VALERIUS’ ARGONAUTICA AS AN IDEOLOGICAL EPIC OF THE FLAVIAN ERA

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1. The Ideological Dimension in Valerius

Despite the reluctance of earlier criticism on Valerius’ Argonautica to recognize any ideological dimension in the poem, Ruth Taylor’s study initiated a renewed interest in the ideological character of the epic.¹ Her approach focuses on a network of symbolisms and typologies read as mere reflections of the contemporary Flavian reality. Flavian epicists, according to Taylor,² assume, in their imitation of Virgil, the symbolic connection between historical reality and epic, as well the typological connection between its mythological characters and certain historical and contemporary figures.

Symbolism and typology, however, seem to be the outer symptoms of some inner, textual processes concerning both structural and actantial matters. Moreover, Taylor’s attempt for certain identifications (i.e., Hercules = Augustus, Jason = Vespasian) is not always consistent³ with the text since external prolepses foretell Jason’s failure to ensure the continuity of his gens, and, as a result, of his dynasty, a fact that differentiates and distances him from Vespasian and his offspring, as they are portrayed in the proem. In addition, the association of Hercules to Augustus seems rather difficult since Antony himself had claimed the demigod as his own ancestor.⁴

In place of symbolisms, therefore, a concrete definition of “ideological” would be more appropriate. In Authoritarian fictions, Susan Suleiman

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³ See also Conte (1994) 405, who observes that the link between Jason and Vespasian is not consistently sustained through the course of the poem.

⁴ Edwards (1999) 152 and n. 6, 158.
proposes the following definition: “A roman à thèse [an epic à thèse, in our case] is a work written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical or religious doctrine.” In other words the narrated story entails its own specific meaning and interpretation to which the reader is led by the narrative hypersystem of the text. The omniscient narrator dictates not only the story but its interpretation too, its meaning and the way to be read, the narrator “functions not only as ‘author’ but also as authority.”

In searching for the intended meaning of Valerius’ poem, the epic’s proem is instructive: deviating sensibly from Apollonius (A. R. 1.1–4), Valerius omits any mention of the Golden Fleece and presents as main purpose of the voyage the expansion of navigational frontiers, thus emphasizing the innovative role of the Argo, the first ship ever to sail (V. Fl. 1.1). Moreover, the dedication to Vespasian that follows the proem presents the emperor too as conqueror of the sea (1.7–8) who has surpassed his predecessors, the Julio-Claudians (1.8–9). It becomes obvious that Argo’s voyage as a parallel to Vespasian’s conquests denotes the analogy between the Argonautic expedition and Vespasian’s enterprise.

The alignment is further reinforced through the catasterism of the ship: the Argo will be transferred to the sky (1.4), as Darcy Krasne and Carey Seal have discussed in this volume, a fate to which Tiphys hints in the second book describing Argo’s course in accordance to the constellation of the Serpent that never sets (sed mihi dux, uetitis qui numquam conditus undis \/ axe nitet, Serpens, septenosque implicat ignes, “but my guide will be he that never hides beneath the forbidden waters as he shines about the pole, the Serpent that enfolds the seven stars,” 2.64–65); at the same time, the reader

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7 Taylor (1994) 216 underlines the significance of the first four lines of the epic that “offer us an authoritative and unique insight into the way in which the poet himself viewed its subject-matter.”
8 Cf. Feeney’s (1991) 331 comment that “the emphasis on the Argo as the world’s first ship is something of overpowering importance, crowding out even mention of the golden fleece from the proem.” See also extensively Seal in this volume, pp. 113–135; however, the ratis in Hypsipyle’s story (2.285) may refer to any floating object, from a raft to a ship (OLD s.v. ratis) as it is implied by Apollonius’ (λάρνακι δ’ ἐν κοίλῃ, “a hollow chest”, A. R. 1.622) or Statius’ account (curuo robore, “in curved timber,” Theb. 5.287). On the proem, see Stover (2012) 14–25.
9 See Hardie (1993) 84.