Although this book aims at a revolutionary re-appraisal of the way in which we view Hellenistic poetry, its overall thesis is quite simple. In their frequent presentations of the gods and heroes of Greece as children (or, in the case of Callimachus’ Theseus and Apollonius’ Jason and Medea, young men and women), Radke argues, the Hellenistic poets signalled their intention to go a step earlier than the canonical poets, and thereby to lay claim to a territory and a primacy of their own. In separating the world of the traditional poets from Hellenistic modernity in this way, the Hellenistic poets simultaneously and self-consciously created the first history of literature in Western literary criticism, for they were inventing the literary periods of Classicism and what J. G. Droysen was to call ‘Hellenism’. According to Radke, their division of Greek poetry into Classical and modern is in fact analogous to the way in which the thinkers of Romanticism distinguished the literary periods of antiquity and modernity in order to define modernity more closely. And, just as the Romantics used this procedure to highlight the validity of the modern, so the Hellenistic poets made their distinction in order to herald their own special virtues, notably their freedom of imagination. The Hellenistic poets themselves, therefore, challenge the modern view of their œuvre as merely imitative, derivative post-literature.

Radke’s first four chapters lay the theoretical groundwork. They constitute well over a third of the book, and argue at a high level of abstraction. Chapter One contextualises Radke’s notion of Hellenism as antiquity’s answer to the modernity of the Romantics: in a manner analogous to the Romantics’ division between the ancient and modern periods, the Hellenistic poets presented the world of early myth as a threshold of creative hope between the waning of the old and the coming of the new, in which poetry can give form to what has not yet been completed, in which modernity can disavow the priority of its predecessors, and in which it can thus give free expression to its driving force, the imagination. Radke then (Chapter Two) mounts a radical assault on what she regards as the dominant view of Hellenistic poetry as a poetry of decadence, post-art, or, at best, as a mere museum for art. She sees the origin of this characterization in Droysen’s teleological categorization of ‘Hellenism’, arguing forcefully, for example, that, while Droysen saw the period as a preparation for the coming of Rome, the Hellenistic poets saw themselves as the telos of Hellenic culture. Another Romantic tendency that Radke identifies as contributing to the common modern evaluation of Hellenistic culture is the use of the ‘shorthand’ descriptions of the period, which began with F. A. Wolf and was taken up by the Schlegel brothers; she succeeds in showing that, far from encapsulating the essence of the period, the procedure actually robs it of its own special identity.

However, Radke illuminatingly demonstrates how the Hellenistic poets use one particular form of shorthand description that they themselves invented, the epigrams on dead poets, and how different their deployment of it is from that of the Romantics (Chapter Three). Through an analysis of the epigrams of Antipater of Sidon, Leonidas of Tarentum and Theocritus on Anacreon and Hippo-
show an intense emotional closeness to poets long dead. (As she arrestingly puts it at p. 81, «Tot ist die Dichtung der Alten, es lebe die Dichtung der Gegenwart.») Moreover, the older poets become code-names for the genres in which they worked, and yet the poems lamenting their death are anything but abstract, celebrating the mood of their poetry with remarkable vividness. In all this, the Hellenistic poets invent literary history in a way that is unprecedented in prior literary thought as found in Aristotle’s Poetics and Aristophanes’ Frogs, and which is strikingly modern.

On the debit side, when Radke contends that the new poets discover their literary past as a lost childhood that they can relive at a more reflective level though without the naïveté of the past, and that an understanding of the epigrams on dead poets is therefore crucial to the interpretation of Alexandrian stories of childhood, the nexus of her logic seems rather loose, however useful her discussion of the poems is as evidence for the Hellenistic invention of the past.

The main preoccupation of Chapter Four is the further exploration of the dichotomy of past and present. Just as the Romantics viewed antiquity as a foil to their modernity, the Hellenistic poets regarded themselves as modernity vis-à-vis the pre-modern Classical period. Radke offers an important examination of the consequences of this for intertextual studies of Hellenistic poetry, emphasizing the fact that intertextuality can only define the relationship between the new text and its construction of the model rather than the model itself, and drawing attention to the way the literary tradition is translated into vivid images evoking moods and atmospheres.

The Alexandrians, then, establish their new poetic cosmos in the period in myth before the early times of the Classical poetic tradition. And here at last we turn from Radke’s exhaustive theoretical underpinnings to her thesis concerning the practice of Hellenistic poetry.

Chapter Five argues that the visual vividness of the Hellenistic poets’ scenes of the gods and heroes’ childhoods is not, as is commonly held, so much in contrast with self-reflectivity as in fact a product of the latter; the two create the new poetic cosmos, in which the imagination is freed and enabled to encompass an unprecedented range of subject-matter. To illustrate her point, Radke first turns to the moment in Apollonius’ Argonautica when the Argonauts pass the suffering Prometheus, and hear his cries as the eagle gnaws at his liver (Arg. 2.1246–69). The new divine order is, Radke argues, seen here as evolving, with Zeus still in his youth, and this is an image of the new poetic world. Another threshold figure, Radke continues, is the Heracles of the Argonautica’s first book. Radke challenges the view of Heracles as an old-style hero, and argues instead that in Apollonius’ presentation of him his physicality and sensuality make him a non-reflective, passive pictorial image, whose effect is primarily aesthetic. Heracles is a symbol of the new poetic strategy of picturability, though he is anti-modern in that he does not possess the ability of Jason also to observe and reflect; the two components are vital for the new poetry’s achievement of its special vividness.

However, it might be objected that Radke goes beyond the evidence when she states that Heracles’ departure from the epic is pure chance (p. 134), and without defined reasons (p. 135): Glaucus may indeed be something of a deus ex machina, but he explicitly states that in wanting the hero back they are acting against the will (Dios boule) of the very Zeus
whom Radke has argued is still in his early days: it is his moira to fulfil Eurystheus’ labours (Arg. 1.1315–20). One is left with the feeling that notions of arete might after all be more at issue than Radke cares to admit.

When we consider the Heracles of Theocritus’ seventeenth Idyll, she goes on to suggest, we see the interweaving of the early world of myth and the political present, which, she will argue in the following chapter, is a basic element of Hellenistic poetry’s fresh creation of the real, political and cultural present. Again, it is the picture of Heracles that is paramount, tipsiness and all. Thus traditionally iconized, Heracles simultaneously becomes a comment on literary history, while not forfeiting his role as a saviour; in this way, Theocritus makes the ambivalence in the tradition his theme, broadening the horizons of mere political propaganda, again to primarily aesthetic ends. This broadening, Radke notes in passing, can also be observed in the inclusion of the images of old age, ugliness and decay which we find in the depictions of Apollonius’ Iphias, Polyxo and Phineus. These are ‘the product of the absolute emancipation of the poetic imagination’ (p. 142); pictorial vividness in the depiction of the childhood of myth is part and parcel of the Hellenistic desire to define a new literary history. Radke concludes that the Hellenistic poets themselves turn upside down any assumption that literature and art develop from naïveté and pictorialism to complexity and causal organization, and also that antiquity can be classified as pictorial and unified, while modernity is indirect and disjunctive: the modernity of Hellenism strives to be far more pictorial and direct than early-Greek and Classical antiquity.

Chapter Six further explores the effects of the unfettering of the poetic imagination found paradigmatically in Callimachus’ Hymn to Delos. This freedom can allow the poet to ignore the birth of Artemis, which was traditionally synchronic with her brother’s. It permits the insecurity over the nature and very name of Delos: from Leto’s womb, Apollo refers to her as ‘clearly visible’ (191) suggesting ‘Delos’, while the island is still known as Asteria. The instability is a product of the dynamism of poetry. And, since Apollo is not yet born, we are transported into a primitive, pre-poetic world, and in the process we are presented with a history of literature. Aetiology is therefore a potent tool in the invention of the history of the literary past, which is simultaneously set apart from the Ptolemaic present and its poetry. Delos’ very flexibility is the result of modern poetry’s ability to re-shape the past and indeed the cosmos. Because of his poetry’s absoluteness, Callimachus does not enter into a dialogue with earlier accounts of Apollo’s birth as in Pindar (Fr. 33 Snell-Maehler), and, Radke concludes, intertextuality is therefore inadequate as a means of interpreting the Hymn to Delos. Movement is the guiding principle of the poem’s whole narrative: the world is set in motion through Callimachus’ desire to dissolve the old order and introduce a new one, in which the poetic imagination can comprehend a new panorama, from the ugly to the fantastic. We therefore have another reason to reject the characterization of Hellenistic poetry as derivative. The Hellenistic poets are independent of even the modern regents, whose reality the poets shape rather than vice-versa: Philadelphus’ execution of the mercenaries in 279 BC is given short shrift, while his real mission is proclaimed to be his services to Apollo and the Muses. This need not suggest that the regent’s political achievements are
treated ironically, merely that poetry can now integrate the present-day realities as a purely aesthetic poetic virtue.

In the long Chapter Seven Radke further examines the application of her central thesis to Hellenistic poetry. She sees the Argonautica of Apollonius as pre- and anti-Homeric and anti-Aristotelian, in that rational ordering is supplanted by narrative order which can be based on arbitrariness, like Jason’s loss of a sandal. The debate over Jason’s status as an anti-hero is therefore a fossil, since he is merely a passive hero, appointed to lead by dint of chance. Moreover, since, in Radke’s view at least, Zeus’ domination of the cosmos is not yet established, his motivation of the plot is non-existent, and the plot is therefore aestheticized into a statement of literary history. Radke argues that the unfinished thunderbolt depicted on Jason’s cloak is, like Zeus himself, purely aesthetic, and is an indicator of the incompleteness of Zeus’ tenure of power on Olympus. Likewise, Aphrodite’s offer of Zeus’ childhood toy ball to Eros is not, as is commonly thought, only an example of the Hellenistic domestification of the gods, or a statement of Zeus’ cosmic role, but is both a reminder of Zeus’ childhood and presents Eros as a successor of Zeus, while the new literature is the successor of Eros: as a dice-player, Eros is hardly capable of guiding action. In all this one feels, however, that the notions of contingency and arbitrariness are insufficiently related to the childhood of myth. In addition, we may wonder whether the Greeks of any period thought that Zeus’ rule was not yet established at this time. The last sixty lines of Hesiod’s Theogony explicitly show that Zeus is fully established before the age of the heroes like Heracles and Jason, and in fact Callimachus in his Actes seems to play with this notion and to present his work as a sequel to the Theogony.

Radke finds further assaults on rationalism in Theocritus’ Cyclops (Id. 11) and Callimachus’ hymns. In the Hymn to Zeus, for instance, the poet deconstructs the argument against Crete as Zeus’ birthplace by objecting that the Cretan version of the god’s death is impossible since gods do not die. However, according to Radke Callimachus gives the lie to this rationalism by emphasizing the birth of the god. Elements from childhood in fact set the scene for modern poetry’s evocation of early times. And again imagination has absolute autonomy. In the case of the Hymn to Artemis, the opening scene of Artemis on Zeus’ knees shows, through Zeus’ nod, his accession to power in directing action, while the second scene of Artemis among the Cyclopes as a three-year-old is, Radke argues, chronologically anterior to the poem’s first. The motif of Heracles on the lookout for any animals that Artemis might bring to Olympus involves Artemis in her maturity. The pre-Homeric and traditional ages are thus presented as literary history, indeed as a history of metaculture, and this is made possible through the perspective of childhood. Callimachus’ presentation of Artemis in this way embodies and supersedes the whole tradition of poetry.

Chapter Eight deals with Books Three and Four of the Actes of Callimachus and Theocritus’ Encomium to Ptolemy (Id. 17). Radke proposes that the Actes books thematize the separation of the real world of the Ptolemies and art, incorporating the former into the world of the latter, in a manner beyond the categories of encomium and poetic autonomy which she calls ‘hymnic’. She regards the incestuous marriage of Philadelphus and Arsinoe as a key point in her analy-
sis, indeed as a major structural element in this part of the Aetia. She suggests that the beginning of the book-pair goes out of its way to emphasize the incest-theme, if only because Berenice is presented as the sister of Euergetes when in fact she was his cousin. The prefiguration of the Ptolemies’ incests may indeed be found in the hieros gamos of Zeus and Hera, an event from the childhood of myth, but in the Acontius and Cydippe ‘action’ Callimachus does not use the story as a justificatory precedent for the dynastic marriage-practice; rather, he evokes the primal forces of the distant past before the establishment of universal order and morality. Yet this complex stance is not wholesale destruction, but is incorporated into the poet’s sovereign world of absolute self-sufficiency: the regents are therefore not the subjects of either the poet’s irony or his consent, but are placed in his independent, poetic world: they gain cosmic significance through their subordination to the laws of the poet. The Acontius and Cydippe story also demonstrates that the scholarly view of the Aetia as ‘anti-epic’ is false: the marginalisation the story’s climax, the marriage night, is, instead, yet another demonstration of poetic autonomy. This extends to the fact, as Radke sees it, that not even the new main theme or new protagonists are treated as such, being entirely under the control of the poet, so that, for example, we hear nothing of the feelings of the youthful lovers for one another. This in turn explains the discontinuity of Callimachus’ narrative.

Chapter Nine further pursues the depiction of heroes in their childhood, beginning with Theocritus’ picture of the baby Heracles in the Heracliscus. Heracles, Radke argues, is a perfect example of the way the hero is shaped at a stage of development which is prior to the literary tradition, especially in the section dealing with Heracles’ education by the prototypical educators like Linus (Id. 24.103–34). In this way Theocritus deconstructs and aetiologizes Heracles’ traditional iconography, though Radke perhaps presses the evidence too hard when she claims that Heracles has a predilection for his lamb’s-wool blanket which is meant to be felt as a foil for the lion’s skin: all the text says is that Amphitryon tucks Heracles in with the blanket after the adventure with the snakes (62–5). Apollonius’ baby Achilles (Arg. 1.553–8) is a supreme example of how the Hellenistic poets could reshape the towering figure of Homer. Callimachus applies the same strategy to himself in the frame of Books One and Two of the Aetia: he pictures himself in his youth on the threshold of literacy, and the Telchines in a time before literature existed; and the childishness with which they chide him is offset by his insistence on the continuing favour of the Muses (Fr. 1.37–8). Attempts to identify Callimachus’ critics among the Telchines therefore ignore the fact that the role that they play is poetological.

In her Epilogue, the author draws together the strands of her inquiry. The anti-rationalist creative imagination sets new criteria for poetry, which results, for example, in pictorialist writing, arbitrariness, novelty and the creation of a world beyond reason. Form is now the ruling force, and content is widened to fill the poetic imagination’s new world. The obsession with childhood is integral to the development of literary history and the idea of a past poetry whose poets can only come back to life, as they do with the Hipponax of Callimachus’ Iambi, through the breath of life which the new poetry can give them. Moreover, the new, independent poetry can be ‘hymnic’ in presenting a future poetry, in which
the world of reality, including rulers like the Ptolemies, is incorporated into poetry, and becomes the creation of poets. The consequent literary history is therefore bipartite, consisting of the old that no longer exists and the new that does not exist yet.

Radke has courageously presented an extreme case with engaging energy and verve, and, if we accept her thesis, we shall indeed be rescuing the Hellenistic poets from the charge of mere derivativeness, though the titles of recent books like M. Fantuzzi and R. L. Hunter’s ‘Tradition and Innovation in Hellenistic Poetry’ (Cambridge 2004) show that the charge hardly has the currency it once enjoyed. We shall also be calling into question the Hellenistic poets’ involvement with their life and times, though Radke is generous in acknowledging the value of, for example, the recent interest in the impact of the Egyptian milieu on the poetry of Alexandria. In certain key areas, however, we may wonder whether Radke’s thesis is too extreme.

First, her reading of the *Argonautica* leaves us with the impression that Zeus is not yet established on Olympus. But, as we have seen, this was not the usual Greek view, and Zeus is credited with a *Dios boule* by Glaucus at the close of Book One. Moreover, the image of his unfinished thunderbolts on Jason’s cloak (*Arg*. 1.730–34) does not necessarily imply that Zeus’ symbol of power is incomplete at the time of the *Argonautica*’s dramatic narrative: no indication is given as to actually when the Cyclopes on the cloak are supposed to be at work, and it could easily be well in the past. Moreover, the ball that Zeus played with in his childhood and which Aphrodite promises to Eros (*Arg*. 3.31–41) can in fact be viewed as, among other things, underscoring the distance between Zeus’ childhood and his present power. True, at the end of Book Two (lines 1246–59) Prometheus is still in chains, but, as Radke acknowledges (p. 122), by the time the Argonauts reach the Hesperides Heracles has, according to the commonly accepted chronology of events, freed the Titan, so the earliness of Zeus’ reign does not seem as stark as Radke argues. I have noted, moreover, that there are places where Radke is a little free in her argumentation, as with the association of the childhood of myth with arbitrariness, and where she pushes the evidence too hard, as with her conclusion that Heracles’ desertion of the Argonaut expedition is the result of mere chance.

One senses, secondly, that Radke overestimates the patience of the Ptolemies in being reduced to the status of their poets’ creatures, and to the consequent Ästhetisierung: even if we jettison the story of the execution of Sotades, can we really imagine that the regents would have appreciated (or understood) such a strategy in compensation for straight encomium, let alone have accepted the critique of their programme of incest that Radke proposes? In general, Radke tends to underestimate the impact of studies of the political aspect of Hellenistic poetry; since the publication of Radke’s book, we now have A. Mori’s ‘The Politics of Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica*’ (Cambridge 2008) as an impressive contribution to this field.

A third concern is whether Radke has separated childhood too radically from other ‘realistic’ motifs found in Hellenistic poetry. Childhood is nowadays generally felt to be of interest to the Hellenistic poets because it is a new theme which can be creatively foregrounded, in deliberate contrast with the compara-
tive marginalisation that it receives in earlier poetry, and as such is on a par with other areas of human life, including the life of people low on the social scale, old age, sickness, exhaustion, poverty, drunkenness, and sex.

Finally, no one nowadays denies that there is much truth in the notion that the Hellenistic poets tried to outflank Homer and the tradition by selecting material from the margins of the tradition. And there is great sense in Radke’s idea that the Hellenistic poets did this by selecting material that would ‘pre-date’ him. But in suggesting that the later poets were thereby stating their radical independence from the Classical poets surely Radke is admitting that the former were actively engaging with the latter, even if to deny any connection? The logic here is loose; and the Hellenistic poets themselves advertise the connection, as when Apollonius evokes the sequel of the story of Medea in Euripides’ Medea. Moreover, when she argues that because of this rupture with the past the value of intertextual studies is limited, surely she is swinging the pendulum too far? She spends little time on Callimachus’ Hecale, for example, but that poem, admittedly placed in a period of myth prior to the period of Homer’s main narratives, nonetheless consciously inverts the magnitude, personnel and tone expected of epic, and depends for its full effect on pointed echoes of Homeric scenes and language. As so often with Hellenistic poetry, innovation is a matter of degree and extent.

Radke commands our respect through the power of her argumentation for her view, but the view, in my opinion, does not cover all the facts, and should, at some stage, be confronted with the results of work on other elements of Hellenistic poetry, especially intertextuality and the political dimension. However, her learning, vigour, clarity and courage are enormously impressive, and Hellenistic studies will be in debt to her for the exciting challenge that she has thrown down.