DESPERATE SIMAETHA: GENDER AND POWER IN THEOCRITUS, IDYLL 2*

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars, influenced by Gow’s commentary, have regarded Theocritus Idyll 2 as an important source for the study of erotic magic in antiquity. It is the contention of this paper that this poem should not be treated as if it were a literary precursor of the erotic magical papyri, but rather as a comic parody of a magic ritual in which the love-sick practitioner perpetrates ritual mayhem for the entertainment of Theocritus’ audience, in which real magic was the domain of men, not women (as the papyri overwhelmingly testify). Consequently, Idyll 2 does not add to the corpus of literature demonising women as witches; more seriously, it parodies female independence and initiative in establishing a relationship with a man, freed from the patriarchal network of familial marriage alliances. Embodying this in a mime indicates that for Theocritus’ audience, as for that of Aristophanes, women in control of their lives was still, in the Hellenistic world, an alternative too laughable, and perhaps too threatening, to contemplate.

Idyll 2 has recently been subjected to an interesting array of critical approaches. The poem has been regarded as indispensable evidence for the practice of erotic magic in antiquity, as a significant contribution to the tradition of male-produced literature which demonises women as witches, as a minefield of cunning narratological devices and as an exploration of the interlocking nexus of power, gender, class, mobility and immigration in the Hellenistic world.1 In this paper, I would like to argue that the above approaches, whilst often thought-provoking and ingenious, ignore the poem’s humour, genre (mime) and context. In the light of these, I would like to suggest that Idyll 2 ought not to be interpreted solely or even primarily as a literary precursor of the erotic magical papyri, because the poem seems to be comic parody of bungled ritual practice, designed to

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entertain, and that the *Idyll* does not thus contribute to the *corpus* of Western literature which demonises women as practitioners *par excellence* of the black arts.

To begin with, the situation in the poem as Theocritus delineates it. Theumaridas' Thracian nurse had begged Simaetha to go to a festival of Artemis (70-72), in which her friend, Anaxo, was participating as a basket-bearer (66-67). En route to the grove where the festival was being held, Simaetha espied the handsome Delphis walking together with Eudamippus, both gleaming with good health and oil after a work-out in the ancient equivalent of the local gym. Simaetha claims that she was instantly seized with mad desire for Delphis and spent ten days and nights burning with the fever of lust (82-86); she was reduced to skin and bones, her hair began to fall from her head and, in her desperation, she resorted to magic to cure herself (88-91), all to no avail. Eventually she dispatched her slave-girl to the wrestling-school with a message for Delphis; he was to come to her, and the oily Delphis readily obeyed (94-98, 100-03). As she saw him crossing her threshold, Simaetha experienced the hot flushes and cold sweats, reminiscent of Sappho's famous passion (104-10); the smooth Delphis sat upon her couch and revealed how she had simply anticipated what he had been planning all along (114-16); he would have come to her, he confessed, with a couple of friends, bearing lover's gifts and wearing on his brow a wreath of white poplar entwined with red ribbons (118-22). A mere kiss would have satisfied the handsome stud (124-26); rejection would have resulted in the siege of the *exclusus amator* (127-28). Delphis then thanks Aphrodite for the flame of love and Simaetha, whose invitation to her house has rescued him from the heat (130-34). The hapless Simaetha falls for this speech and promptly seduces him (138-43). She is no longer a virgin (41); three or four times a day Delphis visited her, often leaving his oil-flask with her (155-56); all was perfect until yesterday (144), but she last saw him eleven days ago (157, cf. 4). Now the gossiping mother of the piper has informed her that Delphis is displaying all the symptoms of

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1 For the purposes of this study, I have used Gow's text (1973, repr.), but have retained the order of the lines as in all the manuscripts except K (see note 5).

2 The apparent chronological problem is best explained by Gow's suggestion that, although Simaetha has not seen Delphis for eleven days, she had nothing definite to go on until yesterday (Gow 60), when presumably the rumour of his infidelity reached her, only to be confirmed the following day by the mother of the piper (145-47).
someone madly in love (145-53); Simaetha has no reason to doubt the word of the gossip (154) and thus resorts to love-magic to bind him to herself (159) or otherwise she threatens to kill him with evil potions, the use of which she has learnt from an Assyrian stranger (159-62). In any case, she plans to visit him in the wrestling-school on the morrow to reproach him (8-9) and present him with an erotic potion (58).

The *Idyll*, however, does not open with this linear narrative of the course of Simaetha’s relationship with Delphis, but with Simaetha and her slave, Thestyliis, preparing her love-magic in the moonlight (1-11); details of the relationship are slowly revealed by Simaetha as the magic ritual unfolds. After a softly chanted address to the Moon and then to Hecate (10-16), Simaetha moves the magic wheel and utters the refrain which punctuates the ritual ten times: *magic wheel, drag to my house this man of mine* (17).

The ritual itself consists of the following elements: a cup is wreathed with crimson wool (2), barley is scattered and burnt on the fire, whilst the words ‘I scatter the bones of Delphis’ are uttered (18-21); laurel leaves are burnt in the fire (23-24), wax is melted in the fire, so Delphis may melt with love (28-29), a bronze *rhombos* is spun, so Delphis may

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4 Gow (1973:33) suggests that the rite could have been performed either outside in the open air, or indoors, in the courtyard or an open upper room, but White (1979:17-20) convincingly demonstrates that the suggestion of the open air is without foundation; in view especially of a fragment of a mime by Sophron, describing a magic ceremony, set in an inner room inside the house, she imagines Simaetha inside, looking at the moon and stars through the window.

5 According to the texts of Gow and Dover, who place lines 28-31 after line 42, on the evidence of K (the Ambrosian) and P3 (the Antinoe papyrus). All other manuscripts have lines 28-31 in order (between 27 and 32). Gow’s arguments (1973:40) for retaining the transposition of the lines are as follows: he divides the *Idyll* into nine quatrains which vary the pattern of magic act plus prayer or statement, actual or implied; his central quatrain (28-31) has two acts and two prayers, in compensation for the absence of prayer or statement in the fourth quatrain (38-41), in which the pattern is broken by the arrival of the goddess (36). Hence 28-31 must remain after line 42. White argues (1979:25) that lines 33-36 (Gow’s third quatrain) do not contain one ritual act but two: the burning of the bran and the striking of the bronze gong; lines 28-31, therefore, are not the central quatrain simply because of two acts. Furthermore White (1979:27) offers a persuasive contextual reason. Simaetha, after her panic-stricken clashing of the gong surely needs to appease Hecate immediately with the libation, rather than keep the goddess waiting, as the order of lines adopted by Gow entails. An ancient reader, according to White (1979:27-29) probably re-arranged the lines
spin about Simaetha’s door (30-31); bran is burnt in the fire and a prayer to Artemis is interrupted by the clash of a bronze gong (33-36); a triple libation is poured to Hecate to make Delphis forget his current lover, male or female (43-44); ἰππομανές is added to the fire to make Delphis as mad with lust as the mares it inflames (48-49); a fringe from Delphis’ cloak is shredded and tossed into the flames (53-54); finally, Simaetha threatens to crush a lizard and take it to Delphis on the morrow (58) and Thestylis is ordered to take some θρόνα and knead them over Delphis’ threshold in the darkness, whilst uttering ‘I knead the bones of Delphis’ (59-61).

Older commentaries on the poem seem convinced that Simaetha’s love magic is not a mere literary creation of Theocritus, but closely resembles actual magic ritual of the period. Gow believes that the ‘details of Simaetha’s magic have every appearance of being true to contemporary practice, and the earlier part of the Idyll probably owes much of its power to keep the barley, bay and bran together as these were regularly sacrificed to Hecate-Selene. The intrusion of the wax (not offered to Hecate-Selene) spoils this procedure, but comically the naive Simaetha forgets about the correct ritual procedure, remembers and then adds the bran. I agree with preserving the original order of the lines to give the impression of Simaetha’s ritual confusion; see Lavagnini 1950:81-83, who argues, unconvincingly, for the placement of lines 27-31 after line 46. For a defence of the traditional order from the point of view of structure and Theocritus’s strophic composition, see Lawall 1961: 83-294 and Hommel 1956:198-99.

6 Gow (1973:44) distinguishes between the ῥόμβος and the ἱνγξ on the grounds that it is highly improbable that the instrument featured in the refrain would feature among the spells and unlikely that ῥόμβος ever means magic wheel. Dover (1971:99) also makes the distinction between ‘wryneck’ and ‘bullroarer.’ White (1979:30-34) argues that the instruments are identical, as Theocritus associates the ῥόμβος with Aphrodite, thus alluding to Pindar, Pythian 4.214ff., where Aphrodite is said to have invented the ἱνγξ: hence the instruments are one and the same.

7 Crateuas in the scholia here claims that ἰππομανές is a plant similar to οἶκυκος ἄγριος (‘the squirting cucumber’; Gow 1973:45); LSJ (s.v. ἱνγξ) opt for ‘an Arcadian plant, thorn-apple, Datura stramonium’, but for problems with LSJ’s plant-names, see Raven 2000:3-10. Datura stramonium is a very poisonous narcotic (Huxley & Taylor 1977:128; see also Lembach 1970:61) and would not inflame the lusts of Delphis; on the contrary, it would probably silence them forever. The acrid milky juice of the ‘squirting cucumber’ (ecballium elaterium) or of spurge (tithymallos), dangerous to skin and eyes (Huxley & Taylor 1977:98, 108), would presumably have been avoided by Simaetha. However, perhaps Theocritus wants to suggest that Simaetha, in her blundering way, knows of the reputation of ἰππομανές (whatever Arcadian plant it is), but is ignorant of its toxicity and of its possible effect on herself and on Delphis (see subsequent interpretation).

8 Θρόνα seems to have been an Aetolian word for drugs/magic herbs (Gow 1973:46).
and its atmosphere to the skill with which T. has captured the spirit of his models’ (1973:35); Luck (1985) includes this poem in his collection of source material for magic in antiquity. Even more recent commentators, such as Gager,9 who accepts Gow’s parallels without question,10 Faraone11 and Ogden,12 are prone to treat this poem as if it were documentary evidence.

By models, Gow presumably means the collection of magical papyri, reference to which he skilfully weaves into the course of his magisterial commentary on the poem. The fact that many of the papyri are far later than Theocritus’ Idyll 2 is no problem for Gow who regards the ‘coincidence’ between Theocritus and the papyri as evidence ‘for the antiquity of the detail’ in the papyri themselves (1973:36). There are, of course, some papyri which date from the second century BCE and lead curse tablets which are at least two centuries older (Graf 1997:175); the earliest erotic tablet dates from the fourth century BCE (Gager 1992:78). Thus it is not inconceivable that Theocritus may have been acquainted with early forms of magic spells and the accompanying rituals. An oral tradition, as envisaged by Gager (1992:78), may also have contributed to the shape of Simaetha’s ritual.

However, it is important to examine closely what ‘coincidences’ Gow sees between Theocritus’ Idyll and the magical papyri he cites as exempla. Laurel leaves (Id. 2.1) certainly feature in magic rites as φυλακτήρια;13 however, neither of the spells mentioned by Gow has anything to do with erotic magic, or binding. Furthermore, both involve inscribing characters on the leaves themselves;14 Simaetha burns the leaves (23-24). Binding a leaden plate with thread does occur in the context of a general binding spell,15 a magician does wear a garland of white and red wool16 and a φυλακτήριον is wrapped in a red skin,17 but binding a bowl with crimson wool in the context of an erotic binding spell (Id. 2.2),

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10 Ibid: 84, n. 4.
13 PGM 7.842-43; 1.280.
14 PGM 7.802-03; 1.266.
15 PGM 7.438 (Σπάρτης), 452 (μίτον μέλανα).
16 PGM 2.71-72.
17 PGM 4.2705-06.
perhaps to suggest the binding of Delphis or the protection of the bowl, could be a Theocritean invention. Further coincidences noted by Gow include the use of the binding formula καταθήσομαι (Id. 2.3, 10, 159), not especially convincing as almost all the manuscripts read καταθήσομαι, the utterance of incantations in low tones (Id. 2.11), but this in the context of initiation into the mysteries (hence the silent mutterings), not love magic; δαίμων (Id. 2.11) is used of male deities in the references Gow provides, not of the Moon; the association of Hecate and dogs (Id. 2.12) is common in the papyri where she is addressed as, or depicted as, a dog, but Hecate before whom the dogs shiver, the graves, and the dark blood, are decidedly literary. Δασπλής, used of Hecate in Idyl 2.14, is used of Selene in the papyri; Gow comments on the suggestive use of τέλος (Id. 2.14), as τελείων is used in the PGM for the execution of orders within an

18 All the mss, with the exception of the Antinoe papyrus, read καταθήσομαι which, Gow argues (1973:37), is inappropriate in lines 3 and 159, and inelegant in line 10. Gow’s unhelpful references are to the use of the nouns: φυλτροκατάθεσις (PGM 4.296), κατάθεσις (PGM 4.336). Faraone (1995:11 n. 37) argues that the affinity of Idyl 2 with the defixiones was obscured by the mss reading, ‘overturned by the discovery of early papyri that have καταθήσομαι in all three places.’ Both Gow and Faraone seem determined to ensure that the text of the Idyl reflects the language of the magical papyri. Faraone (ibid.:1-15) does offer examples of the use of the ‘performative future’ in binding incantations and in Idyl 2, but neither he nor Gow can find instances of the use of the future middle. Fabiano (1971:531) imagines that this could be an aorist subjunctive (a convenient ‘hapax’). The use of the verb κατάθεω in the active is common in erotic binding spells; see, for instance, Suppl. Mag., Daniel & Maltomini 1992:45: εδήσα (8), κατάθησατε (36, 44); Suppl. Mag. 47: κατάθησαν (7); Suppl. Mag. 48: κατάθησαν (7); Suppl. Mag. 49: κατάθησαν (19, 62, 77). In the absence of convincing evidence for the retention of καταθήσομαι, I would suggest retaining καταθήσομαι, which LSJ (s.v.) gloss as ‘I shall compel by sacrifices’, which interpretation is obviously assimilated to καταθήσομαι.

Retaining it would convey Simaetha’s ignorance of the precise vocabulary of a binding spell and her confused sense of the ritual.

19 PGM 4.745-46.
20 PGM 5.250 — to Hermes (Gow 1973:38); 7.239, 242 — to Besas (Betz 1992:122), not Bes (Gow 1973:38). Gow does refer to the elaborate address to the Moon at PGM 4.2785, but throughout the address the moon is never addressed as δαίμων, but as δέσποινα (2786), θεά (2851), and she whom the δαίμονες fear (2830-31).
21 PGM 4.1434 — addressed as κύων μέλανα.
22 PGM 4.1878, 2122, 2251, 2721-22, 2810-11, 2884, 2945-46.
23 As Gow (1973:38) demonstrates.
24 PGM 4.2858.
agoge spell; for the prayer to Hecate to ensure that Simaetha’s drugs are as potent as Circe’s, Medea’s or Perimede’s (Id. 2.15-16), Gow cites a prayer to give strength to a phylactery and a prayer to Aphrodite to fulfil the charm completely, in the context of an agoge. Neither reference focusses explicitly on the φόμιμακα, with the dramatic force and literary pedigree of Theocritus’ allusions.

Gow then cites what he considers to be a ‘very precise parallel’ for Simaetha’s spell in the papyri, which turns out to be an agoge spell addressed to myrrh, recited over coals and bristling with the imagery of fire and burning: the parallel, however, turns out to be far from precise. In the papyrus spell, the man puts the spell on a woman in a far more violent and comprehensive manner than Simaetha’s spell on Delphis; in contrast to Delphis’ bones and flesh (Id. 2.21, 26), this man prays to burn her heart, entrails, liver, spirit, bones and brain.

As for the ingredients used by Simaetha, Gow comments on the barley (Id. 2.18), an essential element in Greek sacrifice, which, together with the bran (Id. 2.33), features among the ingredients of a δεινων θυμίαμα in the papyri. The adamantine gates of hell (Id. 2.33-34) feature in the papyri, but Gow is hard pressed to find, in the papyri, an example of the clash of a bronze gong (Id. 2.36) to ward off evil spirits. Magicians, who call up evil powers, need to avert these from themselves with a variety of phylacteries, from words to teeth, but no bronze gongs; even so, Gow distinguishes between the bronze gong and the bronze rhombos, twirled by Simaetha to make Delphis twirl around her door (Id. 2.30-31): in the context of a spell addressed to the waning moon, the

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26 PGM 4. 1651-52.
28 PGM 4. 1496-1595.
30 PGM 4.1544-45. More appropriate is Gow’s PGM 16.1-75, in which the woman Diokourous puts a love spell on the male Sarapion so that he pine and melt away with love for her.
31 PGM 4.2580 (bran), 2583 (bay leaves), 2584 (barley). Significantly, Simaetha gets the order wrong (bay leaves, barley, bran).
32 PGM 4. 2719.
cymbals seem to be apotropaic, the rhombos attractive.\(^{34}\) No example of the rhombos used in an erotic spell can be found. Simaetha refers to the stillness of the sea and breezes, in contrast to the torment in her heart (Id. 2.38-39); Gow cites as parallels the need for silence in a charm for a direct vision,\(^{35}\) in an agoge,\(^{36}\) in a prayer for the epiphany of Helios\(^{37}\) and for a deity to predict the future;\(^{38}\) none of these directly parallels the situation in Theocritus’ poem. Simaetha makes three libations to Hecate (presumably; Id. 2.43: \(\pi\dot{\omicron}\tau\nu\lambda\alpha\)), accompanied by three requests that Delphis may forget his current lover (Id. 2.43-44); finding the number three in the papyri, especially in connection with Hecate, is not difficult\(^{39}\) and the request that Delphis forget his current lover can be paralleled in some agogai, although Gow only cites those addressed by men to women.\(^{40}\) For Theocritus’ mythological analogy (as Theseus forgot Ariadne, Id. 2.45-46), Gow cites two barely relevant examples from the papyri\(^{41}\) and one with more appropriate reference to the paradigmatic pairings of Isis and Osiris, and Odysseus and Penelope.\(^{42}\) For the fringe of Delphis’ cloak shredded and cast into the flames (Id. 2.53-54), Gow cites a prayer addressed to Helios within a \(\pi\alpha\theta\pi\kappa\alpha\tau\beta\)\(\omega\lambda\iota\).\(^{43}\) but the remnant (\(\lambda\epsilon\iota\phi\alpha\nu\alpha\nu\alpha\nu\)) held in the hand of the practitioner belongs to the daimon, not to the loved one. Simaetha’s drink of crushed lizard (Id. 2.58) cannot be precisely paralleled in the papyri; Gow (1973:46) refers to the manufacture of a dangerous unguent by cooking a lizard in oil, but the other examples cited, neither of which actually refers to the \(\sigma\alpha\upsilon\rho\alpha\), do not parallel Simaetha’s potion.\(^{44}\) Finally, Gow refers to the quiet end of the poem, where the power

\(^{34}\) PGM 4.2296: ‘I whirl the wheel for you; I do not touch the cymbals.’

\(^{35}\) PGM 7.320-24: earth, air, sea, winds.

\(^{36}\) PGM 36.156-60: ‘may no barking dog, clash of cymbals, etc. release you.’

\(^{37}\) PGM 3.198-205: birds, dolphins, daimons.

\(^{38}\) PGM 13.681: ‘in the middle of the night when there is quiet, light the altar fire ...’

\(^{39}\) Gow cites PGM 4.2524-26 (spell within an agoge), to Selene: triple-sounding, triple-voiced, triple-headed, triple-pointed, triple-faced, goddess of the triple ways, holding unquenchable flame in triple baskets, etc.

\(^{40}\) PGM 4.2741-44; 4.1511-14; 4.2757-59; 4.2960-61.

\(^{41}\) PGM 4.2905-06 (agoge): ‘I’ll bind on him another wheel of Ixion’; 4.3039-40 (demon possession): ‘I conjure you by the seal which Solomon placed on the tongue of Jeremiah.’

\(^{42}\) PGM 36.288-89 (pudenda key spell): ‘let her love me as Isis loved Osiris; let her remain chaste as Penelope did for Odysseus.’

\(^{43}\) PGM 4.448.

\(^{44}\) PGM 7.186-90; 7.628.
summoned is dismissed, as consonant with ‘necromantic practice’; however, Simaetha does not dismiss the power in the peremptory manner which is used in the examples from the papyri cited, but bids farewell to the Moon and stars with the more formal χαίρε (χαίρουσα, 163; χαίρε, 165; χαίρετε, 165), reminiscent of the closure of the Homeric hymns.

In short, the coincidences and parallels Gow finds between Simaetha’s magic ritual and the magical papyri are not precise at all. Certainly Theocritus suggests the world of the papyri, and the defixio in particular. The bungled binding formula, the appeal for supernatural assistance (28, 33-34) and the persuasive analogies (25-26, 28-29, 48-51, 59-62), all of which characterise defixiones (Gager 1992:13), occur in the Idyll; the melting of wax – perhaps an image of Delphi (28) – , and the use of clothing (53-54), are also common features of love magic (Gager 1992:15-18). These suggestions are skilfully interwoven with allusions to Homer, Sappho, the Greek tragedians, Pindar, and Apollonius Rhodius. Noticeable is Gow’s inability to find parallels in the papyri for the use of the ἰνυξ, the wheel which forms the crux of Simaetha’s magic ritual and which has a distinguished literary and artistic pedigree.

Recently, Graf has commented in detail on the elements of Simaetha’s ritual and has suggested that ‘Theocritus does not realistically describe an actual ritual scenario and does not play the ethnologist, but rather constructs a mosaic, a kind of superritual capable of activating in its readers all sorts of associations connected with magic, and he constructs it following ritual facts that are well-informed but, taken as a whole, would not work. In short, this poem does not constitute a source of information for contemporary magic’ (1997:184). Indeed, Simaetha’s spell would not have worked, but is Graf right? Does Theocritus construct a superritual, and, if so, to what purpose?

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41 PGM 4.1061: ‘go away, lord, to your own heavens’; 7.333: ‘go away, Anubis ...’; 4.920: ‘go away, Lord, to your thrones ...’
43 For some of the possible allusions to Homer, see Gow 1973:38 on line 13; ibid.:39 on 14; ibid.:51 on 82; ibid.:52 on 83; to Sappho; to Pindar, ibid.:41 on 17; to Sophocles, ibid.:46 on 55; to Euripides, ibid.:58 on 136; to Apollonius Rhodius, Dover 1971:97 on lines 30-33. For Theocritus’ ‘disruptive’ use of epicisms in Idyll 2, see Fabiano 1971:535-36.
The answer to these questions, I would like to suggest, lies in the nature of the poem itself. According to Σ, Theocritus borrowed the character of Thestylis and the subject matter of the magic from the mimes of Sophron (Gow 1973:33). We know that one of Sophron’s mimes was entitled ‘The women who claim to drive out the goddess’ (Dover 1971:97). Furthermore, a papyrus fragment of Sophron clearly deals with the dramatization of a magic rite, in which the participants wear bay leaves behind the ears (Gow 1973:34, line 4) and a dog is sacrificed (ibid.: line 7), presumably to Hecate. Although there is no evidence that this fragment belongs to the mime whose title we have, it is obvious that Sophron wrote a mime about women dabbling in magic; ‘The women who claim to drive out the goddess’ clearly belongs with ‘The women quacks’ and ‘The women visitors to the Isthmia’, in which Sophron (like Herodas) presumably continued the Aristophanic and Menandrian tradition of lampooning the attendance of women at religious festivals.48

Now Simaetha is not a participant in a wild women’s festival, although she first espied Delphis on her way to one (66-77); she and Thestylis commune in a magical religious rite. Like Idyll 15 in which Theocritus parodied the attendance of two Syracusan women at an Alexandrianised version of the Adonia, presumably for the entertainment of his learned Ptolemaic audience,49 so in Idyll 2, Theocritus parodies the magic ritual of a desperate lovesick would-be witch and her slave, who get everything wrong.50 The search for precise parallels in the magical papyri is indeed doomed; there aren’t any. Skilful parodies must have something to parody; so clever is Theocritus’ that it conjures up the world of magic, only to foreground the hopeless efforts of Simaetha. Graf wonders why Simaetha uses the bronze gong to ward off the angry Hecate, when the gong usually ‘signals the presence of subterranean power’ (183); the clash of the bronze is presumably a panic-stricken error, in which Simaetha

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49 Lambert 2001:87-103.
50 Including her allusions to famous witches. See White’s convincing interpretation of the comic effect of the naive Simaetha who transforms the Homeric Agamede into Perimede (1979:21-22, 28). Cf. Griffiths 1979a:113: ‘Having rather poignantly taken for herself models much too grand for her very ordinary circumstances, she cannot quite get them straight: she invokes both Medea and Perimede (v. 16) without realizing, as the bright philologists of the Museum would surely have known, that the latter seems to be only an alternative name for the former.’
confuses presence and absence. This must surely have raised a chuckle in the audience, for which this very literary mime was presumably intended.\textsuperscript{51} The very fact, too, that Simaetha’s ritual begins like a sacrifice, with the scattering of the barley (Graf 1997:181), is surely another instance of the ritual mayhem in the \textit{Idyll}. The most telling example of Simaetha’s ritual folly is the use of the \textit{iynx} itself: Detienne’s research into myths associated with the \textit{iynx}, not to speak of the eponymous lynx herself, reveals that these myths are characterised by destruction of or interference with stable, legitimate unions like marriage.\textsuperscript{52} Using this love-charm could result in the very reverse of Simaetha’s intentions; another clever touch of comic irony for the audience-reader.\textsuperscript{53} A further example of bungled magic practice is Simaetha’s plan to take Delphis the potion of crushed lizard on the morrow, thus breaking a cardinal feature of ancient magic: secrecy (Ogden 1999:82).\textsuperscript{44} Thus, instead of Graf’s superritual, we have, I believe, a delightfully comic send-up of a bungled magic ritual, which cleverly alludes to an array of magical practices with which Theocritus’ audience would have been familiar. His Simaetha is not a scheming female witch, but a love-sick and spurned woman who resorts to magic, makes clearly spurious claims about her magic education (162) and generally makes a fool of herself by rushing in, quite literally, where angels fear to tread.

A great deal has been made in contemporary criticism of the fact that the vast majority of practitioners of erotic magic in the papyri are male, whereas most of the stereotypic witches in male-produced literature are female. Winkler believed that men thereby publically denied and transferred their irrationality onto women and so re-assigned the location of victimage; in the real world of the papyri, men are overwhelmingly the writhing victims of love and lust; in Theocritus’ \textit{Idyll}, Simaetha is the victim (Winkler 1990:90). Consequently, in literary creations, the power imbalance, clearly experienced by men in the papyri, is restored. Graf too refers to the fact that erotic magic, in the competitive network of marriage

\textsuperscript{51} See White’s comments on the comic effect of this (1979:26).
\textsuperscript{52} See Segal 1981:73-84, Iles Johnston 1995:178, 204: the \textit{iynx} brings grief to the user.
\textsuperscript{53} Griffiths 1979a:113: ‘... nor has she noticed that she is contaminating a spell to destroy the faithless Delphis with one to bring him back to her.’
\textsuperscript{54} Gager 1992:82-83 disagrees: ‘... the intended target of the spell was almost certainly aware that someone had commissioned and deposited an erotic tablet because she or he was already the object of that person’s attention.’ Significantly, he makes this point precisely because he (erroneously in my opinion) uses \textit{Idyll} 2 as a source for actual magic practice.
alliances, ‘remained a secret weapon, unworthy of the ideal warrior world of men...’ (1997:187); thus literary tales of erotic magic are a ‘means for getting rid of what should not exist’ (ibid.:189). A true man, remarks Graf, does not need erotic magic, ‘the only male sorcerers are those funny foreign specialists’ (ibid.). How accurate are these now widely-accepted views of Winkler and Graf?

Before we attempt to answer this question, let us briefly look at Theocritus’ creation Simaetha. Firstly, her name may have erotic connotations and is that of the Megarian πόρνη in Aristophanes (Ach. 524). Σ describes the name as Δωρικότερον (Gow 1973:54), thus providing a suggestive link with Kos, Idyll 15 and Sophron. The name thus has a comic Doric pedigree, a fitting choice for a mime in the Sophronian tradition. Theocritus’ Simaetha is not a prostitute, though. She is an independent woman, freed from family supervision, living with one slave-girl in a house in a city by the sea; she is not wealthy, for she has to borrow a ξυοτίς (Id. 2.74) to go to the festival of Artemis; her friends include the mother of a piper she knows and the daughter of Eubulus, who was a basket-bearer at the festival she attended. She seems to have learned something about evil drugs from an Assyrian stranger. Most important of all, we learn that she has lost her virginity to Delphis, a Myndian, and is now utterly wretched, ἄντι γυναίκος (41), instead of being a wife. In

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55 Gow 1973:54 on line 101.
56 Burton 1995:19, 29. Dickie (2001:9, 103, 176) seems certain that Simaetha is a prostitute, but there is no convincing evidence for this claim. Her independence could imply that Theocritus conceives of her as the orphan daughter of poor free or freed-slave parents now dead; obvious parallels occur in New Comedy (e.g. Terence’s Andria, Adelphoe, Phormio).
58 Burton (1995:9, 28, 43) contrasts her class with the upper-class sympotic set from which Delphis presumably comes, believing that Theocritus foregrounds class difference in the poem; the relationship between Delphis and Simaetha is thus between a member of the idle, immigrant elite and one of society’s marginals.
59 Burton believes (1995:19, 43) that the themes of mobility and immigration — Delphis is a ‘privileged male colonizer’ — inform the gendered power dynamics in the Idyll. Whether Theocritus foregrounds the theme of colonization (and its links with patriarchy) is questionable. Of Simaetha’s eleven references to Delphis by name, one refers to Delphis ‘the Myndian’ (29) and one simply to ‘the Myndian’ (96); this may simply be a reflection of standard Greek naming-practice and Theocritean variatio (and little else). Simaetha’s Doric name indicates that she, too, is a colonizer, with a slave whom she verbally abuses (20); she, too, is an exploiter and, from Thestylis’ perspective, a ‘privileged female colonizer’.
many situations in New Comedy, a man spots a woman at a religious festival; this often results in seduction and/or rape. In *Idyll* 2, the situation is reversed; Simaetha espies Delphis on the way to the festival, conceives a violent passion for him, lures him to her home and initiates sexual relations. This comic reversal of the theatrical norm ensures a brief moment of power for Simaetha, which is cruelly crushed when Delphis, according to Simaetha, turns out to be a vain, fickle smooth-talker, who has the gall to finish his speech of seduction (as conceived by Simaetha) with the observation that Eros 'scares a virgin from her bed-room with his wicked madness and a bride from her husband's bed before it is cold' (136-38). But Delphis is not the prime seducer; Simaetha is. Yet throughout the *Idyll*, Theocritus creates a woman who constructs herself as a victim; the

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61 See Andrews 1996:21-53, who uses narratological theory to analyse Simaetha's monologue and argues that Simaetha cleverly weaves Homeric allusions into her account of her relationship with Delphis, primarily to construct herself as the ultimate victim and so win sympathy for her plight. In this analysis, Simaetha emerges not as a naive young girl, but as a highly sophisticated 'character-narrator, in command of an impressive array of narrative techniques that she employs for powerful emotional and rhetorical effect in the poem' (50). Andrews considers neither the literary form of the poem (the mime), nor Theocritus' intention in creating such a character; consequently the possible comic effect of Theocritus' use of the Homericisms in the creation of the character of Simaetha escapes him. Segal (1984:201-09) also comments on the intertextuality in *Idyll* 2, in particular on the allusions to Homer and Sappho, but prefers to regard Simaetha as naive, inexperienced, speaking 'the language of Homeric epic and Sapphic introspective lyric', but remaining 'in total ignorance of the gap between herself and the texts she echoes' (207). The multiple dimensions of that gap are for the sophisticated reader to divine; not merely 'humorous or ironic contrast' (208), but also pathos (205), which pull the reader in different directions; similarly, Goldhill 1991:272. In the strong Homeric echoes at the end of the poem, Segal (1985:115-17) finds both pathos and irony, as Simaetha seems to convey a 'nascent capacity for objectively distancing the experience.' Griffiths (1979a:113 n. 10) finds 'incongruities' in Theocritus' use of Homer, and although he considers the pretentious diction of the Syracusans in *Idyll* 15 comic, he does not consider the 'mixture of the higher sort of style and the lower sort of setting' in *Idyll* 2 humorous, because of the 'honesty' with which Simaetha finally 'confronts her circumstances' (1979a:82-84). However, Simaetha's use of epicsisms at the end of the poem especially (163-66) seems to me to be as pretentious as the Syracusans' diction and reveals not her honesty, but her comic self-delusion, which finds escapist relief in the kind of rhetoric which is as meaningless as her bungled magic.
Thracian nurse begged her to go the festival (70-72); she faded away with the fever of love, which seized her (85); she reports the speech of Delphis and tries to justify her amatory initiative by claiming that Delphis would have approached her anyway, like a conventional comastic lover, had he made the initial overtures; Delphis brought trouble on her (23); Delphis took her virginity (41); she reports the speech of the gossiping informant, thus adding to her portrayal of Delphis as the fickle bastard, who not only left her in the lurch (3, 7, 112), but who also appears to swing happily from male to female partners (44, 150). She is the forlorn lover, pining away with desire, another traditionally male literary role she usurps. Theocritus’ creation thus oscillates between presenting herself as a woman of initiative, who operates outside conventional gender boundaries, and one who constructs herself as a victim the moment her initiative fails. Simaetha then resorts to magic to regain the power she has lost; in her binding spell, Delphis becomes the victim again, but to the audience of the poem, Simaetha is the ultimate loser; she cannot even get this right.

To return to the arguments of Winkler and Graf. In the public, male-dominated world of literature, is irrationality always transferred onto women, who are often in the process demonised as witches? In Theocritus’ *Idyll*, Simaetha reports that Delphis claimed that he would have behaved like the love-crazed exclusus amator, armed with axes and torches, if Simaetha’s door had been barred against him; he has rushed to Simaetha’s house, half-burnt by the flame of Aphrodite. He behaves as irrationally as Simaetha; the only thing he does not do is resort to love magic, not because love magic is not for men, or for ‘funny foreign specialists’, but simply because he does not need to; he does not love her; he did not make the first move. In Theocritus’ learned audience, perhaps in Ptolemaic Kos or Alexandria, there were presumably quite a few ‘funny foreign specialists’, for whom the boundaries between magic and religion were not neatly demarcated; as the Ptolemies negotiated the tricky cross-cultural swamps in Egypt, the Greek settlers (of whom Simaetha with her Doric name is presumably meant to be one) must have come into contact with and been

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84 Perhaps ‘empowering’ herself psychologically against the sexual and social privileges assumed by the aristocratic Greek male (Burton 1995:64-65, 68).
influenced by Egyptian religious practices which would perhaps have been labelled as ‘magic’ in the pages of the Hippocratic corpus, but not in Egypt.\(^{64}\) I suspect that Theocritus was aware of this; consequently he parodies a woman making a mess of erotic magic for the entertainment of his audience, because he knows that in his context real magic is the domain of men (as the papyri overwhelmingly testify). *Idyll* 2 does not add to the corpus of literature demonising women as witches, or as especially susceptible to the guile of Eros. More seriously, it parodies female independence and initiative in establishing a relationship with a man, freed from the patriarchal network of familial marriage alliances;\(^{65}\) Delphis, according to Simaetha, has claimed that Eros scares a virgin from her bedroom and a bride from her husband’s bed. But this is precisely what, in reality, the agogai (the ‘leading forth’ spells), placed on women by men, aimed to achieve, spells which could then be used to defend patriarchal honour.\(^{66}\) This element is missing in Theocritus’ *Idyll*; Simaetha is alone; she wants to make Delphis forget his current lover and fall in love with her; we know that he will not; we know that her magic spell will fail; we know that she is condemned to ‘bear her longing as she has endured it’.\(^{67}\) We know that, despite her amatory initiative, she will continue to be a victim. That Theocritus could embody his experiment with gender, power and erotic magic in the form of a mime indicates that for his audience, as for that of Aristophanes, women in control of their own lives was still, in the Hellenistic world, an alternative too laughable, and perhaps too threatening, to contemplate.

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\(^{64}\) On the impossibility of distinguishing between magic and religion in the ancient Mediterranean sources, pre-dating Christian theology, see Brootea 1996:109-11.

\(^{65}\) Perhaps a patriarchal concern in the Hellenistic world (Burton 1995:69).

\(^{66}\) A point well made by Winkler 1990:97: ‘... not only are such rites of use to lovelorn swains, they are very useful for the face-saving needs of families whose daughters have actually eluded parental control. If they can claim that some devil made her do it, family honor is not so deeply hurt as it would be by her voluntary wantonness.’ Cf. Brooten 1996:102, who suggests that spells create a social space for women to have desire and act upon it.

\(^{67}\) For difficulties with the translation of this phrase, see Goldhill 1991:269-70. Griffiths (1981:248) writes of Simaetha’s ‘almost tragic stature’ and the ‘kind of spiritual freedom’ (ibid.:262) she attains, in contrast to the comic stereotypes of Gorgo and Praxinoa in *Idyll* 15, yet he considers Theocritus’ tone at times to be ‘mock-tragic without being dismissive’ (ibid.:261). I would interpret this line as ‘mock-tragic’; Theocritus presents Simaetha constructing herself as the ultimate victim and here we see her at her most self-consciously tragic.
Bibliography


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