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SOLON'S FOX: POETRY AND REVOLUTION IN ARCHAIC ATHENS

Who was Solon and what did he actually do? These questions cannot be answered with any degree of certainty. He is considered the founder of Athenian democracy, but how, in what capacity, and in what context did he found it? In this paper I will not try to answer these questions positively, but rather negatively, by focusing on some problems of interpretation and some assumptions that prejudice a clear overview of the situation in Archaic Athens.

I feel that several important issues can be raised regarding the metaphor of the fox in Solon fragment 11 of West's edition, particularly in view of Bowie's theory regarding the performance context of early Greek elegy¹. This theory, briefly put, postulates that all early Greek elegiac poetry was performed, either in the symposia or in festivals. It is highly probable that this theory is correct, and for the purposes of this present exercise I will assume that it is correct. I also want to take issue and raise some questions which are suggested by the claim, as Kathleen Freeman put it: "Before Solon's reforms the Athenian constitution was a strict oligarchy; after them it develops rapidly in the direction of democracy ... This development was to a great extent the result of his work ..."²

I translate the fragment:

*If you have suffered grief through your baselessness
do not attribute this lot to the gods.
You yourselves empowered (?) them (?) by giving defenses (?),
and through these things you have base slavery.
Each one of you walks along the trail of a fox,
all of you have a gaping mind.
You see the tongue and the words of a crafty man,
but you do not look at the work that is coming about.*

I purposefully do not translate the asyndeton in l. 6, because I am not entirely sure that the thought it is conveying is a causal explanation. The most problematic line is the third, however. Even in Hellenistic times people were not sure what to make of it. Primarily due to it they thought Solon was referring to Peisistratos shortly after his departure from Athens and Peisistratos' taking power.³ This may be the case. What I am interested in is the metaphor of the fox and how a consideration of its use and implications may shed some light on the problems that plague a historical perspective of this relatively mysterious period in Greek history.

¹ E.L. Bowie, "Early Greek Elegy, Symposium and Public Festival" *JHS* 106 (1986), p. 18-32.

² *The Work and Life of Solon*, Oxford 1926, p. 13.

³ Plut., *Sol.* 18.5, Diog. Laert. 1.51, and Diod. 9.20.2.

The proverbial craftiness of the fox has a long history⁴. But I feel that the sense of these lines cannot be apprehended fruitfully by considering other examples of the use of fox-imagery. Cratinus fr. 135 K-A has the sense “each one of you is bribed like a fox.” This meaning is probably not what Solon intended. According to Masaracchia⁵ the meaning of the line is “ciascuno di voi va sulle orme della volpe” (293). This is what comes to mind most readily. But I do not entirely agree with the implications he draws from this reading. He draws attention to the fox’s greed; and this does capture part of the sense, but not all of it. The fundamental question is, does the fox refer to the citizens (or whomever the elegy is addressed to), or does it refer to the “crafty man” in l. 7. Either reading carries implications; both readings are plausible.

If the thought is that the citizens are *becoming* foxes, the meaning is that they are becoming crafty and unscrupulous, because their minds are deficient. And the crafty man is the one that is causing them to be so, and they fail to see the work of their indifference. But if the thought is that they are *following* a fox in following this man (whoever the crafty man is), the meaning is that their porousness of mind is displayed in their listening to the crafty man. I grant, that the difference in meaning is very slight between the two variations. But it is important if we want to know the context of the poem’s performance.

The problem with considering l. 5 to refer to the citizens’ craftiness is that in the following line their *voŷs* is called *χαῦνος*. The focus of Solon’s accusation is not the fox then, but the citizens, specifically their empty-mindedness. I doubt that a fox can be called “empty-minded,” since it is proverbial for its unscrupulous craftiness. The other possibility for the sense of these lines is derived from other Solonian poems, particularly the “Eunomia” and 9W, wherein Vlastos and others⁶ see a new concept of civic duty emerging. This sense can be summed up: citizens must look after one another. Usually, this view is expressed in the context of the evidence for archaic pollution; and Solon is given the credit for the shift from a supernatural ethic to a civic ethic. Accordingly, the metaphor of the fox is meant to invoke an image of greed and indifference. Masaracchia’s interpretation - i.e. to take the poem as a general warning against thoughtlessness - follows along the basic lines of Vlastos’s, but the reading can only be persuasive, as he astutely says (292)⁷, if we ignore the sources themselves, all of whom interpret the fragment as referring to Peisistratos’ rise to power, and take l. 7 to refer to “a man” in the general sense, and not one particular man, i.e. Peisistratos. This reading tends to gloss over the problematic l.3, whereas my reading would preserve the ancient commentators’ interpretation.

Following my reading of Solon’s lines, they become a rebuke against the citizens for not staying the course, but rather following the tracks of a fox, not through craftiness but through stupidity. The

⁴ Most prominent for our purposes are Babr. 95, 103, Aes. 147, Ael. 6.24, 13.11; also in Aristophanes, *Peace* 1190, where for the first time comparison is drawn between the craftiness of the fox and the bravery of a lion, and *Wasps* 1241, “it is not possible to play the fox and to be a friend to both ...;” also in *Lys.* 1268, where we have αἰμυλᾶν ἄλωπέκων, “the craftiness of foxes,” in contrast to “an easy [εὐπορος] friendship through covenants [συνθήκαις]”.

⁵ *Solone*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice 1958, p. 289-295.

⁶ “Solonian Justice”, *CP* 41 (1946), p. 65-83, was the first. Recently J. McGlew, *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece*, Cornell University Press 1993, p. 91-123. He has a very different take on Solon 11 than myself. He sees it as an expression of contempt “for his competition, the Athenians who have different ideas of his political responsibility and their own” (101). To support this he follows the GP edition, which cuts the fragment off after “you look to the tongue and words of a wily man” and does not take “you do not see what work is happening” as part of the same poem.

⁷ Thus also Wilamowitz-Müllendorf, *Aristoteles und Athen*, II.312: “... nicht um einen einzelnen, sondern um eine mehrheit ..., die μεγάλοι ἄνδρες.”

fox is not the primary thing here, it is the tracks and their being followed. In other words I take the image to refer to the *actual* tracks, not to tracks in a metaphorical sense. The fox is a scavenging animal, and it wanders from here and there when it is moving. So I take the lines to refer to a foxhunt. Xenophon describes dogs hunting hares⁸, and the hunting of a fox should not be very different. The hounds “make many circles and tangents ... they lose their prey, they find it again ...” Accordingly, the sense becomes: you are wandering aimlessly, i.e. you have lost your sense of direction⁹.

The main reason why I prefer my reading to Masaracchia’s is that viewed this way, an important problem comes into view: Exactly why did Solon write poetry? And more importantly: How does his poetry relate to what he is accredited with accomplishing?

McGlew emphasizes Solon’s role as a mediator. He makes the claim that it was by utilizing the framework of tyranny that he accomplished his legislation.¹⁰ He points to the tradition of Solon ostracizing himself for a period, in which various stories locate him in Egypt¹¹, or in Asia Minor¹², and relates it to an abdication of tyrannical power: “... Solon reformed Athens the way a tyrant ruled his city: alone and in possession of extraordinary political power” (94). This viewing of Solon as a tyrant is plausible, if we solely want to understand how to make sense of the reforms that were attributed to him. We cannot imagine how one man, given the situation that AP and Plutarch give us, managed to do so much, unless he wielded dictatorial authority. But the problem is that no one ever called him a tyrant. AP calls him δῆμου προστάτης (2.3)¹³, but he is never called a tyrant¹⁴ And as

⁸ *Cyn.* 3.1. In 6. 3 he says that dogs should not become accustomed to hunting foxes, presumably because they will lose the trail of the hare and be thrown completely off by the meandering scent of the fox. If this small piece of evidence may be permitted to bear any weight, we could even say that Solon’s sense is: “You have gone completely off the track.”

⁹ I believe that a closer idea to Solon’s original intent can be obtained by considering an image in Dante. In *Inf.* 3.25-66, the first pocket of hell, Dante is confronted by an immense crowd of souls. They are following a banner (52), Virgil tells him “guarda e passa,” observe them and move on. These are they who were neither for God nor for his enemies (63), and so they have a fate worse than death (46). They were indifferent, or only for themselves (39), and they are legion (56-7). The particular image that I want to draw attention to is the banner (insegna). Dante characterizes it as “whirling” -girando- and behind it follows the crowd in whatever direction it might lead. These are whose mind is truly χαῦνος, they have no will of their own, but follow the herd and the fashion of the day.

¹⁰ The AP says: “Having become master of affairs [κύριος πραγμάτων] ...” he freed the people, divided everyone into classes, giving the upper classes right to magistracies, and the lower classes right to attend assemblies (6-7).

¹¹ Plato *Tim.* 20e ff. The thing to note here is the context of the story’s transmission. Donald Zeyl translating: “It’s a story that Solon, the wisest of the seven sages once vouched for. He was a kinsman and a very close friend of my great-grandfather Dropides. Solon himself says as much in many places in his poetry. Well, Dropides told the story to my grandfather Critias, and the old man in turn would tell it to us from memory. The story is that our city had performed great and marvelous deeds in ancient times, which owing to the passage of time and the destruction of human life, have vanished”. Side note: φθορὰς ἀνθρώπων could be either subjective or objective, making this sentence tantalisingly ambiguous.

¹² RE’s “Solon” article (p. 950) for full listing of testimonia.

¹³ See P.J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia*. Oxford, 1981, p. 97. He observes that Her. 3.82.4 very much sets up an opposition between tyrant and the “people’s protector.” In contrast, the AP (28.2) also mentions Peisistratos by that title. However 14.2 makes clear that a tyrant is something different from a protector: Solon knew that Peisistratos was “aiming at tyranny” – ἐπιτιθέμενον τυρανν[ί]δ[ι].

¹⁴ Thiel, in his *Studies in Ancient History*, Gieben 1994, p. 23-31, discusses the statement that Solon is to have said (Plut., *Sol.* 14.8), “tyranny is a good fort [χωρίον], but it has no exit [ἀπόβασιν],” and dismisses them

to the question whether he was an Aesymnete¹⁵ it would be logical if he was ever called that, for this would explain how exactly he managed to accomplish his reforms.

Here we must consider the matter from a historiographical perspective. I find Hignett's view¹⁶ appealing, that Solon could not have been a democratic hero before there was a democracy, and most of the tradition is probably an invention. I find it very difficult to understand and believe the view held both by ancient and modern commentators that "the Athenians, in a state of tension between rich and poor, chose Solon to be archon and mediator". Such choices are not just made. The transition from the period of strife that would inevitably precede drastic change cannot have been solved by one man legislating laws, no matter how wise he was. In Plutarch, the attributions reach the realm of the absurd. The Athenians saw Solon as alone blameless and unprejudiced (14.1). He taught them to feel sympathy with each other as though they were part of the same body (18.6). These claims are unbelievable. It is clear that even by Plato's time, people had lost any historical (what we would term so) perspective and were relying on hearsay and oral tradition. They, like us, were also trying to make sense of Solon's activity¹⁷. The problem, however, is: if Solon had the power (regardless of its specific nature) to bring about even a portion of the accomplishments he is accredited with, why would he write poems that almost seem to be pleading with the people?

I agree with Jacqueline de Romilly when she says¹⁸, "The Greeks were not interested in civilizations but in practical and political life; and, although they relished general ideas, their political life was too narrow and their attention too much in contact with immediate reality for them to dream of such grand prospects [i.e. the idea of the progress of power]. Also, these prospects rested on a notion that man himself changes, which was quite foreign to them. It is no surprise, then, that no Greek ever ventured to imagine such patterns." Aristotle is especially frustrating. We would expect him to have some insight into the question of the emergence of democracy, but he offers us nothing better than, "Democracy... arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because they are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal" (*Pol.* 5.1.1301a30, tr. Barnes). Confronted by such intransigence from our ancient authorities we have to ask ourselves: Is this question we are asking, how did democratic institutions come about, fair? It obviously never struck Aristotle. Are we perhaps abusing history for our own interests? I have to answer: yes and no. It would be naive to suppose that the social-structure and institutions of the city-state came about smoothly, without upheaval. On the other hand, it would be foolish to assume that only a great struggle can bring about change and form institutions. Aristotle makes the claim: "Revolution may be facilitated by the slowness of the change" (5.4.1303a20)¹⁹ Previously in the same section (a15) he makes the claim that states can change without revolution, "sometimes owing to election contests [ἐπιθειᾶς]," of which case he gives Heracleodorus as an example. To get a clearer picture of Solon's time we have to confront the ancient authors' prejudices, but also our own.

as unfitting Solon's profile, who would have refused tyranny "on principle." This sort of argument, I find, is circular: we know Solon's principles through his statements and then adjudge his statements through his principles. But even the ancients did not have much more than this to go on.

¹⁵ Arist., *Pol.* 3.14.1285b25.

¹⁶ *A History of the Athenian Constitution to the End of the Fifth Century*, Oxford 1952.

¹⁷ Plutarch (14.1) says that Phantias the Lesbian claims Solon achieved the reconciliation between rich and poor by means of deceit. Thiel, op. cit. p. 21, points out that the Phantias-fragment may indicate that Solon himself made no positive promises, as far as was known in Phantias' time.

¹⁸ *The Rise and Fall of States According to Greek Authors*, University of Michigan 1977, p. 5.

¹⁹ παρὰ μικρόν. In the previous section he mentions Heracleodorus of Oreum, who "from an oligarchy made [κατασκευάσεν] a constitution and democracy" (1303a19). Again, the same assumption: one man *made* a constitution and a democracy.

To review: If we say that Solon achieved his program single-handedly, as our ancient sources suggest and most modern commentators seem to assume, we are claiming he had tyrannical power, which as we have seen is not the case. If, on the other hand, we say he was only the foremost of a reform party, we risk being anachronistic and positing democracy before democracy is supposed to have existed. There must be a middle ground. We must avoid the error of the either/or fallacy: either democracy or no democracy. Rather, we can say that the mechanism and the institution of democracy *followed* its spirit. That is, the climate of discussion and disputation was present before the formal assemblies - an *informal* democracy. And this mechanism being present, through it the change of the social status of the classes was effected.

The other alternative we have is a large-scale upheaval in the model of the French revolution, which none of our sources so much as makes a hint at, unless they understood by *stasis* the whole gamut of conflict, forensic to bloody, and not just “party strife” as the word is usually translated. This postulation would solve the problem of the origin of democracy, but would run counter to the facts. Unless we are willing to claim that the history of this conflict is buried in myth and perhaps even purposefully repressed.

Further, to view Solon as a moralist is to overestimate the power of the moralist in general. In my opinion a moralist records the morality of his time and gives it a rational foundation, but rarely seeks or succeeds in changing it. Attempts to see a theorist in him²⁰ are also suspicious, both because they inevitably need to read too much into his fragments, which are after all just that, and because the fragments have nothing of theory in them, as I understand the word²¹.

The accounts we have paint a very bleak picture of the situation before the reforms. AP 2 says: “The poor and their wives and their children were in slavery to the rich ... If they failed to pay they became subject to arrest, both they and their children. And loans were with their bodies as security ... They were without a share, so to speak, in anything.” Now, we have to be careful how we read this passage. Woodcock is right to caution us²². Notice the rhetorical nature of the passage, the insistence of mentioning children and wives. Then the pun: “with a share in nothing,” literally. This is clearly an oversimplified view the AP displays. Perhaps it betrays the author’s bias, perhaps it was written in support of democracy by showing how bleak things were before. At any rate, it should be taken with a grain of salt.

A more realistic view is that espoused by Rhodes that the opposition to the nobles came not only from the poor but also from the ignoble wealthy (96). Aristotle recounts for us the reasons that men revolt: profit or honor, or their opposites (5.2.1320a30). It is very easy to conceive the shift from Homeric aristocracy to oligarchy would have kept the principles of nobility, while at the same time new occupations such as trader and merchant would have produced a class of wealthy people of ignoble birth. These would have found themselves possessors of economic yet not institutional power and influence. And they would have provided a substantial impetus for change.

²⁰ This is a view that Emily Anhalt develops most successfully. Although she focuses on what aspects of thought would have compelled Solon to introduce democracy. So she reads his poems as instances of political theory, not as I do, as traces of conflict and politics.

²¹ If pressed to point to one concept that Solon might have introduced into Athenian political discourse, I would say that would be *aletheia*. See T. Cole, “Archaic Truth”, *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 13 (1983), p. 7-28. He makes a plausible reconstruction of the word’s meaning. He bases his ideas on passages of Homer, Pindar and Aeschylus primarily, but there is no reason to think that his conclusion, “the linguistic success [of ἀλήθεια] can be explained ... as yet another aspect of the general passage in Greek thought from oral, mythical and poetic to logical and rational” (28), cannot also be applied fruitfully to interpretation of Solon, specifically fr. 10 W.

²² *Solon the Liberator*, Octagon 1965, p. 17.

Given this unstable situation, I find it easier to see how Solon's poetry would have served a purpose. He needed support, because after all he was not a tyrant. And the banquets of the wealthy, both the noble and the ignoble, served as an ideal forum. It is the symposia, furthermore, that I would postulate as the cradles of democracy. Accordingly, fr. 11 W is a call for steadfastness, delivered within the political arena of these impromptu gatherings. We can view the famous image of Solon as a wolf (36.26-7) in similar interpretation. He says:

*Because of [my enemies] I steeled my heart,
and spun about like a wolf among a pack of dogs.*

Things are grim for him. He is losing the popular support that carried him to the archonship and accepted his new distribution of tribes. He needs to rally this support. How does he do this? By reminding his constituents of his accomplishments:

*The black Earth, whose boundaries I pulled up,
that were wounding her; before she was enslaved,
now she is free (36.5-7).*

*I stood putting a mighty shield between both [rich and poor],
not letting either prevail unjustly (5.5-6).*

But also by preaching their folly:

*You follow a fox's trail
because your mind is empty (11.5-6).*

*Place your great mind upon the middle way;
for we will not obey, nor will these things be favorable to you (4c).*

And by proposing an alternative:

*Eunomia makes all things favorable and well-ordered,
it place fetters around the unjust;
it smoothens the rough, ceases extravagance²³, obscures hybris,
prunes (?) the blossoming flowers of atē,
straightens crooked judgments, calms boastful deeds,
and ceases the deeds of strife.*

These poems would make no historical sense if written by a man who was chosen by two inimical sides to conciliate them and to give them new laws, raising one while diminishing the other. Rather, they give us an image of constant struggle between Solon, his enemies, but also his constituents. I think Oswyn Murray is mistaken when he interprets Solon as the figure of a lawgiver. He says: "The figure of the lawgiver is a response to this double need to curb the power of the aristocracy and maintain the force of customary law. The lawgiver was chosen from among the class

²³ I am aware that κόρος is translated "satiety," or "the insolence that is bread through satiety," but I think our "extravagance" captures the idea nicely. "Satiety," in my understanding of the English word, is not negative. "Luxury" or "extravagance" have the sense of fulness, with the implication of *over*-satiety.

of experts, and could therefore be given absolute power to establish a written code."²⁴ This glosses over many problems. I find it difficult to believe that classes with a clear conception of their authority bred into them over generations would submit to change without a struggle. Rather, I think the figure of the *nomothetes* is an explanatory device used by the ancients themselves to answer the question: how did we come to be democratic?

However, I do not want to give the impression that I believe Solon was unimportant and just a pawn to history and forces of change. He must have been a forceful personality that compelled confidence in all who heard him. Very much like a modern politician, he might have garnered support from opposing sides. And like a modern politician, he would have been held accountable when he did not carry through his promises. In sum, whatever the actual events were that led to his archonship, what support and opposition he had from which quarter, I have been trying to show that things were very complicated and unstable. The very artifacts we have of him, his poems, if viewed under the proper light show that the situation was far more complex than even perhaps his contemporaries and himself could have imagined.

²⁴ *Early Greece*, Harvard 1993, p. 182.