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Author

Cheesman, Margaret

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Callimachean Poetics

Margaret Cheesman
King's College, University of London
Department of Classics
Class of 2015

Abstract: *A piece exploring Hellenistic poet Callimachus' key aesthetic tenets and uncovering the profound legacy he left for the literary world we know today.*

“While the Greek poetry of the archaic and classical eras fascinates and thrills with its depth and grandeur, Hellenistic literature charms and challenges with its more modern realism and intricacy.”¹

In the early third century following the conquests of Alexander, socio-political change accompanied ‘new aesthetic sensibilities’.² Here, aesthetic relates not just to a sense of beauty, but also more generally to the ‘perception by the senses’ (Chambers, 1988). In this period of remarkable innovation, Callimachus is said to have reinvented Greek poetry for the Hellenistic age.³ He may have also pioneered the physical aesthetic of literature: his *Hymns* is our earliest surviving example of a poetic book.⁴ This essay will explore the deeper main aesthetic principles by which he composed his poetry: smallness in poetic form, selectivity of language, laborious research and meticulous scholarship, and a fresh take on myth with new thematic preferences.

‘A big book is a big evil’:⁵ it was essential that a poem should be brief. New genres such as the epillia, which were short epic narratives, and literary epigrams, short poems that could be adapted to treat almost any subject matter, were developed in the Hellenistic period.⁶ Callimachus favored these short, highly polished styles: they were ‘more expressive of the genius of the age.’⁷ He focused on creating an aesthetic that was small, exact, refined and intricate rather than hefty and grand.⁸ Thus, rather than writing a long, spacious, bombastic ‘continuous poem in many thousands of verses on glorious kings or heroes of old’, ‘like a child I [Callimachus] unroll my poem little by little [I tell a tiny tale], though the decades of my years are not few’.⁹ Callimachus’ simile ‘like a child’ in this preface is amusing. It suggests the simplicity of writing in a compact style, though Callimachus is well aware of the intellectualism and skill required to compose a poem that is short but also carefully formed and worded: he denounces his critics as ‘ignorant’¹⁰ for not appreciating his poetic ingenuity. Mair suggests that, to Callimachus, the long epics that his critics, such as his ‘ibis’ (enemy)¹¹ Apollonius, preferred, written with set phrases and formulae, ‘could hardly be other than a weak and artificial echo of Homer: it could be no expression of the living culture of Alexandria: it could have no originality,

¹ Gutzwiller, p. 26

² Ibid.

³ Gutzwiller, p. 60.

⁴ Nisetich, xxix

⁵ Mair p. 4 citing Athen. ii. 72a.

⁶ Gutzwiller, p. 27.

⁷ Mair, p. 3.

⁸ Gutzwiller, p. 61.

⁹ Callimachus, preface to the *Aetia* fr 1.1-6. All translations supplied by lecturer unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nisetich, xx.

nothing individual.’¹² In his *Aetia*, Callimachus, in a manner reminiscent of Pindar, bestows himself with divine poetic authority. He suggests his special relationship with the patron of poetry, Apollo (Chambers 1988), who instructs him on what his aesthetic principles should be through powerful metaphors of length, as in the ‘Persian mile’ and ‘slight’ versus ‘long-eared’ animals:

“In future, judge fine poetry by art/craft (*techne*), not by the Persian mile. Do not look to me for the birth of a loud-resounding poem: thundering is not my job but Zeus (...) my good friend, nourish a slender/slim Muse. We sing among donkeys. Let another bray like the long-eared beast, but may I be the light/slight, the winged one.”¹³

Callimachus presents Apollo as mocking the ‘thundering’ long epics, likening them to the ‘raucous noise of donkeys’, common, ‘long-eared’ animals, in contrast to the ‘pure sound’ of remarkably loud-chirping cicadas, which are of a ‘slight, winged’ form (Chambers, 1988), a form that, in poetry, was appreciated by the elite peers of Callimachus as well as ‘slenderness’ or *ischnos*.¹⁴ These strong metaphors also exemplify a main literary quality of his verse, sound and imagery: ‘the appeal to the audience is through the pleasures of hearing and imaginative visualisation.’¹⁵

Callimachus’ poems were not only short, but also exquisitely refined (*leptai*)¹⁶ in terms of *techne*: word craft. Language was painstakingly selected. Callimachus metaphorically suggests that rather than ‘sing like the mighty sea’, which contains ‘much of the earth’s filth and refuse’, his desire is to write ‘pure and undefiled’ poetry ‘from holy spring a small trickle, the supreme choice’.¹⁷ A new emphasis was put on the single word.¹⁸ He refused to write polluted, prolific, indiscriminate material like that of epic poetry, but selected only the best, focusing not primarily on content, but on creating fine-spun writing, with a ‘supreme choice’ of well-crafted language:

“The author’s claim to literary excellence lies elsewhere, in the *techne*, “art,” of the composition, based on a different knowledge: that of how to compose verse.”¹⁹ Gutzwiller’s words here encapsulate a main part of the Callimachean aesthetic: writing with technical skill and cleverly selected language. Callimachus and other early Hellenistic poets used the adjective *leptos*, meaning “refined”, to convey the essential qualities of their poetry ‘in the sense of minutely sifted, so that what remains is accurate, delicate and choice.’²⁰ We can see Callimachus’ appreciation of this poetic feature in his epigram about Aratus of Soli’s *Phaenomena*, which was partly modeled on Hesiod:

“Hesiodic is the song and the manner. Not the ultimate of poets, but, I dare to say, the sweetest of verses has the poet of Soli stripped off to copy. Hail words of refinement, symbol of Aratus’ wakefulness.”²¹

¹² Mair, pp. 3-4.

¹³ Callimachus, *Aetia*, fr 1.17-32.

¹⁴ Gutzwiller, p. 32.

¹⁵ Gutzwiller, p.29.

¹⁶ Gutzwiller, p. 33.

¹⁷ Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo* 2. 105-12.

¹⁸ Hopkinson, p. 10.

¹⁹ Gutzwiller, p. 29.

²⁰ Gutzwiller, p. 33.

²¹ Gutzwiller, p. 33.

Callimachus praises Aratus' words as refined and 'stripped off' i.e. *leptos* not only because they imitate Hesiod selectively, choosing only what is gem-like, but also because of Aratus' scholarly hard work. As Gutzwiller points out, 'the Greek word translated "wakefulness" plays beautifully on the nighttime observations required for Aratus' astronomical poem and on the midnight hours of labour that went into its composition'.²² Formal qualities that were of great importance in the *techne* of Callimachus' poetry were his use of dialectal forms and a metrical smoothness.²³ With Callimachus came 'novel fusions of metre, dialect and genre'.²⁴ Callimachus took pride in his ability to 'compose in various poetic genres and dialects' i.e. his *polyeideia*.²⁵ This demonstrates the elitism in his intellectuality – only a select crowd of eminent scholars could appreciate this skill and ingenuity. Knowledge of these poetic techniques, genres and dialects would have been gained by laborious research and meticulous scholarship.

The benefits of this hard work and 'pedantic curiosity'²⁶ gave Callimachus another of his poetic principles: intellectual display, which was not immediately aesthetically appealing to all, but was sensually pleasurable to an elite group of his fellow learned scholars. The Hellenistic period saw the birth of the phenomenon at the library of Alexandria of literature becoming a scholarly battlefield of intense, microscopic study.²⁷ The word *ponos* (hard work) signifies the technical skill and erudition valued by Hellenistic poets as the stamp of their art.²⁸ Callimachus made use of the 'expert scholarly knowledge'²⁹ he acquired in his role at the centre of the library's projects categorising and commenting on its vast stores of literature, e.g. in his *Pinakes*:³⁰ he, with great skill, shaped it into poetry.³¹ Callimachus would have enjoyed writing intricate verse in order to exhibit this knowledge and challenge his well-read peers in the Hellenistic age of competitive textual criticism and innovative writing. For example, his work often made intertextual allusions to other poets, particularly Homer. *Hekale* was written 'for an audience familiar with the Eumaeus episode in Odyssey 15'.³² Furthermore, Callimachus used Homeric *hapax legomena* (words only occurring once) and 'allusions to topically contentious passages, themselves steeped in earlier literature'.³³ Thus, it is evident that a detailed knowledge of literature was an important aesthetic tenet in allowing Callimachus to provide his learned reader with a sensually pleasurable puzzle. Though his works could be enjoyed without this detailed knowledge, Hopkinson points out that 'those who do not have even Homer by heart are liable to miss much that is important, and can easily gain a false impression of tone, style and literary texture'.³⁴

Callimachus' diligent, painstaking research enabled him to explore the byways of mythical subject matter. A fresh take on these myths, familiar content reshaped with new

²² Gutzwiller, p. 33.

²³ Gutzwiller, p. 29.

²⁴ Hopkinson, p. 10.

²⁵ Gutzwiller, p. 60.

²⁶ Nisetich, xxii.

²⁷ Hopkinson, p. 8.

²⁸ Gutzwiller, p. 31.

²⁹ Gutzwiller, p. 29.

³⁰ Nisetich, xxii.

³¹ Nisetich, xxii.

³² Hopkinson, p. 8.

³³ Hopkinson, p. 10.

³⁴ Hopkinson, p. 10.

thematic preferences, was also an important aesthetic tenet. Callimachus' poetry gave his audience a new perception by the senses, a surprise that challenged what they knew: it was an alternative to the myth in epic writing, which was all about familiarity, the same stories retold in an old-fashioned, outdated way.³⁵ He read obscure texts, finding new stances on well-known storylines and characters. In his work, Callimachus offered a shift in focus onto the minor figures, 'elevating' those 'worse than ourselves' and reinventing or 'deflating'³⁶ the old heroes. He brought women into the limelight of his poetry. For example, Hekale is an obscure figure from local mythology, her name fished out from his research into local Athenian chronicles.³⁷ The poem, *Hekale*, is about the well-known hero, Theseus, but his heroic exploit, the defeat of the bull of Marathon, is merely brushed over in comparison with homelier matters – Hekale, an old woman, becomes the real hero: the main point is about her humility and the Simple Life, as we appreciate her hospitality despite great poverty.³⁸ As Hopkinson suggests, *Hekale* highlights 'the delicacy of Callimachus in character portrayal'³⁹ – the pathos of description and the sympathetic treatment of Theseus truly engage the senses in a more rustic, homely, un-epic, unusual way. Callimachus reinvented epic heroes and shifted thematic focus points, demonstrating his key aesthetic principle of innovation when it came to subject matter. He famously said 'I detest the cyclic poem (...) I do not drink at the fountain – I loathe all common things.'⁴⁰ Here, the 'fountain', contaminated by all like the 'mighty sea',⁴¹ is in contrast to the 'pure spring'⁴² from which he is inspired to write pristine, original poetry free from the polluting constraints of epic writing, with its limitations in subject matter. Callimachus' objection to intellectual vulgarity has anti-populist political implications, as Whitmarsh argues: "The word for 'common', *demosia*, denotes the sphere of *demos*, the 'people', whose power was advanced in democracies. Intellectual, cultural and political elitism are all bound up together."⁴³

Callimachus' work clearly demonstrates his anti-populist elitism, particularly when he writes, from the divine perspective of Apollo, that a poet should avoid the 'common tracks':

"This too I bid you: proceed on paths not trodden by wagons, do not drive your chariot in the common tracks of others nor on the broad highway, but on unworn roads, even if you will drive a narrower path."⁴⁴

Callimachus certainly portrays himself as an innovator in this suggestion that his poetry was an 'unworn' novelty written with the divine advice of Apollo. But despite the often voiced reservations about his elitism, it seems to be true that he revolutionised the aesthetic of poetry for his age: everyone recognises his importance,⁴⁵ even though scholars point out that his readers, from the very beginning, needed help in reading his work. In the *Amores*, Ovid's reference to Callimachus, 'strong in art though not in genius', may not be an opinion on the limitations of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ismene Lada-Richard's Lecture.

³⁸ Hopkinson, p. 10.

³⁹ Nisetich, xxxii

⁴⁰ Callimachus, Epigram 28 Pfeiffer.

⁴¹ Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo* 2. 105-12.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Whitmarsh, p. 136.

⁴⁴ Callimachus, *Aetia*, fr 1.17-32.

⁴⁵ Nisetich, xiii

Hellenistic poetry: as noted by Nisetich, 'Ovid's words succinctly summarise Callimachus' central belief that knowledge and technical skill, not simply talent, make the poet.'⁴⁶ Callimachus' exquisite poetry left a major aesthetic legacy for first-century Roman poets,⁴⁷ and without him, the craft today would not be the same.

⁴⁶ Nisetich, xxxi.

⁴⁷ Gutzwiller, p.61.

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