

The Trojan War in Alc. 283 V

Alc. 283 V has been understood mostly as a condemnation of Paris and Helen, whether with emphasis on the former (e.g., Treu 1963: 131-2, Pallantza 2005: 34-41) or the latter (e.g., Liberman 1999: 92, Blondell 2010: 360-2). In this paper, I argue that the poem is not didactic, at least in a moral sense, but rather an expression of the somber disposition of the archaic Greeks toward human life, a disposition which, in turn, becomes the impetus for the sympotic motif of *carpe diem*. That Alcaeus steers away from moral considerations is suggested by his suppression of the elements of blame and guilt, as Paris' presence is only oblique, while Helen's agency is severely diminished. I propose therefore that we approach fr. 283 differently, by paying attention to the poem's two foci: (pre-Paris) Sparta and (Helen's) Troy. The former is the incarnation of domestic bliss through the pleasures of motherhood and matrimony, while the latter is an image of destruction and blood. It has been suggested (Nagy 1974: 220, Mayer 1996: 2-3) that the wedding of Peleus and Thetis is the last manifestation of the Golden Age, while the Trojan War the first act of our Age. In this scheme, we could understand Helen and Paris as the pivotal figures that usher humanity into a new era dominated by sorrow and death. The warriors that fall around Troy are no longer recognized as Trojans or Greeks, innocent or guilty, but rather as victims of the unfathomable will of the gods. The indiscriminate slaughter (13-17) and devastation around Troy negate any symmetry between crime and punishment, rendering any moralistic—or rationalizing—approach inadequate. Yet, although the poem “makes no sense,” the occasion of its performance provides the means for its proper interpretation. We do not know exactly how the poem ended, but a sympotic exhortation like that at the closing of the Sisyphus fragment

(38a.10-12), would not have been out of place. In fact, it would have clarified how a distressing poem becomes part of a convivial event.

Bibliography

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