

Historical Examples of War Poetry

Fragment 10, 7th Century BCE

For 'tis a fair thing for a good man to fall and die fighting in the van for his native land, whereas to leave his city and his rich fields and go a-begging is of all things the most miserable, wandering with mother dear and aged father, with little children and wedded wife.

For hateful shall such an one be among all those to whom he shall come in bondage to Want and loathsome Penury, and doth shame his lineage and belie his noble beauty, followed by all evil and dishonor. Now if so little thought be taken of a wanderer, and so little honor, respect, or pity, let us fight with a will for this land, and die for our children and never spare our lives.

Abide then, O young men, shoulder to shoulder and fight; begin not foul flight nor yet be afraid, but make the heart in your breasts both great and stout, and never shrink when you fight the foe. And the elder sort, whose knees are no longer nimble, fly not ye to leave them fallen to earth.

For 'tis a foul thing, in sooth, for an elder to fall in the van and lie before the younger, his head white and his beard hoary, breathing forth his stout soul in the dust, with his privities all bloody in his hands, a sight so foul to see and fraught with such ill to the seer, and his flesh also all naked;

yet to a young man all is seemly enough, so long as he have the noble bloom of lovely youth, aye a marvel he for men to behold, and desirable unto women, so long as ever he be alive, and fair in like manner when he be fallen in the vanguard. So let each man bite his lip with his teeth and abide firm-set astride upon the ground.

—Tyrtaeus, Spartan poet



Poem from *Elegy and Iambus*, trans. J. M. Edmonds (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1931), http://demonax.info/doku.php?id=text:tyrtaeus_poems.