

Classic Poetry Series

Solon
- poems -

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Solon()

Solon was born into a well-to-do family of Athens. He worked as a merchant in the export-import trade, and he considered himself relatively poor. He did not worship money, as is evident from some poems of his.

Poetry was for Solon a way to entertain himself, and he also used poetry to give his ideas easy access to the minds of the Athenians.

The seven wise men of Greece were well-known, both to each other and to the general public. 1 Anacharsis, who was one of these wise men, came to visit Solon in Athens. When Anacharsis saw Athenian democracy at work, he remarked that it was strange that in Athens wise men spoke and fools decided. Solon admired this man's ready wit and he entertained Anacharsis as his guest for a long time. Solon showed Anacharsis some laws that he was drafting for the Athenians. Anacharsis laughed at Solon for imagining that the dishonesty and greed of the Athenians could be restrained by written laws. Such laws, said Anacharsis, are like spiderwebs: they catch the weak and poor, but the rich can rip right through them.

When Solon went to visit another of the seven wise men, Thales of Miletus, Solon asked why Thales did not get married and have children. Thales gave no reply, but he hired an actor, who a few days later pretended to have just arrived from Athens. Solon asked this actor for the latest news, and the actor replied as he had been instructed by Thales. He said that nothing important had happened, except there was a funeral of some young man who had died while his famous father happened to be away. "Poor man," said Solon, "but what is his name?" With every question and answer, Solon got more and more worried, until finally he mentioned his own name. "That's the man!" said the actor, and Solon went into all of the usual expressions of grief while Thales watched impassively. After a while, Thales said to Solon: "You asked why I did not marry and have children. You now see the reason. Such a loss is too much for even your brave spirit to bear. But don't worry, it was all nothing but a lie."

Nevertheless, it shows a lack of judgment and courage to avoid having good things because we are afraid of losing them. Even our virtue, which is by far our most valuable possession, can be lost through sickness or drugs. The soul has an innate tendency of affection, and when it cannot fix itself on a child it seeks some other object, and grief comes just the same. When a dog dies, or a horse, smug bachelors collapse in sorrow, but some fathers can bear the loss even of a child without extravagant grief.

It is not affection, but weakness, that brings a man -- unarmed against fortune by reason -- into these endless pains and terrors. Because they are always worrying about what might go wrong, most are unable to enjoy their present opportunities for happiness.

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For a long time, the Athenians and the Megarians had been fighting over the island of Salamis. The Athenians got tired of the war and passed a law that anyone who advocated possession of Salamis would die. Solon saw that most of the young men wanted to finish the fight, but were afraid to speak out because of this law.

So Solon pretended to go crazy. A rumor spread that Solon had made up some crazy poems and was now totally out of his mind. Then one day he appeared in the marketplace and stood in the speaker's place. All of the Athenians swarmed to hear the crazy man speak. Still keeping up the act of insanity, Solon sang a song of over a hundred verses about Salamis. The poem was so well done that the people forgave him for violating the new law. Before long, the law was repealed, and the Athenians prosecuted the war with greater vigor than ever before. Solon, who meanwhile had recovered, was chosen to be the general to lead them in it.

Salamis was occupied at the time by the Megarians. Solon sent a spy there to tell the Megarians of a great opportunity to kidnap the most noble ladies of Athens, who were celebrating a festival at the temple of Venus. This was true, but what the Megarians failed to realize was that Solon knew that they would be coming.

When he saw their sails coming from Salamis, Solon replaced the women with beardless men dressed in women's clothes. From a distance, the Megarians could not tell the difference. They landed and anchored their ships, jumping out into the water in their eagerness to get at the women. The last thing on their minds was defense, and every one of them was killed. Then the Athenians sailed to Salamis in the Megarians' ships and took the island by surprise.

Athens at this time had three factions: the people of the hills, who favored democracy; the people of the plains, who favored oligarchy; and the people of the shore, who favored a mixed sort of government and prevented either of the other two factions from prevailing. The political turmoil had come to the point where it appeared that the only way any government at all could be established

would be for some tyrant to take all power into his own hands.

Under Athenian law at that time, if a loan went into default, the creditor could seize the debtor and his family and sell them as slaves to get money to pay off the debt. The cruelty and arrogance of the rich caused the poor to form into gangs to save themselves and rescue those who had been made slaves through usury. The best men of the city saw Solon as someone who was partial to neither the rich nor the poor, and they asked him to lead. The rich consented because Solon was wealthy, and the poor consented because he was honest.

Solon's task was dangerous and difficult because of the greediness of one side and the arrogance of the other. To placate both sides, Solon said: "Fairness breeds no strife." To the poor, "fairness" meant equal wealth; and to the rich, "fairness" meant keeping what they owned. 2

Both rich and poor, therefore, believed for a while that Solon was on their side. But soon the poor people became disgusted that Solon would not use his power to seize the property of the rich. Solon's friends advised him that he would be a fool if he did not take advantage of the opportunity that fate had presented. Now that he had this power, they said, he should make himself a tyrant. Solon, who was a wise man, replied that tyranny is indeed a very pleasant peak, but there is no way down from it.

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Unlike Lycurgus, Solon could not change the state from top to bottom, so he worked only on what it was possible to improve without a total revolution. He only attempted what he thought he could persuade the Athenians to accept, with a little compulsion. Wherever possible, Solon made use of euphemisms, such as calling taxes "contributions." With a judicious mixture of sweet with sour, justice with force, he managed to achieve some success. When afterwards Solon was asked whether he had made the best laws he could for the Athenians, he answered: "The best they were able to receive."

Solon's first reform was forbidding mortgages on bodies. Even with the consent of the debtor, the creditor could no longer legally enslave him and his family. Those who had already become slaves were liberated, and those who had been sold to foreigners returned to Athens as free men. Solon also ordered that all outstanding debts were forgiven, so all mortgages on land disappeared.

But here Solon was disappointed by his friends. Shortly before he published his law releasing all mortgages, he told some of his most trusted friends. They

immediately went out and borrowed money to buy land, giving the purchased land as security for repayment of the loan. When the law was published, they had their land free and clear. For this, Solon was suspected, but when it came to be known that he himself had lost fifteen talents by his own law, he managed to escape serious damage to his reputation.

Neither the rich nor the poor got all they wanted from Solon's reforms. There was no complete redistribution of wealth as the poor had demanded, and the rich were angry about the loss of the money they were owed. Both the rich and the poor now hated Solon for not obeying their desires. Even those who had been friendly to him before now looked at him with grim faces, as an enemy. But with time and success came forgiveness. When the Athenians saw the good result of the release of debts, they appointed Solon general reformer of their law.

Solon repealed the laws of Dracon, 3 which punished even small offenses with death, so it was said that the laws of Dracon [codified 621 B.C.] were written in blood instead of ink. When someone asked Dracon why he had made his laws so severe, he answered: "We need the death penalty to prevent small crimes, and for bigger ones I can't think of any greater punishment." Solon reserved the death penalty for murder and manslaughter.

Solon made it a law that anyone who refused to take sides in a revolution would lose all civil rights. By this law he made sure that the good would resist the bad and not hide hoping to save themselves, or wait until they could see which side will win.

When Solon was asked once which city he thought was well-governed, he said: "That city where those who have not been injured take up the cause of one who has, and prosecute the case as earnestly as if the wrong had been done to themselves." Accordingly, he allowed anyone to take up the cause of a poor man who had been injured.

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Solon was willing to allow the rich men to continue to be the officers, but he wanted to allow the poor citizens to participate in the government. 4 He therefore classed the citizens according to income. The lowest class, the thetes, were ineligible for election to any office. However, the thetes were allowed to come into the assembly, and as jurors they decided cases submitted to their vote. Since Solon's laws were deliberately obscure and ambiguous, the courts had significant powers of interpretation. What had seemed an insignificant concession to the poor turned out to be a significant privilege.

Solon created a supreme court, whose members were former archons [annual presidents] of Athens. Seeing that after the release of debts the people were beginning to be unruly and arrogant, Solon also created a council of four hundred -- one hundred from each of the four tribes in Athens. This was an additional legislative body, whose powers were limited to debating matters before they were submitted to the people for a vote. Nothing could be voted on until it had been vetted by the four hundred. With the supreme court and the council of four hundred as anchors, the turbulence of the people was restrained within safe limits.

Solon made it a crime to defame the dead. As for the living, attacks on character were prohibited in the council-chambers of the city and at certain festivals. Solon knew that spite is part of human nature, but he established certain places where it was illegal to indulge this weakness. To suppress it completely would have been impossible.

If the aim is to punish a few, moderately, as an example -- rather than many, severely, to no purpose -- the lawmaker must confine his law to the limits of human nature, and not try to legislate perfection.

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Many people had come to Athens rather than struggle to scratch a living from the barren land of Attica. Without something to sell, Athens could not feed itself. Therefore crafts became essential to the city's prosperity. Solon made it a law that a son was not bound to relieve his father's old age unless the father had set him up in some craft. He also made it a law that every man had to report each year how he made his living, and anyone found to be unemployed was punished.

The laws promulgated by Solon were written on boards. Every one of the leading citizens publicly swore to observe them. But now Solon was besieged every day by people asking for an interpretation of some provision, or complaining about how a law affected them. Solon decided that he should leave the Athenians for a while so that they would cease bothering him, and work things out by themselves. He got permission to leave Athens and took a ship to Egypt [590 B.C.].

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The priests of Egypt told Solon the ancient story of the lost continent of Atlantis. 5 Solon translated the story of Atlantis into Greek verse, thinking that

it would be a very good thing for the Greeks to know.

King Croesus of Sardis, who was at this time the richest man in the world, invited Solon to come and visit him at his palace. Solon arrived, and upon entering the palace he saw a man magnificently dressed and accompanied by a retinue of slaves and soldiers, so he assumed that this man must be Croesus. But he turned out to be only a minor official in Croesus' court. As Solon proceeded through the palace, he saw several other officials just as grand. Finally Solon was admitted to the king's chamber for the interview, and there was Croesus dressed in his most splendid clothes and jewelry.

Solon was not dazzled by this display of barbaric magnificence, which had awed so many others. So King Croesus commanded that his treasure houses be opened so that Solon could see how many beautiful clothes he had, and how much gold. Solon politely looked at everything, then came back to the king. "Well, Solon," said Croesus, "have you ever seen a man who was more fortunate than Croesus?"

Solon replied: "Yes, I have, and that was Tellus, a citizen of Athens. He was an honest man who left his children well provided for and with good will in the city. He lived to see grandchildren by his sons. Then he died gloriously, fighting for his country."

This frank answer enraged Croesus, but Solon pacified him by adding: "Oh mighty king of the Lydians, the gods have given us Greeks only small things, and our wisdom is only of small things and not the business of men as important as you. We consider how a man's life is so much subject to chance, and how disaster can come to us completely by surprise, so we don't consider any man to be successful until he has died well, with his good fortune intact to the end. Otherwise, if we should say that a living man is a success, when there is so much that can still happen to him, we would be like soldiers celebrating victory before the battle is over." After that speech, Solon made his exit and saved his life.

He happened to meet Aesop, the author of the famous fables, who also had been invited to the palace of Croesus. Aesop said: "Either we must not come to mighty men at all, or we must try to please them." But Solon replied: "Either we must not come to mighty men, or we must tell them the truth."

Afterwards, King Croesus was defeated by King Cyrus of Persia. Croesus lost his kingdom and was taken prisoner. He was tied to a stake, and was about to be burned alive for the amusement of Cyrus, when Croesus cried out Solon's name three times. Cyrus stopped the proceedings and asked Croesus whether

this Solon was a man or one of the gods. Croesus answered: "He was one of the wise men of Greece, whom I invited to my palace. Not that I might learn anything, but so that he might witness my good fortune at that time. The loss of it now is more painful than its enjoyment was pleasant. My riches were really only words and opinion, and now they have brought me to be burned at the stake. Solon saw me in my foolish prosperity and foresaw my present misery. He warned me that I should consider the end of my life, and not boast on slippery ground, since no man is happy until he has died well." Cyrus saw the teaching of Solon confirmed by such a notable example. He released Croesus and kept him at his court as one of his most honored counselors.

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While Solon was gone, the three factions [Hill, Plain, and Shore] began to quarrel again. Although they kept his laws, each one looked forward to some kind of change that might give an advantage over the others. Solon was too old to take an active role when he arrived back in Athens, but he met privately with the leaders and tried to calm down the partisan rancor.

Pisistratus, who led the poor, seemed to be the most willing of all. Pisistratus was a smooth talker and a master of fraud. He fooled the poor and even old Solon, who said that if only the worm of ambition could be plucked from the head of Pisistratus there would be no better citizen.

One day, Pisistratus smeared blood over himself and dramatically appeared in the marketplace. He told the people that their enemies, the rich, had done this to him because he was the friend of the poor. One of his followers then made a motion to appoint a fifty-man bodyguard to protect this martyr of the people's cause. Solon saw through this trick, but the poor were determined to gratify Pisistratus, and the rich were afraid to resist him.

Solon told the Athenians that they were indeed shrewd as individuals, but collectively they made one big fool. And with that parting shot, Solon went away, saying that he was wiser than some and braver than others -- wiser than those who had fallen for the trick, and braver than those who understood what was happening but did not dare to speak out against the coming of a tyrant. 6

No one questioned Pisistratus as he gathered many more than fifty armed men around him. No one noticed what Pisistratus was doing until one day he seized the strongholds of the city and made himself tyrant [561 B.C.]. The rich saved their lives by fleeing Athens. Solon was weak and old, and he had no man willing to stand by him, but he went to the marketplace and scolded the Athenians for

being too afraid of Pisistratus and his gang to take back their liberty. "Before," he said, "you might have more easily stopped this tyranny, but now that it is already in place you can win even more glory by rooting it out."

But the Athenians did nothing, and Solon stayed home and wrote bitter poems. His friends warned him to get out of Athens, or at least not to anger Pisistratus with his free speech. They asked him why he thought he was safe to speak so boldly against the tyrant, and Solon answered: "My age." Pisistratus, however, continued to pay great respect to Solon, and continually consulted him. He kept most of Solon's laws, and even obeyed them himself.

Eunomia.

These things my spirit bids me
teach the men of Athens:
that Dysnomia
brings countless evils for the city,
but Eunomia brings order
and makes everything proper,
by enfolding the unjust in fetters,
smoothing those things that are rough,
stopping greed,
sentencing hybris to obscurity
making the flowers of mischief to wither,

and straightening crooked judgments.
It calms the deeds of arrogance
and stops the bilious anger of harsh strife.
Under its control, all things are proper
and prudence reigns human affairs

Solon

The Man Whose Riches Satisfy His Greed

The man whose riches satisfy his greed
Is not more rich for all those heaps and hoards
Than some poor man who has enough to feed
And clothe his corpse with such as God affords.

I have no use for men who steal and cheat;
The fruit of evil poisons those who eat.

Some wicked men are rich, some good men poor,
But I would rather trust in what's secure;
Our virtue sticks with us and makes us strong,
But money changes owners all day long.

Solon