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Valerius Flaccus' Collapsible Universe

For the Romans in particular, the Argonauts' voyage was the *prisca fraus* (Verg. *Ecl.* 4.31) that led to the end of the Golden Age (Davis 1989, Fabre-Serris 2008). Multiple poets confronted the Argonauts' association with and responsibility for this crime against the natural order of things, drawing explicit connections between mankind's violation of the sea and later human crimes of internecine strife and civil war. Civil war also looms large independent of the Argonautic voyage, ultimately developing a specific vocabulary in Roman poetry—a vocabulary of disintegration, transgression, and (in)discrimination, including on a cosmic level—that becomes almost inseparable from the poetics of civil war, following Lucan (Lapidge 1979, Masters 1992). As a result, the Argo's transgressive voyage becomes more deeply connected to civil war through the shared concept of violated boundaries. This paper demonstrates how Valerius Flaccus' post-Lucanean *Argonautica* intensifies that link by harnessing the language of cosmic dissolution to depict an unstable universe that also reeks of civil strife.

I identify three primary loci of cosmic instability in the *Argonautica*. The first of these comes at the end of Book 1, at the death of Jason's parents, when Valerius describes in Hesiodic and Vergilian fashion the layout of the subterranean realms (1.827-45). Here we have the potential for Chaos to subsume the cosmos should it collapse (1.830-1), the notion that it *might* in fact collapse (1.828-9), and possibly even Jupiter's hypothetical desire to return the cosmos to a primordial stew (*Iuppiter et primae velit omnia reddere massae*, 1.829b, from Carrio's manuscript). We see, therefore, that cosmic stability is by no means guaranteed in Valerius' universe, beyond which, I argue that intertextual allusions here to Vergil, Ovid, Lucan, and the *Octavia* hint both at further aspects of cosmic dissolution and at civil war.

The second mention of a threat to universal order comes in Phineus' description of the Clashing Rocks' concussions (4.561-76), which employs Stoic cosmological terminology similar to that with which Lucan had depicted cosmic dissolution (*BC* 1.72-3, 1.80; Lapidge 1979). Moreover, the same language evokes Seneca's portrayal of the Argonauts' crime in his *Medea*, so that although the Argonauts' stilling of the Symplegades ostensibly abates their persistent threat to cosmic order, the Argonauts themselves become a new threat to the fastenings of the universe. In addition, language evocative of civil war (4.562-4, 4.641, 4.692) goes hand-in-hand with that of cosmic dissolution in Phineus' and the poet's descriptions of the Symplegades, to illuminate the Rocks' self-aggression.

Finally, Medea's sorcerous activities are described exclusively in terms of her interference with the natural order of things (6.441-5), even while explicit comparisons are drawn with Thessalian witchcraft that smacks of Lucan's Erictho (6.446-8). As the cosmic disturbances that Medea creates neither begin nor end with the Argonauts' arrival, we can, for a third time, perceive a continual threat to cosmic stability; at the same time, the Lucanean intertext brings Medea's activities into dialogue with the Thessalian center of Lucan's world of unremitting civil strife, underscoring the similarities between civil war and cosmic instability.

Works Cited

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