

ALLUSION AND NARRATIVE POSSIBILITY IN THE *ARGONAUTICA* OF VALERIUS FLACCUS

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THE *ARGONAUTICA* OF VALERIUS FLACCUS is a poem that has only just begun to find the readership it deserves. The previously ambivalent reception of this subtle and complex work resulted in large part from a failure to grasp its deep-rooted metaliterary preoccupations, an aspect that scholars have recently started to address.¹ This is an important advance: since some of the most noteworthy features of the Roman *Argonautica* do not concern the various levels of meaning inherent in the narrative material itself, but rather the artistic ways in which Valerius fashioned this material into sophisticated poetry, analysis of the poem must be conducted, at least in part, on the level of an individualized poetics.

This paper will examine the use of allusion to reflect upon narrative choice and artistic creativity in the Roman *Argonautica*.² A striking quality of the poem is its literary “afterness,” its evident awareness of its own place in the poetic tradition.³ Valerius repeatedly draws attention to his own status as a poetic “recycler,” or to his mediating role as a selector of variants within the tradition. In many instances this is achieved by making reference to versions of the myth that the poet has chosen *not* to follow. Such “negative allusion,” by signaling the poet’s program of options, highlights his engagement of the literary tradition as it simultaneously underscores the fictive quality of the narrative.⁴ The marking of unchosen variants is thus a

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1. Feeney 1991, 313–37; Malamud and McGuire 1993; Barchiesi 1995.

2. Other aspects of self-consciousness in Valerius’ poem are well treated in Feeney 1991, 313–37.

3. The pronounced quality of “afterness” in Valerius is well discussed in Barchiesi 1995. Of course this quality was already present to a lesser extent in the Greek *Argonautica*. For example, Apollonius begins his narrative with an explicit metaliterary gesture in the form of an “Alexandrian footnote” (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.18–19): Νῆα μὲν οὖν οἱ πρόσθεν ἔτι κλείουσιν αἰοῖδοι / Ἄργον Ἀθηναίης καμέειν ὑποθημοσύνησι’ (“The ship, as earlier poets have told, was built by Argus with the guidance of Athena.”) The difference between Valerius’ approach and that of his various predecessors will be addressed later in the paper.

4. “Negative allusion” is not an entirely satisfactory designation for what is in essence a kind of intertextual praeteritio. It will, however, be used throughout the paper of these self-conscious references to rejected narrative variants.

pointed metaliterary gesture, and one which in its more extreme manifestations tends to generate a rift or contradiction in narrative logic.⁵

To start with the least problematic case, Valerius may simply make reference to rejected variants without disrupting the story line. In such instances the poet mentions narrative possibilities available within the inherited tradition without actualizing them in the narrative. For example, there were a number of different accounts of the fate of the dragon that guarded the golden fleece in Colchis. According to Pindar, Jason had himself slain the dragon in order to gain the fleece (*Pyth.* 4.247–49).⁶ In Euripides' seminal tragedy, Medea claimed that she had herself killed the dragon (*Med.* 480–82). In the version of Apollonius, Medea had lulled the dragon to sleep with magic (*Ap. Rhod.* 4.156–66). When confronted with this moment in the narrative, Valerius' Medea seems to offer Jason a choice of variants (8.64–66):

"dic age nunc utrum vigilant hostemque videnti
exuvias auferre velis an lumina somno
mergimus et domitum potius tibi tradimus anguem."

"Tell me now whether you would prefer to take the fleece from [the dragon] while he is awake and can see his enemy, or shall I rather immerse his eyes in sleep and hand down to you a subdued serpent?"

It seems clear that Valerius is airing the possibilities offered by rival versions of the myth and in so doing he sets his work in the context of a literary tradition.⁷ In effect, Medea offers Jason a choice between the versions of Pindar and Apollonius, respectively.⁸ This brief debate serves both to locate the poem within a spectrum of "possible narratives," and to examine the chosen story line through the plot-defining decisions of a pair of characters within the text. This amounts to a fleeting thematization of the poem's "composition myth," indicating a moment of authorial decision making.⁹ The metapoetic sense of this narrative mediation is here further marked by the verb *tradimus*, which suggests the very transmission of the mythological tradition from which the poet is choosing.¹⁰ In fact, *domitum . . . tradimus anguem* conveys rather well the tradition that Apollonius might be said to have narrated or indeed to have "handed down" to the Roman poet—since this is the version that Valerius adopts.¹¹

5. Such "contradictions" have often been cited as evidence that the poem was never finished, most recently by Poortvliet 1991a. Summers 1894, 2–4 lists numerous discrepancies, while at the same time allowing that some of them "may be due to the poet's style." The study of Malamud and McGuire, 1993, offers a compelling demonstration of the self-conscious use of narrative contradiction by Valerius in Mopsus' prophecy at 1.205–26; their arguments are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

6. This is also the tradition followed by Pherecydes according to the Scholiast on *Ap. Rhod.* 4.156–66.

7. For such encoding of "literary genealogies," see Barchiesi 1995, 55.

8. Cf. *Ap. Rhod.* 4.145–61, where Medea simply induces sleep without considering alternatives.

9. For the term "composition myth" used in the context of Roman epic, see Masters 1992.

10. *OLD*, s.v. "*trado*," 10a. For application of this verb to poetic transmission in particular cf. Cic. *Inv. rhet.* 2.1.3. Valerius himself explicitly uses the verb in this sense in a catalogue of warriors at 6.103–4: "te quoque venturis, ingens Ariasmene, saeculis / tradiderim."

11. It is of course frustrating not to have the version of Varro of Atax, which presumably followed Apollonius' narrative on this point. If so, that would only strengthen the force of *tradimus* in Valerius' text, as does the fact that Ovid follows the Apollonian version at *Met.* 7.149–58, as well as in *Her.* 6 and 12.

A little later, in her brief speech of consolation to the sleeping dragon, Medea makes reference to the heretofore unmentioned third possibility—that is, the Euripidean variant—while underscoring that Apollonius' version is being followed (8.98–99):

“quam gravida nunc mole iaces, quam segnis inertem
flatus habet! nec te saltem, miserande, peremi.”

“In what a heavy mass you now lie, what sluggish breathing holds you inert!
But at least, poor thing, I did not kill you.”

By mentioning the rejected possibility of the Euripidean version (i.e. that she herself kills the dragon), Medea completes the inventory of major variants.¹² That is to say, Medea had hinted at the Pindaric version (Jason fights and kills the dragon) before the fact, and actually followed the Apollonian version (Medea drugs the dragon); the second unfulfilled possibility rounds off the list.¹³ This is a studied but effective touch; Valerius offers an inventory of versions transmitted by the tradition, while at the same time endorsing one particular version. Encoded in this passage is an artistic decision by the poet, and one that he implicitly invites the reader to assess.¹⁴

To be sure, this allusive activity is carefully integrated into its narrative context. Valerius presents three possible sequences of events, but only one is actualized in the narrative. In other words, because the “composition myth” and the narrative are connected through a shared structure, the intrusion of the authorial persona into the narrative is essentially seamless. Nevertheless, this type of metaliterary gesture is an exhibition of fictional artifice that clearly runs the risk of becoming an affectation—and Valerius uses it sparingly.¹⁵ Elsewhere in the poem the marking of unchosen variants is done rather less obtrusively by simply incorporating them in a marginal manner within the narrative proper. This inclusion often creates a contradiction in strict narrative logic, but the effect is generally fleeting. In its more radical form, however, such “negative allusion” can complicate interpretation in interesting ways.

A negative allusion causing a minor narrative contradiction is found early in the first book of the poem, where Valerius seems to provide two different accounts of Pelias' status as ruler. On this question, the tradition had long been split, with Pindar (*Pyth.* 4.106–15), saying that Pelias

12. Medea had perhaps already hinted at the possibility of slaying the dragon in her prayer to Somnus, whom she addresses as *fratrique simillime Leto* (8.174; cf. Ap. Rhod. 4.145–48, where only Hypnos is mentioned).

13. There are, to be sure, other variants that have not survived in the literary tradition. For example, an Attic red-figure cup dated c. 480–470 B.C.E. and attributed to Douris (Munich, *Antikensammlungen*) shows Jason hanging limp from the jaws of the dragon. Here, as elsewhere, Valerius appears to have limited his allusive program to major literary variants.

14. It is perhaps with the third variant, cited *ex post facto* by Medea, that the reader is most likely to sense the poet's exaggerated concern with unrealized narrative possibility. In this passage, then, the task of the reader is to decode the poet's confrontation with the literary tradition, that is, to grasp the metaliterary preoccupations of the passage signaled by the implicit shift from the perspective of the characters to that of the authorial persona.

15. Indeed, such a pointed airing of the narrative possibilities must have been intended to confirm retroactively Valerius' less obvious allusive activity in the earlier books of the epic, as discussed below.

usurped the throne from his half-brother Aeson, but other versions making him the lawful king of Thessaly.¹⁶ At 1.22 of the Roman *Argonautica*, Valerius seems to endorse the latter version, rejecting the claim of Pindar that Pelias drove Aeson from the throne (1.22–23):

Haemoniam primis Pelias frenabat ab annis,
iam gravis et longus populis metus.

From his earliest years Pelias, now old and long the terror of nations, had ruled Haemonia. (Trans. Mozley)

There is clearly no possibility of a usurpation as described by Pindar here. But, as Summers has observed, there is an oblique allusion to the Pindaric tradition later in the first book.¹⁷ After being ordered by Pelias to undertake the expedition to Colchis, Jason considers some of the options available to him. In particular, he briefly considers the possibility of sparking a revolution and civil war, trusting in the broad support for his father Aeson and the general hatred for his uncle Pelias (1.71–73):¹⁸

heu quid agat? populumne levem veterique tyranno
infensum atque olim miserantes Aesona patres
advocet . . . ?

Ah what is [Jason] to do? Should he call to his aid the fickle populace that hates the old tyrant, and the elders who for a long time now have pitied Aeson . . . ?

Although Valerius does not say so explicitly, *olim miserantes Aesona patres* clearly alludes to the version of *Pythian* 4 in which Aeson was driven from the throne by Pelias.¹⁹ The sudden switch of narrative tracks is disconcerting: it amounts to a nod by the poet to another variant of the tale, an evocation of a narrative space alien to his own account. Here the airing of an alternate version comes at the expense of strict narrative logic: the hint of an earlier usurpation by Pelias stands in contradiction to the primary textual sequence. The reader is momentarily wrenched from any suspension of disbelief by the incongruity, and compelled to acknowledge—or even participate in—the poet's mediating role as selector of variants within the tradition.

It is perhaps worth making some brief observations before leaving this example. Through this metaliterary gesture, Valerius has created a minor narrative inconsistency by reporting two contradictory versions of the myth. But

16. See Gantz 1993, 342. A reference to the tradition of usurpation may be found as early as Hesiod, whose description of Pelias as ὀβριστής Πελῆϊς (*Theog.* 996) has been taken by some scholars as a reference to the illegal seizure of the kingdom of Iolcus from Aeson.

17. Summers 1894, 18.

18. In Apollonius, Jason only considers the possibility of refusing Pelias retrospectively, assessing the result of this refusal as certain death for himself (χρῆν γὰρ ἐπιεμένοιο καταντικρὺ Πελῆϊο / αὐτίκ' ἀνήσασθαι τόνδε στόλον, εἰ καὶ ἔμελλον / νηλειῶς μελεῖσσι κεδαιόμενος θανέεσθαι, *Ap. Rhod.* 2.624–26). At 1.761, Aeson will, like Jason here, briefly consider the possibility of leading a revolt against Pelias. Like other imperial epicists, Valerius makes civil war a fairly ubiquitous thematic element in his poem. An irony, clearly intended by the poet, is that Jason will encounter a similar situation in Colchis, and this time will become involved in a civil war between two brothers.

19. The reference to *Aesonias* . . . *urbes* at 7.17 likewise hints at the possibility that Aeson was once ruler. Peter Green has suggested to me *per litteras* that Apollonius makes similar allusions (at 1.287, 1.411) to a version in which Aeson and his wife have been removed from power.

the two variants are not asserted with equal force. The first variant is stated bluntly (*Haemoniam primis Pelias frenabat ab annis*) whereas the second is referred to only obliquely (*olim miserantes Aesona patres*). Because of this difference it might still be claimed that, as in the previous example of the dragon's fate, one variant is asserted positively, as a narrative fact, whereas the second variant is offered as a more-or-less straightforward "negative allusion," a statement of an unfulfilled narrative possibility.

Later in the first book, the poet alludes more forcefully to an excluded variant, in the course of a rather remarkable prophecy by the seer Mopsus. This *vates* figure, in an apparent state of divine possession, looks forward to the trials facing the Argonauts later in the narrative. He starts reasonably enough by predicting a divine council in response to the sailing of Argo, followed by the pleas of Juno and Pallas which result in the reluctant acquiescence of Neptune.²⁰ But Mopsus' subsequent vision of the abduction of Hylas is somewhat more problematic (1.218–20):

"... subita cur pulcher harundine crines
velat Hylas? unde urna umeris niveosque per artus
caeruleae vestes?"

"Why does fair Hylas suddenly cover his locks with reeds? Whence the pitcher upon his shoulders, and the blue garment on his snow-white body?"

Mopsus clearly indicates here that Hylas is abducted while fetching water (*urna umeris*, 1.219). But when events unfold in Book 3 the poet deviates from his prophet, describing Hylas as hunting a stag rather than fetching water at this moment (3.545–51). This is an unusual violation of epic convention: prophecies by seers are supposed to be "no less definite than prophecies by divine beings."²¹ Why has Valerius deviated from this practice, providing a faulty prophet? As Malamud and McGuire point out, Mopsus' prophecy assumes the version that is attested in Apollonius and Theocritus.²² "It seems that the confusion that Mopsus generates with his prophecy arises from the fact that his knowledge is not based on a reading of signs and omens, but on a reading of Apollonius' *Argonautica*."²³ Seen in this light, the prophet's question—*unde urna umeris?*—takes on a metaliterary force: the source of the urn becomes not a narrative problem per se but rather a matter of literary debt. Rather than serving to adumbrate the plot, this part of the prophecy articulates an aspect of Valerius' poetic program.

Mopsus' prophecy, then, does not serve to clarify the narrative, as epic convention demands. Rather, it constitutes a vision of a narrative possibility,

20. In fact, the divine assembly as described by Mopsus is likewise not found in the subsequent narrative. This, however, may be a simple matter of ellipsis rather than negative allusion (see discussion below). Certainly the intervention of Juno and Pallas with Neptune on behalf of the Argonauts is borne out at 1.642–44. The subsequent reference to a combat in the vicinity of the fleece (*quem circum vellera Martem / aspicio?*, 1.223–44) is not, however, presented in the subsequent narrative. Cf. Fucecchi 1996, 115–16, who locates the latter prediction within a larger context of military activity in the first book.

21. Duckworth 1933, 19.

22. Malamud and McGuire 1993, 198; the Hylas episodes referred to are Ap. Rhod. 1.1207–72 and Theoc. *Id.* 13.39–75.

23. Malamud and McGuire 1993, 198.

an Apollonian variant crystallized momentarily but not included in the subsequent text. It is at once an intertextual acknowledgment of dependence and a subtle declaration of independence. The effect (when retrospectively perceived) is unsettling: Valerius' gesture to a rival version of the myth is a breach of the implicit contract between poet and reader that Mopsus' prophecy represents, and as such it has a destabilizing effect upon the narrative.

If the prophecy of Mopsus serves as a false narrative anticipation, there are a number of narrative retrospections that likewise constitute a negative allusion by referring to episodes not found in the text. The status of these retrospections is sometimes more ambiguous and difficult to assess. This is because, in the strictest sense, the failure of narrative representation does not necessarily imply the impossibility of what is not represented. To use the language of formalist critics, *histoire* and *récit* do not always enjoy a one-to-one correspondence. Given Valerius' highly elliptical narrative style, it is occasionally difficult to distinguish between simple narrative omission and negative allusion.²⁴ A case in point is the description of Idas' horror as he looks in Book 7 upon Jason confronting Aeetes' fire-breathing bulls (7.573–75):

horruit Argoae legio ratis, horruit audax
qui modo virgineis servari cantibus Idas
flebat et invito prospexit Colchida vultu.

The crew of Argo shuddered; even bold Idas shuddered who was just now lamenting being saved by a woman's magic, and despite himself he turned his gaze to the Colchian girl.

Seeing Jason confronted with the dangerous animals, Idas' resistance to seeking Medea's aid suddenly weakens. The problem here is that there is no reference to any such resistance in the previous narrative; this is a flashback to a nonexistent episode. In fact, Idas' objections to enlisting the aid of a "feeble girl" are found in Apollonius' third book (3.558–63):

ᾧ πόποι, ἧ ῥα γυναῖξιν ὁμόστολοι ἐνθάδ' ἔβημεν,
οἳ Κύπριν καλέουσιν ἐπίρροθον ἄμμι πέλεσθαι,
οὐκέτ' Ἐνυαλίῳ μέγα σθένος, ἐς δὲ πελείας
καὶ κίρκους λέυσσοντες ἐρητύονται ἀέθλων.
ἔρρετε, μῆδ' ὕμιν πολεμῆα ἔργα μέλοιτο,
παρθενικὰς δὲ λιτῆσιν ἀνάγκιδας ἡπεροπεύειν.

"Shame on us, have we come here as fellow-voyagers to women, calling on Cypris for help and not on the strength of mighty Enyalios? Do you expect doves and hawks to save you from the trial? Please yourselves, then—look no more to deeds of war, but beguile feeble girls with words of supplication."

Valerius' flashback is evidently recalling the well-known Apollonian episode here. Idas' objection to salvation at the hands of a girl (*virgineis servari cantibus*) is the bone of contention in both cases. The question to be answered, then, is whether this flashback is a "negative allusion" in the strict sense; that

24. One such problematic case is the retrospectively reported prophecy of Aeson's death at 3.301–3, on which see Poortvliet 1991b, 25.

is, are we to imagine the episode absent from Valerius' *histoire* as well as his *récit*? Put another way, did Idas' objections really occur in some imagined "full version" of Valerius' tale or not? No definite answer is possible, of course, and to some extent that is the point; but it seems probable that the reference is to an event outside the narrative space of Valerius' text.

In Apollonius, Idas' objection is based on the fact that Jason seeks the aid of a mere girl rather than using a more martial approach (cf. οὐκέτ' ἔννο-αλίοιο μέγα σθένος, Ap. Rhod. 3.560).²⁵ Such an objection has little point in the Roman *Argonautica*, for Jason and his men have just fought heroically in the civil war between Aeetes and his brother Perses, the account of which occupies the whole of Book 6.²⁶ Indeed, the Argonauts were promised the golden fleece by the Colchian king in return for their military assistance, but Aeetes reneges at the beginning of Book 7, and sets Jason the traditional trials that begin with yoking the fire-breathing bulls.²⁷ At this stage of Valerius' narrative, then, the Argonauts have clearly won the fleece through martial prowess and stand double-crossed by the Colchian tyrant.²⁸ The resort to Medea's aid has thus been afforded a strong moral justification, and in the aftermath of a whole book of fierce battle narrative, Idas' objection as found in Apollonius ceases to make much sense. Thus, it seems reasonable to read the flashback to Idas' complaint at 7.574–75 as a negative allusion, that is, as a marker of a rejected narrative possibility.

The above instance shows the difficulties that may arise in identifying negative allusions in a poem as elliptical as the Roman *Argonautica*. In other cases, however, allusions to alternate versions of the myth are less difficult to detect. For example, when the Argonauts contemplate abandoning Hercules in Mysia, Peleus angrily "reminds" Jason that Hercules had been the Argonauts' first choice as leader of the expedition (3.699–702):

"non hi tum flatus, non ista superbia dictis,
litore cum patrio iam vela petentibus Austris
cunctus ad Alciden versus favor: ipse iuvaret,
ipse ducis curas meritosque subiret honores."

"There was no such haughtiness, there wasn't this arrogance to your words then, when on the shores of our fatherland with the south winds wooing the sails, the favor of all was given to Hercules. They wanted him to take on the responsibility of leadership, they wanted him to have this honor."

This is a jarring reminder, not just for Jason, but for the reader as well, since the leadership vote did not occur in the previous narrative. Moreover, Valerius' strong emphasis on Jason's leadership from the very beginning of the poem excludes the possibility that it merely went unmentioned until this

25. For a discussion of this scene, see Hunter 1989, 152–53.

26. Cf. Fucecchi 1996, 133, and 1997, 12–13.

27. For an important discussion of the self-conscious narrative redirection employed by Valerius in returning to the conventional trials, see Feeney 1991, 325–26.

28. For the eclipsing of the traditional trials by the battle narrative of Book 6, see Fucecchi 1996, 153, and 1997, 29.

point.²⁹ Rather, it seems clear that Valerius is alluding to the tradition followed by Apollonius. In the Greek *Argonautica*, the leadership vote takes place just as Peleus describes it in Valerius' poem (Ap. Rhod. 1.331–43):

τοῖσιν δ' Αἴσωνος υἱὸς εὐφρονέων μετέειπεν·
 “Ἄλλα μὲν, ὅσσα τε νηὶ ἐφοπλίσσασθαι ἔοικεν,
 πάντα μάλ' εὖ κατὰ κόσμον ἐπαρτέα κεῖται ἰοῦσιν,
 τῷ οὐκ ἂν δηναῖον ἐχοίμεθα τοῖο ἔκητι
 ναυτιλίας, ὅτε μούνον ἐπιπνεύσουσιν ἄῃται·
 ἀλλὰ φίλοι, ξυνὸς γάρ ἐς Ἑλλάδα νόστος ὀπίσω,
 ξυναὶ δ' ἄμμι πέλονται ἐς Αἰήταο κέλευθοι,
 τούνεκα νῦν τὸν ἄριστον ἀφειδήσαντες ἔλεσθε
 ὄρχαμον ἡμείων, ᾧ κεν τὰ ἔκαστα μέλοιτο,
 νείκεα συνθεσίας τε μετὰ ξείνοισι βαλέσθαι.”
 Ὡς φάτο. πάπτηναν δὲ νέοι θρασὺν Ἡρακλῆα
 ἤμενον ἐν μέσσοισι, μῆ δέ ἐ πάντες αὐτῇ
 σημαίνειν ἐπέτελλον·

And among them Aeson's son spoke with good will. “All the equipment a ship needs—for all is in due order—lies ready for our departure. Therefore, we will make no long delay in our sailing for these things' sake, when the breezes blow so favorably. But friends—for common to all is our return to Greece hereafter, and common to all is our path to the land of Aetes—now you must choose with ungrudging heart the bravest to be our leader, the one who shall be careful for everything, who will take upon himself our quarrels and our covenants with strangers.” Thus he spoke, and the young heroes turned their eyes towards bold Hercules sitting in their midst, and with one shout they all enjoined upon him to be their leader. . . . (Trans. Seaford)

A reference to the Greek passage is clearly signaled by Valerius. Peleus' description of the Argonauts assembled on the beach and ready for departure with favorable winds blowing, retrospectively recreates the scene from Apollonius. But this reference is at odds with the larger narrative context and hence has a destabilizing effect. Peleus' recollection of a nonexistent episode constitutes a vision of a rejected narrative possibility, an Apollonian variant that is crystallized momentarily but is not found in the previous text. To paraphrase Malamud and McGuire, the hermeneutic confusion that Peleus generates with his account of past events arises from the fact that this account is based not on a recollection of the preceding narrative, but rather on a recollection of Apollonius' *Argonautica*.³⁰ Peleus' allusion thus constitutes an “impossible” reflection on the narrative past—a counterpart to Mopsus' “impossible” anticipation of the narrative future. The poet radically merges two separate narrative domains even as he differentiates them. Again, this display of artifice is a pointed metaliterary gesture; what Conte has termed “poetic memory” is appropriated by a character within the text, resulting in a jarring suppression of narrative coherence in favor of intertextual continuity.³¹

29. Cf. the remark of Aeson at 1.342–43: (“‘video nostro tot in aequore reges / teque ducem’”) and the assertion of Jason's leadership (“duce te”); the same ablative phrase is used by Valerius of both Vespasian and Jupiter) by Acastus at 1.177.

30. Cf. n. 23 above.

31. The formulation is taken from Hinds 1998, 3. Cf. the comment on Mopsus' prophecy by Malamud and McGuire, 1993, 198: “versions of the myth other than the one that the author chooses to tell are available not

Another important type of negative allusion employed by Valerius is reference to rival variants through acts of the imagination like dreams, lies, or misapprehensions.³² This is a means of generating a negative allusion without producing an inconsistency in the narrative. In such cases, the gesture may become rather more overtly self-conscious, for the process of visualization performed by the character closely resembles the poet's own act of creative imagination. Again there is an example early in the narrative. At 1.43–50 Pelias tells Jason of recurring dreams suggesting that Aeetes has murdered Phrixus:

“hunc ferus Aeetes, Scythiam Phasinque rigentem
qui colit—heu magni Solis pudor!—, hospita vina
inter et attonitae mactat sollemnia mensae
nil nostri divumque memor. non nuntia tantum
fama refert: ipsum iuvenem tam saeva gementem,
ipsum ego, cum serus fessos sopor alligat artus,
aspicio, lacera adsiduis namque illius umbra
questibus et magni numen maris excitat Helle.”

“Savage Aeetes, the shame of the great Sun, who dwells in Scythia and the frost-hardened Phasis, slaughtered him [sc. Phrixus] among congenial drinks and the ceremonies of the shocked banquet, thinking neither of me nor the gods. The news was brought to me not by rumor alone: I see the young man himself, groaning so pitifully, when sleep comes late to bind my weary limbs. With ceaseless complaints his wounded shade and Helle, goddess of the great sea, disturb my sleep.”

Significantly, Pelias cites two sources: *fama* (rumor) and a dream visitation. The first of these, *fama*, is a familiar metaliterary trope in Latin poetry. As the work of Feeney and Hardie has demonstrated, *fama* stands as a self-conscious emblem for the “plasticity of poetic truth,” for the possibility of competing versions of that truth.³³ Likewise for Valerius in the present passage, *fama* programatically evokes the possibility of rival versions within the mythic tradition, a possibility that is realized in the reported dream that follows.

This dream, as reported by Pelias, is contradicted at 5.224–25, where it is stated as fact that Phrixus died of old age. In Valerius' text, then, Pelias' claim that Phrixus was murdered must be false.³⁴ Thus it can safely be assumed that Pelias never received a dream visitation from Phrixus in Valerius' version of the myth. Nevertheless, this falsehood is intertextually authorized: a similar dream visitation is reported at Pindar *Pythian Odes* 4.160–63.

only to the reader, but apparently to some of the characters as well.” For “poetic memory” more generally, see Conte 1986.

32. For the more conventional intertextual function of dreams in epic poetry, see Barchiesi, 1995, 55–57.

33. Feeney 1991, 247–49; Hardie, 1997.

34. In fact, Valerius' narrative conveys a strong impression of a close bond between Aeetes and Phrixus' family. Most notably, the Greek exile's sons do not join the Argonauts en route as they did in the Hellenistic poem, and they do not plead Jason's case before Aeetes. In fact, their first mention, in the battle narrative of Book 6, seems to underscore the closeness of Aeetes and Phrixus through what is, in effect, a double patronymic: *Aeolii proles Aeetia Phrivi* (6.542). Moreover, this mention occurs at a moment when their allegiance to the Argonauts, still allied to Aeetes, would create no conflict of interest.

More importantly, as Ehlers points out, although Pelias' reported dream is false in the plot of Valerius' epic, it is derived from other versions of the story in which the dream contents are true.³⁵ In particular, Hyginus testifies to the tradition that Aeetes was told that he must beware of death at the hands of a descendant of Aeolus, and therefore killed his own son-in-law.³⁶

Pelias' dream, then, is best understood as a falsehood (cf. *fictis dictis*, 1.43); in the context of works of fiction, a lie by definition corresponds to no reality in the narrative domain. On a metaliterary level, however, the lie is far from innocent, for it corresponds to a reality in a different narrative domain. In other words, this willful act of the imagination signals rival versions of the myth and thus becomes a further instance of negative allusion.³⁷ Through Pelias' mendacity, Valerius airs a competing version of the myth, while fully integrating it into its new narrative context.³⁸

So far, this discussion has focused on the evocation of alternate traditions through negative allusions of a fairly straightforward type. In some cases, however, Valerius' airing of alternate narrative possibilities functions rather more deviously. There is, for example, an intriguing metaliterary gesture in the final book of the poem, which involves transformation of imaginary content in the model passage. It has just been suggested that Pelias' reported dream offered a mythic variant that the poet had rejected; but Valerius also reverses this effect by presenting dream contents from his literary model as narrative fact in his own poem. This is achieved most strikingly when, prior to pilfering the golden fleece, Jason gallantly reassures Medea that she by herself is all the reward he really needs for his labors (8.37–40):

“o decus in nostros magnum ventura penates
solaque tantarum virgo haud indigna viarum
causa reperta mihi, iamiam non ulla requiro
vellera teque meae satis est vexisse carinae.”

“O maiden, who shall bring glory to my home, you alone have proved to be a worthy reason for so great a voyage: I no longer need any fleece, it will be enough that my ship has borne you.”

35. Ehlers 1970, 50. Barchiesi 1995, 57 has a fine discussion on the poetic use of dream sequences to open up “una fenestre intertestuale.”

36. “Phrixum autem Aeeta libens recepit filiamque Chalcipen dedit ei uxorem; quae postea liberos ex eo procreavit. sed ueritus est Aeeta ne se regno eicerent, quod ei responsum fuit ex prodigiis ab aduena Aeoli filio mortem caueret; itaque Phrixum interfecit” (Hyg. *Fab.* 3).

37. There are clear metaliterary implications to the phrase *fictis dictis*. On the literal level, Valerius is rejecting the variant and calling it a lie; at the same time, *ficta dicta* are precisely what all poets, including Valerius produce (cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 5.39, 115). This is a nice double entendre which allows Valerius to affirm the alternate tradition even as he rejects it.

38. Although the scope of this discussion must be limited to Valerius' allusion to variants of the *Argo-nautica* tradition, it should be mentioned that the poet produces similar effects by accessing other poetic traditions. An example is the sequence 6.455–67 in which Juno asks Venus for the loan of her *cingula* on the pretense that she wants to seduce her husband Jupiter. In the context of Valerius' poem, this is clearly a lie, and one that fails (cf. *sensit diva dolos*, 6.467). In metaliterary terms, however, Juno's falsehood evokes the famous scene of the seduction of Zeus by Hera in *Iliad* 14 (on which see Fucecchi 1997, 14–15). This is an intriguing Homeric allusion: Iliadic “fact” enters Valerius' poem as a contrived “fiction” on the part of one of the characters.

In fact, Jason's words constitute a rather suggestive reworking of Medea's "deadly and deceitful" dream in Apollonius' third book (3.617–23):

ἄφαρ δέ μιν ἡπεροπῆες,
οἷά τ' ἀκηχεμένην, ὅλοοι ἐρέθεςκον ὄνειροι·
τὸν ξείνον δ' ἐδόκησεν ὑφεισάμεναι τὸν ἄεθλον
οὔτι μάλ' ὀρμαίνοντα δέρος κριοῖο κομίσσαι,
οὔδ' ἐ τι τοῖο ἔκητι μετὰ πτόλιν Αἰήταο
ἐλθέμεν, ὄφρα δέ μιν σφέτερον δόμον εἰσαγάγοιτο
κουριδίην παράκοιτιν.

At once she was disturbed by deadly dreams, deceitful ones such as visit someone in distress. She imagined that the stranger undertook the challenge, not at all because he wanted to recover the fleece—it was not for that that he had come to Aetes' city—but to take her back to his own home as his properly wedded wife. (Trans. Hunter)

Again there is a subtle assertion of intertextual continuity in Valerius' scene, but Apollonius' passage has been cleverly transformed, or distorted, by the reenactment: the imagined "dreamscape" of the Greek *Argonautica* has been transmuted into narrative fact.³⁹ Reality and imagination stand inverted vis-à-vis the model: Medea actually hears Jason's words of devotion instead of merely dreaming of them.

This allusive recasting harbors a curious implication for the model passage. According to ancient thought, certain types of dream were capable of predicting the future, whereas others were not. The Alexandrian Herophilus identified two kinds of dreams: "god-sent" (i.e., predictive), and those that merely involved erotic wish fulfillment.⁴⁰ In Apollonius, Medea's dream is not predictive, but rather belongs to the category of erotic wish fulfillment. Valerius' scene, however, compels a reappraisal of its model. For by actualizing the dream from the Greek *Argonautica*, Valerius alters its status: Apollonius' dream is transformed from a piece of erotic wish fulfillment to a prophetic vision. Of course, this is done retrospectively: Medea's dream in Apollonius is made to anticipate the narrative reality of Valerius' poem. The effect is slightly paradoxical: instead of destabilizing his own narrative, as in the previous examples, the Roman poet here destabilizes the narrative of his predecessor. This is a particularly sophisticated metaliterary gesture, in which two texts are interlaced in such a way as to generate new meaning retrospectively from an intertextual engagement.⁴¹

* * *

39. The phrase *tantarum . . . viarum* at 8.38 enhances the sense of recapitulation and rewriting. For the *Argonautica* as a tale rich in metanarrative potential *qua* itinerary, see Davis 1989.

40. Here I am following Hunter 1989, 164.

41. There is, of course, a cost involved in this transformation. As Hunter's fine commentary makes clear, the dream sequence in Apollonius constitutes a wonderful piece of characterization. The troubled dream movingly reveals Medea's vulnerable and deluded state of mind, thereby psychologically preparing the familial betrayal that is to follow. This aspect is more or less forsaken by Valerius in order to achieve a more contrived effect on the authorial level. But this trade-off is typical of the "belated" poet, and Valerius, I think, would make no apologies.

A striking feature of Valerius' poem, then, is its almost obsessive concern with its own place within a rich literary tradition. The Roman *Argonautica* is a demanding and hyper-allusive text, which repeatedly requires the reader to grasp intertextual connections with a number of earlier texts, most notably Apollonius' *Argonautica*. As Conte observes, the Roman *Argonautica* is a work that "in order to realize an arduous and sophisticated poetics, presupposes a broad literary competence in its audience."⁴²

Perhaps more than any other ancient text, Valerius' poem exhibits a persistent drive to air the possibility of rival versions of its myth. The poet builds into his narrative a series of metaliterary indices that encode his negotiation of the maze of literary variants he has inherited. The signaling of unchosen variants is not in itself a novelty; indeed it is an epic practice that can be traced through Virgil back to Homer.⁴³ What makes Valerius' approach unique is the extent to which he allows the interference patterns generated by the simultaneous assertion of mutually contradictory variants to affect the very fabric of his narrative. The primary narrative sequence of the poem is repeatedly punctured by overlapping intertextual gestures, which create a radical fusion of distinct narrative domains. As a result, the reader is confronted with internal discontinuities arising from the coexistence of distinct and incompatible statements of narrative fact. The poem thereby lays bare the creative process by which a particular narrative constellation is established at the expense of others, and at the same time it problematizes that process. The "meaning" of the text thus resides, in part, in the thematization of the act of fictionalizing; Valerius' epic unfolds as an ongoing process of reception that gains its own vitality from its constant reworking and reappraisal of the narrative content of its models. The poem thus constitutes, on one level, a self-conscious meditation on the diffuseness and mutability of mythological narrative.⁴⁴

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42. Conte 1987, 490.

43. Slatkin 1991 demonstrates Homer's repeated allusions to the range of mythic traditions he is amalgamating or shunning, observing that "the displacement [of certain mythological material] into more or less oblique references (rather than overt exposition), including its subordination within digressions, is a defining principle by which the *Iliad* demarcates its subject and orients the audience towards the treatment of its themes" (15). Virgil's use of such techniques is well analyzed in Horsfall 1991, who stresses both continuity and "confrontation" with literary predecessors. Within the *Argonautica* tradition, Thomas 1982 demonstrates an extensive system of nine separate allusions to previous versions of the myth in the first eighteen verses of Catull. 64. The most compelling (and yet still partial) precedent for Valerius' approach may be found in a series of deliberate narrative discontinuities in Ovid's Phaethon episode (*Met.* 1.747–2.400), a point I hope to elaborate at a later date. The Ovidian obsession with poetic positioning had an undeniably strong influence on Valerius.

44. Cf. Zeitlin's description (1985, 53) of myth as "the province of an individual poet who, while in active engagement with the mythic material of the tradition, himself is involved in a true act of mythopoesis."

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