

It's Complicated: Marriage and Kinship in Alcaeus

This paper examines Alcaeus' characterization of Pittacus and Helen through their marital and family ties. These problematic characters—both the historical tyrant and the legendary unfaithful woman—are marked in Alcaeus' poetry by problematic kinships. Poems suggesting that Helen was a bad wife and mother are unsurprising (42V and 283V); the more startling poems emphasizing Pittacus' marriage (70V and 72V) allow the poet to cast his enemy in a passive position in his marriage and highlight his ties to spheres of influence beyond Lesbos.

In the case of 42V, Alcaeus defines Helen through what she is not. Here, somewhat inexplicably, an idealized marriage of Thetis contrasts with his characterization of Helen. Indeed, Alcaeus avoids any mention of Helen as wife or mother. Priam has children (Περράμω καὶ παῖσι, 2), Thetis has her own remarkable child (παῖδα γέννατ' αἰμιθέων [φέρειστον, 13); meanwhile Helen is the source of destruction for them all (οἱ δ' ἀπώλοντ' ἄμφ' Ἑλένα Φρύγες τε / καὶ πόλις αὐτῶν. 15-16). The much-discussed irony at the core of this poem (cf. Davies, Blondell, Caprioli) is that the poem purports to tell a story about Helen, yet passes over her story entirely, except to proclaim her culpability. By contrast, in 283V Alcaeus presents a passive Helen—her heart is fluttered (ἐν στήθε[ε]σιν [ἐ]πτ[ό]αισε / θυμον, 3), and she is ἐκμάνεισα by the Trojan Paris (5). As a result of her mania and persuaded by her θυμός, she leaves her home, child, and bed (7-8). These first lines paint the woman as love-struck, but the poem continues by describing the terrible destruction caused by her decisions (11-17).

In 70V and 72V Alcaeus insinuates that Pittacus' family, like Helen's is marked by passivity and the potential for mass destruction. In 70V, Alcaeus introduces the tyrant not by his own name, but through the name of the family into which he married, namely the Atridae: "Let that guy, since he has married into the Atridae, devour the city like he did with Myrsilus" (κῆνος

δὲ παώθεις Ἀτρεΐδα[ν] / δαπτέτω πόλιν ὧς καὶ πεδὰ Μυρσί[λ]ω[, 6-7). Pittakos actually married into the powerful family of the Pentilids, who in turn claimed their name from a son of Orestes. As Gagné notes, Alcaeus' use of "Atridae" casts the marriage in a markedly different light: "Rather than portraying the marriage in the traditional language of aristocratic honor, he points to its destructive power for the entire community." (2013, 224-5) In addition to tying Pittacus to a people-eating clan, Alcaeus also manages to emasculate him through the passive verb, παώθεις: rather than taking a woman into his family, Pittacus has been married into the woman's family, stripping him of the possibility of agency within his own household.

In 72V, Alcaeus again presents Pittacus by reference to his family. These lines lack any reference to Pittacus by name, but line 7, like line 6 of 70V, begins with κῆνος and launches into a negative description of a man who fails to obey proper sympotic procedures. At the start of the next stanza, however, Alcaeus switches to an apostrophe and addresses the interloper directly: "And you, born from that woman, do you have the kind of reputation of free men, born of noble parents" (σὺ δὲ τεαύτας ἐκγεγόνων ἔχη<ι>ς / τὰν δόξαν οἶαν ἄνδρες ἐλεύθεροι / ἔσλων ἔοντες ἐκ τοκήων, 11-13). Defining the man by reference to his mother stands in stark contrast to other poems where he defines men through paternal ties (6.12-13 and 130b.5). With this early "yo' momma" joke, Alcaeus ridicules his foe by defining him through his matrilineal roots and separating him from any potentially respectable heritage.

By tying his marriage to the house of Atreus, Alcaeus marks Pittacus as legendary in his own right, and ties him to Helen. Helen's love had terrifying repercussions for Troy. The very existence of Helen's marriage led to the damage of her adopted city. Helen bungled her appropriate gender role, abandoning the man who had taken her into marriage; likewise, Pittacus, for whatever reason, allowed himself to be taken into a marriage, not vice versa. In a way,

Alcaeus pairs his emasculated Pittacus with Paris in this telling—the Trojan mama’s boy who ties himself an Argive woman and must suffer the consequences of this association in his own land.

Bibliography:

Blondell, Ruby. 2010. “Refractions of Homer’s Helen in Archaic Lyric.” *AJPh* 131: 349–91.

Caprioli, Michele. 2012. “On Alcaeus 42, Voigt.” *CQ* 62 (May): 22–38.

Davies, M. 1986. “Alcaeus, Thetis, and Helen.” *Hermes* 114: 257-62.

Gagné, Renaud. 2013. *Ancestral Fault in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.