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Greek Song Poetry

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Preface:

The Greek tradition is one permeated by poetic expression. From antiquity through to now, verse has communicated the emotions and stories emblematic of the human experience. The following poems come from two opposite sides of the small nation and reflect emotions universal to us all. They have both been sung and recited by the peoples of Greece for generations and are passed down to descendants as a way of preserving timeless feeling.

Mantinada:

A mantinada is a short Cretan musical expression that typically revolves around the themes of love and its sorrows or exuberance. The following is a mantinada found in the village of Spili, Rethymno, and is written in the Cretan dialect of Greek.

Μόνο εκείνος π'αγαπά
μπορεί να το πιστέψει,
πως της αγαπης ο καημός
τη σταματά τη σκέψη.

*Only he who is transfixed by love
can ever comprehend
how the yearnful sorrow of the heart
paralyzes the mind.*

-Traditional mantinada of Crete from the village of Spili, Rethymno as sung by Thanasis Skordalos.

Mirologi:

A mirologi in its most basic form is a melody of sorrow. A typical theme of mirologia is that of ξενιτια, or the feeling that one is foreign even to their own body due to grief, or general melancholy. The following mirologi began likely as a lament for the deceased but changed meaning in the late nineteenth century to the early eighteenth century as young men from Greece went abroad to the United States, Australia, Germany and U.K. in hopes of a brighter future. The lament was then used by the mothers, sisters, brothers, spouses, and even children they may have left behind to signal the sadness in their loss.

Ξενιτεμένο μου πουλί και παραπονεμένο,
μωρέ ξένε μου και παραπονεμένο
η ξενιτιά σε χαίρεται
κι εγώ 'χω τον καημό σου, μωρέ ξένε μου
κι εγώ 'χω τον καημό σου.
Τι να σου στείλω ξένε μου
αυτού στα ξένα που 'σαι μωρέ ξένε μου,
αυτού στα ξένα που 'σαι;
Σου στέλνω μήλο, σέπεται,

κυδώνι μαραγκιάζει μωρέ ξένε μου,
κυδώνι μαραγκιάζει
Σου στέλνω και το δάκρυ μου
σ' ένα φτενό μαντίλι μωρέ ξένε μου,
σ' ένα φτενό μαντίλι
ο δάκρυ μου 'ναι καυτερό
και καίει το μαντίλι μωρέ ξένε μου,
και καίει το μαντίλι

*My foreign bird, my grief-striking one,
mine who is abroad and has evoked my grief,
In the foreign land, they rejoice to have you but here I long for you, mine abroad,
and here I long for you.
What can I send you, my heart abroad,
there in the distance,
to remind of where we lament you.
I shall send you an apple
alas, it will only rot
I shall send you a pear
alas, it would only wither
all does wither.
Then I shall send you my tears
in ragged cloth, my dear departed
In withered cloth.
How the tears burn,
and too I burn this old cloth
My foreign one
cloth burned by my sorrow.*

-Traditional song-poem of the Pogoni region in Epirus.

All translations done by Peter Stamoulis '26.