

Greek Wisdom and Literature

Dr. Alan Haffa

Please Silence Cell Phones

Hesiod's Works and Days: Two Types of Strife

Strife is no only child. Upon the earth two Strifes exist; the one is praised by those who come to know her and the other blamed. Their natures differ: for the cruel one makes battles thrive, and war; she wins no love but men are forced, by the immortals' will, to pay the grievous goddess due respect. The other, first-born daughter of blackest Night, was set by Zeus, who lives in air, on high, set in the roots of earth, an aid to men. She urges even lazy men to work: a man grows eager, seeing another rich from ploughing, planting, ordering his house; so neighbor vies with neighbor in the rush for wealth: this Strife is good for mortal men—Potter hates potter, carpenters compete, and beggar strives with beggar, bard with bard.

Shame and Honor: Iliad VI

Hector to Andromache, VI. 521 ff

"All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman. But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy and Trojan women trailing their long robes if I would shrink from battle now, a coward. Nor does the spirit urge me on that way. I've learned it all too well. To stand up bravely, always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers, winning my father great glory, glory for myself. For in my heart and soul I also know this well: the day will come when sacred Troy must die, Priam must die and all his people with him."

Laments for Andromache's fate; laughs at his son Astyanax and prays for him to be "strong and brave like me" so that people say, "He is a better man than his father!--when he comes home from battle bearing the bloody gear of the mortal enemy he has killed in war—a joy to his mother's heart."

Two Urns of Zeus, Iliad Book 24

Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts, rake them up no more, raw as we are with mourning. What good's to be won from tears that chill the spirit? So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men, live on to bear such torments-the gods live free of sorrows. There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus's halls and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings. When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man, now he meets with misfortune, now good times in tum. When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only, he makes a man an outcast-brutal, ravenous hunger drives him down the face of the shining earth, stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men.

Odyssey Supplicates Nausikaa

"Yesterday, on the twentieth day, I escaped from the wine-dark sea, but ever until then the wave and the swift winds bore me from the island of Ogygia; and now fate has cast me ashore here, that here too, haply, I may suffer some ill. For not yet, methinks, will my troubles cease, but the gods ere that will bring many to pass. Nay, O queen, have pity; for it is to thee first that I am come after many grievous toils, and of the others who possess this city and land I know not one. Shew me the city, and give me some rag to throw about me, if thou hadst any wrapping for the clothes when thou camest hither. And for thyself, may the gods grant thee all that thy heart desires; a husband and a home may they grant thee, and oneness of heart—a goodly gift. For nothing is greater or better than this, when man and wife dwell in a home in one accord, a great grief to their foes and a joy to their friends; but they know it best themselves."

Odysseus Talks to Achilles in Underworld

‘Achilles, no man aforetime was more blessed nor shall ever be hereafter. For of old, when thou wast alive, we Argives honored thee even as the gods, and now that thou art here, thou rulest mightily among the dead. Wherefore grieve not at all that thou art dead, Achilles.’

“So I spoke, and he straightway made answer and said:
‘Nay, seek not to speak soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.

Greatest Joy: Fighting with Son and Grand-son

“Telemachus, now shalt thou learn this—having thyself come to the place of battle, where the best warriors are put to the trial—to bring no disgrace upon the house of thy fathers, for we have ever excelled in strength and in valor over all the earth.”

510] And wise Telemachus answered him: “Thou shalt see me, if thou wilt, dear father, in my present temper, bringing no disgrace upon thy house, even as thou sayest.”

[513] So said he, and Laertes was glad, and spoke, saying: “What a day is this for me, kind gods! Verily right glad am I: my son and my son's son are vying with one another in valor.”

Repay your debts and make right the wrongs you have done

[Teiresias bade me go forth to full many cities of men, bearing a shapely oar in my hands, till I should come to men that know naught of the sea, and eat not of food mingled with salt; aye, and they know naught of ships with purple cheeks, or of shapely oars that serve as wings to ships. And he told me this sign, right manifest; nor will I hide it from thee. When another wayfarer, on meeting me, should say that I had a winnowing fan on my stout shoulder, then he bade me fix my oar in the earth, and make goodly offerings to lord Poseidon—a ram and a bull and a boar, that mates with sows—and depart for my home, and offer sacred hecatombs to the immortal gods, who hold broad heaven, to each one in due order. And death shall come to me myself far from the sea, a death so gentle, that shall lay me low, when I am overcome with sleek old age, and my people shall dwell in prosperity around me. All this, he said, should I see fulfilled.”

Sappho: An Alternative Value System

Some there are who say that the fairest thing seen
on the black earth is an array of horsemen;
some, men marching; some would say ships; but I say
she whom one loves best
is the loveliest.

[The Anactoria Poem](#)

Oedipus: Hubris

Insolence gives birth to tyranny—
that insolence which vainly crams itself
and overflows with so much wealth
beyond what's right or beneficial,
that once it's climbed the highest rooftop,
it's hurled down by force—such a quick fall
there's no safe landing on one's feet...

But if a man conducts himself
disdainfully in what he says and does,
and manifests no fear of righteousness,
no reverence for the statues of the gods,
may miserable fate seize such a man
for his disastrous arrogance,

if he does not behave with justice
when he strives to benefit himself,
appropriates all things impiously,
and, like a fool, profanes the sacred.

[890]

1060

Socrates: Humility and Limits of Knowledge; Plato's "Apology"

- Oracle at Delphi
- Questions Politicians, Poets, Artisans
- But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets; because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters...This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and make inquisition into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.

Conclusion

- Strife/Competition can be Good or Bad
- Honor and Shame
- Human Fate and Mortality
- Importance of Family
- Fulfill obligations and debts
- Love and Beauty
- Avoid Hubris
- Be Humble in Your Knowledge