

Rewriting Sibylline Poetics in Proba's *Cento*

In her fourth-century *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi*, Proba stitches together quotations of Virgil to tell a brief version of the story of the Bible. In the proem, the only part of the text not composed entirely of Virgilian material, she states that she will uncover a Christian truth that was latent in Virgil: “I will assert that Virgil sang of the pious deeds of Christ” (*Vergilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi*, 23). But more than a simple interpreter of Virgil, she elsewhere presents herself as divinely inspired. For example, she borrows an emblem of Apollonian inspiration when she describes herself as “soaked in the Castalian spring” (*Castalio ... fonte madens*, 20).

Because of her relationship with Virgil, her vatic self-presentation, and her gender, medieval and renaissance authors consistently treated her as a Sibyl (Cullhed 2015: 23-46, esp. 24). I will argue in this paper, however, that in her own text Proba reconfigures Sibylline inspiration as it appears in Virgil, rejecting the paradigm of inspiration as rape (on this paradigm, see Fowler 2002: 149) and instead offering a consensual model. Consider her first mention of inspiration: “Now, all-powerful God, accept this holy song, I pray, and open the mouth of your eternal, sevenfold spirit, and unbar the inner chambers of my heart, so that I, Proba, may relate all the mysteries of a prophet” (*nunc, deus omnipotens, sacrum, precor, accipe carmen / aeternique tui septemplex ora resolve / spiritus atque mei resera penetralia cordis, / arcana ut possim vatis Proba cuncta referre*, 9-12). This contrasts with *Aen.* 6.77-80, where Apollo overpowers the Sibyl (“so much more does he wear out her raging mouth, taming her wild heart, and he molds her by pressing,” *tanto magis ille fatigat / os rabidum, fera corda domans, fingitque premendo*). In both passages, the union of inspiration involves mouth and heart;

however, Proba offers her heart willingly, and the mouth is not hers but God's, which she invites him to open.

This reworking participates in a larger complex of passages in which she presents her body, spirit, and voice as fused in various ways with those of God and Virgil, but this fusion is cooperative rather than coercive: they all together choose the same song. For instance, Virgil's voice seems to emanate from her mouth, renouncing his earlier, more trivial verse: "for, after all I confess, I used to sing about the spectacles of light things, always about horses and arms and the man and fights" (*namque—fatebor enim—levium spectacula rerum / semper equos atque arma virum pugnascue canebam*). Likewise, when Proba describes the holy spirit moving through her limbs (25-28), intertexts from Anchises' description of metempsychosis in *Aen.* 6 remind readers that Virgil's *membra* are simultaneously being reanimated (Hinds 2014: 187-88).

This cooperative physical harmony of inspiration rewrites the violent Apollonian model of the *Aeneid*. I argue that this shift is closely tied to the rejection of the violent subject matter of the epic tradition. In *Aen.* 6, after all, the *horrida bella* (6.86) that the Sibyl is violently forced to narrate constitute a miniature preview of the poet's own violent song in the second half of the epic (*dicam horrida bella*, 7.41). Proba, on the other hand, begins her poem by rejecting the typical martial subject matter of epic (*crudelia bella*, 3). In transforming Virgil's epic violence into a new sort of song, she reconfigures the power dynamic of inspiration.

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