

The Authority of the Callimachean Hymnists

If one browses recent discussions of the so-called “unreliable narrator,” one quickly notices a number of trends. Certain works, for example, get cited repeatedly in these studies. One often reads about how Humbert Humbert, narrator of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, has skewed values which make him believe in his theory of “nymphets,” or about how Stevens, the butler narrator of Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, has a distorted perspective on his previous employer which causes him to misunderstand that employer’s anti-Semitism. Several other works often appear in such discussions: many works by Edgar Allen Poe (especially *The Tell-Tale Heart*), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, among others, are routinely mentioned as exemplary instances of unreliable narration.

Another aspect all of these works share, besides their unreliable narrators, is their modernity. All of these works were written within the past two hundred years. This is not to say that there are no unreliable narrators before this period; Riggan 1981, for example, cites such earlier unreliable narrators as Odysseus, the *Satyricon*’s Encolpius, and Lucius from Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. In general, however, unreliable narration seems to be a much more frequently-employed stylistic device in the past two hundred or so years than in any earlier period.

In her 1998 article on Callimachus’ *Hymn to Zeus*, Kathrin Lüddeke argues that Callimachus employs a number of techniques in that hymn to undermine the narrator’s authority. The purpose of this paper is to examine Lüddeke’s contention that the narrator of the *Hymn to Zeus* has his authority undercut in a number of ways and to examine the rest of Callimachus’ *Hymns* to see how their narrators fare in comparison. The paper will also briefly discuss associated concepts in Callimachus studies such as the “insubstantial voices” discussed by

Hopkinson 1984, Harder 1992, and Bing 1993, as well as the “polyphony” described by Goldhill 1986.

I will first look at Lüddeke’s specific arguments and show that they fail to provide sufficient support for her conclusion. Lüddeke makes much of the “paradoxes” in the *Hymn to Zeus*; I will examine these paradoxes using the typology of Rescher 2001. I will then turn to some considerations which make it *a priori* unlikely that Callimachus would have employed unreliable narration in his *Hymns*, including Callimachus’ historical and literary contexts as described by Fraser 1972 and Zerweck 2001, respectively. Finally, I will examine Callimachus’ six *Hymns* in the light of different models of unreliable narration proposed by narratologists, including those developed in Riggan 1981, Wall 1994, Cohn 2000, Olson 2003, Hansen 2008, and Nünning 2008. This examination will show that, on practically every model of unreliable narration, the narrators of Callimachus’ *Hymns* come off as reliable. Those models which would condemn the hymnists’ reliability themselves suffer from insuperable problems. By thus examining Callimachean narration, one can see not only that such narration is not unreliable, but also that Callimachus establishes the reliability of his hymnists in a variety of ways.

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