

*RATES/RATES: ANOTHER GAMMA-TELESTICH  
IN OVID'S ARS AMATORIA*

OR

*AN ACROGRAM AMONG ANAGRAMS\**

by

JERZY DANIELEWICZ

*Ingenio verbis concipe plura meis.  
Ovid. Rem. Am. 360*

ABSTRACT: The gamma-telestich *AMOR-ROMA* detected by HANSES at III 507–510 is by no means the only significant example of such a device in the *Ars Amatoria*. Another noteworthy case (*RATES-RATES*) can be found at I 172–176. The author goes well beyond mere “gamma-reinforcement” by showing how the telestich partakes in a complex wordplay involving its immediate context that lends itself to a subversive anagrammatic reading. He also presents a terminological proposal with regard to the systemic classification of acro- and telestichs, suggesting to subordinate both of these terms to a higher category of “acrogram” in the neutral sense of “edge lettering”. Incidentally, he cites a couple of hitherto unnoticed acrostics (I 712–718 *C-I-A-S*; II 738–744 *A-C-V-I*) and telestichs (I 720–724 *RATE ATER*).

Until recently, the *Ars Amatoria* was considered a poem in which Ovid – exceptionally, compared to his other works – did not introduce any acrostics<sup>1</sup>. Without denying the correctness of such a radical statement (if a rigorous definition of acrostic is adopted)<sup>2</sup>, it must be noted that the absence of acrostics on the left side of the lines is compensated for by several telestichs on the opposite edge.

---

\* I would like to thank the anonymous referees of the journal for their insightful comments that not only contributed to the improvement of the article, but also inspired me to further research.

<sup>1</sup> See Monica GALE, *Name Puns and Acrostics in Didactic Poetry: Reading the Universe*, in: L.G. CANEVARO, D. O’ROURKE (eds.), *Didactic Poetry of Greece, Rome and Beyond: Knowledge, Power, Tradition*, Swansea 2018, pp. 123–150.

<sup>2</sup> Although, following the method applied by Leah KRONENBERG, *Tibullus the Elegiac Vates: Acrostics in Tibullus 2.5*, *Mnemosyne* LXXI 2018, pp. 508–514, some skipped-line acrostics can be found in the *Ars Amatoria*, see e.g. I 712–718 *C-I-A-S* (‘rouse’, alluding to *manibus tangi* at 713); II 738–744 *A-C-V-I* (responding to *Arma dedi vobis [viri]* at 741).

To my knowledge, the first scholar to discover a meaningful telestich in the *Ars Amatoria* was Mathias HANSES<sup>3</sup>. This telestich appears quite late in the poem (at III 507–510) and reads *AMOR*:

	Vos quoque si media speculum spectetis in ira,	A
	Cognoscat faciem vix satis ulla suam.	M
	Nec minus in vultu damnosa superbia vestro:	O
510	Comibus est oculis alliciendus <b>amor</b> .	A M O R

	If you too should glance in mid-wrath at a mirror,	R
	with difficulty would any of you recognize her own face. No	O
	less does an expression of arrogance spell doom:	M
	it is with affable eyes that we must attract <b>Love</b> .	L O V E

(transl. by M. HANSES)

The non-accidentality of the telestich seems to be confirmed by the identical word *amor* at the end of line 510, with which it shares the final letter *r*. The whole construct has the form of an inverted gamma (J)<sup>4</sup>. The peculiarity of this particular set of letters is that it additionally offers a play on the city name Rome, since the key word may be read in both directions: *AMOR-ROMA*. After “straightening out” this gamma-telestich one obtains the palindromic sequence *AMOR(R)OMA*, which reads the same backwards or forwards.

The above-mentioned gamma-telestich detected by HANSES is not, as it turns out, the only example of such a device in the *Ars Amatoria*. A similar case of the telestichic acrogram<sup>5</sup> can be found at I 172–176:

	Quid, modo cum belli navalis imagine Caesar	
	Persidas induxit Cecropiasque <b>rates</b> ?	R A T E S
	Nempe ab utroque mari iuvenes, ab utroque puellae	E
	Venere, atque ingens orbis in Urbe fuit.	T
175	Quis non invenit turba, quod amaret, in illa?	A
	Eheu, quam multos advena torsit amor!	↑ R

<sup>3</sup> M. HANSES, *Love's Letters: An Amor-Roma Telestich at Ovid, Ars Amatoria 3.507–10*, in: P. MITSIS, I. ZIOGAS (eds.), *Wordplay and Powerplay in Latin Poetry*, Berlin 2016, pp. 199–211. I summarise here the subtle observations of this scholar but selectively; for further interpretation, including some subversive readings of the phrase in question, the reader is referred to the whole of that paper.

<sup>4</sup> As for its shape, this is a mirror image of the prototypical left-side gamma-acrostic ΛEITTH in Aratus 783–787.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to make a terminological proposal regarding the systemic classification of acro- and telestic(h)s. I suggest subordinating both of these terms to a superior category of ‘acrogram’ (in the neutral sense of ‘edge lettering’). For fuller discussion of this question, see Appendix.

What of that time, recently, when Caesar, in mimic naval battle<sup>6</sup>./ staged the Persian and Athenian ships?/ Truly, young men from either sea, girls from either sea<sup>7</sup> came, and the great circle of world was in the City./ Who did not find someone he might love in that crowd? Ah, how many were twisted by an alien love!

In this passage, we are dealing with a telestich spelling out – when read vertically upwards – the word *RATES* ('boats', 'ships'), the same as that ending line 172, with which it shares the final letter *S*. Taken together, the two words produce the shape 1, i.e. the mirror image of the Greek letter *gamma*. Such a close verbal link prompts one to suppose that this telestich is not accidental. I formulate this suggestion with due caution, recognising the sceptics' argument that the mere fact that it is a gamma-telestich is not enough to guarantee intentionality. On the other hand, there is no doubt that this edge lettering, whether introduced on purpose or not, perfectly suits the content of the passage: the lines encompassed by *RATES* describe the great spectacle involving ships that took place in Rome in 2 BCE by the order of the emperor Augustus.

As a non-sceptic, I propose to look at this "theoretically possible" telestich with the assumption of its intentionality. From this perspective, the context is read in such a way as to reveal potential signposts alerting the reader to the presence of an acrogram. Here are some relevant observations that can be made. The unit begins with a hexameter that does not partake in the telestich, but does contain the expression *belli navalis imagine*: the emphasis given to *imago* is metapoetic in that it calls attention not only to the semantics of "fakeness" (this is a mock-battle) but also to the *enargeia* in Ovid's visual *description* of the battle. However, the rhetorical attention raised by the *imago* may be also re-oriented to the actual visual aspect of the poem: telestichic *RATES* is an *imago* of the *naumachia* itself. At lines 173–174, the doubling of *ab utroque* may also point in the direction of a two-way reading, as may the paradoxical concept *orbis in Urbe*, which represents the continuous roundness of the world as contained within one compressed space, not unlike a telestich. Finally, 175 *quis non invenit* may be taken, along with the other "clues", as a heuristic provocation to search for something, potentially in a "twisted" (176 *torsit*) fashion<sup>8</sup>.

This last observation, in my opinion, additionally invites an anagram-based reading of the passage. Read in that way, the text reveals a hidden layer<sup>9</sup>, bringing

---

<sup>6</sup> Literally, "in image of naval battle".

<sup>7</sup> Probably, "from the Eastern and Western shores of the world", see *Ovid. Ars Amatoria, Book I*. Edited with Introduction and Commentary by A.S. HOLLIS, Oxford 1977 (1992), p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> In presenting this aspect, I take full advantage of the valuable comments of one of the anonymous referees (with his/her consent); I hereby wish to expressly acknowledge my indebtedness.

<sup>9</sup> The fact that I take into consideration this possibility should not lead to the conclusion that I am obsessed with the "hidden meaning" theory; for a complex discussion of the problems

some surprising, even subversive, meanings. The witty comments encoded in the anagrams may suggest Ovid's mocking distance from Augustan propaganda and disclose the auctorial view of the entire event<sup>10</sup>. Consider, if only for an experiment, two interesting examples from the lines that frame the unit:

(171) Quid, modo cum **belli navalis** imagine Caesar  
→ belli vana lis<sup>11</sup>

(176) Eheu, quam multos advena **torsit amor!**  
→ venator sit amor<sup>12</sup>

As for the telestich *RATES*, an encoded allusion to it can be tracked, as stated above, at 175: "Quis non invenit turba, quod amaret, in illa?". The natural translation of this phrase is, "Who did not find someone to love in that crowd?". However, if attention is paid to the use of the depersonalising pronoun *quod* to describe the desired love object and the double meaning of the noun *turba* ('confusion' / 'crowd'), the phrase may be understood as indicative of the desired text search result: "Who did not find what he might like in that confusion [of letters]?"<sup>13</sup>; the answer is contained in **amaret** (when read anagrammatically): *RATEM*<sup>13</sup>.

The likely presence of anagram games in the passage under discussion encourages us to look at the supposed telestich from this point of view. Among the possibilities of a sensible rearrangement of the letters that make up *RATES* (e.g. *ARTES*, *SERTA*, *STARE*, *SERAT*, *TERAS*), the first combination deserves special

---

resulting from the interpretation of the *Ars Amatoria* from such a point of view (with Augustus as the first anti-Augustan reader of the *Ars*) see Sergio CASALI, *The Art of Making Oneself Hated: Rethinking the (Anti-) Augustanism in the Ars Amatoria*, in: R.K. GIBSON, S. GREEN, A. SHARROCK (eds.), *The Art of Love: Bimillennial Essays (Anti-)Augustanism in Ovid's Ars Amatoria and Remedia Amoris*, Oxford 2006, pp. 216–234.

<sup>10</sup> I am writing this with Alison SHARROCK's (*Ovid and the Politics of Reading*, MD XXXIII 1994, pp. 97–122, at 98) caveat in mind: "[i]t should be stressed that all readings are appropriations and that in the end a text of itself cannot be either 'pro-' or 'anti-' 'Augustan', only readings can be".

<sup>11</sup> With an ironic overtone, "empty strife of war", as if it were a futile case in court.

<sup>12</sup> Or, alternatively, "Eheu, quam multos advena **torsit amor!**" → "en sator it amor". This reading (casually?) brings together two notable words from the edges of the famous Pompeian "magic squares": *SATOR* and *AMOR* which, when read backwards, give *ROTAS* and *ROMA*, respectively. Both these squares exhibit, *inter alia*, reversed gamma-telestichs. The combination of *ROTAS* and *RATES* would merit attention as paronomastic; the two words are composed of the same letters except one. Apart from that, the regular (though interrupted) retrograde sequence *ROMA* ... *ROTA* in the second half of the line may, epanaleptically, refer to the idea of *orbis in Urbe* at 174. – For the 'amans venator' theme in the *Ars Amatoria*, compare I 45–50: "Scit bene venator, cervis ubi retia tendat, [...] Tu quoque, materiam longo qui quaeris amori, / Ante frequens quo sit disce puella loco".

<sup>13</sup> The case of an anagrammatic link between *ratem* (synecdochically, *singularis pro plurali*) and *amaret* would be significant in itself.

attention. *ARTES* in the sense of special love tricks appears several times in the *Ars Amatoria*<sup>14</sup>. Here, the “anagram-capable” term *RATES* seems to denote not only material objects (ships), to which it verbally refers, but also, figuratively<sup>15</sup>, an attractive opportunity to make love relationships, to be used as part of the strategy recommended by the poet.

Finally, a remark on the selection of the key nautical term. It is tempting to ask why Ovid entered the word *rates* in his telestich, and not simply *naves*. The question does not seem to be pointless, especially since in the *Ars Amatoria* the former term completely displaces the latter one (no occurrence), whereas in the *Remedia Amoris* the latter noun prevails in a ratio of 5:2. It is not enough to look for a metrical reason here (preference, typical for Roman elegists, to end the pentameter with an iambic word and the impossibility to put the spondaic word *naves* at the end of the pentameter) as *naves* could be easily placed at the end of the hexameter<sup>16</sup> and so the telestich just shifted one line up. The reason must have been different. I think that what was of importance was the transformability of the acrogram into its context-fitting anagrammatic variant<sup>17</sup>. It is largely due to such an interplay that it gains in probability.

#### APPENDIX: ACROGRAM

In what follows I propose to introduce a category higher than acrostic and telestich<sup>18</sup> that would include both of them within a system ranked by degree of generality. Addressing this problem is justified by the lack of consistency in the existing nomenclature. It seems obvious that the term ‘acrostic(h)’, of ancient origin<sup>19</sup>, due

<sup>14</sup> See *Ars Am.* I 265–266: “Nunc tibi, quae placuit, quas sit capienda per artes/ Dicere praecipuae molior artis opus”; I 435–436: “Non mihi, sacrilegas meretricum ut persequare artes./ Cum totidem linguis sint satis ora decem”; II 17–18: “Magna paro, quas possit Amor remanere per artes./ Dicere, tam vasto pervagus orbe puer”; 2.425: “Docta, quid ad magicas, Erato, deverteris artes?”. Interestingly, B.P. MOORE and A.D. MELVILLE in their outstanding translation of the *Ars Amatoria* (*Ovid. The Love Poems*, Oxford 1990) use the term ‘arts’ in each of these places.

<sup>15</sup> For another Ovidian example of figurative thinking expressed in nautical terms, see *Rem. Am.* 487–488 (with a retrospective reference to *artes* serving as a periphrastic title of the *Ars Amatoria*): “Quaeris, ubi invenias? artes tu perlege nostras:/ Plena puellarum iam tibi navis erit”.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ovid. *Met.* II 163: “utque labant curvae iusto sine pondere naves”; *Her.* 16, III: “fundatura citas flectuntur robora naves”; 19, 183: “arte laboratae merguntur ab aequare naves”.

<sup>17</sup> This criterion is met to a greater extent with *rates/artes* than with, e.g., *naves/venas*. For another anagrammatic interplay involving the noun *ratis* compare the telestichs *RATE ATER* (semantically correlated, overlapping, reversed) at I 720–724 that can be rendered as “sunburnt aboard the ship” (signposted by *nauta ... niger* at 723–724).

<sup>18</sup> As well as mesostic(h), another newly coined term denoting a meaningful series of letters running vertically along the centre of the consecutives lines.

<sup>19</sup> As for acrostics, the basic ancient term is ἡ ἀκροστιχίς; it is also an early term, attested already in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, see Cicero *Div.* II III: “Non esse autem illud carmen furentis cum ipsum poema declarat (est enim magis artis et diligentiae quam incitationis et motus), tum vero ea,

to its etymology (ἄκρος ‘at the farthest point or end’, στίχος ‘verse’) should refer to words formed by the first *and* last letters of the lines concerned, i.e. words appearing along *any* edge of the relevant section of the text. However, in line with centuries-old usage, it is assigned only to their left edge<sup>20</sup>. Created, so to speak, out of necessity, as a counterbalance, the modern term ‘telestic(h)’<sup>21</sup> fills the naming gap and defines vertically readable words along the right-hand border of the text.

The term ‘acrogram’ proposed by me to denote a category superior to acro- and telestich has the advantage of better reflecting the scope of occurrence of the wordplay under discussion, and, additionally, includes the component *-gram* that defines it as a written message, that is, a specific type of text<sup>22</sup>. I suggest using it while discussing the edge lettering phenomenon in general, when sub-divisions are not taken into account. The existing terms acrostic(h) and telestic(h) obviously remain valid by virtue of their constant use in literary criticism. Alternatively, they may be replaced by such periphrastic phrases as acrostichic/telestichic acrograms, respectively.

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań  
j.danielewicz@gmx.net

ORCID: 0000-0002-6775-3563

---

quae ἀκροστιχίς dicitur, cum deinceps ex primis <primi cuiusque> versus litteris aliquid conecititur, ut in quibusdam Ennianis: Q. Ennius fecit. Id certe magis est attentī animi quam furentis”; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. Rom.* IV 62, 6 (in the description of the Sibylline oracles on the Capitol, brought from different countries): ἐλέγχονται δὲ ταῖς καλουμέναις ἀκροστιχίσι. The variant term: τὰ ἀκρόστιχα is much later and seems to define the acrostic as the sum of its components. At least, Gregory of Nazianzus in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE contrasts the two terms according to such a rule, see *Carmina de se ipso* 14 where – in the extended descriptive title (*PG XXXVII*, pp. 1244, 9–1245, 3) – he uses the term ἀκροστιχίς, and then, giving directions on how to read it, writes: Ἀκροστίχοις πρόσελθε, καὶ γνώσῃ σαφῶς, “Follow the edges of the verses, and you will clearly recognise” (*scil.* the acrostic). This acrostic is, as usual, built into the left side of the text.

<sup>20</sup> Also, the alternative name to acrostic, παραστιχίς, emphasising the position of the vertically stacked letters παρά ‘beside’, ‘along’ [the lines], theoretically, could *iusto iure* refer to both ends of verse; nevertheless, like acrostic, it was associated by ancient authors only with its left edge. The most important confirmations of this (use of the) term can be found in Diogenes Laertius (V 93). See also Gellius (XIV 6, 4).

<sup>21</sup> Nowadays also called (by analogy with *acrostichis/akrostichon*) *telestichis/telestichon*. It is surprising that the ancient critics did not come up with an adequate term when the existing one (i.e. acrostic) was no longer appropriate due to its firm assignment to the left edge of the text. – The fact that Vergil placed the artfully signposted telestich *O-T-(ot)I-A* at *Georg.* IV 562–565 allows the inference that he counted on its decoding by readers (incidentally, this obvious case should now be a warning to those who, by definition, reject the existence of telestichs in ancient poetry). One wonders why even such an attentive reader of Vergil’s poems as Maurus Servius Honoratus makes no mention of that wordplay in his detailed comment *ad loc.* In modern times, Vergil’s telestich was only discovered in 1983 by Walter SCHMIDT (*Vergil-Probleme*, Göttingen 1983, p. 317).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the same component in the *epigramma*, literally ‘inscription’.