

Elizabeth WALTON

Poets in Drag: Female Voice in the *Pharmaceutria* of Theocritus and Vergil

A significant common feature of Theocritus' and Vergil's *Pharmaceutria* poems is the male poets' adoption of female voice. Although the female-gender connection with spell singing which often occurs in ancient poetry deserves consideration as a possible motive, Vergil and Theocritus have more compelling reasons for composing these poems in female voice. A close reading of the texts reveals that the male poets' creative decision to write as women serves to define their place in a poetic tradition. Theocritus' allusions to Sappho in *Idyll 2* suggest that through Simaetha, the poet adopts what Skinner calls a "Sapphic Voice," experimenting with an alternate mode of discourse in a Sapphic tradition rather than composing in his newly created pastoral genre. Vergil, however, is attempting something far more complex. Pastoralizing Simaetha's song by putting it in the mouth of a rustic shepherd, the second singer in a contest which resembles *Idyll 6* in form, Vergil employs gender to contrast the dual meanings of the word *carmina*, spell and song, as remedies for unrequited love. As he juxtaposes the two *pharmaka* in Theocritus' *Idylls 2* and *11*, Vergil engages the reader in a clever game that demonstrates his mastery of the bucolic genre.

Because Alpheisiboeus' song obviously alludes to *Idyll 2*, his gender has never been questioned: the reader assumes that Alpheisiboeus is singing as a woman. But unlike Theocritus, Vergil does not even attempt to assume Skinner's "Sapphic mode" of discourse; indeed, while Damon is clearly male, context clues to Alpheisiboeus' gender are deliberately vague. *Coniunx* (line 66), which can be used for either male or female, describes the lover, and in a curious mixed gender metaphor which not only reminds the reader of Simaetha's gender-bending comparison of herself to Theseus and her lover to Ariadne (lines 45-46) but also serves to further pastoralize the allusion to *Idyll 2*, Alpheisiboeus compares the love Daphnis will feel for him to that of a heifer searching for a bull (lines 85-89). Furthermore, Vergil's attention to the ritualistic details of the spell differs greatly from Theocritus' treatment of ritual in *Idyll 2*, where the spell serves merely as a backdrop for Simaetha's story. Thus, Alpheisiboeus sings as a woman not because Vergil, like Theocritus, is employing "Sapphic" discourse, but because the self-imposed rules of the artificial poetic contest which Vergil has described require him, as the second singer, to provide a *contrarium* response to Damon's song. Vergil's mastery of Theocritus is evident in *Eclogue 8's* marriage of *Idylls 2* and *11*, of male and female song.