MAGIC, MEDICINE AND EROS IN THE PROLOGUE TO THEOCRITUS’ *ID*. 11

CHRISTOPHER A. FARAONE

At the beginning of *Id*. 11, Theocritus sings the following hexametrical verses to his friend Nicias (ll. 1–6):

> Οὐδὲν ποτὸν ἔρωτα πεφύκει φάρμακον ἄλλο,  
> Νίκια, οὔτ’ ἔγχρωστον, ἐμῖν δοξεῖ, οὔτ’ ἐπίπαστον,  
> ἦ ταῖ Πιερίδες’ καύσφον δὲ τ’ οὖ τοῦτ καὶ ἀδύ  
> γίνετ’ ἔπ’ ἀνθρώποις. εὐρεῖν δ’ οὖ φάρμακον ἔστι.  
> γινώσκειν δ’ οἷμαι τ’ ἱλιῶσ’ ἱστρόν ἔκτοτα  
> καὶ τ’ αὐτ’ ἐννέα δ’ ἰατρ’ ἐλκυσάν ἐστί

Against *eros* there is no other *pharmakon*, Nicias, neither ointment, it seems to me, nor salve, it seems to me, nor salve, except the Muses; light is this *pharmakon* and sweet for mortals, but it is not easy to discover. But I think that you know this well, since you are a physician and indeed loved in excess by the nine Muses.

These lines and the rest of the prologue have generated much interest among scholars of Hellenistic poetry because they are used in a rather sophisticated manner to embed at an ironic distance the “bucolic” song of the lovesick Cyclops that occupies most of the poem. The implicit boast of the poet, moreover, about the superior power of his own craft (hexametrical poetry) over that of his love-sick friend Nicias (medicine), clearly has a programmatic ring to it, as does the explicit connection made in the very next line between the two Sicilian singers: Theocritus and his fellow Sicilian Polyphemus (l. 7: ὁ Κύκλωψ ὁ παρ’ ἁμῖν).

Commentators nonetheless continue to disagree over the precise claims being made here. Some suggest, for example, that Theocritus presents both himself and Polyphemus as lovesick Sicilian poets, who compose songs simply as entertainment that will distract themselves from their present cares, in contrast to Nicias, the doctor, for whom the poet provides specific medical analogies in the first two lines:

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1 I use the text of Gow (1952) and my own translations throughout.
“For (i.e. the disease of) eros there is no other medicine, Nicias, neither ointment ... nor salve”.

This reading stems, in part, from the high probability that Theocritus is responding to the famous dithyramb of Philoxenus, who similarly framed Polyphemus’ song as a healing event. Other readers suggest that Theocritus is alluding more explicitly to current theories about the cathartic or healing power of music, especially against the passions, or that the embedded song is treated both as a curative draught and as a love-potion. In large part this disagreement stems from the notorious ambiguity of the word pharmakon, which can be rendered as “herb” (medicinal or poisonous) or as “incantation” (beneficial or destructive). There is also the additional puzzle that although Nicias, the addressee of the poem, is described as both doctor and poet, there is far more emphasis on his status as a poet, which takes up an entire hexametrical verse and is rhetorically emphasized by the numbering of the Muses (“loved in excess by the nine Muses”).

The recent publication and study of a series of inscribed lead amulets from Magna Graecia and Crete can, however, provide a new way of looking at the claims of the prologue, because the hexametrical incantations inscribed upon these amulets make boasts that are similar in content and phrasing to the opening verses of the prologue to Id. 11. These similarities suggest that Theocritus presents the Cyclops as the “first discoverer” of an ancient Sicilian form of protective song or incantation and that he invokes the Greek idea of pharmakon as “incantation”, usually hexametrical, that is also employed in the poetry of Empedocles, another Sicilian poet who sang in hexameters. I shall argue, in fact, that Theocritus playfully contrasts this old Sicilian tradition of protective incantations with similar claims made by medical doctors like Nicias, who in Theocritus’ day had begun to treat erotic seizure as a medical pathology worthy of their professional attention. Theocritus, however, seems to imagine the danger not as a disease (eros), which can be cured by medicine, but rather as the “demon” Eros, who must continually be warded off or kept at bay by means of an incantation.

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6 One fragment from the lost poem (PMG 822), preserved in Σ Theocr. 11.1–3b (p. 241 Wendel), says that the Cyclops sent a message to Galatea (by way of some dolphins) “that he was healing his eros with the Muses” (ταῖς Μ/ΝκΩς τὸν ἔρωτα ἀκεῖται), which suggested that in Philoxenus’ poem Polyphemus used poetry as an ἄκουος.