

Failed Visions: The Goatherd's Cup and Daphnis in Theocritus' First Idyll

In Theocritus' first Idyll, a goatherd elaborately describes the scenes on a wooden cup and ends his description by calling the cup a "goatherd's marvel" (*aipolikon thaêma*, 1.56). Many scholars have taken this label at face value and recognize the ecphrasis of the cup as a programmatic statement on behalf of the poet (Cairns 1984, Halperin 1987). But the reasoning behind such a reading is questionable. The goatherd, like many of the literary forebears that share his profession, ends the poem looking like a fool, interrupting his bestowal of gifts upon the singer Thyrsis to shout at his she-goats and threaten them with sexual violence. Thyrsis' song also questions the character of the goatherd when Priapus compares Daphnis with a goatherd who weeps because he cannot mount his flock. These passages raise doubt about the goatherd's alignment with the poet's authority.

One might also read *aipolikon thaêma* as "something only a goatherd would marvel at" (cf. Gow 1950 [vol. 2]: 13). The irony of such a reading distances the poet from the goatherd's pronouncement and suggests that the goatherd's ecphrasis attempts and fails to claim the elevated status associated with marvelous art. He claims the cup as a marvel and posits himself as both the privileged viewing audience for such a work and the virtuosic performer of the ecphrasis. When Thyrsis narrates the exchange between Priapus and Daphnis, he denies the goatherd's claims through his own authority as poet (1.23-24) and the authority of a divinity that is present before the two performers (*Id.* 1.21). After noting the way that the rest of the poem ironizes the goatherd's cup, I will offer a reading of the poem that accounts for this irony.

In addition to offering a rebuttal to the goatherd's performance, Thyrsis' song also offers a corresponding ironic treatment of virtuosity. In Thyrsis' song, Daphnis prays that his death cause an inversion of the entire order of nature (1.132-36). This prayer too fails. Immediately

following the end of this prayer, the poem returns to the peaceful pastoral world that Thyrsis and the goatherd inhabit, which is free from inversion. The landscape that the goatherd and Thyrsis inhabit ironizes the statement of Daphnis just as the poem ironizes the goatherd's ecphrasis. Many correspondences between the ecphrasis and Thyrsis' song have been documented (Frangeskou 1996, Calame 2005) but this correspondence allows the audience to take Priapus' comparison of Daphnis with a goatherd at face value. He does act like a goatherd because his poetic vision also fails. I will conclude my reading of this poem by comparing the ironized performances of the goatherd and Daphnis with other ironic performances in Theocritus, such as the song of Polyphemus in Idyll 11 and of the goatherd in Idyll 3.

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