CHAPTER 9

Romanas veluti saevissima cum legiones Tisiphone regesque movet: Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica and the Flavian Era

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Introduction

The almost complete lack of evidence regarding Valerius’ life presents the greatest challenge to characterising the relationship of his Argonautica to the contemporary world. No definite statement can be made regarding the dates of the poem’s composition. Many scholars assume that Valerius likely began the poem not long after the Flavian victory in 70. Apparent emulation of episodes of the Argonautica by the other Flavian epicists, such as Statius’ Lemnian episode, suggests that Valerius’ work indeed appeared earlier than theirs.¹ Yet a simile mentioning the eruption of Vesuvius (Val. Fl. 4.507–11) indicates that composition of the poem must have continued at least through the summer of 79. Sometime before 94, Quintilian wrote his laconic obituary notice multum in Valerio Flacco nuper amisisimus (‘We recently lost a great deal in Valerius Flaccus’, Inst. 10.1.90), but nuper does not specify how ‘recent’ the poet’s death was for Quintilian. Discussion of the question now proceeds from Stover’s recent study, which makes a forceful argument that the Argonautica was mostly completed during the reign of Vespasian and that Quintilian’s nuper can indeed refer to a time as long as fifteen years before. The presence of the Vesuvius simile only proves that Valerius was still working on the poem in 79; it does not require us to accept that the poet had completed no more than the fourth book. Stover argues that Valerius could have added the simile to an epic otherwise mostly complete.²

The readings that I present in this brief survey do not require that the question of the poem’s dating be answered definitively. We cannot assume that each potential reflection of the contemporary world suggested by the text of Valerius’ poem is the result of a discrete and clearly identifiable authorial

¹ See Parkes and Augoustakis in this volume.
intention. Identifying such reflections is an act of subjective interpretation performed by the reader. The methodological assumptions that guide such identifications are similar in form to those used in the study of literary intertextuality.\(^3\) The Roman world in which Valerius composed his poem is now only available to us as the product of a severely limited set of textual and archaeological discourses. Therefore acts of interpretation linking the poem to its world also represent a form of intertextual analysis, of linking Valerius’ text to a series of verbal and material ‘texts’. As with the study of intertextuality, then, choosing where to draw the boundaries is a subjective consideration. My mode of interpretation has more in common with the paradigmatic approach exemplified by those readers for whom Valerius analyses the imperial system of power as a whole, rather than commenting only upon the individual political decisions of his own day.\(^4\) Though details of the relationship between the Roman elite and the emperor varied during the brief reign of Titus and the early years of Domitian’s reign, the major structures of power did not. Nor did memories of the recent civil war suddenly fade for the Roman aristocracy. Therefore while it would be welcome to know if Valerius died in 80 (or 81, or 82, or even after the supposed turn for the worse in the later years of Domitian’s reign), the inability to recover such knowledge does not prevent us from seeing a clear connection between the poet’s discourse and the tensions experienced by the senatorial class.

An example from the poem’s first speech will illustrate the necessity of reading ‘contemporary reference’ with broad temporal boundaries. Pelias boasts to Jason that, were he younger and capable of taking revenge, he would display Aeetes’ head as a trophy: *et regis caput hic atque arma videres* (‘Here you would see the king’s head and his weapons’, Val. Fl. 1.52). The tyrants Amycus and Oenomaeus actually enact this desire to display an enemy’s head (Val. Fl. 4.183, 7.285), in the manner of Virgil’s Turnus who displays the heads of Nisus and Euryalus (Aen. 9.465–7). Pelias’ boast therefore reflects a typical pattern of tyrannical activity within the intra- and intertextual economy of the *Argonautica*.\(^5\) A reflection of recent history can certainly be observed here: Tacitus reports, for example, that Otho’s men ‘fixed the heads’ of his enemies Galba and Piso ‘on lances and displayed them amid the cohorts’ battle standards next to the legion’s eagle symbol’ (*praefixa contis capita gestabantur inter signa cohortium iuxta aquilam legionis*, Tac. Hist. 1.44). Yet in doing

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5 See Cowan in this volume.