BUCOLIC SINGERS OF THE SHORT SONG:
LYRIC AND ELEGIAC RESONANCES
IN THEOCRITUS’ BUCOLIC IDILS

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“This little tune I worked out lately on
the mountainside …”
—Theocr. 7.51

1. A song sung (and recalled)

Hellenistic poetry’s engagement with the short songs of the earlier lyric
and elegiac traditions is a typically multi-faceted one; the later period’s
reception of song encompasses preservation and reading, collection and
comparison. Further, it necessarily contextualizes the individual song
recalled through evocation of its earlier singer(s), and through artistic
recreation in a new setting, and so frequently creates in the mind of a
later audience the occasion of an earlier song’s singing; in this respect
Hellenistic reception is often simultaneously analytic and mimetic. In
the same song settings later voices perform and earlier voices sing
again.

A revealing example of this process is the opening motto of one of
Theocritus’ Aeolic poems, Id. 29.1: “Οἶνος, ὃ ϕίλε παῖ, λέγεται, “καὶ ἀλάθεα”.
The motto, from a poem of Alcaeus now no longer extant, serves as the springboard for the later poet’s reading of the motto, and
as the pretext for Theocritus’ own Aeolic symposiastic/erotic compo-
sition, his poem’s mimetic rendering of the original singing of these
words.

1 Plato cites this line earlier at Symp. 217e3–4 τὸ λεγόμενον, οἶνος ἄνευ τε παιῶν
καὶ μετὰ παιῶν ἦν ἀληθής “as the saying goes, wine without boys and with boys is
truthful”, where the scholiast assigns the proverb to Alcaeus. An interesting question
arises here as to whether Theocritus is evoking only Alcaeus here, or Plato’s invocation
of Alcaeus in the Symposium, a text which he is clearly recalling in the opening of Id. 13.

non meraviglia certo, quando si rifletta che proprio in questo periodo giunge a per-
“Οἶνος, ὦ φίλε παῖ”, λέγεται, “καὶ ἀλάθεα”: κάμμε χρή μεθύοντας ἀλάθεας ἐμμενει. κάτω μὲν τὰ φρένον ἐφέω κέατ’ ἐν μύχων οὖν δᾶς φιλέν μ’ ἑθέλλου’ ἀπ’ καρδίας.

"Wine, dear boy", it is said, “and truth”. And we too, as we drink deep, should be truthful. And I will say what lies inmost in my mind. You are not willing to love me with your whole heart.

The inscription here is highlighted by the development of each image in the following lines. οἶνος, “wine”, morphs into μεθύοντας “drinking deep”, the noun of the motto now transformed into verbal action, as the image of past symposium is transferred to the present one. ἀλάθεα, “truth”, in the motto is transformed into ἀλάθεας, “truthful”, in the first line of the responding poem, maintaining the sound, number of syllables, and also position of elements of the motto. φίλε, “dear” in the motto recurs in the infinitive φιλέην, “to love” of l. 4 in a rather ingenious way. For the unrequited love that is the subject of the later poem’s speaker is mirrored in the transference of the adjective φίλε, applied to the boy in the motto, to the verbal action not applied on the boy’s part to the speaker of Id. 29. Φίλος παῖς is, in this sense, exactly what the singer of Id. 29 does not have. Finally, and strikingly,