

## Theocritean Anti-Bucolic

Theocritus' highly stylized Bucolic world is unique in Hellenistic literature for its uniformity and coherence (Payne, 2009). Though bucolic, like any genre, is difficult to define precisely, Theocritus' bucolic poetry creates expectations in the reader through consistent approaches to themes and characters, perhaps best encapsulated in the image of the herdsmen singing a song of unrequited love. Since the bucolic world was fashioned amid Hellenistic explorations of generic innovation and experimentation, it is no surprise that bucolic themes and imagery find their way among Theocritus' urban characters, such as *Idyll 2*'s Simaetha, who sings to the moon of her unrequited passion, or *Idyll 15*'s songstress, who sings of the ephemeral love of Aphrodite and Adonis. *Idyll 14*, which is often noted for its realism (Burton, 1992; Sterns, 1975), similarly seems to blend bucolic notions with a realistic setting (Pretagostini, 2006). I agree with this assessment, but would like to propose that *Idyll 14* treats bucolic differently from other urban mimes in that it does not elide the gap between reality and rustic fantasy, but rather offers a playful recognition of bucolic absurdity. To coin a phrase, *Idyll 14* is anti-bucolic poetry.

Unrequited love and rustic song are staples of Theocritean bucolic poetry. For example, in *Idyll 1*, Thyrsis sings of Daphnis, who dies after refusing to give in to love, *Idyll 3*'s goatherd pines for a nymph in a cave, in *Idyll 7*, songs sung in a contest focus on love, and *Idylls 6* and *11* both treat the relationship between Polyphemus and Galatea through song. Thus, when in *Idyll 14* Aeschinas relates his lovesickness to Thyonichus after being spurned by a certain Cynisca at a symposium (which evokes bucolic through its rustic setting), he seems a typical Theocritean character (Griffiths, 1979). The expected integration of bucolic elements and realism, however,

is overturned and bucolic's artificiality exposed as Aeschinas' passion leads him to violence against his beloved, and ultimately to a decidedly unbucolic cure for his lovesickness.

To give but a few example, it is noteworthy that unlike bucolic lovers whose reverence for their beloveds leaves them utterly powerless (*Idyll 3*'s goatherd deems his beloved's open cave to be an impenetrable barrier), Aeschinas, drunk and angry, strikes his beloved and sends her fleeing in tears (14.34-36). Surprisingly, Aeschinas' violence was incited in part by song (14.30-31), which by contrast serves as a φάρμακον for love in the bucolic world (a concept well-enough associated with Theocritean bucolic for Callimachus to reference it in an epigram (AP 12.150)). Finally, when Aeschinas, in bucolic fashion, asks what φάρμακον there is for love, he finds the answer in an unexpected place: military service under Ptolemy (14.52-56).

As "anti-bucolic" poetry, *Idyll 14* amusingly overturns expectations of bucolic themes and misuses programmatic terms (such as ἡδύς and φάρμακον (Cairns, 1984)) to underscore that the bucolic world does not exist as an extension of real-world emotions and possibilities (despite some pointed *bon-mots*), but rather delves into other issues, especially pertaining to poetry and poets, in a space deliberately set apart from the distractions of reality. Though the poem sheds little light on the workings of the bucolic world, if it does indeed expose bucolic's fiction, it could provide an intriguing point of departure for considering Theocritus' conception of bucolic, particularly as a genre.

#### Bibliography

- Burton, Joan. "The Function of the Symposium Theme in Theocritus' *Idyll 14*." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 33 (1992): 227-245.
- Cairns, F. "Theocritus' First *Idyll*: The Literary Programme". *WS* 18 (1984): 89-113.
- Griffiths, Frederick. *Theocritus at Court*. 1979. Brill.

Payne, Mark. *Theocritus and the Invention of Fiction*. 2009. Cambridge.

Pretagostini, R. "How Bucolic are Theocritus' Bucolic Singers?" In *Brill's Companion to Greek and Latin Pastoral*, ed. Marco Fantuzzi and Theodore Papanghelis, 2006, 53-74.

Sterns, Jacob. "Theocritus' Idyll 14." *GRBS* 16 (1975): 51-58.