

The Muses' Playground: Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*

A) Introduction.

4 books. "quest" narrative: Jason and the Argonauts journey from Greece to Colchis to retrieve the golden fleece

Hellenistic context (first half of the 3rd century BC): experimentation, surprise, obscure myth, learning, aetiologies...

scholar-poet (e.g. debate about ending of *Odyssey*)

- 1) "and **gladly** you stepped out on to the shores of Pagasai" (*Arg.* 4.1781)
- 2) "and **glad** indeed they were to lie once more together in the bed that had known them long ago" (*Od.* 23.296)

interest in magic and the exotic. e.g. Lynceus (can see through earth, A.R. 1.154-55); Euphemus (can run on water; 1.182-82), Periclymenus (shape-changer 1.159-60), the Boreads (can fly, 1.219-23). Contrast catalogue of ships: men missing (Achilles *Il.* 2.687-88, Protesilaos 698-702, Philoctetes 721-26)

B) Heroism.

What kind of hero is Jason? Parallels with Hector/Odysseus/Achilles. Responsible leader. Return important

- 3) "his father, gripped by deadly old age, lay wrapped in the covers on his bed" (of Aeson after Jason's departure, A. R. 1.263-64)
- 4) "And in their midst the old man sat shrouded tight in his cloak" (of Priam after Hector's death, *Il.* 24.162-63)
- 5) "I must fear for this man and that, for you no less than for all our other companions, that I shall be unable to bring you back unharmed to Greece" (Jason worrying about crew, A.R. 2.635-7)
- 6) "Friends, I shall tell you the plan I myself favour, but it is for you to give it your assent. Common is our need, and common to all alike the right to speak" (Jason, A. R. 3.171-4)
- 7) "Apollonius ... appears to move away from Homeric epic, where ... competitive values outweigh cooperative excellences." (Mori 2005: 212)

Jason prone to doubts/fears. Needs female help. Heroically challenged by comparison?

best of the Achaeans (Achilles/Agamemnon)> best of the Argonauts (who? Herakles?)

- 8) "They began to quarrel fiercely and squabble bitterly amongst themselves because they had abandoned the best of all the heroes" (speaking of Herakles, A.R. 1.1283-5)
- 9) "This was your plan. You didn't want his glory to overshadow yours throughout Greece" (Telamon accusing Jason of wanting Herakles left, A.R. 1.1291-2)

anger of Telamon (cf. anger of Achilles in *Iliad* 1 and 18) but anger without grounds

- 10) "But why waste time in words? I shall go after him, even without these friends of yours who

helped plan this treachery.” (Telamon threatening to go and find Herakles, A. R. 1294-5)

11) “But what pleasure can I take in it, when my dear friend is killed, Patroklos, a man I honoured above all my companions” (Achilles, *Il.* 18.80-81)

Jason doesn't harbour anger (needs new leadership skills). Typically epic emotion of anger renounced by poem

12) “But though I felt pain then, I shall not nurse a bitter wrath, since it was not for flocks of sheep or possessions that you raged in anger, but rather for a man who was your comrade. I hope that you would fight like this with another for my sake...” (Jason, A. R. 1.1339-41)

13) “We find in Jason's acceptance of Telamon's apology a revision of Achilles' rejection of Agamemnon's terms in *Iliad* 9.” (Mori 2005: 212)

Jason: similarities/parallels with Herakles (e.g. acquisition of golden objects in trees that are guarded by serpents and sited at the edge of the world)

Herakles' old-style heroism (force; individualism) out of place; agreements needed; diplomacy

14) “But when they had seen the mouth of the Rhyndakos ..., then Herakles' oar broke in the middle while he was ploughing long furrows in the rough water. He fell sideways; one piece was left in his hands and the other was carried away by the eddying sea. He sat up again and glared around in silence, for his hands were not used to idleness” (A.R 1.1164-71)

15) “therefore now without other thoughts choose the very best man as your leader- the man who will be concerned with every detail in conducting both our quarrels and our agreements with men of foreign lands” (Jason to crew, A. R. 1.338-40)

16) "it is at the conclusion of Book 1 that Apollonius identifies Jason as the hero of the epic in contradistinction to the quintessential archaic hero, Heracles" (Clauss 1993: 13).

Love. Jason as love-hero. Success partly due to lover abilities

17) “they left the deep-shaded grove of Ares. And when a young girl catches in her fine dress the gleam of the full moon hanging high over her bedroom under the roof, and her heart is delighted at the sight of the lovely radiance; just so then did Jason rejoice as he lifted the great fleece in his hands, and over his fair cheeks and forehead the sparkle of the wool threw a blush like flame” (A. R.4.166-73)

18) “... the simile, by describing the blissful sentiments of a girl looking forward to her wedding, must have had the effect of initially directing the reader's attention to the joy which permeates Medea now that she is walking at Jason's side as his bride-to-be.” (Bremer 1987: 425)

war to love: change in Homeric context:

i) Hera and Athena visit Aphrodite at Hephaestus' home to provoke love in Medea (cf. visit of Thetis to get shield *Il.* 18) (also cloak instead of description of shield)

ii) weaving simile *Il.* 12.432-5 (Trojan-Greek battle as evenly drawn as the scale balanced in a working woman's hand)

19) “As when a woman heaps up twigs around a burning brand - a poor woman who must live from working wool - so that she might have light in her dwelling at night as she sits very close to the fire,

and a fierce fame spurts up from the small brand and consumes all the twigs, just so was the destructive love which crouched unobserved and burnt in Medea's heart" (A. R. 3.291-7)

iii) Jason/Dog-star comparison: cf. *Il.* 5.5-7 (Diomedes' flames) and *Il.* 22.26-31 (Achilles)> underlines Jason's attractiveness and erotic harm he brings

20) "Soon, however, he appeared to her as she desired, like Sirius leaping high from the Ocean; it rises brilliant and clear to behold, but to flocks it brings terrible misery." (Jason appearing to Medea, A. R. 3.956-61)

21) "... Jason brings ruin to Medea in the very same way that the Dog star brings it to the flocks and fields. They will both perish from the thirst, one for water, one for love." (Clack 1972: 313)

22) "an exchange of words between a young man and a girl" (what Hector says duel between him and Achilles cannot be, *Il.* 22.128)

Homosexual and heterosexual love: Hylas has relationship with Herakles and nymph

23) "The nymph of the spring, however, was just rising from the fair-flowing water when Hylas came, and she saw close at hand how the sweet grace of his beauty blushed red in the rays of the full moon which shone from the sky. The Kyprian goddess set her heart racing" (A. R. 1.1229-33)

24) "When Herakles heard this, sweat poured down over his temples and deep in his body the dark blood boiled. In a rage he threw the fir-tree to the ground and ran wildly wherever his feet led him. As when a bull is stung by a gadfly and rushes off, abandoning the meadows and the marshes, and has no thought for the keepers or the herd, but runs without resting or sometimes stops and lifts its broad neck to bellow in distress at the bite of the cruel fly" (symptoms suggestive of erotic passion, A. R. 1.1261-9)

Hylas (opposite to Herakles)= like Jason: precursor of him as love hero. Episode causes Herakles (as old-style hero, a "threat" to the epic) to leave the mission

C) Tragic intertexts: the *Argonautica* as "prequel" to Euripides *Medea*

Medea torn as to whether to save Jason (A.R. 3.771-801); cf. Eur. *Medea* 1040-80 (infanticide?)

25) "Away with shame, away with fine reputation! My efforts shall save him, and then he may go off safe wherever he wishes; on that day, when he has accomplished the task, may I find death" (Medea, A. R. 3.785-9)

Jason dependent on Medea in Euripides' play (*Medea* 476-87); has debt to her as a suppliant (*Medea* 496-8; cf. A.R. 3.985-9); swore oath to respect her as his lawful wife

26) "O mighty Themis and my lady Artemis, do you see what I suffer, I who have bound my accursed husband with mighty oaths?" (Eur. *Medea*, 160-3; tr. Kovacs)

27) "Dear girl, may Olympian Zeus himself, and Hera goddess of marriage, who shares Zeus' bed, witness my oath that I shall make you my lawful wedded wife in my home, when we return safely to the land of Hellas" (Jason to Medea, A. R. 4.95-8)

Apollonian Medea's accusations of ingratitude prefigure her actual betrayal in Corinth

28) "Where are your oaths by Zeus, protector of suppliants? Where have all the sweet promises

gone? It was these which made me abandon my homeland, the reputation of my house, and even my parents, everything which was most important to me” (Medea, A. R. 4.358-62)

29) “where am I now to turn? To my father’s house, which like my country I betrayed for your sake when I came here?” (Eur. *Medea* 502-3; tr. Kovacs)

Apsyrtus description: foreshadows Medea's murder of her children

30) “like a child testing a winter torrent which not even grown men will cross” (A. R. 4.460-1, of Medea's brother, Apsyrtus, whom she lures to his death),

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