

Alpheus of Mytilene and Some Greek Responses to Rome

Despite having a dozen poems in the Greek Anthology, Alpheus of Mytilene remains a rarely discussed epigrammatist. While there could be a variety of reasons for this, such as his obscurity in a neglected field, it partially stems from Gow-Page's dismissal of him as "unimaginative" and a "mediocre composer" (Gow-Page 1968). However, there are several reasons, explored in this paper, why Alpheus is an especially interesting poet to investigate. His poetry not only displays an interaction with his poetical predecessors—from the distinguished and eminent Homer and Archilochus to the more recent and political Alcaeus of Messene and Antipater of Thessalonica—but also contributes to the representation of Rome in Greek poets after Augustus.

This paper thus attempts three things: first, it seeks to situate Alpheus in his literary and historical context; next, it analyzes the poem of Alcaeus' that Alpheus imitates, which problematizes previous interpretations of Alpheus' poems; finally, it looks at other poems of Alpheus and other poets praising Rome in order to show how and why Alpheus was not as sincere in his praise of Rome as others claim he is.

Alcaeus of Messene, who several times attacked Philip in his poems, in one (*Anthologia Graeca* 9.520) was seemingly sincere in praise of him. Early scholarship was divided on the issue (Edson 1934; Momigliano 1942; Walbank 1942, 1943), but eventually a sarcastic reading of the poem noting the similarity between Philip's future conquest of Olympus and Aloadae and unconquerable heaven in Homer, Pindar, and Lucian, was established as the *communio opinionis* (Edson 1948).

Despite this, a later imitation of the poem by Alpheus of Mytilene (*Anthologia Graeca* 9.526), with Rome rather than Philip V as the subject, was still seen as sincere in its flattery

toward Roman rule. However, with such a harsh polemic permeating Alcaeus' original, it is unlikely that Alpheus was entirely oblivious of the original meaning of the poem. Comparing this poem to others written by not only Alpheus but also other Greek poets writing in a Roman context, I argue that this poem of Alpheus, like the original by Alcaeus, subverts Roman imperial propaganda and casts the power which Rome held negatively.

This subversion is congruent with and emerges from other poems of his preserved in the *Greek Anthology*. In 9.97 and 7.237, Alpheus celebrates the Greek victories in the Trojan War and the Persian Wars respectively, and in 9.101, mourns the passing of Homeric Greece. However, in 9.104, his mourning is coupled with a further resentment for the current rise of Troy, which could only be an allusion to the dominance of Rome, long associated with Aeneas and Troy, over Greece. This resentment and a sarcastic reading of 9.156 point to a reaction to Roman rule over the Greeks, and simultaneously is a reiteration of Greek identity.

Alpheus thus stands out from his compatriots on Lesbos. Melinno (if, that is, she really was from Lesbos) and Crinagoras afford a contrast, in that both praise Rome, and Melinno in particular attribute to *moira* Rome's conquests. Indeed, despite siding with Mithradates VI and later with the Pompeians, Mytilene enjoyed a special status after the Roman civil war and paid no indemnities. The feeling must have been tenuous, however, as the descendents of Theophanes of Mytilene, a Pompeian supporter, were executed and exiled by Tiberius. While it is impossible to locate the events which stirred on Alpheus' poetry, his poetry is not out of place in a city recently affected by Tiberius' wrath and which long had anti-Roman sentiments.

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