

Why is Jason Climbing the Dragon?

A Hidden Catasterism in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* 8

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This paper explains a controversial key passage in the episode of the capture of the Fleece in Valerius Flaccus (8.109–20). Through a complex network of allusions, involving an astronomical context, the poet exploits the analogies between the myth of the Golden Fleece and the myth of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides to establish a connection between the last actions of Jason in Colchis and the last labor of Hercules. The connection highlights the difference between the two characters and their destinies: Hercules will reach glory in the sky, while Jason will fall deeper into human tragedy. This feature also provides a concluding function to the poem, drawing together the beginnings and endings of Hercules' and Jason's *labores* with the beginning and ending of Valerius' epic.

In almost all the sources of the Argonautic myth, overcoming an enormous, sleepless dragon is the last obstacle to obtaining the Golden Fleece, but the way in which this task is performed varies among authors.¹ Early in the last book of his epic, Apollonius Rhodius devotes about forty lines to describe Jason's capture of the fleece (A. R. 4.127–66); Valerius Flaccus gives it more than half as much (V. Fl. 8.55–120). This is not the only time that the Flavian poet expands an episode inherited from his predecessor; but if we consider that in the Hellenistic poem “the fleece represents the single obsessive end,”² and that Valerius does not even mention it in either of his proems, it is worth exploring the differences. This is all the more true if we remember that instead of the retrieval of the Fleece, Valerius defines the catasterism of the Argo as the ultimate outcome of the adventure. Although in the Latin poem the Fleece is not “a vital thematic concern *per se*,”³

1. The Latin text of Valerius Flaccus is taken from Ehlers (1980); translations are adapted from Mozley (1934), unless otherwise noted. I would like to thank Joseph Farrell, Marco Fucecchi, Philip Hardie, Andrew Zissos, and the anonymous reviewers for their generous assistance and thoughtful comments. My thanks also go to Beatrice Cady for proofreading the paper and to the editor, Antony Augoustakis.

2. Hunter (1988) 440.

3. Zissos (2004) 316.

the way in which it is carried off is nonetheless highly suggestive. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on a key passage in the episode of the capture of the Fleece (V. Fl. 8.109–20) that has yet to be fully explained, and in particular to show that, through a characteristically clever network of allusions, Valerius establishes a connection between the last actions of Jason in Colchis and the last labor of another Argonautic hero, Hercules. The poet depicts parallel paths for the two heroes, but with contrasting destinies. In doing so, he exploits an astronomical context as well as the analogies between the myth of the Golden Fleece and that of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. As a result, he suggests that Hercules will rise towards the stars and will be given a place among the gods, while Jason faces a tragic future. This parallelism also provides a concluding function to the poem, drawing together the beginnings and endings of Hercules' and Jason's *labores*, while it also connects the beginning and ending of the epic itself in a sort of ring-composition.

In broad strokes, Valerius Flaccus follows the narrative of Apollonius in order to relate the episode of the Fleece's capture. Medea first invokes the god *Somnus* for help, calling on him to direct his might against the dragon. Because of the dragon's resistance, Medea uses all the power of the infernal forces, together with her magic words and gestures, to overcome the beast's glance. The monster finally collapses, and Medea addresses it with kind and affectionate words. Jason then asks her how he could reach the Fleece:

quaerenti tunc deinde uiam, qua se arduus heros
ferret ad aurigerae caput arboris, 'heia per ipsum
scande age et aduerso gressus' ait 'imprime dorso'.
nec mora fit. dictis fidens Cretheia proles
calcat et aeriam squamis perfertur ad ornum,
cuius adhuc rutilam seruabant bracchia pellem,
nubibus accensis similem aut cum ueste recincta
labitur ardenti Thaumantias obuia Phoebos.
corripit optatum decus extremumque laborem
Aesonides longosque sibi gestata per annos
Phrixiae monumenta fugae uix reddidit arbor
cum gemitu tristesque super coiere tenebrae. (V. Fl. 8.109–20)

Then when the hero asks how he should climb aloft to the summit of the gold-freighted tree: "Hurry," she cries, "go climb the serpent himself, and set your footsteps on his back!" With no delay Jason trusts her word and, over the scales, climbs the lofty ash tree, where still the branches held the glinting pelt, similar to illumined cloud or to Iris when she unbinds her robe and glides to meet glowing Phoebus. Jason snatches the longed-for

prize and the final fruit of toil, and the tree scarcely gave up the memorial of Phrixus' flight, its years-long burden, but it gave a groan and gloomy darkness closed in upon it.

Some scholars have found it comic, if not grotesque, that Medea should invite Jason to climb on the dragon, as if it were a stairway, in order to reach the Fleece.⁴ The image is indeed striking, and it is meant to be so. But except for any hint of comedy that may or may not be intended, the aim is above all to evoke a precise constellation. And in order to understand this scene fully, we need to clarify the elements of Valerius' allusive network.

The Astronomical Context

Valerius Flaccus is allusively constructing a scene that can be observed in the sky. I suggest that the reference here is to the constellation of Engonasin ("<the one> on his knees," the Kneeler),⁵ a figure usually identified as Hercules, who was raised to the heavens by means of catasterism to commemorate his triumph over the dragon of the Hesperides.⁶

If we look at a star chart, we can indeed see Hercules (Engonasin), as he is stepping over the Dragon constellation's head.⁷ (See page 144.)

To confirm that Valerius is indeed alluding to this image, we need to have a closer look at some preceding passages, where the astronomical context is already introduced. At the beginning of the episode, Medea and Jason arrive at the sacred grove of Mars, where the dragon is watching over the Fleece. Jason sees a flame in the sky, and asks what it is. Medea answers that this flame is produced by the dragon, which seems to have a special relationship with her:

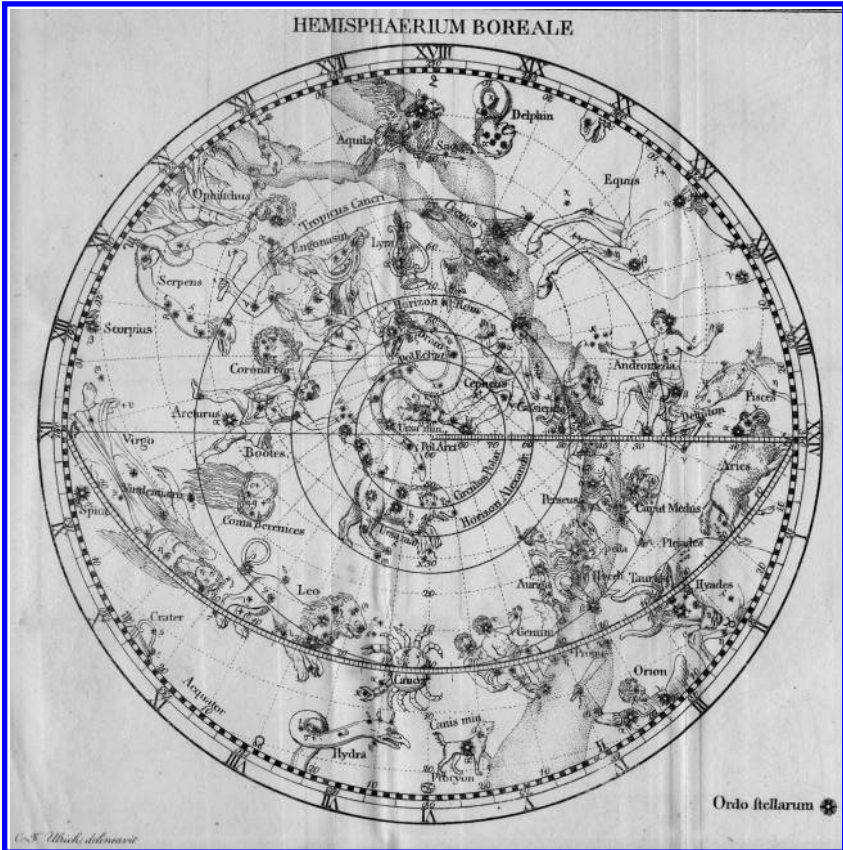
. . . . cum subito *ingentem* media inter nubila *flammas*
conspicit et saeva uibrantes luce tenebras.
'quis *rubor* iste *poli*? quod tam *lugubre refulsit*

4. E.g., Spaltenstein (2005) 410.

5. On this constellation, see Allen (1963) 238–46; Le Boeuffe (1977) 100–102 and 193.

6. Hyg. *Astr.* 2.6.1: *Engonasin. Hunc Eratosthenes Herculem dicit, supra Draconem conlocatum, de quo ante diximus, eumque paratum ut ad decertandum, sinistra manu pellem leonis, dextra clauam tenentem. Conatur interficere draconem Hesperidum custodem, qui numquam oculos operuisse somno coactus existimatur* ("The Kneeler. Eratosthenes says he is Hercules, placed above the dragon we have already mentioned, and prepared to fight, with his left hand holding his lion skin, and his right the club. He is trying to kill the dragon of the Hesperides, which, it is thought, never was overcome by sleep or closed its eyes, thus offering more proof it was placed there as a guard," trans. Grant). Cf. Eratosth. *Cat.* 4, with Pàmias and Geus (2007) 68–69 and notes; Santoni (2009) 70–71 and notes. See also Avien. *Ph.* 169–93.

7. The Dragon is right in the middle of the chart, and Hercules on his left.



Hemisphaerium Boreale. This celestial map is reproduced from Matthiae (1817). Image courtesy of Dr. Martin Fiedler.

sidus? ait, reddit trepido cui talia uirgo:
 ‘ipsius en oculos et lumina torua draconis
 aspicias. ille suis haec uibrat fulgura *cristis*
 meque pauens contra solam uidet ac uocat ultro,
 ceu solet, et blanda poscit me pabula lingua’ (V. Fl. 8.56–63)

When suddenly he sees an enormous flame amid the clouds and the darkness quivering with angry gleams of light. “What is that red glow in the sky, what is that baleful star?” he asks; and the maiden answers to his fear: “It is the eyes and angry glare of the dragon himself you see; he flashes these lightning bolts from his crests, only me he sees and fears, and of his

own accord he summons me, as he is accustomed to do, and with fawning tongue he asks me for food . . . ”

Snakes are of course frequently associated with flames (especially their glance),⁸ but here Valerius is playing on both the terrestrial and the celestial levels, as some scholars have already suspected. In particular, *rubor* and *lugubre refulsit sidus* have prompted Maserius to think of a comet, whose appearance in the sky was, in most cases, a very unfavorable sign. Liberman follows Maserius’ interpretation and quotes Vergil (*Aen.* 10.270–75),⁹ where Aeneas is compared to a comet and to the Dog Star Sirius.¹⁰ But these are not the only astronomical references, and the terminology used in the passage seems to point to the constellation Draco.¹¹

Called Δράκων or Ὀφίς by the Greeks, *Draco*, *Serpens* or *Anguis* by the Romans,¹² the constellation of the Dragon is still nowadays a circumpolar one, and in ancient times the star Thuban (α Draconis) served as the North Pole star. We can find the description of Draco in Aratus’ *Phaenomena*,¹³ its Roman translations and adaptations (such as Cicero’s), and its description in Eratosthenes.¹⁴

8. E.g., A. R. 4.1543–45; Verg. *G.* 3.433. See also Knox (1950) 379–400; Sauvage (1975) 244–45 and 251.

9. Liberman (2002) 352n38.

10. *ardet apex capiti cristisque a uertice flamma / funditur et uastos umbo uomit aureus ignis: / non secus ac liquida si quando nocte cometae / sanguinei lugubre rubent, aut Sirius ardor / ille sitim morbosque ferens mortalibus aegris / nascitur et laeua contristat lumine caelum* (“From the peak of Aeneas’ helmet flames are leaping forth and a deadly blaze comes pouring from its crest. The golden boss of his shield spews streams of fire, strong as the lethal, blood-red light of comets streaming on in a clear night, or bright as the Dog Star, Sirius, bearing plague and thirst to afflicted mortal, rises up to shroud the sky with gloom,” trans. Fagles). Valerius compares Jason to the Dog Star Sirius at 5.368–72 (the first meeting with Medea). On this simile and its astronomic implications, see Stover (2003) 133–46 and also Nelis (2001) 323.

11. On this constellation see Wagner (1905); Allen (1963) 202–12; Le Boeuffle (1977) 98–99 and 191. Cf. also Eratosth. *Cat.* 3, with Pâmias and Geus (2007) 64–65 and notes; Santoni (2009) 68–69 and notes.

12. For *Draco* see, e.g., Cic. *Arat.* 8.2; Vitruv. 9.4.6; Man. 1.627; Germ. *Arat.* 58; Avien. *Ph.* 140. *Serpens* in Vitruv. 9.4.6; Germ. *Arat.* 49; Hyg. *Astr.* 2.3.1. *Anguis* in Verg. *G.* 1.205, 244; Man. 1.306; Sen. *Thy.* 871.

13. Arat. *Phaen.* 45–50: τὰς δὲ δι’ ἀμφοτέρας οἷη ποταμοῖο ἀπορροῶς / εἰλεῖται, μέγα θαῦμα, Δράκων, περὶ τ’ ἀμφὶ τ’ ἐαγῶς / μυρίας· αἱ δ’ ἄρα οἱ σπείρης ἐκάτερθε φέρονται / Ἄρκτοι, κυανέου πεφυλαγμένα ὠκεανοῖο. / Αὐτὰρ ὁ γ’ ἄλλην μὲν νεάτη ἐπιτείνεται οὐρῇ, / ἄλλην δὲ σπεῖρη περιτέμνεται (“Between the two Bears, in the likeness of a river, winds a great wonder, the Dragon, writhing around and about at enormous length; on either side of its coil the Bears move, keeping clear of the dark-blue ocean. It reaches over one of them with the tip of its tail, and intercepts the other with its coil,” trans. Kidd). On how to interpret and translate ποταμοῖο ἀπορροῶς, see Possanza (2004) 146–49.

14. Eratosth. *Cat.* 3.

In Valerius the cosmic context is clearly signaled by words like *poli* (8.58),¹⁵ *sidus* (8.59), and *flammas* (8.56),¹⁶ while *lumina* (8.60) is polysemous, as it can mean the brightness of light-giving bodies, like the stars, or the glance of the eyes. Similar words are used to describe the catasterism of the Ram (Aries) in Valerius (in both cases they appear suddenly in the sky, and are large in size),¹⁷ but we can find most of them also in Cicero's comments on the Dragon constellation,¹⁸ including the same play with *oculi* and *lumina* (see fr. 9.3):

has inter, ueluti rapido cum gurgite flumen,
toruu' Draco serpit supter superaue *reuoluens*
 sese, conficiensque sinus e corpore flexos. (Cic. *Arat.* fr. 8 Soubiran)

Between the two [*Ursae*, i.e., the Big and the Little Bear], like river in full spate, the frowning Dragon, flexing sinuous coils, glides over and beneath them. (trans. Walsh);

huic non una modo caput ornans stella relucet,
 uerum tempora sunt duplici fulgore notata,
e trucibusque oculis duo feruida lumina flagrant,
 atque uno mentum radianti *sidere* lucet;
 obstipum caput, a tereti ceruice reflexum,
 obtutum in cauda Maioris figere dicas. (Cic. *Arat.* fr. 9 Soubiran)

No single shining star adorns his head, for dual brightness studs its countenance. From its fierce eyes twin flashing lights blaze forth; a single gleaming star ignites its chin. Its head is slanted, bent from tender neck; you'd swear it gazes on the Great Bear's tail. (trans. Walsh).

Scholars have argued about a possible pleonasm of *oculos* and *lumina* at V. Fl. 8.60,¹⁹ but I think that Valerius is alluding to Cicero's passage (which follows the Aratean tradition) in which *lumina* refers to the two stars that form the eyes (*oculi*) of the Dragon constellation.²⁰ Valerius is then allusively playing with both dragons, the one in the sky (8.56–60) and the one in Colchis

15. On the usage of *polus* in an astronomical context see, e.g., Le Boeuffe (1987) 219.

16. For the use of *flamma* when referring to stars, see *OLD* s.v. 5 and Le Boeuffe (1977) 42 (quoting several parallels, such as Germ. *Arat.* 56–57, referring to Draco).

17. *mira repente / flamma poli magnoque aries apparuit astro / aequora cuncta mouens* ("suddenly appeared a marvellous flame in heaven, and the ram in a vast constellation stirring up all the sea," V. Fl. 5.226–28).

18. *Polus* is used in Cic. *Arat.* fr. 4: *extremusque adeo duplici de cardine uertex / dicitur esse polus* ("the furthest point of the axis at either end is called the pole," trans. Walsh).

19. See discussions in Liberman (2002) 352n39 and Spaltenstein (2005) 398.

20. The two stars of the eyes are β and ν Draconis, while the temples (*tempora*) are γ and ξ Draconis.

(8.60–63). The switch is clearly made at line 62, when Medea is talking only about the one on earth, whereas line 60 (and maybe also 61) could be referring to both dragons.

A puzzling simile in V. Fl. 8.88–91 prompted scholars to suggest several explanations, but none fully satisfying.²¹ The meaning becomes clearer if we consider the astronomical implications. The dragon is about to surrender to Medea’s magic, and the poet describes the slope of its long neck, which is compared with three famous rivers:

iamque altae cecidere iubae nutatque coactum
iam caput atque ingens extra sua uellera ceruix
ceu *refluens* Padus aut *septem proiectus* in amnes
Nilus et *Hesperium* ueniens Alpheos in orbem. (V. Fl. 8.88–91)

And now the high crest sinks, now the head is nodding overpowered and the huge neck has slipped from around the fleece it guarded, like backwards-flowing Po or Nile that sprawls in seven streams or Alpheus when his waters enter the Hesperian world.

In the Aratean tradition, the Draco constellation is compared to a river (or a portion of a river) that flows between the two Bears (Arat. *Phaen.* 45–46; see quotation in n13 above). This same image recurs many times, not only in the Aratean translations, but also in Vergil (*G.* 1.245) and Seneca (*Thy.* 870), among other authors.²² Valerius seems to express the idea of the Aratean εἰλεῖται by the initial *refluens* of line 90 (*reuoluens*, Cic. *Arat.* 8.2). It seems likely that Valerius chooses the rivers Po (Eridanus) and Nile to emphasize the allusions to the celestial context, because these are names traditionally given to the constellation of River.²³ The “seven streams of the Nile” is a common expression in Latin literature,²⁴ but in this case *proiectus in septem* may be seen as a complementary way to allude to the seven stars of the Bears, towards which the Dragon constellation reaches. Besides, Valerius himself mentions this image elsewhere (V. Fl. 2.65), in an explicit reference to the Dragon constellation: . . . *serpens, septenosque implicat ignes* (“ . . . the Serpent that enfolds the seven stars”).²⁵

21. For discussion see Liberman (2002) 357–58.

22. See, e.g., Firm. *Mat.* 8.17.7; Cic. *Arat.* 8.1–3; Germ. *Arat.* 48–50; Avien. *Ph.* 138–41.

23. Cf. Germ. *Arat.* 617; Hyg. *Astr.* 2.32.1. On this constellation, see Allen (1963) 215–20; Le Boeuffe (1977) 139–40 and 203. Cf. also Eratosth. *Cat.* 37, with Pámias and Geus (2007) 186–87 and notes; Santoni (2009) 138–39 and notes.

24. See, e.g., Catul. 11.7–8; Verg. *Aen.* 6.800 (applied by Valerius at 4.718 to the Danube).

25. *Septenos* can refer to the seven stars of the two Bears, or only the Little Bear; see Poortvliet (1991) 61. For the *septem stellae* or *Septentriones*, see Le Boeuffe (1977) 87–91.

These allusions to an astronomical context are also supported by a passage in book 7. In 7.519–20, Medea warns Jason that, after defeating the bulls and the earth-born warriors, he would have to face a *saevior labor*, a “harsher task,” in the grove of Mars, namely the dragon, guardian of the Fleece. Medea also expresses this wish:

‘. . . O utinam [ut] nullo te sim uisura labore
 ipsam *caeruleis* squalentem *nexibus* ornum
 ipsaque *peruigilis calcantem lumina* monstri.
 contingat bis deinde mori!’ (V. Fl. 7.534–37)

“ . . . Ah, how I wish that I could see you climbing without hard work this
 ash tree, all rough and dark with interlacing spires, and trampling the eyes
 of the sleepless monster; then might I die twice!”

At line 536 some editors (e.g., Ehlers and Liberman) accept Meyncke’s correction *calcare uolumina*, but the manuscripts’ reading *calcantem lumina* is defended by Leo, Damsté, Morel, Courtney and Poortvliet.²⁶ None of these scholars refer to *lumina* as stars, but I think that Valerius is already playing on the double sense of the word, in preparation for the astronomical imagery that underlies the scene in which Jason actually does tread upon the snake’s *lumina* in book 8.²⁷ There Medea’s wish will be fulfilled,²⁸ but the scene depicted here already alludes to what is visible in the sky.²⁹

As we have already observed, the circumpolar Draco is mainly interpreted as the guardian of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, defeated by Hercules.³⁰ In Valerius a connection between Jason and Hercules is made explicit by a simile,³¹ which provides other astronomical references:

*micat omnis ager uillisque comantem
 sidereis totos pellem nunc fundit in artus,*

26. See Damsté (1921) 401–2; Morel (1938) 71; Courtney (1970) 158; Poortvliet (2003) 609–10.

27. *Caeruleis nexibus* (V. Fl. 7.535) could also refer to the astronomical context.

28. Note the similarities between *caeruleis squalentem nexibus ornum / ipsaque peruigilis calcantem lumina monstri* (V. Fl. 7.535–36) and *calcat et aeriam squamis perfertur ad ornum* (V. Fl. 8.113).

29. The cosmic context would still be present, even with the emendation *calcare uolumina*, if we think, for instance, of Germ. *Arat.* 49.

30. Eratosth. *Cat.* 3; Hyg. *Astr.* 2.6.1; Avien. *Ph.* 169–93. Some sources identify it as Python killed by Apollo or the dragon killed by Cadmus (*Schol. Arat.* 45); for others it was Athena who catasterized a dragon in the Gigantomachy (Hyg. *Astr.* 2.3.2; *Schol. Germ.* 60.15–17 Br.); or it was Zeus who transformed himself into a constellation for his own protection (*Schol. Arat.* 46). It is worth noticing that, as far as we know, it is never the dragon of Colchis (and Valerius might be playing on this).

31. On this simile, see also below n63.

nunc in colla refert, nunc implicat ille sinistrae:
talis ab Inachiis Nemeae Tiryntius antris
ibat adhuc aptans umeris capitique leonem. (V. Fl. 8.122–26)

The whole landscape flashes while the hero now drapes about his body the Fleece with its starry tufts of hair, now shifts it to his neck, now folds it upon his left arm. Likewise went the Tiryntian from the Inachian caves of Nemea, still fitting the lion to his head and to his shoulders.

The pelt is described as *comantem sidereis uillis*. *Sidereus* points to the *sidera*, but the participle *comantem* seems to refer to a comet. More precisely, I think that Valerius is alluding here to the famous passage of *Met.* 15.746–50, in which Ovid mentions the catasterism of Caesar.³² We may also add that Augustus calls Caesar’s comet a *sidus crinitum* (Plin. *Nat.* 2.94), and one may spot an echo of this in *uillisque comantem / sidereis . . . pellem* (8.122–23).³³ Lastly, the celestial context is also suggested by the glittering of the Fleece, which is compared to *nubibus accensis* (“illuminated cloud,” V. Fl. 8.115) and to Iris, the rainbow (*ardenti . . . obuia Phoebos*, “to meet glowing Phoebus,” 8.116).

The Hesperides

As I have previously observed, the constellation Draco represents the catasterized guardian of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, who was slain by Hercules. I would like now to focus on Valerius’ references to this final labor of the Tiryntian hero,³⁴ since it will help us understand better the poet’s intentions.

The similarities between the tales of the Golden Apples, guarded by a great serpent in a grove located at the westernmost point of the known world, and the Golden Fleece, guarded by another great serpent in a grove at the easternmost edge, were already known to ancient authors.³⁵ A passage that seems to have inspired Valerius is Dido’s evocation of a Massylian priestess,³⁶ where the

32. In the same metrical position in Ov. *Met.* 15.749: *stellamque comantem*.

33. P. Hardie *per litteras* suggests that *scande* (in 8.111) seems to be inspired by Ov. *Fast.* 1.297–98.

34. On this labor, see Sittig (1913); *LIMC* 5.1 (1990) 100–111 s.v. *Herakles and the Hesperides (Labour XII)* (G. L. Kokkorou-Alewrás); Gantz (1993) 410–13. There is no uniformity among ancient sources concerning the precise order of the twelve labors, but the last two are usually the descent to Hades and the Golden Apples of the Hesperides (and the order of these two final labors varies). For discussion and references, see *LIMC* 5.1 (1990) 5–6 s.v. *Herakles Dodekathlos* (J. Boardman).

35. E.g., Pease (1935) on *Aen.* 4.483.

36. Verg. *Aen.* 4.480–86: *Oceani finem iuxta solemque cadentem / ultimus Aethiopum locus est, ubi maximus Atlas / axem humero torquet stellis ardentibus aptum: / hinc mihi Massylae gentis monstrata sacerdos, / Hesperidum templi custos, epulasque draconi / quae dabat, et sacros seruabat in arbore ramos, / spargens umida mella soporiferumque papauer* (“Close to the bounds of Ocean,

similarities between the myth of the Golden Apples and the tale of the Golden Ram can be detected: both are set in a very remote land (the far West in the *Aeneid*, the far East in the *Argonautica*), they both have a powerful enchantress (the Massylian priestess, Medea) and a golden treasure, watched by a sleepless dragon, which is lulled to sleep by drugs or charms. Both the Massylian priestess and Medea have a unique relationship with the dragon, and they feed him; they use honey and drugs, and they have magic powers over nature. Valerius uses this Vergilian passage for his very first description of the dragon³⁷ and employs it again in book 8.³⁸

Another source is Diodorus Siculus, who proposes a rationalistic explanation of the Hesperides myth, claiming that χρυσῶ μῆλα were not “golden apples” but “beautiful sheep” (the word μῆλον means both); Dracon was the name of their shepherd (Diod. Sic. 4.26.2–3). With this kind of interpretation the similarities between the two myths could lead to confusion, whether accidental or deliberate,³⁹ and Valerius takes advantage of this opportunity to embed in his narrative several allusions to the Hesperides tale.

But before Valerius, and even before Vergil, another poet (from whom both certainly take inspiration) had already exploited these similarities: Apollonius Rhodius. The episode of the Hesperides is narrated in *Arg.* 4.1396–1484, during the home-leg of the Argonauts’ journey: the heroes arrive at the desert of Libya, at the other end of the Mediterranean from where they had last seen Heracles (who was segregated from the expedition after Hylas’ abduction), and are desperate with thirst. They reach the Garden of the Hesperides, where on the previous day Heracles had brutally killed the dragon and left the tree despoiled

west with the setting sun, lies Ethiopian land, the end of the earth, where colossal Atlas turns on his shoulder the heavens studded with flaming stars. From here, I have heard, a Massylian priestess comes who tended the temple held by Hesperian daughters. She’d safeguard the boughs in the sacred grove and ply the dragon with morsels dripping loops of oozing honey and poppies drowsy with slumber,” trans. Fagles).

37. V. Fl. 1.60–63: *tantoque silet possessa dracone / uellera, multifidas regis quem filia linguas / uibrantem ex adytis cantu dapibusque uocabat / et dabat externo liuentia mella ueneno* (“ . . . he said nothing of the Fleece guarded by so fearsome a dragon, which, as it flicked its forked tongues, the king’s daughter was accustomed to summon forth from its innermost sanctuary by incantation and by food, and to give it honey livid with a venom not its own,” trans. Zissos).

38. V. Fl. 8.95–97: *non ego te sera talem sub nocte uidebam / sacra ferens epulasque tibi nec talis hianti / mella dabam ac nostris nutribam fida uenenis* (“You were not so, when I saw you in the deep of the night, bringing the holy offerings and your food; nor such was I when I placed the honey-cakes in your open mouth and faithfully fed you with my potions.”)

39. Cf. Man. 5.16, where Feraboli and Scarcia (2001) 437–38 spot echoes of Vergil’s possible confusion between these two myths.

of its Golden Apples. The Hesperides bemoan their loss and tell the Argonauts the story, with anger against Heracles, who is compared to a beast of the field when filling his belly from a spring he had caused to flow by kicking a rock. But the spring is the salvation of the Argonauts, as one of them observes: “A true wonder! Though he is far away, Heracles has saved his comrades who were worn out by thirst; if only we could find him on his travels as we traverse the broad land” (*Arg.* 4.1458–60, trans. Hunter). Some of the Argonauts dash off to find him,⁴⁰ but they all fail. “As for Heracles, Lynceus alone at that time thought that he saw him far away across the vast land, as a man sees or imagines he sees the moon through a mist at the beginning of a new month” (*Arg.* 4.1477–80, trans. Hunter). Lynceus rejoins his companions, swearing to them that none of the searchers would be able to catch up with Heracles on his route.

As Feeney rightly observes, at the moment when the Argonauts come closest to Heracles, they are in fact further away from him than they have ever been: “As Lynceus says, they will never catch him up. The vast difference between their principal achievement and his is heightened by a systematic series of correspondences. Heracles, in the further West, takes golden μῆλα from a tree guarded by a serpent, which he kills. The rationalisers of myth claimed that these μῆλα were really sheep. Jason, in the furthest East, takes the golden fleece of a ram from a tree guarded by a serpent, which is lulled into sleep by the magic of Medea. Jason’s unwitting ‘anticipation’ of Heracles deed reveals the difference and the distance between them.”⁴¹ We will come back to this comment by Feeney, but let us first consider the references to the Hesperides myth in Valerius Flaccus’ treatment of the capture of the Fleece. It is important to observe that the allusions are found mainly in Medea’s words and actions.

The tale of the Hesperides is reported variously in the sources, but it follows basically two main schemata: Atlas obtains the apples while Heracles takes his place supporting the heavens;⁴² or Heracles himself obtains the Golden Apples from the tree after killing the guardian snake. The first version is recounted in detail by Pherecydes⁴³ and Apollodorus,⁴⁴ while Apollonius follows the second

40. Apart from Canthus, they all have peculiar abilities: the sons of Boreas can fly; Euphemus is the fastest runner; Lynceus possesses spectacular eyesight.

41. Feeney (1986) 63–64.

42. Advised by Prometheus, Heracles asks the Titan Atlas to collect the fruit from the garden of the Hesperides. Meanwhile, Heracles carries the sky on his shoulders. When Atlas returns, amazed by the feeling of being without the burden of the sky, he declares that he will carry the Apples to Eurystheus himself. Heracles pretends to agree but begs him to hold the sky just for a moment, while he puts a cushion on his head; then he escapes, cheating the Titan.

43. Cf. *Schol. ad A. R.* 4.1396–99a.

44. See Apollod. 2.5.11. Apollodorus also refers to the version in which Heracles kills the snake.

version at *Arg.* 4.1396–1460. Now if we take a closer look at the first speech that Medea addresses to the dragon in Valerius, we can spot echoes of the first version of the tale:

te quoque, Phrixiae pecudis fidissime *custos*,
tempus ab hac oculos tandem deflectere *cura*.
quem metuis me adstante *dolum?* *seruabo parumper*
ipsa nemus; *longum* interea tu pone *laborem*. (V. Fl. 8.75–78)

And you too, faithful guardian of Phrixus' sheep, it is time at last to turn your eyes away from this duty of yours. What treachery do you fear while I am beside you? I will guard the grove myself for a little; in the meantime take some rest from your long labor.

Just like the dragon, Atlas performs a *longus labor* characterized as a *cura*; in both cases a *dolus* is perpetrated (Heracles cheats Atlas, Medea cheats the dragon); the emphatic *seruabo parumper* would fit both situations.

Medea also calls to mind the second version of the tale (Heracles killing the dragon) in her brief speech of consolation to the sleeping dragon:

quam grauida nunc mole iaces, quam segnis inertem
flatus habet! *nec te saltem, miserande, peremi*.
heu saeuum passure diem, iam nulla uidebis
uellera, nulla tua *fulgentia dona* sub umbra. (V. Fl. 8.98–101)

In what a heavy mass you now lie, what sluggish breathing holds you inert!
But at least, poor thing, I did not kill you. Alas! How cruel the daylight
you shall endure! Soon shall you see no fleece, no gleaming offerings in
the shadow of your tree.

Andrew Zissos points out that the phrase *nec te saltem, miserande, peremi* makes reference to the Euripidean version of the Argonautic myth (in which Medea herself kills the dragon), one of the possibilities rejected by Valerius in his narrative;⁴⁵ but the same words could also allude to the version of the Hesperides myth recounted by Apollonius, in which Heracles kills the dragon. Moreover, Medea describes the Fleece as *fulgentia dona*. The *uellera* are considered *fulgentia dona*, because Phrixus donated the Fleece to Aietes, and it had been consecrated to Mars (V. Fl. 1.528). But *fulgentia dona* could also describe the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, Gaia's wedding gift to Zeus and Hera (Pherecyd. *FGrH* 3F16a), and also Aphrodite's to Hippomenes (Theoc. *Id.* 3.40–42; Ov. *Met.* 10.560–707).⁴⁶

45. Zissos (1999) 291.

46. One wonders whether Valerius is thinking here of Lucretius (5.32) and Lucan (9.366–67), later echoed by Silius Italicus (3.282–83).

In a brief summary of her actions a few lines later, Medea declares:

patrios exstinxi noxia tauros,
terrigenas in fata dedi: fusum ecce draconis
corpus habes! (V. Fl. 8.106–8)

Guilty I quenched my father's bulls, I slew the earth-born men; look, there
lies the dragon's body at your feet!

Medea refers here to the bulls, the earth-born warriors, and the dragon, all overcome thanks to her magic (V. Fl. 7.556–643), but the same words could fitly describe a few of the Herculean labors, such as the bulls, the Hydra,⁴⁷ and the dragon of the Hesperides. Finally, references to Hesperides can be detected in the simile at V. Fl. 8.88–91, already quoted above.

It may be a coincidence, but the only passage in which the same three rivers of the simile appear together seems to be a sequence of Hesiod that comes right after the mention of the snake watching over the Hesperides:

Κητώ δ' ὀπλότατον Φόρκυι φιλότητι μιγείσα
γείνατο δεινὸν ὄφιν, ὃς ἐρεμνῆς κεύθεσι γαίης
πεύρασιν ἐν μεγάλοις παγχρύσεια μῆλα φυλάσσει.
τοῦτο μὲν ἐκ Κητοῦς καὶ Φόρκυος γένος ἐστί.
Τηθὺς δ' Ὠκεανῶ ποταμοὺς τέκε δινήεντας,
Νεῖλόν τ' Ἀλφειὸν τε καὶ Ἑριδανὸν βαθυδίνην. (Hes. *Theog.* 333–38)

The youngest that Ceto bore in shared intimacy with Phorcys was the fearful serpent that guards the golden apples in a hidden region of the dark earth, at its vasty limits. That is the descendance of Ceto and Phorcys. Tethys bore to Oceanus the swirling Rivers, the *Nile*, *Alpheus*, and deep-swirling *Eridanus*. (trans. West)

In the second line of Valerius' simile, we read: *Hesperium ueniens Alpheos in orbem*. Flowing between Elis and Arcadia, the Alpheus is the main river of the Peloponnese. Several sources talk about the attempts of the river-god to seduce the goddess Artemis and the Nymphs.⁴⁸ For instance, Alpheus follows Artemis (or Arethusa) all the way to Ortygia, into the middle of the harbor of Syracuse in Sicily, where the nymph is transformed into a spring. The phrase *Hesperium orbem* alludes then to a western land, *Hesperia*, an ancient name for Italy; but the choice of *Hesperius* may function as another gesture towards the *Hesperides*, especially if we consider that this is the only occurrence of this adjective in Valerius, who seems to be inspired by a line of the *Metamorphoses*, at the

47. These tasks (the Hydra and the bulls) are also mentioned in V. Fl. 1.35–36, on which see Zissos (2008) 102–5. Cf. also V. Fl. 7.622–24, with Perutelli (1997) 467–68.

48. On Alpheus, see *LIMC* 1.1 (1981) 576–78 s.v. *Alpheios* (O. Palagia).

very beginning of Ovid's account of the Hesperides myth (*constitit Hesperio, regnis Atlantis, in orbe, Met. 4.628 ~ Nilus et Hesperium ueniens Alpheos in orbem, V. Fl. 8.81*; with the same metrical position for both *in orbe ~ in orbem* and *Hesperio ~ Hesperium*, but with *Alpheos* instead of *Atlantis*).

What conclusions can we draw from the above observations? In the episode of the capture of the Fleece, it is Medea, not Jason, who accomplishes all the work to neutralize the dragon. Moreover, in some passages she seems to play the role of Hercules himself.⁴⁹ The embedded allusions to the Hesperides myth suggest that, while describing what is called Jason's "last labor" (*extremumque laborem, 8.117*), Valerius is also alluding to Hercules' last labor. This would not only confirm what we have argued in the previous section about the astronomical allusions in the narrative, but it could also lead us to other important issues.

The first such issue is linked to the above-mentioned passage in Apollonius (4.1396–1484). According to Feeney's observations, Heracles managed to fulfill the conditions set forth by the sea-god Glaucus at the end of Apollonius' first book. He has completed his labors, he has taken the Golden Apples of eternal life, which represent his final labor, and he has won his prize of immortality.

He has gone virtually all the way down the path towards becoming a god, and that is the extraordinary interstitial point which Apollonius captures in that beautiful moment when Lynceus sees him in the far distance, or thinks he sees him. In this last mention of him in the poem, he is passing out of the world of men, and into the world of gods. In saving his companions, even in his absence, he has already begun to fulfill the functions of a god. At the moment when the Argonauts come closest to him, they are in fact further away from him than they have ever been; as Lynceus says, they will never catch him up. . . . In this last scene, Apollonius luxuriates in the paradoxes at his command. Just when Heracles lays his hands on his guarantee of apotheosis, Apollonius casts him at his most brutish, a creature of violence, wearing the raw untanned hide of a beast (1438 f.). Heracles causes misery to the Hesperides, but as the ἀλεξίκακος he saves the Argonauts.⁵⁰

If we consider Valerius' treatment of the episode of the capture of the Fleece, we could apply the same observations. Hercules is not physically present, but his actions are suggested by Medea's words and behavior. Like Heracles, Medea

49. Echoes of such an exchange of roles can be found, e.g., in V. Fl. 8.55 (*ille haeret comes*, "he clings to her side"), a phrase which suggests an infantilization of Jason towards Medea, similar to that of Hylas towards Hercules (V. Fl. 3.486: *haeret Hylas lateri passusque moratur iniquos*, "Hylas keeps close to his side, delaying the strides that are too long for him"), which is in turn inspired by Ascanius and Aeneas in Verg. *Aen.* 2.723–24. See Garson (1963) 261–62.

50. Feeney (1986) 63–64.

saves Jason and the Argonauts. To do so, she uses supernatural powers, including control over nature; the strength of her action has a cosmic range, since she summons up also all the infernal forces (V. Fl. 8.68–74 and 83–87). In her magic *furor* she recalls Seneca's Medea, who was able to impose her power over constellations, and in particular to force all the snakes of the sky to come down and give her their poisons (Sen. *Med.* 692–702). Valerius' Medea puts the Colchian dragon to sleep, but at the same time, the astronomical allusions suggest that her power is also directed against the celestial Draco (in a sort of *deductio*), which matches the Hercules/Engonasin supremacy over the stellified dragon. But in her magic trance Medea also becomes a sort of monstrous being (8.67, 83–87, 108). Like Heracles, she inflicts pain on the dreadful dragon (which she then mourns), but as ἀλεξίκακος, she saves the Argonauts. If this reading is correct, Valerius is then reworking Apollonius' passage, but his *uariatio* raises an issue: if Medea is the real hero, what about Jason? And what about the comparison with Hercules? We shall discuss this crucial point in the next section.

Hercules and Jason

The general parallel between Hercules and Jason has been clearly drawn by Valerius from the beginning of the poem (V. Fl. 1.31–36).⁵¹ The tasks that Jason will have to accomplish under Pelias are similar to the ones Hercules had executed under Eurystheus. Moreover, both heroes run into another tyrant in their paths: Aetes, in Colchis, for Jason, and Laomedon, in the Troad, for Hercules. Hercules participates in the Argonautic expedition from the beginning, but he is separated from his comrades when he goes on the quest for his beloved Hylas, who has been abducted by a nymph. The hero of Tiryns will not meet the other Argonauts again but will continue his journey alone: his destiny is to perform labors and reach the realm of the gods. During the whole outbound journey, Jason and Hercules are very close, and the latter seems to be a heroic model for the former, but without showing a clear superiority, such as we find in Apollonius. In Valerius Flaccus' poem, Hercules performs two remarkable tasks that are not described in the Hellenistic *Argonautica*: the liberations of Hesione at 2.451–549 and of Prometheus at 5.154–76. With each task, Hercules becomes greater and more elevated, and his increasing distance from the other Argonauts is not only physical, but also metaphysical.⁵² The hero's destiny has already been foreshadowed, as has the way in which it will be achieved, in a programmatic speech delivered by Jupiter

51. On this passage, see Zissos (2008) 100–5. Jason himself equates his labors with those of Hercules at 5.486–88.

52. As observed by Galinsky (1972) 163–64.

in the middle of the first book: the king of the Olympians announces his vision of the future, which involves competition for power among the world's nations;⁵³ he then addresses Hercules and the Dioscuri, predicting that they will win a place among the stars, but only through labors and struggle (1.561–67). Jupiter gives voice to a Stoic vision of heroism: stars will be the reward (1.563), but this can only be obtained through labors.⁵⁴ Hercules is indeed the paradigmatic Stoic hero: all the tasks he accomplishes in the poem are full of *uirtus* and *amor laborum* and are performed in an unselfish quest for a heroic contribution to humankind.

Whereas the interpretation of Hercules' character in the Latin *Argonautica* is relatively straightforward, scholars continue to disagree about Jason's character and his heroism. Hull's positive interpretation of Jason⁵⁵ has been strongly questioned by Lewis, who applies a close reading of similes.⁵⁶ Lüthje proposes a negative reading of Jason's character by contrasting his egotistical pursuit of glory to Hercules' unselfish heroism.⁵⁷ More recently Hershkowitz has once again seen Jason as a largely positive character throughout the epic, and Hercules as a complement, rather than a foil,⁵⁸ while Delarue,⁵⁹ following Lüthje's view, suggests Jason is an "héros manqué" by pointing out all the negative traits of the character throughout the poem. The most recent contribution is by Ripoll, who criticizes the two main contrasting points of view and argues instead that the question of Jason being a hero or an anti-hero is irrelevant, because the

53. On Jupiter's world plan (V. Fl. 1.531–67) see most recently Zissos (2008) 314–15, with bibliography.

54. On the Stoic elements in Jupiter's speech (particularly the impartial operation of fate), see Billerbeck (1986) 3129–30.

55. Hull (1979) follows Adamietz's position ([1970] 35–38 and [1976] 6, 65–66) that Valerius strove not to weaken Jason's leadership (as in Apollonius) by incorporating Hercules into the poem, but to provide a suitable model for Jason.

56. Lewis (1984) 95–96. On Jason's negative portrayal, see also Feeney (1991) 327n46 and Edwards (1999) 158–63.

57. Lüthje (1971) 76–78, 138, and 373–75.

58. Hershkowitz (1998) 105–28 (discussion and bibliography especially in nn1–8) and 146–59. On the relationship between Jason and Hercules in Valerius, see also: Piot (1965) 352–58, who highlights the metaphysical meaning of the two Herculean rescues, detecting a Stoic-Pythagorean influence; Galinsky (1972) 163–64 resumes this interpretation and insists on the superhuman dimension of Hercules; Ripoll (1998) 88–112 singles out the unity and coherence of Hercules' character (denied by Spaltenstein), and traces the evolution of his tasks, which start from a human level and progress to a divine one. His journey is paradigmatic of a hero's career, and Jason accomplishes it in Hercules' footsteps, but on a human scale, since the heroes have different natures (Hercules is Jupiter' son, while Jason is fully human). See also Zissos (2008) 100–2 and Río Torres-Murciano (2011) 41–43.

59. See Delarue (2004).

poet's purpose is not to elevate or denigrate Jason, but pointedly to elicit different emotions in accordance with the poetic project in which *pathos* is more important than *ethos*.⁶⁰

The complexity of Jason's character and his relation to the paradigmatic figure of Hercules become perhaps more understandable if we consider the bipartite structure of this poem. As observed by Zissos, the epic is divided into two "thematically and teleologically disconnected halves. The first half of the epic takes as its overarching theme the opening of the seas (the Argonauts' voyage involves technological conquest as part of a broader civilizing mission) and projects a generally positive sense of the future. The second half features internecine strife, destructive sexual passion, and familial betrayal, and insistently adumbrates a tragic conclusion to the Argonauts' voyage."⁶¹ Otte has discussed the devaluation of Jason's character after the arrival at Phasis, attributing the gradual negativity of the hero to his exposure to the Eastern world (and his encounter with Medea).⁶² In the first half of the poem, Jason seems therefore to follow the model of Hercules, showing positive heroic qualities. But in the second half the whole climate of the narrative changes, and Jason's heroic behavior becomes more and more ambiguous. In keeping with this perspective, I argue that the crucial scene of the capture of the Fleece provides several hints to support the reading that the Jason portrayed in the last book is no longer a clear example of heroism.

As observed in the first paragraph, the connection between Jason and Hercules is made explicit by the simile in V. Fl. 8.122–26.⁶³ For some scholars,⁶⁴ this simile proves that Jason has accomplished his heroic path, but a more careful examination is needed. By referring to the Nemean lion, Valerius links the last labor of Jason with the first of Hercules, and he sets the characters on two very different stages of their respective heroic path.⁶⁵ Moreover, although

60. Ripoll (2008) 182–83.

61. Zissos (2004) 311.

62. Otte (1992) 108–11.

63. See above p148–49. On this simile, see Adamietz (1970) 37–38; Hull (1979) 403; Lewis (1984) 95–96; Gärtner (1994) 224–25; Fucecchi (2002) 56–58. At the same point in the story, Apollonius (4.167–73) introduces a very controversial simile (Jason is compared to a young girl catching on her delicate gown the beam of a full moon). P. Hardie *per litteras* suggests that we may also spot an allusion to the episode of Omphale, since Jason seems to handle the lion's skin as a dress; if this is the case, it fits the whole allusive context of role-exchange between Hercules and Medea.

64. Hull (1979) 403 suggests that "now at last the hero has come into his own. . . . Now he has equalled Hercules who won the lion's skin: he has achieved truly heroic status of the traditional kind." See also Ripoll (1998) 92. *Contra* Lewis (1984) 95–96. A more nuanced reading is given by Fucecchi (2002) 56–57 who points out the possibility of a subjective perception by Jason in this simile.

65. On Valerius' use of the similes to highlight some ambiguities of Jason's character, see Gärtner (1994) 284–88, Caviglia (2002), and Fucecchi (2002).

Jason does finally claim the Fleece, we must ask whether he really deserves it. Lewis observes that “Jason has appropriated Hercules’ mantle, but he has not fully deserved it, for Hercules had overcome the Nemean lion by his own strength and ingenuity while Jason had merely to climb a tree to obtain the fleece after Medea has rendered the dragon harmless.”⁶⁶ And Feeney comments that “despite the fact that Jason compares himself to Hercules (5.487–88), his deed is actually performed for him by a woman, and therefore does not resemble Hercules’ labours at all. This point is stressed again when Jason actually has possession of the fleece, a moment described as his ‘last labour’ (8.117); again he is compared to Hercules (8.125–26), and again the simile points up the vast gulf between their deeds.”⁶⁷ As I have previously observed, in the episode of the Fleece’s capture it is indeed Medea who accomplishes all the work to neutralize the dragon, and in some passages she plays the role of Hercules himself. This is a relevant point for the interpretation of the Hercules-Jason parallelism. In particular, the embedded allusions to the Hesperides myth suggest that Valerius has composed a complex scene, in which we see in the foreground a non-heroic deed (Jason’s acquisition of the Fleece), and in the background a truly heroic labor (Hercules’ fetching of the Golden Apples).

At V. Fl. 8.117, we read that Jason *corripit optatum decus extremumque laborem*. The seizing of the Golden Fleece is thus considered as Jason’s last labor. Hercules’ last labor, which granted him immortality, was to fetch the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. The similarities between the catasterism of Hercules/Engonasin and the scene described in V. Fl. 8.110–16 allowed us to argue that the image of Jason trampling the dragon on earth alludes to what Hercules does in the sky. The dragon is then a sort of “stairway to heaven.” Thus could we see here the fulfillment of the command “strive for the stars, heroes” (*tendite in astra uiri*, 1.563) expressed by Jupiter in the programmatic speech of book 1, where the father of the gods announces his vision of the future?

As we know, Hercules will indeed find his place within the firmament; he achieves immortality, following his father’s will, by completing the *labores* that have been either narrated explicitly throughout the poem or, in the case of the final *labor*, alluded to in the passage that describes the acquisition of the Fleece. The poet’s choice of hinting at this labor highlights in an elegant way (inspired by Apollonius) the metaphysical dimension of the hero, who is about to become a god. Indeed, the final explicit mention of Hercules in the (extant) poem is in a simile inserted by the poet into the scene of Jason’s wedding with Medea. The *comparans* of the simile is Jason:

66. Lewis (1984) 95–96. *Contra* Gärtner (1994) 225–26.

67. Feeney (1991) 327n46.

... seu cum caelestes Alcidae inuisere mensas
iam uacat et fessum Iunonia sustinet Hebe. (V. Fl. 8.230–31)

... or when Hercules has leisure at last to visit the heavenly banquet, and Hebe, child of Juno, sustains him exhausted.

This simile shows that Hercules has finally reached the sky. He can enjoy the company of the other gods, together with a legitimate wife (the fact that Hebe is called *Iunonia* shows the final reconciliation between Hercules and Juno).

But what about Jason? Some scholars take the above simile as an indication that he has finally completed his heroic journey and can enjoy his deserved reward.⁶⁸ However, if we take a closer look, we notice that the simile is a double one. Jason is compared not only to Hercules, but also to Mars:

... qualis sanguineo uictor Gradius ab Hebro
Idalium furto subit aut dilecta Cythera. (V. Fl. 8.228–29)

... as Mars when he comes in triumph from bloody Hebrus' stream and steals into Idalium or beloved Cythera.

Jason has already been compared to Mars in book 7 when he subdued the bulls (7.645–46),⁶⁹ but this time the simile has another purpose. In the previous book, the comparison with Mars credited Jason as a brave warrior because he physically faced the bulls; in book 8 he is compared to Mars when the god furtively (*furto*) visits his mistress Venus. The latter is then a negative comparison, since the liaison between Mars and Venus is adulterous. Therefore, Jason is compared to an *adulter*, and this complicates the narrative by foreshadowing the events in Corinth, where Jason will have an adulterous relation with Creusa while married to Medea.⁷⁰ Moreover, this double simile has also a philosophical meaning, involving as it does the choice between *uirtus* and *uoluptas*, the paradigmatic (and proverbial) choice of Hercules.⁷¹ As we know, and as the poet suggests,

68. E.g., Ripoll (1998) 92–94. Hull (1979) 398–99 observes that “before his wedding Jason is compared to Mars as well as to Hercules when he has attained heaven (8.228–31), a hero whose stature we may infer he has now equalled.”

69. On this simile, inspired, as the one in book 8, by Verg. *Aen.* 12.331–38, see Perutelli (1997) 476–78. Jason is compared to Mars also in 3.83–86, on which see Fucecchi (2004) 126–29.

70. Jason is already called an *adulter* by Styrius (to whom Medea was betrothed) at 8.337–38: *transferet ergo meas in quae uolet oppida dotes / Colchis et Haemonius nobis succedet adulter?* (“Shall then the Colchian take my dowry to what towns she will? Shall a Haemonian adulterer supplant me?”). This is the only occurrence of the word *adulter* in Valerius (it echoes *Aen.* 10.92).

71. Prodicus’ parable of the choice of Heracles is preserved by Xen. *Mem.* 2.1.21–24. On the literary aspects of the subject in antiquity, see Alpers (1912); for the artistic and literary reflections especially in the Renaissance, see Panofsky (1930). Cf. also Galinsky (1972) 101–25 and Stafford (2005).

Hercules makes the right choice, which leads to his *apotheosis*, while Jason will make the wrong one, leading to suffering and tragedy.

The paradigmatic choice of Hercules can also be found in an earlier passage, underscoring once again Jason's incorrect choice. After describing the dragon, Medea asks Jason what he wants to do:

‘ . . . dic age nunc utrum uigilanti hostemque uidenti
exuuias auferre uelis an lumina somno
mergimus et domitum potius tibi tradimus anguem’.
ille silet, tantus subiit tum uirginis horror. (V. Fl. 8.64–67)

“Come tell me now, if you want to rob him of the fleece while he is awake and can see his enemy, or shall I rather immerse his eyes in sleep and deliver you a serpent subdued?” The other is silent, mastered by such dread of the maiden.

As noticed by Zissos, with this question “Valerius is airing the possibilities offered by rival versions of the myth and in so doing he sets his work in the context of a literary tradition.”⁷² The phrase *uigilanti hostem . . . auferre* alludes to the version of Pindar (*Pyth.* 4.249), in which Jason engages the dragon in physical combat.⁷³ The phrase *an lumina somno mergimus . . . anguem* refers to the version that will be adopted by Valerius (putting the dragon to sleep), whose direct source of inspiration is Apollonius. But the same question illustrates a philosophical choice. Medea asks Jason whether he is willing to act, facing all danger, to obtain what he wants, or if he rather prefers to wait passively to get the prize through someone else's effort. These options reflect the choice of Hercules between ἀρετή and κακία.⁷⁴ Jason stands still.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to shed some light on a passage (V. Fl. 8.109–20) that had not been fully understood before. If my reading is correct, through a clever network of allusions the poet exploits an astronomical context to establish a connection between the last actions of Jason in Colchis and the last labor of Hercules. The similarities between the tales of the Golden Apples, guarded by a great serpent in a grove located at the westernmost point of the known world, and the Golden Fleece, guarded by another great serpent in a grove at the easternmost

72. Zissos (1999) 290.

73. This version is well attested iconographically; see *LIMC* 5.1 (1990) 632 no. 30–35 s.v. *Iason* (J. Neils).

74. For the importance of Hercules' full consciousness of his own freedom of choosing, see Galinsky (1972) 101–2.

edge, were well-known to ancient authors. Modern scholars⁷⁵ have analyzed the analogies between the last labor of Herakles and Jason's capture of the Fleece in Apollonius Rhodius, pointing out that "the Hesperides story is one of the poet's most obvious uses of Heracles as a foil to the Argonauts as a group and to Jason as an individual."⁷⁶ Concerning Valerius Flaccus, scholars continue to disagree about the interpretation of Jason's heroism and his relationship with his model, Hercules. My analysis suggests that the comparison between Jason and Hercules in Valerius *Argonautica* 8 highlights the distance between the two characters, more than their proximity. Indeed, in the whole episode of the Fleece, Jason accomplishes no labor. Acting as Hercules, Medea does all the work, neutralizing the dragon with her magic and supernatural power. Jason only needs to climb over the monster to get the golden trophy and behave as a triumphant hero. But Jason's walking on the defeated dragon is only a clumsy terrestrial imitation of what Hercules is doing in the sky. Jason will not be catasterized. Even if the poem breaks off at 8.467, several clues constantly foreshadow Jason's and Medea's future tragedies,⁷⁷ and the Jason of the last book is very different from the *dux* of the first part of the poem: he can be perceived less as an accomplished epic hero than a tragic one.⁷⁸ On the other hand, Hercules enjoys an *apotheosis* and serves as an *exemplum* to be followed. All this illustrates well Jupiter's Stoic vision of heroism: it is only through real struggles and deeds that one can reach the glory of the sky.

As previously observed, the killing of the Nemean Lion is usually considered Hercules' first labor. Therefore, Jason's final labor recalls not only Hercules' final labor, but his first as well, and thus in a sense all twelve of them, from beginning to end, conferring a closural function to the episode of the capture of the Fleece. It is tempting to see a link between the reference in book 8 to the Nemean Lion and the mention of this same labor in book 1. At 1.33–36 we are told that Hercules' successful completion of most of the labors, including the Nemean Lion, is the reason why Jason must begin his own Argonautic *labores*, which will culminate in the retrieval of the Fleece. Thus Jason's quest begins where Hercules' labors are about to finish, and once Jason has completed his

75. E.g., Lawall (1966) 128–29; Feeney (1986) 62–66.

76. Lawall (1966) 129.

77. For instance, at the very beginning of the book 8 (16–23) Valerius provides a short allusive summary of what will happen at Corinth.

78. Similarly, Toohey (1992) 202–3 observes: "Jason does not come off well either. He is too reliant on women. Medea almost coaches him in his attempt on the fleece (8.68–133). This is hardly what one would expect of a hero (made plain also by Medea's brother, Absyrtus, 8.353–55). He is faithless too. . . . The portrait of Jason is becoming increasingly unflattering."

final task, he is explicitly likened to none other than Hercules, whose heroic exploits had made the Argonautic expedition necessary in the first place. Not only does Valerius draw together the beginnings and endings of Hercules' and Jason's *labores*, but in a ring-composition⁷⁹ he also connects the beginning and ending of his own epic (if we assume of course that the poem was designed to fill eight books). Concerning this last, still controversial point,⁸⁰ Valerius' choice of alluding to the episode of the Hesperides through the episode of the capture of the Fleece, could be considered as one of the shortcuts used by the poet to hint at episodes present in Apollonius' poem, but absent from the Flavian epic.⁸¹ And this provides another argument in favor of the eight-book composition theory.

The final lines of the passage we have set out to discuss (*Phrixiae monumenta fugae uix reddidit arbor / cum gemitu tristesque super coiere tenebrae*, V. Fl. 8.119–20) seem to corroborate our reading. Only reluctantly does the tree release the Fleece, since it is not a deserved reward, and its *gemitus* foreshadows the future sorrow, which is also adumbrated by the *tristes tenebrae* that fall over the scene, dramatically closing the episode (as a theater's curtain) with a gloomy darkness that clearly anticipates the future tragedies.

Erudition and allusive style make the *Argonautica* an extremely rich and difficult text, and much work is still to be done on Valerius' poem, especially on the astronomical implications. It is not to be excluded that by alluding to the very central constellations in the sky, Valerius also suggests his own aetiology for the constellation of the Engonasin, left unidentified by Aratus.⁸² At any rate, my feeling is that the sky of the Latin *Argonautica* still has a lot more to say.

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79. For an account and discussion of other formal and thematic correspondences between books 1 and 8, which generate a ring-composition effect for the poem overall, see Zissos (2008) xxxi–xxxii.

80. The question of the precise number of books has not been completely solved, though most of the scholars agree that eight books were intended; see Zissos (2008) xxvi–xxviii.

81. On the episode of the Hesperides in Apollonius 4, see particularly Lawall (1966) 128–31, and Feeney (1986) 64–66. On Valerius' shortcuts to episodes narrated by Apollonius, see Adamietz (1976) 110–12.

82. This hypothesis is also suggested by one of the reviewers of *JCS*, whom I wish to thank.

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