

Bovine Hoofs and Epicene Sexuality:

Natural History as Intertextual Space in Moschus' *Europa* and Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*

The first book of Longus' novel *Daphnis and Chloe* ends with a humorous scene: the young Daphnis makes his escape from pirates when their boat capsizes, and he swims for shore clinging awkwardly to the horns of two cows – at which point, the narrative gives way to a digression on the topic of bovine swimming skills (1.30). This natural history digression reads as “pseudo-scientific nonsense” (Bowie 2019, 160), and scholars have debated whether it should be regarded as an integral part of the text or as a wayward interpolation. The current consensus is to accept it as part of the text, but views differ on how to understand its tone and function. Most see the excursus as a performance of scientific sophistication framed ironically either by the novel's author (Morgan 2004) or by its internal narrator (Maciver 2020). My purpose in this paper is to argue that Longus digresses on swimming cows in order to create an intertextual connection with Moschus' *Europa*. Extending the analysis of Pattoni (2005), I show that the language of Longus' excursus, the scene to which it is connected, and also the focus on natural history in the context of a reflection on erotic experience all have precedents in Moschus' epyllion. This is significant, I argue, because Moschus' nuanced representation of feminine erotic experience provides a model – unique in the Hellenistic repertoire – for the fluid emotional landscape of epicene sexuality that is the subject of Longus' pastoral novel.

In the first part of the paper, I outline the verbal connections between Longus' excursus and Moschus' poem and argue that Longus constructs this intertextual link to frame Daphnis' swimming-scene as a humorous reversal of Moschus' representation of Zeus' rape of Europa. When Longus' narrator explains that cows are just as good swimmers as people are and that the

only way a cow might perish by swimming is “if the nails of his hoofs (τῶν χηλῶν οἱ ὄνυχες) should get thoroughly wet (διάβροχοι) and fall off” (1.30), this – patently false – detail echoes Moschus’ description of Zeus disguised as a bull, “moving over the broad sea with un-wetted hoofs (χηλαῖς ἀβρέκτοισιν)” as he carries Europa away (Moschus, *Europa* 114). Longus inverts the picture on several counts: whereas Europa is carried off over the waves majestically by a bull in what turns out to be a divine rape, Daphnis struggles along awkwardly with the help of ordinary cows back towards the shore, where he resumes his own un-heroic life in safety.

In the second part of the paper, I argue that Moschus provides a model not only for the material of Longus’ natural history digression, but also for the strategy itself: on a smaller scale, Moschus too uses natural history as a frame for exploring the emotional dimensions of erotic experience. When Moschus’ Europa realizes she has been abducted, she fixates on the detail of the swimming bull. Europa observes: “sea-going dolphins don’t move on land, nor do bulls walk on the sea, but you” – here she addresses Zeus, her abductor – “go fearless both by land and by sea, using your hoofs (χηλαί) as oars” (141-3). Noticing this apparently incongruent animal behavior prompts Europa, belatedly, to a new understanding of her experience. So, in Moschus’ poem, the figure of the swimming bull – first described ecphrastically by the author and later queried quasi-scientifically by the character – opens up the psychology of feminine erotic desire and its ambiguities. In *Daphnis and Chloe*, working on a broader canvas, Longus extends this interest in feminine sexual self-awareness and sexual development to young people both female and male.

Of all Longus’ Hellenistic predecessors Moschus, uniquely, offers a touchstone for the exploration of the mixed emotions characteristic of liminal, pubescent sexual experience. By way of the excursus on bovine hoofs, with its reversed gender roles and its confused account of

animal behavior, Longus brings Moschus' *Europa* into his text as a model and counter-model for his portrait of epicene sexuality.

Bibliography

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