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Review of Katharina Volk, *Manilius and his Intellectual Background*

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159, for *Pelieacae* read *Peliacae*; 164, for *uehunter* at 4.6.58 read *uehuntur*; 169 n.54, for "Messala's" read "Messalla's"; 182 n.20, for "Fantham (2005)" read "Fantham (2006)"; in the bibliography, the editor of the volume which includes DuQuesnay's article is D. [not J.] West, there is some trouble with the font in the entry for Ling, and the first word of the title of the following entry should be *Aspects*). Overall, however, the sensitivity of analysis and clarity of presentation suggest that Keith's *Propertius* is indeed a labour of love, if not necessarily of leisure.

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L. B. T. Houghton
University of Glasgow



Katharina Volk, *Manilius and his Intellectual Background*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. xiv + 314. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-19-926522-0) \$125.00.

Everyone knows that Manilius' *Astronomica* exists, but few, especially in this country, know the poem itself at all well. The situation is something of an embarrassment. Here we have an ambitious work on an important topic by a man of learning who is no mean poet. Admittedly, the condition of the text was once poor and its exegesis correspondingly difficult. But precisely because it was difficult it attracted attention from the greatest critics, men like Scaliger, Bentley, and Housman; and since the edition of the last-named, it has been possible to read the poem with understanding and appreciation. But not many do. Why?

One reason is that the poet's best critics have not always been his most effective champions. Housman's edition practically screams *procul, o! procul este profani!* on every page; and while he metes out praise as well as censure, back-handed compliments about Manilius' "eminent aptitude for doing sums in verse" are what find their way into our histories of literature. So, if the editor who understood Manilius better than any reader since antiquity could recommend him in no higher terms, why waste one's time?

Katharina Volk may help change this situation. Her new book is a comprehensive introduction to Manilius from a cultural historical perspective. Her concern is not to advance a novel interpretation of his poem, but to state what can definitely or (in most cases) probably be said about when it was written (quite late in Augustus' principate but before Tiberius' accession), how much of it we actually have (probably all that Manilius intended to write), what are its sources, its principal aims, and so forth. This she does in six well-focused and well-organized chapters. The brief first chapter states what little we actually know about Manilius himself. The lengthier second and third chapters explain in detail, respectively, the astronomical argument of book 1 and the astrological

teachings of books 2–5. Chapters 3 through 6 cover, in order, the place of astrology in imperial ideology, Manilius' position in literary history, and the philosophical underpinnings of his conception of the universe. A detailed outline of the poem, a handy glossary of astronomical and astrological terms, and the usual indices (bibliographical, passages cited, and general) round out the volume.

As this summary shows, the bulk of the book is devoted to situating Manilius in his scientific, philosophical, social, and historical context. Only one chapter deals mainly with literary concerns. This is the right balance: Volk saw clearly where potential readers of the *Astronomica* need the most help and encouragement, and focusing her efforts on those areas has made the book a success. Astronomy and astrology were, as Volk clearly and abundantly documents, matters of great intellectual curiosity to educated Romans and (in the case of astrology) of intense personal importance to many Romans of all classes. Astral imagery and associations formed a prominent part of Augustan propaganda and, as such, became a fundamental element of subsequent imperial ideology. Volk aligns the composition of the *Astronomica* with these realities as well as with what we know about ancient astrology from other sources.

Manilius emerges as occupying a position well within the mainstream in most respects, but perhaps as more concerned than other astrologers to represent the cosmos as entirely orderly. This concern appears most clearly in the fact, otherwise difficult to explain, that he says virtually nothing about the enormous role played by the planets in most astrological systems. This silence may indicate that the poet decided to jettison the most unruly elements of celestial mechanics in order to emphasize the perfection of the cosmic order. But there are, as Volk points out, various other gaps and inconsistencies within Manilius' account—his wavering between a deterministic and a probabilistic view of astral influence, his inveighing against and then frequent exploitation of the concept of catasterism, and so on—that cannot help but raise questions in the mind of an attentive reader. Volk lays out these issues with great clarity, but does not make them the focus of her interpretive efforts, generally preferring to explain discrepancies by invoking homely metaphors (such as “having one's cake and eating it too”). This is probably the right approach in what is intended to be a basic introduction to the author and his work, especially as Volk also cites the work of critics who have made more of these issues, so that the interested reader is shown the way to more challenging (and sometimes more tendentious) interpretations.

The chapter on poetics, following up on Volk's previous work, places Manilius in a direct line of succession from poets like Lucretius, Vergil, and Ovid. And as Volk shows, Manilius does indeed make all the moves that would be expected of such a poet—a didactic poet, an intertextually self-conscious poet, a Callimachean poet. It was necessary to make these points, but I would like to have seen more attention to other factors, as well, and perhaps a slightly different emphasis. Manilius' strengths as a

poet—and possibly his value as a witness to contemporary taste—have to do with his undeniable talent for versecraft, his nearly infinite capacity for *variatio*, the charm with which he invests his descriptions of potentially drab material. (This inference is made more difficult by the fact that we can cite but little evidence that Manilius made much of an impression on many ancient readers, although his influence on Lucan and on subsequent astrological writers is certain. Perhaps new research on early imperial poetry will change this picture.) These traits may not be the same thing as the holy fire that one expects of a canonical author; and it may be that missing this defining quality in Manilius is a failure on my part. Volk writes sympathetically of Manilius' claims to have surpassed Lucretius and Vergil in particular, and she is absolutely right to stress that the poet places himself within this tradition. But my view of his significance is not that he bears comparison with his most inspired predecessors and contemporaries, but that, unlike any of them, he deals directly and at length with a subject that is important in various ways to many Roman poets and enormously important to Roman society in general. In a sense, the question of whether he overcame his anxiety of influence is of less interest than the access that he gives us to this element of Roman culture. Whether he measures up to the standard of poets who do not give us such access in so direct a form is a question that distracts our attention from the real reason for studying him.

To begin such study is suddenly much easier than it was till now. Although Katharina Volk, unlike her poet, resists invoking the *primus* (or *prima*) *ego* motif, this is the first monographic treatment of Manilius in English, and it has few recent competitors in any language. It is very well done—thoroughly researched, lucidly written, balanced in judgment. As a general introduction to the essential aspects of the poet's intellectual and cultural milieu as they bear on the poem that he wrote, it should serve anyone who is interested in getting to know this text as a reliable *vade mecum*. For this, Volk has placed us all very much in her debt.

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Jane Wilson Joyce, *Stattius. Thebaid. A Song of Thebes*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. xxxv + 502. Paper (978-0-8014-8285-4) \$27.95.

Without doubt publications on Flavian epic have burgeoned in the past fifteen years. Previously labeled as silver age authors or even poets of the decline, the Flavian epicists, Silius Italicus, Statius, and Valerius Flaccus, have been given a thoroughly fresh look by a number of methodologically challenging and astute critical studies. Publication of English translations