

John K. Williams

A Piece of Street Wisdom



One of the illusions of our age is that wisdom is most likely to be found in the writings of the learned and the deliberations of *academia*. That this belief is an illusion is demonstrated if, in imagination, we take a tour of Athens as it was in the fifth century B.C.

Scholars we can find aplenty. The historian Thucydides is penning a volume which, he claims, "is not . . . designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but [to] last for ever."¹ The philosopher Socrates is raising questions destined to haunt the human mind for millennia. The dramatist Sophocles is writing plays which audiences, in the year 1985 A.D., will still find awesome.

Yet in the streets of Athens ordi-

nary people are doing what ordinary people ever have done and ever will do. They haggle in the market, discuss the weather, and make wagers on sporting events. They boast of their triumphs, lament their tragedies, and devise their schemes. They tell one another jokes and pass on the latest gossip. Occasionally they spice their conversations with snippets of street wisdom, quoting proverbs they drank in with their mothers' milk.

One such proverb might puzzle us. "Ah, well," one Athenian sighs, "the avenging gods are shod with wool." "True, true," nods his neighbor, and the conversation proceeds. And we wonder. "What," we ask, "does this saying mean?" "The avenging gods are shod with wool."

Actually, the saying enshrines a dramatic change in Greek thought, a change explored by Gilbert Murray in his magnificent little volume,

Five Stages of Greek Religion.² The Greeks once believed that the avenging gods were swift and furious, riding in fiery chariots and announcing their entry into human affairs by ear-shattering thunder. They exacted vengeance with a blazing sword the visibility of which brought fear to the hearts of erring mortals.

The proverb questions this picture. The avenging gods, it affirms, are slow, deliberate, silent. No thundering sound or blazing sword signifies their presence. Their footfall is as soft as a whisper or a sigh. There is no noise, no spectacle, no chase, no headlong pursuit. For the feet of the avenging gods are shod with wool.

It would be superficial to dismiss the saying because we no longer believe in the avenging gods of Greek mythology, be these gods drawn by galloping steeds or shod with wool. Indeed, the Greeks themselves did not take the inhabitants of Mount Olympus too literally. What they believed and what the folk-saying we are considering affirmed, is that life is consequential. Actions have consequences which, while not always obvious, are inescapable.

They saw it in nature. A sapling, struggling toward the sky, is injured. It continues to grow, but the injury it incurred has consequences. The grown tree is crooked. The unintended injury has undesired consequences.

So, affirmed the ancient Greeks,

with human life. The actions we sow determine the harvest we reap. That this is so is not, they held, entirely to be regretted. If a growing sapling could not bend its trunk to an injury, it could not bend its roots around rocks and seek out nourishment. If error did not carry the consequences of error, truth could not carry the consequences of truth. Unless folly brought the consequences of folly, wisdom could not bring the consequences of wisdom. If actions defying the laws of nature did not lead to disaster, actions in accordance with these laws could not lead to blessing. Indeed, were the world capricious rather than consequential, knowledge and partial control of the world would be impossible. Or so the ancient Greeks believed.

Actions Have Consequences

No sphere of human activity more displays the reluctance of human beings to acknowledge the consequential nature of their world than does the economic sphere. Again and again men and women have learned to their dismay that actions defying economic laws lead to disaster, but it would seem that our species suffers what educationalists pretentiously call a "subject-specific learning difficulty." National leaders, laughingly called statesmen, launch a war against economic reality, then desperately seek for scapegoats when the nation they have so ill-served

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