Abstract: In this article I begin by comparing and contrasting our reading practice regarding acrostics with our practice regarding allusions and intertexts, looking in particular at the problematic notion of authorial intention; I suggest an approach that assumes that ancient learned readers were on the look-out for acrostics, just as they were for allusions, and that they would test them for significance (as we imagine they did for allusions). I then apply this approach to the beginning and end of the *Aeneid*, and the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*, exploring how our reading of these well-studied passages changes if we pay attention to the acrostics and telestics that this process unearths. I note among other things how the presence of *ILUS*, of *ARMA* and a man, and of a Horatian *MUS* and a Vergilian *ERATO* can enrich our reading of the text. I close with an old and particularly controversial acrostic in *Eclogue* 4 (*CACATA*) that presents a potential challenge to my approach.

Arms and a Mouse: Approaching Acrostics in Ovid and Vergil[1]

«This may be pure chance…». When Don Fowler argued for the significance of the acrostic MARS at *Aeneid* 7.601-604, back in 1983, [2] he did so with some apparent anxiety. His hesitancy manifested itself not just in our opening quotation, but also in his apologetic tone throughout: he feared that he might be «gullible enough to believe» in its significance; in place of statements there were questions («is it inconceivable that Vergil may have used an acrostic in this way?»); and he concluded the article with the now-famous *envoi* «I await the men in white coats», which has since become something of a meme in acrostic scholarship. In the crowded ledgers of scholarly lunacy, Fowler's suggestion is hardly the most disturbing entry, but clearly he felt that in attributing this acrostic not to literary chance but to Vergilian choice he might evoke a strong negative reaction. Such negativity also seems to have been on the mind of Nicholas Horsfall some fifteen years later, when commenting on this passage and its possible acrostic: «Like it or not, this was an old Alexandrian game and however serious the passage, such an ornamentation is truly not grotesque». [3]

Such a negative reaction is however not a recent phenomenon: indeed, those who would find the idea of Mars' presence at the edges of the *Aeneid* either insane or grotesque do have some ancient company. For if, as Horsfall comments, acrostics have a long history, so too do the impatience and scepticism with which they can be received. Aulus Gellius was distinctly unimpressed with a book he was given containing a wealth of learned trivia, including (among many other things) a list of name-acrostics, isopsephic verses, and other oddities in Homer: [4] such things, in his opinion, have «the

[1] I would like to thank Stephen Heyworth, Calypso Nash and Talitha Kearey (who read an earlier version of this paper) and the journal's anonymous referees for their valuable comments. Their time and their insight is much appreciated.

[2] Fowler 1983. As Fowler notes, the acrostic was spotted by Hilberg (in his article of 1899), but is one of many dismissed by him as accidental. For recent surveys of classical acrostics and acrostic scholarship, see Katz 2013 with updates in Katz 2016 (to which add the various articles by Adkin; Trzaskoma 2016; Kronenberg 2017 and 2018; Kersten 2017; and Robinson 2019); Luz 2010, pp. 1-77; Damschen 2004; Courtney 1990; Vogt 1967. Hilberg's article lists thousands of acrostics that he identified in Latin hexameter poetry, but rejected as accidental; a follow-up article (Hilberg 1900) added a few more authors to the list. The work of Simon 1899 and Schmid 1983 contains some useful observations, though many of their suggestions both as to content and encoding of the hidden messages are somewhat idiosyncratic.

[3] Horsfall 2000, p. 391 (on line 601).

[4] *Noct. Att.* 14.6. Gellius himself does not dignify such trivia by giving any examples, but for a similar approach to Homer that does come with examples, see Athenaeus 10.457c-e. Modern scholarship can help: for acrostics

appearance of learning, but are neither entertaining nor useful». [5] It is not clear whether there was any attempt to find meaning in the acrostics in Gellius' list; [6] but the debate as to whether one person's significant acrostic is another's over-interpretation of a random occurrence can be traced back (if the story is genuine) to one of our earliest recorded examples of an acrostic. [7]

In Diogenes Laertius's biography of the 4th-century B.C. philosopher and polymath Heracleides, [8] we learn that a certain Dionysius Metathemenos had written a play entitled *Parthenopaeus*, but passed it off as the work of Sophocles. Heracleides believed the play to be authentic, and cited it as a work of Sophocles in his writings. When Dionysius revealed that he was in fact the author, Heracleides did not believe him. As proof, Dionysius pointed to an acrostic in the play that formed the name of his *eromenos* (Pankalos). Heraclides was still not convinced «and said that such a thing might happen by chance». [9]

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that form names in Homer, see Hilton 2013. Isopsephic verses are verses in which the Greek letters, read as numerals, add up to the same number: see in general Luz 2010, pp. 247–325; Hilton 2011 on Homer and Apollonius; Page 1981, pp. 503-40 on Leonidas; for consecutive isopsephic verses in Homer, cf. e.g. 1.490 and 491 (which both add up to 3,833) or 7.264 and 265 (which both add up to 3508 with the inclusion of iota subscripts); and for a full list and further discussion, see Hilton 2011. The book given to Gellius also specified where in Homer one could find a verse in which each word contained one more syllable than the last: cf. e.g. *Iliad* 3.182 ὦ μάκαρ ᾽Ατρεΐδη μοιρηγενὲς ὀλβιόδαιμον.

[5] The words come from the title of the chapter: *cuimodi sint quae speciem doctrinarum habeant, sed neque delectent neque utilia sint*.

[6] It seems more likely that for the compiler of this list, knowledge of such things was an end in itself, rather than a prelude to interpretation. Compare for example the textual games described in the quotation from Clearchus at Athenaeus 10.457c, and the discussion that follows (e.g. of lines of Homer whose first and last syllables form a proper name, or the name of an object, or which do not contain a sigma), where the purpose of such games seems to be to display one's detailed recall of a text.

[7] The earliest reported example would be 6th century Epicharmus (6th/5th century BC), who according to Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 8.78 inserted acrostics in some of his works to make his authorship clear: καὶ παραστιχίδα γε ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις τῶν ὑπομνημάτων πεποίηκεν, οἷς διασαφεῖ ὅτι ἑαυτοῦ ἐστι τὰ συγγράμματα. ('and he has made acrostics in most of his treatises, by which he makes it clear that they were his own writings'). What exactly these *hypomnemata* were is not clear: see Luz, pp. 25-7. Note that the Loeb translation of Hicks 1925 translates παραστιχίδα as «marginal notes».

[8] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 5.92 f. Diogenes is usually thought to be writing in the 3rd century AD.

[9] 5.93 ὡς δ' ἔτι ἀπιστῶν ἔλεγε κατὰ τύχην ἐνδέχεσθαι οὕτως ἔχειν. Dionysius presents Heracleides with further evidence of his authorship, but the precise nature of the evidence is not entirely clear. Diogenes writes πάλιν ἀντεπέστειλεν ὁ Διονύσιος ὅτι "καὶ ταῦτα εὑρήσεις· Α. γέρων πίθηκος οὐχ ἁλίσκεται πάγῃ· Β. ἁλίσκεται μέν, μετὰ χρόνον δ᾽ ἁλίσκεται." ('Dionysius sent word back to him: "you will find this passage too: [A] An old monkey is not caught in a trap. [B] Yes he is, but he is caught after some time"). That these lines are in iambic trimeters and seem to be part of a dialogue strongly suggests that they are lines from the play, to which Dionysius draws Heracleides' attention (though Courtney 1990, p. 3, seems to think that the whole phrase is another acrostic). Not so clear is the final piece of evidence: Diogenes continues καὶ πρὸς τούτοις· Ἡρακλείδης γράμματα οὐκ ἐπίσταται. ὁ δ' ᾐσχύνθη. ('and in addition to this: Heracleides does not know his letters. He was ashamed'). The phrase ὁ δ' ᾐσχύνθη is an emendation of the manuscripts' οὐδ' ᾐσχύνθη ('nor is he ashamed'): the emendation enables the first part of the sentence (Ἡρακλείδης γράμματα οὐκ ἐπίσταται) to scan as an iambic trimeter (missing the first syllable): in other words, this final piece of evidence might also be from a line in the play, though it is harder to see how such a sentence might fit a tragedy about the Seven Against Thebes. For Courtney 1990, p. 3, this is another acrostic; Damschen 2004, p. 92, n. 9 refers to it initially as an acrostic, but later mentions that it is 'hidden'; for others it is simply a comment by Dionysius (cf. e.g. Kotlińska-Toma 2015, p. 145) or Diogenes (Peirano 2012, p. 55). Either way, the idea that Heracleides 'does not know his letters' would have particular relevance if he failed to spot the acrostic. For further discussion, see Luz 2010, pp. 27-29.

However, these two stories reveal much more than just a historical familiarity with (and antipathy towards) acrostics - they have much to tell us about the various ways in which ancient texts were being read (and written). In what follows, I hope to use the topic of acrostics not so much as a way to achieve «the appearance of learning» but rather as a way of thinking about reading practices, both ancient and modern. I begin with a section on method, in which I compare and contrast our reading practice regarding acrostics with our practice regarding allusions / intertexts, looking in particular at the problematic notion of authorial intention and at our expectations of ancient and modern readers; I suggest an approach that assumes that a number of ancient readers were on the look-out for acrostics, just as they were for allusions. The methodological section is followed by a practical one, in which I apply this approach to three well-studied passages from Ovid and Vergil, and see what happens to our reading of a text if we pay attention to the acrostics and telestics that this process unearths. I close with an old and particularly controversial acrostic that presents a potential challenge to my approach.

At Random? Intuiting chance and its alternatives

When Heracleides dismissed Dionysius' acrostic as a meaningless random occurrence, he may well have been motivated by concern for his scholarly reputation, but he also articulates one of the central problems of acrostics: apparently meaningful combinations of letters can arise by chance, so how do we know whether to take them seriously or not?

The power – and playfulness – of chance can be usefully illustrated by the presence of English-language acrostics in Latin texts. For example, those familiar with the heated debate concerning the validity or otherwise of the (in)famous MA-VE-PU acrostic at *Georgics* 1.429-33[10] may find it a curious coincidence that the lines immediately preceding this passage contain the acrostic DUNCES;[11] and it is a similarly curious coincidence that at the close of *Eclogue* 10 we seem to hear a final farewell to the bucolic genre from the βοῦς itself, with the telestic MOO appearing at the start of the final section.[12]

On these occasions, we can be sure that these acrostics are entirely accidental, even if amusingly appropriate. But what of Latin acrostics in Latin texts? While some texts, usually inscriptions, explicitly draw attention to the existence of an acrostic,[13] this is not often the case for literary texts,

[10] For details of the Ma-Ve-Pu acrostic, see note 51

[11] Verg. *Georgics* 1.419-24: ***d****enset erant quae rara modo, et quae densa relaxat, / **u**ertuntur species animorum, et pectora motus / **n**unc alios, alios dum nubila uentus agebat, / **c**oncipiunt: hinc ille auium concentus in agris / **e**t laetae pecudes et ouantes gutture corui. / **s**i uero solem ad rapidum lunasque sequentis*. The passage containing the MA-VE-PU acrostic begins at 1.424. For those unfamiliar with the word, a 'dunce' is a term for a stupid person, though it once meant 'One whose study of books has left him dull and stupid; … a dull pedant' (OED, §4).

[12] Verg. *Ecl.* 10.70-72:*Haec sat erit, diuae, uestrum cecinisse poeta**m**, / dum sedet et gracili fiscellam texit hibisc**o**, / Pierides: uos haec facietis maxima Gall**o**…* For non-English speakers, I should note that 'moo' is the onomatopoeic word for the noise made by a cow. While the same sound is implicit in the Latin *mugire*, that sound cannot be represented in Latin by 'oo' or 'ō' (taking 'oo' as an orthographic representation of a long vowel).

[13] Cf. e.g. the final line of an early 3rd century AD inscription from Bu Njem in Libya, which reads *capita versorum relegens adgnosce curantem* ('recognise the man who saw to the setting up of this monument by

so the question as to whether a particular acrostic is 'real' – or whether it appears by chance or not - would appear to be absolutely fundamental to further enquiry. As one scholar writes, «Methodologically there is one chief danger … that is, the problem of determining when an acrostic is really an acrostic, and when it is merely an accidental confluence»;[14] and to quote some recent scholars: Luz in 2010 comments in the introduction to her chapter on acrostics, «For each acrostic, therefore, there is the fundamental question, whether it happened by chance or was intended by the author of the text».[15] Or again, Stewart (writing of a possible acrostic in the *Argonautica*, also in 2010): «But the question of authorial intent is deeply relevant to the Argonautica: is there any evidence to support the claim that the word ἄκτια was genuinely intended as an acrostic?»[16] Or again Katz (in 2014): «A presumably accidental acrostic … is obviously less interesting than an intentional one».[17]

Now this distinction between 'accidental' and 'intentional' acrostics is entirely intuitive: it seems obvious that it is 'intention' that gives an acrostic its meaning. If MARS is not intentional, then why should it be of any more scholarly interest than DUNCES? It is no surprise that this distinction has been and remains extremely common in the context of acrostics. In the context of Latin literary scholarship more generally, however, some of us might feel a little uncomfortable at such a direct and unqualified evocation of authorial intention. This concept has been the subject of intense theoretical debate,[18] and even if nowadays we have become comfortable with a certain theoretical fuzziness on this topic and are somewhat more relaxed about referring to the author (or the useful fiction of the author), granting authorial intention such a fundamental role in our interpretative process remains problematic.[19]

Now I do not want to go too deeply into the difficult problems of authorial intention here, but I do think it is valuable to explore – very briefly – the issue of intention in relation to acrostics. One of the great benefits of the theoretical debates of the previous years is that they have forced us to articulate precisely what it is that we think we are doing when we are interpreting a text, and such self-reflection will be helpful when thinking about our interpretation of acrostics.

For a long time, authorial intention was a key principle of interpretation: whether one was thinking about an acrostic, some etymological word-play, or a possible allusion, it was important to discover

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reading the first letters of the verses'). The inscription contains the acrostic *Porcius Iasucthan cent(urio) leg(ionis) f(ecit) c(urante) mac(istro)*. For further details, see Mairs 2013; and for further examples of acrostic and telestic inscriptions (in addition to those in Mairs), see Courtney 1990; Luz 2010, pp. 33-47; Garulli 2013.

[14] For the reference, see below and note 21.

[15] Luz 2010, p. 5: "Es stellt sich also grundsätzlich für jedes Akrostichon die Frage, ob es zufällig entstanden ist oder vom Verfasser des Textes beabsichtigt war".

[16] Stewart 2010, p. 403. See also the frequent dichotomy in acrostic articles between 'chance or choice': e.g. Morgan 1993, Clauss 1997.

[17] Katz 2014.

[18] For a brief overview, cf. Hinds 1998, ch. 2; Edmunds 2001, ch. 2. Edmunds remarks (p. 168) of authorial intention that "few take it seriously" and those who do use it do so "with apology" (thinking of Hinds). A few years later, however, Farrell 2005, p. 98, noted that authorial intention "now attracts less direct attention than it used to".

[19] It is nonetheless interesting to compare our intuitive response to authorial intention in the case of acrostics and our response more generally, as these responses may differ. If so, we may wonder which response we want to prioritise and why.

whether or not this was a meaningful intentional act by the author, as opposed to mere meaningless chance. This principle served classical studies well, and I suspect is it still the way most of us think about texts, no matter how we might present our thought processes to others. The principle is not without its problems, however. In the case of classical texts, even before we raise any sophisticated theoretical concerns about the role of intention in creating meaning,[20] we are confronted with a basic epistemological difficulty: how can we know what Vergil's intention was? We cannot ask him about MARS, and in the absence of any notes, rough drafts, diaries etc., we have no way of discovering his intention beyond the text that we are trying to interpret.

So again, putting aside any theoretical concerns about the validity of authorial intention as a guide to interpretation, from a strictly practical point of a view, Vergil's intention – since it is ultimately unknowable - is not much help as a criterion for meaning. So what is it that we are actually doing when we talk about or ascribe something to Vergil's intention? What does it mean to say that an acrostic is 'intentional'?

Now these questions have all been asked before, and they are perhaps most familiar – or rather, they have received the most attention in Latin literary studies – in discussions of allusion and intertextuality; and much of the work done in that area is applicable to the subject of acrostics, with just a simple substitution of 'acrostic' for 'allusion' (or 'reference' etc.): indeed, the unattributed quotation with which I began this discussion was in fact a slightly edited quotation from an article not about acrostics, but about allusion.[21] Now while I believe that our attitudes towards intertextuality and acrostics can be usefully and interestingly compared, I do not wish to claim a direct equivalence between acrostics and allusion/intertextuality in all respects. Furthermore, the term 'intertextuality' has been theorized in a variety of different ways,[22] and only some of these can be interestingly compared with acrostics. My interest is more in those approaches where 'intertextuality' comes closer to 'allusion'; broader and more systemic approaches, such as Conte's theory of 'poetic memory', for example, according to which every text is a product of— and

[20] Theorists of modern literature of course are faced with the problem that in some cases it is possible to ask the author what they intended; and their theories must explain why the author's response is not always helpful or relevant. For a brief account of such problems, see Edmunds 2001, ch. 2; for an attempt to restore the author to their central role, see Burke 2008. One claim made by theorists is that the author cannot always be trusted to tell the truth – for a relevant example, we can compare the response of Governor Schwarzenegger's spokesman when confronted with the discovery of the acrostic "FUCK YOU" in one of Schwarzenegger's veto-letters, vetoing a bill sponsored by Tom Ammiano (who had heckled Schwarzenegger at an event not long before). The spokesman dismissed this acrostic as a "weird coincidence". The story (and the gubernatorial response) was subsequently widely reported, though the precise wording of the response varies. See for example the account in the NY Times: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/us/29arnold.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=schwarzenegger%20obscenity&st=cse (retrieved 31/07/2017).

[21] Thomas 1986, p. 174. The actual quote is as follows: «Methodologically there is one chief danger in a study such as this, that is, the problem of determining when a reference is really a reference, and when it is merely an accidental confluence.»

[22] The classicist's 'intertextuality' tends to be a much milder version of the 'intertextuality' as envisaged by its originator, Julia Kristeva. For some recent (and some classic) thoughts on 'allusion' vs 'intertextuality' and other aspects of this debate, see (as regards the discipline of Classics) Conte 1986, Lyne 1994, Fowler 1997, Hinds 1998, Edmunds 2001, Farrell 2005 and Conte 2017. For the debate more generally, see Irwin 2004 who argues against 'intertextuality' as a term in literary studies and attempts to resurrect the author and their intention.

therefore necessarily intertextual with—an entire cultural history, move the debate in a very different direction.[23]

As Edmunds notes in his book on intertextuality, «clues to intentions are almost always lacking and have to be inferred from poems.»[24] What we are doing when we say that an acrostic or an allusion is 'intentional' is offering an interpretation of that example that appears meaningful in the context of our wider interpretation of the text, and one that coheres with our image of the author, which is itself the result of our interpretation of the text. For Edmunds, to claim that this interpretation is in fact the author's intention is just a rhetorical flourish.[25]

Of course, our interpretation does not exist in a vacuum. What validates our claim of 'intentionality', since validation cannot come from the author, and indeed, what validates our image of the author him- or herself, is the interpretative community.[26] In this regard, Fowler's 1997 article on intertextuality (repurposed through the substitution of 'acrostic' for 'allusion' or 'correspondence'), presents helpful reflection on what we are doing when we claim that something is 'authorial':

> «… This is another complaint sometimes made against recent work, that the *acrostics* … have too much made of them … but it is arguable that the criteria applied in deciding whether to accept an *acrostic* have not actually changed. Earlier criticism might have phrased its concerns in terms of whether a particular *acrostic* was in the author's mind or not, but the criteria for deciding whether it was authorial are the same as critics might now use to decide whether to accept as readers an *acrostic*: markedness and sense. We require an *acrostic* to stand out and to make sense: that is, if someone wants to convince the interpretative community of a particular *acrostic*, they must say how the *acrostic* is special, and they must do something interesting with it, make it mean.»[27]

Were Don Fowler to have returned to *MARS* after publishing this article, he would presumably have been less explicitly concerned about accusations of gullibility or about Vergil's intent, though the substance of his arguments may have remained the same: just as with allusion, the criteria by which in practice we decide whether to accept an acrostic or not – either as 'intentional' or as 'meaningful'

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[23] Cf. Conte 1986, where for example allusion is «an aspect of the systematic character of literary composition» (p. 27); «[i]Intertextuality, far from being a matter of merely recognising the ways in which specific texts echo each other, defines the condition of literary readability. Certainly the sense and structure of a work can be grasped only with reference to other models hewn from a long series of texts of which they are, in some way, the variant form» (p. 29); and «the text … is a profoundly contextualized network of association, echoes, imitations, allusions – a rich root system reaching down and entwined with the fibers of the culture in its historical dimension» (p. 49). On this view of intertextuality, authorial intention is of less critical concern since every word, whether consciously or not, reflects the literary and cultural system from which it emerges. Conte restates and updates his approach in Conte 2017, allowing a little more space for authorial intention; though he concludes his theoretical section with the following: «In short, it is risky to seek in the text the conscious action of the author; his intention, whether reflexive or calculated, may be ambiguous, fleeting, often cheating. On the other hand, to discover models, both those voluntarily sought out and those involuntarily experienced, can tell us something more verifiable about the poet's creativity, if not his consciousness: his tastes, his assimilated reading, the mnemonic workshop of his texts» (p. 51).

[24] Edmunds 2001, p. xii.

[25] Edmunds 2001, p. xii, and 166.

[26] This is a descriptive comment, rather than a prescriptive one.

[27] Fowler 1997, pp. 19 f.

– do not necessarily change depending on our theoretical outlook, since to say that an acrostic is 'intentional' was always to say that we can tell a convincing story about it, that we can 'make it mean'.

However, even if the nature of the arguments adduced in support of an intention-free intertext were not in fact much different from those adduced in support of an intention-bearing allusion (indeed, for many of us who embraced the term intertextuality, the author was in fact never far beneath the surface), the 'intertextual' approach did have one important effect, in that it encouraged readers who might otherwise have dismissed certain features of a text as fortuitous to submit those features to greater intellectual scrutiny. The words of Oliver Lyne on this subject – once again with the lightest of edits – can offer something valuable for our approach to acrostics:

> «[The problem with an approach that relies on authorial intention is that it] encourages us to invoke the author's intention to settle any unwelcome facts or difficulties… We think we know about people and what they intend, especially our favourite poets. And thus we feel licensed to say that Vergil *intends significance in* this *acrostic*, but – if we cannot seem to make sense of it – not in *that* one.»[28]

He suggests a different approach, one which does not prioritise the author but concentrates on what the text itself contains. This approach

> «encourages us to state *facts* about a *text*; more precisely, it allows us to say relatively objective things about something which exists. And if we do this it becomes harder to dodge difficult or unwelcome implications.»[29]

Now a scholar such as Edmunds would dispute the claim that intertextuality is a feature of a text,[30] but this claim is harder to dispute when it comes to acrostics: there can be no doubting the presence of the letters in the text. However, there are hundreds if not thousands of acrostics—that is to say, sequences of letters forming a Latin word—in the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*. Clearly, not all of them will be meaningful. How do we judge their significance? Lyne's pragmatic advice regarding intertextuality is equally applicable for acrostics: «Judge each case on its merits».[31]

Again, in some respects we might be back where we started, since we might feel that judging each case on its merits is what we do anyway, but what I think is valuable and new here (at least as regards acrostics) is the primary focus on the text, rather than on any unreflective impatience or scepticism we might have towards acrostics and telestics. It is an undeniable fact that there are many Latin words to be found at the edges of the text of Ovid and Vergil. In many cases we may be unable to do anything interesting with them, or 'make them mean', but this approach encourages us to at least make an attempt. We may dismiss them once we have

[28] Lyne 1994, p. 187. The original read «thus we feel licensed to say that Vergil significantly alludes in *this* echo».
[29] Lyne 1994, p. 189.
[30] Edmunds 2001, pp. 154-157. Farrell 2005 attempts to challenge this approach.
[31] Lyne 1994, p. 189

evaluated them, but we should not simply ignore them. In other words, we should embrace all the interpretative possibilities offered by the text. Of course, this is not the same as embracing every acrostic: we must, as Lyne says, judge each one on its merits, or as Fowler says, show its markedness and sense.[32]

But as Hinds has shown in his discussion of allusion, we need to think quite carefully about how we interpret 'markedness'. With only minor edits, his axiom on this topic is again relevant to our enquiry:

> «[t]here is no *acrostic* in a Roman poem, no matter how unremarkable in itself, and no matter how frequently repeated …, that cannot in some imaginable circumstance mobilize a specific *interpretation*.»[33]

This too is a useful axiom for the study of acrostics – no matter how frequently an acrostic occurs (and as we shall see, some occur very frequently), there is always some context in which it might have meaning. Which brings us on to our next section.

Meaning, Markedness and Sense

In the ultimate absence of the author's intention, the question arises as to who is responsible for meaning, and what constrains our interpretation of the text. Some such as Hinds encourage us to stick with the author as a useful and productive concept, despite all its epistemological problems;[34] but in general the approach has been to shift focus away from the author and on to the text and the reader (and reading communities), the precise balance between the two varying with differing theoretical approaches.[35] As a result, we are all now familiar with the idea of the 'model reader' or the 'learned reader', who is often figured as reading a text in much the same way that we do. This 'reader response' approach can also be a productive strategy for thinking about acrostics, and given my interest in reading practice, it is one that I will use in what follows, though my conception of the learned reader (as a reader who embraces the interpretative possibilities of a text) is shaped by the discussion above.

Whether we embrace authorial intent or put it to one side as either theoretically undesirable or epistemologically impossible, when we argue for the significance of a proposed allusion, or etymological wordplay, or an acrostic, we often try to show, as Fowler noted, its 'markedness' within

[32] Though Conte 2017, esp. ch. 2, laments that recent scholarship has undermined his theoretical approach (cf. e.g. Conte 1986) and opened up too many interpretative possibilities, since it failed to respect the proper field of application.

[33] Hinds 1998, p. 26. The actual text reads «There is no discursive element in a Roman poem, no matter how unremarkable in itself, and no matter how frequently repeated in the tradition, that cannot in some imaginable circumstance mobilize a specific allusion.»

[34] Hinds 1998, p. 144: «Let us grant (as grant we must) that the self-fashioning, intention-bearing poet is a figure whom we ourselves read out from the text to test our readings in an interpretative move which is necessarily circular: yet the energy generated by this interpretative circulation is very real….

[35] Edmunds 2001 articulates a strongly reader-response based approach to intertextuality; Lyne 1994 was considerably less interested in the reader; see also Conte 1994.

the system. I now want to look at some of the features by which we might attempt to gauge the 'markedness' of acrostics.

Mathematics

The first area I want to look at is the science of mathematics. Acrostics would appear to yield more readily to statistical analysis than allusions or etymological word-play, and so this might seem to be a reassuringly objective way to gauge the significance or 'markedness' of an acrostic.[36] To take Fowler's MARS as an example: the fact that MARS appears as an acrostic nowhere else in Vergil (whose works amount to nearly 13,000 lines) might at first seem to be highly significant; and when we learn that the probability of those four letters occurring together is 1 in 258,138 (i.e. once in every 258,138 lines), the matter may seem to be settled.[37] But unfortunately things are not quite that simple, primarily because the way the human brain intuitively interprets probability bears very little relationship to mathematical interpretation of the same data.

So while it is true that MARS appears as an acrostic only once in all of Vergil's works, it may come as a surprise to learn that the same is true for almost any specific four-letter acrostic sequence that we find in Vergil (it should be noted that things are a little different for telestic sequences).[38] For example, the first letters of the four lines that precede MARS at 7.597-600 spell SNFS – which only occurs here and nowhere else in all of Vergil's works; the four lines before that (7.593-596) spell MFIO – which again only occurs here and nowhere else in all of Vergil's works. Indeed, of the 12,902 four-letter acrostics that can be read in the complete works of Vergil,[39] the vast majority (11,137 to be precise, which is over 86%) occur only once.[40] When we discover that the probability of SNFS occurring is a mere 1 in 72,308 (as opposed to 1 in 258,138 for MARS), we might think we are on to something again: but things become more complicated when we discover that the probability of MFIO occurring at random is 1 in 326,244. Even more remarkable is the sequence KOQP at *Aen.* 1.13-16 – its probability is an astonishing 1 in nearly 47 *million* (1 in 46,750,655.5, to be precise). Surely such a virtually impossible event cannot have occurred by chance?

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[36] Such mathematical calculations form the basis for the arguments of Morgan 1993 in support of an acrostic DISCE at Horace, *Odes* 1.18.11-15.

[37] The probability was calculated based on frequencies of the letters found at the beginning of the line in all of Vergil's works (simple enough to calculate with the help of a computer). These figures are different from the frequencies of letters found at the beginning of *words* in Vergil, and different again from general letter frequency in Vergil.

[38] It should be noted that I use the term 'acrostic' and 'telestic' to describe a sequence of letters built up from the first or last letter of each line respectively, without necessarily implying that the series of letters forms a meaningful word. For some of the statistical differences between acrostic and telestic sequences, see note 40.

[39] That is, if we were to put the *Eclogues*, *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* together in a continuous sequence of lines (and include the Helen episode in *Aeneid* 2).

[40] These figures were calculated using a Python script. Of four-letter sequences that appear twice, there are 1265 examples; of sequences appearing three times, there are 194 examples; of sequences appearing four times, 24 examples; and 10 sequences appear five times (the sequences: AAAA, AACI, AAIA, ADEA, CAIA, DAAI, EACE, IAAI, IACC, IUIN). The situation is very different for telestics, given the more limited range of letters that can be found at the end of the line. Whereas 11,137 four-letter sequences occur only once as acrostics in Vergil, there are only 3,732 unique four-letter telestics. Repeated sequences are therefore much more common: so in contrast to the 24 four-letter acrostic sequences that appear four times, there are 230 such telestic sequences; and in contrast to the 10 acrostic sequences that appear five times, there are 148 such telestic sequences, and many beyond that. Indeed, the telestic sequence SSSS appears 132 times.

Now it is not necessarily the case that statistical analysis is of absolutely no use, but its role is primarily a negative one: that is to say, evidence of low frequency does not automatically illustrate the 'markedness' of an acrostic, whereas evidence of high frequency may make it harder to argue for 'markedness'. However, as the words of Hinds' axiom above reminds us, this is not definitive, since statistics mean little in the face of a good story, and context can be everything.

Signs

Before we tease out the implications of that assumption, I want to think a little more about how we go about assessing 'markedness', and about reading practices more generally, both ancient and modern.

With this in mind, I want to turn to what is perhaps one of the most famous of all classical acrostics, namely Aratus' *ΛΕΠΤΗ* acrostic at *Phaenomena* 783-787:

σκέπτεο δὲ πρῶτον κεράων ἑκάτερθε σελήνην.
ἄλλοτε γάρ τ' ἄλλῃ μιν ἐπιγράφει ἔσπερος αἴγλῃ,
ἄλλοτε δ' ἀλλοῖαι μορφαὶ κερόωσι σελήνην
εὐθὺς ἀεξομένην, αἱ μὲν τρίτῃ, αἱ δὲ τετάρτῃ·
τάων καὶ περὶ μηνὸς ἐφεσταότος κε πύθοιο.
λεπτὴ μὲν καθαρή τε περὶ τρίτον ἦμαρ ἐοῦσα
εὔδιός κ' εἴη, λεπτὴ δὲ καὶ εὖ μάλ' ἐρευθὴς
πνευματίη, παχίων δὲ καὶ ἀμβλείῃσι κεραίαις
τέτρατον ἐκ τριτάτοιο φόως ἀμενηνὸν ἔχουσα
ἡὲ νότῳ ἄμβλυνται ἢ ὕδατος ἐγγὺς ἐόντος.
εἰ δέ κ' ἀπ' ἀμφοτέρων κεράων τρίτον ἦμαρ ἄγουσα
μήτ' ἐπινευστάζῃ μήθ' ὑπτιόωσα φαείνῃ,
ἀλλ' ὀρθαὶ ἑκάτερθε περιγνάμπτωσι κεραῖαι,
ἐσπέριοί κ' ἄνεμοι κείνην μετὰ νύκτα φέροιντο.

(*Phaenomena* 778-791)

> Observe first the moon on each side of her horns. Different evenings paint her with different lights, and different shapes at different times horn the moon as soon as she is waxing, some on the third day, some on the fourth; from these you can learn about the month that has just begun. If slender and clear about the third day, she will bode fair weather; if slender and very red, wind; if the crescent is thickish, with blunted horns, having a feeble fourth-day light after the third day, either it is blurred by a southerly or because rain is in the offing. But if, when she brings the third day, the moon does not lean forward from the line of the two horn-tips, or shine inclining backwards, but instead the curve of the two horns is upright, westerly winds will blow after that night.[41]

Now when scholars tell stories about acrostics, they point to various elements in the text that can help mark out that acrostic or give it meaning – to give it «markedness and sense». In this particular

[41] Translation from Kidd 1997, slightly adapted.

story – one which is often told,[42] and one which continues to be refined -[43] the following elements help give it significance: first, the word that begins the acrostic, λεπτὴ in line 783, is also the word formed by the acrostic in 783-787: this kind of acrostic has become known as a 'gamma acrostic' (from the shape of a capital gamma: Γ).[44] The word λεπτὴ itself is a significant one, since the adjective and its cognates are strongly associated with Aratus, and with an important part of the Alexandrian aesthetic;[45] the skilfulness of the acrostic is then an illustration of the skilfulness that the word itself connotes; furthermore the whole passage is filled with other such metapoetic terms (e.g. καθαρή in 783, παχίων in 785). It has also been argued that in its feminine singular form, the acrostic looks back to one of the earliest acrostics in Greek literature, namely the acrostic LEUKH formed by the first five lines of *Iliad* 24;[46] and it is in the company of other acrostics nearby.[47]

Scholars have also argued for specific signs in the text that point us towards the acrostic in various ways. The passage is introduced as a hunt for hidden signs (768-771),[48] and to discover these hidden signs we are instructed to look closely (σκέπτεο) at the moon, on either side of her horns or 'edges' (778-782);[49] and to look repeatedly (as αἱ μὲν τρίτῃ, αἱ δὲ τετάρτῃ at 781 has been interpreted). Such elements are often referred to as 'sign-posts', the idea being that they alert us to the fact that the text contains an acrostic: in a similar way, a phrase such is *dicitur* or *fertur* is said to 'sign-post' an allusion.[50] These elements are often an important part of the process of «making the acrostic mean».[51]

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[42] First noted by Jacques 1960, with many contributions and discussions subsequently. For a full, useful, and recent summary of bibliography, see Hanses 2014, who argues for a diagonal *ΛΕΠΤΗ* acrostic in 783-7.

[43] In addition to Hanses 2014, see Danielewicz 2015, who proposes a boustrophedon *ΛΕΠΤΗ* acrostic in 783-4; and now Trzaskoma 2016, who argues for further sign-posting through the alphabetic (and thus numerical) shape of the acrostics, and through punning on the word 'horns' as a term for lines in letterforms.

[44] The term was coined by Morgan 1993, and it is a useful one. No such handy terms exist for other members of the group of which this is a subset, namely what one might call 'right-angle acrostics' (or telestics), which include not only the acrostics which spell out the word they begin with, but also any acrostics or telestics that spell out a word that begins or ends (or appears in the middle of) the acrostic / telestic.

[45] Its importance as a literary term is often ascribed to Callimachus (cf. the famous occurrence of λεπταλέην in the *Aetia* prologue fr. 1.24), but some argue for Aratus as its originator (e.g. Cameron 1995a, pp. 321–328). The adjective appears in three epigrams about Aratus: one by Callimachus (*Ep.* 27 Pf. = *AP* 9.507); one by Leonidas (*AP* 9.26); and one by 'King Ptolemy' (SH 712.6). Its presence in these epigrams is often taken as a recognition of his clever acrostic. There is also debate about the precise meaning of the adjective λεπτός in this poem and for the Alexandrian aesthetic more generally: cf. e.g. Hutchinson 1988, p. 215, n. 4; Volk 2010, pp. 205-8; Volk 2012; and more widely Porter 2010.

[46] Cf. Jacques 1960.

[47] Cf. e.g. Levitan 1979 – ΠΑΣΑ at 803-6; Haslam 1992 – the syllabic acrostic ΜΕΣΗ at 807-8; for other acrostics in Aratus see the summaries and suggestions of Danielewicz 2005 and 2013.

[48] πάντα γὰρ οὔπω / ἐκ Διὸς ἄνθρωποι γινώσκομεν, ἀλλ' ἔτι πολλὰ / κέκρυπται, τῶν αἴ κε θέλῃ καὶ ἐσαυτίκα δώσει / Ζεύς· ὁ γὰρ οὖν γενεὴν ἀνδρῶν ἀναφανδὸν ὀφέλλει / πάντοθεν εἰδόμενος, πάντῃ δ' ὅ γε σήματα φαίνων ('For we men do not yet have knowledge of everything from Zeus, but much still is hidden, whereof Zeus, if he wishes, will give us signs anon; he certainly does benefit the human race openly, showing himself on every side, and everywhere displaying his signs').

[49] As Feeney and Nelis 2005 note, the Greek κέρας used here can mean the top or extremity of something, i.e. the edge of the line of verse.

[50] This device is often referred to as an 'Alexandrian footnote' - see Ross 1975, p. 78; see also Hinds 1998, ch. 1.

[51] For an example in Latin, compare the details that have been adduced in supported of the supposed authorial signature in Vergil's translation of the Aratus passage just discussed. The proposed signature is located in the first syllables of three alternate lines at *Georgics* 1.429-433, which give MA-VE-PU, i.e. the first syllables of Vergil's full name in reverse: **Ma**ro **Ve**rgilius **Pu**blius. Scholars have noted that we find verbs encouraging us to

Some scholars argue that such sign-posts are essential for spotting acrostics, or other word games. For example, Stewart in an article on some acrostic play in Aratus,[52] comments: «The first two Aratean acrostics, ΛΕΠΤΗ and ΠΑΣΑ are preceded by a signpost in the form of an imperative σκέπτεο, 'be watchful', in 778 and 799; an acrostic that occurs hundreds of lines into a poem rather than in the opening lines requires a 'signpost', for to do without is positively to invite oblivion.» Cameron, in an article arguing against a suggested anagram in the Christian poet Prudentius, makes a similar point about other word-games in ancient literature: «such virtuosity was not left to be discovered by chance; isopsepha and anacyclica are normally equipped with headings or notes explaining what they are»;[53] he dismisses the idea that an anagram might be «concealed in a poem without warning … on the assumption that readers will be on the lookout».[54] As it happens, Cameron explicitly excludes acrostics from this requirement, since he argues that «[e]ven when incorporated in passing in a long poem, an acrostich is easy to spot».[55]

These two authors crystallise some important questions about ancient (and modern) reading practices. The first concerns what exactly an ancient reader might be «on the lookout» for: Stewart assumes that readers are not on the lookout for acrostics, though they might be on the lookout for sign-posts (though modern readers managed to miss both – in print anyway - in the case of Aratus' *LEPTE* acrostic until the Jacques article of 1960); Cameron assumes that readers are not on the lookout for word-games like anagrams. It is these assumptions that I want to probe in what follows, and the first step towards doing so begins with Cameron's claim that «an acrostich is easy to spot».

Ways of Reading

As we have seen, Cameron's position is in direct contrast to that of Stewart. For Stewart, an acrostic that appears in passing in a long poem will not be noticed without explicit signposts; only acrostics in the opening lines have any chance of being spotted. Presumably for Cameron, such opening-line acrostics are even easier to spot than «those incorporated in passing». Both might agree, however, that an acrostic that covers the entire length of the poem would be the easiest acrostic to spot of all.

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look in sequence (*si … sequentis / ordine respicies* 424 f.); hints that the 'acrostic' is reversed have been found in *luna reuertentis* and in the fact that Vergil reverses the order of the Aratus passage; before the final syllable of the acrostic we are told *is certissimus auctor*, and much as in Aratus, the acrostic is to be found if we look 'between the horns' (the word *cornu* 'horn' ends line 428, immediately before the first syllable; and the word *cornibus* is the penultimate word in line 433, the final line of the 'acrostic'). Furthermore, in adding the detail of the virginal blush to Aratus in the *uirgineum* of line 430, it has been argued that Vergil is here glancing at his nick-name Parthenias: on all of this, see Brown 1963, pp. 102-105; Feeney and Nelis 2005; Katz 2016. Haslam 1992 sees hidden signs in anagrams of *ignis* and *signi*, and also a glance to Aratus with *sol … signa dabit* (Aratus of Soli or Aratus Soleus). Somerville 2010 notes that Vergil's use of a syllabic acrostic looks to Aratus' use of one at 807-8 (see note 47); Danielewicz 2013 has suggested that we catch of glimpse of LEPTE in the PTE of 432-5, which we can complete with an 'L' and an 'E' from elsewhere. More convincing perhaps is his suggestion of a reverse acrostic at 439-443, giving (reading upwards) SCIES, with the final letter of the acrostic in 439 being the first letter of SIGNA, i.e. *scies signa*.

[52] Stewart 2010, p. 402.

[53] Cameron (1995b), p. 478.

[54] Cameron (1995b), p. 478.

[55] Cameron (1995b), p. 477 f.

However, many examples can be found from modern times of authors who have managed to slip such lengthy acrostics past their editors. Rolfe Humphries (of *Metamorphoses* fame) is one such, who published a mischievous acrostic-forming poem in the prestigious magazine *Poetry*.[56] The subsequent response of the editors of *Poetry* is instructive: «Not being accustomed to hold manuscripts up to the mirror or to test them for cryptograms, the editors recently accepted and printed a poem containing a concealed scurrilous phrase…».[57]

The point here is that while Cameron is right to say that acrostics are easy to spot (especially when compared to complex word-games such as isopsepha), they are only easy to spot if you are looking for them. The editors of *Poetry* were «not accustomed» to read submissions in this way, nor are many of us accustomed to read classical texts in this way. Indeed, many of the acrostics and telestics I discuss below have not been noticed before, despite their presence in some well-known and much-discussed passages of classical literature. There is no inherent difficulty in spotting an acrostic – all it requires is an ability to read – but it does require a particular way of reading.

So I would disagree with the claim of scholars such as Stewart that some kind of sign-post is essential for the discovery of acrostics. Indeed, it is not much harder to spot an acrostic that to spot a sign-post; furthermore, many of the so-called 'sign-posts' might be better interpreted as 'confirmations', whose meaning only becomes clear once an acrostic has been spotted, and subjected to initial scrutiny, and whose presence reassures the readers of the significance of the acrostic.[58]

My second point is a broader one, regarding the importance (or otherwise) of sign-posts for any 'hidden message' that lies beneath the surface of the text. The words of Cameron, though referring specifically to word-games such as anagrams and isopsepha, capture an important assumption sometimes made about ancient reading practices more generally: «Different though all these ways of hiding words behind the surface of texts are, the one feature they share is the provision of a pointer in the context or the structure of the text. The implication is that it would not otherwise occur to readers to look behind the surface.»[59] That is to say, no one is looking unless they are told to look.

In this context, it might be helpful for a moment to think about this question in terms of another kind of word-play or 'hidden message'. Now this is an altogether much more challenging kind of

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[56] Vol. 54, issue 3, pp. 136 f. Humphries' poem can be found at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=54&issue=3&page=18. It contained the acrostic "Nicholas Murray Butler is a horse's ass".

[57] *Poetry* Vol. 54, issue 5, p. 294: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=54&issue=5&page=60

[58] In his work on etymological word-play, O'Hara 1996, p. 6, discusses a similar problem to those working on acrostics: «How can we determine whether an etymological wordplay is really in the text, or has been invented by an overly imaginative interpreter without the encouragement of the text?». He finds the first step to an answer in the «conventions of etymological wordplay» (which help to confirm the validity of the wordplay). He also notes that they can act as sign-posts («they will also help me to recognize some etymologizing that I might otherwise have overlooked»; cf. perhaps especially the «naming constructions as etymological signposts» at pp. 75-9). O'Hara's work (along with that of Paschalis [1997]) strongly suggests that ancient readers were «on the lookout» for etymological play. Whatever the extent to which the ancient reader would have required sign-posts to spot etymological play, it is certainly harder for the modern reader to spot than acrostic play.

[59] Cameron (1995b), p. 480.

word-play than mere acrostics, which are after all right there in front of us in the text. This kind of word-game might seem impossibly difficult – it involves reading the text in front us while simultaneously recalling from memory the tiniest details from hundreds of works by dozens of authors, amounting to thousands and thousands of lines of text in Latin and Greek, in poetry and prose. While sometimes these games are sign-posted, there are many examples which would appear to lack such sign-posting.[60] But how on earth would these examples be noticed? Would such virtuosity be left to be discovered by chance? Would we be tempted to conclude, that «allusions are not concealed in a poem without warning … on the assumption that readers would be on the lookout»? Or to rephrase Stewart, that «an allusion that occurs hundreds of lines into a poem rather than in the opening lines requires a 'signpost', for to do without is positively to invite oblivion»?

For most Latin scholars these days, those statements seem absurd – precisely because in Latin literature at least, the hunt for allusion is so fundamental to our contemporary reading practice, and (we assume) to the reading practice of an important group of ancient readers too. But it is worth reminding ourselves that this approach – by which I mean the search for meaningful allusion, as opposed to just *Quellenforschung* and the search for parallels – is, in the grand scheme of things, fairly recent. By way of example, we need only look back to 1990, and to David West's blistering review of Lyne's *Words and the Poet*, where he criticises Lyne's intertextual interpretation of Lavinia's blush at *Aen.* 12.67-9 on the following grounds: «Virgil was not writing for hyperintertextualists, for readers who would collate his text with Homer to decode the secrets of a young girl's heart».[61] This 'hypterintertextual' approach to Vergil, which was for West entirely flawed, is for many of us these days entirely fundamental.

The fact that academic history, or at least academic fashion, is on the side of the hyper-intertextualists is due perhaps to the success of our contemporary reading practice in telling stories that enrich our reading of texts such as the *Aeneid*. Our assumption that ancient learned readers—not necessarily all readers, of course—were on the lookout for allusion has proved a productive one, and there seems to be no *a priori* reason to assume that they would not also be on the lookout for something much easier to spot,[62] especially in a reading culture that was demonstrably familiar not only with acrostics, both in influential Greek texts and their own,[63] but also with the idea of acrostic hunting.[64]

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[60] My point is that allusions frequently lack explicit sign-posting (along the lines of «look here for an allusion!»). However, in attempting to find 'markedness' for the allusion we will of course look for 'confirmations' in the text, such as the occurrence of words in the same metrical *sedes*; the presence of other correspondences; appropriate context, etc.

[61] West 1990. Lyne 1994, pp. 196 f. quotes this line from West's review as a prelude to arguing against a reader-based approach to interpretation, against limiting our interpretation of a text through ideas about what a reader may or may not have noticed or understood. My approach is rather different.

[62] In what follows I concentrate on simple kinds of acrostics and telestics – i.e. just first and last letters, going up or down – as opposed to more complex forms such as 'mesostics' (formed by the middle letters) or 'akroteleuta' (formed by acrostics going down and telestics going up in the same series of lines). For the latter, see Damschen 2004.

[63] See the various surveys of Latin and Greek acrostics listed in note 2.

[64] The presence of acrostics in texts suggests the habit of looking for them, but note also the implications of the book given to Gellius described above, and the kind of textual games mentioned by Athenaeus (see note 6).

My suggestion, then, is that the learned reader of Ovid and Vergil read their texts on the look-out for acrostics, just as we imagine they read them on the look-out for allusion. For acrostics, just as for allusions, this necessarily involves a process of testing and filtering; a process which becomes habitual.[65]

Openings and Closings

What I propose to do now is to look at three very familiar passages from Ovid and Vergil—the beginning and end of the *Aeneid*, and the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*—to put this reading practice to the test. Is anything to be gained from attention to the edges of the text? How might we (or the learned reader) go about the process of filtering, or of constructing meaning? Before we do so, we might again want to think of allusion and how the process works there.

Let us take for our example the word *arma*. It is a word that at different times in different places can fulfil a variety of literary functions, sometimes simultaneously. In some cases, the word *arma* encodes the genre of martial epic in general; it some cases, it activates a specific literary memory, recalling the first word of the *Aeneid*; in some cases, the word invites innuendo;[66] in many cases, it means simply *arma*. We are comfortable with the idea that any occurrence of the word *arma* may be activating any one of these meanings, and often more than one. Our reading practice involves taking a moment to scrutinise the context of any occurrence of *arma*, to think through its possible implications, and to make a judgement about which meanings we want to bring to the fore, and which to leave in the background. So at the beginning of *Amores* 1.1 we are accustomed to read the opening words *arma graui numero* as looking both to the genre of martial epic in general (as Ovid does also in *Amores* 2.1), but also specifically evoking the opening words of the *Aeneid* (*arma uirumque cano*).[67] Both contexts are also to the fore at the beginning of the *Fasti*, where Ovid recasts the familiar opposition between epic *arma* and elegiac *amor* as an opposition between *arma* and *arae* (*Fast.* 1.13 *Caesaris arma canant alii: nos Caesaris aras*);[68] however, few if any have suggested that there is a strong sense of double-entendre in either passage. The precise function of *arma* is somewhat harder to delineate at the beginning of *Ars* 3: *arma dedi Danais in Amazonas; arma supersunt / quae tibi dem et turmae, Penthesilea, tuae*.[69] There is still a certain generic *frisson* in referring to the arts of love as *arma*;[70] activation of the opening of the *Aeneid* is less specific, though there is perhaps a sense that instead of arms and a man Ovid will now be talking about arms and women; one could plausibly bring the phallic sense of *arma* to the fore here too, in both occurrences of the word *arma*. In *Amores* 1.6.29 f., as Ovid is trying to negotiate his way passed a locked door to

[65] My point is not that the reading processes are identical – one does not recognise an allusion in the same way that one recognises a word in the initial or final letters of a poem. However, there are similarities in the way that a reader is looking for something beyond the surface meaning of the words, and then subjects what they find to some intellectual scrutiny.
[66] Cf. e.g. Mckeown on *Amores* 1.9.25-26; Adams 1982, pp. 19-21.
[67] Cf. e.g. McKeown on *Amores* 1.1.1-2.
[68] «Let others sing of Caesar's arms: we will sing of Caesar's altars». For the opposition see e.g. Green on *Fasti* 1.13-14.
[69] «I have given arms to the Greeks against the Amazons. Arms remain that I must give to you, Penthesilea, and your troop».
[70] Cf. e.g. Gibson on *Ars* 3.1-2.

see his beloved, the epic sense of *arma* in the couplet *urbibus obsessis clausae munimina portae / prosunt; in media pace quid arma times?*[71] does not add much to our reading; the sexual sense may add a little more, but perhaps on this occasion – certainly as on many other occasions in Ovid, perhaps indeed the majority - having cycled through all the possible options we might decide that *arma* are primarily just *arma*.

My point here is that when we read a word like *arma*, or *tenuis*, or *deduco*, we are accustomed to probe it for significance, and believe this to be a worthwhile and potentially productive intellectual activity. We also tend to assume that this was the reading practice of the ancient learned reader, and we assume that all this is true for allusions more generally; and my suggestion is that we assume the same to be true for acrostics and telestics.[72]

So let us turn then to the opening of the *Aeneid*, and let us assume that the text we have is the text that Vergil had before him as he read through the text he had written, and that was shared with his first readers. I want to stress that I am not claiming that any of the acrostics or telestics that we identify are intentional – but rather, that they are all potentially operational.

Arma uirumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiam fato profugus Lauiniaque uenit
litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
ui superum, saeuae memorem Iunonis ob iram,
multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
inferretque deos Latio; genus unde Latinum
Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae.
Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso
quidue dolens regina deum tot uoluere casus
insignem pietate uirum, tot adire labores
impulerit. tantaene animis caelestibus irae?

[71] «The protection of a closed gate is useful to cities under siege: but in the midst of peace why do you fear arms?»

[72] My suggestion focuses on the reader, in an attempt to keep the author at arm's length. However, for those who are comfortable with authorial intention in the broadest terms, I offer the following addendum (which is not a necessary part of what follows) along the lines developed by Farrell 2005. We assume a particular reading practice regarding allusion, but we also assume that Ovid wrote in awareness of this reading practice. So when Ovid writes *arma* – or reads the *arma* he was written – he does so in awareness of all the ways in which it might be read, but also with the expectation that it will be read in a certain way by a certain subsection of his readership—even if he knows that he can never have full control over their reading. The same might be true of acrostics. We might also assume that Ovid and Vergil (and others with whom they shared their texts before wider circulation) read through the text pre-publication, following their habitual reading practices. All these first readers of the pre-publication text (including the poet) will (according to my assumed reading practice) have been looking for and will have spotted the acrostics and telestics in the text, not just those that were deliberate, but also those that were accidental, of which there will be many. Some of these accidental acrostics they will quickly dismiss and expect other learned readers to dismiss too; some accidental acrostics they might rather enjoy and hope that others might too – their control over these responses is minimal. However, some they might feel to be out of place or disruptive, and these they have the opportunity to remove. The net result of this is that those acrostics that remain in the text do so with the tacit approval of the author, whatever the circumstances of their creation.

> Arms and the man I sing, who first from the coasts of Troy, exiled by fate, came to Italy and Lavine shores; much buffeted on sea and land by violence from above, through cruel Juno's unforgiving wrath, and much enduring in war also, till he should build a city and bring his gods to Latium; whence came the Latin race, the lords of Alba, and the lofty walls of Rome. Tell me, O Muse, the cause; wherein thwarted in will or wherefore angered, did the Queen of heaven drive a man, of goodness so wondrous, to traverse so many perils, to face so many toils. Can heavenly spirits cherish resentment so dire?[73]

Our experimental approach – of looking for and thinking through acrostics and telestics – encounters its first material for exploration at the end of the very first line, which begins the telestic *STO*.[74] This three-letter telestic turns out to be the second most common three-letter telestic in the *Aeneid* (appearing 65 times), though particularly at this prominent position in the poem, its frequency need not tell against it.[75] However, at first glance there would seem to be no significance in Vergil (or anyone else) 'standing', and we may be tempted to dismiss the telestic and move on. On the other hand, given Vergil's intense interest in mapping out his poetic career and his place in the literary tradition at the beginning, middle, and ends of his work, and the scrutiny to which ancient and modern reading practice subjects such passages, our hypothetical ancient reader may well have wondered whether there was some kind of story to be told here. For the moment, however, let us move on, but let us keep *STO* in mind—we shall return to it a little later. Staying with the right-hand margin for a moment, the next telestic we encounter is *MEOS* at 6-9. Grammatically this could go with *deos* at the beginning of the telestic or with *casus* at the end, but neither a patriotic embrace of the gods of Rome ('my gods') nor a mysterious claim to share the misfortune of Aeneas ('my perils') would seem to add much to our reading here, and both we and our ancient reader could quickly dismiss this telestic.

What of the left-hand edge? Lines 2-5 present us with the acrostic *ILVM*,[76] which might hold our attention somewhat longer: for Ilus is not without his significance. Ilus, son of Tros, father of Laomedon, grandfather of Priam, was the founder of Troy (Ilium), and the discoverer of the Palladium;[77] but as well as the past, Ilus also represents the future, in that Ilus is also a former name of Ascanius (as Jupiter tells us):[78] 1.267 f. *at puer Ascanius, cui nunc cognomen Iulo / additur (Ilus erat, dum res stetit Ilia regno)*.[79] In connecting the name Iulus to Ilus, Vergil confirms the link (in this

[73] Translation from Fairclough and Goold 1999.

[74] Various more complex acrostics have been found at the beginning of the *Aeneid*: Heil 2002 noted ALMA (in alternate lines) at *Aen.* 1.1–7, though he did not suggest that it was deliberate; Damschen 2004, p. 108, n. 64, suggests ALMAE MOS in an alternate line akroteleuton; and Castelletti 2012 finds A STILO M(aronis) V(ergili) in a boustrophedon acrostic. Schmid 1983, pp. 334 f., extracts (with some difficulty) a dedication to Gaius Sosius from the *Ille ego qui* verses.

[75] Note that owing to the limited number of letters that can end a word in Latin, the frequency of particular letter-sequences in telestics tends to be higher than those in acrostics: see note 40.

[76] This acrostic managed to escape Hilberg 1899.

[77] Cf. Aeneas' genealogical speech at *Il.* 20.230-38; and Apollodorus 3.12.2 f.

[78] Cf. also Appian *BC* 2.68 on Julius Caesar sacrificing to 'his ancestor Venus': ἐκ γὰρ Αἰνείου καὶ Ἴλου τοῦ Αἰνείου τὸ τῶν Ἰουλίων γένος παρενεχθέντος τοῦ ὀνόματος ἡγεῖτο εἶναι ('for it was believed that from Aeneas and his son, Ilus, was descended the Julian race, with a slight change of name').

[79] «But the boy Ascanius, to whom the name Iulus is now given (he was Ilus, while the Ilian state stood in sovereignty)». Ilus is also the name of a son of Dardanus, according to Apollodorus 3.12.2 and Hesiod fr. 177.13-15 MW. As Edwards 1991 notes on *Iliad* 20.230-2: «Twice [in the *Iliad*] Ilos is called Δαρδανίδαο, which

passage at least) between the Julian line and Troy with a stronger etymological link than the Julian family themselves may have suggested.[80] Furthermore, Jupiter's prophecy explicitly links Ascanius/Ilus/Iulus with the move to Alba Longa, and Iulus' connection with Alba Longa was an important one for Julius Caesar, according to Dio.[81] That we should find ILVM, a name that links the founder of Troy with the founder of the Julian name, and that links the Trojan past with the Alban and Roman future, in a passage that performs precisely the same function (*Troiae ab oris … genus unde Latinum / Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae*), at the moment that the narrative moves from the shores of Troy to Italy, is intellectually pleasing at least. I would suggest then that the presence of and the recognition of *ILVM* enriches our reading of the narrative, however it came to be in the text; and I suspect that our learned reader would not dismiss this particular acrostic, or be too concerned as to why it did not begin at the first line, or why the name is in the accusative.[82]

In the following lines, more decisions need to be made. Immediately following ILUM we find IAM. This could be connected directly with ILUM—a reminder that another 'son of Aeneas' is in power at the current time; as readers we certainly might have more to say about IAM than we would about AVI, at 1.40-42 (as Juno angrily recalls Athena's punishment of Ajax); or about VIDI(T) at 1.41-44 (or 45) in the same context, since acrostic emphasis that Juno herself witnessed this punishment does not add much to our interpretation of this passage. The learned reader would presumably be quick also to dismiss DITA (1.43-46) ('enrich!') or ALI (1.52-54) ('to be nourished'); the acrostic EGI ('I drove, I pursued') at 1.66-68, as Juno tells Aeolus how a «race she hates» (*gens inimica*) is sailing to Italy, might possibly suggest her presence as a dark power behind some of the misdaventures of Book 3, but the learned reader might well dismiss this one too as they do EAE at 1.75-77. Similarly, moving across to the right-hand edge, not much reflection would be required to dismiss the telestic IMA at 1.14-16 (in a description of Carthage and Juno's love for it), or the series of telestics that follow, all of which are extremely common in the *Aeneid*: EIS at 1.18-20 (which occurs 18 times in the *Aeneid*), SIS at 1.22-24 (which occurs 82 times), ESO at 1.27-29 (28 times), EST at 1.46-48 (30 times), STEM at 1.76-80 (5 times), or MEA at 1.87-89 (12 times).

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may mean that the son of Dardanos is meant … or misunderstanding of the patronymic may have led to the invention of the earlier Ilos».

[80] According to DServius on 1.267, a Caesar (either I. or L.) suggested that Ascanius acquired the name Iulus after killing Mezentius in single combat, either as a reference to his skill with arrows, or to the first showings of a beard that he had at the time (*vel quasi ἰοβόλον, id est sagittandi peritum, vel a prima barbae lanugine quam ἴουλον Graeci dicunt, quae ei tempore victoriae nascebatur*). For the problem of the various conflicting accounts of Aeneas' children, see Cornell 2013, vol. 3, pp. 65-72; and for differing views on how Vergil deals with them, see e.g. Dingel 2001; O'Hara 1990, pp. 145-147; O'Hara 2007, 88-91.

[81] Dio 43.43 τῇ τε γὰρ ἐσθῆτι χαυνοτέρᾳ ἐν πᾶσιν ἐνηβρύνετο, καὶ τῇ ὑποδέσει καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐνίοτε καὶ ὑψηλῇ καὶ ἐρυθροχρόῳ κατὰ τοὺς βασιλέας τοὺς ἐν τῇ Ἄλβῃ ποτὲ γενομένους, ὡς καὶ προσήκων σφίσι διὰ τὸν Ἴουλον, ἐχρῆτο ('He used to show among all men his pride in rather loose clothing, and the footwear which he used later on was sometimes high and of a reddish colour, after the style of the kings who had once reigned in Alba, for he claimed that he was related to them through Iulus.').

[82] The learned reader may also wonder if this acrostic is a response to the acrostic they may have noted at the beginning of the *Odyssey* at lines 1.14-21, which spells NEA TEKNA ('new/young children') – on which see Hilton 2013. But that question is for another time. One of the anonymous referees suggests (without endorsing the learned reader's view) the possibility that a learned reader might link the accusative *ILVM* with the anonymous *virum* of the first line; leading to the possible conclusion that the true protagonist of the *Aeneid* is not Aeneas, but Iulus, the founder of the *gens Iulia*.

However, the learned reader may pause a little longer over the next telestic, at lines 89-92. Again, the context is significant. Having promised us 'arms and a man' at the very beginning of the poem, Vergil finally presents us with 'the man' in line 92, as Aeneas makes his first appearance in the narrative:

> … ponto nox incubat atra;
> intonuere poli et crebris micat ignibus aether
> praesentemque uiris intentant omnia mortem.
> extemplo Aeneae soluuntur frigore membra;

> 'black night broods over the deep. From pole to pole it thunders, the skies lighten with frequent flashes, all forebodes the sailors instant death. Straightway Aeneas' limbs weaken with chilling dread…'[83]

If we look at these lines more closely, if we pay close attention to the edges, then we find that line 92 reveals not only the 'man' but also the 'arms', as this line completes the telestic ARMA. Did Vergil plan this deliberately, or was it just a happy accident? We cannot say. But would the Vergil we think we know—and the readers we think he was writing for—have enjoyed the discovery? I suspect they would have. Do we therefore miss something if we do not pay close attention to the beginnings and ends of lines? I suspect we do.

Now as we saw above, neither we nor our learned reader will find meaning in every acrostic that we find. Indeed, for every acrostic or telestic that we may find meaningful, there will be many that we will dismiss. Again, as we saw above, a great many of these will consist of words of three letters—which can arise easily by chance in any random sequence of letters, and it is no surprise to find that the works of Vergil are full of acrostic pigs, goddesses, and bronze;[84] and if anything, such three-letter words are even more common at the end of the line, where less variety is possible, with the three most frequent three-letter telestics SIS, STO, and MOS appearing 82, 65 and 47 times respectively.

As such, it is very tempting just to filter out these three-letter words and to ignore them as mere random noise. In his vast list of random acrostics, Hilberg only lists words with four or more letters, since as he says, 'it would be pointless to record the countless *et* and *ut*, *aes* and *sus*',[85] and it is certainly the case that his lists of acrostics would be almost unmanageably vast if he had included them. Even scholars who embrace acrostics often discount such short ones: see, for example, the words of one such scholar (Danielewicz), citing another such (Hendry), in a passage in which he discusses the criteria for deciding whether an acrostic is merely a random occurrence or not (a passage to which we will return later): «Continuation of the message beyond four letters would prove that it was intended, though it might be disputed just how many more letters would be

[83] Translation from Fairclough and Goold 1999.
[84] The word SUS appears 5 times as an acrostic in the *Aeneid*; DEA appears 10 times, as does AES.
[85] Hilberg 1899, p. 266: 'Es wäre in der That sinnlos, die unzähligen et und ut, aes und sus u. dgl. zu verzeichnen'.

needed for proof. The converse is not true: the pattern may be intentional, even if it only covers one four-letter word…».[86] But not, it seems, if it covers one three-letter one.

With this in mind, let us continue our experiment of paying attention to the edges of the line, and with my next two examples I hope to illustrate how even a three-letter acrostic can repay some intellectual scrutiny.

Let us turn then to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Barchiesi has shown how the end of the poem repays scrutiny of the edges, noting how the very words that announce that the work is finished (*iamque opus exegi*) begin an unfinished acrostic INCIP- (the root of the verb 'begin'),[87] providing yet another example of the way the *Metamorphoses* constantly fights against its own closure;[88] and I have suggested elsewhere how close attention reveals the authorial signature NASO at the moment when Ovid introduces *amor* into the *MetAMORphoses*, and confronts his poetic present with his poetic past.[89]

But just as we did with the *Aeneid*, let us look at the very beginning of the *Metamorphoses*:

In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas
corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illa)
adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi
ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen!
ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum
unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe,
quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles
nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem
non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum.
nullus adhuc mundo praebebat lumina Titan,
nec nova crescendo reparabat cornua Phoebe,
nec circumfuso pendebat in aere tellus
ponderibus librata suis, nec bracchia longo
margine terrarum porrexerat Amphitrite;
utque erat et tellus illic et pontus et aer,
sic erat instabilis tellus, innabilis unda,
lucis egens aer; nulli sua forma manebat,
obstabatque aliis aliud, quia corpore in uno
frigida pugnabant calidis, umentia siccis,
mollia cum duris, sine pondere, habentia pondus.

Changes of shape, new forms, are the theme which my spirit impels me
now to recite. Inspire me, O gods (it is you who have even
transformed my art), and spin me a thread from the world's beginning
down to my own lifetime, in one continuous poem.
Before the earth and the sea and the all-encompassing heaven

[86] Danielewicz 2005, p. 323, citing Hendry 2004.
[87] At *Met.* 15.871-875 (the poem ends four lines later).
[88] Barchiesi 1997a. He notes the acrostic at page 195.
[89] A telestic at *Met.* 1.452-55 *Primus amor Phoebi…*., on which and on other acrostics in Ovid, see Robinson *forthcoming*.

> came into being, the whole of nature displayed but a single
> face, which men have called Chaos: a crude, unstructured mass,
> nothing but weight without motion, a general conglomeration
> of matter composed of disparate, incompatible elements.
> No Titan the sun god was present to cast his rays on the universe
> nor Phoebe the moon to replenish her horns and grow to her fullness;
> no earth suspended in equilibrium, wrapped in its folding
> mantle of air; nor Amphitrite, the goddess of ocean,
> to stretch her sinuous arms all round the earth's long coastline.
> Although the land and the sea and the sky were involved in the great mass,
> no one could stand on the land or swim in the waves of the sea,
> and the sky had no light. None of the elements kept its shape,
> and all were in conflict inside one body: the cold with the hot,
> the wet with the dry, the soft with the hard, and weight with the weightless.[90]

The first acrostic we encounter is found at lines 14-16, the three-letter word MUS ('mouse'). Our first instinct may well be to dismiss this just as we might the pigs and the bronze – for what relevance could a mouse have to these scenes of primeval chaos, to the origins of the universe itself?

However, our learned reader might not be so hasty. They might recall the way in which Ovid's extremely dense proem—and his extremely dense poem—present a competitive and antagonistic engagement with a variety of poetic principles. As is often noted, with *perpetuum deducite … carmen* Ovid seems to be combining Callimachean poetic style (as represented by the verb *deduco*) with the kind of poem (the *perpetuum carmen*) that Callimachus himself rejected in the *Aetia* prologue.[91] Furthermore, as has again often been noted, Ovid also seems to have Horace in his sights, in particular the principles of poetry as expressed in the *Ars Poetica*.[92] There Horace urges the poet to keep his work *simplex … et unum*,[93] since a man who tries too hard to vary his uniform subject is like someone painting a dolphin in the woods, and a boar in the waves (29 f.).[94] Many scholars have noted that in the *Metamorphoses* – a poem that is anything but *simplex et unum*, and a poem in which Ovid certainly does try very hard to create variety—we do not have to wait long to find exactly the image Horace rejects, as Ovid places the dolphins in the trees and the boars in the waves in his account of the flood.[95] Examples of Ovid's provocative engagement with Horace could

[90] Translation from Raeburn 2004.
[91] Cf. e.g. Kenney 1976; Wheeler 1999, ch. 1; Barchiesi 2005 on *Met.* 1.1-4.
[92] Cf. e.g. Galinsky 1975, pp. 81 f.; Tissol 1997, pp. 95-97; Barchiesi 1997b, 250; Tamás 2014.
[93] *Ars Poet.* 23 f.: 'simple and uniform'.
[94] Hor. *Ars* 29 f. *qui variare cupit rem prodigialiter unam, / delphinum silvis adpingit, fluctibus aprum*.
[95] Ov. *Met.* 1.302–7: *… silvasque tenent delphines et altis / incursant ramis agitataque robora pulsant. / nat lupus inter oves, fulvos vehit unda leones, / unda vehit tigres; nec vires fulminis apro, / crura nec ablato prosunt velocia cervo…* ('The dolphins invade the woods, brushing against the high branches, and shake the oak trees as they swim against them. The wolf swims among the sheep, while tawny lions and tigers are borne along by the waves. Neither does the power of his lightning stroke avail the boar, nor his swift limbs the stag, since both alike are swept away by the flood').

be multiplied,[96] but I want to focus on the specific advice Horace gives about how to begin a story. The poet, Horace tells us, should not begin at the beginning but rather hasten *in medias res* (146-148): against this advice, Ovid's decision to begin *prima … ab origine* is again pointed. Even more important, however, is the reason that lies behind Horace's advice. For Horace, it is the mark of gross over-ambition to attempt to begin at the beginning and sing the entirety of a subject as big as the Trojan war (136-138):

> nec sic incipies ut scriptor cyclicus olim:
> "fortunam Priami cantabo et nobile bellum"
> quid dignum tanto feret hic promissor hiatu?
>
> And you are not to begin as the Cyclic poet of old: "Of Priam's fate and famous war I'll sing." What will this boaster produce in keeping with such mouthing?[97]

Horace then illustrates the necessary result of this overambition with a striking and famous image:

> parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.
>
> The mountains will go into labour, and there will be born a ridiculous mouse!

Ovid's ambition, of course, rather dwarfs that of the cyclic poet, since it stretches not merely to telling the entire story of the Trojan war from its beginning, but rather to telling the entire story of the history of the universe from creation to the present day (*prima ab origine mundi … ad mea tempora*).

It is at least an interesting coincidence then, that just as Ovid is beginning his mountainous tale, we should find a *MUS* in the margins. It becomes harder not to see this as a glance back to Horace when we note that the word that begins the acrostic – *margine* – seems to provide confirmation of the acrostic, the word itself pointing us to the edge. Harder again, when we look across from the left margin to the right and notice that the same line (14) that begins the acrostic *MUS* also begins the telestic *ERATO*.[98] The Muse of Love seems an appropriate presence not only given Ovid's erotic

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[96] Cf. e.g. *Ars* 129 f. *rectius Iliacum carmen **deducis** in actus / quam si proferres ignota indictaque primus* ('and you are doing better in spinning into acts a song of Troy than if, for the first time, you were giving the world a theme unknown and unsung') against Ovid's emphasis on newness (the suggestion of the opening words, *in nova fert animus*, even if the sense will be changed by what follows) and his prayer that the gods spin/bring to port his song (*ad mea perpetuum **deducite** tempora carmen*). Or compare Horace's strictures on maintaining generic boundaries (*Ars* 73-98), with the delight with which the *Metamorphoses* challenges them.

[97] Translation from Fairclough 1926.

[98] As noted by Simon 1899, p. 227. Simon also notes that the immediately preceding lines (10-13) give the telestic NESO: he emends *Phoebe* at the end of line 11 to what he claims to be the 'genuine Latin form' *Phoeba* to give NASO. Although we do find some Greek feminine nouns alternating between –e and –a (e.g. Atalanta and Atalante), *Phoeba* is not attested anywhere in classical Latin. However, several factors make this worth at least a second thought: the context here involves the moon (Phoebe) and her horns: this happens to be the context of Aratus' famous *LEPTE* acrostic (see above) and also of the suggested Vergilian authorial signature MA-VE-PU in *Georgics* 1.424-433, where *cornua* play an important role, and in the middle of which, and at the end of the line, we encounter Phoebe herself. Furthermore, the *NASO* telestic at 1.452-5 involves not only

interests in the *Met*, which will surface for the first time a little later in the poem (with the introduction of *amor* at 1.452-455, in a passage also marked by a telestic), but also because she recalls – in this competitive antagonistic context – her striking presence in the *Aeneid* at the start of the second proem to the work, as Vergil begins what is often labelled the Iliadic half of his epic.[99] The details of this passage are worth recalling:

> Nunc age, qui reges, Erato, quae tempora, rerum
> quis Latio antiquo fuerit status, aduena classem
> cum primum Ausoniis exercitus appulit oris,
> expediam, et primae reuocabo exordia pugnae….
>
> maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo,
> maius opus moueo.

> Come now, Erato! Who were the kings, what were the times, what was the state of affairs in ancient Latium, when first that foreign army landed on Ausonia's shore—this will I unfold; and I will recall the beginnings of the opening battle. … a greater order of things is born for me, I set a greater work in motion.[100]

Aeneid 7.37-45

Where for Horace there will be born (*nascetur*) a *ridiculus mus*, for Vergil there is born (*nascitur*) a *maior ordo*, as he sets a *maius opus* in motion. In evoking that metapoetic passage of Vergil here, Ovid engages in a characteristically competitive manoeuvre, setting Vergil's *maius opus* against the vast historical sweep of the *Metamorphoses* (which Ovid will characterise as his own *maius opus* at *Trist.* 2.63), and of course, his *mus*. Vergil's 'bigger work' will start with 'the beginning of the first battle', Ovid's with the beginning of the universe—a comparison that shows us exactly which of these two poets actually has the bigger *opus* – and it's not Vergil.

Once again, attention to the edges of the poem, and a willingness to think about what we find there, leads to an enriched reading of a familiar passage. Furthermore, I hope to have shown how a three-letter acrostic can generously repay attention. With this in mind, I want to turn now to our final example, which we shall find in the final three lines of the *Aeneid*. Once again, this is a very familiar and intensely studied passage, but once again I believe that it can benefit from a reading practice that is on the lookout for anything of interest at the extremities.

> hoc dicens ferrum aduerso sub pectore condit
> feruidus; ast illi soluuntur frigore membra
> uitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras.

> So saying, full in his breast he buries the sword with fiery zeal. But the other's limbs grew slack and chill, and with a moan life passed indignant to the Shades below.

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cornua but also Phoebe's brother Phoebus; it also involves Cupid and *amor*, who have obvious connections to the muse Erato. I owe the Simon reference to Talitha Kearey.

[99] On the significance of Erato here and on the passage in general, see esp. Horsfall on *Aen.* 7.37-45 and Nelis 2001, pp. 266-275.

[100] Translation from Fairclough, adapated.

As mentioned above, the beginning, middles, and ends of poems are often extremely dense intertextual and metatextual passages that invite and reward close scrutiny, often locating the text in its generic and literary space, triangulating its position relative to the works of others and other works of the poet themselves. This is particularly true for Vergil, who often uses the beginning, middle and ends of his works to reflect on his poetic career in a complex and well-documented intertextual dialogue. The beginning of the *Eclogues* evokes Theocritus but also Vergil's radical departure from his model; in the middle (*Eclogue* 6) we find a restatement of Callimachean poetics, as the poet is discouraged from singing of *reges et proelia*; and at the close, the final lines of *Eclogue* 10 are not only strongly closural but also (as we shall see) look to Vergil's imminent generic ascension from the 'humble' genre of bucolic. In the middle of the *Georgics*, Vergil's aspirations for his poem-temple once again look to his poetic future, while the close of the *Georgics* famously looks back to the *Eclogues*, with its last line consisting of an almost exact quotation of the first line of the *Eclogues*. The beginning of the *Aeneid* looks most obviously to Homer, while the invocation of Erato in the middle (*Aen.* 7.37-45) looks to Apollonius, but also to Vergil's ambitions for a *maius opus* as he returns in the second half of the *Aeneid* to the *reges et proelia* he abandoned in *Eclogue* 6. The final lines of the *Aeneid* not only look back to its opening, but also with its the final word *umbras* the poem looks back to the close of *Eclogue* 10.

Let us look at some of these passages in more detail, beginning with the end of the *Georgics*.

> Haec super aruorum cultu pecorumque canebam
> et super arboribus, Caesar dum magnus ad altum
> fulminat Euphraten bello uictorque uolentis
> per populos dat iura uiamque adfectat Olympo.
> illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat
> Parthenope studiis florentem ignobilis oti,
> carmina qui lusi pastorum audaxque iuuenta,
> Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi.

> So much I sang in addition to the care of fields, of cattle, and of trees, while great Caesar thundered in war by deep Euphrates and bestowed a victor's laws on willing nations, and essayed the path to Heaven. In those days I, Virgil, was nursed by sweet Parthenope, and rejoiced in the arts of inglorious ease—I who toyed with shepherds' songs, and, in youth's boldness, sang of you, Tityrus, under the canopy of a spreading beech.[101]
>
> *Georgics* 4.559-566

Many readers have spotted that the last line of the *Georgics* (*Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi*) repeats almost verbatim the first line of the *Eclogues* (*Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi*), with Vergil replacing *cecini* for the *recubans*, the word describing Tityrus' recumbent posture as he lies beneath the shade of the tree. Some learned readers, paying attention to the end of the line, will have also spotted the telestic *OTIA* at 463-466, which picks up not only on the *oti* of 465 but also provides another link back again to the beginning of *Eclogue* 1, and to the divinely bestowed *otia* that Tityrus celebrates at *Ecl.* 1.6 *deus nobis haec otia fecit*.[102] Given that readers can find a

[101] Translation from Fairclough and Goold 1999.
[102] Cf. Schmid 1983, pp. 317 f. who first noticed the telestic; for interpretation, cf. e.g Nelis 2010, pp. 22 f.

telestic at the end of the *Georgics*, they may be especially observant at the end of the *Aeneid*: and they can indeed find a telestic there. Indeed, just as the *Georgics* uses verbal echoes in both text and telestic to evoke the beginning of the *Eclogues*, the *Aeneid* will use the same tools to evoke the end of the *Eclogues*. As regards the textual links: as is often noted,[103] the final word of the *Aeneid* (*umbras*) looks back explicitly to the close of *Eclogue* 10,[104] to the three-fold repetition of *umbra* in the penultimate and antepenultimate lines of the poem (10.75 f. *surgamus: solet esse grauis cantantibus umbra*, / *iuniperi grauis umbra; nocent et frugibus umbrae*).[105] These lines themselves look back to the final line of *Eclogue* 1, *maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae*,[106] picking up on the presence of *umbra*, but inverting the sense of falling in *cadunt* with the sense of rising in *surgamus* (more on which shortly).[107] As for the telestic, the final three lines of the *Aeneid* offer the reverse telestic *SAT*. Not only is this an appropriately closural note on which to complete one's poetic *oeuvre*, but our learned reader might reflect that it also evokes the close of *Eclogue* 10: Vergil begins the final section of his final eclogue with the line *haec* ***sat*** *erit, diuae, uestrum cecinisse poetae* (10.70), which is echoed in the words of the very final line ***sat****urae … capellae* (10.77).[108] Now the fact that the telestic is reversed will have made it a little harder to spot: however, this may not be the only example of this phenomenon in the Aeneid, at least for readers who are convinced by the reverse signature MA-VE-PU in *Georgics* 1.429-33.[109]

With *surgamus* in mind, let us move from the telestic in the final three lines of the *Aeneid*, to the telestic we saw in the first three lines, *STO*, which our learned reader might see as participating in this same intertextual dialogue between beginnings and endings.

When at the end of the *Eclogues* Vergil writes *surgamus: solet esse grauis cantantibus umbra*, / *iuniperi grauis umbra; nocent et frugibus umbrae*, his use of *surgamus* here is often taken as a hint towards generic ascension, towards the higher genre of the *Georgics* that are to follow,[110] and indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, towards the *Aeneid*, a higher genre still.[111] At this point it is helpful to continue the quotation that begins the sphragis of the *Eclogues* beyond the line quoted above: *haec sat erit, diuae, uestrum cecinisse poetam, dum sedet et gracili fiscellam texit hibisco*[112]— the *Eclogues* ends with the poet explicitly in a seated position, already at a somewhat higher level

[103] Cf. e.g. Boyle 1993, p. 103; Theodorakopoulos 1997; Tarrant 2012 on *Aen.* 12.952.
[104] The word also looks back implicitly to the close of the *Georgics* (and thus the opening of the *Eclogues*), where of course, Virgil depicts himself and Tityrus sitting *sub tegmine fagi* ('under the cover of a beech-tree').
[105] «Let us rise: the shade is often harmful to singers, the shade of the juniper is harmful. Shade is harmful to the crops too».
[106] «The shadows fall longer from the high mountains»
[107] *Ecl.* 1.83 *maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae* ('and the shadows fall longer from the high mountains').
[108] On this and other closural elements in *Eclogue* 10, see Harrison 2007, pp. 71-74.
[109] In Robinson 2019 I argue for a reverse acrostic at *Aen.* 12.68-71, inverting a (normal) acrostic at *Aen.* 4.27-30. Adkin identifies various other up-and-down acrostic pairings in Adkin 2014, 2015b, 2015c, and 2016. We might also wonder if recollection of *surgamus* at 10.75 might encourage us to look upwards at the end of the *Aeneid*.
[110] Cf. Kennedy 1983.
[111] Cf. e.g. Wright 1983, p. 113. Hardie 2007, p. 73.
[112] He is sitting and weaving a basket – somewhat like, perhaps, Callimachus in the *Aetia* prologue (fr. 1.21 f. ἐμοῖς ἐπὶ δέλτον ἔθηκα / γούνασιν), whom Apollo addresses as he has his writing tablets on his knee – presumably also in a seated position.

than Tityrus, who opened the work *recubans* ('reclining').[113] But the poet now encourages himself to rise up – *surgamus* — both from his seated position, and to a higher genre. Could our learned reader then read the *Aeneid*'s first telestic as a sign that Vergil—as he begins his greatest work so far—has now 'risen up' from a seated position to a standing one?

To some extent the telestics *SAT* and *STO* represent a test case for the limits of this reading practice – as with intertexts and allusions, we face the question of how hard we want to work (or want our learned reader to work) to create meaning. It is partly a question of what kind of *Aeneid* we want to read, what kind of author we want to imagine, and of how much we want to open up the interpretative possibilities of a text. My final example, however, is a test case at the opposite end of these limits, where we face the question of how hard we want to work to close down interpretative possibilities. As such, it in some senses represents a challenge to my entire project.

Insane and Truly Grotesque

My approach thus far has been to assume that some ancient readers were on the look-out for acrostics and telestics, just as we assume that some ancient readers (probably the same ones) were on the look-out for allusions and intertexts. I have suggested that they would have filtered out many acrostics as random occurrences, but that they would have at least taken some time to 'test' the acrostic for meaning, and to look for confirmation of significance in the meaning it gives to the text and in the presence of sign-posts in the text. This assumption—that readers are 'on the look-out' for acrostics—is an explicit part of my approach, but I would suggest that it is implicit in much writing on acrostics; especially in cases where scholars wish to argue not just for simple up/down acrostics or telestics that spell a simple word, but for more complex ones whose hidden message requires more intense levels of scrutiny to discover, and more focused intellectual activity to decode.

However, if we are to believe that readers are sensitive to—and indeed looking for—acrostics, then we do have one serious problem that needs to be dealt with. This problem lies not so much with the pigs and goddesses mentioned above, who rarely threaten to destabilize the narrative, but rather with the kind of acrostic whose presence in the text is so potentially damaging to the received understanding of a text (and perhaps of its author) that it would seem both insane and truly grotesque to suggest that the author was aware of it and did nothing about it; indeed, the only solution would be to claim that neither the author (nor, presumably, anyone close to them) was aware of it. However, if this was the case—if the offending acrostic was spotted neither by the author nor by anyone with whom they may have shared their text prior to general release—then that might suggest that readers and writers were perhaps not so sensitive to acrostics after all.

I want to close with one such acrostic. The acrostic is one that was identified by Hilberg,[114] and (of course) discounted by him as occurring by chance, as it has been discounted by a number of other scholars too. It poses something of a challenge to my claim that readers were sensitive to acrostics -

[113] For *sedet* as representing low genres in connection with *surgamus*, see Nauta 2006, p. 321, n. 68; and cf. e.g. Iuv. *Sat.* 4.34 f. *incipe, Calliope. licet et considere: non est / cantandum* with Braun ad loc. ('The seated position suggests an inferior level of subject matter'), and see Hinds 1987, p. 166, n. 39 on the use of *surgere* at Ov. *Met.* 5.338 f. and Prop. 2.10.7-12. Cf. also Ov. *Trist.* 2.559.
[114] Hilberg 1899, p. 303.

indeed, this acrostic has been presented as evidence to suggest that Vergil paid no attention to acrostics at all.[115]

Our test case is to be found at the climax of what is historically speaking one of the most revered poems in Latin literature, and one that is still one of the most mysterious, namely the Fourth Eclogue:

> ipse sed in pratis aries iam suaue rubenti
> murice, iam croceo mutabit uellera luto;
> sponte sua sandyx pascentis uestiet agnos.
> 'Talia saecla' suis dixerunt 'currite' fusis
> **c**oncordes stabili fatorum numine Parcae.
> **a**dgredere o magnos (aderit iam tempus) honores,
> **c**ara deum suboles, magnum Iouis incrementum!
> **a**spice conuexo nutantem pondere mundum,
> **t**errasque tractusque maris caelumque profundum;
> **a**spice, uenturo laetentur ut omnia saeclo!
> o mihi tum longae maneat pars ultima uitae,
> spiritus et quantum sat erit tua dicere facta!
>
> ECLOGUE 4.43-63.

> … but of himself the ram in the meadows will change his fleece, now to sweetly blushing purple, now to a saffron yellow; and scarlet shall clothe the grazing lambs at will. «Ages so blessed, glide on!» cried the Fates to their spindles, voicing in unison the fixed will of Destiny. O enter upon your high honours—the hour will soon be here—dear offspring of the gods, mighty seed of a Jupiter to be! See how the world bows with its massive dome—earth and expanse of sea and heaven's depth! See how all things rejoice in the age that is at hand! I pray that the twilight of a long life may then be vouchsafed me, and inspiration enough to hymn your deeds!

Here, at the climax of his great prophecy, as Vergil invokes the Fates and the joys of the coming centuries, we find in lines 47-52 the acrostic *CACATA* ('shat out' or 'shitty').[116] It seems a little out of place here, to say the least. Indeed, Danielewicz presents this acrostic as an «important reservation» to his general principle that an acrostic of more than four letters is likely to be deliberate. «To take this as a non-fortuitous acrostic, a kind of scatological marginal comment, would result in admitting hypocrisy, even blasphemy, on the part of the Roman poet, not to mention the internal inconsistency of tone in the poem beginning with the appeal *paulo malora canamus*.»[117]

We are reminded of the earlier (edited) quotation from Lyne: «[The problem with an approach that relies on authorial intention is that it] encourages us to invoke the author's intention to settle any unwelcome facts or difficulties… We think we know about people and what they intend, especially our favourite poets. And thus we feel license to say that Vergil intends significance in *this* acrostic,

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[115] By Bruno Häuptli in an article for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* dated 16/5/2013, available at https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/buecher/ist-in-vergils-aeneis-die-signatur-ihres-autors-versteckt-1.18081813, retrieved on 05/04/2017.

[116] I.e. 'excreted' or 'excreted upon': for discussion of the meaning of the word (in Catullus), see Watson 2005.

[117] Danielewicz 2005, p. 324.

but – if we cannot seem to make sense of it – not in *that* one.» The important point here is that for proponents of acrostics, reference to authorial intention allows too easy an escape route from problematic passages such as this one, which can be dismissed as the result of chance. Once we put authorial intention to one side, however, we are forced to reflect on and articulate the mechanics of our interpretation.

I imagine that the gut response of most modern readers, including many who are happy to see acrostics elsewhere, would be that *CACATA* is just an accidental acrostic, and as such, a meaningless one.[118] However, the challenge is to expresses this without reference to authorial intention. What makes *CACATA* meaningless?

For those who tend to dismiss all acrostics and telestics, the solution is fairly simple: ancient readers, learned or otherwise, would not have not have been troubled by *CACATA* for the same reason that the vast majority of modern readers, even those who have studied the poem intensely, have not been troubled by it – and that is because they did not notice it, and that is because they are not in the habit of looking for acrostics.

To deny that anyone would have noticed it is of course not possible on my approach, and again, I would suggest that it is not really possible for any proponent of acrostics.[119] If we expect readers to have noticed *FONS* at *Ecl.* 1.5-8,[120] or *INANIS* at *Ecl.* 8.42-47,[121] or *UNDIS* at *Ecl.* 9.34-38,[122] why would they not have noticed *CACATA* in *Ecl.* 4?[123]

One could try to argue against it in terms of «markedness and sense». It is true that the four-letter cluster CACA appears four times in Vergil (including this passage),[124] when the vast majority of four-letter clusters in Vergil only appear once, which might suggest a certain insensitivity to the word;

[118] Cf. e.g. Danielewicz above; Katz 2013, p. 5: 'the existence of C-A-C-A-T-A … will suffice to show that accidents happen'. There are some who take it more seriously, however: Thomas 2014b briefly entertains the possibility that «a deliberate joke might be seen here»; but Adkin 2016 (in an article which came to my attention only after this article was completed) mounts a vigorous case in support of the acrostic. While some of the arguments we adduce in support of this acrostic are similar, in many cases we reach the same conclusion via different (but usefully complementary) paths.

[119] On a more intentional approach, one could try to maintain general sensitivity to acrostics by arguing that this was just an embarrassing error that slipped through the net, since it is the case that mistakes do happen. Despite the best efforts of proof-readers, who are professionally 'on the look-out' for errors, some famously escape their attention with devastating or highly offensive results: some notorious examples include the first impression of Penguin Australia's 2010 Pasta Bible, in a recipe for «Spelt tagliatelle with sardines and prosciutto», where the 'pepper' in «freshly ground black pepper» was printed as 'people'; perhaps the most famous example is that of the 'Wicked Bible' of 1631, whose version of the Ten Commandments instructed readers to commit adultery (though it has been suggested by some that the omission of 'not' from the seventh commandment was an act of sabotage: cf. Campbell 2010, p. 110). But given the scrutiny to which we subject poems such as the *Eclogues*, the excuse is somewhat feeble.

[120] Cf. Clauss 1997.

[121] Cf. Danielewicz 2005, p. 324.

[122] Cf. Grishin 2008.

[123] Other acrostics have been suggested more recently in the *Eclogues*: cf. e.g. Kronenberg 2017; Adkin 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2017a.

[124] The word *caca* would appear to the 2nd person singular imperative of *caco* ('shit!'). It also appears at *Aen.* 3.677-680 and 12.250-253, and *Georg.* 4.339-342. Adkin 2016 sees further evidence of scatological play at *Aen.* 11.820-827 in Camilla's dying address to Acca.

and one might suggest that in the absence of sign-posts or confirmation in the text, or of a meaningful interpretation, a learned reader might move on. As for the first point, I would suggest that here at the climax of *Eclogue* 4, the presence of the six-letter sequence *CACATA* is quite marked by its length and striking inappropriateness; and as for the second point, we may be surprised to discover that we find both sign-posts and confirmations: a learned reader who stops to 'test' this acrostic by looking for such signs can easily find them. Just as with Aratus' ΛΕΠΤΗ acrostic, we find repeated invocations to look (*aspice* in 50 and 52),[125] and we are directed to the edges with *pars ultima* in 53; not only that, but the Sibylline context of the poem (*ultima Cumaei uenit iam carmina aetas*)[126] gives a very strong invitation to look for acrostics, given that acrostics were the hallmark of the oracular poems of the Sibylline books;[127] and this is especially pertinent if we take lines 48-52 (which contain the bulk of the acrostic) to be spoken by the Fates. I will discuss the possible significance of the *nutantem … mundum* ('nodding cosmos') of line 50 below.

It seems then that the text is offering us 'markedness' by all the criteria we usually rely upon. But what about sense? Having noticed it, can we interpret it? Or as Fowler would say, what kind of story can we tell about it?

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[125] As noted by Adkin 2016, who notes (p. 25) that the first *aspice* coincides with the end of the first complete word *caca*, the second with that word's extension to *cacata*; he also notes the two-fold repetition of σκέπτεο at *Phaen.* 778 and 799. Adkin finds further confirmation of the acrostic in the presence of *laetantur ut omnia* that follows the second *aspice*, arguing that *laeto* can have the sense *stercoro*; he suggests rather pleasingly that the unusual quadrisyllabic spondaic ending of line 49 *incrementum* invites us to «toy with the prefix» to produce *magnum Iovis excrementum*; he also notes the possible sense of *suboles* as 'you smell'. I would add that for those who like the suggestion that the 63 (9 * 7) verses of *Eclogue* 4 are built around the number 7, this significant line (49) is 7*7. In his article he puts forward many further arguments in support of the acrostic.

[126] See also Katz 2013 who sees an acrostic at *Aen.* 6.77-84 involving the Cumaean Sibyl, and argues for the importance of the Sibylline context in encouraging us to look for an acrostic: "if there is one place in the *Aeneid* where one might positively expect to find an acrostic, it is here". See also Adkin 2015a and Kronenberg 2017.

[127] Cf. e.g. Cicero, *De Diu.* 2.110 ff. esp. 112 (on the subject of acrostics): *atque in Sibyllinis ex primo versu cuiusque sententiae primis litteris illius sententiae carmen omne praetexitur* ('And in the Sibylline books, throughout the entire work, each prophecy is embellished with an acrostic, so that the initial letters of each of the lines give the subject of that particular prophecy') with Pease ad loc; cf. also Dion. Hal. 4.62.5 f. '[The original Sibylline books were destroyed in a fire] Those which are now extant have been scraped together from many places, some from the cities of Italy, others from Erythrae in Asia … and others were brought from other cities, transcribed by private persons. Some of these are found to be interpolations among the genuine Sibylline oracles, being recognized as such by means of the so-called acrostics…' (Courtney [1990], p. 4 thinks that Dionysius means that the forgeries contained acrostics, though this seems unlikely). It seems to be the case that the first line of the oracle was reproduced in acrostic form in the text of the oracle. The 2nd century AD writer Phlegon of Tralles claims to record an oracle from the Sibylline books, which seems (as far as one can tell in its fragmentary state) to have followed this pattern: see Diels 1890, pp. 25-37 for discussion and pp. 111-115 for text; for a recent translation and commentary, see Hansen 1996. For further discussion of acrostics in the Sibylline books, see Luz 2010, pp. 29-33. It should be noted that Nisbet 1978, p. 59, specifically denies any evocation here of the Sibylline Books, which he believes 'seem to have dealt with prodigies and sacrifices'; for him the reference would be to the Judaeo-Hellenistic Sibylline Oracles: in the surviving collection of which, acrostics are not a key feature. However, the Sibylline Books seem to have been particularly associated with the sibyl of Cumae (see Lact. *Inst.* 1.6, citing Varro, who identifies the old woman who sells Tarquin the Sibylline books as the sibyl of Cumae), and *Eclogue* 4 is far from a precise text. Those seeking the identity of the *puer* might take note of Cicero's comments on the acrostic prophecy (which he associates with the Sibylline books) that appeared to suggest that Caesar should be named *rex*: *De Diu.* 2.110 'If this is in the books, to what man and to what time does it refer? For it was clever of the author to take care that whatever happened should appear foretold because all reference to persons or time had been omitted'.

Let us begin with the word itself. The vulgarism *cacata* is quite un-Vergilian; its precise meaning is debatable – it may mean 'excreted' or 'excreted upon'.[128] Its precise grammatical form is uncertain – perhaps feminine singular (as with the acrostics ΛΕΥΚΗ and ΛΕΠΤΗ), or possibly neuter plural (in which case, it might agree with *talia saecla*).

While un-Vergilian, the word does of course have some famous literary heritage, namely a starring role in one of the poems of Catullus, where the phrase *Annales Volusi, cacata charta* opens and closes poem 36.[129] Here our story gets a little more interesting, since *Eclogue* 4 is awash with echoes of Catullus, in particular Catullus 64.[130] Furthermore, the acrostic begins in the line that follows one of the most striking evocations of that poem: with line 46 *'talia saecla' suis dixerunt 'currite' fusis* compare the refrain from the song of the *Parcae* in Catullus 64, introduced at 64.327 *currite ducentes subtegmina currite fusi* and repeated a number of times.

As Du Quesnay notes,[131] Vergil has combined reference to the Parcae's refrain with a reference to lines that precede and follow their song, lines which happen to be particularly important when it comes to assessing the truth-value of their prophecy and our approach to Catullus 64 in general: the *talia* of Vergil's line 46 looks first to 64.321 f. *talia divino fuderunt carmine fata, / carmine, perfidiae quod post nulla arguet aetas* ('They poured out such fates with divine song, with song that no future age will accuse of treachery').[132] *Talia* also looks to the lines that immediately follow the song: 64.382 f. *talia praefantes quondam felicia Peleo / carmina divino cecinerunt pectore Parcae* ('predicting once upon a time such happiness for Peleus, the Parcae sang songs from their divine breast').

The point here is that Catullus and the Fates repeatedly emphasise both the truth of the prophecy (cf. e.g. 326 *ueridicum oraclum*) and the happiness of Peleus and Thetis (cf. e.g. 334-336, 372-374); unfortunately, the happiness promised to Peleus and Thetis by the truth-telling Fates is in direct contradiction to traditional versions of the story, and seems even to be undermined by their own song:[133] so in fact anyone familiar with Homer or Apollonius may well «accuse their song of treachery». Furthermore, this is a central aspect of the poem: much of Catullus' narrative, in particular its insistence on various controversial points of detail,[134] brings his reliability as a narrator into question by being either internally inconsistent or in opposition to traditional accounts.

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[128] For a discussion of the meaning of *cacata* (in Catullus 36), see Watson 2005.

[129] Given the context in the rural *Eclogues*, Catullus' criticism that they are «full of the countryside» (*pleni ruris*) has a particular irony.

[130] See most recently the discussion of Nappa 2007 with bibliography, and the commentary of Cucchiarelli 2012.

[131] Du Quesnay 1977, p. 68.

[132] Vergil's *fusis*, like Catullus' *fusi*, also glances to *fuderunt* and its past participle: the *fusi* ('shuttles') that weave the web of fate being in some way connected to the song that has been poured forth (i.e. the *carmina fusa*).

[133] Cf. e.g. Gaisser 1995, pp. 610-613.

[134] So for example the emphatic claim that it was when the Argo was setting out (and at no other time) that Peleus saw Thetis (cf. 15, 19-21): cf. e.g. Thomas 1982 and Gaisser 1995.

Eclogue 4 is usually interpreted as in some way offering a positive response to the pessimism of Catullus 64, a poem that ends with a depressing account of humanity's current state in contrast to the glories of the heroic age.[135] But recent approaches to Catullus 64 have suggested that while the poem does have a pessimistic view of the modern age, the central theme of its complex and provocatively problematic narrative is more generally 'unknowability and confusion', and the unreliability of its narrator;[136] and this seems to me to be of crucial importance. As Hubbard, one of the few scholars to propose a pessimistic reading of *Eclogue* 4, puts it: Catullus 64 «is not simply a negative and pessimistic poem to which Vergil makes a happy reply. The epyllion is significant precisely as an epithalamic poem that is on the surface happy and positive, foreboding a bright future for the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, but that contains within it ominous and disturbing undercurrents, culminating in the song of the Parcae on the homicidal destiny and early death of the child Achilles.»[137] To put it another way, an attempt to correct the pessimism of Catullus 64 via an optimistic prophecy which specifically evokes a false and misleadingly optimistic prophecy in a poem that constantly undermines its own narrative is a bold and somewhat dangerous strategy.

For Hubbard, the «undercurrent of doubt and ambiguation amid the manic enthusiasm of *Eclogue* 4» is built upon a «network of Catullan allusions» (including not just Catullus 64) that implants «into the Vergilian text the dominant tones of irony and dissonance that are the hallmarks of Catullus 64».[138] In this context, our acrostic, with its strong Catullan associations, gains a great deal more significance. If it is the case that a «network of Catullan allusions» serve to undermine the optimistic prophecy of *Eclogue* 4, then it seems entirely appropriate that we should find a further complicating, destabilizing voice expressed by means of a further Catullan allusion.[139] The acrostic—which I would take as neuter plural agreeing with *saecla*—suggests that the *saecla* heralded by the Fates are not as golden as they seem: far from being *aurea*, they are in fact *cacata*.[140]

The acrostic gains an extra metaliterary point from its echo of Catullus 36: both the prophesied *saecla* and Volusius' *Annales* are described as *cacata*: a term whose application in Catullus 36 Watson sees as looking to the end of Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo*, and the «mud and filth» that pollutes the river Euphrates, contrasted of course with the pure drops of water that represent Callimachean *leptotes.* So in evoking through Catullus the terminology of Hellenistic literary criticism, Vergil may in his acrostic *CACATA* offer a humorous inversion of the famous *LEPTE* acrostic that Aratus offered in his poetic account of the cosmos. Note here the presence of *mundum* in line 50,

[135] See e.g. most recently Hardie 2012, p. 217: "Alternatively – and more plausibly perhaps – Eclogue 4 revises and gives new meaning to Catullan mythological fantasy by turning it towards an expression of political hope for the future of Rome … On one point … most critics are agreed, that Eclogue 4 revises the pessimism of Catullus 64, most obviously by running backwards the Hesiodic ages"; or Trimble 2013, who argues that *Eclogue* 4 "creates a more hopeful vision of the future". See also Nappa 2007, p. 380, who gives further bibliography and briefly explores the possibility of a darker vision.

[136] For the phrase, see Breed 2006, p. 142. For this approach, see e.g. Bramble 1970, Gaisser 1995, Theodorakopoulos 2000.

[137] Hubbard 1998, p. 82: this section of the book is a reworking of Hubbard 1995.

[138] Hubbard 1998, pp. 82 f.

[139] Especially since, if we accept the emendation in Catullus 36.9 of *et hoc pessima* to *nec uos pessima* (cf. Harrison and Heyworth [1998], 91), Catullus 36 itself contains an incomplete acrostic *DESIN-* (or the complete one *desini*), an almost-gamma acrostic, since the word starting the acrostic is *desissem*.

[140] Precisely the same formulation in Adkin 2016, p. 24.

which has the sense of both 'clean' and 'cosmos'. That this cosmos is nodding its approval may be further confirmation of our suspicions.[141]

Here then Vergil might not be so much correcting Catullus' misleading prophecy as continuing it. Indeed, his acrostic prophecy – if we could call it that – would turn out to be much more accurate prediction of years that followed the pact of Brundisium in 40BC, and one whose latent pessimism – and perhaps even it scatological theme - will be picked up in Horace's *Epode* 16.[142]

On this reading, the bizarre colour-changing sheep, whose obtrusive presence has forced many desperate attempts to normalize them, and which immediately precede this section, can be given the force that some have wished to assign them, namely as markers of the hopeless unreality of this prophecy.[143] That they are covered in *croceo luto* also looks to the acrostic: Vergil is of course talking about *lūtum* (with a long vowel, meaning 'yellow dye'), but visually speaking (and we are interested in visuals) the word is identical to *lŭtum* ('mud, filth'); and as noted by Watson, in his article on *cacata charta*, «the terminological glide from mud to excrement was easy and inviting».[144]

Of course, as is always the case with Vergil, none of this is explicit. Diametrically opposed readings of the text remain open depending on the outlook of the reader. As Hubbard concludes «through measured deployment of hermeneutic indeterminacies, Vergil creates a text that can survive the subsequent twists and turns of history: partisans of various stripes would be free to identify the mystery child as they wish and to read the praise either as straightforward encomium or as an allusive ambiguation of the hegemonic discourse of power» – just the kind of uncertainty that we would expect from a Sibylline prophecy.[145] As always, there is plausible deniability: the significance of intertexts is in the hands of the reader; and so too perhaps for the acrostic. Some will not have noticed it; some may have noticed it, and interpreted it in the way I have suggested above; others may have noticed it, but thought «this may be pure chance…».[146] In the ancient world, as now, there may well be more than one kind of learned reader.[147]

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[141] For Adkin 2016, p. 27 f., the phrase *nutantem mundum* suggests the derivation of *mundum* from *moueo*, and pointedly not from *mundus* ('clean').

[142] Assuming, with Watson 2003 ad loc., that Horace's *Epode* 16 was written after Vergil's *Eclogue* 4. Could we see in the *Epode*'s closing lines (63-6) *Iuppiter … inquinauit aere tempus aureum, / aerea dehinc ferro durauit saecula …* a glance in *inquinauit* 'soiled, smeared' back to Vergil's *CACATA*? For the conjunction of *inquino* and excrement, cf. e.g. Cat. 23.20-3 *nec toto decies cacas in anno, / atque id durius est faba et lapillis; / quod tu si manibus teras fricesque, / non unquam digitum inquinare possis*; Hor. *Sat.* 1.8.37-9 *mentior at siquid, merdis caput inquiner albis / corvorum atque in me veniat mictum atque cacatum / Iulius et fragilis Pediatia furque Voranus*. Adkin 2016 also sees the acrostic as making a political point, and he connects this to other acrostics he has proposed in the *Eclogues* and elsewhere: an up and down acrostic of *laesis* in *Ecl.* 6.14-24, reflecting badly on Varus (see Adkin 2015c); Horace undermining his praise of Pollio's civil war history with the acrostic *NEPIA* at *Odes* 2.1.22-26; and a political reading of the acrostic *UNDIS* at *Ecl.* 9.39-43 (see Adkin 2015b).

[143] Cf. e.g. Wallace-Hadrill 1982, p. 21; Perkell 2002, pp. 16-18. Adkin 2016, p. 24, also notes the peculiarity of the sheep, and finds some etymological play there.

[144] Watson 2005, p. 270, citing as one example Plaut. *Per.* 406 f. *o lutum lenoninum / commixto caeno sterculinum publicum* ('Oh, you pimp dirt, you public dungheap mixed with filth').

[145] See the quotation from Cicero in n. 127.

[146] I am told that someone gave a conference paper in which argued for the acrostic to be taken seriously, but as the basis for a more optimistic interpretation of the poem.

[147] Cf. Robinson 2010's categorisation of learned readers of the *Fasti* as 'suspicious' or 'supportive'.

Conclusion

In this paper I hope to have demonstrated that a reading practice that urges us to be on the look-out for acrostics and telestics, just as we are on the look-out for allusions, and one that encourages us to reflect on their possible significance rather than dismiss them out of hand, can be a productive one.[148] While the examples I have chosen are primarily from passages in the text that invite intense scrutiny, I hope to have gone some way in providing more general support for attempts to find acrostics and telestics elsewhere in these texts and others, and for attempts to make these acrostics and telestics "mean" - without (I hope) fear of a visit from the men and women in white coats.

[148] I continue to put this theory into practice in Robinson 2019, which forms something of a companion piece to this article. There I argue for the telestic NASO at the *Metamorphoses*' 'second proem' at 1.452-455; another Ovidian acrostic response to Horace with the acrostic NITIDO at the very centre of the *Met.* 8.533-538; the acrostic AUSUM at the very centre of the *Aeneid* at 7.177-82; LEPTE on the shield of Aeneas at *Aen.* 8.663-670; and AIAS at the moment that Dido introduces her Ajax-like shame at *Aen.* 4.27-30, and its reverse SAIA when the anti-Dido Lavinia reveals her shame with her blush at 12.66-69.

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