



PROJECT MUSE®

Oral Tradition and Hellenistic Epic: New Directions in
Apollonius of Rhodes

Michael Barnes

Oral Tradition, Volume 18, Number 1, March 2003, pp. 55-58 (Article)

Published by Center for Studies in Oral Tradition

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ort.2004.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/51576>

Oral Tradition and Hellenistic Epic: New Directions in Apollonius of Rhodes

Michael Barnes

Any investigation of oral tradition in Hellenistic literature immediately runs up against two longstanding interpretive frameworks that have not only defined the nature of Greek literature during this period (roughly 323-30 BCE), but also seem *a priori* to cut off the possibility of oral traditional influence. The first is the idea of a radical separation: as refugees in northern Egypt, poets such as Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Theocritus were cut off—temporally and culturally, as well as geographically—from the native springs that inspired the poets and other writers of archaic and classical Greece. These later authors, conscious of an epochal break between themselves and the great writers of the past, were still the heirs of a tradition, but by then a decidedly literary tradition, fixed in the texts on deposit in the Library of Alexandria.

The image of the Library leads us to the second paradigm: the daunting bookishness of Alexandrian poetry. Little need be said about the self-consciously sophisticated, highly allusive, and scholarly nature of Hellenistic poetry; one need only read a hymn of Callimachus or a few lines of Lycophron to understand its essentially textual nature. The combination of these fundamental and mutually reinforcing interpretive frameworks produced, in the title of Bing's important study (1988), a well-read Muse, under whose patronage "poetry . . . for the first time became grounded—institutionally—in the written word" (15).

This standard view has important consequences for our reading of the lone Alexandrian epicist whose work survives in full, Apollonius of Rhodes. The resurgence of scholarly interest in the *Argonautica* has largely overlooked any connections between that poem and oral tradition, preferring instead to explore the epic's exquisite webs of literary allusion; or matters of character, especially the elusive character of Jason; or the place of the *Argonautica* in contemporary Alexandrian poetic debate (a perilous subject). Recently, however, a few scholars, most notably Robert Albis and Martijn

Cuypers, have begun to look more carefully at the narrative dynamics of the epic, and in particular at the ways in which Apollonius is often at pains to create the illusion of a traditional oral performance.

Features imported from the world of performance—the hymnic openings to Books 1, 3, and 4, for example, but especially the narrator’s frequent interruptions of the narrative, whether to correct some aspect of the tale (e.g., 2.844-50), to implore the gods (e.g., 4.445-51, 1673-75) or defer to the Muses (e.g., 4.552-56, 1381-88), or even to mollify a potential religious offense caused by his verses (2.708-10, 4.982-92)—may be understood as evidence of an epic poet laboring to re-create the aura of oral performance and the intimacy between performing bard and audience. The occasional abrupt use of second-person addresses to an assumed audience, coupled with the studious use throughout of archaic epic vocabulary, likewise abets the literary construction of an oral performance arena. The fiction of oral performance created by these elements suggests that Apollonius was aware of the oral dimension of Homeric verse and perhaps even foregrounded imitations of it to compensate for the distance that writing was felt to create between poet and audience.

Others have begun to apply ideas about Homeric oral poetics to the *Argonautica*. Anatole Mori in these pages (2001) recently grounded a discussion of the political and the literary dimensions of Apollonius’ text (focusing on the figures of Arsinoë and Arete) and representations of public and private speech-acts within the nexus of Richard Martin’s work (1989) on oral *epos* and *muthos* in Homer. I am currently at work on an article on the presence of *sêmata*—a deeply resonant term in Homeric oral poetics, as John Miles Foley (1999: espec. chs. 1, 5, and 7) and others have demonstrated—in the *Argonautica*, looking especially their frequent connections to traditional epic *kleos* and the memorializing figure of the aition.

Yet for all these recent approaches, Martijn Cuypers has observed (1998) that “there is still much basic, micro-level research of the more laborious sort to be done” on the relationship of the *Argonautica* to oral traditional poetics. Cuypers, building on the work of Visser, Jahn, and Bakker, undertakes some of this micro-level research by examining Apollonius’ exploitation of “peripheral expressions” as a means of understanding his appropriation and modification of the Homeric formulaic tradition. Marco Fantuzzi has recently furthered our understanding of Apollonius and the oral nature of Homeric verse by investigating the similarities between the “way in which Apollonius conceived the internal formulaicity of his poem and the probable expectations and ‘desires’ of his contemporaries [esp. Zenodotus] regarding the ‘real’ formulaicity of Homer’s

text” (2001:177). This direct focus on the interplay between Apollonius’ scholarly work (and that of his contemporaries) and how that work might have affected his own conceptions of epic style—perhaps resulting in, as Cairns (1998) has already argued, an occasional strategy of “re-oralization”?—is also enormously promising.

Taken together, the broader, conceptual approaches and the bedrock micro-level research herald a significant new direction in Apollonian scholarship, one that focuses on the myriad intersections between the oral poetics of Apollonius’ principal model and Apollonius’ own literate strategies of appropriation, imitation, and experimentation.

University of Houston

References

- Albis 1996 Robert Albis. *Poet and Audience in the Argonautica of Apollonius*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Bing 1988 Peter Bing. *The Well-Read Muse: Present and Past in Callimachus and the Hellenistic Poets*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.
- Cairns 1998 Francis Cairns. “Orality, Writing, and Reoralisation: Some Departures and Arrivals in Homer and Apollonius Rhodius.” In *New Methods in the Research of Epic (Neue Methoden der Epenforschung)*. Ed. by H. L. C. Tristram. Tübingen: Gunter Narr. pp. 63-84.
- Cuypers 1998 Martijn Cuypers. “In Apollonius’ Workshop with Parry’s Toolbox: the *Argonautica* and Oral Poetry.” Unpub. paper presented at the 1998 Hellenistic Poetry Workshop, Groningen.
- Cuypers forthcoming ———. “Apollonius of Rhodes.” In *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative. Vol. 1: The Narrator*. Ed. by I. J. F. de Jong et al. Leiden: Brill.
- Fantuzzi 2001 Marco Fantuzzi. “‘Homeric’ Formularity in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes.” In *A Companion to Apollonius Rhodius*. Ed. by Theodore D. Papanghelis and Antonios Rengakos. Leiden: Brill. pp. 171-92.
- Foley 1999 John Miles Foley. *Homer’s Traditional Art*. University

Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

- Hunter 2001 Richard L. Hunter. "The Poetics of Narrative in the *Argonautica*." In *A Companion to Apollonius Rhodius*. Ed. by Theodore D. Papanghelis and Antonios Rengakos. Leiden: Brill. pp. 93-125.
- Hunter 2002 _____. "Le 'Argonautiche' di Apollonio Rodio e la Tradizione Epica." In *Muse e Modelli: La Poesia Ellenistica da Alessandro Magno ad Augusto*. Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza. pp. 121-75.
- Martin 1989 Richard Martin. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mori 2001 Anatole Mori. "Personal Favor and Public Influence: Arete, Arsinoë, and the *Argonautica*." *Oral Tradition*, 16:85-106.
- Pearce 1993 James B. Pearce. "Theocritus and Oral Tradition." *Oral Tradition*, 8:59-86.