

Genre and Style in Callimachus

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As far back as we know anything about Greek poetry, certain sorts of poems were written in certain metres, dialects and styles, though it was not till much later that what we call the genres were systematized. In the elegant formulation of L. E. Rossi, in the archaic period the laws of the genres were respected, but not written down; in the Hellenistic age they were written down—but not respected.¹ According to Rossi (83), Callimachus exemplifies a “new and revolutionary” attitude towards the traditional literary genres. According to Hutchinson, he deliberately “flouted” them;² according to Halperin: “It is almost as if the Alexandrians undertook to analyze and define the rules of the classic genres in order to be able to violate them all the more vigorously”;³ and according to Clayman: “By mixing up the form of one genre with the content of another, Callimachus demonstrates the emptiness of both.”⁴ I myself doubt whether even the older approach in terms of a striving for novelty at all costs does justice to the facts of social and literary history.

It was certainly an innovation to write (as Callimachus did) epinicia in elegiacs and iambics. But this was more than a perverse decision made in an ivory tower.⁵ Callimachus lived in a new and different world. He and his generation were not so much deliberately repudiating choral lyric as responding in their own way to changes forced upon them. Choral lyric flourished at a particular stage of Greek society. It was not just poetry, but an “indissoluble complex of poetry, melody and dance.”⁶ By the fourth century this complex was no more, and not merely for the lack of a new Aeschylus or Pindar. As we know from the comic writers, the songs of Alcman and Stesichorus and Simonides seemed terribly old fashioned to later generations. It was less the poetry that had dated than the music. In choral lyric the music had

¹L. E. Rossi, “I generi letterari e le loro leggi scritte e non scritte nelle letterature classiche,” *BICS* 18 (1971) 69–94. The present paper is a summary of a number of topics treated at greater length in my forthcoming book, *Callimachus and his Critics* (Princeton).

²G. E. Hutchinson, *Hellenistic Poetry* (Oxford 1988) 55 (though note too the more cautious remarks at 14–16).

³D. M. Halperin, *Before Pastoral* (Yale 1983) 204.

⁴D. L. Clayman, *Callimachus' Iambi*, *Mnemosyne Suppl.* 59 (Leiden 1980) 51.

⁵The image of the ivory tower is never far from the surface in modern writing on Callimachus and his peers.

⁶R. P. Winnington-Ingram, in *OCD*² 711.

been subsidiary to the poetry. Technical developments associated particularly with the names of Phrynis and Timotheus helped to emancipate music from the tyranny of the word: “ultimately music was to have unchallenged supremacy over poetry, with the text becoming a libretto for the music.”⁷ Choral lyric of a sort continued for a while, but it was no longer written by the leading poets of the age and it must be doubted whether trained choruses were widely available by the time Euripides came to write his epinicion on Alcibiades.⁸ Yet the athletic festivals themselves went from strength to strength. Indeed there were more of them than ever before. How was a thoughtful poet of the third century, aware of the two centuries of social, literary and musical change that separated him from the age of Pindar, going to face up to the problem of writing a poem on the victor in the games?

Pindar had been poet, composer, and choreographer in one. To revive dactylo-epitrites without the music and dance would have been mere archaizing, hardly what we would expect from Callimachus. Many of the traditional themes could be preserved, but a different metrical form was inevitable. The only question was which one. To demonstrate his expertise, Callimachus did write occasional poems in lyric metres, though usually in stichic or epodic form, and usually employing each metre once only. This is why they are cited in the later metrical handbooks. Of these, the most famous was his poem on the death and apotheosis of Arsinoë Philadelphos in 268, in Archebuleans.⁹ It would be interesting to know whether the poem was publicly performed—and if so whether or not by a chorus. But most of Callimachus’s poems, like those of most of his contemporaries, were restricted to just three metres: hexameters, elegiacs and iambics.

The shorter lyric forms, especially erotic and sympotic themes, tended to be subsumed in what we now call epigram, which in the early Hellenistic age were often quite long and not invariably written in elegiacs.¹⁰ The epigram was arguably the most lasting contribution made by the Hellenistic age to Greek literature. The two leading practitioners were Callimachus—and his critic Asclepiades. Every poet of the day followed their lead.

⁷B. Gentili, *Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore 1988) 24–31; M. L. West, *Greek Metre* (Oxford 1982) 138–52. What survives is far less complex than early lyric and never strophic.

⁸Itself something of a curiosity and of uncertain authenticity: C. M. Bowra, *On Greek Margins* (Oxford 1970) 134–148.

⁹Fr. 228; it is still worth consulting Wilamowitz’s original publication in *SB Berlin* 1912, I, 524–537.

¹⁰See my *Greek Anthology* (Oxford 1992) Ch. I.

The other dominant poetic form of the early Hellenistic age was undoubtedly elegy. Callimachus was no innovator here either. His immediate predecessors and contemporaries all wrote elegies: Philitas, Hermesianax, Alexander Aetolus. It was then that the long elegiac *Lyde* of the late fifth-century Antimachus was rediscovered. It is most unlikely that contemporaries saw Callimachus' choice of the elegy for an epinician or a hymn as a "flouting" of tradition. The mere fact that he wrote *three* elegiac epinicians hardly suggests the "revolutionary" experiment that Rossi (for example) supposed. An iambic epinician (*Iamb.* 8) might seem more surprising, but so might an iambic hymn to a god, and yet we have Castorion's on Pan (*SH* 310). Rossi also found Callimachus' one elegiac hymn surprising, but short hymnal invocations are found as early as the archaic age,¹¹ and from the fourth century we have the parodic hymn on simplicity in elegiacs by Crates the Cynic.¹² As Hutchinson has sensibly observed, "the effect of parody would have been spoiled had the metre seemed a startling novelty" (16). In *Iamb.* 13.18 Callimachus implies that he has been accused of mixing dialects, whence Rossi inferred that such mixing of dialects was also a bold innovation. But a generation before Callimachus, Erinna wrote a hexameter lament in a mixture of Doric and Aeolic (*SH* 400–401). Nor was Callimachus the first to revive the choliambic; in this he was preceded by Phoenix of Colophon.¹³ Pfeiffer was reluctant to admit the possibility that the one hexameter we have from Callimachus' epithalamium on Arsinoë (F 392) might come from an elegiac poem, on the grounds that this would be without parallel before the fourth century A. D. But we have substantial fragments from what is surely another epithalamium on Arsinoë, ascribed by the papyrus to Posidippus (*SH* 961).

The ritual lament is another interesting case. Simonides and Pindar wrote lyric threnoi, but there was also an elegiac lament tradition.¹⁴ Curiously enough, however, the Hellenistic poets turned to the hexameter (Erinna's *Distaff*, perhaps as early as the fourth century; Bion's *Lament for Adonis*). Here the motive may have been less the desire to be different than the inappropriately lighter associations elegiacs had picked up by then.

Parody of high genres like epic and tragedy is understandable and well documented,¹⁵ but systematic parody of the classical genres is hardly

¹¹A. W. Bulloch, *Callimachus: the Fifth Hymn* (Cambridge 1985) 35.

¹²*SH* 361; H. Diels, *Poet. Philos. Fragm.* (Berlin 1901), F 12, 221.

¹³On their relative chronology, P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria II* (Oxford 1972) 1030, n. 136.

¹⁴M. L. West, *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* (Berlin 1974) 4–9.

¹⁵Much evidence is collected in brief compass by Denniston and Dover, *OCD*² 783–4.

conceivable—and certainly not supported by any evidence. Clayman has recently gone even further, claiming that Callimachus' *Iambi* are a parody of his own *Aetia*. But what could count as parody of Callimachean elegy,¹⁶ itself notoriously hostile to the high style? Poets of the age experimented with the genres, combining dialect, metre, theme and treatment in original and unexpected ways (the so-called "crossing of the genres"¹⁷). Without knowing all the strange terms invented by Cairns and Giangrande, erudite ancient readers will surely have savoured these experiments—some of which will naturally have been more popular and successful than others. But it is a grave misunderstanding of this phenomenon to interpret it in terms of parody—or even to assume that the various genres had ever existed in rigid isolation.

Did Callimachus' contemporaries (as often assumed) perceive him as treating the old genres cavalierly? The answer depends in part on how seriously we are prepared to take his own polemics: namely the *Aetia* prologue and *Iamb.* 13. In the latter he defends himself vigorously against what he represents as an outcry against playing fast and loose with the genres. Particularly problematic is the *Aetia* prologue, widely supposed to be an answer to these critics and a rejection of epic poetry. There is a widespread modern view that the age of Callimachus saw a great debate about the validity of epic. Some conservatives are supposed to have championed multi-book traditional epics on mythological themes, while the school of Callimachus, to quote Pfeiffer, "was ostentatiously anti-Aristotelian. Rejecting unity, completeness, and magnitude, it consciously aimed at a discontinuous form...in a more or less loose series of pieces of a few lines."¹⁸ Most bizarrely of all, Callimachus is supposed to have looked to Hesiod as his model rather than Homer.

There does not seem to be a scrap of real evidence for any of this. Why should there have been a debate about epic? No one was writing it any more. Ziegler's famous monograph notwithstanding,¹⁹ no large scale epic poem, whether historical or mythical in theme, can be securely dated to the entire century before Callimachus published his *Aetia*.

¹⁶D. L. Clayman, "Callimachus' *Iambi* and *Aetia*," *ZPE* 74 (1988) 277–86.

¹⁷The well-known formulation of W. Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart 1924) 202–24.

¹⁸R. Pfeiffer, *A History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford 1968) 137.

¹⁹K. Ziegler, *Das hellenistische Epos: ein vergessenes Kapitel griechischer Dichtung*² (Leipzig 1966); see too the recent Italian translation, *L'epos ellenistico: un capitolo dimenticato della poesia greca*, by Francesco De Martino with full introduction by Marco Fantuzzi (Bari 1988).

Why the *Aetia* prologue has been thought to refer to epic is difficult to understand. Callimachus actually names one of the poets he is criticizing in line 11 and as good as names the other by naming his poem: they are Mimnermus and Philetas, the two great masters of elegy. Neither can have any relevance to a debate about epic. However we identify the “tall lady” and “fat lady” of lines 10 and 12, both must have been elegies. The debate between Callimachus and his critics surely concerned elegy, not epic.

It is that much quoted phrase ἔν ᾧσιμα διηνεκές that has been the source of the confusion. It *looks* so appropriate a definition of epic. But what sort of epic? Most have assumed that “continuous” or “unbroken” song simply means “narrative” or “epic,” giving διηνεκές no limiting force. That is to say, any long poem would qualify as an ᾧσιμα διηνεκές. But not all epics do consist of unbroken narrative—most conspicuously the two longest and most famous of all, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Now we know from epigrams by Asclepiades (*AP* ix. 63) and Posidippus (*ib.* xii. 168) that the *Lyde* of the late fifth-century Antimachus enjoyed a sudden vogue in early third-century Alexandria, of which Callimachus evidently disapproved: Λύδη καὶ παχὺ γράμμα καὶ οὐ τορόν (*F* 398). We are also told that Asclepiades and Posidippus were two of the critics pilloried in the *Aetia* prologue.²⁰ The obvious solution is that the *Aetia* prologue is attacking Antimachus’ *Lyde* and its contemporary admirers. Callimachus does not actually mention Antimachus; but Mimnermus’ *Nanno* was undoubtedly the model and inspiration of the *Lyde* of his fellow-Colophonian Antimachus.

Antimachus’ *Lyde* was a catalogue of love stories which, though in elegiacs, was written in a heavily epicizing style. The one long fragment (*F* 57 Wyss) has been described as “a cento of Homeric phrases” (Wilamowitz). This is surely what Callimachus denounced as a μέγα ψοφέουσιν ἀοιδήν: an elegy written at a length and in a style more suited to an epic. It is not epic itself that he is attacking, but the inappropriate influence of the impersonal and prolix epic style on the fashionable genre of elegy.

This brings us back to Hesiod, whom (on no serious evidence beyond a misinterpretation of his famous epigram on Aratus) Callimachus is supposed to have chosen as his stylistic model (as though he could have modelled an elegy on an epic!). But Antimachus’ *Lyde* should surely be considered the first Hesiodic elegy. The poets of the early third century did not restrict themselves to praising the *Lyde*; they produced elegiac catalogues of their own, one after another. It is unfortunate that we know so little of what may have been the

²⁰See the Schol. Flor. to *F* 1 (Pfeiffer 7).

first, the evidently substantial elegy of Philetas that Callimachus disparaged as his “big lady,” presumably named after the Bittis he is represented as singing about by his disciple Hermesianax (F 7.77). Another big lady was the *Leontion* (again named after a mistress) of Hermesianax. The one surviving fragment is much the most crudely Hesiodic poem to have survived from the golden age of Hellenistic literature. In less than 100 lines Hermesianax introduces no fewer than five of the lovers in what Athenaeus bluntly calls his “catalogue” with a Hesiodic οἶος formula (F 7.1; 57; 71; 85; 89). From the same period we have a substantial fragment from another such elegiac catalogue, the *Loves*, or *Beautiful Boys* of Phanocles; two of its three extant fragments begin ἦ ὥς (F 1.1; 3.1). Then there is the *Apollo* of Alexander Aetolus. Other catalogue poems of the age are no more than names to us: the γυναικῶν κατάλογος of Nicaenetus of Samos; the Ἦ οἶοι, *Or such men as*, of Sosicrates of Phanagoreia.

Last comes Callimachus himself. Though seldom explicitly so categorized, the *Aetia* clearly belongs to the same family. It is an elegiac catalogue poem in several books, differing only in theme (aetiological stories), arrangement, and treatment. Looking at the poem in this context, no contemporary would have seen the opening reference (F 2) to Hesiod as programmatic or polemical. It was not (of course) intended to indicate that Callimachus was proposing to write in a genre or manner that was new. Both would have been obvious enough to any contemporary from the metre and title alone. What Callimachus objected to was elegies that pushed unsophisticated imitation of either Homer or Hesiod too far.

There is no indication how Antimachus linked his stories. The likelihood that the whole of Bk. 1 was devoted to the Argonauts suggests that individual stories were merged into a continuous narrative of every Argonautic adventure Antimachus could find. That is to say, a classic ἄεισμα διηγεκὲς on kings and heroes in many thousands of lines.

Callimachus was not *refusing* to write an *epic* (who ever heard of anyone being criticized for *not* writing a long enough poem?), but stating that the poem he *had* written, the poem the prologue introduces, namely the *Aetia*, was not that sort of ἄεισμα διηγεκὲς. Callimachus saw elegy as having the potential for a different sort of narrative and a more personal style. Perhaps the most conspicuous and original stylistic feature of the *Aetia* is the injection of the poet’s own personality into the narrative. The most obvious example is naturally the prologue. The first two books are a conversation between Callimachus and the Muses, the separate stories being their answers to his questions. F 43, with its vivid reminiscence of Pollis’ symposium, brings

Callimachus before the reader almost as conspicuously as the prologue. In Acontius and Cydippe he interrupts his narrative in a remarkable way, affecting to reproach himself for his blasphemous garrulity, thus heightening the dramatic tension, and indirectly giving a memorable self-characterization, a pious but fussy fellow, not to be trusted with a secret (F 75).

This “subjectivization” of the narrative was surely a calculated response to Antimachus’ *Lyde*. This hypothesis has the advantage of accounting for the remarkable difference of opinion about the *Lyde* among contemporaries. Those who liked it included such masters of the refined style as Asclepiades and Posidippus. It was no doubt a learned and polished piece of work. Callimachus’s objection was simply that it did not fulfil the potential of elegy; the grand style was all very well in its place, but elegy called for a more intimate approach. The *Aetia* was meant to be a model narrative elegy, a demonstration of what could be done. Posterity rightly looked back on Callimachus as the founder of personal elegy. It is often said that the *Aetia* was controversial. This is to read the prologue too literally. On the contrary, all the evidence suggests that the *Aetia* was a triumphant success, at once supplanting the *Lyde* as the classic narrative elegy. The *Lyde* has disappeared almost without trace.

Those who have assumed that the *Aetia* prologue was a rejection of epic have usually blurred the distinction between epic and elegy, often even claiming that Callimachus saw the *Aetia* as an epic, his own version of epic. But this is to ignore the fact that he did in fact write an epic, the *Hecale*.

The modern obsession with Callimachus’ attitude to epic has blinded scholars to the care with which he differentiated his epic from his elegy. If the *Aetia* was intended as a model elegy, the *Hecale* was surely meant to serve as a model epic, an epic in miniature.

There has been curiously little serious study of the difference between Callimachus’ hexameter and elegiac style. It is not enough to compare the elegiac and hexameter hymns. Hymns are hymns, whatever the metre. And if there is one thing we can be certain of about Callimachus’ varied works, it is that they were classified by genre rather than metre. For example, his epigrams included short poems in metres other than the elegiac couplet; his *Iambi* included poems in a number of metres other than choliamb.

The *Aetia* begins with a highly personal and polemical prologue, and ends with a programmatic epilogue. The *Iambi* begin with a programmatic first poem and include the no less polemical *Iamb* XIII. We are fortunate enough to possess the opening line of the *Hecale* (F 230): Ἀκταίη τις ἔναϊεν Ἐρεχθεὺς ἔν ποτε γυνῶ. No personal prologue. The poem began, as an epic should, *in*

medias res. There are none of the personal touches so profusely scattered throughout the *Aetia*. The first person is entirely absent from the *Hecale*, as too that allied feature of Callimachus' elegiac style, the dramatic apostrophe. The subject matter is indeed much the same: aetiological explanations of myth and cult practices. But the presentation is quite different: the "objective" epic manner. There are no elaborate epic similes in the *Aetia*, and only two in the hexameter hymns. There are a number in the *Hecale*.²¹ There are also more direct Homeric borrowings in the *Hecale*.

The basic plot is simple. Theseus takes refuge from a storm in Hecale's humble cottage, and goes off next morning to kill the Marathonian bull, establishing heroic honours for Hecale on his return. Thus the action itself covers a period of barely 24 hours, though by skillful use of flashback (in the form of speeches) digression and foreshadowing (in the form of aetiology), Callimachus contrives to take in much of the early lives of both Theseus and Hecale—and their posthumous influence as well. Not then an ἄριστος διηγετής on my definition of the term. But he deploys in miniature just those unifying techniques that set the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* apart from cyclic epic—and (we might add) from Apollonius. To those who see Callimachus as pursuing a deliberate aim of unhomeric disunity, evidence of a sort may be found in the *Aetia*—but hardly in the *Hecale*.

However much he might modify the subject matter and treatment of both epic and elegy, Callimachus nonetheless reveals himself extraordinarily sensitive to what he perceived to be the essential form and stylistic level appropriate to the differences between the genres.

²¹A. S. Hollis, *Callimachus Hecale* (Oxford 1990) 10–15.