

Zeus in Aratus' Phaenomena

Scholars working on the *Phaenomena* have observed a multifaceted figure in Aratus' Zeus: his resemblance to Stoic Pneuma, his traditional role as the poet's source of inspiration and knowledge, his role as an important character in several of the poem's catasterism myths, and the use of the appellation to indicate "sky" have all been noted. However, what unifies these aspects of Zeus receives little attention: Zeus' role as a source of knowledge, which, I argue, is key to the poetics of the *Phaenomena*. Aratus uses the polyvalent semantics of "Zeus" in order to map the observational model of acquiring astronomical knowledge onto an older model of divinely inspired knowledge witnessed in proems of Homer and Hesiod. In so doing, Aratus creates a tension between knowledge acquired by keen observation (Zeus as the celestial sphere) and traditional poetic inspiration (Zeus as god), two sources at times in disharmony.

Showing up twenty-one times in the *Phaenomena*, Zeus' name has a conspicuously wide semantic range. So when Aratus tells us that no star dies from our ken ἐκ Δίοϋ in *Phaen.* 259, simultaneously he activates senses of "from the sky" and "by the will of Zeus." In *Phaen.* 253, moreover, Aratus tells us that Perseus kicks up dust ἐν Διὶ πατρὶ as he runs across the sky, bringing to bear simultaneously notions of the sky and the anthropomorphic father of Perseus. An element of playfulness belies these usages, but I would suggest something more substantial is happening. Aratus uses this ambiguity to collate a model of knowledge acquired by scientific astronomical observation with a traditional model of the knowledge of the epic poet, whose inspiration entails his authoritative access to truth. Thus in the proem the constellations are signs provided by a benevolent god, whereas later in the poem (*Phaen.* 367-85) the

constellations are the creation of a human observer as a principle by which to organize phenomena. But the sky, the benevolent provider of signs, and the anthropomorphic catasterizer are all in fact “Zeus,” and all are, in some sense, a source of knowledge through the medium of signs.

Aratus uses the polyvalent concept of “Zeus” to compare different sources of knowledge, highlighting instances when they are at odds with one another, and so questioning the credibility of different models of knowledge. Thus the first catasterism myth about the origin of the Bears (*Phaen.* 30-35) immediately calls into question its own truth, as Aratus frames the account by two line endings, “if it is true” (εἰ ἔτεδ' ὀν δῆ) at the beginning, and “when they deceived Kronos” (ὅτε Κρόνον ἐψεύδοντο) at the myth’s end. The poetic tradition, divinely inspired, is called into question, and Zeus the catasterizer of the Bears is implicated in deception. When treating the Pleiades (*Phaen.* 257-61), moreover, Aratus tells us that although there are only six members visible to our eyes, Zeus has ensured knowledge of the seventh (οὐ μὲν πῶς ἀπόλωλεν ἀπευθῆς ἐκ Διὸς ἄστῆρ), thus highlighting the divergence between the two sources.

Katharina Volk has recently interpreted the *Phaenomena* as a poem about reading signs. Reading mediates between the signs and the knowledge that they provide. The *Phaenomena*’s famous proem, a hymn to Zeus on the model of the opening of Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, outlines a path by which knowledge reaches Aratus’ audience: Zeus is the ultimate source, the Muses help the poet describe how Zeus’ signs work, and, one presumes, the audience will in turn read the poem to learn from the poet. Astronomy, held in particularly high regard in antiquity, works in a similar way: celestial phenomena occur within the sky—also Zeus—the observer organizes them, deriving meaning based

on patterns, and records his findings for posterity. The ambiguity of Zeus' name keeps both models active at once, one a model of knowledge based on the inspiration of a benevolent divinity, and the other a model of knowledge based on keen observation of the celestial sphere. Thus Aratus uses "Zeus" to explore distinct epistemological models simultaneously, as a part of a broader "double" aesthetic that entails his frequent transition from scientific to poetic discourse.

Bibliography

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