Wordplay in Vergil and Claudian

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Damien Nelis

1 Several recent studies have suggested that Latin poets like to signal to their readers certain kinds of textual phenomena, such as patterns of allusion, etymological wordplay, metrical particularities and even acrostics. At least two of them seem to have adopted a similar approach to the use of anagrams.

Vergil

2 Aeneid 8, lines 319 to 323, where Evander describes for Aeneas the establishment of the Saturnian Golden Age in Italy, read as follows:

*primus* ab aetherio *uenit* Saturnus Olympos *arma* Iouis *fug*iens et *regnis exsil ademptis.*

*is genus* indocile ac dispersum montibus altis composit legesque dedit, *Latium*que uocari *maluit,* his quonia *Latium*isset tutus in *oris.*

These verses have an intriguing resemblance to the opening lines of the poem (*primus,* 1.1; *venit,* 1.2; *arma,* 1.1; *profugus,* 1.2 (cf. *exsil*); *genus,* 1.6; *oris,* 1.1), which creates a striking parallel between Saturn and Aeneas as exiles from lost kingdoms arriving in Latium:

*Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris*

*Italiam,* *fato profugus,* Laviniaque *venit* litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto vi superum, saevae memores lunonis ob iram; multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem, inferretque deos *Latio, genus* unde *Latium,* Albanique patres, atque altae moenia Romae.

3 But the interpretation of line 322 raises an interesting problem. Here is a sample of some of the most commonly used translations:

Then Saturn came, who fled the Pow’r of Jove
Robb’d of his Realms, and banish’d from above.
The Men, dispers’d on Hills, to Towns he brought;
And Laws ordain’d, and Civil Customs taught:
And Latium call’d the Land where safe he lay,
...

The first thing was that Saturn came hither from Olympus,
An exile deprived of his kingdom, fleeing the power of Jove.
He made a united nation of his intractable folk
Scattered among the hills, gave laws to them, chose the name of Latium – a word suggesting the safe refuge he had found there.

The first to arrive among them was Saturn, from heavenly Olympus, an exile who had lost his throne and was retreating before Jupiter’s weapons. He unified the folk, who had been living scattered among hill-tops and were slow to learn, giving them laws and choosing ‘Latium’ from the land’s name, because he had been safe in hiding, ‘latent’, within its boundaries.

Then Saturn came to them from high Olympus,
A fugitive from his lost kingdom, flying
From the attack of Jove. He made a nation of
Of those untamed and scattered in high mountains
And gave them laws. And he choose Latium
As name, because he had lain safely hidden
Along these coasts.

In those early days, in flight from the weapons of Jupiter, came Saturn from heavenly Olympus, an exile who had lost his kingdom. He brought together this wild and scattered mountain people, gave them laws and resolved that the name of the land should be changed to Latium, since he had lain hidden within its borders.

First from heavenly Olympus came Saturn, fleeing from the weapons of Jove and exiled from his lost realm. He gathered together the unruly race, scattered over the mountain heights, and gave them laws, and chose that the land be called Latium, since in these borders he had found a safe hiding place.

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(John Dryden)
(C. Day Lewis)
(W.F. Jackson Knight)
(A. Mandelbaum)
(D. West)
(R. Fairclough, G. Goold)
(M. Rat)
(J. Perret)
(L. Canali)
(F. della Corte)
The problem lies in the translation of *Latiumque* in line 322. All the translators quoted take it to be a neuter noun of the second declension, naming the region known as Latium. This seems the natural interpretation, given that in line 323 there follows the explanatory phrase *his quoniam ... in oris*, which strongly suggests that Vergil is referring to a place in line 322. But there are difficulties with this approach. It is obvious that the subject expressed pronominally by *is*, i.e. Saturn, must be taken with the three verbs in the perfect tense (*composuit ... dedit ... maluit*). The direct object of *composuit* is *genus*. The verb *dedit* has *leges* as direct object and *genus* must be supplied as indirect object. The question to be asked is, what is the object of the third verb, *maluit*? Commentators and translators generally assume that the object of this verb is in fact not expressed, and must be supplied by adding some such word as ‘land’, ‘pays’, ‘terre’, ‘Landschaft’, as in several of the versions quoted above. But there is an alternative interpretation. It is possible to take *Latium* as the adjective *Latius/a/um* qualifying *genus*. Evander says that Saturn (is) fled from the Jupiter, settled (*composuit*) a mountain-inhabiting race (*genus*), gave (*dedit*) laws to it, and wished (*maluit*) it (i.e. *genus*; there is no need for a comma after *dedit* and no need to imagine a non-existant word referring to ‘the land’) to be called Latin (*Latium*). *Genus* is the direct object of *composuit*, the implied indirect object of *dedit* and must be included (rather than some non-existant word for ‘the land’ as assumed by most of the translations quoted above) as part of the object clause following the verb *maluit*. Therefore, the phrase does not mean ‘he preferred it (the land) to be called Latium’, but rather ‘he preferred it (the race) to be called Latin’.

There is a strong argument for refusing to believe that for Vergil *genus Latium* means ‘the Latin race’: in the prologue to *Aeneid* 1, a passage which is clearly in his mind, as noted above, he uses *genus... Latium* (1.6) to mean exactly that. However, there is also a strong counter-argument to this objection: Vergil has wordplay in mind, and he uses *Latium* in order to create an anagram with *maluit*. Furthermore, he signals the presence of the anagram with the words *genus...dispersum... composuit*. The *Latin race*, which is scattered (*dispersum*) in the word *maluit*, is settled and brought to order (*composuit*) in the word *Latium*. Vergil then goes on at once to offer an etymological explanation of *Latium*. It is so called because that is where Saturn lay in safe hiding, *his quoniam latuisset tutus in oris*. And the etymology too is marked, by the signal *vocari*. The collocation of the anagram and the precise etymology, both signposted, is remarkable. On one level the latter corrects the
former: Latium appears first in jumbled form in maluit, but then a logical explanation of
the name is immediately supplied. It may also be the case that the transition from
anagram to etymology actually enacts Saturn’s activities in Latium, since he brings order
to an uncivilized race. When he arrives he finds a genus indocile, but he gives it laws and
settles it, starting a civilizing process and conferring a new name on it. On another
reading, the presence of the anagram may be thought to destabilize or deconstruct the
apparent certainty of the etymological explanation offered, suggesting a less coherent
and positive view of the processes of historical change and narratives of progress and
civilization.8

Claudian

7 A similar, but no doubt not directly related, practice of signalling the presence of a
thematically important anagram occurs in the Panegyricus de sexto consulatu Honorii
Augusti of Claudian. Lines 77 to 81 read as follows:

hinc tibi concreta radice tenacius haesit
et penitus totis inolevit Roma medullis,
dilectaeque urbis tenero conceptus ab ungue
tecum crevit amor. nec te mutare reversum
evaluit propria nutritor Bosporos arce.

8 The anagram, or, more precisely, the palindrome involving Roma-amor, is relatively
common in Latin poetry, and will have been obvious to many readers8. But Claudian takes
care to signal it, I would argue, by his use of reversum in close proximity. Further points
can be added. The collocation dilectaeurbis…amor (love of the beloved city, i.e. Rome) eases
the link, over three verses, between Roma and amor. Furthermore, the whole clause which
follows amor, i.e. nec te mutare reversum/evaluit is also relevant. mutare and reversum mean
literally ‘change’ and ‘turned back’, but in context reversum must have the meaning
‘returned’. And it is important to note where Honorius has returned from. The subject of
evaluit is Bosporos, i.e. the other imperial capital, Constantinople, which could not change
Honorius’ love of Rome, and which, of course, could not form a palindrome (nec…mutare
reversum evaluit) with amor, thus drawing attention to the fact that Roma and amor do in
fact form a perfect palindrome. Roma planted her roots in his heart at a young age and
amor grew there; Honorius’ love of Rome is natural, deep-rooted and eternal.

9 Perhaps for the inattentive reader, Claudian includes a more obvious signal in lines 360 to
362:

... ipsa suis cunctantem Roma querellis:
‘dissimulata diu tristes in amore repulsas
vestra parens, Auguste, queror.’

10 Once again, we see Roma and amor, but this time we also find Roma...dissimulata...inamore
The word which immediately follows, repulsas, no doubt also functions in the same way
as reversum in the earlier passage, signalling that we once again have that most particular
kind of anagram, a palindrome.
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NOTES

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2. See Feeney and Nelis (2005).


4. Ahl (1985) 47f; note also quoniam latuisset. It may be worth noting that I noticed the anagram independently of Ahl. Most discussions ignore it; but see Cairns (1989) 63 nn. 15 and 16, Thomas (2004-05) 132 n. 23.


8. Zetzel (1997) 201f: ‘The history of early Italy, it is apparent, is multiple: there is more than one way to understand it; ... Although he permits the reader to interpret, he lays no claim to omniscience or to truth: he makes the reader aware that Rome has many histories... Rome’s past, and its future, are what the reader will make of them.’


ABSTRACTS

This paper looks at two examples of anagrammatic wordplay in Vergil and Claudian, and argues that in each case the poet carefully signals the presence of the anagram to the reader.

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Mots-clés: Wordplay, Vergil, Saturn, Latium, Claudian