The *Argo* in the Underbrush: A Note on Theocritus 13.41

As Hylas embarks on his fateful errand to draw water for Heracles and Telamon, he wanders through a Theocritean *locus amoenus* oddly populated with κυάνεον χελιδόνιον, “dark celandine” (13.41). No variety of celandine can be remotely considered dark hued. There are no other literary representations of this plant as such. Since Theocritus generally provides physically and topographically plausible descriptions of his trees, plants and flowers (Lindsell, *passim* and esp. 80-2; Lembach, 91-3; Amigues 1996: 473-5) even as he embraces and embellishes literary representations of nature (Hunter, 12-13 and 191-3 nn. 135-47), commentators have been mystified by (or silent about) this description (Σ 13.41a; Gow, 2. 239 n. 41; Dover, 185; cf. Hunter, 277 n. 41; cf. Amigues 1996: 479). In this paper, I will argue that Theocritus describes χελιδόνιον as κυάνεον in order to create an elaborate geographical allusion that affiliates his “dark celandine” with the mythical Clashing Rocks. Theocritus thereby pointedly suggests that for the hero, even a hero like Heracles, insurmountable trials do not reside in traditional epic locales but surreptitiously within the common retinue of the poet’s bucolic plants.

The Peace of Callias, at least as it was imagined and transmitted in Antiquity, stipulated that a Persian warship could not sail inside the Cynaean Rocks and Chelidonian Islands: ἔνδον δὲ Κυανέων και Χελιδονίων μακρᾷ νηὶ καὶ χαλκεμβόλῳ μὴ πλέειν (Callisthenes 2b 124 F frag. 16 line 3[Jacoby]; Crater. frag. 7; Aristodem. 2a 104 F frag. 1 line 250 [ Jacoby]; Plu. *Cim*. 13.4). This provision becomes virtually a fixed phrase as it is repeatedly transmitted *verbatim* by the sources (cf. Dem. 19.273 for a variant). Using these landmarks as a boundary within so vital a treaty clearly indicates that the Cyanean Rocks and the neighboring Chelidonian Islands were well-known and closely associated *topoi* by at least the 4thth century BCE. The Cyanean Rocks themselves are the historic remnants of the mythical Clashing Rocks (e.g. Hdt. 4.85.1; Str. 3.2.12). In popular and historical imaginations, the Cyanean Rocks and so the Symplegades are firmly rooted adjacent to the Chelidonian Islands. Theocritus’ κυάνεόν τε χελιδόνιον mimics that geographical proximity.

By the *aural* association of the otherwise inexplicable “dark celandine” with the historical locale of the mythic Symplegades, Theocritus subsumes the Clashing Rocks and all of their attendant dangers within the tendrils and the vines of his Nymphs’ watery spot. As the κυάνεον χελιδόνιον forebodes, the heroic *duseros*, Heracles, will find the erotic hazards of this Mysian *locus amoenus* far more daunting than running the actual Symplegades. Theocritus’ Argonauts --in striking contrast to their Apollonian counterparts (AR 2.549-606) -- traversed those with ease (ἅτις κυανεᾶν οὐχ ἅψατο συνδρομάδων ναῦς [13.22]). By inscribing the Argonauts’ singular nautical achievement within his version Heracles’ loss of Hylas, Theocritus offers within his version of the *Argonautica* an amusing, but pointed, comment upon the real dangers confronting the “epic” hero.

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