TRANSLATION AND CANONIZATION OF TEXTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE LATIN RENDITIONS OF ARATUS’ PHAENOMENA

MARÍA GABRIELA CERRA
Universidad Nacional del Sur
gabriela.cerra@uns.edu.ar

The present article discusses how linguistic and stylistic considerations are significant and even critical to the acceptance, survival, and ultimately to the canonical status of literary works. The choice of subject, style and the translation process are factors which influenced the status and fate of many literary compositions. We use this criterion to examine the case of Aratus’ Phaenomena, one of the most successful poems of antiquity. Our paper focuses on how the survival and popularity of Aratus’ poem were affected by its being translated into Latin by Cicero, Germanicus and Avienus.

canonization / translation / commentary / Aratus / astronomy

TRADUCCIÓN Y CANONIZACIÓN DE TEXTOS CON ESPECIAL REFERENCIA A LAS TRADUCCIONES LATINAS DE LOS PHAENOMENA DE ARATO

El presente artículo discute de qué modo consideraciones lingüísticas y estilísticas son significativas o incluso críticas para la aceptación, la supervivencia y en última instancia para el status canónico de una obra literaria. La elección del tema, el estilo y los procesos de traducción son factores que influenciaron el status y la suerte de muchas composiciones literarias. Usamos este criterio para examinar el caso de los Phaenomena de Arato, uno de los poemas más exitosos de la antigüedad. Nuestro artículo analiza de qué modo las traducciones de Cicerón, Germánico y Avieno contribuyeron a su popularidad y supervivencia.

canonización / traducción / comentario / Arato / astronomía

1 A Hebrew version of this article was published in: BEN-SASSON, BRODY, LIEBLICH, SHALEV (2010: 332-350).
The most significant example of a Greek literary work that immediately after its publication became one of the most successful poems of antiquity is provided by the *Phaenomena* written by Aratus of Soli in 4th-3rd century B.C. The *Phaenomena*, “Things Seen in the Sky”, including an Appendix on weather-signs, the *Prognostica*, is the only surviving poem of Aratus’ literary oeuvre, but the continuously renewed interest aroused by it kept Aratus’ name alive until the 13th century. Aratus’ *Phaenomena* was incessantly commented on, and translated into Latin by Cicero in the 1st century B.C., Germanicus in the 1st century A.D., and Avienus in the 4th century A.D. Virgil also follows closely a passage of Aratus’ *Prognostica* (*Phaen.* 909–941) in the *Georgica*, 1.356–382 (see Appendix examples 12 and 16).

The *Phaenomena* is a poetic reworking comprising 1200 hexameters of a prose astronomic treatise written in Greek in the 4th century B.C. by Eudoxus of Cnidus (ca. 390–340). Eudoxus’ *Phaenomena*, a description of the constellations with calendric notices of rising and setting, survives only in fragments cited by Greek Hellenistic commentators like Hipparchus in his *Commentary on the Phaenomena of Aratus and Eudoxus* (2nd century B.C., see Appendix examples 6 and 7). In astronomy Eudoxus was the first Greek to construct a mathematical system to explain the motion of the heavenly bodies. His geometric model of rotating celestial spheres have come to our knowledge mainly through Aristotle’s account of it in his *Metaphysica* (1073b–1074a).

The basic theme of Aratus’ *Phaenomena* is how to recognize the different constellations and interpret weather signs for the benefit of seafarers and farmers. In detail, the first part is a description of the heavenly bodies, their names and celestial positions. Aratus gives a detailed description of the astronomical system of Eudoxus but, not being himself an astronomer,

*cum sole et luna semper Aratus erit*

(Ov. *Am.* 1. 15. 16)

“As long as the sun and the moon Aratus live on”

(Transl. Showerman, 1921)

---

2 The rest of Aratus’ compositions, a *Hymn to Pan*, some poems mainly on medical subjects, and a collection of trifles, are lost.


4 According to the biographical tradition found in Diogenes Laertius 8.86–91, Eudoxus studied geometry with the Pythagorean Archytas. When he was about 23 years old he came to Athens to hear the Socratics, later he spent time in Egypt studying astronomy with the priests. In a second visit to Athens he had the opportunity to discuss his astronomical model with both Plato and Aristotle.
commits a number of mistakes, which the ancient commentators conversant with astronomy singled out and corrected by comparison with Eudoxus’ prose original. The second part, also known as the Prognostica, deals with how animals and nature foretell weather changes, and is in all probability based on a specialist source, On weather signs, transmitted under the name of Theophrastus (4th-3rd century B.C.).

The success of Aratus’ Phaenomena: features in the text

Formally, the Phaenomena follows the general plan of Hesiodus’ Works and Days. In the proem, a hymn to Zeus as the establisher of reliable signs in the sky for the benefit of mankind, we recognize the rational divine providence of the Stoics, and indeed one verse is actually quoted from the stoic Cleanthes’ Hymn to Zeus (331–233 B.C., cf. n. 17). Instead of presenting Zeus as the relentless, unpredictable weather-god of Hesiod’s Works and days, Aratus adjusts his cosmology to the philosophic and religious atmosphere of his time.

In general, Aratus’ poem rests on solid epic tradition in borrowing his poetic language and verse meter from Homer, and laying thereby a claim to general validity. On the other hand, the language of the Phaenomena is updated by the use of forms from the Attic dialect and enriched by the author’s own coinages.

Hellenistic sophistication

At the same time, Aratus’ small-scale epic poem follows the poetics of graceful style and of ‘trifles’ of the Neoteric poets, peppering the technical description of constellations with miniature myths. By presenting facts and theories in a new light that bore the mark of the Alexandrian school, Aratus sets his poem within a contemporary frame of reference; and indeed we find some points of contact between Aratus’ Phaenomena and Callimachus’ astronomical poem, the Lock of Berenice (3rd century B.C.). Aratus’ poem won the approval of Neoterics like Callimachus and Leonidas mainly for the ‘fineness’ or ‘subtleness’ of his style:

Ἡσιόδου τό τ’ ἄεισμα καὶ ὅτρόπος· οὐ τὸν ἀοιδῶν ἔσχατον, ἀλλ’ ὀκνέω μὴ τὸ μελιχρότατον τῶν ἐπέων ὁ Σολεὺς ἀπεμάξατο. χαίρετε, λεπταὶ ῥήσιες, Ἀρήτου σύμβολον ἀγρυπνίης,

(Call. Anthologia Palatina, 9.507)
The rhythm and the manner are Hesiod’s. He of Soli (scil. Aratus) took as a model not the worst of the poets, but, I am afraid, the most honeyed of his verses. Hail! delicate phrases, the monument of Aratus’ sleepless nights.

(Transl. Paton, The Greek Anthology, 1916, III.507)

Γράμμα τόδ’ Ἀρήτοιο δαήμονος, ὃς ποτε λεπτῇ

φροντίδι δηναιοὺς ἀστέρας ἐφράσατο,

ἀπλανέας τ’ ἀμφω καὶ ἀλήμονας, οἰσιν ἐναργῆς

ιλλόμενος κύκλως οὐρανὸς ἐνδέδεται.

αἰνείσθω δὲ καμὼν ἔρον μέγα, καὶ Διὸς εἶναι
dεύτερος, ὅστις ἐθηκ’ ἀστρα φαεινότερα, Leon.

(Anthologia Palatina, 9.25).

“This is the book of learned Aratus, whose subtle mind explored the long-lived stars, both the fixed stars and the planets with which the bright revolving heaven is set. Let us praise him for the great task at which he toiled; let us count him second to Zeus in that he made the stars brighter.”

(Transl. Paton, The Greek Anthology, III.25)

There is an analogy lurking behind Aratus’ ‘subtle’ poetic language and the subject matter of his poem, i.e. the divine order of the cosmos:

πάντα γὰρ οὖπω

ἐκ Διὸς ἄνθρωποι γινώσκομεν, ἀλλ’ ἔτι πολλὰ
kέκρυπται, τῶν αἱ κε θέλη καὶ ἐσαυτίκα δώσει

Ζεὺς ὁ γὰρ οὖν γενειήν ἄνδρον ἀναφανδὸν ὰφέλλει

πάντοθεν εἰδόμενος, πάντη δ’ ὅ γε σήματα φαίνων,

(Phaen.768–772)

For we men do not yet have knowledge of everything from Zeus, but much still is hidden, whereof Zeus, if he wishes, will give us signs anon; he certainly does benefit the human race openly, showing himself on every side, and everywhere displaying his signs.

In the same way as Zeus displays signs that may reveal to the observer the hidden patterns of the universe, the poet leaves traces that invite us to search for hidden patterns in the verbal arrangement of his poem. In the verse that follows, Aratus forebodes that “some things the moon will tell you” (Ἄλλα δὲ τοι ἐρέει ἤ που διχώσα σελήνη, Phaen.773). Thus, Aratus refers to the moon not only as a sign for undisclosed phaenomena in nature but also as a clue for discovering the acrostic hidden in verses 783–787. The initials forming the Greek word λεπτή, ‘fine’, ‘light’, are an imitation of
the acrostic pattern found in Homer with the word λευκή, ‘light’, ‘white’ (ll. 24.1–5), and has the secondary purpose of highlighting the Alexandrian ideal of poetic style:

Λεπτὴ μὲν καθαρή τε περὶ τρίτον ἠμαρ ἐσόσα
Εὐδιός κ’ εἰη, λεπτῇ δὲ καὶ εὐ μάλ’ ἐρευθής
Πνευματιὴ παχίων δὲ καὶ ἀμβλεῖσθι κεραίαις
Τέτραττον ἐκ τριτάτοιο φῶς ἀμενηνὸν ἔχουσα
’Η νότου ἀμβλύνετ’ ἡ ὕδατος ἐγγὺς ἐόντος.

(the moon) If fine and clear about the third day, she will bode fair weather, if fine 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.

(Adapted from Kidd’s translation, 1997).

The success of Aratus: beyond the text

All these features contributed to the immediate success of Aratus’ Phaenomena also beyond the circle of educated Hellenistic readers, and in fact the earliest papyrus that has come to our hands with fragments from Aratus’ Phaenomena is an anthology, in all likelihood used as an elementary handbook on astronomy at school, from the 2nd century B.C. (P.Hamb. 121). An artistic description of the constellations, which is less difficult and more entertaining reading than its scientific source, presented in a didactic manner and in the Homeric verse form, suited the purpose of aiding the memory of the students to learn an otherwise arid topic.

---

5 The acrostic passage was discovered by Jacques (1960: 48–61).

6 Aratus, unlike Eudoxus, presents the whole astronomic description from the point of view of the observer, turning his attention to the different constellations by means of second-person addresses, e.g.: ‘Impressive is the Bear and impressive are the stars near her: once you have sighted them, you do not need any other guide’ (transl. Kidd, 1997) versus Eudoxus’ Πρὸ δὲ τῶν ἐμπροσθίων ποδῶν τῆς Ἀρκτού ἀστήρ ἐστι λαμπρὸς, Eudox. fr. 28 (Lasserre): “before the Bear’s fore-feet there is a brighter star”. Aratus’ advice on sailing and farming given in the tone of a schoolmaster clearly follows the Hesiodic model of didactic epic: κλῦθι ἰδὼν ἀίων τε, δίκῃ δ’ ἴθυνε θέμιστας / τύνη· ἐγὼ δέ κε Πέρση ἐτήτυμα μυθησαίμην, Hes., Op., 9–10: “Attend you with eye and ear, and make judgements straight with righteousness. And I, Perses, would tell of true things” (transl. Evelyn-White, 1977).
Aratus was not the first Greek author to undertake the poetic reworking of a scientific prose treatise\(^7\), but the tremendous success of his *Phaenomena* and *Prognostica* doomed an immense body of didactic poetry on astronomy and meteorology to oblivion. Two Greek didactic epic poems written by his later contemporary Nicander of Colophon (2\(^{\text{nd}}\) century B.C.) survived, the *Theriaca* (958 verses) and *Alexipharmaca* (630 verses) dealing with the treatment of bites of poisonous animals and with the treatment of food poisoning, respectively\(^8\). Analogously to the technical source of Aratus’ work, these are based on medical prose texts on vegetable and animal poisons of one Apollodorus (3\(^{\text{rd}}\) century B.C.). Aratus’ influence upon Nicander may be detected in his use of an acrostic bearing his signature, ΝΙΚΑΝΔΡΟΣ, in a highly ornamental mythological passage (Nicander, *Ther.* 345–353), and in his adoption of some of the lexical innovations of the former\(^9\).

Only against the background of Nicander’s tedious handling of the poetically intractable subject of poisonous animals and herbal remedies against their bites, overloaded with impenetrable technical vocabulary (printed in caps in the following passage), can one fully appreciate the magnificent achievement of Aratus’ poem:

Now will I distinguish between each one of the remedies for these afflictions. You should take at one time the leaves, like wild-lettuce, of *alkanet*, at another *potentilla*, or the crimson flowers of the *bramble*; *bearwort*, *sorrel*, and the long-stemmed *viper’s herb*, *cicamentum*, the luxuriant

---

\(^7\) A precursor to this Alexandrian didactic epic on scientific subjects can be found in Menecrates of Ephesus (born 340 B.C.), Aratus’ teacher and the author of two poems on agriculture and apiculture, most probably written in the manner of Hesiod, and of a poem on astronomy.

\(^8\) Cf. Gow-Scholfield (1953).

\(^9\) As for example the poetic superlative θερείτατος, ‘hottest’, for the prosaic form θερινός, attested only in Aratus and Nicander: ἦτοι ὅτ’ ἡλίου θερείτατο ἵσταται ἀκτίς, Nic. *Ther.* 469: “At the hour when the sun’s rays are at their hottest” (transl. Gow-Scholfield); ἐνθά μὲν ἡλίου θερείταται ἐστὶ κέλευθοι, Arat. *Phaen.* 149: “This is where the sun’s track is hottest” (transl. Kidd).
HARTWORT, and you may well include GROUND-PINE and thick bark which you have broken off from the OAK TREE; with them too HEDGE-PARSLEY, and seed gathered from the carrot, and the fresh and variegated fruits from the TEREBINTH.

(Transl. Gow-Scholfield, 1953).

Furthermore, from the didactic point of view, whereas the reader of Aratus’ Phaenomena may obtain some practical information on astronomy and weather-signs for sailing and farming, no victim of a snake-bite or poison would dare to consult Nicander’ heroic menagerie of venomous animals for medical first-aid, cf. e.g.:

αὐτὰρ ὁ κάμνων
ἀλλοτε μὲν διψη φάρυγα ξηραίνεται αὖ,
pollaki d’ ἐξ ὀνύχων ἵσχει κρύος, ἀμφὶ δὲ γυίοις
χειμερίῃ ξαλώσα τερε βέβοιθε χάλαζα.
pollaki d’ αὖ χολόεται ἀπήρυγε νηδύος ὄγκους
ὡχραίνων δέμας ἀμφὶς- ὁ δὲ νυτέων περὶ γυίοις
ψυχρότερος νιφετοῖο βολῆς περιχεύεται ἱδρώς.

(Nic., Thé. 249–255)

Meantime the sufferer at one moment has his throat parched with dry thirst, often too he is seized with cold from the finger-tips, while an eruption with wintry rage lies heavy upon his whole skin. And again a man often vomits up the bile from upon his stomach and turns pallid all over his body and, while a moist sweat, colder than a falling snow, envelops his limbs.

(Transl. Gow-Scholfield, 1953)

The inclusion of Aratus’ Phaenomena in the school syllabus is perhaps connected with the variety, already in the 2nd century B.C., of commentaries on the Phaenomena, which have been transmitted to us in fragments and scholia: Attalus, Commentariorum in Aratum reliquiae; Hipparchus, Arati et Eudoxi Phaenomena; and Boethus Sidon (Stoicorum veterum fragmenta, III. 6, pp. 265–267). The grammarian Attalus and the astronomer Hipparchus compare Aratus with Eudoxus’ work in trying to decide on astronomical and textual problems. The Stoic Boethus, who wrote a commentary in at least four books on Aratus’ Phaenomena, from which only a few fragments have been handed down to us, was probably more interesting in philosophic and religious questions. An Alexandrian collection of the scholia on Aratus’ Phaenomena ascribed to Theon was published most probably in the 1st century B.C. The impressive amount of scholia on Aratus’ Phaenomena transmitted to us —comparable only with that written on
Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—bears witness to the immediate appreciation of Aratus’ work in Alexandria. Copies from Aratus’ text were presumably made in the great Library itself in order to preserve the work for posterity. This would explain the early provenance of the papyrus aforementioned (*P.Hamb.* 121, 2nd century B.C.), as well as of two other papyri from the 1st century A.D., three more from the 3rd century and two from the 4th century. The Greek historians Posidonius (2nd-1st century B.C.) and Diodorus (1st century B.C.) were probably the authors of two lost commentaries on Aratus’ *Phaenomena*. The Greek astronomer Geminus (1st century B.C.) writes an *Introduction to the Phaenomena* with particular regard to difficult technical passages in Aratus’ work, possibly to be used as an elementary manual at school. In the 3rd century B.C. the Greek astronomer Achilles wrote an introduction to cosmology, collecting material from a great range of poets and philosophers, including Aratus. The section referring to Aratus appears quoted in a manuscript from the 13th-14th century A.C. (*Vaticanus* 1910) as an introduction to the *Phaenomena*, although it was not written as a preface to any specific author.

*Latin translations of Greek literary works*

Translations from Greek into Latin in Classical Antiquity represent an unique case in the history of translations, in that the Latin translations were not born from any need of the Roman readers for a Latin version of the Greek sources —since any educated Roman had fluent command of the Greek language,— but for the purpose of developing the Latin language as a scientific and artistic language through the studied adaptation and imitation of Greek models. The history of the reception of Greek literature by the Romans began in the 3rd century B.C. with Livius Andronicus’ *Odusia* (translated fragments from Homer’s *Odyssey*). This translation marks the first attempt to convert the Latin language into a literary language that measures up to the *Kunstsprache* and generic conventions of Greek literature. On the one hand, the Roman authors took account of the Greek literature and literary language, which they recognized as superior. On the other hand, they were conscious of what they called *patrii sermonis egestas*, “the poverty of the mother tongue” (Lucr. 3.260) and tried to enrich it through the imitation of Greek models. Lucretius emphasizes the need of coining new words in Latin “due to the poverty of the language and the novelty of the subject matter” (*propter egestatem linguae et rerum nouitatem*, Lucr. 1.139).

---

The striving to conquer all the scientific and poetic domains, which were under Greek power, through translation and imitation, is especially notorious in the massive engagement of linguistic innovators such as Cicero, Lucretius and Ovidius in the creation of Latin calques from the Greek, i.e. semantic close copies of Greek terms built from Latin components. Illustrative of this conscious linguistic innovation through the practice of translation as a rhetorical exercise is Cicero’s commentary in De oratore, 1.155:

Postea mihi placuit, eoque sum usus adulescens, ut summorum oratorum Graecas orationes explicarem, quibus lectis hoc adsequeram, ut, cum ea, quae legeram Graece, Latine redderem, non solum optimis uerbis uterer et tamen ustitatis, sed etiam exprimerem quaedam uerba imitando, quae noua nostris essent, dum modo essent idonea.

Afterwards I resolved — and this practice I followed when somewhat older — to translate freely Greek speeches of the most eminent orators. The result of reading these was that, in rendering into Latin what I had read in Greek, I not only found myself using the best words — and yet quite familiar ones — but also coining by analogy certain words such as would be new to our people, provided only they were appropriate.

(Transl. Sutton, 1948)

In his philosophical translations and treatises Cicero enriched the Latin language with numerous intellectual neologisms, some of which have become permanently established. Sometimes we are able to follow the process of lexical innovation, which in the end led to the canonization of one of the Latin candidates and the discarding of other translational equivalents. Thus, for example, for the Greek Epicurean term πρόληψις, ‘preconception’ (the mental picture or scheme into which experience is fitted), Lucretius proposes notities (from notus, ‘known’), whereas Cicero hesitates between praenotio (from praegnoscre, ‘to know beforehand’), praesentire (from praesentio, ‘to perceive beforehand’ [with the senses]), and anticipatio (from anticipare, ‘to apprehend beforehand’). The rejection of Latin neologisms proposed for Greek technical terms is founded either on morphological difficulty —the form of the word is unusual— or semantic ambiguity —the sense of

---

the word is inexact. Cicero’s commentary on a neologism proposed by his friend Atticus furnishes an illustrative case of a translational equivalent discarded due to its semantic imprecision:

‘inhibere’ illud tuum, quod ualde mihi adriserat, uehementer displicet. Est enim uerbum totum nauticum. Quamquam id quidem sciebam sed arbitrabar sustineri remos cum inhibere essent remiges iussi. Id non esse eius modi didici heri cum ad uillam nostram naus appellaretur. Non enim sustinent sed alio modo remigant. Id ab ἐποχῇ remotissimum est. Qua re facies ut ita sit in libro quem ad modum fuit. Dices hoc idem Varroni, si forte mutauit.

(Cic. Att. 13.21.3)

the word inhibere suggested by you, which at first took my fancy very much, I strongly disapprove of now. For it is exclusively a nautical word. That, however, I knew before; but I thought rowers rested on their oars, when told to inhibere. Yesterday, when a ship put in by my house, I learned that was not so. They do not rest on their oars, they back water. That is very different to the Greek epoché (‘suspension of judgment’). So change the word back to what it was in the book (sc. Cic. Ac. 2.94), and tell Varro to do the same, if he has altered it.

(Transl. Winstedt, 1963)

Latin translations of Aratus’ Phaenomena

In the 1st century B.C. Aratus became popular also in Rome as is evinced by the translations written by Cicero (see Appendix examples 7 and 8) and

Quintilian’s discussion of Latin coinages for Greek rhetoric and philosophic terms illustrates these two main reasons for the ephemeralism of some of these neologisms: Rhetoricien in Latinum transferentes tum oratoriam, tum oratricem nominauerunt... sed non omnia nos ducentes ex Graeco secuntur, sicut ne illos quidem quotiens utique suis uerbis signare nostra vooluerunt. Et haec interpretatio non minus dura est quam illa Plauti ‘essentia’ et ‘queentia’, sed ne propria quidem; nam oratoria sic effertur ut elocutoria, oratrix ut elocutrix, illa autem de qua loquimur rhetorice talis est qualis eloquentia. Nec dubie apud Graecos quoque duplicem intellectum habet (Quint. Inst. 2.14.1–5): “Rhētoricē is a Greek term which has been translated into Latin by oratoria or oratrix... but translations from Greek into Latin do not always succeed, just as the attempt to represent Latin words in a Greek dress is sometimes equally unsuccessful. And the translations in question are fully as harsh as the essentia and queentia of Plautus (scil. the philosopher), and have not even the merit of being exact. For oratoria is formed like elocutoria and oratrix like elocutrix, whereas the rhetoric with which we are concerned is rather to be identified with eloquentia, and the word is undoubtedly used in two senses by the Greek” (transl. Butter, 1920).
Varro Atacinus (from Varro’s version only 10 verses corresponding to Aratus’ *Phaenomena*, 938–939, 942–945, and 954–957 have survived). Virgil imitates both Aratus’ *Phaenomena* and Hesiod’s *Works and days* in the *Georgics*, with a subject change from astronomy and weather to agriculture and animal husbandry (see Appendix examples 12, 13, 14 and 16). Literary charm, rather than accuracy of the astronomical content, seems to be what drew Cicero’s attention to the *Phaenomena* (cf. Cicero’s germane reason for translating Greek authors as a rhetorical exercise in *De oratore*, 1.155):

Etenim si constat inter doctos, hominem ignarum astrologiae ornatissimis atque optimis uersibus Aratum de caelo stellisque dixisse ... quid est cur non orator de rebus eis eloquentissime dicat, quas ad certam causam tempusque cognorit?

(Cic.* de Orat.* 1.69)

For if the learned world is agreed that Aratus, though quite ignorant of astronomy, has composed a most eloquent and artistic poem on the heavens and the stars ... why should not the orator be able to speak with the eloquence of a master on subjects which he has only studied for a particular case and occasion?

(Transl. Sutton, 1948)

Cicero’s *Aratea* is not a free adaptation like those of his Roman predecessors in the art of literary translation —Ennius’ *Annales* and tragedies recasting Greek sources from Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; or Plautus’ and Terence’s reworkings of Menander’s comedies—, but rather the *Aratea* is a close version of the Greek original. However, this faithfulness to the source should be understood in a wider context. Cicero does not pretend to give an exact image of Aratus’ text through a word-by-word rendition, but to produce a new Latin composition enjoyable on its own merit. His purpose, and the purpose of Roman translators in general, is driven by an additional agenda: to defeat the Greeks on their own ground by conquering each genre through literary talent and innovation.

---


14 Thus, for example, recalling a popular saying versified by Euripides in *Hel.* 665 (ἡδύ τοι μόχθων κλύειν, “to hear of trouble past is a pleasure” [transl. Kovaks, 2002]), Cicero supports his intentions of outdoing his Greek source: *uligo enim dicitur: ‘iucundi acti labores’, nec male Euripides — concludam, si potero, Latine: Graecum enim hunc uersum nostis omnes* (*Fin.* 2. 105): “There is a popular saying to the effect that ‘Toil is pleasant
Germanicus’ Latin translation of Aratus’ *Phaenomena* (15 B.C–A.D 19) is concerned not only with its style, but also with the scientific accuracy of the content. Unlike his Roman predecessor Cicero, Germanicus corrects the astronomic information of the Greek original with the aid of the Greek commentaries and scholia. He also supplements his model with information drawn from astronomical globes and illustrations, derived from illustrated manuscripts of Aratus.

Avienus’ Latin translation of Aratus’ *Phaenomena* in the 4th century manifests a strictly literary rather than scientific interest in Aratus’ work (see Appendix examples 7–10).

The *Aratus Latinus*, a version of the *Phaenomena* by an anonymous author in France was translated probably in the 8th century. It is a word for word translation but the Latin is often unintelligible due to the misinterpretation of Greek words; Greek was less widely and thoroughly known in this later period. The purpose of the Latin version was probably only to “explain” the Greek text and to propose conjectures to unfamiliar Greek words, which are sometimes simply transliterated or omitted.

The interest in Aratus’ work continues in fact up to the end of the 13th century, when the Byzantine scholar Planudes revises the scholia and the text of Aratus’ *Phaenomena*, and rewrites in Greek and emends a difficult passage of 32 verses dealing with celestial circles. In addition we count 14 codices of Aratus’ text from the 13th to the 16th century, two of which (*Vaticanus Gr. 191 and 381*) contain a register of 27 authors who wrote about Aratus’ *Phaenomena*.

**Evidence from the New Testament**

From a quotation by the apostle Paul of the fifth verse of Aratus’ *Phaenomena* in his speech in the Areopagus of Athens in *Acts* 17:28 we may assume that the *Phaenomena* was widely read by educated Greek speakers of his day. Paul’s literal citation in an oral message suggests a familiarity, even a rote knowledge, of the opening lines of Aratus, possibly from his schooldays. Furthermore, Paul’s use of a verse from Aratus’ in order to support his position before a Greek erudite audience attests to the popularity and to the religious and philosophical authority which this poem enjoyed in antiquity especially in the Greek and the Roman cultural spheres:

> when it is over’; and Euripides writes not bad (I will attempt a verse translation in Latin; the Greek line is known to you all)” (adapted from Rackham’s translation, 1951).


As testified by Lesky (1971: 752).
For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring (King James) (= Arat. Phaen. 5: “For we are also his children”)

Aratus probably never intended to make a serious contribution to astronomical and philosophic literature, or to write a manual for use at school. His artistic objective was rather to produce an aesthetically pleasing poem. In singing of the stars and of nature from the point of view of the new astronomical and Stoic theories of his time, and presenting it in the traditional costume of the Hesiodic didactic epic and in the refined, sophisticated, style of Alexandrian poetry, Aratus creates for his poem an “everlasting charm”. The beauty of his subject, the splendor of the starry sky, has clearly been a source of inspiration for Aratus’ verbal art. Amusingly, the astronomer Hipparchus (2nd century B.C) blames this ‘grace’ or ‘charm’ (χάρις) of Aratus’ verses for their success in convincing people of the truth of their content:

Since the charm of [Aratus’] verses bestows certain trustworthiness upon the things said. And nearly all those interpreting this poet agree with the things said by him.

Hipparchus’ censure based on scientific grounds is in fact reminiscent, after the playful Hellenistic fashion, of Pindar’s personification of Charis in the Olympian Odes 1.30:

Χάρις δ’, ἀπερ ἀπαντα τεύχει τὰ μείλιχα θνατοῖς,
ἐπιφέροισα τιμὰν καὶ ἄπιστον ἐμῇσατο πιστὸν
ἐμμεναι τὸ πολλάκις·

17 Aratus recalls both a verse from Cleanthes’ Hymn to Zeus (4th-3th century B.C.), v. 4: έκ σού γάρ γενός ἐσμέν, and less directly two verses from Homer,έκ γαρ ἐμεύ γένος ἐσσί, Il. 5.896, and έκ θεώριν γένος ἦν, Il. 23.347, but Paul’s literal citation comes from Aratus’ Phaenomena.
For Charis, who fashions all things pleasant for mortals, by bestowing honor makes even what is unbelievable often believed.

Appendix

Conspectus of astronomical parallel passages

Astronomical description became a theme for poetry long before it evolved into a subject of scientific investigation. According to the evidence found in the Homeric texts five constellations impressed the ancients by their brilliancy and magnificence: the Pleiades, the Hyades, Orion, the Bear, and Hesperus, the evening star:

(1) Homer, Il. 18. 483–489 (description of Achilles’ shield):

Ἐν μὲν γαῖαν ἔτευξ’, ἐν δ’ οὐρανόν, ἐν δὲ θάλασσαν,
ἡέλιον τ’ ἀκάμαντα σελήνην τε πλήθουσαν,
ἐν δὲ τὰ τείρεα πάντα, τὰ τ’ οὐρανὸς ἐστεφάνωται,
Πληϊάδας θ’ Ὑάδας τε τό τε σθένος Ὠρίωνος
Ἄρκτον θ’, ἣν καὶ Ἄμαξαν ἐπίκλησιν καλέουσιν,
ἥ τ’ αὐτοῦ στρέφεται καί τ’ Ὠρίωνα δοκεύει,
οἴη δ’ ἀμμοφός ἐστι λοετρῶν Ὀκεανοίο.

Therein he (scil. Hephaestus) wrought the earth, therein the heavens, therein the sea, and the unwearied sun, and the moon at the full, therein all the constellations wherewith heaven is crowned — the Pleiades, and the Hyades and the mighty Orion, and the Bear, that men call also the Wain, that circles ever in her place and watches Orion, and alone has no part in the baths of Ocean.

(Transl. Murray, 1999)

(2) Homer, Il. 22.318:

οἷος δ' ἀστήρ εἰσὶ μετ' ἀστράσι νυκτὸς ἀμολύγῳ
ἔσπερος, ὁ κάλλιστος ἐν οὐρανῷ ἱσταται ἀστήρ

As a star goes forth amid stars in the darkness of night, the Hesperus (i.e. the star of evening), that is set in heaven as the fairest of all

(Transl. Murray, 1999)
(3) Homer, Od. 5.270–275:

and he (scil. Odysseus) sat and guided his raft skillfully with the steering oar, nor did sleep fall upon his eyelids, as he watched the Pleiades, and late-setting Boötes, and the Bear, which men also call the Wain, which ever circles where it is and watches Orion, and alone has no part in the baths of the Ocean.

To this stock of astronomic lore Hesiod adds the names of the Sirius and Arcturus:

(4) Hesiod, Op. 609–611:

but when Orion and Sirius came into midheaven, and rosy-fingered Dawn sees Arcturus, then cut off all the grape-clusters, Perses, and bring them home.

(Transl. Evelyn-While, 1943)

(5) Hesiod, Op. 614–617:

But when the Pleiades and Hyades and strong Orion begin to set, then remember that this is the plowing season
(6) Eudoxus’s scientific description of the Pleiades in his prose work, *Phaenomena* fr. 35–36 (Lasserre):

Παρὰ δὲ τοὺς πόδας τῆς Ἀνδρομέδας ὁ Περσεὺς ἔχει τοὺς ώμους, τὴν δεξιὰν χεῖρα πρὸς τὴν Κασσιέπειαν ἀποτείνων, τὸ δὲ ἀριστερὸν γόνυ πρὸς τὰς Πλειάδας. Ὑπὸ δὲ τὸν Περσέα καὶ τὴν Κασσιέπειαν οὐ πολὺ διέχουσα ἔστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τῆς Μεγάλης Ἀρκτοῦ· οἱ δὲ μεταξὺ τούτων ἀστέρες εἰσίν ἁμαυροὶ.

Near the feet of Andromeda Perseus has his shoulders; stretching out his right hand toward Cassiopeia and his left knee towards the Pleiades. Beneath Perseus and Cassiopeia standing not very far apart is the head of the Great Bear; the stars between them are faint.


άμφότεροι δὲ πόδες γαμβροῦ ἐπισημαίνοιεν Περσέος, οἱ δὲ καὶ τῇ εἰκῇ ἐπωμάδιοι φορέονται. αὐτάρκ' ὃ γ' ἐν βορέω φέρεται περιμήκετος ἄλλων. καὶ οἱ δὲ ἐπιτελῇ μὲν ἐπὶ κλισμόν τετᾶνυσαι πενθερίου δίφροιο· τὰ δ' ἐν ποσίν οἷα διώκων ἱχνια μηκύνει κεκοιμένος ἐν Διὶ πατρί. ἄγχι δὲ οἱ σκαίης ἐπιγουνίδος ἢλιθα πᾶσαι. Πληιάδες φορέονται· ὁ δ' οὐ μάλα πολλὸς ἁπάσας χῶρος ἔχει, καὶ δ' αὐταί ἐπισκόποντον ἄφαντα.

The two feet of Andromeda will be pointers to her suitor Perseus, as they move forever above his shoulders. He runs taller than other figures in the north. His right hand is stretched out towards his bride’s mother’s chair-seat, and as if on some pursuit he takes long strides as he runs in the realm of his father Zeus. Near his left knee all in a cluster the Pleiades move. The space that holds them all is not great, and they are individually faint to observe.

(Transl. Kidd, 1997)

(8) Cicero’s translation of Aratus’ *Phaenomena* 248–256 (= Cic. *Aret.*, fr. 34.20–28 [Traglia]):

*e pedibus natum summo loure Persea uisses, quos umero retinet defixo corpore Perseus quem summa ab regione Aquilonis flamina pulsant.*
hic dextram ad sedes intendit Cassiepiae
diversosque pedes uinctos talaribus aptis
puluerulentus uti de terra elapsus repente
in caelum uictor magno sub culmine portat.
At propter laeuum genus omnis parte locatas
parua Vergilias tenui cum luce uidebis.

You will see Perseus, born of highest Jupiter, at her feet [Andromeda’s],
which Perseus supports on his shoulder with fixed body. Gusts of the
North Wind from the uppermost region strike him. He stretches his right
hand to the throne of Cassiopeia and, covered with dust as if suddenly
having glided from the ground, he, victorious, sets his feet, far apart, shod
in fastened sandals, in the sky under the great summit. But near his left
knee all located in a small space you will see the Pleiads [orig. Vergilias]
with faint light.

(9) Germanicus’ translation of Aratus’ Phaenomena, 248–256 (= Germ.
Phaen.248–258):

Subter utrumque pedem deuotae uirginis ales
Perseos effigies, seruatae grata puellae.
moles ipsa uiri satis est testata parentem:
tantus ubique micat, tantum occupat ab loue caeli.
dextera sublatae similis prope Cassiepiam
sublimis fulget: pedibus properare uidetur
et uelle aligeris purum aethera findere plantis.
Poplite sub laeuo, Tauri certissima signa,
Pleiades suberunt. breuis has locus occupat omnis,
 nec faciles cerni, nisi quod coeuntia plura
sidera communem ostendunt ex omnibus ignem.

Underneath both feet of the Maiden vowed to destruction lies the winged
form of Perseus, pleasing to the girl he saved. The size of the hero is in
itself sufficient evidence of his parentage: he shines so huge in all his
parts, so much of the sky does the son of Jove occupy. His right hand
resembles a hand lifted up; it shines on high near Cassiepia; his legs seem
to be hastening and he seems to be desirous of cleaving the sky with his
wing-bearing feet. Under his left knee lie the Pleiads, a most reliable sign
of the Bull. A small space contains them all, nor would they be easily
visible, except for the fact that they lie together and present to the eye
the combined radiance of them all.

(Transl. Gain, 1976)

> quin et uestigia propter  
> Persea sub uolucri par est tibi quaeerere forma.  
> in caput inque umeros rotat aegram machina mundi  
> Andromedam, Thraeci nam sub flabris aquilonis  
> nititur alato uindex pede, maxima cuius  
> dextera maerentis solium prope Cassiepiae  
> tenditur ingentique dehinc uestigia passu  
> puluerulenta quasi cano procul aere pandit.  
> Pleiades femoris pariter sub fine sinistri  
> Perseus protollit.

and then near [Andromeda’s] feet you should look for Perseus under a winged form. On his head and his shoulders the structure of the heaven rotates sorrowful Andromeda, then, under the gusts of the Thracian North Wind leans the avenger with winged foot, whose bravest right hand is stretched near the throne of Cassiepeia and then he spreads his feet, covered with dust as if with white air, in a huge stride. At the same time, Perseus holds up the Pleiades close to his left tight.

(11) Nicander, *Ther.* 121–123 on the Pleiades:

> ἀλλ’ ἤτοι θέερος βλαβερὸν δάκος ἐξαλέασθαι  
> Πληιάδων φάσις δεδοκημένος, αἵ θ' ὑπὸ Ταύρου  
> ἀλκαίην ψαίρουσαι ὀλίζωνε φορέονται·

But chiefly in summer must you be on your guard against harmful snakes, observing the rising of the Pleiades, those smaller stars which graze the strength of the Bull in their course

(Transl. Gow-Scholfield, 1953)


> καὶ βόες ἤδη τοι πάρος ὑδατος ἐνδίοι  
> οὐρανὸν εἰσανιδόντες ἀπ’ αἰθέρος ὀσφρήσαντο·

Now also before rain from heaven cattle, gazing up at the sky, sniff the air

*mollipedesque boues, spectantes lumina caeli, naribus umiferum duxere ex aere sucum.*

and the slow-footed oxen, gazing at the clarity of the sky, with their noses inhaled the juice bringing rain from the air

(14) Varro Atacinus’ translation of Aratus’ *Phaenomena*, 954–955 (= Varro Atacinus, fr. 22 Blänsdorf):

*et bos suspiciens caelum – mirabile uisu – naribus aerium patulis decerpsit odorem*

and the ox gazing up at the sky –wondrous to behold– plucked the aerial smell with nostrils fully open


*imber erit, latis cum bucula naribus auras concipit*

there will be rain, when the heifer inhales the breeze with open noses.

(16) Virgil, *G.* 1.375–376:

*aut bucula caelum suspiciens patulis captauit naribus auras*

or the heifer gazing up at the sky inhaled the breeze with open noses.

Bibliography

*Editions and commentaries*


References


Fecha de recepción: 22-04-2014  
Fecha de aceptación: 02-09-2014