



THE
GREEK
POETS

HOMER TO THE PRESENT



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EARLY MODERN

IN THE TRADITIONAL VIEW of Greek poetry, a glorious ancient Greece is followed by an exciting, if not that well-known, modern Greece, with a fallow two millennia in between. But in this anthology a host of new translations brings to life the poetry not only of Byzantine, but also Venetian, Ottoman, medieval, and newly independent Greece. With the decline of Byzantium and then the fall of Constantinople in 1453, poets throughout the Greek world turned away from heroic and religious subject matter and focused on the pain and wonder of ordinary life. In Stefanos Sachlikis's poem about life in a Cretan jail or the anonymous animal fables of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, we already sense a new aesthetic in which neither Athens and the classical world, nor Constantinople and Christianity, are the measure of things.

Linguistically as well as thematically, poets from the fourteenth century on increasingly moved away from ancient and ecclesiastical models to writing the way people spoke. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw attempts to return to a "purer" language closer to ancient ideals, but ultimately the language of the people prevailed, paving the way for the literary achievements of the twentieth century. Unlike many cultures in which literature is written in the high language, in Greece poets tend to leave the learned language to the pedants. The early modern period gives us abundant examples of poetry written in everyday language about everything and meant for everyone.

While politically the centuries of Venetian and Ottoman occupation are often

characterized as dark times, marked by the marginalization of the Greek world, in literary terms cultural syncretism seemed to liberate the poets from the burden of tradition. Greek poets began experimenting with poetry that was about all sorts of times and places, not only those of classical and biblical importance. In Georgios Chortatsis's play *Panoria* a lame shepherd flirts with an old peasant woman when he loses his goat. In the *Erotokritos*, Greece's greatest tale of star-crossed lovers, Vitsentzos Kornaros creates a lyrical world where wet-nurses, knights, and princesses mix and remap social order, while monks like Kaisarios Dapontes tell us more about the sensual pleasure of figs and travel than about God. Italy's influence during this period was formative. Whether in the Venetian Crete of Georgios Chortatsis or Vitsentzos Kornaros, or in the Venetian, and later British-dominated, Ionian islands of Andreas Kalvos and Dionysios Solomos, Italy offered a language and culture more open to other influences.

When freedom finally came after the Revolution of 1821, poets continued to keep their minds on ordinary life. Although their poetic forms paid homage to the heady times of war heroes and philhellenism, their hymns and odes often strayed from topics of national interest. Solomos, whose "Hymn to Liberty" became the national anthem, also wrote satirical verses, while nineteenth-century poets like Georgios Souris and Georgios Drossinis used their poems to praise coffee and cigarettes as well as the hallowed soil of Greece.

Scholars divide the poetry of this era into categories that reflect the places of the greatest literary activity, most notably Crete in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, the Ionian islands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Athens at the end of the nineteenth century. This anthology takes the view that works from the *Erotokritos* up to the beginning of the twentieth century already speak in a modern idiom. Without a Renaissance or an Enlightenment in the strictly European sense, Greek poetry seems to cut straight to a form of expression that is immediately recognizable to readers today. The folk songs that end this section are the best example of this precocious modernity. Mostly in their nineteenth-century versions, though with their roots going back to the twelfth century and earlier, these songs of love, lament, and everyday chores have the visual economy of twentieth-century poetry: red lips dye a kerchief, a stream and half the sun. And if the voices of women in this anthology have more often been available through the texts of men, here we finally have them firsthand. It is the homesick daughters and mourning mothers in these songs that speak most immediately to our modern sensibility.