

AUSONIUS' LETTER TO HESPERIUS ATTACHED TO THE *PROTREPTICUS AD NEPOTEM* AND QUINTILIAN'S *INSTITUTIO ORATORIA* 10.1.17–19

This note uncovers parallels between Ausonius' letter to his son Hesperius that precedes the hexameter *Protrepticus ad Nepotem* and a passage in Book 10 of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*.¹ The parallels raise the possibility that Ausonius took Quintilian as a model when composing his letter.

The *Protrepticus*, an exhortation to study addressed to Ausonius' grandson and Hesperius' nephew,² was written c. 380.³ In the prefatory letter to Hesperius, Ausonius relates that he is sending a copy of the *Protrepticus* ahead of a visit, with the request that his son read it; a reasonable assumption is that Ausonius wanted to get some feedback on a draft of his work when he arrived.⁴ Ausonius continues that he would prefer Hesperius to read the poem rather than to listen to Ausonius recite it, so that Hesperius' assessment of it might be freer. The point is that Hesperius will be a better critic of the *Protrepticus* as a reader than he would be if he were to listen to his father deliver the poem:

Libellum quem ad nepotulum meum, sororis tuae filium, instar protreptici
luseram venturus ipse praemisi legendum. hoc enim malui quam ipse
recitare, esset ut tibi censura liberior.

* I thank Miriam Griffin and *CQ*'s anonymous reader for their *censura libera*. Naturally, all defects that remain are my own responsibility.

¹ I use the texts of R. P. H. Green (ed.), *Decimi Magni Ausonii Opera* (Oxford, 1999), 23 and of M. Winterbottom (ed.), *M. Fabi Quintiliani Institutionis Oratoriae Libri Duodecim*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1970) 2.570–1.

² The child bore the name of his grandfather Ausonius. He was the son of Ausonius' daughter, whose name is unknown, and probably Thalassius, her second husband, rather than Euromius, her first husband. On these historical topics, see R. P. H. Green (ed. and comm.), *The Works of Ausonius* (Oxford, 1991), 287–8. As Green also notes, Ausonius' exhortation is unlike other examples of the genre, and it was probably a playful poetic variation on *protreptici* rather than an earnest stimulus to the child.

³ Green (n. 2), 288, suggests this date for the *Protrepticus*, as does A. Pastorino (ed. and trans.), *Opere di Decimo Magno Ausonio* (Turin, 1971), 72 and 78. P. Bruggisser, *Symmaque ou le rituel épistolaire de l'amitié littéraire: recherches sur le premier livre de la correspondance* (Fribourg, 1993), 270–1, places the date of composition between 378 and 380.

⁴ Critics have questioned the sincerity of Ausonius' requests for criticism in his prefatory letters (other examples appear in *Praef. Var.* 4.16–18 [Green] and the epistle attached to the *Ludus Septem Sapientum* 11–18). Green (n. 2), xliii, however, rightly states that 'the request(s) may be seriously meant'. I see no reason to doubt that Ausonius' solicitation of criticism in this case is sincere. Certainly, the circumstances in which Ausonius sent the *Protrepticus* to Hesperius suggest that he considered the work to be at a draft stage. Dispatching the poem to Hesperius in anticipation of a visit would have given Hesperius the chance to read and evaluate the poem before his father got to him. Ausonius could have then received the text back from his son, presumably with suggestions and markings on it, during his visit. (The letter to Hesperius would then somehow have been preserved with the final version of the *Protrepticus*.) For more on Ausonius' circulation of written drafts for evaluation, see H. Sivan, 'The dedicatory presentation in late antiquity: the example of Ausonius', *ICS* 17 (1992), 86 and 96. On the circulation of literary works in Latin antiquity, see e.g. R. J. Starr, 'The circulation of literary texts in the Roman world', *CQ* 37 (1987), 213–23 (with a discussion on 213–14 of both circulating drafts in written form and reciting them for criticism).

Ausonius proceeds to identify two factors that customarily impede *censura*; the first is relevant to this note. Ausonius states that ‘things heard pass more quickly past the ears than things read’. The implication is that reading will enable Hesperius to criticize his father’s poem more patiently and carefully and thus better than he could if he listened to a recitation. Ausonius returns to this idea a bit later, asserting that Hesperius, rather than having to contend with the speed of things *audita*, will be free to linger over the poem when he reads it:

(*Censura liberior*) quae duabus causis impediri solet: quod aures nostras audita velocius quam lecta praetereunt et quod sinceritas iudicandi praesentia recitantis oneratur. nunc tibi utrumque integrum est, quia legenti libera mora est et iudicatio non obstat nostri verecundia.⁵

Ausonius’ claim that Hesperius will provide superior criticism if he reads the *Protrepticus* than he would if he listened to Ausonius recite it, and the first reason he offers for why that is so, recall Quintilian’s *Inst.* 10.1.17–19. Those chapters comprise the bulk of a discussion (10.1.16–19) of how listening to forensic speeches offers some advantages while reading them offers others (*alia vero audientis, alia legentis magis adiuvant*, 10.1.16). Two assertions within 10.1.17–19 correspond to material in Ausonius’ letter:

In lectione certius iudicium (10.1.17) ... lectio libera est nec <ut> actionis impetus transcurrit, sed repetere saepius licet, sive dubites sive memoriae penitus adfigere velis (10.1.19).

Quintilian’s position in *lectione certius iudicium* resembles Ausonius’ *esset ut tibi censura liberior*. Ausonius and Quintilian are of course concerned with different kinds of performances and texts; and the sort of critical response that Ausonius seemingly envisions, with the reader serving as an editor, diverges from what Quintilian describes, where readers judge a work without a direct editorial role. The two authors also identify different things that reading does for judgement, with Ausonius observing that it makes criticism ‘freer’ and Quintilian that it makes criticism ‘surer’. But beneath those divergences lie fundamental similarities: in passages that oppose the oral and the written,⁶ both Ausonius and Quintilian deem reading superior to listening as a basis for critical evaluation.

After explaining why listening to a forensic speech hinders *iudicium* in *Inst.* 10.1.18–9,⁷ Quintilian leaves behind the topic of critical judgement and turns to other

⁵ Given that the second factor Ausonius cites is *sinceritas iudicandi praesentia recitantis oneratur*, a position to which he returns when he writes (*tibi*) *iudicatio non obstat nostri verecundia, censura liberior* means more attentive and detailed criticism, which the slowness of reading will promote, and more frank criticism, which the absence of Ausonius will promote.

⁶ This division holds even if Ausonius had audible reading in mind, as might have been the case given the absence of *nostros oculos* as an explicit object of *lecta praetereunt*, as *nostras aures* is to *audita* (*praetereunt*). At the same time, Ausonius could have been opting for economy, leaving *nostros oculos* unstated because clearly understood. Another option is to supply *oculos* after *quam*; as Green notes in his *apparatus criticus*, Mommsen did precisely that, but without manuscript support. Whether Quintilian also had audible reading in mind is uncertain; but as with Ausonius, the clear operative distinction in his account is between responding to a live oral performance and responding to a written version of a text.

⁷ The reasons are that bias towards a speaker might sway a listener, as might the favourable reaction of those in the crowd around him. Quintilian continues that the listener might be too embarrassed to contradict the crowd’s applause and too modest or diffident to trust in his own judgement, even though the taste of the majority is poor, and even though invited audience members (*conrogati*) will applaud even what they do not like (10.1.18–19). I should register my

benefits of reading. Quintilian states first that *lectio* is 'independent' and does not rush past hastily, as an orator's delivery of a speech does. Reading, he continues, allows one to revisit a text again and again, and by doing so to clear up any confusion or to commit a work firmly to memory (*lectio libera est nec <ut> actionis impetus transcurrit, sed repetere saepius licet, sive dubites sive memoriae penitus adfigere velis*, 10.1.19). *Lectio libera est* thus refers to the reader's freedom to pause and to revisit passages in ways he could not when listening to an oration, to the benefit of his comprehension and his memorization of a text.

Although Quintilian moves on to issues other than *iudicium* in the sentence beginning with the words *lectio libera est* in 10.1.19, that material has points of contact with the first explanation Ausonius gives for why Hesperius will make a better critic as a reader than he would as a listener. First, the content of Ausonius' *aures nostras audita velocius quam lecta praetereunt* is comparable to Quintilian's *lectio . . . nec <ut> actionis impetus transcurrit*. Ausonius' assertion, moreover, that Hesperius will be able to linger over the *Protrepticus* as a reader, which elaborates on his statement about the slowness of reading and the speed of listening, is close to the message of Quintilian's *sed repetere saepius licet*, which elaborates on his statements about the same subjects.

Ausonius' letter to Hesperius also contains verbal echoes of the material in Quintilian under consideration. These appear in the phrase *legenti libera mora est*. Ausonius elsewhere uses *libera mora* in letters to Axius Paulus (*Ep.* 2.10, Green) and to Theon (*Ep.* 15.24, Green), where he connects the phrase to the word *desidia* to describe the freedom to linger in idleness.⁸ Joining *libera mora* to the participle *legens*, however, occurs only in the letter to Hesperius.⁹ The result is a remark whose language resembles Quintilian's *lectio libera est*.

Admittedly, the linguistic correspondences between Ausonius and Quintilian are in themselves unexceptional, as they consist of quite common words. But as we have seen, Quintilian's *lectio libera est* follows upon a discussion of why reading outdoes listening as a medium for critical judgement, which is of course also Ausonius' topic. This fact, coupled with the similarities in content between *legenti libera mora est* and *Inst.* 10.1.19, makes the linguistic connection between Ausonius and Quintilian seem tighter and less accidental than it would if the echoes appeared in some other setting in Ausonius.

The substantive and verbal ties between the letter to Hesperius and *Inst.* 10.1.17–19 support the idea that Ausonius turned to Quintilian as a model.¹⁰ Ausonius may have

sense here that Ausonius' reference to *verecundia* as the second hindrance to good criticism at a recitation is not at all significantly indebted to Quintilian's *et velut tacita quadam verecundia inhihemur*, describing the modesty that keeps an audience member from exercising his critical faculty (10.1.18). It is possible that Quintilian influenced Ausonius' choice of the word *verecundia*; but the two are far apart conceptually, with each describing a different kind of modesty.

⁸ In *Ep.* 2, Ausonius asks Paulus to visit him and to do it soon, because he will quickly have to leave again for Bordeaux to celebrate Easter, and because he is not free to linger idly (*libera nec nobis est mora desidia*, 2.10). In *Ep.* 15, Ausonius asks Theon to visit him after a lengthy absence, and facetiously writes that if he chooses not to do so, Theon can purchase his idleness (*ergo aut praedictos iam nunc rescribe Darios / et redime, ut mora sit libera desidia*, 15.23–4).

⁹ Cf. L. J. Bolchazy and J. M. Sweeney (edd.), *Concordantia in Ausonium* (Hildesheim–New York, 1982), 368.

¹⁰ Ausonius was familiar with Quintilian; on this topic, see Green (n. 2), xxi, 291, 308, 313, 331–2, 408, 506, 544, 595, and 651. Green (n. 2), 288, R. Peiper (ed.), *Decimi Magni Ausonii Burdigalensis Opuscula* (Leipzig, 1886), 484, and S. Prete (ed.), *Decimi Magni Ausonii Burdigalensis Opuscula* (Leipzig, 1978), 72, cite Horace's *Ars Poetica* 180–1 (*segnius irritant animos*

claimed that reading will facilitate *censura liberior* under the influence of Quintilian's *in lectione certius iudicium*, or remembered Quintilian's words upon asserting that Hesperius would be a better critic as a reader than he would be as a listener. In either event, we might reasonably speculate, on the basis of thematic and verbal parallels, that Ausonius then adapted Quintilian's thoughts in *Inst.* 10.1.19 on how *lectio* allows for patient, protracted attention to his account of why reading is more conducive to criticism than is listening. Ausonius would have therefore supported a claim that agreed with an argument that Quintilian made in *Inst.* 10.1.17 and pursued into 10.1.19 by reworking material that followed immediately after the presentation of that argument, namely the sentence beginning with *lectio libera est*, in 10.1.19.

Rice University

SCOTT MCGILL

smcgill@rice.edu

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demissa per aurem / quam quae sunt oculis subiecta fidelibus) as a parallel to Ausonius' comments. But I believe that Ausonius' observations are closer to Quintilian's than to Horace's or any other predecessor's. Pastorino (n. 3), 386, K. Schenkl (ed.), *D. Magni Ausonii Opuscula*, MGH 5.2 (Berlin, 1883), 36, and M. Jasinski (ed. and trans.), *Ausone: oeuvres en vers et en prose*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1934–5), 1.40, do not cite any passages comparable to Ausonius'.