

Masking Epic: Bacchic Imagery in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*

The *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus begins with the promise of immortality: *fatidicamque ratem...quae/...flammifero tandem consedit Olympo* (*Argo*.1.2-5). By opening the seas, the Argo and its crew will achieve star status, a place among the gods and in the epic canon. In the face of this challenge, Jupiter's exhortation to his sons – Hercules, Castor, and Pollux – reinforces the centrality of *labor* to the pursuit of glory: *tendite in astra, viri.../...sic ecce meus, sic orbe peracto/ Liber et expertus remeavit Apollo* (*Argo*.1.563-7). As a demigod, Bacchus, in particular, represents a specific type of heroic profile: epic achievements that win everlasting fame, a model neatly tailored to the Argonauts' self-perception and their author's ambitions to literary immortality. Bacchus also, however, brings with him the potential to divert the Argonauts' storyline away from its epic triumph. Through a brief survey of Bacchus' role in the *Argonautica*, this paper explores Valerius' thematic use of Bacchic images to illustrate the tragic potential inherent in the Argonauts' epic journey to the East.

For the crew, Bacchus functions as a military exemplar, returning in triumph from the conquest of the East (*Argo*.1.563-7, 3.538-40, 6.137-40); Jason himself compares his mission to Bacchus' (*Argo*.5.495-7). As a demigod who wins apotheosis through a civilizing journey, Bacchus represents the path to epic triumph that the Argonauts hope to follow. The Argonauts see only his militaristic aspect, without taking into account the alternative blueprint he also represents, and their narrator would also prefer to stay on a martial track. At the same time, however, Bacchus represents the tragic madness that strikes the Lemnian women and Medea, a promise of the very un-epic future that awaits the poem's protagonists (*Argo*.7.301-6, 8.446-50). In the context of the Argonauts' pursuit of an epic narrative, Bacchus' dual nature has far-reaching consequences.

Bacchus' role in the *Argonautica* draws significant impetus from the *Aeneid*, in which the god provides a vehicle for the poem's resonance with the contemporary world. As Mac Góráin (2014: 144) suggests, Vergil uses Dionysiac myth to think about Roman civil wars, characterizing the *furor* of war as a type of Bacchic madness. On both the political and literary levels, the figure of Bacchus models the change, or possibility of change, in individuals and narrative: his story is one of mistaken identity and misguided reaction. Along similar lines, Gildenhard and Zissos (1999: 162-4) describe how tragic characters in the *Metamorphoses* bring their own generic ethos with them into Ovid's epic. In the *Argonautica*, I suggest, Bacchus provides a point of reference for the interactions of different generic frameworks.

Bacchus' narrative impetus is multidirectional, signaling shifts between the two genres he represents. In the Lemnian episode, for example, he figures not only the tragic, intrafamilial violence of the Lemnian women, but also the reappearance of heroism in a disguise both literal and literary. To rescue her father Thoas, Hypsipyle dresses him as a cult statue of the god and smuggles him out of the massacre, a deed worthy, Valerius says, of everlasting fame (*Argo.2.242-6*). Epic *pietas* emerges from a tragic wasteland and, no less surprising, in female form. As the Argonauts continue their voyage, however, Bacchus' repeated appearances indicate a shift in the other direction, hinting that epic conquest may not be all that awaits them. Valerius' *excursus* on Lampsacus and Callichorus (*Argo.2.621-5*, *5.75-81*, respectively) suggest that the crew's voyage to unknown lands is simultaneously a journey towards an unexpected literary future. The former raises the possibility that the Argonauts, as well as their opponents, are subject to *Phrygius furor*, while the latter hints at the tragic madness that follows Bacchus' epic conquests.

Bacchus' presence in the text signals the presence of unseen narrative possibilities: what you see (or what you think you see) is not necessarily what you are going to get. Epic conquest may turn to tragic, civil violence, and heroic deeds may emerge from the depths of female madness. As the god of tragedy, Bacchus brings with him an element of disguise, of hidden identities. Valerius exploits this quality to draw a sharp contrast between the god's appearance in different spheres, suggesting that the layered view of a particular place or event reflects the characters' limited ability to perceive more than one generic framework at a time. Bacchus figures the poet's experience of the disjuncture between the epic triumph he would like to sing, and the inevitable turn to tragedy encoded in his literary models.

Bibliography

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