

Ausonius and Virgil's Nether Regions

*Revised from a paper given to the Virgil Society on 5 March 2011**

This contribution opens with a warning via the so-called *Parecbasis* of Ausonius' *Cento Nuptialis*. The original poem apparently dates to c. AD 374, when Gratian, the son of the emperor Valentinian I, got married.¹ Some years later, Ausonius sent a copy of the poem to his friend Paulus, now with some prose sections, such as the *parecbasis*, woven in. So far, after a lengthy prose preface and a dignified address to the emperors Valentinian and Gratian (1-11), the *Cento* has been in the form of a sort of descriptive commentary on the wedding celebrations, including the festive meal (12-32), the arrival of the bride (33-45), of the groom (46-56), the presentation of gifts (57-66), the departure of the couple towards their bedroom (67-79) and their first words of intimacy there (80-100). At this point, the voice of Ausonius interrupts in prose:

Hactenus castis auribus audiendum mysterium nuptiale ambitu loquendi et circuitione velavi. Verum quoniam et Fescenninos amat celebritas nuptialis verborumque petulantiam notus vetere instituto ludus admittit, cetera quoque cubiculi et lectuli operta prodentur ab eodem auctore collecta, ut bis erubescamus, qui et Virgilium faciamus impudentem. Vos, si placet, hic iam legendi modum ponite: cetera curiosis relinquite.

(“So far I have veiled the mystery of marriage which is to be heard by chaste ears in a circuitous and roundabout way of speaking. But since wedding celebrations love Fescennine verses and a game well known in ancient custom allows a wantonness in words, the remaining secrets of the bedroom and the bed will be gathered and offered by the

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¹ The work is transmitted via manuscript Z; for text and commentary, see Green (1991).

same author, so that I blush twice when I also make Virgil shameless. If you like, put an end to your reading here and now; leave the remainder to the curious”).²

My discussion will focus on the so-called *Imminutio* section of Ausonius’ *Cento Nuptialis* (101-31), which features adult content, sex and violence, graphically rendered. I shall consider details of the *Imminutio* section not so much within the context of the poem as within the context of Virgilian cento writing in general, which enjoyed a reasonable amount of popularity in Late Antiquity.³ But let me insist again on the offensive nature of this material, this time in the words of Roger Green: “It is one of the most detailed descriptions of sexual intercourse in Latin literature, and also one of the most violent”.⁴

In his own defence Ausonius claims his subject matter – a nuptial cento - was dictated to him by Valentinian on the occasion of Gratian’s wedding. Allegedly, the emperor had composed such a cento himself, and wanted to see if he could do better than Ausonius (already a well-known literary figure). Under orders if not duress, Ausonius could neither refuse, nor egregiously outdo the emperor, so was in a bit of a bind. The prose preface does not record who won this contest, so we can only guess.⁵

Ausonius’ prose preface contains the only ancient definition of a “cento” (“patchwork”):⁶ the centonist takes units from a poem or author (for example one or two complete lines, or parts of lines) and stitches them together with others from the same origin to create a new narrative. Ausonius explains in detail the point at which units of less than a complete line can be joined - essentially a choice is available, just as there is a choice for the location of a hexameter line’s caesura. To reproduce two originally consecutive lines in a cento is condemned by Ausonius as *ineptum* (“inept”), and three on the trot as *merae nugae* (“utter nonsense”). He specifies no restrictions or ideals for a cento’s subject matter, but requires that the result be fluent and new. The “rules” for centonic composition as defined by Ausonius are, then, perfectly clear on the technical matters of metre and of sequence and number of hypotexts (*i.e.* original units) in the new work. These can stand as useful criteria in analysis of surviving centos

² Translations are my own. Latin texts of the secular centos are usefully gathered in McGill (2005) 119-52.

³ Ehrling (2011) determinedly relates appreciation of the *Imminutio* section to the rest of the poem.

⁴ Green (1991) 519.

⁵ We should note that if we take Ausonius at his word and accept that he wrote his cento under orders, it is still not clear that he was under orders to write a sexually explicit cento.

⁶ Pollmann (2004) 79-83; McGill (2005) 2-30; Ehrling (2011) 30-31.

Late Antiquity has left us twelve secular Virgilian centos and four Christian.⁷ They date from c. AD 200 to c. 534, and cover a range of subject-matter, including Biblical narrative, mythological narrative, “epithalamia” (wedding poems), and the mundane. They vary in length, from eleven lines on bread-making (the *De Panificio*) to nearly seven hundred lines of Old and New Testament narrative (*Cento Probae*). They also vary in tone. In principle, of course, subjects such as bread-making, dicing (the *De Alea*) and sex could receive serious treatment, but they can also be treated light-heartedly, and Ausonius insists on his own humour in his prose preface, referring to his *Cento* as *frivolum opusculum* (“a frivolous little work”), *ioculari ... materia* (“with jocular subject”) and *ludicrum* (“a game”). On the other hand, mythological and Christian narratives in particular might be less suitable for light-hearted treatment, and in this respect it is well to note *Cento Probae*, the most famous Christian Latin cento of Late Antiquity (probably dating to the 360s), in whose preface Proba is not remotely frivolous or playful, but completely earnest when she promises to speak of the Christian truth in the works of Virgil.⁸

In sum, in form and date, the body of surviving centos offers a relatively compact and manageable episode in Virgilian reception;⁹ but in its content, tone and ideologies, it also accommodates an extraordinary range. Because, by its extravagance, it is at the very outer limits of that range, Ausonius' *Imminutio* section offers an interesting case for consideration of details and generalities of the cento as a small part of the Virgilian tradition.

But before I turn to that passage, I would like to consider as my first example of Virgilian centonic verse the anonymous *De Panificio*, as a control against which to set Ausonius' work. In the following presentation of the poem as it survives, vertical lines indicate the “joins” in Virgilian units; references on the right hand side indicate book and line numbers from the *Aeneid* and *Georgics* (*G*).

<i>Ipsē manu patiens inmensa volumina versat </i>	(7.490 5.408)
<i>adtollitque globos. Sonuerunt omnia plausu. </i>	(3.574 5.506)
<i>Tunc Cererem corruptam undis emittit ab alto. </i>	(1.177 1.297)
<i>Septem ingens gyros, septena volumina traxit </i>	(5.85)

⁷ McGill (2005) discusses the secular poems; Ehrling (2011) 24-37 very helpfully surveys the surviving field and its major modern editions, to which Sineri (2011) can now be added.

⁸ *Virgilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi* (“I shall say that Virgil sang the pious duties of Christ”, 23).

⁹ So too in provenance/s, transmission traditions etc. See McGill (2005) xix-xxi, 57; Ehrling (2011) 24-25.

<i>lubrica convolvens</i> <i>et torrida semper ab igni.</i>	(2.474 G.1.234)
<i>At rubicunda Ceres</i> <i>oleo perfusa nitescit,</i>	(G.1.297 5.135)
<i>scintillae absistunt.</i> <i>Opere omnis semita fervet.</i>	(12.102 4.407)
<i>Fervet opus redoletque.</i> <i>Volat vapor ater ad auras.</i>	(G.4.169 7.466)
<i>Instant ardentes</i> <i>veribusque trementia figunt,</i>	(1.423 1.212)
<i>conclamant rapiuntque focis</i> <i>onerantque canistris.</i>	(5.660 8.180)
<i>Undique conveniunt</i> <i>pueri innuptaeque puellae.</i>	(5.293/9.720 G.4.476/6.307)

(“Working by hand he turns the huge folds and lifts up dollops. Everything resounded with the kneading. Then he lets fall from above wet and salted flour; huge, he drew out seven rings, seven loads, turning them over when oiled and constantly warmed by the fire. And the corn, soaked in oil, shone ruddy, the sparks go away. The whole way is busy with work. The work is busy and gives off a smell, black smoke rises to the breeze. They crowd in passionately and fix the trembling [bread] on spits, they shout out and seize it from the fireplace and load up their baskets. Boys and unmarried girls gather all around”).

If we first consider the poem according to Ausonian criteria: we can easily identify a new narrative; the poem is metrically competent; there are no instances of consecutive lines reproduced as such. If we move beyond the Ausonian criteria we can find even more to commend here - the deployment of certain Virgilian units in a markedly new sense, in particular ll. 2 and 4. But there are also some awkwardnesses here: *ingens* (4) is not appropriate; there are a few minor inflections or other changes to Virgil’s text which make the new narrative work better (*manum*, 1; *convolvit*, 5), and one which is perhaps the result of a faulty textual transmission (*tum*, 3).¹⁰ To be carping perhaps, in ll. 2 and 7 in particular, there is no syntactical or even compelling narrative connection between the words before and after the caesurae, so the verses remain fragmented; the repetitions *opere ... fervet / fervet opus* might not appeal to everyone, and the asyndeton (l. 7) is even less likely to have admirers; the final line is weak primarily because it has nothing to do with breadmaking.

But admiration for the author’s imaginative redeployment of Virgilian subjects to a new context at ll. 2 and 4 prompts wider consideration of what constitutes centonic success: at various points, especially in the *Aeneid*, Virgil devotes lines to the preparation and consumption of food. Some of the hypotexts in the *De Panificio* are from such sections

¹⁰ McGill (2005) 190, n.25 on the general preference for *tunc* over *tum* in the codex Salmasianus.

(e.g. *Aen.* 1.177; 7.466; 1.212; 8.180). The new poem's l. 3 even begins with a Virgilian hypotext about making bread. There is novelty in the new poem, where *corruptam* is used to describe the addition of salt rather than sea-damage (although *corruptam* is then perhaps unconvincing and vulnerable to criticism), but the objection can be raised that, technical competence aside, the inclusion in a composition of a Virgilian cento about breadmaking of a half line which in its original, Virgilian hypo-context, refers to breadmaking, lacks transformative ingenuity. This anonymous poet's achievement is limited.

An analysis which puts a premium on the centonist's transformative ingenuity can usefully be extended to other examples of the genre. The longest secular Virgilian cento we have from Antiquity is the *Medea*, attributed to Hosidius Geta, and dating to the late second / early third century.¹¹ The narrative follows the Medea myth which had so interested Greek and Roman tragedians: the heroine's murder of her own children in revenge for her treatment by their father Jason. For its occasional metrical errors, obscurity and incoherence, the *Medea* is generally considered of suspect quality, although for the very *scale* of his project (461 lines, against the *De Panificio*'s 11), perhaps Geta deserves some credit.¹² Unusually, this cento is in the form of a drama script – that is, with lines attributed to different *dramatis personae*. The Virgilian book Geta draws on most heavily is *Aen.* 4. This fact is not without critical value, as it suggests that in the late second / early third century, that book of Virgil lent itself to understanding in formal tragic terms, a position still orthodox amongst most readers of the *Aeneid* today.¹³ But in terms of transformative ingenuity, Geta is vulnerable: how much of an achievement is it to write a narrative about the tragedy of a princess which draws very heavily on an original narrative about the tragic fall of a queen? Still, perhaps the tragedies of Dido and Medea are sufficiently different to demand a transformative process which exculpates Geta – surely more so than is the case with the *De Panificio*. In different ways, then, Geta's *Medea* cento and the *Cento Probae* can claim to, or can be understood to, tell an essential truth about the works of Virgil; they can be exegetical or interpretive of Virgil's texts at the same time as being transformative.

This critical approach will be brought into play as we turn now to the notorious passage from Ausonius' *Cento nuptialis*.¹⁴

¹¹ Text in Lamacchia (1981); discussion in McGill (2005) 31-52.

¹² On technical grounds, McGill says of the *Medea*: "This is hardly an impeccable piece of cento composition", (2005) 31.

¹³ E.g. Moles (1987); Horsfall (1995) 123-24.

¹⁴ As above, vertical lines indicate the "joins" in Virgilian units; references on the right hand side indicate book and line numbers from the *Aeneid*, *Georgics* (G) and *Eclagues* (E).

- 101 *Postquam congressi |sola sub nocte per umbram |* (11.631|6.268)
et mentem Venus ipsa dedit, |nova proelia temptant. | (G.3.267|3.240)
Tollit se arrectum: |conantem plurima frustra | (10.892|9.398)
occupat os faciemque, |pedem pede fervidus urget, | (10.699|12.748)
- 105 *perfidus alta petens: |ramum, qui veste latebat, |* (7.362|6.406)
sanguineis ebuli bacis minioque rubentem | (E.10.27)
nudato capite |et pedibus per mutua nexis, | (12.312|7.66)
monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum, | (3.658)
eripit a femine et trepidanti fervidus instat. | (10.788)
- 110 *Est in secessu, |tenuis quo semita ducit, |* (1.159|11.524)
igneae rima micans: |exhalat opaca mephitim. | (8.392|7.84)
Nulli fas casto sceleratum insistere limen. | (6.563)
Hic specus horrendum: talis sese halitus atris (7.568|6.240-1)
faucibus effundens |naris contingit odore. | (7.480)
- 115 *Huc iuvenis nota fertur regione viarum |* (11.530)
et super incumbens |nodis et cortice crudo (5.858|9.743-44)
intorquet summis adnixus viribus hastam. |
Haesit virgineumque alte bibit acta cruorem. | (11.804)
Insonuere cauae gemitumque dedere cavernae. | (2.53)
- 120 *Illa manu moriens telum trahit, ossa sed inter |* (11.816)
altius ad vivum persedit |vulnere mucro. | (G.3.442|11.817)
Ter sese attollens cubitoque adnixa levavit, (4.690-01)
ter revoluta toro est. |Manet imperterritus ille; | (10.770)
nec mora nec requies: |clavumque affixus et haerens (G.3.110|5.852-53)
- 125 *nusquam amittebat oculosque sub astra tenebat. |*
Itque reditque viam totiens |uteroque recusso | (6.122|2.52)
transadigit costas |et pectine pulsat eburno. | (12.276|6.647)
Iamque fere spatium extremo fessique sub ipsam (5.327-28)
finem adventabant: |tum creber anhelitus artus (5.199-200)
- 130 *aridaque ora quatit, sudor fluit undique rivis, |*
labitur exsanguis, |destillat ab inguine virus. | (11.818|G.3.281)

“After they came together through the shadow in the lonely night and Venus herself gave inspiration, they tried new battles. He lifted himself erect, and mastered her mouth and face as in vain she tried everything, in a frenzy he pushed foot against foot, faithless one seeking the deep; from his inner thigh he seized the bough which lay hidden beneath his cloak, flushed with the blood-red elder berries and vermilion, its head uncovered, its feet mutually joined, a horrendous monstrosity, ugly, huge, missing an eye, and in a frenzy he pressed against fearful her.

“There is an inlet, where a small path leads, a fiery flashing crack, darkly exhaling poison. It is wrong for anyone chaste to cross the wicked threshold. Here there is a horrendous cave; such vapour pours out from the black jaws, and captures nostrils with its scent. Here the young man was carried by a route he knew well, and lying above, straining with all his strength, he twisted in his spear, with its knots and rough bark; it clung and driven in drank deeply the virginal blood. The hollow caves sounded out and gave a groan. Dying she pulled at the weapon with her hand, but the blade at the wound at her core between her bones sits deeper into the quick. Raising herself three times she rested supported on her elbow; three times she was rolled back on the bed. He remained, unafraid; there was no delay, no rest; holding his rudder without moving, at no point did he let go, and kept his eyes beneath the stars. He went over and over the route so often, striking against the belly, he thrust through the ribs and pounded with his ivory plectrum. And now, nearly at the final stage, exhausted they approached the end itself; then, frequent panting shook their limbs and dry mouths, sweat poured everywhere in streams, she slipped faint with blood loss, the secretion dripped from the groin”).

Roger Green notes that the change in l.122 from *Aen.* 4.690's *adnexa*, to *innixa* “makes no difference to the meaning and may have been inadvertent”.¹⁵ Virgil's *iam pectine* (*Aen.* 6.647) changes to *et pectine* (127). Otherwise, there are no inflections from the Virgilian originals. There are no consecutive runs of more than one and a half original lines.¹⁶ The passage is metrically competent.¹⁷ Despite its densely metaphorical nature (to be discussed below) and the licence taken with genital physiology, the narrative is generally clear, although there has been some disagreement about what is going on at 104: Adams assumes *irrumatio*, which Green rejects.¹⁸ Ausonius moves from description of the penis, to description of the vagina, to penetration despite resistance, coital motion, and

¹⁵ Green (1991) 524.

¹⁶ *N.b.* Ausonius' insistence on this in his preface's account of what a cento is; see above.

¹⁷ Ausonius' preface contains detailed prescriptions about metrical divisions within verses.

¹⁸ *irrumatio* is oral rape. Adams (1981); Green (1991) 519. Because this action anticipates the action of 105-31, I think Adams must be wrong, and I assume instead the groom is trying to impose (unwelcome) kisses on the mouth and face of the bride.

ejaculation. We may object to the subject matter, especially in the light of its designation as “playful” (see above), but the passage is technically accomplished.

And to consider the transformative quality of the passage: where the author of the *De Panificio* turned to excerpts of Virgilian narrative about food and bread preparation, and for his *Medea*, Hosidius Geta to Virgilian tragic *parole*, where might one turn in the Virgilian corpus for material for explicit erotic narrative? Heterosexual sex in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is not uncommon (between mortals, between gods, and in the case of Odysseus, a mixture) although the narratives are never graphic. By contrast, there is not much such narrative in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, despite there being various relationships, including marriages, we can assume would have had a sexual dimension. Two notable exceptions are the Aeneas-Dido episode in the cave in *Aen.* 4 (160-171, allusively told) and the Venus-Vulcan exchange in *Aen.* 8 (387-406, more explicit).¹⁹ Of the 49 Virgilian hypotexts in the 30 lines of the *Imminutio* passage, two come from *Aen.* 4 (122-23) and one comes from book 8 (111); none is from the original sex scenes. Moreover, this distribution of Virgilian hypotexts is not representative of the *Cento Nuptialis* in general, as *Aen.* 4 and 8 contribute respectively 12 and 19 hypotexts to the poem’s 128 lines. Similarly, *Aen.* 1 is the most prolific source book for the cento as a whole (with 33 hypotexts), but only one features in the *Imminutio* passage (110). Therefore, with the same frequency as book 8, *Aen.* 1 is in joint last place in the competition amongst books of the *Aeneid* for citation in the *Imminutio* section. By contrast, *Aen.* 5 (7 out of a total of 21), 6 (7 of 16), 7 (5 of 9) and 11 (7 of 16) provide more hypotexts for the *Imminutio* than they do for any other sections of the poem.²⁰ In sum, these figures for Virgilian source (by book) against Ausonian location (by section) reveal the centonist’s inconsistent practice across the 131 lines of his poem, in particular, in the *Imminutio* section, there is an uncharacteristically heavy use of *Aen.* (5), 6, 7 and 11, and an uncharacteristically light use of books 1, 4 and 8. These distributions invite analysis.

There are no descriptions of male or female genitalia in Virgil, of course, and the Virgilian narratives of sex are not used, so it seems a challenge Ausonius set himself in the *Imminutio* section was to transform: the *Imminutio* scene is more transformative than the preceding

¹⁹ *N.b.* the miraculous account of the impregnation of mares by the wind at *Ge.* 3.270-83. In the verse section before the *Imminutio*, the hypotext for line 83 is *Aeneid* 4.166; and that for 85-86 is 8.388-89. I suggest the effect is twofold: both to heighten the erotic charge of the moment, and to accentuate the absence of further evocation of those Virgilian scenes in the *Imminutio* section. This latter effect is repeated in the work’s closing prose section, where Ausonius cites the Vulcan-Venus episode.

²⁰ These counts are taken from the identifications of hypotexts given in Green (1991), and count successive lines as 2, *e.g.* 122-23 = *Aen.* 4.690-91.

sections of the poem, and also than the other centos considered above, the *De Panificio* and the *Medea*. This transformation combines a huge difference between the source and new narratives with an insistent density of metaphor. The considerable transformative ingenuity reveals and / or appeals to a particular psychological or cultural attitude towards Virgil's text.

Whether or not *irrumatio* is narrated at 103-04, the vaginal sex is surely a domestic rape scene (see 120, 122).²¹ In such a violent context, the metaphors for the groom's penis are frequently, though not exclusively, military:²² *hasta* (117), *muco* (121) and *telum* (120). At some other times, when the penis itself is not denoted in an explicit metaphor, its activity is derived from Virgilian hypotexts which are themselves martial: for example, *tollit se arrectum* (103) is Mezentius' horse rearing up in combat; *eripit a femine* (109) is Aeneas drawing his sword to attack Mezentius; *transadigit costas* (127) is used of the death by spear of one of the nine sons of Gylippus. Similarly, it was the spear of Laocoon that was hurled into the wooden horse, the consequences of which are redeployed by Ausonius at 119 and 126. The first two words of the passage are taken from a battle scene, and the attack by the Harpies is also used to set the scene in a violent way at 102. The bride's resistance at 103 recasts the narrative about the overpowering of Euryalus; the disputed opening to 104 derives from Mezentius, mid-*aristeia*, killing Latagus with a rock in the face, and the close to 104 derives from the account of Aeneas chasing Turnus. The death-scene of Camilla, in battle, is reprised at 118, 120, 121 and 131.²³ It is not accurate, of course, to say that the battles are confined to the second-half of the *Aeneid*, but not without reason is it referred to as the *Iliadic Aeneid*. Given then that the figures I presented above for the distribution of Virgilian hypotexts across the cento suggested some conscious and unusual selection, we can see that one of the effects of the transformative process from Virgilian hypotext to Ausonian cento is to make sex violent, both directly by metaphor and indirectly by intertextual association.²⁴

The victim of the violence is the bride, but there is a distinctive pattern to the transformation of Virgilian hypotexts which apply to her. We have seen how the penis is generally signified by objects, usually weapons.²⁵ Ausonius' chosen field for female physiology is rather different. We start with *est in secessu* (110), an example of a common Virgilian means of signalling a change in narrative direction, but here of course, the place is the focus of the dramatic and narrative attention, so that its co-option by Ausonius as

²¹ *N.b.* too the bride's words at 94-98, dismissed by the groom.

²² Ehrling (2011) 164-65.

²³ Ehrling (2011) 167.

²⁴ Burkert (1981) 59; Fowler (1987) 186.

²⁵ Cf. *clavus* (124) and *ramus* (105).

a transitional device in plot-narrative is wry. *tenuis quo semita ducit* (110) is taken from the landscape where Turnus goes to ambush Aeneas, as is *huc iuvenis nota fertur regione viarum* (115). *ignea rima micans* (111) is interesting, not just for its representation of female physiology, but because the phrase comes from the lightning simile used by Virgil of the sexual desire for Venus felt by Vulcan in *Aen.* 8 – a clear indication of Ausonius' determination *not* to use Virgil's lines 8.405-06. *ignea rima micans* of the vagina is all the more grotesque for the natural beauty of the original Virgilian simile, a dramatic meteorological event. The noxious gases, cavernous chamber and darkness insistently used to characterise the vagina in 111-14 (and 119) continue this presentation of female sexual anatomy as place.

Demonization by males of female sexual anatomy as unclean, threatening, and mysterious is not peculiar to Roman society, but a commonplace of gender relations in many cultures, including modern western society.²⁶ Ausonius colludes in this by excerpting and redeploying Virgilian phrases from the sinister topographies of Turnus' ambush and the Wooden Horse, and various places associated with the Underworld: *exhalat opaca mephitim* (111) is taken from the Oracle of Faunus, a liminal place where the living can come into contact with the dead; *nulli fas casto sceleratum insistere limen* (112) describes the threshold of Hell's punishment chamber; *hic specus horrendum* (113) is the Underworld home of Allecto, and the scent at 114 is taken from the narrative of her distraction of the Trojan hunting dogs. Meantime, *talis sese halitus atris / faucibus effundens* (113-4) is at Avernus, the entry cave to the Underworld.

The gendered landscape has proved an interesting critical position in scholarship of Latin poetry, but here we see Ausonius' extreme cento taking the figure to extravagant lengths – by association with the Virgilian hypocontexts, female sexual anatomy is otherworldly, underworldly, unattractive, and threatening to male order, and, as is the case with book 11, discussed below, the fact that *Aen.* 6 and 7 feature more heavily in the *Imminutio* section than elsewhere in the cento suggests this was a conscious choice by Ausonius.

The *sine qua non* for appreciation of a cento is the ability to recognise, however vaguely, that behind the new text lies an earlier one – for without that recognition, the whole enterprise falls flat. For its insistency, the most prominent hypotext in the *Imminutio* section is that of *Aen.* 11 where Arruns kills Camilla: Virgil's lines 804, 817 and 818 find new life in Ausonius' 118, 121 and 131. In his famous discussion of eroticised violence, Don Fowler argued that, although much of the *Imminutio* adopts as sexual metaphor words and ideas which were not originally (*i.e.* in the hypotext) metaphorical (see above), the

²⁶ Dworkin (1987) 198-229; Ehrling (2011) 167.

death of Camilla needed no such transformation. Much of Fowler's argument depended upon a chain of texts, from Homer to Catullus, in which the theme of the violent death of virgins developed, to then be explored more fully in the *Aeneid*. In the case of Camilla, Fowler emphasised the pathos evoked by Virgil's reminder of her virginal state at her death, *haesit virgineumque alte bibit acta cruorem* and asserted "I believe the sexual overtones are already present in the *Aeneid*".²⁷ This is more likely to be true for a reader like Fowler – or Ausonius (?) – in command of the chain of texts. I would argue that for any reader for whom these overtones were not *already present* in Virgil, Ausonius' redeployment of the lines *makes them present*. The interplay between hypotext and hypertext will not be the same for one reader as for another (one variable will be the individual's capacity to recall the original; another her response to the original, as to the hypertext). But as was argued above in the case of the *Medea* cento, in principle, traffic in interpretation of the relationship between hypotext and hypertext can work in both directions. Just as a reader of Hosidius Geta's *Medea* may be left more sensitised to a tragic element in *Aen.* 4, so too a reader of the *Imminutio* section may return to the hypotexts of the *Aeneid* with a new critical eye. That is, without being prescriptive about the response it cultivates, the insistence in the *Imminutio* section on (male-wrought) acts of violence as the hypotexts for male sexual activity, and on liminal and threatening places as the hypotexts for female sexual anatomy, can encourage an interpretive function for each text in respect of the other.

In the construction of his narrative and his choice of hypotexts, Ausonius demonstrates identifiable preferences. These preferences are both revealing of Ausonius' experience of Virgil and accordingly influential on Ausonius' readers' subsequent experience of Virgil. This latter phenomenon could no doubt be trivial or serious, according to individual psychology and critical preference: McGill notes that some readers of Ausonius might have found the cento "good, dirty fun"²⁸ – such a reader might sniggeringly find *Aen.* 6 forever trivialised thereafter, when the epic hero brandishes his *ramus* on his journey to the Underworld. But on revisiting the *Aeneid*, different readers, ones horrified by the cento's concentrated account of domestic violence, might forever find that horror cleaving to them still when they re-read *Aen.* 6 and its revelation of Aeneas' imperial mission.

In very different ways, the centonists Proba and Ausonius might have acknowledged the cento's capacity to effect a change in appreciation of the source text. Proba's claim that "Virgil had sung the pious duties of Christ" (*Virgilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi*,

²⁷ Fowler (1987) 196.

²⁸ McGill (2005) 104. See also Ehrling (2011): "the result ... is *comic*" (166); "the humorous side of the cento is striking" (179).

23) depended upon the source text's later resequencing for its Christianity to be realised, but nonetheless the poetic programme could be premised upon belief in a particular immanence in Virgil, brought out by the cento: a reader who shares that belief will return to Virgil's text with fresh eyes. Meanwhile, in his prose preface, Ausonius says *piget equidem Virgiliani carminis dignitatem tam ioculari dehonestasse materia* ("It is disgusting to have disfigured/dishonoured the dignity of Virgilian poetry with such jocular material"). This notion of "disfigurement" might be thought only to apply while reading the cento. But equally, as in the case of Proba, it might apply to any rereading of Virgil thereafter. Ausonius makes light of it (*frivolum opusculum; ioculari ... materia; ludicrum*), but in its potential hermeneutic implications, his cento's practice is no less serious than Proba's. This point comes more sharply into focus in the final words of the work's closing prose section, which has tended to receive much less critical attention than the prose preface. In the preface, Ausonius adopts a posture that is both defensive and modest: defensive, in that he claims to have written the cento under orders (*iussum erat*, "it had been commanded"), and modest, in that he downplays the work's merit (*nullius pretii opusculum*, "a minor work of no value"). At the end of the cento, something remains of his original tone, but a more purposeful line can be detected too:

Et si quid in nostro ioco aliquorum hominum severitas vestita condemnat, de Virgilio arcessitum sciat. Igitur cui hic ludus noster non placet, ne legerit, aut cum legerit obliviscatur, aut non oblitus ignoscat. Etenim fabula de nuptiis est: et velit nolit, aliter haec sacra non constant.

("If some men's clothed severity condemns anything in my joke, let them know it has been summoned from Virgil. And so, if this game is displeasing to someone, he shouldn't read it; or when he has read it, he should forget it; or if he can't forget it, he should forgive it. For this is a / the story of a wedding, and whether he likes it or not, these rites do not take place in any other way").²⁹

The close echoes the preface's protestation of lighthearted playfulness (*ioco ... ludus*), but at the same time the final phrase insists on the truth of the work's fundamental premise. There is potentially something very serious about this joke, be it about sexual relations and gender, or textual relations and genre.

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²⁹ *N.b.* Ausonius assumes his reader is male – *oblitus*.

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