

BOOK REVIEW

Valerius Flaccus: Argonautica Book 8: Edited with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary. By CRISTIANO CASTELLETTI, ANTONY AUGOUSTAKIS, MARCO FUCECCHI, AND GESINE MANUWALD. Oxford Commentaries on Flavian Poetry. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. ix + 273. Hardback, \$170.00. ISBN: 978-0-192-86589-2.

This volume is the latest in the Oxford Commentaries on Flavian Poetry series, designed to provide authoritative and accessible commentaries on literature of the era, following editions on Books 3 and 9 of Silius Italicus' *Punica* and Book 7 of Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*. Before his untimely death, Castelletti translated his Italian commentary on *Argonautica* 8 into English. In 2012 Pelluchi and Lazzarini published Italian commentaries on this book, which are frequently referenced by Castelletti, but his is the first in English. It therefore fills an important gap for scholars of Flavian literature, covering the final, incomplete book of Valerius' epic, which narrates Medea's fateful flight from her father and homeland with the faithless Jason. In Castelletti's memory, Augoustakis, Fucecchi and Manuwald, completed the project, editing it for this series but keeping the substance unchanged. The resulting product consists of an Introduction (1-13), Text and Translation (15-47) and Commentary (49-254), supplemented by: a list of abbreviations (ix); a bibliography (255-267) divided into "Editions, Commentaries and Translations of Valerius Flaccus" and "Other Works"; an "Index Locorum" and "General Index" (269-273). The latter is selective, making it brief and leaving some entries incomplete, for example those for Hercules.¹

Divided into four sections, the slim introduction begins with Castelletti outlining context and aim, promising a new interpretation of Book 8 and the entire poem. Next, "The Poem's Ideology in a *Sphragis*" considers Aratus' influence on the *Argonautica*, revealing Castelletti's particular scholarly focus. While

¹ The index mentions Hercules on pp. 2, 6-7, 52, 107, 115-116, 122, 124-125, 167-169, but he also appears on pp. 96-97, 136, 176, 181, 212-213.

interesting much space is devoted to this theory, where more widely held views might be expected, perhaps indicating that it was not originally written with this series in mind. In “The Eighth Book and the End of the Poem,” the abrupt ending and intended length of the *Argonautica* is discussed surprisingly briefly for a commentary on this final extant book. This pertinent matter also receives a relatively cursory examination in the commentary itself²: for example, the interesting idea that the Peuce episode ended with Absyrtus’ death, on the basis of a comparison with the section leading to Cyzicus’ death, warrants more attention (182). Finally, “Text, *Sigla*, Editions, and Textual Abbreviations” explains the manuscript tradition, setting out *sigla*, manuscripts derived from Laurentianus Plut. produced after 1429, early modern editions and other works abbreviated in the *apparatus criticus*. Castelletti’s approach is thorough, comparing all previously published major editions from 1474 onwards and examining the principal manuscripts himself.

The Latin verse is faced by Castelletti’s English prose translation, offering a welcome update to Mozley’s 1934 Loeb edition. The easy style, making Book 8 more widely accessible, is one of this commentary’s greatest assets. The epic’s loftiness is sometimes diminished by suitably informal translations, such as “hug” instead of “embrace” for *amplexus* (8.11, 17); here, this familiarity expresses the closeness between Medea and her father, thereby underscoring her sacrifice in betraying him. The manuscript variations are detailed beneath each page of Latin text, reflecting the impressive level of scholarship involved.

The commentary itself divides the text into sections, each with a brief contextual introduction useful for those less familiar with the story. Castelletti offers an in-depth study, presenting insightful views on characters and fully considering Valerius’ literary influences, while detailing linguistic and stylistic points and discussing manuscript variations at length. His consideration of the uncertain and fragmentary final lines of the book, where he presents a full range of textual transmission options, demonstrates his comprehensive approach (243-254 *passim*).

Throughout, Castelletti highlights fundamental themes in Valerius’ version of the myth, such as Medea’s conflict between *pudor* and *furor*,³ a facet of her role as a Roman daughter preoccupied with *pietas* to her father; or the motif of *fides*, as Jason’s loyalty is increasingly called into question later in the book.⁴ Emphasis is

² See pp. 116, 123, 127-8, 136, 152, 155, 163, 174, 182-183, 202-203, 226, 229.

³ On pp. 56, 59, 80, 107, 109.

⁴ See pp. 231, 233-234, 236-238, 240, 242.

placed on the foreshadowing of dramatic events from later in Medea's story, and the resulting tragic irony contained therein.⁵ For example, Castelletti detects a hint of violence in Medea and Jason's sexual union in the cave, which presages both a doomed marriage and the future devastation in which it results (lines 255-256, 180-181).

The section discussing the dragon guarding the golden fleece (79-115) is particularly informative. Castelletti presents the view of Lüthje, that for Medea the dragon symbolizes her father (107-114 *passim*) and observes the parallel between the heroine and her pet, for whom she has much affection (107-109). Deriving from his interest in Aratus, he offers a celestial reading of the text which can somewhat detract from more established themes, such as the elegiac nature of this scene,⁶ which is not fully explored. There is much of merit, though, such as due recognition of Medea's now active role over the passive Jason.⁷

Castelletti offers carefully balanced scholarly views: for example, when Medea boards the Argo (8.121-133, 122), he notes that Hull believes Jason is of good faith, while Lewis and Lüthje discern his duplicity. His own views on these points are not always stated, but he presents his opinion convincingly on questions of textual transmission: for example, on line 263 (184-185), he successfully argues for the use of *diram* over *diro*, supported by evidence from a variety of sources.

Castelletti's points throughout are expressed with a refreshing clarity and precision, and this well-researched book has a highly professional finish which is pleasingly free from errors.⁸ This important contribution to the field undoubtedly achieves the aim of promoting further studies of Valerius' *Argonautica* and seems a fitting tribute to the memory of Castelletti.

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⁵ For example, pp. 56-64, 107, 110-111, 113, 126-127, 134-135, 163, 165-167, 170-172, 174, 178, 181, 184, 190, 226, 228, 234, 236, 238-239, 245, 250.

⁶ On which, see, for example, pp. 243-244 of La Penna, A. (1979): "Tipi e Modelli femminili nella Poesia dell'Epoca dei Flavi," *Studi Vespasiani: Congresso Internazionale: Programme and Papers 1979 Sept; Rieti, Italy*: 223-51; and pp.247-249 of Corrigan, K. (2013): *Virgo to Virago: Medea in the Silver Age*, Newcastle.

⁷ For example, pp. 79, 81, 84, 90.

⁸ Rare instances that can be found are *feens* given for *ferens* under the notes on line 135 (129), and the typographical error "indirecly" in the notes on lines 390-391 (228).