



Theocritus' Pastoral Analogies: The Formation of a Genre (Wisconsin Studies in Classics)

Kathryn J. Gutzwiller

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In a book as beautifully written as the poetry it celebrates, Kathryn Gutzwiller uses the famous Idylls of Theocritus to show us the formative processes at work in the creation of a literary genre—the pastoral—and how the very structure of a genre both shapes and limits judgments about it.

Gutzwiller argues that Theocritus' position as first pastoralist has haunted critical assessments of him. Was he merely a beginner, whose simple descriptions of country life were reworked by Vergil into poems of imagination and tender feeling? Or was he a genius of great creative ability, who first found the way to encapsulate in humble detail a metaphysical vision of man's emotional core? Examining Theocritus from the point of view of "beginnings," Gutzwiller succeeds in placing him both within his native Greek intellectual tradition and within the tradition of critical commentary on pastoral. As she points out, "beginnings are hard to pin down . . . the thing begun did not exist before and yet its composite parts were already somewhere in existence."

Gutzwiller provides an analysis of the herdsman figure in pre-Hellenistic Greek literature, showing that the simple shepherd or goatherd had long been used as a figure of analogy for characters of higher rank. Theocritus was the first poet to focus on the shepherd himself and bring the analogies down into the pastoral world. Through her careful analyses of the seven pastoral Idylls, Gutzwiller demonstrates that in turning the focus on the shepherd Theocritus created a group of literary works with an inner structure so unique that later readers considered it a new genre.

In her conclusion Gutzwiller explores subsequent controversies about the pastoral, from ancient to modern times, revealing how they continue to reflect the structural pattern that originated in Theocritus's poetry.

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