

Allusion and Interpretation in Aratus, *Phaenomena*, 41-2

πολλή φαινομένη Ἑλικὴ πρῶτης ἀπὸ νυκτός·
ἢ δ' ἑτέρη ὀλίγη μὲν, ἀτὰρ ναύτησιν ἀρείων·

Helike shines bright from the onset of night
the other [Kynosura] is dim, but is better for sailors.

(Aratus, *Phaenomena* 41-2)

Within this description of these two stars Aratus pointedly modifies the Homeric formula, *πρότερος καὶ ἀρείων*, a phrase found at *Iliad* 2.707 and 23.588 (cf. *Odyssey* 19.184). In this paper, I will illustrate how Aratus revises and redefines this Homeric phrase to instil ἀρείων with a novel significance. I thus briefly illustrate one way in which Aratus appropriates literary tradition to pursue his own didactic ends.

In Homer *πρότερος καὶ ἀρείων* describes a warrior foremost in the ranks (*πρότερος*) and (therefore) superior (*ἀρείων*). Aratus uses ἀρείων to close line 42 in order to contrast the qualities of Kynosura and Helike. In the *Phaenomena* passage that alludes to it, the poet shifts to superlative *πρῶτης* (41) and cleverly transfers the adject to *nyktos* to underscore Helike's physical superiority. These modifications in turn deepen the depth of the reversal when Kynosura, though dim(mer) (*ὀλίγη*), is declared "better" (*ἀρείων*).

At first glance, Aratus would simply seem to be engaged in a typical piece of Hellenistic *variatio* that offers an ironic reading of its Homeric analogs, but the poet's linguistic play also introduces a subtle but significant shift in the qualities idealized within the world of Aratus. Within the *Phaenomena* something can be *δύτερος* and *ὀλίγη* but *ἀρείων* all the same. For Homer (as I will quickly demonstrate) this is just not possible-- whether *ἀρείων* is conceived of in purely physical terms or as a value word with ethical implications.

Aratus' clever contrast between Kynosura and Helike thus takes on a wider significance. Aratus is offering not just a critique of Homer's physical description of the cosmos but also of its ideal qualities. The basis for superiority in the cosmos described by Aratus is not so much physical prowess but stability as his closing meditation upon the basis for Kynosura's superiority amply demonstrates (*Arat* 43-4). Because Kynosura meanders less around the pole it is a better guide for sailors. This is an innovative criterion for evaluation of what is better and worse and the novelty of that measure is underscored by the strikingly novel line "μειοτέρῳ γῶρ πῶσα περιστρέφεται στροφάλιγγι" (Kidd 1997, 191 nn.) used to describe it. In sum, Aratus in one the most beautiful (and mythical) passages of his poem with one of its strongest Homeric resonances manipulates the language of Homer to chart a very

different world, one that is infused with his philosophic ideals of a stable, predicable cosmos which, as with his description of Helike and Kynosura, are subtly disclosed within his *Phaenomena*.

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