Solonian *Hybris*: Resurrecting Religion in the *Eunomia* (4W)

*Hybris* in Solon is often discussed in a legislative rather than religious context. Most often, scholars study Solon’s use of *hybris* hoping to reconstruct the Solonian *Graphe Hybreos* mentioned by Demosthenes. Oswyn Murray, for example, suggests that Solon 4W (hereafter, “*Eunomia*”) uses *hybris* primarily in a legal sense, neglecting the larger poetic and religious force of the term in favor of its narrow legislative implications (Murray 1990). Such a reductive approach remains common in later scholarship: N.R.E. Fisher defines Solonian *hybris* as “the activities of the greedy rich” (Fisher 1992: 71); Anhalt sees the *Eunomia* as a means of bringing about “a desired social condition, a goal of Solon’s personal policy” (Anhalt 1993: 111); Blaise interprets the poem as exploring “autonomous (mortal) political action” apart from the gods (Blaise 2006: 127).

More recent publications have also focused on Solon’s law of *hybris* to the exclusion of his poetry (e.g., Lambert 2011). But even if the *Eunomia* does in fact contain the secrets of the *Graphe Hybreos*, to focus on *hybris’* legislative aspect alone ignores the profoundly religious language and imagery which pervades the poem.

Comparison with Solon 13W (hereafter, “*Prayer to the Muses*” or just “*Prayer*”) will demonstrate the religious depth of the *Eunomia*. The *Prayer* is explicitly and uncontestedly religious in a traditional sense. Close analysis of the terminology and imagery that the two poems share reveals that the *Eunomia* and the *Prayer to the Muses* adopt the same religious stance. The *Eunomia*, then, transcends simple allusion to Solon’s political platform. The sympotic imagery which prompts Murray to define *hybris* narrowly as “drunken violence committed in the context of the symposium” (Murray 1990: 144) is in fact only the root of a
larger metaphor: the symposium represents the city, and the city is subject to the laws of traditional religion. Solon fears not only civic disruption but also divine retribution.

Such a theologically-charged poetic stance does not preclude a political agenda. It does, however, avoid notions of class struggle and oppression in favor of theo-political ideology, even anticipating pre-Socratic notions of balance and world order. (See, for example, McKirahan 2010:58-69 on “Xenophanes of Colophon.”) This presentation of the poet’s political views in religious rather than demagogic terms suggests an intended audience of intellectual elites gathered at a symposium rather than a popular throng gathered in the agora. (An interpretation accepted by Nouissa-Fantuzzi 2010: 233. Contra West 1974: 12. Cf. Bowie 1986; Irwin 2005; Nagy 2010.) Such a context would further elucidate the utility of Solon’s sympotic metaphor: the disorder of the symposium is likened to the disorder of the polis, which in its turn, draws down the universal vengeance of the gods. Seen from this perspective, Solon’s presentation of hybris is a lynch-pin connecting contemporary politics, their moral and religious implications, and the performance audience, which would presumably be a collection of powerful, sober-minded aristocrats whose influence Solon has already won or hopes to secure. Solon’s Eunomia, then, is a persuasive manifesto, not limited to a single talking point (the hybris of the komos) or even simple politics, but presenting his larger political aim in terms of deference to the gods and morality: Solon seeks to restrain all forms of excess within the polis – excess which invites the retribution of the gods and so must be avoided at all costs.
Bibliography


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