

## BOOK REVIEW

*Epic and Empire in Vespasianic Rome: A New Reading of Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica*. By Tim Stover. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 244. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-964408-7.

Fourteen years after Debra Hershkowitz's influential study of Valerius Flaccus' Roman *Argonautica*, Tim Stover presents to us a new monograph with fresh insights and challenging observations on the Flavian poem. Stover's book focuses on several appealing aspects of Valerius' poem and offers an interesting re-evaluation of the socio-political context in which the poem was produced; first and foremost, Stover dates the poem to the first decade of the rule of the Flavian dynasty, from 70 to 79 ce, during the reign of Vespasian. The book is divided into six chapters, prefaced by a short introduction.

The first chapter ("The Date of the *Argonautica*") tackles the difficult topic of the chronology of the composition of Valerius' *Argonautica*. Given Quintilian's reference to the "recent" (*nuper*) death of the poet, many critics have dated the poem to the early 90s ce. Stover carefully surveys external and internal evidence and convincingly argues for an earlier dating: as he points out, Vespasian was still alive and is addressed as such in Valerius' prefatory dedication, whereas references to his apotheosis are futuristic and anticipated. According to Stover, Valerius died soon after the death of Vespasian, perhaps in the first few months after the assumption of power by Titus in 79 ce. But why is the date of the poem important for Stover's argumentation concerning the interpretation of its function? It is precisely because Stover reads the *Argonautica* as a reactionary poem to Lucan's Neronian *Bellum Civile*—in other words, as the poem of the renewal and rebirth of the empire under the Flavians, especially Vespasian ("the poetics of rehabilitation," 27).

Chapter 2 ("The Inauguration of the 'Argonautic Moment'") directs our attention to the socio-political message of Jupiter's prophecy in Book 1 of the *Argonautica*. By sharp contrast to Lucan's a-theistic epic, Valerius' reintroduction of divine machinery constitutes a strong message of restitution and renewal by the re-assertion of divine providence. Not every reader will agree with Stover's

arguments that Jupiter's prophecy offers a strongly positive message for the future of empire; in fact, as the author himself recognizes, "the dualistic structure of Valerius' narrative is not in dispute ... fear alternates with hope, tragedy with triumph, and collapse with refoundation" (42, 45). But, certainly, Valerius' message subverts Lucan's impasse: to the absolute dissolution of the cosmos, as described by the Neronian poet, the Flavian *vates* offers the Argonautic expedition as the first epic endeavor of all time and thus ratifies the strong bond between epic and empire. In Lucan, Nero becomes Phaethon; in Valerius, Vespasian becomes a latter-day Argonaut. Parallelisms between Vespasianic Rome and the Argonautic expedition confirm, according to Stover, the link between the two: the Flavian dynasty provides the empire with the "new Argonautic moment" that will give rise to the infinite abilities of *virtus*.

In the third chapter ("The Sea Storm and Political Allegory"), Stover investigates the role of the storm in the first book as a marker of political subversion, similar to Olympian Gigantomachy. Despite Boreas' and Aeolus' efforts to put a stop to the mission of the Argonauts, the heroes emerge as "pious enforcers" of Jupiter's *Weltplan* (79). The poet's endeavor to depict the voyage as an "act of reunification" (91) is in accordance with his portrayal of the Argonauts as the anti-Caesar of Lucan's storm in *Bellum Civile* 5. If the Argonauts are the enforcers of Jupiter's will, then Vespasian is also the stabilizer of a disturbed world after the death of Nero and the civil war of 69 ce.

Chapter 4 ("Gigantomachy and Civil War in Cyzicus") examines the central episode of the battle in Cyzicus in the third book. Again the theme of Gigantomachy serves as the springboard for Stover's analysis of civil-war narratives. Certainly, many readers of Valerius will not be persuaded by Stover's arguments here that the poet presents civil war with a positive function, that is, as a new beginning that leads to new structures or the reconstruction of old mechanisms. Civil war narratives in Valerius are complex, and, I believe, often with a negative message (cf. Stover's n. 93, p. 149 concerning Colaxes, who defies categorization). For sure, Valerius presents the Cyzicans as Giants who oppose the Argonautic mission, but what the reader would have liked to see here is an extensive analysis of the civil war in Book 6 (which is now confined to a three-page appendix) and how exactly this episode functions as the beginning that leads to something new.

The fifth chapter ("The Vespasianic *Vates*") concentrates on prophetic figures in the *Argonautica*, such as Phineus and Mopsus in particular, as contrasted to Lucan's Phemonoe. Unlike Lucan, Valerius fashions vatic enterprises as a "starting over," the renewal offered after moments of crisis in the epic. In other

words, Stover persuasively argues, *carmen* “is essential for the maintenance of order” (152), a reversal of the Lucanian function of the prophet-poet who obstructs the revelation of a nefarious, disastrous future. Stover’s discussion inextricably links the *Argonautica* to Vespasianic Rome: as a song of “purification” and renewal, the Roman *Argonautica* marks an era of new beginnings and the refoundation of the empire under the Flavians.

In the final chapter (“Recuperating the Hero: Medea and the Issue of Jason’s *Virtus*”), Stover addresses the controversial issue of Jason’s heroism, especially from the perspective of Medea’s contributions to the restoration of Jason’s image. For instance, Jason’s *aristeia* functions, Stover claims, as a sort of “poetic recovery” of his heroic stature. I expected a more thorough discussion of Jason and Medea in the final, unfinished book of the poem and a more detailed examination of Jason-qua-Vespasian and his role in Flavian Rome, but perhaps Stover will undertake the task in a future study.

Undoubtedly, this is a highly recommended book for all students and critics of Latin epic and of Imperial epic in particular. Its insightful and challenging views will provoke future discussion and studies on the fascinating poem of Valerius Flaccus.

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