ποιητὴς ὀλιγοποιός: Animal Song and Metapoetry in Cicero's *Prognostica*

Cicero's *Prognostica*, the second part of his translation of Aratus' *Phaenomena*, details various activities performed by animals that can be used by humans to forecast changes in the weather. Remarkably, whereas Aratus represents the animals as no more than passive signifiers of Zeus' will, Cicero subtly but meaningfully modifies his Greek source by anthropomorphizing them, granting them the ability to perceive their surroundings, feel emotions such as anxiety and curiosity, and sing songs in response. In this paper, I argue that Cicero employs his animals as metapoetic symbols of ideal didactic poets who, like himself, study nature and produce *carmina* from which others might learn. In the process, Cicero's revises Aratus' Stoic natural philosophy, updating the *Phaenomena* in light of two centuries of philosophical progress and Cicero's own arguments in his philosophical works about the relationships between nature, humanity, and the divine. Rather than viewing this poem in isolation from his other work or as a dilettantish hobby (Ewbank 1933, Williams 1968, Courtney 1993), I show that Cicero's *Prognostica* is intimately connected with his serious philosophical dialogues and represents part of his larger discourse on the role of human observation and its relationship to literary production.

Aratus' poem is based in Old Stoic doctrine, and Kidd 1998 shows that the *Phaenomena* promotes the view that Zeus dictates all outcomes and personally offers humans, unique among mortal creatures, signs of his future creation of natural phenomena. In the late 2nd century BCE, however, this view of the Old Stoa was softened by Panaetius of Rhodes, whom Cicero praises at *Div*. 1.6–7 for rejecting active divine intervention. Posidonius of Apamea, Panaetius' student and Cicero's teacher, later argued for *sympatheia*, the idea that everything in the cosmos is intimately linked to everything else, as an explanation for why divination often works (Kidd 1988). Cicero sketches these ideas in his dialogues. At *Div.* 2.14-16, he states that weather-signs from animals

prove that the gods do not actively direct nature, as weather is too unpredictably inconsistent to be attributed to flawless divine order (*Div.* 2.14-16). Elsewhere he says *ratio*, the Stoic notion of purposeful order, does not directly affect the world beneath the aether (*Nat. Deor.* 2.56), but that *cognatio naturalis* (= *sympatheia*) implies reasonable connections between overarching *ratio* and weather-signs in nature (*Div*. 2.145).

Possanza 2004 shows that Cicero actively modifies Aratus' sections on the stars and Gee 2001 demonstrates that many of Cicero's changes in the constellations update Aratus' discussion of star-signs to fit later Stoic interpretation. Following their leads, I argue Cicero humanizes the animals in his *Prognostica* to convey that all creatures on Earth possess free will and, while not directly manipulated by divine forces, they find guidance in the regular motions of the heavens. *Prognostica* frr.3–4 translate Aratus 909–15 and 946–55, which describe signs that animals give before storms. Cicero keeps much of the original, but he breaks from Aratus by imbuing animals (which in the Greek are only senseless beasts) with agency and human emotions. He stresses the anxiety of seabirds (fr.3.7–9), addresses the frogs directly, (fr.4.1–2), and ascribes philosophical interest in the constellations to cows (fr.4.10–11). Throughout these passages, Cicero implicitly links his own activity as poet observing nature and reporting his findings for his audience to the behavior of animals, noting that they gaze at the stars (*spectantes lumina caeli*, fr.4.10), look out for signs (*vos quoque signa videtis*, fr.4.1), and sing songs (*cantus*, fr.3.9; *canit…carmen*, fr.4.4). The animals in Cicero's *Prognostica*, in stark contrast to Aratus' dumb beasts, are thus described in terms reserved for human poets like Cicero himself.

Cicero equates his own Latin *carmen* with the *carmina* of animals that can be understood by humans if they have a keen poet/interpreter like himself to guide them. Cicero thus integrates didactic poetic activity into the natural world that it seeks to explain. This revision of Aratus also

demonstrates the importance of Cicero's own work as both didactic poet and philosopher: if even animals look to the heavens for support and report their findings in song, then *a fortiori* humans like his Roman audience should observe the skies and pay attention to those like Cicero who sing about them.

Bibliography:

Courtney, E. 1993. *Fragmentary Latin Poets*. Oxford.

Ewbank, W.W. 1933. *The Poems of Cicero*. London.

Gee, E. 2001. "Cicero's Astronomy." *CQ* 51:520-36.

Kidd, D.A. 1988. *Posidonius*. 3 vols. Cambridge.

—. 1998. *Aratus: Phaenomena*. Cambridge.

Possanza, M. 2004. *Translating the Heavens: Aratus, Germanicus, and the Poetics of Latin Translation.* New York.

Williams, G. 1968. *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry*. Oxford.