HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Theocritus (1st half of 3rd Century B.C.)

Theocritus was a contemporary of Herondas, and born in Syracuse in Sicily. From there he went to Alexandria, the site of the Great Library founded by the Greek speaking Ptolemies in honor of Alexander of Macedon. (Both Callimachus and Apollonius of Rhodes (#70) were Head Librarians there; an indicator both of the scholarly nature of Hellenistic poetry, and of the shift in Greek cultural energy from the mainland of Hellas to Egypt and Asia Minor.) Theocritus too gravitated to the Alexandrian cultural matrix, not as a figure of the library itself, but as a client of rich and powerful patrons, who were themselves a sign of the new literary climate of the Hellenistic world. (Many of Theocritus's poems, idylls and bucolics, in fact concern the greatness of useful rulers—such as Hiero of Syracuse, from whom Theocritus expects largesse, or the greatness of such semi-divine rulers as Ptolemy II of Egypt, whom Theocritus praises for his generosity to poets.) The most memorable, and influential, of Theocritus' poems were bucolics, in which country men and women---highly stylized and placed in an idealized country setting—woo and chatter in complex and sophisticated dialogues, generated by those complex meters that the erudite Theocritus had inherited from a long matured tradition. Some of his best mimes pick up the conversational language of his time, like the following in which two neighbor ladies prepare an outing together:

GORGO (*with her maid Etychis at the door, as the maid Eunoa opens it*)
Praxinoa at home?

PRAXINOA (*running forward*)
Dear Gorgo! at last! she is at home. I quite thought you'd forgotten me. (*to the maid*) Here, Eunoa, a chair of the lady, and a cushion on it.

GORGO (*refusing the cushion*)
No, thank you, really.

PRAXINOA
Do sit down.

GORGO (*sitting*)
O what a silly I was to come! What with the crush and the horses, Praxinoa, I've scarcely got here alive. It's all big boots and people in uniform. And the street was never-ending, and you can't think how far your house is along it.