

The Witty Anonymous: A Playful Acrostic in the *Ciris*

This paper explores a heretofore unacknowledged acrostic in the pseudo-Vergilian work, the *Ciris*. Lines 436-8 begin with the letters n, o and n, respectively, spelling the Latin word “non” vertically. I argue that the beginning of these three lines is not a mere accident of writing, but must instead be viewed as a conscious construction by the anonymous author. This acrostic is further marked by the double use of the word “non” to begin lines 436 and 438; these lines frame line 437 which begins with “o”. The phrase that follows, “omnia vicit amor”, is an almost exact rendering of the authentic Vergilian phrase of *Eclogue* 10.69 (Lyne, 1978).

The beginning of *Eclogue* 10.69, itself an allusion to a line of Gallus, is alluded to on multiple occasions by authors such as Tibullus, Sulpicia, Ovid, Propertius, and Vergil in the *Aeneid*, demonstrating its popularity and importance in the genre of elegy (Cairns 2006). Although the *Ciris* is written in dactylic hexameter, rather than elegiac meter, its content is nevertheless reminiscent of that genre. Here, Scylla, spurred on by Eros, is forced to cut the protective crimson lock of her father’s hair in order to be joined with her love Minos. It is in her lament at the end of the poem that we find this acrostic. While at first she thought that she would only have to fear retribution from the inhabitants of her native land because of her actions, she believes that she has in fact been betrayed by Minos himself, who refuses to marry her, instead taking her prisoner – *scelus* conquers all (427), again an allusion to *Eclogue* 10.69. Just nine lines later, though, her speech reaches its climax. Scylla admits that it was neither riches nor beauty that moved her, as in the case of so many other girls, but love, here punctuated by the quotation of the line of Vergil’s *Eclogues* and specifically marked by the acrostic. In both works, the line is spoken by a lover who has been wronged by a beloved. For Gallus in the *Eclogue*, his lover Lycoris has been unfaithful, having cheated on him (Coleman, 1977), and in the *Ciris*,

Scylla has been betrayed by the unfaithful Minos who broke his oaths to her. To add another layer, Scylla is mentioned in her alternate mythological form as a monster in *Eclogue* 6 (74-77), another *Eclogue* featuring Gallus. Directly after the mention of Scylla as a monster is the story of Philomela who was turned into a bird. Scylla in the *Ciris* actually addresses Philomela right at the beginning of her speech (410), while still in human, not avian form. This acrostic, then, serves to mark the contrast in, or correction of, the myth of Scylla.

Although most scholars agree that the *Ciris* is an example of pseudepigraphic literature, for a time in antiquity this text was thought to belong to the juvenilia of Vergil (Peirano, 2012). The poem is mentioned in both major biographies of Vergil—those of Donatus and Servius – as authentically Vergil’s. However, as I will argue, the author of the *Ciris*, whose work is transmitted under the name of Vergil, used several techniques, such as reusing the actual words of Vergil in the fashion of cento (538-41), but most especially this acrostic, to indicate that Vergil is not the true author of this work. The emphasis on the word “non,” with the acrostic surrounding a slightly modified version of one of Vergil’s most famous lines – one most readers surely would have encountered at least in their education (McGill, 2005) – is an indication to the reader that the author of the work is not who he says he is.

In addition to the suggestion about the authorship of the *Ciris*, this acrostic is also indicative of ludism (Kwapisz, 2012; Wagenvoort, 1956), a trend that is found throughout the pseudo-Vergilian poems of antiquity (*cf. Culex* 1-10). Many pseudepigraphic authors create a game or word play, for which the reader is meant to work out the meaning. Here, the author uses the acrostic to tease the reader about the authorship of the poem – if the reader is clever enough to find it.

Works Cited

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