

CENTONES:

Recycled Art or the Embodiment of Absolute Intertextuality?

by Marie Okáčová (Brno)

first publication.

This paper was written under the auspices of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research into Ancient Languages and Early Stages of Modern Languages (research program MSM 0021622435) at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic.

1 In vulgar Greek, as Crusius, Otto: Sub voce *Cento*. In: Wissowa, Georg (Ed.): *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Vol. 3. Stuttgart: Metzler 1899, p. 1930, notes, we can also find, among other names, the denomination κέντρων, which is strikingly similar to its Latin counterpart.

2 Gärtner, Hans-Armin/Miebertmann, Wof-Lüder: Sub voce *Cento*. In: Cancik, Hubert/Schneider, Helmuth (Eds.): *Der neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike* (henceforth abb. as DNP). Vol. 2. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler 1997, p. 1061. Cf. the explanations of the literal meanings of the discussed names given in Liddell, Henry/George-Scott, Robert (Eds.): *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon 1996, p. 939, sub voce Κέντρον: »piece of patch-work, rag«; and Souter, Alexander et al. (Eds.): *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon 1968, p. 299, sub voce *Cento*: »A quilt, blanket, or curtain made of old garments stitched together.«

3 Cf. the encyclopaedic and dictionary sources quoted in notes 1 and 2. A brief discussion of the etymology and semantic development of the term *cento* is also included in Verweyen, Theodor/Eitting, Gunther: *The Cento: A Form of Intertextuality from Montage to Parody*. In: Plett, Heinrich F. (Ed.): *Intertextuality*. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 1991, p. 166f. Cf. also the definitions of the *cento* poetry provided, e.g., by Salanitro, Giovanni: *Osidio Geta e la poesia centonaria*. In: Haase, Wolfgang (Ed.): *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*. Part 2. Vol. 34/3. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 1997, p. 2319ff.; Usher, Mark David: *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia*. Lanham, MD et al.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998, p. 1f.; and McGill, Scott: *Virgil Recompiled: The Mythological and Secular Centos in Antiquity*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP 2005, p. xv.

One of the most controversial literary forms within the corpus of the extant late ancient poetry is doubtlessly the intriguing *cento*, the underlying poetics of which, as will be sufficiently corroborated, almost necessarily elicits ambivalent critical stances. The denomination of the poetic compositions in question is, unsurprisingly enough, of Greek origin; even though there is not a perfect one-to-one semantic correspondence between the Greek term κέντρων¹ and the Latin word *cento*, the basic original meaning common to both these expressions denotes »eine aus Resten gebrauchten Stoffes zusammengenähte Decke«.² As figurative titles, the discussed terms later came to refer to patchwork poems fashioned out of separate lines or half-lines appropriated more or less verbatim from the great bards of the past, in the context of antiquity, typically, though not exclusively, from Homer and Virgil, and stitched together into various stories quite different from those related in the canonical model texts.³

Thus, the discussed type of poetry is completely derivative as far as the syntagmata employed are concerned⁴ and at the same time highly original in terms of its formal conception and the very content of the individual *cento* pieces; in a sense, the uniqueness of the *cento* consists in its absolute derivativeness.⁵ As a matter of fact, it is exactly this contradiction or, to adopt poststructuralist terminology, this Derridean paradox⁶ perceptible in the formal conception of the hotchpotch poems that appears to have been a thorn in the flesh of several ancient, as well as modern scholars and literary critics, who essentially considered the *cento* as mere childish play and condemned such verse as a serious devaluation, or at least as an improper use, of the inviolable masterworks.⁷ Before I embark on a thorough analysis of the *cento* poetics and clarify my stance in the heated debate over the literary legitimacy of the *cento* form, a concise historical overview of the discussed type of poetry, demonstrating that obviously not all men of letters were equally prejudiced against the non-classical practice of centonizing the classics, shall be provided.

Conceptually speaking, the *cento* technique seems to be closely linked to the orality of early ancient Greek society; the roots of *cento* composition can be detected in the tradition of the Homeric rhapsodes.⁸ These professional reciters first committed the vast stock of epic material ascribed to Homer to memory and then refashioned it in each and every performance in a way similar to the centonists' treatment of their source texts. The fully-fledged Greek *cento* compositions are, however, of much later origin. The *cento* was a familiar and relatively popular literary form in the Hellenistic period, the subsequent Roman period, and the era of the Byzantine Empire. Anyway, there are actually not many representative and substantial examples that survived those days.⁹ The extant Homeric *centos* comprise three short mythological poems included in the Byzantine collection titled *Anthologia Palatina*,¹⁰ a ten-line *cento* quoted by the second-century bishop of Lyons Irenaeus in his work *Adversus Haereses*,¹¹ a six-line *cento* in the scholia to Dionysius Thrax, and a seven-line grafitto inscribed on the statue of Memnon in Egypt.¹² On the whole, the only extensive Homeric *centos* we have originated in Byzantine Greece and elaborate on biblical themes. The Homeric adaptation at issue is the Christian *cento* by the fourth-century bishop Patricius, which was later significantly expanded by the empress Eudocia, wife of Theodosius II.¹³

The Virgilian patchwork poems were, similarly to the Homeric ones, flourishing particularly in late antiquity.¹⁴ All of the sixteen extant Latin *centos* were composed sometime between the second and sixth century AD; the rough terminal dates proposed by Scott McGill are years 200 and 534.¹⁵ On the basis of the themes handled, we can distinguish poems on mythological and secular subjects,¹⁶ and the Christian variety.¹⁷ The former group comprises the anonymous Narcissus, Hippodamia,¹⁸ Hercules et Antaeus, Progne et Philomela, Europa, Alcesta, and the Iudicium Paridis, traditionally attributed to Mavortius,¹⁹ consul in 527 AD; all the listed *centos* relate quite well-known mythological stories. The remaining non-Christian *centos* are Hosidius Geta's²⁰ tragedy *Medea*²¹ and two *epithalamia*: the *Epithalamium Fridi*²² by the sixth-century epigrammatist Luxorius²³ and Ausonius's *Cento Nuptialis*.²⁴ Last but not least, the pagan *cento* collection also includes the anonymous pieces *De Panificio* and *De Alea*,²⁵ both of which depict rather trivial matters, namely the baking of bread and maybe a game of dice.²⁶ The Latin Christian *cento* poetry contains

4 On the necessary accommodations of the Homeric and Virgilian units in the process of *cento* composition, cf. Usher 1998, pp. 35-56; Lamarcchia, Rosa: Dall'arte allusiva al cento (A proposito di scuola di poesia e poesia di scuola). In: A&R 3 (1958a), p. 211f.; and McGill 2005, p. 22.

5 Cf. McGill 2005, p. 23, who comes to the conclusion that »secondariness and originality, far from being antithetical, are complementary forces in *cento* composition«. The disparate nature of the *cento* is also comm. on by Opelt, Ilona: Der zümende Christus im *Centio* der Proba. In: JbAC 7 (1964), p. 106f.; and Pavlovskis, Zoja: Proba and the Semiotics of the Narrative Virgilian *Centio*. In: Vergilius, 35 (1989), p. 70f.

6 Jacques Derrida's method of deconstruction, when applied to a work of literature, is aimed at finding the point where the oppositions on which the work is based collapse and the text appears to contradict itself (on the implications of deconstruction on literary criticism, cf., e.g., Eagleton, Terry: Post-Structuralism. In: Eagleton, T.: Literary Theory: An Introduction. Minneapolis/MN: Minnesota UP 1983, p. 132ff.; cf. Belsey, Catherine: Deconstructing the Text. In Critical Practice. London, New York: Methuen 1980, pp. 103-124). In one way, the *cento* can therefore be seen as a case study in self-deconstruction.

7 The most telling examples of *cento* criticism expressed from different perspectives will be cited later. On the commonly unfavourable opinions on the *cento* and the literary output of late antiquity in general, cf. Herzog, Reinhart: Die Biblepik der lateinischen Spätantike: Formgeschichte einer erbaulichen Gattung. Vol. 1. Munich: Fink 1975, p. 6f.; and Pavlovskis 1989, p. 70f.

8 On this theory, cf., e.g., Crusius 1899, p. 1930f.; Wilken, Robert L.: The Homeric *Centio* in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I, 9, 4. In: VChr, 21 (1967), p. 28; and Pavlovskis 1989, p. 71. For an examination of the similarities and differences between the practice of the rhapsodes and that of the centonists, cf. Lamarcchia 1958a, p. 214f.

9 The rather untypical and questionable occurrences of the debated poetic phenomenon in Greek literature include, e.g., several Homeric quotations in Aristophanes, which could also be recognized as examples of

the anonymous *De Verbi Incarnatione*,²⁷ the *De Ecclesia*,²⁸ whose probable author is the above-mentioned Mavortius,²⁹ the *Versus ad Gratiam Domini*, a work attributed to someone named Pomponius and composed perhaps in the fifth century,³⁰ and the famous *Centio Probae*³¹ by the fourth-century poetess Proba.³²

For the sake of complexity of the above-provided account, it should be remarked that there also existed non-Homeric and non-Virgilian *centos* fabricated, for example, from the verses of Hesiod or Ovid,³³ as well as works that Giovanni Salanitro terms pseudo-*centos* such as the comic epic *Batrachomyomachia* or Reposianus's *De Concubitu Martis et Venere*.³⁴ Finally, we should observe that the *cento* form did not die out at the end of classical antiquity; rather, this poetic oddity remained popular in medieval as well as Renaissance literature and continues to be cultivated in modern times, too.³⁵

As becomes evident from the preceding survey, the production of Greek, as well as Latin *cento* poetry is characteristic of the later stages of the respective literary traditions. This close parallelism is admittedly not fortuitous. Generally speaking, late ancient authors' literary preoccupations are marked by significant formalism.³⁶ Without much exaggeration, we can speak about the cult of form adhered to at the expense of content³⁷ and actually lying at the very root of the *cento* technique. The centonists were above all experimenters in poetic form. They expressed themselves in Virgil's language, which obviously imposed serious limitations on the literary quality of their works and occasionally resulted in their vagueness and obscurity.³⁸ The most glaring example in this respect is the *De Alea*; in this case, not even the very subject matter of the *cento* can be determined beyond doubt because of the poem's inaccurate and metaphorical wording. Whether the piece really portrays dicing, as its title suggests, and likens it to a combat between armed forces or whether it rather describes a kind of athletic – presumably gladiatorial – competition held in an amphitheatre simply remains unclear.³⁹

Nonetheless, as I have already suggested, the *cento* poetry was perfectly in line with the spirit of the age and contemporary authors' predilections for various ›original‹ and formally elaborate adaptations of the canonical texts. In fact, the late ancient notion of originality markedly differs from, for instance, the Romantic concept of the creative spirit or the modern understanding of the author's genius.⁴⁰ The patchwork texts should simply be viewed in connection with the ancient tradition of the *imitatio veterum*. The centonists undoubtedly embraced this concept *satis superque*.⁴¹

In the ensuing examination of the modes of production of the *cento* verse, the focus will be predominantly on the Latin *centos* and specifically on the non-Christian conversions of the Virgilian material, which, while being formally, and thus generically, the same as the Christian *cento* pieces, are still substantially different from them, especially in terms of purport and mood. The formal design of both the above-mentioned *cento* types exhibits equal playfulness. Nevertheless, whereas the authors of the pagan *centos* handle rather trivial themes and their creations are typically of humorous and frolic nature, the Christian patchwork pieces are meant to be serious poetic endeavours exalted in both tone and thought.⁴² The stark contrast between, on the one hand, Ausonius's and Luxorius's employment of Virgil's language as an effective means of divulging the secrets of the wedding night,⁴³ or the two practically parodical accommodations of the bard's dignified epic to very down-to-earth topics such as breadmaking and dicing,⁴⁴ and on the other hand, Proba's programmatic declaration that she »will say that Vergil sang the holy gifts of Christ«⁴⁵ is all too evident. In point of fact, the pagan *centos*, whose rather frivolous topics are perfectly consistent with their frolicsome mechanics of composition, appear to be more consonant with the ancient understanding of the role and purpose of the patchwork texts than the Christian *cento* interpretations of Virgil actually are.

The most comprehensive ancient source of information on the *cento* poetics is indisputably a unique prose prefatory letter to the *Centio Nuptialis*,⁴⁶ which Ausonius addressed to his friend, the rhetor Axius Paulus. In this epistle, the fourth-century poet, rhetorician, and, in a sense, literary theorist exposes the principles and specifies the rules of *cento* composition.⁴⁷ The basic inherent quality of the *centos* that Ausonius repeatedly points out is the playful and ludicrous nature of these poetic enterprises, which he considers as trifling rather than serious works.⁴⁸ At the very beginning of the prooem, Ausonius designates his poem as *frivolum et nullius pretii opusculum* (CN, praef. 1).⁴⁹ The poet then briefly comments on the origin of the term *cento*, using the verb *ludere*: *centonem vocant qui primi hac*

the pastiche technique, though (cf. Gärtner, Hans Amin: Sub voce *Cento*. In: DNP 1997, vol. 2, p. 1062).

10 Stadtmüller, Hugo (Ed.): *Anthologia Graeca Epigrammatum Palatina cum Planudea*. Vol. III. Pars Prior: *Palatinae Libri IX Epp.* 1-563, *Planudeae L I Continens*. Leipzig: Teubner 1906, poems 9.361, 381, and 382.

11 For a careful examination of this patchwork text, cf. Wilken 1967, pp. 25-33.

12 I paraphrase Usher 1998, p. 3, note 3. Cf. the list of the pagan *centos* composed out of Homer's poetry supplied by Salanitro 1997, p. 2325ff.

13 Cf. the edition of Eudocia's work by Usher, M.D. (Ed.): *Homocentones Eudociae Augustae*. Stuttgart, Leipzig: Teubner 1999; and the most recent ed. by Schembra, Rocco: *Homocentones*. *Corpus Christianorum: Series Graeca*, 62. Turnhout: Brepols; Louvain: Louvain UP 2007. The extent and importance of Eudocia's contribution to the final version of the *cento* is examined by Usher, M.D.: *Prolegomenon to the Homeric Centos*. In: *AJPh* 118.2 (1997), pp. 305-321. For a detailed analysis of various aspects of the *cento* text in question, cf. the illuminating monograph Usher 1998.

14 A kind of precursor of the fully-fledged Latin *centos* is, e.g., a quotation from Virgil in Petronius (Liebermann, Wolf-Lüder: Sub voce *Cento*. In: DNP 1997, vol. 2, p. 1062).

15 McGill 2005, p. xv.

16 Except for the *Cento Nuptialis*, all these patchwork texts can be found in the *Codex Salmasianus* in Riese, Alexander (Ed.): *Anthologia Latina sive Poesis Latinae Supplementum*. Pars Prior: *Carmina in Codicibus Scripta*. Fasc. I: *Libri Salmasiani Aliorumque Carmina*. Leipzig: Teubner 1894, poems 7-15 and 17-18.

17 The Latin Christian *centos* are included in Schenkl, Karl (Ed.): *Poetae Christiani Minores*. *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 16. Vienna: Tempsky 1888, pp. 511-640.

18 For a critical ed. of this *cento*, cf. Paolucci, Paola (Ed./transl./comm.): *Il centone virgiliano Hippodamia dell'Anthologia Latina*. Introduzione, edizione critica, traduzione, commento. Hildesheim et al.: Olms 2006.

concinnatione luserunt (3). The next sentence, in which Ausonius describes the process of composing his own *cento* and envisages what the reader's reaction to this minor poem may be like, reads as follows: *solae memoriae negotium sparsa colligere et integrare lacerata, quod ridere magis quam laudare possis* (4f.). Further, we should note the use of the noun *ludus* in lines 11 and 43, the employment of the deverbative noun *ridenda* in line 20, the adjective *iocularis* in line 7 and *ludicrus* in line 21, the nominal use of the latter adjective in line 32, and, last but not least, the adjective *ridiculus* in line 42 of Ausonius's preface. All of the above-listed expressions refer more or less directly to Ausonius's *cento opusculum* or the *cento* in general.

On the basis of the above-presented textual evidence, we can draw the conclusion that Ausonius's opinion on the *cento* was a bit depreciative. Even though this is most probably to a large extent a matter of the authorial pose of modesty quite common in the prefaces to ancient works and conventionally adopted to appeal to readers' benevolence,⁵⁰ the debated attitude of Ausonius is not thoroughly insignificant. The poet makes it clear that he cherishes no aspirations to compete with serious poetic works; he acknowledges that the *cento* is a kind of literary play or memory exercise,⁵¹ and as such should be classed among the minor, light forms of poetry.

Another distinguishing quality of the *cento* that Ausonius notices is its derivative and piecemeal essence, which, however, at least in his opinion, should constitute no insuperable obstacle to the unity and coherence of the patchwork pieces. The poet claims that his *cento*, and therefore every work written in the *cento* form, is or should be *de inconexis continuum, de diversis unum, de seriis ludicrum, de alieno nostrum* (CN, praef. 2of.). The same motif reappears later in the epistle where Ausonius characterizes the structure of the patchwork poem in the following way: *variis de locis sensibusque diversis quaedam carminis structura solidatur* (2f.).⁵² The poet consequently takes this explanation as a starting point for his description of the verse schemes and metrical rules recommended for the *cento*.⁵³ The wholeness vs. the patchiness of the *cento* pieces is again discussed in the concluding part of Ausonius's epistle. After a lengthy figurative passage in which the author befittingly compares the patchwork technique to the ancient Greek jigsaw-puzzle-like game called *στομάχιον*,⁵⁴ he returns to the *cento* proper and presents the final set of rules under which the piecemeal poems should operate:

hoc ergo centonis opusculum ut ille ludus tractatur, pari modo sensus diversi ut congruant, adoptiva quae sunt ut cognata videantur, aliena ne interluceant, arcessita ne vim redarguant, densa ne supra modum protuberent, hiulca ne pateant. (43-46)⁵⁵

The emphasis here is again on the neat coalescence of the individual Virgilian verse units, the linkage of which should become virtually invisible so that the piece could give the impression of an organic whole, which conveys a distinct meaning.

Lastly, we should note that the tone which Ausonius adopts in the debated preface is not only instructive and ostensibly disparaging, as demonstrated above, but also apparently apologetic. At one point he claims that he regrets having profaned the dignity of Virgil's poetry: *piget equidem Vergiliani carminis dignitatem tam ioculari dehonestasse materia* (CN, praef. 7f.). This subject then recurs in the parecbasis included in the *Cento Nuptialis*⁵⁶ (*cetera quoque cubiculi et lectuli operta prodentur, ab eodem auctore collecta, ut bis erubescamus qui et Vergilium faciamus impudentem* [CN, parecb. 4-6]) and it is further discussed in the epistolary epilogue of the *cento*⁵⁷ where it becomes evident, however, that the author is certainly not serious about his feelings of remorse towards Virgil and his works. On the contrary, Ausonius asks his friend to defend him against those of his potential readers who would judge his morality from the character of his poem (*sed cum legeris, adesto mihi adversum eos, qui, ut Iuvenalis ait, >Curios simulant et Bacchanalia vivunt<, ne fortasse mores meos spectent de carmine* [CN, epilog. 1-3]) and emphasizes that the obscenity of a work of literature gives absolutely no indication of the low morals of its author: *>lasciva est nobis pagina, vita proba<, ut Martialis dicit* (3). Moreover, Ausonius even suggests that the indecency of his verse stems actually from Virgil (*et si quid in nostro ioco aliquorum hominum severitas vestita condemnat, de Vergilio arcessitum sciat* [17f.]), which means that he himself is beyond reproach. The poet essentially intimates that even the writings of such a reputable author as Virgil are not devoid of possible ambiguities and hidden obsce-

19 For a discussion of Mavortius's identity and his authorship of the *Judicium Paradis*, cf. Vidal, Joesp-Lluís: *Christiana Vergiliana I: Vergilius Eucharistiae cantor*. In: *Studia Virgilliana: Actes del VIè Simposi d'Estudis Clàssics*, 11-13 de febrer de 1981 (Estudis de literatura comparada). Barcelona: Secció Catalana de la Societat Espanyola d'Estudis Clàssics 1985, p. 210ff.; Salanitro 1997, p. 2339; and McGill 2005, p. 72f.

20 The confusion surrounding the centonist's name is discussed, e.g., in Vidal, J.-L.: *Tragic Vergil: Rewriting Vergil as a Tragedy in the Cento Medea*. In: *CW 95.2* (2001/02), p. 152f. On Geta's name and identity, cf. also Lamarccchia 1958a, p. 204, note 1; and Salanitro, G. (Ed./transl.): *Osidio Geta: Medea. Introduzione, testo critico, traduzione ed indici. Con un profilo della poesia centonaria greco-latina*. Rome: Ed. dell'Ateneo 1981, pp. 63-66.

21 Cf. the edition of this *cento* by Salanitro 1981 and Lamarccchia, R. (Ed.): *Hosidii Getae Medea: Cento Vergilianus*. Leipzig: Teubner 1981. The unusually copious secondary literature on this particular *cento* includes, e.g., Lamarccchia, R.: *Metro e ritmo nella Medea di Osidio Geta*. In: *SIFC 30* (1958b), p. 175-206; Lamarccchia, R.: *Osservazioni sulle sigle dei personaggi e le rubriche nella Medea di Osidio Geta*. in: *PP 13* (1958c), pp. 312-321; Lamarccchia, R.: *Problemi di interpretazione semantica in un centone virgiliano*. In: *Maia*, 10 (1958d), pp. 161-188; and McGill 2001/02, pp. 143-161.

22 The *cento* is included in Rosenblum, Morris (Ed./transl./comm.): *Luxorius: A Latin Poet among the Vandals. Together with a Text of the Poems and an English Translation*. New York, London: Columbia UP 1961, poem 91; as well as in the comm. ed. of Luxorius's poetry by Happ, Heinz (Ed./comm.): *Luxorius*. Vol. 1: *Text und Untersuchungen*. Vol. 2: *Kommentar zu AL 37.18.203.287-375 Riese*. Stuttgart: Teubner 1986, poem 18.

23 For a discussion of the spelling variants of the centonist's name, cf. *ibid.*, 1.142-158. On Luxorius's identity and career, cf. *ibid.*, 1.83-91; cf. Rosenblum 1961, pp. 36-48.

24 The *cento* can be found, e.g., in the comparatively recent comprehensive ed. of Ausonius's works by Green, Roger P.H. (Ed./comm.): *The*

nities, which ancient grammarians termed *cacemphata*.⁵⁸ In effect, the somewhat elusive quality of Virgil's language is perhaps one of the reasons why his works were so frequently reused and ›abused‹ in antiquity.⁵⁹

After the examination of the most important concepts of the *cento* technique as they were programmatically formulated by one of its practitioners, it is essential to emphasize that the above-discussed intrinsic characteristics of the patchwork pieces, namely their derivativeness and their playful nature, were exactly what their critics could not bear. The Christian apologist of the second-century AD Tertullian in his work *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, for example, remarks upon the defamiliarizing methods of *cento* composition, which he disdains on account of its very – in his view, practically heretical – essence.⁶⁰ Further, two centuries later, Jerome, another Christian apologist, in one of his letters despises the piecemeal texts for similar reasons.⁶¹ It is evident that these two opinions on the *cento* poetics were necessarily theologically biased.⁶² Nevertheless, we can adduce a more recent example of a surprisingly severe *cento* criticism voiced from a purely literary theoretical perspective; D.R. Shackleton Bailey, the author of the 1982 edition of the *Anthologia Latina*, rejected the ancient Virgilian *centos* as literary eccentricities, and even refused to include any of the twelve patchwork texts contained in Alexander Riese's edition of the same anthology in his own volume.⁶³ To be sure, recent verdicts on the *cento* are typically much more lenient.

Having clarified in what ways the basic underlying principles of the *cento* poetics represent its most controversial aspects, let us focus on what the intricate *cento* form entails for its general readership. Essentially, in order to penetrate all the significance inherent in the *centos*, readers have to be continually aware of the semantic duality of these texts, which are made up of independent Homeric or Virgilian phrases uprooted from their original contexts and transposed to new and different ones.⁶⁴ This defamiliarizing technique⁶⁵ applied to the authoritative classics poses a big challenge for the recipients of the *cento* poetry, who have to pay close attention to the greater or lesser changes in the denotations of the individual formulations appropriated from the canonical writers. In reading a patchwork text, one is simply supposed to negotiate its meaning with constant reference to the source material. The readers of the Latin *centos* are therefore expected to approach these ›verse jigsaw puzzles‹ with profound knowledge of Virgil's poetry; otherwise, they cannot relish the unique interplay of meanings, which contributes to the richness and complexity of the narratives told.

A case in point is the *cento* tragedy *Medea* by Hosidius Geta; the author's selection of particular lines from *Aeneid 4* invites us to draw parallels and to recognize differences between the fortunes of the Colchian princess Medea and the destiny of her typological forerunner, the Carthaginian queen Dido. Moreover, as Scott McGill convincingly suggests, Geta's adaptation of Virgil also echoes both Seneca's tragedy *Medea* and the lost play *Medea* by Ovid.⁶⁶ Such involved interplay of allusions is really supreme and ensures that Geta's *cento* makes both extremely demanding and unexpectedly rewarding reading. To sum up, thoughtful reading of such a *cento* text requires the reader to recognize the means of its production as well as to actively participate in the centonists' skilful play with language. Seen through the lens of modern reception theories, the reader reproduces and completes each particular *cento* through interpretation and concretization.⁶⁷

From what has been observed on the mechanics of *cento* composition and the readers' reception of the patchwork poems, we can conclude that the semiotics of these literary works, as well as their semantics is determined by the allusiveness of their phrasing and the patchwork texts' interactions with the base text, which is what eventually yields meaning.⁶⁸ Viewed from the perspective of poststructuralist literary criticism, the *cento* is therefore certainly one of the most blatantly and most pervasively intertextual modes of writing. The term ›intertextuality‹ was coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960's and it generally refers to the complex interrelationships between literary texts that are essential for the recognition and interpretation of their signification.⁶⁹ We have to acknowledge that the ancient *centos* exemplify this underlying principle of all literature in general to the greatest degree possible.⁷⁰

In conclusion, I would like to consider the implications of the centonists' work with language material as such. In adopting the exact verses of the bards of the past and rearranging them so that they convey new and distinct meanings,⁷¹ the authors of the patchwork poems take advantage of the arbitrariness of language, or rather a distinct literary metalanguage,

Works of Ausonius. Ed. with Intr. and
Comm. Oxford: Clarendon 1991,
poem XVIII.

25 For an ed. of the *De Alea*, cf. Carbone, Gabriells (Ed./transl./comm.): *Il centone De alea*. Introduzione, testo, traduzione, note critiche, commento e Appendice. Loffredo: Naples 2002.

26 The thematic obscurity of the *De Alea* will be discussed in more detail.

27 This Christian *cento* is included in Riese, A.: *Anthologia Latina Sive Poesis Latinae Supplementum*. Pars Prior: *Carmina in Codicibus Scripta*. Fasc. II: *Reliquorum Librorum Carmina*. Leipzig: Teubner 1906, poem 719.

28 Cf. Riese 1894, poem 16.

29 On Mavortius's authorship of the *De Ecclesia*, cf. Vidal 1985, p. 210ff.; Salanitro 1997, p. 2354f.; McGill 2005, p. 169, note 63.

30 On Pomponius's authorship and the dating of the *cento*, cf., e.g., Salanitro 1997, p. 2351f.

31 On this *cento*, cf. esp. Herzog 1975, pp. 14-51; Clark, Elizabeth A./latch, Diane F. (Ed./transl.): *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*. Chico/CA: Scholars Pr. 1981b, including an English transl. of Proba's text. Inspiring articles examining different aspects of the discussed *cento* text include Opelt 1964, pp. 106-116; Clark, E.A./latch, D.F.: *Jesus as Hero in the Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*. In: *Vergilius*, 27 (1981a), pp. 31-39; Pavlovskis 1989, pp. 70-84; Green, Roger P.H.: *Proba's Introduction to Her Cento*. In: *CQ*, 24.2 (1997), pp. 548-559.

32 On the identification of the author of the discussed Christian *cento* and the poem's date, cf., e.g., Barnes, Timothy D.: *An Urban Prefect and His Wife*. In: *CQ*, 56 (2006), pp. 249-256.

33 Essentially, *cento* poems, as Wilken 1967, p. 28, remarks, »could be composed out of any well known author such as Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, or Ovid«. Clark/latch 1981a, p. 37, note 9, mention a Greek *cento* composition on the passion of Christ consisting of lines adopted from the plays of Euripides and ascribed to Gregory of Nazianzus; Verweyen/Ritting 1991, p. 168, refer to Lucian's *cento* nuptial ode composed out of the verses of Pindar, Hesiod, and

the significance of which is always dependent upon the surrounding context.⁷² In view of this fact, the *cento*, whose effect on the readers very much depends on their interpretive skills, can be understood as a sort of verse comment on the communicative function of language. Contextual factors that play a key role in the formal conception of the *cento* basically operate as the Saussurean differential elements constitutive of all discourse in general.⁷³ In brief, what Ferdinand de Saussure and other structuralist linguists discerned as the very nature of language the ancient centonists enthusiastically exploited much earlier.

Taking all this into account, I believe that the *cento*, rather than being an eccentric curiosity devoid of all literary value, is primarily a kind of intricate and actually perfectly legitimate play with language, which reflects its principles of operation.⁷⁴ Being in fact the embodiment of absolute intertextuality, the patchwork poems implicitly question every notion of literary originality because they emphasize the interdependence of individual texts representing different literary metalanguages. The *cento* is therefore »recycled« art only in a more conspicuous way than the rest of literature inevitably is; this, however, does not mean that a work of literature can actually never be original and inventive. In fact, as an example of intertextuality *par excellence*, the patchwork poetry is, at least conceptually, a highly innovative literary form.

Mag.a Marie Okáčová (geb. 1981), is assistant at the Department of Classical Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno and lecturer at the Language Centre, Faculty of Medicine Division, Masaryk University, Brno. She studied Latin and English, 2006 MA degree with the thesis: MA thesis: *Carmina Figurata at the End of Classical Antiquity: Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius – Innovative Conception of Figured Poetry*. Since 2006 PhD studies in Classical Philology.
Contact: 52294@mail.muni.cz

Anacreon. Cf. McGill 2005, p. xvi, and p. 155, note 13. McGill (ibid., p. xvi and p. 155, note 14) also speaks about Ovid's lost work from the verses of Macer and a poem in the *Codex Salmasianus* comprised of the lines of the *Ars Amatoria* (poem 263 in Bailey, David R. Shakleton [Ed.]: *Anthologia Latina I: Carmina in Codicibus Scripta*. Fasc. I: Libri Salmasiani Aliorumque Carmina. Stuttgart: Teubner 1982). For a general account of the non-Homeric and the non-Virgilian *centos*, cf. Salanitro 1997, p. 2332f. and p. 2356, resp.

34 Ibid., p. 2333f. and p. 2356f. Cf. notes 9 and 14 earlier.

35 Cf. e.g., Pavlovskis 1989, p. 77; Verwey/Eitting 1991, p. 167ff.; Gärtner, Hans Armin: Sub voce *Cento*. In: DNP 1997, vol. 2, p. 1063; and McGill 2001/02, p. 156, note 49.

36 The poetry of Ausonius, e.g., is a case in point. On Ausonius's rhetorical formalism, cf. Sánchez Salor, Eustaquio: Hin zu einer Poetik des Ausonius. In: Lossau, Manfred J. (Ed.): *Ausonius*. Darmstadt: WBG 1991, pp. 112-145.

37 Think, for instance, of the so-called *technopaegnia* or *carmina figurata*, a formally extremely elaborate type of verse, which is of comparatively little literary merit, though, and which flourished esp. among Alexandrian and late Roman authors. Helm, Wilbur N.: The *Carmen Figuratum* as Shown in the Works of Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius. In: TAPhA 33 (1902), p. xliii, introduces his article on the discussed poetry with the following generalized statement: »Although the period of decline in any great literature offers little of value from the standpoint of literary content and excellence, it is not always without some features which are interesting and often almost amusing from the standpoint of structure and form.« On the characteristic features of late ancient poetry, cf. also Alvar Ezquerro, Antonio: Realidad e ilusión en la poesía latina tardoantigua: notas a propósito de estética literaria. In: Emerita 60 (1992), pp. 1-20.

38 Cf., e.g., Lamarccchia 1958a, p. 211f.

39 On this question, cf. esp. Carbone 2002, p. 73ff.; McGill, 2005, p. 64ff., who both favour the former interpretation.

40 On the appraisal of the *cento* in the Romantic period, cf. Herzog 1975, p. 6, note 24. For a comment on the differing notions of originality, cf. also Lamarccchia 1958a, p. 195.

41 Ibid., pp. 193-216: Lamarccchia, e.g., sees a direct link between the technique of *cento* composition and what we may call scholastic classicism responsible for the mimetic character of ancient literature in general. The same point is mentioned by Salanitro 1981, p. 15f. McGill 2005, p. 23, however, points out that the *cento* cannot be seen as an instance of the regular *imitatio cum variatione* because its intertextual relationship to the model text is unprecedented; on Virgil as a source for imitative and emulative literary works, cf. ibid., p. xviiiif.

42 On the distinctions between the licentious *cento* and the grave Christian type, cf., e.g., Pavlovskis 1989, p. 82ff. On the essential differences between the Greek and the Latin Christian *centos*, cf. ibid., p. 72ff.

43 On the sexual imagery employed in Ausonius's *cento epithalamium*, cf. esp. Adams, James Noel: *Ausonius Cento Nuptialis* 101-131. In: SIFC, 53 (1981), pp. 199-215.

44 On the perception of the *De Panificio* and *De Alea* as the only really parodical *cento* pieces, cf. McGill 2005, p. 53ff.

45 In the ed. by Schenkl 1888, the original line reads as follows: *Uergilio cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi* (Proba. *Cento* 23). The above-cited English transl. is by Green 1997, p. 556. Cf. the transl. of the debated verse by Clark/latch 1981b, p. 17: »That Virgil put to verse Christ's sacred duties / Let me tell.« For an analysis of Proba's preface to her *cento*, cf. esp. Green 1997, pp. 548-559.

46 Henceforth abb. as CN, praef.

47 For a transl. and a close examination of Ausonius's introductory letter, cf. McGill 2005, p. 1ff.

48 The ludic character of the *cento* is dealt with in detail esp. in ibid., p. 5ff. Lamarccchia 1958a, p. 214, even remarks that the *cento* can be seen as one of the more ingenious forms of the playful *technopaegnia* (cf. note 37 earlier).

49 All quotations of Ausonius's text were taken from Green 1991.

50 For a discussion of the *captatio benevolentiae* adopted by Ausonius in his letter to Paulus, cf. McGill 2005, p. 7f. and p. 11.

51 The role of memory and ancient mnemonic techniques in composing patchwork poems is examined in ibid., p. 10ff. On the scholastic memory exercises by ancient authors, cf. also Lamarccchia 1958a, p. 193f.

52 In analysing these lines, McGill 2005, p. 19, focuses esp. on the figurative significance of the word *structura* and remarks that »centonists treat Virgil's language as though it had a material presence«.

53 Auson. CN, praef. 25-32: [...], *in unum versum ut coeant aut caesi duo aut unus <et unus> sequenti cum medio. nam duos iunctim locare inepitum est et tres una serie merae nugae. diffunduntur autem per caesuras omnes, quas recipit versus heroicus, convenire ut possit aut penthemimeres cum reliquo anapaestico aut trochaice cum posteriore segmento aut septem semipedes cum anapaestico chorico aut * * post dactylum atque semipedem quicquid restat hexametro, [...]*. For a comm. on this set of metrical rules of *cento* composition and their application in the *Medea* of Hosiudius Geta, cf. Lamarccchia 1958b, pp. 175-206.

54 Auson. CN, praef. 32-42: [...], *simile ut dicas ludicro, quod Graeci στομάχιον vocavere. ossicula ea sunt: ad summam quattuordecim figuras geometricas habent. sunt enim quadrilatera vel triquetra extensis lineis aut <eiusdem> frontis, <vel aequicurria vel aequilatera, vel rectis> angulis vel obliquis: isoscele ipsi vel isopleura vocant, orthogonia quoque et scalena. harum verticularum variis coagmentis simulantur species mille formarum: elephantus belua aut aper bestia, anser volans et mirmillo in armis, subsidens venator et latrans canis, quin et turris et cantharus et alia eiusmodi innumerabilium figurarum, quae alius alio scientius variegant. sed peritorum concinnatio miraculum est, imperitorum iunctura ridiculum.* The meaning of this rather extensive metaphorical passage is interpreted by McGill 2005, p. 8f. and p. 20f.

55 These lines are closely linked to the above-quoted figurative description of the *cento* text as a *structura*. McGill notices that Ausonius again characterizes the *cento* »in structural terms« in this passage (ibid., p. 20). Cf. note 52.

56 Henceforth abb. as CN, parechb.

57 Henceforth abb. as CN, epilog.

58 On the cacemphatic expressions embedded in Virgil's poetry, cf. McGill 2005, p. 109ff. Cf. Adams 1981, p. 201.

59 Pavlovskis 1989, p. 72, says that, in comparison with Homer, »Virgil is penumbral and indirect, more mysterious and therefore more suitable for imitation.[...]«

60 The following quotations from the writings of the Church Fathers were taken from the Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts [database online]. CLCLT-5. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002, available on http://litterae.phil.muni.cz. Tert. Praescr. 39: *Vides hodie ex virgilio fabulam in totum aliam componi, materia secundum uersus et uersibus secundum materiam concinnatis. Denique hosidius geta medeam tragoediam ex virgilio plenissime exsuxit. Meus quidam propinquus ex eodem poeta inter cetera stili sui otia pinacem cebetis explicuit. Homocentones etiam uocari solent qui de carminibus homeri propria opera more centonario ex multis hinc inde compositis in unum sarciant corpus. Et utique fecundior diuina litteratura ad f acultatem cuiusque materiae. Nec periclitur dicere, ipsas quoque scripturas sic esse ex dei uoluntate dispositas, ut haeticis materias subministrarent cum legam oportere haereses esse quae sine scripturis non possunt.*

61 Hier. Epist. 53, 7: *taceo de meis similibus, qui si forte ad scripturas sanctas post saeculares litteras uenerint et sermone composito aurem populi mulserint, quicquid dixerint, hoc legem dei putant nec scire dignantur, quid prophetae, quid apostoli senserint, sed ad sensum suum incongrua aptant testimonia, quasi grande sit et non uitiosissimum dicendi genus deprauare sententias et ad uoluntatem suam scripturam trahere repugnantem. quasi non legerimus homocentonas et uergiliocentonas ac non sic etiam maronem sine christo possimus dicere christianum, quia scripserit: iam redit et uirgo, redeunt saturnia regna, iam noua progenies caelo demittitur alto, et patrem loquentem ad filium: nate, meae uires, mea magna potentia solus, et post uerba saluatoris in cruce: talia perstabat memorans fixus quae manebat. puerilia sunt haec et circulatorum ludo similia, docere, quod ignores, immo, et cum clitomacho loquar, nec hoc quidem scire, quod nescias.*

62 McGill 2005, p. xvi, notes that both Tertullian's and Jerome's critical views on the *cento*, and Ausonius's contemptuous attitude towards his own patchwork text merely reflect the particular interests of these figures.

63 Bailey 1982, p. iii: *Ex carminibus quae Alexander Riese in primo Anthologiae Latinae suae fasciculo A.C. 1894 curis secundis edidit pauca variis de causis praetermissi. [...] Centones Vergiliani (Riese 7–18), opprobria litterarum, neque ope critica multum indigent neque is sum qui vati reverendo denuo haec edendo contumeliam imponere sustineam.*

64 Lamarccchia 1958a, p. 209, describes this feature of *cento* composition as semantic acrobatics. In her study of the semantic adaptations of Virgil's lines in the *cento* tragedy by Hosidius Geta, Lamarccchia 1958b, p. 161, underlines the fact that semantic changes form the very basis of the *cento* technique. Some of the most marked shifts in the meaning of the Virgilian verse units in the individual non-Christian *centos* are discussed in relevant chapters in McGill 2005.

65 Verweyen/Eitting 1991, p. 169, even use the expression »frivolous defamiliarization« in connection with the *cento* form; and Usher 1998, p. 12f., describes the same aspect of the *cento* poetics with the Brechtian term *Verfremdung*.

66 McGill 2001/02, p. 149ff.; and McGill 2005, p. 40ff.

67 Cf. Eagleton, T.: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory. In: *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis/MN: Minnesota UP 1983, p. 74ff. For a general discourse on the aesthetics of reception, cf., e.g., Fokkema, Douwe Wesse/Sunne-Ibsch, Elrud: *The Reception of Literature: Theory and Practice of Rezeptionsästhetik*. In: Fokkema, D.W./Sunne-Ibsch, E.: *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century: Structuralism, Marxism, Aesthetics of Reception, Semiotics*. London: Hurst; New York: St. Martin's Pr. 1977, pp. 136-164.

68 Essentially, allusive references to the Homeric or Virgilian works are omnipresent in every single *cento* by virtue of its secondary nature. Cf., e.g., McGill 2005, p. 23ff. On the *cento* in relation to the imitativeness and allusiveness of ancient poetry as such, cf. Lamarccchia 1958a, pp. 193-216. Cf. also Daube, David: *The Influence of Interpretation on Writing*. In: Cohen, David/Vimon,

Dieter (Ed.): *Collected Studies in Roman Law*. Vol. 2. Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann, 1991, p. 1257, who does not mention allusion as the main driving force of the *cento* technique; instead, Daube says that »the *cento* originated in a mode of interpretation: anastrophe, interpretation by transposition«.

69 On the postmodernist concept of intertextuality, cf., e.g., Kristeva, Julia: *Linguistics, Semiotics, Textuality*. In: Moi, Toril (Ed.): *The Kristeva Reader*. New York: Columbia UP 1986, esp. p. 37 and p. 111. An account of various forms of intertextuality is provided by Plett, H.F.: *Intertextualities*. In: Plett 1991, pp. 3-29.

70 Gärtner/Riebermann 1997, p. 1061, observe that the *cento* »stellt einen Extremfall von Intertextualität dar«. Cf. McGill 2005, p. 23, who says: »*Centos* intertextuality is also unique in how total it is [...] and how closely it is linked to a single source. No other literary form engages the work of a particular poet as openly, pervasively, and exclusively as the *centos* do.« The ways in which the *cento* can be seen as the embodiment of intertextuality are also discussed by Verweyen/Eitting 1991, pp. 165-178.

71 Usher 1998, p. 10f., examines this feature of the *cento* poetics from the standpoint of modern linguistics and suggests that the relation between a patchwork poem and its source text can be seen as that of parole to langue, which is, in my view, an absolutely legitimate proposition.

72 In other words, as Pavlovskis 1989, p. 75, believes, »[i]nherent in any *cento* is a belief in the significance of language and the assumption that a metalanguage can be built upon another metalanguage«. The *cento* poetics therefore implicitly comments on »the subservience and simultaneously the dominance of language versus meaning«.

73 On the structuralist differential view of the sign and relational conception of language, cf., e.g., Hawkes, Terence: *Linguistics and Anthropology*. In: Hawkes, Terence: *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen 1977, pp. 19-32.

74 In short, I entirely agree with Pavlovskis 1989, p. 75, that »in a sense language is what a *cento* is about«.