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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The study of Hellenistic poetry in general and of Alexandrian poetry in particular ought to stand on the threshold of a golden period.[1] On the one hand, there are the important accessions to our corpus of texts which the papyri have brought and which are now gathered in the splendid *Supplementum Hellenisticum* of Peter Parsons and Hugh Lloyd-Jones. Although it is only Callimachus who has been a big winner in terms of new texts, our sense of what is typical of the period has improved dramatically; it would be churlish to complain that Egypt has not necessarily given us what we would have wished.[2] Moreover, many recent trends in literary criticism would seem to suit well a poetry as self-conscious as that of the high Alexandrian period, and there are indeed signs that these texts are now finding new and sympathetic readers. Nevertheless, some attempt must be made here to analyse the reasons for the generally poor critical reception of Alexandrian poetry in general and of the *Argonautica* in particular, both because future progress must have a context and because these reasons will explain many structural features of the present book. Four broad types of explanation – beyond the poor state of textual survival – may be identified; the types do, of course, overlap at many points.[3]

The first is a matter of both literary and political history. The tendency to view Alexandria as a staging-post – or, perhaps rather, detour – on the road between classical Athens and imperial Rome

[1] On the history and development of the notion of the 'Hellenistic' cf. R. Bichler, '*Hellenismus*'. *Geschichte und Problematik eines Epochenbegriffs* (Darmstadt 1983). I do not imagine that my use of 'Hellenistic' and 'Alexandrian' throughout this book has been entirely consistent, but I use the former as the more general term; I have tried to refer to poetry as 'Alexandrian' only when there are good grounds for associating it (or its author) with Alexandria.

[2] A significant fragment of a poem of Apollonius other than the *Argonautica* would be a precious find indeed.

[3] Any full account would presumably demand a history of taste in the twentieth century; I hope that no one will be disappointed not to find that here.

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has greatly restricted the range of questions which has usually been asked of its poetry. Seen either as a scholarly game of 'fooling around' with classical models,[4] or as a series of almost prophetic foreshadowings of Roman developments to come, the texts have been viewed as mediators between other bodies of texts, rather than themselves as significant products (and definers) of a dynamic society. There are, of course, important exceptions in the history of scholarship, but the broad truth of this generalisation is, I think, hard to deny.[5] Ptolemaic culture is, after all, of less importance for the cultural history of the West (as narrowly defined) than that of classical Athens or Augustan Rome; the ultimate 'failure' of Ptolemaic power and culture has affected the way that the poetry of third-century Alexandria has been read. The seeds and omens of this 'failure' *must* be visible in Alexandrian poetry of the high period; or so, I think, did the (often) unstated assumption run.

Secondly, Alexandrian poetry is, by and large, the product of royal patronage; thus the *Argonautica* was probably composed in Alexandria by the Head of the Royal Library in the middle years of the century, during the latter part of the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus.[6] A rather vague distaste for 'patronage-poetry' and the prob-

[4] Cf. still Hainsworth 1991.57: 'prettified verse [which] flattered its readers' pretensions to Hellenism and the cultivated mind and did not disturb their moral complacency'. Unsurprisingly, this assertion is not accompanied by any argument.

[5] Fraser 1972 is a partial exception, but serious literary criticism is not that book's concern. On Hutchinson 1988 cf. *JHS* 110 (1990) 233–4.

[6] For the evidence and discussion cf. Hunter 1989. 1–9. I did not there discuss Anthony Bulloch's important argument for the priority of *Arg.* 2.444–5 over Call. *h.* 5.103, cf. *AJP* 98 (1977) 121–2, his edition of *h.* 5 at p. 41 and his note on vv. 103–4; if correct, this would have important chronological implications, as the Callimachean poem seems to be parodied by Asclepiades/Poseidippus at *Anth. Pal.* 5.202.4 (= *HE* 977), which is unlikely to be later than *c.* 260, cf. A. Cameron, *GRBS* 31 (1990) 304–11. The argument is a strong one, but not, I think, conclusive. Both Call. *h.* 5.103 and *Arg.* 2.444 echo *Il.* 1.526 (Zeus to Thetis), a passage which is a crucial model also at *h.* 5.131–6; thus the echo of the *Iliad* in v. 103 fits a repeated theme of the close association of Athena and Zeus and a repeated pattern of allusion, and certainly does not need an origin in Apollonius (where the Iliadic echo reminds us that Zeus is behind Phineus' blindness). Bulloch's claim that 'reminiscence of Apollonius adds various dimensions to Callimachus' text' really amounts to very little. More potent is his observation that the placing of a proclitic immediately before the central caesura is paralleled three times in the *Argonautica* (2.1203, 3.115, 4.1554), but is otherwise unexampled in our corpus of Callimachus; he argues, with proper caution, that this seems to point to the priority of Apollonius. This, however, leaves unanswered the problem of why Callimachus should at this point abandon his normal practice and offer a verbatim quotation which may well be metrically marked as such. I wonder whether the apparent stylistic oddity is not of a piece with the repetition of δῖα γύναι (vv. 97, 103) in characterising Athena's striking mixture of firmness – the caesura in v. 103 isolates and highlights the negative – and consolation. At the very least, I do not believe that the priority of either poet in this instance has been established.

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lems it raises has until recently exercised an unhealthy influence on the attitudes of many classical scholars; this may be seen in the extraordinary contortions which some critics have performed in order to free, say, Pindar and the Augustan poets from the dreaded 'shackles' of patronage. Where those 'shackles' have been accepted, it is the esteem of critics for the value and success of the patron that has too often been influential in the critical reception of the poetry honouring that patron: it is one thing to write for Augustus, quite another for Nero. Scholarship on both Pindar and imperial Latin poetry has apparently emerged from this coyness, and a similar freedom is now being enjoyed by Callimachus. Very little attention has, however, been paid to the Ptolemaic context of Apollonius' epic, to the question of why the Head of the Library should write on *this* subject rather than any other. Even in formulation the question sounds strange. Until recently it would have been thought hardly worth asking.[7]

Thirdly, there is what is perhaps the most discussed aspect of Alexandrian poetry – its creative re-use of the literature of the past, its overt and self-conscious 'textuality', the fact that, for example, the *Argonautica* consistently demands to be read against Homer, indeed can only thus be understood, and in a way which is qualitatively different from, say, Attic tragedy's constant engagement with archaic epic. Related to this feature is the open display and exploitation of the apparatus of scholarly learning which so marks this period. These phenomena remain stumbling-blocks for many modern readers. Despite modern parallels, the notion of 'scholarly' poetry has seemed to many 'scholars' who themselves stand, ironically enough, in a fairly direct line of descent from their Alexandrian prototypes to be rather a poor thing after the public grandeur and self-proclaimed importance of the poetry of the archaic and classical periods. 'Callimachus is not Aeschylus' is not a very sophisticated critical position, but it is not hard to feel it lurking behind much that – at least until recently – has dominated the field. When a scholar who probably did more than anyone else for the study of Hellenistic poetry in this century was able to say of it that 'it showed no original magnitude of subject or gravity of religious and ethical ideas',[8] it is plain that those less knowledgeable and thoughtful were

[7] For an attempt at an answer cf. Chapter 6 below.

[8] Pfeiffer 1955.73. Cf. Dover 1971.lxix '[the great Hellenistic poets] did not bring their intelligence to bear upon profound issues which excite the intellect and the emotions simultaneously'; what is most surprising about this assertion – above all from this scholar – is the assumption that we could always identify such issues, particularly in another culture, and that everyone in a culture will be 'excited' by the same issues.

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unlikely to have much patience with these poems. For what it is worth, I believe that this assertion is quite false, but we must recognise that such attitudes to Alexandrian poetry arise not least from the very different rhetoric which, broadly speaking, distinguishes Alexandrian poets from their predecessors – namely, a persistent and ironic rhetoric of doubt, self-effacement, deferral. These poets have indeed written their own reception. A poetry which so openly advertises its dependence upon the past, what has rightly been called its sense of 'perceived epigonality and artistic disjunction',[9] is unsurprisingly damned with faint praise. A particular manifestation of this attitude is the (sometimes unintentional) implication that Hellenistic poetry is not 'about anything'. A familiar quotation from Wendell Clausen may serve as illustration: 'The poetry of Callimachus and others like him could be appreciated by only a very few readers as learned or nearly as learned as themselves. Theirs was a bibliothecal poetry, poetry about poetry, self-conscious and hermetic.'[10] This interpretation is, I think, derived not merely from a reading of the poems themselves, but also from views about the circumstances of production and narrow circulation of these texts.

Any response to such criticism must, of course, be grounded in close readings of the relevant poems, but certain general observations may be made. We *know* very little about the contemporary performance and circulation of the poems of Callimachus and Apollonius, even if it is in fact conceded that such knowledge could illuminate the nature of the poems themselves. Comparative evidence shows clearly that 'intensely intellectual' poetry[11] can be enjoyed by readers and listeners who are themselves not intense intellectuals, and that such poetry does not necessarily aim exclusively at a very narrow audience. Both Callimachus and Apollonius, to judge from the numerous papyri, were widely circulated in later antiquity;[12] what external evidence there is indeed points away from the more extreme versions of the 'ivory tower' view of their poetry. More important for present purposes, however, is the fact that the prominent use of intertextual allusion may be (perhaps, usually is) a significant mode for conveying often complex meaning. What that meaning is it is the

[9] Bing 1988.75. There is much of interest and importance in W. R. Johnson, 'The problem of the counter-classical sensibility and its critics', *CSCA* 3 (1970) 123–51.
[10] *GRBS* 5 (1964) 183. Bulloch 1985.543 stands in the same tradition.
[11] The phrase is from Bulloch 1985.542–3.
[12] For Apollonius cf. Vian 1 lxxxviii–xc; Haslam 1978. Note also the remarks of Hutchinson 1988.6–7.

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task of readers and critics to elucidate, but a strong sense of 'historical self-consciousness'[13] does not necessarily go hand in hand with shallowness of ideas. Put like this, of course, the idea seems completely absurd, and yet it is precisely that notion which surfaces all too often in discussions of post-classical poetry.

Pfeiffer's apparently damning observation which I have just quoted is couched in terms ultimately derived from Aristotle's *Poetics* ('magnitude', μέγεθος; 'gravity', σπουδαῖον), and this fact points to a final feature which has worked against the reception of Alexandrian poetry and of the *Argonautica* in particular. Post-Aristotelian 'classicism' has tended to privilege (often unexamined) notions of unity and consistency, whereas it may well be that the predominant Alexandrian aesthetic is to be sought elsewhere. This is something much more than a concern for variety over long stretches of text or within a corpus; it is central to the whole conception of this poetry.

Inconsistency and unevenness reign in all aspects of the *Argonautica* – narrative style, tonal level, characterisation, *Realien*,[14] literary texture, and so forth. To what extent this may be a deliberate shattering of received norms – specifically Aristotelian prescriptions – will be considered later.[15] Here it will be sufficient to note that, for example, many modern readers have found it hard to believe that Book 2, with its long stretches of ethnography and geography, and the universally admired Book 3 belong to the same poem, hard to understand Medea's 'character' except as a sign of singular poetic incompetence, and hard to accept Jason's virtual disappearance from large parts of Book 4. Such readers are, I believe, operating for the most part with an explicit or implicit notion of unity and consistency which is held to be 'artistically satisfying' and would be defended, if need be, by appeal to two proofs: Homer and Virgil on one side, and 'real life' or 'common sense' on the other. Only the former need be considered here. Homer and Virgil do, each in his own way, display an extraordinarily powerful poetic vision, which manages to impose order upon threatening disorder, where the myriad voices of the text all seem to 'speak the same language', even when – as with Dido and Aeneas – the gap of incomprehension is at its widest.[16] In the

[13] Cf. Greene 1982.17.
[14] Thus, for example, whereas there is a fairly consistent attempt to reproduce 'Homeric' sailing technology, the architecture of Aietes' palace spans both the 'Homeric' and the contemporary.
[15] Cf. the Appendix.
[16] Cf. below p. 172.

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Argonautica, however, the myriad voices work against each other, creating disorder and fracture. When the poet professes himself helpless before his task (4.1–5), this is not merely a passing literary fancy; it is a statement, or perhaps a particularly obvious manifestation, of a total poetic strategy. The material, in all its diversity, imposes upon the poet and runs uncontrollably riotous.[17]

If the poet lays the difficulties of his task before us, it is also true that the *Argonautica* is not an easy poem to read. Written in epic hexameters on a traditional subject of Greek heroic myth, it nevertheless seems to flaunt an awkwardness of structure, unevenness of tone and style, and a refusal to treat tradition in traditional ways. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that it is now finding new admirers at a time when literary criticism is concerned as never before with the difficulties and pleasures of 'reading' (in all its manifold senses). Thus, for example, in the last ten years the *Argonautica* has been the subject of a detailed and fruitful narratological reading,[18] and (with rather less argumentation) it has been claimed that 'Apollonius was what we now call a Deconstructionist'.[19] This epic is thus set fair to become – indeed has become already – a site of critical struggle, as the process of revising the way we look at 'post-classical' literature continues to gather pace; the current critical interest in 'Silver Latin' epic may be an analogous phenomenon. In one way, at least, both the criticism of Apollonius and that of the 'Silver Latin' poets have, until recently, suffered from a similar handicap: prior assumptions about these poets' intentions and methods and the quality of their poems have affected the way in which the poems have been read (or not read, as the case may be). Thus even a very sympathetic reader has recently described the *Argonautica* as 'one of the finest failures in the whole of Greek literature',[20] apparently confident that 'it is patent that Apollonius conceived his poem as being fundamentally Homeric ... an attempt to construct a Homeric epic for the Alexandrian world',[21] an attempt which then clearly failed. My own impression is that the purposes and aesthetic of the epic are not (or at least not to everyone) 'patent', and that much basic analysis, of the kind we take for granted with

[17] For the actual control of the poet cf. Chapter 5 below.
[18] Fusillo 1985.
[19] John Gardner in Beye 1982.x–xi.
[20] Bulloch 1985.586.
[21] Ibid. 589.

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most ancient poetry, remains to be done before any judgement is possible (if indeed we believe that that is a task proper to the literary critic). This present book seeks both to offer some of that analysis and to place the *Argonautica* within its social and intellectual context.

The *Argonautica* is a poem which invites 'readings' rather than 'a reading', and though I hope that my overall conception of the poem does emerge, I have tried not to conceal my awareness that criticism of this epic is at a very early stage. It need hardly be said that if this book can prompt others to read or re-read the *Argonautica* and then take discussion beyond what is offered here, it will have fulfilled one of its most important tasks.

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CHAPTER 2

Modes of heroism

(i) EPIC CHARACTER

For many readers of poetry 'epic' and 'heroic' are virtually synonymous terms; epics, after all, are about heroes. Achilles is named, and Odysseus and Aeneas alluded to, in the opening verses of the epics devoted to their deeds. At one level, the *Argonautica*, which is to tell of the 'glorious deeds of men of old' (1.1), follows the pattern, although Jason does not actually enter the poem until the sixth verse. The Argonauts, like Homer's heroes, belong to Hesiod's age of 'semi-divine heroes', and during the classical and Hellenistic periods some of them in fact received cult honours as 'heroes' in the technical sense of Greek ritual; the hymnic coda with which the poem ends makes a clear allusion to this status.[1] Nevertheless, many modern readers have wished to deny 'heroic' status to Apollonius' characters and to his poem.[2] This is not just the result of a consideration of the difference between oral and written epic – that is, the belief (in my view mistaken) that only the former can be truly 'heroic' – but also arises from various specific contrasts between the *Argonautica* and the Homeric poems.

One is the centrality of death in the *Iliad*, most famously expressed in the great speeches of Achilles and the haunting words of Sarpedon to Glaukos in *Iliad* 12:

> 'Dear friend, if we were going to live for ever, ageless and immortal, if we survived this war, then I would not be fighting in the front ranks myself or urging you into the battle where men win glory. But as it is, whatever we do the fates of death stand over us in a thousand forms, and no mortal can run from them or escape them – so let us go, and either give his triumph to another man, or he to us.' (*Il.* 12. 322–8, trans. Hammond)

[1] Cf. below pp. 128–9.
[2] Cf., most recently, Hainsworth 1991.67, 'the first epic that we know of in which the heroic element is not dominant'.

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It is the *Iliad* which has most crucially shaped western notions of epic 'heroism', and in that poem the struggle with death on the battlefield seems decisive. In the *Argonautica*, however, not only do battles play only a small part in the narrative,[3] but many of the most important Argonauts – Heracles, Orpheus, the Dioskouroi, the sons of Boreas – are too far removed from 'ordinary humanity' to qualify as 'heroes' in this secondary, Iliadic sense. However nuanced the moral and social issues fought out in the *Iliad* might be, the simple fact of the ever present danger of death in combat gives Iliadic 'heroism' a stark clarity which every listener or reader can readily grasp. In the *Argonautica*, however, though the threat of death constantly attends the heroes, the danger is usually of being overwhelmed pathetically by natural and irresistible forces – the sea, fire, hunger. An Achilles or a Diomedes can fight against rivers or divinities – they are to this extent larger than their environment – but, as I hope this book will demonstrate, actions in the *Argonautica* are too often morally layered and ambivalent for any simple construction of 'heroism'. Moreover, the tone and style of Apollonius' epic are, in comparison with Homer, too various and inconsistent to conform with the pattern derived from Homer; the jarring juxtapositions with which the poem abounds inevitably threaten to undermine this pattern. Further, as we shall see,[4] Apollonius appears to engage in some stylistic parody of the archaic epic, and this too obviously affects the presentation of 'heroism'.

Related to these issues of character and style is the fact that much of the Hellenistic epic is devoted to adventures which are 'fantastic' or 'magical' in a way which, modern scholars have argued, works against any deeper sense of the human condition. In the *Odyssey*, it is claimed, the elements of fantasy are set off against and help to define the 'reality' of the social structures on Ithaca; they are not themselves at the centre of the epic's poetic concerns. In the *Argonautica*, however, there is no such 'reality' to set against, say, Jason's magical victory over the Earthborn, the eerie world of Circe, the terrible landscapes of Libya, or the victory over Talos; these scenes are at the heart of the epic, and as such destroy the assumptions upon which epic heroism is based. Finally, there is the problem of Apollonius' central character, Jason. The heroes of epic should be, if not idealised or 'perfect' figures, at least admirable ones who inspire in listeners

[3] Cf. below pp. 41–5.
[4] Cf. below p. 108.

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and readers an awe and a desire, however misplaced or unrealisable, to imitate them; heroes should be exemplars of moral and physical action. It is on this count above all that Apollonius' Jason is held to fail. Jason has not chosen to undertake the expedition for heroic *kleos*, as a demonstration of *arete*, but rather the deadly task has been imposed upon him by Pelias (1.15–17) and its beginnings are marked by gloom and foreboding.[5]

Many responses to criticism of this kind are possible. At one level we must note ancient and modern warnings[6] against the assumption that an epic must have a single 'hero' of extraordinary skills at its centre. Moreover, we must be clear what precisely is at stake in trying to decide whether Apollonius' characters are 'heroic'. If this label is used as a heuristic device in order to help to define how Apollonius exploits the epic tradition, then it may be positively useful. If, however, the label is used – as it too often has been – merely in an attempt to decry the characters of Apollonius in comparison with those of Homer, then it is an obstacle to understanding; here, as commonly in the literary criticism of classical texts, the analysis of difference soon slides into the assertion of qualitative hierarchies.[7] More concretely, Apollonius did not inherit from Homer a monolithic and fixed picture of 'heroism', but rather a series of contesting models in which 'heroic values' were always matters for dispute.[8] Even when allowance is made for the fact that, for their own literary purposes, poets regularly present their predecessors as more internally consistent, less problematic, than they really are,[9] there are clear affinities between the behaviour of heroes in both epics. Thus, for example, the doubts and even despair to which Jason seems prone have close parallels in the Homeric epics. Iliadic heroes are affected by fears and anguish just as strong as those which trouble the Argonauts, and the feeling of helplessness (*amechanie*) which strikes Odysseus and his comrades after the Cyclops' first bloody meal (*Od.* 9.295) matches closely the various shocks which the collective of Argonauts receives (cf. 2.408–10, 3.502–5, 4.1278–9). Despite these obvious similarities, the figure of Jason remains for many critics a curious puzzle, and it is to this which I now turn.

[5] Cf. below p. 84. Contrast the 'simple heroism' of Theocritus 13 in which Pelias is not mentioned; vv. 25–6 suggest that the expedition is a normal event following the start of the new sailing season.
[6] Cf., e.g., D. C. Feeney, 'Epic hero and epic fable', *Comparative Literature* 38 (1986) 137–58.
[7] For a similar instance with Apollonius and Virgil cf. below p. 171.
[8] Cf., e.g., Goldhill 1991.313.
[9] Apollonius does this to Homer, and Virgil does it to Apollonius, cf. below pp. 174–5.

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