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AN ‘ARS POETICA’ ACROSTIC IN A POEM OF ALBERTINO MUSSATO

PAUL K. HOSLE*

The prehumanist Albertino Mussato’s *Poem* 33 has been adduced as a fine example of his classicizing artistry.¹ The broader context of the poem is the eventful arrival of Henry VII, Holy Roman Emperor in Italy in 1310. According to Guido Billanovich, the poem is to be dated to probably the early part of 1311,² shortly after Henry VII was crowned King of Italy in Milan on January 6 of that year. As Mussato tells us, he composed this poem in hopes of winning the favor of the emperor, to whom he had been sent as an official ambassador on behalf of his native Padua. The poem precedes by two years the death of Henry VII in August 1313 and by four years Mussato’s being crowned poet laureate in December 1315, an honor which he received for his play *Ecerinis*, depicting the tyrant Ezzelino III da Romano who had oppressed Padua for almost two decades in the thirteenth century, and his historical work *De gestis Henrici septimi Caesaris*, which detailed Henry VII’s Italian expedition. Consisting of seven elegaic couplets, *Poem* 33 is replete with learned circumlocutions and borrowings from classical poets. The text as a whole laments the fate of poetry and poets, himself in particular, in the contemporary cultural climate which has largely lost its ability to appreciate and support them. The text may be cited in full.³

* My thanks go to the anonymous referees of this article.

¹ See Witt 2001, 121–122. For a recent biography of Mussato, see McCabe 2022. Much can be learned about his engagement with classical Latin literature from the commentaries on his metrical epistles in Lombardo 2020. As Lombardo (2020, 27–31) notes, the influence of Ovid is particularly pronounced, but also that of many others, including Vergil, Horace and Statius. Especially relevant is the following comment (pg. 28) “Ricorre con assiduità nei luoghi che argomentano la difesa della poesia l’Orazio dell’*Ars poetica* e delle altre *Epistulae*”.

² Billanovich 1976, 54.

³ See Padrin 1887, 26–27.

Anxia Cesareas sese convertit ad arces:
 Romulidum veteres occubere patres.
 Suspiciis Adriacis dominantem fluctibus urbem?
 Praemia castalio sunt ibi nulla deo.
 Occidit in terris, si quis fuit em[p]tor Agavae,
 Et Maecenatem non habet ulla domus.
 Territus effugio pennati stagna caballi:
 Iudicat infirmas has Galienus aquas
 Cumque vetet princeps immunes esse poetas,
 A Tritone rubri me trahit unda Tagi.
 Frons, Henrice, mee satis est incomta Camene,
 Lecta tamen veri nuntia fida soni.
 Et michi grata tamen; saltem quia reddet amicum
 Me tibi, sulcandum iam bene stravit iter.

“My anxious Muse turns herself toward the Caesarian citadels; the ancient fathers of Romulus’ posterity have gone to their rest. Do you look up to the city dominating the waves of the Adriatic? There are no prizes there for the Castalian god. If someone has purchased Agave, he has perished on the lands, and no house has a Maecenas. Terrified, I flee the swamp of the winged horse. Galen considers these waters dangerous to the health. And since a prince refuses to give immunity to poets, the wave of the red Tagus draws me from Athens. The brow of my Muse, O Henry, is rather unadorned; yet after being read it is a faithful messenger of a true sound and is pleasing to me; at least, because it will give me as a friend to you, it has already well laid open a way to be plowed.”⁴

Rome, Venice, Hippocrene and Athens, places that one might associate with patronage and poetic inspiration, no longer provide safe-haven and support for those who practice the poetic art. Billanovich, introducing his remarks on this poem, wrote in 1976: “Varrà la pena di indugiare su questo carme – finora male interpretato –, che sembrerebbe piuttosto un frammento, mutilo al principio.”⁵ The comment that the poem is mutilated at the beginning refers

⁴ I have adapted at various points the translation of Witt 2001, 121–122.

⁵ Billanovich 1976, 53.

to the fact that we must supply the noun *Musa* (vel sim.) to be modified by *anxia*. He proceeded to helpfully explicate the historical context as well as the literary sources of this poem.⁶ And yet, almost half a century later, this poem would appear to have remained inadequately interpreted insofar as its single most important formal feature has – as far as I am able to tell – gone completely unnoticed. The initial letters of the first ten verse spell out a significant acrostic: *ars poetica*.⁷ Acrostics are abundantly attested in Latin poetry from the ancient, late-antique, and medieval periods, and we can assume that some of them did not escape Mussato's notice. It is also interesting to observe that at roughly this time Dante was employing acrostics in his *Commedia*.⁸ The intentionality of this present acrostic finds abundant confirmation within the text. Its broad relevance for the theme of the poem should require no explanation. Moreover, it is no accident that the three verses constituting the *ars* acrostic include four words which contain in sequence the letters *a*, *r*, and *s*: *Cesareas*, *arces*, *patres*, *Adriacis*. The penultimate verse of the *poetica* acrostic contains the word *poetas*.⁹

Although the acrostic does not span the entire poem, this potential inelegance is more than compensated by making the couplet immediately after the acrostic most directly allude to it. He claims that the brow of his Muse is rather unadorned, before qualifying this with the statement that upon being read she (Camena now bearing the sense of poem) is a faithful messenger of a true sound. Why Mussato speaks here of a 'true sound' (*veri ... soni*) has not been fully explained.¹⁰ The answer becomes clear in light of the acrostic. If one were

⁶ *Ibid.*, 54 fn. 204. For example, the reference to *emptor Agavae* is to be explained with reference to Juvenal, *Sat.* 7.82–87, on Staius being forced to write pantomimes to survive financially. Nowadays – so Mussato complains – poets do not even find this opportunity.

⁷ This is not perceived by Billanovich 1976, Witt 2001 or Modonutti 2022.

⁸ The most widely accepted Dantean acrostic is *VOM* or *UOM*, 'man' in *Purgatorio* 12. *V(edea)* begins the four *terzine* from v. 25 to 36, *O* the four *terzine* spanning v. 37 to 48, and *M(ostrava)* the four *terzine* from v. 49 to 60. This is then recapitulated in v. 61–63, where the verses begin with *Vedea*, *O* and *mostrava*. The acrostic was first perceived by A. Medin in 1898, and for further discussion, see Barolini 1987.

⁹ These means of confirming the acrostic conform to the techniques of the classical poets themselves. Cf. e.g. Hosle 2020, 1145–1146, including fn. 8, where Horatian and Ovidian examples are treated.

¹⁰ Billanovich (1976, 54) closely paraphrases the couplet as follows: "Disadorna è la sua Musa, però, letta, si dimostra fedele annunciatrice del vero". But he does not attempt to represent the effect of adding *soni* in particular.

to listen to the poem recited, one would not hear the words *ars poetica*. Only by visually analyzing the poem does one have the chance to see these words and utter them forth. Just because they only appear vertically in the text, we should not doubt that they are a ‘true sound’, i.e. a real part of the poem that the poet wants us to pronounce out-loud upon discovery. Furthermore, the former verse (*Frons, Henrice, mee satis est incomta Camene*) may in its own way be a clever nod to the acrostic. After reading the poem, we realize that the *frons Camene*, understood metatextually to refer to the front, i.e., the initial letters of the poem, is in fact the most heavily stylized part of all.¹¹ We have here a case of wry understatement at its best.

In the final couplet of the poem, the poet expresses his satisfaction with his composition, a feeling whose justification is even more apparent now.¹² This short poem turns out, upon closer inspection, to be an exquisite, condensed embodiment of precisely the ‘poetic art’ that Mussato desired to receive more respect in his world. The poem is a complete organic unity¹³ and has admirably synthesized content and form. In this regard, Mussato can also claim to have followed well the precepts of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*. Mussato is not a first-tier poet, but this present note suggests that he was capable of a literary finesse that has not consistently received the appreciation that it deserves.

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¹¹ Parallels to this technique of referring to the acrostic can be found in Feeney and Nelis 2005, 644–646, where it is noted that, e.g., *prima movent ... Martem* in Vergil, *Aen.* 7.603 signals the *Mars* acrostic (7.601–604).

¹² It seems also possible that the very ending of the poem, *sulcandum iam bene stravit iter*, has a double meaning, referring to the laying out of the acrostic in the text.

¹³ Billanovich’s (1976, 53) above-cited description of the poem as a fragment therefore misses the mark. For the same reason I cannot see any basis for the claim in Witt (2001, 121, fn. 11) that “[t]he poem may have originally been longer than fourteen lines”, an idea reiterated in Modonutti 2022. Witt himself notes the poem’s “sonnet-like form of fourteen lines, reflecting vernacular influence” (*ibid.*, 121).

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