Silius versus Valerius: Orpheus in the Punica and the Argonautica
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1. Introduction: Silius and Valerius

Scholars generally agree that Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica was written before Silius Italicus’ Punica. Particularly because the two Flavian epics were composed so close to each other in time, allusions of Silius to Valerius are to be expected. Whereas Silius’ indebtedness to his most important models, and Virgil’s Aeneid in particular, has received a lot of scholarly attention, the relationship between the Punica and Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica has not. This is probably due to the fact that intertextual contact between the two poems is hard to pin down. F. Ripoll has discerned various verbal and thematic parallels, but these are very general in nature, and it is difficult to interpret them as self-conscious allusions. When Ripoll deals with possible ‘direct allusions’ to Valerius’ Argonautica, an investigation that he finds ‘hardly fruitful’, he concludes that ‘it is difficult to determine if Silius was thinking specifically about the work of Val-
rius’. Only Silius’ extensive eulogy of the Flavian emperors at the end of *Punica* 3 exhibits some very striking similarities with the prologue of the *Argonautica*, which suggest direct influence. So it seems clear that Silius at least knew Valerius’ epic, but as these encomiastic passages are more or less detached from the narratives proper of both epics, the question remains why hardly any firm contact can be detected in the epics proper. To a certain extent this may have to do with Silius’ allusive technique, which, as M. Wilson has emphasized, is rather peculiar:

Compared with other writers of Latin epic, he tends to eschew signposting his intertexts by the technique of ‘quotation’, that is, by repeating complete phrases or other word collocations from earlier poems. He prefers to signal the intertextual connection by alternative means, in particular, by coincidence of situation and detail rather than wording and, occasionally, by more explicit hints.

In the case of Valerius Flaccus, however, this does not explain why there are not even clearly significant similar situations or points of detail.

In this article, I would like to suggest a different explanation for the relative silence that characterizes the intertextual contact between Silius and Valerius, by exploring the presence of the archetypal poet Orpheus in both epics, which reveals a paradoxical kind of intertextuality.

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4 Ripoll 1999, 517: “Après avoir examiné les endroits des *Punica* qui suggèrent une influence latente de Valérius, il convient de se demander si l’on ne peut pas déceler, chez Silius, des allusions directes à des épisodes ou à des personnages de la geste argonautique qui renvoient clairement à l’épopée de son prédécesseur. Or une telle investigation ne s’avère guère fructueuse: on relève bien quelques références à l’expédition des Argonautes, mais il est difficile de préciser si Silius pensait spécifiquement à l’œuvre de Valérius.” Cf. Ripoll 1998a, 8: “... l’influence générale de Valérius sur Silius semble tout de même assez limitée.”

5 For the parallels between the two passages see e.g. Ussani 1955, 40–47; Wistrand 1956, 24–26; Ripoll 1999, 515–516, and Zissos 2006a, 166 n. 6, who speaks of the “considerable influence of Valerius’ Flavian eulogy ... upon Silius’ ...” and conveniently summarizes the striking similarities (Zissos 2008, 82 [on Arg. 1.7–21]): “The two passages have in common a flattering comparison with the Julian dynasty (8–9; *Pun*. 3.594–6); praise of Vespasian’s British campaigns (7–9; *Pun*. 3.597–8); laudations of Titus and Domitian, dwelling on the former’s conquest of Jerusalem and the latter’s literary talents (12–14; *Pun*. 3.603–21); anticipation of apotheosis with similar astral imagery (16–20; *Pun*. 3.626–9). Both use *Caledonius* in connection with Vespasian’s military command in Britain and *Idume* in connection with the sack of Jerusalem.”

6 Wilson 2004, 226.
2. Orpheus in the *Punica*

Orpheus makes three appearances in the *Punica*. The first, brief passage is part of the already mentioned eulogy of the Flavians at the end of book 3. There, after praise of his rhetorical skills, emperor Domitian is praised for his literary skills, and he is in that respect considered superior to Orpheus (3.619–621):

\[\text{huic sua Musae sacra ferent, meliorque lyra, cui substitit Hebrus et venit Rhodope, Phoebus miranda loquetur.}\]

The Muses shall bring him [i.e. Domitian] offerings, and Phoebus shall marvel at his song—a sweeter strain than his [i.e. Orpheus’] whose music made the Hebrus stand still and Mount Rhodope move on. (trans. Duff 1934)

This passage seemingly has nothing to do with Valerius’ *Argonautica*, as it does not evoke the Argonautic expedition at all, but I will return to this passage at the end.

In the other two passages in which Orpheus features in the *Punica* the poet is associated with the Argonautic expedition, and he thus at least brings Valerius’ epic to mind. In book 11 the poet is mentioned by the bard Teuthras, who entertains the Carthaginians during their stay in Capua with two songs. In the second song (11.440–480), he sings about the power of poetry, describing legendary poets and their supernatual feats. After Amphion, Arion and Cheiron, Orpheus is dealt with most extensively. After a description of his music’s effect on nature, the poet’s participation in the Argonautic expedition is dealt with (11.469–472):

\[\text{quin etiam, Pagasae ratis cum caerula, nondum cognita terrenae, pontumque intrare negaret,}\]
\[\text{ad puppim sacrae, cithara eliciente, carinae adductum cantu venit mare.}\]

Moreover, when the Argo at Pagasae refused to launch out on the blue water which on land she had never known, the sea, summoned by the lyre, obeyed the music and came up to the stern of the sacred bark. (trans. Duff 1934)

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7 On (the ancient sources for) Domitian’s literary activity, see e.g. Coleman 1986, 3088–3095. See also Section 6 below.
8 On this song see e.g. Marks 2010, 192, but in particular the thorough discussion by Deremetz 1995, esp. 418–434.
This passage again brings Valerius’ *Argonautica* to mind, where, in the first book, Orpheus also sings to his fellow Argonauts before the start of the expedition (1.277–293). In fact, Orpheus performs the night before departure, ending the festivities and putting the Argonauts to sleep with his song (1.294–295):

iamque mero ludoque modus, positique quietis
conticuere toris; ...

And now there is an end to wine and festivity; outstretched upon quiet couches, the men have grown still; ... (trans. Zissos 2008)

This passage is a reworking of a scene in the first book of Apollonius’ *Argonautica* (1.496–511), where Orpheus sings a song to soothe a quarrel between Idas and Jason, also the evening before departure. But neither Apollonius nor Valerius mention any trouble with the launching of the Argo the next day, as Silius does; nothing is said about the Argo or the sea resisting.

In *Punica* 12, Silius uniquely depicts a historical poet, Ennius, as fighting in the front lines on the battlefield. The famous Roman epic poet is compared by Silius to Orpheus (12.398–402):¹

is prima in pugna (vates ut Thracius olim,
infestam bello quateret cum Cyzicus Argo,
spicula deposito Rhodopeia pectine torsit)
spectandum sese non parva strage virorum
fecerat, et dextrae gliscebat caedibus ardor.

He [i.e. Ennius] fought in the front (like the Thracian poet long ago, when Cyzicus attacked the Argo, who laid down the plectrum and shot Rhodopean arrows) and had made himself conspicuous by slaying many of the enemy; the ardor of his right hand was growing with the number of his victims. (trans. Casali 2006)

Silius here refers to an event that was extensively told by Valerius Flaccus in *Argonautica* 3. There the Argonauts are mistakenly attacked at night by their former host Cyzicus and his men, only to find out what happened the morning after. Valerius describes several Argonauts fighting, but Orpheus is not among them, which thus creates a striking difference with Silius’ passage.

So is Silius alluding to Valerius in these two passages in which Orpheus appears in an Argonautic context? There are no ‘markers’ such as striking verbal

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¹ See e.g. Schubert 1998, 273; Zissos 2004a, 73, 75; 2008, 214–215 (on Arg. 1.277–93) for comparisons between the two songs.
similarities and words in the same metrical sedes,¹¹ to suggest that Silius is alluding to Valerius Flaccus. But there can be no question of coincidence, as the differences between Silius and Valerius in their depiction of Orpheus are so striking, especially when one considers that the Argonautica was produced so close in time to the Punica. It is, in short, impossible not to think of Valerius.¹² So what is going on then? I would like to suggest that Silius does self-consciously allude to the Argonautica, and that the ‘vagueness’ of Silius’ allusions and his different depiction of Orpheus have to do with the different, in fact opposing, poetical agenda of the Punica with regard to Valerius’ epic.

3. Silius’ poetics

As R. Marks has recently emphasized,¹³ Silius Italicus’ Punica self-consciously rejects epic on Greek mythological themes, which had become increasingly popular since the end of the Republic, as part of a broader upsurge of a-political, Callimachean poetry. In Augustan Rome, ‘Callimacheanism’ was associated with small-scale genres, such as bucolic and elegiac poetry, which self-consciously opposed epic poetry. In the Flavian period, however, Valerius and Statius “use the Callimachean recusatio form not to reject epic in favour of another genre but to reject one kind of epic (epic on contemporary Flavian history) in favour of another (the epics they compose). What this evidence suggests is that in the Flavian period the distinction between mythological and historical epic was being drawn quite sharply.”¹⁴ In contrast to his Flavian colleagues Valerius and Statius, Silius puts his own epic in the waning tradition of Roman-historical epic, the tradition of Ennius in particular, but also Virgil. To a certain extent Homer, whose reincarnation Ennius claimed to be in the proem to his Annales, is also an important model, particularly because of the bard’s proven ability to sing the κλέα ἀνδρῶν, which is what both Ennius and Silius aim at: to com-

¹¹ See in particular Wills 1996, 18–24, 30–31, for the various ways in which allusions can be marked.

¹² I am not dealing here with Silius’ allusions to the Orpheus stories of Virgil and Ovid in Pun. 11.459–472, on which see in particular Wilson 2004, 232–234.

¹³ Marks 2010. For Silius’ poetics, as expressed by the songs of Teuthras, which function as mises en abyme of the Punica, see in particular the extensive discussion by Deremetz 1995, 413–474 (ch. 6: “Les chants de Teuthras ou l’acte poétique: Silius Italicus, Punica, 11”).

¹⁴ Marks 2010, 191, with reference to Nauta 2006 (on which see also n. 35 below), on the Callimachean recusatio in Flavian epic. See also Galli in this volume.
memorate the heroic efforts of famous Romans such as Scipio, who can thus act as exempla of virtus.¹⁵

According to Marks, it is through poet figures in the Punica, notably Ennius and Teuthras, that Silius “most clearly articulates his views on poetry and marshals his defence of historical epic”.¹⁶ Silius achieves that by turning these two poets into warriors; this “allows him to address and mend what he sees as one of the major problems facing epic in his times, the disconnection between the genre and history; for the poet-warrior symbolically bridges the world of poetry, which Silius himself inhabits, and the world of history, about which he writes, and thus becomes the perfect vehicle by which to reconnect them”.¹⁷

As we have seen, Orpheus appears in connection with both Ennius and Teuthras in the Punica, so in a very programmatic context. As Orpheus in these passages also evokes Valerius’ Argonautica, I will argue that Silius sets off his own poetical agenda not only to Callimachean, mythological epic in general, as Marks has shown, but also reacts specifically to Valerius Flaccus’ Argonautica.

4. Silius versus Valerius

When Ennius programatically appears as a warrior on the battlefield and is compared to Orpheus, Silius aligns himself and his Punica with Ennius and the kind of epic poetry on the exploits of Rome that he wrote. Silius and Ennius are of course both epic poets, writing about Roman history, which already suggests a connection between the two, but, as Marks remarks, “Ennius’s very status

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¹⁵ See e.g. Deremetz 1995, esp. 470 – 474; Manuwald 2007, 82 – 88, for the way in which Silius presents himself as a new Homer, as Ennius had done before him. For a systematic overview of Homer’s influence on the Punica, see Juhnke 1972. See e.g. Marks 2010, 193, for the way in which Silius’ epic “instills and fortifies in its readers those virtues and ideals that Teuthras undermines in Hannibal and his men: hard work, a thirst for glory, and martial valor, or in Latin virtus.”


¹⁷ Marks 2010, 190. Cf. Casali 2006, 573 – 574. For the way in which Teuthras is depicted as a warrior, see Marks 2010, 192: “When we first lay eyes on Teuthras, he look like the typical bard of epic poetry who entertains guests at a banquet and releases them from their cares … . But once the pro-Roman goddess Venus orders her Cupids to wound Hannibal and his men with their arrows during the banquet (11.385 – 99), it becomes clear that entertaining the Carthaginians is a way of defeating them and the banquet itself a sort of battle in which Hannibal and his men are to be conquered. … After the Cupids accomplish this task with the bow (11.410 – 31), Teuthras next steps onto the battlefield, as it were, with his lyre … .”
as a poet-warrior invites us to identify Silius with him. After all, if the collapse of the poet and the warrior into one figure implies the collapse of the poet into the martial world about which he writes, then the inference lies readily at hand that Silius is here blurring the distinction between himself, the poet of the \textit{Punica}, and Ennius, about whom he is presently writing.”\cite{18} In this context Silius compares Ennius to Orpheus fighting at Cyzicus, a depiction so strikingly different from Valerius’ \textit{Cyzicus} episode, where Orpheus is not present on the battlefield. Silius’ \textit{vates} ... \textit{Thracius} (\textit{Pun.} 12.398) may allude to Orpheus’ song in book 1 of Valerius’ \textit{Argonautica}, where the poet is denoted as \textit{Thracius ... vates} (\textit{Arg.} 1.277).\cite{19} If this is indeed an allusion, it would emphasize – as well as generalize – the difference between Valerius’ Orpheus, who is predominantly a singer in the \textit{Argonautica}, and Silius’ fighting Orpheus, a difference that seems significant in this specific context in the \textit{Punica}.\cite{20} I suggest that Silius has transformed Valerius’ Orpheus into a poet warrior not only to express his own epic agenda but also to reject Valerius’ mythological epic at the same time. This could also explain the sly allusion of Silius, who wants to show the difference from Valerius, but does not want to credit his Flavian adversary too much.\cite{21}

But what about the other appearance of Orpheus in the \textit{Punica} in an Argonautic context? Can this also be explained in this ‘anti-Valerian’ way? Orpheus is here associated with another programmatic figure, Teuthras, in the second song that the bard sings in Capua for Hannibal and his Carthaginians (\textit{Pun.} 11.440–480), on the power of Greek mythological poetry and poets, Orpheus in particular. As A. Deremetz and R. Marks have shown, Teuthras – who, significantly, is from Cumae, a city that has remained loyal to the Romans\cite{22} – helps the Romans

\begin{itemize}
\item \cite{18} Marks 2010, 190. Cf. also Marks’ interesting interpretation of Apollo’s words (and reference to his future \textit{Annales}) that Ennius ‘will raise leaders to the skies’ (\textit{attolletque duces caelo, Pun.} 12.641) as an allusion to the opening of the \textit{Punica} (1.1–2): \textit{ordior arma, quibus caelo se gloria tollit Aeneadum ... – ‘Here I begin war by which the fame of the Aeneadae was raised to heaven ...’} (trans. Duff 1934).
\item \cite{19} As suggested by Zissos 2008, 216 (on \textit{Arg.} 1.277–8). If Silius here indeed alludes to Orpheus’ song in \textit{Arg.} 1 (but the similarity is of course of a very general nature), the allusion could perhaps also be read as a hint by Silius to compare this passage with the other one featuring Orpheus, in Teuthras’ song (discussed below), as the situation described there (Orpheus helping to launch the Argo) directly evokes Orpheus’ song in \textit{Arg.} 1 the night before departure.
\item \cite{20} Cf. Manuwald 2007, 79: “By having Orpheus fight on Cyzicus, Silius Italicus includes a reference to a further Roman epic poet, while surpassing him and adapting the available material to his own narrative purposes.”
\item \cite{21} In line with this interpretation, \textit{olim} (‘long ago’, \textit{Pun.} 12.398) can be read as a rather ironic marker of the allusion to Valerius’ singing Orpheus in \textit{Arg.} 1.277 (“in that old mythological stuff!”), as Stephen Hinds suggests to me.
\item \cite{22} Deremetz 1995, 414.
\end{itemize}
by weakening Hannibal and his men in Capua, with disastrous consequences for
the Carthaginians, who will no longer stand a chance against the Romans after
this episode in Capua.²³ As Marks has it: “It is not mere coincidence that Silius
chooses a song of this sort to weaken Hannibal and his men; in doing so he can
suggest that such poetry, poetry on Greek mythological themes, is morally unins-
piring and even destructive.”²⁴ Orpheus in this passage also clearly brings Va-
lerius’ Argonautica to mind – by reference to the Cyzicus episode, which also fea-
tures in Valerius’ epic, as well as by emphasizing the primacy of the Argonautic
journey, an aspect that plays an important role in the Flavian Argonautica as is
already evident from the epic’s very first word (prima, Arg. 1.1).²⁵ Nevertheless,
the allusions are again quite vague, and one gets the impression that Silius
also in this passage rejects Valerius’ Argonautica. Moreover, Silius has again
transformed Valerius’ mythological Orpheus, giving him more power to make
him more dangerous, as he is now able to calm the seas and get the Argo
launched, where Valerius’ Orpheus only sung a lullaby the evening before the
departure of the Argonauts. Silius’ changes to Valerius’ Orpheus thus reveal
what Silius thinks not only of Callimachean, mythological poetry in general,
but also of Valerius’ Argonautica in particular.

5. Valerius’ Orpheus as mise en abyme

But if Silius’ allusions to the Argonautica can be read in this oppositional way,
why would Silius take on Valerius through Orpheus? Of course, Orpheus is not
just a character: he is the mythological poet, as well as an Argonaut, and he
is thus ideally suited to represent Valerius’ epic. In fact, already in the Argona-
tica itself Orpheus functions as Valerius’ alter ego, the representation of the poet
in the text. Of course Orpheus has a rich history of being a mise en abyme of the
poet, notably in Ovid’s Metamorphoses.²⁶ As scholars have often shown, for ex-
ample, the series of songs Orpheus sings in book 10 of the Metamorphoses seem

²³ Deremetz 1995, 418–434; Marks 2010, 192. See also Deremetz 1995, 413–418, on the first song
of Teuthras (Pun. 11.288–302), who interprets the seemingly just pleasant mythological song as
in fact a hidden admonition to the Capuans to stay loyal to the alliance with the Romans.
²⁴ Marks 2010, 192.
²⁵ I owe this suggestion to Denis Feeney. For the importance of the theme of the Argo as the
first ship and the inauguration of the sea in Valerius’ Argonautica, see e.g. Zissos 2008, 72–73
(on Arg. 1.1).
²⁶ For Orpheus as a mise en abyme of Apollonius in the Argonautica and of Virgil in Georgics 4,
see e.g. Albis 1996, 29–31, and Lee 1996 respectively.
representative of Ovid’s entire work.²⁷ Valerius Flaccus’ Orpheus sings two major songs, which also seem miniature versions of the epic that contains them. Orpheus’ song in the first book, for instance, which has already been discussed briefly, is about Phrixus and Helle (Arg. 1.277–293). It is about the prehistory of the Argonautic expedition, and so it is an ‘external analepsis’,²⁸ but in a sense, as W. Schubert for instance has noted, it reflects Valerius’ Argonautica itself, as both stories describe sea voyages involving the Golden Fleece, and as the story of Phrixus and Helle ends in a minor key, so is Valerius’ Argonautica also ‘painted in rather darker colours than Apollonius’ epic’.²⁹ Furthermore, as P. Davis has noted, the song can be read “as foreshadowing events to come. After all Phrixus, like Jason, makes his way from Greece to Colchis and marries one of Aetës’ daughters.”³⁰

The song Orpheus sings in Argonautica 4, when the Argonauts arrive at the Bosporus (4.351–421), is about the nymph Io, who, transformed into a cow, is forced to travel east and is eventually deified, as the Egyptian goddess Isis. Valerius thus suggests obvious thematic similarities with the Argonautica itself.³¹ So Orpheus and his song seem to resemble Valerius himself and his epic. There are also hints of a Callimachean agenda. First of all, there is the aetiological aspect of Orpheus’ song – it explains the name of the Bosporus – which brings Callimachus’ Aetia to mind. Furthermore, Valerius’ song of Io alludes to the extensive version of the same story in Ovid’s Callimachean epic Metamorpho-

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²⁷ See e.g. Knox 1986, 47–64, but with the perceptive additional comments of Hinds 1989, 269, and Nagle 1988, 111–113, who systematically describes the many similarities between both Orpheus’ and Ovid’s carmina perpetua.
³⁰ Davis 2009, 10, who continues to “suggest that elements of Orpheus’ first song find parallels in both Jason’s present and his future. ... Bearing in mind Jason’s immediate circumstances, we can note that Pelias, like Athamas, is a relative who attempts to kill a youthful blood relation and that both Jason and Phrixus cross the sea. But the parallels with the future are more comprehensive and more persuasive. Like Athamas, Aetës is a king who attempts to kill a youth. This results in the flight of Jason and Medea from Colchis and Absyrtus’ death.”
³¹ Cf. e.g. Murgatroyd 2009, 178: “Scholars have already pointed out that the bard’s splendid song about Io ... continues the epic’s themes of wandering and divinely imposed suffering; ... it has ties with Helle, Hercules and Medea elsewhere in the Argonautica ... . In addition, it looks back to the previous episode ... and forwards to the following one ... .” See also Davis 2009, 11–12, for interesting parallels between Io and the Argo and between Io and Medea in particular: “... the primary purpose of Orpheus’ song of Io in Book 4 is to prefigure the story of Medea, the story which dominates Books 5 to 8 of the Argonautica.”
ses. And that is not all: Valerius adapts Ovid’s version, adding new elements and omitting others, in a way that resembles Ovid’s reworking of Virgil’s Aeneid in Metamorphoses 13 and 14, and, as a matter of fact, the way Ovid deals with Virgil’s Orpheus story in Metamorphoses 10 and 11. To speak with P. Murgatroyd in his commentary on the passage: “Valerius Flaccus is doing an Ovid on Ovid.”

Whether or not the ‘Callimachean’ and ‘Ovidian’ aspects of this song of Orpheus can be seen as representative of Valerius’ entire epic, Orpheus in the Argonautica at least in certain respects acts as a mise en abyme of Valerius. These two aspects of Valerius’ Orpheus – his Callimachean and Ovidian associations and his function as mise en abyme – make the character particularly fitting for Silius to criticize Valerius’ Greek-mythological epic through Orpheus, as I think he has done in the two passages discussed.

6. Epilogue: Domitian and Orpheus

If Silius does indeed allude to Valerius in these passages, we are dealing with a somewhat paradoxical kind of intertextuality, which is quite vague. The reason for this, as I have suggested, is that Silius does not want to allude too much to a predecessor with whom he disagrees on what kind of poetry to write. But how far can one go in interpreting this kind of intertextuality? Could the other passage in which Orpheus features, where Domitian was considered a superior singer to Orpheus (Pun. 3.619–621), perhaps also be interpreted as an allusion.

32 For the allusions to Ovid see Davis 2009; Murgatroyd 2009, 178–179 (on Arg. 4.344–422). For the Metamorphoses as a Callimachean (and in particular elegiac) epic see e.g. Knox 1986; Hinds 1987.

33 For Ovid’s ‘little Aeneid’ see e.g. Papaioannou 2005, with pp. 3–16 for a discussion of earlier work. See e.g. Anderson 1982 for Ovid’s reworking of Virgil’s Orpheus in Georgics 4.

34 Murgatroyd 2009, 179 (on Arg. 4.344–422). See esp. Davis 2009 for Ovidian influences in this episode.

35 I have argued elsewhere (Heerink 2010, 189–206; 2013) that Valerius’ reaction to the Aeneid in the Hylas episode can be seen as “Callimachean” and can, furthermore, be compared with Ovid’s poetics in the Metamorphoses, with which Valerius also associates himself in the Hylas episode. As Nauta 2006, 27–30, has argued (see also n. 14 above), Valerius uses, but reworks, the Callimachean motif of recusatio in the proem to the Argonautica so as to refuse to write a panegyric epic on Titus’ exploits in Judea; Valerius is only able to write a mythological epic on heroes of the past. Furthermore, Stover 2010 has recently interpreted the scene describing the building of the Argo (1.120–129) metapoetically as expressing Valerius’ allegiance to “the erudition and stylistic exquisiteness characteristically associated with Alexandrian poetry” (p. 643).
to Valerius? Orpheus does not feature here in an Argonautic context, so there is nothing that points specifically to Valerius’ epic, except perhaps for the bare mentioning of Orpheus itself. But I just wonder if the passage can be interpreted in a way similar to the other passages concerning Orpheus in the Punica. As ancient sources suggest, Domitian was apparently in his youth, before his accession to the throne in 81 CE, engaged in writing poetry.³ Martial suggests that Domitian wrote an epic Bellum Capitolinum on Vitellius’ siege of the Capitol in 69 CE,³ and Valerius hints at an epic about his brother Titus’ siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.³ If Domitian indeed wrote these epics, does Silius in this passage then assert that he prefers Domitian’s poetry to that of Orpheus because of its historical, Roman subject matter? And does Silius here again, albeit very implicitly, through Orpheus reject Valerius’ Argonautica as an example of the kind of epic that he dislikes?

³ Tac. Hist. 4.86.2; Suet. Dom. 2.2; Quint. Inst. 10.1.91. See Coleman 1986, 3088–3095, for an analysis of these (and other) passages concerned with Domitian’s literary activity.

³⁷ Mart. 5.5.7–8: ad Capitolini caelestia carmina belli | grande cothurnati pone Maronis opus. – ‘Beside the celestial lay of the Capitoline war place the great work of buskined Maro [i.e. the Aeneid].’ (trans. Shackleton Bailey 1993). Cf. Zissos 2008, 87 (on Arg. 1.12–4): ‘Mart. 5.5.7 ... evidently refers to an epic by Domitian on the Flavian defeat of Vitellius in 69.” Coleman 1986, 3089, suggests that the author of the epic could be Martial’s addressee, Sextus, but as Nauta 2002, 327, duly notes, “the term caelestia ... can only refer to the emperor.”

³⁸ Arg. 1.12–14: versam proles tua pandit Idumen, | sancte pater, Solymo nigrantem pulvere fratrem | spargentemque faces et in omni turre furentem. – ‘Your own son [i.e. Domitian], holy father [i.e. Vespasian], sings of Idume overthrown, of his brother [i.e. Titus], black with the dust of Solyma, scattering torches and raging against every tower.’ (text and translation: Zissos 2008). We have no other source for such an epic, but cf. Plin. NH Praef. 5, who also suggests that Domitian wrote in praise of his brother: quanto tu ore patris laudes tonas! quanto fratris famam! quantus in poetica es! – ‘How eloquently you thunder forth your father’s praises and your brother’s fame! How great you are in the poet’s art!’ (text and translation: Rackham 1938). Waszink 1971 argues, however, that the poem referred to by Valerius is a Panegyricus Titi (see also Coleman 1986, 3090–3091).