

CORYDON'S WINNING WORDS IN *ECLOGUE* 7

RORY B. EGAN

*Haec memini, et victum frustra contendere Thyrsin.
ex illo Corydon Corydon est tempore nobis.*

WITH THESE TERSE WORDS, as enigmatic as they are decisive, the herdsman Meliboeus concludes his report of the great contest in bucolic singing, the *certamen magnum* that he had once observed between his fellow herdsmen Thyrsis and Corydon. As he closes his account of what he calls the *ludus* (v. 17) with a statement of the verdict he simultaneously opens up a debate, still vigorous after two thousand years, as to why Corydon was the winner. Meliboeus offers no explicit help on this point. Indeed his abrupt closure seems almost calculated to challenge readers to tease out the reasons. Neither he nor any other participant in the poem even says who is responsible for the verdict, although it is often assumed that Daphnis, the storied master singer of the bucolic world, who was present as a distinguished observer at the contest, served as umpire.¹ Since Meliboeus' reticence at the end, his virtual assertion that he has told us all that he can, leaves us to reason why, the ludic qualities of the contest are thus extended beyond the contest itself, and indeed beyond the poem.² Not every modern reader is willing to take up the game at all. T. E. Page (1963: 155), for instance, avoided it by pronouncing Meliboeus' declaration of Corydon's victory "fictitious" while, at the opposite end of the spectrum, others see it as superfluous on the grounds that Corydon's superiority is self-evident.³ We shall of course never know how confident such critics might be of Corydon's triumph if the poet had made Meliboeus keep entirely silent. In any case, every modern reader who does take up the game, who engages with the riddle, might be both burdened and assisted by the recorded efforts of numerous predecessors. Since the rules and criteria of the original contest are unknown, apart from the fact that Thyrsis was required to respond to each of Corydon's quatrains, each player in the interpretive game has always had some latitude in determining the rules by which to compete. The only constant is of course that everyone must attempt to ascertain why Corydon was the winner. As my own rules do not require me to wrestle with the arguments and opinions of all past players, I shall not engage in any sort of review of the dozens of earlier explanations for Corydon's victory.⁴

For Charles Fantazzi in the year of his retirement from the University where, 35 years ago, I first experienced the pleasures of the *Eclogues* under his lively and inspiring guidance.

¹ So, e.g., Clausen 1994: 212; Della Corte 1984: 563.

² This effect is in some respects analogous to the pair of riddles posed at the end of *Eclogue* 3 on which see Dix 1995.

³ So, e.g., Leach 1970: 223.

⁴ One survey is available in Clausen 1994: 210 f.

Even if the premises of all predecessors, the rules of their respective games, were all the same, they would still disagree in their conclusions. Despite disagreements among themselves, however, few if any of their arguments are entirely incompatible with my own. Some of them, particularly those who see the final quatrains as decisive, actually offer some support to my arguments.

My game will begin with the last line: *ex illo Corydon Corydon est tempore nobis*. Corydon is a Greek name, one previously used by Theocritus (notably in *Idyll* 4) for a rustic character. It is also a Greek common noun, κορυδών and κόρυδος being two of the many variants of a word for "lark."⁵ In Meliboeus' etiologizing repetition of "Corydon" he forges an antonomastic link between the name and its Greek etymon and, by appropriate extension, with the proverbial excellence of the lark as a songster.⁶ Any paraphrase of Meliboeus' succinct formula will necessarily be clumsily prosaic and neglect the paronomasia, while any translation that simply repeats Corydon's name in the target language will miss most of its significance. Perhaps most of the semantic content, though none of the poetry, of Meliboeus' words can be rendered as follows. "From that point on as far as we are concerned Corydon really has been 'Corydon' because his name means 'lark' which is to say 'singer par excellence.'" That much can in fact be garnered from two different passages of Servius in which he comments on Corydon's name. At the opening of the second *Eclogue* he remarks, *Corydona a Vergilio ficto nomine nuncupari ex eo genere avis quae corydalis dicitur dulce canens*, and at the end of *Eclogue* 7 that Corydon means *victor, nobilis supra omnes*.⁷ This bit of rustic cleverness, it might be suggested, seems gratuitous and hardly worth the effort expended in contriving or in comprehending it, but I would argue to the contrary that, inasmuch as it alerts the reader to the antonomastic potential of Corydon's name, it is actually integral to the question of how Corydon won the contest.

Leaving aside the implications of Corydon's name for the time being, I would consider another clue which Meliboeus, for all his brevity, seems to leave for us, this time in the second last line of the poem: *haec memini et victum frustra contendere Thyrsin*. The sequence of tenses, with the perfect participle *victum* followed by the present infinitive *contendere*, suggests that Thyrsis continued to compete even *after* he was defeated. There must, then, be some point between the beginning of the contest and its abrupt end at which the superiority of Corydon rendered all of Thyrsis' efforts futile (*frustra*). I suggest that this point is Corydon's sixth and last quatrain and that, though Thyrsis gamely tries to match it, there is something in Corydon's lines which virtually precludes the possibility of successful capping.

In each of the first five exchanges Corydon had made a fresh start in theme or subject matter. This means that in those five exchanges Thyrsis is left to

⁵ For variants see Thompson 1936: 165; Capponi 1979: 47 ff.; André 1967: 24–25, 63.

⁶ Cf. Caviglia 1984: 887, and, for a full elaboration of the connection, see Bettini 1972.

⁷ Cf. Bettini 1972: 265.

react to what Corydon has sung, but Corydon, for the purposes of composing his next challenge to Thyrsis, is not constrained by anything that Thyrsis has sung, nor does he pick up on any of the themes or subjects with which Thyrsis has most recently dealt. Corydon's sixth quatrain, however, is different in that it does explicitly reflect an element in Thyrsis' previous response. In his fifth quatrain Corydon had mentioned the beloved Alexis whom he connected with the prosperity of the country, and Thyrsis rejoined with a similar reference to his beloved Phyllis. The sixth pair of quatrains now follows. It is here that several earlier interpreters of the poem identify the definitive marks of Corydon's superiority.⁸

Corydon *Populus Alcidae gratissima, vitis Iaccho,
formosae myrtus Veneri, sua laurea Phoebō;
Phyllis amat corylos; illas dum Phyllis amabit,
nec myrtus vincet corylos, nec laurea Phoebe.*

Thyrsis *Fraxinus in silvis pulcherrima, pinus in hortis,
populus in fluviiis, abies in montibus altis;
saepius at si me, Lycida formose, revisas,
fraxinus in silvis cedat tibi, pinus in hortis.*

Corydon here appropriates Phyllis in more than one sense.⁹ He makes her an object of poetic and amatory rivalry (as she was in *Eclogue* 3.76 ff.). Not only is Corydon thereby entering a counterclaim to Thyrsis' expression of his amatory interest in Phyllis, he is also seizing higher ground by capping Thyrsis' lines (something which until now the rules had not required him to do). In addition to that he has used Phyllis as an element in the next poetic thrust that Thyrsis is called upon to parry. It seems, at any rate, once Corydon has introduced the complexity of an amatory rivalry or challenge that implicates Thyrsis' previous song, that Thyrsis should not ignore this dimension in any response to Corydon. In fact, though, there is nothing in his response that matches this feature of Corydon's song. While this might be one symptom of Thyrsis' failure, Corydon's deployment of Phyllis has other aspects to it and poses further problems for Thyrsis.

For one thing Phyllis' name is repeated within the same verse; repeated, moreover, with a form of the verb *amo*: *Phyllis amat . . . Phyllis amabit*. Here Corydon focuses attention on Phyllis and on her amatory associations, but he does so while simultaneously perpetrating and repeating a bilingual, Latin-Greek, pun involving the Greek root $\phi\lambda\lambda$ - and the Latin *am*-¹⁰ (Compare, for example, *parvus* . . . *Mico*, "little Little" at verses 29 f. of this same *Eclogue*.)¹¹ Once again Thyrsis has nothing with which to match him. There is more, though, to Corydon's

⁸ So, e.g., Klingner 1967: 124; Skutsch 1971: 28–29; Fantazzi and Querbach 1985: 366.

⁹ Cf. Fantazzi and Querbach 1985: 366.

¹⁰ Cf. the similar collocation *Phyllida amo* at *Eclogue* 3.78.

¹¹ Cf. Pöschl 1964: 113; Bettini 1972: 267.

dextrous verbal manipulations of Phyllis' name. He introduces her into a short catalogue of trees: the poplar that is pleasing to Hercules, the vine of Bacchus, the myrtle of Venus and the laurel of Apollo. The catalogue also includes the humble hazel that, says Corydon, Phyllis loves. *Phyllis amat corylos*. But the name of Phyllis is itself integrated into the catalogue of trees in another way. "Phyllis" was in fact a poetic name of a tree, the almond tree, as the late agricultural writer Palladius explicitly tells us,¹² and as we might otherwise deduce from the myth of a love-sick Thracian princess named Phyllis, who was transformed into an almond tree. Although the story of her metamorphosis is not explicit in any extant work earlier than Servius (on *Eclogue* 5.10), this mythical Phyllis is a character well known to Augustan poets,¹³ and one to whom Vergil himself seems to have alluded in the third *Eclogue*¹⁴ and again in the fifth.¹⁵ In fact that part of her story in which Phyllis, as a leafless almond tree, bursts into leaf upon the return of her beloved might well underlie v. 59 of our *Eclogue* 7:¹⁶ *Phyllidis adventu nostrae nemus omne virebit*. It seems, then, that Phyllis' name contributes a sixth tree to Corydon's catalogue by virtue of an onomastic *double-entendre* of the same type that is involved in Meliboeus' repetition of "Corydon."¹⁷ Having reverted to the latter name, I shall now attempt to show that it has not only twofold but multiple references in the contest's denouement.

At first glance the clause *Phyllis amat corylos* seems to say nothing more than that Phyllis is fond of hazel bushes. Whatever that might mean it is surely enough to give any reader pause, to fix attention on the words, and to prompt queries as to whether that is all it means. There are of course a number of possibilities that take us beyond the virtual nonsense that a literal reading presents. The hazels, for instance, might be emblematic of the idyllic rustic life and its associated amatory and musical aspects. Then too, since both the subject of the verb, *Phyllis*, and its object, *corylos*, are plant names the verb *amo* probably means something like "thrive" or "flourish" as it sometimes does in agricultural or horticultural contexts where favorable growing conditions are described as, for example, at *Georgics* 2.112 f. (*apertos Bacchus amat collis*), at *Georgics* 4.124 (*amantis litora myrtos*), or Ovid *Amores* 2.16.41 (*ulmus amat vitem*).¹⁸ Thus *Phyllis amat corylos* might be construed as something like "The almond thrives among the hazels." If this is,

¹² *De insitione* 14, 61, 97, 149. The same author uses *amygdalus* for the tree in his prose works. Cf. André 1985: 198.

¹³ Phyllis is the putative writer of Ovid *Her.* 2 where the metamorphosis is, almost by necessity, not mentioned. See also, e.g., *Culex* 131 ff.; Ovid *Am.* 2.18.22; *Ars. Am.* 2.353-354; 3.459-460; *Rem. Am.* 591 ff.

¹⁴ See Dix 1995.

¹⁵ Suggested implicitly by Servius and explicitly by Rose 1942: 119 and by Dix 1995: 258.

¹⁶ Cf. Dix 1995: 258.

¹⁷ Bettini (1972: 268) sees another pun on Phyllis' name at verse 59 of this same *Eclogue*.

¹⁸ Other examples cited in *OLD*, s.v. "*amo*," 11.b.

as it might be, a truism of arboriculture,¹⁹ it lends some additional sense to the remainder of Corydon's quatrain. As long as the almond flourishes in company with the hazel (i.e., for ever and ever)—*illas dum Phyllis amabit*—the hazel will be preeminent among plants. This sort of semantic dissection of the name *Phyllis* must not, however, occlude the fact that the word is also the name of a personality associated with Corydon. A similar claim must now be made for *corylos*, the second dendronym in the phrase.

If, as the words *Phyllis amat corylos* first strike the ears or eyes of the reader, *corylos* does not immediately evoke associations with the phonetically similar and metrically identical *Corydon*, the name of the character who sings the word, and if *corylos* still fails to do so when it is repeated in the next verse, then perhaps Meliboeus' reiterative *Corydon Corydon* can succeed in retrospectively emphasizing the near homophony even as, in accordance with my earlier suggestion, it alerts the reader to the potential for word-play in Corydon's name. Pöschl (1964: 139) has already commented upon the similarity of *corylos* to *Corydon* (and, remarkably, might have been the first to do so), but that similarity is probably even closer than he realized because of the phonetic identification or confusion of *d* with *l* to which the Latin language was prone (as exemplified by *odor* and *oleo*, *lacrima* and *dacrima*, *lingua* and *dingua* etc.)²⁰ and which, we know, could on occasion be exploited by punning poets as it was by Plautus at *Pseudolus* 841–842. where the word-play involves *olos*, "swan" and *odos*, "smell."

*is odos demissis pedibus in caelum volat.
eum odorem cenat Iuppiter cottidie.*

In our context in *Eclogue* 7 the effect of phonetic identification or blurring is to give a different meaning to Corydon's assertion *Phyllis amat corylos*. Phyllis not only loves hazel bushes, "Phyllis loves Corydon."²¹ By the same words Corydon also says that Phyllis loves the lark (i.e., κορυδών which has such variants as κόρυδος and κορυλόν that display the same phonetic ambiguity), and that she loves the master singer. Corydon thus confidently vaunts his own superiority and his anticipated victory. By using the words *Phyllis amat corylos* to proclaim himself as the object of Phyllis' affection and as the champion of song he lends a certain poignancy to the equally vaunting hyperbole of his final statement: *dum Phyllis amabit / nec myrtus vincet corylos nec laurea Phoebe*. The effect of this statement is to say that as long as Phyllis loves the hazels, emblematic of the rustic world, and as long as Phyllis (the lover) loves him, Corydon (the champion singer), then the domain of Venus (love) and the domain of Apollo (music) are more than matched by the eponymous lover (Phyllis) and the eponymous singer (Corydon, *corylos*, etc.). Corydon manages to say all this while at the same time, mindful

¹⁹ See Stadler 1912: 2489.

²⁰ For additional examples see Leumann 1963: 128–129. Cf. Monteil 1970: 58.

²¹ Cf. Pöschl 1964: 138 f. Dahlmann (1966: 232) demurs as does Skutsch 1965.

of his poetic catalogue, continuing to use tree-names—*Phyllis* and *corylos*, *myrtus* and *laurea*. What is Thyrsis to do now? Just as Corydon betrays a confident expectation of victory, Thyrsis must have the sense of defeat and frustration suggested by Meliboeus' words *victum frustra*. But Thyrsis struggles on with his response and succeeds in matching some of the constituents of Corydon's lines, as a comparison of their final efforts shows.

Like his rival, Thyrsis presents a catalogue of trees in his quatrain, although he includes only four instead of the six that Corydon named. Like Corydon he repeats a couple of words or formulae—*fraxinus in silvis* and *pinus in hortis*, though without the variation that Corydon had achieved in *Phyllis amat . . . Phyllis amabit* or *laurea Phoebo / laurea Phoebi* or *amat corylos / vincet corylos*. Like Corydon, Thyrsis introduces a lover, Lycidas, who will be superior to two of the trees, but Lycidas is not himself a tree and the trees which Thyrsis names have no apparent associations with divinity nor with love or song. In general, while Thyrsis formally and superficially responds to most of the elements in Corydon's quatrain, his words and phrases are unidimensional. Each tree is a tree and nothing else. There is nothing of Corydon's elaborate bilingual word-play which identifies song and love, the singer and the lover, with trees. While Thyrsis does introduce a personal reference with Lycidas, there is no etymological linking of Lycidas or Thyrsis with trees, or with love and song, nothing analogous to the phonetic and quasi-etymological connections of Phyllis and Corydon (*corylos*) some of which might be schematically represented as follows.

Cory*o*	Phyllis
1. one of the characters in the poem	1. one of the characters in the poem
2. the name of a nut tree	2. the name of a nut tree
3. by antonomasia, a singer	3. by antonomasia, a lover

On such criteria, as well as others,²² Thyrsis is no match for Corydon in this final and decisive exchange.

While I have focussed attention here on evidence derived from the final pair of quatrains, I concede to several of my predecessors that there might be other demonstrations earlier in the contest of the superiority of Corydon or that the advantage, however it is determined, might shift back and forth between Corydon and Thyrsis over the course of the contest. Many, if not most, interpreters have scored the contest as if it were something like a boxing match with Corydon winning some, but not necessarily all, rounds, or in some way accumulating a higher score over the whole course of the contest. I can concede that Corydon might have been ahead on points, or tied with his rival, or possibly even behind him after five complete rounds. In the sixth round, however, Corydon delivers the *coup de grace* or, to extend the pugilistic metaphor, wins by a technical knock-out

²² Cf. the criticisms of 'Thyrsis' response by Klingner 1967: 163; Skutsch 1965 and 1971, Fantazzi and Querbach 1985.

as his punishing paronomastics leave Thyrsis reeling and flailing, still game but clearly outclassed and incapable of rallying.²³

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS
UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA
R3T 2M3

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- André, J. 1967. *Les Noms d'oiseaux en latin*. Paris.
 — 1985. *Les Noms de plantes dans la Rome antique*. Paris.
 Bettini, M. 1972. "Corydon Corydon," *SCO* 21: 261–276.
 Capponi, F. 1979. *Ornithologia Latina*. Genoa.
 Caviglia, F. 1984. "Coridone" in *Enciclopedia Vergiliana* 1. Rome.
 Clausen, W. 1994. *A Commentary on Virgil Eclogues*. Oxford.
 Dahlmann, H. 1966. "Zu Vergils siebentem Hirtengedicht," *Hermes* 94: 218–232.
 Della Corte, F. 1984. "Bucoliche" in *Enciclopedia Vergiliana* 1. Rome.
 Fantazzi, C. and C. W. Querbach. 1985. "Sound and Substance: A Reading of Virgil's Seventh *Eclogue*," *Phoenix* 39: 355–367.
 Dix, T. K. 1995. "Vergil in the Grynean Grove: Two Riddles in the Third *Eclogue*," *CP* 90: 256–262.
 Klingner, F. 1967. *Virgil, Bucolica, Georgica, Aeneis*. Zurich and Stuttgart.
 Leach, E. W. 1970. *Vergil's Pastoral Art: Studies in the Eclogues*. Princeton.
 Leumann, M. 1963 [1926]. *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*. Munich.
 Monteil, P. 1970. *Éléments de phonétique et morphologie du latin*. Paris.
 Page, T. E. 1963 [1897]. *P. Vergili Maronis Bucolica et Georgica*. London.
 Pöschl, V. 1964. *Die Hirtendichtung Virgils*. Heidelberg.
 Rose, H. J. 1942. *The Eclogues of Vergil*. Berkeley and Angeles.
 Skutsch, O. 1965. A review of Pöschl 1964, in *Gnomon* 37: 162–169.
 — 1971. "The Singing Matches in Virgil and in Theocritus and the Design of Virgil's Book of *Eclogues*," *BICS* 18: 26–29.
 Stadler 1912. "Haselnuss," *RE* 7: 2486–89.
 Thompson, D. W. 1936. *A Glossary of Greek Birds*. London.

²³ I am grateful to the anonymous referees for their helpful criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.