CHAPTER 4

Certare alterno carmine: the Rise and Fall of Bucolic Competition

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1 Introduction

The picture of Tityrus as Meliboeus finds him at the opening of Vergil’s first Eclogue—a shepherd peacefully piping in the shade of a tree, at leisure and unencumbered by cares—is iconic for the pastoral genre, a representative image, if not quite a representative anecdote in Paul Alpers’s terms.¹ Once we put another shepherd into this picture, however, the mood shifts: contemplative and carefree is not the dominant way in which ancient bucolic poetry represents how shepherds relate to one another around and through music. An essential underlying feature of how the shepherds interact with each other is competition, be it in the spoken preliminaries or in the sung exchanges that can be said to constitute the singing contest proper.² In the artificial pastoral world that we find in these poems the shepherds always appear to be on the lookout for a singing contest and just waiting to slot themselves and others into the position of a competitor or a judge.³ But it is the way the contest functions in this world that sets bucolic competition apart from other genres and contexts, namely, the built-in role of collaborative creativity. The shepherds need to show their skills as singers not in isolated showpieces but by displaying the ability to listen and respond, that is, to use the contribution of their rivals as a point of departure for their own song and then to surpass them. Exchange as a crucial part of bucolic creativity is not limited to how the human singers interact with each other, for even what might appear solitary composition turns out, most of

¹ ‘Representative anecdote’, a term borrowed from Kenneth Burke, is a central concept in Alpers’s cross-cultural and cross-historical treatment of pastoral; see Alpers 1996, 13–21 for a discussion of Burke.
² Rossi 1971b terms this section ‘preagon’; Henderson 1999 in his analysis of Vergil’s third Eclogue breaks it into ‘bickering’ (3.1–27) and ‘bargaining’ (3.28–54).
³ On the fictional world of the pastoral see Payne 2007, especially the introduction, and Kania 2016. For a different approach to the status of these competitions see Gutzwiller 1991, 134–137 on Theocritus 5 and 4; she reads the poems as verisimilar representations of ancient shepherds’ interactions.
the time, to be conceived of as an exchange between the singer and the sounds of nature. This back and forth, mutual inspiration, and inherent competition lie at the heart of what bucolic poetry does.

In this chapter I trace the trajectory of how the narrative patterns and themes of this competition develop over time, from their origins in Theocritus's *Idylls*, through Vergil's reception of them in the *Eclogues*, to their transformation in the *Eclogues* of Calpurnius Siculus, a collection in which the poet takes the traditional features and stretches and expands them to their logical conclusion, bringing them to the point of self-parody and self-destruction. In my discussion I demonstrate that, as the tradition develops, the poems engage more explicitly with external models of competition—forensic, military, and athletic—to which the bucolic contest is analogous. I argue that the increasingly explicit nature of the connection between bucolic competition and its more openly adversarial equivalents is ultimately exploited by Calpurnius to explode the central feature of the bucolic genre he inherited.

2 The Structure of Bucolic Contests in Theocritus and Vergil

Our first example of a proper bucolic contest is found in Theocritus's *Idyll 5*, and it contains many features that were imitated in the later tradition and came to be seen as typical. When the two shepherds Comatas and Lacon first meet, they open their interaction with accusations of theft. Comatas accuses Lacon of having stolen his goatskin, the latter in turn claims that Comatas took his pipe. The invitation to a singing contest provides a way out of the impasse in which each shepherd vigorously denies the accusation against him (*Id. 5.17–22*):

C. Oh, no, my good man, no, by these nymphs of the lake, if only they would be propitious and kindly towards me, Comatas did not secretly steal your pipe!

L. If I should believe it, may I reap the pains of Daphnis. But then, if you wish to put up a kid—and that is nothing of importance—still I will compete with you in song until you say: enough.

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5 Translations throughout this chapter are my own. For Theocritus's text I quote Gow's edition.