

Numbering the Pleiades: Aratus, Hipparchus and Zeus

I have two objectives in this paper: first, to spare Aratus the indignity of the interpretation that wrongly attributes to him the assertion that there are six stars in the constellation Pleiades, rather than seven (*Phaen.* 254–267; Kidd 1997, Martin 1998), even though no less an authority than the astronomer Hipparchus criticizes the poet for missing one of the seven sisters; and second, to reconsider, in light of my revised interpretation of the Pleiades-description, Zeus' role in the poem as beneficent and providential deity with a view to supporting the poem's religious and philosophical theme of a Zeus-ordered cosmos against the contention that the poem is primarily literary artifice, more concerned with poetics and literary tradition than with the philosophical and theological significance of stars and weather signs (Fakas 2001). In my view, consistently throughout the poem Aratus maintains the priority of Zeus as author of "signs" which humans must seek to understand, and in the world of the *Phaenomena* the attempt to understand "signs" is a recognition of Zeus immanence in nature and the rational order he created and maintains. As a result, the literary "sign" is by definition a manifestation of Zeus. In this instance religious feeling and poetry are inseparable

Readers have been too ready to defer to Hipparchus's authority when he criticizes Aratus for saying that only six of the Pleiades are visible to the eye. Aratus asserts nothing of the kind. Hipparchus and subsequent readers who interpret the text to mean that only six stars, according to the poet, are visible to the eye, though tradition says there are seven, assume that the participial phrase in 258 is an authorial assertion. It is in fact part of the predicate, i.e. what is said among men, not by the poet, about the Pleiades: "it is said among men that they are seven in number with six alone, though, being visible to the eye." Aratus is reporting, and, as the rest of the passage makes clear, rejecting the tradition according to which only six of the seven Pleiades are said to be visible to the eye. The explanation for the erroneous tradition current among men is implied in the poet's references to the constellation's stars as small and faint.

Aratus's correction of the tradition affirms the providence of Zeus as the divine power who put the stars in the heavens for a purpose. When he says that "Zeus is the cause" (265) of the Pleiades' special status as the sign of the beginning of winter and summer, he not only provides another example of how the god has benefited humankind, he also reminds the reader that the order of the heavens established by Zeus is unchanging: the story that one of the Pleiades has vanished from the sky illustrates how human observers can "misread" the signs and, as a result, come to an imperfect understanding of Zeus' nature. Moreover, the language in which the poet vindicates the god's providential care for the human world, (Ζεῦς δ' ἀπειτιός 265), involves another correction, for that same phrase is also used to blame Zeus for trouble and misfortune (*Od.* 1.348, and in general 1.32–43; Eur. *Alcestis* 3). A true understanding of Zeus' nature emerges from a correct understanding of his signs.