

# Apollonius of Rhodes

*Jacqueline Klooster*

## Introduction

The *Argonautica* has often been studied from the point of view of characterization, especially of its two protagonists Jason and Medea. The description of the inner workings of the love-stricken Medea's psyche (book 3) forms a focal point in these studies. This portrayal has even gained Apollonius the fame of being the inventor of the interior monologue, and his epic that of being a precursor of the modern novel.<sup>1</sup> But the characterization of Jason and Medea has also given rise to much perplexity among scholars. In Jason's case this has predominantly centred on the evaluation of his 'problematic' heroism: is he a scoundrel and anti-hero, or merely a human being in an epic scenario, or rather a love-hero and successful diplomat, and thus really a new kind of hero?<sup>2</sup> Medea's portrayal on the other hand has evoked bafflement on account of the perceived inconsistencies in her character and attitude towards Jason: an innocent maiden helplessly in love with the attractive stranger, or rather a fearsome witch with a dark, paranoid and basically cruel nature, whose love has vanished before the epic is over—or again, is she a complex figure, and should the aforementioned polarities not be considered incompatible? It will perhaps not come as a surprise that these issues have negatively influenced the appreciation of Apollonius' epic in the past: Jason was often considered a 'failed' hero and Medea's apparent '*Zwiespalt*' was understood as a result of Apollonius' general inability to create narrative unity.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 Scholes and Kellog 1966: 181: 'the credit for this development must go to Apollonius Rhodius—a narrative artist who has nothing like his due acclaim—though he undoubtedly learned something from the Greek tragic dramatists.' See on this Papadopoulou 1997: 641–664 and Fusillo 2008: 147–166.
  - 2 See for different appraisals of Jason, with recognition of the ambivalence of his character especially: Lawall 1966: 121–169 (anti-hero/love-hero); Klein 1983: 115–126 (sceptic philosopher); Hunter 1988: 436–453 (textual construct); Jackson 1992: 155–162 (human being in epic scenario); Mori 2008 *passim* (diplomat).
  - 3 Jason: Körte 1929: 183: 'discreet, proper, quite weak and somewhat colorless', Bowra 1933:

Although such conclusions now hopefully seem wide off the mark, the questions that led to them are not entirely misguided. Instead of *polumētis*, *polutlas* or simply *dios*, Jason's stock epithet is, significantly, the rather unheroic *amēkhanos* (helpless, at a loss). The inscrutability of Medea's motives is in fact given thematic prominence in the opening of the fourth book, where the narrator, invoking the Muse, expresses his own uncertainty as to whether fear or love drove Medea to follow Jason and leave her fatherland (4.1–4). It must be immediately noted that figures of relatively minor importance (such as the Argonauts Heracles, Peleus, Idas, Telamon and Polydeuces but also Hypsipyle, Aeetes and Phineus) are much less ambiguously drawn and accordingly have received less, and less widely varying, appraisals.<sup>4</sup>

The *Argonautica* is an epic that is played out between the twin poles of heroic quest and romance. These two motifs, the adventurous, potentially glamorous task of gaining the Golden Fleece and the first and violent onset of erotic love are of crucial importance for the sketching of the protagonists' characters. Love and quest both function as rites of initiation of a kind, testing grounds for the mettle of young Jason and Medea, into which they have been involuntarily drawn by the scheming of the tyrannical Pelias and the gods. The ways they experience these trials, their emotions and (re)actions, are arguably a central concern of the epic. Heroism and love also represent two seemingly opposite and obviously gendered goals (Jason's ultimate aim is not the winning of the maiden princess' heart; Medea's most heartfelt wish is not to steal the Golden Fleece and gain fame), which are however inseparably linked: one goal cannot be reached without the successful integration of the other.<sup>5</sup> And as it finally turns out heroism is not possible without love, but love is also impossible without sufficient heroism, as the ominous events in book 4 with their overtones of Euripidean tragedy imply.

The intricate way in which Apollonius varies and combines his characterizing devices repays close attention. It may immediately be noted that he often uses a whole array of these techniques all mixed together for an immediate effect in a scene depicting a secondary character (like Amycus, Hypsipyle or Phineus), but that characters are also slowly built up by recurrent, cumulative,

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221, 'uninteresting when he is not repellent', Mooney 1964: 37 'tame and insipid', on Medea's dichotomy: Rohde 1960: 112; Wilamowitz 1924: 12; Christ-Stählin-Schmid 1920: 145; this thesis was revived by Otis 1963: ch. 3. See in general Phinney 1967: 327–334, Hunter 1987: 129–139; Dyck 1989: 455–470.

4 See e.g. Fränkel 1960: 1–20 on Idas; Williams 1996: 463–479 on Aeetes.

5 Cf. the emblematic picture of Aphrodite mirrored in the shield of Ares on Jason's cloak in 1.742–746.

mutually reinforcing or contrasting indications throughout the epic (Jason and Medea) and that to discuss devices separately may not always be representative of Apollonius' use of them. For that reason I will in the following, besides discussion of isolated techniques, also look at how *scenes* are constructed, and give comprehensive overviews of the construction of some minor characters. I finish with a more detailed discussion of the portrayals of Jason and Medea, with special focus on the question of why these protagonists have been open to such different evaluations.

### Indirect Characterization through Intertexts with Previous Models (Metaphorical)

As in Homer (→), in the *Argonautica* we are dealing with the material of myth, and, therefore, with a story about well-known heroes. Even more to the point, in Apollonius' age the myths about the Argo's quest had presumably already been treated numerous times by previous or contemporary authors, and, therefore, when the narrator characterizes his protagonists he may count on a deposit of literary associations in the minds of his narratees, which he can activate or manipulate. A case in point is the connection between Euripides' Jason and Medea and Apollonius' characterization of them. It has often been observed that the *Argonautica* is written as a prequel to the Euripidean end-game between the former lovers: working back from the Euripidean data, the poet has tried to imagine what interplay of psychological and situational elements finally led to the tragic outcome.<sup>6</sup> The remarkable effect is that Jason and Medea become more 'real' in this way, since they exist outside of the *Argonautica* as well, and narratees will be tempted to fill in gaps in the epic with their knowledge of this other portrayal of the protagonists. Related in effect is the fact that some of the Argonauts are the fathers of Homeric heroes, which invites comparison with their well-known sons: Peleus (Achilles) and Telamon (Ajax), whose valour is stressed on various occasions, come to mind.

Besides previous literary treatments of his characters, the narrator also invokes more general models and literary stereotypes, mainly by pointedly alluding to Homeric story patterns and vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> Thus Medea is notably linked with Nausicaa (another innocent girl in love with a stranger) and Home-

6 Cf. Hunter 1989: 19; 24.

7 See e.g. Hunter 1987; 1993; Knight 1995; Rengakos 1993.

ric Circe (another potentially dangerous but amorously inclined sorceress), whereas Jason is different from Iliadic heroes like Agamemnon or Achilles (not prone to anger, no prominent physical courage, no real concern for *timē*, *kudos* or *kleos*, no arrogant leadership), but in certain ways very similar to Odysseus (an opportunistic traveller who charms women and has a way with words).<sup>8</sup> The narratees are thus also continually invited to weigh the characters against Homeric foils, a process that enhances depth and complexity: could Medea actually be like Nausicaa, given the circumstances? In what ways is Jason an anti-Achilles, and why?

The complexities of comparisons to mythical and literary predecessors are pointedly reflected in the strategy of self-interpretation attributed to the characters in the epic when Jason, in his courtship of Medea, compares their situation to that of Theseus and Ariadne (3.997–1006). Jason significantly leaves out the bit where Theseus abandons Ariadne, which triggers the narratees to remember his own eventual abandonment of Medea in Corinth in tragedy. Medea, who is unaware of this episode of the myth answers that she will not be another Ariadne (3.1107–1108). Given the context, this apparently means that she does not expect her father to come to terms with Jason (as Minos did with Theseus, in Jason's version). But the narratees are invited to ask in what other ways this may be true (Medea is certainly much more dangerous for Jason than Ariadne was for Theseus), or false (Medea *is* like Ariadne in that she will be abandoned by the man she helps).

### Minor Characters

The catalogue of heroes appears very early in the poem (1.22–233), and thus functions as a roll-call (*geneēn te kai ounoma hērōōn* 1.20). From the point of view of characterization, it serves as a presentation of the Argonauts as heroes, brave and famous men, born long ago (cf. *palaiogeneōn klea phōtōn* 1.1, *aristēessi sun andrasin* 1.70), which of course creates a certain epic *Erwartungshorizont* for the narratees. The Argonauts generally function as a group, and are at several occasions even apostrophized as such.<sup>9</sup> As a group they are characterized as young, pious and democratic Greek heroes.

The short curriculums of the heroes are in some ways also reminiscent of the obituaries of the Homeric (→) 'little warriors', in that they furnish only

8 Hunter 1989: 29.

9 Cf. Klooster 2013: 151–173.

the briefest of heroic credentials: e.g. their courage, why they participate, their heroic lineage, geographic provenance and supernatural powers (when of divine descent). The description of Polyphemus will serve as an example (1.40–44):

... from Larisa came Polyphemus, Eilatus' son, who in former times had fought as a young man among the mighty Lapithae when the Lapithae armed themselves against the Centaurs. At this point though, his limbs were already heavy but his heart still remained as warlike as before.<sup>10</sup>

As noted, the secondary figures in the epic are usually characterized in a far more straightforward way than the protagonists. Direct characterization by the narrator (through adjectives or epithets) may at times even seem overdetermined, and caricature-like: the interpretation and appreciation of the narratees is steered very clearly. So for instance the introduction of the king of the Bebrycians, Amycus:

Here were located the ox stables and sheepfold of Amycus, the haughty (*agēnoros*) king of the Bebrycians, whom the nymph Bithynian Melie, having made love to Poseidon Genethlius once bore, the most arrogant (*huperoplēestaton*) of men, who imposed even on strangers an outrageous (*aeikea*) law that no one could depart before making trial of him in boxing; and many were the neighbours he had killed. And on this occasion he went to the ship and insolently scorned to ask (*huperbasiēisin atissen*) the purpose of their voyage or who they were ...

2.1–9

The image of Amycus as a randomly aggressive brute is subsequently compounded more indirectly, though not at all more subtly, by his speech (referred to by the narrator as spoken in 'arrogance', *mega phroneōn* 2.19). At this point it may be remarked that the narrator of the *Argonautica* practically always qualifies the tone of speech of his characters. It is hardly ever left to the narratee to decide what the tone of a specific utterance is, and often, as here, qualification contains an element of moral evaluation.

Amycus' *hubris* is emphasized again and again in this scene: by the Argonauts' justifiably angry reaction (*agriōs ... / heile kholos*) and by the detailed contrast in appearance between Amycus and Polydeuces, who accepts his chal-

10 Transl. Race, adapted. All translations are from Race 2008.

lenge. Polydeuces is dressed in a closely woven delicate robe he received as a love gift from one of the Lemnian women; Amycus has a double-folded black cloak, and a knotted staff of mountain olive. As metonymical devices of characterization, these dress-codes tell the narratee much about the level of civilization of the wearers.

And neither in form nor in stature were the two men alike to behold. The one seemed like the monstrous offspring of deadly Typhoeus or even of Earth herself, like those she had long ago brought forth in anger at Zeus. But Tyndareus' son was like a heavenly star, whose twinkling is most beautiful when it shines through the evening darkness. Such was Zeus' son, still sprouting the first down of a beard, still bright-eyed, but his strength and courage waxed like a wild animal's ... Amycus ... stood back in silence and kept his eyes on him and his heart was pounding in his eagerness to make blood splatter from the other man's chest.

2.37–50

The similes unambiguously associate Amycus with the chthonic forces of chaos and destruction and Polydeuces with heavenly beauty and harmony. Where we get access to Amycus' thoughts, it becomes clear that (though not why) he wants only to hurt or kill the stranger: he is a random force of savage and senseless violence, and is as such duly dispatched by the young, gallant, civilized Argonaut. Amycus functions as a symbolic foil (chaos) to what the Argonauts represent (harmony), and is in this sense also a forerunner of the Colchian king Aetes, who is similarly gratuitously aggressive and threatening, and similarly associated with chthonic forces.<sup>11</sup>

The process of Aetes' characterization is more complex than that of Amycus, though the result is hardly any more ambiguous.<sup>12</sup> It may be noted that his name figures 14 times before he is actually introduced to the Argonauts by Argus: it is practically always to indicate his city, palace, or country, with which he is thus emphatically identified.<sup>13</sup> This may in turn explain why Aetes is not

11 For the idea of the *Argonautica* as symbolizing on one level the battle between the forces of chaos and harmony, see in particular Clare 2002.

12 Pace Williams 1996: 463–479. I do not agree with her conclusion that Aetes embodies a Homeric type of heroism, whereas the Argonauts embody a 'new, Hellenistic' heroism. Aetes is too sinister, and too openly characterized negatively by the narrator and characters to evoke Homeric heroes.

13 Cf. Sistakou 2011: 82. Aetes' name is linked with his land, palace or city 19 times. Equally

usually qualified by epithets:<sup>14</sup> he is the mysterious king of the equally enigmatic Aea, land of the Golden Fleece. Up until the end of the second book, narratees and Argonauts do not receive any information about his character, although the former would of course have expected (from previous versions of the myth) that he was dangerous and hostile to the Argonautic quest, and the Argonauts are worried that he may be. Argus' first outright characterization of him confirms that Aeetes is fearsome:

'Aeetes is terrifyingly armed with murderous cruelty,<sup>15</sup> and for that reason I very much fear to make the voyage. He claims to be the son of Helius, and all around dwell countless tribes of Colchians. Even for Ares he would be a match with his terrifying war-cry and mighty strength. No, not even taking the fleece without Aeetes' knowledge is easy, for such is the snake that keeps guard all around it ... which Earth herself produced on the slopes of the Caucasus by the rock of Typhaon, where they say Typhaon dripped warm blood from his head when he was blasted by the thunderbolt of Zeus ...'

2.1203–1212

As noted, Aeetes shares with Amycus an emphatically negative characterization dominated by savage bloodlust and the association, through his guardian snake, with chthonic forces. That it is Aeetes' grandson Argus, a sympathetic figure for the Argonauts, who characterizes Aeetes in such a way, has the effect of making the characterization trustworthy and simultaneously indicating that Aeetes must be a real monster, if even his grandson speaks of him this way. Plot-wise, this of course enhances the suspense: how will the Argonauts achieve their goal in the face of such an obstacle?

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revealing of his importance, and presumably of his power, is the fact that his name predominantly figures in the genitive form (42 times), indicating what and who belong to him, are closely associated with him, or fall under his sway. Besides the items just mentioned, significant objects/persons are the Golden Fleece (twice), Medea (seven times!), Apsyrtus (twice), his wife (once), and his anger (three times).

- 14 Epithets in the *Argonautica* have long been neglected; I have learned much from A. van den Eersten's 2013 MA-thesis on the topic. Aeetes' qualifying epithets are the geographic *Kutaios* (2.403; 2.1094; 3.228) and evaluative *huperēnōr* (4.212; 4.1051); epithets which indicate his kingly status are *kreiōn* (3.240; 3.1177) and *sēmantora Kolkhōn* (1.175).
- 15 The alliterations in the Greek might imply that Aeetes' name is etymologized as being related to *aiai*, *ainōs* etc. (2.1203: *all' ainōs oloēisin apēneiēs in arēren / Aiētēs*).

In line with the observation that Aeetes is continually metonymically identified with his land or his city, as Sistakou points out, it is in fact his fantastic *palace* (rather than his physical appearance), with its many bronze Hephaestean artefacts, which is described in detail when the Argonauts enter the Colchian realm (3.213–248). This palace illustrates the magical, sinister and tyrannical character of Aeetes: its sheer size amazes the Argonauts (*tethēpotes*, 215); it incorporates magical fountains, many fantastic bronze objects, suggestive of an earlier heroic age, and its layout with large towering rooms for the king and lower buildings for the women and the slaves suggest Aeetes' patriarchal and despotic hold over his family.<sup>16</sup>

Aeetes has a number of speeches that characterize him; these are all concentrated in the scene of the encounter with the Argonauts. Most of them are preceded or concluded with evaluating remarks of the narrator about the (already of itself quite obvious) tone of the speeches, e.g. 3.382: 'Thus he spoke in anger' (*khalēpsamenos*). The king starts by asking his grandsons in an unfriendly way why they are back, and who the strangers are they brought with them (3.304–316). In doing so, he refers to a trip he made in the chariot of his father Helios, which showed him how far away Hellas is; this once more underlines his semi-divine stature. His reaction to Argus' explanation of the Argonauts' request of the Golden Fleece is every bit as unreasonable and threatening as Argus' characterization would have led us to expect. In his paranoid, typically tyrannical rage, Aeetes expresses his belief that the Argonauts have really come to take his throne (3.375–376), and says he would have cut off their hands, had he not just hosted them at his table. Jason, ever the diplomat, nevertheless tries to appease him with gentle words (*meilikhioisin*, 3.385), offering to war down Aeetes' enemies for him. But the only result is that Aeetes 'ponders in his heart whether he should attack and slay them on the spot or should make a test of strength' (3.397–399). The following, lengthy speech in which Aeetes describes how he himself yokes the bronze bulls that graze the plain of Ares and challenges Jason to do the same confirms the sinister supernatural strain in Aeetes' character (3.401–421), and the hopelessness of the Argonauts' plight.

Some further elements in the characterization of Aeetes are not similarly easy to interpret, although they do not undermine the general image of the fearful despot. First are two speeches to the Colchians, relayed at considerable length in *indirect discourse* by the narrator, about Aeetes' plans to trap and punish the Argonauts, before and after the contest of Jason (3.579–609 and

16 Sistakou 2011: 82.



4.228–236). It is unclear why this formal choice is made, but scholars have suggested that the intended effect is that the whole speech would have been ‘too long’ to represent directly, Aeetes’ long-windedness being a sign of tyrannical nature.<sup>17</sup>

There is also a strictly speaking redundant (as Aeetes will not engage in fighting), lengthy Homeric arming scene, in which Aeetes is described as donning the war gear of Ares, and looking like Poseidon: the effect is to create another impressive image of Aeetes as a superhuman and sinister king (3.1225–1245).

Finally a simile likens Aeetes to a desolate farmer whose crops have been destroyed by heavy rains (3.1399–1404). Paradoxically, this last simile seems to invite the narratees’ sympathy for cruel and tyrannical Aeetes and his horrific magical creatures. Perhaps we should read a prefiguration of Apsyrtus’ murder by Medea into the mutual killing of the Earthborn. Both the arming scene and the simile fit in the generally hyperbolically Iliadic passage (thick with similes) that ends the third book.

Every act of Aeetes is tyrannical, threatening and cruel: he inspires fear and fears for his own power in turn: there is no doubt about the way the narratees are asked to interpret his portrayal. He thus has a clear structural function in the quest-plot, symbolizing the forces of evil and chaos, the opponent that would bar the heroes from obtaining the Fleece. His positive counterparts are the just rulers of the Phaeacians: *polupotnia* (4.1069) Arete and *kreion* (4.1009; 1069) Alcinous,<sup>18</sup> thanks to whose wise intervention Medea will be able to avoid falling into the hands of her murderous father (4.1009–1029; 1069–1110).

I have described the characterization of Amycus and Aeetes at some length in order to show something of the techniques used throughout to characterize the secondary figures. A similar procedure can be found in the portrayals of, for instance, Phineus, Hypsipyle, Idas and Peleus, though on a smaller scale.

### Characterization through Intratextual Foils

Whereas the evil figures of Amycus and Aeetes serve to contrast with the valour and piety of the Argonauts as a collective, there is also an amount of intratextual characterization through association or opposition within the group of the Argonauts. Important in this context is the recurrent question (clearly inspired by the *Iliad*) of who ‘the best of the Argonauts’ is, which is first

17 Cf. Hunter 1989 *ad* 3.579.

18 Note that Alcinous shares this epithet with Aeetes.

broached in *Arg.* 1.332–340, as Jason invites the Argonauts to choose as their leader the ‘best man’ (*ton ariston*).<sup>19</sup> They choose the established hero Heracles, who refuses and states that the one who gathered the crew should also be their leader. Jason gladly accepts, but on several occasions the Argonauts or others hint that Heracles (who has by then been left behind) should really have accepted this role.<sup>20</sup> Heracles thus on the one hand becomes a kind of looming heroic alternative to Jason, but his portrayal by the narrator is also full of ironies that may make the narratees question his fitness as alternative leader, and see Jason’s not always obvious qualities in a new light.

At Lemnos, as practically the whole crew of the *Argo* is busy making love to the Lemnian women, Heracles stays on board of his own accord, and is finally the one whose reproaches bring the men shamefacedly to leave Lemnos and return to their quest (1.861–874). This would seem to indicate that Heracles is the only one with the right priorities: business goes before pleasure. Shortly afterwards, however, Heracles’ single-mindedness and superhuman force quite graphically make him stand apart from the crew, and invite the question whether he can indeed function profitably in any kind of group (1.1167–1172):

... as Heracles was heaving up furrows in the rough swell, he broke his oar in the middle. Still grasping a piece of it in two hands, he fell sideways while the sea carried the other piece away on its receding wash. He sat up, looking around in silence, for his hands were not used to being idle.

This scene moreover leads up to the episode where Heracles is accidentally left behind because he goes looking for his squire (and probably *erōmenos*) Hylas. Heracles goes completely berserk when he hears that Hylas has disappeared; he is like a mad bull stung by a gadfly. His is apparently an *erotic* madness, as the simile implies by its reference to the *oistros* (1. 1265–1272).<sup>21</sup> What the narratees are left with as a final image is the superhumanly powerful Heracles impotently raging over a lost boy, forgetting the expedition. By contrast, the efficiency with which Jason succeeds in leaving Queen Hypsipyle behind without any drama (1.888–910) reveals that his approach to love, which turns out to be quite opportunistic, is, here at least, after all more practical for the quest.

19 On this theme, see in general Claus 1992.

20 E.g. when Heracles is left behind, a great strife breaks out among the Argonauts ‘to think that they had gone off and left abandoned the *best man* of their comrades’ (1.1284–1286).

21 Cf. the simile that likens Eros shooting Medea to a gadfly (*oistros*) at 3.277–278 and the openly erotic version of Theoc. *Id.* 13.

Comparable functions may be attributed to the figures of Idas, Peleus and Telamon in their various ways. Idas stands out by his arrogance, his unwillingness to accept female help, and his lack of respect for the gods,<sup>22</sup> which creates a stark contrast with Jason's submissiveness to fate and his *amēkhaniē*. Peleus and Telamon are champions of purely physical bravery, which is not a natural talent in Jason either.

In the representation of female characters similar processes operate. The parallels and contrasts between Hypsipyle and Medea clarify but also complicate the image the narratees are invited to form of the latter. Both are nubile young virgins of royal birth, but whereas Hypsipyle is the only one of the Lemnian women who apparently abstained from the murder of male kin (a slaughter which was, significantly, caused by frenzied erotic jealousy), Medea will of course be involved in fratricide, and beyond the epic, infanticide, all as a result of her love for Jason. Hypsipyle is erotically involved with Jason (1.887), but seems to accept that he will leave her behind and probably not return, a stance that Jason admires (1.899). Medea, on the other hand, is desperately in love with Jason (*amēkhaniē* also characterizes her once she is struck with love)<sup>23</sup> and moreover clings to him with all her might; at the fear that he may leave her, she starts threatening him with furies and doom (4.379–390).

### The Gods

Apollonius' portrayal of the gods is unequally divided over his epic.<sup>24</sup> In most of the epic the gods (notably Apollo and Zeus) remain distant, aloof and enigmatic for the human protagonists, and sometimes even the narrator, contributing to what Feeney calls 'the complex pessimism of the epic ... the clammy atmosphere of uncertain confusion' (1991: 89). Yet there is one extended scene portraying the Olympian gods Hera, Athena, Aphrodite and Eros, which has traditionally been lauded as 'typically Hellenistic comedy of manners', but which on closer inspection hardly differs from the Iliadic characterization of the gods as humans without mortal cares. Hera is (as always) the angry spurned woman, Aphrodite deceitful and charming, and Eros an irresponsible, badly behaved and greedy child, who cheats his playmate Ganymede in a game of knucklebones (*astragaloi*).<sup>25</sup> The stark contrast between their light-heartedness and

22 Fränkel 1960: 1–20.

23 3.772; 3.951; 3.1157.

24 See on this topic Klein 1931: 18–65; 216–257 and Feeney 1991.

25 An allusion to Anacreon *PMG* 398.

the wretched suffering of especially Medea, their pawn, is a major theme of the epic. The piety of the Argonauts too is cast in a somewhat ironic light by this divine behaviour.

### Complex Characterization

So far I have concentrated on the unambiguous characterization of minor figures and gods, and the way this enhances the intertextual and intratextual mirroring and paralleling that go on in the epic; here and there my discussion has already shown some glimpses of the character of the protagonists. It is their characters that I will now discuss, since they are the most complexly drawn figures in the epic, and their evaluation has been most debated.

#### *Jason*

The first glimpse we catch of Jason (1.260–309) is that of a young man, surrounded and clasped by women (his mother Alcimede and the servants), whom he is trying to console with soft words (*kateprēunen anias* 265; *meilikhiois epeessi parēgoreōn* 294)<sup>26</sup> as they bewail his imminent departure. This scene sets the tone for the characterization of Jason in the rest of the epic. Jason is repeatedly surrounded by women who bewail or fear his imminent departure (on Lemnos, in Colchis); his heroism characterized by the fact that it is only through female help (Medea, the goddesses Hera, Athena and Cypris, but also Circe and Arete) that he succeeds, although he will eventually also come to grief because of a woman. His words practically always attempt to soothe, appease or console his interlocutors. His first speech, addressed to his mother is also revealing of his attitude to fate. He tells her to bear her grief, since his departure is the will of the gods. He furthermore piously expresses his confidence in divine help, inspired by the favourable oracles.<sup>27</sup> Immediately afterwards, Jason is compared to the god Apollo going off to one of his sanctuaries; his beauty and youth are the points of comparison.<sup>28</sup>

26 It may be noted that epithet *meilikhios* is repeated numerous times to characterize his words: of the 19 occasions on which roots of the word *meilikh-* occur, 7 are associated with Jason speaking.

27 The piety of the Argonauts, foremost among them Jason, which often takes the form of instituting rituals and cult-sites has often been remarked upon.

28 For his beauty, preternaturally enhanced by Hera, cf. 3.919–925 and the star-similes discussed below.

The main characterizing elements in this scene, then, are Jason's connection with women (who need him as he needs them); his youth and beauty; his consolatory gentleness in speech;<sup>29</sup> and his pious submission to fate and the gods, resulting in a heroism *malgré lui*. He goes on his way unwillingly, not to gain fame (unlike so many of the Argonauts, as the catalogue reveals). This explains his notorious, recurrent attacks of *amēkhanīē*:<sup>30</sup> he has landed in this adventure despite himself, in obedience to Necessity in the form of Pelias' request,<sup>31</sup> and he often seems to have no answer to the (admittedly enormous) problems that cross his path. It is no surprise that he leaves his country in tears (1.534–535).

Shortly after, another scene shows Jason among the Argonauts and broaches the theme of his functioning as a leader. As noted, Jason democratically offers the crew the opportunity to choose among themselves the 'best man, who will see to each thing, to take on quarrels and agreements with foreigners' (1.338–340), since 'common to us all is our return again to Hellas' land and common is our voyage to Aetes' land' (1.336–337; the order here may reveal Jason's priorities). The crew 'with one voice' chooses Heracles, who however thinks the honour should go to Jason, as gatherer of the crew. 'Warlike' Jason (the somewhat surprising epithet *areios*, 1.349) then gets up joyfully and rouses the men to action, beginning, of course, with a sacrifice to Apollo. This sequence shows some other qualities: Jason is not obsessed with *timē* like the Iliadic warlords but favours a democratic procedure. And yet, he is not, after all, entirely averse to personal martial honour.

In other scenes we see that Jason feels a paralyzing sense of responsibility for his crew (his *amēkhanīē* at Idmon's prophecy of his own death, 1.460; at the loss of Heracles, 1.1286; at the death of helmsman Tiphys, 2.866). In one rather surprising scene, this theme returns with a twist. The Argo has just successfully passed the Clashing Rocks, which means, if Phineus' prophecy is to be believed, that there are no imminent dangers in store for the Argonauts, as Tiphys, the helmsman, remarks. Jason replies thus (2.622–637):

'Tiphys, why are you saying these consoling words to me in my distress? I made a mistake and committed a terrible and irreversible error. For when Pelias gave his order, I should have immediately refused his expedition

29 Unlike Medea, Aetes, Heracles, Idas and others, Jason never speaks 'in anger' throughout the epic.

30 1.460; 1.1286; 2.410; 2.623; 2.885; 3.423; 3.432.

31 Cf. his words to Aetes at 3.430; cf. the appraisal by Jason of Jackson 1992: 155–162.

outright, even if I was bound to die, cruelly torn limb from limb. But now I am given over to excessive fear and unbearable worries, dreading to sail over the chilling paths of the sea in a ship and dreading the time when we set foot on land, for everywhere are hostile men. And always, day after day, ever since you first gathered together for my sake, I spend the dreary night thinking about every detail. You speak easily, since you are concerned with your own life alone, whereas I am not in the slightest distraught about mine, but fear for this man and that man and equally for you and the other comrades, if I do not bring you back safe and sound to the land of Hellas.'

Although perhaps somewhat strangely timed, this speech seems entirely in character after the numerous previous attacks of *amēkhaniē*, but as the narrator subsequently reveals, its purpose was 'to test the heroes' (2.638). There is an intertextual allusion here to the disastrous *peira*-scene in *Iliad* 2,<sup>32</sup> and the remarkable thing is in fact that Jason's ploy is successful, because the men 'shouted back words full of courage.' Nevertheless, the narratee must feel tested too: what to make of this speech; if it is a 'test', then why is it so in line with what we know to be Jason's true feelings? But perhaps one ought to consider that the *peira* of Agamemnon actually contains some elements of his true desperation about the situation as well. The fact remains that even this strategy of perhaps truly revealing his desperation confirms Jason's idiosyncratic success as an unlikely leader of men.

The only time Jason is fully confident and enjoys the exhilaration of martial prowess which is traditionally associated with Iliadic heroism is at the moment when his physical strength has been unnaturally enhanced by the magical drugs of a lovesick sorceress, as he prepares for the contest with the bronze bulls and the earth-born giants, and is likened to an eager war horse (3.1256–1267). The implication seems to be that Jason could not have risen to the task without these aids. Indeed, the only other occasions where Jason sheds enemy blood are characterized by confusion (at Cyzice, where the Argonauts accidentally slay their former hosts) and treachery (the horrifying murder-plot against Apsyrtus) rather than the heroism of combat.

This brings us to the topic of Jason's interaction with women. The first significant encounter is that with Hypsipyle at Lemnos. To meet her, Jason dons his blazing red cloak made by Athena. As the scholiast already noted, this

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32 Cf. Hunter 1989: 445–447.

cloak metonymically characterizes Jason as *apolemos*.<sup>33</sup> Its defining qualities, brilliance and red colour, are strongly associated throughout the epic with seduction and erotic passion. And indeed, as Jason enters the city he is likened to 'a shining star, which young brides gaze upon as it rises above the houses and enchants their eyes with its beautiful red lustre' (1.774–781). The emphasis on the female gaze implies that this is the focalization of the Lemnian women. This star simile is moreover a precursor to another star simile in book 3, when Jason goes to meet Medea for their first conversation. The simile is a clear expression of focalization by Medea:

But soon he appeared to her longing eyes, striding on high like Sirius from the Ocean, which rises beautiful and bright to behold but casts unspeakable grief on the flocks. So did Jason come to her, beautiful to behold but by appearing he aroused lovesick distress.

3.956–961

Here the ominous and disastrous effect of Jason's attraction are broached, both explicitly and implicitly through the allusion to the Iliadic star-simile which describes Achilles' arrival as focalized by Priam and Hecuba as they stand on the wall fearing for Hector's life. The simile thus elegantly shows how Jason's erotic appeal replaces Iliadic martial prowess, and has the same devastating effects.<sup>34</sup>

But how does Jason himself feel about women? Does he love Hypsipyle and Medea, or is he just opportunistically using their services? It seems that in the case of Hypsipyle this question is really irrelevant; the Lemnian adventure is just a diversion from the quest. In the case of Medea something more complex takes place. To begin with, the narrator creates a marked contrast between Medea's lightning-like falling in love, pierced as she is by Eros' dart (3.276–284), and the gradual, insecure development of love, fed by pity, on Jason's part (3.1077–1078). Moreover, whereas the narratees are made fully aware of every step in the process of Medea's falling in love with Jason, hardly any information is given about Jason's feelings. The narratees are invited to identify fully with Medea's feelings and point of view, and to feel vicariously frustrated at the lack of insight in Jason's feelings.

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33 Cf. *schol. ad 1.771*, p. 60 Wendel 1967.

34 Cf. the way the Iliadic phrase *phuzan aeikelian* (4.3) describes Medea's flight out of love, and how her affliction (mist covering the eyes, loss of control over limbs) resembles that of dying or wounded warriors.

The opacity of Jason's intentions and motives becomes an important theme in book 4 when Medea fears that he will hand her over to the Colchians.<sup>35</sup> It remains unclear whether Jason does at first intend to do so but is then swayed by her violent threats, or whether he has plotted beforehand to remove Apsyrtus and thus save the Argonauts from their pursuers. The narratees, like Medea, are ultimately left in doubt, and will presumably be tempted to use their knowledge of Euripides' tragedy to form their answer, which privileges the interpretation of a 'culpable' Jason.

Looking again at the question of Jason's 'problematic' heroism, I think we need to take stock of the fact that if he appears flawed, this does not mean that he is in that sense different from Homeric heroes. If Jason's proneness to compromise, his attempts to appease his opponents rather than fight them, in the end (beyond the *Argonautica*) prove to be his undoing, this is not basically different from the way in which Achilles' proneness to wrath, Agamemnon's arrogance or Odysseus' curiosity (threaten to) do so.

### *Medea*

Medea's portrayal is rich and complex. Especially in book 3, the devices used to characterize her are manifold and sketch a remarkably complete image, which clearly invites the identification of the narratees.<sup>36</sup> The narrator shows her living arrangements in the palace, her relation with her sister/confidante Chalciope, her daily routine as priestess of Hecate, her foraging in the graveyard for lugubrious drugs and also her play with her companions. Other characters describe her with a sustained focus on her duality of maiden (*kourē*) and powerful witch.<sup>37</sup> The narratees are invited to imagine her divine (*ambrosios*) beauty and preternaturally gleaming eyes (sign of her kinship with Helios), and receive a detailed bulletin from the narrator on all the outward symptoms of the pathology of love<sup>38</sup> and, to a lesser extent, fear (4.10–19). They are also told about her dreams (3.616–632) and about her inner feelings (by narratorial remarks and extended similes),<sup>39</sup> and finally the three interior monologues

35 Cf. Byre 1996: 3–16; Hunter 1987: 129–139; 1988: 436–453; 1993: 12–15; 18–20; 59–68 and Dyck 1989: 455–470.

36 Cf. Fusillo 1985: 347–355; 2008: 147–166; Byre 1996: 3–16.

37 Hera 3.27; Argus: 3.477–478; 3.528–533.

38 Changing colour, rising temperature, copious tears, frantic pacing to and fro, speechlessness, sleeplessness, fluttering heart, pain 'along the delicate nerves and deep down beneath the nape of the neck' (3.762–765), lack of concentration, sightless, staring eyes, loss of control over limbs. For a list of the exact references, see Toohey 1992: 265–286.

39 The similes predominantly use imagery that suggests the helplessness of abandoned



in book 3 provide a uniquely direct insight into her inner world. This intense description of Medea's innermost feelings, which strongly emphasizes her isolation, is more or less confined to the third book. In book 4, near the beginning, there are some glimpses of her desperate fear, both before leaving Colchis and when she fears abandonment by Jason, but after the horrific slaughter of Apsyrtus she is more and more confined to the background.

Partly as a result of this compositional choice, the traditional debate about Medea's characterization in the *Argonautica* focuses on two related issues: has Apollonius succeeded in drawing a consistent character, and is the narrative development of Medea's feelings psychologically consistent? In the past, scholars have often claimed that there is a discontinuity between book 3 where Medea is still the 'innocent' maiden in love with Jason, and book 4, in which she perpetrates all sorts of gruesome magical acts (the taming of the snake, the killing of Apsyrtus and Talus), and her love for Jason is replaced by a blind panic expressing itself in violent threats.

Recent readings have recognized that the presentation of Medea's character is in fact much more subtle and sophisticated. It may for instance be noted that the goddess Hera's characterization of her as 'Aeetes' daughter, expert in drugs' (*kourēn Aiēteō polupharmakon* 3.27), might be said to contain the germs of both sides of Medea's character: she is on the one hand a *kourē*, a young girl, who is entirely under paternal authority.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand her prominent familial linkage (it recurs seven times in the epic) with the fearsome king implies that she shares strains of his menacing character.<sup>41</sup> This seems confirmed by the fact that she is called *expert in drugs*, with a Homeric epithet that immediately calls to mind another member of the family, Circe (her aunt, Aeetes' sister).

But there are numerous other indications of Medea's disturbing side: the first scene in which Medea is presented (3.250–252) refers to her activity as a priestess of the sinister chthonic goddess Hecate, near whose temple she will eventually contrive to meet Jason. An image in the same scene emblematically captures her piquant double-sidedness, as she puts the *Promētheion*, a drug

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women: a destitute widow trying to provide for her offspring (3.291–297); a bride whose young husband has died (3.656–664); a captive slave girl abused by a cruel mistress (4.35–39).

40 Cf. the recurrent stress on Medea's youthfulness, her behaviour that is 'natural for a young girl (*hoiē te kourē*) and her loveliness.'

41 Apollonius seems to hold that characteristics can be genealogically inherited. It seems the case with the implied similarity between Achilles and Peleus and Ajax and Telamon, but also with Jason, whose desperate and weak mother Alcimedea and debilitated father Aeson figure quite prominently in the opening scenes of the epic.

made of the blood from the liver of the tortured titan Prometheus, ‘in the fragrant band that was fastened around her divinely beautiful breasts’ (3.868) in order to hand it over to Jason. When she drives out to meet Jason, she is likened to Artemis (an avatar of Hecate) surrounded by nymphs and cowering wild animals as she makes her way. The simile thus encapsulates both her youthful, majestic beauty and her fearsomeness, and moreover reminds us of the fact that Jason was likened to Apollo, Artemis’ twin.<sup>42</sup> This clearly means that there is a predestined link between the two. Perhaps, like the gods referenced, they are both each other’s doubles and negative images.

The context in which Medea is first named, the Muse invocation that opens book 3 (1–5), reveals that Medea’s love will now be essential to the Argonautic quest. As Hera’s first mention (3.27) of her makes clear, moreover, Medea will be a means to an end, a pawn. She is to be made to fall in love with Jason, so that she will help him gain the Fleece, return with him to Greece and kill Pelias, in order to avenge Hera’s anger. Much like Jason, then, Medea is a helpless (if much more strong-willed) victim of Necessity, or of the frivolous will of the gods, which explains why her feelings are often characterized, by herself and by the narrator, as *amēkhaniē* or *atē*; sometimes she or others even dimly seem to recognize the hand of the gods in her plight.<sup>43</sup> The scene in which the sniggering boy Eros finally shoots his arrow (qualified as ‘bringer of much sorrow’ 3.279 and ‘like to a flame’ 3.287) into Medea’s heart in order to gain the pretty ball that his mother Aphrodite has promised him emblemizes the cruel irony of her fate.<sup>44</sup>

It is sometimes forgotten by scholars and critics describing Medea’s character and actions how prominently this divine motivation of her acts is represented by the narrator, and to what extent it may explain that in the end Medea’s motivation is so unclear: is it love or fear, or rather a mix of both that drives her actions? Can anyone, including the narrator or Medea herself, even know and understand what she is feeling, if these feelings are caused and repeatedly manipulated by exterior entities? For we may remember that it is not just Eros’ dart which influences Medea; Hera twice averts her from suicide (3.809–818, 4.22) and casts ‘excruciating fear’ in her heart, in order to make her flee her father’s palace (4.11).<sup>45</sup> This issue is pointedly thematized in the invi-

42 1.260–309, cf. Hardie 2006: 25–41 on these similes and the ones they inspired in Vergil’s *Aeneid*.

43 Cf. 3.776 (Medea); 3.973–974 (Jason).

44 Cf. the apostrophe to ‘cruel Eros, great affliction’ (4.445–449). The stock epithet of *erōs* (both with capital and without) is *oulos*.

45 Although Medea is not the only one who is thus manipulated by the gods (cf. Arete’s

tation to the divine Muse (at the opening of book 4) that she must personally ‘tell of the distress and thoughts of the girl’. The human narrator, for his part, mimicking his character’s *amēkhaniē*, confesses:<sup>46</sup>

... for truly the mind within me whirls in speechless stupor (*amphasiē*), as I ponder whether to call it the ill-desired pain resulting from violent delusion (*atēs pēma dusimeron*)<sup>47</sup> or shameful panic (*phuzan aeikelian*), which made her leave the Colchian people.

4.2–4

At the same time, this lack of motivational clarity nevertheless leads to a psychologically accurate description of impossible love and its frustrations. Indeed, it seems that those critics who claim there is no consistency in Medea’s behaviour from book 3 to book 4, have not carefully read the monologues, which from the very first express the violent confusion of her feelings, irrationally darting between desire, desperation and fear (3.464–470; 636–644; 771–801).<sup>48</sup> Medea’s basic dilemma is between *himeros* (her longing for Jason) and *aidōs* (her sense of propriety; her loyalty to/fear of her parents and her people). This opposition causes such turbulent emotions that she almost immediately wishes for Jason’s and her own death (3.465–466; 774–809), revealing the violent strain in her character. Her despair culminates in the realization that even these events would not cure her plight, for in one case she would be dreadfully unhappy, and in the other she would invite the posthumous, but equally unbearable, scorn of her fellow-Colchians.<sup>49</sup>

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plans attributed to intervention from Hera in 4.1199–1200), she is certainly the character in whose portrayal this manipulation figures most prominently. The repeated description of Medea’s *nous/psukhē* as departing from her own body, as e.g. at 3.289; 3.446–447; 3.1151 also symbolizes Medea’s loss of self-control.

46 For the growing uncertainty of the Apollonian narrator with regards to his subject matter during the epic, cf. *SAGN* 1: 46–53 (Cuypers) and Morrison 2007: 271–311. A similar practice can be noted in Pindar (→). Note the verbal echo *amphasiē* 4.3 = 3.284, the very first word describing Medea’s love.

47 Race 2008 translates the difficult phrase as ‘the lovesick affliction of obsession.’

48 See especially Papadopoulou 1997: 641–664 and Fusillo 2008: 147–166. The latter remarks upon interior monologue’s ‘suitability for representing the mental fluctuations of a divided self’ (159).

49 For Medea’s concern for her *kleos* as based on her portrayal by Euripides, cf. Papadopoulou 1997: 641–664. She discusses the way in which the great third interior monologue (3.772–801) is based upon and relates to Euripides’ *Medea* 1021–1055 (→).

On consideration then, it seems that what was sometimes understood as inconsistency is really the essence of Medea's nature and her dilemma:

... there is no major difference with respect to the heroines who will come after her ... from her direct descendant, Virgil's Dido, to a very distant one, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, who is torn between social codes and love, and between her maternal role and her relationship with Vronsky. Their conflictuality is equally insoluble and produces a deep sense of frustration.

FUSILLO 2008: 159

### Conclusion

I started with the observation that there is a great difference in complexity and hence ambiguity between the drawing of Jason and Medea on the one hand and the minor characters on the other. I have argued that this contrast forms part of Apollonius' technique, which involves characterizing his two protagonists indirectly (metonymically) through intratextual parallels and oppositions. Of course this is but one of the many devices for characterization that can be identified in the epic. Others, as we have seen, range from the direct (epithets, explicit moral evaluation by the narrator or by characters), to indirect metonymical (description of physical qualities or reactions, speeches, interior monologues and dreams, typical settings and objects, similes) and indirect metaphorical (a very important part is played by pointed intertextual allusions to former texts; mainly Homeric epic and Euripides' tragedy *Medea*), or downright obscuring (the sometimes uncertain level of divine involvement in the psychological processes described, and the withholding of information, or expressed doubt about the characters' motives by the narrator).

The misunderstanding of these latter two techniques has in previous scholarship sometimes led to a negative appraisal both of Apollonius' poetic technique and of the moral value of his characters. More recent readings have recognized the true subtlety of Apollonius' characterizing techniques, and the literariness and, simultaneously, lifelikeness of his characters.