

MYTHOLOGICAL REFERENCES IN AUSONIUS' EPISTOLARY*

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Summary: Ausonius' letters constitute a specimen of the way he employs references to Greek mythology. The process by which Ausonius reworks mythological material follows patterns that were already well established in the Latin literary tradition of reworking Greek sources. The recycling of such material is not only proof of his technical prowess, but also demonstrates his ability to perform precise thematic choices. Frequently, the use of mythology is part of the metaliterary and metapoetic discourses tackled by Ausonius while addressing his friends as recipients of letters. The analysis of individual letters reveals how the poet used mythological references for two main purposes. The first is to elevate the tone and content of the discourse, employing a series of artificial comparisons with mythical characters and events. Brief mythological references used to formulate playful numerical periphrases are also worth noting here. The second aim is encomiastic, namely the celebration of his friends, the recipients of his letters, who are transferred from everyday reality to the higher level of the mythical dimension and the superhuman sphere.

Characteristics of Ausonius' letters

For some time now, scholars have noted that formal experimentalism is one of the main traits characterising the multifaceted literary production of Decimus Magnus Ausonius.¹ The collection of his epistolary is also

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1 Green 1991: xv; Wolff 2013: 584.

influenced by this experimental approach, as noted by Charles Aull.² Roger Green's edition of the collection includes 24 letters,³ which he ascribes to a posthumous edition of the works of Ausonius.⁴ The epistolary is mostly written in verse, but letters 5, 9, 14, 17, 19, 20 stand out for their mixture of prose and verses, and only letter 12 is entirely in prose. Furthermore, letter 7 is written in Greek, while letters 6 and 8 present a hybrid form due to the alternation of Greek and Latin. In addition, letter 7 is written in Greek, while letters 6 and 8 present a hybrid form due to the alternation of Greek and Latin. Letter 6, in particular, is an entirely unusual 'experimental' text, featuring not only a mix of Greek and Latin words, but also words composed half with Greek letters and half with Latin letters.⁵

More generally, it is worth noting that Ausonius was able to write in Greek with quite exceptional competence.⁶ In addition to the epistles in which Greek is used, Ausonius composed several epigrams,⁷ some entirely in Greek,⁸ others alternating between Greek and Latin,⁹ and still others as translations of Greek epigrams from the *Anthologia Palatina* into Latin with readaptations.¹⁰ Moreover, Greek words appear in the *Ludus Septem Sapientium*, and the *Technopaegnion* includes a short poem on the letters of the Greek and Latin alphabets.¹¹

2 Aull 2017: 131.

3 The order and the numbering of the letters proposed in Green's 1991 edition is followed here.

4 Regarding the structure of the original edition, i.e. the archetype, from which the two different collections, contained in manuscript V and the family of manuscripts called Z, derive, see the discussion in Green 1991: xlv-xlix. On the complex textual history of Ausonius' works and the posthumous edition, see the clear overview provided in Aull 2017: 131-45.

5 Goldlust 2010: 140.

6 John 2021: 849.

7 See Kay 2001.

8 *Epigr.* 33, 34.

9 *Epigr.* 31, 35, 41, 85, 100.

10 *Epigr.* 12, 15, 22, 23, 24, 38, 43, 50, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 62, 63, 76, 78, 85, 90, 91, 104, 105. On Ausonius' quotations, translations, and re-elaborations of Greek epigrammatic models see Munari 1956; Benedetti 1980; Traina 1982; Ternes 1986; Cameron 1993: 90-96; Kay 2001: 13-19; Cazzuffi 2017; Floridi 2013 and 2015; Wolff 2018.

11 *Technop.* 14. On this work, see Di Giovine 1996.

In addition to these singular linguistic choices, the letters also feature sophisticated rhetorical devices, such as in letter 10, where wordplays on the number six are used, and in letter 14, which is entirely built on periphrases alluding to the number thirty.¹² Such riddles were much loved by Ausonius, who also composed the *Griphus ternarii numeri*, a full-length poetic joke on the number three.¹³

In terms of form, the most relevant aspect of Ausonius' epistolary is certainly the use of the prosimetrum.¹⁴ This choice places Ausonius among a wider cohort of authors who wrote letters in prose while also including short poetic compositions.¹⁵ Examples of this stylistic phenomenon could already be found in the private correspondences of Cicero and Pliny the Younger, but it became more widespread over time, and mainly in late antiquity, when it would evolve into a true literary genre.¹⁶ Symmachus, Paulinus of Nola, Sidonius Apollinaris and Ennodius, in particular, wrote prosimetric letters.¹⁷ Ausonius also used prosimetrum in other works, where a prose introduction precedes the verse composition.¹⁸ These include *Epicedion in patrem*, *Liber protrepticus ad nepotem*, *Epitaphia heroum qui bello Troico interfuerunt*, *Cupido cruciatus*, *Griphus*.¹⁹ Also worthy of mention are the *Technopaegnion*, of which we have two prose dedications;²⁰ the *Parentalia* which is introduced by both a prose and a verse preface;²¹ the *Bissula* with a prose dedication and a verse preface;²²

12 *Ep.* 15 can be added to these: in that letter Ausonius complains to Theon that about three months have passed since their last meeting: the time lapse is indicated with various numerical periphrases. Cf. Piras 2014: 138-39.

13 Lowe 2013.

14 On prosimetrum in general, see Dronke 1994; Pabst 1994; Harris & Reichl 1997; Braund 2001; Relihan 2018.

15 On collections of prosimetric letters, see Neger 2018 and 2020.

16 Neger 2018: 43-44.

17 On Sidonius' prosimetric letters, see Neger 2018. On those of Symmachus, see Neger 2020.

18 On the entirety of Ausonius' prefaces to his works, see Sivan 1992. On Ausonius' prose prefaces in particular, cf. Gruber 1981: 215-21; Pabst 1994: 98-102; Pelltari 2014: 62-72.

19 On the preface to the *Griphus* in particular, cf. Lowe 2013: 339-41 and Piras 2014.

20 Pavlovskis 1967: 550-51.

21 Piras 2014: 114.

22 Piras 2014: 114.

the *Cento Nuptialis*, where the dedication and epilogue are both in prose, but which also includes a verse preface.²³

Ausonius' epistolary includes letters addressed to his son Hesperius, his friends Axius Paulus, Petronius Probus, Ursulus, Tetradius, Symmachus,²⁴ Theon, and his disciple Paulinus of Nola, of whom two replies have also reached us.²⁵ As for the selection of contents, Ausonius mostly wrote to his friends to send them greetings or invitations, or to exchange verses, or simply to comment on various kinds of food. Ausonius' private correspondence is also an important testimony to the relationships between intellectuals of the aristocratic class in 4th century Roman Gaul.²⁶

Ausonius' treatment of mythology in his letters

Several scholars have so far dealt with questions concerning the transmission of Ausonius' letters and their historical context. However, one specific aspect, which emerges here and there in the epistolary correspondence, remains to be explored: the use of mythological references. It is noteworthy that Ausonius' treatment of mythology – not only in his letters but throughout his works – often concerns Greek mythical tales, greatly outnumbering any references to the Roman tradition. This process of re-enacting and remaking mythological material constitutes as much a mark of Ausonius' technical skill, as evidence of his profound knowledge of Greek culture.²⁷ As Alison John has shown, the process of learning Greek, as well as the knowledge and re-elaboration of the works of Greek authors, were still very much alive in 4th century Gaul.²⁸ The literary production of Ausonius is an important testimony to the ongoing interest in Greek, which was still taught in rhetoric schools in Gaul,²⁹

23 Pavlovskis 1967: 551-52.

24 It is Ausonius' reply to a letter sent by Symmachus: cf. *Symm. Epist.* 1.31, in Salzman-Roberts 2011. See also Green 1995, App. B 2.

25 *Paul. Nol. Carm.* 10 e 11. On the correspondence between Ausonius and Paulinus, cf. Pastorino 1971: 56-61; Walsh 1975: 20-24; Trout 1999: 55-59.

26 Coşkun 2002: 6-8; Sowers 2016; Scafoglio 2018: 19-20.

27 Goldlust 2010.

28 John 2021.

29 John 2021: 850-57. On the relevance of rhetorical training, see Lendon 2022: 3-13.

where young men from aristocratic families were educated and intellectuals trained.³⁰

In all his works, Ausonius' exhibition of Greek erudition, borrowed from the grammarians of Bordeaux,³¹ reveals a strong adherence to a process of appropriation of Hellenic cultural models, already implemented by Latin culture for centuries. Knowledge of Greek texts, alongside with their reproduction and imitation, remains a decisive aspect of Ausonius' writings.³² Nonetheless, the ways in which Ausonius selects the Greek mythological material to be treated do not indicate a merely rhetorical or stylistic process, but rather a choice that is in fact also founded on precise content and conceptual implications. Ausonius purposefully extracts from the sources and organises what he needs for his rhetorical and argumentative aims of constructing discourse. Therefore, for the scope of this study, the analysis of mythological references in Ausonius' epistolary exchanges constitutes an emblematic *specimen* of his working method, and especially of the application of his knowledge inherited from the previous literary tradition, in which the Greek matrix and its Latin reinterpretation are merged.

Two elements should be highlighted as preliminary remarks on the theme addressed in this article: a) in Ausonius' epistolary correspondence – taken as a whole – allusions to mythical events work towards elevating the tone and content of the discourse, by providing material for comparisons that transfer everyday reality to the higher level of the mythical dimension; b) references to mythical characters and events largely have an encomiastic purpose, i.e. they serve to celebrate Ausonius' friends, symbolically raised to the level of the superhuman sphere.

30 On the environment of the school in Bordeaux, where Ausonius had taught, cf. Karsten 1988. On Ausonius' teaching in the school of Bordeaux, cf. Coşkun 2002: 12-20. On the relations between Greek and Roman culture in general, see Woolf 1994.

31 Pastorino 1971: 16-17; Sivan 1993: 76-79.

32 Lossau 1989; Goldlust 2010.

Mythology in verse letters

Moving on to the analysis of the texts, it is worth noting that in most of the verse letters there are a few concise mythological references. More than once, Ausonius mentions Mnemosyne³³, the Muses³⁴, the Camenae³⁵ and Apollo³⁶ to indicate poetry in general. The mention of these super-human beings, traditionally linked to the exercise of singing, music and poetry, acts here as a pure rhetorical device, which characterise Ausonius' metapoetic discourse. It is no coincidence that, almost constantly, these names appear in the letters that testify to the fruitful exchange of poems between Ausonius and his friends Theon, Axius Paulus and Paulinus, who were also poets.³⁷ In these letters Ausonius often discusses poetic matters with his recipients, and reflections on poetic work are one of his favourite themes.³⁸

In this regard, the letters to Axius Paulus,³⁹ his friend and colleague in the exercise of poetic activity, are significant. For example, in letter 4 Ausonius defines Paulus as "the most famous pupil of the Camenae of Castalia" (*Ep.* 4.3: *Camenarum celeberrime Castaliarum alumne*). In Greek tradition, Castalia Spring was linked to the Delphic oracle of Apollo.⁴⁰ Here, Ausonius follows the path of many Latin authors, such as Tibullus, Propertius, Ovid and Martial, who often point to it as a place of inspiration for poets.⁴¹ Ausonius then invites Paulus to keep his promise to visit him, because "Phoebus wants the truth to be told" (*Ep.* 4.8: *Phoebus iubet verum loqui*), even if he has to put up with the Pierides deviating from this rule. With these words Ausonius offers a quick allusion to the myth of the Pierian sisters – narrated in detail by Ovid⁴² – who challenged the Muses to

33 *Ep.* 13.64.

34 *Ep.* 6.3; 8.9; 8.17; 11.6; 11.38; 13.8; 21.73.

35 *Ep.* 4. 3; 110.7; 10.31; 1.9; 11.24; 13.66; 18.12.

36 *Ep.* 13.8. Cf. *Ep.* 4. 8 where the name Phoebus appears.

37 Green 1972; Sowers 2016. Cf. Scafoglio 2018: 28-30.

38 Sowers 2016: 521-37.

39 On the character of Axius Paulus, see Pastorino 1971: 46-47.

40 Pin. *Pyth.* 1.39; 4.163; Eur. *Ion* 94; *Phoen.* 222; Nonn. *Dion.* 4.309-310; Helioid. *Aeth.* 2.26.4.

41 Tib. 3.1.16; Prop. 3.3.13; Ov. *Am.* 1.15.36; Mart. 9.18.8; 12.2 (3). Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.61; Sen. *Oed.* 229; Stat. *Theb.* 1.697; 6.338.

42 *Met.* 5. 294-314. Cf. Ant. Lib. 9.

a singing contest, suggesting to Paulus not to follow their deviant behaviour. The letter ends with Ausonius' request to Paulus to bring his verses with him. In letter 6, referred to by Ausonius as "a playful bilingual composition" (*Ep.* 6.2: *sermone adludo bilingui*), Paulus is defined through a linguistic joke as "a partaker of the Greek Muse and the Latin Camena" (*Ep.* 6.1: Ἑλλαδικῆς μέτοχον Μούσης *Latiaeque Camenae*), while Ausonius calls himself "a useless servant of the soft-haired Pierides" (*Ep.* 6.7: Πιερίδων *tenero* πλοκάμων θεράποντες *inertes*). Further on, the author invokes the nine daughters of Mnemosyne (*Ep.* 6.13) to assist him in composing a poem to alleviate Paulus' melancholy (*Ep.* 6.24; 37-38). In letter 8 Ausonius again invites Paulus and asks him if he has resumed his poetic activity, metaphorically designated as the frequency of the locality of Pimpla, which here seems to correspond to a fountain, given the use of the adjective *riguam* connected to *Pipleida* (*Ep.* 8.9).⁴³ Then Ausonius exhorts Paul not to carry his works with him, as the Muses "have a great weight" (*Ep.* 8.23: *grande onus in Musis*). As Aaron Pelttari noted,⁴⁴ in this letter Ausonius' metaphorical play revolves around the number of "papers" (*Ep.* 8.23: *chartis*) to be carried, and thus the mythological references are part of an ironic metapoetic reflection. Soon after, Ausonius lists the many volumes he keeps in his house, among which he includes tragedies and comedies, indicating them with the names Thalia and Therpsichore (*Ep.* 8.28).⁴⁵ They too, while being superhuman creatures in the Greek mythical tradition, are mentioned here only as rhetorical figures of metonymy, embellishing Ausonius' discourse.

43 This passage probably indicates the fountain, as in *Stat. Silv.* 1.4.26; 2.2.37 (Green 1991: 617, fn. 9). The Greek scholiasts explain that the name Πίμπλεια can be connected either with a locality, a mountain, or a spring: *Schol. in Lyc.* 275; *Schol. Ap. Rhod.* 1.23-25; *Hesychius s.v. Πίπλ(ε)ια*. Cf. *Mojsik* 2011: 48-49.

44 Pelttari 2014: 151.

45 Thalia was already associated in Greek tradition with comedy (*Schol. Ar. Ran.* 875), but Therpsichore was usually associated with choruses (*Schol. Hes. Op. prol.*, Gainsford 1823: 26; *Schol. Ar. Ran.* 875), or with citharodic singing (*Schol. Hes. Theog.* 76), or with dances (*Schol. Hom. Batr.* 1, *Ludwich* 1896: 201). Ausonius, by linking the name Τερψιχόρη here to the noun σύμμα indicating the long tragic robe, alludes to the tragic choruses, as *Pastorino* 1971: 713, fn. 11, already supposed.

Metapoetic reflections also surface several times in letter 13, which is addressed by Ausonius to his friend Theon⁴⁶ to ask him for news. The tone of this letter is entirely satirical. Ausonius ironically imagines how his friend might pursue different occupations, such as trading, chasing thieves, hunting, fishing, and finally poetry (*Ep.* 13.17-70). Also in this letter, Ausonius dwells on the theme of poetic work, dedicating a few verses to explaining to Theon the various types of hendecasyllables, as his friend is said to ignore them (*Ep.* 13.82-93). In this context, we find various mythological references that metaphorically indicate Theon's poetic activity: Ausonius mentions the Muses and Apollo (*Ep.* 13.8), Helicon and Hippocrene (*Ep.* 13.9), as well as Mnemosyne's daughters, whose number may vary from three to eight (*Ep.* 13.63-54). Concerning this point, it is worth noting that Ausonius was aware of the different traditions regarding the number of the Muses,⁴⁷ a discussion which was evidently still going on in his time. Indeed, letters 6 and 10 mention the canonical nine Muses.⁴⁸ In general, allusions to the Muses or Camenae are employed several times by Ausonius in other metapoetic contexts resembling the letters, especially in relation to the lives of some of his family members and acquaintances. This is the case, for instance, in the *Protrepticus*, where Ausonius refers to his nephew's literary studies, which he suggests should be alternated with leisure (*Protr.* 1-2: *sunt etiam Musis sua ludicra; mixta Camenis otia sunt*), or in the *Professores*, where he recalls the poetic activity of the grammarian Delphidius (*Prof.* 5.20) and the teaching of Greek by grammarians in Bordeaux (*Prof.* 8.3: *Atticas Musas*). Coming back to letter 13, the description of Theon's literary activity also includes the metaphor based on the mythological allusion to "the black daughters of Cadmus" (*Ep.* 13.74: *Cadmi nigellas filias*), which refer to the letters of the alphabet. Additionally, in *Ep.* 14.52 we read a very similar expression: *Cadmi filioli atricoloribus*. The author thus clearly shows knowledge of the mythical tradition on the invention of the alphabet that already dated back to Herodotus (5.58-59) and Diodorus Siculus (5.74), and was later recounted by the Latin authors Hyginus (*Fab.* 277),⁴⁹

46 On Theon, see Pastorino 1971: 47.

47 See the source data collected by Mojsik 2011: 74-97.

48 *Ep.* 6.14; 10.7. The canon of the nine Muses is attested by Hes. *Theog.* 75-76.

49 *Fab.* 277. See the comments in Gasti 2018.

Pliny (*HN* 7.192-193) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 11.14). According to this tale, which constitutes a foundation myth, Hermes is said to have invented the Greek letters in Egypt, while Cadmus later exported them from Phoenicia to Greece.⁵⁰ Considering the structure of Greek myths, the expression used by Ausonius in this letter does not seem to be merely a rhetorical periphrasis but rather the trace of a particular mythical variant according to which “the black daughters of Cadmus” are superhuman beings that existed in the ‘time of origins’, and then in historical time came to embody the elements of the alphabet. Continuing the analysis of letter 13, mythological references are variously interwoven with other circumstances of Theon’s life as it is ironically described by Ausonius. On the hunting activity of Theon and his brother, Ausonius constructs hyperbolic and paradoxical comparisons. Theon’s brother is compared to the hero Meleager, slayer of the Calydonian boar (*Ep.* 13.39), and to the young Athenian slayer of the Erymanthian monster (*Ep.* 13.40),⁵¹ while Theon himself is compared to Adonis, who died during a hunt (*Ep.* 13.41-43), and to the god Orcus, lord of the underworld and abductor of the daughter of Deo (*Ep.* 13.49-51). Here Ausonius, as a scholar, uses the term *Deoida* deriving from the learned Greek variant Δηώ of the name Δημήτηρ, which appears for the first time in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.⁵² It cannot be excluded that Ausonius was familiar with Greek poetic texts where that term appeared, although he probably followed Ovid’s example.⁵³ Summing up, letter 13 significantly represents one of the ways in which Ausonius uses his erudition when handling mythology: references to mythical characters function as clever rhetorical devices, whose purpose is to show the paradoxical contrast between an ideal world and the mediocrity of everyday life.

In line with what can be noted in letter 13, mythological allusions are inserted by Ausonius in other letters too in such a subtle way that they constitute terms of comparison with contingent situations and private

50 On the mythical tales concerning the invention of writing, see Piccaluga 1991.

51 With regard to this verse Green 1991 and 1990 accepted the conjecture *Cromyoneo*, but it would be better to leave the transmitted lesson *Erymantheo*, as Evelyn White 1921 and Pastorino 1971 did.

52 *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 47. Cf. LSJ s. v. Δηώ.

53 In *Met.* 6. 114 *Deoida* is found.

events he describes. From this point of view, the epistolary exchanges with his friend and disciple Paulinus are particularly significant.⁵⁴ In epistle 22, Ausonius complains about Paulinus' enduring silence,⁵⁵ and assuming that his friend does not want his messages to be known by people lacking in discretion, suggests that he should also begin to communicate through secret messages. To this purpose, Ausonius again employs the artifice of the ideal comparison by mentioning some mythical examples: Philomela, who embroidered on a cloth the outrage suffered by Tereus (*Ep.* 22.13-15), Cydippe, who is said to have declared her love by writing it on an apple (*Ep.* 22.16-17), and King Midas' servant, who spilled the secret about his master's donkey ears into a hole (*Ep.* 22.18-20). As Ian Fielding has noted, it is significant that these three mythological scenes, sketched with quick and skilful strokes by Ausonius, are described in Ovid's works, which Ausonius probably had on his mind.⁵⁶ The stories of Philomela and of Midas' servant are found in the *Metamorphoses*,⁵⁷ while that of Cydippe is narrated in the *Heroides* (20-21), where, in contrast to Ausonius, we read that it was Acontius who forced Cydippe to marry him, as she read aloud the message on the apple he threw as an unbreakable oath.⁵⁸ Given Ausonius' profound erudition in the field of traditional Greek heritage, he probably knew a variant of this tale, compared to the better-known vulgate. It is remarkable that Ausonius, as in other cases, uses the same mythological allusions in several works: the reference to the violence suffered by Philomela also appears in the *Technopaegnon* (11.3). Considering the subject and purpose of letter 22, it certainly constitutes another significant case of how mythological examples are employed by Ausonius to ennoble Paulinus' actions, elevating them to an idealised level.

54 On the biography of Paulinus and his relationship with Ausonius, see Trout 1999: 55-76; Conybeare 2000: 147-157; Coşkun 2002: 99-111. On the correspondence of Paulinus and Ausonius in particular, see Witke 1971: 3-74; Amherdt 2004; Knight 2005; Ebbeler 2007: 303-15; Chin 2008: 148-55; Hardie 2019: 6-43.

55 On letters 21 and 22 sent by Ausonius to Paulinus, see the extensively annotated edition of Rucker 2012.

56 Fielding 2017: 26-27.

57 On Philomela *Ov. Met.* 6.572-578; on Midas' servant *Met.* 11.180-93.

58 The entire story also appears in Callim. *Aet. fr.* 67-75, Pfeiffer 1949; Ant. Lib. *Met.* 1; Aristaenetus 1.10.

Finally, verse letter 24, the last of the epistolary, presents a fair number of mythological allusions. Ausonius writes to Paulinus lamenting his unwillingness to visit him. The references to mythology are evidently aimed at heightening the tone of the discourse in a serious context, as Ausonius communicates his regret to his friend, letting his feelings shine through. In the beginning of the letter, using the metaphor of the *iugum*, the author claims that the bond between him and Paulinus is now broken.⁵⁹ Continuing with the same metaphor, Ausonius recalls the horses of Mars (*Ep.* 24.15-16), those stolen from Diomedes (*Ep.* 24.16), and those that brought down Phaeton in the Po (*Ep.* 24.17-18), because all of them would have easily supported the yoke that bound them. These are well-known examples mostly inspired by the epic verses of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid,⁶⁰ which Ausonius had to keep in mind. Indeed, as Philip Hardie has shown, the text of letter 24 displays numerous literary echoes.⁶¹ On the whole, literary reminiscences contribute to making this letter a high example of stylistic skill. More specifically, the mythological allusions which refer above all to the epic testify to how Ausonius sought a lofty style appropriate to the celebration of his bond of friendship with Paulinus, which was indispensable for him. Later, well-known mythical examples appear again, where Ausonius reminds Paulinus that their two names were about to be included in the list of “old friends of better times” (*Ep.* 24.41: *antiquis aevi melioris amicis*). As remarked by Gillian Knight, Ausonius evokes a golden age, to which he ascribes a number of exemplary characters who championed immortal friendship.⁶² He mentions the well-known heroes Pylades and Nisus (*Ep.* 24.34), inextricably united with their friends in their adventures, and then adds the Pythagorean Damon (*Ep.* 24.35), famous for having saved his friend Phintias from a death sentence.⁶³ According to the division of Ausonius' letters

59 On the theme of friendship and the metaphor of *iugum* in *Ep.* 24, see Ebbeler 2007: 308-09. See the in-depth analysis of *Ep.* 23-24 in Knight 2012.

60 On the horses of Ares/Mars, see Hom. *Il.* 15.119-20; Verg. *Georg.* 3.91. On the horses of Diomedes cf. Verg. *Ecl.* 17.9; Serv. *Aen.* 1. 752. The detailed myth of Phaeton is told in Ov. *Met.* 2.19-332.

61 Hardie 2019: 27-30 dwelt on the echoes of Virgil's *Eclogues* in letter 24.

62 See the insightful analysis of this passage by Ausonius in Knight 2012: 390-94.

63 The story of the unbreakable bond of friendship between Damon and Phintias is told by Cic. *Off.* 3.10.45; *Tusc.* 5.63; Val. Max. 4.7 ext. 1. See also Diod. Sic. 10.4.3. For an

proposed by Green,⁶⁴ the same ideal models of friendship appear in the epistle 23, where Ausonius accuses Paulinus, metaphorically, of breaking the bonds of Theseus and Pirithous (*Ep.* 23.19), Nisus and Euryalus (*Ep.* 23.20), Pylades and Orestes (*Ep.* 23.21), and the oath of Damon (*Ep.* 23.22). The stories of such characters were well known among Latin poets⁶⁵ and prose writers⁶⁶ – who largely reworked Greek sources⁶⁷ – but here Ausonius employs them specifically to provide terms of comparison with the bond between himself and Paulinus. The comparison thus reveals a two-fold purpose: on the one hand, the famous examples of myth serve to ‘elevate’ their friendship, and on the other hand, they serve to ‘lower’ Paulinus’ behaviour, who wanted to distance himself from Ausonius. Expanding further on the main theme of letter 24, namely the exaltation of his friendship with Paulinus, Ausonius uses another notable mythological reference, that to the goddess Rhamnusia (*Ep.* 24.44; 101), whom he suggests was angered by their proud friendship. The poet then identifies her with Nemesis,⁶⁸ a divinity from Attica (*Ep.* 24.49), who raged against Darius and the Persians for their pride (*Ep.* 24.45–49).⁶⁹ Remarkably, Ausonius also dedicated epigram 22 to Nemesis, making her speak in the first person as a statue-trophy for the Greeks’ victories over the Persians: in this epigram Ausonius paraphrases and translates into Latin the text

analysis of the primary sources and an extensive bibliography on this story, see Santorelli 2012.

64 On the division between letters 23 and 24, see Green 1991: 654–56.

65 On Theseus and Pirithous cf. *Ov. Trist.* 1.5.19; 1.9.31–32; *Met.* 8.405–6; *Stat. Silv.* 4.4.103–4. On Euryalos and Nisus cf. *Verg. Aen.* 9.170–433; *Stat. Theb.* 10.447–48. On Pylades and Orestes cf. *Ov. Trist.* 1.9. 27–28; 5.6.26.

66 *Cic. Lael.* 24.

67 On Theseus and Pirithous, see *Hom. Il.* 1.263–65 and *schol. ad loc.*; *Diod. Sic.* 4.63; *Plut. Thes.* 30. On Pylades and Orestes it is sufficient to recall Aeschylus’ *The Libation Bearers*.

68 Ausonius follows the tradition of Greek sources that identify Πάμνουσία with Νέμεισις; see *Steph. Byz., Phot. Lexicon, Hesychius s. v. Πάμνουσία*. From the small village of Πάμνοῦς, where there was a sanctuary and a famous statue of Nemesis, derives the epithet Πάμνουσία (*Paus.* 1.33.2; *Strabo* 9.1.17; *Plin. HN.* 36.17).

69 Ausonius reports in verses 45–49 the defeat handed down to the Persians by the goddess Nemesis herself. See the detailed account in *Paus.* 1.33. Cf. *Pastorino* 1971: 758 fn. 11. Rhamnusia also appears in *Catull.* 64.395; 66.1; 68.77; *Ov. Tr.* 5.8.9; *Stat. Silv.* 3.5.5.

of *Anthologia Palatina* 16.263.⁷⁰ In letter 24, the evocation of Nemesis' jealousy functions as a sort of imprecation to 'banish' any obstacle, even of a superhuman nature, that may stand in the way of the solid friendship that binds Ausonius to Paulinus. Ausonius complains that the goddess enjoys tormenting him and Paulinus "the noble descendants of Romulus" (*Ep.* 24.50: *Romulidas proceres*), and invites her to stay away from men who have worn "the sacred purple of Quirinus" (*Ep.* 24.56-57: *sacra Quirini purpura*). He then contemptuously calls her a "foreign deity" (*Ep.* 24.58: *peregrinae divae*) and an "oriental monster" (*Ep.* 24.59: *Eoi monstri*). It is clear that here Ausonius, by appealing to his and Paulinus' descent from the founder of Rome and their role as consuls, aims to celebrate their origins and give them the heft he thinks they merit. Added to this is the annoyance he shows for a god alien to Roman civilisation and linked to the world of the barbarians. The reference to Roman tradition, therefore, testifies to Ausonius' sense of belonging to his own people and homeland. It is one of the few passages in the entire epistolary where Ausonius evokes the sacred domain of the origins and traditions of Rome.

Finally, in the last part of letter 24, Ausonius again uses mythological examples from the Homeric epic: the two tales on the impossibility of stretching Ulysses' bow (*Ep.* 24.99)⁷¹ and brandishing Achilles' shaft (*Ep.* 24.100)⁷² are hyperbolically evoked to demonstrate the unbreakable nature of the pact of friendship between Ausonius and Paulinus. In this respect, it should be noted that the Homeric model is often recurrent in Ausonius' letters. In letter 3, sent to Axius Paulus, Ausonius mentions two Homeric examples contrasting with his own frugality, that of the table of Penelope's suitors (*Ep.* 3.14)⁷³, and that of the banquets at the palace of Alcinous (*Ep.* 3.15).⁷⁴ At the end of letter 21, written because of Paulinus' lack of response, Ausonius rails against those who may have driven Paulinus to silence, wishing them to be forced to wander in inaccessible and deserted places, in the same way as Bellerophon (*Ep.* 21.69-72). It is notheworthy that in verse 71 Ausonius quotes Cicero's words *hominum*

70 On *Epigr.* 22, see the commentary by Kay 2001: 123-24.

71 Cf. *Hom. Od.* 21.89-92.

72 Cf. *Hom. Il.* 16.140-44.

73 Cf. *Hom. Od.* 20.279-80; 248-56.

74 Cf. *Hom. Od.* 8.70; 429; 470-73.

vestigia vitans (*Tusc.* 3.63), which in turn translate the Homeric expression *πάτον ἀνθρώπων ἀλεείνων* (*Il.* 6.201-2).⁷⁵

Mythology in prosimetric letters

Looking at Ausonius' entire epistolary, the use of mythology appears rather more significant in the prosimetric letters than in the verse letters, as the mythological allusions are better articulated and more wide-ranging.

Only letter 5 presents just a single mythological reference in the prose section. The letter is addressed by Ausonius to his friend Axius Paulus, who sent him some verses and a prose text and asked to read Ausonius' latest verses in return. It constitutes further evidence of the exchange of poems between Ausonius and his friends, and the metapoetic discussions he favoured. In his reply, Ausonius deflects the issue, saying that one who is an experienced poet and speaker should not push the inexperienced to show their work. To clarify this assertion, the author uses a comparison with the behaviour displayed by Venus during the renowned beauty contest with the goddesses Juno and Minerva, that Paris was summoned to judge.⁷⁶ In the tale reported by Ausonius, Venus first presents herself clothed before Jupiter, in ordinary attire, not arousing the fear of her rivals, but then performs naked before the Trojan shepherd – just as she had lain with Mars – defeating the other participants in the competition. It should be noted that the theme of Venus' nakedness is one that is well known to Ausonius, as he re-proposes it in epigram 59, where Pallas challenges Venus to arm herself and fight, invoking Paris, while Venus rebukes her for having once defeated her when she was naked. As some scholars have noted,⁷⁷ the subject of this epigram, i.e. the contest

75 In *Tusc.* 3.63 Cicero translates Hom. *Il.* 6.201-2. Paulinus responded to this allusion by Ausonius in poem 10.156-158: "My mind is not deranged, my way of life does not shun men's company like the rider of Pegasus who you write lived in a Lycian cave" (trans. by Walsh 1975). Another reference to Bellerophon's loneliness is found in *Rut. Nam.* 1.449-52. For a discussion of these passages see Mondin 1995: 264-65. Cf. Filosi 2008: 138.

76 See the detailed account in Kerényi 1958: 246-47.

77 Green 1991: 403; Kay 2001: 190-92.

between Pallas and Venus-in-arms, is similar to that of a series of Greek epigrams in the *Anthologia Planudea*.⁷⁸ It is noteworthy that according to the interpretation of this poem put forward by some scholars,⁷⁹ Ausonius relates an ancient version of the myth, that had already been recounted in the *Cypria*:⁸⁰ Aphrodite would have presented herself to be judged by Paris wearing robes prepared by the Graces and the Hours, who had also dyed them with the colours of spring flowers. The context of Ausonius' story is clarified further by reading Lucian's passage from the *Dialogues of the Gods* devoted to the same episode, where Athena reproaches Aphrodite for appearing before Paris wearing an enchanted girdle and embellished with many colours, whereas she should have been naked from the beginning.⁸¹ The motif developed by Ausonius in letter 5, unlike that of epigram 59, appears more closely connected to the episode of Paris' judgement, and is certainly more articulate and complex. If we compare the account in letter 5 with the versions of the same myth recounted in the *Cypria* and by Lucian, it is clear that Ausonius' knowledge of Greek tradition was indeed extensive, and it cannot be excluded that he was familiar with these sources.

As concerns the other prosimetric letters, it is significant that the mythological references are concentrated in the verse sections. Following the common thread of letters testifying to Ausonius' literary exchanges, we come across letter 9, which contains the dedication, in prose, of two volumes sent by Ausonius to his friend Sextus Petronius Probus⁸² for the education of his son: Julius Titianus' apologies⁸³ and Cornelius Nepos' *Chronica*.⁸⁴ The poet then adds a 105-dimeter iambic

78 Green 1991: 403 noted that the text of *Anth. Plan.* 16.174 is the one most similar to Ausonius' *Epigr.* 59. Kay 2001: 190-91 indicated the epigrams of *Anth. Plan.* 16.171-77 as direct references to the episode of the contest between Pallas and armed Venus. But on the nudity of Venus as seen by Paris and depicted by Praxiteles, consider also the epigrams of *Anth. Plan.* 16.160-70.

79 Bernabé 1996: 46. Cf. Kerényi 1958: 247.

80 Fr. 4, Bernabé 1996.

81 *Dial. D.* 20. In Lucian's account Athena accuses Aphrodite of wanting to use the girdle to bewitch Paris.

82 On the biography of this figure, see Pastorino 1971: 48; Mondin 1995: 152.

83 For information on this work, see Mondin 1995: 164-65.

84 Mondin 1995: 154.

poem, composed as a preface to the apologues. Here Ausonius plays with the figure of the speaking poem, calling his composition *libellus* and inviting it to go and greet Probus (*Ep.* 9b.1; 53; 64). This rhetorical device is built on the personification of the booklet, able to convey an oral discourse. The apostrophe to the *libellus* clearly reveals the imitation of Catullus' proemial poem,⁸⁵ and the adherence to a well-established poetic motif, such as the well-known opening verses from Horace (*Epist.* 1.20.1) and Ovid (*Trist.* 1.1), and numerous other verses in the epigrams by Martial.⁸⁶ Further confirmation that Ausonius' model is the well-known poet from Verona is provided by the quotation of Sirmio in verse 1, which clearly refers to Catullus' poem 31. This kind of allocution to the *libellus* is used by Ausonius in other poetic compositions as well. As several scholars have pointed out, Ausonius quotes the well-known Catullian verse 1.1. in a proemial epigram with the dedication of one of his *libellus* to his friend Depronius Pacatus (*Praef. var.* 4.1).⁸⁷ Similarly in another proemial epigram Ausonius jokes with his *libellus* claiming it would prefer worms to his verses (*Praef. var.* 5.1-3). Overall, the short poem in Ausonius' letter 9 is constructed with a high level of rhetorical skill, as the plays on the etymology of the name Probus (*Ep.* 9b.42-46) and on the meaning of the name Ausonius (*Ep.* 9b.76) also demonstrate. Alongside such rhetorical devices, this short poem is characterised by three prominent and extensive mythological references, whose function is eminently encomiastic:

- a) the association of Probus with Menelaus, Ulysses, and Nestor for his eloquence (*Ep.* 9b.10-15);
- b) the refutation of Hesiod's idea (*Op.* 174-78) that present-day humanity lives in an iron age, in as much as Probus proves the opposite: he is the scion of a golden lineage and the father of a golden offspring (*Ep.* 9b.27-30);

85 Cfr. McGill 2017: 272-75; Hernández Lobato 2017: 281-82. In *Praef. var.* 4 Ausonius used the same figure of the *libellus*, quoting Catull. 1.1. On this subject, see the study by Mattiacci 2019.

86 3.2.1; 6.1.4; 8.24.1; 9.58.5. Cf. Mattiacci 2019: 248-49.

87 Scafoglio 2018: 33-38; Mattiacci 2019: 246-48.

- c) the comparison of the marriage of Probus, who had mixed the blood of the Probi and the Anicii (*Ep.* 9b.31-34), with the birth of Silvius, son of Aeneas, who had mixed the Silvii with the Iulii (*Ep.* 9b.82-89).

Some observations can be drawn when considering these mythographic references that clarify both Ausonius' background and his cultural heritage. The praise of the faculties of the three heroes he mentions could already be found in the *Iliad*, where Menelaus is celebrated for his fluency of speech (*Il.* 3.213-4), Odysseus' eloquence is compared to snowflakes (*Il.* 3.222) – whereas here Ausonius speaks of Odysseus' "hail" (*Ep.* 9b.13: *grandines*) – and finally Nestor's speech is likened to the sweetness of honey (*Il.* 1.247-49).⁸⁸ The Homeric passages where these three heroes speak contain precisely the speeches of Achaean leaders addressing their fellows. These characters play a role of authority⁸⁹, the purpose of their words is to admonish and spur on their comrades to do what appears to be for the good for their community.⁹⁰ Later, on the basis of the Homeric text, a canonical classification of three styles of eloquence, symbolised by these three Homeric characters, is formed in the reworking of Roman culture. In particular, this process is witnessed by a passage from Quintilianus (*Inst.* 12.10.64)⁹¹ and another from Gellius (*NA* 6.14. 1-2).⁹² Therefore, verses of Ausonius' letter 9 provide further evidence of the spread of this canon of the three *genera eloquendi*. In this regard, it should be

88 Pastorino 1971: 719 fn. 8

89 On the authority of Homeric leaders, see Pisano 2019: 46-50; 66-76.

90 As examples, see the speeches of Menelaus in *Hom. Il.* 3.96-110, of Ulysses in *Il.* 2.278-335, of Nestor in *Il.* 2.336-68; 2.432-83; 9.52-78.

91 Here we read that Homer gave "a concise, appropriate language, with pleasantness, and devoid of the superfluous" (*brevis cum iucunditate, et propria et carens supervacuis eloquentia*) to Menelaus, "a manner of speech sweeter than honey" (*dulciorem melle sermo*) to Nestor, while "a supreme eloquence" (*summa facundia*), "a mighty voice" (*magnitudo vocis*) and "an oratorical power" (*vis orationis*) to Ulixes. See also Quint. *Inst.* 2.17. 8. Cf. Mondin 1995: 157.

92 In this passage we read that the styles of eloquence handed down by Homer are three: that of Ulysses "magnificent and copious" (*magnificum et ubertum*), that of Menelaus "fine and sober" (*subtile et cohibitum*), and that of Nestor "mixed and moderate" (*mixtum et moderatum*). Cf. Mondin 1995: 157.

mentioned that Ausonius uses the comparison with the same three Homeric heroes both in the *Gratiarum Actio* (4.19-20) in reference to the eloquence of emperor Gratian, and in the *Commemoratio Professorum Burdigalensium* (21.16-24) to praise the eloquence of the grammarian Urbicus. These passages from Ausonius, including the one in letter 9, clearly show that he mentions Achaean heroes, who represent authority figures, as comparative terms for the high-ranking men of his society: his aim is to praise them by elevating them to the level of well-known figures from Greek mythology, and therefore invested with their own sacredness. In Ausonius' text, a process of symbolic transfer is thus triggered on the level of an ideal competition between the men being praised and the Homeric heroes. All this implies a vision according to which characters of the highest social class can overcome the limitations of the human condition. In the same short poem from letter 9, the second mythological theme used by Ausonius to praise Probus is that of the reference to the golden age, following the division of human life formulated by Hesiod. This theme was quite common among writers wishing to praise emperors or people of high lineage. Recalling Vergil's eclogue 4, which celebrates the new golden age of the Augustan principate (*Ecl.* 4.9), is a must here. Similarly, in the *Consolatio ad Liviam*, the well-known female character is credited with establishing a golden age and giving rise to a lineage of princes (*Epiced. Drusi* 343-44).⁹³ Finally, we may recall how the poet Claudian, a contemporary of Ausonius, also celebrated the empire of Theodosius, extolling the birth of a new golden age (3.51-52). A third mythological reference is also greatly developed by Ausonius in these verses, an allusion that he in fact makes twice: it is the comparison between Probus' marriage and that of Silvius, son of Aeneas. This is a learned reference to the purely Roman tradition, according to which Silvius is the last son of Aeneas and Lavinia, brother and successor of Iulus on the throne of Alba.⁹⁴ Set within the complex tradition on the relationship between Silvius and Ascanius-Iulus, Ausonius' reference emphasises

93 Cf. Mondin 1995: 159. In general on this work, Schlegelmilch 2005.

94 This tradition is found in Verg. *Aen.* 6.760-66 and Gell. *NA* 2.16. The same information is in Dion. Hal. 1.70. However, versions of the relationship between Silvius and Ascanius differ and the issue is controversial. In Serv. *Aen.* 6.760 we read that Silvius was

the kinship between the families descended from them, in order to praise the nobility of the *Iulii* lineage, famously celebrated as the founders of the principate.⁹⁵ As in the previous verses on the Homeric heroes, in this comparison, based on the attribution of prerogatives that are emblematic of a hero from mythical times to a character from historical times, a typical ideological mechanism operates to elevate mortal beings to the superhuman sphere. Several significant examples of this process can be found in the texts of many Roman writers who elevated emperors and their relatives⁹⁶ to the rank of deities. Finally, we may note how skilfully Ausonius' reference to this purely Roman tradition is mixed with the Greek mythological strand. Through such a process, the author reveals himself to be an intellectual of his time: in celebrating a character associated with imperial power,⁹⁷ he uses topical motifs that simultaneously combine the Greek and Roman traditions, showing how the two cultures were perfectly assimilated.

Letter 7 also lies within the scope of the letters dedicated to the exchange of literary writings between Ausonius and his friends.⁹⁸ Here we are faced with a rather elaborate scheme of alternating poetry and prose, as there are three poetic inserts, equally characterised by mythological references. This text constitutes Ausonius' response to a letter from Paulinus, his student, who sent him a composition based on a compendium of Suetonius' *De Regibus*.⁹⁹ Letter 17 is introduced by a refined astronomical periphrasis of 10 hexameters, which shows that it follows models

called Ascanius, while in Liv. 2.3.6 Silvius is said to be the son of Ascanius. Cf. Mora 1995: 154-55.

95 Hardie 1993: 91-92.

96 See the well-known celebrations of Augustus' divinity: Verg. *Ecl.* 1.6; Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.45; Ov. *Fast.* 419-28.

97 Also emblematic in this respect are the Panegyrici Latini: cf. Whitby 1998; Rees 2002. On the motif of the celebration of the divinity of emperors in Claudian, Sidonius Apollinaris and Cassiodorus, see Consolino 2011. On the same theme elaborated by the Panegyrici Latini, Claudian, Sidonius Apollinaris and Corippus, see Tommasi Morreschini 2016. On the celebration of characters linked to the imperial court in Claudian's works, see Schindler 2014.

98 On the subject of this letter in connection with the method used by Ausonius for epitomising, see Sowers 2023.

99 On this lost work by Suetonius, see Sivan 1993: 154; Mondin 1995: 115.

from epic poetry¹⁰⁰ that were already widespread in Homeric poems¹⁰¹ and then further elaborated upon by Latin authors.¹⁰² In this periphrasis, there is mention of the horses of the Sun, which is associated with the name Titan.¹⁰³ Further on, we read a quotation of 9 hexameters from Paulinus' poem, where another interesting reference appears, not strictly mythological, but inherent to the geographical conception of the world known to the Greeks and Romans. Here, we are reminded of the three parts into which the entire Earth was divided, according to Graeco-Roman tradition: Europe, Asia and Libya. This division recurs fairly constantly among the Greek and Roman authors who wrote geographical works, of which Strabo's *Geography* (1.4.7), Dionysius Periegetes' *Description of the Inhabited Land*¹⁰⁴, with its Latin translations by Avienus¹⁰⁵ and Priscianus¹⁰⁶, and Pomponius Mela's *Chorographia* (1.8) are among the most noteworthy examples. Later in Paulinus' verses, as quoted by Ausonius, there appear the names of several barbarian kings – Illibanus, Avelis, Vonones, Caranus, Nechepsos and Sesostris – who were mostly unknown to the earlier tradition. Of these kings,¹⁰⁷ the most information we have regards Sesostris, who is mentioned by several authors as king of Egypt.¹⁰⁸ In particular, it is worth noting how the typical Greek idea that kingship belongs to a different dimension, to the otherness of the barbarians,¹⁰⁹ clearly transpires from the content of these verses: this

100 Mondin 1995: 113.

101 See, for example, the passage in Hom. *Od.* 12.3-4.

102 Passages by other authors comparable with Ausonius' are noted by Mondin 1995: 113.

103 On a comparative level, particularly significant are the verses of Verg. *Aen.* 11.913-14 and Sil. *Pun.* 1.209-10, where horses drawn by Phoebus and Titan respectively are mentioned, two characters that are often identified by Latin authors (see for instance Avianus *Fab.* 4). In *Ep.* 14b.10 Ausonius also refers to Sol as Titan.

104 Dionys. *Per.* 9, Amato 2005.

105 *Orbis terrae* 17-18, Raschieri 2010.

106 *Perihegesis* 15, Bernhardt 1828.

107 The sources are reported by Pastorino 1971: 733 fn. 3. Vonones is the king of the Parthians mentioned in Tac. *Ann.* 2.1; 58; 68. Caranus is the first mythical king of Macedonia cf. Theopomp. *FGrH* 115, F 393; Liv. 45.9; Iust. 7.1.7-12. On the astronomer Nechepsos cf. Firm. *Mat. Mathesis* 3. *proem.* 4; 4. *proem.* 5; 4.22.2; 8.4.14; 8.5.1.

108 Hdt. 2.102-5; Diod. *Sic.* 1.53-58; Strabo 15.1.6; Arr. *Indica* 5.5.

109 Isaac 2004: 60-69; Vlassopoulos 2013: 192-93.

conception is emphasised precisely in the text with regard to the *barbara nomina* of the mentioned kings. Finally, scrolling through the same letter, we find a third poetic insert, containing another reference of a mythographic kind. Ausonius quotes two more verses from Paulinus' composition, where the latter is compared to the reckless Icarus, while the master Ausonius is associated with the prudent Daedalus (*Ep.* 17.41-42). Commenting on the significance of this comparison, Ausonius reinterprets the well-known myth¹¹⁰ of Icarus' ill-fated flight, emphasising that Paulinus used it as a clever artifice for celebratory purposes. The analogy formulated by Paulinus, in Ausonius' opinion, reproduces the father-son and master-disciple schema. However, immediately afterwards, Ausonius himself reverses the terms of the comparison, declaring that in truth it is Paulinus who is prudent while he himself is uncertain and unsteady. Given the way the text is composed, it is clear that Ausonius wishes to raise the tone of the discourse and employ the mythological reference to eulogise Paulinus and his poetic skill. An interesting point to note here is that Ausonius uses a topical motif that is quite common among Latin authors,¹¹¹ such as in the case of Horace's comparison of himself both to Icarus, when he alludes to the superiority of his poetic 'flight' (*Carm.* 2.20.13-16), and to Daedalus for his clumsy and unsuccessful poetic exercise (*Carm.* 4.2.1-4). As already seen in other letters, Ausonius uses mythological references in a metapoetic context: in other words, by quoting Paulinus' two verses on Daedalus and Icarus, he creates a meta-literary game in which both intertextuality and a kind of 'intermythology' recur and are used to indicate the outcomes of different poetic skills.

As for letter 19, it is certainly the most interesting of the prosymetric letters, both in terms of its formal structure and its content, which extensively develops a mythological theme. It once again testifies to the exchange of poems between Ausonius and Paulinus. In the first part Ausonius thanks Paulinus for the food he has given him, inserting two hexameters. He then reassures Paulinus that he will revise the poem he has sent him, and in the meantime sends him a poem of 46 iambic trimeters

110 Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.6.3; *Epit.* 1.12-13; Ov. *Met.* 8.183-235; Hyg. *Fab.* 40.

111 Ov. *Ars am.* 2.21-96; Plin. *Ep.* 7.4. On Pliny the Younger's comparison between his elegies and the flight of Icarus, see Tzounakas 2012.

as a tribute. The short poem is devised by Ausonius using the figure of the personification of iambic verse, who is imagined as flying high and bringing his greetings to Paulinus. Verses 1-13 contain an interesting mythological digression on the origin of the iambic meter (*Ep.* 19b.1-13):¹¹²

*Iambe Parthis et Cydonum spiculis,
iambe pinnis alitum velocior,
Padi ruentis impetu torrentior,
magna sonorae grandinis vi densior,
flammis corusci fulminis vibratior,
iam nunc per auras Persei talaribus
petasoque ditis Arcados vectus vola.
Si vera fama est Hippocrene, quam pedis
pulsu citatam cornipes fudit fremens,
tu, fonte in ipso procreatus Pegasi,
primus novorum metra iunxisti pedum
sanctisque Musis concinentibus novem
caedem in draconis concitasti Delium.*

Iambus more fleet than Parthian or Cydonian dart,
Iambus more fleet than wings of birds,
more impetuous than rushing Padus' current,
more searching than the downpour of rattling hail,
more darting than lightning's dazzling flash,
even now speed through the air borne by Perseus' winged sandals
and with the cap of the Arcadian god.
If 'tis truly told that Hippocrene
gushed forth at the hoof-beat of the impatient courser,
thou, begotten in the very fount of Pegasus,
wast first to link new rhythmic feet
and, while the nine holy Muses sang in harmony,
didst urge the lord of Delos to slaughter of the dragon.

112 This quotation and the following reproduce the Latin text by Green 1999, and the English translation, with some modifications, is by Evelyn White 1921.

Ausonius' text is not simply built on a rhetorical device but refers to the typical features of the 'myths of origins' or foundation myths, as the iambus is invoked as a mythical character capable of flight, carried by Perseus' winged shoes¹¹³ and the *petasus*, the broad-brimmed hat, of the god Mercury.¹¹⁴ In addition, the text also recalls his mythical birth at the Hippocrene spring, generated by the hoof of Pegasus.¹¹⁵ This image as a symbol of poetic inspiration was a traditional motif, as evidenced by its recurrence in the first choliambic verse of the prologue to Persius' *Satires*.¹¹⁶ Subsequently, Ausonius' verses add that in the very same place, having created for the first time the measures of new rhythmic units, while the Muses sang, iambus is said to have incited Delian Apollo to kill the serpent Python. Several versions of this myth have come down to us. Athenaeus¹¹⁷ reports two different versions, one attributed to Clearchus of Soli¹¹⁸, according to which Leto urged Apollo to shoot Python with an arrow, exclaiming "*híe paí*"¹¹⁹, and the other by Heraclides Ponticus¹²⁰ in which it was the god himself who repeated "*ié paían, ié paían, ié paían*" three times. Another variant of the same tale is given by Terentianus Maurus, according to whom the cry was uttered by the priests of Delphi to incite the child god against Python.¹²¹ Considering the tradition referred to by Ausonius, it is distinguished by the place of the mythical event near the Hippocrene spring, whereas the other versions mention Delphi. The mythical motif continues later in the text, when Ausonius asks the iambus to fly "winged and swiftly" (*Ep.* 19b.14: *praepes et volucripes*) to Paulinus' dwelling, bringing him his greetings, and to turn back (*Ep.* 19b.19-22):

nihil moreris iamque, dum loquor, redi,

113 Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.4.2-3; Catull. 55.6; Prop. 2.30.3; Ov. *Met.* 4.665-67; Hyg. *Fab.* 64.

114 Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.4.2-3; Ov. *Met.* 1.671-72.

115 Avienus *Aratea* 495-96; Ov. *Met.* 5.262; cfr. *Fast.* 5.7-8.

116 In Persius' text we read: "I never wet my lips in the horse's spring" (*Nec fonte labra prolui caballino*).

117 Ath. 15.701c-f.

118 Ath. 15.701c (= Clearchus fr. 64, Wehrli 1948)

119 See also the account of Macrob. *Sat.* 1.17.17.

120 Ath. 15. 701e-f (= Heraclides Ponticus fr. 158, Wehrli 1953).

121 *De litteris, de syllabis, de metris* 1584-95.

*imitatus illum stirpis auctorem tuae,
 tripliei furentem qui Chimaeram incendio
 supervolavit tutus igne proximo.*

Tarry not at all, and return now ere I cease to speak,
 after the example of that author of thy source,
 who o'er Chimaera with her triple blast of raging flame
 flew safe from the fire so near.

Again, Ausonius' verses evoke the mythical Pegasus, who managed to fly above the Chimaera, thus helping Bellerophon to defeat it.¹²² Ausonius reconstructs here a mythical genealogy of the iambus, giving it the status of an extra-human being, invested with a fundamental function. Therefore, evaluating the events narrated by Ausonius as a whole, it seems that he uses a mythical chronology divided into various stages, although presented in reverse order: first, the reference to a time, in which Apollo – the son of Leto and Zeus according to tradition – is now an adult god, who defeats the serpent Python by pronouncing the first iambic verse, while being supported by the Muses' song in accomplishing his deed; second, the evocation of a remote primordial epoch, in which Chimaera, one of the monsters inhabiting the world before the order established by the reign of Zeus, was destroyed. In short, in letter 19 Ausonius' allocution to the iambic verses, sent to Paulinus, presents a skilful rhetorical design, which not only focuses on the rapid and incisive details of the description, but also transfers the expressive instrument of poetic inspiration onto the higher level of the mythical dimension. In this way, the contingent side of poetic activity is transfigured and becomes essential.

Among the letters dedicated to Paulinus, the prosimetric letter 20 deserves a final mention. Ausonius asks his friend and disciple the courtesy of helping his former administrator Philo to transport some food to his villa in Lucaniacus to relieve him of shortages.¹²³ The author then states that he is sending Paulinus some iambic verses that actually constitute

122 Hes. *Theog.* 325; Pind. *Ol.* 13.90-91; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.3.2; *Schol. ad Lycoph.* 17; Hyg. *Fab.* 57.

123 Cf. Mondin 1995: 139.

his “personal brand” (*character*).¹²⁴ At the end of his verses, dedicated to the description of Philo’s activities, Ausonius’ declaration – clearly created for encomiastic purposes and offered as a form of *captatio benevolentiae*¹²⁵ – stands out rather strongly: he wishes to honour Paulinus more than Ceres and put his *numen* before Triptolemus, Epimenides and Bouzyges (*Ep.* 20b. 45-49). The common trait of the characters mentioned concerns their being protagonists in the mythical tales that narrate the introduction of wheat. Regarding Ceres, there is no doubt that her sphere of action is constantly connected, both in myth and ritual, to the cultivation of wheat and to agriculture in general.¹²⁶ As far as Triptolemus, Epimenides and Bouzyges are concerned, these are rather well-known culture heroes in the Greek tradition.¹²⁷ But for the purposes of analysing this text, what is most interesting is that Paulinus is elevated, figuratively, by Ausonius to a rank higher than human, even higher than divinity. Here too, the mythological references – as in the other letters – have the function of raising and embellishing the tone and content of the poetic discourse.

Mythological references in letters with numerical games

The discussion of Ausonius’ use of mythology would not be complete if we did not also examine letters 10 and 14, which are constructed as contrived rhetorical plays on numbers. In these letters, mythological references provide the basis for catalogues formed by numerical periphrases.

124 On the use of this term, see Mondin 1995: 141.

125 On Ausonius’ use of *captatio benevolentiae*, see McGill 2014: 258-59.

126 Among the many studies on Ceres, one of the most significant is by Spaeth 1996.

127 These three characters are often overlapped in mythical variants. On Epimenides and Bouzyges as the first ox-drivers, see Schol. Hom. *Il.* 18. 483; Hesych. s.v. Βουζύγης. On Triptolemus and Bouzyges cf. Plin. *HN* 7.199. The complexity of the mythical accounts of the origin of ploughing is reported by Serv. *G.* 1.19, where it is narrated that Ceres had granted the use of the plough to Triptolemus as a gift. In this connection, we should recall the myth narrated by Ovid about the gift of the first plough to the child Triptolemus by Ceres (*Fast.* 4.550-60). Cf. Pastorino 1970: 761 fn. 15; Green 1991: 645; Mondin 1995: 145-46.

The compilation of catalogues, as well as centones and epitomes, assembled through a skilful and meticulous collection of material taken from past works, constitutes one of the fundamental components of Ausonius' literary production and prowess. As Brian Sowers has shown, however, Ausonius' work in assembling and combining literary sources and quotations is never mechanical nor an end in itself, but always gives rise to unique and functional variations on already known themes.¹²⁸ Letters 10 and 14 are evidence of Ausonius' inclination for a virtuoso rhetorical, linguistic and stylistic play, thanks to which he created a series of literary jokes, of which the best known are the *Griphus ternarii numeri* and the *Technopaegnon*.

In letter 10, Ausonius tells his friend Ursulus¹²⁹ how he endeavoured to make sure he received the emperor's gift of six solids. The text appears as a rhetorical game built on a series of periphrases indicating the number six, many of which are mythological allusions. The first of these circumlocutions mentions "two Geryons" (*Ep.* 10.6: *duo Geryones*), alluding to the fact that Geryon in mythical tales has three heads and three bodies.¹³⁰ Not by chance, the metaphor based on the monstrous figure of Geryon appears in both *Ep.* 14b.6 and in *Griphus* 82, where Ausonius again plays on numerical periphrases. Remarkably, letters 10 and 14 – which according to some scholars were written later than the *Griphus*¹³¹ – constitute a further reworking of the same rhetorical game on numbers. A second mythological periphrasis indicates "the Muses minus three" (*Ep.* 10.7: *demptoque triente Camenae*), which once again confirms Ausonius' interest in the number of Muses,¹³² and a third circumlocution mentions "how many men are entrusted with the destinies of Rome and Alba" (*Ep.* 10.9: *commissa viris Romana Albanaque fata*), an allusion to the fight between the three Horatii and the three Curiatii, whose story is reported in Livy's account (1. 24). In the entire epistolary, this is one of the very few

128 See the correct remarks by Sowers 2023 on the method Ausonius followed in epitomising his sources.

129 Cf. Pastorino 1971: 48.

130 Hes. *Theog.* 287; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.10; Paus. 5.19.1; Hyg. *Fab. praef.* 30; 151.

131 See the chronology established by Pastorino 1971, according to which the *Griphus* dates to 368, *Ep.* 10 (= 18 Pastorino) is dated 375–378, *Ep.* 14 (= 7 Pastorino) is dated after 383. According to Mondin 1995: 121, letter 10 (= 7 Mondin) dates to 377.

132 See above on letter 13.

references to traditional tales on Rome's origins. When considering letter 10, there are very few numerical periphrases built on mythological characters and subjects when compared to others that are displayed as mathematical equivalences. Quick and short mythological details echo ancient traditions that were well known to Ausonius' addressees and audience, but are decontextualised from their original setting and given a new function, becoming formal expedients for the realisation of a refined and elevated style.

Of the two letters constructed with numerical games, letter 14 is the most complex and representative: it constitutes a worthy continuation of the kind of rhetorical exercise already implemented by Ausonius in the *Griphus*. This letter is sent by Ausonius to Theon to comment on his gift of thirty oysters. It offers a fine example of the rhetorical devices that are particularly favoured by the author and most often used in his works. In addition to the prosimetric form, the satirical tone and the periphrastic play on the number thirty make the letter particularly emblematic of Ausonius' style. The most interesting aspect of this letter is the inclusion of a short polymetric composition of 56 verses, where verses 6-17 constitute a series of monostichs containing equivalences of the number thirty linked to the Greek or Roman mythical tradition. Let us look specifically at the structure of these numerical associations as borrowed from mythology.

- 14b.6 The periphrasis "the Geryons multiplied by ten" reproduces the same metaphor already seen in *Ep.* 10.6 and in *Griphus* 82.
- 14b.7 The multiplication by three of the canonical 10-year duration of the famous Trojan conflict evokes the epic tradition.¹³³
- 14b.8 Here we find a sentence that is harder to interpret. Green suggests reading *quotve dies solidi* as referring to the days of the month.¹³⁴ Agostino Pastorino instead maintains the reading offered by the manuscript *V aut ter ut Eolidi* and defends Elia Vinet's interpretation that *Eolis* is Canace, daughter of Aeolus, who is said to have given birth after a ten-

133 Hom. *Il.* 2.299-330; Apollod. *Epit.* 3; Cic. *Div.* 2.30.63-65; Hyg. *Fab.* 108.

134 Green 1991: 633.

month pregnancy.¹³⁵ By contrast, Luca Mondin suggests amending the text with *teru<e quo>t Aeolidi*, giving it this meaning: “three times are the months the sun has for the granddaughter of Aeolus”.¹³⁶

- 14b.9 The nights included in the lunar month indicated by the name of the goddess Cynthia, often identified with the moon, are briefly alluded to. Such identification, besides often being found among 1st century poets,¹³⁷ is indeed often seen in other late antique poets such as Avienus,¹³⁸ Claudian,¹³⁹ Dracontius,¹⁴⁰ Ennodius.¹⁴¹
- 14b.10 Reference is made to the days that *Titan*, i.e. *Sol*, takes to cross each single sign.¹⁴²
- 14b.11 The 30-year duration of the revolution of Saturn, indicated by the epithet *Phaenon*,¹⁴³ is mentioned.
- 14b.12 A recall to the thirty years of the ministry of the Vestal Virgins is added.¹⁴⁴

135 Pastorino 1971: 233. The account of Canace’s pregnancy is in Ov. *Epist.* 11.45–46.

136 Mondin 1995: 212–13, argues that *Aeolidi* refers to Tyro, daughter of Salmoneus and granddaughter of Aeolus, seduced by Poseidon; the scholar connects this idea to the passage in Gell. *NA* 3.16.15, where the duration of pregnancy is discussed and it is assumed that female beings loved by Poseidon could have a longer pregnancy.

137 Luc. 1.218; 2.577; Sil. *Pun.* 4.480.

138 *Aratea* 1445–88.

139 *Carmina* 8.427; *Carmina minora* 27.38.

140 *Romulea* 10.188–92.

141 *Carmina* 2.128. 4.

142 In the text of Aratus *Phaen.* 546–52, we read that he goes through the 12 stages of the zodiac, throughout the year. See also Quint. Smyrn. 2.502–6. Cf. Luc. 1.15; 540. The name *Titan* is often used by Latin authors to identify *Sol* (the Greek name is *Helios*), son of Hyperion, himself belonging to the first generation of *Titanes*. See *Ecl.* 23.4 and *Ep.* 17.2.

143 Several sources speak of Saturn’s revolution: Cic. *Nat. D.* 2. 52; Plin. *HN* 2.32; Censorinus *DN* 13.3; Firm. Mat. *Mathesis* 3.3.2.; Mart. Cap. 8.851. Cf. Green 1991: 633; Mondin 1995: 213.

144 Dion. Hal. 2.67.2; Plut. *Num.* 10; Symmachus *Epist.* 9.108. Wildfang 2006.

- 14b.13 The Vergilian quotation *Dardaniusque nepos* indicating Ascanius, king of Alba for thirty years, appears here.¹⁴⁵
- 14b.14 A numerical periphrasis by subtraction is provided: Priam's sons, who traditionally numbered 50¹⁴⁶ minus two ten.
- 14b.15 The number of the *quindecimviri* guardians of the Sibylline oracles is indicated here.¹⁴⁷ Interestingly, this is a rhetorical game that re-proposes another numerical periphrasis on the same personages already mentioned in *Griphus* 87.
- 14b.16 Mention is made of the piglets that the sow of Alba gave birth to under the holm oaks.¹⁴⁸

These verses of letter 14 display such a diversified range of mythological references, that it vividly conveys Ausonius' impressive erudition in this area. His skilful use of this knowledge constitutes a refined exercise that is meant to elevate the level of his poetic and rhetorical proficiency. Ausonius here uses his usual technique of reproducing and recomposing small fragments of the mythological material at his disposal:¹⁴⁹ it is thanks to this cataloguing procedure that the composition appears unified in its theme and construction. As a demonstration of the technical skill with which Ausonius compiles and formulates this short poetic interlude, it is worth looking at verses 19-23, in which Ausonius, using a sharp satirical tone, emphasises the obtuseness of his addressee Theon, who – in his opinion – might not understand mythical tales at all. Evidently, Ausonius plays here on a 'metamythological' level, so to speak, lingering jokingly and paradoxically in his address to Theon in order to continue his rhetorical game on the number thirty. Immediately after-

145 As already noted by Pastorino 1971, Green 1991 and Mondin 1995, the Vergilian quotation is in *Aen.* 4.163, and the prediction of the duration of Ascanius' reign over Alba is found in *Aen.* 1.167-70.

146 Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 2.503.

147 The members of the *collegio sacris faciundis* were originally two, then became ten and were later increased to fifteen. See Santi 1985 and Gillmeister 2019.

148 The same image is found in *Aen.* 3.390-91.

149 On the method of fragmenting and recomposing in epitomes of late antiquity, see Sacchi & Formisano 2023: 2-14. On the same method used by Ausonius, see Sowers 2023.

wards, in fact, another series of mathematical equivalences is introduced, based on the decomposition of the factors that form the number itself (*Ep.* 14b.24-35).

Conclusions

This analysis of Ausonius' epistolary – though only a limited part of his literary production – shows that the manner in which he reworks the mythological heritage at his disposal is very clear. The re-adaptation of such material is evidence as much of his deep-rooted knowledge of the contents and the ideas of the literary tradition of the past, as of his complete identification with that world: Ausonius clearly shares its ideals, which comprise his keys to interpreting everyday reality. On the one hand Ausonius' re-elaboration of mythological material implies refined rhetorical techniques, and on the other, it is a readjustment to his own themes.

From a formal point of view, allusions to mythical events constitute one of Ausonius' tools in his quest for an elevated style, the function of which is predominantly aesthetic. Within this process, some relevant aspects are worthy of note.

First of all, in many cases mythological references are included in *metapoetic* discussions as they relate to the poetic activity of Ausonius and his friends, as can be seen several times in the letters in verse, where there are allusions to the Muses and their seats, or in the epistles that testify to exchanges of literary works (*Ep.* 4 and 8 to Theon, *Ep.* 5 to Axius Paulus, *Ep.* 9 to Petronius Probus, *Ep.* 17, 19 and 20 to Paulinus). The *metamythological* reflections of letter 14 – where Ausonius pokes fun at Theon's misunderstanding of myths – and the *intermythological* layering of letter 17 – where Ausonius quotes Paulinus' verses containing mythological references – also fall within this remit.

Second, mythological references are often connected to Ausonius' private affairs, such as when he asks for news of Theon (*Ep.* 5) or urges Paulinus to host his factor Philo (*Ep.* 20) or extols his friendship with Paulinus (*Ep.* 24).

Third, Ausonius very frequently employs well-known Homeric, Virgilian and Ovidian epic models to construct abstract comparisons between an ideal world and the reality of everyday life. Such analogies are used by Ausonius in two directions. In one sense, to 'elevate', i.e. to celebrate his friends, as in letter 9 where the three Homeric heroes are compared to Probus, or in letter 20 when he considers Paulinus a sort of cultural hero superior to Triptolemus, Epimenides and Bouzyges, or in letter 24 where the friendship between Ausonius and Paulinus is assimilated to various mythical examples of couples of indissoluble friends. In the other sense, to 'lower', i.e. to offer contrasting and paradoxical examples, as in letter 4 concerning Pierides' misbehaviour, which Axius Paulus is discouraged from imitating, or in letter 13 when ironically Theon's hunting activity is compared to that of Adonis and his performance to the god Orcus.

Again, mythological motifs are more extensively developed in the prosimetric letters where formal experimentation and contrived style are more elaborated. This can already be seen in letter 17 where there are three poetic inserts, consisting of a mythological-astronomical periphrasis, a digression on oriental mythical geography, and a reference to the pair Daedalus-Icarus. But it is particularly evident in letter 19, where Ausonius extensively recounts the myth of the origin of the iambus, who becomes a mythical character of the 'time of origins'.

Lastly, mythological motifs are sometimes combined with complex numerical word games, as in letter 10 on the number six, or in letter 14 on the number thirty. Here there is evidence of technical-rhetorical prowess and literary delight by Ausonius, who collects and rearranges small fragments of the tradition of the past, arriving at unitary poetic structures.

In sum, the task performed by Ausonius when collecting from older sources, assembling, and rearranging the mythological material in his letters, does not appear to be mechanical work at all. On the contrary, it is an ordering process that follows a clearly defined approach: mainly that of looking at everyday reality through the lens of an erudite man, who knows how to use his knowledge intelligently and ironically.

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