This little but wide-ranging book consists of three chapters connected by a focus upon Greek and Indo-Iranian word-groups employed as literary metaphors. Chapter One treats the root *peik- (Grk. ποικ-) and examines the possible origins of the literary metaphor of handicraft in ποικίλος in the poetry of Vedic India and ancient Iran. Jackson first posits an analogy between the semantics and usage of *tetk- (preparation of wood → fabrication) and *peik- (colour → paint, write). Next he considers the range of uses of *peik-, which in the Vedic pis is pressed into meaning ‘adorn’ (pace Mayrhofer) as well as ‘hew out, carve’, and Jackson concludes that the semantic ambiguity in both the Greek and Vedic roots points to a proto-Indoeuropean source in which it may have been used in an abstract sense. Thus the roots *peik- and *tetk- refer to different levels of “finess in the preparation of mouldable matter” (13) which may have been applied figuratively to poetic composition.

Thereupon Jackson turns to the early usage of ποικίλλω, especially in Iliad 18.590 and Phercydies of Syros (DK 7B 2.5-7, superseded by Schibli’s 1990 Oxford edition and commentary), which, he observes, indicates a semantic shift from handicraft to cosmogony. He rightly notes the significance of Dionysiaca 25.392 (Ἡλίων ποικίλλεν), and might have observed also that this phrase occurs in an ekphrasis marked by literary discourse, and that it recalls the Pindaric ποικίλαν ὄμοιον in the programmatic proem (1.15). In a fine illustration of the value of comparative linguistics, Jackson produces evidence from descriptive passages in Old Norse skalds, in which the Germanic continuator of *peik-, namely *faðon, may bear the abstract meaning ‘depict’. The metaphorical usage of the verb in the context of writing in these Icelandic poems and in the two passages of archaic Greek poetry points to an earlier, proto-Indoeuropean source. Hereby Jackson supplements and refines the argument in Bader 1987) that the conception of poetry as a work of art which may be compared to other manufactured objects existed in pre-Greek literature.

The argument here provides verbal evidence for the function of ekphrasis as a locus for meta-poetry, and it might have been strengthened by a fuller consideration of the usages of διαδ- and τευχ- in
descriptive passages (e.g., διάδαδα πολλά τετεύχατο, Hes. Th. 581, Mosch. Eur. 43, etc.) and literary contexts (e.g., μελετηδούσι διαδαδθέντα μελίζεν ἀσθενίζ, P. N. 11.18). For these and other relevant terms one must consult Nünlist 1998) (esp. ch. 3 “Handwerk”), which also treats the link in the possibly meta-poetic meaning of τέρπης in Il. 19.19 (shortly following the ekphrasis of Achilles’ shield) with the root τερε in the Rig Veda 4.5.14. Jackson ends the chapter by suggesting (17) that the different connotations in the root of *peik-, including that of literary composition, presented themselves as soon as writing developed in ancient Iran, Europe, and Central Asia.

Chapter Two investigates metaphors in the Rig Veda which concern cultic performances and the composition of hymns. Vedic poets perceived a unity in different ritual procedures, including the utterance of speech and poetic composition, and it seems plausible that terms applied in one realm were transferred easily to another. With this in mind, Jackson examines the Vedic roots ञञ (anoint → decorate) and строитель (embroidery → variegated patterns of meaning), which in his reading are mutually applied to the performance of sacrifice and the writing of poetry. The evidence adduced includes the Rig Vedic hymn to the goddess Usas (Dawn), 1.92.1-6 (Geldner), for which it is argued that the metaphorical usage of phia (‘adorned’) involves the visual appearance of an embroidery as well as variegated patterns that encode ritual meaning and speech.

The Vedic root ञ (which covers the semantic field of binding, plaiting, or winding) and the difficult ञञ (perhaps ‘proper path’ or ‘winding of threads’) are interpreted as applying to the execution of sacrifice and to the composition of poetry. The argument that the collocation of these roots effected a semantic matrix which included literary composition is not entirely convincing, mainly because of the paucity of evidence. Nevertheless, Jackson suggests that these word-meanings were employed as a device that “could be represented as an intricate web in which the verbal or kinetic executions of ritual appear as embroideries or ornaments” (45). In other words, the weaving metaphor was employed in determining ritual principles and in composing hymns.

In an excursus on the use of phia- words in Pindar, Jackson argues that the analogy between ornamentation and verbal art provides a parallel for the same phenomenon in the poetry of Vedic India, and together with it points to earlier usage. Thus in the two traditions the formulaic device of the ‘adorned poem’ initially referred to the weaving of an elaborate work of art, and eventually specified something else, like a poem. These two distinct “circumlocutions for the poetic craft could thus be shown to form a unity” (49).