Given that it increases interpretability, it would seem that ambiguity diminishes the authority of the writer who deploys it. But I argue in this paper that by allowing his readers to understand the opening and closing couplets of *carm.* 3.26 in discrete ways, Venantius Fortunatus exploits ambiguity in order to control the ways in which this poem might be understood, thus affirming most powerfully his poetic authority. Further, I argue that the poet understands ambiguity to be a species of order, akin to antithesis, rhyme, parallelism, and the like. Modes of poetic order found throughout the poem thus go to the larger interpretive project highlighted at the poem’s beginning and end, where ambiguity, as the most important kind of ordering, controls the poet’s words.

In exploiting ambiguity in this way in *carm.* 3.26, I hope to suggest the ways in which Fortunatus reaches simultaneously a public and a private audience, in order to validate a notion of friendship as we understand it, that is, as “a personal relationship predicated on affection and generosity.”1 For, as I hope to suggest, there would be no need to write under ambiguity’s authority if *carm.* 3.26 exploited friendship simply as a rhetorical move, that is, as a way to pay a requisite compliment to a social superior. On the contrary, precisely because ambiguity connects counterpoised public and private spaces, this poem reveals the precise power of friendship’s bonds by framing private attachments against the larger fabric of public acclaim, enabling the affiliations of friendship to be seen as equivalent to the grandest of things – God, Christ, the soul, nature, and ultimately ensuring that the poet’s own voice is unambiguously, authoritatively, understood to say as much.

Let me begin with a note about the term “ambiguity,” which has received much attention over the past century: more positively by the New Critics, who considered it the acme of “good literature”;2 and recently, but less

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1 The phrasing is from D. Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge, 1997), 5.
optimistically, by the Poststructuralists, who have seen in it the harbinger of the indeterminacy of the word.\(^3\) While there is much to be said for these views, and for others articulated in the theoretical space between them, I adhere in what follows to Quintilian’s definition:

[in ambiguity] two things are signified and, so far as the written or spoken word is concerned, the two sides are equally balanced

\[\text{Duas enim res significari manifestum est et quod ad scriptum vocemve pertinet in utramque partem \text{par est}; Inst. Orat. 7.9.14}.\]^4

On this elegantly simple view, two discrete features made emphatic by word placement stand out: first, an ambiguous word harbors two meanings (the \textit{duas} of the definition’s opening) that are, second, thematically equal (the \textit{par} of the definition’s ending), qualities pointed up in the term by which Quintilian designates “ambiguity” –, not the Latin \textit{ambiguitas}, but the Greek \textit{amphibolía}, a word whose literal sense, “a state of being attacked on both sides,”\(^5\) elicits the image of a single word controlling two discrete meanings.\(^6\) As will become clear in what follows, Fortunatus would seem to adhere to this notion of ambiguity as part of a larger project in which he says two things at once in order to clarify his thematic aims.

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5 \textit{LSJ}\(^9\), p. 90, s.v. \textit{amphiboleiús}, –ia.

6 The etymology of the Latin \textit{ambiguitas}, \textit{ambo} + \textit{gerere}, literally, to bear something in two ways, is nearly identical, but is too close to the English “ambiguity” to stand clear of current synonym – vague, ambivalent, unclear, muddled, and so forth – that confuse, rather than clarify, the issue. It may perhaps be that Quintilian chose a Greek word for just this reason, since \textit{ambiguitas} bears some of these current associations in antiquity also. Quintilian also commends doubleness and equality in his own definition, in which, in the phrase, \textit{in utramque partem \text{par est}}, one sees and hears “\text{par}” twice – and in the very phrase, and concerning the very words, that articulate the qualities of doubleness (\textit{in partem}) and equality (\text{par est}) that Quintilian otherwise highlights.