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In terms of the genre of epic, the landscape of the English Renaissance, like that of Augustan Rome, is dominated by two poems. In Rome: the Aeneid, emerging as the classic of Rome’s national literature in the same years that the victorious Octavian was solidifying into Augustus, the first princeps; and the Metamorphoses, written in the later years of Augustus’ principate, and prescient, in Ovid’s and Ovid’s readers’ hindsight, of the poet’s own expulsion from the cultural and political centre of Rome. In England: Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (1590 and 1596), written in the later years of Queen Elizabeth, and declaring itself a celebration of the glory of Gloriana – Elizabeth by another name –, the last monarch of the Tudor dynasty, which based its legitimacy partly on the claim to have brought order to England after the civil wars of the fifteenth century; and Milton’s Paradise Lost, whose first edition in ten books appeared in 1667, and a second edition in twelve books in 1674: a poem published in the years following the Restoration of the English monarchy after the English Civil War of the 1640s and the Cromwellian Republic of the 1650s, but whose author, the steadfastly republican Milton, lived out the last years of his life in Charles II’s England in a kind of political and spiritual internal exile.

It is a commonplace of modern Ovidian criticism that the nature of the Metamorphoses as an epic poem can only be properly understood as a sustained engagement with the Aeneid, a massive poetic act of simultaneous homage, rebellion, and commentary. The Faerie Queene does not occupy anything like the same central position in the genesis of Paradise Lost, but John Dryden, in the preface to Fables, Ancient and Modern (1700), asserts that “Milton has acknowledg’d to me, that Spencer was his Original”; and Dryden there further states that “Milton was the Poetical Son of Spencer... for we [poets] have our

1.– Trinity College, Cambridge.
Lineal Descents and Clans, as well as other Families”. At the beginning of Book 9 of *Paradise Lost* Milton contrasts his epic on Christian history with the line of previous epics on wars and warriors, encapsulating a brief history of the genre that goes through Homer to Virgil, and concludes with the chivalric epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser, 34-7: “Or tilting furniture, emblazoned shields, | Impreces quaint, caparisons and steeds; | Bases and tinsel trappings, gorgeous knights | At joust and tournament”. In this passage Milton is deliberately exaggerating the things that distinguish his epic from the previous tradition; elsewhere he acknowledges a greater community of purpose between his own epic and Spenser’s, a community reinforced by their shared language, English: Milton’s decision to write his epic in English and not Latin is central to his conception of his poetic mission. And in the preface to Book 2 of the *Reason of Church-Government* Milton identifies Spenser as his precursor in the writing of a poetry “doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation”.

Those words, “doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation”, might well describe what used to be a standard reading of the *Aeneid*. In its doctrine and exemplarity *Paradise Lost* is more sustainedly serious than *The Faerie Queene*. If we view the relationship of the two English epics through the lens of the relationship of the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*, then it might seem that we have an Ovidian Spenser, followed by a Virgilian Milton. *Paradise Lost*, into which Milton poured all his deep classical learning, is a far more Virgilian epic than *The Faerie Queene* in its overall structure and its use of the conventions of classical epic. The 1674 redistribution of the matter of the poem into twelve books brings it closer to the *Aeneid* (the ten books of the 1667 first edition may be a nod in the direction of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*, and civil war both in heaven and on earth is a central theme of *Paradise Lost*). Within the twelve books there is a provisional resting point of triumphal closure at the end of book 6 as Raphael narrates the Messiah’s defeat of Satan, followed by his triumphant return in glory to sit at the right hand of his Father, corresponding to the vision in the Parade of Heroes in *Aeneid* 6 of the conquering Augustus at the end of Roman history, and in both epics this is followed by a proem in the middle at the beginning of Book 7. The main action of *Paradise Lost* is a unified action, occupying a limited section of time, from the fall of Satan and his angels, hurled into the abyss by Christ, to the Fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden; the rest of history divine and human is incorporated through narrative analepsis and prophetic prolepsis, as in the *Aeneid*.

*The Faerie Queene* was planned as a poem in twelve books on the twelve private moral virtues (so coinciding with the Virgilian number of books), to be followed by another twelve books on the political virtues (so aspiring to the twenty-four books of a Homeric epic). Of this vast project only a quarter was completed, in two campaigns, the 1590 *The Faerie Queene*, consisting of Books 1-3, and the 1596 *The Faerie Queene*, comprising books 1-6. *The Faerie Queene* is a poem that supplements and revises itself, in a manner comparable to the œuvre of Ovid taken as a whole. The 1590 *The Faerie Queene* ends with the
reunion of the lovers Scudamour and Amoret, fused together in their mutual love like Hermaphroditus and Salmacis (III. xii. 46), firm closure, albeit it figured as an Ovidian myth. In the 1596 *Faerie Queene* Scudamour wanders off into further adventures before he can be reunited with Amoret. The last three books of *The Faerie Queene* present an increasingly gloomy picture of the prospects of the poet’s chances of success in a fallen world, with a growing sense of alienation and exile, and Book 6 ends not with a glorious vision of Gloriana, but with the escape into the world of the Blatant Beast, a monster of envy and defamation. There is a parallel with the last of Ovid’s poems from exile, *Ex Ponto* 4.16, which ends with Ovid’s complaint at the ceaseless attacks of Liuor, Envy, on the poet’s body, and unmissable too is the parallel with another 12-book poem left as a 6-book torso as a result of the exile of its poet, Ovid’s *Fasti*.

But, compared with *Paradise Lost*, *The Faerie Queene* already strikes the reader as a rather Ovidian poem as we enter Faeryland in book 1. It is a highly episodic poem, set in a world where the usual laws of nature (and the usual laws of the world of the Homeric and Virgilian epics) are suspended. A world in which humans interact with personifications, in a long medieval and Renaissance tradition that has its roots in the major personifications of the *Metamorphoses*. A world full of erotic pursuit and intrigue. *The Faerie Queene* is also highly self-conscious about its own poetic craftsmanship, and it brings on stage a number of verbal and visual artists and artefacts whose metapoetic valency owes much to the many portraits of the artist and his art to be found in the *Metamorphoses*. In the first canto of the first book the evil magician Archimago sends a spirit to the house of the god of sleep, Morpheus, who sends up a false dream to delude the Christian hero, the Redcross Knight, a passage that knowingly exploits the metapoetics of the Ovidian Morpheus in *Metamorphoses* 12.

And yet in the proem to *The Faerie Queene* Spenser presents himself as a new Virgil, as he introduces himself and his epic with a rewriting of the Virgilian *ille ego* proem (I. Proem i. 1-4):

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds,
Am now enforst a far vnitter taske,
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds.

In preparing himself to write his national epic Spenser was conscious of following the Virgilian career, with its ascent through the genres to the height of epic. His first major work had been *The Shepheardes Calender*, twelve pastoral eclogues which, like Virgil’s *Eclogues*, combine the humble concerns of herdsmen with anticipations of higher poetic ambitions. Indeed one of the ways in which Spenser is Milton’s original is in his setting a precedent for an

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aspiring British national poet to follow the Virgilian career. Milton made his first major appearance in the world of English letters with his 1645 volume of poems in English and Latin: the most prominent pieces in each language were his pastoral laments, *Lycidas*, perhaps the most famous pastoral poem in the English language, and the *Epitaphium Damonis* lamenting the death of his close childhood friend Charles Diodati.

Spenser’s Virgilian ambitions were recognized by his contemporaries. Thomas Nashe called him the “Virgil of England”, not however with a view to a contrast between Virgil and Ovid, but using another pairing of ancient poets as a way of thinking about English literary history “Chaucer, and Spencer, the Homer and Virgil of England”. Geffrey Chaucer is the great primitive wellhead from which flows English poetry, while Spenser is the later, more artful, poet, who builds his own textual monument on the foundations of the earlier poet. This example shows well how the use of these contrastive pairings, whether it be Virgil and Homer, or Virgil and Ovid, always serves particular discursive purposes; they are not disinterested and objective descriptions of literary-historical “facts”.

In his adaptation of the four-line Virgilian *ille ego* poem Spenser makes a significant swerve in his own fifth line, “And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds”4. We move from the world of Virgil’s Trojans to the medieval world that is the setting of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, I. i. 1-2 “Le donne, i cavalier, l’arme, gli amorì, l cortesìe, l’audaci imprese io canto”. Spenser thereby acknowledges the importance of the Italian tradition, Ariosto and Tasso, for his own poem. To imitate Ariosto is also to take up a position in a contrastive judgement on the pairing of Virgil and Ovid, through the protracted debates in sixteenth-century Italian literary criticism on the relative merits of epic and romance, debates which focussed on a comparison of the multiple plots and digressive structure of the *Orlando Furioso* with the tighter forms of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Giraldi Cinzio, in his 1554 *Discorsi intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, defends Ariosto’s compositional practice by an appeal to Ovid who, in the *Metamorphoses*, abandoned the norms of Virgil and Homer, and ignored the rules of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Ovid, Giraldi says, was not criticised for going his own way. Ariosto’s digressions on “jousts, tournaments, loves, beautiful women, passions of the mind, landscapes and buildings” are closer, Giraldi claims, to Ovidian than to Virgilian or Homeric practice5.

The success of the *Orlando Furioso* and its establishment as the classic of the genre of romance in turn fed back into a sharpened sense of the difference between the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*. Daniel Javitch has argued that

4.– For comment see T. Cain, “Spenser and the Renaissance Orpheus”, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 41, 1972, p. 24-47, noting that the fifth line, the point at which Spenser turns from Virgil to Ariosto, is also the point at which the Spenserian stanza leaves the rhyme scheme of the Ariostan ottava rima.
“counter-classical strains in ancient poetry began to be more widely appreciated in Italy by the late sixteenth century, partly as a result of Ariosto’s influence.” Javitch shows how the two major sixteenth-century Italian volgarizzamenti of the Metamorphoses adopt Ariosto’s ottava rima and remodel Ovid in other ways to conform to an Ariostan template, even to the extent of mimicking the typographical layout of editions of the best-selling Furioso. “Moreover, by making Italian readers affiliate the Metamorphoses with the counterclassical romanzo, these translations served to intensify the historical awareness that Vergilian norms of epic, recently challenged by the romanzo, had already been defied successfully by the Metamorphoses almost as soon as they had been established by the Aeneid.”

But one might ask whether Javitch would have been able so clearly to “see” the ways in which Ariosto challenges Vergilian norms had Javitch himself not been writing at a time when this view of the Metamorphoses was rapidly becoming the orthodoxy among classical Latinists: Javitch draws on, inter alios, Brooks Otis and Joseph Solodow, and he owes his use of the term “counter-classical” to an influential 1970 article by Ralph Johnson.

Modern critics have put the Renaissance distinctions to good use. I take as an example one of the most stimulating discussions of the genre of romance, Patricia Parker’s Inescapable Romance (1979), which marries sixteenth-century critical discourse on epic and romance with the Yale school of post-structuralist literary theory. Parker comments thus on Ariosto’s Ovidian divagations from an epic closure: “The enchantment of romance is in the constant Ovidian metamorphosis which keeps its fiction going and defers, like the storytelling of Scheherezade, the fateful moment of truth.” Parker sees in the parody of Dante’s Commedia in Astolfo’s journey to the moon in Canto 35 of Orlando Furioso a parallel to the Ovidian reductio of the matter of the Aeneid in Books 13 and 14 of the Metamorphoses.

Spenser combines the Virgilian and Ovidian in complex and productive ways. He remodels Ariostan romance in the service of a more providential plot, and elevates Ariosto’s dynastic epic romance in praise of the ruling house of a small Italian state, the d’Este family, to a truly national – and so more Virgilian – epic, praising the history and achievements of Elizabethan England. At the local level Virgilian and Ovidian models are often combined. I take two examples, from the beginning and end respectively of The Faerie Queene. In the first canto of Book 1 the Redcross Knight and Una are forced to take shelter in a “shady grove” by a storm, corresponding to the storm that drives the Trojans of course at the beginning of the Aeneid. They enter a version of Dante’s dark wood, but the grove is described as a catalogue of trees, I. i. 8-9, based on the catalogue of

9.– P. Parker, ibid., p. 44-46.
trees which gather to listen to Orpheus singing at *Metamorphoses* 10.90-105, but which itself is indebted to the much shorter list of trees cut down for the funeral pyre at *Aeneid* 6.179-182 (*itur in antiquam siluam ...*).

The Blatant Beast, a monster of calumny and defamation, threatens the poet’s verses at the end of the 1596 *Faerie Queene*, an incarnation of the Envy that Ovid brushes aside in *Amores* 1.15, but which, as we have seen, lacerates Ovid’s poetic body in his last exilic poem, *Ex Ponto* 4.16. But before the Blatant Beast breaks his iron chain to rampage through the world of Edmund Spenser, he had been mastered and enchained by Calidore, the hero of Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*. The Blatant Beast is a hellish monster, related to Virgil’s Allecto and *Fama*, and also a verbal version of the *Furor* enchained at the end of Jupiter’s prophecy of Roman history to Venus in *Aeneid* 1.294-296. Spenser is less optimistic than the Virgilian Jupiter about the chances of incarcerating such a monster for good. But the *Aeneid* itself already has an alternative ending to the Jovian plot, since the final outburst of Aeneas at the end of Book 12 could be seen as an eruption of *Furor*.

If *The Faerie Queene* is an Ariostan romance tilted in the direction of a Virgilian national and providentialist epic, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a classicizing epic, heavily indebted to the *Aeneid* and, to a lesser extent, to the Homeric epics, that manages to accommodate an amount of Ovidianism that might seem surprising if our image of Milton is that of the serious-minded Puritan. Some of the Ovidian – and romance – elements in *Paradise Lost* attach to the Satanic. The most extended episode of personification allegory in the poem is in Satan’s encounter with Sin and Death at the gates of Hell. Sin is closely related to Spenser’s monstrous Error. She has a general affinity with the major Ovidian personifications, who are her remoter ancestors, but her metamorphosis from a divinely fair maiden into a monster half woman and half serpent is based on Ovid’s story of the transformation of Scylla into a sea-monster (*Met.* 14.59-67). This allegorical episode is often felt as an intrusion into the more realistic, Homero-Virgilian, texture that characterizes most of the narrative of *Paradise Lost*; one way of explaining this fact is to see in these shadowy personifications a correlative to the ontological inferiority of the fallen Satan and his offspring, in a universe where full reality is reserved for God the Father and his children and creation. The other major episode of Ovidian metamorphosis in *Paradise Lost* is the transformation of Satan and his devils into serpents, after the Fall, at 10.504 ff., modelled on the metamorphosis of Cadmus and Harmonia in *Metamorphoses* 3, on which are overlaid elements from Lucan’s catalogue of

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10. – Spenser also registers his debt to Chaucer, who had imitated the Ovidian catalogue of trees in *The Parliament of Fowls* 176-82 (coincidentally ending at the same line-number, 182, as the Virgilian catalogue in *Aeneid* 61).

snakes in the Libyan desert in *Bellum Civile* 9, and Dante’s serpentine transformations in *Inferno* 24 and 25.

But Milton also draws on the *Metamorphoses* in positive ways as he reconfigures the patterns of Homeric and Virgilian epic. Like the *Metamorphoses*, *Paradise Lost* is a universal epic, even outbidding the *Metamorphoses*’ temporal span *prima ab origine mundi ad mea tempora*, as Milton reaches from at time even before the creation of the world to a point beyond the poet’s own times, in the archangel Michael’s prophecy to Adam of the future history of the world, down to the Second Coming, “Till time stand fixed” (12.555). Milton also looks to Ovid in the more intimate areas of psychology and personal relationships. One of the most productive of Ovidian myths for Milton is that of Narcissus, most obviously in Eve’s temptation to a narcissistic love for her own reflection on the day of her creation from Adam’s rib, in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, before she is admonished by a divine voice that she should look for her true other self in Adam. Narcissism of negative and positive varieties also characterizes Satan’s relationship to himself and to his own creations, as well as divine relationships within the Trinity.

*Paradise Lost* has no single hero. Christ is the heroic victor in the war in heaven, and the future saviour of mankind. Satan is an anti-hero, performing the roles of Homeric and Virgilian warrior and wanderer in the pursuit of evil. The poem announces its subject, in Homeric and Virgilian manner, in the first line, “Of man’s first disobedience...”. “Man” here means “mankind” collectively, whose serial disobediences begin with the sin of the first man, Adam. Central to the human narrative of the poem is not the individualistic striving of the one man Adam, but his relationship to the first woman, Eve. The major episode of love in the *Aeneid*, of Dido for Aeneas, is confined to a part of Virgil’s epic, and constitutes a digression from the main epic drive of the poem. The love of Adam and Eve is in important respects the central part of Milton’s plot, a love which goes from innocent fulfilment, through tragic loss and alienation, to reconciliation and redemption. As an epic of eros *Paradise Lost* arguably has more in common with the *Metamorphoses* than with the *Aeneid*. In a recent book, *Milton’s Ovidian Eve* (2009), Mandy Green traces the multiple Ovidian models for Eve in her evolving relationship with Adam.

I turn from epic to drama, starting with Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s use of Ovid both in his plays and his poetry has been extensively discussed, notably in Jonathan Bate’s excellent book *Shakespeare and Ovid* (1993). Frequently quoted is the claim by a contemporary of Shakespeare, Francis Meres, that “As the soule of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras: so the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous and hony-tongued Shakespeare” (with reference to Shakespeare’s epyllia and *Sonnets*). While Virgil was at the centre of Shakespeare’s, and as of all early modern schoolchildren’s, schooling in Latin, his
reponse to Virgil was not as profound as to Ovid. Charles Martindale, in a recent reconsideration of the topic of “Shakespeare and Virgil”, says that he “remains of the view that Shakespeare is not usefully to be described as a Virgilian poet. By that I mean that his reading of Virgil did not result in a profound modification of his sensibility and imagination in the way that his reading of other books did”\textsuperscript{14}. Here I want only to touch briefly on modern readings of one play, possibly Shakespeare’s last, \textit{The Tempest}, which has become something of a touchstone for competing Virgilian and Ovidian interpretations that clearly mirror a standard contrast between Virgilianism and Ovidianism in classical criticism\textsuperscript{15}. \textit{The Tempest} (1611), like the \textit{Aeneid}, opens with a storm leading to shipwreck on a strange shore, introducing a plot which culminates in a dynastic marriage and the restoration of an exile to his homeland. Modern criticism, particularly of a New-Historicist kind, has seized on the play’s handling of the relationship between Prospero (and also the shipwrecked sailors) and the inhabitants of his island, Caliban and Ariel, in this “brave new world”, for what it has to tell us about issues of colonialism and imperialism in early seventeenth-century England. Equally, if not more, clear are the Ovidian elements in the play, nowhere more than in the character of Prospero, the magician and stage-manager of illusion in the play who has often been understood as a figure for the playwright Shakespeare, like the many figures of the poet whom Ovid writes into the \textit{Metamorphoses}. So, is the ground of \textit{The Tempest} Virgilian or Ovidian\textsuperscript{16}? Is Prospero a statesmanlike master of the storm, guiding a providential plot to a Virgilian conclusion of dynastic marriage, and a dukedom restored to its rightful ruler after usurpation and exile? Or is he an Ovidian magician and fantasist, a master of poetic special effects who knows both about the power of illusion and the necessity of disillusionment? What might be called the “New World” school of reading \textit{The Tempest} lays emphasis on the play’s deployment of the imperial themes of the \textit{Aeneid}. Jonathan Bate, with a case to make for an Ovidian Shakespeare, is sceptical of imperial readings of the New World events in the play, and sees the play rather as “a romance-style reworking of epic material”\textsuperscript{17}. For Bate Shakespeare “revises... Virgil’s imperial theme in the same way that Ovid does... What the imperial theme is subsumed into is a demonstration of the pervasiveness of change, and in this sense \textit{The Tempest} is Shakespeare’s last revision of the \textit{Metamorphoses}... ‘Sea-change’ is this drama’s principal motif”\textsuperscript{18}.


\textsuperscript{17.–} J. Bate, \textit{Shakespeare and Ovid}, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 244.

\textsuperscript{18.–} J. Bate, \textit{ibid.}, p. 245-246.
The contest between Virgilian and Ovidian readings can be continued right up to the end of the play. In the epilogue Prospero, uniquely in Shakespeare, speaks not as an actor in a play but as a character aware of his place in a fiction. The most ambitious modern study of *The Tempest* as a rewriting of the *Aeneid* claims that Prospero’s self-deprecating tone is a stance regularly associated by Renaissance writers with Virgilian statements of poetic inadequacy in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*19. Now I am not in fact myself convinced that there is anything Virgilian here, so let me enter the lists with an Ovidian counterclaim. Prospero’s humble appeal to the audience contains elements in common with the superficially very different, self-confident epilogue to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (15.871–9), an epilogue imitated more directly in some of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. Prospero’s final request is for liberation, “Let your indulgence set me free” – the freedom that Ovid exultantly anticipates for himself and his poem on the death of his mortal body. “Gentle breath of yours my sails | Must fill”, Prospero tells the audience; two lines later he says “Now I want Spirits to enforce, art to enchant”, where “spirits”, Prospero’s fairy sprites, also suggests Prospero’s own mental powers, breath of inspiration20. Hereafter he – and the future reception of the play – will rely on the words borne on the breath of this and future audiences – the breath of kind words about the performance; the breath also of prayer, for after his display of magic arts, Prospero resorts to the Christian language of redemption. But he has not completely renounced the pagan Ovid. In the epilogue to the *Metamorphoses* Ovid claims *ore legar populi*, “I shall be read on the lips of the people”, a boast that at the same time recognises that the future success of the poet’s project is dependent on its perpetuation on the lips and breath of his readers21. Having abjured the magic spells of the Ovidian Medea, Prospero/the play *The Tempest* relies on the power of Shakespeare’s words to spellbind its audiences and readers; and in the last resort *they* always have the power to withhold their favour. Just so the continued lives of both Virgil and Ovid have relied on the power of their words to inspire rebreathings, rewritings, in the texts of later authors, but also on the willingness of those who come after to offer blood to the ghosts.

I conclude with a text in which the contrast between Virgil and Ovid is quite explicitly a central theme, for the very good reason that the two poets appear on stage as characters in a play, Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster* (1601). Ben Jonson was a younger contemporary of Shakespeare, and far more self-conscious about his classical learning and about his own self-positioning with regard to the ancient poets. *Poetaster* draws a sharp contrast between Virgil and Ovid in their relationships to Augustus: Ovid, who has rebelled against his father’s wish that he become a lawyer, stages a banquet of the gods, a masquerade of false divine

20.– “Spirits” pl. is used of “mental powers” (*OED* s.v. *spirit* sb.) in Shakespeare’s time. From a later date cf. Dryden, *Virgil’s Pastoral*ds 4.66: “To sing thy praise, wou’d Heav’n my breath prolong, / Infusing Spirits worthy such a Song” (imitating *Ecl.* 4.53–54 *o mihi tum longae maneat pars ultima uiae, / spiritus et quantum sat erit tua dicere facta*).
presences, for which he is banished by the emperor at the same time as Corinna, identified with the elder Julia, Augustus’ daughter, and who has played Juno to Ovid’s Jupiter at the banquet, is condemned to imprisonment. Before their final separation, in a rewriting of the balcony scene from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* the doomed lovers play out a scene of Ovidian desire and illusionism. As Jonathan Bate comments, “Once Ovid is exiled, Virgil is brought on as an example of the true poet who practises decorum and celebrates piety, honour, and the best traditions of Rome.”

From the point of view of the theme of “Virgil and Ovid” the situation in *Poetaster* is complicated by the fact that Jonson brings on stage not two, but three of the great Augustan poets, the third being Horace the satirist, the Roman poet with whom Jonson identifies his own poetic ambitions and anxieties most closely, both in this play and in his own poetic career more generally. In fact the main plot of *Poetaster* is an allegory of the so-called “War of the Theatres” between Ben Jonson (Horace) and the playwrights John Marston and Thomas Dekker, who appear in the play in the characters of Crispinus and Demetrius. In *Poetaster* Virgil champions Horace against Crispinus’ and Demetrius’ charges of malicious detraction. But through the Ovidian subplot Jonson also defines his own Augustanism, on the one side with reference to Ovid, and on the other side to Virgil, with Horace in the middle as a kind of Horatian mean with which Jonson can comfortably identify himself. Jonson’s Ovid is a master of poetic invention and fantasy but deluded in his unwillingness or inability to accommodate himself to the political realities of an enlightened principate. The banishment of Ovid contains more contemporary reference, implying Jonson’s judgement on the vogue for Ovidianism in English poetry of the 1590s, of which the best known products were Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, two mythological “epyllia” based on models in the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*.

Virgil, on the other hand, stands for an almost superhuman ideal of poetic power, as also for an ideal relationship between poet and ruler that Jonson can only dream of. This ideal is realised most fully in Act V Scene I, preluding the entrance of Virgil himself in the next scene, in which Augustus delivers a praise of poetry that echoes and revises the discourse on *Romanae artes* in the Speech of Anchises in *Aeneid* 6. In this play of impersonations, the emperor himself ventriloquizes for Augustus. And when Virgil does enter, he is idealized as a prince of poets, hailed by Caesar himself as an *alter ego*, V. ii. 1-5:

> See, here comes Virgil; we will rise and greet him.  
> Welcome to Caesar, Virgil. Caesar and Virgil  
> Shall differ but in sound; to Caesar, Virgil  
> Of his expressed greatness shall be made  
> A second surname, and to Virgil, Caesar.

22.– *Bate, op. cit.*, p. 168-169.  
Political and poetic greatness, the fame of the ruler and the fame of the poet, are solidly united, in a way that Jonson could hardly dare to claim for himself.

Ovid and Virgil are also contrasted in the matter of *fama*, a matter of obvious interest to Jonson himself both in its senses of poetic fame and immortality, and of ill-fame or defamation, a particular concern for the poet as satirist, who must draw a clear line between the satirist’s attacks on vice and the defamations of the slanderer. If convicted of the latter, the satirist himself will suffer ill fame; in the figure of Horace Jonson embodies his own anxiety to be recognised as a satirist working to the same socially regulatory ends as the law and the monarch in the character of Horace, the target of various attacks in the play. In the first scene of *Poetaster* Ovid enters composing the first major statement of his own confident ambition for fame, defying the attacks of Envy, *Amores* 1.15, which he reads out in toto at the end of the scene. In the last act a demonstration is given of the efficacy of the *sortes Vergilianae* in matching canonical text to present reality, when Caesar Augustus selects at random, and Virgil recites, the narrative of the “wedding” of Dido and Aeneas and the subsequent outbreak of *Fama*-rumour/slander (V. ii. 56-97 = *Aen.* 4.160-88). Ironically the assertion of good *fama*-as-fame is given to Ovid, the poet who falls foul of Caesar through an illicit sexual liaison with Julia/Corinna that is as ill-starred as the union of Aeneas and Dido, while the delineation of bad *fama*-as-rumour is given to the poet who is of one mind with Caesar, and whose verse has the power to immortalise Rome and her monuments, Virgil. But this should not cause surprise. While Ovid’s control of his fame against the onslaught of envy is not totally secure, at least in his own lifetime, Virgil is fully able, in his own world of Rome, to control the monster *Fama*. He is interrupted in his recital by the entry (right on cue, just as Virgil starts a new sentence of the translation with “This monster”) of the informer Lupus, bearing a false accusation of libel against Horace, whose good name is successfully defended by his friend Virgil. The startling slide from a poetic world of personified abstractions to the real world of Virgil’s Rome is matched by the play’s transparent mirroring of contemporary events in the fictitious tale of ancient Rome.

But the dichotomies of the play do not work in a rigidly exclusionist manner – and this might be generalized to a statement about the always provisional and partial nature of the Virgil/Ovid dichotomy. If *Poetaster* is an important document in the history of a polarized reading of Virgil and Ovid, yet Ovid’s opening assertion of his undying fame is not negated by his expulsion in the play from the circle of Caesar, since the fame of Ovid’s poetry is a long-established and indelible fact by the time of *Poetaster*. Ovid’s long-term victory over Envy

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is as secure as is Virgil’s judgement, within the confines of the play, on Horace’s behalf through the arraignment of Crispinus and Demetrius. The version of *Amores* 1.15 that Ovid reads out is substantially the translation of Christopher Marlowe, which had first appeared in an edition of Marlowe’s translations of Ovid’s *Elegies* that had been banned by the censors and publicly burned. If the discomfiture of Ovid in *Poetaster* reflects Jonson’s judgement on 1590s Ovidianism, nevertheless the inclusion of Marlowe’s translation of *Amores* 1.15 is an act of homage to Marlowe’s Ovidian exercises, as well an acknowledgement of Ovid’s success in achieving the immortality in fame for which he aspired, in the real world of Jonson’s audiences and readers.

**Bibliography**


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