



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

**APOLLONIUS OF RHODES**

*Jason and the Argonauts*

## JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS

APOLLONIUS OF RHODES (third century BCE) was a citizen of Alexandria in the time of the Ptolemies. Though little is known of his life, his fame rests solely on the *Argonautica*, a poem that was from the start unfairly compared with Homer's *Odyssey*, but from which Virgil was not ashamed to borrow. Unlike Callimachus, a fellow Alexandrian poet with whom he had a long and complex history of mutual artistic emulation and innovation, Apollonius developed the classical traditions of the Homeric epic, expanding them to include a flair for romance and realistic psychological insight that was entirely his own. Some ancient sources suggest that Apollonius composed an earlier, less successful version of the poem. These sources posit that the poet retired to Rhodes and possibly there composed a more successful version. On his later return to Alexandria, Apollonius became a tutor to the future Ptolemy III Euergetes and the director of the Alexandrian Library, a principal storehouse of the literature and learning of antiquity.

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APOLLONIUS  
OF RHODES

Jason and the Argonauts

*Translated by*  
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*With an Introduction and Notes by*  
BENJAMIN ACOSTA-HUGHES

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# Introduction

## 1. THE POET

Apollonius of Rhodes was a poet and scholar who lived under the rule of the early Ptolemies in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century BCE. Alexandria was a new city; founded by Alexander in the course of his Egyptian conquest (331 BCE), the city was drawn up on one of the mouths of the river Nile near Naucratis, an early Greek *emporion*, or trading post, on the Mediterranean. Thus, unlike Pharaonic cities such as Thebes (Luxor) or Memphis, Alexandria looked to the north, and the history of this city under Ptolemaic rule was one of engagement with the Mediterranean world. The Macedonian general, now king, Ptolemy I Soter made Alexandria his capital around 300 BCE, transferring there the body of Alexander the Great from Memphis, capital of the Pharaonic New Kingdom. The movement both toward Europe and from Egypt is representative of the mixed cultural heritage that quickly characterized the new city, and that has recently been confirmed by a series of spectacular maritime archaeological discoveries in the Mediterranean off the Egyptian coast. To Alexandria came settlers from many parts of the ancient Mediterranean world, the larger groups being from Macedon, home of Ptolemy I and much of his soldiery; Cyrene, an old Greek city-state some five hundred miles to the west (in modern Libya); the Aegean islands; the Peloponnese; and Athens. Unlike earlier Greek *poleis*, or city-states, this new, post-Alexander capital consisted from its instantiation of people from a variety of backgrounds, bringing with them the cultural memory of their own dialects, religious festivals, and local heroes. Much like a modern metropolis, Alexandria was something of a melting pot of a variety of ethnic groups and a blending of disparate traditions. One exemplary product of this new world, a world of a new kind of multicultural syncretism and new geopolitical spaces, is Apollonius' modern "take" on an age-old saga, the *Argonautica*.

Our knowledge of Apollonius' biography comes primarily from two much later *Lives* that are included in the manuscript tradition of scholia (learned notes) to the *Argonautica*, circumstantial evidence, and a good deal of speculation, some of which has (unfortunately, in some regards) passed into conventional scholarship and is easily accessible to the modern student. What we know more or less for certain is that Apollonius was a tutor to Ptolemy III Euergetes, who succeeded to the Egyptian throne on the death of his father, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, in 246 BCE. According to the ancient testimony, he also served as the second royal appointed head of the Alexandrian Library, although we have no way of knowing exactly what the title τῆς βιβλιοθήκης προστάτης ("figure in charge of the library") may actually have entailed, and recently some of the ancient evidence has been contested. Apollonius is thought to have been born in Alexandria. Why he acquired the epithet "the Rhodian" is a matter of speculation. The ancient lives reference a close relationship to his fellow Alexandrian poet Callimachus (he is said to be the latter's μαθητής or "student"), with whom he certainly has a much intertwined artistic rapport (see further below).

Only one of Apollonius' poetical works, his *Argonautica*, has survived intact (it has come to us in manuscript tradition, i.e., a heritage of texts that were copied for many hundreds of years by hand, though it includes the *Homeric Hymns*, Callimachus' *Hymns*, and the much later *Orphic Argonautica*). Of his



other poetic output, we know of a *Canopus*. This presumably dealt with the legend of Canopus, helmsman of Menelaus, and the foundation of a city with his name east of Alexandria, which now lies underwater (the Bay of Aboukir). Apollonius also authored several foundation poems, one of Alexandria, one of Naucratis, and one of Rhodes (this may have had to do with the epithet “of Rhodes,” which conveniently now differentiates our poet from a later “librarian,” Apollonius the Eidographer (“compiler of forms”). There are extensive scholia that have survived with the *Argonautica* (originally these were written on separate papyrus rolls, but with the appearance of the codex, more like the modern book in form, they came to be included in the margins of the text). These scholia reference, for several lines in the first book of the four-book poem, a *proekdosis*, or “previous version,” of at least this first book, and give alternate readings. We don’t, in fact, know enough about the circumstances of publication in third-century Alexandria to be able to say that we are talking about an earlier “edition,” only that there was some sort of “previous version” of the poem’s first book.

The knowledge of an earlier version of the *Argonautica*, and of some sort of close relationship with his near (if somewhat older) contemporary Callimachus, gave rise early on to a narrative of rival artists and rival art forms. In fact, the two poets show a remarkable awareness of each other’s work, apparently over a considerable period of time. It may be more helpful for the modern reader to consider their similarities rather than their differences, particularly in the case of Apollonius’ extant four-book hexameter poem, his *Argonautica*, and Callimachus’ fragmentary four-book elegiac poem, the *Aetia* (“Origins” or “Causes”). Both poems transform a vast amount of earlier material, from both poetry and prose, into a new or different use of a traditional poetic form (whether hexameter or elegy). Both poems are interested in *aetia*, in the limits of Ptolemaic geography, and in divine retribution of human transgression. In terms of their poetic forms, both poems recast a traditional relationship of poet and source(s) of divine inspiration, markedly eschew a purely linear narrative, and close with the type of hymnlike language that is traditionally characteristic of hymn. The points of contact between the two poems, whether shared subject, shared source of allusion, or cross-reference between the works, are legion. It is clear that the two poets knew each other’s work in the course of composition and over a period of time, though many details of how this dynamic worked remain unknown. In some respects the association of contemporary artists today in other media, whether painting or music, provides a helpful model for thinking of the interrelationship of these contemporary Alexandrian court artists: at issue is contemporaneity rather than chronology.

We find a similar situation with another contemporary poet, Theocritus, who is of Sicilian origin but spent much of his artistic career in Alexandria. Theocritus clearly paid great attention to Apollonius’ poem. Two of Theocritus’ *Idylls*, 13 and 22, respond to episodes that occur at the end of *Argonautica* 1 and the beginning of *Argonautica* 2, respectively. I would argue that the relationship is closer than has been previously understood. Theocritus’ *Idyll* 2 is another instance of this close response (here to Medea’s infatuation with Jason, and specifically to Apollonius’ use of the lyric poet Sappho), and also there is a close relationship between the narrative frame of exchange and the *ecphrasis* (description of an art object) in *Idyll* 1 and the opening of *Argonautica* 3. Again thinking in terms of tight chronology here, albeit a traditional approach to these artists, may not be the right paradigm. At issue seems to be a close association and awareness of each other’s creative activities over time, which, given the context of a royal court with extensive royal patronage, is perhaps unsurprising.

## 2. THE POEM

The saga of the *Argo* and its heroic voyage is of great antiquity, and may go back to an earlier period than even the Homeric poems, to ancient Near Eastern narratives of sea voyages around the Black Sea. At the heart of the saga, as the German scholar Karl Meuli observed in his 1921 study of the *Odyssey* and the *Argonautica*, is a simple folk-tale motif, the young prince sent on a dangerous journey to the land of the Sun (i.e., to the farthest east) to achieve a heroic end, which he can only do through the aid of a local princess. The *Odyssey* is the earliest Greek text that is aware of this legend: in the opening of the twelfth book, as the magical enchantress Circe recounts Odysseus' future journey to him, she tells him of the Clashing Rocks (lines 69–72) through which only one ship has ever passed before, the *Argo*, "subject of care for all," because of Hera's love for Jason. Yet although the saga itself, with its motif of a hero aided by a goddess sent on a daunting quest, would seem an ideal theme for heroic epic, no known epic *Argonautica* has survived, and, given the silence on earlier epic poems in the rich Apollonius scholia, it is possible that none had survived to the time of Apollonius. It is not inconceivable that, for Apollonius, the composition of an *Argonautica* in hexameter may have been more of an innovation than a gesture toward established tradition, thus making the poem as an artistic composition, like Virgil's *Aeneid*, something quite new.

Earlier treatments of episodes, or more, of the *Argonautica* in other poetic forms certainly did exist, however. Jason figures in Hesiod's fragmentary hexameter *Catalogue of Women*, and treatments of the legend in lyric poetry are remarkable. These include extensive fragments of the poets Ibycus and Simonides, and particularly Pindar, whose fourth *Pythian Ode* has a lengthy treatment of the myth at its center. As the one extant lyric treatment, the influence of this model on Apollonius' poem can be traced in considerable detail. All three of the major tragedians treated material from the *Argonautica* narrative. Aeschylus composed a number of plays that treated themes from this narrative, among others an *Argo*, a *Lemnian Women*, a *Phineus*, and an *Hypsipyle*. Sophocles composed a *Medea*, a *Lemnian Women*, and a *Phrixus*. A lost play of particular interest for reading our poem would have been Sophocles' *Women of Colchis*. Euripides composed a *Hypsipyle*, of which considerable fragments survive, and of course his fully extant *Medea*. This last often reflects back on the journey of the *Argo*, famously in the tragedy's opening lines, but Apollonius was not composing his *Argonautica* with this play alone or particularly in mind. The long fame of Euripides' *Medea* is another story—it is one of many possible tragic models for the Alexandrian poet.

Among the many sources Apollonius interweaves into his epic poem are historical and philosophical ones. The former include Herodotus on Egypt (the second book of Herodotus' *Historiae*) and Xenophon's description of Black Sea geography in *Anabasis* Book 5. Several images in Apollonius' poem implicate the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, and, like other Hellenistic poets, Apollonius appears to be particularly drawn to Plato's erotic dialogues.

Apollonius was not only a careful reader of Homer, but a Homeric scholar: his knowledge of and sensitivity to the Homeric epics is pervasive throughout the *Argonautica*, and this manifests itself in a variety of ways. His poetic language is replete with rare Homeric words, including those whose meaning was doubted by Apollonius' contemporaries. His use of these Homeric words is frequently his own way of asserting their correct definition. Apollonius' similes are his own elaborations or variations on Homeric ones. And Apollonius is acutely aware of Homeric narrative lines in constructing his own. Let us consider one example, the sixth book of Homer's *Odyssey*. The narrative of this book is fairly linear. Odysseus arrives at Scheria (land of the Phaeacians) and, at the end of *Odyssey* 5, burrows down, alone, like an animal (his lowest point before he begins his reintegration into human society), by the riverside. Book 6 opens with Athena appearing in a dream to the daughter of the local king and queen, Alcinous and Arete; the dream compels the princess Nausicaa to take the



washing to the river. There the princess and her maids play with a ball and the poet compares the girl to Artemis amid her attendant nymphs. A ball thrown and then missed wakes Odysseus. He then supplicates the young princess, and compares her to a tree. She tells him that only on his kneeling as a suppliant to her mother, the queen, Arete, can he be safely accepted among the Phaeacians. Apollonius reworks every moment of this episode into *Argonautica* 3–4. At the conclusion of *Argonautica* 2 the Argonauts wait among the reeds at the river Phasis. At the opening of *Argonautica* 3 the gift of a ball is the original cause that sets the erotic narrative in motion. Medea goes forth from town with her attendants, and the poet compares her to Artemis with her nymphs. Medea awaits her first meeting with Jason as her maids play, and here there is no ball, as that figured earlier in this book of the poem. In their first meeting the poet compares the two to silent trees. Later in the poem they come to the island of Aia, where Circe (enchantress of the *Odyssey*, and Medea's aunt), on having a nightmare, comes to the water to wash her clothing. On arrival at Scheria in flight from the Colchians, it is through Arete's actions that Medea's safety is ensured.

One area where we repeatedly observe Apollonius' own enhancement, or variation, on Homer is in his similes. Similes are a central feature of Homeric narrative. Plainly put, similes make the intangible tangible for the poem's audience. For example, the military prowess of a mythohistorical hero, a figure distant in time and space, when compared to a ferocious beast that preys on flocks and terrifies shepherds, becomes more "vivid," or "present," for the narrative's listener, who can, through the comparison to what he or she knows through experience, or through common knowledge, then better imagine what is going on in the narrative. Similes in Homeric poetry are of many kinds, among them human to nature, human to art object, human to divine, and human to human (Odysseus' weeping in *Odyssey* 8 compared to the weeping of a woman widowed in war and about to be led off to slavery). Some are simple, and easily repeated (e.g., military hero to lion); others are rather more complex both in composition and in their meanings (the previously cited comparison at the end of *Odyssey* 8 would be a good example of the latter). In Apollonius' poem, which, unlike the Homeric poems, is *not* the product of an oral poetic tradition, and lacks many of the features of that tradition (repeated epithets, formulaic lines, repeated short similes), similes are not only complex but also generally are implicated in multiple ways in the surrounding narrative.

Let us consider two examples. The comparison of Jason as Medea beholds him at *Argonautica* 3.1239–50 to Sirius, the Dog Star of late summer, not only emphasizes his physical beauty in the girl's eyes, but at the same time denotes great foreboding for her; this love has great destructive force. The comparison at *Argonautica* 4.203–18 of Jason cavorting with the golden fleece to a young girl admiring her dress in the moonlight not only highlights sensual pleasure in material in both cases, but both emphasizes Jason's physical allure and also brings his stature *qua* hero into an odd light. While the heroic Medea pacifies the horrific monster, Jason prances in the moonlight. The moon, Medea's companion throughout the narrative of her nights troubled by erotic visions, and the scornful celestial body that watches over her night-time flight from home and family earlier in the book, here reappears in a comparison that likens Jason's radiance to that of a young girl's dress, and frames an epic hero in a setting of sensuality and something rather like decadent irresponsibility.

There are many individual moments throughout the poem, both larger and smaller, that recall moments in the Homeric epics. Apollonius can certainly be read as an extraordinary act of reception of Homeric epic, but he is not derivative (and here some prejudices of earlier scholarship on the Alexandrian poem continue to echo in modern criticism). His engagement with Homer is anything but one-sided: the *Argonautica* questions, furthers, enhances, alters its Homeric models; its reading next to Homer is at once an act of attraction and disjunction.

Modern criticism of the *Argonautica* has foundered on several of the poem's novel features. One is of course the "difference" from Homer. Many of the standard features that the Homeric poems owe to an oral narrative tradition, formulaic epithets and repeated set scenes among others, are missing in Apollonius' poem. As already observed, there is a distinctly different mechanism in the use of simile. The portrayal of the gods, and their appearance in the poem, is markedly different from Homer. In the Homeric poems the gods serve a variety of functions within the poem, as metaphor, as directional movement (the passage of a divine figure from Olympus to Earth and vice versa changes the scene of narrative focus), and in the *Iliad* in particular as lighter and deathless contrast to the grim realities of war on the battlefield. Generally gods in the Homeric poems interact with mortals in disguise, even in dream sequences. Appearances of the gods in the *Argonautica* are quite different, and consciously play on Homeric convention. The one extended scene on Olympus (the opening of Book 3), in some ways reworking of several scenes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is at the same time unlike any scene in Homer: Homeric Olympus does not allow for this kind of portrayal of domestic intimacy. There are two extraordinary moments in the poem when the heroes actually see the god Apollo as the god Apollo. And when gods intervene in the Apollonian narrative, as Athena does when holding back the Clashing Rocks, they do so as anthropomorphized divine forces.

A major problem for modern criticism of the poem is the portrayal of Jason. Admittedly our first encounters with Odysseus in the *Odyssey* (the hero on the beach weeping with longing for his homeland) and Achilles in the *Iliad* (the hero on the beach lamenting to his mother of his mistreatment by Agamemnon) are not high moments in epic heroism, but these moments fit within a code of epic-heroic expectations: the hero in isolation, the hero dishonored. Jason is more complex, and, quite arguably, more problematic. The Argonauts' initial choice of Heracles to lead the expedition is only the first of a series of moments in which Jason's leadership is cast in doubt either by other Argonauts or by the poet's descriptive language. Jason is frequently characterized as *amekanos*, "resourceless," "at a loss." His first action in battle is to kill his host Cyzicus, king of the Doliones, albeit in error, but the action remains problematic. The hero who steps forward to fight the savage Amycus at the opening of Book 2 is not Jason but Polydeuces. Jason *does* succeed at the superhuman tasks assigned by the Colchian Aeëtes, but only through Medea's magic. And, as already observed, Jason's prancing about with the golden fleece is an odd reflection of traditional heroism.

To be sure, Jason has his defenders. Indeed, defenses of Jason are something of a small industry in Apollonian scholarship.<sup>1</sup> And the argument can indeed be made that here, as with Aeneas (though in some ways differently), at issue is a more modern, more complex type of epic hero. Certainly there are some factors that set Jason rather apart from his Homeric predecessors. One is without doubt the role of Jason's erotic appeal, already present in the Lemnian episode in Book 1, and at the center of the drama of Medea's psychological struggle in Book 3 and the opening of Book 4.<sup>2</sup> Only Paris in the *Iliad* is similarly characterized, but

he has a somewhat circumscribed role in that poem.<sup>3</sup> Jason's beauty is the object of an eroticized female gaze, and, particularly in the case of Medea, this leads to extensive internal psychological reaction.

Jason is also a different kind of leader, one whose diplomacy is called repeatedly into action. Here one reading of Jason would be not so much as a hero of traditional epic as a reflection of the needs, and realities, of a modern monarch. Apollonius is a court poet who composed his poetry at the court of one of the successor kings who followed Alexander's campaigns, which transformed the ancient Mediterranean world into a series of competing dynastic monarchies. The *Argonautica*, and the figure

of Jason himself, can be read against this immediate historical backdrop, and the relations of the major power figures in the poem can be understood in light of the political and military struggles of the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, the Antigonids, and other successor kings.

Similarly Medea's character, and the dominant role that she takes in the last half of the poem, can be read against a recent history where powerful women, among them Olympias, Alexander's mother, play central roles in the unfolding of political and dynastic (and even military) events that are far different from those of the archaic and classical periods. A recently discovered text from this period, a series of epigrams now attributed to Apollonius' near contemporary poet Posidippus of Pella,<sup>4</sup> is of particular interest here. The collection of hitherto almost entirely unknown short poems focuses largely on women in a variety of conquests, including as queens and subjects of victory celebrations. As several scholars have observed, Medea becomes a different sort of hero in the latter half of the poem. Whereas Jason's psychological processes are rarely touched on, the inner workings of Medea's mind, her dreams, her fears, her frightened inability to control her emotions, are all given considerable scope in the poem's third and fourth books. A particularly revealing moment is her interchange with the enchantress Circe in the fourth book, where Medea and Circe communicate in their own language. This moment sets Medea in the role of Odysseus, who seeks Circe's aid and whose particular relationship with Circe sets him apart from his followers. In the final combat with an otherworldly figure, the giant Talus, it is Medea whose magical knowledge is victorious, as is true with the dragon that guards the golden fleece, and of her "creation" of Jason as the hero who slays the earthborn men.

At the time of the *Argonautica's* composition, the Ptolemaic Empire covered a vast geographical space, extending from the Cyreneica in the west (modern Libya) to Coele-Syria (modern Israel, Palestine, Lebanon) in the east, much of southern Asia Minor, and many Aegean islands.<sup>5</sup> The Ptolemies were further major players in the political world of mainland Greece, where they served as a counterweight to Macedon. The new epigrams attributed to Posidippus include a number of poems dedicated to early Ptolemaic queens, several of which, poems that celebrate victory in horse racing at Nemea in the Peloponnese, attest to the actual presence of individual royal family members at the games. Apollonius' *Argonautica* can be understood in one sense as a four-book travel narrative, one that takes its point of departure from a long-ago saga that told of a journey from Thessaly through the Propontis and around the Black Sea (an older trajectory). The poem then, in its long last book, brings the poem's audience (the newer trajectory) along the Danube, then down the western Adriatic coast, back up the Adriatic to the Po in Italy, to the Rhône in France, to Libya (importantly, the setting of the prophetic oracle of Zeus-Ammon at the Oasis of Siwah, where Alexander had been proclaimed son of Zeus), to Crete, and thence back to the Greek mainland. Apollonius' mapping of the Argonauts' return brings the heroes of the *Argo* through areas that were relevant to the Ptolemaic Empire with its vast naval fleet, a different Greek world from that imagined in the ancient saga tradition.<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of the ancient saga, this return involves a journey into the unknown. This journey may be in part a reflection of the expeditions that took place under the Ptolemies to Nubia, and particularly the Arabian Sea. The quest narrative of the original legend (a young prince is sent to the land of the Sun in search of a magical object, and is aided in that quest by a local princess) finds real-life parallels as it were, in the early Ptolemaic quest for more widespread hegemony and control of the import of luxury goods.

While the *Argonautica* is, on the one hand, an epic hexameter poem heavily imbued throughout by Homeric and Hesiodic tradition, it is, in other ways, quite new, and to a modern reader, particularly one coming to the poem without much experience of its earlier models, may read much more like

Tolkien in poetic form than anything else. And this would perhaps be right. In its combination of the real and the fantastical, its engagement with traditions of medicine, astronomy, and science, its magical vessel that speaks and yet serves as the plaything of water nymphs, heroes that have wings, and a king whose grandfather is the center of the solar system, it is truly without exact parallel in previous or contemporary Greek literature. The *Argonautica* has its detractors, and has long had its detractors, but for those who admire the poem, even on multiple rereadings, it is an experience close to magical.

BENJAMIN ACOSTA-HUGHES

## Notes

- [1.](#) Clauss 1993 is an excellent and accessible study of this issue.
- [2.](#) There are a number of studies on the role of Eros in the *Argonautica*. A particularly good one is the second chapter of Richard Hunter's 1993 literary studies of the poem.
- [3.](#) Here the portrayal of Paris in two poems of the Trojan cycle, the *Cypria* and the *Little Iliad*, may have been contributing factors to Apollonius' portrayal. Neither poem, however, has survived.
- [4.](#) These are available in English in the translation of F. Nisetich in Gutzwiller 2005.
- [5.](#) On the Ptolemaic naval empire see now Bursalis, Stefanou, and Thompson 2013.
- [6.](#) Thalmann 2011 is an excellent and proactively new study of the poem in these terms.

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## A Note on the Text and Translation

Based on the edition of Francis Vian and Émile Delage (published from 1974 to 1999), this is an unabridged English translation of Apollonius of Rhodes' ancient Greek epic *Argonautica* (*Jason and the Argonauts*). My intention with this project was to create the most engaging and readable translation of the poem available.

Given its large cast of characters and vast geographic scope, *Jason and the Argonauts* is rich in proper nouns. I opted for the Latin spellings of Greek names because they look less foreign to the reader and are more likely to be recognized. Thus, Zeus' father is "Cronus" and not "Kronos," and Aphrodite is given the title "Cypris" instead of "Kypris" so that her connection to the island Cyprus would be clear. I translated Greek names that end in the letter *eta* with the Latin *a* ("Athena" instead of "Athene" and "Zona" instead of "Zone," for example) to clarify their syllable counts. I did, however, allow for exceptions where the names are standard in English with an *e* ending: Alcimede, Antiope, Aphrodite, Arete, Ariadne, Chalciope, Circe, Cleite, Cyrene, Dicte, Hecate, Helle, Hypsipyle, and Terpsichore. I include diaeresis ( ) in some names, again to assist with pronunciation and clarify syllable counts: Aeëtes, Alcinoös, Calais, Danaë, Laocoön, Nausithoös, Peirithoös, and Phaëthon.

In the lengthy roster of heroes (Book 1, lines 35–322), the names of the Argonauts are presented in boldface to make them stand out from the names of their fathers, grandfathers, mothers, home cities, and homelands. Furthermore, whereas editions of the Greek original present the reader with thousand-plus-line columns of text broken only at the ends of books, this translation takes the editorial license of breaking up the text into stanzas, easily digestible units of sense. I have also inserted, I hope unobtrusively, in-text translations of Greek words and word roots in the few cases where they are essential to understanding the surrounding passage. Line numbers are provided every five lines, and every fifteen lines line numbers for the Greek original are provided in parentheses to facilitate cross-reference. In short, I have done all that I could to make this translation as reader- and scholar-friendly as possible.

I have felt for years that *Jason and the Argonauts* needed a verse translation in which the poetic rhythms reinforce syntactic units, as do the rhythms of the original, and in which the electricity of language we expect in poetry is sustained. I hope I have achieved these goals. My models were the great blank verse epics of the English language: John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Iambic pentameter has the advantage of being familiar to the English ear, as dactylic hexameter, the meter of the original, was to the ancient Greek one. Given the longer lines of the original and the compression of ancient Greek, my translation averages fifteen lines for every twelve of the Greek.

Again and again in *Jason and the Argonauts*, poetry works magic and effects rapture. For example,

Apollonius informs us that, while Zethus, one of the founders of Thebes, struggled under the rock he was lugging to build the city walls, his brother Amphion “simply strolled along behind him / and strummed his golden lyre, and a boulder / twice as gigantic followed in his footsteps” (Book 1, 994–96). The mythic father of poets, Orpheus, is, in fact, one of the Argonauts, and we are told that he could “soften stubborn / mountain boulders and reverse a river’s / current with the seduction of his songs” (Book 1, 39–41). The effect of his music on humans and animals is mesmerizing. We learn that, when Orpheus strummed his lyre from the deck of the *Argo*, “fish both big and small came leaping out of / the sea to revel in the vessel’s wake” (Book 1, 774–75). At the conclusion of his song to the Argonauts around the campfire, we find the following description:

So Orpheus intoned, then hushed his lyre  
at the same time as his ambrosial voice.  
Though he had ceased, each of his comrades still  
leaned forward longingly, their ears intent,  
their bodies motionless with ecstasy.

(Book 1, 696–700)

John Milton was so smitten with this passage that he all but translated it for *Paradise Lost*:

The Angel ended, and in Adam’s Ear  
So Charming left his voice, that he a while  
Thought him still speaking, still stood fixt to hear.

(Book VIII, 1–3)

Apollonius is himself subject to the same rapt amazement. In what is, perhaps, his most emotional insertion of himself into the epic, he expresses awe at the fact that his character Medea is able to cast a spell that brings down bronze giant Talus:

Father Zeus, profound astonishment  
has stormed my mind—to think that death can come  
not only through disease and injury,  
but people can undo us from afar,  
just as that man, though made of bronze, surrendered  
and fell down underneath the far-flung onslaught  
of that ingenious conjurer, Medea.

(Book 4, 2158–64)

Thus I found justification for a verse translation of the epic within the epic itself—a prose version would have captured the meaning but left out the magic. Though Orpheus, Medea, and Apollonius himself are stiff competition, I can console myself with the knowledge that I did my best to make my translation a tribute to their powers.

In addition to being thoroughly endearing, Apollonius’ voice is elastic—it rises to Homeric heights and slips into the “storybook” tone of fairy tale and indulges in genealogical, mythological, and geographic asides, to which it enjoys calling attention (“wait, why have I digressed so widely, talking about Aethalides?”, Book 1, 874–75). Furthermore, though he was head librarian at the Great Library of Alexandria, Apollonius is no mere pedant. He is as much a psychological realist as Henry James when it comes to matters of love and sex (“devastating / affection crept up over him, because / she was a maiden, crying,” Book 3, 1391–93), and his characters, especially the females, are capable of operatic pathos. Take, for example, Medea’s contemplation of suicide as she decides whether to help Jason win the contest of the bulls:



~~I cannot hope that, even when he dies,~~  
I will be free from anguish. He will be  
a curse on me when he has lost his life.  
So good-bye, modesty. Good-bye, fair name.  
Once I have saved him, let him go unharmed  
wherever he desires while I, the day  
that he completes the contest, leave this life  
by dangling my body from a rafter  
or taking drugs, the kind that kill the heart . . .

(Book 3, 1032–40)

Unlike Homer, Apollonius provides occasional comic relief, and sexual innuendo is not too lowbrow for his Muse. We are told that, when Medea’s handmaids teased the Argonauts over the paltry offerings they were giving the gods, “the men responded / with crude suggestions, and delightful insults / and sweet harassment sparkled back and forth / among them” (Book 4, 2227–30). It took perseverance to find a voice that could accommodate this range of modes, tones, and character voices, but I am confident the voice I found is Apollonius’ own.

For as long as I have known the ancient Greek language, I have been certain that Apollonius is a great poet and that *Jason and the Argonauts* is a great epic. My translation, a labor of love, is an attempt to convince Greekless readers that this is so. I hope that the poem becomes, like Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, essential reading for a cultured individual. This project would have been much slower reaching completion without the financial support of the National Endowment for the Arts, to which I am very grateful.

AARON POOCHIGIAN

Taking my lead from you, Phoebus Apollo,  
I shall commemorate the deeds of men  
born long ago. King Pelias insisted,  
so they drove the tautly fitted *Argo*  
up through the narrows of the Pontic Sea  
and past the Cobalt Clashing Rocks to win  
the golden fleece.

Pelias had received

a prophecy: a miserable doom  
awaited him, a murder brought about  
by someone he would see come from the country  
wearing a single sandal. Soon thereafter  
the prophecy came true: that winter Jason  
was fording the Apidanus at flood time  
and only saved one sandal from the mud—  
the river current snatched the other one.  
He simply left it in the depths and strode on  
straight to the court of Pelias to take  
a portion of the feast the king was hosting  
in honor of his father lord Poseidon  
and all the other sacred gods, excepting  
Hera the goddess of Pelasgia,  
to whom he paid no mind.

Soon as the king

saw Jason, he was sure he was the man  
and right away contrived a labor for him,  
a cruel voyage, in the hope that he  
would die at sea or fighting savages  
and never make the journey home to Greece.

Past poets have already told in song  
how Argus with Athena's guidance built  
a ship, the *Argo*. I intend to tell you  
the names and lineages of the heroes,  
their travels on the wide-paved sea, and all  
that they accomplished in their wanderings.  
Come, Muses, be the surrogates of my song.

**Orpheus** is the first we should remember.

They say it was ~~Calliope~~ that bore him  
beneath the peak of Mount Pimpleia after  
she coupled with Oeagrus king of Thrace.  
The legends say their son could soften stubborn  
mountain boulders and reverse a river's  
current with the seduction of his songs.

The wild oaks his lyre charmed and marched  
down out of Mount Pieria still today  
are flourishing in dense, well-ordered ranks  
at Zona headland on the Thracian coast—  
clear proof of what his music could accomplish.

Such, then, was Orpheus, the king of all  
Bistonian Pieria, and Jason  
invited him to join the expedition  
just as the Centaur Cheiron had advised.

Cometes' son **Asterion** arrived  
without delay. He hailed from Peiresiae  
under Mount Phylleius on the banks  
of the sublime but wild Apidanus  
right where it weds the noble Enipeus.  
(Both rivers travel far to reach that union.)

Next **Polyphemus**, offspring of Eilatus,  
forsook his native Larissa to join them.  
Back in his adolescence he had fought  
beside the mighty Lapiths when they waged  
war on the Centaurs. Though his limbs had since  
grown burdensome, his heart remained as keen  
for battle as it had been in his prime.

Since he was Jason's uncle, **Iphiclus**  
did not remain at leisure in Phylaca.  
Aeson, you see, was wedded to the sister  
of Iphiclus (and daughter of Phylacus),  
and ties of blood and marriage left no choice—  
Iphiclus had to be included, too.

Nor did **Admetus**, king of sheep-rich Pherae,  
hang back beneath the peak of Chalcedon.

**Echion** and **Erytus**, both ingenious

at artifice, both sons of Hermes, rushed  
to leave behind the wheat fields of Alopa.

As they were setting out, **Aethalides**,  
half brother to them on their father's side,  
ran out to catch their march and be the third  
in their brigade. Phthian Eupolemeia,  
Myrmidon's daughter, bore him on the banks  
of the Amphryssus, and Menetes' daughter  
Antianeira bore the other two.

75 (54)

Next Caeneus' son **Coronus** left  
Gyrton, a wealthy town, to make the journey.  
Yes, he was brave, but not his father's equal.  
Poets recount how Caeneus went down,  
while still alive, beneath the Centaurs' clubs.  
All alone, separated from his comrades,  
he still routed the Centaurs from the field.  
When they stampeded back, they failed to break  
or slay him, so he sank into the earth,  
invincible, triumphant, hammered down  
by a relentless rain of pine-wood clubs.

8

88  
90 (63)

**Mopsus** the Titaesian also joined them.  
Leto's son had taught him how to read  
the sacred signs exhibited by birds  
better than any other man alive.

9

**Eurydamas** the son of Ctimenos  
came, too. He left a home in Dolopian  
Ctimena beside lake Xynias.

Actor allowed his son **Menoetius**  
to leave their home in Opus, so that he  
could see the world with distinguished men.

10

**Eurytion** and valiant **Eurybotes**  
were also quick to join. One was the son  
of Iros son of Actor; one the son  
of Teleon. (In all truth Teleon  
had sired world-famous Eurybotes,  
and Iros had begot Eurytion.)

105 (72)

**Oileus** joined them as a third, a man  
of giant strength and matchless at harassing  
foes from behind once he had turned the lines.

11

Euboean **Canthus** joined them next. His father  
Cerinthus son of Abas gave him leave  
since he insisted on the quest. But no  
homecoming had been fated for him, no  
return to fair Cerinthus. Fate had ruled  
that he and the distinguished seer **Mopsus**  
would wander to the farthest ends of Libya  
and perish there. Wherever people travel,  
catastrophe is waiting—so those two  
were laid to rest in Libya, a land  
as far from Colchis as the space between  
the rising and the setting of the sun.

111

120 (82)

Next came those wardens of Oechalia,  
**Clytius, Iphitus**, sons of cruel Eurytus,  
to whom Far-Shooting Phoebus gave his bow.  
Eurytus, though, did not enjoy it long  
because he dared defy the god who gave it.

121

Aeacus' two sons arrived at different  
times and from distant points of origin.  
You see, they accidentally had murdered  
their brother Phocus and had fled at once  
to separate exiles outside Aegina:  
while **Telamon** had claimed the Attic Island,  
**Peleus** had erected walls in Phthia.

131

135 (94)

Next, from the land of Cecrops came the soldier  
**Boutes**, the son of noble Teleon,  
and with him came the staunch spearman **Phalerus**.  
His father Alcon let him go. Although  
there were no other sons to tend his age  
and mind the homestead, Alcon all the same  
sent him—his only heir, his best beloved—  
to win renown among courageous heroes.

141

(Though Theseus was mightier than all  
the other offspring of Erechtheus,  
he never came. Invisible restraints  
detained him in the earth beneath Taenarus  
where he had traveled with Peirithoös—  
a wasted trip. They would have made this quest  
much easier for everyone who sailed.)

141

150 (104)

**Tiphys** the son of Hagnias forsook

Siphae, a Thesopian harbor town, to join the heroes' party. When it came to knowing when breakers would disturb the sea's expanse, anticipating stormy gales and plotting course headings by the sun and stars, he was a mastermind. Tritonian Athena had packed him off to join the expedition, and his arrival cheered a crew in need of naval knowledge. After she designed the speedy ship, Argus, Arestor's son, had worked with her and built it to her order, and that is why, of all the watercraft that ever challenged ocean with their oars, the *Argo* was the most remarkable.

153

160

165 (114)

**Pleias**, the next to join them, had forsaken Araethyraea where he had been living in luxury because he was the son of Dionysos. The estate he left there was very near the source of the Asopus.

170

**Talaus** and **Areios**, sons of Bias, marched out of Argos, and beside them marched courageous Leodocus. Pero, daughter of Neleus, had borne all three of them—this was the Pero for whose sake Melampus, Aeolid Melampus, had endured hard sorrow in the stalls of Iphicles.

173

No story claims strong-willed, invulnerable **Heracles** failed to answer Jason's summons. When he got word the heroes were assembling, he was just crossing from Arcadia into Lyrceian Argos, on his shoulder a big live boar that had of late been grazing the meadows of Lampeia all along the Erymanthian swamp. He slid it down, netted and muzzled, from his massive back there in the Mycenaean's meeting place and freely hastened off to join the quest against the orders of Eurystheus. With him went **Hylas** in the prime of youth, a noble squire, to bear his bow and arrows.

180 (124)

183

190

Next came divine Danaus' descendant

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Nauplius.</b> As the son of Clytonaeus,<br>he was, of course, grandson to Naubolus.<br>Naubolus had been sired by Lernus, Lernus<br>by Proteus, and Proteus in turn<br>by Nauplius the Elder. Long ago<br>Amymona the daughter of Danaus<br>had lain in love beneath the god Poseidon<br>and borne this Nauplius, and Nauplius<br>had bested all men in the art of sailing.  | 195 (135)  |
| Of all the heroes reared in Argos, <b>Idmon</b><br>came latest. Though he had foreseen his death<br>in bird signs, he enlisted all the same<br>so that his town would not deny him glory.<br>Idmon was not, in fact, the son of Abas—<br>Apollo had begotten him on one<br>of far-famed Aeolus' many daughters.<br>Phoebus himself had taught him to divine<br>future events by closely studying<br>bird omens and the flames of sacrifice. | 200<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>210 (145) |
| Leda of Aetolia dispatched<br>thick-sinewed <b>Polydeuces</b> and his brother<br><b>Castor</b> , master of swift-hoofed steeds, from Sparta.<br>She bore her much-beloved sons together<br>as twins in King Tyndareus' palace<br>and, when they begged to go, she gave them leave<br>to prove Zeus was their sire by worthy deeds.  | 210<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>215       |
| Two sons of Aphareus, <b>Lynceus</b><br>and firebrand <b>Idas</b> , marched out of Arena,<br>both of them glorying in boundless courage.<br>Lynceus also was endowed with vision<br>keener than that of any man alive.<br>They say that he could easily project<br>his eye beams even underneath the earth.   | 220<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>225 (155) |
| <b>Periclymenus</b> , Neleus' son,<br>joined up as well. He was the eldest born<br>of all the offspring Neleus had fathered<br>at Pylos, and Poseidon had bestowed<br>infinite strength upon him and the power<br>to change into whatever shape he wished<br>so that he could survive the shock of battle.  | 230<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>235       |



|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Next, <b>Cepheus</b> and <b>Amphidamus</b> left<br>Arcadia and came. Sons of Aleus,<br>they marched out of a home in Tegea,<br>Apheidas' estate. Their elder brother<br>Lycurgus had released his son <b>Ancaeus</b><br>to be the third man in their company.<br>Yes, though Lycurgus stayed behind at home<br>to tend Aleus who was weak with age,<br>he couldn't keep his son from setting out.<br>The boy wore only a Maenalian bearskin,<br>lugged only a gigantic ax. You see,<br>his grandfather had hidden all the other<br>arms and armor in the granary,<br>hoping to keep the lad from going, too. | 233       |
| <b>Augeas</b> also joined the voyage. Fame<br>pronounces him the son of Helius.<br>King over Elis, he enjoyed his wealth<br>but greatly wished to see the Colchian land<br>and King Aeëtes of the Colchians.   | 240 (166) |
| Next came <b>Asterius</b> and <b>Amphion</b> ,<br>both sons of Hyperasius. They forsook<br>Pellena in Achaea to enlist—<br>the same Pellena that their grandsire Pellen<br>had founded on the brow of Aegialus.  | 244       |
| <b>Euphemus</b> , next, came to them from Taenarus.<br>He was the fleetest-footed man alive.<br>Europa, lordly Tityus' daughter,<br>had borne him to Poseidon. He could dash<br>across the whitecaps of the dull gray sea<br>without submersing his precipitate feet.<br>Only his toes would touch the liquid path.  | 255 (178) |
| Two other of Poseidon's sons arrived—<br><b>Erginus</b> who had left the citadel<br>of glorious Miletus, and superb<br><b>Ancaeus</b> who forsook Parthenia,<br>cult center of Imbrasian Hera. Both<br>exulted in their sea- and battlecraft.  | 260       |
| From Calydon came Oeneus' son,<br>strong <b>Meleager</b> , with <b>Laocoön</b><br>Oeneus' half brother. (Yes, the men  | 270 (190) |



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