

BOOK REVIEW

Theocritus: Space, Absence, and Desire. By WILLIAM G THALMANN. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. 256. Hardback, \$83.00. ISBN: 9780197636558.

William Thalmann (University of Southern California, emeritus) offers a study of Theocritus' *Idylls*, tracing central themes, the space, absence and desire of the title, and helping place Theocritus in his historical and literary contexts. The first two chapters focus on the perspective of space examining in turn the bucolic poems, the urban mimes, the mythological poems and the encomiastic works. The third chapter focuses on the themes of absence and desire across the subgenres and the final chapter considers marginal *Idylls*, both in the sense of poems that focus on subjects adjacent to bucolic and that emphasize the fictionality of the bucolic perspective. Thalmann does not present linear readings of individual poems but rather uses a given *Idyll* as a starting place to examine Theocritus' deployment of his themes in the poem and the collection. The approach is primarily literary, focusing on themes, characters and Theocritus' creation of the bucolic idea, but also informed by Thalmann's longstanding interest in how literature uses social constructions of space,¹ making this a novel contribution to our appreciation of the poet. This volume is especially welcome as, among the Hellenistic poets, Theocritus has been overshadowed by Callimachus and Apollonius in recent years. It also makes an important contribution to the study of Hellenistic poetry generally, engaging central themes such as the poetry book and court poetry.

The first two chapters address the variety of Theocritus' collection, looking at four "spaces": bucolic, urban, mythological and encomiastic. Theocritus' construction of a bucolic space is foregrounded as the poet's most distinctive achievement, but also as a perspective that informs the non-bucolic poems and as self-consciously fictional. Thalmann builds on Theocritus' well-recognized use of flora and fauna in creating the pastoral effect, identifying the symbolic boundaries

¹ Especially central in: Thalmann, William G. *Apollonius of Rhodes and the Spaces of Hellenism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

of bucolic space: it is consistently separated from agriculture, the sea (pointedly in the Polyphemus poems, where the boundary reinforces the separation of the pastoral giant and the sea-nymph), cities and the wilderness. He identifies “the mountain” as poetic shorthand for bucolic space (thus, Simichidas’ destination at the farm (“agricultural space”) reflects how he is not yet a true bucolic poet, in contrast to Lycidas’ song, which offers an encounter with the bucolic (“the mountain”). While some of the bucolic poems are placed in the “real world” (e.g., *Idylls* 4 and 5 in southern Italy), the emphasis on their symbolic topography both helps create the pastoral mood and foregrounds their fictionality. Thalmann uses a similar approach with the urban poems, *Idylls* 2 and 15, interrogating how space is deployed, though, in these cases the focus is more on how the characters position themselves in these spaces. For example, Gorgo and Praxinoa use the space of the palace to identify with the Ptolemaic imperial project by consuming the Pan-Hellenic contributions to the festival, but on the streets of multi-cultural Alexandria they must negotiate their identity, distancing themselves from the Egyptians, placing themselves as under Ptolemy’s protection, defending their Doric dialect as authentically Greek. In the mythological *Idylls* 13, 22 and 24, Thalmann considers how the heroic and bucolic worlds interact. For example, in the first half of *Idyll* 22, the typically bucolic spring that Amycus guards is set off from the beach where the heroic Argonauts disembark; Amycus is figured as Polyphemus, denying hospitality as in *Odyssey* 9, but also suggesting the bucolic Polyphemus; thus, Polydeuces revises Odysseus’ interaction with the monster, making Amycus swear to uphold the rules of hospitality, reclaiming the spring for bucolic space. In addition to sensitive readings of individual passages, these chapters make a strong case for the unity of the collection in the sense that it creates and employs a coherent symbolic language.

Chapter 3 focuses on absence as integral to the idea of bucolic. Thalmann uses *Idyll* 3 as his model here: Amaryllis’ problematic status (is she a girl, a Nymph, a fantasy, a statue, the same as Amaryllis who has died in *Idyll* 4?) creates the occasion for the goatherd’s song: if she were fully present he would not need to sing, but could enjoy the object of his desire. This models the whole bucolic world, then, where the foundational myth of Daphnis’ death in the programmatic *Idyll* 1 sets the condition for pastoral: bucolic poetry is always an attempt to recover the absence of Daphnis’ original song, further reflected back into the absence of Daphnis’ own girl (*Idyll* 1.82-85) and forward into Theocritus’ own attempt to mimetically reproduce Thyrsis’ sweet singing. Thalmann further relates this to

the centrality of the figure of apostrophe (as in 3.6 ὦ χαρίεσσ' Ἀμαρυλλί) for bucolic poetry, since it implies the absence of the addressee, which, in turn supports one of Thalmann's key concerns in the book overall, that of the self-conscious fictionality of Theocritus' poetry: bucolic addresses a girl/Nymph-that-never-appears, a world-that-never-was; a compelling argument how the theme of absence is replicated on different levels, from the figure of speech to the whole set of pastoral poems.

The fourth chapter returns to the idea of space, looking at poems that are on the margins of bucolic: *Idylls* 4, 10 and the (probably) pseudo-Theocritean 21. Thalmann reads *Idyll* 4 as the temporal counterpart to Thyrsis' song in *Idyll* 1: where that inaugurates the bucolic world, *Idyll* 4 dramatizes its closure. Thus, Aegon's departure for Olympia replays Daphnis' departure to Hades, but whereas Daphnis' absence produces desire for an idealized world, Aegon's departure deflates the bucolic tropes: Aegon's cattle yearn for him, but only because Corydon is an incompetent herder; where bucolic herding is always deferred in favor of song, Battus and Corydon's songs are pre-empted by the need to direct the cattle. This elision of the bucolic world into a realistic agricultural world is the central theme of *Idyll* 10: as Chapter 1 established agriculture as a boundary to bucolic space, *Idyll* 10 looks back into pastoral from agriculture: the bucolically named Bucaeus references the tropes of pastoral, but is topped by Milo's song as more fitting for working men, again marking bucolic as fictional. *Idyll* 21 follows the same trajectory, focusing on the sea as the margin: if not by Theocritus, it demonstrates his early readers appreciated his spatial organization of the bucolic world.

Altogether this book is a delight; Thalmann effectively uses the idea of imaginative spaces to illuminate Theocritus' creation of his bucolic world while keeping the focus on the poetry, not the theory. At the same time, he engages contemporary concerns in Hellenistic poetry: the poetry book, engagement with contemporary politics, particularly the Ptolemaic Empire and Alexandrian self-consciousness.

PAUL OJENNUS

Whitworth University, pojennus@whitworth.edu