LYCIDAS AND DOUBLE PERSPECTIVES: A DISCUSSION OF THEOCRITUS’ SEVENTH IDYLL

It would be inappropriate to salute the manifold and pivotal achievements of Professor Manuel Fernández-Galiano with some uncontentious paper about a third-rate author or an untrodden byway of literature. As teacher, scholar, lecturer and administrator Galiano has both occupied a central place in classical studies for close on forty years and concentrated on the important issues. Accordingly, it seemed to me most fitting to commemorate these attainments and record my pleasure in a personal friendship of many years’ standing with this brief but (I trust) positive contribution to a much-discussed problem that is itself central to the interpretation of one of the glories of Hellenistic literature. What is the predominant function of Lycidas in Theocritus’ seventh idyll?

The bibliography on this question and on others related to it was already substantial before A. S. F. Gow published his first edition of Theocritus in 1950, but in the last thirty years the crop has turned into a glut. In 1979 it was possible to list 36 discussions of the idyll published between 1955 and 1976, and several more have appeared in the last seven years.


2 These are listed in my earlier paper on this idyll, QUCC 32, 1979, 99 f., n. 1.

Since a good number of the recent discussions review in detail the varied approaches and irreconcilable interpretations of their predecessors, there is no need to waste space here on an elaborate recapitulation of earlier theories about the identity of Lycidas and his function in the poem. The aim of this paper is neither to criticise point by point previous identifications of Lycidas as masquerading god or poet, symbolic projection of Theocritus’ own personality, and historical or imaginary goatherd, nor to present a totally new (and therefore probably implausible) identification, but rather to place Theocritus’ techniques of presentation in a wider literary context, and in consequence to suggest (no stronger term is advisable) that one major intention of the poet was a little different from the various ones hypothesised by several recent contributions to the problem.

In this idyll, a first-person narrator, whose name or nickname is first divulged as Simichidas in line 21, is accompanied by two friends on a walk from the town of Cos on a hot day in July or August 4. One of the friends, Amyntas by name, is described (132) in a way that suggests he may be a boy admired or even beloved by the narrator. The destination of these walkers is an estate owned by two Coan aristocrats, and located in all probability at or near the modern Linopóti, eleven and a half kilometres west-south-west of the town of Cos. Just short of halfway, before the mound that in fact rears above their goal becomes visible (10 f.) 5, the three travellers meet Lycidas, a goatherd wearing the dress and reeking with the smell of his profession, but apparently accompanied by no goats 6. After a lively exchange which graphically portrays the contrasted characteristics of Lycidas and Simichidas—the goatherd combines good-natured raillery with modesty and self-confidence, while Simichidas adopts a more challenging tone which may be intended to indicate the conceit of juniority 7—the two agree to sing songs in juxtaposed rivalry to each other as evidences of their abilities, but without any overt idea of competition, judgement and prize-giving such as we find in some other pastorals. Before the songs begin, Lycidas promises to give Simichidas the crooked stick of wild olive that he is carrying (43 f.), and he hands it over at the conclusion of Simichidas’ song (128 f.). Here their ways part. Lyci-

4 Cf. A. S. F. Gow, Class. Quart. 34, 1940, 117, and his edition (commentary on 7.134, and his preface to the idyll).
5 Cf. my earlier paper (n. 2), 103 ff.; and ZANKER (n. 3), 373 ff.
6 Cf. WALKER (n. 3), 66, asking ‘Where are his goats?’ The question may perhaps be illegitimate with reference to work of poetic imagination, but the absence of the animals is still striking.
7 The presentation of the two main characters has been much discussed: see for instance B. A. VAN GRONINGEN, Mnemosyne 12, 1959, 24 ff.; and G. GIANGRANDE, Ant. Class. 37, 1968, 491 ff.
das turns off left on the track to Pyxa\textsuperscript{8}, while Simichidas and his two friends continue their walk to the estate.

A century ago, in the days of Fritzsche\textsuperscript{9}, it was generally assumed that the narrative portions of this idyll were an authentic record of a real event in Theocritus' own life. Although this assumption has often been legitimately challenged by subsequent critics, the question relating to it —how much of the poet's personal experience is incorporated into the narrative?— still exerts an unhealthy fascination. Doubtless Theocritus would have walked the route described from the town of Cos to the area of the Haleis more than once during his stay on the island, otherwise the environmental details of geography and natural history could not have been registered with such accurate particularity. That is all that can be stated with any degree of plausibility. Speculation beyond that about the relation of idyll 7 to events in the poet's own life is idle, because it deals with things unknown and (since the death of Theocritus and his immediate circle) unknowable\textsuperscript{10}. It is also too frequently based on the fallacy that poetical narrative obeys the rules of historical writing, whereas under the control of a creative imagination it transforms or fabricates experience\textsuperscript{11}.

Far more important than the question of possible historicity, however, is that of the poet's major aim or aims in the description of the walk and the encounter with Lycidas. The evidence here is both the text of idyll 7 and the practice of other poets, earlier and contemporary. In the text of the narrative sections of the poem the first thing that stands out, it seems to me, is the powerful illusion of reality, which presumably misled earlier scholars into the belief that they were reading an autobiographical account. The trompe-l'oeil effect, however, is often a deliberate aim of those writers of fiction who wish to practise sleights of hand by their illusions.

Theocritus achieves his illusion of reality in idyll 7 largely by the precision and accuracy of several types of particularised detail. The topographical references, for example, are not overstated, but they are placed with such exactitude that it is possible for a twentieth-century rambler to follow the route

\textsuperscript{8} Or Phyxa: the orthography poses a problem. On this, and the location of the place, see the discussions referred to in my paper (n. 2), 102, and that of ZANKER (n. 3), 374.


\textsuperscript{10} See especially VAN GRONINGEN (n. 7), 45 ff.

of Simichidas and his friends with reasonable confidence still, noticing how the long mountain ridge plausibly identified as Lycidas’ Oromedon (46) dominates the horizon on the left during the whole of the walk, catching then the first glimpse of Brasilas’ mound (11) as the gentle rise at the four-kilometre mark is surmounted, and perhaps delighting in the observation that at the point where Lycidas turned off left to Pyxa (130 f.) an old sunken track can be seen even today leaving the highway in the direction of that village’s modern descendant.

Accurate details about the natural history of Cos add a second perspective to the illusion of reality. It is of course impossible to be sure after an interval of over 2250 years since the poem’s composition that the flora and fauna of Cos have not suffered major changes, yet the flowers and living creatures mentioned by Theocritus can still be observed on the island at the right season. My own visit to Cos was paid in November, when the attested summer migrants such as the nightingale (139 f.) and turtle dove (141) had moved south, but crested larks were visibly abundant in the roadside fields near the meeting-place of Lycidas and Simichidas (23, cf. 141), agama lizards scuttered over walls not far away (22), and chaffinches appeared to be the commonest species of finch (141).

One detail alone seems to clash with an ornithologist’s concept of reality. Theocritus describes his nightingale singing side by side with his crested larks, finches and the turtle dove. This avian music is heard at a picnic held to celebrate the winnowing of the year’s barley, when apples, pears and sloes are ripe (143 ff.), and vines have newly been stripped of their leaves (134). As Gow demonstrated with his usual lapidary brevity over forty years ago, the ancient writers on agriculture prescribe the two months between 24th June and 24th August for the winnowing of barley, and late summer, ‘when the sun’s heat has begun to lose its edge’ for the vine-stripping. On this evidence Simichidas and his two friends will have been imagined taking their walk on a hot day of late summer, probably in August, as Gow concluded. At this time of the year, however, most species of bird have ceased to sing. The purr of the turtle dove can still occasionally be heard in August, but chaffinches and

12 Cf. my earlier paper (n. 2), 102. The identification has recently been challenged by H. White in a paper (Corolla Lond. 1, 159 ff.; see n. 3 above) which argues that Theocritus wrote not Oromedon but Eurymedon (so mss. A, U; cf. the scholion on K), and that Eurymedon’s mount should be identified with the Atlas Mountains of north-west Africa. This African equation seems to me unconvincing.


14 Class. Quart. 34, 1940, 117.

15 Geoponica 5.28.4.
crested larks stop singing in mid-July, and nightingales shortly after mid-
June 16. Either Theocritus has made an unconscious error, or just possibly
he has sacrificed realism to the illusion of reality. The average reader of
pastorals is not now, and probably never has been, a pedantic naturalist,
and his concept of a summer picnic, even in August, is likely to include
the early-summer counterpoint of bird song. The error accordingly seems
more realistic to the normal reader than the actuality would have done.

A third contribution to the illusion of reality in this poem is made by
the naming and presentation of the subsidiary characters in the idyll. All of
these-Eucritus and Amyntas, the companions of Simichidas; Phrasidamus
and Antigenes, the aristocratic owners of the estate where the winnowing
was being celebrated; people referred to in Lycidas’ and Simichidas’ songs,
like Aristis (99 f.) and Philinus (105, 118 ff.) —are given plausible names
that sound authentic against their geographical and historical context 17.
Perhaps some of them were real people —the two Coan land-owners, for
example, thus being thanked by Theocritus for past hospitality in the im-
mortality of his verse 18— but in the end the question of their historicity is
less important than the contribution that these names and the techniques of
their portrayal make to the realistic illusion. These subsidiary figures are
not overdrawn; some are just names, once mentioned and soon forgotten;
others are briefly illuminated with a single graphic detail which brings
them alive for that moment and hints at possibilities beyond. Amyntas thus
is called ‘beautiful’ and given an affectionate diminutive (132); are we
meant to suspect that the narrator had a crush on him? Philinus is still an
attractive teenager pursued by older homosexuals, but he is losing his
boyish complexion (118 ff.); women have begun to notice this, Theocritus
says (120 f.), and the implication is that Philinus is about to change from
homosexual prey to heterosexual hunter.

This emphasis on the realistic detail is not of course confined to the
minor figures. Many scholars 19 have commented on the similarly life-like
portrayal of the external characteristics of Lycidas when he enters the
scene (11 ff.). His dress —the old tunic fastened with a broad belt, and a
goatskin over the shoulders— is described in a vivid cameo that breathes

16 These facts can be checked in any competent ornithological handbook, such as H.
17 See especially Gow’s edition of Theocritus (2.127 ff., and comments on 7.1, 2, 3,
13, 99, 105). It is noteworthy that some of these names (e.g. Eucritus, Philinus) occur
commonly in ancient Cos, while related forms of others (Lycæthus, Lyco, Lycurgus but
not Lycidas; Simale, Simias, Simus but not Simichidas) were very popular: see the
onomasticon appended to Sherwin-White’s book (n. 3), 385 ff.
18 Sherwin-White (n. 3), 49, following Gow’s note on 7.3 f.
19 E.g. Giangrande (n. 7), 531 ff.
reality; no-one could possibly have failed to identify Lycidas’ occupation at first sight, as Theocritus himself points out (13 f.). To this are added two other particularities. The goatskin has its own especial smell, of curdled goat’s-milk (16), and here the poet refers with greater delicacy than elsewhere (contrast 5.51 f.) to a fact that all country people know: goatherds, whether ancient or modern, Greek or British, carry about with them the stench of goats 20. Secondly, Lycidas is carrying a crooked stick of wild olive (18 f.), used mainly for bringing down hares and other small game, but so characteristic of countrymen in Theocritus’ time that it appears to have been carried by rustics in New Comedy as a distinguishing mark 21.

The powerful illusion of reality which the totality of these details conveys is clearly one of the poet’s main objectives in writing the seventh idyll. Side by side with this illusion, however, there is a second and different aspect or angle of view, which distorts realistic perspectives by its disjunctive juxtaposition. The reader is not simply being swathed in the atmosphere of a hot summer’s day in Cos during the 270’s, when ordinary people did ordinary things and the pleasure could be revived in nostalgic tranquillity. He is also expected, as he reads, to observe a series of echoes reverberating from a different world of non-reality. These echoes remind him of some conventions mainly (but not always) in earlier literary tradition, and they come through with that blend of irony and erudite allusiveness which is the hallmark of the Alexandrian poet. Several scholars of course in the last thirty years have called attention to these echoes in their own literary analyses of this idyll, but they have tended to interpret them in accordance with divergently preconceived theories about the poetic purpose of the encounter between Lycidas and Simichidas, and so the perspectives have become distorted. If a critic begins his study with an unshakable conviction that the idyll is a roman à clef with Lycidas its most cunningly disguised masquerader 22, he will be inclined to concentrate his attention on those details which link Lycidas with a whole gallery of

21 The information given by Gow in his commentary on 4.49 can now be supplemented by the Mytilene mosaic of a scene from Menander’s Epitreponetes, where the crooked sticks carried by the two rustics are clearly shown. Cf. L. KAHL and others, Les mosaiques de la maison du Ménandre à Mytilène (Antike Kunst, Beiheft 6, Berne, 1970), 44 ff., 80 f. and plate 4.
22 The theory that the idyll is a masquerade goes back at least to the end of the eighteenth century, when F. L. C. GRAF FINK VON FINKENSTEIN first proposed it in his Arethusa oder die bukolischen Dichter des Althertums, Berlin, 1806 (revised edition: 1st edition 1789), 1.140. WEINGARTH (n. 1), 15 ff., has a full account of its later ramifications.
poets from Hesiod down to Leonidas 23, or with a choice selection of gods
like Apollo and Pan 24, but at the same time he will be compelled by his
preconceptions to misinterpret, misrepresent or totally ignore other details
which do not support his parti pris. It seems to me better to investigate
without any prejudgement those echoes from a non-realistic world which
have been superimposed on the encounter between the goatherd and the
travellers, and then to see whether any conclusions about the juxtaposition
of realistic and non-realistic details can safely be drawn.

The echoes can most conveniently be investigated under two separate
headings, although there is a considerable interconnection between them:
first, the divine intimations added to the otherwise realistic portrait of
Lycidas; and secondly, the demythologised mimicry of the literary motif
of the poet's consecration. They will be discussed in that order.

The superimposition of certain divine intimations onto the generally
naturalistic description of Lycidas turn him into something more com-
plex, mysterious and elusive than a mere goatherd. First, the words used to
introduce Lycidas' physical appearance ('no-one seeing him could have
mistaken him, for he looked particularly like a goatherd', ὅδε ξέ τίς ν ν
/ ἡγνοίηςév ἰδῶν, ἔπει αἰπόλω ἔξιχνος ἔνωξει, 13 f.) recall, with a typically
Hellenistic combination of verbal precision and connotative ambivalence,
the language used by Homer and other early poets in the epic tradition to
describe the sudden appearances of gods —never of humans— on the
scene (II. 1.537, 2.807, 13.28; Od. 5.78; H. Hermes 243; Hes. Theog.
551) 25. It needs to be emphasised, however, that in most of the epic cases
one god is appearing before another god in his own form; only in Iliad
2.807 has a divinity (Iris) appeared in disguise before a human, and
that disguise been penetrated. The implications of the Theocritean

23 Hesiod was proposed by E. R. SCHWINGE, Philologus 118, 1974, 40 ff.; Leonidas
(the most popular choice) by a series of scholars, including P. E. LEGRAND, REG 7,
1894, 192 ff.; E. BIGNONE, Teocrito, Bari, 1934, 36 ff.; and B. A. VAN GRONINGEN (o.c.
in n. 7). For other human identifications (Aratus, Astacidas, Callimachus, Dosiadas,
Rhianus, an otherwise unknown poet among Theocritus' contemporaries called Lycidas),
see GOW, 2.130 and WEINGARTH (n. 1), 19 ff. Cf. also PUELMA (n. 11), 147 f., n. 13; and
A. CAMERON, Studi A. Rostagni, Turin, 1963, 291 ff., suggesting that the figure of
Lycidas conceals a poet of the time nicknamed or calling himself 'The Goatherd'.

24 F. WILLIAMS, Class. Quart. 21, 1971, 137 ff. (Apollo); E. L. BROWN, o.c. in n. 3
above (Pan).

25 The Homeric sources have been noted by several scholars: e.g. PUELMA (n: 11); G.
SCHWINGE (n. 23); and BROWN (n. 3); but the specific Homeric contexts and verbal
linkages have not always been correctly described. For instance, the phrase ἔξιχνος ἔνωξει
does not itself derive from Homer, who prefers πάντα ἔνωξεi in descriptions of divine
disguise (Od. 4.654, 24.446).
echo at 13 f. are accordingly elusive; we are not entitled to assume from them that Lycidas is a god in disguise, only that he has divine forebears in the epic tradition.

A similar ambivalence surrounds Lycidas’ most particularised characteristic, a quiet and good-natured smile to which Theocritus calls attention three times (19 f., 42, 128 f.) 26. What were the poet’s reasons for this triple emphasis? We cannot now be sure, but part of the answer seems to be characterological: Lycidas’ smile distinguishes him from Simichidas and his friends 27 as totally self-assured and perhaps more mature than the others, with an ironic appreciation of Simichidas’ naively blustering candour, which appears to him just as amusing as the appearance of three obvious townsmen out of their element in these rural surroundings 28. Such a natural, realistically functional explanation fits all three references to the smile 29, but it may not entirely circumscribe the poet’s intentions here. The language used in the references appears not to contain any clear verbal echoes of Homer or other early poets, but the idea itself of a fixed, quiet smile may be intended to remind the reader of certain divinities whose enigmatic smiles linger through his literary memories, particularly Dionysus (Homeric Hymn 7.14 f.; Euripides, Bacchae 380, 439, 1021) and Pan (Homeric Hymn 19.37) 30. Thus Lycidas the human again seems to have divine forebears.

Other features in the portrayal of Lycidas can similarly be shown to share this same dual function, of underlining the realistic details in a human personality while hinting simultaneously at divine connections. The crooked stick that Lycidas carries typifies the countryman, as we have already noted; but is it merely a coincidence that such a stick is often carried by gods such as Pan in Hellenistic works of art? 31. Furthermore, Lycidas’ name, place of origin (Cydonia, 12) and destination (Pyxa, 130 f.) all contribute to the illusion of realism; the name is not

26 Cf. the papers of PUELMA, LUCK and SCHWINGE referred to in the previous note.
27 And, incidentally, from other goatherds in Theocritus. None of these is ever characterised as smiling, and only one of them laughs at any time—Comatas at the moment of victory in 5.142 f.
28 Cf. here especially GIANGRANDE (n. 7), 507 ff.; and C. SEGAL, AJP 95, 175, 125 ff.
29 PUELMA (n. 11) argues that the third reference to the smile is psychologically less appropriate than the previous two, but here he seems to me guilty of too subtle an interpretation of the goatherd’s action. The third smile can be read simply as an appreciative (and perhaps also partly ironic) response to Simichidas’ song.
30 Demeter too, as SERRAO (n. 25) does well to observe, is made to smile at the very end of the idyll (v. 156). Cf. also WALKER (n. 3), 70.
31 Cf. BROWN (n. 3), 92 f.
uncommon in real life 32, while birthplace and destination are both highly plausible for a goatherd in Cos 33. At the same time, however, Lycidas, Cydonia and Pyxa all have close connections with the god Apollo, as a recent paper has convincingly demonstrated 34. Lycidas hints at Apollo Lycius, worshipped in Cos under that appellation; Cydonia in Crete was previously called Apollonia; there was a shrine of Apollo in the village of Pyxa or Phyxa. It seem to me mistaken, however, to conclude from this triad of Apolline connections that Lycidas simply represents the god in human disguise. At this stage of the argument it would be wiser instead just to note an ambivalence and duality in the portrayal, with Lycidas from one angle a human goatherd, but from another a more elusive figure with literary forebears and divine associations.

The second group of echoes is linked to the offer and presentation of Lycidas’ crooked stick to Simichidas. Here again the action has a double perspective. From one viewpoint it is a perfectly ordinary story of human generosity told in imaginatively realistic detail. A goatherd in the Coan countryside promises to give Simichidas his stick because, as he says with a laugh, Simichidas is a ‘young sprig moulded by Zeus (or young sprig from Zeus moulded) in truth’ (42 ff.). The statement, with its four examples of typically Hellenistic equivocation 35, is ironically ambivalent, hinting at the mysteries behind the realistic surface, but Lycidas’ subsequent actions are unambiguous. After Lycidas and Simichidas have sung their songs in informal and unjudged rivalry, Lycidas presents Simichidas with the stick, «laughing pleasantly as before, as a token of friendship from the Muses» (128 f.).

32 Cf. Gow’s note on 7.13, citing Herodotus 9.5 (a member of the Athenian Council in 479: Kirchner, Pros. Att. 9194) and Demosthenes 20.131 (a freedman, formerly a slave of Chabrias). Two other fourth-century homonyms are mentioned in literature: an Athenian miller (ps.-Demosthenes 53.14) and an Aetolian commander of mercenaries in Egypt (Arrian, Anab. 3.5.3).

33 Especially if Lycidas’ Cydonia is part of Cos, as Huxley (n. 3) has recently suggested.

34 F. Williams (n. 24).

35 The phrase ἐκ δαμαθείπ can mean either ‘(moulded) for the purpose of truth’ or ‘in fact’ (cf. especially G. Giangrande, Mnemosyne 29, 1976, 148, n. 10); ἐκ Διός may depend on either ἔρνος or πεπλασμένον; Διός may be ‘Zeus’ simply, but the possibility of an allusion to Ptolemy Philadelphus cannot be altogether excluded; and πεπλασμένον may mean just ‘fashioned’ (as commentators and critics too readily assume) or it may be understood as ‘counterfeited’ (cf. Segal, o.c. in n. 28; and F. H. Sandbach’s commentary on Menander, Dyskolos 764). Where there is so much deliberate equivocation, no single unambiguous translation can be acceptable. Those scholars who attempt one are in effect distorting an intentional and ironic multivalency by their over-simplifications.
It is all very natural, and yet from a different angle, as many scholars have pointed out 36, this incident can be seen to translate into everyday, human terms an old tradition revived in Hellenistic times which sanctified the moment when a poet came of age with the image of a divine encounter and sometimes also a divine gift. The tradition begins for us with Hesiod, who describes in his *Theogony* (22-34) how the Muses came to him as he was pasturing sheep under Helicon, presented him with a staff of laurel and breathed into him a divine voice. A similar tale was told in Hellenistic times about the poet Archilochus, who was said to have met a group of women in the country; they receiv-
ed his pleasantries with laughter, gave him a lyre in exchange for a cow, and then disappeared; only afterwards, when he had recovered his equanimity, did he realise that these women had been the Muses 37. Pausanias (1.21.2) records a similar tradition about Aeschylus, and in his *Aetia* (1.21 ff.) Callimachus alleges that Apollo had instructed him how to be a poet.

Theocritus’ account of the presentation of the stick to Simichidas is clearly inspired by the tradition of the poet’s divine certification, as at least four parallels of detail between the idyll and the tradition indicate: (1) the meeting occurs in the country, when the poet is involved in an agricultural pursuit (Hesiod, Archilochus, Aeschylus); (2) the occasion is one of badinage and laughter (Archilochus); (3) the poet is told how to write (Callimachus); (4) he receives a gift (Hesiod, Archilochus). Indeed, certain passages in Theocritus’ poem which have commonly puzzled critics become less difficult when interpreted in the light of the tradition: for example 91 ff., where Simichidas claims to have received instruction from the Muses when tending cattle on the mountains, simply imitates and varies Hesiod, *Theogony* 22 f. 38; and 45 ff., where Lycidas attacks Homer’s Hellenistic imitators, is not merely a statement of support for Callimachus’ literary polemic against contemporary epicists, but it also (like the similar Callimachean manifesto in *Aetia*, 1.21 ff.) takes

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37 The text of the inscription which records this story (SEG 15, 517) is printed most conveniently in M. Treu’s edition of Archilochus (Munich 1959), 40 ff.

38 Cf. Puelma (n. 11), 151, n. 22; Schwinge (n. 23), 43. Van Sickle (n. 36), 14 f., has a useful discussion of the development of this concept from agricultural literality to poetic metaphor.
its traditional position in such episodes as part of the advice given by the strange visitant to the young poet (cf. Hesiod, *Theogony* 26 ff.) 39.

These parallels are striking and instructive, but equally arresting is the one major difference between the Lycidas episode and the tradition which it follows. In all the other instances cited, the visitation is clearly divine: the Muses (Hesiod, Archilochus), Dionysus (Aeschylus), and Apollo (Callimachus), but in Theocritus the strange bestower of the gift is identified as an ordinary human goatherd. In other words, Theocritus has largely demythologised the model, while deliberately inserting into his narrative a series of usually ambiguous pointers to divine elements in the earlier tradition 40. Most of these have been mentioned already, in the discussion of Lycidas’ portrayal, but two further —and final— little groups will more conveniently be dealt with here, as a tailpiece to this section on the poet’s investiture, because they clearly reveal something of Theocritus’ techniques and purpose in this idyll.

The first group links Lycidas enigmatically with the Muses whose gifts to Hesiod and Archilochus could be seen as divine acknowledgements of the poet’s art. Although Theocritus has substituted an earthy goatherd for the divine Muses, he hints three times at the possibility that Lycidas may be a human intermediary for these goddesses. The three travellers are described as meeting the goatherd ‘with the help of the Muses’ (οὖν Μοίσαις, 12); Simichidas recognises that Lycidas is ‘dear to the Muses’ (95); and the gift of the stick is ‘a token of friendship from the Muses’ (ἠχ Μοισαῖν ξεινιήν, 129). All three passages 41 can be interpreted simply as poetic metaphors for ‘good (poetic) fortune’, ‘poetical and musical’, and ‘(friendship) in poetry and music’ respectively; but the last passage particularly seem to oscillate with typical Hellenistic ambivalence between the modes of metaphor and literality.


40 It was only after this paper was completed that I came across B. EFES’S analysis of Theocritus’ epyllia (13, 18, 22, 24, 26) in *Rhein. Mus.* 121, 1978, 48 ff. EFES’S conclusion, that in these poems Theocritus ironically distances himself from a mythological tradition which can no longer be accepted or exploited in its original terms, is substantially identical with my own reading of idyll 7, and this concurrence may perhaps serve at least in part to underpin each other’s arguments. Cf. also WALKER (n. 3), 69.

41 The first and last passages have evoked a great deal of comment from antiquity (the scholia take οὖν Μοίσαις in v. 12 with ἐσθάλων rather than with ἑδρομεν, and explain ἠχ Μοισαῖν in 129 as διὰ τὴν μουσικὴν) on. In addition to the modern commentators, see especially VAN GRONINGEN (n. 7), 24 ff.; 29; PUELMA (n. 11), 155 and n. 35; WEINGARTH (n. 1), 105, n. 1; GIANGRANDE (n. 7), 518 ff., 523 ff.; OTT, *Rhein. Mus.* 115, 1972, 137, n. 8; and SCHWINCE (n. 23), 47 f., 56. Cf. also F. F. GRIFFITHS, *Theocritus at Court* (*Mnemosyne, Suppl.* 55, Leiden, 1979), 49.
Two references to Zeus form the second group. The multiple ambiguity of one of them has already been mentioned; in it Lycidas calls Simichidas ‘a young sprig moulded from (or ‘fabricated by’) Zeus’ (44). The other is a claim by Simichidas that his reputation as a poet may have reached the throne of Zeus (93). Those scholars who interpret the second reference as a polite but veiled acknowledgement that Theocritus’ talents had now attracted the attention of Ptolemy Philadelphus in Alexandria may perhaps be right, but their interpretation rests on unverifiable assumptions. We cannot be certain that in this idyll Simichidas is to be identified as the poet Theocritus himself, or Zeus as Ptolemy, although the latter hypothesis at least can be supported by similarly ambiguous equations elsewhere 42.

Theocritus’ method and aims in the seventh idyll will now, I trust, be more intelligible. The narrative portion of the poem juxtaposes two perspectives: one of natural realism, in which three walkers meet an ordinary goatherd, and the other perspective blurred by veiled allusions to an earlier literary tradition in which gods appeared to men in human disguise and endorsed their poetic careers.

This use of double perspectives, however, is not confined to the one idyll of Theocritus. Similar but not exactly parallel exploitations in authors as different as Euripides and Menander may at first sight seem surprising, although Euripides shares with Hellenistic poetry a fondness for such things as word-games and structural balance, while Menander was not just a Hellenistic poet in period alone. A brief examination of the employment of double perspectives by these two playwrights may shed additional light on Theocritean techniques and purpose.

Euripides’ use of two perspectives in his Electra is remarkably similar to that of Theocritus in the idyll; could the later poet here have been consciously imitating his predecessor? Too much Greek literature of the intervening period has perished for this question to be answered with any certainty, but in the play Euripides has juxtaposed two violently clashing views about the story of the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Electra interprets events in traditionally heroic terms; her code of values is based on Homer, and she greets the slaughter of Aegisthus with language and actions more suitable to a bloodless victory in the games at Olympia. The more objective viewpoints of the other major characters contrast harshly with Electra’s. They see the murders as sordidly vicious, and the murderers as unheroic villains no better than their victims. Euripides has thus in effect removed the halo of romance from the tradi-

42 See Gow’s commentary, ad loc.
tional myth and shown by his harsh juxtapositions just how squalid allegedly heroic events and participants become when viewed in contemporary, real-life terms 43.

Shortly before Theocritus wrote his seventh idyll, Menander wrote a long speech in his Sikyonioi which employs double perspectives rather differently. The contrast is still between myth tradition and contemporary reality, but here the reality lacks any seamy side. The speech is made by Blepes, who like a tragic messenger describes at length an informal gathering at Eleusis which settled a dispute about the legal position of a young maiden called Philoumene (176 ff.). The situation in certain respects recalls that of Electra and Orestes after the murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra as described in the messenger’s speech of Euripides’ Orestes (866 ff.); Electra’s fate there was also decided by the vote of the local popular assembly. Menander calls attention to the similarity by structuring his speech in the same way and by inserting in it a few quotations or veiled echoes of the Euripidean speech 44.

With these two parallels from Euripides’ Electra and Menander’s Sikyonioi in mind, we can perhaps draw some conclusions about one meaning of Theocritus’ multivalent and many-layered poem. All three writers lived at times when old values and traditions were being challenged. Theocritus flourished in the autumn of a civilisation whose earlier achievements in literature had been so overwhelming that the more sensitive of the Alexandrians regarded them both as unattainable peaks (hence the reference at 45 ff. of the idyll) and as an oppressive incubus. New genres like pastoral could still be developed, with opportunities for original creativity, but the old poetry with its traditions and values resembled a great monument chiselled by high genius but now chilling and remote. 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. When Theocritus’ poet went out into the country, there were no Muses, no Apollo to greet him and endorse his excellence as a writer with a divine gift, but only a quizzical human goatherd who bestowed on Simichidas a rustic stick. The glamour of the past has been replaced by the realities of contemporary life. By

43 This paragraph summarises the arguments put forward in my paper on this play, Greece & Rome 28, 1981, 179 ff.

means of the technique of double perspectives Theocritus could recall in juxtaposed contrast the literary tradition whose glories the encounter between Lycidas and Simichidas so palely reflected. Muted verbal and thematic echoes are part and parcel of the Hellenistic poet's equipment, and they enabled him to trick out his goatherd with teasingly ambiguous reminders of what his illustrious predecessors were and did. As a literary convention the divine investitures of poets might survive yet for several hundred years. In the reality of Hellenistic Alexandria, however, these dowering divinities had been superseded by the Ptolemies, whose patronage was less romantic but more substantial 45.

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