



A NEW ACROSTIC AND TELESTIC AT *LAVS PISONIS* 227–30?*

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a new acrostic (*SAPI*) and telestic (*SOIS*) at *Laus Pisonis* 227–30. Their position opposite one another is an indication that they are to be read as a single sentence and an admonition to both dedicatee and reader that poet and patron need each other to gain eternal fame. The telestic allows us to reconstruct the poet's *usus scribendi* of the reflexive possessive pronoun *suus*.

Keywords: acrostic; telestic; wordplay; *Laus Pisonis*; book art; *fama*; orthography

Recently, Leventhal discovered an intricate mesostic (*MESA*) and telestic (*MORA*) at *Laus Pisonis* 200–3 (hereafter *LP*), showing that this once maligned poem is fully conversant with Hellenistic poetics and Roman visual culture.¹ To this I add an acrostic (*SAPI*) and a—somewhat more controversial—telestic (*SOIS*) at *LP* 227–30:²

iuuat, optime, tecum	
degere cumque tuis uirtutibus omne per aeuum	
carminibus certare meis: sublimior ibo,	
si famae mihi pandis iter, si detrahis umbram.	
abdita quid prodest generosi uena metalli,	225
si cultore caret? quid inerti condita portu,	
Si ductoris eget, ratis efficit, omnia quamuis	
Armamenta gerat teretique fluentia malO	
Possit et excusso demittere uela rudentI?	
Ipse per Ausonias Aeneia carmina genteS	230
qui sonat, ingenti qui nomine pulsat Olympum	
Maeoniumque senem Romano prouocat ore,	
forsitan illius nemoris latuisset in umbra,	
quod canit, et sterili tantum cantasset auena	
ignotus populis, si Maecenate careret.	235

I would happily, dear sir, join you and throughout my life my songs would rival your qualities: I will go more loftily if you open up to me the road to fame, if you remove the shadow [of obscurity]. What use is a hidden vein of precious metal if it does not have someone to mine it? What use is a boat if it, hidden in a quiet port, lacks a captain, even though it is fitted out with all the tackle and could let down its flowing sails from the smooth mast, if someone just slackened the rope. Even the poet who makes his poem on Aeneas resound among the peoples of Italy, who with his mighty reputation traverses Mt Olympus and challenges the old Maeonian with a Latin-speaking mouth, might have played his reed in vain, unknown to those peoples, and his poem might have remained hidden in the shadow of the grove, if he had lacked a Maecenas.

* I thank *CQ*'s reader for their constructive comments.

¹ M. Leventhal, 'Politics and play in the *Laus Pisonis*', *CQ* 71 (2021), 741–58.

² Text from A. Seel (ed.), *Laus Pisonis: Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Erlangen, 1969) rather than from S. Di Brazzano (ed.), *Laus Pisonis: introduzione, edizione critica, traduzione e commento* (Pisa, 2004), who is less inclined to follow the paradosis: cf. below. Translations are mine.

Despite some textual turmoil in lines 228–9,³ we find opposite one another the words *SAPI SOIS*, forming the sentence ‘to be savoured by’ or ‘known among one’s own’.⁴ I submit that, even though we need not accept the telestic since *SAPI* alone makes perfect sense in context and vis-à-vis the *LP*’s coda, there is added point in reading it alongside *SOIS* (as an alternative to *suis*). Before turning to the telestic’s orthography and the poem’s programme of alphabetic play, I consider what the poet wishes to convey.

Our passage stresses the importance of gaining renown for poet and sponsor, the former begging to be lifted out of the shadows (234 *in umbra*, cf. 224 *umbram*), hiding (226 *abdita*; 227 *condita*; 233 *latuisset*), obscurity (236 *ignotus*), in short ‘to be known’ (*SAPI*). Through Piso’s patronage, both poet and Piso will be elevated and recognized by their respective peers (*SOIS*), the one to be numbered among the Virgils, Variuses and Horaces (236–42), the other among the Maecenases (238–9) of their time. The poet makes this point explicitly in closing. ‘You will be sung as my memorable Maecenas in my smooth verse’ (247–8 *memorabilis olim | tu mihi Maecenas tereti cantabere uersu*, picking up *tereti ... malo* in line 229). It is Piso’s task to ‘lift up this man who is hidden from view’ (253–4 *tu, Piso, latentem | exsere*, picking up *latuisset*), a man ‘whose slender fortune is hiding in its darkness’ (255 *tenuis fortuna sua caligine celat*, *caligine* playing on *umbram* and *in umbra*, *celat* paralleling *abdita*, *condita*, *latuisset*, *latentem*). A ‘reputation of eternal glory’ (249 *aeternae nomen ... famae*) awaits both, as *fama* is a reciprocal phenomenon.

To return to the orthography of the (archaicizing or dialectical?) *sois* for *suis*: it is curious but not unheard of. We should be wary of retrojecting the modernized conventions of Late(r) Antiquity into earlier texts, as it is likely that our texts displayed greater orthographical and dialectic variation than the manuscripts would lead us to believe.⁵ Our form *sois* is attested in epigraphical evidence,⁶ has a solid basis in historical linguistics (cf. **sew-* > *souos* > *suus* vs the parallel development of **syos* > **sos*, the latter not to be confused with the demonstrative),⁷ and eventually the stem

³ See the apparatus criticus in Seel (n. 2) and Di Brazzano (n. 2) for the word order in the second half of line 228: all manuscripts, however, have *malo* at line-end so that the *o* in *SOIS* is guaranteed. In line 229 Di Brazzano prints *t³*’s *rudente* rather than *F*’s *rudenti*, traditionally preferred by editors: the former is found in the earliest sixteenth-century editions and in a marginal note in *t* by a sixteenth-century hand, doubtlessly copied from a contemporary edition (cf. Di Brazzano [n. 2], 119–20). The latter is surely *lectio difficilior*, as Seel (n. 2), ad loc. realizes, but not quite as rare as Di Brazzano makes out ([n. 2], 374–5; to his n. 437 add German. *Arat.* 154, a close parallel, printed by E. Baehrens (ed.), *Poetae Latini Minores* 1 [Leipzig, 1879]), and the consensus of all florilegia, including *t* (12th–13th cent.). It may be another archaic(izing) feature: cf. LHS §§355–7 (1.433–41) and below.

⁴ OLD s.v. *sapio* 1 and 6b.

⁵ So R. Tarrant, *Text, Editors, and Readers: Methods and Problems in Latin Textual Criticism* (Cambridge, 2016), 5. If we accept the telestic, this provides insight into the poet’s spelling habits.

⁶ The uncontracted Old Latin *soueis* is found in *CIL* XI.1 3078, *CIL* IX 4463 = I.2 1861 (3rd–2nd cent. B.C.), *souom* in *CIL* VI.1 373 = VI.4.2 30926 = I.2 727. These could represent a middle stage in a bifurcated development (see following n.). See E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae veteres* (Berlin, 1925–1931) for *sous*, no. 1373 A (Trier) = *CIL* XIII.1 3861 = E.F. Le Blant, *Inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieure au VIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1856), no. 275 (page 381); *soi* (= *sue* = *suae*), no. 3659 (Eisenstadt); *so*, nos. 811 e. (Milan), 4133 G.; *soum* is reported by *Mar. pap. dipl.* CXXIV, 9 (6th–7th cent.); *CIL* II 4978 might have *soai*. Alternatively, our *sois* might be an archaicizing backformation, perhaps from Old Latin *sis*. This is attested, for instance, at *Enn.* 3.137, *Lucr.* 3.1025 (with Bailey ad loc.).

⁷ See P. Geyer, ‘Beiträge zur Kenntnis des gallischen Lateins’, in E. Wölfflin (ed.), *Archiv für lateinische Lexicographie und Grammatik mit Einschluß des älteren Mittellateins* 2 (1885), 25–47, at 34; M. Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre* (Munich, 1977²), 1.465 (§369 A.); M. de

so- returned in several (Gallo-)Romance languages.⁸ Perhaps our form was retained or (re)created by analogy in the poet's local dialect. If the telestic represents the poet's *usus scribendi*, future editors might wish to print forms of the reflexive possessive pronoun with the stem *so-* rather than *su-*.

It is tempting to think that the letters of the acrostic and the telestic in the poem's *mise-en-page* were highlighted through rubrication, but there is no hard evidence for such practices in the Neronian period, to which the *LP* conventionally is dated. Nevertheless, in the passage discussed above and in that on the *ludus latruncolorum* (played with black and white pieces) yielding the other known instances of alphabetic play in the poem, the poet contrasts light and dark, as he does throughout.⁹ Some believe that acrostics contain metapoetical clues of rubrication.¹⁰ Do the new acrostic and telestic hint at this practice? Given the *LP*'s imitation of material culture elsewhere we might not dismiss the idea out of hand.¹¹ If so, the acrostic and the telestic in our passage, like the mesostic and the telestic in that on the *ludus latruncolorum*, enact the relationship between poet and patron (it takes two to play, just as poet and patron need each other to win *fama*) as well as reader and medium (without readers, no *fama* for poet or patron but also no successful decoding of the text, which can now be read horizontally and vertically).

Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), s.v. *se*; J.N. Adams, *Social Variation and the Latin Language* (Oxford, 2013), 101–2. The chute of *u* before *o* or *u* is common (e.g. V. Väänänen, *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes* [Berlin, 1966³], 41), so that one can postulate the reconstruction **souois* > *soueis* > **soeis* > *sois* alongside the usual **souois* > *soueis* > *sueis* > *suis*. But our form may also be an ablative plural of Old Latin **sos*. On the different ablaut grades, see M. Weiss, *Outline of the Historical and Comparative Grammar of Latin* (Ann Arbor and New York, 2009), 334 (§VIII.D) and J. Klein, B. Joseph and M. Fritz (edd.), *Handbook of Comparative and Historical Indo-European Linguistics* (Göttingen, 2017), 774 (§4.5.2). A third alternative is that *sois* was recreated by analogy to the *sou-*stem, with *so-* for *su-* giving an archaic appearance.

⁸ E.g. Asturian *so*, Corsican *so*, Fr. *son*, Friulian *so*, (Old) Catalan *son*, Old Portuguese *son*; development discussed by Adams (n. 7), 111–13.

⁹ On the counters of the *ludus* and their 'translation' into black ink on white papyrus, see Leventhal (n. 1), 9–10.

¹⁰ E.g. T. Habinek, 'Situating literacy at Rome', in W.A. Johnson and H.N. Parker (edd.), *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 2009), 114–40, at 131; G. Damschen, 'Das lateinische Akrostichon: neue Funde bei Ovid sowie Vergil, Grattius, Manilius und Silius Italicus', *Philologus* 148 (2004), 88–115, at 97 n. 28; M. Hanses, 'The pun and the moon in the sky: Aratus' ΑΕΠΙΘ acrostic', *CQ* 64 (2014), 609–14, at 612–13; (briefly) M. Hanses, 'Love's letters: an *Amor-Roma* telestich at Ovid, *Ars amatoria* 3.507–10', in P. Mitsis and I. Ziogas (edd.), *Wordplay and Powerplay in Latin Poetry* (Berlin, 2016), 199–211, at 204. Rubrication became a standard method of highlighting wordplay in later antiquity and the Middle Ages: see W. Levitan, 'Dancing at the end of the rope: Optatian Porfyr and the field of Roman verse', *TAPhA* 115 (1985), 245–69, at 254–5; E. Courtney, 'Greek and Latin acrostichs', *Philologus* 134 (1990), 3–13; U. Ernst, *Carmen figuratum: Geschichte des Figurengedichts von den antiken Ursprüngen bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters* (Cologne, 1991), index s.v. 'Farbgebung'; M.-O. Bruhat, 'The treatment of space in Optatian's poetry', in M. Squire and J. Wienand (edd.), *Morphogrammata/The Lettered Art of Optatian: Figuring Cultural Transformations in the Age of Constantine* (Paderborn, 2017), 55–120, at 60–1, 68–9, 73–4, 100 with nn. 22, 122.

¹¹ Inscribed texts regularly made letters stand out by using brightly coloured stones or inks: see (with a spatiotemporal spread) several essays in A. Petrovic, I. Petrovic and E. Thomas (edd.), *The Materiality of Text: Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston, 2019), 260, 308, 388, 390–4.

If Piso was willing to look past the superficial appearance of both poet and poem, so should we: perhaps we will find more messages encoding eternal glory hiding in the shadows of the text, and so give the poet and Piso the *fama* they are due.

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