

Theokritos: Idyll XI.

Brief Notes. (P.G. Brown)



Commentaries and Editions:

Theocritus, A.S.F. Gow, 2 volumes, 2nd edition 1965.

Theocritus, H. Kynaston, 1892.

Theocritus: A Selection, R. Hunter, 1999.

Theocritus: Select Poems, K.J. Dover, 1987 edition.

A Hellenistic Anthology, N. Hopkinson, 1988. (Contains Idylls 10,11).

The Idylls of Theocritus, R.J. Cholmeley, 1896.

Theocriti Reliquiae, T. Kiessling, 1819. (Contains the Scholia).

The following notes are taken from the above, especially from Hunter and Dover.



Notes:

This poem, addressed to Nikias, a doctor and mentioned in other poems and epigrams, explains that there is no remedy for love except through song and exemplifies this by a song sung by Polyphemos. The remedy (φάρμακον) is not necessarily a cure, but can also mean a palliative. Through the medium of song, Polyphemos comes from love sickness to self-enlightenment. He engages on an internal journey through his own feelings and motivation and attempts in a slow subjective manner to come to grips with his desire and the impossibility of his relationship with Galatea. Unlike other more rational discourses between a person and their soul, Polyphemos' words are very irrational and subjective. The transition from thinking about the irrational madness of his passion to a realization of the impossibility of his love is very slow and far from clearly defined.

Lines 1-18:

The maxim that there is no other palliative, nor salve nor remedy for love-sickness save song is introduced along with the name of the listener Nikias, a doctor, who may himself be suffering from the same problem, although this is not explicitly stated here. Given Nikias' medical background the language of the introduction is wholly appropriate. Polyphemos seems to have found the

answer. The distance between the poet and the character is indicated in a nicely balanced way, using the expression, ὠρχαῖος Π., yet showing also their affinity using ὁ παρ' ἄμιν. Polyphemos is at this stage a youth, thereby indicating that he has not yet encountered Odysseus.

2. ἐπίπαστον - '(remedy) sprinkled'.

7. ῥάιστα διάγε - 'did as well as possible, suffered as little as possible'.

Repeated in line 81.

παρ' ἄμιν - tr. 'our' or 'my neighbour'. Sicily had been identified as the home of the Kyklops in earlier times.

8. ὁ ἄρχαῖος.

10. κίκιννος - 'curl of the hair', (given as a love token).

12. αὐταί - 'of their own accord'.

14. αὐτός - tr. 'alone'.

φυκιοέσσας - 'covered in seaweed'. (Only here).

Lines 19-79. The Song.



Figure 1. Polyphemos and Galateia, Roman fresco.

Lines 19-24: Polyphemos calls on Galateia and asks the obvious question, 'why don't you like me?' He then praises her looks and manner. He is still love-sick

and incoherent in his own thoughts. He sees her only in his dreams and when they pass, so Galateia vanishes.

20. πακτά - 'cream cheese'.

21. γαῦρος - 'playful', 'proud', 'standoffish'.

φιαρός - 'bright, shining'.

ὄμφαξ - 'unripe grape'.

ὠμός - 'unripe'.

22. αἶθι - 'here'

ὄκκα - 'when'.

Lines 25-33: Polyphemos moves to a new stage in the internal dialogue. He attempts to retrace the steps which led him to his present predicament. He had fallen in love with her when they first met, when she and his mother were plucking hyacinth (line 26). Since that day he has had no rest from love-sickness. He is aware of her lack of reciprocation and looks for reasons. The obvious one is that he is so grotesque, with his one eye surmounted by a very shaggy eyebrow, and his broad nose (line 33.)

28-30. sc. ἐρῶν. 'And having seen you, from that time forth (ἐκ τήνω), I cannot afterwards even now at all cease (from love)'. A contorted and rambling sentence.

32. ὡς = οὗς.

Lines 34-49: He can do nothing about his external appearance but he has other things to offer her. He recognises that love involves active giving on his part. He lists the material advantages that life with him would bring and entreats her to give up her life in the sea, but still fails to understand that her life is in the sea. The τις of this line is very forceful since his question rhetorically expects the answer that no-one would turn down his offer, has for the reader, the opposite effect.

35. τὸ κράτιστον - 'the finest'.

34. βοτόν - 'animal'.

37. ταρσός - 'cheese rack'.

ὑπεραχθές - 'full to bursting'.

39. τίν = σε. As in line 68.

39b. 'singing (of you) and at the same time myself'.

40. ἄωρί - 'at an unreasonable hour'.

41. μαννοφόρος - 'with markings around the neck', hence rare and prized.



Figure 2. Polyphemos piping.

43. ὄρεχθέω - 'beat noisily'.

45. ῥαδινός - 'slim, slender'.

Lines 50-72: At this stage Polyphemos realizes that he must give more than material goods and pleasures. He offers his soul and his one eye. He still assumes that ultimately she will renounce her real self and desert her marine habitat in order to live with him. He even laments the fact that he cannot go into her world to bring her from it. Lines 63-4 are at the heart of the problem. He calls on her to forget her world just as he is prepared to forget his. This cannot be. Each is tied by their own existence to their natural habitats. He changes tack now and blames his mother both for her lack of direct support for him and her lack of understanding of his feelings.

51. ἀκάματος - 'undying'. 'and beneath the ash an undying fire'. Reference here to his future blinding by Odysseus.

52. ἀνεχοίμαν - 'I would offer up'.

54. ὅτι - a very rare elision.

βράγχια - 'gills'.

56. κρίνα - Often translated as 'lilies', but the plant is unidentified.

57. πλαταγώνιον - 'petal'.

66. δριμείαν - 'pungent, acidic'.

67. Polyphemos' mother is Thoosa.

68. οὐδὲν ... ὄλως - 'absolutely nothing'.

71. σφύζω - 'throb, burn with fever'.

sc. 'my mother', 'let my mother suffer as I suffer'.

Lines 73-79: Line 72 marks the beginning of Polyphemos' self-realisation. He is saying 'what on earth could I be thinking?' His life with Galateia, a water nymph trying to live in a pastoral setting would be impossible. He re-examines his life in the pastoral setting. Perhaps he will find someone in his own world better than Galateia. There are, after all, many girls who enjoy his company. (perhaps other female Kyklopes), and here he is the master of all he surveys. He appears to have come to the realisation that no inherent fault in himself is the main reason for Galateia's rejection, but rather the different circumstances they find themselves in.

73ff. 'if you might go (from here), weave baskets, and reaping green shoots bring them to the lambs, perhaps you would be in a much better state of mind'.

78. κιχλίζω - 'giggle'.

ὑπακούσω - 'I might answer them'.

79. 'It is clear that on land at least I appear to be someone.'

Lines 80-81: The narrator returns to his listener Nikias to sum up the truth of the opening maxim.