CHAPTER 17

Valerius Flaccus and Seneca’s Tragedies

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Confronting Tragedy

Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* famously reasserts an epic mode that follows in the footsteps of Virgil, righting the wrongs done to it by the Augustan epicist’s subversive and challenging successors, Ovid and Lucan. Where those authors had done away with the notion of a story centred on a single heroic figure, a figure to be judged against standards of martial glory and the potential to obtain everlasting renown (*kleos*/*fama*), the *Argonautica* rehabilitates this model, offering us a Jason who fits the bill as ‘recuperated’ *dux*, in command of an expedition guaranteed by Jupiter to succeed (*ratis omnia vincet*, 1.236; cf. 1.4).\(^1\) Yet for all its ‘fidelity’ to Virgil, the Flavian *Argonautica* is always aware that tragedy is just beyond its horizon. Valerius’ obsession with prolepsis and gloomy presentiment has long been recognised, and at every stage of the Argo’s journey, the exploits of the Argonauts are set against tragedy-oriented backdrops as they encounter figures such as the Lemnian women, Cyzicus, Phineus and Prometheus.\(^2\)

The linguistic influence of Valerius’ most immediate tragic precursor, Seneca, on the Flavian epic has also been long recognised—in 1871 Karl Schenkl noted that Valerius was a diligent reader of Senecan tragedy—but the significance of the role Senecan tragedy plays within the *Argonautica* has not been explored in much depth.\(^3\) In this chapter, I will first start with the big picture, sketching the

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\(^2\) On the *Argonautica’s* ‘pessimistic’ tone, see esp. Lüthje (1971); Burck (1979a); most recently, see Zissos (2003) (concerned that the *Argonautica* speaks to an ideological ‘rootlessness’ in elite Flavian culture) and (2009), conceptualising the *Argonautica* as ‘aporetic repudiation’ of any positive ideological drive or ‘historical master narrative’.

\(^3\) Although Manitius (1889) omitted Seneca from his list of Valerian influences, Schenkl (1871) 271–382 and Summers (1894) 40–1 provide lists of correspondences and Mehmel (1934) 109–19 offers further comment. For further evidence of linguistic influence, see the modern commentaries, esp. Poortvliet (1991b); Wijsman (1996) and (2000b); Fucecchi (1997); Perutelli (1997); Zissos (2008); Murgatroyd (2009). Grewe (1998) 173–4, the only specific study of
way Senecan tragedy operates in Book 1 of the *Argonautica* to adumbrate interpretative choices about the value of the voyage of the Argo, its socio-political outlook, and its narratological drive. Then, taking two specific examples—the *Medea* and the *Hercules* plays—this chapter will analyse Senecan intertextual presence in more depth. I shall propose that in these two case studies we can discern an intertextual role for Senecan tragedy that does not simply enrich our understanding of the *Argonautica* as a carefully wrought, highly artificial and mannered poem, but also suggests that Valerius is using a central generic tension between tragedy and epic to articulate the compositional ‘fracture’ the epic suffers, its division into ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ halves, its fundamental ambivalence about the integrity of an epic *Argonautica* in itself.*4

A Senecan *Argonautica*?

The *Argonautica* is a Greek mythological epic. But Senecan tragedy makes an important contribution to the conspicuously Roman milieu of the opening book, which situates Jason’s quest for *gloria* against a backdrop of civil war and sets a ‘fickle mob’ and impotent *patres* (‘elders’, but also ‘senators’) under the heel of the tyrannical rulers of Iolcus and Colchis. The wrathful, dissembling and treacherous Pelias and Aeetes have sometimes been compared to the later imperial figures of Tacitus’ *Annals*.5 But the angry and vengeful behaviour of

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4 This chapter does not have room to explore other tragic influences. On Valerius’ possible use of Ennius, who wrote at least one *Medea*, see Jocelyn (1988). There are only two surviving fragments of Ovid’s *Medea*, while nothing at all remains of the *Medea* of Lucan. Nor has there been much examination of the influence of Greek tragedy, though Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all wrote tragedies addressing aspects of the Argonautic myth (see Zissos (2008) xxvii–xxv for a comprehensive account of the myth, esp. xx on Athenian tragedy); for analysis of the influence of Euripides’ *Medea* and *Bacchae*, see Bessone (1998) 169–70; Buckley (2013); for *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, Poortvliet (1991a) 159; Frings (1998) 263. For the possible influence of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* on Hercules’ liberation of Prometheus (Val. Fl. 5.154–76), see Zissos (1997) 123–34 and p. 323 below.

5 Cf. Zissos (2003), (2009); on Roman tyranny and the *Argonautica*, Burck (1971b) 39 argues for similar ‘worldviews’ in Valerius and Tacitus, and at 48 for affinities between Pelias and Tiberius; cf. Preiswerk (1934) 439–40; Burck (1979a); Stadler (1993); McGuire (1997) 24–8 and *passim*. Hershkowitz (1998b) 246–7 sets Valerius’ tyrants against *Hist.* 4.86.2 and *Ann.* 3.71.4, 6.50, arguing that the dissimulating tyranny of Pelias and Aeetes is fitting for a work written in Domitianic Rome.