MINIATURIZING THE HUGE: HERCULES ON A SMALL SCALE (THEOCRITUS IDYLLS 13 AND 24)

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It is a remarkable feature of the Theocritean corpus, given its inclination for novelty in generic creation (Theocritus is thought to be the originator of literary bucolic poetry) and adaptation (of e.g. the mime to a literary form) that a recurrent figure, who appears in a variety of different poetic types that constitute this collection, is the hero Heracles, the original hero of early Greek mythology. Reasons for his prominent place among the poems are not hard to find: he is a figure from whom the Ptolemies claim descent, like Alexander (and also Ptolemy Soter) his parentage is both divine and mortal, and as a hero whose worship is fairly ubiquitous in the Greek world he is not tied to one locality. As Stephens (2003) has detailed, Heracles is further a figure of both Greek and Egyptian mythologies and so an ideal figure for a bicultural audience. Yet it does remain remarkable that in a collection of small hexameter poems, many of them featuring what we might call “small figures” whether of the bucolic, urban or even mythical world, the presence of the truly megal heroic figure is so prominent. Paradoxically, perhaps, his is a recurring presence in the novel poems of Theocritus, as his is a recurring absence in the heroic Argonautica. Three of the noncontested poems of Theocritus showcase him; if we include Heracles the Lion-Slayer (possibly by Theocritus, but this cannot be proven beyond doubt) and Megara (a poem sometimes attributed to the Theocritean emulator Moschus, and now part of the collection Bucolici Graeci, Gow [1952a] 146–150), there are five. Each of these is distinctly different from the others; each is, in its own way, an example of Hellenistic transformation of a central figure of cultural heritage in a new frame. My effort here with this figure is to consider each of the Heraclean appearances in the three poems that are unquestionably by Theocritus (Idylls 17, 24 and 13) in turn, then to try to draw some conclusions about what

this transformation may mean. I conclude with some brief thoughts on [Theocritus] *Idyll 25, Heracles the Lion-Slayer.*

I begin with Theocritus *Idyll 17, Encomium for Ptolemy.* The poem celebrates Ptolemy II in terms of his filial piety (to his recently deceased, and now divine, parents), his excellence as a warrior (in a series of heroic comparisons), and his more distant divine associations (Alexander and Heracles, and ultimately Zeus and Hera). Following the proem where the singer calls for inspiration to sing of praise for his human (but not too human) subject, the poem opens on Olympus, where it will also close, in a gesture that both imitates Homeric narrative structure and reminds the audience of Ptolemy’s future existence among the gods (lines 13–33):

He is from such forefathers as could accomplish great deeds; Ptolemy son of Lagus, who set such plans in his heart as no other man could consider. Him even among the blessed dead the father made equal in honor to the immortals, and for him a golden throne is fashioned in the house of Zeus. By him Alexander sits, kindly disposed, a god of variegated crown, a heavy weight for the Persians. And opposite is established the seat of Heracles slayer of centaurs, made of hard adamant. With the other Olympians he

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3 On this poem see Schmitz in this volume.
4 All texts of Theocritus are from the edition of Gow (1952a); all translations are my own.