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From Servius to Frazer: The Golden Bough and its Transformations

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For the past 2,000 years, no work of secular Western literature has been so widely read, studied and interpreted as Vergil's *Aeneid*. Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, exegetes of the poem have focused on its sixth book as the source of ancient pagan wisdom; one of the central images in this book is that of the Golden Bough, which Aeneas plucks in order to gain entry into the underworld. This paper discusses the entire history of the Bough's interpretation, beginning with Servius and culminating with James Frazer; the Bough is used as an index of the rise and decline of allegorical interpretation, and further hermeneutic developments are studied in some detail. Attention is also given to literary reworkings of the Bough, from late antiquity to the seventeenth century. I conclude with a discussion of modern attitudes towards mediaeval interpretations, and an analysis of the ongoing continuity of exegetical methods, as reflected in twentieth-century accounts of the Bough's meaning.

In 1890, James Frazer published the first edition of his masterpiece, *The Golden Bough*.¹ He explained the idea behind his book in a letter to his publisher George Macmillan, sent on November 8 of that year:

I shall soon have completed a study in the history of primitive religion which I propose to offer to you for publication. The book is an

* For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article, I would like to thank Guido Giglioni, Wolfgang Haase, Arnold Hunt, Jill Kraye, Paul White, and the two anonymous readers for the *IJCT*.

1. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* appeared first in two volumes (London: Macmillan, 1890), the second edition, with the subtitle *A Study in Magic and Religion* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1900), arrived in three volumes, and the third in twelve, issued as a complete set in 1911-1915 (London: Macmillan).

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explanation of the legend of the Golden Bough, as that legend is given by Servius in his commentary on Virgil.²

The Golden Bough, plucked by Aeneas before his journey to the underworld in Book Six of the *Aeneid*, seems central to Frazer's work, appearing both as its title, and on its opening and closing pages. But the Bough painted so warmly in Frazer's introduction is, in fact, *not* Vergil's—it is only J. M. W. Turner's, and then, as Frazer acknowledges in his letter, that of Servius. Jonathan Smith is correct that the book's title is a 'misnomer', for the Bough itself plays a very minor rôle therein, even by the author's own eventual admission.³

In spite of this, Frazer's interpretation of the Bough, when it finally arrives towards the end of his work, is of particular interest. His reading embodies the Romanticism and positivism of nineteenth-century scholarship, and at the same time, paradoxically, engages deeply with the tradition of allegorical exegesis which had flourished since late antiquity. At the heart of that tradition was a Platonic conflation of philosophy and poetry, Truth and Beauty, as a timeless, ahistorical ideal. It was only in the late Enlightenment, with its development of a historicising system of values, that allegory was banished from the practice of interpretation. The materials of the past would henceforth be read *as* past materials, not as the keys to timeless truth; and poetry would be read *as* poetry, or as a historical witness, and not as disguised philosophy.

But although the aims and results of interpretation changed dramatically, aspects of the old method persisted. Mediaeval allegorists had sought for correspondences and analogies; early modern scholars hunted instead for comparisons, patterns and, later, genetic connections. Far from being a radical break with the past, the discipline of comparative religion was a glittering bloom grafted onto a dark and ancient stock. It was only fitting, then, that *The Golden Bough* should mark its culmination, and that it, too, should be plucked away by later critics, eager to establish their own interpretive rites. This paper does not attempt a full account of this change, but only a single view, through the lens of one image—the Bough itself—which has been crucial to readings of the *Aeneid* since Servius. Although much excellent work has been done on the reception of Vergil's epic, the Bough has been oddly ignored in this context, in favour, especially, of the events in *Aeneid* IV.⁴ This book, with its ethical and worldly themes, has arguably been the locus of the most interesting

2. Quoted in Robert Fraser, *The Making of the Golden Bough: The Origins and Growth of an Argument* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 52.

3. Jonathan Z. Smith, 'When the Bough Breaks', *History of Religions* 12 (1973), 342–371, p. 351 (= Smith, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 23 [Leiden: Brill, 1978], pp. 208–239, p. 217).

4. Throughout this paper, I am deeply indebted to two scholars of Vergil's post-classical reception: Julian Ward Jones and Craig Kallendorf. The latter's many books and articles, in particular, have had a far greater bearing on this paper than might be suggested by my explicit citations. Since I began writing, another invaluable resource has been published: *The Virgilian Tradition: The First Fifteen Hundred Years*, eds. Jan M. Ziolkowski and Michael C.J. Putnam (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007). See pp. 545–546 for Servius on the Golden Bough, pp. 547–548 for Bernard Silvestris, and pp. 548–550 for John of Salisbury.

exegetical innovation.⁵ The Bough, by contrast, is a simple and central image; because it is simple, we can easily compare its readings, which, because it is central, tend to encapsulate a broader interpretation of the poem. The benefits of such a comparison are obvious. By examining specific responses to the Bough's hermeneutic possibilities, we will more easily see how and why the allegorical mode was replaced by the historical, and to what extent it was replaced at all.

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In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, the hero seeks admission to the underworld. He consults the Cumaean Sibyl, who explains that, to be granted entry, he must first pluck from a sacred grove the *ramus aureus*—known to English readers since Dryden as the Golden Bough—as an offering to Proserpina, queen of the underworld. Vergil describes the Bough twice, first in the Sibyl's description (ll. 136-139):

*Latet arbore opaca
aureus et foliis et lento uimine ramus,
Iunoni infernae dictus sacer; hunc tegit omnis
lucus et obscuris claudunt conuallibus umbrae.*

There lies hidden on a shady tree
a bough, golden both of leaves and pliant shoot,
set apart as sacred to Proserpina; the grove hides it
utterly, and shadows enclose it with umbrous valleys.⁶

And then when Aeneas actually reaches the Bough, beginning mid-sentence at l. 204:

discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit
from which a breath of gold glowed in contrast through the
boughs

at which point it is compared to the growth of mistletoe on an oak.⁷ Aeneas plucks the Bough, as instructed, and returns with it to the Sibyl; together they enter the underworld, where she presents the Bough to Charon (l. 406) as proof of their good intentions. Finally, again commanded by the Sibyl, Aeneas fixes the Bough before the threshold of Elysium (l. 636) as a gift for Proserpina. The Bough evidently mediates between the living world of the epic as a whole, and the world of the dead in which Aeneas meets his father Anchises—the climactic episode of the poem's first half.

The episode of the Bough has never been merely one detail, in one book of twelve, in one poem of many: rather, it is the central detail of the central book of what was, from late antiquity through to the end of the Renaissance,

5. See, for instance, J. Christopher Warner, *The Augustinian Epic, Petrarch to Milton* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 33-36 on Petrarch, and 67-70 on Cristoforo Landino. In each case, the relationship between Dido and Aeneas presents a particular opportunity for individuality in interpretation.

6. Vergil, *Aeneid*, in *Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 131.

7. Vergil, *Aeneid*, in *Opera*, p. 133. The comparison to the mistletoe appears in ll. 205-209.

the most significant and prestigious work of pagan literature in Western Europe. Martin Irvine is quite typical in pairing the *Aeneid* with the Bible itself, both 'supreme texts ... which a community privileges for self-definition, authority, and authentication'.⁸ From the very start it was popular as a national epic and a fixed point of cultural reference—to be used in the classroom,⁹ and pastiched by later writers who could rely on their readers to spot the source. The setting of the Bough, to give an example germane to this paper, is gently suggested by Apuleius in a description of a grove of wild roses.¹⁰ The significance of the *Aeneid* as a cultural standard perhaps reached its peak with the Vergilian centos of the fourth century, which fashioned new narrative material out of hemistichs lifted from the original epic. In Proba's case, the new story is Christian: the beginning of Genesis and the life of Christ.¹¹ Scholars have disagreed about this cento's purpose, but it is clear at least that Proba, like her fellow Christians, acknowledged the high cultural status of the *Aeneid*, if not its theological probity.¹² One image in her cento is of particular interest for us: the Bough 'becomes', by contextual transposition, the fruit of the Edenic Tree of Knowledge.¹³ The central image of the pagan poem is thus con-

8. Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350-1100*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 19 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 15. Irvine later refers, p. 80, to the *Aeneid* as 'cultural and even religious scripture'.
9. We have a late specimen of a propaedeutic gloss on the *Aeneid*, in Priscian's *Partitiones duodecim versuum Aeneidos principalium*, ed. Henricus Keilius, *Grammatici Latini* III (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1859; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2002), pp. 457-515, and Priscianus, *Opuscula II: Institutio de nomine et pronomine et verbo & Partitiones duodecim versuum Aeneidos principalium*, ed. Marina Passalacqua, *Sussidi eruditi* 48 (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1999), pp. 43-128. See Manfred Glück, *Priscians Partitiones und ihre Stellung in der spätantiken Schule*, *Spudasmata* XII (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967).
10. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, IV.2. Another example can be found in Claudian, *De raptu Proserpinae*, II.290-91.
11. The cento has been translated as Proba, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross*, eds. and trs. Elizabeth A. Clark and Diane F. Hatch, Texts and Translations Series (American Academy of Religion) 5 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981). On its probable date in the 350s, see R. P. H. Green, 'Proba's Cento: Its Date, Purpose, and Reception', *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 45 (1995), 551-563.
12. On Proba's cento, see, in addition to Green's article cited above, Reinhart Herzog, *Bibelepik der lateinischen Spätantike: Formgeschichte einer erbaulichen Gattung*, 2 vols (Munich: Fink, 1975), I, pp. 14-51; and Reinhart Herzog and Peter Lebrecht Schmidt, eds., *Handbuch der lateinischen Literatur der Antike*, vol. V: *Restauration und Erneuerung. Die lateinische Literatur von 284 bis 374 n. Chr.* (München: C.H. Beck, 1988), pp. 337-340 = Reinhart Herzog and Gérard Nauroy, eds., *Nouvelle Histoire de la Littérature Latine*, vol. V: *Restauration et renouveau: la littérature latine de 284 à 374 après J.-C.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), pp. 386-388. Not all contemporary Christians welcomed Proba's syncretism: St. Jerome laments Christian readings of Vergil's poetry in Letter 53 to Paulinus, par. 7. Over a millennium later, Erasmus' approval of Jerome's sentiment reflects his own attitudes towards the matter—see his edition of Jerome's letter in Erasmus, *Collected Works*, eds. James Brady and John Olin (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), LXI, p. 211, with his comments on pp. 223-224.
13. Proba, *Golden Bough*, p. 30 (ll. 151-152). Cf. John of Salisbury, at n. 55 below.

flated with the central image of Genesis 3.

By the end of the fourth century, the *Aeneid* had come to be seen as something more than a cultural touchstone: Vergil had become a *classic*, and his poem a repository of information lost to the present.¹⁴ Servius, for instance, when he adapted Aelius Donatus' notes on Vergil for his own extensive commentary (c. 420), 'change[d] Donatus' present tenses to imperfects, thus relegating paganism firmly to the past'.¹⁵ This information was partly cultural, but also religious, philosophical, even mystical—Vergil became for Latin readers what Homer had long been, and would continue to be, for the Greeks.

Insofar as the information was cultural, it had only to be glossed; but insofar as it was mystical, it had to be *decoded*: this was the function of allegorical interpretation. The Neoplatonists, and notably Porphyry, collapsed the distinction between poetry and philosophy, reading the Homeric epics as philosophy—Neoplatonism, of course—revealed through parable: as 'a screen of poetic fiction masking a general truth about human experience'.¹⁶ The concept of a screen or veil is significant: Proclus would use παραπέτασμα in the same sense,¹⁷ while according to Macrobius, Vergil concealed his true meaning 'under a pious veil of fancies'.¹⁸ The same image would encapsulate the principle of allegorical exegesis throughout the Middle Ages, and even as late as Francis Bacon, as we shall see. For Macrobius, Vergil is revealed by interpretation as a sage 'skilled in all disciplines', and explicitly as a rival to Christian wisdom.¹⁹ Thus from its inception, allegory was used to support proprietary claims over Vergil's text.

The allegorical Bough

Servius, a contemporary of Macrobius who appears in the *Saturnalia*, put this principle into practice.²⁰ His aims were generally pedagogical, explicating

14. See James E. G. Zetzel, *Latin Textual Criticism in Antiquity* (New York: Arno, 1981), p. 111, on the implications of this for Servius' grammatical analysis.
15. Alan Cameron, 'Poetry and Literary Culture in Late Antiquity', in Simon Swain and Mark Edwards, eds., *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 327-354, at p. 342.
16. Robert Lamberton, in Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, tr. and introd. Robert Lamberton (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1983), p. 7.
17. On Proclus and the Greek tradition, see Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*, *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 9 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), with a discussion of the influence on Vergil commentaries on p. 185.
18. Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. Iacobus Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), p. 6 (I.2.11): 'sacrarum rerum notio sub pio velamine figmentorum'. Macrobius was familiar with Porphyry's exegesis of Homer, as is evident from *Commentarii*, I.12.1. Meanwhile, Félix Buffière, in the introduction to his edition of Heraclitus, *Allégories d'Homère* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1962), p. 81, n. 1, finds traces of this allegorist in *Saturnalia* I.10.11.
19. Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, ed. Iacobus Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), p. 75 (I.16.12): 'omnium disciplinarum peritus'. Irvine, *Making of Textual Culture*, p. 80, calls the *Aeneid* a 'a symbol of resistance to the growing Christian textual community'.
20. Lamberton in Porphyry, *On the Cave*, p. 14, remarks that the 'process of absorption of Homer the sage into the tradition of commentary on Virgil the sage begins as

mythological and other references in Vergil's text for pagan and Christian students alike.²¹ But in the occasional allegorical reading of the poem, we catch glimpses of a loftier, Macrobian purpose.²² These readings are concentrated in Servius' notes on the *Aeneid* VI, explicitly stated to be the most important book of the epic:

Totus quidem Vergilius scientia plenus est, in qua hic liber possidet principatum, cuius ex Homero pars maior est. et dicuntur aliqua simpliciter, multa de historia, multa per altam scientiam philosophorum, theologorum, Aegyptiorum, adeo ut plerique de his singulis huius libri integras scripserunt pragmatias.

In truth, all of Vergil is full of learning, but most of all this book, the best part of which is from Homer. And some [of these things] are related simply, much about history, or by way of the profound learning of the philosophers, theologians and Egyptians, to such an extent that many have written entire treatises about these individual parts of the book.²³

Vergil's pagan wisdom, derived from Greek philosophers and Egyptians, is older, and thus by implication greater, than the wisdom of Christians. Servius' reason for highlighting the sixth book is not obscure: its *katabasis* could be eas-

early as Servius in the 4th century'. Macrobius' Servius, by scholarly consensus, has little in common with the real Servius, on which see Robert Kaster, 'Macrobius and Servius: *Verecundia* and the Grammarian's Function', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 84 (1980), 219-262.

21. Gerald Snare, 'The Practice of Glossing in Late Antiquity and the Renaissance', *Studies in Philology* 92 (1995), p. 450, claims of Servius' commentary that its 'primary function, supported as it was by noble patronage, was to introduce secondary-level students to the study of literature'. See also Robert Kaster's description of Servius in the context of grammatical education, in his *Guardians of Language: the Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity*, The Transformation of the classical heritage 11 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 169-170. Alan Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 184, notes that Servian scholars 'have usually been interested in its value either for the textual criticism of Vergil or for the teaching of Latin in late antiquity'.
22. Julian Ward Jones, Jr., 'The Allegorical Traditions of the *Aeneid*', in John D. Bernard, ed., *Vergil at 2000: Commemorative Essays on the Poet and His Influence*, AMS Ars Poetica 3 (New York: AMS, 1986), p. 113, reads these interpretations as part of Servius' attempt to Neoplatonize Vergil, a practice 'employed by pagan writers as a countervail to Christianity'. However, see the cautionary remarks in Cameron, 'Poetry and Literary Culture' (above, n. 15), pp. 341-344. For a categorization of Servius' allegories, see Julian Ward Jones, Jr., 'Allegorical Interpretation in Servius', *Classical Journal* 56 (1961), 217-226, which concludes, p. 224, that Servius 'emphasizes a philosophic approach to the understanding of Vergil'. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, p. 170, on the other hand, sees the lack of historical gloss in the work as a 'sign of the emphasis that the late-antique *grammatici* placed on linguistic instruction'.
23. Servius, *Qui feruntur in Vergilii carmina commentarii*, eds. Georg Thilo and Hermann Hagen (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1881-1902, repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1961), II, p. 1.

ily situated in an ancient tradition of mystery religions and sacred philosophy.²⁴

The key object in the Vergilian *katabasis* is the Golden Bough. Modern scholars have recognised the Bough's centrality both within Book Six, and in the *Aeneid* as a whole.²⁵ Servius, glossing lines 136-137 on the Bough, makes good use of the pre-Christian material he has espoused, invoking mystery religion and traditional Roman folklore, as well as Pythagorean philosophy, or what is perceived as such.²⁶ It was Servius' reference here to the priesthood of Diana at Nemi that later set Frazer on his own voyage, although according to Smith, and later Austin, this digression has 'no definable relevance to Virgil'.²⁷ In addition to providing this cultural information, Servius indulges in an allegorical reading of the Bough as the 'Pythagorean letter':

[N]ovimus Pythagoram Samium vitam humanam divisisse in modum Y litterae, scilicet quod prima aetas incerta sit, quippe quae adhuc se nec vitii nec virtutibus dedit; bivium autem Y litterae a iuventute incipere, quo tempore homines aut vitia, id est partem sinistram, aut virtutes, id est dexteram partem sequuntur ...

We know that Pythagoras of Samos divided human life according to the letter Y, that is, because the first age is unformed, not yet given

24. Heraclitus *Allégories*, p. 75, had read Homer's *nekuia* as the last and deepest region for Odysseus' spiritual exploration. In other contexts, cave imagery has been repeatedly associated with mystery ritual and *katabasis*, as in Porphyry's exegesis of the Cave of the Nymphs (*Od.* 13, 102-112), which Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, V.3.18-19, associates with a similar cave in *Aeneid* I.159-168. Vergil himself was well aware of the philosophical significance of Aeneas' descent; as well as Homer, he drew on the ideas and imagery of Plato's Myth of Er and Cicero's Dream of Scipio, itself modelled on Plato. For an analysis of the latter connections, see Philip R. Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 71-75.
25. Robert A. Brooks, 'Discolor Aura: reflections on the Golden Bough' (1953) in Steele Commager, ed., *Virgil: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 158, argues that the Bough is 'one of the most critical and complex events in [the *Aeneid*'s] internal structure'. Louis A. MacKay, 'Three levels of meaning in *Aeneid* VI', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 86 (1955), 180-189, p. 186, likewise acknowledges that within the metaphorical architecture of the *Aeneid*, 'the central episode is that of the Golden Bough'. Servius, however, is the first extant writer who took any interest in the Bough. It is absent, for instance, from early Christian apologetics, which otherwise cited Vergil extensively; on the reception of the poet in this milieu, see Stefan Freund, *Vergil im frühen Christentum: Untersuchungen zu den Vergilzitaten bei Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Novatian, Cyprian und Arnobius*, *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums* 1 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).
26. C. P. Segal finds this duality of 'mythic' and 'philosophical' to be present in the Bough itself: see his '*Aeternum per saecula nomen*, the Golden Bough and the Tragedy of History: Part I', *Arion* 4 (1965), 617-657, at p. 619.
27. Frazer cites the Servian passage in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd edition, 12 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1990), I, p. 11, n. 1. The quoted expression is from R. G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos liber sextus, with a Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), note to line 138, p. 83, but see also Smith, 'When the Bough Breaks' (above, n. 3), pp. 350-351 (= Smith, *Map is not Territory*, pp. 216-217).

over either to vices or to virtues; and that the fork of the letter Y begins with youth, at which time men follow either vices (the left path) or virtues (the right path).²⁸

The Y has some significance for a defence of paganism. A century earlier, Lactantius had cited the letter as a common visualisation of pagan ethics, only to object that it fell short of the truth—for the ‘fork’ occurs not during life, but at the moment of death, when a man’s soul will go either to heaven or to hell.²⁹ Lactantius here acknowledges *Aeneid* VI.540, where the hero faces a choice of paths in the underworld, to Elysium or to Dis.

It is tempting to suggest that Servius associated the Y-shaped Bough with *Aeneid* VI.540; he makes a similar connection in his gloss on VI.477, and Louis MacKay notes that the Bough, for Servius, is ‘appropriately dedicated at the point where its bearer turned to the right along the path of virtue’.³⁰ But the link remains implicit: there is no mention of the Bough in the annotations to VI.540, or to VI.636, when the dedication occurs. However, Servius does allude earlier to the Bough’s function in the ‘*sacra Proserpinae*’ or death-offering, recalling the circumstances of her own capture by Hades:

[R]amus enim necesse erat ut et unius causa esset interitus ... et ad sacra Proserpinae accedere nisi sublato ramo non poterat ...

For the bough was necessarily the cause of someone’s death ... and he could not approach the holy places [*sacra*, alternatively ‘worship’] of Proserpina unless the bough had been plucked.³¹

There are therefore two noteworthy aspects of Servius’ reading of the Bough. Firstly, it uses the image to reinforce a traditional point of pagan ethics; and secondly, it augments the Bough’s metaphorical resonances within the structure of *Aeneid* VI. Servius’ readings, nonetheless, are superficially isolated in his series of glosses, and lack an overarching exegetical framework. Such a framework was the contribution of Fulgentius.

Fulgentius’ *Expositio Virgilianae continentiae*, composed around 500 AD, was the first Christian commentary on the *Aeneid*. The work consists of a short dialogue between Fulgentius himself and the resurrected poet; its analysis of the epic, ostensibly through Vergil’s own mouth, attempts to syncretise pagan philosophy, particularly in its Stoic aspects, with Christian thought, although at the same time this very process is called into question. At the start, Ful-

28. Servius, *Commentarii*, II, pp. 30-31.

29. Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, VI.3.5-10.

30. Servius, *Commentarii*, II, p. 72. Louis A. MacKay, ‘Three Levels of Meaning in *Aeneid* VI’ (above, n. 25), p. 186.

31. Servius, *Commentarii*, II, p. 30. Servius’ interest in the mystery-religion aspect of the Bough takes its cue from Vergil’s own symbolism throughout the book, from the emphasis on concealment and darkness (‘*latet*’ and ‘*opaca*’, 136, ‘*tegit*’, 138, ‘*lucus*’, ‘*obscuris*’ and ‘*umbrae*’, 139, ‘*operta*’, 140, ‘*opaca*’, 208), to the imagery of death and rebirth exemplified by the name Hesperia (6), the mistletoe (*viscum*, 205), holly (*ilex*, 209), cypress (*cupressos*, 216) and elm (*ulmus opaca*, 283), the presence of Hecate or Trivia (13, 35, 69, 118, 247), and so forth. It is possible that Trivia, whose name means ‘three roads’, representing her status as boundary-goddess, was connected by Vergil with the branching path of Aeneas.

gentius, like Macrobius and Servius before him, nods to Vergil's concealment of secret wisdom in his poetry.³² Towards the end of the dialogue, similarly, he praises Vergil for his mystical prediction of the Virgin Birth in *Eclogues* 4.6-7—a patristic commonplace—but then he laments the poet's inclusion of 'Epicurean' doctrine in *Aeneid* VI.³³ At this, Vergil admits his own pagan ignorance: 'no one comes to know the whole truth except you [i.e. the Christians], for whom the sun of truth blazes'.³⁴

This complex dialectic between paganism and Christianity has been the subject of most scholarly interest in the work.³⁵ But Fulgentius' formal innovation is also significant: he is the first to provide an overarching scheme of interpretation, according to which the *Aeneid* as a whole represents the six ages of a man's life.³⁶ Within this scheme, the *katabasis* of the sixth book represents the movement of the young man towards wisdom:

[I]n sexto [sc. libro] ad templum Apollinis adveniens ad inferos descendit ... dum quis futura considerat, tunc sapientiae obscura secretaque misteria penetrat ...

In the sixth book, [Aeneas], reaching the temple of Apollo, descends to the underworld ... when anyone sees the future, he penetrates the obscure and secret mysteries of wisdom.³⁷

Whereas in Servius allegorical readings were only single specimens, here allegory is integral to the structure of Fulgentius' interpretation. And within the scheme of the sixth book, the Golden Bough plays a special part, as the poet explains:

[N]on antea discitur cognitio secretorum, nisi quis ramum decerpserit aureum, id est doctrinae atque litterarum discatur studium. Ramum enim aureum pro scientia posuimus ...

There is no acquisition of secrets before one has plucked the Golden Bough, that is, has pursued a study of learning and literature. For I put in the Golden Bough [to represent] knowledge [scientia].³⁸

The Bough no longer stands in for an image of pagan ethics, as for Servius, but now represents simply learning or knowledge, by which Fulgentius intends the object of a grammatical education. The Bough is subsequently glossed as 'acquired learning'.³⁹ The allegory here is not specific to a given religion; its

32. Fulgentius, *Expositio Virgilianae continentiae secundum philosophos morales*, in his *Opera*, ed. Rudolph Helm (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1898; repr. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1970), p. 83.

33. Fulgentius, *Expositio*, p. 102. The doctrine in question, that souls return to their bodies from heaven after death—quoted by Fulgentius from *Aeneid* VI.719-21—is of course not Epicurean, but derives from Plato, *Phaedrus* 246-249.

34. Fulgentius, *Expositio*, p. 103: 'nullo [or 'nulli'] ... omnia vera nosse contingit nisi vobis, quibus sol veritatis inluxit'.

35. See, for instance, Robert Edwards, 'Fulgentius and the Collapse of Meaning', *Helios* 3 (1976), 17-35.

36. Fulgentius, *Expositio*, pp. 89-90.

37. Fulgentius, *Expositio*, pp. 95-96.

38. Fulgentius, *Expositio*, pp. 96-97.

39. Fulgentius, *Expositio*, p. 98: 'ramum aureum, id est doctrinam adeptus'.

message might easily be accepted by pagan or Christian, as with other contemporary works, such as Boethius' *Consolation*. While syncretism is questioned elsewhere in the *Expositio*, here it is untroubled; by eliminating every historical particularity of the *Aeneid*, the Christian Fulgentius can thus reclaim its *basic* philosophy, if not every one of its individual doctrines, for his own use.

Ever since Fulgentius, commentators have repeated his 'ages of man' scheme; modern scholars are no exception.⁴⁰ The broad outlines of his syncretistic interpretation, meanwhile, were adopted for over a thousand years, and very little of originality would be written on the Bough until the seventeenth century. During this period, the *Aeneid* was commented upon, and allegorised, by two principal groups, both of a Platonist character: those at or near Chartres in the mid-twelfth century,⁴¹ and those in Florence over three generations in the fifteenth. For both groups, the Bough, a physical key to the underworld, would be understood as a spiritual or intellectual key to philosophical wisdom—an image which goes right to the heart of the Neoplatonic worldview.

Of the Platonising commentaries, perhaps the most important is an anonymous text of the twelfth century, traditionally ascribed, on rather doubtful grounds, to Bernard Silvestris.⁴² Bernard, like his 'Chartrian' colleagues, made use of the old pagan doctrine of the screen or veil—what Macrobius called the *velamen figmentorum*, they termed the *integumentum* or *involucrum*—cloaking the philosophical truth of a poem.⁴³ Like their predecessors, these writers sought to neutralise the non-Christian elements of pagan literature by means of allegorical exegesis.⁴⁴

40. MacKay, 'Three Levels of Meaning in *Aeneid* VI' (above, n. 25), p. 186: 'The order that operates [in the *Aeneid*], as many scholars have seen, is the order of the stages of human life'.

41. The classic study of this 'Chartrian Platonism' is Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: the Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972). R. W. Southern, however, argues forcefully for the group's location at Paris in his unfinished last work, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), I, chapter 2.

42. For a discussion of authorship, see the introduction to *The Commentary on the First Six Books of the Aeneid of Vergil commonly attributed to Bernardus Silvestris*, eds. Julian Ward Jones and Elizabeth Frances Jones (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), pp. ix–xi. For the sake of simplicity I will refer to the author as Bernard, and to the work as his *Commentary*.

43. A canonical formulation is provided in Bernard, *Commentary*, p. 3. On the two words, see also Edouard Jauneau, 'L'usage de la notion d'*integumentum* à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 24 (1957), 35–100, and Frank Bezner, *Vela Veritatis: Hermeneutik, Wissen und Sprache in der Intellectual History des 12. Jahrhunderts*, Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 85 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 33–35 and 346–358.

44. As Marie-Dominique Chenu, 'Involucrum: Le mythe selon les théologiens médiévaux', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 22 (1955), 74–79, at p. 76, remarks: 'En vérité cet involucrum révèle l'ambiguïté que toujours la foi chrétienne a éprouvée devant les formes mythiques de la croyance religieuse'. On Bernard's use of

Bernard reuses the Fulgentian scheme for his own purposes, although he abandons the earlier conceit that this philosophical interpretation was the poet's own intention. All semblance of the historical Vergil is missing, as is any doubt that his world can be harmonised with Bernard's.⁴⁵ Given the passage that troubled Fulgentius, it is no problem for Bernard to read back into the *Aeneid* the Neoplatonic doctrine of the soul's imprisonment in the body.⁴⁶ The descent of the human soul into the body is paralleled in *Aeneid* VI by the hero's own *katabasis*, which Bernard interprets as an allegory for metaphysical 'descent', the progress towards philosophical wisdom.⁴⁷ Appropriately, then, Bernard devotes three quarters of his commentary to the sixth book, in which, he claims, 'Vergil declares ... philosophical truth more profoundly'.⁴⁸ On the Bough, Bernard combines the interpretations of Servius and Fulgentius. Servius' contribution, the less important of the two, is given second:

Hic ramus est in ARBORE. Pitagoras appellavit humanitatem que in duos ramos, id est in virtutem et vitium se dividit. Cum enim in initio continuat, deinceps quidam in dextrum, quidam in sinistrum, id est quidam in vitium, quidam in virtutem se dividunt. Hec autem arbor gravedine carnis opacca [sic] est. Quia humanitas ad modum arboris dividitur, ideo hoc loco "arbor" vocatur et a Pitagora per y characterem furcate arboris formam habentem figuratur.

This bough is on a tree. Pythagoras called humanity [a tree] which is divided into two branches, that is, into virtue and vice. For while they are together in the beginning, afterwards some people divide themselves to the right, some to the left, that is, some to vice, some to virtue. And this tree is shady with the heaviness of the flesh. Because humanity is divided in the manner of a tree, so in this place it is called a 'tree', and is figured by Pythagoras with the character Y, which has the form of a forked tree.⁴⁹

Bernard adds to Servius his own Neoplatonic emphasis, by insisting on the 'heaviness of the flesh'. In the same way he develops Fulgentius' reading in the direction of twelfth-century pedagogy:

classical materials in his commentary, see David L. Pike, 'Bernard Silvestris' Descent into the Classics: the *Commentum super sex libros Aeneidos*, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 4 (1997-1998), 343-363.

45. D. A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1995), pp. 96-97, is unwise to imply that an 'assumption' of authorial intent is necessary to allegorical exegesis. Although such an assumption is clearly, albeit problematically, present in Fulgentius, the same cannot be assumed of his mediaeval and Renaissance successors.

46. See above, n. 33. Jane Nitzsche reads a parallel between the soul's imprisonment in the body and the 'incarceration of truth in fiction' represented by the *integumentum*: see her *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 59.

47. Bernard, *Commentary*, p. 30.

48. Bernard, *Commentary*, p. 28: '*profundius philosophicam veritatem ... declarat Virgilius*'.

49. Bernard, *Commentary*, pp. 58-59. In this passage and the next, I have sometimes translated '*ramus*' as 'branch' for the sake of English idiom; but the semantic continuity between bough and branch should be understood.

Ramus integumentis vocatur quodlibet quod in diversa scinditur ut virtutes, vicia, scientie. RAMUS ergo AUREUS hoc loco intelligitur philosophia quia quemadmodum ramus per alios furcatur, ita philosophia quasi quidam stipes in duas alias, scilicet theoreticam et practicam que rursus in alias secernuntur ... AUREUS autem quia per aurum sapientia intelligitur ...

By *integumentum*, anything which is divided into several parts, such as the virtues, vices, and knowledge, is called a branch. Therefore the Golden Bough is understood here as philosophy, because just as the branch is forked into other [branches], so philosophy is like a tree [forked] into two branches, that is, the theoretical and the practical, which in turn are divided again. . . 'Gold' because by gold is understood wisdom.⁵⁰

For Fulgentius, the Bough had stood for learning (*doctrina*) and knowledge (*scientia*); for Bernard, whose educational programme is more specific, the Bough is 'philosophy', which, as he notes earlier, 'is called both lofty and profound'.⁵¹ The 'ramifications' of philosophy, in Bernard's picture, reflect the 'Chartrian' revival of the classical liberal arts. Just as the Bough has two branches, so philosophy can be either theoretical or practical; and each branch divides again.⁵² Christopher Baswell interprets these divisions as integral to the commentary, which 'is structured so as to imitate the series of choices and divided paths which "Bernard" sees as the fundamental integumental story of the *Aeneid*'.⁵³

Another 'Chartrian' reading offers only a small variation. John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* contains an allegorical digression on the *Aeneid*, complete with the *involutrum* doctrine and the 'ages of man' scheme.⁵⁴ For John, the Bough represents not wisdom itself but the 'virtuous effort' required to gain wisdom.⁵⁵

50. Bernard, *Commentary*, p. 58. Bernard further follows Fulgentius in his reading of line 636 (the dedication of the Bough): see Fulgentius, *Expositio*, p. 101, and Bernard, p. 115.

51. Bernard, *Commentary*, p. 41: 'Alta namque et profunda dicitur philosophia'.

52. These divisions were a mediaeval commonplace; Bernard may have taken the exact scheme from Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon* (1128), II.1, II.19.

53. Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 112.

54. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, sive, *De nugis curialium et vestigiis philosophorum*, ed. Clement C. I. Webb, 2 vols in 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909, repr. New York: Arno Press, 1979), II, p. 415 (8.24.817a), and II, p. 417 (8.24.818a).

55. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, II, p. 421 (8.25.820b): 'Plane quid penarum lateat in terrenis vel quid in his possit mereri solus agnoscit qui de arbore scientiae ramum bonae operationis avellit' ('He who tears the bough of virtuous effort from the tree of knowledge alone understands plainly what punishments lie hidden in the earth, or what he can deserve in the matters'). The '*arbor scientiae*' clearly recalls the Edenic '*lignum scientiae boni et mali*' (Genesis 2:9)—an association like that of Proba's, on which see above, n. 13. It might be objected that such reminiscence is disruptive to John's message, since for Adam to take the fruit was a sin, whereas plucking the Bough is here a virtue; this discrepancy is never resolved. On the Bough in John, see also Peter von Moos, *Geschichte als Topik: das rhetorische Exemplum von der Antike zur Neuzeit und die historiae im 'Policraticus' Johannis von Salis-*

Likewise, only small variations were offered by the Italian humanists. Petrarch, in a letter to Federico d'Arezzo, sketches a conventional exegesis of the *Aeneid*, again alluding to Vergil's *velum allegoriarum*, but he does not reach the sixth book.⁵⁶ In the next century, however, Coluccio Salutati, Cristoforo Landino and Marsilio Ficino all produced allegorical readings of *Aeneid* VI, treating the *katabasis* as a descent towards the philosophical wisdom (*sapientia*) embodied by the Bough.

Salutati's contribution is found in the fourth book of his *De laboribus Herculis*, left unfinished at his death in 1406. His conclusion is stated briefly: 'by this Golden Bough is meant wisdom [*sapientia*]'.⁵⁷ After a discussion of Servius and Bernard, this wisdom is defined as '*divinarum humanarumque rerum scientia*', following the Stoic formulation of Augustine.⁵⁸ Salutati proceeds to cite scripture (Proverbs 20:15) and patristic authorities (Bede, Gregory the Great) on the equation of gold with wisdom; in this respect his interpretation is comparative but completely ahistorical. Landino and Ficino, later in the century, follow Salutati closely, although their interpretations are more closely centred on the Neoplatonism of Ficino's circle. In his 1472 *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, Landino revives the old terminology, noting that great writers of the past concealed their meaning 'with varied fictions and veils [*integumenta*] of figures'.⁵⁹ In Book Four, a sustained interpretation of the *Aeneid*, he writes, in a close paraphrase of Salutati:

Aureus autem ramus sapientiam nobis indicat, sine qua non est speculatio eligendarum agendarumque rerum iudex. Neque mireris aurum sapientiae symbolum apud hunc poetam obtinere ... Aurum enim est sapientiae vigor atque fulgor.

The Golden Bough indicates to us wisdom [*sapientia*], without which contemplation is not the judge of things which must be chosen and then done. Nor should you wonder that gold is presented as a symbol of wisdom by this poet. ... For gold represents the shining brilliance of wisdom.⁶⁰

bury, *Studien zur Literatur und Gesellschaft des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit* 2 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1996), pp. 166-167.

56. Francesco Petrarca, *Res seniles, libri I-IV*, eds. Silvia Rizzo and Monica Berté (Florence: Le Lettere, 2006), p. 312 (IV.5).

57. Coluccio Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis*, ed. B. L. Ullman, 2 vols (Zurich: Artemis, 1951), II, p. 564 (IV.8.5): '*per hunc ramum aureum sapientiam designari*'.

58. Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis*, II, p. 573 (IV.9.4). On Augustine's definition of wisdom and its influence, see Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 4.

59. Cristoforo Landino, *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, ed. Peter Lohe, *Studi e testi* (Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento) 6 (Florence: Sansoni, 1980), p. 113: '*variis figmentis, variis figurarum integumentis*'. I use the translation in Thomas Herbert Stahel, *Cristoforo Landino's Allegorization of the Aeneid: Books III and IV of the Camaldolese Disputations* (Johns Hopkins PhD, 1968, Language and Literature, Baltimore Maryland), p. 44.

60. Landino, *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, p. 224. Stahel, p. 212. The very same reading can be found in Landino's often-reprinted 1488 line-by-line commentary on the poem; see Vergil, *Opera omnia, cum commentariis Servii Mauri Honorati grammatici, Aelii Donati, C. Landini atque D. Calderini* (Nuremberg: A. Koberger, 1492), fol. 194v,

Ficino, meanwhile, in a recently-published excerpt (on the three kinds of life) from his *Philebus* commentary, digresses on a short interpretation of the *katabasis*:

[Aeneas, dum] defessus divinum ab oraculo auxilium imploraret, divina clementia impetravit ut ramum aureum sortiretur, mentis videlicet lumen infusum ab alto, quo perspicue tutoque posset per obscuras rerum latebras penetrare.

When Aeneas ... became exhausted and implored divine help from the oracle, he was permitted by divine mercy to be allotted the Golden Bough (that is, the light of reason [*mens*] poured in from above), with which he could penetrate into the obscure retreats of things with clarity and safety.⁶¹

Ficino, like Landino, correlates *mens* with the contemplative life and the pursuit of *sapientia*; his predecessors would have accepted wholeheartedly his stipulation that this light is 'poured in from above'. The great similarity between the Italian readings and those of twelfth-century France is evident. Thomas Stahel tentatively claims that Landino knew Bernard's commentary, but he draws a subtle distinction between the two interpretations: 'the acquisition of wisdom is for Bernard frequently couched in academic terms, whereas Landino's concern is single-mindedly moral: the "golden bough" of VI, 137 is for Bernard "*philosophia*", a scholastic discipline, whereas for Landino it is "*sapientia*", a personal attainment.'⁶² The distinction cannot be pressed too far, as both Bernard and Fulgentius invoked *sapientia*, and furthermore, the specific definition of *sapientia* given by Salutati and repeated by

glossing *Aeneid* 6.137. Landino had already lectured on the poem in 1462-63, and repeated many similar observations in his Italian commentary on Dante; see Craig Kallendorf, 'Cristoforo Landino's *Aeneid* and the Humanist Critical Tradition', *Renaissance Quarterly* 36 (1983), 519-546, pp. 520-522. On Landino's use of Vergil in the *Disputationes*, see also Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 142-154; Rainer Weiss, *Cristoforo Landino: Das Metaphorische in den "Disputationes Camaldulenses"*, Humanistische Bibliothek. Reihe I, Abhandlungen 30 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1981), pp. 112-117; and Eberhard Müller-Bochat, *Leon Battista Alberti und die Vergil-Deutung der Disputationes Camaldulenses: zur allegorischen Dichter-Erklärung bei Cristoforo Landino*, Schriften und Vorträge des Petrarca-Instituts Köln 21 (Krefeld: Scherpe-Verlag, 1968), especially pp. 26-29.

61. Marsilio Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, ed. and tr. Michael J. B. Allen (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 448-451. The commentary was written around 1491-92, and published in 1496, although the present section was omitted: see Allen's notes at pp. 13 and 446. I have adapted the translation from Allen's own, for the sake of literalness.
62. Stahel, *Cristoforo Landino's Allegorization*, pp. 11-12. Oddly, Kallendorf, 'Cristoforo Landino's *Aeneid*', p. 527, describes the commentary of Bernard as 'single-mindedly moral', and liberally asserts its influence on Landino. In his later book *In Praise of Aeneas: Virgil and Epideictic Rhetoric in the Early Italian Renaissance* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1989), p. 142, Kallendorf, in accordance with Stahel, reads Landino's *sapientia* as 'the "knowledge" we need to make moral choices'.

Landino had been a commonplace throughout the Middle Ages.⁶³ Bernard's *philosophia*, equally, has much in common with the contemplative life extolled by both Landino and Ficino. For the Christian Platonists of both the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, the quest for philosophical wisdom can only have been a moral one—wisdom, after all, was one of the cardinal virtues. Attempts to draw serious distinctions between Bernard and, say, Landino, are thus unpersuasive.⁶⁴

Sustained allegorical exegesis of the *Aeneid* declined after Ficino; although earlier results were retained as individual readings, there would be little further innovation. Erasmus, to give one important example, followed the old line in a casual remark from his 1512 *De copia*.⁶⁵ Commentaries remained staunchly conventional for the next two centuries. Josse Bade's 1500 edition of the *Aeneid*, with Servius' commentary as well as his own, repeats both earlier readings of the Bough—as *sapientia*, and as the *virtus* associated with the '*dextera pars y litterae pythagorae*'.⁶⁶ Bade's commentary, a French conduit for the ideas of the Italian humanists, and specifically Landino, would remain popular through the sixteenth century, and was published in 27 editions.⁶⁷ The Servian reading remained popular in commentaries throughout Europe: Juan Luis de la Cerda in Spain, Jacobus Pontanus and Friedrich Taubmann in Germany, John Boys in England, and Charles de la Rue in France all offered it in their entries on the Bough.⁶⁸

63. Rice, *Idea of Wisdom*, pp. 4-6.

64. Kallendorf, *In Praise of Aeneas*, p. 138, claims that Landino's significance 'arises from his being the first humanist to work out a detailed critique of the poem in which the major points from the first six books are subordinated to an overarching interpretive scheme'—a judgement which is only true by virtue of Landino's status as a 'humanist'. In 'Cristoforo Landino's Aeneid', p. 533, Kallendorf had already said as much, finding no more originality in Landino than a treatment of the *Aeneid* in the order of the events described, rather than in the order of the telling. Warner, *Augustinian Epic*, p. 60, is similarly overstating his case when he claims that there is 'a very big step ... from the allegorizing imaginations of Bernard and Petrarch to that of Cristoforo Landino'.

65. Erasmus, *De copia*, in *Collected Works* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), XXIV, ed. Craig Thompson, p. 612 (II.11).

66. Virgil, *Aeneid*, comm. Servius and Josse Bade, *P. Virgilii Maronis Aeneidos libri duodecim cum commentario Servii Mauri Honorati Grammatici et Jodoci Badii Ascensii* (Paris: Thielmann Kerver, 1500), fols. 177v-178r. Bade further equates the *virtus* of the Bough with Christian *charitas*. On the differences between the commentaries of Landino and Bade, see Craig Kallendorf, 'Ascensius, Landino, and Virgil: Continuity and Transformation in Renaissance Commentary', in his *The Virgilian Tradition: Book History and the History of Reading in Early Modern Europe*, Variorum Collected Studies Series (Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), no. XIII, especially pp. 359-360.

67. Philippe Renouard, *Bibliographie des impressions et des oeuvres de Josse Badius Ascensius, imprimeur et humaniste, 1462-1535*, 3 vols (Paris: 1908), I, p. 149; see also III, pp. 356-379.

68. Jacobus Pontanus, *Symbolarum libri XVII Virgilii*, *The Renaissance and the Gods* 18, 3 vols (Augsburg, 1599, repr. New York and London: Garland Publishing,

To this dearth of allegorical innovation, there is one late exception, in the *De sapientia veterum* (1609) of Francis Bacon. Bacon's reading is strictly allegorical, but idiosyncratic, and entirely outside the tradition stretching from Servius to Bader. His project in this work, of reinterpreting ancient myths as allegories, not of Neoplatonism but of Bacon's own brand of occult naturalism, is introduced in the most conventional terms. A *velum fabularum*, he states, has been drawn over antiquity, and the old stories serve as an '*involucrum et velum*' to philosophical truth.⁶⁹ The twenty-ninth fable is that of Proserpina, whose capture by Hades represents the trapping of ethereal spirit or life-force under the earth.⁷⁰ The Golden Bough, by which the hero descends to Proserpina and safely returns, is interpreted as the art of harnessing this natural power:

Nobis certe compertum est ex compluribus antiquorum figuris, eos conservationem atque instaurationem quadantenus corporum naturalium pro re desperata non habuisse, sed potius pro re abstrusa et quasi avia. Atque idem sentire hoc etiam loco videntur, cum virgulam istam inter infinita virgulta ingentis et densissimae sylvae collocarunt; auream autem finxere, quia aurum durationis tessera est; insitivam, quia ab arte huiusmodi effectus sperandus est, non ab aliqua medicina, aut modo simplici aut naturali.

From many figurative allusions I am satisfied that the ancients regarded the conservation, and to a certain extent, the restoration of natural bodies as a thing not impossible, but rather as hidden and out of the way. And this is what I take them in the passage before us to mean, by placing this branch in the midst of the innumerable other thickets of a vast and thick wood. They represented it as golden; because gold is the emblem of duration; and grafted, because the effect in question is to be looked for as the result of art, not of any medicine or method which is simple or natural.⁷¹

1976), II, sig. V*r (1398c); Vergil, *Opera omnia: Bucolica, Georgica, Aeneis; Ciris et Culex: cum commentario Frid. Taubmanni. Curante & edente Christiano Taubmanno Frid. f. Additi sunt indices necessarii*, 2 vols ([Wittenberg]: Zacharias Schurerus, 1618), II, p. 692; Vergil, *Priores sex [posteriores sex] libri Aeneidos: argumentis, explicationibus notis illustrati auctore Ioanne Ludouico de la Cerda, Toletano Societatis Iesv, in curia Philippi Regis Hispaniae Primario Eloquentiae Professore. Cum indicibus necessariis*, 3 vols (Lyon: Horatius Cardon, 1612), I, pp. 633b-634a; John Boys, tr., *Aeneas his descent into Hell as it is inimitably described by the prince of poets in the sixth of his Aeneis* (London: R. Hodgkinson, 1661), p. 56; Vergil, *Opera, interpretatione et notis illustravit Carolus Ruaeus* (Paris: Simon Benard, 1675), p. 267. It is worth noting that the last of these is distinctly more reserved about Servius' interpretation.

69. Francis Bacon, *De sapientia veterum*, in *Works*, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols (London: Longmans, 1857-1874), VI.2, pp. 625, 627. For an account of Bacon's changing attitudes towards allegory, see Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, tr. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968), pp. 81-96. For Rossi, the *De sapientia veterum* represents the full maturation of Bacon's views on the subject.

70. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum*, pp. 680-682, translated on pp. 758-761. Rossi, pp. 104-105, discusses this fable in relation to the contest between alchemy and natural philosophy.

71. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum*, p. 682. I have slightly adapted Spedding's translation, p. 761.

This interpretation is the last of the mediaeval-Renaissance type, in that it is wholly ahistorical and programmatic, without any reference to the Bough's original context. As such, it is an excellent example of Bacon's reuse of old methods for new ends. After Bacon, Vergilian allegory did not die out, but was instead transmuted. Later readings were no longer found in commentaries on the *Aeneid*, but rather set into scholarly treatises; they remained allegorical, but began to acquire a new, historical dimension.

The historical-allegorical Bough

Each age has its scholarly interpretation of Vergil's epic—its Servius, Bernard, Landino—and also its literary reworking. In antiquity, the *Aeneid* had been alluded to and pastiched, as by Apuleius. In late antiquity, it was refashioned into centos by Ausonius and Proba. In Bernard's age, it was rewritten as a vernacular romance, in the *Roman d'Eneas* (c. 1160). In Landino's era, respectful imitation of the epic reached a new peak with Maffeo Vegio's 1428 addition of a thirteenth book to Vergil's twelve.⁷² The early seventeenth century, meanwhile, saw a return to the Christian cento tradition, first with Etienne de Pleure's 1618 *Sacra Aeneis*, and then with the 1634 *Virgilius evangelisans* of Alexander Ross. The latter work, a retelling of the life of Christ in Vergilian hemistichs, was greatly expanded in 1638 as the *Virgilii evangelisantis christiados libri xiii* to include the Old Testament; in this work we find the Bough recast as the sprig of olive delivered to Noah by his dove:

*Aureus hic ille est foliis et vimine ramus
Divini eloqui, magnum et venerabile donum
Quod Christus nobis demissus ab aethere summo
Attulit ...*

This is that bough, golden of leaves and shoot,
Of divine eloquence—the great and venerable gift
Christ brought us when he came from the highest heaven.⁷³

Ross is not content to trade the Bough for the olive-branch, as Proba was to trade it for the Tree of Knowledge: he must also give the *ramus* an allegorical gloss as 'divine eloquence'. Vergil's words are a means to an end; as J. Christopher Warner has argued, Ross' aim was 'to enlist readers' knowledge of Vergil's epic in the ongoing defense of their faith'.⁷⁴ All of these literary responses to the *Aeneid*, like the allegorical commentaries of their respective eras, have something in common: they imply a respect for Vergil's poem as an archetype—even, perhaps, the archetype—of Western culture.

It is no surprise that the seventeenth century, when cultural authority of all kinds came under serious challenge, also saw the first sustained literary attacks on the *Aeneid*. These were playful and immediate, but pointed to a

72. Maffeo Vegio, *Short Epics*, ed. and tr. Michael C.J. Putnam, I Tatti Renaissance Library 15 (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 2-41.

73. Alexander Ross, *Virgilii evangelisantis christiados libri xiii* (London: Johannes Legatus, 1638), Book I, p. 10.

74. Warner, *The Augustinian Epic* (above, n. 5), p. 155. See also pp. 138-44 for a comparison of the centos of Ross and Proba.

deeper shift, which bore more serious fruit in scholarly discussions of the epic, albeit much more subtly and gradually.

Between 1648 and 1659, Paul Scarron composed his *Virgile travestie*, a burlesque of the first eight books of the *Aeneid*; the work proved wildly popular, and would be imitated in France and England for the next half-century. The popularity of the genre can only be understood by the continuing cultural importance of its target: as H. Gaston Hall notes, 'to Scarron's generation the *Aeneid* itself more perhaps than any other work stood as model, mine, and challenge'.⁷⁵ Scarron plays on familiar tropes from the epic, puncturing their grandeur in his French retelling—in Book Six (1651), he jests on the Golden Bough:

... Sur le rameau qu'il voulait prendre,
Qui rendait les yeux éblouis
Comme un jacobus ou louis,
Tant reluisait ce rameau rare.⁷⁶

... On the bough that he would pluck,
Which dazzled his eyes
Like a *jacobus* or *louis*,
So glistened this rare branch.

Here the gold of the Bough is not that of wisdom or eloquence, but that of coins—the *jacobus* and *louis*—a literary image appropriate to the age of Molière. Scarron proceeds to upbraid Vergil himself for not conveying the Bough's splendour with sufficient sublimity. In 1664 Charles Cotton, now best known for his Montaigne translation, produced his *Scarronides: or, Virgile travestie*, an English version of Scarron, covering the first book of the *Aeneid*, and in 1670 he published his version of the fourth book. Following Cotton, three burlesques of the sixth book would be published within 20 years—Maurice Atkins' *Cataplus* (1672), John Phillips' *Maronides* (1673) and James Farewell's *The Irish Hudibras* (1689), which put Aeneas' *katabasis* into an Irish setting. All three, unsurprisingly, pay close attention to the Golden Bough. Atkins, for one, subverts the Bough's Vergilian splendour with a gusto even greater than Scarron's:

From whence (the place being dark) a cluster
of glow-worms cast a dainty lustre;
Or have you seen in Winter-time
On hedge a kind of brittle-slime?
Or frothy trash which sluggish snail
Draws along the ground at tail?

75. H. Gaston Hall, 'Scarron and The Travesty of Virgil', *Yale French Studies* 38 (1967), 115-127, p. 116.

76. Scarron, *Le Virgile Travesti*, ed. Jean Serroy, ser. Classiques Garnier (Paris: Garnier, 1988), p. 492 (Book VI, ll. 744-747). On Scarron see Craig Kallendorf, *The Other Virgil*, ser. Classical Presences (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 197-199, and Luigi Nardis, 'Virgilio 'deriso' in Francia nel XVII secolo', in *La fortuna di Virgilio*, ed. Marcello Gigante, Pubblicazioni del bimillenario virgiliano promosse dalla regione di Campania 7 (Naples: Gianni, 1986), 195-206.

Such was the brightness of the bough
Of which I gave a hint e're now.⁷⁷

The others are in a similar vein—for Phillips, the Bough becomes a 'Brain confounding' apple tree, while for Farewell, it is a 'Bunch of Three-leav'd-grass / Call'd by the Boglanders, Shamroques'.⁷⁸ These travesties superficially resemble pastiche or parody; in fact they are quite different. Hall draws a fine distinction between parody and travesty, arguing that the latter, unlike the former, employs a 'comic discrepancy between the dignity of the characters and the triviality of their language'.⁷⁹ By such a discrepancy, travesty scorns as mere pomposity the poem's authority, taken metonymically for the authority of classical antiquity itself. It would have been hard to take seriously the moral splendour of the Bough with Atkins' 'brittle-slime' ringing in one's ears.

The travesties are symptomatic of that century's scepticism towards classical authority as a *timeless* absolute: they reject the notion, implicit in earlier literary responses to the *Aeneid*, that the lessons of that poem and its world are straightforwardly applicable to modern problems. The literary—and, by extension, cultural—'syncretism' of Apuleius' rose grove, or of Ross' olive-branch, is precisely what Scarron and his imitators reduce to absurdity. So it would be, increasingly, for scholarly commentators: the *Aeneid* was to be explicated not in support of supposedly eternal truths, but, instead, better to understand its author's allusions, or the culture peculiar to his age. This was the foundation of historicism, and it was Frazer who brought such a project to its logical conclusion.

The process was, admittedly, slow. Scholars of the mid-century, if they thought less of philosophy and more of history, were far from historicist, and they remained focused on Christianity as a religion outside the temporal framework of other cultures. Pagan and oriental histories were commonly presented at best as allegories, at worst as mere corruptions, of true Christian history.⁸⁰

77. Maurice Atkins, *Cataplus; or, Aeneas his descent to hell. A mock poem, in imitation of the sixth book of Virgil's Aeneis, in English burlesque* (London: Printed for Maurice Atkins, and are to be sold by William Hinchman, at the Kings-Head in Westminster-Hall, 1672), p. 29.

78. John Phillips, *Maronides, or, Virgil travesty being a new paraphrase upon the sixth book of Virgil's Aeneids in burlesque verse* (London: Printed by S.G. and B.G. for Nathaniel Brooks, 1673), p. 30. James Farewell, *The Irish Hudibras, or, Fingallian prince taken from the sixth book of Virgil's Aeneids, and adapted to the present times* (London: Printed and are to be sold by Richard Baldwin, 1689), p. 23. Donna Hamilton, *Virgil and The Tempest: the Politics of Imitation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), pp. 88-91, reads a similar parodic use of the Golden Bough in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, 4.1.181ff, but I find her argument unconvincing.

79. Hall, 'Scarron' (above, n. 75), p. 118.

80. See Allen, *Mysteriously Meant* (above, n. 60), pp. 53-82. An example relevant to this paper can be found in Jacobus Hugo's (Jacques Hugue's) treatise on the origins of Rome, *Vera historia romana, seu origo Latii vel Italiae ac romanae urbis* (Rome: Franciscus Moneta, 1655). In his dedication to Pope Alexander VII, fol. A2v, Hugo identifies Aeneas as St. Peter, and the *ramus aureus* as the oak emblem inherited by the Pope from the Della Rovere family. Here Aeneas and the Bough are still allegorical and ahistorical, although they represent not abstract types, such as wisdom or eloquence, but instead specific figures. They constitute, in other words, secular

In 1661, we find a glimmer of what was to come, together with the old and conventional, in the notes of the antiquary John Boys to his translation of *Aeneid* VI. Like his predecessors, Boys insists, in his preface, on the superiority of this book to the others, citing Servius.⁸¹ In addition to his Servian reference, noted above, he slightly adapts the usual moral allegory of the Bough, reading it as the 'Virtue, Wisdome, and unwearied Constancy ... by which we subdue and triumph over the greatest difficulties'.⁸² More unusual are his lengthy digressions on ritual and folklore in relation to the Bough and the episodes surrounding it. Whereas elsewhere he makes Vergil and *Aeneid* serve as Royalist figureheads,⁸³ here, where the poet has written with such 'exactnesse', Boys tells us he will stick, 'more closely than elsewhere, to the literall sense'.⁸⁴ Pliny the Elder, Statius, Plutarch and others are adduced to explain obscure cultural material, just as in Servius. We have in these notes an application of humanist scholarship to the literary interpretation of Vergil, as a prelude to the developments of the nineteenth century.

Four more authors will illustrate the gradual turn from allegorical to historical interpretations of the Bough, and of Vergil more generally. In his 1668 dissertation on the history of chemistry, the Danish polymath Ole Borch alludes to the Bough as evidence that Vergil, or one of his sources, was familiar with the practice of alchemy. After quoting *Aeneid* VI.136-148 on the Bough, he notes:

Haec [sc. verba] de materia chemici magisterii fudisse Cumaeam vatem opinio est variorum ... nec inficiandum sub illo fabulae involucro arcanum sensum delitescere, forsitan Virgilio ipsi, qui ex alio haec mutuatus est, incognitum ...

It is the opinion of various men that the Cumaean priestess poured forth these words on the subject of the alchemical magistry ... and it cannot be denied that the arcane meaning lies hidden—perhaps unknown to Vergil himself, who borrowed these things from another—beneath that *involucrum* of fable.⁸⁵

equivalents of Scriptural types. On Hugo and his contemporary reception, see also Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*, p. 162.

81. Boys, tr. *Aeneas*, sig. Ar-v.

82. Boys, tr. *Aeneas*, p. 55.

83. Boys, like his friend John Ogilby, was a staunch supporter of the monarchy at least since the last days of Charles I, and like Ogilby, used Vergil 'in a distinctly partisan fashion'—see Ronald Knowles' introduction to his edition of John Ogilby, *The Entertainment of his most Excellent Majestie Charles II in his Passage through the City of London to his Coronation, Renaissance Triumphs and Magnificences*, n.s. 3 (London, 1662, facsimile reprint, Binghamton: MRTS, 1988), pp. 22-24. For Boys in his political context see Kallendorf, *The Other Virgil* (above, n. 76), pp. 138-143.

84. Boys, tr. *Aeneas*, p. 60.

85. Olaus Borrichius, *De ortu, et progressu chemiae dissertatio* (Copenhagen: Matthias Godicchenius, 1668), p. 101. One of those listed in support of Borch's opinion is Robert Duval or Vallensis, whose *De veritate et antiquitate artis chemicae* (Paris: Apud Federicum Morellum, 1561) had presented *Aeneid* VI.136-148 in a long catalogue of passages, ancient and mediaeval, Christian and pagan, alleged to have concerned alchemy.

The Bough contains a deeper, allegorical significance, but this is predicated on a *historical* claim, namely that Vergil or his source possessed alchemical secrets. Unlike previous readings, this was intended to be historically convincing. Of course, as John Selden had already suggested, it was *not* convincing—but the intention counts.⁸⁶

At the end of the century, Borch's interpretation found favour with Georg Wolfgang Wedel, the dean of the medical faculty at Jena, who in 1699 published an 'inaugural propempticum' on the interpretation of the Bough.⁸⁷ Wedel summarises previous allegorical readings, rejecting each in turn. 'Almost all,' he begins, 'pursue a moral explanation, and judge that prudence, right reason or wisdom is meant'.⁸⁸ But this account is weak, he argues, since reason and prudence, while useful in life, are not sufficient to attain the highest and inaccessible mysteries: Aeneas could reach hell only by carrying a token [*tessera*] of safe conduct. Hence the analogy which is necessary to allegory breaks down. Wedel continues:

Neque satisfacere videntur, qui per ramum aureum intelligi volunt litterae Pythagoricae Y emblema, imitationem et imaginem, seu quasi virgulam auream et per hanc virtutes sequendas ... Si enim verum fateamur, neque haec interpretatio quadrat, ubi emblema unum per alterum explicari, contra morem receptum, deprehendimus.

Nor do they seem to suffice, who would understand the Golden Bough as an emblem, imitation and image of the Pythagorean letter Y, or as a golden staff, and by this, virtues which are to be followed ... For to tell the truth, this interpretation does not square up, as soon as we realise that it goes against received custom to explain one emblem by another.⁸⁹

Both explanations fail because they misunderstand the relationship between an image and its referent: in other words, because they mistake the mechanics of allegorical coding. But Wedel is sure that there is *some* deeper meaning: to deny this would be contrary to the wisdom of the ancients, and the Sibyl's obscurities even invite us to elicit the Bough's inner sense.⁹⁰ Wedel's preferred solution is alchemical; here Borch and his predecessor Duval are adduced. Again, however, we are interested more in his reasoning than in his conclusions. For an allegorist, Wedel is remarkably conscious of Vergil as a historical figure, and his aim is explicitly 'to make clearer the author's mind and

86. John Selden, *Table Talk*, ed. Samuel Harvey Reynolds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 155 (§ 115, 'Presbytery'): 'Other professions likewise pretend to antiquity. The alchymist will find his art in Virgil's *aureus ramus*, and he that delights in optics, will find them in Tacitus.'

87. Georg Wolfgang Wedel, *Propempticum inaugurale de ramo aureo Virgilii* (Jena: In aedibus Gollnerianis, 1699). The pamphlet is addressed to Wedel's student, the medical 'doctorandus' Johann Sebastian Büchelmann.

88. Wedel, *Propempticum*, sig. 2r: 'Plerique omnes moralem sectantur explicationem, prudentiam, rectam rationem, vel sapientiam innui arbitantes'.

89. Wedel, *Propempticum*, sig. 2v. Wedel's choice of words follows Taubmann, in Vergil, *Opera* (above, n. 68), II, p. 692, to whom he refers: '*Ramum, qui litterae illius Pythagoricae Y imitatio et imago est*'.

90. Wedel, *Propempticum*, sig. 2v.

intention'.⁹¹ Unlike his predecessors, Wedel takes the principle of *involucrum* not as an abstract dogma to be assumed, but as a fact of history to be accepted: 'it is believed that in the earliest centuries philosophers propounded their theories enigmatically'.⁹² Vergil, he claims ingeniously, took his allegorical Bough from the *Timaeus*:

Auri autem ramus propter densitatem durissimus et nigricans adamas appellatur.

A bough of gold [*auri ramus*, χρυσοῦς ὄζος], very hard on account of its density, and turning black, is called 'adamant'.⁹³

Vergil had his wisdom from Plato, who had it from the Egyptians: all were alchemists. We have returned to a Servian occultism, but one guided by a new sense of historical development. Wedel's solution may be no more convincing or satisfactory than Borch's, and may, like Borch's, derive from the same old stock of allegorical exegesis: but his greater awareness of the methods and limits of interpretation is richly evident.

A similar historical consciousness is evinced by John Beaumont, an amateur geologist, in his 1693 critique of Thomas Burnet's famous *Theory of the Earth*. In the second part of this work, he digresses from a discussion of Paradise to offer an exegesis of the *katabasis* in *Aeneid* VI. For Beaumont, this descent and vision of the Elysian Fields, a 'divine Institution of the Sibyl', is necessary for Aeneas before he becomes the founder of the Empire.⁹⁴ The Bough is explained as 'that divine Spirit, which must be his Passeport to the Elysian fields', and its colour is interpreted thus:

*Gold, for that it's a pure and incorruptible Metal, and the most ductile and extendible of all Bodies, and in its Colour resembles the glorious Lights of Heaven, it terminating also the desires of Man, was made by the Ancients the sacred Type of the Deity, or of that divine Nature diffus'd thorow the World ...*⁹⁵

This passage is original less in its conclusions—although its analysis of the properties of gold goes beyond Landino and Baocn—than in its reasoning. For in support of his association of gold with divinity, Beaumont lists a number of mythological comparisons: the Golden Chain, the Golden Fleece, and so on. In other words, the cultural system which he deems most relevant to interpreting the Bough is not a modern or allegedly universal one, as it had been from Fulgentius to Bacon, but specifically the system of classical mythology in which it explicitly appears. Beaumont appreciates, albeit in a small way, the historical specificity of Vergil's imagery.

91. Wedel, *Propempticum*, sig. 3r: 'ut magis pateat mens ac intentio auctoris'.

92. Wedel, *Propempticum*, sig. 3r: 'Ratum est, pristinis olim seculis Philosophos aenigmatice dogmata sua proposuisse'.

93. Wedel, *Propempticum*, sig. 3r. The line translates Plato, *Timaeus* 59b 4-5: χρυσοῦ δὲ ὄζος διὰ πυκνότητά σκληρότατον ὂν καὶ μελανθὲν ἀδάμας ἐκλήθη ('And the offshoot of gold, being, because of its density, very hard and black in color, is called 'adamant'').

94. John Beaumont, *Considerations on a Book, Entitled The Theory of the Earth, Publisht some Years since by the Learned Dr. Burnet* (London: Randal Taylor, 1693), p. 120 (II.7).

95. Beaumont, *Considerations*, p. 121.

In a later work, Beaumont makes a definite claim about Vergil's historical intentions. He returns to *Aeneid* VI in his essay on the ancient Sibyls, forming the second chapter of his 1724 *Gleanings of Antiquities*. Here he reads the *katabasis* as a deliberate allegorical exposition of Vergil's own spiritual initiation: 'Now these Verses manifestly show, that some *Sibyl* had led *Virgil* through the subterraneous Regions, as the *Sibyl* had carried *Aeneas*, and other Heroes, thither'.⁹⁶ Beaumont denies that Vergil foretold Christianity, but does admit that "the Mysteries of the *Gentiles* were consonant to our Faith concerning God'.⁹⁷ The traditional, Platonic exegesis of Bernard and Ficino had syncretised pagan philosophy and contemporary Christianity, interpreting the *katabasis* as an occult descent towards *sapientia*, without any reference to authorial intent. In Beaumont we find a very similar occult descent, only now the allegory is grounded in Vergil's design; the syncretism, meanwhile, has been refashioned as a harmonisation of *historically discrete* religious systems. The change is subtle but profound.

An interest in the ancient mysteries is found again in the last important allegorical reading of the *Aeneid*, and specifically of the Golden Bough; this appears in the first volume of Bishop William Warburton's *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1737), a mammoth work marshalling great erudition to defend the Hebrew Bible from a Deist charge of impiety. Warburton's principal theme is the doctrine of 'future rewards and punishments', which he traces back to Egyptian mystery religion. In doing so he makes explicit what Beaumont only implied—that Judeo-Christian religion had its roots in an older, more universal tradition. In book two, section four, Warburton demonstrates that *Aeneid* VI, with its proto-Christian account of heaven and hell, is in fact 'an enigmatical Representation of [Vergil's] INITIATION INTO THE MYSTERIES', by which are meant specifically the Eleusinian mysteries.⁹⁸ The basis of these mysteries is the doctrine of heaven and hell, which must be central to any good national legislation:

We see then, *Virgil* was obliged to have his Hero initiated; and that he had the Authority of fabulous Antiquity to call this Initiation a Descent into Hell. And surely he made use of his Advantages with great Judgment; for this Fiction animates the Relation, which, delivered without an Allegory, had been too cold and flat for Epic Poetry.⁹⁹

Here the mediaeval doctrine of *integumentum* is recast as a principle of literary decorum; at heart it is still the same. Warburton ignores the mediaeval and Renaissance readings of the Bough, but he does return to Servius, accepting the latter's view 'that *many* Things were here delivered in the profound Learning of the Egyptian Theology'.¹⁰⁰

Servian specifics, however, are rejected. For instance, Warburton refutes Servius' identification of the Golden Bough with the 'Tree in the Middle of the sacred Grove of *Diana's* Temple in Greece'; he adds, with typical scorn,

96. John Beaumont, *Gleanings of Antiquities* (London: W. Taylor, 1724), ch. 2, p. 105.

97. Beaumont, *Gleanings*, p. 77.

98. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated, on the Principles of a Religious Deist*, 3rd edition (London: Fletcher Gyles, 1742), I, p. 199.

99. Warburton, *Divine Legation*, I, p. 204.

100. Warburton, *Divine Legation*, I, p. 206.

'nothing can be more foreign to the Point in Question than this rambling Account'.¹⁰¹ For Warburton, the Bough is instead an image of 'the Wreath of Myrtle, which the Initiated were crowned with at the Celebration of the Mysteries'.¹⁰² He continues:

But it will be asked perhaps, why is this myrtle Branch represented as a *golden* one? Not merely for the Sake of the *Marvellous*, I will assure the Reader. A *golden Bough* was, literally, Part of the sacred Equipage in the Shews of the Mysteries.¹⁰³

Vergil, according to Warburton, is delivering his narrative as an 'allegory'; but the Bough, or rather *a* Bough, was 'literally' a part of the ancient rites. The poet's purpose is to encode not timeless truths, but a particular religious ritual in his story. The rites of Egypt, Eleusis and Christianity are distinct, as for Beaumont; but genetically related.¹⁰⁴ Servius is not simply an abstract authority to be cited, but a source to be weighed and, if necessary, contradicted, as he is for modern scholars. Finally, the purpose of reading and interpreting the *Aeneid* is not—overtly—to support a general doctrine with Vergil's authority, but rather to learn about the past from one of its witnesses. The poet has become cultural testimony. In all these ways, Warburton, while making a sustained allegory of *Aeneid* VI like so many before him, moves even closer to a sense of Vergil's poem as a specific entity in history. Formal comparison is still his guiding method, but as with Beaumont, the range of *comparanda* is restricted by historical criteria. His analysis of the Bough is representative of this development: it stands not for any abstraction, not even in Vergil's own design, as Beaumont had it, but rather for a concrete object in religious history. We are on the verge of Frazer's *Golden Bough*.

The post-allegorical Bough?

Warburton's contemporaries demonstrated a growing distaste for allegorical interpretation. This practice had already been burlesqued; now it simply seemed unnecessary. In 1738 the Abbé Banier dismissed Servius' reading of the Bough—and, by implication, other such exegeses—suspecting instead that the image was '*le fruit de l'imagination des Poètes*'.¹⁰⁵ Vergil himself, meanwhile, did not need to be hallowed as a philosopher or occult initiate, but only, as

101. Warburton, *Divine Legation*, I, p. 208.

102. Warburton, *Divine Legation*, I, p. 208.

103. Warburton, *Divine Legation*, I, p. 210.

104. Warburton's focus on genealogy rather than analogy can usefully be understood as part of a broader Protestant-Deist framework of religious history. For an insightful critique of this framework, and its relevance to modern scholarship, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 9 (London: SOAS, 1990), ch. 2.

105. Abbé Banier, *La mythologie et les fables expliquées par l'histoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Briasson, 1738-40), II, p. 444. On p. 443 he writes, again thinking of Servius, '*Je ne vois pas qu'on puisse trouver de même dans les traditions Egyptiennes, rien qui ait rapport au rameau d'or*'.

John Jortin put it in 1731, as ‘the best of the Latin poets’.¹⁰⁶ As a consequence, standards of literary taste could come to the fore; as early as 1697, an anonymous satirical pamphlet listed the Bough among the poem’s many ‘faults against *Probability*’.¹⁰⁷ When Isaac Disraeli repeated this observation in 1791,¹⁰⁸ another anonymous pamphlet leapt to Vergil’s defence. Warburton, claimed the latter, had ‘clearly solved’ the ‘mystery of the *golden bough*’; but crucially, its apology no longer rested on this interpretation:

Setting aside the *allegorical* meaning, if the *golden bough* be considered merely as a *poetic fiction*, it is certainly entitled to an equal degree of credit with that of the famed apples in the gardens of the Hesperides.¹⁰⁹

By now, allegory had been widely rejected, and ‘poetic fiction’ was the preferred description of the Bough and other such images. Twenty-five years earlier, the young Edward Gibbon had published a small book, also anonymous, entitled *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid*. This was an explicit attack on Warburton, and marked the death-knell for Vergilian allegory. With characteristic sarcasm, Gibbon describes Warburton’s thesis as ‘supported with singular ingenuity, dressed up with an easy yet pompous display of Learning, and delivered in a style much fitter for the Hierophant of Eleusis, than for a Modern Critic, who is observing a remote object through the medium of a glimmering and doubtful light’.¹¹⁰ These last words are significant. By exegesis, the old allegorists had eliminated any historical distance between Vergil and themselves. The new commentators, from Boys to Warburton, perceived the poet as a historical figure, but the very function of interpretation was to reduce that distance. Gibbon, by contrast, was operating in a philological climate that *emphasised* historical distance and alterity. In a footnote Gibbon quotes the *Rambler*, condemning those critics who

discover in every passage some secret meaning, some remote allusion, some artful allegory, or some occult imitation, which no other reader ever suspected: But they have no perception of the cogency of

106. John Jortin, ‘Remarks on Virgil’, in his *Miscellaneous Observations upon Authors Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols (London: Thomas Wotton, 1731-32), I, 5-15, at p. 5. Later Jortin, ‘On the state of the Dead, as described by Homer and Virgil’, in his *Six Dissertations upon Different Subjects* (London: Whiston and White, 1755), 207-324, at p. 246, identifies *Aeneid* VI as the epic’s ‘most resplendent part’—the old evaluation was still in place, though now for merely literary reasons.

107. *Verdicts of the Learned, Concerning Virgil and Homer’s Heroic Poems* (London: J. Hartley, 1697), p. 7.

108. Isaac Disraeli, ‘Virgil’, in *Curiosities of Literature* (London: J. Murray, 1791), 238-246, p. 239. Disraeli’s other examples make clear his unacknowledged debt to the *Verdicts*.

109. *An Attempt Towards a Defence of Virgil Against the Attacks of J. D’Israeli* (Sherborne: Goadby and Lerpiniere, 1795), pp. 7-8.

110. Edward Gibbon, *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (London: Printed for P. Elmsley, successor to Mr. Vaillant, in the Strand, 1770, repr. 1794), p. 2. (The essay can now be found in John Lord Sheffield, ed., *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.*, vol. IV: *Classical and Critical* [London: John Murray, 1814], pp. 467-514, and in: Patricia B. Craddock, ed., *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], pp. 131-162.) For more context, see the cursory re-

arguments, the contexture of narration, the various colours of diction, or the flowery embellishments of fancy.¹¹¹

Allegorical exposition is fanciful and impossible to take seriously; it is also pallid:

Whatever was animated (I appeal to every reader of taste), whatever was terrible, or whatever was pathetic, evaporates into lifeless Allegory.¹¹²

If Warburton had invoked literary decorum for his allegorical reading, Gibbon now appeals to *taste* in his rejection of such readings. Poetry has nothing to do with Philosophy—the one aims at ‘Pleasure’, the other at ‘Truth’—and thus the entire history of allegorical interpretation comes to a dead halt.

Gibbon’s attitude anticipates the Romantic distaste for allegory as ‘an exercise of subliterate fancies’, as well as the positivistic dismissal of far-fetched and over-interpretative textual readings—both responses characteristic of the nineteenth century.¹¹³ Domenico Comparetti, the first scholar of Vergil’s reception in the Middle Ages, had both Romantic and positivist sympathies. The former fostered his interest in the popular traditions of the Middle Ages; Giorgio Pasquali, for instance, attributes to Romanticism Comparetti’s belief in a folk-tradition of ‘*origine antichissima*’.¹¹⁴ The latter gave him a contempt for the mediaeval practice of allegorical exegesis. He writes, for instance: ‘the process of Fulgentius is so violent and incoherent, it disregards every law of common sense in such a patent and well-nigh brutal manner, that it is hard to conceive how any sane man can seriously have undertaken such a work, and harder still to believe that other sane men should have accepted it as an object for serious consideration’.¹¹⁵ For Comparetti, allegory is ‘a species of dialectical hallucination, which owes its origin to those earnest convictions which are natural to a vigorous and impulsive temperament’—and so it is ‘naturally vain to seek for a basis of fact in any allegorical speculation’.¹¹⁶ Moreover, ‘to a cultured mind accustomed to scientific criticism’, an enthusiasm for alle-

marks on Gibbon’s book in J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–), II (1999), p. 388.

111. Gibbon, *Critical Observations*, p. 16. The quotation is from *Rambler* 176 (Saturday, November 23, 1751): see Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. Donald D. Eddy, Samuel Johnson & Periodical Literature 1, 2 vols. (London: Payne, 1753), II, pp. 1053–1054.

112. Gibbon, *Critical Observations*, pp. 35–36.

113. Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: the Making of Allegory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1959), p. 3.

114. Giorgio Pasquali, ‘Il “Virgilio nel Medio Evo” del Comparetti’, in Pasquali, *Pagine Stravaganti di un Filologo*, ed. Carlo Ferdinando Russo, 2 vols. (Florence: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1994), II, 119–132: p. 124. Jan Ziolkowski understands Comparetti as Romantic ‘in his desire to achieve a panoptic view and in his fascination with the vitality of traditions’; see his introduction to Domenico Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, tr. E. F. M. Benecke (Princeton: University Press, 1997), p. vii.

115. Comparetti, *Vergil*, p. 112; the passage has been singled out for quotation both in Ziolkowski’s introduction, and in Edwards, ‘Fulgentius and the Collapse of Meaning’ (above, n. 35), p. 17.

116. Comparetti, *Vergil*, pp. 106, 111.

gorical interpretation 'can seem little else than a disease'.¹¹⁷ Comparetti's positivistic distaste for mediaeval allegory is palpable.

His contemporary, James Frazer, exhibited a greater ambivalence. On the one hand, he was fascinated by the analogical patterns of primitive thought; on the other, he was confident that magic and religion had been superseded by natural and historical science. For Frazer, allegory is a prettifying lie: for instance, the true nature of primitive ecstatic rituals 'was indeed often disguised under a decent veil of allegorical or philosophical interpretation, which probably sufficed to impose upon the rapt and enthusiastic worshippers, reconciling even the more cultivated of them to things which otherwise must have filled them with horror and disgust'.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the legends about the worship of Diana at Nemi are obviously 'unhistorical', with 'no other foundation than the resemblance, real or imaginary, which may be traced between it and some foreign ritual'.¹¹⁹ These sentiments are not so far from Comparetti's. And yet Frazer's own aim is to establish the origins of the Nemi priesthood by parallels to rituals in other societies. He admits at the beginning that an argument from such analogies, 'in default of direct evidence as to how the priesthood did actually arise, can never amount to demonstration', and so he is content 'to offer a fairly probable explanation' of the priesthood—one might say, an unhistorical explanation with no other foundation than resemblance.¹²⁰ It is with this in mind that we turn to Frazer's *Bough*, the most significant interpretation since Gibbon, and the supposedly complete rejection of allegory.

The *Bough* itself, announced at the beginning of *The Golden Bough*, by way of Turner and Servius, is not 'explained' until the very end:

It is not a new opinion that the Golden Bough was the mistletoe.
True, Virgil does not identify but only compares it with mistletoe.
But this may be only a poetical device to cast a mystic glamour over
the humble plant.¹²¹

Frazer cites three sources on the identification, the earliest being J. Sowerby's *English Botany* (1805); as Smith notes, these authorities 'are not convincing'.¹²² In fact, the conflation of *Bough* and mistletoe was much older than Sowerby—two humanists of the Italian Renaissance, Domizio Calderini and Pietro Crinito had made the same connection, exploring the *Bough* in relation to the Druidic veneration of mistletoe, for which Pliny was the regular authority.¹²³

117. Comparetti, *Vergil*, p. 113.

118. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, V, Book II, p. 299.

119. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, p. 21.

120. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, p. 10.

121. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, XI, p. 284.

122. Smith, 'When the Bough Breaks' (above, n. 3), p. 357 (= Smith, *Map is not Territory*, p. 224).

123. *Vergilius cum commentariis quinque, videlicet Servii, Landini, Antonii, Mancinelli, Donati, Domitii, Servii item errores suis locis annotati* (Venice: Philippus Pincius, 1499), f. 223v; Pietro Crinito, *De honesta disciplina* (1504), ed. Carlo Angeleri, Edizione nazionale dei classici del pensiero italiano, ser. II, 2 (Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1955), pp. 233-235 (X.6). Cf. Pliny the Elder, *Historia naturalis*, XVI.95 on the Druids and mistletoe. Crinito was cited in turn by Taubmann, in Vergil, *Opera* (above, n. 68), II, p. 692 and Wedel, *Propempticum* (above, n. 87), sig. 2v. Cf. John Quincy, *Pharmacopœia officinalis et extemporanea* (London: A. Bell, etc., 1718), p. 124 (II.4, # 230).

Fourteen years before the first edition of the *Golden Bough*, the identification had been firmly asserted in an obscure French pamphlet by one J. Villeman, of which, admittedly, Frazer is unlikely to have known.¹²⁴

But although these scholars reached conclusions similar to Frazer's, they shared neither his erudition nor his aims. Calderini and Crinito were exploring a point of antiquarianism; for the latter, in particular, Vergil's allusion to Druidic rites was simply another example of his impressive religious knowledge.¹²⁵ Villemans, meanwhile, wanted to claim Vergil for French literature. But Frazer was trying to *explain* the Bough, by subsuming it in a wider analogical framework of his own rich device. This framework is historically specific, as with Beaumont and Warburton, only far more elaborate, and far better understood. The explanatory process, however, remains the same as before.

Such a process has evolved directly from the earlier allegorists: all of the writers discussed above sought to explain the Bough, like the rest of the *Aeneid*, as the specific form of a generic principle or object—from *sapientia* to the Eleusinian myrtle—and all used analogies to make their case. The key difference is that Frazer offers this logic not as *valid*, but as historically *authentic*: we cannot understand the primitive mind, he implies, without thinking as it did—that is to say, in analogies. This approach to a subject is characteristically modern: it makes use of the old methods while holding them at a distance, though a historian's lens. Frazer, unlike any of his predecessors, firmly demarcates himself from his ancient subjects.

The irony is that while Frazer keeps the analogical method at arm's length, his use of it is thorough and systematic. And if *The Golden Bough* would be judged by the criteria of historical scholarship, it fails as surely as Bernard and the rest. Frazer's system centres on the mistletoe; as Smith puts it, the mistletoe hypothesis is 'the one, indispensable assumption in the work'—and it is a bad one.¹²⁶

For these reasons, *The Golden Bough* has survived better as imaginative literature than as reliable anthropology; and despite its author's best efforts, it is now studied, like the mediaeval commentaries, chiefly as a historical document. Even in Frazer's day, it was commonly criticised for its overreliance on

124. J. Villeman, *Le rameau d'or, offert à Proserpine par Enée* (Paris: Villeman, 1876). Villeman claims, p. 4, that '[d]ans ces nombreux passages du VI^e livre de l'Enéide où Virgile parle du rameau d'or, il est bien évident qu'il s'agit du gui, du gui des Gaulois, du gui sacré'. For this he adduces five proofs, and concludes triumphantly, not only that Vergil was familiar with Druidic ritual, but that he was himself *Gaulish*: 'Plaçons le nom de Virgile dans le livre d'or de la nation Gauloise; et reportons son rameau d'or sur notre arbre généalogique' (p. 32). Fancy aside, it is worth noting that Villeman's 'decipherment' of the Bough is here in service of a *historical* claim about the poet, and one with obvious nationalistic significance. In this respect, his reading of the Bough can be usefully contrasted, as the product of a historicising age, to that of Jacobus Hugo (above, n. 80).

125. Crinito, *De honesta disciplina* (above, n. 123), p. 233, still conceives of Vergil as a disguised philosopher, in whose epic 'et sacra omnia et humanae leges atque ritus tanta eruditione tractantur, ut eum mirari potius homines possint quam pro merito satis laudare'.

126. Smith, 'When the Bough Breaks' (above, n. 3), p. 355 (= Smith, *Map is not Territory*, p. 222).

analogy.¹²⁷ A similar complaint was enunciated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his remarks on Frazer, largely written in 1930-31, when he attributed to the work the positivism he deplored—although he does not use that word here. On the very first page he writes:

Frazer's account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*. . . Even the idea of trying to explain the practice—say the killing of the priest-king—seems to me wrong-headed. All that Frazer does is to make this practice plausible to people who think as he does.¹²⁸

Frazer is now added to the allegorical tradition: just as the mediaevals sought to make Vergil's text more acceptable to a Christian reader, so Frazer seeks to make Vergil, and Servius, more *plausible*—a rationalist's word—to his late nineteenth-century readers. Wittgenstein calls into doubt the very process of explanation, as something self-serving or motivated by ideology. Allegory, like the positivism that treats earlier ideas as 'mistakes', fails to respect the past for its own sake; some things, as for Gibbon, simply do not need explanation.

Since Frazer there have been many scholarly accounts of the Golden Bough; I will not attempt to summarise them in any detail here.¹²⁹ The *Aeneid* is no longer encoded philosophy; it is now only a poem. The Bough, likewise, is not a philosophical allegory, but a poetic *symbol*, consciously employed by a historical Vergil. The shift is explicit; as Louis MacKay writes, in his 1955 article on the Bough:

We should seek not for allegory, which demands a single interpretation, but for symbolism, which permits the simultaneous handling of several levels of meaning.¹³⁰

The distinction goes back to Goethe and Coleridge, for whom allegory denoted the seeking of a particular to stand for the general, while symbolism was the seeking of the general in the particular. The former involved a discreditable shrinking of meaning; the latter, identified as the true essence of

127. John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 68: 'Even in his own day some reviewers found *The Golden Bough* characterized by poetic and *allegorical interpretations* and commendable for its exquisite style rather than for scientific accuracy and coherence.' (Emphasis mine.)

128. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's 'The Golden Bough'*, tr. A. C. Miles, rev. and ed. Rush Rhees (Retford: Brynmill Press, 1979), p. 1: 'Frazers Darstellung der magischen und religiösen Anschauungen der Menschen ist unbefriedigend: sie läßt diese Anschauungen als Irrtümer erscheinen ... Schon die Idee, den Gebrauch—etwa die Tötung des Priesterkönigs—erklären zu wollen, scheint mir verfehlt. Alles was Frazer tut ist, sie Menschen, die so ähnlich denken wie er, plausibel zu machen'.

129. For further reading, see Smith, 'When the Bough Breaks' (above, n. 3), p. 354, n. 42 (= Smith, *Map is not Territory*, p. 220, n. 42); H. E. Butler, *The Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1920), pp. 111-13; and Segal, 'Aeternum per saecula nomen' (above, n. 26), *passim*.

130. MacKay, 'Three Levels of Meaning in *Aeneid VI*' (above, n. 25), p. 183.

poetry, an indefinite expansion.¹³¹ These are the conceptual and evaluative categories inherited by modern critics. Thus Maud Bodkin, for instance, in 1934 reads the Bough variously as a 'natural symbol of that visionary power granted by heaven to those whose eyes "piercing in the quest" are to explore the viewless places of earth', as a 'symbol of the transition from death to life', and as a 'symbol of the power that is in [the voyager] of life and faith'.¹³² Robert Brooks in 1953 reads the *Aeneid* as 'a web of antithetic symbols, of tensions and oppositions never finally resolved. The golden bough is one of the most critical and complex events in this internal structure'.¹³³ For Adam Parry, the Bough is a 'symbol of splendor and lifelessness', and for C. P. Segal it is a symbol balancing life and death, philosophy and folklore: 'In the Bough Vergil has created a symbol which conveys the complexities he wishes to present'.¹³⁴

All of these critics focus on the symbolic multivalence of Vergil's image, much in line with the delight in semantic ambiguity exhibited by literary critics of the period, from William Empson to Mikhail Bakhtin. It is by no means true, however, that allegory 'demands a single interpretation'. As we have seen, Servius gives more than one reading of the Bough, as do Bernard Silvestris, Salutati and Boys.¹³⁵ Fulgentius, too, engages in polysemy, as Robert Edwards has convincingly argued.¹³⁶ Andrew Laird, meanwhile, has noted the similarities between ancient allegorical and modern readings, concluding that the process of allegorization is inextricable from that of interpretation itself.¹³⁷ The difference between allegory and symbolism, therefore, cannot lie in the latter's superior capacity for handling 'several layers of meaning'. On this level the distinction appears, ultimately, arbitrary. Modern critics have a richer sense of literature *as* literature, and a greater awareness of the limits of historical plausibility; but no less than Frazer, and no less than the allegorists, their primary goal is to render Vergil's text more intelligible to their readers—and their own biases and predilections, like those of their predecessors, have become steadily more apparent over time.

131. See, for instance, the discussion of this distinction in Angus Fletcher's influential *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 13-19. Cf. Fletcher's citation of Northrop Frye, pp. 304-305, on critics' resentment of allegory for the limitations it places on their own reading. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity*, p. 97, also accuses ancient interpreters of mistaking symbolism for the restrictive 'equivalence' of allegory.

132. Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 133-135.

133. Robert A. Brooks, 'Discolor Aura' (above, n. 25), p. 276.

134. Adam Parry, 'The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*', *Arion* 2 (1963), 66-80: p. 78. Segal, 'Aeternum per saecula nomen' (above, n. 26), p. 619.

135. On the ambiguities in Bernard's commentary, see Pike, 'Bernard Silvestris' Descent' (above, n. 44), p. 348.

136. Edwards, 'Fulgentius and the Collapse of Meaning' (above, n. 35), p. 33: 'By separating Virgil's explanation of the poem from his own, Fulgentius explores the wider consequences of an interpretive system that permits varieties of meaning'.

137. Andrew Laird, 'Figures of Allegory from Homer to Latin Epic', in G. R. Boys-Stones, ed., *Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition: Ancient Thought and Modern Revisions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 151-175, especially pp. 173-174. Although Laird's observations are valuable, I do not share his preference for *absolute* conflation, either of mediaeval and modern approaches to Vergil, or of allegorization and interpretation.