

An Anthropology of the Singing Cyclops

This paper will examine how Theocritus' eleventh and sixth *Idylls* contribute to the anthropological discourse surrounding Polyphemus. Theocritus' extant literary antecedents use Polyphemus to explore what it means to be human. In Homer and Euripides, humanity or human culture takes the form of categories (civilized/uncivilized) represented by actions and is easily interpreted by structural anthropology (e.g. Konstan 1992). In Theocritus, Polyphemus tries and fails to perform human erotic culture, for which I turn to Geertz's (1977) definition of culture as always and only existing in acts of performance and interpretation. Each *Idyll* presents a different aspect of performance. *Idyll* 11 shows Polyphemus attempting to interpret and perform as *erotes*, and serves as a model to Theocritus' friend Nicias. *Idyll* 6 shows two herdsmen performing a bucolic song; by performing Polyphemus' erotic failure, the two herdsmen strengthen their own social bond. Theocritus' new ideas about performing and interpreting culture serve as a model to residents of the newly formed Hellenistic metropoleis.

Theocritus follows Homeric and Euripidean precedent by presenting human culture through behavior. Polyphemus in both the *Odyssey* and the *Cyclops* reveals his inhumanity by breaking with human cultural norms of eating, drinking, economy, and social organization. Theocritus' *Cyclops* as *erotes* shows Polyphemus trying to participate in human culture. While Polyphemus retains the isolated social organization first described by Homer, his behavior reveals none of the savage inhumanity of earlier versions. His superhuman size and strength are overlooked, and the main typological difference from humans, his single eye, is not emphasized as inhuman, but shown as less abnormal than the gills he would need to live among the nymphs (11.54). Polyphemus'

inhumanity is not based on categorical exclusion, but on a failure to interpret and perform.

Human culture in the “Polyphemus *Idylls*” is more than the oppositional schemata of Homer and Euripides—it exists in interpretation and performance. Polyphemus’ song in *Idyll* 11 opens with an attempt to understand the behavior of Galatea (11.19), while Daphnis’ song in *Idyll* 6 explains the nymph’s behavior to goad Polyphemus to action. Both of these inquiries into behavior offer a hypothetical context for Polyphemus’ performance. He responds to Galatea’s behavior by performing Cyclopean culture as a means of courtship. In *Idyll* 11, Polyphemus offers an encomium of his lifestyle containing the same anthropological criteria described above: eating, drinking, economy, and (lack of) social organization (11.34ff). In *Idyll* 6, Polyphemus plays hard to get, solipsistically turning his social isolation into the means by which he plans to seduce the nymph. This isolation is juxtaposed with the productive social relationship that results from Damoetas’ performance as the Cyclops. In both *Idylls* Polyphemus’ courtship comically fails because of his isolation and inability to understand the situation.

Theocritus emphasizes how cultural knowledge and social context influence our definition of humanity and how human culture exists in performance. This type of cultural criticism has been recognized in Theocritus’ symposiastic *Idylls* (2 and 14, Burton 1995) and is a common topos in Hellenistic literature. Beginning with Homer, Greek literature offers a way for listeners/readers to interpret the world and the roles individuals assume. Hellenistic literature challenges this aspect of Greek literary culture by transforming old literary roles and modes of interpretation. Hellenistic literature responds to a world changed by the campaign of Alexander. Old roles like the fifth-

century citizen-soldier had been made less relevant by the new mercenary model of warfare. Multicultural cities like Alexandria challenged established ethnic binaries. Theocritus shows and awareness of the contingency of culture in this new world.

Selected Bibliography

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