

Katabasis and Ritual in Theocritus 15

The few extensive treatments of Theocritus' fifteenth *Idyll*, a mime depicting the journey of two Syracusan women to the Adonis festival in the center of Alexandria, are extremely varied. Griffiths (1979) considers the effect of Ptolemaic patronage on the poem. Burton's (1995) anthropologically informed work has important discussions of gender, class, and cultural tensions. Hunter (1996) considers the mimetic aspect of the genre. But in all of these studies, the discussions of Theoc. 15 are aimed at illuminating the broader issues of Ptolemaic propaganda, Alexandrian society, and Hellenistic metapoetics. Contrary to this trend, this paper examines the internal coherence of the poem's ritual content and its narrative structure.

My first claim is that this poem is a figurative katabasis—the journey depicted is not itself mythical, rather it alludes to those myths in which a hero descends into the underworld. Priam's journey in *Il.* 24, for example, is a figurative katabasis. There are several indications that Theoc. 15 is another. Praxinoa and Gorgo, the two pilgrims, travel towards the Adonia, a rite for an infernal demigod. An old woman, who speaks in riddles as she helps the women enter the precinct, acts as the necessary guide—cf. Circe in the *Odyssey* and Heracles in the *Frogs*. At the precinct's threshold, they meet the expected liminal guardian, a vituperative misogynist. Like many katabases, this scene also features an ecphrasis at the liminal point. For example, in Petronius the painting of the dog at the entrance of Trimalchio's home is both a guardian—it terrifies Encolpius—and an ecphrastic scene that emphasizes the crossing of the threshold. Finally, the Adonis song describes the mythical return of the demigod from over the Acheron. The content of the song is a *mise en abyme*, reflecting mythologically the figurative katabasis

that preceded it. The same technique can be found in the myth of Er in the *Republic*, a work that Voegelin (1957) has shown to be katabatic.

Intertwined with the katabatic theme is the ritual structure of the poem. Theoc. 15, properly divided into three sections, corresponds structurally to the stages of ritual outlined by von Gennep (1977): separation—the women leave home—liminality—they come to and take part in the rite—and reintegration—they return home. The liminal phase is particularly important, since it is here that the initiates undergo certain ritual ordeals. The threats, the verbal and physical abuse, the assistance of a guide, and the stripping away of expressions of identity, like clothing, undermine an initiate's sense of self and prepare him for the ritual. The four encounters that Praxinoa and Gorgo have on the streets of Alexandria and at the threshold of the precinct all resemble ritual ordeals. They are threatened by Ptolemy's cavalry, they find a guide, Praxinoa's cloak is destroyed, and at last they suffer *aischrologia* that is directed specifically at their ethnicity and gender. We are able to identify these as ritual ordeals because they accord with representations in other literature, because they have the proper disorienting effect on the women, and because the poet has emphasized the katabatic and ritual structure of the poem. But these ordeals are actually accidental encounters; they are not properly part of the Adonia. Theocritus has imbued the secular space of the street with ritual liminality—it is thus transformative space.

The tripartite structure of the poem illuminates the significance of this liminality. Krevans (2006) has shown that the last third of the poem, beginning with the Adonis tapestry, verges generically on Theocritus' pastoral poetry. Moreover, I assert that a comparative study of surviving mimic literature shows that only the first 43 lines of

Theoc. 15—the household scene—conform to the formal features Hellenistic mime. The result is that mimic and bucolic sections bookend a more ambiguous central section. Onto this structure the poet has superimposed a ritual progression from secular space, the home, to sacred space, the ritual, with the liminal space of the streets bridging the two. What is symbolically enacted when the Syracusan immigrants leave home and pass through the liminal, preparatory space of Alexandria is the metapoetic passage from mime, a genre traditionally associated with the Syracusan writer Sophron, to pastoral, a new genre created in Alexandria, and invested with that city's revolutionary poetics.

Bibliography

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