ABSTRACT

This project is designed to create a new methodological paradigm for the study of literature, fusing reception studies with book history to provide a model that can be used to ground the changing interpretations of any literary text in the physical objects that not only carry, but also contribute inextricably to, their cultural meaning. It will also provide a test case for this new paradigm, following the texts by the Roman poet Virgil that stood at the center of Western education for two thousand years through the succession of physical forms in which their readers encountered them. The objective during the grant period is to get the project to the point where external funding is a reasonable goal. Anticipated results include grant proposals, a series of conference papers, and a monograph to be published by a major university press.

Key words: classics, reception studies, book history, Virgil, literary history
Proposal Description

Qualifications of the investigator. I am seeking support for a monograph, tentatively entitled ‘The Protean Virgil: Material Form and the Reception of the Classics.” This project requires expertise in classical studies and book history, along with the languages necessary to read the relevant primary and secondary material. My graduate training centered on the classical tradition, and my appointment at TAMU is divided between the language program, where I teach Greek and Latin, and the English Department, where (among other things) I have initiated course work in book history at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I have published three monographs on Virgil and four book-length bibliographies of early printed material, three focused on Virgilian editions, and I work comfortably in French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Spanish, the modern languages needed to manage this project.

Background information and project impact. For twenty-five years my work has focused on the reception of classical literature, especially Virgil, in post-classical culture. This area has recently become one of the ‘hot’ subfields in classical studies, but there is a problem, I believe, in the way research there is generally conducted. The problem as I see it is that the object of study is almost invariably a disembodied text—words that are seen to stimulate the writing of other words which are analyzed in detail without paying attention to the books that carry the words. This practice of looking through rather than at books as physical objects, I argue, means that reception as it is generally practiced gives us at best an incomplete, if not a misleading, picture of the influence of the classics.

Building on my previous research, this new monograph will do two things. First, it will establish a new methodological paradigm, fusing reception studies with book history to provide a model that can be used to ground the changing interpretations of any literary text in the physical objects that not only carry, but also contribute inextricably to, their cultural meaning. My monograph will also provide a test case for this new paradigm, following the poet who stood at the center of western education for two thousand years through a succession of physical forms that change as quickly and unpredictably as Proteus himself when someone tried to catch him.

Up to this point, there have been several impediments to doing a project like the one I am proposing. Virgil’s popularity led to a massive number of editions of his work, but unfortunately these books have remained poorly catalogued and dispersed throughout the libraries and private collections of Europe and the United States. In order to prepare for my current project, I have used support from Harvard University’s Loeb Classical Library Foundation to prepare a basic bibliography of the early printed editions of Virgil up to the year 1850. This bibliography also rests on a new methodological paradigm, in that it takes full advantage of computerized resources that have come on line only within the last decade to supplement the library visits and letter-writing campaigns on which work like this has traditionally rested. My bibliography lists over 3,500 different editions, more than twice as many as the only previous effort to catalogue this material. I have also taken over from Virginia Brown, who recently passed away, the general editorship of the Virgil volume for the Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum, a project founded over fifty years ago by Paul Oskar Kristeller to describe all the manuscript commentaries to every Greek and Latin author. This project is also well underway and I have access to everything that has been done there. In short, now is the time to press forward with my monograph.
Project objectives. My goal during the award period, quite simply, is to advance this project to the point where external grant support becomes a reasonable goal.

The project begins with the Virgilian graffito found on the walls of Pompeii and ends in the editions printed in the twelfth century, when changes in the broader cultural context finally expelled Virgil from his longstanding position at the center of western education. The first chapter covers the period from late antiquity to the beginning of the Renaissance when Virgil’s poetry circulated in handwritten form, focusing primarily on the manuscripts which carried the Eclogues, the Georgics, and the Aeneid through the long Middle Ages. This chapter argues that an emphasis on the physical aspects of manuscript transmission leads to the conclusion that Virgil’s poetry supplemented, and in some ways even challenged, the Bible for cultural dominance in this period, serving as a sort of secular scripture. Book historians have noted that the Bible drove the passage from roll to codex, and it is no accident, I argue, that we have more codices of Virgil’s poetry produced at an earlier period than those of any other classical author. The earliest printed books mimicked manuscripts, so the form in which the Virgilian incunables (books printed before 1501) appeared is also significant: large folio editions, often with commentaries, the same format in which the earliest printed Bibles were published. To explain this phenomenon, I offer both a strong and a weak thesis (the terminology is borrowed from Charles Martindale’s Redeeming the Text). The strong thesis is that into the early Renaissance, many readers believed that Virgil was inspired in some way by the Christian God, so that Virgil’s Eclogue 4 foretold the coming of Christ and his Aeneid contained theological truth. The weak thesis, for those modern scholars who are uncomfortable with the idea of Virgil as a poet-theologian, is that the themes of Virgil’s poetry – work hard for a worthy goal, acknowledge the inevitability of moral failure while continuing to strive for the good – are broadly compatible with Christianity, thereby making this poetry the secular counterpart of Biblical truth.

The second chapter turns to Renaissance printed books. Here I argue that failure to give due attention to the books in which early modern readers encountered their Virgil has led to some fundamental misperceptions about reading in this period. Anyone who has looked at a large number of early printed books has noticed that they often contain marks: passages are underlined and key words, often referred to as ‘indexing notes,’ are written in the margins. The passages underlined are generally memorable for either their moral content or their stylistic felicity; the ‘indexing notes’ contain the key words under which the underlined passages were to be filed. The passages were transferred to commonplace books which were usually kept in handwritten form by their compilers but were themselves sometimes published. Renaissance readers regularly shattered Virgil’s poetry into moral and stylistic fragments which they then put back together in their own image, based in the values that they considered important. In other words, they read differently than we do. To borrow a phrase from a now-classic book by Stephen Greenblatt, the result is a sort of ‘Virgilian self-fashioning’ in which Renaissance readers used Virgil’s poetry as a guide to construct a version of themselves that was based in the past but relevant to the world around them. This phenomenon is only comprehensible today if we return to the books in which Renaissance readers encountered and responded to Virgil’s text.

A glance at a large number of Virgilian editions printed in the eighteenth century and afterwards shows that something has changed dramatically, for these books are almost invariably free of the handwritten marginalia that covered so many copies from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Virgilian editions continued to roll off the presses for generations in the same quantities as before, but these books show us how the texts they contained were used in different ways. The editions of Baskerville, Bodoni, and Didot adorned the libraries of
gentlemen throughout Europe, but the pristine state in which most copies are found today confirms that they served as monuments to be admired, not treasuries of wisdom to be read, marked up, and internalized. The Georgics edition of John Martyn is notable for turning what had been seen as a poem about the moral value of hard work into a repository of all the most current knowledge about the plants mentioned in the text, making it a handbook for botanists, not a guide to everyday life. This trend reaches its logical conclusion in the great edition of Christian Gottlob Heyne, in which six volumes of philological commentary and indices overwhelm Virgil’s text. The consumer of a book like this is the isolated scholar in his study, not the educated general reader in search of guidance toward a life well lived. The fine press editions of the twentieth century confirm Virgil’s passage from the center of culture to the periphery, for they, too, were designed to sit unread in a living room or study, a testament to the taste and success of their purchaser, but not an integral part of her life.

Of all the early printed editions of Virgil, those that most clearly embody the ever-changing physical form of this material are those with illustrations. The text being illustrated, of course, remains largely the same, but this text is invariably envisioned and re-envisioned through the prism of cultural change. A Baroque artist, for example, focuses on the moment when Juno sent Iris down to pluck away the dying Dido’s soul, as a way to stress the flurry of movement and the foreshortened perspective at the center of Baroque aesthetics. When a neo-classical engraver reproduces the drawings in one of the early Virgilian codices, however, he selects a scene in which the characters are at rest and the perspective is balanced in perfect symmetry. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions, the woodcuts and plates regularly cover a full page; by the twentieth century, however, the illustrations have often migrated to the margins of the page, reflecting what has happened to the text they illustrate.

Timeline for performing work. I have published articles based in part on chapters 2 and 4, but have not done either the full research or any writing for the other two chapters. During the summer of 2011, I intend to do the necessary research on the first chapter, refine my argument, and at least begin writing the chapter. During the academic year 2011 to 2012, I will finish writing the first chapter and complete the research on the third. At the same time I shall begin a serious search for external support to finish the project.

Anticipated outcome within one year of the award. I think with initial help from PESCA, I can have a finished manuscript a year from the ending date of the award. Oxford University Press has published my last two monographs and has the ‘right of first refusal’ on this one as well. I generally give several papers a year, some invited, some as regular conference offerings, and I would also anticipate drawing from this project over the next couple of years for them.

Potential for external support. I believe my chances of winning external support to help complete the project are very good. I have received five major fellowships in the past from such granting agencies as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Delmas Foundation, and the Loeb Classical Library Foundation at Harvard, so I have a track record here. This project has broad appeal in several fields; I simply need some more time to refine the presentation before going to external funding agencies.

Interdisciplinary linkages. By definition this is an interdisciplinary project, drawing on classical studies and book history, along with art history, literary history, and intellectual history.