I have been arguing that *The Tempest* is not a transcendent, indifferent text and that Shakespeare was not an apologist for monarchy. There are many reasons that assumptions other than these have often governed readings of this play and other Shakespeare plays. The explanation that receives the most emphasis in this study centers around the matter of style. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the approved manner of address for both high literature and high politics was a style characterized by an indirection that only a practiced skill in rhetoric could produce. In this culture, skill in rhetoric could purchase not only safety, but respect, authority, and power. Thus such skill was as useful to writers engaged in oppositional politics as to those who were apologists for the established authority. As is true of all situated discourse, the position any of these writers assumed within a particular political controversy cannot be fully appreciated by later readers unless a text has been sufficiently historicized. Hence, it has been easy for readers who would emphasize the “transcendent” Shakespeare to misrecognize the passion for resistance that Shakespeare exhibited in many plays and throughout his career, but that perhaps appears nowhere more cunningly than in *The Tempest*.

II

Because *The Tempest* was Shakespeare’s last play before he left London, it has always occupied a special place in the canon, one made all the more secure by the feeling, shared by many, that the play has an autobiographical dimension. Shakespeare’s choice to imitate Virgil in it also has relevance to this issue.
For the Renaissance poet, it was always true that imitation of Virgil was a way to claim one’s place in the company of the great poets. There is nothing to belie the assumption that Shakespeare would have understood his own imitative act, as he left London, as an opportunity to identify the place he saw himself as having acquired, through stagecraft, in the ranks of England’s poets. One could even take this line of thought one step further, in the direction of a Bloomian hypothesis, and see *The Tempest* as Shakespeare asserting himself over the poet whom he had confronted and rewritten almost obsessively throughout his career; even in *The Comedy of Errors* he modeled on Virgil.

Given the public meanings of *The Tempest*, along with the challenge of trying to assess the Virgilian impact on it, it is especially interesting to turn to the epilogue, and to what may be described as one of the most private moments in the entire work—the moment when Prospero steps forward and sues the audience for its applause and also, it seems, for prayers for forgiveness:

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Now my charms are all o’er thrown
And what strength I have’s mine own
Which is most faint. . . .

    Now I want
Spirits to enforce, Art to enchant;
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be reliev’d by prayer,
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon’d be,
Let your indulgence set me free.
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Ten of Shakespeare’s plays end with epilogues. There are similarities among them. They typically express, in one way or another, the hope that the play has pleased the audience, and they ask for applause. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* we hear: “If we shadows have offended, / Think but this and all is mended. . . . Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin will restore amends.” In *As You Like It*, Rosalind urges the audience to “like as much of this play as please you.” In *All’s Well*, the king assures the audience that the play is “well ended” and instructs
them, "That you express content / Your gentle hands lend us and take our hearts." Sometimes Shakespeare expresses more diffidence than others, as for example in the epilogue to Henry V: "Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen, / Our bending author hath pursu'd the story."

As a group, the epilogues seem similar, and yet each is tailored to fit the particular play that it ends. The epilogue to Henry V speaks about the death of this Henry and the coming to rule of the child, Henry VI. In 2 Henry IV, the epilogue has the actor speak of having acted earlier in a play that displeased the audience. In Troilus and Cressida, Pandarus talks about the diseases in himself and in the audience. In Pericles, Gower summarizes and moralizes about the story. In the epilogue to The Tempest, Shakespeare includes the standard request for applause, but he also writes more particularly.

One of the striking features of the epilogue is its capacity to suggest that different voices are speaking at the same time, a characteristic also of numerous other passages in this play. Some of the voices here, as earlier, are political. Prospero speaks as the duke on his way back to Naples, who, having given up his magic, is thinking about his new frailty ("what strength I have's mine own") and considering his need for mercy, an important reconceptualization of the meum et tuum formula that is at the center of the king-subject relationship. But because the epilogue moves away from the action of the play, Prospero also speaks as an actor, one who has played the part of a ruler but who now, about to finish that part, suddenly stands as a subject—and, at a court performance, as a subject before his own king. Then, too, Prospero is the dramatist himself, who has used his art to enchant but must now ask for approval, and then for forgiveness. In The Tempest Shakespeare has exercised fully his prerogative as public poet, and the ending would seem to ask that no one judge his use of this authority harshly.

These various resonances in the epilogue work simultaneously and so share in the multivocality of the play as a whole. Nevertheless, it is possible, especially in combination with the potential for an autobiographical reading, to wonder whether the personal voice that Shakespeare has allowed to emerge in The Tempest may, in
part, also be contrived—that is, part of the imitation of Virgil. Or, as Frank Kermode remarks in considering the possibility of seeing in the play a personal allegory, such a reading "is almost inevitable; why should it not attach itself to Shakespeare as it did to Homer, Virgil, and Ovid?"

What Kermode is referring to are those lines of the ancient poets which have been understood as comments on their art. Of these, Ovid's remarks at the end of the Metamorphoses are among those which represent the voice of the poet directly. They are also among the most self-congratulatory: "Let comme that fatall howre / Which (saving of this brittle flesh) hath over mee no powre. . . . For looke how farre so ever / The Romane Empyre by the ryght of conquest shall extend, / So farre shall all folke reade this work. And tyme without all end / (If Poets as by prophesie about the truth may ame) / My lyfe shall everlastingly bee lengthened still by fame." In contrast, Virgil adopts a self-deprecatory tone. Like the speaker of Shakespeare's epilogue in Henry V, the narrator in the Georgics declares his modest aims: "Not mine the wish to embrace all the theme within my verse, not though I had a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths, and a voice of iron" ("non ego cuncta meis amplecti versibus opto, / non mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum, / ferrea vox," 2.42-44).

Although in this case Virgil speaks through a general narrator, in other instances he chooses a more specific character. One example occurs in Eclogue 9, where the poet-shepherd Lycidas remarks on his unworthiness as a poet: "Me, too, the Pierian maids have made a poet; I, too, have songs; me also the shepherds call a bard, but I trust them not. For as yet, methinks, I sing nothing worthy of a Varius or a Cinna, but cackle as a goose among melodious swans" ("et me fecere poetam / Pierides, sunt et mihi carmina, me quoque dicunt / vatem pastores; sed non ego credulus illis. / nam neque adhuc Vario videor nec dicere Cinna / digna, sed argutos inter strepere anser olores," 9.32-36). The self-deprecatory tone that characterizes this statement is regularly associated with Virgil. Robert Durling shows that it was a stance imitated by other poets, including Tasso, and David Coldwell suggests that Gavin Douglas was also imitating Virgil when he wrote, in his first and ninth pro-
logues to his translation of the *Aeneid*, of his failure to match the artistry of the master, Virgil. There he begs forgiveness of God, and of Virgil too:

> Lat all my faltis with this offens pass by.
> Thou prync of poetis, I the mercy cry,
> I meyn thou Kyng of Kyngis, Lord Etern
> Thou be my muse, my gydar and alnd stern,
> Remittyng my trespass and every myss . . .
> Forgif me, Virgill, gif I thee offend.
> Pardon thy scolar, suffer hym to ryme
> Sen thou was bot ane mortal man sum tyme.

(Prol. i.45–55, 472–74)

Whatever other readings or resonances we may find in the epilogue to *The Tempest*, it is to this long and rather disparate tradition wherein the poet humbles himself before his audience that it ultimately belongs. Writing after and alongside the diffident Virgil, Shakespeare furnished an epilogue that declares his fallibility and inadequacy. It is the comeliest of departures and the surest of rhetorical gestures. The poet who has imitated Virgil and has, in the same work, intervened in national politics ends his play gracefully and yet with authority. The closing language, however humble, invokes the authority of Virgil, which Shakespeare has made his own.