

I Will Make Mary Male...and Jesus Female: Gender Fluidity in Eudocia's Homeric Cento

Within the past few decades, scholars have grown increasingly interested in centos: patchwork poems that rework lines from the Homeric and Vergilian corpus to form new literary products. One Homeric cento, which was revised or updated at least four times during late antiquity, retells select scenes from the Bible and was composed, in part, by Aelia Eudocia, the wife of the eastern emperor Theodosius II and the best-surviving female poet from antiquity. Despite growing interest in Eudocia's cento, recent scholarship tends to focus on specific topics, including her method of composition, her theology, and her relationship to other late antique poets, particularly Nonnus of Panopolis and Faltonia Betitia Proba both of whom wrote biblical paraphrases.

Building on yet deviating from that developing tradition, my approach in this essay is to examine gender, particularly gender fluidity and ambiguity, in the cento. In my view, the heightened intertextual potential inherent to cento poetics allows us to read each biblical character as a hybrid composite of various Homeric actors. At times, the resulting bricolage of Homeric-biblical intertexts reinforces binary/rigid gender roles and, in so doing, supports patriarchy and misogyny. Elsewhere, the conflation of masculine/feminine voices produces a dynamic gender fluidity that can be seen as a subtle challenge or corrective to hierarchical models. My analysis focuses on five scenes within the cento: the fall (Cento 33–87), the annunciation (Cento 202–268), the hemorrhaging woman (Cento 993–1045), the Samaritan woman at the well (Cento 1046–1152), and Mary mourning the crucified Jesus (Cento 2030–2073), and advances a provocative method for reading late antique Christian centos.