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Manilius' Heavenly Steps (*Astronomica* 4.119–121)

As frequently noted by scholars, Manilius in his astrological poem likes to picture himself as traveling through the heavens. In this paper, I examine one particular instance of the motif of the celestial journey, three lines that have been considered spurious (most notably by Bentley and Housman) but that I argue are entirely consonant with both Manilius' poetic technique and his larger world-view.

After the proem of *Astronomica* 4, the poet signals his transition to the main topic of the book, the discussion of zodiacal influences:

quod quoniam docui, superest nunc ordine certo

caelestis fabricare gradus, qui ducere flexo

tramite pendentem ualeant ad sidera uatem. (4.119-121)

The wish of the poet to reach the stars is based on the popular notion that fame equals a rising to the sky, and Manilius may be alluding in particular to two famous lines of Horace (*Carm.* 1.1.35f.). The rather more unusual image of the steps is an instance of the cross-cultural concept of the stairs or ladder that provides a conduit between heaven and earth. What is remarkable, though, is that Manilius intends to build these steps himself—no doubt a fanciful adaptation of the archaic image of the poet as a craftsman.

While a normal ladder implies a strictly vertical movement, Manilius' steps run along a curved path. I believe that the *flexus trames* is a reference to the zodiac, whose treatment begins in the immediately following lines. Thus, for the greater part of Book 4, the poet is indeed moving along the zodiac, discussing the properties and influence of each individual sign in turn. In this context, it is striking that *gradus*, Manilius' word for "step," can also mean "degree" in a mathematical sense and refer to the degrees of the zodiac. This play with the word's double meaning is typical for Manilius, who likes to blend signifier and signified, the realm of his poem and the realm of his subject matter. Thus, the "heavenly steps" are both a metaphor for the poet's own work and a reference to the contents of this particular part of his poem. The same ambivalence is at work also in *ordine certo*, "in a certain order": the poet will "build" his song in a certain orderly manner, but the degrees (*gradus*) of the zodiac, his subject matter, also follow one another in an orderly way.