

Love is Vain

Scholars traditionally preferred to interpret the corpus of Theocritus' *Idylls* thematically, giving less emphasis to their ordering. In this paper I argue that Theocritus' *Idylls* 10 and 11 can be productively read as an ordered pair of poems that work toward the same goal. They take the same view of love—that it is a waste of time—but advance their argument in different settings and with different roles ascribed to song. *Idyll* 10 has a realistic setting and employs song as a vehicle for fantasy, while *Idyll* 11 has a fantastical setting and employs song as a vehicle for reality.

The most important feature of these poems is their unusual use of song. Although most bucolic poetry posits a world in which the characters have the leisure to take part in a singing competitions because (as Thomas Rosenmeyer argues) it does not detract from their work, in *Idylls* 10 and 11 the singers are neglecting their work by singing. In *Idyll* 10, Bucaeus, whose name is reminiscent of *boukolos*, cowherd, is not only not tending his cattle, but is also not reaping the harvest as he should. Bucaeus is behaving as if he were at leisure while he is at work in reality. In *Idyll* 11, Polyphemus is entirely neglectful of his flock because he is too busy “shepherding his love” instead.

Idylls 10 and 11 thus act as a pair working toward the same goal. They take the same view of love—that it is a fruitless emotion that should be treated through song, in which the lover describes his beloved and their imagined life together. However, the two poems represent the lovers and their imagination from opposite realms: the imaginary (i.e., mythical) Polyphemus singing a song of a realistic marriage with Galatea, and the realistic Bucaeus singing of an imaginary world where he and Bombyca become golden statuary offerings to Aphrodite.

The narrator interrupts the therapeutic setting of Polyphemus' song by prescribing palliative singing to Nicias which brings the audience back to reality, just as Milon interrupts Bucaeus which prevents him from spending more time speaking about his beloved Bombyca and redirects his attention to the real world around him. The improper setting for a song at leisure further connects the two lovers. Bucaeus' and Polyphemus' behavior stands out from both the audience's expectations as well as the lovers' audience embedded in the poems. Although previous scholars overlooked the thematic connection between *Idylls* 10 and 11 and would prefer to arrange them in separate categories, I have shown that they do indeed correlate with each other thematically and reflect one another in terms of reality and fantasy.

Bibliography

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