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Arsinoë in Egypt and Helen in Sparta: Theocritus, Idyll 15, Odyssey 4 and the Poetics of Imperialism

In this paper I will consider the comparison of Arsinoë II to Helen in Theocritus, Idyll 15.110 in light of several subsequent allusions to Odyssey 4 made within the poem. I will show that through the course of the hymn performed within the Idyll (15.100-44), the Argive hymnist makes three specific (and previously unnoticed) allusions to Odyssey 4. I will argue that the allusions are meant to be read in conjunction with the initial comparison between the queen and the heroine. The poet thus offers a specific literary context as a basis for comparing Helen and Arsinoë. Although the images of Arsinoë as presented in Idyll 15 and Helen in Odyssey 4 may display many corresponding features, I will focus exclusively upon the ideological value of the intertext, namely, as a rationale for Greeks in Egypt. I will conclude that Theocritus' repeated allusion to Odyssey 4 provides substance, detail, and a literary pedigree to the generic "poetics of imperialism" that has been detected in the comparison of Arsinoë to Helen (most recently: Reed, TAPA, 2000, 334). This argument and conclusion lends further credence to the view that hymn is not a bungled cult hymn, but a sophisticated modulation of such a hymn that serves the overall encomiastic aims of the Idyll.