

SYMMETRICAL WORDPLAY IN THE FIRST BOOK OF MANILIUS’
ASTRONOMICA

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Marcus Manilius’ *Astronomica* is one of the earliest extant astrological treatises. Consisting of five books, the work dates at least partly from the reign of Augustus and thus the poet belongs to the last generation of Latin literature’s Golden Age.¹ While the didactic poem attracted little attention until the later twentieth century, especially among English-speaking scholars,² recent scholarship has shed fresh light on the Augustan poet’s literary contributions. Focusing on Manilius’ fondness for the deliberate arrangement of words, this note suggests a further example of wordplay in the didactic poem.

Manilius has been shown to employ more than one form of wordplay. One such is the acrostic, the technique of forming a word from the first letters of successive lines of a poem.³ Already occurring in the last book of the *Iliad*,⁴ acrostics are more typically found among Hellenistic poets such as Aratus, in whose *Phaenomena* Jacques discovered the famous λεπτὴ acrostic.⁵ Manilius imitates Aratus’ poem in the first book of the *Astronomica*, particularly regarding the catalogue of constellations (Man. 1.255–531). The

¹ A.E. Housman’s Augustus-Tiberius theory is challenged by Flores 1960. On the chronological problems of the *Astronomica*, see also Volk 2009:137–61.

² Housman’s splendid edition did not gain the poem a general readership, no doubt due to the fact that it was written in Latin, as Goold rightly notes with regret (Goold 1959:95). On recent Manilian scholarship, see Hübner 1984:132–35. A brief survey of the editorial history from the twentieth century onward is given by Volk 2009:2–3.

³ The most detailed examination of Manilius’ use of the acrostic is by Colborn 2015:113–21; see also Gale 2019. For a general discussion of Greek and Latin acrostic, see Vogt 1967; Courtney 1990; Damschen 2004; Kwapisz *et al.* 2013.

⁴ *Il.* 24.1–5. On this λευκὴ acrostic and its intentionality, see Korenjak 2009.

⁵ [Λ]επτὴ μὲν καθαρὴ τε περὶ τρίτον ἡμᾶρ εὐοῦσα / εὐδιδός κ’ εἴη, λεπτή δὲ καὶ εὖ μάλ’ ἔρευθής / πνευματὴ, παχίων δὲ καὶ ἀμβλείησι κεραταῖς / τέτρατον ἕκ τριτάτοιο φῶως ἀμενηνὸν ἔχουσα / ἢ νότω ἀμβλυνταὶ ἢ ὕδατος ἐγγυὸς ἐόντος. ‘If slender and clear about the third day, she will bode fair weather; if slender and very red, wind; if the crescent is thickish, with blunted horns, having a feeble fourth-day light after the third day, either it is blurred by a southerly or because rain is in the offing.’ (Aratus *Phaen.* 783–87, tr. Kidd 1997); see Jacques 1960; Kidd 1997:445–46.

most interesting example occurs in lines 796–99, in which a proper name in the vocative case is spelled by the initial letters of the subsequent lines (Man. 1.796–99):⁶

... et Claudi magna propago,
Aemiliaeque domus proceres, clarique Metelli,
et Cato fortunae victor, fictorque sub armis
miles Agrippa suae, Venerisque ab origine proles
Iulia.

Here is the great line of Claudius; the leading members of the Aemilian house, and the famed Metelli. Here are Cato and Agrippa, who proved in arms the one the master, the other the maker of his destiny; and the Julian who boasted descent from Venus.⁷

Another technique was pointed out by MacGregor, in which the poet repeats the same words at regular intervals: in Man. 5.161–70, for instance, the word *ille* is deliberately and regularly repeated four times.⁸ While MacGregor considers this ‘tetractys pattern’ to be evidence of Pythagorean sources in the *Astronomica*, it seems more likely that this rhythmical word-patterning reflects the lively movement of children born under Lepus, an extra-zodiacal constellation rising with Gemini. Like acrostics, the technique belongs to Hellenistic literary aesthetics and shows that Manilius was not only well acquainted with ludic word-arrangement, but also keen to apply it in his poem.

While scholars have tended to concentrate on word-patterning at the start of verses, an examination of word arrangements at verse ends also yields an instance of symmetrical wordplay in the *Astronomica* that has thus far gone unnoticed. In the first book, Manilius describes the structure of the universe. After a brief doxography on the origins of the universe (Man. 1.118–254), he enumerates the constellations. Having listed the twelve zodiacal signs, Manilius precedes a catalogue of the northern constellations with an argument concerning the polar axis, which he explains as follows (Man. 1.285–93):

nec vero solidus stat robore corporis *axis*
nec grave pondus habet, quod onus ferat aetheris alti,
sed cum aer omnis semper volvatur *in orbem*

⁶ For this acrostic, see Feraboli *et al.* 1996:xviii–xix.

⁷ The text and translation of the *Astronomica* used in this paper are those of Goold 1977.

⁸ MacGregor 2005:59–65.

quoque semel coepit totus volet undique *in ipsum*,
 quodcumque in medio est, circa quod cuncta *moventur*,
 usque adeo tenue ut verti non possit *in ipsum*
 nec iam inclinari nec se convertere *in orbem*,
 hoc dixere *axem*, quia motum non habet ullum
 ipse, videt circa volitantia cuncta moveri.

Yet the axis is not solid with the hardness of matter, nor does it possess massive weight such as to bear the burden of the lofty firmament; but since the entire atmosphere ever revolves in a circle, and every part of the whole rotates to the place from which it once began, that which is in the middle, about which all moves, so insubstantial that it cannot turn round upon itself or even submit to motion or spin in circular fashion, this men have called the axis, since, motionless itself, it yet sees everything spinning about it.

Colborn has already noted that *in ipsum* in 290 corresponds to *in ipsum* in 288,⁹ but it is also part of another, more deliberate, wordplay. The last words of line 291 (*in orbem*) echo the end of line 287 (*in orbem*),¹⁰ so that line 289 functions as the axis between these two pairs of verses just as the polar axis, according to this schema, is located at the centre of the universe.

That this symmetrical structure is not coincidental is supported by the fact that the *Astronomica* can be read as a textual mirror of the universe. First, Manilius often makes the description (*signifiant*) correspond with its subject (*signifié*). For instance, the following hyperbaton in the Andromeda episode is used for that purpose (Man. 5.598–600):¹¹

sed, quantum illa subit, semper, iaculata profundo,
in tantum revolat laxumque per aethera ludit
Perseus et ceti subeuntis verberat ora.

But, as much as it rises hurtling up from the deep, always so much does Perseus fly higher and mock the sea-beast through the yielding air and strike its head as it attacks.

⁹ ‘Here *in ipsum* presumably serves only to echo 288 (which ends with the same words), drawing the reader’s attention to the contrast between the sky, which does turn (287f.), and the axis, which cannot.’ Colborn 2015:246–47.

¹⁰ Furthermore, *axis* in 285 may be loosely related to *axem* in 292.

¹¹ See Housman 1930:76 for further examples of Manilius’ hyperbaton.

Here the entangled word order underlines the surging battle between Perseus and Cetus.¹² Furthermore, as a recent Manilian study argues, the poet also draws an analogy between his poem and the universe (*mundus*).¹³ Colborn has rightly interpreted the *Astronomica* as a textual representation of the universe,¹⁴ and stated that Manilius uses ‘wordplay to highlight the balancing of forces on which the universe’s regularity and stability depend’.¹⁵ Indeed, in the proem of the first book, Manilius says ‘at two shrines I make my prayer, beset with a twofold passion, for my song and for its theme’ (*ad duo templa precor duplici circumdatus aestu / carminis et rerum*, Man. 1.21–22) [emphasis added], and states that he sings according to ‘a fixed measure’ (*certa cum lege*, Man. 1.22) of both the metrical rule and of the music from the celestial sphere. Thus, the *axis* wordplay noted in lines 285–93 of Book 1 may be read as representing the spherical and therefore symmetrical structure of the universe, and so harmonizes perfectly with Manilius’ poetic cosmology.

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¹² We can also find similar correspondences between *signifiant* and *signifié* in Lucretius, one of Manilius’ most important predecessors: *ipsam seque retro partem petere ore priorem / vulneris ardenti ut morsu premat icta dolore* (Lucr. 3.662–63, the complicated word order describes the mutilated body of a snake); *is quoque enim duplici geminoque fit aere visus* (4.274, explaining the mechanism of the reflection in a mirror). On the former, see Kenney 2014:161; on the latter, Godwin 1986:110.

¹³ See especially Volk 2002:234–45; 2009:195–96.

¹⁴ Colborn 2015:107–28.

¹⁵ Colborn 2015:107.

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