

Caelata fagina pocula: Irony in Virgil's Pastoral Ekphrasis
Holly L. Murphy (Baylor University)

Scholars suggest that Virgil purposefully exposes the limits of pastoral poetry in his third Eclogue, a poem ironically satiated in the pastoral tradition (Segal "Vergil's *Caelatum Opus: An Interpretation of the Third Eclogue*" [1967] 284-290). Virgil may employ ekphrasis in Eclogue 3 for that very purpose; while he uses language that invites comparison to Homer, his cups prove inferior both in material and in craftsman. Through his subtle use of irony, Virgil may be revealing an intention to move beyond bucolic poetry and look for a poetic masterpiece more suited to Homeric vocabulary.

In Eclogue 3, as Menalcus praises his cups that he will wager in the singing contest, he describes them as *caelatam*. The use of this particular word sparks reflection, for it traditionally described only metal objects (R. Faber, "Vergil *Eclogue* 3.37, Theocritus 1, and Hellenistic Ekphrasis" [1995] 411-417). Readers would recall famous scenes from epic poetry such as Homer's description of Achilles' bronze shield (*Il.*18.478-608). Menalcus's cups, however, are *fagina pocula* (*E.*3.36). Virgil's readers would have seen the idiosyncrasy in a wooden *caelatam* cup; Faber suggests Virgil is trying to prove that pastoral poetry is a *res...non parva* (R. Faber, "Vergil *Eclogue* 3.37, Theocritus 1, and Hellenistic Ekphrasis" [1995] 411-417). Virgil may, however, have intended precisely the opposite effect; the *caelatam opus* may purposefully reveal one of pastoral poetry's limitations. Metallic masterpieces, such as the shield created for Achilles, are out of place in pastoral poetry. Beech wood cups are appropriate for the pastoral genre; however, by using the term *caelatam*, Virgil highlights the disparity between the humble material in pastoral ekphrases and epic poetry's ornate creations (Segal "Vergil's *Caelatum Opus: An Interpretation of the Third Eclogue*" [1967] 287).

Virgil employs another method that recalls Homeric ekphrasis: he mentions the artist. Menalcus declares that his *fagina pocula* were the crafted work *divini Alcmidontis* (*E.*3.54). Homer, in describing Achilles' shield, also explicitly names the maker, Hephaestus (R. Faber "Vergil *Eclogue* 3.37, Theocritus 1, and Hellenistic Ekphrasis" [1995] 415). This invites a comparison between the two artisans. Virgil stamps the term *divini* on Alcmidon much like he stamped *caelatam* on the beech wood cups; neither appear worthy of their title. When compared to the truly-divine forger of Achilles' shield, the unknown Alcmidon falls short.

Virgil's characters bring further attention to the cups' humble workmanship. Damoetas comments that if Menalcus would look to the cow that he (Damoetas) was offering as a prize, Menalcus would have no praise for the cups: *si ad vitulam spectas, nihil est, quod pocula laudes* (*E.*3.48). Menalcus does not value them highly either; he is far more willing to be deprived of them than a member of his flock (*E.*3.32-35).

Schultz suggests that, in the wager between Menalcus and Daometes, the cow represents the realistic aspect of bucolic poetry, while the cups signify the poetic aspect (Schultz "*Latet Anguis in Herba: a Reading of Vergil's Third Eclogue*" [2003] 199). If so, then Virgil's ekphrasis may indeed hint that bucolic verse, though realistic, is poetically inferior to epic verse. The ironic terms he uses to describe the cups certainly seem to bring their inferiority to the surface. Why would he have wanted to do this? While the *Aeneid* may or may not have been shadowing his thoughts, the closing lines of Eclogue 3 could indicate that Virgil was looking beyond pastoral poetry to something new. Paelumus commands the singing shepherds: *claudite iam rivos, pueri: sat prata biberunt* (*E.*3.111). The shepherds ceased their *rivos*, a metaphor for bucolic verse (Conington 54); the meadows were satiated. Perhaps Virgil, satiated with pastoral poetry's limited capabilities, was hinting that his poetry would soon flow in a new direction, one capable of producing a poetic *opus* worthy to be *caelatam*.

Works Cited

- Faber, Riemer. 1995. "Vergil *Eclogue* 3.37, Theocritus 1, and Hellenistic Ekphrasis." *AJP* 116:411-17.
Segal, C. P. 1967. "Vergil's *Caelatum Opus: An Interpretation of the Third Eclogue*." *AJP* 88:279-308.
Schultz, Celia E. 2003. "*Latet Anguis in Herba: a Reading of Vergil's Third Eclogue*." *AJP* 124:199-224.
Virgil, Publius Vergilius Maro, John Conington, Henry Nettleship, Francis Haverfield. 1979. *P. Virgili Maronis Opera with a Commentary by John Conington and Henry Nettleship*. New York: George Olms.