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The Tale of the Third Bird, Pseudo-Ausonius

What devotees of the Practice of the Order of the Third Bird call the "Tale of the Third Bird" began as an *arcantum* of intramural lore, but has come to be treated as something much more. The tale in question represents a paratextual elaboration of the celebrated story (Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, Book 35, Section 36) of Zeuxis and the painting of the boy carrying grapes. In the original, of course, the great painter takes no satisfaction in the birds coming to peck at the grapes in his tableau, for he deems their intrepidity a dismissive verdict on the verisimilitude of the boy — of whom the feathered creatures ought properly have been afraid. That is as far as the Plinian account goes. This version of the story, however, recounts the painter's reworking of his creation, and then details another avian *paragone* in which three birds approach the image. By tradition the text is said to be the work of the fourth-century Roman poet and rhetorician Decimius Magnus Ausonius (c. 310-c. 395). It should be noted, however, that no such epyllion has come to light, and, further, that no commentary on or elaboration of *Natural History* 35.36 by Ausonius is known. The earliest existing Latin copy of the tale appears in ink inside the back cover of a copy of *D. Magni Ausonii Burdigalensis Opera* (Paris, 1629) held in the W-Cache. The author of the holograph text, here given in its entirety, is not known:

Fertur Zeuxis operi manum retulit ut pueri figuram melius pingeret et, pictura siccari foras exposita, sese in virgultis abscondit atque respexit. Etiam dicitur aves tres appropinquantes vidit: una, uvas petens, puerum repente agnovit et stridenter evolavit. Secunda, a fructu pariter attracta, custodem ex toto ignoravit et epulas rabiose becco carpsit fictas. Sed avis tertia ante tabulam pictam cessavit et in atrio harenato stetit, imaginem constanter tuens, cogitatione sicut perdita. "Curiosula avis!" murmuravit Zeuxis, sed volucer haud movebat.

It is said that Zeuxis put his hand to the work again [after the grapes were praised so highly], so that he might improve the figure of the boy, and that after leaving this new work outside to dry, he hid himself in the bushes and watched. And it is said that he saw three birds approaching. One, making for the grapes, suddenly noticed the boy and flew off shrieking. The second, attracted to the fruit in the same way, completely ignored the guardian [implicit: the boy in the painting], and was furiously trying to snatch up the fake grapes with his beak. But the third bird froze before the tablet and stood in the sandy courtyard, looking constantly at the image, seemingly lost in thought. "A rather curious bird!" mumbled Zeuxis, but the winged creature wasn't moving at all.

