

Gender and Reception in Theocritus

Theocritus' *Idyll* 15 has been described as offering a comic contrast between the low dialogue of Praxinoa and Gorgo and the delicacy of the priestess' song (Gow, Hunter, Hutchinson). Burton (1995, 2005), Davies, and Skinner see it as depicting the female experience of a religious festival. The Adonia, celebrating Aphrodite's love for Adonis, offers the women an escape from their daily lives and unsatisfactory husbands (Davies). Further, the women assert their right to express their opinions (Burton 2005). Following up, I argue that the idyll portrays the women's journey as an experience of art viewership. This reading unites the mime with other idylls that are concerned with the creation and reception of art (e.g., 1, 7, 10).

I investigate the developing characterization of the women. Theocritus uses their journey to illustrate the way viewers create perceptions of art, beauty, and love—three primary subjects of his idylls. The poem depicts the women as they leave the domestic space, confront the public streets of Alexandria, and experience a religious ritual. As they journey, they progressively assert their feminine identity in the public sphere. When Praxinoa and Gorgo encounter new spaces and persons, they construct an understanding of the world—strangers, hectic streets, art, ritual—from their knowledge of the domestic sphere. Through these interactions, they legitimize themselves as viewers of the festival and its artwork.

The opening provides necessary background and characterization. At home, the women fuss over children, complain about husbands, and discuss Praxinoa's new garment. The scene paints a picture of their daily lives, anxieties, and pleasures. They are preoccupied with their marriages, a unifying theme of the poem (the Adonia and the return home at the conclusion). As they navigate the public sphere, their reactions represent the familiar female, domestic realm. They use this perspective to construct an understanding of their settings. For example, an old

woman serves as their guide (60-64), affirming their ability to travel safely to the festival. The rupturing of the familiar, however, causes calamity. When a man rips Praxinoa's garment, she is frightened (69-75). Thus Theocritus crafts a vision of the city through the women's eyes.

By tracing the women's journey, Theocritus illustrates the way in which landscape is perceived through gender. The women bring this gendered viewing to the festival, commenting on the skill and extravagance in the tapestries, and echoing Gorgo's comments about Praxinoa's garments. When a second male intruder tells them to stop prattling, Praxinoa asserts her freedom of speech and her right to sound Doric (87-93; cf. Burton 1995). These lines capture not just a miscommunication but a conflict of gender: he cannot understand the uniquely female reaction to the artwork. In response, Praxinoa asserts the authority of her speech and, consequently, the authority of the women's reception of the artwork.

By voicing their opinions, the women claim legitimacy as viewers. Here I build on the work of Goldhill who argues that "seeing meaning" became a subject for Hellenistic poetry. Theocritus constructs his poem such that readers watch the women viewing. A view through the women, rather than the poet, turns back to the reader the requirement for evaluative response—that is, the reader must evaluate the meaning and symbolism (Goldhill, Zanker). I argue that our experience of the priestess' dirge, depicting Aphrodite's passion for Adonis, is enhanced by seeing it through the eyes of the women we have watched developing throughout the idyll. Their experience and reactions demonstrate the personal relationship between art and life: how art is both shaped by its viewer and how it in turn enriches and informs the viewer.

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