Alcaeus fr. 42: Human Perception and Divine Workings

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Abstract: In Alcaeus fr. 42 the two opposed female characters, Helen and Thetis, represent a significant antithesis between the way that reality is perceived by mortals and the actual *modus operandi* of the gods and, in particular, Zeus. It is in his person that the oppositions prevailing in this poem ultimately converge through the implicit connections that Alcaeus establishes between seemingly different mythological realities via an elaborate nexus of verbal repetitions and allusions. This convergence also tends to the ethical exoneration of Helen, thus aligning Alcaeus to Stesichorus and Sappho, and possibly reflects the poet's own experience from his contemporary political reality.

> ὠς λόγος, κάκων ἄ[χος, Ὤλεν’, ἔργων
> Περράμωι καὶ παῖσ[ι φίλοισ’ ἔπηλθεν
> ἐκ σέθεν πίκρον, π[ύρι δ’ ὤλεσε Ζεῦς
> 4 Ἴλιον ἴραν·
>
> οὐ τεαύταν Αἰακίδαι[ς ἄγαυος
> πάντας ἐς γάμον μάκ[αρας καλέσσαις
> ἄγετ’ ἐκ Νή[ρ]ηος ἔλων [μελάθρων
> 8 πάρθενον ἄβραν
>
> ἐς δόμον Χέρρωνος· ἔλ[υσε δ’ ἄγνας
> ζῶμα παρθένω· φιλό[τας δ’ ἔθαλε
> Πήλεος καὶ Νηρείδων ἀρίστ[ας.
> 12 ἐς δ’ ἐνίαυτον
>
> παῖδα γέννατ’ αἰμιθέων [φέριστον,
> ὄλβιον ξάνθαν ἐλάτη[ρα πώλων·
> οἰ δ’ ἀπώλοντ’ ἀμφ’ Ἐ[λέναι Φρύγες τε
> 16 καὶ πόλις αὔτων.[1]

It has long been acknowledged by modern scholarship that this fragment of Alcaeus, which constitutes in all probability a complete poem, despite the fact that it functions through an antithesis between the personages of Helen and Thetis, in fact implies the contiguity of opposites through the decisive contribution of Achilles, Thetis' son, to the destruction of Troy, which was allegedly brought about by the fickle Helen.[2] What has not been pointed out so far is that the two

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1   The text is that of D.L. Page from his *Lyrica Graeca Selecta* (Oxford 1968).
2   See D. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford 1955) 280, G.M. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody* (Ithaca 1974) 89, A.P. Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets. Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho* (Cam-

opposed female characters represent a much more significant antithesis be-
tween the way that reality is perceived by mortals and the actual *modus oper-
andi* of the gods and, in particular, Zeus. It is in his person that the oppositions
prevailing in this poem ultimately converge through the implicit connections
that Alcaeus establishes between seemingly different mythological realities via
an elaborate nexus of verbal repetitions and allusions. This convergence also
tends to the ethical exoneration of Helen, thus aligning Alcaeus to Stesichorus
and Sappho.

In order to demonstrate the above points, we must first explore the exact na-
ture of the antithesis between Helen and Thetis. Gomme has objected that The-
tis was obviously not a good wife, since she abandoned Peleus after the birth of
Achilles in order to return to her father and sisters; Penelope would have cer-
tainly provided a much better counter-example to Helen.[3] However, it must be
noted that it is not the overall qualities of the two women as spouses that are here
contrasted, but only one particular aspect, their marital fidelity. The fact that
Thetis is twice referred to as a virgin (8 and 10) stresses by implication that Helen
did not possess that quality when she was led to Troy by Paris and, thus, serves
to underline her infidelity towards her first husband.[4] To this end, the mention
that Peleus received his bride directly from her father's house (7) emphasizes the
legitimacy of their union as opposed to that between Helen and the younger son
of Priam. Presumably, one of the reasons that Peleus is called "illustrious" (5),
if Page's supplement is correct,[5] is that his spouse was faithful to him and did not
disgrace his marital bed. On the other hand, if we bear the above observations
in mind, Helen's "bad deeds" (1) refer exclusively to her adultery. Thus, the pre-
cise point of contrast between the two women lies on their marital fidelity; Hel-
en's behavior transgresses the social norms, while that of Thetis does not.

However, Alcaeus associates these two antithetical paradigms in two ways.
Firstly, the phrase παῖσι φίλοισ' ("beloved children", 2), which is used to refer to
Priam's progeny as the victims of Helen's bad deeds, is echoed by the noun
φιλότας ("love", 10) and the subsequent application of the word παῖδα (13), when
the product of Peleus' and Thetis' love, i.e. Achilles, is mentioned. Therefore, an
implicit connection is established by the poet between the children of the Trojan
king, who suffered from Helen's vile deeds, and the son of Peleus and Thetis.
And it should be remembered not only that Achilles slew Hector, who was the

bridge MA 1983) 194–198, S. Scully, "The Fate of Troy", in M.M. Winkler (ed.), *Troy. From
Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (Oxford 2007) 125 and R. Blondell, "Refractions of Homer's
Helen in Archaic Lyric", *AJPh* 131 (2010) 359.

3   A.W. Gomme, "Interpretations of Some Poems of Alkaios and Sappho", *JHS* 77 (1957) 258.
     Cf. D.A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (New York 1967) 292 and G.M. Kirkwood, *loc.cit.* (n.
     2 above) 90.
4   Cf. G.M. Kirkwood, *loc.cit.* (n. 2 above) 89.
5   On the other hand, J.H. Barkhuizen, "Alcaeus 42 LP, 5", *Mnemosyne* 36 (1983) 151–152 pro-
     poses ἄκοιτιν instead. The other reason of Peleus' illustriousness was of course that all the gods
     attended his wedding.

bravest of Priam's sons and was consistently presented in the *Iliad* as the main defender of Troy, but also that Achilles himself was mortally wounded by another son of the Trojan king, namely Paris. The implications of this connection will be better understood if we take into consideration the second link between the two contrasting mythological narratives, which concerns Zeus. Immediately after the mention of the negative consequences of Helen's adultery on Priam and his children it is Zeus who is cited by the poet as the ultimate author of the destruction of Troy (3–4). And Alcaeus subsequently reminds us that Peleus had invited all the gods to his wedding (6), including of course Zeus. Thus, it is the supreme god himself who establishes an additional – and more meaningful – connection between Helen, Thetis and Achilles. All these mythological characters are ultimately mere instruments in Zeus' plans.

We might not be far off the mark if we surmise that the precise purpose of the plans of Zeus, who implicitly connects the two parts of the antithesis that Alcaeus has established, was the consolidation of his power. This much can be inferred from the characterization of Thetis as "the best of Nereus' daughters" (Νηρεΐδων ἀρίστας, 11). The application of the adjective ἀρίστας to describe Thetis, preceded as it is by a partitive genitive which further stresses her value, would appear rather problematic if it was meant to allude to her virginity, which has already been emphasized adequately, or to her beauty. In all probability, it is a subtle reminder that her power constituted a threat to Zeus, who, in the past, had wanted to appropriate her, because it was prophesied that her offspring would surpass his begetter; the fact that the adjective ἀρίστας corresponds in sense and in metrical position with the one used to refer to Achilles two lines later (φέριστον, 13), as well as the preceding qualification of Achilles' characterization with another partitive genitive (αἰμιθέων, 13), which subtly denotes the neutralization of the danger that Zeus confronted, since Thetis was married to a mortal, serves to reinforce the above argument. We should also take into consideration that the mythological tradition connected the wedding of Thetis and Peleus with the very beginning of the Trojan War, i.e. the contest of beauty between the three goddesses promoted by Eris, all of whom were present at the wedding feast. The two mythological narratives are associated by fr. 1 of the *Cypria*,[6] where the stated purpose of Zeus is to reduce the human population. The *Iliad* scholia offer the additional information that Gaia makes that appeal to Zeus because she is burdened not only by the number of mortals, but also by their impiety.[7] Thus, both the marriage of Peleus and Thetis and the Trojan War are in the interest of Zeus. Alcaeus' audience, familiar as it was with mythology, needed only a mere hint or allusion to establish the connection between these two events. And that connection is of course reinforced by the description of Achilles as a "driver of horses" (ἐλάτηρα πώλων, 14), an image with an agonistic

6   As R. Blondell, *loc.cit.* (n. 2 above) 352 reminds us.
7   See T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore 1993) 567.

context which almost certainly alludes to his part in the Trojan War, especially if we bear in mind that this war is mentioned immediately after.

But if the ultimate purpose of Alcaeus' poem is to fuse the opposites, why is the antithesis between the unfaithful Helen and the faithful Thetis presented in such strong terms (οὐ τεαύταν, 5) and why does Helen appear again at the end of the poem, thus creating a ring composition? The answer to this question is provided by the very first phrase of the fragment. Most of the parallels adduced for ὡς λόγος (1) from modern commentators lead us to the conclusion that the meaning that the Lesbian poet intends to impart to this phrase regards "common talk" and/or "tradition".[8] Alcaeus emphatically starts his poem by mentioning what is commonly believed about the case of Helen; and he does that in order to indirectly subvert this belief. The way that the responsibility for the Trojan war is imparted is, in this regard, of major significance: despite the fact that Alcaeus addresses Helen, he does not make her the subject of the first verb; instead he uses a subjective genitive (ἔργων, 1) and he implicitly connects the action that Zeus undertakes in the destruction of Troy (ὤλεσε, 3) with the person of Helen (Ὤλεν', 1) in an elaborate word play that reminds of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (ἐλένας ἕλανδρος ἐλέ-/πτολις, 689–70). Therefore, Helen is implicitly presented as a mere instrument in the plan of Zeus and her responsibility is automatically reduced. The only problem that presents itself is whether we are meant to consider the second sentence of the poem (πύρι δ' ὤλεσε Ζεῦς Ἴλιον ἴραν, 3–4) as subordinate in sense from ὡς λόγος or not. Much depends on whether we think that the particle δ' is conjunctive or antithetical. My opinion is that Alcaeus intentionally creates this ambivalence with his phrasing and syntax; he implicitly differentiates himself from the mythical tradition, but at the same time he might as well hint that this tradition partially encompasses or insinuates the opposite view. Helen and her part in the Trojan War are then repeated at the end of the poem. But now the poet not only has alluded by the juxtaposition of the mythical narrative concerning Thetis and Achilles and by the way he has linked it with that concerning Helen at the contiguity of opposites, but also he repeats the same verb (cf. ὤλεσε, 3 to ἀπώλοντ', 15), suggesting thus that the real responsibility lies with Zeus. In this sense, it is not a coincidence that the emphasis is here not given to Priam and his children, but to Troy and its inhabitants; the repetition of the content of the second sentence of the first stanza strengthens, thus, the implied connection with Zeus, at the same time broadening the range of the consequences paid for the fulfillment of his plans, which included Achilles' glory – it was not just the king and his kin, but an entire city that suffered.[9] In this context,

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8   See D.A. Campbell, *loc.cit.* (n. 3 above) 292 and A.D. Skiadas, *Ἀρχαϊκός Λυρισμός 2* (Athens 1981) 256. Cf. C.M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford 1961) 169 and M. Davies, "Alcaeus, Thetis and Helen", *Hermes* 114 (1986) 260.

9   That is why I am not inclined to accept E. Hall's reading of l. 15 in "When Did the Trojans Turn Into Phrygians? Alcaeus 42.15", *ZPE* 73 (1988) 15–18, who proposes δάμεντες, παθόντες or κάκιστα instead of Φρύγες; the emphasis must be given, I think, to the entire people of Troy.

the phrase ἀμφ' Ἐλέναι (15) takes on the meaning "on account of Helen", or even "in the name of Helen". Thus, the use of ring composition is innovative: the initial claim is not merely reiterated, but takes on an entirely different meaning, a meaning which is almost ironic, through the previous associations.

What Alcaeus here suggests is that, despite the fact that human perception is often regulated through binary oppositions conditioned by socially accepted norms and behaviors, in reality gods blur these oppositions in order to carry out their plans. Not only were both the morally good Thetis and the immoral Helen necessary for the production of Achilles' martial glory,[10] but also this glory came at a steep price, as it is made manifest by the final emphasis given to the victims of Achilles' valor (14–16);[11] and it is this emphasis which justifies the total disregard on the part of the poet of the hardships of the Greeks. "Good" is inextricably mixed with "bad". Only mortals choose to ignore it and tend to base their judgments on antithetical comparisons, which when examined more closely are proven unsustainable. At a deep level, all oppositions are fused. Even the bad Helen can ultimately be associated with the progeny of the good Thetis; the two adjectives used to refer to Achilles, "blessed" and "blond" (ὄλβιον ξάνθαν, 14),[12] might well serve as points of identification with the unfaithful wife of Menelaus. On the one hand, Helen was known to have the same color of hair. On the other, ὄλβιον might be taken to allude to Achilles' afterlife in the Isles of the Blessed, despite the fact that it is first attributed to Achilles in the *Odyssey* (ω 35), where the hero resides in the Underworld. We must bear in mind that the epic tradition in general was not happy with the fate assigned to Achilles in the Homeric works and created a special afterlife for him, which in its turn paved the way for a select group of heroes to follow.[13] In addition, there was a mythological version, preserved by Pausanias, according to which Helen was actually married to Achilles in the Isles of the Blessed (Ἐλένην δὲ Ἀχιλλεῖ συνοικεῖν, 3.19.13). That Alcaeus might allude to this tradition can be supported not only by the use of the adjective ὄλβιον, which ultimately bypasses the anguish of Achilles' premature death at the Trojan battlefield and renders it a prerequisite for his future deification, but also by the reminder that he was a demigod (αἰμιθέων, 13), which can

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10 As R. Blondell, *loc.cit.* (n. 2 above) 359 so aptly points out. The moral goodness of Peleus' and Thetis' union is also stressed by the fact that the bride is carried to the house of the centaur Cheiron (9), instead of that of Aiakos, who was Peleus' father. Cheiron was characterized by Homer as "the most just of the Centaurs" (*Il.* 11.832) and was the tutor of many heroes, including Achilles, Asclepius and Jason.

11 Cf. W.H. Race, "Sappho, Fr. 16 L-P. and Alkaios, Fr. 42 L-P.: Romantic and Classical Strains in Lesbian Lyric", *CJ* 85 (1989–90) 23, who considers the poem a miniature *Iliad* and stresses its tragic seriousness.

12 I follow A.P. Burnett, *loc.cit.* (n. 2 above) 194, who maintains that the second adjective belongs to both the hero and his horses. However, I am reluctant to accept her following view, endorsed by R. Blondell (*loc.cit.*, n. 2 above) 358–359, that the word also alludes to Achilles' horse Xanthos.

13 See T. Gantz, *loc.cit.* (n. 7 above) 135.

be associated with the previous mention of the gods as μάκαρας ("blessed", 6). The reference to Achilles' semi-divinity can, furthermore, function as an indication that he too, like Helen, was part of Zeus' broader plan.

It goes without saying that, if the opposition is strongly stated by Alcaeus only to be abolished, then Helen is ethically exonerated. After all, she was only a means for Zeus to carry out his plan. Page was then right to associate this fragment with Stesichorus;[14] only I think it is more relevant to his *Palinode* (11 D.) than to his previous *Abuse of Helen*. Both fragments address Helen, both oppose in their different ways the standard mythological tradition by using the significant word λόγος; only Alcaeus' technique is much more subtle and suggestive than that of Stesichorus. Furthermore, his conception of Helen's responsibility for the Trojan War is somewhat analogous to that of his Lesbian counterpart, Sappho (fr. 16), in that he avoids blaming her; even when he refers to the mythological version which he subsequently intends to deconstruct, he refrains from using any negative adjective to characterize her moral demeanor; he only speaks about her deeds.

Finally, I would maintain that this fragment is essentially one of Alcaeus' most profoundly political poems, relevant as it might be considered to a large extent to his everyday political reality;[15] being a member of an *hetaireia* and being actively involved in the political struggles of his contemporary Lesbos he must have realized that oftentimes "good" leads to "bad" and vice versa, that antithetical states and situations cannot be sharply distinguished and can be confounded, that nonetheless these simplistic distinctions persist in public opinion, despite the fact that there are always hints which suggest their arbitrariness.

Relevant, in this sense, is the case of Pittacus: Alcaeus was once co-conspirator with the man who was to be named one of the seven sages of antiquity against the tyrant Myrsilus, only to be betrayed by him later on;[16] the former friend and ally eventually became the target of a considerable portion of Alcaeus' poetic invective, despite the fact that many sources testify that Pittacus' subsequent rule was beneficial to the state of Mytilene. Can this persistence on the part of the poet be attributed to personal spite fomented by the initial sense of betrayal and perhaps by his deluded hopes of seizing the power of the state himself or to political insight aiming solely at the well-being of the people? Even more important is the fact that one of the main reasons that the power of Mytilene was conceded by its people to Pittacus was their fear of Alcaeus' faction. The irony of the situation is patent: the man who actively sought what he considered to be the good

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14   D. Page, *loc.cit.* (n. 2 above) 280–281.

15   On Alcaeus' public life and its reflection in his poetry see H. Martin, *Alcaeus* (New York 1972) 15–37. See also A.P. Burnett, *loc.cit.* (n. 2 above) 107–181 and D. Yatromanolakis, "Alcaeus and Sappho", in F. Budelman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric* (Cambridge 2009) 206–211.

16   Pittacus became associated with Myrsilus in power after making a marriage alliance with the aristocratic house of Penthilus.

of the *damos* was deemed its enemy, after having tasted the bitterness of exile (fr. 129). But perhaps this was to be expected of someone who did not hesitate to make major concessions for his cause: indicative of this mentality is the fact that he and his faction received 2,000 staters from the Lydians for their dubious political enterprises, allowing them thus to interfere in the political affairs of Lesbos (fr. 69). Throughout Alcaeus' political career, then, "bad" is inextricably mixed with "good", even if that means that a case of death – like that of Myrsilus – might well serve as an occasion for festivities (fr. 332).[17]

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