

Classic Poetry Series

Theognis

- poems -

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Theognis(540 BC - 480 BC)

A 6th century BC Greek poet, it has been estimated that Theognis was born around 540 BC and the last date mentioned in his work is 480 BC.

Theognis was an aristocrat who settled in Megara. A didactic poet, he wrote many of his poems for a young man named Cynus. Many of his works begin with the Greek for "O Boy" and are passionate in their descriptions of both hate and love.

Another theme of his work was his lament that those he considered 'unrighteous' were gaining power above those aristocrats, such as himself, who he considered deserved it more.

Amongst the ancient Greek poets, Theognis is rare in that much of his work has remained intact. However, of the 1,400 surviving lines attributed to him, it is now believed that some were the work of other writers.

Fragments - Lines 0001 - 0004

O lord, son of Leto, child of Zeus, you I shall never
Forget, either beginning or coming to an end,
But always, first and last and in the middle,
I shall sing of you. And you, hear me and grant good things.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0005 - 0010

Lord Phoibos, when the goddess, lady Leto, bore you,
Clasping a palm tree in her slender hands,
You the most beautiful of immortals, beside the wheel-round lake,
Then all of boundless Delos was filled
With an ambrosial scent; the huge earth laughed,
And the deep waters of the hoary sea rejoiced.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0019 - 0030

Kyrnos, as I work my craft let a seal be set upon

These words of mine, and they will never be stolen unremarked,

Nor will anyone change the good that is there to something worse;

And this is what everyone will say: 'These are the lines of Theognis,
The man from Megara' -- famous throughout all peoples.

But all my fellow citizens I have not yet been able to please.

This is nothing to wonder at, son of Polypaos, for not even Zeus

Pleases everyone, whether he rains or holds it back.

To you with kindly intent I offer such advice as I myself,

Kyrnos, heard from noble men when I was still a child.

Be intelligent, and do not at the cost of shameful or unjust deeds

Attempt to draw to yourself honors of merits or wealth.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0173 - 0178

Of all things it is poverty that most subdues a noble man,
More even than hoary old age, Kyrnos, or fever;
Indeed, to avoid it one should even throw oneself into the sea's
Deep gulfs, Kyrnos, or off sheer cliffs.
For the man subdued by poverty can neither say
Nor do anything, because his tongue is tied.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0183 - 0192

Among rams and asses and horses, Kyrnos, we look for those
Of noble breeding, and a man wants them to mate
From worthy stock. Yet a noble man does not mind marrying
A base woman of base birth if she brings him money in abundance,
Nor does a woman shrink from becoming the wife of a base man
With wealth; she prefers a rich husband to a worthy one.
Money is what they honor; the noble weds a base man's daughter,
The base a worthy man's: wealth mixes stock.
Thus do not be amazed, son of Polypaos, that the citizen's stock
Is growing feeble, for what is noble is being mixed with what is base.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0213 - 0218

My heart, display toward all your friends a changeful character,

Adding into it the disposition that each one has.

Adopt the disposition of the octopus, crafty in its convolutions, which takes on

The appearance of whatever rock it has dealings with.

At one moment follow along this way, but at the next change the color of your skin:

You can be sure that cleverness proves better than inflexibility.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0219 - 0220

Do not distress yourself too much at the turbulence of your fellow citizens,
Kyrnos, but walk down the middle of the road, as I do.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0237 - 0254

To you I have given wings, on which you may fly aloft
Above the boundless sea and all the earth
With ease. At feasts and banquets you will be present
On all occasions, lying in the mouths of many,
And to the clear-toned sound of pipes young men
With seemly grace and loveliness, their voices fair and clear,
Will sing of you. And when beneath the hollows of the murky earth
You go to Hades' halls ringing with lamentation,
Not even then, though dead, will you ever lose your fame; instead, you will be
known
To people of all time, your name imperishable,
Kynos, roaming through mainland Hellas and up and down the islands,
Passing over the restless fish-swarming sea,
Not mounted on the backs of horses, but sent abroad
By the radiant gifts of the Muses, violet-crowned:
To all who care for them, even to those who are not yet born, you will be
Alike a theme of song, so long as earth and sun exist.
From you, however, I get scant respect;
Instead, you cheat me with words as if I were a little child.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0255 - 0256

The noblest thing is justice; the most advantageous, health;
But what gives greatest delight is to gain the object of one's desire.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0425 - 0428

Not to be born is the best of all things for those who live on earth,
And not to gaze on the radiance of the keen-burning sun.
Once born, however, it is best to pass with all possible speed through Hades'
gates
And to lie beneath a great heap of earth.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0429 - 0438

To beget and rear a man is easier than to put good sense
Inside him. No one yet has ever contrived a way
To make the senseless sensible and good men out of bad.
If the sons of Asklepios had this gift from the god,
To work a cure on badness and men's infatuate wits,
Many and great would be the fees they earned.
And if understanding could be fashioned and placed in a man,
Never would a good man's son have turned out bad,
By heeding the words of sensible counsel. But as it is, no teaching
Will ever serve to make the bad man good.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0467 - 0496

Of those now here with us, do not detain anyone who is unwilling to remain,
Nor show the door to anyone who does not wish to go,
Nor wake anyone who is sleeping, Simonides, should one of us,
Well fortified by wine, be gripped by gentle slumber;
Nor bid the wakeful man to sleep against his will;
For everything that is forced is by nature painful.
For the one who wants to drink, let the boy stand close and pour;
Not on all nights is it possible to enjoy delights like these.
But as for me, since I have reached my limit of honey-sweet wine,
I shall think of sleep that loosens cares, going home.
I have reached the point when a man feels most pleasure in drinking wine,
Being neither sober at all nor yet excessively drunk.
Whoever goes beyond the limit of drinking, that man no longer
Is master of his own tongue or of his mind;
He talks recklessly, saying things which the sober find disgraceful,
And feels no shame in any action when he is drunk,
A man of sound sense before, and now a fool. But you,
Understanding these things, should not drink to excess,
But either stand up and leave before you get drunk -- don't let your belly
Overpower you as if you were a base laborer hired by the day --
Or else stay put and refrain from drinking. But no, 'Pour me another'
Is what you keep idly chattering, and that's why you get drunk.
For one cup comes around in the name of friendship, another on a bet;
Another you pour out as a libation for the gods, another you keep on hand,
And you do not know how to refuse. That man is truly invincible,
Who though he has drunk many cups says nothing foolish.
As for the rest of you, take care in what you say as you linger around the wine
bowl,
Steering well clear of quarrels with one another,
Speaking in a way that any may hear, whether you address one or all together.
Conducted in this way, a drinking-party proves far from unpleasant.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0667 - 0682

If I had money, Simonides, I would not feel such pain

As I do now, when in the company of the noble.

As it is, wealth recognizes me but passes by, and I am speechless

Out of want, although it would seem that I know better than most

That now, with our white sails lowered, we are being carried

Out of the Melian Sea through the murky night,

And the men refuse to bail, although the sea sweeps over

Both sides of the ship. Indeed, only with great difficulty is anyone likely to be
Saved, acting as they are: they have stopped the helmsman,

Good though he was, who kept watch skillfully;

And they are plundering the cargo by force. Discipline has perished,

And fair division is no longer carried out in an open fashion;

The deckhands are in control, and the base have the upper hand over the noble.

I am afraid that the waves may swallow up the ship.

Let this, well hidden, be my riddling message for the noble,

Though a base man too may understand it, if he is clever.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0783 - 0788

Yes, I went once to the land of Sicily too,
I went to Euboia's vineyard-covered plain,
And to Sparta, that splendid city on Eurotas' reedy banks;
And everywhere I went they welcomed me with kindness.
But no pleasure came to my heart from any of them:
So true is it, after all, that nothing is dearer than one's homeland.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 0983 - 0988

Let us devote our hearts to merriment and feasting
While the enjoyment of delights still brings pleasure.
For quick as thought does radiant youth pass by;
Nor does the rush of horses prove to be swifter
When carrying their master to the labor of men's spears
With furious energy, taking joy in the plain that brings forth wheat.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 1267 - 1270

A boy and a horse are alike in mind, for the horse does not
Weep for its rider when he lies in the dust,
But, fed full with barley, it carries the next man;
And in just this way the boy too loves whoever is at hand.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 1327 - 1334

My boy, as long as your cheeks and chin are smooth, I shall never
Cease to praise you, not even if I am fated to die.
For you, the giver, it is still honorable, and for me as lover it is not shameful
To ask. But I beseech you, in the name of my parents:
Show me respect, my boy, and grant me favor. If in time to come,
Craving in your turn the gift of the violet-crowned
Cyprian, you shall approach another, then may the gods
Grant that you meet with just such words as I hear now.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 1337 - 1340

No longer do I love a boy. I have kicked aside harsh torments;
From grievous hardships I have gladly escaped;
I am set loose from longing by fair-wreathed Kythereia.
As for you, my boy, you have no attractiveness in my eyes.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 1341 - 1350

Alas, I am in love with a soft-skinned boy, who to all my friends
Reveals that this is true, though he does so against my will.
I shall endure without concealment the many outrages done in my despite,
For not ill-favored is the boy whose conquest I am shown to be.
The love of boys has given delight ever since Ganymede
Was loved by Kronos' son himself, king of the immortals,
Who seized and brought him up to Olympos and made him
Divine, possessing as he did the lovely bloom of boyhood.
So do not be amazed, Simonides, that I as well have been
Shown to be conquered by love for a handsome boy.

Theognis

Fragments - Lines 1353 - 1356

Bitter and sweet, alluring and tormenting:

Such, till it be fulfilled, Kyrnos, is love to the young;
For if one finds fulfillment, it proves sweet; but if, pursuing,
One fails of fulfillment, then of all things it is most painful.

Theognis