WHEN THE ARGO MET THE ARGO:
POETIC DESTRUCTION IN VALERIUS’ ARGONAUTICA*

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Early in the first book of Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica, the poet dedicates twenty-eight lines to the construction and decoration of the Argo (V. Fl. 1.121–148). This was a topic that Apollonius Rhodius had eschewed as a hackneyed theme of song, although glimpses of the Argo’s construction are subsequently visible throughout the Hellenistic epic.¹ Valerius, however, not only chooses to tread this well-trodden ground but even calls attention to his belated rendition of the construction scene in several ways. Of these, the most pertinent to my argument here is the scene’s opening:

feruere cuncta virum coetu,
simul undique cernit
delatum nemus et docta resonare bipenni
litora. iam pinus gracili dissoluere lamna
Thespiaden iungisque latus lentoque sequaces
molliri uidet igne trabes remisque paratis
Pallada uelifero quaerentem bracchia malo.
constitit ut longo moles non perua ponto,
puppis et ut tenues subiere latentia cerae
lumina, picturae varios super addit honores. (V. Fl. 1.121–129)

There [Juno] sees all astir with the throng of men, and at the same moment the forest felled on every side and the shores ringing under the deft axe; already Thespian Argus is breaking apart pines with the thin saw, and the side is being joined and the planks are being softened into pliancy over a slow flame; the oars are ready, and Pallas is seeking a yard for the sail-bearing mast. When the ship stood firm in its huge bulk, impervious to long tracts of sea, and

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¹ See, e.g., Murray (2005), who reads the apparent præteritio as an actual polemic against earlier versions. Furthermore, recurring similes of ship-building (e.g., A. R. 1.1003–1010, 2.79–82) and allusions to the moment of construction (e.g., A. R. 1.526–527 and 721–724) suggest that the composition (and reading) of the epic progressively recreates the composition of the ship; this is not entirely dissimilar to the parallel that Valerius draws between the construction of the ship and the construction of the poem.
when fine wax had filled the lurking holes, s/he\(^2\) adds varied adornments of painting.

As Timothy Stover has recently argued, this passage overtly enacts Valerius’ own poetic construction of the *Argonautica*.\(^3\) Of course, metaphors of sea-faring as poetry are traditional, reaching at least as far back as Hesiod;\(^4\) what is new in Valerius’ realization of the metaphor and in Stover’s reading of it is the addition of what might be termed a Lucanean metaphor of destructive poetic deforestation, implying that earlier poetic versions of the Argo become the literal material, not just the literary material, used to build that poetic craft.\(^5\) The timber that Argus has broken apart to build the Argo becomes the timber of previous instantiations of the Argo,\(^6\) suggesting that destruction is an intrinsic part of Valerius’ creative process,\(^7\) especially since his work has already been fashioned by other craftsmen so many times in the past.

I find a disquieting echo of this construction later in book 1, when Valerius announces that Argus’ task aboard the Argo is to keep her from splitting apart at the seams:

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Arge, tuae tibi cura ratis, te moenia doctum
Thespia Palladio dant munere; sors tibi nequa
parte trahat tacitum puppis mare fissaque fluctu
uel pice uel molli conducere uulnera cera. (V. Fl. 1.477–480)
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To you, Argus, falls the care of your own vessel, you with the skill that Pallas has bestowed on you are the gift of the city of Thespiae; it is your lot to see that the ship on no side let in the stealthy water, and to seal with pitch or pliant wax the wounds cleft by the waves.

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\(^2\) While Mozley takes Argus as the subject of *addit* (1.129), there is in fact no grammatical reason to be certain of this, and contextually, arguments could be made for Argus, Juno, or Minerva; cf. Zissos (2008) 154.

\(^3\) Stover (2010).


\(^5\) This idea is strengthened when the personification of the Argo tells Jason that Juno has taken her from *fatidicis siluis* (V. Fl. 1.303). Not only does Valerius hint that the Argo’s prophetic prow possibly came from multiple trees, *siluis*, rather than a single oak, but there is also a pun inherent in *siluis*, which can signify literary material (*OLD s.v. silua 5b*). This pun is implicit in the actual construction scene, which does not use the word *silua* (although it does use the equally metapoetic *nemus*, 1.122), and explicit here in the Argo’s speech.

\(^6\) As Stover (2010) 645–646 points out, the word *dissoluere* (1.123) is unusual in its present context of breaking apart raw timber; *solo* and its compounds are usually applied to the breaking apart of whole ships. Thus, Stover says, “it is as if previous instantiations of Argo must first be ‘pulled apart’ in order to yield the material to (re)build the ship anew” (646).

\(^7\) The idea in itself is not unique to Valerius (cf. Masters [1992] 25–29); what is unique is his application of this to the Argo, which in turn is a stand-in for the poem as a whole.