

## The Power of the Gaze and Ritualized Song in Theocritus' *Idylls*:

### A Commentary on Female Mobility

This paper demonstrates female mobility in Theocritus' *Idylls* via the agency of her gaze and ritualized song, suggesting that the *Idylls* reflect contemporary social views of women. Scholars have recognized that women in the Hellenistic period achieved greater freedom in the public arena than in previous eras (Mori: 2008, van Bremen: 1996, Burton: 1995, Fantham: 1994, Pomeroy: 1990). The queens of Alexandria, for instance, held public prominent positions in varying capacities. Arsinoë II helped Philadelphus by supplying ships for Alexandria's fleet, and she also sponsored the Sanctuary of the Great Gods at Samothrace (Pomeroy: 1995, Ridgway: 1990). Sculpture set up by women and for women in the Hellenistic period moreover point to a trend of female affluence among ordinary women as well (Kron: 1996, Höghammar: 1993). With this in mind, I argue that the *Idylls* provide commentary on this new mobile caste in contemporizing vignettes in two ways: 1) through the power of the female gaze, and 2) through ritualized song.

In Theocritean poetics, the witch, the nagging wife, and even the goddess Aphrodite, represent the growing empowerment of women. The typical female is not a queen, nor would she normally hold public affluence, but Theocritus enabled his women; instead of being the object of the male gaze, she controls the gaze and is the agent of her own attraction. Not all women fit this model. Like Amaryllis of *Idyll* 1, many females of pastoral song fulfill their stock role as objects of obsessive male affection. Several prominent female characters, however, break this mould and control the scene with their gaze: the young woman on the shepherd's cup and the beguiling smile of Aphrodite in *Idyll* 1, the smile of Demeter at the end of *Idyll* 7, and the gaze of Praxinoa

in *Idyll* 15 as she objectifies the image of Adonis on the tapestry. Each of these female characters controls her sexualization with just a look. The male cannot escape her voyeurism.

I also draw on Karanika's article (2007), which demonstrates how the repetition of work songs in the ancient world manifested female agency. She compares the ritualization of female activities with song to the hypnotic repetition of love magic. The singer gains control over that project. Like the folk singer, Theocritus' female protagonists control the agency in pursuit of a beloved, thus taking an active part in love's ritual (cf. Simaetha of *Id.* 2, the singer of *Idyll* 15, and Alcmena of *Id.* 24). Ritualized actions in Theocritus' private and public vignettes depict women empowered in scenes typically dominated by males. The more outspoken female characters of *Idyll* 15 make public their newfound independence and test society's acceptance. Praxinoa and Gorgo demonstrate Alexandria's female mobility as the women take on the city and men while on their way to a festival sponsored by a powerful Alexandrian queen.

When the female gains agency she expresses her independence in manners that control the situation, either in gaze objectifying the male or in song that can be akin to magical incantation. I therefore propose that the prominent female Theocritean protagonists of *Idylls* 1, 2, 7, 15, and 24 provide a social commentary on the increasing mobility of women in Hellenistic Alexandria.

### Bibliography

- Burton, Joan B. 1995. *Theocritus's Urban Mimes: Mobility, Gender, and Patronage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fantham, Elaine, et. al., ed. 1994. *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Karanika, Andromache. 2007. "Folk Songs as Ritual Acts: the case of work-songs." In: *Finding Persephone: women's rituals in the ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Maryline Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kron, Uta. 1996. "Priesthoods, Dedications and Euergetism: What Part Did Religion Play in the Political and Social Status of Greek Women?" In *Religion and Power in the Ancient Greek World*, edited by Pontus Hellström and Brita Alroth, 139-82. Motala: Motala Grafiska AB.
- Höghammar, Kerstin. 1993. *Sculpture and Society: A Study of the Connection between the Free-standing Sculpture and Society on Kos in the Hellenistic and Augustan Periods*. Uppsala: ACTA UNIVERSITATIS UPSALIENSIS.
- Mori, Anatole. *The Politics of Apollonius' Argonautica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. 1995. Reprint. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books. Original edition, New York: Schocken Books, 1975.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. 1990. Reprint. *Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexandria to Cleopatra*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. Original Edition, New York: Schocken Books, 1984.
- Ridgway, Brunilde Sismondo. 1990. *Hellenistic Sculpture I: The Styles of ca. 331-200 B.C.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Van Bremen, Riet. 1996. *The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*. Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, Publisher.