

Stoicism in the Stars: Cicero's *Aratea* in the *De Natura Deorum*

In Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* (2.104-114), the Stoic character, Q. Lucilius Balbus, gives 44 discrete quotations from Cicero's *Aratea*, consisting of approximately 90 verses of full or partial hexameters. Balbus uses Cicero's translation of Aratus' *Phaenomena* to substantiate his claim that the universe was created by a divine intellect. The fixed and predictable movement of the stars in the night sky demonstrates the fundamental principle of 'ratio' which guides the universe.

In his monumental critical edition of the *De Natura Deorum*, Arthur Stanley Pease described Balbus' quotations of Cicero's *Aratea* in the following way (1958 II:803): 'These lines injected in 2.104-114 are far from a complete picture of the constellations, and add nothing to the progress of the argument, which resumes its course in 2.115, and they are surely not from Posidonius, who would not have had the same incentive of vanity as Cicero for their insertion.' Pease's view was that the quotations of the *Aratea* did not contribute anything of significance to Balbus' argument, and that their inclusion in the dialogue was primarily motivated by a self-promotional impulse.

Quotation was, in fact, part of the philosophical practice of Stoicism, which mined literary sources for evidence of its own doctrines. From the Stoic perspective, literature recorded human observations from reality, and, even if that representation was encoded in a manner that was 'wrong,' it nonetheless contained traces of truth that could be parsed out using the Stoic philological toolkit. Zeno etymologized 'Chaos' in Hesiod's *Theogony* as 'primal water' from the homophony between the Greek word 'chaos' ('χάος') and the verb 'to pour' ('ἀπὸ τοῦ χέεσθαι,' SVF 1.103-104; cf. Long 1992:62). This etymology demonstrates that, even though Hesiod did not fully understand the theories of Stoic physics that structure the cosmos, his per-

ception of their effects is rendered by his poetic activity. Chrysippus quoted from the tragedies of Euripides so much that one of his books is jokingly referred to as ‘Chrysippus’ *Medea*’ (Diog. Laert. 7.180). Aratus, who is said to have studied under Zeno at Athens, encodes Stoic ideas in his *Phaenomena* (Kidd 1997:10-12, Gee 2000:70). Stoic philosophers, such as Boëthus of Sidon and Posidonius, wrote commentaries on the didactic epic. The extant scholia of Aratus’ *Phaenomena*, whose ancient ancestor is thought to have appeared in the 1st c. BCE (Dickey 2007:58), and was used by Cicero in making his Latin translation (Soubiran 1972:93), use Stoic theories to explain terms within the poem. Several Stoics are named in the ancient commentaries, such as Crates of Mallos, the intellectual credited with bringing philology to Rome when he broke his leg in an open sewer.

Balbus’ use of the *Aratea* to substantiate his Stoic argument must be situated within the fact that the Stoics used literary citation to exemplify their own doctrines, and the fact that the Stoics had a long standing interest in the astronomical content of Aratus’ *Phaenomena*. Balbus’ criteria for the inclusion and omission of verses from the *Aratea* abide by Stoic principles. Balbus quotes verses of the *Aratea* which exemplify visual and linguistic self-evidence. The brightest stars in the night sky are included (Spica, Capra, Sirius), the dimmest omitted. Opportunities for epistemological ambivalence are suppressed. Stars whose names reflect their meteorological effects are etymologized, highlighting consonance between language and reality: e.g. the Eagle (*aquila*), whose rising brings heavy rain, is derived from the Latin for ‘north wind’ or ‘storm’ (*aquilo*). Balbus’ prose imitates the verses which are grammatically integrated into it, and also expands exegetically upon the quotations in the manner of a scholiast. Pease’s perception of the ‘incompleteness’ of Balbus’ presentation of the constellations was correct - but he did

not realise that the citational selectivity was purposeful, and that the pattern created by that selectivity reflected the Stoic mission of Balbus' argument.

Bibliography

Dickey, E. 2007. *Ancient Greek Scholarship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gee, E. 2000. *Ovid, Aratus and Augustus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kidd, D. 1997. *Aratus: Phaenomena*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Long, A. A. 1992. 'Stoic readings of Homer,' in R. Lamberton and J. Keaney, eds., *Homer's ancient readers*. Princeton, NJ. 41-66..

Pease, A. S. 1955-1958. *De Natura Deorum*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Soubiran, J. 1972. *Aratea: fragments poétiques*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.