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Of Marginal Significance: Acrostics and Allusion in Hellenistic Poetry

Numerous acrostics - words or phrases formed by initial letters in lines of poetry - have been detected in Greek and Latin verse. The paper raises the question how readers in antiquity were to find particular acrostics: with the help of a coherent tradition of markings in manuscripts, or by chance observation? More often by chance, I argue. The interest here lies in the implication that an acrostic is an esoteric literary device - a communication initiated by an author careless of its reception, content to have it go unnoticed, and yet perhaps aware that a discoverer would be affected with the same sense of wonder and election that generally attends upon learning a secret.

This study focuses on the rare but telling cases of acrostics that allude to acrostics. Take the acrostic *lept®* found at Aratus *Phaenomena* 783-7 (Jacques 1960). Three poets, contemporaries of Aratus (Callimachus, Leonidas, 'Ptolemy'), betray their familiarity with it through the prominent use of forms of *leptñw* in epigrams addressed to the author. Two-and-a-half centuries later, in Italy, Vergil acknowledged the device by fitting an acrostic of his name into a translation of the Aratean context (*Geo.* 1.429-33; Brown 1963). No source outside of the epigrammatists identifies the Aratus acrostic, not even the compendious ancient scholia on the *Phaenomena*. How then did Vergil find it?

Nicander's *Theriaka* incorporates an acrostic of the author's name (345-53; Lobel 1928). As a sign of his detection of it, Dionysius Periegetes, in his didactic poem on geography, inserted a signature acrostic down lines that borrow directly from the Nicandrian passage (109-134; Leue 1884). At least two-and-a-half centuries separate Dionysius from Nicander; again, the latter's scholiasts make no mention of the acrostic. What, besides knowing that such things exist, led Dionysius to see it?

Were acrostics marked in their manuscripts? Anecdotes in Diogenes Laertius, Gellius, and Athenaeus suggest rather that acrostics worked by being unmarked. A strong argument from silence also exists: a number of acrostics appear in papyrus texts, one of which even contains illumination, yet none are rubricated or benefit from marking. Only in the 2nd century C.E. does evidence for highlighted acrostics develop. The conclusion is that early Hellenistic acrostics were commonly hidden, uncovered either by a reader's curiosity or by chance (*pace* Cameron 1992, 1995).