

RESEARCH PAPER

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JASON AND THE GREEK EPIC HERO IN LIGHT OF ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM

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Frye's seminal work on literary criticism is used as the theoretical basis of this paper, which examines the role of Jason as the hero of the *Argonautica* in light of archetypal criticism. Through a close reading and analysis of the text of Apollonius' *Argonautica* and reflection upon Frye's archetypal criticism as related in his *Anatomy of Criticism* it is demonstrated that Jason may only superficially be identified as a hero, as his characterization, in many instances, breaks the rules of the Greek epic genre, this being especially evident after considering the role of Medea in the third and fourth books of *The Argonautica*.

Keywords: Jason, *Argonautica*, Medea, Frye, archetypes, hero

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The most complete retelling of the story of the Argonauts comes to us not from the Classical age, as would perhaps be expected, but from the Postclassical period, from the age of Alexander. This is, of course, surprising, as the *The Argonautica* represents the oldest of the epic cycles, a fact noted by the ancient Greeks themselves. Thus, in *The Argonautica* we find a blend of the old and the new, the most archaic of Greek tales blended with Alexandrian aesthetics, the Homeric epic tradition redefined by Callimachean and Aristotelean poetics. Much like his contemporary, Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes flouted standard literary practices as set out by his predecessors, in his case Homer in particular, deliberately seeking to revolutionize the genre in question.¹ While certain "rule-breaking" efforts are obvious at a cursory

¹ For more on the topic, see Rossi 1971, Cameron 1992, and Cameron 1995.

glance, such as the length (in hexameters) of the epic poem in question,² others, such as his characterization of the protagonist of the tale, are much more subtle.

Jason is, presumably, the hero of the narrative. He is overshadowed, however, in the second half of the poem by Medea. This work will examine to what degree Jason corresponds to the archetypal hero of the high mimetic mode, as outlined by Northrop Frye, both by examining Jason's role in the narrative and contrasting it with that of Medea. Along with Frye's theories about the high mimetic mode, his theories concerning the romantic and mythical strands will also be examined, in order to provide a more complete picture of the hero(es) of *The Argonautica*.

In the first section of this paper, I will examine the theoretical framework that I will use to discuss the archetypal hero of the high mimetic mode, which will serve to elucidate the manner in which Apollonius of Rhodes presented the image of the hero with the protagonist of *The Argonautica*, Jason. In the second section of this paper, a non-protagonist hero of the epic poem is examined in light of the theoretical framework, namely Medea. Following this, I will attempt to use textual evidence to support the idea that Apollonius of Rhodes used Jason to dismantle the traditional literary representation of the epic hero as presented in the classical epic tradition, this literary representation itself forming the basis of Frye's essays.

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, first published in 1957, was and continues to be incredibly influential. A product of its time, Frye's archetypal criticism was created before its author could be exposed to the modern lenses through which literature is viewed today. Hart, in an essay penned in 1996, states:

Anatomy of Criticism (1957), as Frye later acknowledged, would have been a different book had he written it late in life. The critical or theoretical environment in which he found himself during the 1940s and 1950s was radically distinct from that of the 1980s and 1990s. Had he written *Anatomy* during the period from 1980 to 1991, he would have had to work more to come to terms with feminism, deconstruction, gender studies, postmodernism,

² The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for example, are comprised of 24 books each (having been divided into books in Hellenistic times), containing a sum of 15,693 and 12,110 lines written in dactylic hexameter, respectively. *The Argonautica*, on the other hand, is comprised of 4 books, with a sum 5836 lines written in dactylic hexameter. For more on the Homeric epic, see Lesky 1996: 14–84.

gay and lesbian studies, postcolonial theory, cultural studies, environmental writing, and so on. (Hart 1996: 62)

Despite its seeming disconnection from a more modern literary framework, Frye’s framework belies the strength at the core of critical theory, as a foundational text. Based on classical literature, the reception of which is visible even today in all literary media, Frye’s framework is extremely flexible, allowing the researcher to layer upon it as necessary. Viewing *The Argonautica* through the lens of critical theory allows us to read the epic poem as a subversive take on the Greek hero in comparison with earlier epic heroes, which would otherwise not be possible. As Frye’s theory is derived directly from the text itself rather than from contemporary social issues, it provides a framework that is as timeless as the texts viewed through it.

A strong case is made by Frye for the use of Classical mythology as the basis for his study on literary archetypes, as, according to him, more abstract literary modes allow for more stylization in their structure; this stylization is made possible by the great power of action given to the heroes of mythology, due to their close relation to the gods, Greek epic heroes generally being themselves demi-gods (Frye 1957: 134). This is certainly the case with the heroes of *The Argonautica*: “So too with all the rest: each one of his companions / on this quest is son or grandson to an immortal” (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* III 365–366).³ The world of myth has a sort of purity not found in other literary genres, which makes it a particularly apt starting point for the study of archetypal criticism, because this world is “...an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience. In terms of narrative, myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire” (Frye 1957: 136). Myth, then, is seen by Frye as a distillation of the structural principles of literature, literature in its purest form: “In myth we see the structural principles of literature isolated; in realism we see the same structural principles (not similar ones) fitting into a context of plausibility” (Frye 1957: 136), making the study of myth the best starting point for an examination of archetypal criticism.

It is fitting, in the opinion of the author of this paper, to use *The Argonautica* as an example of non-traditional characterization of the ancient epic hero. While Apollonius’ retelling of the tale is written at a relatively late point in the history

³ “ὧς δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι πάντες ὅσοι συνέπονται ἑταῖροι / ἀθανάτων υἱές τε καὶ υἰοὶ γεγάασιν” (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* III 355–356). All English translations used in this paper are from Green 2007 unless otherwise stated.

of Ancient Greek literature, that is, during the Hellenistic period, it recounts a tale older than that of the Iliad or the Odyssey, using a language similar to that used in the very first Greek epic poems written. The content and delivery method are very ancient, predating even Homer’s epic poems, yet the poem is coloured by all the wealth of the epic tradition that predated it, as well as by the literary aesthetic of the Hellenistic period, during which a sort of re-examination of the form and content of literature was undertaken, with the verbosity and repetition of Homer’s tales replaced with conciseness in expression, with the divine heroes of old presumably replaced by paler, more human versions.

The topic of Jason as a hero has been discussed by R. L. Hunter, C. Rowan Beye, S. Jackson, and T. M. Klein.⁴ This paper, however, is the first attempt, to our knowledge, at framing the question of Jason’s heroism within the framework of literary theory as posited by Northrop Frye. The theoretical framework for this paper is based primarily on archetypal critical theory as outlined by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, in particular those theories concerning heroes, based upon Frye’s reading of classical literature. This theoretical framework is taken from various sections of *Anatomy of Criticism*, with discussion on heroes in literature not concentrated in any one section of the book. In the first essay, entitled *Theory of Modes*, Frye outlines fiction as classified by the hero’s power of action. He defines the hero of the high mimetic mode as follows:

If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the high mimetic mode, of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero that Aristotle had in mind. (Frye 1957: 38)

Frye suggests that the development of the high mimetic mode is one of the most remarkable feats of Greek civilization, even though it is difficult, in Greek literature, to “separate the mythical, romantic, and high mimetic strands completely” (Frye 1957: 39–40) due to the nature of Greek religion and mythology, according to which humans can submit to apotheosis and can often claim divine descent, and in which gods themselves have decidedly human attributes (Frye 1957: 40). Thus, the mythical and romantic strands must also be examined in order to gain a fuller picture of the heroes of *The Argonautica*.

⁴ For more, see Hunter 1993, Rowan Beye 2006, Jackson 1992 and Klein 1983.

The central plot of *The Argonautica* revolves around a quest given to Jason at the very beginning of the poem (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* I 1–15), thus framing him from the beginning as the hero of the epic poem, in which, according to Frye:

A quest involving conflict assumes two main characters, a protagonist or hero, and an antagonist or enemy. (...) The enemy may be an ordinary human being, but the nearer the romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero and the more the enemy will take on demonic mythical qualities. The central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focussed on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero. (Frye 1957: 187)

Hunter, however, notes that Jason is not alluded to until the sixth verse of the poem, and not mentioned by name until the eighth; in contrast, Achilles is explicitly named in the first verse of the *Iliad* ("Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος"), Aeneas is alluded to in the first verse of the *Aeneid* ("Arma virumque cano..."), and Odysseus is alluded to in the very first word of the *Odyssey* ("Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον...") (Hunter 1993: 8; Verg. *Aen.* I 1.; Hom. *Il.* I 1.; Hom. *Od.* I 1.; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* I 1–8). In fact, Apollonius sings not of a hero in the first line of the poem, but rather of heroes: "Starting from you, Phoibos, the deeds of those old-time mortals / I shall relate..." (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* I 1),⁵ the emphasis being on κλέα φωτῶν, the famous deeds of mortals, not gods, and mortals, plural, at that. In the Homeric epic poems, as well as in the Homeric hymns, the opening line has the important function of introducing the subject of the poem, in each case a hero or deity. Apollonius sets the stage of *The Argonautica* as being an epic poem about a group of heroes, as opposed to an individual hero; this is seemingly the case in the first two books of the poem, in which Jason is overshadowed by other heroes, most notably by Hercules. It should be noted that Jason, unlike Aeneas and Achilles, is not a demi-god, a fact which, according to Jackson, places him in a different category than the aforementioned Achilles or Hercules: "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. He not only meets physical dangers; he must face moral dilemmas too" (Jackson 1992: 155). In the opinion of the author of this paper, however, it is Jason's relation and contrast with Medea, expanded upon later in the paper, that speaks most to his non-heroism, rather than his birth and mortal status.

⁵ Ἀρχόμενος σέο Φοῖβε παλαιγενέων κλέα φωτῶν / μνήσομαι..." (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* I 1).

been immediately obvious to his audience. Jason does not fit into the heroic categories postulated by Frye (who evidently relied more on more traditional models when composing them) and compiled from Classical literature; this deviation from traditional models is by Apollonius' own design (Fantuzzi and Hunter 2005: 266). While his epic poem modifies and plays with the epic formula as presented in Hesiod and Homer (as a continuation of earlier, oral tradition),¹⁰ it also, in its characterization of the hero, serves the same purpose; that is, to question and reinterpret the conventions of the genre (Fantuzzi and Hunter 2005: 99). This was part of a larger trend at the time, in which vast socio-political changes were reflected in literary production, and traditional literary forms were being reinterpreted.¹¹ The movement of the locus of intellectual culture from the Peloponnese in general and Athens in particular to the wider Greek-speaking world (Pomeroy et al. 1999: 448–449) would necessarily bring along with it a new concept of Greek identity; this new identity would necessarily be reflected in literature, in which the old models were reworked and revised by new authors.

Epic poetry developed as a form of literature that spoke to national sentiment, both in its choice of subject matter and in its characterization of heroes; in this respect it differed from lyric poetry, poetry that generally spoke to personal and local, rather than national, relations.¹² Together with the shifting of power away from the Greek polis during the Hellenistic age, there was also a shift in attitudes toward the Self and the Other: "...this 'other' Hellenism features a culture and thought that transcends the national and mono-civilizational, a form of life that respects and should be attuned to the logos of the Other, to the beauty of the Other" (Constantinou 2006: 54). In this process, epic poetry loses its primary function, and the hero his identity, as the nation expands far beyond its original limits. Let us now return to Homer's *Catalogue of Ships* in the Iliad, in which heroes' parentage is examined at length. While it has long been argued that the *Catalogue of Ships* ultimately dates from the Mycenaean era (Huxley

Homer's *Odyssey*, paralleled in many of the modern languages of Europe, in which translations of the Bible, the most culturally important text of the time, often mark the oldest vernacular texts. On the popularity of Homer in antiquity, see Porter 2002.

¹⁰ Those interested in the oral tradition and its relation to the development of epic poetry may consult Foley 1990.

¹¹ This is especially evident with Callimachus, whose play on genre is discussed in Cameron 1992.

¹² For more, see Pavličić 1986 and Kravar 1986. For more on the nature of lyric poetry in Greece and the social role of the wandering poet, see D'Alessio 2009.

1956), it begins with a lengthy cataloguing of the Boeotian contingent, which proves to be by far the most numerous; while the question of when exactly this portion would have been added to the catalogue remains unanswered (i.e., whether it is a "Homeric" addition per se, or derives from an earlier time) (Kirk 1962: 154–55), it is clear that it would have been added at a time in which the composer had personal or familial ties to Boeotia. The fact remains that such lists of parentage were important to communities in which members knew each other, or at least of each other, on a personal level. While Apollonius also includes a catalogue of ships in his poem as a convention of the epic genre, the purpose it serves has less to do with recognizing possible ancestors among the heroes listed, and more to do with a shorthand at characterization involving the heroes' position on the list and their descriptions.

Despite Jason's poor placement on Apollonius' catalogue, he does retain several heroic characteristics throughout the poem, as defined by Frye, while yet serving as a contrast to others. Frye makes mention of the heroic quest, as quoted above; the axis of the narrative of *The Argonautica* is, of course, a quest. Jason's enemy in this is ill-defined. The dragon guarding the Golden Fleece certainly has the demonic mythical qualities noted by Frye, but it is neither the source of main conflict for Jason, nor is it killed by Jason. Pelias sends Jason on the quest, one that he knows will be dangerous, but the catalyst for this would be Jason's saving of Hera and the prophecy given to Pelias, not the mechanizations of a villain.

One salient feature of heroic literature as exemplified in myth is the use of prophecy as the mark of a hero; the hero, existing on a level above that in which other mortals exist, is marked as a hero through his reception of prophetic statements concerning himself or his journey: "The introduction of an omen or portent, or the device of making a whole story the fulfilment of a prophecy given at the beginning, is an example. Such a device suggests, in its existential projection, a conception of ineluctable fate or hidden omnipotent will" (Frye 1957: 139). This mark of the gods' interest through prophecy (i.e., as being important enough to be the object of prophetic sayings) marks the hero as someone apart from other men; in *The Argonautica*, Jason is thus marked in the opening lines of the poem:

or Pelias heard it voiced that in time thereafter
a grim fate would await him, death at the prompting
of the man he saw come, one-sandaled, from folk in the country:
and not much later—in accordance with your word—Jason,

foring on foot the Anauros's wintry waters,
 saved from the mud one sandal, but left the other
 stuck fast in the flooded estuary (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* I 5–11).¹³

The Homeric hero is compared to the Apollonian in great detail by Charles Rowan Beye, who notes that changing societal gender roles played a large role in the portrayals of Medea and Jason by Apollonius; while women, during the Classical period of Greek literature, were often described in misogynistic terms, in the Hellenistic age they are afforded greater respect (Rowan Beye 2006: 202–203). This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Jason, while presumably the hero of the epic poem, fades into the background once Medea arrives on the scene: "Jason and the Argonauts, of whom there is not word in the proem of Book 4, have left center stage and Medea takes their place" (Köhnken 2010: 140). This framing of Medea as a hero is also noted by Rowan Beye: "Again, Jason *seems* to be the hero, the only hero, the true traditional centerpiece of the action, until in the middle of the third book Medea starts to debate her great moral choice. Suddenly all that is crucial is hers; she begins to emerge as Jason's equal" (Rowan Beye 2006: 196).

Medea was likely already well-known to readers of *The Argonautica*, both as a mythological figure and as the protagonist of Euripides' *Medea*. Euripides' portrayal of Medea as a woman who, scorned by her husband Jason, murders her two sons in order to get revenge on her husband for infidelity, is contrasted here by Apollonius' version of a young, love-struck girl; and yet, the woman that Medea became could never have been far from their mind, this being yet another example of the author subverting the audience's expectations. Moreover, hints that Jason would become opportunistic and heartless in his old age are sprinkled throughout the poem and are most evident in his interactions with Medea.

It was noted in the previous section that at the beginning of the poem, in the invocation, *κλέα φρωτῶν* (*the deeds of mortals*) are listed as the subject of

¹³ Τσίην γὰρ Πελήης φάτιν ἔκλευν, ὧς μιν ὀπίσσω
 μοῖρα μένει στρυγερή, τοῦδ' ἀνέρος ὄντιν' ἴδοιτο
 δημόθεν οἰοπέδιλον ὑπ' ἐννεσίησι δαμῆναι·
 δηρὸν δ' οὐ μετέπειτα τεῖην κατὰ βάζιν Ἰήσων,
 χειμερίοιο ῥέεθρα κιῶν διὰ ποσσίν Ἀναύρου,
 ἄλλο μὲν ἐξεσάωσεν ὑπ' ἰλύος ἄλλο δ' ἔνερθεν
 κάλλιπεν αὐθι πέδιλον ἐνισχόμενον προχοῆσιν (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* I 5–11).

the tale. The third and fourth books of the poem (notably, not the second) also begin with invocations (Rowan Beye 2006: 195–196). In the case of the third book, both Jason and Medea are mentioned, with the muse in question invoked being Erato, the muse of love poetry, indicating that it is the love of Jason and Medea, not the heroic deeds of Jason himself, that will take precedence in the third book: "Now come, Erató, stand by me, and tell me how Jason / brought the Fleece back from Kolchis to Iolkos / through the love of Medeia" (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* III 1–3).¹⁴ The fourth book begins with an invocation in which Jason is not mentioned at all. Furthermore, Jason is alluded to, taking on the role here of an antagonist:

Do you yourself now, goddess, daughter of Zeus, my Muse,
voice the torments and plans of Medeia: for my own part
I cannot: my inner thoughts spin in dumb distress, uncertain
whether to call it the pain of an ill-starred infatuation
or shameful panic that drove her from her Kolchian homeland. (Ap. Rhod.
Argon. IV 1–5)¹⁵

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Medea's love of Jason is thus framed as something shameful and painful, here related directly to her flight from her homeland and family, but perhaps ultimately alluding to her murder of her children and death as recounted by Euripides.

The story of a hero's quest to slay a dragon guarding a treasure is present in the myths of many Indo-European speaking groups, and can in fact be reconstructed as an Indo-European mythologem; this dragon-slaying myth is present within the Greek world in several different forms, perhaps most notably recounted in the story of Apollo's slaying of the Python.¹⁶ Later, when the pagans of Europe converted to Christianity, the dragon slayer, through *interpretatio christiana*, became a saint, in many cases St. George, or Juraj, Ivan, Jan, etc., in various Slavic-speaking regions.¹⁷

¹⁴ Εἰ δ' ἄγε νῦν Ἐρατώ, παρ' ἔμ' ἴστασο καί μοι ἔνισπε / ἔνθεν ὅπως ἐς Ἴωλκὸν ἀνήγαγε κῶας Ἰήσων / Μηδείης ὑπ' ἔρωτι (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* III 1–3).

¹⁵ Αὐτὴ νῦν κάματόν γε θεὰ καὶ δήνεα κούρησ
Κολχίδος ἔννεπε Μοῦσα, Διὸς τέκος· ἧ γὰρ ἔμοιγε
ἀμφασίη νόος ἔνδον ἐλίσσεται, ὀρμαίνοντι
ἠὲ τόγ' ἄτης πῆμα δυσιμέρου ἧ μιν ἐνίσπω
φύζαν ἀεικελίην ἧ κάλλιπεν ἔθνεα Κόλχων. (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV 1–5).

¹⁶ For further information, see Watkins 1995, Katičić 2008.

¹⁷ For further information, see Belaj 2009.

In the dragon-killing legend of the St. George and Perseus family, of which more hereafter, a country under an old feeble king is terrorized by a dragon who eventually demands the king's daughter, but is slain by the hero. This seems to be a romantic analogy (perhaps also, in this case, a descendant) of a myth of a waste land restored to life by a fertility god. (Frye 1957: 137)

The dragon-killing legend is turned on its head by Apollonius in his *Argonautica*, with the author flouting the reader's expectations. In the poem, the dragon does not demand the king's daughter, only to be slain by the hero; it is not slain at all, and it is in fact the king's daughter (i.e., Medea) who bests the beast in order to obtain the treasure that it guards. Frye elaborates on this myth, explaining that:

The central form of quest-romance is the dragon-killing theme exemplified in the stories of St. George and Perseus, already referred to. A land ruled by a helpless old king is laid waste by a sea-monster, to whom one young person after another is offered to be devoured, until the lot falls on the king's daughter: at that point the hero arrives, kills the dragon, marries the daughter, and succeeds to the kingdom. (Frye 1957: 189)

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Jason fulfills the marriage requirement for heroism, but the marriage is neither long-lasting, nor ultimately a happy one. The king's daughter is in no danger from the monster, and in fact defies her father in taming the beast. The very notion of killing the monster, in this case a dragon, is overturned with Medea's drugging of the beast:

Now as it writhed

Medeia forced it down there, holding it with her eyes, 145
in sweet tones calling on Sleep, supreme among gods,
to charm this fearful creature, then invoked the night-wandering
Queen of the Nether World for success in her venture.
Jason followed behind her in terror; but already
the dragon, charmed by her spells, was relaxing the long spine 150
of its sinuous earthborn frame, spreading out its countless coils,
as some dark wave, stealthy and noiseless, rolls over
a sluggish expanse of ocean; yet still it struggled
to rear up its frightful head, still obstinately urgent
to wrap its killer jaws round the pair of them together. 155
But she with a branch of juniper, newly severed,
dipping it in her potion, chanting strong spells, drizzled

her charged drugs in its eyes, and their most potent odor enveloped it, laid it unconscious. (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV 144–159)¹⁸

Not only is the beast not killed at all, as dictated by the heroic tenets of Frye, nor is he subdued by Jason, the presumed hero, but rather by Medea, the king's daughter herself. The dragon, furthermore, did not terrorize anyone in particular, but rather has a protective role, one disturbed through Jason's treachery. Jason does marry the maiden, but as a suitor, Jason is not considered an acceptable match for Medea, the daughter of a king: "Get out, and take the stranger with you, / whoever he is, this no one you've picked up to spite your father!" (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV 745–746).¹⁹ Indeed, her marriage to Jason is ill-fated, and her status as a foreigner seems to invalidate the marriage altogether, at least in the eyes of Jason, judging by the events of Euripides' *Medea*, with which readers of *The Argonautica* most certainly would have been familiar.

In the very first lines of the *Argonautica*, the task of searching for the Golden Fleece is framed as the central journey of the epic poem (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* I 1–4). Here, again, we are in the realm of Indo-European myth, with the golden object on the top of a tree reflected in Slavic myth (Katičić 2008: 42), or perhaps in the golden apple given to Jarovit by his sister and future wife, Morana as a symbol of her choice of him as her bridegroom (Katičić 2010: 134–137). Medea acquires the golden fleece for Jason not as a promise of marriage from her given to him, but rather as a bargaining chip in order to coerce Jason into marriage:

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¹⁸ ...κατ' ἰδμματος εἴσατοῖ κούρη,
 ὕπνον ἀοσητήρα, θεῶν ὕπατον, καλέουσα
 ἠδεῖη ἐνοπιῇ, θέλξει τέρας, αὔε δ' ἄνασσαν
 νυκτιπόλον, χθονίην, εὐαντέα δοῦναι ἐφορμῆν.
 εἶπετο δ' Αἰσονίδης, πεφοβημένος αὐτὰρ ὄγ' ἦδη
 οἴμη θελγόμενος δολιχὴν ἀνελύετ' ἄκανθαν
 γηγενέος σπείρης, μήκυνε δὲ μυρία κύκλα,
 οἷον ὅτε βληχροῖσι κυλινδόμενον πελάγεσσιν
 κύμα μέλαν κωφόν τε καὶ ἄβρομον· ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔμπης
 ὑποῦ σμερδαλέην κεφαλὴν μενέαιεν ἀείρας
 ἀμφοτέρους ὀλοῆσι περιπτύξαι γενύεσσιν.
 ἠ δέ μιν ἀρκεύθιοιο νέον τετμηότι θαλλῶ,
 βάπτουσ' ἐκ κυκεῶνος, ἀκήρατα φάρμακ' αἰοδαῖς
 ῥαῖνε κατ' ὀφθαλμῶν, περί τ' ἀμφι τε νήριτος ὀδμη
 φαρμάκου ὕπνον ἐβαλλε· γένυν δ' αὐτῆ ἐνὶ χώρῃ
 θῆκεν ἐρεισάμενος, τὰ δ' ἀπείρονα πολλὸν ὀπίσσω
 κύκλα πολυπρέμνοιο διέξ ὕλης τετάνυστο (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV 145–161).
¹⁹ ἔρχεο δ' ἐκ μεγάρων, ζείνω συνοπηδὸς ἐοῦσα
 ὄντινα τοῦτον ἄστον ἀνεύραο πατρὸς ἀνευθεν (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV. 745–746).

“Oh, I’ll give you the Golden Fleece, when I’ve lulled its guardian serpent asleep—but do you, in the presence of your comrades, stranger, invoke the gods to witness those solemn vows you made me; nor when I’ve voyaged far from here leave me despised and dishonored through lack of guardians.” So she spoke in her grief; but the heart of Aison’s son knew great joy, and at once he gently raised the suppliant, unclasped her arms from his knees, spoke words of comfort: “Poor girl, let Olympian Zeus himself, and Hera, Zeus’s bedmate, goddess of marriage, bear me witness that I’ll set you up in my home as my wedded wife when our voyaging’s done and we reach the land of Hellas.” (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV 87–98)²⁰

The actual acquisition of the Golden Fleece is, however, anti-climactic, and is not the climax of the narrative, which would be the escape of the Argonauts, again orchestrated by Medea.

In relation to Medea, Jason particularly shows a lack of courage; he has managed, by the fourth book, to fulfill the quest set to him at the outset of the poem; yet, he manages to do this only through the help of a woman, one whose heart he won over, and who betrays her own family after Jason promises her marriage. Once his goal has been met, Jason is ready to cast aside his new bride as soon as she becomes a liability:

No temples, no ramparts are mine: no other protection can I hold out as my shield save your own persons. Cruel, ruthless, hard-hearted—do you not feel secret shame at the sight of me so helpless, arms outstretched to clasp

²⁰ δώσω δὲ χρύσειον ἐγὼ δέρος, εὐνήσασα φρουρὸν ὄφιν· τὴν δὲ θεοὺς ἐνὶ σοῖσιν ἑταίροις ζεῖνε τεῶν μύθων ἐπίστορας οὓς μοι ὑπέστης ποιῆσαι, μηδ’ ἔνθεν ἑκαστέρω ὀρμηθεῖσαν χήτει κηδεμόνων ὀνοτήν καὶ ἀεικέα θείης.” Ἴσκεν ἀκηχεμένη· μέγα δὲ φρένες Αἰσονίδαο γήθεον. αἴψα δὲ μιν περὶ γούνασι πεπτηῖαν ἦκ’ ἀναειρόμενος, προσπύξατο θάρσυνέν τε· “Δαιμονίη, Ζεὺς αὐτὸς Ὀλύμπιος ὄρκιος ἔστω Ἴρη τε Ζυγίη, Διὸς εὐνέτις, ἣ μὲν ἐμοῖσιν κουριδίην σε δόμοισιν ἐνιστήσῃσθαι ἄκοιτιν, εὗτ’ ἂν ἐς Ἑλλάδα γαῖαν ἰκώμεθα νοστήσαντες” (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV 87–98).

the knees of a foreign queen? Ah, when you were eager
to get your hands on the Fleece, why, then you’d have crossed swords
with the whole Kolchian host, and proud Aiētēs: but now,
when they’re cut off and isolated, you’ve forgotten your courage! (Ap. Rhod.
Argon. IV 1045–1052)²¹

This forms a sharp contrast with the Greeks’ most famous married epic heroes, Hector and Odysseus; the former was a dedicated husband, and his parting scene with his wife in the *Iliad* remains one of the most touching in Greek literature, the latter giving up the possibility of immortality to return to his wife.

The question of heroism in *The Argonautica* is implicitly tied to gender and gender roles as seen in the dichotomy hero/heroine as represented by Jason and Medea, in which Medea’s male attributes (as expressed by gender conventions of the era and place) yet again contribute to Apollonius’ subversive take on epic conventions.²² Hadas, in a very brief article dating from the interbellum, notes that Jason is depicted as feeble in artwork and described most often by Apollonius with the epithet ἀμήχανος, yet “sympathetic descriptions of him seem always to occur in the poem in connection with the admiration of women” (Hadas 1936: 167). He concludes with the idea that feminine depictions of Jason pre-date *The Argonautica* by at least two centuries, as evidenced by iconography (Hadas 1936: 167–168). Indeed, Jason’s most manly trait, according to Hadas, is his attractiveness to women (Hadas 1936: 167), a trait he shares with Homer’s Paris, a character disparaged for his cowardliness and traditionally considered distinctly un-heroic, despite having all of the prerequisite predispositions attributed to the epic hero.²³

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²¹ οὐ νηούς, οὐ πύργον ἐπίρροθον, οὐκ ἀλεωρήν
ἄλλην, οἴοθι δὲ προτιβάλλομαι ὑμέας αὐτούς·
σχέτλιοι ἀτροπίης καὶ ἀνηλέες, οὐδ’ ἐνὶ θυμῷ
αἰδεῖσθε ξείνης μ’ ἐπὶ γούνασι χεῖρας ἀνάσσης
δερκόμενοι τείνουσαν ἀμήχανον· ἀλλά κε πᾶσιν,
κῶς ἐλεῖν μεμαῶτες, ἐμείξατε δούρατα Κόλχοις
αὐτῷ τ’ Αἰήτη ὑπερήνορι, νῦν δὲ λάθεσθε
ἠγορέης, ὅτε μούνοι ἀποτμηγέντες ἔασιν. (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV 1045–1052).

²² For more on ancient perceptions of gender and emotions, see Allard et al. 2018. On sex and gender in Hesiod, see Kelly 2021. On female masculinity in Roman oratory, see Deminion 2020.

²³ For more on Homer’s Paris, see Suter 1987, Scott 1919, Gladstone 2014, and Lloyd 1989. Cowardice, in particular, is considered a trait assigned to the female gender, as seen expressed explicitly by Euripides, as in Allard et al. 2018: 25; see also Wissmann 2011.

Jason, too, has cowardly attributes, as noted above. Medea, as presented by Euripides, "refuses to give in to any form of cowardice, displaying anger instead" (Allard et al. 2018: 26); her audacity places her firmly in the realm of men from a societal point of view. This sentiment is echoed by Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses*: "Then Psyche, otherwise infirm both in body and spirit... (her) sex is changed by courage" (Apul. *Met.* 5.22).²⁴

Further examples of Medea taking on behaviour that was gendered as male include *μητις* "wisdom, skill, craft", but also "counsel, plan, undertaking" (Liddell & Scott s.v. *μητις*). While this quality is not strictly considered a masculine trait in Greek literature, owing to the dichotomy *μητις* / *βίη* "force", in which secretive, cunning behavior could be seen as the female counterpart to masculine force, it is often associated with male epic characters (Holmberg 1997: 1–3). This quality was famously associated with Odysseus, as well as with many of the Greek gods and titans, including Zeus, Prometheus, Hephaistos, and Hermes (Holmberg 1997: 2–3). In Apollonius' epic poem, however, this quality is most strongly associated with Medea: "In the *Argonautica*, too, the quality and strength of *μητις* is represented as gendered: some males have a rather prosaic access to *μητις*, but the strongest and most successful *μητις*, as well as the most sinister, belongs to the female Medea" (Holmberg 1998: 136). Examples of Medea's cunning have already been discussed above, through which it becomes clear that Jason takes advantage of Medea's *μητις* for his own ends, using her as a tool to achieve his goals; that is, until he loses control over her (Holmberg 1998: 136).

Jason is not only shown to not be a hero when viewed in relation to Medea due to his lack of courage in the face of her audacity, as in her killing of her brother (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV. 455–480) and her abandonment of her family home (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* IV. 1029–1041), but he also strategically woos her, in order to use her knowledge of magic to fulfill his quest, effectively ruining her life and making her a tool to achieve his objectives. Her relationship with Jason, who uses her in order to obtain the Golden Fleece, thus fulfilling his quest, causes Medea to have a falling out with her family that results, as mentioned, in the murder of her brother; as readers of the *Argonautica* in antiquity would have been familiar with Euripides' play, *Medea*, Jason later leaves Medea for another daughter of a king, citing political and pragmatic reasons for his betrayal. The resulting anger leads Medea to kill her and

²⁴ "Tunc Psyche, et corporis et animi alioquin infirma... sexum audacia mutatur". Translation mine.

Jason’s sons, as depicted by Euripides. His pursuit of her is intentional, with the manipulative goal of winning her love in order to use her magical skills in order to complete the quest:

Son of Aison, you’ll find fault with the counsel that I’m going to give you; but in a crisis no suggestion should be neglected. There’s a girl—you’ve heard me mention her already—skilled in drug-magic, taught by Hékaté, Perses’ daughter. If we could but win her, I think there’d be no panic about your defeat in the contest; yet I have a terrible fear lest my mother may not help us in this matter (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* III. 475–481).²⁵

Medea’s aforementioned magical talents and the erotic relationship between her and Jason are reflected in another of Frye’s descriptions of the demonic erotic relationship:

The demonic erotic relation becomes a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty or frustrates the one who possesses it. It is generally symbolized by a harlot, witch, siren, or other tantalizing female, a physical object of desire which is sought as a possession and therefore can never be possessed. (Frye 2000: 149)

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Medea fits neatly into Frye’s conception of the symbol of destructive passion. She is a witch in the flesh, as is most evident in her taming of the dragon through the use of incantations and potions, rather than the strength expected of a hero. Jason, in Euripides’ *Medea*, wishes to remarry a Greek (i.e., not foreign) princess and to make his former, barbarian wife a concubine, which would also make her a harlot in the eyes of Greek society, an act to which she does not allow herself to submit (Eur. *Med.* 522–575).

In conclusion, Frye’s seminal work on literary criticism, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, is relevant even today, and is particularly useful in the analysis of epic poems dating from antiquity. From a structural perspective,

²⁵ Αἰσονίδη, μήτιν μὲν ὀνόσσειαι ἦντιν’ ἐνίψω,
πείρης δ’ οὐ μάλ’ ἔοικε μεθίμεν ἐν κακότητι.
κούρην δὴ τινα πρόσθεν ἐπέκλυες αὐτὸς ἐμεῖο
φαρμάσειεν Ἐκάτης Περσηίδος ἐννεσίησιν·
τὴν εἴ κεν πεπίθοιμεν, ὄιομαι, οὐκέτι τάρβος
ἔσσειτ’ ἀεθλεύοντι δαμήμεναι· ἀλλὰ μάλ’ αἰνῶς
δεῖδω μὴ πως οὐ μοι ὑποστήτη τότε μήτηρ (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* III. 475–481).

Apollonius makes it clear that in contrast to conventional Greek epic usage, Jason does not occupy the position usually afforded to a hero in epic works. A close reading of Apollonius' *The Argonautica* in light of Frye's writings on archetypal criticism reveals that, despite superficially featuring as the hero of *The Argonautica*, Jason does not fit into Frye's heroic categories; this is particularly evident when taking into consideration the role of Medea in the third and fourth books of the epic poem. Textual evidence from *The Argonautica* is used throughout the paper to support the idea that Apollonius of Rhodes' Jason was not meant to represent the traditional literary representation of the epic hero.

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