

AUSONIUS TO AXIUS PAULUS: METAPOETICS AND THE *BISSULA*

Among the extant verse-epistles addressed by Ausonius of Bordeaux to his fellow-rhetor and fellow-poet Axius Paulus is a letter of ‘mixed’ type (Ep. 5 Green).¹ In the manuscript tradition through which this letter is transmitted, it appears as two blocks of prose, separated by ten lines of verse in the form of Archilochean distichs² and followed by five lines of hendecasyllables. In practise, however, the first block of verse has routinely been excised by editors as an interpolation and transposed to Ausonius’ *Bissula* (a poetic cycle concerning a young Swabian ex-slave girl, with erotic implications), preserved through the same manuscript tradition and preceded by a prose letter of dedication similarly addressed to Axius Paulus. The excision was initially challenged by Pastorino, who did not, however, re-instate the passage in his 1971 edition of the works of Ausonius.³ Re-incorporation was undertaken by Mondin in his 1995 edition of the letters.⁴ Green’s edition of 1991 explicitly rejects Pastorino’s arguments,⁵ while the continuing omission of the passage in his revised text of 1999 suggests that he remains unconvinced.⁶ Most recently the case has been taken up and re-argued by Zucchelli.⁷ The case for inclusion will be made here from a slightly different perspective, that of metapoetic discourse.⁸ Specifically, it will be argued that the perceived similarities

1) R. P. H. Green (ed.), *Decimi Magni Ausonii Opera*, Oxford 1999, epist. xxvii. 5.

2) That is, hexameter followed by dactylic trimeter catalectic.

3) A. Pastorino (ed.), *D. Magno Ausonio Opere*, Turin 1971, 236.

4) L. Mondin (ed.), *Decimo Magno Ausonio Epistole*, Venice 1995, 8–9 = Ep. 3.

5) R. P. H. Green (ed.), *The Works of Ausonius*, Oxford 1991.

6) Green (as n. 1) 221–3. The omission seems more striking in view of the tribute to Mondin found in the preface.

7) B. Zucchelli, *L’epistola 3 Mond. di Ausonio come prelude alla Bissula, Maia. Rivista di letteratura classica* 52 (2000) 275–284.

8) The use of the term ‘metapoetry’ to imply conscious self-referral to the act of composition as defined, for example, by Laird (A. Laird, *The Muses in epic reception*, in: E. Spentzou/D. Fowler [eds.], *Cultivating the Muse. Struggles for*

between Ep. 5 and the prose preface to the *Bissula* are rooted in imagery which can be related to traditional representations of composition and publication in general and to the nature of the *Bissula* as outlined above in particular. Further, it will be argued that this metapoetic significance can be extended to cover the disputed verses of the *Bissula*, thus offering a further confirmation of the authenticity of their presence.⁹

As presented by the manuscripts,¹⁰ Ep. 5 takes the following form:¹¹

Versus meos utili et conscio sibi pudore celatos carmine tuo et sermone praemissis dum putas elici, repressisti; nam qui ipse facundus et musicus editionis alienae proleat audaciam, consilio quo suadet exteret. tegat oportet auditor doctrinam suam, qui volet ad dicendum sollicitare trepidantem, nec emerita adversum tirunculos arma concutiat veterana calliditas. sensit hoc Venus de pulchritudinis palma diu ambiguo ampliata iudicio. pudenter enim ut apud patrem velata certaverat nec deteribat aemulas ornatus aequalis; at postquam in pastoris examen deducta est lis dearum, qualis emererat mari aut cum Marte convenerat, et consternavit arbitrum et contendentium certamen oppressit. ergo nisi Delirus tuus in re tenui non tenuiter laboratus opuscula mea, quae promi studueras, retardasset, iam dudum ego ut palmas audacior in hibernas adhuc auras improbum germen egissem, periculum iudicii gravis inconsulta festinatione subiturus. denique pisonem,¹² quem tollenonem¹³ existimo proprie a philologis appellatum, adhibere,¹⁴ ut iubebas, recen-

power and inspiration in classical literature, Oxford 2002, 117–140, p. 126) is extended here to cover a prose letter of introduction accompanying or including part of a poem.

9) While Zucchelli argues on other grounds for Ep. 5 as a response to a demand for publication, the metaphors discussed here receive little attention, and there is no discussion of any relation with the verse of the *Bissula*.

10) That is the Z-group, comprising C (Padua, Capit. C. 64), K (London, Brit. Lib. King's 31), M (Florence, Conv. Soppr. J. 6. 29), T (Leiden, Voss. Lat. Q. 107). See Green (as n. 5) xli.

11) Both prose and verse present a number of textual problems and have a complicated history of proposed emendations. The differences between Mondin and Green are slight and lie mostly in punctuation. I have opted to follow Green, inserting what appears there as the second verse preface to the *Bissula* (Green [as n. 1] *Biss.* xvii. 2, 1–10) into the text of his Ep. 5. The translation is my own.

12) Although this reading appears in three out of the four manuscripts, it has been the subject of considerable emendation. In fact, as Zucchelli points out, it can be plausibly explained.

13) *Tollenonem*, the emendation for *tolle nomen* proposed by Peiper, is followed also by Mondin.

14) The MSS *adcrevi* appears in Mondin with a crux. *Adhibere*, the emendation of Peiper, is accepted also by Zucchelli.

ti versuum tuorum lectione non ausus, ea quae tibi iam cursim fuerant recitata transmissi. etenim hoc poposcisti atque id ego malui, tu ut tua culpa ad eundem lapidem bis offenderes, ego autem, quaecumque fortuna esset, semel erubescerem.

*Carminis inculti¹⁵ tenuem lecture libellum,
pone supercilium.
seria contractis expende poemata rugis:
nos Thymelen sequimur.
Bissula in hoc schedio cantabitur, utque Cratinus¹⁶
admoneo ante bibas.
ieiunis nil scribo; meum post pocula si quis
legerit hic sapiet.
sed magis hic sapiat, si dormiat¹⁷ et putet ista
somnia missa sibi.¹⁸*

Vide, mi Paule, quam ineptum lacessieris in verbis rudem, in eloquendo hiulcum, a propositis discrepantem, in versibus concinnationis expertem, in cavillando nec natura venustum nec arte conditum, diluti salis, fellis ignavi, nec de mimo planipedem nec de comoediis histrionem. ac nisi haec a nobis missa ipse lecturus esses, etiam de pronuntiatione rideres. nunc commodiore fato sunt, quod licet apud nos genuina apud te erunt adoptiva.

*Vinum cum biūgo parabo plaustro,
primo tempore Santonos vehendum,
ovum tu quoque passeris marini,
quod nunc promus ait procul relictum
in fundo patriae Bigerritanae . . .*

While you thought that my verses, concealed by advantageous and conscious modesty, could be drawn forth by your poem and letter sent out in advance, you checked them; for one who himself eloquent and

15) In two of the MSS this appears as *incompti*. The sense, however, is unaffected.

16) This emendation for *aut erasinus*, first proposed by Dezeimeris, is followed also by Mondin. It has, however, been plausibly challenged, as will be seen later.

17) *Sapiat . . . dormiat* represent an emendation by Green of the *sapiet . . . dormiet* offered by the MSS. Mondin appears to accept the second emendation but to reject the first. The sequence of thought, which equates discernment with sleeping and dreaming, remains the same.

18) As indicated in Mondin's apparatus, three of the manuscripts (KCT) follow this with a new heading as if indicating a fresh letter to Axius Paulus. This heading is omitted, however, from M.

poetic entices the audacity of another's bringing forth, frightens off by the counsel by which he encourages. The listener who wishes to induce one who is afraid to speak should hide his learning, nor should veteran cunning brandish seasoned weapons against raw recruits. Venus realised this concerning the palm of beauty long delayed by doubtful judgement. For she had competed modestly veiled as before her father nor did equal apparel deter her rivals; but after the contest of the goddesses was brought to the examination of the shepherd, as she had come forth from the sea or come together with Mars, she both prostrated the judge and quelled the strife of those competing. Therefore if your *Delirus* worked not slightly in a slight matter had not held back my little works, which you had been eager to be brought forth, long since as an over-audacious vine-shoot, I would have brought forth an inferior bud into still wintry breezes, to undergo the peril of grave judgement with unadvised haste. At last, not daring to apply the *piso*, which I think is properly called the *tolleño* by the learned, as you ordered, in respect of the fresh reading of your verses, I have despatched those which had already been recited to you at a run. For you demanded this and I preferred that you by your own fault should strike a second time against the same stone, while I, whatever the fortune might be, would blush once.

You who are about to read the slight writing of an uncultured poem,
 lay aside superciliousness.
 Weigh serious poems with furrowed brows:
 we follow Thymele.
 Bissula will be sung in this improvisation, and like Cratinus
 I admonish you to drink beforehand.
 I write nothing for those who are fasting; whoever after drinking
 reads my book will be wise.
 But he would be more wise, if he were to sleep and consider these
 things
 dreams sent to him.

See, my Paulus, how foolish a one you have harried, rough in words, gaping in utterance, discordant from the proposition, in verses destitute of skilful composition, in raillery neither graceful by nature nor seasoned by art, of diluted wit and sluggish bile, neither a pantomime in respect of mime nor an actor in respect of comedies. And if you yourself were not going to read these things sent by me, you would laugh also at the manner of delivery. Now they have a more favourable fate, because although for me they are natural, for you they will be adoptive.

I will prepare wine with a two-yoked wagon,
 to be conveyed to Saintes at the first opportunity,
 you also the egg of an ostrich,
 which now the steward says has been left far off
 in the estate of the homeland of Bigorre . . .

In the face of the manuscript tradition, the onus of proof would seem to rest on those who would excise the block of verse in question. In his commentary, Green gives two reasons for adhering to the (standard) hypothesis of textual dislocation (a hypothesis which he himself characterises as ‘very odd’).¹⁹ The first, the inappropriateness of the wording of the criticism which follows, is effectively demolished by Mondin’s contention that the language functions in self-ironising contrast.²⁰ Green’s second claim, that with it in place the closing hendecasyllables are deprived of any function, depends upon their identification with the poem being ‘demanded’ by Axius Paulus. As both Mondin²¹ and Zucchelli²² point out, these lines comprise an ‘invitation’ of a familiar type. The language of Ep. 5, however, suggests that something more unusual than a verse-epistle is in question.²³ Mondin also makes the telling point that the removal of the *Bissula* verse robs the following encouragement to Axius Paulus, *vide ... quam ineptum*, of its immediate point of reference.²⁴

Of the arguments which have been put forward in favour of authenticity, the most convincing is the identification of certain linguistic and thematic similarities between Ep. 5 and the prose preface to the *Bissula*.²⁵ Less satisfactory is a specific argument emanating from Pastorino,²⁶ and developed in greater detail by Zucchelli,²⁷ which turns on Ausonius’ use of the term *tolleno* (a mechanical device used to raise water from a well) as an apparent substitute for *pisso* (attested from classical sources in the sense of mortar). Ausonius is said to be responding here to a demand from Axius Paulus that he rescue his poems (that is, the *Bissula*) from the oblivion into which he has cast them, as expressed through the

19) Green (as n. 5) 613.

20) Mondin (as n. 4) 79.

21) Ibid.

22) Zucchelli (as n. 7) 276.

23) See, for example, Pastorino who dismisses an earlier hypothesis that Ausonius is referring here to a verse epistle in mixed Latin and Greek (Pastorino [as n. 3] 236).

24) Mondin (as n. 4) 79. He points for comparison to Pliny, Ep. 4.27. 5.

25) As initiated by Pastorino, these comprise: hiding, modesty, roughness, handing over, blushing (Pastorino [as n. 3] 236–238).

26) Ibid. 237–238.

27) Zucchelli (as n. 7) 280–281. Mondin, however, seems altogether more sceptical (Mondin [as n. 4] 78).

proverbial saying *conicere aliquid in puteum*, ‘to throw something into a well’. While Zucchelli argues convincingly for an extension of *piso* to represent some kind of complex pestle, worked like the *tolleno* on a (reciprocating) principle of raising and lowering, he provides no evidence for his contention that in popular usage the term had come to designate *tolleno*. In fact, in view of their different functions (grinding corn/raising water), it may seem more likely that Axius Paulus’ demand should be interpreted simply in terms of the reciprocity demanded by friendship. At the same time, Ausonius’ apparent substitution of *tolleno* may be linked to its usage elsewhere to designate an instrument of warfare,²⁸ reflecting the prominent place allocated to military imagery at the start of Ep. 5. Finally, there is the small but potentially telling corroborative detail found in the first verse preface to the *Bissula: ut voluisti, Paule, cunctos Bissulae versus habes*,²⁹ seeming to imply the receipt by Axius Paulus of a previous incomplete version.³⁰

Before embarking on a detailed examination of the imagery, it seems desirable to lay out the epistolary parameters. The letter from Ausonius presents itself as responding to a request from Axius Paulus, underpinned by the sending of a *carmen* and *sermo* (probably an accompanying prose letter),³¹ for some (unspecified) *versus* of Ausonius. What follows suggests that the *carmen* is to be identified with *Delirus tuus*,³² set in opposition to *opuscula mea*. The hypothesis of equating these ‘little works’ with an implied *Bissula mea* is an attractive one.³³ Zucchelli goes further, claiming that Axius Paulus has specifically requested the publication of the latter.³⁴ Such specificity may, however, be problematic. The nature of epistolary

28) Livy, 24.34.10; 38.5.4. Zucchelli notes the military associations, but appears to dismiss them (Zucchelli [as n. 7] 280 n. 19).

29) Biss. xvii. 1. 1.

30) Pastorino (as n. 3) 237; Zucchelli (as n. 7) 283.

31) On the equivalence of *sermo* and ‘letter’ at this period see e.g. C. Conybeare, *Paulinus noster*, self and symbols in the letters of Paulinus of Nola, Oxford 2000, 25–26 and n. 34.

32) We can only speculate about what this was. The suggestion that it may have been quasi-theatrical in nature (Green [as n. 5] 612) seems tempting in view of the subsequent play on mimes and performance.

33) As Dräger points out, Ausonius’ reference to ‘all the verses of/on Bissula’ as given above points to an oscillation between ‘Bissula’ as (poetic) subject and ‘Bissula’ as title (P. Dräger [ed.], *D. Magnus Ausonius, Mosella, Bissula, Briefwechsel mit Paulinus Nolanus*, Düsseldorf/Zürich 2002, 185, 1.1).

34) Zucchelli (as n. 7) 276 and passim.

dialogue, with its tendency towards fictionalisation and (mis)representation,³⁵ makes any attempt to reconstruct the exact nature of Axius Paulus' (missing) epistolary overtures from an interpretation of the (extant) response doubly problematic.³⁶ While Ausonius' letter is couched in dialogic terms which purport to be responding to his friend's 'demand' (*ut iubebas; hoc poposcisti*), this forms part of a wider feature, taking the form of repeated attempts to 'wrong-foot' his correspondent. Thus the communication is said to have checked the very response it was intended to elicit,³⁷ while Paulus' choice of wording is reproved on the grounds of linguistic scholarship.³⁸ While the 'modesty' may be related in part, as Zucchelli argues, to conventional manifestations in late antiquity of reluctance to 'publish',³⁹ the wrong-footing can equally be read as an expression of *amicitia iocosa*, 'joking friendship'.⁴⁰ As will be seen, the concept of 'making public' is certainly present in the imagery of both letters, but the ambiguity of the language leaves it unclear where exactly this should be placed on the scale between 'quasi-private' exchange between friends and full-blown exposure to the 'public' arena.

In Ep. 5, the central metaphor is that of 'publication' as participation in a form of competition.⁴¹ It is preceded by an opposition which pits Ausonius as (poetic) tiro against Axius Paulus as (poetic) veteran.⁴² Seemingly set up as a compliment to the latter's

35) The classic work on epistolarity is that of Altman (J. G. Altman, *Epistolarity: approaches to a form*, Columbus 1982).

36) In relation to the 'water from a well' hypothesis, for example, both Pastorino and Zucchelli go so far as to insert actual words into Axius Paulus' mouth (Pastorino [as n. 3] 237; Zucchelli [as n. 7] 281).

37) *dum putas elici ... repressisti; ergo nisi Delirus tuus ... opuscula mea ... retardasset ...*

38) *quem ... existimo ... proprie a philologis appellatum ...*

39) Zucchelli (as n. 7) 283 and n. 38.

40) While the term was coined in relation to the twelfth century, the phenomenon can be traced back earlier. See, for example, the distinction between *familiare et iocosum* and *severum et grave* as epistolary types (Cicero, *Fam.* 2.4.1).

41) Compare the presentation of (public) recitation as a (wrestling) contest necessitating an intermission: ... *luctantis acuto ne secer ungui, / 'displacet iste locus', clamo et diludia posco. / ludus enim genuit trepidum certamen et iram ...* (Horace, *Ep.* 1.19.46–48).

42) The same opposition appears in a (prose) letter from Ausonius to Symmachus, where the latter, despite being a 'tiro', is said to have earned at the imperial court the 'rewards of veteran warfare', whilst Ausonius, a 'veteran', is said to have exercised the condition of a 'new recruit' (Ausonius, *Ep.* 12 Green [as n. 1] 232–3). See Mondin (as n. 4) 23.

superiority in experience and skill, it can in fact be seen as an extension of the wrong-footing through the construction of his request as a form of inappropriate (and ultimately self-defeating) 'challenge'. 'Veteran artfulness' should not 'brandish seasoned weapons' (*emerita ... arma concutiat*)⁴³ against 'raw recruits' (*tirunculos*).⁴⁴ Within this metaphorical framework come two subsidiary linguistic nexuses which further emphasise Ausonius' poetic 'inadequacy', that of 'shame', 'modesty' (*conscio ... pudore; pudenter; erubescerem*), and that of 'boldness', 'daring' (*audaciam; audacior; non ausus*). At one remove from the standard forms of modesty topos found in Christian writing,⁴⁵ this type of playfulness, neatly dubbed in relation to Ausonius' society *modestia nugatoria* by La Penna,⁴⁶ as demonstrated for example in the prose preface to the *Griphus*,⁴⁷ is at once self-deprecating and boastful. There may be more to it than simple play, however. In its most developed form, it can be seen to comprise a complex and highly self-conscious manipulation of metapoetic discourse, as in the prose preface to the *Bissula*, where, as will be seen, warfare and modesty combine to present publication as a form of (sexual) 'violation' (*verecundiae meae scilicet spoliium concupisti*) on the part of Axius Paulus.

The notion of 'publication' as competition (*iudicio; certaverat; lis; certamen*) is formulated here in terms of a 'beauty contest' through a specific analogy with the judgement of Paris (*pastoris ex-*

43) For the expression *arma concutere* compare Ovid, *Met.* 1.143; 7.130.

44) A similar opposition is used by Jerome in his correspondence with Augustine but to opposite effect, as Augustine is warned to steer clear of theological debate through an allusion to the defeat of the arrogant young challenger Dares at the hands of the experienced Entellus (Jerome, *Ep.* 102.2 in: I. Hilberg [ed.], *CSEL* 55, Vienna 1996, 236). As a 'veteran', Jerome claims the right to enjoy his retirement, while Augustine is encouraged to seek out younger opponents (*Ep.* 105.3, *ibid.* 244).

45) See A. Garzya, *L'epistolografia letteraria tardoantica*, in: *Le trasformazioni della cultura nella Tarda Antichità. Atti del Convegno* (Catania, 1982) I, Rome 1985, 347–373, p. 356.

46) A. La Penna, *Il 'lusus' poetico nella tarda antichità. Il caso di Ausonio*, in: *Storia di Roma III* 2, Turin 1993, 731–751, p. 745.

47) Ausonius, *Griphus Ternarii Numeri*. Pref. in: Green (as n. 1) xv. 120–122. Addressed by Ausonius to Symmachus, this preface displays several points of contact with *Ep.* 5. The poem, *libellus ignobilis*, is initially depicted as 'lurking' (*latebat inter nugas meas*), described in Catullan parody as *illegidum et rudem*, and characterised as *nugator*.

amen; pulchritudinis palma), and developed through a verbal link between the verses ‘concealed’ (*celatos*) through self-conscious ‘modesty’ (*pudore*) and Venus, said to have competed initially ‘modestly ... veiled’ (*pudenter ... velata*). The underlying notion, that the verses are expected to ‘strip’ and display themselves ‘naked’ to public gaze (*qualis emergerat mari aut cum Marte convenerat*)⁴⁸ seems to draw on the trope of ‘publication’ as a form of venal display aimed at wooing the public, as enshrined in Catullus’ sending out of his smart new little book⁴⁹ and Horace’s warning to his wanton book of epistles.⁵⁰ The trope is favoured by Martial⁵¹ (one source for the disputed verses of the *Bissula*), in whose work one particular inversion may merit comparison. Martial’s ‘address’ to his book instructs it to learn to speak ‘more purely’, ‘from a modest mouth’, while the patronage of ‘naked Venus’ is dismissed in favour of that of (chaste) Minerva.⁵² The presentation of the poem as ‘prostitute’ together with the concomitant reduction of the role of the poet to that of ‘pimp’, as discussed recently, for example, by Fear,⁵³ can be seen here as a further means of wrong-footing the hapless Axius Paulus.

In the prose preface to the *Bissula*, the metapoetic discourse is built around the metaphor of profanation of the Mysteries:

48) The trapping and putting on display of the adulterous lovers is memorably depicted in the *Odyssey*, where the subsequent bathing, anointing and dressing of Aphrodite by the Graces points towards her previous state of nakedness (Od. 8.364–66). The birth of Venus from the sea was enshrined in the artistic depiction of *Venus Anadyomene*, as recalled, for example, by Ovid, *nuda Venus madidas exprimit imbre comas* (Ovid, *Ars Am.* 3.224; cf. also *nuda Dione*, Ovid, *Amor.* 1.14.33–34).

49) *Cui dono lepidum novum libellum/arida modo pumice expositum?* (Catullus, 1.1–2). On the potential for sexual innuendo behind the notion of ‘smoothing, polishing’ with pumice, see W. Fitzgerald, *Catullan Provocations*, Berkeley 1995, 40–1 and p. 252 n. 29. Ovid similarly plays on the idea of removing unsightly ‘hair’ (*hirsutus; sparsis ... comis*) (Ovid, *Trist.* 1.11–12).

50) *odisti [sc. liber] clavis et grata sigilla pudico ...* (Horace, *Ep.* 1.20.3). See E. Oliensis, *Life after publication: Horace, Epistles* 1.20, *Arethusa* 28 (1995) 209–224.

51) See e.g. Martial, *Epigrams* 1.3; 3.2; 3.68; 4.10; 4.86.

52) *Laurigeros domini, liber, intrature penates/disce verecundo sanctius ore loqui. / nuda recede Venus; non est tuus iste libellus: / tu mihi, tu, Pallas Caesariana, veni* (Mart. *Epig.* 8.1).

53) T. Fear, *Poet as pimp: elegiac seduction in the time of Augustus*, in: T. Fear (ed.), *Fallax opus: approaches to reading Roman elegy*, *Arethusa* 33.2 (2000) 217–240.

Pervincis tandem et operta musarum mearum, quae initiorum velabat obscuritas, quamquam non profanus irrumpis, Paule carissime. quamvis enim te non eius vulgi existimem quod Horatius arcet ingressu, tamen sua cuique sacra, neque idem Cereri quod Libero, etiam sub isdem cultoribus. poematia quae in alumnam meam luseram rudia et incobata ad domesticae solacium cantilenaе, cum sine metu (laterent)⁵⁴ et arcana securitate fruerentur, proferri⁵⁵ ad lucem caligantia coegisti. verecundiae meae scilicet spoliū concupisti aut quantum tibi in me iuris esset ab invito indicari. ne tu Alexandri Macedonis pervicaciam supergressus, qui fatalis iugi lora cum solvere non posset abscedit et Pythiae specum quo die fas non erat patere penetravit. utere igitur ut tuis, pari iure, sed fiducia dispari; quippe tua possunt populum non timere, meis etiam intra me erubescō. vale.⁵⁶

You conquer at last and although not uninitiated, dearest Paulus, burst into the secret places of my muses, which the darkness of sacred mysteries veiled. For although I would not judge you of that rabble which Horace bars from entrance, each has his own rites, nor is it the same for Ceres as for Liber, even under the same celebrants. You have compelled the rough and imperfect verses which I had composed on my foster-daughter for the solace of private song, while they were lying hidden without fear and enjoying concealed safety in darkness, to be brought forth to the light. Undoubtedly, you lusted after the spoil of my modesty or for it to be revealed by one unwilling how much authority you had over me. Indeed you have exceeded the wilfulness of Macedonian Alexander, who when he could not loose the reins of the fated yoke cut them and penetrated the cave of the Pythia on a day it was not lawful for access. Use them, therefore, as yours, with equal authority but unequal confidence; for yours can be unafraid of the public, but I blush for mine even within myself. Farewell.

Dräger, building on the link between the second verse preface (the ten lines found in Ep. 5) and the anonymous and obscene *Carmina Priapea* (a collection of verses in celebration of the fertility god Priapus), sees an allusion here to the (erotic) ‘mysteries’ of the fertility deity Priapus.⁵⁷ In fact, the clear signalling of the Horatian pose of poet-celebrant (*Musarum sacerdos*),⁵⁸ would seem to suggest that the primary significance is metapoetic.⁵⁹ Indeed, throughout

54) This represents Peiper’s emendation for *sine metu et* of the MSS.

55) This form is offered by three of the manuscripts while the fourth has the alternative *proferre*. The meaning is not essentially affected.

56) Bissula, Praef. 1–16 in: Green (as n. 1) xvii. The translation is my own.

57) Dräger (as n. 33) 184. 0.1; 285.

58) *Odi profanum volgus et arceo; / favete linguis; carmina non prius / audita Musarum sacerdos / virginibus puerisque canto* (Hor. Carm. 3.1.1–4). Arceo finds a further echo in the phrase *arcana securitate*.

59) Pastorino puts this slightly differently, to the effect that the practice of poetry is being compared to initiation into the mystery cults (Pastorino [as n. 3])

his discussion Dräger seems to flirt with the notion of metapoetics without ever quite pinning it down as such, as in his rendition of *operta musarum* as ‘temple of (my) Muses’⁶⁰ and his claim of a further link with the *Priapea* through the equation there of ‘temple’ with ‘book’.⁶¹ Further metapoetic indications may lurk in the statement that ‘each (deity) has their own rites ... even under the same worshippers/priests’, perhaps inverting the Ovidian claim that all poets share ‘common rites’ (*communia sacra*).⁶² The reference to Ceres and Liber may exploit an opposition between ‘silence’ and ‘speech’,⁶³ finding an echo here in the contrast between ‘private’ and ‘public’ (*domesticae ... cantilenae; populum ... timere*). At the same time, erotic associations are also present. The accusation of transgression (*operta ... irrumpis*) is made explicit through the analogy with Alexander ‘irreligiously/unlawfully penetrating’ the cave of Apollo’s prophetess, in terms which appear to reinforce the notion of (sexual) violation as discussed earlier, while it is Ovid again who suggests that the rites of Venus should be veiled in silence.⁶⁴

Linked with the metaphor of the Mysteries in the prose preface is a recurring opposition between ‘light’ and ‘darkness’, ‘concealment’ and ‘revelation’ (*operta; obscuritas; caligantia/proferri (-e) ad lucem*).⁶⁵ In Ep. 5 the opposition is developed through the language of ‘bringing forth’ (*dum putas elici; editionis alienae; quae promi studueras*) and culminates in a metaphor borrowed from

606). This picks up one side of the equation but seems to obscure the role of poet-priest.

60) Dräger (as n. 33) 184. 0.1; 285. The phrase offers a parallel with the subsequent reference to the ‘cave of the Pythia’, presumably the underground chamber beneath the temple at Delphi.

61) Priapus is asked to look favourably upon *quidquid id est, quod otiosus/templi parietibus tui notavi*, that is, these poems (*Priapea*, 2.9–10 in: F. Bücheler [ed.], *Petronii Saturae et Liber Priapeorum*, Berlin 1922). See Dräger (as n. 33) 184. 0.1.

62) E.g. *sunt tamen inter se communia sacra poetis, / diversum quamvis quisque sequamur iter* (Ovid, *Pont.* 2.10.17–18); *sunt mihi vobiscum communia sacra, poetae, / in vestro miseris si licet esse choro* (ibid. 3.4.67–68).

63) The Eleusinian mysteries demand the first (e.g. *Hor. Carm.* 3.2.26–27), wine provokes the second (e.g. *ibid.* 3.21.14–16).

64) *praecipue Cytherea iubet sua sacra taceri ...* (*Ars Am.* 2.607). Just previously he has asked, *quis Cereris ritus ausit vulgare profanis ... ?* (ibid. 601).

65) On initiation as transition from darkness into light see e.g. Seaford (R. Seaford, *Dionysiac drama and the Dionysiac mysteries*, *Classical Quarterly* 31 [1981] 252–275).

husbandry, as Ausonius likens himself to a precocious 'vine-shoot' which would have produced an unseasonable and inferior 'bud' (*in hibernas adhuc auras improbum germen egissem*) had the action not been averted through the interference of his friend. Again, the associations may be metapoetic as, for example, in Catullus 65, where the imagery of procreation and childbirth seems to hover somewhere between the notion of poetic creativity and that of publication.⁶⁶ In turn, it can be seen as paving the way in Ep. 5 for the more familiar form of the trope, that of poet-father/poem-child⁶⁷ (as introduced by the earlier reference to Venus' initial modesty *ut apud patrem*), in terms of the verses' 'adoption' by Axius Paulus (*apud nos genuina / apud te ... adoptiva*). Like Ep. 5, the prose preface may partake simultaneously of humility and of arrogance, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of the (self-ironising) *rudia*, 'inexperienced', 'rough',⁶⁸ with the (poetically knowing) *luseram*, connoting both poetic composition and amorous dalliance.⁶⁹ Ausonius' *Bissula* may be both too naive and too sophisticated to enter the public arena.

It can be argued, accordingly, that the communality shared by Ausonius' Ep. 5 and the prose preface to the *Bissula* is based on a form of metapoetical discourse which exploits the interface between (private) creativity and (public) dissemination through metaphors which play on 'publication' as a loss of virginal innocence. This communality can be shown to extend beyond the prose letters into the disputed lines from the *Bissula*. Cast in the form of an address to the 'reader' (*lecture*), they can be seen to explore the same ground but from the opposite viewpoint, shifting the focus from composition to reception and the burden of responsibility for

66) *non potis est dulcis Musarum expromere fetus/mens animi* (Cat. 65.3–4); *mitto/haec expressa tibi carmina ...* (ibid. 15–16). See Fitzgerald (as n. 49) 192–193 and p. 281 n. 10.

67) For example, Martial advises a would-be plagiarist to seek out hitherto unpublished work, in terms of a 'virginal sheet' 'known' only to its 'father': *secreta quaere carmina et rudes curas/quas novit unus scrinioque signatas/custodit ipse virginis pater chartae* (Mart. Epig. 1.66.5–7). See M. Citroni, Le raccomandazioni del poeta: apostrofe al libro e contatto col destinatario, *Maia* 38 (1986) 111–146.

68) A similar play on 'roughness' and (sexual) 'inexperience' may perhaps be found in Martial: *hoc me frigore basiet nec uxor/blandis filia nec rudis labellis* (Mart. Epig. 7.95.7–8).

69) For the first, compare e.g. Virgil, *Ecl.* 110; Ovid, *Amor.* 3.1.27; for the second, compare e.g. *Ars Am.* 2.389; Mart. Epig. 11.104.5.

the success of the poem from poet to reader. It will be argued in what follows that this shift of focus is maintained throughout the verse as tropes concerned with poetic inspiration and composition are seemingly re-allocated from poet to audience. The tone is set by the opening request to ‘set aside supercilious disapproval’ (*pone supercilium*), which conflates the opening distich of the *Priapea*,⁷⁰ so setting up an expectation of erotica, with Martial’s dedicatory epigram to the emperor Domitian.⁷¹ The claim to be ‘following Thymele’ (*Thymelen sequimur*), representing a further appropriation from the same Martial context,⁷² serves to further this expectation.⁷³ Martial frequently tropes his poems as ‘mimes’, thus simultaneously deprecating and revelling in their indecency.⁷⁴ As pointed out by Mondin, the allusion signals the intention of Ausonius to be ‘lively and salacious’ and more than a little ‘histrionic’,⁷⁵ and can be seen to give spice and point to the disclaimer in the prose which follows that he is no ‘mime artist’ or ‘(comic) actor’.⁷⁶

It may seem, then, that the stress in both Ep. 5 and the prose preface on the shame/modesty of the poem, together with the act of blushing attributed to the poet (*ego ... semel erubescerem; meis*

70) *Carminis incompti lusuriosus lecture procaces, /conveniens Latio pone supercilium* (Priap. 1.1–2). As Mondin points out, this allusion may explain the appearance in two of the MSS of *incompti* for *inculti* (Mondin [as n. 4] 79–80).

71) *contigeris nostros, Caesar, si forte libellos, / terrarum dominum pone supercilium* (Mart. Epig. 1.4.1–2). The issue of priority between the *Priapea* (variously dated to between BC 31 and AD 100) and Martial is not relevant here.

72) *qua Thymelen spectas derisoremque Latinum, /illa fronte precor carmina nostra legas* (Mart. Epig. 1.4.5–6).

73) Whether Thymele is to be identified with an individual actress from the period of Domitian as claimed by Mondin (Mondin [as n. 4] 79) or with a stock character as claimed by Green (Green [as n. 5] 516) makes little difference. The primary association is clearly with the ‘indecency’ associated with mime, as demonstrated, for example, in Juvenal, 6.65, which turns on the performance of an effeminate mime artist impersonating Leda and the swan: *attendit Thymele; Thymele tunc rustica discit*. Even Thymele, it implies, has something to learn. See Dräger (as n. 33) 186. 2. 3.

74) E. g. *epigrammata illis scribuntur qui solent spectare Florales. non intret Cato theatrum meum, aut si intraverit, spectet ...* (Mart. Epig. 1. Praef. 16–18); *cur in theatrum, Cato severe, venisti?* (ibid. vv. 3); *audieris [sc. parve liber] cum grande sophos, dum basia iactas ...* (Epig. 1.3.7). See M. Citroni (ed.), *M. Valerii Martialis, Epigrammata Liber 1*, Florence 1975, 32; P. Howell (ed.), *Commentary on Book One of the Epigrams of Martial*, London 1980, 115.

75) Mondin (as n. 4) 79.

76) *... nec de mimo planipedem nec de comoediis histrionem.*

... *intra me erubescerem*),⁷⁷ is to be understood both figuratively and literally. Ausonius is 'embarrassed' alike by the poetic inadequacy of the poem and by its sexual connotations.⁷⁸ What follows is built around two tropes normally associated with poetic composition but here inverted to fit into the scheme of instruction to the 'reader'. The first turns on the traditional association between wine and poetic inspiration (*admoneo ante bibas; post pocula*). *Utque Cratinus*, 'and like Cratinus ...', as accepted by both Green and Mondin, represents an emendation of the *aut erasinus* of the manuscripts. The explanation offered, that it constitutes an allusion to the traditionally inebriated state of that writer of Greek Old Comedy,⁷⁹ brings out the significance of the point at issue but presupposes considerable disruption of the text. Dräger maintains the manuscript reading, *Bissula in hoc schedio cantabitur, haut* (= *haut*) *Erasinus*, explained in terms of a claim that 'hot' erotic poetry rather than the 'chilly' river celebrated in epic will provide the subject-matter for what follows.⁸⁰ Dräger's reading is probably the more satisfactory, as involving the least textual disruption. As Mondin demonstrates, however, the exhortation to 'drink' is best explained by comparison with the prose preface to the *Griphus*,⁸¹ where Ausonius claims that it is unjust for a 'sober' reader to pass judgement on an 'inebriated' poet.⁸²

The conceit which follows doubles the notion of inspiration through intoxication with that of poetic composition as a 'dream'

77) Dräger links the second of these with the red-painted phallus of Priapus (Dräger [as n. 33] 185. 4.3). The allusion, however, seems slightly forced.

78) This 'embarrassment' is attributed by della Corte to Ausonius' foolishness as (infatuated) *amator senex* (F. della Corte, *Opuscula* vii, Genoa 1983, 251–259, p. 21). Dräger, on the other hand, presents the relationship in terms of sexual initiation, of an immature *virguncula* by an older and experienced Priapus figure (Dräger [as n. 33] 285–6).

79) As echoed by Horace: *prisco si credis ... Cratino/nulla placere diu nec vivere carmina possunt/quaes scribuntur aquae potioribus* (Hor. Ep. 1.19.1–3). Green's (rather odd) comment to the effect that Ausonius would appear to have 'badly misunderstood' this (Green [as n. 5] 516) is convincingly countered by Mondin, who points rather to 'witty re-interpretation' (Mondin [as n. 4] 80).

80) Dräger (as n. 33) 186. 2. 5. For *gelidus* as a stock epithet, see Stat. Theb. 1.357; Sen. Ag. 317.

81) Mondin (as n. 4) 80.

82) *sed tu quoque hoc ipsum paulo hilarior et dilutior lege; namque iniurium est de poeta male sobrio lectorem abstemium iudicare* (Aus. Griph. Praef. 31–33). The point may be acknowledged in Dräger's rendition of *ieiunis nil scribo* as "für Nüchterne schreibe ich nichts" (Dräger [as n. 33] 55).

(*dormiat; somnia*), ‘dreamed up’, as it were, by the poet. This metapoetical usage can be illustrated from Roman Comedy, where it can be seen to form part of a wider metatheatrical, or perhaps better, metacompositional awareness.⁸³ Rather than reducing the metaphors of intoxication and dream to a straightforward demand for the suspension of critical judgement, as Mondin suggests,⁸⁴ it may seem preferable to see them as a playful tweaking of the concept of ‘reciprocity’ viewed through the ironising lens of *modestia nugatoria*. The ‘reader’, in this case the fellow-poet Axius Paulus, is being required to match the state of inspirational ‘intoxication’ of the author. Only in this way, it is implied, can the poems truly be understood and appreciated. It may be noted that in the first verse preface to the *Bissula*, Ausonius appears to turn against Axius Paulus another standard metaphor for poetic composition exploited by Roman Comedy, that is, the metaphor of ‘cooking up’ a plot.⁸⁵ Axius Paulus is advised, in an adaptation of Terence,⁸⁶ *tibi quod intristi, exedendum est*, he must ‘eat up’ what he has ‘pounded’,⁸⁷ that is, he must put up with the shortcomings of the poetic ‘dish’ which he has compelled Ausonius to cook and serve. Taken together, the allusions to ‘eating’, ‘drinking’ and ‘sleeping’ may conjure up the picture of a ‘feast’, an image which, as will be seen, may have particular relevance to what follows here.

There remains the question of what function is to be attributed to the (seemingly truncated) hendecasyllables found at the end of Ep. 5. In view of their apparent mutilation, it might seem tempting to argue for the thesis of displacement, but as with the *Bissula* verses this would fly in the face of manuscript tradition. As Green points out, these verses contain (some) of the features char-

83) E. g. to figure the illusions and delusions of (the) plot(s) in Plautus’ *Miles Gloriosus*: claimed by Philocomasium, *hac nocte in somnis ...* (Mil. 383, cf. *ibid.* 385); reclaimed by Palaestrio, *Palaestronis somnium* (*ibid.* 386; cf. *praesens somnium*, *ibid.* 394.) See S. A. Frangoulidis, Palaestrio as playwright: Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus* 209–212, in: C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 7, Brussels 1994, 72–86, pp. 76–77.

84) Drink is said to be invoked not as a vehicle of inspiration but rather as a ‘sort of anaesthetic for the mind’ (Mondin [as n. 4] 80).

85) See E. Gowers, *The loaded table. Representations of food in Roman literature*, Oxford 1993, 50–108.

86) *tute hoc intristi: tibi omnest exedendum ...* (Ter. Phorm. 318). Phormio has master-minded the plot; now he must deal with the consequences.

87) Biss. xvii 1. 5.

acteristic of an invitation, that is, mention of travel, a destination and (part of) a menu.⁸⁸ According to Zucchelli, the addition here of an invitation can be seen as supplying a discourse on a totally different subject with an ending more typical of the 'friendship-letter'.⁸⁹ In fact, as regards the epistolary interchange between Ausonius and Axius Paulinus, the primary association of the (verse) invitation seems to be as much with poetry as with friendship. Five such verse-epistles are offered by Green,⁹⁰ reduced to four by Mondin, who presents 7 and 8 as a single entity.⁹¹ In each case, the 'invitation' is seemingly linked, as here, with some kind of (projected) poetic exchange.⁹² In addition, Ausonius' offer of supplying the 'wine' (*vinum* ... *parabo*) may have particular relevance for Ep. 5. At one level, it can be seen to pick up the demand for the 'intoxication' of the reader, as discussed above. At the same time, there is a possibility that 'wine' should be seen as standing in figurative terms for 'poetry', as has been argued in relation to Horace (a major influence on the poetry of Ausonius).⁹³ If so, it can perhaps be seen as standing here for the *Bissula* itself.

To recap, it has been argued that the linguistic and thematic similarities diagnosed between Ep. 5 and the prose preface to the *Bissula* are rooted in metapoetic conceits linked with the motif of 'publication', as beauty competition on the one hand and profanation of the Mysteries on the other, with associated notions of

88) Green (as n. 5) 613. In view of this, his claim that they are to be identified with the subject of Ep. 5 may seem surprising.

89) Zucchelli (as n. 7) 276.

90) Ausonius, Epp. 2, 4, 6, 7, 8.

91) Ep. 7 is a distich in Greek comprising salutation and injunction to 'hasten'. It appears in two out of the four manuscripts where, Mondin argues, it has been wrongly detached from what follows. If restored to the beginning of Ep. 8, it can be seen to counterbalance a mostly Latin valediction, which in turn follows a substantial block of Greek. See Mondin (as n. 4) 180.

92) *perfer in excursu ... nobiscum invenies ...* (Ep. 2 in: Green [as n. 1] 11–13). This recurs with variations: ... *tota cum merce tuarum / veni Camenarum citus / ... nobiscum invenies ...* (Ep. 4, *ibid.* 35–41); *attamen ut citus venias ... / historiam mimos carmina linque domi ... / nobiscum invenies ...* (Ep. 8, *ibid.* 21–25). The remaining invitation poem (a Latin-Greek hybrid) recommends that Axius Paulus seek 'coaxing consolation' with a 'fellow-attendant of your Muses', that is, Ausonius (Ep. 6, *ibid.* 38–39).

93) As, for example, in Odes 1.20 where Maecenas is offered a 'modest Sabine wine' stored in a 'Greek jar'. See B. Pavlock, Horace's invitation poems to Maecenas: gifts to a patron, *Ramus* 11 (1982) 79–98.

shameless display and violated innocence. It has been argued further that the incorporated verse of the *Bissula* likewise demonstrates a preoccupation with metapoetics through the transference of two metaphors associated with poetic composition (intoxication and dreaming) from poet to reader and through the troping of poetry as 'mime'. One final point of interest may arise from the reference there to *hoc schedium*. As Mondin points out, this term borrowed from Greek appears to be associated with the activity of extemporisation, improvisation.⁹⁴ Its use here may serve to connect the *Bissula* with the *Griphus*, allegedly composed in the course of a dinner-party,⁹⁵ suggesting that this poem should also be seen as having been undertaken in the course of a similar entertainment. Rather than concurring with the suggestion of Mondin that Ep. 5 accompanied a first draft of the *Bissula*,⁹⁶ it seems possible that the work should be seen as having advanced no further than its promissory verse, improvised and 'recited at a run', as replicated here (*ea quae tibi iam cursim fuerant recitata transmissi*). In other words, it may be that Ep. 5 should be seen as offering merely the parody of a dedicatory letter and as comprising an elaborate joke between fellow-poets.

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94) Mondin (as n. 4) 80. The sense of improvisation emerges most clearly from its use in Apuleius, where it appears in a passage which begins *qui me voluitis dicere ex tempore* ... and where it is followed by an opposition between *repentinus* and *praeparatus* (Apuleius, [De deo Socratis Prologus] I, in: C. Moreschini [ed.], *Apulei Platonici Madaurensis opera quae supersunt*, 3, Stuttgart 1991, 1–2).

95) *coeptos inter prandendum versiculos ante cenae tempus absolvi* (Aus. Griph. Praef. 28–29).

96) Mondin (as n. 4) 79. He also suggests there that this verse may have been specially composed for Ep. 5. Zucchelli, on the other hand, argues that it was integral to the *Bissula* but subsequently replaced by two new prefaces, one prose, one verse (Zucchelli [as n. 7] 284).