

A Very Dreary Drinking Song: Alcaeus 38a in Context

In this paper, I examine Alcaeus 38a alongside *comparanda* from both the Alcaic corpus and Hesiod to explore how the solemnity, martial language, and didactic elements fit the complicated political context in which it was likely performed.

Alcaeus 38a is typically read as an early example of the *carpe diem* topos common in ancient drinking songs (Meyerhoff 1984, Burnett 1983, Campbell 1967). I argue, however, that the exhortation to drink in this poem has an added intensity because of the turbulent political environment in which Alcaeus is writing. Combining a somber tone with martial vocabulary, Alcaeus exhorts Melanippus to drink not just because of the ephemerality of youth, but because conflict may soon bring an abrupt end to their companionship and possibly to their lives. Alcaeus' inclusion of an instructive mythological exemplum and use of speech patterns common in didactic poetry fit this political reading.

Fragment 38a is strikingly solemn for a drinking song. There are no apparent calls to drink after the first line, and the poem contains bleak and vivid references to the whirling Acheron (2), the absence of light (3-4), and the possibility of infinite toil. Instead of extolling the carefreeness, energy, or camaraderie youth allows, Alcaeus instead frames youth as the time when men are most able to persevere through difficulties (11-12). The Mytilenean civil conflict in which Alcaeus and his sympotic companions were embroiled may explain this somber tone and imagery. References to military activity and civil strife occur in many of Alcaeus' other sympotic poems (fr. 140, 305) and suggest that Alcaeus' *hetaireia* functioned as a military alliance as well as a social group (Burnett 1983, 155-181). The mention of the north wind (*ἀνεμος βορρῆας*, 13), a symbolic indicator of stasis, aligns 38a with these more overtly political poems and invites us to read it as a grim lament on the imminent possibility of sympotic dissolution and death.

In line with this message, Alcaeus uses syntax reminiscent of didactic poetry and a negative mythological exemplum to forcefully instruct, rather than convivially invite, Melanippus and his

peers to seek relief from cares and embrace their few remaining days together by drinking. In particular, Alcaeus seems to echo Hesiod in the language he uses to address Melanippus. The initial vocative paired with likely double imperatives (1), subsequent negated imperatives (4, 10), and explanatory coda following the final imperative (11-12) closely resemble the speech patterns Hesiod uses to offer advice to his brother Perses in *Works and Days*.

The use of Sisyphus as a counterexample of correct behavior amplifies the didactic tone of the poem. Mirroring the instructive function of mythological narratives throughout the Alcaic corpus (fr. 42, 283, 298; see Meyerhoff 1983, 76-110), Alcaeus uses this story to advise his companions not to attempt to avoid inevitable death (like Sisyphus) but instead to make the most of their limited time on earth by drinking. As Alcaeus elsewhere refers to wine as a divine gift inappropriate to deny (fr. 346), the Sisyphus reference also serves as a warning to Melanippus and his peers; to refuse drink is to disrespect the gods, as Sisyphus did, and to risk eternal punishment.

To sum up, rather than merely extending a light-hearted invitation to drink, Alcaeus 38a instructs its audience, who are facing imminent danger, to seek appropriate and necessary relief from their cares at a symposium.

Select Bibliography

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