

INTRODUCTION TO VERGIL'S ECLOGUES



***Eclogues* ("Short Selected Poems") or *Bucolics* ("Cowherds' Songs") – Context**

In these 10 short poems, Vergil turns to Theocritus, the Hellenistic writer of Idylls (we have heard a presentation on his Idyll!!, where Polyphemus the Cyclops is love-sick). The world of Theocritus's poetry is at the same time simple, delicate, and artificial. For a time Roman culture, so strongly urban, ignored Theocritus and preferred to turn to other, less pastoral models of poetry, although Theocritus himself was the product of the teeming, cosmopolitan, city of Alexandria - the Rome of his time. Shepherds are the protagonists in Theocritus, and along with them a rich but static countryside, with everything suspended in an everyday existence that is rarefied, yet brightened by poetry. While the pastoral world of the Idylls is filled with rustic people, descriptions, and activities it can also treat broad themes, but it does so, of necessity, in a simple and remote way. In particular, these shepherds, as singers of song, comment on the creation of poetry and its distinctive power.

Vergil's *Eclogues* were written in a distinctive historical moment. Caesar's assassins had been defeated by his son Octavius and his lieutenant Marc Anthony; an uneasy peace prevailed between two, erstwhile allies. The Roman countryside was devastated by wars and the confiscation of property as Rome's new overlords paid off their troops and settled old scores. In this time of uncertainty, it is unsurprising that Vergil would turn to the pastoral world of Theocritus; although Vergil's genius allows him to fuse harsh, contemporary realities with the world of pastoral fantasy.

The ten poems hang together as a collection, with a high level of organizational complexity and unity.

Summary and Organization

Poem 1: Dialogue between two shepherds, Tityrus and Meliboeus. Contrast of destinies: the former, helped by a divine young man at Rome, will enjoy his tranquil life; the latter, dispossessed, will wander far and wide.

Poem 2: Love complaint of the shepherd Corydon, who is consumed with love for the young man Alexis.

Poem 3: Poetic contest between two shepherds, conducted in alternating songs (the "amoeban" form, in which remark is followed by reply).

Poem 4: Prophetic song for the birth of a child who will witness the coming of a new and happy cosmic age

Poem 5: Lament for the death of Daphnis, a deified pastoral hero. It is divided between two shepherds, Menalcas and Mopsus.

Poem 6: The aged Silenus, captured by two young men, sings a catalogue of mythical and naturalistic scenes, the climax of which is the poetic consecration of the great elegiac writer Cornelius Gallus. The eclogue is prefaced by a declaration of poetics, which clearly, in Alexandrian fashion, serves to introduce the second half of the book.

Poem 7: Meliboeus recounts in the first person a duel between two poets, the Arcadian shepherds Thyrsis and Corydon.

Poem 8: A singing contest, dedicated to Asinius Pollio and divided into two lengthy stories of unhappy love: the lament of Damon, who will choose death, and the magical practices of a woman in love.

Poem 9: Dialogue between two shepherd-poets, with references to the reality of the Mantuan countryside and to the expropriations that followed the civil wars.

Poem 10: Consolation by the bucolic poet Vergil for the love pangs of the elegiac poet Cornelius Gallus.