

## IN BED WITH VIRGIL: AUSONIUS' *WEDDING CENTO* AND ITS RECEPTION\*

Judging from its history of effect, the *Wedding Cento* produced by the fourth-century poet Ausonius is in fact not a poem about a wedding at all. It is a work about the ethics of textual recycling; about the impact of political power and patronage on literary production; about smut, or rather about where the responsibility lies when a reader sees smut when none was intended. It is also a poem about sexual violence, but this aspect of the text has been largely missing in its scholarly reception. Such an absence is perhaps to be expected. Sexual assault is a notoriously under-reported offence, and its invisibility tends to extend into the realm of artistic representation and its scholarly treatment. During the last couple of decades, for instance, film scholars have addressed the need to re-read cinematic portrayals of rape in order to unearth it from 'metaphor and euphemism, naturalized plot device and logical consequence...restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring that is, the violence – the physical, sexual violation'.<sup>1</sup> This issue must be addressed here, but first a few words about the *Cento* and the most prominent trends in its reception.

### The poem

Ausonius' *Wedding Cento* consists of 131 verses or combinations of half-verses plucked primarily from Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as from the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. As is usually the case in Ausonius' works, the poem is enclosed by and interspersed with extradiegetic sections written in prose. This framework takes the form of an epistle addressed

\* This research was supported by a fellowship from the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>1</sup> L. A. Higgins and B. R. Silver, 'Introduction: Rereading Rape', in L. A. Higgins and B. R. Silver (eds.), *Rape and Representation* (New York, 1991), 4; D. Russell, *Rape in Art Cinema* (New York, 2010), 3.

to the rhetor Axius Paulus, in which the author himself inaugurated the reception of his creation with a devastating critique: the *Wedding Cento* is frivolous and worthless, unworked and unpolished, witless and immature. It is a ridiculous game that degrades Virgil's dignity to a humorous topic, yet the poet had good reason to write it anyway: the emperor Valentinian had written a wedding cento himself and implicitly ordered Ausonius to produce a similar piece but of poorer quality. The enterprise became a tightrope walk for Ausonius, balancing between giving way to the emperor and risking being accused of flattery, or surpassing him and being guilty of arrogance. By carrying out the task, but at the same time showing signs of unwillingness, he got off the hook. In other words, although this composition, which Ausonius has recently found among his drafts and sent to Paulus, may seem to be a poetic failure, it is but the textual trace of a great success, by which Ausonius skilfully navigated a precarious patronage situation. Explaining the art of cento composition, he likens it to the pastime called *stomachion*: skilful players can arrange the geometric figures to produce marvellously diverse shapes, but the combinations created by unskilled players are ridiculous – and it is the latter kind of player that Ausonius has imitated for this occasion.

The poem itself opens with an address to Valentinian and Gratian, stating that the poet is doing the emperor's bidding (1–11). Six sections follow, describing the banquet (12–32), the bride (33–45), the groom (46–56), the wedding gifts (57–66), an epithalamium sung by boys and girls (67–79), and the couple's entrance into the bedchamber, where the bride asks the groom to postpone the consummation of the marriage to another night, but he refuses (80–100). A short prose digression follows, warning the reader about the explicit nature of the following verses, where Ausonius will initiate his reader into the 'mystery' of lovemaking. The poet's embarrassment is described as twofold, indicating the two levels of textual indecency that pervade the final lines: the detailed description of the sex act and the implicit attribution of this licentious text to Virgil. The final passage, entitled 'The Defloration' (101–31), offers a detailed description of how the groom forces himself on the bride, penetrates her despite her struggle, and falls down exhausted. The passage is followed by a prose epilogue, stressing the humorous intention of the poem and pointing out the dangers of interpreting poetry biographically, as a witness of the author's moral conduct in life. The question of guilt comes up once again; unlike the preface, however, Ausonius does not accuse the emperor here but in a spirit of

contradiction shifts the blame to a number of other agents: first to Virgil, since the verses are taken from him; then to the reader, who has chosen to read it and harbour resentment; then, finally, to human nature itself: 'For, as a matter of fact, it is the story of a wedding, and, like it or dislike it, the rites are exactly as I have described.'<sup>2</sup>

### Earlier reception

Little is known about the *Centio's* reception during the first millennium of its existence. The sixth-century Carthaginian poet Luxorius clearly imitated it in his centonic *Epithalamium for Fridus*. Influence is particularly clear in Luxorius' sex scene, which shares a number of Ausonius' re-uses but is also much shorter and focuses less on the resistance and suffering of the bride.<sup>3</sup> Other evidence seems to suggest that the sexual content was not entirely unproblematic. The *Wedding Cento* has only been transmitted in the Z family of Ausonian manuscripts, and is omitted in the other major branch, V, together with a number of other pieces characterized by erotic content.<sup>4</sup> Yet, all we have are mostly fourteenth- and fifteenth-century copies and it is difficult to say much about when and why this redaction arose, or about the contexts of its subsequent transmission. We can, however, safely say that Ausonius' *Wedding Cento* did not enjoy a popularity similar to that of Proba's cento, present in Carolingian school curricula, in late medieval debates on Virgil as a proto-Christian, and in early humanist dialogues on women's right to education.<sup>5</sup> It existed within the confines of Ausonius' oeuvre, and even here its erotic content made it liable to elimination.

This situation changed dramatically in 1472, when Bartolomeo Girardini produced the first printed edition of the poem, in a volume that also included Proba's cento. From this point onwards, the two centos were continually presented together in a series of editions. They came to define the genre, often configured as a dichotomy of sacred

<sup>2</sup> 'etenim fabula de nuptiis est et, velit nolit, aliter haec sacra non constant'. Translation from H. G. Evelyn-White, *Ausonius*, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1919), 392–3.

<sup>3</sup> S. McGill, *Virgil Recomposed. The Mythological and Secular Centos in Antiquity* (New York, 2005), 92, 105–106.

<sup>4</sup> M. D. Reeve, 'The Tiliandus of Ausonius', *RhM* 121 (1978), 350–66; M. D. Reeve, 'Ausonius', in L. D. Reynolds (ed.), *Texts and Transmission. A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford, 1983), 26–28; R. P. H. Green, *The Works of Ausonius* (Oxford, 1991), xli.

<sup>5</sup> S. Schottenius Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet. The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Leiden, 2015), 82–112.

and profane, chaste and obscene, angelic and demonic. Their relationship has been described by one scholar as a fifteenth-century marriage, a metaphor that demonstrates the dominant role allotted to Ausonius' *Wedding Cento* in determining the status and function of this literary form as a humorous pastime, a definition that has occasionally proven detrimental to the appreciation of Proba's rather serious endeavour.<sup>6</sup> Yet, at other times, it has rather been Proba who has defined how to treat the dignity of Virgil properly by choosing an immaculate topic, making Ausonius' poem appear inappropriate.<sup>7</sup>

In his *Adagia* of 1508, Erasmus refers to both poems in a fairly neutral fashion, emphasizing that Ausonius lays out the rules for the genre. He occasionally wrote Homeric centos himself, yet there are sections where he expresses general reservations about excessive use of the cento form.<sup>8</sup> A detailed treatment of Ausonius' *Wedding Cento* appears in an overlooked section of his later work *The Institution of Marriage* from 1526. In a section discussing the education of young girls, Erasmus stresses the importance of linguistic conduct: children must be kept away from swearing, obscenities, and erotic narratives, which 'drip like poison into their tender ears' and eventually lead to wicked deeds. He offers a definition of three kinds of obscenity: it is obscene to speak of natural and God-given acts such as lawful sexual intercourse and bodily functions; it is also obscene to describe unlawful acts, such as adultery, in a straightforward manner and for no useful purpose, without expressing any disapproval. 'But worse than obscene', Erasmus continues, 'is to adapt some blameless piece of writing to a filthy theme, as did Ausonius in his *Cento nuptialis*, a work utterly unworthy of a Christian.'<sup>9</sup> For the humanist Erasmus, no linguistic act can be more obscene and harmful to the young than the systematic refashioning of Virgilian epic into pornography. This kind of negative attitude was particularly strong in scholarly debates concerning the uncertainty of Ausonius' religious persuasion. In his *Stories about the Poets*

<sup>6</sup> H. Cazes, *Le livre et la lyre. Grandeur et décadences du centon virgilien au moyen âge et à la renaissance*, PhD thesis, Paris (1998), 309–10.

<sup>7</sup> Schottenius Cullhed (n. 5), 95, n. 73, 99–100.

<sup>8</sup> Erasmus, *Adagia* 2.4.58, in R. A. B. Mynors (ed.), *Erasmus. Collected Works. Adages 2.1.1 to 2.6.100* (Toronto, 1991), 221–2. See also Schottenius Cullhed (n. 5), 96–8; G. H. Tucker, 'Mantua's 'Second Virgil: Du Bellay, Montaigne and the Curious Fortune of Lelio Capilupi's *Centones ex Virgilio* (Romae, 1555)', in G. Tournoy and D. Sacré (eds.), *Ut Granum Sinapis. Essays on Neo-Latin Literature in Honour of Jozef IJsewijn* (Leuven, 1997), 272, n. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Erasmus, 'The Institution of Marriage', transl. Michael Heath, in E. Rummel (ed.), *On Women* (Toronto, 1996), 17, 19.

from 1545 Giglio Gregorio Giraldi argued that 'Ausonius was indeed a Christian, but he was so indecent and licentious that he does not deserve to be counted among the Christians anyway.'<sup>10</sup>

Yet we also find sixteenth-century scholars who simply praised the poem. In 1561, Julius Caesar Scaliger referred to Ausonius as well as Proba in the chapter on the cento form in his *Poetice*, acclaiming the *Wedding Cento* for being 'full of intelligence and elegance', and hailing Proba as the *primus inventor* of the genre.<sup>11</sup> Henri Estienne printed the poems of Ausonius and Proba in his *Parodiae morales* (1575), a work in which he also presented an extensive study of this poetic form. Unlike Erasmus, Estienne saw the virtuoso use of the cento technique as a test of spiritual refinement.<sup>12</sup> He greatly praised Ausonius' skills and reproduced his apologetic rhetoric in his own preface: 'It is clear that he regrets his poem and, as I have already shown, that he is even ashamed: but what aches in him is not his shame but that he has introduced obscenities in the *Cento*.'<sup>13</sup> Etienne Pasquier (1529–1615) similarly commended Ausonius' *Cento* for its gracefulness in the second edition of *Researches on France*, praising it, in particular, for the ease with which Virgil is adapted.<sup>14</sup> These sympathetic opinions should certainly be understood as connected to a wider project of glorifying the literary past of France. In Ausonius, a learned poet from Bordeaux freely experimenting with Latin as well as Greek, they found a worthy predecessor.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, these eulogists and apologists did not put a stop to the *Wedding Cento*'s critics, especially when it came to the debate on Ausonius' relationship to Christianity. Isaac Vossius and Scaliger the younger referred to the poem in this context,<sup>16</sup> and an extensive discussion appears in the German historian and poet Heinrich Meibom's 1597 edition of the text, together with the centos of Proba and Laelius Capilupus. Meibom firmly argues against the possibility that

<sup>10</sup> G. G. Giraldi, *Historiae poetarum tam Graecorum quam Latinorum dialogi decem* (Basel, 1545), 514.

<sup>11</sup> J. C. Scaliger, *Poetice* (Geneva, 1561), i.43; Cazes (n. 6), 165.

<sup>12</sup> H. Estienne, *Parodiae morales H Stephani* (Geneva, 1575), 60.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 61: 'Quod dicit (tamquam veniam petens) pigere se Virgiliani carminis dignitatem tam ioculari materia dehonestasse, est certem (ut antea quoque docui) quod eum pigeat et pudeat etiam, sed eorum quae in Centone illo obscoena potius sunt quam iocularia.'

<sup>14</sup> E. Pasquier, *Les Recherches de la France* (Paris, 1596), 656b.

<sup>15</sup> Green (n. 4), xxxvii; D. Brancher, 'Virgile en bas-de-chausse: Montaigne et la tradition de l'obscénité latine', *BibH&R* 70 (2008), 116.

<sup>16</sup> See B. Bureau, 'Ausone', in M. Furno (ed.), *La Collection Ad usum Delphini*, ii (Grenoble, 2005), 505.

Ausonius was converted: 'For what is farther from Christian worship than taking that which nature wants to keep secret and covered, and presenting it in ostentatious ornaments of words to the innocent young, offering them an occasion to sin?'<sup>17</sup> Meibom affirms that he would not have included the defloration scene unless it was already widely read, and he has to accept that it fills an important function in defining what the cento is and laying down its laws, just as Erasmus had stressed in his *Adagia*. Yet, despite his dislike for the explicit sexual nature of the poem, he has refrained from censoring parts of it:

*Castrare autem Poëtam, hoc est, particulam eius omittere, honeste non potuimus. Transiliet igitur lector ista, quae pietati officiunt, et caetera, sanè lepida, elegantia, amplectetur: tam enim Cento totus est elaboratus, quam pars illa inuerecunda.*

But to castrate the poet, that is to omit one of his parts, was impossible to do respectfully. Hence, the reader should rapidly pass through these parts that are detrimental to piety, and embrace the rest, indubitably neat and elegant. For the whole *Cento* is as elaborately composed as that part is shameless.<sup>18</sup>

These works continue a process of reception that Ausonius had set into motion himself in the epistle.<sup>19</sup> An atrocious crime had been committed against Virgil, but the offender is regretful and tries to shift the blame first onto Valentinian, then onto Virgil himself, onto the reader, and onto human nature. Some scholars free him from the charge, others condemn him for transubstantiating the emblematic literary chastity and dignity of Virgil into filth; yet, they never exact the punishment considered befitting of a textual rapist, namely castration – deletion of the phallic deflowering scene. Such an editorial intervention never occurs in the long series of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century editions, although, we do, indeed, come across individual copies where the pages have been torn out or the text erased.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> M. Meibom, *Virgilio-Centones auctorum notae optimaе, antiquorum et recentium* (Helmstadt, 1597), fol. 30v: 'Quid enim à religione Christiana magis alienum, quam ea, quae natura arcana et tecta esse vult, ambitiosis verborum phaleris innoxiae iuventuti objicere, eique ad peccandum occasionem praebere?'

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> On the impact of Ausonius' preface, see Cazes (n. 6), 3–4, 24–5; R. Shorrock, *The Myth of Paganism. Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity* (London, 2011), 6, 126.

<sup>20</sup> The beginning of the *imminutio* on page 108 has been crossed out and the subsequent pages (109–10) are missing in *Opuscula Varia* (Lyon, 1540): <[http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10995175\\_00109.html](http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10995175_00109.html)>, accessed 19 June 2015. Likewise, the *imminutio* on pages 107–10 are missing in *Opuscula Varia* (Lyon, 1549): <[http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10170895\\_00108.html](http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10170895_00108.html)>, accessed 19 June 2015. Both editions are found in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.

Criticism turned from prefatory plan to editorial action in the *Ad usum delphini* edition from 1730, where the deflowering scene in the *Wedding Cento*, alongside a number of epigrams, was moved to an appendix entitled 'Obscenities cut out from the Ausonian text'.<sup>21</sup> However, even here the editor follows his predecessors in arguing that the author of this text could still have been a Christian, since Valentinian forced the task upon him.<sup>22</sup> Ausonius' powerlessness before the emperor is also emphasized in Pierre Jaubert's free translation of the text from 1769, which moreover avoids translating the deflowering scene altogether.<sup>23</sup> In a reprint of the *Ad usum delphini* edition from 1782, the appendix with obscene texts has been entirely removed, and in the *Patrologia Latina* even the preceding section, 'The Entry into the Bedchamber', has been removed. Omission also occurs in Pietro Canal's Italian translation from 1853 and in Pietro Beltrani's from 1897, which both similarly lack the epilogue.<sup>24</sup> Beltrani also modifies the two final verses of the 'Entry into the Bedchamber' before the poem breaks off prematurely:

*But for the graceful boy, in whom love  
and ardour set light to erotic desires,  
the trembling prayer does not reach his heart  
and he plucks the beautiful flower of the girl.*<sup>25</sup>

The explicit sex scene becomes severely shortened and euphemistically beautified. In this branch of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reception, the thing occurred that Heinrich Meibom had feared: Ausonius loses his untamed spirit of obscenity as he is 'castrated' and domesticated. Eventually, this philological tendency impacted the critical discourse on the *Wedding Cento*. The problem of obscenity often simply disappeared in certain eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarly commentary, where the *Cento* is commonly invoked as a charming example of this curious literary pastime: a 'tour de force',<sup>26</sup> and a pleasant little piece of poetry.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> J.-B. Souchay, *D. Magni Ausonii Burdigalensis Opera* (Paris, 1730), 383, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Souchay (n. 21), xxiv–xxvi; see also Bureau (n. 16), 504–5.

<sup>23</sup> P. Jaubert, *Oeuvres d'Ausone* (Paris, 1769), iii.182–3.

<sup>24</sup> P. Canal, *Le opere di Decio Magno Ausonio volgarizzate da Pietro Canal* (Venice, 1853), 440–4; P. Beltrani, *Il Cento Nuptialis di Ausonio* (Faenza, 1897), 7–14.

<sup>25</sup> Beltrani (n. 24), 14: Latin: *ille autem: 'Causas nequiquam nectis inanes' / Praecipitatque moras omnis solvitque pudorem*. Italian: *Ma de'l vago garzon cui tutto accende / Amore ed ardon le amorose voglie, / la trepida preghiera in cor non scende / e il più bel flor de la fanciulla coglie* (emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> *Dictionnaire de la conversation et de la lecture* (1855), s.v. Ausone.

<sup>27</sup> R. O. Cambridge, *The Scribleriad* (London, 1751), 15; I. D'Israeli, *Curiosities of Literature* (New York, 1835 [1791–1807]), 79; N. N., *The Ladie's Repository* (1861), 563. See also Schottenius Cullhed (n. 5), 71.



Yet, this censoring approach that had begun in the eighteenth century became increasingly untenable in certain contexts during the nineteenth century, owing to the professionalization of classical philology during this era. In accordance with the new scientific ideals, it became imperative to print the text in its entirety,<sup>28</sup> and even translators began to tackle the defloration scene for the first time.<sup>29</sup> Yet it did not necessarily arouse feelings of condemnation. In a number of the *Classical Journal* from 1829, we learn that it was 'too celebrated',<sup>30</sup> and the great Italian classical philologist Domenico Comparetti regarded it as the best example by far of cento poetry.<sup>31</sup> Altogether unique is the positive response by the French symbolist Remy de Gourmont. With great empathy he portrayed Ausonius in his *Latin mystique* as 'curious of everything, rich in imagination and consequently also in contradictions' (*curieux de tout, riche d'imagination et par conséquent de contradictions*). The poet, de Gourmont argued, was haunted by carnal visions and was in desperate need to free himself from them through writing.<sup>32</sup> Here, Ausonius textual eroticism and the *Wedding Cento* in particular was integrated into French *fin-de-siècle* decadence, which turned to the idea of Late Antiquity and the notion of decline as a positive aesthetic paradigm.<sup>33</sup>

Much harsher was the tone among the gentlemen of Anglo-American scholarship. Terrot R. Glover described the poem as 'a disgrace to its author as a scholar and a man',<sup>34</sup> and Hugh Evelyn-White rejected it as equally abhorrent in the introduction to the Loeb translation of 1919: 'Neither the thorough knowledge of Virgil's text, nor the perverse ingenuity displayed in the compilation can redeem this literary outrage';<sup>35</sup> his exclusion of the sex scene in the facing translation is well known. The last part of the poem is also missing in Jack Lindsay's

<sup>28</sup> C. Schenkl, *D. Magni Ausonii Opuscula* (Berlin, 1883), 140–6; R. Peiper, *Decimi Magni Ausonii Burdigalensis Opuscula* (Leipzig, 1886), 214–15.

<sup>29</sup> E. F. Corpet, *Œuvres complètes d'Ausone* (Paris, 1842–3), ii.117–19.

<sup>30</sup> N. N., 'On the Writings of Ausonius', *Classical Journal* 77 (1829), 111.

<sup>31</sup> D. P. A. Comparetti, *Virgilio nel medio evo* (Livorno, 1872), i.72.

<sup>32</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Le Latin mystique* (Paris, 1892), 37.

<sup>33</sup> S. Rebenich, 'Late Antiquity in Modern Eyes', in P. Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2009), 81. See also M. Formisano, 'Reading Décadence: Reception and the Subaltern Late Antiquity', in M. Formisano and T. Fuhrer (eds.), *Décadence. 'Decline and Fall' or 'Other Antiquity'?* (Heidelberg, 2014), 11–12; J. Uden, 'Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Visions of Late Antique Literature', forthcoming in S. McGill and E. Watts, *Blackwell Companion to Late Antique Literature*.

<sup>34</sup> T. R. Glover, *Life and Letters in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge, 1901), 115.

<sup>35</sup> H. G. Evelyn-White (n.2), xvii.



popular translation from 1930 and it was not until the turn of the millennium that a full English translations appeared.<sup>36</sup>

### Rape, conquest, and the *Centio* today

Some of the tendencies observed so far have clear continuations in later twentieth-century scholarship. The binary opposition Ausonius–Proba is one of them, and it finds its way even into theoretical expositions on the intertextual structure of centos.<sup>37</sup> In this context, the *Wedding Cento* is often invoked as an example of centonizing where there is a strong contrast between the original Virgilian verses and Ausonius' use of them.<sup>38</sup> This tendency appears to be underpinned by a conscious or unconscious desire to free the Augustan poet from his scandalizing epigone. Reinhart Herzog argued that Ausonius used the Virgilian verses as a 'means of distancing',<sup>39</sup> and Giovanni Polara stressed that the re-uses in the *Wedding Cento* are systematically antanaclastic: that is, they have maximal formal similarity with the source text but minimal semantic affinity.<sup>40</sup> Parts of Proba's cento are also described in this way, but it is generally characterized as operating through parallel or by analogy.<sup>41</sup> For all of their formalist precision and use of ancient rhetorical terminology, these theoretical discussions seem to depend on an a

<sup>36</sup> D. R. Slavitt, *Ausonius. Three Amusements* (Philadelphia, 1998), 69–73; A. M. Murray, *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul. A Reader* (Peterborough, Ontario, 1999), 53–4; H. G. Evelyn-White, *Ausonius* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); S. Ehrling, 'De Inconexis Continuum. A Study of the Late Antique Latin Wedding Centos', PhD thesis, University of Gothenburg (2011), 128–33.

<sup>37</sup> See K. Pollmann, 'Sex and Salvation in the Vergilian Cento of the Fourth Century', in R. Rees (ed.), *Romane Memento. Vergil in the Fourth Century* (London, 2004), 79–96; M. Formisano and C. Sogno, 'Petite poésie portable', in M. Horster and C. Reitz (eds.), *Condensing Texts—Condensed Texts* (2010), 387–8.

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, R. Lamacchia, 'Dall'arte allusive al centone', *A&R* (1958), 208–9; T. Verwey and G. Witting, 'The Cento', in H. F. Plett (ed.), *Intertextuality* (Berlin and New York, 1991), 169; Ehrling (n. 36), 166, 179; A. Rondholz, *The Versatile Needle. Hosidius Geta's Cento 'Medea' and Its Tradition* (Berlin, 2012), 22.

<sup>39</sup> P. L. Schmidt, R. Herzog, and J. Divjak (eds.), *Handbuch der lateinischen Literatur der Antike* (Munich, 1989), 296. See also F. E. Consolino, 'Da Osidio Geta ad Ausonio e Proba: le molte possibilità del centone', *A&R* 28 (1983), 146–7.

<sup>40</sup> G. Polara, 'I centoni', in G. Cavallo (ed.), *Lo spazio letterario di Roma antica* (Rome, 1990), iii.268–9. See also Consolino (n. 39), 146–7; M. Gioseffi, 'Due note su Ausonio (Auson. Ecl. 4, p. 99 Prete; Cent. vv 103–31)', *Maia* 46 (1994), 331.

<sup>41</sup> Lamacchia (n. 38), 208–9; R. Herzog, *Die Biblepik der lateinischen Spätantike. Formgeschichte einer erbaulichen Gattung* (Munich, 1975), 12, 21–6; Polara (n. 40 [1990]), iii.268–9; J. Schnapp, 'Reading Lessons: Augustine, Proba, and the Christian Détournement of Antiquity', *Stanford Literary Review* 9 (1992), 112–15. See also discussion on 'typology' in Proba's cento in Schottenius Cullhed (n. 5), esp. 15–16.

priori classification of the two centos strongly anchored in traditional notions about the cultural place of the Virgilian texts: potentially analogous with a Christian worldview, yet strongly contrasting with sex and humour.

Another persistent feature is the focus on Ausonius' treatment of Virgil rather than the story content of the *Wedding Cento*: following the agenda set by the poet himself in the extradiegetic sections, there is a general inclination among scholars to historicize and problematize, understand or condemn Ausonius' centonization but not his representation of sex and especially sexual violence. For the *Cento* represents sex as a battle between a willing attacker and an unwilling attacked. In this regard, Sabine Horstmann's chapter on the *Cento* stands out when she points out that the sex scene hardly can be seen as comical or parodic when read in relation to the Virgilian source texts. In contrast to the quiet amusement of her often male scholarly predecessors, she does not find the young bride's attempt to defend herself and her screams of pain to be very humorous.<sup>42</sup> As Lauren Caldwell puts it in her historical and sociological study of Roman girlhood: 'Ausonius...takes the bride's terror further into the realm of the perverse in [his] mock *epithalamium*.'<sup>43</sup> Of course, it is possible to object that the sexual ethics of the period were different from ours; that the concept of 'rape' as we usually understand it – non-consensual sexual activity – had no equivalent that would apply to a married couple; that the representation of the bride's initial unwillingness to have sex belonged to the conventions of wedding poetry, since lack of desire was seen as a guarantee of virginity in Roman culture.<sup>44</sup> But my point is precisely that scholarship has tended to avoid discussing these kinds of question at length,<sup>45</sup> whereas Ausonius' literary 'rape' of Virgil is heavily scrutinized: described

<sup>42</sup> S. Horstmann, 'Spätantike Hochzeitscentones', in *Das Epithalamium in der lateinischen Literatur der Spätantike* (Munich, 2004), 299. In contrast to J. N. Adams, 'Ausonius *Cento Nuptialis* 101–31', *SIFC* 53 (1981), 199–202; Consolino (n. 39), 147. See also, for instance, R. F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic. The Search for a New Arion* (Woodbridge, 1990), 60; J. Mansfeld, *Heresiography in Context. Hippolytus' Elenchos as a Source for Greek Philosophy* (Leiden, 1992), 154: 'For the *connoisseur* it is fun to read Ausonius' *Cento nuptialis*, especially the pornographic section'; A. Burnier, 'Démonter Virgile et bâtir un classique: le Centon nuptial d'Ausone comme jeu de re-construction', *Itaca. Quaderns Catalans de Cultura Clàssica* 21 (2005), 87–8.

<sup>43</sup> L. Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the Fashioning of Femininity* (Cambridge, 2014), 161–4.

<sup>44</sup> K. K. Hersch, *The Roman Wedding. Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2010), 61–2. See also K. F. Pierce, 'The Portrayal of Rape in New Comedy', in S. Deacy and K. F. Pierce (eds.), *Rape in Antiquity. Sexual Violence in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (London, 2002), 163–84.

<sup>45</sup> For an exception see Caldwell (n. 43), 161–4.

negatively as an act of impudence or aesthetic failure,<sup>46</sup> or positively as a sign of technical skill and virtuosity, of goodhearted humour and intimacy with Virgil that heralds postmodern poetic attitudes.<sup>47</sup>

For this reason, let me venture on a few preliminary observations on the sex scene, keeping in mind these lessons extracted from the *Centio's* history of effect. For the sake of convenience, I will use Genette's terminology and call the *Centio* a *hypertext* that unavoidably comments on the Virgilian poems, its *hypotext*.<sup>48</sup> Another term that should be briefly glossed is Reinhart Herzog's concept of *Leitremiszenz*, 'leading reminiscence', which occurs when one particular place or character in the Virgilian hypotext is repeatedly used for one particular phenomenon in the centonic hypertext.<sup>49</sup>

We could point to several such elements, but here we shall trace one particular chain of *Leitremiszenzen*. About one-third of the verses in the sex scene are somehow related to battle, mostly to the Trojans' conquest of Latium.<sup>50</sup> The groom tends to be represented by verses originally describing Aeneas and other Trojan warriors, whereas the bride is portrayed with recycled descriptions of falling combatants on the losing side.<sup>51</sup> A key figure is doubtlessly Camilla.<sup>52</sup> Don Fowler argued that the sexual undertones exploited by Ausonius are already present in

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, L. A. Montalant-Bougleux, *Études sur les poètes dans leur relations avec les cours* (Versailles, 1854), 184; F. Ermini, *Il centone di Proba e la poesia centonaria latina. Studi* (Rome, 1909), 51; M. J. Byrne, *Prolegomena to an Edition of the Works of Decimus Magnus Ausonius* (New York, 1916), 61–2; H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Latin Literature* (London, 1936), 529; M. von Albrecht, *A History of Roman Literature* (Leiden, 1997), ii.1327. See also discussion in M. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation. Prudentius and Classical Mythology* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), 37.

<sup>47</sup> S. G. Nugent, 'Ausonius' Late-Antique Poetics and "Post-Modern" Literary Theory', *Ramus* 19 (1990), 37–41; Polara (n. 40), 270–1 (cf. L. Mondin, 'Dieci anni di critica Ausoniana [1984–1993]', *BStudLat* 24 [1994], 242); Burnier (n. 42), 87–90; P. F. Moretti, 'Proba e il *Centio nuptialis* di Ausonio', in P. F. Moretti, C. Torre, and G. Zanetto (eds.), *Debita Dona. Studi in onore di Isabella Gualandri* (Naples, 2008), 334–9, 346; M. S. Williams, 'Sine numine nomina: Ausonius and the Oulipo', in C. Kelly, R. Flower, and M. S. Williams (eds.), *Unclassical Traditions* (Cambridge, 2010), i.96–105; S. Hinds, 'The Self-conscious Cento', in Formisano and Fuhrer (n. 33), 193–5.

<sup>48</sup> See Pollmann (n. 37), 91. See also Schottenius Cullhed (n. 5), 15.

<sup>49</sup> Herzog, (n. 41) 12, 21–6. See also Schottenius Cullhed (n. 5), 17.

<sup>50</sup> 101: *Aen.* 11. 631; 103: *Aen.* 10.892, *Aen.* 9.398; 104: *Aen.* 10.699, *Aen.* 12.748; 107: *Aen.* 12.312; 109: *Aen.* 10. 788; 110: *Aen.* 11.524; 115: *Aen.* 11.530; 116–17: *Aen.* 9.743–4; 118: *Aen.* 11.804; 120: *Aen.* 11.816; 121: *Aen.* 11.817; 123: *Aen.* 10.770; 127: 12.276; 131: *Aen.* 11.818.

<sup>51</sup> See G. H. Tucker, 'Le Gallus de Lelio Capilupi', in D. Sacré and J. Papy (eds.), *Syntagmatia. Essays on Neo-Latin Literature in Honour of Monique Mund-Dopchie and Gilbert Tournoy* (Leuven, 2009), 332, 341–2; A. S. Cueto, 'Las lágrimas de la nova nupta', *Minerva* 24 (2011), 141; Caldwell (n. 43), 162; P. Hardie, *The Last Trojan Hero. A Cultural History of Virgil's Aeneid* (New York, 2014), 177–8.

<sup>52</sup> 118: *Aen.* 11.804; 120: *Aen.* 11.816; 121: *Aen.* 11.817; 131: *Aen.* 11.818.

Virgil and that the analogy between defloration and virgin death produces an implicit critique of the sexual identity and deviating lifestyle represented by the amazon warrior: 'She should have stayed at home to become a wife and mother in the normal way: her death shows the abnormality of her life.'<sup>53</sup> This element of sexual brutality in the *Wedding Cento* has clear parallels in love elegy, and in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* 14, where the sword piercing St. Agnes 'clearly evokes a deflowering penis'.<sup>54</sup> The same metaphorical rationale is present in Ausonius' use of the Virgilian scene where Dido, pierced by the sword and drenched in blood, hopelessly attempts to prop herself up on her elbows and gaze upon her sister one last time. In the *Cento Nuptialis*, this line becomes the bride's desperate effort to free herself from the groom after the act of penetration (122–3 ~ *Aen.* 4.690–1). On the hypotextual level, this connection is foreshadowed in the preceding section, the 'Entry into the Bedchamber'. In the Virgilian context, many of the lines here describe characters fearing Aeneas' actions: Turnus before his deadly wound (92; *Aen.* 12.916), Lucagus in the same situation (94; *Aen.* 10.597), and Dido reacting to his betrayal (91; *Aen.* 4.362). It establishes a connection between the groom and Aeneas, and between the bride and those who had to give their life for the sake of Rome. In the subsequent sex scene, this preliminary connection is fulfilled.

One particularly important passage is the description of Aeneas' descent into the Underworld. Like Pollux, who repeatedly goes back and forth between the lands of the living and the dead, so the groom's penis is repeatedly thrust in and out of the bride (126; *Aen.* 6.122). The same happens with Orpheus' plectrum striking against the lyre in Elysium (127 ~ *Aen.* 6.647). By way of association, the rather misogynist depiction of the female genitalia as repulsive is adapted from Virgil's representation of the home of a necromantic prophetess in the Albunean forest (111; *Aen.* 7.84). Hence, via the hypotexts the sex act is represented as a kind of terrifying *catabasis* that has to be carried out for a greater purpose.<sup>55</sup> This leading reminiscence also pervades the description of the groom: his penis is the famous golden

<sup>53</sup> D. Fowler, 'Vergil on Killing Virgins', in M. Whitby, P. Hardie, and M. Whitby (eds.), *Homo Viator. Classical Essays for John Bramble* (Bristol, 1987), 196.

<sup>54</sup> L. Grig, 'The Paradoxical Body of Saint Agnes', in A. Hopkins and M. Wyke (eds.), *Roman Bodies. Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2005), 116; J. Uden, 'The Elegiac Puella as Virgin Martyr', *TAPhA* 139 (2009), 212. See also J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore, MD, 1982), 19–22; Caldwell (n. 43), 161–2.

<sup>55</sup> See Hinds (n. 47), 194.

branch that granted Aeneas his descent into the underworld (105 ~ *Aen.* 6.406); moreover, the whole sex scene is introduced with a line from Aeneas' and the Sibyl's journey (101 ~ *Aen.* 6.268).

In this way, the meeting between bride and groom becomes a parallel to the grand narrative about the Trojan conquest of Latium. Just as Aeneas made the arduous and terrifying but necessary journey to Hades and then prevailed in battle over the Italic peoples in order to found the Roman Empire, so the groom has to conquer his bride in order to perpetuate Roman culture. Considering the reference to commission by the emperor and the extremely lavish wedding gifts described in the text, the poem's genesis may have been somehow connected to an imperial wedding, possibly that between Gratian, Valentinian's son and Ausonius' student, and Constantia. In this case, we could reformulate the interpretative suggestion: just as Aeneas underwent a series of arduous adventures and aggressions in order to found the Roman Empire, so this imperial groom has to conquer his bride in order for the same empire to survive.<sup>56</sup> It can even be read as a panegyric wish for a rebirth of Rome through the marriage. In such an interpretation, which defies the nugatory rhetoric of the extradiegetic sections of the poem, the use of Virgilian epic becomes more harmonizing and meaningful.

The sexual act and its central position in the *Wedding Cento* has been interpreted as a part of a metapoetic comment on the poem's relationship with Virgil.<sup>57</sup> Yet it acquires further dimensions against the background of Rome's formation, as the Roman foundational myths and legends are closely tied to sex, violence, and rape. James A. Arieti has discussed the political and constitutional signification of rape in Livy's *Ab urbe condita*: Mars rapes Rhea Silvia, who gives birth to Romulus; the mass rape of the Sabine women produces the Roman people; Sextus Tarquinius' rape of Lucretia leads to the foundation of the Republic; and so on.<sup>58</sup> Arieti relates these repeated stories to the fact that Venus, erotic desire, is Aeneas' mother, whereas Romulus' father and Venus' lover, Mars, symbolizes violence and destruction. This mythical fusion of antithetical forces enounces the ideological association of conquest with sex.<sup>59</sup> Arieti argues that this

<sup>56</sup> B. Moroni, 'L'Imperatore e il Letterato nel "Cento Nuptialis" di Ausonio', *Acme* 54 (2006), 84–5, notes that the wedding night is a prerequisite for the survival of the dynasty.

<sup>57</sup> McGill (n. 3), 92; Hinds (n. 47), 194–5.

<sup>58</sup> J. A. Arieti, 'Rape and Livy's View of Roman History', in Deacy and Pierce (n. 44), 209–18.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

use of rape was initially a 'positive force' that was corrupted into lowly 'lusts' as Roman culture declined.<sup>60</sup> Yet he offers as an exception to this rule a quotation demonstrating the persistency of the idea, a passage from fifth-century poet Rutilius Namatianus' *On His Way Home* (1.67–72): 'Whom Rome has feared she conquers, whom she has conquered she loves.'<sup>61</sup> The groom's non-consensual sex with the bride in Ausonius' *Wedding Cento* could be seen as yet another such continuation. The hypertextual structuring of Virgilian verses points directly to the suffering caused by Aeneas in his mission to found Rome, and indirectly to misogynist elements in Roman mythology, and ultimately to a configuration of masculine desire deeply entrenched in the idea of conquest. This is, *pace* Ausonius, no laughing matter.

SIGRID SCHOTTENIUS CULLHED

[sigrid.cullhed@littvet.uu.se](mailto:sigrid.cullhed@littvet.uu.se)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 225–6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.