

ORPHEUS IN VALERIUS FLACCUS' *ARGONAUTICA*: THE POET AS AN *ARCHAEOLOGOS*

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Introduction.

Orpheus the Thracian is one of the most unorthodox heroes of Greek mythology, for he did not fight with weapons but with music. His figure is also shrouded in mystery and speculation, without one general account of his story. His father is always Oeagrus and his homeland is always Thrace, but his mother may change; normally is Calliope, but in some instances she becomes Polyhymnia, or even Menipe, daughter of Tamiris¹. He is mostly regarded as a Muse's son, however, and it is due to this distinguished lineage where his special abilities stem from: with his song he could calm all beasts and soothe all hearts, making even trees move. He is said to have created the *cithara*², and is sometimes regarded as the inventor of all musical arts³. Nevertheless, he was undoubtedly assumed to be the most legendary of bards and singers, and as such he was amply celebrated and remembered all throughout the Greco-Roman period, insofar as to never slip away from the Western collective memory. Even today, his name frequently appears in pop culture and media, and his figure is still synonymous with musical and artistic prowess.

His story usually concerns three aspects of his life: his epic youth, his love tragedy, and his death. Out of these mythical episodes, his Argonaut persona will be the one engaged with throughout the greater part of this paper, and as such I will be brief detailing it. His role in the hero-filled ship was that of a *keleustes*, that is, the person responsible for keeping the rhythm of the rowing with his chanting⁴, as well as having ritualistic functions⁵ that made him the priest of the heroic ensemble⁶. He also has some epic episodes, 'defeating' the sirens with his singing, or guiding the Myniae in their initiating into the Samothracian mystic cult⁷, among others. All of these were primarily narrated by Apollonius on his *Argonautica*, the most complete account of it.

¹ Grimal, 1981, p. 391.

² Grimal, 1981, p. 391.

³ Marlow, 1954, p. 361.

⁴ Karanika, 2010, p. 392.

⁵ Karanika, 2010, p. 395.

⁶ Grimal, 1981, p. 392.

⁷ Grimal, 1981, p. 392.

His most famous myth, however, is his tragic love story with the nymph Eurydice, firstly brought to us by Virgil and later recreated by dozens of writers across the centuries all over the Western world. According to Grimal⁸, the story goes as follows:

“Eurydice [Orpheus’ wife] is a nymph (a dryad) or a daughter of Apollo. One day, while strolling by a river in Thrace, she was pursued by Aristeus, who tried to rape her. While running through the fields, a snake bit her and she died. Orpheus, torn apart, descended into Hades searching for his wife. With the sounds of his lyre, he not only mesmerizes the monsters of Tartarus, but also the infernal deities. [...] Hades and Persephone agree to return Eurydice to a husband as loving as Orpheus, but they’ll do it on one condition: that Orpheus goes back to the surface, followed by his wife, without turning to see her before having left Hades. Orpheus accepts and he starts his journey back. He is almost back to the light of day when terrible doubts come to his mind: Has Persephone tricked him? Is Eurydice really following him? And he turns back. But Eurydice vanishes and dies for a second time. Orpheus tries to get her back once again, but this time Charon bans him from the afterworld. Broken apart, he has to go back into the human world.”

The tale of his death is the most variable, but most authors agree that he died at the hands of a group of Bacchantes, who tore him up limb to limb. Whether this was a divine decree or if he was simply caught up on their frenzy for other reasons changes from account to account⁹. It is also known that his disembodied head and lyre were still operative after his death, and soothed creatures all the way from Thrace to the isle of Lesbos, where Orpheus finally received proper burial. This legend, therefore, tries to explain the lyrical prowess Lesbos will be known for¹⁰.

Finally, there should be at least a mention of the Orphic cult that was inspired by his figure and that prospered all throughout the Greek and Roman world. They were one of the most well-known and respected mystic cults, and they were centered around a map of the afterworld Orpheus supposedly had crafted on his descent there.

Orpheus in Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*.

Whereas in Apollodorus’ poem Orpheus is a central character with an active role in the events, Valerius’ Orpheus has very limited appearances and his part is usually relegated to a second plane, separated from the epic and the heroic deeds that are associated with the Argonaut’s myth. There are only six direct references – plus one usage within a comparison¹¹ – to this figure throughout the eight books that constitute the epic

⁸ Grimal, 1981, p. 392.

⁹ Marlow, 1954, p. 365.

¹⁰ Grimal, 1981, p. 392.

¹¹ V.Fl.2.426: “*nec minus Orphea tristis ceruice tuaque...*”

poem, and only in two of those references (plus the comparison one) they refer to him by name; for the most part he is either known as “the Thracian bard”¹², “Odryasian [chief]”¹³, or “the pious bard from Oeagrus’ line”¹⁴. It is thus inferred that his most important descriptors throughout the poem are his origins and his job as a bard; no religious duties are conferred to Valerius’ Orpheus, just bardic. Below I will detail the already mentioned references. In my opinion, there are two instances that hold more importance than the others, and as such I will be discussing them first.

Orpheus as a narrator of myths:

In two occasions the Thracian bard is used as the narrator of mythical episodes within Valerius’ own narrative, one at the very beginning of the poem, in book one, and other in book four.

When the Minyae are preparing to set sail, Orpheus delights them with his song, relating the myth of Phrixus and Helle to the crew. They were to be sacrificed by their father, Athamas, to Zeus Laphistus, but the god grew compassionate of them and sent a golden winged ram for the siblings to ride, all the way from their homeland in Orchomenus to Colchis. During the trip Helle tragically died in the strait that would we called Hellespont in her honour, but Phrixus made it safely to the shores of the Black Sea and married the princess of Colchian king Aeëtes¹⁵.

Orpheus focuses more on the tragic aspects of the poem, concerning primarily on Helle’s untimely death:

“Seven times had Aurora fulfilled her course, and seven nights had the Moon completed in heaven, when Sestos, that from afar the waters seemed not to sunder from Abydos, began to part from its twin city. Then the sister whose name shall live for all time forsakes Aeolus’ son, saved, alas! in vain from her cruel stepmother. Still with weary hands she strains far behind the wet fleece, but the waves draw down her garments heavy now with the drenching water, and her hands slip off the smooth gold. What grief was thine, Phrixus, when rapt on by the whirling tide thou didst look back and see the face of the hapless maid as she called to thee—her hands only—then her hair spread out upon the waters.”¹⁶

Similarly to Demodocus’ chant about the Trojan War in the *Odyssey* or the *ekphraseis* present throughout epic poetry, a relation can be established between Orpheus’ narrative and Valerius’ one, wishing for the reader to connect both discourses in a meaningful way. In this case, the tale of Phrixus and Helle constitutes an *aitia* for the Argonauts’ voyage: after Phrixus’ arrives to Colchis, he sacrificed the ram to Zeus and offered its fleece to the king, who consagrated it to Ares and hang it from a holm oak in

¹² V.Fl.1.277, 4.85.

¹³ V.Fl.1.470, 5.98.

¹⁴ V.Fl.4.344.

¹⁵ Grimal, 1981, p. 208.

¹⁶ V.Fl.1.283-93. Trans. J. H. Mozley, 1934.

a sacred grove¹⁷. Given that Orpheus' chant occurred the evening before the start of their sail, it functions as a last reminder for both the crew and the reader of the goal of the Argonauts in a subtle way, for Valerius writes at a time where the Argonautic myth was well established and known, and there was no need for detailed explanations; the golden fleece is not even mentioned in Orpheus' ode.

The narration also expands upon the archeology of the fleece and makes it tangible, as well as setting a precedent for the own Argonauts. Speaking of, Phrixus manages to make a similar trip to that of our heroes, and that is not a mere coincidence; the reader is intended to link Greek Phrixus' journey to Colchis with the one the Argonauts are about to embark to, and as such, knows that it is a possible feat. Moreover, the ending of Phrixus' story, marrying a Colchian princess, makes him relate to Jason and his love affair with Colchian Medea, sister of the princess Phrixus marries. In fact, later on Helle herself will link Jason and Phrixus' fate in a more direct manner¹⁸. In this way, Valerius' makes use of the tired Argonautic myth to bring these comparisons forward without fear of misunderstandings from the reader's part, as well as masterfully and liberally using foreshadowing across his poem. Finally, another subtle tie between Phrixus and the Argonauts is Orchomenus: while Phrixus and Helle hail from that city, the collective name for the Argonauts is Minyae or Minyans, as, according to Apollonius¹⁹, most of its most notable members claim to descend from Minyas, a Thessalian hero that founded the Boeotian city²⁰.

However, Orpheus' narration does not relate the full myth, as seen above, but focuses on the most tragic instance of it. This focus on the tragedy of Helle stems from the context in which it is sung: they are standing right before the first sea journey ever, and as such, it is only normal there would be some fear of the many dangers the sea posits. Orpheus then both warns and raises the stakes for the crew – and the reader; the adventure they are about to embark on would not be easy, for some of them could end up drowning like Helle and never returning home.

Even if Orpheus is the narrator of this scene, he is not offered any characterization whatsoever; his function is that of a bard and bard only, without being given the chance of exist beyond that role. The mid-song change from indirect to direct speech also reinforces this “de-humanization” of Orpheus' character, as the line between his and Valerius' narration blur²¹ as they become more difficult to separate. This way, as Río Torres-Murciano²² puts it; “this particular form of telling Phrixus' story, mixing the internal and the external narrator's voices, [...], serves to turn the author into a tangible figure, while he is replaced by Orpheus, the character-poet. Like Valerius, Orpheus sings the Argonautic myth.”

The other instance of this bardic Orpheus happens in book four, where he sings the myth of Io, one of the many lovers of Zeus; she was a priestess of Hera in Argos and

¹⁷ Grimal, 1981, p. 208.

¹⁸ Río Torres-Murciano, 2015, p. 173.

¹⁹ Cf. 1.229 *cont.*

²⁰ Book 1, note 60, in Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, Antonio Río Torres-Murciano (trans.), 2011, p.106.

²¹ Río Torres-Murciano, 2015, p.171.

²² Río Torres-Murciano, 2015, p. 172.

daughter of Inacus, son of Oceanus himself. Hera, as per usual, became jealous of them. To save her from demise, Zeus transformed the priestess into a heifer, but Hera – seeing through the farce – demanded him to offer Io as a present to her spouse. After suffering through several trials Hera imposed the cow and under the incessant vigilance of Argus, Hermes managed to set her free. Io then roamed Greece until getting to Egypt, where she became human again before being deified²³.

I believe it is worthwhile to mention that, before he even starts his narration, we get a glimpse of his composition methods: “then the pious bard of renowned Oeagrus’ line invoking his mother’s aid (*admonita genetrice*) tells of the places and their story (*casusque locorum*), of Inachus’ daughter and her wanderings...²⁴”. As previously stated, Orpheus’ mother is almost always a muse, and it is upon her inspiration from which the bard draws his songs. This is anything but innovative; invocations to the Muse / Muses have been present all throughout the Greco-Roman literature, all the way since Homer. The needless inclusion of it in Valerius Flaccus’ poem remarks the traditional stance of Orpheus and his characterization as an *aoidos*, wandering minstrels that had long been gone in Valerius Flaccus’ time. It is also interesting to remark “*casusque locorum*”, as that is the core of Orpheus intervention not only in this case but also in the last one; he narrates the past of the places they are visiting or are to come across in a mythic form, in a true *archaeologos* fashion.

This second mythical narration is far heftier than the previous one – it lasts for seventy verses²⁵ – and centers itself around Io’s journey, having already been transformed into a cow, all the way from Juno’s plan to kidnap her until her deification in Pharos. Due to the context, Orpheus’ story here serves as an *aitia* for the Bosphorus’ name, and as such, only the *bos* part of the myth is worth mentioning, with no regard for Jupiter and Io’s affair, skimming over it before amply detailing to the aftermath. Just like Helle with the Hellespont, Io’s myth gave name to a geographical feature the Argonauts pass through their travels. And, just like Helle – and Phrixus –, Io embarks on a journey that is greatly detailed in Orpheus’ account. This allows scholars like Aricò²⁶ to suggest a link between Io’s and the Argonaut’s trips, commenting that “both Io and the Argonauts undergo a long and dangerous voyage, a series of trials that demand physical and mental resilience”²⁷. Moreover, Davis suggests a connection with Medea herself²⁸. I agree with both authors’ claims, as it would link both of Orpheus’ narrations and give them commonalities difficult to ignore. These are what make Valerian’s Orpheus a singer of the past that overarches through the present in mythical form, providing reference for the crew and elevating the whole voyage to a legendary status.

²³ Grimal, 1981, pp.289-90.

²⁴ V.Fl.4.348-9.

²⁵ Verses 351-421.

²⁶ Cf. Giuseppe Aricò, ‘...ignotas iubet ire vías: Die Io-Geschichte bei Valerius Flaccus’, in Ulri Eigler and Eckard Lefèvre (eds.), *Ratis omnia vincet: Neue Untersuchungen zu den «Argonautica» des Valerius Flaccus* (Munich, 1998) 285-92, at 289.

²⁷ Davis, 2009, p. 4.

²⁸ Davis, 2009, pp. 5 cont., at p.5: “*Io’s story is explicitly the story of a woman. It would be extraordinary if Io’s history did not find parallels in the history of the poem’s most important woman, Medea herself.*”

Minor appearances of Orpheus in the *Argonautica*:

Even though the two episodes I have discussed above provide the main and more extensive discourse around Valerian's Orpheus, I deemed worthy of noting the other four instances where the character is mentioned throughout the poem.

The first mention of the Thessalian bard comes at the start of book one: "then rose the sailors' cry as they panted, and the sound of Orpheus' soothing lyre (*blandus testudines*)"²⁹. This quick passage gives the reader an introduction to Orpheus as a character and to his role within the crew as the *keleustes*, soothing the sailor's mind with his *blandus testudines* while keeping the rhythm of the rowing necessary for a steady navigation.

Moreover, at the end of the same book, during a descriptive passage in which Valerius details the role each of the notable members of the Argonauts had as sailors within the crew, Orpheus is once again reduced to the role of the *keleustes*: "nor yet does Odrysian Orpheus spend himself upon the thwarts or plough the sea with an oar, but with his song he teaches the oars to swing, that they clash not everywhere upon the surface of the tide."³⁰ Valerius utilizes Orpheus mainly as an extension of his narrative voice when telling the myths discussed above, and barely needs him beyond that. Valerius' Orpheus, then, is barely a character and more of a linguistic and narrative resource for the author.

On book four Orpheus is once again used as a narrative resource; in the following fragment, Valerius exploits Orpheus' inherent characteristics to provide breathing between heroic episodes. As such, he uses his exceptional talent previously discussed – that of being able to soothe even trees and rocks – to appease the troubled spirits of the crew: "no sooner had he taken his lyre than grief and anger and weariness (*fide et luctus et irae et labor*) was dispelled"³¹. It is at this instance that Orpheus' mythical persona comes to the narration. There is no need for a build up to it or an explanation for his powers, as Valerius thrives on known myths and themes. Every contemporary reader would have known Orpheus' myth and qualities, and as such, the exceptional characteristics presented on this brief passage do not appear as forced or unexpected; they are a given for any story involving Orpheus.

Finally, it is on the last appearance of the bard, on book five, where there is a heroic and active role of Orpheus within the narrative, albeit brief: "moreover, the Odrysian chief begins in order due the chant that shall appease the spirit (*placantia manes*) they have seen, and strikes his echoing lyre, singing the while, and bequeaths a name to the sands"³². If in the last passage Orpheus' powers are alluded to, here they appear in full form, being able to quell the unruly spirits that surrounded the *Argo* with his song. Furthermore, Apollonius – who also narrates this episode³³ – wrote that Orpheus offered his lyre to an altar of Apollo the *Argonauts* built on that beach, which from there on was

²⁹ V.Fl.1.186-7.

³⁰ V.Fl.1.470-2.

³¹ V.Fl.4.88-9.

³² V.Fl.5.98-100.

³³ Cf. 2.928 *cont.*

named Lyre³⁴. Valerius Flaccus chooses to deliberately omit this information, probably due to disinterest in it, as he focuses his attention on other aspects of the Argonautic myth.

Conclusions. Orpheus as an *archaeologos*:

As previously discussed, Valerius' Orpheus should not be considered – at least, in full – a character *per se*. Throughout the history of the Argonautic myth certain authors doubted the inclusion of Orpheus as part of the crew; the Historian Herodorus claimed, for example, that he was “such a weak man”³⁵ he did not understand how he even managed to be an Argonaut, as he was of no use to them. However, by the time Valerius Flaccus' was to compose his *Argonautica*, these doubts had been dissipated – mainly thanks to Apollonius' poem. Orpheus had been demonstrated to be of great use to the Argonauts, not only as *keleustes* and spiritual leader, but also as hero of some episodes. As such, Valerius had no point to make, and as such he could malleate Orpheus into this narrative vessel relegated to a secondary plane, fit to help Valerius in the conception of his *magnum opus*.

Valerius' Orpheus is thus stripped of a more fleshed out character due to the sheer popularity of his myth, providing an outlet for the author's creativity, connecting in this way myth and reality through the common role of poet. However, there are still certain qualities pertaining to Valerius' Orpheus that are worth discussing and that set apart this version of the bard from others. In the *Argonautica*, Orpheus is presented as a bard who eases and soothes the crew with his songs, which are always mythical in nature, such as was the endeavor of *aoidoi*. Furthermore, these mythical narrations serve a purpose within the epic poem; as I have previously discussed, they appear to be like *ekphraseis*, at least in intention. The reader is expected to draw similarities between the greater Argonautic story and the mythical events Orpheus is singing about, greatly improving the overall narration and *pathos* of the poem. Moreover, Orpheus' myths are always associated with a physical place the Argonauts visit at some point in their voyage, and always have a strong sense of movement attached to them. Of course, the theme of movement is overarching throughout the Argonautic myth, but what Orpheus does through song is bringing the past of a place and embedding it of a special connotation through aetiologic means and relatable characters. In short, Orpheus acts as an *archaeologos* who assesses legendary stories as truthful aetiologies for pertinent *loci*. This way, just as his mother and the rest of the Muses were said to hold the truth of all past events, Valerian's Orpheus acts as the Muses' substitute in the *Argonautica*, illuminating the reader and the crew with knowledge of their own past, which is always taken as truth at face value.

In conclusion, Valerius Flaccus masterfully reinterpreted tired narratives, myths and characters into a compelling story filled with thematic compositions and interwoven accounts in which Orpheus served as his main outlet into the exploration of the relation between myth and reality, as well as *aitia* and *archaeologia*.

³⁴ Book 5, note 13, in Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, Antonio Río Torres-Murciano (trans.), 2011, p.259.

³⁵ Marlow, 1954, p. 363.

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