

PROBA'S INTRODUCTION TO HER CENTO

The cento of Proba has recently enjoyed a remarkable upsurge of scholarly interest. A welcome translation was provided in 1981,¹ and an article of five years later, scrutinizing the evidence for its date and authorship, has aroused much controversy.² In two recent contributions vindicating the traditional date new or more precise suggestions have been made about the poem's historical context.³ In between these, yet another article has argued, without confirming or refuting the revised dating and attribution, that in various ways the work reflects the interest of the aristocratic ladies of the Anician family.⁴ And now there is a second article by Danuta Shanzer, repeating many of her early points (not always with greater clarity) and adding some interesting new ones.⁵ All this sudden attention is not unmerited, for as Herzog observed long ago⁶ the work is not of the comic or trivializing kind that Ausonius envisaged in his comments on the genre⁷ and does not degrade Vergil but rather, at least in the often quoted words of its prefatory poem, 'improves' him.⁸

The concern of the present article is not primarily with this controversy, but with the author's own introduction to these remarkable verses on parts of the Old and New Testaments. But first a few words are necessary about the prefatory poem of fifteen lines, beginning *Romulidum ductor*, which precedes it, and is demonstrably not from Proba's hand. Its writer had evidently been instructed, or at least invited,⁹ to produce a version that Arcadius, the emperor addressed in them, could give to one of his children. There seems little justification for not accepting this straightforward reading of the poem: there is little force in Sivan's arguments that such an order hardly fits the inert Arcadius (the merest nod or wink would surely have sufficed) and that a scribe could not have written in such a vein (the epithets 'mere', 'anonymous', and 'humble' are purely of her own construction).¹⁰ Nothing is known of the writer except his date,¹¹ the quality of his writing (it is roughly as good, or as bad, as Proba's), and his gender: note *famulo* in line 5, which excludes the possibility that it was written by an

¹ E. A. Clark and D. F. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (American Academy of Religion: Texts and Translations 5 [1981]).

² D. Shanzer, 'The Anonymous Carmen contra paganos and the Date and Identity of the Centonist Proba', *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 32 (1986), 232–48.

³ J. Matthews, 'The Poetess Proba and Fourth-century Rome: Questions of Interpretation', in M. Christol, S. Demougins, Y. Duval, C. Lepelley, and L. Pietri (edd.), *Institutions, Société et Vie Politique dans l'Empire Romain au i^e siècle ap. J.-C.* (Paris, 1992), and R. P. H. Green, 'Proba's Cento: its Date, Purpose, and Reception', *CQ* 45 (1995), 551–63.

⁴ H. Sivan, 'Anician Women, the Cento of Proba, and Aristocratic Conversion in the Fourth Century', *Vigiliae Christianae* 47 (1993), 140–57.

⁵ D. Shanzer, 'The Date and Identity of the Centonist Proba', *Recherches Augustiniennes* 27 (1994), 75–96. Her new comments affect Matthews' dating rather than my own, and I confine myself to observing that the apparent reference in ll. 690–1 of the cento to controversy about the timing of Easter, discussed on pp. 91–6, need not refer to a particular year, but could just as easily relate to a time (such as the 350s or early 360s, to judge from the data assembled there), when uncertainty on this issue was particularly marked.

⁶ R. Herzog, *Die Bibelexepik der Lateinischen Spätantike*, vol. 1 (Munich, 1975), pp. 4–13.

⁷ R. P. H. Green, *The Works of Ausonius* (Oxford, 1991), poem XVIII, and especially ll. 24–46 of the introductory letter.

⁸ *Maroneml mutatum in melius*, from the preface about to be discussed (ll. 3–4).

⁹ For *iubeoliussa* in such contexts, see Mynors on Vergil, *G.* 3.41.

¹⁰ Sivan (n. 4), pp. 144–5.

¹¹ Early 395 according to Sivan, before June 397 according to Green (n. 7, p. 562).

Anicia. Whoever he was, his little dedication was retained to serve as a preface, no doubt being thought to add prestige to the work. It also provides a summary of contents, but a rather misleading one, since it says nothing of the Fall, a major topic of the cento, and dilates on the soteriological implications of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension in a way that Proba does not. It is not present in all manuscripts, a fact which has given rise to some cloudy talk about archetypes,¹² based on some rather obscure statements by Schenkl.¹³ Its absence from certain manuscripts need not imply its absence from the archetype: since the preface could have been omitted by scribal choice, this has less probative value than the omission of a line such as line 233, which could hardly have been done by two or more scribes independently, and so must have been absent from their common source. The poem's transmission merits further study, but this will not help to solve the historical questions at issue.

The fifty-five prefatory verses written by Proba herself fall into two sections, of which the first ends not at line 23, where some manuscripts, noting that the cento proper began in the next line, end the preface or prologue, but at line 28. Unlike the second half, the first half has only a few lines which are totally constructed from Vergilian material (24–8), the remainder being largely independent. Proba presumably felt that she had some things to say which she could not express in Vergil's exact words. The line that conveys her procedure most clearly (23)—to be discussed later—is the last before the actual cento begins. Preceding it we have a long description of her previous work (1–8), a prayer for God's help (9–12), an abjuration of traditional kinds of invocation (13–17), and a statement of her motives and methods (18–22). Some of these themes recur in the second half, but the two halves are better described as complementary than as 'largely identical', as Sivan does. There are certain parallels, to be sure, but also some clear differences. The brief prayer to Father and Spirit in 9–12 is followed by a longer prayer to Father and Son in 29–34. Lines 47–8 describe her previous work from a different angle from that of lines 1–8: the former passage treats its matter as trivial, the latter as horrific and impious. Lines 50–3 complete the description of her motives, which were presented rather obscurely in 18–19. There is little, if anything, to correspond to the content of lines 20–4, and nothing to foreshadow lines 35–45, which introduce one of her main themes. More generally, there is also a notable contrast between the emphasis on war and destruction in the first half, and the picture of prelapsarian bliss which is central to the second. This overall relationship between the two halves is an argument in favour of single authorship, if one is needed; so too perhaps is the exact or almost exact symmetry,¹⁴ which reflects that of the poem as a whole.

In the selective commentary that follows, more attention will be given to the first half, as its phrasing and allusions require; much could be said about the reuse of Vergil which is predominantly found in the second, but if they so choose readers may do that for themselves, using the references provided by Schenkl. The text given below is Schenkl's, but the punctuation is improved in various places.

Iam dudum temerasse duces pia foedera pacis,
regnandi miseros tenuit quos dira cupido,
diversasque neces, regum crudelia bella
cognatasque acies, pollutos caede parentum

¹² Shanzer (n. 2), pp. 234–5, and Sivan (n. 4), p. 146, whose words 'it is worth noting that there is at least one archetypal lacuna in that part (at line 233), a tenuous but possible indication of different archetypes', beggar the understanding.

¹³ K. Schenkl, *Poetae Christiani Minores* (CSEL XVI: Leipzig, 1888), p. 523.

¹⁴ Line 42 may conceal a lacuna: see below.

insignis clipeos nulloque ex hoste tropaea,	5
sanguine conspersos tulerat quos fama triumphos,	
innumeris totiens viduatas civibus urbes,	
confiteor, scripsi. satis est meminisse malorum.	
nunc deus omnipotens, sacrum, precor, accipe carmen	
aeternique tui septemplex ora resolve	10
spiritus atque mei resera penetralia cordis,	
arcana ut possim vatis Proba cuncta referre.	
non nunc ambrosium cura est mihi quaerere nectar,	
nec libet Aonio de vertice ducere Musas,	
non mihi saxa loqui vanus persuadeat error	15
laurigerosque sequi tripodas et inania vota	
iurgantesque deos procerum victosque penates.	
nullus enim labor est verbis extendere famam	
atque hominum studiis parvam disquirere laudem.	
Castalio sed fonte madens, imitata beatos	20
quae sitiens hausit sanctae libamina lucis	
hinc canere incipiam. praesens deus, erige mentem:	
Vergilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi.	
rem nulli obscuram repetens ab origine pergam,	
si qua fides animo, si vera infusa per artus	25
mens agitat molem et toto se corpore miscet	
spiritus et quantum non noxia corpora tardant	
terrenique hebetant artus moribundaque membra.	

In the opening lines, as well as the Vergilian references given by Schenkl for lines 2, 5, and 7,¹⁵ there is also an obvious general resemblance to Lucan's *Pharsalia*, especially his proem, in language, style, and tone. The first line makes use of *temerataque iura* (1.225, where it is immediately preceded by *pacem*) and *foedera pacis* (4.205, 365). Proba puts Lucan's *cognatasque acies* in exactly the same position (it is line 4 of both poems). Though the ending of line 5 is verbally closer to Vergil's *diverso ex hoste tropaea* (G. 3.32), there are similarities in Lucan: compare 1.12 *nullos habitura triumphos*, which, as will be seen, is also thematically important; 1.375 *quocumque ex hoste triumphos*; 4.94 *nulloque obsessus ab hoste*. The proximity of *pollutos* and *sanguine conspersos* in the surrounding lines suggests the influence of Lucan 6.581/2 and 584. There is striking similarity in terms of length and structure too; both passages are of seven lines, and the theme is developed in a series of short, forceful clauses, and the verb is by contrast relatively inconspicuous. In Proba the summary of the civil war creates an effect of exaggerated reportage which is rather different from the controlled comment of Lucan; but in *nulloque ex hoste tropaea* there is a pointed comment reminiscent of Lucan 1.12 quoted above, and in general her tone is not very different. The most obvious explanation of this degree of similarity is that it reflects the tone of her original poem; Lucan was well-known as a schoolbook, and seemed the most appropriate literary model for her poem on the war between Constantius and Magnentius—which is surely the war in question.¹⁶

The flowing syntax of these lines is interrupted by two relative clauses in lines 2 and 6, both of which demand attention. The first is strongly Vergilian, based most closely on G. 1.37 *nec tibi regnandi veniat tam dira cupido*. In the phrase *dira cupido* (also used by Vergil in 6.373 and 721 [with *miseris*] and 9.185), described by Austin as a 'tag',¹⁷ *dira* has the sense of 'preposterous', 'unnatural', implying an impossible desire to cross boundaries, as between Heaven and Hell, or between mortal and immortal, as shown

¹⁵ Add A. 6.721 for *miseros* . . . *dira cupido*.

¹⁶ See Matthews (n. 3), pp. 291–9.

¹⁷ R. G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Sextus*, (Oxford, 1977), on l. 373.

by an overmastering impulse for power or glory. It is perhaps more sympathetic than condemnatory in Vergil, yet in spite of *miseros* there is some element of censure in this line, and in the first line there is a more palpable hostility towards the *duces* who broke the pre-existing peace, presumably Magnentius and his generals.

The second relative clause, that in line 6 *sanguine conspersos tulerat quos fama triumphos*, has yet to receive a satisfactory explanation. Clark and Hatch offer 'Bloodstained parades of triumph "fame" had won', but fame is usually the result and not the cause of triumphs. The inverted commas not only impute scorn to the writer but betray the difficulty of the interpretation. Shanzer offers something similar: 'triumphs which fame had brought', and sees the difficulty: but to say that the idea of fame bringing war and discord is common, and then to illustrate that with two passages in which rumour is described as causing fear does not help at all.¹⁸ The translation 'vaunted triumphs bespattered with blood' has also been suggested—triumphs, that is, which fame has lifted on high, or made famous—but there are serious objections to this interpretation. There are less clumsy ways of saying 'famous' and in this usage one expects some amplification of the predicate.¹⁹ These objections are avoided by taking *fama* as 'rumour' or 'report', and giving *fero* its usual sense in this idiom: 'triumphs which rumour had it were stained with blood'. This gains point by being paradoxical: triumphs are usually, indeed always, stained with blood in some sense, as are the victories which (if 'triumph' is taken strictly) lead to them. But what view is being contradicted by rumour or general report, and why is this point, already made by references to indiscriminate slaughter, repeated and highlighted in this rather tortuous way? What we know of the historical background offers a convincing answer. This line could well refer to a well-known historical event, the visit of Constantine to Rome in 357, four years after his victory over Magnentius at Mursa, a visit which, though strictly speaking an *adventus*, is described as a triumph by Ammianus (16.10.1) and by Themistius in the speech he wrote for the event.²⁰ This is how Themistius portrayed the confrontation: against the barbarians and the unnamed but indubitably real 'illegitimate and counterfeit successors' (43b) and a man of drunken violence who assaults the people, mutilates the senate, and fills the Tiber with slaughter and pollution (43c), stood the emperor armed with philosophy, who 'using it, stood against the older man and won a bloodless victory': and in the sentence which precedes this, 'philosophy is your strength, philosophy your army, philosophy your guards and your armour-bearers; with these you exacted the penalty from the drunkards' (45b). Themistius' strategy is to have things both ways: Constantius won a victory, but a peaceful one. It may well have been this propagandist implication, emphasized by the strongly placed *ἀναιμάκτων*, that Constantius' victory had been bloodless—like that of the ideal Stoic or Christian magistrate unstained by human blood²¹—that moved Proba to write as she does here. The reference is highly sarcastic, since everyone not gulled by the propaganda must have known what had really happened. This also gives point to the close relation of the two lines, which describe appearance and reality; after stating that the trophies were won from no (true) enemy, Proba makes clear that there was indeed an enemy, who paid with his blood.

The theme of blood is also present in Ammianus' more famous description of the events, which contains the words in 16.10.1 *post Magnenti exitum absque nomine ex Romano sanguine triumphaturus*. Here it is the word *Romano* in particular that is

¹⁸ Shanzer (n. 5), pp. 84–5, with n. 61.

¹⁹ As in Liv. 21.32.7 *fama . . . qua incerta in maius vero ferri solent*; Verg. A. 7.231/2 *nec vestra feretur fama levis*.

²⁰ 3 in Downey.

emphatic, just as there is an emphasis on *Latio* in the similar phrase of Claudian (from a dissimilar context) at 28.396 *scilicet ut Latio respersos sanguine currus (aspicerem)*. It might be asked whether Proba's point would not be better made with such an adjective, which could have been present in a line now lost. But her point is the awfulness of the bloodshed in general, not the spilling and celebration of Roman blood; and it is not easy to see what else a lacuna might have contained. Syntactically speaking, the words *quos . . . triumphos* could be taken as a relative clause elaborating *tropaea*;²² and the expression might have been inspired or suggested by that of Vergil *G.* 3.32/3, where the word *tropaea* leads on directly to (*adde*) *triumphatas*. There seems no obvious need to postulate a lacuna in Proba's text.

Another item in Ammianus' account is relevant: the phrase *absque nomine*. A typical interpretation of this passage²³ is given by the unusually full and explicit Penguin translation: '(Constantius . . . conceived a strong desire to visit Rome) and celebrate the fall of Magnentius by a triumph to which he had no title, since it had been won by the spilling of Roman blood'. This suits the context, for Ammianus goes on to claim that he had won no foreign victories, even vicariously, had made no additions to the empire, and had done nothing worthy of a leader in moments of crisis; but it is not the only possible interpretation. In fact, the interpretation of *absque nomine* as 'without right' or 'entitlement' may be questioned, for the parallel phrase *in nomine* carries no such implication and may indeed be used of false authority. The phrase does not recur in Ammianus, but the meaning 'without mentioning a name' is supported by other writers, who indicate the name of either a person or a rank.²⁴ Ammianus could perhaps mean that the official title of triumph was not specified: this is not contradicted by the contemporary references to 'triumphs' already mentioned, but it is less easy because the 'name' or title in question (that of *triumphator*) has to be understood from the verb *triumphaturus*. The order of the words—which is not determined by rhythm, since *nomine* and *sanguine* are rhythmically equivalent—favours the interpretation that it was Magnentius who was not named. His name stands on one side of the phrase, the adjective *Romano* on the other. This also fits the somewhat sly logic of the passage: Constantius had won no external victory, or even heard of one, and so the victim over whom he was triumphing must have been Magnentius. If it was the blood of the Roman Magnentius and his followers that was the occasion of this apparent triumph, there is more than a hint of duplicity in Constantius' posturings. Proba may well be drawing attention to the absurdity of this, a generation before Ammianus,²⁵ with extra irony, in her words *nulloque ex hoste tropaea*, developing Lucan's point in her own way. This line, then, is hostile to Constantius, and perhaps more blatantly so than the other gloss, that of line 2, was to his adversaries. Whatever the circumstances and colour of the original poem, neither

²¹ To the small collection of references cited by Green on Ausonius, *Moselle* 405/6 add HA *Antoninus Pius* 13.4 *sine civili sanguine et hostili*.

²² As in Ausonius III. 15/16, where *tantum . . . spatium* is followed by *quanta . . . tempora*; and Cic. *Div. in Caec.* 41, where *illius . . . temporis* is followed by *quo die*.

²³ There is a similar interpretation in the Loeb translation, and in R. Klein, *Athenaeum* 57 (1979), 99, and J. F. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London, 1989), pp. 233–4. See also the translations quoted by P. de Jonge, *A Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XVI* (Groningen, 1972), *ad loc.*

²⁴ Jer. in *Gal.* 1.8 *se itaque et angelum nominatim posuit, alios vero absque nomine*; Sulp. Sev. *Chron.* 1.54.7 *Godoliam eiusdem gentis praeposuit absque ullo insigni regio aut imperii nomine*.

²⁵ This could be claimed as an early example of the 'senatorial' interpretation of this event seen by D. Vera, 'La Polemica contro l'abuso imperiale del trionfo: rapporti fra ideologia, economia e propaganda nel Basso Impero', *Rivista Storica dell'Antichità* 10 (1980), 89–132.

side is favoured in this summary of it. The focus is on the physical and moral evils of war.

In contrast to these *mala*, Proba now offers a poem that is *sacrum*. The contrast is brought out further by the pun in line 12, one evidently popular with its beneficiaries²⁶ and no doubt tiresome to others: she is the poetess Proba, and a (morally) good poetess. At the risk of over-elaboration one could see more in this: a hint that she was a recent convert to Christianity, as often suggested, though this cannot be deduced solely from *confiteor* in line 8; and even an ironic comment that she is also 'good' in Julian's terms, i.e. free from the double standards of which he accused Christians.²⁷ In the phrase *vatis Proba*, *vatis* should not be taken as genitive, as it was by Wiesen:²⁸ the meaning 'all the bard's recondite secrets' is unlikely because Vergil is not mentioned until line 23, and because it would contradict *rem nulli obscuram* in line 24. As will be seen shortly, Proba is praying to the sevenfold Spirit²⁹ not for help in divining the secrets of Vergil—that is not a problem—but for inspiration and illumination to put forward Christian truth in this strange garb. She must first understand her theme by faith and meditation and then express it in the difficult way that she has chosen. Compared with the self-effacing prayers of Paulinus of Nola and Prudentius³⁰ these words may seem rather self-assertive, but that is no reason to interpret them differently. Juvencus had shown great confidence in his short preface. The abilities are there; they just need to be revealed and expressed.

The emphatic *nunc* of line 9, repeated in line 13, suggests that her previous poem had not begun with such a prayer, but with an appeal to the traditional sources of poetic inspiration. These she now dismisses: she needs no nectar,³¹ and she will not lead down the Muses from their Aonian height, as Vergil aspired to do in the different circumstances of *G.* 3.11. As elsewhere in this preface the bard is echoed and contradicted at the same time. The rest of the sentence poses problems of interpretation. Line 15 seems to mean 'let not vain error persuade me that rocks speak'. It would be difficult to take *saxa* as object of *loqui* as 'to speak of (mere) rocks'; such a reading, with presumably a pejorative reference to pagan gods, would be brusque and obscure. In this sense, initially at least, Christians seem to have preferred *lapides*—more appropriate to dressed stone—to *saxa*, as in Tert. *Idol.* 4.3 (referring to Enoch), Ausonius II.3.44, and Prudentius, *Symm.* 1.206, *Per.* 3.82.³² So the construction in line 15 which *persuadeat* governs should be an accusative and infinitive, but line 16 cannot be so construed: the infinitive there must be an infinitive of command ('to follow', or 'seek after', 'the tripods bedecked in laurel³³ and [make] vain prayers'). Such a variation of construction is clumsy and unclear. In the only analogy that has offered itself, Cypr. *Ep.* 59.7 *item Paulus monet nos cum mali de ecclesia pereunt non moveri nec recedentibus perfidis fidem minui*, the reverse order ('command' followed by

²⁶ Aus. *Ep.* 9b 35–52, *CIL* 6.1752.4.

²⁷ R. P. H. Green, *CQ* 45 (1995), 555–6.

²⁸ D. S. Wiesen, *Hermes* 99 (1971), 72; for *vatis* as nominative, see F. Neue and C. Wagener, *Formenlehre der lateinischen Sprache*³ (Leipzig, 1902), p. 1.281. There are two parallels in Ausonius, IV 8 and VII 5. Cf. also Shanzer (n. 2), p. 233 and n. 8, on the reading *natis*.

²⁹ On this see M. R. Cacioli, in her article 'Addattamenti semantici e sintattici nel Centone Virgiliano di Proba', *SIFC* 41 (1969), 188–246, at 216–17; but it may be wrong to assume that the pseudo-Tertullianic *carmen adversus Marcionem* was written before Proba.

³⁰ Paulinus c. 18.25–69, Prudentius, *Hamartigenia* 931–66.

³¹ For this see Persius, prol. 14 and J. C. Bramble, *Persius and the Programmatic Satire: A Study in Form and Imagery* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 52.

³² Cf. also Lucret. 5.1199 *vertier ad lapidem atque omnis accedere ad aras*, and the proverbial *lapidemque a sepulchro venerari pro deo* (Cic. *Planc.* 95).

³³ Cf. schol. Aristoph. *Plutus* 39.

what is surely a 'statement': cf. Romans 3:3) makes understanding easier, as does the existence of a scriptural parallel.

The grammatical problem might be solved by transposing either lines 14 and 15 or 15 and 16. The mistake could be explained by confusion involving *nec* (14) and *non* (15); if it originally followed line 13, it may have been overlooked at first and written in after line 14, or if it originally followed line 16, it might have been accidentally copied a line too soon and made to follow the initially similar line 14. The second solution should be preferred, on stylistic grounds, because it offers two tricola, one based on *libet*, the other on *persuadeat*. If eyebrows are raised by the use of concinnity as a criterion, it should be noted that in the first fifty lines of the cento proper, Proba creates tricola in at least four places (65/6, 84/5, 92/3, 96–8), only one of them totally being derived from Vergil. It is true that according to this interpretation *sequi* does not quite have the sense it has in Statius *Theb.* 7.707 *tripodas laurusque sequi . . . doctus* (of Amphiaras)—at least Proba is thinking of poets, not worshippers or seers—but this is not a difficulty: even if she knew the line, she was quite capable, like any writer of her age, of reinterpreting it. There is now an attractive antithesis in *ducere* and *sequi*, and it may further be argued that the zeugma created by *inania vota* is less harsh if this is the last element of three rather than part of a longer sequence. There is also a more sensible train of thought. She abjures first nectar, then the Muses, then the tripods of Delphi, and decries the futility of all such invocations: this is similar to the threefold distinction that we have in Nemesianus, *Cynegetica* 3ff., which for all its bizarre ornamentation follows a wooden formula of Muses (Aonian frenzy), Delphi (Helicon), and Apollo (*Castalius*), and in the letter of Optatianus Porphyrius to Constantine³⁴ (*pro Heliconii verticis nemore, pro Castalii fontis haustu versifico, pro Apollinis lyra et Musarum concinentibus choris*). The same general formula is found in Paulinus' first reply to Ausonius, where, in his elaborate reply to Ausonius' simple appeal to the Muses to bring him back (*Ep.* 21.73/4), he chooses to denounce the Muses, the Delphic grot, and the heights of Parnassus as sources of inspiration.³⁵ It is worthy of note that, like Paulinus in that passage,³⁶ Proba carefully avoids mentioning a fountain: that was a Christian metaphor as well, and so was not a symbol to be avoided.

The second tricolon now yields the meaning 'let not vain error persuade me that there is speech in rocks, or in the squabbling gods and the conquered *penates*'. The contradiction in *iurgantes* and *loqui* reinforces the point that the gods are not real: for all their noisy bickering in the pages of Vergil, they may as well be a dumb show. Like the other implications—that pagan gods are no more than stones, and that the *penates* had suffered a defeat even before they started looking after Rome—this refers to familiar Christian polemic.³⁷ But there are also important Vergilian resonances, and their purpose is not only to be 'representative' of Vergil in a general way,³⁸ but to evoke specific contexts. Firstly, that of *A.* 3.90–8, where at Delos (which is described like Delphi), everything trembles, the mountain seems to move, and the *cortina* sounds forth to the expectant Trojans. For the squabbling gods we must turn to the celestial

³⁴ Hardly a medieval forgery as maintained by G. Polara, *Optatianus Porphyrius, Carmina I* (Turin, 1973), pp. 4–6; this was always unlikely on stylistic grounds, and the chronological difficulties are well solved by T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Harvard, 1981), pp. 47–8.

³⁵ Lines 25–8 in poem 10 (Hartel), printed as App. B3 in Green.

³⁶ *petere e nemoribus aut iugis* (10.28). Various manuscripts give *fonte*, but their lines do not scan.

³⁷ For example Tert. *Apol.* 14, Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 24, Aus. II 3.44.

³⁸ 'Stellvertretend' is the word of R. Herzog, *Die Biblepik*, Einführung, p. LI, n. 160.

council in book 10, and in particular line 95 *irrita iurgia iactas* (Vergil uses the noun only here and the verb *iurgare* not at all). It is of course no problem that the first two lines of Proba's prayer (29–30) derive from just these two contexts (10.18 and 3.89): this is a good example of how Proba drags things from their original context, which becomes strictly irrelevant. Vergil's words are used of Christian things; she is not here appealing to the ancient gods themselves. In the third element the actual phrase *victosque penates* derives of course from *A.* 1.68, but a little later on in Book 3, at lines 147–71, the *penates* themselves address Aeneas.

One word remains to be elucidated: *procerum*. This has been described by Shanzer as having no real function, so that the phrase is 'slightly cryptic'³⁹ unless it is seen to derive from and refer to a strikingly similar passage in the *carmen contra paganos*,⁴⁰ where *iurgantesque deos* in line 22 is followed in the next line by *proceres*, evidently in the vocative. The words suit the context of the latter passage very well; if they are less comfortable in Proba, then there is indeed a case for supposing that she is the imitator, and for wrestling anew with the chronology. The word *proceres* certainly means 'senators' regularly in late antiquity, but not exclusively: Ausonius in II.3.40 uses the words *proceres . . . pii* to denote worthies of the Old Testament. The context of that passage makes it plain that we are dealing with leaders of a community seen as extending through history, almost 'forbears' or 'pioneers'. So in Proba's context the Vergilian *proceres* might be meant: the 'founding fathers' of the Roman race. Vergil himself uses the word *proceres* nine times—of the Trojans, not surprisingly, in more than half these cases—and although there is nothing out of the ordinary about his usage, the reference that the word regularly has in Vergil may have influenced Proba's choice. Proba refers, then, to the squabbling gods who guided and were worshipped by Rome's ancestors: this gives excellent sense, and she has not borrowed from anyone except Vergil.

The point behind the two lines just analysed is that Proba knows her Vergil, but that whatever other readers of Vergil may have thought (note the emphatic *non mihi*), 'vain error' will not persuade her that the pagan gods have anything worthwhile to say. Vergil himself is not rejected, only his patently discredited gods: there is no inspiration to be gained from them. The connection of the two lines that follow is less obvious, and has been badly misunderstood. She does not, as one might have expected, develop the points already implied, that pagan poetry is fictional, unedifying, or horrific, but makes a different point entirely. A literal translation (different in important respects from what Clark and Hatch have to offer)⁴¹ would be: 'For it requires no effort to extend one's fame with words and to seek' (or 'gain') 'some small praise by following human studies.' In the first of these lines there is a clear remodelling of Verg. *A.* 10.468 *sed famam extendere factis, hoc virtutis opus* to underline her dismissal of human estimates of the value of traditional literary study and composition. To write an epic of the traditional kind, according to human conventions, is easy enough, but adds little to one's reputation. (*parvam*, it should perhaps be emphasized, is not used in mock-modesty.) Proba says that she wanted a challenge, and more than a little prestige; the first point, at least, is clear in line 52. The implication that the Christian

³⁹ Shanzer (n. 2), p. 236. The text of this paragraph has suffered typographical corruption (the half-word 'spe-' has no continuation), but the thrust of her argument, repeated in (n. 5), pp. 88–9, is plain enough.

⁴⁰ Poem 4 in Riese's *Anthologia Latina*, poem 3 in Shackleton Bailey's.

⁴¹ 'It is not my task indeed to publicize my fame on the strength of words, thereby to seek some small acclaim from human favor'.

poetess was seeking fame embarrassed Ermini;⁴² but a similar point emerges in lines 336/7, in a prayer at the start of the section on the New Testament: . . . *temptanda via est, qua me quoque possim tollere humo et nomen fama tot ferre per annos*. It should not be dismissed as due to the exigencies of the cento form, for the lines could have been omitted: centonists have a choice of what to say, if not of how they say it. It is essentially the same point that Juvencus had made in his prologue: his aim was *aeternae in saecula laudis immortale decus*.⁴³

Proba has set out her principles and her aims: now comes a more detailed description of her programme. Her intention to put her thorough knowledge of classical poetry to Christian ends is neatly expressed in the formal contrast between *madens* (which there is no need to take pejoratively: cf. *Hor.* c. 3.21.9) and the scriptural *sitiens*. She will sing of the divine light that she has received. Her programme is in essence the same as that of other Christians (*imitata beatos*); these are presumably earlier Christian writers and even the writers of the gospels and perhaps David.⁴⁴ But her starting point will be Vergil, as neatly implied by the Vergilian half-line *hinc canere incipiam* neatly placed just before the cento begins. Then, after a brief prayer (perhaps alluding unspecifically to Vergil in *praesens deus* and certainly using Lucan's *erige mentem* from 8.76), there follows the programmatic line, more often paraphrased than translated,⁴⁵ which ought to mean 'I will say that Vergil sang the holy gifts of Christ', and surely does, though some might prefer a weaker meaning for *loquar*, such as 'imply'. The point is not that Vergil is being mined for secret Christian truth (so Wiesen⁴⁶), or reinterpreted, but that he will be made or alleged to speak of the 'gifts of Christ', a phrase which may be taken without difficulty to refer to both Old and New Testaments.

To bring her point home, she then begins to construct her lines entirely from Vergil. The reference of *rem nulli obscuram* (not noted by Schenkl: it comes from *A.* 11.343) is not immediately clear; but since Proba refers to her chosen subject in line 12 as *arcana* and in line 51 (contrasting it again with her earlier work) as *res altas terra et caligine mersas*, it should refer not to *pia munera Christi* nor to the idea *Vergilius cecinisse* (her use of Vergil is something new), but to the works of Vergil. She will use the known schooltext to explain the unknown Christian mysteries. But *ab origine* must refer to Genesis, since it would make no sense if it referred to the *Aeneid*, or to the Vergilian corpus as a whole. The opening lines of the epic are in fact avoided, as are the opening lines of the first Eclogue; and in any case Vergil's lines are found in no order but all over the place. Although this interpretation goes against the phrasing of Vergil's *repetens ab origine pergam* (*A.* 1.372), such freedom (or clumsiness) is matched elsewhere in this and other centos, and could be said to be part of the exercise.

⁴² F. Ermini, *Il centone di Proba e la poesia centonaria latina* (Rome, 1909), p. 17.

⁴³ Juvencus, *Pref.* 17–18. See P. G. Van der Nat, 'Die Praefatio der Evangelienparaphrase des Iuvencus', in W. den Boer, P. G. van der Nat, C. M. J. Sicking, and J. C. M. van Winden (edd.), *Romanitas et Christianitas: Studia Iano Henrico Waszink . . . oblata* (Amsterdam, 1973), pp. 249–57.

⁴⁴ Herzog, *Die Biblepik*, Einführung p. L, n. 156. Cf. also Paulinus of Nola, c. 6.20–4.

⁴⁵ Translated by Clark and Hatch as 'That Vergil put to verse Christ's sacred duties let me tell'. According to Shanzer (n. 2, p. 232) Proba 'used the words of Vergil to retell portions of the Old and New Testament'; for Sivan (n. 4, p. 141) her purpose is 'to sing the praises of Christ in Virgilian verses', for J.-L. Charlet in J. Fontaine and C. Pietri (edd.), *Le Monde latin antique et la Bible* (Bible de Tous les temps, 2: Paris 1985), pp. 634–5, it is 'montrer que Vergile a chanté l'histoire sainte, et donc inviter à lire la Bible à travers son oeuvre'. No help is offered by W. Kirsch, *Die Lateinische Versepik des vierten Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1989), p. 122.

⁴⁶ Wiesen (n. 28), pp. 72 and 85.

She continues to draw on Vergil for the remaining lines, which refer to her earlier prayer and take up her earlier requests for faith and spiritual illumination (lines 9–11). Such divergences as there are from Vergil should not be dismissed as due to the technical problems of recycling his poetry (though these occur not infrequently in Proba's cento and others), but can be shown to have a purpose. Line 25 is based on A. 3.434 *si qua fides, animum si veris implet Apollo* and 6.726 *totamque infusa per artus*. Schenkl's *si vera infusa* is a conjecture, but seems a good one; the manuscripts have *fusa*, preceded by *si* and *veros*, *veris*, *viris*, or *vires*, none of which can stand. The temptation to prefer *tota* to *vera* should be resisted, for *toto* is needed in the next line for Vergil's *magno*, now that *corpore* refers to Proba, not the world. *toto* has a particular point, and in any case she would hardly have used *magno* . . . *corpore* of her own person, even if it were true. *vera*, then, should be accepted; the departure from Vergil's text is within the limits that she allowed herself later. In *vera* . . . *mens* she appears to be making a further polemical point, contrasting the Stoic World-spirit with the Holy Spirit or the Christian logos.⁴⁷

O pater, o hominum rerumque aeterna potestas, da facilem cursum atque animis illabere nostris, tuque ades inceptumque una decurre laborem, nate, patris summi vigor et caelestis origo, quem primi colimus meritosque novamus honores. iam nova progenies, omnis quem credidit aetas. nam memini veterum volvens monumenta virorum Musaeum ante omnes vestrum cecinisse per orbem quae sint, quae fuerint, quae mox ventura trahantur. † omnia et ipse tener mundi concreverit orbis. felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas, unde hominum pecudumque genus vitaeque volantum et quae marmoreo fert monstra sub aequore pontus, † et liquidi simul ignis et caeli mobilis umor. haut aliter prima crescentis origine mundi inluxisse dies aliumve habuisse tenorem crediderim. maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo, si qua fidem tanto est operi latura vetustas. namque—fatebor enim—levium spectacula rerum semper equos atque arma virum pugnascue canebam et studio incassum volui exercere laborem. omnia temptanti potior sententia visa est pandere res altas terra et caligine mersas. inque dies aliquid iam dudum invadere magnum mens agitat mihi nec placida contenta quiete est. ore favete omnes laetasque advertite mentes matres atque viri pueri innuptaeque puellae.	30 35 40 45 50 55
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At this point Proba launches into a prayer, following up the brief *praesens deus erige mentem* of line 22 and her hope that the *mens* and *spiritus* of God would enhance her own mental and physical abilities. The frequency of such elaborate and classically oriented prayers in later Christian poets should not blind us to the fact that here is one of the earliest, perhaps indeed the first. As such it may have been influential, like the (probably later) prayer of Ausonius; indeed although echoes of a Vergilian cento are naturally hard to spot, there does seem to be an echo in Ausonius' *Oratio* (II 3), at line 27, where Ausonius takes over the phrase *nate patris summi* with the same Christian sense and reference that Proba had given it. In this prayer to Father and Son the latter

⁴⁷ See Green on Ausonius II 3.81.

is described in the words used of the mind-spirit of *A.* 6.726, already alluded to in 25–6, but there is no longer a need to add any qualification, for we are now fully into the cento so that reinterpretations of Vergil do not need to be signalled. The context of each original line is, strictly speaking, irrelevant.

In typical Graeco-Roman fashion, a persuasive reason is given for granting the prayer; it was they who inspired Moses of old. Schenkl believed that *vestrum* referred to the pagans implicitly addressed in the poem, and that Musaeus was the bard of classical myth, here used to signify the Sibylline oracles; but it is surely more natural to refer *vestrum* to the persons of the Godhead just mentioned, and to understand Musaeus as Moses. This appeal, then, develops the concise *imitata beatos* of line 20. Moses—seen as the author of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch—wrote of past, present, and future (through prophecy and typology), and in particular of the creation of the world. In the section in which Proba dilates on this point there are difficulties with lines 38 and 42. Line 38 is difficult where it stands, but transposing it after line 42, as Schenkl suggests, merely moves the problem. But if *omnia* is taken with the previous line, and *ut* of some manuscripts accepted for *et*, there is reasonable sense. If the asyndeton offends, then *omnia et ut*, with *omnia* in synizesis, might be considered; this seems to abide within the limits Proba allows herself. Line 42 does not scan: the third foot cretic is something that Proba does not perpetrate. The evidence of the manuscripts offers no solution, since other phrases from the original context do not fit. Schenkl suggested that the present components of line 42 were each, in fact, the second half of a verse. Before *et caeli mobilis umor* he suggested *semina terrarumque* (Verg. *E.* 6.32), which creates a perfectly acceptable verse; but he was unable to offer a hemistich to precede *et liquidi simul ignis*. He was surely wrong to seek a phrase describing water, for that is provided by *et caeli mobilis umor*; and there is no need to assume that *et liquidi simul ignis* formed the second half of a line rather than the first, as it does in Vergil. But even so, and even with the help of a concordance such as Schenkl did not have, the supplement is elusive: perhaps *et aeris* (or *aetheris*) followed *ignis*, but what then? *incrementum*? To circumvent the problem that these items are presented in the nominative case (but there is no problem with *mobilis*, which is surely genitive) one might emend *umor* to *umorem*, which in Verg. *G.* 1.295 undergoes hypermetric elision. They could then be in apposition with *causas* in line 39; as Schenkl suggested, the development of the theme is improved if line 42 precedes lines 40–1. My very speculative restoration, then, is this: . . . *rerum cognoscere causas, semina terrarumque et caeli mobilis umorem, et liquidi simul ignis et aeris incrementum, unde hominum pecudumque genus*. . . In this position lines 40/1 also create a better link with lines 43/4, which reproduce *G.* 2.336–7 with the small change of *haud aliter* for *non alios* (or *alias*). Why Proba made this change is not obvious; perhaps she simply wanted to avoid having two continuous lines from Vergil, which Ausonius would describe as *ineptum*.

maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo (line 45). The new order of things is not, of course, one greater than that inaugurated by the Creation just described, or one greater than that performed as author by Moses, but one greater than her previous poem. This claim is not qualified in any way by the conditional clause in the following line, which could be explained, as Harrison⁴⁸ explains the original (*A.* 10.792), as an expression of ‘pathetic hope’, or rather in this case a modest or even confident one. Proba hopes that the *vetustas* of Vergil will bring credibility to her undertaking (*tanto operi*). (It is true that Genesis is an older book, but it is one relatively unfamiliar to her readers.) From

⁴⁸ S. J. Harrison, *Vergil Aeneid 10* (Oxford, 1991), *ad loc.*

her new perspective she dismisses the subject-matter of her previous epic as *levium spectacula rerum*, something as trivial as public entertainments (in Christian eyes) or indeed the movements of Vergil's bees.⁴⁹ Traditional epic is put in its place in the new order of things. This new departure is presented with a plea for a respectful and enthusiastic reception (line 54), and with a further reference to the universality of the Christian message (following *omnis quem credidit aetas* in line 34), which is highly appropriate to the serious educational purpose of her poem.

Glasgow University

R. P. H. GREEN

⁴⁹ Cf. Shanzer (n. 5), p. 86 for a different approach. But reference to Verg. *A.* 9.777 suggests that there is nothing derogatory about the placing of the phrase *arma virum*, and shows that the imperfect tense derives from Vergil. *Cecini* would not scan.