Poetry as window and mirror: Hellenistic poets on predecessors, contemporaries and themselves
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INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, Hellenistic literary studies were in a sorry state, judging by the introduction of Gregory Hutchinson’s 1988 book *Hellenistic Poetry*:

The celebrated poets of the third century BC have not received much literary treatment; what is sadder, they seem fairly seldom to be read with much enjoyment and understanding. (...) Here stands the great bridge between the literatures of Greece and Rome; yet it seems only rarely to receive more than a swift and very limited inspection. (Hutchinson, 1988: 1)

Far from being neglected, today Hellenistic poetry is almost over-studied, so much so in fact, that the 2004 Groningen workshop on Hellenistic poetry resorted to a conference on Hellenistic poets “beyond the canon.” Whereas the great third-century poets Apollonius, Callimachus, and Theocritus would have qualified as such for most readers twenty years ago, this category is now reserved for such authors as Crates of Malles, Hermesianax of Colophon, and Simias of Cos. And who knows what the future may bring? The stream of publications in the field of Hellenistic literature is increasing rapidly, and the on-line Hellenistic Bibliography by Martine Cuypers currently includes more than 20,000 titles.

So, why another book on Hellenistic poetry? And why on the poetics, surely the most eye-catching aspect of Hellenistic poetry? In the first place, it was simply a question of personal inclination: Hellenistic poetry strikes a chord with me, and I wished to learn more about it. But more importantly, the questions this book aims to answer about Hellenistic poetry have not been fully studied, nor have they been approached from the angle that I shall propose.

Let me begin by setting out these questions. My study started out as an enquiry into the representation of the poet in early Hellenistic poetry, that is to say, the extant works of the Greek-speaking poets of the third century BCE. The initial query was: how do these

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1 This would seem to be a slight rhetorical exaggeration; Hellenistic poetry was certainly not invisible before 1988, although it is true that in particular the last twenty years have seen a great boom in Hellenistic scholarship. For this study I have not been able to take into account any literature that appeared in 2007 or later.

2 The Groningen Hellenistic workshops have greatly contributed to the opening up of the subject in general.

3 The corpus of poets discussed includes Callimachus, Apollonius, Theocritus, Aratus, Herondas, Hermesianax, Timon of Phlius, Phanocles, and the epigrammatists Leonidas, Asclepiades, Posidippus, Hedylus, Nossis, Alexander Aetolus, Dioscorides, Alcaeus of Messene, Mnasalces, Crates, Damagetus,
poets represent themselves as poets? In my search for an answer, I came across the following passage:

Qui est poète doit confesser la poésie, sagt Paul Valéry. Die Frage was ein Dichter sei, haben immer und zuerst die Dichter selbst beantwortet—durch ihr Werk. Am Anfang steht die Dichtung, die Poetik ist sekundär. Die Frage kann weder theoretisch gestellt werden, noch theoretisch beantwortet werden, und so sind denn auch zu allen Zeiten die Antworten so verschieden gewesen wie die Dichtung selbst. (Maehler, 1963: 1)

This sounds like common sense: in order to find out what poets think about their profession, look at their poetry. But, as most scholars would agree, this is more complicated for Hellenistic poets than for poets of other periods in Greek literary history because the Hellenistic era differs from what went before in that poets of the archaic and the classical age wrote about their own profession only occasionally and only in select passages, whereas Hellenistic poets seem to have constantly reflected on poetics, poets and, poetry from all ages. Orpheus, the legendary bard, is an important character in Apollonius’ epic Argonautica; Callimachus’ lambus 1 presents the poet Hipponax as a speaking persona; numerous epigrams represent and evaluate the great poets of the early Greek literary tradition and frequently criticize or praise contemporary colleagues. It seems reasonable to suppose that this is done to reflect on the author’s own position as a poet. Therefore the question how Hellenistic poets viewed themselves as poets is only part of the broader question of how they viewed poets in general and in history.

Can this preoccupation with poetics be explained by the nature of Hellenistic poetry and the circumstances under which it came into existence? Some aspects of this poetry suggest this and consequently have invited critical attention time and again. Foremost are its striving for new and unexpected combinations of various generic elements (Kroll’s famous Kreuzung der Gattungen), its treatment of old myths in new (narrative) ways, its strong emphasis on the human and un-heroic element or on romance, and its somewhat ironic or intellectual distance from its subject matter. As opposed to classical drama, for instance, this poetry seems hardly occupied with social or political issues. This has led some critics to see Hellenistic poetry as a kind of “modernist” Spielerei, an experimental art for art’s sake written

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Nicaenetus of Samos, Simias of Rhodes and Theodoridas of Samos. I have chosen not to discuss Nicander and Lycophron, because there are convincing arguments that they belong to a different era, cf. respectively Magnelli (2007: 185-204), Kosmetalou (2000: 32-53).

Kroll (1924).
in an ivory tower, which frivolously mixes in random elements from earlier poetry in order to create surprise effects:5

Als ernsthaft galt die Befassung mit Wissenschaft, nicht mit Dichtung. Diese war zum Spiel, zur paidia geworden. Ihr traditioneller Stoff wurde nicht mehr ernst, sondern sentimental oder ironisch, also spielerisch behandelt. Der Dichtung fehlte die frühere gesellschaftliche politische Bedeutung, insbesondere ihre Funktion im Kult, sie war also Spiel. Formal verlegte sie sich’s aufs Experiment, auf spielerisch Versuchen. Zu solchem Spiel haben sich Hellenistische Dichter denn auch bekannt. (Muth, 1966: 259)

Of course such a verdict contains elements of truth, but it obscures the fact that some archaic or classical poetry is also playful, full of surprise effects, and preoccupied with the personal rather than the political and also consists of disparate generic elements.6 Still, it may be claimed that Hellenistic poetry, in a self-conscious manner, takes these characteristics one step further.

How can this palpable if subtle difference be explained? Traditionally, scholars have rightly pointed to the societal and cultural changes that came over Greek society after the conquests of Alexander the Great for an explanation:

Now for the first time the Greeks were convinced that the old order of things in the political as well as in the intellectual field, their whole way of life, indeed, was gone forever. They became conscious of a definitive break between the mighty past and a still uncertain present. (...) The new generation of about 300 BC living under a new monarchy realized that the great old poetical forms also belonged to ages gone forever. (Pfeiffer, 1968: 87)7

It would however appear that, precisely because the Hellenistic Greeks recognized the differences between their way of life and the great past, they also sought continuity with this past.8 One well-known example is in the establishment of the famous Library of Alexandria by Ptolemy Soter. All important texts of the Greek literary heritage were kept there to be studied by scholar-poets such as Callimachus and Apollonius; it literally brought the literary heritage of Greece to a new seat, in Alexandria.9

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6 E.g. the Homeric Hymns, Pindar’s epinicia, Euripides’ dramas, Sappho’s lyric poetry, recently the new Simonides-fragments of the so-called Plataea-elegy respectively.
8 Contra e.g. Radke (2007), who argues that Hellenistic poetry attempts to present itself as radically new and the past as something definitively closed off.
9 Cf. e.g. Blum (1991: 104-105). Of course, mutatis mutandis the same applies to the other great libraries of the age, such as the one in Pergamon.
The changes from small-scale *polis* to mass society, from democracy to monarchy, also brought along changes in the way poetry functioned in society; it was no longer predominantly a public art nor an indispensable means of providing social cohesion. These facts, as Pfeiffer notes, naturally also had their effect on the work of the scholar-poets. Living in a changed world yet confronted daily with the legacy of the past, they sought to come to terms with it and learn from it in their own writings.

The new writers had to look back to the old masters (...) not to imitate them—this was regarded impossible or at least undesirable—but in order to be trained by them in their own poetical technique. Their incomparably precious heritage had to be saved and studied. (Pfeiffer, 1968: 87)\(^\text{10}\)

The Hellenistic poets’ difference with what went before, then, paradoxically seems to lie in their awareness of this difference, the self-consciousness which resulted from their critical study of the great texts of the past. If we wish to know how they saw themselves as poets, therefore, the first thing to take into account is their relationship to the past.

One way in which their poetry expresses this is sophisticated and extensive intertextuality with and allusions to the poetic texts that were studied in the Library. This tendency is to blame for much of the bad press Hellenistic poetry used to get as being pedantic, derivative, and overly intellectual:

*Si la création du Musée seconda les efforts des érudits et l’écllosion des travaux individuels, elle ne put ni faire naître des génies, ni inspirer des œuvres nationales. Ce fut une renaissance mais aussi un déclin. Il y eut beaucoup de gens de lettres, mais peu de grands écrivains, beaucoup de livres, mais peu de chefs-d’œuvre. Ce siècle, si remarquable par l’érudition ne produisit qu’une littérature de second ordre. (Couat, 1882: Préface)*\(^\text{11}\)

However, in a world that has gotten used to allusion in the works of (post-) modern authors like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, or Derek Walcot, the relentless erudition of Hellenistic poetry is appreciated rather differently. No longer victim to reductive attempts at *Quellenforschung*, allusion and intertextuality are now recognized as aesthetic ideals in their own right and form a topic that receives scholarly comment as a matter of course.\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^{10}\) Cf. e.g. Hunter and Fantuzzi (2004: 1-37).

\(^{11}\) Cf. e.g. Rose (1960: 314).

\(^{12}\) Because of the presence of specialized commentaries that treat the subject extensively and also because it is such a vast and hard to delimit subject, I have chosen in general to discuss this aspect of Hellenistic interaction with the past only marginally, except in one case where, as I argue, a Homeric *hapax legomenon* is employed by Theocritus and Apollonius to pronounce on their status as poets in relation with the poetic practices of the past (Chapter 8).
1. Poets of the Past

Yet, there is another way in which Hellenistic poets reveal their wish for continuity with the past that is even more relevant to my initial question of how they represent themselves. It concerns the way they introduce poets of the past as “characters” in their poetry. Such poetic predecessors appear in Hellenistic poetry strikingly often and play an important and novel role in it, as is recognized by Fantuzzi and Hunter:

In the Hellenistic Age (...) we find that another figure takes his place beside the divine inspirer, or at times as a substitute for him in the role of ‘guarantor’ of the origin of the work. The conventional role of acting as a source of inspiration may well be left to the Muses, but now an illustrious predecessor often steps in to teach the new poet the ropes and how to proceed to construct the work he has undertaken or else he verifies and ratifies the correctness of the method that the new poet has followed. (Fantuzzi and Hunter, 2004: 1)\textsuperscript{13}

This is well illustrated with an example from the poetry of Callimachus. Several passages in his \textit{Aetia} have been marked out as vital for understanding his views on poetry; most importantly the so-called \textit{Prologue} (fr. 1 Pf.) and the \textit{Dream} (fr. 2 Pf.), both found near the opening of the poem. As the complex \textit{Prologue} will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, we may leave it aside for the moment and turn to the \textit{Dream}. Although little of this passage is left, a combination of \textit{testimonia} and fragments suggest that in it Callimachus recounted how he was transported in a dream from Libya to mount Helicon, where he met the Muses, who answered his questions on the origins (aitia) of sacrifices and cults. Their explanations form the subject of the \textit{Aetia}.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, a poetical investiture on Helicon by the Muses immediately calls to mind another ancient poet: the author of the \textit{Theogony}, Hesiod, who is indeed duly referred to in the most substantial fragment of the passage:

\textsuperscript{13} Besides Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004), the most important studies focusing on the appearance of (poets of) the past in Hellenistic poetry are: Gabathuler (1937) a complete if somewhat dated overview of Hellenistic epigrams on poets; Bing (1988) which focuses on the shift from orality to literacy and the way it affects the representation of poets in Hellenistic poetry; Bing (1991), which treats some epigrams ascribed to Theocritus on the poets of the past from the angle of ancient biography; Barbantani (1991), which describes the representation of the canon lyric poets in Hellenistic epigram; Hunter (1996), which discusses the way archaic lyric forms are reinterpreted and recycled in Theocritus’ poetry; Radke (2007) which reverts to the point of view that Hellenistic poetry represents a complete break with tradition; Morrison (2007), which treats the narrator in archaic and Hellenistic poetry; due to their recent appearance, I have regrettably not been able to take these last two studies fully into account.

\textsuperscript{14} The seminal study on this passage is Kambylis (1965); see Benedetto (1993) for a more recent overview of scholarly work on this passage.
When the group of the Muses met the shepherd Hesiod as he was pasturing his sheep near the footprint of the swift horse [...] the creation of Chaos...

It would appear that Callimachus alludes to a poet of the past at the beginning of his poem to identify his aims as a poet. But how and why is Hesiod, the archaic hexameter poet of a genealogy of the gods, the model for Callimachus, the sophisticated Hellenistic librarian and author of learned elegy on the origins of obscure cults, which contains panegyrical of the Ptolemies?

Perhaps Hesiod’s importance as a model should be sought in the tension between his likeness with and his difference from Callimachus. To start with the likeness, the *Theogony*, by virtue of being a genealogy of the gods, might be called an aetiological explanation of how everything in the cosmos came into existence. As has been pointed out, the central tale of Prometheus teaching mankind to sacrifice to the gods (and cheat them out of the best bits of the victim by burning only the fat) is an aetiological story about forms of sacrifice (the main theme of the *Aetia*). Yet, unlike Hesiod, Callimachus is not a rough Boeotian shepherd who claims that he ran into the Muses on Helicon and started singing their praises in what must surely have appeared to a third-century audience in Alexandria as a crude hexametric style. He cannot and does not wish to be this; such a presentation of himself would have fallen flat with his sophisticated readers.

To indicate his distance from the model, Callimachus therefore presents his Hesiod-like meeting with the Muses as taking place in a dream, that is, at a remove from reality. Hesiod is a model, but not one that is imitated in every detail; he cannot be, since the times the poets lived in are so different. At the same time, the choice to name a model at all is a sign that Callimachus wishes to forge continuity with the past despite this difference. What this example demonstrates is that how Callimachus represents Hesiod should be considered to learn more about the way he perceives himself as a poet.

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15 Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004: 54).
16 Although of course this begs the question whether Hesiod truly was what he claims to be in the *Theogony*; at any rate, in his day this apparently seemed a plausible way of representing oneself.
This theme, the various ways in which predecessors serve as a “window and mirror” for Hellenistic poets, will form the subject of the first part of this book. The observation in itself may not be entirely new,\textsuperscript{17} but by bringing to bear upon it theories from the field of social sciences, in particular Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory” and Hobsbawm’s “invention of tradition,” I attempt to bring out the cultural conditions influencing issues of creative reception, (problematic) literary appropriation, and the wish for continuity with the tradition more clearly. In doing so, I also treat material that has not been considered from this angle before. This enables me to analyze the differences between the various forms of introducing the poets of the past. The mere dropping of a name has a different significance and effect than the introduction of a poet as a speaking character in his own poetry. What are the underlying reasons for these diverse strategies and what the effects?

I will also put the question whether there is a distinction between the representation and employment of historical poets, like Homer and the tragedians, and mythical poets, like Orpheus (in the Argonautica of Apollonius) and Daphnis (in the Idylls of Theocritus) and how it can be defined and explained. Which category of poets is more suitable for aims of literary appropriation and why will turn out to be of vital interest.

2. Poets of the Present

Although Hellenistic poets were constantly exploring their relationship with the past, it would surely go too far to say that they were not interested in their own time and surroundings, even if their poetry has often—and not entirely incorrectly—been considered a rarefied art for art’s sake, written in an ivory tower, for a select company of cognoscenti:

\emph{Diese Literatur redet nicht zu den Vielen, ihr Reichtum an Voraussetzungen erschliesst sich allein dem Kenner, und ihre Sprache meidet es ebenso, Formeln der tradition unverändert zu übernehmen, wie sie sich vom Alltag distanziert. (...) Man ist unter sich, und die raren Dinge die man sich zu erzählen hat, vertragen keine Lauten Töne.} (Lesky, 1971: 788)

\textsuperscript{17} As noted, the fact that the literature of the past plays an important role in the combination of tradition and innovation that characterizes Hellenistic poetry has especially been argued by Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004). However, they devote only one section of a chapter (pp. 1-17) to the phenomenon of poetic predecessors as models in Hellenistic poetry. Recently, Radke (2007) has argued on the contrary that Hellenistic poets deliberately closed the past off from their own era, in order to free the way for their own innovative poetry.
It is undeniable that expressions of aesthetic preference suggestive of such a picture are frequently found, in particular in Callimachus’ poetry (e.g. in the Prologue of the Aetia, fr. 1 Pt.; the Hymn to Apollo, 102-end; the Iambi). Complete poetic wars have been reconstructed on the basis of these expressions. Thus, “the most famous literary quarrel in antiquity” (Rose, 1960: 325) allegedly took place between Callimachus and Apollonius. It was supposedly concerned with the question of whether epic poetry on heroic themes could still be written in the third century, as Apollonius had done in the Argonautica. More recent scholarship recognizes the difficulty of proving the existence of the quarrel and proposes that Callimachus’ expressions should be considered from a rhetorical or strategic point of view as a means of creating a position vis à vis his readers. But although the reality of the quarrel between Callimachus and Apollonius seems doubtful (Chapter 4 will cast a fresh glance at the evidence usually adduced), the persistence with which it has been propounded does raise some questions. Why is the tone of Callimachus’ declarations of aesthetics throughout so aggressive? Why has the story of the quarrel been accepted so readily by generations of scholars? Moreover, even if there were no actual quarrel, it may still be assumed that the two poets had an opinion about each other’s works. Or was there perhaps something else at stake?

To answer such questions, it must be realized that the Alexandrian Library provided the link not only with poets of the past, but necessarily also with living contemporaries and their works. It is reasonable to assume that this particular social context was a formative influence on Hellenistic poetry, especially as the Library, the Museum and their fellows were in some way subsidized by the Ptolemaic court and hence dependent on its favors. Scholarship has always taken into account the fact that much Hellenistic poetry was produced at, or for the benefit of, a court, but the questions that have usually been studied in this context concentrate on its portrayal of royal ideology, and its “propagandistic” qualities. What has not been asked is how the competition between the poets at court may

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18 E.g. Lefkowitz (1981), who treats the matter from the point of view of biographical fictions in the Vitae of the Greek poets; Cameron (1995), whose revisionary book tends to read all of Callimachus’ poetry with an eye on its rhetorical effects rather than as pronouncing on actual matters of poetical debate; Schmitz (1999), who applies modern literary theory to an analysis of the Prologue of the Aetia, and reaches broadly the same conclusions.

19 Cf. e.g. Weber (1993) who tries to identify elements of Ptolemaic ideology or propaganda in Hellenistic Poetry in general; Effe (1995: 107-123) discusses possible ambivalences in panegyric poetry;
have influenced the nature of their poetry. Focus on this rivalry produces a somewhat different picture of the declarations of aesthetic principle that are rife in the poetry of the age. This is the angle from which I choose to approach the interaction of contemporary poets in Chapters 4 and 5. Grounding my observations by referring to modern sociological models, I will argue that the social space in which Hellenistic poetry was composed, that is to say the field of tension between poets, colleagues, audiences, and patrons, could be described, in terms of the modern sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, as a “field of cultural production.”

Although the negative and aggressive statements in this field have usually commanded more attention, I will also focus on the instances in which allegiance or praise are expressed with regard to the poetics of a contemporary; evidently they too form an integral part of the dynamics of Hellenistic poetic interaction. To illustrate this, another text concerning Callimachus and Hesiod may be cited. This is AP 9.507, the difficult epigram by Callimachus in praise of Aratus’ *Phaenomena*. (The specific problems of text and interpretation will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5).

'Ἡσίώδου τόδ’ ἀεισιμα καὶ ὁ τρόπος· οὐ τὸν ἄοιδόν ἐσχάτον, ἀλλ’ ὀκνέω μή τὸ μελιχρώτατον τῶν ἐπέων ὁ Σολεύς ἀπεμᾶξατο. χαῖρετε, λεπται ὤψεις, Αρίττου σύντονος ἀγρυπνιή. (AP 9.507)

This song and its style are Hesiod’s; not that the man from Soloi [has imitated] the poet entire, although it must be admitted that he has imitated the sweetest part of his verses. All hail, refined discourses, product of Aratus’ intense sleeplessness.

Callimachus here compliments Aratus for following Hesiod while not imitating him in every particular. Of course, the procedure he praises here is remarkably similar to what he has done in the *Aetia*. By paying Aratus this compliment, Callimachus both points to his own poetics and creates an allegiance with the popular and successful author of the *Phaenomena*. This means that the epigram can and should be used to learn more about Callimachus’ view of his own poetics. At the same time, it also shows something about his way of maneuvering among contemporaries in the cultural context of his own era.

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Blum (1991) and Erskine (1995) explain the foundation of the Library and the Museum of Alexandria as a Ptolemaic bid for the heritage of Alexander the Great, i.e., Greek paideia; Hunter (2003) discusses questions of ideology in Theocritus’ *Encomium of Ptolemy Philadelphus* (Id. 17). Yet another approach is Stephens (2003), who reads Hellenistic court poetry looking for Egyptian elements, which, according to her were included to legitimize the Ptolemaic rule towards the Egyptian populace.
3. **Self-representation in the Age of the Book**

The “Age of the Book” is what Rudolf Pfeiffer called the Hellenistic era; an important statement with repercussions both for the perception and practice of poets and their readers. In the first place, Hellenistic poetry was written primarily to be read rather than performed. As Graham Zanker observes, “Reading is a solitary process that removes the reader from the world around him. He lives instead in the world of the author and communicates only with him.” (1987: 197). This means that the author of a written text has different, perhaps more sophisticated, means at his disposal for communication with the reader than a speaker: a reader may turn back to passages he has already read and thus grasp intertextual allusions and other literary niceties more easily than a listener. However, the fact that he is writing for readers also means that the author has to make sure the reader understands who is communicating with him through the medium of written text as opposed to speech. The reader cannot see him, only form an image of him on the basis of the text. Self-representation is therefore important in written poetry as a means of identifying the author as author towards the reader.

By the Hellenistic age, as Peter Bing recognizes in his 1988 study, authors had become readers, namely of texts of the past, more consciously than ever before. This means that the Muse who inspired them was a “well-read Muse.” She was not, as in Homer, omniscient through her divine presence at the legendary occasions she described to the poet, but, figuratively, through her wide browsing in the library. 20 In other words, Hellenistic poets were heavily dependent upon written sources, both literary and scholarly, for their inspiration. Often they implicitly or explicitly acknowledged the fact that these texts formed their primary inspiration. In what way did this influence their self-representation? Is the fact that their art is embedded in the culture of reading and writing a discernible element in their self-representation?

To answer such questions I will analyze so-called *sphragis*-passages, where poets characterize themselves and their works. Such passages occur particularly frequently in epigrams, which were mostly gathered in poetry books by the Hellenistic age. Kathryn Gutzwiller was the first to suggest that these epigrams should be read in the (reconstructed) context of their original collection. If so, it seems plausible that *sphragis*-epigrams served to

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introduce the poet’s persona, the presupposed speaker in many of a book’s epigrams, to the reader in such collections. These self-representations in epigram should be related to the fictive epitaphs for dead poets, discussed in the first chapter: sphragis often assume the form of fictive epitaphs. Looked at from this angle, these epigrams suggest the way Hellenistic poets wished to enter the literary tradition they were so acutely aware of.

Broadcasting a poetic identity to a reader who has no direct contact with the author, many of the sphragis-epigrams sketch succinct self-portraits that are meant to be immediately recognizable. Yet, the opposite may also be found: Hellenistic poets occasionally like to pose the reader riddles as to their identity as author. This is done by the adoption of significant alternative names (e.g. Callimachus’ “patronymic” Battiades) or the creation of enigmatic alter egos (e.g. Simichidas in Theocritus’ seventh Idyll). The instances named here have invited a great amount of critical attention that has however failed to provide completely convincing solutions. The name Battiades harbors more significance than a mere patronymic, and the figure of Simichidas is more complex than an alter ego.

Moreover, the wider phenomenon as such has not been analyzed satisfactorily. Why do Hellenistic poets create such riddles about their identity? What does this reveal about their poetics? The matter was approached in the nineteenth century by Reitzenstein with his Masquerade Bucolique theory, which reads Theocritus’ poetry as a great charade in which all major Alexandrian poets are dressed as herdsmen, but this idea lacks any basis in Hellenistic poetry or history, as has been duly recognized. To follow Treu (1963), who claims that such riddles qualitate qua defy our attempts at interpretation, on the other hand, seems too bleak a prospect. Trying to find a middle way, I will concentrate in particular on the meta-poetic meanings of the enigmatic forms of sphragis.

Besides unambiguous identifications and enigmatic alter egos, there are also poems in which the first-person speakers are in no way identifiable with the author, most notably in the so-called mimetic Hymns of Callimachus. These poems resemble mimics in that there is no external narrator but a first-person speaker, apparently involved at the moment of speech in the procedure of the festival of a particular god. The mimetic element of these poems has

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22 On Callimachus, see in particular White (1999: 168-181); the bibliography on Theocritus’ seventh Idyll comprises over 200 titles. A good overview of the most important currents in the interpretation of the identities of Simichidas and Lydias is provided by Hunter (1999, introduction to Idyll 7).
received a good deal of attention, mostly focusing on the way in which Callimachus invites his readers to participate actively in imagining the context that is hinted at in the text (the so-called technique of the *Ergänzungsspiel*, which is also found in Callimachus’ epigrams).\(^{24}\) What has not been asked is whether this practice may be related to the particular circumstances under which Callimachus worked, that is, as a scholar-poet in the Library of Alexandria. I will argue that this is the case and show that ultimately the practice is a manifestation of Callimachus’ own perception of his position in literary tradition.

Scholarly occupation in the library also influenced the way in which Hellenistic poets represented the issue of revealed knowledge derived from the Muses. If Callimachus could not or did not wish to claim that he had actually met these goddesses on Helicon, the question arises how he and his learned colleagues did view and represent inspiration. It comes as no surprise that texts from the literary past played a great role in this matter; as noted, the Hellenistic Muse was a well-read lady. The last chapter discusses a specific case that illustrates this particularly well. It is concerned with the use that Apollonius and Theocritus make of the Homeric *hapax legomenon hypophetes* and its variant *hypophetor* in contexts addressing questions of inspiration and poetic authority. Although the use of this rare word by both poets has been noted and discussed,\(^{25}\) scholars have not drawn conclusions about the representation of poetic inspiration and authority that may be reached when all passages in which these words occur are connected.

4. **Some Remarks on Methodology**

It might be asked if looking at Hellenistic poetry merely to shed light on the question of how Hellenistic poets represent the profession of the poet is not a reductive way of reading. Evidently, this poetry was not written only to comment on poetry or poets. That being said, it has to be admitted that Hellenistic poetry is particularly self-conscious and that most poets of this period reveal themselves as true poets’ poets: poetics are a recurrent and emphatic preoccupation. As I hope to have made clear, this book will try to place these poets in their historical context to achieve a greater understanding of precisely this preoccupation. The

\(^{24}\) The term *Ergänzungsspiel* is Bing’s (1995: 117-123). The process has been analyzed for the *Hymns* by Hopkinson (1984), Harder (1992: 384-394), Depew (1993: 57-77).

\(^{25}\) Most commentaries on either poet have commented on the occurrence of the word, with different degrees of accuracy and insight; besides there is the excellent article by González (2000: 270-292).
reason for this, is that I believe that it is an interpreter’s duty, if she wishes to appreciate what she reads at all, to form some kind of understanding of the background against which a literature has come into being. But this is a difficult matter, as for instance Stephen Greenblatt recognizes:

If interpretation limits itself to the behavior of the author, it becomes literary biography and risks losing a sense of larger networks of meaning in which both author and his works participate. If, alternatively, literature is viewed exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions, it risks being absorbed entirely into an ideological superstructure. Finally, if literature is seen only as a detached reflection upon the prevailing behavioral codes, a view from a safe distance, we drastically diminish our grasp of art’s concrete functions in relation to individuals and to institutions, both of which shrink into obligatory “historical background” that adds little to our understanding. We drift back toward a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal human essence, or alternatively as a self-regarding autonomous, closed system—in either case, art as opposed to social life. (Greenblatt, 1980: 4)

So how should literary expressions from a world so different from ours be approached? Owing to the lack of substantial or detailed historical data about the Hellenistic period, information about the socio-cultural background is to some extent sketchy and theoretical. This causes a dilemma: ignore the background completely or try to make some sense of it, with the risk of projecting one’s own concerns on it? The first possibility seems unattractive, so I have chosen the arguably more problematic second approach. Clearly, I do not wish to apply theory wherever concrete historical facts are lacking, nor do I wish to base dangerous generalizations about “the spirit of the age” on elements I perceive in the texts themselves. Yet, I do think it useful and necessary to ground the recurrent characteristics that involuntarily strike any reader of Hellenistic poetry in some kind of grander explanation, since it would seem otherwise as if each individual work of poetry discussed here had randomly come into existence in a vacuum.

This is why I have tried to shed new light on well-known elements of Hellenistic poetry by viewing them from the angle of a comprehensive socio-historical frame inspired by modern theorists such as Bourdieu, Hobsbawm, and Assmann. I realize that, in doing so, I am liable to invite the criticism that this is anachronistic or a case of “the Emperor’s new

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26 Of course the great work of Fraser (1972) offers a veritable treasure-trove of what we do know about Hellenistic poets at the court of the Ptolemies, but regrettably much of this information derives from untrustworthy sources (anecdotes from later authors or late antique Vitae).
clothes,” a fancy way of dressing up of what everyone has already noticed. For one thing, I hope the results of my approach may justify my choice of method. For another, I feel that it is impossible to look at literature thinking one can truly retrieve in a positivist way “wie es eigentlich gewesen” just as it is irresponsible to treat it as if it came into being in a vacuum. Projecting a modern viewpoint on ancient matters is defensible, or indeed indispensable, in some cases. It may help to view contours of an age that had not seemed clearly defined until that moment. Bourdieu’s theories have been developed with an eye on twentieth-century French cultural life; Hobsbawm concentrates on nineteenth-century cultural institutions, and Assmann’s theory of cultural memory was developed in relation to the analysis of early Jewish communities but later applied to ancient Egyptian society. Yet, as the last example shows, the strength of these theories is that they focus on universal elements in civilized society and may therefore be used as hermeneutic tools for the analysis of very different situations.

With relation to literature, it is salutary to realize that, to some extent, every period in time molds the authors it reads into a reflection of its own image by a selection of elements it recognizes, or it creates a negative image of itself by singling out what it perceives as strange. We may indeed wonder if the Hellenistic authors would recognize themselves in the modern image I will sketch of them, aided by sociological models and theories. In answer to this, the metaphor of the literature of the past as a window and mirror may once more be called to mind. Although the view from the window always remains more or less the same, every viewer sees another reflection in the mirror. In other words, although the literary past has unchangeable qualities, there is always an element of appropriation in later generations’ approach to it. To analyze the unchangeable facts about a literature that distinguish it from a later reader’s world, this reader cannot help but involuntarily highlight elements of himself and his surroundings in it. The perfect example of how this works may be found in the example addressed earlier: Callimachus’ Hesiod is not the Hesiod of seventh-century BCE Ascr, nor that of, say, a modern scholar like Martin West. Still, despite the individual differences in emphasis, all of these Hesiods possess something of an unalterable core.

As a modern classical scholar, I believe it is essential to put the questions of how and why the poetry of poets who have been dead for more than two thousand years is still read. As stated before, I did so at first because I wished to learn about a literature that I intuitively
appreciated. I now realize that what I learned in the process of writing this dissertation concerns modern ways of viewing Hellenistic poetry as much as it concerns Hellenistic poetry. Yet, to my mind, this is a legitimate approach to literature. Frankly, it seems like one of the more realistic ones. I hope that this book may be of use to others wishing to learn about Hellenistic poetry, as well as to those who wish to see what it looks like from the point of view of the twenty-first century.