How to End an Epic

P.G. Walsh

Every schoolchild who studies Shakespearian drama knows how a tragedy or a comedy should end. In her celebrated study of Erasmus, Margaret Mann Phillips relates how the Dutch humanist repeatedly and dejectedly described the incipient Reformation as a tragedy, but after Martin Luther married a nun liberated from the cloister, the Erasmian wit reasserted itself, and he remarked: ‘Perhaps it is not a tragedy after all, but a comedy; for it has ended with wedding-bells.’ But there has never been such an explicit convention with regard to epic poetry, and for obvious reasons; epic is a Protean creature which continually transforms its shape. Plato called Homer the first among tragedians, and Aristotle in the Poetics similarly but in greater detail sought to categorise epic as a form of tragedy; ‘Whoever knows what is good or bad tragedy’ he says ‘knows also about epic poetry, for all the elements of an epic poem are found in tragedy, but the elements of a tragedy are not all found in an epic poem.’ But the Alexandrians disregarded such restrictive categorisation; not only did they open the genre to such fields as agriculture, astronomy and even meteorology, but they broadened the treatment of heroic epic, or what had been heroic epic, to bring the hero down to the level of mere mortals. J. K. Newman, an English classicist teaching in America, in his recent book The Classical Epic Tradition, envisages this Alexandrian liberation of epic as a decisive era in literary history, exercising its effect obliquely first on the Italian tradition and then on the epic in English. It is certainly true that Dante by calling his epic Commedia shows a fine disregard for Aristotelian precept. In a letter to Can Grande explaining why he gave his epic the title of Commedia, Dante wrote: ‘Comedy for its part begins with unruly circumstances, but its theme ends happily, as may be seen from the comedies of Terence … This shows why my present work is called a comedy. In the beginning it is fearful and noisome because it is Hell. At the end it is happy, desirable and pleasing, because it is Paradise.’ Or again, Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata for all its stately Virgilian beginning (‘I sing of the pious arms and the captain who freed the great sepulchre of Christ’) is so dominated by the love-theme that it was criticised for being a romance rather than an epic, and it duly ends happily with the marriage of Sofronia and Olindo after their ordeal by fire.

This notion that the epic should end happily is a prominent feature of English criticism in the late 17th and early 18th centuries for which Milton’s Paradise Lost is the target. When John Dryden translated Juvenal and Persius
in 1693, he prefaced his translation with a criticism of Milton’s epic in these words: ‘His design is the losing of our happiness; his event (that is, the ending of the poem) is not prosperous like that of all other epic works.’ Clearly Dryden believed that an epic poem should end happily, and that *Paradise Lost* is flawed in this respect. Four years later Dryden published his great translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in the Introduction to which he extends his criticism. He says that Milton could have overcome Homer and Virgil if only the devil had not been his hero, if only the giant had not overcome the knight and sent him out of his castle to wander with his lady errant through the world.

A few years later in 1712 Addison wrote a series of essays on *Paradise Lost* in *The Spectator*, in which he claims that the only imperfection in the action of Milton’s epic is ‘that the event of it (that is, the ending) is unhappy’. Milton, he says, was sensible of this imperfection in his fable, and he tries to cure it by several expedients; in particular, in his depiction of Adam before his expulsion from Eden, he prefigures the defeat of Satan by Christ, the seed of Adam. In this same essay of February 9 1712, Addison echoes Dryden’s observation that an epic should end happily: ‘This kind of fable’ he says ‘wherein the event is unhappy, which is the most perfect in Tragedy, is not so proper for an heroick poem.’

There are many rejoinders which Milton might have made to this stereotyped criticism. First, perhaps, that just as Dante’s *Inferno* eventually leads to the *Paradiso*, so *Paradise Lost* is to have its happier sequel. Secondly, that a careful reading of the last two books of *Paradise Lost* does not leave the reader with the final impression of unmitigated tragedy, for Adam and Eve are schooled for their new existence, so that the scene is set for *Paradise Regained*:

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The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide ...
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But a third and possibly the most effective rebuttal would have been to challenge the assumption that the happy ending was prescriptive, and to point to the close of the *Aeneid* of Virgil as an enlightening analogue, a deliberately poised statement of ambiguity. Let me remind you how the epic ends. Aeneas and the Trojans have reached Italy safely, but their hope of a peaceful settlement is dashed when the hostile goddess Juno incites the Latins and their allies to go to war against them. The decision is made to leave the outcome to a duel between Aeneas and his chief opponent Turnus. Aeneas wounds Turnus, and has him lying at his feet; Turnus asks for mercy, but Aeneas checks his initially favourable response when he sees the belt which Turnus
wears. It is the belt of the young Pallas, the son of king Evander of Pallanteum, the site of the future Rome; Pallas had led a military contingent to aid the Trojans, and Turnus had slain him in the earlier fighting. Aeneas' fierce regard for his youthful ally leads him to reject Turnus' plea for his life. Virgil's final lines are:

hoc dicens ferrum aduerso sub pectore condit
feruidus. ast illi soluntur frigore membra,
uitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras.

'With these words in the heat of passion Aeneas buried his sword in the enemy's breast. Then Turnus' limbs relaxed in the cold of death, and with a groan his vital spirit fled in resentment to the shades below.'

The duel is over, and so is the epic. What happened thereafter is left to our imaginations. Did Virgil really intend to leave the reader to grapple with the two problems which the abrupt ending raises? First, why does he allow his civilised hero to slaughter a prostrate suppliant, and how can this be squared with the Augustan vision of a perfected Aeneas? And secondly, if the slaughter of Turnus is envisaged as justifiable and even inevitable, should the poem have ended so precipitately on this note of tense revenge, or should Virgil have appended some reassuring sequel?

Had the poet in fact intended this ending to be his final word? As we know, the life of Virgil by Donatus describes how he set out for Greece and Asia in 19 BC, having decided to devote three whole years to the revision of the epic. But when he reached Athens, he was met there by the emperor Augustus, who persuaded him to return to Italy in his company. But at Megara Virgil contracted sunstroke; instead of resting there, he decided to continue on his journey home. As many will recall from Hermann Broch's novel, The Death of Virgil, he reached Brindisi but died there. On his deathbed he constantly called for the boxes containing the poem, intending to burn them, but his requests were disregarded. So the poem was neither destroyed nor revised, and it is an academic question whether he would have left the ending unchanged. But what we can do is to analyse the possible reasons why he ended it as he did, and to probe the implications of so abrupt an ending.

The Homeric poems had served as Virgil's chief models. It will be recalled that in the Iliad, which inspired so much of the second half of the Aeneid, Homer introduces a final note of reassuring magnanimity: when Priam comes to the Greek camp to beg for his son Hector's body, Achilles finally relents. In this sense the Iliad could be adduced as support for the thesis of Dryden and Addison that epics should end happily; and the romantic reunion of Odysseus with his wife Penelope likewise brought the Odyssey to a
close which induces no pity or fear. Then too the Alexandrian epic which was
the other major influence on Virgil, the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius,
ends with the safe return of the hero Jason to Thessaly accompanied by his
new wife Medea. Thus the three most influential Greek epics end on a happy
note, a fact which makes Virgil’s curt and bloodthirsty conclusion the more
surprising. The subsequent history of the heroic epic, beginning with Statius’
*Thebaid*, encouraged the tendency to look for a romantic ending; and it comes
as no surprise to find a young Italian, Maffeo Veggio, writing at Pavia in
1428, being inspired to round off the *Aeneid* by composing a thirteenth book.
Like so many Italians of the period, Veggio wrote superb Latin verses, and
this supplement of 630 lines was frequently incorporated into subsequent
editions of the *Aeneid*. His additional book became still more celebrated when
in 1502 Sebastian Brant illustrated it with six woodcuts. In this appendix to
Virgil’s epic, Veggio describes how Aeneas receives the surrender of the
opposing Latin army, and restores the body of Turnus to his grieving father
Daunus at Ardea. Then king Latinus, king of the Latins, concludes a treaty
with the Trojans; there is a marriage-festival at Laurentum as Aeneas marries
Latinus’ daughter Lavinia; the new city of the Trojans is marked out. Finally,
Aeneas at his death is transported to the stars.

There is an amusing Scottish sequel to this supplement of Veggio’s.
About a century later in 1513 Gavin Douglas, bishop of Dunkeld, had just
completed his splendid Scots rendering of the *Aeneid*, and he was walking in
the Scottish fields on a June evening. It must have been the rare species of
Scottish day when the sun deigned to shine from a cloudless sky, because the
bishop sat under a tree to rest, and promptly fell asleep. He claims that he
heard a voice addressing him, and before him stood none other than Maffeo
Veggio, who accosted him saying: ‘I bear thee no good will, in that thou hast
rendered into thine own language the other twelve books, so that they may be
read and sung all over Albion’s isle, but of mine thou hast taken no heed.’
Douglas replied that he had overspent his time on the books of Virgil. ‘If I
longer laid aside my pressing tasks’ he added ‘what would folk think? Believe
me, father, there be those that hold that your book adds no more than doth a
fifth wheel to a cart.’ Veggio was mortally insulted by these words, and began
to belabour Douglas with a club until the bishop consented to append a
translation of the thirteenth book. This serves as his excuse for incorporating
Veggio’s appendix, but his judgment damns it with faint praise: ‘Though his
style be not like that of Virgil …’. He means that the verses of Veggio are too
regular and predictable, too unambiguous and untortured, in short too Ovidian
to be taken for Virgil’s.
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Veggio’s example was followed by other attempts to finish Virgil’s epic for him between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries; the interested student can find these documented in Anna Cox Brinton’s edition of Veggio. These versifiers seem untroubled by the first of the two problems which preoccupy modern scholars, the slaughter of Turnus after he had surrendered, and his resentful departure to the shades below. Perhaps Dryden and Addison took the same general view, that the epic does end happily in the sense that the hero both survives and triumphs; to adapt Dryden’s words, the knight overcomes the giant. The problem whether Aeneas acts out of character by slaying the prostrate Turnus seems to be predominantly a twentieth-century problem. As posed by modern critics, the problem is this: why does Aeneas appear to lose his disciplined self-control and refuse to spare Turnus after he has submitted? After all, this line of argument runs, the epic recounts not merely the physical Odyssey from the old Troy to the foundation of the new, but also the moral and spiritual pilgrimage of the central character from selfish Homeric hero to Roman community-leader. Aeneas on his journey has learned to embrace traditional Roman values. At Troy he was a self-regarding individual who had first to learn a proper devotion to gods, fatherland and kin; it is significant that Virgil never attaches the epithet pius to him in this second book. On the journey westward in Book 3 he has to learn to endure labor with the necessary constancy; the key-word throughout is fessus, as the Trojans are repeatedly compelled to uproot themselves and to seek their destined land elsewhere. At Carthage he has to learn continentia, to renounce the pleasures of sex with Dido, and the prospect of security and a settled home; and thereafter in Sicily when the Trojan matrons in their longing for an end to incessant travel set fire to their ships, he has again to shrug off despondency with Roman constantia. More positively, by his subsequent visit to and emergence from Hades he attains a superhuman knowledge and accordingly a stature higher than that of a mortal, for his father Anchises reveals to him in Elysium the divine course of the world as well as the future destiny of Rome. Finally, in the course of his attempts to settle his Trojan community in Italy first by peaceful negotiation and then by reluctant war, he confronts the furor of Turnus’ fierce hatred and persuades him to decide the issue by duel rather than by further widespread bloodshed.

But here a vital question has to be posed in relation to Aeneas’ slaughter of Turnus: is clemency a necessary virtue in the perfected hero? The traditional Roman policy of parcere subiectis et debellare superbos, to spare the submissive and to overpower the proud, can certainly be traced back to the Second Punic War, and in the first century BC Julius Caesar repeatedly boasts of his own clementia; by the time of the Augustan age, as Livy’s narrative repeatedly demonstrates, clementia was an important catchword. Camillus’
treatment of Tusculum in the fourth century BC, Scipio Africanus’ policy of clemency towards the Spaniards in the third, Quinctius Flamininus’ attitude towards the Aetolians in western Greece in the second exemplify that idealised clementia which the civilised manners of the Augustan age expected of the great leaders of its past. It is not, I think, legitimate to argue that Virgil chose to invest his hero with the moral standards of the twelfth century BC rather than with those of his own age; Aeneas is demonstrably the civilised Roman. So when he goes on the rampage in Books 10 and 11, slaughtering Italians indiscriminately, and again when he dispatches the suppliant Turnus at the end of the epic, it is not merely an anachronistic Christian perspective which finds his actions disturbing and distasteful; Virgil’s civilised contemporaries would have reacted similarly. So why does Virgil fly in the face of such Augustan sentiment?

It is possible to offer three complementary explanations as a tentative solution of the final savagery of Aeneas. The first, which we may label the philosophical explanation, touches upon the Virgilian pessimism which is the focus of much recent criticism: the poet wishes to stress the limitations of human reason in controlling men’s conduct. In spite of his long apprenticeship, in spite of his approximation to the highest level of humanity in the image and likeness of Hercules, the Stoic patron saint, Aeneas is still subject to human limitations and imperfections. So in the final scene, as in the indiscriminate carnage in Books 10 and 11, he never fully succeeds in restraining irrational rage by reason. The conditions under which it is particularly difficult to hold brutal conduct in check are the circumstances of war. The civil wars that had dogged the Roman state intermittently during Virgil’s lifetime made the poet keenly aware how warfare blunts the civilised sense, how even responsible and level-headed leaders demean themselves by gestures of revengeful anger. On this interpretation, the final dispatch of Turnus, together with the indiscriminate slaughter in which Aeneas indulges earlier, represents a relapse of conduct. Virgil is stressing that the human condition is not perfectible; he is espousing a doctrine close to that of original sin, the notion that there is a moral canker in all of us.

This vision of Virgilian realism is particularly influential amongst American critics. It began with Michael Putnam’s discussion of Book 12 in his *The Poetry of the Aeneid*, which speaks of Virgil’s ‘profound meditation on the necessities of historical development as seen through the eyes of a poet’. If we paraphrase crudely, Virgil is proclaiming that the birth and growth of Rome was achieved by a mode of behaviour repugnant to the civilised critic in Augustan Rome. Other scholars have been tempted to extend the thesis into a Virgilian condemnation of Aeneas’ conduct as representative of the ruthless
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aggression of the Roman imperial system. But it is hardly possible to square this extreme view with the earlier course of the epic, in which the Roman imperial destiny is repeatedly prophesied and recommended.

Yet even if we reject the broader thesis that the Aeneid is a sustained criticism of the Roman imperial mission, we can still acknowledge that Virgil is underlining the tragic aspects of Rome’s growth to imperial dominion. It has been noted how many of the individual books of the Aeneid end on the note of death. Creusa at the fall of Troy, Anchises at the end of the journey westward, Dido after the interlude at Carthage, Palinurus on the final stage of the journey to Italy, Marcellus in Anchises’ catalogue of the future heroes of Rome; and again in the final books Turnus’ slaughter of Pandarus. Aeneas’ dispatch of Mezentius, the death of the warrior-huntress Camilla all seem to anticipate as climax the completion of the pattern with the death of Turnus. R. S. Conway rightly speaks of ‘the sudden gust of tragedy’ which repeatedly blows through Virgil’s poem. We recall that in his lifetime every major political figure at Rome had died by violence; Pompey, Caesar, Cicero, the younger Cato, Brutus, Cassius, Mark Antony all died by the sword of another or by their own hand. It was an achievement for a political leader in Virgil’s lifetime to have died in bed. So the bleak end of the Aeneid suggests that death, violent death, may be the inevitable precondition of desirable change in the political and social order.

So much then for the tentative philosophical explanation for the abrupt close of the epic in the slaughter of Turnus: man is not perfectible, reason does not always prevail, death by violence may be the prerequisite of political progress. We may turn now to a second level of justification, the historical explanation. Heroic epic is poetic history; Virgil did not invent the characters who confront Aeneas in Italy in the second half of the Aeneid. In fact we possess a detailed account of the arrival and initial struggles of Aeneas in Italy from the pen of a Greek historian contemporary with Virgil, Dionysius of Halicarnassus. There are considerable differences of detail between the accounts of the historian and of the poet. In the historian, an alliance is quickly cemented between Trojans and Latins by the marriage of Aeneas and the princess Lavinia; the three-year struggle that follows has Aeneas and king Latinus as allies against the combination of the Etruscans and Turnus. Both Turnus and Aeneas die before the climax of the war, Turnus as the victim of a joint onslaught by the forces of Aeneas and Latinus, Aeneas at the hands of the Etruscan Mezentius; it is left to Ascanius, Aeneas’ son, to strike the peace-treaty with Mezentius.

Obviously Virgil has felt free to handle the legends with originality. He seeks to present the main conflict as between Trojans and Latins, not as
between Trojans and Latins on the one side and Etruscans on the other. His purpose here is to point forward to the cultural absorption of the Trojans by the Latins, the concession granted by Jupiter to Juno in the final book as consolation for Aeneas' ultimate victory. Since the main struggle is between Trojans and Latins, the climax must come with Turnus as Aeneas' final foe, and Turnus must die because his death symbolises the end of Latin resistance to the new order announced by Jupiter towards the close of the epic. The theme of Trojans versus Latins reflects Virgil's preoccupation with the recurrence of internecine war throughout Rome's history. The striking feature of the scenes depicted on the shield forged by Vulcan for Aeneas as a pictorial prophecy of the future is that they do not introduce external struggles with a Pyrrhus or a Hannibal, an Antiochus or a Mithridates; the conflicts are all between Romans and communities in Italy, climaxed by the grand scene in the centre of the shield which depicts the rout of Mark Antony and Cleopatra by the forces of Octavian and Agrippa at Actium in 31 BC. The duel between Aeneas and Turnus, like the conflict between Hercules and the evil giant Cacus recounted to Aeneas by Evander, foreshadows the ultimate struggle between Mark Antony and the future Augustus. The deaths which ensue in all three engagements, of Cacus at the hands of Hercules, of Turnus slain by Aeneas, of Mark Antony following the victory of Octavian, are in each case the inevitable prelude to the creation of a new political order of peace at Pallanteum, in Latium, and in the new foundation of Rome by the emperor Augustus.

These, then, are the historical considerations which weighed heavily with Virgil when he decided that Turnus must die. He had to die, but he need not have died as a prostrate suppliant, vainly entreating the clemency of the victor. To try to explain the heartlessness of Aeneas we must go beyond the philosophical and historical motives to the third and crowning factor, the spell of literary imitation. We cannot stress too emphatically the dominance which Homer exercised over his disciple Virgil's creative imagination. The life of Virgil which stems from Suetonius states that the poet regarded his work as a counterpart to both Homeric poems, and almost every major episode in the Aeneid is skilfully linked with some comparable incident in the Iliad or in the Odyssey.

In his close patterning of the climax of the Aeneid on the confrontation between Achilles and Hector in the Iliad, Virgil builds into the characterisation of Aeneas and Turnus a sustained irony. As the plot of the second half of the Aeneid unfolds, it becomes clear that Trojan Aeneas is to play in Latium the victor's role that Achilles played at Troy, while Turnus is cast as a second Hector, the protagonist who must die. Young Pallas, son of king Evander of Pallanteum, is a second Patroclus, whose death at the hands of
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Hector in the *Iliad* had roused Achilles to abandon his sulking in his tent and to sally forth to slay Hector. The Virgilian irony lies in the fact that until the final stages of the epic, Turnus believes himself to be the second Achilles, the hero who will eliminate Aeneas, the second Hector, and thus crush the Trojans a second time. This Homeric patterning dominates Virgil’s artistic design. Turnus must die in the final duel of the *Aeneid* because Hector died in the duel in *Iliad* xxii, the classic example from antiquity of the creative imitation in which the imitator strives to outdo the model.

In Virgil’s duel a critical difference from the duel in Homer lies in the target of the crippling blow. Achilles chooses Hector’s jugular as the vulnerable spot, so that his spear strikes Hector above the corselet. But Aeneas in Virgil’s account wounds Turnus below the corselet, in the thigh. Whereas in Homer Hector is killed by this spear-thrust in the jugular, Turnus by contrast is not mortally wounded; Virgil deliberately makes him beg for mercy, but the plea is rejected, and he is dispatched by Aeneas’ sword.

This, then, is the focus of the final scene. Turnus as grovelling suppliant (*humilis*) makes a plea on behalf of his old father Daunus. ‘Exploit your victory’ he says to Aeneas ‘but if any thought for my poor father can touch your heart, I beg you as one who had just such a father in Anchises: Take pity on Daunus’ old age, and restore me to my kin, or if you prefer, my corpse robbed of life. You are the conqueror. The Italians have witnessed me the vanquished holding out my hands to you. Lavinia is yours as wife. Let not hatred make you take this further.’ Here is a most important change from Homer; Hector can beg Achilles for the return of his corpse to Troy for a ransom, but he knows that it is futile, not to say dishonourable, to beg for his life. Such a plea would have departed from the code of the heroic warrior, and indeed Achilles at this point is unwilling to promise even the restoration of Hector’s corpse. ‘You thought you were safe’ he says to the prostrate Hector ‘when you stripped the body of Patroclus, but now while Patroclus receives burial, the dogs and birds will have you.’ But the Roman code of magnanimity to the prostrate foe allows Turnus to beg for what Hector would never have dreamt of asking, and Aeneas is half-persuaded to show clemency. ‘He held fast, a fierce figure in his armour, eyes darting, and he stayed his right hand. Each moment he hesitated the more, and Turnus’ words began to sway him ...’. But then the baldric of Pallas which Turnus sported on his shoulder caught Aeneas’ eye:—

When Aeneas with his eyes took in these spoils, the remembrance of his savage grief, he was filled with fury, and awe-inspiring in his anger he said: ‘Are you, clad as you are in the spoils of my dear ones, to escape from me here? It is Pallas who with this blow dispatches you, Pallas who exacts punishment from your crime-steeped blood’.
The repetition of Pallas’ name makes the point vehemently. Turnus had to die because Pallas died, just as Hector died because Patroclus died. Though Virgil throughout this episode makes minor changes from the pattern of events in the Iliad, the retention of the basic outline is never in question. Turnus dies because in the Homeric architecture of the Aeneid, Turnus has to play Hector as Pallas has to play Patroclus.

But if the literary patterning from Homer is so decisive, why does Virgil end his epic there and then? In the Iliad, the action does not end with the death of Hector. The desecration of the corpse by Achilles’ gleeful companions follows, and then the lifeless body is dragged round the whole of Troy to be witnessed by the Trojans. But subsequently, after the funeral-games in honour of Patroclus, king Priam ventures alone and unarmed into the Greek camp to beg Achilles for his son’s body. Achilles at last relents, and releases the body, thus permitting the epic to end on a high note of magnanimity. Should Virgil not have sought a similarly consoling conclusion?

It has to be emphasised why this would have been wholly inappropriate in the civilised Roman epic. All that happened in the Iliad after the slaughter of Hector — the dragging of the corpse by the heels round the city-wall, the intention to expose it to the dogs and the birds, even though followed by the final magnanimous relenting of Achilles — was unthinkable in the context of an Augustan epic. Even the slaughter of the prostrate foe, as we have seen, would have made Virgil’s contemporaries wince; to have outraged the corpse and to have refused to relinquish it for burial would have been inconceivable. There is a well-known analogue in the pages of Virgil’s contemporary, the historian Livy when he describes a duel between the Roman hero T. Manlius Torquatus and a giant Gaul in 361 BC. We happen to have the earlier account of this duel which Livy followed; it states that after Manlius had slain the Gaul, he cut off the corpse’s head and removed his necklace as the prize of victory. But Livy, reflecting the civilised standards of his age, leaves the Gaul’s head in place; ‘he robbed the corpse of the necklace alone, and harmed it in no other way.’ Similarly the Homeric ending was not an option for Virgil; he could not have allowed his Roman hero to contemplate either the barbaric behaviour of Achilles or the magnanimity which followed it. It would have been wholly superfluous to append the restoration of the body.

My suggestion is, then, that analysis of the psychology of the poet offers us three different considerations which impelled Virgil to end his epic in an abrupt and bloodthirsty way. Turnus has to die for a combination of philosophical, historical, and literary reasons. He has to die in a duel predominantly for literary reasons, to enact the role of a Hector. He has to die as a suppliant for a philosophical reason, to demonstrate that not even the
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archetypal Roman can attain moral perfection. The epic must end abruptly with the death, partly because the aftermath of the concession of the body could be taken for granted, but more importantly because for Virgil a concluding death is of huge symbolic significance, suggestive of the tragic conviction that death is the inevitable precursor of political and social progress.

Virgil’s ending never became prescriptive; epic turned more and more in the direction of romance. Not the least bizarre outcome, however, is the tribute which Ariosto pays to the Roman poet when he brings to a close his epic poem about Roland, the Orlando Furioso. After a plot of bewildering complexity, the epic abruptly ends when Ruggiero, king of Reggio and the descendant of Hector, dispatches the African king Rodomonte: the marriage between Ruggiero and Bradamante is left to the reader’s imagination. In this sense Ariosto believed, as Gavin Douglas believed, that the happy ending later demanded by Dryden and Addison would be a fifth wheel to the cart.

University of Glasgow