CRUEL BOYS AND AGEING MEN: THE PAEDERASTIC POEMS IN THE THEOCRITAN CORPUS

Michael Lambert
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg

ABSTRACT

In this analysis of the paederastic poems in the Theocritan corpus (Idylls 12, 23, 29, 30), the author argues that the poet reflects intensively on mutuality in a relationship between an older and younger man and engages not only with the paederastic literary tradition (as has been argued by many contemporary scholars), but also creates a ‘homosexual identity’ not encountered in texts of the Archaic and Classical periods.

Recent studies of the paederastic poems in the Theocritan corpus (i.e. Idylls 12, 23, 29, 30) have painstakingly uncovered the extent to which Theocritus echoed, alluded to and, in some cases, subtly transformed, themes and imagery in Archaic Greek lyric, particularly in the consciously-wrought poems in Aeolic dialect and metres (29, 30). In fact, uncovering inter-textuality in Theocritus has become an industry of note; apparently satisfying the postmodern literary critic’s need to excavate ‘textual layers’ and hunt for irony. However, whilst some attention has been paid to the peculiarly Hellenistic features of the Theocritan construction of ‘homosexual’ desire in relationships between older and younger men (such as the dialogue between the lover and his ἔρασμα in Idyll 30), not enough emphasis has been placed on the one striking way in which

1 This is a revised version of a paper presented at the biennial conference of the Classical Association of South Africa, held at the University of Stellenbosch from 30 June to 2 July 2003. My grateful thanks to the referees for their helpful comments.
3 Thus Hunter 1996:186: ‘As with Idyll 29, therefore, this poem [Idyll 30] is constructed of textual layers from both the recent and the distant past, and these lend both historical perspective and historicising irony to the pain of unrequited passion.’ Cf. Elke 1992:55-67.
4 In her study of the Homericisms in these poems, Palazt draws attention to Odysseus’ speech to his ἔρασμα in Iliad 11.407, mediated through an echo in Alcaeus (1955:105). Walsh, however, convincingly demonstrates how differently the relationship between the ἔρασμα and the self is conceptualised in Hellenistic poetry, a change
these Hellenistic creations differ from archaic and classical reflections on male same-sex desire, and that is in the intense reflection on mutuality, reciprocity or homosexual χάρις.

In Idyll 12, in what is presumably an ψιλαθρεία, extravagantly welcoming a young man (ιοίπε, 1), after an absence of an excruciating two days and nights, the poet-lover prays that he and his ιοίπος will be remembered by future generations for the mutuality of their love (15-16); significantly, for this idealised mutuality, the poet uses φιλίαν and ινθοφόρον (16) (and a cognate like φιλίτης, 20), in contrast to εὐπαίς and εὐποιήθη, predominantly used elsewhere in the Theocritean corpus for unreciprocated sexual passion which torments, is unequivalent, and can result in madness and disease. This somewhat wistful desire for mutuality in love is embedded in a conventional model of male sexual desire: the deliberately arcane, archaicizing and perhaps even comical use of εὐποιήθη (13) and ινθοφόρον (14) point to the situation created

(he argues) evident first in Euripides. Where speakers in archaic poems addressed their ‘organs of feeling’ as if they were rational interlocutors separate from the self, the speakers in Hellenistic poetry (like Euripidean heroes) do not split the self as previously, and think aloud (often in confusion and doubt), rather than argue (1990:1-21). See too Pretagostini 1997:17-21 for the ways in which Idyll 30 (more so than the other paederastic poems) incorporates features specific to ‘poesia alexandrina’.

Cf. Cairns, who draws attention to Menander Rhétor’s confusion between the ψιλαθρεία, to which genre Cairns prefers to assign Idyll 12, because the poem has all the necessary elements of the genre (welcoming the traveller who has arrived at the place where the speaker is), a number of recognisable ιοίπος, and should be distinguished from the ψιλαθρεία, which can also be applied to the speech of the traveller (not relevant in Idyll 12). Whether the difficulties critics have found in the poem can be neatly resolved by the assignment of the poem to this genre is obviously debatable (1972:8-31); see Quinn’s review of Cairns work for trenchant criticism of the ‘generic’ approach to literature (1973:403-07).


4 ιοίπος: 1.37, 93 (ποικίλος); 2.29, 69, 75, 81, 87, 93, 99, 105, 111, 117, 123, 129, 135; 10.10, 57 (ιοίπος); 14.26, 52 (ιοίποςκας); ινθοφόρων: 1.70; 2.149, 5.132, 7.97; 8.68; 9.13, 10.12. In the male same-sex contacts mentioned outside the paederastic poems, ιοίπος and ινθοφόρον are used of consuming, unrequited loves (7.56, 102) and doomed, disastrous attachments (13.6, 48). Significantly, the adjective used for cursed in love is δέιμονος (1.85; 6.7).

3.42 (μανία of Ateleantai); 11.8, 10 (μανία of Polyphemus), 25.

4 11.1. For a similar attitude to ιοίπος, see Apoll. Rhod. 4.445-49.

Cf. Giangrande 1971:411, 103-04 n. 30 believes that Theocritus intends the speaker to
by the poet. There is a penetrator and a penetrated, an older and a younger. The relationship is unequal, fraught with tension. Where has the boy been for two days and nights? He has hurt his lover (25). The assumption that the judge of the kissing-competition prays to Ganymede for morally discerning lips (35-37) discloses the poem's subtext. The poet-lover's Gany-mede is fickle; he is not to be trusted. The poet-lover oscillates between physical desire itself which is ageing (2) and longing for mutuality (the equal yoke) which is ageless (an immortalisning έλξην). A similar oscillation is apparent in the smiles he uses to express his joy at the boy's arrival (2-8): as the ewe is deeper of fleece than the lamb, as a virgin surpasses a wife thrice-married, 'so have you delighted me by your arrival.' Both hint at the gap between youth and age, innocence and experience, the first privileging the richness of age, the latter the freshness of youth and inexperience. The overwhelming feminine nature of his joy (the ewe, the maiden, the thrice-married wife, the fawn, the nightingale) is succeeded by the overwhelmingly masculine nature of the envisaged ideal (13-14): εὐφρεδες, explicitly ἀνδρες; the story of this love will be on the lips of unmarried young men (21). From feminine to masculine, from inequality to reciprocity, from desire to commitment, such is the nature of the older man's dilemma in his relation-ship with this young man. 'I run to you like a traveller to the shady oak when the sun is scorching' suggests the lover's relief at being re-united with his boy, but at the same time a flight from desire itself.

Kyll 29, the first of the Aeolic 'paidikai,' further problematises the unequal relationship and the longing for mutuality. We are to imagine that the poet-

be a pretentious rustic, ludicrously using learned language. See Kelly 1979-1980.55-61 for a different interpretation of the irony he sees in the poem, in which (he argues) we are meant to laugh with, not at; the rustic humour.

19 For καταμαθώ and σημείω, see Gove 1975:523-24. I assume that at least the former ('inspirer') has sexual connotations (Hubbard 2003:69 n. 30).

20 Cf. Hunter 1996:191: "The theme of the impossibility of telling from a kiss what mind lies behind it ... betrays also the deluded insecurity of the speaker of the poem. How is he to know what his young man's attitude to him is? He too now is enjoying sweet kisses, but for how long?"

21 See Hunter's perceptive comments on the 'lack of control of language' in these lines 'which clearly reflects the speaker's emotional state' (1996:190).


23 For the purposes of this analysis, I have chosen to discuss the poems in the order 12, 29, 23 and 30, simply because, thematically, 12 and 29 belong together, and 23 and 30 comment effectively on each other. This is not to imply anything about the chronological order in which the poems were composed. West has, for example, demonstrated convincingly that, on metrical grounds alone, poems 28, 29, 30 were probably written in that order, and the grouping 28-31 may perhaps go back to the
lover and his παις are at an Alcaean symposium\(^{13}\) at which the older lover, more keenly aware of the age-gap than the lover in Ιδίϊλλιον 12 (see line 10), gives his boy a lecture on fidelity and on such symptomatic commonplaces as the flight of youth and the rapid onset of age (25-30). Significant for our purposes is the fact that the poet, mired in inequality and insecurity (6-8), envisages an ideal, reciprocal relationship, when the boy reaches manhood (33). The ideal mutuality envisaged here is that of Achilles and Patroclus (54). Φιλίων is what the poet-lover expects of the παις (4), in return for what he feels himself (9, 18); Achilles and Patroclus are characterised (heroically) as Ἀρχαιόν χίλιον (34); yet, in direct contrast to the idealised mutuality of Ιδίϊλλιον 12 (in which φιλίων and ἀντιφιλίων are used), the poet-lover uses ταυραμένη συνέφισμα (32). In the Ιδίϊλλιον, Ἔρως has already been characterised as a destructive force (22-24), especially if the boy persists in his fieldliness, so why use, of the mutual ideal, the very verb which the poet uses elsewhere of destructive, one-sided passion\(^5\)? Perhaps the prefix πευ- and the adverb ἀδιάβροχος (32, ‘without guile’) soften ἐρωτιδευτικά and almost shade it into φιλία, but this verbal chiaroscuro is unconvincing. What is the poet implying?

At the beginning of the Ιδίϊλλιον, the poet-lover regrets that the παις does not love him with all his heart (ἀγαθικόν, 4); he wants complete emotional commitment from the boy, and then promptly reveals that half his life is dependent on the boy’s physical beauty (his ἄλεκτο, 6). Like the poet-lover in Ιδίϊλλιον 12 who is hurt and then healed by his συνέφισμα (25-26), the lover in Ιδίϊλλιον 29 is tossed from divine light to black despair at the boy’s whim (7-8); in both cases the boy holds the strings of the emotional yo-yo. In his characterisation of Ἔρως as a destructive power, the lover reveals that he has been transformed (24); if so, he too must have been a fickle παις; hence perhaps the focus on the swift-moving cycle of youth and age (27-30). The very precariousness of the envisaged ideal is thus highlighted by the use of ταυραμένη συνέφισμα: the older man, who was a fickle παις, exalts the παις to love with all his heart an older man who huts after his ἄλεκτο (note the final word of the poem: πόθος).

The very choice, too, of the Achilles-Patroclus exemplum encapsulates this uneasy ambiguity:\(^{18}\) who really was the younger? Was their relationship really

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\(^{13}\) Peacham 1995:89; Hunter 1996:176; Pretagostini 1997:10-11. This is not to imply that we possess any substantial evidence of Alcaean ιδίϊλλιον (Page 1955:295).

\(^{14}\) See notes 6-8 above.

\(^{15}\) See Hunter’s comments on the use of this verb, which distances the situation in this poem from Platonic φιλία: ‘the appeal to the brevity of youthful beauty and the inevitable onrush of time (vs. 25-30) are ironically pathetic in a poem that evokes a ἀκρόα which lives for ever’ (1996:180-81).

\(^{16}\) Cf. Bizzère (1990:282): ‘On sait pourtant que les noms de ces héros peuvent
restricted to Homeric ἀλόγα or did it include the saucy ἐρως of the later tradition?²⁹ The mutual ideal is undone (perhaps amusingly) by the poet-lover’s heavy desire, his πάθος (40).

Idyll 23, despite its authorial and apparent manuscript problems (and Gow’s magisterial dismissal of it),³⁰ contributes further to the intense reflection on mutuality we have been discussing. From the outset, the poet distinguishes between the passionate ἀγάμος and the cruel ἐρήμος (1, 60; cf. 56), variously addressed or referred to as a ποιήσ (19, 35, 61; cf. 32) or κόμος (22). Of the four paederastic Idylls, the age-gap between the lovers in 23 seems to approximate more closely the gap between ἐξιστήμη and ἐρωμένος in the Platonic dialogues and Xenophon; the poem is entitled ΠΡΑΣΘΗΣ and this is how the older lover is designated in line 15. The lover in this Idyll is not the grey-haired wrinkled of Idyll 30 but, like the lover in Idyll 29, he reminds the youth of the swift passage of time and the evanescence of youthful beauty (28-32). Like the lover in 29 too, the lover in 23 is aroused by the boy’s beauty (2) and by the anger of his rejection. Stung by the boy’s contempt (ἐπεθέκοτο, 15), the pathetic ἔξοικος ἀματός kisses the door-post (18) and addresses his final words to the absent boy,²¹ before hanging himself in the doorway. The lover’s speech is laced with traditional ἄνω, but of interest to us are the words the lover asks the boy to utter over his grave in ritual lament (44-45): ύ θεός, κοινόν (friend, here you lie) and καλός δέ μοι ἄρθρα ἐρωμένος (my lovely companion is no more). But the lover has claims to neither δεῖλος nor ἐρωμένος. From line 1, the poet has used ἔρωμαν of the man’s love for the youth; ἐρως in line 20. So momentarily the desire for mutuality and reciprocity gleams in the

³⁰ For the conflicting traditions about older and younger, Homeric ἀλόγα and the ἐρως of the classical tradition, see Dover 1978:197-98, Buffière 1980:367-74, and, most recently, Hubbard 2003:183 n. 28.
³¹ For authorial and manuscript problems, see Gow 1973:408. His dismissal is all-embracing: ‘... the essential badness of the poem is plainly due to the author not to the scribes. The narrative is bald, frigid, and improbable; the sentiment is sloppy, and embodied in an address to the boy who, ex ἐξιστήμα, cannot hear it. These faults are not relieved by any particular elegance in the style and the poem is the least attractive of the whole Theocritean corpus’. Similar opinions are expressed by older commen-tators like Pasquale and Legrand (‘l’estime de troisième ordre’, cf. Radcli Colace 1971:325-26), and perpetuated by more modern ones like Segal (1981:63-64). For a detailed defence of the poem on stylistic grounds (with particular reference to Homer, Bion and Moschus), see Radcli Colace 1971:325-46. Giaourde forcefully defends the text and style of lines 26-32 against Gow’s unnecessarily harsh judgment (1992:213-20).
²¹ I fail to understand why Gow should be troubled by this (see previous note). Addressing sentiments to an absent boy or mistress is a common feature of the παρακλασίτιμο of which genre Idyll 23 clearly belongs (Copley 1940:52-61).

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imagined φόλα, only to be erased by the honesty of the epitaph the suicide scratches on the wall (46): τίτην Ερώς ... ἐπαύρων (47-48): “This man love killed; traveller, do not pass by, but stop and say “he had a cruel friend”.” Once again thoughts of mutuality and reciprocity are fractured by Ἐρώς. The final ἐπαύρων seems to me not to be careless writing, but to highlight the hopelessness of a desire for mutuality in an un reciprocated relationship of this kind.

As Ἐρώς is destructive in Ιδήλ 29, in 23 his statue is murderous and kills the cruel φόλα; the justice of Ἐρώς takes vengeance on those who hate, but not on those who love (φόλας, στέργες, 62-63).

A possible solution, bleak and cynical, is offered to the problem of mutuality in a relationship between an older man and a youth in the second of the Aesoic ‘paidikia’ (Ιδήλ 36). The spotlight falls on the lover, who is much older than the lovers in the other paederastic poems: his temples are flecked with white hair (13). For this reason, the folly of his passion is characterised as a disease from line 1, with clinical precision (2) and loathing (5, 17). Strikingly, Ἐρώς (2, 9, 17) is used of his passion. There are no wistful longings for the φόλα of reciprocity; there is no reference to the flight of youth (Ιδήλ 29) or the passage of time (Ιδήλ 23); there is reference, however, to the futility of youth raised in Ιδήλ 29. This lover does not look forward to a romantic future, but looks back. His φόλας is fed by his remembering, but one thing he has forgotten is that it is indeed better for him who is older to hold aloof from the painful love of boys” (16-17). In a very European exchange with his own δῆμος, passive submission to Ἐρώς is recommended: he must drag his yoke against his will (29); resistance against a god who humbled the mind of Zeus and of Aphrodite herself is impossible. Instead of the immortalising κλέος of Ιδήλ 12, the last of the paederastic poems ends with a reworking of the bleak image of the Homeric leaf tossed about for a day (ἐπαύρων 31). It is not the brevity of human life to which the image alludes, but the emphatically positioned ἦμες. We must remember that the δῆμος is speaking, the very heart of the older man’s emotions, his affections, are ephemeral; so much for the remembrance of times past.

There is a close relationship between time, memory and desire in these four poems which is worth commenting on. In Ιδήλ 12 hope for a future φόλα is undone by a φόλα which ages one in a day; in 29, longing for the φόλα of Achilles and Patroclus is undone by a φόλα which is difficult and painful to

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11 For authorship and manuscript problems, see Hunter 1996:181, who demonstrates that ‘the case against Thessalian authorship is very far from proved.’
12 Petragostri (1997:19): ‘ ... la tradizionalissima similitudine degli uomini paragonati alle foglie ... non serve più a trasmettere, come in arcaico, il senso della caducità della vita umana, ma quello della debolezza del dio πάθος del poeta di fronte alla potenza del dio Ἐρώς.’

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endure; in 23, the longing at least for a phony memory of ἡλία beyond the grave is undone by a painful ἐρωτή, in ἰδής Μό, as the ageing lover remembers the pain of his desire, he realises its evanescence. The quartet, intermittent disease is transmuted into the leaf that survives for a day. Read against the ἡλία or ‘true ἐρωτή’ of Plato and Xenophon, who carefully expose the baseness of an ἐρωτή and πτώς which last after boys’ bodies,24 as they attempt to construct a desire without the body, these Idylls are keen reflections on the ineluctable tension between ἡλία and ἐρωτή.25 The lovers are not Platonic prototypes, their eyes fixed on the ἴδιος, as they mount the sīla amoris. The ἴδιος they have in their minds’ eye are not fixed, immutable, unchanging, the purest of forms; on the contrary, these lovers attempt to educate or are educated about change;26 the ἴδιος of their boys change and grow and age; memory attempts to preserve that brief moment of perfection; there is a longing for permanence, for mutuality, but desire does indeed feed on one’s inmost marrow and the perfect body, like the leaf, lasts but for a day.

It remains to consider in what other ways these Theocritean reflections on the problem of mutuality in an unequal relationship between an older and a younger man, and its apparently bleak resolution, are markedly different from archaic and classical reflections on relationships of this kind. A number of important studies (I think especially of Foucault and the most ardent of his disciples, Winkler and Halperin) have rightly, in my opinion, focussed on the social structuring of ‘homosexual’ desire;27 especially in the classical period, in which it is not difficult to appreciate the inextricable relationship between gender, sexuality and power in the classical city-state (or even earlier, in the structured commensality of the archaic symposium). Relationships between older and younger youths were part of the social fabric; that these relationships were necessarily unequal, often unreciprocated, often competitive and swiftly over, when the efflorescence of youth had wilted and the ἐρωτήτος had his turn to be an ἐρωτήτης, was surely accepted social practice, in which the intense exploration of mutuality we encounter in the Theocritean corpus would have seemed ostrose, and in the case of ἰδής Μό, bizarrely self-indulgent. That is precisely where these poems are different. Despite the layered intertextuality, the poet seems to me to create a ‘homosexual’ desire and longing for mutuality outside of the structured inequality of classical Athens. We have moved outside the city-

24 For Platonic distinctions between good and bad ἐρωτή, see Dover 1964:33-40.
25 A tension well delineated by Hunter’s mode of analysis (1990:168-69, 181).
26 See Dover’s perceptive comments on the greater transience of homosexual as opposed to heterosexual relationships (1964:39).
state into a world where the neat binaries between older and younger, powerful and powerless, seem to have unravelled and where male same-sex relationships seem to have lost their social function and legitimacy. Desire rather than tradition seems to structure these poems. Paul Foucault (who never even considers Thucydides), I do not think that the 'homosexual' becomes a personage in the 19th century. In the wake of Plato's and Aristotle's reflections on paederastia, I would like to suggest that the intense reflection on mutuality in the poems we have discussed indicates that this process was inclusive in the paederastic poems in the Theocritean corpus.

If the lovers in Idyl 12 and 29 desire mutuality in a relationship in which permanence rather than transience is the ultimate ideal, and if the lover in Idyl 23 dramatically commits suicide because he is rejected, Thucydides is creating a homosexual phrensi with a sense of identity: 'I love young men only and want to grow old with one in particular' is surely different from 'I love young men for a period because my father and grandfather did before me.' Furthermore, there is nothing in these poems to suggest that boy-love is one of the distinguishing features of the cultural praxis of an aristocratic elite. The lover in Idyl 12 may not be Giangrande's baccic Mr Malaprop, but the images he uses are rooted in nature (5-9), and his turn of phrase is decidedly earthy (23-24). The lover in Idyl 29 (rather like Sinaertha in Idyl 2) seems to be placed in an urban setting (22, 39). In Idyl 23, references to the doorpost (18), the door (53), wrestling-school, baths (56-57), and the vengeful statue (60), suggest an urban environment rather than an aristocratic symposium in an archaic setting. Thucydides, in the manner of Herodas' mimes, can comment on what must have been contemporary women (Idyl 2, 15), and on the political realities confronted by the Greeks as colonisers (Idyl 17). Could he also have not explored the problems of mutuality in age-unequal

30 Perhaps inaccurately perceived binaries, as Hubbard 2002:288-90 argues, in his critique of what he calls the 'penetration-centered regime of phallic subordination' (popularized by Dover and Halperin). Beautiful boys obviously exerted a kind of power over their lovers, but not social or political power (which is the kind of power meant by Dover and Halperin) or even the power granted by the right of access. There is no evidence that ἱπποτα were pursued, but abundant evidence (visual and textual) that ἱπποτα were.
33 Cf. Dover 1984:3.
34 Hubbard 1998.
homosexual relationships, read against archaic and classical models of ταξίδομος, as one can read the situation of Simaetha in Ἰδήλ 2 against that of women in the Classical period? The fact that these Idylls are highly artificial creations in artificial dialects does not mean that they cannot mediate or comment on social and sexual realities.34

What is of further interest in these poems is the fact that Theocritus’ sympathies in all four poems are with the older lover, who, in Ἰδήλ 30, is white-haired (13) and definitely bereft of youthful attractions (14); “better it is for him to keep away from the painful love of boys” (16-17). Why? Because the old man in love with a fickle youth is in the grip of a disease (1); he is afflicted by debilitating memories and nightmares (22); he passively submits to the yoke of desire (28-29); he is acutely conscious (as a young man would not be) of his transience (31-32). In contrast to the active ἐρωτικός of the Classical tradition, this powerless old homosexual, gnawed by unreciprocated desire for a fickle youth and feeding on his memories, is deeply moving. Sympathy for the aged is yet another particularly Hellenistic feature of this poem.35 That Theocritus could extend this to the ageing man in love with the cruel boy, grounding it in his awareness of the literary and social pedigree of ταξίδομος, is surely yet another indication of the brilliant way in which he blends his engagement with the literary tradition and his Hellenistic context.

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34 But see Hunter’s caveat: ‘To move from these literary considerations to conclusions about social change is, of course, extremely difficult. The “archaic” of these poems cannot be considered in isolation from the gradually increasing freedom with which literature explored heterosexual, particularly female, desire. This freedom may have offered poets the possibility, rather than the necessity, of associating paederasty with “the archaic” and heterosexual desire with “the new”, almost regardless of the social facts lying behind such a construction’ (1995:171).

35 Evident, for example, in Hellenistic sculpture; cf. Pollitt 1986:141-46.
Saffo e Alceo in Teocrito Idilli 28-30 tra άρχαιον (la metrica e innovazione alessandrina.” MD 46:9-37.


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