

## BOOK REVIEW

*Solon and Early Greek Poetry: The Politics of Exhortation*. By ELIZABETH IRWIN. Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xiii + 350. Cloth, \$90.00. ISBN 0-521-85178-5.

Perhaps it is faint praise to say that Elizabeth Irwin's *Solon and Early Greek Poetry* is the most exciting book on Solon's political elegy ever written. Most of the scholarship devoted to Solon's poetry has not been remarkably adventurous; certainly it has had nothing close to the white hot critical energy that crackles through Irwin's work.<sup>1</sup> As she notes, Solon scholars have traditionally put the lawgiver before the poet; the poetry has been treated as corollary to the political activity. But Irwin shows how organically the poetry and the politics are linked; indeed, the multiform configurations of this linkage are her true abiding theme. The dual career of Solon offers a rich case study of poetic politics and political poetics: he "represents the ideal figure through which to analyse the political implications of poetic expression in the archaic period" (p. 87).

The semantic, grammatical and tonal ambiguities and discontinuities in the political elegies that scholars have traditionally tried to correct or explain away in an effort to preserve an unproblematic Solonian "viewpoint" are Irwin's hermeneutic bread and butter. She capitalizes on these details to the fullest, freeing texts such as fragment 4 (the *Eunomia*) from the gray cocoons in which they have been trapped to reveal the dynamic *poikilia* of Solon's poetic and political personae. Irwin's Solon is a polytropic expert in semantic contestation, Lakoffian "framing," conceptual detournement and recuperation, and subtly coded doubletalk; he is a bravura self-fashioner, a cunning political and poetic "master of the game." What you see is what you do not get (e.g., "Solon exploits the language of tyranny while seeming explicitly to reject it" (p. 243)—such disingenuous disavowal being a characteristic Solonian maneuver). All this furious signifying and rhetorical sleight of hand will not be everyone's cup of tea. This Solon may seem to some like too dreamy a poster boy for a certain second-generation New Historicist-inflected classical studies. I, however, would take him any day over the straight Solon, the measured statesman and earnestly versifying propagandist. Both are too good to be true, but there can be no doubt that Irwin's trickster is more responsive to the sophisticated and contentious political and poetic cultures of Archaic Greece.

Above all, Irwin's Solon is a self-serving manipulator of poetic traditions. Crucial to her arguments is an intelligent approach to

<sup>1</sup> But see now the stimulating essays, including one by Irwin, in Part I of J. Blok and A. Lardinois, eds., *Solon of Athens: New Historical and Philological Approaches* (Leiden, 2006).

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intertextuality and allusion, between elegy and Homer, elegy and Hesiod, and sympotic and public elegy, and the way intertextual engagement allows poets and reperformers to fashion complex sociopolitical identities. Irwin is aware of the special methodological dangers in arguing for “strong” intertextuality in orally derived poetry, but succeeds in creating an “interpretive space between the traditional verdict of strict allusion and the countervailing view that reduces all repeated themes ... to the category of moral and poetic clichés” (p. 115). She channels Stephen Hinds here, whose expansive vision of metapoetic interplay in Latin poetry she convincingly imports into the study of early Greek elegy, which badly needs its sophistication. Irwin largely stays away from arguments for strict textual reference, preferring to describe the more gestural yet ultimately richer modes of intertextual acknowledgement through which Solon engages the postures of rival poets, genres and traditions as shaped by their own frames of reception.

In Part One, “The Politics of Exhortation,” Irwin undertakes to read anew the martial exhortation elegy of Tyrtaeus and Callinus. The intertextual engagement between this elegy and martial epic allowed sympotic performers to indulge in “a type of heroic self-fashioning” (p. 62). Such narcissistic role-playing belies the *pro patria mori* sentiments of the poetry, which most scholars take as a genuine expression of an emergent polis ideology. Anything but, argues Irwin; polis ideology has a purely instrumental function, to reinforce aristocratic ideology. As the Iliadic *laos* was there to validate the *kleos* of the hero, so the *dêmos* in elegy confers status on its sympotic singers in the eyes of their fellow symposiasts.

Part Two, “Political Poetics: Solon’s *Eunomia*,” argues that Solon critically defined his public elegy against the sympotic elegiac tradition; the imagery of martial exhortation in the latter, which served the distinction of the few, is detoured in civic exhortation toward the collective concerns of the polis. At the same time, Solon’s *Eunomia* implicitly criticizes the martial epic (i.e. the *Iliad*) that supports the ideological orientations of a Tyrtaeus. Solon’s epic model is rather the *Odyssey*. Through thematic and structural allusions, he “recapitulates in elegy” the *Odyssey*’s own critique of the *Iliad* “through his use of martial epic and elegiac imagery as foil” (p. 121). Irwin further suggests that Solon modeled both his poetic and political stances on Odysseus, that “master at controlling his own reception” (p. 148). She explores in detail two key episodes in Solon’s biographical tradition—the “crazy like a fox” performance of the *Salamis* elegy and the accounts of travel—arguing that both reflect Solon’s success at defining the terms of his reception; they positively narrativize his self-representation in the poetry as a cunning Odysseus. (Irwin’s semiotic analysis of the felt hat supposedly worn by Solon when he sang the

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*Salamis* is a brilliant example of how to recoup “cultural truth” from apocryphal anecdotes.) The section concludes with a long but less interesting discussion of Solon’s (well-known) Hesiodic debts.

Part Three, “Poetry and Political Culture,” looks at the framing of political language in the elegies. The primary contention is that Solon’s political activity is haunted by the specter of tyranny, which he does not attempt to exorcize fully. Rather, he performs a coy dance with the language of tyranny, at once virtuously rejecting and subtly embracing it—while customizing its valency—in order to define a distinctly autocratic yet populist position within the polis. The win-win rhetoric is, “I’m not a tyrant; I don’t want to be, but I could be, and if I *were*....”

Irwin moves on to argue for continuities between the careers of Solon and Pisistratus. Both had complicated relationships to tyranny, were savvy political dramaturges, tried on Odyssean identities and used poetic performance for political gain. The last point is taken up in the Conclusion. Just as Solon democratized sympotic elegy (and, by extension, its Iliadic model), so Pisistratus democratized the *Iliad* with his institution of its Panathenaic performance, where it was tailored to fit demotic ideology, its celebration of heroic *kleos* shaded over into an object lesson in the wages of *stasis* and the destructive power of aristocratic entitlement.

My one substantial criticism of Irwin’s book is that she never delves into the performative *realia* of Solonian elegy. While making much of how the sympotic context of martial-exhortation elegy fundamentally affects its message, she does not dirty her hands with strong conjectures about the performance context of Solon’s elegy beyond the assumption that it was “public.” In her discussion of the anecdote about the performance of the *Salamis* elegy, she does focus attention on the detail that Solon sang the poem in the agora, but treats it more symbolically than historically (it narrativizes an ethical shift in the genre from private to public). I admire Irwin’s desire to transcend the deadlock of *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, but given her emphasis on performance context as determinant of meaning, historical specificity is important. Was elegiac performance in the agora more common an occurrence than we might think? What might have been other civic fora for it?

More importantly, can we be sure that a poem such as the *Salamis* was even delivered in public in Solon’s time? E.L. Bowie has argued that it was performed sympotically, for an audience of “upper-class *neoi*” (*JHS* 106 (1986) 19). Some elegies (e.g. fr. 26W<sup>2</sup>) do seem to belong to the symposium, and several anecdotes implicate Solon there as well. In the most famous, Solon, over wine, exhorts his nephew to teach him a song of Sappho, so that “having learned it I may die” (Aelian ap. Stob. *Flor.* 3.29.58). Irwin does not tarry with the sympotic

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Solon. That is a pity, as he would enrich her picture of citizen Solon. I would be especially curious to know how she would treat this anecdote. After all, is there not some ambiguity in Solon's death wish? Is he expressing genuine rapture or snidely criticizing sympotic lyric and the elitist ideology it celebrates? I am not sure which, but it is a credit to Irwin's welcome reappraisal that the question had never occurred to me before.

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