

Before Queen: Vergil and the Musical Tradition of Sampling Popular Song

To better teach the complexities of Vergil's *Eclogues* to undergraduate audiences, I propose looking more closely at the rhythms and lyrics of music popular with students. Just as contemporary artists sample music to invest their songs with cultural meaning, Vergil sampled Theocritus. Vergil used Theocritus' pastoral *Idylls*, which were inherently self-reflexive and laden with cultural resonances, as a vehicle for his own commentary on contemporary Roman politics and literary criticism. Finding these nuances within the ancient poetry, however, is a difficult task. I therefore suggest that a comparison between modern-day pop music and ancient popular song would place pastoral poetry within familiar territory. I explain my approach in two steps by demonstrating 1) clear examples of where modern artists have sampled music and lyrics to invest their songs with our own musical heritage and 2) how this practice compares to what dialogue Vergil was carrying on with his own previous musical traditions through Theocritus.

The rock group Queen provides a good example of how pop artists sample each other's music. Queen's music has become so popular that it still resonates among our youth culture. For instance, when Gwen Stefani recites the verse "another one bites the dust" in her 2006 hit "Hollaback Girl," she joins in a tradition of defiant lovers. By repeating this lyric from Queen's 1980 hard rock hit, Gwen defines not only what exactly is a "hollaback girl," but also the tone of her song. As another example, the classic Queen stadium rock anthem "We Will Rock You" (1977) has one of the simplest and most recognizable beats in pop music. When Lady Gaga crossed musical genres and sampled this beat in her love song "You and I" from her album *Born This Way* (2011), she characterized the strength of her love. Lady Gaga sampled Queen's iconic beat in her emotional ballad to show that her love for "you" will champion through life's trials. Queen, moreover, originally sampled the musical tag from Aaron Copland's classical hit

“Fanfare for the Common Man” (1942). The beat is the war cry for everyman. Lady Gaga assumes the deeper meaning of this beat and molds it for her own purposes into a war cry for love. The students, whether they are aware of Freddie Mercury or not, probably are familiar with the electric beat of “We Are the Champions” and probably stomped their feet and clapped their hands to this beat while cheering on their high school football teams. By following the way contemporary artists sample one another’s lyrics and rhythms to invest their own music with cultural meaning, we better understand our own music and also the discourse between the ancient poets on shared musical traditions.

Popular music culturally resounds from generation to generation because the songs share a musical tradition; artists use typical frames and memorable patterns and repeat familiar names, lyrics, and themes. The second part of this paper therefore demonstrates how to apply the sampling of modern pop artists to Vergil’s *Eclogues*. Theocritus composed with certain themes and musical patterns common to folksongs (Dover: 1971), and he used this simple pastoral mime to philosophize, debate literary criticism, and comment on Hellenistic society (Gutzwiller: 2007). As Gutzwiller impressed in *Theocritus’ Pastoral Analogies*, shepherds are good to think with (1991). Vergil carried on Theocritus’ rustic façade by sampling the proper names, phrases, and musicality of the *Idylls*. Like Gwen Stefani, Vergil invoked Theocritus through repeated words and phrases; like Lady Gaga, he sampled Theocritus’ meter and musical patterns (Coleman: 1977, Alpers: 1979). For instance, Vergil sampled the musicality of *Idyll* 1.1-3 with mellifluous sound play in *Eclogue* 1.1-3; however, *Eclogue* 1 is not about Daphnis or song, but about land confiscation after the civil wars. Vergil politicized the amoebaeon competition by placing Theocritus’ bucolic lover, Tityrus, against a harsh Roman reality, Meliboeus (Hubbard: 1998). He created his own voice in the popular song of his day with intertextual allusions to and poetic

sound play with Theocritus. I therefore propose that by teaching the students to seek out these elements in their pop music, we modernize the complexities of Vergil's *Eclogues* and facilitate student understanding in the classroom.

Works Cited

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