SOLVING PROBLEMS WITH ACROSTICS: MANILIUS DATES GERMANICUS

The dating of Manilius' *Astronomica* and of the *Aratea* attributed to Germanicus are both long-standing problems of Latin scholarship.[1] The large number of significant correspondences between the two poems suggests a considerable degree of imitation and allusion one way or the other, but it is widely agreed that the internal evidence of the poems can shed no light on the direction of the influence. I would like to present a new observation, however, suggesting that the *Aratea* was already available to Manilius in some form by the time he came to compose his first book.

From what we have of his work, it appears that the *Aratea* poet's imitation of the original *Phaenomena* did not extend to the deliberate use of acrostics.[2] There is, however, one sequence of letters in the left margin – apparently an accident – that spells out a Latin word of significant length: the narrative of Iustitia (Δίκη) and the ages of man (German. *Arat.* 98–139) contains six lines whose initial letters spell SPARSV, supine of *spargo* 'I scatter, sprinkle'.

> **S**ponte sua tellus nec parui terminus agri
> **P**raestabat dominis, sine eo tutissima, rura.
> **A**t postquam argenti creuit deformior aetas
> **R**arius inuisit maculatas fraudibus urbis
> **S**eraque ab excelsis descendens montibus ore
> **V**elato tristique genas abscondita rica … (Germanicus, *Aratea* 118–23)

Hilberg, who discovered the sequence, recognized it as a mere coincidence,[3] and there are two good reasons why it cannot have been deliberate. First, there is nothing in the adjacent passage to which it corresponds either in sense or etymologically.[4] The position of the acrostic, secondly, is too inopportune to be genuine. For while *spargo* and its cognates are occasionally used to describe the arrangement of stars,[5] the SPARSV sequence falls in a part of the poem to which a notion of scattering bears no relevance: the Aratean tale of the ages of man. While a narrative passage is a suitable location for an acrostic of general and obvious significance to a poem (as with Nic. *Ther*. 345–353 ΝΙΚΑΝΔΡΟΣ, housed within a narrative), *sparsu* cannot claim such an honour. It makes best sense, therefore, to treat it as simply a product of chance.

[1] For the *historia quaestionum* and relevant bibliography, see J.-H. Abry, 'Manilius et Germanicus : une énigme historique et littéraire', *REL* 71 (1993), 180 n. 2, and K. Volk, *Manilius and his Intellectual Background* (Oxford, 2009), 189 n. 29.

[2] The reason may be that, as we have it, the translation covers only the astronomical portion of Aratus' poem (*Phaen*. 1–731), stopping before the famous ΛΕΠΤΗ and ΠΑΣΑ acrostics (783–7, 803–6). The author may have included an acrostic elsewhere in his work, although the surviving fragments contain none.

[3] It is included, at any rate, in his catalogue of accidental acrostics in Latin poetry, I. Hilberg, 'Ist die Ilias Latina von einem Italicus verfasst oder einem Italicus gewidmet?', *WS* 21 (1899), 264–305; 22 (1900), 317–18.

[4] Contrast Arat. *Phaen*. 783–7, 803–6; Verg. *Aen*. 7.601–4 (with D.P. Fowler, 'An acrostic in Vergil (*Aeneid* 7.601–4)?', *CQ* 33 [1983], 298); Manilius 1.334–40, 705–10, 798–801 (with R. Scarcia et al., *Manilio: il poema degi astri*, vol. 1 [Milan, 1996], xviii–xix; P. Bielsa i Mialet, 'Manili : un nou acròstic', *Faventia* 22.1 [2000], 135–9 and 'Manili : notícia de més acròstics', *Faventia* 22.2 [2000], 141–3). *rarius* (121) could only have fulfilled this role if it had its local sense ('more dispersedly') and not its temporal sense ('more rarely') here. Likewise, *maculatas* (121) in its metaphorical sense ('stained, polluted') is too loosely connected to the act of sprinkling to appear deliberate.

[5] The participle *sparsus -a -um* occurs several times in the earlier *Aratea* (Cic. 155; German. 169, 329, 371; cf. also German. fr. 3.2 *spargit*). Aside from the instance proposed in this article, Manilius makes no use of the verb.

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In contrast to the *Aratea* poet, Manilius has a keen eye for acrostics. Throughout *Astronomica* 1 – the part of his poem that corresponds most closely with the *Phaenomena* – he builds upon the precedent of Aratus' ΛΕΠΤΗ in a series of experimental word formations.[6] His interest in the Aratean acrostic, moreover, is likely to have spurred him to seek imitations of the figure in a Latin version of the *Phaenomena*. While he can have found no deliberate examples in Germanicus, the accidental SPARSV seems to have caught his eye, for the very same sequence occurs in his description of comets:

> **S**unt etiam raris orti natalibus ignes,
> **P**rotinus et rapti. subitas candescere flammas
> **A**era per liquidum tractosque perire cometas
> **R**ata per ingentis uiderunt saecula motus.
> **S**ive, quod ingenitum terra spirante uaporem
> **V**midior sicca superatur spiritus aura … (Manilius, *Astronomica* 1.813–8)[7]

That we are dealing with a mere coincidence is ruled out by the extreme statistical unlikelihood of the event.[8] Moreover, this uncommon supine is just too strange a choice for Manilius to have made without some sort of precedent: while the notion of scattering is rather fitting for the passage in question (a discussion of showering meteors),[9] a

[6] On Manilian acrostics see Bielsa i Mialet (n. 4), Scarcia et al. (n. 4) and G. Damschen, 'Das lateinische Akrostichon: neue Funde bei Ovid sowie Vergil, Grattius, Manilius und Silius Italicus', *Philologus* 148 (2004), 88–115. Acrostics in Manilius are almost exclusively located in the first book: elsewhere, only SAETA (2.93–7) carries any conviction (see text to n. 10). The last few years have seen a burst of interest in related forms of wordplay in Aratus' other successors: see G. Damschen (this n.); J. Danielewicz, 'Further Hellenistic acrostics. Aratus and others', *Mnemosyne* 58 (2005), 321–34; F. Hurka, 'Ein Akrostichon in Ciceros Aratea (vv. 317–320)', *WJA* 30 (2006), 87–91; J. Katz, 'Vergil translates Aratus: *Phaenomena* 1–2 and *Georgics* 1.1–2', *MD* 60 (2008), 105–23; J. Katz, 'Wordplay', in S.W. Jamison, H.C. Melchert and B. Vine (edd.), *Proceedings of the 20th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference* (Bremen, 2009), 79–114; S. Stewart, '"Apollo of the Shore": Apollonius of Rhodes and the Acrostic Phenomenon', *CQ* 60 (2010), 401–5.

[7] Unlike Germanicus' SPARSV, this sequence has escaped the notice of modern scholars, even, apparently, that of Hilberg (n. 3).

[8] At the request of the anonymous reviewer, I offer the probability of the SPARSV acrostic occurring by chance in both Germanicus and *Astronomica* 1 as one in 8.967×10^8, that is, over 64 times as unlikely as winning the British National Lottery jackpot. To reach this figure one must first calculate the probabilities of the letters S, P, A, R, S, V occurring at the beginning of six consecutive lines anywhere in each text, based on the relative frequency of each letter in line-initial position (roughly 1/40802 and 1/21977 respectively). The probability of the acrostic occurring somewhere in both texts, then, is the product of these two numbers. While it might be more illuminating to give the probability of *any* meaningful six-letter string occurring in both poems, such a calculation is impossible without a comprehensive list of such strings. However, we can note at least that the probability of a single arbitrary six-letter string, meaningful or not, occurring in both texts must still be fairly low, approximating, at most, the two figures given above for the individual texts. This, however, is no reason to doubt that the SPARSV acrostic occurred by chance in Germanicus: as a glance at Hilberg's long catalogue (n. 3) can confirm, it is reasonably likely that any text as long as the *Aratea* will contain at least one meaningful chance acrostic.

[9] The passage sets out to discuss comets, but erroneously conflates them with meteors (see G.P. Goold, *Manilius*: *Astronomica* [Cambridge, MA, 1977], xxxv); note also the particle-based theory of comets expounded directly afterwards (817–25), to which the notion of scattering is equally fitting. Joshua Katz points out to me that the initial letters of the first four words of 813 form the acronym SERO, which could perhaps be intended as a gloss for *spargo*. In doing so Manilius would be following the famous example of Ennius, *moribus antiquis res stat Romana uirisque* (see M. Hendry, 'A Martial acronym in Ennius?', *LCM* 19 [1996], 108–9). However, I have yet to ascertain whether Manilius is engaged elsewhere in this type of wordplay.

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passive form would have made a more intuitive choice than the verbal noun (‘*by* scattering’). Chance, however, had offered a precedent, in the form of Germanicus’ accidental acrostic. The only plausible scenario is that Manilius, a man who likes to seek out meaningful patterns in the apparently random, had noticed the sequence in Germanicus and rehabilitated it in a part of his own poem to which the notion of scattering is more germane. For that to have been possible, Germanicus must have written before Manilius.

The borrowing of the SPARSV acrostic may, in fact, form part of a wider trend in Manilius. Damschen has identified a very similar example at 2.93–7, on the waxing and waning of the moon, where the initial letters spell SAETA, ‘shaggy’.[10] Taken on its own, the word is too far removed from the content to appear deliberate without some sort of earlier prompt. However, a very similar sequence occurs at Aratus, *Phaen*. 778–82 (ΣΑΑΕΤα), also located – significantly – in a passage on the moon, directly before the ΛΕΠΤΗ acrostic at 783–7. It seems, therefore, that Manilius was on the lookout for such peculiarities in his poetic models. Whether there are any further examples must, for the moment, remain to be seen; but sufficient grounds have already been given to have faith in the deliberate borrowing of the SPARSV sequence.

For the first time, an acrostic can provide us with more than just a textual or literary insight. While a number of seemingly insuperable problems still plague the absolute chronology of the poems, the discovery of the borrowed acrostic solves the puzzle of their relative dating: the *Aratea* attributed to Germanicus must already have been available to Manilius before he composed *Astronomica* 1. At last the door is open for a proper analysis of Manilius’ use and imitation of his direct predecessor in the tradition of astronomical poetry.[11]

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[10] Damschen (n. 6), 109 n. 65.
[11] I thank Gregor Damschen, Bruce Gibson, Joshua Katz and Tobias Reinhardt for their comments on drafts of this paper.

TACITUS, *ANNALS* 1.1.1 AND ARISTOTLE

The first sentence of the *Annals* reads *urbem Romam a principio reges habuere*. Commentators observe the echo of Sallust, *Catiline* 6.1 *urbem Romam, sicuti ego accepi, condidere atque habuere initio Troiani*, and of Claudius, *ILS* 212 *quondam reges hanc tenuere urbem*.[1] In a stimulating recent contribution David Levene also compares the first sentence of Justinus’ *Epitome* of the Histories of Pompeius Trogus: *principio rerum gentium nationumque imperium penes reges erat*.[2] A fourth potential model may now be taken into consideration: Ἀθηναῖοι τὸ μὲν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐχρῶντο βασιλείαι.

[1] E. Koestermann, *Cornelius Tacitus, Annales. Band I: Buch 1–3* (Heidelberg, 1963), ad loc.; F.R. D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus 1–6: Annals 1.1–54* (Cambridge, 1972), ad loc.
[2] Just. *Epit*. 1.1.1; D. Levene, ‘Pompeius Trogus in Tacitus’ *Annals*’, in C.S. Kraus, J. Marincola

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