

Politicizing the Cosmos in Manilius' *Astronomica*

Manilius' *Astronomica*, a poetic treatise on astrology written in the early first century C.E., is a text absorbed in the mysteries of the stars. At the same time, its perspective is firmly rooted in the late Augustan era. The poet constantly vacillates between the divine and terrestrial spheres, which he sees as intimately intertwined. In Book 5, he explains that the cosmos is like a *res publica* in the sky: *sic etiam magno quaedam res publica mundo est/ quam natura facit, quae caelo condidit urbem* ("So there is a sort of *res publica* in the vast universe crafted by nature, which has founded a city in the sky," 5.738-9 (adapted from Goold 1977)). The direction of the comparison is surprising; it is not Rome that reflects the cosmos, but the cosmos that reflects Rome (Volk 2009: 114). Using political terminology to articulate questions of astrological significance, Manilius implies that the heavenly sphere is a politicized space.

Manilius' admittedly challenging treatise has seen a revival of scholarly interest in the past decade (Green 2013; Volk and Green 2011; Volk 2009). Its political dimensions, however, remain underexplored. Discussion tends to focus on moments when Manilius explicitly invokes the *princeps*, as he does at the beginning of the poem: *tu, Caesar, patriae princepsque paterque* ("You, Caesar, First Citizen and Father of the Country," 1.7). Yet his engagement with Augustan political culture goes deeper than such panegyric interludes. In this paper, I argue that Manilius' portrait of the cosmos implicitly endorses the principate. Applying corporeal metaphors to both the stars and the *res publica*, he stresses the necessity of a ruler able to harmonize disparate limbs into one body politic. In doing so, he signals his support for the new political order in Rome.

It was a central tenet of ancient astrology that the design of the cosmos mirrored that of the human body (Hübner 1984: 237-42). Manilius articulates this principle in Book 1, writing,

*Hoc opus immensi constructum corpore mundi/ membraque naturae diversa condita forma/ aeris
atque ignis, terrae pelagique iacentis,/ vis animae divina regit* (“This fabric which forms the
body of the boundless universe, together with its members composed of nature’s diverse
elements, air and fire, earth and level sea, is ruled by the force of a divine spirit,” 1.247-50). If
the universe is like a body, the elements that constitute it are the limbs. Because they are
different in their form and function, they tend towards conflict. What keeps them together is a
divine governing spirit: *sacroque meatu/ conspirat deus et tacita ratione gubernat/ mutuaque in
cunctas dispensat foedera partes* (“by sacred dispensation the deity brings harmony and governs
with silent reason, arranging mutual bonds between all parts,” 1.250-2). Without it, the cosmos
would fall apart.

At key points in the *Astronomica*, Manilius suggests that the same lesson can be applied
to the human sphere. Just like the cosmos, the *res publica* is composed of diverse members
whose interests are at odds (5.734-7). Under the republic, their conflicts often led to civil war:
adde etiam Latias acies Romamque suis/ pugnantes membris, adice, et civilia bella (“Add to
these the battles in Latium and Rome in arms against her own limbs; add also the civil wars,”
4.43-44). Depicting Rome as a body at war with itself, Manilius recounts the city’s intestine wars
at length (Scarcia, Flores, and Feraboli 2001: *ad loc.* 1.906-26). His tone remains optimistic,
however, for he reports that discord has finally been put into chains: *adamanteis discordia vincita
catenis* (“discord, bound in steel chains,” 1.923). The jailer is the *princeps*, whose rule has
unified the world: *Caesar melius nunc condidit urbem/ et propriis frenat pendentem nutibus
orbem* (“Caesar has now built a better city and bridles a world hanging on his nod alone,” 4.776-
7). Augustus’ refoundation of Rome (*Caesar...condidit urbem*) precisely parallels nature’s
creation of a city in the sky (*natura...condidit urbem*, 5.739). The emperor emerges as the human

equivalent of the divine force that governs above. Representing sole rule as the solution to both cosmic and terrestrial discord, Manilius naturalizes the implementation of autocracy in Rome.

Bibliography

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