

The Cyclops in Love: Reexamining Theocritus' Portrayal of Polyphemus in *Idyll 11*

Greek Poetry

The commonly-observed ironic distance which separates the poet and his learned audience from the rustic characters portrayed in Hellenistic pastoral poetry has moved many commentators to posit that Theocritus intended his love-lorn Polyphemus in *Id. 11* to be a risible character. However, there is compelling evidence for a contrary reading when we examine the literary tradition concerning the myth—including Theocritus' own *Id. 6*, which provides quite a different take on the dynamic between Polyphemus and Galatea.

Verity and Hunter (2002) read the pathos in *Id. 11* as "comic" (xii, 100), while Hopkinson (1999) claims that "Polyphemus, the one-eyed Odyssean pastoralist, is presented as a quintessentially naïve and rustic character" (149). The conceit of Polyphemus in love does, to be sure, represent a major inversion of the Homeric characterization of the Cyclopes as solitary and austere self-sufficient. Nevertheless, the position put forward by Segal (1981), Schmiel (1975) and Haber (1994) that Polyphemus is unable to realistically assess his standing with his would-be lovers does not have much textual support, and may be a judgment colored by the comic bent in the treatment of the myth by earlier authors (e.g., Philoxenus of Kythera's original dithyramb; Aristophanes' parody of it in his *Plutus*; and Euripides' satyr play, *The Cyclops*). After all, Polyphemus is aware that Galatea is repulsed by his monstrous appearance (*Id. 11.29-30*) and admits that he is such as he is (*Id. 11.34*)/ More importantly, as Walsh (1990) points out, Polyphemus' attempt to mollify his heartache through song *works*. However surprisingly, the Cyclops stands as heir to a tradition of the noble shepherds that are "superlative poets" (Dover 1971, lxii).

The argument for an unmitigated ironic reading of *Id. 11* is further rendered untenable when the internal textual evidence is taken together with the presentation of the Cyclops in *Id. 6*. In the singing contest between Daphnis and Damoitas we see quite a different Polyphemus. He is still unlucky in love, but in Daphnis' version, the Cyclops is quiet and unresponsive to an aggressive Galatea who appears to be pursuing *him*. Damoitas' response, which takes the form of Polyphemus' reply to Daphnis' characterization of him, claims that the nymph's antics have not escaped his notice, and this his lack of response is a ploy to drive her to frenzy (*Id. 6.22-27*). Far from the unsure, nervous Cyclops in *Id. 11*, Damoitas' song portrays a creature confident in his possessions and his person, and the dramatic irony which is thought to so distances the reader from Polyphemus in *Id. 11* begins to melt away.

The power of *Id.* 11, as in much Hellenistic poetry, lies in its ability to elicit a complex range of emotions from the reader by operating on multiple levels. Indeed, Bion, the last of the great Greek pastoralists has Myrson urge on his companion to sing some graceful, moving song of the sort Polyphemus might have sung to Galatea (2.1-3). It would appear, then, that by the 2nd century CE, Theocritus' Cyclops—monster, cannibal, and love-struck country bumpkin though he may be—can finally assert with some confidence that on land he is somebody (*Id.* 11.79)/

Bibliography

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