

# Wordplay in Vergil and Claudian<sup>1</sup>

---

DAMIEN NELIS

[damien.nelis@lettres.unige.ch](mailto:damien.nelis@lettres.unige.ch)

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.<sup>2</sup> At least two of them seem to have adopted a similar approach to the use of anagrams.<sup>3</sup>

## *Vergil*

*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 Olympo  
**arma** Iouis **fugiens** et *regnis exsul ademptis*.  
is **genus** indocile ac dispersum montibus altis  
composuit legesque dedit, **Latium**que uocari  
**maluit**, his quoniam **latui**isset tutus in **oris**.

---

1. I would like to thank Michael Dewar, Sandro La Barbera, Jocelyne Nelis-Clément, Wolfgang Polleichtner, Catherine Ware, Stephen Wheeler and Tony Woodman for advice and help of various kinds. It would be a serious misjudgement to assume on the basis of their kindness and generosity that they subscribe to the ideas proposed here.

2. See Feeney and Nelis (2005).

3. On anagrams in Latin poetry and the wider context see, for example, Starobinski (1971), Ahl (1985), Armstrong and Armstrong, Oberhelman in Obbink (1995).

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. *exsul*) ; *genus*, 1.6 ; *oris*, 1.1), which creates a striking parallel between Saturn and Aeneas as exiles from lost kingdoms arriving in Latium :

**Armavirumque** cano, Troiae qui **primus** ab **oris**  
 Italiam, *fato profugus*, Laviniaque **venit**  
 litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto  
 vi superum, saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram;  
 multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem,<sup>5</sup>  
 inferretque deos **Latium**, **genus** unde **Latinum**,  
 Albanique patres, atque altae moenia Romae.

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,  
 ...

(John Dryden)

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.

(C. Day Lewis)

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.

(W.F. Jackson Knight)

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 chose Latium  
 As name, because he had lain safely hidden  
 Along these coasts.

(A. Mandelbaum)

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.

(D. West)

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.

(R. Fairclough, G. Goold)

Le premier, Saturne vint de l'Olympe éthéré, fuyant les armes de Jupiter, exilé et dépossédé de son royaume. C'est lui qui rassemble ce peuple indocile, épars sur de hautes montagnes, qui lui donne des lois et lui choisit le nom de Latium, pour avoir sur ces bords trouvé une sûre cachette.

(M. Rat)

Le premier qui vint fut Saturne, descendu de l'Olympe éthéré, fuyant les armes de Jupiter, exilé, déchu de sa royauté. Il réunit ces hommes indociles et dispersés sur les hautes montagnes, il leur donna des lois et choisit pour le pays le nom de Latium parce qu'il avait sur ces bords trouvé une retraite sûre.

(J. Perret)

Primo venne Saturno dell' etereo Olimpo,  
fuggendo le armi di Giove ed esule del regno usurpato.  
Raccolso la stirpe indocile e dispersa per gli alti monti,  
e diede leggi e volle che si chiamassero Lazio  
le terre nella cui custodia era vissuto nascosto.

(L. Canali)

Saturno fu il primo che venne dall' Olimpo celeste,  
Alle folgiori di Giove sfuggendo, esule dal regno usurpato.  
Riunì le rustiche genti e vaganti sulle alte  
montagne, diede leggi e volle che Lazio fosse chiamato  
poiché in questi luoghi era stato latitante al sicuro.

(F. della Corte)

Kam da als erster Saturn aus den Himmelshöhn des Olympus,  
Fliehend Jupiters Waffen, verbannt aus entrissener Herrschaft,  
Der dem rohen Geschlecht, das auf hohen Gebirgen zerstreut war,  
Ordnung schenkte, Gesetze verlieh, und nannte die Landschaft  
Latium, bergendes Land, weil dort er sich sicher verborgen.

(W. Plankl, K. Vretska)

Bald kam Saturnus herab vom aetherischen Olymp auf der  
Flucht vor Jupiters Waffen, verbannt aus dem Reich, das ihm  
geraubt worden war. Er führte das unbelehrte Volk zusammen,  
das im hohen Gebirge verstreut lebte, gab ihm Gesetze, und es  
gefiel ihm, das Land Latium zu nennen, 'das Bergende', da es  
ihn in Sicherheit geborgen hatte.

(V. Ebersbach)

Als erster kam ins Land vom himmlischen Olymp Saturnus,  
auf der Flucht vor Jupiters Waffen und heimatlos, seines  
Reiches beraubt. Er einte die noch unkultivierten Menschen,  
die auf hohen Bergen verstreut lebten, gab ihnen Gesetze und  
wählte den Namen Latium für das Land, weil er sich an dieser  
Küste hatte sicher verbergen können.

(E. Binder, G. Binder)

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 of 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-existent 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-existent 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... Latinum* (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*.<sup>4</sup> 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*)

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.

in the word *Latium*. Vergil then goes on at once to offer an etymological explanation of *Latium*.<sup>5</sup> 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*.<sup>6</sup> The collocation of the anagram and the precise etymology, both signposted, is remarkable.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

### *Claudian*

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

5. See O'Hara (1996) 207f.

6. See O'Hara (1996) 207.

7. For the striking number of etymologies in Evander's speech see Briquel (1992), O'Hara (1996) 207f, Nelis (2001) 223f.

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.'

tecum crevit **amor**. nec te mutare **reversum**  
 evaluit propria nutritor Bosporos arce.

The anagram, or, more precisely, the palindrome involving *Roma-amor*, is relatively common in Latin poetry, and will have been obvious to many readers<sup>9</sup>. 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 *dilectae urbis...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.

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.'

Once again, we see *Roma* and *amor*, but this time we also find *Roma...dissimulata...in amore*. 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.

9. See Cairns (1989) 118.

## Works Cited

- F. Ahl, *Metaformations. Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets*, (Ithaca 1985).
- D. Armstrong, 'The Impossibility of Metathesis: Philodemus and Lucretius on Form and Content in Poetry', pp. 210-32 in *Philodemus and Poetry. Poetic Theory and Practice in Lucretius, Philodemus and Horace*, ed. D. Obbink, (Oxford 1995).
- D. Armstrong, S. Oberhelman, 'Satire as Poetry and the Impossibility of Metathesis in Horace's *Satires*', pp. 233-54, in *Philodemus and Poetry. Poetic Theory and Practice in Lucretius, Philodemus and Horace*, ed. D. Obbink, (Oxford 1995).
- D. Briquel, 'Virgile et les Aborigènes', *REL* 70 (1992) pp. 69-91.
- F. Cairns, *Virgil's Augustan Epic* (Cambridge 1989).
- D. Feeney and D. Nelis, 'Two Vergilian Acrostics: certissima signa?', *CQ* 5 (2005) pp. 644-646.
- D. Nelis, 'L'Énéide et les origines de Rome: l'épopée étiologique', pp. 223-240 in *Origines Gentium*, edd. V. Fromentin, S. Gotteland, (Bordeaux 2001).
- J. O'Hara, *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay*, (Ann Arbor 1996).
- J. Starobinski, *Les mots sous les choses: les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure*, (Paris 1971).
- R.F. Thomas, 'Torn between Jupiter and Saturn: Ideology, Rhetoric and Culture Wars in the Aeneid', *CJ* 100 (2004-05) 121+47.
- J. Zetzel, 'Rome and its Traditions', pp. 188-203 in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. C. Martindale, (Cambridge 1997).
- En collaboration avec J. Nelis-Clément (Université Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux 3), 'Petronius' epigraphic habit', *Dictynna* 2 (2005).
- 'Apollonius Rhodius' dans *The Blackwell Companion to Ancient Epic*, éd. J.M. Foley (Oxford 2004) pp.353-63.
- 'The Reading of Orpheus: The *Orphic Argonautica* and the Epic Tradition', dans *Roman and Greek Imperial Epic*, éd. M. Paschalis, *Rethymnon Classical Studies* 2 (2005) pp. 169-92.
- 'The Roman Callimachus: Structure and Coherence in the Propertian Corpus', dans *Koruphaiô andri: Mélanges offerts à André Hurst*,

éd. A. Kolde, A. Lukinovich, A.-L. Rey, (Genève 2005) pp. 235-48.

'Patterns of Time on Vergil. The *Aeneid* and the *Aetia* of Callimachus', dans *La représentation du temps dans la poésie augustéenne*, éd. J.P.Schwindt, (Heidelberg 2005) p. 71-83.

En collaboration avec D. Feeney (Université de Princeton), 'Vergilian acrostics – *certissima signa?*', *Classical Quarterly* 55 (2005) pp. 264-6.