Callimachus and his Critics: a Response

The basic thread of Cameron’s argument is easy enough to follow, and runs like this. Rudolf Pfeiffer and Peter Parsons are wrong in postulating that the prologue to Callimachus’ Aetia was added to a second edition of the poem in c. 245 BC, together with the third and fourth books framed with pieces written in honour of Berenice II. Rather, the prologue was the beginning of the original Aetia, published in around 270, when the poet was in his late forties. And the subject of the prologue is not, pace Pfeiffer and Parsons, contemporary epic, but elegy. Because of the prologue’s repeated references to the poet’s old age, we are presented with a chapter on how the ancients conceived themselves as being old from about thirty onwards. More importantly, Cameron has to play down the evidence for Callimachus and his contemporaries’ engagement with the genre of epic. Thus ‘one continuous poem’ has no reference to epic but to an elegy like Antimachus’ Lyde, which was too close to Homer; the Lysanias epigram is erotic rather than an expression of an aversion to ‘cyclic’ epic; the end of the Hymn to Apollo contrasts the hymn itself, not epic in general, with ‘the much longer and less carefully polished hymn that a lesser artist might have produced’ (406); the epigram on Aratus only expresses qualified praise of Hesiod, since Aratus did not imitate him in every aspect, but only his most agreeable qualities; the Hecale is no evidence of any systematic anti-Aristotelianism in Callimachus’ views on epic, because the poem is still recognisably an epic; Theocritus in Idyll 7 is not concerned with imitating Homer, but with the characterization of Simichidas; later use of the proem, e.g. by Virgil, as a rejection of epic was merely an imposition on the part of its imitators, and was not at all founded in what Callimachus said. In fact, the whole picture of the age as

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63 Review article of Alan Cameron, Callimachus and his Critics (Princeton, NJ 1995).
concerned with the question of how to write epic, as drawn by
Ziegler and approved by Lloyd-Jones, is false: all Ziegler's
evidence is spurious or later than Callimachus, and, although we
are most reliably informed about the great length of Rhianus'
epics in particular, we are told that he came after Callimachus' generation.

In this way Cameron seeks to change the entire face of the
field of Hellenistic studies. But let us tug at various points in the
thread of his argument to see whether the tapestry remains intact.
We shall begin at its beginning, the contention that Aetia I and II
should be dated to c. 270, with the prologue already in situ, and
that Books 3 and 4 were produced soon after 246. We may first
question Cameron's premiss that 'If Callimachus saw fit to add a
new prologue to his continuation, he would (of course) have placed
it before Bk III' (109). This is one of the several key occasions on
which Cameron simply begs the question. Callimachus could
indeed have placed a new prologue at the head of the second
dition with its continuation. It is no argument to claim that the
procedure 'would certainly be without parallel' (118). And I find
nothing to convince me that the Somnium could not have stood at
the original beginning of the first book (119-32). In particular,
Cameron assumes that, because (as he sees it) there is no sign of a
seam between Fr. 1 and 2, prologue and Somnium were one. But this
is hardly the only alternative: we might rather expect a poet like
Callimachus to incorporate new material into the old in a way
that was perfectly fluent and seamless (despite the ineffectual
remarks on this possibility on p.132). And Cameron's chapter on
ancient perceptions of old age starting in one's forties is based on
much later evidence and amounts too often to nothing more than
specious erudition, a signal case being the argument that Saint
Jerome called himself a senex at the age of forty, Cameron's only
'secure example of a forty-year-old senex' (179).

Next in the thread comes the postulation that in the prologue
to the Aetia Callimachus is concerned solely with elegy, not epic.
The contemporary reader of the prologue, when confronted by its
first six lines, without any further qualification and with their specific complaint about the Telchines that they grumble at Callimachus because he ‘did not complete one continuous song in many thousands of lines on kings ... or heroes’, can only have taken the pronouncement as referring to epic, because of the emphasis placed on unity, length—Callimachus’ *epos* is brief, like a child’s utterance—and subject-matter. The contemporary reader would therefore have seen in the lines a statement of what Callimachus abhorred in epic and of the way he has adapted the genre. It is important to note, moreover, that Cameron nowhere successfully dismisses Pfeiffer’s *ἐς σέβας* the supplement is mentioned but the discussion trails off into inconclusiveness, and the conclusion that there is ‘no real justification for seeing a reference here to long poems on living kings’, for this reason if for no other, is quite unfair (267). Reading on, the contemporary reader would have found that Callimachus has subtly shifted the reference to elegiacs, represented by Philetas, Mimnermus and Antimachus. So the first six lines would now have been taken as a statement on epic and, retrospectively, on elegy. No need to deny the relevance to Callimachus’ views on epic. Cameron’s own reading half recognises the truth, but has to modify it, as for example, in the statement: ‘Whence the attack on epic in the *Aetia* prologue; not epic itself, but the style and manner of epic’ (315). Again, ‘it is not epic itself he is attacking, but the influence of the impersonal and prolix style of Cyclic epic on the fashionable genre of elegy’ (351). But that only comes into play at lines 31f., on the braying of donkeys. It is symptomatic of his selective treatment that in his discussion of ‘one continuous poem’, Chapter XII, Cameron quotes only the first six lines of the prologue, thus debarring himself of a consideration of the subtle shift of emphasis from epic to elegy. Moreover, if Cameron can allow that terminology relevant to epic ‘epitomizes’ what he wants no-one to find in elegy, ‘the grand style’ (330), then how can he stall the process and deny that the Telchines’ words on kings and heroes are similarly an index of what we should not expect of elegy’s subject-matter? Such an implied denial seems all the stranger since Callimachus’ own essay in the genre includes heroes like the Argonauts, Heracles
and, at least in Books 3 and 4, living royalty like Berenice and Euergetes. It seems to me more plausible to think that Callimachus uses the Telchines' epic-centred attack (in Cameron's chronology Callimachus' *Hecale* preceded *Aetia* 1 and 2: 437) to pronounce by contraries his own tastes in epic; then he subtly twists the Telchines' criticisms, based on epic, to his own purposes in defining what he finds appropriate to elegy, starting with his discussion of Mimnermus, Antimachus and Philetas. In addition, one important issue is entirely neglected by Cameron. This is the respectable body of thought which has it that at this period epic and elegy were considered as much the same. If the equation is correct, Cameron could not deny epic reference in the prologue, even if he persisted in his belief that Callimachus was really preoccupied with elegy. In short, we are still at liberty to believe that the prologue does indeed give us a guide to Callimachus' tastes in epic, however right Cameron is in reminding us that the ultimate application is to elegy. It is simply that Cameron has swung the pendulum too far.

The rest of Cameron's discussion depends on whether he convinces us on these two basic issues. If he doesn't, all his subsequent arguments are either misguided or pointless. In the case of Lycidas and Simichidas' conversation in Theocritus *Id.* 7.26-48, we have to accept not only Cameron's interpretation of the *Aetia*-prologue in order to distinguish the idyll's intent from that of the prologue, but also his view that the idyll is concerned not with literary matters like the rejection of Homeric imitation and but with pure ambition. This last seems in any case absurd: we can indeed make literary sense of the passage if we remember that directly after Lycidas' deprecation of imitating Homer Lycidas says 'let us immediately begin bucolic song', thus making a significant link between criticism of Homeric imitation and exemplifying the kind of epic one can legitimately engage with. Indeed, if 'Elegy was the great preoccupation of the age of Callimachus' (437), what are we to do with Theocritus and Apollonius?
Long-standing opinions ought certainly to be challenged, and the Pfeiffer/Parsons reconstruction of the *Aetia* and interpretation of the prologue, the hypothetical nature of which has never been a secret, is no exception. Clearly, too, Cameron makes good points. One example is the suggestion that *wilde* at line 16 of the prologue refers to the *Aetia* itself—'poems are sweeter, as follows.' The trouble here, as elsewhere, is that the insight makes just as much sense if the prologue were added to the beginning of Book 1 after 246 as it would have if it went with the original publication of *Aetia* 1 and 2 c. 270. Cameron's assault thus fails; in order to supplant the achievements of Pfeiffer and Parsons, we need arguments which depend less than Cameron's on the heaping of hypothesis on hypothesis.

The editor of this journal has kindly allowed me to illustrate some of Cameron's methods in further detail by concentrating on some of Cameron's criticisms of my own book, *Realism in Alexandrian Poetry: A Literature and its Audience* (London 1987). The latter half of my book dealt with one facet of Alexandrian genre-crossing (a major one), namely the crossing of the form of grand genres with the subject-matter of low genres. Cameron brings to a head much of what criticism of my model has involved, and I am grateful to be able to defend my ground, while at the same time, I hope, giving a fair picture of Cameron's approach.

In *Realism in Alexandrian Poetry* I tried to place my view of an early Alexandrian 'Hellenizing' culture, poetry in particular, within the social context of the young city (19-27). I argued that a sense of deracination on the part of immigrant intellectuals, merchants, soldiers and influential administrators is evidenced in the very Greek colour of social institutions like marriage in the city, while such institutions became disassociated from their Greek forms in the *chora*; in the way in which the upper classes and the intelligentsia retained their ethnics, keeping up their ties with their Greek home-cities; in areas of tension with the numerically vastly superior native Egyptian populace; and in the lack of interest which these groups show towards new Ptolemaic
religious programmes, especially the worship of Sarapis. Cameron will have none of this (25f.), because of his desire to see Callimachus as 'a child of his age', not as ranged against the dominant poetic tastes of the Hellenistic period, especially in epic. Hence he objects to my use of the term 'Alexandrian', whereby I tried to identify a literary movement whose leading light was Callimachus active in Alexandria and which might include literary enemies of Callimachus like the Florentine Scholiast's Asclepiades and Posidippus, or poets whom Callimachus seems to have influenced but whose connection with the city of Alexandria, or even with Callimachus himself, is unverifiable or non-existent, like Leonidas of Tarentum. It does not seem to me that this approach is 'both too subjective and too restrictive, presupposing as it does an explanation in terms of direct personal influence'. Moreover, Cameron's comparison with labelling 'Nonnian' much early Byzantine poetry is not very pertinent, because Nonnus hardly worked in an artistic matrix like Callimachus' Alexandria, where so many others in his 'movement' were based, and because I would have to have used the term 'Callimachean' if Cameron's analogy were to be in any way precise enough to be convincing.

In fact, Cameron simply fails to address several of the issues I raised. However, he denies any significance in my argument from the retention of ethnics, on the grounds that the phenomenon is paralleled in third-century Athens, and for some reason claims that 'Zanker assumes that poets permanently abandoned their native cities for Alexandria'. The latter claim completely misrepresents my point that they and other elite Greeks of the city steadfastly maintained their links with their Hellenic origins, embodied in their native cities. This observation makes more sense of my view of the ethnics than Cameron's misreading would suggest. In fact, K.Goudriaan, *Ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt* (Amsterdam 1988) 1-21 has demonstrated that for Ptolemaic Egypt it was open to every Greek or Macedonian citizen to retain his ethnic (apart from the military, for which it was mandatory), a fact which strongly suggests that the retention of ethnics by
Greeks in Alexandria was indeed at least in part motivated by their concern with self-definition. Cameron also objects to my contention that the Ptolemies enlisted their poets, as he puts it, to ‘assimilate the recent history of Alexandria and the cult of the Ptolemies to the Hellenic mythical past’, claiming that ‘Every new city the length and breadth of the Hellenistic world’ witnesses the same drive. In fact, I had myself acknowledged, with documentation, that ‘In some ways the picture of the “culture shock” of the Greeks living in Alexandria is generally true of the Greek colonies of the Hellenistic world as a whole’, but what Cameron ignores here is the uniqueness of the problems and strategies of Alexandria, the largest city in the Hellenistic world, with its circumambient culture, the Pharaonic, ‘which was remarkably ancient, conversative, articulated and coherently uniform’. More recently, S. Sherwin-White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis* (London 1993) 141-87 have shown how very much more free were Greek interactions with non-Greek civilisations in the Seleucid empire—and how dangerous it is to extrapolate from the lack of real contact with Egyptian culture among the elite of Alexandria to the colonial experience of the Hellenistic world as a whole. Nor do we find, pace Cameron, in any of Alexandria’s poetry in the period, much resonance of Bickerman’s ‘explanation’ of the Greeks’ ‘natural instinct’ to assume ‘that non-Greek peoples were descended, however remotely, from Greek ancestors’. As Cameron himself is forced to admit, ‘unfortunately’ we know nothing of Apollonius’ *Foundation of Naucratis*, and, we might add, little enough of his *Foundation of Alexandria*, nor do his other examples compel us to believe that the Alexandrian poets were much interested in providing an *interpretatio Graeca* of the origins of Egypt, except in as much as linkages could hallow things by relating them to the heritage of Hellas, especially local landmarks like ‘the Island of Helen’, and Proteus and the Island of Pharos, as we see in Callimachus’ *Victoria Berenices* Fr. 254. 4-5 S.H. Cameron also points out that there was, on the part of poets like Callimachus, ‘no attempt to provide a respectable Greek ancestry for Sarapis’. But rather than proving that the Ptolemies were concerned to find Hellenic origins
of 'Egyptian' aspects of Alexandrian life, Cameron in fact illustrates the Alexandrian poets' coolness towards the Egyptian 'origins' of the city. And finally, when he comes to the obvious truth of the matter, that what the Ptolemies wanted to stress was their connections with the Argead line of Macedon and ultimately with Heracles and Dionysus, he at last touches on the regents' real concern, at least for the upper-class Greek inhabitants of Alexandria, to affirm and proclaim the authentic, unadulterated Greekness of the origins of their house and their city; what their upper-class subjects thought of Sarapis—which was, according to P.M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford 1972) 306, 116f. 251ff. 273, itself an attempt to provide Alexandria with a recognisable Greek city-deity—was left to them. In short, Cameron is here confusing the separate notions of Ptolemaic cultural programme and dynastic programme. Which brings us back to the likelihood that the Ptolemies did indeed have a 'cultural policy', one designed to fill the cultural vacuum sensed by the upper-class Greek immigrant population, a position which I have developed elsewhere (*A,u,A.* 35 [1989] 91-9). I do not think that anything in Cameron's criticisms forces us to conclude that the Alexandrian Greeks would not have related with pleasure or a sense of confirmation—the possible tones are immense—to allusions to the grand Hellenic past juxtaposed with 'low', 'everyday' settings.

Cameron is also sceptical of the whole notion of genre-crossing. The main ground that he alleges for his doubts is his contention that the genres were never really separated in the first place. As he puts it, '... it is a grave misunderstanding of this phenomenon to interpret it in terms of parody—or even to assume that the various genres had ever existed in rigid isolation' (146). (Even Cameron would find it hard to dismiss all the evidence I collected from pre-Alexandrian literary practice and theory at *Realism in Alexandrian Poetry* 133-54; it is sobering to reflect upon the consequences if he had made the attempt.) From this premiss he challenges the argument that in the Hellenistic period the laws of the genres were formalised in such a way that they could be violated all the more effectively. He adduces the new Simonides
fragments (153), agreeing with the assessment of Peter Parsons, 'Summing Up', Proc. 20th Int. Congr. of Papyrologists (Copenhagen 1994) 122: 'Miniaturisation, crossing of genres—wouldn't we be tempted to call that Hellenistic?' Given this scepticism, it comes as something of a surprise to find Cameron constructing the order of sequence of Callimachus' oeuvre in its collected edition by the argument that the sequence he proposes would be 'in harmony with the traditional hierarchy of genres: epic, hymn, elegy, iambus, epigram' (113). Elsewhere we find Cameron supporting his thesis that Aetia 1-2 ended with Fr. 112 Pf. on the grounds that then we would be reminded of 'the slopes of Helicon and the styles appropriate to the various genres' (162). Characterizing Callimachus' critics of his diction and polueivdeia, Cameron says that the essence of the criticism was the 'distortion of individual genres. Scenarios should be in pure ionic, but Callimachus's are a hybrid' (372). In other words, he clearly accepts that there was a general expectation of generic propriety. To my mind, Cameron is making things too easy for himself by this internal inconsistency, and there we could let the matter lie. But there are external considerations. Cameron is forced to accept that in the Proem to the Aetia Callimachus denounces epic subject-matter '(kings and heroes)' in a manner paralleled in Aristophanes' Frogs where of course Aeschylus' Homeric heroes (1040-42) are contrasted with Euripides' women in love and so on (1043, 1079-81) (330). That is to say, Cameron must admit that there were generally accepted levels of subject-matter that might be expected of tragedy, a mode of thought at least countenanced by Callimachus himself. In Realism in Alexandrian Poetry 139-44 I discussed in some detail the evidence on the matter provided by Aristotle's Poetics. In that treatise, I tried to demonstrate, we have a systematic underpinning of the traditional view that epic has as its appropriate subjects the spoudaioi, people of consequence, comedy the phauloi, people of little consequence. The basic framework of my analysis is therefore the Aristotelian opposition spoudaios/phaulos. This evidence, like the rest that I assembled, is nowhere adequately appreciated by Cameron; on p.443 he sounds indebted to my own conclusions, and yet does not go far
enough. And what of the new Simonides fragment? Cameron is already in some real disagreement with Parsons in that he has to qualify Parsons' statement (art. cit. 122) that 'the whole structure <'old heroes' in the hymn, 'new heroes' in the narrative> is transposed into elegiacs' by a footnote in which we are advised: 'Perhaps rather a continuing tradition of elegiac narrative: Ch. XI. 3' (153 n. 67), for the reason that Cameron would make elegy the traditional vehicle of the theme of recent wars and heroes (thereby tacitly setting up his own type of generic propriety ...). But even the new Simonides itself does nothing to undermine my contention that there is one form of genre-crossing which is unattested earlier than the Hellenistic period. This is the crossing of a high literary form with the subject-matter of a low genre without an exclusive concern for parodistic effects. As Cameron shows himself aware (444f.), I regard Callimachus' own Hecale as an instance of this. Where in the new Simonides fragments do we have one 'low' moment or motif? I shall return to Cameron's objections to my thesis—which is not, incidentally, confined to the Hecale; but suffice it here to conclude that Cameron need feel no unease about either this aspect of the pre-Hellenistic separation of styles or the mixture of them in the Hellenistic period.

As we have seen, the main thrust of Callimachus and his Critics is that the prologue to the Aetia has nothing to do with Callimachus' views on how to write epic but has as its exclusive concern the question of the style and tone appropriate to elegy. As we have also seen, if the prologue to the Aetia is not relevant to epic, then even Cameron seems forced to admit that it at least uses epic as a springboard, and in very truth tells us Callimachus' predilections in the genre. These were obviously untraditional, and included a taste for non-traditional literary heroes like Hecale or Molorchus. Once again, I see no reason to abandon my argument that Callimachus was subverting traditional expectations of the subject-matter proper to epic. Rightly enough, Cameron takes into special consideration the new fragments of Simonides celebrating in elegiacs the Greek battles with the
Persians in the fifth century. So he argues that they show that 'elegy rather than epic was the medium for recent battles' (280; cf. 291). To judge from the hymn to Achilles, moreover, ancient heroes were also at home in elegiaccs. What the Simonides fragments come nowhere near to illustrating is the 'humanisation' of the victors and heroes of Callimachus' elegiac Aetia, with a resultant drastic lowering of tone in their depiction: a Heracles who laughs and cries with pain as his hungry baby, Hyllus, tears out a handful of hair from the hero's chest; the hero, the peasant and the mousetrap; Euergetes sallying forth to the Syrian War showing signs of tiredness from love-making with Berenice the night before; and so on. As we have seen, even Cameron puts elegy high on the ancient hierarchy of the literary genres, and in Callimachus we find an unprecedented quotient of 'low' and 'everyday', comic, detail, with a corresponding lowering of the tonal register. Here again, we find nothing to dislodge the view that we are indeed dealing with a crossing of the genres, in the sense of the crossing of the form of a 'high' genre with the material of a 'low' genre such as I tried to explore in Realism in Alexandrian Poetry. This is to be differentiated from the crossing of genres which we have seen Cameron following Parsons in remarking, a hymn in elegiacs and so forth.

Then there are Cameron's objections to my treatment of the Hecale (443-5). Cameron claims that I go too far in my assertion in 'Callimachus' Hecale: A New Kind of Epic Hero?', Antichthon 11 (1979) 73, 77 that the Hecale 'may be seen as a break with the whole of the Greek epic tradition', and that Hecale is 'a new kind of epic hero'. According to Cameron, 'The Hecale is no proletarian epic.' He points to Fr. 254 = 41 Hollis which makes it clear that Hecale was nobly born and once rich, like her predecessors Eumaeus, Eurycleia and the Farmer of Euripides' Electra. However, I had myself nowhere gone so far as Cameron suggests, and he takes no notice of my fuller treatment of Callimachus' epic in Realism in Alexandrian Poetry (147, 209-14), in which I discuss the noble origins of Hecale in terms of an attempt to assure the audience that, as a morally virtuous agent capable of independent
moral action like offering hospitality, Hecale could be viewed within the traditional Greek structure of values, while at the same time, given the present social position which Callimachus so vividly evokes for us, she could be presented as a phaulos. I used the Aristotelian framework, and Cameron seems indebted to my analysis (443); I would think that he represented my own position surprisingly accurately when, for example, he writes 'In fact throughout the poem Callimachus is subtly undermining the basic classical axiom that epic, like tragedy, deals with great deeds of great men, in Aristotelian terminology spoudaia by spoudaioi.' Again I find nothing to upset my exploration of the Hecale as an essay in the type of genre-crossing that I was concerned with.

The final objection that I wish to raise in this context against Cameron is to his treatment of Theocritus' bucolic Idylls. These, he claims, cannot have aroused any epic expectations, among other things because by Theocritus' time 'hexameters had been used for many sorts of poetry other than heroic narrative', and Theocritus bears such 'an obvious debt to drama and mime' (esp. 417, 425f., 429f.). Yet, as I argue in Realism in Alexandrian Poetry 164-74, we can only appreciate fully the humour of an Idyll 5 and its vulgar banter if we bear in mind that the rustics are speaking in the metre which of all the Greek metres was the 'stateliest and most weighty' and the most unlike the rhythmical pattern of ordinary speech, as Aristotle characterizes it at Poetics 59b34f. and Rhetoric 1408b32f. In this respect at least, metre and genre are inseparable. This analysis seems to be borne out by moments like the close of Idyll 5, when Comatas threatens to castrate his straying billy-goat or himself become the castrated Melanthius of the Odyssey, where a character refers to his 'canonical' forebear in epic with ironic appositeness. In the case of the poems on the Cyclops, too much is made of Odyssean allusion for us to believe that the poems are not a redefined epic response to traditional epic, as when the monster is made to swear by his one eye, which is more dear to him than anything else. By divorcing the bucolic Idylls from epic, we are therefore likely to miss their full effect. We are thus indeed dealing with epic expectations, which are
cheated or perverted in such a ‘low’ context. Here, too, it seems more reasonable to take the view that Theocritus is crossing the genre of epic and its form with well attested material from earlier low genres like comedy, parodic dithyramb, and mime. This seems more likely to be the case with the epic allusion found in the elegiac Victory of Berenice as well.

Which brings me to the last general reservation about Cameron’s methods that I wish to raise in this occasion. Cameron’s approach is a historian’s. That is an approach for which I have the utmost respect. But by ignoring the aesthetic aspect of Hellenistic poetry as in the Theocritean example I have just quoted, he effectively cuts out a significant part of the evidence which should have contributed to his dossier.

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