

In Defense of Thyrsis: The Importance of the Poetic Loser in Vergil's *Eclogues*
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In his interpretation of Greek pastoral poetry, Vergil keeps the idealistic world and the concern with artful poetry, while adding the Roman touch of realism. If a poet is unable to balance the real and the ideal, he cannot master pastoral poetry as Vergil envisions it. He makes this challenge clear in the two poetic contests in the *Eclogues*. By showing singers who demonstrate mastery (both competitors in *Eclogue* III and Corydon in VII) and singers who must learn such mastery (Thyrsis in *Eclogue* VII), Vergil puts forth his poetic agenda of what good pastoral poetry should be and sets the precedent for generations of pastoral poets to come.

Although the two share the same general format of an amoebean contest, *Eclogues* III and VII are very different in their frames, characters, and content. *Eclogue* III contains a more elaborate frame, more characterization, and the contest is declared a friendly draw. On the contrary, *Eclogue* VII has a brief introduction, the characters barely speak outside of the contest, and a clear winner and loser are appointed. In exploring these different treatments of the same well-established form, two questions arise: why is Thyrsis, the loser of *Eclogue* VII, the only loser, and is he really just a loser? Several key aspects of Vergil's contribution to pastoral poetry come to light in the pursuit of the answers to these questions. First, one of Vergil's most innovative contributions to pastoral is the element of the real world presence, and second, the subtle exploitation of balance between the ideal and the real proves to be a crucial challenge that fascinates later writers of pastoral through the Renaissance and beyond. In the end, Thyrsis becomes a somewhat exaggerated representative, not of a crude poetic failure, but of Vergil's vision for pastoral poetry.