

The figure of Mary Mother of God in *Christus Patiens*:  
fragmenting tragic myth and passion narrative in a Byzantine  
appropriation of Euripidean tragedy<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract:

The Byzantine passion play *Christus Patiens* (*Christ Suffering*) is a cento: composed of quotations and borrowings from other sources, it takes Euripides' tragedies as its main source for reworking the passion narrative. The genre, popular with Christian authors who usually transformed classical epics, enacts cultural exchange between canonical pagan literature and biblical narrative. Traditionally transmitted as the work of Gregory of Nazianzus, this drama showcases the tensions inherent in this re-use of Greek tragedy which threatens to collapse the original texts under the weight of their new meaning – or vice-versa.

While the afterlives of classical texts, especially Greek tragedy, have been increasingly well explored, the scant attention afforded *CP* has largely consisted of debating the disputed date and authorship. At the same time, scrutiny lavished on Virgilian centonic technique provides a helpful spring-board.

This article focuses on the four tragedies most plundered in *CP*: *Rhesus*, *Medea*, *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*. It concentrates on interpreting the protagonist, Mary the Mother of God, through key passages which borrow most heavily from these plays. These stretch centonic conventions by almost exclusively reworking contiguous lines featuring the tragic mothers Medea, Agave and Musa; yet Mary is otherwise created from multiple conflicting voices. Analysis of these passages as frames for the cento-author's own compositions and in the context of the prologue's invitation to identify specific Euripidean re-workings suggests that the author playfully flirts with creating a narrative of fragmentation through clashes between centonic form, tragic sources and Christian subject.

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## Introduction

The Byzantine cento *Christus Patiens*—also known as *Christos Paschon* (*Suffering Christ*)—at first glance appears to present a straightforward Christian appropriation of Greek tragedy. A passion play formed of a myriad recycled lines and half-lines from both Classical and Christian texts, it initially gives the somewhat predictable impression of subjugating its pagan sources to the Orthodox salvation narrative of crucifixion and resurrection that its protagonist, Mary Mother of God, proclaims throughout. Closer reading, however, does not substantiate this composite text as a clear-cut instance of doctrinal repurposing: rather, for those familiar with Greek tragedy—as its target audience undoubtedly would have been—its unusual combination of excessively motley building-blocks complicates interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The resulting conspicuous tragic resonances which radiate from this Mary problematize her doctrinal interpretation, rendering the text's overall effect highly unstable and raising wider questions about the wider reworking of Classical culture. My argument builds on scholarship which has celebrated the intertextual, allusive possibilities inherent in centos as 'open texts'; moving beyond attempts to pin down precise context, it focuses on the 'hermeneutic puzzle' presented by its repackaging of tragic voices.<sup>3</sup> This article will contend that lines, passages and characters chosen for reworking are not selected at random, cannot combine cleanly, and import all their problematic connotations; analysis of passages which stretch centonic conventions to the breaking point afford crucial insights into the characterization of Mary through her pagan analogues and so also into this cento's overt project of redefining tragic mythologies in the service of Christian doctrine.

This study can therefore be read as a response both to repeated passionate calls for the cento to be treated as 'more than a haphazard quarry of recycled lines' that have been discussed as 'isolated case[s]' as well as a reply to the need perceived by Byzantine scholars for 'thorough analysis' of the source-texts and character of Mary.<sup>4</sup> It is astonishing that these protests of neglect still largely stand: *Christus Patiens* (hereafter *CP*) was omitted from a recent list of Greek centos and is most frequently cited in reconstructing the ending of Euripides'

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<sup>2</sup> We do not know whether the cento was performed: it seems most likely that it would have been read, but a listener is also implied in the prologue (ἀκούσας, κλύειν, ἄκουε: *CP* 1–3) and perhaps epilogue (λέξω, *CP* 2610) maybe to preserve a dramatic illusion. Scholarly consensus rejects performance: see Puchner (2002); Alexopoulou (2013) 126.

<sup>3</sup> Peltari (2014) 138. Cf. Malamud (2012) 163 on Geta's *Medea* as sophisticated allusion.

<sup>4</sup> Most (2008) 229; 230; de Aldama (1972) 417; Mullet (2011) 279, 287. Centanni (2007) does introduce Mary's characterization and contextualizes it in theological disputes; Lacore (2002) 105–06 discusses Jason and Musa.

*Bacchae*, to which it has contributed as many as 42 lines.<sup>5</sup> Despite the attention paid in recent years to the appropriation of Classical culture and, in particular, to the reception of Greek tragedy, *CP* remains largely unfamiliar and unexplored. This is all the more surprising given the upsurge in studies of intertextuality alongside the energy recently lavished on epic centos and the Christian poet Nonnus' protean *Dionysiaca*, which has many similarities with *CP*.<sup>6</sup> There has been valuable progress in considering *CP*'s theological and dramatic context as well as paralleled or substituted characterization: in particular, Pollmann's pioneering analysis of *CP*'s character substitutions, which focuses on Christ and Dionysus, concludes that there is no single fixed scheme, and paves my way here for more detailed exploration of Mary.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, studies of correspondences in Proba's cento and of syncretism in Nonnus emphasize the potential for further studies.<sup>8</sup> The most recent analyses of *CP*'s classical sources raise interesting questions of characterization but focus on *CP*'s reception of *Bacchae*.<sup>9</sup> While it is true that Christ's sufferings could be seen to correlate to those of Dionysus, another dying-rising god and ritual sponsor of ancient Greek theatre, continuing to privilege *Bacchae* over other hypotexts misses the point.<sup>10</sup> Rather than fixating on contested authorship and dating, focusing on a single instance of reworking, or concentrating on just one source, I examine this complex and often apparently chaotic collaging: on some level, all a cento's source-texts must be read equally.

Astoundingly, the only English translator, Fishbone—whose version I will quote throughout—states outright in the preface to his invaluable translation that *CP* is 'less important as a literary work in its own right than as a paradigmatic text for early modern biblical tragedy and as a context ... for *Samson Agonistes*'.<sup>11</sup> The cento's significance for Milton surely underscores the value of understanding its relationship with its own sources. Yet the vital question of what is at stake in the cento's borrowing and recontextualizing of Greek tragedy has been largely overlooked; the few lines so far considered show the potential for comprehensive

<sup>5</sup> Alexopoulou (2013) is the only new literary analysis since Most (2008): it examines small sections from different sources before focusing on *Bacchae*. Vakonakis (2011) focuses largely on the authorship, dating and textual criticism. Centos are listed in Rondholz (2012) 5–10. For focus on *Bacchae*, see e.g. Garland (2004) 85; Grafton, Most, Settis (2010): 'the suffering of Dionysus is replaced by the suffering of Christ'. See Friesen (2015) 252 n. 8 for discussion of various reconstructions, pioneered by Kirchoff (1853).

<sup>6</sup> Recent studies of Latin centos: Cullhed (2015); Pelttari (2014); Rondholz (2012); Bažil (2009); McGill (2005). Discussions of centos and intertextuality either bypass or mention *CP* only briefly. *CP* has suffered from the same binary view of Christian/pagan identified by Shorrock ((2013) 6) by which pagan centos are seen as frivolous, Christian ones as serious, and *CP* as a bad example of the latter: *CP* and *Dionysiaca* also share the problem of a Christian writer producing pagan work (Chuvin (2014) 4–5).

<sup>7</sup> Pollmann (1997) 101, 105. For an English translation of this ground-breaking research, see Pollmann (2017) 152, 157. For dramatic context, see especially Puchner (1992); (2002); Sticca (1974).

<sup>8</sup> Pollmann (2004). For syncretism in *Dionysiaca*, see de la Fuente (2014); Cavero (2009) 569 suggests that Nonnus avoids presenting Dionysus as Christ's equivalent.

<sup>9</sup> Alexopoulou (2013) 128; Friesen (2015) 250–60.

<sup>10</sup> Alexopoulou (2013) 136: 'Euripides' *Bacchae* was the main model' for *CP*. Garland (2004) 84 claims that the 'most significant borrowings occur in the central scene ... closely modelled on the scene in *Bacchae* ... (1280ff.)'. This scene as such does not exist in *CP*: *Bacchae* borrowings are split among characters with most reserved for the narrator.

<sup>11</sup> Fishbone (2002) 129.

analysis. Such scrutiny, predicated on the assumption that ‘every choice presupposes thought [and] judgment’, has been fruitful with regard to epic centos:<sup>12</sup> Proba's Christian cento, which reveals an elite Roman matron's engagement with Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Hosidius Geta's Virgilian *Medea* have ‘stimulated some energetic academic comment in recent years’:<sup>13</sup> scholars have engaged in comparative readings, identified sophisticated typologies and theorized the relationships between hypo- and hyper-texts, despite lacking absolutely precise biographical information.<sup>14</sup>

This is the spirit in which this article approaches *CP*: not just as a source for textual criticism of its original sources or for later reception but, rather, as a fascinating example of innovative intertextuality in its own right. To open up the text in this way, we must move past the indeterminate context. I will argue that *CP* is an invaluable illustration of the complex mechanics and acute significance of systematically reworking Greek tragedy for a new context. At around two-thirds longer than a Euripidean drama, roughly three times longer than Proba's cento, and composed of iambic trimeters rather than the usual epic hexameters, this is an idiosyncratic cento:<sup>15</sup> the poet not only alternates biblical and tragic material, but also draws on multiple authors and works, apocryphal and canonical alike.<sup>16</sup> As if such generic capaciousness were not enough, this unconventional cento daringly reworks entire contiguous passages. Despite lifting whole sections, however, it also happily adapts words and phrases as needed.<sup>17</sup> In short, *CP* refuses to play by the ludic conventions of the cento-game as set out by the fourth-century Roman poet Ausonius, who likened the transformative mechanisms—often described as ‘patchwork’ or ‘mosaic’—to a geometric puzzle.<sup>18</sup>

Its modifications foreground the fragmentation, plasticity or stubbornness of Greek tragedy as well as the theological issues of the potential dangers inherent in the notion of a Christian tragedy.<sup>19</sup> Whereas Proba drew on Virgil's epic and pastoral verses to create a Christian epic, *CP*'s amalgamation of non-dramatic with tragic hypotexts raises generic questions more similar to those suggested by Hosidius Geta's *Medea*, which recreated from Virgil's hexameters a tragedy

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<sup>12</sup> Kyriakidis (1992) 121, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Curran (2012) 325; cf. 331. On Geta's *Medea* see e.g. Malamud (2012), Rondholz (2012), Hardie (2007), McGill (2002), Dane (1950).

<sup>14</sup> Pollmann (2001) and (2004); Curran (2012) esp. 334. Discussion in recent studies (n.6) and McGill (2002); Stehliková (1987); Schnapp (1992).

<sup>15</sup> Apart from the anapaests at 1461–63 (Pollman (1997) 91, 98), *pace* Rondholz (2012) 25: ‘Homer and Virgil apparently came to be the only primary texts for cento poetry in antiquity’. In comparison, only four of 16 Virgilian centos are religious and contain Christian material (McGill (2005) 1–2).

<sup>16</sup> For details of Classical sources, see Alexopoulou (2013) 126 n.13. Brambs (1885) and Tuilier (1969) indicate all source-texts. In contrast, Hosidius Geta's *Medea* has only two half-lines not directly reworked from Virgil's three major works (Dane (1950) 75).

<sup>17</sup> Contrast Hinds (2014) 173: ‘every single phrase is taken verbatim from the same canonical model’; Pelttari (2014) 96: ‘a cento retains the exact words of a predecessor’.

<sup>18</sup> Pelttari (2014) 64 discusses Ausonius in detail.

<sup>19</sup> See Waller and Taylor (2013) on collapsing caricatures of Christianity and tragedy.

previously dramatized by Euripides and Seneca in iambic trimeters. *CP* therefore forces its reader to consider not only how a cento can function when composed from a babel of competing voices, but how the specifically tragic, rather than epic, borrowings operate within an overtly Christian narrative of salvation. Newly constructed from disparate materials, the cento celebrates its own dissident possibilities and predisposes the reader to spot—and compare with source-texts—elements that do not dovetail neatly.

Analysis of specific passages from throughout the drama will demonstrate that a significant proportion of its borrowings are neither indiscriminate nor arbitrary. While there must always be some serendipity as well as ‘powerful recall’ at work in the creation of a cento, the presence of clumps of lines from the same source-text signals that a more systematic process is at work.<sup>20</sup> Alarm-bells must ring even more loudly when those unusual clumps reproduce entire contiguous passages; the stakes are correspondingly higher when those lines represent a single character's speech in both source and cento.

Here I focus on the character who speaks most often, whose speeches depend on several such clumps and for whose interpretation this methodical overlapping becomes particularly resonant: Mary the Mother of God. There are three possible reasons for selecting Mary as protagonist. One is that a Euripidean cento offers plenty of scope for tragic heroines;<sup>21</sup> this renders all the more surprising the fact that a cento which takes such a catholic approach to source selection should limit its major borrowings to just four of Euripides' plays—*Bacchae*, *Medea*, *Rhesus* and *Hippolytus*—and again suggests a methodical approach to mapping and overlapping characters.<sup>22</sup> Theologically, while precise contextual interpretation is rendered difficult by uncertainties over dating, the focus on Mary engages with Marian fervour and backlash against heresies. Most importantly, her human, maternal experience, essential to the idea of an Orthodox Christian tragedy which emphasizes Christ's simultaneous divinity and humanity, gives us an insight into the cento's overall project: we shall see that Mary both does and does not map on to the most important Euripidean tragic mothers chosen: Medea, Musa and Agave.<sup>23</sup> The resulting fragmentation of these

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<sup>20</sup> Curran (2012) 333.

<sup>21</sup> Walton (2014) 60 discusses the preponderance of female roles.

<sup>22</sup> A rough count of line numbers from Tuilier's indices (not including multiple uses) reveals 1343 borrowings from these four tragedies: the body of *CP* numbers 2604 lines, with 30 lines of prologue and 6 lines of epilogue. *Medea* contributes 424 instances, *Bacchae* 372, *Rhesus* 289 and *Hippolytus* 258. In contrast, Tuilier lists 17 line numbers which draw from five books of the Old Testament; 8 lines from the New Testament excluding Gospels; 325 from the Gospels (of which 108 are drawn from Matthew). Additional tragedies used are, in increasing order of number of lines re-used: Euripides' *Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Helen*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Iphigeneia at Tauris* (1 line each); Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (2); ps-Aeschylus' *Prometheus* and Lycophron's *Alexandra* (8 lines each); Euripides' *Hecuba* (19); Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (22), Euripides' *Orestes* (59) and Euripides' *Troades* (93); Tuilier also records a single borrowing from the *Iliad*. Euripides' *Rhesus* is now generally considered pseudo-Euripidean, but authenticity is not important here (although the cento-author probably considered it Euripidean): the point is that it was sufficiently well known to be recognized.

<sup>23</sup> The complex influence of *Hippolytus*—beyond the scope of this article but offering opportunities for future research—in some ways parallels the Dionysiac influences regarding worship and *sparagmos*: the divine plot is

individual voices is an essential part of the game of recognition at play in the cento.

Mary's central role, in calling attention to issues of genre as well as juxtaposed allusions, lays bare the teasing layers of such a recognition game.<sup>24</sup> My analysis will draw on existing approaches to better-known centos to investigate how *CP* plays with both consonances and dissonances to orchestrate the clash between plot and structure highlighted through Mary's inevitable failure to appropriate tragic models.<sup>25</sup> Unpacking *CP* through focusing on its protagonist and sources opens a new window onto its reception of Greek tragedy and contribution to Mariology, Christian appropriation of pagan and Classical culture, and the playful, problematic possibilities inherent in consciously intertextual allusions.<sup>26</sup> This text appears eccentric because it is unique: the sole surviving cento from Classical source-texts not in hexameter verses, and often considered 'the only extant [Byzantine] attempt to put together in dramatic form the passion, death and resurrection of Christ'.<sup>27</sup> If we can move beyond its perceived oddities and give it the holistic analytical attention it deserves, then we get a whole new insight into the post-classical reception of tragedy.

The body of the article will analyse the highly unexpected contiguous clusters of tragic lines transferred (almost) entirely intact to *CP* from the four main Euripidean sources. Since these passages frame original didactic verses, constitute the major loans from each source, consist of originally contiguous lines, and even map single speakers, they strikingly suggest possible consonances or dissonances between Mary and the tragic mothers (Medea, Musa and Agave, complicated by echoes of Aphrodite, Phaedra and Dionysus). In the context of *CP*'s programmatic prologue and epilogue, which announce the game of finding tragic resonances, these shifting possibilities open up divergent, even potentially subversive, readings. Before turning to the passages themselves, however, it is necessary first to outline the cento's plot and establish its innovations, both within the centonic genre and in its creation of Mary as protagonist.

### Innovations in centonic technique and biblical/ tragic protagonist

Described as 'the most famous closet-drama written in Byzantium', *CP* is variously outlined as a 'tragedy on Christ's passion in the style of Euripides', a dramatic trilogy comprising the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, and a

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vengeful and destructive; the only mother in the play is Phaedra, who worries about her children's futures but kills herself rather than them.

<sup>24</sup> See further Pelttari (2014) 142.

<sup>25</sup> Consonance and dissonance are terms borrowed from Schnapp's (1992) discussion of 'steady oscillation' in Proba's cento between allegorising and ironizing tendencies.

<sup>26</sup> C.f. Shorrock (2013) 118 describes Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* as playful engagement with canonical texts.

<sup>27</sup> Sticca (1974) 13, 26. Similarities may be found in the Cyprus Passion cycle (Puchner (2006); see also Puchner (2002) 319 and the illustrated twelfth-century homilies of Monk Jacob/James Kokkinobaphos (ed. Jeffreys (2009)) based on the Protevangelium of James, which present 'sequential episodes in the life of the Virgin' (Hennessy (2013) 29); however, neither of these is a cento.

‘cento poem in dialogue form’.<sup>28</sup> The prologue Mary delivers *en route* to the crucifixion sets it up as a dramatic variation on the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the Virgin's lament.<sup>29</sup> Other characters include Christ, a messenger who is one of the disciples (τῶν Παιδὸς τινὰ ... ὁπαδῶν: one of your child's companions, *CP* 124), Joseph of Arimathea (who provided his own tomb for Christ's body),<sup>30</sup> Nicodemus (a sympathetic Pharisee who aided in Christ's burial),<sup>31</sup> a Theologian, a Youth, an Angel and Mary Magdalene. There is also a very Euripidean chorus of Galilean women. Embedded within the Messenger speech (*CP* 2270–2377) Pilate, the High Priests and Guards of the tomb feature in a scene which is almost a *teichoskopia* (viewing from the walls: *Iliad* 3.121–244): these dramatic structures come straight from Classical drama and epic, although extant Greek tragedies never include characters speaking within a messenger speech.<sup>32</sup> The cento ends with an anonymous speaker, perhaps the poet himself, addressing Christ and Mary as guarantors of his and, by extension, the reader's, redemption.

The drama was transmitted in the corpus of ‘the greatest Christian poet of late antiquity’, Gregory of Nazianzus: this attribution—and therefore the dating and even integrity of the text—has been contested since the first edition was published in the sixteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Even after this ‘exceptionally long and heated’ debate,<sup>34</sup> dating still varies across the 800-odd years between the fourth and fifth to eleventh or twelfth centuries AD.<sup>35</sup> It is understandable but unfortunate that this ‘vexed issue’ has hogged almost all the scant scholarly attention afforded this drama.<sup>36</sup> These considerations obviously affect interpretation, especially with regard to the early Church's attitude towards pagan

<sup>28</sup> White (2010) 384; di Berardino (1992) 158 s.v. ‘cento’, 165–66 s.v. ‘*Christus Patiens*’; Evans (1988) 151; Puchner (2002) 317.

<sup>29</sup> Ševčenko (2011) 247–62, esp. 248: ‘writers from the later sixth century onward began to put words into her mouth’; Sticca (1974) 14–15 compares the relationship between drama and ritual in Classical Greek drama.

<sup>30</sup> John 19.38–39; Mark 15.46; cf. Matthew 27.57 and Luke 23.50–56.

<sup>31</sup> John 19:39–42; see also 3.1–21; 7.50–51.

<sup>32</sup> See Puchner (2002) 318 for the centonist's confusion of messenger speech with *teichoskopia*.

<sup>33</sup> Most (2008) 238; Sticca (1974) 26.

<sup>34</sup> Puchner (2002) 317.

<sup>35</sup> The *communis opinio* falls into two camps: Tuilier (1969), Evans (1988), Swart (1990), Trisoglio (1996) and (2002), Garyza (1997) and Salanitro (2003) favour a pre-sixth-century dating; Brambs (1885), de Aldama (1972), di Berardino (1992) di Berardino (1992) 165–66 s.v. ‘*Christus Patiens*’, Pollmann (1997) and Puchner (2002) the later, eleventh/twelfth-century dating. Puchner supports his mid-Byzantine theory with an iconographic argument (see also Puchner (1992) 127–34) and de Aldama with doctrinal and lexical comparison; Garyza supports a fourth/fifth-century dating with palaeographic evidence while admitting that *CP* is mid-Byzantine in type. Tuilier's linguistic and historical analysis of the textual and manuscript traditions points towards Gregory Nazianzus as fourth-century author and Trisoglio's detailed linguistic comparison with Gregory's *oeuvre* also favours this authorship, as does Sticca's theological discussion (1974). The inclusion of apocryphal material (such as Acts of Pilate) on an equal footing with canonical Biblical texts could support an earlier date. Hunger (1968) dates the text to the twelfth century; see also the pioneering lexical work of Hörandner (1988). Pollmann points out that ‘Mother of God’ was a title used in the fourth century, but contested in the fifth, and that Gregory is not attested until thirteenth- to sixteenth-century manuscripts: see further Most (2008). Trisoglio (1996) is perhaps the most detailed study, comparing *CP* with works of Gregory of Nazianzus and four possible alternative authors: Gregory of Antioch, Theodore Prodromos, John Tzetzes and Constantine Manasses. See also e.g. Garyza (1997), Swart (1990) and (1992) and Wittreich (2002).

<sup>36</sup> Most (2008) 240 passionately vents his frustration over this fixation.

theatre: pinpointing *CP*'s date would help enormously in understanding its tragic borrowings and theological nuances. However, to resolve the question is beyond the scope of this article. Our inability to know does not hinder this project of intertextual analysis: for these purposes, it is enough that 'the adaptation is the work of a thinker ... and an artist', 'a theologian and an apostle'.<sup>37</sup>

More than other centos, *CP* forces readers into a continual balancing act: they must juggle understanding the new surface meaning with interpreting redeployed individual words and phrases (microtextual allusion) as well as reworked themes and characters (macrotextual allusion), here from multiple sources.<sup>38</sup> There is constant tension between the practical mechanics of the cento-game and the integrity of the resulting text for a 'strong and active' reader or 'democracy of readers'.<sup>39</sup> Such interpretations are, like the cento itself, predicated on the 'reader's familiarity with its source-text'.<sup>40</sup> Given *CP*'s likely target audience and that Euripides was one of the most-read Classical authors in Byzantium, this is a reasonable assumption; I therefore follow recent Latin scholarship in considering the intrinsic openness of centos, which enables such a 'multiplicity of readings', as the locus of their interest.<sup>41</sup> This profusion of interpretative possibilities complicates any easy dichotomy between pagan and Classical elements, whether seen as reciprocal, blended or clashing.<sup>42</sup>

Since 'a cento's primary text always was on the educated reader's mind',<sup>43</sup> the contiguous clumps of Euripidean text must have leapt off the page; especially since it is reasonable to assume that readers would have been expecting the sort of cento described by Ausonius in which two contiguous lines were considered 'weak' while even 'three in succession is mere trifling'.<sup>44</sup> These clumps could render *CP* as more of an example of juxtaposed allusion than a cento; more importantly, such 'clustered citations' have been seen to 'establish a multi-layered convergence' between source and cento, especially when these 'leading

<sup>37</sup> Tuilier, quoted di Berardino (1992) 165 s.v. '*Christus Patiens*'; Trisoglio (1996) 245.

<sup>38</sup> On interpreting prototext and metatext see Stehliková (1987) 12; for 'strong reading' see Pelttari (2014) 103; Cullhed (2015) 13–14 discusses previous suggestions for interpreting allusion in centonic poetry. Rondholz (2012) 152 points out that the subtext of the source-text was needed to grasp a cento's 'take' on its sources but that this (p. 38) does not render the cento inferior.

<sup>39</sup> Pelttari (2014) 103; Hardie (2007) 176. McGill (2005) 25–29 distinguishes between 'allusive weight' and 'semantic aptness' but claims 'there is no such thing as an allusively inert verse unit in any cento' given that there is no way for the reader to determine authorial intention.

<sup>40</sup> Pelttari (2014) 98; Kyriakidis (1992) 122 sees knowledge of the cento's religious sources and literary mode as a 'precondition' for understanding Proba's cento. Rondholz (2012) 22–24 discusses Christian criticism as proof that 'cento and primary text were inseparable to the educated audience'. Pelttari (2014) 98; Kyriakidis (1992) 122 sees knowledge of the cento's religious sources and literary mode as a 'precondition' for understanding Proba's cento. Rondholz (2012) 22–24 discusses Christian criticism as proof that 'cento and primary text were inseparable to the educated audience'.

<sup>41</sup> Pelttari (2014) 103; openness as 'a constitutive part of its literariness': Cullhed (2015) 15; Hinds (2014) 173 sympathetically characterizes the 'dearth as excess' challenge as 'interpretative overstimulation'.

<sup>42</sup> On the reciprocity of Classical and Christian culture, see Shorrock (2013) 118: 'In the poetry of Nonnus there is no Mary without Athene, no Athene without Mary'.

<sup>43</sup> Rondholz (2012) 14.

<sup>44</sup> Ausonius, *Letter to Axius Paulus*, 22–23: McGill (2005) 3; Pelttari (2014) 64.

reminiscences' create a specific character or episode.<sup>45</sup> Clearly they are an obvious way in to exploring typological correspondence; they exhibit much of the 'protean nature' that path-breaking studies of Proba's characterization have emphasized.<sup>46</sup> However, Kyriakidis contends that Proba makes no effort to correlate one character directly with another; to achieve this, loans would have had to be drawn from continuous verses or the same thematic area, which centonic convention would not have permitted.<sup>47</sup> These clumps—exactly what we do find in *CP*—raise questions over the problems of imposing unforeseen, or extruding latent, allegories: their potential consonances and dissonances between characters force readers to ponder just how successfully a whole new vintage could be created by decanting old and new wine together; a new fabric from motley patches.<sup>48</sup>

The cento's focus on Mary's tragic potential might have been just as surprising for the reader as these unusual mechanisms. Even as *CP* experiments with its re-use of Classical texts, it diverges from its Christian sources; Mary's dual aspects as 'Mother of God' and 'Second Eve', however, fit comfortably within Orthodox cult and iconography.<sup>49</sup> The contradictory emotional and theological implications of her title, *theotokos*, are fully explored: she is chief mourner but also expounder of doctrine; a heroine who is greater than the sum of Euripides' tragedies since, in awaiting Christ's resurrection and subsequent salvation of mankind, she must surely transcend her present grief. This tension, between grieving mother and faithful believer, is utterly neglected in the gospels and only conveyed through the help of the tragic verses: although entirely created from biblical and tragic material, Mary does not fully mirror either model.

Mary's astonishing marginality in the gospels is perhaps due to the early Christian emphasis on monotheism, which diverted attention away from potentially awkward syncretism with Olympian polytheism, mother goddesses and parthenogenesis.<sup>50</sup> To understand just how much *CP*'s Mary differs from her biblical characterization, it is essential to realize how small a part she plays. John's gospel—the latest of the four canonical gospels—is the only one to include Mary's vigil at the cross (John 19:25–27; alluded to at *CP* 729).<sup>51</sup> The earliest gospel, Mark's, focuses on Jesus' adult life and only mentions Mary once when

<sup>45</sup> Schnapp (1992) 114; Herzog (1975) 12, 21–26.

<sup>46</sup> Cullhed (2015) 158. See Pollmann (2001) for typology; Kyriakidis (2002) discusses the construction of Mary and Eve although, as Cullhed ((2015) 187) observes, fewer than fifteen of Proba's verses refer directly to Mary.

<sup>47</sup> Kyriakidis (1992) 147.

<sup>48</sup> In addition to the sewing metaphor, Cullhed (2015) 75 discusses bridging the gap; Herzog (1975) 21–26 ('polyphonic and potentially chaotic'); Pelttari (2014) 112 (text remains 'fragmented').

<sup>49</sup> Pentcheva (2006). Another Byzantinist (Mullet (2011) 279), points out the similarity between Mary's centrality in *CP* and architecturally e.g. mosaic in the main apse of Torcello Cathedral. See Warner (1976) for discussion of 'types' of Mary, esp. 51–69 for Second Eve.

<sup>50</sup> See further Graef (2009) 25–26. Mary's importance was largely confined to Christ's infancy: Pentcheva (2006) 11. See Warner (1976) 3–25 for an overview of Mary in the New Testament.

<sup>51</sup> See Warner (1976) 211. Aside from this, Mary is only central to the first miracle at Cana (John 2:3–5; mischievously referenced at *CP* 456–57).

Jesus rebuffs his ‘mother and brothers’ (Mark 3:31–35). Matthew includes the same scene, her only appearance in his gospel after the Nativity. Both Mark and Matthew’s Maries are silent. Luke’s speaks four times, yet the only time she addresses her son is when she finds him with the rabbis (Luke 2:48); while Mary’s experiences dominate this pregnancy and infancy narrative—itself an extraordinary addition to Mark’s preceding version—*CP* chooses not to rework much from Luke’s gospel. In addition, no gospel ever claims that the risen Jesus appeared to his mother, despite descriptions of encounters with Mary Magdalene (who sees him first at Matthew 28:9, Mark 16:9, John 20:10–17), the ‘other Mary’ (Salome: Matthew 28:1) and the disciples. Highlighting Mary is unusual even among apocryphal texts: the second-century *Protevangelium of James* is ‘unique’ in taking ‘Mary as its central character’ and stressing her Virginity; but it seems not to have been used until Romanos the Melodist’s eighth-century hymns, while George of Nikomedeia’s ninth-century homilies first ‘write Mary into the story at key points’.<sup>52</sup>

Mary’s expanded part in *CP* therefore gives voice to a largely silent figure: arguably what (Greek) tragedy itself is all about, especially where female characters are concerned. Her role must be seen as part of this dual inheritance since her grief, ‘entirely foreign’ to the gospels, is crucial to the cento’s dynamics.<sup>53</sup> It is she who initiates a movement towards the tomb (βῶμεν πρὸς ὄρθρον τύμβον ἐς ζωηφόρον: we will [let us] go directly to the life-giving tomb, *CP* 1914) and asks for a volunteer (Τίς δῆτα φίλων ... τολμᾷ κατόπτις ἔννυχος τύμβῳ μολεῖν: who then among you ... will dare to go by night to the tomb to spy? *CP* 1933–34). It is Mary Magdalene who goes first (Ἐγὼ πρὸς ὑμῶν τόνδε κίνδυνον θέλω / ρίψασα: I wish to cast myself into this danger for you, *CP* 1941) as in the gospels, but in contrast to their accounts, here Mary decides to accompany her (Ἐφέσομαι καὶ γὰρ δὲ σὺν σοὶ: And I will follow with you, *CP* 1989). Moreover, after the Angel tells the women of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene predicts that the risen Christ will appear first to Mary (Ὅψει γε θᾶπτον, ὥς ἐγὼμαι, πλειόνων: You will see him sooner than the others, I believe, *CP* 2084); Christ indeed greets them both at *CP* 2098. Although he addresses both women, it is his mother who replies (*CP* 2099–2104; 2108–15) while Mary Magdalene—presumably imagined to be standing nearby—notices the ‘beautiful youth’ (εὐπρεπῆς νεανίας, *CP* 2125) by the tomb and then disappears to tell the disciples, as this Youth orders; it is while she is running this errand that the Messenger appears to Mary the Mother of God.

*CP* thus combines, somewhat greedily, all four resurrection accounts. This is not only a question of line-references, but also the more general borrowing of episodes. The empty tomb is only specifically described at Luke 24:3 and John 20:6–7 but all accounts are used: the angel stems from Mark 16:5–7 and Matthew

<sup>52</sup> Cunningham (2011) 164–67; Maunder (2007) 13 (with plot summary at 39–40); Shoemaker (2011) 54–55.

<sup>53</sup> Sticca (1974) 27; 30.

28:5–7 (*CP* uses words from both at *CP* 2060–69 in the Angel's first speech at *CP* 2060–75) rather than from John 20:11 or Luke 24:4 (where there are two angels). Christ's speech is from Matthew 28:9–10 while the Youth is described and speaks in words also from Mark 16:5–8 (the end of the original gospel). Mary Magdalene's account to the chorus contains material from each evangelist (and *Rhesus*), while Christ's final appearance to the disciples, the last event of the play, echoes events in all the gospels. the Messenger who recounts the Guard's, Jews' and Pilate's perspective on the resurrection describes events narrated in Matthew 28:11–15. However, the speech is not composed of purely Christian material: here, the Messenger uses lines from *Bacchae* and, whereas in Matthew's gospel the guards lie for the High Priest's bribes, here both Pilate and the Guard refuse to lie. Both as a cento and product of later antiquity, *CP* seems more culturally tolerant than the canonical gospels: in this version, Jews and Romans are also allowed integrity. *CP* acknowledged the episode but overturns it. Within a cento where the characters must speak in different voices, and it is left to the reader to determine which allusions matter most, this borrowing and inversion begs Pilate's question of Jesus at his trial (John 18:38): what is truth?

This usurpation of well-known episodes is programmatic for both *CP* and Christianity: Christianity gobbles up the Classical past, creating something new in order to set itself apart. All tragedies are equally recyclable goods, with no distinction between, for example, *Rhesus* and *Bacchae*. Yet, as I will explore more fully at the end of this article, one problem the text continually raises is that there is no exemption for biblical material; it is treated in exactly the same way as the tragedies. Mary's status within *CP* epitomizes, and further problematizes, these processes. Her new importance walks the same ambiguous tightrope as her biblical balancing act between marginality and—rather necessary—centrality. Here, she relies structurally on the words of tragic characters and thematically, on her newly important status as Mother of God: after Christological controversies over the incarnation led to her increased importance from fourth- and fifth-century AD patristic writings onwards,<sup>54</sup> she became an ascended saint to whom the cento-poet and reader could pray specifically and personally in the epilogue (*CP* 2572–2602: the end of Tuilier's text).<sup>55</sup>

What sort of Mary is this, expanded from a largely elided character into a vocal exponent of Christian doctrine, leaving Christ with surprisingly few lines? What does it mean for her to speak in the voices of Medea, Agave, Musa, Phaedra, Jason, Pentheus, Hector and Hippolytus? While she may be considered a tragic woman, she is more than this: a character who exploits the jarring unexpectedness inherent in a centonic composition. Concerns arising from this study of Mary will be drawn together through viewing *CP* as an example of a

<sup>54</sup> She was now not merely a vessel of incarnation but an active figure in her own right (Pelikan (1996) 14).

<sup>55</sup> Compare the late-fifth/early-sixth-century Akathistos Hymn to the Virgin, 'one of the most influential texts in Byzantine literature' which relates the story of the incarnation and birth of Christ (Pentcheva (2006) 12).

clash between form and subject: this cento is not just ‘old wine in new bottles’ but a play which uses the old language and form of Greek tragedy to tell a new, biblical story even as it sets itself against the pagan form in which it is being told.

*Rhesus* as a frame for doctrine: a son with a higher purpose

One of the most striking instances of the cento's re-use of tragedy is a substantial passage from *Rhesus*, which fashions part of Mary's principal lament over the body of her son as he is taken from the cross (*CP* 1309–1426). Even within *CP* it is exceptional that this passage comes from one speech by Rhesus' mother, the goddess Musa.<sup>56</sup> This generates Mary's main speech stressing her Virginity and therefore, Christ's divinity (*CP* 1351–66). The centre of this extraordinary section makes very little use of *Rhesus* or biblical material: the lines appear to be, almost entirely, the cento-author's own composition. A rude intrusion into a passage marked out as borrowed from *Rhesus*, it forces the reader to ask two questions: why borrow from a single tragic speech to such an unusual extent here? And what is the significance of creating a cento, only to compose original lines?

Both the cluster from Musa's speech and the new lines which interrupt it break centonic convention, disrupting the integrity of the resulting hypertext. This peculiarity highlights correspondence between Musa and Mary as well as the doctrinal elaboration. However, juxtaposing tragic lament with didactic Christian verses indicates also that no suitable tragic or biblical lines could be found to express (so defensively) the outcome of contemporary debates concerning the Virgin birth and nature of Christ. This central section, at the heart of Mary's summary of Christian history, explains how Joseph married Mary as ‘guardian for my child, to whose birth he was a stranger’ (παιδαγωγὸν Παιδὸς, οὗ γονῆς ξένος, *CP* 1355) but stressing through prominent repetition that she ‘remained a Virgin’ (Μένω γὰρ αἰθις παρθένος, *CP* 1356) and ‘pure’ (ἀγνή μένω, *CP* 1357). She also emphasizes that her son, whom she is supposedly addressing, was ‘conceived from God the Father’ (τεχθέντος, ἐκ Πατρὸς Θεοῦ, *CP* 1359) and explains their flight into Egypt as the result of gossips ‘blabbering falsely that I conceived you from some mortal’ (ψευδῶς τεκεῖν βάζοντες ἐκ τινος βροτῶν, *CP* 1361).

Despite the privilege conferred by the central passage's lack of sources, perhaps indicating a more truthful insight into the Christian story than that enabled by centonic technique, it is the tragic frame (*CP* 1338–50 and *CP* 1367–79, given below) which emphasizes the uniqueness of this passage and suggests its significance for interpreting this Mary. Recognizing this frame is as important

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<sup>56</sup> Aside from the passages discussed in this article, Mary's longest borrowing from a single source comes at *CP* 88–99, also from *Rhesus*, but using the words of Hector, Aeneas and the chorus. Otherwise, the closest parallel within this cento is *CP* 568–88, where Mary maps on to *Bacchae*'s Tiresias, with three contiguous lines reproduced but otherwise mixed, and interspersed with Christian material, in explaining the divine salvation plan. Pollmann (1997) 100–01 (=2017) 152–54 pioneered the assessment of similar character correspondences between *Bacchae* and *CP*, but further analysis is still needed. See also n. 77 below.

as recognizing the picture itself: the careful ring-composition emphasizes Mary's account of the Virgin birth, setting it apart as a separate narrative.

Ἡ πολλὰ μὲν ζῶν, πολλὰ δ' εἰς ἄδου μολὼν,	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 915; all <i>Musa</i> )
Παγκράτορος Παῖ, τῆς ἐμῆς ἥψω φρενός.	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 916)
Ἐκ τῶνδε πρώτων πρώτον ἄρξομαι λέγειν.	1340 (~ <i>Medea</i> 1030)
Ὑβρις μὲν, ἥγ' ἔσφηλε πάντων μητέρα	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 917 & Genesis 3:20)
καὶ πατέρα πρώτιστον, ὃς βροτῶν γένος	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1314)
ἔσπειρε κάζημησε κάλλιστον θέρος,	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1315)
τεκεῖν μ' ἔθηκε παραδόξως σ', ὦ Τέκνον,	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 918)
εὐδοξον, ὡς ἔδοξε σῶ Γεννήτορι,	1345
πρὶν ἢ γενέσθαι καὶ μὲ καὶ πᾶσαν κτίσιν.	
κάπειδ' ἐτέχθην, Πατρός, οἶμαι, σοῦ κρίσει	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 926)
τρέφειν με πατὴρ οὐ βροτεῖαν ἐσχάραν	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 928)
μήτηρ τ' ἔδωκεν ἱεροῦς ἀμφὶ δόμους·	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 929)
ἐνθ' ἐκτραφεῖσαν χειρὸς ἀγγέλου ξένως.	1350 (~ <i>Rhesus</i> 930)

You attached many things, many things to my heart  
 In going to hell, Child of the All-powerful.  
 And from these things first I shall begin to speak. 1340  
 The sin which ensnared the mother of all  
 And the first father who begat the race  
 Of mortals and who moulded the most beautiful bloom,  
 Caused me to bear you so wondrously, Child,  
 Glorious, as seemed best to your begetter 1345  
 Before I or the whole of creation were born.  
 And when I was born, I believe it was the judgment  
 Of your father for my father to raise me  
 Not by an ordinary mortal hearth,  
 But my mother put me in holy houses  
 And there, being nourished strangely by an angel's hand,<sup>57</sup> 1350

[middle section discussed above]

οὐ θνητὸν ὥμην σ' οὐδ' ἐδείμαινον θανεῖν·	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 933; all <i>Musa</i> )
ἀλλὰ σε πατρός Ἀβραὰμ συνθήματι	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 935 & Luke 1:73)
πρέσβευμά θ' αἶ τε μυρίαὶ γερουσίαι	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 936)
ὄρκος θ', ὃν ὠμοκας πρὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν,	1370 (~Luke 1:73)
θανεῖν ἔπεισαν κάπικουρῆσαι γένει.	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 937)
Ἐντεῦθεν ἔτλης καὶ τόκον τε καὶ πότμον·	
κάγῳ δὲ μισθὸν τῶν ἀφερτάτων πόνων	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 948)

<sup>57</sup> Translations all from Fishbone (2002).

ἐν ἀγκάλαις κρατοῦσα νεκρόν σ', ὦ Τέκνον,	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 948)
θρηνῶ γε πικρῶς καὶ στένω καὶ δακρύω· 1375	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 949)
θρηνῶ, σοφιστὴν δ' ἄλλον οὐκ ἐπάξομαι.	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 949)
Πέπλοις δ' Ἰωσήφ εὐπρεπῶς σ' ἀμφιάσαι	
ἔτοιμός ἐστι, πρὸς δὲ καὶ τεῦξαι τάφον	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 959; Hector)
καὶ ξυγκενῶσαι μυρίων μύρων χλιδὴν,	(~ <i>Rhesus</i> 959 & John
19:39)	

I thought you were not mortal and did not fear you would die.  
 But the agreement with father Abraham  
 And the embassy and the myriad patriarchs  
 And the oath of salvation which you swore 1370  
 Persuaded you to die and help the race.  
 And then you underwent both birth and death  
 And I, as a reward for these unbearable labours,  
 Holding you in my arms as a corpse, Child,  
 Lament you bitterly and groan and cry: 1375  
 I lament, but summon no other aid.  
 Joseph is ready to wrap you properly  
 In a cloak and bring you to the tomb  
 And apply the balm of myriad ointments

This frame is almost entirely created from Musa's first words in iambic trimeters (*Rhesus* 915–49 excepting only nine lines of the *CP* passage): all but six of her lines in the entire cento are concentrated here. Furthermore, both first and last lines of her speech help create the beginning and end of this surround (*CP* 1338; 1375~*Rhesus* 915; 949), clearly indicating correspondences with Musa's situation and character. As *dea ex machina*, she appears at the end of *Rhesus* to reveal the true account of events and announce the future destiny of her dead son. Rhesus's fate, to lie underground awaiting his salvation-role, echoes Christ who, in the course of *CP*, dies, is buried and rises again. However, this correlation can never be more than allusive: the lines giving precise details (*Rhesus* 962–73.) are omitted as Rhesus cannot (be allowed to) parallel too closely the fully-human and fully-divine god who ascends into heaven (*CP* 1669–99).

Rather, the focus remains on correspondences between Mary and Musa, Rhesus' divine mother.<sup>58</sup> In both plays, the scene could be described as 'the prototype of the Christian pietà';<sup>59</sup> Euripides' scene perhaps reaches back to the scene in Aeschylus' lost *Psychostasia* where Eos appears, suspended in the air and holding the body of her son Memnon after his fate has been weighed against Achilles' and found wanting.<sup>60</sup> Both Musa and Mary know their mortal sons are

<sup>58</sup> See further Lacore (2002) 106.

<sup>59</sup> Arrowsmith (1978) xii.

<sup>60</sup> *OCD* s.v. Eos.

destined to die in order to save their people but neither seems fully to have expected their situation would actually arise, hence their shock at the start of the second passage above (*CP* 1367–*Rhesus* 933). While Musa states that she knew that Rhesus was safe while he was prevented from going to Troy by his defence of his own country, Mary's repetition of the line encapsulates once more the crucial difference between Rhesus, who might have escaped his fate, and Christ, whose manner of death could be seen as the primary purpose of his life.

This crucial difference prevents full correspondence between the two mothers. In addition, *CP* does not utilize resonances of Achilles' mother Thetis, the 'greatest of all mourning mothers' despite Musa's allusion to the sea-nymph's 'greatest lament in literature' at *Rhesus* 977. These goddesses' grief is assimilated to Mary's, indeed critics of *Rhesus* have compared Musa to the 'divine *mater dolorosa*' but, in *CP*, the details cannot be allowed to impinge upon the story of the Virgin birth.<sup>61</sup> A three-fold web of mythographic allusion via tragedy and epic is denied even as it is suggested: Mary's (and therefore Christ's) uniqueness is once again asserted, not only through the specially composed lines, but even in the use to which existing lines are now put.

The key to Mary's uniqueness, expressed through the central section framed by Musa, is her title *theotokos*. Mary as Mother of God held enormous political, imperial and theological connotations between the fourth and thirteenth centuries; by the seventh century, John of Damascus could claim that 'this name embraces the whole mystery of the divine dispensation'.<sup>62</sup> This title, used of Mary's lines throughout *CP*, contrasts with the common titles by which other characters address her: more easily culled from tragedy, the contrast with the poet's designation again suggests tension between tragic sources and doctrinal message.<sup>63</sup>

At the heart of controversies over the *theotokos* was the Virgin birth: after the fourth-century heresies such as Gnosticism and Arianism (which claimed, respectively, that Christ was not, or was only, human), this motif encompassing Christ's simultaneous humanity and divinity became central to Orthodox theology.<sup>64</sup> In addition to the careful framing of this doctrinal speech, adjectives used of Mary in *CP* emphasize the poet's view of the extraordinary importance of the Virgin birth, while her boast created from *Medea* and *Troades*, 'I bore him, and I know how I conceived him', runs like a mantra throughout the play (Ἐτικτον αὐτὸν, οἶδα δ', ὡς ἐγείνάμην, *CP* 119, 428, 516, 2402).<sup>65</sup> This emphasis

<sup>61</sup> Arrowsmith in Braun (1978) xi.

<sup>62</sup> The Orthodox Faith III 12; *PG* 94: 1029–32. Graef (2009) chronologically charts usage of the title, discussing Gregory of Nazianzus at p.50. Rubin (2009) 285 sees this aspect of Mary as providing 'a focus for the emergent Christian world'. See further Pentcheva (2006) 2, 16; Pelikan (1996) 55 defines *theotokos* as 'one who gave birth to the one who is God'. See also Warner (1976) 66–90; 90–108; on imperial importance see esp. Rubin (2009) 42–53; for Christological significance: Boss (2007) 50–55; Price (2007) 56–63.

<sup>63</sup> See De Aldama (1972) 418 for *theotokos* as surprisingly absent from Gregory's *oeuvre*.

<sup>64</sup> Warner (1976) 64; on the Virgin birth, see Warner (1976) 35–50.

<sup>65</sup> E.g. μητροπαρθένου (mother virgin: prologue 6), μήτηρ παρθένος (virgin mother: *CP* 23), μήτηρ παναγος (chaste mother: prologue 29), τίκτουσαν οὐ τίκτουσαν (giving birth though not giving birth: *CP* 62).

on Mary's Virginity and painless childbirth supports her popular patristic parallel role as 'Second Eve'.<sup>66</sup> *CP* repeatedly sets up this correspondence with the first mother, whose temptation and expulsion from Eden necessitated salvation.<sup>67</sup> This overarching Christian narrative of divine restitution, reminiscent of the cento-technique itself, is summarized in 1 Corinthians 15:22: 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive'. Ironically, this element of Mary's role as Mother of God is precisely what reinforces the very improbability of writing the passion narrative as a tragedy: if God in the form of Mary's divine son Christ can reverse the effects of Adam and Eve's fall, with redemption on such a vast scale, then how can this process be tragic?<sup>68</sup> The author continually plays at being revisionist but is not; in the same way, the text raises yet another expectation that it cannot quite fulfil.

The drama's unexpected reversal of its centonic fragmentation in these passages sets up strong character parallels; however, the very detail of the tragic correspondences, enabled by the longer juxtaposition amid smaller fragmentation, doomed them to failure. Musa's speech was carefully but necessarily bisected by the centonist's didacticism regarding the Virgin birth.<sup>69</sup> This implies fundamental problems with the mythic resonances of retelling the Christian salvation narrative in tragic form, even as it suggests that *CP* attempts to transcend such problems; ironically, by problematizing its very utilization of these dangerous parallels. One way to negotiate this was to examine the immediate human impact of a divine fate as focalized in a grieving mother, thereby avoiding directly tackling the controversial issue of Christ's dual divinity and humanity.<sup>70</sup> *CP* takes this route through its focus on Mary's sorrows, by combining the influence of Musa—fully aware mother of a fated son—with that of *Medea*: also an atypical divine mother willing to sacrifice her children for (what she perceives as) a higher cause, but, unlike Mary, a woman who struggles to reach her decision.

### *Medea* and Aphrodite, premeditation and worthwhile grief/grievance

<sup>66</sup> Graef (2009) 29; Sticca (1974) 31.

<sup>67</sup> *CP* prologue 16–18, *CP* 1–20, 578–79, 1341–42, 1650–51, 1760. For more detail on this parallel, see Warner (1976) 59, quoting Justin Martyr, *A Dialogue with Trypho* 100:5, and Pelikan (1996) 57. As most important title from OT typology, see Beattie (2007) 86–90 (for OT typology) and 81–86; 96–99 (on Virginity). For Christian typology as equivalent to Jewish *aggadah*: Louth (2011) 156; typology vs allegory Dawson (1992). Pelttari (2014) 87 discusses allegoresis in centos. Pollmann (2001) examines Virgilian typologies in Proba's cento; see also Curran (2012) 334.

<sup>68</sup> While some Greek trilogies do seem to have ended in reconciliation, this is unusual for Euripidean tragedies.

<sup>69</sup> Warner (1976) 35 suggests the motif of parthenogenesis was attacked because of its commonness in pagan belief. Her description of the 'most sophisticated counterattacks', which claim that the resemblances foreshadow Christ, could be the spirit in which this cento was written. It is worth noting here that, in the same way, Semele and Dionysus' doubters in *Bacchae* stressed Dionysus' humanity over his divinity. In fact, Dionysus appears in the *Bacchae* (borrowed in *CP*) in both human and divine form: his statement that he has undergone metamorphosis, so as to manifest himself as mortal man (*Bacchae* 4) is one of the most repeated lines in *CP*.

<sup>70</sup> Friesen (2015) 260 helpfully observes that *CP* moves the lamentation from the end of *Bacchae* to the middle of the cento, where it no longer forms the tragic climax, but prepares for the alternative Christian goal of resurrection and salvation.

Mary's channelling of *Medea* is the other most striking cluster of borrowed lines found in *CP*: an entire short speech which tackles head-on the tension between Christianity and tragedy. It contains four single lines and two contiguous sections from *Medea*, of which six lines come from one speech. Into this are woven seven lines from *Hippolytus*, five from a single speech. As in the recycled passages from *Rhesus*, the poet pushes centonic technique to its limits; Christ's reply also uses lines from *Medea*. This suggests the most striking difference in this example: the cento does not suggest consonances between just one character; rather, Mary speaks in the voices of *Medea*, Phaedra's nurse, Aphrodite and Theseus, while the two combined source-texts set up even more complex correlations. It is no surprise that *Medea* is not fully assimilated to Mary: it is perhaps more surprising that this archetypal infanticidal mother is recycled into the Mother of God at all, let alone channelled from *CP*'s opening word.<sup>71</sup> Yet the fact that her obvious aspect as magical seductress is not explicitly channelled enables the easy correlation here: both mothers are willing to endure suffering for a cause they perceive as worthwhile; both undergo confusion and doubts in the process. Yet this particular combination of *Medea* and *Hippolytus* highlights foreknowledge and Mary's consent in the divine salvation plan. However, especially given the (im)moral situations of these tragic heroines, these correlations, which also highlight Mary's more troubling Byzantine connotations of vengeance, cannot be straightforward.<sup>72</sup>

Οὐδέν· λαοῦ τοῦδ' ἐννουμένη περὶ	(~ <i>Medea</i> 925; all <i>Medea</i> )
ἔγωγ' ἐμαυτῇ πρὸς λόγους ἀφικόμην	(~ <i>Medea</i> 872)
καὶ τούσδε θρηνῶ συμφορᾷ νικωμένη, 740	(~ <i>Hipp.</i> 458; Nurse)
ῥῶμαξά θ', οἷον ἔργον ἔστ' εἰργαστέον	(~ <i>Medea</i> 791)
τοῦντεῦθεν αὐτοῖς, οἳ σ' ἀνήρτησαν, Τέκνον,	(~ <i>Medea</i> 792)
καταδοκῶ τε πάνθ' ὅπη προβήσεται.	(~ <i>Medea</i> 1117)
Λύπη δὲ κρείσσων καὶ βεβαίας ἐλπίδος.	(~ <i>Medea</i> 1079)
Τὸν μὲν γὰρ ἡμῶν δυσμενῇ πεφυκότα 745	(~ <i>Hipp.</i> 43; Aphrodite)
ῥᾶον κτενεῖς σὺ καὶ καταβάλης μόρον,	(~ <i>Hipp.</i> 44 cf. I
Corinthians 15:26)	
θαττόν τ' ἀνιῶν τοὺς ἀλάστορας τίσεις·	(~ <i>Medea</i> 928)
γυνὴ δὲ θῆλυ κατὰ δακρύοις ἔφυ·	(~ <i>Hipp.</i> 38; Aphrodite)
ὄθεν κάγω στένουσα καὶ πεπληγμένη	(~ <i>Hipp.</i> 39; Aphrodite)
κέντροις ἀνίας, ἢ τλάμων ὀδύρομαι 750	(~ <i>Hipp.</i> 47; Aphrodite)
Εἴμ' εὐκλεῆς μὲν, ἀλλ' ὅμως ἀπόλλυμαι,	(~ <i>Hipp.</i> 838; Theseus)
στερουμένη σῆς θεσπεσίας μοι θέας.	

<sup>71</sup> Most (2008) 230 and Alexopoulou (2013) 127 point out the consonance set up between *Medea* and Mary's maternal grief from the similarity in first lines: εἴθ'. Mullet (2011) 286 discusses fearsome Byzantine Maries. See Lacore (2002) 105 on Mary's transformation of Jason's plea to touch his children's corpses into a prayer.

<sup>72</sup> See Louth (2011) 154; and Baun (2011) 213–14 for vengeful Mary in seventh- to tenth-century texts; Price (2007) 63 argues that before the eighth century Mary could still show weakness.

Ὡς γὰρ ἄελπτον δρᾶμα προσπесὸν τόδε	(~Medea 225)
ψυχὴν διέρθαρκ'· οἴχομαι γοῦν, τοῦ βίου	(~Medea 226)
χάριν μεθεῖσα, κατθανεῖν χρήζω, Τέκνον· 755	(~Medea 227)
καὶ γὰρ ἔρημος, ἄπολις τε τρύχομαι,	(~Medea 255)
οὐ μητέρ' οὐκ ἀδελφὸν οὐδὲ συγγενῇ	(~Medea 257)
μεθορμίσασθαι τῇσδ' ἔχουσα συμφορᾶς·	(~Medea 258)
Κἄν μὴ τάχιστ' ἴδω σε, πῶς οἴσω, Τέκνον;	
Ἄλλ', ὦ φίλ' Υἱέ, μή μ' ἔρημόν σου λίπης. 760	(~Medea 712)

I don't, but thinking about these people,  
 I came to these conclusions myself  
 And, overcome by this disaster, I lament them 740  
 And I bewail the deed that would next be done  
 By those who crucified you, Child,  
 And I wait to see how all these things will be.  
 Pain is stronger than the most secure hope.  
 For you will easily kill our enemy 745  
 And you will cast down death and, arising swiftly,  
 You will take revenge upon your torturers.  
 But woman is weak and naturally prone to tears.  
 And so, I lament and am struck  
 By barbs of pain and grieve wretchedly. 750  
 I have glory, but nevertheless am destroyed  
 Since I am stripped of your divine sight.  
 For when this un hoped-for event occurred,  
 I lost my soul; I am gone, losing all delight  
 In life and I want to die, Child. 755  
 And alone, with no home, I am exhausted  
 Having no mother or kindred sibling  
 As a refuge from this misfortune.  
 And if I do not see you soon, Child, how shall I endure?  
 Do not, dear Son, abandon me alone. 760

Mary, speaking mostly through Medea's words, attempts to answer Christ/Jason's previous question: 'why do you lament your child?' (Τί δῆτα λοιπὸν σῶ γ' ἐπιστένεις Τέκνω, CP 737). Mary's contradictory and confused answer encapsulates the cento's central tension. She believes in the resurrection (CP 746–47). Yet she nonetheless weeps for her son's pain (CP 741), since she feels her pain is stronger than any hope (CP 744). Her desire to die (CP 755), explained in Medea's words to the Women of Corinth, follows the clichés of tragedy in its despair and hopelessness; yet inverts them in the new context of CP: Mary wishes to die, perhaps, precisely because she believes not in the nothingness of the Classical tragic afterlife, but in Christianity's promise of eternal life. In particular,

Mary/Medea grieves for her status without her son-husband (*CP* 752; 759) and excuses her feminine tears (748). The reuse of this line, from Medea's dissimulating speech to Jason, is complicated by the shock that Medea does not weep for her children's deaths at the end of *Medea*: she admits the pain of killing her own children (used at *CP* 745) but, after they are dead, she holds all emotion regarding them at bay; pain is worthwhile if it hurts Jason too (*Medea* 1362). In contrast, Mary struggles to control her grief at the crucifixion, despite anticipating the resurrection as a reversal of Adam and Eve's original fall from grace (*CP* 1340–45; first half of the *Rhesus* frame).

The interwoven loans from *Hippolytus* further complicate any character correspondences. Whereas the borrowings from *Medea* have already set off subversive undertones, for example as Mary waiting for Christ's resurrection channels Medea waiting for news of her poisoning of Jason's new wife (*CP* 743), the re-use of lines from Phaedra's nurse, Aphrodite and Theseus creates even more troubling correspondences. Phaedra's Nurse correlates Phaedra, and therefore Mary, to the (pagan) gods afflicted by Aphrodite's lust (despite the cento's emphasis on Mary's Virginity); Aphrodite at *CP* 749–51 confirms the Phaedra-Mary parallel. However, she also sets up a correspondence between Hippolytus and Christ via their fated deaths: this is troubling since Hippolytus' broken body will be brought on at the end of *Hippolytus* with no hope of revival, while Theseus' line at *CP* 752 applies his grief over Phaedra's suicide to Mary's grief over her son's crucifixion. The instability of these unsettling allusions is further complicated by the final line of this passage, in which Mary/Medea/Phaedra/Aphrodite begs Christ/Jason/Medea's children/Hippolytus/Aegeus not to abandon her, in the voice of Medea begging Aegeus for protection from the consequences of her murders. Mary's grief, the driving force of *CP* and self-conscious fulfilment of Simeon's prophecy of the dagger which would pierce her heart (Luke 2:35; *CP* 27–31), is the easiest, expected parallel with the tragic heroines who give her voice. Yet there is a vital difference between Mary and Medea: Medea laments despite having devised her murderous plan to avenge Jason's betrayal; Mary weeps despite having consented to the salvation plan by which Christ saved the created mortals who betrayed him.<sup>73</sup> her tears symbolize her son's purifying self-sacrifice.<sup>74</sup> This difference in motivation problematizes correspondences, while linking the characters through their desire for vengeance subverts the Christian narrative and so is unlikely to be

<sup>73</sup> A poetic tradition ultimately descended from Classical threnody: Pelikan (1996) 128. For Mary's consent, see Warner (1976) 207, 218.

<sup>74</sup> Warner (1976) 233. Both theologically and artistically, this Mary 'absorbs much of Christ's function as intermediary between God and Man': Pelikan (1996) 128, quoting Dobrov 'Dialogue with Death', *GRS* 35 (1994) 393–97.

the intended primary effect.<sup>75</sup> Rather, the primary correlation between them is of divine foreknowledge; a patristic theme which Aphrodite's presence strengthens.<sup>76</sup>

Although, earlier in the scene, Mary questions, in the words of Medea and Theseus (and the chorus of *Orestes*), the death she knows is necessary (Τίνοϋ δ' ἔκητι γῆς ἀποστέλλει Πατὴρ / ... Δύστηνος, οἷον οἷον ἔργον νῦν βλέπω/ οὐ τλητὸν οὐδὲ λεκτὸν, ἀλλ' ἀπώλόμεν: But why does the Father send you from the earth? ... Wretched, what a deed I now see, Unbearable, unspeakable, I am dying! *CP* 712–15),<sup>77</sup> she later openly and repeatedly recognizes—also in the myriad voices of assorted tragic characters—the divine salvation plan of which her sorrow is an unavoidable part (*CP* 891–94, 1008) and so awaits the resurrection (*CP* 354–57, 587–95); the epilogue vindicates this by alluding to Mary's bodily assumption (*CP* 2573–76). Rather than merely resisting or transcending tragedy, through the expectation and description of the resurrection, as might first appear, perhaps instead the uncertainties caused by the new centonic form heighten the tragic double bind, always inherent in this aspect of Christianity but minimized in the Bible's elision of Mary: her most tragic hours are also, through her consent and foreknowledge, the hours of her fulfilment.<sup>78</sup> In *CP*, a mother simultaneously laments the death of her son Christ and welcomes it because, through that death, he becomes the saviour of the world (*CP* 751).

Any simple interpretation of Mary borrowing Medea's lines, even if to invert them, is complicated by the fact that none of these tragic heroines, Musa, Medea or Aphrodite (nor Mary), is a straightforwardly mortal woman. So far each examined here is, in her own way, differently divine, whether as a goddess in her own right, daughter of the sun-god, or Mother of God. There may be comparison, allusion, even linguistic and emotional synthesis, but they cannot fully assimilate: Mary must remain human, even if sanctified, for Christ to be fully human as well as fully divine. While Medea, an exile from her homeland, tries to get the women of Corinth on her side with her famous lines 'I would rather stand three times in the battle line than give birth once' (*Medea* 250–51) and, as an exile, sets herself apart from other women, the chorus of *CP* borrow these lines to emphasize Mary's difference as a Virgin mother (*CP* 1019–30). Even, or especially, within her own cento, Mary remains set apart from these goddesses, 'blessed among women' (Luke 1:42).

### *Bacchae* and failed recognition/ assimilation

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<sup>75</sup> See De Aldama (1972) 420 for specific themes familiar from tragedy: the desire for vengeance which emerges in Mary's speech after learning of Judas' treachery (267–357). Most (2008) 231 discusses Mary's appropriation of Clytemnestra's deceitful words.

<sup>76</sup> Sticca (1974) 30.

<sup>77</sup> It is dubious whether, as a grieving mother using the words of Greek tragedy to convey her sorrow and confusion, Mary really remains as 'profound' and 'dignified' here as De Aldama claims ((1972) 420).

<sup>78</sup> Pelikan (1996) 126.

It is perhaps therefore more of a surprise to realize that Mary completely fails to assimilate Agave, mortal woman and her most expected model. Given how much this cento does recycle from *Bacchae* it is striking that Mary speaks through Agave's words for only four lines; in fact, the overwhelming majority of Mary's borrowings from *Bacchae* are Dionysus' words, of which—at around 50 refashioned lines—she is by far the most frequent re-user.<sup>79</sup> The scarcity and fragmentation of lines borrowed from Agave are all the more extraordinary given the common misapprehension that she must be Mary's primary model, alongside the latter's successful, albeit troubling, reuse of Dionysus's words regarding his own triumphantly executed plan in *Bacchae*.<sup>80</sup> The key reason for this failed appropriation—and her main difference from Musa, Medea and Aphrodite aside from her lack of divinity—must be Agave's bewildered incomprehension. Whereas Mary shares in Dionysus' divine foreknowledge and recognizes Christ's divinity, Agave fails to recognize the divine parentage of her sister's unborn son Dionysus. Forced into becoming a maenad as punishment, rather than through belief in the new god Dionysus, she also fails to recognize her own son Pentheus, who—as a substitute for Dionysus-Zagreus—has been dismembered in the *sparagmos* (rending of flesh) which is made to correspond with the Christian Communion, itself a reworking of the Jewish Passover rituals. These four lines in which Mary channels Agave are too fragmented to bear much analysis, yet the divergences between the women are emphasized by the thematic suitability of Agave's recycled words.

Appropriately, the first appropriation features Agave's slow movement towards realizing that the lion she has proudly brought back from the Bacchic hunt is in fact her son (ἔα, τί λεύσσω; Ah! What do I see? *Bacchae* 1280). The cento-poet uses her exclamation at two pivotal moments in the plot where Mary must perceive that her son is both fully mortal and divine. These are Mary's first view of Christ on the cross (Οἶμοι, τί λεύσσω; χερσὶ τῶν ἀλαστόρων: Alas, what do I see? In impious hands..., *CP* 444), and then as she watches his death (Ἔα, τί λεύσσω; σὸν δέμας νεκρὸν, Τέκνον: Ah, what do I see? I see your body is a corpse, child, *CP* 853). This brief allusion to Agave emphasizes the tragedy of the moments of dawning recognition as Mary's expectations of salvation begin to be fulfilled in the worst possible way.

<sup>79</sup> Friesen (2015) 252 notes 'some 300 lines from the *Bacchae*' in this 'most overt and conspicuous' of the 'literary engagements with the *Bacchae*' examined in her book. By my count of Tuilier's concordance, *CP* borrows 372 lines from *Bacchae*; all except three of Mary's 51 lines borrowed from Dionysus occur in her 130-line speech from *CP* 1489–1619, beginning as Joseph bears Jesus' body and continuing during and after the Entombment (three common subjects in Byzantine iconography). The next frequent recycler of Dionysus' words is the Theologian with only 8 lines: *CP* 1752, 1754, 1758–60, 1685, 1668, 1306; Dionysus' only other borrowings are by Christ (*CP* 2519–20), Pilate (*CP* 2311), Messenger (*CP* 2268), Guard (*CP* 2277–80, 2286), Joseph (*CP* 1287), Poet (*CP* 2560, 2573–74). I am indebted to *JHS*' anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to make this comparison with Mary's use of Dionysus' words. These lines, in which Mary displays divine foreknowledge (which explains the poet's choice of Dionysus' lines from the prologue and when taunting Pentheus) support my argument but, due to confines of space, cannot be analysed further here since, strictly speaking, they relate to Jesus' and Pentheus' actions rather than Mary's characterization.

<sup>80</sup> Garland (2004) 85. Agave otherwise only provides words for the Messenger at *CP* 161, 165–69.

Agave's next echo, as Mary predicts the future repentance of her son's crucifiers, is perhaps even more programmatic for a composite text such as *CP*, juggling conflicting sources (Τί γὰρ καλόν; τί δ' ἄσεβῶς τῶνδ' οὐκ ἔκει; For what is beautiful? What of these things is not impious? *CP* 1058). Her question, 'What in these things is not good, what is painful?' (τί δ' οὐ καλῶς τῶνδ' ἢ τί λυπηρῶς ἔχει; *Bacchae* 1263) forms part of Mary's vengeful speech against unbelievers. However, Mary uses not only Agave's words here, as she witnesses her son's crucifixion, but also Cadmus' previous lament over Agave's metaphorical blindness and future repentance. Cadmus has claimed that if his daughter remains ignorant of what is wrong with her gruesome trophy she will never suffer (and so Dionysus' vengeance on the family who did not believe in his divinity would not be complete). This emphasis on Agave's unawareness perhaps maps on to the experience of the non-Christian: until God is revealed, there cannot be any sense of sin. This interpretation is encouraged by Mary's reversal of the original sense to denounce the crucifixion. She predicts that, if the murderers do not repent upon realizing who it is that they have killed (*CP* 1053–57, 1060), they will die (*CP* 1059). Her knowledge is painful but, she appears to claim, these sinners will suffer unless they realize and repent of their actions before the second coming and last judgment, the closest Christian parallels to Dionysus' arrival in Thebes.

Thebes is the subject of Mary's last echo of Agave (ὦ καλλίπυργον ἄστὺ Δαυΐδου [θηβαΐας] χθονός: Oh lovely-towered town of the land of David [Thebes], *CP* 1598 (~*Bacchae* 1202)). The diseased city of Greek tragedy, at a safe remove from the Athenian audience, Thebes becomes in *CP* an analogy for Jerusalem which must be encouraged to 'return again unto the Lord your God' (Lamentations of Jeremiah): in this 'Christian view of history', the centonist 'replaces the Thebans with the Jewish nation as the subjects of divine wrath'.<sup>81</sup> The biblical Jerusalem epitomizes God's relationship with his chosen people and foreshadows the new covenant of the cross. Additionally, the 'New Jerusalem' in the vision of Revelation is the perfect city where the resurrected live in harmony with God. In contrast, Dionysus is rejected by Thebes and the consequences of his vengeful return to reassert his divinity are painful; this perhaps corresponds more to the judgment anticipated through *CP* than to Christ's appearance in human form.

It is natural that Agave is seen as Mary's closest tragic counterpart: *Bacchae* is channelled throughout the cento; moreover, she remains human throughout her Bacchic frenzy. Agave is possessed by Dionysus and so to some extent not directly responsible for murdering Pentheus (except through her original disbelief that her sister Semele could be pregnant by Jupiter). In the same way, Mary, as a mortal woman, could be seen as part of the fallen creation necessitating her son's death while not directly responsible for the actual crucifixion.

<sup>81</sup> Friesen (2015) 260. For Thebes as 'anti-Athens' in Attic tragedy, see Zeitlin (1992) 144.

However, the links between Agave and Mary cannot be as important as expected: Agave's is too human a grief, inflammable and even dangerous if compared too directly to Mary's in a Christian context. Mary can recycle these heroines' words, echo their feelings, but she cannot be allowed to be shaped too closely by them: she is something more than a tragic woman. In this way, *CP* treads a dangerous tightrope. Just as the Bible remains mostly silent about Mary, even a tragedy which allows—needs—her to take centre-stage must deny her tragedy by silencing those in whose words she speaks. It is not just that Mary speaks with others' words, but that she is never allowed to give voice to those words which would most express her tragic emotions.

Agave is a case in point: her lines are only used thirteen times in total, and more often by the Messenger and Joseph.<sup>82</sup> Even when Agave's borrowed lines are newly juxtaposed in *CP*, they are not usually contiguous in *Bacchae*, where she speaks largely in stichomythia.<sup>83</sup> The exception is Agave's maximum adjacent lines in both *CP* and *Bacchae* at *CP* 165–69 (*Bacchae* 1239–43). While not as lengthy as the previous correspondences set up for Mary with Musa and Medea, this is twice as long as Mary's correspondence with Aphrodite; within a cento, and for such an otherwise fragmented character as Agave, this concentration of five lines within a passage is highly significant. These are also important lines on the narrative plane, in which Agave proudly boasts of capturing the 'lion' (her son Pentheus).

“Πάτερ, μέγιστον νῦν πάρασχέ μοι κλέος·	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1233; all Agave)
τὸ παρὰ σοὶ γὰρ λιπὼν ποτὲ κλέος,	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1236)
εἰς μείζον ἤξω, δυσμενῇ κτανὼν βροτῶν·	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1237)
ἔνθη τε διδοῖς πάντ' ἔχοντι πρὸς σέθεν·	(~Psalm 2,8; John 17.6-10)
λαβὼν δὲ πάντα, χῶς ἀριστεῖον σφέων	165 (~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1239)
ὑπερκρεμασθεῖς, αὖγε σαῖν χεροῖν νέμω.	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1240)
Κυδρούμενος δὲ τοῖς ἀριστεύμασί μου,	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1241)
κάλει φίλους εἰς δαῖτα. Μακάριος εἶ,	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1242)
μακάριος τοιάδε διειργασμένος.”	(~ <i>Bacchae</i> 1243) <sup>84</sup>

‘Father, give me now the greatest glory:  
 Leaving none of the glory I once had with you,  
 I have come to greater, killing the enemy of mortals:  
 May you grant me all the nations, to have them in you;  
 And, taking them all, and having been crucified      165  
 Then I will rule them with your hands.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. *CP* 161–63, 165–69 (Messenger); *CP* 444, 853, 1058, 1310, 1598, 1601 (Mother of God); *CP* 1263–65, 1703–6 (Joseph); *CP* 1756 (Theologian).

<sup>83</sup> E.g. *CP* 161–62 (~*Bacchae* 1233; 1236–37).

<sup>84</sup> NB these line numbers differ slightly from those in editions used by Tuilier (1969) 17 and Brambs (1885) 37–38.

Glorified by my deeds;  
Call your friends to the feast. You are blessed,  
You are blessed, the creator of these deeds.'

However, it is not in fact Mary but her son who speaks these lines: Christ (albeit reported here by the Messenger, speaking to Mary) uses Agave's words more than his mother. This is surprising, and all the more remarkable since Christ rarely speaks in *CP*.<sup>85</sup> If Agave earlier mapped on to the unbeliever, here her words, uttered in the grip of Dionysiac delusion, are spoken by the Son of God. A more expected correlation would be Christ-Dionysus (unrecognized god) or perhaps Christ-Pentheus (death as a divine atonement), but this example of Christ speaking a tragic mother's passage underlines once again how *CP* suggests possible parallels only to destabilize them.

The fact that Christ speaks words perhaps more naturally reminiscent of Mary, and that they are reported, removes them further from reality: they have been spoken in *Bacchae*, borrowed by the cento-author, implicitly re-spoken by Christ, reported by the Messenger and then (probably) read. This new assignation enhances the artifice of the centonic form, whereby the reader is forced to work hard to arrive at the text's meaning. This game complicates the difficulties inherent in reading any text as readers are enticed to interpret the cento through disentangling the references, but can never quite find stable allusions. Instead, this passage's suitability for inclusion is its content; in particular, the potential for Christian interpretation—and interpolation—of Agave's words at *Bacchae* 1233–43. Her declaration of victory is suitable, if one can ignore its original tragic irony, for Christ's demand for glory. However, important specifics are added to the celebratory feast. The outline of the speech is coloured-in with Christian significance; the result is an apparently Christian picture, but the blueprint of these troubling lines lurks beneath the freshly-painted surface: Cadmus' reaction to his daughter's words is immeasurable grief.

To adapt Agave's words for their new context, the cento-author must add in references to the creation story, Christ's victory over death and/or the devil, depending on how the 'enemy of mortals' (δυσμενῇ ... βροτῶν, *CP* 163) is understood, and his power over all nations; but the other elements are already present in embryonic form. Just as divine Son praises his Father because of his own forthcoming death and resurrection, Agave calls her father Cadmus blessed because of her own deeds. Her actions, although she is unaware of this, are also directed by a god—Dionysus—but they destroy, rather than save, her family line.

The feast is another common feature (*CP* 168; *Bacchae* 1242). However, while in *Bacchae* this is a straightforward celebratory meal, it gains additional resonances in the cento's Christian context. In *CP*, it alludes not only to the Passover which memorialized the Exodus from Egypt but also to the culmination

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<sup>85</sup> Lacore (2002) 99 suggests Christ is more an object of contemplation than a dramatic character.

of this sacrificial ritual in the crucifixion, foreshadowed in the Last Supper and in turn memorialized in the Eucharist. The new covenant of Christ's sacrifice recalls, but drastically reworks, the Dionysiac sacrifice where Pentheus was torn apart by his female relatives. However, vital differences between these sacrificial deaths intersect with the cento-author's unexpected character choices, and the reader's forced inability to interpret the tragic form of the text as it shrinks away from tragedy; in the same way as Mary must remain separate from Agave, Christ must be distinguished from Pentheus.

Yet despite these considerations, *Bacchae* still seems to be able to go where the other tragedies cannot. As the movement of the play crescendos towards resurrection and beyond, the broad sweep of references shows biblical material taking over. *Bacchae* alone among CP's pagan sources manages to stake out a significant place in the epilogue (e.g. CP 2542–74). This is perhaps to do with its subject matter: a play about rebirth of god and initiand, the god's appearance in mortal form, and belief in that epiphany may be seen as broadly similar to the Christian story. As with the other reworked tragedies, however, differences are as important as similarities. To imagine that *Bacchae* really can go further in creating parallels than any other source-text is to fall for a narrative trick of failed expectations. Lines from *Bacchae* are indeed present in the epilogue, evoking the painful and troubling conclusion of *Bacchae* but, as with the few lines here from *Hippolytus*, they are sparse, separated in orthodox centonic manner and therefore incoherent apart from their new context. *Bacchae* is levelled with the other tragedies and, like Agave and Mary herself, finally silenced.

### A ludic cento: prologue and epilogue

The effect of such a gag (in both ludic and silenced senses) cannot be seen as merely tragic material muted by the pressure of the Christian narrative. Any such view is complicated by the fact that it is the cento-author's own, highly ambiguous compositions which prevail over every other source-text at either end of CP.<sup>86</sup> These passages, from the start of the prologue and close of the epilogue, play out the tensions inherent in the struggle for supremacy between Christian and tragic material. In an inversion of the technique whereby Musa's speech from *Rhesus* framed the new Virgin birth narrative, here original composition embraces the entire centonic drama. Its originality conveys a special status within the centonic text, even as this fresh content playfully highlights and problematizes the friction between the two types of material.<sup>87</sup>

The very beginning of the prologue makes a clearly programmatic

<sup>86</sup> Even if the prologue and epilogue were not composed by the same centonist as CP (see Most (2008)), they still record and perpetuate a ludic approach, and response, to the cento.

<sup>87</sup> Even if these sections are by a later editor, they have been transmitted as part of the text for such a long time that there is no reason to ignore them as part of the text presented now or to earlier readers; such accretions can be seen as organic additions which show a text's earlier reception and increase potential interpretations.

statement (prologue 1–4):

Ἐπείδ' ἀκούσας εὐσεβῶς ποιημάτων  
ποιητῶς νῶν εὐσεβῇ κλύειν θέλεις,  
πρόφρων ἄκουε· κνῦν τε κατ' Εὐριπίδην  
τὸ κοσμοσωτήριον ἐξερῶ πάθος,

(~Acts of Pilate B, 10)

Since, having heard poems sacredly,  
You now wish to hear sacred things poetically,  
Listen attentively: now, along the lines of Euripides,  
I shall proclaim the world-saving passion.

The word play between the first two lines further draws attention to itself, while reference to poems being performed in a sacred context might allude to Romanos the Melodist's hymns, as well as to the tragic source-texts, originally performed for Dionysus. Euripides is clearly indicated as both source and generic model; this citation reinforces the fact that the references are meant to be spotted and that it is somehow in them, if anywhere, that the meaning of *CP* lies. However, the equally clear declaration of the 'world-saving passion' as the cento's subject simultaneously minimizes and highlights the clash between the two types of material and its subject matter.

This clash is a theme to which the cento-author returns (in lines which are omitted in Tuilier's edition; this text is from Brambs).<sup>88</sup> Again, the reader is addressed and 'stories of piety' (*CP* 2607) contrasted with 'the dung of mythic trash' (*CP* 2606). The tension is perhaps resolved into a joke, since of course the cento contains both elements: neither tragedy nor Christianity is left fully with the upper hand:

Ἦχεις ἀληθὲς δρᾶμα κοῦ πεπλασμένον  
astronom. 463, 465 tom. XXIII, part II)  
πεφυρμένον τε μυθικῶν λήρων κόπρω,  
ὁ φιλομαθὴς εὐσεβοφρόνων λόγων.  
Εἰ γοῦν θέλεις σὺ, καὶ Λυκόφρωνος τρόπῳ  
γλυκόφρωνος νῦν ὥς θέμις ἐγνωσμένου  
λέξω τὰ πολλὰ νητρεκῶς, ὧν μ' ἱστορεῖς.

2605 (~Theod. Prodr. Carm.

You have my true dream [*sic*: see below], something not made up      2605  
Nor stained with the dung of mythic trash,  
You who love to hear stories of piety.  
If therefore you wish, in the manner

<sup>88</sup> Brambs' apparatus cites 2605–10 as only present in manuscripts C (Paris 2875) and M (Gr. 154). See Brambs (1885) 4–5 and 72. If not original, the fact that an early reader made these connections still supports my reading.

Of sweet-minded Lycophron, as is right,  
I shall read the many things which you tell me.

2610

Here, the cento-author plays both with the reader's expectation of a Christian cento in tragic form and with the fissures inherent in such a patchwork text. It is worth noting that Fishbone's 'dream' is an extremely odd, protean translation for δρᾶμα (*CP* 2605): far from implying that the events of the whole play are an invention, this 'highly marked term' was used in Byzantine literature to denote a narrative or story, particularly in connection with 'Byzantine allegorization of ancient Greek fiction'.<sup>89</sup> The invented ancient dramas are contrasted with the true drama of the Passion; the mythological, invented narratives with historical, real Christian history. Even as this epilogue suggests that the true (ἁληθές) historical Christian Passion narrative trumps any mythic play that pagan antiquity could produce, it also claims that the cento has repurposed these fictional accounts to tell the truth: as Pollmann demonstrates, *CP* is underwritten by the assumption that canonical pagan texts implicitly tell a truth which can be uncovered by a skilful centonist.<sup>90</sup>

However, it seems that it is to tragedy rather than, for example, the gospels, that the reader is directed next as the poet promises to tell whatever stories the reader requires. He perhaps means tragedy in general; although this also signposts the final reference to Lycophron's *Alexandra*, this time it is Lycophron rather than Euripides who is invoked.

The reader is left with a conflicting message: does this text function more as a *damnatio memoriae* of tragedy by attempting to erase the original context of borrowed lines and painting new faces over defaced portraits, or can it rehabilitate tragedy within a new context?<sup>91</sup> In deriding pagan culture's 'mythic trash', the cento-author perhaps makes a mockery of his entire cento, since tragedies would have to be included in any such contempt. In particular, *CP* 2605–07 derides the reader who loves 'stories of piety' but could believe a drama was 'not made up'. The choice of πεπλασμένον (2605, from πλάσσω: to form, mould, shape) deliberately flags up the question of artifice. Any text is something which is 'made up', but especially a cento which inherently draws attention to its own making. In this way, *CP* perhaps ends with the conundrum that truth is in the eye of the reader: the cento game triumphs. Yet it is difficult to decide whether *CP* sets itself up against disapproval of paganism, through its tragic reworking of the ultimate Christian story, or whether in fact it is precisely this centonic retelling

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<sup>89</sup> Roilos (2006) 105, 134. For example, Roilos (2006) 134 explains that Alexios Makrembolites (in his fourteenth-century commentary on *Lucius or the Ass*) uses the term to argue 'that Lucian wished to convey a more profound meaning through his fabricated story'. Additionally, the thirteenth-century hagiographer Constantine Akropolites criticizes the anonymous twelfth-century Lucianic satire *Timarion* using this term: see Baldwin (1984) 24–26 and Treu (1992) 361–65. I thank the anonymous reader for drawing my attention to these paralleled usages.

<sup>90</sup> See Pollmann (1997) 105.

<sup>91</sup> For the example of the inscription on a statue base in Trajan's forum, Rome (CIL 6.1783) and discussion of issues of memory and silence in early Christianity, see Hedrick (2000).

which undermines such a project, since it is implied that any Christian story told in tragic form cannot be serious.

This announcement of the ludic aspect inherent in identifying the cento's tragic resonances further emphasizes the challenge of interpretation; in particular, the incongruities of the clusters which stretch the technique's conventions to breaking point. Mary is given a new voice, set free to tell her side of the story rather than merely the few words reported by the gospel writers. However, this is no proto-feminist move, nor is she simply converted into a tragic heroine bemoaning a cruel bereavement: Mary does not speak purely female (or feminine) lines. Instead, rent apart in an alien context, she speaks, with all the manifold voices of tragedy, lines which become a confusing Babel for those who recognize the words of the ancient heroes, heroines, victims and passers-by. In passages which do not feature contiguous speeches from a single character, she is often composed from violently opposing characters, whose originally stichomythic, argumentative lines still compete for the last word, even as they are forced together in a semblance of polished coherence.<sup>92</sup> In addition to this is a wider competition with the new Christian material which inserts itself between the cracks of, or forcibly splits open, the tragic dialogue. The play could equally be seen the other way round, as pagan material fragments and problematizes the Christian thrust of the narrative. But either dichotomized view is complicated by the fact that, while the plot is the Christian salvation story, the majority of the lines are tragic. While there is more Christian material than the reader might expect once the cento's tragic form becomes clear, *CP* nonetheless problematizes the Christian content by offering alternative narratives.

Mary stands at the centre of this tension. She is not only important because of her position as Christ's mother (and her long speeches); she is also vital to the very idea of writing a Christian tragedy. Without Mary, there could be no tragedy as, within the context of Orthodox Christianity, a tragic Christ would create theological problems. Her paradoxical dual position as mourning mother and rejoicing believer highlights the tragedy of the human plane. As mourning mother of a divine son, she symbolises the separation from God which Goldmann's influential readings of later tragedies posit as a prerequisite of Christian tragedy; but this tragic interpretation is undercut by her role as primary exponent of the resurrection which we see fulfilled at *CP* 2504-31.<sup>93</sup> This tragic tension, inherent but usually glossed over in Christian accounts, is not something the cento-author merely requisitions from his models, and Mary's characterization is vital to this realization within the play. Mary is not the key figure in this play as the sum of her tragic components, but precisely because of her divergence from them: the

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<sup>92</sup> E.g. *CP* 461-64: Jason and Medea, including originally consecutive lines from *Medea* 1402-03.

<sup>93</sup> Goldmann (1964) 37 argues: 'at the very moment that God appears to man, then man ceases to be tragic'. Friesen (2015) 260 and Pollmann (2017) 156 agree that *CP* confirms Steiner's view that tragedy and Christianity are essentially incompatible.

Christian cento-author not only moderates the excesses of Mary's maternal grief,<sup>94</sup> but ensures that her human, emotional maternity is always checked by a higher vision.<sup>95</sup> The mechanisms by which she is created from clusters of lines from Musa and Medea's speeches, as well as echoing Aphrodite, Phaedra, Dionysus and, to a much lesser extent, Agave, affords an insight into the cento-game: the poet experiments with such consonances but ultimately privileges the original composition which entirely breaks the cento mould.

## Conclusions

As a Christian cento in tragic form, *CP* must then be seen as a text that celebrates its own oddities, simultaneously flirting with and resisting its clash between form and subject; Mary embodies this tension. She is the essential protagonist through whom Christian tragedy could be made thinkable: can Christ really be the hero of an 'untragic tragedy' in a 'comic world view' whose last act is resurrection? Instead, just as the cento's surface collates a 'sum of seeming incongruities', so Mary, whom the Akathistos Hymn praised as 'the woman in whom all opposites are reconciled' offers the solution:<sup>96</sup> 'the instrument mediating bafflement at the mystery of the Redemption with emotional understanding'.<sup>97</sup>

It is also Mary, however, through whom this Christian tragic drama becomes obviously unstuck. Symbolizing the cento's odd gap between predictability and peculiarity, she not only makes the whole idea of a tragic passion-play possible but then shows just how impossible it is. Even as Mary becomes more identified with Musa, Medea, Aphrodite and Agave, their words—both those put into her mouth and those she does not speak—highlight the theological unfeasibility of a completely tragic Mary. The discordance between Mary's freshly composed Christian story with her tragic borrowings, between the original context of her words and their new content, accentuates the impossibilities of the entire project. In this way, Mary's centonic character within *CP* moves beyond the narrative level to focalize the clash of cultures, inherent in the text, whereby a tragic Christian cento becomes overtly and inevitably ludicrous. One of the most central, but also most marginalized New Testament characters, she is given a new prominence through her partial identification with tragic heroines—yet these correspondences could only ever be incomplete. We might expect this cento to 'beat ... pagan culture with its own weapons' but *CP*

<sup>94</sup> E.g. Mary's speech of anger with Judas, in words from *Medea* and *Hippolytus* (*CP* 267–357), is balanced by the certainty that she will see her son again (354).

<sup>95</sup> De Aldama (1972) 417. Mary's despairing speech at *CP* 419–36 also contains at its heart the certainty that 'death will not subdue the one who conquers death' (426–27~Romans 6:9).

<sup>96</sup> Hinds (2014) 197; Brubaker and Cunningham (2011) 5.

<sup>97</sup> von Balthasar (1993) 400; Livanos (2010) 205; Warner (1976) 211. Cf. Taylor (2013) 55: 'The cross is a tragic event not glibly undone by the resurrection'.

ends mockingly, revelling in its own openness but forcing the reader to make a decision which is ultimately impossible.<sup>98</sup>

While the *Bacchae* is considered a primary building block in the composition of *CP*, any correlation or rather, distinction, between Agave and Mary only accounts for a small proportion of the cento-poet's choices. Mary is, amongst many others, a collage of Musa, Aphrodite, Phaedra, Pentheus, Dionysus and Cadmus, combined with Medea, Jason, their children and both Medea's and Phaedra's Nurses.<sup>99</sup> This Orthodox patchwork of multiple texts and authors constantly fails to meet any expectations of clear-cut typologies: instead, the text's shifting meanings perhaps lie in recognizing where the mapping of texts fails to conform to expectation; the unexpected omissions of source-texts and the gaps at the seams prohibited by Ausonius' definition of the cento-technique. This realization opens up the most important aspect of this cento: it is not moments of overlap that are important but the visible *sparagmos* of the sources, painfully resurrected.<sup>100</sup>

If *CP* simply channelled *Bacchae*, as is often expected, it would arguably portray an unconvincing version of both tragedy and Christianity: the poet cannot assert the primacy of either material, or even the original doctrinal passages, without rendering the entire cento invalid as a literary exercise. Rather, in going out of its way to celebrate Mary's tragic potential even as this is denied by its increasing fragmentation, this cento implodes intertextual conventions to offer its esoteric repackaging of Greek tragedy in an overtly acceptable doctrinal wrapping, for Byzantine Christian readers.

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<sup>98</sup> Pollmann (2001) 64, 75.

<sup>99</sup> E.g. Agave: *CP* 444, 1601; Pentheus: 1557–59; Dionysus: 1574–90; Cadmus: 2562–63; Medea: 466–72; Jason: 354–465; their children: 474, 477–78; Nurse: 1–4.

<sup>100</sup> Hinds (2014) 197 lists Proba's metaphors for centonic technique including problematic reanimation; see also Malamud (2012) 175. Alexopoulou (2013) 132 discusses parallels in *CP* between *sparagmos* and crucifixion.

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