IS THERE URBAN PASTORAL? THE
CASE OF THEOCRITUS’ *Id.* 15

Nita Krevans

Theocritus’ *Id.* 15, “Syracusan Women, or Women at the Adonis Fes-
tival”, follows two Alexandrian housewives on an expedition to the
celebration of the Adonia at the palace of the Ptolemies. Gorgo and
Praxinoa meet at the latter’s home, then set off to the palace, com-
plaining about their husbands, their servants, and the crowds in the
streets. Once inside the palace, the two women admire tapestries and
an Adonis tableau; the feast for their eyes is then followed by a feast
for their ears—a song for Adonis, performed by a professional singer,
and quoted in its entirety. The poem concludes with a comment by one
of the women, praising the singer and offering a prayer to Adonis—
with a final jab at her grumpy husband sandwiched in between the two
encomiastic statements.

This idyll is often showcased as an example of urban mime in the
Theocritean corpus.¹ What that means, in modern critical terms, is that
*Id.* 15 belongs to the “non-bucolic” half of the Theocritean corpus, a
section that sometimes appears to be partitioned off from the “bucolic”
poems by an adamantine wall.² Thus Griffiths (1979a), Burton (1995)
and Hunter (1996), all of whom treat 15 at great length, barely touch
on *Id.* 1 and 3–7; meanwhile Halperin (1983a) and Gutzwiller (1991)
discuss 15 only in passing, while Hubbard (1998) does not even mention
it. Since Griffiths’s focus is court poetry, Burton’s this very category of
urban mime, and Hunter’s Theocritean reworkings of earlier literary
forms, their interest in 15 is understandable. Conversely, Halperin,
Gutzwiller and Hubbard are all concerned with examining Theocritus’
role in the development of pastoral, and therefore focus on the so-called
“bucolic” idylls.

¹ E.g. Horstmann (1976) 18, Goldhill (1991) 274, Fantuzzi in Fantuzzi and Hunter
² As noted (and decried) by Hutchinson (1988) 144–146, who goes on to frame his
entire discussion of Theocritus as a refutation of this dichotomy.
Reasons for this bifurcated view of the idylls are not difficult to find. The retroactive canonization of Theocritus as the father of pastoral by the later western tradition, beginning with Virgil, is explanation enough; add to that Theocritus’ own tendency to use special programmatic terminology in the bucolic pieces and the notably unrealistic erudition of his herdsmen, and it is no wonder that the marked term in Theocritean studies became “bucolic”; poems like *Id.* 15 are defined as negatives: not-bucolic. The bifurcation is also practical, in a certain sense: scholars of pastoral find a group of idylls (genuine and spurious) neatly sequestered for their use, while critics interested in patronage or myth turn to the higher-numbered poems.

In the exercise that follows, therefore, I acknowledge that the generalizations I will challenge are often helpful. Nevertheless, in any examination of pastoral, and especially of Theocritean pastoral, it is surely useful to conduct the occasional test: what, precisely, prevents a given poem in the corpus from being considered “pastoral”? *Id.* 15, as it happens, is a promising subject for such a test. While its setting is urban, its structure and content have more in common with notably bucolic idylls such as 1, 3, and 7 than with the other urban poems (*Id.* 2, 14) or the other explicitly Ptolemaic poems (*Id.* 14, 17). Nor should we allow the traditional exclusion of females from pastoral to discourage a consideration of poem 15. After all, if we define as “not-pastoral” a poem about city-dwellers who attend a festival celebrating an agricultural deity and hear a song about a dying herdsmen, we run the risk of excluding *Id.* 7 from the bucolic canon.

1. *Id.* 15 and *Herodas* 4: two urban mimas?

An examination of the structure of *Id.* 15 reveals the complicated relationship between this poem and other surviving examples of urban mime. The first, most basic structural question involves what ancient commentators on both the *Idylls* and the *Eclogues* called “modes” (χαρακτήρες). They divide poetry into three possible types: “narrative” (διηγηματικός), in which only the poet speaks; “dramatic” (δραματικός), in which the poet is silent and only characters speak, and “mixed” (μικρός).

---

3 On the prevalence of female characters in urban mime, see Finnegan (1992). *Id.* 15 has been studied as an example of ‘female’ poetics; e.g. Skinner (2001), Griffiths (1979a) 116–123.