

Claiming Aeneas: Julio-Claudian echoes in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*

At the opening of Book 4 of Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, we are met, after a series of battles and adventures, with a domestic squabble among the gods. Juno, we find, has just orchestrated the rape of Hylas, her hated stepson Hercules' beloved companion, at the hands of a local nymph, causing Hercules to abandon the Argonauts' expedition in search of his friend. Jupiter, however, both objects to this flagrant mistreatment of his own son, and, furthermore, protests her move on literary grounds: '*sic Iuno ducem fovet anxia curis/ Aesonium, sic arma viro sociosque ministrat?*' (VF. 4.7-8). Jupiter, clearly not impressed with the epic he's reading, questions Juno's poetic interference: what kind of *Aeneid* is this, if we've just lost epic's *ur-vir*? But we may equally ask Jupiter's question of Valerius' poem: what kind of *Aeneid*, what kind of ideological epic will come out of the Flavian rise to power? This paper proposes to use the episode of Hercules' disappearance as a case study for Valerius' engagement with the ideological rhetoric of the *Aeneid* through the cautionary lens of the *Bellum Civile*. By examining echoes of such loaded terms as *magnanimus* and the collocation *arma vir* in the Argonauts' debate over their (literary and physical) voyage, it suggests that Valerius enacts the constructive and destructive potential of such language for its audience.

I begin by surveying the role of Valerius' Hercules as the representative of the epic tradition within the *Argonautica*. Assigned Aeneas' epithet *magnanimus* in the first book, he then acts to reinforce a properly epic (cf. Hinds 2000: 221-7 on epic's martial ideal) standard of behavior among his more junior companions: in Book 2, for example, he recalls the Argonauts—currently dallying with the Lemnian women—to their mission, reassembling the *arma viros* of the voyage (VF. 2.392). With his disappearance in Book 3, however, the Argonauts lose their ethical guide. In the debate that follows (VF. 3.611-714, on which my analysis focuses) two

sides emerge: Telamon argues that they should be loyal to their lost companion and await his return, while Meleager argues that the crew should continue without the man himself, but in the spirit of his quest for heroic *labor*. Both Telamon and Meleager claim distinctly Aeneas-like attributes: Telamon is *pious*, while Meleager is described as *magnanimus*. Both, too, employ Vergilian language to make their case. Meleager asserts that others among the crew have equal *robur* to Hercules—a word used for Hercules’ club both at *Aen.* 8.221 and VF. 1.634 (cf. Stover 2012: 185), while Telamon swears an oath on the spear of great-souled (*magnanimi*) Didymaon, warning that the crew will soon look in vain for Hercules’ *arma viri*. The moral terminology of the *Aeneid* splits down the middle, as both sides seek to use it for their own ends.

This instability is further complicated by the lurking presence of the *Bellum Civile*. Substituting *bella...canimus* for Vergil’s *arma virumque cano* (Sklenář 2011: 318-20), Lucan uses *magnanimus* for only a handful of characters: Brutus; Vulteius; Hercules; Pompey (*post mortem*); and Tullus, a follower of Cato. All are or become figures of the past, representatives of a Republican heroism no longer resonant or relevant in the Neronian world. For Valerius’ Flavian speakers, then, the re-use of such language to achieve forward progress raises the question of whether the story Meleager tells will be the heroic *arma virumque* of the epic tradition, or the *vana lingua* (VF. 3.632) of the defeated past.

What then, will this epic turn out to be, when the rhetoric of the Augustan age divides as readily as it unifies? The interaction between Jupiter and Juno embodies the very question that Valerius himself is asking: what kind of epic will this *Argonautica*, and this new dynasty, achieve? Valerius offers us one further twist. As Meleager makes his case, he closely echoes the language and tone of the tribune Laelius in *Bellum Civile* 1, pledging to follow Caesar into civil war—even, he says, to the point of fixing his sword in his father’s throat (*BC.* 1.376-7:

condere...gladium). Valerius thus follows Lucan's lead in his exploration of the divisive potential of Vergil's language. By concentrating these terms in the debate over the Argonauts' future voyage, Valerius offers a profound meditation on the instability of Augustan rhetoric as a foundation on which to write the new Roman narrative.

Bibliography

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