

“Applaud me or boo me”: Performativity and Resonance in Ausonius’ *Play of the Seven Sages*

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1. Introduction

The text that is the subject of this chapter is easy to describe and, by the same token, elusive. It is a play written by the late antique poet Ausonius (c. 310-394 CE) which – as its title *Ludus septem sapientium* indicates – dramatises the canonical Seven Sages of antiquity and their famous sayings:¹ Solon of Athens, Chilon of Sparta, Cleobulus of Lindos, Thales of Miletus, Bias of Priene, Pittacus of Lesbos and Periander of Corinth enter the stage one after the other and present in short speeches the maxims for which they are known. This sequence of appearances is introduced by a double prologue that sets the scene and explains the content of the play. To this ‘text proper’ of the *Ludus septem sapientium*, Ausonius added a paratextual preface, a dedicatory verse letter to Pacatus Drepanius, proconsul of the year 390 CE.²

So much for the easy part. Far more intricate than the fairly simple structure of the text is the game it plays with its audience.³ The difficulty here

1 See Althoff/Zeller (2006b), 5-24, on how the canonisation of the Seven Sages came about: the oldest extant reference to the Seven Sages as a group appears in Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras* (343a1-b3; the dialogue was probably written in the first quarter of the 4th c. BCE). Later, Demetrius of Phalerum (born c. 360 BCE) collected the sayings and established the then canonical catalogue of seven names. The Sages themselves all belong to the archaic period (7th/6th c. BCE).

2 This date thus sets a *terminus post quem* for the dedication/the publication with this prefatory letter; it is possible though that Ausonius composed the play at an earlier date, cf. Green (1991), 597; Cazzuffi (2014), lxxiii n. 17.

3 The various connotations of *ludus*/“play” are important here: with this title, Ausonius consciously designates his text as a theatrical play, but also as a ludic text in a broader sense (see Scafoglio [2020], 60-61, for a detailed discussion of the relevant ‘significati’)

is not so much the question of whether the play was written for an actual performance on a stage of whatever kind or if it was intended for a reading reception.⁴ The play's form makes it perfectly possible to actually stage it,⁵ and this dramatic 'texture' is so evident that it will inform every reading of the play. Moreover, the staging versus reading dichotomy should not be pressed too hard anyway since modes of reception that stand between these opposites are equally possible and even likely: a recitation of the play at a banquet (*convivium*) is a very plausible definition of the text's 'Sitz im Leben'.⁶ The challenge is rather to describe and interpret the ambiguous communication the *Ludus septem sapientium* establishes with its audience in any form of reception.

This is where resonance comes into play: in what follows, I will argue that interpreting the complexities of the text in terms of "Resonanzwirkung" ("resonant effects") opens up new ways of understanding and appreciating this fascinating, yet still neglected piece of late antique literature. To this end, I will proceed in three steps: I will first focus on the play's metatheatrical character and the various affordances it makes to its listeners/readers. I will then turn to "Unverfügbarkeit" ("uncontrollability") as a crucial aspect of the play's speech acts and its appeals to the audience. Finally, I will analyse the paratextual preface and explore the implications of the 'model reader' addressed in this introductory dedication.

of the term). Cf. also La Penna (1993) for the complex notion of *lusus* in other texts of Ausonius' oeuvre.

4 This question has vexed scholars, see Spahlinger (2006), 166-167, n. 14.

5 Cf. Lepetit (2016), 186-190.

6 Cf. the *Querolus sive Aulularia*, a comedy from the early 5th c. CE (so not much later than Ausonius' *Play of the Seven Sages*) whose unknown author expressly states in the opening dedication that the piece is intended for recitation at a banquet (*nos fabellis atque mensis hunc libellum scripsimus*, Peiper [1886], 3, 16-17).

2. "I appear on the stage": Self-Consciousness, Metatheatre and 'Resonance Offer'

The first aspect I would like to highlight is the double self-consciousness exhibited by all the characters who appear on stage in the *Play of the Seven Sages*: they know that they are part of a drama, and they are aware of their own history or of the history of theatre as a performance space and social institution. This awareness gives the whole play a decidedly metatheatrical character and establishes a very specific way of communicating with the audience. Right at the beginning, the speaker of the prologue recounts the history of Graeco-Roman theatre by focussing on the different social functions of theatrical buildings in Greece and Rome and on the development of performance spaces in the latter place, "our city" (19-41):⁷

<i>Septem sapientes, nomen quibus istud dedit superior aetas nec secuta sustulit, hodie in orchestram palliati prodeunt. quid erubescis tu, togate Romule, scaenam quod introibunt tam clari viri? nobis pudendum hoc, non et Atticis quoque: quibus theatrum curiae praebet vicem.</i>	20
<i>nostris negotis sua loca sortito data: campus comitiis, ut conscriptis curia, forum atque rostra separat ius civium. una est Athenis atque in omni Graecia ad consulendum publici sedes loci, quam in urbe nostra sero luxus condidit. aedilis olim scaenam tabulatam dabat subito excitatam nulla mole saxea. Murena sic et Gallius: nota eloquar. postquam potentes nec verentes sumptuum nomen perenne crediderunt, si semel constructa moles saxeo fundamine in omne tempus conderet ludis locum: cuneata crevit haec theatri inmanitas: Pompeius hanc et Balbus et Caesar dedit Octavianus concertantes sumptibus.</i>	25
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7 I quote Evelyn-White's (1919/21) text (which is based on Peiper [1886]) and translation.

The Seven Sages, as an earlier age called them – nor has a later withdrawn the title – to-day step forth upon our stage, wearing Grecian cloaks. Why do you blush so hotly, toga-clad Roman, because such famous men are to appear upon the stage? With us this is a disgrace, but is not so also with men of Greece, whose theatre serves them in place of a Senate House. Our proceedings have their own allotted places: the Campus for elections, as the Curia for the Senate, while the privilege of the citizens sets apart the forum and the rostra⁸. At Athens and everywhere in Greece the only public place for debate is that which luxury established in our city at a late date.⁹ The aedile¹⁰ in old times used to provide a wooden theatre, hastily run up, and not a massive pile of stone. That is what Murena and Gallius did¹¹ – I will mention established facts. When men, grown powerful and reckless of expense, believed their names would endure for ever if they once raised a massy structure on stone foundations to be a place for shows to all time, this immense theatre with its radiating gangways came into being: this theatre Pompey and Balbus and Octavianus Caesar gave us,¹² vying with each other in their outlay.
(Transl. after Evelyn-White)

A first and important form of resonance appears in these words of the prologue: the theatrical past resonates in the *Play of the Seven Sages*. The characters of the drama make history present, by reflecting upon the development of theatre, as the prologue does, by bringing figures from a distant past – the archaic Sages – on stage, and not least on a linguistic level by modelling the play’s language and metre on the century-old comedy, the so-called *fabula palliata*, of Plautus and Terence (late 3rd/early 2nd c. BCE).¹³ All these elements from the past are appropriated, and combined, to form a highly resonant text that invites its late antique audience to take

8 The speakers’ platform.

9 I.e. the theatre.

10 The Roman magistrate chiefly responsible for organising the *ludi* (“games”) which included theatrical performances.

11 Both held *ludi* in the 60s BCE, see Cazzuffi (2014), 40-41, and Dräger (2015), 337, for details.

12 These theatres were built in the mid (Pompey) and late 1st c. BCE (Balbus, and Octavianus Caesar [= the theatre of Marcellus]), see Green (1991), 599, for details.

13 For a useful outline of the appropriation of Plautine and Terentian language by the play, see Green (1991), 597-598. The archaic ‘tinge’ of Evelyn-White’s English translation is thus no accident (or only rooted in the usage of his period), it rather reflects a key characteristic of the text’s Latin.

up a stance that mirrors the play's broad historical scope:¹⁴ the listeners/readers are to adduce and activate their cultural and literary knowledge in order to grasp and enjoy the virtuoso fusion of Greek characters and Roman language and setting, of distant periods, and of different forms of interaction with the audience, which brings us to the next sections of the play.

The first Sage to enter the stage after the introductory 'scene(s)',¹⁵ Solon, corroborates the picture of a highly metatheatrical play, but also adds further nuances to the resonant character of the text. Solon is perfectly aware that he is famous and canonised and addresses his listeners accordingly (73-87):

*De more Graeco prodeo in scaenam Solon,
septem sapientum fama cui palmam dedit.
set famae non est iudicii severitas; 75
neque enim esse primum me, verum unum existimo,
aequalitas quod ordinem nescit pati.
recte olim ineptum Delphicus suasit deus
quaerentem, quisnam primus sapientum foret,
ut in orbe tereti nominum sertum inderet, 80
ne primus esset, ne vel imus quispiam.
eorum e medio prodeo gyro Solon,
ut, quod dixisse Croeso regi existimor,
id omnis hominum secta sibi dictum putet.
Graece coactum est ὄρα τέλος μακροῦ βίου, 85
quod longius fit, si Latine dixeris:
spectare vitae iubeo cunctos terminum.*

After the Greek fashion I appear upon the stage, Solon, to whom among the Seven Sages the general voice has given the palm. But the general voice has not the strictness of the judgment-seat; for I regard myself not as the first, but one of them, because equality cannot brook gradation. When a fool once asked who was the first among the Sages, well did the Delphic god advise him to fasten a slip bearing their names about a round ball, that no one should be first or last. From that circle's midst I, Solon, come forward, in order that that word, which it is thought I spoke to Croesus, all the human race may regard as spoken to itself. In Greek 'tis tersely put

14 On 'appropriation' as a key notion of the theory of resonance, see Gärtner's introduction to this volume, 3.3., and Rosa, in this volume.

15 After *Prologus*, a certain *Ludius* ("conférencier"/"master of ceremonies"?) [cf. Marti [1974], 169) enters and briefly quotes all the Sages' sayings.

ὄρα τέλος μακροῦ βίου, but becomes somewhat longer if rendered in your tongue: I bid all men watch life's end.
(Transl. after Evelyn-White)

After telling the story of his famous encounter with king Croesus of Lydia, the context his saying originated in,¹⁶ Solon closes his speech with yet another proof of his metatheatrical self-consciousness (and personal self-confidence): he asks the audience to applaud (*Ego iam peregi, qua de causa huc prodii. | venit ecce Chilon. vos valet et plaudite*, “Now I have finished that for which I came forward here. Look! Chilon is coming. Fare ye well and applaud”, 129-130).

From the perspective of a resonance-related approach, this appeal to the audience can be described as an “offer of resonance”, to quote a term coined by U. Gärtner.¹⁷ Taking up this concept helps to understand the specific structure of the text's affordances. For the offer made by the *Play of the Seven Sages* is much more complex than simply demanding applause for a clear-cut moral maxim like Solon's “watch life's end”. Rather, the play unfolds a spectrum of different, even contradictory appeals to its listeners/readers, as appears from the ensuing scene: Chilon enters, and he counters Solon with a fairly polemical argument – and by negating the Athenian's applause-seeking closure (131-146):

*Lumbi sedendo, oculi spectando dolent,
manendo Solonem, quoad ad se se recipiat.
hui, quam pauca, di, locuntur Attici!
unam trecentis versibus sententiam
tandem peregit meque respectans abit.* 135
*Spartanus ego sum Chilon, qui nunc prodeo.
brevitate nota, qua Lacones utimur,
commendo nostrum γνῶθι σεαυτόν, nosce te,
quod in columna iam tenetur Delphica.
labor molestus iste fructi est optimi,* 140
*quid ferre possis, quidve non, dinoscere;
noctu diuque, quae geras, quae gesseris,
ad usque puncti tenuis instar quaerere.
officia cuncta, pudor, honor, constantia*

16 Cf. Hdt. 1,29-33 and 86-87.

17 See Gärtner, in this volume, 1.

in hoc, et ulla spreta nobis gloria.

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Dixi: valete memores. plausum non moror.

My loins ache with sitting, my eyes with watching, while I waited for Solon to come to himself. Good Lord! What “brief speaking” these Athenians use! When at last he has finished off a single saw in heaven knows how many lines, he goes off looking back at me regretfully.

I who now come on am Spartan Chilon. With that well-known curtness which we Laconians use I recommend my γνώθι σεαυτόν, “know thyself,” which is still preserved on a column at Delphi. That irksome toil produces most excellent fruit – to distinguish what you can endure and what you cannot; by night and day to examine what you are doing, what you have done, down to the smallest atom. All virtues – self-respect, honour, fortitude – lie in this, as well as any noble trait I have passed by.

I have done: farewell, be thoughtful. I do not wait for applause.

(Transl. after Evelyn-White)

Again, as with the prologue’s retrospective view of the history of Graeco-Roman theatre, there is a double dynamic of resonance here: Chilon strongly reacts to Solon, which adds further complexity to the temporal outlook of the play – the *Ludus* not only refers to a past outside of itself (the first theatrical buildings, early Roman comedy etc.) and makes this past resonate within the text, but also creates its own ‘internal’ chronology (and history) by performing the succession of the Sages’ speech acts. By the time Chilon is on stage, Solon’s utterance has become a past event that resonates in the ‘now’ of Chilon’s statement. By the same token, just as the prologue’s metatheatrical reflections appeal to the listeners’ or readers’ knowledge and afford them the opportunity to engage with the historical resonances in the play, Chilon’s reaction to Solon offers the audience yet another take on the Sage’s sayings, (“do not applaud me, just remember my saw”), which invites them to revisit their prior evaluation of Solon or of their preconceptions of the Sages in general. If we pick up the musical connotations of the metaphor of resonance,¹⁸ we could say that the characters of the *Play of the Seven Sages* continuously modulate the tune of the reverberations the drama creates in its listeners/readers.

18 For resonance as an “akustische Figur”, see Lichau/Tkaczyk/Wolf (2009), 15-20. Cf. also Weidner, in this volume.

The next scene takes this modulation even further. Cleobulus of Lindos enters and turns the audience, it seems, into co-actors who share in his performance (147-162):

*Cleobulus ego sum, parvae civis insulae,
magnae sed auctor, qua cluo, sententiae:
ἄριστον μέτρον quem dixisse existimant.
interpretare tu, qui orchestrae proximus* 150
*gradibus propinquis in quatuordecim sedes:
ἄριστον μέτρον an sit optimus modus,
dic! adnuisti? gratiam habeo. persequar
per ordinem. iam dixit ex isto loco
Afer poeta vester “ut ne quid nimis,”* 155
*et noster quidam μηδὲν ἄγαν. huc pertinet
uterque sensus, Italus seu Dorius.
fandi, tacendi, somni, vigiliis is modus,
beneficiorum, gratiarum, iniuriae,
studii, laborum: vita in omni quidquid est,* 160
*istum requirit optimaе pausae modum.
Dixi: recedam. sit modus. venit Thales.*

I am Cleobulus, native of a small island, but author of a great saying which makes me famous – he whom they believe to have said ἄριστον μέτρον. Translate please, you who sit next the orchestra in the stalls close by: is not ἄριστον μέτρον “moderation is best”? Come, tell me! You nodded? Thank you. I will go on to the next point. Your African poet¹⁹ has already said from this stage “do nothing overmuch,” and one of my own countrymen says μηδὲν ἄγαν. Both maxims, Latin and Greek, bear on our purpose. ’Tis moderation in speech, in silence, in slumber, in watching, in benefits, in gratitude, in wrongs, in study, in toil. Whatever our whole life can show demands this moderation, which is timely cessation.

I have said my say: I will go off. Let us be moderate! Thales is coming. (Transl. after Evelyn-White)

In what is arguably the strongest metatheatrical moment of the play, Cleobulus casts one member of the audience as an interpreter of the Greek saw. In fact, this casting goes even beyond a mere affordance since Cleobulus does not simply offer the interpreter’s part, but in fact directly assigns it to a person of his choosing and performs the expected affirmative answer himself by stating (153): *adnuisti? gratiam habeo.* – “You nodded? Thank

19 I.e. Terence.

you.”²⁰ With this performative closure of Cleobulus' interaction with the audience a further aspect of resonance comes into play here: the, to use H. Rosa's words, *Unverfügbarkeit* (“uncontrollability”) of every process or act of resonance (*Resonanzgeschehen*).²¹

3. “*I could wish I had never said it*”: “*Unverfügbarkeit*” (“*Uncontrollability*”)

At first glance, Cleobulus seems to aim for a maximum of “*Verfügbarkeit*” (“controllability”). That he himself performs the affirmation he seeks in l.153 means that he does not allow for any other, potentially non-affirmative reaction by the audience, a strategy of closure that is supported by the fact that the unnamed *tu* (“you”) is denied any speech act: Cleobulus includes no quote, no direct utterance of this “you” in his performance, he only states in his own words that approval has been given. The effect of this strategy on the listeners (and also the readers of the text) is that they are, to some extent, deprived of what H. Rosa has called the experience of “self-efficacy” (“*Selbstwirksamkeit*”), a key component of every truly resonant interaction with a text, a work of art or any other object of perception: while (true) resonance “is not just a passive experience of something happening to us”,²² the listeners or readers of Cleobulus' scene have no say in his performance of self-affirmation and must simply let it happen. In other words, the Sage seems to consciously sacrifice one part of the potential for resonance in order to assert his control over the meaning of his saw.

There is, however, another level of interacting with Cleobulus' words that still offers an experience of resonance which includes “*Selbstwirksamkeit*” (“self-efficacy”). For as much as the Sage excludes the audience's voice, the listeners or readers are of course free to reflect on Cleobulus' strategy of control and what it means for them. In fact, the palpable contrast between the apparent gesture of opening up the Sage's discourse (*interpretare tu ...*, “Translate please, you ...”, l.150) and the actual closure of his speech act

20 For models of this usage of *adnuo* in Plautus, see Cazzuffi (2014), 87-88.

21 Cf. Rosa (2016), 475-480, 496-500. See also Gärtner, introduction to this volume, 3.4., and Rosa, in this volume, 2.4.

22 Rosa, in this volume, 2.2.

invites the listeners/readers to engage with this contradiction, both emotionally (they can feel the ‘price of control’ and might even be disappointed by the Sage’s ‘trick’) and intellectually (defining the meaning of the sayings seems to depend on controlling the way we talk about them).

It appears thus that the text plays with the “(Un-)Verfügbarkeit” (“[un-]controllability”) of the Sages’ saws and the speech acts around them. Another striking feature of Cleobulus’ scene works in the same direction: there is a glaring anachronism in that he as a figure from archaic Greece – the historic Cleobulus lived around 600 BCE – refers to Terence (“your African poet”) who wrote his comedies in the 2nd c. BCE. Cleobulus even treats the Roman poet as a figure from a (presumably distant) past, as becomes evident from his words in ll.154-155: *iam dixit ex isto loco | Afer poeta vester ‘ut ne quid nimis’*, “Your African poet has already said from this stage ‘do nothing overmuch’”.²³ *iam* (“already”) and the past tense are clear markers here – the archaic Sage, it seems, is aware that he acts on a stage of the 4th c. CE, and he is able to incorporate plays and sayings from any period prior to this performance date into his speech act.²⁴

Again, Cleobulus shows himself to be in full control – “Verfügung” characterises his performance, be it in terms of assigning roles or defining (or defying?) chronology. For the audience, however, the paradoxical fusion of chronologically distinct periods into an artificially created stage time creates a dynamic that is hardly controllable: like in the image evoked by Solon in his scene, a round ball with the names of all the Sages attached to it so that no name is first or last (78-81), the play offers its listeners/readers a polychronic montage that gives no fixed order or hierarchy, but invites the audience to connect and mentally recombine the elements, to bring in their knowledge of past periods and texts and to link it to what is quoted or

23 The reference is to Ter. *An.* 60-61.

24 If Peiper’s much-quoted interpretation that the following remark *et noster quidam μηδὲν ἄγαν* (156) refers to E. *Hipp.* 264-265 is correct, Classical Greek tragedy also forms part of Cleobulus’ sweeping historical outlook (cf. Peiper [1886], 177; Green [1991], 603; Cazzuffi [2014], 88-89; Dräger [2015], 354).

mentioned by the figures of the play – an associative process that by its very nature is open-ended and thus “unverfügbar” (“uncontrollable”).²⁵

When we again follow the performative sequence of the play and turn to the next Sages who enter the stage, a further form of “uncontrollability” appears. Thales and after him Bias come and face a rather delicate task: to ‘sell’ to the audience a saying which will probably offend some or even all listeners. Both Sages tackle this task by negotiating expectations and by giving the audience an incentive to interpret their saws in the way the speakers desire. Thales starts with telling a story that shows his modesty and, by the same token, his pre-eminent status among the Seven Sages.²⁶ He then presents his maxim (175-188):

<i>Is igitur ego sum. causa set in scaenam fuit</i>	175
<i>mihi prodeundi, quae duobus ante me,</i>	
<i>adsertor ut sententiae fierem meae.</i>	
<i>ea displicebit, non tamen prudentibus,</i>	
<i>quos docuit usus et peritos reddidit,</i>	
<i>en ἐγγύα, πάρα δ' ἄτα graece dicimus:</i>	180
<i>Latinum est, sponde, noxa set praesto tibi.</i>	
<i>per mille possem currere exempla, ut probem</i>	
<i>praedes vadesque paenitudinis reos.</i>	
<i>sed nolo quemquam nominatim dicere:</i>	
<i>sibi quisque vestrum dicat et secum putet,</i>	185
<i>spondere quantis damno fuerit et malo.</i>	
<i>gratum hoc officium maneat ambobus tamen.</i>	
<i>Pars plaudite ergo, pars offensi explodite.</i>	

That man, then, am I. But the reason for my appearing on the stage, as with the two who have preceded me, is to become the champion of my own maxim. It will offend some, but not those canny ones who have learned from experience and have been made worldly-wise. Well, ἐγγύα πάρα δ' ἄτα, we say in Greek: in your language, “Be

25 See Scafoglio (2017), 1050-1056, for another take on the play’s fusion of diverse elements: he stresses the cultural aspect, the “comparazione” and “compenetrazione tra le due culture, greca e latina” (1053).

26 A tripod as prize for the Wisest is given to Thales who rejects it; having been passed on to the other Sages who also, one by one, reject it, the tripod returns to Thales who dedicates it to Apollon (163-174). Various versions of this story existed in antiquity as appears from D.L. 1,27-33 where a whole range of these narratives are recounted in the context of Diogenes’ biography of Thales (cf. Althoff/Zeller [2006b], 21-24; Cazzuffi [2014], 93-96).

a surety, but Ruin stands near you.” I could run over a thousand instances to prove that those who give bond or bail appear at the bar of regret. But I do not care to mention anyone by name: let each of you mention such to himself and reflect how many have suffered loss and harm by standing surety. Yet may both parties still find pleasure in this service!

Clap, then, some of you; the rest, affronted, hiss me off the stage.

Central to Thales’ rhetoric is the contention that the *prudentes*, the “clever ones” who have learned from experience, will *not* be offended by the Sage’s maxim (178-179) – an ingenious means of nudging the audience to accept (and applaud) Thales’ wisdom: who would want to be counted among the unwise and unexperienced? But then again, Thales cannot be sure of the audience’s reaction, in other words: he cannot fully control the effect of his maxim and his speech delivered on stage. He is, of course, aware of this “Unverfügbarkeit” and reckons with a divided mood in the audience, as his closing line with the explicit antithesis of the imperatives *plaudite – explodite* (“applaud – hiss me off the stage”, 188) shows. For the listeners/readers this means that they are not just made an ambiguous or complex affordance by Thales. What has been observed above in terms of ‘resonance offer’, is here taken to a dichotomic extreme: Thales’ closing speech act divides the audience in two parties, which challenges the listeners/readers to take sides – a moment of marked tension right in the middle of the play.²⁷

With the next Sage, Bias of Priene, this tension seems to be resolved. Bias explicitly states that he only sees *one* kind of listener in the audience, and in tune with this perception, he foresees just one coherent reaction: he expects applause from everyone again. But below the neat surface of this restoration of a united community of spectators (and of a consensus between audience and performer) looms a contradiction that again points to uncontrollability as a fundamental characteristic of the Sages’ sayings and their stage performances: Bias can only assure (or at least assert) the audience’s approval by means of a radical reinterpretation of his maxim (189-201):

27 It is no accident that this happens in the third, i.e. central, of the seven ‘presentations’ of the Sages – another instance of Ausonius’ play making full use of the performative sequence of scenes or speech acts.

Bias Prieneus <quod> dixi oĩ pleĩστοι κακοί,
Latine dictum suspicor: plures mali. 190
dixisse nollem; veritas odium parit.
malos sed imperitos dixi et barbaros,
qui ius et aequum et sacros mores neglegunt.
nam populus iste, quo theatrum cingitur,
totus bonorum est. hostium tellus habet, 195
dixisse quos me creditis, plures malos.
sed nemo quisquam tam malus iudex fuit,
quin iam bonorum partibus se copulet,
sive ille vere bonus est, seu dici studet.
iam fugit illud nomen invisum mali. 200
Abeo. valete et plaudite, plures boni.

I am Bias of Priene, and my saying οĩ pleĩστοι κακοί. I fancy you would render “most men are bad.” I could wish I had never said it; truth breeds hatred. But by the “bad” I meant uncultured men and savages, who disregard right and equity and hallowed customs. For this throng filling the circle of the theatre is of good men all. It is your enemies’ country that contains those of whom you think I spoke, “the many bad.” But no one would be so bad a judge as not to attach himself to the side of the good, whether he is really good or anxious to be so called. So now that hated epithet “the bad” takes flight.

I must move off. Farewell and applaud, you who “most are good.”

(Transl. after Evelyn-White)

Bias alters the meaning of his saw in two steps: he first restricts its object (“it is not you I referred to, but the barbarians”) to arrive at a completely reversed saying at the end of his speech: *plures mali* (“most men are bad”) is turned into *plures boni* (“most are good”). This closure might be a “witticism”,²⁸ but it nonetheless runs counter to the sense of the original maxim, and this flat contradiction cannot be lost on any listener or reader. In fact, Bias himself lays bare that any consensus he might reach with the audience is not based on factual virtuousness, but on the shared willingness to be *called* a community of the good: “but no one would be so bad a judge as not to attach himself to the side of the good, *whether he is really good or anxious to be so called (sive ille vere bonus est, seu dici studet)*” (197-199). So, there might and will actually be people in the audience who are not *boni*, and this together with the all too evident rhetoric of flattering the audience

28 So Green (1991), 604-605.

(and saving Bias from the hatred he himself evokes in l.191) makes the listeners/readers wonder whether the Sage's original saw, "most are bad", might not have a point after all. One could even consider whether Bias is playing a double game here and consciously uses the ploy of ostensible redefinition to covertly uphold his authentic maxim.²⁹

In any case, what is going on here is a performance of "(Un-)Verfügbarkeit" that highlights the control the Sages want to exert over their sayings and the limits of any speech acts they use to this end. Uncontrollability manifests itself on the level of the maxims themselves – they are short, often elliptic utterances which neither name contexts nor give any explanations and thus need to be interpreted by their listeners/readers³⁰ – and also in the scenes performed by the Sages in Ausonius' play: the Seven present their maxims, which means that they repeat the sayings, and they revisit them. Their awareness of their own history, an aspect already mentioned above, becomes important here again. The Sages refer to their saws as past speech acts – *dixi* or *dixisse* ("I said", "I [am believed] to have said"), or related expressions as *docui* ("I taught"), are the standard phrases they use,³¹ and it is precisely this harking back that demonstrates the limits

29 Scafoglio (2017), 1054-1056, sees an irony in Bias' words, an interpretation mainly based on the fact that the same Bias who locates all the *mali* among the non-Romans is himself, as a Greek, also a non-Roman.

30 Cf. Asper (2006), 85-86: "Sie alle [sc. all the Seven Sages' saws] schreiben ein Verhalten als verbindlich fest. Dabei sind sie überaus einfach und reduziert: sie klären keine Begriffe, differenzieren nicht nach Situationen oder Adressaten, sie geben keine Begründungen oder Argumentationen. Sie bestehen in der Regel nur aus einem imperativischen Verbalbegriff und einer ganz knappen Situationsbeschreibung, die oft genug nur aus einem Partizip besteht. Ihre einfache, apodiktische Form schließt aus, dass hier jemand überzeugt werden soll."

31 Cf. Solon: *quod dixisse Croeso regi existimo* ("that word, which it is thought I spake to Croesus", 83); Cleobulus: *Cleobulus ego sum [...]* ἄριστον μέτρον *quem dixisse existimant* ("I am Cleobulus [...], he whom they believe to have said ἄριστον μέτρον", 147-9); Bias: *Bias Prieneus <quod> dixi* οἱ πλεῖστοι κακοί ("I am Bias of Priene, and my saying οἱ πλεῖστοι κακοί", 189); Pittacus: *Pittacus sum Lesbios, γίνωσκε καιρὸν qui docui sententiam* ("I am Lesbian Pittacus who taught the saying γίνωσκε καιρὸν", 202-203); Periander: *huc Periander prodeō, μελέτη τὸ πᾶν qui dixi* ("I come forward on this stage, Periander, who said μελέτη τὸ πᾶν", 214-215). Chilon does not use a verb in a past tense, but still makes sufficiently clear that his maxim is old and famous (*commendo nostrum* γνῶθι σεαυτὸν, *nosce te, quod in columna iam tenetur*

of “Verfügbarkeit”. Cleobulus’ casting of an interpreter, Thales’ ‘nudging’, and Bias’ redefinition of his saying all happen when the Sages bring their saws from the Greek past into the present of the late antique Roman stage, a process that proves to be so delicate and indeterminable that Bias is led to the hyperbolic statement: *dixisse nollem*, “I could wish I had never said it [sc. my maxim]”.

Such a stance towards one’s own saying is not repeated after Bias’ scene. In the two last sections of the play, Pittacus of Mytilene and Periander of Corinth seem to be perfectly at ease with their maxims, and there is no apparent negotiation with the audience about the interpretation of the saws or potentially conflicting reactions they might provoke. The *communitas* of the listeners is stressed by the use of the words *vester* and *cuncti* (207, 211, 220, 230) and phrases like *Romana vox* (as opposed to Greek, the Sages’ native tongue, 206) and *res publica* – the expression the play ends with (*plaudite, | meditando et vestram rem curetis publicam*, “Applaud, and take thought while you manage your state affairs”, 229-230).³²

However, every listener/reader who has followed the openly tension-laden performances of Thales and Bias will not stop asking questions about all the Sages and their speech acts. And in fact, one aspect discussed above as an important element of the text’s play with (un-)controllability, the anachronism resulting from the archaic Sages’ reference to Terence, is present in the two closing scenes too, and at least in Pittacus’ case in an even more marked way (202-213):

*Mytilena ego ortus Pittacus sum Lesbius,
γίνωσκε καιρόν qui docui sententiam.
set iste καιρός, tempus ut noris, monet
et esse καιρόν, tempestivum quod vocant. 205
Romana sic et est vox: veni in tempore.
vester quoque iste comicus Terentius
rerum omnium esse primum tempus autumat,
ad Antiphilam quom venerat servus Dromo*

Delphica, “I recommend my γνώθι σεαυτόν, ‘know thyself,’ which is still preserved on a column at Delphi”, 138-139); with Thales, it is also the context, especially the story of the tripod, which shows that his maxim stems from the past.

32 Cazzuffi (2014), 130, and Dräger (2015), 363, rightly argue against Green’s transposition of ll. 229 and 230 (cf. Green [1991], 605-606).

*nullo inpeditam, temporis servans vicem.
reputate cuncti, quotiens offensam incidat,
spectata cui non fuerit opportunitas.
Tempus monet, ne sim molestus. plaudite.*

Born at Mitylene, I am Lesbian Pittacus who taught the saying γίγνωσκε καιρόν. But this καιρός advises you to know the time, and that καιρός is what is called the timely time. Your own word too has the same sense, as: “I am come in time.” Your comic poet also, Terence, speaks of time as the most important of all things, when the slave Dromo was come to Antiphila choosing the right time, when she was disengaged. Reflect, all of you, how often a man gets into trouble who has not watched for the right opportunity.

Time warns me not to be wearisome. Give me your applause.

Pittacus not only quotes a specific passage of Terence – he refers to *Hau.* 364-365 –, but also gives an outline of the dramatic context of the cited verses.³³ Beyond the general effects of such an anachronism already described above, Pittacus’ quotation specifically invites his listeners/readers to reflect on his saw and the openness of every process of interpreting it: First, his saying is precisely about the ‘right time’, and in this very context he as the author of this maxim freely transgresses any boundary of temporal logic, which highlights and dramatises the basic hermeneutic – and practical – problem presented by the concept of καιρός: how can we define the ‘right time’, and can our attempt to seize the right moment ever come to an end? Second, by describing details of the invoked Terentian scene, Pittacus supplies what the maxims themselves are lacking: a context. This reminds the listeners/readers that it is up to them to establish a frame of reference in which the Sages’ sayings make sense and can be put to good use – a process of resonance that will inevitably be idiosyncratic and thus hardly “controllable” (“verfügbar”).

It is in this light that the play’s final ‘turn’ appears to the audience or readership: Periander’s appeal – spoken after yet another reference to Te-

33 A mistaken one, as no modern commentator hesitates to point out: Ausonius/Pittacus here confuses the characters of Terence’s scene (the speaker of *Hau.* 364-365 is actually Syrus, and he is speaking of Bacchis). Moreover, it has often been claimed that the interpretation of the quoted lines given by Pittacus is erroneous, cf. Green (1991), 605, and Dräger (2015), 360; but see Scafoglio (2017), 1054 n. 78, for an argument to the contrary.

rence³⁴ – to take thought while managing the Roman *res publica* (229-230) is certainly a forceful closure, but does not settle the many questions and issues raised by the Sages' multifaceted speech acts. Rather, Periander adds yet another layer to the play's montage: Solon's ball, to quote his powerful image again (cf. 78-81), keeps spinning, even after the end of the Sages' play.

4. Reading the Play: The Introductory Letter

This now brings us to the paratext that accompanies and introduces the *Play of the Seven Sages* in its edited form: a dedicatory poem, a verse letter addressed by Ausonius to Pacatus Drepanius, proconsul in 390 CE,³⁵ precedes the play and constitutes a model of how to read the text – the 'model reader', it appears, is critical and active, and even capable and willing to intervene in the text, a process Ausonius expressly encourages Drepanius to engage in (1-18):

Ausonius consul Drepanio proconsuli sal.
Ignoscenda istaec an cognoscenda rearis,
ad tento, Drepani, per lege iudicio.
aequanimus fiam te iudice, sive legenda,
sive tegenda putes carmina, quae dedimus.
nam primum est meruisse tuum, Pacate, favorem: 5
proxima defensi cura pudoris erit.
possum ego censuram lectoris ferre severi
et possum modica laude placere mihi:
novit equus plausae sonitum cervicis amare,
novit et intrepidus verbera lenta pati. 10
Maeonio qualem cultum quaesivit Homero
ensor Aristarchus normaue Zenodoti!
pone obelos igitur primorum stigmata vatium:
palmas, non culpas esse putabo meas;
et correcta magis quam condemnata vocabo, 15
adponet docti quae mihi lima viri.

34 *adversa rerum vel secunda praedicat | meditanda cunctis comicus Terentius* ("Whether things go well or ill – so Terence the comedian declares – everyone should take careful thought", 219-220), cf. Ter. *Ph.* 241-243.

35 On Drepanius, see Cazzuffi (2014), lxxiii-lxxvi. He is also the dedicatee of two other texts of Ausonius, *Praefatio* 4 and the *Technopaegnon*.

*interea arbitrii subiturus pondera tanti
optabo, ut placeam; si minus, ut lateam.*

Ausonius the Consul to Drepanius the Proconsul sends Greeting

Read through these lines, Drepanius, needfully judging whether you think they should be pardoned or perused. With you as judge I shall be content, whether you think the verse I send worth conning or concealing. For my first aim, Pacatus, is to earn your countenance: to defend my modesty shall be my second thought. I can bear a stern reader's criticism, and I can satisfy myself with a modest meed of praise: a horse learns to love the sound of a patted neck, learns also to endure the pliant lash unterrified. What finish did critic Aristarchus and Zenodotus with his rules demand in Maeonian Homer! Set down your brackets, then – brands which distinguish the chiefest bards: I will consider them marks of fame, not blame; and will call those passages corrected rather than condemned which the polish of a scholar's taste shall mark against me. Meanwhile, ere I face a verdict of such weight, I'll hope to impress you; or else myself suppress.

(Transl. after Evelyn-White)

The letter's central image are the *obeli* ("daggers"), the signs used by critics like the famous Alexandrinians Aristarchus and Zenodotus to athetise spurious verses in the Homeric epics. This is precisely what Ausonius asks Drepanius to do with the *Play of the Seven Sages*: to read it critically and to decide what should be deleted or at least requires the *lima*, the file mentioned in l.16. Athetising lines or marking up passages for revision results, of course, in a materially changed text – by inviting Drepanius to do so, Ausonius lets his model reader become part of what S. McGill has called "plural acts of authorship".³⁶ In other words, instead of being 'just' a reader, Drepanius is made a co-author of Ausonius' play.

Again, "Resonanz" and "Unverfügbarkeit" are useful terms to describe the dynamic Ausonius sets in motion here: in addition to the highly resonant game the Sages play with the listeners/readers and the many ways (un-)controllability is performed in their speech acts, Ausonius himself consciously surrenders a significant part of his authorial control to the reader. As A. Pelttari has shown, this dynamic is characteristic of Ausonius'

36 McGill (2017), 253.

prefaces in general:³⁷ similar offers of a share of or even control over the text are made in the prefaces to the *Bissula*, the *Technopaegnon*, the *Parentalia* and the *Cento*. Its widespread use throughout the Ausonian corpus shows that this kind of 'resonance offer' forms an important part of Ausonius' literary aesthetics, and Pelttari is right to interpret the various affordances as appeals to the audience in general: in the communication with his dedicatees, Ausonius expresses principles that are relevant for every act of reading these texts.³⁸ We all, when we read Ausonius, are invited to follow the model readers addressed in the prefaces. For the *Play of the Seven Sages*, this means that we are supposed to 'join the game' on several levels: to engage with the individual performances of the wise men, and to make use (and sense?) of the openness of the text as a whole.

5. Conclusion

Focussing on the "Resonanzwirkung" ("resonant effects") of the play has proven to be a fruitful way to deal with the text's complexity. The notion of "Unverfügbarkeit" ("uncontrollability") is particularly helpful for describing and interpreting the powerful, yet often uneasy position the play's audience finds itself in. By the same token, this analysis of the *Ludus septem sapientium* corroborates the methodological assumption the present volume is based on, that there is a close link between resonance and performativity. The text's self-conscious play with its dramatic, yet emphatically literary structure and its strongly marked appeal to the audience form and emphasise its structural and functional performativity.³⁹ And it is precisely this performative dynamic that generates the 'resonance offer' of the *Ludus*

37 Pelttari (2014), 62-72. Since he only analyses the epistolary *prose* prefaces, Pelttari does not treat or mention the dedicatory verse epistle of the *Play of the Seven Sages*, although this paratext corroborates his findings.

38 Cf. e.g. Pelttari (2014), 71: "Ausonius uses the formal apparatus of dedicatee and dedication as a pretext for his evocation of the reader's role in making sense of the text", and 72: "Because late antique poets wrote with powerful readers in mind, they embraced the preface and its potential to dramatize the openness of their texts."

39 On this terminology, see Gärtner, introduction to this volume, 3.4.

and leads to the uncontrollability of the process (the “Resonanzgeschehen”) initiated by Solon and the other characters.⁴⁰

To conclude my analysis, I would like to point out one specific implication of the resonance-centred approach adopted here: it shifts the focus away from the much-debated question of the presumable didactic intentions of Ausonius’ play.⁴¹ Rather than expecting to find the answer to the many questions raised by the play’s peculiarities in a straightforward ethical message or a didactic method, this approach makes visible to what extent the play revolves around contradictory speech acts, paradoxical anachronisms, ambiguous conclusions and self-defying rhetoric. When even the authors of these seemingly simple maxims struggle to control the meaning and impact of their saws and consciously perform this uncontrollability, we as listeners or readers cannot ‘get beyond’ this uncertainty and openness. But, as the results of this analysis suggest, trying to do so would miss the point of the text anyway: the *Ludus* addresses an audience that is cultured and competent as much as it is fond of – playing.

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40 Cf. Fischer-Lichte (2021), 89-101, 161-173, for “Unvorhersehbarkeit” (“unpredictability”) as a key aspect of performativity.

41 For this debate, see Green (1991), 597; Spahlinger (2006), 170-173; Cazzuffi (2014), lxxxi-xci; Lepetit (2016), 181-186; Cazzuffi (2017); Scafoglio (2017), 1032-1036; Venuti (2019), 87-89; Scafoglio (2020), 60-63.

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