

Greek World 1B: tutorial 5

Hellenistic poetry

Theocritus and Homer

Instructions:

Read with care *both* the story of Odysseus and Polyphemus at Homer *Odyssey* 9.105-566 (use either one of the online translations indicated below or another translation) *and* the two poems of Theocritus given below.

For each of the two Theocritean poems, consider the following questions (and come to the tutorial with notes organised around these headings for each of the two poems):

- where is it apparent that the poems interact with the presentation of Polyphemus and the land of the Cyclopes as we find it in the *Odyssey* (make a list for each poem)?
- how do the poems play on the audience's previous knowledge of the *Odyssey*?
- does this require that the audience know the *Odyssey* itself, or would it be enough for them merely to know the approximate story?
- why might this particular part of the *Odyssey* have been particularly interesting to Theocritus?
- how do the two poems differ from one another? is Theocritus repeating himself?
- does this kind of poetry demand a 'scholarly' audience?

Homer *Odyssey* 9 trans. Murray:

<http://tinyurl.com/yavpgld>

Homer *Odyssey* 9 trans. Johnston:

<http://tinyurl.com/yzrrhl6>

Theocritus *Idyll* 6

Damoetas and Daphnis had brought their herd together
In the same place, Aratus. The face of one
Was blurred with down, the other had a beard coming.
It was noon in summer. They sat by a spring and sang.
Daphnis began since he was the first to challenge. 5

DAPHNIS

Galatea pelts your flock, Polyphemus, she pelts it
With apples, and calls you goatherd, clumsy lover.
You sit absorbed in the sweetness of your piping
And take not a blind bit of notice. Look now, she aims
At the dog which guards your sheep. It barks in fury 10
At the wide sea and races its own reflection
Along the foreshore where small waves rustle in.

Call it to heel, or it will dash at her legs
 And tear her fine skin when she comes from the sea.
 She waits there, teasing you. Like the to-fro drift 15
 Of thistledown as it hangs in the summer air,
 If you follow her she flees, if you flee she follows.
 She changes the rules as she plays. But often, often
 In the game of love, Polyphemus, foul seems fair

Then Damoetas took up the tune and sang a reply: 20

DAMOETAS

I watched her pelting my flock, so help me Pan.
 He that has one eye sees the better for it
 (Must be afraid to lose it, so Telemus says;
 May the wicked prophecy come home to his door).
 But I have my game too, and take no notice. 25
 I say her place is filled, and relish the longing
 That makes her wild. How sweet her jealousy tastes!
 She gazes from the billows at my caves and flocks.
 I whistled to my dog to bark. When our love went well,
 It would whimper and lay its muzzle along her lap. 30
 Let my treatment work on her; she will send a message
 Perhaps. But the door is closed till she promises
 To share my bed and live with me on this island.
 My face is not half so ugly as folk make out.
 I studied it just now in a calm sea-hollow, 35
 These handsome cheeks of mine, this handsome eye –
 So I honestly thought then; and the water mirrored
 My teeth with a whiter gleam than Parian stone.
 Then I spat three times on my chest to stop bad luck
 As the wise woman Cotyttaris taught me to do. 40

Damoetas closed the song with a kiss for Daphnis,
 Gave him his pipe, was given a flute in return.
 Then Damoetas began to flute and Daphnis the cowherd
 To pipe, while their calves frisked over the soft turf.
 There was no winning or losing where both played best. 45

Tr. Wells.

Theocritus *Idyll* 11

I have learnt that there can be no remedy for love,
 No special herb or ointment to soothe the heart,
 Except the Muses. It is light and quick, their drug,
 And works for all, but is very hard to find.
 I think you know this, Nicias, without my saying, 5
 Since you are a doctor and poet, a child of the Nine.

My simple countryman, Polyphemus the Cyclops,
 Discovered this long ago when he loved Galatea
 And down spread over his cheeks and round his mouth.
 His was no game of love-locks and little gifts 10
 But a pure madness that shut out all other thoughts.
 His flock would come home to the cave unshepherded
 From the green pasture, while he would be off by himself
 All day, singing up the dawn on the weed-strewn shore
 And pining for Galatea as he nursed the wound 15
 Which the dart from Cypris had cut into his bowels.
 Gazing seaward from the high rock where he sat
 He found and applied the one remedy. This was his song:

‘Galatea, why do you treat your lover harshly?
 You are whiter than ricotta, gentler than a lamb, 20
 Livelier than a calf, firmer than an unripe grape.
 You wait until sleep takes hold of me to come here
 And when sleep lets go, then you slip away
 As if you were a sheep and I the great grey wolf.
 I fell in love with you, girl, on your first visit. 25
 You came with my mother, wanting to gather orchids
 In the hill-meadows. It was I who showed the way.
 To you it meant nothing at all. But to me the moment
 When I set eyes on you lasts from that day to this.
 You slip away from me, girl, unreachably graceful. 30
 No need to say the reason: this shaggy eyebrow
 Which stretches from ear to ear across my forehead;
 This single eye and flattened nose, these lips.
 But fine looks could not buy me the flock I graze,
 A thousand strong, nor the milk I draw and drink 35
 Nor the cheese which lasts through summer into autumn
 And loads the racks down even to winter’s end.
 No other Cyclops plays the pipe as I can,
 Singing far into the night, my silver pippin,
 Of you and me. For your amusement I rear 40
 Four bear-cubs and eleven fawns with dappled coats.
 Come to me then. You will never wish yourself back.
 Let the green sea wash its anger on the shore:
 Night spent in the cave beside me is far more sweet.
 Baytrees and slender cypresses grow there, ivy 45
 With its dark leaves and vines with sugary grapes.
 Fresh water flows there, which forest-sided Etna
 Sends down for me, cold fruit of her white snow.
 Who could refuse such things for the cheerless sea?
 And if I seem shaggy, I keep in my heart’s cave 50
 A fire of oaklogs glowing beneath the cinders.
 Let it blaze: I shall not mind how it sears my life
 Or shrivels this treasure of treasures, my single eye.

If Mother had only borne me with fish's gills!
 I might have dived and found you and kissed your hand 55
 (If you would not give your lips); I might have brought you
 Delicate poppies with broad red petals, or snowdrops;
 A posy for summer or winter, each in its time:
 I could not bring you their white and scarlet together.
 I must learn to swim at once; but perhaps if I wait 60
 Some kindly stranger will come in a ship to teach me.
 Then I may fathom what pleasure lives in the depths.
 Come up from the sea, Galatea. Forget to go home.
 I will teach you by my example, sitting here late.
 Follow the flocks with me and help me to milk them, 65
 Help me to set the cheese with a dribble of rennet.
 Mother is to blame. Though she might have won you
 By speaking for me, she said not a single word.
 Doesn't she see me grow thinner every day?
 I will tell her my head and my feet ache fit to burst, 70
 To make her sicken with worry and suffer like me.
 O Cyclops, Cyclops, have you gone out of your mind?
 You should be gathering browse to feed your lambs
 Or plaiting baskets for cheese; that would show more sense.
 Milk the beast you can catch; let the others range. 75
 You will find a new Galatea with lovelier looks.
 The girls call after me, 'Shall I see you tonight?'
 And laugh in a huddle as soon as I turn my head.
 On land, I clearly have something to show for myself.'

So Polyphemus shepherded his love by singing 80
 And found more relief than if he had paid out gold.

Tr. Wells.

A very few notes on Theoc. 6 and 11:

The underlying story in both poems is that, prior to the events of *Odyssey* 9 (which should be in the reader's mind), the young Polyphemus, later the Cyclops in whose cave Odysseus and his men were held captive (and in some cases eaten), was in love with Galatea, a sea-nymph. This story can be traced back into the fourth century BCE.

Theoc. 6:

2 Aratus is addressed by the narrator, as if a friend of his. There was a contemporary poet of the same name, who might be being addressed by Theocritus, but this is uncertain.

5 "first to challenge": the two shepherds are singing competitively.

23 In the *Odyssey* (9.507-12), Telemus prophesied the blinding of Polyphemus.

Theoc. 11:

5 Nicias was a historical person: apparently a friend of Theocritus, and a doctor; "the Nine" are the Muses.

7 "my simple countryman": Theocritus came from Sicily.

54 Polyphemus' mother was a sea-nymph, Thoosa, and his father was Poseidon. So it is not unreasonable for him to feel that he should have been able to cope underwater.

Good alternative translation of Theocritus, with notes:

A. Verity (trans.) and R. Hunter (intro. & notes): *Theocritus. Idylls*, Oxford (World's Classics), 2002.