REVEALING THE CHAMAeleON:  
Young, low-mass stars surrounding $\eta$ and $\epsilon$ Chamaeleontis

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A thesis submitted for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy 
of the Australian National University

Research School of Astronomy & Astrophysics

Submitted 8th November 2011
Accepted 23rd January 2012
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Disclaimer

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is that of the candidate alone, except where indicated below or in the text of the thesis. The work was undertaken between March 2007 and November 2011 at the Australian National University, Canberra. It has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree at this or any other university.


Daniel Bayliss (RSAA/ANU) observed and reduced the Magellan/MIKE spectrum of 2MASS J0820−8003 which appears in the second paper and Chapter 3.

The balance of the observations, data reduction and analysis presented in these papers and chapters was performed solely by the candidate, who also wrote the text in its entirety. The co-authors provided valuable discussions and comments on the text.

The thesis was unconditionally accepted by a panel of expert examiners and ratified by the Dean of the College of Science on 23 January 2012. Following the suggestions of the examiners, this copy contains several improvements, additions and minor corrections.

Simon J. Murphy
16th February 2012
Acknowledgments

Although it is my name on the cover page, no Ph.D. thesis has ever been written in isolation. This document is the result of a collaborative effort with the dozens of colleagues, friends and loved-ones I have been lucky enough to know and work with over the past four and a half years. As the author Gladys B. Stern once wrote, “Silent gratitude isn’t much use to anyone”, so it is my pleasure to especially thank a few people who made this all possible.

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Professors Mike Bessell and Warrick Lawson, for their continuous support and guidance throughout my candidature. Your enthusiasm for this work, patience and breadth of knowledge have been extraordinary and it has been a privilege to work with and get to know you. I hope that this thesis is just the start of a fruitful collaboration for many years to come.

To my dearest Maggie, thank you for your ever-present love, support, encouragement and interest in what I do, despite the late nights and preoccupied weekends. Although I didn’t know you when I started this work, I can’t imagine ever completing it without you. You have been, and are as always, truly wonderful.

To my friends here in Canberra and further afield—thank you for the timely distractions and the pleasure of your company these past four and a half years. You are a large part of the reason I am still sane enough to write these words.

I would be amiss if I didn’t thank my long-time officemate Wolfgang for the many hours of lively, engrossing discussions over the years, several of which I’m sure were work related! The same goes for the students and staff of Stromlo, current and former—you have made it a pleasure to come to work everyday and for this I thank you all. Thanks also to Geoff, Judy and the team at SSO for ensuring countless observing runs were as pain-free as possible.

Finally, I am perpetually grateful to my parents, who—from the time I first looked up at the dark sky over Arrowtown and started this journey too many years ago—have never wavered in their support and encouragement, even though I’m sure you wished I became an engineer, lawyer or a real doctor! This thesis is dedicated to you both.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial support of an RSAA Joan Duffield Research Scholarship and an ANU College of Science Distinguished Research Scholarship.
Abstract

The deep southern sky surrounding the Chamaeleon dark clouds is abundant with pre–main sequence stars of various ages. Because of their youth (5–10 Myr) and proximity ($d \sim 100$ pc), members of two such stellar populations—the open cluster $\eta$ Chamaeleontis and the nearby $\epsilon$ Chamaeleontis Association—are ideal laboratories in which to study the formation and evolution of sparse stellar groups and proto-planetary systems. To better understand their role as some of the closest evidence of recent star formation, this thesis explores the birth, dynamical evolution, accretion and disk properties of both groups’ low-mass members.

The notable lack of low-mass stars in the young open cluster $\eta$ Cha has long been a puzzle. Two possible explanations have been suggested; a top-heavy initial mass function or dynamical evolution, which preferentially ejected the low-mass members. Previous efforts to find these stars several degrees from the cluster core have been unsuccessful. By undertaking a wider (95 deg$^2$) photometric and proper motion survey with extensive follow-up spectroscopy, we have identified eight low-mass stars that were ejected from $\eta$ Cha over the past 5–10 Myr. Comparison with recent N-body simulations shows our results are consistent with a dynamical origin for the current configuration of the cluster, without the need to invoke an initial mass function deficient in low mass stars.

Two of the dispersed members exhibited strong, variable H$\alpha$ emission during our observations, including a star which had an event suggestive of accretion from a circumstellar disk. New infrared photometry confirms the presence of the disk. This star demonstrates that infrequent, episodic accretion can continue at low levels long after most disks around ‘old’ pre-main sequence stars have dissipated. Furthermore, we show that dynamical evolution is likely to be responsible for the higher-than-expected disk fraction observed in $\eta$ Cha.

Another two non-members are slightly older than the cluster, but are only 42 arcseconds apart and share similar kinematics and distances. We have shown that they almost certainly form a wide (4000–6000 AU) $\sim 10$ Myr-old binary at 100–150 pc. The system is one of the widest pre-main sequence binaries known. Its isolation and dynamical fragility put strong constraints on any birthplace and mode of formation, which we propose was in a turbulent gas filament in the vicinity of the Scorpius-Centaurus OB Association.

In addition to $\eta$ Cha, we have also examined membership of the unbound $\epsilon$ Chamaeleontis Association, which lies some 10 degrees to the east and has similar age, distance and kinematics. The two groups were almost certainly born in the outer regions of Sco-Cen only a few million years apart. Many members of $\epsilon$ Cha have been proposed in the decade since its discovery. After considering the kinematics of candidates from the literature, we have confirmed 11 further stars as likely members. Many of the new members possess infrared spectral energy distributions attributable to circumstellar disks, including four stars with strong H$\alpha$ and forbidden emission which are actively accreting material.

This work on $\eta$ and $\epsilon$ Chamaeleontis has identified many interesting targets for follow-up studies of disk evolution, accretion, binarity, and other investigations that require samples of nearby, intermediate-age pre-main sequence stars. Several avenues for future work are discussed in the last chapter of the thesis, including the impact of photometry and astrometry from the forthcoming SkyMapper Southern Sky Survey.
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