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From Melantheus to Lycidas:

The Pastoral Hierarchy and Genre Delineation in Theocritus' *Idylls*

Theocritus has often been credited, by both ancient and modern critics, with having invented the genre of pastoral poetry (D. M. Halperin, *Before Pastoral: Theocritus and the Ancient Tradition of Bucolic Poetry* (New Haven 1983) p. 2 offers a list of some representative critics). However, much recent criticism has called into question the basic assumption that a single person or even group of people can "invent" a genre single-handedly (K. J. Gutzwiller, *Theocritus' Pastoral Analogies: The Formation of a Genre* (Madison, 1991) pp. 3-19 discusses this problem specifically with regard to Theocritus). The poetry of Theocritus was surely something new, and it is an assumption of this study that by considering certain aspects of the *Idylls* carefully, one can pinpoint facets of the poetry that serve to help define it and differentiate it both from what came before and from more traditional forms of contemporary Hellenistic poetry. This paper claims to contribute to the theoretical discussion of genre-inception only insofar as it shows one way in which the author -- and thus the poetry itself -- both appropriates and subverts a particular traditional element of Greek poetry, and in doing so produces a new framework for its own understanding. The traditional element in question is the portrayal of herdsmen: namely cowherds, shepherds, and goatherds.

Whether a pastoral hierarchy -- that cowherds are somehow superior to shepherds, who are in turn superior to goatherds -- exists within the poems of Theocritus has been a debated question for many years (most importantly discussed by B. A. van Groningen, "Quelques problèmes de la poésie bucolique grecque," *Mnemosyne* 4th ser. 11 (1958) pp. 293-317, and E. Schmidt, "Hirtenhierarchie in der antiken Bukolik?" *Philologus* 113 (1969) pp. 183-200). While it seems clear that too strict an ordering of the herdsmen in Theocritus' pastoral poetry puts its interpretation under unnecessary constraints, there surely is a loosely defined hierarchy between the three types of herdsmen found in the poems. This paper proposes, instead of constructing a strict hierarchy enforced by the poet, viewing the three professions as simply carrying different markings, with cowherds carrying positive connotations and goatherds negative ones; shepherds can be thought of as simply "unmarked" members of the system, able to be influenced in either direction. To demonstrate how Theocritus then uses this system, we will first examine the direct ancient evidence for a strict hierarchy of herders in pastoral poetry and some modern theories of its existence, and then turn back to a few selected examples from earlier Greek literature starting with Homer in order to show that while there appears to be no concept of a complete hierarchy previous to Theocritus, a system of markings indeed existed in literature far earlier than Theocritus' time. We will then return to the *Idylls* and trace how the poet uses these positive and negative connotations of his different herders in a programmatic way. What we can see is the legacy of Melantheus, the traitorous goatherd of the *Odyssey*, running a parallel and contrary course with that of legendary cowherds such as Anchises and even Apollo. Theocritus then elevates and embellishes the role of the lowly goatherd, while not neglecting the connotations of that profession's original inferiority, and in doing so, delineates a facet of his new pastoral poetics.