Abstract: While some recent studies have recognized Simaetha, the main character and narrator of Theocritus’ second Idyll, as a poet-figure, they have still neglected or undervalued her as a serious example of female authority in classical antiquity. While Theocritus’ portrayal of the witch is tinged with some irony, this element of the poem has been greatly exaggerated, obscuring the nuance with which Theocritus creates his female character. By examining the comparative evidence of the Greek Magical Papyri, I argue that Simaetha’s spell is not an ironic parody of actual ancient magic, but rather exemplifies how this counter-cultural practice may have afforded (desperate) women with a venue for authorship, authority, and self-expression.

Theocritus’ second Idyll—in which a young woman, Simaetha, is slighted by her lover Delphis and turns to magic to bring him back to her—has often been of critical interest because of its portrayal of magic in the ancient world and its depiction of gender, given the surprising amount of power and initiative Simaetha exerts in her relationship with Delphis. It is no surprise that both of these strands of critical inquiry intersect in the peculiar character of Simaetha, the young woman who boldly seeks out Delphis rather than waiting for him, who performs the magic incantation with which the Idyll is concerned, and who narrates the entire poem. Simaetha has been seen alternately as a poet-figure standing in for Theocritus and the blundering subject of ironic ridicule. In perhaps characteristically Hellenistic fashion, Theocritus mixes elements of both these readings—sympathy and comedy, pathos and irony—in his portrayal of Simaetha. Nonetheless, despite some of the ironic elements of the poem, one may find in Simaetha a source of female authority remarkable in antiquity. By playing into the cultural tropes of witches, Simaetha is able to find a venue for female power, authority, and self-expression.

1 Magic is, of course, a relative term, whose distinction from religion is socially constructed. Nonetheless, there are a variety of activities that seem clearly to have been perceived and represented in the ancient Greek world as occult, outside of normal religious structures, and, thus, magical. Idyll 2, in its secretive, nighttime setting and similarities to the Greek Magical Papyri would certainly qualify as an instance of magical activity.

2 For the former, see Duncan 2001; for the latter, Lambert 2002
Before engaging with various readings of the character of Simaetha, it is worth recounting her narrative. *Idyll 2* does not present her story in a completely linear fashion, but the events may be reconstructed as follows: on her way to see a procession to the temple of Artemis, Simaetha sees the young man Delphis and is immediately stricken with desire for him (lines 70 ff.). She suffers the intense physical symptoms of this longing (82 ff.), until, unable to bear it any longer, she sends Thestyli to bring him to her home (100 ff.). Delphis arrives and claims that he was planning on coming to Simaetha of his own accord (118 ff.) and the two consummate their desire (137 ff.). However, after this, Simaetha learns that Delphis seems to be in love with someone else (145 ff.) and the next night (the time during which *Idyll 2* is set), she turns to magic to bring Delphis back to her.

This entire narrative may be analyzed as a continuing dynamic of power and control, conditioned by gender roles of the Hellenistic world. When struck with desire for Delphis, Simaetha loses control over herself, emotionally and physically: “in a moment I looked and was lost, lost and smit i’ the heart; the colour went from my cheek…How I got me home I know not…a parching fever laid me waste and I was ten days and ten nights abed.” As a passive victim of *eros*, Simaetha has no agency over this new love. But after enduring such *eros*, a desperate Simaetha seeks to gain agency and control over the situation by sending Thestyli to fetch Delphis, rather than passively waiting for him, transgressing more normal gender roles. When Delphis claims that he would have come to her door even if she hadn’t sent Thestyli, he hints at a more normative love narrative. In particular, he claims that, if Simaetha had rejected his advances, he would have attacked her home: “but if ye had sent me packing with bold and bar, then I warrant ye axes and torches had come against you.” This rather clearly alludes to the

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3 Theocritus, *Idyll 2*.82-86. Here and elsewhere I use the English translation of J.M. Edmonds, who attempts to find an English equivalent of Theocritus’ particular Doric dialect.
paraklausithyron scene of a male locked outside of his female lover’s home. In other words, had Delphis been the love-sick character, he would have had both a culturally normative option of action (going to Simaetha’s home) and a standard literary trope (the paraklausithyron) on which to model his experience. As a woman seeking control in her relationship with Delphis, Simaetha has no such options. Thus, when Delphis leaves her for someone else, the only realm to which she can appeal for power, control, and authority is a counter-cultural one, the occult world of magic.

Delving into magic grants Simaetha authority in several ways. In the simplest sense, her incantation (should it be effective) will grant her control over Delphis and over the situation generally. Moreover, the actual act of performing the spell allows her to realize this control through physical manipulation of symbolic objects: “as this puppet melts for me before Hecat, so melt with love, e’en so speedily, Delphis of Myndus. And as this wheel of brass turns by grace of Aphrodite, so turn he and turn again before my threshold.”4 Simaetha’s physical control over the puppet and brass wheel stands in for her desired control over the actual Delphis and his actions. Significantly, the power that the spell gives Simaetha is one that extends beyond the domestic sphere of her home. As analyzed by Charles Segal,5 Idyll 2 is deeply structured around the relationship between the domestic space of Simaetha and “the urban life around it.”6 Isolated, because of her gender, within her own domestic space, Simaetha uses magic to gain agency outside of such space, to extend her sphere of activity into the larger urban world, where the male Delphis is free to roam. Finally, Simaetha’s magic activity grants her authority in the sense that she authors an incantation. The spell becomes a venue for self-expression and Simaetha

4 Theocritus, Idyll 2.28-31
5 Segal 1985
6 Segal 1985: 103
becomes a poet-figure. After all, it is Simaetha who speaks, narrates, and focalizes the entirety of *Idyll 2*. More specifically, though, her incantation comes to resemble a poetic creation. As Anne Duncan notes, in her study of Simaetha and Apollonius’ Medea as poet-figures, Simaetha begins her spell with an invocation of various deities (lines 10 ff.) that is similar to a poet’s invocation of the muses.\(^7\) Moreover, with its highly deliberate structure, including a refrain, Simaetha’s magic approaches the formal structures of poetry.\(^8\) Indeed, both magic and poetry “are highly structured forms…which are uttered aloud…both are dependent on the performance of a special kind of discourse for their efficacy.”\(^9\) Thus Hugh Parry refers to Simaetha’s spell as a kind of “lyrical, that is, self-expressive poetry.”\(^10\) To the degree that lyric poetry is founded upon the self-expression of a speaker’s subjectivity (the lyric “I”), Simaetha’s spell certainly qualifies as such. And even if the act of reciting a spell is only similar to a poetic act, one must remember that Simaetha is not merely uttering a formulaic spell, but is rather the voice through whom Theocritus presents a stylized poem largely in the form of a spell. Indeed, Theocritus embeds in Simaetha’s self-expression intertextual allusions to both Sappho and Homer. As Delphis delivers his clever speech to Simaetha, he comes to resemble the wily Odysseus of the *Iliad* and his speech itself comes with a “Homeric speech-formula.”\(^11\) And when Simaetha dismisses several deities at the end of the poem (165-166), she does so with the “formal χαῖρε…reminiscent of the closure of the Homeric hymns.”\(^12\) These instances reinforce Simaetha’s incantation as a poetic endeavor, but the *Idyll’s* intertextuality with Sappho is even more significant. In describing her

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7 Duncan 2001: 47
8 Duncan 2001: 47
9 Duncan 2001: 47
10 Parry 1988: 45
11 Segal 1984: 203
12 Lambert 2002: 79
reaction upon Delphis’ arrival at her home, Simaetha adopts the bodily symptoms of desire described famously by Sappho in fragment 31:13

then I went as cold as ice my body over, and the sweat dripped like dewdrops from my brow; aye, and for speaking I could not so much as the whimper of a child that calls on his mother in his sleep; for my fair flesh was gone all stiff and stark like a puppet’s.14 This incorporation of Sappho (literally bringing the body of Sappho’s suffering speaker, as well as the corpus of her poetry, into the text) functions on several levels. First, like the Homeric resonances noted earlier, it heightens Simaetha’s narrative to a lyric level, by taking the poet Sappho as a model. Similarly, it compares Simaetha to the speaker of Sappho’s poem, thus framing Simaetha’s desire for Delphis as the serious onslaught of a powerful eros. But finally, and perhaps most significantly, the equation of Simaetha with Sappho aligns her not only with a female figure undergoing the experience of eros, but also with the exceptional female author of such experience par excellence. Insofar as Simaetha becomes a Sapphic figure, she asserts her ability and authority to express her own female subjectivity in a lyric form.

The authority and agency that Simaetha finds in her magic has a rather therapeutic effect on her. Hugh Parry compares her to Polyphemus, in Theocritus’ eleventh Idyll, who “has his song to thank for curing the pain of unrequited love.”15 A similar process may be observed in Idyll 2, where “the mere performance of the spell makes the singer feel better in the end.”16 At the end of the Idyll, Simaetha, having finished her spell, dismisses the various deities she has invoked for aid: “so fare thee well, great Lady; to Ocean with thy team. And I, I will bear my love as best I may. Farewell sweet lady o’ the Shining Face, and all ye starry followers in the

13 As numbered by Lobel and Page 1955
14 Theocritus, Idyll 2.106-110
15 Parry 1988: 43
16 Parry 1988: 43
Here, Simaetha withdraws from the world of magic and prepares to endure her love (“I will bear my love as best I may”), seemingly aware in advance of the magic’s inefficacy. Moreover, if the farewell to Night signals the coming of dawn, one may even read this ending as a movement toward the clarity and rationality of day, after a brief nighttime foray into magic. So Segal reads the scene: “the last lines of the poem...lead out of her enclosed, emotion-defined world of hopeless passion...Instead of ‘Chthonic Hecate’ Simaetha now calls upon a goddess of the heavens; instead of the dark night which her sinister magic requires, she looks to a starlit night.”

This reading is supported by a closer examination of Simaetha as a witch character. While critics often refer to her as a witch, it is important to distinguish that—outside of the spells she turns to in desperation—she does not seem to be engaged in magic generally. As she is presented in Idyll 2, it is more accurate to describe Simaetha as a woman who turns to magic out of a desire for authority. In other words, the poem presents the world of magic as a realm of experience through which a woman can find some form of (secretive) authority, without entirely becoming a demonized witch. Simaetha is able to appeal to magic and then withdraw after having obtained some of the agency that she is otherwise forbidden in her relationship with Delphis. As Parry writes of the ending of Idyll 2, “the spell reaches its conclusion, the song its form, the singer her catharsis.”

In this reading of Idyll 2, the male-authored trope of denigrating powerful women or female agents as witches actually becomes available to women as a way of expressing authority. Thus, the poem might suggest, a Hellenistic woman like Simaetha can play into the role of a witch in order to become a kind of author, in order to perform self-expression. Such a reading,

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17 Theocritus, Idyll 2.163-166
18 Segal 1973:42-43
19 Parry 1988: 48
though, is at odds with the ironic tone that many critics read into *Idyll 2*. Since Simaetha is the speaker of the entire poem, it is difficult to parse an authorial stance on the part of Theocritus toward this female character-narrator. Nonetheless, some find a great deal of ironic distance in Theocritus’ portrayal of Simaetha, which would seem to deflate the more optimistic reading of the *Idyll*’s treatment of gender roles outlined above. It is in this vein that Michael Lambert argues that the entire poem should be read as a “comic parody of bungled ritual practice,”\(^{20}\) in which Simaetha inexpertly trespasses into the world of magic, “the domain of men, not women.”\(^{21}\) According to Lambert, “women in control of their lives was still, in the Hellenistic world, an alternative too laughable, and perhaps too threatening, to contemplate.”\(^{22}\) Lambert’s parodic reading of *Idyll 2* relies upon two lines of argumentation, both of which will be shown to be tenuous assumptions: first, that in the real world of Hellenistic Greece magic was the domain of men; and, second, that Simaetha’s incantation is an incorrect, “bungled”\(^{23}\) version of magic ritual.

Lambert’s assertion that magic was the domain of men is based on the fact that the vast majority of those using spells in the Greek Magical Papyri are male: “of the eighty or more extant *eros* spells, only seven are used by women to attract men.”\(^{24}\) But, even if more males used love magic than females, one shouldn’t overstate the fact. The mere preservation of any magical papyri for female use evidences that there was some tradition of women using magic, even if this was a transgression of sorts. Indeed, “later handbook recipes for *agoge* spells sometimes insert

\(^{20}\) Lambert 2002: 71
\(^{21}\) Lambert 2002: 71
\(^{22}\) Lambert 2002: 71
\(^{23}\) Lambert 2002: 71
\(^{24}\) Faraone 2002: 406
parenthetical variations that allow for male targets,” suggesting the possibility of a female user.\textsuperscript{25}

Moreover, it is important to remember the possible biases of preservation inherent in constructing ancient perceptions of magic from a fragmentary papyrological corpus. The fact that magic was a counter-cultural, largely secretive activity means that one should be even more careful about drawing conclusions from the few papyri we are fortunate enough to have today. While extremely valuable and informative, the Greek Magical Papyri do not necessarily give a complete representation of the use of magic in the ancient Greek world. Thus, while they may suggest that the use of love magic was a predominantly male pursuit, the absence of more female-oriented papyri does not warrant the claim that the realm of magic was exclusively a male domain. And literary representations of magic do point to female involvement in magic.\textsuperscript{26}

This is often seen as a way for male authors to ascribe the irrationality of magic to women, even though men were the actual practitioners of magic, as a way of “getting rid of what should not exist.”\textsuperscript{27} This may hold true for much of ancient Greek literature, but is it necessarily always the case? While one should not use literary sources as strict documentary evidence, it is certainly possible—especially considering the Greek Magical Papyri used by women—that such depictions suggest at least some amount of female involvement in magic. In any case, it seems rash to conclude with as much confidence as Lambert, that “real magic was the domain of men, not women.”\textsuperscript{28}

In \textit{Idyll} 2, then, Simaetha does not necessarily trespass naively into the male territory of magic, but may simply be appealing to an available body of knowledge and experience in which there can exist some degree of female authority.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Faraone 1999: 149
\item \textsuperscript{26} Consider, e.g., figures such as Circe and Medea
\item \textsuperscript{27} Graf 1997: 189
\item \textsuperscript{28} Lambert 2002: 71
\end{itemize}
Lambert’s other claim—that Simaetha’s magic rituals are botched, incorrect attempts at magic—stems from the fact that Theocritus’ description of these rituals does not match those attested in the Greek Magical Papyri. Lambert catalogues the inconsistencies dutifully: Simaetha uses laurel leaves, which are never used in erotic spells in the papyri,\(^{29}\) she uses the incorrect epithet for the moon and for Hecate,\(^{30}\) and her use of a rhombos and description of the still ocean and wind are found in the papyri but never in *eros*-related spells.\(^{31}\) From inconsistencies such as these, Lambert concludes that Simaetha’s spell is a comic parody of magic ritual. But this neglects other possibilities for Theocritus’ deviation from such spells. In constructing a literary, stylized version of an incantation, Theocritus may simply combine various elements of magical spells, or actions that seem magical based on some association with the occult. Theocritus is not concerned with creating a functional love spell in *Idyll 2*, but rather with producing “a mosaic, a kind of superritual capable of activating in its readers all sorts of associations connected with magic.”\(^{32}\) In addition, Lambert’s comparison of Theocritus with the Greek Magical Papyri neglects the possible difference in time between these two sources, given that the collection of Greek Magical Papyri contain texts “from the second century B.C. to the fifth century A.D.”\(^{33}\) Both sources are part of the same larger tradition of magic in the ancient Greek world, but some magical traditions may have changed or evolved over time. And, as mentioned before, the Greek Magical Papyri do not necessarily paint a full picture of the use of magic in antiquity. Theocritus’ deviations might point to other, alternative versions of spells. In short, the

\(^{29}\) Lambert 2002: 75  
\(^{30}\) Lambert 2002: 76  
\(^{31}\) Lambert 2002: 78  
\(^{32}\) Graf 1997: 184  
\(^{33}\) Betz 1992: xli
inconsistencies between Theocritus and the papyri are not sufficient evidence to see Simaetha’s magic as muddled attempts that parody actual magical activity.

Lambert wants to conclude that a powerful, authoritative woman in the Hellenistic world was simply “laughable,” but who, aside from Lambert, is doing the laughing? It would seem that Theocritus’ treatment of Simaetha is perhaps more sympathetic, and certainly more nuanced than mere ridicule. But this is not to deny the existence of some irony in Theocritus’ portrayal of Simaetha. When she invokes Circe and Medea, for example, Lambert notes that Simaetha calls upon Circe, Medea, and Perimede. Perimede, though, seems only to be an alternate name for Medea, an apparently clear case of ironic distance between the learned Theocritus (and his readership) and Simaetha. Similarly, Segal sees some irony in Simaetha’s application of Homeric language to her non-Homeric situation.

But instances such as this, as well as the comedic mime tradition from which Theocritus perhaps derives Simaetha, do not reduce Simaetha to mere comedy. Rather, as Segal concludes, such effects can be part of an “ennobling as well as an ironizing device,” such that the poem functions through a combination of pathos and irony. Anne Duncan phrases a similar conclusion in narratological terms: “while this narrative is partially focalized through the perspective of the distraught girl, at the same time it partially objectifies the girl.” Thus, while one may find in Theocritus’ Idyll 2 a female character who gains a degree of authority and control by playing into the role of a witch, the poem is no feminist text. It still objectifies the young, vulnerable

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34 Lambert 2002: 71
35 Theocritus, Idyll 2.15-16
36 Lambert 2002: 80, n. 50
37 Segal 1984: 4
38 Lambert 2002: 80
39 Segal 1984: 205
40 Duncan 2001: 53
Simaetha even as she narrates the poem, a combination of focalization and objectification that “reflects ancient ‘erotic handbooks,’ which were written for men by men under the pseudonyms of *hetairai.*”\(^{41}\) Moreover, any female authority Simaetha might obtain is still within Theocritus’ male-authored text and restricted to the secretive world of magic. Nonetheless, Theocritus’ portrayal of female subjectivity through Simaetha is remarkably nuanced, not merely ironic. One must be careful about deriving concrete historical conclusions from a literary text, but the character of Simaetha at least suggests the possibility that women could actually use the cultural trope of powerful women demonized as witches to their advantage. Within the world of magic, perhaps, a woman otherwise stifled and restricted could find power, authority, and a venue for the performance of self-expression, even if it had to be under the cover of night.

\(^{41}\) Duncan 2001: 53
Works Cited


