

# Homer in Irenaeus

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## ■ Abstract

Scholars have long maintained that Irenaeus rejected the use of Hellenic resources in Christian theology. While recent decades have seen better recognition of Irenaeus' philosophical and rhetorical knowledge, Irenaeus' use of poetic literature, especially Homer, has received little attention. The present article rectifies this deficiency. First, it defines the role of Homeric material in Irenaeus' broader theological project. Then, studying Irenaeus' use of a unique Homeric word, *propocylindomene* (*Haer.* 1.11.4), it demonstrates that Irenaeus appropriates Homer to his theological project with the facility that Quintilian associates with a practiced and skillful rhetorician. In light of this, the article concludes by contending that Irenaeus likely composed the Homeric cento in *Haer.* 1.9.4 himself. If this is the case, *Haer.* 1.9.4 constitutes perhaps Irenaeus' most skillful appropriation of Homer to his theological project. It best illustrates how for Irenaeus the poet could be used in a Christian theological project.

## ■ Keywords

Irenaeus of Lyons, Homer, Cento, Quintilian, rhetoric, rhetorical theory, Rule of Truth, *Haer.* 1.9.4, irony

## ■ Introduction

A fundamental question faced by Christianity's earliest theologians was what role—if any—to afford to the resources that their Hellenic culture provided. Generations of scholars regarded Irenaeus as one who resisted the use of any resource from outside his own Christian tradition. In recent decades, however, appreciation for Irenaeus's engagement with Hellenic culture has increased, albeit not in a linear or equal fashion. Robert M. Grant's seminal article, which appeared in *Harvard Theological*

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*Review*, argued against the perception “of Irenaeus as orthodox but rather stupid” by demonstrating Irenaeus’s rhetorical training and use of a philosophical doxography.<sup>1</sup> Years later, Grant published a second article in this journal further demonstrating Irenaeus’s familiarity with and positive attitude toward the classical educational program.<sup>2</sup> Between these two studies, William R. Schoedel took Irenaeus’s use of doxographies as an indication that Irenaeus was not a competent philosopher,<sup>3</sup> but a more positive picture of Irenaeus’s abilities emerged in Schoedel’s later writings,<sup>4</sup> and recent scholarship has demonstrated Irenaeus’s use of philosophical themes to an even greater extent.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, scholars have come to appreciate Irenaeus’s knowledge of rhetorical principles and related literature more over time, though again the increase has not always been linear,<sup>6</sup> and in some ways investigation into the depth of Irenaeus’s classical learning remains in its inchoate phases.

For example, even Irenaeus’s use of Homer, who was fundamental to classical education, has received very little attention.<sup>7</sup> Robert Louis Wilken’s writing on the

<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Grant, “Irenaeus and Hellenistic Culture,” *HTR* 42 (1949) 41–51, at 51. For an earlier treatment of Irenaeus’s rhetoric, see D. B. Reynders, “La polémique de saint Irénée: Méthode et principes,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 7 (1935) 5–27.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Grant, “Carpocratians and Curriculum: Irenaeus’s Reply,” *HTR* 79 (1986) 127–36.

<sup>3</sup> William R. Schoedel, “Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus,” *VC* 13 (1959) 22–32. See too the conclusion of André Benoît at *Saint Irénée. Introduction à l’étude de sa théologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960) 73.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, William R. Schoedel, “‘Topological’ Theology and Some Monistic Tendencies in Gnosticism,” in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Böhlig* (ed. Martin Krause; Brill: Leiden, 1972) 88–108; idem, “Enclosing, Not Enclosed: The Early Christian Doctrine of God,” in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant* (ed. William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken; ThH 53; Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979) 75–86, esp. 77–81; idem, “Theological Method in Irenaeus (*Adversus haereses* 2. 25–28),” *JTS* 35 (1984) 31–49.

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus* (OECs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Agnès Bastit, “Irénée philosophe? L’arrière-plan philosophique grec de l’œuvre d’un polémiste et théologien chrétien,” in *La philosophie des non-philosophes dans l’empire Romain du I<sup>er</sup> au III<sup>e</sup> siècle* (ed. Sophie Aubert-Baillet, Charles Guérin, and Sébastien Morlet; Orient et Méditerranée 32; Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2019) 237–69.

<sup>6</sup> See recently Lewis Ayres, “Irenaeus vs. the Valentinians: Toward a Rethinking of Patristic Exegetical Origins,” *JETS* 23 (2015) 153–87; Anthony Briggman, “Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus, Part 1,” *VC* 69 (2015) 500–527; idem, “Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus, Part 2,” *VC* 70 (2016) 31–50, with comments on Irenaeus and Homer at 48 n. 52; Francesca Minonne, “Aulus Gellius and Irenaeus of Lyons in the Cultural Context of the Second Century AD,” *SP* 93 (2017) 265–73; Brendan Harris, “Irenaeus’s Engagement with Rhetorical Theory in his Exegesis of the Johannine Prologue in *Adversus haereses* 1.8.5–1.9.3,” *VC* 72 (2018) 405–20; Scott Moringiello, *The Rhetoric of Faith: Irenaeus and the Structure of the Adversus haereses* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019). For criticism of the competence with which Irenaeus employs rhetorical devices, see, for example, R. A. Norris, “The Transcendence and Freedom of God: Irenaeus, the Greek Tradition and Gnosticism,” in *Early Christian Literature*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> This is true both of studies on Irenaeus and on Homer in early Christianity. For the latter, see Karl Olav Sandnes, *The Challenge of Homer: School, Pagan Poets and Early Christianity* (LNTS 400; London: T&T Clark, 2009), which refers to Irenaeus only in passing, and Hugo Rahner’s classic study, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (trans. Brian Battershaw; London: Burns and

Homeric cento in *Adversus haereses* (*Haer.*) 1.9.4 is a noteworthy exception,<sup>8</sup> but Irenaeus's use of Homer elsewhere has been largely neglected, and even scholarship on *Haer.* 1.9.4 often seems influenced by old narratives that emphasize Irenaeus's disinterest in classical culture.<sup>9</sup> As for Wilken's study, relatively little space is dedicated to Irenaeus's use of Homer. Instead, Wilken focuses on disproving Jean Daniélou's hypothesis that Valentinus wrote the cento.<sup>10</sup> Neither, according to Wilken, did Irenaeus write the cento. He puts it to good use in his polemic, but its original composition is to be credited to an unknown third party rather than Irenaeus himself. Thus, even the best-known study of Homer in Irenaeus has little to say about Irenaeus' own facility in classical literature.

The present article contributes to the ongoing reassessment of Irenaeus's classical learning by demonstrating that Irenaeus uses Homer skillfully and creatively in his theological project, the *Adversus haereses*. Taking Irenaeus's use of *Iliad* (*Il.*) 2.1–4 in *Haer.* 1.12.2 as a representative sample, it demonstrates that Irenaeus used Homer in the negative or polemical aspect of his broader theological project. But that Irenaeus uses Homeric material to criticize his opponents' theology does not diminish the significance of the role that Homer plays in Irenaeus's theological project, nor does it correspond to a superficial or clumsy engagement with Homeric material. Rather, the opposite: read in light of Quintilian's description of the student who has achieved *hexis* in rhetoric, Irenaeus's oft-misunderstood use of an obscure Homeric term, *proprocy lindomene* (rolling on and on), reveals that Irenaeus appropriates Homer to his unique needs as would a skilled and practiced rhetorician. In light of this, the final section argues that scholars have been too quick to dismiss the possibility that Irenaeus composed the Homeric cento of 1.9.4. It is valid if not preferable to see Irenaeus as the cento's author, in which case 1.9.4 would constitute Irenaeus's most skillful and creative adaptation of Homeric material to his criticism of Valentinian theology. In 1.9.4 as elsewhere, Irenaeus's knowledge of Homer, enhanced by his facility in ancient rhetorical and literary composition, constitutes a valuable resource for his theological project.

## ■ Homer in Irenaeus's Theological Project: A Preliminary Observation

We begin with a general observation on Irenaeus's approach to Homeric material in contrast with other materials from outside the Christian tradition. In *Haer.* 1.12.2, Irenaeus writes against Valentinians who depict the divine mind in terms that, in Irenaeus's reading, attribute human psychology to God:

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Oats, 1963), where Irenaeus is missing from the section that, according to Rahner, "might well be entitled, 'Homer among the Fathers of the Church'" (332).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, "The Homeric Cento in Irenaeus, 'Adversus Haereses' I, 9,4," *VC* 21 (1967) 25–33.

<sup>9</sup> For examples, see below.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (ed. and trans. John Austin Baker; London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1973) 85.

Do not these men seem to you, my dear friend, to have had in mind the Homeric Zeus more than the Sovereign of the Universe. Zeus was not able to sleep on account of his anxiety while he was planning how he might honor Achilles and destroy the Greeks. He [the Sovereign], however, has accomplished whatever He willed at the same time that He thought of it; and He thinks of whatever He wills at the same time that He wills it. Whatever He wills He thinks of, and whatever He thinks of He wills, since He is all thought, all will, all mind, all eyes, all ears, the whole fountain of all good things.<sup>11</sup>

This paragraph appropriates two classical materials. First, it refers to an episode from the opening lines of *Iliad* Book 2: “Now all the other gods and men, lords of chariots, slumbered the whole night through, but sweet sleep did not hold Zeus, for he was pondering in his heart how he might do honor to Achilles and slay many beside the ships of the Achaeans.”<sup>12</sup> The second classical material is the “He is all thought ...” statement that follows. This material, as scholars have often noted,<sup>13</sup> is based on a reception of a fragment of the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes, who wrote, “all he sees, and all he thinks, and all he hears.”<sup>14</sup>

Of interest here is the differing ways in which Irenaeus draws upon the two pieces of classical writing. First, Irenaeus uses the Homeric material negatively to illustrate the deficiency of the Valentinian view of God, which Irenaeus relates to the anthropomorphic deities in Homer. Homer, in other words, provides Irenaeus with a resource to advance a theological critique. On the other hand, both here and elsewhere Irenaeus uses the Xenophanes material positively to advance an account of God that Irenaeus views as correct.<sup>15</sup>

What we see in 1.12.2 is consistent with Irenaeus’s overall approach. Irenaeus can criticize philosophical doctrines and, drawing analogies between classical philosophy and his opponents, can use philosophy to criticize his opponents,<sup>16</sup> but

<sup>11</sup> Translations of Irenaeus are from Dominic Unger and John J. Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies* (ACW 55; New York: Newman, 1992) unless otherwise noted, with occasional modifications. Texts are from A. Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies livre I* (SC 264; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> Homer, *Il.* 2.1–4. Unless noted, the text and translations of Homer are from *Homer: Iliad* (trans. A. T. Murray; rev. William F. Wyatt; 2 vols.; LCL 170–171; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924; repr. 1999), and *Homer: Odyssey* (trans. A. T. Murray; rev. George F. Dimock; 2 vols.; LCL 104–105; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919; repr. 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See recently, Agnès Bastit, “Simplicité de l’intellect et perception divine chez Plinie l’Ancien et Irénée de Lyon. Aperçu de la réception d’une sentence de Xénophane à l’époque impériale,” in *Diuina studia. Mélanges de religion et de philosophie anciennes offerts à François Guillaumont* (ed. Élisabeth Gavoille and Sophie Roesch; Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2018) 139–53.

<sup>14</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 24, in J. H. Lesher, *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), from Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Prof.* 9.144 (*Adv. Phys.* 1.144, in *Sextus Empiricus: Against Physicists. Against Ethicists* [trans. R. G. Bury; LCL 311; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936]).

<sup>15</sup> See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.13.3, 2.28.4–5, 4.11.2. For the formula in Irenaeus’s theology, see Briggman, *God and Christ*, 90–99.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.14.

Irenaeus himself finds much that is useful in Hellenistic philosophy.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, poetic materials, above all Homeric episodes and verses, nearly always function to advance Irenaeus's theological criticisms.<sup>18</sup> It seems that philosophical sources provide material that is "religious and pious" (2.13.3) and therefore appropriate for the constructive portions of Irenaeus's theological project. Homer and the poets do not.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, Irenaeus, in contrast to other early Christian writers,<sup>20</sup> relegates poetic material to a negative function within his theological project.

It is perhaps due to Irenaeus's relegation of Homeric material to a negative function in his theological project that Irenaeus's use of Homer has been neglected in scholarship. Irenaeus's positive use of Xenophanes and other philosophers contributes to his own thought and therefore appears more compelling and significant for understanding Irenaeus's theological work. Irenaeus, however, dedicated the bulk of the first two books of his project against the "heresies," as he saw them, to convincing his readers that his opponents' doctrines were incorrect. In Irenaeus's explanation, this element of his work was essential to his overarching theological project.<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus's description of his work suggests that the negative and polemical aspects of his theology were just as crucial as the positive portions—and were crafted with as much care. It is worthwhile, then, to better understand the value of Homer within that theological critique.

## ■ *Hexis* in Quintilian

The following two sections will reveal the sophistication of Irenaeus's use of Homeric material in his critique of Valentinian theology, but in order to see this it is first necessary to visit the tenth book of *Institutio oratoria*. There, Quintilian describes the student who has achieved *hexis* in oratory, and, in so doing, describes how a skilled and practiced rhetorician adapts material from Homer and other classical literature to their own unique needs. Though Quintilian intends to instruct orators rather than writers, since Quintilian suggests the principles of good rhetorical oratory can be practiced in written rhetoric, his discussion provides criteria by which to evaluate the proficiency of Irenaeus's appropriation of Homer.<sup>22</sup> To this end, the present section defines *hexis* in rhetoric and the skills Quintilian associates with it.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent overview, see Bastit, "Irénee philosophe?," 237–69, and Briggman, *God and Christ*.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the passages discussed below, see also 2.14.1–2, 2.18.5, 2.21.2.

<sup>19</sup> This attitude may be partly indebted to philosophical discussions such as Plato's expulsion of the poets from his Republic (*Rep.* 377a ff.). See Robert M. Grant, *Jesus after the Gospels: The Christ of the Second Century* (Louisville: WJK, 1990) 96–98. Bastit has suggested Irenaeus's form of the Xenophanes quotation was influenced by poetic literature: "Réception de Xénophane," 139–53. This could well be the case, though there is no indication Irenaeus recognized it as in any way Homeric.

<sup>20</sup> For positive uses of Homer in Christian writing, see Arthur Droge, "Homeric Exegesis among the Gnostics," *SP* 19 (1989) 313–21; Peter Widdicombe, "Justin Martyr, Allegorical Interpretation, and the Greek Myths," *SP* 31 (1997) 234–39; Carl-Martin Edsman, "Clement of Alexandria and Greek Myths," *SP* 31 (1997) 385–88.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.pr.1–3.

<sup>22</sup> In Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 10.1.2, the orator gains *hexis* in oratory "by much practice in writing."

At the onset of Book 10, Quintilian seeks to advance the reader beyond “theoretical knowledge” to “a certain assured facility (*firma facilitas*), which the Greeks call *hexis*.”<sup>23</sup> Though in English the Greek word ἕξις literally translates as “having” or “possession,” in ancient use it took an assortment of more precise meanings when applied in various fields of study.<sup>24</sup> Its technical uses make it difficult to translate, but Marc van der Poel offers a convenient definition: “This philosophical term refers in general to a permanent condition as produced by practice; in rhetoric it denotes the complete mastery of the skill of speaking through talent and theoretical knowledge, and it is reinforced by practice.”<sup>25</sup>

As this definition suggests, *hexis* in rhetoric implies competence achieved by continual practice of the discipline. This is implicit in *Institutio oratoria* itself. There, Quintilian’s contrast between “theoretical knowledge” and the *hexis* required to “ensure oratorical power” implies that *hexis* is characteristic of skilled and practiced orators, not novices. Similarly, Michael Winterbottom points out that Quintilian does not introduce the idea of *hexis* until the tenth book of *Institutio oratoria*. To Winterbottom, this implies, “Ἑξις could not possibly be attained early on [in the *progymnasmata*]: far more experience was required.”<sup>26</sup> Quintilian’s association of *hexis* with proficiency in oratory is echoed by other ancient writers such as Seneca the Elder and Theon.<sup>27</sup> As Quintilian describes the skills one

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Trans. and text in *Quintilian: The Orator’s Education, Volume IV: Books 9–10* (ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell; LCL 127; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> “Sed haec eloquendi praecepta, sicut cognitioni sunt necessaria, ita non satis ad vim dicendi valent nisi illis firma quaedam facilitas, quae apud Graecos *hexis* nominatur” (*Inst. or.* 10.1.1).

<sup>24</sup> For an overview of ἕξις in ancient literature, see Amedeo Alessandro Raschieri, “*Facilitas* and *héxis* in Latin Rhetoric,” in *Papers on Rhetoric XIV* (ed. Lucia Calboli Montefusco and Maria Silvana Celentano; Perugia: Editrice Pliniana, 2018) 109–33. The variety of ways *hexis* is rendered in *The Oxford Handbook of Quintilian* illustrates the difficulty of conveying the term’s meaning in English. Marc van der Poel uses “fluency of expression and the ability to address an audience suitably in every situation” (91) and “verbal dexterity” (“Quintilian’s Underlying Educational Programme,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Quintilian* [ed. Marc van der Poel, Michael Edwards, and James J. Murphy; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021] 80–100, at 89). Richard Leo Enos’s “habit” is also a common rendering: see “Quintilian in the Graeco-Roman Rhetorical Tradition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Quintilian* (ed. van der Poel, Edwards, and Murphy), 181–200, at 194. Aristotle uses *hexis* to refer to characteristics or engrained habits arising from practice in morality and art: see *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1, 1103a–b; *Art of Rhetoric* 1.1, 1354a.

<sup>25</sup> Marc van der Poel, “Quintilian’s Programme,” 93. See too Heinrich Lausberg: “at the level of ἕξις, the *ars* has become the permanent possession of the ‘artist’ – ever available, and usable in ‘virtuoso’ style” (Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study* [ed. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson Leiden; trans. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, and David E. Orton; Leiden: Brill, 1998] 4, §7).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Winterbottom, “Something New Out of Armenia,” in *Papers on Quintilian and Ancient Declamation* (ed. Antonio Stramaglia, Francesca Romana Nocchi, and Giuseppe Russo; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 218–33, at 229.

<sup>27</sup> See Seneca’s *Controversiae* 7.2, in LCL 464, and Theon’s *Progymnasmata*, in George Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (WGRW 10; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2003) 9.

must possess to achieve *hexis*, then, he provides criteria by which to evaluate the competence and experience of an ancient rhetorician.

As Quintilian continues his discussion, he associates specific skills with *hexis*. In particular, the early chapters of *Institutio oratoria* 10 emphasize the necessity of developing an expansive vocabulary or, as he puts it, “a wealth of words” (*copia verborum*).<sup>28</sup> Nary a word is to be omitted from the orator’s supply, according to Quintilian, because any one of the many and diverse situations the rhetor might encounter may call for a unique locution. So, the person seeking to achieve *hexis* is to acquire “practically all words,” for “any word ... may be the best possible word somewhere or other.”<sup>29</sup>

Acquiring a *copia verborum* is a first step to achieving *hexis*, but the possession of an expansive vocabulary does not amount to *hexis* in rhetoric unless the student practices “the principles of choosing and arranging his words ... as well and as easily as possible.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Quintilian mocks students who possess extensive vocabularies but deploy their words “without discrimination” (*sine discrimine*), without concern for maximizing the effect of their words in any given situation.<sup>31</sup> To do this, one must exercise “judgement” (*iudicium*) in selecting the appropriate word and also in “arranging” the selected words within the overarching discourse. In emphasizing not only knowledge of words but also the exercise of the principles of selection and ordering or arrangement (*dispositio*) within the composition,<sup>32</sup> Quintilian gives a sketch of the characteristics of an author who possesses practiced skill or *hexis* in rhetoric. Such an author’s writing will exhibit an extensive vocabulary with words suited to the occasion and aptly arranged within the broader discourse.

Having summarized the skills necessary for the attainment of *hexis* in rhetoric, Quintilian goes on to prescribe a method for gaining the experience that leads to *hexis*. Ridiculing those who build their vocabularies by memorizing lists of synonyms,<sup>33</sup> Quintilian recommends acquiring one’s *copia verborum* along with practical examples of rhetorical principles “by reading and hearing the best.”<sup>34</sup> To this end, Quintilian offers a lengthy section directing the student to “the best” (*optima*) authors,<sup>35</sup> who are to be read carefully and repeatedly.<sup>36</sup> Significantly for our purposes, the first writer whom Quintilian says deserves scrupulous and exhaustive

<sup>28</sup> Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 10.1.6, my trans.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 10.1.9: “Omnibus enim fere verbis ... omnia verba ... sunt alicubi optima.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 10.1.4: “verba quoque et eligendi et conlocandi rationem perceperit ... quam optime quam facillime possit.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 10.1.7.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 10.3.5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 10.1.7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 10.1.8: “optima legendo atque audiendo”; cf. 10.1.15.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 10.1.46–131.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 10.1.19–20. Cf. Quintilian’s description of the student scrupulously re-reading “the best” as if thoroughly chewing meat with Irenaeus’s allegorical reading of Lev 11:3 at Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.8.3.



reading is Homer, “supreme not only in poetic but in oratorical excellence.”<sup>37</sup> By reading the supreme practitioner of rhetorical principles, along with other less laudable authors, Quintilian expects the student to advance toward “that assured facility ... the formation of *hexis*.”<sup>38</sup> For Quintilian, then, the orator can gain *hexis* in rhetoric by reading Homer, can build his vocabulary by learning Homer’s, and by imitating Homer’s style can learn how to deploy his *copia verborum* with selection and ordering so as to maximize the effect of each word within the broader discourse.

### ■ Irenaeus’s *Hexis* in *Haer.* 1.11.4

With Quintilian’s advice to the student pursuing rhetorical *hexis* in mind, we turn to Irenaeus’s parody of the Valentinian aeons in 1.11.4. There, we find Irenaeus practicing the skills Quintilian describes in *Inst. Or.* 10.1:

Woe, woe! Alas, alas! Indeed such a tragic exclamation of names is truly in place, relative to such a concoction of names, and such boldness as his to add the names to his falsehood without blushing. For when he says: “Before all things there existed a certain First-Beginning, a First-unthinkable, whom I call Oneness,” and again: “With this Oneness there coexists a Power, which I name Unity,” he most clearly confesses that what he said is a fabrication and that he himself added to the fabrication the names that heretofore were not attached by anyone else. And unless he had had the boldness to do this, according to him, truth would today not have a name. Nothing, therefore, prohibits anyone else from proposing names for the same system as follows: There is a certain royal First-Beginning, First-unthinkable, First-non-substantial Power, Rolling On and On.<sup>39</sup>

Irenaeus goes on to fill out his mock-Pleroma with aeons like Gourd, Cucumber, and Melon, but it is with Irenaeus’s first-principle that we are primarily interested. Irenaeus describes the first-principle thus: “Est quaedam Proarche regalis, proanennioetos, proanypostatos, Virtus proprocyli-domene.” The Greek substrate is lost, but Rousseau offers the following retro-translation based on the transliterated Greek: “Ἔστι τις Προαρχὴ βασιλική, προανεννόητος, προανυπόστατος τε καὶ προπροκυλινδομένη.”<sup>40</sup>

It is above all the last epithet of Irenaeus’s mock first-principle, *proprocyli-domene* or προπροκυλινδομένη, that demonstrates Irenaeus’s *hexis*. Striking though the

<sup>37</sup> Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 10.1.46. Cf. Homer’s place in similar lists: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Imitation* 9.2.1, 32 in Germaine Aujac, *Denys d’Halicarnasse: Opusculs Rhétoriques* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002). Dio Chrysostom calls Homer “first ... middle and last” (*Or.* 18.8, [*Dio Chrysostom: Discourses 12–30* (trans. J. W. Cohoon; LCL 339; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939)]). Hermogenes’s estimation of Homer is no different than Quintilian’s or Dio Chrysostom’s: see *On Types of Style*, 389–91, in Cecil W. Wooten’s translation, *Hermogenes’ On Types of Style* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 115.

<sup>38</sup> Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 10.1.59: “illam firmam facilitatem ... ad hexin.”

<sup>39</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.4.

<sup>40</sup> Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies, Livre I* (SC 263; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979) 233.



term is, it has received little attention, and those who have addressed it have struggled to comprehend its meaning. For example, René Massuet, one of the earliest editors of *Adversus haereses*, apparently did not know what to make of Irenaeus's *propocylindomene* and so corrected it to *procylindomene*.<sup>41</sup> More recent editions retain the manuscript reading, but editors and translators have struggled to make sense of it. The uncertainty of the term's meaning is exemplified by its disparate translations, including, "first-ever-forward-rolling" (ACW), "vorwärtsfortrollende,"<sup>42</sup> "extended into space in every direction" (ANF), and Grant's "pre-prerotund,"<sup>43</sup> which follows Rousseau's "pro-pro-doté-de-rotondité."<sup>44</sup> Likewise, what sparse commentary has been offered has failed to capture the term's meaning and function in *Haer.* 1.11.4. Grant refers to the expression as "Homeric" but gives more attention to the vegetables in Irenaeus's parody, which he also relates to Homer.<sup>45</sup> Rousseau's discussion of the meaning and function of *propocylindomene* in *Haer.* 1.11.4—the best I know—makes useful points,<sup>46</sup> but Rousseau falls short of capturing the meaning of the word and its place in Irenaeus's criticism of Valentinian theology. The following section provides a brief word study of *propocylindomene* and an analysis of its function in 1.11.4. The results show that Irenaeus's use of *propocylindomene* is a creative appropriation of Homer within his critique of Valentinian theological method—an appropriation that exhibits the characteristics that Quintilian associates with *hexis* in rhetoric.

<sup>41</sup> See René Massuet, *Sancti Irenaei* (ed. J. -P. Migne; PG 7; Paris, 1857) col. 567.

<sup>42</sup> Ernst Klebba, *Des heiligen Irenäus fünf Bücher gegen die Häresien. Buch I–III* (Kempten: Jos Kösel, 1912) 37.

<sup>43</sup> *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; 10 vols.; 1885–1887; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 1:332. R. M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (The Early Church Fathers; London: Routledge, 1997) 74.

<sup>44</sup> Of these only Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus* (ACW 55), 199 n. 17 provides a rationale. The translators take *prokulindesthai* as expressing "forward-rolling action" and interpret the additional *pro-* as "first." Hence, "First-ever-forward-rolling." See also the translations in note 90 below.

<sup>45</sup> Grant, *Irenaeus*, 28 with 190 n. 19. Grant's suggestion is based not on the parody of 1.11.4 but rather 1.11.5, where Irenaeus finishes his review of the Valentinians before adding one final "melon" insult. Rousseau's Latin has, "O pepones, sophistae uituperabiles, et non uiri." Epiphanius's Greek has Ὁ ληρόλογοι σοφισταί, but according to W. Wigan Harvey, *Saint Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons' Five Books Against Heresies* (2 vols.; Cantabrigia, 1857; repr. Rochester: St. Irenaeus Press, 2013) 1:107 n. 2, Grabe thought Irenaeus quoted *Il.* 2.235. Harvey conjectured instead a paraphrase. Compare Rousseau's Greek translation of the Latin (the English trans. are mine):

Ὁ πέπωνες, σοφισταί ἐλεγχεῖς, καὶ οὐχὶ ἄνδρες; "Melons! Shameful sophists, and not men!" (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.5).

ὁ πέπωνες, κάκ' ἐλέγχε', Ἀχαιίδες, οὐκέτ' Ἀχαιοί; "Melons! Base, shameful things, Achaeian women, no longer Achaeian men!" (Homer, *Il.* 2.235).

For the vegetables in the parody, biblical antecedents have also been suggested: Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 158 n. 66, citing Num 11:5; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon* (SC 263), 235.

<sup>46</sup> For Rousseau's discussion see Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon* (SC 263), 233–34.

The starting point for our word study is a simple observation: προπροκυλίνδομαι is extremely rare in ancient literature.<sup>47</sup> It is used twice in Homer: at *Iliad* 22.221, where it describes the action of “Apollo ... groveling before Father Zeus” as he begs for Hector’s life,<sup>48</sup> and at *Odyssey* 17.525, where it describes Odysseus, who is “ever suffering woes as he wanders on and on.”<sup>49</sup> In both lines the verb can be translated “rolling on and on,” but *proprocyлиндomene* elicits two distinct images in the two passages. In the former, the image is one of exaggerated supplication, whereas the latter emphasizes the extensiveness of Odysseus’s travels. Liddell and Scott’s *A Greek-English Lexicon* provides no additional references to προπροκυλίνδομαι, which perhaps led Rousseau to suggest Homer’s influence on *Haer.* 1.11.4 and led two leading commentaries on Homer to assert that προπροκυλίνδομαι does not occur outside *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.<sup>50</sup> In point of fact, the verb is used at least seven times in five different writers outside Homer and Irenaeus before the end of the fourth century,<sup>51</sup> but these uses merely confirm the Homeric origin of the verb in *Adversus haereses*. Most of the uses of *proprocyлиндomene* come in literary or grammatical handbooks, usually in direct quotations of Homer.<sup>52</sup> The exception is Oppian’s *Halieutica* 1.167, where προπροκυλίνδομαι describes a fish “rolling

<sup>47</sup> Προπροκυλίνδομαι is built from κυλίνδω, which is common enough; see Homer, *Il.* 22.414, Plato, *Phaedr.* 275e, and Tatian *Or. ad Graec.* 21.4. Its extended form, προκυλινδ(έ)ομαι, which usually means “to roll before” in the sense of “to prostrate one’s self,” is rarer, though still used in Aristophanes’s *Birds*, 501—a play to which Irenaeus alludes at *Haer.* 2.14.1. It is possible, but unlikely in my view, that Irenaeus derives his reference to Aristophanes from a doxography as Grant maintains in “Early Christianity and Greek Comic Poetry,” *CP* 60 (1965) 157–63, at 157–58. At any rate, Irenaeus uses *proprocyлиндomene* in a different sense than Aristophanes uses προκυλινδέομαι. It appears unlikely that Irenaeus constructed his *proprocyлиндomene* on his own. It was not common to duplicate the προ- in order to intensify the verb. Liddell and Scott list only nine προπρο- words, and a large percentage of the examples listed in those entries occur in two poets, Apollonius Rhodius and Oppian, who probably was himself inspired by Homer’s use of προπροκυλίνδομαι (see n. 53 below).

<sup>48</sup> Ἀπόλλων προπροκυλινδόμενος πατρός Διός; Homer, *Il.* 22.220–21 (LCL 171). Cf. Walter Leaf, *The Iliad: Vol. II Books XIII–XXIV* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1960) 446: “rolling violently, i.e. grovelling.” Paul Mazon, *Homère Iliade Tome IV (Chants XIX–XXIV)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982): “en se roulant aux pieds de Zeus Père.”

<sup>49</sup> πῆματα πάσχων, προπροκυλινδόμενος; *Od.* 17.524–25; LCL 105.

<sup>50</sup> Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon* (SC 263), 234: Irenaeus was “trop heureux de trouver dans Homère,” a word as redundant as προ-προ-κυλινδόμενη. Grant apparently follows at Irenaeus, 28, and 190 n. 19. The Homer commentaries alluded to are Nicholas Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary* (ed. G. S. Kirk; 6 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, repr. 2000) 6:131; Joseph Russo, Manuel Fernández-Galiano, Alfred Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey* (3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 3:44.

<sup>51</sup> Statistics from TLG lemma and text searches, performed February 2022.

<sup>52</sup> See Fred Householder, *The Syntax of Apollonius Dyscolus* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1981) 231; R. Janko, *Philodemus On Poems: Book 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 287, where Philodemus selects the term from “the poet” in order to illustrate the euphonic effect of the duplicated προ- on the sense of hearing; Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s *On Literary Composition*, 110–11 (*Dionysius of Halicarnassus: Critical Essays, Volume II: On Literary Composition. Dinarchus. Letters to Ammaeus and Pompeius* [trans. Stephen Usher; LCL 466; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985]), where Dionysius quotes the line from *Iliad* to illustrate Homer’s mimesis: the lengthy word προπροκυλινδόμενος matches Apollo’s “long and deeply earnest prayer.”

on and on” as it retreats from birds. Though in *Halieutica* Oppian does not use *proprocyliodomene* in a quotation of Homer, Oppian, according to Adam Nicholas Bartley, still likely learned the word from Homer.<sup>53</sup> Oppian follows Quintilian’s advice by imitating Homeric vocabulary in his own poetry.

The extreme rarity of προπροκυλίνδομαι has two immediate implications for Irenaeus’s use of Homer. First, that the term appears to have been used exclusively under Homer’s influence makes it all but certain that *proprocyliodomene* in 1.11.4 is an appropriation of Homer. Second, the rarity of the word shows that Irenaeus has, as Quintilian says, “practically all words” acquired from “the best” authors. This goes part way in showing that Irenaeus’s appropriation of Homer accords with the way Homer was used by advanced practitioners of the classical art form that Quintilian teaches, but it remains to be determined if Irenaeus has selected and ordered his Homeric term in a way well suited to his occasion, namely, his criticism of Valentinian theology.

Examining the selection and ordering of *proprocyliodomene* within Irenaeus’s discourse is all the more important because, for all the attention scholars have paid to Irenaeus’s rhetorical training, Irenaeus’s application of rhetorical principles in his own polemic remains underappreciated. Though scholars have often noted Irenaeus’s use of “ordering” or “arrangement,” *dispositio* or οἰκονομία, as a theological principle,<sup>54</sup> they have rarely provided examples of Irenaeus putting the principle to work in his rhetoric. Rather the opposite is the case: Irenaeus’s “ordering” in *Adversus haereses* has been regularly criticized.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, the suitedness of *proprocyliodomene* to Irenaeus’s parody has been questioned, with Rousseau suggesting Irenaeus chose the word for its redundancy rather than “for its precise signification.”<sup>56</sup> This assessment sells Irenaeus well short. A close reading reveals that Irenaeus has carefully selected and arranged the terms within his parody to suit his critique of Valentinian theology.

Irenaeus presents his parody after comparing the Ptolemaean system described in *Haer.* 1.1-9 to the systems of several other Valentinians in *Haer.* 1.11. He will go on to describe yet more elaborate systems, but he pauses in 1.11.4 to drive home the points he has been making with his parody. In particular, Irenaeus attacks what he sees as verbosity and arbitrariness in Valentinian theology. In inventing new aeons

<sup>53</sup> Bartley has argued that Oppian used *proprocyliodomene* here and other unique *propro-* prefixes elsewhere under Homer’s influence (Adam Nicholas Bartley, *Stories from the Mountains, Stories from the Sea: The Digressions and Similes of Oppian’s Halieutica and the Cynegetica* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2003] 237, 258).

<sup>54</sup> See Grant, *Irenaeus*, 49–50; John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (OECs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Briggman, “Theory, Part 1,” 517–23.

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., R. A. Norris, “The Insufficiency of Scripture: *Adversus haereses* 2 and the Role of Scripture in Irenaeus’s Anti-Gnostic Polemic,” in *Reading in Christian Communities: Essays on Interpretation in the Early Church* (ed. Charles A. Bobertz and David Brakke; Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 63–79, at 65: “his way of organizing his polemic is an odd one.”

<sup>56</sup> Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon* (SC 263), 234.

whom they describe with pseudo-philosophical jargon,<sup>57</sup> Irenaeus maintains that each Valentinian teacher claims to pursue “a greater height and a more profound knowledge”<sup>58</sup> but is inwardly motivated only to “appear more perfect than the perfect and be more knowledgeable of the truth than the Gnostics.”<sup>59</sup> Since each teacher invents new aeons only to transcend his predecessors, the number of aeons grows without limit,<sup>60</sup> and since, in Irenaeus’s view, nothing but pride guides the introduction of new aeons, new “knowledge” can be “discovered” by anyone—even Irenaeus himself.<sup>61</sup> Their systems, in short, are pretentiously obtruse and arbitrary. To illustrate these criticisms, Irenaeus invents a new first-principle and piles upon it a series of epithets designed to build to *proprocyliodomene*: *proarche*, *proanenoetos*, and *proanypostatos*.

In Irenaeus’s parody, two principles guide the selection and ordering of these epithets. First, each epithet recalls authentic Valentinian terminology. Irenaeus himself reports that Valentinians used *proarche* and *proanenoetos* to describe their aeons. The third epithet, *proanypostatos* (προανυπόστατός), is not Valentinian, but it retains a Valentinian flavor first because it begins with the *pro-* prefix and secondly because its meaning, “beyond un-substantial,” is apparently related to the authentic Valentinian term, προόντα.<sup>62</sup>

The reason why Irenaeus transitions from authentic Valentinian terminology to terminology that only looks and sounds Valentinian constitutes the second principle guiding Irenaeus’s selection and ordering: Irenaeus’s list mimicks the pursuit of increasing (false-) knowledge and mystery he charges against the Valentinians by building in obscurity as it progresses. The first term, *proarche*, was common in Valentinian teaching. It was used as Rousseau notes by the “renowned teacher” of 1.11.3<sup>63</sup> and also by the Ptolemaeans in 1.1.1 and the anonymous Valentinian in 1.11.5. The second, *proanenoetos*, is still authentically Valentinian but is only ascribed to the teacher of *Haer.* 1.11.3.<sup>64</sup> With *proanenoetos*, Irenaeus increases the obscurity of his aeon by following a ubiquitous Valentinian expression with a term that is rare in Valentinian teaching. Irenaeus’s third epithet, *proanypostatos*, escalates the sense of obscurity to an even greater degree. It is not used elsewhere in *Adversus haereses* or, to my knowledge, in any other ancient source. It appears to

<sup>57</sup> On the inaccessibility of the Valentinians’ doctrines, see Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.4.3.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 1.11.3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 1.11.5.

<sup>60</sup> See ibid. 1.21.1, where Irenaeus complains each teacher invents a new account.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., ibid. 2.16.4 on Basilides’s followers, who posit 365 aeons and criticize the Valentinians for acknowledging only 30. Irenaeus asks why there cannot be 4,380 aeons. See further 2.26.2.

<sup>62</sup> Used by the Ptolemaeans according to Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.1.1. See note 65 below. For broader comments, see E. R. Dodds, *Proclus: The Elements of Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) 262.

<sup>63</sup> Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon* (SC 263), 234.

<sup>64</sup> It appears again only in 1.12.4, where Irenaeus lists divergent Valentinian opinions concerning the Savior. It is unclear who is responsible for the positions described there, but the language is reminiscent of 1.11.3.

be Irenaeus's coinage, probably intended to make his aeon supercede the Valentinian aeon that is "beyond-essence" (πρωόντα) but not "beyond-un-substantial" as Irenaeus's is.<sup>65</sup> In coining a new epithet for his first-principle, Irenaeus has done exactly what he accuses the Valentinians of doing: he has concocted his own esoteric "knowledge," advancing his own "truth" beyond that of the Valentinians themselves. And not only that, but it is possible, as Rousseau claims, that Irenaeus intends *proanypostatos* to strike the reader as repetitive.<sup>66</sup> If so, the term has the additional function of mocking the Valentinians by using their methods to arrive at absurd results.

This leads to *propocyndomene*, which Irenaeus deploys within his parody to emphasize the arbitrariness and absurdity of Valentinian theological method. The term does this in several ways. First, it continues the principles underlying the selection and ordering of the first three aeons in that its *propocy-* prefix advances the parody's sense of escalating grandiosity by building on the Valentinian *pro-*. But with *propocyndomene*, Irenaeus does not simply add more of the same criticism as the first three epithets implied. Rather, Irenaeus replicates the elitism he charges against the Valentinians by using an obscure Homeric word. They were not the only ones, Irenaeus shows, who possessed obscure knowledge.

Most of all, contrary to Rousseau's claim, the meaning of *propocyndomene*, which is here as elsewhere in ancient literature "rolling on and on," makes the term a suitable climax for Irenaeus's list of epithets. With *propocyndomene*, Irenaeus retains an ostensibly Valentinian form but abandons Valentinian meaning. Instead, Irenaeus supplies an epithet that indicates his own opinion of Valentinian aeons and epithets: they roll on and on. They never stop. Each Valentinian invents more and more.<sup>67</sup> By using an ostensibly Valentinian formula to arrive at epithets that reflect his own understanding of their systems, Irenaeus intends to impress the faults of Valentinian method upon his readers with humorous mockery—mockery that becomes still more explicit when Irenaeus abandons Valentinian morphology and posits the aeons Gourd, Cucumber, and Melon.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> The prefix in πρωόντα likely is intended to have a negative function, as Einar Thomassen explains: *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 197. In this case, Irenaeus's term may have an even more directly related meaning: un-substantial (πρωόντα) and "un-un-substantial" (*proanypostatos*). Cf. the report assigned to Basilides in *Ref.* 7.21.1: οὐχ ὄλη, οὐκ οὐσία, οὐκ ἀνούσιον (text M. David Litwa, *Refutation of All Heresies* [WGRW; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016]).

<sup>66</sup> Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon* (SC 263), 234.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus* (ACW 55), 199 n. 17, where *propocyndomene*, understood as "first-ever-forward-rolling," anticipates "the long line of an indefinite number of future emissions" and is intended "to ridicule the Gnostic position."

<sup>68</sup> Employing a spattering of Homeric language to enhance the comedic effect of one's parody has roots in Greek literature written centuries before Irenaeus wrote *Adversus haereses*. See S. Douglas Olson and Alexander Sens, *Matro of Pitane and the Tradition of Epic Parody in the Fourth Century BCE* (American Classical Studies 44; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 3–12.

In 1.11.4, then, Irenaeus uses Homer to criticize Valentinian theological method, but his appropriation of Homeric material is no less sophisticated than is his positive use of other classical resources. Irenaeus appropriates Homeric material in a manner that is commensurate with the way Quintilian suggests an advanced practitioner of rhetoric would. In so doing, Irenaeus reveals his own *hexis* in rhetoric and his erudition in Homer's writings.

### ■ Irenaeus's *Hexis* and the Homeric Cento

This article has noted Irenaeus's use of Homer in the negative or critical aspects of his theological project and demonstrated that Irenaeus's appropriation of Homer exhibits creativity and skill equal to that of one who has achieved *hexis* in rhetoric. In so doing, it has elucidated the role of Homer in Irenaeus's theological work as well as Irenaeus's facility in classical literature and art forms. This final section revisits the Homeric cento in 1.9.4 in light of the foregoing discussion.

Again in 1.9.4, Irenaeus uses Homer to criticize his opponents' theological method—specifically, their exegesis. At the outset, it is necessary to clarify that while some describe Irenaeus as a critic of centos as an art form,<sup>69</sup> this is not the case. In 1.9.4, Irenaeus accuses his opponents of constructing a rule of truth by drawing lines from Scripture as if they were composing a cento, irrespective of the original “hypothesis” or “plot” those lines supported in the biblical narrative.<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus maintains that constructing a theology via this method is wrong, but he does not condemn writing centos for other purposes. It is, then, in a criticism of Valentinian exegetical method and not of any particular classical art form that Irenaeus provides the following Homeric cento:

“Thus saying, there sent forth from his house deeply groaning.”—*Od.* 10.76.  
 “The hero Hercules conversant with mighty deeds.”—*Od.* 21.26.  
 “Eurystheus, the son of Sthenelus, descended from Perseus.”—*Il.* 19.123.  
 “That he might bring from Erebus the dog of gloomy Hades.”—*Il.* 8.368.  
 “And he advanced like a mountain-bred lion confident of strength.”—*Od.* 6.130.  
 “Rapidly through the city, while all his friends followed.”—*Il.* 24.327.  
 “Both maidens, and youths, and much-enduring old men.”—*Od.* 11.38.  
 “Mourning for him bitterly as one going forward to death.”—*Il.* 24.328.  
 “But Hermes and the blue-eyed Athena conducted him.”—*Od.* 11.626.  
 “For she knew the mind of her brother, how it laboured with grief.”—*Il.* 2.409.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> E.g. M. D. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) 11; A. Le Boulluec, “Exégèse et polémique antignostique chez Irénée et Clément d'Alexandrie. L'exemple du centon,” *SP* 17 (1982) 707–13, at 707. Jerome's criticism of the literary genre is potentially motivated by theological and sociological factors: see Carl Springer, “Jerome and the *Cento* of Proba,” *SP* 28 (1993) 96–105.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.14.2. “Hypothesis” is a term from literary and rhetorical theory; see Briggman, “Theory, Part 1,” 502–16.

<sup>71</sup> Trans. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Roberts and Donaldson), 1:330, with modifications. Irenaeus's cento is far from the only cento in ancient Christian literature. Nicholas Wagner has recently published a papyrus with a cento comprised of biblical verses: see “A Fragment of a Biblical



The significance of this cento for Irenaeus's theological critique has already been sketched by Wilken and has often been repeated since.<sup>72</sup> We may, then, focus on what it tells us of Irenaeus's ability to creatively and skillfully appropriate Homer to his polemic. As a piece of literature, the cento betrays a reasonable amount of skill in its author. Its composer, for example, shows erudition by quoting from throughout Homer, from four books of *Iliad* and four of *Odyssey*, including nine different passages overall. Furthermore, according to J. Rendel Harris, the author's skill is seen in that the author mostly avoids quoting successive lines of Homer.<sup>73</sup> The extent to which the cento reveals Irenaeus's own creative use of Homer, however, is unclear because the original author of the cento is unknown. Though the possibility that Irenaeus wrote the cento was raised as early as 1871, it has not been recently defended outside Dominic Unger and John J. Dillon's work.<sup>74</sup> To the contrary, most scholars after Wilken have been dismissive of the possibility that Irenaeus composed the cento himself, favoring instead the hypothesis that Irenaeus copied it from an unknown third party.<sup>75</sup>

Cento in the Duke Papyrus Archive (P.Duk. inv. 660)" *VC* 74 (2020) 505–14. For an analysis of another ancient Homeric Cento from a Christian author, the fifth-century empress Eudocia, see Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, and Brian Sowers, *In Her Own Words: The Life and Poetry of Aelia Eudocia* (Hellenic Studies 80; Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2020) 33–63. See too Anni Maria Laato's recent article on Faltonia Betitia Proba's *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi*, "Noah and the Flood in the *Cento* of Proba," *SP* 128 (2021) 57–68. Wilken's "Homeric Cento," 27–29, has a concise overview of centos in early Christianity. Tertullian, who often follows Irenaeus's heresiology, compares his opponents to those who write centos at *Praescr. haer.* 39.

<sup>72</sup> See recently John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Christian Theology in Context; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 110–11.

<sup>73</sup> J. Rendel Harris, *The Homeric Centones and the Acts of Pilate* (London: J.C. Clay and Sons, 1898) 40–41. Cf. Brian Sowers, "Herculean Centos: Myth, Polemics, and the Crucified Hero in Late Antiquity," in *Herakles Inside and Outside the Church: From the First Apologists to the End of the Quattrocento* (ed. Arlene Allan, Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, and Emma Stafford; Leiden: Brill, 2020) 94–115, at 100 n. 26.

<sup>74</sup> Heinrich Ziegler, *Irenäus der Bischof von Lyon. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte der altkatholischen Kirche* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1871) 17. Ziegler is often cited (e.g., Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus* [ACW 55], 181 n. 21) to the effect that he believed Irenaeus composed the cento, but his position is non-committal: "Mag Irenäus diese Zusammenstellung selbst gemacht oder aus dem Buche irgend eines derjenigen Schriftsteller entlehnt haben." See Osborn's reading of Ziegler: *Irenaeus*, 158 n. 68. Grant, referring to Ziegler, reaches the same conclusion at "Irenaeus and Hellenistic Culture," 48. P. Beuzart wrote, "il compose un centon d'Homère," in *Essai sur la théologie d'Irénée. Étude d'histoire des dogmes* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1908) 15. For Unger and Dillon's position, see *St. Irenaeus* (ACW 55), 181–2 n. 21.

<sup>75</sup> See "Homeric Cento," 29. Sandnes follows Wilken's reasoning at *The Gospel 'According to Homer and Virgil': Cento and Canon* (NovTSup 138; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 134 n.81. Cf. Harris, *Homeric Centones*, 39, who calls the cento an "interesting specimen quoted by Irenaeus"; Harvey, *Irenaeus*, 86 n.2. Benoît, *Irénée*, 60–61, believes Irenaeus learned the cento in school. So also D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Paideia and Polemic in Second-Century Lyons: Irenaeus on Education," in *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Emma Wasserman; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017) 323–57, at 351 n.82; David Jorgensen, *Treasures Hidden in a Field: Early Christian Reception of the Gospel of Matthew* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016) 60–61. Bernhard Mutschler suggests it is from an anonymous contemporary source: *Irenäus als*



The question deserves fresh consideration here because the arguments for and against Irenaeus's authorship have been unconvincing, often relying on the ambiguous phrases used to introduce the cento in 1.9.4. In some cases, the same evidence has been cited to support contradictory theses. For example, Unger and Dillon support their case for Irenaeus authorship by insisting: "Irenaeus does not say that he is copying from someone else,"<sup>76</sup> but Bingham refers to the same silence as a point against Irenaeus's authorship. Irenaeus, Bingham avers, "tends to clarify" when he is offering his own "composition."<sup>77</sup> Bingham supports his claim with a reference to *Haer.* 1.4.3–4 and 1.11.4, but these two passages are hardly sufficient for establishing a rule for determining whether Irenaeus authored a parody or poem that appears within his own work. In 1.11.4, at least, Irenaeus uses first-person verbs to mock his opponent's style rather than to clarify that he wrote the parody he presents.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the reasoning can be replicated from similar evidence to produce the opposite conclusion. For example, elsewhere in *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus specifies that he is citing a poem from another author;<sup>79</sup> one could reason from this that Irenaeus must be the author of the cento because he tends to specify when he is quoting someone else's poetry, but this would be rash. Irenaeus's apologetic remark just before the cento supplies sufficient reason—if one is needed—why he might have chosen not to specify he was the cento's author. In saying, "For the sake of illustration it is not forbidden to cite these verses" (*Haer.* 1.9.4), Irenaeus implies some of his readers might consider it forbidden to cite verses pertaining to non-Christian deities in other contexts. So, in light of the negative attitude Irenaeus anticipates, he could well have declined to advertise his own facility in Homer. Considering all this, it is clear that the vagueness of Irenaeus in respect to the cento's author is just that: vague. No conclusion can be drawn from it. Much the same can be said of the other ambiguous expressions used to introduce the cento.<sup>80</sup>

That neither advocates nor critics of Irenaeus authorship of the cento have been able to marshal compelling cases for or against Irenaeus's authorship may lead one

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*johanneischer Theologe. Studien zur Schriftauslegung bei Irenäus von Lyon* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 21; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004) 119. Rousseau declines to favor a hypothesis (*Irénée de Lyon* [SC 263], 222). Droge is one of the few after Wilken to attribute the cento to Valentinus: see "Homeric Exegesis," 320.

<sup>76</sup> Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus* (ACW 55), 181 n. 21.

<sup>77</sup> Bingham, "Paideia and Polemic," 351 n. 82.

<sup>78</sup> In *Haer.* 1.11.4, quoted above, Irenaeus parodies the "renowned teacher's" use of first-person verbs (*voco*, καλῶ/ὀνομάζω) in naming his aeons. Irenaeus's claim is that saying "I name the aeon X" implies that the speaker arbitrarily invents "truth" rather than receiving it from Scripture or tradition.

<sup>79</sup> See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.15.6.

<sup>80</sup> For competing interpretations of the phrase *scribens ita/γράφων οὕτως*, see Wilken, "Homeric Cento," 29, followed by Sandnes, "According to Homer," 134 n. 81, and Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus* (ACW 55), 181 n. 21. Wilken suggests "both" (ἀμφοτέροις) refers to Valentinians and the cento's author. It appears to me that Irenaeus is comparing "both" types of literature referenced in 1.9.4, centos and Valentinian exegesis.

to doubt whether the issue can be settled. And indeed, barring the discovery of new evidence the question must be approached in terms of probability rather than certainty. Yet, the majority of scholars have dismissed the possibility of Irenaeus's authorship too quickly, almost as if the truest obstacle to seeing Irenaeus as the author of the cento lies in an inability to imagine Irenaeus playing so skillfully with classical literature. This is true even of scholars who claim neutrality on the question of Irenaean authorship. In a recent treatment, Brian Sowers refers to the question of the cento's composer as "unanswerable,"<sup>81</sup> but he goes on to propose that the cento "should be read and interpreted on its own before being placed within the context of Irenaeus's polemical agenda."<sup>82</sup> This method, which presupposes Irenaeus did not compose the cento for his "polemical agenda," allows Sowers to conclude that Irenaeus "fails to appreciate its unifying themes."<sup>83</sup> In principle, then, the question of the cento's authorship remains open, but in practice Sowers interprets the cento as the composition of another. This approach fails to give due credit to the possibility that Irenaeus wrote the cento himself, a possibility that should remain on the table for three reasons.

The first and most essential point that would allow for the possibility that Irenaeus composed the Homeric cento himself is that, in light of our analysis of *Haer.* 1.11.4, it is certain that Irenaeus had the facility or *hexis* necessary to compose the cento. In the parody of 1.11.4, which no one denies Irenaeus wrote, Irenaeus employs an exceedingly rare Homeric word in a way ideally suited to his polemic. To write the cento, he would only have to apply the facility he demonstrates in appropriating the single Homeric word *propocyliodomene* on a broader scale, recalling and ordering whole lines rather than single words.

But perhaps this over-simplifies the case. One might object, for example, that Irenaeus is unlikely to have written the cento because the cento evidences a more thorough knowledge of Homer than Irenaeus does elsewhere. André Benoît, who denies that Irenaeus composed the cento, has noted that Irenaeus does not evidence the same familiarity with *Odyssey* as he does with *Iliad*.<sup>84</sup> The latter Irenaeus quotes

<sup>81</sup> Sowers, "Herculean Centos," 99–102, at 98.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 100. Irenaeus denies that the hypothesis of the cento is the same as the hypotheses that the lines were originally written to support but not that the cento has "unifying themes."

<sup>84</sup> Benoît, *Irénée*, 60–61. Briggman's comment, "He quotes passages from numerous books throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which suggests he had read both works in their entirety" (*God and Christ*, 33), accepts the cento as indicative of Irenaeus's reading. Irenaeus alludes to an episode from *Il.* 2.1ff. at *Haer.* 1.12.2 and quotes *Il.* 14.201 at 2.14.2 (on this "citation littérale," see Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies, Livre II* [SC 293; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1982] 255). Hermann Diels, *Doxographi graeci* (repr. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1965) 171, suggests that, in 2.14.2, Irenaeus is following Pseudo-Plutarch's doxography, but the line quoted in *Plac. philos.* 1.3 is *Il.* 14.246. Ps.-Plutarch does not refer to Thetis as Irenaeus does, nor does the passage in question refer to the generation of the gods as in Irenaeus and *Il.* 14.201; so, it appears that Irenaeus is following the outline of a doxography but has replaced the doxographer's citation of *Il.* 14.246 with a citation of 14.201, which is more suited to his criticism of Valentinian theology. It remains possible, however, that Irenaeus has learned or recalled the line from a Christian

or alludes to at least seven times. In contrast, outside *Haer.* 1.9.4, Irenaeus does not quote *Odyssey*. The cento, unlike the rest of *Adversus haereses*, quotes from *Odyssey*, and four different books at that. This is significant because, according to Raffaella Cribiore, *Iliad* was read earlier in the education process and was, furthermore, read more completely.<sup>85</sup> Since the quotations in *Haer.* only prove that Irenaeus read *Iliad*, one might maintain that Irenaeus does not appear to have progressed far enough in his reading to have mastered *Odyssey*, too, and therefore is not likely to be the cento's author.

Two factors undermine this argument. For the first, we return one last time to Irenaeus's use of *proprokylin-domene*. As was noted above, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* use *προπροκυλίνδομαι* in two different senses. In *Iliad*, Athena uses *προπροκυλίνδομαι* to describe Apollo grovelling or rolling on and on before Zeus, begging for Hector's life. Here, the verb *προπροκυλίνδομαι*, like the less extravagant *προκυλινδ(έ)ομαι*, describes an act of supplication.<sup>86</sup> The duplicated syllable functions to emphasize the "already somewhat far-fetched" image of Apollo humbling himself before Zeus.<sup>87</sup> Athena uses this exaggerated and "remarkably contemptuous" language to mock the lengths to which Apollo has gone in vain to protect Hector from Achilles, who is now to defeat Hector with Athena's help.<sup>88</sup> By mocking Hector's divine defender, Athena intends to inspire the confidence necessary for Achilles to face and defeat Hector.<sup>89</sup> In *Odyssey*, however, the verb refers to Odysseus's wanderings as his "rolling on and on." It is this latter image that fits Irenaeus's parody. The Valentinian epithets

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intermediary (cf. Athenagoras, *Leg.* 18.3 and Theophilus, *Ad Autol.* 2.5). Irenaeus also quotes *Iliad* at 2.5.4 (*Il.* 4.43), 2.22.6 (*Il.* 4.1–2), and 4.33.3 (*Il.* 9.312–13). There are allusions to *Il.* 2.235 (1.11.5) and *Il.* 5.844–45 (1.13.6).

<sup>85</sup> Cribiore writes that copies of *Iliad* are "three times more numerous" than copies of *Odyssey* (*Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001] 194); cf. eadem, "A Homeric Writing Exercise and Reading Homer in School," *Tyche* 9 (1994) 1–9, at 4. According to Cribiore, the same preference for *Iliad* is evidenced in second and third-century literature: Dio of Prusa, Maximus of Tyre, Aelius Aristides, Plutarch, and Lucian show *Iliad* "read in its entirety" and quoted at a 2:1 ratio compared to *Odyssey* (*Gymnastics*, 196–97). Likewise, Nicole Zeegers-Vander Vorst's table of citations of poetic literature in the early Christian apologies shows a massive preference for *Iliad* over *Odyssey* (*Les citations des poètes grecs chez les Apologistes Chrétiens du IIe siècle* [Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 1972] 32–33). P. Dudzik finds a 10:1 preference for *Iliad* over *Odyssey* in Tatian ("Tatian the Assyrian and Greek Rhetoric: Homer's Heroes Agamemnon, Nestor and Theristes in Tatian's *Oratio ad Graecos*," *SP* 93 [2017] 179–89, at 181).

<sup>86</sup> John Gould connects "Apollo pleading with Zeus for the life of Hector" here with Priam's appeal to the Trojans a little later in *Il.* 22.414: "HIKETEIA," *JHS* 93 (1973) 74–103, at 94 n. 102. There, Priam is described as "rolling in dung" (*κυλινδόμενος κατὰ κόπρον*). The "near parallel," as Gould says, confirms that the former passage and its unique term *προπροκυλινδόμενος* refers to "supplication and (painful) self-abasement."

<sup>87</sup> Irene J. F. de Jong, *Homer: Iliad Book XXII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 116; cf. Leaf, *Iliad*, 446.

<sup>88</sup> Richardson, *Iliad*, 131.

<sup>89</sup> de Jong, *Iliad*, 116.

roll on and on. They do not grovel at anyone's feet.<sup>90</sup> It is the image that the verb creates in *Odyssey* rather than the image in *Iliad* that is more likely to have inspired Irenaeus to employ it in his parody. We have, then, an indication that Irenaeus had read at least some of *Odyssey* closely enough to recall its unique vocabulary. His ability to use obscure bits of *Odyssey* in one case makes it more believable that he could do so elsewhere, such as when composing a Homeric cento.

A second indication of Irenaeus's knowledge of Homer's lesser read books comes in *Haer.* 1.9.4 itself.<sup>91</sup> Irenaeus writes of the lines in the cento, "some of them were spoken of Odysseus, others of Hercules himself, others of Priam, others of Menelaus and Agamemnon." Scholars have noted that this comment reveals Irenaeus's knowledge of Homer but have not unpacked the significance of this comment for the question of Irenaeus's authorship of the cento.<sup>92</sup> Yet, the comment is revealing. With these words, Irenaeus correctly identifies the context for each line of the cento: *Od.* 10.76 and 6.130 pertain to Odysseus, *Od.* 21.26, *Il.* 8.368, and *Od.* 11.626 apply to Hercules,<sup>93</sup> the two lines from *Iliad* 24 belong to Priam, and finally, *Il.* 2.409 is taken from narration concerning Menelaus and Agamemnon.<sup>94</sup> If Irenaeus has not learned the contexts of each line from his source, then he apparently possessed the knowledge of Homer necessary to recall or at least locate the correct context for each line, including the passages from *Odyssey*. In identifying the context for the *Odyssey* lines, Irenaeus provides evidence that he was more familiar with that epic than his use of Homer elsewhere demonstrates. This knowledge of *Odyssey* makes it impossible to cite his alleged ignorance of the epic as evidence he is not the author of the cento. In fact, the simplest explanation for Irenaeus's ability to identify the original referent of each of Homer's lines may be that he noted the contexts himself when composing the poem.

A third and final point in favor of Irenaeus's authorship stands in the proximity of Homeric references. Irenaeus occasionally refers to Homer throughout his work, but

<sup>90</sup> Reynders apparently relies too heavily on *Iliad* when he writes for *proprocyliodomene* in 1.11.4, "qui se roule aux pieds" ("Le polémique," 26). Cf. Rousseau's definition, "se rouler aux pieds de (quelqu'un)" (*Irénée de Lyon* [SC 263], 234), which explains why he believes the meaning of *proprocyliodomene* does not fit Irenaeus's parody.

<sup>91</sup> The quotations from *Iliad* 19 and 24 in the cento could be used to construct an argument against Irenaeus's authorship parallel to the argument outlined above. Criboire notes that only advanced students progressed to *Iliad*'s second half ("Homeric Writing Exercise," 4–5). Irenaeus does not quote from any of *Iliad*'s last ten books. If the quotation of *Il.* 14.201 at *Haer.* 2.14.2 derives from a Christian intermediary rather than Irenaeus's reading of Homer (see n. 84 above), the evidence for Irenaeus's reading stops at Book 9. Again, one could argue the cento's author read more Homer than Irenaeus did.

<sup>92</sup> See Wilken, "Homeric Cento," 32. An apparent allusion to this line supports Irenaeus's authorship of the cento in Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus* (ACW 55), 181 n. 21.

<sup>93</sup> *Od.* 11.626 is spoken by Hercules in first-person in Homer, here of Hercules in third person: Homer, in LCL: Ἑρμείας δὲ μ' ἐπεμψεν ἰδὲ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη; Irenaeus, in SC: Ἑρμείας δ' ἀπέπεμπεν ἰδὲ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη.

<sup>94</sup> Irenaeus does not refer to the contexts of *Il.* 19.123 and *Od.* 11.38 because the lines themselves refer to the original subjects.

*Haer.* 1.9–13 has an unusually high concentration of references to or uses of Homer. There, we have the cento (1.9.4), with its lines from across *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, a comparison of Homer’s Zeus to the Valentinian god (1.12.2),<sup>95</sup> and a reference to the “helmet of Hades” (*Haer.* 1.13.6; cf. *Il.* 5.844–45)—all these to Homer by name. Adding *propocyndomene* in 1.11.4 and the appropriation of Homer’s “melon” insult in 1.11.5,<sup>96</sup> Irenaeus utilizes Homer five times in five chapters. In so doing, he exceeds in a short space the number of references to Homer that can be found in the remainder of *Adversus haereses*.<sup>97</sup> It seems that immediately after giving the cento, Irenaeus had Homer on his mind and plenty of Homeric material at his fingertips. It is possible that his appropriation of such a unique word as *propocyndomene* and other uses of Homer in the chapters immediately following 1.9.4 are the fruits of the reading he had just done while composing his cento.

It may not be possible to prove with certainty that Irenaeus wrote the Homeric cento, but it is possible, perhaps even likely, that he did. He had the skill and knowledge to select and appropriate unique words from Homer, he was familiar with the context of the lines he reproduces in 1.9.4, and he appears to have had Homer on his mind when writing the subsequent chapters of *Haer.* Book 1. The only objection would be that such a composition would be quite a large investment, given that he passes by it soon after, but Wilken points out that the cento takes a central role in his argumentation.<sup>98</sup> It serves as an effective illustration of lines used outside their original hypothesis. Recent scholarship has emphasized even more the significance of this idea in Irenaeus’s writing.<sup>99</sup> It would appear plausible, then, that Irenaeus found the work of composing the cento worth the time and effort.

## ■ Conclusion

Scholars have increasingly appreciated Irenaeus’s familiarity with classical culture overall, particularly in specific fields such as philosophy and rhetoric. These Irenaeus employs to develop his own positive theology. In this article, I have maintained that Irenaeus uses Homer with commensurate creativity and skill, though to advance a different aspect of his broader theological project. In *Haer.* 1.11.4, Irenaeus appropriates the unique Homeric term *propocyndomene* to his criticism of Valentinian theological method. In this parody, Irenaeus uses Homer in the same way Quintilian envisions the student who has achieved *hexis* would.

<sup>95</sup> See the first section of this study.

<sup>96</sup> See n. 45 above.

<sup>97</sup> Homer is referenced four more times by name: Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.5.4 (quoting *Il.* 4.43); 2.14.2 (referring to *Il.* 14.201); 2.22.6 (quoting *Il.* 4.1–2); 4.33.3 (quoting *Il.* 9.312–13). There are perhaps other allusions such as *Haer.* 2.14.4 (see John J. Dillon and Dominic J. Unger, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies (Book 2)* [ACW 65; New York: Newman, 2012] 135 n. 24), but even considering such passages, the point stands that *Haer.* 1.9–13 contains a disproportionately high amount of Homeric material.

<sup>98</sup> Wilken, “Homeric Cento,” 33.

<sup>99</sup> See n.70 above.

The knowledge and competence Irenaeus displays in this passage should lead us to reconsider the probability of Irenaeus himself having composed the cento of *Haer.* 1.9.4. If the hypothesis that Irenaeus wrote the cento himself appears a possible solution, perhaps even the simplest solution, then *Haer.* 1.9.4 can be regarded as the most creative and skillful appropriation of Homeric material to the critical part of Irenaeus's theological project. Despite the impiety in Homer's depiction of the gods, Irenaeus knew Homer's writings well and considered them a valid resource for the advancement of Christian theology.