Classic Poetry Series

Theognis of Megara

- 21 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

A Secret Spring

While only I quaffed yonder secret spring,
'Twas clear and sweet to my imagining.
'Tis turbid now. Or it no more I drink,
But hang o'er other stream or river-brink.

Theognis of Megara

A Time for Wine

Now that in mid career, checking his force,
The bright sun pauses in his pride and force,
Let us prepare to dine; and eat and drink
The best of everything that heart can think:
And let the shapely Spartan damsel fair
Bring with a rounded arm and graceful air
Water to wash, and garlands for our hair:
In spite of all the systems and the rules
Invented and observed by sickly fools,
Let us be brave, and resolutely drink;
Not minding if the Dog-star rise or sink.

Theognis of Megara

An Avenger for the State

Our state is pregnant; shortly to produce
A rude avenger of prolong'd abuse.
The commons hitherto seem sober-minded,
But their superiors are corrupt and blinded.
The rule of noble spirits, brave and high,
Never endanger'd peace and harmony.
The supercilious, arrogant pretence
Of feeble minds; weakness and insolence;
Justice and truth and law wrested aside
By crafty shifts of avarice and pride;
These are our ruins, Kurnus!-never dream
(Tranquil and undisturb'd as it may seem)
Of future peace or safety to the state;
Bloodshed and strife will follow soon or late.
Never imagine that a ruin'd land
Will trust her destiny to your command,
To be remodell'd by a single hand.

Theognis of Megara

An Even Line

I walk by rule and measure, and incline
To neither side, but take an even line;
Fix'd in a single purpose and design.
With learning's happy gifts to celebrate,
To civilize and dignify the State;
Not leaguing with the discontented crew,
Nor with the proud and arbitrary few.

Theognis of Megara

Angry Words

Rash, angry words, and spoken out of season,
When passion has usurp'd the throne of reason,
Have ruin'd many. Passion is unjust,
And for an idle, transitory gust
Of gratified revenge, dooms us to pay
With long repentence at a later day.

Theognis of Megara

Beware Crafty Minds

Let no persuasive art tempt you to place
Your confidence in crafty minds and base!
How can it answer? Will their help avail
When danger presses, and your foes assail?
The blessing which the gods in bounty send,
Will they consent to share it with a friend?

No! to bestrew the waves with scatter'd grain,
To cultivate the surface of the main,
Is not a task more absolutely vain,
Than cultivating such allies as these,
Fickle and unproductive as the seas!

Such are all baser minds; never at rest,
With new demands importunately press'd
A new pretension or a new request;
Till, foil'd with a refusal of the last,
They disavow their obligations past.

But brave and gallant hearts are cheaply gain'd
Faithful adherents, easily retain'd;
Men that will never disavow the debt
Of gratitude, or cancel or forget.

Theognis of Megara

Easy Friends

Never engage with a poltroon or craven
Avoid him, Kurnus, as a treach'rous haven!
These friends and hearty comrades, as you think,
(Ready to join you, when you feast and drink),
These easy friends from difficulty shrink.

For a shrewd intellect, the best employ
Is to detect a soul of base alloy;
No task is harder nor imports so much;
Silver or gold, you prove it by the touch;
You separate the pure, discard the dross,
And disregard the labour and the loss:
But a friend's heart, base and adulterate
A friendly surface with a core of hate!
Of all the frauds with which the Fates have cursed
Our simple easy nature-is the worst:
Beyond the rest ruinous in effect;
And of all others hardest to detect:
For men's and women's hearts you cannot try
Beforehand, like the cattle that you buy.
Nor human wit nor reason, when you treat
For such a purpose, can escape deceit:
Fancy betrays us, and assists the cheat.

Theognis of Megara

Fame

The generous and the brave, in common fame,
From time to time encounter praise or blame:
The vulgar pass unheeded; none escape
Scandal or insult in some form or shape.
Most fortunate are those, alive or dead,
Of whom the least is thought-the least is said.

Theognis of Megara

Fate

No costly sacrifice nor offerings given
Can change the purpose of the powers of Heaven;
Whatever Fate ordains, danger or hurt,
Or death predestined, nothing can avert.

Theognis of Megara

Hope

For human nature Hope remains alone
Of all the deities; the rest are flown.
Faith is departed; Truth and Honour dead;
And all the Graces too, my friends, are fled.
The scanty specimens of living worth,
Dwindled to nothing, and extinct on earth.
Yet whilst I live and view the light of heaven,
Since hope remains and never has been driven
From the distracted world-the single scope
Of my devotion is to worship Hope.
When hecatombs are slain, and altars burn,
When all the deities adored in turn,
Let Hope be present; and with Hope, my friend,
Let every sacrifice commence and end.
Yes, Insolence, Injustice, every crime,
Rapine and Wrong, may prosper for a time;
Yet shall they travel on to swift decay,
Who tread the crooked path and hollow way.

Theognis of Megara

Human Nature

Learn, Kurnus, learn to bear an easy mind;
Accommodate your humour to mankind
And human nature-take it as you find!
A mixture of ingredients, good or bad,
Such are we all, the best that can be had.
The best are found defective, and the rest,
For common use, are equal to the best.
Suppose it had been otherwise decreed-
How could the business of the world proceed?

Fairly examined, truly understood,
No man is wholly bad, nor wholly good,
Nor uniformly wise. In every case,
Habit and accident, and time, and place
Affect us:-'tis the nature of the race!

Theognis of Megara

Learning and Wealth

Learning and wealth the wise and wealthy find
Inadequate to satisfy the mind
A craving eagerness remains behind;
Something is left for which we cannot rest,
And the last something always seems the best
Something unknown, or something unpossessed.

Theognis of Megara

On Arranged Marriage

The daily marriages we make,
Where price is everything: for money's sake
Men marry; women are in marriage given.
The churl or ruffian that in wealth has thriven
May match his offspring with the proudest race;
Thus everything is mixed, noble and base!

Theognis of Megara

On Inborn Traits

To rear a child is easy, but to teach
Morals and manners is beyond our reach;
To make the foolish wise, the wicked good,
That science yet was never understood.
The sons of Esculapius, if their art
Could remedy a perverse and wicked heart,
Might earn enormous wages! But in fact
The mind is not compounded and compact
Of precept and example; human art
In human nature has no share or part.
Hatred of vice, the fear of shame and sin,
Are things of native growth, not grafted in:
Else wives and worthy parents might correct
In children's hearts each error and defect:
Whereas we see them disappointed still,
No scheme nor artifice of human skill
Can rectify the passions or the will.

Theognis of Megara

Poverty

For noble minds, the worst of miseries,
Worse than old age, or wearisome disease,
Is Poverty. From Poverty to flee,
From some tall precipice into the sea,
It were a fair escape to leap below!
In Poverty, dear Kyrnus, we forego
Freedom in word and deed, body and mind;
Action and thought are fetter'd and confin'd.
Let me then fly, dear Kyrnus, once again!
Wide as the limits of the land and main,
From these entanglements; with these in view,
Death is the lighter evil of the two.

Theognis of Megara

Pride and the State

Pride and oppressive rule destroy'd the state
Of the Magnesians-Such was Smyrna's fate;
Smyrna the rich, and Colophon the great!
And ours, my friend, will follow, soon or late.

Theognis of Megara

Sumptuous Obsequies

I envy not these sumptuous obsequies,
The stately car, the purple canopies;
Much better pleased am I, remaining here,
With cheaper equipage, and better cheer.
A couch of thorns, or an embroidered bed,
Are matters of indifference to the dead.

Theognis of Megara

The Insolence of Wealth

The gods send Insolence, to lead astray
The man whom Fortune and the Fates betray,
Predestined to precipitate decay.
Wealth nurses Insolence, and wealth, we find,
When coupled with a poor and paltry mind,
Is evermore with Insolence combined.

Never in anger with the meaner sort
Be moved to a contemptuous, harsh retort,
Deriding their distresses; nor despise,
In hasty speech, their wants and miseries.

Jove holds the balance, and the gods dispense
For all mankind, riches and indigence.

Theognis of Megara

The Poet and His Muse

You soar aloft, and over land and wave
Are borne triumphant on the wings I gave,
The swift and mighty wings, music and verse;
Your name in easy numbers smooth and terse,
Is wafted o'er the world; and heard among
At banquetings and feasts, chaunted and sung,
Heard and admir'd: the modulated air
Of flutes and voices of the young and fair
Recite it, and to future times shall tell;
When clos'd within the dark sepulchral cell
Your form shall moulder, and your empty ghost
Wander along the dreary Stygian coast,
Yet shall your memory flourish, fresh and young,
Recorded and reviv'd on every tongue,
In continents and islands, every place
That owns the language of the Grecian race!

No purchas'd prowess of a racing steed,
But the triumphant muse, with airy speed,
Shall bear it wide and far, o'er land and main,
A glorious and unperishable strain;
A mighty prize, gratuitously won,
Fix'd as the earth, immortal as the sun!

But for all this-no kindness in return!
No token or attention or concern!
Baffled and scorn'd, you treat me like a child,
From day to day, with empty words beguil'd.
Remember! common justice, common sense
Are the best blessings which the Gods dispense:
And each man has his object; all aspire
To something which they covet and desire.

Like a fair courser, conqueror in the race,
Bound to a charioteer sordid and base,
I feel it with disdain; and many a day
Have long'd to break the curb and burst away.

Theognis of Megara

Wine

My brain grows dizzy, whirled and overthrown
With wine: my senses are no more my own.
The ceiling and the walls are wheeling round!
But let me try! perhaps my feet are sound.
Let me retire with my remaining sense,
For fear of idle language and offence.

Theognis of Megara

Worldly Wisdom

The worldly-minded and the worldly wise,
In ignorance and arrogance, despise
All talents and attainments but their own;
Wisdom is their's, they think-and their's alone.
But no! the lessons of deceit and wrong,
In point of fact, are neither hard nor long:
And many know them; but a better will,
Prohibits some from practicing their skill
Some have a taste for good, and some for ill.

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