

## Chiron in Alcaeus Fr. 42 V

The presence of Chiron in fr. 42 has not been explained satisfactorily: Burnett (193), for instance, thinks that the cave underlines the virtuous austerity of Peleus; Race (21-2), the Centaur's role as the future teacher of Achilles; Davies (261), the normalization of a peculiar marriage between a mermaid and a mortal. More recent discussions of the fragment either ignore the issue (Blondell) or accept older views (Caprioli, 29-30 endorsing Race). In this paper I suggest that Chiron be understood in the light of the poem's immediate thematic concerns: by beginning and ending with the war around Troy, fr. 42 frames human happiness (joys of feasting, love-making and youth, as expressed through the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and the care-free adolescence of their offspring Achilles) with the constraints of mortality. The presence of Chiron contributes precisely to that effect. In the *Iliad*, when Achilles puts on Hephaestus' divine armor, he draws from its stand his father's ashen spear which "Chiron had given to him from the peak of Pelion" (19.390-1), and which he later uses to kill Hector. The latter's death, however, precipitates Achilles' own. In 19.387-417, the hero's arming himself with the spear and the prediction by Xanthus of his death occur within such close proximity that in essence they are part of the same scene. The connection between Chiron and the death of Achilles was not lost on the ancients: Sophilos and Cleitias, two well-known early Attic black-figure artists, painting the wedding procession of Peleus and Thetis (based on the *Cypria*), depict in the center Dionysus holding a vase and also Chiron carrying an ash branch. Both elements allude to the destiny of Achilles in that the ash branch will become his spear and the amphora will ultimately serve as the receptacle for the ashes of Patroclus, and his own (Scaife, 178; Haslam, 43-4). Alcaeus is not alone, then, when on the very day of Peleus' wedding, he inserts a detail which alludes to the loss of the latter's only son. Here the authority of the mythological exemplum is used for the

validation of the motif of *carpe diem*, of seizing the pleasures of the moment while it is still possible. The “pleasures of the moment” are none other, of course, than those of the symposion (e.g., Rösler, 33-6), in which the poet performs and the participants, amidst wine and music and in a spirit of camaraderie, seek respite from the everyday hardships. Contemplation of the dire reality of death, which even the greatest of the heroes cannot avoid, acts as an incentive for the enjoyment of this brief window of happiness, while one is young and beautiful and still able to enjoy life. Chiron’s presence contributes to the reinforcement of this idea.

#### Bibliography

- Blondell, R. 2010. “Refractions of Homer’s Helen in Archaic Lyric.” *AJP* 131: 349-91.
- Burnett, A. P. 1983. *Three Archaic Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Caprioli, M. 2012. “On Alcaeus 42, Voigt.” *CQ* 62: 22-38.
- Davies, M. 1986. “Alcaeus, Thetis and Helen.” *Hermes* 114: 257-62.
- Haslam M. 1991. “Kleitias, Stesichoros, and the Jar of Dionysos.” *TAPA* 121: 35-95.
- Race, W. 1989. “Sappho, fr. 16 L-P. and Alkaios, fr. 42 L-P.: Romantic and Classical Strains in Lesbian Lyric.” *CJ* 85: 16-33.
- Rösler, W. 1980. *Dichter und Gruppe: Eine Untersuchung zu den Bedingungen und zur historischen Funktion früher griechischer Lyrik am Beispiel Alkaios*. Munich.
- Scaife, R. 1995. “The *Kypria* and Its Early Reception.” *ClAnt* 14: 164–92.