

Alcaeus fr. 42: Political Discourse and Mythological Exempla

M. Caprioli's recent article (*CQ* 62: 22-38 [2012]), the latest contribution to a long discussion on Alcaeus fr. 42, builds on an argument first set forth a century ago by H. Jurenka, according to which the poem is a *skolion*, i.e., it was sung by the poet in his attempt to cap a previous song by another symposiast. Although I too agree that fr. 42 is performed in a sympotic context, the poem seems to be too complex and refined to be a *skolion*. Instead I view the short treatments of the unions of Helen/Paris and Thetis/Peleus as the juxtaposition of two mythological exempla utilized as referential loci not only for the ideological demarcation of Alcaeus' political faction (*hetaireia*) but also for the advancement of its causes. I am not suggesting here that there are precise correspondences between the particulars of the two mythological exempla and the realities surrounding Alcaeus' *hetaireia*, despite some tempting similarities, e.g., Helen's betrayal of her household and improper union/marriage to Paris and Pittacus' betrayal of Alcaeus' *hetaireia* and his marriage into the tyrant house of Penthilus. What I am suggesting is that in the setting of his sympotic performance the poet adjusts his mythological discourse in a way that reflects the preoccupations of his political discourse. Armed with self-righteousness, the poet raises his political enemy Pittacus' offences (*μῆνδικα*, fr. 298.1) from political infidelity to transgression of moral laws which brings ruin to the city and calls for both human and divine punishment (fr. 129) in a way not much different from that of the first (negative) exemplum in fr. 42; at the same time, he depicts his own aristocratic *hetaireia* in (ethical) terms reminiscent of those of the second (positive) exemplum. That the poet is willing to resort to mythological paradigms to drive home a political point is indicated, for instance, by fr. 70, in which the Penthilids are

called “descendants of Atreus” (thus associated with inherited guilt and ancestral curses, see R. Gagné, *JHS* 129: 39-43 [2009]), despite their closer descent from the son of Orestes, Penthilus; or by fr. 298, in which Pittacus is likened to Locrian Ajax, whose outrageous conduct after the fall of Troy earned him the hatred of both the gods and the Greeks. Despite the fact that fr. 42 retains its mythological framework throughout and is devoid of contemporary allusions, its concerns (proper marriage, offspring, war, welfare of the polis, see W. Race, *CJ* 85: 16-33 [1989]) are quite in line with the motifs that permeate Alcaeus’ political corpus. Thus for his listeners the two oppositional exempla induce not merely abstract moral lessons, but more concrete advice relevant to the welfare of the *hetaireia*.