The Well-Worn Road: Metapoetics from Ennius to Ovid

Although metapoetics in Roman literature are associated most with Augustan poetry,

scholars continue to show that metapoetic expression was a continuous substratum in Roman

literary thought, from at least as early as Ennius. Stephen Hinds' remark about the Roman

fondness for metapoetic foot puns, that "Latin poets are always ready for *any* wordplay involving

human and metrical feet" (1985), is broadly true of many familiar metaliterary motifs. Rather

than adduce more specific examples, this paper will trace the continuity of several such motifs

between the Augustans and earlier Roman poets. These poets often draw on the same store of

motifs, but adapt them to the specific context of their own poem and literary program.

Augustan and Republican poets all draw for their metapoetic effects on the Latin

language's rich vocabulary of metaphors for reading, writing, and poetry. Some of these, like the

application of *pes* to both metrical and anatomical feet, work in both Latin and Greek, so have

long metapoetic histories (Pindar, Aristophanes, etc.). When metapoetic *pes* appears in Rome, it

is most conspicuous in poets for whom meter is a prominent part of their program: Ennius, for

whom Latin hexameter is an innovation (*Ann*. 1.1; Hinds 1998); Catullus, whose embrace of

iamb includes the "limping" choliamb (c. 31; Morgan); and the elegists (Ovid *Am*. 3.1, Prop.

2.12.21–4, et al.), whose rejection of epic was a stand against traditional metrics as well as

morals. Other metapoetic motifs seem unique to Roman literature, like their exploitation of

metaphors that relate to reading and writing: writing on wax tablets, e.g., is deeply connected to

plowing in the Latin lexicon (*arare*, *exarare*, *perarare*), and although Greek also sometimes

conceives of writing and plowing as analogous (βουστροφήδον), the pun seems especially to

interest the Romans, including Republic comic poets Titinius (*com*. 160) and Quinctius Atta

(*com*. 13) and Ovid (*Am*. 1.11.17 et al.); Vergil exploits the pun throughout the *Georgics*, as when the old man of Tarentum lays out his elms *in versum* (4.144; Kronenberg).

Other metaphors are drawn from familiar passages of Hellenistic Greek literature. Most influential is the *Aetia* prologue. Before Vergil pastoralized this in *Eclogue* 6, Lucretius adapted Apollo's exhortation to avoid the well-worn track, expressing his own priority in Latin philosophical didactic (1.925–26; 4.1–2); in contrast to his poetic independence, however, Lucretius uses the same image to express his philosophical dependence on Epicurus, in whose very steps he places his feet (3.3–6). This use of *vestigia* to mark respectful imitation alludes less to the *Aetia* prologue than to the story of Acontius and Cydippe from *Aetia* 3, in which Acontius's desirous lovers likewise follow in his footsteps. The same story is later influential on Vergil and the elegists (Kenney, Barchiesi), where it represents elegy and intertextual imitation.

Also widely influential are the prefatory epigrams sometimes prefixed to bookrolls. Two well-known epigrams on Aratus's *Phaenomena*, Callimachus *Epigram* 27 and Leonidas *AP* 9.25, seem to have opened manuscripts of that poem, which they characterize respectively as the author's "lucubration" and "labor"—two widely used Augustan metaphors for refinement: Lucretius and Vergil use both together to indicate the hard work of writing refined didactic poetry (Henkel 2011), while Catullus and Propertius use *vigiliae* alone of refinement in love poetry, which they liken to the erotic sleeplessness (Thomas 1983). Similarly influential is the epigram of Artemidorus (*AP* 9.205), which prefaced his edition of Theocritus's bucolics with a claim to have collected Theocritus's scattered flock—his poems—into one fold. This likening of poems to herd animals is the final step in the development of the bucolic metaphor, by which poets are likened to herdsmen and the poems eventually to livestock (Gutzwiller). This metaphor is obviously influential on Vergil's *Eclogues*, where herding and poetry are equivalent activities,

but it also appears in Cicero's translation of Aratus, where "soft-footed cows" represent his own refined verses (*Progn*. fr. 4).

A thorough handout will trace the development and continuity of these motifs in detail, from Republican to Augustan poetry.

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