BRILL

Review
Reviewed Work(s): Repeats and Symmetrical Clusters of Metrical Patterns in the First Four Feet in Latin Silver Age Epic Poetry by Horatio C. R. Vella
Review by: V. J. Chr. Hunink
Source: *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, Vol. 42, Fasc. 1/2 (1989), pp. 265-267
Published by: Brill
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4431837
Accessed: 17-03-2025 21:50 UTC

HORATIO C. R. VELLA, *Repeats and symmetrical clusters of metrical patterns in the first four feet in Latin Silver Age epic poetry*, Malta, Aurora Enterprises, 1987. VII, 159 p. Pr. Fl. 51,85.

In this useful book the author, working at the university of Zimbabwe, presents some statistical material on metrics in Lucan, Silius Italicus and Statius. His study is a sequel to previous articles on Apollonius of Rhodes and Valerius Flaccus, and is mainly based

on studies by E. Coleiro (*An introduction to Vergil's Bucolics with a critical edition of the text*, Amsterdam 1979), and G. E. Duckworth (*Vergil and classical hexameter poetry*, Ann Arbor 1969). Vella aims at providing detailed analyses of the use by Lucan, Silius and Statius of dactyls and spondees in the first four feet, and the resulting variety in metrical structures, within a verse, groups of subsequent verses and more complex chains of verses. In his conclusions V. includes results of work on Valerius Flaccus, Apollonius of Rhodes and Vergil. His findings are listed in 21 tables within the text, giving averages as well as individual statistics for each poet.

V.'s study is built up in a logical way. Starting from differences in use of dactyls and spondees in general, thereby grouping Lucan, Silius and Vergil together in their preference for the spondee, as against Valerius Flaccus and Apollonius of Rhodes, he then proceeds to examine the successive repetition of a dactylic or spondeic first foot in seven lines or more, including successive alternation of dactylic and spondeic first feet. The results are rather disappointing; only Statius has a clear preference for successions of dactylic first feet. In Chapter 3 V. examines the frequency of the sixteen possible metrical structures (ranging from DDDD to SSSS) for each of the poets. In doing so he follows in the track of Duckworth and others, and his findings are not very different: a large majority of verses corresponds to only a few basic structures. Some differences between poets exist, and V. groups the poets according to them. Going further in chapter IV he discusses repetitions of metrical patterns in subsequent verses, discovering that they are very rare in successions of more than two verses, and do not vary much between poets. In the remaining chapters V. enters even more into detail: symmetrical 'clusters' of verses with the same structure, such as A-X-A or A-B-B-A, or even A-B-C-D-X-A-B-C-D, are listed in chapter V, and combinations of repeats (ch. IV) and symmetrical clusters (ch. V) in the closing chapter. Unfortunately this does not really lead to a climax, as the results get more predictable as well as less relevant. In Lucan, for instance, the symmetrical cluster A-X-A covers 16,18% of the text, A-B-X-B-A 3,61%, A-B-B-A 2,48%, ABAB 1,9% and some 31 other patterns remain below 1%. And in Silius (11,245 vv) V. discovers a pattern A-B-C-X-C-X-D-X-D-B-A, which, to me, doesn't sound like a pattern at all. In his conclusion V. gives a summary of his results, leading up to a final grouping of Lucan, Silius and Statius (in his *Thebaid*) on the one hand, and Valerius Flaccus and Apollonius of Rhodes on the other hand.

Although the study offers a thorough examination of metrical matter, providing statistics and factual evidence, some reservations must be made. V. repeatedly states that his findings are slightly different from those of other scholars, without indicating a cause or a consequence. I'm afraid this reduces the reliability of his findings. Probably some differences result from his usage of older texts, such as the 1905 Teubner edition of Lucan by Hosius, whereas others, such as Duckworth, use more recent editions. Also, it is not quite clear whether V. has had access to computer facilities or not: this may have played a role too. A second objection may be that V. makes an extremely limited investigation, even within the field of metrics, as he focusses on dactylic and spondeic patterns, excluding all relations with word order, coincidence of word accent and ictus, rhythm or, for that matter, meaning and style. On the other hand this limitation increases the lucidity of the book as a whole. A serious methodical objection one can make to this work is that its choices are not seldom arbitrary. I see no reason, except for a practical one, why the criterion in chapter II should be 'a sustained number of lines, say, in seven lines or more' (13), or why the maximum number of lines forming a cluster is put at 11 lines in chapter V. Some metrical patterns are so rare and so complex that singling them out is making an arbitrary selection. Less serious is the fact that he compares Silver Latin epic poets with the Greek Apollonius of Rhodes rather than the Roman Ovid. This may be due to his own apparent predilection of Valerius Flaccus, which, to my view, is peculiar but not inexcusable.

To sum up: Vella provides exact and detailed statistics on Silver Latin epic poets, but not always on solid foundation. The book can be very useful but must be consulted with some caution.

University of Nijmegen V. J. Chr. Hunink