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Reading the Puzzles in Vergil's *Eclogues*

Since antiquity, puzzles—passages that invite explanation of a specific mystery—have been seen as an important characteristic of Vergil's poetry. As Hexter (*YJC* 1990) has shown for the *Aeneid*, Vergilian puzzles demand resolution from their readers, as well as from characters in the poem, even as they deny definitive answers. The act of interpreting these puzzles is an attempt to gain control over the text by fixing a particular meaning for it. Understanding Vergil's puzzles is especially relevant for the *Eclogues*, a work in which puzzles of various kinds have often dominated the critical reception. I will use as a test case *Eclogue* 3, a poem in which puzzles are especially prominent and linked with the issue of control: both the pastoral characters' control over their environment and critics' control over the nature of the poem.

Ecl. 3 opens with the herdsman Menalcas asking Damoetas “*cuium pecus? an Meliboei?*” The line is a famously close translation of Theocritus 4.1. But this translation also introduces ambiguities. Theocritus' animals are explicitly cows (*boes*), but a *pecus* can be composed of cows, goats or sheep, and indeed, one can make a case that this one is made up of any of three kinds of animals. The ownership of the *pecus* is similarly ambiguous, and is disputed by the two characters. Menalcas intimates that it was stolen from Meliboeus, a claim that suggests an intratextual reading for the poem, as a continuation of *Ecl.* 1. Damoetas, on the other hand, stresses his rightful ownership of the *pecus*, as a repetition of a canonically Theocritean scenario. The differences between these two interpretations become even more pointed when we consider the common pastoral metonymy of flocks for poetry. The conflict opens into a question about the relationship between poets: are translation and adaptation forms of appropriation, or acts of poetic succession?

These differing interpretations of the *pecus* are mirrored by modern scholars' approaches to the poem. Those who have approached *Ecl.* 3 as a unified poetic expression have taken the *pecus* as composed of Theocritean cattle. By contrast, those who stress the conflict and powerplay in the passage have been more willing to entertain the notion that these are Meliboeus' goats, and thus emphasize the tensions within the pastoral world. Interpretations of this seemingly minor puzzle, therefore, are illustrative of larger critical approaches to and ideological stances toward this poem and its relationship with other texts.