

Theocritus Iambist: Reconsidering Genre in the *Idylls*

The poems known as Theocritus' *Idylls* are a variegated and diverse collection, at times hymning the gods and at other times dealing with slanderous shepherds. In terms of genre, most scholarly attention has centered on the question of the bucolic poems and the origin of this "new" type of poetry. Instead of looking back to the habits of ancient shepherds themselves (Dover 1971) and folk songs (Bulloch 1985), however, I propose that we consider the bucolic *Idylls* in light of a different genre of poetry: *Iambos*.

Despite the Suda's statement that Theocritus wrote *iamboi*, this claim has been dismissed by scholars (Rotstein 2010, p.36 n.34). Two epigrams to iambists exist under his name (to Archilochus and Hipponax), however, and the epigram to Archilochus is in a combination of Archilochean and iambic meter. Looking beyond these epigrams, I argue that some of his *Idylls* should be considered iambic poems. In this paper, I will first briefly describe the iambic genre, identify iambic features in Theocritus' *Idylls* such as scurrility, teasing, and competition, and finally turn to *Idyll 7* as a case in point.

As far as we can reconstruct, it seems that in its earliest stage iambic poetry was closely tied to festivals of Demeter and Dionysus and consisted of traditional jesting, ribaldry, or what we now call blue comedy. By the seventh century BCE we have remains of a more "literary" *iambos* (best known by poems in the Archilochean tradition), which scholars have argued is still tied to cult (West 1974). Unsurprisingly, iambic trimeter is a common meter for *iamboi*, but so is trochaic tetrameter, and it is clear that by the fifth century BCE the word *ιαμβίζεiv* was used to mean "mock" without reference to meter (Brown 1997). In the Hellenistic period, Alexandrian editors included choliambics, trochaic tetrameters and epodic poems in their editions of *iamboi*

(Bowie 2001, 5), and poetry either in iambic meter or having iambic content could both be referred to as *iambos* (Rotstein, 20). Some of Theocritus' *Idylls*, while not in iambic meters, contain many features of iambic poetry. We have scurrility, teasing and competition, and similarities to Callimachus' *Iamboi* and Herondas' *Mimiamboi*. Theocritus' innovation can be seen by taking material appropriate for *iambos*, but then cloaking it in dactylic hexameter.

In *Idyll 7*, the narrator is on his way to a harvest festival for Demeter when he runs into the goatherd Lycidas. After some gentle teasing back and forth, a singing contest ensues. *Idyll 7* is one of Theocritus' most programmatic poems, containing poetic succession as the goatherd Lycidas gives his staff, a symbol of his poetic authority, to the poem's narrator. One iambic marker is the setting: a festival of Demeter. Demeter is strongly linked to *iambos*, as exemplified by her interaction with Iambe in her *Homeric Hymn*, as well as in ritual. Another iambic marker is allusion: there are allusions to Hipponax and Archilochus (Henrichs 1980), the iambic poets par excellence, as well as allusions to Sappho, whose connection to the iambic genre has been magnified with the publication of the newest Sappho (Martin 2016). Finally, I argue that Lycidas himself functions as an iambic marker. His very name, Lycidas, is reminiscent of Archilochus' great iambic foe, Lycambes, while his appearance as a goatherd links *Idyll 7* to Herondas' *Mimiamb 8*, in which Hipponax is named as the narrator's master.

Considering the connection to *iambos* in Theocritus' *Idylls* gives us a firmer grasp on the genre of Theocritus' poetic project, as well as giving us a broader picture of Hellenistic *iambos* and Hellenistic poetry in general. Callimachus' *Iamboi* and Herondas' *Mimiamboi* are very different corpora; Adding a third Hellenistic corpus of iambic poetry, Theocritus' iambic *Idylls*, can help illuminate threads that run between them.

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