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By A. W. Verrall and Edited by M. A. Bayfield and J. D. Duff

Excerpt

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TYRTAEUS. I

THE history of poetry, says Horace¹, begins with the various lore attributed to such half-mythical personages as Orpheus and Amphion, and presents to us next the famous names of Homer and of Tyrtæus, 'whose verses made sharp for battle the souls of men.' It is implied by the context that this conjunction, though partly suggested by community of spirit between the poet of the *Iliad* and the military bard of Lacedaemon, is also justified by chronology; and in fact, if we accept the tradition which ruled in the Roman schools and still rules in modern manuals, the elegiacs and anapaests composed by Tyrtæus for the encouragement of the Spartans in their struggle to recover Messenia were the earliest pieces of literature, strictly historical and datable, which the Greeks possessed. According to the story, presented to us in its entirety by Pausanias, and accepted in substance by all writers of the Roman age, the original subjugation of Messenia was accomplished in two episodes, a first conquest and a rebellion, separated by an interval of about one generation. The central date is B.C. 700. The activity of Tyrtæus was assigned, since he expressly

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describes his war as a war of recovery, not to the first of these contests but to the second, and his date therefore stood about B.C. 680. The modern speculations, which would bring it a little lower, assuming for the moment that they work on a substantial foundation, would still make no essential difference. If we place Tyrtaeus at any time before 650, we put him as high as we can with assurance put any extant Greek literature, except the primitive Epos or portions of it: and if in that age or near it his elegiacs, being what they are, were current and popular in Laconia, their importance to history in many respects is such as we cannot easily overrate. The object of this paper is to overturn this hypothesis completely, not by any speculative argument, but by direct testimony, the full, plain, and conclusive statement of the principal and only trustworthy witness who speaks to the point.

The adventures of Tyrtaeus in the 'second Messenian war' of the seventh century, as admitted or partly admitted by modern historians, are the remnant of an elaborate 'house on the sands,' some time since flooded and ruined by the rain of criticism. All, I believe, are now agreed, and it is therefore needless to argue, that about these primeval conflicts between the Spartans and Messenians the ancients had no solid information, except what they might rightly or wrongly infer from the poems of Tyrtaeus. To support that long romance,—all omens, oracles, desperate amours, miraculous feats, and hair-breadth escapes,—which is reproduced in detail by Pausanias,

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no authority is even pretended, except writers, the chief of them a poet, separated by four centuries from the events supposed: and if Rhianus of Crete and Myron of Priene troubled themselves about the evidence for their novels any more than Scott troubled himself about the evidence for *Ivanhoe*, they must have found that evidence in such oral tradition as may have been propagated in Messenian cabins during the dark ages of oppression, ready to emerge and expand after the deliverance effected in the fourth century by Epaminondas. But for that deliverance, as Grote remarks, we should probably have heard little or nothing about the original resistance. The historians or quasi-historians of the third and later centuries would probably then have left the events of the 'first and second Messenian wars' in that general oblivion which seems to cover them down to the age of Aristotle. In these circumstances scientific criticism had a simple task. Aristomenes, the protagonist of the alleged Messenian insurrection, belongs to that class of popular heroes whose history is naught and their very existence not unquestionable. He may stand possibly above Tell or Vortigern, but not with William Wallace or Llewelyn, perhaps on a level with Hereward the Wake. For serious writers it is now enough to mention his name¹.

¹ See for example Beloch, *Gr. Geschichte*, vol. 1, p. 284. Those who (as Prof. Holm and Mr Abbott) condescend to repeat the narrative of Pausanias do so under reservations effectually destructive; and in fact there is no controversy about the matter.

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If therefore these same writers treat on a totally different footing the connexion of this same episode with the life of Tyrtaeus, if for the 'second Messenian war' they use the fragments of Tyrtaeus as confidently as Aeschylus for the battle of Salamis, they do so, not because this proceeding is countenanced by Pausanias, nor out of deference to any witness who can have been influenced by the transfiguration performed upon the history of Messenia in the romances of the third century. Pausanias, and in general all the writers of later antiquity, accepted and circulated so much about primitive Messenia which no one would accept now, that we should concern ourselves little, if that were the question, with what they allege about Tyrtaeus. But in fact the poems of Tyrtaeus, and his story, complete in all essential features, can be traced, not indeed into the seventh century, but well above the level of Rhianus or Myron¹. Already in the fourth century both he and his works were known and had admirers at Athens. He is cited and some points in his life are noticed by Plato in the *Laws*; he is extolled by the orator Lycurgus, who also narrates at length the circumstances in which his elegies were composed. And more significant than all upon the question of his historical validity, Aristotle, in the *Politics*, adduces without scruple the witness of his poem entitled *Eunomia*, or *The Blessings of Order*, as to the

¹ The date of Myron cannot be fixed, but that he was an author of the same kind and standing as Rhianus is plain from the account and treatment of him in Pausanias.

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effect of external pressure in producing a particular kind of political discontent. It is upon the strength of these names, which certainly make together as strong a body of evidence as could be desired, that historians now accept what can be learnt from or about Tyrtaeus as affording a glimpse at least of 'the second Messenian war.' Rhianus cannot have seduced Plato; Lycurgus had not read Myron; Aristotle had probably never heard, and certainly did not depend upon, any fireside anecdotes that may have run loose in Messenia. If all three are agreed—and they are—in accepting a certain belief about Tyrtaeus, it was probably in the main well founded. But the question remains, What was it?

Of the three, the fullest and most explicit statement is that of the orator. The allusions of Plato and Aristotle, though they support that statement so far as they go, and are significant when read in the light of it, contain but little information, and upon the vital point are in themselves uncertain. The account of Lycurgus, which words could hardly make plainer or more definite than it is, puts everything, if we believe him, beyond question. In reading it we should bear in mind that the speaker was in his day perhaps the very first figure in the literary world of Athens, not so much for his actual production, which is and was always reckoned imperfect, as for his political and social character, his zealous and somewhat ostentatious interest in educational matters at large. If there is any person from whom we may accept the assurance that at Athens

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in the latter part of the fourth century a certain piece of Athenian history was unquestioned, that person is Lycurgus, who shall now be quoted at length. He is dilating upon the beauty and praises of patriotism, which he has illustrated from Euripides; and he continues the subject as follows¹.

Another authority whom I would commend to your approbation is Homer: a poet of whose merit your forefathers had so high an opinion, that they appointed his works by law to be recited, solely and exclusively, at the quadrennial celebration of the Panathenaea, as an advertisement to Hellas that the noblest of actions were the chosen ideal of Athens. And in this they did well. Laws in their brevity command what is right, but do not teach it: it is the poets, with their pictures of human life, who select the noblest examples, and also by reason and demonstration recommend them to men. Take for instance the patriotic exhortation which is addressed to the Trojans by Hector,

‘Fight to the ships, fight on: and whoso meets
Perchance from sword or spear the fated death,
E’en let him die! To die defending Troy
Mis-seems him not; and for his wife and babes,
They are saved, and safe his homestead and his fields,
If but the foeman’s navy homeward fly.’

This, gentlemen, is the poetry to which your ancestors used to listen; and the ambition of deeds like these wrought in them such a valour, that not for their own city only, but for Hellas also, our common fatherland, they were ready to lay down their lives, as was seen when the army of Marathon gave battle to the foreigner and defeated the host of Asia, imperilling themselves to win security for the whole Greek brotherhood, and proud not of their glory but of the deeds by which it was deserved. They had made Athens the champion of Hellas and mistress over the national foe, because their manly virtue was not exercised in

¹ Lycurgus, pp. 162–163, *c. Leocr.* §§ 102–109.

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phrases, but exhibited to the world in act. And therefore so excellent, both as a body and as individuals, were the men by whom our city was in those days administered, that when the Lacedaemonians, who in earlier times were first in martial qualities, had a war with the Messenians, they were commanded by the oracle to take a leader from among us, and were promised victory, if they did so, over their opponents. And if to the descendants of Heracles (for such have been ever the kings of Sparta) the Delphian god preferred a leader from among us, it must be supposed that the merit of our countrymen was beyond all comparison. It is matter of common knowledge that the director whom they received from Athens was Tyrtaeus, with whose help they overcame their enemies, and also framed a system of discipline for their youth, a measure of prudence looking beyond the peril of the moment to the permanent advantage of the future. Tyrtaeus left to them elegies of his composition, by the hearing of which their boys are trained to manliness: and whereas of other poets they make no account, for this one they are so zealous as to have enacted that, whenever they are under arms for a campaign, all should be summoned to the king's tent, to hear the poems of Tyrtaeus; nothing, as they think, could so well prepare the men to meet a patriot's death. It is good that you should listen to some of these elegiacs, and thus learn what manner of poetry obtained the approval of Sparta.

‘He nobly dies who, foremost in the band,
 Falls bravely fighting for his fatherland;
 But beggared and expelled, to utter woes
 From town or happy farm the exile goes,
 With all his dearest vagabond for life,
 Old sire, sweet mother, babes, and wedded wife.
 No loving welcome waits him in the haunt
 Where need may drive him and the stress of want.
 His birth to stain, his person to deface,
 All vileness cleaves to him, and all disgrace.
 If, then, the wanderer pines in such neglect,
 And all his seed are doomed to disrespect,

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Fierce for our country let us fight to death,
 And for our children fling away our breath.
 Stand firm, young gallants, each to other true;
 Let never rout or scare begin with you.
 Stout be your hearts within, your courage high,
 And fighting, reck not if ye live or die.
 Your elders there, whose limbs are not so light,
 Betray not ye their honour by your flight.
 What shame it were, upon the field to find
 The wounded, age in front and youth behind;
 To see the hapless senior, hoar and gray,
 Gasp in the dust his noble soul away,
 His hands the bleeding entrails holding in—
 O sight to taint the very eyes with sin!—
 His body bare!...But nothing misbeseems
 The lad, whose youth in him yet lovely teems:
 Eyes, hearts adore him, while he draws his breath;
 And falls he vanward, fair he is in death.
 So plant you each one firmly on the land
 With open stride, set tooth to lip,—and stand.'

Yes, gentlemen, they are fine verses, and profitable to those who will give them attention. And the people, therefore, which was in the habit of hearing this poetry, was so disposed to bravery, that they disputed the primacy with Athens, a dispute for which, it must be admitted, there was reason on both sides in high actions formerly achieved. Our ancestors had defeated that first invading army landed by the Persians upon Attica, and thus revealed the superiority of courage above wealth and of valour above numbers. The Lacedæmonians in the lines of Thermopylae, if not so fortunate, in courage surpassed all rivalry. And the bravery of both armies is therefore visibly and truly attested before Hellas by the sepulchral inscriptions, the barrow at Thermopylae bearing the lines,

'Go tell to Sparta, thou that passest by,
 That here obedient to her laws we lie.'

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while over your ancestors it is written,

‘Foremost at Marathon for Hellas’ right
The Athenians humbled Media’s gilded might.’

Such is the passage which—the fact may appear astonishing, but it shall presently be accounted for—is constantly mentioned in histories and books of reference, as part of the evidence for the current assertion that Tyrtaeus lived and wrote two hundred years before the Persian war. Is it not surely manifest beyond all possibility of debate, if only we raise the question, that on that supposition the whole narrative and argument of Lycurgus would be nonsense? Lycurgus assumes, and calls it a ‘matter of common knowledge,’ that Tyrtaeus flourished about a hundred years before his own time, *between the Persian war and the Peloponnesian*, and that the Messenian war in which Tyrtaeus served the Lacedaemonians was that of our fifth century, now dated about 464–454 B.C. The preference, he says, given by the Spartans with divine sanction to Tyrtaeus, an Athenian, over their own countrymen, was a *consequence* and *attestation* of the virtue displayed by Athens in the defeat and conquest of the Persians. And again, the teaching of Tyrtaeus, by restoring and elevating the Spartan character, encouraged and enabled the Spartans to dispute the pre-eminence which (according to the orator) in the times immediately following the deliverance of Hellas had belonged without question to Athens. How can this be understood, or what can it mean,

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if Tyrtaeus had lived and done this work, had strengthened the Lacedaemonian arms and improved the Lacedaemonian schooling, two hundred and fifty years before Athens and Sparta contended for the hegemony, and a full century or more before that public adoption of Homer by Athens as the basis of an improved education from which the orator (rightly, though not perhaps exactly on the right grounds) deduces, as an effect, the primacy of Athens, and the greatness displayed by his city at Marathon, at Salamis, and in the development of the Confederacy of Delos? Athens became so pre-eminent about B.C. 475, that she bestowed a teacher upon Sparta—in 680? Sparta from about B.C. 445 began to dispute that pre-eminence of Athens, by virtue of an education adopted—in 680?

The meaning of Lycurgus is so plain, and so plainly stated, that we hardly know how to suppose it to have been overlooked. But it is at any rate the fact that, in the best and most recent expositions which I can discover, the early date of Tyrtaeus is taken as constant, without a hint that, according to one at least of the oldest witnesses adduced, that date is wrong by a trifle of two centuries. And there is a possible reason for this, which is itself not the least curious part of the case. It is not indeed possible, as I think, to read the whole passage of Lycurgus, with a mind awake to the question, 'At what date does he put Tyrtaeus?', without arriving at the right answer. But it is easy (I may perhaps say so, as I have done it several times myself) to