

CLCS4009. READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE

SEMINAR THREE: WRITING THE ROMAN SKY: MANILIUS' *ASTRONOMICA*: COSMOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND ASTRONOMY IN LATIN LITERATURE

Conduct the following reading on the Handout below, considering the questions below, and be prepared to present your thoughts in class.

NOTE: Please ensure that you print out and bring this seminar handout to the seminar.

Manilius' *Astronomica*: Some background information...

- Manilius was a Latin poet who wrote the *Astronomica* (a didactic poem about astronomy and astrology) in the second decade of the first century AD.
- His poem is written in hexameters and consists of five 'books.'
- Almost nothing is known about the life of Marcus Manilius – he is not quoted nor mentioned by any ancient writer.
- The poem itself implies that he lived under Augustus or Tiberius and was a citizen and resident of Rome.
- He often imitates Lucretius

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- 1/ Who was Manilius?
- 2/ What is didactic poetry?
- 3/ Which historical figure is mentioned in the opening paragraph?
- 4/ What kind of cosmology is expressed by Manilius in Book 1 of his *Astronomica*? (note: cosmology means 'account of the cosmos' or universe)
- 5/ What is said about the gods and their roles in the universe?
- 6/ How does Manilius imagine and describe the stars and the sky?
- 7/ In what ways can we see the influence of Lucretius on Manilius?
- 8/ What is the role of reason (*ratio*) in Manilius' cosmology?

Book 1

By the magic of song to draw down from heaven god-given skills and fate's confidants, the stars, which by the operation of divine reason diversify the chequered fortunes of mankind; and to be the first to stir with these new strains the nodding leaf-capped woods of Helicon, as I bring strange lore untold by an before me: this is my aim. You, Caesar, First Citizen and Father of your Country, who rule a world obedient to your august laws and merit the heaven granted to your sire, yourself a god, are the one who inspires my design and gives me strength for such lofty themes. Now is heaven the readier to favour those who search out its secrets, eager to display through a poet's son the riches of the sky. Only in time of peace is there leisure for this task. It is my delight to traverse the very air and spend my life touring the boundless skies, learning of the constellations and the contrary motions of the planets. But this knowledge alone is not enough. A more fervent delight is to know thoroughly the very heart of the mighty sky, to mark how it controls the birth of all living beings through its signs, and to tell thereof in verse with Apollo tuning my son. Two altars with flame kindled upon them shine before me; at two shrines I make my prayer, beset with a twofold passion, for my song and its theme. The poet must sing to a fixed measure, and the vast celestial sphere rings in his ears besides, scarce allowing even words of prose to be fitted to their proper phrasing.

Deeper knowledge of heaven was first granted to earth by the gift of the gods. For who, if the gods wished to conceal it, would have guilefully stolen the secret of the skies, by which all things are ruled? Who of but human understanding would have essayed so great a task as to wish against heaven's wish to appear a god himself; to reveal paths on high and paths beneath the bottom of the earth and stars obedient to appointed orbits through the void? You, God of Cyllene [i.e. Mercury / Hermes], are the first founder of this great and holy science; through you has man gained a deeper knowledge of the sky – the constellations, the names and courses of the signs, their importance and influences – that the aspect of the firmament might be enhanced, that awe might be roused not only by the appearance but by the power of things, and that mankind might learn wherein lay God's greatest power. Moreover, nature proffered her aid and of her own accord opened up herself, deigning first to inspire those kings whose minds reached out to heights bordering on heaven, kings who civilized savage peoples beneath the eastern sky, where the stars return to view and soar above the cities of dusky nations.

Then priests who all their lives offered sacrifice in temples and were chosen to voice the people's prayer secured by their devotion the sympathy of God; their pure minds were kindled by the very presence of the powerful deity, and the god of heaven brought his servants to a knowledge of heaven and disclosed its secrets to them. These were the men who founded our noble science and were the first by their art to discern the destinies dependent on the wandering stars. Embracing long ages in unremitting toil, they assigned to each period of time its particular events, noting an individual's nativity and the subsequent pattern of his life, the influence of each hour on the laws of fate, and the great differences effected by small moments. After every aspect of the sky had been observed, as the stars returned to their customary positions, and the unvarying sequences of fate had assigned to each figuration of the planets its peculiar influence, by repeated practice and with examples pointing the way experience built up the science; and from wide observation discovered that by hidden laws the stars wield sovereign power and that all heaven moves to the eternal spirit of reason and by sure tokens distinguishes the vicissitudes of fate.

Before their times man lived in ignorance: he looked without comprehension at the outward appearance and saw not the design of nature's works; he gazed in bewilderment at the strange new light of heaven, now sorrowing at its loss, now joyful at its rebirth; nor why the Sun so often rose, putting to flight the stars, why days varied in duration and the period of darkness fluctuated, and why the lengths of the shadows differed according as the Sun retreated or drew nearer, could he understand from the true causes. Nor as yet had ingenuity taught man arts and crafts: the earth lay waste and idled under ignorant husbandmen; gold then had its abode in unvisited mountains, and the sea disturbed by non concealed the existence of unsuspected worlds, for man dared not to entrust his life to the deep or his hopes to the winds, and deemed his little knowledge adequate. But long ages sharpened human wits, the struggle for survival endowed those wretched folk with ingenuity, and the burden of each man's lot forced him to look to himself to better it: then they took thought to divide their tasks and vied with each other in performing them, and whatever shrewd experience had found by trial, they joyfully communicated and surrendered to the common weal. Their barbarous speech, too, then subjected itself to laws of its own; rough soils were tilled for a variety of crops; and the roving sailor made his way into the uncharted sea and established trade-routes between lands unknown to each other. Then the passage of time led to the arts of war and peace, for practice ever breeds one art from another. Not to tell the commonplace, men learnt to understand the utterance of birds; to divine from the entrails of animals; to burst snakes asunder by incantations; to summon up the dead and rouse the depths of Acheron; to turn day into night and night into the brightness of day. Thus, ever ready to learn, ingenuity by its endeavours overcame all obstacles. Nor did man's reason set bound or limit to its activities until it scaled the skies, grasped the innermost secrets of the world by its understanding of their causes, and beheld all that anywhere exists. It perceived why clouds were shaken and shattered by so loud a crash; why winter's snowflakes were softer than summer's hail; why volcanoes blazed with fire and the solid earth quaked; why rain poured down and what cause set the winds in motion...After reason had referred these several happenings to their true causes, it ventured beyond the atmosphere to seek knowledge of the neighbouring vastness of heaven and comprehend the sky as a whole...

Further Reading: Bibliography

Josèphe-Henriette Abry, "Manilius and Aratus: two Stoic poets on stars," Leeds International Classical Studies 6.01 (2007): www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/lics/

Habinek, T. "Probing the Entrails of the Universe: Astrology as bodily knowledge in Manilius' *Astronomica*," in Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh (eds), *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2007), 229-240.

Katharina Volk, *Manilius and his Intellectual Background*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.