No more than a few generations after the first extant bucolic poetry was composed, an epitaph from Egypt called attention to the learning expected of its ideal reader:¹

Εἰ καὶ βουκόλοι ἄνδρες ὃδὸν διαμείβετε τίνδε,
καὶ ποίμνας οἶνον φέρετε μηλονόμοι,
ἀλλὰ σὺ, Μουσείος καμίτοις τεθραμμέν’ ὀδίτα,
ἰσχε καὶ αὐθόρας σήμ’ Ἀλίνης ἄπιθι,
χαῖρε εἰπών δις [δ’ α]ὐτός ἔχοις τόδε τέχνα δὲ λείπω
τρίζυγα καὶ ποθέοντ’ ἀνδρὰ λέλοιπα δόμοις.

Although you cowherds travel this road, and you shepherds pasture your flocks of sheep, nonetheless you, passerby, raised through toiling in the Muses, stop and, after saying “this is the tomb of Aline”, go your way. Bid me “farewell”, and fare twice so well. I leave at home a brace of children, and a husband who yearns for me.

The original location of this carefully composed inscription is now unknown, but the poem itself presupposes that it was set up in an isolated, rural place frequented by the cowherds and shepherds to whom it is initially addressed. Indeed, the point of the opening lines depends on the epitaph’s explicit recognition of an apparent contradiction between the professions of those who frequent the locale, on the one hand, and the learning expected of its intended readers, on the other. At the same time, however, the use of the second person in the opening apostrophe to βουκόλοι and μηλονόμοι, who are thus imagined as being able to read the inscription, implies that in the view of the speaker at least some of the poem’s readers will be herdsmen, with the result that the epigram blurs the distinction between the educated traveler “raised in the toils of the Muses” and those shepherds and cowherds who use the road regularly. In emphasizing the learning required of its intended reader, the epitaph offers a nice piece of evidence that some of the values of the “birdcage of the Muses” that was the Alexandrian Museum tran-

¹ IMEGR 34 = GVI 1312. The date of the poem has been variously assigned to the late 3rd (so Bing (1998)) or 2nd century (cf. Bernand ad loc.).
scended its bounds.\(^2\) Whether the person who composed the epitaph for Aline really believed that herdsmen might be able to read the opening couplet is unknowable, but the author of the epigram presupposes, or at least pretends that few if any would in fact have been able to do so. Thus the address to passing βουκόλοι and μηλονόμου is a conceit whose origins lie less in life than in art,\(^3\) and indeed the world envisioned in the epitaph seems to owe something to what is a fundamental assumption of the bucolic tradition, namely the fiction of an idyllic rural landscape populated by herdsmen well trained in poetry.

One strand of this tradition is obviously to be found in the bucolic poems of Theocritus. But in opening with an address to herdsmen, the composer of the Aline epitaph may also have been influenced by another early Hellenistic poetic form, literary epigrams in which herdsmen and the natural world in which they live play a prominent part. Indeed, the flowering, early in the 3rd century, of epigrams destined for performance or for the written page rather than any actual monument ranks as one of the most interesting and important developments in the literary history of the Hellenistic period. Poets expanded the traditional boundaries of epigram in a variety of ways, incorporating into a form originally designed to mark graves and dedications material from a number of other literary traditions, including both archaic and classical poetry, but also the work of near contemporary writers. It is thus not surprising that already in the 3rd century we find a number of epigrams that incorporate motifs that also appear in Theocritus’ poetry. Some of these poems explicitly mention herdsmen (including figures with overtly pastoral names like Daphnis and Thyrsis) or rustic divinities like Pan, Hermes (as protector of crops and the like; e.g. Hermocreon, \textit{APlan}. 11 = \textit{HE} 1943\(\ell\)), and the Nymphs and objects like the \textit{syrinx} that were closely associated with them.\(^4\) Others invite


\(^3\) For the address to passing herdsmen, cf. Leonidas \textit{AP} 7.657.1–4 = \textit{HE} 2062–2065: Ποιμένες οἱ ταῦταν ὄρεον δόξαν οἰσπολέείτε / ἀγγας κεντόνως ἐμποτεύοντες δις, / Κλειστερόη, πρὸς Γῆς, ὀλίγην χώραν, ἀλλὰ προσηνή / τίνοτε χονίς εἴνεκα Φερσεφόνης, “Shepherds who travel alone on this mountain ridge pasturing your goats and wooly sheep, may you grant to Clitagoras, by Earth, a small but gentle favor for chthonic Persephone’s sake”.