

## Constructing Authority in Cicero's *Aratea*

It was well known in antiquity that Aratus' *Phaenomena* depended upon the astronomical treatises of Eudoxus, as Hipparchus' *Commentary on Eudoxus and Aratus* attests. Although Aratus' lack of astronomical expertise comes as no surprise when Cicero remarks that Aratus described the constellations "non astrologiae scientia, sed poetica quadam facultate" (*De Republica* 1.22) and that Aratus was an "hominem ignarum astrologiae" (*De Oratore* 1.69), such comments raise questions about Cicero's own astronomical expertise in his translation the *Aratea*. This paper will examine the translation of astronomical content within Cicero's *Aratea* in the context of didactic authority. In particular, I will address how Cicero fashions an authoritative voice by manipulating traditional astronomical knowledge. This paper attempts to reconcile the problem arising from Cicero's later use of the *Aratea* to support Stoic doctrine when the authority behind the original poem has been undermined and the translator has not inserted an alternative voice of authority.

Scholarly assessments of Cicero's translation are widely divergent, ranging from innovative and improving on earlier texts (Morford 1967 112) to amateurish and unconcerned with accuracy (Toohey 1996 84, Gee 2001 527). This paper follows Gee (2001) by examining the surviving fragments of Cicero's *Aratea* in conjunction with other references to Aratus and the *Aratea* within Cicero's oeuvre. While Gee, directing her attention to the new context of the *De Natura Deorum*, asserts that the *Aratea* takes on a philosophical significance, this paper focuses on the persona of the teacher within the didactic framework to question whether a didactic poet's expertise has any effect on the poem's didactic content.

A close reading of the fragments reveals that Cicero generally follows Aratus' text carefully, but within the language of tradition Cicero conceals his modifications. Cicero draws attention to tradition through repeated references to names that the Greeks use (frr. 12, 14, 28, 34.179, 34.318) or to other commonly used names (frr 16, 34.400). Thus, Cicero distances himself from the position of authority ordinarily assumed in didactic poetry. The ultimate effect of this authoritative distance, however, is that any change to the content of the poetry translated becomes veiled as traditional.

This paper will examine the construction of authority in passages translating those in the *Phaenomena* where Aratus reveals limitations in his own expertise specifically as well as limitations in the study of astronomy more generally. For example, Cicero's treatment of the Pleiades reveals a careful balance between traditional and innovative elements (34.27-41). While generally following Aratus' description of the cluster of stars, Cicero emphasizes the disparity between the seven traditional names of individual stars and only six observable stars. Cicero's repeated references to the common tradition (*vulgo, more vetusto*, 34.29) as well as the role of ancient poets in establishing this tradition (*ut veteres statuere poetae*) characterize Aratus as the primary authority of this inexplicable astronomical observation. Cicero carefully removes from this tradition the role of Zeus in establishing the Pleiades as a sign of the beginning of summer and winter (*Ph.* 265). This seemingly slight modification, however, also diminishes the original Stoic subtext of Aratus' poem, raising doubts about the efficacy of the *Aratea* to support Stoic doctrine (contra Gee 2001 529). Additional examples will include Aratus' *recusatio* of the

explication of planetary orbits (*Ph.* 454-461 vs *Aratea* fr. 34.226ff) and Aratus' treatment of unconstellated stars (*Ph.* 367-385 vs *Aratea* fr. 34.155-166).

Nearly 45 years after initially translating Aratus' *Phaenomena*, Cicero incorporates more than 100 lines into *De Natura Deorum*. While the reader notices that Cicero praises his own poetry through the mouth of the character Balbus, he also recalls statements made by Cicero elsewhere that undermine Aratus' status as a teacher of astronomy. Therefore, Cicero's use of his own poetic translation, which necessarily depends on these same teachings, invites speculation concerning the nature of didactic authority. This paper examines Cicero's construction of authority not only as it functions in a primary text teaching astronomy, but also as it functions in a secondary text supporting Stoic doctrine. While focused specifically on the relationship between the *Phaenomena* and one of its translations, such an examination has broader implications for the study of didactic poetry. The use of the *Aratea* within the *De Natura Deorum* provides a unique example of how didactic poetry was used in antiquity. Therefore, by examining how the poet constructs his didactic persona, we are able to see how this generic convention of didactic poetry influences not only the presentation of the poem's lessons but also the reader's/student's use of those lessons.

#### References:

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Toohey, P. 1996. *Epic Lessons: An Introduction to Ancient Didactic Poetry*. London.