Strength of Character: Jason in Pythian IV and the Argonautica

HPGK 7022 – May 19, 2022 (2,049 words)

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Pindar's *Pythian IV* and Apollonius' *Argonautica* both tell the story of Jason and the Argonauts, but do so in very different ways. The authors' portrayal of Jason in particular stands out as one of the most divergent elements in the poems. A comparison of the physical power that both versions of Jason show in the scene with the fire-breathing bulls gives a useful point of comparison, revealing the very different artistic aims and social environments of these two authors.

Pindar and Apollonius portray Jason's physical strength in starkly different ways. In the scene with the fire-breathing bulls, for example, Pindar shows Jason as reliant on Medea's magic only for protection from the flames: σὺν δ᾽ ἐλαίῳ φαρμακώσαισ᾽ ἀντίτομα στερεᾶν ὀδυνᾶν / δῶκε χρίεσθαι ("having prepared with oil remedies for great pain, she gave them to him to anoint on his body," lines 221-22).[1] Protected from the flames, Jason himself provides the awe-inspiring strength needed to yoke the bulls and control them as he ploughs the land:

> πῦρ δέ νιν οὐκ ἐόλει παμφαρμάκου ξείνας ἐφετμαῖς
> σπασσάμενος δ᾽ ἄροτρον, βοέους δήσαις ἀνάγκᾳ
> ἔντεσιν αὐχένας, ἐμβάλλων τ᾽ ἐριπλεύρῳ φυᾷ
> κέντρον αἰανὲς βιατὰς ἐξεπόνησ᾽ ἐπιτακτὸν ἀνήρ
> μέτρον.
>
> By the commands of the foreign woman skilled in all magic charms, the fire did not daunt him. After drawing the plough and binding the oxen by their necks in the rigging by force, and whipping a dreadful goad against their stout forms, the powerful man finished off his appointed measure (lines 233-37).

Apollonius, on the other hand, shows a very different Jason in the story of the bulls, because it is Medea's magic charm alone that gives Jason his strength:

> ἦρι δὲ μυδήνας τόδε φάρμακον, ἠύτ᾽ ἀλοιφῇ
> γυμνωθεὶς φαίδρυνε τεὸν δέμας, ἐν δέ οἱ ἀλκὴ
> ἔσσετ᾽ ἀπειρεσίη μέγα τε σθένος, οὐδέ κε φαίης

[1] All translations are my own.

> ἀνδράσιν, ἀλλὰ θεοῖσιν ἰσαζέμεν ἰσάζω.
>
> Early in the day, you soak this charm, and having stripped naked, cleanse your body as if with oil; then the strength in your body will be boundless, and you will have great power, and you will say that you equal not men but the immortal gods (lines 1042-45).

Underlying this difference in physical strength is a fundamental difference in the heroic heart of each version of Jason. The traditional Homeric hero exemplifies a superior level of bravery, strength or other qualities that make him stand out as worthy of honour over others. Achilles, for example, outpaces all the other Greeks in his martial skill, which compelled other warriors to defer to him, and justified his anger when Agamemnon insulted his honour.[2] Pindar's Jason then, displays his extraordinary strength when he yokes the bulls, which justifies the praise and leafy crown his comrades give him when he completes his task (lines 239-41). Similar to Achilles wearing Hephaestus' armour but fighting by his own unmatchable skill, Jason can use Medea's protective charm without losing any respect, because the outstanding strength that completes this task is entirely his own.

Apollonius' Jason, however, is entirely dependent on Medea's charms to complete his tasks – a point that haunts him in Book IV when Medea discovers him negotiating her fate with their Colchian pursuers: …. μοι σόος ἀμφί τε βουσὶν / ἀμφί τε γηγενέεσσιν ἀναπλήσειας ἀέθλους ("... through me you could safely complete the contest with the with both the bulls and with the earth-born men" lines 364-65). From the start, in fact, this Jason fails to show any trait commands the deference needed to set a hero apart. When the Argonauts set out in Book I, for example, they unanimously acclaim Heracles as leader; it is only his refusal that puts Jason in command (lines 341-47). Unlike Pindar's Jason, who is strong in his own right and commands deference from others, as the scene with the bulls illustrates, Apollonius ties his Jason's strength explicitly to Medea, leaving him a rather lackluster hero. The reasons for these starkly different versions of Jason can be found in each author's literary and historical situation.

[2] Michalopoulos, 1966, pp.72-73; Finkelberg, 1998, p. 16.

PINDAR

Jason in *Pythian IV* was as much a commercial as an artistic creation.[3] Pindar was commissioned to write this poem in honour of Arcesilaus IV, the Battiad king of Cyrene, after his victory in the chariot race during the Pythian games of 462 BC.[4] Because poets such as Pindar accepted commissions to write poems in celebration of athletic victories, there was every reason cast their patrons in a positive light.[5] Indeed, such poems were often the centrepiece of public performances that had the potential to raise the victor to quasi-heroic status within his community.[6] Moreover, it seems likely that victory odes expanded the victor's fame internationally.[7] Thus, victory odes such as *Pythian IV* had the potential to influence a person's reputation both within his community and in the wider Greek world. For this reason, Pindar's use of the Argonautic journey in *Pythian IV* serves to celebrate Arcesilaus' victory by tying him to a heroic past. His Jason, then, had to embody heroic virtues, such as extraordinary strength and bravery, as those virtues reflected directly on Arcesilaus.

Pindar's poem also served a political purpose. It is virtually certain that Demophilus, an exiled aristocrat opposed to Battiad rule, commissioned the poem as a plea for his recall to Cyrene. In fact, it is likely that his recall had been arranged before the performance of Pythian IV, so Arcesilaus could grant the recall, and thereby demonstrate his clemency before a large audience, and help foster reconciliation with his political opponents.[8] By retelling the Argonautic journey, which included a god granting the

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[3] Woodbury, 1968, p. 536, notes that Scholiasts recorded an anecdote of Pindar asking 3,000 drachmas (as much as a sculptor's fee) for a single poem.
[4] Braswell, 1998, p. 1.
[5] Poets might sometimes offer criticism too, but only in mild and veiled terms, Burnett, 1987, p. 441-42.
[6] Burnett, 1987, p. 438: "In order to be sure of an undying glory, the victor had to entrust his reputation to an epinician poet...". Thomas, 2006, p. 166 calls the epinician performance an "...opulent display of achievement...the kind of individual glory not really attainable in Archaic Greek warfare but which could instantly raise someone to a local or even Panhellenic hero."
[7] Burnett, 1987, p. 439: "...the victory ode offered its client's deeds not just to a local public but to the entire Hellenic community." Carey, 2006, p. 209: "The ideal was to free the victor's fame from the confines of its own polis by creating poetry of sufficient appeal to achieve reperformance in other cities."
[8] Braswell, 1998, p. 5.

Argonaut Euphemus (Arcesilaus' mythical ancestor) the divine right to rule Libya, the poem also publicly demonstrated Demophilus' acceptance of Arcesilaus' kingship.[9] Within this context, the episode of the fire-breathing bulls needs to emphasize Jason's strength and heroic nature: as the leader of the Argonautic expedition, Jason's character is emblematic of the Argonauts as a whole – including Euphemus, who, as father of the Battiad line, indirectly reflects on Arcesilaus. Thus, by simultaneously calling for Demophilus' return and acknowledging Arcesilaus' legitimacy as ruler through his Argonautic lineage, *Pythian IV* helps to smooth over political differences and restore the traditional, divinely-ordained order of society: "Pindar thus urged an active conservatism upon his noble victors, invoking them as powerful but reminding them that they moved within a fixed and transcendent scheme."[10] By implication, those who were ruled by these elites were also called upon to accept this social order. The figure of Jason in Pythian IV, then, embodies strength and leadership in a mythical setting, which Arcesilaus, as a king and victor in the Pythian games, wished to show in his own political context. Pindar's Jason is fundamental in encouraging acquiescence to Battiad rule of Cyrene and discouraging civil strife.

Apollonius

It is no overstatement to say that scholars' views of Apollonius' Jason varies widely.[11] However, most scholars agree that Jason in the *Argonautica*, unlike Homer's heroes, is generally passive and pushed along by events in the poem. "…[W]e cannot deny that Jason is uniformly portrayed as passive. Such consistency suggests that Apollonius consciously chose to present Jason in this fashion"[12] In fact, Jason in the *Argonautica* sometimes bears the decidedly un-heroic epithet ἀμήχανος ("resourceless").[13]

[9] Braswell, 1998, p. 5-6.
[10] Burnett, 1987, p. 444.
[11] See Jackson, 1992, p. 155 for a brief summary of some of these opinions, as well as his take on Apollonius' Jason.
[12] Beye, 1969, p. 48.
[13] Gutzwiller, 2007, p. 170 notes that this epithet specifically alludes to Odysseus' helplessness in the Cyclops' cave. See also Hadas, 1936, p. 167 and Klein, 1983, pp. 115-16 for a more detailed discussion of this characterization of Jason than is possible here.

This decidedly unheroic Jason may not have been Apollonius' invention. Fragments of a poem called the Ναυπάκτια and a fifth-century krater both depict Jason as weak and relying heavily on the aid of goddesses to a greater extent than other heroes.[14] If there was indeed already a tradition of an effeminate or passive Jason, then Apollonius extended this characterization to literally epic proportions. As an author of the Hellenistic age, Apollonius was part of a literary environment that adapted, re-invented and conflated earlier poetic models and genres.[15] The poetry of Homer in particular was appropriated and reinterpreted during the Hellenistic age.[16] In this context then, Apollonius created an epic poem in a decidedly un-epic style. As Beye describes it:

> "Apollonius … took the materials of epic and put them together with various incongruities that, while legitimate, are bizarre, to create an epic poem that is thoroughly sensible and by denying much that is Homeric maintains the sense of Homer throughout."[17]

The Jason of Apollonius, then, is in many ways an inversion of the traditional epic hero, presented within the form of a traditional heroic epic. More man than hero, Apollonius portrays him making the best of difficult situations, not by powering through challenges with heroic strength, but availing himself of whatever assistance he can find. "As a Hellenistic hero Jason is, in fact, *not* a hero of non-human proportions at all, but a man, with all man's qualities and faults."[18] The episode with the bulls, then, shows a man temporarily elevated to heroic status through magic, so unlike the Jason seen throughout the rest of the poem. Even when he shows great physical strength in this scene, his return to weakness and passivity is never far away. Jason's strength is not in his body, but in his adaptability, making him as human as his audience, and immediately relatable to anyone who can imagine himself in Jason's position.

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[14] Hadas, 1936, pp. 167-68: "Thetis' help does not discredit or efface Achilles, nor does Venus' Aeneas. But when vigor or decision is required, Jason is imbecile; his success comes only from the help of women…"
[15] Gutzwiller, 2007, pp. 173: "...authors asserted their independence from the literary past by remaking genres in terms of length, subject matter, tone, and purpose."
[16] Hunter, 2005, p. 477.
[17] Beye, 1969, p. 34.
[18] Jackson, 1992, p. 155.

Conclusion

Pindar's Jason is heroic in every respect, because he is a mythical exemplar of the strength needed to overcome the most difficult of obstacles—a fitting counterpart for the victor in a major athletic competition. Explicitly linked through the poem to Arcesilaus, Jason and the Argonauts in *Pythian IV* help elevate the victor's fame both in his home state and abroad. Moreover, Jason is the leader of the expedition that gave Euphemus the divine right to colonize Libya, which in turn gave legitimacy to Arcesilaus' rule over Cyrene. A weak Jason would denigrate Euphemus by association, and thus reflect negatively on Arcesilaus. Doubtless, it would also undermine Demophilus' recall to Cyrene, and do nothing to smooth over political differences within the kingdom that Arcesilaus desired. Apollonius, on the other hand, presents a passive Jason who depends entirely on Medea's magic to take on the fire-breathing bulls. This Jason was very much a creature of his times, created within a literary environment that delighted in reworking and reinterpreting mythical themes, characters and settings. Apollonius' contribution was a poem of epic form turned in novel directions. The strength of body and personality that won such glory for Pindar's Jason is absent in the *Argonautica*. Apollonius' Jason is a deliberately un-epic hero who shows a decidedly imperfect and entirely human nature.

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