

Divina Palladis Arte: A Metapoetic Reading of Hosidius Geta's Medea (104-147)

The second choral ode of Hosidius Geta's tragedy *Medea*, a *cento* composed of Virgilian hemistichs, uses a selection of epic lines from the fall of Troy in *Aeneid* 2 to develop the theme of human arrogance and foolishness, and it concludes with three relevant *exempla mythologica*. The first one, featuring Marsyas (131-138), has intrigued critics (Malamud 2012, Shumilin 2015, Silva 2024) because of the dramatic stylistic shift generated by the sudden intrusion of a cluster of bucolic lines (131, 132, 135, 138) selected from the *Eclogues*. In this paper, I argue that Hosidius Geta exploits this deliberate dissonance between high and low poetic registers, as well as the intrinsically intertextual nature of *cento* poetry, to mark and develop a metapoetic reflection on the *cento* technique.

The metapoetic potential of the *Eclogues* lines and of Marsyas' *exemplum* has already been noted by Malamud (2012), who reads in the satyr's bodily *sparagmos* at the hands of Apollo the dismemberment of Virgil's text by the centonist. Offering a flipped interpretation of Marsyas' *exemplum* supported by the two following *exempla*, I argue that, as a *cento* poet, Hosidius Geta identifies with the satyr as a fellow practitioner of a lesser form of artistic technique who foolishly dares to challenge an obviously superior opponent, Virgil. I thus interpret the concept of *sparagmos* in this literary context not as the dismembering of the text at the heart of the *cento* technique, but rather as one of its possible pitfalls.

To begin, I briefly restore the *Eclogues* lines used in Marsyas' *exemplum* to their original Virgilian context to show how Hosidius Geta makes his reader receptive to a metapoetic perspective by selecting lines that Virgil famously used to establish key features of the bucolic genre, notably the hemistich *Recubans sub tegmine fagi* (*Ecl.* 1.1) at line 131. Hosidius Geta's

metapoetic reflection, however, does not really concern the bucolic genre, but rather the *cento* technique as a fellow (fictitiously) lesser form of poetry that actually requires great poetic mastery and sophistication.

Then, I analyze a key passage from Marsyas' *exemplum* (134-138) to present the competition between the satyr and Apollo as a foil to the one between the centonist and Virgil. In particular, I focus on the fact that the *Divina Palladis ar[s]* (137), i.e. flute playing, with which Marsyas foolishly believes he can surpass Apollo, shares its essential characteristics with *cento* poetry: it creates melodies by combining a finite series of notes just as the centonist creates his poetry by recombining a finite series of verses (the Virgilian *corpus*). In contrast, Apollo's singing is indicated by the verb *cano* (*Medea* 138), designating the unconstrained and sublime mode of traditional composition used by Virgil (cf. *Aen.* 1.1). The equation between *Divina Palladis ar[s]* and the *cento* technique is reinforced by the hemistich's original context, which in the *Aeneid* (2.15) designates the technique used by the Achaeans to assemble planks to shape the Trojan horse, an assemblage operation comparable to that performed by the centonist. The themes of Marsyas' *exemplum* are reiterated in the following two *exempla* featuring Icarus and Pentheus, who share the arrogant *dementia* imputed to the satyr (135) and also die by being torn to pieces. Referring once again to the original Virgilian context, I show how behind Icarus (141-142) and Pentheus (144, 147) lie two artists who dared too much and saw their work or their bodies dismembered: Daedalus from *Aeneid* 6.14-15 and Orpheus from *Georgics* 4.522-523.

Finally, once established that Hosidius Geta identifies as a poet risking *sparagmos*, I use the introductory *Epistula* to Ausonius' *Cento Nuptialis*, considered the poetic manifesto of *cento* poetry, and its description of a successful *cento* to argue that in *Medea* the centonist's literary *sparagmos* is to be understood as the disintegration of his authorial voice and identity, the

potential result of his failure to assemble a new, independent, and organic work from Virgil's *corpus*.

This interpretation allows me to integrate Hosidius Geta's metapoetic reflection within the ode's broader narrative and moral commentary through the theme of human foolishness and arrogance. However, as doomed as Hosidius Geta's challenge to Virgil may seem, like Marsyas' to Apollo, its inclusion in the tragedy suggests that *cento* poetry is not to be perceived simply as a mechanical game, but (if successful) as a delicate poetic operation that allows its author to reclaim their own voice and authorial independence.

Bibliography

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