CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NA VIGATING POWER:

VALERIUS FLACCUS’ ARGONAUTICA

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Introduction

A cursory examination suffices to grasp the extent to which Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* is embedded in a specific culture and historical moment. As numerous critics have pointed out, the world in which the Thessalian hero Jason and his fellow Minyae move has been thoroughly “Romanized.” Despite the intrinsically Greek background of the myth and the use of Apollonius Rhodius as principal narrative model, Valerius’ poem manifests a preoccupation with Roman culture and history. In the first book, for example, the Argonauts’ nautical exploits are implausibly likened to those of Vespasian during Claudius’ British expedition (1.7–9), Jupiter is made to predict a succession of world empires that will culminate in Rome (542–60), and victorious Roman generals win the eternal peace of Elysium (835–7; discussed below); elsewhere references to Roman affairs, practices and institutions abound. Equally striking is the tendency anachronistically to impose

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1 For the very different socio-cultural milieux in which Apollonius and Valerius were writing, see Alfonsi (1970) 117–32; Serpa (1979) 79–88. On Valerius’ frequent alteration of the myth to create links to the Roman world, see Summers (1894) 56–7; Mozley (1934) xi–xiii; Bardon (1940) 289–303; Kröner (1968) 733–54; Pollini (1984) 51–61; Boyle (1991) 272–5. As Schetter (1960) 125 notes, this aspect of Valerius’ narrative distinguishes his approach from that of his contemporary Statius, who shuns references to contemporary and more remote Roman history. For Valerius’ “Romanizing” depiction of individual characters, see below and, more generally, Hershkowitz (1998b) 127–50.

2 Particularly noteworthy are 1.12–4 (Flavian conquest of Jerusalem); 1.682–5 (rites to avert drought in Calabria); 2.245–6 (the *Fasti*, or lists of Roman magistrates); 2.304–5 (the grove of Egeria); 2.619–20 (the god Janus); 3.417–58 (a Roman purification ceremony); 4.507–9 (the eruption of Vesuvius; cf. 3.208–9); 5.251–2 (an evocation of the cry of a Roman general in the grove of Mars when war is declared); 6.55–6 (the *legio fulminata*; see Otte (1992) 126–7); 6.402–6 (Roman civil war, probably that of 69 CE; see Preiswerk (1934) 440–1; Ussani (1955) 52–3; Strand (1972) 25); 6.410–1 (shipwrecks on the coasts of Latium); 7.83–6 (Tyrrhenian merchants); 7.635–6 (the festival of Bellona); 8.243–6 (a Roman wedding custom). More diffuse Romanizing touches have also been detected: e.g., Schubert (1991) 125–6 subtly observes that the heightened prominence of Jupiter,
Roman geographical conceptions and categories, often by substituting them for properly Greek references in the corresponding passages of Apollonius. In short, an impulse to “Romanize” pervades Valerius’ epic, often seeming stronger than the desire to evoke an “authentic” Greek legendary past.

Beyond the enumeration of such unambiguous manifestations of Romanitas, scholars have sought to identify the political perspective of the poem. This has for the most part involved associating narrative contents with contemporary figures and events. Preiswerk, for example, reads book 1 as a justification for the expedition of Petillius Cerialis to Britain in 71 CE. Arcellaschi sees the epic as justifying Titus’ policies in the east. Otte, Toohey and Taylor read the poem variously as sustained political allegory, which is—at least initially—pro-Flavian in orientation. Such readings depend upon elaborate and sustained symbolic

Juno and Minerva, who comprise the so-called Capitoline Triad, constitutes a partial intrusion of Roman theologia civilis into the theologia fabulosa of epic. On the microcosmic level as well, there is as well a pervasive anachronistic cultural “overlay,” though that is normative for Roman epic. Early examples include a favorable omen appearing on the left at 1.156–7 (the Greeks regarded the right side as propitious); and Pelias referring to his penates (Roman protective household deities) at 1.721.

4 Such elaborate allegorizing is to be distinguished from the more restrained analysis of critics like Summers and Burck, who detect echoes of historical figures and situations in passages such as Pelias’ scheming against Jason (see below, n. 19) without arguing for sustained networks of allusion.
5 Preiswerk (1934) 435. This interpretation, which is but a small part of Preiswerk’s suggestive analysis, draws upon Bernays (1861) 50–1.
7 Otte (1992) 11–2 sees the poem’s presentation of the passage of humanity to a new (and better) age as a broad allegory for “the transition from the disasters of Nero and the civil war of 69 to the promise of peace and stability under Vespasian.” He later argues (98) that Bacchus provides a paradigm for imperial apotheosis, and suggests that the mention of Bacchus’ eastern conquests at 5.75–80 echo the brief account of Titus’ conquest of Jerusalem at 1.12–14. Toohey (1993) 191 argues that Jason stands as a “mythic, heroic prototype for the Roman emperor and his empire”—a poor choice, as it turns out, because “Jason was too ambiguous a hero for such an analogic function.” Toohey reads Jason as a cipher for Vespasian in the early narrative (as the proem might suggest; but cf. below, n. 9) and Domitian in the second half. Much is made of Minerva’s prominence in the poem, which is explained as arising from Domitian’s well-known enthusiasm for that goddess (nee sua Crethiden latuit dea, 6.609 is adduced as affirming the analogy Jason/Domitian, linking the Colchian wars in book 6 with Domitian’s eastern campaigns). Taylor (1994) 212–35 proposes an elaborate political allegory, in which the mythical end of the Golden Age is mapped onto the historical collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the rise of the Flavians. In this