

## The Cup of Doom: Theocritus and the Heidelberg Exiles

Reception studies on Theocritean pastoral have been hampered by a mistaken assumption commonly found in the scholarship on sixteenth-century humanism. The issue centers around humanism proper and “confessionalism” – a term used to denote a defining of religious attitudes on the European scene. Typically, a sharp line is drawn between the two (McGrath: 1987), with humanism represented as “classicist” and confessionalism as interested in classicism only for its educational value (Rummel: 2000). However, as our understanding of the early modern era continues to grow through the study of hitherto unknown Greek and Latin texts, these categories are proving inadequate.

A case in point: To celebrate the marriage of Frederick III’s daughter to John VI of Nassau-Dillenburg, the Greek scholar Simon Stenius published in 1580 an idyll, composed in Doric Greek and painstakingly modelled after Theocritus’s *Idylls* 1 and 7. Not content, however, simply to imitate Theocritus, Stenius takes several celebrated passages from these idylls and turns them completely on their heads. Once one sees just why he does this, the line between humanism and confessionalism becomes much harder to draw and, consequently, a fuller appreciation of the life Theocritean bucolic took on becomes possible.

Using the structure of the idyll as a control to its meaning, I discuss how the arrival of a goatherd who has narrowly escaped death in the Low Countries and the song for peace that concludes the poem locate the characters in a liminal space so as to create unease and a sense of foreboding. I then focus on what occupies the central position of the idyll, the ekphrasis of a cup (kissybion). Pointing out the unmistakable debt to Theocritus (*Idyll* 1.28-56), I then explore the differences. For example, the coquettish woman on Theocritus’s cup is replaced by a veiled matron with nine attendants in mourning; the foxes plundering a vineyard are replaced with

foxes who fail to get any food at all; and the strong, but old fisherman is replaced with a tragic scene in which birds and lizards viciously attack a swarm of industrious bees.

Offering my interpretation of the piece, I start with contextualization. In 1580 the Heidelberg scholars, by and large Calvinists, had been banished from the city and replaced by Lutherans at the behest of Ludwig VI, Elector Palatine. Although the scholars found refuge under Ludwig's brother, Johann Casimir, in Neustadt, their future looked bleak, surrounded as they were by hostile Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Stenius' cup, I argue, responds to this sense of impending doom.

My argumentation then becomes comparative and linguistic. For instance, I equate the bucolic vineyard (alōē) with the refugees at Neustadt by pointing out that the vineyard was a common metaphor derived from Matthew 20:1 (ampelōn) for the Christian body and that Stenius emphasizes its productivity of much good fruit (polykarpos), at the same time raising the register to epic tones (hiemenē per). But, unlike Theocritus's scene, the foxes fail to damage the fruit because the boy keeps a good watch on it, despite his preoccupation with making a cricket-trap. Yet the foxes are still present *in* the vineyard, and so represent fear of Ludwig and his Lutheran policies.

I go on to explore the wide-ranging implications of Stenius' meticulous adaptation of Theocritean bucolic. For all his mastery of bucolic diction, themes, and otherworldliness, Stenius makes unique use of the ekphrasis. While (on the whole) Theocritus used the ekphrasis to penetrate deeper into his imaginary world (Lawall: 1967, Halperin: 1983, Hunter: 1999), Stenius uses it to re-introduce the real world *back* into his pastoral world in order to upset the joy of the royal wedding without however actually subverting it, his ultimate goal being to inspire the hope of peace that this marriage with John VI (and, through him, with his more famous brother,

William of Orange) might ultimately bring. Such peace, however, could only come at the expense of Ludwig VI, currently Stenius' sovereign! Thus in the end Stenius' ekphrasis, through its blend of Theocritean and original material, allows Stenius to come quite close, perhaps dangerously close, to the notion of civil disobedience. And this notion, arrived at with such subtlety, betrays the unmistakable influence of the Classics.

### Bibliography

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