

## Goddesses, Monsters, and Shepherds: Playing with Homeric Fantasy in Theocritus' *Idylls*

Important studies (e.g., Gutzwiller-2010) have pointed out programmatic statements on Hellenistic aesthetic in the imagery, language, and sound of the bucolic *Idylls*. Theocritus' play with characters of Homeric fantasy, I suggest, is another indicator of his verbal innovation. I propose that Theocritus placed three characters of Homeric fantasy in each of his three programmatic *Idylls* to highlight his aesthetic in opposition to Homeric epic style. This paper discusses 1) how tensions in the narratives of Aphrodite in *Idyll 1* and Polyphemus in *Idyll 11* release the characters from their epic weight and 2) how Lycidas' manipulation of myth and lyricism in *Idyll 7* instructs the audience on the new aesthetic.

In *Idyll 1*, Daphnis rejects the fantasy of Homeric Aphrodite in order to cleanse himself of this type of literary pollution (Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo*). Daphnis rebukes her epic heritage, which he invokes in the memory of her conflict with Diomedes in the *Iliad*; and although Daphnis dies in *Idyll 1* after refusing her aid (Segal-1974), an allusion to his rebirth occurs in *Idyll 7*. Daphnis is not lost to the spiraling eddy of an obscure literary death; instead, the audience hears the verbal innovation that Daphnis now embodies as he melts into the peaceful soundscape of Theocritus' *locus amoenus*.

*Idyll 11* similarly presents a formidable character of Homeric song, but he is totally devoid of his epic monstrous behavior. Although Polyphemus' fantasy plays with the idea of control (as Polyphemus tries to "control" Odysseus, he tries to "control" Galatea), the *Idyll* strips him of his epic cruelty and, instead, develops his nature as a bumbling fool (Fantuzzi and Hunter-2004). *Idyll 11* recalls his epic past several times: in his appearance and vocation (vv. 30-7), in a burning eye (vv. 52-3), and in a visitation from a stranger by ship (v. 61). Polyphemus

wants Galatea's love, and he offers her everything that epic song can provide, but it is only when he releases himself of his outdated habits that the audience recognizes the sound and content of a new literary aesthetic. The lovesick monster drops the lethargic style of epic song in favor of light, sonorous play with the girls nearby (Stanford-1967) and musicality of a bucolic *locus amoenus*.

Finally, the character of Lycidas realizes the tenuous fantasy that he inhabits. Lycidas invokes the Chian bard (v. 47), and the Homeric gods inspired the depiction of his character (Brown-1981, Clayman-2009). Unlike the narrative tensions of the first two examples, however, Lycidas is completely at ease with his epic heritage and instructs on a neater register. He includes language used by contemporary literary critics when he compares a finely crafted composition to a builder (*téktōn*, v. 45) and complains about poets who try to vie with Homer in length (on "builder," cf. Porter-2010). Simichidas' song, under the tutelage of Lycidas, even closes *Idyll 7* by invoking a *locus amoenus* so fantastic it is best compared to Calypso's garden in the *Odyssey*.

Poetry produced in court at Alexandria was likely spoken and not sung (Fantuzzi and Hunter-2004, Prauscello-2006). This change in performance style preferred a new "literary" Muse to the old Muses of Homer; however, I suggest a more fluid transition. Through comparison of euphonist criticism (Janko-2000, Halliwell-2011) to Theocritus' text, it seems that the *Idylls* were part of a larger conversation in the Hellenistic period on literary aesthetics and the re-imagining of traditional performance style. Theocritus acknowledged the songs of his Homeric predecessors with myth and sound – maintaining the fantasy – while simultaneously declaring his distance through opposition and an escape into the soundscape of a bucolic *locus*

*amoenus*. Theocritus' play with Homeric fantasy allowed the myth to act as *exempla* for Alexandria's new literary aesthetic.

### Bibliography

- Brown, E.L. 1981. "The Lycidas of Theocritus' *Idyll 7*." *Harvard Studies in Philology* 85: 59-100.
- Clayman, Dee. 2009. *Timon of Phlius: Pyrrhonism into Poetry*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Fantuzzi, Marco, and Richard Hunter. 2004. *Tradition and Innovation in Hellenistic Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gutzwiller, Kathryn. 2010. "Literary Criticism." In *A Companion to Hellenistic Literature*, eds. James J. Clauss and Martine Cuypers, 337-65. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Halliwell, Stephen. 2013. Reprint. *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Janko, Richard. 2000. *Philodemus: On Poems, Book 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Porter, James I. 2010. *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prauscello, Lucia. 2006. *Singing Alexandria: Music between Practice and Textual Transmission*. Boston: Brill.
- Segal, Charles. 1974. " 'Since Daphnis Dies': the meaning of Theocritus' first idyll." *Museum Helveticum* 31: 1-22.
- Stanford, W.B. 1967. *The Sound of Greek: studies in the Greek theory and practice of euphony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.