
Forgotten Stars: Rediscovering Manilius' Astronomica edited by Steven J. Green and Katharina Volk

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Despite his participation in the Golden Age of Latin literature under Augustus, and despite many passages of surpassing artistry, Manilius and his *Astronomica*, a 4200-line poem describing the heavens and the astrological methods of forecasting, have until recently received little attention in the English-speaking world. Modern scholarly work has generally appeared in German, French, or Italian, and has been crowned by an excellent two-volume Italian edition with translation and extensive commentary on the literary and astrological matters relevant to the text [Feraboli, Flores, and Scarcia 1996–2001]. Unfortunately this edition is somewhat difficult of access in the United States. The Anglosphere's access to Manilius is through G. P. Goold's indispensable Loeb edition [1977], which provides a thoroughly edited text, a fine translation, and a 120-page introduction with a detailed explanation of Manilius' astrology. Now Katharina Volk, the author of two previous books on Manilius, and Steven Green, who has written on Manilius' contemporary Ovid, have edited an outstanding collection of essays on the *Astronomica*, presenting in English the results of recent German (Hübner, Heilen), French (Abry), and Italian (Flores) work, along with essays by English and American scholars. The editors hope—reasonably—that this collection will restore Manilius to his proper place in scholarship, if not in popular appeal.

The book is edited with an eye to the reader's convenience: Manilius' Latin text is quoted extensively but always with an English translation, usually Goold's; footnotes are at the bottom of the page; background information and important comments are in the text where they belong, not relegated to the footnotes. The book's binding and printing are first rate; any typographical errors escaped my notice.

Katharina Volk's 'Introduction: A Century of Manilian Scholarship' introduces the poet and his poem, focusing on the textual and manuscript history, including the several Renaissance editions and commentaries that appeared after the poem's discovery in 1417. The definitive modern edition, she notes, appeared in A. E. Housman's five volumes [1903–1930]. It should be added that Housman's openly expressed contempt for his author (as well as for all previous students of Manilius) probably did much to discourage English scholarship on Manilius. Volk also discusses the poem's date, political context, and intellectual background, particularly its Stoicism. She raises the interesting question concerning Manilius' decision to write an astrological poem in a political atmosphere hostile to the art, especially after Augustus' decree of AD 11 against astrologers. Volk likewise discusses the poem's didactic genre and its poetics—her book of 2002 is on this topic—and finally the reception of the poem in the Renaissance. Each of the topics mentioned by Volk is also addressed in the other essays collected here.

The essays are divided into five categories arising from the nature of the contributions, not from any requirement derived from Manilius' work itself. This review will describe each essay under its category.

1. Intellectual and Scientific Backdrop

The essays in this section describe Manilius' philosophical background, with particular emphasis on his Stoicism. Citing passages from Cicero and Seneca, Elaine Fantham's 'More Sentiment Than Science' outlines the conventional Roman attitudes to the stars and celestial phenomena: non-scientific, sceptical about the stars' predictive value, and suspicious of astrology in general. These attitudes derive from upper-class scepticism about scientific topics and from political caution, especially after Augustus' decree of AD 11 against astrologers.

Thomas Habinek's 'Manilius' Conflicted Stoicism' discusses the contradictions in the poem's philosophy. Stoic physics emphasized the corporeality of everything; it rejected Platonic 'ideas', Aristotle's contrast of matter and form, and any type of non-physical manifestation. The universe is a single body with rational causation. The four elements interact with each other through the *pneuma*, or life-breath; this *pneuma* explains how celestial bodies influence things on Earth. Manilius' difficulty lies in the traditional astrological doctrine that stars interact through the geometrical figures of trine, square,

opposition, and conjunction, all being incorporeal geometric figures, not bodies. Habinek also devotes several paragraphs to a criticism of Goold's translation for being too metaphorical. For example, 'quibus aspirantibus' [5.142] is translated by Goold as 'beneath their influence'. Habinek suggests that this should be 'when they, i.e., stars, breath [on them, i.e., those born when the stars are visible]', treating 'aspirare' as 'to transmit the *pneuma*'. In short, Goold has watered down Manilius' Stoic physics.

Daryn Lehoux's 'Myth and Explanation in Manilius' begins with the conventional contrast of myth *versus* science; the history of science is the history of not-myth. So what is myth? Lehoux uses Manilius as a test case. For Manilius, myth can be a series of poetic tropes, traditional in epic. These are not to be taken seriously because 'Earth creates the cosmos from which it hangs' [2.38]: the mythical figures have no independent existence but are simply representations of the qualities of early creatures. Myth can also be allegory which captures some truth about the universe, for example, the interrelationships among the nature of earthly creatures (bears), its celestial representation (Ursa Major), and those born under the influence of these celestial bodies. Myth enables us to express the meaningful arrangement of this rational universe.

2. Integrity and Consistency

The central essay in this section is Katharina Volk's 'Manilian Self-Contradiction.' Volk cites the following example of a contradiction: in book 3, Manilius describes two ways of calculating the rising times of each zodiacal sign. The first is a fairly sophisticated stepwise method of deriving the rising times for each sign as the day-length changes at the different latitudes from the equator to the North Pole [3.247–482]. So far so good. But immediately thereafter, Manilius presents another totally inaccurate method: assign two hours rising time for each sign throughout the year at every latitude [3.483–509]. Manilius gives both methods equal validity. How does the reader deal with such contradictions? Previous explanations have included ignorance on the part of Manilius, hasty composition, or verses interpolated by a later, incompetent writer. Volk suggests that Manilius' presentation of traditional topics in traditional language gives rise to many of these contradictions. In addition, Manilius desires to orchestrate an effect in each chapter rather than to create a coherent whole and, hence, is less worried about contradictions.

The other essays in this section respond to Volk. John Henderson's 'Watch This Space (Getting Around 1.215–46)', a densely argued postmodernist *tour de force*, argues that in fact many so-called contradictions are no such thing. Earlier commentators had accused Manilius of:

- (1) confusing the northern and southern hemispheres of the globe with the eastern and western;
- (2) thinking that the Moon is eclipsed differently in different parts of the Earth; and
- (3) believing that stars visible in the southern hemisphere (like Canopus) cannot be seen in the northern hemisphere.

By explicating lines 215–246 in detail, Henderson explains away the contradictions. He also describes Manilius' vocabulary relating to space and time, and he shows how Manilius plays with and off the knowledge, language, and poetic devices of astronomical epic. Occasionally Manilius' metaphorical language violates logic because he, like Icarus, reads the universe from above, with a vantage point beyond the terrestrial.

Wolfgang-Rainer Mann's 'On Two Stoic "Paradoxes" in Manilius' discusses two contradictions (paradoxes) that derive from Manilius' Stoicism. The first is 'Every human being has the capacity to understand because of inborn reason' *versus* 'Only an elite can grasp the real nature of the universe through astrology.' The second is that 'The universe is reasonable and wants to be understood' *versus* 'The universe is hidden and needs Manilius to reveal the truth.' Mann shows how these paradoxes are solved in other Stoic authors: reason is indeed an intrinsic potential capability in any rational being but is in fact a hard-won achievement.

In 'Arduum ad astra: The Poetics and Politics of Horoscopic Failure in Manilius' *Astronomica*, Steven Green, one of the editors of this collection, approaches Manilius as if he, Green, were a student of limited knowledge attempting to learn astrology from the author. He fails but then explains why. Manilius has intentionally written a defective or incomplete account of the science to avoid political problems. Astrology was not in good odor under Augustus, the dedicatee of the *Astronomica*. Hence, Manilius praises the science to the emperor as science but he does not actually present the material necessary to allow a civilian to learn the science. A corollary to this incompleteness is that the contradictions may well be intentional, a method

to mislead the unwary. This essay is well argued but the hypothesis seems to this reviewer to be unlikely.

In fact, the four essays in this section, ‘Integrity and Consistency’, ignore the circumstances under which a literary work (I intentionally avoid the term ‘book’) was published in antiquity. Frequent references in ancient literature show that authors read sections of their works to patrons,¹ to peers,² or to occasionally unwilling guests.³ Manilius doubtless read free-standing sections of his poem to his audiences over a period of several years. Under such circumstances, perfect consistency between one section and another is not to be expected [see Markus 2000].

3. Metaphors

These essays dissect Manilius’ verbal artistry. In ‘Tropes and Figures: Manilian Style as a Reflection of Astrological Tradition’, Wolfgang Hübner, the contemporary dean of Manilian studies with publications going back to 1975, points out that poetry and astrology are both metaphorical. In astrology, the figures in the heavens are modeled on figures and events in human life and, in return, human life is considered to be governed by these heavenly figures.⁴ Leo the celestial lion is derived from the Earthly lion and in turn makes those born under him lion-like in character, resulting in a two-way metaphor. Hübner reviews Manilius’ use of figures and tropes—word order, comparisons, verbal antithesis, metonymy, and metaphor in general—and shows how this verbal artistry enriches Manilius’ astrological doctrines.

Duncan Kennedy, in perhaps the most original contribution to this collection, ‘Sums in Verse or a Mathematical Aesthetic?’ addresses Housman’s famous comment on Manilius, that he had an ‘eminent aptitude for doing sums in verse which is the brightest facet of his genius’ [Housman 1903–1930, 2.xiii; this was not a compliment]. After several pages of introductory matter on Housman, Manilius *versus* Lucretius, and the status of astrologers under the empire, Kennedy arrives at his main point: in Manilius ‘ratio’, usually

¹ As Vergil read parts of the *Aeneid* to Augustus and Octavia [Donatus, *Vita Verg.* 32].

² The popularity at court of Lucan’s poetry made Nero jealous [Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.49].

³ In a few invitations, Martial promises not to recite [*Ep.* 5.78.25, 11.52.16], thus humorously encouraging attendance; elsewhere he mentions the recitation of an entire book of epigrams [1.118].

⁴ Compare line 2.38, p. 168 above.

translated 'reason', more often means 'calculation.' According to Manilius, it is through calculation that human beings can penetrate and understand the heavens. The numbers so slightly mentioned by Housman are in fact not just sums but an essential way of knowledge which has been hitherto inaccessible and unknown in poetry. Manilius' chief boast is that he is the first to reveal the methods of calculation in verse.

In his 'Census and *commercium*: Two Economic Metaphors', Patrick Glauthier discusses two words from the business world, 'census' ('a census, wealth, resources') and 'commercium' ('commerce, interchange, trade'). The two spheres, the terrestrial globe and the celestial sphere, have *commercium* with each other in two ways: they carry on an exchange through their influences on each other, and the celestial sphere makes its wealth of knowledge available to the terrestrial astrologer. Glauthier analyses other economic words which extend the metaphor: 'censor', 'scrutor' ('investigator'), the verb 'potior' ('to possess'), 'fines' ('territory'), 'pretium' ('value, price'). Astrological knowledge is a valuable commodity and the astrologer plays an important role in the cosmic economic system.

4. Didactic Digressions

Three contributions make up the fourth section. In 'Digressions, Intertextuality, and Ideology in Didactic Poetry: The Case of Manilius', Monica Gale demonstrates that Manilius engages with previous literature in three important digressions: his history of civilization (beginning of book 1), his discussion of comets (end of book 1), and his vignettes of the four seasons (end of book 3). For Manilius, human civilization has progressed under the guidance of a benevolent Stoic divinity. This view contrasts with that of Manilius' chief rival Lucretius (first century BC), for whom this progress is a result of impersonal and mechanical atomic motion, uncontrolled by any external force. It also contrasts with the 'Golden Age' hypothesis of Hesiod and Vergil, according to whom humanity has degenerated from gold to silver to iron or worse. Concerning comets, Manilius believes that they presage disasters which God in pity has sent men as forewarnings. In epic verse, Manilius cites the comets which presage the famous plague at Athens, Varus' defeat in Germany, and the various battles of the Roman civil wars. Again, his doctrine contradicts that of Lucretius, for whom comets simply occur and have no meaning; it is only fear of them that exacerbates previously existing difficulties. Both poets write set pieces on the plague at Athens

to illustrate their points [Lucretius, *De rer. nat.* 6.1138–1286; Manilius, *Ast.* 1.884–895]. Finally, Manilius responds to both Lucretius and Hesiod in his description of the four seasons. Rather than focus, like the earlier writers, on agricultural work through the year, Manilius' interests center on Rome's imperial ambitions; he describes the seasons for military campaigns and makes parallels between the divine and the imperial order.

Josèphe-Henriette Abry unhappily died before this book reached print. Her contribution, 'Cosmos and Imperium: Politicized Digressions in Manilius' *Astronomica*', was revised by the editor Steven Green. Abry considers the relationship between three digressions in Manilius and three monuments of Augustan Rome. In his digression on the Milky Way [1.761–804], Manilius' list of brave souls who inhabit this region may reflect the statues erected in the Forum Augustum, which opened shortly before 2 BC and for which there is some archeological and literary evidence. Less certain is the relevance of Manilius' digression on day-length [3.443–482] to the Horologium Augusti, which was perhaps a giant sundial but more likely a solar meridian built to track the changes in day-length and concomitantly the progress of the Sun through the zodiac [see [Heslin 2007](#)]. Abry suggests that both the monument and Manilius' digression may reflect Roman intellectual curiosity. Finally, Manilius gives the first complete description in Latin of the οἰκουμένη, the inhabited world [4.585–743]. Abry suggests that this literary description reflects the map commissioned by Agrippa and erected in the Campus Agrippae by Augustus. No fragments of the map survive, only a description by the Elder Pliny, but the left-to-right orientation of Manilius' description of the world, some expressions ('Sardinia looks like a footprint'), and the strange emphasis on wind directions and small islands indicate that Manilius is describing some sort of visible map. Manilius' digressions on these monuments again make parallels between the celestial and political orders, between cosmos and imperium.

In 'A Song from the Universal Chorus: The Perseus and Andromeda Epyllion', James Uden analyses Manilius' version of this story, so popular in ancient drama, with those found in plays by Euripides, Sophocles, Ennius, and Accius, not to mention a treatment by Manilius' contemporary Ovid [*Meta.* 4.663–5.249]. Uden shows how Manilius' small epic [5.538–630] minimizes the amatory, personal elements (grief of parents, Perseus in love, Perseus' conflicts with other suitors), which were the essence of the story for everyone else. Instead, Manilius emphasizes the natural world: the sea is enraged, the

birds grieve, the breeze soothes Andromeda in her grief. For Manilius, the characters of the myth are not only people but also constellations; and he emphasizes the Stoic concept of *σμπάθεια*, the interconnections between the natural world and humanity.

5. Reception

The three essays in this section treat Manilius' later influence. In a brief essay 'Augustus, Manilius, and Claudian', Enrico Flores, one of the editors of Manilius' Italian edition, addresses the date of the *Astronomica*. For centuries the *communis opinio* was that Manilius wrote during the last years of Augustus. Nineteenth-century scholars opted for a date under Tiberius. Housman and Goold were persuaded that the poet began writing under Augustus and finished under Tiberius. By comparing passages from the late Roman poet Claudian's *In Rufinum* (written ca. AD 395) and from book 4 of the *Astronomica*, Flores shows that Claudian believed that Manilius wrote under Augustus. We are left to decide for ourselves how decisive Claudian's opinion should be.

The final two essays address Manilius' influences on the writings of Giovanni Pontano and (at greater length) Lorenzo Bonincontri. In her 'Renaissance Receptions of Manilius' Anthropology', Caroline Stark outlines Pontano's *Urania* (1480), an astrological poem in five books modeled on the *Astronomica*. Pontano describes the non-deterministic celestial forces acting on mankind, concluding that all good is from God, all evil is man's doing. Astrology simply supplies valuable knowledge and informs man's choices; it does not replace free will. Stark also introduces us to Bonincontri (*fl.* 1475), who was the first to lecture and write a commentary on the *Astronomica*. He also wrote *De rebus naturalibus et divinis* (1475). In this work Bonincontri's version of the Endymion myth serves to show that astrological knowledge coupled with right choices leads to divine inspiration and enables mankind to ascend to heaven.

Stephan Heilen's 'Lorenzo Bonincontri's Reception of Manilius' Chapter on Comets (Astr. 1.809–926)' is a significant contribution to scholarship in itself, editing some 120 lines on comets from Bonincontri's *De rebus naturalibus et divinis* with detailed commentary. Unfortunately, he does not include an English translation. Heilen begins with a brief account of Bonincontri's life and works, certainly the most accessible summary in English. He then contrasts Manilius' view of comets—their physical nature, their shape, their

negative significance [1.809–926]—with Bonincontri’s hypothesis in *De rebus* that individual planets create comets, which again always forecast disaster. Bonincontri describes at length the comet of 1456 (a real one; most comets in ancient literature are fictional) and its associations with dreadful events in Naples: the earthquake of 1456, the plague, the death of King Alfonso in 1458, wars, and (more personally) the deaths of Bonincontri’s wife and children. Heilen suggests that this traumatic series of events convinced Bonincontri to study the *Astronomica*. In the appendix to his essay, Heilen edits with commentary this section on comets from *De rebus* [1.474–591]. In the body of his essay, Heilen also describes Bonincontri’s philological-historical commentary of 1484 on the *Astronomica*, in which Bonincontri made conjectures on Manilius’ difficult text, cited literary parallels, and occasionally showed Manilius’ relevance for his (Bonincontri’s) own time, as in the passage on comets. Bonincontri focuses on the comet of 44 BC, which appeared at the funeral games of Julius Caesar, and the disastrous comet of 1456. Bonincontri considers comets to be warnings sent by God.

The bibliography included in *Forgotten Stars* is the most extensive on Manilius available anywhere, far larger than that included in **Feraboli, Flores, and Scarcia 1996–2001**. The book concludes with an *index locorum* (ancient authors only; Pontano and Bonincontri might have been included), and a highly selective and inadequate one-page general index.

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