

## Gorgo and Praxinoa as Natural Philosophers?: An Experimental Reading of *Idyll 15*

Theocritus' Syracusan housewives are infamous as a parody of middle class bumpkins (Legrand 1898, Griffiths 1981). But do these women also serve as caricatures of ancient scientists? Before they set out for the Adonis festival at the palace, Praxinoa tells Gorgo: ἐν ὀλβίῳ ὀλβια πάντα "in a rich man's house, everything is rich" (*Id.* 15.24). This remark is often read as referring to material wealth, but another conception of the word *olbios* may also be at play. Empedocles identifies the man as *olbios* "who possesses a wealth of divine understanding" (fr. 132). A fragment of Euripides similarly calls *olbios* a man who gains knowledge through inquiry (*historia*) and "observes the ageless order of immortal nature" (fr. 910). Perhaps the riches that Gorgo and Praxinoa seek on their way to the palace are not simply material wealth, but knowledge. The rhetoric of sightseeing had already been adopted by natural philosophy (Nightingale 2004). These sightseeing housewives turn that rhetoric back against natural philosophy as parody.

Immediately following Praxinoa's remark about rich men, Gorgo sets an intent for the journey that resembles a research agenda: to explain the things they see to one who has not seen them (*Id.* 15.25). Like good natural philosophers, Gorgo and Praxinoa begin from the phenomena. On their journey to the palace they frequently engage in empirical observation, e.g. "look how fierce [that horse] is" (ἴδ' ὡς ἄγριος, 15.53), "look ... how great the crowd around the doors is" (θᾶσαι ... περὶ τὰς θύρας ὄσσοις ὄμιλος, 15.65). The same phrasing appears when they describe the tapestries in the palace: "Look ... at the tapestries, how fine and graceful they are" (τὰ ποικίλα ... ἄθρησον, λεπτὰ καὶ ὡς χαρίεντα, 15.78-79). The end of the poem offers support for my hypothesis when the same type of qualifying clause (signaled by ὡς or ὄσσοις) identifies the hymnist of the Adonis festival as "rich for all the things she knows" (ὀλβία ὅσσα ἴσατι,

15.146). This association of *olbios* with knowledge rather than wealth lends credence to my reading of Gorgo and Praxinoa's journey as one of discovery. The women even engage in another familiar practice from natural philosophy, the critique of folk wisdom (Lloyd 1979), when they encounter a cryptic old women at the door of the palace (*Id.* 15.60-64).

Despite compelling recent arguments for reading the women sympathetically (Burton 1995, Skinner 2001) this reading suggests that both the housewives and natural philosophers are the butt of Theocritus' joke. This conclusion is strengthened by reference to *Idyll* 11, which similarly aligns the lovesick Cyclops with the figure of a doctor (Erbse 1965).

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