

# Entanglements

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## 1 Introduction: entanglements

In the Phrygian capital of Gordium, the peasant Gordius became king when he fulfilled an oracle by being in the right place (on his way to the temple of Jupiter), at the right time (when those who consulted the oracle went looking for someone on his way to the temple of Jupiter). Gordius commemorated his elevation by consecrating his wagon, including the knot that attached its yoke, in the temple. Such was the complexity of the knot that a new prophecy arose: whoever could untie it would rule all of Asia. The story of Alexander's encounter with the Gordian knot finds a typically ambiguous retelling in Walter of Châtillon's twelfth-century *Alexandreis*:

Mouit Alexandrum supplendi fata cupido,  
Extollensque iugum nexus dissoluere temptat,  
Luctatusque breui, cum se contendere frustra  
Conspicit, astantes ne triste reuerberet omen,  
“Quid refert,” inquit “proceres, qua scilicet arte  
Quoque modo tacitae pateant enigmata sortis?”  
Dixit et arrepto nodos mucrone resoluit,  
Vnde uel elusit sortem uel forte reclusit.<sup>1</sup>

The desire to fulfill the prophecy stirred Alexander and, raising the yoke, he tried to untangle the bond [*nexus*]. After a brief struggle, when he saw he was striving

<sup>1</sup> Walter of Châtillon, *Alexandreis*, ed. Colker, 2.83–90 (40–41).

in vain, and lest the omen strike onlookers as ill-fortuned, he said: “What does it matter, my lords, how or by what skill the riddles of silent destiny are revealed?” He spoke and, snatching up a sword, unfastened the knots [*nodos*]. By which he either mocked destiny, or perhaps revealed it.<sup>2</sup>

The principal source of the passage is Quintus Curtius Rufus’s *Historia Alexandri Magni*, but Walter expands Alexander’s speech with an echo of Lucan (“Quid refert,” *Civil War* X.383). The last line, substantially present already in Curtius Rufus, bespeaks a wry humour at the expense of the conqueror. We see enough of Alexander’s thought processes to perceive his solution of the problem of the knot as the act of a chancer on the verge of public humiliation, led on by lust (*cupido*) for conquest. The echo of Book 10 of Lucan’s *Civil War* connects the passage to the tradition in which Alexander is a violent, indeed insane, over-reacher. But Walter, and his sources, do not go so far. ‘Perhaps’ Alexander’s method—destroy the enigma, if you can’t solve it—was the one foreseen. The ambiguity extends to the nature of oracles.

Trying to understand the knot aligns the reader with Alexander. We have been previously told that it consists of ropes or threads combined with each other (*funicibus inter se coeuntibus [...] conplosis*) by a secret art, that its end or head cannot be found, nor its knots undone. Without beginning or end, it is a *nexus*, something intricate, bound, which consists of multiple “nodes”: a knot of many knots, impenetrable in its obscurity. Its dismantling at sword-point is both comedic liberation from portent and the blade’s crass violation of art. Entanglements, we might conclude, come ready-freighted with expectations and temptations. They invite untangling, ‘resolution’ through the restoration of a previous form. They also resist such efforts, to the point of provocation. The transformation of a knot into a line is the act of a reader, an editor, and perhaps also a conqueror, but the knot itself may be the product of some *ars latens* whose principles elude the grasping fingers of the onlooker.

The spirit with which the contributors to this special issue of *JOLCEL* view entanglement is happily far from that of Alexander’s approach to the Gordian knot. Whether a line of verse, a literary lineage, or a line of transmission, each of the five articles explores the ways in which classical lines were translated, reworked, chopped, mixed, tied up, and repurposed during the Middle Ages. Rather than seeking to untangle or cut through, they aim to trace, explicate and enjoy the knot, understanding anachronism as a hermeneutic tool, and seeing ‘classical reception’ as something more than uni-directional. The approach is evidently thought-provoking, and productive of rich analysis. But what is at stake in the notion of entanglement? What does this conceptualisation of medieval reworking of classical writing reveal, and where might it lead us? The following remarks offer some initial reflections.

<sup>2</sup> The translation is mine, but compare those of Pritchard, *The Alexandreis*, 60; and Townsend, *The Alexandreis*, 26.

## 2 Remix, tangle, rhizome

There is no better example of the entangled nature of classical reception—or perhaps better, of the ongoing creation of ancient literature—than Proba's *Centio*. One of the more extraordinary literary forms of late antiquity, *centio* sees poems sliced and diced to form an entirely new work from almost entirely old material. Viewed from the perspective of a modern edition, where every half-line is identified, *centio* can look deranged, the work of a surrealist poet let loose with scissors and paste and access to a set of Loeb's. Lines 107–14 of Proba's *Centio Vergilianus* can serve as an example:

Iamque dies alterque dies processit et omne = *Aen.* 3.356 + *Georg.* 2.20 / *Aen.* 7.514  
 hoc virtutis opus, divinae mentis et haustus = *Aen.* 10.469 + *Georg.* 4.220  
 prospiciens genitor, perfectis ordine rebus, = *Aen.* 1.155 + *Aen.* 3.548 + *Georg.* 4.449  
 expleri mentem nequit ardescitque tuendo = *Aen.* 1.713  
 terrasque tractusque maris caelumque profundum, = *Buc.* 4.51 / *Georg.* 4.222  
 alituum pecudumque genus, secumque volutat, = *Aen.* 8.27 + *Aen.* 10.159  
 qui mare, qui terras omni dicione tenerent, = *Aen.* 1.236  
 neu segnes iaceant terrae; iuvat usque morari. = *Georg.* 2.37; *Aen.* 6.487<sup>3</sup>

Yet it works—not only do the lines make formal sense, they construct meanings quite unlike the original from which they derive. Who needs veiled references to the son of God in the fourth *Eclogue*, when Virgil's words can be crafted unambiguously to describe Christian history? The already entangled nature of *centio* encounters further layers as it is read alongside the (unmixed) works of Virgil. As Mary Hitchman points out, since *centio* is itself a patchwork of quotation, it becomes hard to know whether it, or the text it has repurposed, is being quoted. Sometimes, however, it is possible to see that an author is using Proba's Virgil, rather than Virgil's Virgil: the *Laterculus Malaiianus*, plausibly attributed to Theodore of Tarsus, is a case in point.

The papers that follow Hitchman's show us convergent, though not identical, understandings of the concept of entanglement. In Paul Vinhage's explication of the thought of John Scotus Eriugena, the tangle begins when late antique authorities such as Priscian and Donatus muddle rival philosophical doctrines. To this hybrid of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, Eriugena adds his own complications, which operate in aid of a Christian understanding of fundamental concepts such as *vox* and *littera*. Ivo Wolsing's examination of Walter's metapoetic diction in the *Alexandreis*, meanwhile, defines entanglement, following Barad and Nuttall, as intersection with others and the lack of self-containment (somewhat the opposite of the Gordian knot, then, though broadly consistent with Vinhage's hybridity). Philippa Byrne's study of the associations of Virgil with southern Italy witnesses the entanglement of orally-transmitted narrative with the political ambitions of more than one dynasty, and the intervention of multiple Latinate authors working on behalf of noble patrons. The tangle thus connects oral with written, local with

<sup>3</sup> Proba, *Centio Vergilianus*, eds Fassina and Lucarini, 13.

transnational or imperial. Finally, Ramani Chandramohan's rich exploration of Herbert's *Dolopathos* reveals, somewhat in the manner of Proba's *Cento*, the inherent entanglements of a text that incorporates the figure of Virgil to star in a reworking of a frame narrative of eastern origin; the Latin text's translation into a European vernacular adds further knots. Here, as in the examples studied by all other authors, one has the impression of texts folding in on themselves, in addition to their enfolding in a variety of intertexts. In all cases, albeit some more forcefully than others, the use of entanglement as a model is designed to resist the claims of linearity in favour of hybridity and deliberate anachronism.

If 'entanglement' is to be developed further as a model for literary-historical study, though, it may be helpful to articulate its relationship to other attempts to grasp non-linear modes of textual relationship. There are obvious points of convergence, for a start, with the currently fashionable, indeed ubiquitous, notions of networks and connectivity, even if such models seek less to explicate entanglement than to use mapping to reveal system.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps a closer analogue lies in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. This too was an attempt to resist linearity, above all the line of the tree and its roots, positing instead the notion of multiplicities without beginning or end, an anti-genealogy comprising lines of territorialisation and flight that do not form a whole.<sup>5</sup> In a number of ways, Deleuze and Guattari's vegetal rhizome seems congruent with the function of the entangled invoked by the authors of these essays. The latter, however, appear to favour a less doctrinaire response to linearity, one that can be organic, artificial, or a combination of the two, conceiving of paths of resistance that are not necessarily 'rhizomatic.' In any case, for 'entanglement' to gain traction as a paradigm of classical reception a clearer sense is needed of its debts to, and divergences from, these and other ways of unthinking still-dominant models of descent and inheritance.

### 3 Twisted Virgils

The most striking of several points of continuity between the articles in this collection is the figure of Virgil. There can be no question of the centrality of Virgil to medieval Latinity, to the pedagogical programmes that spanned the Middle Ages, whatever their local developments and divergences, and accordingly to multiple medieval literary cultures, Latin and vernacular. But what the articles assembled here draw our attention to is the plural nature of 'Virgil' in the Middle Ages. If Virgil was central, he was never monolithic. At a textual level, this meant the reception and re-working—or mixing, in the hands of a Proba—of three very different works, the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*, all of which could—as Wolsing points out—be read through the lens of Servius's commentaries. The various nature of the content of these poems ensured multiple possibilities for styling their author. He could be positioned as pagan, proleptically Christian, or (Proba again)

<sup>4</sup> For recent reflections on, and critique of, the concept of connectivity see Ramgopal, "Connectivity and Disconnectivity."

<sup>5</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Massumi, 3–25.

revoiced as a propagator of Christian doctrine. He could figure as a sage, from which point necromancy was a short step. The *Aeneid* becomes, in vernacular tradition, a *roman*, its narrative read in the imperialistic, sometimes proto-nationalistic terms of the *translatio imperii*. These of course are only a few of the medieval Virgils. There is also the Virgil of the Carolingian scriptorium; the Virgil of Latin lyric poetry; the scientific Virgil whose verses inform John of Sacrobosco's immensely influential *De sphaera*; the Virgil of Dante. The protean nature of this figure—something equally true of Lucan and Ovid—makes his capture within a 'tradition' impossible.<sup>6</sup> Better then to speak of medieval Virgils, not least because—as Byrne suggests—humanists such as Petrarch, and all who have followed them, had a vested interest in constructing a singular 'medieval Virgil,' ensconced in a Neapolitan cave. This Virgil could be easily associated with the things most vehemently excluded from humanist culture: superstition, folk tradition, romance narrative. As Byrne shows, the southern Italian Virgil jokingly sought after by Petrarch was a genuine creation of the Middle Ages, a mixture of popular and learned traditions. But he was only one of many incarnations of the poet.

Humanist approaches to ancient texts, of the kind developed by Petrarch and his followers, are a form of disentanglement: the humanist Virgil is an author stripped of the accretions of medieval commentary and lore, his antiquity restored in order better to enable a dialogue with *moderni*. (This did not stop humanists inventing their own Virgiliana, of course, adding books to the *Aeneid*, copying and commenting on the works.) Modern scholarly practices in many ways continue this approach, as instantly revealed by a comparison between a medieval manuscript of Virgil's poetry, filled with marginal and interlinear glosses, and a modern edition of the same, all clean lines, white margins and text framed with a discreet textual apparatus. We cannot completely escape this hermeneutic of disentanglement, and it would be unwise to try. Even as they embrace entanglement, the contributions to this issue make use of chronology, of lines of transmission as well as of translation, and they are right to do so. It should, after all, be possible to acknowledge and even embrace entanglement without completely abandoning linearity. There has to be a middle way, a space in-between slicing through the knot and gazing at it with mystified reverence.

#### 4 The problem of paganism?

One area where we may also be unconsciously working along humanist lines is in framing paganism as something difficult or problematic for medieval Christian authors. Humanists, famously, were comfortable with pagans – happy to retrieve their neglected works from monastic libraries, to engage them in dialogue, to invoke their gods. It stands to reason then that pre-humanist Christian thinkers must have viewed pagan authors with suspicion, warned off by Jerome and Augustine. But did they? The "problem of paganism" is noted on more than one

<sup>6</sup> See Kallendorf, *The Protean Virgil*.

occasion in Chandramohan’s article,<sup>7</sup> and while the phrase does not appear elsewhere, in general the contributors seem to share the view that Christian authors felt the need to defend, or at least justify their use of pre-Christian material, such as the works of Virgil, or the historical narrative of Alexander. The difficulty identified is that of incorporating pagan thought within Christian letters, indeed on basing Christian learning to a significant extent on the works of classical Greece and Rome. The “problem of paganism” is of course also that of the salvation of the pagan, an exercise requiring some imagination and literary skill. But all these accounts of agile reworkings of classical texts, and the equally agile reimagining of classical authors, suggest it might be worthwhile to contemplate the possibility that there was no *problem* of paganism.

What if, far from a problem, paganism is the necessary condition of an integral Christian literature? What if the pagan poet, in all his myriad forms, is exactly what Christian Latin literature needed: something that could at once stand adjacent, prior to, and overlapping with Christianity—a useful source of heterogeneity with a built-in dispensability? Dante, in the end, had very little problem denying his *maestro* Paradise (it is twenty-first century readers, preferring Virgil to Beatrice, who find this exclusion a problem).<sup>8</sup> Standard statements of regret of the “if only he had known of Christ” kind work both ways: they draw attention to the moral and religious superiority of the Christian author, while attesting the innocence and vaunting the prowess of the non-Christian forebear. The glosses in the many medieval manuscripts of classical works primarily serve to explicate the literal sense of the text, only secondarily and far less consistently its allegorical, historical and mythographic meanings. The first imperative of the student of Virgil was to understand what his words meant, and detailed studies of reader response to his works suggest a span of secular, as well as religious, uses, few if any of which appear to have been hampered by lingering concern about Augustan paganism.<sup>9</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

Cavils aside, this collection leaves us with much to think about and much to enjoy. It demonstrates the complexity of the entanglements of classical and medieval literature, as well as offering snapshots across several hundred years of reading, interpreting, and re-writing ancient texts: the presence of Proba in seventh-century Canterbury; Eriugena’s daring positioning of the letter before the voice; the

<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Marenbon’s *Pagans and Philosophers*, a rich exploration which acknowledges the “Problem of Paganism” to be “a newly-invented label” (1). As the span of his title indicates, Marenbon does not view the problem as one that characterises the Middle Ages, but includes early modern and humanist authors in his analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Such as the Irish singer-songwriter Hozier, whose album *Unreal Unearth: Unending* (2024) draws directly on Dante’s *Commedia*; the song “Hymn to Virgil” expresses the singer’s refusal to enter Paradise if Virgil is not allowed in: “I would not be seen walking through any door / Some place that you’re not welcome to.” My thanks to Grace Moran for introducing me to Hozier’s work, and for her insightful comments on “Hymn to Virgil.”

<sup>9</sup> See Munk Olsen, *L’Étude des auteurs classiques latins*, esp. 111–21, 187–217; Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England*; Reynolds; and Day, *English Humanism and the Reception of Virgil*, 14–44.

fertile, perhaps even febrile, interactions between Latin and vernacular literature in twelfth- and thirteenth-century France, as evidenced in their different ways by the *Alexandreis* and *Dolopathos*; the unexpected and irrepressible nature of the medieval Virgils, from *cento* to grotto. Such studies speak of but do not resolve the multiple lives of classical texts, and their authors, in the Middle Ages.

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