1. What is Persius saying here about contemporary literary culture, and how does he use metaphor to do so?

* Persius criticises contemporary writers for vain pretension to poetic glory through association with traditional poetic themes (l.1-2). Their poetry is outdated, as indicated by the marble bust (l.6)
* The central metaphor equals these writers to parrots and magpies (l.8-9), birds who simply repeat phrases they have overheard. In the same way, poets fill their texts with allusions to other people’s works and therefore lack originality.

I.e. many who claim to be poets are nearer to animals than to gods (or to divine inspiration). They are driven by narcissism and self-regard, and insofar as they can only imitate, are in a sense already dead, stone busts. Yet this metaphor, with its personification (‘I leave poetic pretension to those whose busts clinging ivy licks’), also suggests perhaps that the derivative poets are akin to the sycophantic, mindless ivy which snakes its way around (representations of) the bodies of dead poets.

Note that crows had the reputation of feasting on corpses (like vultures) in the ancient world.

The allusions to various birds within the prologue (the former that imitates and the latter that steals) could infer that none of the other poets have original thought are are effectively “bird brains”

The phrase “*semipaganus*” through suggesting he is not wholly committed to a community, suggests that Persius does not wish to conform to the poetic culture that has become the norm in Neronian Rome and tries to make satire “his own”. However, as he is critiquing the poetic culture through poetry, to a certain extent he is conforming to poetic form, following Horace’s tradition of trying to make the genre his own. This informs our understanding as to why Persius isn’t completely isolated from the “bards’ rites”.

1. From what position does the poet speak in this poem, and where have we seen this kind of posturing before in this module?

* The poet here assumes the role of an outsider to poetry. He claims he lacks the lofty inspiration (perhaps the poetical training?) of his contemporaries (again l.1-2, *nec… nec…*). Labelling himself as a *semipaganus* (l.7), he acts surprised at having ‘turned out as a poet’ (*sic poeta prodirem*, l.3). This artificial pose as an outsider in poetry appears in Phaedrus’ prologue to Book 3 (*fastidiose tamen in coetum recipior*, l. 23).

Is Persius claiming, simply, that he is marginal figure? Or is he distancing himself from those who would make pretentious claims to literary inspiration? In Stoic terms, becoming good at writing poetry takes hard work, application, self-examination: one can’t become a poet on a whim, or in a flash, as if suddenly filled with the divine. Most contemporary poetry, Persius implied, is inspired not by ‘higher realms’ but by bodily desires, especially greed, and narcissism.

Persius -like Phaedrus - spurs us to see the world from a different perspective. He wants to make it shocking and alive for us. What are nostra verba, ‘our words’ (v.9)? Is the test of the originality of this poem that it is very hard to imitate?

We can see the poet distancing himself from other poets and poetic devices and this leads us to question where that behaviour leaves him. He still uses animal metaphors/dehumanising imagery and such devices that other poets use ( eg. Horace epodes 8+12) but yet is critical and distant about other poets...In a void somewhere between?

The metaphors that Persius used to describe the other poets as “parrots” and “magpies” suggests that they are no longer humans. He creates a distance between himself and the other poets, where their talents derive from their “belly” which is associated with greed and gluttony is unnatural and compared to birds trying to attempt human speech. This critical outlook on the other poets suggest that he sees himself as a marginal figure.

1. Does it take one to know one? Look at the shapes and sounds of the poem, especially the final two lines in Latin.

* At the end of the text, Persius gives away (intentionally?) that he has more in common with those poets than he previously admitted. This can be seen in, at least, two aspects of the last two lines: 1) the alliteration ‘*poetas et poetridas picas*’ (l.13) evokes sounds made by parrots and magpies. 2) the allusion to Pindar, the greatest of Greek poets, in the final line (poetry = nectar cf. *καὶ ἐγὼ νέκταρ χυτόν, Μοισᾶν δόσιν*, Ol.7.8) reveals some of the same poetic ambition we have just seen criticised.

Notice also the alliteration of ‘c’ and ‘t’ in the final two lines - nobody could quite claim that this ‘awful poetry’ was the ‘honey of the muses’!

Hard consonants and sibilance, as well as (ironically) being another commonly used poetic device, leave the bitter taste of his pointed jest/criticism in audiences’ mouths...Intentional?

Remember that when we read/recite this poem (carmen = ‘song’, v.7), we mouth, or ‘sing’ these harsh sounds. Persius is describing crass, unoriginal repetition (poets are just parrots these days): but his own poetry sounds like the harsh cawing of birds, rather than like birdsong, a frequent metaphor for beautiful poetry from archaic Greek verse onwards. It is difficult - and this is the point - to make a neat distinction between those awful parroting poets, and a satiric voice that sounds like he is pecking at our ears. At the same time, these harsh crow-like sounds the poem makes, and forces us to make with our mouths, actually *is* original stuff: *poetridas* (‘poetesses’), like *semipaganus*, is apparently a neologism.

How might we link these grating sounds with the form (i.e. metre: scazons) of the poem?