

*Alcman and the Cosmos of Sparta*. By GLORIA FERRARI. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. viii + 184 + 20 color plates + 2 halftones. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-226-66867-3.

Due to its fragmentary state, as well as our incomplete knowledge of performance contexts in archaic Sparta, Alcman's famed Louvre *Partheneion* fragment has had a long and contested history of interpretation. Ferrari (F.) provides a novel interpretation of the poem, while situating it within its literary and cultural matrices. She states that the purpose of her book is to show "that cosmic imagery ... runs through Alcman's song and governs its staging" (p. 7) and that "on the occasion of a major state festival celebrating the cycle of the seasons, the chorus dances the Hyades and points to the Moon, Dawn, and Night" (p. 17). Although by no means the first scholar to note astral imagery in the poem, F. is the first to do so in such an extended fashion. The basic questions for all readers, then, are: does F. persuade us that the cosmic imagery she purports to uncover is as widespread as she claims? Are her interpretations overly constrictive?

In the introduction, F. criticizes the assumption that the poem preserves a transcript of a performance in which the chorus speak of themselves as themselves. She points out that lyric choruses "could, and did, play the part of mythical or epic characters" (p. 11), and then asserts that "the chorus of the *Partheneion* ... take on the role of archetypal dancers, in their case a chorus of stars" (p. 17). F. is correct, of course, that we should be aware of our assumptions, and there is no reason to assume *prima facie* that the chorus could not play something other than themselves.

In Chapter 1, "The Myths," F. systematically addresses the myths presented in the poem and interprets them in light of their social and literary context. She elegantly points out that the myth of Tyndareus, Hippocoon and his sons shows the problems that ensue when an illegitimate heir takes control of the state; at Sparta with its system of dual kingship, this myth of fraternal rivalry and illegitimate succession would have had important political resonance. F. then turns to the famed Aisa and [Poros] passage of the papyrus and interprets Aisa as "the time allotted to darkness and night" and Poros as "the road of heaven." Traditionally, Poros and Aisa (Portion and Allotment) are taken to refer to the duration of life given the heroes mentioned in the immediately preceding catalogue. The word *geraitatoi*, which is textually sure, works well with this *opinio communis*. But, if we follow F.'s interpretation, "the road of heaven" and "the time allotted to darkness and night" are called the oldest [gods?]. This

seems strange, even given the Greek fondness for personification. F. also excises some now widely accepted supplements, presumably because they do not work with her thesis. While such excisions are legitimate, I would have liked to see her address the surrounding text that is still sure.

In lines 16–17, F. finds reference to the myth of Phaethon, which she connects with Poros and Aisa, discussed above as “path” and “measure.” She suggests that “*poros* and *aisa* in the gnome are highly relevant, since it was the youth’s inability to follow the ‘path’ of the Sun and thus keep to the ‘measure’ of the day that resulted in disaster.” Once again, I wish F. had discussed the broader extant text. She omits reference to lines 18 and 19, in which the possibility that females besides Aphrodite might be married is clearly mentioned, and focuses only on one bride, Aphrodite, for Phaethon. In support of her interpretation, F. offers the supplement “flee from” in line 17 (i.e., no one should flee from marrying Aphrodite), but Blass’ widely accepted “try” seems preferable (i.e., let no one try to marry Aphrodite), since the gnomic line 16 seems to exhort humans to be aware of their mere mortal status. I doubt that many scholars will follow F. and read the myth of Phaethon into this passage.

In Chapter 2, “The Chorus,” F. focuses on the chorus and its performance. F. addresses the notoriously difficult line 49, but does not consider the possibility that the passage is simply corrupt. Like G.O. Hutchinson in his *Greek Lyric Poetry*, I would obelize the passage. Shortly thereafter, F. asks whether we should assume that the females (Agido, Hagesichora, Anesimbrotia) mentioned in the poem are historical, and (following others) points out that many of the women seem to have “speaking names.” Is this fortuitous or do names like Hagesichora, “leader of the chorus,” tell us that we are wrong to regard these as historical personages rather than acted roles? Given her thesis, F. stresses that these names do not refer to historical personages but can be used of actors generically. This may be true, but, unfortunately for F.’s thesis, the names do not connect in any obvious way with names for stars. Moreover, F.’s argument that the poem would not be preserved, were these historical characters, is particularly weak. For example, we still have epinician odes in which Hieron of Syracuse plays a prominent role.

In her discussion of the hotly contested lines 60–3, F. points out that the Pleiades and Hyades are often positioned in literature together in reference to the beginning of winter, the time for plowing. Since the Pleiades are mentioned in the text, F. deduces that Alcman’s chorus must be the Hyades, who are competing against the Pleiades; this is

all heavily based on the hotly contested verb *makhontai*, “fight.” But the texts F. marshals in support of her thesis (Hes. *Op.* 614–17; *Il.* 18.486) never describe the Pleiades “fighting” with the Hyades; rather it seems that the Pleiades and Hyades move in tandem. If we are to presume that Alcman’s chorus of Hyades is fighting the Pleiades, as F. argues, we should expect a similar arrangement within Greek discourse concerning the Pleiades and the Hyades, but the comparanda F. offers suggest the opposite.

Alcman’s text is problematic for F.’s thesis in other ways as well. In “we are carrying a plow/robe,” the language seems quite literal and works better on the assumption that an offering is being made on behalf of the chorus and civic body to a deity, presumably Orth(r)ia. In none of the comparison texts F. cites is *phero* used to describe the introduction of the plowing season. Moreover, an interpretation of the verb’s object as the “plowing season” rather than the “plow” itself warrants more explanation. Most commentators also take *Orthriai* as a dative singular—as Hutchinson notes, the syntax practically demands it—while F. takes it as a nominative plural with the Pleiades. The common interpretation, *contra* F., works well if we assume that this poem was written for a festival at which a deity was given some material offering, either a plow or a robe. It may also be that we are wrong to even consider plow/plowing season as a possibility for *pharos* here, since robes are fitting gifts for goddesses in Greek cult and the interpretation of *pharos* as plow apparently cannot be supported outside this text and the commentary on it; Hutchinson, for example, takes it for granted that *pharos* must mean robe (pp. 77, 91). F. further suggests that Agido is Dawn, Hagesichora the Moon, and Anesimbrotia Night; but she offers no substantial evidence in support of these equivalences. For many reasons, therefore, I find myself unable to accept the interpretation F. offers for interpreting Alcman’s chorus as the Hyades.

Nor can I believe that the chorus refer to their performance as *ponoi*, “labors,” at line 88. It seems odd to say that a goddess healed a chorus from performing a ritual. More likely the chorus are calling upon the goddess as a reliever of some specific toils/sufferings the community experienced, and the text encourages this interpretation, since a reference to peace comes shortly thereafter. As Hutchinson points out, the peace follows logically after the *ponoi*. The goddess Aes, then, was the citizens’ healer, as causal *gar* makes clear (just as Hagesichora will provide the chorus of girls with peace). F. translates *eks Hagesikhoras* (line 90) as “away from Hagesichora,” but the idea seems to be that the youths are set upon the path of peace

“thanks to” Hagesichora, just as the city is set upon the path of peace thanks to Aos.

F. also suggests that the horse imagery in the poem refers to the horse-driven celestial bodies of the night sky, and that the number ten in the final stanza can be understood in reference to Pythagorean cosmology and harmonics. This moves a long way from the *opinio communis*, which interprets the ten simply as a reference to the number of individuals in the chorus. Moreover, the horse imagery cannot obviously be connected with astral imagery, nor is the number ten obviously connected with Pythagorean cosmology in this text. In fact, the Greek geographic epithets associated with the horses (Venetic, Colaxean, Ibenian) do not trigger associations with stars but with places on earth, and the “ten of children” in Alcman’s text makes perfect sense as a reference to the number of performers.

In Chapter 3, “Ritual in Performance,” F. considers performance context. Like most commentators, she assumes that the poem was part of a state festival, and stresses that the festival “had the function of linking the orderly workings of the cosmos to the well-ordered city” (p. 107). Since F. assumes that the poem preserves the dance of the Hyades, she suggests that it was performed at the changing of seasons, and views the performance as a rite of passage for the performers. F. elegantly discusses the discourse of praise and blame inherent in the poem, as well as noteworthy functions of dramatic technique, such as Alcman’s use of what would later be known as the Brechtian *Verfremdungstechnik*. She also finds within the poem a strong strain of lament, which she links to Spartan society. In my opinion, the section on lament is inadequately supported.

In her postscript, F. suggests that Alcman’s poem was performed at the Karneia festival, and looks at representations of the *kalathiskos*-dance, which she interprets in relation to the dance of the stars hypothesized for Alcman’s text. With regard to the Karneia, F. provides a revisionist argument, suggesting that this is a winter rather than a summer festival.

F. works comfortably with philological, historical, art-historical and anthropological data and methods, and has written an impressively interdisciplinary book. But the passages in Alcman’s text that are problematic for her thesis are too often passed by unmentioned or are interpreted tendentiously: F. has not successfully supported her thesis.

CHRIS ECKERMAN

*University of Oregon*