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Domitian and the Argonauts: The Trouble with Tyranny in the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus

In Valerius' *Argonautica*, elaborate descriptions of three non-Roman tyrants - Pelias, Amycus, and Aeetes - invite speculation on the extent to which these characters reflect the position and practices of the Roman emperor. The poem's insistent emphasis on the instability of these tyrants' reigns highlights the crisis created by the death or removal of an emperor, recalling the civil wars that ensued after the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and reflecting contemporary anxiety surrounding Domitian's lack of an heir. The connection between tyrannical regimes in the Argonautic world and Rome's political future is further underscored by a prophecy by Jupiter, who comments on the transitory nature of political power and seems to point to Rome as the nation that will put an end to the series of shifts in political power.

The Valerian Jupiter's allusion to Rome as the *imperium sine fine* indicated by Virgil's Jupiter in the *Aeneid*, however, is in tension with the frequent references to the inevitable end of the reigns of Pelias, Amycus, and Aeetes. Allusions to Pelias' death at the hands of his own children and also to the terrible torments that await Pelias in the underworld emphasize the consequences of the actions of a tyrant who compels his subjects to commit suicide. Amycus' graphic death at the hands of Pollux in a boxing match similarly suggests a world in which a just and appropriate end is expected, as he dies in the same manner as that to which he has subjected all earlier visitors to his kingdom. Finally, the treachery of Aeetes, who tricks Jason and the Argonauts into aiding him in the civil war against his brother Perses but then refuses to hand over the fleece as he had promised, is met in kind by his daughter Medea, who betrays her father by giving Jason drugs and spells that enable him to complete the labors Aeetes sets for him. The justness of this outcome is ultimately supported by the narrator, who declares Aeetes worthy of being deceived, and worthy of being abandoned.

What light can these stories of tyrants brought to justice shed on contemporary views of Domitian? Recent work has cautioned against taking at face value the harsh characterizations of Domitian by Tacitus, Pliny, and Suetonius (Jones, Southern). The link between tyrants depicted in poetry and the historical Domitian is even more tenuous, and, as Newlands' work on Statius' *Silvae* has shown, even direct comparisons between Domitian and typical tyrants such as Xerxes and Nero are not necessarily condemnations of Domitian himself. I suggest that reading Valerius' depictions of tyrants as an uncomplicated critique of Domitian fails to take account of more positive models of power in the poem, most especially Jason, whose reputation as a leader is insistently recuperated from his characterization in Apollonius' poem. Finally, while Senecan portraits of tragic tyrants - and thus also the emperor Nero - undeniably stand behind Valerius' characterizations of Pelias, Amycus, and Aeetes, their relation to Domitian remains an open question. Valerius' *Argonautica* suggests that Rome's future is *not* pre-determined, but rather depends upon the ability of the Roman emperor to differentiate himself from the behavior of the doomed tyrants depicted therein.