THE COMA STRATONICES: ROYAL HAIR ENCOMIA AND PTOLEMAIC-SELEUCID RIVALRY?

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Abstract: In this paper, I investigate how Ptolemaic poets’ presentation of their queens compares with and relates to the practice of their major rivals, the Seleucids. No poetic celebration of a Seleucid queen survives extant, but an anecdote preserved by Lucian sheds intriguing light on Seleucid poetic practice (Pro Imaginibus 5): queen Stratonice, bald through a long illness, organised a competition in which poets elaborately praised her non-existent locks. I subject this testimonium to a close analysis. First, I consider the details and reliability of Lucian’s account, arguing that it reflects key aspects of the queen’s character and story as told elsewhere, and is likely drawn from a pre-existing source, perhaps even from the ambit of the Seleucid court itself; then I compare this episode with Alexandrian poets’ encomia of Ptolemaic queens, highlighting parallel encomiastic techniques and possible direct connections with the poetry of Callimachus, especially his own poem on queenly hair: the Coma Berenices. Given the nature of the evidence, my arguments must be considered tentative and exploratory, but I suggest that the anecdote offers hints of an inter-dynastic poetic rivalry: royal women and their hair stood at the centre of a literary battleground, in which poets not only celebrated the status of their own queens, but also negotiated the poetry and authority of their rivals.

Ptolemaic Egypt was not the only home of powerful queens in the Hellenistic world. Every major Hellenistic kingdom had its own cast of prominent royal women who played a central role in the politics of their day. Beyond Alexandria, we may particularly think of Apollonis, wife of Attalus I, as well as the string of early Seleucid queens: Apama, Stratonice, Laodice I and more.
Such female figures feature prominently in modern scholarship on Hellenistic history,¹ but they receive scant attention in literary studies. This is no doubt a reflection of the Ptolemaic context of much extant Hellenistic poetry, which celebrates the likes of Arsinoe and Berenice in both explicit and allegorical terms, overshadowing their rivals from other dynasties.² If we look closely, however, we can still find intriguing poetic scraps that relate to other Hellenistic queens, such as the nineteen epigrams purportedly inscribed at Cyzicus by Eumenes II and Attalus II to celebrate their mother Apollonis (AP 3).³ By paying more attention to such isolated snippets, we can gain a richer picture of the role that royal women played in Hellenistic poetry across and between kingdoms.

In this paper, I wish to pursue this agenda by exploring how Ptolemaic poets’ presentation of their queens compares with and relates to the practice of their major rivals, the Seleucids. Such a study is not straightforward, since no poetic celebration of a Seleucid queen survives today.⁴ But we have one key piece of extant evidence, an anecdote preserved by Lucian

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² See e.g. Carney (2000); Bielman Sánchez et al. (2016); Coşkun & McAuley (2016); Hämmerling (2019); Carney & Müller (forthcoming). Macurdy (1932) remains a valuable resource.

³ See Livingstone & Nisbet (2010: 99-101). The dating of these epigrams is debated: they are commonly considered post-Hellenistic (Demoen 1988; Cameron 1993: 147-149), but Merkelbach & Stauber (2001: 18) remain undecided and argue that at least the prose introductions were produced soon after the peace of Apamea in 189 BCE.

which may shed some light on Seleucid poetic practice (*Pro Imaginibus 5*). In what follows, I shall subject this *testimonium* to a close analysis. In section I, I shall consider the details and reliability of Lucian’s account; and in section II, I shall compare the episode he recounts with Alexandrian poets’ *encomia* of Ptolemaic queens. Given the nature of the evidence, my arguments must be considered tentative and exploratory, but I shall suggest that the anecdote offers hints of an inter-dynastic poetic rivalry: royal women and their hair stood at the centre of a literary battleground in which poets not only celebrated the status of their own queens, but also negotiated the poetry and authority of their rivals.

**1. The *Coma Stratonices***

In the first half of Lucian’s *Pro Imaginibus*, Polystratus recounts Panthea’s criticism of the *Imagines*, a text in which she (Panthea, the mistress of the emperor Lucius Verus) had been flatteringly compared to the masterpieces of classical Greek art.5 Her response (which is mediated now not by images, but by Polystratus’ reported speech) complains of the excesses of flattery and the impropriety of comparing a mortal woman to goddesses and heroines. It is in the context of this complaint that we find an account of Seleucid poetic practice, as one of two illustrative *exempla* of such depraved flattery. Queen Stratonice, while still the wife of Seleucus I (c. 300-294 BCE), is said to have set up a competition to see which poet could best praise her hair:

παραπλήσιον δὲ καὶ μακρῷ τούτου γελοιότερον Στρατονίκην ποιῆσαι τὴν Σελεύκου γυναίκα. τοῖς γὰρ ποιηταῖς ἁγόνα προθείναι αὐτὴν περὶ ταλάντου, ὅσις ἄν ἀμείνην ἐπαινέσαι αὐτῇς τὴν κόμην, καὶ τοιούτῳ ἐπήγαγε οὕσα καὶ οὐδὲ ὅσας ὀλίγας τὰς ἐαυτῆς τρίχας ἐχούσα. καὶ ὅμως οὕτω διακειμένη τὴν κεφαλήν, ἀπάντων εἰδότων ὅτι ἐκ νόσου μακρὰς τὸ τοιοῦτον ἑπέπόνθει, ἣκουε τῶν καταράτων ποιητῶν ὑμικῆνας τὰς τρίχας αὐτῆς λεγόντων καὶ οὕλους τινὰς πλοκάμους ἀναικεκόντων καὶ σελίνιος τοὺς μηδὲ ὀλως ὄντας εἰκαζόντων.

5 This pair of dialogues has attracted much scholarly interest: see e.g. Goldhill (2001: 184-193); Sidwell (2002); Vout (2007: 213-239); Cistaro (2009).
She said that Stratonice the wife of Seleucus did something similar and even more ridiculous than this: she set up a contest for poets with a talent as the prize for whoever could best praise her hair – despite the fact that she was bald and didn’t even have a few hairs of her own. Even so, although this was the state of her head and everybody knew that it had happened because of a long illness, she listened to those wretched poets calling her hair hyacinthine, plaiting thick tresses, and comparing her completely non-existent curls to celery.\(^6\)

This is an intriguing passage, with many peculiar details. Stratonice had apparently lost all her locks through a protracted illness, but this did not stop Seleucid poets, impelled by the prospect of a talent’s reward, from praising her ‘hair’ in ornate and figurative terms.\(^7\) In particular, the description of Stratonice’s allegedly ‘thick’ (οὐλοὺς) and ‘hyacinthine’ (ὑακινθίνας) hair recalls the beautified locks of the Homeric Odysseus, whom Athena divinely enhanced before his meetings with both Nausicaa and Penelope:

\[
\text{μεῖζονά τ’ εἰσινδέειν καὶ πάσσονα, κάδ δὲ κάρητος}
\text{οὐλας ἢκε κόμας, ὑακινθίνῳ ἀνθεὶ ὀμοίας.}
\]

(Homer, Od. 6.230-231 = 23.157-158)

[Athena made him] taller and broader to look upon, and from his head she made the locks flow thick like the hyacinth flower.

\(^6\) Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Throughout, I translate σέλινον as ‘celery’, rather than ‘parsley’: see Andrews (1949).

\(^7\) Baldness from illness was an acknowledged danger in antiquity: see e.g. Ov. Am. 1.14.41, Lucian Dial. meret. 12.5. For baldness and lovesickness, see \[p. 000 \{10-11\}\] below. Notably, Stratonice was not the only Hellenistic queen concerned with hair-loss: a handbook on cosmetics attributed to Cleopatra VII included recipes for this condition: Gal. Com. med. loc. 12.403-404 Kühn; Fraser (1972: II 548 n.306); Rowlandson (1998: 41).
Such an underlying Homeric analogy renders this praise doubly culpable in Panthea’s eyes: not only does it falsify the truth of Stratonice’s bald state (it is not ‘appropriate’ to her nature, cf. προσόν, Pro imag. 2), but it also associates the queen with a major figure of the heroic age, transgressing Panthea’s sense of encomiastic decorum (cf. Pro imag. 7). The whole scene is a travesty of κολακεία σαφής, ‘outright flattery’. In such a context, the verb ἀναπλέκόντων is particularly appropriate, since it not only denotes the plaiting or garlanding of hair, but also evokes a common metaphor of poetic production: the Seleucid poets ‘weave’ Stratonice’s locks into existence, fashioning a deceptive and poetic εἰκών (cf. εἰκαζόντων).

Like the goddess Athena, they are purveyors of artifice.9

Despite (or because of) its oddities, this anecdote is particularly alluring for our exploration of the poetic celebrations of Seleucid queens. Before going any further, however, we must assess the reliability of Lucian’s account. What should we make of this anecdote? And is it any truer than the author’s playfully apocryphal ‘True Stories’? Lucian is a difficult source, frequently inventive and creative in his handling of the (literary) past, so we must be extremely careful. Indeed, we must seriously consider the possibility that this account is simply the product of his own fertile imagination.

There are certainly arguments that could be made to support such a conclusion. In its Lucianic context, for example, this account forms a diptych with another episode of excessive flattery. Panthea reportedly mentioned a similar situation in which a short but otherwise

8 For poetic ‘weaving’, see e.g. Snyder (1981); Scheid & Svenbro (1996: 111-155); Fanfani (2017); Evans (this volume: 000 {19 with n.85}). For this specific verb, cf. Agathias AP 11.64.2 (ῥυθμὸν ἀνεπλέκομεν); Dion. Hal. Comp. 25, II.133.4-7 Usener-Radermacher (ὁ δὲ Πλάτων τοὺς ἐαυτοῦ διαλόγους κτενίζων καὶ βοστρυχίζων καὶ πάντα τρόπον ἀναπλέκων). The metaphor is particularly apt here, since both celery (σέλινον) and hyacinth (ὑάκινθος) were used in woven garlands: e.g. Anac. 410 PMG, Pind. Ol. 13.32-34, Isth. 2.16, Theoc. Id. 3.23 for celery; Alc. fr. 296b.8 Voigt (suppl. Page), Cratinus fr. 105.4 K-A for hyacinth.

9 This play with appearances and artifice would be particularly apt if Stratonice wore a wig to conceal her bald state (as is likely given her status and the stigma attached to hair loss in antiquity): we would then have a three-way analogy between Athena, the poets, and wigmakers as crafty distorters of reality. On wigs and baldness in the ancient world, see e.g. Draycott (2018); Davies (2019: 152-154).
‘beautiful and well-proportioned’ noble woman was praised by a poet for being ‘tall’ like a poplar tree:

ἐφη γυναῖκά τινα τῶν ἐπιφανῶν τὰ μὲν ἄλλα καλὴν καὶ κόσμιον, μικρὰν δὲ καὶ πολὺ τοῦ συμμέτρου ἀποδέουσαν, ἐπαινεῖσθαι πρὸς τινος ποιητοῦ ἐν ἁσματι τά τε ἄλλα καὶ ὁτι καλὴ τε καὶ μεγάλῃ ἦν· αἰγείρῳ δ’ αὐτής εἰκαζέν ἐκεῖνος τὸ εὐμηκές τε καὶ ὅρθιον. τὴν μὲν δὴ γάνυσθαι τῷ ἐπαίνῳ καθάπερ αὐξανομένην πρὸς τὸ μέλος καὶ τὴν χεῖρα ἐπισείειν, τὸν ποιητὴν δὲ πολλάκις τὸ αὐτὸ ἤδειν ὅροντα ὡς ἴδοιτο ἐπαίνουμενη, ἄχρι δὴ τῶν παρόντων τινὰ προσκύψαντα πρὸς τὸ οὖς εἰπεῖν αὐτῷ, ‘πέπαυσο, ὦ οὖτος, μη καὶ ἀναστήναι ποιήσῃς τὴν γυναίκα.’

(Lucian, Pro imag. 4)

She said that a woman of a distinguished family, who was beautiful and well-proportioned in other respects, but much shorter than the average, was praised in song by a poet for being, among other things, beautiful and tall; he likened her to a poplar for her great height and upright stature. She was truly delighted by the praise, as though she were going to grow to match the song, and she shook her hand in applause. The poet kept repeating the same song, since he saw that she enjoyed being praised, until at last one of the company leaned over and said in his ear, ‘Stop, you fool, before you make the woman stand up!’

This episode closely parallels that of Stratonice: in both, a prominent woman’s physical imperfections are falsely praised through poetry. And in each case, this praise is primarily achieved through comparison (εἰκαζεν, 4 ~ εἰκαζόντων, 5) to the flora of the natural world (poplar and hyacinth/celery). As in the Stratonice anecdote, there is a strong emphasis on poetic artifice and deception: the poet is encouraged to stop before the laudanda stands up in applause, exposing her short height and the mendacity of his song. And as in Pro imag. 5, we might also be able to detect an allusion to the Homeric verses on Odysseus’ divine makeover: the short woman is presented as tall (μεγάλη), just as Odysseus appears ‘taller’ thanks to Athena’s intervention (μείζων, Od. 6.230, 23.157).10 Given the degree of overlap and parallelism between these two

10 The comparison of the woman to a poplar might also recall Odysseus’ later likening of Nausicaa to another tree, a young palm (Od. 6.160-169).
passages, we might wonder whether Lucian has simply fabricated two mirror episodes to substantiate Panthea’s point.

Within the wider context of Lucian’s work and the literature of the Second Sophistic, we could also see both these stories as instantiations of a common literary type: the paradoxical encomium, “one of Lucian’s favourite genres”.\(^{11}\) Elsewhere in his works, he selects objects of praise which would not usually be thought worthy of any adulation, such as the fly or a parasite, and exalts them with much irony and satire.\(^{12}\) The best parallel for our Stratonice passage, however, is offered by the work of a slightly earlier author: Dio Chrysostom’s *Praise of Hair*, which is preserved in Synesius’ *Praise of Baldness*.\(^{13}\) Both these texts display the same concerns as Lucian’s Stratonice anecdote. Dio, in particular, begins by claiming to be in ill health, with neglected (if not bald) hair, and goes on to cite the same Odyssean passage which Lucian’s Seleucid poets echo (*Od. 6.230-231*). The text does not contain praise of Dio’s own coiffure, but rather of ‘hair-lovers’ in general (οὐκοῦν ἐπήμει μοι τοὺς φυλοκόμους ἐπαινεῖν), so it is not a precise parallel. But even so, Lucian’s anecdote might conceivably allude to Dio’s earlier treatment of this similar theme, exaggerating its satirical edge by transforming the dishevelled Dio into the bald Stratonice. Moreover, the echo of the Homeric Odysseus in both passages also reflects the general climate of second sophistic *paideia*, paralleling Dio’s and Lucian’s frequent and deep engagement with Homer elsewhere.\(^{14}\) And more generally, the very topic of baldness seems to have particularly interested Lucian, since it recurs in a number of his works.\(^{15}\) In many ways, therefore, Lucian’s Stratonice anecdote appears to be a product of its (Imperial) age, and we could question whether it really has any historical or Hellenistic pedigree.

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\(^{12}\) E.g. *Praising a Fly (Muscae Encomium); About the Parasite (De Parasito)*.

\(^{13}\) Cf. too Lucius’ praise of hair at *Apul. Met. 2.8-9*, Menophilus of Damascus’ hexametric celebration of his beloved’s ‘ever-blooming locks’ (ἀειθαλέας πλοκαμίδας, *SH 558.12*) and Eumolpus’ laments over hair loss at Petron. *Sat.* 109.9-10, which together suggest a broader rhetorical tradition of hair encomia (and lament).

\(^{14}\) Cf. Kim (2010). For Homer and Lucian, see too Householder (1941), esp. his statistics on p. 41; Bouquiaux-Simon (1968). The same Odyssean passage is also echoed in the pseudo-Lucianic *Amores (Amor. 26)*.

\(^{15}\) The adjective φαλακρός (‘bald’) appears nineteen times in his extant œuvre: e.g. *Alex. 59; Luct. 16*. 
Nevertheless, however tempting it is to see Lucian up to his old tricks, in this case I believe there are substantial grounds for seeing the Syrian author building on some kind of prior tradition and not just freely inventing. For a start, it is significant that Lucian names Stratonice explicitly here, unlike the anonymous noble woman of his first anecdote. Such specificity requires explanation. Either Lucian chose her as the butt of an invented joke (perhaps through fondness for her character and a sense of geographical kinship), or rather he drew on a pre-existing tradition attached to her name. Given the degree to which this episode maps onto other accounts attached to this Seleucid queen, the second of these options seems more plausible. Daniel Ogden has noted how well the whole episode coheres with Lucian’s account of Stratonice in the De Dea Syria, in which the queen (again, while still married to Seleucus) suffers from a serious illness after failing to heed a dream-request from Hera-Atargatis to construct a temple in Hierapolis Bambyce (μιν μεγάλη νοῦσος ἔλαβεν, Syr. D. 19). Such a ‘serious illness’ (μεγάλη νοῦσος) parallels the ‘long illness’ (νόσου μακρᾶς) which caused her baldness in the anecdote and which ‘everybody was aware of’ (ἀπάντων εἰδότων, Pro imag. 5). In both these passages, Lucian appears to be building off different elements of the same Stratonice story.

Nor is the cohesion of this Stratonice story restricted to Lucian’s own corpus. As Ogden has further noted, the ‘healthy sense of self-deprecating humour’ which Stratonice seems to show in Lucian’s account is paralleled by another anecdote concerning the queen’s portrayal by a different creative artist, in this case a painter:

innotuit … Ctesiles reginae Stratonices iniuria. nullo enim honore exceptus ab ea pinxit volutantem cum piscatore, quem reginam amare sermo erat, eamque tabulam in portu


17 The expression ἀπάντων εἰδότων may even serve as a kind of ‘Alexandrian footnote’ in Pro imag. 5, signposting Lucian’s debt to a prior tradition which he expects ‘all’ his readers to ‘know’. On appeals to audience knowledge as markers of allusion, cf. Nelson (forthcoming b: § III).

18 Cf. Ogden (2017: 182): “the nature of Lucian’s handling of the baldness tale, which makes no effort to relate it to or explain it by means of the De dea Syria’s Combabus-Stratonice tale, rather hints that the story-complex as a whole may have had an independent existence beyond his oeuvre”.

19 Ogden (2017: 181), from whom the following translation is drawn.
Ephesi proposuit, ipse velis raptus. regina tolli vetuit, utriusque similitudine mire expressa. 

(Pliny, HN 35.140)

Ctesicles became famous as a result of his insult to Queen Stratonice. Because she did not receive him in honourable fashion, he painted her rolling around with the fisherman with whom she was rumoured to be in love. He put the picture on display in Ephesus’ harbour before making a quick escape by sail. The queen forbade its removal, because he had represented each of them with amazing accuracy.

Here too, we find a playfully subversive Stratonice who seems to revel in her unqueenly behavior (adultery with a fisherman), just as in Lucian she revels in her unqueenly appearance (baldness). This Pliny passage further highlights a recurring aspect of Stratonice’s character which is only implicit in the Lucianic anecdote: her erotic allure. The queen’s amatory escapades with the fisherman parallel other accounts of her alleged liaisons with her step-son Antiochus (Syr. D. 17-18; Plut. Dem. 38) and the courtier Combabus (Syr. D. 19-27), all of which seem to reflect her cultic association with Aphrodite. This same element is present in Lucian’s account, but on a more implicit level through the poet’s description of Stratonice’s ‘hair’. Flower similes are a staple feature of erotic literature, a topos which lends an underlying amatory flavor to the comparison of her locks to hyacinth and celery, especially given the erotic association of both flowers. And this is reinforced further by the Seleucid poets’ Odyssean echoes, which point to

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21 Cf. Tarán (1985) for the association of hair and flowers in erotic contexts. Hyacinth grows in response to the lovemaking of Zeus and Hera in its sole Homeric appearance (Il. 14.346-349); symbolises a vulnerable bride (Sappho fr. 105b Voigt: Griffith 1989: 56); adorns the hair of a bridal chorus (Id. 18.2); and has a special connection with Aphrodite (Cypria fr. 5.3 West; Alc. fr. 296b.8 Voigt, suppl. Page; Sappho fr. 194 Voigt; Anac. 346 fr. 1.7-9 PMG). Celery was a
two specific Homeric moments in which Odysseus’ beauty is divinely enhanced before his encounters with Nausicaa and Penelope (scenes endowed with a great deal of erotic potential).\textsuperscript{22}

Stratonice’s ill health (νοσος, Syr. D. 19; νόσου, Pro imag. 5) may also reflect this erotic association. It is well known that the noun νόσος/νοσος can refer to lovesickness as much as a real disease. Indeed, this meaning dominates the story of Antiochus’ love for Stratonice, in which the doctor explicitly recognizes the prince’s ‘illness’ as ‘love’ (ἔγνω τὴν νοσον ἔρωτα ἐμμενα, Syr. D. 17).\textsuperscript{23} But one particular symptom of such extreme desire is hair loss. In the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women, the daughters of Proteus are inflicted with a mad lust for offending Hera (μαχλάδα, fr. 83 Most; μαχλοσύνης στυγερῆς, fr. 81 Most = 132 M-W = 47 Hirschberger) and suffer physical deterioration as a result:

καὶ γὰρ σφιν κεφαλῆσι κατὰ κνύος αἰνόν ἔχεων·
ἄλφος γὰρ χρόα πάντα κατέσχεθεν, αἰ δὲ νυ χαῖται
ἐρρεον ἐκ κεφαλέων, ψύλωτο δὲ καλὰ κάρηνα.

(Hesiod fr. 82.3-5 Most = 133 M-W = 49 Hirschberger)

for onto their heads she poured a dread itch; for a scabby illness seized hold of all their skin, and their hair fell from their heads, and their beautiful heads became bald.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{23} Cf. LSJ s.v. νόσος, II 2; Eur. Hipp. 764-766 (ἔρωτων ... Ἀφροδίτας νόσῳ). On ancient lovesickness, see Toohey (1992).

\textsuperscript{24} Tr. Most (2018: 169). Ps.-Apollodorus claims that in Hesiod’s version the girls offended Dionysus, not Hera (2.2.2: fr. 79 Most = fr. 131 M-W) but other sources (e.g. Probus: fr. 80 Most = 131 M-W; Philodemus: fr. 83 Most) suggest the slight was directly against the goddess. For discussion of the myth and fragments, see Hirschberger (2004: 298-302).
Similarly, in Theocritus’ second *Idyll*, lovestruck Simaetha starts to lose all the hair from her head (ἐρρευν δ’ ἐκ κεφαλᾶς πᾶσαι τρίχες, *Id.* 2.89), while in a fragment dubiously attributed to Euphorion, the otherwise unknown Eutelidas loses his formerly ‘fair locks’ (καλαὶ φόβαι) after falling in love with his own reflection and suffering an ‘unseemly sickness’ (νοῦσος ἀεικής, fr. 197 Acosta-Hughes & Cusset = fr. 189 Lightfoot = Plut. *Mor.* 682b-c). The whole story of Stratonice’s long illness and hair loss thus complements and resonates fruitfully against the queen’s larger association with immoderate passions.

Considered against the larger backdrop of the ‘Stratonice tradition’, therefore, Lucian’s anecdote in the *Pro Imaginibus* does not seem so fanciful. Indeed, it reflects key aspects of her character and story that can be found elsewhere: her illness, sly humour and erotic allure. Taking the evidence together, I think it likely that Lucian drew this episode from a pre-existing source.

Of course, this conclusion does not prove the strict historicity of the episode, something which is ultimately unprovable on current evidence. Rather, it suggests that traditions surrounding Stratonice were already circulating in antiquity before Lucian’s day, part of the

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25 See Hunter (2019: 55-56), who notes the lack of Sapphic precedent for this image, and points instead to Hesiod’s *Proetids*.

26 The whole episode also fits into a wider pattern of rulers’ concern with hair loss. Besides Cleopatra VII’s recipes against the condition (p. 000 n. 000 {p. 4 n.7}), many Roman emperors were troubled by baldness (e.g. Julius Caesar, Suet. *Iul.* 45.2; Caligula, Suet. *Calig.* 50.1; Otho, Suet. *Otho* 12.1). Domitian offers a particularly good parallel: he apparently produced a *libellus de cura capillorum* (‘a little book *On the Care of Hair*’), a parodic *consolatio* which wittily adapted Achilles’ sentiments on the inevitability of death (*Il.* 21.108-110) to the inevitability of baldness (Suet. *Dom.* 18.2): Morgan (1997). The emperor was mocked as a ‘bald Nero’ by Juvenal (calvo Neroni, 4.38), but was depicted with a full head of hair in his portraits (Strong 1988: 136-137) and in more laudatory poetry (e.g. *crinibus*, Stat. *Theb.* 1.28).

27 Though see Lightfoot (2003: 39, 390) on the historical plausibility of the Seleucids’ involvement in the construction of Hierapolis: the first Greek coins minted there bear Seleucus’ name, the city was thought to have received its name under ‘Seleucus’ (Ael. *NA* 12.2), and the identification of the god Nebo with Apollo may also reflect Seleucid involvement (given his central role as “*Stammvater of the dynasty*”); cf. Cohen (2006: 172-178, esp. 175). The story of Stratonice’s sickness, then, can at least be pinned to a real historical context.
larger canon of Seleucid legend which has been so well charted by recent scholars.\(^\text{28}\) Like many other elements of that legend, however, it is likely that this tale too can be traced back to the mythmaking of the Seleucid court itself. At various other points in his works, Lucian appears to treat Seleucid myth in a way that seems to echo Seleucid ideology and literature. The romance of Antiochus and Stratonice (Syr. D. 17-18), for example, has been traced back to Seleucid propaganda, while Lucian’s account of Antiochus’ Elephant victory (Zeux. 8-11) also appears to reflect Seleucid commemorations in the wake of the battle.\(^\text{29}\) Given these parallels, it is likely that Lucian’s account of Stratonice’s baldness can also be traced back to Seleucid traditions, even if perhaps in a comically distorted form.\(^\text{30}\)

In that case, it is worth asking how this scene of queen Stratonice and her poetic celebration compares with Alexandrian poets’ praise of Ptolemaic queens. How similar is it, and can we see any relationship between the poetic praise of each kingdom? These questions will be the focus of the second half of this paper.

2. Inter-Dynastic Poetics

If Lucian’s anecdote in the Pro Imaginibus does indeed reflect Seleucid tradition, as I have suggested, it provides a rare opportunity to compare this poetic presentation of a Seleucid queen

\(^{28}\) Esp. Primo (2009); Kosmin (2014a); Ogden (2017).

\(^{29}\) Antiochus/Stratonice: Almagor (2016); see his p. 77 n.41 for possible Hellenistic sources. Elephant Victory: Nelson (forthcoming a: § 3), where I argue that the source is more likely to be a prose history rather than Simonides of Magnesia’s epic treatment of the battle (723 SH = BNJ 163). On echoes of Seleucid propaganda in later sources more generally, see Primo (2009: 179-307).

\(^{30}\) Perhaps the Seleucid poets originally celebrated the artifice and lifelikeness of Stratonice’s artificial wig or reminisced about the virtues of her lost locks (like Anacreon 347.1-2 PMG and Ovid Am. 1.14.3-34), rather than simply pretending that she had never lost her hair in the first place (as Lucian implies). The queen’s hair loss could also have served as a source of royal propaganda, a celebration of her devotion and religiosity, especially if it was associated with her construction of a temple to Hera-Atargatis (see p. 000 [8] above).
with the more well-known treatment of Ptolemaic queens by Alexandrian poets. In this section, I shall begin by comparing the encomiastic techniques of the poets in Lucian’s anecdote and their Alexandrian peers, before turning to a more specific exploration of the possible connections between the anecdote and several Callimachean poems, especially the most famous Alexandrian poem on queenly hair: the *Coma Berenices*.

Taking Lucian’s tale at face value, the encomiastic practice of the Seleucid poets can be readily paralleled with that of their Ptolemaic peers. In particular, the most direct point of overlap comes in their parallel strategy of epicising. As we have already noted, the description of Stratonice’s ‘thick’, ‘hyacinthine’ hair recalls the Homeric Odysseus (*Od*. 6.230-231, 23.157-158). Such an allusive association of the queen with a figure of the heroic past was one of Panthea’s key concerns in the *Pro Imaginibus*. Yet this technique of epic analogy was also a common feature of Alexandrian poetry. In Theocritus’ *Idyll* 15, for example, Arsinoe is similarly aligned intertextually with a host of epic prototypes, including Arete, Circe and Helen, while in *Idyll* 17, both Berenice and Arsinoe are variously associated with Alcmene and Arete.31 Such allusive associations were a staple of Alexandrian praise poetry. By employing the same kind of intertextual manoeuvre, Lucian’s Seleucid poets exhibit a kindred encomiastic technique.

However, there is a significant difference between these Alexandrian instances and our Stratonice example. All the Ptolemaic parallels involve the association of Arsinoe or Berenice with epic women, ensuring a continuity of gender between the tenor and vehicle of each implicit comparison. The only possible exception is the analogy drawn between Berenice and Heracles in Callimachus’ *Victoria Berenices*, explored by Brett Evans in this volume (pp. 000 {9-13}). But even here we should note that this connection is made with Heracles when he is at his most effeminate: the hero is assimilated to a bride in a poem which avoids dwelling on his defeat of the Nemean lion, downplaying his heroic masculinity.32 In Stratonice’s case, by contrast, a


32 Cf. Lopes da Silveira (this volume: 000 {10-11}) for a comparable inversion of gender roles in Callimachus’ *Hymn to Demeter*: Erysichthon’s allusive association with Medea undermines his masculinity. More speculatively, Berenice’s hair dedication in the *Coma Berenices* could also recall the Homeric Achilles, who similarly offered a lock of hair to his dead friend Patroclus (*Il*. 8.222-223).
female queen is associated with a male hero in full vigour, blurring gender roles even further.\textsuperscript{33} The point may be to assert the dominance and power of Stratonice, establishing her as an equal to the masculine warriors of epic. After all, the military associations of her name (evoking στρατός, ‘army’, and νίκη, ‘victory’) suggest that she is not out of place in the most masculine of spheres. Whereas Ptolemaic queens primarily remained models of femininity, Stratonice proves to be something more.\textsuperscript{34}

Besides this general parallel of technique, however, we can also situate the Seleucid episode against a specific Ptolemaic poem which treats queenly locks: Callimachus’ \textit{Coma Berenices} (fr. 110-110f Harder). At the end of the \textit{Aetia}, Callimachus famously ventriloquises a lock cut from Berenice’s head after her husband Ptolemy III had safely returned from war in Syria. In the surviving Greek version of the text, the lock recalls its journey to become a new star and laments its departure from Berenice’s head. The context and frame of this poem is significantly different from that of Lucian’s Seleucid encomium, but there are nevertheless notable points of overlap. In both, hair serves as the medium and topic by which the queen is praised, in part through celebration of her tresses (Berenice’s καλὸς … πλόκαμ[ος], ‘beautiful lock’, fr. 110.62; Stratonice’s ‘thick’, ‘hyacinthine’ curls). Both involve some kind of hair loss (for Berenice, a single lock; for Stratonice, her whole coiffure). And both develop each queen’s association with Aphrodite: we have already noted the evocation of Stratonice’s erotic allure 23.140-153); however, we lack any direct verbal parallels and such hair offerings were common in antiquity: cf. Draycott (2017).

\textsuperscript{33} We might compare the ‘reverse similes’ of the \textit{Odyssey} (for which, see Foley 1978). Stratonice may thus also be aligned with Penelope, another queen who was associated with male figures: a just king (\textit{Od.} 19.108-114), a shipwrecked sailor (\textit{Od.} 23.233-240), and (implicitly) her husband Odysseus.

\textsuperscript{34} Though contrast the Ptolemaic tradition of armed queens (Stephens 2005: 240-243), and Arsinoe II’s adoption of male iconography (Masséglia 2015: 49-50). As Aneurin Ellis-Evans highlights (\textit{per litteras}), this blurring of gender roles contrasts with the conventionally feminine role that Seleucid queens later played in other spheres, such as euergetism; see e.g. the benefactions of Antiochus III and Laodice at Iasos: while the former supported the masculine sphere of civic politics (e.g. sponsoring ‘foreign judges’ and rebuilding political institutions), Laodice focused on traditionally feminine concerns like dowries for the daughters of poor citizens (Ma 1999: 180-182).
through the floral similes, but in Callimachus’ poem this is even more explicit since it is Aphrodite herself who receives the queen’s lock and sets it in the sky.\(^{35}\) Both Lucian’s Seleucid poets and the Ptolemaic Callimachus thus dwell on the same unusual subject matter to effect their praise.

If this were the only point of contact between these two poetic utterances, we would not be able to take our analysis any further. Fortunately, however, another possible connection does exist, since Callimachus’ poem appears to allude to the Seleucid kingdom at several points. As Marijn Visscher has recently demonstrated, Callimachus co-opts the Ptolemies’ anti-Persian and anti-Seleucid rhetoric from the Third Syrian War to cast the Seleucids as the heirs of an outdated, barbarian and non-Greek empire.\(^{36}\) Judging from Catullus’ later translation of the poem (Catull. 66 = fr. 110d Harder), Callimachus appears to have described this rival kingdom in distinctly orientalising terms as ‘the land of Assyria’ (\(\text{finis } \ldots \text{ Assyrios}, 66.12\)) and ‘Asia’ (\(\text{Asiam}, 66.36\)), invoking geographical polarities that go back to the Persian Wars.\(^{37}\) The extant portion of the Greek text, meanwhile, explicitly recalls Xerxes’ construction of a canal through Mount Athos (fr. 110.45-46), a “byword for Persian \(\text{hybris}\)” which “invites the reader once more to view the events of the Third Syrian War in the light of an essentially barbarian tradition of empire”.\(^{38}\) Within the broader context of Ptolemy Euergetes’ war against Seleucus II, the poem contains an underlying strain of anti-Seleucid rhetoric.

\(^{35}\) Esp. fr. 110.56 (\([\text{Kύπρ}]\text{ιδος}\), 64 (\([\text{Kύπρ}]\text{ις}\)). See Gutzwiller (1992: 362-369) on Ptolemaic queens’ links with Aphrodite. The \(\text{Coma}\) may also offer a parallel for the Seleucid poets’ blurring of gender, given the possible description of Berenice as \(\mu\varepsilon\gamma\alpha\theta\omicron\mu\nu\) (fr. 110.26[?], cf. \(\text{magnanimam}\), Catull. 66.26: Harder 2012: II 809-811) and the lock’s emphasis on simple, masculine ointments (fr. 110.75-78: Harder 2012: II 843-844).

\(^{36}\) Visscher (2017: esp. 219-223).

\(^{37}\) Visscher (2017: 219-223), with due caution about the dangers of relying too heavily on Catullus’ Latin version (cf. Bing 1997). She notes that Catullus tends to render proper names more faithfully than other words (citing Pfeiffer 1975: 135) and that Catullus’ use of \(\text{Assyrios}\) notably diverges from other uses of the word in the first century BCE. Such rhetoric may build on the Seleucids’ own self-presentation as inheritors of Achaemenid Asia: cf. Kosmin (2014a: 121-125); Nelson (forthcoming a: § 3). For Seleucid and Ptolemaic geopolitical competition, see too Kosmin (2017: esp. 91-94).

\(^{38}\) Visscher (2017: 223).
As Visscher has further shown, such an anti-Seleucid sentiment extends to other key passages of Callimachus’ oeuvre, including the programmatic Aetia Prologue and the similarly metapoetic epilogue of the Hymn to Apollo.39 In the former, the poet pejoratively dismisses the Persian σχοινός as a tool for measuring poetry (Aet. fr. 1.18 Harder), aligning his poetic preferences with Ptolemaic anti-Persian polemic. In the latter, his poetic patron Apollo similarly dismisses the large and filthy Euphrates (‘the great stream of the Assyrian river’, Ἀσσυρίου ποταμοῖο μέγας ρώς, hAp. 108) in favour of small and pure drops from a holy spring – a particularly loaded assertion given the centrality of the Euphrates to Seleucid geography and mythmaking.40 In both passages, the Seleucid empire and its heritage are presented squarely as what Callimachus’ poetry is not. The rival kingdom stands as a foil for Callimachus’ poetic programme.

Within such a context of inter-dynastic literary polemic, it is worth returning to the relationship between Lucian’s Seleucid poets and Callimachus’ Coma Berenices. Visscher closed her paper by noting that “Whether or not Callimachus had ‘real’ Seleukid literature and culture in mind when he rejected the Assyrian river and Persian schoinos is a moot point.”41 Given our limited extant evidence, this is a reasonable and appropriately cautious conclusion. However, I would like to suggest tentatively that in the Coma, at least, Callimachus could have had in mind the kind of Seleucid poetic traditions preserved in Lucian’s anecdote. Stratonice was queen of Seleucus I at the very start of the third century (c. 300-294 BCE), well before the composition of Callimachus’ poem (c. 245 BCE).42 Knowledge (if not texts) of a native Seleucid tradition of royal hair encomia could have easily reached Egypt during the intervening decades and become familiar to the famously well-read Alexandrian poet, author of the Pinakes. In that case, Callimachus’ treatment of Berenice and her hair would be even more complex, as would the anti-Seleucid strand of his poem. In the face of the Seleucids’ more traditional conceits of flower-like curls, Callimachus produced his own far more elaborate encomium, outdoing the Seleucid poets at their own game. Moreover, if the γελοιότερον aspect of the Seleucid poets’


41 Visscher (2017: 229).

42 For the date of the Coma Berenices, see Harder (2012: II 796-797).
praise was traditional and well-known, Callimachus would also be outdoing their humour by producing an even more playful poem, spoken in the voice of a ventriloquised lock. In so doing, Callimachus would have agonistically positioned himself and his queen against the literary tradition of a rival kingdom.

Such a scenario can, of course, be nothing more than a tantalising possibility on current evidence. Nevertheless, we can perhaps pursue this line of thinking even further: Callimachus may also have engaged with the same Seleucid tradition in his other major poem for queen Berenice, the *Victoria Berenices* (frr. 54-60j Harder).43 In this elegy, Callimachus celebrates the queen’s victory in a chariot-race at the Nemean Games and narrates the embedded myth of Heracles’ visit to Nemea and his stay with the old farmer Molorcu. As part of the poem, Callimachus told the *aetion* of the celery wreath as the victory crown for the Nemean Games: the word σέλινον itself is not transmitted in our extant fragments, but Athena appears to have prophesied its use as a prize (ἀέθλιον) instead of horses or cauldrons (fr. 58 Harder), and to have predicted its later adoption at the Isthmian games (fr. 54i.2-9 Harder).44 As Harder notes, the attention lavished on this *aetion* not only reflects Callimachus’ antiquarian interests, but also “illustrates the importance of the Nemean Games and the prestige of the celery wreath won by Berenice”.45

Given this strong focus on celery, the *Victoria* too gains further point when set against the tradition lying behind Lucian’s anecdote: the Seleucid poets compared Stratonice’s missing locks to curly σέλινον as a kind of false garland (cf. στεφανοῦντας, *Pro imag.* 6); but Callimachus’ Berenice has won a real victory crown made of σέλινον. If the details of Lucian’s anecdote reflect the wording of an original Seleucid encomium, we could see Callimachus here – as in the *Coma* – striving to outdo his Seleucid predecessors. Berenice’s real crown of celery signals her superiority to Stratonice’s fabricated, celery-like locks. However sycophantic and flattering the

43 I thank Annemarie Ambühl for encouraging me to pursue this further connection.

44 See Harder (2012: II 387-388, 474-476, 487-488). Cf. too Probus’ mention of the celery wreath (*apiacea corona*, fr. 60c.8 Harder), and Callimachus’ similar references to celery in the *Victoria Sosibii* (σέλινοφόρον, fr. 384.4 Pf.; σέλινα, fr. 384.21 Pf.).

45 Harder (2012: II 475).
Seleucid poets may have been, Callimachus implies that Berenice’s appearance and achievements ultimately surpass those of Stratonice.\footnote{Notably, the post-Callimachean Seleucid poet Euphorion appears to have taken up the same aetion concerning celery and its use at the Isthmian and Nemean games in his Dionysus (fr. 18 Acosta-Hughes & Cusset = fr. 107 Lightfoot), with several echoes of the Victoria Berenices (esp. τρηχεία λαβή, v. 3 ~ τρηχώς ἀέθλος, fr. 55.3 Harder; Μήνης παίδα, v. 4 ~ fr. 56 Harder). Could he have been responding in some way to Callimachus’ inter-dynastic polemic? Euphorion’s temporal play, focusing on events before Callimachus’ account (cf. οὐ γὰρ πῶ, ‘not yet’, v. 3), certainly suggests a competitive attempt to rival Callimachus: he can outdo the Alexandrian poet by treating the even more distant past.}

Taken together, therefore, these possible allusions to Seleucid tradition in both the Coma and Victoria Berenices may offer a rare example of Hellenistic inter-dynastic literary polemic in action, as Callimachus positioned himself and his queen against the poetic tradition of a rival kingdom. Notably, these polemical moments appear to occur at structurally significant points of the Aetia (the start of Book 3 and close of Book 4), framing the second half of the poem with an intertextual competition between the Ptolemaic Berenice and Seleucid Stratonice. Alongside the anti-Seleucid sentiment of the Aetia prologue (cf. p. 000 \{15\} above), it seems that Callimachus’ poem was punctuated at key points by an underlying inter-dynastic rivalry, centred especially on competing models of queenship.

On current evidence, however, this can be nothing more than an attractive hypothesis. Rather than pursue this line of thought any further, therefore, I would like to close by considering whether this putative Seleucid tradition of hair encomium finds any echoes in the later literary traditions of Rome.\footnote{Besides the following Latin examples, Daniel Ogden attractively suggests (per litteras) that the Emperor Julian’s Misopogon (‘Beard-Hater’, 362 CE) might also engage with this Seleucid tradition: it is a paradoxical and satirical attack on the emperor’s own beard (“an unwelcome hair-growth in the age of the clean-shaven, as opposed to an unwelcome hair-loss”; see esp. 338b-339c), which is notably addressed to the people of Antioch and involves explicit recollection of Antiochus’ love for Stratonice (347a-348b). Amid Julian’s many literary references and allusions, it is certainly possible to detect a nod to local traditions surrounding another ruler’s abnormal hair.} Hair, baldness and encomia are recurring concerns of Roman poets,
especially elegists and epigrammatists.\textsuperscript{48} Ovid compares a hairless head to the ugliness of a hornless bull, a field without grass and a tree without leaves (\textit{turpe pecus mutilum, turpis sine gramine campus, | et sine fronde frutex, et sine crine caput}, Ov. \textit{Ars. Am.} 3.249-250), while Martial repeatedly mocks the baldness of his satirical targets (e.g. 2.66, 6.57, 10.83). More pertinently for our current discussion, meanwhile, Propertius imagines praising his beloved’s errant locks in an allusive catalogue of poetic genres at the start of his second book:

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
seu vidi ad frontem sparsos errare capillos,
gaudet laudatis ire superba comis.
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

(Prop. 2.1.7-8)

if I have seen the locks straying scattered on her brow, I praise her hair and for joy she walks with head held high.\textsuperscript{49}

As in Lucian’s anecdote, an aesthetic infelicity (in this case, errant hair) is transformed into an object of praise. As James Zetzel has noted, this scene serves as a paradigm of praise poetry, reinforced through a bilingual pun (\textit{laudatis ... comis ~ ἐγκώμιον}, ‘encomion’): the praising of hair is the archetypal encomiastic activity (at least from an elegist’s perspective).\textsuperscript{50} Behind this sentiment we might detect a reference not only to Callimachus’ \textit{Coma Berenices}, but also to Seleucid traditions of hair encomia.

Most significant, however, is Ovid’s \textit{Amores} 1.14, a poem to which I have already referred on several occasions in previous footnotes. The speaker of this poem gloats over his beloved’s loss of her hair (through dyeing) and blames her for its disappearance. The majority of the poem is spent celebrating the virtues of the now lost hair through a host of flattering comparisons (1.14.3-34).\textsuperscript{51} In the past, scholars have connected this poem with Callimachus’ \textit{Coma Berenices}, noting especially the parallel presentation of the girl’s hair “as the innocent

\textsuperscript{48} See e.g. McKeown (1989: 364-365); Hälikkä (2001); Hohenwallner (2001); Burkowski (2012); Pandey (2018).

\textsuperscript{49} Tr. adapted from Goold (1990: 103).

\textsuperscript{50} Zetzel (1983: 92); see his pp. 91-93 for the generic catalogue at Prop. 2.1.5-16.

victim of torture.” I wonder, however, whether the Seleucid tradition of hair encomia attested by Lucian may also lie behind Ovid’s poem. Not only does Ovid compare his lover’s locks to flora (cedar stripped of its bark, 1.14.11-12) like the Seleucid poets (hyacinth/celery), but he also flatteringly compares the lost locks to the coiffure of the goddess Venus (1.13.33-34), a deity with whom Stratonice was closely aligned, as we have noted above (p. 000 n.000 (9 n.20)). Moreover, later in the poem, Ovid explicitly denies that his beloved’s hair loss is the result of a violent disease (nec tibi vis morbi nocuit, 1.14.41), implicitly setting this cosmetic accident against the tradition of Stratonice’s illness. Again, we can only draw tentative conclusions, but perhaps in Ovid’s poem we see the combination of both the Seleucid and Ptolemaic traditions of royal hair encomia, as the Roman elegist adapts and reconciles two competing ‘strands’ of Hellenistic poetics. If so, this Ovidian elegy attests to the diverse influence of Hellenistic literature at Rome; not everything can be traced back to a solely Alexandrian source.

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Abbreviations


See McKeown (1989: 372-373 on Am. 1.14.23-30), who particularly notes the parallel with Aet. fr. 110.47-48 Harder: τί πλόκαμοι ῥέξομεν, ὅτ’ οὐρεα τοῖα σιδήρῳ | εἰκουσιν; (‘what may we locks of hair do, when such mountains yield to iron?’). For recent studies on other Roman receptions of the Callimachean Coma, see too Höschele (2009); Ambühl (2016).


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**Key Words for Index Rerum**

- Aphrodite
- Baldness: see hair loss
- Berenice
- Callimachus
- Encomium
  - Sincere
  - Paradoxical
- Inter-dynastic poetics
- Gender roles, inversion
- Hair encomia
- Hair loss
- Hellenistic Queenship
- Heracles
- Homeric allusion
- Love sickness
- Lucianic reliability
- Roman reception of Hellenistic poetry
- Stratonic
- Seleucid poetry

**Key Passages for Index Locorum**

- Callimachus frr. 54-60j Harder
- Callimachus fr. 110-110f Harder
- Euphorion fr. 18 Acosta-Hughes & Cusset = fr. 107 Lightfoot
- [Euphorion] fr. 197 Acosta-Hughes & Cusset = fr. 189 Lightfoot
- Hesiod fr. 82 Most = 133 M-W = 49 Hirschberger
- Homer, *Odyssey* 6.230-231
- Homer, *Odyssey* 23.157-158
- Lucian, *Pro Imaginibus* 4
- Lucian, *Pro Imaginibus* 5
- Ovid, *Amores* 1.14
- Pliny, *HN* 35.140
- Propertius 2.1.7-8