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Performing the other: (fe)male chorus
and feminine voice in Alcman's *Partheneion*

Reading the *Partheneia* of Alcman is always a challenging and puzzling quest for classicists, stemming from a combination of fragmentary quality with perplexing imagery and metaphoric language (Peponi, 2004). Thus, fragment 1 has provoked many readings in an attempt to decipher the words of the female chorus: Calame's (1997) classic discussion reads the fragment as a rite of passage from girlhood to adulthood, from the status of *parthenos* to that of *gyne*. According to Stehle (1998) the chorus emphasizes their "lack of voice" in order to "publicly demonstrate their internalization of gender roles, while reinforcing the construction of these roles for the audience" (1998, 72). The poem presents us with an interesting problem of feminine voice and subjectivity reinforced by the structure of the poem: the song is divided in two parts, a "male" and a "female" part: The first section, the catalogue of warriors, reveals a strong authoritative male speech while in the second the authority of the chorus' speech is problematic, almost impossible. (Robbins, 1994; Clark, 1996).

I will then argue that the maidens of the *Partheneion* fail to perform a feminine discourse staged as either incapable of uttering any voice or as mimicking the predominant male discourse. The chorus mimics both the language and structure of the first section in describing its performance as a battle and employing a catalogue of female adornments mirroring the catalogue of male warriors. Moreover, using metaphoric language while describing the dancers, the chorus is pointing to a spectacle that cannot be fully seen; an abstract image blurring the subjectivity of the dancers. It is then through metaphors that the young girls are represented as animals, racing horses, doves or metals emphasizing their function as valuable objects.

The passage into order of a society, into the symbolic order, is then linked with the institutionalized gazing upon women as objects of transaction; Women, like signs, myths and commodities are made to be exchanged and always refer back to men. The young women of the *Partheneion*, I argue, are represented in such a way they can be seen as commodities with no subjectivity, no voice, no desire, no language. The young girls of the chorus are clearly represented as valuable possessions: clothing, jewelry, or horses. I will also argue that the construction of a (fe)male self is equally impossible. Women in the *Partheneion*, act like men: fight, defend themselves, see and project themselves as men. And of course, they talk like men emphasizing hierarchical models, or models of desire that emphasize the objectification of the beloved. Moreover, the inability of feminine discourse is emphasized: women in the *Partheneion* either mimic a male language or utter animal cries, an otherwise unrepresentable voice, represented only via similes.

Composing songs for young women then, Alcman chooses to represent feminine voice as different from human voice, stressing a matter inherent to feminine voice: its alterity and problematic representation. Mimicking a language that does not belong to them, the women in the *Partheneion* seem to carry on the Father's name as their own, mirroring also structures that it is not their own. For to assume masculine language means assuming male roles and male ideology.

