

Theocritean *erga*: Epic Framing in *Idyll* 15

The purpose of this paper is to unify three points of interpretational difficulty that arise from Theocritus' *Idyll* 15: its genre, its treatment of its female protagonists, and its characterization of Ptolemy and Arsinoe. Although the poem is clearly mimetic, it also contains features of pastoral and allusions to epic, suggesting that it defies simple generic categorization (Krevans 2006). This blend of genres makes it difficult to interpret the tone behind Theocritus' presentation of Praxinoa and Gorgo. One locus of uncertainty is the historical accuracy of his depiction of the daily lives of Alexandrian women (Griffiths 1981). Furthermore, many scholars make the women objects of mockery, but there is disagreement as to the effect of this mockery (e.g. Krevans 2006, Lambert 2001). Besides Praxinoa and Gorgo, another woman in *Idyll* 15 complicates these questions: Arsinoe, whose agency is also a matter of scholarly debate (e.g. Hazzard 2000), and whom Theocritus surrounds with epic imagery (Foster 2006; Hunter 1996). It is possible to unite the threads of scholarship outlined above by adopting *Idyll* 15's epic allusions collectively as an interpretational framework; in particular, this paper argues that the epic allusions cast Praxinoa and Gorgo as Iliadic heroes, and that this metaphor guides the structure of the poem. With this unifying device in mind, it is possible to read the poem as an exploration of three types of *erga*: female *erga* (textile crafts), epic male *erga* (heroic deeds in battle), and royal *erga* (the accomplishments of the Ptolemies).

Theocritus evokes epic in a variety of ways throughout *Idyll* 15. One is through his diction. Before Praxinoa and Gorgo leave the house, for example, they use epic language to describe their husbands, transforming positive or neutral Homeric words into insults. Epic also manifests itself in the similes and metaphors of *Idyll* 15; most notably, Praxinoa and Gorgo encounter an old woman who compares the task of entering the palace to that of the Greeks entering Troy. I utilize such examples, among others, as evidence that epic underlies not only the poem's

language and content, but also its structure: the activities of Praxinoa and Gorgo parallel an Iliadic battle sequence. Indeed, many aspects of *Idyll 15* that initially seem arbitrary come into focus when considered alongside the type scenes and typical structures of Iliadic battle narrative (c.f. Fenik 1968): the women have an extended “arming” scene as they prepare to leave the house; they encounter a decidedly martial atmosphere when they navigate the city; Praxinoa engages in verbal sparring with a man in the crowd; and their battle sequence culminates in death – the death of Adonis. The poem’s Homeric diction and direct references to epic characters and events anchor this structural parallel. In this way, Theocritus juxtaposes the lofty with the mundane as epic metaphor fluctuates between the women’s lived experience, their direct speech, and the song of Adonis. As a result, the poem’s narrative frames and generic markers blur together to create an effect that transcends genre, an effect that can only be achieved by means of the particular generic tapestry Theocritus has woven. In addition, the structural parallel to epic emphasizes the levity of women’s activities in contrast to men’s. However, just as Praxinoa and Gorgo rise to the realm of male activity, the men in the poem are demoted to, in the words of Gorgo, *ergon ep’ ergô* (20).

I argue that it is productive to consider this word, *ergon*, as a unifying device for the poem: Praxinoa and Gorgo move between the realms of female *erga* (textile crafts) and epic male *erga* (heroic deeds in battle) as they navigate the festival, which (in Praxinoa’s words, 46) is an example of the splendid *erga* of the royal couple. Thus, while Theocritus trivializes the activities of women and men, Ptolemy and Arsinoe loom large, and Arsinoe in particular marshals (*kosmein*, 24) not only the festival, but also the entire framework of *Idyll 15* within which men and women toil at their respective *erga*.

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