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Poetry and Magic: Realism in Theocritus' *Idylls* II and VII

The *Idylls* of Theocritus take place in a world which is simultaneously fully realized and dream-like. In places he provides a startling amount of detail; in others, he glosses over aspects which would seem evident. This confusion may be a purely modern one; it is possible that the physical and setting temporal would be perfectly clear to Theocritus' audience. Upon closer inspection, however, Theocritus' inclusion, or suspension, of detail serves an artistic purpose: to explore how the arts related to the divine—namely magic and poetry, which are indelibly linked to the great literature of pre-Hellenistic Greece—survive and grow in the context of the modern world, both in the world of Theocritus' *Idylls* but also in Hellenistic poetic thought.

In order to explore why Theocritus does or does not include details about the time and setting of the *Idylls*, it is necessary to catalogue which details he does include. In the case of *Idyll* II, Theocritus does not explicitly identify where it takes place. Simaitha herself does not truly leave her house, except for flashback, for the entirety of the poem, but wherever she stands presumably has a view of the moon (Gow 33). Theocritus gives hints about the surrounding terrain, such as it is close enough for Simaitha to hear the sea, and is in a town or city large enough to have at least one gymnasium (Gow 33), possibly more since Simaitha feels obliged to identify it by owner. Simaitha also seems to intimately know her neighbors, the members of the procession, and the layout of the town, although this does not seem quite strong enough to make an argument for it to be a small town.

Although Theocritus does not state it, the setting has strong associations with the island of Cos. Delphis, for example, is not a common name, but it does appear frequently in Coan

inscriptions (Gow 42). His hometown, Myndia, is not far from Cos (Hopkinson 159). Philinus as well is a common Coan name, and in the context of running, it brings to mind Philinus, the son of Hegepolis, who was a famous runner from Cos (Gow 55). Additionally, Theocritus uses this name again in Idyll VII, which is more firmly set on Cos, although it likely does not refer to a Coan (line 105). The oath Simaitha uses, $\nu\alpha\iota\ \text{Μορ}\alpha\iota$, is identified by Gow as a Coan oath (62). More thinly, but still a point of interest, Roman authors associated Cos with Berosus, which could possibly explain the cryptic last line of the poem (Gow 62, “Berosus”).

It is unclear whether this confirms the location of Cos, or whether it merely suggests that Theocritus wanted the idea of Cos to be in the background. Gow, for his part, does not seem to think the poem is definitively set on Cos, as he does not mention Cos in his initial description of the location (33). Theocritus also does not name Cos in his Idyll VII, whose location is much more accepted; rather, readers recognize it from its geography and residents. It is possible, therefore, that the doubts about Cos are purely a modern concern, and that the location would be immediately recognizable to Theocritus’ audience. This is supported by no apparent thematic connections between Cos and Idyll II apart from Berosus’ astrological school. A simpler explanation, then, is that these references to Cos are literal rather than metaphorical.

Similarly, Theocritus does not clarify the time in which Idyll II is set. It takes place at night, although the dawn is not far away, hence Simaitha telling Thestylis to hurry on her errand “ $\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma\ \tilde{\epsilon}\tau\iota\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \nu\acute{\upsilon}\xi$ ” (60). More broadly, it is not the very distant past: Simaitha prays to Hecate that her charms be “ $\chi\epsilon\rho\acute{\epsilon}\iota\omicron\nu\alpha\ \mu\acute{\eta}\tau\epsilon\ \tau\iota\ \text{Κ}\acute{\iota}\rho\kappa\alpha\varsigma\ \mu\acute{\eta}\tau\epsilon\ \tau\iota\ \text{Μ}\eta\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma\ \mu\acute{\eta}\tau\epsilon\ \xi\alpha\nu\theta\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma\ \text{Π}\epsilon\rho\iota\mu\acute{\eta}\delta\alpha\varsigma$.” (14-5). This establishes the temporal setting as well after the events of *The Odyssey* and Euripides’ *Medea*, as these women have become bynames for magical skill. As to the name Perimede, it is safe to assume that this does not refer to the Homeric name for Medea, as she is already in the list, but

rather is a misspelling of Agamede, mentioned in *The Odyssey* (Gow 39). This demonstrates the checkered quality of Simaitha's still-impressive knowledge but also implies that much time has passed since Agamede lived, so that even to a knowledgeable practitioner of magic, her name is partially forgotten. Although Theocritus chooses not to clarify the exact date, his message is clear: Simaitha is closer to now than then.

The abstractness of the date and place, however, are juxtaposed with the detailed and accurate depiction of Simaitha's magic, which appears entirely true to life (Gow 35). Against a foggy and imprecise background, the details of Simaitha's ritual are conveyed in startlingly precise and accurate detail (Gow 35). This depiction of Simaitha's skill is startling, as the narrative seems to imply she began her magical practice after her initial encounter with Daphnis, as she makes no reference to using her own skills but rather refers to her visiting countless other women for a cure (lines 88-91). The verisimilitude of the setting is added to by a surprising lack of the supernatural, given the topic of the poem. Although the audience "watches" Simaitha's ritual, the only noticeable display of magic is when the corn burns without leaving ash (lines 24-5). As the audience must take Simaitha's word on this occurring, its reality is in question; and even if it is true, it is small magic. Similarly, compared to the sheer number of references to the divine in *Idyll VII*, the divine makes scant appearance here; the closest occurrence is in line 36, when Simaitha refers to the barking of dogs, presumably a sign of Hecate's presence (Gow 43). But again, the reader must take Simaitha's word on this, and if it is true, it is still a small showing from a dread goddess.

Ultimately, Theocritus' use of references to great sorceresses and the more modern, specific setting, demonstrates how literary types hold up in the real world, namely the classical witch and the Hellenistic lover. Simaitha the witch, a figure modeled on Homeric and

Euripidean prototypes, seems small and pathetic so far from her source. Few readers anticipate Simaitha's venture in ending with a display of great magic and her successful reunion with, or destruction of, fickle Delphis. The figure of the sorceress, which seems terrible aboard the Argo or firmly anchored in the distant past, seems much less terrible living in a city with only one slave. A similar thing happens with the tropes Theocritus borrows from New Comedy, in which lovers meet at festivals and remain together (Bustos 44). It is painfully obvious to the reader that Delphis is insincere, but Simaitha, halfway between reality and stories, fails to see it. This also serves to weaken threatening figures in the narrative, such as the witch and the sexually aggressive woman. These figures, both embodied in Simaitha, become safe, disempowered, and even laughable in Idyll II.

Unlike Idyll II, Idyll VII is firmly grounded in a real, identifiable location. Its sense of space in time, however, is also vague, as Theocritus balances it sometime after the heroic age yet still before the current time. The poem opens “Ἐς χρόνος ἀνίκ” (line 1). According to Gow, “Phrases of this type occur where we might say *once upon a time* with an implication of remoteness.... But the Greek implies only that the epoch referred to is closed, or the state of affairs no longer existing, not that it belongs to the distant past” (131). The supposition that it occurs in the shallow rather than deep past is supported by the references to people, either alive when Theocritus wrote or who lived within living memory, such as Philetas of Cos, who lived in the third or fourth century BCE (line 40, “Philetas”). Therefore, this poem is set in modern time, albeit a time which has in some way passed or is not exactly current.

The most polarizing and complex figure in this text is doubtless Lycidas, whose precise nature Theocritus leaves unclear. To say that he is associated with the divine would be an understatement. Rather, Theocritus throws allusions at his readers, ranging from the obvious--

his thrice-mentioned fixed smile (Krevans 205-6) and his staff, which simultaneously references the Muses and also depictions of Pan in Hellenistic art (Arnott 341)—to the truly subtle, including a supposed acrostic reading “Pan” in lines 135-7 (Clauss 293). Even his journey is indicative of the divine, as he, a traveler from Cydonia, which was previously called Apollonia, journeys to Pyxa, where there was a shrine to Apollo, while passing by Mount Oromedon, the name of which was an epithet to Apollo (Williams 143). Most obviously of all, the name Lycidas is a variation of the epithet used by Apollo on Cos, referring to the god’s time as a herdsman (Williams 139).

The assumption that Lycidas is Apollo in disguise is not as perfect a fit as it seems, however; for example, although the evidence tends to lean in the direction of Apollo, Lycidas’ goat-like appearance and staff could just as easily reference Pan, while his fixed smile could refer to Dionysus (Arnott 340). He also bears a strong resemblance to the Muses as they breathe poetic inspiration to Hesiod by Mount Helicon (Arnott 342). This mixed metaphor, then, makes it seem like Theocritus is invoking the general rather than specific divine in his description of Lycidas. This is supported by the curious safety and goodwill of the smiling Lycidas, who cheerfully gives Simichidas his staff. A musical contest with an Apollo-like figure must immediately remind the reader of King Midas and his donkey’s ears. Compared to this, Lycidas is a safe, friendly, and probably mortal figure.

Theocritus devotes a great deal of description to Lycidas, a staggering nine lines (11-20). The details he includes, stressing the sensory experience of his “λασίιο δασύτριχος... τράγοιο κνακὸν δέρμ” and how he was “νέας ταμίσιοιο ποτόσδον” (15-6). Lycidas is the most fully realized thing in a landscape which has long been praised for its realism. He sharply contrasts the narrator, Simichidas, about whom the audience learns almost nothing. In some ways,

Theocritus balances the reality and unreality of this character through his attention to detail: he picks up on the detail that goatherds, by necessity, smell of goat, which is customarily left out of romantic reflections on their occupation (Williams 141). This piece of realism is drowned out by the fact that Lycidas' character, like all goatherds in bucolic poetry, is ultimately absurd; goatherds had goats to tend to and did not have limitless leisure in which to compose poetry. Lycidas may seem to be the realest thing in this poem, but ultimately he is a poetic device.

It is worth noting a sensory detail about Lycidas which Theocritus includes and which connects him to Simaitha of Idyll II. When Simichidas and his friends encounter him, he smells of fresh rennet. Rennet is curdled milk taken from the stomach of a young animal and used to make cheese. Given its stench, it is not something even goatherds casually keep about them, so the inclusion of this detail means that Lycidas was recently making cheese, or at least involved in some way in the cheese-making process (Gow 136). Although Theocritus does not touch upon it, there are ways in which cheese-making is similar to the Greek conception of magic. Both begin with strange ingredients, which may have animal origins; it is not a far stretch to associate Lycidas' rennet with the lizard drink which Simaitha mentions (line 58). Unless the cheese-maker has a detailed knowledge of enzymes, the cheese-making process resembles magic, or even creation, as the cheese-maker makes something out of nothing, through an unclear and quasi-magical process. It is most certainly a *τεχνη*, as it requires skilled knowledge, training, and a standardized process to make cheese.

Lycidas further parallels Simaitha's magic with his skill in poetry. Magic and poetry, although assigned to different deities, do have similarities: "The poet enchants his audience as a magician chants a spell or administers a drug, causing pleasure and the forgetfulness of pain in the listener" (Duncan). Both are deeply emotional processes which are inextricably linked to the

divine (Parry 54). Simaitha transitions seamlessly from a spell to a lament (line 64). The magic that comes from spells and music, however, has different connotations. It is for one thing deeply gendered: the great witches of are the women Simaitha references, Medea, Circe, and Agamede (Parry 50-1). In the male context, the closest similarity is Orpheus, whose connotation is significantly more positive (Parry 50-1). The only time these fully overlap is in the Sirens (Parry 52). Poetry also suggests the noble and divine, while magic suggests the chthonic and ambiguous. It is hardly an accident that the most radical god Theocritus references in Idyll VII is Pan.

Theocritus may also use these poems to comment on the difference between magic and poetry. Theocritus' bias as a poet must be admitted, but his logic holds: poetry, he seems to imply, in its highest form creates order out of chaos. Simaitha's magic creates only more chaos, as symbolized by the ever-turning but never changing nature of the iynx (Segal 35). By demonstrating how Simaitha's magic fails in the modern context, while poetry continues to thrive, Theocritus may be breaking the parallel between magic and poetry, or at least demonstrating which half he finds preferable.

It is unclear what Theocritus means to convey through the simultaneously real and unreal nature, both of Lycidas and of the Idylls more broadly. Krevans is perhaps on to something when she postulates that Theocritus reflects on the changing nature of poetry and the origin of poetic inspiration (215). In this question, time once again becomes important: as Arnott observes, "Hesiod long ago could go out into the country, commune with and be honoured by real Muses, and describe the experience in total sincerity. In Theocritus' day, however, such heroic adventures (together with their participants and the beliefs to which they held) seemed to belong to a bygone, more fantastic world.... The glamour of the past has been replaced by the

realities of contemporary life” (345). Lycidas, whose associations with Hesiod and the Muses evoke a bygone age, refers to his poetic inspirations as legendary, albeit fictional, herdsmen-poets who received their inspiration straight from the gods (Krevans 220). For Simichidas, and by extension Theocritus, however, their admired poets wrote within living memory, sometimes even to the present day (Krevans 220).

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