CHAPTER ONE

POETIC PREDECESSORS IN EPIGRAM

1.1. From Greece to Alexandria

The foundation of the Ptolemaic Library and Museum made Alexandria into the intellectual center of the Hellenistic world, a shrine of Greece’s literary and intellectual heritage, towards which scrolls from all over the known world gravitated, just like the scholars and poets who studied them. An epigram on the new Posidippus Papyrus (P. Mil. Vogl. VIII 309), as Peter Bing argues, illustrates the idea that Greece’s literature had traveled from its old home to the harbor of Alexandria. It describes the dedication of a lyre brought to land by “Arion’s dolphin” on the coast of Alexandria and a song (?) about it at the shrine of Arsinoe Philadelfus, the wife and sister of Ptolemy II.

῾Αρσινόη, σοὶ τῇ [ν]δὲ λύρην ὑπὸ χειρ [……..]
Φθεγξαμένη δὲλείζῃ ἕγαγ᾽ Ἀριόνοιο [gewater]
οὖρη ἐλ’ οὐ [βλάψ]ας ἐξ κόψατος ἀλλ’ ὅτι [ε ὅσαι]
κεῖνος αὐ[……..]ς λευκὰ περία πελά[γη]
—πολλὰ πο[ει ψι]ότητι καὶ αἰόλα—τῇ π[ανοδύρτωι]
φωνῇ π[ῆ ἔλ]ακον καῦνων ἀσδον[ίδες]
ἀνθείμα Δ’, [ὁ Φιλ.]ἀδέλφε, τὸν ἦλασεν [……..]ιον,
τόνδε δἐ[χου,] ὃςον μείλεια ναςύλο[ν.]

(AB 37)

To you Arsinoe, this lyre, which the hands [of a bard] made resonant, was brought by Arion’s dolphin. With its tail, it lifted it from the wave without [damage], but when [after saving it] [unexpectedly] it goes on its journey through the white sea—it does many various things through [kindness]—with [all-plaintive] voice, the nightingales lamented the novel [calamity]. As an offering, [O] Brother—[loving one] receive this […] which [A]rion brought forth, a present from [.]ysus the temple guard.1

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1 This translation, based on the text and translation of Austin and Bastianini, is more or less exempli gratia. Some notes on the text: 1 fin. χειρ[ι μελοδόο]υ[?] χειρ[ός ἁθώδο]υ vel χειρ[ός ἀθήλο]υ Austin | 3 Austin | 4 ἀν[ηθεὶ]ς brevius spatio ἀν[οἵστο]ς fort. longius | 5–6 Austin|6 καυνων pap.| 7 [ὁίμον Αρ]ιων e.g. Austin| 8 Λ[ύσου, Μ]ύσου, N]ύσου aeditui nomen μιλα pap.
Bing suggests:

The poem represents a striking example of how an object, the lyre, may be made to embody the cultural historical heritage and become (quite literally) the vehicle by which that heritage is transmitted to a new place. (...) The epigram clearly alludes to the legend of Arion, “the best singer in the world” (...) by describing how his lyre—together with the tradition it evokes—came to Egypt. Thus the poet links the third-century BC shrine of Arsinoe to one of the great figures of archaic poetry from the seventh century and with him to the rich tradition of Lesbian lyric including Terpander, Sappho and Alcaeus. (...) That is, (...) emblematic of the Ptolemies’ claim to be the true inheritors and guardians of the literary legacy of Hellas, in particular here the great tradition of Lesbian song. The Lesbian lyre has passed on; today its home is Egypt.2

(Bing, 2004: 128–130)

A similarly striking interest in the continuity with and renewal of the Greek literary heritage is evident in many other poetical expressions of the Hellenistic age, as we shall presently see.

1.2. Greek Poets and Their Predecessors

Preoccupation with the literature of the past is of course not an exclusively Hellenistic phenomenon, even if its intensity may be peculiar to this age. The early Greeks already honored poets of the past as sages and artists, as various texts, portrait statues, and vase paintings from as early as the sixth century BCE affirm.3 Such authors might be regarded as positive examples, a standard by which one’s own works might be measured and which provided instruction.4 Other critical assessments, in both the negative and neutral senses of the term, are also common in archaic

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2 Cf. Austin and Bastianini (2002: 60): Arsinoae Philadelpho lyram, quam ab undis delphimus servaverat, et carmen Arionium (v 7 s.) dedicat fani sacerdos. Bing furthermore links this passage with Phan. fr. 1 Powell, where the severed head and lyre of Orpheus undertake a similar sea journey. They reach Lesbos and there become the fountainhead of lyric poetry.

3 The exceptional status of poets is also demonstrated by the cults that many of them enjoyed, cf. Clay (2004).

4 For instance, Aeschylus claimed that his tragedies were “only slices from the banquet of Homer” (Ath. 8.347); Antiphon remarks upon the usefulness of knowing the ancient poets (P. Oxy. III 414 coll. i–iii); Critias’ comments on Anacreon emphasize the immortal charm of his poetry (Ath. XIII 600D–E). See on the topic of portrait statues of the ancient poets in particular Schefold (1965) and Zanker (1995), who argues for a relationship between portraiture and biographical interests (1995: 145).