VALENTINUS POETA: NOTES ON ΘΕΡΟΣ*

BY

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Introduction

The terrain of Valentinian studies has changed somewhat with the publication of Christoph Markschies's *Valentinus Gnosticus*. Close examination of the fragments attributed to Valentinus and resistance to reading back the reports of heresiologists or the systems of later Valentinians have led Markschies to question the "Gnosticism" of the supposed Gnostic heresiarch. If Markschies ultimately adopts a sort of agnosticism as to the real position of Valentinus, it is a robust one which runs against the current of recent research and the tendency to read the fragments with what may now seem to be an unwarranted inter-textuality, whether in the traditional form of concern with orthodox doctrinal history or in terms of comparison with the library of Nag Hammadi.

While Markschies has not won the debate, the center has certainly shifted, and the more serious consideration given by him to the fragments of Valentinus' writings seems to be the example for research to follow in the near future. Nevertheless, the value of a hermeneutical separation of Valentinus from Gnosticism cannot dispense entirely with the need to consider how he "became" Gnostic. Whether the disjuncture between the reports and the fragments represents an esoteric tradition, a personal change, or the transformation of his tradition by followers, some link must be provided to the emergence of the fulsome theological systems already well-known to Irenaeus. There is therefore more room for discussion of the writings of Valentinus themselves after Markschies's massive contribution, rather than less; but careful attention must be given both to the likely original contexts and meanings, and to the readings and reception that followed soon after.
The Refutatio Omnium Haeresium of Hippolytus contains a poem which is unique among the remnants of Valentinus; not so much a fragment as a complete, if tiny, work.6

Although form or genre might hint at the purpose of such a work, in this case the clues are of a subtle nature at best. The poem or hymn, whose title could be rendered “Harvest” or “Summer” or both,8 observes the conventions of Greek meter.9 The poem indicates some literary skill, but avoids more traditional or “high” classical forms still being used by others in this period.10 Its dactylic tetrameter uses traditional components, but in an unusual combination, and the “mouse-tail” endings of each line (iambics instead of dactyls or spondees) are also notable. There are many hexameter verses using “mouse-tails” (individual lines are found even in Homer) but whole works are few in number, and the uses of these extant “mouse-tail” hexameters vary, as does modern judgement on their literary merits.11 A pair of “mouse-tailed” acrostic song-texts from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (P. Oxy. 15 and 1795) which deal in popular wisdom have been called sea-shanties or drinking songs.12 The Tragopodagra of Lucian uses the meter in a satirical choral section (313-25).13 An early Christian hymn of uncertain date, De Moribus Christianorum, also uses “mouse-tails,”14 and Annianus, a contemporary of Valentinus, wrote Fescinnini, a type of bawdy Latin verse, in dactylic tetrastich.15

The form of the work therefore exemplifies general trends in poetry in the period rather than revealing much about its origins or purpose.16 T.F. Higham suggested that “mouse-tailed” verses have both tragic intensity and a certain vulgarity;17 they may have been thought of as somewhat inspirational or at least emotive. It seems possible that Valentinus was consciously avoiding formality (while remaining within the rules of meter) and hence crafting a work capable of popular use, perhaps in terms reminiscent of the strategy later said to have been employed by Arius, among others.18 The dactylic mouse-tails do seem to have been intended for