

Sappho, you remember, was chiefly known for her poems on themes of love and beauty in honour of Aphrodite. Alcaeus, although he did write some love songs, could hardly be more different. As a normal male citizen of a Greek *polis* or city-state, and more particularly as a member of the upper, ruling class, he was very active in the politics of his community. Politics then and now were about power. Faction struggled with faction for supremacy in the state. Alcaeus' songs record the ups and downs of his group's fortunes. As political documents, they reflect in full measure the vital and dynamic, but often violent, competition that was characteristic of life in the *polis*.

We can tell that many of Alcaeus' songs were written for *symposia*, the social gatherings at which political associates met to reinforce their alliances and plot against their enemies. "Symposium" in Greek means "drinking party." Actually, it was a dinner party followed by plentiful drinking and various other entertainments, especially songs. (The modern English sense of "symposium" as a meeting of experts for serious discussion of some topic derives from Plato's very unusual party in his dialogue, *The Symposium*, in which the guests dispense with the usual drinking in favour of philosophical conversation.) The songs typically included traditional favourites, praises of the gods, riddling and joking songs, and compositions done especially for the occasion by the more musically talented of the company such as Alcaeus. The poems we have today are the texts of these songs; of the music we know next to nothing. Some of Alcaeus' songs are rollicking invitations to get drunk; others are exuberant celebrations of successes the group has recently enjoyed; still others complain of setbacks or bitterly curse political foes. All reflect the concerns of the audience and the circumstances of the songs' performance.

Here are a few examples of the first theme I mentioned:

Have a drink, Melanippus, and get drunk with me.
Do you really think you'll see the light of day again

When once you cross the swirling stream of Acheron?
Lesser targets I advise; why even royal Sisypus,

Aeolus' son — no man knew greater stratagems —
Took it in his head to conquer death; but even he,

Wily though he was, at fate's behest twice crossed
The swirling stream of Acheron, there to meet

With toilsome labour imposed by Cronus' kingly son
Beneath the gloomy earth. Come, let this not be our hope!

Drink, while we are young (when better?), and pray instead
The god may give us kinder fate than this to dread.

Alcaeus of Lesbos

by R.L. Fowler

In the last issue of *Labyrinth* I promised a discussion of Alcaeus, who was, alongside Sappho, the other famous poet of ancient Lesbos. The island had a long tradition of music and poetry before these two contemporaries flourished around 600 B.C., and continued to enjoy a fine artistic reputation long afterwards. But the accidents of time and preservation have ensured that, of all the poets of Lesbos, only these two are more than names for us; and even so we have only fragments of their works. Still, there is enough to give us some sense of the original, and to see that Sappho and Alcaeus deserved the fame they enjoyed in antiquity.

"To cross the Acheron" is to enter the underworld and die. Legend told how the clever Sisyphus managed to return from Hades to the upper world, but even he eventually died for good a second time, and was punished for his trickery by being condemned to push a rock uphill forever. Death is inevitable for all of us, argues Alcaeus, so we may as well enjoy life while we can. This "seize the day" theme is best known from Horace's Latin version, *carpe diem* (*Odes* 1.11); Horace imitated Alcaeus in many of his poems.

In two other poems, Alcaeus' advice is plain:

Don't wallow in your troubles.
Moping about won't get us anywhere.
Bychis, the best of cures is to pour the wine
And guzzle.

Let's have a drink. Why wait for lamptime? The daylight left
Is but a finger's breadth. Fetch me big expensive goblets.

Wine to banish mortal cares was Semele's gift
And Dionysus'! Let the wine in double measure

Follow water, fill the crater to the brim;
Let chalice jostle chalice...

The last poem makes reference to the Greek practice of adding water to wine just before drinking; the modern custom is to add water prior to storing and fermenting. The essence laid up in the fall after the grape harvest was a thick, syrupy, and potent substance; normally, three parts of water were added to one of wine, so you can see that Alcaeus was calling for strong liquor when he prescribed two parts of wine to one of water. (In the *Odyssey*, the Ismarian wine carried by Odysseus required twenty parts of water to make it potable; the Cyclops drank it neat, and was quickly rendered unconscious, thus allowing the escape of Odysseus and his men from the cave.)

One of Alcaeus' main enemies was named Myrsilus, who managed to make himself sole ruler of Mytilene. His death was the occasion for a triumphant whoop from Alcaeus ("Now's the time for drunkenness, now's the time to drink for all you're worth: Myrsilus is dead!"), but Alcaeus' bitterest words are reserved for Pittacus son of Hyrrhas, who was originally allied with the poet's party against Myrsilus, but went over to the other side and was eventually made ruler of Mytilene himself. Unlike Myrsilus, his rule had the support of the people, and Pittacus went down in history as one of the Seven Wise Men of ancient Greece. If we had only Alcaeus' words to go by, however, our opinion of him would be quite different. To Alcaeus and

his friends, Pittacus had committed the worst of sins, treason — not against the *polis*, but against his former associates. It emerges from the poem translated below (and is confirmed in others) that Alcaeus suffered exile as a result of his political activities. It would have been Pittacus who imposed the exile, fearing quite naturally for his safety and the stability of his government; it is obvious from all that Alcaeus says that he and his fellow conspirators would hear nothing of compromise. The poem is a prayer to the three gods of an ancient sanctuary on the island of Lesbos. The beginning is lost and the end is mutilated, but comparison with other Greek prayers shows that in the opening lines Alcaeus is reminding these gods of the great service his people did them in establishing the sanctuary, and hopes therefore that they will be kindly disposed towards his present request. The request is for vengeance on Pittacus, who is savagely cursed: the Erinyes (more familiar as the Furies) are asked to pursue him, creatures of hell whose only purpose is to inflict hideous punishment on those who commit the worst crimes such as the breaking of an oath.

[... since in years gone by] the people of Lesbos
Built this grand, conspicuous shrine for all to share,
And placed therein altars of the blessed gods.

For Zeus, the god who grants our prayers, they named this place,
For you as well, Hera, Aeolian goddess, mother
Of us all, and for a third they named it sacred
To this god here in effigy, son of Semele,

Dionysus, who consumes the sacrifice uncooked.
Come, be thou propitious, your hearts and minds dispose
To hear our prayers: save us from this wretched torment,
From this sad exile whole we pray deliver us;

And may the Erinyes pursue the son of Hyrrhas
For those who swore with us so long ago upon
The sacrificial victim that never, never, so long
As we drew breath would we betray a single one

Of our companions; we should either wear a cloak
Of earth as corpses, slain by our opponents' swords
Or else ourselves victorious kill the lot of them
And our people rescue from their hard oppression.

Of this old Fatguts took no notice, the oath took not
To heart; beneath his feet the promise trampled lay
And now the city his voracious maw devours...

"Fatguts" is one of several colourful insults Alcaeus has for Pittacus in his verse. According to this poem, the conspirators, Pittacus among them, had

sworn eternal loyalty to each other and promised to kill or be killed in the cause. It may be inferred that some of Alcaeus' friends had in fact been killed in the political fighting, and that Pittacus was by that time among the warriors on the other side. That is why the Erinyes are asked to pursue him "for those who swore with us so long ago"; the Greek idea was that people so badly mistreated in life had personal Erinyes to avenge them after death. It is these spirits who are invoked in the curse.

Alcaeus and the other members of his faction pretended to be true patriots, with only the best interests of the *polis* at heart. But as these lines show, their only real loyalty was to their own group, not to the country. They considered the country's best interests to be identical with their own; this selfish point of view allowed them to claim that anyone opposed to them was also a traitor. So far from benefiting their country, their extreme partisanship only served to promote civil war. While enjoying the vigour and vitality of Alcaeus' verse, we cannot help reflecting that it illuminates a nasty side of human nature that, regrettably, has changed very little in the two and a half thousand years since he wrote.