

Hecate's Cure for Lovesickness

Theocritus' second Idyll is a fascinating poem that depicts a young woman, Simaetha, performing an incantation to bind her lover, Delphis. Following her incantation, Simaetha offers a to Selene. This poem has garnered a considerable amount of attention, particularly for the possible window it offers onto the reality of Hellenistic life. Simaetha's skill as a magician, for example, has been evaluated through comparison with Greek magical papyri (Domány, 2013) and her characterization has given rise to discussions of social status in Hellenistic Egypt (Lambert, 2002; Burton, 1995). In this paper, however, I would like to focus on Idyll 2's frequent use of recurrent imagery to consider more broadly how Theocritus develops Simaetha as a character and how she might help us understand the concept of love in the Idylls.

Idyll 2 is rich in recurrent imagery that provides important insight into Simaetha's intentions in the poem. To give but one example, it is noteworthy that in attempting her magical rite, Simaetha is essentially acting out of a desire for reciprocity. Her incantation to bind Delphis (10) requires that she burn a number of objects (barely, bran, a bay leaf), acts reminiscent of the flame of love for Delphis kindled in Simaetha (μοι πυρὶ θυμὸς ἰάφθη, 81) as well as the heat of their passion (140-141). Of course, her incantation calls for Delphis to burn in an intense, but now literal, flame (24-26). Similarly, in lines 28-29, Simaetha melts wax in the hope that Delphis would similarly melt or waste away with love (the verb for both is the same, τήκω). Of course, Simaetha herself has and continues to suffer the experience she attempts to foist upon Delphis; at line 83, her beauty wastes away (τὸ δὲ κάλλος ἐτάκετο), and a more graphic image of her "melting" comes in lines 88-90 as she turns pale, loses her hair, and is reduced to skin and bones. Finally, the notion of binding Delphis and placing him under her control, and perhaps more

specifically manipulating him through the wax effigy, is echoed in her loss of control when he comes to her for the first time. On that occasion, Delphis' words cause her to turn cold and leave her speechless as her body becomes stiff like a doll (106-110).

I propose, then, that whether Simaetha's spell is correctly performed or not is secondary to her desire to see her lover suffer as she has. Her magic attempts to make Delphis feel simultaneously the pains of love that Simaetha felt spread over the course of her brief relationship with him, seeking to inflict upon him her initial fiery passion, her anguished longing, and her powerlessness when he eventually came to her. I suspect, then, that Simaetha's incantation aims to make Delphis a lover not so that he will be compelled to satisfy Simaetha's desire, but so that he can know what it means to suffer as she does. Indeed, by the poem's end, if he will not come knocking on her door and show a care for whether she even lives (4-5) then he will knock at the gates of Hades (160).

Finally, the poem early on has Simaetha create a pairing of Hecate and Selene (10-12), the former called upon to see her spell fulfilled and the latter the recipient of Simaetha's account of her suffering; Hecate and Selene are, tellingly, two aspects of the same goddess. Some have interpreted Simaetha's address to Selene as a therapeutic contrast to the spell (Parry, 1988; Griffiths, 1979). My paper concludes by suggesting that Simaetha's spell and lament, like Hecate and Selene, are in fact inseparable; if Simaetha finds some relief by the poem's end, it is because her anger and grief—not her passion—have guided her songs and brought her at least understanding of her situation, if not satisfaction.

Bibliography

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