

## NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

### A NOTE ON THEOCRITUS *IDYLL* 18

When at last in the war's ninth year he faced Paris in single combat, it was purely for the sake of form. "I don't ask why she went with you," he paused to say. "But tell me, as I spear you: did Helen ever mention, while you clipped and tumbled, how she happened to choose me in the first place?"

[John Barth, "Menelaiad"]

In his wedding song to Helen and Menelaus, Theocritus has introduced a subtle vein of humor or irony in the contrast between the divine stature of Helen, whose praises occupy the middle thirty lines of the chorus (19–48), and the rather hapless figure which Menelaus cuts as the butt of several sallies.<sup>1</sup> Menelaus is first rebuked for being too tired or sluggish to attend to his wife on their wedding night (9–15). Then, his success in wooing her is attributed to a lucky sneeze (16–17). A stroke of wit at the end of the poem completes the picture of a groom himself amazed to have the divine Helen as his wife. The joke is subtle and has been obscured by misguided commentary. I shall attempt to recover it.

In lines 56–57, the chorus promise to return at dawn, "when the first songster raises his gaily-feathered neck from sleep to crow." The translation is A. S. F. Gow's, and is inspired, like all other versions of these lines, by the interpretation of the scholiast: *ἀμα ὄρθρω καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐλευσόμεθα ὅταν ἀλεκτρυὼν ᾄσῃ* (p. 333 Wendel). Despite Gow's lengthy defense of this interpretation in his commentary, it should be noted that the scholiast ignores the ambiguities of the original: *ἐπεὶ κα πρῶτος ἀοιδός / ἐξ εὐνᾶς κελαδήσῃ ἀνασχὼν εὐτριχα δειράν*. For example, where Gow has "songster," we should properly read "singer." "Songster" carries the specific suggestion of a songbird, while *ἀοιδός* ordinarily denotes a human minstrel, and nowhere (outside of the present passage) means "rooster," as Gow points out. Second, *εὐνή* can refer to a nest, as it does in a vivid simile at Sophocles *Antigone* 424, and is also occasionally used for the lairs of mammals; but it is difficult, in the context of an epithalamium, to suppress its common significance of "marriage-bed" (LSJ, s.v., 4), which it bears, for example, at line 11 of this poem. *Κελαδέω* is perhaps neutral: it can refer to the chirping of birds or to the act of singing a hymn or other song (LSJ, s.v., I. 2; cf. II. 1, the transitive usage). On the other hand, "gaily-feathered" specifies *εὐθριξ* far too narrowly. *Εὐθριξ* may also be applied to human hair, as the root *θριξ* is generally, and by extension to the manes of horses (always in the *Iliad*) or the wool or fur of other mammals (LSJ, s.v.). While Gow cites three other instances of *θριξ* or its compounds referring to birds, one of these involves a deliberately striking metaphor (Bacchyl. 5. 28 *λεπτίτριχα . . . ἔθειραν*, of an eagle), and in any case the usage is obviously rare. Finally, it may be pointed out that

1. "Middle thirty lines" indicates my conception of the structure of the poem: eight lines of introduction, with the following song divided ten-thirty-ten. Despite Dover's recent arguments for a different arrangement (*Theocritus: Select Poems* [Basingstoke and London, 1971], p. 231), I believe that change of addressee as well as verbal responsions guarantee the symmetry of the chorus.

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πρῶτος need not mean “first” in the sense of “earliest”; taken predicatively, it can also signify “for the first time,” as it does in lines 43 and 45 of this same poem.

Taken together, these observations suggest a plausible version of 56–57: “when a minstrel for the first time raises his well-tressed neck from the marriage-bed and crows.” Strange way to describe a rooster. But another subject presents itself when we recognize in εὔτριχα at 57 (the final line of the poem, apart from the conventional invocation to Hymen) an echo of ξανθότριχι πᾶρ Μενελάω in the first verse. Thus, the strained periphrasis for “rooster” conceals a witty comment on Menelaus’ exuberant pride in the consummation of his marriage to the divine Helen—he tosses his mane and howls aloud (a reference to his famous war cry?) as though he had just learned to sing.<sup>2</sup>

The comic treatment of Menelaus may conform to a Fescennine convention, although there is no certain evidence for such a convention in Greek epithalamia. Nowhere, moreover, is the groom presented as sluggish or reluctant. He is more likely, in what survives of Sappho’s epithalamia, to be the subject of extravagant praise (frags. 111, 115). In the poem which by all accounts is thematically closest to Theocritus *Idyll* 18 (Sappho frag. 44, on the wedding of Hector and Andromache), the bride and groom are both likened to gods (vv. 21, 34). I suggest that the disparity between the lovers conveyed by the epithalamium for Helen and Menelaus is rather in keeping with Theocritus’ treatment of love in several other idylls, such as those devoted to Polyphemus and Galatea, or the third on Amaryllis and her enamored goatherd. I am inclined to venture an additional interpretative point. Theocritus has refrained from anything more than a hint at Helen’s future elopement: the hint occurs at 37 τὰς πάντες ἐπ’ ὀμμασιν ἱμεροὶ ἐντί. Dover, following Gow, explains that “‘on whose eyes are all desires’ means ‘whose eyes kindle a desire surpassing all others.’”<sup>3</sup> Surely, however, the phrase—for which there is no precise parallel—is ambiguous, and also suggests Helen’s passions. Perhaps, too, the contrast between bride and groom intimates the denouement. When Menelaus, astonished at his good fortune, bellows after possessing the divine Helen, the reader may be entitled to suspect that Helen, idealized and transcendent, must ultimately exceed and elude him.

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2. Shall we also retain the scholiast’s interpretation and treat the verse and a half as an elaborate play on words? I tend to think we should, although I do not feel confident about the matter.

3. *Theocritus*, p. 235.

### THE THREE HUNDRED AT THASOS, 411 B.C.

The overthrow in 411 B.C. of democracy and the establishment of the oligarchy of the Four Hundred in Athens were accompanied by simultaneous plots—carried out in conjunction with local collaborators—to set up oligarchies elsewhere in the Athenian empire. The Athenian conspirators apparently reasoned that they could rule oligarchically at home and at the same time preserve the empire by establishing cooperating oligarchies in the allied states (Thuc. 8. 48. 5; cf. 8. 91. 3). Thu-