

Relationship, Role, and Genre in Theocritus' *Idyll* 13

In *Idyll* 13, Theocritus offers a treatment of the rape of Hylas in order to demonstrate to his friend Nikias a general truth about Eros. Unfortunately, the majority of scholarship on the poem has been preoccupied with the undecided and perhaps undecidable question of its precise temporal relationship to the Apollonian version of the same episode (1.1172-1357). Of the few scholars who have considered *Idyll* 13 in its own right, Mastronarde (1968) has done the most to demonstrate that this short poem is more complex than it first appears: by juxtaposing the heroic with the pederastic, he argues, Theocritus sets the inherited traditions of epic against a series of new poetic alternatives. Hunter (1999), whose commentary is valuable on many details, adds that lyric and elegy are also prominent in the traditional background against which the poet works, but otherwise contributes little to an overall understanding of the poem. I will argue that the *Idyll* shows a much broader concern than has been recognized with the nature of human relationships and the purpose these serve in the development of personal and social identities. The pederastic relationship which appears to be at the center of the narrative is not merely set against the heroic ideal, or only against heterosexual desire: it is presented alongside the relationship between parent and child and that between *hetairoi* as well. The way in which each of these relationships interacts with the others, sometimes beneficially and sometimes to the detriment of one or more parties, is a central concern of the poem. Inasmuch as the characters in the poem are defined by their roles in these relationships, or by the balance they achieve or fail to achieve between conflicting roles, and inasmuch as these roles may be further classified as heroic or erotic (or other), the meditation on relationships doubles as a meditation on genre and poetic sensibilities. This reading constitutes a shift in emphasis from the metapoetic incongruities and juxtapositions, which are Mastronarde's focus, to the complex human interactions that make *Idyll* 13 rather more

than a mere manifesto. I will accordingly analyze Theocritus' treatment of different relationships and how they interact, a subject which has received scant attention apart from incomplete assessments of the pederastic relationship of Herakles and Hylas. This analysis will entail a discussion of the natural imagery of the *Idyll*, which in every instance functions to reinforce Theocritus' portrayal of human relationships. Finally, I aim to demonstrate that Theocritus uses these schemata, on one level, to represent the socialization of Hylas and the civilization of Herakles – and, in turn, the undoing of these processes; on another level, the *Idyll* sets forth a metapoetic argument for the transformation of traditional epic poetry through the agency of *eros*.

Bibliography

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