The *Theoi* of Theocritus: Generic Divinity in *Idyll* 1

It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke: "three gods walk up to a dying cowherd and…" Yet nevertheless, it is under such unusual circumstances that we are first introduced to Theocritus' bucolic poetry. A programmatic poem designed to establish a new "lower" genre, *Idyll* 1, in fact, includes more divine figures than mortals. Theocritus' unusual treatment of divinities begins most strikingly with his portrayal of the Nymphs, but culminates in his depiction of a trio of erotic deities—Hermes, Priapus, and Aphrodite, a set who do not occur together elsewhere in the *Idylls*. While the invocation of such diverse gods may seem Homeric, the presentation of these divine figures falls short of the expectations and patterns set up by Homer. In their encounters with Daphnis, their divinity is strangely suppressed, and the approaches, attire, and overall portrayal of the gods are reduced to simple, mundane terms that utterly lack the glory of epic. Interpretation of the roles of these gods has varied over time. A. S. F. Gow proposed that Hermes, at least, comes to Daphnis as a fellow herder, a "god of flocks and herds" who reminds the reader of the pastoral environment (1950); Kathryn Gutzwiller, focusing on Daphnis' conflict with Aphrodite, explains his divine encounters as Theocritus' attempt to emphasize Daphnis' mythical prowess in rejecting love (1991); Marco Fantuzzi simply accepted the presence of these deities as a vestige of the mythical background of Daphnis (1998). There is no consensus among scholars; rather, there is a clear dichotomy, as Gow's interpretation relies on the familiarity of a god and Gutzwiller and Fantuzzi's on their divinity.

Charles Segal, on the other hand, suggested that such supernatural encounters set the mythical tone of *Idylls* 1 and 7 and allowed Theocritus to define his "poetic essence" (1977); but in the parade of deities within Thyrsis' song, Theocritus seems to be taking his project a step further—instead of simply elevating his own poetry to the divine, Theocritus actually lowers the

divine to the level of his poetry. By giving the role of authority in each confrontation to Daphnis, who is himself a poet, rather than to the god or goddess at hand, Theocritus subsumes their power to the discernment of Daphnis, and thereby to Theocritus himself. Daphnis' silence is thus Theocritus' silence, and by examining Daphnis' responses to these gods we metaphorically gain insight into Theocritus' own responses to his predecessors, whose poetry, I argue, these gods embody.

The difficulty of understanding the nature of Theocritus' gods is underscored by Daphnis' treatment of them. Spurning two gods in tandem, only to rebuke the third, all without prayer or supplication, Daphnis crosses the line between familiarity and contempt. Even among demi-gods and heroes, such impious arrogance would be unforgiveable; Helen, a daughter of Zeus, nearly meets her end for similarly dismissing Aphrodite in the *Iliad* (3.396-412). Yet if these gods are invoked by Theocritus not as manifestations of the divine but as representations of various genres, the responses of Daphnis to each become not simply narrative decisions, but generic choices. Daphnis, as the embodiment of Theocritus himself, reveals the bucolic father's own relationship with the works of his predecessors and contemporaries as well as his understanding of the inchoate bucolic genre. Viewing Hermes, Priapus and Aphrodite as figures reduced to the level of allegory, therefore, I propose that these gods are purposefully invoked metaphorically to answer under what aegis Hellenistic bucolic poetry should fall.

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