The history of the reception of the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius at Rome has yet to be written. Twenty years ago such an opening sentence would have been interpreted either as the musing of an idle idiot or as a joke, a satiric attack on the writing of pretentious articles on obscure topics of no scholarly interest. There are many, no doubt, who will take it thus still today. But given the development of Apollonian studies over the last twenty-five years it is surely to be hoped that my opening will now be taken seriously by at least a few as one which, while perhaps still sounding vaguely pretentious, refers to a subject of some importance. The minimalist case for the influence exercised by Apollonius Rhodius on Latin literature before Virgil would point to his importance for the understanding of Catullus 64 and to his translation by Varro Atacinus. A more ambitious case would attempt to argue that Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius and Accius were all keen readers and imitators of the *Argonautica* long before Catullus and his generation “discovered” Alexandrian or Hellenistic poetry. In any case, it would have to be agreed that Virgil’s *Aeneid* represents the climax of a fascinating and complex story.¹

Apollonian influence on the *Aeneid* is pervasive and profound. Just as Virgil clearly spent much time reading Homer before beginning to write his own epic,² so he also studied the *Argonautica* in great detail at the same time. He surely devoted much time and energy to working out the internal complexities of the structures of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Argonautica*, and no doubt of many other works as well. Furthermore, he certainly worked hard at uncovering the ways in which Odyssean narrative structures both resemble and differ from Iliadic patterns,³ and in discovering the ways in which Apollonius uses both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* throughout the *Argonautica*.⁴ Readers of the *Aeneid*

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¹ See Nelis (2001).
² See Knauer (1964).
⁴ See Knight (1995).
must be constantly aware of Iliadic and Odyssean elements working at every level in the text, from the selection and form of individual words to narrative patterns running over many hundreds of verses. They must be equally alert to Virgil’s constant use of Apollonius and to the complex ways in which he reads the Argonautica as a complex reworking of Homeric texts. Without denying the obvious importance of a bewildering range of other texts, from Hesiod to the poet’s own Georgics, it is true to say that appreciation of the interaction between Apollonius and Homer is crucial to the understanding of Virgil’s Augustan epic. The Aeneid is more than the fruit of a profound meditation on the nature of Homeric epic. It is the result of Virgil’s meticulous investigation of the whole tradition of both Homeric and post-Homeric epics, and in his view of this epic tradition Virgil saw Apollonius’ Argonautica occupying a position of absolutely central importance.

The enormous influence of Apollonius on Virgil has often been stated, often taken for granted and almost equally often ignored. Aulus Gellius, Servius and Macrobius all mention him as one of Virgil’s models, Ovid and Valerius Flaccus often show their awareness of the connections between the Aeneid and the Argonautica, and a considerable amount of modern scholarship has been devoted to the topic. Nevertheless, in studies of Virgilian imitatio the Hellenistic poet has received much less attention than Homer both in antiquity and in modern times. The many similarities between Dido and Medea have obviously attracted most scholarly attention over the years. Only in relatively recent times has there been a welcome willingness to build on earlier collections, such as those of Rütten and Hügi, and to look for Apollonian influence elsewhere. And as appreciation of the Argonautica has reached more sophisticated levels, there has been less reluctance to accept the fact that this much-maligned poem seems to have exercised an enormous influence on Virgil.

Already in the Eclogues and Georgics, when Virgil composes highly programmatic passages in which he reflects on the subject matter of

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5 There is much of value in De la Ville de Mirmont (1849), Conrardy (1904), Rütten (1912), Bozzi (1956), Leitich (1940), Mehmel (1940), Hügi (1952), Cova (1963), but they are not often cited. See, for a relatively recent formulation, Gransden (1984) 4: “Charming though it is, one cannot take the Argonautica of Apollonius seriously as an essential anterior text to the Aeneid”.