

Seeing Double: Simile and Reality in Mopsus's Prophecy

In Book 1 of Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica* (1.211-26), the prophet Mopsus foresees six events which nearly form a catalogue of the Argonautic tradition's most "famous" episodes: the abduction of Hylas, Pollux's boxing match against Amycus, Jason's trials in Colchis against Aeetes' fire-breathing bulls and the Sown Men, Medea's murder of her children—and an unspecified "war." In this paper, I examine those events of Mopsus's prophecy which come to pass in the epic's second half, namely Jason's two trials and the oddly mysterious "war" (*circum vellera Martem*, 1.223), the latter of which I argue forms a pair with the final part of Mopsus's vision: the post-Argonautic, murdering Medea.

Mopsus calls the future horrors which he foresees *discrimina* (1.217). While they are naturally "dangers," Feeney has observed the more literal element of division inherent in the Argonauts' sea-voyage. It is especially surprising, therefore, that Mopsus does not see the Clashing Rocks, which, standing at the center of the epic, are the epic's most notable *discrimen* (4.689) in both senses and are signaled elsewhere (1.3-4, 4.561-76) as crucially important for the poem. As such, they surely belong in Mopsus's list of *discrimina*-highlights. However, a well-noted feature of Mopsus's prophecy is its "false narrative anticipation" (Zissos 294; cf. Malamud and McGuire), in that Mopsus's narration of events does not precisely match their eventual narration within the text. I propose that we can, in fact, discover the Clashing Rocks cunningly hidden within Mopsus's vision.

Jason's trials—his yoking of Aeetes' bulls (7.559-606) and his combat with the fratricidal Sown Men (7.607-43)—are the Clashing Rocks' metaphorical counterpart. Jason's bull-yoking repeats in many particulars the Argo's passage through the Rocks, especially via the sharing and exchange of language and similes. Juno and Minerva restrain the Clashing Rocks like a man yoking an unwilling bull (4.682-5); by contrast, Valerius describes the attack of Aeetes' bulls as waves dashing against a cliff and receding (7.581-3). The double flame produced by the Rocks' clashing (4.659-60) is likened to a storm's thunder and lightning (4.661-4), while the fire-breathing bulls are like Jupiter's twin lightning bolts (7.564-75). The parallels are drawn still further through comparison with Valerius's constant intertext, Apollonius Rhodius's, description of the trials (*Arg.* 3.1293-1303). In turn, the Sown Men's inherent fratricidal tendencies (Dominik) echo the fratricidal nature of the Clashing Rocks' eternal impetus, which Valerius explicitly describes in terms of civil war (4.562-6).

The other prophesied episodes I discuss are Mopsus's ambiguous *circum vellera Martem* (1.223) and Medea's future career as murderess. The meaning of this "war," or Mars, is a frequently-debated topic (Fucecchi) which as yet has no satisfactory answer: does it predict the war which may be fought between the Argonauts and their Colchian pursuers after the epic's fragmentary ending (Kleywegt, Liberman); Mars himself, or his dragon, as guardian of the Golden Fleece (Summers, Strand); a fight between Jason and the guarding dragon (Courtney); or another war/Mars entirely? I read Mars as a problematic Jason, paired with Medea-the-murderess.

Valerius twice compares Jason to Mars in similes. Immediately following the Colchian trials, Jason is Mars *entering* the Hebrus after a battle (7.645-6), and shortly afterward, at his marriage to Medea, he is Mars *emerging* from the Hebrus to visit Venus (8.228-9)—Medea herself is garbed as Venus during this wedding (8.232-6). However, Medea's wedding raiment is notorious (8.235-6), and Mopsus again foresees Medea's murder of her children (8.247-51); Jason's pairing here with the post-Argonautic Medea underscores his already-negative representation in the second half of the epic. Between the two Mars-similes comes Jason's seizure of the Golden Fleece from the grove of Mars, a sequence of events literally reflecting Mopsus's *quem circum vellera Martem / aspicio?* (1.223-4). The ambiguity of Mars, then, is twofold: Jason *as* Mars, and also Mars-the-fighter versus Mars-the-lover. Like all prophecies, Mopsus's prophecy cannot be properly understood—even by the reader—until its predicted events have already transpired.

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