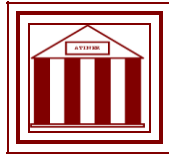


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**Mocking Epic and Tragic Patterns
in Apollonius of Rhodes'
*Argonautica***

Maria-Luiza Dumitru Oancea

Lecturer Dr.,

Department of Classical Philology

University of Bucharest

Romania

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
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**Mocking Epic and Tragic Patterns in
Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica***

**Maria-Luiza Dumitru Oancea
Lecturer Dr.,
Department of Classical Philology
University of Bucharest
Romania**

Abstract

We propose a new reading grill of Apollonius' *Argonautica* as a poetical banter through which the author mocks the epic and tragic models of the age. The Prelude itself presents Jason in a somewhat embarrassing situation due to the loss of a sandal. The image stands out from the very beginning as a „warning” about how *The Argonautica* should be read. This impression is strengthened by countless embarrassing situations featuring Jason and his followers. Towards the end of the story, we could fully appreciate the wholehearted laughter underneath the folds of an exciting story and realize that we are looking at a poetical joke - a true *badinage*. The present study analyzes circumstances, characters, sentiments, thoughts and gestures that support our hermeneutical approach. We conclude that Apollonius wished to minimize epic and tragic patterns in order to humanize the heroic model.

Contact Information of Corresponding author:

Epic and tragic patterns

The present study investigates seven epic and tragic patterns together with seven corresponding counter-patterns i.e. reversal of the traditional heroic mode: heroic feats vs. illusory acts; prophets vs. false prophets; genuine love vs. illicit intervention; heroism vs. magic; merit vs. slyness; hospitality vs. inhospitality; sacrifice vs. simulation of sacrifice.

Illusion, instead of heroism

Greek heroes usually pursue lofty, important goals in order to prove their virtues. However, sometimes Greek heroes pursued frivolous goals. A constant of the heroic mode illusion is the search for the golden fleece which is, in our opinion, a frivolous goal. We think that going in search of a little, defenceless ram to destroy it may not be a particularly praiseworthy endeavour. The ram was not an enemy, nor was it a monster. In fact, it had human-like attributes (it could think and speak). The golden fleece stands for powerlessness and frivolity, its search a means of obtaining pleasure (*hedone*) and repose (*hesychia*). Besides it offers the prospect of a mirage, a fascinating reality blur that draws attention away from truth and opens the gates of an imaginary world. The location of the fleece neighbours the mirific yet perplexing Orient. The golden fleece is a frivolous erotic object used to cover the nuptial bed of Jason and Medea, carried out in secret (IV, vv. 1141-1143): *ἐνθα τότε ἔσπόμεσαν λέκτρον μέγα: τοῖο δ' ὑπερθεν/ χρύσειον αἰγλήεν κῶας βάλον, ὄφρα πέλοιτο/τιμῆεις τε γάμος καὶ ἀοίδιμος* 'There at that time did they (the heroes) spread a mighty bed; and thereon they laid the glittering fleece of gold, that so the marriage might be honoured and praised'.

Jason's first occurrence in the poem is arguably ridiculous, as the hero shows up at the court of his uncle Pelias with only one sandal ("coming forth from the people with but one sandal": *δημόθεν οἰοπέδιλον*, I, v. 7; 'saved one sandal from the mire, but the other he left in the depths held back by the flood': *ἄλλο μὲν ἐξεσάωσεν ὑπ' ἰλύος, ἄλλο δ' ἔνερθεν/κάλλιπεν αὖθι πέδιλον ἐνισχόμενον προχοῆσιν*, I, vv. 10-11.). Jason was thus limping because of this loss, and the image itself brings to mind famous tragical characters who suffered afflictions at one of their feet (or body parts), as Labdacos did (the one with a limp, similar to the letter la(m)bda, or Oidipous (swollen foot), or gods of the likes of Hephaistos, limp-legged and, by extension, of One-Eye and One-Arm etc. But Jason was limping not because he was suffering of a disability. He was just lacking a shoe, a mimetic object by excellence, imitating only the form of the foot, but failing to replace the function and role of the organ itself. We are faced with the illusion of a missing body part, with the mocking and minimization of tragic and epic models of the character in suffering. On the other hand, the image of Jason's being stuck is one of utmost ridicule; one gets the image of a neophyte, a person "stuck" who wants to become the people's hero.

Phineus, the false prophet

Another element that contributes to the cristalization of the minimized image of traditional epic models is the influencing of the Argonauts actions by the treacherous prophet Phineus (Bouvier, Moreau 1983: 5-19). He is portrayed from the very beginning as a villain, guilty of *hybris* against Zeus, whose mysteries he had defied, revealing them to the mortals without his permission. Thus, Phineus stands out as a unique character among those of the same rank, if we consider that none of the consacrated epic prophets of the time (for example Calchas, Teiresias etc.) had given in to similar subversive practices aimed at deceiving divinity. But presenting the prophet's past is not accidentally inserted in the story, as it further substantiates his advice to the Argonauts not to underestimate Cypris' (Aphrodite's) aid that would guarantee their success: ἀλλά, φίλοι, φράζεσθε θεᾶς δολόεσσαν ἄρωγῆν/Κύπριδος. ἐκ γὰρ τῆς κλυτὰ πείρατα κεῖται ἀέθλων, 'But, my friends, take thought of the artful aid of the Cyprian goddess (II, vv. 423-425). For on her depends the glorious issue of your venture'. Mentioning Cypris only leads to the reintegration of Phineus within his essential characteristics as mystifying prophet who approves of and encourages mischievous deeds, since Aphrodite was the charming and mystifying goddess par excellence. Therefore, the epic model of the prophet is altered, rendering him to nothing more than a mock version of the epic, grave, god-fearing, wise and savior-like prophet. Phineus proves to be the garrulous prophet-type, unaware of his mission, who, in the end defies the boundaries between man and divinity through his demythologizing and even disconcerting attitude. Despite having been severely punished by Zeus himself, he doesn't come around, but persists in deceiving from a different perspective, promising the Argonauts a pseudo-glory. But Phineus appears to be the mock replica of another blind prophet, Teiresias, whom Odysseus meets in the Inferno and who prophesies his future fate, offering him some clues that would warn him about his long trip coming to a close end. Hence, we are again confronted with the mocking of a traditional epic model: the grave look of the blind prophet of the Inferno, who becomes the treacherous and garrulous prophet who had fallen into misery in *The Argonautica* of Apollonios. He seems to be living in the world of shadows even in his earthly existence, damned by fate and witness to the repelling vision of the harpies.

Illicit help from above

In Chant Three, the divine accomplices Hera and Athena agree that only a crafty act (*dovlon tina*, III, v. 12) can help Jason get his hands on the golden fleece from the Aeetes. Athena (III, v. 20) acknowledges that boosting the heroes' courage relies on *this artfulness* (τοῦτον δόλον) that she had not yet discovered. Hera is the one who, finally, indicates that Aphrodite only could help them. The aid is awaited in surprise, as the golden fleece is the symbol of

the Oriental mirage, a blinding illusion that could not be obtained either legitimately (Hera) or rationally (Athena). The unexpected visit of the two goddesses to Aphrodite allows for a digression-portrait of naughty Eros as the mistificator by excellence or as the ludic trickster. Eros sees mistification as a challenging game, possibly a mistification of the mistification by the principle of the anti-phrase. Eros had just tricked the child Ganymede at the game of jacks, and was also behind the mistifying relationship of Jason and Medea - he shot his venomous arrow at the virgin, making her fall in love with Jason against her will and more importantly, against her father's will. Eros thus also influenced the relationship of Jason and Aetes, as the king's fury was ignited by Eros¹ arrows (cf. Campbell 3; Hunter, *The Argonautica of Apollonius* 59; Knight 250). Aphrodite herself, knowing that her son was fidgety and undisciplined, tricks him into accepting to target Medea with an arrow and make her fall in love with Jason. In exchange, Aphrodite promises Eros a beautiful toy² (cf. Campbell 134). Here we have an example of tricking the trickster by means of the anti-phrase. It is important to note that the aid of Aphrodite is indirect (she could do nothing by herself). This reminds one of derision, of childish ludic gestures. Eros, the fidgety child by excellence, always keen on playing tricks and even capable of evil, becomes the guarantor of Medea's deeds (herself a child) and of Jason's (an untutored youth). In fact, Chant Three is entirely devoted to the goddess Erato (a simile of Eros), whom the poet invokes from the very beginning. she. The invocation is not of Aphrodite as a love goddess, but as a ludic creature, defined by a subtle kind of violence, recklessness and craftiness embodied as Eros, the god-child archer. Immaturity thus is shared by Eros, the whimsical divine child, with both Jason and Medea. Hera describes Medea as being 'full of wiles' *δολόεσσα* (III, v. 89), using the same adjective employed by Phineus to characterize Aphrodite (II, v. 423). Further (III, v. 687), Medea addresses her sister Chalkiope 'with guileful words' (*δόλω*), 'for the bold Loves were pressing her hard' *θρασέες γὰρ ἐπεκλονέεσκον Ἔρωτες* (III, v. 687). In turn, Jason mimetically embraces Medea's slynesses when he accepts the potion prepared to appease the bulls *θελκτήρια φάρμακα ταύρων* (III, v. 738) and when he receives the magic potion (*φάρμακον*) to become invincible (III, vv. 843-848). But Jason's sweet talk is also a cunning weapon to trick his enemy and appease his anger (the furious Aetes, for example III, v. 385: *ἀμείψατο μειλίχιοισιν* 'he himself first made gentle answer').

¹ On Eros' destructive power see Campbell; Hunter; Knight who maintain that the narrative about Eros' contribution to the love union is one of destruction, evincing that the unfolding of Jason and Medea's wedding would not be a happy one.

² Kypris realizes she cannot afford to appear impolite in front of Eros. Also, Eros is described in IV as an agent of destruction (IV, 445 sqq.).

Magic, instead of heroism

In Chant Four, Medea employs her alluring charms to send the dragon to sleep (ὑπνον ἔβαλλε), thereby allowing Jason easy access to the glittering golden fleece. Jason took the golden fleece from the oak, as urged by the girl (ἔνθα δ' ὁ μὲν χρύσειον ἀπὸ δρυὸς αἴνυτο κῶας, / κούρης κεκλομένης, 'hereupon Jason snatched the golden fleece from the oak, at the maiden bidding' vv. IV, 162-163). Not the slightest hint of effort or fatal encounter with the monster, no courageous deed enlivens Jason's spirit; he is pleased to be able to acquire the valuables without proving his virtues. In fact, Apollonios brings forth a comparison, drawing on subtle irony, when he associates the joyful and satisfied look on Jason's face upon seeing the golden fleece with that of a maiden happy to touch her glittering garments (ὡς ... παρθένος... / ... ὡς τότ' Ἰήσων, 'as a maiden ... so did Jason', IV, vv. 167,170). Jason is not really a hero of the Argonauts, who had gone in the search of the golden fleece after leaving everything in the care of a woman¹ (cf. Nyberg 123; Beye, *Epic and Romance* 90; Beye, 'Jason as love-hero' 43) who had run away from her father's house for the sake of her lover. However, Jason returns as a victor, clad with the golden ram's fleece hanging down his shoulders all the way to his ankles, proud of his trophy (ἦϊε δ' ἄλλοτε μὲν λαιῶ ἐπιειμένος ὤμω/αὐχένος ἐξ ὑπάτοιο ποδηκεές, 'he strode on now with the fleece covering his left shoulder from the height of his neck to his feet', IV, vv. 179-180). The image is similar to that of the hero Herakles, victorious after the merciless grappling with the lion of Nemea, wearing its skin on his shoulder as trophy and therefore appears taunting and ironic, very much in Apollonios' style. The emphatically displayed scene of mock-heroism is followed by that of another Jason, fearful for his life and deprived of his precious adornment (...δίεν, ὄφρα ἔ μή τις/ἀνδρῶν ἠὲ θεῶν νοσφίσσεται ἀντιβολήσας, 'he feared exceedingly, lest some god or man should meet him and deprive him thereof', IV, vv. 181-182), as if to remind us of the true mold of our hero. The contradictory images are purposefully adjacent like the pieces of a puzzle for the reader to solve and uncover Jason's personality: hero or false hero?

Slyness instead of personal merit

A significant episode from the perspective of the illusory heroic mode is that of the attack against the Argonauts by the warrior birds on Aretiás Island (Chant Two). We think that these aggressive birds protected by Ares announces the subsequent attack of king Aetes, himself under the protection of Ares. The Argonauts defeat the birds not due to their strength, but to their slyness: they stirred up a great racket, waving their helmets, shouting strongly and raising their spears to simulate a counter-attack. Finally, they hit their shields to raise

¹ On Jason's dependence of women's aid and his sexual attraction towards women see Nyberg and Beye.

havoc among the warrior birds. The language used is clear in this regard: 'let us contrive' (*ἐπιφραζώμεθα*, II, v. 1058), some other 'device' (*μητιν*, II, vv. 1050, 1058) etc. The comparison with Herakles, who had similarly eluded the Stymphalide birds by spinning a sounding brass, is not amiss. However, the difference between the two situations is striking: whereas Herakles does not consider the facts as challenging his heroic virtues i.e his physical force (a hero does not fight birds) but only as an opportunity to apply his practical abilities to escape an awkward situation, the Argonauts consider the birds as true combatants. As for slyness, which is the method employed here, it takes the form of a mock-battle announcing a future episode at king Aetes' court, where the Argonauts (Jason) will create the illusion of a battle with the aid of Medea's witchcraft.

Hospitality, instead of inhospitality

After their sojourn on the Isle of the Doliones (*ἐνξεῖνοισι Δολίοσιν*, I, v. 1018) led by King Cyzicus, the Argonauts embark on their ship Argo and leave behind these hospitable places. But during the night, the wind make them unwittingly return to the island (*οὐδέ τις αὐτὴν νῆσον ἐπιφραδέως ἐνόησεν/ἔμμεναι*, 'Nor did anyone note with care that it was the same island' (I, v.1021). In the dark (*ὕπὸ νυκτί*, I, v.1022), neither the Argonauts nor the Doliones recognize one another, so the hosts arm themselves and kill their supposed enemies, the Macrians. The pseudo-conflict breaks out in wild rage (*σὺν δ' ἔλασαν μελίας τε καὶ ἀσπίδας ἀλλήλοισιν* 'And with clashing of ashen spears and shields they fell on each other' I, v. 1026). In the ensuing havoc, Jason kills no other than King Cyzicus, king of Doliones and his benefactor (*ἀλλὰ μιν Λισονίδης τετραμμένον ἰθὺς ἐοῖο/πλήξεν ἐπαῖξας στήθος μέσον, ἀμφὶ δὲ δουρὶ/ὄστέον ἐρραίσθη*, I, 1032-1034) 'But Aeson's son leapt upon him as he turned to face him, and smote him in the middle of the breast, and the bone was shattered round the spear'. Not only does the hero fail to guarantee strict observance of the rules of hospitality, but he fails to show heroism on the battle-fields. There is no sign of any desire to obtain military glory (*kleos*) or becoming enshrined in the memory of the offspring. Jason's only wish is for him and his comrades to make it alive. This episode marks the transition from hospitality to inhospitality: the hosts turn into attackers, while the guests become their victims. The reason for their fight is darkness (*nyx*), synonymous with the ensuing havoc. Darkness personifies the ignorance that annihilates shape and the capacity to think wisely (*ἐπιφραδέως*), thus empeaching the ritualistic game of hospitality. The ritual transforms itself into transgression. We think of darkness as a divinity striking in anger (*ate*) those whom (s)he wants to kill, by determining one to act out of ignorance. The episode casts an unfavourable light on the Argonauts and especially on Jason: they are guilty of lacking lucidity. This reminds us of the lack of memory or remembrance that constitute mock-heroism – the landmark of true heroism is the will to remain in people's memory. Divine punishment will readily sanction this lacking in

wisdom.. On leaving Mysia, which is the next halt, the Argonauts lose three of their mates, Herakles, Hylas and Polyphem. At dawn, both sides become aware of their horrific mistake.

Simulation, instead of sacrifice

Yet another example of reversed hospitality is an episode in Chant Four, where Jason and Medea plan the cowardly murder of Medea's blood brother, Apsyrtus. What strikes at first is the strange association of two divinities: Dionysus, the orgy god of the extremes, of actions performed in a state of mental confusion, the wild god who encourages actions situated at the threshold of two kingdoms: the human and the animal, and who is a threshold god by excellence, and Artemis, the maiden-goddess, wild and lunar, who acts mostly at night time, by moonlight, in the dark hideouts of the forest, and thus indirectly, not in plain sight, a nightly goddess, patroness of witch charms carried out in the dark. Thus, the two divine creatures share a wild nature, nocturnal and confusing, but are drawn apart by the fact that the former acts within an orgiastic frame, at twilight, while the latter acts within a nocturnal, hidden frame. The two are purposefully mentioned as their role is to create a wild, nocturnal and semi-divine frame, suitable for the plotted kill. Even the temple of Artemis is mentioned (*νηοῦ σχεδόν* 'in the vicinity of the temple', IV, v. 469), the sacred space in the vicinity of which the fratricide would take place. Moreover, it would function as a pseudo-guarantor of a so-called sacrifice. On the other hand, we notice a subtle ironic similarity between the killing of Apsyrtus near Artemis' temple and the tragic scene of preparing Iphigenia's sacrifice for the same wild goddess in Aulis. Thus, the crime and the sacrifice are presented in a certain contiguity, as they appear interchangeable. The sacrificial scenario, therefore, is thrown into ridicule, minimized and sanctioned.

Conclusions

In Apollonius' *Argonautica* values suddenly turn into non-values, as their symbolic status is minimized, cast into ridicule and defied - a tendency characteristic of children, certainly not of adults, for whom meanings carry serious overtones, and personal merit is valorized and gratified accordingly. Even Odysseus' defining trait, *polymetis* ('very smart'), becomes, in Apollonius' *The Argonautica metis* (simple craftiness, stratageme, cunningness) whose attribute is *doloessa* ('cunning, guilefull'). The capacity of being smart turns into craftiness or cunningness. We believe that the whole poem *Argonautica* minimizes the erotic status and personal merit, as well as the social institutions *e.g.*, hospitality and marriage. The pillars on which the *Argonautica* rests are lies, illusion, artfulness, chiaroscuro and derision. The epic poem always appears to be marked by the hypothetical game similar to

those that have in one way or another influenced the childhood games of 'I am Mom and you are Dad'. Apollonios' intention in creating this ludic and minimalist frame for the famous adventure could be explained by the general tendency of Alexandrian poets to mock and condemn heavily dense epic plots, tributary to the lengthy heroic cycles as well as the countless, long and tiresome fantasmagorical digressions. On the other hand, we think Apollonios did not wish to sketch a comedy based on traditional values, but to humanize the hero and bring both the divine world and the heroic world closer to humans' abilities and resourcefulness.

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