

The Metamorphosis of the Olympians: Renewal and Re-creation in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*

It has already been argued that Valerius Flaccus' epic poem *Argonautica* develops a historical narrative about the emperor Vespasian and his program to restore tradition and start fresh after the disastrous Year of the Four Emperors (Stover 2012). This paper will explore this theme based on Valerius' use of the gods in his epic, particularly Jupiter and Juno, in the context of their previous identities in Ovid and Virgil. Both regal deities possess a long history in Latin epic by the time of Valerius Flaccus, a history which is now well understood (Feeney 1991). This paper argues that in the *Argonautica*, the poet skillfully imitates past interpretations of Jupiter and Juno for the purpose of rebranding them to strengthen his political narrative of renewal in Vespasianic Rome.

First, Jupiter's character is largely consistent with past iterations, but Valerius uses Ovidian references to portray a ruler who is focused on renewal and new beginnings. In Book I, Jupiter takes the role of an all-seeing prophetic king, much like Virgil's Jupiter. As Randall Ganiban points out, however, while Virgil's Jupiter prophesies an optimistic future leading to Rome's *imperium sine fine*, Valerius' Jupiter prophesies a future of tension, in which empires end before they rise and in which humanity's global expansion increases the potential for suffering (Ganiban 2014). While this Jupiter is more inclined to allow human suffering, he also advocates for a new future for mankind, much in the way that Ovid's Jupiter does after the flood narrative in the *Metamorphoses*. In this way, Valerius is commenting on how the reign of Vespasian is starting afresh after the pattern of Ovid's second creation of man.

Second, Valerius reinforces the concept of new beginnings with his portrayal of Juno. From the start of the poem, Juno is a driving force for the voyage of the *Argo*, and her advocacy

immediately contrasts with her hostile opposition to the hero's journey in the *Aeneid*. In addition, Valerius's Juno is notably more constructive than the destructive Juno of Virgil, as she literally helps construct the Argo along with Minerva. Valerius underscores the intertextual development of Juno's character through multiple references to the *Aeneid* in Juno's dialogue, and her speech uses strikingly Ovidian phrases that evoke notions of change and transformation. The character of Juno thus confirms the political metaphor that under Vespasian, Rome is no longer subject to authority that is sinister and destructive, but that his reign offers possibilities of political renewal and cooperation.

Finally, the novelty of Vespasian's regime, and his displacement of old power structures, becomes most clear in how Valerius plays on Ovid's character of Sol. Scholarship has generally established that the character of Sol in the *Argonautica* is a highly political character who represents political anxieties among Roman elites in Vespasian's reign (Zissos 2003, Stover 2016). In addition to this role of Sol, this paper will also argue that the political nature of Sol in the epic must be understood in light of Ovid's Sol, as portrayed in the Phaethon segment of the *Metamorphoses*. While Ovid's Sol has an irreplaceable role in the pantheon and couches himself as Jupiter's equal, in the *Argonautica*, Sol is no longer relevant to the Olympian regime. The paper argues that this "metamorphosis" of power between Sol and Jupiter further demonstrates that the Olympians in Valerius Flaccus have transcended their former boundaries, defeating the Titanic chaos of Rome's past and heralding in a new Vespasianic regime.

Works Cited

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