NEW ACROSTICS IN OVID?*

ABSTRACT

This article highlights two possible unnoticed acrostics in Ovid's Metamorphoses *concerning the predictions of Calchas and Helenus.*

Keywords: Ovid; *Metamorphoses*; acrostics; anagrams; predictions; Troy; Rome

At the beginning of Book 12 of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid makes the transition from 'mythical' events to the so-called 'historical' narration,[1] the Trojan War and Aesacus' funeral. Calchas, the skilled augur, pronounces his famous omen at this event after contemplating the scene of a serpent devouring eight fledgling birds along with their mother. The text runs as follows (*Met.* 12.18–23):

> 　　　　　　　at ueri prouidus augur
> Thestorides 'uincemus', ait, 'gaudete, Pelasgi!
> Troia cadet, sed erit nostri mora longa laboris',　　　20
> atque nouem uolucres in belli digerit annos;
> ille, ut erat uirides amplexus in arbore ramos,
> fit lapis et seruat serpentis imagine saxum.

Immediately he prophesies from the nine birds nine years of war. These verses introduce for the first time in the *Metamorphoses* the history of Troy and the near future of Rome as its successor.

　　　The aim of this note is to discuss whether a key is hidden in such an important structural point, thus drawing our attention to this highly significant moment for both Troy and Rome, with Ovid's use of an as yet undetected acrostic (*Met.* 12.20–3):

> **Troia cadet**, sed erit nostri mora longa laboris',　　　20
> **a**tque nouem uolucres in belli digerit annos;
> **i**lle, ut erat uirides amplexus in arbore ramos,
> **f**it lapis et seruat serpentis imagine saxum.

　　　It is reasonable to conjecture that Ovid is playing here with both the fall of Troy and the future appearance of Rome: with the initial *Troia cadet* being balanced by the reverse acrostic *fiat Troia*. At 12.23 the verse also opens with *fit*, producing something like an

　[1]　For the 'historical' section of the *Metamorphoses*, see G. Luck, 'Myth and history in Ovid', in M.C. Álvarez Morán and R.Mª. Iglesias Montiel, *Y el Mito se hizo Poesía* (Madrid, 2012), 113–26.

inversion of the Γ-acrostic in Aratus (*Phaen.* 783–7),[2] including a polyptoton within the acrostic.[3] First, the attention of the careful reader should be drawn to the existence of *fiat* formed backwards in the margin in the acrostic. Moreover, this would not be the first instance of an acrostic in reverse. In fact, recent scholarship has endeavoured to report new discoveries of this kind of linguistic device.[4] Robinson, particularly, tries to explain how acrostics work, and how they could be understood: 'It can be helpful to think about acrostics in the same way as we think about allusion and intertextuality.'[5] This would not be the first instance of an acrostic in reverse either; the authorial signature MA-VE-PV, representing the name of Publius Vergilius Maro in reverse in Verg. *G.* 1.429–33, is a good example. And as Danielewicz suggests,[6] we can also find another reverse acrostic in Verg. *G.* 1.439–43—namely, *scies*:

> **s**igna dabit; solem certissima signa sequentur,
> **e**t quae mane refert et quae surgentibus astris.   440
> **i**lle ubi nascentem maculis uariauerit ortum
> **c**onditus in nubem medioque refugerit orbe,
> **s**uspecti tibi sint imbres: namque urget ab alto.

But an acrostic could work here not only as an allusion to an implicit idea or text. I think we can go further. Any educated person in Rome knew, at the very least from Virgil's *Aeneid,* that the foundation of Rome originated in the diaspora following the fall of Troy, the arrival of Aeneas in Italy, and the founding initially of Alba Longa and subsequently of Rome itself. In this way, the idea provided in the acrostic can be reinforced by the fact that the words *mora* and *longa* appear linked together (*Met.* 12.20):

> Troia cadet, sed erit nostri **mora longa** laboris

longa could evoke *Alba Longa* (Ov. *Fast.* 2.499; Verg. *Aen.* 6.766), and *mora* is one of the usual anagrams of *Roma*. The function of *mora*, and its relationship with Rome, can be perceived in some passages of the *Aeneid*, for example 1.414, 1.670–1, 4.347,

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[2]
> **Λ**επτὴ μὲν καθαρή τε περὶ τρίτον ἦμαρ ἐοῦσα
> **ε**ὔδιός κ' εἴη· λεπτὴ δὲ καὶ εὖ μάλ' ἐρευθὴς
> **π**νευματίη· παχίων δὲ καὶ ἀμβλείῃσι κεραίαις   785
> **τ**έτρατον ἐκ τριτάτοιο φόως ἀμενηνὸν ἔχουσα
> **ἠ**ὲ νότῳ ἀμβλύνετ' ἤ ὕδατος ἐγγὺς ἐόντος.

See J. Kwapisz, 'The *technê* of Aratus' *leptê* acrostich', *Enthymema* 23 (2019), 374–89.

[3] See also another comparable polyptoton within an acrostic in Manilius 1.705–10. Cf. P. Bielsa i Mialet, 'Manili: un nou acròstic', *Faventia* 22 (2000), 135–9.

[4] See C. Luz, *Technopaignia. Formspiele in der griechischen Dichtung* (Leiden and Boston, 2010), 1–77. For recent bibliography on acrostics in Latin literature, see J.T. Katz, 'The Muse at play: an introduction', in J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain and M. Szymański (edd.), *The Muse at Play. Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Berlin, 2013), 1–30; R.M. Colborn, *Manilius on the Nature of the Universe* (Diss., Oxford University, 2015), 113–19 and J.T. Katz, 'Another Virgilian signature in the *Georgics*?', in P. Mitsis and I. Ziogas (edd.), *Wordplay and Powerplay in Latin Poetry* (Berlin, 2016), 69–85. See also M. Robinson, 'Looking edgeways. Pursuing acrostics in Ovid and Virgil', *CQ* 69 (2019a), 290–308 and M. Robinson, 'Arms and a mouse: approaching acrostics in Ovid and Vergil', *MD* 82 (2019b), 23–73. Finally, see K. Mitchell, 'Acrostics and telestichs in Augustan poetry: Ovid's edgy and subversive sideswipes', *CCJ* 66 (2020), 165–81, at 171–80.

[5] Robinson (n. 4 [2019a]), 290.

[6] J. Danielewicz, 'Vergil's *certissima signa* reinterpreted: the Aratean *lepte*-acrostic in *Georgics* 1', *Eos* 100 (2013), 287–95.

4.566–70, 12.11 (*nulla mora in Turno*).[7] Even the word *ramos* could be seen as another anagram of *Roma* in the plural, using the idea of Rome as a second Troy: *altera Troiae | Pergama* (Verg. *Aen.* 3.86–7).

This important structural moment is balanced by another prophecy in Ov. *Met.* 15.439–49. Helenus, the twin brother of Cassandra, predicts to Aeneas his own destiny and, at the same time, the future of Rome, beginning with Aeneas himself:

> 'nate dea, si nota satis praesagia nostrae
> **men**tis habes, **non tota cadet** te sospite **Troia**:   440
> **fla**mma tibi ferrumque dabunt iter; ibis et una
> Pergama rapta feres, donec Troiaeque tibique
> externum patrio contingat amicius aruum.
> Vrbem etiam cerno Phrygios debere nepotes,
> quanta nec est nec erit nec uisa prioribus annis.   445
> hanc alii proceres per **saecula longa** potentem,
> sed dominam rerum de sanguine natus Iuli
> **efficiet**; quo cum tellus erit usa, fruentur
> aetheriae sedes, caelumque erit exitus illi.'

Contrary to the first prediction of Calchas, Troy will not fall entirely while Aeneas lives. The one born to the bloodline of Julius is Augustus, as is well known; but more surprising is the plausible reverse acrostic in *Met.* 15.440–1, *flamen*; this may be addressed both to Aeneas and to Augustus, as religious reformer, suggesting the development of the imperial cult, or the *flamen* of the deified Julius Caesar. At this point the ground we tread upon seems unsure, from the moment that the emperor's old enemy, Mark Antony, was the first *flamen* of Julius Caesar. The victory of Octavian over Mark Antony established a new step forward in Roman history: Troy, a new Troy, that is, Rome, and a new Rome under Augustus as ruler of a new world. Finally, we can also compare now *mora longa* in *Met.* 12.20 with *saecula longa* in *Met.* 15.446, and the reverse acrostic *fiat* in *Met.* 12.20–3 with *efficiet* in *Met.* 15.448.

Furthermore, with the anagrams in *mora* (*amor*, *Roma*) in his so-called 'little *Aeneid*' (*Met.* 13.623–14.582), was Ovid intending to make his readers also think about Maro, that is, Publius Vergilius Maro?

I believe that these instances of formal, inlaid complexity are real and significant, and observing them enhances our understanding of the text.

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[7] For the relationship between *Roma*, *mora* and *amor* in the *Aeneid*, see J. Reed, '*Mora* in the *Aeneid*', in P. Mitsis and I. Ziogas (edd.), *Wordplay and Powerplay in Latin Poetry* (Berlin, 2016), 88–105. For *Roma/amor* in Ovid, see M. Hanses, 'Love's letters: an *amor-Roma* telestich at Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 3.507–10', in P. Mitsis and I. Ziogas (edd.), *Wordplay and Powerplay in Latin Poetry* (Berlin, 2016), 199–211. The relationship between *Roma* and *mora* in Ovid is yet to be acknowledged, but see Ov. *Ars am.* 1.55 *tot tibi tamque dabit formosas Roma puellas* and 3.73–4 *mora semper amantes | incitat.*