



# THE MYTH OF PAGANISM

Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity

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Robert Shorrock

B L O O M S B U R Y

## The Myth of Paganism

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CLASSICAL LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

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## Editor's Foreword

The aim of this series is to consider Greek and Roman literature primarily in relation to genre and theme. Its authors hope to break new ground in doing so but with no intention of dismissing current interpretation where this is sound; they will be more concerned to engage closely with text, subtext and context. The series therefore adopts a homologous approach in looking at classical writers, one of whose major achievements was the fashioning of distinct modes of thought and utterance in poetry and prose. This led them to create a number of literary genres evolving their own particular forms, conventions and rules – genres which live on today in contemporary culture.

Although studied within a literary tradition, these writers are also considered within their social and historical context, and the themes they explore are often both highly specific to that context and yet universal and everlasting. The ideas they conceive and formulate and the issues they debate find expression in a particular language, Latin or Greek, and belong to their particular era in the classical past. But they are also fully translatable into a form that is accessible as well as intelligible to those living in later centuries, in their own vernacular. Hence all quoted passages are rendered into clear, modern English.

These are books, then, which are equally for readers with or without knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages and with or without an acquaintance with the civilisation of the ancient world. They have plenty to offer the classical scholar, and are ideally suited to students reading for a degree in classical subjects. Yet they will interest too those studying European and contemporary literature, history and culture who wish to discover the roots and springs of our classical inheritance.

The series owes a special indebtedness and thanks to Pat Easterling, who from the start was a constant source of advice and encouragement. Others whose help has been invaluable are Robin Osborne who, if ever we were at a loss to think of an author for a particular topic, almost always came up with a suitable name or two and was never stinting of his time or opinion, and Tony Woodman, now at Virginia. The unfailing assistance of the late John W. Roberts, editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, is also gratefully acknowledged. Deborah Blake, Duckworth's indefatigable Editorial Director, has throughout offered full support, boundless enthusiasm and wise advice.

*Editor's Foreword*

Finally, I pay tribute to the inspirational genius which Michael Gunningham, *fons et origo* of the series and an editor of consummate skill and phenomenal energy, brought to the enterprise. His imprint is everywhere: *sine quo, non*.

David Taylor

## Preface

It has taken a long time for this project to see the light of day. I had high hopes of finishing this book before the birth of my first child. I now have three children and that first child is already seven years old. *The Myth of Paganism* has indeed been dragging on for so long that at times even I began to think that it was itself a myth. That I should have finished it at all is miraculous, but if anyone is to blame then Vedia Izzet must stand at the top of the list. To Deborah Blake I owe a great debt of gratitude for putting up with my regular prevarications and excuses with saintlike patience and never giving up on the book (and for her help with the cover). I would like to thank Michael Gunningham as the original commissioning editor for the series and the current series editor David Taylor for his helpful comments and support. A number of friends and colleagues have commented on various parts of the book, shared articles, ideas and bibliographies. I am particularly grateful to Gianfranco Agosti, Fotini Hadjitofti, Jason König, Konstantinos Spanoudakis and Mary Whitby, and to the participants of a stimulating conference on Later Greek Literature organised by Caterina Karvounis and Richard Hunter at the University of Cambridge back in 2006.

I would like to thank Eton College for the sabbatical leave that has at last given me the chance to put an end to *The Myth of Paganism* and to apologise in advance to my parents who think that the book they ordered on Amazon several years ago is going to be a 'good read'.

31 May 2010  
Cyprus

R.E.C.S.

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## Introduction: The Myth of Paganism

It may be admitted that the culture of the fifth century is not a fascinating study. The idolatry of mere literary form combined with the poverty of ideas, the enthusiastic worship of great models without a breath of the spirit which gave them their enduring charm, immense literary ambition without the power to create a single work of real artistic excellence – this is not a subject which promises much interest.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last 40 years or so our view of the critical landscape of late antiquity has been subject to a radical transformation. In the face of Edward Gibbon's long-enduring notion of 'decline and fall', the work of scholars such as Peter Brown (on the body and society), Averil Cameron (on the formation of Christian discourse) and Jas Elsner (on material culture), has begun to revolutionise our understanding of this most complex of periods. Late antiquity has now begun to emerge as an arena of dynamic, self-confident and highly sophisticated interaction. In the area of literary culture, however, notions of decline and decay are still flourishing. Though of course we have come a long way from 1905 and the words of Samuel Dill quoted above, it was still possible to read as recently as 1998 that '... we are dealing with an epoch in which ... people did not express themselves chiefly through literature, which is therefore not outstanding'.<sup>2</sup> As this book will argue, nothing could be further from the truth: the literature of the period had a central role in helping to define and communicate what it meant to live in a post-Classical world.

The principal focus of this book falls on the role of the poet within the emerging Christian world of the fourth to sixth centuries AD. By the fourth century Christianity had risen to a position of prominence as the officially sanctioned religion of the Roman Empire (both East and West). Though the triumph of Christianity is often considered in absolute terms, as marking a dramatic and definitive breach with the old world of Classical antiquity, the reality was, of course, much less clear cut. Classical culture was not like a garment that one could simply discard in favour of the latest fashion; it was embedded in the very warp and weft of the late antique world. The language one spoke, the books one read in a school, the art and architecture in private houses and public spaces – all around lay constant and inescapable reminders of a pre-Christian world. As such, instead of being able to perform a clean break with the past, the late antique present found itself caught up in an unavoidable dialogue with the Classical tradition. In

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order to understand what it meant to live in a Christian world it was an absolute necessity to come to terms with the Classical past. What were the place and status of Classical culture within an increasingly Christianised world? Was it useful or dangerous? Should it be rejected or embraced?

This book shines a spotlight onto the role played by the poets of late antiquity within this debate. Modern critical discussions have largely ignored the part played by these traditional communicators of cultural knowledge and authority in the making of late antiquity. Yet as this book will argue the literature of the period (both pagan and Christian), far from being an irrelevant sideshow, dramatises the central concerns of the age. The complex and often contradictory ways in which Classical culture is embraced and rejected, integrated and ignored, by the poets of the period, promises to transform our understanding not merely of late antique literary discourse, but of the wider social, political and religious discourses of the late antique world.

### **Periodisation**

The chronological framework of this book spans three centuries, from the fourth to the sixth centuries AD. This is a period of transition that takes us from the world of Classical antiquity to the beginnings of a very different medieval world. This period is most popularly referred to as 'late antiquity', though the title itself is a relatively modern construction. 'Late antiquity' owes perhaps its greatest debt to the work of the influential historian Peter Brown and has become, unquestionably, the dominant descriptive label – a global brand that is at once both instantly recognisable and highly respected.<sup>3</sup> The 'invention' of late antiquity has stimulated tremendous advances in our understanding of the culture and society of the fourth to sixth centuries (and beyond). Importantly, this has allowed notions of decline – frequently and lazily associated with this period from Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth century onwards – to be challenged and reversed.<sup>4</sup> Previously this period had been considered 'simply' as a transitional phase, an indistinct smudge on the time-line that takes us from the end of 'pagan' antiquity to the beginnings of a new Christian world. Now 'Late Antiquity' exists in its own right – as academically respectable and self-confident as, say, the Hellenistic Period or the Principate.

The conceptualisation of late antiquity has transformed our view of the fourth to sixth centuries AD. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this conceptualisation is not entirely problem-free. The creation of a clearly defined academic territory has encouraged a sense, in some quarters, of independence, separatism and isolation, as if the world of the third century AD were an entirely different thing from the world of the fourth. This sense of separation and boundedness has been exacerbated by recent scholarly activity into the 'Second Sophistic', a period that has drawn its borders in the fourth century, at the point where Christianity becomes the

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official religion of the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup> It is telling that the latest edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* has an entry for the ‘Second Sophistic’, but nothing for the period of ‘late antiquity’.<sup>6</sup>

Though ‘late antiquity’ has become the dominant descriptor, there exists alongside it a plurality of broadly overlapping periodisations, each with their own slightly different emphases and chronological frameworks. For example, the ‘Later Roman Empire’ emphasises continuity with the Classical world rather than rupture;<sup>7</sup> however, this phraseology itself carries a good deal of ideological baggage – it was a title used by influential historians from earlier generations, such as J.B. Bury and A.H.M. Jones and suggests a clear link to Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>8</sup> In a recent edited volume, *Signs of Life? Studies in Later Greek Poetry*, the choice of the comparative ‘later’ suggests a subtle corrective to the categorical assumptions implicit in ‘late antiquity’.<sup>9</sup> As I have said, some titles place emphasis on rupture rather than continuity. The phraseology ‘post-Classical’, although it describes a relationship with the past, nevertheless expresses a clear movement beyond it. Other titles link themselves not with what comes before, but with what comes after, thus we read of studies concerning the ‘Early medieval period’ and the ‘Byzantine world’.<sup>10</sup>

Every new attempt at periodisation opens up new ways of seeing the world, while inevitably bringing with it its own problems, limitations and blind spots. Since no single label could ever hope to be inclusive enough to describe a period in its totality, it is important therefore to remain conscious of the provisional and limited nature of any given periodisation. I have chosen to use ‘late antiquity’ in the subtitle of this book and in the pages that follow not because I think it is an inherently ‘better’ way of describing the period, but because it is as good as, and certainly no worse than, any other; at the same time, it has the advantage of being the most readily recognisable and accessible of all currently available terms.

### **The myth of paganism**

The period of late antiquity has traditionally been characterised as a struggle between two clearly defined groups: ‘pagans’ and ‘Christians’.<sup>11</sup> This simple binary opposition was adopted by Robin Lane Fox as the title for his popular and influential study of the period from the second century to the conversion of Constantine in the fourth, but the terms of reference readily follow through into the next centuries.<sup>12</sup> The division of the late antique world into discrete and clearly identifiable groups is largely uncontroversial and taken as a generally established ‘fact’. For example, Ramsey MacMullen has produced monographs on *Paganism in the Roman Empire* and *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Christopher Haas, although he nuances the categories

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that he describes, nevertheless divides late antique Alexandria into three distinct 'communities': Jewish, pagan and Christian.<sup>14</sup>

The traditional story that is told about these clearly defined groups of pagans and Christians is based on opposition and conflict.<sup>15</sup> Evidence for the nature of this power struggle can be adduced from any number of reported 'historical' confrontations between the two groups: for example, the destruction by Christians of the 'pagan' temple of Serapis in Alexandria in AD 391 and the death at the hands of a Christian mob of the 'pagan' philosopher Hypatia in AD 415. Late antique writers themselves clearly support and encourage belief in the sharp antithesis between pagans and Christians.<sup>16</sup>

The pagan/Christian dichotomy creates the impression that we are dealing with monolithic and exclusive categories, a world that can be viewed in black and white, but this is, of course, far from the case. In fact, for some time now, attempts have been made to move away from the clear-cut distinctions and assumptions between pagan and Christian, as part of a broader reappraisal of the landscape of late antiquity.<sup>17</sup> However much we may wish to differentiate Christian and non-Christian culture, increasing emphasis is now being placed on a dialogue between the two, with a suggestion that they are parts of the same whole, watered from the same cultural well-spring.

As Markus has written, 'There was a wide no-man's land between explicit pagan worship and uncompromising Christian rejection of all its trappings and associations. It left ample room for uncertainty.'<sup>18</sup> Beard, North and Price conclude their first volume on the religions of Rome with a discussion of the Lupercalia that was still being celebrated in the city of Rome at the end of the fifth century AD. As they describe it, the festival was celebrated 'by pagans and Christians' and the survival of this ancient ritual 'was not simply a question of "paganism" resisting Christianity'. They continue: 'There is, after all, no reason to assume that those who continued to watch the scantily clad young men race round the city thought of themselves as "non-Christian". The boundary between paganism and Christianity was much more fluid than that simple dichotomy would suggest and much more fluid than some Christian bishops would have liked to allow.'<sup>19</sup> Faced with this challenge to the traditional boundary between 'pagan' and Christian, the old certainties begin to break down.

A reappraisal and deconstruction of the pagan/Christian dichotomy in historical terms has also been witnessed within the field of late antique literary studies. Averil Cameron has led the way for a radical challenge to the traditional categorisation of pagan and Christian within literary culture with her hugely important work on the evolution of Christian discourse: 'Unfortunately, modern criticism still largely polarizes the issue by starting from the assumption of a great divide between Christian and pagan; this has the effect of obscuring the real issues by implying that everything in fourth-century literature is to be explained in terms of

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“conflict”. By contrast, as anthropologists and indeed theologians have realized in recent years, translating from one cultural system into another is not a straightforward process; it embraces many shades of relation, from outright conflict to near-total accommodation.<sup>20</sup> It is important, then, that we look beyond the rhetoric of the texts themselves. Cameron again: “The seemingly alternative rhetorics, the classical or pagan and the Christian, were more nearly one than their respective practitioners, interested in scoring off each other, would have us believe.”<sup>21</sup> A similar belief in the underlying similarity between ‘pagans’ and Christians informs my own approach to the poets of late antiquity. In what follows I want to consider the overlap and similarities between ‘pagan’ and Christian texts that often lie concealed behind the masks of difference.

Any discussion of ‘pagans’ and Christians inevitably runs the risk of floundering on the stumbling-block of terminology. As Gillian Clark has said, “The word “pagan” is widely, but reluctantly, used by historians: reluctantly because it was Christian disparagement of non-Christians, widely because it is difficult to find an alternative.”<sup>22</sup> Since ‘pagan’ poets occupy a central position in this book, the implications of the word need careful consideration. The use of the term ‘pagan’ is part of a complex process of the creation of Christian identity.<sup>23</sup> It marks an attempt by Christian writers to contain and control an otherwise heterodox other, seeking to reduce a vast range of responses to a simple antithesis with Christianity. The *pagani* – a term coined by the Christians of late antiquity to describe the unbelieving ‘other’ – were literally those who lived ‘in the countryside’. The implied contrast here is, of course, with those who lived ‘in the city’, where Christianity was so vigorously pursued. The description is not simply a matter of geography. Further contrasts lie close to the surface: Christians are imagined as residing at the heart of the late antique world, pagans on the edge; Christians are educated and forward-looking, pagans are unsophisticated and backward-looking. Above all else we get the impression that, in contrast to Christians, pagans are not active participants in the contemporary world but hangers on – anachronistic and misguided survivors from a previous age.

The idea that paganism endured in remote areas, far away from the powerful urban centres of Christianity is one that is still prevalent. In the words of Alan Cameron, ‘No one disputes that there were still a number of pagans left here and there in the Roman world down through the fifth and probably even sixth centuries, *especially in the countryside*’.<sup>24</sup> The story of these last survivors of a vanished world (as charted, for example, by Pierre Chuvin in *Chronique des Derniers Païens* and by Alan Cameron in his forthcoming *The Last Pagans of Rome*) readily captures the imagination.<sup>25</sup> There are analogues here with the stories of ‘lost’ tribes which are still said to inhabit areas of the world today, living in remote stone-age societies.<sup>26</sup> But, of course, the ‘lost’ tribes are never quite as lost as the epithet suggests.<sup>27</sup> Closer investigation always suggests interaction with the out-

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side world. Even if it might simply mean that the tribe moves deeper into a forest in order to escape detection, that interaction results in a change, an implicit, inevitable acknowledgement of the existence and constraints of the wider world. So it is with the 'last/lost' pagans. Whatever Christian rhetoric might tell us, the world of late antiquity was not theirs alone.

Assumptions based on the pagan/Christian dichotomy have had a profound effect on the way that critics up to the modern age have engaged with, and judged, the literary output of the period. On a basic level of punctuation, for example, the simple fact that we write 'pagan' with a lowercase 'p', while we write 'Christian' with a capital 'C' makes an implicit comment on the relative importance of the two groups. A good example of the way that late antique Christian construction of paganism continues to influence our view of the late antique world can be found in the presentation of an entry on the cento tradition in Latin literature in the third edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

In his entry on cento poetry, Simon Harrison first discusses 'pagan Virgilian centos'.<sup>28</sup> In this number he includes the 'wittily obscene' *cento nuptialis* of Ausonius who in his own words classified his cento as 'a slight work, frivolous and worthless'. It is straight from Ausonius' poetic self-assessment that Harrison turns to the Christian tradition: 'Christian cento-writers had a more serious evangelistic purpose in blending pagan learning with Christian doctrine'. The contrast drawn here between pagan frivolity and the high moral purpose of Christian writers could not be more striking: pagan literature provides entertainment, but is essentially regarded as devoid of meaning; Christian literature provides instruction and has obvious significance. Christian poetry is serious, innovative and dynamic; pagan poetry is lightweight, derivative and inert. By implication, Christian writers are imagined as having a clear stake in the construction of the new late antique world; pagan authors appear to have little contribution to make. It is especially telling that Ausonius' statement on the frivolity and worthlessness of his cento poem should be treated by Harrison as an unproblematic description of the 'pagan' cento genre (instead of as a self-deprecating and playful aesthetic assessment in the spirit of Catullus 1.1).

Through the continued use of the term 'pagan', as if it were a value-neutral descriptor, modern scholarship colludes with, and perpetuates, a Christian myth, suggesting above all that non-Christians had no real role to play in the making of late antiquity. Although I would not deny the existence within the period of late antiquity of individuals, groups and even whole communities (both in the countryside and in the city) who did not adhere to the Christian faith and who celebrated their connection with the pantheon of the Classical world by means of various deeply-rooted ritual and cultural activities, I am reluctant to accept the implications and simplifications that arise by labelling such people as 'pagans' because of the rigid contrast with 'Christians' that this term implies.

### **The myth of secularity**

The problems associated with the pagan/Christian dichotomy have led some critics to explore other ways of viewing the world of late antiquity. One of those ways of viewing is through the lens of 'secularity'. Secular poetry, like secular architecture, imagines an opposition not between different religions, but between different spheres of activity: religious and non-religious.<sup>29</sup> This realignment of the traditional pagan/Christian dichotomy has proved particularly helpful when dealing with poets who produce work within both the Classical and Christian traditions: whereas it was once imagined as unintelligible for a Christian writer to produce 'pagan' poetry (unless a religious conversion were speculated), it has now become much easier to understand how the same author could move between different modes of writing, rather than between different religious systems, in order to produce both religious and secular poetry. Nevertheless, one of the limitations of the religious/secular polarity is that it encourages us to conceptualise the existence of two parallel worlds with no obvious points of intersection.

An interesting recent monograph on the Virgilian cento tradition by Scott McGill illustrates the point well. The focus of McGill's work is the 'mythological and secular' cento tradition. These cento poems 'especially help us explore the enthusiasm for light and playful verse composition that abided in that era' and contribute to the scholarship on 'Virgil's reception', but otherwise are not considered as engaging with the wider world of Christian late antiquity.<sup>30</sup> Most significantly, no attempt is made to consider how these 'secular' poems intersect with the four surviving examples of Latin cento poetry with an explicitly Christian agenda. They are described simply as being 'very different texts from the Christian variety', though without any serious discussion of what that difference might be. It is an important part of my own argument that the Christian and the secular cannot be so neatly detached. Whether the poetry be categorised as 'secular' or Christian, the perspectives of all late antique writers (and readers) are inevitably influenced by the Christian world of which they are a part.

The difficulty of drawing clear lines between secular and non-secular in the world of late antiquity suggests parallels with the legacy of Atatürk's modernisation of Turkey in the 1920s. There, in a clear striving for modernity and wider acceptance on the world stage, emotive external signs of 'primitivism' were done away with: the fez was abolished and the Roman script was introduced in place of Arabic script. Most important of all, a clear division was established between the state and religion through the formation of an explicitly secular state. However, the recent rise of Islam as a dominant force within modern Turkey has shown just how difficult it can be to police the boundaries between religious and secular life.<sup>31</sup> This is a telling perspective from which to view attempts to divide late antique life into discrete categories of secular and religious. In this

area too there is a significant difference between the clarity of rhetoric and the fog of reality.

On account of my rejection of both ‘pagan’ and ‘secular’ as terms to describe poetry that does not engage explicitly with Christian themes, I am faced with a problem about appropriate terminology. In the following chapter I will suggest an alternative way of characterising the poetry of late antiquity that focuses on poetic *personae*. Poets who write in an explicitly Christian mode I will consider as ‘poets of Christ’; those poets who engage with Classical themes and seek to locate themselves within the Classical literary tradition I shall consider as ‘poets of the Muses’. The most important aspect of this categorisation is that no assumption is made about the actual religious belief of any poet. My interest is not in the historical reality of flesh-and-blood poets, but in the way that the texts we have in front of us communicate and debate ideas. It is my belief that ideas presented by the ‘poet of Christ’ are not inherently more important than those presented by the ‘poet of the Muses’. Moreover, it is quite possible for one poet to write in two different modes as both ‘poet of the Muses’ and ‘poet of Christ’, without making any assumptions about religious convictions.

### **Christianisation/becoming Christian: process and event**

Over the last two decades Classicists, influenced by new developments in Postcolonial theory, have become increasingly interested in the process of Romanisation – the implications and contingencies of ‘becoming Roman’.<sup>32</sup> Traditional models of Romanisation imagined a simple uni-directional exporting of Roman culture to non-Roman peoples. More recently work has focused on the extent to which the emerging provinces of the empire themselves contributed to the process of Romanisation. In other words, ‘becoming Roman’ was not simply something that was done to non-Romans; rather, they were direct participants in the process of becoming Roman. In this way, Romanisation profoundly affected not just the ‘conquered’, but the ‘conquerers’; it was a process in which everyone was implicated.

This model of Romanisation offers suggestive and helpful parallels with that of Christianisation.<sup>33</sup> Traditional accounts of the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity emphasise the rapidity with which ‘pagans’ were won over to Christianity. Christianisation was figured not so much as a process as an event. It was as if the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire changed everything at a single stroke. As a result, little attention was paid to the process of that conversion, or to the fact that – as with Romanisation – this was not a one-way street, but a process that affected both sides.

From one perspective, of course, the adoption of Christianity was indeed an event that did change the world overnight; it was a reality just like the reality of the capture of new territory in the name of Rome. A more

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arresting analogy, however crude it might seem, is the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 9/11 2001. One may not have been consciously affected by it, one may even never have heard about it (living somewhere ‘deep in the countryside’, perhaps?), but either way, like it or not, irrespective of one’s religious, political or cultural identity, this was an event that did change the world. It is hard to imagine anyone whose life has not been impinged upon and transformed to some degree, however small or apparently insignificant that might be: waiting for a plane, reading a paper, eating French fries. Even if our lives seem to go on just as they did before, the point is that they do not: we do things as ever, but ever so slightly differently. And, like the adoption of Christianity and the capture of a new province, the destruction of the Twin Towers was an event that did not emerge from nowhere, but merely brought to a head in a highly visible way issues that had been building for years, if not generations.

The importance of the event of Christianity cannot be underestimated. At the same time, it is only part of the process of becoming Christian. After the event comes the attempt to work out exactly what it means to live in a Christian world. From hindsight, the ‘triumph’ of Christianity suggests that there existed right from the start a clear sense of direction and meaning, but this was far from the case. Peter Brown eloquently describes how the Christian rhetoric of a speedy and decisive triumph masked a less certain reality: ‘the notion that a relatively short period (from the conversion of Constantine, in 312, to the death of Theodosius II, in 450) witnessed ‘the end of paganism’; the concomitant notion that the end of paganism was the natural consequence of a long-prepared ‘triumph of monotheism’ in the Roman world; and the tendency to present the fourth century AD as a period overshadowed by the conflict between Christianity and paganism – all this amounts to a ‘representation’ of the religious history of the age that was first constructed by a brilliant generation of Christian historians, polemicists and preachers in the opening decades of the fifth century. By means of this representation, Christian writers imposed (with seemingly irrevocable success, to judge by most modern accounts of the period) a firm narrative closure on what had been, in reality, in the well-chosen words of Pierre Chuvin, a ‘Wavering Century’.<sup>34</sup>

As Brown suggests, late antiquity was not an age of certainty and stability; it was a period of excitement (without doubt), but also of uncertainty and interrogation. What did it mean to be Christian? What was the relationship between the Classical past and the new Christian present?

### **The boundaries of late antiquity**

Studies of late antique literature have tended to focus on specific authors, on specific regions, genres or linguistic traditions.<sup>35</sup> It is unusual for the poets from the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire to be

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considered together.<sup>36</sup> There are good reasons for this, since there are important cultural, linguistic and regional variations in literary production that have to be taken into consideration. For the purpose of this book, however, I want to look beyond linguistic and regional differences in order to consider the possibility of underlying structural similarities, of broad trends that affect all the poets of late antiquity.<sup>37</sup>

My encouragement for doing this is grounded in the fact that, besides the mobility of poets across regions and across the linguistic and imperial divides,<sup>38</sup> there was a remarkable and enduring homogeneity between the educational structures of East and West.<sup>39</sup> Whether from the Western or Eastern part of the Empire, whether living in Carthage or Constantinople, whether writing in Latin or Greek, whether looking to Virgil or Homer, whether 'pagan' or Christian, the poets of late antiquity are all participants in a shared endeavour: the challenge of coming to terms with the Classical past in the Christian present.

In what follows I shall argue that it is possible to view the diverse poetic output of the period as a meaningful whole and that the poetry of late antiquity exhibits striking similarities that transcend regional and linguistic variations. Before proceeding any further, however, I think that it is important to draw attention to an ongoing debate within late antique literary studies concerning the knowledge of Latin and Greek. That Latin poets from the Western Empire were often well versed in Greek language and literature is not a subject of much debate.<sup>40</sup> More controversial is the question of how widespread was the knowledge of Latin literature in the Greek-speaking East. Egypt inevitably provides most evidence, owing to the remarkable preservation of vast 'archives' of papyri. Latin was certainly read in the schools, and there is even evidence that poetry – in particular Virgil's *Aeneid* – was read in the original Latin with the help of Greek word lists, for example.<sup>41</sup> Yet according to a recent assessment of the evidence, knowledge of Latin was not deep: 'by and large, the Greeks were not interested in Roman culture and literature ... a veneer of Latin satisfied most of the needs of the Greeks of Egypt'.<sup>42</sup> This chimes with the findings of a recent investigation into the possible intertextual relationship between Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.<sup>43</sup> According to this study, although an intertextual relationship between Quintus and Virgil cannot be ruled out, there is no compelling evidence that suggests Quintus had read Virgil.

Notwithstanding such findings, there is a growing feeling among literary critics that later Greek poetry does perhaps owe a larger debt to Latin literature than we have been prepared to acknowledge.<sup>44</sup> However, in the absence of clear evidence, the burden of proof lies with those who make claims for direct knowledge of Latin literature by Greek writers. At the same time, this does not mean that we should be prepared simply to fall back on the time-honoured hypothesis of the 'lost Greek original', as a

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common source that might explain similarities between later Latin and Greek texts. Even without ‘proof’ of a relationship, the very process of searching for Latin intertexts within later Greek texts allows these texts to be seen with fresh eyes and brings into play sophisticated techniques of literary criticism that have not traditionally been applied to later Greek material.

This introductory chapter has briefly set out and explored some of concerns and issues fundamental to the study of poetic discourse (both Christian and ‘pagan’) in the fourth-sixth centuries AD. Chapter 2 focuses on the role of the poet in a new post-Classical world. It takes as its starting point the poet in his traditional guise as an active cultural agent, someone instrumental in communicating, debating and shaping issues of broad social and political relevance, beyond the ‘merely’ literary. It eschews the simplistic categorisation of poets as either ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’, and focuses instead on the construction of two contrasting poetic *personae*: the new ‘poet of Christ’ and the traditional ‘poet of the Muses’. The chapter highlights the importance of inspiration in this period, and the emerging tension between the traditional role of the poet as communicator with the Muses and the new inspiration and authority of Christ. A concluding section explores the interplay between inspiration and authority within the sphere of material culture with an examination of Constantine’s appropriation and exploitation of Classical statues of the Muses in his New Rome.

The two following chapters focus on the apparently contrasting output of the fifth-century AD poet, Nonnus of Panopolis. Chapter 3 is devoted to the hexameter *Paraphrase* of St John’s Gospel written in the *persona* of the ‘poet of Christ’. Its rootedness in the Christian world of late antiquity has already been well established and explored. What is less well appreciated is the way in which the Christian *Paraphrase* engages with the Classical literary tradition. The playful and sophisticated dialogue between Classical and Christian ideas that emerges from this engagement – including the suggestive interplay between the figures of Christ and Dionysus – is a central theme of this chapter.

The focus of Chapter 4 is the epic *Dionysiaca*, produced in the traditional *persona* of the ‘poet of the Muses’. Much attention has been paid to the relationship between Nonnus’ epic and the Classical literary tradition stretching back to Homer; by contrast relatively little attention has been paid to the specific cultural context in which this work was produced. This chapter will approach the epic as a product of a post-Classical and increasingly Christianised world and will explore parallels, overlaps and analogies between the story of Dionysus and the story of Christ.

The preceding two chapters open up the possibility of an active dialogue between the Classical tradition and the emergent Christian world, as played out against the backdrop of late antiquity. Chapter 5, the concluding chapter of the book, moves on to consider the implications of such a

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dialogue both for our reading of Nonnus and for our understanding of late antique literary culture more broadly. The experience of reading Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* encourages an active and often provocative interplay between Classical and Christian culture, where meaning is not fixed, but constantly open to interrogation and negotiation. This stands in marked contrast to the tradition of biblical hermeneutics that sought to fix meaning and thus to close down the potential for questioning, exploration and dissent. A concluding examination of the cento poem *De ecclesia* serves to illustrate how this new hermeneutic model is not unique to Nonnus, but can be applied more widely to the literary (and material) culture of late antiquity.

## Inspiration and Authority: The Voice of the Poet in Late Antiquity

In a recent discussion of the Second Sophistic period, Tim Whitmarsh drew attention to the preference of writers of the first to third centuries AD to communicate in prose rather than poetry: ‘Roman Greek literature marks its innovative flavour in numerous ways, but most conspicuously by the near universal adoption of prose ahead of poetry: unsurprisingly perhaps for the genres of philosophy, rhetoric and history, but ostentatious in the case of Aelius Aristides’ prose hymns. Plutarch even claims that the Delphic oracle has begun to prophesy in prose rather than verse.’<sup>1</sup>

Given the lack of regard traditionally expressed for the poetry of late antiquity (in particular for that poetry written in the Classical mode), it is tempting to take the confident declaration of the triumph of prose in the Second Sophistic period as the final word on the matter of literary production in the ancient world. However, as Alan Cameron has recently, and astutely, observed, this is very far from the case: ‘By Late Antiquity poetry both Greek and Latin had made a remarkable comeback. Indeed the resurgence of poetry after centuries of hibernation is one of the most intriguing features of the literary culture of Late Antiquity.’<sup>2</sup> Though we must, of course, be careful not to overplay the idea of a poetic hibernation – poetic production was not a negligible feature of the Second Sophistic<sup>3</sup> – the case made by Cameron is compelling. Where Aelius Aristides turned hexameter hymns into prose, it is now the traditional ground of prose that is taken over by the colonising force of poetry. For example, biblical prose is transformed into Homeric and Virgilian style hexameters; while prose inscriptions set up to honour public officials are now produced using hexameters and elegiac couplets. The prosification of the Delphic oracle itself meets with a dramatic reversal. Cameron again: ‘Already before [Plutarch’s] death oracular shrines were beginning to enjoy a remarkable resurgence ... notably at Delphi, Didyma and Claros – mostly given in their traditional hexameters. And Sibylline oracles continued to be composed and circulate in book form, many now Jewish and Christian.’<sup>4</sup>

A forceful illustration of the renascent power of poetry can be seen in the ephraastic work of Christodorus of Coptus, writing in the fifth/sixth century AD. The tradition in which he is writing looks back to the third century AD and the ephraastic works of the sophists Philostratus of Lemnos, his grandson Philostratus (and, from the third/fourth century,

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Callistratus). In keeping with the spirit of the age, the sophists had used prose in order to describe statues and paintings comprising a variety of mythological scenes and images; when in the sixth century Christodorus comes to describe the statues that decorate the baths of Zeuxippus in Constantinople (preserved as Book 2 of the *Greek Anthology*) he does so in hexameter verses.

Just why should poetic discourse stage such a remarkable comeback in late antiquity? As will be seen in what follows I believe that it is no coincidence that the voice of the poet becomes stronger and louder at the same time that Christianity was establishing itself as the dominant force in the late antique world. From the epic compositions of Homer and Hesiod at the very beginning of Western literary tradition onwards, the 'poet of the Muses' had occupied a privileged position within society as mediator between the spheres of the human and the divine. This position was based on the special access claimed by the poet, and denied to other members of the community, to divine inspiration – through his relationship with the powerful and mysterious figure of the Muse.<sup>5</sup> The Muses, as the daughters of the goddess Memory, granted the poet access to a divine database of knowledge (of all that had been, all that was, and all that was yet to be). The Muse provided the poet both with knowledge – the raw data that a poet would need in order to shape his narrative – and also with a voice with which to sing. As a result of this relationship, divine knowledge and wisdom were communicated to an eagerly-waiting world, through a mixture of skill and divine possession.

The poet's 'special' relationship with the Muses gave him an unrivalled position of authority over his audience. Debarred from any other route of access to knowledge, the audience was accustomed to rely on what the poets told them. The poets were not slow to realise the potential to exploit the dependency and ignorance of their audience. At the beginning of his *Theogony*, Hesiod reports an encounter with the Muses in which they declare their ability not merely to reveal the truth, but also to speak false things as if they were true.<sup>6</sup> In the early lines of the *First Olympian*, Pindar raises a similar anxiety concerning the ability to distinguish the truth from words that resemble the truth.<sup>7</sup> By bringing themes of deception and concealment into the foreground of their work, the poets cause their audiences to think hard and perhaps even anxiously about the reliability of the stories to which they are listening.<sup>8</sup> In the words of Denis Feeney, 'The problem of belief was always potentially in play, because the poets persistently put the issue of their authority and their fictive power in the foreground, and because the boundaries of credence are constituted by what one will not give credence to – there is no belief without disbelief.'<sup>9</sup>

The role of the poet and his relationship with the force of inspiration did not, of course, remain static over time. Within the oral poetic tradition of archaic Greece the Muse was invoked in her capacity as the daughter of Memory; in the literate society of the Hellenistic world the poet sought out

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inspiration not on mountain tops but from book rolls: the Muse had learned how to read.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, regardless whether the poet relied on memory or on intimate knowledge of the vast book stacks of the Library at Alexandria, he never lost his claim to divinely inspired authority.

The coming of Christ as a new source of inspiration and divine knowledge presented a profound challenge and stimulus to the poets of the age. In the face of such a challenge, poets found themselves at the forefront of a far-reaching debate on such questions as the relationship between the realms of the human and the divine, and between Christianity and traditional culture; about the communication, negotiation and control of knowledge and power.<sup>11</sup> As such, the poetry of late antiquity emerged as a dynamic arena of contestation through which the distinctive discourses of a new Christian world would be forged.

My investigation into the politics of poetic discourse in late antiquity begins in the late fourth century AD with a remarkable exchange between the Gallic aristocrat (and Bishop) Ausonius and his friend, and former pupil, Paulinus of Nola.<sup>12</sup> Hitherto Paulinus and Ausonius had enjoyed a literary friendship through the media of letters and poems on Classical themes, written in Classical metres. Though both men articulated their adherence to the Christian faith they appeared to have no difficulty in reconciling their religious beliefs with a deep love for traditional Classical culture.<sup>13</sup> But then quite suddenly – so it seems – Paulinus stopped talking to Ausonius. Ausonius' letters to his friend went unanswered and he became increasingly concerned about the reason for Paulinus' silence. Suspecting the worst, Ausonius prayed to the Muses of poetry to assist him in bringing Paulinus back into the fold of Classical culture (21.73-4 Green):

haec precor, hanc vocem, Boeotia numina Musae,  
accipite et Latiis vatem revocate Camenis.

This I pray: receive these words of mine, divinities from Boeotia, Muses,  
and with Latin poetry call back the poet-priest.

Paulinus at last responded to his former poetic master with a devastating and uncompromising attack on the traditions of Classical culture that he had formerly embraced (*Carmen* 10.19-32):

quid abdicatas in meam curam, pater,  
redire Musas praecipis?  
negat Camenis nec patent Apollini  
dicata Christo pectora.  
fuit ista quondam non ope, sed studio pari  
tecum mihi concordia,  
ciere surdum Delphica Phoebum specu,  
vocare Musas numina,  
fandique munus munere indultum dei  
petere e nemoribus aut iugis.

5

10

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nunc alia mentem vis agit, maior deus,  
aliosque mores postulat  
sibi repossens ab homine munus suum,  
vivamus ut vitae patri.

Why do you instruct the Muses that I have rejected to return to my affection, my father? Hearts given up to Christ give refusal to the Camenae [sc. Latin Muses], and are not open to Apollo. Once upon a time there was this understanding between me and you, equals not in power, but in enthusiasm – to summon deaf Apollo from his Delphic cave, to call on the Muses as goddesses, and to seek from groves or mountains the gift of speech granted by the gift of god. Now it is another force that directs my mind, a greater God, and he demands another mode of life, claiming for himself from man the gift he gave, so that we may live for the Father of life.

Paulinus' reply to Ausonius represents an attack on the very foundations of poetic identity. The traditional system of poetry – as communicated by respected *vates* ('poet-priests') who for countless generations had claimed privileged access to Classical culture and divine revelation through the figure of the Muse – is forcefully rejected. Paulinus' engagement with Classical culture is referred to explicitly in the past tense (*fuit*), what he did 'once upon a time' (*quondam*). This contrasts sharply with what the poet does 'now' (*nunc*): it is 'another force that directs his mind' (*alia mentem vis agit*) and a 'greater god' (*maior deus*) who 'demands that he behaves in a different way' (*alios ... mores postulat*).

For Paulinus, the claims of traditional poetry are based on bogus and deceptive authority and do not represent the words of true prophecy. Paulinus' rejection of the Muse is predicated on the fact that for him all true knowledge comes not from some vague divine sphere, but from the Christian God.<sup>14</sup> In the words of 2 Timothy 3:16, perhaps the most well-known of all Biblical quotations on the subject of inspiration, 'all Scripture is breathed out by God (*theopneustos*)'. 2 Peter 1:19-21 provides a more detailed description of the mechanics of inspiration, focused on prophecy:

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.<sup>15</sup>

We must of course be careful not to assume that Christian ideas about inspiration are fixed and unproblematic. The question of Biblical inspiration is one that continues to generate much debate.<sup>16</sup> In what way were the writers inspired? Is this inspiration evident in the words that they write? Such questions intersect precisely with the sort of questions and debates

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that had long occupied the Classical world concerning the relationship between the poet and the Muse.

Paulinus' attack on the traditions of Classical poetry continues in the following spirited manner (*Carmen* 10.33-46):

vacare vanis, otio aut negotio, et fabulosis litteris	15
vetat; suis ut pareamus legibus lucemque cernamus suam, quam vis sophorum callida arsque rhetorum et figmenta vatium nubilant,	20
qui corda falsis atque vanis imbuunt tantumque linguas instruunt, nihil adferentes, ut salutem conferant, quod veritatem detegat.	
quid enim tenere vel bonum aut verum queant, qui non tenent summae caput, veri bonique fomitem et fontem deum, quem nemo nisi in Christo videt?	25

To give time to worthless things, whether at rest or work, even to fairytales, he [God] forbids; in order that we may obey his laws and perceive his light which is obscured by the cunning power of the sophists, the skill of the rhetoricians, and fabrications of the inspired poets. It is these men who steep our hearts in things that are false and worthless, and only train our tongues to bring a feeling of well-being, contributing nothing which might uncover the truth. For what can they hold that is either good or true who hold not the head of all, the touch-paper and source of that which is true and good – God – whom no-one sees except in Christ.

Here then the 'truth' (*veritatem*) of Christ is contrasted with the 'fictions' (*fabulosis litteris*) and 'falsehoods' (*figmenta*) of the Classical tradition.<sup>17</sup> The former provides that which is 'true and good' (*veri bonique*); the latter provides things which are 'false and worthless' (*falsis atque vanis*). The poets of the Muses (along with the sophists and teachers of Classical culture) are deemed to have no worthwhile contribution to make (*nihil adferentes*); in fact their actions are seen as positively harmful because they 'obscure' (*nubilant*) the light of Christ with their rhetoric.

The contrast elaborated here between the lies of Apollo and the truth of Christ can already be seen in operation in the second century in Tertullian's description of the difference between the poet-priest Hesiod and the prophet Moses (*De corona* 7):

If there really was a Pandora, whom Hesiod mentions as the first of women, hers was the first head the graces crowned, for she received gifts from all the gods whence she got her name Pandora. But Moses, a prophet, not a poet-shepherd, shows us the first woman Eve having her loins more naturally girt about with leaves than her temples with flowers. Pandora, then, is a myth.

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While Eve is described without question as the first woman, uncertainty is said to surround Pandora ('if there really was a Pandora'), until Tertullian moves to the final definitive conclusion: 'Pandora is a myth'.<sup>18</sup> As Springer suggests, 'The lying poet is practically a commonplace in the Christian literature of Late Antiquity.'<sup>19</sup>

In the power games of inspiration that are played out in the exchange between Ausonius and Paulinus, we see the relationship between the two men being dramatically rewritten. Paulinus may have declared himself inferior in talent to Ausonius, but Christ the 'greater' god gives him a new opportunity to claim superiority. With Christ on his side Paulinus is more than a match for his former master: Paulinus' *alia alios* replies directly to the polyptoton of Ausonius' *haec hanc*. What is more, Paulinus sharpens his attack by insisting that his instructions come from on high – in contrast to the time when both Ausonius and he used to call Apollo from his cave. The implication here is that with Christianity there is an imperative for action that is quite absent from the Classical tradition: where the Classical poet is the one who actively solicits the Muse for inspiration, it is Christ himself who calls upon Paulinus.

The model of poetic conquest articulated by Paulinus leaves us in no doubt that the very attempt to write Classical poetry in a Christian world was an ultimately superficial and meaningless endeavour – a culpable refusal (as far as Paulinus is concerned) to engage with the serious and important issues of the age. It is a model that can be located within the wider framework of the pagan/Christian dichotomy discussed in the introductory chapter: the poetry of Christ is serious and relevant; the poetry of the Muses is frivolous and irrelevant. As we have already seen, the legacy of this attempt to view the late antique world as a struggle between pagans and Christians has cast a long shadow. Paulinus would have found little to quibble about in Robert Browning's assessment of the poetry of Ausonius from the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*: 'Whatever lessons Ausonius the man may have learnt in the long and varied course of his life, Ausonius the poet shows no signs of intellectual, moral or aesthetic development. A prodigious memory, a facile talent for versification, a cheerful and kindly optimism, and an avoidance of all that was serious or profound or disquieting mark him throughout his literary life.'<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter 1, however, the clear polarities that have for so long informed the critical approach to late antique literature – and that have been so eloquently set out by Paulinus in his reply to Ausonius – have in recent years been subject to an increasingly rigorous interrogation. A closer analysis of Paulinus' response to Ausonius will serve to illustrate the way in which the apparent dichotomy between Classical and Christian culture (with the implications of value versus worthlessness that such a dichotomy implies) is not all that it may first appear. For at the same time that Paulinus articulates his rejection of the Classical tradition and tries with great force to close down lines of communication between the two

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cultures, he finds himself drawn ineluctably into a dialogue with that same Classical tradition. As we shall see, right from the start of Paulinus' reply, claims of rupture and radical innovation are undermined by a deep continuity with the well-springs of Classical inspiration.

It is important to emphasise right from the start how much subtlety and playfulness there is in the reply to Ausonius – something that belies the generally harsh and uncompromising tone of the letter and that is easy to overlook. Paulinus is fully aware of the contradiction of his position, of the need to use and engage with the Classical world even as he seeks to traduce it. This engagement and performance of Classical culture is not something that Paulinus attempts to disguise or play down in any way. Far from it: the lines quoted above come from a much longer poetic response to Ausonius in three sections – each section in a different Classical metre: first, elegiacs, then iambs, then hexameters. Paulinus chooses to respond to Ausonius not only using Classical metres, but also Classical techniques of rhetoric and Classical imagery.

This is an erudite and bravura performance. We saw above that Ausonius had called on the Boeotian Muses to bring back Paulinus to the Classical fold. The reference here is to one of the foundational figures of Greek poetry – Hesiod.<sup>21</sup> It was on Mount Helicon, in the region of Boeotia, that the shepherd Hesiod first encountered the Muses and was transformed into an inspired poet. Ausonius clearly hopes that the Boeotian Muses will have the same effect on Paulinus that they had on Hesiod. Paulinus shows that he has understood the implication of Ausonius' words when he states that there indeed used to be an understanding between them 'to seek the gift of speech granted by the gift of a god from groves or mountains'. Although Paulinus presents us with a generalised image of poetic inspiration, at the heart of the image lies a clear allusion to that unique moment in the Classical literary tradition when Hesiod was given the gift of poetry by the Muse on the mountaintop of Helicon. In a similarly playful mode Paulinus describes how the two friends used to 'summon deaf Apollo from his Delphic cave' (*ciere surdum Delphica Phoebum specu*). Here the placement of the adjective *Delphica* in the centre of its line would have appealed to Ausonius' Classical learning: as anyone with any claim to *paideia* (i.e. education/high-culture) would know, Delphi was not simply to be found at the centre of a line of verse, but was in fact the very centre of the Classical world.<sup>22</sup>

As Paulinus is keen to spell out, Classical culture – represented by an unholy trinity of sophists, teachers and poets – is not simply irrelevant and lacking in value, but positively dangerous because it obscures the truth of Christ. Arguments about the potential danger of poetic discourse inevitably recall Plato's famous exploration of the subject in *Republic* 10: poets were to be excluded from Plato's idealised republic because of the danger that their fictions might be mistaken for the truth.<sup>23</sup> I am not suggesting that Paulinus had Plato specifically in mind at this point; it would,

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however, not be lost on either Ausonius or Paulinus that the rejection of Classical culture has been presented not only in Classical metre, but in the form of a *tricolon* – a technique highly prized by the very rhetoricians (*ars rhetorum*) whom Paulinus has explicitly denounced.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, when Paulinus dismisses the ‘fabrications of the inspired poets’ (*figmenta vatium*) he does so by means of the metaphorical – and hence poetically charged – image of ‘clouding’ (*nubilant*). The poets rejected by Paulinus may well cloud the truth with their words, but Paulinus’ own use of poetic and rhetorical language casts as much shade as it does light.

Paulinus finds himself caught in a bind: how can one cut oneself free from Classical culture, when that culture remained the bedrock of education across late antique society?<sup>25</sup> Some writers, such as Basil, were happy to advocate the study of Classics as a precursor to higher things. Such an apparently relaxed attitude to Classical culture was not always the case, however. As a Christian, Jerome condemned ‘poetry, the wisdom of the world, the pompous eloquence of the orators, this food of devils’ (*Epist.* 21.13), but was unable to deny the value of a Classical education as a necessary preliminary to a Christian education, something that once mastered could be laid aside.<sup>26</sup> A similar contradiction is evident in the work of Augustine. In his *Confessions* he appears to reject Classical learning in the strongest possible terms: ‘Truly over the door of the grammar school there hangs a curtain, yet that curtain is a shroud of falsehood, not a veil of mysteries’ (*Confessions* 1.13); yet he is unwilling and ultimately unable to escape from the literary and rhetorical influence of the Classical tradition, in particular Virgil and Cicero.<sup>27</sup>

However different Christianity might have been from what had gone before, it was impossible reject the linguistic and literary discourses of the Classical world in any simple or categorical manner. Regardless of one’s approach to Classical culture, it remained an inescapable part of the late antique experience. Christianity, then, was forced to articulate its own identity through a dialectic of similarity and difference with the Classical world. Behind the ‘simple’ rhetoric of rejection lay a far more subtle accommodation between the Classical past and the Christian present. Rather than presenting a radically new framework, Christian discourse sought to accommodate, absorb and overwrite the traditions of the Classical world.<sup>28</sup>

### **Poetic personae**

In what follows I wish to explore a diverse range of poetic responses to the debate about the role of Classical culture in a post-Classical world. Rather than considering the poetry of late antiquity in terms of the traditional oppositional categories of pagan/Christian or secular/religious (dichotomies that were scrutinised and rejected in the introductory chapter), I want to look at the way that figure of the poet is represented within the texts

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themselves. In what follows I will look at two different poetic *personae* that emerge from the poetry of the period: the ‘poet of Christ’ and the ‘poet of the Muses’. The ‘poet of Christ’ deals explicitly with Christian themes; the ‘poet of the Muses’ deals with traditional themes. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I draw no conclusions about the religious beliefs held by the poets who employ either of these *personae*. The personal faith of a poet is not something that is recoverable from the text that he writes. The literary output of poets such as Ausonius (who writes in both traditional Classical and Christian modes at different times) shows us that it is perfectly possible to change one’s mask at will.<sup>29</sup> There may well, of course, be a significant overlap between the poet and the mask that he chooses to wear, but the degree to which poet and mask coincide is ultimately unknowable and does not form part of this investigation.

At a fundamental level the very action of writing poetry in late antiquity pitches the poet into a debate about the value of Classical culture and the relationship between the human and divine spheres. Such debate is sharpened by explicit references to the Muse – a symbol of both the Classical tradition and the visceral force of divine inspiration and a figure who is fundamental to the construction of poetic identity. The particular focus of my investigation here will be on the way that the concept and meaning of inspiration are explored and debated by the poet of Christ and the poet of the Muses.

Across history, the Muse has functioned to give form and definition (however vague that might be) to the powerful, irrational and ultimately inexpressible force of creativity – that disturbing intrusion into the world of man from somewhere ‘beyond’. As Don Fowler reminds us in his posthumous article on ‘The Poetics and Politics of Inspiration in Latin Poetry’, ‘literary and other creation *is* a mysterious process which is very much not in the control of the author’.<sup>30</sup> At the same time the Muse also stands as a symbol of Classical culture *par excellence*. When a poet calls on the Muse for inspiration he calls not ‘simply’ upon some abstract force, but upon the resources of a literary tradition that stretches back to Homer and the start of Western culture. Inspiration comes both from some mysterious place and from an accessible body of knowledge contained within the literary canon.

It is important to emphasise that both the poet of the Muses and the poet of Christ have an equal stake in the making of the world of late antiquity.<sup>31</sup> Whether the poet rejects the Muse as inappropriate for his new Christian theme or whether the poet calls on the Muse in the time-honoured manner, his words are inevitably and inescapably located within a wider discourse of inspiration. The poetry of late antiquity provides a unique platform not only for the exploration of the place of Classical culture (the product of the Muses) in a new post-Classical world, but also for an exploration of the way that divine knowledge is accessed, controlled and contested. For it is through the process of inspiration that the poet

gains access to the world of the divine and is empowered to communicate that divine knowledge. Never before, perhaps, had the poet's voice been so relevant.

### **The poet of Christ** **Rejection/rupture: expressions of difference**

One of the clearest ways of articulating a new poetic identity in the period of late antiquity is through the rejection of the traditional Muse of Classical poetry. The scene of the rejection of the Muses (as symbols of both Classical culture and of access to the world of the divine), so forcefully performed by Paulinus of Nola can be traced through an array of late antique texts from Juvencus to Paulinus of Périgueux and Venantius Fortunatus.<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to observe that the great majority of texts that articulate a clear rejection of the machinery of Classical inspiration come from the Western (Latin) half of the Empire. This *topos* of 'rejection' – or, to use Curtius' expression, the 'Contrast between Pagan and Christian Poetry' *topos*<sup>33</sup> – is worth examining in closer detail. As with Paulinus, we are not dealing with a simple rejection of one system of inspiration in favour of another. The way that individual 'Christian' poets deal with the figure of inspiration in their poetry presents a diverse range of responses from uncompromising rejection to playful accommodation.<sup>34</sup>

As noted by Ernst Curtius, the rejection of the Muse *topos* can already be seen in the poetry of the 'earliest Christian epic poet', the fourth-century Spanish poet C. Vettius Aquilinus Juvencus.<sup>35</sup> Juvencus produced an epic poem in four books, the *Evangeliorum Libri*, based on the life of Christ and closely following the Gospels, with a particular emphasis on the Gospel of St Matthew.<sup>36</sup> Here the Holy Spirit is substituted for the Muses. The Classical notion of inspiration – the breath of the Muse that provides the poet with his power – is taken over by Christian poets from Juvencus onwards through analogy with the Holy *Spiritus*. Juvencus concludes the preface to his epic as follows (1.25-7):

ergo age sanctificus adsit mihi carminis auctor  
Spiritus, et puro mentem riget amne canentis  
Dulcis Iordanis, ut Christo digna loquamur.

Come then, may the sanctifying Spirit be present, the author of my song, and may the sweet Jordan with its pure stream nourish me as I sing, so that I may speak things that are worthy of Christ.

For Juvencus the question of authority – the relationship between the poet and the divine force of inspiration – is clearly answered: the poem is not his but the work of another (*auctor/Spiritus*) and he is merely a cipher through whom the Holy Spirit works.

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Alongside the image of the Holy Spirit stands (or rather flows) the image of the river Jordan. Traditional descriptions of poetic inspiration often had recourse to the image of inspirational water – most famously the Castalian spring at Delphi. It was with water from the Castalian spring that the Pythia and those seeking a prophetic response from the Pythia would purify themselves. From Juvencus onwards, Christian poets actively seek to reappropriate the waters of Classical inspiration. Where the image of the spring had once called to mind Pegasus and the Castalian spring, it now evokes the image of a Christian *fons*: Claudian, for example, calls on ‘Christ, lifegiving spring of divine life’ (*AP* 1.19.3); Paulinus (23.27) prays to God as a ‘well-spring of the word’ (*fons verbi*); Proclus (*Hymni* 9.64) invokes Christ as ‘spring of life’ (*biou ... pégê*).<sup>37</sup> In the case of Juvencus the river Jordan has an appropriate biblical context, since it was the place where John the Baptist had baptised with water.<sup>38</sup> The use of water imagery leads on from an earlier passage in the preface where Juvencus had described songs of an earlier age ‘flowing from the spring of Smyrna’ (*Smyrnae de fonte fluentes*, 1.9), i.e. inspired by Homer. In this new Christian song Homer and the Classical tradition are emphatically submerged by the waters of Christ.

Towards the end of the fifth century AD the bishop Paulinus of Périgueux produced an hexameter paraphrase of Sulpicius Severus’ *Life of St Martin* (4.245-50):

... vesana loquentes  
dementes rapiant furiosa ad pectora Musas:  
nos Martinus agat. talis mutatio sensus  
grata mihi est, talem sitiunt mea viscera fontem.  
Castalias poscant lymfatica pectora lymfas:  
altera pocla decent homines Iordane renatos.

Let those gibbering madmen clutch the Muses to their raging breasts. Let Martin guide us. Such a change of the mind is pleasing to me, it is for such a well-spring that my heart thirsts. Let frenzied breasts demand Castalian water; other cups are right for men who have been reborn in the river Jordan.

Once again the traditional imagery of prophetic water has been reappropriated to serve a new Christian theme. In place of water from the ‘Castalian spring’ (*Castalias ... lymfas*) we are now presented with ‘other cups’ (*altera pocla*) suitable for ‘those who have been reborn in the River Jordan’ (*Iordane renatos*). Noteworthy here is the attempt to associate Classical inspiration with the forces of madness and frenzy (*vesana ... dementes ... furiosa*), in contrast with the implicitly more rational and careful guidance provided by St Martin. The poet suggests that he had formerly kept company with the Muses, but talks explicitly about a ‘change of mind/heart’ (*mutatio sensus*) that he has experienced: it is now St Martin, not the Muses, who is to direct him (*nos Martinus agat*).<sup>39</sup> Paulinus

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of Périgueux makes a further implicit contrast with the source of Classical inspiration when he talks about his innards thirsting for the water (of Christ): Christian ‘water’ (*fontem*) is metaphorical and spritual in its effect; Classical water is, by implication, nothing more than the substance itself.

At the beginning of his four-book panegyric, *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, the poet Corippus, writing in the mid-sixth century AD, explicitly and self-consciously replaces the Muses not with a Saint, but with other more ‘appropriate’ female figures (*Iust.* 1.7-13):<sup>40</sup>

praecommodo linguam:  
vos, divae, date verba, et quae Vigilantia mater  
et quae summa regens protegis orbem.  
vos mihi pro cunctis dicenda ad carmina Musis  
sufficitis, vos quaeque latent arcana monetis.  
tuque, dei genetrix, sanctam mihi porrige dextram  
et fer opem, quaeso.

I offer my tongue: you, goddesses, give me the words – both Vigilantia who is the mother and you who protect the world, Wisdom, ruling all, you are enough for me in place of all the Muses in composing my song, you tell me all the hidden secrets. You too, Mother of God, stretch out your divine hand to me and give me aid, I beg.

In this scene Corippus playfully exploits the similarity and difference between Christian and Classical modes of inspiration. To begin with it appears that we are dealing with a traditional invocation to the Muses. The appeal to ‘you, goddesses’ (*vos, divae*) leads one to imagine that it is the goddess Muses themselves who are being invoked – Corippus had already made explicit reference to the Muses (*Musis*) a few lines earlier. This speculation is sustained, if not actually enhanced, by the fact that Corippus speaks about the clear relationship between him and the divinities who inspire him in just the same terms as countless generations of poet-priests before him: Corippus claims to have the ‘facility to speak’ (*linguam*), but needs divinities to supply the ‘words’ (*verba*).<sup>41</sup> The suggestion that we are dealing here with the Muses of Classical poetry inevitably challenges the reader to consider the appropriateness of Classical Muses in a Christian poem. However, any readerly anxiety is suddenly banished by the introduction of three quite different female divinities: Vigilantia, Sapientia and the Mother of God. This powerful trinity is explicitly described as more than a match for the nine Muses of the Classical world: Vigilantia and Sapientia alone are said to be enough for the poet ‘in place of all the Muses’ (*pro cunctis ... Musis*); the Mother of God is the icing on the Christian cake.

The moment when the poet rejects the traditional Muses presents a potential point of tension and weakness for the new poet of Christ. For the

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poet hereby rejects the authoritative position enjoyed by the poet of the Muses as a custodian and communicator of traditional Classical culture. Corripius, however, is careful to impress upon his readers that his poetic authority has not in anyway been diminished on account of his rejection of the Muses. As he clearly points out, these new divinities provide him with privileged access to the 'secret mysteries' (*arcana*) – mysteries which it is assumed he will share with his readers.

Venantius Fortunatus (AD 530-609), in his preface to the *Life of St Martin* (inspired, like his countryman Paulinus of Périgueux before him, by the *Vita Martini* of Sulpicius Severus) expresses rather less confidence in his abilities as a poet of Christ (31): 'My spirit wavers, for it is not bathed in the water of the Latin Muses' (*fluctuat ingenium cui non natat unda Camenae*). Venantius Fortunatus' professed lack of familiarity with Classical culture prompts him to turn away from the traditional discourse of inspiration and seek inspiration from a different quarter. The poet calls instead – like Paulinus of Périgueux – on the figure of St Martin in order to fill the sails of his poetic boat (37-40):

credere tunc potero ad portum mea carbasa ferri,  
adspirante fide, si sua flabra favent.  
ferre precanter opem et de Verbo poscite verba:  
si fons ille rigat, rivulus iste meat.

Then I shall be able to believe that my boat [lit. sails] is being carried towards the harbour, with faith breathing upon me, if his own [St Martin's] breezes support me. Bring help with your prayers, demand words from the Word: if that spring provides water, let my little stream flow.

We must of course be wary of taking the poet at his word. The opening declaration of ignorance about Classical culture is in fact playfully undermined by his skilful performance as a poet. First, the simple declaration that his spirit is not immersed in the 'water of the Latin Muses' (*unda Camenae*) serves to confirm the opposite, since it demonstrates an obvious familiarity with the discourse of Classical inspiration in terms of both the language and imagery. What is more, the image of the poetic vessel that requires the help of St Martin to get it safely to shore – an image with which the *Preface* opens and which the poet sustains throughout – reprises the traditional metaphor of the ship of poetry, much beloved by Classical poets such as Horace and Propertius.<sup>42</sup> Although the poet describes himself an 'unskilled sailor' (*nauta rudis*), Venantius clearly demonstrates his mastery of the ship of poetry *topos*. The very fact that his poetic ship is described by the use of a metonym *carbasa* ('sails') is a literary flourish of which the poets of the Classical tradition would have wholeheartedly approved.

The way that Venantius describes the relationship between himself and his surrogate Muse, St Martin, is of further interest. According to Venantius, the saint has power to inspire, quite literally, by means of 'blasts of

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air' (*flabra*) that fill the poet's sails. The poet calls on the saint's *flabra* to 'bring help' (*ferre ... opem*), just as Paulinus of Périgueux had called on the Mother of God to 'bring help' (*fer opem*). However, St Martin is not the ultimate target of the poet's prayers: Venantius uses him as an intermediary, a figure who can intercede with a higher authority still on the poet's behalf: the divine 'Word' (*Verbum/Logos*). For Venantius it is the Christian *Verbum* rather than the Classical Muses who are imagined as the ultimate source of inspiration from whom he can get, at one remove, the *verba* that will allow him to produce poetry.<sup>43</sup>

The ship of poetry is not the only image employed by Venantius. The inspirational *fons* of Christ/*Verbum* (an image which was employed, as we have seen, by a number of poets such as Paulinus of Nola and Corripus) is also described, providing us with another way of understanding the process of poetic inspiration. Venantius concludes his appeal for inspiration from the well-spring of the *Verbum* as follows: 'if that spring provides water, let my little stream flow' (*si fons ille rigat, rivulus iste meat*). This pentameter line is fashioned to create a clear contrast between the poet and the source of his inspiration:

fons	ille	rigat
rivulus	iste	meat

The *fons* ('spring') of Christ contrasts with the modest and diminutive *rivulus* ('little stream') of Venantius' poetry. The difference in status between the poet and his source of inspiration is further emphasised by the use of pronominal adjectives: *ille* suggests something positive, even famous; *iste* – with its hissing sibilance – is often used in negative, even contemptuous contexts.<sup>44</sup> The comparison is completed by the pairing of the verbs: the *rivulus* will only be able to flow (*meat*) if the *fons* provides the water (*rigat*).<sup>45</sup> This nicely captures the traditional division of labour between the poet and his Muse/source of inspiration: the water supplied by the *fons* is equivalent to the *verba*, the *rivulus* is the verbal facility of the poet, the channel through which the inspired words may flow.

Questions about the place and relevance of the traditional figure of the Muse within the world of late antiquity clearly exercised the mind of the sixth-century philosopher-poet Boethius. At the beginning of his great work *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (*De consolatione philosophiae*) – written in alternating sections of prose and verse – we are witness to a dramatic confrontation between the figure of *Philosophia* and the traditional Classical Muses.<sup>46</sup> We are presented with a debate that is still in the process of being settled about exactly what sort of literary *persona* Boethius should adopt: should he play the part of the poet of the Muses or of the philosopher? The work begins with a declaration of Boethius' lamentable condition (in the appropriate form of elegiac couplets), written in the mode of a poet of the Muses (1.1-8):

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carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi,  
flebilis heu maestos cogor inire modos.  
ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda Camenae  
et ueris elegi fletibus ora rigant.<sup>47</sup>  
has saltem nullus potuit peruincere terror,  
ne nostrum comites prosequerentur iter.  
gloria felicitis olim uiridisque iuuentae,  
solantur maesti nunc mea fata senis.

5

I who once wrote poetry while my enthusiasm was flourishing, in tears alas I am compelled to compose sad rhythms. Look, the Latin Muses in mourning keep dictating the poems that I have to write down and my face is wet with the true tears of elegy. These Muses at least no terror was able to conquer to prevent them from following me in my journey, as companions. Once they were the glory of my happy if callow youth, now they console my fate as a sad old man.

Up to this point, or so it seems, the poet has continued to keep faith with the Muses of Classical culture. The ‘Latin Muses’ (*Camenae*) have been his ‘companions’ (*comites*) on his journey through life, from youth to old age. Although times have changed and Boethius’ fortunes have waned, the Muses have not deserted him – a point emphasised not simply by the frequentative present tense *dictant* (‘they keep dictating’), but also through the use of the vivid interjection *ecce* (‘look’). The *Camenae* have themselves maintained a dominant position in the poet/Muse relationship: it is they who tell Boethius ‘what he must write’ (*scribenda*).

Boethius’ Muses are notably described as ‘lacerated’ or ‘torn’ (*lacerae*). The adjective hints perhaps at Boethius’ own mangled state, as he lies in prison, awaiting execution on the orders of the Ostrogothic king, Theoderic the Great. But we are not merely dealing with a transferred epithet that is specific to Boethius. The ‘mangled’ state of the Muses also serves to remind us that in the period of late antiquity more broadly the once revered Muses of Classical culture were themselves under attack – the subject of insult, challenge and rejection.

This opening elegiac sequence is followed by a passage of prose in which a mysterious woman appears before the poet. The reader is kept guessing as to who this enigmatic figure might be – though the clues are all there to identify the personification of Philosophy: she is vigorous, but clearly very old, of uncertain stature (now the height of a human, now touching the heavens with her head); she has two Greek letters on her tunic representing theoretical and applied branches of philosophy; she carries books in her right hand and a sceptre in her left (1.26-41):

quae ubi poeticas Musas uidit nostro adsistentes toro fletibusque meis uerba dictantes, commota paulisper ac torvis inflammata luminibus: ‘quis,’ inquit, ‘has scenicas meretriculas ad hunc aegrum permisit accedere quae dolores eius non modo nullis remediis foverent, uerum dulcibus insuper alerent

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venenis? hae sunt enim quae infructuosis affectuum spinis uberem fructibus rationis segetem necant hominumque mentes assuefaciunt morbo, non liberant. at si quem profanum, uti vulgo solitum vobis, blanditiae vestrae detraherent, minus moleste ferendum putarem; nihil quippe in eo nostrae operae laederentur. hunc vero Eleaticis atque Academicis studiis innutritum? sed abite potius Sirenes usque in exitium dulces meisque eum Musis curandum sanandumque relinquite.

When she saw the Muses of poetry, who were standing by my couch, dictating words to fit my tears, being moved for a short while and inflamed with fierce flashing eyes, 'Who,' she asked, 'has allowed these stage prostitutes to approach this sick man? Not only do they not cure his pains with any remedies, but they even nourish them with sweet poisons. For these are they who with the fruitless thorns of their feelings kill the harvest of reason that is rich with thorns that bear fruit. They accustom the minds of men to disease, but they do not release them from it. But if your sweet-talking were to lead astray some non-initiate – as commonly happens where you are concerned – I would not find it very hard to put up with. For in him my work will in no way be violated. This man who has in fact been nurtured on the learned studies of the Eleatics and of the Academy? But I would rather that you went away, you Sirens – sweet to the point of destruction – and leave him to be looked after and healed by my own Muses.

This passage leaves us in no doubt about the relationship between the poet and his inspiration. The poet is an ultimately powerless figure who has no say in the nature of the Muse who inspires him. He is presented as a passive entity, little more than a prize to be fought over by competing divinities. Philosophia's complaints about the Muses of poetry have much in common with the critique of the Muses articulated by Paulinus of Nola. In both instances Classical culture is seen, not merely as a misguided enterprise, but as potentially dangerous. Paulinus used a metereological metaphor to explain how Christian truth was being 'clouded' by Classical lies; the leading metaphor for Boethius is medical in nature: the spiritually 'sick man' (*aegrum*) needs to be kept away from the sweet poison of Classical culture. In the eyes of Philosophia (who is not afraid to mix her metaphors) the Muses are 'stage prostitutes' (*scenicas meretriculas*). The implication of this is that the Muses are entertaining representations, not meaningful realities, and that the motive for their performance is base.<sup>48</sup> Those who seek to watch such a performance are also indirectly impugned. Philosophia then uses a further metaphor to describe the Muses, wholly appropriate to the Muses' close association with Classical culture: they are described as Sirens whose sweetness can lead one to destruction.

In the face of this spirited attack the Muses of poetry now leave the field, acknowledging the victory of the Muses of Philosophy, whom Philosophia has just described as both literally and metaphorically surrounding the poet/patient (*meisque eum Musis*). However, this victory is much less clear-cut than this opening scene might lead us to believe. One may first

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observe the highly poetic language and imagery (including metaphorical images such as the ‘harvest of reason rich with fruit’: *uberem fructibus rationis segetem*) used by Philosophia in her attempt to vanquish the Muses of poetry. More striking still is the fact that, after the retreat of the Muses of poetry, Philosophia goes straight on to declaim – poetry. In fact, tension remains throughout the text about the relationship between the forms of poetry and prose, literature and philosophy, lies and truth. Ultimately Philosophia shows herself unable to resist entirely the sweet siren call of Classical culture and passages of poetry continue to alternate with prose throughout the text. At 4.6, for example, poetry is imagined as something that (far from making him ill) will refresh Boethius and leave him better prepared for further philosophical instruction.<sup>49</sup>

sed uideo te iam dudum et pondere quaestionis oneratum et rationis prolixitate fatigatum aliquam carminis exspectare dulcedinem; accipe igitur haustum quo refectus firmior in ulteriora contendas.

But I see that you have for a long time now been burdened by the weight of the question and tired by the length of the argument, and that you are waiting for the sweetness of some poem; therefore receive this drink so that you can hurry on refreshed to the next stage.

Categorical rejection of the ‘stage prostitutes’ at the beginning of the book has now given way to a more nuanced accommodation of poetry within Boethius’ philosophical work – much like the discussion in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* in which poetry is imagined as the honey on the cup that makes the bitter wormwood medicine of philosophy palatable.<sup>50</sup> Philosophia may still see poetry as subordinate to philosophy, even as a potentially dangerous medium, but poetic discourse remains an essential and inescapable part of the story.

Alongside explicit attempts at substitution it is possible to identify more openly accommodating approaches to the traditional machinery of inspiration. Not all poets writing with Christian *personae* adopt such a strident position as Paulinus and some are happier to work with traditional material rather than against it, fashioning a more conciliatory dialectic of appropriation and accommodation. Instead of advocating a rejection of the Muse in favour of a new form of inspiration, Prudentius seeks to encourage the Muse herself to turn her back on her previous Classical incarnation, urging her conversion to Christianity at *The Daily Round* 3.26-30:

sperne, Camena, leues hederas,  
cingere tempora quis solita es,  
sertaque mystica dactylico  
texere docta liga strophio,  
laude Dei redimita comas.

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Reject, my Latin Muse, the light/insignificant (*leves*) ivy-leaves with which you have been accustomed to encircle your brows; learn to weave mystic garlands and tie them with a band of dactyls, and wear your hair wreathed with the praise of God. (tr. H.J. Thompson)

The effectiveness of Prudentius' attempt to persuade the Muse can be gauged from the following later passage (9.1-3):

da, puer, plectrum, choreis ut canam fidelibus  
dulce carmen et melodum, gesta Christi insignia.  
hunc camena nostra solum pangat, hunc laudet lyra.

Give me my plectrum, boy, so that in faithful trochees I may sing a sweet, melodious song of the famous deeds of Christ. He alone shall be my Latin Muse's theme, him alone my lyre will celebrate.

The Muse of Prudentius is here imagined as being fully and exclusively (*solum*) enlisted into the service of Christ. The playful parallel drawn between the 'poem' (*carmen*) and the 'Latin Muse' (*camena*) helps to assimilate the Muse with glorious deeds of Christ.<sup>51</sup> Prudentius continues (9.4-6; 11-12):

Christus est, quem rex sacerdos adfuturum protinus  
infulatus concinebat voce, chorda et tympano,  
spiritum caelo influentem per medullas hauriens ...  
... ipse fons et clausula  
omnium quae sunt, fuerunt, quaeque post futura sunt

Christ it is whose speedy coming the priest-king in his priestly vestment sang with sound of voice and string and tambour, drinking deep the spirit that flowed on him from heaven ... He is both the source and end ... of all things that are or have been or shall be hereafter.

This scene of Christian inspiration is no restrained reworking of a traditional Classical *topos*, but an energetic and noisy celebration of the power of Christ. The inspired *rex sacerdos* ('priest king')<sup>52</sup> drinks into his marrow (*per medullas*) the spirit of heaven and celebrates with a *tricolon crescendo* of voice, lyre and tambour (*voce, chorda et tympano*). Here again the Classical image of the *fons* is appropriated to the inspiration of Christ. This is implicit in the case of the king priest 'drinking in the spirit' (*spiritum ... hauriens*); explicit in the description of Christ as the 'source/beginning and the end of all things' (*fons et clausula omnium*) – an image that attempts to replicate the more familiar description of Christ from Revelation 1:8: 'I am the alpha and the omega,' said the Lord, "who is, was, and is to come – the Almighty".

A further way of responding to the Muse is to attempt to contain and neutralise her force by turning her into an allegorical figure. Clement of

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Alexandria gives an account of the Muses that reduces their status to mere serving maids. This fits into a broader euhemerising tradition that attempted to explain how the divinities of the Classical world were merely mortals whose achievements had been embellished. Clement begins his exhortation with singers who have extraordinary power: Amphion, Arion and Orpheus (*Protrepticus* 2.27):

But as for the dramas and the Lenaeon poets, who are altogether like drunken men, let us wreath them if you like, with ivy, while they are performing the mad revels of the Bacchic rite, and shut them up, satyrs and frenzied rout and all – yes and the rest of the company of daemons too – in Helicon and Cithaeron now grown old; and let us bring down truth, with wisdom in all her brightness, from heaven above, to the holy mountain of God and the holy company of the prophets. (tr. G.W. Butterworth)

Sometimes the Muses are assimilated with musical harmony and the heavenly spheres.<sup>53</sup> In a letter to his friend Nymphidius, the fifth-century Gallic bishop, Sidonius describes the newly-published work *De statu animae* ('On the state of the soul') by his friend, the 'Christian philosopher' Mamertus Claudianus, in which the author claims that the Muses are to be understood not as real figures in any sense, but as allegorical representations (5.2):

... novem quas vocant Musas disciplinas aperiens esse, non feminas. namque in paginis eius vigilax lector inveniet verioria nomina Camenarum, quae propriam de se sibi pariunt nuncupationem. illic enim et grammatica dividit et oratoria declamat et arithmetica numerat et geometrica metitur et musica ponderat ...

[Claudianus] makes it clear that the nine so-called Muses are branches of learning, not females. In his pages the vigilant reader will find the truer names of the Latin Muses, who themselves bring forth the appellations appropriate to them; for in that work grammar classifies, rhetoric declaims, arithmetic numbers, geometry measures, music modulates ...

Instead of reproducing the traditional names of the nine Muses, as Ausonius had done before him,<sup>54</sup> Sidonius points to the 'truer names' (*verioria nomina*) of the Latin Muses as branches of learning such as rhetoric and geometry. But this is not a final statement on Sidonius' own interaction with the figures of Classical inspiration. We saw earlier how Corippus teased his audience as to the identity of his inspired goddesses (*divae*); Sidonius Apollinaris demonstrates a similar keenness to exploit the complex interplay between Christian and traditional modes of inspiration. His *Euchariston ad Faustum Episcopum* (16) neatly exploits the ambiguous relationship between the two discourses. The letter begins as follows:

Phoebum et ter ternas decima cum Pallade Musas  
Orpheaque et laticem simulatum fontis equini

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Ogygiamque chelyn, quae saxa sequacia flectens  
cantibus auritos erexit carmine muros

Phoebus and the nine Muses together with Pallas as tenth, Orpheus and the fabled water of the horse's spring, and the Theban lute that with its music moved the stones to follow it and raised by its strains the eagerly-listening walls.

In these opening lines we are encouraged to believe that Sidonius has called upon an array of inspirational figures from the Classical world for assistance in his poem to a Christian bishop. The extraordinary possibility of such a reading is, however, brought abruptly to an end in line five, by means of a delayed rejection: *sperne, fidis* ('reject, o lyre'). Instead of the inspiration of the Muses, Sidonius calls upon the Holy Spirit (5): *magis ille veni nunc spiritus, oro* ('Rather do you come, O great Spirit, I pray'). It is this Spirit that, as Sidonius goes on to recount, inspired (by various ways and means) a long array of Biblical figures including Miriam, Judith, Gideon and Jonah. Sidonius' teasing strategy at the start of this Christian poem works precisely because of the topicality of inspiration, because of the perceived inappropriateness of calling upon the Muses and associated figures of Classical inspiration within a poem dedicated to a bishop.

Thus far attention has tended to focus on literary evidence from the Latin West.<sup>55</sup> It is notable that the literary sources of the Greek East offer few clear instances of the 'topos of rejection' so familiar from the literature of the Latin West. This apparent lack of explicit debate about the role of Classical inspiration and about the role of the Classical tradition more broadly within an increasingly Christian world is consonant with the view expressed by R.A. Markus concerning the difference between East and West: 'In the Greek-speaking East there had never been a strong sense of discontinuity between Christian and pagan, between sacred and secular, which ... had been so characteristic of the Latin ... Christian tradition.'<sup>56</sup> However, it is important that we are not beguiled into thinking that for the Eastern Empire there was no issue about the role of Classical modes of inspiration within a Christian world. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, makes a clear substitution of the breath of the Muse for the breath of the Holy Spirit at *Arcana* 1.22-3: 'Spirit of God (*pneuma theou*), may you stir my mind and my tongue, loud-blaring trumpet of truth'.<sup>57</sup> One might likewise consider the following epigram from the Christian tradition of the Greek East (*AP* 1.23):

Son, co-eternal with the immortal Father, Lord of all, who rules over all things in Heaven, in the Sea and on Earth, give to your servant Marinus who wrote this book the grace (*charin*) of eloquence and of wisdom in speech. (tr. W.R. Paton)

As with the poets of the Latin West, Marinus' epigram here performs a subtle appropriation of the traditional Classical mechanism of inspiration.

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First Marinus asks Christ for *charis* ('grace') – a quality that is closely connected with the traditional Muses, particularly through the personified figures, the Charites ('Graces').<sup>58</sup> According to Hesiod, the Charites live near the Muses.<sup>59</sup> Poets rely on the support of both the Muses and the Charites. In the words of Gutzwiller, 'The Muses have the power to make present for the composer the places and times of the past so that he may celebrate the deeds of heroes and gods. The Charites add ... pleasure, sweetness, charm.'<sup>60</sup> One of the most well-established features of the relationship between the poet and his Muse was that the poet would issue his call for inspiration and eloquence at the start of his work.<sup>61</sup> In the light of this tradition it is noteworthy that Marinus should call upon Christ not at the beginning, but only after the work has been completed. We are witness here perhaps to the revolutionary nature of Christ's inspiration – a retrospective power that is able to turn the Classical tradition on its head.

### The silence of the oracles

Paulinus, in his rejection of Classical culture, eschewed the tradition of poetic inspiration that came from the Muses together with divine knowledge that was supplied by oracles. Although there is a clear difference between poetic and oracular inspiration, there are important similarities between the two arenas.<sup>62</sup> Both poetic inspiration and oracular utterance involve communication with the world of the divine. Apollo is the god associated with both of these routes to divine knowledge – the one controlled by poets, the other by priests. The difference between poetic and oracular inspiration is itself frequently elided within the literary tradition. Paulinus blurs the distinction between poetic inspiration and the inspiration of the oracles when he describes how he used to join with Ausonius in summoning Apollo 'from his Delphic cave'. The reference to the Delphic cave recalls Apollo's function as the god of oracular knowledge (rather than 'simply' as god of poetry); Clement, in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, expresses a similarly close connection between poetry and prophecy [2.24]: 'This is what the prophetic and poetic Sibyl (*hē prophētikē ... kai poiētikē Sibylla*) enjoins on us'. Here the 'prophetic' Sibyl has taken on the mantle of the 'poetic' Muse.

Given the close connection that was perceived between Classical inspiration and oracular utterance it is no surprise that both these routes to divine authority were subject to debate and critique within late antique writers. The idea of the emptiness of 'pagan' prophecy and inspiration is exploited by a range of late antique authors: it was apparently not enough to suggest, as Paulinus had done, that Apollo was deaf (*surdum ... Phoebum*) – with implications perhaps of senescence and decrepitude; time and again, as we shall see, writers express the idea that the god of prophecy had lost his voice and that the traditional sites of oracular power had now ceased to function. In AD 390 the Delphic oracle was closed down by the

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emperor Theodosius. Already in the second century AD, however, the silence of the traditional oracular sites was being noisily affirmed. In the words of Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus* 2.10-11):

Do not therefore seek diligently after godless sanctuaries, nor after mouths of caverns full of jugglery, nor the Thesprotian cauldron ... The Castalian spring, at least, is all silent. So is the spring of Colophon; and the rest of the prophetic streams are likewise dead. Stripped of their absurd pretensions, though none too soon, they are at last thoroughly exposed; the waters have run dry together with the legends attached to them. Relate to me the utterly vain utterances of that other form of divination – I should rather say hallucination – the oracles of Apollo: Clarian, Pythian and Didymean ... (tr. G.W. Butterworth)

Paradoxically, Clement's declaration in prose about the silence of the oracles as locations of inspired utterance has inspired in him some of his most poetic and impassioned language. The oracle sites are referred to allusively, without giving them their obvious names: the Thesprotian cauldron refers to Dodona, the Castalian spring to Delphi, the spring of Colophon to Clarus in Lydia. Reality then blends with metaphor as Clement explains how the legends about the oracular springs – as well as the springs themselves – have all run dry. He even plays with the traditional language of inspiration when he says 'relate to me' – in just the same way that a poet would call upon his Muse.

Clement's insistence on the silence of the oracles was approvingly endorsed by bishop Eusebius in the early fourth century (*Praep. Evang.* 4.2):

For where will you find the temple that was at Delphi, celebrated from the earliest times among all the Greeks? Where is the Pythian god? Where the Clarian? Where even the god of Dodona? As for the Delphian shrine, the story goes that it was burnt a third time by Thracians, the oracle not having been able to give any help to the knowledge of what was coming, nor the Pythian god himself to guard his own abode ... (tr. E.H. Gifford)

By means of a series of rhetorical questions Eusebius flags up the failure of all the leading sites of Greek oracular knowledge. The fact that Delphi had been sacked three times is used by Eusebius to prove his case. After all, as he goes on to say: 'it is not likely that they who have been of no use to themselves in misfortunes would ever be able to give help to others'.

The silence of the ancient oracles was also a matter of clear concern to the short-lived emperor Julian 'the apostate'.<sup>63</sup> During the winter of 361-2, Julian was resident in Antioch where he tried to revive an ancient oracle at the temple of Apollo at Daphne. The oracular site was centred on a spring called Castalia (a name that clearly recalls the famous Castalian spring at Delphi); traditionally priests would interpret the bubbling of the water and issue oracular pronouncements.<sup>64</sup> The alleged reason for the silence of the oracle at Daphne was the presence of the bones of Babyllas,

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a third-century bishop. Much to the outrage of the local population Julian had the bones exhumed and reburied elsewhere. A fire then destroyed the temple of Apollo for which the Christian community were then blamed.<sup>65</sup>

It is against this specific backdrop that the fourth-century poet Gregory of Nazianzus adds his own voice to the *topos* of the silent oracle. Now that Julian has died, Gregory reasserts that the oracular voice really has been silenced.<sup>66</sup>

No more (*ouk eti*) does the Oak speak; no more (*ouk eti*) does the Cauldron give oracles; no more (*ouk eti*) is the Pythia filled with I know not what, except stories and nonsense. Once again (*palin*) Castalia has been silenced and is silent – its water is no longer a source of oracles, but a laughing-stock; once again (*palin*) Apollo is a voiceless statue; once again (*palin*) Daphne is a tree lamented in story.

Like Clement before him Gregory takes up the story of the silence of the oracles with gusto. The passage above comprises just two sentences. Each sentence is constructed as a *tricolon* (the first sentence as a *tricolon crescendo*) forcefully underlined by the *anaphora* of *ouk eti* and *palin* respectively. Once again the oracles are referred to in an elliptical manner. Readers must divine for themselves that the ‘oak’ and the ‘Cauldron’ refer to Dodona and that the ‘Pythia’ refers to Delphi. The reference to the Castalian spring follows on straight after a reference to Delphi and we are led to assume that this is the Delphic Castalia; the mention of Apollo serves to reinforce this reading. However Gregory wrong-foots his readers: the subsequent reference to Daphne (in the final part of the tricolon) demands that readers revise their interpretation – it is not Delphi, but the oracular site at Daphne that is being described. The misreading encouraged by Gregory may seem to be slight in terms of its literary implications, but it makes an important hermeneutic point: the interpretation of oracles just like the interpretation of texts is not to be taken for granted.

Towards the end of the fourth century the emperor Theodosius promulgated his edict on the closure of all temples and oracle sites. Throughout his reign Theodosius had become gradually more intolerant towards the ‘pagan’ past: in 390 the Delphic oracle was officially closed; in 391 the Serapeum was destroyed; in 392 temples of pagan cults closed; in the performance of traditional sacrifices was decreed as an act of treason against the emperor; at the same time ‘pagan’ libraries were forced to close.<sup>67</sup> It was at this time that the poet Prudentius made his own contribution to the *topos* of the silence of the oracles (*Apotheosis* 435-48):

ex quo mortalem praestrinxit spiritus alvum,  
spiritus ille dei, deus et se corpore matris  
induit, atque hominem de virginitate creavit;  
Delphica damnatis tacuerunt sortibus antra,  
non tripodas Cortina tegit, non spumat anhelus

fata Sibyllinis fanaticus edita libris. 440  
perdidit insanos mendax Dodona vapores,  
mortua iam mutae lugent oracula Cumae,  
nec responsa refert Libycis in Syrtibus Ammon:  
ipsa suis Christum Capitolia Romula maerent  
principibus lucere deum destructaque templa 445  
imperio cecidisse ducum: iam purpura supplex  
sternitur Aeneadae rectoris ad atria Christi,  
vexillumque crucis summus dominator adorat.

Since the spirit, that Spirit who is God, touched a mortal womb and God entered into a mother's body and by a virgin made himself man, the cavern of Delphi has fallen silent, its oracles condemned; no longer does the cauldron direct responses from the tripod. No longer does a priest possessed utter with foaming mouth and panting breath fates drawn from Sibylline Books. Lying Dodona has lost its maddening vapours; Cumae is dumb and mourns for its dead oracles; and Ammon returns no answer in the deserts of Libya. The very Capitol at Rome laments that Christ is the God who sheds light for her emperors and her temples have fallen in ruins at her leaders' commands. Now the successor of Aeneas, in the imperial purple, prostrates himself in prayer at the house of Christ, and the supreme lord adores the banner of the cross. (tr. H.J. Thomson)

Prudentius creates a roll call of all the great oracular sites located across the Roman Empire from Delphi and Dodona in Greece to Cumae in Italy (all sacred to Apollo) and Jupiter Ammon in Africa. These famous sites from the Classical world are not just described as having lost their power – in a novel twist on the silent oracle *topos* we are encouraged to think about the active discomfort of these 'pagan' divinities and sites in the face of a triumphant Christ: Cumae 'mourns' (*lugent*) the death of her oracles; the Capitol of Romulus 'grieves' (*maerent*) because it is now Christ who sheds light on its leaders. The prostration of the 'successor of Aeneas' (i.e. the Roman Emperor) before Christ invites ironic recollection of Virgil and his own story of Aeneas. Certainly, *sternitur Aeneadae* has a clear Virgilian ring to it (cf. *Aen.* 10.429). Like the Emperor, Prudentius, the 'successor of Virgil', has also turned to Christ – though still rooted in the poetic tradition of the past.

What is most obvious, but nonetheless significant, about the *topos* of the silent oracles is that writers should feel the need to draw attention so insistently to the fact that Apollo (the god of prophecy and inspiration) and the oracle sites of the Classical world have lost their power. That writers felt it necessary to emphasise time and again the silence of the oracles suggests that the theme of prophecy and inspiration continued to exert a powerful influence, that the traditional routes to divine knowledge still presented a challenge and threat to a newly emerging Christian age. After all, why make an issue over something that is no longer an issue?

**The poet of the Muses**  
**Continuity: expressions of similarity**

In my exploration of the poet of Christ I have emphasised the development of a literary discourse that questioned, rejected, reappropriated and re-fashioned the Classical past to suit a new world order. I come now to a quite different corpus of late antique poetry that does not engage explicitly with Christian themes. Traditionally those poets who express a close affiliation with the Classical tradition (in contrast with those who write about explicitly Christian themes) have been characterised as ‘pagan’ or ‘secular’ and as a result their poetic output has been marginalised, even trivialised. As explored in the preceding chapter such categorisation risks oversimplifying and misrepresenting the continuation of a strong Classical tradition of poetry throughout the period of late antiquity. In place of ‘pagan’ or ‘secular’ poets I wish to consider the Classical *persona* adopted and adapted by a range of poets from both the Latin West and the Greek East. Some of these poets also deploy a Christian *persona*; others adhere solely to Classical modes of expression (in the extant works that are attributed to them).

Continuity with the Classical world, a sense of belonging to the same tradition, is demonstrated in both form and content. Mythological poetry demonstrates a particularly strong (and obvious) continuity with the past. Quintus of Smyrna, probably writing in the third century AD, begins at the very point where Homer left off at the end of the *Iliad*, as if unaware of the thousand years that divide them.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the *epyllia* of Triphiodorus, Colluthus and Musaeus and the vast epic of Nonnus take their inspiration (together with the same metrical form of the hexameter line) from stock mythological themes from the Classical tradition such as the Trojan war and the story of Dionysus.

On the face of it, then, the Classical *persona* gives the impression that the new force of inspiration ushered in by Christ has simply failed to register on the poetic record. Poets of the Classical tradition seem able to invoke the Muses in the manner of Homer and Hesiod, without any reference to the debate about inspiration and the new force of Christianity that was raging around them. The fourth-century Triphiodorus, for example, true to Classical form, calls on the Muse Calliopeia at the start of his *epyllion* to tell the story of the end of the Trojan war (albeit in abbreviated form). His appeal ‘tell, Calliopeia’ (*ennepe, Kalliopeia*, 5) looks straight back to the opening of Homer’s *Odyssey*: ‘tell, Muse’ (*ennepe, Mousa*, 1.1). Towards the conclusion of the poem Triphiodorus talks about himself in traditional metaphorical terms as a charioteer of poetry (634-7): ‘All the multitude of strife and the sorrows of that night I could not sing, distinguishing each event. This is the Muses’ task (*Mousaôn hode mochthos*); and I shall drive, as it were a horse, a song which, wheeling about, grazes the turning-post.’<sup>69</sup> The inability of the poet to function without the aid of

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the Muse is itself a *topos* of traditional poetry and can be traced back to Homer and his appeal to the Muses at the beginning of the Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* 2.<sup>70</sup>

Consider too the following four lines addressed by the poet Claudian to a certain Aeternalis (3 (81) 1-4):

quidquid Castalio de gurgite Phoebus anhelat,  
quidquid fatidico mugit Cortina recessu,  
carmina sunt; sed verba negant communia Musae.  
carmina sola loquor: sic me meus implet Apollo.

Phoebus' every breath from the Castalian spring, the tripod's every moan within the shrine of prophecy – all these are poetry. Of prose the Muses will have none. In poetry only can I express myself, so wholly does my patron, Apollo, possess me. (tr. M. Platnauer)

The machinery of Classical inspiration is used here to illuminate a stock antithesis between poetry and prose and does not in any obvious way touch on questions about the relevance of Classical inspiration in a late antique world. In the preface to Book 3 of *De consulatu Stilichonis*, Claudian's exploration of the powerful position of the poet is one that appears to be similarly rooted in the Classical past, not the Christian present. Here Claudian describes the relationship between the poet who sings of great deeds and the hero who performs them – a theme that can traced back once again to Homer's *Iliad* (3.4-6):<sup>71</sup>

semper erat vatium maxima cura duci.  
gaudet enim virtus testes sibi iungere Musas;  
carmen amat quisquis carmine digna gerit.

Poets were ever the hero's special care. For valour always likes to seek alliance with the Muses that they may bear witness to her deeds; he loves song whose exploits deserve the meed of song.

It is easy to be beguiled into accepting the rhetoric of Classical continuity. Nevertheless, however deeply rooted in the Classical tradition these scenes of invocation may appear, it has to be remembered that the poet of the Muses, just like the poet of Christ belonged to, and was embedded within, the world of late antiquity. To address the Muse in the fifth century AD was *not* the same as to address the Muse in the fifth century BC, for even if the words used are the same, the world had changed.<sup>72</sup> Although the poet may consciously engage with the pre-Christian Classical tradition, it was impossible for him to call upon the Muse from within a cultural vacuum. Consider, for example, the preface to the second book of *In Rufinum*, where Claudian again draws on the Classical language of inspiration in order to allude to the victory of Stilicho over Alaric in Greece in AD 397 ((4)1-2; 5-8):

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pandite defensum reduces Helicon sorores,  
pandite; permissis iam licet ire choris:  
...tu quoque securis pulsa formidine Delphis  
floribus ultorem, Delie, cinge tuum.  
nullus Castalios lattices et praescia fati  
flumina polluto barbarus ore bibit.

Throw open rescued Helicon, you sisters [Muses] who have been led back, throw it open; now again may your company gather there ... Do you too, Delian Apollo, now that Delphi is safe and fear has been dispelled, wreath your avenger with flowers. No barbarian with polluted mouth drinks Castalian waters and the streams that have knowledge of fate.

In the guise of the poet of the Muses, Claudian gives the impression of complete immersion into the Classical tradition. Thanks to Stilicho, Helicon (the home of the Muses), and Delphi (the centre of Apolline inspiration), are safe once more. Yet the news of the salvation of Delphi is hard to divorce from the contemporary late antique context of this poem: by the date of Stilicho's victory, as we have seen, the Delphic oracle had already been officially abolished by Theodosius.

The poets of the Muses actively exploit the language of inspiration in order to place themselves within a long and continuous poetic tradition that stretches back seamlessly (or so they would have us believe) to Homer and the very beginning of literary culture. It is not, however, just through direct appeals to the Muses that these poets attempt to express their continuity with the literary traditions of Virgil and Homer, Horace and Pindar. Not only is their poetry written in Classical meters, but it is crammed with explicit quotations and allusions. Through their numerous references to the names of poets, writers and myths they are able to give the impression that they are still very much part of the Classical tradition and inhabitants of a Classical world. As Penelope Murray has said, 'speaking in the voice of another is in some sense to become that person'.<sup>73</sup>

For the poet of the Muses in late antiquity the practice of Classical 'name-dropping' becomes almost *de rigueur*.<sup>74</sup> Take the following exuberant passage from Sidonius Apollinaris, a roll call of eleven writers in as many lines (2.182-93):

praeterea quidquid Latialibus indere libris  
prisca aetas studuit, totum percurrere suetus:  
Mantua quas acies pelagique pericula ludit  
Zmyrnaeas imitata tubas, quamquamque loquendi  
Arpinas dat consul opem, sine fine secutus  
fabro progenitum, spreto cui patre polita  
eloquiis plus lingua fuit, vel quidquid in aevum  
mittunt Euganeis Patavina volumina chartis;  
qua Crispus brevitate placet, quo pondere Varro,

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quo genio Plautus, quo fulmine Quintilianus,  
qua pompa Tacitus numquam sine laude loquendus.  
his hunc formatum studiis, natalibus ortum ...

Besides these he was wont to range through all that antiquity strove to inscribe on Latin pages: the battles and the dangers of the deep that Mantua paraded [Virgil], copying the trumpet-tones of Smyrna [Homer]; whatever power of speech the consul of Arpinum [Cicero] affords, he who follows without ceasing that smith's son for whom a tongue polished by eloquence was worth more than a spurned father [Demosthenes]; or again whatever the volumes from Padua [Livy] deliver for all time in those Euganean pages; the brevity by means of which Crispus gives pleasure [Sallust], the weightiness of Varro, the wit of Plautus, the lightning of Quintilian, and the majesty of Tacitus, never to be spoken of without praise. By such studies was he moulded, from such lineage sprung. (tr. W.B. Anderson)

A number of Classical authors are playfully identified by means of toponyms: Mantua (Virgil); Smyrna (Homer); Arpinum (Cicero); Padua (Livy). The description of Virgil's poetic output as battle lines (*acies*) and the dangers of the deep (*pelagique pericula*) appears to allude to the Iliadic (war) and Odyssean (wandering) elements of the *Aeneid*.<sup>75</sup> The connection with Homer is made yet clearer with the detail that Virgil has copied the trumpets of Smyrna – one of the cities that was traditionally claimed as the birthplace of Homer.

After epic poetry comes the prose of Cicero ('the consul from Arpinum'). Just as Virgil is described as following in the steps of Homer, so Cicero is himself located within a tradition that looks back to the world of Greece: the craftsman's son (*fabro progenitum*) refers us to the famous Attic orator Demosthenes whose father had been a swordmaker; the 'tongue polished by eloquence' (*polita eloquiis lingua*) recalls the story of how Demosthenes polished his declamatory skill by speaking with pebbles in his mouth and competing with the crash of waves on the sea-shore. Historians have a prominent place in Sidonius' catalogue. Among these is Crispus – a reference to Sallust, picked out for praise because of the 'brevity' of his style. As Sidonius' readers would no doubt appreciate, the description of Sallustian style, 'the brevity by means of which Crispus gives pleasure' (*qua Crispus brevitate placet*), constitutes the briefest description of any author in the list so far.

This is not just a playful exercise in antiquarian list making, but an intellectual dialogue with the past, an attempt to keep open a conversation with the Classical tradition – to make the past relevant to the present. Importantly we learn that these great names of the Classical past do not merely provide lessons to be learned (*formatum studiis*). Sidonius makes the claim that the addressee of his poem is indeed descended from the writers of the Classical tradition: 'from such lineages sprung' (*natalibus ortum*). Ironically, however, the sheer number of names invoked in this

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passage and the insistence on a direct link with the past serve to emphasise difference, not similarity; rupture, not continuity.

It is of course not just the names of the Classical writers that are invoked by the poets of the Muses in their bid to express their connection with the Classical tradition, but the very words of those writers as well. Consider for example the opening to the seventh book of Ausonius' *Eclogues*, dedicated to his son Drepanius (7.1.1-12):

cui dono lepidum novum libellum?  
Veronensis ait poeta quondam  
inventoque dedit statim Nepoti.  
at nos inlepidum, rudem libellum,  
burras, quisquilias ineptiasque, 5  
credemus gremio cui fovendum?  
inveni, trepidae silete nugae,  
nec doctum minus et magis benignum,  
quam quem Gallia praebuit Catullo.  
hoc nullus mihi carior meorum, 10  
quem pluris faciunt novem sorores,  
quam cunctos alios Marone dempto.

'To whom do I give my elegant, new pamphlet?' the poet of Verona once said, and, immediately found Nepos to give it to. But this inelegant, rough pamphlet – junk, trash, and drivelling – to whose lap shall I commit it to be cherished? I have found someone – silence, my anxious trifles – no less learned and more generous than him with whom Gaul furnished Catullus. No one of my own is dearer to me than he, and the Nine Sisters esteem him more highly than all others, with the exception of Maro [Virgil].

Catullus' own words (*cui dono lepidum novum libellum?* – the opening line of his own first poem) become a starting point for Ausonius' poem, the opening of a dialogue between past and present.<sup>76</sup> At a fundamental level this can be seen as an attempt to bring back the voices of the past into an active dialogue with the present. But however much the poets of late antiquity strive to bring the Classical world to life within their work, it is a world that still remains irrevocably distant and other. The poets of the Muses are in fact profoundly aware of their own sense of belatedness, aware too of the ultimate irrecoverability of the past: as Ausonius says, Catullus spoke 'once upon a time' (*quondam*).

The past functions as an important measuring stick against which the present may be set. As Ausonius' first *Eclogue* shows, the relationship between the past and the present is complex and often ambivalent. In contrast with the *libellus* of Catullus, Ausonius declares that his own pamphlet is *inlepidus* ('inelegant') and *rudis* ('rough'). The inferiority of Ausonius' work takes its terms of reference from Catullus' description of his own work as *lepidum* ('elegant') and *arida modo pumice expoliturum* ('just now polished with dry pumice'). Part of the game here is that if we

have read Catullus we know that his opening poem is a masterpiece of ironic self-deprecation. He gives his work to Nepos because he used to think that Catullus' trifles' (*nugae*) were worth something. It seems clear that we should understand Ausonius' deprecating remarks about his own *libellus* as similarly ironic. The apparent 'roughness' of Ausonius' work is undercut by the sophisticated intertextual relationship that it displays with Catullus' poetry. We have already seen how the judgement about Ausonius' poetry plays off and explicitly contrasts with the description of Catullus' own *libellus* as elegant and polished. Ausonius further describes his work as *ineptias* ('drivelling'), using an image drawn straight from Catullus 8.1: 'wretched Catullus, stop playing the fool' (*miser Catulle, desinas ineptire*).<sup>77</sup> Similarly, when Ausonius asks of his *libellus* into whose lap he should commit it to be cherished (*credemus gremio cui fovendum*) the conceit again may be traced back to Catullus – not in his opening poem, but borrowed from poem 3.8 on the death of Lesbia's pet bird: *nec sese a gremio illius movebat* ('nor did it move from her lap'). At the end of the poem the reference to the Muses ('nine sisters': *novem sorores*) itself recalls the end of Catullus' first poem which mentions a mysterious and inspirational 'patron maiden' (*patrona virgo*).

Ausonius' ambivalent relationship with Catullus takes a new turn when he asserts that, although his poetry may be inferior, his son Drepanius, the dedicatee of the poem, is 'no less learned' (*nec doctum minus*) than Nepos, Catullus' dedicatee – and actually a 'nicer person' (*magis benignum*).<sup>78</sup> The final playful sting in the tail is that Drepanius, in the estimation of the Muses themselves, is 'second only to ... Virgil' (*Marone dempto*). One might have imagined a reference to Catullus here since it is Catullus who has loomed so large throughout the poem, but instead the poet of Verona is swept aside in favour of the poet from Padua. Catullus had ended his opening poem with a prayer to his muse that his book of poetry might last for more than one century (*plus uno maneat perenne saeclo*). Ausonius' sudden shift from Catullus to Virgil seems to respond to Catullus' prayer, hinting at the fragility, even fickleness, of the literary tradition; it also demonstrates the power of the late antique poet as gatekeeper to the Classical world: Catullus needs Ausonius to keep his work and his words alive just as much as Ausonius needs Catullus.

Notwithstanding the attempt of poets of the Muses to locate themselves within the Classical literary tradition, and to elide the distance between past and present, the Classical tradition is nevertheless often referred to as something clearly distinct from the present. Significant attention is drawn to the (old) age of the Classical tradition: it is *vetustas*, *antiquitas*, *senes*.<sup>79</sup> Triphiodorus' narrative, as we have already seen, presents itself as a continuation of the story of the Trojan War that seeks to mask the chronological distance between him and Homer; at the same time the poet does not fail to draw attention to the fact that the story that he is trying to tell belongs to the past, when he asks the Muse to sing of the 'ancient strife of men' (*kai archaiên erin andrôn*, 4).

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A further characteristic of the poetry of the Muses is a neurotic dialogue between inferiority and self-confidence with regards to the Classical tradition – a desire to express both similarity and difference at the same time. At times the present seems able to live up to, or at least resemble, the noble examples of the past, as the following lines, again from Ausonius, suggest (5.21.13-18):

nam tu Crispo coniuncte tuo  
prosa solebas et versa loqui  
impete eodem,  
priscos ut [mox] heroas olim  
carmine Homeri commemoratos  
fando referres

For in the company of your friend Crispus you would pour out a flood of words in prose and verse with equal ease and with such eloquence as to remind us of those heroes sung by old Homer. (tr. H.G. Evelyn-White)

At other times the self-confidence of the present comes to the fore. In a poem by Claudian written in honour of the marriage of the emperor Honorius, the emperor's qualities put him above the gods and heroes of the Classical world (*Fescennina de nuptiis Honorii Augusti* 1 (11) 6-9):

te Leda mallet quam dare Castorem;  
praefert Achilli te proprio Thetis;  
victum fatetur Delos Apollinem;  
credit minorem Lydia Liberum.

Leda would rather have you as her son than Castor; Thetis prefers you to her own Achilles; Delos declares that Apollo has been vanquished; Lydia holds that Liber [Bacchus] is inferior.

In the Eastern half of the empire Nonnus describes the battle that rages through the first two books of his epic *Dionysiaca* with a similar self-confidence (*Dion.* 2.359-63):

No herds of cattle were the cause of that struggle, no flocks of sheep, this was no quarrel for a beautiful woman, no fray for a petty town: heaven itself was the stake in the fight, the sceptre and throne of Zeus lay on the knees of Victory as the prize of combat.

The poet clearly has the story of the Trojan War – and specifically Homer – in his sights. The abduction of Helen (a 'quarrel for a beautiful woman') and the whole of the narrative of the Trojan War (a 'fray for a petty town') are dismissed in little more than a line; in pointed contrast we are told that *this* fight is much more important. The comparison is sharpened by means of a specific allusion to the duel between Achilles and Hector at *Iliad*

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22.159-61: 'for it was not for beast of sacrifice or for bull's hide that they strove, such as are men's prizes for swiftness of foot, but it was for the life of horse-taming Hector that they ran.' Nonnus alludes to Homer in order to beat him at his own game, because his narrative concerns not the fate of one man, but of the very sceptre and throne of Zeus – heaven itself.

At the start of *Dionysiaca* 25 Nonnus again declares the superiority of his narrative in comparison with other narratives of war (*Dion.* 25.22-8):

Time never saw before another struggle like the Eastern War, nor after the Indian War in later days has Enyo seen its equal. No such army came to Ilion, no such host of men. But I will set up the toils and sweat of Dionysus in rivalry with both new and old (*neoisi kai archegonoisin erizôn*).

The army of Dionysus, Nonnus suggests, is the biggest that has ever been seen and is therefore able to trump Homer's account of the war at Troy – at least numerically. Nonnus' strategy is complicated by the fact that the Indian War is chronologically anterior to the Trojan War, while Nonnus is obviously writing at a much later point than Homer. Nonnus' relationship with Homer is far more nuanced than this 'top-trumps' strategy of literary competition suggests, however. Consider the following passage in which Nonnus turns to address Homer directly (*Dion* 25.253-61):

O brilliant son of Meles [Homer], deathless herald of Achaia, may your book pardon me, immortal as the dawn! I will not speak of the Trojan War; for I do not compare Dionysus to Aiacydes or Deriades to Hector. Your Muse ought to have hymned so great and mighty a struggle, how Bacchus brought low the Giants, and ought to have left the labours of Achilles to other bards, had not Thetis stolen that glory from you.

On the face of it Nonnus openly acknowledges the superiority of Homer, the deathless herald of Achaia. He explicitly states that Homer is not a target for competition. But his statement that he will not mention the Trojan War and will not compare his heroes with those of Homer is a classic *praeteritio* – clearly not to be taken at face value. Nonnus continues his oblique criticism of Homer by implying that his own subject is superior to Homer's and that Homer ought to have taken up the story of Dionysus.

At other times the poet of the Muses acknowledges his inferiority in the face of the Classical tradition. Such a relationship is precisely analogous with that of the poet of Christ who expresses his lack of training in/familiarity with the Classical tradition, but compensates for this apparent failing with a more 'important' subject matter. Although later critics have been tempted to take this acknowledgment at face value, it may be better understood as an ironic and often sophisticated performance by the late antique poet to demonstrate his own superiority. Consider the following lines by Sidonius (4.15-18):

## 2. *Inspiration and Authority: The Voice of the Poet in Late Antiquity*

non ego mordaci fodiam modo dente Maronem  
nec civem carpam, terra Sabella, tuum.  
res minor ingenio nobis, sed Caesare maior;  
vincant eloquio, dummodo nos domino.

I shall not now pick at Maro [Virgil] with a carping tooth or criticise your citizen, Sabine land [Horace]. My work is inferior in talent, but it is greater in its Caesar. Let them surpass me in eloquence, so long as I surpass them in my master.

Sidonius openly admits that his talent is ‘inferior’ (*minor*) to the likes of Virgil and Horace. However, this admission is tempered by his declaration that the Caesar about whom he sings is ‘superior’ (*maior*). This Caesar is in fact not only *maior* by nature but MAIORianus by name. Sidonius’ punning here serves to undercut the suggestion of any real inferiority as to his ability (*ingenium*). His poetic ability is further supported by the literary reference to Horace in *terra Sabella*.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, for those readers who are well versed in Horace, the immediately preceding phrase *nec civem carpam* (‘I shall not criticise the citizen’) hints playfully at Horace’s celebrated imperative at *Odes* 1.11.8: *carpe diem* (‘seize the day’).<sup>81</sup>

At the beginning of his epic poem *Iohannis*, the sixth-century Corripus calls in Classical mode on the Latin Muses: *Aeneadas rursus cupiunt resonare Camenae* (‘the Latin Muses desire to echo again the followers of Aeneas’). This is an undertaking that Corripus approaches with a certain anxiety. In his ‘Preface to leading Carthaginians’ (*Praefatio ad proceres Carthaginienses*) he expresses his feelings of poetic inadequacy on account of his lack of culture. At *Praef.* 28 he describes his Muse as ‘rustic’ i.e. unsophisticated (*Musa est rustica ... mea*); at *Praef.* 37 Corripus imagines this same unsophisticated Muse doing battle with the Roman Muses i.e. Virgil (*rustica Romanis ... certat Musa Camenis*). Here the implicit admission of a lack of culture is undercut first by the very fact that Corripus is engaging with the *topos* of inspiration and the figures of *Musae* and *Camenae* at all, and second by the careful crafting of the line into the formation a b C A B that was famously described by Dryden as ‘that verse which they call Golden, of two substantives and two adjectives with a verb betwixt to keep the peace’: (*rustica* [a] *Romanis* [b] ... *certat* [C] *Musa* [A] *Camenis* [B]).<sup>82</sup>

### The poets of late antiquity

I have outlined above two different poetic ‘personalities’ that emerge from the literature of late antiquity. The first, as exemplified by Paulinus of Nola, presents a new poet of Christ who declares a noisy and absolute breach with the traditions of the Classical world (poetic dissent); the second, exemplified by Ausonius, is the poet of the Muses who is consciously positioned within a tradition that stretches back to Virgil and Homer (poetic descent). We have seen in both cases that the positions

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adopted cannot be taken at face value: for the poet of Christ, the rhetoric of difference and rupture masks a significant degree of similarity and continuity with the Classical tradition; for the poet of the Muses the rhetoric of similarity and continuity masks a significant degree of difference and rupture.

From the investigation above it is apparent that many of the same concerns and rhetorical positions, the same obsessive and playful interest in the power of words and intertexts, are common to both the 'traditional' poet of the Muses and the 'new' poet of Christ.<sup>83</sup> All late antique poets, regardless of the *personae* that they choose to employ, share similar anxieties in their bids to establish and demonstrate their authoritative positions. For these poets (as for all poets) the past and the present are not absolute and unchanging realities, but constructs – and it is through poetic discourse (among other forms of communication) that essential concepts of past and present, of Christian and Classical, and of identity itself, are debated, shaped and defined.

### **Inspiration at large**

In this brief concluding section I want to turn away from the role of inspiration within the poetry of late antiquity, in order to consider how the notion of inspiration and the figure of the Muse resonated within late antique culture more widely. Beyond the poetic record it is remarkable to observe the extent to which the material culture of late antiquity abounds with images that celebrate the vital force of inspiration: Apollo and the Muses, along with Dionysus and his inspired and intoxicated retinue, appear again and again on textiles, sculptures and mosaics, on ivory, cups and salvers.<sup>84</sup> My particular focus here, however, is on the emperor Constantine and the way that he exploited the discourses of Classical inspiration as part of his self-presentation.

Bishop Eusebius, writing in the fourth century AD, had no doubts about the motives of Constantine in bringing to his newly-founded city statues and works of art from across the Roman world.<sup>85</sup> The emperor, he said,

... confuted the superstitious error of the heathen in all sorts of ways ... the sacred bronze figures, of which the error of the ancients had for a long time been proud, he displayed to all the public in all the squares of the Emperor's city, so that in one place the Pythian [Apollo] was displayed as a contemptible spectacle to the viewers, in another the Sminthian [Apollo]; in the Hippodrome itself the tripods from Delphi, and the Muses of Helicon at the palace. The city named after the Emperor was filled throughout with objects of skilled artwork in bronze dedicated in various provinces. To these under the name of gods those sick with error had for long ages vainly offered innumerable hecatombs and whole burnt sacrifices, but now they at last learnt sense, as the Emperor used these very toys for the laughter and amusement of the spectators.<sup>86</sup>

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What is most interesting here is not so much the spin put on Constantine's actions by Eusebius, but the images that Eusebius singles out for ridicule, chosen from all the Classical statues and 'pagan' relics that poured into Constantinople at this time.<sup>87</sup> What was it about Apollo, the Muses and the tripods from Delphi that motivated Eusebius to present them as such a contemptible spectacle to the viewers of his own work? And why indeed did Constantine place these particular statues and relics in such conspicuous and prominent positions around the city?

It is hard to resist the idea that by installing the Muses of Helicon in his palace, the Emperor was laying claim, in a very explicit way, to that traditional authority that was generated by a close relationship with the Muses. Such a gesture casts him in the protecting guise of Apollo and as such mimics the actions of Augustus, the first Roman emperor who encouraged a close identification between himself and the god Apollo (connecting, for example, his house on the Palatine with the temple and library of Apollo).<sup>88</sup>

The figures of the Muses whom Constantine now watches over in his palace invest the emperor and his city with impressive cultural authority. As we have seen the Muse figures both as a cultural signifier (broadly symbolic of Classical culture), but also as the instantiation of a mysterious and irrational force. It is this irrational aspect of inspiration, the dramatic confrontation between the human and the divine that is illustrated most clearly by the tripods of Delphi that, as Eusebius tells us, were placed in the Hippodrome for all to laugh at. From these seats the Pythia, priestess of Apollo (the god of poetry and prophecy) would utter her divinely-inspired revelations. Removed from the symbolic centre of the Classical world the tripods were now relocated in the centre of a new Christian world. Eusebius' forceful response suggests that these symbols of Classical inspiration retained the power to unnerve and disturb. For the emperor these figures were clearly more than just symbols of Classical culture, but were representative of a powerful and unpredictable force that he felt the need to contain and control.

Other evidence for the life of Constantine encourages us to think that the emperor's use of inspiration in this case was part of a longer-term engagement that helped to establish and consolidate his own authoritative position. The supernatural guidance that appeared to encourage Constantine in his victory over Maxentius in 312 AD, an episode famously described on the arch of Constantine (315 AD) as having taken place 'at the prompting of/through the inspiration of a divinity' (*instinctu divinitatis*),<sup>89</sup> is particularly relevant; so too the erection of a radiate statue of Constantine in the guise of Apollo on top of a column that marked the point where the emperor had announced the foundation of his new city, again at the prompting of a divine vision.<sup>90</sup>

To bring the Muses of Helicon to Constantinople was not just an exercise in nostalgic antiquarianism, but a highly charged and deeply

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political gesture. It pitched into the very centre of the new city far-reaching and dramatically relevant questions about the relationship between spheres of the human and the divine; about access to and control of knowledge, about the very place and value of traditional classical culture in a post-Classical world. Inspiration was not 'simply' the preserve of the poets, but was a force with the power to affect the whole of the late antique world.

## Christ and Dionysus: Nonnus' *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel

Nonnus of Panopolis is widely acknowledged as the author of two quite different hexameter poems, the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel. Both poems share an obvious linguistic relationship in terms of a common word-hoard of compound adjectives, distinctive phrases, sometimes whole lines.<sup>1</sup> Though linguistically very close, however, the poems have appeared sharply contrasting in terms of their content and ideological charge: the *Dionysiaca* is a 48-book epic that tells the story of Dionysus and his long struggle to earn a place in the heaven alongside his father Zeus; the *Paraphrase* is a 'translation' in epic style of the story of Christ based on the Gospel of St John. Successive generations of critics working within the intellectual framework of a rigid pagan/Christian dichotomy have struggled to come to terms with the idea that a 'Christian' *Paraphrase* and 'pagan' *Dionysiaca* could both be the product of a single author.<sup>2</sup>

The most imaginative 'solution' to the supposed problem of single authorship of two such contrasting poems was put forward in the late nineteenth century, not in a work of scholarship but in the form of a literary fiction. A short story by Richard Garnett (librarian for nearly 40 years at the British Museum) contained within his collection *Twilight of the Gods* works up the conceit of Nonnus' appointment to the bishopric of Panopolis:

Nonnus sat in his study, wrinkling his brow as he polished his verses by the light of a small lamp. A large scroll lay open on his knees, the contents of which seemed to afford him little satisfaction. Forty-eight more scrolls, resplendent with silver knobs and coquettishly tied with purple cord, reposed in an adjoining book-case; the forty-eight books, manifestly, of the Panopolitan bard's *Dionysiaca*. Homer, Euripides, and other poets lay on the floor, having apparently been hurriedly dislodged to make room for divers liturgies and lives of the saints. A set of episcopal robes depended from a hook, and on a side table stood half-a-dozen mitres, which, to all appearance, the designated prelate had been trying on.<sup>3</sup>

In Garnett's playful recreation, Nonnus converts to Christianity in order to please his readership, who wants him to 'sing what we may listen to',

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and endures a contest with the hermit Pachymius to become Bishop of Panopolis.<sup>4</sup> As it happens, however, both contenders fail to impress the Governor of the city: Nonnus refuses to burn a single book of the *Dionysiaca* in order to demonstrate his newly-found Christian credentials; Pachymius refuses to wash. In the end, Nonnus recants his Christian faith before the god Apollo and asks to be punished for having abandoned the Muses: “But before all things let me destroy my paraphrase.” “Thou shalt not destroy it,” said Phoebus. “Thou shalt publish it. That shall be thy penance.”<sup>5</sup>

Garnett’s late nineteenth-century literary fantasy of Nonnus as Christian convert anticipated conclusions that were shortly to be arrived at within the academic study of Nonnus. In the early decades of the twentieth century, two influential Nonnian scholars, Rudolph Keydell and Paul Collart, championed the idea that Nonnus had experienced a sudden conversion to Christianity that caused him to abandon his 48-book epic poem on Dionysus and devote his energies instead to a hexameter translation of John’s Gospel.<sup>6</sup> Corroborating evidence for this was adduced from the fact that in places the *Dionysiaca* appeared to lack a final editorial hand.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time as Collart and Keydell were advancing their ideas about the priority of the *Dionysiaca*, Wifstrand published a metrical analysis which revealed that the *Paraphrase* allowed more irregularities than the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>8</sup> His revelations encouraged some critics to form precisely the opposite conclusion from Collart and Keydell: namely that the metrically ‘weaker’ *Paraphrase* could not have been written after the *Dionysiaca*. The metrical irregularities of the *Paraphrase* were to be understood as the mistakes of a novice poet who had not yet begun work on his *magnum opus*.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, by placing the *Paraphrase* before the *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus’ oeuvre could now be seen to follow the pattern of the ‘traditional’ poetic *cursus honorum*, where the long epic poem comes at the culminating point of the poet’s career, preceded by works of less ambitious scope (exemplified by Virgil’s progression from *Eclogues* to *Georgics* to *Aeneid*).

This view of the relative chronology of the two poems was tentatively endorsed by Vian in the first volume of his Budé commentary in 1976, and has been widely accepted within the world of Nonnian studies.<sup>10</sup> Vian suggested that the *Dionysiaca* was written between 450 and 470 (but closer to 470 than 450), while the *Paraphrase* was written in the decade following the Council of Ephesus in 431 (on account of references to Mary as *theotokos* ‘mother of God’).<sup>11</sup> This hypothesis was given further support by Vian through a comparative linguistic study of the use of the word *μάρτυς* (‘witness’) in both the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>12</sup> Vian’s study of the deployment of this word in the two different contexts suggested that the word sustained a greater range of meanings in the *Paraphrase* than in the *Dionysiaca* and that, according to Vian, the most persuasive explanation

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for this was that the semantic range of the word shrank during its later appearance in the *Dionysiaca*.

In the early 1990s, a radical reappraisal of the relationship between the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* was proposed by Lee Sherry.<sup>13</sup> According to Sherry the metrical differences between the two poems (as highlighted by Wifstrand) pointed not to the fact that Nonnus wrote the *Paraphrase* before the *Dionysiaca*, but to its being a later composition and not by the hand of Nonnus at all. His confident reidentification of 'Pseudo-Nonnus' has, however, failed to convince.<sup>14</sup> As scholars working on the *Paraphrase* have shown, the fact that there may be more metrical anomalies in the *Paraphrase* than in the *Dionysiaca* need not be equated with metrical incompetence but can be specifically related to the context and practice of writing Biblical paraphrase.<sup>15</sup> The case for suspecting the authorship is, for Hopkinson, 'hardly bolstered by the fact that one of the few testimonia for Nonnus names him as the author of the *Paraphrase*';<sup>16</sup> while a study of Hellenistic poetic allusions in the *Dionysiaca* suggested that a single author must have been responsible for the quotation of two halves of a single line from Callimachus' *Hecale* – one half in the *Dionysiaca*, the other in the *Paraphrase*.<sup>17</sup> The close relationship between the two poems in terms of vocabulary and imagery certainly goes far beyond that imagined by Sherry who sought to characterise the *Paraphrase* as 'virtually a cento', reconstituted out of lines and phrases of the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>18</sup> Although the arguments formulated against Sherry's hypothesis do not put beyond doubt the possibility that the *Paraphrase* was the product of an inspired later poet who was intimately acquainted with Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, in the absence of solid evidence to the contrary, the cumulative case for single authorship remains persuasive.

Intriguingly, the argument that metrical 'defects' in the *Paraphrase* may be attributed to the constraints and conventions of writing Biblical epic rather than to poetic inexperience has encouraged critics to question the established orthodoxy that Nonnus wrote the *Paraphrase* before the *Dionysiaca*. What if Nonnus wrote the two texts contemporaneously?<sup>19</sup> This suggestion has much to recommend it. It would readily explain why at times the *Dionysiaca* appears to have been written in the light of the *Paraphrase*, while at other times the *Paraphrase* appears to have been written in the light of the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>20</sup> Even Vian, who has cautiously defended the priority of the *Paraphrase*, has not been wholly convinced by his own arguments. For example, in his analysis of the Tylus episode in *Dionysiaca* 25, he suggested that an intertextual link with the Lazarus episode in *Paraphrase* 13 would work better if the *Dionysiaca* were the earlier of the two texts.<sup>21</sup> The idea of contemporaneous composition would also mesh neatly with wider attempts to break down the rigid boundaries between 'pagan' and Christian. It is quite possible for one poet to operate in different modes at the same time.<sup>22</sup> As we saw in Chapter 2, late antique poets were able

to shift without difficulty between ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ *personae*.<sup>23</sup> It is thus no longer necessary to speculate that the only way that the poet of the *Dionysiaca* could have written the *Paraphrase* was by means of a religious conversion.

There remains, however, a certain practical problem with the idea that the two texts were produced at the same time. Since the *Dionysiaca* is over five times the length of the *Paraphrase*,<sup>24</sup> it is a reasonable assumption that it took Nonnus significantly longer to complete the *Dionysiaca*. In that case, for the works to be contemporaneous, the *Paraphrase* must have been produced at some point when the *Dionysiaca* was still a work in progress. But at what point, then, relative to the *Dionysiaca*, might the *Paraphrase* have appeared? The question might seem to be splitting hairs, but any answer would have important implications for our understanding of the relationship between the two texts. Did the *Paraphrase* appear towards the start, as a sampler for Nonnus’ larger-scale epic production; or towards the end of the *Dionysiaca* as a sort of coda; or at some point in between? On the basis of what we know we simply cannot tell. We are ultimately left rehearsing the same seemingly unanswerable questions about priority that we had sought to escape by means of the theory of contemporaneous production. This does not mean, however, that we should fall back into a state of *aporia*; rather, it is an indication that we should be asking different questions.

### **Shadowlands: mutual intertextuality**

Instead of engaging in further vexed speculation about the historical relationship between the *Paraphrase* and *Dionysiaca*, I want to turn my attention towards the experience of late antique (and modern) readers of the two texts.<sup>25</sup> In this chapter I shall approach the *Paraphrase* from the position of an informed reader of the *Dionysiaca* (a reader perhaps much like Nonnus himself), exploring some of the ways in which the *Paraphrase* can be seen to connect and engage with the imaginative poetic world of the *Dionysiaca*; in the following chapter I shall approach the *Dionysiaca* in the light of both the *Paraphrase* and wider late antique debates about the relationship between traditional mythological imagery and Christian doctrine and ideology.

The majority of studies that trace intertextual relationships between literary works begin with a clear idea of the chronological relationship between those texts. In a study of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for example, one may examine the influence of, say, Homer and Apollonius Rhodius – two clearly anterior poets.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, such clarity is wholly absent from Nonnus’ texts. We are confronted with two texts that have frustrated the best attempts of critics to determine a clear chronological relationship between them. Here then is no linear model of intertextuality, but a more ambiguous and dynamic model, what one might characterise as ‘circular’

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or 'mutual' intertextuality: the *Paraphrase* colours our reading of the *Dionysiaca* while at the same time the *Dionysiaca* colours our reading of the *Paraphrase*.<sup>27</sup>

Such mutual intertextuality is, of course, nothing new. In a now classic text on reception theory and the active role of the reader Charles Martindale described how the relationship between texts was not dictated by chronology, but mediated and constructed by the experience of the reader: 'Homer has been changed for us by Virgil and Milton, who have left their traces in his text, and thereby enabled new possibilities of meaning.'<sup>28</sup> Reading is neither an innocent nor passive activity: not only does Homer have the power to influence our understanding of Virgil and Milton, but Virgil and Milton have the power to influence our understanding of Homer. Mutual intertextuality is not unique to the works of Nonnus therefore; but in few texts are the stakes so high. However much Virgil has the power to influence Homer, the absolute chronological priority of Homer cannot be entirely effaced or ignored; with Nonnus there can be no such certainty.<sup>29</sup>

The aim of this reader-based study is to move away from a rigid and linear approach to the interpretation of the poems and how they relate to one another. By placing the poems side by side I hope to open up both texts to a broader range of questions that may help to enrich our understanding not only of the texts themselves but also of the culture that produced them. My analysis will not simply limit itself to obvious correspondences and intersections between the two texts. I will also focus on some of the many deeper connections and resonances that form such a significant and challenging part of the wider reading experience. As should by now be clear, this investigation is not a search for definitive meaning, but an exploration of a range (both complementary and contradictory) of resonances and ambivalences and new possibilities of meaning.

#### **Rehabilitating the *Paraphrase***

The ironic ending to Garnett's fiction about the life of the poet Nonnus, quoted above, echoes a view – still widely held – that the *Paraphrase* is not a work of real quality or interest. In recent years much important work has been done to rehabilitate the genre of paraphrase (or biblical epic) in general and the *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel in particular. Valuable accounts of the late antique tradition of verse paraphrase have been produced by Michael Roberts (Latin) and Gianfranco Agosti (Greek).<sup>30</sup> The *Paraphrase* itself is the subject of a significant ongoing project to provide an edition of the text, together with a translation and detailed commentary (with particular emphasis on the theological importance of the text).<sup>31</sup> Despite the groundbreaking work that has already been done, however, the neglect of the *Paraphrase* within literary studies of the period stands out beyond the general neglect of late antique literature.

This neglect has much to do with the fact that the *Paraphrase* – though

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written in epic hexameters – is regarded as having its roots in the world of theology and as such is imagined to fall outside the range and experience of literary studies. It is telling (though unsurprising) that although there exists a Loeb edition of the *Dionysiaca*, there is no *Paraphrase* in the same series. Classical libraries may well stock works on the *Dionysiaca* and Theology libraries may stock works on the *Paraphrase*, but in few libraries are the two to be found together. However, the dawn of the internet age has presented us with exciting opportunities for the breaking down of traditional boundaries between disciplines and faculties – offering Classicists, for example, ready access to valuable ‘theological’ resources such as Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* and *Latina*.

A further, more important, explanation for the neglect of the *Paraphrase* derives from its very status as a paraphrase or translation. It has, in other words, been overlooked and disregarded on account of its apparent lack of originality, as if it were nothing more than St John’s Gospel in Homeric garb. However, a recent surge of interest in the cultural practices of translation, linked to the wider revolution in Post-Colonial theory, encourages us to look more sympathetically at the production of the *Paraphrase*.<sup>32</sup> As such, it is no longer acceptable to view Nonnus’ act of translation as a ‘simple’ attempt to render the words of the Gospel in epic form. Translation, as we now know, is not an innocent activity: however closely a text may appear to adhere to the ‘original’, it is inevitably transformed by the contemporary context of its production. To take the point to its extreme, even a word for word copy of a text nevertheless represents a different text with the capacity to tell a quite different story (as illustrated so well by Borges in his short story ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’).<sup>33</sup> As Stephen Hinds reminds us in his stimulating 1998 monograph, *Allusion and Intertext*, ‘repetition ... always entails some alteration’.<sup>34</sup> It is important therefore that the *Paraphrase* should be approached not as a derivative copy, but as an original composition located within a fifth-century AD context. This may seem like a strong claim to make for a text that is so closely aligned to the Gospel of St John, but in retelling the story of the Gospel Nonnus has inevitably changed it and made it his own. As will be seen, the epic form of Nonnus’ poem is more than just a sugar-coating, designed to win over ‘pagans’ to the charm of the Gospel; it represents a profound and sophisticated meditation on the relationship between Classical culture and biblical culture.

### **Christ and Dionysus**

Before turning to look more closely at the specific relationship between the *Paraphrase* and the world of Dionysus I want briefly to consider the wider interaction between the spheres of Christ and Dionysus. From its beginning the story of Christ was drawn into active dialogue with the narratives of Classical antiquity. Artists and writers were quick to draw and exploit

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parallels and antitheses with the Classical world. Of all the figures in the Classical pantheon it was Dionysus whose life-story intersected most obviously with the new Christian saviour, through both literary and material culture.<sup>35</sup> In their broadest terms (drawing on material from a diverse range of sources) the life stories of both figures suggest obvious parallels: both are the sons of divine fathers and mortal mothers, who are destined to have a profound and transformative impact on the lives of their followers (Jesus through his message of immortal life; Dionysus through his gift of wine); both suffer early persecution (Jesus at the hands of Herod; Dionysus at the hands of Hera) and are forced to flee for their lives (Jesus to Egypt; Dionysus to the Eastern court of Rhea, mother of the Gods); both encounter resistance from many of those whom they try to convert, and in each case their divinity is brought into question; both perform miracles. Both have a universal appeal: Christianity is a religion that refused to recognise rigid social hierarchies; while Dionysus was an accessible divinity with enduring and widespread popularity.<sup>36</sup> Just as the Greek god, in the guise of Zagreus, is destroyed by the Titans (before his resurrection as Dionysus), so Christ too suffers death and resurrection.<sup>37</sup> And at the end of their respective narratives both figures are at last reunited with their fathers in heaven, leaving behind an empty tomb.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of material culture there exist striking connections and overlaps. Glen Bowersock has highlighted the visual correspondences that connect the scene of the birth of Dionysus on the Nea Paphos mosaic on Cyprus with the Christian nativity scene.<sup>39</sup> For Mathews, 'Early Christian art is rich with Dionysiac associations whether in boisterous representations of agape feasting, in the miracle of water-into-wine at Cana, in wine and vine motifs alluding to the Eucharist, and most markedly ... in the use of Dionysiac facial traits for representations of Christ.'<sup>40</sup> He continues: 'when Christ is given a youthful, beardless face and loose long locks it assimilates him to the company of Apollo and Dionysus'.<sup>41</sup> It is possible too that representations of Christ holding a magician's wand owe their inspiration at least in part to the *thyrsus* (staff) of Dionysus.<sup>42</sup>

The vigorous and flourishing foliage of the vine was a prevalent motif not only in Dionysiac contexts, but also in much early Christian art, commonly deployed in tomb-paintings, as for example on the Mausoleum of Constantia in Rome.<sup>49</sup> Although the Christian and Dionysiac vine may ultimately be seen to derive from different and independent traditions, it is hard to draw a clear line between the vine of Dionysus and the vine of Christ. The appearance of vine-imagery in the context of Christian tombs clearly relates to ideas of resurrection and new life but shares an obvious overlap with Dionysiac imagery (which is also commonly found in funereal contexts).<sup>50</sup>

The imagery of Dionysus is consciously co-opted to serve the new figure of Christ in textual as well as visual form. The proximity of Dionysus and Christ is exploited from a scriptural perspective by Clement of Alexandria

during his denunciation of mystery cults at *Protrepticus* 12.1-13.5: 'In the blaze of torches I have a vision of heaven and of God. I become holy by initiation. The Lord reveals the mysteries; he marks the worshipper with his seal, gives light to guide his way, and commends him, when he has believed, to the Father's care, where he is guarded for ages to come. These are the revels (τὰ βαχεύματα) of my mysteries! If you wish, be yourself also initiated, and you shall dance (χορεύσεις) with angels around the unbegotten and imperishable and only true God, the Word of God joining with us in our hymn of praise.' As pointed out by Hanson in his discussion of this passage, Clement here outbids the mystery cults 'by using the vocabulary of mystery religions (specifically the purely literary religion of Euripides' *Bacchae*) in speaking of Christianity'.<sup>43</sup>

Correspondence between the vine of Dionysus and the vine of Christ is further explored in written as well as visual form. The image of the vine (independent of the Classical tradition) was already deeply rooted within the Old Testament,<sup>44</sup> and is a recurrent motif in the Gospels, where it is symbolically connected with Israel.<sup>45</sup> As noted above, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make a clear differentiation between the Christian and Classical resonance of this image within late antiquity. Its symbolism is frequently discussed and developed by the Church Fathers, particularly with relation to the Eucharist.<sup>46</sup> Clement of Alexandria, for example, provides his own imaginative engagement with the image of the vine as a Christian metaphor (*Paedagogus* 2.2.19.3.1-4.2):

Then the sacred vine produced the prophetic cluster. This was a sign to them ... the great cluster, the Word crushed on behalf of us, the blood of the grape – since the Word had wanted to be mixed with water, as his blood is mixed with salvation. And the blood of the Lord is twofold. For there is the blood of His flesh, by which we are redeemed from corruption; and the spiritual, that by which we are anointed. And to drink the blood of Jesus, is to become partaker of the Lord's immortality; the Spirit being the energetic principle of the Word, as blood is of flesh.

Cyril of Jerusalem in his fourth-century lectures to catechumens preparing for their baptism declares that 'The saviour comes in various forms to each person according to need. To those who lack joy he becomes a vine; to those who wish to enter in he is a door ...'<sup>47</sup> John Chrysostom talks about the 'spiritual vine of the sacred Scriptures' (*Discourse* 4), and about the cup, 'not overflowing with unmixed wine, but filled with spiritual instruction' (*Discourse* 1). In Clement's *Paedagogus*, we read again about the Word (*logos*) being compared with the vine: 'For the vine produces wine, as the Word produces blood, and both drink for health to men – wine for the body, blood for the spirit.' The association of blood and wine has obvious precedents in the Classical tradition from Homer onwards.<sup>48</sup>

### Nonnus and John

Before I turn to the interaction of the *Paraphrase* within late antique culture, I want first to examine the relationship between the Gospel of John and the world of Dionysus. St John's Gospel is famous for two key intersections with what one might call the realm of Dionysus. First, the narrative of the wedding at Cana in John 2, when water is miraculously transformed into wine; secondly, the declaration by Christ in John 15 that 'I am the true vine'.

The possible intersection between the miracle story of water into wine at the wedding at Cana and the world of the wine god Dionysus has not gone unnoticed.<sup>51</sup> Barrett records that, although this scene lacks parallels in the Synoptic Gospels, 'non-biblical parallels ... suggest themselves at once'.<sup>52</sup> Such parallels include the discovery of the vine by Dionysus and the miraculous transformations of water into wine.<sup>53</sup> In Barrett's words, 'There was thus an exact precedent for the benefaction of Jesus in a pagan worship doubtless known to some of John's readers'.<sup>54</sup>

In his discussion Barrett is careful to emphasise that the main point of the John's narrative of the transformation of water into wine does not have to do with the relationship between Classical and Christian imagery, but with Christianity and Judaism 'to show the supersession of Judaism in the glory of Jesus.' He continues, 'It is possible that in doing so [John] drew material from Dionysiac sources; but it was Jewish purificatory water which stood in the water pots and was made the wine of the Gospel.' However, although Barrett sees Judaism as a key to understanding the symbolism of John's Gospel, he does not dismiss the importance of the Dionysiac tradition out of hand, since it is 'far too characteristic of John to use material with a twofold, Jewish and pagan, background, for us easily to set aside the parallels to the miraculous transformation of water into wine which have been noted in Hellenistic sources'.<sup>55</sup>

The question about the precise relationship between Biblical and Classical traditions within the Fourth Gospel does not concern us directly here. My focus instead is on the *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel and on the way that this text brings the traditions of Classical poetry into dialogue with the story of Christ. Right from the start, the choice of the author to recreate the Gospel of John in Classical metre inevitably unites the two traditions and invites us to see the interconnectedness between the Classical and Christian worlds. Readers are invited to see very clearly, for example, the parallels that exist between scriptural and Classical representations of the vine, between the very figures of Jesus and Dionysus. The *Paraphrase* presents us with a blend of John's scriptural tradition with the Classical tradition, offering us the chance to see Nonnus' own take on the complex relationship between Christian scripture and traditional epic. It is a poem that poses an important question: what does a biblical story look like from a classical perspective?<sup>56</sup>

## *The Myth of Paganism*

A close study of Dionysiac imagery in the *Paraphrase* will suggest a subtle and dynamic interplay of Biblical and Classical traditions, far removed from the traditional narrative of a fundamental opposition between competing ideologies. My exploration of the *Paraphrase* falls into three sections: in section one I will look at the wedding at Cana; section two will focus on the metaphor of the vine; a final section will highlight the presence of Dionysiac elements in the *Paraphrase* more widely.

### **1. Water into wine: the wedding at Cana**

The wedding at Cana forms a prominent part of the narrative of the Fourth Gospel. It opens the second chapter of John's account (John 2:1-12) and presents the first of Christ's miracles: the transformation of water into wine. It takes place in the semi-private setting of a wedding, but marks a transition to the public ministry of Christ.

The Johannine account, though not sparsely told, nevertheless contrasts sharply with the exuberant elaboration of the same scene in the *Paraphrase*. A juxtaposition of the two accounts brings out the degree of sameness to and difference from John's account that Nonnus' version articulates. In comparison with John, Nonnus' version is not only more exuberant, but it also places wine and its miraculous effects more directly at the centre of the stage.<sup>57</sup>

For the sake of convenience I have divided the narrative into four sections: (a) the wine runs dry; (b) the stone pots; (c) the miracle of water into wine; (d) conclusion.

#### **(a) The wine runs dry**

The introduction to the story of the wedding at Cana as presented in the second chapter of John begins as follows (using the King James version) (2:1-3):

<sup>1</sup>And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there:

<sup>2</sup>And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage.

<sup>3</sup>And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine.

This same passage is rendered by Nonnus as follows (*Paraphrase* 2.1-20):

The third day (a day of wedding) dawned and streaked the rocks purple. In the land of Cana in fertile Galilee a wedding took place, the first-begetting beginning of child-bearing life. It was a blessed wedding because Christ was invited by the long-haired wedding party to dine, beside the earthly bridal-chamber. And all his disciples sat in a row at the same table.

The virgin carrier of God, Christ's mother, was herself present at the

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banquet and was sharing in the wedding meal with unsullied hand: child-bearing, in flight from the marriage bed, always following the path of maidenhood. All the fragrant jars of sweet-tasting wine were empty, exhausted by the very high demand. The wine-waiters beside the wine-loving bridal-chamber now presided gloomily over a sober feast. They tried and failed to draw out cups of wine – they could not even wet their hands. When Christ had become aware that the wine had run out while the party was still in full swing, his mother, seated at his side spoke thus: 'This wedding has need of your propitious voice: the flow of sweet-bubbling wine has come to an end.'<sup>58</sup>

The contrast between these two introductions to the story of the wedding at Cana could not be more striking. Although John's narrative is often described as the most poetic of the four Gospels, it is nevertheless overwhelmed by Nonnus' colourful riot of adjectives and imaginative detail.<sup>59</sup> Where John used 43 words (in the original Greek), Nonnus employs 111 – a statistic that seems even more impressive when one takes into account the fact that Nonnus' rendition avoids all use of the definite article.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, where John uses one adjective, 'third' (τρίτη), Nonnus deploys over 30.<sup>61</sup>

We see first how Nonnus' account establishes its connection with the traditions of Homeric epic by marking the beginning of a new day with an elaborate description of the dawn: 'The third day (a day of wedding) dawned and streaked the rocks purple'.<sup>62</sup> The phraseology of the Greek at 2.1-2, ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ ..... ἠώς ('but when the dawn ...'), derives from a common Homeric formula used to mark the passage of time in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.<sup>63</sup> In Homer, especially in the *Odyssey*, the image of the dawn is often supplemented by a reference to her 'rosy' colour, most famously through the epithet 'rosy-fingered' (ροδοδάκτυλος).<sup>64</sup> This Homeric image of the rosy tint of dawn is also used in the *Dionysiaca*,<sup>65</sup> but what is interesting in this passage from the *Paraphrase* is that Nonnus characterises the rocks (or rather, the light that covers the rocks) not as rose-coloured, but 'purple' (πορφυρέας, 2.2). Though one might be inclined to dismiss this as 'simple' variation, it should be recalled that the colour purple is frequently associated with wine in the *Dionysiaca* and elsewhere.<sup>66</sup> Seen in this light, Nonnus' variation may be regarded as a subtle anticipation of the miracle of the water into wine that is to come.

This is not just a poem that plays with, or parades its knowledge of, the epic genre, however. As Enrico Livrea and his team of *Paraphrase* editors have well established, the hermeneutic tradition of Cyril of Alexandria is never far from the surface of Nonnus' text.<sup>67</sup> The opening lines of *Paraphrase* 2 are dominated by images of fertility and childbirth that appear to owe nothing to the narrative of St John: Galilee is 'fertile' (ἀξειφύτος, 2.2) and the wedding is 'the first-sown beginning of childbearing life' (παιδοτόκου ... βίου πρωτοσπóρος ἀρχή, 2.3). According to Cyril's commentary on the Fourth Gospel, Christ is present at Cana 'in order to sanctify the beginning (τὴν ἀρχήν) of human creation' (135 D).<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Christ's

role, Cyril reveals later, is as ‘a source of happiness and joy for all, in order to dispel the former sadness that was associated with childbirth’.<sup>69</sup> It seems clear then that Nonnus has followed Cyril’s lead at this point in emphasizing the natural physical result (and indeed even purpose) of marriage: the production of children – a matter, as we have seen, that was left unexpressed by John.

The reference to Cyril does not, however, fully explain Nonnus’ emphasis on sexuality and childbirth at the start of this scene. In the opening book of the *Dionysiaca*, Eros the god of love is described as ‘first-sown beginning of marriage that results in offspring’ (τελεσσιγόνοιο γάμου πρωτόσπορος ἀρχή, 1.398).<sup>70</sup> The reader who comes to the *Paraphrase* from the *Dionysiaca* can be under no illusion as to the powerful force of reproductive sexuality that is present at the start of Nonnus’ narrative of the wedding at Cana – a force that has been so carefully circumscribed in John.

The complex and unpredictable interaction of imagery from Christian and Classical traditions can be further seen at *Paraphrase* 2.6, where the company that make up the wedding party to which Christ and his disciples have been invited are described as ‘having long hair at the back’ (ὀπισθοκόμων). This is a curious detail, that owes nothing to the Gospel narratives.<sup>71</sup> The adjective occurs elsewhere only twice in the extant literature, both in Book 13 of the *Dionysiaca* during the catalogue of Dionysian troops.<sup>72</sup> The first use of the adjective comes during part of the catalogue of troops that describes the soldiers sent from Euboea, including those from the city of Chalcis (*Dion.* 13.165-6):

Together with these came a company of people whose fatherland was Chalcis, mother-city of the Ellopians who wore their hair long at the back (ὀπισθοκόμων).

This passage appears to look directly back to Homer’s catalogue of ships in *Iliad* 2, specifically to the description of a company from Euboea, the Abantes, who march to war under the command of Elphenor ‘wearing their hair behind’ (ὀπιθεν κομόωντες, *Il.* 2.542). Nonnus’ reworking of the Homeric catalogue of ships has retained the unusual Homeric detail about the ‘long-haired’ soldiers from the city of Chalcis. It was a detail picked up by the A scholia on the *Iliad* and was used to explain how the Curetes (warriors from the city of Chalcis) came to acquire their name.<sup>73</sup> It is suggestive of Nonnus’ playful scholarship that his own passing description of the Abantes at 13.154-5 should itself make explicit mention of the Curetes – a scholiastic detail that is wholly absent from Homer’s own catalogue.<sup>74</sup>

Though a clear intertextual relationship can be established between the *Dionysiaca* and the *Iliad* at this point, it remains to be seen how the appearance of the same adjective can be explained in the context of the *Paraphrase*. On the face of it, there appears to be no compelling reason why

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the wedding guests at Cana should make us think about either the Homeric catalogue of ships or the Dionysian catalogue of troops. Yet the use of the adjective is far from gratuitous. Like Christ himself, the wedding guests who are described as having 'long hair at the back' are Galileans.<sup>75</sup> Within the *Paraphrase*, the Galileans are furnished with a number of epithets relating to their long hair: at 1.170 and 4.252 they are described as 'having long locks of hair' (τανυπλοκάμων); at 2.57 and 7.35 as 'having uncut hair' (ἀκερσικόμων).<sup>76</sup> The adjective 'having long locks of hair' (τανυπλόκαμος) is recorded only in the *Dionysiaca*, where it is used explicitly to refer to Dionysus (*Dion.* 35.328) and his Bacchantes (*Dion.* 36.155); while the adjective 'having uncut hair' (ἀκερσεκόμος) is used in the *Dionysiaca* primarily of Dionysus and his associates.<sup>77</sup> Arguably, the attribution of long hair to the Galileans (a detail which we may recall is *not* to be found in John's Gospel) does not merely reflect a traditional image of the Galileans, but helps to encourage and sustain parallels with the representations of Dionysus and his retinue not just in the *Dionysiaca* but in the iconographic record.<sup>78</sup>

#### *All about Mary*

In contrast to the start of the Gospel account of the wedding at Cana, where Mary is introduced simply as 'the mother of Jesus', striking attention is placed in the *Paraphrase* on the figure of Mary from the outset (2.9-11). Nonnus gives an elaborate description of Mary: she is 'virginal' (παρθενική), she 'shuns the marriage bed' (φυγόδεμνος) and she is 'always following the path of maidenhood' (ἀεὶ μεθέπουσα κορείην);<sup>79</sup> paradoxically, at the same time, she is also described as 'mother of Christ' (Χριστοῦ ... μήτηρ), 'carrier of God' (θειτόκος) and 'child-bearing' (παιδοτόκος).<sup>80</sup> Though one might be tempted to dismiss these details as mere verbal padding, I would like to suggest that there is more to Nonnus' description of Mary than meets the eye.<sup>81</sup>

Nonnus' characterisation of the mother of Christ demands to be read not only against the theological and social background of late antiquity, but also against the backdrop of the Classical tradition. To begin with, the description of Mary as the 'carrier of God' (θειτόκος, 2.9) resonates with the theology of the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 when this epithet (which had been in use since the third century AD) was officially conferred upon Mary in recognition of the fact that her son was both fully divine and fully human by nature.<sup>82</sup> This position explicitly contradicted (and rejected) the idea that Mary was to be seen only as the 'carrier of Christ' (Χριστοτόκος), i.e. as the mother of Christ solely in his physical (human) form. Nonnus' use of the epithet θειτόκος appears to support the view of the Council of Ephesus that Mary gave birth to a child who was both fully divine and fully human in form. At the same time, Nonnus' description of Mary as Χριστοῦ ... μήτηρ and παιδοτόκος seems to come

uncomfortably close (in doctrinal terms) to the discredited epithet Χριστοτόκος.

The apparently colourless detail that Mary touches the table with her ‘unsullied hand’ (ἀχράντω παλάμη, 2.10) itself turns out to have a powerful resonance both within the wider theological discussions on the virginal status of the mother of Christ and within the realm of Dionysus. The adjective does not appear in John’s Gospel, but can be found in the Church Fathers where Christ is frequently referred to as having been born ‘from the unsullied/immaculate (ἀχράντου) virgin [Mary]’.<sup>83</sup> The adjective also intersects with the world of the *Dionysiaca* and suggests overlap with the characterisation of the virgin goddess Athena. In one of the few places where ἀχράντος occurs in the *Dionysiaca* it is used to describe Athena.<sup>84</sup> The connection between the two women is a significant one, because of the obvious similarities between them in terms of their prized virginity.<sup>85</sup> At *Dion.* 27.114 Athena is herself described in terms that closely resemble the Mary of the *Paraphrase*: παρθενική φυγόδεμος ... Παλλάς ἀμήτωρ (‘virginal, in flight from the wedding bed, Pallas who is not a mother/motherless’).<sup>86</sup>

Outside Nonnus the word φυγόδεμος (in its variant form φυγόδεμνιος) occurs only once in the extant literary tradition in an epigram by Antipater.<sup>87</sup> Significantly, the subject of the epigram is, once again, Athena (*AP* 6.10.1-2):

Tritogeneia, saviour, Zeus’s daughter who shuns the marriage bed  
(φυγοδέμνιε), Pallas, mistress of virginity without experience of childbirth  
(ἀπειροτόκου δεσπότι παρθενίης).

The most obvious difference between the two virgins Mary and Athena, as brought out by the representation of Athena in the Antipater epigram and the *Dionysiaca*, is that Athena is not a mother (ἀμήτωρ)<sup>88</sup> and has no experience of childbirth (ἀπειροτόκος), while Mary is most obviously a mother (μήτηρ) who has given birth to a divine (and human) child (θεητόκος/παιδοτόκος). It is worth observing, however, that, although traditionally Athena has no experience of childbirth, at the end of the *Dionysiaca* she assumes the role of a surrogate mother to Dionysus’ son, Iacchus (48.954-6): ‘The goddess Pallas welcomed him inside the temple, into her unwedded (ἀνυμφεύτω) bosom that gave welcome to a god; to the boy she gave her breast, at which Erechtheus alone had suckled’.<sup>89</sup> Her increased proximity to Mary at this point is brought out by the use of the adjective ‘unwedded’ (ἀνυμφεύτος) – an epithet used to describe Mary in a number of Patristic texts.<sup>90</sup>

Athena is one of a group of female figures in the *Dionysiaca* who share an overarching concern for their virginity, the most prominent of whom – Nicaea and Aura – are devotees of that other virgin goddess, Artemis.<sup>91</sup> Unlike Athena, however, Nicaea and Aura both fail to preserve their virginity, are made pregnant by Dionysus, and are reluctantly forced into

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the role of mothers. In Book 16 Dionysus drugs Nicaea with water transformed into wine before raping her; a similar trick is used in Book 48 to facilitate the rape of Aura. Where Athena and Mary are linked by the fact that they retained their status as virgins, Nicaea and Aura share with Mary the experience of motherhood that result from their union with a god.<sup>92</sup> However, in contrast with Mary neither Nicaea nor Aura manage to preserve their status as virgins: Nicaea is described as a νόμφη ('married woman') at 48.948; and although Artemis addresses Aura as a 'virgin mother' (παρθένε μήτηρ, 48.859),<sup>93</sup> she does so in mockery (having already described her as a νόμφη in the preceding line).<sup>94</sup>

Parallels between Mary and the two maidens Nicaea and Aura take on a pointed irony when the specific context of *Paraphrase 2* is called to mind. Mary is introduced into the narrative just before her words to Christ that he should do something to remedy the lack of wine at the wedding feast. In other words, she functions as the catalyst for the miracle that will turn water into wine. If the stories of Nicaea and Aura are in our minds at this point then it is hard to avoid the irony that the virgin Mary is taking a leading role in the production of a substance that leads in the *Dionysiaca* (and elsewhere) to the rape and marriage of other avowed virgins.<sup>95</sup>

#### *The power of wine*

In advance of the actual transformation of water into wine, Nonnus' narrative gives strong hints about the miraculous power of wine itself. The emphasis on the extraordinary nature of wine is quite absent from John, but its details and language can be seen to relate very closely to the descriptions of wine that suffuse the *Dionysiaca*. As to the nature of the substance itself: it is 'fragrant' (θυώδεις, 2.12) and 'sweet-tasting' (ἡδυπότος, 2.12) – qualities that are explicitly connected with wine in the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>96</sup> The phrase 'sweet wine' (ἡδέος οἴνου, 2.20) – found in earlier hexameter poetry only at Homer, *Odyssey* 3.51 – occurs 14 times in the *Dionysiaca* in the same position at the line end; 'flow of wine' (χύσιν οἴνου) is found 11 times in the *Dionysiaca*; while the adjective 'loving unmixed wine' (φιλακρήτος, 2.14) used to describe the wedding at Cana itself occurs 29 times within the epic.<sup>97</sup>

Such is the popularity of the drink at the wedding that the wine jars supplied for the celebration run dry on account of the high demand. A more literal translation for this 'high demand' is 'one cup after another' (ἕπασσύτεροισι κυπέλλοις, *Para.* 2.13). The same phrase occurs twice in the *Dionysiaca* within 30 lines.<sup>98</sup> The context there is one that illustrates the dangers of excessive consumption of alcohol: the story of Icarus and his murder at the hands of a band of drunken Athenian farmers. At 47.106-7 we read: 'So the countrymen quaffed cup after cup (ἕπασσύτεροισι κυπέλλοις), and all made a wild revel (πάντες ἐβακχέυθησαν) over the wine which dazed their wits'. The connection with *Para.* 2.13 where all the jars

were emptied (πάντες ἐγυμνώθησαν) by the drawing of one cup after another (ἐπασσυτέροισι κυπέλλοις) seems particularly striking. In the *Dionysiaca* there is an endless flow of wine, in the *Paraphrase* by contrast, the wine has run out and the table is, as we learn in the next line, 'lacking in the spirit of Dionysus' (ἀβακχεύτοιο, 2.15).

Attention has already been drawn to the intertextual relationship between the Icarius episode and the wedding at Cana in an important article by Konstantinos Spanoudakis.<sup>99</sup> His own reading of the relationship between the two texts does not encourage the possibility that the *Paraphrase* might be read in the light of the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>100</sup> However, a reader of the *Dionysiaca* who does subsequently approach the *Paraphrase* might well see in this first description of wine (before the miracle at Cana had even been performed), a powerful hint not only about the potential dangers of this most extraordinary of substances, but also about Christ's own future destruction.<sup>101</sup>

In the *Paraphrase*, the wine-stewards return from their attempt to draw wine with 'unwetted (ἀβρέκτοις, 2.16) hands'. It is noteworthy that the only use of the adjective ἀβρέκτος in the *Dionysiaca* with specific reference to wine relates to the transformation of the water of Lake Astacis into wine in Book 17. There an enemy soldier who has avoided drinking from the drugged waters of the lake reports back to his lord Orontes that he has 'escaped from the deceptive water with unwetted (ἀβρέκτοισι) lips' (*Dion.* 17.129). The two texts present ironically contrasting views of the way that wine is regarded: the enemy soldier runs away from all contact with the substance; the wine-stewards long to wet their hands with wine.

The lack of wine leaves the servants at the feast in despondent mood: they are specifically described by Nonnus as 'gloomy' (στυγνοί, 2.14), a detail that is not to be found in John.<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, it is precisely this detail that is used to describe the lot of unhappy mortals before they are cheered up by wine at *Dionysiaca* 12.268-9: 'a grieving man, whenever he tastes sweet wine, will shake off the hateful/gloomy (στυγνόν) burden of increasing pain'. This transition from a miserable lack of wine to a joyous supply is paralleled in the *Dionysiaca* 7, where the despondency of the goddess Seasons (Horai) is explained as follows: 'for there was a need for wine: the joy of a dance without Dionysus was incomplete and unprofitable' (7.17-18).<sup>103</sup> Following these lines in *Dionysiaca* 7, Aion initiates a conversation with Zeus that will, of course, result in the birth of Dionysus and the invention of wine; in the *Paraphrase* (following John) Mary initiates a conversation with Christ that will result in a fresh supply of wine.

The final line of this section nicely illustrates the dialectic between sameness and difference that runs through the text. Here the *Paraphrase* plays explicitly on the language of the Gospel text by means of a verbal or, rather, 'acoustic' echo. The Mary of the Gospel tells Christ in simple terms that the wedding guests 'have no wine' (οὐκ ἔχουσιν); in Nonnus this is

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expanded almost beyond recognition into the statement that 'the flow of sweet-bubbling wine has come to an end' (οὐ γὰρ ἐυπραθάμιγγος ἔχει χύσιν ἠδέος οἴνου, 2.20). Almost, but not quite – though Nonnus' fertile poetic imagination has clearly transformed John's words, his new text nevertheless preserves an echo of the 'original' version: from ἔχει χύσιν straight back to οὐκ ἔχουσιν.

#### (b) The stone jars

The second section of the story concerns the filling of the water jars in preparation for the miraculous transformation of water into wine. In the words of John (2.4-7):

4. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.
5. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.
6. And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece.
7. Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim.

Once again Nonnus' hexameter translation of the scene is significantly more exuberant (*Paraphrase* 2.21-34):

Christ replied: 'Woman, what concern is this of yours or mine? My final hour has yet to run its course.' Mary then told the servants to do whatever Christ told them.

Leaning up against the far wall were six amphorae all together in a row; their capacious bellies held two or three measures. From within its interior of stone each one produced water for purification, holy water preserved for the Jews. Christ chivvied the servants of the drinkless feast with wine-stirring voice: 'Please fill the pot-bellied amphorae with fresh water.' Thus charged they poured water into all the jars, one by one, until they were full to the brim with liquid.

In the *Paraphrase* Christ's words to Mary begin in a manner closely reminiscent of the words employed by John. Nonnus diverges from John, however, through the introduction of the image of life being a 'course' (δρόμος). It would be easy to dismiss this as a clichéd reference to the 'race of life' metaphor, but, as Livrea has shown, its inspiration appears to have come – once more – from Cyril's commentary on St John's Gospel: δρόμος here seems to look back directly to Cyril's δρομαῖον in his own description of the same scene.<sup>104</sup>

Nonnus' subsequent description of the water-jars closely follows the description in John in terms of basic details, but again the linguistic resonance ranges more widely. The *Paraphrase* introduces the detail of 'the jars leaning up against the far wall all together in a row' (ἀμοιβαίω δ'

ἐπὶ τοίχῳ / κεκλιμένοι στοιχηδὸν ὁμόζυγες ἀμφιφορῆς, 2.25). This description creates a close (and unique) verbal correspondence with the scene of the feeding of the five thousand at *Paraphrase* 6.34-5: καὶ ἕκαστος ἐρείδετο γείτοني τοίχῳ / κεκλιμένοι στοιχηδὸν ἐπ' εὐπετάλοιο τραπέζης ('and each one leant against the neighbouring wall, reclining in a row at the leafy table'). The connection is not 'simply' verbal, but establishes for readers of the *Paraphrase* an important link between two miracle scenes in which a shortage of supply (wine or bread) is remedied by the sudden intervention of Christ: in Book 2 six jars begin to flow with a superabundance of wine; in Book 6 the division of five loaves of bread produces enough food to satisfy a crowd of five thousand.

A further striking connection is established in *Paraphrase* 2 between the jars leaning in a row against the wall and the disciples who 'all recline together in a row' (ὁμοκλινέες δὲ μαθηταὶ / πάντες ἔσαν στοιχηδὸν, 2.7-8). Certainly, the jars are described in terms that suggest personification and therefore encourage a blurring between the two: each jar has a 'belly' (κόλπῳ), and an active role in 'keeping safe/guarding' (φυλάσσω) the holy water. Furthermore, the amphorae and the disciples are both – appropriately enough – described by Nonnus by means of the adjective 'yoked together'/'corresponding' (ὁμοζυγες).<sup>105</sup> The similarity between the jars and the disciples casts new light on the way that we perceive the disciples of the *Paraphrase*. Just as vessels originally used for Jewish ritual ablutions have been transformed into jars for (Christian) wine, so the disciples – formerly Jewish in their religious observance – have been transformed into followers of Christ. Just as the wine itself is to be shared and enjoyed, so the message of Christ is to be spread by the disciples for the delight of all.

The jars are described by Nonnus as 'holding two or three measures' (τρία μέτρα κεχανδότες ... ἢ δὺο, 2.26). The phrase μέτρα κεχανδότες derives ultimately from *Iliad* 23.267-8, where Homer describes Achilles setting out prizes for the chariot race in honour of his dead friend Patroclus: 'for the third prize he set out a beautiful cauldron not touched by the fire, holding four measures (τέσσαρα μέτρα κεχανδότα), still shining new'. The only other appearance of the phrase comes from a description of a mixing bowl in the *Dionysiaca* (19.120-1): 'a *cratêr*, full of old and fragrant wine, made of gold, containing innumerable measures (ἄσπετα μέτρα κεχανδότα)'. The description in *Dionysiaca* 19 appears to form a direct intertext with Homer. The phraseology creates a precise match – κεχανδότα – in contrast to the *Paraphrase*'s κεχανδότες; there also appears to be a clear parallel in terms of context: in the *Iliad* Achilles sets out prizes for funeral games in honour of his dead friend Patroclus; in the *Dionysiaca* Dionysus sets out prizes for funeral games in honour of his dead friend Staphylus. The competitive atmosphere evoked by the funeral games may well give a further edge to Nonnus' use of Homer at this point. The prize offered by Dionysus ostentatiously upstages the more modest gift supplied by Achilles: Achilles' cauldron has a capacity of four measures in contrast to the countless

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measures contained within Dionysus' *cratêr*; the cauldron is presumably made of bronze and is intended as a vessel for heating up water; the *cratêr* is made of gold and contains vintage wine. It is tempting to see Nonnus' depiction of the *cratêr* of Dionysus as part of a self-consciously literary competition, a poetic *agôn* between himself and Homer.

The *Paraphrase* intertext does not parade such a close relationship with the Homeric passage, but this is not to say that the recollection of the Homeric passage is gratuitous or irrelevant. We have just seen how in the *Dionysiaca* Homeric water (the cauldron of Achilles) was transformed into Nonnian wine (the *cratêr* of Dionysus). A reader who encounters the *Paraphrase* after the *Dionysiaca* may already have in mind this literary transformation of water into wine. In that case the description of the water jars 'holding two or three measures' would call to mind the miraculous transformation of water into wine even before it had happened. Moreover, Nonnus' use of the Homeric intertext in both of his poems encourages the reader to compare (and contrast) the use of Homer in the *Dionysiaca* and the use of John in the *Paraphrase*.

In the *Paraphrase* the jars themselves are described as normally containing 'holy water' (ἅγνον ὕδωρ, 2.29) for the Jews. This detail intersects with a description of the Pythian Oracle at an early stage in the *Dionysiaca* in which holy water is also mentioned (4.352-5): '[Cadmus] looked for a flow of spring water, so that he might clean (καθήρη) his priestly hands and pour holy water (ἅγνον ὕδωρ) on the sacrifice; for not yet was the tender produce of the growing fruit visible in gardens planted with vines'. Beyond the simple fact that the phrase 'holy water' (ἅγνον ὕδωρ) occupies the same metrical *sedes* in both passages, there exists a clear thematic connection.<sup>106</sup> In the passage of the *Dionysiaca* quoted above attention is drawn to the traditional practice of cleansing one's hands with water prior to sacrifice; in the *Paraphrase* similar attention is drawn to the use of water in Jewish ritual for the purpose of purification (καθάρσιον ὕδωρ, 2.28). What is clearly of interest is that in both passages the 'holy water' forms the central part of an established ritual observance that is soon to be displaced: in the *Paraphrase* Jewish water gives way to the new and revolutionary substance of Christian wine; in the *Dionysiaca*, as the quotation above reminds us, it is the wine of Dionysus that will supersede traditional water.

#### (c) The miracle of the wine

After the filling of the jars comes the miraculous transformation of the water into wine. In John the event is narrated as follows (John 2.8-10):

<sup>8</sup>And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it.

<sup>9</sup>When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom,

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<sup>10</sup>And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now.

The same scene in the *Paraphrase* is rendered thus (*Para.* 2.35-54):

All at once a miracle occurred. The water changed its appearance and snow-white form into a stream of sparkling wine, a flood of purple.<sup>107</sup> The air was thick with the intoxicating smell of unmixed drink coming from the water-jars. The Lord gave the signal with wine-faced voice: 'Draw sweet water from the covered vat of spring water and take it to the master of the feast.' They drew off a flood of wine, returning for cup after cup. When the steward of the feast tasted with his own lips the ruddy flood of water turned to wine, he did not know from where it had come, but the servants who carried the drink knew, those who had drawn from the big-bellied pots of stone a flood of water all transformed – then the steward called within the hall for the bridegroom who had just stopped dancing and addressed him warmly: 'Usually a man will bring out and blend a wine of noted quality at the very start of the feast; later on, when he sees that the company is drunk, their heads sunk low, he will bring out a second batch of wine that is not so good. But you have kept this *grand vin* hidden away in the house until the eleventh hour.'

In John's narrative we are told almost in passing that 'the water has been transformed into wine' (τὸ ὕδωρ οἶνον γεγενημένον); emphasis is placed instead on the reaction of the steward – unaware that a miracle has taken place – who expresses his surprise that good wine should be served towards the end of the evening when the guests were already drunk (and so unable to appreciate it). In Nonnus, by contrast, direct emphasis is placed on the miraculous nature of the event right at the start of the section: 'all at once a miracle occurred' (ἄφνω δ' ἔπλετο θαύμα, 2.35).

There follows an extended description of the miracle that is without precedent in the Gospel narrative. In fact, the scene shares many affinities with an episode in the *Dionysiaca*, where water is also transformed into wine.<sup>108</sup> In Book 14 wine is poured into the water of Lake Astacis in order to drug and thus defeat the enemy of Dionysus. The visual aspect of the transformation is highlighted at 14.413: χιονέην μειψε φυήν ξανθόχροον ὕδωρ ('the water changed its snow-white form to red').<sup>109</sup> An almost identical line is used in the *Paraphrase* to describe the chromatic change of shining water to red wine: χιονέην μειψε φυήν ἑτερόχροον ὕδωρ ('the water changed its snow-white form to a different colour').

Shortly after the waters of the lake have been mixed with wine emphasis is placed on the fragrance of the drink that is carried by the breezes (14.416): 'the breezes blew, fragrant with the newly-poured wine' (ἔπνεον ἀρτιχύτσιο μέθης εὐώδεις ἀύραι); while in the *Paraphrase* 'the breeze blew, with the intoxicating smell of unmixed drink' (ὕδατος ἀκρήτσιο φιλεύσιος ἔπνεεν αὐρή, 2.38). Of particular interest here is the use of the adjective

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φιλεύιος. The word, which is found only here in the *Paraphrase*, literally means 'loving the cry of εὐδοῖ'<sup>110</sup> (i.e. loving the ritual cry of Dionysus) and is firmly rooted in the world of Dionysus and the *Dionysiaca*. It appears in the opening and closing lines of an extraordinary 'hymn' to Dionysus preserved in the *Greek Anthology* (listing no fewer than 99 different epithets for the god in alphabetical order).<sup>111</sup> Beyond the *Anthology* it is found only once in the *Paraphrase* (as mentioned) and sixteen times in the *Dionysiaca*.

The contamination of Lake Astacis with the wine of Dionysus has a long-term effect on the narrative of the *Dionysiaca*: it is transformed water from this same source that is used in Book 16 to drug the virgin huntress Nicaea; the same potion is subsequently used in Book 48 to drug the virgin huntress Aura. The description of the water-into-wine in both these later episodes creates further links with the miracle at Cana. Most suggestive is the response of Aura on first encountering the strange substance that is water transformed into wine (48.602): 'what is this miracle?' (τί τὸ θαῦμα;). From the lake at Astacis to the water-jars at Cana, it is a question that cannot fail to resonate.

Further correspondence between the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* relates explicitly to the effect of drinking wine. In the Gospel (2.10), the leader of the feast mentions the point at which drinking wine leads to drunkenness: 'when people are intoxicated ...' (ὅταν μεθυσθῶσι). The *Paraphrase* embellishes this bald statement by describing the 'heavy heads' (βαρυνομένων δὲ καρῆνων, 2.51) that result from overindulgence. This detail chimes with similar accounts in the *Dionysiaca* where drinking similarly results in a 'heavy head'.<sup>112</sup>

A close relationship is also discernible with the world of the *Dionysiaca* regarding the description of the 'bridegroom who has just come from the dance' (νυμφίον ἀρτιχόρευτον, 2.49).<sup>113</sup> In the *Dionysiaca* this unusual phrase is employed on three separate occasions.<sup>114</sup> The detail can be found in neither John nor Cyril. It is interesting to note, however, that in John's account the bridegroom and the leader of the feast are juxtaposed in the following manner: νυμφίον ὁ ἀρχιτρίκλινος. It is possible that Nonnus' νυμφίον ἀρτιχόρευτον invites recollection of John's νυμφίον ὁ ἀρχιτρίκλινος. This would amount to another example of the playful dialectic between sameness and difference that so animates Nonnus' *Paraphrase*. Indeed, if one looks more closely, the letters seem for a moment to swim before our eyes, encouraging an anagrammatic play between ἀρτιχόρευτος and ἀρχιτρίκλινος. At this point it might seem that readers as well as the guests at the wedding party are able to experience something of the intoxicating quality of wine.

#### (d) Conclusion

The Gospel narrative of the wedding at Cana concludes simply in the following manner (2.11):

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11. This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.

Nonnus' version ends on a typically expansive note (*Para.* 2.55-62):

Jesus performed this first miracle openly at the wine-soaked wedding in Cana, elevated home of the long-haired Galileans. And so, when faced with a feast where the wine ran dry, he revealed to the Hebrews his towering glory...The disciples placed all their trust in him without hesitation.

The Lord did not stay long in the land of Cana after the wedding banquet and the drunken bridal-festivities.

Nonnus follows John by marking the end of the episode by means of ring-composition: in John 'in Cana of Galilee' (ἐν Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας) picks up the same phrase used at the start of the episode at 2.1; in Nonnus 'the land of Cana' (πέδον Καναναίου) likewise reprises the description at *Paraphrase* 2.3. Nonnus diverges from John once again through the emphasis he places on the role of wine in the wedding celebrations. Within the space of eight lines reference is made to the 'wine-soaked wedding' (φιλακρήτω παρὰ παστῶ, 2.55), the 'feast where the wine ran dry' (διψαλέην παρὰ δαίτα, 2.59) and the 'drunken bridal festivities' (μεθυσφαλέων ὕμενάων, 2.62).

The last of these three references (comprising the final two words of the whole episode), presents another suggestive intersection with the world of the *Dionysiaca*. Outside the *Paraphrase* the phrase 'drunken bridal festivities' (μεθυσφαλέων ὕμενάων) is recorded only in the *Dionysiaca*. It occurs twice during Book 16 to describe the situation of Nicaea's rape by Dionysus (after she unwittingly drank water changed to wine).<sup>115</sup> The same phrase is reprised at 48.569 just before the 'copy-cat' drugging and rape of Aura, when Dionysus remembers his earlier drink-charged conquest of Nicaea. The use of the same phrase in both the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* establishes for the reader a challenging, provocative, and possibly uncomfortable connection between the world of Dionysus and the world of Christ. Once again, Nonnus resolutely refuses to draw a clear line between these two worlds.

### *Poetic superiority*

Christ's transformation of water into wine has been interpreted by critics as a metaphor that shows Christ's ability to move beyond and distance himself from his Jewish context. First we are shown the limitations of the existing order on account of the fact that the supply of wine had dried up. The absence of wine suggests the metaphorical limitations of Judaism. Christ's solution – which shows how he transcends the existing world order – is a radical one: he boldly appropriates stone water-jars that have been set aside for purposes of ritual purification (wine is traditionally stored in earthenware not stone) in order

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to supply wedding guests with wine.<sup>116</sup> In this way traditional Jewish water is transformed into new Christian wine, even though the structures (i.e. the stone jars) remain the same. The fact that the new wine is acknowledged by the master of ceremonies as better wine than that which had been tasted before serves as a corroborating sign of the superiority of Christ.

It is possible to see a further level of metaphor in operation in the *Paraphrase*. As Christ stands in relation to the traditional religion of Judaism so, by analogy, Nonnus stands in relation to the Biblical tradition narrated by John. The more sober and sparse (though undeniably poetic) prose of John's narrative may be seen to represent the Jewish water, miraculously transformed by the poetic wine of Nonnus into a new and more satisfying narrative.<sup>117</sup> More specifically, when the steward marvels at the quality of the wine that comes out at the end of the feast, it is possible to see in his words an implicit comment on Nonnus' epigonal relationship with John: the better Biblical narrative (that of Nonnus) has been kept until last. The idea that Nonnus may have the temerity to rate his own work more highly than that of John may seem heretical to some readers; but it should be remembered that any attempt to recast the words of another into a different form (however respectful and even humble that attempt may be) inevitably draws the author into a struggle for literary supremacy.<sup>118</sup>

The poetic symbolism of the transformation of water into wine has further implications for the way that we understand the stone water-jars themselves. As detailed above, Nonnus follows John in describing six vessels, each 'with a capacity of two or three measures' (τρία μέτρα κεῖχανόδοτες ... ἠὲ δύο). In a prose text this detail may pass by with little notice – beyond a comment on how much wine such vessels could contain.<sup>119</sup> Within a work of poetry, however, this detail has a different resonance. It may be observed that the six vessels described in Nonnus' poem match the six feet of the hexameter line; more intriguingly, just as the capacity of the vessels is two or three measures each, so the 'capacity' of each metrical foot is measured in terms of two or three syllables – namely, spondees and dactyls. Nonnus' poem, one might argue, has not only transformed John's prose, but has also transformed our perception of the water-jars contained within the Gospel account. The jars have now become appropriate containers not only for wine, but for words as well – contained within the six metrical vessels that constitute the hexameter line.<sup>120</sup> The description of the vessels arranged 'in a line' (στοιχηδόν) – a detail that is not to be found in John's account – further encourages this metapoetic reading. Elsewhere in the *Paraphrase* the adverb is used to refer to people assembled 'in a row', but at the very end of the poem it is used explicitly to describe lines of text.<sup>121</sup>

## 2. The true vine

The second prominent intersection between the realms of Dionysus and Christ discernible in the Gospel of John comes in Chapter 15 with an extended viticultural metaphor that establishes God as the gardener and Christ as the vine (15.1-6):

<sup>1</sup>I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

<sup>2</sup>Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

<sup>3</sup>Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

<sup>4</sup>Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

<sup>5</sup>I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

<sup>6</sup>If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

The version of the *Paraphrase* runs as follows (*Para.* 15.1-26):

I am the vine of life for the regenerative world, and my Father is the vine-dresser. He lops the vine-branch with its lovely leaves that knows not how to bring forth clustered grapes. As for the branch that is dappled with wine-faced fruit, my Father the farmer of life knows how to purge it so that it brings forth bigger fruit with new-grown leaves. You have yourselves already been purged by the words that I have spoken. Remain entwined with my regenerative foliage, remain entwined with me, offshoots of the world.

Just as a branch of the cultivated vine will never bear fruit if it does not grow on the vine plant, a grapy imitation of a cluster thick with shoots, so you will not have strength to bear god-fearing fruit, if you do not remain entwined with me. I am the vine that has a voice and you are all the speaking shoots weighed down with wise fruit. Every mortal with lasting wisdom who stays entwined in me, will bring forth in greater measure fruit fit for God, a fruit ever flourishing not a fruit that will die. But if someone stays no longer amid my shoots, this viny imitation is tossed out into a heap upon the ground as a branch of the cultivated vine, lying stretched out on the ground, dried up like a withered cluster. Having gathered him up, heaven's workers throw him on the furnace. He is incinerated by smoking flames of fire, having left alone the saplings of my vines.

### *The language of viticulture*

According to Barrett, the possible overlap between the Christian and Classical symbolism of the vine held little importance for the vine metaphor developed by John.<sup>122</sup> Whether this is the case or not, the relationship between the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* at this point is of the greatest importance. The rich poetic vocabulary of the Nonnian passage corresponds directly with the viticultural imagery used in the *Dionysiaca*. The

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growth of fruit on the vine is described by Nonnus with the phrases βότρυν ἀέξειν and καρπὸν ἀέξει – both of which find precise parallels in the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, the description of grapes in the *Paraphrase* as the 'wine-faced fruit' (οἴνοπι καρπῶ) corresponds directly to descriptions in the *Dionysiaca*: at *Dion.* 12.187, for example, we read how 'the trees were garlanded with the new wine-faced fruit' (οἴνοπι ... καρπῶ).<sup>124</sup>

The 'vine-branch' (κλήμα) mentioned four times in this single chapter of the *Paraphrase* has its roots in the Gospel of John;<sup>125</sup> but is also found in the *Dionysiaca* where, for example, we are presented with the image of 'vine-branches full of clusters of grapes' (κλήματα βοτρύεντα).<sup>126</sup> The 'cultivated vine' (ἡμερίς) – a word not found at all in John's text – occurs 27 times in the *Dionysiaca*.

#### *Poikilia*

The *Paraphrase* elaborates on the Johnine description of the vine-branch, qualifying it with the adjective 'dappled' (ποικίλον) [15.4].<sup>127</sup> In the *Dionysiaca* the vine shares a similar association with the quality of *poikilia*: at 5.279 we learn how 'the ripening vine grows in dappled clusters (ποικιλόβοτρυς); at 27.284 Dionysus is himself described as 'having dappled clusters (ποικιλόβοτρυς) [of grapes]'. For the *Dionysiaca*, the word ποικίλος does not function 'simply' as a descriptive adjective, but takes on an important programmatic significance, an aesthetic quality that, it has been argued, encapsulates the whole work.<sup>128</sup> It is introduced in the proem to Book 1 where the poet asks the Muses to set Proteus before him, so that he might appear 'in his diverse/changeable form, because I am striking up a diverse/changeable hymn' (ποικίλον εἶδος ἔχων, ὅτι ποικίλον ὕμνον ἀράσσω, 1.15). Just as the poet is seen to embody the complex and shifting quality of *poikilia* in his narrative, so Dionysus his main character is seen to share the same *poikilos* quality.

The description of the vine-branch as *poikilos* encourages further reflection on the relationship between Christ and Dionysus and the similarity (and difference) between them.<sup>129</sup> The *poikilia* of Christ is in fact developed further at several other points in the *Paraphrase*. At 7.19 Christ's brothers urge him to 'reveal (δειξόν) his diverse miracles (ποικίλα θαύματα) for the world to see'; this forms a striking parallel with *Dion.* 45.324, when 'Dionysus revealed (ἐδείκνυε) his diverse miracles (ποικίλα θαύματα) to all the people'. Similarly, whereas Christ – dressed in a rich purple tunic supplied by Pilate – is described as 'dapple-backed' (ποικιλόνωτος, 19.25), Dionysus is presented wearing a dappled fawnskin (νεβρίδα ποικιλόνωτον, *Dion.* 1.35; 43.78).

#### *Resurrection and regeneration*

Though not explicit in John, the themes of resurrection and regeneration form a central part of Nonnus' metaphor of the vine. *Paraphrase* 15 starts

with the phrase ‘for the regenerative world’ (παλιναυξεί κόσμῳ). The adjective ‘regenerative/growing again’ (παλιναυξής) used here twice within eight lines, occurs in a number of places in the *Dionysiaca* where it is also closely associated with themes of regeneration, rebirth and resurrection. At *Dion.* 7.1 the world is seen recovering from the cataclysm sent by Zeus ‘with the fruit of everflowing life growing again (παλιναυξεί);<sup>130</sup> at 9.159 Dionysus himself is described as ‘growing again’ (παλιναυξέα) with specific reference to the earlier incarnation of the god as Zagreus (a figure popular in Orphic narratives who was destroyed by the Titans and brought back to life again in the form of Dionysus). At 25.542 the adjective is employed during a description of bodily resurrection in a scene concerning the resurrection of a monster by means of a magical plant which brought back the breathing soul into the dead body and made it rise again (παλιναυξεί).<sup>131</sup>

Emphasis on the regenerative quality of the vine – the fact that it dies away before springing back to life – is one that is found elsewhere within Christian descriptions of the vine. According to Dionysius the Areopagite wine has a revivifying quality.<sup>132</sup> The metaphor of the vine is employed during John Chrysostom’s *Fourth Discourse* on the Lazarus episode. One of the features of the ‘spiritual vine of the sacred Scriptures’ is the fact that it keeps replenishing itself: ‘when we have gathered all the fruit that is to be seen, more still remains. Thus many also before us have spoken on this subject; many perhaps after us will speak on it; but no one will be able to exhaust the whole store of wealth. For such is the nature of this abundance, that the more deeply you dig down, the more plentifully divine instruction wells forth: it is a fountain never failing.’<sup>133</sup>

The regenerative aspect of the vine also intersects pointedly with the account of the discovery of the vine in the *Dionysiaca*, when the satyr Ampelus (Ἄμπελος) dies and is ‘reborn’ as a vine (ἄμπελος).<sup>134</sup> At *Paraphrase* 15.15 Nonnus’ Christ declares himself to be ‘the talking vine’ (ἄμπελος αὐδήσσα).<sup>135</sup> Within the Christian tradition this appears to constitute an unparalleled declaration. The unique nature of the declaration makes its similarity with the words of Dionysus at *Dion.* 11.315-16 all the more remarkable: ‘Father Zeus, if you love me, and if you know the toil of being in love, / bring back a talkative Ampelus (Ἄμπελον αὐδήεντα) again for just one hour’.<sup>136</sup> In the *Paraphrase*, as we have seen, Christ declares himself to be the ‘talking vine’ (ἄμπελος αὐδήσσα); in the *Dionysiaca* the talking vine is identified with the dead boyfriend of Dionysus (Ἄμπελον αὐδήεντα).<sup>137</sup> For the reader of the *Dionysiaca*, Christ’s declaration that he is a ‘talking vine’ stimulates and provokes inevitable questions about the relationship between the world of Christ and of Dionysus and about the meaning and wider resonance of the symbol of the vine. Who has the strongest claim to be the true vine: Dionysus or Christ?

### 3. Christ and Dionysus: Nonnus' Paraphrase of St John's Gospel

#### *The true vine?*

As we have just seen, Nonnus' poeticisation of the vine metaphor makes explicit the theme of regenerative growth that was at best only implicit in John's account. On the face of it, it seems remarkable that the *Paraphrase* account should at the same time choose to neglect one of the most prominent parts of John's vine metaphor, namely the declaration of Christ that 'I am the true vine' (ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή) at John 15.1.<sup>138</sup> The Christ of the *Paraphrase* does indeed announce that he is a vine, but side-steps the declaration of authenticity by stating that 'I am the vine of life' (ζωῆς ἄμπελος εἰμι). Although elsewhere Nonnus appears happy to follow John in his depiction of Christ by affirming that his body is 'true' (ἐτήτυμος),<sup>139</sup> here he chooses to avoid any declaration of truth.<sup>140</sup> The question why Nonnus chose to remove the qualification of truth from Christ's vine is ultimately unanswerable, but it is still an interesting question to pose. Biblical scholars have interpreted Christ's statement in John 15.1 as suggesting a contrast with the traditional image of Israel as the vine: 'Jesus' description of Himself as *the true*, or 'genuine', *vine*, implies that Israel had been an imperfect foreshadowing of what was found to perfection in Himself.<sup>141</sup> It has been also been suggested, however, that John's description of the 'true' vine was intended as a direct contrast to the 'false' vine of Classical tradition.<sup>142</sup> It is tempting to consider that Nonnus' failure to describe Christ as the 'true' vine in the *Paraphrase* may have something to do not with the vine of Israel but the vine of Dionysus. By refusing to call himself the true vine, Nonnus' Christ certainly avoids the implication that the vine of Dionysus (as dramatised in the *Dionysiaca*) was, to paraphrase Tasker, 'an imperfect foreshadowing of what was found to perfection in Himself'.<sup>143</sup> By refusing to assert the veracity of Christ's vine, Nonnus' text keeps open the possibility of alternative readings. We are left with a nagging and provocative suggestion that the truth may lie elsewhere.

#### 3. The Dionysiac at large

Although the most sustained and significant engagement with Dionysiac imagery in the *Paraphrase* (and in the Fourth Gospel) can be located within the two scenes that we have just explored (the wedding at Cana in Book 2 and the metaphor of Christ as the vine in Book 15), it is important to note that imagery associated with the vine and with wine is not restricted to these two passages, but suffuses the wider narrative of the *Paraphrase*.

Soon after the wedding at Cana, Christ enters Jerusalem and drives the money-lenders and dove sellers out of the temple. His sojourn in the city coincides with the festival of the Passover. In Nonnus' detailed rendition we learn that Christ crossed the city (2.112-13): 'celebrating the Passover

that was still going on; and an inspired feast consecrated the noisy mysteries of the lamb-eating priests' (εὐάζων ἔτι πάσχα, καὶ ἀρνοφάγων ιερῶν / ὄργια μυστιπόλευε φιλόκροτα θυιάς ἑορτή);<sup>144</sup> in John's account we read simply (2.23): 'Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, on the feast day ...'.

Nonnus' description once again invites the suggestion of a relationship between the worlds of Christ and Dionysus. The reference to the Passover as 'mysteries' (ὄργια) suggests one such potential intersection with the world of Dionysus. At *Dionysiaca* 13.7 Zeus describes Dionysiac ritual practice in terms of 'mysteries' (ὄργια), and frequent reference is made specifically to the mysteries of Dionysus.<sup>145</sup> Strikingly, several passages in the *Dionysiaca* replicate the phraseology of 'consecrated the mysteries/rites' (ὄργια μυστιπόλευε) employed here in the *Paraphrase*: at 33.229, for example, it is stated that Chalcomede did not 'consecrate the rites (ὄργια μυστιπόλευεν) of sleepless Lyaius [Dionysus]'; while at 48.774 Artemis orders Aura to 'consecrate the rites (ὄργια μυστιπόλευε) of your woman-mad Bacchus'.<sup>146</sup> It is interesting to note that Dionysus' satyrs are described as 'performers of the mystic rites' (μυστιπόλοι) at *Dion.* 31.153, an epithet that is also attributed to the disciples of Christ at *Para.* 3.126. The train of Dionysiac imagery within the description of the Passover in *Paraphrase* 2 is further reinforced by Nonnus' description of the Passover meal as 'inspired' (θυιάς) – a word used in the *Dionysiaca* as an epithet for Bacchants.<sup>147</sup>

Most arresting of all is the use of the participle εὐάζων (2.112) to describe Christ 'celebrating' or 'honouring' the Passover. With reference to the narrative of the Gospel, it may seem reasonable to understand the participle in loose metaphorical terms as a 'simple' description of Christ's celebration of the Passover.<sup>148</sup> In its original, non-metaphorical, sense the verb bears the meaning of 'crying εὐαί in honour of Bacchus', i.e. 'making the cry of Dionysus'.<sup>149</sup> A reader of the *Dionysiaca* would certainly be unlikely to miss the resonance that brings together the worlds of Christ and Dionysus so explicitly. Attempts to block out the resonance of the root meaning of the verb here would need to account for the Dionysiac atmosphere of the scene already activated by words such as ὄργια μυστιπόλευε and θυιάς, together with the wider context of *Paraphrase* 2 during which Nonnus has presented his readers with his wine-charged, 'Dionysiac' renarration of the wedding at Cana.

In the *Dionysiaca* the verb, in its more common compound form ἀνευάζω, is employed on a number of occasions with specific reference to Dionysus and Dionysiac ritual.<sup>150</sup> In the *Paraphrase* the verb is used three times at 4.108, 12.79 and 14.89. At John 4.22 during Christ's discussion with the Samaritan woman, a contrast is drawn between the ignorant religious practice of the Samaritans and that of the Jews: 'We know what we worship'. This is transformed by Nonnus into: 'We join our mysteries (ὄργια) to holy altars, / crying *euai* (ἀνευάζοντες), this we know, with a

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consecrating (μυστιπόλω) voice' (4.107-8). The imagery here intersects closely with that employed the scene of the Passover described in *Paraphrase* 2: the Dionysiac resonance of ἀνευάζοντες is supported by the reference both to ὄργια and μυστιπόλω.

In Book 12 Nonnus' Christ enters Jerusalem seated on a donkey and is mobbed by the crowds who have heard how he raised Lazarus from the dead: 'An assembled crowd of people testified that Jesus had called Lazarus from the tomb, rousing from the dead a man four days deceased, pouring over him his spirit-guiding voice. For this reason a great crowd of travellers flooded to meet him, invoking him with ritual cries as Christ (Χριστὸν ἀνευάζων, 12.79) saviour of corpses, son of David'.<sup>151</sup> Again the detail is a Nonnian elaboration: the analogous passage in John 12.18 relates simply: 'For this reason the people also met him'. And again it is the *Dionysiaca* that provides a clear analogy: during the proem to Book 1, the poet declares 'I shall invoke Bacchus with ritual cries' (Βάκχον ἀνευάζω, *Dion.* 1.20).<sup>152</sup>

The final occurrence of ἀνευάζω comes in *Paraphrase* 14 when Christ responds to a question about how it is possible for him to reveal himself only to his followers and not to the world at large in the following terms (14.89-90): 'Any man who loves me, honouring me the more with cries of *euai* (ἀνευάζων, 14.89), will keep my words safe in the refuge of his heart'. Nonnus' account represents an elaboration of the narrative at John 14.23: 'If a man loves me, he will keep my words'; and here once again the text of the *Paraphrase* keeps open a small but significant window of communication between the world of Christ and the world of Dionysus.

Two further related aspects of Dionysiac ritual and worship find a resonance within the *Paraphrase*: intoxication and madness. In John's Gospel the only direct reference to drunkenness comes, as we have seen, when the steward at the wedding at Cana describes how it is usual at feasts to serve the good wine first and save the worse wine for 'when people are intoxicated' (ὅταν μεθυσθῶσιν, 2.10). The theme of drunkenness that, as we have seen, was elaborated by Nonnus in his narrative of the wedding, is reprised at another significant moment in the *Paraphrase* when Judas departs in order to betray Christ 'in an intoxicated state after the supper' (μεθύων μετὰ δόρπον, 13.124).<sup>153</sup> The detail that Judas was intoxicated at the point of his betrayal of Christ – a detail absent from John's Gospel – contrasts sharply with the more positive presentation of wine and the vine in the *Paraphrase* in Books 2 and 15.<sup>154</sup>

This presentation of the negative and unstable aspect of wine is one that chimes with its similarly ambiguous presentation in the *Dionysiaca*, particularly in Book 47 when Icarus is murdered by the drunken farmers.<sup>155</sup> There drunkenness is closely linked with madness and it is interesting to note that this same connection is made with regard to Judas who is described in the *Paraphrase* as not only intoxicated but also filled 'with madness for money' (φιλοκερδέι λύσση) at 13.124. There is, in fact, a

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prominent (and overwhelmingly negative) emphasis on ‘madness’ (λύσσα) – again quite absent from John – that is present throughout the *Paraphrase*.<sup>156</sup> The word ‘madness’ (λύσσα) is of course closely related to Dionysus on account of his cultic title ‘Lyaius’ (Λυαίος), the god who ‘sets free’ (λυῶ = ‘I free’). The ‘freedom’ from restraint delivered by the god, as is well established within the literature of Dionysus, can lead to madness and destruction.<sup>157</sup> The direct connection between drunkenness and madness is itself clearly made in the *Dionysiaca*: in the *Periochi* for Book 22 we learn of the ‘madness of Dionysus’ (λύσσα Λυαίου) and at 32.137 and 33.11 the hexameter lines are framed by the same two words;<sup>158</sup> at *Dion.* 12.381 the punning connection between drunkenness and madness is suggested when Rheia hands Dionysus ‘the amethyst that wards off the grip of madness (λυσσαλέης ... ἀνάγκης)’.<sup>159</sup>

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Nonnus’ transformation of the story of Christ into Classical epic is no mere literary exercise. The juxtaposition of the *Paraphrase* with the world of Dionysus and the *Dionysiaca* has elucidated a complex web of correspondences and points of intersection. The text of the *Paraphrase*, drawing on the rich seam of Dionysiac imagery already present in John’s Gospel, encourages us to reflect on the intersection between Christ and the figure of Dionysus and his world. The *Paraphrase* does not present a simple mapping of Dionysiac imagery onto Christian; nor does it provide us with any neat conclusions about the relationship between Classical tradition and the Christian world. At the heart of the relationship between these two spheres lies an essential, one might say Dionysiac, instability – a disturbing (yet exhilarating) refusal to dictate and determine meaning. This is closely related to the ambivalent nature of wine and the vine: it can transform one’s view of the world in a positive manner (as is implied by the transformation of water into wine at the wedding at Cana), but it also has the power to disturb and destroy (as is implied by the drunkenness and madness of Judas at the point of his betrayal of Christ). It is little wonder that readers have so often chosen to downplay – even ignore – the interaction between the Dionysiac and the Christian in this most challenging and hermeneutically provocative of texts.

## Dionysus and Christ: Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*

Although in its day the *Dionysiaca* rivalled Homer in terms of popularity and influence, its marginal place in the history of modern classical scholarship needs little elaboration.<sup>1</sup> For many, Nonnus' epic on the earthly struggles of the hero Dionysus to join his father in Olympus – the largest poem to have survived from the whole of antiquity – exists as an often-quoted yet little-read compendium of obscure mythological information; it is periodically trawled for allusions to earlier (and implicitly better) poets whose works have survived only in fragmentary form, but has rarely considered on its own terms as a literary creation. Over the last thirty years, however, a work of quiet and heroic rehabilitation has been going on: in 1976 Francis Vian produced the first volume of an 18-book commentary on the *Dionysiaca* that was finally completed with the help of a team of collaborators in 2006.<sup>2</sup> Vian's 'French school' of Nonnus has had a profound impact on the modern study of the *Dionysiaca*, contributing to a significant and still ongoing literary rehabilitation not just of Nonnus, but of the Greek poetry of late antiquity more generally.<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, the methodology of the project has been to emphasise the continuity between the *Dionysiaca* and the Classical tradition and to highlight the text's sophisticated literary register. This Classicising or, to use the language of translation theory, 'familiarising' tradition can be clearly observed, for example, in Neil Hopkinson's 1994 edited volume on *Studies in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus* and in my own 2001 monograph on allusion and intertextuality in the *Dionysiaca*.

At first sight the *Dionysiaca* does indeed look like a text that would be better placed in the fifth century BC, not the fifth century AD. Here is a text that parades and celebrates its relationship with the preceding thousand years of Greek literature. It seems to go to great lengths to avoid making allusion to the contemporary world of late antiquity, in particular Egypt where the book was written.<sup>4</sup> It is Homer, the figurehead of the Classical tradition, whom Nonnus invokes as his literary father (*Dion.* 25.265), and it is the combined 48 books of Homer's own *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that serve as a clear stimulus for Nonnus' own 48-book epic.<sup>5</sup> Its adherence to Classical form, language and content has led many to the conclusion that it has no contribution to make to the late antique world – a text with few roots in the soil of late antiquity.<sup>6</sup>

This view of the *Dionysiaca* as a Classical, as opposed to a late antique, text has to some extent been perpetuated by the way in which modern

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scholarship has treated the *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel. As noted in the preceding chapter, a projected 21 volumes of commentary, text and translation of the *Paraphrase* was inaugurated by Enrico Livrea in 1989, running along similar lines to that of Vian's *Budé Dionysiaca*.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis of Livrea's series is on the theological resonance of the poem – an attempt to understand the *Paraphrase* as a part of late antique religious culture. Although allusions to Homer and the wider literature of the Classical world are carefully noted in the commentaries, the main focus of attention is on Nonnus' engagement with the Gospel of John, on Cyril of Alexandria's *Commentary* on the Gospel of John and on the scriptural tradition of texts and discussions in the New and Old Testaments and the Church Fathers. The contrasting emphases placed on Nonnus' two poems have served to perpetuate the idea that the *Paraphrase* is a poem that belongs to the world of Christian late antiquity, while the *Dionysiaca* belongs to the Classical world – only one step from the view still prevalent in the early twentieth century that saw the *Dionysiaca* as a 'pagan' text, in contrast to the Christian *Paraphrase*.

Modern scholarship has, then, tended to take little account of the fact that the *Dionysiaca* was itself the product of a post-Classical, Christian world, written in all likelihood by the author of the *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel. A few critics have, however, been more willing to contemplate interaction between the Classical figure of Dionysus and the world of late antiquity. In the words of Bowersock, 'Christian perspectives impinged just as powerfully upon pagan thought and imagery as pagan perspectives had earlier shaped Christian doctrine and iconography'.<sup>8</sup> For Bowersock, indeed, Nonnus' Dionysus takes on the guise of a Christianised pagan deity, 'a polytheistic Christ'.<sup>9</sup> The broad brush strokes of this picture of the *Dionysiaca* have been complemented more recently by adherents of what one might call the 'Italian school' of Nonnian studies – critics whose work on the *Dionysiaca* has grown out of, and been profoundly informed by, the *Paraphrase*.<sup>10</sup> Inevitably, given their academic background, these critics have been more open to seeing Christian allusions in Nonnus' epic poem, not just in general tone but in specific details. Accorinti, for example, has suggested parallels between Dionysus' entry into Athens in Book 47 and Christ's own entry into Jerusalem mounted on a donkey;<sup>11</sup> while in a recently published article, Spanoudakis has produced a detailed account of how the death of Icarus may be read as a version of the passion of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Following the lead of the Italian school I will explore points of intersection between the *Dionysiaca* and the wider cultural and social contexts of late antiquity. In keeping with my approach to the *Paraphrase* in the preceding chapter I choose to place emphasis not so much on the author (and speculation about his intentions), but on the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. The degree to which the *Dionysiaca* and its principal character Dionysus are caught up in a dialogue with the new

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force of Christianity – and what the implications of that dialogue might be – remains to be considered.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. First I shall examine the way in which the *Dionysiaca* locates itself within the wider debate about poetic inspiration across late antiquity (picking up on the central theme of Chapter 2); a second longer section will then consider the relationship between the *Dionysiaca* and Christian discourse (including the *Paraphrase*) more specifically.

### 1. Dionysus and the Muses

Although poets of the Muses have, since the time of Hesiod, acknowledged the controlling influence of the god Apollo, this is not the only Classical divinity to be associated with the Muses and the powerful force of inspiration. For poets throughout the Classical world (and beyond), Dionysus stands alongside Apollo as an important figure of inspiration.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the influence of Nietzsche, we have been accustomed to think of Apollo and Dionysus as two diametrically opposed figures, as reason versus madness.<sup>14</sup> However, surviving evidence from the Classical world suggests that it is similarity not difference that best characterises the relationship between these two inspirational divinities.<sup>15</sup>

Dionysus' connection with poetic inspiration is closely bound up in his prominent role as the patron of the great dramatic festivals (both tragedy and comedy) in fifth-century Athens.<sup>16</sup> In a famous passage from Plato's *Ion*, the madness of poetic activity (the so-called *furor poeticus*) – when the poet is imagined as being overtaken by divine madness, literally having the god within him (*enthousiasmos*) – is explicitly compared to the madness induced by Dionysus (*Ion* 533e-4a): 'Yet when they fall under the power of melody and rhythm, they are inspired and possessed: like Bacchae who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but cannot do so when they are in their right mind'.<sup>17</sup> Curiously, perhaps, no explicit connection is drawn here between Dionysus and wine, though the earlier poet Archilochus does make clear the link between Dionysus and the inspirational quality of wine: 'I know how to begin the beautiful song of lord Dionysus, the dithyramb, after my mind has been thunderstruck by wine.'<sup>18</sup>

Further evidence for Dionysus' long-established association with the Muses can be found at Sophocles, *Antigone* 965 where Lycurgus' attack on Dionysus is said to have 'angered the Muses' (ἠρέθιζε Μούσας). As Jebb notes in his commentary, evidence for the close relationship between Dionysus and the Muses can be adduced from his Athenian epithet as 'the singer' (Μελπόμενος).<sup>19</sup> This epithet is recorded by Pausanias (1.2.5); in his description of the region of Boeotia, Pausanias also records the presence of several statues of Dionysus located together with statues of the Muses and Apollo on Mt Helicon (9.30.1). In his essay on *How the Young Man should*

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*listen to Poetry*, Plutarch develops the metaphor of the ‘poetic vine of the Muses’ (τὴν ποιητικὴν ἡμερίδα τῶν Μουσῶν),<sup>20</sup> while at *Quaestiones Conviviales* 613D, during a discussion about philosophy in the context of a symposium, he records a suggestion for ‘the mixing of Dionysus [wine] not less with the Muses than with the Nymphs [i.e. water]’.<sup>21</sup>

The connection between Dionysus and the Muses was further developed by the Roman poets, picking up on the work of Hellenistic writers such as Callimachus.<sup>22</sup> Lucretius famously describes the effects of Bacchic inspiration at *DRN* 1.922-3: *sed acri / percussit thyrsos laudis spes magna meum cor* (‘but great hope of praise struck my heart with its sharp thyrsus’). The power of Dionysiac inspiration is a theme frequently exploited by Augustan poets, such as Horace in *Odes* 2.19.<sup>23</sup> In the words of one recent critic, ‘Augustan poets turned Bacchus [i.e. Dionysus] into a principal source of poetic inspiration’.<sup>24</sup>

The close association between Dionysus and inspiration continues into late antiquity. Bishop Eusebius quotes the historian Diodorus Siculus as follows: ‘They say that the Muses travel around with him [Dionysus]. They are virgins and extraordinarily well-educated, and they give pleasure to the god with their singing and dancing.’<sup>25</sup> Prudentius, in a passage quoted in Chapter 2, describes the Classical muse as wearing ivy (*hederas*), one of the traditional motifs associated with the god Dionysus;<sup>26</sup> Ausonius too suggests a playful connection between poetic activity and the realm of Dionysus when he relates how ‘the story goes that you once got drunk with wine in order to produce poetry to match that found in Virgil and Horace’ (*creditus olim fervere mero, / ut Vergilii Flaccique locis / aemula ferres*, 5.21.4-6).<sup>27</sup>

Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* itself establishes a clear connection between Dionysus and the Muses. In the opening lines of the epic, the poet undergoes an initiation that will turn him into a poet of Dionysus (1.11-12): ‘Bring me the fennel-stalk, crash the cymbals, you Muses. Put in my hand the thyrsus of Dionysus, subject of my song.’ There is here already a blurring of the functions of Muses and Bacchantes, since the Muses are imagined to be in possession of the Dionysiac accoutrements of fennel-stalk, cymbals and *thyrsus*.<sup>28</sup> The blurring of the boundaries between Muses and Bacchantes is further in evidence at *Dion.* 12.152-3 where the Muses in company with Dionysus ‘raise up the ritual cry of Dionysus’ (ἀνευάζουσι) in honour of Ampelus. At *Dion.* 13.46 a reference to the ‘Corybantic Muses’ hints at a further connection between the Muses and the sphere of Dionysus: at Plato, *Ion* 533e-534a inspired poets were compared not only with Bacchantes but with Corybants, ‘a frenzied cult with strong links to Dionysus’.<sup>29</sup>

An explicit description of the inspiring power of Dionysus comes at *Dion.* 17.68 when the peasant Brongus was ‘moved by the divine inspiration (δαμονίῳ ... ἄσθματι) of Bacchus’ to put on an impromptu concert for his guest, the vine god. The ‘inspiring breath’ (ἄσθμα) of Dionysus creates a

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suggestive link with the breath of Homer by means of which Nonnus seeks to be inspired as a poet at *Dion.* 25.261: 'breathe your divine breath upon me' (πνεύσον ἔμοι τεὸν ἄσθμα θεόσσυτον). In fact, in the second line of the poem, the vocabulary of inspiration (literally 'breathing in') is already present in the description of the 'breath of the thunderbolt' (ἄσθμα κεραυνοῦ) that destroys Semele – an ironic (and fatal) contrast to the positive inspiration that appears to emanate from Homer and Dionysus.

Dionysus enjoys a close relationship not only with the Muses but also with Apollo, the 'original' leader of the Muses. At both the beginning and the end of the *Dionysiaca* attention is drawn to the close relationship between Dionysus and Apollo. In the proem, following his initiation as the poet of Dionysus, Nonnus makes explicit his concerns not to offend Apollo, whom he addresses as 'my Phoebus' (Φοῖβον ἐμόν, 1.41). The proximity between the two gods is then emphatically described in the final line of the poem, where – after Dionysus' ascent to heaven where he is to take his place next to his father Zeus – Dionysus is to be found (48.978): 'on a throne beside Apollo' (σύνθρονος Ἀπόλλωνι).

In the intervening books we learn more about the explicit cooperation between Apollo and Dionysus within the specific context of inspiration. In Book 9 the maddened Ino finds herself at the Delphic oracle where her madness is cured by Apollo (9.283-6): 'Long she remained there in the Parnassian wood ... Then she founded dances for Bacchus, yet a young boy, hard by the rock of prophecy, by the oracle of Phoebus.' Later during the catalogue of heroes who muster in support of Dionysus comes further confirmation of the solidarity between the two gods (13.129-30): 'laurelled Apollo shared his land with Dionysus his brother'.

We saw in Chapter 2 how poets had frequent recourse to the *topos* of the silent oracle – an emphatic, yet often neurotic-sounding, declaration that the inspiration of the traditional oracle sites had been traduced.<sup>30</sup> Nonnus' epic, set in the mythological 'past', affords his readers the chance to see the traditional oracular machinery still in full operation. At 13.132-4 we read how 'the Pythian rock uttered the inspired voice of God, and the tripod spoke of itself, and the babbling rill of Castalia – that never silent spring (ἀσιγήτοιο δὲ πηγῆς) – bubbled with wisdom in its waters'.<sup>31</sup> The emphatic description of the 'spring that is never silent' throws the *topos* of the silent oracle into sharp relief.<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding the vibrancy of Nonnus' Delphic oracle, the poet does, however, still manage to supply a 'conventional' late antique description of a silent oracle. When Ino arrives at Delphi her madness is so extreme that it causes the oracle site to be abandoned (9.261-4): 'She drove away the maidens of the temple service: no more libations, no more public worship, no men of Delphi danced near the temple. A few lines later (9.270-4) we learn that: 'The Pythian prophetess herself choked down the foreign sounds of the underworld voice and ran into the mountains, with her customary Panopeian laurel shaking upon her head: she plunged

between the deep-kneed peaks of the ravine, and took refuge in the Delphic cavern, in her fear of maddened Ino.<sup>33</sup> Delphi may have been abandoned for different reasons from those suggested by the Christian writers of late antiquity, but Nonnus' description of the sudden and catastrophic failure of the oracle could not have been more topical.

## 2. Dionysus and Christ

I want to turn now to a more detailed investigation of the intersection between the narratives of Dionysus and Christ, as played out within the pages of the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>34</sup> The following analysis is divided into three parts: I begin with the birth narrative that occupies such a significant position in the stories of both Dionysus and Christ; attention will then shift to the theme of resurrection (both bodily and metaphorical), with a specific emphasis on the rebirth of the young satyr Ampelus as the vine (*ampelus*); a concluding section will consider the relationship between the new wine of Dionysus and the wine of the Eucharist.

### (a) Birth

Tell, goddess, of the agent of Cronides' blazing bed, the breath of the thunderbolt, assisting in childbirth with its bridal spark, and the flash of lightning, Semele's chambermaid; tell of the birth of Bacchus twice-born, whom Zeus plucked wet from the fire, a half-finished baby, from a mother who lacked a midwife's help; with merciful hands he cut an incision in his thigh and carried him in a male womb, at once his father and lady mother, with a clear recollection of another birth, when previously in his fecund head he carried an incredible lump in his pregnant brow and shot out glinting with her weapons – Athena.  
(*Dionysiaca* 1.1-10)

The breathless opening of Nonnus' poem (comprising a single ten-line sentence) establishes a direct link back to Homer through the use of the word 'goddess' (θεά) – a clear reminiscence of the goddess Muse invoked by Homer in the first line of the *Iliad*;<sup>35</sup> at the same time, the opening formula 'tell, goddess' (εἰπέ, θεά) connects Nonnus to more recent (and fellow Alexandrian) poets: Callimachus and Theocritus.<sup>36</sup> Right from the start, then, through its self-conscious use of Homeric and Hellenistic literary allusion, the *Dionysiaca* presents itself as an emphatic continuation of mainstream Classical culture. At the same time, however much one keeps one's eyes on the Classical tradition, the story of the birth of a child from mortal mother and immortal father is one that assumes a dramatic relevance within the world of late antiquity. As a central part of the story of Christ, it was narrated in two of the four Gospels and was the subject of frequent and often lengthy exegesis within the Church Fathers.<sup>37</sup> A clear association between the birth of Dionysus and the birth of Christ can be found, for example, in the representation of the baby Dionysus on the Nea

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Paphos mosaics in Cyprus.<sup>38</sup> A question remains, however, about the extent to which the story of Christ connects with/resonates within the narrative of Dionysus as it is presented in the *Dionysiaca*.

One of the first images with which we are confronted in the proem to the epic is that of the premature foetus of Dionysus, 'whom Zeus plucked wet from the fire' (τὸν ἐκ πυρὸς ὑγρὸν αἰείρας, 1.4). In an attempt to locate this image within the Classical literary tradition one might invoke Quintus of Smyrna and a scene at the beginning of *Posthomerica* 4, when Apollo lifts the body of Glaucus from the funeral pyre at Troy for burial in Lycia (4.4-6):

τὸν δ' αὐτὸς Ἀπόλλων  
ἐκ πυρὸς αἰθομένοιο μάλ' ἐσσυμένως ἀναείρας  
δῶκε θοοῖς Ἀνέμοισι φέρειν Λυκίης σχεδὸν αἴης·

Apollo himself swiftly lifted him up out of the blazing fire and gave him to the swift winds to take to the land of Lycia.

Nonnus, or so it might seem, has self-consciously 'lifted' the words of another poet of the Classical tradition in order to recontextualise them within his own epic composition. The allusion would certainly create a neat parallel between the two texts: where Quintus describes the plucking a dead body from a burning pyre by the god Apollo, Nonnus describes the plucking of a living foetus from a burning womb by the god Zeus. From a 'Christian' perspective, however, it is possible to construct a quite different intertextual narrative. In Book 3 of the *Paraphrase* during a conversation between Jesus and the Jewish leader Nicodemus about the need for two births, one physical and the other spiritual, we read (*Para.* 3.46-7): 'This is the image of every man brought to birth – from the wet fire/wet from the fire (ἐκ πυρὸς ὑγροῦ)<sup>39</sup> – by the spirit and not by a whirl of dust.' The image of a man born from fire clearly intersects with the birth of Dionysus from the fiery womb of his mother.<sup>40</sup> The further detail of 'wet', exploiting the paradoxical relationship between water and fire (and here connected with the water of baptism) makes the intersection all the more powerful. The connection between these two texts is not simply linguistic, however, but also thematic. Baptism, that is, the need for a man to be born twice – once from flesh/dust, once from the Holy Spirit – is a central concern of the third book of the *Paraphrase* (*Para.* 3.16-18):

Unless, after the pangs that brought his birth to completion, a mortal man is born a second time this man will not be able to see the eternal kingdom.

The double birth of the Christian suggests obvious parallels with the double birth of Dionysus, once from a mortal mother and once from an immortal father. What the implications of such parallels might be, whether they should be read as parody or something more serious, will be

considered further in the next chapter. For the moment it is enough to highlight the fact that a late antique 'Christian' perspective has the power to affect profoundly our reading of what might otherwise be considered to be a 'traditional' mythological scene. This example should at the very least caution us against any dogged insistence that Nonnus' portrayal of Dionysus can only be read with reference to the Classical past.

A further intriguing intersection with the world of late antiquity comes in line seven, where Zeus is described as both 'father and mistress mother' (πατήρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ). The phrase derives ultimately from Homer, who deploys it on some 12 different occasions.<sup>41</sup> Vian in his 1976 commentary refers readers to the occurrence of the phrase at *Iliad* 11.452, where it is used in a '*sens différent*'.<sup>42</sup> Arguably, however, it is the use of this same Homeric phrase at *Iliad* 6.429 – where Andromache addresses her husband Hector (with the infant Astyanax close by) – that is more worthy of note (*Il.* 6.429-30):

Ἔκτορ ἀτὰρ σύ μοι ἔσσι πατήρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ  
ἦδὲ κασίγνητος, σὺ δέ μοι θαλερὸς παρακοίτης ἄ

But Hector, you are my father and mistress mother, and brother, and you are my vigorous husband.

It is striking that of all the occurrences of this phrase in Homer, this is the only time when a single person (Hector) is imagined as fulfilling the role of *both* father and mother. As such, the scene in *Iliad* 6 affords the closest parallel with Nonnus' use of the phrase, since it is Zeus alone who is forced to play the part of *both* parents with regard to the foetus Dionysus. The Homeric phrase addressed by Andromache to Hector shortly before his death is redeployed within the *Dionysiaca* to describe the role that Zeus has to play shortly after the death of Semele; but whereas Homer's description of Hector as 'mother and father' was purely metaphorical, Nonnus' description of Zeus has become a paradoxical reality.

Though it might seem that Nonnus' use of this allusion can be sufficiently 'explained' in terms of its Classical resonance, we must again be wary of ignoring the late antique context within which such an allusion was formulated. For the notion of a single figure representing both mother and father is not 'simply' a matter of literary interest, but touches on an important late antique debate about the way that the figure of Christ himself is understood. For Origen, Christ is himself explicitly imagined in the paradoxical position of both the mother and father (*Expositio in Proverbia* 17.212.9-12):<sup>43</sup> 'And Christ can be called father and mother (πατήρ καὶ μήτηρ): a father for those who possess the spirit of adoption as sons; a mother for those who need milk and not solid food.'<sup>44</sup> For Clement of Alexandria it is not Christ, but the divine *logos* who is imagined in the role of father and mother to an infant Christ (*Paedagogus* 1.6.42.3.2-3):

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'The *logos* is everything to the infant: father *and* mother (καὶ πατὴρ καὶ μήτηρ) and teacher and nurse.'

In his Third Homily, John Chrysostom applies the same formula to the relationship between himself and his congregation (*In Acta apostolorum* 60.42.28-31): 'You are everything to me: both father and mother (καὶ πατὴρ, καὶ μήτηρ), brothers, children.' Though Chrysostom shares a clear frame of reference with Origen and Clement, structurally at least, his choice of words ('you are ... to me father, mother, brothers') takes us right back to Andromache's emotional farewell to Hector.<sup>45</sup> The complex overlap of Christian and traditional imagery here reminds us once again that we must resist the temptation to read Nonnus' use of the phrase as if it existed in a direct and unmediated relationship with the Classical literary past.<sup>46</sup> When the perspective of writers such as Origen, Clement, and John Chrysostom is also considered we are forced to confront a much richer intertextual picture. To be clear, I am not arguing that Nonnus' use of the phrase marks some sort of deliberate attempt to bring together the story of Dionysus with the story of Christ, by means of specific intertextual allusions; rather, I would like to suggest that the very act of telling (and of reading) the story of Dionysus in late antiquity was (always) already implicated in wider theological discourses that inevitably drew Christ and Dionysus into dialogue.

#### *Salutations*

Liebeschuetz has argued that a number of references in the *Dionysiaca* 'allude to the salutations of Mary or Elisabeth (Luke 1:28, 42), unmistakably pointing to a parallel between the birth of Jesus and Dionysus'.<sup>47</sup> Since he does not go into detail, it will be worthwhile to examine his assertions a little more closely in order to consider the possibility of further parallels between the birth stories of Dionysus and Christ.

The salutation of Mary refers to the visitation of the angel who comes to give her the news that she is to be the mother of the son of God. It is described in detail at Luke 1:28-33:

<sup>28</sup>And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail (χαῖρε), thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women (εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν).

<sup>29</sup>And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

<sup>30</sup>And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

<sup>31</sup>And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

<sup>32</sup>He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

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<sup>33</sup>And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

This scene presents broad parallels with the ‘salutations’ that the messenger god Hermes gives to Electra, the mother of Harmonia, at *Dion.* 3.425-7, in order to persuade her to allow her daughter to go to Cadmus: ‘Hail (χαίρε), my mother’s sister, bedfellow of Zeus! Hail, most blessed of all women of future times (χαίρε, γυναικῶν πασάων / μετόπισθε μακαρτάτη), because Zeus keeps the sovereignty of the world for your children’.<sup>48</sup> Alongside the (not altogether surprising) parallel of the greeting χαίρε, there is, however, a further similarity in the way that both women are described: where Mary is ‘blessed among women’ (εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν), Electra is ‘most blessed of all women’ (γυναικῶν πασάων ... μακαρτάτη); and while the angel promises kingly rule for Mary’s son for all eternity (καὶ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔσται τέλος), Electra’s offspring are promised the ‘sovereignty of the world’ (κοιρανίην κόσμοιο). A faint echo of Nonnus’ ‘salutation’ of Electra may even be detected in a Christian epigram ‘on the Annunciation’ by the sixth-century poet and historian Agathias (a poet who was clearly influenced by Nonnus)<sup>49</sup> at *AP* 1.44.1-2: ‘Hail (χαίρε), maiden full of grace, most blessed (μακαρτάτη), Bride immaculate, you will have in your womb the son of God conceived without a father.’

As the salutation of Mary leads to the birth of Christ, so the salutation of Electra leads to the birth of Semele, the mother-to-be of Dionysus. In due course, Semele is given her own salutation by none other than Zeus, the father of the child himself, in the closing lines of Book 7 (366-8): ‘Bring forth a son who will not die, and I shall call you immortal. Blessed woman (ὀλβίη), you will bring forth joy for gods and men, having conceived a son who will make mortals forget their troubles.’ As with Mary, Semele’s happiness is here directly attributed to the future greatness of her son.<sup>50</sup> The positive effect that Semele’s son is destined to have on the world parallels the description of the future impact of Mary’s son at Matthew 1:21: ‘And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.’<sup>51</sup>

In Mary’s song of praise to God at Luke 1:48-52 further details are provided about the relationship between the happiness of Mary and the actions of her son:

<sup>48</sup>For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed (μακαριοῦσίν με πᾶσαι αἱ γενεαί).

<sup>49</sup>For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup>And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup>He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud (ὑπερηφάνους) in the imagination of their hearts.

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<sup>52</sup>He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

This double mission of punishment and mercy complements the mission statement of *Dionysiaca* 13 when Zeus sends a message to Dionysus instructing him to 'drive out of Asia ... the race of arrogant (ὕπερφιάλων) Indians ... sweep from the sea Deriades the king and teach all nations the sacred dances of the vigil and the purple fruit of vintage' (13.3-7).

According to the Gospel of Luke, after Mary has received the news that she is to give birth, she hurries off to the house of Zacharias to pay a visit to Elisabeth. Mary now delivers her own salutation to Elisabeth at Luke 1:39-45:

<sup>39</sup>And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda;

<sup>40</sup>And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth.

<sup>41</sup>And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb (ἔσκιρτησεν τὸ βρέφος); and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

<sup>42</sup>And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb (ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας).

<sup>43</sup>And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

<sup>44</sup>For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb (ἔσκιρτησεν τὸ βρέφος) for joy.

<sup>45</sup>And blessed is she that believed (καὶ μακαρία ἡ πιστεύουσα): for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

What is of interest here is not so much the salutation itself, but its effect: Mary's words cause Elisabeth's unborn child to 'leap in her womb' (ἔσκιρτησεν τὸ βρέφος), something that is given extra emphasis in the Gospel story through the repetition of the phrase.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the leaping foetus finds an obvious parallel in the *Dionysiaca*, where we read the following description of the unborn Dionysus (8.27-32):<sup>53</sup>

The child<sup>54</sup> – cognisant, but not yet born – joined in his mother's dance (συνεσκιρτησε τεκούση) as if he also were maddened by the pipes, and although only half made sounded a self-taught echo of tune from within the womb (ὑποκόλπιον ἤχώ). So in the burden (ῥυκῶ) of the manchilding womb grew the messenger of good cheer, that intelligent baby (βρέφος).

Within the Classical tradition, the *topos* of the sentient foetus can be traced back at least as far as Callimachus: at *Hymni* 4.86-99 Apollo, as yet 'in the womb' (ὑποκόλπιος), becomes angry and utters threats from within the womb. It seems quite likely that Nonnus has this Callimachean passage in mind when he described the 'echo from the womb' (ὑποκόλπιον ἤχώ);<sup>55</sup> at the same time, it is difficult to ignore the intersection between Dionysus leaping in Semele's womb and John the Baptist leaping in

Elisabeth's womb. The connection would certainly have been apparent to Agathias, who wrote his own epigram 'on the Visitation' (*AP* 1.45.1-2): 'The prophet, inside the womb, saw and showed by leaping (*σκιρτήμασιν*) that your child was God, and his mistress mother (*πότνια μήτηρ*) gave praise.' Agathias' lines clearly originate in the text of Luke, but it is noteworthy that he should describe Mary as 'mistress mother' (*πότνια μήτηρ*). The phrase is Homeric, but as noted above it is also to be found at *Dionysiaca* 1.7 (and nowhere else in the whole of Nonnus), where it is used to describe Zeus in his role as the surrogate mother of Dionysus.

A linguistic relationship between Nonnus and Luke is most obviously discernible in Nonnus' use of the compound form of *σκιρτέω* ('to dance'). A closer analysis of the language used by Nonnus at this point promises to illuminate the extent to which the wider vocabulary of the *Dionysiaca* is grounded in, and drawn from, late antique theological discourses (as opposed to the language of the Classical and specifically the epic tradition). I want therefore to focus briefly on Nonnus' use of the two nouns *βρέφος* ('new-born child', 'foetus') and *ῥγκος* ('mass', 'lump') – both used to describe Dionysus while still inside his mother's womb.

The word *βρέφος* first occurs in the *Dionysiaca* in the fifth line of the poem when it is used to describe the premature Dionysus. It is interesting to recall that the word features hardly at all in the epic tradition, neither in the sense of 'baby in the womb/foetus' nor more generally in the sense of 'new-born child'.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Nonnus' use of the word accounts for 29 out of 35 citations in extant epic poetry, with only a single occurrence in the whole of Homer.<sup>57</sup> Drawing conclusions from word frequency can be a dangerous exercise, not simply because of the vast gaps that exist in our knowledge, but also because an author such as Nonnus is so voluminous that his statistics for the use of a specific word can look impressive without necessarily being significant. It is nevertheless of interest to observe that in between Homer and Nonnus the noun *βρέφος* takes on a distinctively Christian resonance. The wider Christian use of the word may be derived from its occurrence in the Gospel of Luke: it is used by Luke twice with reference to Christ as a 'baby lying in a manger' (*βρέφος ... κείμενον ἐν φάτρῃ*) and twice with reference to the John the Baptist as a 'foetus in the womb' (*τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ*).<sup>58</sup> After Luke the word is used frequently among the Church Fathers, both in specific quotations from the Gospel and with reference to Christ and John more generally.<sup>59</sup> Its use in a scene from the *Dionysiaca* that already appears to intersect with the Gospel of Luke can only increase the potential for interplay between the two passages.

The basic meaning of the word *ῥγκος* is the 'bulk, size, mass (of a body)'.<sup>60</sup> Nonnus uses the word in this general sense in 30 out of a total of 35 occasions; on the remaining five occasions the word is used to describe the child in the womb.<sup>61</sup> In three of these instances the description is qualified by specific reference to the 'stomach'.<sup>62</sup> In the passage quoted above, for

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example, the foetus of Dionysus is described as the 'lump/weight in the stomach' (γαστέρος ὄγκω, 8.31). In surviving literary sources before the fourth century AD this specific phrase is virtually unknown;<sup>63</sup> but from the fourth century onwards the phrase begins to gain currency. What is interesting about this is that the phrase occurs primarily within theological texts – almost exclusively with reference to Mary's unborn child.<sup>64</sup> Nonnus' own use of the phrase γαστέρος ὄγκος in the context of the pregnancy of Semele seems hard to divorce from its prevalent usage within contemporary theological discourse. Or to put it in a slightly different way, when Nonnus writes about the pregnant form of Semele or Aura (or Athena!) he does so using vocabulary that is inescapably and inevitably connected to the story of the birth of Christ.

#### *Illuminations*

According to traditional accounts of the birth of Dionysus, Semele was destroyed by the thunderbolt of Zeus, following her prayer that he appear to her in his full majesty.<sup>65</sup> Nonnus' accounts of the birth of Dionysus in the proem to Book 1 and in Book 8 lay significant emphasis on the visual aspect of Semele's incineration. The thunderbolt of Zeus is described in the proem as producing both 'sparks' (σπινθήρες) and 'lightning' (στεροπή).<sup>66</sup> At *Dion.* 8.368-74 we are presented with a dazzling *tour de force*: 'He moved through the bosom of the heavens, flashing with lightning (ἀστράπτων), and unwillingly husband Zeus the lightning-gatherer (στεροπηγέρετα) fulfilled the request of his bride. He went towards Semele holding in his sorry hand the bridal sparks of the marriage-stealing thunderbolt. The chamber was lit up with lightning (στεροπήσιν); Ismenos glittered (σελάγιζεν) and all Thebes sparkled (ἀμαρύσσετο) with the breath of fire'.<sup>67</sup>

The illumination associated with the birth of Dionysus fits into a broader Classical *topos* in which heroes are marked out as special at their birth by means of some fiery symbol.<sup>68</sup> At the same time it is interesting to observe that, in addition to the star that guided the wise men and hovered in the sky above the stable in Bethlehem where Christ was born (Matthew 2:9), sparks of lightning such as Nonnus describes as the accompaniment to the birth of Dionysus are also said to accompany the birth of Christ. In an epigram 'on the birth of Christ' by Agathias we read (*AP* 1.37.1): 'Trumpets! Lightning (στεροπαί)! The earth trembles!' Since Agathias knew and imitated the *Dionysiaca* it is not impossible that he adapted the detail of the lightning flash from Nonnus' description of the birth of Dionysus to use in his own epigram on the birth of Christ.<sup>69</sup>

There exists, of course, a strong symbolic association between Christ and light.<sup>70</sup> The 'sparks' (σπινθήραι) that accompany the union of Semele and Zeus and lead to the birth of Dionysus also feature as a common image in the writings of the Church Fathers.<sup>71</sup> Irenaeus, for example, at *Adversus haereses* 1.18.1.12-13, describes how 'he sent the spark of life (σπινθήρα

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ζωής) which stirred mankind and made them live'; the text of the Universal Council of Ephesus talks in a similar manner about the 'spark of faith' (ὁ σπινθήρ ὁ τῆς πίστεως) that kindled 'the flame of piety' (τὴν τῆς εὐσεβείας φλόγα).<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, the images of the 'spark of faith' and the 'flame of piety' are conflated in the *Paraphrase*, where John, 'the true lamp', is described as sending out 'sparks of piety' (σπινθήρας ... εὐσεβίης, 5.135-6).

The images of fire and light that herald the birth of Dionysus in such spectacular form in the opening lines of the *Dionysiaca* are reprised at the end of the first sentence when the birth of Athena is described: the goddess shoots out of Zeus's head 'glinting with her weapons' (τεύχεσιν ἀστράπτουσαν, *Dion.* 1.10). The fiery imagery underlines the connection between Dionysus and Athena (Zeus gave birth to them both, one through the thigh, the other through the head; the birth of Dionysus explicitly reminds Zeus of the birth of Athena); but the use of the verb ἀστράπτω also encourages a further intersection between the stories of Dionysus and Christ. In the Gospel of Luke, Christ's appearance at the coming of the kingdom of God is described 'just like lightning which flashes (ἢ ἀστραπή ἀστράπτουσα) and lights up the heaven from one side to the other' (17.24).<sup>73</sup> The same image is deployed by the Church Fathers in contexts that are closely focused on the births of John the Baptist and Christ. For example, Theodorus Studites, *Homilia in nativitatem Mariae* 96.680.39-41: 'The maiden came into the light, flashing (ἀστράπτουσα) more brightly than a beam of sunlight. The foetus from the barren woman<sup>74</sup> shone out, the holiest precinct of virginity.'<sup>75</sup>

In fact, the word used to describe Athena's birth in a flash of light is reprised later in a description of Dionysus' ascent into heaven (*Dion.* 7.98-9): 'after the Indian War, the bright upper air (αἰόλος αἰθήρ) will receive him to shine beside Zeus (Ζηνὶ συναστράπτοντα) and to share the courses of the stars'. Here the image of Dionysus shining besides his father intersects strikingly with *Paraphrase* 6.190-2 where the relationship between Christ and his Father is described in precisely the same terms: 'If you were to see the son of man flashing in lightning with his Father (συναστράπτοντα τοκῆι), ascending once again to the seat of heaven (αἰθερίων) from where he came, what would you do if you had knowledge of this?'<sup>76</sup>

## The parthenos debate

One of the central features of the Gospel narratives is that Mary gives birth to Christ while still retaining her status as a 'virgin' (παρθένος).<sup>77</sup> The paradox of the virgin mother is one that can be traced back to the *Septuagint* – a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. The Hebrew word *almah* ('young woman') used at Isaiah 7:14 was rendered into Greek as παρθένος: 'the παρθένος will conceive and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel'. The words of Isaiah were subsequently

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reinterpreted as a prophecy that finds fulfilment in the παρθένος Mary. In Greek, the word παρθένος encompasses a range of meanings from 'young woman' to 'unmarried young woman' to 'virgin'.<sup>78</sup> It is the specific reading of παρθένος as 'virgin', however, that has dominated Biblical hermeneutics from the New Testament onwards. Mary's surprised question to the angel Gabriel at Luke 1:34 (after he has informed her that she is to give birth to a child) – 'How shall this be [i.e. that I will give birth to a child], seeing I know not a man?' (πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο, ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω) – shows clearly that Mary is to be understood not simply as young, nor unmarried, but above all a virgin – lacking intimate knowledge of her betrothed.

It is certainly no understatement to say that virginity was a topic of profound concern in the period of late antiquity. As Peter Brown has shown so persuasively, the discourse of virginity was part of a wider 'sexual' revolution that resulted in a radical transformation of how the body was viewed.<sup>79</sup> Where previously, for example, the élite had been happy to display their naked bodies before their slaves, suddenly the naked body became a thing of shame, something that needed to be covered up.<sup>80</sup> Although the paradoxical notion of virgin birth is absent from Nonnus' description of Semele and the birth of Dionysus, Semele's status as a παρθένος is prominently foregrounded in Books 7 and 8 when she is noticed and seduced by Zeus.<sup>81</sup>

Nonnus, in fact, seems to go out of his way to draw attention to a succession of παρθένοι throughout the *Dionysiaca* (many of whom who are entrapped and raped either by Dionysus or his father Zeus).<sup>82</sup> The narrative of Book 1 opens with the abduction of Europa (explicitly described as παρθένος at *Dion.* 1.118); at the start of Book 2, a παρθένος tree nymph (2.96), who feels anxious on account of the heavenly turmoil caused by the monster Typhon, begs to be cut down with the bronze of Athena, 'so that I may die before I wed, and go to Hades a virgin, still a stranger to Eros' (2.107-8). In keeping with the newly-discovered 'propriety' of a late antique woman, the nymph then 'modestly (αἰδομένη) covered the circle of her breast with her green girdle, pressing her thighs together tightly' (2.109-11). In response to this a neighbouring nymph declares at 2.113 that 'I feel the fear inborn in a virgin' (παρθενίης ἔμφυλον ἔχω φόβον).

The virginal status of Dionysus' own sexual victims is itself clearly highlighted.<sup>83</sup> The virginity of the huntress Nicaia is referred to almost obsessively (with 31 references in Book 16 alone); in Book 42, which concerns the failed attempt of Dionysus to win the affections of the παρθένος Beroe, there are 28 references to virgins and virginity. Dionysus' erotic encounters with virgins build towards a crescendo in the final two books of the epic during the narrative of the rape of Aura, with no fewer than 77 references to virgins and virginity.<sup>84</sup> Ironically perhaps, Dionysus' son Iacchus, born of this union, is entrusted to the care of the goddess Athena – Classical virgin *par excellence* – at the very end of the *Dionysiaca* (48.951-7).<sup>85</sup>

One particularly notable feature about Nonnus' emphasis on virginity is the fact the word *παρθένος* (and its compounds) features barely at all in the preceding epic tradition. Though as already stated statistics are prone to mislead as often as they illuminate, it may be of interest to note that 276 out of a total of 383 citations of the word *παρθένος* (and associated words with the same stem) from the epic canon on the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* database come from Nonnus.<sup>86</sup> The possibility that Nonnus' interest in the theme of virginity is closely connected with wider debates about the body and sexuality within the late antique world cannot be readily dismissed.<sup>87</sup>

Leibeschuetz for one has suggested a 'possible allusion to Christianity' within the story of Aura, the huntress who prized her virginity above all else and was raped by Dionysus in the final book of the epic.<sup>88</sup> Following the rape, Artemis mocks Aura on account of the fact that she no longer has her cherished virginity (*Dion.* 48.834): 'I have neither seen nor heard that a virgin bears a child' (οὐκ ἴδον, οὐκ ἤκουον, ὅτι παρθένος υἴα λοχεύει). Taken in isolation, the idea that this line constitutes an explicit allusion to the virgin birth seems difficult to credit, yet when it is located within the wider discourse of virginity both within the *Dionysiaca* and within late antique literature more generally, it assumes a much more powerful resonance. For any reader approaching the text from a Christian perspective the irony is palpable, since the story of Christ is precisely about the revelation of a virgin who *does* give birth to a son. Aura behaves like a Classical heroine, ironically unaware that she is playing out her role before a late antique audience in a post-Classical world.

A further allusion to the virgin birth was proposed by Leibeschuetz at *Dion.* 41.52-3: '[Here dwelt a people] whom Nature by her own breeding, in some unwedded way, begat without bridal, without wedding, fatherless, not born in a natural way, motherless (ἀπάτωρ, ἀλόχευτος, ἀμήτωρ)'. The possibility of an explicit allusion to the virgin birth seems hard to defend or explain at this point. Nevertheless it may be observed once again that when Nonnus chooses to write about this particular birth he uses language that intersects with contemporary theological discourse concerning the paradoxical nature of virgin birth. One might consider, for example, the striking assonance of the phrase ἀπάτωρ, ἀλόχευτος, ἀμήτωρ. This suggests an immediate connection with the opening line of the *Paraphrase* of St John: ἄχρονος ἦν, ἀκίχητος, ἐν ἀρρήτῳ λόγος ἀρχῆ ('beyond time, beyond reach, in a beginning beyond speech, was the word').<sup>89</sup> The phrase also chimes with a similar phrase in Gregory of Nazianus, which was used to describe the unusual circumstances of the birth of Christ (2.7.254): αὐτοπάτωρ, ἀλόχευτος,<sup>90</sup> ἀμήτωρ ἐστὶν ἐκεῖνος ('that man is self-fathered, not born in the natural manner, without a mother').<sup>91</sup> Nonnus' poetic relationship with Gregory is well established, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Nonnus' use of the whole phrase ἀπάτωρ, ἀλόχευτος, ἀμήτωρ was directly inspired by Gregory.<sup>92</sup> The only difference is in the substitu-

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tion of ἀπάτωρ ('having no father') for Gregory's αὐτοπάτωρ ('self-fathered').<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, these two adjectives are both used together in a complementary manner in the *Chronicle* of John Malalas (*Chron.* 65.20-66.1): 'this God, self-fathered, without a father (αὐτοπάτωρ, ἀπάτωρ), a father and a son himself from himself, three times blessed'. It would appear that Nonnus has simply substituted one adjective for the other in his own description.<sup>94</sup>

Nonnus' pairing of the adjectives ἀπάτωρ and ἀμήτωρ can itself be related to wider discussions concerning the paradoxical nature of Christ's birth. In the words of John Chrysostom at *De prophetiarum obscuritate*, 56.166.19-24:

For if he is without a father (ἀπάτωρ), how can he be the Son? If he is without a father (ἀπάτωρ), how can he be only begotten? For the son ought to have a father, since he would not otherwise be a son, but the son of God is both fatherless (ἀπάτωρ) and motherless (ἀμήτωρ). How can that be? He is fatherless (ἀπάτωρ) with respect to his birth down below, motherless (ἀμήτωρ) with respect to his birth up above; for neither does he have a father on earth, nor a mother in heaven.<sup>95</sup>

The second line of *Paraphrase* 1 itself picks up on the paradoxical notion of Christ being a son born without a mother: 'of the same substance as his father, of the same age, a son without a mother (υἱός ἀμήτωρ)' (1.2).<sup>96</sup>

Once again it must be underlined that my argument is not that Nonnus' text describes a clear and carefully plotted allusive relationship with the miracle of the birth of Christ: rather, when Nonnus chooses to write about the birth of Dionysus his language naturally draws on the language and imagery of contemporary theological debate. For the Church Fathers there were indeed few topics that evoked more wonder and curiosity than the highly paradoxical matter of Christ's birth.<sup>97</sup> When Semele delivers a speech of triumph at the glorious destiny of her son and the unusual nature of his birth at 9.208-42 the sense of paradox and wonder that she evokes marks a broad intersection with the language and imagery employed by the Church Fathers. Consider, for example, the following extracts from Semele's speech: 'Zeus brought forth my son – he was the mother in my place. The father begot and the father brought forth his begotten. He brought forth a child from a makeshift womb of his own, and forced nature to change' (9.209-11); '... my son was brought forth openly by his father' (9.218); 'Semele alone had a husband who got and groaned for the same child' (9.235-6).

In her speech, Semele goes on to contrast Zeus's actions in bringing forth a child from his own thigh with Hera's not-wholly-successful attempt to bring forth Hephaestus without the help of a father: 'No fatherless (ἀπάτωρ) Hephaestus could rival Semele's child, none unbegotten of a father (ἄσπορος ἐκ γενετήρος) whom Hera brought forth by her own begetting (αὐτόγονος)' (9.228-9).<sup>98</sup> Semele's description of Hephaestus as both

‘fatherless’ and (an elaboration of exactly the same idea) ‘not begotten of a father’ merits closer attention. Though this perfectly describes the process that brought Hephaestus to birth within the traditions of Classical mythology, the focus on the unusual process that resulted in his birth inevitably intersects with late antique discussions concerning the birth of Christ.

The adjective ἄσπορος (‘unsown’) is in fact used by the Church Fathers with specific reference to the Incarnation.<sup>99</sup> This describes how Mary by-passed the normal human process of sexual reproduction in order to give birth to Christ. Athanasius, for example, refers to the act of conception that made Mary pregnant as ‘getting pregnant through an unsown conception’ (ἐξ ἀσπόρου μὲν συλλήψεως κηῖσασα);<sup>100</sup> similarly, Romanus Melodus during his description of the Nativity (addressed to Mary) describes how ‘angels together with shepherds sing the praises of your unsown son (τὸν ἄσπορον τόκον σου)’.<sup>101</sup> At *Paraphrase* 19.144-5 Christ on the cross describes the disciple whom his mother is to take into her house in terms that are clearly reminiscent of himself:

And unsown (ἄσπορος) is the mother’s son, a man not born in a natural way (ἀνὴρ ἀλόχευτος) from a lady with no experience of the pains of childbirth (ἀπειρώδινος ἀνάσσης).<sup>102</sup>

A further unusual birth is highlighted at *Dion.* 40.430-3, during a description of the foundation of the city of Tyre: ‘People lived here whom Aion (i.e. Time), born together with them, saw – his only contemporaries in the eternal universe, a holy race from the unmarried (ἀνυμφεύτοις) earth, whose bodies, self-fashioned, unploughed, unsown (ἄσπορος),<sup>103</sup> mud brought to birth’.<sup>104</sup> This curious birth narrative might seem to have little obvious connection with the circumstances of the birth of Christ, but even here I would suggest that the resonance of contemporary discourse remains inescapable. We have already considered the use of the adjective ‘unsown’ (ἄσπορος) in relation to the birth of Christ. The bodies of the original inhabitants of Tyre are not merely produced from ‘unsown’ mud, however, but from ‘unmarried’ (ἀνυμφεύτοις) earth. This adjective occurs 32 times in the *Dionysiaca*, used predominantly to describe unmarried (i.e. virginal) women, such as Europa, Persephone, Athena and Artemis.<sup>105</sup> Within Christian writers the adjective is used specifically to describe the ‘unmarried’ state of Mary.<sup>106</sup> John Chrysostom makes an explicit connection between ἄσπορος and ἀνυμφεύτος in his description of Christ and Mary: ‘the child was unsown’ (ἄσπορος ὁ τόκος); ‘the girl unmarried’ (ἀνυμφεύτος ἡ κόρη).<sup>107</sup> Once again, even in the smallest of details, the worlds of Dionysus and Christ can be seen to intersect and resonate.

**(b) Death and resurrection**

‘Among the most conspicuous features of the fiction of the Roman empire,’ writes Glen Bowersock, ‘not only the prose romances but the mythological confections as well, is resurrection after death in the original body’.<sup>108</sup> He goes on: ‘The widespread use of the resurrection motif in many forms of imperial fictional writing – erotic romance, hagiography, mythological revisionism, and satire – suggests an unusually great interest in this subject, far beyond any interest documented for earlier periods.’<sup>109</sup> The explanation that Bowersock puts forward for this phenomenon is that the stories of the Gospels had a direct influence on the production of imperial literature. In what follows I want to consider the extent to which the motif of death and resurrection is deployed and elaborated within the *Dionysiaca* (both in terms of bodily and metaphorical resurrection). My focus here will be on two of the most prominent and extensive treatments of the resurrection theme within the epic: Tylus in Book 25 and Ampelus in Books 11-12.<sup>110</sup>

*The story of Tylus*

I turn first to the story of Tylus at *Dionysiaca* 25.451-552 – an incontrovertible narrative of bodily resurrection. This episode does not form part of the epic narrative proper but is one of a number of scenes depicted on the shield of Dionysus.<sup>111</sup> Tylus, we learn, is a man from Lydia who is attacked and killed by a serpent while out walking one day. His sister, the nymph Moira, watching at a distance, catches sight of the murderous serpent and enlists the help of a local giant to avenge the death of Tylus. The serpent is duly dispatched, but, miraculously, he returns to life again – thanks to a plant administered by his serpent mate. This extraordinary bodily resurrection is witnessed by the nymph Moira, who now applies the same remedy to her dead brother’s body (25.541-52):

Moira also caught up the flower of Zeus, and laid the life-giving herb in the life-begetting nostril. The wholesome plant with its pain-healing clusters brought back the breathing soul into the dead body and made it rise again. Soul came into the body a second time; the cold frame grew warm with the help of the inward fire. The body, busy again with the beginning of life moved the sole of the right foot, rose upon the left and stood firmly based on both feet, like a man lying in bed who shakes the sleep from his eyes in the morning.<sup>112</sup> His blood boiled again; the hands of the newly breathing corpse were lifted, the body recovered its rhythm, the feet their movement, the eyes their sight, and the lips their voice.

The striking similarity (both thematic and verbal) of this scene with the story of Lazarus has not gone unnoticed.<sup>113</sup> The close verbal connections have been assembled by Vian and the most obvious intertextualities can be presented as follows:<sup>114</sup>

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<i>Para.</i> 11.99: ἀκεσιπόνω	<i>Dion.</i> 25.541: ἀκεσιπόνοισι
<i>Para.</i> 11.108: στατὸν ἴχνος	<i>Dion.</i> 25.547: στατὸν ἴχνος
<i>Para.</i> 11.164: παλινάγρετον	<i>Dion.</i> 25.537: παλινάγρετον
<i>Para.</i> 11.167: ὀρθοθέντος	<i>Dion.</i> 25.547: ὀρθάσας
<i>Para.</i> 11.168: ἔχων ἀντόπιον ὀρμήν	<i>Dion.</i> 25.534: ἔχων αὐτόσσυτον οὐρήν
<i>Para.</i> 12. 41: ἔμπνοον ἐψύχωσε	<i>Dion.</i> 25.542: ἔμπνοον ἐψύχωσε

Perhaps the most resonant of all the intertextual connection between the episodes of Lazarus and Tylus is in the use of the word *παλινάγρετον* ('coming back again'). At *Dionysiaca* 25.537 it refers to the returning hiss of the serpent as he comes back to life; at *Paraphrase* 11.164 it refers to the moment when Lazarus, on his return from Hades, sees 'after the end of his life a remarkable new beginning' (μετὰ τέρμα βίου παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν / θαμβαλέην, *Para.* 11.164-5). This line of the *Paraphrase* itself intersects with another scene of the *Dionysiaca* that concerns resurrection (and serpents). In *Dionysiaca* 6, the *parthenos* Persephone<sup>115</sup> is raped by Zeus in the guise of a serpent. The resultant offspring, Zagreus, is subsequently torn to pieces by the Titans. Death, however, is not the end for the infant Zagreus: 'the end of his life was the beginning of a new life as Dionysus' (τέρμα βίου Διόνυσος ἔχων παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν, *Dion.* 6.175).

A further connection between Lazarus and Tylus was noted by Vian in an anonymous Christian epigram on the subject of Lazarus from the *Greek Anthology* (AP 1.49): 'Christ said 'Come here', and Lazarus left Hades, recovering his breath (παλίνσοον ἄσθμα κομίζων) in his dry nostrils (ἀυαλέφ μυκτῆρι).' The phrase 'recovering his breath' clearly echoes *Dion.* 25.535: παλίνσοον ἄσθμα τιταίνων; while 'in his dry nostrils' recalls *Dion.* 25.530: ἀυαλέφ μυκτῆρι. We are faced here either with an allusion to the Lazarus epigram in the story of Tylus or with an allusion to the story of Tylus in the Lazarus epigram. Speculation about which text has priority does not affect the basic point: here is further compelling evidence of a clear and suggestive connection between the stories of Tylus and Lazarus with late antique poetic discourse. The fates of Tylus and Lazarus are inextricably linked.

### The story of Ampelus

I turn now to Ampelus and the story of his death and rebirth in the form of a vine. The Ampelus episode occupies a prominent place in *Dionysiaca* 11-12, both structurally and thematically. Ampelus' death and rebirth have a profound and far-reaching effect on Dionysus, who changes from carefree youth to a hero with a divine mission to fulfil.

In Book 11 Dionysus enjoys a charmed and carefree life in the company of his young lover Ampelus. This comes to an abrupt end when Ampelus suffers a tragic accident: the young satyr is thrown from the back of a bull, trampled, gored and decapitated. Dionysus is overcome with emotion at the death of his young friend.<sup>116</sup> His grief is particularly strong because he

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is aware that for Ampelus death is the end and that it is impossible for him to raise Ampelus from the dead: 'Alas that Hades is never kind and does not in exchange for a corpse accept any glorious gifts of rich metals, so that I can make dead Ampelus alive once more (Ἄμπελον ὄφρα θανόντα πάλιν ζῶοντα τελέσω)' (11.304-6).

Dionysus is given some consolation by the god Eros (in disguise as the old satyr Silenus) who recounts to him the story of two doomed lovers Calamus and Carpus (11.369-483). In this story two young friends compete against each other in races first on land and then in the nearby river. Carpus is tragically drowned; Calamus gets safely to shore, but overcome by grief, he throws himself into the water to join his friend. However, death is not the end for either of them: Calamus gives his form to the reeds (καλάμοισιν) and Carpus grows up as the fruit (καρπός) of the earth (11.480-1). This consolatory story is clearly designed to mirror and anticipate the story of Ampelus. In both narratives the description of the two pairs of lovers (Calamus/Carpus; Dionysus/Ampelus) recalls the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.<sup>117</sup> More importantly, the ultimate fate of Calamus and Carpus clearly anticipates that of Ampelus: all three characters are transformed into eponymous substances (reeds, fruit and vines respectively) and so manage to escape the finality of death and live on in a new form. At the beginning of Book 12 the season Autumn gains access to an oracle preserved in the tablets of Harmonia that confirms the direct link between the story of Calamus and that of Ampelus (12.99-102): 'From young Calamus will spring a reed rising straight and bending to the breeze, a delicate sprout of the fruitful soil, to support the tame vine.<sup>118</sup> Ampelus shall change form into a plant and give his name to the fruit of the vine (Ἄμπελος ἀμπελόεντι χαρίζεται οὖνομα καρπῷ).'<sup>119</sup>

For the moment, however, Ampelus' transformation still lies in the future. Lacking a 'healing physic' (φάρμακον, 12.118) for his fallen comrade, Dionysus continues in his grief: the tambourines fall silent, rivers cease flowing and trees mourn. It is at this point, however, that something miraculous takes place (12.139): 'the awful threads of fate were unloosed and turned back' (φρικτὰ μετετρέψαντο παλίλλυτα νήματα Μοίρης).<sup>120</sup> The Fate Atropus confirms the miracle in emphatic terms (12.142-5): 'He lives, I declare (ζῶει τοι), Dionysus – your boy; and he will not pass the bitter water of Acheron. Your lamentation has found out how to undo the inflexible threads of unturning fate, it has turned back the irrevocable. Ampelus is not dead, even if he died (Ἄμπελος οὐ τέθνηκε, καὶ εἰ θάνεν).'

After Atropus has spoken, a 'great miracle' (μέγα θάμβος, 12.173) appears to Dionysus as confirmation of her fateful words (12.174-6): 'For the lovely corpse rose up (καὶ γὰρ ἀναιξας ἐρόεις νέκυς) and took the form of a creeping snake, and became the heal-trouble flower [i.e. the vine].' Dionysus himself places clear emphasis on the paradoxical miracle of Ampelus' resurrection: 'Persephone ... saved you alive in death (καὶ σὲ νέκυν ζῳγρησε) for brother Bacchus. You did not die as Atymnius is dead (οὐ θάνεις

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ὡς τέθνηκεν Ἀτόμνιος) (12.215-16); 'You are still alive my boy, even if you have died (ζῶεις δ' εἰσέτι, κοῦρε, καὶ εἰ θάνες)' (12. 219).

Although there is no bodily resurrection that would create a perfect 'fit' with the story of Christ, the resurrection of Ampelus appears nevertheless to intersect significantly with a wider Christian interest in the theme of life after death. Christ and Lazarus both suffer bodily death before being raised up to life again in the same form; Ampelus dies bodily but gains new life through metamorphosis. It may be observed that Ampelus does not achieve resurrection in the same bodily form as before, but this can hardly disguise the broad parallels with the resurrection of Lazarus and Christ. Such parallels are supported by the correspondence and interaction between the ἄμπελος of *Paraphrase* 15 and the ἄμπελος of *Dionysiaca* 11 that have already been explored in some detail in the preceding chapter.<sup>121</sup> It seems hard to deny that there is a prominent overlap – and suggestive interplay – between the two texts: where Christ uses metaphor to describe his own similarity to a vine, in the *Dionysiaca*, the young satyr called Ampelus is actually transformed into the plant that bears his name; Christ the metaphorical vine will suffer death, but will be bodily resurrected and will then return to heaven; Ampelus, the satyr, will die, but will enjoy resurrection and new life as the vine.<sup>122</sup>

The figure of Lazarus as portrayed in the *Paraphrase* suggests further correspondence with Ampelus: the one is a friend of Jesus, the other a friend of Dionysus; both suffer death; both enjoy new life – one in his original body, the other in the form of a vine. By a happy numerical coincidence – as if to consolidate the connection – both Ampelus and Lazarus die in the eleventh book of their respective epic poems. The coincidence does not end there, however. Just as the number eleven is imbued with significance within the Christian tradition on account of the presentation of the Lazarus episode in the eleventh Chapter of the Gospel of John,<sup>123</sup> so within the Classical tradition the number eleven takes on a particular significance of its own: it is in the eleventh book of Homer's *Odyssey* (the so-called *Nekuia*) that Odysseus has his celebrated encounter with the spirits of the Underworld. A reader who approaches the story of the death and resurrection of Ampelus might well consider the numerical coincidence that brings together the story of Lazarus and that of Homer's 'book of the dead' into view at the same time. Ironically, in the eleventh book of both the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* both Lazarus and Ampelus respectively manage to achieve what none of the shades of the Underworld encountered by Odysseus is able to achieve: a return from Hades.<sup>124</sup>

#### *'Jesus wept'*

Throughout the *Dionysiaca* Dionysus is presented as a hero who does not cry: as Pan asks at 19.170: 'what have tears to do with Dionysus?' (τί δάκρυσι καὶ Διονύσῳ;). However upset he may be, the son of Zeus remains

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steadfastly 'tearless' (ἀδακρύτος),<sup>125</sup> with 'unweeping eyes' (ὄμμασιν ἀκλαύτοισιν).<sup>126</sup> It is all the more remarkable therefore that following the death of Ampelus Dionysus is actually described as shedding tears. At 11.321, the thought of tears is already clearly pressing upon him when he says (imagining himself in the role of the now dead Ampelus): 'Dionysus who does not mourn, do not shed tears for me' (νηπενθής Διόνυσος, ἔμοι μὴ δάκρυα λείβης). But it is the concluding line of Atropus' speech (announcing the resurrection of Ampelus) that provides us with the clearest indication that Dionysus has failed to keep his composure (12.171):

Βάκχος ἄναξ δάκρυσε, βροτῶν ἵνα δάκρυα λύσῃ.

Lord Bacchus wept, in order to put an end to the tears of mankind.

The contested significance of Dionysus' tears at this point has turned this one line into perhaps the most quoted, even notorious, of all lines of Nonnus' poetry.<sup>127</sup> The hinge of the debate turns on what Vian describes as the possible '*tonalité chrétienne*' of this line.<sup>128</sup> As has long been observed, the imagery used by Atropus at *Dion.*12.171 finds a close parallel in a passage of the *Commentary* of Cyril of Alexandria on John 11:35 (the Lazarus episode); it has also been noted that the tears of Dionysus intersect strikingly with a description of Christ's reaction to the death of Lazarus at *Paraphrase* 11.123-4.<sup>129</sup>

Vian has little to say about the effect that such a resonance might have on our reading of Dionysus. Liebeschuetz is more forthright in his rejection of any meaningful resonance at this point: the implication that this line suggests the Christianisation of Dionysus, he argues, is simply 'not right'.<sup>130</sup> More recently Alan Cameron has expressed scepticism over the Christian overtones of this line: 'Dionysos grieves for the death of his young friend Ampelos, who is turned into a living vine-shoot. For all its trappings, this is simply an old-fashioned aetiology. For all its Christian resonance, the line in question is just a formula that came naturally to the pen of a Christian, without any wider implications beyond its immediate context.'<sup>131</sup> Cameron's uncompromising pronouncement seems designed as a final word on the matter, yet I do not think that this line can be dismissed as readily as he suggests as 'simply' an aetiology and 'just' a formula. As will be seen, the resonance of the line and its intersection with Christian discourse is far deeper and more nuanced than has been appreciated by recent critics.

It must first be observed that this line when discussed has tended to be treated in isolation, without reference to its wider context. It is important to note that the line forms the conclusion of a 30-line speech by the fate Atropus that is, in its entirety, directly concerned with the triumphant resurrection of Ampelus (12.142-71).<sup>132</sup> As the very last line of the speech of Atropus, the description of the tears of Dionysus is afforded especial prominence. This prominence is further enhanced by the

line's rhetorical composition. It is divided into two contrasting, but inter-related, halves:

Βάκχος ἄναξ δάκρυσε,  
βροτῶν ἵνα δάκρυα λύσῃ.

In addition to the *polyptoton* of δάκρυ- in each half-line (emphasising the theme of tears), the opening of each clause suggests a clear antithesis between the world of gods (Βάκχος) and the world of men (βροτῶν). Furthermore, the end of each clause is marked by a verb – the first implying grief (δάκρυσε), the second implying release (λύσῃ).<sup>133</sup>

I want now to look more closely at the apparent intertextual relationship between *Dion.* 12.171 and both the story of Lazarus (as presented in the *Paraphrase*) and Cyril's commentary. Nonnus' account of the tearful reaction of Christ to the news of the death of Lazarus at *Para.* 11.123-4 takes its inspiration from John 11:35: 'Jesus wept' (ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς).<sup>134</sup> In Nonnus' version this brief statement of fact is expanded thus: 'Jesus himself began to groan, shedding unaccustomed tears from his eyes that never weep' (καὶ ἔστεινεν αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς / ὄμμασιν ἀκλαύτοισιν ἀήθεα δάκρυα λειβῶν). The *Paraphrase* replaces ἐδάκρυσεν with the variant δάκρυα λειβῶν,<sup>135</sup> but it is interesting to note that Dionysus' weeping at *Dion.* 12.171 forms a more direct verbal parallel with John 11:35, through the use of δάκρυσε ('he wept'). Moreover, the use of (ἐ)δάκρυσε, though common in the Church Fathers<sup>136</sup> – with frequent allusion to Christ's tears at Bethany – does not appear to figure at all within epic poetry before Nonnus.<sup>137</sup> Dionysus' tears, then, may well have been inspired by the Christian tradition.

As mentioned above, in addition to the *Paraphrase* intertext, a striking analogy with the concluding line of Atropus' speech at *Dion.* 12.171 is supplied by a line from Cyril's *Commentary* on John 11:35 (again with reference to Christ's tears on the death of Lazarus): 'the Lord weeps ... so that he may put an end to our tears (δακρῦει δὲ ὁ Κύριος ... ἵνα ἡμῶν περιστείλῃ δάκρυον)'. All we are told about Christ's tears by the Gospel of John (11:36), beyond the bald statement that 'Jesus wept', is that the Jews reacted to the tears with the words 'See how he loves him [Lazarus]'. In his *Commentary* Cyril puts flesh on the bare bones of John and offers his own interpretation of the enigmatic tears of Christ. Cyril's explanation suggests that the Jews had only a limited understanding of Christ's tears and their significance: 'the Jews thought that He wept on account of the death of Lazarus, but He wept out of compassion for all humanity, not bewailing Lazarus only, but understanding that which happens to all, that the whole of humanity is made subject to death, having justly fallen under so great a penalty.'<sup>138</sup> A similar interpretation is offered by John Chrysostom on the same topic: 'But Jesus wept (ἀλλ' ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς) in order to show us his compassion and love for his fellow men.'<sup>139</sup>

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The gap between the 'misguided' perceptions of the Jewish crowd and the 'true' interpretation of Cyril (and between the private and public nature of the tears), suggests a further intersection with the tears of Dionysus. An analogous gap exists between the way that Dionysus *appears* to behave throughout the Ampelus episode in terms of his private grief for his young friend and how Atropus *interprets* that same scene in terms of the wider impact of the tears on humanity. In other words, before Atropus speaks we are encouraged to view Dionysus' grief much as the Jews viewed Christ's grief ('See how he loves him'); but then Atropus – fulfilling much the same role in the *Dionysiaca* as Cyril plays in his *Commentary* – offers his own interpretation of the scene and thereby transforms our understanding of the significance of the tears of Dionysus. To paraphrase Cyril, what Atropus is saying is: 'Dionysus wept out of compassion for all humanity, not bewailing Ampelus only, but understanding that which happens to all.'

The important distinction made by the proto-commentator Atropus between Dionysus' private grief for Ampelus and the compassion that Dionysus feels for humanity has yet to be grasped. Liebeschuetz objected to the idea that line 12.171 contains significant Christian resonance on the grounds that the presentation of Dionysus throughout the Ampelus episode remains 'traditional' in its outlook: Dionysus weeps for an individual in the manner of a 'traditional Greek', not for mankind like Christ.<sup>140</sup> This fails to take account of the fact that while it is undoubtedly true that Dionysus behaves in a 'traditional Greek manner' throughout the Ampelus episode (playing the part of Achilles to Ampelus' Patroclus), he is nevertheless explicitly presented by Atropus as weeping for mankind, just as Cyril imagines that Christ weeps for humanity.

Although Liebeschuetz does acknowledge that the transformation of Ampelus into the vine was itself 'a solace to grieving mankind', he goes on to say that, unlike the story of Christ, 'this was the result, not the purpose, of Dionysus' tears'.<sup>141</sup> But once again this argument ignores the implications of the commentary that is supplied by Atropus. Atropus' final line clearly reinterprets Dionysus' tears in the light of their effect, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.<sup>142</sup> Accordingly, Dionysus' grief is presented as a *purposeful* action, consciously designed to relieve the suffering of the world, not simply consequent upon it. What is more, this presentation does not simply emerge out of the blue, in the final line of the speech, but develops the position of the preceding lines where it is precisely described that Ampelus has brought mourning to Dionysus 'so that (ὅφρα) when your honey-dropping wine shall grow, you may bring its delight (τερπωλήν) to all the four quarters of the world, a libation (σπονδήν) for the Blessed, and for Dionysus a heart of good cheer (εὐφοροσύνην)' (12.168-70).<sup>143</sup>

Alongside the attempt to analyse the significance of Christ's tears at Bethany by Cyril and other Church Fathers stands a wider, related, question about whether or not it was appropriate for Christ to cry at all.

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For Cyril in his *Commentary* on John the question centres on the essential duality of Christ as both God and man – as God he must not cry, but in his mortal form it is appropriate that he shares mortal tears:

Certainly the Evangelist, seeing the tearless Nature weeping [i.e. Christ], is astonished, although the suffering was peculiar to the flesh, and not suitable to the Godhead ... And He weeps a little, and straightway checks His tears; lest He might seem to be at all cruel and inhuman, and at the same time instructing us not to give way overmuch in grief for the dead. For it is one thing to be influenced by sympathy, and another to be effeminate and unmanly. For this cause therefore He permitted His own flesh to weep a little, although it was in its nature tearless and incapable of any grief, so far as regards its own nature. And even those who hate the Lord, admire His tears.<sup>144</sup>

The paradox of a figure who is ‘tearless’ and ‘incapable of grief’ shedding tears presented by Cyril relates closely to the way that Christ is characterised in the *Paraphrase*, shedding unfamiliar tears ‘from eyes that do not weep (ὄμμασιν ἀκλαύτοισιν)’ (*Para.* 11.124). This same unweeping representation is shared by Nonnus’ Dionysus. See, for example, *Dion.* 29.318: ‘Dionysus mourned with unweeping eyes’ (ὄμμασιν ἀκλαύτοισιν ὀδυρομένου Διονύσου).<sup>145</sup> According to Cyril there is a fine balance to be struck in order to show enough grief to demonstrate humanity, while at the same time avoiding an excessive display of emotion: ‘for it is one thing to be influenced by sympathy, and another to be effeminate and unmanly’. Here the figure of Dionysus presents an interesting foil to that of Christ, since Dionysus is frequently represented within the Classical tradition, and in the *Dionysiaca* itself, as effeminate and unmanly.<sup>146</sup>

The precise interpretation put forward in the *Commentary* of Cyril that Christ weeps over Lazarus in order to put an end to the tears of mankind is one that is itself mirrored in the work of other Church Fathers. Gregory of Nazianzus writes that ‘he weeps, but makes tears stop’ (δακρύει, ἀλλὰ παύει δάκρυον).<sup>147</sup> Here emphasis falls on both the human and divine aspects of Christ: he weeps as a man and makes tears stop as a god. This duality is made more explicit in the following line: ‘he asks where Lazarus was buried, for he was a man (ἄνθρωπος γὰρ ἦν) [i.e. as a man Christ did not have ‘divine’ knowledge of this]; but he roused Lazarus, for he was a god (θεὸς γὰρ ἦν)’. It is interesting to set this exploration of the human and divine aspects of Christ alongside the presentation of Dionysus in *Dionysiaca* 11. It is here that emphasis falls with particular prominence on the fact that Dionysus has a single divine nature. Dionysus draws attention to his divinity when expressing his grief that he is unable to accompany Ampelus to the Underworld (11.325): ‘Alas, that my father did not beget me as a mortal.’

Whatever the differences between the story of Lazarus and the story of Ampelus, this analysis has pointed to significant nodes of intersection.

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Dionysus like Christ is pictured weeping for the death of a friend. This is an action that is interpreted by both the Church Fathers and Atropus as having a wider soteriological significance than is explicitly stated in the narratives of John and Nonnus respectively. In both cases this rare display of grief leads to a miraculous act of resurrection (bodily in the case of Lazarus; into the new form of the vine for Ampelus). Such intersections do not mean that we should view Dionysus as a rival or parody of Christ in any categorical sense. The wider question of interpretation will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapter, but for the moment it is enough to observe that the intertextual connections that link the two episodes inevitably encourage readers to interrogate their own ideas about resurrection, about the meaning of life after death, about what constitutes appropriate behaviour for a god in terms of his relationship with mankind, about the relationship between the divine and the human spheres (particularly when set alongside Christological debates about Christ as one person with two natures, both human and divine).

##### (c) Wine and the Eucharist

One of the points of focus in Bowersock's investigation into the relationship between Imperial fiction and the narratives of the Gospels concerns the account preserved in Achilles Tatius' novel *Leucippe and Clitophon* about the emergence of wine in the city of Tyre. At 2.2.4-6 Achilles Tatius describes how Dionysus supplies wine to a hospitable shepherd who keenly desires to know where Dionysus got this 'sweet blood' (*haima gluky*). Dionysus replies: 'This is the water of the harvest; this is the blood of the grapes.' Then the god leads the herdsman to the vine, takes a cluster of grapes and crushes it saying, 'This is that water; this is the fountainhead.'

According to Bowersock, 'No reader acquainted with the evangelists can miss the similarity to the Christian eucharist. Some have also seen a hint of the Johannine miracle at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. But, since the wine here is pressed directly from the grape, the Eucharistic parallel is more compelling.'<sup>148</sup> He points specifically to Achilles Tatius' use of the formula 'this is ...' (*τοῦτό ἐστι*) and compares it with the phraseology in the Gospel of Matthew: 'this is my body' (*τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου*); 'this is my blood' (*τοῦτο ... ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου*).<sup>149</sup> For Bowersock 'the parallelism is hardly likely to be accidental. The language is far too close, and the solemnity of the divine gift to mortal men too marked.'<sup>150</sup> This is evidence for Bowersock not of an established 'pagan' tradition that was incorporated into Christian discourse, but rather it is a sign that Achilles Tatius' text has been influenced by the language and imagery of the Gospels.

In this section I want to explore further some of the ways in which images of the vine and of wine as presented in the *Dionysiaca* might connect with Christian discourses with particular reference to the rite of the Eucharist.<sup>151</sup> To take a step back, it might be helpful first to spell out

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clearly what is meant by the Eucharist. This was (and indeed still is) one of the most important of all Christian rites: the Holy Communion at which bread and wine are consumed in memory of Christ. It derives from Christ's actions towards his disciples at the Last Supper (as described in the three synoptic gospels).<sup>152</sup> The rite takes its name from the blessing of the wine (εὐχαριστήσας) by Christ. According to the account of Matthew (26:26-9):

<sup>26</sup>And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body (τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου).

<sup>27</sup>And he took the cup, and gave thanks (εὐχαριστήσας), and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it;

<sup>28</sup>For this is my blood (τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου) of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

<sup>29</sup>But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

The main elements of the story also feature in the Gospel of John, although they occur outside the setting of the Last Supper (6:53-6):<sup>153</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

<sup>54</sup>Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

<sup>55</sup>For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

<sup>56</sup>He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

It is this version that forms the basis for Nonnus' (apparently incomplete) account at *Paraphrase* 6.164-8:

My flesh is the true food of life, my blood is the true drink; whichever man tastes of my flesh and of my blood in one covenant, this man shall dwell in me and I shall be united with him.

The connection between blood and wine was not of course novel to the Christian practice of the Eucharist. The correspondence of these two red liquids is well established within the Classical tradition.<sup>154</sup> Although nowhere in *Dionysiaca* is blood treated as an explicit metaphor for wine, there is nevertheless much conscious interplay between the two substances. Within the episode of Ampelus, for example, an obvious attempt is made to connect blood with the juice of the grape when Dionysus sees grape juice dribbling from the mouth of the snake, 'reddening the serpent's lips with purple-coloured drops' (πορφυρέη ῥαθάμιγγι δράκων φοίνιξεν ὑπήνην, 12.323). The language used here clearly evokes the sight of blood. The evocation of blood is strengthened by the similarity between this story about the discovery of wine and an account in Book 40 of the discovery of

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Tyrian purple dye from the murex shell. In Tyre Dionysus marvels at purple cloth and, we are told (40.306-8): 'on the shore a dog, busy by the sea, gobbling the wonderful lurking fish with joyous jaws, stained his white cheeks purple with the blood of a shell (αίματι κόχλου)'. As other sources make explicit, the dog was thought to have cut his mouth, but the dark liquid was dye not blood.<sup>155</sup>

During the description of the murder of Icarus by intoxicated Athenian farmers in Book 47 we discover how 'bloody drops reddened the wine that was the same colour' (αίμαλέη φοίνιξεν ὁμόχροον οἶνον ἔερση, 47.130). At 29.151-63 the bloody thigh wound sustained by Hymenaeus is sprinkled with wine in order to cure it;<sup>156</sup> while at 12.251-3 an explicit contrast is made between wine (and its capacity to bring happiness and comfort) and the painful bloodshed that results from war: 'the Bloody one (αἱματώεις) pours out gore to Ares, the Viny one (ἀμπελώεις) pours to Dionysus the ruddy dew of the wine-soaked grape!'.<sup>157</sup>

There are, however, signs of a more specific intersection between the practice of the Eucharist and the representation of wine in the *Dionysiaca* in the Ampelus episode in Book 12.<sup>158</sup> Dionysus describes with enthusiasm the new drink of wine that has arisen from the death of Ampelus. The transformation of Ἄμπελος the boy satyr into ἄμπελος the vine is no simple juggling trick with words, however. Nonnus places clear emphasis on Ampelus' *physical* transformation into a vine (12.181-4): 'his long neck became a bunch of grapes, his elbow gave place to a bending twig swollen with berries, his head changed until the horns took the shape of twisted clumps of droops'. The fact that Ampelus has been physically (rather than simply metaphorically) transformed has important implications for the wine that Dionysus samples, for it is not just a drink that reminds us of Ampelus, it is a drink that is made from Ampelus himself: 'I absorb all Ampelus to be at home in my heart by that delicious draught' (12.249-50).<sup>159</sup> This suggests a pertinent connection with late antique theological understanding of the Eucharist. For the majority of early Christians (and indeed many Christians to this day) wine is not simply a symbol of the blood of Christ: the celebration of the Eucharist involved the mystical process of transubstantiation in which the wine and bread were literally (not metaphorically) transformed into the blood and body of Christ.

The Christian Eucharist does not of course rely solely on the drinking of wine, but also involves the consumption of bread (the 'body' of Christ). In this respect it is noteworthy that during Nonnus' description of the transformation of Ampelus into the vine, prominent emphasis is placed on the fact that the grape provides both food *and* drink: at 12.203-6 'Bacchus tasted the sweet sap (ἠδυπότου ... ἔερσε) with sipping lips, tasted also the fruit (καρποῖο); and *both* (ἀμφοτέροις) so delighted his heart that he broke out into speech with proud throat.' Dionysus then launches into a paean of praise for the vine as both food and drink, emphasising its transcendence over other substances (12.207-11): 'O Ampelus, this is the ambrosia and

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nectar (ἀμβροσίην καὶ νέκταρ) of my Zeus that you have produced. Apollo wears two favourite plants, but never ate olive fruit nor drank of the iris. Corn does not produce a sweet drink (forgive me, Deo). I will provide food (εἶδαρ)<sup>160</sup> for mortal men, not only drink (καὶ οὐ πόμα μούνον).<sup>161</sup>

Looking at the *Dionysiaca* more widely it may be observed that there are many scenes that involve the practice of table-fellowship, where food is consumed and wine is drunk.<sup>162</sup> One might reasonably point out that there is nothing surprising about the presence of scenes of eating and drinking in an epic poem – and it takes rather more than a meal of bread and wine to make the Eucharist. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the *Dionysiaca* is not the product of a Homeric world, but part of the Christian world of late antiquity, a world that placed great significance on the practice of table-fellowship (whether through Eucharistic ritual or *agape* feasts). It is therefore perhaps worthy of note that Nonnus' epic poem concludes with a scene of commensality – a kind of ultimate last supper (so to speak) – in which Dionysus finally ascends to heaven and 'touched one table with the father who had brought him to birth; after the banquets (δαῖτα) of mortals, after the wine once poured out (προτέρην χύσιν οἴνου), he quaffed heavenly nectar (οὐράνιον... νέκταρ) from nobler goblets' (48.975-7). Readers of the Gospel of Matthew might well be reminded of Chapter 26, Verse 29: 'But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

Dionysus' table-fellowship is itself directly linked to his wider mission to bring wine to the world. This mission follows straight on from death of Ampelus and his transformation into wine in Book 12. No sooner has wine been invented than Dionysus is informed, by means of a message sent from Zeus (via the messenger goddess Iris) that 'he must drive out of Asia with his avenging thyrsus the proud race of Indians untaught of justice (δίκης ἀδίδακτον) ... and teach all nations (καὶ ἔθνεα πάντα διδάξῃ) the sacred dances of the vigil and the purple fruit of vintage' (13.3-7). The most prominent aspect of Zeus's command is the emphasis that is placed on teaching. The theme of teaching creates a strong intersection with the mission of Christ: throughout the Gospels and the Church Fathers, Christ is referred to in his capacity as a teacher (ὁ διδάσκαλος).<sup>163</sup> Teaching about the faith (and the wine of the Eucharist) was, of course, a central part of Christ's mission and of the wider mission of his church.

In the books of fighting and conflict that follow the start of Dionysus' mission, the idea of instruction remains central. In Book 17 Dionysus is entertained by the poor shepherd Brongus. As a reward for the hospitality that he received, 'the Lord taught him (καὶ μιν ἀναξ ἐδίδαξε) the flower-loving work of the vineyard' (17.83). At 18.324-6 Dionysus 'passed from city to city ... and filled all the Assyrian land with his fruit, as he offered to the countrymen the grape-growing flower of the vineyard; in Athens the god presents Icarius with vine shoots in return for his hospitality, 'and the

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Lord taught him (καὶ μιν ἄναξ ἐδίδαξε) the art of making them grow ...' (47.68). Here Dionysus, much like Christ and the apostles of the early church, is not simply presenting individuals with a 'one-off' gift, but is introducing people to a radically new way of life. Icarius, for example, having been taught about winemaking by Dionysus 'passed on to other countrymen the gifts of Bromius with their vintage of grapes, and taught (ἐδίδαξε) them how to plant and care for the viny growth of Dionysus (47.70-2). Moreover, just as the new force of Christianity in late antiquity is active and proselytising, so the wine of Dionysus encourages a similar enthusiasm towards winning over new converts in the *Dionysiaca*. The Indian at Lake Astacis, for example, calls eagerly to his friends to sample the new drink of wine (14.434): 'This way, friends, taste (γεύσασθε) the honey-dripping river.' It may be observed that the verb used for sampling the new wine of Dionysus (γεύομαι) occurs again at *Paraphrase* 6.166 with reference to tasting the wine of the Eucharist.<sup>164</sup>

The simple instructions delivered by Zeus to Iris at the start of Book 13 are not quite the instructions that Iris ends up passing on to Dionysus.<sup>165</sup> The messenger goddess elaborates Zeus's message: the element of punishment is mentioned, along with the promise of the reward of immortality,<sup>166</sup> but no explicit reference is made about the need to teach the world about the vine (13.19-23): 'Your father bids you destroy the race of Indians, untaught of piety (εὐσεβίης ἀδίδακτον). Come, lift the thyrsus of battle in your hands, and earn heaven by your deeds. For the immortal court of Zeus will not receive you without hard work.' She concludes: 'the prize for your labours will be a home in your father's heaven' (13.34-5).

An explanation for the different emphasis that Iris has chosen to place on Zeus's words may well have something to do with the fact that the messenger of the gods has just tasted wine for the first time before delivering her message.<sup>167</sup> What is of particular interest is the change that Iris makes to Zeus's description of the Indians: where according to Zeus the Indians were 'untaught of justice' (δικῆς ἀδίδακτον); in Iris' version they are now 'untaught of piety' (εὐσεβίης ἀδίδακτον). The change may be easily accounted for as *variatio* and thus of little real consequence; but the implied connection between these two words is revealing. Although a precedent for the pairing of these concepts can be found in the Classical tradition,<sup>168</sup> 'piety' (εὐσέβεια) is a key Christian virtue that is itself closely associated with the notion of 'justice/righteousness' (δικαιοσύνη). In the New Testament the two concepts are used together as adverbs,<sup>169</sup> while a direct connection between the two concepts is made in the *Paraphrase*.<sup>170</sup>

In Eusebius, the concepts of 'piety' and 'justice' are again closely linked: *Commentaria in Psalmos* 23.81.10-12 refers to Christ as 'saviour, illuminator of all races, teacher of piety (διδάσκαλος εὐσεβείας),<sup>171</sup> guide to wisdom, originator of justice' (δικαιοσύνης ἀρχηγός). Yet more interesting here is the parallel between Christ as the 'teacher of piety' and the Indians of the *Dionysiaca* who are as yet 'untaught of piety' (εὐσεβίης ἀδίδακτον);

similarly the reference to Christ as the ‘illuminator of all nations’ (φωστήρ τῶν ἐθνῶν ἀπάντων) intersects with the injunction to Dionysus that he must ‘teach all nations’ (καὶ ἔθνεα πάντα διδάξει).

Beyond the didactic nature of both missions it is worth considering what, if anything, the wine of Dionysus and the wine of Christ have in common.<sup>172</sup> The nature of Dionysus’ wine and its powerful effect is well captured by the reaction of an Indian soldier (the first time that Dionysus makes use of the substance since the start of his mission). The soldier speaks about the drink with a voice ‘full of amazement’ (πολυθαμβέα, 14.418): ‘What a strange (ξεῖνον) and incredible (ἄπιστον) drink I have seen’ (14.419). The drink he goes on to describe is unlike milk, water or honey: water soon quenches one’s thirst, likewise one can only consume a certain amount of honey, but this drink leaves one wanting more (14.429): ‘it is sweet (γλυκερόν) but does not induce satiety (οὐ κόπον ... τίκτει)’.<sup>173</sup> This notion of a startling and miraculous product chimes well with representations of Christianity as a revolutionary new force.<sup>174</sup>

A similar emphasis on the novelty of wine is introduced in Book 17. While Dionysus is being entertained by the shepherd Brongus he introduces wine in place of the simple rustic drink of milk (17.78): ‘Forget your wish for your old-fashioned (ἀρχαίου) milk.’ Here the imagery explicitly keys into the familiar idea of the old order being superseded by the new, part of the wider exploration of the relationship between tradition and innovation within the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>175</sup> After Dionysus’ rejection of milk he hands over grapes to the shepherd in gratitude for his hospitality. He then instructs Brongus in the art of viticulture (17.83-6): ‘And the Lord taught him the flowerloving work of the vineyard – to bend the slips of the plants over into fertilising pits, and to cut the top shoots of an old vine, that new shoots of winegendering grapes may grow’. According to H.J. Rose (who supplied the notes to Rouse’s Loeb edition of the *Dionysiaca*), Dionysus’ instructions reveal him to be ‘a very poor vinedresser’.<sup>176</sup> He goes on: ‘He tells [Brongus] to choose the top shoots of an old vine, which is doubly wrong, for the vine should not be old and the top shoots are condemned by the best ancient writers as less fertile.’ For Rose, it hardly needs to be said, Nonnus was clearly not to be mistaken for one of the ‘best of ancient writers’. It is possible, however, to view Dionysus’ instructions more sympathetically. The approach to vine-dressing adopted by Dionysus (encouraging new shoots to grow from an old vine) functions as a simple but effective metaphor for the gift of wine – a metaphor that could equally well apply to Christianity itself: innovation from tradition.

The drink of wine is not just a novelty, however. It has two distinct yet complementary effects, both providing happiness for mankind and taking away their suffering. As Dionysus says to the shepherd Brongus (closing his speech with a memorable *chiasmus*), ‘the snow-white drops pressed from the udders of goats that have just kidded do not make men happy or drive away their cares (ἀνέρας οὐ τέρπουσι καὶ οὐ λούουσι μερίμνας)’ (17.79-

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80). The implied contrast here is with the gift of wine that brings happiness and removes pain. The positive state of happiness provided by wine is commonly described in the *Dionysiaca* by means of the noun εὐφοροσύνη ('good cheer'). At 12.254-5 we learn that olives (in contrast to grapes) 'do not produce good cheer (εὐφοροσύνην)'. At 8.32 Dionysus as he gestates in the thigh of Zeus is described as the 'messenger of good cheer (ἄγγελος εὐφοροσύνης)';<sup>177</sup> at 8.88-90 Phthonos ('Envy') in the guise of Ares says to Hera, 'I feel shame myself far more when some mortal men will say: Zeus granted battles to Ares and happiness (εὐφοροσύνην) to Dionysus'. In the bitter words of Icarius, wine 'has given good cheer (εὐφοροσύνη) to all men and brought fate to Icarius' (*Dion.* 47.133).

The word εὐφοροσύνη has a well-established 'Classical' resonance, and is commonly used to describe the pleasure elicited by communal dining from Homer onwards.<sup>178</sup> It is, however, also a word that is prominent within Christian discourse where it is used to describe a state of happiness relating to knowledge of Christ and God.<sup>179</sup> In Acts 2:28 the apostle Peter quotes from the prophet David about the hope of life after death offered by the Lord: 'your presence will fill me with joy (εὐφοροσύνης)'; again at Acts 14:17 Barnabas and Paul dismiss claims that they are Zeus and Hermes and restate their faith in the one living God who, they say 'gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness (εὐφοροσύνης)'. At *Paraphrase* 8.182 Abraham is brought to a state of εὐφοροσύνη on account of his understanding of the coming of Christ.<sup>180</sup>

As noted above, wine does not simply bring happiness, but is also able to take away pain: it provides 'a relief (ἄμπαυμα) for the human race' (12.158; 47.132),<sup>181</sup> 'a rest from all cares (ὄλης ἄμπαυμα μερίμνης)' (17.74); it is 'the healer of human pain (ἀνδρομέης παιήονες ... ἀνίης)' (47.55). Most specifically wine is able to take away the pain caused by death: 'but the sadly afflicted who has given a wife or a daughter to the common fate, the man who mourns children dead, a mother or a father, when he shall taste of delicious wine will shake off the hateful burden of ever-increasing pain (στυγνὸν ἀεζομένης ἀποσειέται ὄγκον ἀνίης)' (12.265-9).<sup>182</sup> The pain caused by the death of King Staphylus in Book 18 is similarly alleviated for the grieving widow Methe and son Botrys when Dionysus furnishes them with 'care-resolving (λυσιμέριμνον) juice of the wine that drives away all trouble (ἀλεξικάκου)' (19.18).<sup>183</sup> The wine duly softens their pain (ἀνίην, 19.21) and as Methe herself describes (19.25-6): 'by your potion of healing (παιήονος) wine I have quieted my tears'.

The concern to alleviate suffering, particularly with reference to the death of loved ones, suggests an obvious parallel on a general level with the message of Christianity and in particular with the image of Christ as healer.<sup>184</sup> A more specific correspondence between the missions of Christ and Dionysus can be found in the use of the adjective λυσιπόνος ('freeing from care') in the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>185</sup> After the shocking climax of the story of Pentheus, Dionysus comforts the son-killing Agave and her sister Autonoe

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(the mother of the dead Actaeon) by giving them wine – a medicine designed to set them free from pain (λυσίπνον ... φάρμακον, 46.359).<sup>186</sup> The adjective is first attested in Pindar and was specifically associated with Dionysus by Pseudo-Oppian.<sup>187</sup> The connection with Dionysus is apposite because of the etymological link between λύσις and Dionysus cult title Λυαῖος.<sup>188</sup> The adjective is, however, also used in descriptions of Christ and the wine of the Eucharist. In the *Pararion* the fourth-century bishop Epiphanius describes wine as ‘the drink that releases cares’ (τὸ λυσίπνον ... πόμα);<sup>189</sup> in the *Paraphrase* Christ himself is explicitly described as the ‘releaser of cares’ (λυσίπνοος).<sup>190</sup>

One of the additional characteristics of the wine of Dionysus is that it provides ‘the earthly image of heavenly nectar’ (12.159; 17.76). ‘Here I see an image of the heavens (τύπον αἰθέρος)’ (14.435), says the Indian warrior on his first experience of wine. Wine, in other words, gives to the drinker a glimpse of the world of the immortals. In this respect the wine of Dionysus offers a further parallel to the wine of the Eucharist in which communion with Christ encourages followers in the hope of eternal life. Both experiences establish an important connection between the world of humans and the world of the divine.

A suggestive contribution to our understanding of the broad general relationship between Christian discourse and the Classical tradition emerges in *Dionysiaca* 12 where Dionysus offers an elaborate (and appropriately agricultural) metaphor for the progress of his newly invented vine. Having first provided a metaphorical description of wine, as if consisting of a blend of different flowers, Nonnus turns his attention to the vine (12.272-84):

All the trees of the forest bow their heads around, as one in prayer bends low the neck. The ancient palm-tree inclines his soaring leaves, you stretch your feet round the apple-tree, you clasp your hands about the fig-tree and hold fast; they support your fruitage as slavewomen their mistress, while you climb over the shoulder of your maids with your tendrils pushing and winding and quivering, while the winds blow in your face the delicate many-coloured leaves of so many neighbouring trees with their widespread clusters, as if you slept and they cooled you with gentle breath. So the serving-woman waves a light fan as in duty bound, and makes a cool wind for her king.

In my earlier monograph on the *Dionysiaca* I presented a metapoetic reading of this scene in which the image of the vine was developed as a metaphor for a new Dionysiac poetic that was able to dominate the forest of literary predecessors.<sup>191</sup> Just as the vine relies on the support of other plants in order to flourish and dominate, the *Dionysiaca*, I argued, derived its strength from the existing structures of literary genres and texts – through adaptation as much as innovation. Although my reading of this scene has not fundamentally changed, I am ready to accept that my

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analysis does not represent the last word on the resonance of this scene, and that the vine metaphor may have wider cultural/religious resonance.

The idea of a new Christian force that comes to dominate a pre-existing Classical landscape, but still relies on it for support and sustenance, is one that is frequently articulated by Christian writers.<sup>192</sup> In Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* Book 1, for example, an agricultural simile is used to describe the relationship between Classical culture and Christian culture: 'For, like farmers who irrigate the land beforehand, so we also water with the liquid stream of Greek learning what in it is earthy, so that it may receive the spiritual seed cast into it, and may be capable of easily nourishing it.' This image neatly captures one view of the relationship between Classical and Christian in the world of late antiquity: Classical culture here provides the water that encourages the Christian seed to grow in the soil of late antiquity.

Before Nonnus, the image of the vine and its props – a standard feature of Roman viticulture – had already been used by Classical poets as a metaphor for marriage;<sup>193</sup> the image also had a life of its own within Christian discourse: an anonymous second-century AD text known by the title 'The Shepherd of Hermas' relates the parable of the vine and the elm tree, in which the dependence of the vine on the elm tree is used to explain the relationship between the rich (represented by the vine) and the poor (represented by the elm) (Parable 2.3-4):

'This vine', he said, 'bears fruit, but the elm is an unfruitful stock. Yet this vine, unless it climbs up the elm, cannot bear much fruit when it is spread on the ground; and such fruit as it bears is rotten, because it is not suspended upon the elm. When then the vine is attached to the elm, it bears fruit both from itself and from the elm.

You see then that the elm also bears [much] fruit, not less than the vine, but rather more.' 'How more?' I asked. 'Because,' he said, 'the vine, when hanging upon the elm, bears its fruit in abundance, and in good condition; but, when spread on the ground, it bears little fruit, and that rotten. This parable therefore is applicable to the servants of God, to poor and to rich alike.' (tr. J.B. Lightfoot)

Although the image of the vine and the elm (as a symbol of marriage) was frequently exploited by early Christian writers in the Eastern empire,<sup>194</sup> it has been argued that from the middle of the fifth century the image lost its vitality.<sup>195</sup> The suggested reason for this lack of 'vitality' was the disappearance of 'the Shepherd of Hermas' from the 'scriptural canon and from the theological tradition of Christianity at large'.<sup>196</sup> The use of the metaphor of the vine and its props by Nonnus shows that in the later fifth century at least the imagery was still flourishing. Interestingly Nonnus does not follow the tradition established by Latin Classical authors that plays on the idea of a metaphorical marriage of the vine and its prop; in Nonnus' rendition it is the vine that is in the dominant position with the other trees playing the parts of slaves and servants.<sup>197</sup> In this respect

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Nonnus is much closer to the author of the ‘Shepherd of Hermas’ who described the symbolic relationship between the rich vine and the poor elm.

There is, however, quite possibly more to vine metaphor employed by Nonnus than this discussion of the vine/elm *topos* suggests. As we have already seen, Nonnus’ vine manages to achieve a position of dominance by exploiting and relying upon the support of established plants. This model of domination is one that suggests many similarities with the way in which Christianity rose to a position of power within late antique society. As has been described so well by Averil Cameron, Christian discourse actively exploited and developed – rather than rejected – traditional Classical discourses.<sup>198</sup> The triumph of Christianity like the triumph of the vine lay in the ability to bridge the gap between the apparently contradictory claims of tradition and innovation, continuity and rupture, similarity and difference.

I am not suggesting that the image of the vine developed by Nonnus should be seen as a conscious attempt to describe the process of Christianisation from a late antique perspective. What I am suggesting, however, is that when a late antique poet chooses to write about the emergence of a new force and in particular when he describes the way that that force rises to a position of dominance, the model and experience of Christianisation would be likely to impinge to some degree (conscious or unconscious) on his – and his readers’ – conceptualisation of that scene.

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This chapter has examined the *Dionysiaca* not through the traditional literary-critical lens of the Classical tradition, but as a literary creation embedded within late antique culture. My starting point for this examination was the theme of inspiration. As was argued in Chapter 2, questions about poetic identity and the relationship between the Classical tradition and Christian culture were of profound importance to the late antique world. As a god with close connections to the theme of inspiration, Nonnus’ Dionysus is not a remote mythological figure, but a figure with dramatic relevance within the world of late antiquity. I then turned to consider the way that Nonnus’ Dionysus suggested overlap, congruence and parallelism with Christ and the wider thematic concerns of Christian late antiquity. This overlap was considered both in terms of broad themes, such as virginity, resurrection and the symbolism of wine, right down to the use of individual words. In this and the preceding chapter I have elucidated a complex web of parallels between the narratives of Dionysus and Christ as presented by Nonnus in both the *Paraphrase* and *Dionysiaca*. I have made no claim that Nonnus has consciously shaped the character of Dionysus to resemble that of Christ or *vice versa*; indeed, the connections and echoes that I have explored might well be seen (without any appeal to the

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intentions of the author) as an inevitable consequence of writing about similar themes in the Christian world of late antiquity. However, the inevitability of such echoes and connections does not in any way negate their force. In the world of late antiquity the narrative of Dionysus and the Classical tradition and the narrative of Christ and the Christian tradition are inextricably entwined: it is not possible to consider one without regard to the other. In the following concluding chapter I will at last consider the implications of these connections and explore further their impact not just on our reading of Nonnus' *Paraphrase* and *Dionysiaca* but also on our understanding of late antique literature and culture more widely.

## The Poetics of Late Antiquity

Meaning is produced by dialogue, at every level, and the search for a single, monolithic meaning system can only proceed at the expense of smothering this ubiquitous dialogic activity.<sup>1</sup>

It has been a characteristic of critics working within the Classical tradition of Nonnian studies to downplay the relevance of parallelism between the story of Dionysus and the story of Christ. Francis Vian, for example, in his commentary on the concluding book of the epic, gives a robust rebuttal to any possibility of any significant interaction between Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* and the wider discourses of late antiquity: 'The poet does not intend to establish a confrontation between Dionysus and Christ, be that in presenting the former as a rival to the latter, or on the contrary of making an image or prefiguration, although the author of the *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel does not disdain to play on occasion within the two works on similar themes. But it is only through a play on words that one can use Christian terminology in speaking about the "ascension" of Dionysus, the "assumption" of Ariadne or the Bacchic "trinity". The figure of Aura is not a caricature of the Virgin Mary, but her exact opposite: violated virgin and infanticide, she is quite the opposite of the loving mother of Jesus who gave birth to him by immaculate conception ... [Nonnus] presents [Dionysus] above all as a literary creation of the same type as Homer's Odysseus or Apollonius' Jason.'<sup>2</sup>

For Vian, then, although parallels may be acknowledged with Christian texts, they amount to nothing more than that and do not change the way that the *Dionysiaca* is read and interpreted. This same position has most recently been restated by Alan Cameron. Though he acknowledges the production of the epic within a Christian framework, he forcefully resists any attempt to see a meaningful relationship between text and context. According to Cameron, it is not the case that Nonnus has constructed Dionysus 'as a rival of Christ'; 'nor', he goes on, 'is he even ... trying to assimilate Dionysos and Christ'.<sup>3</sup> His reading of Egyptian material culture is similarly clear: though late antique funerary sculpture, together with silver plate adorned with scenes from mythology, has been interpreted as Christian allegory, 'another, no less plausible possibility is that it was seen as purely decorative'.<sup>4</sup>

Wolfgang Liebeschuetz has, on the face of it, been more willing to admit that the context of the poem may have an influence on how it is read. His

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work has identified certain specific allusions that suggest that Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* was indeed engaging with Christian themes; and he has acknowledged that Nonnus' 'point of view inevitably reflects the concerns of his own times'.<sup>5</sup> However, for Liebeschuetz, the concerns that Nonnus' text reflects seem to have little to do with late antique religion and society; instead Liebeschuetz draws attention to areas of contemporary antiquarian interest, such as the interest in the customs and traditions of specific cities as expressed by the genre of *patria* poems. Like Vian and Cameron, Liebeschuetz seeks to downplay the possibility of any significant engagement between the *Dionysiaca* and the Christian world of late antiquity. Allusions to Christianity that are acknowledged within the *Dionysiaca* are interpreted by Liebeschuetz as being humorous, but in no way profound: 'Nonnus is ... writing in a spirit of fun ... he ... sometimes allows himself to joke about Christian doctrine'.<sup>6</sup> In the same vein he notes 'light-hearted allusions to similarities between Dionysus and Jesus in respect of divine paternity'.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately Liebeschuetz sees the *Dionysiaca* as little more than an extended exercise in literary-allusion spotting: 'A principal aim of Nonnus ... was surely to give readers the pleasure of recognizing as many as possible of the vast number of literary allusions – even occasionally to Christian writings – embodied in the text. If the poem has a message, it is to celebrate the ancient literature which he has gathered together in his own way into a kind of encyclopaedia. His text is not committed to any doctrine, religious or otherwise. The poem illustrates the long survival in the East of the traditional autonomy of secular literature.'<sup>8</sup>

The reluctance of critics to take seriously the intersection between the worlds of Christ and Dionysus has much to do with the fact that the *Dionysiaca* is in many ways a profoundly disturbing text when approached from a Christian perspective. Regardless of the similarities between Dionysus and Christ in the poetry of Nonnus, it is easy to direct attention to the differences. The wine of Dionysus may alleviate suffering in this world, but the wine of Eucharist gives believers everlasting life; Ampelus is brought back to life, but not in bodily form. In many significant details Dionysus resembles a perverse and provocative anti-Christ: a charismatic god of excess who preaches a gospel of drunkenness and unrestrained promiscuity, with a predilection for the drugging and raping of young virgins. As Liebeschuetz describes, 'It was a fundamental development of Late Antiquity that religion had become moralized. Gods were thought of as moral beings, and they were believed to demand above all moral behaviour from their worshippers. The moralizing of divinity was as marked in late paganism as in Christianity. Moreover Late Roman morality, whether Christian or pagan, placed great value on sexual restraint, on the need for man's soul to achieve the greatest possible degree of control over the body. Dionysus as represented by Nonnus is the opposite of this.'<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the *Dionysiaca* appears to challenge conventional Chris-

tian ideology in its presentation of Dionysus does not, however, allow us simply to dismiss it as a literary work that has no meaningful relationship with the changing and contested world of 'religious' thought in late antiquity. Attempts to close down meaning in this way run counter to the multiplicitous experience of reading. It is, of course, wholly possible to read the *Dionysiaca* without reference to its contemporary context; at the same time it is wholly *impossible* to exclude readings of the text that do engage with the late antique context. Indeed, I would suggest that the reason for the exceptional popularity of the *Dionysiaca* in late antiquity was not simply its playful engagement with the canon of Greek literature and mythology, but also in large part its disturbing topicality.

In his book, *Literature and Religion at Rome*, Denis Feeney forcefully deconstructs precisely those categorisations of 'literature' and 'religion' that Nonnian scholars have tried so hard to maintain: 'In Rome there are many literary modes and there are many religious discourses, each with its own distinctive associations and semiotic features. Rather than asking how religion is transmuted into literature, then, we should instead be thinking in terms of a range of cultural practices, interacting, competing and defining each other in the process.'<sup>10</sup> Feeney's view of the relationship between 'religious' and 'literary' spheres has important implications for our own reading of Nonnus' poetry. The sophisticated way in which different modes and discourses interact and define each other highlights the unsustainability of attempts that insist on the clear separation of the world of Dionysus and the world of Christ.

In keeping with the spirit of the model outlined by Feeney, we need to think of a more dynamic intersection between the world of Dionysus and the world of Christ in the poetry of Nonnus. This applies to the *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* individually, but also to the two poems together. For it is important to recognise that the *Paraphrase* and *Dionysiaca* are not isolated, oppositional texts (the one 'religious', the other 'literary'); rather, they should be seen as two parts of a provocative diptych. Nonnus offers us a vision of a Christian epic and Classical Gospel and encourages us to see that these are two worlds that cannot be kept apart – the act of reading these texts encourages one to look beyond the generic categories of epic or gospel and the rigid distinctions between 'pagan' and Christian. In the poetry of Nonnus there is no Mary without Athena, no Athena without Mary; Classical and Christian spheres are unable to exist in isolation. The fact that critics have had such difficulty in determining the order of the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* underlines the point exactly: Dionysus follows Christ as inevitably as Christ follows Dionysus. Like the chicken and the egg, the texts refuse to yield ultimate priority, since it seems that the one must always (already) come before the other. To change the metaphor, in the world of late antiquity there is no way back into the Classical garden of Eden: both Christ and Dionysus belong to the same new world.

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The poetry of Nonnus, then, cannot be reduced to a simplistic debate between Classical and Christian views of the world, but rather it presents themes and ideas that belong not to separate and distinct traditions but to the wider shared world of late antiquity. This ‘dialogic activity’, offers readers a ring-side seat in debates about the nature of divinity, the interplay between the realms of the divine and the terrestrial, inspiration and the control of divine knowledge, and sexuality and self-restraint. This is not a debate for which we should expect any clear answers – what we get instead is a rich, complex and often contradictory insight into the concerns of the age. Nonnus’ texts are not, however, simply ‘good to think with’. It is important to remember that in the late antique world Christian discourse was still evolving and that the boundaries of that discourse were not yet fixed. It is through texts like the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* that the often paradoxical relationship between Classical and Christian culture was explored and debated. These are texts that do not just make us think hard about the implications of the newly emerging Christian world, but serve to help construct the very world of late antiquity as we know it.

One might, for example, consider Nonnus’ ambivalent presentation of wine. Wine is generally presented as a positive substance, something that brings release from pain; but, as the *Dionysiaca* never allows us to forget, there is a darker side to drink: it has the capacity induce a maddening and dangerous intoxication. In the case of the Athenian farmers in Book 47 (in one of the most arresting scenes in the whole epic) drunkenness leads them on to the brutal murder of Icarus.<sup>11</sup> Wine is also the powerful drug that allows Dionysus to rape the young virgins Nicaea and Aura. Some readers might see this as evidence that the wine of Dionysus has nothing to do with the positive eucharistic wine of Christ. Yet this is to oversimplify the symbolism and significance of wine within the Christian tradition. We have of course already touched on the ambivalent representation of wine within the *Paraphrase* – where the interplay (blend?) of Christian and Dionysiac discourse frustrates any attempts to allow us to treat the wine of Dionysus and the wine of Christ as separate entities. The dangers and benefits of wine were keenly debated throughout the late antique world.<sup>12</sup> There was no unequivocal ‘party-line’ that represented the Christian response to wine, but a multiplicity of responses ranging from absolute renunciation (such as advocated by the Encratites) to a position of relaxed tolerance.<sup>13</sup> The drunkenness of Noah in Genesis 9 aroused particular interest.<sup>14</sup> For some, drunkenness was seen as completely incompatible with the pursuit of a spiritual life;<sup>15</sup> for others, intoxication was clearly related to inspiration.<sup>16</sup> Nonnus’ own complex dramatisation of the power of wine not only reflects issues of contemporary concern but also actively drives and catalyses further debate.

**Only connect**

Nonnus' vision of late antiquity is one of interconnectedness. It embraces the worlds of both the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase*, hinting at an ultimate sense of order beyond and behind the spectacular and chaotic diversity of the world. This *Weltanschauung* is eloquently represented by Dionysus' dazzling syncretistic hymn to Heracles (*Dion.* 40.392-3; 399-401):

Belos on the Euphrates, called Ammon in Libya, you are Apis by the Nile, Arabian Cronos, Assyrian Zeus! ... Be you called Sarapis, the cloudless Zeus of Egypt; be you Cronos, or Phaethon of many names, or Mithras the Sun of Babylon, in Greece Delphic Apollo ...<sup>17</sup>

This sense of an underlying connection between things, a profound relationship between 'the one and the many' permeates the whole of the *Dionysiaca*. It is foregrounded at the start of the epic in the shape-shifting (and programmatic) figure of Proteus, able to transform himself at will into a diversity of forms, but never losing the ability to be himself. This capacity for multiple transformations is replicated by Dionysus himself.<sup>18</sup> A further important illustration of Nonnus' all-embracing spirit can be found in *Dionysiaca* 12 when Dionysus excitedly describes the grape-vine that has sprung up in place of his beloved Ampelus.<sup>19</sup> He goes on to articulate just what it is about the vine that gives it a position of dominance (12.240-4): 'For with the new-found streams of your crushed fruitage your drink will contain all flowers: that one drink will be a mixture of all (ἐν ποτὸν ἔσται / μινύμενον πάντεσσι), it will combine in one the scent of all the flowers that blow, your flowers will embellish all the springtime herbs and grass of the meadow.'

What makes the wine of Dionysus so special is its inclusive nature: it contains reminiscences of every different kind of drink. But just because it blends so many different kinds of drink this does not mean that it is 'simply' a mixture – there is no doubt from its effect that it is significantly more than the sum of its parts. This inclusive substance may be interestingly juxtaposed with the story of the development of Christian discourse as it 'absorb[ed] ... whatever might be useful from secular rhetoric and vocabulary', and more widely still with the story of the socially inclusive ambitions of Christianity.<sup>20</sup>

Interconnectivity is further revealed in a description of the tablets of Harmonia, a kind of oracular spreadsheet for the history of the world at *Dion.* 12.30-44: '[Helios] raised a finger, and pointed out to his circling daughter close to a wall opposite the separated tablets of Harmonia. In these are recorded in one group all the oracles which the prophetic hand of Phanes' first born engraved as ordained for the world, and drew with his pencil the house proper for each. And Hyperion, dispenser of fire, added

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these words: “In the third tablet, you shall know from where the fruitage of wine shall come – where is the Lion and the Virgin: in the fourth who is the Prince of Grapes – that is where Ganymedes draws the delicious nectar, and lifts cup in hand in the picture.” When the god had spoken, the wineloving maiden turned her eyes about, and ran to the place. Beside the oracular wall she saw the first tablet, old as the infinite past, containing all things in one (εἰν ἐνὶ πάντα φέρουσαν).<sup>21</sup> The tablets of Harmonia suggest clear similarities with the construction of Nonnus’ own epic world. Just as the tablets provide an account of the history of the world, so Nonnus provides within the framework of the single story of Dionysus a compendium that embraces the whole of Greek mythology and literature.<sup>22</sup> The description of the first tablet ‘containing all things in one’ itself clearly mirrors the capacious and inclusive nature of the *Dionysiaca* and looks back to the description of the wine of Dionysus as ‘one drink that will be a mixture of all’.<sup>23</sup>

In this vast interconnected world we are constantly invited to see one image or object in the light of another: at times Christ may resemble Dionysus and Dionysus may resemble Christ, or Odysseus or Alexander ... In the opening lines of the *Dionysiaca*, for example, the birth of Dionysus causes Zeus to recollect another birth – that of Athena, while densely-packed poetic allusions cause us to recall countless other texts and narratives. Similarly in the *Paraphrase* the story of Christ is incorporated within the vast (and seemingly infinite) echo-chamber of the Classical tradition. The attempt by the poet to grapple Proteus in the proem to the *Dionysiaca* dramatises the difficulties in pinning down stable meaning.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the epic multiple scenes and voices are presented without any obvious attempt to authorise one or the other: there exist two ‘contents pages’ for the epic poem, two versions of the discovery of wine,<sup>25</sup> two speeches (with subtle but significant differences in tone) delivered to set Dionysus on his mission in Book 13.<sup>26</sup> These doublet scenes force the reader to engage actively with the dialogic process of reading. On a larger scale the presentation of the *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* – without any clear indication about how we are to understand the relationship between the two texts – encourages and indeed demands our active engagement in the search for certainty and meaning. The quest for ‘definitive’ meaning remains ultimately elusive, however, as exemplified by the opening story of Cadmus and Europa in *Dionysiaca* 1: the epic narrative proper begins with Cadmus’ frustrated search for his sister Europa who has been abducted by Zeus (in the deceptive guise of a bull). Although the search fails to achieve its aim, along the way Cadmus nevertheless helps Zeus to save the heavens from the monstrous Typhon, gains a wife and founds a dynasty that will lead to the birth of Dionysus himself. In the final analysis, if we are to learn anything from Cadmus’ lesson, it is that the process of searching – what happens along the way – matters more than the actual achievement of a tangible goal.<sup>27</sup>

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In order to appreciate the implications of Nonnus' attempts to avoid categorisation and the clear demarcation of boundaries, it is important to recognise that the attempt to label, categorise, designate and contain meaning was a central feature of late antique culture.<sup>28</sup> As we have seen, it was not the modern world that invented the labels 'pagans' and 'Christians', but the world of late antiquity.<sup>29</sup> Such labels were invented nonetheless and imbued with a powerful (and powerfully restrictive) sense of meaning. Tertullian provides a good example of the attempt to close off avenues of interpretation, to control the meaning of words (*Prescription against Heretics* ch. 7):

Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.

Here in no uncertain terms is a powerful anti-syncretistic approach to the world of late antiquity. For Tertullian the very act of interpretation was unwelcome, even dangerous. In contrast to this extreme literalist approach to Christianity stands a broader liberal tradition of Biblical hermeneutics in which the word of God was seen as something that was open to interpretation and explication. Consider, for example, Clement of Alexandria, *The Rich Man's Salvation* 5:

And as we are clearly aware that the Saviour teaches His people nothing in a merely human way, but everything by a divine and mystical wisdom, we must not understand His words literally, but with due inquiry and intelligence we must search out and master their hidden meaning ...

Of course, this liberal tradition of hermeneutics is not all that it seems. The work of commentators such as Cyril of Alexandria to interpret and explain the divine scriptures inevitably resulted in new orthodoxies of interpretation where meaning was fiercely contested and controlled, and dissent was branded as heresy.<sup>30</sup> It is against this backdrop that we should set Nonnus' dramatisation of the frustrated (and frustrating) search for meaning, the seemingly infinite regress of images, the slipperiness of knowledge itself.

Issues of interpretation and the problem of reading lie at the very heart of Nonnus' work. The *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* invite and provoke readers to open up their minds to different ways of viewing the world. At the heart of these texts there is a fundamental and unresolved instability about in the way that images, signs and ideas are interpreted. In this world meaning is opened up, not closed down. To go one step further, one might wish to consider Nonnus' poetry as a response in part to the totalising discourses of late antiquity that sought to reduce interpretation

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to an act of passive reception.<sup>31</sup> The *Paraphrase* and *Dionysiaca* do not simply offer us a window onto a late antique world, but are themselves an integral part of the making of that world. The questions posed force the reader into an active engagement with the crucible of late antique thought. Here then is a prayer to the active endeavour of hermeneutics; a space without boundaries and certainties; but with infinite possibilities.

### **Nonnus, Dionysus and the uncertainty principle**

The model for reading that I have described for Nonnus' poetry chimes well with the theoretical position recently presented by Maijastina Kahlos in her exploration of the construction of Christian identity in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. She describes on the way that Christian identity is formed and developed through a series of binary oppositions, in particular the traditional pagan/Christian dichotomy: 'This simple-minded division of the world into two opposing segments turns out to be problematic because there were individuals (as well as places, practices and festivals) that did not fit into this simplified categorisation. I have developed a concept of *incerti* to describe these individuals in between – in the grey area between the Christians and the pagans.'<sup>32</sup> This concept is explained as follows: 'We could describe *incerti* as being conceptually indeterminant and undecidable. They are both-this-and-that and neither-this-nor-that at the same time. An *incerta* or *incertus* person does not cease to be a pagan, but she or he does not cease to [be] a Christian either. Becoming a Christian did not stop an *incerta/incertus* from continuing to be a pagan and vice-versa. Thus there is no clear-cut choice between the two.'<sup>33</sup>

Although I would wish, for reasons outlined in the introductory chapter, to avoid the use of the problematic descriptor 'pagan', I think that Kahlos' theoretical model represents an important and exciting advance within the field of late antique poetics and beyond. In its movement away from the conceptualisation of a simple opposition between Classical and Christian the *incerti* theory neatly articulates the essential instability not only at the heart of Nonnus' poetry but within late antique poetry more widely. For I would argue that all late antique poetry – whether written in Classical or Christian mode – 'keeps a certain indeterminacy, a double and contradictory value, in a play of differences, or dialectics without synthesis'.<sup>34</sup>

The figure of Dionysus himself forms an interesting adjunct to the theory of the *incerti*. Dionysus is a god who breaks down boundaries, whose very form challenges the stability of meaning. He embraces and holds in tension antithetical and contradictory positions (constantly in operation and constantly unresolved): he is like and unlike, the insider and outsider, comic and tragic, the comforter and the destroyer. He is in many ways a perfect emblem of late antique poetics. In his guise as the god of theatre Dionysus also provides an appropriate metaphor for the approach to reading late antique literature that is encouraged by Nonnus' texts: where

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tragic performances in fifth-century BC Athens provided a 'safe' space for the exploration of the darker side of the human psyche, so in the late antique world texts such as the *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* provide an analogous 'refuge', within which the reader may explore and confront important and potentially disturbing issues such as the nature of divinity, the power of sexuality and the relevance of the Classical tradition to the Christian world. As with tragedy, just how safe this space was, how cut off from the world 'outside', remains open to question.<sup>35</sup>

### **The future of Nonnus**

The 'Italian school' of Nonnian studies has pioneered an approach to the *Dionysiaca* that seeks to consider the 'Classical' poetry of Nonnus within the contemporary Christian world of late antiquity. A feature of this approach has been the endeavour to map out a clear relationship between the worlds of Dionysus and Christ within which allusions to Christianity give new and dominant meaning to the 'Classical' text. Spanoudakis, for example, in his presentation of the interaction of the Icarius episode in *Dionysiaca* 47 with the Passion of Christ, has suggested that the narrative of Christ forms the primary intertext for this scene.<sup>36</sup> In my attempt to trace intersections between the story of Dionysus and that of Christ I have been more tentative in characterising the relationship between Christian and Classical. I would, for example, prefer to see the Icarius episode in terms of a subtle interaction of ideas and texts (both Classical and Christian), rather than suggesting that there exists a clear Christian subtext. For me, the story of Christ represents an important node of interaction, but it does not provide an exclusive key to the understanding of the Icarius episode within its late antique context.

Although I remain sceptical about mapping the narrative of Dionysus onto the narrative of Christ in any systematic manner, as if Dionysus had been constructed as a simple doublet for the figure of Christ, I think that it is important to acknowledge that the study of the interaction between the narratives of Christ and Dionysus in the poetry of Nonnus is still in its infancy. Although it lies beyond the boundaries of this book, it would be interesting, for example, to consider more closely the relationship between Dionysus and Zeus, in the light of late antique discussions about the relationship between Jesus and his own Father. Similarly one might want to consider in greater detail Christian conceptions of the relationship between the divine and mortal spheres in light of the experiences of Dionysus, the mortal who becomes a god.

If one were to sketch further directions for the study of the interaction of Dionysiac and Christian narratives and ideas, emphasis would inevitably fall on the figure of Dionysus and how his journey from pre-birth to heaven intersects with the narrative of Christ. The 'prehistory' of both characters is one such area that could well repay further investigation:

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famously, John the Baptist is sent ahead of Christ to make straight the way of the Lord; the story of Cadmus (the grandfather of Dionysus) that occupies the first seven books of the *Dionysiaca* before the birth of Dionysus functions in a similar manner – and it is through him (as through John the Baptist) that some of the major themes that will occupy Dionysus are rehearsed and explored.

During the course of their missions Dionysus and Christ both meet with great resistance from people who are intent on killing them and ridiculing their soteriological claims. For Christ it is the Jews under the High Priest, for Dionysus it is a series of opponents who test his resolve and remain impervious to his charms: Lycurgus and the mighty Indian leader Deriades. This area may also repay further research; so too the theme of disillusionment: both Christ and Dionysus experience moments of profound disillusionment. In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ contemplates the renunciation of his own mission and asks for the cup of suffering to be taken away from him so that he will not have to undergo crucifixion; while Dionysus contemplates the renunciation of his own mission with the wish that he had been born as mortal in order that he might continue to enjoy the company of his lover Ampelus in Hades (11.325-7). Ironically, Christ and Dionysus both wish for the one thing that the other has: Christ, in his mortal aspect, wishes to avoid the pain and suffering of death on the cross; Dionysus, as a divinity, actually wishes that he might be able to experience death.

### **Beyond Nonnus: readers and viewers**

I now want to look beyond Nonnus and to apply the sort of dynamic model for reading late antique texts that I have applied to the *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* to another understudied and much derided sphere of literary activity – that of cento poetry. As will be seen, the tradition of cento writing keys directly into many of the same sort of contemporary issues and debates that have already been considered with Nonnus – poetic authority, inspiration (where the voice of the past is made to speak anew through the present), and the place of the Classical tradition in a late antique world.

The genre of cento poetry that reaches its zenith in the age of late antiquity might be regarded as the ultimate exercise in poetic recycling.<sup>37</sup> Old lines of poetry (primarily Homeric or Virgilian) are reused in order to construct new poems on themes from Greek mythology and dice, to sexual congress and the crucifixion of Christ. The most celebrated practitioner of this most extraordinary art is none other than Ausonius. In a prefatory letter written to accompany his *Cento nuptialis*, Ausonius provides the following detailed description:

I will expound what a cento is. It is a poem completely built out of a variety of passages and different meanings, in such a way that either two half lines

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are joined together to form one, or one line and the following half with another half. For to place two (whole) lines side by side is weak, and three in succession is mere trifling ...

... you may say that it is like the puzzle the Greeks have called *ostomachia* [a game comprising pieces of bone] ... By fitting these pieces together in various ways, pictures of countless objects are produced: a monstrous elephant, a brutal boar, a goose in flight ... But while the harmonious arrangement of the skilful is marvellous, the jumble made by the unskilled is grotesque ...

... And so this little work, the Cento, is handled in the same way as the game described, so as to harmonize different meanings, to make pieces arbitrarily connected seem naturally related, to let foreign elements show no chink of light between, to prevent the far-fetched from proclaiming the force which united them, the closely packed from bulging unduly, the loosely knit from gaping.

The way that Ausonius presents his cento has had a profound, indeed pervasive, influence not just on our reading of the *Cento nuptialis*, but on the whole cento tradition. As we have seen, critics have been all too keen to take Ausonius at his word, and have readily concurred that this is a poetic tradition that does not represent serious literature, but is ultimately a meaningless entertainment, a juggling trick with Virgilian bones.<sup>38</sup> Following Ausonius, the primary criterion used when considering cento poetry is that of technical competence. The set of rules that Ausonius established for himself has tended to be used as a measuring stick for all other cento poems (and since Ausonius wrote the rules it is hardly surprising to learn that he also tends to be regarded as the most technically competent of these poets). The poems are on occasion seen as 'useful' when scholars have sought to corroborate a particular reading in the Latin text of Virgil, and interesting speculation can be made about the popularity of particular books of Virgil when statistical analysis is applied to the Virgilian lines used; however, notwithstanding recent attempts at literary rehabilitation, this is still not a tradition of poetry that tends to be taken seriously by literary critics.

It is important then to read Ausonius' guide to the cento with a great degree of circumspection. One of the rules of the Ausonian cento is, as we have already seen, that 'foreign elements should show no chink of light between'. In other words, the patchwork should not reveal its joins, and readers of the cento should not therefore be reminded of the original contexts of the Virgilian lines. But in practice, as we shall see, nothing could be further from the truth. Like it or not, appropriate or not, it is the nature of all texts and particularly *centones* to resonate with the memory of other texts. Late antique readers, soaked in the literary culture of the Classical world, were grand-masters of the art of this type of allusive reading. Ausonius demands the impossible of his readers. An engagement with the original context of the Virgil lines was and is a necessary and unavoidable part of the experience of reading the cento.

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As indeed Ausonius himself was well aware, the cento functions by means of a series of dynamic tensions, a continuous play between the original and secondary text, between unity and disjuncture, the serious and the absurd. As he explains in the prefatory letter: ‘So take a little work, continuous, though made of disjointed tags; one, though of various scraps; absurd, though of grave materials; mine, though the elements are another’s; in case you should wonder at the accounts given by priests or poets of the Son of Thyone or of Virbius – the first reshaped out of Dionysus, the second out of Hippolytus.’<sup>39</sup> We are dealing here with a practice and process in no way unique to cento poetry, but one that permeates late antique literary culture: the powerful device of recontextualisation.

Although it might seem like an obvious step to move from discussion of the preface to Ausonius’ *Cento nuptialis* onto an analysis of the cento itself, I want instead to turn my attention to a less well known (and less accessible) example of cento poetry. It is found among a group of twelve cento poems in the eighth/ninth century *Codex Salmasianus* (part of what is called – somewhat misleadingly – the *Latin Anthology*). The *Codex* comprises a collection of poems from North Africa, predominantly from the period of Vandal occupation up to the sixth century AD and represents the largest surviving assemblage of such poems in existence. The cento poems are accessible in Riese’s 1869 *Latin Anthology*, but do not feature in Shackleton Bailey’s 1982 Teubner revision: Shackleton Bailey chose to expunge the cento poems from his edition on aesthetic grounds, because they struck him as an ‘affront to literature’ (*opprobria litterarum*).<sup>40</sup>

The *De ecclesia* (‘On the Church’) is one of the cento poems upon which Shackleton Bailey’s harsh and somewhat perverse action of *damnatio memoriae* has been applied. If the attribution to Mavortius (based on an emendation of a corrupt part of the manuscript) is correct, then the cento probably belongs to the first part of the sixth century and is contemporary with Luxorius’ cento *Epithalamium Fridi*. As the title suggests, in this instance Virgilian hexameters have been turned into a poem on a Christian theme. The cento is too long to reproduce in full but can be summarised as follows:

- 1-10: God establishes a temple for his worship and calls people to prayer.
- 11-98: A priest delivers a brief history of the life, death and resurrection of Christ to the gathered crowd.
- 99-110: Communion is taken and all return home.
- 111-16: Mavortius replies to an acclamation that he is ‘the younger Virgil’.

I want look in detail at one part of the cento that deals with Pontius Pilate and the crucifixion of Christ (16.25-42). This will provide a good opportunity to consider to what extent Mavortius’ cento may be regarded as a creative, dynamic and ultimately meaningful engagement with the origi-

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nal Virgilian text. In the following extract I have put quotations of more than two words in length into bold type and have given the line references of the original Virgilian quotation from the *Aeneid*:

insonstem <b>magno ad regem clamore trahebant</b> [2.58].	25
ille nihil; <b>namque ipse volens</b> [6.146] <b>seque obtulit ultro</b> [8.611]	
hoc ipsum instruere et <b>vatum praedicta priorum</b> [4.464]	
prodere iussa dei, <b>telluris operta subire</b> [6.140].	
<b>primus ibi ante omnes</b> [2.40] <b>sceptrum</b> qui voce <b>gerebat</b> [12.206]	
<b>sustulit ablutas lymphis ad sidera palmas</b> [2.153]	30
hoc dicens: 'equidem in iusto nil tale repertumst;	
nec fas. <b>o miseri, quae tanta insania, cives?</b> [2.42]	
<b>me</b> [numquam] <b>ulla dies</b> tantis neque <b>fortibus ausis</b> [9.281]	
<b>addiderit socium</b> [6.170]. <b>vestra' inquit 'munera vobis,</b> [5.348]	
<b>vos animam hanc potius quocumque absumite leto</b> [3.654].'	35
tum <b>magis atque magis</b> [2.299] <b>magnis furoribus acti</b>	
<b>clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollunt</b> [2.222]	
<b>et magis atque magis</b> [2.299] <b>poenas cum sanguine poscunt</b> [2.72].	
has <b>inter</b> voces <b>medio in flagrante tumultu</b> [11.225]	
<b>arboris obnixus trunco</b> [12.105] ( <b>tibi, magne, tropaeum,</b> [11.7]	40
omnipotens genitor!) <b>palmas utrasque tetendit</b> [6.685]	
teque vocans <b>multo vitam quocumque sanguine fudit</b> [2.532].	

They dragged the innocent man to the King with a great shout. He said nothing: for he presented himself willingly of his own accord to teach this very thing, even the prophecies of earlier prophets, to make known the orders of god, to go down to the secret places of the earth. First there before all, he who wields the sceptre with his voice raised up his hands washed with water to the heavens, saying this: 'Indeed no such thing has been discovered justly; it is not right. O wretched citizens, what is this great insanity? No day shall ever add me as an ally for these deeds so great and brave. Your prize,' he said, 'is for you to keep. It is better that you take away this spirit to whatever death you want'. Then more and more driven on by great madness, they raised up horrible shouts together to the heavens, and more and more they demand his punishment with blood. Amidst these voices in the middle of the blazing tumult pushing against the trunk of the tree (a trophy for you, Great father almighty!) he stretched out both hands; calling on you, he poured out his life with much blood.

In Ausonian terms this would not be regarded as a great technical performance. Not only are there too many whole lines placed side by side, but Mavortius also makes a number of subtle changes in order to make his narrative more coherent. Consider for example line 30 where hands 'freed from chains' (*exutas vinculis*) become 'washed with water' (*ablutas lymphis*) to describe Pilate washing his hands, or line 39 where 'amidst this disturbance' (*hos inter motus*) becomes 'amidst these voices' (*has inter voces*), to fit with the description of shouting in the preceding line. The Ausonian view would see this as cheating, as poetic failure; I would prefer to see this in a rather more positive light, as a sign of Mavortius taking active charge

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of his narrative. The sense of control and quiet authority which Mavortius exercises, and through which he makes the text his own, is neatly exemplified by line 28: *prodere iussa dei, telluris operta subire* ('to make known the orders of god, to go down to the secret places of the earth'). Here the late antique poet has crafted a perfect chiasmic line, where Virgil had none (with three components rather than the usual two: abc-cba).

What then of the experience of reading this passage? The constant stream of Virgilian quotations challenges the reader to locate the original context and think about its new context (whatever Ausonius may say). In just 18 lines Mavortius has managed to draw on an impressive array of material, using quotations from nine out of the twelve books of the *Aeneid*, with a particular accumulation of quotations from Book 2, Aeneas' narrative of the sack of Troy. A detailed analysis of the rest of the poem would no doubt give an interesting insight into the relative popularity of different books of the *Aeneid*. On the basis of our limited sample, Book 2 was clearly a favourite, as it still is today.

The experience of reading the narrative of Christ in the light of the *Aeneid* is by turns stimulating and disturbing, and has the potential to change our view of both the story of Christ and the story of Aeneas. We are presented with a bizarre echo chamber of allusions that encourages us to see the familiar in a radically new way. Pilate, for example, is composed out of a striking amalgam of Virgilian allusions: he raises up his washed hands to the heavens in a line that recalls the Greek traitor Sinon, freed from chains by Priam (2.153); he questions the madness of the citizens in a manner that recalls the words of the Trojan priest Laocoon (2.42); he speaks words first used by Virgil to describe the dead Trojan Misenus in the Underworld ('no day shall ever add me as an ally') (6.170); while his description of 'deeds so great and brave' has its origin in words spoken by the reckless Trojan warrior Euryalus (9.281).

Here then is a Pilate of extraordinary complexity, by turns a treacherous Greek (Sinon) and clear-minded prophet whose sensible words are ignored (Laocoon); a figure brought down by recklessness, but whose demise we pity (Misenus, Euryalus). The portrayal of Jesus is similarly ambiguous and ambivalent, leaving open the possibility of multiple readings and responses. At the beginning of the passage he is dragged before Pilate using a line that recalls the Greek traitor Sinon being dragged before Priam (2.58); he has knowledge of the 'secret places of the earth' that recalls Aeneas and his descent into the Underworld (6.140); his appearance on the cross 'pushing against the trunk of the tree' recalls a simile in which Turnus is compared with a bull before battle (12.105); and he pours out his life-blood in a line used to describe the brutal killing of Polites before the eyes of his father Priam (2.532). Christ then by turn appears as false prophet (Sinon), Roman hero (Aeneas), doomed hero (Turnus), tragic victim (Polites) – the contradictory images provoke, resonate and enrich.

One might of course protest that in order to tell his story, Mavortius

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would have used whatever lines he could find, without giving any thought to the original context: what status then, and meaning, can be ultimately granted to these complex portrayals of Pilate and Jesus? There are two obvious responses to this. First, although Ausonius maintained that one should not be able to see the gaps between the individual pieces of the cento jigsaw this is an ambition that runs counter to the very process of reading. Regardless of authorial attempts to control the meaning of words, as we have seen, the process of reading opens up the possibility of multiple meanings and resonances. A word, phrase or line introduced into a text from elsewhere always carries with it the mark of the original context and is always open to being identified. The possibility of identification is all the more real with a type of poem that is wholly made up of fragments from other poems.

It is not simply that the cento poem (like any text) has the capacity to function like an echo chamber of allusion. Mavortius' text contains clear examples of lines where a knowing and careful process of selection has taken place. I have noted already the quotation from a speech of Euryalus in Book 9 of the *Aeneid*. This is followed in the next line by a quotation from the end of the foot race in Book 5 when Aeneas tells the winning athletes that they can keep their prizes despite accusations of race fixing (5.348). The winner of that race was none other than Euryalus. In Virgil's *Aeneid* there is in fact a clear and important connection between the episodes of Nisus and Euryalus in Books 5 and 9, marking a rite of passage from playing games to fighting in war.<sup>41</sup> Mavortius by means of a deliberate juxtaposition of lines from these two episodes encourages us to read back to the original contexts for these lines in order to make the connection for ourselves.

The debate about the authority and the power of the late antique poet (a theme that has run throughout this book) that is implicit in this section is made explicit at the end of the poem in an extraordinary six-line epilogue [16.111-16]:

cumque Mavortio clamaretur 'Maro iunior!', ad praesens hoc recitavit:

ne, quaeso, ne me ad talis inpellite pugnas!  
namque erit ille mihi semper deus, ille magister.  
nam memini (neque ignari sumus ante malorum):  
formonsum pastor Phoebum superare canendo  
dum cupit et cantu vocat in certamina divos,  
membra deo victus ramo frondente pependit.

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And when Mavortius was acclaimed as 'the younger Maro [Virgil]', he recited the following impromptu lines:

Don't, please, drive me to such battles! For that man will always be to me a god, that famous teacher. For I remember (for we are not ignorant of previous

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troubles): in his desire to overcome the beautiful Phoebus by singing, the shepherd challenges the gods to a musical contest, but when conquered by the god he hangs his limbs from a leafy branch.

All poetic relationships are inevitably shot through with anxiety, a creative tension whereby the poet strives to insert himself into a tradition while at the same time seeking to articulate his own original voice.<sup>42</sup> As Mavortius chooses to remind us, the creative tension is an essential part of the cento tradition. The final lines of the poem dramatise the struggle between Mavortius and Maro, who do not only use the same words to express themselves, but whose names (if we are to believe the textual emendation) even look similar. Mavortius protests that he is not competing with his divine teacher Virgil and ends with a meditation on the dangers of imitation: Marsyas (again note the name) was strung up and skinned for his presumptuous attempt to compete with the gods; Mavortius fears a similar fate.<sup>43</sup> But of course Mavortius is here in ironic mode, using Virgilian lines in order to articulate his denial, employing the time-honoured technique of the *recusatio*. Regardless of what he says, the antagonism embedded in his denial is clearly visible in the vocabulary that he uses (*pugnas, superare, certamina*).

It has been all too easy to write off cento poetry (along with much of the literary production of late antiquity) as a superficial exercise, the triumph of technique over substance, of nonsense over sense, a literature that lacks any deep connections with the culture of which it is a part. In fact, as we have seen, such texts form an integral part of a wider story not merely about poetic authority and poetic engagement with literary tradition, but also about a broader cultural engagement with the Classical tradition. These are texts that ask important questions about the place of Classical culture in the changing world of late antiquity. Like the works of Nonnus, Mavortius' *De ecclesia* offers no clear answers, but presents an exciting and dramatically relevant arena within which such questions can be debated. In particular we see (once again) the importance of the theme of inspiration – the question of where ideas come from. The coda to the poem suggests an act of spontaneous poetic composition (*ad praesens*) – as if we are watching a performance of inspiration, something that actually 'happens' there and then before our eyes (and ears).<sup>44</sup> Mavortius' inspiration derives, on one level, straight from Virgil, but, as we have seen, inspiration is no longer the exclusive preserve of the Classical tradition. Mavortius may not mention Christ in his description of his inspired delivery, but he is there all the same.

I have argued that *De ecclesia* engages with important issues of poetic authority and with the wider relationship between Christian and Classical traditions. I want now to conclude with a brief look at the opening section of the work (16.1-6):

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tectum augustum, ingens, centum sublime columnis, 1  
religione patrum laetum et venerabile templum  
hoc dedit esse suum superi regnator Olympi.  
nam deus omnipotens, qui rex hominumque deumque<sup>45</sup>  
aeternis regit imperiis 'quo tenditis' inquit, 5  
'hic domus est vobis; haec ara tuebitur omnis.'

Sacred edifice, massive, raised up on one hundred columns, through the devotions of our ancestors, a happy and revered temple, the ruler of high Olympus gave this to be his own. For God almighty who rules as king of men and gods with eternal sway said: 'Where are you heading? This is your home; this altar will protect everyone.'

Here in the opening lines of the poem we are presented with the image of a Christian Church sacred to God. Its hundred columns suggest (and echo) the form of a Classical temple, but in contrast, perhaps, to the exclusive nature of Classical temples, emphasis is placed on the inclusive nature of the Church: a new Christian altar will protect 'everyone' (*omnis*). As the Church is imagined rising up on one hundred columns, so by analogy the poem *De ecclesia* may itself be imagined as being raised up and sustained by the hexameter lines of Virgil (116 in number) that have been used by Mavortius in the construction of the poem.

The role of Virgilian lines in the literal 'building' of *De ecclesia* encourages us to look beyond the world of literary constructs, towards the literal transformation of temples and churches within the world of late antiquity.<sup>46</sup> At the same time that Virgil's hexameters were being recrafted into a Christian poem, the physical vestiges of the Classical world were being reincorporated into churches and other buildings throughout the Roman Empire in the form of *spolia*.<sup>47</sup> As with the use of Virgilian lines in the poem of Mavortius, the use of *spolia* should not be dismissed as a simple action of expediency or decorative fancy; nor it is enough to suggest that fragments of material from Classical monuments embedded within new Christian buildings represent the simple and unequivocal triumph of Christianity.<sup>48</sup> There is an inherent tension between the new building and the material used for its construction. *Spolia*, just like the Classical elements in late antique texts, form part of an often provocative dialogue that refuses to close the question about the relationship between Classical and Christian. This dialogue does not only apply to the reuse of temple columns in Christian churches: Dionysiac tapestries buried along with Christian grave goods, bible-boxes with muse-carved lids; friezes with images of Apollo reused as altars, sarcophagi with the images of Dionysus and his retinue (in the shape of a grape-pressing vats) used for a Christian burial<sup>49</sup> – these are not silent and innocent juxtapositions, but active components in a dialogue about the meaning of the new world of Christ. When such juxtapositions (literal and literary) lose their power to engage and provoke, when such images become comfortable, safe, and overlooked, at that point when certainty begins, the world of late antiquity may truly be said to have come to an end.

# Notes

## Introduction: The Myth of Paganism

1. Dill (1905) 390.
2. Grant (1998) 80; compare Isbell (1974) 41: 'The fourth century was characterised by unsettled and unsettling conditions ... In such a situation, the subtleties of learning and its artful expression could hardly have much real value. As a result the learned man must become a source of entertainment not enlightenment. It was not a great age; ... the empire was dead and collapsing inward.'
3. See, e.g., Brown (1971), (1976); Averil Cameron (1993b); see also Martin (1976); Clover and Humphreys (1989) 3-20.
4. Gibbon (1776-88); for recent assessments of Gibbon and his legacy see Bowersock (1988); McKitterick and Quinault (1997); Womersley, Burrow & Pocock (1997); Womersley (2002).
5. On the Second Sophistic see, e.g., Swain (1996), Whitmarsh (2001; 2005); for attempts to move beyond the sharp divide between periods see, e.g., Swain and Edwards (2004). Swain (2006) seeks to broaden the traditional linguistic and cultural boundaries of late antiquity with his recent interdisciplinary study of Polemon (2006). König (2009) fruitfully draws both Classical and Christian texts into his discussion of Greek literature in the Roman Empire.
6. Hornblower & Spawforth (1996).
7. See, e.g., Averil Cameron (1993a).
8. J.B. Bury (1889) *History of the Later Roman Empire*; A.H.M. Jones (1964) *The Later Roman Empire* – published in an abridged and simplified version as *The Decline of the Ancient World* (1966).
9. Carvounis and Hunter (eds) (2008).
10. See, e.g., Bagnall (2007).
11. For an excellent introduction to, and deconstruction of, the pagan/Christian dichotomy see Kahlos (2007).
12. Lane Fox (1986).
13. MacMullen (1983); (1999).
14. Haas (1997); see esp. 152: 'Paganism in late Roman Alexandria was a welter of diverse cults and allegiances, an amalgam of religions with no particular unifying bonds of belief or practice. Nevertheless, the religious history of the fourth century gave rise to a communal consciousness among Alexandria's pagans which enabled them to compete effectively with other communal groups in the city.'
15. As well illustrated by the title of Momigliano's 1963 edited volume, *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*.
16. See Kahlos (2007).
17. See, e.g., Kahlos (2007) 11-54, esp. 26-34.
18. Markus (1990) 33.
19. Beard, North & Price (1998) 388.
20. Averil Cameron (1994) 121-2.
21. Averil Cameron (1994) 20.

22. Clark (2004) 35.

23. See Kahlos (2007) 18: 'Paganism was never a religion and there were no pagans before Christianity. Christians invented paganism, not only as a term, but also as a system. The emergence and phases of the concept pagan illustrates the evolving Christian self-consciousness, Christian eagerness to become separate and different from other, non-Christian, people. Pagans are a relational concept, that is, there were no pagans as such but only in relation to and in most cases in contrast with Christians. Using the concept pagans, Christians identified others as non-Christians in a way in which these people would not have identified or recognized themselves. These people would not originally have identified themselves as a single entity, paganism.'

24. Alan Cameron (2007) 28. My emphasis.

25. Chuvin (1990); Alan Cameron (forthcoming).

26. See, e.g., the report on the 'lost' Sentilese tribe on the Andaman archipelago in the Indian Ocean by Dan MacDougall, 'Survival comes first for the last Stone Age tribe world', *The Observer*, Sunday 12 February 2006.

27. See, e.g., 'Discovered, but were they lost?' by Salem Humaid, *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 14 August 2008 – an article on the Tasaday people in the Philippines expressing doubts about the level of their isolation from the outside world.

28. Hornblower & Spawforth (1996) 309.

29. For the division of architecture into categories of 'religious' and 'secular' see Mango (2000) 918-71.

30. McGill (2005) xv; he goes on to suggest that, although much work has been done on the reception of Virgil in Christian writers, 'there remains much to be said about how audiences not viewing Virgil through a Christian lens – e.g. poets working with pagan and secular material, grammarians and other late antique critics, and students – treated him'.

31. Consider, e.g., the recent controversy in Turkey between 'secularists' and 'Islamists' over the wearing of headscarves. The fact that the wife of the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, wears a headscarf, has been seen by some as a challenge to the secular foundations of the Turkish state.

32. The classic study is Woolf (1998).

33. On Christianisation see MacMullen (1984); Brown (1995).

34. Brown (1995) 4.

35. For single author studies see, e.g., monographs on Claudian by Alan Cameron (1970); Sedulius by Springer (1988); Nonnus by Shorrock (2001); for aspects of the Latin poetic tradition see Roberts (1989); for Latin biblical epic see Green (2006); on Greek literature see Johnson (2006b).

36. A notable exception is the edited volume by Paschalis (2005) on Greek and Roman epic; but although Greek and Latin texts are treated within the covers of the same book there is little attempt at integration.

37. Cf. Roberts (1989) 14: 'My selection is purposely broad, in order to show that the compositional techniques exemplified by Aaron's breastplate are common to a wide variety of poets of late antiquity, whatever their religious affiliation or subject matter'.

38. On the mobility of late antique poets (with specific reference to Egypt) see Alan Cameron (1965)

39. On education in late antiquity see the classic account by Marrou (1956); see also Criore (2007); Riché (1978).

40. Criore (2007) 59-60: 'It is undeniable that the Romans had a deferential outlook towards the Greek language and literature. Cultivated Romans were

exposed to both languages from the early years. While the situation had evolved from the early empire, when all elite children started with Greek in school, a well-educated Roman still knew Greek in the early Byzantine period.’

41. See Cribiore (2007) 47-66.

42. Cribiore (2007) 60.

43. Gaertner (2005).

44. See, e.g., the contributions to Pachalis (2005), in particular the article by Nelis on the potential Latin influence on the *Orphic Argonautica*.

## 2. Inspiration and Authority: The Voice of the Poet in Late Antiquity

1. Whitmarsh (2001) 27. The ideological and political implications of the rise of prose in the Second Sophistic are explored further at Whitmarsh (2006); this chapter incorporates material from Shorrock (2008).

2. Cameron (2004) 328.

3. See esp. Bowie (1990); Hopkinson (1994a). It must be remembered that a lack of poetic material does not necessarily imply that there was a lack of poetic production. Much poetry may simply have failed to survive.

4. Cameron (2004) 332.

5. On the theme of poetic inspiration see esp. Murray (1981); Murray (1996); Fowler & Spentzou (2002).

6. Hesiod, *Theogony* 26-8.

7. Pindar, *Olympian* 1.28-9.

8. For a seminal discussion of the role of the poet see Goldhill (1991).

9. Feeney (1998) 22.

10. See Bing (1988).

11. Compare Feeney (1998) 97: ‘The writers of Roman literature show an intense interest in the problems of the representation of divinity, for they are not only members of a civic culture that compulsively stages and re-stages the categories and attributes of divinity, but honorary members of a Greek poetic and intellectual culture that had concerned itself with these issues for centuries. Already in Homer, “a constant poetic preoccupation ... is the question of how far divine power is susceptible to the narrative accommodations which are the indispensable medium for capturing that power – and this preoccupation mirrors the recurrent pagan insistence on the “contradiction and ambiguity” which are inherent in the “predictable and unpredictable, human and non-human” divine. Poets must accommodate divinity to the forms of language, just as a state must accommodate it to ivory or marble’ (quotation from Gould (1985) 24).

12. On Ausonius see Markus (1974); for text and detailed critical introduction and commentary see Green (1991); on Paulinus see Green (1971); Friend (1974); Trout (1999) esp. 79-89 on Paulinus’ rejection of the Muses in *carmen* 10; Conybeare (2000) esp. ch. 6.

13. Markus (1990) 35: ‘Ausonius and Paulinus shared a literary culture, a way of life based on landed wealth, and high status in Roman provincial society. They also shared their religion, and a form of Christian spirituality in which images of the Gospel blended with an ancient Latin tradition reaching back to Virgil and beyond.’

14. On the theme of biblical inspiration see Orr (1910); Warfield (1951); Marshall (1982); Achtemeier (1999).

15. For quotations from the Bible the King James version has been preferred. See further Matthew 5:18; John 10:34-36; Galatians 3:16.

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16. See, e.g., Achtemeier (1999) 9: 'If Christians agree that in some sense God speaks to us through the accounts contained in the Scriptures, and hence that those Scriptures are inspired, all Christians do not agree as to the way that inspiration is to be described and understood'; for a discussion of different approaches to the theme of biblical inspiration see Trembath (1987).

17. Compare Augustine, *Conf.* 1.17: *figmentorum poeticorum vestigia* ('traces of poetic falsehoods').

18. Tr. Sydney Thelwell. Springer (1988) 16: 'The truth of their new poetic content (as opposed to the *mendacia* which constituted the usual theme of pagan poetry is a fundamental point to which Juvenecus (*Praefatio* 19-20), Sedulius (*Paschale Carmen* 1.22), and other Biblical poets of Late Antiquity emphatically appeal in defense of their Christian poetry.' At *Serm.* 105.7.10 Augustine calls Virgil *mendax vates* ('lying poet-priest').

19. Springer (1988) 16 n. 71.

20. Browning (1982) 701; cf. Browning (1982) 700: 'Ausonius was a Christian throughout most if not all of his life ... But he is not a Christian poet; his Christianity does not affect his poetic persona ... and the ideas and images which fill his poetry are entirely owed to traditional classical paganism.' Cf. Markus (1990) 34-5: 'We must not be misled by the ambivalence of his mode of expression: tolerant, easy-going, averse to all forms of fanaticism, his urbane, aristocratic culture is permeated with pagan motifs. But nowhere in his writing can the slightest opposition be discovered between the two components of his mind: his Christian beliefs and his classical culture, heavy with the weight of pagan imagery as it was. He would have been baffled by Jerome's view that the conversion of a Roman senator demanded a revolution – such as Jerome's friend Pammachius had wrought – in his life-style and the conversion of a man of letters in his style of writing.'

21. The integration of Greek culture within Roman culture is itself consciously alluded to by Ausonius through his use of *Latinae Camenae* – the indigenous Roman Muses (here used as a metonym for Latin literary culture) – alongside the Greek Muses of Boeotia.

22. For the claims made for Delphi as the centre of the world see Cole (2004) 74-9. According to one story Zeus set two eagles free from the far corners of the universe and they met over Delphi at the spot later marked by the *omphalos* (navel) stone located in the temple of Apollo.

23. Murray (1996) 24 describes how Plato 'takes poetry seriously precisely because it represents such a threat to his own philosophical exercise'.

24. On the rhetorical technique of the *tricolon* see, e.g., Wilkinson (1970).

25. See, e.g., Cochrane (1940); as Raby (1927) 7 observed, 'until we arrive at the sixth and seventh centuries, we shall hardly find a Christian poet who does not owe his training entirely to the grammarians and rhetoricians'. As David Taylor points out (pers. comm.) 'to me it seems as if he ensnared himself deliberately and self-consciously (ironically?) perhaps even making your very point to his interlocutor'.

26. See Raby (1927) 6-7; Tertullian (*De idol.* 10) is also forced to admit the benefit of a traditional 'Classical' education.

27. See MacCormack (1998); see also Brown (1967).

28. See especially Averil Cameron (1994).

29. There is no logical reason to suggest that a poet who switches masks is any less committed a Christian than a poet who maintains an exclusively Christian *persona*; nor is a poet who maintains a Classical persona necessarily lacking in Christian faith. Compare Kahlos (2007) 41-2: 'Late antique poets such as

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Ausonius, Claudian and Nonnus of Panopolis have puzzled modern scholars with their ambiguity. Pagan and Christian elements have been observed as being entangled with each other in the writings of these authors and scholars have tried to label these poets either Christian or pagan, with the presupposition that an author's Christian conviction should be manifest in his writings or that pagan motifs should be absent from a Christian writer's works. Claudian, for example, obviously wanted to be regarded as a Christian, even though the Christian polemicists branded him as a pagan. The ambivalent and unclassifiable character of Claudian as well as of Ausonius and of Nonnus is now widely recognized.'

30. Fowler & Spentzou (2002) 144.

31. A mass of material generated by the 'failed' and 'misguided' poet of the Muses has been largely ignored: summaries, cento-poems, catalogues, word games (anagrams, acrostics, puzzles, lipograms, etc.). These apparently superficial games have an important part to play in our attempts to come to terms with the world of late antiquity, but they have as yet failed to attract serious attention.

32. See especially Curtius (1953) 228-46 who dedicates a whole chapter to the literary tradition of the Muses; on Muses in late antique poetry see esp. 234-7; 228: 'For us the Muses are shadowy figures of a tradition that has long since had its day. But once they were vital forces. They had their priests, their servants, their promise – and their enemies'; 235: 'The religious significance of the Muses during the decline of paganism is in all likelihood the fundamental reason for their express rejection by early Christian poetry'; 234: 'It is characteristic of the poetry of the Imperial period that the Muses lose ground, are devalued, or replaced'.

33. Curtius (1953) 235.

34. Compare Averil Cameron (1994) 7: '... in contrast to the common emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christian writers, it is basic to my approach that they be seen as reflecting and responding to the same influences that were making themselves felt on pagan discourse. They were both less and more distinctive than they themselves supposed. Indeed, the prominence of the notion of the difference between Christian and pagan expression in the work of the Christian writers themselves is to be read as a rhetorical device and a symptom of adjustment rather than as a description of a real situation.'

35. Curtius (1953) 235.

36. For further details see Green (2006) 15-23.

37. See Proclus, *Hymni* 5.1: *mia paga* ('one spring'), again with reference to Christ.

38. See Luke 3:3.

39. Compare Paulinus of Nola (*Carmen* 10.19-29): *nunc alia mentem vis agit, maior deus*.

40. See Averil Cameron (1976).

41. On the gifts supplied by the Muses see especially Murray (1981); Murray (1996).

42. For the metaphor of the ship of poetry see Bramble (1974) 166-8; Zumwalt (1977).

43. Compare the trinity of goddesses who are called upon by Corripus to provide him with *verba*.

44. See Kennedy (1965) 152: *Iste* is sometimes contemptuous ... *Ille* may imply respect.'

45. Cf. Juvencus, *Evang.* 1.26-7: *et puro riget amne canentis / Dulcis Iordanis*.

46. See Chadwick (1981); Gibson (1981); Walsh (1999); Marenbon (2003); Marenbon (2009).

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47. With the use of *rigant* compare the 'water of inspiration' *topos* seen in both Corripus and Venantius Fortunatus; for water (and wine) as symbols of inspiration see Crowther (1979).

48. The fact that the prostitute metaphor follows on so closely after the medical metaphor suggests an implied connection between ill-health and prostitution.

49. See Raby (1934) 1.113.

50. See Lucretius, *DRN* 1.931-50 (cf. 4.1-25).

51. A further play may be observed in the use of *choreis ... fidelibus* ('in faithful trochees'): *fides* is also the word for a stringed musical instrument.

52. Compare the traditional presentation of the 'poet-priest' (*vates*).

53. See, e.g., the writings of Fulgentius and Martianus Capella.

54. See Ausonius 22.3: *nomina musarum*.

55. Following scholars such as Ernst Curtius and Peter Brown, I have considered the Latin West as culturally unified (despite clear regional variations).

56. Markus (1990) 2.

57. Moreschini & Sykes (1997) 84; 83: 'In claiming the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Gregory is placing himself in the literary tradition of a poet who in Classical usage called upon the Muses, but as a Christian poet he goes beyond it'. For a discussion of the relationship between Gregory and the Hellenistic poetic tradition see, most recently, Simelidis (2009).

58. See Gutzwiller (1983) esp. 219-22.

59. Hesiod, *Theogony* 64-5.

60. Gutzwiller (1983) 220.

61. See now Wheeler (2002). The opening invocation did not, of course, prevent the poet from seeking inspiration at other points during his poem. See, e.g., Homer's appeal to the Muses at the start of the 'catalogue of ships' at *Iliad* 2.484-93; the appeal by Apollonius Rhodius to Erato at *Argonautica* 3.1-5; and the so-called 'second proem' at Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.37-44.

62. On the relationship between poetry and prophecy see Chadwick (1942), Kugel (1990) and Leavitt (1997); for references in the Classical literary tradition to the '*topos* of the poet as prophet' see Murray (1996) 18.

63. See Bowersock (1978); Athanassiadi-Fowden (1981).

64. Walford (1846) 279 quotes a description of the functioning of the oracle from the *scholia* on Gregory Nazianzus as follows: 'Castalia was a fountain in Antioch, at which Apollo was by the ancients reported to sit, and to give forth oracles at the water. And when any persons came thither on account of consulting the oracle, the water (as it is reported) sent forth gentle blasts and puffs of wind; and then the priests, who were about the fountain, declared those things which the will of the demon had brought forth.'

65. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 22.12.8-13.3; Socrates of Constantinople, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.18; on Babylas and Julian at Antioch see Clark (2004) 56-7. Clark notes the last recorded Delphic oracle, 'a response to Julian's doctor Oribasius in 362 AD', as follows: 'Say to the king: the cleverly-embellished hall has fallen to the ground; Apollo no longer has a cell. He has no prophetic laurel, no babbling spring; even the chattering water has stopped' (*AP* 3.6.122).

66. Tr. C.W. King. *Oration 5: Inveictive against Julian 32 = Contra Julianum imperatorem* 2.35.704.42-705.4; see also *Carmina quae spectant ad alios* 1570.13-1571.4: 'Let Phoebus prophecy the fate of gods who are no longer ... Let the Castalian spring and Daphne, the oracles of the oak tree lie still.'

67. Innis (1950) 134: in Rome Stilicho ordered the burning of the Sibylline books; Ammianus Marcellinus commented that 'libraries like tombs are closed for

ever'; in the Roman Forum the eternal flame in the temple of Vesta was extinguished, and the Vestal virgins were disbanded.

68. For as recent critical reappraisal of Quintus see Baumbach & Bär (eds) (2007).

69. Tr. A. W. Muir. For the chariot of poetry topos see, e.g., Pindar, *Pythian* 9.77; Lucretius, *DRN* 6.90ff; Horace, *Odes* 1.1.4.

70. See Homer, *Iliad* 2.484-93; Colluthus, writing perhaps a century later than Triphiodorus, calls not on the Muses explicitly but the 'nymphs of Troy' (*numphai Trôïades*, 1) who fulfil an analogous function in providing information that lies beyond the reach of the poet. These nymphs are urged to tell the poet (*eipate moi*, 6) from where (*pothen*, 7) Paris came. The inspiration for this request comes from the opening line of Homer's *Odyssey* (*ennepe, Mousa*), but also picks up on the phraseology of the Iliadic proem when the poet asks the goddess to sing about Achilles' anger from that point when (*ex hou*) (*Il.* 1.6) Achilles and Agamemnon started to quarrel; compare Nonnus, *Dion.* 42.62-3: 'Mountain nymphs, tell what ...' (*Oreïades eipate Numphai / ti ...*).

71. See especially the scene in *Iliad* 9 when Achilles consoles himself by playing on a stringed instrument (part of his spoils from a recent sack of a city) and by singing about the 'famous deeds of men' (*klea andrôn*) (*Il.* 9.186).

72. See Chapter 4, pp. 81-4.

73. Murray (1996) 70.

74. One may compare this technique with the explicit naming of prophets and quotation from the Old Testament by Christian writers.

75. This division is itself already reflected in the opening line of Virgil's epic: *arma virumque cano* ('arms and the man I sing'), where *arma* (= the *Iliad*) and *virum* (= the *Odyssey*).

76. The use of Classical quotations in late antique poetry is developed to its most extreme form in the emerging tradition of cento poetry, where new poems are made up solely from the words of Classical authors, primarily Homer and Virgil. See Chapter 5, pp. 125-32 for a more detailed discussion of the cento tradition.

77. See Cat. 6.14: *ni tu quid facias ineptiarum*.

78. See Cat. 1.7: *doctis* (a reference to the work of the poet, historian and biographer Cornelius Nepos).

79. On the notion of the past in late antique literature see Eigler (2003); compare Bing (1988) on notions of temporal rupture and self-conscious discontinuity in Hellenistic literature.

80. On references to the Sabine land in Horace see *Odes* 3.6.38; *Epodes* 17.28; *Epistles* 1.9.29.

81. See Horace, *Satires* 2.6.92: *carpe viam* ('seize the way').

82. Preface to Dryden's *Sylvae*, quoted by Wilkinson (1970) 215 in his discussion on the 'golden' line.

83. This should hardly be a surprise in the case of poets such as Ausonius and Nonnus who produce poetry in both Classical and Christian modes.

84. See, e.g., Weitzmann (1979) for an excellent selection of images. Located within this same discourse of inspiration sits Orpheus, whose power to inspire and bewitch the animal kingdom owed much to his genealogy as the son of a Muse. In addition to abundant representations in material culture (esp. mosaics) he takes a central place in the short late antique epic poem known as the *Orphic Argonautica*.

85. On Constantine and Eusebius see Barnes (1981).

86. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.54.1-3; tr. Cameron & Hall (1999).

87. See Bassett (2004).

88. On the association between Augustus and Apollo see, e.g., Galinsky (1996); Graf (2009) 127-8; Miller (2009).

89. *CIL* VI 1139 = *ILS* 694.

90. As well described by Kelly (1999) 181-2: 'Visions of the divine which commingled the outward and visible forms of sacred and secular power were not uncommon in the later Roman world. Atop its tall porphyry column in Constantinople, the shining golden statue with its radiate crown might be seen as Emperor Constantine, or Apollo, or Christ, or as some combination of all three. These carefully contrived confusions were deftly exploited by those keen to legitimate the emperor as the undisputed center of a highly centralised state.'

### 3. Christ and Dionysus: Nonnus' *Paraphrase* of St John's Gospel

1. On the relationship between the two works see, e.g., Golega (1930) 28-62; see also the argument for single authorship of the *Paraphrase* and *Dionysiaca* advanced by Livrea (1987) 450-1 in his discussion of *AP* 9.198.

2. Vian (1976) xi: 'La coexistence des deux oeuvres pose un problème difficile.' For an excellent brief introduction to the vexed issues surrounding the relationship between the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* see now Whitby (2008) 199-201.

3. Garnett (1911) 214-15; first published in 1888; see Gonnelli (2003) 37-8.

4. Garnett (1911) 216.

5. Garnett (1911) 224-5.

6. Collart (1930) 273; Keydell (1936) 911.32-5; see also Bogner (1934); Golega (1930) 79-88 argues that Nonnus could already have been a Christian when he wrote the *Dionysiaca*.

7. On the incomplete state of the *Dionysiaca* see Vian (1976) xxxvii-xli. Needless to say, the fact that the *Dionysiaca* exhibits signs of incompleteness does not mean that Nonnus necessarily abandoned it for the *Paraphrase*; see Agosti (2008) 17-32.

8. Wifstrand (1933).

9. Vian (1976) xviii refers to the *Paraphrase* as 'une oeuvre de jeunesse'.

10. Vian (1976) xi-xviii; Vian (1976) xviii: '... il convient de le redire, les bases de cette chronologie sont fragiles et des faits nouveaux sont susceptibles de la remettre en question'. Alan Cameron (2007) 36: 'We know pretty much for certain that the *Paraphrase* came first'; Spanoudakis' study of the Icarus episode concurs that 'chronological priority appears to be firmly on the side of the *Paraphrasis*' (2007) 88.

11. Vian (1976) xv-xviii; the fact that Nonnus' *Paraphrase* appears to have been closely influenced by the commentary on the Fourth Gospel by Cyril of Alexandria encouraged Livrea (1987) to suggest a date for the *Paraphrase* after the death of Cyril in 444; at the same time because of the miaphysite views reflected by both Cyril and Nonnus, Livrea argued that the *Paraphrase* must have been published before the Council of Chalcedon in 451 when Miaphysitism was officially condemned as a heresy.

12. Vian (1997).

13. Sherry (1991); Coulie & Sherry (1995).

14. Accorinti (1999) provides a detailed discussion of Sherry's ideas on authorship.

15. See, e.g., Livrea (1989) 65-8; the argument is neatly articulated by Whitby (2008) 201; for a full discussion of metrical 'anomalies' see Agosti-Gonnelli (1995) and Agosti (2003) 175ff.

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16. Hopkinson (1994b) 7 n. 16; with reference to Suda 3.478.26 Adler.

17. Hollis (1994) 58-9 with reference to *Para.* 7.140 and *Dion.* 27.307. It is, of course, not beyond the bounds of possibility that a later poet recognising the quotation should respond with an allusion of his own to the other half of that same line.

18. Sherry (1996) 414.

19. See Livrea (1989); Agosti (2003) 45 n. 33. Whitby (2008) 201 argues that given the relatively short window available for the composition of the two poems, 'the view that they were written contemporaneously is attractive'.

20. See Vian (1976) xiv.

21. Vian (1990) 268; see further Chapter 4, pp. 97-8.

22. For the idea of one poet writing in differently in different literary modes see, e.g., Hinds (1987) on two different treatments of the myth of Persephone by Ovid (in both epic and elegiac modes).

23. For a late antique poet working in two traditions in tandem see Bogner (1934); see also Chuvin (1986) for a nuanced perspective on Nonnus' relationship between 'paganism' and Christianity.

24. *Dion.* = 21,288 lines; *Para.* = 3,750 lines.

25. This is not to deny the importance of the performative aspects of late antique poetry. For Agosti (pers. comm.) 'I think that the most important key to understand Nonnus' poetry is its performative side; it was a poetry conceived to be recited, not simply to be read. In my view, one cannot speak only of *readers*, but one should take into account also an oral audience'; cf. McClure (1981).

26. See, e.g., Nelis (2001).

27. As David Taylor suggests (pers. comm.) 'musical composers, who clearly carry in their heads a stock of thematic material (tunes) that eventually may see the light of day in different compositions, in which case the exact chronological order of the various *opera* may be quite irrelevant. The parallels in the visual arts may show this tendency yet more strongly, if we consider how artists work and re-work sketches or motifs in a variety of compositions, perhaps over a large number of years. All this tends for me to downplay the significance of publication dates, even if we knew them.'

28. Martindale (1993) 6; see further Martindale and Thomas (2006).

29. As Jason König points out (pers. comm.): 'many readers – even Nonnus' near contemporaries – might have read both texts without having the faintest idea which came first'.

30. Roberts (1985); Agosti (2001); see also Springer (1988); Whitby (2008) esp. 195-207; on possible motivations for the writing of biblical paraphrase see Livrea (1989) 40-2; Whitby (2007) 198-9.

31. The projected 21-book commentary was inaugurated by the general editor Enrico Livrea in 1989 with his edition of *Paraphrase* 18. Since then commentaries have appeared on Book 1 (De Stefani (2002)), Book 2 (Livrea (2000)), Book 4 (Caprara (2006)); Book 5 (Agosti (2003)), Book 13 (Greco (2004)) and Book 20 (Accorinti (1996)); as yet unpublished doctoral theses supervised by Livrea include Book 9 Serra (1997)); Book 15 (Savelli (1999)); (Book 19 (Accorinti (1987))). At present we have to rely on Scheindler (1881) for the complete text.

32. On translation theory and the emerging discipline of translation studies in general see Bassnett (1991), Bassnett & Trivedi (1999), Munday (2001); for the Classical world see Hardwick (2000), Lanieri (2006); Lanieri & Zajko (2008).

33. See the excellent discussion by Hinds (1998) esp. 120-1.

34. Hinds (1998) 121.

35. For an overview of the relationship between Christ and Dionysus see Noetzel (1960); Seaford (2006) 120-30; Rech (1998) 36-7; Hengel (1995); Wick (2004); a list of twelve 'mythological equivalences' between Christ and Dionysus is given by Taylor-Perry (2003) 25-6; with specific reference to Nonnus see Willers (1992).

36. On Dionysus' 'communality' see Seaford (2006) 26-38.

37. On the death and rebirth of Dionysus/Zagreus see Plutarch, *The E at Delphi* 389A: 'They name him Dionysus, Zagreus ... and they infer destructions and disappearances, then returns to life (*anabiôseis*) and resurrections (*paliggenesias*).' For a critical reappraisal of the analogies between Christ and Zagreus see Edmonds (1999).

38. The tomb of Dionysus was allegedly located at Delphi under the *omphalos*: see Ciholas (2003) 16-17.

39. Bowersock (1990) 49-53; see further Elsner (1998) 220; Seaford (2006) 128.

40. Mathews (1993) 45.

41. Mathews (1993) 126-7, '... insofar as he copied the look of Apollo or Dionysus, he assumed something of their feminine aspect as well'.

42. On the wand held by Christ see Mathews (1993) 54-9.

43. Hanson (1985) 167; on Clement's 'mystery' vocabulary see Nock's chapter 'Hellenistic Mysteries and Christian Sacraments' in his collected works (1972) .

44. See, e.g., Akpunonu (2004). For references in the Old Testament see, e.g., Ezekiel 15.1-5; 17:8; 19.10-12; Jeremiah 31:5; 48:32; Jonah 4; Isaiah 5.1-7; Psalm 80.

45. On the use of vine imagery in the Christian tradition see Rech (1998); for the specific use of vine imagery in the Gospels see, e.g., Mark 12:1-9; Matt. 21:33-41; Luke 20:9-16.

46. See Jensen (2000) esp. 59-63.

47. Quoted from Jensen (2000) 128.

48. See Spanoudakis (2007) 48; Rech (1998) 30-1; see further Chapter 4, pp. 106-7.

49. See Corrado Leonardi (1947); for the Christian symbolism of the vine/grape see further Nussbaum (1963); Snyder (1985) 52-3; Unwin (1991) 139-42. Cf. Turcan (1996) 314: 'Christian sarcophagi also are known in the shape of grape-pressing vats'.

50. On the connection of Dionysus and death see Burkert (1987) 22-3; Seaford (2006) 76-86.

51. See, e.g., Hengel (1987).

52. Barrett (1978) 188.

53. Justin, 1 *Apol.*, 54, *Trypho*, 69 (discovery of vine); Eur. *Bacchae* 704-7, Athenaeus 1, 61 (34a), Pausanias VI, 24, 1f. (water into wine).

54. Barrett (1978) 188.

55. Barrett (1978) 189.

56. Cf. Johnson (2006a) on the fifth-century *Life and Miracles of Thekla*.

57. Alan Cameron (2007) 37 notes that 'there is conspicuous Dionysiac imagery in the account of the wedding at Cana in Nonnus' own *Paraphrase*'. For Cameron, however, the fact that the imagery is so pervasive is a sign that it has lost any real resonance.

58. All translations of the *Paraphrase* are my own; translations of the *Dionysiaca* are taken from Rouse's 1940 Loeb edition.

59. On the 'poetic' prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18) see Carson (1991) 112.

60. On the decline in use of the definite article in late antique poetry see Alan Cameron (1970) 16.

61. On Nonnus' expansive style see Whitby (2008) 203-5.

62. On the formulaic description of dawn in late antique poetry see D'Ippolito (2003).

63. See, e.g., *Iliad* 1.493; 6.175; 24.31; 24.785; *Odyssey* 5.390; 9.76; 10.144.

64. See *Iliad* 6.175; see *Odyssey* 2.1; 8.1; 17.1.

65. See e.g. *Dion.* 16.46: ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως ('rosy-fingered dawn'); 34.106: ῥόδοεσσα ῥοδοστεφέος πλέων Ἡοῦς ('more rosy than the rose-crowned dawn'). It is possible that the description of the dawn literally 'writing' (ἔγραφεν) on the rocks at *Para.* 2.2 has been influenced by the Homeric epithet 'rosy-fingered'.

66. E.g. *Dion.* 11.518; 12.200. At *Dion.* 22.20 (and at 45.308) a fountain of wine 'stains the rocks purple'. For a parallel for the dawn turning the rocks purple see *Dion.* 22.136-7; cf. *Para.* 6.84-5.

67. On the influence of Cyril of Alexandria's commentary on John's Gospel (written between 425 and 428) on the theology of the *Paraphrase* see the work of the detailed commentaries of Livrea et al. See, e.g., Livrea (1989) 31 note 29: '... la cristologia nonniana sembra dipendere interamente da Cirillo'.

68. Cyril gives clear emphasis at the start of his commentary on this section to the wedding as the starting point (ἀρχή); this same prominence is replicated in the *Paraphrase*. St John described the water into wine as the beginning of Christ's miracles, but only at the very end of his narrative. As Konstantinos Spanoudakis points out (pers. comm.), ἀρχή is a technical term for creation *ex nihilo*, and a word featuring in the first verse of Genesis and of the Gospel of John, cf. esp. Pl. *Tim.* 42e7.

69. Cyril concludes the section with the reminder that as a result of the miracle at Cana, 'no more will children be begotten in pain, since Christ has blessed the very beginning of our coming to birth'.

70. The phrase πρωτόσπορος ἀρχή is used again of Eros at 41.129 (also of Eros by Pseudo-Lucian at *Amores* 32.1-5), and of Rhea the mother of all the gods who suckles Dionysus at her breast (9.221). The adjective is also used to describe Io at 3.360, Hera (in disguise as Phanes) at 9.142, and the city of Beroe at 41.67. The phrase πρωτόσπορον ἀρχήν ('first-sown beginning') is reprised by Colluthus in his *epyllion* on the rape of Helen at Coll. 62 where it is used to describe the apple that is hurled by the goddess Eris into the midst of the divine guests at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. For further details see Vian (1976) 159. A Christian epigram by a certain Claudian (not *the* Claudian: see Alan Cameron (1970)) addresses Christ as the 'first-sown voice' (πρωτόσπορε φωνή) (*AP* 1.19.4). As Livrea (2000) notes on *Para.* 2.4, πρωτόσπορος has an Orphic ring, cf. πρωτόγονος in Orphic texts and the Derveni papyrus (Bernabe vol. III s.v.).

71. See Livrea (2000) 163.

72. *Dion.* 13.166; 13.420 (where the adjective is used to describe the giant Ogyrus, second only in strength to Dionysus himself); for other instances of long-trailing hair in the *Dionysiaca* see, e.g., 6.16, 10.181, 15.230.

73. See the Venetus A scholia on *Iliad* 2.542: 'wearing their hair long at the back: Archemachus the Euboean says that the Curetes lived in Chalcis and were constantly making war on those neighbouring on the city. When the enemy seized their hair and they pulled them down he says that they wore their hair long at the back, but that they cut it at the front. On account of this they were called Curetes (Κουρητάς) from the action of cutting (ἀπὸ τῆς κουράς)'.

74. *Dion.* 13.155: 'the earthborn race of the ancient Curetes'. The Curetes (who had protected Zeus while he was a baby on Crete) were closely associated with Dionysus; cf. Strabo 10.3.

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75. Christ is described as Γαλιλαῖος at *Para.* 18.44, 18.45, 19.104.

76. On the tradition of long-haired Galileans see further Livrea (2000) on *Para.* 2.6, De Stefani (2002) on *Para.* 1.170, Agosti (2003) 130 n. 303. In *Para.* 4 the Galileans are further described as ‘affectionate’ (φιλοστόργων) 4.9, ‘Christ-loving’ (φιλοχριστών) 4.195, ‘God-loving’ (θεοστόργων) 4.202 and ‘lovers of rowing’ (φιληρέτων) 4.214a.

77. *Dion.* 11.239, 15.49, 37.42, 44.147 (Dionysus); 18.12, 32.203 (his young associates); the epithet ἀκερσεκόμος is used of Apollo at 10.207 (in a likely quotation from *Iliad* 20.39) and ἀκερσικόμος at 12.134.

78. On the representation of Christ with long hair see above, p. 55.

79. On the problematic translation of μεθέπω see Livrea (2000) 170 (on *Para.* 2.11).

80. On the virgin-mother motif in late antiquity see Borgeaud (2004) 120-31; Bowersock (1990) 26; Bowersock, Brown & Grabar (1999) 667.

81. Mary Whitby (pers. comm.) makes the intriguing suggestion that Nonnus may be ‘deliberately bandying around all the various accounts of [Mary] that the theologians grappled with, perhaps implying that they all add up to the same thing’.

82. See Vian (1976) xvi-xvii; Livrea (1989) 24-5; Livrea (2000) 167-8; Grillmeier (1996) 97. Berkey (2003) 22-3 points out that the Christological status of Mary was of especial concern in late antique Egypt. Interestingly, the first undisputed use of the title θεητόκος was by Alexander, bishop of Alexandria in 319: see Bowersock, Brown & Grabar (1999) 723-4 (with thanks to Fotini Hadjittofi for pointing this out to me).

83. See, e.g., Athanasius, *Sermo major de fide* 43.4, 48.4; Marcellus, *Expositio fidei* 1.6.2; John Chrysostom, *Homo quidam descendebat* 61.756.73; Didymus Caecus, *Commentarii in Zacchariam* 4.233.5; see also John Damascene, *Epistula ad Theophilum imperatorem de sanctis et venerandis* 95.348.44; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina Moralia* 537.12.

84. At *Dion.* 47.417, ‘[Theseus] swore a marriage oath by immaculate (ἀχράντοιο) Athena’.

85. Mary’s virginal state is emphasised at *Para.* 2.11 by a reference to her ‘always following the path of maidenhood’ (ἀεὶ μεθέπουσα κορείην). The word κορείη (‘virginity/maidenhood’) is used only here in the *Paraphrase*, but is employed 35 times in the *Dionysiaca* (ten times alone in Book 48). It is found in earlier writers only in Gregory of Nazianzus (*Carmina Moralia* 576.4-8) and in a single epigram from the *Greek Anthology* (9.451.2). It reappears in three later writers who had clearly read Nonnus: Christodorus, Agathias and Paul Silentiarius (*AP* 2.1.365; *AP* 5.294.19; *AP* 5.217.1).

86. This passage is especially pertinent since the virgin Athene is here described as suckling Erechtheus. See also *Dion.* 48.956.

87. Within the *Dionysiaca* the epithet φυγόμενος is used of Athena at 3.111; it is also used to describe a range of characters for whom virginity is a serious concern: e.g., Echo (16.361); Chalcomede (33.319); Artemis (36.59, 44.312); Aura (48.760, 48.820).

88. The adjective ἀμήτωρ is nicely ambiguous: the virgin Athena is ‘not a mother’, but she is also ‘motherless’ because she was born from the head of her father Zeus (see LSJ s.v. ἀμήτωρ I and II).

89. For further discussion of this passage see Hadjittofi (2008); for central issue of the ‘*allattamento paradossale*’, see Agosti (2003) 596-7 on *Dion.* 35.302-305 and Newbold (2000/2001) 11-23.

90. See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *In diem luminum* 9.232.9; *In luciferam sanctam domini resurrectionem* 9.318.22; John Chrysostom, *In annuntiationem sanctissimae deiparae* 60.759.13; *In natale domini et in sanctam Mariam genitricem* 2.3; John Damascene, *Sermo in annuntiationem Mariae* 96.656.13; Romanus Melodus, *Cantica* 9, 18 (*passim*). The word occurs 32 times in the *Dionysiaca*, but is not found in the *Paraphrase*.

91. Nicaea is frequently referred to as παρθενική or παρθένος in Books 15 and 16; Aura is similarly described in Book 48. At *Dion.* 4.328 Philomela is described – in a phrase strongly reminiscent of Mary in the *Paraphrase* – as παρθενικὴν φυγόμενον; at *Dion.* 36.59 Artemis is addressed as παρθενική φυγόμενε.

92. Nicaea's pregnancy and parturition are described at 16.395-402; like Mary, Aura is described as 'childbearing' (παἰδοτόκος) (48.725, 809, 903).

93. On the paradox of the virginity of Mary see, e.g., Gambero (1999); Haffner (2004) 134-74. For a discussion of Mary as both mother and virgin see, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 13.3.18; *Oratio in diem natalem Christi* 1136.9: 'the virgin mother' (ἡ παρθένος μήτηρ); John Chrysostom, *In nativitate Joannis Baptistae* 3.15: 'virgin mother of the true vine' (ἀληθινῆς ἀμπέλου ... μήτηρ παρθένος); *Oratio de Epiphania* 13.9: 'virgin mother' (παρθένος μήτηρ); at *Carmina moralia* 632.14 Gregory of Nazianzus addresses Mary as 'virgin bride' (παρθένε νύμφη); the same phrase is used to describe Nicaea at *Dion.* 16.296; at 48.765 Artemis mocks Aura for being both 'virgin' and 'bride' (παρθένε, νύμφη); compare John Chrysostom, *Homilia de capto Eutropio* 52.403.54: 'a virgin is not a bride' (παρθένος νύμφη οὐκ ἔστι).

94. Aura herself declares at 48.905 that 'I am ashamed to use the name bride (νύμφης) after having been a virgin (παρθένον).

95. Dionysus refers to both Nicaea and Aura as his brides at 48.887-9.

96. For its fragrance see, e.g., *Dion.* 19.120; 41.123: θνώδες ἔγκυος οἴνου and 7.86: θνώδεα καρπὸν ὄπωρης; for its sweetness see, e.g., *Dion.* 12.203, 12.249, 15.23, 18.150, 19.140.

97. See e.g. φιλακρήτω παρὰ λίμνη (*Dion.* 16.403); φιλακρήτω παρὰ ληνῶ (*Dion.* 19.38).

98. *Dion.* 47.74, 47.106; see also 19.212.

99. Spanoudakis (2007) 38.

100. Spanoudakis (2007) 88.

101. As Spanoudakis (2007) 38 well observes the (later) observation by the master of the feast that Christ has saved the best wine until last has clear eschatological connotations. The late gift of fine wine stands 'in sharp contrast to the ὄξος ('wine-vinegar) offered to Christ on the cross (Jn 19,30)'.  
102. Spanoudakis (2007) 38: 'At the Cana wedding the initial gaiety of the table companions is succeeded by an apprehensive despondency, unattested in the Johannine "Vorlage"; on wine stewards as 'gloomy' (στυγνοί) cf. Call. *Aet. fr.* 178.18-19.

103. In *Dion.* 19 Methe makes a demand for wine in order to cheer her up. Further correspondence with the *Paraphrase* may be noted in ἀβακχεύτοιο τραπέζης and ἡμιτελή ... μέθην.

104. Livrea (2000) ad loc.

105. See *Para.* 2.25: ὁμόζυγες ἀμφιφορηές (amphorae); *Para.* 13.100: ὁμοζυγέες δὲ μαθηταί (disciples).

106. The same phrase appears at *Dion.* 17.285 (in a description of an Indian god); 22.393 (of the river Hydaspes). It occurs earlier in a context linked with inspired water at Pindar, *Isth.* 6.74; see further Gigli Piccardi (2003) 367.

107. The phrase ‘into a stream of sparkling wine’ (καὶ εἰς χύσιν αἶθοπος οἴνου) occurs elsewhere only in the *Dionysiaca*, during the description of the death of Icarus at 47.127; the description of ‘sparkling’ (αἶθου) wine can be traced back to Homer: it occurs eleven times in the *Iliad* (in either the accusative or the dative) and eleven times in the *Odyssey* (in the accusative only).

108. On the miraculous transformation of water into wine see further Livrea (2000) and Gerlaud (1994).

109. The variation in the first part of the compound adjective results in a different metrical pattern: ... ἦν ἔτεπ ... forms a dactyl (– ∪ ∪); ... ἦν ξανθ ... forms a spondee (– –).

110. LSJ s.v. φιλεύσιος.

111. AP 9.524.1, 26.

112. See *Dion.* 16.258; 18.206: βαρυνομένου δὲ καρῆνου.

113. See Livrea (2000) ad loc.

114. *Dion.* 7.46; 24.193; 26.268; see also 43.419.

115. *Dion.* 16.284, 305.

116. Stibbe (1993) 43: ‘the overall theme of John 2-4 concentrates on responses to John’s charismatic ministry. Another overarching idea is the theme of Jesus’ radical break with Judaism and his inauguration of a new order of things. In the Cana episode in 2.1-11, Jesus replaces the old rituals of purification. The phrase, “they have no more wine” (2.3) symbolizes the inadequacy of Judaism; Judaism has no more to offer humanity by way of salvation. The fact that there are only six jars (2.6) further signals the failure and incompleteness of the old order. The saving of the good wine until now shows that Jesus is the fulfilment of Judaism’.

117. Nonnus repeatedly describes the wine as ‘sweet’ (ἡδύ-) which is a quality commonly associated with poetry itself: see, e.g., Theocritus 1.1, Nonnus, *Dion.* 1.39 etc; for ἡδυεπής (‘sweet-speaking/sweet-sounding’) see *Para.* 6.220; 12.89; 13.32; *Dion.* 6.34, 10.390 (used to describe the syrinx); 41.252.

118. See especially Bloom (1973).

119. Alford (1854) 636 calculated that Christ’s miracle would have produced around 126 gallons of wine: ‘The large quantity thus created has been cavilled at by unbelievers’.

120. The word μέτρα is used by both John and Nonnus to describe the capacity of the jars; but the word is also used in a technical sense to describe poetic metre (see LSJ s.v. μέτρον II).

121. *Para.* 21.141: ‘if a mortal man wrote them all down line by line (στοιχηδόν)’. On the metapoetic value of the concluding lines of the *Paraphrase* see Agosti (2003) 180 and (2006) 31-61.

122. Barrett (1978) 472: ‘Vine-symbolism has a prominent place in certain other non-Christian sources (e.g. the cult of Dionysus ...), but these have no particular relevance here’.

123. *Dion.* 7.87, 38.28: βότρυν ἀέζων; 42.283: καρπὸν ἀέζω.

124. On other occasions the adjective is used to qualify not the fruit but the god, e.g. 13.227: ‘wine-faced Bacchus’ (οἴνοπι Βάκχῳ). The adjective is a literalisation of the suggestive and somewhat ambiguous Homeric image of the ‘wine-faced sea’ (οἴνοπι ποντῷ) see, e.g. *Il.* 23.316; *Od.* 5.132, 7.250.

125. Found only here in the New Testament; see Morris (1995) 594.

126. *Dion.* 12.396; 47.67.

127. The adjective’s primary meaning ‘many-coloured, spotted, mottled, pied’ does not capture its full semantic range which includes ‘intricate, complex, subtle’ and ‘changeable, changeful, unstable’ (see LSJ s.v. ποικίλος).

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128. See D'Ippolito (1964) 37-57; String (1966) 33-70; Fauth (1981); Gonzalez-Senmartí (1981); Hopkinson (1994b) 9-11; Shorrocks (2001) 21-2, 55 n. 84.

129. Compare Agosti (1997).

130. *Dion.* 7.1. The figure credited with this regeneration is Eros. Interestingly he is described in terms of an agricultural metaphor as the 'ploughman' (ἀροπεύς) of love (7.3). This chimes with the agricultural (or more correctly viticultural) metaphor of God as the 'farmer' (γεωργός) in John and the 'vine-dresser' (ἀλωεύς) in *Paraphrase* 15.

131. For further discussion of this scene see Chapter 4, pp. 97-8.

132. Letter IX *To Titus*, section 4; tr. Parker (1897).

133. John Chrysostom, *Discourse* 4.1; tr. Allen (1869).

134. For a detailed discussion of the role of Ampelus in the *Dionysiaca* and the symbolism of his rebirth/resurrection, see Chapter 4, pp. 98-105.

135. See now Caprara (2008).

136. Cf. Call. *Ep.* 52; Asclep. *HE* 875.

137. The vine is feminine nominative in the *Paraphrase* (hence ἀυδήεσσα); masculine accusative in the *Dionysiaca* (hence ἀυδήεντα).

138. See Gigli Piccardi (2003) 81.

139. *Para.* 6.173. John 6:55 develops the idea that Christ's flesh is 'true' (ἀληθής) food. The adjectives ἀληθής/ἐτήτυμος and the nouns ἀλήθεια/ἐτητυμία are used as synonyms in the *Paraphrase*: compare, e.g., 'true voice': ἀληθέα ... φωνήν (1.126); ἐτήτυμον ... φωνήν (4.80); 'witness of truth': μάρτυς ἀληθείης (20.138); μάρτυς ἐτητυμίας (21.140).

140. Instead, Nonnus' emphasis on life (over truth) suggests a link back to John 6:35 where Christ declares 'I am the bread of life' (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς).

141. Tasker (1960) 174.

142. Unwin (1991) 140 suggests that 'one reason why the writer of the gospel emphasised that Christ was the true vine' was 'to provide a contrast with other extant imagery associated with vines'; see Carpenter (1920) 52 n. 2: 'perhaps ... an implicit and hostile reference to the cult of Dionysus'.

143. Compare Gigli Piccardi (2003) 81.

144. On these lines see Vian (2005) 453.

145. For ὄργια Βάκχου see *Dion.* 44.219, 45.25, 46.81, 46.107, 48.774; for ὄργια Διονύσου see *Dion.* 9.114, 27.214, 44.124, 46.96; for ὄργια Λυαίου see *Dion.* 18.6, 33.229.

146. See Agosti (2003) 426-7 (on *Para.* 5.68).

147. For θυιάσι βάκχαις see *Dion.* 17.90, 20.259, 36.273, 46.24, 46.178, 47.664.

148. Cf. Barrett (1978) 201: 'Jesus as a good Jew remains in the city for the Passover'.

149. See LSJ s.v. εὐάζω.

150. See, e.g., *Dion.* 9.204, 16.333, 40.248, 40.274, 40.280, 45.33. In earlier extant literature the verb is attested only twice: at Lycophron, *Alex.* 207 and Claudian, *AP* 9.139.1.

151. The connection between Dionysus and the story of Lazarus suggested by *Para.* 12.79 is one that will be explored again in the following chapter from the perspective of the *Dionysiaca*; see pp. 100-5.

152. See also 12.152; 45.33: Βάκχον ἀνευάζουσα.

153. At 12.16 the scent of myrrh is described as having 'intoxicated' (ἐμέθουσαν) the whole house.

154. See Greco (2004) ad loc. for related references from the Church Fathers.

155. See esp. Spanoudakis (2007).

156. As Agosti points out (pers. comm.), *λύσσα* refers usually to those who do not understand/accept Christ's message'; see Livrea (1989) 166; De Stefani (2002) 129; for occurrences of the word in the *Paraphrase* see *Para.* 1.30; 2.114; 3.91; 4.10; 5.115, 173; 6.182, 197; 7.26; 8.158; 10.109, 117; 13.10, 124; 16.9, 16.69; 17.64; 18.3, 114.

157. See, e.g., Euripides' *Bacchae* (and Nonnus' own version of the *Bacchae* at *Dion.* 44-6).

158. Cf. *Dion.* 35.299, 43.267, 46.189.

159. The amethyst (*ἄ-μέθυστος*), as its name implies, is a stone that protects the wearer from intoxication.

#### 4. Dionysus and Christ: Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*

1. For a brief introduction to the *Dionysiaca* see Shorrock (2005). On the reception of the *Dionysiaca* in both antiquity and the modern era see Lind (1978); Shorrock (2001) 1-3; see Shorrock (2003) on the reception of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* within Roberto Calasso's *Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*.

2. Vian (1976) – building on the work of the formidable German scholar Rudolf Keydell. This impressive philological achievement (providing new text, translation and detailed commentary) has already become an essential tool for all scholars working in the field of late antique literary culture.

3. See, e.g., Hopkinson (1994b); Shorrock (2001); Carvounis and Hunter (2008).

4. For attempts to draw out allusions to Nonnus' contemporary world see esp. Riemschneider (1968); Gigli Piccardi (1998); Gigli Piccardi (2003) 60-6.

5. On Nonnus' relationship with Homer see Hopkinson (1994b) 9-42; Shorrock (2001) *passim*.

6. Critics have, however, been prepared to acknowledge the influence of contemporary astrology: see Stegemann (1930); Lesky (1966) 816 comments that Nonnus' interest in 'magic and astronomy agreed with the mood of the time'.

7. Livrea (1989); see above, Chapter 3, p. 53 with p. 141 n. 31.

8. Bowersock (1994) 162.

9. As he says in the conclusion to his essay, 'Dionysus was the embodiment of Christianised polytheism, and Nonnus his evangelist' (Bowersock (1994) 164).

10. See, e.g., the contributions of these authors to the recent four-volume *BUR* commentary on Nonnus: Agosti (2004); Accorinti (2004); reviewed by Shorrock (2006).

11. Accorinti (2004) 34-6.

12. Spanoudakis (2007); see also D'Ippolito (1995); Gigli Piccardi (1984); Hernández de la Fuente (2007).

13. See, e.g., Ruvoldt (2004) 24-5.

14. Nietzsche (1872).

15. This is not to deny the contrasting characterisation of the two gods that can be found in Classical sources: see, e.g., Plutarch, *The E At Delphi* 389A-B.

16. He is also closely associated with dithyrambic performances.

17. See also *Phaedrus* 245a; for further connections between Dionysus and poetic inspiration see Murray (1996) esp. 115-16.

18. Fr. 120. Murray (1996) 115 quotes this passage, but notes that unlike the passage in the *Ion*, it concerns wine; it is, she argues, with the *Ion* that the 'connexion between poetic inspiration and wineless Bacchic ecstasy ... seems to have begun ...'. See Crowther (1979) on wine as a symbol of inspiration.

19. Jebb (1906) 173; in later classifications of the Muses, Melpomene is specifically designated as the Muse of Tragedy.

20. 15E-F.

21. At 388F-9A Plutarch refers to the fact that Dionysus is identified by ‘the cleverer people’ (οἱ σοφώτεροι) with Apollo.

22. See, e.g., Callimachus fr. 191.7-8; *Ep.* 8.3-4; Antipater of Sidon in an epigram addressed to Anacreon juxtaposes Dionysus and the Muses as follows: ‘for your whole life, old man, was poured as triple offering to the Muses, Dionysus and Love’ (*AP* 7.27.9-10); see also *Epigrammata dedicatoria* 291.13-14: ‘a crown for the Muses of Helicon and for Cadmeian Dionysus’.

23. See *Odes* 1.18, 3.21, 3.25; Propertius 2.30.40; 3.2.9, 3.17, 4.1.62; 6.4.75; Ovid *Am.* 1.3.11-12, *Trist.* 5.3.1, *Met.* 4.17ff. It is interesting to note that in *Odes* 3.21 – Horace’s ode to a wine jar – Dionysiac inspiration is represented as a somewhat informal, more private poetic voice (*Odes* 3.21.17-18): ‘you bring back hope to anxious minds and you furnish a poor man with strength and bravado’ (*tu spem reducis mentibus anxiiis, / virisque et addis cornua pauperi*) in contrast to the more public ‘Apolline’ poetry – with its implications of a rather close connection with the emperor (on the identification of Augustus with the god Apollo, see, e.g., Galinsky (1996) 215-19, 297-9; see, further, Chapter 2, p. 47).

24. Hunter (2006) 42, echoing Nisbet-Hubbard (1978) 316.

25. *Praep. Evang.* 2.2.8.3-9.1 = Diod. 4. 4.3; see also Diodorus 4.5.4: ‘The Muses ... made the life of Dionysus happy and agreeable’.

26. See pp. 29-30.

27. Note here the possibility of a pun on *mero* (*merum* = undiluted wine) and P. Vergilius Maro.

28. See Gigli Piccardi (2003) 120.

29. Hunter (2006) 42; Murray (1996) 9.

30. See pp. 33-6.

31. See also 2.696-8: ‘So much I will foretell for you, the rest I will leave to Phoebus. And now Cadmus do you make your way to the midnipple of the earth and visit the speaking vales of Pytho at Delphi’; 4.286-92: ‘With Harmonia [he went] ... on the way to the oracular sanctuaries. Then he reached Delphi, and asked an oracle from the midnipple axle of never-silent Pytho; and the Pythian axle speaking of himself uttered oracles of sense, resounding about in hollow tone ...’; 4.307-10: ‘So speaking he lulled the tripods’ wild voice: the ridges of Parnassus quaked, when they heard the noise of their neighbour Phoebus; Castalia marked it and her inspired water bubbled in oracular rills’; 4.350: ‘Now that the divine utterance of the Pythian cave was fulfilled ...’.

32. For an alternative explanation of the adjective ἀσίγητος see Gonnelli (2003) 78. A further exuberant engagement with the traditional discourse of inspiration comes in Book 41 with the description of the upbringing given to the young Beroe at 41.221-7: ‘If the girl thirsting asked for a drink, she gave her the speaking Pythian water kept for Apollo, or the stream of Ilissus, which is inspired by the Attic Muse when the Pierian breezes of Phoebus beat on the bank. The dancing maidens of Orchomenus, handmaids of the Paphian, drew from the horse-hoof fountain of imagination, dear to the nine Muses, delicate water to wash her.’ On these lines (and their disputed position) see Accorinti (2004) 160-2.

33. In Book 7, before the birth of Dionysus, Zeus delivers a response to the god Aion (7.71-2): ‘and at last Cronides addressed his divine voice to Time [Aion], and revealed oracles higher than the prophetic centre’. The reference to the ‘prophetic centre’ is of course an allusion to Delphi, the *omphalos* of the world; Zeus claims for his own oracular words an even greater authority than that associated with Delphi.

34. On the relationship between the *Dionysiaca* and the New Testament see esp. Gigli Piccardi (1984), (1985).

35. Vian (1976) 7; see also Gigli Piccardi (2003) 116-17.

36. Callimachus, *Hymni* 3.186; Theoc. 22.116; the use of the formula by Nonnus clearly inspired Musaeus at the opening of his epyllion *Hero and Leander*: 'Tell, goddess (εἰπέ, θεά), of the witness of hidden love, of the lamp'.

37. Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25; cf. *Or. Sib.* 8.456-479, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 38. On the virgin birth in the Church Fathers see Gambero (1999); Gromacki (2002) 97-100. On the theme of miraculous birth see Diogenes Laertius 3.1f.; Iamblicus *VP* 5; Pausanias 2.26.3f.; Diodorus Siculus 4.20.2 f., [Herod.] *V. Hom.* 3; [Plut.] *V. Hom.* 2; Proclus *V. Hom.*; 2, Philostratus *V. Ap.* 1.4-5 (with thanks to Konstantinos Spanoudakis for the references).

38. Chapter 3, p. 55; see further Bowersock (2006) 39-41; Elsner (1998) 220 'And just as some within early Christianity strove to make their faith accessible through assimilations with paganism, so some polytheists began to appropriate aspects of Christian iconography to present their gods in pseudo-Christian terms. In the fourth-century mosaic from Nea Paphos in Cyprus, the infant Dionysus (looking to all appearances like a baby Jesus) is represented seated in the lap of Hermes, surrounded by various personifications. The appropriation of the thematics of the Virgin and Child to a Dionysiac iconography is paralleled by the equally striking assimilation of Christ and his Mother to Isis suckling the baby Horus'; cf. Grant (1990) 61 on the second-century Justin Martyr: 'What seems to have troubled him most was the resemblance of the gospel story to myths about Greek gods.'

39. The phrase may be translated either as 'wet from the fire' (following *Dion.* 1.4), or as 'from the wet/liquid fire'. On the paradoxical conceit of 'wet fire' see further *Dion.* 24.55-6. Konstantinos Spanoudakis notes (pers. comm.) that ὑγρός may appropriate the semantic field of διερός – able to mean at once 'wet' and 'living': see Williams (1981).

40. The allusion is noted and discussed by Gigli Piccardi (2003) 51, 118: 'Mi pare evidente che Nonno abbia rivissuto il tema della doppia nascita di Dioniso, pensando alla doppia nascita in carne e in spirito (e fuoco) del *Vangelo* giovanneo'.

41. Eight times in the *Iliad*; four in the *Odyssey*.

42. Vian (1976) 46.

43. Closely related to discussions of Christ as both father and mother is a thread of discussion that focuses on the different, yet related assertion that Christ is motherless and fatherless. See pp. 94-6.

44. See also Synesius, *Hymni* 5.63-5: 'You are father, you are mother (σὸν πατήρ, σὸ δ' ἔσσι μάτηρ), you are male and female, you are speech and silence'; see Gruber-Strohman (1991) ad loc.

45. See also Themistius, *Peri Filias* 268.b.1-2: 'But to each one he is father and mother (καὶ πατήρ καὶ μήτηρ ἔστι) and brother and in the same way kin.'

46. For a sophisticated discussion of the 'meaning' of Classical quotations within late antique Biblical epic see de Stella in Paschalis (2005) 131-48 (drawing explicitly on the work of Herzog (1975)).

47. Liebeschuetz (1995) 234 n. 43; see Golega (1930) 68-74.

48. The correspondence is also noted by Gigli Piccardi (2003) 323-4. See also 4.77-8 where Aphrodite addresses Harmonia: 'Blessed girl (ὀλβίη)! What a handsome stranger you have in the house! What a man to court you, most blessed of women (μακαρτάτη)!'; at 9.72 Hermes gives salutations to Ino, to whom he entrusts

the care of the baby Dionysus: 'blessed (ὄλβη) are you among all the daughters of Cadmus'.

49. For Agathias' relationship with Nonnus see Averil Cameron (1970) esp. 25-6; for a recent discussion of the poets of the so-called 'school of Nonnus' see Caverio (2008).

50. Compare also the proud boasts of Semele from her position in heaven at 9.208-43; especially 9.237: 'Semele is happiest (ὄλβιστη) because of her son'.

51. Matthew plays here on the fact that Jesus means 'saviour' in Hebrew; elsewhere Jesus' appellation as Christ is explained etymologically from χριστός meaning 'anointed'; Nonnus exploits the significance of Dionysus' own name at *Dion.* 9.18-20: '[Zeus] gave the newborn Lyaius a surname to suit his birth, and called him Dionysus ...'.

52. It is first described by the narrator (Luke 1:41.2-3), then a few lines later it is repeated by Elisabeth herself (1:44.2-3).

53. See Golega (1930) 71; Gigli Piccardi (2003) 576.

54. Rouse translates πάς here not as 'child' but as 'fruit of the womb', suggesting that he too had the salutation of Elisabeth in his mind at this point (see Luke 1:42).

55. At *Hymni* 4.160ff. the pregnant Leto arrives on the island of Cos and is advised by her unborn baby that he should not be born there; the foetus Apollo goes on to address Ptolemy Philadelphus 'greatly you will praise for all the days hereafter him who was a prophet while still in the womb' (4.189-90).

56. LSJ s.v. βρέφος.

57. At *Iliad* 23.266 it is used to describe the foetus of a mule that is to be given as a prize at the funeral games for Patroclus. Nonnus alludes to this scene (but not this line) at *Dion.* 19.120-1; see pp. 66-7.

58. For Christ see Luke 2:12; 2:16; for John see Luke 1:41; 1:44.

59. See, e.g., Origen, *Commentarii in evangelium Joannis* 6.49.253; John Chrysostom, *In natalem Christi diem* 56.392; Theodoretus, *De incarnatione domini* 75.1472.

60. LSJ s.v. ὄγκος (B) I.1.

61. LSJ s.v. ὄγκος (B) I.2. The word first occurs at *Dion.* 1.9 (with reference to the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus); see also 5.193; 8.13; 8.31; 24.210; 41.74.

62. See *Dion.* 24.210; 41.74.

63. The earliest citation occurs at Euripides, *Ion* 15.

64. For the use of this phraseology with reference to the Virgin birth see Theodoretus, *De incarnatione domini* 75.1461.16: τὸν ὄγκον τῆς γαστρὸς; John Chrysostom, *In natale domini nostri Jesu Christi* 61.764.70: ὁ ὄγκος τῆς γαστρὸς; *Peccata fratrum non evulganda* 51.361.4: ὁ τῆς γαστρὸς ὄγκος; see also Basil, *Homiliae super Psalmos* 29.488.9: γαστέρος ὄγκον; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina Moralia* 712.10, 918.13. Athanasius records Mary's question to Joseph at *Sermo de descriptione deiparae* 28.952.41: 'why do you look at my bump (τὸν ὄγκον τῆς γαστρὸς μου) with insolent eyes?'

65. See, e.g., Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 3.27.

66. *Dion.* 1.2-3.

67. Dionysus' association with light continues throughout the *Dionysiaca*: see, e.g., *Dion.* 7.99: 'My son ... will be received by the bright upper air to shine beside Zeus and to share the courses of the stars'; *Dion.* 9.103-6: 'A brilliant light shone from his face, which declared of itself the offspring of Zeus: the gloomy walls of the house grew bright, and the light of unseen Dionysus hid the darkness.'

68. See, e.g., the fire that plays around the head of Ascanius/Iulus in *Aeneid* 2; an analogous fire crowns the head of the baby Servius Tullius in Livy 1. As

Konstantinos Spanoudakis points out (pers. comm.), the mythical Roman king Caeculus at Praeneste was supposedly born from a spark and a virgin mother; see now Panayotakis (2010) 153.

69. The concluding line of this epigram suggests a further intersection with the *Dionysiaca* (AP 1.37.2): 'But into the Virgin's womb you did descend with noiseless tread (ἄνοσον ἶχνος).' The phrase 'noiseless tread' occurs only five times in extant literature: it is first found in Callimachus, *Hymni* 2.12 (with reference to Apollo) and is then taken up by Nonnus (at *Dion.* 3.54; 13.10; 34.2).

70. See, e.g., John 8:12: 'I am the light of the world'; Romanus Melodus, *Cantica* 16.1.2: 'Christ shone out as a great light' (φῶς μέγα ἔλαμψε Χριστός); on the Christian use of the light/dark metaphor see Kahlos (2007) 13-15.

71. On the 'spark' (σπινθήρ) in Christian discourse see Agosti (2003) on *Para* 5.135.

72. C.U.E., *anno* 1, 1, 7.157.12-14; for related uses of σπινθήρ see, e.g., Clement, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 1.3.1.-2; Epiphanius, *Haer.* 1.249.11-17; Theodoretus, *De providentia orationes decem* 83.641.2-4; *Heres.* 309.1-3.

73. As Gianfranco Agosti notes (pers. comm.), the imagery of Christ as a flashing light is quite widespread in late antique oracular language; cf. *Theos. Tub.* 53-4, 443-59 Erbse<sup>2</sup> and *IG XII* 6.2.1265.

74. See Luke 1:7.36.

75. See also Epiphanius, *Homilia in laudes Mariae deiparae* 43.497.35-45: 'from where first Gabriel greeted the Virgin: 'Greetings, blessed one, the Lord be with you; greetings, blessed one, the light of heaven be upon you; greetings, blessed one, you who holds the ray of light that flashes like lightning (ἐξαστράπτου) from heaven with radiant light, Christ the sun'; Romanus Melodus, *Cantica* 16.1.3-4: 'To those who were in darkness a bright light was seen flashing out (ἀστράπτουσα) from Bethlehem.'

76. Compare *Para.* 3.101: 'flashing light' (φέγγεος ἀστράπτοντος); *Para.* 5.139: 'around the flashing lamp' (ἀστράπτοντος ... περι λύχνου).

77. See further, Chapter 3, pp. 61-3.

78. LSJ s.v. παρθένος I.

79. See especially Brown (1988); for a useful overview see Brown (1986); Brown (1998) 61-75 'East and West. The New Marital Morality'; see also Averil Cameron (1989), (1994) 171-88; Clark (1993) 73-6; Cooper (2007); Elm (1996).

80. Brown (1998) 61-75.

81. See 7.173: παρθένος; 7.204: παρθενικῆς (where she is compared with Europa); 7.237: παρθένον; 7.248: παρθενικῆς (where she is compared with Athena); 8.69: παρθένον.

82. On virginity in the Dionysiac world see Gerlaud (2005) 244-58; Hadjittofi (2008).

83. See Hadjittofi (2008).

84. In Books 33-5 the bacchant Chalcomede is frequently described as παρθένος and φιλοπαρθένος in her attempts to resist the Indian Morrheus. On virgins who attempt to resist the advances of men and gods in the *Dionysiaca* see further D'Ippolito (1964).

85. See further Chapter 3, p. 62.

86. It is a pleasing coincidence that in the *TLG* canon of Greek authors Nonnus should come immediately before the New Testament (*Novum Testamentum*).

87. See Hadjittofi (2008).

88. Leibeschuetz (1995) 206 n. 81; the parallel was noted by Collart (1930) 9; see further Vian (2003) 70-3; Accorinti (2004) 724.

89. See De Stephani (2002). It is of course wholly appropriate that the opening

of the first book of the *Paraphrase* (A) should draw attention to the first letter of the alphabet. Compare the opening words of the *Odyssey* (ἀνδρα) and the *Aeneid* (*arma*).

90. The adjective ἀλόχευτος is very rare – attested only eight times in the whole corpus of extant Greek literature. Besides its appearance here in Gregory's poetry it is found once in the poetry of Synesius, *Hymni* 9.54, once in Theodoretus, *Quaestiones in Octateuchum* 259.24; five times in Nonnus, *Dion.* 8.27; 24.269; 41.53; 46.33; *Para.* 19.145; and once in Colluthus (83), with reference to Athena. Compare Epiphanius, *Haer.* 1.287.11: 'Christ ... self-born' (αὐτολόχευτον); *De prophetarum vita et obitu* 62.6-10: 'a virgin giving birth to a god-like baby' (παρθένος λοχεύουσα βρέφος θεοειδές); Didymus Caecus, *De trinitate* 39.792.8: '[Christ] is self-born' (αὐτολόχευτος); Clement, *Paedagogus* 1.6.42.3.1: 'O holy child-birth (λοχευμάτων)'.

91. See Chuvin and Fayant (2006) 159; Accorinti (2004) 181.

92. On Gregory and Nonnus see D'Ippolito (1994) 197-208. Agosti (pers. comm.) suggests that Nonnus and Gregory were inspired by the same oracular source; cf. Alan Cameron (1969) 240-1.

93. Compare Didymus Caecus, *De trinitate* 5.9.13: 'one god, self-begotten (αὐτοπάτωρ), from whom all these things have come'.

94. In fact, the first adjective used to describe Nature at *Dion.* 41.52 is 'self-begetting' (αὐτογένεθλος), a synonym for Gregory's αὐτοπάτωρ; compare *Orphic Hymn* 10.10 where 'Nature' (Φύσις) is also described as αὐτογένεθλος.

95. An almost identical explanation can be found at *De Melchisedech* 56.259.36-41; *In ascensionem* 52.802.64-7: 'the God ascended with a great noise, he who was motherless above, fatherless below (ὁ ἄνω ἀμήτωρ, καὶ κάτω ἀπάτωρ); see further Athanasius, *Dialogi duo contra Macedonianos* 28.1328.17-21: 'the son is uncreated (ἀγέννητος) but not fatherless (ἀπάτωρ); for he has God as a father, from whom he has been born. But the Father is uncreated anduncaused and fatherless (ὁ δὲ Πατὴρ καὶ ἀγέννητος καὶ ἀπάτωρ); Epiphanius *Haer* 3.139.10-20.

96. See De Stefani (2000) 106. Elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca* – excluding its occurrence at 41.52 – the adjective ἀμήτωρ is used exclusively to refer to Athena, born like Dionysus from her father Zeus and not from her mother: see *Dion.* 1.84; 27.114; 36.22; 37.320; 48.803.

97. On the paradox of the virgin birth in Christian discourse see, e.g., Averil Cameron (1994) esp. 165-71; Constan (2003) 60-2.

98. Compare *Para.* 2.65-6.

99. LSJ s.v. ἄσπορος III.

100. *Homilia in occursum domini* 28.1000.24.

101. *Cantica* 11. proem 4-5; see also John Chrysostom, *In annuntiationem deiparae* 62.767.47: 'this unsown offspring' (τοῦτο ἄσπορον βλάστημα); Origen, *Scholia in Lucam* 17.321.20: 'unsown birth' (ἄσπορον τοκετόν).

102. The connection here between ἄσπορος and ἀλόχευτος is also made by Theodoretus in the context of the nativity at *Quaestiones in Octateuchum* 259.23-5: 'Gabriel the archangel proclaimed those birthpangs that were unsown (ἀσπάρτους) and not naturally delivered (ἀλοχεύτους)'.

103. Elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca* the adjective ἄσπορος occurs at 2.221 where, owing to the flight of Aphrodite in the face of Typhon's onslaught, the cosmos is described as 'unsown' i.e. 'barren'; at 25.311 it refers to the sterility of Attis; at 40.119 the Indian hero Orontes is described as 'childless'.

104. See also *Dion.* 39.139.

105. See, e.g., 1.350 (Europa); 2.106 (Athena); 4.340 (Artemis); 5.570 (Persephone).

106. See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *In diem luminum* 9.232.9: 'offspring of an unwedded virgin' (ἐξ ἀνυμφεύτου παρθένου τόκον); John Chrysostom, *In natale domini nostri Jesu Christi* 61.765.5: 'O ... virgin mother, and holy child of an unmarried (ἀνυμφεύτου) mother'; Romanus Melodus, *Cantica* 9. proem. 4: 'hail, unmarried bride' (χαίρε νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε).

107. *In annuntiationem sanctissimae deiparae* 60.759.13.

108. Bowersock (1994) 99.

109. Bowersock (1994) 113.

110. For a number of characters in the *Dionysiaca* death is not the end, but represents the beginning of a new life: in Book 47 Icarus, Erigone (and her dog) are turned into stars following their tragic deaths (47.246-64); Ariadne achieves a similar catasterism after her own death (47.700-4); Semele is welcomed into Olympus after her own fiery death (9.206-7; 47.697-700).

111. The shield of Dionysus is closely modelled on the description of the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18: see Shorrock (2001) 174-8. It is appropriate that Nonnus' shield, in bringing back to life a literary motif from an earlier epic, should have depicted upon it an episode that deals with resurrection.

112. On sleep as a metaphor for resurrection (with reference to Lazarus) see John 11:11-13; *Para.* 11.39-50.

113. See Espinar and Hernández de la Fuente (2002).

114. See Vian (1990) 267-8; it should be noted that for this episode Vian favours the chronological priority of the *Dionysiaca*. He compares *Dion.* 25.544 with *Para.* 18.117 and concludes (Vian (1990) 268): 'Le vers de la *Paraphrase* est une pur enjivement littéraire; il es sans doute une réminiscence de notre passage'.

115. *Dion.* 6.155: 'O Virgin Persephone' (παρθένε Περσεφόνηα).

116. A leading literary model here is, of course, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus – Patroclus' death brings Achilles back into the war; Ampelus' death will precipitate Dionysus' own entry into war against the Indians; see further Shorrock (2001) 58 esp. n. 100.

117. For example, Dionysus puts a lock of his hair onto the corpse of Ampelus (11.239-40); Calamus cuts a lock of his hair in honour of his dead friend (11.464-8), just like Achilles does for Patroclus; see Shorrock (2001) 58.

118. As Calamus (the reed) supports Ampelus (the vine) so the story of Calamus supports the story of Ampelus.

119. A crucial difference between the stories of Ampelus/Dionysus and Carpus/Calamus is, of course, that Calamus drowns himself in order to be with his dead friend, while Dionysus is unable to suffer a mortal death.

120. *Para.* 11.117; 20.44.

121. See Chapter 3, pp. 72-5.

122. Compare the double metamorphosis of Ampelus (first as snake, then as vine) with the two stages of Christ's own resurrection (first in bodily form, then in his heavenly aspect). The transformation of the crushed grape into wine itself marks a symbolic performance of death followed by resurrection; see Rech (1998) 34-5.

123. Compare Bulatkin (1972) 36: 'In Christian allegory, eleven was called the number of excess because it exceeded ten, which had come to symbolize the law of the Ten Commandments. Thus, Saint Augustine interprets the number eleven as a "going beyond" or transgression of the law, and therefore, sin.'

124. Lazarus is explicitly imagined as having returned from 'Hades' at 11.22,

163; at 11.165 reference is made both to 'Hades' and to 'Lethe' (compare *Dion.* 11.326). These are the only references to the Underworld in the entire *Paraphrase*. On Ampelus' descent to, and return from, Hades see *Dion.* 11.214, 304-7; 12.214.

125. See *Dion.* 11.208; 12.138; 30.110.

126. See *Dion.* 25.310; 29.99; 29.275; 29.318; 37.42.

127. See, e.g., Bowersock (1994) 162.

128. Noted by Vian (1995a) 195; see 68 n. 2; see also Gigli Piccardi (2003) 835.

129. The correspondence between Cyril's words at *PG* 74.56A and *Dionysiaca* 12.171 was pointed out by Josph Golega in his 1930 study of the *Paraphrase* (see Golega (1930) 69), an observation developed four years later by Hans Bogner (Bogner (1934) 332) who suggested that the only explanation for the similarity in phraseology was that Dionysus was here being established as an opponent and rival of Christ. For Vian (1995a) 68 n. 2, however, Bogner's conclusion was over-hasty, though he does not elaborate on this judgement.

130. Liebeschuetz (1995) 207.

131. Alan Cameron (2007) 37 (adapted from Cameron (2000) 180-1); he continues 'Dionysos is *not* portrayed as a saviour or redeemer. His mission is simply to bring men and (especially) women joy in the form of wine ... Nonnus is not trying to portray Dionysos as a rival of Christ, nor is he even (as sometimes suggested) trying to assimilate Dionysos and Christ.'

132. *Dion.* 12.142-71.

133. The verb λύση itself brings out an important feature of Dionysus as a god who sets free/liberates – as his cult title Λυαίος implies. See Chapter 3, p. 78.

134. On the tears induced by the death of Lazarus see Wiles (1960) 88. This passage attracts comments from a number of Church Fathers, e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 14.3.12-13; Theodoretus, *De incarnatione domini* 75.1457.41-3; compare *Concilium universale Ephesenum anno* 1,1,6.136.26-30 where a 'deliverance from tears' (δακρῶν ἀπαλλαγή) is balanced by the delivery of 'joy' (εὐφροσύνη). Christ's tears at Bethany intersect with another Biblical scene in which tears play a prominent metaphorical role: at Revelation 7:17 we read of those who stand in white before the throne of God, no longer feeling hungry or thirsty: 'And God will wipe away every tear (πάν δάκρυον) from their eyes'. And again, towards the climax of the same book (21.4): 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away.' As with Christ's tears at Bethany, the actions of God will cause humans to cease their crying and prepares them for the promise of immortal life.

135. The phrase is found only here in the *Paraphrase*; in the *Dionysiaca* it occurs at 6.224; 13.530; 28.143; 36.379; 38.191; 43.137; 47.228; see also δάκρυα λείβω 5.351; 19.16; δάκρυα λείβης 11.321; δάκρυα λείβει 48.428; δάκρυα λείβειν 14.282; 30.113.

136. Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia de gratiarum actione* 31.225.17-18: 'But even the Lord wept for Lazarus, and he wept for Jerusalem' (ἀλλ' ἐδάκρυσεν καὶ ὁ Κύριος ἐπὶ Λαζάρῳ, ἐδάκρυσεν καὶ ἐπὶ Ἱερουσαλήμ); John Chrysostom, *De Lazaro* 48.1019.56-7: 'weep just as your master wept for Lazarus' (δάκρυσον ὡς ὁ Δεσπότης σου ἐδάκρυσεν τὸν Λάζαρον); *De proditione Judae* 49.382.46: 'at the sight of Judas, Christ was perturbed and wept' (Χριστὸς ἰδὼν τὸν Ἰούδαν ἐταράχθη καὶ ἐδάκρυσεν); *In Matthaeum* 57.69.44-6: 'And indeed he himself wept, both about Lazarus and about the city, and he was perturbed about Judas' (καὶ γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐδάκρυσεν, καὶ ἐπὶ Λαζάρου καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς πόλεως, καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ Ἰούδα διεταράχθη); *In Joannem* 59.347.53: 'for he wept for Lazarus' (ἐδάκρυσεν γὰρ ἐπὶ τοῦ Λαζάρου); *In epistulam*

*ad Romanos* 60.465.63: 'And your master wept for Judas' (καὶ ὁ σὸς Δεσπότης τὸν Ἰούδαν ἐδάκρυσεν).

137. Used five times in Nonnus; but note Callimachus fragment 491.

138. Other Church Fathers suggest that Christ sheds tears not just for Lazarus, but also for Jerusalem; and in some accounts for Judas. See above, n. 136. For a brief introduction to Cyril's *Commentary* on John see Norman (2000) 96-129.

139. *In Lazarum* 62.777.35-7.

140. Liebeschuetz (1995) 207.

141. Liebeschuetz (1995) 207.

142. A technique further exploited in the opening of the *Dionysiaca* where an implicit connection is made between the erotic encounter between Zeus and Europa and the theft of the divine thunderbolts by the monster Typhon: see Braden (1974).

143. As discussed on p. 111, the quality of εὐφοροσύνη ('good cheer') is one that has a pointed resonance within late antique Christian discourse.

144. Cyril, *Commentary* on John, 7 (tr. Randell (1885) from the edition by P.E. Pusey); on Cyril's description of the tearless nature of Christ see Hardy (1954) 34.

145. On the relationship between the tears of Christ and Dionysus, see further Agosti (2004) 299-301.

146. See, e.g., Diodorus 4.4.2; see further Shorrock (2001) 57-8.

147. *De filio* 20.16. Compare Marcellus, *De incarnatione et contra Arianos* 992.5-9: 'for his suffering means that we do not suffer, his death takes death from us; his tears mean our joy (καὶ τὸ δάκρυον αὐτοῦ, χαρὰ ἡμετέρᾳ); his tomb our resurrection'.

148. Bowersock (1994) 126.

149. Matthew 26:26; 28.

150. Bowersock (1994) 126.

151. Liebeschuetz (1995) 206 refers to the passage in Book 7 (35-105) where Aion ('Time') begs Zeus to bring relief to a world full of suffering. 'He unmistakably hints that the mission of Dionysus quite closely resembled that of Jesus: Zeus promises to send his son to earth, where he will heal men's sorrow by giving them wine, and eventually to return to heaven to be worshipped as a god. In this passage Nonnus surely wants the reader to think of Christian teaching and the Eucharist.'

152. Matthew 26:27-8; Mark 14:23-4; Luke 22:20; see also Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians 11:23-6 (the earliest recorded account of the Last Supper).

153. Barrett (1978) 299: 'This unmistakably points to the eucharist'.

154. See Spanoudakis (2007) 48.

155. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 4.108; Cassiodorus, *Variae* i.2.

156. Compare *Dion.* 29.268 'He [Dionysus] staunched the newly-flowing ichor of Eupetale with wine'; in order to help another wounded bacchant at *Dion.* 29.273, Dionysus pours 'the draught of the vinepress on the bleeding wound'.

157. See Gigli Piccardi (2003) 846.

158. On the Eucharist see Cabié (1986); Emminghaus (1997).

159. Compare 12.271: 'I will stir my drink through all my limbs' (πάσιν ἔμοις μελέεσσιν ἔμοις ἐγὼ σέο πῶμα κεράσσω).

160. It is interesting to note that Nonnus' choice of the Homeric word for 'food' (εἶδᾶρ) occurs only here in the *Dionysiaca*. In the *Paraphrase* it is employed four times – at 6.164 the context is precisely that of the Eucharist; see also *Para.* 4.156, 157; 6.127.

161. Dionysus goes on to describe how the fig and the apple have charm, but nothing to compare with the grape. The word he uses to describe this 'charm' is

χάρις (12.236) (emphasised by an anagrammatic play with the immediately preceding word, ἄχρις). It is tempting though perhaps rather fanciful to consider a punning connection with the Eucharist at this point.

162. Dionysus, for example, shares food and drink with Brongus in his country hovel (Bk 17), with Staphylus in his palace (Bk 18), with Heracles in his temple (Bk 40) and finally with his father in heaven (Bk 48).

163. See, e.g., Matthew 26:18; Mark 12:14; Luke 10:25; John 1:38; *Para.* 1.42; see also *Para.* 4.61: 'Jesus taught' (Ἰησοῦς ἐδίδαξεν); also 8.88, 9.15; 4.128: '[Christ] will teach us in our ignorance everything that is true' (ἡμέας ἀγνώσσοντας ἐτήτομα πάντα διδάξει); Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.8.62.4: 'The Lord himself will teach us ...' (διδάξει δὲ ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς ὁ κύριος); *Stromata* 1.6.34.1 'as the Lord taught' (ὡς ὁ κύριος ἐδίδαξεν); also Basil, *Asceticon magnum* 31.1240.10; Epiphanius, *Haer.* 1.422.2.

164. Compare the use of γεύομαι at Athanasius, *Didascalia cccxviii patrum Nicaenorum* 28.1642.16-17: 'Don't take wine at all – or only taste it (τοῦ γεύσασθαι) at the Eucharist'.

165. On the difference between Zeus's words and the message delivered to Dionysus by Iris see further Shorrock (2001) 138.

166. On the theme of immortality in late antiquity see Armstrong (1987).

167. See Shorrock (2001) 138.

168. See, e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Pomp.* 6.6.6; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 6.6.1.6.

169. Tit. 2.12.3: 'so that we may live wisely, justly (δικαίως) and piously (εὐσεβῶς)'.

170. *Para.* 16.31-2: 'concerning pious righteousness' (εὐσεβείας δέ / ἄμφι δικαιοσύνης). The two concepts are also paired in the substantive forms of δικαιοσύνη ('justice') and εὐσέβεια ('piety'): see, e.g., Timothy 1.6.11; Eusebius, *Prep. Evang.* 8.6.8.5; *De ecclesiastica theologica* 3.18.4.3; Basil, *Asceticon Magnum* 31.1120.48; John Chrysostom, *De Lazaro* 48.987.18.

171. The phrase recurs in Gregory of Nyssa, *In diem luminum* 9.226.4.

172. One might wish to consider further analogies between the vine of Dionysus and the vine of Christ in terms of the way that they are received – both welcomed with enthusiasm (e.g. Botrys in Book 17) and resisted with great violence (e.g. Lycurgus in Book 20).

173. Compare the reaction of Icarius and the Athenian farmers: Icarius 'drank and drank again with an insatiable (ἀκόρητον) desire' (47.58-9).

174. On the novelty of Christianity see Kippenberg, Kuiper and Sanders (1990) 75.

175. Ampelus is, when still alive, described as 'new/youthful' (νέος) (10.248) – a quality that stays with him after his transformation into the vine.

176. Rose *apud* Rouse (1940) vol. 2.38.

177. See 7.90 (again with reference to Dionysus): εὐφοροσύνης κήρυκα ('herald of good cheer'). Cf. 9.12 where the Horai ('Seasons'), who attend on the birth of Dionysus are described as 'heralds of things to come' (ἔσσομένων κήρυκες); see also 7.107 for an identical description of the Horai in attendance on Zeus.

178. See, e.g., *Odyssey* 20.8.

179. The divine nature of εὐφοροσύνη is one much exploited by the Church Fathers; see p. 111.

180. *Para.* 8.182: εἶδε καὶ εὐφοροσύνης ἐπεβήσατο ('[Abraham] saw and was of good cheer').

181. When Zeus announces himself to Semele as her lover, he comforts her with the thought that she will be the mother of a son who has a special role to fulfil on

earth [7.367-8]: 'Happy woman! You shall bring forth joy (χάρμα) for gods and men, having conceived a son who will make mortals forgetful of their troubles (ἐπιλήθων ἀνίης)'.

182. Note the pattern of the 'golden line' at 12.269: στρυγνὸν ἀεξομένης ἀποσείεται ὄγκον ἀνίης (adjective a, adjective b, verb, noun A, noun B).

183. The adjective ἀλεξικάκος, used here to describe the wine of Dionysus, is also employed in the *Paraphrase* with reference to Christ see, e.g. 11.12; for the Christian resonance of the word see further Agosti (2004) 298 (on *Dion.* 29.90-1).

184. For correspondences between Christ the healer and the cult of Asclepius see, e.g., Dinkler (1980).

185. It is associated not just with wine, but with nectar at *Dion.* 6.29 and ambrosia at *Dion.* 9.282. Compare the use of the compound adjective λυσιμέριμος at *Dion.* 19.18.

186. And a 'drink of forgetfulness' (ποτὸν ληθαίον) (46.360).

187. *Cyneg.* 4.254: 'to Dionysus who releases cares' (λυσιπόνον Διονύσῳ); cf. Oppian, *Hal.* 4.201.

188. See Chapter 3, p. 78.

189. See also *Haer.* 3.515; 2.303: 'the wine that releases cares' (τοῦ λυσιπόνου οἴνου).

190. *Para.* 5.37, 7.119 and 9.26 (with reference to the words that he utters).

191. Shorrock (2001) 132-7.

192. On the (often uncomfortable) reliance of Christian writers on the Classical tradition see p. 20.

193. The metaphor can be found in Virgil, Ovid, Catullus and Horace. The vine is usually imagined as female, with the prop as the male; in Nonnus, however, the vine is figured as both male and female.

194. See, e.g., John Chrysostom in his *Homilies* (Migne, *PG* LVI 701), and the Syrian poet Commodianus in his *Institutiones* (*ulmus amat vitem*, Migne *PL* v 225).

195. Demetz (1958) 526: 'The nuptial motif of elm and vine lost its resplendent vitality in the centuries between Commodianus (c. 450 AD) and the Neo-Latin poet Jovannus Pontanus (1426-1503).'

196. Demetz (1958) 526.

197. Vian (1995a) 201.

198. Averil Cameron (1994).

## 5. The Poetics of Late Antiquity

1. Feeney (1998) 21.

2. Vian (1976) 94-5; translation mine. In her Budé commentary on Books 44-6 (the triad that retells Euripides' *Bacchae*) Bernadette Simon follows Vian in rejecting the possibility (put forward by Tissoni (1998)) that Dionysus functions as a '*figura Christi*' (Simon (2004) 133): 'Il nous semble que cela ne correspond pas aux intentions du poète'.

3. Alan Cameron (2007) 37.

4. Alan Cameron (2007) 38; compare Leader-Newby's discussion of the significance of traditional mythological images on late antique silver plate arguing that the traditional mythological images were used to disguise cultural change and were part of an élite display of *paideia*. Leader-Newby (2004) 123: 'The surviving display plates of the fourth and early fifth centuries are decorated lavishly with a range of mythological images ... What significance did this traditional iconography

have for its late antique viewers in a period in which the context in which it had existed for centuries was being transformed, not least by the establishment of a new religion, Christianity, which called into question the validity of the mythological tradition? One answer was that it disguised such changes by maintaining continuity with the past; on the communication of *paideia* through material culture see Leader-Newby (2004) 123-71.

5. Liebeschuetz (2001) 234.

6. Liebeschuetz (1995) 206.

7. Liebeschuetz (1995) 207; compare Spanoudakis (2007) 87: '[Nonnus] approach is defined by covert parody and a great deal of idiosyncratic, if not, at times, perverted wit'; see also 88-9: 'It is also worthy of note that, whereas there is no trace of mockery of the Christian God in the Paraphrasis, Nonnus plays with Christian ideas under the safe cover of the pagan gods'; see too Cavero (2009) 582: 'The humorous approach towards the iconography of the gods is used to dismantle their ostensible power, especially in the case of Dionysus and other male deities. With it Nonnus provides his readers with many opportunities for laughter at the expense of ridiculous images.'

8. Liebeschuetz (2001) 234; see Liebeschuetz (1995) 207: 'the poem would have been read as essentially non-religious'; Liebeschuetz (2001) 231-2: 'But does the glorification of Dionysus and his fellows really mean that the epic is a religious poem in the sense that the author is actually presenting Dionysus as an all-powerful saviour god, and that his audience would have recognised the poem as advocating the traditional religion with Dionysus as its supreme deity?'

9. Liebeschuetz (2001) 232.

10. Feeney (1998) 1-2.

11. On the murder of Icarus see further Spanoudakis (2007).

12. See Prose (2003) 21-30 on both Christian and Classical responses to drunkenness and excessive consumption.

13. See Grimm (1996) esp. 106-9 on the dangers of drinking as expressed by Clement of Alexandria; Wilson (1998) 64: 'As a Jew, Jesus stood in a tradition of ambivalence about alcohol. The Jewish Bible (Christian 'Old Testament') ranges in attitude from condemnation of wine consumption to praising God for the gift of wine given to gladden human hearts.'

14. See Runia (1993) 179-80.

15. Wilson (1998) 64 (who describes the close connection between drunkenness and sexual licence).

16. On the concept of inspired drunkenness in the Christian tradition see Ruvoldt (2004) 25: 'Sts. Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome likened religious ecstasy to drunkenness.'

17. Liebeschuetz (1999) 204 argues for a late antique solar syncretism shared by Macrobius, Julian, Orphic Hymns, Nonnus and Martianus Capella; for a syncretistic reading of Dionysiac imagery see Leader-Newby (2004) 157; on late antique syncretism see further Thomas (2000) 36-7; Frankfurter (2003).

18. Compare Claudian's description of the construction of a statue of a chariot: *una silix tot membra ligat* ('a single block encompasses so many forms') (7 (87) 3).

19. On Nonnian syncretism see Livrea (1989).

20. Averil Cameron (1994) 5.

21. Much later oracular knowledge contained in the tablets of Harmonia is delivered by Harmonia herself to Aphrodite at 41.340: 'For I have oracles of history on seven tablets'; 41.368-76: 'Such was the word of prophecy that she learnt. But when the deity had scanned the prophetic beginning of the seventh tablet, she

looked at the second, where on the neighbouring wall many strange signs were engraved with varied art in oracular speech, how ... Orpheus [will invent] the streams of mystic song with divine voice, Apollo's Lynus eloquent speech ....' An explicit connection between the oracular tablets and the theme of poetic inspiration is made at 41.385 where the contents of the tablets are described as the 'manifold wonders of the Muse'.

22. See especially Shorrock (2001) 25-31.

23. The description of wine (12.240-4) and the vine (12.272-84) may themselves be read as metaphors for the epic poem: see Shorrock (2001) 132-7.

24. See Shorrock (2001) 20-3.

25. See Vian (1995b).

26. The proem to Book 1 provides a sort of table of contents for the poem as Nonnus demonstrates how he will match Proteus' shapeshifting; but the poem is also furnished with 96 lines of *periochi*. The two versions of the invention of wine are presented at 12.173-292 and 12.292-393; the two speeches (one indirect, the other direct) launching Dionysus' mission against the Indians can be found at 13.3-7 and 13.19-34.

27. Consider the perfunctory ending to the whole epic at *Dion.* 48.974-8 – its brevity serves to emphasise the relative unimportance of reaching 'the end'.

28. See Papadoyannakis (2006) 100-2; König and Whitmarsh (2007).

29. See Chapter 1, p. 5.

30. Consider, for example, the debate over Mary as *theotokos*. See further p. 61.

31. Compare Haas (1997) 424 n. 9: 'By the early fifth century, the political victory of Christianity gave rise to a "totalizing discourse" in which Christian interpretations of the recent past swept away competing historiographies'.

32. Kahlos (2007) 2.

33. Kahlos (2007) 31: 'First the term describes the state of uncertainty – *incertitudo* – on the mental level of individuals. Second it draws into consideration the inflexibility of classifications and the conceptual violence done to individuals by hierarchies. *Incerti* is a concept reminiscent of the term hybrid. Hybrids do not fit in the symmetrical model of the world where the self and the other are defined dualistically in terms of either/or. Instead, hybrids are understood in terms of both – and, confusing the order of the world based on symbolic borders and questioning clearly defined demarcation lines.'

34. Kahlos (2007) 31; she continues: 'Thus the Christian and the pagan are inseparable in individuals and even the most convinced Christian hardliners are forced to bear both parts interwoven in themselves during their lifetime.'

35. On the relationship between the tragic space and the *polis* see, e.g., Goldhill (1997).

36. Spanoudakis (2007); traditionally the Icarus/Erigone episode has been analysed in terms of its intertextual relationship with the Hellenistic literary tradition.

37. For recent works that have begun to rehabilitate the genre of cento poetry see Usher (1998) and McGill (2005).

38. See Chapter 1, p. 6.

39. Note the emphasis on the shape-shifting capacity of Dionysus.

40. Shackleton Bailey (1982) preface; *De ecclesia* can be found as *Reise AL* 16.

41. On the transition enacted by Nisus and Euryalus from games in *Aeneid* 5 to war in *Aeneid* 9 see Hardie (1994) 28-9.

42. As famously expounded by Harold Bloom (1973).

*Notes to pages 131-132*

43. For the fears of a poet about suffering the fate of Marsyas see Nonnus, *Dion.* 1.40-4.

44. Compare Moreschini and Sykes (1997) 92: ‘The poet who is ἀποδοίδακτος is marked off from the ‘school-poets’ by a spontaneity which derives from divine inspiration’.

45. Cf. *Aen.* 1.229: *res hominumque deumque.*

46. On the transformation of temples into churches see Hanson (1985) 347-58; Hahn, Emmel and Gotter (2008).

47. Hansen (2003) provides an excellent and sophisticated analysis of the appropriation and significance of *spolia* in early Christian Rome; see also Christie (2006) 208-13; for a discussion of the significance of *spolia* on the Arch of Constantine see Elsner (2000); for an engaging introduction to the visual symbolism of a late antique church in Rome (Sant’ Agnese fuori le Mura) see Visser (2001).

48. See Christie (2006) 208: ‘... we must be cautious in assuming a Christian “conquest” through such reuse’.

49. See Weitzmann (1979); Bowersock (1994) 158; Turcan (1996) 314: ‘Some Bacchic sarcophagi [in the shape of grape-pressing vats] ... were apparently re-used for Christian burial, those who salvaged them not even taking the trouble to destroy the image of the god or the Bacchantes.’

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