The nineteenth-century scholars who began using the term “epyllion” to designate short hexameter narratives did so because of a perceived gap in the ancient system of genre classification. In the traditional categorization in place during the classical age, some poetic categories, such as epic and elegy, were named for metrical patterns, in which a range of subjects were treated in variable lengths, while others, such as tragedy, comedy, and dithyramb, were based on performative function. Only in the literary critical awakening of the fourth century (as it seems) did length become a factor in establishing generic norms and assessing comparatively the quality of genres.\(^1\) In the early Hellenistic period, as shown by programmatic passages in poetry and critical statements from prose texts, length, always tied to style and choice of subject matter, became a factor in the judgment of what constituted good poetry. It is not, then, an accident of transmission that short hexameter narratives are known from this period in some numbers and that they seem to have served as models for Latin narrative poetry from the late Republic through the Augustan age. Rather, evaluative judgment of short versus long in genres of variable length such as epic and elegy was related to the development of Hellenistic literary critical theories—advanced in prose treatises, illustrated in poetic practice, and always subject to debate and controversy.

The most famous of the Hellenistic epyllia, as they are commonly called, was Callimachus’ *Hecale*. Ancient descriptions and a large number of fragments give us fair knowledge concerning the plot and style of this lost poem, which focused on an encounter between the young Theseus on his way to subdue the Marathonian bull and the poor and elderly Hecale who provided him kind hospitality in her hut. It is the earliest known

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\(^1\) In the *Poetics* Aristotle defines the best length for tragedy as the greatest that is in accordance with clarity of plot structure (1451a 9–15) and sets epic up as distinct in “size of its structure” (τῆς συστάσεως τὸ μῆκος, 1459b 17–18). He grants the possibility of epics shorter than the ancient ones, of a length equivalent to a group of tragedies presented at one performance, but also commends epic for its ability to extend length (τὸ ἐπεκτείνεσθαι τὸ μέγεθος πάλι τι) to enhance weightiness (ὀγκος) (1459b 18–28).
short epic composed in a strictly narrative style, that is, not accompanied by a catalog introduction (like the Hesiodic Shield), hymnal features (like the Homeric Hymns, Callimachus’ narrative hymns, and Theocritus’ Idylls 22, 24, and 26), or an admonitory frame (like Idyll 13). It was read, admired, commented upon, and sometimes imitated throughout antiquity and perhaps beyond. In this essay I consider the Hecale within the ancient critical climate in which it was written and received, in order to examine how traditional generic norms interacted with new poetic theories in the Hellenistic period to favor short epic narratives as a locus for the display of artistic ability and critical sophistication.

A well-known scholium on the conclusion to Callimachus’ Hymn to Apollo connects the length of the Hecale with critical disputes of Callimachus’ day (T 1 Hollis, ad Hymn 2.106):

ἐγκαλεῖ διὰ τούτων τοὺς σκώπτοντας αὐτὸν μὴ δύνασθαι ποιῆσαι μέγα ποίημα, ἵνα νεκρόπολις ποιῆσαι τὴν Ἕκαλην.

In this section he casts blame on those who were making fun of him for his incapacity to compose a large poem, because of which he was forced to compose the Hecale.3

The scholiast is here commenting on the hymn’s programmatic coda (2.105–12), where Phthonus whispers in Apollo’s ear to criticize the poet for not singing “as much as the sea,” and the god responds by defending the hymn because it is not filled with refuse like the “great stream” (μέγας ῥόος, 108) of the Euphrates but is pure and undefiled like “small drops from a holy spring” (πίδακος ἐξ ἱερῆς ὀλίγη λιβάς, 112). Callimachus’ message is that the god of song privileges the refined excellence that can be achieved in a small-scale composition over the grandeur of more substantial poetry. Despite its brevity, the scholiast’s comment clearly links the critical debate evoked at the end of the Hymn to Apollo with the composition of the Hecale where, it is implied, instead of composing a poem of the type represented by the hymn, Callimachus chose to answer the criticism about limitations to his poetic ability by composing a narrative poem on a larger scale.

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3 All translations are my own.