
Marburg

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THE ALDER AND THE POET
Philetas 10 (p. 92 Powell)

Οὐ μὲ τις ἐξ ὀρέων ἀποφώλιος ἀγροιώτης
ἀφόσις κλῆθην, αἱρόμενος μαξέλην;
ἀλλ’ ἐπέσων εἰδώς κόσμον καὶ πολλὰ μογήσας
μύθων παντοίων ὦμον ἐπιστάμενος.

The speaker in this intriguing poem identifies herself as a κλῆθην, an alder tree, and asserts that no uneducated (ἀποφώλιος), mattock-wielding mountain rustic will take her, but ra-

1) ἀποφώλια ... ἀπαίδευτα Schol. Od. 5.182, cf. LfrgrE s. v. In our passage ἀποφώλιος (and by extension the entire païgion) may recall Od. 8.167–177. There, the word appears without a negative for the only time in early epic and, as in Philetas, a contrast is drawn between physical ability and skill with words:

οὕτως οὐ πάντεσιν θεοὶ χαρίζετα διδοῦσιν
ἀνδράσιν, οὕτε φυήν οὐτ’ ἄρ φρένας οὐτ’ ἄγορητιν.
ἀλλάς μὲν γὰρ εἰδὸς ἀκιδόντερος πέλει ἄνηρ,
ἀλλὰ θεὸς μορφήν ἔπεσε στέφει, οἱ δὲ τ’ ἐς οὕτων
tερπόμενοι λεύσοουσιν· ὁ δ’ ἀσφαλέως ἀγορεύει
αἴδοι μειλίχη, μετὰ δὲ πρέπει ἀγρομένοισιν,
ἐχρόμενοιν ἀνὰ ἀστὶ θεῶν ὡς εἰσόρωσιν.
ἀλλὰς δ’ αὐ εἰδὸς μὲν ἀλέγχως ἀθανᾶτουσιν,
ἀλλ’ οὐι οἱ χάρις ἀμφιπεριστέρεται ἐπεέσοιν·
ὡς καὶ σοὶ εἰδὸς μὲν ἀμπερεῖς, οὐδέ κεν ἄλλως
οὐδὲ θεὸς τεῦξε, νόον δ’ ἀποφώλιος ἔσσι.

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2) αἱρόμενος μαξέλην must be taken as a generalizing epithet (parallel to and contrasting with πολλὰ μογήσας for the poet), as was seen by E. Maass,

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ther he who, through his own hard work (πολλά μογήσας v. 3), is knowledgeable in the way of song, i.e. the typical Hellenistic poet. Alder-wood is, of course, fit for a variety of furniture or wood-work. But what would a poet want with the tree; or the tree with a poet? The answer will likely involve us in some sort of ‘play’ inasmuch as Stobaeus (II 4.5) locates the poem among Philetas’ παίγνια.

Two general categories emerge from the many solutions proposed: first, there are those that maintain that the alder is merely a comparison³; we may reject this approach since the text provides not the slightest hint that such was intended: the speaker is simply a κληθον. Then there are those who deal seriously with the apparent fact that the ‘I’ of this poem is, in one way or another, an alder. Here we distinguish two sub-groups, one which sees

3) Thus C. Ph. Kayser, Philitae Coi fragmenta quae reperiuntur (Göttingen 1793) 47, felt that the poet, comparing himself to an alder, says that song would move him more than brute rustic force. N. Bach, Philitea Coi, Hermesianactis atque Phanoclis reliquiae (Halle 1829) 41, also sees the poet as comparing himself to an alder, but with the sense: “summo cum studio poesi litterisque incumbens immortalitatis gloriam consequar”. Similarly C. Cessi, Eranos 8 (1908) 142: “de fama sua agat poeta”; and A. Couat, La Poésie Alexandrine (Paris 1882) 74; R. Herzog, Philologus 79 (1924) 418: “ein dichterisches Selbstbekenntnis in bukolischer Umgebung mit polemischem Sinn”.

Others took this thought in another direction, proposing that a woman is compared to a tree: Thus R. Reitzenstein, Epigramm und Skolion (Gießen 1893) 179, followed by Wilamowitz, Hellenistische Dichtung I p. 117. K. F. W. Schmidt, Symb. Osl. 7 (1928) 30–32, suggested that the woman was herself called Κληθον (though such a name is unattested). T. B. L. Webster, Hellenistic Poetry and Art (London 1964) 42, simply accepted Reitzenstein’s original comparison. Emendation was another means of turning κλήθον into a woman: thus already J. A. Hartung, Die Griechischen Elegiker II (Leipzig 1859) 33, made her ‘tall’, βλόθθηα; and for G. Morelli, Maia 2 (1949) 12, she was ‘tender’, βληθθην.

Others yet would see a book compared to a tree. I. Cazzaniga, Riv. di Fil. 90 (1962) 238–9, for instance, believes that the alder stands for Philetas’ ‘Demeter’. For Q. Cataudella, Helikon 7 (1967) 402–404, it is the title poem for a book of Πατγνα which compares itself to an alder: “il suo libro non sarebbe andato a finire, come un tronco di ontano, nelle mani di un rozzo contadino”. K. J. McKay, Antichthon 12 (1978) 36–44, follows Cataudella’s lead but, supplying δόσμεν – in the general sense ‘tree’ – at the beginning of v. 10 of the Aitia Prologue (allegedly a reference to a work of Philetas), would make Κληθον the (unattested) title of the book.
κλήθη as the alder itself\(^4\)); and one which takes it as the material
from which an object – the actual subject of the poem – is made.

The former group breaks down as it fails to explain satisfac-
torily why an alder tree would want a poet rather than a rustic,
and to what end the poet would take (αἰῶνες) her; nor does it do
justice – far more, like many interpretations, it falls victim – to the
riddling structure of the paignion, which, as Kuchenmüller (op.
cit., n. 2 above, p. 62) and others observed, makes us constantly
reassess our understanding of the poem in the process of reading.

For at least through the first word of v. 2, αἰῶνες, we might
indeed assume that the speaker is no tree at all but, for example, a
woman (cf. n. 3 above), since the subject of μέ in v. 1 is deliberate-
lly vague. With κλήθη, however, we must alter that view: the
speaker within the first couplet is now clearly a tree; there is no
need to take her as anything but a tree, and the fact that εἰς ὅρεων
can go with αἰῶνες rather than ἀγροῦντως reinforces that reading.
Perhaps the last words of the couplet, αἰῶμενοι μακέλην, hint at
the further shift to come, since the 'mattock-wielding' rustic – for
Theocritus at least – is the archetype of one who has no part in
song: μηδ’ ἀλέξης μὴν έπι ψυχρού Ἀχέροντος / ὄντες τις μακέλα
tetuloménoi ἐνδοθι χείρας / ἀχὴν ἐκ πατέρων πενήν ἀκτήμονα
κλαίων (16.31–33). In any case, with the second distich we must
reassess anew, for we are faced with that puzzle – stated above – of
what possible benefit an alder might derive from a poet or vice
versa.

We therewith turn to that second sub-group for which the
understanding of κλήθη is the key to grasping the paignion’s
game\(^5\). Κλήθη, on this view, is an object made of alder-wood.
Two such objects have been considered: the first, a poet’s staff of
alder-wood which – it is argued – would have been intended as a

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4) F. Jacobs, Animadversiones in epigrammata Anthologiae Graecae I 1
(Leipzig 1798) 388, thought it an incised tree that hoped it wouldn’t be cut down
by a rustic, but would be put to some use by a poet. Similarly W. E. Weber, Die
elegischen Dichter der Hellenen (Frankfurt a. M. 1826) 662, thought that the verses
were incised in or hung in a votive tablet around an alder which the poet had
planted. Cf. also F. G. Schneidewin, Delectus poetarum elegiacorum Graecorum
(Göttingen 1838) 145, and R. Holland, PhW 45 (1925) 141, who emends κλήθην
to κλήθηνου, i.e. as a door-bar, and suggests that the wood is the laurel.

5) Thus (with McKay op. cit. n. 3 above, p. 38–39) we may probably see in
αἰῶνες κλήθην the additional, pointed sense of 'grasping intellectually', i.e. no
uneducated rustic will 'understand' the κλήθη, but only he who is versed in the
way of song, in other words the poet or (as we here first comprehend) the educated
reader.
gift, an ἀποφόρητον like that in Theocr. 7.43 (τάν τοι...χορύναν δούρυττομαι), and which the poem would have accompanied and impersonated(6). The second, and to my mind correct, solution is a writing tablet made of alder-wood(7).

In choosing between these two, it seems to me decisive that tablets have a long history of speech(8), the staff has none. The concept of a speaking text, moreover, is immediately understandable; a speaking staff is not. Finally a tablet would allow a true identity between the poem and object, the staff would not. Κλήθη as ‘tablet’ must then be metonymy (as Kuchenmüller saw, op. cit., n. 2 above, p. 61) – an unproblematical solution: for Euripides had used πεύκη metonymously for writing tablets at I.A. 39 and Hipp. 1253 ff.

But before we can embrace this explanation one crucial obstacle must be removed, namely Ulrich v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s doubt, or better flat denial (Hellenistische Dichtung I p. 116 n. 1), that tablets could be made of alder-wood. While Kuchenmüller could point to the variety of objects for which the alder was used, and ask “why not for tablets?” (op. cit. p. 62), he could not produce an example. We, however, are now in a position to do just that – and so provide striking corroboration for our theory that the speaker is a tablet. For alder-wood tablets (early 2nd cent. A.D.) were found in great quantity during the mid 1970s at Vindolanda in England(9).

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6) Thus E. Maass, De tribus Philetae carminibus, Ind. Lect. Marp., 1895, p. 96, who thought the poem was used as a lot which one of Philetas’ circle would have chosen, so receiving the staff as his apophoreton. The idea of the apophoreton was followed by A. Nowacki, Philetae Coi fragmenta poetica, Diss. Münster 1927, p. 56–7. Cf. also E. L. Bowie, CQ 35 (1985) 75.

7) Thus first C. Wachsmuth in his apparatus criticus to the passage in Stobaeus, followed by Kuchenmüller, op. cit., n. 2 above, p. 61.

8) See e.g. already Euripides’ Erechtheus fr. 369.6–7 Nauck: δέντων τ’ ἀνομτύσσομεν γῆσιν / ἀν σοφοὶ κλέονται, or Hippolytus 877–881.

With this objection set aside, then, we can interpret the poem as a ‘talking tablet’\(^\text{10}\). But more, to the extent that it is a riddle the poem marks the ties that had come to exist between writing and song in a particularly dramatic and involving way. It does not merely state the fact of those ties; rather it relies for its effect on their active recognition and acceptance by the educated reader who wishes to solve the puzzle. With a form particularly suited to contemporary tastes, the riddle\(^\text{11}\), Philetas, the first great Hellenistic poet, thus provides us with an early sign of the nascent awareness of writing and books that would characterize the Age\(^\text{12}\).

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\(^{10}\) A late instance of a talking tablet, likewise riddling, is in AP XIV 60 (cited by Kuchenmüller, op. cit. p. 62):

\begin{quote}
'Υλη μὲν με τέχεν, καινούργησεν δὲ σίδηρος:

εἶμι δὲ Μουσάων μυστικὸν ἐκδοχίον

κλεισμένη ἁγίων λαλέω δ’, ὅταν ἐκπέτασις με,

κοινώνον τὸν ὅ ΄ Αρη μοῦνον ἔχουσα λόγων.
\end{quote}

And even the wax on the tablet takes voice, though again at a late date, in AP XIV 45:

\begin{quote}
Εἶμι μέλας, λευκός, ξανθός ἔρος τε καὶ ύγρός:

εὗτε δὲ δουροτέων πεῖδιν ἔπειρ ἐνταύφησις με,

Ἀρεί καὶ παλάμη φθέγγομαι σοῦ λαλέων.
\end{quote}
