

# Fun with Phyllis and Iollas: The game of the name in *Eclogue 3*

*Revised from a paper given to the Virgil Society on 11 May 2019*

## *Damoetas*

*Phyllida mitte mihi; meus est natalis, Iolla.  
Cum faciam vitula pro frugibus, ipse venito.*

(“Send Phyllis to me; it is my birthday, Iollas. When I sacrifice a heifer for the harvest, come yourself”).

## *Menalcas*

*Phyllida amo ante alias, nam me discedere flevit  
et longum ‘formose, vale, vale,’ inquit, ‘Iolla.’*

(“I love Phyllis most of all; for she wept that I was leaving, and in halting accents cried, ‘Iollas: farewell, farewell, my lovely!’”)<sup>1</sup>

(*Ecl.* 3.76–79)

This essay is essentially a reading of the four verses printed above. The accompanying translation can be taken as representative of conventional modern readings from which I shall, respectfully, deviate. I begin by invoking two early and informed readers of the poem, to sound the keynote.

*molle atque facetum  
Vergilio adnuerunt gaudentes rure Camenae.*

(*Hor. Sat.* 1.10.44–45)

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<sup>1</sup> Translations by Fairclough & Gould (1999). All following translations are mine.

(“The Muses who take joy in rustic themes have endowed Virgil with subtleness and wit”).

*felix Aeneados auctor ...*

*Phyllidis hic idem teneraeque Amaryllidis ignes  
bucolicis iuvenis luserat ante modis.*

(Ov. *Tr.* 2.1. 533–38)

(“This same person (the blissful one who wrote the Aeneid) had previously as a youth playfully treated the passions of Phyllis and the gentle Amaryllis in the pastoral style”).

Both Horace and Ovid are clearly referring to Virgil and his *Eclogues*. Horace’s reference can pertain nicely to the entire collection, but his notice of the happy Camenae suggests a specific reminiscence of the third *Eclogue*, where, in the only mention of the Camenae in his entire oeuvre, Virgil cites the pleasure that they take in amoebic singing (*amant alterna Camenae*, 59). In the case of Ovid there can be no doubt that the reference is precisely to the context in *Ecl.* 3 where Damoetas and Menalcas exchange their remarks on Phyllis, which are immediately followed by a reference to Amaryllis in their next exchange. Both Horace and Ovid will be called to the stand again, but they are primarily cited at this stage as contemporary witnesses to a witty playfulness that I find pervading the Phyllis-Iollas couplets.

*Ecl.* 3 opens, impromptu, with the rustics Menalcas and Damoetas engaged in a crude and structurally ragged flyting bout, that continues for 54 verses distributed unequally (in favour of Menalcas) and irregularly. After that Palaemon intervenes as umpire to program an orderly protocol, a more decorous and witty tenour for the competition and, as a set theme, the spring-time fecundity of the countryside, all under the loving patronage of the rustic Muses (55–59):

*Dicite quandoquidem in molli consedimus herba.  
Et nunc omnis ager, nunc omnis parturit arbos,  
nunc frondent silvae, nunc formosissimus annus.  
Incipe, Damoeta; tu deinde sequere, Menalca.  
Alternis dicetis; amant alterna Camenae.*

(“Proceed with your discourse once we are seated together on the soft grass. Right now every field, every tree is burgeoning anew; now the woods are in

leaf and this is the most beautiful time of the year. You lead off, Damoetas, and you then follow, Menalcas. You will converse turn and turn about; the rustic Muses love those exchanges”).

For the next 48 verses the singers adhere to the format dictated by Palaemon, while also maintaining thematic connections to the natural aspects of the rustic environment and to the pastoral life of the herds and herders that it sustains. As they resume their verbal thrust and counter-thrust after the interval, the tone is more civil, less strident, and they have evidently taken Palaemon’s reference to the Camenae in earnest: at one point each of them even approvingly cites Pollio, that urbane paragon of literary sophistication, as an approving colleague in their service to the rustic Muses. The ready acquiescence of the herdsmen in Palaemon’s program has already lent a comedic tinge to the whole performance when, immediately after Palaemon has prodded them with the flattering association with the Camenae, Damoetas boldly proclaims Jupiter’s interest in his songs (60–61), and Menalcas responds by claiming to be a beneficiary of the Olympian musician Apollo (62–63). In each case we note that the singer is also careful to link the divinity to the Palaemonian theme of the fertility of the land. The braggadocio of those couplets also marks, not quite so preposterously, the ensuing sequence of four exchanges (64–75) in which the interlocutors sing of their amatory aspirations and endeavours, the proverbial springtime preoccupations of the young, which are all duly linked in some way to the flora and fauna of their environment. The brashly optimistic tone, along with the amatory-pastoral theme, pervading those four exchanges leads smoothly into Damoetas’ couplet that opens the next one (76–79, quoted above). In Menalcas’ response, however, even as the rustic theme and context are maintained, there is a transition to a less sanguine perspective on amatory matters.

The repetition in this exchange of *Phyllis* and *Iollas* is enough by itself to arrest the attention of auditor or reader, particularly so since *Iollas* is an onomastic rarity, occurring in only one other place in the *Eclogues* (2.57) and nowhere in extant Greek or Latin poetry before Virgil. *Phyllis*, by contrast, has a rather storied profile in a variety of situations in both Greek and Latin literature and lore, that include several appearances elsewhere in the *Eclogues*. The poet offers nothing explicit as biographical, legendary or fictional background that would make either name essentially appropriate to its context in *Ecl.* 3, but it must be an axiom of poetic interpretation, *a fortiori* of Virgilian interpretation, that a writer’s silences in such matters invite the reader to probe for reasons, rather than to assume that fictional names have been chosen indifferently. A major objective of my reading, then, is to demonstrate that the names *Phyllis* and *Iollas* accommodate poetic effects of sound, sense and allusion that would not be present if any other names stood in their place. In the case of *Iollas* the prime factor will be

the combined peculiarity of its very rareness and its distinctive vocal features, while for *Phyllis* the greater weight will attach to its full range of semantic and narrative associations. I begin the discussion with a review of some of the more conspicuous aspects of the deployment of the names in the pair of couplets above.

Palaemon's ruling that Menalcas follow Damoetas is observed almost to the letter as far as the two names are concerned, for Damoetas brackets the first line of his couplet and Menalcas his whole couplet with virtually identical sounds: *Phyllida mitte ... natalis iyolla* and *Phyllida amo ... inquit iyolla*.<sup>2</sup> The responsorial thematics are fortified prosodically and phonetically, most conspicuously in the echo (appropriately delayed for a few seconds as echoes are) at verse-end of *see-yole-la* by *tee-yole-la*. The effect is accommodated by the trisyllabic and purely vocalic (consisting entirely, that is, of vowels, a semivowel and a liquid) *Iolla*. This is all calculated to catch the ear, and Menalcas' literatim, verbatim and measure for measure appropriation of Damoetas' syllables must be at least partially intended to serve as a foil against which other factors stand in counterpoint. So, for example, the second time that the sequence *ee-yole-la* is uttered, it is part of a direct quotation from the tearful female Phyllis. Can we not then surmise that the poet / performer and his character voiced it, along with the rest of the quotation, in a prolonged, ululating falsetto, that contrasts with the same performer's earlier voicing of the male Damoetas' brusque and birthday-cheery imperative? There are other questions here regarding variable phonetic features in the delivery of the couplets. Some of them (pitch, timbre, volume), being unmarked in the text, are subject to speculation. Others, though, identifiable through familiar conventions of orthography and prosody, will be applied below towards awakening long dormant sound effects. In anticipation of that, it might be helpful to note here something that no knowledgeable person would deny, however much modern readers of ancient poetry might ignore it: the primary path of verbal communication, poetic or otherwise, leads from mouth to ear rather than from text to eye. Since the present reading of the Phyllis-Iollas lines involves a concentrated application of "ear-philology" as a complement to the traditionally dominant "eye-philology",<sup>3</sup> a preliminary review of several inter-related topics relevant to Virgilian phonetic poetics will be in order.

One poetic device that Virgil exploits with some frequency is a type of phonomimesis, whereby the sound pattern of a syntactically conventional, concept-bearing, phrase presents an audible image of the semantic content of that same phrase. "The sound must seem an

<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout this piece I use a couple of makeshift conventions to represent the sounds of Virgil's Latin in a manner intelligible, I hope, to most anglophone eyes and ears. The long syllables of the Latin are presented in bold type. Despite some arbitrariness in the transcriptions of Latin syllables I have assumed that these renderings are more generally congenial than a consistently unambiguous rendering in the IPA symbols would be.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the terms from Jespersen (1922) 24. Cf. Stanford (1967) 1 and *passim*.

echo to the sense”, as Alexander Pope expressed it, with his own apt assonance, in a passage partially inspired by Virgil.<sup>4</sup> The term preferred here for the device is *Lautmalerei* (“sound painting”).<sup>5</sup> In anticipation of its application to our passage in *Ecl. 3*, there is an instructive indication of both its traditional place in pastoral poetry and Virgil’s commitment to it in the couplet that opens the entire book of *Eclogues*. The first line contains a catchy imitation of a shepherd’s piping, as Meliboeus addresses Tityrus, who reclines in the shade of a beech tree and, in obeisance to the rustic Muse, plays on his humble pipe:

*Tityre tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi  
silvestrem tenui Musam meditaris avena.*

The *Lautmalerei* of the first three and a half feet – **tee-tew-re too pah-too-lye re-koo-ban soo** – evidently involved some artful attention to phonetic composition, since it is built into a sequence that resonates, in circumstance, sense, and *sound*, with the opening verses of the first *Idyll* of Theocritus, where Thyrsis addresses a herdsman who is piping in accompaniment to the sound of a pine tree.

Ἄδῦ τι τὸ ψιθύρισμα καὶ ἅ πίτυς, αἰπόλε, τήνα,  
ἅ ποτὶ ταῖς παραῖσι μελίσδεται, ἄδῦ δὲ καὶ τὴ  
συρίδες.

The salient imitative syllables can be graphically approximated as **ba-dew tee top seet-hew-brees-ma kye ba-pee-tew sye ... ba-dew de kye-tew / soo-ree**.

Such effects frequently elude both the casual reader of a text and the scrutiny of eye-philologists, even in situations where words or syllables embedded in a phrase or sentence would be pronounced in the same way that they are in isolation. The potential for the eye

<sup>4</sup> *The sound must seem an echo to the sense:  
Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,  
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;  
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,  
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;  
When Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw,  
The line too labors, and the words move slow;  
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,  
Flies o’er the unbending corn, and skims along the main* (*Essay on Criticism* 2.365–73).

<sup>5</sup> I prefer it as a more precise term than “onomatopoeia”, which also commonly refers to the imitative coining of individual words. The distinction can be conveniently illustrated by the final two lines of Tennyson’s ‘Come Down O Maid’: *The moan of doves in immemorial elms / and murmuring of innumerable bees*. Both “moan” and “murmuring” are pre-existing words of onomatopoeic origin that the poet has here placed within a sequence of *Lautmalerei*.

to miss the *Lautmalerei* increases, though, when any of the manifold varieties of sandhi are in play; that is when, in the process of articulation, adjacent phonemes interact to produce audible effects that differ from those of the words in isolation. In such cases, for Latin as customarily read today, the once audible consequences are often lost, being unmarked in the text. Sandhi, a common and usually inadvertent function of speech, can be a significant factor in the multi-stage transmission of words from author's mind to text, from text to reader's eye, from reader's eye to reader's mind, and thence to reader's mouth and on to auditor's ear and mind. The sort of distortions that occur in the transitions can be well exemplified by an English specimen of what our contemporary lexicon recognizes as "mondegreens". The word was devised by Sylvia Wright, an American journalist, who based it on a personal childhood experience. As she listened to her mother reading a sequence from a poem on the death of the Earl of Moray, *They hae killed the Earl o' Moray and they laid him on the green*, her ears and mind received the last seven words as *and the Lady Mondegreen*.<sup>6</sup> Like the words in the silent text, the sounds that she heard are semantically and syntactically coherent, albeit in quite different ways. Like instances of sandhi in general, mondegreens are common and are most often created involuntarily. A skilled writer, though, can contrive (rather than simply fall into) phrases that say one thing in a silent script and something else in oral delivery and / or auditory perception. The effects of the contrivance might of course be enhanced when the same person is both the writer and the performer.

The composer of the *Eclogues* would also have been the first person to perform them aloud, quite likely without resorting to the text from which subsequent oral performers extracted their own approximation of the poet's intended sounds.<sup>7</sup> Now, after many centuries over which text and eye have almost completely replaced voice and ear in the communication of Latin poetry, it might be helpful to recall for present purposes some anecdotal testimony from two millennia ago. A poet named Julius Montanus, a contemporary of Virgil, is said to have reported on his personal experience of Virgil's inimitable virtuosity in oral delivery ([Suetonius], *Life of Virgil* 29–30):

*Pronuntiabat autem cum suavitate et lenociniis miris. Ac Seneca tradidit Iulium Montanum poetam solitum dicere involaturum se Vergilio quaedam, si et vocem posset et os et hypocrisin; eosdem enim versus ipso pronuntiante bene sonare, sine illo inanes esse mutosque.*

<sup>6</sup> See Konnikova (2014); *OED*<sup>3</sup>, *s.v.* 'mondegreen'.

<sup>7</sup> A partially analogous experience for contemporary Anglophones might be reading a text of, say, 'Fern Hill' before or after hearing it as recorded by Dylan Thomas.

(“[Virgil] used to pronounce his words with a polish and wonderfully engaging properties. Indeed Seneca has reported that the poet Julius Montanus was accustomed to saying that he would have appropriated certain effects from Virgil if only he had also been able to appropriate his voice and articulation and dramatic skill; for the same verses that had a fine sonority when he himself was pronouncing them were weak and indistinct without him”).

While Montanus’ reported words offer no specific details on Virgil’s distinctive technique, his general testimony is cited here in anticipation of observations below on vocal effects in the Phyllis-Iollas couplets. In addition to the articulation of sound, other linguistic factors, lexical and syntactic, will also be entertained in the process of teasing out several allusive poetic effects involved with *Phyllis*. A related and overarching consideration, though, lies in the realm of myth and literary tradition.

*Ecl. 3* makes no overt reference to the myth of the ill-starred Thracian princess Phyllis, and it presents nothing explicit to identify its Phyllis with anyone outside the fictional environs of the poem. Consequently that myth has seldom figured in modern interpretations.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the poem is rarely, if ever, cited as witness to the myth. But, with the ludic modality and mythical subject matter noted by Ovid in mind, I assume an allusive presence for the Phyllis myth that informs both Menalcas’ response (78–79) to Damoetas and his subsequent reference to Phyllis as he exchanges riddles with Damoetas in their final pair of couplets (104–07). Brief prolegomena are in order, then, on the lineaments of the myth and what is known of its literary history.<sup>9</sup> We are told that the desirable Thracian princess Phyllis passed up on numerous royal Thracian suitors and married an Athenian prince named Demophon (or, in some sources, Acamas), a son of Theseus, who on the way home from the war at Troy stopped briefly in Thrace. He not only married Phyllis but also received her father’s kingdom as dowry. Soon after their marriage he departed, but with the promise of returning by a specified date after attending to obligations back home in Athens. As the couple parted company, Phyllis gave him a little receptacle containing a mystery object, and instructed him to open it should he ever waver in his intention to return. After the time for that return had passed, she went repeatedly to the sea-shore in desperation and called out to him over the waves to no avail. She eventually concluded that he would not return, and cursed him for his faithlessness, before hanging herself from a leafless almond tree. Among various continuations and conclusions to the story, the almond tree figures etiologically in several ways: Phyllis was transformed into an almond tree; the almond trees in the vicinity lost their leaves in sympathetic grief for the

<sup>8</sup> A recent exception is Fabre-Serris (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the absence of the passages from *Ecl. 3* and *Tristia*, Knaack (1909) remains paradigmatic here for its compendious survey of the ancient literary witnesses

death of Phyllis; or Demophon, proving faithful after all, returned too late and embraced the almond tree, which immediately burst into leaf as if, says Servius (on *Ecl.* 5.10), the transformed Phyllis sensed the presence of her husband. In a different conclusion to Demophon's side of the story, localized for some reason in Cyprus, he opened the container and went into a panic when he saw what was in it, and then mounted his horse, which bolted away and threw him off, causing him to fall, fatally, on his sword.

As an appendix to the preceding summary I mention an inconspicuous, but for us potentially significant, phrase that appears in a couple of Greek mythographic reports of the story.<sup>10</sup> They simply say that what the receptacle contained was something sacred to "mother" Rhea. A chain of associations suggests to me that under the circumstances the sacred object had something to do with almonds and the curse of Phyllis. Mother Rhea, although we are not told so in any account of the Phyllis myth, had a vital association with almonds and an almond tree. She was a Thracian avatar of the Anatolian "great mother" goddess known as Agdistis and Cybele, in whose complicated family genealogy almonds and the almond tree figure prominently as powers of fertility and regeneration.<sup>11</sup>

Although no full narrative of the Phyllis myth survives in a major literary work, we do have several prosaic para-literary summaries from mythographers and scholiasts. There is also ample evidence, from poetic allusions or briefly noted details, that the myth was well known in Augustan times. Particularly noteworthy here is Ovid's *Heroides* 2, a poetic epistle from the aggrieved princess to the unfaithful Demophon. That long poem, hardly a narrative itself, presumes readers with a background knowledge of the overall story, and the same may be said regarding Ovid's briefer notices of Phyllis elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Another indication to that effect is presented in a passage of the *Culex* (130–34) where neither Phyllis nor the almond tree is even mentioned, but both are clearly identified by association with Demophon and by their position in a catalogue of transmuted trees. A further example of a brief allusion that must expect a reader's knowledge of the background narrative occurs in the following couplet from Propertius (2.24.44–45):

*Parvo dilexit spatium Minoida Theseus,  
Phyllida Demophon, hospes uterque malus.*

("For a brief time Theseus was affectionately attentive towards Minos' daughter and so was Demophon towards Phyllis, each of the men a dishonourable guest").

<sup>10</sup> [Apollod.] *Bibl. epit.* 6.16; Tzetzes, Σ *Lycoph.* 49–62.

<sup>11</sup> Pausanias 7.17.10–12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ars* 2.353–55; 3.38, 459–60; *Rem.* 55–56, 591–608; *Tr.* 2.1.533–38.

Such examples invite, if not compel, us to recognize (as Ovid did in his *Tristia*) an allusive presence for the Phyllis of myth among the trees and lovers of the third *Eclogue*.

Other matters preliminary to the reading of the Phyllis / Iolla couplets are intertwined lexical and orthographic complications. The micro-lexicon of almonds has run a complicated course through the long history of the Latin language and its vernacular offshoots.<sup>13</sup> The best attested set of terms are formed from the base *amygdal-* (Greek ἀμυγδαλ-), which has a presumed origin in western Asia, whence it spread westwards in step with the cultivation of the tree itself. Variants of *amygdal-* occur only very rarely in Latin verse, and are relevant here only for their presence in prose accounts of the Phyllis myth. The two terms that will bear significantly on the reading of the exchange of Damoetas and Menalcas, though, are *amand-* and *phyllis*. While the apparatus of Latin scholarship does not generally acknowledge the currency of either term until several centuries later than Virgil's time, I have previously recognized *phyllis* as a dendronym in both the third *Eclogue* and the seventh (7.59, 63).<sup>14</sup> One of my subsidiary points then was that Latin poetic language appears to play recurrently on the name *Phyllis* on the basis of popular etymologizing linking the Greek and Latin roots φιλ- and *am-*. Consider, *Phyllis amat corylos: illas dum Phyllis amabit ...* (*Ecl.* 7.63). I shall presently expand on that conceit while positing *amanda* as a synonym of *phyllis* in *Ecl.* 3.

The semiology of *phyllis* is further complicated on another plane: not only is it one of a cluster of almond terms, but “almond” is only one of a varied cluster of meanings, several of which are potentially at play, simultaneously or sequentially, in the exchange between Menalcas and Damoetas. If the poet has left open a range of interpretive options to both auditor and reader, editorial discretion, or indiscretion, and orthographic conventions can arbitrarily restrict those options for the modern reader. This is a point too clear to require argument but also too fundamental to leave unmentioned. Every modern text of the poem, by capitalizing words to mark them as proper nouns, effectively disqualifies them in the mind of a compliant reader as common nouns, or as any other homonymous parts of speech. The ancients, having no such convention, could not visually distinguish *Phyllida* from *phyllida* nor *Iolla* (a name) from *iolla* (an exclamatory shout?) in contexts where either is semantically and syntactically feasible. While the poet-performer could mark his intention by vocal inflection, subsequent generations of readers had no marker to guide them. How, then, to take a not entirely hypothetical instance, when Servius (on both *Ecl.* 3.76 and *Ecl.* 3.107) glosses Virgil's *Phyllida* as *amicam communem* (i.e. “prostitute”),<sup>15</sup> do we know whether he means

<sup>13</sup> For a copiously documented study see Aebischer (1978). The standard inventory of terms found in classical and late antique texts is presented in André (1967) 178.

<sup>14</sup> Egan (1996) 236–37.

<sup>15</sup> On *Phyllis* as “prostitute” see Prop. 2.24.44; Mart. 10.81.1–4; 11.29.1–2, 8. On *amica communis* meaning “prostitute” cf. Petr. 105.3.

that a particular person named Phyllis is an *amica communis* or that *phyllis* is a metonym and synonym for *amica communis*? And, Servius aside, how, indeed, can we dismiss the possibility that Virgil and / or his character Damoetas, had neither of these options in mind? The early texts lacked any orthographic distinction between proper and common nouns, so that *P/phyllis*, in this case, contained potential for poetic ambiguity or polysemy. In what follows, then, I shall recognize *P/phyllis* as both a personal name and as a common noun, metonym and synonym for “almond tree”, on the analogy of numerous other instances of phytonyms explained by mythical metamorphosis (e.g. narcissus, hyacinthus, anemone). That, it should be noted, can coexist with the meanings suggested by Servius’ glosses.

Finally, something must be said about the natural history of the almond tree and cultural lore that derives from it. A salient and well recognized feature of the annual cycle of the almond tree is its early (sometimes as early as January in the northern hemisphere) and spectacular blooming. Pliny, in a lapidary observation, is one among numerous voices from the classical world to recognize this: *floret prima omnium amygdala mense Ianuario* (16.103.1). The tree’s early blossoming is all the more conspicuous since it precedes its leafing-out and transforms the skeletal and wintry blackness of the bare branches into a brilliant display of whites and pastels. Nowadays the event is celebrated around the globe by annual almond blossom festivals in the temperate latitudes where almonds are cultivated. Although there is no direct report of such celebrations in the ancient Greek or Roman world, we can at least surmise that they arose there some time soon after almond cultivation was introduced to the Mediterranean world from the East. There is indeed some cross-cultural evidence from the west Asian homeland of the almond to encourage such conjectures. The fortuitous survival of evidence of a link between almonds, the Phyllis myth and the oriental fertility goddess Rhea-Cybele has already been mentioned, but there is also some leading cultural information from other quarters of the Near East. There is for instance a Jewish spring-time celebration of new-life linked to the blossoming of the almond in the early spring month of Shevat (January-February). This holiday, which has been traced back to late antiquity, is sometimes referred to as the “birthday of the trees”, and is formally known as *Tu B’Shevat*. Other evidence, some as early as the book of Exodus (25.33–34; 37.19–20), demonstrates for some scholars, suggests for others, a nexus of associations involving almond-trees, the Menorah and the “Tree of Life”. Scholars have explored such matters in the wider context of Near Eastern tree cults.<sup>16</sup> I make this sketchy notice with general thoughts in mind of the almond within an east-west cultural *koinē* and in anticipation of possible implications for the collocation of *Phyllis* with Damoetas’ birthday.

<sup>16</sup> Points of entry to the extensive scholarship on such matters are afforded by Yarden (1971); Taylor (1995) 42–48; Haklilli (2001) 36–40.

Guided now, by a dossier of information on *P/phyllis* that, to judge from the contemporary or near-contemporary literary allusions cited above, had become traditional by Virgil's time, we can turn to a line-by-line reading of the Phyllis-Iollas couplets.

*Phyllida mitte mihi; meus est natalis, Iolla.*

Owing to the morpho-semantic variability, documented for *P/phyllis* and conjectured below for *I/iolla(s)*, this first verse of Menalca's couplet admits of several interpretations including the following, or variations thereof:

1. Send Phyllis to me, Iollas. It's my birthday!
2. Send me a party girl, Iollas. It's my birthday!
3. Provide an almond tree for me, Iollas. It's my birthday!
4. Send me Phyllis – oo-la-la! It's my birthday!
5. Send me a party girl – oo-la-la! It's my birthday!
6. Provide an almond tree for me. Whoopee! It's my birthday!

The first three renderings treat *Iolla*, conventionally, as the vocative of a person's name, while assigning three different meanings to *P/phyllis*. The first one overall follows the traditional interpretation whereby Iollas is a person in control of access to the desirable Phyllis as her master and / or lover. The plausibility of this is supported by the fact that an Iollas has also been named with a similar function as impediment to a would-be lover's access to the desirable youth Alexis in *Ecl.* 2 (1–2 with 56–57). The second rendition differs from the first by regarding *P/phyllis* as a metonym for "prostitute", on the model of the passages cited from Propertius and Martial<sup>17</sup> and the *amica communis* of Servius' gloss. The third introduces "almond tree" as a translation of *phyllis*, based partly on the conjecture of that tree as an accessory at birthday celebrations or possibly cult festivals (remember mother Rhea of the myth). Besides that, though, the presence of Phyllis as dendronym and metonym for "spring-time" (cf. *Ecl.* 7.59) is appropriate, almost mandated, given the context in which Palaemon's programmatic reference to the fecundity of every tree (*omnis parturit arbos*, 56) is followed by a succession of tree or flower names (*arbos*, 56; *sylvae*, 57; *lauri*, 63; *hyacinthus*, 63; *salices*, 65; *silvestri ex arbore*, 70; *phyllida* 76, 78; *arboribus*, 81; *arbutus*, 82; *salix*, 83).<sup>18</sup> The second triad of renditions retains these possible meanings for *P/phyllis*, while in each case replacing

<sup>17</sup> See n.15 above.

<sup>18</sup> For *Phyllis* in another cluster of dendronyms see *Ecl.* 7.52–68 and Egan (1996) 236–37.

*I/iolla*, as a personal name, with expressive exclamations. The latter are somewhat arbitrarily chosen, but “whoopee” is meant to convey a generally celebratory tone, while “oo-la-la” suggests concupiscent anticipations of the desirable birthday companion.

The poet has left several possible ways of construing Menalcas’ line, and individual auditors or readers will, whether reflexively or upon deliberation, choose among them. So far unmentioned is the likelihood of the Thracian princess Phyllis playing, at least fleetingly, in an interpreter’s thoughts. Any notion, though, that she could be, in anything like a literal sense, the object of Menalcas’ present imperative must be immediately dismissed as absurd, given the timing and *mise en scène* of the pastoral drama. So we must put Thracian Phyllis on file until we hear from Damoetas, who, as immediate auditor of Menalcas’ words, also has a complicated menu of interpretive options. Indeed, as he pursues his unique task of capping his rival’s words, he conspicuously and selectively quotes and adapts some of them. In the process, as I shall presently argue, he replaces or supplements Menalcas’ local *P/phyllis* of the moment by giving a presence, even a voice, to the remote Phyllis of the mythical past.

The standard interpretation of the next verse – *cum faciam vitula pro frugibus, ipse venito* – flows along with that for the preceding one, with a second imperative apparently addressed to one Iollas. It is conventional to read Damoetas’ words as inviting this Iollas to attend a later celebration of an agricultural ritual, possibly the Ambarvalia. The invitation is understood as an implicit notice that Iollas’ presence is not wanted at the birthday festivities that would be graced by Phyllis; and also as a facetious allusion to the mandatory abstinence from erotic activities on such ritual occasions.<sup>19</sup> But the invitation is also fully consistent with the theme of the renewed fecundity of the land, earlier introduced by Palaemon. On top of that, the ludicrous impertinence and implausibility of a herdsman’s invitation to an event involving the expensive sacrifice of a heifer points up the witty insincerity of words ostensibly calculated to gratify Iollas and make him amenable to the request for Phyllis. By any interpretation applied to it, l. 77 not only adheres to Palaemon’s program but also conforms to the prevailing ludic tone that will be maintained in Menalcas’ reply. Apart from that, the second verse of Damoetas’ couplet has no apparent bearing on Menalcas’ response. It is as if Menalcas, after hearing l. 76 through to its end, immediately set about composing his capping reply, before hearing l. 77. In that reply, as already noted, he opens and closes his whole couplet with the same words that Damoetas used to open and close the first verse:

*Phyllida amo ante alias, nam me discedere flevit  
et longum ‘formose, vale, vale,’ inquit, ‘Iolla.’*

<sup>19</sup> This explanation is found as early as Servius *ad loc.* and routinely adopted by modern interpreters.

In revisiting this couplet the first thing to recall is that it not only begins with three syllables identical to those that open the preceding couplet, but its first two and a half pre-caesuran feet also form a prosodic match to their counterpart in the previous couplet. In emulating Damoetas, however, Menalcas exercises considerable, although generally unnoticed, poetic variation. His first line begins with a string of four words, a formation highly marked by sandhi, since it contains three consecutive elisions at word boundary, which reduce the ten syllables presented to the eye down to the seven that meet the ear. *Phyllida amo ante alias* thus represents vocables that the same alphabet might with greater phonetic accuracy represent as *phyllidamandalias* or, when conventionally marked for scansion, as *phÿllidā / māndālī / ās //*. In these transcriptions I replace the *t* of *ante* with *d* to reflect the likely voicing of the stop consonant positioned between the sonant *n* and the following vowel. The transcriptions, like the oral delivery that they represent, obscure the word boundaries. The consequence is that both the transcription and the sound offer at least two options for the recovery of a sequence of separate words on the part of an auditor without a text:

1. *Phyllida amo ante alias*: I love Phyllis more than (or before) the others.
2. *Phyllida amandam alias*: Phyllis (*i.e.* “almond tree”) alias Amanda (*i.e.* “almond tree”).

The Latin of option 1 visually presents itself to a reader who, however, when reading aloud will also hear (but perhaps not heed) the Latin of option 2. Only the first one is by itself a complete and intelligible syntagm, and that continues to be true when the whole sentence has been completed after the caesura. That, however, does not mean that it is the first or only option to enter the mind of an auditor and perhaps lodge itself there. Certainly the continuation of Menalcas’ sentence after the caesura disqualifies *Phyllida amandam alias* syntactically, but it cannot retroactively obliterate perceptions initially formed by the sounds of those words. What, then, might those perceptions and their basis have been for Latinophone auditors?

At the caesura, an interval of silence whose duration would be controlled by the poet / performer, the auditor who has heard *Phyllida amandam alias* will momentarily await a continuation of the sentence that might complete and validate those words syntactically. Then, by the time at which that transitory possibility has been eliminated, the juxtaposition of *P/phyllida* and *amandam* informed by *alias* has already awakened the knowledgeable auditor’s memory to the mythical connection of Phyllis with the almond tree. It has, indeed, opened the whole traditional dossier on “Phyllis”, with its numerous associations: amatory, botanical, pastoral, seasonal, metonymic, lexical and tragically lamentable, as Menalcas redirects his rival’s citing of *P/phyllis* from its primary focus on personal amatory and celebratory concerns of the moment towards the wider realms of folkloric, literary, and linguistic tradition.

Should there be any suspicion that what is here perceived as the poet's clever manipulation of the synonymous dendronyms *phyllis* and *amanda* is nothing more than this auditor's accidental mondegreen, that doubt can be allayed with the aid of two other Augustan poets who were well acquainted with *Ecl.* 3 and its themes. In the final two verses of *Heroides* 2, Ovid's patently Phyllis-centred poem, the heroine anticipates her suicide caused by Demophon and writes her own projected epitaph:

**PHYLLIDA DEMOPHOON LETO DEDIT HOSPES AMANTEM.  
ILLE NECIS CAUSAM PRAEBUIT, IPSA MANUM.**

Compare the words in bold type bracketing the hexameter to Virgil's *Phyllida amandam*. Note also the assonantal match, virtually a rhyme, of the closing syllables of each verse: *hospes amantem* and *ipsa manum*, both phrases referring to Phyllis, who is about to become an almond tree.<sup>20</sup> The second helpful Augustan poet, Horace, presents some more subtle and perhaps more complex evocations of the Phyllis of *Ecl.* 3. There are many phrases and motifs common to the Phyllis couplets of Damoetas and Menalcas and one of Horace's *Odes* (4.11).<sup>21</sup> Of particular relevance in the latter is an inamorata who is addressed both as *Phyllis* (3) and as *Amanda* (34).<sup>22</sup> This beloved Horatian Phyllis Amanda, like her Virgilian namesake, features in a verdant spring-time setting on a festive occasion, a birthday celebration no less, with an auspicious ritual animal sacrifice. Horace's Phyllis Amanda, moreover, is one who sings in troubled circumstances at the end of the poem, in contrast to the buoyant ambience of its beginning. Horace even seems to recall Virgil's Phyllis Amanda by inverting one of his tropes: whereas Menalcas claimed Phyllis as his first love (*amo ante alias*), she is announced by the poetic voice of the *Ode* as a last love (*finis amorum*, 32).<sup>23</sup> I conclude that the words of Virgil, Horace and Ovid and their respective contexts attest to a lexical cluster, already current in Augustan times, linking the name of the mythical Phyllis and two poetic terms for the almond-tree.

For any auditor attuned to them, the allusions encapsulated in *phyllidamandalias* inevitably inform the remainder of Menalcas' couplet, which features more phonetically based word-play:

*nam me discedere flewit  
et long/um for/mosew, wa/lew, wale', / inquit, I/olla.'*

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Luke Houghton for pointing out the emphatic assonance at the end of the pentameter and also for several other perceptive comments following my oral presentation to the Virgil Society.

<sup>21</sup> Various affinities of the Horatian *Ode* and the Virgilian *Eclogue* are noted by Thomas (2011) 216, 218.

<sup>22</sup> I construe a vocative, *Amandā*, here but my point would not be entirely disqualified by the conventional reading of an ablative *amandā* in agreement with *voce* in the following verse.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Thomas (2011) 218.

The weeping Phyllis here, in her purported lengthy and / or long-distance (*longum*) farewell to Menalcas, must call to mind her Thracian namesake, who mourned her beloved Demophon for a long time and at a long distance, as she made repeated visits to the seashore where she cried out over the waves for him.

Having previously suggested that the performer's discretionary vocal interpretation of Phyllis' words might have appropriately adapted them to the context, I turn now to consideration of related features of prosody and effects of sandhi. Menalcas' introduction and quotation of Phyllis' words recall Pope's dictum on poetic sound that seems an echo to the sense. The pairing in l. 78 of the long final syllable of *alias* with a caesural pause introduces an extended prosodic sequence leading down to the beginning of the third foot of l. 79:

/ -ās || nām / mē || dīs / cēdērē / || | flēvīt / / ēt || lōn / gūm || fōr / mō -

11 of the 14 syllables at the end of one verse and the beginning of the other are long while, of the 3 short syllables, the 2 in *discedere* are mandated by the metre. Since, moreover, the sequence includes four caesurae (||), one diaeresis (|||) and a pause at verse end (//), the total of fourteen syllables would probably take an unusually long time to voice even without any deliberate exaggeration of the effect by the performer. Hardly accidental to it all is the placement of *longum* spanning the first two feet of l. 79 and set off, for emphasis, we might suppose, between two unusually early caesurae. This prosodically marked isolation of *longum* presents the word as an echo of both the sound (*i.e.* the prolongation of the sequence in its delivery) and the sense of its context. It also draws the listener, phonetics and prosody aside, into questions of semantics: does the adverbial *longum* relate to the temporal duration of Phyllis' weeping, the distance from which she weeps and speaks, or to the time that she uses to utter the words that the poet and Menalcas attribute to her in l. 79? All three possibilities might enter the mind of any reader familiar with an element in the story of the forlorn Thracian princess, as expressed in something like the same terms that Ovid would apply to her repeated lamentations on the seashore just before her death and metamorphosis (*Rem. Am.* 595–98):

*Et modo, qua poterat, longum spectabat in aequor,  
nunc in harenosa lassa iacebat humo.  
'Perfide Demophoon!' surdas clamabat ad undas,  
ruptaque singultu verba loquentis erant.*

The same three possibilities are also enlivened by the sounds of the words attributed to Phyllis in l. 79, '*formose, vale, vale*', *inquit*, '*Iolla*'. Let us, as a temporary expedient, isolate her words in *oratio recta*:

*formose vale vale Iolla*

As noted earlier, *Iolla* contains no obstruents; only vowels, a semi-vowel and sonants. That observation can, once *inquit* has been excised, extend back over the whole hypothetical sequence above. Another feature of the sequence is that at three different word boundaries the vowel *e* is followed by a semi-vowel. Adjusted for sandhi effects, then, the words can be phonetically approximated as follows

*for-moe-sew-wa-lew-wa-ley-yee-yole-la.*

While the single grapheme *i* of *Iolla* is metrically one short syllable, it is here transcribed by the sequence *y-ee-y* which recognizes three different articulatory functions: first a glide (*y*) between the *e* of *vale* and the vocalic *i* (*ee*), then the vocalic *i* (*ee*) itself, and finally a glide (*y*) between the vocalic *i* and the *o* of *iolla*. The postulated four-word sequence of sandhi-adjusted sounds evokes moaning, whooping, howling, ululating or yodelling. The effects would be enhanced should a poet / performer ornament the delivery with variations of volume and with abrupt rising and descending fluctuations in pitch. Those are characteristics of yodelling, that timeless pastime of herders in the mountains, most typically, for many, those mountains fringing Virgil's Transpadane homeland. That same area was also the current, or recent, administrative domain of Pollio, that enthusiast for pastoral poetry with the yodesque name that will soon be sounded out in three successive couplets (*Ecl.* 3.84–89). Other circumstances specific to the content of Menalcas' couplet are consistent with the yodelling model, for the quoted words of Phyllis are voiced over a long distance and / or over a long interval of time. Moreover the couplet's closing trisyllabic *ee-yole-la* resembles not only common yodelling phrases, but also the onomatopoeic words for the activity in several languages of the Alpine region.<sup>24</sup> These words include the common German *jodeln*, but also such lesser known German items as *jolen*, *jola* and *jobla*, which bring us phonetically closer to Latin *iolla*. It is not, indeed, an altogether implausible conjecture that a Latin verb for yodelling (and there surely was at least one)<sup>25</sup> was *\*iollare* and, further, that it might, after mutating phonetically during the centuries of its "hibernation" in the spoken language, have an attested modern reflex in French *iouler*, where the initial *i* is also syllabic. This all indicates an early and enduring pan-Alpine set of mimetic yodel terms extending across the

<sup>24</sup> See for example the opening paragraphs in Baumann (2016) and earlier literature cited there.

<sup>25</sup> *iubilare* (conjectured as derivative of the exclamatory *io*) has previously been identified in that role. Cf. Baumann (2016) with earlier literature; also McKinnon (1996) 215–16. A key text here is Paul. exc. Fest. 74.23 (92 L): *Iubilare est rustica voce inclamare*. Note, though, the earlier Varro, *LL* 6.68.1–4 with what seems to be a citation from a comedy: *ut quiritare urbanorum, sic iubilare rusticorum; itaque hos imitans †Aprisius ait: 'io bucco! Quis me iubilat?'*

geo-linguistic interface of the Italo-Romance and Germanic languages, and now first attested, possibly, in the third *Eclogue*.

To this point the description of the sound effects in l. 79 has been premised on a text that lacks the metrically and syntactically crucial *inquit*. The question now is how the presence of those two syllables might affect the perceived sound effects. Between the second *vale* and *inquit* there is a hiatus, an event unmarked by any grapheme in either ancient or modern Latin texts and so, as commonly assumed, devoid of anything *clearly* audible. And yet this hiatus prevents the two adjacent syllables from merging, unmetrically, into one. The absence of a visible sign only disguises the reality that hiatus commonly involves activity of the speech organs with attendant sandhi effects. In Latin, and numerous other languages, that activity might be the articulation of an unwritten “epenthetic” glide mediating the transition from one vowel to the other, as seen above in *iolla*. A second possibility, seemingly more congenial to our particular Virgilian context, is an intervening glottal stop (*i.e.* ʔ in IPA notation), articulated by the abrupt and complete blocking of air-flow at the larynx followed by an equally abrupt release into the following vowel. The percussive release, often called a “glottal attack”, intensifies the volume at the onset of the second vowel. Within the environment of the *vale-inquit* assemblage, the abrupt insertion of the glottal stop would foreshorten the ordinarily long vowel of *valē* (a “shortening in hiatus” as Latinists frequently call it), while the resumption of voicing in the “attack” would lend audible emphasis to the long initial syllable of *inquit*. This is all to suggest that *inquit*, despite interrupting the pure vocalicity of Phyllis’ utterance with two obstruents (ʔ and *t*), actually enhances the yodelling effects. Indeed glottal stops or “attacks” are recognized by yodelologists (who also use such descriptors as “jolts”, “yips” and “clicks”) as necessary and defining features of the technique.<sup>26</sup> Another consideration is that, in performance, the short second syllable of *inquit* might well be muted or slighted by its position following the long and plosively “attacked” first syllable. In sum, a comparison shows that, if anything, Virgil’s complete hexameter more effectively presents Phyllis’ yodelling than her own words do by themselves.<sup>27</sup> For good measure, I present below two representations of the full line, the latter showing, instead of a glide in the transition from the *i* and the *o* of *Iolla*, another glottal stop and hence an additional yodelling “yip” or “jolt”:

*for-moe-sew-wa-lew-wa-le ʔ eenk wit ee-yole-la.*

*for-moe-seu-wa-leu-wa-le ʔ eenk wit ee ʔ ole-la.*

<sup>26</sup> See *e.g.* Plantenga (2004) 12–15.

<sup>27</sup> Compare, too, versions with only epenthetic glides (underlined) in the hiatus:

*for-moe-sew-wa-lew-wa-ley yeenk wit ee-yole-la.*

*for-moe-seu-wab-leu-wa-lew weenk wit ee-yole-la.*

Since a yodeller's sounds, however emotionally expressive they might be, are nearly always nonsensical, they in effect use the human voice as a musical instrument.<sup>28</sup> If, then, in the example of Virgilian *Lautmalerei* cited earlier from the opening of *Ecl.* 1, the poet uses Meliboeus' meaningful Latin words to imitate the pure sounds of Tityrus' pipe, he here exercises a more complicated variety of sound-painting, by exploiting sandhi effects so that Phyllis' intelligible Latin words also function as pure nonsensical vocalizing in keeping with the conventions of the yodelling mode.

There is still more to be said about the sounds that Phyllis uttered, but at this point in the analysis of the couplet, when philological diagnostics might overburden the poetry itself, a retreat to a summary review of the lines is in order. With l. 76, then, Damoetas introduces *Iollas*, ostensibly as a name, but also a distinctive and perhaps loudly delivered exclamatory vocable. The earlier words of that line continue the previously established combination of amatory and arboreal themes, which are linked by the name of *P/phyllis, amica communis* and dendronym, which also carries a (temporarily) latent hint at the mythical Thracian princess of the same name. In his response Menalcas, as the rules dictate, picks up on Damoetas' words, by repeating the names of Phyllis and Iollas, by extending the arboreal and amatory themes once again when he glosses *Phyllida* with *Amandam*, while echoing Damoetas' sounds and words. He also takes a cue from Damoetas as he brings to the fore the old myth of Phyllis, by explicitly presenting a person so named who calls out sadly to a departed lover. Finally, there is also reason to suppose that he mischievously reconstrues *I/iolla* by foregrounding its distinctiveness as pure sound and slighting or ignoring its prior function as a personal name.<sup>29</sup>

Over the short span of four verses in the Phyllis-Iollas exchange, the mood has changed from Damoetas' evident amatory optimism to the lamentation of the deserted lover Phyllis. The latter tone carries over strikingly into the immediate sequel, as Damoetas begins the next exchange with the two words *triste lupus* at the opening of a verse containing no fewer than six *u*-sounds:

*Triste lupus stabulis, matūris frūgibus imbres*

For this one time at least Damoetas is taking his cue from Menalcas, specifically from his quotation of the yodelling phrases of the sorrowful Phyllis. As convention dictates in amoebic exchanges, Damoetas puts a different twist on his rival's words, specifically here on his sound effects, as he responds with imitative allusion (*Lautmalerei* again) to the howling of

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Plantenga (2004) 12.

<sup>29</sup> Understanding *Iolla* as an exclamatory sequence of yodel sounds avoids what I see as the inherent awkwardness of traditional interpretations that entail transferring the name of Iollas to Menalcas.

wolves, introduced by their inherently onomatopoeic zoonym *lupus* (cf. *bubo*, *cuculus*, *turdus*, *turtur*, *ulula* etc.) and sustained by the four *u*-sounds in the next three words. In noting that, we can safely assume that the comparison of yodelling to the howling of wolves and other canids was as ageless as the phenomena themselves and as commonplace in antiquity as it is in modern times.<sup>30</sup>

While the same verse, as it opens with *triste*, transfers the sadness of the aggrieved Phyllis to the threatened farm animals, the second verse of Damoetas' couplet also seems to include some more subtle retrospectives on the mythical Phyllis, through its allusion to trees and to the anger of a bitter, or embittering, beloved (paronomastically in *Amaryllidis*). Phyllis aside, the same couplet introduces to the dialogue the appropriately pastoral motif of concern for domesticated animals, which is, over the course of the next eleven couplets (82–104), recurrently linked to the previously established leitmotif of flourishing plant life. In that extended sequence, Phyllis is not named, although her various functions as the arboreal harbinger of spring, as embittered lover, and as yodeller (a function echoed by the repetitive *Pollio ... Pollio ... Pollio* in 84, 86 and 88) might maintain a lingering presence for her. She does, in any case, eventually return to prominence.

In introducing the final pair of couplets Damoetas abruptly breaks the pattern of the dialogue by challenging his rival with a riddle (104–05):

*Dic quibus in terris (et eris mihi magnus Apollo)  
tris pateat caeli spatium non amplius ulnas.*

(“Say in what lands the breadth of the sky extends over no more than three *ulnae* and you will be the mighty Apollo in my mind”).

Menalcas counters, not with any apparent attempt to solve that riddle but by echoing Damoetas' introductory phrase and posing another riddle that also remains unanswered when Palaemon abruptly pronounces the competition closed (106–07).

*Dic quibus in terris inscripti nomina regum  
nascantur flores, et Phyllida solus habeto.*

(“Say in what lands flowers bloom with the names of royalty engraved on them, and take sole possession of Phyllis”).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Plantenga (2004) 16.

With the reintroduction of *P/phyllis*, my hope, notwithstanding the risk of falling into “hermeneutic traps”<sup>31</sup> set by riddles, is that the expanded perspective on the various mythical, arboreal, and amatory associations of *Phyllis* presented above opens some new approaches.<sup>32</sup> Hitherto the new reference to Phyllis has hardly figured in explanations of the riddle *per se*, being seen solely as a statement of the consequences of Damoetas’, presumably unlikely,<sup>33</sup> success in solving it. Specifically, Menalcas is promising to reward such success by relinquishing as a favour to Damoetas his own previously expressed amatory interest in Phyllis. This is a patently feasible, even inevitable, reading of Menalcas’ final phrase: *Phyllida solus habeto*. The riddling context of that phrase, however, imposes a caveat on any pat and obvious way of understanding it, for intentional verbal ambiguities are a convention of the genre, whereby facile assumptions divert the aspiring solver from the path to solution. Being mindful, then, of the variable semantic possibilities of *P/phyllis*, we have reason to consider any connections that that word might have to the riddle’s other terminology. The latter, it should first be noted, contains nothing but quotidian lexical items, most of which, however, being semantically varied and flexible, are prone to riddling.

To anyone with a background awareness of *Phyllis* as almond-tree, the conjunction of *flores* and *Phyllida* is immediately striking, for the tree’s blossoms and their early blooming, symbolic of new life, are a conspicuous feature of almond lore, and one that links them to the myth of the Thracian princess. The mythical Phyllis, moreover, was both the daughter of one king and the wife of another, by virtue of her marriage to Demophon, who received her father’s kingdom as a dowry and also succeeded his own father as king of Athens. Could it be, then, that the names of kings, or of royal persons in general,<sup>34</sup> inscribed on, or in, flowers newly come to life (*nascantur*) have something to do with the Thracian princess and / or the almond tree? As a first response to that question I once again invoke words that Ovid assigned to the princess Phyllis, specifically the final two couplets of *Heroides* 2, her letter to Demophon:

*Inscribere meo causa invidiosa sepulcro.*

*Aut hoc aut simili carmine notus eris:*

*PHYLLIDA DEMOPHOON LETO DEDIT HOSPES AMANTEM  
ILLE NECIS CAUSAM PRAEBUIT, IPSA MANUM.*

<sup>31</sup> For the phrase see Henderson (1998) 225, commenting on this sequence.

<sup>32</sup> I forego engaging here in a historical review and critical assessment of earlier proposed solutions, nearly all of which have nothing to do with the overall sphere of Phyllis lore. A single exception is Dix (1995), which also affords a convenient point of entry to earlier literature on the riddles.

<sup>33</sup> The implication here is that the chance of Menalcas solving the riddle and gaining unchallenged possession of Phyllis is as absurdly remote as that of Damoetas solving the first riddle and earning an exalted comparison to the perspicuous god Apollo.

<sup>34</sup> These need not literally be restricted to “kings”. See *OLD s.v. rex*, 2.e “ruling couple”; 6.b “royal household”.

Having resolved on suicide, Phyllis sets out in the first couplet the general character of her epitaph and in the second one a provisional version of its wording. The hexameter of the final couplet contains at least two names of royal persons (Phyllis and Demophon) and the suggestion of a third name in *amantem*, the near homonym of *Amanda*, which can be both an alias of Phyllis and a synonym of *phyllis* as a term for “almond tree”. (I observe once again that attention to *amantem* at the end of one line is maintained or reinforced when its three syllables are virtually repeated homophonetically by *ipsa manum* at the end of the next line.) While Ovid’s Phyllis can predict her own self-determined death and anticipate the wording and format of her own epitaph at her place of interment, she has no apparent foreknowledge of her metamorphosis into the almond tree. Ovid, though, and his readers must know from the mythographic tradition that her *sepulcrum* inscribed with the names of royalty will be the flowering almond tree. I conclude from this that the words of Phyllis’ Ovidian epitaph advance, in their own oblique or riddling way, a solution to the riddle posed by Virgil’s Menalcas. That is to say that the words of the two poets complement one another, at least in the minds of readers informed on the circumstances of the death and metamorphosis of Phyllis. It is almost certain of course that those poets and their contemporaries were conversant with more informants and information than we are. On that point I now introduce for consideration some still extant, and quite possibly relevant, ancient lore about inscription-bearing almond trees.

The following words are excerpted from a passage on the planting and cultivation of almonds in the handbook on agriculture written by Palladius, probably in the fourth or fifth century. This is the same Palladius who, in a poem on the grafting of fruit trees, had used *Phyllis* to mean “almond tree” (*Insit.* 149).

*Graeci adserunt nasci amygdala scripta, si aperta testa nuculeum sanum tollas et in eo quodlibet scribas et iterum luto et porcino stercore involutum reponas.*

(“The Greeks claim that almond trees sprout up with writing on them, if you take an intact kernel from an opened shell, inscribe whatever you want on it and put it back again after coating it with mud and pig excrement”).

(*Op. ag.* 2.13)

In this prosaic context, where Palladius uses only the vulgate term for the tree, his brief words are enough to indicate, perhaps to confirm, independently of cryptic Latin verses on Phyllis by Augustan poets and the philological ruminations that they now elicit many centuries later, that the concept of almond trees engraved with words was known to some readers in antiquity.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> A similar recipe is ascribed to Democritus by the 10th century *Geoponica* (10.14.2).

Palladius is working within a didactic tradition on the cultivation of fruit trees, but in this instance, apart from the presumed fertilizing benefits of the manure, his information seems to belong more to the realm of magic and fantasy. In fact, in the light of its conjunction with the lettered flowers of the Phyllis poetry, the engravings on the almond seed and tree suggest a cursing ritual, and bring to mind the mythographic reports of Phyllis cursing Demophon, after previously giving him the receptacle containing an object sacred to Rhea (an almond?). As tempting as it might be to speculate further on almond-related parallels with the myth of Rhea-Cybele and Attis and on the latter's implications for the genesis of the Phyllis myth, that would divert us unnecessarily from the Virgilian riddle of Menalcas. On that topic we need only reiterate that a coalition of Virgil, Ovid and Palladius points to the names of Phyllis and Demophon being delineated by the blossoms of the almond tree.<sup>36</sup>

A possible answer to Menalcas' riddle, then, is that names of royal personages appear on Phyllis' name-sake tree, either in the earth at the Thracian location of her death and metamorphosis, or anywhere else that almond trees grow. With that answer in mind, we can retroactively adjust the understanding of Menalcas' two imperatives, so that the second one advises or hints at a condition for executing the first: "Tell me in what grounds flowers grow inscribed with the names of royalty and – do be exclusively attentive to Phyllis". By this reading of *Phyllida solus habeto*, Damoetas is advised to concentrate his befuddled thoughts on *Phyllis*. That directive itself, though, necessarily embeds a secondary riddle and a possible red herring if *Phyllis* remains fixed in the front of Menalcas' mind as the lamentable heroine of the almond tree, whereas Damoetas is fixated solely on his chosen birthday companion, that local (*amica communis*?) named Phyllis.

As soon as the umpire Palaemon has heard what he rules to be the final words from the competitors – *Phyllida solus habeto* – it is as if he has recognized the crux in Menalcas' riddle and extended it back over the whole contest. As he declines to judge in favour of either contestant, the prevalent riddling and ludic spirit infectiously pervades his own words (108–11):

*Non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites:  
et vitula tu dignus et hic et quisquis amores  
aut metuet dulcis aut experietur amarus.  
Claudite iam rivos, pueri, sat prata biberunt.*

("It is not for me to resolve the issues of such magnitude between you. You are each deserving of a heifer and so will anyone be who is either fixated on sweet

<sup>36</sup> Would this entail some readable pattern on the individual blossoms or, as seems more plausible, were the configurations of the tree's blossom-bearing branches read as letters?

amours or involved with bitter ones. Now shut off the irrigation channels, boys; the pastures have drunk their fill”).

In declining to judge either contestant superior he commends (with sarcastic hyperbole?) the merits of both and the magnitude of their competitive efforts, before undercutting the compliment by recalling, with *vitula*, the herdsmen’s preposterous braggadocio earlier in the poem (cf. *vitulam*, 29 and 48).<sup>37</sup> The imperative of the final verse also has its belittling effect, as Palaemon abruptly admonishes the performers to stop spouting off. The words with which he does so have an additional effect as reminder of both the verse’s fictional setting in the pastoral landscape and its actual setting in a pastoral poem.

Still to be considered here is another omnibus clause that, *inter alia*, subverts the compliment. Damoetas and Menalcas are of course themselves among those who have experienced the joys or sorrows of love. As early as their exchange of couplets on Phyllis, in fact, we have heard Damoetas’ pleasant romantic anticipation of the one Phyllis lead into Menalcas’ reminiscence of the bitter amatory experience of another Phyllis. The disparaging factor in ll. 109–10 then lies in the allusion to the proverbial concept of bittersweet eros; *everyone* experiences either sweet or bitter *amores*, or both, and anyone who sings of them is as worthy of a big prize as Menalcas and Damoetas are. The bittersweet love topos might seem routine or hackneyed and the same must be said of the comic and commonplace word-play on *amores* and *amaros*<sup>38</sup> highlighted at the end of successive verses. The blatant triteness with which Virgil has Palaemon present these clichés focuses attention on them as he, *mollis atque facetus*, refreshes them from a new, context-specific, perspective. At this point I reiterate that Palaemon’s closing remarks immediately follow the poem’s final mention of the enigmatic *Phyllis*. Can it be then, given all the circumstances involving the various sounds and senses of *P/phyllis*, *amanda*, *amor* (with its other cognates) and almond trees, that it is only by coincidence that *dulcis* and *amarus*, the two descriptors that Palaemon applies to *amor*, are also common descriptors for almonds and almond trees? It is, after all, a botanical reality of which Greeks and Romans were well aware that almond trees and their fruit, like *amor*, exist in two varieties, which the Romans distinguished as *dulcis* and *amarus*.<sup>39</sup> Palaemon seems to have joined the game.

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<sup>37</sup> Are we to understand that Palaemon overheard that part of the dialogue?

<sup>38</sup> Discussed with reference to this passage in Snyder (1980) 114–15. Note also, among several occurrences in comedy, Plaut. *Cist.* 68–69; *Trin.* 260.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Pliny, NH 17.237.4: *amygdalae – ex dulcibus enim transfigurantur in amaras*; 17.252.3: *amygdalae ex amaris dulces fiunt*. Greek scientific writers regularly differentiate the bitter (πικρός) and sweet (γλυκύς) varieties. See e.g. Arist. fr. 277 Rose (= *Geopon.* 3.3.4); Theophr. *Caus. pl.* 2.15.1; *Hist. pl.* 3.17.6; Diosc. *De materia medica* 2.113.1.

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