Theory and Practice in the Vergilian Cento*

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The history of Greek and Latin poetry is marked—some would say marred—by periods of bizarre experimentation with forms which show ingenuity of a mechanical sort but are, all in all, devoid of merit as belles-lettres. Into this category one would presumably put the cento. It had a long if not particularly honorable history,¹ and representatives appear in many unexpected corners of the classical field: Aristophanes, Lucian, Diogenes Laertius etc.²

Yet among the quirks of literary taste and oddities of accomplishment, the cento holds a special place. Other curiosities such as versus rhopalicis are nothing more than games, and show more interest in numerology than in words or ideas. They manipulate the language by finding (or even, it may be, inventing) exotic words, simply to show that an idea can be expressed by a sequence of words with

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¹ This paper is dedicated to my friend and colleague John L. Heller. Limitations of space and exigencies of the production schedule prevented the work from appearing in last year's Fasciculi issue, but I hope that Professor Heller will derive some additional pleasure from this slight prolonging of the celebration.

² Nor, perhaps, as long as Crusius would claim (RE III. 2., cols. 1929-32): he would identify the Homeridae and the entire rhapsodic tradition as the first phase of the cento. But there is a fundamental difference between assembling consecutive verses of Homer to produce Homeric poetry, and combining non-consecutive pieces of Homeric verse to make an entirely new creation on the Christian Gospel (as was a not uncommon pursuit in the time of the Empress Eudocia: cf. Tzetza, Chai. X. 306).

³ For a summary of our information on the ancient cento, see G. Salamitro, ed., Osiria Creta: Medea (Roma 1981), pp. 18-66; earlier and for some aspects more valuable is F. Ermini, Il centone di Proba e la poesia centonaria latina (Roma 1909), pp. 19-55.
arithmetically progressive numbers of syllables: never mind what the idea itself may be. Or again, a poet could aspire to a lexicographic summary of the Odyssey, or a carmen figuratum. These are mere juggler's tricks.

But the cento has two qualities which can raise it above its fellow literary freaks, although their effect is somewhat diminished in unskilled hands. First, it is composed entirely of verses and phrases already penned by a great poet—most frequently Homer or Vergil, although other poets were used for quarrying as well. This has a general effect of felicitous expression at least at the level of the phrase or the individual line: it is as if the censtont were speaking a language whose unit of vocabulary is not the word but the well-turned phrase. Of course even with this initial advantage, a composer of little talent can contrive effects and commit errors to set our teeth on edge. But because of the underlying quality of the component expressions, we are less constantly stunned by the inherent freakishness of the enterprise itself than is the case with such visual games as a poem in the shape of a bird, or an acrostic for which the eye must follow the first, twentieth and final letters of the lines vertically as well as reading the lines themselves—usually distorted to the limits of the language to achieve this crossword effect.

The second saving grace, rather less reliably present than felicitous expression but certainly more common than in other jeux de phrase, is that the cento was often used for significant subjects. There was of course a tradition, inconsistently followed, of parodic treatment in the centos, both in the early stages (e.g. the Batrachomymachia, assuming it belongs in this category) and in the later (e.g. De aula or Ausonius' Cento nuptialis?). But parody was certainly not the purpose behind the Christian centos, most notably Proba's Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi, or indeed behind Hosidius' Gesta Media. These poems show both a seriousness and an ambition which set them far from any tradition of nugar and parody. The loveliness of the model will surely have had some effect. The two most predictable responses to greatness are imitation and mockery. Both are present in the centos. To this extent, Crusius greatly overstated the importance of parody in the genre as a whole.3

4 Even the form imparts a kind of authenticity as literature, as the cento preserves the epic form and frequently treats mythological or quasi-epic subjects. There is of course the important exception of Hosidius' tragic drama, but obviously it serves to strengthen the case for a serious tradition. And even the epithalamia of Ausonius and Luxorius, spiced as they are with wit and in Ausonius' case self-deprecation, nevertheless are representatives of a recognized literary tradition. The cento aspires to keep the company of its literary betters, and is much closer to the generic mainstream of literature than other sports of composition.

And yet when these allowances are made, the cento remains for modern readers as it was for Jerome4 a puzzling and often silly ambition. Proba's evangelical cento brings to mind Dr. Johnson's cheerfully chauvinistic remark: "A woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."

The technique of the cento is straightforward enough in theory: the poet patched together8 verses, or pieces of verses, from Vergil and thereby composed a different poem on an entirely unrelated subject. It was a prodigious feat of memory to keep the entire text of Vergil available in one's mind for quoting. Obviously the censton will have had a copy of Vergil at hand for verification, but the process depended primarily on summoning phrases and lines. The entire context, solar memoriae tempus sparsa colligere et integrae lacerata, says Ausonius (praef. 4). It is astonishing to contemplate the number of poets, over a span of centuries, for whom this exercise was possible: the value placed on the poet whose text was

3 Crusius (above, n.1). The notion that the cento is essentially parodic is incorrectly introduced into most discussions of the form.


5 Auson., i. nupt. praef.: frivolum etnullius pretii opusculam ... pugem enim Vergiliani carmen dignitatem tam locutiae dehonestase materia etc.

6 Jerome, Epist. 105. 7.: puerilia haec sunt . . .

so sedulously committed to memory can only be compared to modern instances of memorizing the entire Authorized Version of Scriptures. Moreover, it is clear that this feat was accomplished by persons of greatly varying talents, including some—such as Próba and Ausonius—who were in fact capable of original composition as well as making literary patchwork quilts.¹²

The cento has attracted occasional attention over the generations, and has recently become the topic of more extensive investigation.¹³ This scholarship has concentrated on the largest specimens of the genre, Próba and Hosidius. I should like to consider a few aspects of the art of the cento with reference to the centos found in the so-called Latin Anthology preserved in the Codex Salmassianus (Par. lat. 10318).¹⁴

This collection, compiled in the last years of the Vandal era in North Africa, contains many poems which may safely be regarded as originating in that region, and from this fact has grown a cumulative likelihood that most of the collection may represent the work of North African writers. The idea is encouraged as well by the perjorative argument that so much of the poetry is so bad that it surely would not have travelled far and still been thought worthy of collecting and preserving. As regards the centos in particular, nearly all the snippets of evidence point to North African origins. Erminii’s passing observation that Alcesta may have been by an Italian poet does not compel assent, and even if true would not greatly weaken the case overall.¹⁴

The centos taken together suggest that they are more likely to be objects of regional interest and pride than of international admiration. A common African origin provides a cohesion to the group offsetting the apparent spread in date of some four centuries from Hosidius in the second century to Luxorius in the sixth.¹⁶ Most of the centos are without evidence of date and thus available for speculation.¹⁷

The sixth book of the Anthology preserves twelve centos in various states of completeness.¹⁸

| 7 (De paniatio) | 11 vv. extant (Riese pp. 33-34) |
| 8 (De alia) | 112 vv. (R. 35-58) |
| 9 (Narcissus) | 16 vv. (R. 38-39) |
| 10 (Mavorius (?): Iudicium Paridis) | 42 vv. (ending lost) (R. 39-41) |
| 11 (Hippodamia) | 164 vv. extant (R. 41-47) |
| 12 (Hercules et Aetnaeus) | 16 vv. (R. 47) |
| 13 (Praga et Philomena) | 24 vv. (R. 48) |
| 14 (Europa) | 34 vv. extant (R. 49-50) |
| 15 (Alcesta) | 162 vv. extant (R. 50-56) |
| 16 (Mavorius (?): De ecclesia) | 111 vv. extant (R. 56-61) |
| 17 (Hosidius Geta: Medea) | 401 vv. (R. 61-79) |
| 18 (Luxorius: Epithalamium Fridi) | 68 vv. (R. 79-82) |

To these we may add for the purposes of the discussion which follows:

- Ausonius: Cesto tepatibus 131 vv.
- Pomponius, Versus ad graham 132 (CSEL XVI, pp. 609-15)
- Domini
- De Verbi incarnatione 111 vv. (CSEL XVI, pp. 615-20)
- Proba, De laudibus Christi 666 vv.²⁰

Taken together, these poems provide an interesting basis for observing differences in the ways a poet could handle his source

¹² Comparetti (Vergil in the Middle Ages I, p. 53) comments that “to know [Vergil’s] works by heart from one end to the other was no uncommon feat,” and goes on to assess cenestas in these terms: “The idea of such ‘Cenestas’ could only have arisen among people who had learnt Vergil mechanically and did not know of any better use to which to put all those verses with which they had loaded their brains.”


¹⁴ Salanitro has also announced a major essay, reediting his introductory pages, to appear in Aufstand und Niedergang des römischen Welt. There is a brief discussion in Stempflinger’s Das Plagiat in der griechischen Literatur (Berlin 1912), pp. 192 ff. For further bibliography see Salanitro, pp. 175-76.


¹⁶ The author of Alcesta (R. 50-56) addresses Apollo as summi custus Soractis (19). But this is after all a Vergilian address to Apollo (actually V. 79: sanctus. Ap. XI. 785), and Vergil’s Italian status is not at issue.

¹⁷ Hosidius is dated on the assumption that our cento is indeed the Medea cento mentioned by Tertullian, de praec. haec 39.5, as the work of a poet whose name is actually garbled in the ms (Vosidius, Ovidius etc). Luxorius makes specific references to Vandalic which permit a dating near the compilation itself.

¹⁸ See Schnell (above n.6), pp. 599 ff. for some considerations; Erminii, pp. 42 ff.; Salanitro, pp. 36 ff.

¹⁹ I use the numbers in Riese). The centos comprised Book VI of the Anthology as originally compiled.

²⁰ Excluding the 29-line prologue, which is only partially centonic.
material. I shall briefly touch on three questions: (1) What rules are stated or deducible for the composition of a cento; (2) To what extent were these rules followed by the centonists; (3) Is it possible to make distinctions of authorship or of date on the basis of adherence to or departure from these rules?

Ausonius provides the clearest and most familiar instructions for the centonist:

Varis de locis sensibusque diversis quaedam carminis structura solidatur, in unum versum ut coeant aut caesi duo aut unus et sequens medius cum medio. Nam duos iuncti locare ineptum est, et tres una serie merae nugae. Diffunduntur autem per caesuras omnes quas recipit versus herosculus, convenire ut possit aut pentehemimeris cum reliquo anapaestico, aut trochaici cum posteriore segmento, aut septem semipedes cum anapaestico choricico, aut sequatur post dactylum atque semipedicem quidquid restat hexametro. (Praef. 25-32 Prete)

From this account we may derive the following rules of the game:

(a) The juncture within a line should only occur at the places where a caesura is permitted in Vergil: | | etc.; | | etc.; | | etc.; and | | etc. There should not be pieces of other sizes than those which caesurae create.

(b) If a line does not consist of a Vergilian verse reused in its entirety, it should consist of two pieces and no more.

(c) The longest continuous quotation approved is 1½ verses (whatever exact meaning mediocris may bear).

(d) The components should present the text of Vergil unchanged, although the meaning of the words may be altered by their new context.

The simplest way to set forth the extent to which the centonists followed or ignored the rules I have described is to tabulate the data as in Table 1, which gives for each poem: the total lines (col. 1); the number (and percentage) of lines which are taken whole from Vergil (col. 2); composed of 2 Vergilian sources (col. 3); composed of 3 or 4 lines (col. 4); containing additions by the centonist—as distinct from Vergilian text which has been altered (col. 5); and the number of instances of quotations extending unbroken for more than 1½ verses (col. 6).

Obviously whenever a line is built of 3 (or even 4) components, the metrical control described by Ausonius has been ignored (note that Ausonius himself did not exercise this freedom). Oddly, Ausonius does not mention using isolated whole lines, but it is of course a principal option, generally accounting for one-fourth to one-third of

![Table 1 - Composition of Verses](image-url)
all lines. As this proportion increases, so does the temptation to use consecutive complete verses of Vergil, the opposite fault from excessive fragmentation. This Ausonius does only once (c. nupt. 25-26 = Aen. VI. 645-46).

The normal distribution for all centos is approximately one-third complete Vergilian verses, and slightly less than two-thirds comprising two segments. Verses containing three or more elements, including non-Vergilian material, account for only about one in forty lines. Against this background, we may observe some exceptions.

It is hardly surprising that De panissae has almost no complete Vergilian verses, as the subject matter is so far from Vergil. But the author is not unskilled, and has made minimal changes in the lines he has used. The same cannot be said for Prognæ and Philoemæa, whose author has not succeeded in using a single complete verse of Vergil, and yet has frequently failed to make coherent sense by the composite verses he has built. Moreover, as if further proof of this clumsiness were needed, he has three lines of 3 parts and one with an addition where the line would not work. The deviations for Narcissus and Hercules et Antaeus are not significant, since one more complete verse would move them into the average range.

At the other end of the spectrum is Luxorius. More than half of his lines are lifted entire from Vergil (many with modifications). His thoughts very often move in units of one line, and he apparently hunted through Vergil on this basis. He is also fond of using two full lines. He has the highest frequency of two-line quotations among the centonists, notably including lines 23-28 consisting of three successive couplets (Aen. VI. 646-47; I. 707-08; I. 663-64). Considering the fact that Luxorius is clearly imitating Ausonius' epithalamium in this poem, and thus had presumably read the earlier poet's strictures against such practices, this feature is even more striking. Yet there are effective touches, and it is not altogether fair to complain (as do Schenkl and Ermini) that he sinks below his usual level of talent—a harsh statement.

The extreme is found in Ad gratiam Domini: on three occasions, the poet has followed Vergil continuously for more than two lines (14-15-16a; 32-33-34a; 46b-47-48a). But in each instance, the poet is expressing—or preserving Vergil's way of expressing—a single thought of real importance to his theme, and this would seem to justify the "violation" of the rules.

But the most skillful centonist of all is the author of Europa. That poet has a rather high proportion of two-source lines (nearly 80%) and commensurately fewer whole lines. There are no three-piece lines and none with original phrases inserted by the poet. Moreover, he never even extends a quotation from one line into the next: there are no quotations involving enjambement, and no successive lines linked by a shared quotation. No other centonist comes close to this level of virtuosity. And on top of this, the cento reads smoothly and the story is presented coherently.

On the other hand, if we look at the frequency of verses composed of 3 or 4 elements, three poems stand out. In De alea this occurs once in every eleven lines, and there are five more with non-Vergilian fillers. Many lines are unintelligible or startlingly clumsy, as if the author could not find or make a proper way to express his thoughts. The problem seems to be not so much the thoughts as the poet, however. The poem is parodic in tone, but quite without sophistication.

Prognæ and Philoemæa has a "failure rate" of one in six lines, as noted earlier, and is altogether deplorable. As for De ecclesia, the problem lines amount to one in seven. This is attributable, at least in part, to the subject matter. Mavortius is a talented poet who has chosen a topic far from Vergil (a Christian liturgical event, complete with summaries of the Gospel). Because of this specialized theme, and because of his desire to sound as much like the Scriptures as possible, he is driven to alter and chop the Vergilian source material. Many of his full lines are bland or generic, and when this approach would not serve, Mavortius was driven most of the time to alter or splice. The poem reads far more smoothly than one might expect, and earns admiration for ingenuity different from Europa but perhaps no less demanding.

We might expect that Proba would show signs of a similar problem, but she does not (total aberrations: 2.2%, or average). But her poem is more narrative and more adapted to the epic style, including modelling Jesus to some extent on the heroic Aeneas. As a result, she takes more complete verses unaltered (about 3 in every eight lines). But they are not evenly distributed: when she turns to more
specifically Christian themes she has fewer complete lines and more composite. The section on the fratricide of Cain, the anger of God, the age of iron and the Flood (285-312) in which 17 of the 28 verses are complete Vergilian lines, stands in contrast with the passage on the birth of Christ, the Magi and the slaughter of the Innocents (346-79), where only 5 of 54 verses are intact.

On the basis of these numbers, it would be risky to assert that any two centos are the work of the same poet, but it would seem more probable that the reverse is sometimes indicated. Surely Progne et Philomena and Judicium Parisiis are by different authors, and more significant perhaps are the differences between Judicium Parisiis and De ecclesia, both attributed to Mavorius. So also Alesia and Hippodamia, which share other features such as halting sentence structure and a similar distribution of sources across the three Vergilian works,\(^4\) show very different profiles when considered from the perspective of how they put their verses together. Luxorius can be seen as an aberration and Ausonius as something of a parrot. There is apparently no clear-cut distinction between African and European practice, nor between early and late, although metrical bowlers are somewhat less frequent in the later examples than in Hosidius. A Christian theme presented special difficulties, reflected in a greater frequency of multi-source lines and additions to the text.

Obviously it was not always possible for the centoist to keep Vergil's words unchanged. There are several types of alterations introduced. First, minor alterations in forms required to preserve syntax (trepid becomes trahunt). These are very frequent and presumably do not count against a centoist's faithfulness to his original. Second, the poet may find it necessary to adjust the sense of a borrowed phrase by replacement of a single word. Some of these are clever and perhaps pointed; e.g. Mavorius, De ecl. 18, in speaking of the birth of Jesus uses Aen. VII. 660 on the birth of Aventinus, son of Hercules and Rhea (mixta deo mulier):

\[ \text{furtivum partu sub luminis edidit oras} \]

becomes

\[ \text{quem nobis partu sub luminis edidit oras,} \]

thus facing, challenging and improving upon the pagan story of the woman giving birth to the son of a god.

Or again, the change may be in proper names. Treating specific myths meant that the centoist often needed to use the names of the characters involved, and impenetrable obscurity could result from failing to accommodate this need (Hippodamia for example suffers grievously from this). Europa 3 by a felicitous substitution takes Ed. VI. 46 and replaces one bull-related heroine by another:

\[ \text{Europam nive solatur amore ivenci.} \]

A particularly ingenious case is Luxorius, Epithalamium Fridi 48-49. The poet borrows Juno's words (Aen. IV. 102-03) inciting Venus to her plan for uniting Dido and Aeneas:

\[ \text{communem hunc ergo populum paribusque regamus} \]
\[ \text{auspicis: licet Phegiso servire marito} \]

and puts the words into Venus' mouth as she addresses Amor (the first half of 48 is from Aen. I. 688, an exactly parallel scene to this):

\[ \text{occultum inspira ignem paribusque regamus} \]
\[ \text{auspicis: licet Frido servire marito}. \]

Vergil's words are used sensibus diversis, says Ausonius. One striking example will serve to illustrate this phenomenon which is woven through the entire fabric of the centos. It also falls under the heading of proper name adaptation. Hosidius takes Geor. II. 126, Media fert tristis sucos, referring to the region of Media, and uses it (Media 191) unchanged to refer to the Colchian princess mixing her poison. We are apparently to think of Ἀδησία with its parapoxytone being reproduced by this word.

Two other kinds of change amount to admissions of defeat. One is to add new text not found in Vergil, and thus only borrow part of a verse. De ecclesia 45, for instance, takes the first half of Aen. III. 519 (dat claram e caelo signum), and then lamely fills the line with nam tempore in illo, which does not occur thus anywhere in Vergil. This step of simply adding non-Vergilian pieces is not common, and is found in only 7 of the centos under review. The worst offenders as noted earlier are De alea and De ecclesia, both of which topics may have presented their poets with intractable problems (although the instance just cited is hardly an obscure or specialized thought). A kindred fault is to move a borrowed phrase to a new position in the.
line when there is no available piece in the only open position (e.g.,
_Iudicium Paridis_ 15: cf. _Aen._ VI. 562).

All these considerations suggest how complex an activity it was to
compose a cento. Ausonius' sketch of the rules implies a far clearer
picture than is actually the case. As with other poetic activities, we
may discern differences of style, of method and of ability. Differentia-
tions which are not evident from reading the centos begin to
emerge from analyzing the centonists' treatment of their sources.

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