

Pelias, Aetes, and Jupiter: The Paranoid Tyrant in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*

As Jason and the other Argonauts seek the golden fleece in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, they encounter numerous rulers, most of whom are tyrants (McGuire 1997). Accordingly, much scholarship (e.g., Timonen 1998, Bernstein 2014) has examined how Valerius Flaccus portrays his tyrant characters. Scholars have demonstrated that the poem's tyrants, especially Pelias and Aetes, display a number of stock traits, including a constant fear that they might be overthrown (McGuire 1997). Close analysis reveals, however, that this concern is not limited to mortals alone. This paper adds to the earlier scholarship on tyranny by showing that the Flavian poet, in referring to the myth of Thetis (V. Fl. 1.130-3), indicates that Jupiter, much like a human king, worries that he may lose his grip on power. But while the mortal tyrants' efforts to eliminate threats to their reigns fail and cause them additional pain, Jupiter manages to navigate the danger Thetis represents. I argue that Jupiter succeeds because he chooses to act openly and to marry Thetis off rather than kill her, whereas Pelias and Aetes attempt to murder a rival through stealth. I then conclude by analyzing the political message that this portrayal sends, noting that it paints a nuanced picture of elite life under the emperors, one which conforms neither to a completely optimistic nor pessimistic worldview.

Valerius Flaccus demonstrates that both Pelias and Aetes fear that Jason will cause their downfall, and with good reason, since each king had received an ominous oracle (1.27-8; 5.528) that he had no reason to doubt (Manuwald 2013). They therefore adopt a similar strategy to prevent their own ruin, duplicitously ordering Jason to perform tasks that they believe will kill him (1.59-63; 7.58-77). Their paranoid plots, however, not only fail to destroy the Thessalian hero, but actively harm the tyrant himself. Pelias' scheming leads Jason to persuade the prince

Acastus to join the expedition (1.153-5), causing the tyrant great distress (1.709-25), while fear that Jason will not survive Aeetes' task prompts Medea to betray her father and aid the Greek hero (7.307-8). These episodes demonstrate that even if a king has legitimate reasons to be afraid, deceptive and murderous plots are ultimately unhelpful.

The paintings on the Argo's hull (1.131-3), in alluding to Ovid's account (*Met.* 11.221-65) of the nymph Thetis (Zissos 2008), indicate that Jupiter, too, received an oracle portending his downfall, specifically if Thetis bore a son from him. But unlike his mortal counterparts, Jupiter did not react by surreptitiously working to kill Thetis, instead openly ordering the human Peleus to marry the nymph and thus dispel the threat to his reign (*Ov. Met.* 11. 227-8). His plan evidently worked, as his rule is firm throughout the *Argonautica*. Since Jupiter faced a similar challenge to the mortal tyrants, the fact that he succeeded where they failed is telling. Though the god certainly did coerce Thetis, he did not aim to kill her and did not proceed by stealth, and this pointed distinction likely explains why his plans did not backfire like those of his mortal counterparts.

The different outcomes experienced by Jupiter and the human kings can be read in multiple ways. In an optimistic reading, one might view Valerius Flaccus' Jupiter as a positive model of kingship, demonstrating that if the emperors wish to remain in power, they should interact with the Roman elite mercifully and honestly. At the same time, the fact that even the overwhelmingly powerful Jupiter is shown to suffer from the tyrant's characteristic fear indicates that said fear was an inevitable, and dangerous, quality of kingship. Similarly, while Jupiter did not kill Thetis, the poet implies that she did not consent to his plans (*V. Fl.* 1.133), suggesting that even a "merciful" king will still abuse the elites who catch his attention. In leaving both readings open, Valerius Flaccus produces a pluralistic effect that casts monarchy in a dim, but

not completely dark light. A king inevitably comes to fear and coerce his subjects, but poets like Valerius Flaccus can still hope to divert him in a less deadly direction.

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