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Poeta Ludens: Thrust and
Counter-Thrust in *Eclogue* 3

BARRY B. POWELL

Although several scholars in recent times have attempted to elucidate the enigmatic Third *Eclogue*,¹ their work has appealed too often, I would complain, to Vergil's Hellenistic antecedents and too seldom to the poem itself. While not disclaiming the usefulness of such appreciations for defining the generic context in which Vergil composed,² I fear that the poem's meaning and value must, in the end, be discoverable from the dynamics of its own internal dramatic development.³ The rules of this development, I wish to argue here, are those we find in game. For in the Third *Eclogue* Vergil gives us twin top-notch gamesters who, in a game of words, seek to overthrow one another through daring twist and lightening rhetorical legerdemain, and we, the understanding listener, will revel in the complexity and ballyhoo that accompanies each turn in a fine match hotly contested.

¹ H. J. Rose (*The Eclogues of Vergil*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1942, 40 ff.), following the lead of A. Cartault (*Études sur les Bucoliques de Virgile*, Paris, 1897, p. 127 ff.), compared the poem with its Theocritean "originals" and found it wanting. J. J. H. Savage ["The Art of the Third *Eclogue* of Vergil (55–111)," *TAPA*, 89, 1958, 142–158] saw in it an elaborate political allegory, but found no followers. C. P. Segal ("Vergil's *Caelatum Opus*: An Interpretation of the Third *Eclogue*," *AJP*, 1967, pp. 279–308) saw the poetry of the Third *Eclogue* as coming from a kind of tension generated between various thematic oppositions. Friedrich Klingner (*Virgil*, Zürich and Stuttgart, 1967, pp. 50–59) carefully measures the tradition and gives the best account of Vergil's debt to his predecessors. M. C. J. Putnam (*Virgil's Pastoral Art*, Princeton, 1970, pp. 119–135), owes much to Segal but discovers insidious elements in the pastoral landscape. Brooks Otis (*Virgil, A Study in Civilized Poetry*, Oxford, 1963) has some comments (particularly pp. 128–133).

² And for defining the context of individual poems within the book; see Otis (above, note 1), p. 128 ff.

³ Compare Putnam (above, note 1), p. 4 ff.

Menalcas calls to Damoetas asking, "Whose herd?" (1). The question is simple, but it throws up to Damoetas that he has no herd of his own: the contest has begun. There is reproach in *an Meliboei*? But the question's precise significance is obscured within the fuzzy edge that surrounds pastoral, the realm of insinuation which lends tone or mood but does not contain objective information. Who is Meliboeus? At least, judging by Damoetas' insistent rejoinder (he twice says "Aegon"), Damoetas would rather not hear the name (2). Then Menalcas answers: "Poor beasts, that they must suffer at your hands, O Damoetas, for Aegon's inferiority to me in love" (3-6). The reply is brave, but Aegon's inferiority to Menalcas is claimed, not proven. And where is Neaera now? Menalcas puts a good face on a poor situation and then insults Damoetas for bringing the matter up at all (*hic alienus custos*, 5).

Innuendo goes with Menalcas' style, as in the vague *an Meliboei* (1); and throughout Menalcas preserves a certain decorum when Damoetas is crass. We may see in this a rudimentary characterization, but we will also recognize Damoetas' agonistic obligation as respondent to intensify the terms that Menalcas has laid down. This he does now: "Remember who you're talking to, my boy (*parcius viris obicienda*). As far as your achievement with Neaera is concerned—why everybody knows you're a pederast on the receiving end (*novimus qui te et quo*)—even the goats are embarrassed (*transversa tuentibus*)" (7-9). This *alienus custos* holds high cards of his own.

The sexual indiscretions of Menalcas may excite the disgust of man and beast, but Damoetas, Menalcas replies, is inept and an oaf: he can't milk goats, he can't even prune a vine (10-11). "O that must have been the time when (*tum*)" establishes the connection with Damoetas' volley, and "I suppose (*credo*)" identifies the adept irony by which Menalcas, false claimant to the deed (*mala vitis incidere falce novellas*), shows where the real guilt lies. This is clever but weak behind the broadside of 7-8.

Realizing a kind of advantage, Damoetas picks up from his *quo sacello* (8) with *Aut hic* (12) and, adding the charge of petty spite to pederasty (alleged again in *perverse Menalca*), Damoetas tells how Menalcas, mortified, once avenged a lover's pique in a way that speaks for itself (12-15).

An unrelenting assault requires new ground for insult (16-20). Damoetas, then, is a knave and a thief (*audent cum talia fures, pessime*), and Menalcas knows whereof he speaks (*ego vidi*). In fact, to prove that this feud is of long standing, we now learn that it was Menalcas who alerted the owner (*Tityre, coge pecus*).

This is touché for Menalcas, and Damoetas is thrust to the defensive. It was his goat anyway, Damoetas complains. He won it by playing on his pipe (21-24), a reply that nicely turns the poem toward its natural form,

the singing contest. "You couldn't play a straw (25-27)," Menalcas snorts. Damoetas wagers a heifer that he can do a lot better than that (28-31).

Damoetas may be cavalier to wager another man's heifer (Aegon's), but Menalcas, the younger of the two herders (compare 7), is driven into apparent retreat when he must admit the limits set to his independence by *pater* and a *noverca iniusta* (32-34). Well, he will put up a *caelatum opus* instead, wonderfully carved and never used. The reference to Conon intends to impress, but *quis fuit alter* reminds us that these men are (for the moment) common people after all, beguiling in their affectation.

Damoetas will not be impressed and mocks the offer. Cups by Alcimedon must not be all that rare, because Damoetas himself has not one but two of them (*et nobis idem Alcimedon duo pocula fecit*, 44). Nor is variety Alcimedon's forte: Damoetas' cups boast a floral motif very like that on Menalcas' cup (45; compare 38-39), and *Orpheaque in medio posuit* (46) answers *In medio duo signa* (40). Lest anyone miss the irony, *necdum illis labra admovi, sed condita servo* (47) exactly repeats 43. Having doubled Menalcas' wager, Damoetas goes on to deny its value, saying, *Si ad vitulam spectas, nihil est quod pocula laudes* (48), a quibble that unexpectedly lets Menalcas back in with "You're only trying to get out of it—all right, a heifer it is" (*numquam hodie effugies; veniam quocumque vocaris*, 49).⁴ Damoetas may seem to have forced the hand of Menalcas, but, after all, if Menalcas will win (he is confident), the *noverca* will have no loss to count. And, by hedging at first, Menalcas has stopped the betting from going higher than Damoetas' original bid while preserving his self-confident image. This is a victory of sorts for Menalcas, and he seals it by calling to a passerby, Palaemon (50). If Damoetas hoped to buy the pot, he has been soundly deceived. He does not disguise his irritation: *Quin age, si quid habes* (52). Nor will this be your ordinary contest—*sensibus haec imis (res est non parva) reponas* (54), advice directed to Palaemon, to Menalcas, and to us.

Palaemon's three lines on *formosissimus annus* (55-57) give rhetorical relief, delimit the preceding informal match, and equip us with the pastoral setting. Then 58-59 mark out the terms of the formal contest (*incipit Damoeta, alternis dicetis*) and announce its inception.

The amoebean contest may be compared to the riddling folk song, wherein we seem to see something ancient, a battle of spells perhaps whose outcome, for the weaker magician, is shame or death. This urbane descendent of a primordial custom may stake no such odds, but it is not a game for amateurs. Moving swiftly, it is merciless to the unclever. According to its rules the leader (Damoetas) needs to dazzle and bewilder his opponent through versatile handling of conventional literary forms and

⁴ Segal, I take it, has not understood that a heifer *is* the prize. See above, note 1, p. 302.

through sudden shifts in subject or theme. The respondent (Menalcas) must match the leader's convention but, in some way, turn its content around. Damoetas is like White in chess, because his aggressive style and strategy develop from his being first to move. Black on the other hand—Menalcas—gains in definition what he loses in initiative; if he can only keep even, perhaps White will make that one wrong move.

Damoetas leads off slow and sure, a hymn to Zeus (60–61). *Principium* is a pun: from Zeus does the world proceed and from the subject of Zeus does Damoetas' song commence. Then, deftly, he continues in formal hymnal style (*auxesis*): having named the god, he cites an outstanding attribute (*Iovis omnia plena*). Through an oblique syllogism, whose conclusions are expressed in two sentences joined by the demonstrative pronoun in hymnal anaphora, it follows that Zeus not only nourishes all life (*ille colit terras*), but also nourishes the poet's song (*illi mea carmina curae*).

Menalcas replies to this elegant opening by declaring that he, for his part, is loved by Phoebus. If Zeus be king of all, Phoebus is lord of poetry, the subject now at hand. So Menalcas is personal where Damoetas has been abstract, which gives Menalcas' address greater force: *et me Phoebus amat*. Menalcas answers the *auxesis* by naming Apollo's special plants, a metaphor probably for his own (pastoral) poetry.

Taking advantage of his lead, Damoetas shifts to an amatory theme, perhaps picking up from his opponent's *amat* (62). "My girl Galatea wants to play games—she's running away, but not too fast" (64–65). The picture charms and provokes, but Menalcas comes back easily: "Amyntas and I—we're past playing games—I make it with him as often as I do with Delia" (66–67). Whatever Damoetas' Galatea is leading up to, Menalcas has already concluded with Delia. Amyntas, *puer delicatus*, makes two to Damoetas' one. And there is no lost motion here (*At mihi sese offert ultro*).

Damoetas pursues the theme. "I give everything to my beloved—sweets for the sweet" (68–69). Since, metonymically, his love is *Venus*, the gift will be *palumbes*. "Well I do what I can (*quod potui*)," Menalcas answers, "I've already sent apples to my boy, and tomorrow he gets more" (71). What Damoetas only has in mind, Menalcas has accomplished: as often in Greek and Latin poetry, *mala* symbolize sexuality fulfilled.

The going gets tougher with "O the things my girl has spoken—I only hope the gods are listening in" (who will see her pledges fulfilled)⁵ (72–73). But the connection between 72 and 73 is obscure,⁶ and Menalcas,

⁵ For the interpretation see Klingner (above, note 1), pp. 55–56, n. 2.

⁶ Too obscure for Servius (and his followers) who mistakes 72–73 to mean *ita . . . mecum dulce locuta est Galatea, ut deorum auditu eius digna sint verba*.

on his toes, like ourselves, must supply the missing words to follow the sense.

Menalcas' answer reveals that he takes the lines correctly. Where Damoetas formally praises (his girl promises all) but in fact complains (talk is cheap), Menalcas appears to complain when really he praises: "What's the use that you love me, Amyntas (*me ipse animo non spernis*), when your birth is so high (*dum tu sectaris apros*) and mine is so low (*ego retia servo*)" (74-75). "Poor" Menalcas—he takes his lovers from the best class.

Speaking of class, Damoetas claims it for himself in the next complicated distich. "Today's my birthday—send me your girl Phyllis, O Iollas; come the *Ambarvalia*—then send yourself" (76-77). Damoetas therefore stands as master to Iollas—so much for Menalcas' confessed servility in 75 (Damoetas scores 1 point). Birthdays are for love, and real love is between man and woman; as for pederasty (*Iolla . . . ipse venito*), that is suitable for a day of abstinence (*cum faciam vitula pro frugibus = Ambarvalia*), that is, it is as good as nothing—so much for Menalcas' sexual inclinations (Damoetas scores 2 points). Counting Galatea, Damoetas is the lover of three—so much for Menalcas' much-vaunted Amyntas (give Damoetas a score of 3 points).

Menalcas resists the attack by denying the premises upon which Damoetas has built it. Assuming, brilliantly, the identity of Iollas,⁷ Menalcas shows us where that man's affections lie in *Phyllida amo ante alias* (78). *Discedere* (78) answers *mitte* (76)/ *venito* (77) and *Formose, vale, vale, inquit, Iolla* (79) deals with Phyllis' putative affections, while reserving to the last word of the distich the key to the masquerade. Damoetas, then, by Menalcas' reckoning, is odd man out.

Damoetas has other cards to play: a four-part priamel and yet another girl. "Wolves are hard on flocks, rain ruins the harvest, and wind the trees—but what hurts *me (nobis)* is the displeasure of Amaryllis" (80-81). The first three terms of the priamel (*lupus, imbres, venti*), cast in images from nature, establish foil for the "pronominal cap" (*nobis*),⁸ which personalizes and forms a climax to the focusing device of the priamel.

Menalcas answers the terms one by one, but replaces the mood of gloom (*triste*, 80) with cheer (*dulce*): "Moisture pleases the sown seed, arbut the kid, willow the pregnant flock—but to me is pleasing Amyntas

⁷ Here I follow the punctuation of E. de Saint-Denis (*Virgile: Bucoliques*, Paris, 1970, p. 53). "Si *Iolla* était exclu des paroles d'adieu, li ne serait pas placé à la fin du vers" (p. 114, n. 80).

⁸ For the term see Elroy Bundy, *Studia Pindarica I* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1962), p. 5, n. 18.

alone" (82–83). Damoetas seeks to aggrandize his position by adding lover to lover, but he has thereby invited the charge of frivolity. There must be *some* advantage in having a single beloved (*dulce mihi solus Amyntas*, 82) over suffering the wrath of still one more girl (*triste nobis Amaryllidis irae*, 80).

It is Damoetas' prerogative to shift topic or motive suddenly, and now he defies the expectations of all by knocking down the very convention by which the poem exists—as if an actor stepped off the stage and into the audience, there to carry on a conversation with an eminent person unrelated to the dramatic action. And the effect on us is the same: shock combined with pleasure at the unexpected intimacy. Here then in the Third *Eclogue* is no "real" country setting. We have a strictly formal literary contest, waged between Vergil and himself (and the audience) with the intent of delighting and entertaining. "Well the genre may be pastoral, but at least *Pollio* likes it," Damoetas says. "Let's have a prize (*vitulam*) for the good man" (for he has fine taste in literature) (84–85). The lines are a plug for *Pollio*, Vergil's tribute to his friend and fellow poet. *Quamvis est rustica*, needless to say, is ironical: a sophisticated, not simple, taste characterizes this *lector*.

Menalcas appreciates the subtlety and comes back with higher praise still. (He not only likes poetry, but) "Pollio, a *novus poeta* like Vergil, writes it himself (*et ipse facit nova carmina*)—give the good man (not a heifer but) a bull" (86–87). *Nova carmina* answers *rustica*, but the irony is gone. And *taurum* betters *vitulam* as *poeta* betters *lector*: well, a superior talent merits a richer reward.

Damoetas returns for a second try. "May he who loves you, *Pollio*, come where it pleases you to be; and may the honey flow for him, and the bramble bear spice" (88–89). Damoetas compliments *Pollio* once again, obliquely alluding to a kind of poetry that *Pollio*, as *novus poeta*, will have written, *viz.*, amatory verse, for which the *adunata* of 89 are standard fare. *Qui* therefore will be he whom *Pollio* addresses in his verse, and Damoetas-Vergil's lines amount to "May you be successful in your suit, my friend *Pollio*."

It is the natural role of Menalcas to mock his opponent, and now he parodies *qui te, Pollio, amat* (88) by *qui Bavium non odit* (90). He thereby preserves the form (*qui . . .*), inverts the meaning (*odit*), but also changes the subject (*Bavium*). Maevius, too, he pillories⁹ and then completes the formal similarity of his couplet to 88–89 by matching Damoetas' elegiac *adunata* by *adunata* proverbial for the fool (91)—you'd have to be *that* deranged to enjoy such stuff. Damoetas in his couplet has sought to

⁹ Compare Hor., *Epod.*, 10.2.

compliment Pollio, but Menalcas' reply, while formally a close parallel to his opponent's words, abandons Pollio entirely to attack viciously contemporary poetasters (perhaps literary opponents of Pollio).

Attacking Menalcas' vituperative tone, Damoetas carries back the poem to within the usual bounds of pastoral; as if the actor returned to the stage and resumed the action of the play, but with an offhand reference to the preceding extemporization. "You who gather flowers and strawberries burgeoning on the earth" (92) are Damoetas' pretty words for "You who enjoy poetry in the pastoral genre," while "flee, lads, flee hence, a cold snake lurks in the grass" (93) tell how Damoetas see Menalcas' relationship to this world: Menalcas turns a gentleman's game into a parlous exchange of insult.

Damoetas has spoken to the lover of pastoral (*qui legitis flores*). Menalcas' surprise, therefore, is to reply as the *pastor* himself. "Careful, my sheep, don't go too far—that's a dangerous bank—you see how the ram has just fallen in" (94-95). To speak as the shepherd is an effective stroke, because of course he *is* a shepherd (at least when on stage). *Ipse aries* (95) answers *anguis in herba* (93) and embarrasses Damoetas (= *aries*) by denying to him metaphorically the surefootedness which a slippery game, like this one, requires to survive. He means "Nice try, but no success."

In the now white heat of battle Damoetas seeks no new attack, but answers Menalcas in kind. "Hey Tityrus, get your goats back from the river—when the time comes, I'll wash them in the spring myself" (96-97). The image is pastoral, but its rhetorical force amounts to "Hold on, my friend, you go too far: why destroy yourself? I'll do it for you, with my poetry (*in fonte*)."
Tityre may recall the First *Eclogue*, but here the word is metonymy for "shepherd," thus "my pastoral friend." The figurative significance of *flumen* as "danger" has been established by Menalcas himself (95); and *capellas* reminds us that Menalcas is a goatherd (8). The metaphorical equation between the herd-cum-herder and poet-singer also has been suggested (94-95). But the *jeu des idées* turns finally upon *in fonte*, because, presented as an alternative to *flumen* (96) and suggested by Menalcas' own *ripae* (94), it bears the second meaning of "poetic font." He means "Back off, or you're all washed up."

To reply Menalcas begins with a close imitation of *reice capellas* (96) and then shifts radically in imagery while upholding the tone of virulent attack. "Gather the sheep, boys; if the heat stops up the milk—like just recently—we shall press in vain the teats with our hands" (98-99). We might paraphrase: "You better watch out yourself (*cogite ovis, pueri*): if you're going to get hot under the collar (*si lac praeceperit aestus*)—like just now (*ut nuper*)—I'll win the game by default (*frustra pressabimus ubera*)

palms).” Damoetas’ anger—Menalcas alleges—is going to confound his flow of wit as the summer heat stops up milk in the udder. Damoetas will lose the match before Menalcas can win it; Menalcas’ own wit will then have no object, nothing to “work over.” Here Menalcas plays the same game that he did in 94–95. While meeting the formal requirements laid down by his opponent (*frustra pressabimus ubera palmis* is equivalent to *omnis in fonte lavabo*), he denies that his opponent has made a point at all.

Fighting fire with fire, Damoetas answers, “Alas! how thin is our bull amidst the rich vetch! One and the same love is the ruin of herd and herder” (100–101). The image is strictly pastoral, referring to the life of the herd, and “poetic” in its projection of human feelings into the animal world. But its figurative significance is “The possibilities of the genre are great (*pingui arvo*), but your performance is wanting (*macer taurus*); your eagerness (*amor*) ruins your poetry (*pecori*) as it disgraces you (*magistro pecoris*).” Damoetas, in effect, calls Menalcas a “bull-in-a-china-shop.”

Although by *mihi taurus* (100) Damoetas has referred to his opponent, Menalcas refuses the assault by taking the words literally, as if Damoetas had simply meant, “O My, I have problems in my herd—the bull is in love.” “Sure,” Menalcas parries, “I have problems too—since someone (that is, *you*) gave them the evil eye” (102–103). These may be fighting words, but Menalcas’ meaning adheres as closely to his expression as does flesh to the bones of ailing goats (that is, *vix ossibus haerent*). So Menalcas seems to say also that “If the inner meaning to my words in this poetic game hangs as loosely on the external image as does the flesh on the bones of diseased sheep—well, *you* have brought us to this pass.”

Beyond such obfuscation can lie only mystery, and on that note the contest ends. “You will be Apollo if you tell me where the breadth of the sky is not more than three cubits” (104–105). “And I really will give you Phyllis, if you can tell me where the names of kings are born on flowers” (106–107). *Apollo* does recall 62, as often observed, as *Phyllida* recalls the exchange in 76–79, therefore returning the end of the contest to its beginning. But the riddles themselves have no answers, as proved by the weakness of proposed solutions.¹⁰ Klingner describes the verses correctly: “Das Spiel wird endlich in den beiden Rätselfragen [104–107], die mit ihrer paradoxen Phantastik—Grosses im Kleinen—doch wohl verblüffen

¹⁰ Asconius Pedianus and Cornificius, according to Servius and Philargyrius, discover a *jeu de mots* between *caeli* and *Caeli*, the second referring to one Caelius, a prodigal Mantuan who lost all save three cubits of earth for his tomb. Heyne thought the reference to be the bottom of a well. Savage argues for the hole in the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline (J. J. Savage, “The Riddle in Virgil’s Third Eclogue,” *CW*, 47, 1954, 81–83). Compare also, J. Perrett, Virgile, *Les Bucoliques* (Paris, 1961), p. 44; M. C. J. Putnam, “The Riddle of Damoetas,” *Mnemosyne*, 18, 1965, 150–154.

und necken und jedenfalls eben spielen wollen, so leicht wie Seifenblasen."¹¹ Damoetas hopes to trick up Menalcas, at last, by posing an impossible question. Menalcas, undaunted, answers in kind.

The explicitly riddling form of the last two couplets of the contest would seem to confirm that the true ancestry of this now modern and polished genre belongs to that primordial magical duel whose issue, for the lesser spellbinder, mythology preserves in the tales of Apollo-Pan¹² and Apollo-Marsyas.¹³ Here, however, there is no winner. Palaemon rightly calls it a draw. Each man deserves the sacrificial animal (*vitula*, 109) and "so do all good *novi poetae* (*quisquis amores| aut metuet dulcis aut experietur amarus*)" (109-110). It has been a good bout, well fought and rich in poetic fare (*sat prata biberunt*, 111), and now it is finished (*claudite iam rivos*, 111).

The Third *Eclogue* has long frustrated understanding because its critics, I think, when not too much given to *Quellenforschung*, have sought to discover what they fancied to be "poetic virtue" in it. But by poetic, when all is said and done, they have meant something like "emotional." Somehow we are to know the *Eclogue* as poetry through the subtle reverberations that play between original and re-creation or through alleged tensions that different levels of meaning and image generate within us, as if Vergil were a Romantic after all. But word games are played with the brain, not the solar plexus, and it is from the intense intellectuality of daring affront and bold riposte that we take our pleasure in the poet's words—not a draught for children, perhaps, who love the idle play of poignant image, but a heady liquor for men and women at the banquet of Augustan song.

University of Wisconsin at Madison

¹¹ Klingner (above, note 1), pp. 57-58.

¹² *Ov., Met.*, XI, 146 ff.

¹³ *Ov., Met.*, VI, 302 ff.; *Apollod.*, I, 24; *et al.*