

The astronomer Hipparchus of Nicaea is remembered for many things: his discovery of the precession of the equinoxes, his incredibly precise calculation of the length of the year, and his monumental influence on Claudius Ptolemy, to name a few. His love of poetry, however, is not typically included on the list. Indeed, it is now customary to assert that Hipparchus' methods were closer to a modern scientist than an ancient one, and that his scrupulous attention to detail, careful observational work, and penchant for questioning earlier experts in his field did not leave room for the enjoyment of literature. For evidence, scholars point to Hipparchus' unforgiving critique of Aratus in his only surviving work, the *Commentary on the Phaenomena of Aratus and Eudoxus*. Netz, however, has recently questioned this assumption, drawing attention to the playfulness of Hipparchus' relationship with Aratus. In this paper I offer another corrective to the common view, pointing out that while Hipparchus might be considered a forerunner of the modern scientist in his astronomical work, when it came to reading and interpreting literature, he often stayed close to methods popular in the wider Greek commentary tradition.

Hipparchus' commentary has long been taken as indicative of his famous contempt for his predecessors, and it is certainly true that its opening chapters are dominated by polemic—against Aratus, whose poem is filled with astronomical errors, against Eudoxus, who provided a faulty model for Aratus, and against Attalus of Rhodes, a contemporary Aratean commentator, who was more interested in justifying Aratus' mistakes than in correcting them (e.g., 1.2-1.3). It is Attalus and his ilk who particularly exercise Hipparchus, and he explains their acceptance of Aratus' errors by an appeal to the Platonic notion of the dangerous and seductive power of poetry. "The beauty of the poetry confers a certain trustworthiness upon what is said," he complains, adding later that if Aratus had written in prose, his work would have been ignored (1.1.7). The implication is clear: Hipparchus is immune to the charms of Aratus' poetic authority, and will hold the poet to the same standards as a prose-writing expert.

But as the commentary progresses, it becomes evident that Hipparchus cannot maintain this ideological purity. He too gives in to the seductiveness of Aratus' poetic authority, employing at several points the exact strategy for which he had condemned Attalus in the introduction: namely, performing a reading of the poem in order to prove that Aratus agrees with his interpretation, rather than his opponent's (see, e.g., 1.8.8, 2.2.39, 2.3.7, 2.3.21). While this apparent hypocrisy belies the now popular characterization of Hipparchus as an impartial scientist, it nonetheless places him well within the mainstream of the Greek commentary tradition, as I will show.

In bringing this practice to light it is not my goal to condemn Hipparchus. Rather, I believe that we should take these passages in his commentary, which is the earliest extant, as an invaluable glimpse of the assumptions that lay behind literary interpretation in the Hellenistic period, and as an indication of the stability of the commentary tradition: this practice is, after all, not so different from the one that obtains in late antique commentaries.