

The interpretation of the *Argonautica* has developed rapidly in the past generation, and the complexity and brilliance of the poem has become ever clearer. In the context of recent scholarship, Jackson’s brief monograph, consisting of studies of Apollonius’ sources and his modifications of them in five episodes, is something of a throwback to earlier concerns, while DeForest’s study is an attempt to interpret the entire poem as a metafiction concerned with the struggle between competing types of literary theory in Alexandria. Jackson’s goals are modest, and his analyses are sometimes useful; DeForest’s book is far more ambitious in its approaches, but while its goals are admirable, and while it contains some intriguing interpretations, it is far less successful in achieving the goals it sets for itself.

Consider, for instance, the two treatments of the Phineus episode in book 2, one of the most important scenes in the first half of the *Argonautica*. Jackson analyzes the sources, concluding that Apollonius has chosen a Hesiodic framework for the myth of Phineus (as opposed to the grim story of the blinding of
Phineus’ children in Sophocles), but that in fact no earlier version of the tale of the Argonauts included a meeting between Jason and Phineus. He argues that the Phineus episode as a whole is (14) “a lesson to Jason in the avoidance of hybris and the necessity of themis” and that the encounter is part of Jason’s education in the Argonautica. Jackson sees the Argonautica as focussed on Jason’s “character, nature, and thoughts” in various situations, and describes his education, his departure from and return (in the story of Euphemus in Book 4) to themis, and his pragmatic devotion to anankê throughout the poem. Jackson’s Argonautica is, by and large, a moral tale. For DeForest, on the other hand, Phineus is a representative of the Callimachean narrator of the Argonautica, twisting the tale away from the Homeric and towards the Callimachean, away from heroism and towards eros. She argues that the entire poem is the attempt of a Callimachean narrator (not identical with Apollonius himself) to subvert the epic poem of which he is in charge; that the pedantic and anti-heroic narrator simultaneously subverts the Callimachean aesthetic of which he is an oversimplified representative and the Homeric aesthetic to which he is hostile; and that the poem as a whole is “an epic story changed to an allegory of poetic theory” (8). For her, the importance of the Euphemus episode is the fact that Euphemus, via the clod and Thera, is the ancestor of Callimachus himself. For Jackson, Jason, though not an epic hero of the old style, is certainly the central figure of the poem, and the traditionalist heroes (Telamon, Idas, even Heracles) are discredited; for DeForest, Heracles is—at least to the other characters in the poem—the main character: “By his failure to develop into a vital character, Jason does not fill the hole [left by Heracles], but defines its presence” (69). For her, it is Medea who is the true hero of the Argonautica.

By now, the divergent perspectives of Jackson and DeForest have, I hope, become evident: the two of them could comfortably fit into DeForest’s critical allegory of the Argonautica itself, two characters in the poem disputing the meaning of the text in which they find themselves. In certain respects, they are not so far apart in ideas as they are in terminology. Jackson makes a plea for regarding Jason not as a failed hero but as a normal human being thrust uncomfortably into a heroic poem (30): “As a Hellenistic hero Jason is, in fact, not a hero of non-human proportions at all, but a man, with all man’s qualities and faults. . . . Apollonius’ Argonautica is a work of Hellenistic sensibility composed within the traditional framework of epic convention, motif and idiom.” This is no less acceptable as a basis of interpretation than is DeForest’s more fashionable metapoetic reading: “Underlying Jason’s story is a struggle between Homeric tradition and Callimachean poetics—a struggle treated with exquisite irony and humor. The narrator is in conflict with his poem” (9). The weakness of Jackson’s approach is that he seems almost entirely oblivious to the problems of Alexandrian poetics; the weakness of DeForest’s is that she can see nothing else.

For DeForest, the opposing perspectives of the poem’s narrator and characters are Callimachean and Homeric respectively: the Argonauts want to be in a Homeric epic; the narrator wants to write Callimachean poetry (9). The crew’s choice of Heracles as leader in book 1 is emblematic of the difference: they, and Jason, are not only different types of hero, they belong to different genres of po-
etry. The Callimachean narrator subverts the epic to which Telamon and the others think they belong; to do so, he turns it from epic poetry to love, and then Medea, the protagonist of this Callimachean poem, escapes her narrator; she deceives and terrifies reader and narrator alike, destroying epic (allegorically found in the figure of Talos) as her last act in the poem.

While metapoetics is certainly a legitimate approach to Alexandrian (or indeed, Roman) poetry, and while the distinction between author and narrator is an essential one, there are times at which DeForest’s Argonautica seems to have been written by Pirandello rather than Apollonius. A more serious drawback is that her imprecise blurring of terms (such as ‘heroic’ ‘epic’ and ‘Homeric’) and her peculiar understanding of Callimachean poetics seems to me to undermine her whole project. The latter aspect is quite important, and here DeForest seems aware of her difficulties and tries hard to muddy the waters. On the one hand, her narrator is a Callimachean; on the other, he misrepresents both Homeric and Callimachean poetics through malicious oversimplification (and to justify this DeForest invokes, briefly and superficially, Harold Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence). This allows her to eat her cake and have it too: she knows perfectly well that Callimachus was not a love poet in any significant sense, but the turn to erotic poetry can be seen by her parodic-Callimachean narrator as true Callimacheanism; she can state (in whose voice I am unsure) that “the refusal to write an epic poem . . . is the central, unifying theme of Callimachus’ poetry” (2), but she is well aware that there is a great deal more to Callimachus than that. Although she can say that the significant presence of aetiological tales throughout the Argonautica is a sign of the narrator’s Callimacheanism, she nowhere recognizes that the very incongruities—of “heroic” characters in unheroic moments, of peculiar motivations, of the mixture of the fantastic and the quotidian or the humble and the grand—that are endemic to all high Alexandrian poetry are an essential context for the conflict she sees in the Argonautica between narrator and characters. There is indeed such a conflict, and DeForest does well to bring it out; but it is not a metapoetic allegory of the struggle between Homeric and Callimachean poetics, it is Alexandrianism pure and simple. Jackson, whose approach to the Argonautica is far less sophisticated, has managed in this (perhaps through sheer naivété) to offer a far more sensible reading.

Nor are DeForest’s proofs of the Callimacheanism of her narrator altogether convincing or consistent. She depends on precise verbal reminiscences of Callimachus to make a number of her arguments, and yet she knows that the chronological underpinnings of this approach are shaky at best: her Argonautica emerges as the final work of high Alexandrian poetry, completed after 246 (and probably by some years)—something which I find, if not impossible, highly improbable. She rests arguments on the repetition of key-words of Callimachean aesthetics, notably dienekes—but admits that the word does not have one consistent meaning in Apollonius. Some arguments are simply wrong: when the Argo passes through the Symplegades, it is compared to a kulindros, “an ancient word for the container of book rolls. . . . Just as Athena’s hand pushes the boat, so the reader’s hand keeps the story going by unrolling the volume. . . .” (79) And the argument goes on, becoming ever more remote from either sense or the text. And it might be pointed out that the only citation in LSJ for kulindros in the
sense that DeForest wants is from Diogenes Laertius—scarcely evidence for Alexandrian usage. Add to this that DeForest’s book is filled with irrelevant digressions, repetitions, and errors, and it will be clear that the intelligent points that she does have to make about the narrator of the Argonautica, about Medea, about Jason’s cloak and Orpheus’ song, and about other specific passages are submerged in a welter of misdirection. The Argonautica is indeed an important part of the Alexandrian debate about the goals and nature of poetry in the new age, but it is too great a poem to be pigeonholed as no more than metapoetic allegory.

I ended by being uncertain too about the audience that DeForest wants to address: there is far too much simple (and often over-simple) explanation of background for anyone with any knowledge of Greek literature, but the argument is far too narrow for anyone but an aficionado of Alexandrian poetry. Ultimately, I wondered whether this book too has a narrator at odds with its author and subject.

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