Justine Sophia-Jeaux Li

ENG 407: Reading Innocence

Professor Lawrence Danson

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Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*

MUTILATED BODIES, ROTTING DOLPHINS AND LUPINE RAPISTS: *Examining the narrative tendency towards exhibitionism and the grotesque in* Longus’ *“Daphnis and Chloe”*

The narrative tendency towards exhibitionism and the grotesque in Longus’ *Daphnis and Chloe* gives insight to the complex psychological evolution that both reader and protagonists experience. In the *Prologue*, Longus, “gazing admiringly at many other scenes, all of a romantic nature,” encourages us to invade the intimacy of this pastoral landscape with our eyes.[[1]](#footnote--1) Almost immediately, we are aware of the fact that nature, oozing sexuality, *desires* the presence of a spectator:

[…] their whole attitude was suggestive of dancing. The mouth of the cave was in the very middle of the rock, and from it water came gushing out and flowed away in a stream; so there was an expanse of very lush meadow in front of the cave, as the moisture made the grass grow thick and soft.[[2]](#footnote-0)

The geo-sexual imagery of this passage is not just suggestive—it’s wanton. Unmistakably referencing “thick and soft” pubic hair, and “moist,” sexually stimulated, female genitalia, Longus makes a spectacle of intimacy. In doing so, the status of nature is elevated to that of something that is capable of inducing pleasure. The personification of nature is aided by images of Nymphs carved out of stone, which immediately sets into motion an exploration of this intimate relationship between art and nature. Because Chloe and Daphnis are at one with their surroundings, “[imitating] the sights and sounds around them,” it logically follows that they inherit certain exhibitionist tendencies as they experiment sexually.

For Daphnis and Chloe to be genuine exhibitionists, they must be cognizant of their exposed state. This awareness occurs on two levels: they are conscious of each other’s gazes, as well as the persistent gaze of an external spectator. When Chloe “let Daphnis see her washing her own body,” for the first time, she is solely motivated by the sexual desire to be seen and the act of washing becomes a performance. Longus emphasizes that Chloe required “no washing to make [her body] beautiful” for “beauty had already made [it] white and clean.”[[3]](#footnote-1) After bathing, they gather flowers, embellish the statues with garlands, and “hung Dorcon’s pipe on the rock as a thank-offering.”[[4]](#footnote-2) These intimate bathing scenes take place at the sanctuary of the Nymphs, and the presence of these stone statues infuse the performance with ritualistic motive, as though the sight of their naked bodies might be offered as a sacrificial spectacle to the gods. There is ample evidence to support the fact that both Chloe and Daphnis realize that they are performing for an external audience. When Chloe is abducted by the Methymneans, Daphnis appeals to the Nymphs: “Was Chloe carried off under your very eyes? […] And could you bear to see it? The girl that’s been making garlands for you […] –the girl that hung up this very Pan-pipe here?”[[5]](#footnote-3) The Nymphs are visual witnesses to the events that occur at least in the physical boundaries of the cave, if not beyond.

The presence of an omniscient gaze is fully revealed to Daphnis and Chloe by Philetas. A mysterious being who “used to sit beside [Philetas] while [he] played [his] Pan-pipe underneath those oaks, when [he] was in love with Amaryllis,” is now “looking after” Daphnis and Chloe. Philetas tells the children that they are “dedicated to Love, and Love is looking after you.”[[6]](#footnote-4) The implication of such divine attention is defined in Book Two, when Pan intervenes in Chloe’s abduction. He reveals that Chloe is a character in a story, and that she must be returned to the proper story for which she was chosen. By cleverly and subtly inserting himself into the narrative as Pan, Longus reveals an element of artifice that is inherent to the story that is *Daphnis and Chloe.* He demands the return of the “girl” and the “animals that I spoke of” as if they are props that have been displaced. This moment is particularly intimate because it exposes the presence of a timeless audience and emphasizes the reader’s gaze to Chloe.

Interestingly, Daphnis and Chloe derive pleasure by exposing their own bodies, but do not easily embrace the role of spectators themselves. During the festival of Dionysus, Daphnis becomes the object of girly infatuation, “which excited him and annoyed Chloe.” Alternatively, when Chloe becomes the object of male desire, “Chloe was pleased and Daphnis annoyed.”[[7]](#footnote-5) Neither of them enjoys seeing the other exposed in public, and they cannot wait to return to “their usual surroundings.” Even in their relatively private surroundings, being the witness to a spectacle is somewhat unpleasant:

But Daphnis could not bring himself to feel cheerful now that he had seen Chloe naked and seen beauty revealed which had previously been hidden. He had a pain in his heart as though it was being eaten away by poison. His very breathing was affected; sometimes he panted violently as if someone were chasing him, and sometimes he could hardly breathe at all […][[8]](#footnote-6)

From these first, disturbing images of the “piracy of Love,” we are introduced to the possibility that Love is inherently predatory—the affected breathing and violent panting alludes to the physiological affects of intercourse. Chloe’s psychological pain foreshadows the physical pain of virgin intercourse. She recognizes it as a pain that is worse, but comparable to such experiences as being scratched by thorns or “stung by bees.” She identifies a “pricking” in her heart that hurts more than anything she has ever felt before.[[9]](#footnote-7)

These metaphors depict an invasive, predatory potential that natural Love possesses, which leads to a second question: What are mutilated bodies, rotting dolphins, and lupine rapists doing in a pastoral landscape so often seeped in the language of innocence and love that it borders on the saccharine? Instances of mutilation occur both mythologically and thematically. Both of the Pan myths deal with mutilated, transformed female bodies, but the story of Echo is particularly graphic: “So he sent the shepherds and goatherds mad, and they like dogs or wolves tore her to pieces and scattered her limbs about the whole earth.”[[10]](#footnote-8) It is significant that Daphnis is a goatherd, and in his version of the tale, he is transformed into a dog—or a “wolf.” He is directly responsible for the terrible demise of Echo. This parable serves as a subconscious reflection of his fears of the mutilating aspects of virginal sex. More grotesque imagery follows Daphnis’ attempt to socialize his privatized feelings for Chloe through marriage. The fact that Daphnis’ pursuit of love leads him to the rotting corpse of a dolphin—an image that Longus found necessary to elaborate not once—but twice, introduces an element of wry comedy:

[…it] is lying covered with seaweed beside a dead dolphin—as a result of which no one walking that way has gone anywhere near it, but everyone runs past to get away from the stench of the rotting corpse.

Why did Longus find it so important to include a dead dolphin in this bucolic narrative? He forces us to inhale the stench of decay: “Apparently he was not going to have much trouble, for the foul smell of the dolphin, which had been thrown ashore and was slimy with decay, suddenly came to meet him.”[[11]](#footnote-9) The overwhelming presence of odor in this passage exaggerates the grotesque, disfiguring aspects of sexual maturation. Longus’ preoccupation with the smell of rotting fish, may be a subtle reference to female menstruation. His tribute to the sea, which was “even more delightful than the land—since it was the sea that was helping him marry Chloe,” is further evidence that Longus is referencing female menstruation. A woman becomes marriageable when she beings to menstruate, and the sea has long harbored connotations to such sexual cycles.

The power of the grotesque to subvert the norm and challenge hierarchies is explored in *Daphnis and Chloe*’s liminal world of artful innocence. Though the pastoral predators that invade their space are primarily male, the only successful wolf is Lycaenion. It is she who ultimately teaches Daphnis how to “Love,” not Philetas. She wields a feminine power that trumps the traditional male authority. After Daphnis is initiated by Lycaenion, he becomes vulnerable to the dangers of exhibitionism. He “did not allow Chloe to be naked very often,” a change which surprises Chloe, who is “too shy to ask why it was.”[[12]](#footnote-10) The dangers of beauty become Daphnis becomes a threat to Chloe’s state of innocence. The desire to be clothed reflects the psychological shifts that occur in Daphnis. When the two protagonists finally consummate their love in the final scene, their performance is shielded and hidden from the reader’s view. The exhibition is over; all that was exposed to us before “had been nothing but childish play.”

Works Cited

Longus. *Daphnis and Chloe.* Translated by Paul Turner. London, Penguin Books. 1989.

1. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe: Prologue.* Translated by Paul Turner. London: Penguin Books. 1956, 2.17. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe.* I.4.20-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* I.32.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* I.32.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* II.22.57. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* II.6.47. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* II.2.44. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* I.32.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* I.14.28. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* III.23.84. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* III.28.89. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe,* III.24.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)