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Epigrammatic Elements in the Fables of Avianus

Abstract: By choosing the elegiac distich as the metre for his fables, the late antique poet Avianus innovated in the tradition of the genre of fable. In their metre and length, however, Avianus' fables have much in common with elegy and epigram. The present contribution compares Avianus' fables to epigrammatic poetry and similar types of *carmina minora*. At first glance, Avianus' poems lack the pointedness and wit of epigrams such as those of Martial. However, in Late Antiquity the definition of epigrammatic poetry is quite fluid and broad, encompassing a great variety of poetic types. The paper examines Avianus' interaction with the genre of epigram and demonstrates that many of his fables have striking similarities with epigrammatic poetry in the use of motifs, metapoetic allusions, and literary play. Avianus seems to be well aware of the epigrammatic tradition, using epigrammatic motifs and techniques in his elegiac fables, which could also be read as epideictic epigrams that take fables as their main topic.

1 Introduction

By choosing the elegiac distich as the metre of his verse fables, the late antique poet Avianus added an innovative element to the tradition of the fable genre, after Phaedrus' *senarii* and Babrius' choliambics. However, Avianus was not the first poet to present material from the fable tradition in elegiacs. In his monograph on the ancient fable, Holzberg refers to some poems from the *Greek Anthology* as parallel cases where motifs known from fables are varied in this metre.[1] However, as Holzberg argues, the Greek epigrammatists were less interested in conveying a moral message than in adapting the topics of fables to the conventions of epigrammatic poetry. Although some of the surviving Greek and Roman verse fables have a narrative structure reminiscent of epigrammatic poetry,[2] Holzberg does not believe that the poems of Avianus could be characterized as short and pointed, a feature otherwise typical of epigrams. It is certainly true that in most cases Avianus

1 *Anth. Pal.* 6.217; 7.210; 9.3; 9.86; 9.99; 11.348; cf. Holzberg 2012, 70; for fables in epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*, see Christodoulou 2020 and Christodoulou's contribution in this volume.

2 See Mattiacci 2011; Neger 2022; see also Weinreich 1931.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111181936-016

extends the narratives of his models, especially Babrius, rather than condensing them. However, with regard to the length of individual poems it it should be noted that Avianus avoids the large fluctuations of Babrius' collection where the longest fable reaches an almost epic dimension of 102 lines (Babr. 95), whereas the shortest poems consist of tetrastichs (Babr. 8, 29, 39–41, 54, 60, 73, 80–81, 83, 90, 96, 109–110, 113, 121, 133).[3] In comparison with Babrius, we find a more even distribution of longer and shorter poems in Avianus' collection, with the shortest fable (27) comprising 10 lines, the longest (9) extending over 24 verses. As Lukas Spielhofer demonstrates in this volume, Babrius' tetrastichs are characterized by epigrammatic wit and pointedness. Avianus' fables are certainly less witty, but still, as I would like to suggest, a comparison of his fables with the genre of epigram may be a fruitful enterprise as well; this seems to be all the more true as especially in Late Antiquity, ways of defining epigrammatic poetry are quite fluid and broad, encompassing a great variety of poetic types.[4] For instance, writing at the end of the 5th century CE, Sidonius Apollinaris even labels poems of more than a hundred lines and with a more lyrical character as epigrams — e.g. the poems embedded in his letters 8.9 and 9.13 —,[5] while he also mentions contemporary epigrammatists who preferred to keep their compositions brief and took care not to exceed a length of four lines, such as the rhetor Lampridius to whom Sidonius dedicates the obituary letter 8.11.[6] Avianus, of course, never uses the term *epigramma* in his collection, but it does not seem out of place to read his œuvre in the wider context of epigrammatic compositions both earlier and contemporary. Jochen Küppers in his monograph on Avianus has already pointed out that another context that should be considered is the late antique epigrams such as those of Ausonius and the *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, in which Greek models are used and rewritten in a similar way to Avianus.[7]

3 See Spielhofer's contribution in this volume. Phaedrus' fables also show significant differences in terms of length, with the prologue to Book 3 comprising 63 lines, followed by Phaed. 3.10 Z. [= G.] with 60 lines; the shortest poems are Phaed. *app*. 2 Z. [= G.] with 3 lines (the text is probably incomplete) as well as 1.7 Z. [= G.], 5.23 Z. [= 4.24 G.], and *app*. 22 Z. [= 24 G.] of 4 lines. For tetrastichs and the ideal of brevity in Byzantine fable, see Scognamiglio's contribution in this volume.

4 See Mondin 2019; for Late Antique epigram, see also Munari 1958; Guipponi-Gineste/Urlacher-Becht 2013.

5 Sid. Apoll. *Epist*. 8.9.3: *epigrammatis* [...] *lemma*; *Epist*. 9.13.5: *epigrammata singulorum*.

6 Sid. Apoll. *Epist*. 8.11.7: *praeterea quod ad epigrammata spectat, non copia sed acumine placens, quae nec breuius disticho neque longius tetrasticho finiebantur* ("now further, as regards epigrams, he gave pleasure not by length but by point; they were never shorter than a couplet or longer than a quatrain"; transl. Anderson).

7 Küppers 1977, 199–204.

2 Paratexts

A first peculiarity that links Avianus' collection to the tradition of ancient epigram is his decision to introduce his fables with a prose epistle addressed to a Theodosius, usually identified as the famous Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius.[8] The combination of prose prefaces with poetry books appears first in the works of Martial and Statius, and later we find examples in the works of Ausonius, who continues this literary strategy by opening several of his poetic collections with prose epistles.[9] On the other hand, one might here also mention prose letters, such as those of Pliny the Younger and Symmachus, which sometimes contain shorter poems as inserts, some of them in elegiacs.[10]

Avianus in his prose epistle creates a genealogy of the fable genre by referring in loose chronological order to Aesop, Socrates, Horace, Babrius, and Phaedrus, a series of predecessors to which he adds his own name at the end. Aside from Babrius' second prologue, one may also be reminded of Ovid's catalogue of models in the famous autobiographical poem in the *Tristia* where the elegist presents himself as a successor to Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius:

> Vergilium uidi tantum, nec auara Tibullo
> tempus amicitiae fata dedere meae.
> successor fuit hic tibi, Galle, Propertius illi;
> quartus ab his serie temporis ipse fui.
> (Ov. *Tr*. 4.10.51–54)

> Vergil — I only saw him, and envious fate did not give enough time to Tibullus to be my friend. He was your successor, Gallus, and Propertius followed him. I myself was the fourth in this chronological order.
> (Transl. M.N.)

A similar generic genealogy also appears in the first prose epistle of Martial's epigrams, there in the context of justifying obscene language as an important characteristic of epigrammatic poetry (1 *praef*.): *Lasciuam uerborum ueritatem, id est epigrammaton linguam, excusarem, si meum esset exemplum: sic scribit Catullus, sic Marsus, sic Pedo, sic Gaetulicus, sic quicumque perlegitur* ("I would justify the sexually explicit vocabulary, which is the language of epigram, if I had offered

8 See Cameron 1967; Küppers 1977, 28–64; against this view Luzzatto 1984; cf. Holzberg 2012, 76–77, with a survey of the debate.

9 For prose epistles opening poetry books, see Janson 1964; Pavlovskis 1967.

10 Pliny the Younger: *Ep*. 3.21; 4.14; 4.27; 6.10; 7.4; 7.9; 9.19; Symmachus: *Ep*. 1.1; 1.2; 1.8.

the first example: this is how Catullus writes, and Marsus, and Pedo, and Gaetulicus, and whoever is read entirely"). Similar to Ovid and Avianus, Martial too constructs a more-or-less chronological succession of predecessors, here from the time of the Roman Republic (Catullus) via the age of Augustus (Domitius Marsus and Albinovanus Pedo) to the reign of Tiberius (with Lentulus Gaetulicus, consul in 26 CE).[11]

Avianus' preface also has some similarities to the prefaces of Ausonius. For example, when he states that he wrote fables in the elegiac metre which were composed *rudi Latinitate* ("in crude Latin"), this does not necessarily mean that he is referring to a Latin collection of prose fables, but could also be playfully undercutting his own work.[12] One could compare Ausonius' preface to the *Bissula*, a collection he characterizes as *poematia, quae luseram* […] *rudia et incohata* ("poems, which I had composed playfully [...] and in crude, unfinished form"). Moreover, Avianus' characterization of his collection at the end of the epistle (*habes ergo opus, quo animum oblectes, ingenium exerceas, sollicitudinem leues, totumque uiuendi ordinem cautus agnoscas* ["here you have a work to entertain your mind, to exercise your intellect, to mitigate your anxiety, and to recognize the whole course of life attentively"]) is reminiscent of not only Phaedrus' first prologue (1 *prol.* 3–4: *risum mouet* […] *prudenti uitam consilio monet* ["it arouses laughter [...] gives prudent advice for life"]),[13] but also Pliny the Younger's characterization of epigrammatic poetry as *carmen argutum et breue* ("witty and short poem") in letter 7.9.12–13:[14]

> itaque summi oratores, summi etiam uiri sic se aut **exercebant** aut **delectabant**, immo **delectabant exercebantque**. nam mirum est ut his opusculis **animus** intendatur **remittatur**. recipiunt enim amores odia iras misericordiam urbanitatem, omnia denique quae in **uita** atque etiam in foro causisque uersantur.
>
> (Plin. *Ep.* 7.9.12–13)

11 One could add the letters of Pliny the Younger where Pliny justifies his decision to compose epigrammatic poetry. After invoking the authority of Catullus in *Ep.* 4.14, he offers a list of Roman individuals — in his case men of high standing — who also enjoyed composing light poetry in their *otium* (*Ep.* 5.3).

12 For this interpretation, see the translation of Duff/Duff 1934, 683: "writing in unembellished Latin"; Küppers 1977, 186–187; for the other view (a prose paraphrase of Babrius), see Cameron 1967, 398–399; Mann 2015, 264, offers a third possibility, namely that Avianus is referring to the Latin fable tradition in general; see Poms in this volume.

13 Uden 2009, 113; Mann 2015, 266.

14 For this letter, see Keeline 2013; Whitton 2019, 272–322.

> And therefore the greatest orators, and also the greatest men, used to exercise or entertain themselves, or — better — to entertain *and* exercise themselves in this way. For it is striking how through these little works the mind is both concentrated and relaxed. They encompass our feelings of love, hatred, anger, compassion, and refinement — in sum, everything that happens in life and even in our public and legal activities.
>
> (Transl. M.N.)

There are clear lexical overlaps between Pliny's letter and Avianus' *Epistula ad Theodosium*: Pliny's *exercebant* is echoed through Avianus' *exerceas*, whereas *delectabant* and *remittatur* are varied through the synonyms *oblectes* and *leues* in Avianus' text. Both writers emphasize the effect that the composition or reading of short poems has on the mind (*animus*) and stress their connection with matters of real life (*uita*). The *ingenium* ('intellect') which, according to Avianus, is exercised through the reading of his fables also plays a prominent role in Pliny's letter: in a poem that Pliny inserts into the same letter to illustrate his argument, he states that the human mind has to be trained and kept agile through a variety of intellectual studies: *sic hominum ingenium flecti ducique per artes | non rigidas docta mobilitate decet* ("so the human intellect has to be kept agile and guided through various disciplines with learned flexibility", *Ep*. 7.9.11.7–8).

3 Poetological motifs in fables 1–3

Avianus' fables have until now mainly been studied in relation to their role within the fable tradition itself and their use of the language and style of classical poets such as Vergil, Ovid, Horace, and Propertius.[15] I would like to suggest in this chapter that it could also be fruitful to examine in more detail the interaction of the fables with the broader tradition of epigrammatic and occasional poetry.[16] One might bear in mind that, despite Martial's attempts to define epigrammatic poetry and distinguish it from other literary genres, throughout antiquity the generic boundaries of poems that we now classify as epigrams were never particularly narrow.[17] Catullus, for instance, whom Martial refers to as his most important

15 See e.g. Küppers 1977; Adrados 2000, 254–274; Scanzo 2001; Holzberg 2012, 69–79.

16 For a similar approach, see Spielhofer's contribution in this volume, which discusses epigrammatic elements in Babrius' fables.

17 See Holzberg 1988, 24: "Von allen seinen griechischen und römischen Vorgängern innerhalb der Gattung Epigramm [...] unterscheidet sich Martial in seiner Formkunst besonders darin, dass die überwiegende Mehrzahl seiner Epigramme auf eine besinnliche oder witzige Pointe zugespitzt ist" ("From all his Greek and Roman predecessors within the genre of the epigram [...]

model, never uses the term *epigramma*.[18] Martial's contemporary Pliny the Younger, who in letter 4.14 ponders the titles by which he could have labelled his epigrams, provides a catalogue of several alternatives: *proinde, siue epigrammata siue idyllia siue eclogas siue, ut multi, poematia seu quod aliud uocare malueris, licebit uoces; ego tantum hendecasyllabos praesto* ("therefore, if you prefer to call them 'epigrams' or 'idylls' or 'eclogues' or, as many do, 'poems' or otherwise, this is of course legitimate; I offer only 'hendecasyllables'", 4.14.9). For Pliny, the term *epigramma* is interchangeable with various other types of short poems such as idylls, eclogues, and the like.[19]

Viewed in this light, it is certainly legitimate to investigate the ways in which Avianus' fables may have been influenced by the broader tradition of epigram and *carmina minora*. On a formal level, Avianus with his elegiac fables offers something comparable to monothematic collections of poems such as Ausonius' *Parentalia*, *Professores*, *Bissula*, *Caesares*, and so on.[20] In addition, playing with generic boundaries is a feature that epigram and verse fables seem to share. Generic markers and metapoetic symbols are especially dense at the beginning of Avianus' collection. Already the first fable plays with the literary conventions of elegy and epigram, as the poem varies, or even parodies, various motifs of Latin love elegy:[21] the wolf, having heard the countrywoman's words, remains *peruigil ante fores* ("vigilant in front of the door"), resembling the *exclusus amator* of Latin love elegy, transformed into an *exclusus praedator* in the fable. The *lassata membra* ("weary body") of the baby boy who has become tired and falls asleep replace the erotic weariness of the elegiac lovers after the act of love-making: *lassi requieuimus ambo* ("exhausted we both lay down to rest", Ov. *Am*. 1.5.25).

It seems that, especially in the fables at the beginning of the book, the motif of literary smallness, brevity, and humbleness or low status is lurking behind allegorical stories with animals as protagonists. In the second poem we encounter a turtle who wants to fly with the help of an eagle but dies in the attempt.[22] Besides the moral message, the turtle may also serve as a symbol or warning against the aspirations of a small genre like the fable to aim too high and claim the fame and reputation of epic or tragic poetry. Some of the vocabulary used by Avianus in this

Martial's formal art differs particularly in that the vast majority of his epigrams are centred on a thoughtful or witty punch line"); Citroni 2019, 35; cf. Puelma 1996 and 1997 on the use of the term ἐπίγραμμα/*epigramma* in Greek and Latin literature; Neger 2012; Mindt 2013.

18 See Neger 2012, 55.

19 See Citroni 2003 and 2004.

20 For Ausonius, see Pastorino 1971; Green 1991; Dräger 2011–2015.

21 See Poms' contribution in this volume.

22 Cf. Babr. 115; Ellis 1887, *ad loc.*; Küppers 1977, 111–118.

fable could also be understood as literary critical terms: *sublimis* ("lofty", 11) evokes *sublimitas* ("loftiness"),[23] *ingemuit* ("she moaned", 12) recalls the idea of elegy as a lamentation (ἔ ἔ λέγειν),[24] *labor* ("toil", 14) echoes the famous Callimachean or Horatian ideal of *labor et lima*.[25] The phrase *tardo* […] *gressu* ("slow pace", 5) referring to the turtle's slow movements could also recall the elegiac metre, which is personified in Ovid's *Am.* 3.1.8 and depicted as a limping woman (*et, puto, pes illi longior alter erat* ["and, I think, one of her feet was longer"]),[26] or the choliambic metre (σκάζων) used by Babrius, Avianus' most important model. Moreover, the verb *tumescit* ("swells", 15) in the epimythium of a poem located at the beginning of the collection might not only be read literally as a warning not to aspire to what is beyond one's reach, but also not to allow the work to grow too big in size. Finally, one may wonder if we are supposed to draw a connection between the *avis* as the fable's protagonist (*pennatis avibus*, 2) and the name of the fable author.

The motif of walking also appears in poem 3 about two crabs, where the mother crab tries to correct or straighten her offspring's way of walking, although she is not able to demonstrate it correctly herself:

> "ne tibi transuerso placeant haec deuia, nate, 5
> rursus in obliquos neu uelis ire pedes,
> sed nisu contenta ferens uestigia recto
> innocuos proso tramite siste gradus."[27]
> (Avian. 3.5–8)

> "Don't go zigzag and choose these crooked ways, my child, and don't seek to move backwards and slantwise on your feet. Step out vigorously with straightforward effort and plant your footsteps safely in the onward path."
>
> (Transl. Duff/Duff)

The mother crab who reproaches her child for its walking style not only serves as a funny example of someone who, although incompetent herself, criticizes the faults of others, but may also be read as an allegory for a critic who is dissatisfied

23 Cf. the work *De sublimitate* / Περὶ ὕψους of Ps.-Longinus; for the *sublimitas* of epic poetry, cf. Quint. *Inst.* 1.8.5.

24 For this popular etymology, see Holzberg 2006, 5.

25 Hor. *Ars P.* 291: *limae labor*.

26 Cf. Stat. *Silv.* 1.2.7–10; the idea that elegiac verses create some sort of delay, whereas hexameters are swifter, is also expressed in the *Carmen de providentia Dei* written by a Pseudo-Prosper around 416/417 CE, thus close in time to Avianus' fables: *ac ne sermo moram patiatur ab impare uersu | heroi numeris porrige pentametrum* ("but lest my speech be delayed by unequal verse, stretch the pentameter to the heroic metre", 95–96); see Cutino 2011.

27 The Latin text of Avianus follows the edition of Guaglianone 1958.

with the metrical rhythm: instead of the elegiac distich with its uneven lines, she would prefer something more straightforward such as prose (cf. *proso* […] *tramite*, 8);[28] however, the critic is not able to produce anything better than the poet. One might compare a short poem by Claudian on a critic with gout:[29]

> Quae tibi cum pedibus ratio? quid carmina culpas?
> scandere qui nescis, uersiculos laceras?
> "claudicat hic uersus; haec" inquit "syllaba nutat";
> atque nihil prorsus stare putas podager.
> (Claud. *carm. min.* 13 [= 79])

> What's your problem with feet? Why do you condemn my poems? Are you who can't get up really abusing my little verses? "This verse limps" you snap, "this syllable falters." And so you think that nothing stands up straight, you gout-ridden man.
>
> (Transl. Ferriss)[30]

The wit of the poem is based on the double meaning of *pes* as the foot both in a literal sense and as the foot of the metre. Claudian in his scoptic epigram is mocking an anonymous opponent with gout, i.e. someone unable to walk, for criticizing his (Claudian's) verses, among them the present poem in elegiacs. It almost seems as if Avianus has turned this satiric epigram into a fable with animal protagonists.[31] Neither Claudian's *podager* nor the mother crab in Avianus' poem is capable of doing a better job than the target of their criticism. Thus, when the small crab characterizes its mother as a *censor* who marks shortcomings (*notes*, 12), though she is not flawless herself (*uitiosa*, 12), one could compare Martial's and Phaedrus' attempts to defend themselves against literary censorship (*innocuos censura potest permittere lusus* ["censorship can allow harmless trifles"], Mart. 1.4.7); in this context, both poets often address the figure of Cato as the personification of the stern critic of light poetry (Phaed. 5.7 Z. [= 4.7 G.]; Mart. 1 *praef.*).

28 One might also think of Horace's *musa pedestris*, i.e. the genre of satire (Hor. *Sat.* 2.6.17).

29 For this poem and Catullus 71, see Ferriss 2009; for further allusions to Claudian in Avianus' fables, see Küppers 1977, 60–63.

30 Ferriss 2009, 377.

31 Avianus' fable is, of course, based on Babrius 109, which consists of only four lines, and so has an epigrammatic character too (see Spielhofer's contribution); however, it seems that Avianus' poem has been "filtered" through Claudian's epigram and enriched by its poetological message.

4 Travellers and physicians

It seems that Avianus' fables, at least at the beginning of the collection, conceal poetological motifs and literary critical discourses behind fictional stories. The motif of walking is continued in fable 4 where we encounter a *uiator*, a figure also characteristic of epigrammatic poetry, usually in the role of the reader who passes by and is addressed by the speaker of the poem.[32] During a competition between Boreas (the north wind) and Phoebus (the sun), a randomly chosen *uiator* is to be made to take off his coat due to the natural forces unleashed by the two opponents: *pallia nudato decutienda uiro* ("to make the man take off his coat and disrobe", 6). Whereas Boreas does not manage to accomplish this aim by sending wind and rain, Phoebus wins the competition by increasing the heat, forcing the wanderer to take off his *pallium* and making him sit down and rest: *donec lassa olens requiescere membra uiator | deposita fessus ueste sederet humi* ("until the traveller wanted to rest his exhausted body, took off his coat, and sat down on the ground", 13–14). In my opinion, there are some metapoetic messages connected with the traveller's character: his coat, the *pallium*, reminds one of ancient comedy, the *fabula palliata*, whereas nudity (*nudato* […] *uiro*) could be connected with the mime, a type of comic drama belonging to a lower literary level; mime actors were usually barefoot, without masks, and female actresses would perform something like a striptease on stage.[33] Taking off the *pallium* and showing oneself naked thus might also resemble a movement downwards in the hierarchy of comic genres. Mime is a theatrical genre to which Martial too repeatedly compares the character of his epigrams.[34]

If we read Avianus' elegiac verse fables as poems similar to ancient epigrams, the figure of the resting *uiator* could also have other metapoetic implications, serving as the counterpart of the reader who, after only four fables, is already exhausted and wants to rest. Compare, for instance, Martial 2.6 where the lazy reader — likewise near the beginning of the book — is addressed and compared to a traveller (*uiator*) who needs to rest already after a short distance:[35]

32 See Höschele 2007.

33 Cf. Diom. III 490 Keil; Val. Max. 2.10.8; for ancient mime, see Panayotakis 2010, 1–32.

34 See Gaffney 1976; Neger 2012, 232–235.

35 For this epigram, see Williams 2004, *ad loc.*; Höschele 2010, 44–46; a lazy reader also appears in Mart. 5.80 and Phaed. 3 *prol.* 4–5 Z. [= G.]; see Neger 2022, 155.

I nunc, edere me iube libellos.
lectis uix tibi paginis duabus
spectas eschatocollion, Seuere,
et longas trahis oscitationes.
[…]
lassus tam cito deficis uiator,
et cum currere debeas Bouillas,
interiungere quaeris ad Camenas?
(Mart. 2.6)

Go ahead, tell me to publish my little books! You have hardly read a couple of pages, Severus, and you are looking at the final sheet and fetching lengthy yawns. […] Does the traveller flag so quickly? When you ought to drive to Bovillae, do you want to change horses at the Camenae?

(Transl. Shackleton Bailey)

Avianus' fourth fable primarily teaches the moral message that "no one can win after threats have already been sent in advance" (*nullum praemissis uincere posse minis*, 16); on a second level, however, this tale could imply that Avianus' readers have already got tired at this stage, similar to the Severus whom Martial makes fun of by comparing him to a weary traveller.

The tradition of the satirical epigram, especially about various professions such as doctors, seems to have inspired Avianus 6, about a charlatan frog who claims he can heal the other animals and extend their lives.[36]

Edita gurgitibus limoque immersa profundo
et luteis tantum semper amica uadis,
ad superos colles herbosaque prata recurrens
mulcebat miseras turgida rana feras,
callida quod posset grauibus succurrere morbis
et uitam ingenio continuare suo;
nec se Paeonio iactat cessisse magistro,
quamuis perpetuos curet in orbe deos.
tunc uulpes pecudum ridens astuta quietem,
uerborum uacuam prodidit esse fidem:
"haec dabit aegrotis" inquit "medicamina membris,
pallida caeruleus cui notat ora color?"
(Avian. 6)

Sprung from pools, immersed in depths of mud, the constant friend of naught but miry shallows, a distended frog, revisiting the hills above and the grassy meadows, sought to comfort the afflicted beasts with the assurance that her leech-craft could relieve their sore diseases

36 For doctors as targets of satirical epigrams, see Ehrhardt 1974; Neger/Holzberg 2020.

and her genius could prolong their lives. Her boast was that she had never been surpassed by the Paeonian master, though he attended the everlasting gods in turn. Then a cunning vixen, laughing at the acquiescence of the cattle, disclosed the futility of giving credence to words: "Is physic," she asked, "going to be prescribed for diseased limbs by this frog, whose pale face is sicklied over with a livid hue?"

(Transl. Duff/Duff)

The fable consists of three parts of equal length: the first four lines introduce the frog (1–4), the next four lines (5–8) contain its speech in *oratio obliqua*, whereas in the last four lines (9–12) the clever fox appears who exposes the frog as a charlatan. The last distich of the poem concludes the narrative pointedly with the fox's direct speech deriding the frog's pale face. Avianus' fable is modelled on the shorter Greek version by Babrius:[37]

Ὁ τελμάτων ἔνοικος ὁ σκιῇ χαίρων,
ὁ ζῶν ὀρυκτοῖς βάτραχος παρ᾽ εὐρίποις,
εἰς γῆς παρελθὼν ἔλεγε πᾶσι τοῖς ζῴοις·
"ἰατρός εἰμι φαρμάκων ἐπιστήμων,
οἷων ταχ᾽ οὐδεὶς οἶδεν, οὐδ᾽ ὁ Παιήων, 5
ὃς Ὄλυμπον οἰκεῖ καὶ θεοὺς ἰατρεύει."
"καὶ πῶς" ἀλώπηξ εἶπεν "ἄλλον ἰήσῃ,
ὃς σαυτὸν οὕτω χλωρὸν ὄντα μὴ σῴζεις;"
(Babr. 120)

That denizen of the swamps who likes the shade, the frog, who lives beside the ditches, once came forth on dry land and bragged to all the creatures: "I'm a physician, skilled in the use of drugs such as no one, doubtless, knows, not even Paean who lives on Olympus, physician to the gods." "And how," said a fox, "can you cure someone else, when you can't save yourself from being so deathly pale?"

(Transl. Perry)

Whereas Avianus splits the narrative into three equal sections of four lines each, Babrius[38] introduces the frog in three lines (1–3), uses another three lines for the frog's speech, here in *oratio recta* (4–6), and immediately adds two lines of direct speech by the fox, wittily exposing the frog as a quack-doctor. Avianus adds four lines to the Greek version and reduces the narrative speed of Babrius' version by rendering the frog's words in indirect speech and inserting two lines before the direct speech of the fox. Both in Babrius' and in Avianus' version the frog compares himself to the "Paeonian master", i.e. the mythological doctor Paean.[39] Only

37 Ellis 1887, 61; Küppers 1977, 74–75.

38 For Babrius' version, see Mann 2015, 232.

39 Παιήων in Homer's *Iliad* (5.401–402; 5.899–904).

in Avianus' poem, however, does the frog boast of being able to prolong the lives of his patients (*et uitam ingenio continuare suo*, 6). Ellis cites the parallel of Ausonius' *Parentalia* 1.13–14,[40] but without discussing possible implications; I wonder if Avianus' frog deliberately imitates the first poem of that collection (written between 380 and 390 CE), an epitaph for Ausonius' father Julius Ausonius, a doctor. On his father's medical skills Ausonius writes as follows:[41]

> praeditus **et uitas** hominum *ratione medendi*
> **porrigere** et fatis amplificare moras.
> (Auson. *Parent*. 1.13–14)

> To him was given the power to prolong men's lives by means of medicine, and make the Fates wait their full time.
> (Transl. Evelyn-White)

In Ausonius' poem, the enjambment and hyperbaton of object (*uitas*) and verb (*porrigere*) imitate the idea of the physician being able to prolong his patients' lives. It would be a witty variation of this Late Antique funeral epigram if the frog's self-praise in Avianus' poem (*callida quod posset grauibus succurrere morbis | et uitam ingenio continuare suo*, 5–6)[42] were read as a deliberate imitation of Ausonius' poem: instead of *uitas porrigere*, Avianus uses the synonym *uitam continuare*, at the same time shortening the hyperbaton of Ausonius' poem,[43] and replaces *ratione medendi* through *ingenio suo*. Avianus' fable on the charlatan frog thus combines two different epigrammatic subtypes: the funeral epigram on a doctor at the beginning of Ausonius' *Parentalia*,[44] and the tradition of satirical epigrams on incompetent physicians, a topic especially popular in the Imperial age.[45] Both book 11

40 Ellis 1887, 62.

41 See Lolli 1997, 64–65.

42 The phrase *succurrere morbis* (5) seems to have been borrowed from Quintus Serenus' *Liber medicinalis* where, among other things, remedies for eye complaints are discussed (206): *haec etiam annosis poterunt succurrere morbis*.

43 Perhaps a humorous hint that the frog is not able to prolong the life of his patients to the same extent as Ausonius' father, who was a real doctor. This idea is also suggested by metrical peculiarities: the ending of the accusative *uitam* in line 6 has to be elided before *ingenio* which starts with a vowel; thus, in the pentameter the life is actually shortened by losing a syllable.

44 One could also compare the epigrams praising Hippocrates in the *Greek Anthology*: in *Anth. Pal.* 9.53 it is said that Hippocrates had saved the lives of λαῶν ἔθνεα ("whole peoples") and that νεκύων ἦν σπάνις εἰν Ἀίδῃ ("there was a scarcity of dead in Hades"; transl. Paton); for further epigrams praising the skills of doctors, cf. *Anth. Gr*. 16.267–274.

45 For other fables on medical topics, see Phaed. 1.14 Z. [= G.] (with Gärtner 2015, *ad loc.*) and Babr. 121 (again an "epigrammatic" fable of only four lines).

of the *Greek Anthology* and Martial's epigrams contain several examples mocking incompetent doctors and charlatans.[46] Ausonius, too, continues this tradition in an epigram which, interestingly, was inspired by one of Babrius' fables:[47]

Languentem Gaium moriturum dixerat olim
  Eunomus. euasit fati ope, non medici.
paulo post ipsum uidet, aut uidisse putauit,
  pallentem et multa mortis in effigie.
"Quis tu?" "Gaius," ait. "Viuisne?" hic abnuit. "Et quid
  nunc agis hic?" "Missu Ditis", ait, "uenio,
ut, quia notitiam rerumque hominumque tenerem,
  accirem medicos." Eunomus obriguit.
tum Gaius: "Metuas nihil, Eunome. dixi ego et omnes,
  nullum, qui saperet, dicere te medicum."
    (Auson. *Epigr*. 79 Kay [= 4 Evelyn-White])

Eunomus had once pronounced that Gaius would die of his sickness. He slipped away, Fate — not the doctor — aiding. A little afterwards the doctor saw, or thought he saw, the man, pale, and in death's very likeness. "Who art thou?" he asked. "Gaius," he answered. "Art thou alive?" He answered "No." "And what now dost thou here?" "I come," said he, "at the behest of Dis, because I still retained knowledge of the world and men, to summon to him doctors." Eunomus grew stiff with fright. Then Gaius: "Fear nothing, Eunomus: I said, as all men say, that no man who is wise calls you a doctor."

(Transl. Evelyn-White)

Ausonius' epigram in 10 elegiac lines condenses a fable of Babrius (75) that narrates the same story in 20 choliambics.[48] The narrative pace in Ausonius' epigram is much faster and the last distich pointedly concludes the epigram with the words uttered by Gaius the patient. The wit of the epigram is based, among other things, on the fact that the doctor Eunomus is not able to distinguish a living person from a dead one and has to ask Gaius if he is alive (*Viuisne?*, 5).

46 See Ehrhardt 1974; Neger/Holzberg 2020; Fögen 2024.

47 See Kay 2001, 228–229.

48 See Green 1991, *ad loc.*; Neger/Holzberg 2020, 84–86; Ellis 1887, xxxv, is less than enthusiastic about Ausonius' adaptation of Babrius 75: "With the exception of brevity [...] Ausonius' version has no merit at all. It fails to preserve any part of the charm of the original."

5 Fortune's fickleness and clever solutions

Both Ausonius and Avianus use Babrius' fables as models for satirical poems on charlatans, both human and animal. The interaction of Avianus' fables with epigrammatic versions on similar topics can also be observed in poem 12. In this fable, a farmer finds treasure in his field;[49] after his life has changed for the better due to this discovery, he starts worshipping the goddess Tellus but forgets to pay tribute to Fortuna too. The fable concludes with a speech by Fortuna, who predicts that once the farmer has lost his treasure again, it will be she, Fortuna, whom he will invoke first. The core content of the fable is based on a prose version attributed to Aesop (Aesop. 61 P. [= Hsr.; 84 Ch.]); the conclusion of Avianus' fable, however, with the idea that the treasure will be lost again (*surrepto* […] *auro*, 11),[50] resembles similar reflections in contemporary epigram, such as in Ausonius (*Epigr*. 23 Kay) and a poem from the *Epigrammata Bobiensia* (28); in these poems, the topic of Fortuna's fickleness is showcased with a story about a man who is about to commit suicide but after finding a treasure discards his original plan; instead, the man who had originally hidden the treasure and can no longer find it decides to kill himself. Both epigrams are probably inspired by two Greek models in the *Greek Anthology* (*Anth. Pal.* 9.44–45). As Otto Weinreich suggested, these epigrams could be regarded as condensed versions of a cautionary fable[51] and thus nicely illustrate how the two genres interact.

The fable of the crow and the pitcher which Avianus narrates in poem 27 also has a variation in epigrammatic poetry. Avianus' version reads as follows:

Ingentem sitiens cornix adspexerat urnam,
  quae minimam fundo continuisset aquam.
hanc enisa diu planis effundere campis,
  scilicet ut nimiam pelleret inde sitim,
postquam nulla uiam uirtus dedit, admouet omnes
  indignata noua calliditate dolos.
nam breuis immersis accrescens sponte lapillis
  potandi facilem praebuit unda uiam.
uiribus haec docuit quam sit prudentia maior,
  qua coeptum uolucri explicuisset opus.
(Avian. 27)

49 The fable varies Aesop. 61 P. [= Hsr.; 84 Ch.], see Ellis 1887, 71–73.

50 For antithesis as one of Avianus' preferred stylistic devices, see Küppers 1977, 82.

51 Weinreich 1951; Kay 2001, 126.

> A thirsty crow had spied a huge jar containing a very little water at the bottom. Long did the crow strive to spill this water on the level plain, to banish, of course, thereby her excessive thirst; but, when no valiant effort could provide a way, she lost her temper and with fresh cunning applied all her crafty devices. She threw pebbles in, and the low level of water rose naturally and so supplied an easy way of drinking. This fable has proved the superiority of foresight over stout efforts, as by it the crow accomplished the task she had undertaken.
>
> (Transl. Duff/Duff)

The story also survives in the collection of Pseudo-Dositheus (8 Hsr.),[52] but our earliest source is in the *Greek Anthology* in a poem by Bianor (1st century CE) also written in elegiac distichs:[53]

> Καρφαλέος δίψει Φοίβου λάτρις εὖτε γυναικὸς
> εἶδεν ὑπὲρ τύμβου κρωσσίον ὀμβροδόκον,
> κλάγξεν ὑπὲρ χείλους, ἀλλ᾽ οὐ γένυς ἥπτετο βυσσοῦ.
> Φοῖβε, σὺ δ᾽ εἰς τέχνην ὄρνιν ἐκαιρομάνεις·
> χερμάδα δὲ †ψαλμῶν σφαῖρον πότον ἄρπαγι χείλει
> ἔφθανε μαιμάσσων λαοτίνακτον ὕδωρ.
>
> (*Anth. Pal.* 9.272)

> When a crow, the minister of Phoebus, parched with thirst, saw on a woman's tomb a pitcher containing rain-water, it croaked over the mouth but could not reach the bottom with its beak. But, thou, Phoebus, didst inspire the bird with opportune artfulness, and, by dropping pebbles in, it reached in its eagerness with its greedy lips the water set in motion by the stones.
>
> (Transl. Paton)

Like Avianus, Bianor too focuses on a crow; the Greek epideictic epigram tells the story in six lines, which can be divided into two parts: lines 1–3 narrate the problem — a thirsty crow sees a pitcher with water but is unable to reach the water with its beak —, while the second half (4–6) contains the solution that the bird finds with the help of Phoebus. In contrast to the Greek version, the crow in Avianus' fable can solve the problem by herself and does not need Phoebus' inspiration, similar to the version in Ps.-Dositheus (μεθόδῳ ἐπέτυχεν). Avianus also omits the detail that the crow saw the pitcher on a woman's tomb, mentioned in the Greek epigram, thus fading the spatial setting out of the narration. Apart from these details, the story in Avianus' poem (again longer than the Greek model) shows a similar division into two parts: the first four lines narrate the crow's problem, the next four (5–8) the solution. By adding another distich that serves as the epimythium (9–10), Avianus 'marks' his poem as belonging to the fable tradition.

52 See Ellis 1887, 100–101.

53 See Gow/Page 1968, II, 203, with reference to Plin. *HN* 10.125; Plut. *Mor*. 967a; Ael. *NA* 2.48.

6 Statues and tombstones

Finally, we may look at Avianus 23–24, two fables that also share elements typical of inscriptions or epigrams. Poem 23 is about a merchant who has the option of selling a statue of Bacchus either as a dedicatory object for a temple or as an item decorating a tomb:

Venditor insignem referens de marmore Bacchum
  expositum pretio fecerat esse deum.
nobilis hunc quidam funesta in sede sepulcri
  mercari cupiens compositurus erat;
alter adoratis ut ferret numina templis,
  redderet et sacro debita vota loco.
"nunc", ait, "ambiguum facies de mercibus omen,
  cum spes in pretium munera dispar agit,
et me defunctis seu malis tradere diuis,
  siue decus busti, seu uelis esse deum.
subdita namque tibi est magni reuerentia fani,
  atque eadem retines funera nostra manu".
conuenit hoc illis, quibus est permissa potestas,
  an praestare magis seu nocuisse uelint.
(Avian. 23)

A trading craftsman who had fashioned a fine Bacchus in marble had put up the god for sale. A nobleman who wanted to buy it intended to place it in the funereal resting-place containing his tomb. Another wished to present the god in the temple where he worshipped and in the hallowed precincts to fulfil a vow that was owing. "Now," said the statue, "you will make a puzzling forecast about your wares, when two far different prospects set a price upon your work, and you will be in doubt whether you prefer to consign me to the dead or to the gods, whether you wish me to adorn a tomb or to be a deity. To your arbitration is submitted the reverence of a great sanctuary;[54] in your hand also you hold my death-warrant." This is applicable to those who have it in their power to do a good or a bad turn as they wish.
(Transl. Duff/Duff, slightly modified)

The narration of the *uenditor* and his Bacchus statue consists of two halves: lines 1–6 introduce the merchant and his two customers — for each protagonist Avianus uses one distich (*uenditor* [...] *nobilis* [...] *alter*) —, then in lines 7–12 Bacchus addresses the salesman in direct speech. Finally, an epimythium in one distich (13–14) concludes the fable with a moralizing comment. Avianus' poem is based on a shorter version by Babrius comprising ten lines, where a statue of Hermes,

54 I follow Baehrens' conjecture *fani*; cf. Holzberg 2022, 210.

rather than Bacchus, is offered for sale (30).[55] The structure of Babrius' version is less schematic: lines 1–4 contain an exposition (a sculptor and his two customers), lines 5–7a refer to the evening when the sculptor had not yet sold his statue, and finally in lines 7b–10 Hermes appears to the sculptor in a dream and addresses him in direct speech (9–10). The dream-scene is completely absent from Avianus' version, and instead the statue of Bacchus appears as a 'speaking object', a motif that is also typical of epigrammatic poetry.[56] Speaking images of Dionysus, for example, appear in book 16 of the *Greek Anthology* (16.183–184)[57] and in *Anth. Pal.* 9.748 and poem 20 of the *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, in which Dionysus/Bacchus is depicted on a cameo of amethyst.[58]

The motif of the tomb as one of the possible locations for the statue of Bacchus connects fable 23 with poem 24, where a hunter and a lion discuss the iconography of a tombstone:

Certamen longa protractum lite gerebant
uenator quondam nobilis atque leo.
hi cum perpetuum cuperent in iurgia finem,
edita continuo forte sepulcra uident.
illic docta manus flectentem colla leonem
fecerat in gremio procubuisse uiri.
scilicet affirmans pictura teste superbum
se fieri: "exstinctam nam docet esse feram".
ille graues oculos ad inania signa retorquens
infremit et rabido pectore uerba dedit:
"irrita te generis subiit fiducia uestri,
artificis testem si cupis esse manum.
quod si nostra nouum caperet sollertia sensum,
sculperet ut docili pollice saxa leo,
tunc hominem adspiceres oppressum murmure magno,
conderet ut rabidis ultima fata genis."
(Avian. 24)

A huntsman of renown and a lion were once engaged in a contest protracted by long dispute. As they desired to put an end once for all to their quarrel, they saw on the instant, it so

55 Ellis 1887, 92–93; the fable of Avianus and its relation to Babrius' version is discussed by Küppers 1977, 118–123.

56 See Wachter 2010; Schrader 2017; the tradition of the dedicatory epigram may have influenced Avianus' poem 39, in which an old soldier dedicates all his weapons to the fire; his war-trumpet protests against this act in direct speech (9–12); see Ellis 1887, 123–124.

57 See Gow/Page 1968, II, 44.

58 The humour is here based on the antithesis between the god of wine and ἀ-μεθύω; see Nocchi 2016, *ad loc.*; for the role of Dionysus in funeral cult, see Küppers 1977, 120–123.

> happened, a lofty tombstone. Thereon a cunning hand had represented a lion bowing its neck in submission and prostrate in a man's embrace. The hunter asserted that the evidence of that work of art showed his superiority: "Because it shows the death of the beast." The lion, turning downcast eyes to the unreal figures, growled and in fierceness of heart broke into speech: "Vain is the confidence in your human birth that has entered into you, if you desire to have for a witness an artist's hand. If our ingenuity admitted of an extra sense, allowing a lion to engrave stones with skilful touch, then you would behold how the man, overwhelmed by a loud roar, closed his final destiny in ravening jaws."
>
> (Transl. Duff/Duff)

The fable starts with an exposition of two lines, introducing the antagonists (*uenator* [...] *leo*, 2), and continues with another distich (3–4), in which the two opponents catch sight of a tomb (*sepulcra*, 4). Lines 5–6 contain a short ekphrasis of the tombstone's iconography, while in lines 7–8 we read the hunter's interpretation of this image. The second half of the poem (9–16) is dedicated to the lion's reaction, containing six lines of direct speech (11–16).[59] This time there is no parallel in Babrius' collection, but only a prose paraphrase and other versions attributed to Aesop that vary the same story (Paraphr. *Ba* 148 Kn.; *Bb* 91; Aesop. 284 P.; [= 264 Hsr.; 59 Ch.]; Ps.-Dosith. 15 Hsr.). As Ursula Gärtner (2023) has pointed out, the description of the tomb and its decoration in lines 5–6 is much more detailed in Avianus' poem than in the Greek prose versions: Avianus offers a mini-ekphrasis enriched through allusions to Vergil and other poets.[60] It is probably not a coincidence that Avianus juxtaposes this fable with the previous, likewise epigrammatic fable on the speaking statue of Bacchus. A scenario like the one depicted in Avianus' fable — a lion killed by a hunter — is also the topic of one of Ausonius' epigrams:

> Quod leo tam tenui patitur sub harundine letum,
> non uires ferri, sed ferientis agunt.
>
> (Auson. *Epigr*. 6 Kay)

> In that a lion suffers death from such a slender arrow, it is not the strength of the metal that does it, but of the archer.
>
> (Transl. Evelyn-White)

According to a superscription to this ekphrastic poem, the emperor Gratian is the hunter who killed the lion with a single arrow.[61] Another motif typical of

59 Gärtner 2023, 346, divides the poem into exposition (1–6), action (7–8), and reaction (9–16).

60 Cf. Verg. *Aen*. 11.622 and 8.630–631; Ov. *Fast.* 3.832; Gärtner 2023, 348; one could also add Tib. 1.8.12: *artificis docta subsecuisse manu*.

61 See Kay 2001, *ad loc*.

epigrammatic poetry is the contemplation and interpretation of a tomb's iconography by visitors to it: book 7 of the *Greek Anthology* contains a series of poems that vary this motif (7.422–429).[62] We also encounter epigrams with lions depicted on tombs, such as *Anth. Pal.* 7.243 and 7.344a+b on the tomb of Leonidas, or 7.426 by Antipater of Sidon on the tomb of a certain Teleutias:[63]

α. "Εἰπέ, λέων, φθιμένοιο τίνος τάφον ἀμφιβέβηκας,
βουφάγε; τίς τᾶς σᾶς ἄξιος ἦν ἀρετᾶς;"
β. "Υἱὸς Θευδώροιο Τελευτίας, ὃς μέγα πάντων
φέρτερος ἦν, θηρῶν ὅσσον ἐγὼ κέκριμαι.
οὐχὶ μάταν ἔστακα, φέρω δέ τι σύμβολον ἀλκᾶς
ἀνέρος· ἦν γὰρ δὴ δυσμενέεσσι λέων."
(*Anth. Pal.* 7.426)

A. "Tell, lion, thou slayer of kine, on whose tomb thou standest there and who was worthy of thy valour." B. "Teleutias, the son of Theodorus, who was far the most valiant of men, as I am judged to be of beasts. Not in vain stand I here, but I emblem the prowess of the man, for he was indeed a lion to his enemies."

(Transl. Paton)

Similar to Avianus' fable, here too a dialogue between a lion and a human observer is staged, although in this case, in line with the epigrammatic fiction that objects have the ability to speak, it is the image of the lion on the tombstone that enters into a conversation with the human; in Avianus' poem, on the other hand, both dialogue partners play the role of the viewer of an image for which they offer differing interpretations.

7 Conclusion

As this survey has shown, Avianus' fables do not contain many direct allusions to epigrammatic poetry, and few of his poems have pointed endings similar to the epigrams of Martial; on the other hand, not all ancient Greek and Latin epigrams are distinguished by pointed endings, and even in Martial's epigram books only

62 See Gutzwiller 1998, 267–276; Neger 2019, 184–185; in addition to the epigrammatic tradition, Avianus' poem seems to imitate the scene in Vergil's *Aeneid* in which Aeneas contemplates the images on Juno's temple in Carthage (*Aen.* 1.464: *animum pictura pascit inani*; cf. Avian. 24.9: *inania signa*); see Gärtner 2023, 349–350.

63 See Gow/Page 1965, 59–60; the epigram perhaps praises a Teleutias from Cos also mentioned in a Coan inscription of the 2nd century BCE.

some of the poems exhibit this feature, which "has been considered emblematic not only of his output but of the entire literary genre".[64] In addition to formal elements such as length and metre, Avianus' fables share similarities with epigrammatic poetry in the use of certain topics, figures, metapoetic allusions, and the way poems interact with other literary genres, absorbing them and adapting them to the aims of Avianus' literary project. Avianus seems to be well aware of the epigrammatic tradition and frequently uses epigrammatic motifs and techniques, perhaps in direct imitation of poets such as Martial, Claudian, and Ausonius. Avianus' poems can therefore be read not only as an innovative contribution to the fable tradition but also as a kind of epideictic epigram with fables as its main topic.

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64 Citroni 2019, 35.

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