Household Mime and the Structure of Theocritus’ Fifteenth *Idyll*

Theocritus’ fifteenth *Idyll* describes the pilgrimage of two Syracusan émigrés, Praxinoa and Gorgo, from the home of the former on the outskirts of Alexandria to the Adonia in the city center. Praxinoa and Gorgo’s dialogue and their interactions with people on the Alexandrian streets comprise the first two thirds of the poem, and a hymn to Adonis concludes it. This poem poses two major interpretative problems. First, the generic identification of *Idyll* 15 has been thrown into doubt. As Nita Krevans has pointed out, several aspects of Theocritus 15, including its multiple settings and embedded hymn, are inconsistent with the rest of the mimes of Herodas and Theocritus (Krevans 2006, 126). Second, this generic (mis)identification obscures the position of *Idyll* 15 within the Theocritean corpus. In this paper I will show that a consideration of the formal features of Herodas’ and Theocritus’ mimic poetry clarifies the genre of Theoc. 15. Moreover, once the poem is understood to be neither purely mimic nor non-mimic, but rather both mimic and pastoral, its position in the Theocritean corpus can be understood as well.

The generic problem can be solved by setting off the first 43 lines from the rest of the poem. This section, which I call the *household mime*, demonstrates several features which characterize the other mimes of Theocritus and the mimes of Herodas. There are only two speakers, Praxinoa and Gorgo. We might note that in lines 26-33, Praxinoa berates her silent handmaid, Eunoa, whose reticence confirms Theocritus’ interest in limiting the number of speaking roles and conforming to the generic norm in this part of his poem. This section also begins with a greeting scene which establishes the setting of dialogue (Herod. 1, 4, 6, 7). And like most surviving Hellenistic mime, this section ends with the abandonment of the setting of the dialogue, when Praxinoa tells her slave to lock the door of the house as she and Gorgo are departing (Herod. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

The generic consistency of these first 43 lines sets the household mime off from the rest of the poem. What follows is a scene set in the anarchic streets of Alexandria, comprised of successive encounters with a generous old woman (15.60-64), a contrite, clumsy man (15.72-75), and finally, in the temple precinct, an obnoxious xenophobe (15-87-95). The range of characterization and the variety of dialogue point to the deliberate breaking of mimic convention. The central section of Theoc. 15 throws this poem, which had begun so peacefully in the home of Praxinoa, into complete disarray, an effect that is relieved only when the performance of the Adonis hymn begins (15.100). Having established that Theocritus constructs a formally mimic section only to leave it behind, it is left to determine what this generic structure says about the place of Theoc. 15 in the author’s corpus.

According to Nita Krevans, the prominence of Adonis, the archetypical mythical herdsman, in the concluding section of Theoc. 15 introduces an element of the pastoral into the poem (Krevans 2006, 129). This is a particularly apt observation, since the ecphrastic section which precedes the hymn recalls Theocritus’ very bucolic *Idyll* 1, which is comprised of an ecphrasis followed by a pastoral song that overlaps thematically with the content of the ecphrasis. In terms of structure, we have here a poem that begins with a pure mime and ends with a pastoral scene. This structure is especially important for two reasons. First, the pilgrimage of Praxinoa and Gorgo to the Adonia has been cast as a sort of metaphor for their immigration from Syracuse to Alexandria (15.8-10). Second, Theocritus himself was a Syracusan poet who had taken as one of his primary literary models the 5th-century Syracusan mimeographer Sophron. So, rather than attempting to assign the fifteenth *Idyll* to a single genre, we should recognize that it is bookended on one side by a scene which represents the poet’s local, literary heritage, and on the other side by a scene which represents the bucolic poet that he would become as a member of the Alexandrian literary community, and so metaphorically depicts, in the pilgrimage of two women through the hectic streets of Alexandria, the process of becoming a Hellenistic poet.

Works Cited:

Krevans, N. 2006. “Is there Urban Pastoral? The Case of Theocritus’ *Id*. 15.” In *Brill’s Companion to Greek and Latin Pastoral*. ed. M. Fantuzzi and T. Papanghelis, 119-146. Leiden: Brill.