

εὐρεῖν δ' οὐ ῥάδιόν ἐστι: Bad Poet and Good Poet in Theocritus' *Idyll* 11

In *Idyll* 11, Theocritus claims that song (τὰ Πιερίδες, 3) is the most effective remedy for lovesickness, adding, however, that “it is not easy to find it” (εὐρεῖν δ' οὐ ῥάδιόν ἐστι, 4). Surprisingly, scholars have overlooked this qualifying statement which may hold the key to a credible interpretation of this baffling poem. For knowing that Theocritus flourished in a cultural milieu which valued erudition, rarity and refinement, and that he was also a follower of Epicureanism, which proposed a set of well-defined rules for poetry, we may assume that here he speaks in esthetic terms. The difficulty in finding therapeutic poetry reflects the difficulty in finding poetry that embodies the above literary qualities. Thus we may recast Theocritus' statement as follows: “Good poetry is a remedy for lovesickness, but to make good poetry is not easy.” In this light, the idyll's lover/singer Polyphemus presents a paradox. For, on the basis of the quoted song, he is not a good poet, and yet Theocritus tells us that he manages to secure the healing benefits of the Πιερίδες. The fact, however, that he mentions it three times (7, 17, 80-81) is in itself suspicious, reminiscent of Shakespeare's “The lady doth protest too much.” The sophisticated Theocritus knows that Polyphemus' song, lacking literary merits, cannot cure. But the failure of the Cyclops is Theocritus' success. He not only establishes a character whose crudeness and naiveté are revealed through his song, but he also creates humor, irony and minor puzzles, all of which were highly prized by the Hellenistic poets. By making the Cyclops a bad poet, Theocritus becomes himself a good one, having found that which εὐρεῖν δ' οὐ ῥάδιόν ἐστι.