Introductory Lecture on Callimachus

Callimachus (Καλλίμαχος)

Aspects of Hesiod which appealed to Callimachus (Over and Against the Model of Homer)

1) Didacticism -- the challenge of turning an unpoetic subject into poetry, and the display of the poet's "learnedness."

2) The personal voice (Hesiod's vision on Mt Helicon, echoed in Callimachus' personal, retrospective statement about his poetic calling, which appears deeply felt)

3) The "epic substitution" of a medium length poem with no unified narrative structure, composed of loosely connected fables, myths, aetiologies, and first person discourse.

Didacticism

Many of the aspects of Callimachus' poetry (what are often collectively dubbed the "Callimachean Aesthetic") are qualities that thoroughly partake of the historical circumstances of the Hellenistic Age in which he lived. Above all, his is an Alexandrian poetics, a poetics of the poetry that emerged in the city that was most emblematic of the far-flung conquests and cultural diffusion that occurred under Alexander. Alexandria in Egypt had of course been named after the Macedonian conqueror, was located outside of the old pale of the Greek world, in an alien culture, and formed the capitol for a line of Greek Pharaohs that descended from one of Alexander's generals. The second of these rulers, Ptolemy Philadelphus, had established and endowed the preeminent cultural institution in the whole Greek-speaking world, the Museum of Alexandria. Rather than simply a [museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum) in the sense that has developed since the Renaissance, namely a public exhibition house for collections of works of art, the Museum of Alexandria was an institution that brought together some of the best scholars of the [Hellenistic world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellenistic_civilization), analogous to the modern [Institute for Advanced Study](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_for_Advanced_Study) in [Princeton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princeton,_New_Jersey) or to the [Collège de France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coll%C3%A8ge_de_France) in Paris. In the 21st century, the nearest equivalent is a [university](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University). More than 1,000 scholars lived in the Museum at a given time. Staff members and scholars were salaried by the Mouseion, through Ptolemaic munificence, and paid no taxes. They also received free meals, free room and board, and free servants. There the Mouseion's scholars conducted scientific research, published, lectured, and collected as much literature as possible from the known world, and it is in this respect that we see the chief point of importance regarding Callimachus. For the Museum also housed the great library, the greatest indeed ever known in the ancient world until early modern period. The early literature of Greece (as well as foreign texts which were translated from Assyrian, Persian, Hebrew, Indian, and other sources) was there collected, studied, discussed, commented upon, and, as the esteemed classicist Wendell Claussen put it nicely, "men came to know the exquisite delight of writing books about books." Up until that point, Greek literature had been known primarily (if not exclusively) in an oral and performative capacity: the epics of Homer, the lyrics of Pindar and others, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and even the historical works of Herodotus and Thucydides (to say nothing of the oratory of Demosthenes, Lysias, and Isocrates) were all experienced primarily in public readings and performances before live audiences. But now, texts were collected from all over the Greek world and stored in the Great Library to be read and studied privately. Many colorful anecdotes exist about the process by which this collection occurred.

But an important development which occurred because of this codification of Greek literature was that variations which had thitherto existed in texts (particularly Homer) now could be collated and compared. Different scholarly opinions could be proffered as to which word or words ought to be preferred in a disputed passage. Essentially, the tradition of textual criticism was born here, albeit in a nascent and far from scientific manner compared to modern standards. More broadly, different versions of the same myths could be collected, geographical knowledge of the known world, now vastly expanded since Alexander, could be amassed and studied, and the rituals, cultures, and myths of these new places could be learned and compared with those of the Greeks. Knowing all these different things formed the substance of what was meant by Alexandrian "learnedness."

Callimachus was active and important in the library at Alexandria, though he never became its head. From the point of view of the poetry which he and the other figures connected to the library wrote, one of the first and most readily apparent elements is this "learnedness." They, and particularly he, were not just poets and scholars: they were poets because they were scholars, men whose business was literature. Such it seems was indeed Callimachus' own view of himself, and of good poets in general, as when, for instance, in his treatise against one Praxiphanes, he praises Aratus ὡς πολυμαθῆ καὶ ἄριστον ποιητήν. (Pfeiffer fr. 460) Spending his days "in the stacks," his entire perspective on the literary enterprise was inseparable from his pedantry and detailed knowledge of its traditions. His delight was to show-off his learning through well-placed allusions to classical texts (using, for instance, ἅπαξ λεγόμενα from Homer and defining them in a context of his own making, perhaps to spite another scholar-poet. He would employ an obscure variant of a myth or legend, all the while deftly signaling to an alert reader his awareness of other variants as well; he would subtly modify an admired metaphor or simile from one of the classical authors; he would set a word that was deliberately archaic and poetic together with a word of new provenance together in an elegant collocation. An example of this latter tendency can be seen in Callimachus' Hymn to Zeus (89-90) where he gives the line τῶν δ' ἀπὸ πάμπαν | αὐτὸς ἄνην ἐκόλουσας, ἐνέκλασσας δὲ μενοινήν (*of some things you utterly prohibit the fulfillment, and you thwart their eager desire*). ἄνη is an archaic word taken from Aeschylus Sept. 713, whereas μενοινή that first makes an appearance with Callimachus' contemporary Apollonius of Rhodes (1.894). Here to, the chiastic arrangement calls attention to what the poet has done, to his cleverness, as does also the parallelism, alliteration and assonance of the verb forms. Yet such cleverness only becomes apparent to one who is a highly sophisticated *literateur*, alone reading the text. Whereas earlier Greek poetry had presumed an large audience of hearers, Alexandrian sophistication supposed a small group of readers. Such "bookish" poetry of Callimachus and others like him could and was only meant to be appreciated by a few readers as learned or nearly as learned as themselves. Theirs was a bibliothecal poetry, poetry about poetry, self-conscious and hermetic.

This degree of self-consciousness, subtlety, cleverness, and wit in the Hellenistic poets is really the main difference between their learned allusions, puns, etymological play, and preoccupation with roots, causes, origins, and aetiologies and those which we find in earlier Greek poets who were also interested in such things.

Given these tendencies, it is easy to understand why these recondite poets were drawn to the composition of didactic poetry. For in such poetry they had everywhere the chance to show off their erudition and to demonstrate by how much their manner excelled their matter. Hence their choice of inert or apparently intractable subjects to versify. The poet Nicander, for instance, wrote an entire poetic treatise about snakes; Eratosthenes composed a mathematical compendium in verse explaining, among other things, how to square the cube; and perhaps most famously in antiquity, the poet Aratus wrote an entire astronomical work in poetic verse. Yet their aim in all this was to shine, not to persuade.

Such an inclination towards didactic poetry (and non-poetic subject matter to versify) led them more readily to Hesiod as an influence than to Homer. Callimachus, for instance, in praising the *Phaenomena* of Aratus asserts (*Epigram* 27) that it was written in the style of Hesiod.

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*The theme and the character is of Hesiod; I do not doubt that the poet of Soli has modeled himself upon Hesiod's every last verse, and not just those that are honeysweet. Hail, O subtle expressions, a proof of Aratus' tireless labor.*

There is much in these verses that illustrates the Callimachean principles of poetry (principles which we call Callimachean not because he invented them, but because they were hallmarks of his poetry and he was their most vocal proponent). Of course, we can see immediately the place of Hesiod, and not Homer, as the model. Now, the attitude of Callimachus to Hesiod and Homer has sometimes been misunderstood: for Callimachus Hesiod was imitable, Homer inimitable. Callimachus did not condemn Homer, though apparently Callimachus' student Parthenius did (it is not unusual for a disciple to be more extreme than his master); rather Callimachus condemned those who imitated Homer, who copied the epic form, not realizing that it was by now empty and obsolete. Poets like Creophylus of Samos in an earlier time, for whom to be mistaken for Homer was the highest possible compliment.

Τοῦ Σαμίου πόνος εἰμί, δόμῳ ποτὲ θεῖον Ὅμηρον

Δεξαμένου· κλαίω δ᾿ Εὔρυτον, ὅσα ἔπαθεν,

Καὶ ξανθὴν Ἰόλειαν. Ὁμήρειον δὲ καλεῦμαι

Γράμμα. Κρεωφύλῳ, Ζεῦ φίλε, τοῦτο μέγα.

Strabo 14.1.18 (Callimachus *Epigram* 6)

To later poets Hesiod was the exemplar of didactic as Homer was of epic poetry, and Callimachus found Hesiod more to his liking. Hesiod's poetry are, while sizeable, short when compared to Homer. This was Callimachus' ideal length as well, as he famously stated "a big book is a big evil" (μέγα βιβλίον -- μέγα κακόν). Likewise, Hesiod's poems recounted no long, involved tales of heroes and battles. Rather, the *Theogony* (and one suspects that it was this work more than the *Works and Days* that really interested Callimachus) dealt with the causes of things (or αἴτια). This was the name Callimachus gave to his most significant work and which like Hesiod's works had no overarching narrative structure, but was a collection of loosely related explanatory myths and stories.

Above all, it was Hesiod's personal voice that appealed to Callimachus. Quite unlike the earlier poet(s) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Hesiod's own voice and first person details make frequent appearances in his poetry. We learn, for instance, that he lived in central Greece, at Ascra in Boeotia. Moreover, he tells us about himself and his family, his dispute with his brother over their inheritance, and other details. In this way, he is often called the "first personality in European literature" -- a characteristic that would endear him greatly to a certain segment to these later poets during the Hellenistic age who preferred such personalizing tendencies to the austere and remote majesty of Homer. In particular, it was Hesiod who provided Callimachus with a means of describing his own source of inspiration, a matter of deep concern to so late and so self-conscious a poet. While keeping his flock under Mt. Helicon Hesiod met the Muses; they gave him an olive branch (the visible symbol of poetic inspiration) and breathed into him the divine power of song, that he might sing of things that had been and would be, and of the gods who are forever.

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*From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon, and dance on soft feet about the deep-blue spring and the altar of the almighty son of Cronos, [5] and, when they have washed their tender bodies in Permessus or in the Horse's Spring or Olmeius, make their fair, lovely dances upon highest Helicon and move with vigorous feet. Thence they arise and go abroad by night, [10] veiled in thick mist, and utter their song with lovely voice, praising Zeus the aegis-holder, and queenly Hera of Argos who walks on golden sandals, and the daughter of Zeus the aegis-holder bright-eyed Athena, and Phoebus Apollo, and Artemis who delights in arrows, [15] and Poseidon the earth holder who shakes the earth, and revered Themis, and quick-glancing*[*1*](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0129#note1)*Aphrodite, and Hebe with the crown of gold, and fair Dione, Leto, Iapetus, and Cronos the crafty counsellor, Eos, and great Helius, and bright Selene, [20] Earth, too, and great Oceanus, and dark Night, and the holy race of all the other deathless ones that are for ever. And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me — [25] the Muses of* [*Olympus*](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/entityvote?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0001&auth=tgn,7011019&n=1&type=place)*, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis: “Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.” So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they plucked and gave [30] me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvellous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally, but ever to sing of themselves both first and last.*

While still a young man, Callimachus dreamt he had been wafted to Helicon and there met the Muses, who told him of the causes of things (αἴτια). The details of the scene are uncertain, because only a fragment of the text survives. This scene serves as an introduction to the Aetia. This signified that Hesiod, not Homer, was the poet to emulate, and in that comparison to challenge his model (for what use is a model that cannot be surpassed). It is an introduction that is at once personal, allusive, and polemical: in a word Callimachean. To his second edition of the *Aetia*, Callimachus prefixed a polemical preface that is perhaps the single most complete and mature statement regarding his view of poetry, written as elegantly as it is rancorous, the so-called *Reply to the Telchines*.

*I know that the Telchines who are ignorant and no friends of the Muse, grumble at my poetry, because I did accomplish one continuous poem of many thousands of lines on kings or heroes, but like a child I roll forth a short tale, though the decades of my years are not few. And I say this to the Telchines: "The shorter poems of Mimnermus and Philetas are better than their long. Let the crane delighting in Pygmies' blood fly far, from Egypt to Thrace; and let the Massagetae shoot their arrows from a great distance at the Medes; But poems are sweeter for being short. Be gone, you baneful race of Jealousy! Hereafter, judge poetry by the canons of art, and not by the Persian chain, nor look to me for a song loudly resounding. It is not mine to thunder. That belongs to Zeus. For when I first placed a tablet on my knees, Lycian Apollo said to me: "poet, feed your victim to be as fat as possible, but, my friend, keep the Muse slender* (λεπταλέην). *This too I bid you: tread a path which carriages do not trample. Do not drive your chariot upon the tracks of others, nor along a wide road, but on unworn paths, even though it be narrower." I obeyed him; for I sing for those who like the delicate echoing song of the cicada, not the braying of donkeys."*

There is much here, and we may note that nowhere is the 'self-conscious' aspect of Callimachus' work more apparent than in passages such as these and other of his numerous polemical references to the theory and practice of poetry. The *Reply to Telchines* uses vivid metaphor and imagery to advocate short, sweet, refined verse, and to deny that length is a valid yardstick for measuring talent. Rather this short, refined verse was to be "slender" (λεπτός). This word λεπτός is perhaps the most significant single word to express the aesthetic which Alexandrian poets pursued. What is meant by this idea of λεπτός is one of careful refinement, where wit, elegance, and learning all are crafted into every line. Returning to the epigram in praise of Aratus' *Phaenomena*, we see a mention of this most crucial aspect of Alexandrian poetics in Callimachus' praise of Aratus' "subtle expressions" (λεπταὶ ῥήσιες) which were "a token of his tireless labor." Let us take a look at some of the passages of Aratus' fine craftsmanship in verse which Callimachus so appreciated.

*Phaenomena*

*From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed; full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. For we are also his offspring;[[1]](#footnote-1) and he in his kindness unto men giveth favourable signs and wakeneth the people to work, reminding them of livelihood. He tells what time the soil is best for the labor of the ox and for the mattock, and what time the seasons are favorable both for the planting of trees and for casting all manner of seeds. For himself it was who set the signs in heaven, and marked out the constellations, and for the year devised what stars chiefly should give to men right signs of the seasons, to the end that all things might grow unfailingly. Wherefore him do men ever worship first and last. Hail, o father, mighty marvel, mighty blessing unto men. Hail to thee and to the elder race! Hail, ye muses, right kindly, every one! But for me, too, in answer to my prayer direct all my lay, even as is meet, to tell the stars.*

*Phaenomena* 96-136*.*

*Beneath both feet of Bootes mark the Maiden, who in her hands bears the gleaming Ear of Wheat. Whether she be daughter of Astraeus, who, men say, was of old the father of the stars, or child of other sire, untroubled be her course! But another tale is current among men, how of old she dwelt on earth and met men face to face, nor ever disdained in olden time the tribes of men and women, but mingling with them took her seat, immortal though she was. Her men called her Justice; but she assembling the elders, it might be in the marketplace or in the wide-wayed streets, uttered her voice, ever urging on them judgments kinder to the people. Not yet in that age had men knowledge of hateful strife, or carping contention, or din of battle, but a simple life they lived. Far from them was the cruel sea and not yet from afar did ships bring their livelihood, but the oxen and the plough and Justice herself, queen of the peoples, giver of just things abundantly supplied their every need. Even so long as the earth still nurtured the Golden Race, she had her dwelling on her earth. But with the silver race only a little and no longer with utter readiness did she mingle, for that she yearned for the ways of the men of old. Yet in that silver age was she still upon the earth; but from the echoing hills at eventide she came alone, nor spake to any man in gentle words. But when she had filled the great heights with gathering crowds, then would she with threats rebuke their evil ways, and declare that never more at their prayer would she reveal her face to man. "Behold what manner of race the fathers of the Golden Age left behind them! Far meaner than themselves! But ye will breed a viler progeny! Verily wars and cruel bloodshed shall be unto men and grievous woe shall be laid upon them." Even so she spake and sought the hills and left the people all gazing towards her still. But when they, too, were dead, and when, more ruinous than they which went before, the race of Bronze was born, who were the first to forge the sword of the highwayman, and the first to eat the flesh of the plowing ox, then verily did Justice loathe that race of men and fly heavenward and took up that abode, where even now in night time the Maiden is seen of men, established near to far-seen Bootes.*

1. Acts 27: 16-34.*16Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.17Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.18Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he reached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. 19And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? 20For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.21(For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)  22Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. 23For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To The Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. 24God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; 25Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; 26And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; 27That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: 28For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. 29Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. 30And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.32And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.33So Paul departed from among them.34Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)