

Quaenam ista lues?: The Theme of Sickness in Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica

In Book 6 of the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius investigates connections between volcanic activity, earthquakes, winds, and lightning bolts; Philip Hardie (Hardie 1986) has famously shown the ways in which Vergil draws on the structures and associations of this book, in his *Aeneid*. Valerius Flaccus also draws on the themes from *DRN* 6 and on Vergil's "re-mythologized" adaptation to create an inter- and intratextual network of images and meaning within his *Argonautica*. I propose to investigate Valerius' use of one additional theme from *DRN* 6 that seemingly did not make it into Vergil's implementation of the system (at least not on Hardie's reading): the theme of fever and disease, which for Lucretius serves as a human parallel for volcanic activity (Garani 2007).

Although largely unremarked except as discrete episodes, both literal and metaphorical disease are prevalent in Valerius' epic. Actual physical illness is largely limited to the plague which strikes down the Argonauts Tiphys and Idmon at the headwaters of the Acheron, among the Mariandynoi (*Arg.* 4.594–8, 5.1–31), and to a plague that initially afflicts the Trojans after Laomedon's defrauding of Neptune (2.475–6), but a spiritual malaise afflicts the Argonauts *en masse* after the accidental nighttime slaughter at Cyzicus (*aegra mens*, 3.365; *lues*, 3.373), and Medea is of course plagued by love-sickness throughout the second half (e.g., *pestem latentem*, 7.252). Furthermore, terms like *lues* and *pestis* are frequently used of figures that exist fully or partially within Valerius' network of volcanic and seismic imagery (e.g., the Harpies are *luem* at 4.432 etc, while the cosmos-shaking sea-serpent that harries Troy is *pestis* at 2.498), helping to underscore the Lucretian connection between the two, and potentially bringing under consideration other passages that integrate the language of disease.

In addition, recognition that Valerius is leveraging this Lucretian system sheds light on an odd phrase that has long been dismissed or awkwardly explained by scholars, namely the image of Typhoeus *sacras revomentem pectore flammis* (2.25) as he flees from the gods. Attempts to justify the adjective *sacras* have ranged from Mozley's translation "accursed" to Poortvliet's rationale that "the flames are *sacrae* because they have been brought about by Jupiter's thunderbolt" (Poortvliet 1991: 39); but we can now offer the alternative that the phrase alludes to *sacer ignis*, one Lucretian term for the disease which he treats in *DRN* 6 (Commager 2007, Fowler 2007), and entirely fitting given that Typhoeus is himself one of the mainstays of the volcanic system in Valerius.

Where the remainder of the Lucretian themes that Valerius imports are largely concerned with the geological, cosmological, and meteorological, the recognition that Valerius' numerous fevers, plagues, and various sickness-related images are also bound up in this system opens a new dimension that is equally concerned with the eschatological and ontological. Moreover, in keeping with Valerius' largely Stoic fashioning of his cosmos, his engagement with Lucretius' analogy between fiery human sickness and fiery terrestrial volcanism helps to reaffirm that humans are a microcosm of the macrocosmic system.

Bibliography

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