CHAPTER 7

War and Love in Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*

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Introduction

One of the most important literary features of Valerius Flaccus’ epic is the peculiar interaction between war and love. In this new Latin version of the saga, the two themes, which in Apollonius’ *Argonautica* are reciprocally exclusive, manage to co-exist and activate a dialectical relationship. Indeed, the Flavian poet largely draws upon the Homeric and Virgilian tradition in order to ‘rectify’ the anti-belligerent character of the Argonautic myth, as established by his Alexandrian exemplary-model. Therefore, war receives more exposure (though not always in canonical ways), often manifesting itself in unexpected forms, even in connection with love (e.g. Venus’ ‘war’ in Lemnos). This does not mean that the fundamental narrative outcomes are affected by war. Passionate love still remains the key factor in the plot, but it also undergoes a process of deconstruction. As a result of the intense manipulation of the human will (Medea’s) by an oppressive system of power (represented by Juno and Venus), love risks losing its autonomy as aesthetic category. Besides Medea’s tragic inner conflict, the text highlights the external causation of her passion, which will become the ‘unconventional weapon’ allowing Jason to achieve his goals.

By exploiting the archetypal character of the Argonautic myth, Valerius Flaccus reconstructs a belated background to his great epic models, thought of as ‘descendants’ of his (epigonic) poem, via a selection of topical features.¹ In this affectedly primeval context, where roles and hierarchies are still fluid and unstable,² war and love negotiate their respective domains and competences. The privileged place of war³ may be considered an indirect ‘post-modern’

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¹ This also brings about the revival of Homeric elements discarded by Virgil (e.g. the *teichoskopía*). See also Deremetz in this volume.
² Essays of cosmological poetry stand alongside digressions about ‘original wars’ (Gigantomachy and Centauromachy).
³ Buckley (2010) is an up-to-date evaluation of the *Kriegsthema* in Valerius’ poem, with particular reference to the Colchian war in Book 6: a war which oscillates between the two poles of *bellum civile* and *bellum externum* and aims to provide a (belated) background to the Homeric-Virgilian tradition.
response to Ovid’s provocatory rereading of the Homeric and Virgilian poems *sub specie amoris:* if ‘pure war-epic’ does not exist, the same is true (*a fortiori*) of ‘epic without war’.

However, Valerius’ aim is not to deny the force of love as a literary device altogether. At the core of the war narrative (Book 6), a decisive event takes place: Juno asks Venus and Cupid for help, because she knows that Medea’s magical power is the only way for Jason to accomplish his mission successfully and return home (6.427–76). The dramatic switch from ‘war’ to ‘love’ needs mediation, i.e. the entrance of a character like Medea, who works as the catalyst for this change. But, as we shall see, this is just one link (not even the first) in the long chain of world history, where war and love will repeatedly come face to face.

**War and Love between Asia and Europe**

The voyage of the first ship is meant to extend the boundaries of the known world, opening a new era. Being uncomfortable with the *otia* of Saturnus’ reign (1.500), Jupiter invites the most valiant men to emulate his own *virtus* in gaining supreme power and participate in a competition for glory.5

Recovering the Golden Fleece is Jason’s official task. However, according to Jupiter’s plan, the effective goal of the Argonautic expedition is to launch a historical process which will shift world supremacy from Asia to Greece (*accelerat sed summa dies Asiamque labantem | linquimus et poscunt iam me sua tempora Grai, ‘but now her last day is hastening on and we are leaving Asia tottering to her fall, while the Greeks now claim of me their time’, 1.542–3).6 Consequently, the voyage will also pave the way to war (*via facta per undas | perque hiemes, Bellona, tibi, ‘for you, Bellona, has a path been fashioned through the billows and through storms’, 1.545–6), as well as to love: the seduction and the abduction of a girl will be the starting point of an international feud culminating with the Trojan War (*propiorque ex virgine rapta | ille dolor, ‘the still closer pang

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5  1.563–7 (with Zissos (2008) 323–5). The king of the gods has to deal with some internal opposition to his ‘imperialistic’ plan (Sun: 1.503–27; Neptune: 4.118–30, but see also 1.642–50; Mars: 1.528–9; 5.624–48 etc.), but does not seem worried about that. On Jupiter’s prophecy and its intertextual implications, see Stover (2012a) 42–6.
6  Translations of Valerius’ *Argonautica* are adapted from Mozley (1934).