

Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.103-113: Translation, and
Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.167-178: A Critical Commentary

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I. Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.103-113 Greek Text and Translation

ἔνθ' ἔπος ἡδὲ καὶ ἔργον ὁμοῦ πέλεν σσυμένοισιν·
 εἰς γάρ μιν βήσαντες ἀπὸ χθονὸς αὐτίκ' ἔωσαν
 105 νῆα· πολὺς δ' ὀρυμαγδὸς ἐπειγομένων ἐλάτησιν
 ἦεν ἀριστήων. ἡ δ' ἔμπαλιν αἰσσοῦσα
 γαίῃ χεῖρας ἔτεινεν ἀμήχανος· αὐτὰρ Ἴησων
 θάρσυνέν τ' ἐπέεσσι καὶ ἴσχανεν ἀσχαλόωσαν.
 ἦμος δ' ἀνέρες ὕπνον ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἐβάλοντο
 110 ἀγρόται, οἳ τε κύνεσσι πεποιθότες οὐ ποτε νύκτα
 ἄγχαυρον κνώσσουσιν, ἀλευάμενοι φάος ἡοῦς,
 μὴ πρὶν ἀμαλδύνη θηρῶν στίβον ἡδὲ καὶ ὁδμήν
 θηρεῖν λευκῆσιν ἐνισκίμψασα βολῆσιν.¹

Then word and deed were one to them in their hurry;
 putting her (Medea) on board, they immediately pushed the ship away from
 105 land; and loud was the din as the heroes strained at their oars
 in haste; but she rushed to the stern
 stretching out her hands in helpless despair towards land while Jason
 encouraged her with words and held her back/restrained her grief.
 And at the time when huntsmen cast sleep from their eyes,
 110 who rely on their hounds and never sleep

¹ Apollonius Rhodius. *Argonautica*. W. H. Race (ed. and trans.). 2009 Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

during the last portion of night, but avoid the light of dawn

lest, by pressing upon them with its white beams,

it efface the track and scent of the quarry,

II. Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.167-178 Greek Text and Translation

ὥς δὲ σεληναίης διχομήνιδα παρθένος αἴγλην
 ὑψόθεν ἐξάνεχουσαν ὑπωροφίου θαλάμοιο
 λεπταλέῳ ἐανῶ ὑποίσχεται, ἐν δέ οἱ ἦτορ
 170 χαίρει δερκομένης καλὸν σέλας· ὥς τότε Ἴησων
 γηθόσυνος μέγα κῶας ἑαῖς ἀναείρετο χερσίν,
 καί οἱ ἐπὶ ξανθῇσι παρηίσιν ἡδὲ μετώπῳ
 μαρμαρυγῇ ληνέων φλογὶ εἵκελον ἶζεν ἔρευθος.
 ὅσση δὲ ῥινὸς βοὸς ἦνιος ἦ ἐλάφοιο
 175 γίγνεται, ἦν τ' ἀγρῶσται ἀχαιινέην καλέουσιν,
 τόσσον ἔην, πάντη χρύσεον, ἐφύπερθε δ' ἄωτον
 βεβρίθει λήνεσσιν ἐπηρεφές· ἥλιθα δὲ χθῶν
 αἰὲν ὑποπρὸ ποδῶν ἀμαρύσσετο νισσομένοιο.²

And as a maiden catches on her fine dress the gleam of the full moon
 rising high above her roofed chamber
 and her heart within her rejoices at the sight of the beautiful radiance,
 170 so joyfully then did Jason lift and carry the magnificent fleece in his hands;
 and from the shimmering of the wool there settled on his fair cheeks
 and forehead a red flush like a flame.

² Apollonius Rhodius. *Argonautica*. Edited and translated by William H. Race. Loeb Classical Library 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009

And as large is the hide of a yearling ox or of the deer

175 which huntsmen call achaiines,

so great it was all golden, and on top the fleece

was heavy with its covering of woollen tufts. The ground under and in front of his feet

sparkled brightly with every step he took.

III. A Brief Critical Commentary on Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.167-178

a. Introduction

The climax of Jason's quest in *Argonautica* 4.167–178 departs markedly from conventional models of heroic achievement. Instead of martial triumph, Apollonius Rhodius offers a scene dominated by light, vision, and aesthetic pleasure, transforming the seizure of the Golden Fleece into an act of viewing rather than conquest. Set immediately after the subduing of the serpent by Medea's *pharmaka*, as Jason confronts the long-sought prize before the narrative turns to the couple's escape, the passage reframes the heroic climax through an extended simile and richly visual language. This interplay of simile, imagery, and characterisation can be traced in detail in the diction and phrasing of the passage, as the following lemmatic analysis demonstrates.

b. Lemmatic Commentary

167-70 ὥς δὲ σεληναίης διχομήνιδα παρθένης αἴγλην

ὑψόθεν ἐξανέχουσιν ὑπωροφίου θαλάμοιο

λεπταλέῳ ἐανῶ ὑποίσχεται, ἐν δὲ οἱ ἦτορ

χαίρει δερκομένης καλὸν σέλας· ὥς τότε Ἴησων

The extended simile compares Jason's delight in the radiance of the Fleece to that of a young girl catching the moonlight in the delicate fabric of her dress. Although formally reminiscent of Homeric comparisons between male heroes and female figures,³ the image is strikingly original in its refined, domestic setting. Its closest parallel within the poem is a simile in which the brilliance of Jason's cloak is compared to women watching a star,⁴ reinforcing the association between luminous

³ cf. Hom.*Il.* 16.7–10

⁴ cf. A.R.*Arg.* 1.774–80

textiles and acts of viewing. Similarly, the lunar imagery evokes the erotically charged glow associated with Hylas.⁵

This feminised and affective mode of perception is reinforced by the emphasis of the simile on moonlight which carries suggestive nuptial connotations,⁶ while the girl's gesture of 'catching the moonlight' (σεληναίης...αἴγλην...λεπταλέῳ ἐανῶ ὑποίσχεται)⁷ evokes an anticipatory grasp of future fulfilment. Her absorbed gaze (δερκομένης) and inner delight (ἐν δέ οἱ ἦτορ χαίρει) further develop this atmosphere of intimate, forward-looking pleasure. While this has led some critics to see the girl as an implicit analogue for Medea whose role as bride-to-be dominates the preceding narrative,⁸ the effect of the simile lies less in identifying her with a specific figure than in introducing a feminised mode of perception, centred on vision and emotion.

When this imagery is applied to Jason, it creates a clear and intentional contrast. Instead of reaching the climax through decisive action, he experiences it in a way more commonly linked to feminine sensitivity and erotic response.⁹ This has often been seen as characteristic of Apollonius Rhodius' reconfiguration of heroism, in which Jason's success, dependent on Medea's intervention, appears less as the product of decisive action than as an almost passive acquisition. In doing so, Apollonius adapts a Homeric technique¹⁰ but reverses its dynamics, transferring a feminised perspective onto the male hero, and thereby marking a clear distance from the energetic model of Homeric epic. The nuptial imagery also carries a darker, proleptic force.¹¹ The radiant garment

⁵ cf. A.R. Arg. 1.1228–33

⁶ cf. A.R. Arg. 1.1228–33, 4.166–71

⁷ cf. A.R. Arg. 4.473; Hdt. 8.137.4–5 (on 'catching the sun')

⁸ Bremer, 1987, pp.423-6; Hunter, 2015, p.104

⁹ Knight, 1995; p.99; Bernd, 2001, pp.151-2

¹⁰ cf. Hom. Od. 23.231–9

¹¹ Knight, 1991, pp.248-50

recalls the fatal wedding robe of Medea's rival in Euripides' *Medea*,¹² suggesting that the scene gestures towards the eventual destruction of Medea and Jason's union.

171-3 γηθόσυνος μέγα κῶας ἑαῖς ἀναείρετο χερσίν,

καί οἱ ἐπὶ ξανθῇσι παρηΐσιν ἡδὲ μετώπῳ

μαρμαρυγῇ ληνέων φλογὶ εἵκελον ἵζεν ἔρευθος.

Only at this point is Jason revealed as the subject of the simile, producing a moment of surprise that retrospectively disrupts the expectation that the maiden might correspond to Medea. The transfer of this feminised imagery onto Jason sharpens the erotic charge of the scene while simultaneously subverts conventional gender roles. Jason's action in lifting the Fleece (ἀναείρετο) evokes the language of 'carrying off' prizes in epic contexts,¹³ yet here the gesture is curiously unheroic, aligning him more closely with the maiden's delicate act of 'catching' the light than with martial achievement.

The visual intensity sharpens as the wool's gleam (μαρμαρυγῇ ληνέων) throws a fire-like glow across Jason's face, while a blush (ἔρευθος) rises and settles over his cheeks and forehead. This interplay of light and body recalls both earlier descriptions of youthful male beauty and the eroticised colouring used elsewhere for figures on the verge of transition.¹⁴ The fire imagery (φλογὶ εἵκελον)¹⁵ and the blush (ἔρευθος) carry wider thematic resonance within the poem¹⁶ where such colouring is repeatedly associated with youthful beauty, erotic awakening, and celestial imagery.

¹² cf. Eur. *Med.* 784-9, 947-55, 1156-66

¹³ cf. Hom. *Il.* 23.614, 778.856

¹⁴ cf. A.R. *Arg.* 1.725-26, 3.163, 4.125-26

¹⁵ cf. A.R. *Arg.* 4.1143-8

¹⁶ cf. A.R. *Arg.* 1.1230 (Hylas), 3.122 (Eros), 1.726 (Jason's erotic cloak)

Jason himself has earlier been compared to a shining star,¹⁷ an image that suggests both his attractiveness and the desire he awakens. As figures such as Hypsipyle and Medea are marked by blushes that signal a loss of innocence, so Jason's reaction to the Fleece may hint at a comparable shift in his character.¹⁸ The emphasis on the gleam of the wool (μαρμαρυγῇ ληνέων) further heightens the sensuous, almost tactile quality of the scene. The imagery thus not only aestheticises the moment but also anticipates a change in Jason's behaviour, as visual delight gives way to possessiveness, evident in his later reluctance to share the prize.¹⁹

174-5 ὄσση δὲ ῥινὸς βοὸς ἦνιος ἢ ἐλάφοιο

γίγνεται, ἥν τ' ἀγρῶσται ἀχαιινέην καλέουσιν,

The physicality of the Fleece, previously suggested through its visual effects, becomes more explicit in the following lines, where it is described as a hide (ῥινός)²⁰ of a young animal, either a yearling (ἦνιος) heifer or a stag.²¹ This comparison marks a shift from the earlier emphasis on radiance and delicacy to one of scale and material substance, grounding the object in a more tangible and animalistic register. The description of the Fleece as a hide-like object worn over the body evokes parallels with earlier heroic figures such as Argos and Heracles, subtly aligning Jason with a more forceful, even violent, mode of heroism.

At the same time, the use of rare and technical vocabulary, particularly ἀχαιινέην, identified as the term used by hunters (ἀγρῶσται... καλέουσιν), introduces a distinctly learned, Hellenistic

¹⁷ cf. A.R.Arg. 1.774–80

¹⁸ Rose, 1985, pp.38-9

¹⁹ cf. A.R.Arg. 4.181–188

²⁰ cf. Hom.II. 20.276 (where ῥινὸς βοὸς only occurs)

²¹ Hunter, 2015, p.105

texture.²² This display of specialised language, while momentarily arresting the narrative, contributes to a quasi-ecphrastic effect: the precision of the description invites the reader to visualise the Fleece in concrete detail. The passage thus balances wonder with specification, transforming the Fleece from a luminous marvel into a physically graspable artefact, while showcasing the poet's learned control of diction.

176-8 τόσσον ἔην, πάντη χρύσειον, ἐφύπερθε δ' ἄωτον

βεβρίθει λήνεσσιν ἐπηρεφές· ἤλιθα δὲ χθών

αἰὲν ὑποπρὸ ποδῶν ἀμαρύσσετο νισσομένοιο.

The physical qualities of the Fleece continue to be foregrounded in τόσσον ἔην, πάντη χρύσειον, ἐφύπερθε δ' ἄωτον, where Apollonius distinguishes the κῶας as a whole (πάντη) from its woolly surface (ἄωτον), preserving the Homeric sense 'fleece' while drawing attention to its texture.²³ The specification λήνεσσιν (tufts) further emphasises thickness and density, so that the scale suggested by τόσσον becomes vivid and almost overwhelming. This focus on materiality invites comparison with the μέγαν καὶ πελώριον beast described in both Apollonius and Callimachus, aligning Jason's encounter with familiar patterns of heroic struggle.²⁴ Yet the contrast is clear: Jason remains silent and inward, unlike Theseus addressing his countrymen, so that Apollonius' use of indirect discourse presents the moment as one of private perception rather than public heroism.²⁵

The emphasis on radiance is developed in ἤλιθα δὲ χθών / αἰὲν ὑποπρὸ ποδῶν ἀμαρύσσετο νισσομένοιο, where the brilliance of the Fleece extends into the surrounding landscape. The

²² Hulse, 2015, p.129-30

²³ Platt, 2012, pp.41-2

²⁴ cf. Ap. Rhod. 4.143; Call. fr. 69.3 Hollis

²⁵ cf. Callimachus Aetia fr. 7 Harder

adverbs ἤλιθα (intensely) and αἰέν (at every step) stress the continuity of this effect, while the rare preposition ὑποπρό (under and before) gives it a broad spatial reach. The verb ἀμαρύσσετο, with its associations of flickering light,²⁶ develops the gleam already linked with the κῶας into a more active force. The Fleece thus appears not just as a shining object but as a source of light spreading around it, enveloping Jason as he moves while he himself remains restrained.

Taken together, the lemmatic detail of 4.167–178 shows a clear shift from action to perception. The Fleece is presented less as something to be seized than as something to be seen. Through its texture, scale, and radiance, it dominates the scene, while Jason’s restrained response recasts the climax as one of viewing rather than action, exemplifying Apollonius’ reworking of Homeric epic through an Alexandrian focus on vision and refinement.

²⁶ cf. Hes. Th. 827; Homeric Hymn to Hermes 415

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