

When the Argo Met the Argo: Poetic Destruction in Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica*

The destruction of Valerius Flaccus's Argo in the central section of his *Argonautica* is highly poetically charged. Stover has shown how the Argo's construction (1.121-9) represents Valerius's own construction of the *Argonautica*; Argus's refashioning of Pelion's forest into a new ship suggests Valerius's reworking of extant Argonautic material into a new form. In this paper, I argue that Valerius performatively eradicates these models—in particular, Apollonius Rhodius and Aratus—through a threefold destruction of the Argo as she passes through the Clashing Rocks and in the events that immediately follow. Furthermore, beyond serving as a statement of poetics, the Argo's destruction is an initial manifestation of the civil conflict that pervades the poem's second half.

The Argo dies three deaths—crushed between the Clashing Rocks (4.689-98), visually immolated by Idmon and Tiphys's funeral-pyre (5.32-4), and metaphorically eviscerated as Prometheus's avian tormenter (5.171-6)—of which the first and last implicate Valerius's Hellenistic models. The last is straightforward: Zeus's eagle in Apollonius, likened in its flight to a ship (2.1251-5), has long been recognized as a parallel for the Argo (Byre, Newman, Gow). Through intertextual allusion, therefore, the death of this once-ship-like bird at Hercules' hands suffices for the Argo's symbolic gutting in Valerius's epic.

Her first death addresses a more surprising Greek predecessor, Aratus. In the *Phaenomena*, the constellation Argo (342-50) moves in reverse, stern-first (343/348); indeed, only her rear half is present in the sky. Zissos observes that, for Valerius, the crushing of her stern by the Clashing Rocks defines her "ultimate celestial form" (p.327)—but Valerius inverts the catasterism. For Aratus, the ship's *front* half is dark and starless (349-50). For Valerius, that same half will (problematically) be catasterized (4.692-3).

While Valerius destructively dissociates his Argo(nautica) from the Argo(nautica)s of these poetic predecessors, the models themselves also symbolically destroy Valerius's Argo. Two similes (VF 4.682-5, 4.686-8) associate the Clashing Rocks with Apollonius's *Argonautica* (specifically to Aeëtes' bulls, 3.1293-5, 3.1299-1303), and another associates them with Aratus's *Phaenomena* (VF 4.642-3). Discord and civil war are crucial elements of Valerius's *Argonautica*; at the *Argonautica*'s center, the poem-ship's encounter with her own source-material causes her destruction.

Works Cited

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