

Aaron Poochigian (ed.), *Aratus: Phaenomena. Translated, with an introduction and notes. Johns Hopkins New Translations from Antiquity.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. xxxi, 72. ISBN 9780801894664. \$25.00 (pb).

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Aratus' *Phaenomena* suffers from a strange contradiction. In Antiquity it was immensely popular, widely read, studied and commented upon, and translated at least six times into Latin. Its contents, its charm, and its elegance appear to have captured generations of ancient readers, among whom we can count Cicero, Ovid, Germanicus, Manilius (who all made translations), Callimachus, Leonidas of Tarentum, and even St. Paul, who quotes a line from the *Phaenomena* in Acts 17:28. It is, moreover, one of the few Greek poems that was translated into Arabic. Yet in the twentieth century the poem hardly seems to have been read. It never made it to graduate reading lists, and it is seldom taught. Histories of classical literature have not shown a great deal of interest in Aratus's off-beat masterpiece. The general feeling seems to be one of awkwardness, as most modern readers fail to see the appeal of Aratus's tedious and endless enumerations of stars and signs.

The last few decades, however, the *Phaenomena* has slowly returned from oblivion. In the wake of the surge of interest in Hellenistic poetry of the last 25 years, Aratus has been given a fair deal of scholarly treatment. Apart from the extensive editions with translation and commentary by Jean Martin in the Budé-series¹ and Douglas Kidd in the Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries series,² Christos Fakas's penetrating monograph on Aratus's game of *imitatio-variatio* of Hesiod's *Works and Days* shows a sound approach to the proper appreciation of the *Phaenomena*.³ Moreover, scholars have moved beyond the discussion of the alleged Stoic element of the poem; whether such a philosophical dimension can be found or not is not irrelevant or of little interest (see Richard Hunter's 1995 article),⁴ but it need not dominate every single discussion of the *Phaenomena*. The attention given to Aratus by e.g. Fantuzzi & Hunter⁵ also shows a reappraisal of the *Phaenomena*, following on the way paved in 1988 by Gregory Hutchinson.⁶

Apparently the time is now right for a low-key publication with a translation of the *Phaenomena*. Of course Kidd's English prose translation facing the Greek text suits its purpose finely, but even the relatively inexpensive paperback edition of his commentary is still far beyond the budget of an average student. Moreover, in terms of aesthetic appreciation, a verse translation does more justice to Aratus's poetic aims. To my knowledge there have been very few modern translations of the *Phaenomena* in verse; the proem, together with a very brief selection from the *Diosemeia* (i.e. the poem's second part on weather signs), is found in Barbara Hughes Fowler's anthology of Hellenistic poetry⁷. The only modern full length verse translation is that of Stanley Lombardo from 1983, now long out of print⁸. This new translation of Aaron Poochigian may therefore be a welcome addition, being part of the Johns Hopkins New Translations from Antiquity series, which contains more unlikely classics, such as translations of Quintus of Smyrna (*The Trojan Epic*), and Statius (*The Thebaid*).

The book consists of a large introduction (xxxii pages, in which the use of (end)notes has fortunately not been shunned), a translation, two appendices (a brief calendar of constellation risings and settings, and a table of the English and Latin names of the star signs, following the designations of Johann Bayer's 1603 star atlas), twenty-five pages of notes to the text, and a short bibliography of works cited. Surprisingly, the translation is occasionally supplied for the aid of the reader with drawings of the star signs discussed, taken from a fifteenth century printed edition of Hyginus's *Poeticon astronomicon*; the stars that make up the constellations are clearly marked. Although the idea is neither original, nor particularly helpful -- the appendix of Erren's 1971 Tusculum-edition of Aratus⁹, already containing 24 highly useful star maps of the relative constellations, does a better job -- the result is welcome nonetheless. A complete star map, such as the one included in the outdated 1921 Loeb edition of Mair¹⁰ would of course have been even better.

Poochigian's Introduction, well-informed and without eager speculation, comprises the following sections: (i.) History and Biography, (ii.) Influences on the *Phaenomena* (Hesiod, Early Science, and Early Stoicism), (iii.) Hellenistic Poetry and the *Phaenomena*, (iv.) The *Phaenomena* and its Latin translations, and (v.) France and the Caliphate (Medieval translations), followed by a few remarks about the author's translation methodology. In some twenty pages Poochigian thus captures many points of interest of various kinds. Avid readers of Aratus would perhaps not have minded a more thorough survey of his poetics, but, considering the scope of the series and the fact that this translation is most likely aimed at those who do not read Greek, Poochigian's introduction does not disappoint. As to the question whether the *Phaenomena* is a genuine didactic poem or an artful experiment without a real didactic aim, Poochigian supports the former view, arguing against Volk's idea of art for art's sake¹¹. Section (iv.), on the Latin translations of the *Phaenomena*, gives a brief treatment of each of the six known translators and their approach to Aratus's poem. The brief note of the poem's afterlife in Arabic shows its endurance in a world beyond the scope of the average student of Hellenistic Greek.

Poochigian's aim is to provide the reader for the first time with a translation that does justice to contents *and* poetics. Other translations have mainly focused on a proper rendition of Aratus's at times complex subject matter. Poochigian's solution is radically different: in order to force the reader to recognize Aratus's work as artful poetry Poochigian has rendered the *Phaenomena* in rhyming couplets. Although the use of end rhyme, particularly when paired, certainly is a strong means of presenting any translation as poetry, it may be a bit too much for those familiar with the original Greek way of composing poetry, in which rhyme, certainly end rhyme, of course hardly plays a role. When compared to Lombardo's translation, however, Poochigian's is definitely more enjoyable as poetry on its own, despite the merits of Lombardo. To get an idea of the result of Poochigian's labour I quote the opening lines:

Let Zeus be foremost — never may our hymns
Omit him. Zeus fills roads and markets, brims
Oceans and bays. By Zeus alone we live
Born as his children, too. He deigns to give
Signs out of kindness to remind us rest
Must yield to work. He shows which soil is best
For cows, and which for hoes, and oversees
Seasons for sowing seeds and planting trees.

Ten-syllable lines in a pleasant iambic rhythm, reminding us of e.g. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but with rhyme: it is obvious Poochigian put a lot of work into this result. Translating Aratus is never easy, and the restrictions of both verse and rhyme certainly make the effort a difficult one. It is therefore a surprise to see with what ease Poochigian has completed his task. Admittedly, not all lines scan flawlessly, and occasionally it takes a second look to see how a line should be read. The iambic problem of the stressed second syllable in every line throughout the poem cannot always be solved, and it demands some flexibility on the part of the reader to make these lines work, but the result is surprising in two ways: Poochigian has made Aratus fun and easy. With a good ear for alliteration and assonance, combined with sparkling rhyme, Poochigian has produced a text that is at times a pleasure to read.

There are of course prices to pay when turning difficult Greek hexameters into iambic English rhyming couplets. When compared to the Greek text of the *Phaenomena* Poochigian's translation is very liberal, focusing on the contents of the Greek rather than its syntax, its moods, or even its words. Often Poochigian is simply incorrect. Already in the brief opening section I noticed two serious errors. Lines 1-2 of the Greek have τὸν οὐδέποτ' ἄνδρες ἐῶμεν / ἄρρητον ("whom we, men, never leave unspoken"). The verb cannot be a subjunctive, considering that the Greek has οὐδέποτ', not μηδέποτ'. Yet Poochigian translates here "never may our hymns / omit him", taking the verb as a subjunctive. In lines 7-8 of the Greek I noticed another unnecessary mistake: λέγει δ' ὅτε βῶλος ἀρίστη / βουσί τε καὶ μακέλησι ("he tells when the soil is best for oxen and mattocks") is translated as "he shows which soil is best / for cows, and which for hoes", turning the conjunction ὅτε into a pronoun. This is not the place to give a thorough analysis of Poochigian's exact rendition of the Greek, and perhaps one should give literary translations a little more credit, but readers are warned here not to take Poochigian's translation too literally, and certainly not to base any scholarly ideas upon it. In my opinion, it is not unfair to say that in the process of producing an elegant translation, in which he has succeeded, Poochigian ended up rewriting the poem in English, taking its contents and its sentences, reshuffling them into something that looks and sounds good, but loses many of the details of the Greek. To demand that every detail in the Greek is taken care of is a lot to ask for in a verse translation, but, when Poochigian's translation is compared to that of Barbara Hughes Fowler, it is clear that her verse rendition is much closer to the Greek. For the convenience of readers familiar with the Greek text Poochigian has added the original line numbers in square brackets every fifteen lines.

I noticed some careless mistakes: on p. 47 the Greek εἶδωλον is transcribed as *eidwlon*, instead of *eidolon*. In the short bibliography on p. 71 'hellenische' should be 'hellenistische'; 'Aratas' should be 'Aratos'. On p. 72 'Manlius' should be 'Manilius'; 'Shiler' should be 'Sihler'. More interesting, the proper title of the work of Eudoxus referred to on p. xv is not *Entropon*, but *Enoptron* ('mirror', 'reflecting surface'). That this is not merely a typo is shown by Poochigian's explanation ('on "cyclic" astronomy'), which derives the incorrect title *Entropon* from the cognate ἐντρέπω. It is careless, moreover, that Poochigian does not state explicitly on which text edition his translation is based, although from the note on 1-3 on p. 45 one can deduce it is Kidd's. Likewise, on p. 50 Poochigian refers to Eudoxus fr. 28 without telling us which edition he is referring to.

Those who always wanted to read the *Phaenomena* in translation, but never came round to doing it will be pleased with this accessible, nimble translation in flowing English couplets, which conveys the pleasure of Aratus well. Both the introduction and the notes are up-to-date, clear, and useful. However, those who are familiar with the Greek and/or those who want to

know more exactly what Aratus is saying literally, had better resort to Kidd's prose translation, as they may be disappointed by the poetic license Poochigian has allowed himself.

Notes:

- [1.](#) J. Martin, *Phénomènes*. Aratus (2 vols.), Paris 1998.
- [2.](#) D. Kidd, *Aratus: Phaenomena* (Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 34), Cambridge 1997.
- [3.](#) Chr. Fakas, *Der hellenistische Hesiod: Arats Phainomena und die Tradition der antiken Lehrepik* (Serta Graeca 11), Wiesbaden 2001. Reviewed in BMCR [2003.06.17](#).
- [4.](#) R.L. Hunter, "Written in the Stars: Poetry and Philosophy in Aratus' *Phaenomena*", *Arachnion* 2 (1995) 1-34.
- [5.](#) M. Fantuzzi & R.L. Hunter, *Tradition and Innovation in Hellenistic Poetry*, Cambridge 2004.
- [6.](#) G.O. Hutchinson, *Hellenistic Poetry*, Oxford 1988.
- [7.](#) B. Hughes Fowler, *Hellenistic Poetry: An Anthology. Selected and translated by Barbara Hughes Fowler*, Madison, WI 1990.
- [8.](#) S. Lombardo, *Sky Signs: Aratus' Phaenomena*, Berkeley, CA 1983.
- [9.](#) M. Erren, *Aratos: Phainomena. Sternbilder und Wetterzeichen* (Tusculum-Bücherei), München 1971.
- [10.](#) A.W. Mair & G.M. Mair, *Callimachus: Hymns and Epigrams. Lycophron. Aratus* (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, MA 1921.
- [11.](#) K. Volk, *The Poetics of Latin Didactic: Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, Manilius*, Oxford 2002.