

*New spins on old rotas: Virgil, Ovid, Milton**Maggie Kilgour*

As other essays in this volume have already indicated, the contours of the Virgilian rota, once considered the dominant career pattern for any serious Renaissance poet, do not seem as clear as they once did. Despite the trope of the wheel, critics have often focused on the linear, teleological thrust of the Virgilian model, which has been seen to give a progressive, developmental shape to the poet's life that reflected simultaneously the movement of civilization.¹ As Michael Putnam's essay reminds us, Virgil's model is also a rota in a truer sense, as it comes full circle to trace a movement back to its earlier origins. Virgil's career ends where it began, in the dubious land of shades, *umbrae*.² This return to origins reveals the unity of the works as a whole and brings them to a close in a final self-gathering of climactic fulfilment and resolution. But it also creates a counter, centrifugal pressure to the linear thrust of Virgil's career that resists closure. The unresolved tension between the two movements mirrors the conflict now frequently noted in the *Aeneid* itself. While Aeneas' career involves progression, his transformation from defeated Trojan into the Roman whose climactic victory over Turnus suggests the triumph of civilization over barbarism, the final moments of the text seem to suggest that the hero is relapsing into barbarism.³ The abrupt ending of the poem – which focuses on the slaying of the defeated Turnus – calls the progress of Rome into question. But it also raises questions about the career of the author which ended

¹ On this model and its influence, see Curtius 1953: 231–2, Lipking 1981: 76–93, Coolidge 1965: 1–23, Neuse 1978: 606–39, Cheney 2001: 79–80 and also Cheney 1993: 49–63.

² See Putnam above, Ch. 1, and also Theodorakopoulos 1997: 157, 162–4 especially.

³ For a discussion of the tradition of darker readings of the poem, see R. F. Thomas 2001. David Quint also shows how Aeneas' linear progress is haunted by the temptation not just to return to Troy but also to repeat his past. The journey to Rome must include but redirect this drive backwards: rather than simply replicating the past, Aeneas must find a way of recreating it 'with a difference' (Quint 1993: 50). Readers do not agree as to whether the end demonstrates such a triumphant recreation, or a darker type of regression.

equally abruptly with death.⁴ Like the poem, the Virgilian path seems haunted by shadows and questions that make the end of the poem and the author's life less the triumphal climax of interdependent empire and authorial self than a confession of radical uncertainty about the poet's past and future. If the poet's rota comes full circle, where indeed has he been going? Moreover, who has been spinning the wheel? As Nita Krevans' essay in this volume further shows, Virgil's reported and highly ambiguous deathbed request that the *Aeneid* be destroyed both reinforces and undermines the final shape of the rota. While the gesture seems one of supreme authorial control, the story reveals the lack of the poet's authority over his own works; the *Aeneid* was published, as Donatus tells us, 'auctore Augusto'.

As critics have begun to look more closely at Virgil's career, they have also begun to re-examine its meaning for and indeed dominance of Renaissance poets. Certainly other models were possible, especially for the growing number of professional playwrights whose careers took a very different shape. As several essays in this volume demonstrate, other Classical writers established alternatives as well. Patrick Cheney, who has gallantly rescued several writers from the relentlessly 'grinding circumference of the Virgilian Wheel' (Cheney 1993: 53) has argued that Ovid offered Marlowe a fruitful counter-Virgilian model. Cheney suggests that Ovid's vision of his own development from elegy to tragedy in the *Amores* presents Marlowe with 'a relatively stable and coherent Ovidian career model' (Cheney 1997: 41). Moreover, Ovid offers an alternative to the Virgilian model which is (Cheney 1997: 29):

non-progressive and non-typological: it sets up a sacred generic order only to scramble it. In this generic play, oscillation infiltrates, contaminates, and finally orders progression. Thus genre progression and genre itself remain vital to the Ovidian poet, but he delights in a series of deft manoeuvres that explode the developmental idea of a career (literary or civic) so important to Roman and Elizabethan culture, even as he clearly develops himself.

Given Ovid's general influence in the Renaissance it seems highly plausible and helpful to imagine that writers studied his example. But I have some reservations about this model. It first of all presupposes an opposition between Virgilian and Ovidian paradigms. Where Virgil is progressive and typological, Ovid is not; he scrambles the order Virgil

⁴ A rather literal identification of the death of Turnus with that of the author was made by Petrarch who wrote in his copy of Virgil: 'You were too sure a prophet of your own death: for with such words on your lips life fled you' (qtd in P. Hardie 1997a: 145).

sets up. This is a common way of thinking about the two poets, as well as their legacies in the Renaissance. It assumes that Ovid is a "bad" reader' – or at least a very naughty one – of Virgil (Cheney 1997: 15): 'I'll return to this traditional antithesis shortly. But the alternative looks somewhat limited, as Cheney's reading has Ovid creating another typological and teleological sequence, with an 'Ovidian triad' (Cheney 1997: 41), based on the plan of the *Amores*, that indeed progresses as it evolves from elegy to tragedy (epic's rival for the highest status in the Renaissance hierarchy of the genres). Although Cheney notes that, in reality, Ovid offers two career models, the one he announced in the *Amores* and the other that he actually lived, Cheney argues that only the first is important to Marlowe (Cheney 1997: 12, 47). This may be true of Marlowe, whose career reached its own abrupt and unexpected ending. But it is not true of other writers of the time. While Ovid's early proposed programme sets his (and our) expectations, it is finally his lived career, like that of Virgil, that later writers knew all too well. The spectre of Ovid's life haunted the reception of his works from the beginning.⁵

In his career, as in so many other ways, Ovid has indeed seemed the antithesis of Virgil – and certainly has *not* offered an obviously attractive role model for any later poet! Where Virgil's writing appears to unfold itself naturally towards its final epic triumph, Ovid's career has been seen as one of sad decline, a myth of regression not progression. He reaches his epic peak prematurely with the *Metamorphoses*; his last poems, written from exile in Tomis, are repetitive, and frankly whiney. It is hardly heartening for a reader when a poet himself announces that his creative powers have been worn down by circumstance. But the loss of ability becomes itself a major theme of these works, as Ovid constantly complains that his talents have been worn away by hardship; he fears that he is regressing, devolving from the urbane and witty Roman into a barbaric demi-Gete. He notes that his writing is becoming monotonous in its subject, for the exiled poet can only write of one single subject: his own dismal fate. If the *Metamorphoses*, like the *Aeneid*, ends like a grand symphony, in which beginning and end are gathered together into a single climactic whole, the end of Ovid's exilic work might better be compared to the fade-out on a modern recording, when a tune simply repeats itself over and over, echoing itself, until it disappears altogether.

⁵ See Lyne 2002: 288–300. See also Robathan 1973: 191–209 and Smarr 1991: 139–51; Piccone 2003: 389–407; and Pugh 2005.

For a long time, Ovid's disclaimers made it easy for critics to ignore these works except as the sorry end of a great talent. Still, if they are indeed the failure Ovid insists, their attraction and importance for later writers, especially those who also experienced some form of exile, seems odd, or at least sadistic or possibly masochistic. Recent criticism has begun to suggest the importance and complexity of Ovid's last poetry.⁶ Even as the poet complains that his career is over – crushed by the *princeps's* power – he is subtly putting himself back together and reinventing himself. In exile, he reviews and indeed rewrites his entire career, giving it a unifying shape, so that it appears held together as carefully as Putnam shows Virgil's was, and by oddly similar means.⁷ After experimenting with the epic in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid returns in his final works to his first source of poetry, the elegy. The themes of the erotic verse reappear, though typically metamorphosed: the frustrated sexual desire of the erotic verse becomes the longing to return home and the disdainful mistress is replaced by the *princeps*. At the end, the poet comes full circle, back to where he started.

Here again Ovid might seem Virgil's opposite, who is deliberately and cheekily turning the Virgilian rota the wrong way, setting it in a backwards motion.⁸ Yet given the retrogressive undertow of the Virgilian career itself it seems too simple to see Ovid as merely reversing Virgil's motion. Rather than being an antithetical 'bad reader' of Virgil, Ovid shows himself here to be, as Stephen Hinds notes, 'one of Virgil's most sympathetic and perceptive readers' (Hinds 1988: 16). As Richard Thomas suggests, 'he brings out what was already there in Virgil' (R. F. Thomas 2001: 80).⁹ Like Virgil, at the end of his career Ovid returns to his own origins. In so doing, he circles back to the questions raised at the end of the *Aeneid*. Where indeed has the rota brought the poet? At the end of the *Metamorphoses*, and in the *Fasti*, Ovid asserts that art takes him to the stars. The last work suggests that poetry also has led to Tomis, to exile, where, as Putnam reminds us, Virgil's poetry began. Ovid seems to have gone both too far and nowhere at all.

⁶ See especially Kenney 1965: 37–49, Dickinson 1973: 154–90, Nagle 1980 and H. Evans 1983. Also see Hinds 1985: 13–32 and Hinds 1999; Williams 1994 and P. Hardie 2002a: 283–325.

⁷ See also Hardie 2002a: 31 n. 1.

⁸ In a paper presented at the conference in which this volume originated, Patricia Parker spoke of Ovid's Medea as a figure for the 'preposterous' career, modelled on Medea's powers to reverse the forces of nature and make time run backwards. Given Ovid's interest in and later identification with Medea, a figure to whom I will return, Parker's reading is highly suggestive.

⁹ On Ovid's adaptation of Virgil, and its influence, see also Farrell 2004: 41–55 and Barchiesi 2005: cxlviii–cxlix.

At the same time, Ovid's final poetry is a powerful summary of and conclusion to his career in which the poet seems to take control of his life once again. It is an astonishing feat, in which he gives his career – a career which was interrupted and derailed by external circumstances over which he had no control – the illusion of authorial organization. As Putnam suggests, Virgil's career seems planned, crafted itself by the poet's art. By following Virgil and bringing his poetry back to its origins, Ovid asserts his control over the shape of his life. At times also, especially early on, he defiantly asserts the inability of Augustus to influence his art.¹⁰ Speaking of himself as already dead, he both conveys his insubstantiality outside of Rome and gives himself a striking authority: he is a voice issuing from beyond the grave, posthumously pronouncing the last word on his own poetry.¹¹ As Krevans notes also in the following chapter, Ovid restages Virgil's deathbed scene playing all the roles: it is he, not Augustus who saves his work for posterity and shapes his career. But at the same time, the poetry draws attention to the poet's loss of control. This is not just a strategy of self-deprecation, though it clearly has a rhetorical purpose. It suggests the other pressing question: who finally determines the shape of the poet's career? In a very real sense, the answer for both Ovid and Virgil is Augustus, who rescued Virgil's epic and sent Ovid to Tomis. As Ovid explains too, Augustus had exiled the poet partly in anger after reading Ovid's earlier erotic verse (*Trist.* 2.207). The *princeps* demonstrates the power of the reader over the works and, in Ovid's case, even over the poet himself.

Given the questions Ovid's last verse raises, it is not surprising that it moved poets, especially at the end of their lives. The influence of Ovid's exilic review is evident at both the beginning and end of Milton's career. In the early *Elegy* 1 (the first of the Latin poems in his 1645 volume of works), Milton playfully compares his own pleasant rustication with Ovid's bleaker relegation; his final works suggest more sombre parallels between his own situation and that of the exiled Ovid.¹²

Ovid's example, however, seems in conflict with a career that is usually imagined as planned and executed on a linearly Virgilian trajectory. As often noted, the young Milton bursts on the scene in 1645 with a volume

¹⁰ See especially his poem to his protégée Perilla: Ovid *Trist.* 3.7.43–54.

¹¹ On the theme of exile as death see Nagle 1980: 21–32.

¹² See lines 17–24. E. K. Rand suggests the parallel also: Rand 1922: 109–35. The connection is implied but never really developed by Louis Martz (Martz 1980). It is common to see Milton's life after the Restoration as a period of exile; so Elizabeth Sauer notes wryly that 'Ovid's punishment is now visited on Milton in his late years' (Sauer 2001: 217).

that is carefully crafted to present him as a Virgilian poet.¹³ His early autobiographical statements impose a deterministic and rigorously linear shape upon his life that seems, in retrospect, uncannily prophetic. Richard Neuse and Louis Martz see his debut collection as prophesying a Virgilian career, a prophecy which is neatly fulfilled in *Paradise Lost*. According to John Coolidge, moreover, Milton is finally able to go beyond Virgil: the epic's 'sequel', *Paradise Regain'd*, is Milton's Christian transcendence and fulfilment (by typological completion) of the Virgilian progression (Coolidge 1965: 20–3).¹⁴

Milton's cunning presentation of his own development has too often encouraged readers to see him as a monolithic ego, sure of himself from the very start and unchanging from beginning to end. This is Stanley Fish's Milton, a 'poet of closure' and relentless consistency (Nuttall 2001: 19).¹⁵ This monumental Milton has been challenged in recent years by readings which have focused on a Milton who is conflicted, destabilized, 'uncertain', even, in Gordon Teskey's deliciously provocative term, 'delirious' (Teskey 2006).¹⁶ Milton's development, like Ovid's, was certainly derailed by forces he neither foresaw nor controlled. Moreover, the early works and statements show an uncertainty about direction understandable in even a highly gifted young man: Milton has a sense of his own promise, but the path to fulfilment is shadowier to him than it is to the modern reader, blessed with the prescience of hindsight.¹⁷ While the opening of the English section of the 1645 *Poems* with the Nativity Ode, with its echoes of *Eclogue* 4, seems to present his own poetic nativity as Virgilian, the opening of the second Latin section with the exilic *Elegy* 1 gives us a second beginning with a more ominous subtext that points to another possible career path. If Milton begins his career twice he also gives us two endings from which to choose. In general, Milton brings

¹³ See Neuse 1978; Martz 1980: 31–59; and Revard 1997. For the young Milton's identification with Virgil, see also Campbell 1984: 234–8.

¹⁴ Martz's identification of *Paradise Regain'd* as a 'Georgic' work, however, suggests the possibility of a different sequence; see Martz 1980: 293–304.

¹⁵ Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson also note how Milton continues 'to enjoy the status of the most monumentally unified author in the canon' (Nyquist and Ferguson 1987: xii).

¹⁶ See also Fallon 2007 and Herman 2005.

¹⁷ Lorna Sage notes the danger of simply accepting the superb illusion of self-completion in Milton's self-presentations: 'Milton has excluded muddle, failure, contingency, all the signs of the experiment he was continuously engaged in' in order to 'present himself so determinedly as a finished product' (Sage 1973: 261). As Sage reminds us, 'We tend to under-rate the amount of creative energy certain artists – Milton and Joyce among them – put into shaping their lives in order to write their works. It is easy to be taken in by the illusion they project, and to treat them as distantly god-like figures in control of all the pressures and accidents of existence' (262). One might add Ovid to her list.

his career to a stutteringly clumsy conclusion – in which *two* versions of the grand climactic epic (1667, 1674) frame another complex and generically shady pair of poems, *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson Agonistes* (1671) (a brief epic and a closet drama).¹⁸ These poems are themselves about careers and career choice; the first shows Christ searching for the path by which he may start to fulfil his destiny, and the second, the path by which Samson may end his.¹⁹ Together they therefore show the beginning and endings of a career, and each has frequently been read autobiographically. In 1673 Milton also returned to where he started as a poet, releasing a new edition of the 1645 *Poems*, with the addition of some other early but previously unpublished works. Talk about generic scrambling! – and at the very point in his career when Milton might have been expected to be arranging things carefully to present his final word and summing-up of his achievement.²⁰ But this, I believe, is precisely what he was doing. Milton's encyclopedic mind certainly had the power to absorb events, history, the literary and intellectual tradition, and shape them into a focused whole, whether that be the myth of Genesis or the myth of his own maturation. Given Milton's care with the publication of individual works in this period – his revision of the 1645 *Poems* (in which also the addition of dates of composition to the individual poems gives a precise and linear sequence to artistic development) and his restructuring of *Paradise Lost* – it seems hard to imagine that he was not involved in the presentation of the 1671 volume. As Milton must have anticipated also, the juxtaposition and order of the two poems has influenced their reception, and especially the reading of *Samson Agonistes* as in some sense the blind failed revolutionary's last word. I therefore want to look at *Samson* as part of Milton's retrospective on his poetic development, his spin of the rota as he also looks back on his career.²¹ Milton's tragedy depicts the end and

¹⁸ John Shawcross notes also the contemporary concern with questions of genre; see Shawcross 1983: 238.

¹⁹ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues that in *Paradise Regain'd* 'the interpretation of one's career' is 'the basic temptation in the poem' (Rushdy 1988: 255). One might expect it to be a temptation to which Samson, unlike Christ, succumbs; as I will suggest, the end of Milton's play however makes the temptation that of the reader.

²⁰ Lipking notes how writers have often felt that 'Last works, like last words, have a special aura of authenticity', so it is 'Small wonder that poets should take such care to end on a proper note' (Lipking 1981: 67, 68). Herman suggests that, while 'it seems as if Milton intended his final poems as a *summa* of his life's work – a crowning achievement that summons all his previous writing on stage for a final, brilliant affirmation and curtain call', *Samson* undermines the grand climax: '*Samson Agonistes* undoes whatever certainties *Paradise Regain'd* achieves' (Herman 2005: 24).

²¹ My argument here is anticipated in some points by Coiro 1998: 123–52.

summing-up of a life which leaves us not with a triumphant sequence of early promise posited and then neatly fulfilled – which would be truly fearful symmetry – but with a messy and open ending, full of questions about the past, and the future.

Milton's most disturbing and controversial work is doubly so because of its apparently intimate relation with Milton's own life and even, as in Virgil's case, death. Milton's blind and imprisoned Samson, a revolutionary betrayed by his people, is inevitably compared to the poet himself. Yet critics disagree violently on Milton's attitude towards his violent hero.²²

These debates are in many ways reminiscent of critical disagreement over the end of the *Aeneid*. In a longer paper, I argue for a Virgilian subtext in *Samson Agonistes*, especially comparing Samson and Aeneas as heroes.²³ I'll abridge a few important points of comparison here. Both heroes' careers are themselves derailed by disasters connected with the sea: at the start of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas first appears in the storm that tosses his ships off course to Carthage, while Samson and the Chorus both describe him as shipwrecked by his Dido, Dalila (*SA* 198–200; 1044–5). The situation symbolizes the protagonists' loss of a past heroic identity and marks the beginning of their transformation into a new kind of hero. Their journeys take them through a process of rebirth and renewal, reinforced in both cases through images of fire and serpents, which culminate when the originally shipwrecked heroes obtain symbolic power over water.²⁴ Even more strikingly, however, both heroes undergo this regeneration by

²² As Stephen M. Fallon notes, *Samson* is 'Milton's most indeterminate poem, the most resistant to critical consensus' (Fallon 2007: 251). Many readers have seen Samson's final act as proof of his recovery of his insight and his fulfilment of God's plan; the drama thus shows the process of regeneration. See Radzinowicz 1978; Low 1974; and Shawcross 2001. While most regenerative readings tend to downplay the violence as an unpleasant but necessary side-effect of spiritual growth, Michael Lieb argues forcefully that Milton approves of violence as a regenerative act. Violence is not a by-product of the action, it is the main action: 'The drama is a work of violence to its very core. It extols violence. Indeed, it exults in violence' (Lieb 1994: 237). See also Feisel G. Mohamed who argues that current critical denials of Milton's support of violence suggest a need to idealize both Milton and the western tradition as rational and pacific (Mohamed 2005: 327–40). In contrast, John Carey and Joseph Wittreich especially have argued that Milton means us to denounce, not applaud, Samson's violent end. Carey's article, 'A Work in Praise of Terrorism' (2002: 15–16), pushes to an extreme the arguments of his earlier work; see especially J. Carey 1967: 395–9, J. Carey 1969, as well as the notes in J. Carey 1968: 337–41. See also the series of arguments developed by Joseph Wittreich (Wittreich 1986b, 2002; Wittreich and Kelly 2002). Derek Wood provides a thoughtful summary and critique of the critical disagreements over the character of Samson during the last fifty years (Wood 2001: 3–26).

²³ See Kilgour 2008: 201–34.

²⁴ On the imagery of fire and serpents in Virgil, see especially Knox 1966: 124–42. On this imagery and that of water in Milton, see Carey 1967 and Wittreich 2002: 247–60.

means of a process of definition by contrast in which they reject alternative models of heroism embodied in a series of potential rivals. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas' identity is transformed through relationships with three central figures who serve as doubles for aspects of himself: Anchises, Dido and, finally, Turnus. Similarly, the main action of *Samson Agonistes* revolves around the encounters with Manoa, Dalila and Harapha which lead up to the drama's climax. Each hero thus faces a benevolent father figure who ties him to his own past, a female counterpart who dangerously seduces him from his destiny, and a foreign hero who most directly represents an alternative set of heroic values. Each hero must leave behind these seductive potential selves, undergoing renewal through psychological amputation. Both narratives thus seem to suggest a pattern of heroic growth and development, through loss, trial and the rejection of temptation. Despite the initial setbacks, these seem progressive career models.

The fates of both Aeneas and Samson are more complex, however, than this model might suggest. The violent climactic act that seems to separate the hero from his alternatives in fact potentially confirms continuing identification and hints at a darker end for individual and historical progress. Both endings generate parallel questions: do the authors celebrate or critique violence, as a tool of empire, in Virgil's case, or of revolutionary change in Milton's? The final scenes – the slaying of Turnus and the slaughter of the Philistines – make us question whether the career of the hero is one of progression or regression.

Like the *Aeneid*, *Samson Agonistes* seems to look backwards. In every way it seems a throwback. Generically, Milton is returning to the Classical models renounced in *Paradise Regain'd*. Stylistically and thematically the poem seems also to belong to an earlier stage of Milton's career – a fact which has caused some critics to argue that it was written much earlier.²⁵ The verse builds on patterns of doubling and repetition.²⁶ The retrogressive quality is evident in Samson himself, who evokes earlier models of heroism and who moreover, like Aeneas, has a bad habit of repeating the past. Milton's nephew Edward Phillips claimed that the name Samson meant 'There a second time' – an appropriate etymology for a man whose

²⁵ See especially Parker 1949: 145–66 and Shawcross 1961: 345–58. In response, see Radzinowicz 1978: 387–407. As the subtitle of Radzinowicz's book ('The Growth of Milton's Mind') suggests, debates over *Samson*, including the date of composition, are very much concerned with the shape of the poet's development.

²⁶ See Carey 1968: 328–9. There has been much discussion of repetition and doubling in the poem; see especially the analyses of the role of verbal repetition and rhyme in the poem in Carey 1968: 335–8 and Coiro 1998: 134–6. See also the powerful reading in Shoaf 1985: 169–89.

fall is linked to a repeated compulsion to marry foreign females. As a result of his choices Samson finds himself in a helpless state of dependency and weakness, in which he appears infantilized. By succumbing to temptation, Samson has returned to a more primitive state of individual development.

But the climax of the poem is seen by his followers as a more positive form of return, in which Samson recovers his original identity and divine purpose. The dead Samson now appears to his father, Manoa, to be reunited with his early self (1709–11):

Samson hath quit himself
Like *Samson* and heroically hath finish'd
A life Heroic.²⁷

As the verbal circularity suggests, Manoa and the Chorus think that Samson's career reaches fulfilment by both moving forward and coming full circle. To celebrate this achievement, Manoa claims he will build a memorial monument – the traditional marker for Classical closure and poetic immortality – and heads off any further doubts by telling us not only the meaning of Samson's life, but how we are to respond to it: 'With peace and consolation ... And calm of mind all passion spent' (1757–8). Closure is thus marked symbolically and achieved aesthetically, through the creation of the illusion of Aristotelian catharsis.²⁸

There are, however, some unsettling elements here that open up the questions Manoa and the Chorus seem to be trying to close off. Manoa's tautological comparison of Samson 'to himself' draws on a Renaissance commonplace, used to stress a hero's self-consistency and integrity.²⁹ It shapes Samson's character as a closed and autonomous circle. Yet the verbal and logical redundancy, in which an anticipated simile collapses in on itself in perfect likeness (*A* is like *A*), seems potentially suspicious here, especially given Samson's previous tendency towards repetition. The phrase has also disturbing parallels with the language of Shakespeare's Roman plays. Lucilius prophesies that the captured Brutus 'will be found like Brutus, like himself' (*Julius Caesar* 5.4.25), and we later learn that by committing suicide, 'Brutus only overcame himself' (5.5.56).³⁰ The

²⁷ All citations of Milton's works are from Flannagan 1998.

²⁸ The impression of closure and the containment of strong feeling is reinforced by the forceful emergence of rhyme in the final speech which, as Coiro notes, almost settles into the form of a sonnet (Coiro 1998: 146). The technique here also looks backwards in Milton's career, to the conclusion of 'Lycidas' with an ottava rima.

²⁹ See Price 1940: 178–81.

³⁰ Citations to Shakespeare's works are from Evans and Tobin 1997.

redundant phrasing contributes to Shakespeare's image of Rome as a divided world, caught in an endless and self-destructive cycle of violence.³¹ Brutus' enemy and conqueror Antony will in turn commit suicide, as 'a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquish'd' (*Ant.* 4.15.57–8).³² Despite the Chorus' attempts to convince us of the contrary (*SA* 1665–6), Samson's end is also hard to differentiate from sheer suicide. The Chorus suggests that Samson has progressed from a physical hero to a more saintly figure of heroic suffering and patience (1287–95) – one who might seem to later readers as a type of Christ. But his final violent action is hardly Christlike or patient; to many modern readers especially it marks an even more vicious relapse into barbarism than that suggested at the end of the *Aeneid*. Even in terms of practical effects it seems ambiguous, as it does not lead to an even brief liberation of Samson's people. Instead it produces a state of anarchy which, tellingly for British history, leads eventually to the Israelites' request for a king (I Samuel 8:5). As in the story of the Augustan empire, the revolutionary leader leads to the consolidation of power in one man: all roads lead to Rome, indeed. It is hard not to ask cynically what Samson's career has achieved.³³

The complicated imagery at the end of the play further suggests the underlying tensions here. When Manoa hears of his son's death, he is first crushed (*SA* 1574–77):

What windy joy this day had I conceiv'd
Hopeful of his Delivery, which now proves
Abortive as the first-born bloom of spring
Nipt with the lagging rear of winters frost.

'Delivery' is a key word in the poem, connected to Samson's sense of his own identity as the liberator of his people. The wordplay here shifts it into an image of birth (see also 1504–6), only to slip once again: Samson's death is imagined grotesquely as an abortion – a

³¹ See Kahn 1997.

³² On the influence of *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play which combines Ovidian and Virgilian elements, on *Samson*, see Guillory 1986: 112–15 and Ferry 1968. A central question of Shakespeare's play is when is Antony 'himself' (see for example 1.1.42–3, 57–9; 3.11.7; 3.13.92–3, 185–6): he is divided between his Egyptian and Roman natures which are only resolved – if ever – through suicide. Shakespeare also exploits the potential humour in these tautologies in Antony's comically redundant description of the crocodile: 'It is shap'd, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is, and moves with it own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates' (*Ant.* 2.7.42–5).

³³ As Teskey notes, 'any episode chosen from history for heroic celebration will be unintentionally ironized by our knowledge of what is to follow; our knowledge, that is, that in history, nothing heroic is definitely achieved' (Teskey 2006: 140).

collapsing of birth and death.³⁴ It turns Samson into a child again, who has prematurely died before he could be reborn, and who ends before he can begin. The sense of regressive, almost self-consuming, circularity is reinforced by the fact that in these lines Milton is coming back to one of his earliest English works, 'On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough', which he would publish for the first time in his collected poems of 1673. There the dead child is a 'Fairest flower no sooner blown but blasted' (1) by 'Bleak winters force' (4). At the end of Milton's career, he, like Virgil, looks back to his own beginning, through an image of the destructive identification of birth and death, beginning and ending.³⁵

However, this image of a destructive return is itself overturned. If Manoa's anticipated birth turns into death, Samson's death is quickly reimaged by the Chorus as rebirth through an elaborate and intricate series of images of birds and snakes, which culminate in the figure of the phoenix (SA 1697–1707):

So vertue giv'n for lost,
Deprest, and overthrown, as seem'd,
Like that self-begott'n bird
In the *Arabian* woods embost,
That no second knows nor third,
And lay e're while a Holocaust,
From out her ashie womb now teem'd,
Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
When most unactive deem'd,
And though her body die, her fame survives,
A secular bird ages of lives.

The phoenix is of course a conventional, even predictable, figure for rebirth, appropriated by Christians as a type for Christ.³⁶ Milton's readers would have recognized this significance, which reminds them that Samson is also a type for Christ. While the Hebrew Chorus is obviously ignorant of typology, the image seems intended to celebrate Samson's triumphant recovery – his return to 'himself'.

However, if the general meaning seems Christian, the image and wording itself are Classical, looking back especially to Ovid's phoenix in *Metamorphoses* 15.391–407, a figure which brings other elements into the

³⁴ On the imagery here, see also Kerrigan 1974: 212–17.

³⁵ On the echo here as part of Milton's retrospect, see also Coiro 1998: 138.

³⁶ See Van den Broek 1972.

poem.³⁷ It suggests a subtle shift from Virgilian influence to an Ovidian one, recalling especially a moment in which Ovid is himself commenting on Virgil. The phoenix appears near the end of the *Metamorphoses*, in which Ovid directly retells the *Aeneid*. While chronology gives these last books a slightly more linear thrust, Ovid's version of Virgil's story is typically digressive and redundant.³⁸ Moreover, his history of Rome is jarringly interrupted by Pythagoras' lengthy lecture which provides a vision of eternal return that counters and here even impedes the forward linear movement towards Augustan Rome. In contrast to the grand linear march of Virgilian history, Pythagoras suggests a world of endless recycling, in which things change, *omnia mutantur* (*Met.* 15.165), but stay the same: *animam sic semper eandem / esse, sed in uarias doceo migrare figuras* 'I teach that the soul is always the same, though it takes different forms' (15.171–2).³⁹ Pythagoras' vision of eternal return is especially easy to identify with the poet of endless flux who himself recycles old stories in new forms.⁴⁰ Juxtaposed with the linear narrative of Roman history that emerges, if faintly, in the last books, Pythagoras seems to reinforce an opposition between Virgilian and Ovidian routes.

The figure of the phoenix appears itself as a kind of further digression within or exception to this Pythagorean digression. Pythagoras notes that in a world of flux and mutable identities, the phoenix is the only thing that does not change, that is, in essence, always and only like itself: *una est quae reparat seque ipsa reseminet ales* 'there is one bird which itself renews and reproduces itself' (15.392). For this reason, it was a useful image for Elizabeth I, associated with her motto, *Semper eadem*.⁴¹ In the *Metamorphoses*, the figure has itself a kind of autonomy, detached from the narrative proper and even outside of Pythagoras' vision of flux. On the periphery of the Virgilian narrative, from which it seems completely cut off, however, it is one of Ovid's most perceptive readings of the darker undertones of Virgil's story. The image of the son who *fertque pius cunasque suas patriumque sepulcrum* 'piously carries his own cradle and his

³⁷ See especially Kerrigan 1974: 232–9, 256; Wittreich 2002: 261–9. As in Ovid, the phoenix is both male and female, which complicates matters further.

³⁸ On the revisions of Virgil in these books especially, see Solodow 1988: 110–56; Hinds 1998: 104–22.

³⁹ Citations are from Tarrant 2004. Translations are my own.

⁴⁰ See Solodow 1988: 162–8 for overviews of the critical responses to this pivotal episode. As Solodow notes, readers have tended to see it either as the metaphysical key revealing the principles behind Ovidian metamorphoses, or utter nonsense, Ovid's little joke.

⁴¹ Strong 1987: 82–3, 104; as Strong also notes, Elizabeth used imagery that identified her rather ambiguously with both Aeneas and Dido, otherwise known as Elissa, or Phoenissa; see 106–7.

father's tomb' (15.405), recalls the journey of the pious Aeneas who carries his father out of Troy. For Virgil, Anchises borne on his son's shoulders from the burning city is a central image for the progress of civilization through the pious transmission of the past. In this succinct rewriting, Ovid suggests that the Virgilian line is in fact sheer repetition, an endlessly circular exit from and return to a fiery origin by a son who *is* his own father.⁴² The wheel may be spinning, but it is not advancing.

Milton's phoenix is similarly a problematic image for transcendence. Like Ovid's bird, it provides an indirect interpretation of the main action, one that seems to counter, not support, Manoa's reading. The description of the bird seems to echo Ovid's claim at the end of the *Metamorphoses* that: *per ... omnia saecula fama ... uiuam* 'I will live in fame through all time' (15.878–9). The wording thus might suggest Samson's own achievement of immortality beyond change – an idea that is reinforced by his father's plan to turn the dead man into his own monument. But Milton's 'secular bird' (*SA* 1707) seems bound to the endurance of 'fame' (1706) and to the repetitive cycles of human time and the world, 'saeculum',⁴³ and thus cut off from the *spiritual* resurrection of Christ. The fact that it is 'self-begott'n' (1699) recalls Satan's claim in *Paradise Lost* to be 'self-begot, self-rai'd' (*PL* 5.860). The phoenix suggests an ideal for self-sufficiency, which, as in Shakespeare's Roman works also, seems at least socially suicidal. If the phoenix generates *itself*, it also cannot generate anything else: it knows no second or third. There is no succession when the bird that dies is simply reborn as itself. When the son *is* his own father, the present is an exact repetition of the past, recycled without progression or difference and, as 'secular' may suggest, without transcendence. Like the *Aeneid*, Milton's tragedy makes much of father–son relations, and gives a central role to Samson's father, Manoa. But it ends with the rupture of succession. Samson does not leave a son. In this he is differentiated from his final adversary, the giant Harapha, a figure Milton not only invents but also ostentatiously claims is the father of Goliath. By making the rival Harapha the founder of a gigantic dynasty, Milton emphasizes Samson's contrasting lack of progeny. For Samson, circling back to the past entails a cutting off of the future. The father becomes his son's heir, custodian of his memory, builder of his monument and shaper of his career and fame; succession is both broken off and reversed.

⁴² See also my discussion of this figure in relation to Roman law, in which the son is *heres sui ipsius* in Kilgour 1990: 41–2. The fact that Ovid's bird is *female* also creates an unsettling parallel with Dido, Phoenix, who immolates herself and from whose ashes will be born war with Rome.

⁴³ See also Kerrigan 1974: 245–6.

This sense of a backwards movement is reinforced by the poem's presentation. It was published in 1671 along with *Paradise Regain'd*, the poem which Neuse and Coolidge have read as the climax of Milton's Virgilian career. The pairing of the two poems and heroes makes it hard not to see the Old Testament hero from a New Testament perspective and to compare the two. But *Paradise Regain'd* precedes *Samson Agonistes* in the volume: the order of their presentation seems provocative and even perverse.⁴⁴ If *Samson* had been placed first in the volume, the two poems would have presented a neat piece of typology: we would read the shadowy antitype of the Old Testament hero first and then move on to the new, improved New Testament fulfilment. The volume itself might then suggest repetition that includes progression: Samson would be the historically earlier and therefore morally inferior version of Christ whom Christ completes and replaces when he imagines a new form of heroism. Instead, the reading experience takes us backwards in time, undercutting any sense of historical advancement.

The tension between progressive and regressive movements here points to a perhaps surprising but suggestive parallel between *Samson* and the conclusion of another work written at the end of its author's life: Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Prospero is often read as a double for Shakespeare as he concludes his career.⁴⁵ Like *Samson*, *The Tempest* has a complicated literary genealogy that has itself generated much debate. Partly because of interest in the play's relation to colonization, many recent readings of the play have focused on allusions to Virgil.⁴⁶ Yet in some ways the Virgilian references seem subsumed by a vaguer yet more discernable Ovidian element;⁴⁷ certainly the interweaving of these two sources contributes to the complexity of the work. In a recent reading,

⁴⁴ Nothing is known of the publication of the volume, so we simply do not know whose decision it was to print the texts together, and in the present sequence. Stephen Dobranski notes that authors at this time had little control over publication, but argues that the sequence conforms to Milton's general practice of pairing poems. He therefore suggests a collaboration between publisher and author (Dobranski 2002: 32–3). Wittreich also notes how the present order of the poems conforms to Milton's recurrent habits of thought: see Wittreich 1986a: 164–6. For other discussions of the unity of the volume, see Wittreich 1986b: 329–85, Coiro 1998: 127–8, Shawcross 1983: 225–48, Rajan 1973: 82–110, Barker 1973: 3–48 and Herman 2005: 155–76.

⁴⁵ The engraving of Prospero's speech (*Tempest* 4.1.149–58) on Shakespeare's monument in Westminster Abbey set the identification in stone. On the Shakespearean career see Cheney above, Ch. 8; on the relevance of Prospero to Shakespeare's review of his own career, see also Nuttall 2007: 376.

⁴⁶ See especially Hamilton 1990 and Kallendorf 2007.

⁴⁷ On the Ovidian elements in the play generally, see J. Bate 1993: 8–10, 239–63; and Lyne 2000: 150–64. Charles Martindale argues that Shakespeare's engagement with Virgil is rarely profound: see Martindale 2004a: 89–106.

Craig Kallendorf argues that Prospero takes on aspects of the character of Aeneas (Kallendorf 2007: 107). At the same time, Prospero's great speech renouncing his art (*Tempest* 5.1.33–57) is based on Medea's summoning of her powers in *Metamorphoses* 7.192–219. The emergence of this subtext as Prospero both returns to his old life and yet seems to move forward to a higher stage of art is unsettling: Medea is a figure associated with the relapse into barbarism; her powers, as she notes in her speech, enable her to reverse nature and time. It is tempting to speculate that Shakespeare reads Ovid's Medea as a comment on the *Aeneid*, which suggests that Aeneas himself is at heart a truly deranged version of Dido.⁴⁸ But it is also tempting to read Prospero as a redeemed Aeneas, and a Medea corrected by reversal – black magic turned into white. Still, the superimposition of a scene of *renunciation* of power on one of its *affirmation* creates an uneasy effect of simultaneous detachment and reattachment, exclusion and inclusion: *vale atque ave*. The rhetorical analogue for this kind of strategy is the *recusatio*, in which the stance of exclusion inevitably entails inclusion. Jonathan Bate thus can state that: 'Prospero and Medea are in some sense the same' (J. Bate 1993: 9).⁴⁹ But the situation is not that clear; Charles Martindale notes the problems raised by the subtext: 'Is Prospero being sharply differentiated from Medea, the mage who renounces his white magic from the witch who abuses her black powers? Or is there a worrying insinuation that one form of magic may not differ much from another?' (Martindale 2004b: 204).⁵⁰ The author leaves the question and relation open: it is the readers who have to make the choice.

The parallel with Prospero may not be coincidental; as Ann Baynes Coiro argues, 'The idea of Shakespeare haunts, I think, Milton's last poem' (Coiro 1998: 125). As she suggests also, in this Milton is returning to pre-occupations also evident in his early works, especially his first publication 'On Shakespeare'.⁵¹ In *Samson*, the sense of going backwards is heightened

⁴⁸ The *Argonautica* is of course one of Virgil's important subtexts. Virgil himself links Medea and Aeneas, transferring Apollonius' simile describing Medea's troubled mind (*Met.* 3.756) to Aeneas (*Aen.* 8.20–5). Ovid's representation of Medea has one eye on Virgil's rewriting of Apollonius' *Argonautica*.

⁴⁹ For Bate also, Sycorax, a version of Medea, is Prospero's 'dark Other' (J. Bate 1993: 254). See also Lyne, who reads the renunciation as a farewell to Ovid in which 'if Shakespeare plays with the idea of renouncing the "magic" of Ovid, that too is only partial' (Lyne 2000: 162).

⁵⁰ In fact, Martindale, who is arguing for caution in interpreting the relation between text and subtext, notes other options: 'Or is Shakespeare adapting a famous locus about magic with little regard for its original context or speaker? ... The reader will have to decide between such mutually exclusive possibilities' (Martindale 2004b: 204).

⁵¹ Coiro argues that the echoes of 'On Shakespeare' suggest Milton's concern with artistic immortality: Milton looks back to his earlier poem on a great dead poet from the 'threshold of his

further by the sense of the poet returning, like Virgil and Ovid, to the start of his career. The poem makes us consider the relation between the young and old Milton, the poet's beginnings and his ending. Debates on the politics of the poem have noted the echoes and parallels with Milton's early political pamphlets.⁵² What is their role here? Is Milton returning to these scenes to affirm and renew his continuing beliefs, or to critique and detach himself from them? The tantalizing question thus concerns the development of his political thought: does it change, or does he remain relentlessly the same, true to his early revolutionary principles?⁵³

It is also striking, however, how in *Samson* Milton returns to his early poetry, and especially passages dealing with young and premature death – the topic that also haunted Virgil and with which his epic abruptly concludes. The imagery of shipwreck recalls Virgil, but it also echoes 'Lycidas', Milton's early lament for the drowned Edward King. Manoa's plans to take Samson's body and, 'from the stream / With lavers pure and cleansing herbs wash off / The clotted gore' (*SA* 1726–8), recalls both 'Lycidas' and the description of the watery baptism of another young *sui-cide*, Sabrina, in Milton's masque, *Comus* (832–41). I have already noted parallels with Milton's very early 'On the Death of a Fair Infant'. Manoa's closing claim that 'Nothing is here for tears' (*SA* 1721) translates '*Nec tibi conveniunt lacrymae*' (202), of Milton's 'Epitaphium Damonis', a poem written on the death of his closest friend, Charles Diodati, in which also he first used the image of the phoenix to suggest rebirth (187–9). The theme of young death moved the young Milton, as it had Virgil, perhaps because of his own fears of mortality cutting short his poetic career.

In *Samson*, as the poet looks back on his beginning from the perspective of his end, these images of premature ends seem to return with renewed urgency. They create the impression that Milton is writing an elegy for himself that will safeguard his own immortality. As in Virgil's return to his shadowy origins, the bringing together of beginning and end of Milton's career creates the effect of a self-gathering towards climactic fulfilment and resolution that seems appropriate for what was Milton's last published new work. But at the same time, as Ovid shows, such a return inevitably opens up new questions. Has Milton indeed acquitted himself like Milton – and, if so, what does that mean?

becoming a great dead poet himself' (1998: 126). For a related discussion of 'On Shakespeare', see also Lipking 1981: 139–40.

⁵² See especially Lieb 1994: 226–63.

⁵³ The poem thus seems to keep making us return to Joseph Wittreich's question: 'whether Milton's is a mind fixed or changing' (Wittreich 2005: 1641).

As Milton comes back to his beginning, things must have looked rather different from the view in 1645. When he set out on his Virgilian jaunt, Milton did not know that there would even be a revolution, let alone that it would be lost – as would be two wives and his eyesight along the way.⁵⁴ In *Samson*, Milton rereads his own life in order to find a pattern, the underlying coherence to unify a life full of change, revolution in all senses, and to understand the meaning of his own achievement. Like the exiled Ovid, he turns the Virgilian rota to review and make sense of his career.

Samson's absence at the final summation, however, is important. In Virgil, it is the narrator who brings the story and the author's career to an end; in Ovid, it is the poet himself, as he struggles to assert his own power over the shape of his life. In a drama, the task falls usually to a character. Here, significantly, the hero does not have the last word on the meaning of his life; this is given the Chorus and his heir, who also happens to be his own father. A conservative figure who looks back to the past, Manoa tries to resolve ambiguity and achieve what we today call 'closure'. He ties up the loose ends of Samson's life, asserting its essential unity. Projecting the act of summation and unification onto this backwards-looking character suggests that coherence may itself be simply a fiction. Moreover, it enables Milton to include within the play the act of interpretation that will continue long after the poet is himself dead. Samson himself exits in a state of 'abiding uncertainty' (Fish 2001: 420),⁵⁵ not knowing that the end is near or what it will mean. His last words are a simple confession of his own ignorance of his fate: 'the last of me or no I cannot warrant' (*SA* 1427). For many critics, these words are a sign of Samson's final redemption through submission to faith and indeed uncertainty.⁵⁶ But they also suggest the author's submission to a future whose reading he cannot control, and which may, in a new Augustan age especially, be as severe as that of Augustus. The audience or reader decides Prospero's fate: is he really Medea or not? If Milton's final work is about Milton, it is also about us, the readers, and our role and responsibility in the poet's career.

⁵⁴ See also Fallon on Samson as Milton's darker double who reflects 'the distance Milton has come from the fantastic and naïve self-constructions of the young man' (Fallon 2007: 263).

⁵⁵ See Fish 2001: 417, 464–5.

⁵⁶ See Fish 2001. The concept of uncertainty is key also to Herman's reading of the poem and Milton's works generally (Herman 2005), as well as to Shawcross 2001. Barbara Lewalski argues that the play shows how 'political choices must be made and actions taken *in medias res*, in circumstances always characterized by imperfect knowledge and conflicting testimony. The thematic of true political experience in this work offers readers no definitive answers, but instead presents a process for making such choices in such circumstances.' (Lewalski 1988: 248)

CLASSICAL LITERARY CAREERS AND THEIR RECEPTION

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