

A Gift of Guilt and Grace: The Portrayal of Eve in Faltonia Betitia Proba's Virgilian Cento

I. Introduction

"And suddenly a wonderful gift appears":¹ these are the first words that the Roman poet Faltonia Betitia Proba uses to describe Eve in her *Probae Cento*, calling the woman a wondrous gift, or perhaps a strange one. Proba's poem is its own sort of strange gift: a cento where she retells Genesis and the life of Jesus Christ using only lines from Virgil's poetry. She describes herself as a reinterpreter — almost a hunter — who will "pursue" Christ in Virgil's work.² As a writer, Proba was unusual. She was a Roman, Christian, female poet who chose as a subject not only Gospel stories but also the Christian creation account and as a medium the "literary freak"³ of the cento, which constrained her to another poet's verses. By setting out to retell Genesis, Proba gave herself the task of interpreting Eve. Understanding her interpretation depends both on the practical context of her composition and on the theological endeavor she undertook as she Christianized Virgil.

¹ Faltonia Betitia Proba, *Probae Cento* 129: "Subitoque oritur mirabile donum." All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

² "Sequi." Elizabeth A. Clark and Diane F. Hatch, trans. "Probae Cento," in *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholars Press, 1981), 17.

³ David F. Bright, "Theory and Practice in the Vergilian Cento," *Illinois Classical Studies* 9, no. 1 (1984): 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23062582>.

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II. The Cento: Problems of Interpretation

Because Proba chose to compose a cento, the language that she uses to describe Eve, like the rest of her poem, comes from Virgil's poetry. The Emperor Julian had enacted a law that proscribed Christians from instructing their students using pagan texts, which may have motivated Proba's choice of form.⁴ Her cento could be used to expose children to Virgilian Latin using Christian stories, thereby circumventing the law.⁵ In fact, Proba herself seemed to recognize that her poem would be used for instruction, ending it with the wish that through her piety, her children's children may remain faithful.⁶ Yet her *Cento* is more than a practical scrabble to preserve Virgil's art under an authoritarian law. By composing this poem, she took on a complex work of synthesis to fuse pagan and Christian narratives.⁷ Each of the stories she tells uses Virgil's poetry as a well-known, canonical "hypotext" and transforms it into a "hypertext" with a new meaning that nevertheless carries with it a complex web of relationships to the original work.⁸ Virgil's poetry is expansive, and he often treats similar subjects in different contexts, so Proba had, as Stratis Kyriakidis points out, multiple potential sources for each line in her poem.⁹ Proba did not merely string random poetic fragments together but instead

⁴ Clark and Hatch, "Faltonia Betitia Proba and Her Cento," 99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶ Proba, *Probae Cento* 694.

⁷ Stratis Kyriakidis, "Eve and Mary: Proba's Technique in the Creation of Two Different Female Figures," in *Materiali e Discussioni per l'analisi Dei Testi Classici*, no. 29 (1992): 123, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40236015>.

⁸ Karla Pollman, "Sex and Salvation in the Vergilian Cento of the Fourth Century," in *The Baptized Muse: Early Christian Poetry as Cultural Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 101.

⁹ Kyriakidis, "Eve and Mary," 123.

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repurposed Virgil and capitalized on his cultural weight to tell new stories that, for full understanding, require familiarity with the original context of his verses.

This additional level of intricacy within Proba's work makes interpreting her portrayal of Eve more difficult. Her poem's form depends on Virgil, but there are multiple ways to interpret the relationship between her source material and the message of the *Cento*. In line 23 of the *Cento*, Proba claims that Virgil "put to verse" Christ's deeds,¹⁰ which suggests that she saw herself as revealing Christian messages that were already present in Virgil's poetry. An anonymous contemporary scribe and commentator, on the other hand, in a dedication to the emperor Arcadius that often prefaces Proba's work, claimed that Proba changed Virgil for the better.¹¹ Scott McGill argues that this phrasing indicates that the scribe believed Proba added Christian ideas that were entirely absent from Virgil's poetry, thereby improving it.¹² Nevertheless, I will follow the methods of more recent scholarship¹³ and take Proba's own claim of

¹⁰ Clark and Hatch, "Text and Translation," 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² Scott McGill, "Virgil, Christianity, and the *Cento Probae*," in *Texts and Culture in Late Antiquity: Inheritance, Authority, and Change*, ed. J.H.D. Scourfield (Swansea, Wales: The Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 174; in contrast, Philip Hardie has compared centos to *spolia*, mosaics formed from fragments of other works. This analogy suggests that only the cento has discernible sense and structure, and the original poem, like the small fragments that make up *spolia*, is simply the medium, without a connection in meaning to the new text. My approach to centos, however, is influenced by authors such as McGill and Sigrid Schottenius, who accept Proba's own claim that the meanings of her poem and Virgil's works are closely intertwined. See Philip Hardie, "Mosaics and Intertextuality," in *Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 237.

¹³ See, e.g., Scott McGill, *Virgil Recomposed: The Mythological and Secular Centos in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 23-30, and Sigrid Schottenius, "Typology and the Cento of Proba,"

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intertwined meanings at face value by examining intertextual relationships between Virgil and Proba.

III. Proba and Contemporary Theology

These intertextual relationships provide a window into Proba's theology. In the preface to her poem, for example, Proba describes God's spirit as *septemplex* ("sevenfold"),¹⁴ adapting a pagan description of Orpheus' lute to reference the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Other contemporary theologians such as Ambrose shared this sevenfold view of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ Some scholars have argued that Proba's poem also reflects the developing doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁷ The way that Proba adapted ideas from her source material to express these contemporary theological concepts shows that she was "sensitive" to the interplay between Virgil's pagan poetry and Christianity.¹⁸ Through her cento, Proba expressed nuanced relationships between pagan religious ideas and contemporary Christian ones.

Proba's contemporaries were highly critical of Eve and her role in the Fall. Jerome's *Vulgate*, for example, differs from the Hebrew and *Septuagint* versions of Genesis in ways that stress Eve's sin and emphasize the power that Adam held over her.¹⁹ Similarly, the view of Eve as a "temptress" traces back to

in *Quaderni Urbinati Di Cultura Classica* 95, no. 2 (2010).
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25747183>.

¹⁴ Proba, *Probae Cento* 10.

¹⁵ Daniel J. Nodest, *Doctrine and Exegesis in Biblical Latin Poetry* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1993), 23.

¹⁶ Ambrose, *De Iacob et Beata Vita*, 2.39.13.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Nodest, *Doctrine and Exegesis*, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-3.

¹⁹ John Flood, *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 7.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203832646>.

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the Church Fathers.²⁰ In this interpretation, instead of simply giving Adam the fruit, Eve is described as beguiling, corrupting, and persuading him in ways that parallel the serpent.²¹ Proba, therefore, was surrounded by highly critical portraits of Eve that emphasized Eve's agency in the Fall. Elizabeth Clark and Diane Hatch note that contemporary views of Eve blended with general criticisms of women by Jerome and others, including Tertullian.²² Proba herself was criticized for undertaking a theological endeavor at all. Jerome, her contemporary, referenced passages from Virgil to criticize centoists in his *Letter* 53,²³ and the passages that he cites also appear in Proba's cento; the consensus view is that he was obliquely criticizing her.²⁴ In the same letter, Jerome lambasted not only centoists but also women who teach scripture.²⁵ Thus, he criticized not only the form of Proba's poetry but also her very involvement in contemporary theology.

IV. Perspectives on Proba's Eve

Modern criticism has tended in the opposite direction, focusing on Proba's perceived inability to escape contemporary views on women, especially in her treatment of Eve. The dominant interpretation among scholars is that, despite her extremely

²⁰ Jean M. Higgins, "The Myth of Eve: The Temptress," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44, no. 4 (1976): 641. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1463485>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Clark and Hatch, "The Myth of Feminine Evil," 151.

²³ Jerome, *Letter* 53.7.

²⁴ McGill, "Virgil, Christianity, and the Cento Probae," 178. See also Clark and Hatch, *The Myth of Feminine Evil*, 104-5, and Green, R.P.H. "Proba's Cento: Its Date, Purpose, and Reception." *Classical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1995): 551-63: 553-4.

²⁵ Jerome, *Letter* 53.7.

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rare position as a female Latin poet from late antiquity,²⁶ Proba's portrayal of Eve is not only negative but also more critical than the portrayal of Eve in Genesis itself. Stratis Kyriakidis takes this stance. Kyriakidis argues that even though Proba's description of Eve appears to be positive, the poet's "real stance" is discernible in the interaction between those descriptions and Proba's source material; he ultimately concludes that Proba desired to place "particular blame" for original sin on the figure of Eve.²⁷

Clark and Hatch share aspects of Kyriakidis' interpretation. They argue that Proba goes beyond merely retelling the biblical account of Eve's culpability and in fact "distorts" aspects of that narrative to emphasize Eve's role.²⁸ They cite Proba's switch from a Genesis 1- to a Genesis 2-based account of creation when describing the creation of Adam and Eve, God's warning to Adam about "woman," and the suggestion of love-madness or frenzy in Adam's response to Eve as evidence of Proba's critical view of her.²⁹ Kyriakidis, Clark, and Hatch all arrive, albeit reluctantly, at a Proba who portrays Eve as purely the villain of the piece, blamed by God, Adam, and the poet herself.

V. Redeeming Eve

I argue, however, that the consensus view that Proba takes an overly critical view of Eve is, in its turn, an overly critical view of Proba herself. In fact, Proba's account of Eve dovetails more closely with the Creation account in Genesis than these critics

²⁶ McGill, "Virgil, Christianity, and the Cento Probae," 173.

²⁷ Kyriakidis, "Eve and Mary," 130.

²⁸ Clark and Hatch, "The Myth of Feminine Evil," 151.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-3.

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acknowledge. When Proba's accounts of both Adam and Eve are read with the *Aeneid* in mind, Proba's picture of Eve is less harsh than these critics suggest. Through the details she includes about Eve and her relationships to God and Adam, Proba in fact subtly highlights Adam's culpability for original sin and presents a tempered condemnation of Eve.

A. Eve and Adam's Physicality

Proba departs from the Genesis account by describing Eve's physical characteristics,³⁰ and Kyriakidis relies heavily on the ironic implications of the lines Proba uses to physically describe Eve to support his claim that Proba places full blame for the Fall on Eve. Kyriakidis argues that Proba hints at the disaster Eve will bring by employing loan lines that, in the *Aeneid*, refer to disastrous divine gifts and "ironic and ambiguous" forms of beauty.³¹ In order to discern Proba's intent, Kyriakidis turns to Virgil's original use of the lines that Proba borrowed.

Applying this method to Proba's description of Adam, which Kyriakidis ignores, reveals the same suggestion of prefigured destruction. As Sigrid Cullhed notes, Proba in fact pulls lines from the same verses in Virgil that she describes Eve with to describe Adam as *os omerosque deo similis* ("like a god with respect to mouth and shoulders").³² Any negative prefigurations that she intends the reader to recognize in Eve, therefore, are also present in Adam. Furthermore, just as she

³⁰ Proba, *Cento Probae* 130-2: "... claraque in luce refulsit / insignis facie et pulchro pectore virgo, / iam matura viro, iam plenis nubilis annis."

³¹ Kyriakidis, "Eve and Mary," 127.

³² Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 143, referencing Proba, *Cento Probae*, 120, which comes from Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.589.

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does in her description of Eve, Proba goes beyond the bare description of Adam in Genesis³³ and highlights his physical appearance. She remarks on his *nova forma* that is *pulcherrima primum* ("new form" that is "at first the most beautiful").³⁴

The first of these phrases comes from Book Three of the *Aeneid*, where Virgil describes the *nova forma* of a wretched suppliant and refugee acutely aware of his own guilt in waging war against Troy.³⁵ The phrase *pulcherrima primum* occurs only once in the *Aeneid*, where it refers not to a man but to a promised reward from the gods.³⁶ Thus, even here in what is ostensibly a pious description of Adam, the beautiful image-bearer of God, Proba hints at future suffering: a man who loses a promised reward and becomes a refugee from Eden due to his own guilt. If Kyriakidis' reading of Eve is correct, reading Proba's description of Adam in the same way reveals the same irony. Rather than condemning Eve alone, Proba makes a more nuanced claim about the culpability of both man and woman.

Proba continues to hint at joint culpability when she describes God's actions in creating Eve: *omnipotens genitor costas et uiscera nudat*³⁷ ("The Almighty Sire laid the ribs and entrails bare").³⁸ Here the first half of the line comes from a prayer uttered in Book Ten of the *Aeneid*, when Turnus asks the *omnipotens genitor* if he is undergoing a punishment for his own guilt.³⁹ The remainder of the line is from a description of a feast among Aeneas' men in the midst of death and disaster.⁴⁰ The

³³ Genesis 2:7 (ESV).

³⁴ Proba, *Probae Cento* 119.

³⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* 3.591-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.253.

³⁷ Proba, *Probae Cento* 127.

³⁸ Clark and Hatch, "Text and Translation," 29.

³⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 10.668.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.211.

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feast is a brief and joyful reprieve, but it ends in mourning for dead comrades.⁴¹ In this way, during God's creative act before he has finished forming Eve from Adam's flesh, Proba implicates both Adam and Eve in the coming Fall. She also foreshadows the shared feast that seems desirable and yet brings about their ruin and their future acknowledgment of guilt. Comparing Proba's initial descriptions of Adam and Eve demonstrates that they both prefigure disaster and suggest future guilt; from the beginning, Proba places the two on the same level.

B. Eve and Adam's Interactions with God

Proba emphasizes the equality of Adam and Eve through the interactions she portrays between Adam, Eve, and God — in particular, God's warning about the Tree of Knowledge and the eating of the fruit. In the cento, God begins his warning with the plural imperative *vivite*⁴² and addresses his audience as the plural *vestris*.⁴³ He is speaking to both Adam and Eve. Proba's version of the warning has no direct parallel in Genesis because she merges the narratives of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2; importantly, however, Proba indicates that Eve is present to hear the warning. Thus, Adam and Eve interact with God in the same way. Although Clark and Hatch imply that Proba presents Eve as inferior because she explicitly describes only Adam as sharing the likeness of God⁴⁴ — they go so far as to describe Eve's creation as "rib surgery"⁴⁵ — they ignore Proba's portrayal of Adam and Eve's interactions with God, which suggest their equality.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1.220-22.

⁴² Proba, *Probae Cento* 139.

⁴³ Proba, *Probae Cento* 147.

⁴⁴ Clark and Hatch, "The Myth of Feminine Evil," 152.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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Furthermore, Proba's version of events places more culpability on Adam than Genesis does. In the Genesis narrative, God warns Adam generally not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge.⁴⁶ Proba's version includes both this general warning and a specific mention of "woman,"⁴⁷ which Clark and Hatch argue is an example of the way Proba stresses Eve's sole guilt.⁴⁸ Yet Clark and Hatch ignore how this specific warning affects Adam: Proba depicts an Adam who has been presented with both a command by God to be obedient and a warning against the way he will be tempted to disobey.

Each of the four verses that Clark and Hatch identify as sources for the warning does describe women as dangerous, distracting, and changeable.⁴⁹ But the criticism of woman in these verses does not preclude a subtler critique of man. The first source is from the *Georgics*, and the warning concerns man's potential to forget grass and groves through a woman's persuasion.⁵⁰ Although the woman is the instigator, it is the man who ultimately turns away from the proper object of his attention. This parallels the way that Adam will turn away from the utopia of Eden, forgetting the promises that God made him. Similarly, in the fourth source, Tarchon criticizes his male

⁴⁶ Genesis 2:16.

⁴⁷ Proba, *Probae Cento* 155. Clark and Hatch translate the passage "I grant that you be warned with Woman—that one word—and let no creature's / Passion get the best of you" (31). They take *femina* somewhat awkwardly as an ablative; if it is instead taken as a vocative (possible if there is a hiatus between *te* and *ullius*), this section of the warning may be read as addressed directly to Eve. This reading would strengthen the suggestion of equality between Adam and Eve as joint recipients of God's warning. Nonetheless, even if Clark and Hatch's reading is correct, they ignore the implications of the warning for Adam's guilt. See Clark and Hatch, "Text and Translation," 31.

⁴⁸ Clark and Hatch, "The Myth of Feminine Evil," 153.

⁴⁹ Virgil, *Georgics* 2.315; *Aeneid* 4.211, 570; *Aeneid* 11.734.

⁵⁰ Virgil, *Georgics* 3.216.

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soldiers for their cowardice in being overpowered by a woman.⁵¹ Although these references are all openly critical of women, they also suggest that Proba's Adam has a role to play in humanity's fall from grace.

To tell how Eve and Adam eat the fruit and bring about their own ultimate destruction, Proba realigns her narrative with the events in Genesis. In the Hebrew, Genesis 3:6 states that Eve gave fruit to Adam, who was *עמה* ("with her").⁵² Only Eve interacts with the serpent, but the already warned Adam is present to witness the temptation. Although there is no indication that Proba read Hebrew, both the Septuagint and at least some of the extant *Vetus Latina* texts preserve this detail.⁵³ Whether or not Proba knew of this specific textual detail, she preserves the narrative sequence and suggests neither that Adam was absent during the serpent's temptation nor that Eve sought him out somewhere else to tempt him. Proba's Eve admires the tree, tastes the fruit, then thrusts it out to Adam.⁵⁴ In this way, Proba maintains the suggestion of Adam's culpability that is already contained in the story.

Adam's presence during the temptation in Proba's cento is subtle, but he is there, and Proba preserves the impression given in Genesis of Adam standing by as Eve disobeys God. Her version of the specific events of the temptation and fall matches Genesis closely, which, set against the departures from the Genesis narrative in her account of God's warning, indicates that

⁵¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 11.734.

⁵² Julie Faith Parker, "Blaming Eve Alone: Translation, Omission, and Implications of *עמה* in Genesis 3:6b," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 4 (2013): 729. <https://doi.org/10.2307/42912464>.

⁵³ Genesis 3:6 (LXX); Genesis 3:6. *Vetus Latina Database*, <http://apps.brepolis.net/vld/Default.aspx>.

⁵⁴ Proba, *Probae Cento* 200-5.

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she made no attempt to “distort” the narrative of the Fall itself to condemn Eve alone; in fact, any distortions occur in the opposite direction as she elevates Eve to Adam’s status before God by making them both participants in God’s warning.

As the repercussions of Adam and Eve’s disobedience unfold, Proba’s Adam does not come away blameless when God confronts him. Adam claims he was innocent and unwary of what Eve was doing,⁵⁵ yet the very fact that God warned him against “woman” calls that claim into question, as does Adam’s presence at the tree when he and Eve ate the fruit. Through the prior context that she has given in the story, Proba gives Adam’s protests a false ring. Even so, Kyriakidis, Clark, and Hatch take his condemnation of Eve at face value, viewing it as further evidence of Proba’s own condemnation. But Proba’s Adam is a man attempting to absolve himself from guilt who lies, begs, and changes his story.⁵⁶ Ultimately, Proba’s Adam acknowledges his responsibility. He uses the first-person plural to describe who committed the sin that will make him an exile from Eden, telling God that *we* — he and Eve — grasped the fruit, not Eve alone.⁵⁷

VI. Eve and Proba

Through the composition of her cento, Proba herself becomes almost the reverse of Eve. Eve descends from God’s utopia to a fallen world of sin and death by succumbing to the persuasive language of the serpent. Proba presents Eve as unquestionably culpable, but neither alone in her guilt nor worthy of total

⁵⁵ Proba, *Probae Cento* 240.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 233-43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

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condemnation. Proba turns the same eye to her own past and observes a parallel in reverse: she interprets her own life as an ascent from pagan poetry filled with slaughter to the fulfillment of her Christian duty to glorify God with her words.⁵⁸ Both her understanding of Eve and her self-understanding are nuanced. She conceals neither Eve's sin nor what she perceives as her own past sin. And she allows herself the possibility of an artistic redemption through her *Cento*.

VII. Conclusion

Proba presents an Eve who is deceived, errs, and sins. There is no suggestion that she intends to absolve Eve of responsibility for the Fall. But what Proba does not do is condemn Eve alone. Kyriakidis, Clark, and Hatch each miss key, though subtle, signs that demonstrate the complexity of Proba's portrayal of Adam and Eve. While her physical descriptions of Eve suggest that the woman is a gift who brings disaster, her physical descriptions of Adam taint him with guilt as well. Before Eve exists, Proba uses a guilty man's prayer to describe God's use of the rib that is still part of Adam. Eve is guilty; Adam is as well. But Proba does not merely emphasize the shared depths of Adam and Eve's sinfulness. Instead, she elevates them together in their relationship with God. She includes Eve in interactions with God, and she keeps the subtle details in Genesis that demonstrate Adam's own responsibility. The *Probae Cento* is a dense tangle of interactions and a mosaic of fragments that nonetheless retain their connections to Virgil's work. Throughout, Proba's poetic gaze is clear-sighted: she presents Eve as a guilty woman who is neither alone in her sin nor a distorted caricature of guilt,

⁵⁸ Proba, *Probae Cento* 47-55.

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and suggests that she herself has followed a parallel but opposite course to Eve and may reach redemption through her poetic art.

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