

# Is virgil's adaptation of theocritus' eleventh idyll



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Virgil's second Eclogue is not merely 'furta' - a plagiarised, replication of Theocritus, but is a successful amalgamation of Virgil's poetic personality with the model's. Indeed, the poem's theme is directly adapted from Theocritus' eleventh Idyll, it remains a distinctive work - no prior knowledge of the model is needed to fully appreciate Virgil's poem. That is not to say that the second Eclogue does not, to a certain extent, almost emulate the model. This, however, is not an issue.

The practice of 'imitatio' was fundamental to the development of Roman literary culture. Poets were always readers and listeners of other poets, and the imitation of poems was an established educational technique. In short, allusion to previous poetry was almost unavoidable. Indeed, allusion was a handy tool for the classical poet to gain prestige. By alluding to a famous poet he can demonstrate that he belongs to the same celebrated genre, thus elevating himself to a similar level of 'fama'.

This in turn gave birth to an elite community of listeners and readers who were able to recognise the allusions made. Although neglecting parody and despising plagiarism, emulation and rivalry was strongly encouraged. The concept of 'imitatio' therefore legitimises Virgil's emulation. The main characters of the poems, Virgil's Corydon and Theocritus' Polyphemus share obvious similarities. They are both shepherds, who lack desirable beauty, so they offer their expertise in shepherding as their most desirable attributes.

Polyphemus in his love sick song describes " this single eye and flattened nose" but boasts how " fine looks could not buy me the flock I graze", and that " no other Cyclops plays the pipe as I can". Virgil's Corydon mirrors this,

explaining that he is "rich in livestock, in wealth of snowy milk... A thousand lambs of mine roam the Sicilian hills". He even compares his singing to Amphion who famously charmed the stones into the walls at the site of Thebes with his lyre. Corydon is certainly more confident about his looks.

Although not beautiful, after seeing his reflection in the sea he believes that "if that mirror tells true, I could compare with Daphnis and win your verdict". This sense of optimism runs subtly throughout Virgil's poem and is what makes Virgil's Corydon different to Polyphemus. Polyphemus is struck by a kind of "pure madness that shut out all other thoughts". The Cyclops is desperate, made worse by his wounded eye (a tip of the cap in Homers direction), whereas Corydon's desire is less of a madness than a passing fancy, though he is strongly passionate about the boy.

There are, however, hints of self-depreciation and self doubt in Corydon, for instance when he berates himself thus: "Bumpkin! As if Alexis cared twopence for your offerings.... Poor fool that I was to have such daydreams". Both shepherds lose sight of and neglect their duties through the pursuit of their desire. As Poseidon's lovesick son reaches the end of his song he remembers his duties. The denouement of Virgil's second eclogue clearly replicates this passage as Polyphemus, like Corydon, checks himself, asking: "O Cyclops, Cyclops, have you gone out of your mind?".

The Cyclops resolves to resume his work, again addressing himself: "You should be gathering browse to feed your lambs" (my italics). Corydon similarly has a moment of realisation: "Ah Corydon, Corydon, what is this lunacy you're possessed by?" A clear replica of the final passage in

Theocritus; Virgil even mimics the basket that Polyphemus feels he should plait. The reason the two shepherds decide to resume their work is that they both feel they shall find another love to desire. Sadly, it seems that Polyphemus is less likely to - he mentions the obviously mocking girls that he mistakes as admirers.

In contrast Corydon, one assumes, is not as gruesome as the Cyclops - he mentions earlier on that he would " have done better to bear the sulks and rages, the insolent/ Disdain of Amaryllis, or to make up with Menalcas" - Corydon perhaps is more likely to find " another" love. This is in fact one of the fundamental differences that Virgil's personality exerts on to Theocritus' model; Corydon does not seem as doomed in love as Polyphemus, and this offers a more light-hearted feeling to the poem.

However, there is an alternative version of Polyphemus` myth, which has the sea nymph, Galatea, finally yielding to Polyphemus` desire and giving birth to Galas, ancestor of the Gauls. The gifts that Corydon offers Alexis are very similar to those that the Cyclops offers his nymph. Corydon sings of two roes that he is keeping for Alexis: " their hides not yet lost the white markings", and the Cyclops offers " four bear cubs and eleven fawns with dappled coats".

They similarly offer flowers: Polyphemus " delicate poppies with broad red petals, or snowdrops" and Corydon " great baskets of lilies for you ... pale iris and poppy heads" delivered by the Naiad. The shepherds also dream of the life they would live together with their loved ones. Corydon sings of " how wonderful it would be to live together in these rough fields in a homely

cottage, hunting the deer with our bows", and Polyphemus of his cave and how " bay trees and slender cypresses grow there, ivy with its dark leaves and vines with sugary grapes".

Virgil makes it quite clear that Theocritus' eleventh Idyll is the model of his Eclogue. The poet follows the same structure: poet's introduction, the boast of shepherdly expertise, the dream of a life with ones lover, the offering of gifts, and the final realisation. Virgil even goes so far as to virtually mimic certain images; for example the " great grey wolf" hunting the sheep. Yet, Virgil succeeds in fulfilling the highest goal of 'imitatio', that is, fusing ones own personality with that of the models.

Theocritus himself drew inspiration from earlier Greek poetry but " seeked variety not homogeneity". Virgil's Eclogue loses no poetic merit in its imitation of Theocritus. He intended it to be an imitation as to be associated with the popular bucolic genre, yet does not simply parody the poem. Virgil successfully fuses his own lively, humorous, and romantic poetic personality with the bleak pessimism of Theocritus; he is not idly practising 'furta'.