DOORS AND STARS IN THEOCRITUS, IDYLL XXIV

BY

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Lines 11-16 of Theocritus’ Idyll XXIV present, as Gow wrote, “two formidable difficulties” 1. The object of this paper is to overcome them both. First of all, the text:

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I should like to deal first with the difficulty represented by lines 15-16. Scholars have been puzzled by the fact that the poet does not tell us how the snakes pass the door in order to enter the house. Gow (in his commentary, ad line 15) wonders whether the phrase 

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Herter, to whom we owe the best paper on this problem 2, has shown that this is impossible, inasmuch as 

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Gow (art. cit., 108 f.) concludes that, since “Theocritus’ phrase has given us no precise information as to the means by which the snakes got past the doors . . . there is perhaps a reason why it should not”: the reason, Gow suggests, is that, in Theocritus’ view, to explain how the snakes got past the door “might well be tedious at this point of the narrative”. Later, in his

1) Class. Quart. 1942, 104.
commentary, Gow himself (ad loc.) abandons his unconvincing suggestion, and cannot offer any reason why the poet should leave out this detail. Herter, realizing that there must be a reason why Theocritus is silent on this point, surmises (art. cit., 156) that perhaps we are meant by Theocritus to infer that the “Furnitur” had become “schadhaft” and the damage had created an interstice through which the snakes got past. This hypothesis is of course untenable, because Theocritus mentions no damage to the inlaid woodwork and, even if the inlaid woodwork was damaged, the “Furnierarbeit” in question did not entail perforating the doorposts, but only scooping them out on the surface.

The solution to the problem is very simple. Every Hellenistic reader knew that doors unfailingly and automatically opened whenever a god (or goddess) was near them. This ‘Epiphaniewunder’ has been well explained by Weinreich 3). For instance, in Callim. Hymn. Αφ. 6 f.

αὐτοὶ νῦν κατοχῆς ἀνακλίνεσθε πυλάων,
αὐταὶ δὲ κληίδες· ὁ γὰρ θεὸς οὐκέτι μακράν

the particle γὰρ emphasizes that “das αὐτόματον der Türöffnung” in the presence of a god was a commonly accepted fact, well known to everybody and universally taken for granted. Theocritus, therefore, does not have to mention this αὐτόματον, inasmuch as it was the normal and unfailing behaviour of every door. Only when a mortal tried to achieve this αὐτόματον was it necessary for him (or her) to recite an ἐπορεύθη (as Medea does 4)): in the case of a goddess such as Hera, there was no need to recite anything, and the reader does not need to be told that the door will open, given the fact that this was the unfailing, automatic reaction of every door to a god’s ‘Epiphanie’ 5). There is no doubt that Hera is imagined by the poet to be present near the door of Amphitryon’s house: she ‘starts’ the snakes in person on the spot (ὡρασθεν: cf. LSJ, s.v. ὡρυσμι, 2) and gives them instructions in person (ἀπειλησκοῖ). In all probability, Theocritus is ‘correcting’ his model, Pindar: at Nem. 1, 40 ff. we are told

3) Religionsgeschichtliche Studien (Darmstadt 1968), 45 ff., 67 ff.
5) Cf. especially Weinreich, op. cit., 71-73.