

A RECONSTRUCTION OF PROBA, *CENTO VERGILIANVS* 42A–B

ABSTRACT

Proba's Cento Vergilianus contains a corruption at line 42, sometimes printed as two half-lines separated by a lacuna (42a–b). Previous attempts to emend the passage based upon the four classical elements have met with limited success. This article argues for a novel reconstruction of the passage based upon the six days of the biblical creation, summarized in reverse. Two possible variants of the reconstruction are presented and evaluated on textual, metrical, compositional and contextual grounds.

Keywords: Proba; cento; Latin poetry; Late Antiquity; early Christian poetry; Virgil; textual criticism; Genesis

Scholars have long recognized that Proba's *Cento Vergilianus* contains a corruption at line 42. The transmitted text, as given by Fassina and Lucarini in their critical edition,¹ is as follows:

nam memini ueterum uoluens monumenta uirorum	35
Musaeum ante omnes uestrum cecinisse per orbem	
quae sint, quae fuerint, quae mox uentura trahantur	
omnia et ipse tener mundi concreuerit orbis.	
felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,	
unde hominum pecudumque genus uitaeque uolantum	40
et quae marmoreo fert monstra sub aequore pontus,	
†et liquidi simul ignis et caeli mobilis umor.†	
haut aliter prima crescentis origine mundi	
inluxisse dies aliumue habuisse tenorem	
crediderim.	45

Clearly, line 42 is corrupt on metrical grounds; semantically, it is also suspect (*liquidi ignis umor* does not make good sense). Thus, some editors print it as two lines, 42a and 42b, with an intervening lacuna:²

et liquidi simul ignis {	42a
..... } et caeli mobilis umor.	42b

An associated issue is that line 38 is syntactically (though not metrically) suspect, as there appears to be no verb upon which *concreuerit* could depend. However, this problem is readily dealt with by postulating (as, for example, Cullhed does) an *ut* in Proba's original text,³ modified back to the Virgilian reading of *et* by a later scribal error; such

¹ A. Fassina and C.M. Lucarini (edd.), *Faltonia Betitia Proba: Cento Vergilianus* (Berlin and Boston, 2015), cxx and 9; daggers mine.

² S.S. Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Leiden and Boston, 2015), 194; Fassina and Lucarini (n. 1), 9.

³ Cullhed (n. 2), 194. Note also that three manuscripts (C, Ch, S) give *ut*: see Fassina and Lucarini (n. 1), 9.

small changes to Virgilian material are common within Proba's cento technique, and a scribe familiar with Virgil might well have reversed her change unconsciously.

A number of scholars have attempted a restoration of the lacuna, under the hypothesis that the original passage referenced the four classical elements;⁴ with fire (*et liquidi simul ignis*) and water (*et caeli mobilis umor*) already mentioned, the missing material must by this reasoning reference earth and air. Such restorations also tend to feature a rearrangement of lines, on the assumption that the corruption extends beyond lines 42a–b (possibly encompassing the issue with line 38). Previous attempts to restore the passage include:

Schenkl (1888, incomplete):⁵

felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas	39
< . . . > et liquidi simul ignis	42a
<semina terrarumque> et caeli mobilis umor,	42b
omnia et ipse tener mundi concreuerit orbis,	38
unde hominum pecudumque genus uitaeque uolantum	40
et quae marmoreo fert monstra sub aequore pontus ...	41

Green (1997):⁶

omnia ut ipse tener mundi concreuerit orbis	38
felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,	39
<semina terrarumque> et caeli mobilis umor,	42a
et liquidi simul ignis <et aeris incrementum>,	42b
unde hominum . . .	40

Pollmann (2002):⁷

felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,	39
<qua ratione aer> et caeli mobilis umor	42a
et liquidi simul ignis <semina terrarumque>:	42b
omnia et ipse tener mundi concreuerit orbis,	38
unde hominum . . .	40

Fassina and Lucarini follow Schenkl and Pollman in their rearrangement of lines; Lucarini argues that, as the *tener mundi orbis* is formed out of the four elements, it should follow the summary of them. However, he also points out that these two proposals share a common flaw in that they place either *et liquidi simul ignis* or *semina terrarumque* in the second half of the hexameter; this appears to break Proba's own compositional rule, whereby a half-verse extracted from Virgil is kept in the same metrical location in which it originated.⁸ Though Lucarini does not discuss his reasons for rejecting Green, the

⁴ This hypothesis appears to originate with Schenkl, who bases it on Proba's use of two excerpts (*et liquidi simul ignis*, *Cento* 42a = *Ecl.* 6.33; *omnia et ipse tener mundi concreuerit orbis*, *Cento* 38 = *Ecl.* 6.34) from Silenus' song of the Creation in *Ecl.* 6.31–40, a passage which mentions the four classical elements (*semina terrarumque animaeque marisque fuissent* | *et liquidi simul ignis*, *Ecl.* 6.32–3). See M. Petschenig, R. Ellis, G. Brandes and C. Schenkl (edd.), *Poetae Christiani Minores: Pars I* (repr. New York and London, 1972), 524.

⁵ Petschenig et al. (n. 4), 524–5.

⁶ R.P.H. Green, 'Proba's introduction to her *Cento*', *CQ* 47 (1997), 548–59, at 558.

⁷ K. Pollman, 'Philologie und Poesie: zu einigen Problemen der Textgestaltung in *CSEL* 16', in A. Primmer, K. Smolak and D. Weber (edd.), *Textsorten und Textkritik* (Vienna, 2002), 211–30, at 228.

⁸ Fassina and Lucarini (n. 1), cxxi, citing V. Sineri (ed. and transl.), *Il Centone di Proba* (Acireale, 2011), 119 n. 163. Proba, however, does occasionally allow for *minor* metrical shifts a) within what I term a 'composite' excerpt (where two or more excerpted elements are recombined into a single excerpt based on one or more linking keywords) as further discussed below (n. 16), or b) when

difficulty is likely *aeris incrementum*, as *aeris* is nowhere found in a fourth-foot position in Virgil. (I would add that *incrementum* feels like a weak term for describing the creation of fire and air, and that the line as proposed by Green lacks Proba's characteristic elegance.)

Faced with these difficulties, Lucarini comes to a rather pessimistic conclusion. Since diligent searches of the Virgilian corpus for material that satisfies the metrical and compositional requirements have repeatedly turned up empty-handed, he postulates that Proba, unable to find anything to fill the gap to her satisfaction, left lines 42a and b (*et liquidi simul ignis* and *et caeli mobilis umor*) as separate half-lines in the margin, perhaps planning to return to the passage later; these two partial lines were then combined and inserted after line 41 by a later editor. Thus, Fassina and Lucarini propose:⁹

nam memini ueterum uoluens monumenta uirorum	35
Musaeum ante omnes uestrum cecinisse per orbem	36
quae sint, quae fuerint, quae mox uentura trahantur,	37
felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,	39
et liquidi simul ignis	42a
et caeli mobilis umor	42b
omnia et ipse tener mundi concreuerit orbis,	38
unde hominum pecudumque genus uitaeque uolantum	40
et quae marmoreo fert monstra sub aequore pontus.	41
haut aliter prima crescentis origine mundi	43
inluxisse dies aliumue habuisse tenorem	44
crediderim.	45

Although this scenario is logically possible, it seems rather inconsistent with the immense care that Proba has taken elsewhere in her poem, and with her clear wish, or even expectation, that her poetic fame among posterity should rest upon the *Cento*,¹⁰ one would expect her to have been more painstaking with her *magnum opus*. In addition, the lines *felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas, | omnia et ipse tener mundi concreuerit orbis . . .*, with lines 42a–b placed aside as marginalia, fail to hold together syntactically; one can of course speculate that Proba's intention was to eventually bridge the syntactic gap as well as the semantic one.

I now propose a reconstruction along rather different lines. It is my contention that the central assumption of those who have previously tried to emend the passage—that is, that Proba's original text referenced the four classical elements—is incorrect. Rather, I see in these lines a summary of the six days of Creation, but in reverse order:

material is removed from, or transposed within, a larger excerpt (e.g. *tantis nauis surgentibus undis*, *Aen.* 6.354 → *tantis surgentibus undis*, *Cento* 315, where *nauis* is removed and *tantis* shifted by a foot). However, none of the proposed reconstructions given above uses excerpted material which meets either criterion.

⁹ Fassina and Lucarini (n. 1), 8–9. Two earlier editions simply print the transmitted text: Sineri (n. 8), 44 (with discussion in the critical apparatus) and A. Badini – A. Rizzi (edd.), *Proba, Il Centone* (Bologna, 2011), 76–8, who obelize lines 38 and 42.

¹⁰ E.g. *Cento* 335–7 *quamuis angusti terminus aevi | excipiat, temptanda uia est, qua me quoque possim | tollere humo et nomen fama tot ferre per annos*. See also Proba's description of her poetic project in monumental terms at *Cento* 45–6, 50–3 *maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo, | si qua fidem tanto est operi latura uetustas . . . omnia temptanti potior sententia uisa est | pandere res altas terra et caligine mersas. | inque dies aliquid iam dudum inuadere magnum | mens agit at mihi nec placida contenta quiete est*.

and Proba's *ignes* might easily have (in most manuscripts) mutated back to the original Virgilian *ignis* in a manner similar to the *ut* to *et* reversion discussed earlier.

Second, with *liquidi* ... *ignis*:

... et quae marmoreo fert monstra sub aequore pontus,
 et liquidi simul ignis (**fontes** | **et genus omne** G. 2.200/4.18; G. 2.20 (*his* → *et*) 42a
siluarum frutumque) et caeli mobilis umor. G. 2.21 42b
 haut aliter prima crescentis origine mundi ...

There is some textual support for this latter reconstruction in that one manuscript (Ch) reads *et liquidi fons ignis et caeli mobilis umor*,¹⁴ possibly a corrupted form of the original (assuming an intermediate version such as *et liquidi simul ignis fontes et caeli mobilis umor*, as for *aetheris* above). One potential objection against *fontes* is that it is rare in dactylic hexameter, and particularly in the Virgilian style, for a spondee to directly precede a bucolic diaeresis, particularly when there is a break in the sense as observed here;¹⁵ another potential objection is that *fontes* is not found in a precise fourth-foot position anywhere in Virgil. However, Proba does occasionally allow some metrical flexibility within a composite excerpt (one formed by recombining two or more excerpts linked by one or more common keywords).¹⁶ *fontes* occurs in close proximity to *liquidi* three times in Virgil (G. 2.200, 3.529, 4.18). G. 2.200 (*non liquidi gregibus fontes, non gramina derunt*) would require a shift of only half a foot to place *fontes* in the fourth-foot position, while G. 4.18 (*at liquidi fontes*) requires a larger metrical shift (1.5 feet), but could perhaps more intuitively be recombined with *et liquidi simul ignis* given the similarity of the introductory particle (*at*, *et*) and the lack of intervening text; either excerpt seems a plausible source for *fontes* in the composite passage.

Returning to the wider context, we might ask on what grounds we can assume that Proba intended this passage as a (reverse) summary of the six days of the Creation. In fact, I contend that this is more likely than the 'four elements' reading, for three reasons:

- (1) Given that Proba is a Christian poet who is writing an explicitly Christian epic, the six days of the biblical Creation seem a more likely referent than the four elements of pagan Greek philosophy.
- (2) A few lines earlier (in line 36), *Musaeus* is mentioned. As discussed in detail by Cullhed,¹⁷ this is Proba's Virgilian equivalent of the biblical Moses, and Proba is referring to the Pentateuch when she writes: *Musaeum ante omnes uestrum cecinisse per orbem | quae sint, quae fuerint, quae mox uentura trahantur*, 36–7. For her to continue this line of thought to reference the Mosaic account of Creation would seem only natural; the four Greek elements, on the other hand, are alien to the Mosaic worldview.

¹⁴ Fassina and Lucarini (n. 1), 9.

¹⁵ H.H. Huxley, 'Significant diaeresis in Vergil and other hexameter poets', *Vergilius* 33 (1987), 23–8, at 26.

¹⁶ E.g. *interea pauidam uolitans pinnata per urbem* (*Aen.* 9.473) + *exemplo Libyae magnas it fama per urbes* (*Aen.* 4.173) → *interea uolitans magnas it fama per urbes* (*Cento* 456), where *pauidam* is dropped and *uolitans* shifted by one foot metrically; *dant manibus famuli* (*Aen.* 1.701) + *dant fruges manibus* (*Aen.* 12.173) → *dant manibus fruges* (*Cento* 586), where *fruges* is shifted by a foot; *fari quo sanguine cretus* (*Aen.* 2.74) + *fari iubet* (*Aen.* 11.240) → *farique iubent, quo sanguine cretus* (*Cento* 609), where a *-que* is inserted after *fari*, and *iubet* (modified to *iubent*) is shifted by half a foot.

¹⁷ Cullhed (n. 2), 127–9.

- (3) The *Cento* contains a second, extended Creation account at lines 56–135. This account fails to strictly follow Genesis 1 in several respects: it displaces several events onto different days, condenses several days into one, and even leaves out material (such as the creation of the firmament). It also in places displays the influence of pagan thought regarding the created order; for example, the first line and a half, *principio caelum ac terras camposque liquentes | lucentemque globum lunae*, is taken directly from Anchises' cosmological speech to Aeneas (*Aen.* 6.724–5). It is understandable that, preceding this longer account, Proba might wish to emphasize her underlying orthodoxy, assuring readers that, despite the idiosyncrasies of the Creation account to come, she remains a faithful Christian; and the definitive statement in lines 43–5 (*haut aliter prima crescentis origine mundi | inluxisse dies aliumue habuisse tenorem | crediderim*) suggests that this was indeed her goal in writing this first, shorter Creation account.

We might also ask why Proba should choose to arrange her (first) summary of the Creation in reverse order. Two reasons suggest themselves: first, as is made clear in her statement at *Cento* 23, she is committed to advancing the idea that Virgil's works are prophetic of the Christian story (*Vergilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi*). The very fact that the lines *hominum pecudumque genus uitaeque uolantum | et quae marmoreo fert monstra sub aequore pontus* occur consecutively in Virgil (*Aen.* 6.728–9), appearing to summarize Days 5 and 6 of the Creation in a precise backwards sequence, might well have prompted her to continue the pattern through the remaining four days.

Second, looking at the introduction to the *Cento* (1–55) more broadly, we can observe an overall backwards temporal narrative: Proba reflects upon her own past as a poet (*Cento* 1–12); Virgil (12–23); the Incarnation (31–4); *ueterum . . . monumenta uirorum* (35); Musaeus/Moses' writings (36–8); and finally turns to the first subject of her poem proper, the Creation narrative. This new section begins with the word *principio* (*Cento* 56); thus the 'backwards Creation narrative' functions as part of a larger movement leading the reader backwards in time to the *principium*, when the Creation story can begin.

To conclude, this article has presented two variants of a novel reconstruction of Proba's *Cento Vergilianus* 42a–b based upon the six days of the biblical Creation, summarized in reverse. This reconstruction not only fills the textual gap more smoothly than previous attempts while meeting the compositional and metrical requirements for a Virgilian cento; it also fits more convincingly with the surrounding context and with Proba's own Christian religious commitments, while providing a reasonable explanation as to how the textual corruption occurred. There are, then, multiple grounds on which to conclude that one of the reconstructions proposed here, or another produced along similar lines, likely represents the original text.

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