CONFLATING FUNERALS: THE DEATHS OF IDMON AND TIPHYS IN VALERIUS’ ARGONAUTICA

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The second half of Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica opens with two deaths. At the end of the fourth book, following their successful passage through the Clashing Rocks, the Argonauts arrive in the kingdom of Lycus on the Black Sea coast. They are welcomed with open arms, but as the next day dawns, disaster strikes: the seer Idmon, and a little later the helmsman Tiphys as well, succumb to a deadly illness and are buried together on Jason’s orders (V. Fl. 5.1–62).

As may be expected, Valerius’ description of these two deaths on the shore is a reworking of Apollonius’ description of the same events (A. R. 2.815–863). But Valerius’ rewriting of his Argonautic predecessor is also heavily indebted to several Virgilian deaths and funerals, those of Palinurus and Misenus in particular. Virgil had been inspired by Homeric examples, such as the death and funeral of Elpenor, which also lies behind the death of Idmon as described by Apollonius. In their turn the Apollonian funerals, together with the Homeric ones, had served as a Greek source of inspiration for Virgil.¹

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¹ There are plenty of other deaths and funerals in Greek and Latin epic that may be taken into account in an analysis of this Valerian passage. A sample of these parallel funerals is briefly discussed in this note. The original great epic funeral, that of Patroclus in Homer’s Iliad, is present in the background, as is noted by Wijsman (1996) 19, Liberman (2002) 160–161 and Dräger (2003) 450. Liberman suggests that the mixing of the ashes of Idmon and Tiphys at the end of the passage may be inspired by Patroclus’ wish that Achilles’ ashes and his own be mixed together (Hom. Il. 23.83–84). Thus one may consider these allusions to Patroclus’ funeral a return to epic origins (compare Zissos [2002] 87–92), an Iliadic erasure of all of the intertextual mirroring and doubling discussed in this article. In terms of epic plot structure, the theme of funerals at the mid-way point of an epic or of an epic journey is paralleled in Lucan, Statius, and Silius. One may compare the loss of the “helmsman” Pompey in Lucan; the funereal stand-still during the epic games in the sixth book of the Thebaid; and finally Hannibal’s burying of the Romans in Punica 10, like Jason a stranger in a strange land (compare Spaltenstein [2004] 392–393). I thank those present at the Flavian conference in
It is my aim in this article to investigate Valerius’ poetic response to this epic tradition of nostos deaths and funerals in his description of the deaths and funerals of Idmon and Tiphys. I shall focus on Valerius’ intertextual engagement with Virgil and Apollonius in particular, and will situate my interpretation of this passage in the more general debate on Valerius’ intertextual technique. In this passage Valerius emerges both as a confident restructurer of, and a sophisticated commentator on, the epic tradition he has inherited. These two roles within the poetic tradition that Valerius creates for himself should not be considered separately—rather, they are closely connected.

1. Valerius Flaccus between “Roman” and “Argonautic” Epic

One of the most important topics in scholarship on Valerius’ Argonautica is the poem’s relationship to its two most important predecessors: Virgil’s Aeneid and Apollonius’ Argonautica. Generally speaking, two different views on Valerius’ intertextual self-positioning between his two most important sources of inspiration have emerged. On the one hand, Valerius has been viewed as an author confidently restructuring the tradition that he has inherited to suit his poetic needs. On the other hand, scholars have argued that the defining characteristic of Valerius’ intertextual technique is the constant undermining of a reader’s attempts to make final sense of the poet’s allusions to poetic predecessors, thereby emphasizing the infinite complexity of the epic tradition. Below follows a necessarily brief and perhaps somewhat generalizing outline of the two positions as they have taken shape in late twentieth century—predominantly Anglo-Saxon—Valerian scholarship. I should emphasize from the start that it is not my aim to challenge either of them, but rather to use them as complementary tools in my own analysis of this particular passage.²

The picture of Valerius as a confident poet, whose vision is firmly rooted in the grand structures of Latin epic, is most clearly articulated by Denis Feeney in the Valerian section of his Gods in Epic.³ As a representative

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² Unfortunately I have not been able to consult Traglia (1983) and Ferenczi (2007) on Valerius’ literary self-positioning in relation to Virgil and Apollonius. In addition to the works cited in the following footnotes, see Zissos (2002); Río Torres-Murciano (2005).