

Friends in Need: *Philia* in Hellenistic Literature

ἡ φιλία περιχορεύει τὴν οἰκουμένην κηρύττουσα δὴ πᾶσιν ἡμῖν ἐγείρεσθαι
ἐπὶ τὸν μακαρισμόν.

(Epicurus *Sent. Vat.* 52)

Friendship dances around the world, telling all of us to wake up to happiness.

The ever-expanding Hellenistic world's increased spatial and social mobility placed new strains upon kinship and ethnic bonds, which were, in many cases, replaced with “more flexible ties based on similarity of interests and compatibility of personality” (Humphreys 1978). In this new, great world, a Greek would come to depend not on associations determined by social status and identity, but ties created by mutual affection and enduring loyalty—that is, friendship or φιλία.

Philosophical circles helped give shape to the understanding of φιλία through the classical and Hellenistic periods: Plato's *Lysis* is devoted to friendship and explores the compatibility of self-sufficiency with other-directed concern; Aristotle treats friendship at length, analyzing its essence and touching on the question of whether friends are necessary for happiness; Epicurus considers friendship to be so important that the benefits of life with a community of friends outweighs the disadvantages. And yet, for all the attention philosophical discussions give to the theorizing about the motivations and behaviors of friends, to understand what φιλία is like, it is necessary to turn to the poetic world, in which character-driven narrative establish and affirm what gives shape to friendly feelings and ties.

At first glance, the lack of stories about friendship in the poetry of Theocritus, Callimachus, and Apollonius of Rhodes is noticeably clear. Perhaps this comes as no surprise, given the general perception that Hellenistic literature, in comparison to the depth and grandeur of epic song and archaic Greek poetry, largely “charms and challenges with its more modern realism and intricacy”

(Gutzwiller 2007). Still, while they may eschew the renowned friendships of Achilles and Patroklos, Theseus and Perithous, and Orestes and Pylades, the Alexandrian poets, with distinct but complementary aesthetic principles, nonetheless engage with the mythological tradition.

In this paper, I will shed light on what makes Hellenistic literature stand apart for its exploration of friendship in selected poems—all hexameter narratives—composed by Theocritus, Callimachus, and Apollonius. Theocritus’ “urban mimes” (*Idylls* 2, 14, and 15) highlight how bonds of friendship can overcome aspects of social alienation in a changing, unstable world (Burton 1996). Callimachus’ epyllion *Hecale* tells of the hero Theseus but glosses over his mighty deeds to celebrate the kindness and hospitality of an old woman, Hecale, and the friendship of an unlikely pair. Apollonius’ *Argonautica* foregrounds the Alexandrian concept of ὁμόνοια, and it is this sense of like-mindedness aimed at cooperation that motivates Jason and the Argonauts on their voyage to Colchis. Signs of affection emerge in the poems of the Hellenistic world: with hints of genuine intimacy, reaching out in times of suffering and despair to touch a friend in need is proof of a friend indeed.

Bibliography

Burton, J.B. 1996. *Theocritus’ Urban Mimes: Mobility, Gender, and Patronage*. Berkeley.

Gutzwiller, K. 2007. *A Guide to Hellenistic Literature*. Malden.

Humphreys, S. C. 1978. *Anthropology and the Greeks*. London and Boston.