

Lara K. AHO

**Theocritus 14.61: the "sweetness" of the king**

In Theocr. 14.59 the speaker Thyonichus tells his companion Aeschinas that King Ptolemy is the “best paymaster” for one seeking military service. Aeschinas asks Thyonichus to elaborate on Ptolemy’s character, and Thyonichus obliges, saying: *toisin aristos / eugnomon, philomousos, erotikos, eis akron hadus* (14.61). The sense of these adjectives causes some problems in translation and interpretation, not least because these lines of earnest praise seem to stand isolated in the otherwise informal, bantering dialog of Theocritus’ *Idyll*. Gow’s commentary (ad loc.) captures the problem readers have upon encountering the line (“It may be remarked that the panegyric...does not provide much information likely to profit [Aeschinas] when he enlists as a private soldier”). Some critics have attempted to accommodate the passage by suggesting that the entire dialog is merely a frame composed by Theocritus to showcase the lines of praise, others regard it as a gratuitous digression.

Theocritus’ language in this passage links Ptolemy closely to poetry itself in a way that critics have not yet appreciated. This paper will offer a reading of the passage that is based on an elucidation of the adjective *hadus* in line 61, with additional reference to aspects of the lovesick lament of Thyonichus (especially 14.25 and 14.52), as well as to Theocritean writings as a whole. It seems likely that the lines do form an aside within the dialog, a nod from the poet to Ptolemy in the king’s role as patron &ndash; possible parallel constructions may even be adduced elsewhere in Theocritus (7.93; 15.22-24). However, I will argue that Theocritus does not merely represent Ptolemy as a witty *aficionado* and patron of poetry but actually &ndash; in this passage and elsewhere &ndash; as a poetry-like *pharmakon*, a soothing remedy for the afflictions of his subjects.

The representation of Ptolemy as a *pharmakon* has interesting implications. Poetry, of course, is called a *pharmakon* in *Idyll* 11.1-3; there, it is a *pharmakon* for the lovelorn, one to which even a Cyclops could turn. In the context of *Idyll* 14, Ptolemy appears at first to be a *pharmakon* for Thyonichus’ unsuccessful love life, the answer to Thyonichus’ question in 14.52. Since the adjective *hadus* is associated elsewhere in Theocritus predominantly with song and music, particularly in notable opening and closing passages such as 1.1-2, 7; 1.145; 11.3, the reader easily associates the description of Ptolemy in 61 with the qualities of poetry, especially given the preceding adjective *philomousos*. In this line of panegyric, then, Theocritus is blurring the causal relationship between a patron and the poetry he inspires &ndash; a relationship described in his own *Idylls* 16 and 17. He assimilates the effects of poetry to the person of the king himself, rather than to the efforts of the inspired poet.

I propose that in making this conflation Theocritus is developing a theme which runs through his encomiastic *Idylls* 16 and 17. In these poems, Theocritus emphasizes the peace, prosperity, and poetry *caused* by the acts of the rulers (16.76-100; 17.51-52; 17.102-116). In his line of praise in *Idyll* 14, Theocritus may be alluding to what he presents in *Idyll* 17 (in a drastic rewriting of the archaic poetic *topos* that calls for the

king to act justly) as the innately beneficent presence of the godlike king Ptolemy which generates *olbos* and poetry alike for his subjects.