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From Zero to Hero: Jason's Redemption and the Evaluation of Apollonius' *Argonautica*

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From Zero to Hero: Jason's Redemption and the Evaluation of Apollonius' *Argonautica*

Not long ago, Apollonius of Rhodes' Jason was commonly lambasted as a weak, unheroic figure, an embarrassing protagonist for the high, lofty genre of epic. In the words of one representative critic, Jason was "the hero without heroic qualities", "inferior to his followers", his "glittering surface" of hunkish good looks contrasting with the "lugubrious reality" beneath.¹ In the last few decades, however, Jason's street cred has steadily been on the rise and he seems to be winning over an increasing number of supporters (or at least apologists) to his cause, as scholars find an increasing number of ingenious ways to redeem him from the throes of failure. Upon closer inspection, we are told, Jason is sometimes a fair match for Homeric heroes, while his apparent failings can often be explained away when read against Hellenistic political, philosophical or literary thought. I too, when reading the poem, can't help but feel that Jason has been hard-done-by by older critics and that many of these recent readings are far more convincing than those of previous generations. Yet what concerns me a little is how this increasingly optimistic assessment of Jason seems to have occurred pretty much at the same time as the increasingly optimistic evaluation of the *Argonautica* itself as a piece of literature. Like its central protagonist, the poem was once dismissed as a "magnificent failure,"² yet it is now commonly regarded as a complex, sophisticated epic, more deserving of praise than of scorn. Of course, the literary history I'm constructing here is more streamlined and simplified than the reality,³ but there is an undeniable trend over the past century of scholarship whereby both text and character have risen simultaneously in their readers' estimations.⁴ In this short space of time, I'd like to explore this apparent phenomenon, pondering on what it suggests about our own attitudes to and value judgements of ancient literature.

I: Zero?

After a quick read-through of the *Argonautica*, it might be unsurprising to find that some readers of Apollonius' poem have regarded its central protagonist Jason as a bit of a failure. Throughout the poem, Jason is repeatedly characterised as a figure of helplessness, paralysed by ἀμηχανία in the face of the tasks ahead – a stark contrast to Homer's πολύμητις Odysseus.⁵ Even when he does act, he's not much of a warrior, only killing his host Cyzicus in a tragic night time battle of mistaken identities (*Arg.*1.1026-1077) and treacherously accomplishing the murder and mutilation of Apsyrtus, Medea's own brother (*Arg.*4.451-81).⁶ His greatest success comes in his unconventional *aristeia* where he yokes Aetes' fire-breathing bulls, ploughs the plain of Ares and kills the earthborn men sown from dragon teeth; yet

¹ DeForest (1994) 54.

² Wright (1932) 100.

³ Even if a precisely linear progression cannot be plotted, one must admit that far fewer overtly negative views of Jason, such as those of Rose (1984) and Schwinge (1986), have been published in the past few decades.

⁴ For a useful, though somewhat judgemental and at times rather scathing review of the past fifty years of discussion on Apollonian "heroism," see Gleis (2008) 6-12. He characterises scholarship on the topic with a different emphasis than my own, claiming that "[t]he debate...has reached a point where either older arguments are recycled or novel, absurd theses are put forth. No stance is in view which is both fundamentally new and more plausible." His emphasis on the cyclical regurgitation of arguments underestimates, in my opinion, the general pattern of increasingly positive attitudes to Jason's character over the past decades. Most other treatments of the topic also begin with a recent bibliography: see e.g. Carspecken (1952) 99-100; Hunter (1988) 436-7 and Jackson (1992) 155.

⁵ Jason is called ἀμήχανος or said to suffer from ἀμηχανία by characters or the narrator at the loss of Heracles (1.1286); at Phineus' description of the journey to Colchis (2.410); at Tiphys' death (2.885); at Aetes' ultimatum (3.423) and challenge (3.432); and when they seem fated to die in Libya (4.1318). Jason also admits ἀμηχανία himself and when testing his crew by saying that the voyage was a mistake (2.623). A typical response to the accumulation of such instances is Klein (1983:115), claiming that Jason "appears to be compromised even by his epithet", also noting uses of the verb ἀσχαλάαν (*Arg.*2.888, 3.432-3).

⁶ cf. Goldhill (1991: 317): "The military endeavour that is crucial to the exemplarity of the heroes of the *Iliad* – the route to excellence, the reason for memorial – becomes for Apollonius a site of tragic error and failed aspirations."

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here, he is completely reliant on Medea's magic,⁷ and employs his martial weapons in completely untraditional ways: his helmet acts as both a bowl for the dragon's teeth (*Arg.*1.1321-2) and a drinking vessel (*Arg.*1.1348-9), while he uses his spear as a goad for the bulls (*Arg.*1.1322-4).⁸ Perhaps most problematic for Jason, however, is the overbearing presence of Heracles amongst his initial crew. Even before departing, Jason loses out to the archaic hero, whom the rest of the crew unanimously prefer as leader, and it is only when Heracles refuses the honour that the leadership is lumped back onto him (*Arg.*1.331-362). Later on Lemnos, meanwhile, it is only Heracles who persuades the crew to move on from their sojourn of love-making (*Arg.*1.861-78).⁹ Even when Heracles has been left behind at Mysia at the end of Book 1, however, the rest of the poem cannot escape his latent presence: we are repeatedly told he could have single-handedly accomplished the challenges with which they struggle,¹⁰ while the Argonauts also keep landing at places through which the archaic hero has already passed.¹¹ Jason is thus subjected to a continual comparison with the archetypal epic hero, a comparison which it might seem he can never win. No wonder, then, that Jason has been regarded as "morally, spiritually and intellectually impotent,"¹² a "weak and insignificant hero."¹³ Indeed, by postponing Jason's name until the eighth line of the poem, in stark contrast to Homeric and Virgilian practice, it is as if even Apollonius himself were embarrassed by his creation.¹⁴ The figure that emerges from this overview is, in short, not the kind of man you'd want or expect to lead an epic voyage.

II: A Hero Yet?

Thankfully, however, in recent years, Jason has been re-evaluated by a number of more sympathetic scholars, whose approaches can generally be grouped into two main categories. One approach has been to restore some degree of heroic *kudos* to Jason through reanalysing Apollonius' text in detail, as well as highlighting similarities which he shares with Homeric and other literary paradigms; the other has been to accept that Jason falls short of traditional heroic behaviour, but to question the significance of this fact and turn these allegedly 'unheroic' elements into positives – better suited to the political, philosophical and literary context of Apollonius' time. I don't have time here to examine every recent study of Jason, but a summary of some of their arguments should demonstrate the more optimistic assessment of his character that has increasingly emerged over the past few decades.

(a) Intratextual Context

The simplest way in which Jason has been re-evaluated is through a careful re-examination of Apollonius' text on its own terms, without making prior assumptions about Apollonius' intentions or purposes. Many of the criticisms raised against Jason are partly the result of misreading passages or individual words out of their larger context. A prime example is Jason's ἀμηχανία. One cannot deny that Jason is frequently described as helpless and dismayed, but reading the poem as a whole, it quickly becomes apparent that such a trait is not unique to Jason himself but is rather all-pervasive in the world of the Argonauts: the whole crew often feel similar emotions of despair as a group, as do a number of

⁷ cf. Lawall (1966) 166: with the help of Medea's drugs, Jason "becomes...the great hero that he never was in reality."

⁸ cf. Campbell (1983) 78; Fantuzzi/Hunter (2004) 271.

⁹ Heracles even raises the possibility of leaving Jason behind!

¹⁰ e.g. *Arg.*2.145-53 (Heracles would have felled Amycus; that Polydeuces' own defeat of Amycus is an imitation of Heracles, god of boxing, is highlighted when Lycus later recalls Heracles' own boxing exploits, 2.783-5); 3.1232-34 (only Heracles could have faced Aetes' spear).

¹¹ e.g. Heracles passed through Lycus' kingdom on his quest for Hippolyte's belt (*Arg.*2.775-9), while it is Heracles' former violence in producing a spring that saves the Argonauts in Libya (*Arg.*4.1458-9). For the continuing shadow of Heracles, see especially Philbrick (2011) for Book 2 and Hunter (1993: 27).

¹² Beyé (1969) 37.

¹³ Wright (1932) 100.

¹⁴ e.g. Hunter (1993) 8. Of course, the anonymous ἀνὴρ in line 6 also foreshadows Jason's presence. See also Köhnken (2000) on how Jason is overshadowed in the prologue by the greater prominence of his uncle Pelias, who is named three times in the opening (3, 5, 12).

individuals, including Medea, Circe and Peleus – it is a characteristic of the poem as a whole, not of Jason in particular.¹⁵ Even from those occasions on which Jason appears to be dismayed, however, we should not draw sweeping conclusions, for appearances can often be misleading. When Jason is rebuked by Idas before the ship's departure, for example, he is described as not only ἀμήχανος, but also κατηφιόωντι ἐουκώς, “like a man in despair” (1.462); as Richard Hunter has noted, Apollonius seems to emphasise the potential discrepancy between appearance and reality here by failing to provide any further objective information.¹⁶ Later in Book 2, meanwhile, Jason's words of fear and dismay after passing through the Clashing Rocks are actually only a test of his crew's loyalty (2.638 περιώμενος) – but Apollonius only tells us this after the speech, as if inviting us to question Jason's heroic credentials before proving us wrong.¹⁷ Beyond such bouts of despair, in fact, Jason displays good leadership skills, often leading by example (being the first to turn to preparations before departure: 1.363 πρῶτος) as well as exhibiting considerable piety, his frequent sacrifices and cult rituals aligning him with positively presented monarchs in the text, such as Alcinous, Cyzicus and Lycus, rather than the likes of Amycus and Aetes.¹⁸ Perhaps most significant, however, is the fact that Jason perfectly fits the job description for the crew's leader that he sets out at the initial election scene: throughout the epic he – and not Heracles – does precisely what he says a leader should, “seeing to each thing, taking on quarrels and making agreements with foreigners” (ὄρχαμον ὑμείων, ὧι κεν τὰ ἕκαστα μέλοιτο | νείκεα συνθεσίας τε μετὰ ξείνοισι βαλέσθαι, *Arg.*1.339-40). Indeed, on the two occasions of ἀμηχανία that we noted a moment ago, Jason's pensive thoughts are described in such a way as to echo the very words of this job description (1.339b ὧι κεν τὰ ἕκαστα μέλοιτο; cf. 1.461 προφύρεσκεν ἕκαστα, 2.633 φραζόμενος τὰ ἕκαστα).¹⁹ In this way, Jason is set in opposition to many of the poem's representatives of old-fashioned brute force, such as Heracles, Idas and Peleus, whose blustering ways prove ineffectual during the expedition.²⁰ Within the larger context of the poem, it thus seems that Jason can often be regarded as a successful, and perhaps even heroic, figurehead of the expedition.²¹

(b) Intertextual Context

Along similar lines, scholars have also rehabilitated Jason within the larger literary tradition by highlighting the characteristics he shares with other heroes, both in Homer and elsewhere. Starting once more with his helplessness, Hunter has noted how even this has Homeric precedent, for many Homeric heroes weep and despair (e.g. Agamemnon, *Il.*9.13-14; Odysseus, *Od.*10.495-500 and Achilles, *Il.*18.22-35), while Odysseus even feels the very same ἀμηχανία as Jason in the Cyclops' cave (*Od.*9.295).²² Indeed, the fact that this word is a Homeric *hapax* strengthens the possibility that Apollonius' audience would have clocked the similarity;²³ Jason, it seems, fits right in with one of the

¹⁵ The Argonauts often experience ἀμηχανία as a group (*Arg.*2.681, 860; 3.504; 4.825, 1308, 1701), but also inspire it in others (on Lemnos, 1.638; and at Colchis, 3.893). Various other individuals also experience it, including Hylas' water nymph (1.1233); Phrixus' son Argus (2.1140); Medea (3.772, 4.107); Circe (4.692); Peleus (4.880); Ancaeus (4.1259); and Mopsus (4.1527).

¹⁶ cf. Hunter (1988) 443-4.

¹⁷ pace Lawall (1966: 164), who takes Jason's complaints here at face value.

¹⁸ For Jason's piety, see Mori (2008) Chap.5.

¹⁹ cf. Hunter (1988) 443, citing Fränkel.

²⁰ The opposition between Jason and these various figures has been a popular topic in scholarship: see e.g. Fränkel (1960) for Idas vs. Jason; Galinsky (1972: 108-116) and Clauss (1993) for Heracles vs. Jason. Lawall (1966: 121-148) expands such readings by claiming that all the Argonauts, with their various skillsets (brawn, skill, valour and piety), offer foils to Jason. The opposition between Jason and Heracles seems to begin at the very start of the poem, Heracles μέγα φρονέων (1.348) contrasting with Jason εὐφρονέων (1.331). However, see Goldhill (1991: 314-5) for a discussion of this approach's excessive simplicity.

²¹ For further re-evaluations of Jason through careful re-examination of the poem, see e.g. Vian (1980: 32-8) on Book 3 and Hunter (1988: 442-8) on Books 1-2.

²² Hunter (1988) 438-9.

²³ For other such *hapax legomena* as signposts of intertextual links in the *Argonautica*, see e.g. Clauss (1993:41-2, n.10) on Apollonius' use of the Homeric *hapax* ἐντυπίας (*Il.*24.163) at *Arg.*1.264, which consolidates the intertextual connection between Aeson and the bereaved Priam.

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great heroes of the Homeric past.²⁴ Moreover, as Hunter also notes, the Jason of Euripides' *Medea* also faced "many irremediable disasters" (πολλὰς...συμφορὰς ἀμηχάνους, *Med.*551-4),²⁵ while Jason's despair also echoes Orestes' doubts and insecurities in Athenian tragedy, both young men representing a larger mythological paradigm of transitional rites of passage.²⁶ Yet it is not only Jason's excessive emotions which link him with the epic past, for a number of other episodes recall Homeric scenes, such as Jason's testing of the crew in Book 2, reminiscent of Agamemnon's own testing of the Greek army in *Iliad* 2,²⁷ as well as Jason's reliance on Medea's magic, reminiscent of Homeric heroes' frequent reliance on divine aid.²⁸ As Williams concludes: "This Jason is an ultimately Homeric figure," who still "cares about the same things as a Homeric warrior: honor, glory, authority, achievement are still his goals."²⁹

III: Explaining Differences?

(a) Better than Homer

Of course, it would strain the limits of plausibility to claim that Jason is a match for Homeric heroes in every respect; sometimes we cannot escape the inevitable differences between Jason and his epic forebears.³⁰ Yet even in these cases, scholars have found ways to redeem Jason. One approach has been to question the significance of the comparisons with Homeric precedent anyway: why should we expect Jason to adhere to the behaviour of an Achilles or an Odysseus? After all, as Simon Goldhill notes, the Homeric texts themselves display "no single and simple model of heroism," since heroic values are contested even within these epics – as they also were in the fifth and fourth centuries through the works of Pindar, the tragedians and others.³¹ It is simply too naïve to evaluate Jason's success by comparison with the behaviour of specific Homeric individuals.

Even with this proviso, however, some scholars have made strong arguments to explain Jason's differences from Homeric heroes in a positive light. In some cases, in fact, Jason even appears to surpass his epic predecessors. Jason's stay at Lemnos of several days, for example, hardly seems excessive in comparison to Odysseus' year-long visit to Circe and eight years with Calypso,³² while Jason – unlike Odysseus – displays true concern for his whole crew's survival.³³ Moreover, the feud between Jason and Telamon about Heracles' departure at the end of Book 1 is almost a complete inversion of that between Achilles and Agamemnon in the *Iliad*. For although Telamon exhibits Achilles' anger and Agamemnon's blazing eyes (*Arg.*1.1296-7, *cf.* *Il.*1.103-4), Jason does not rise to the bait and immediately quells the quarrel, Telamon admitting his foolish mistake immediately (ἀφοραδίησιν, *Arg.*1.1332), unlike Agamemnon who only admitted his own ἄτη eighteen books later in the *Iliad* (19.137).³⁴ As Mori and others have noted, the contrast with the *Iliad* seems highlighted in the use of the rare μῆνιν (1.1339),

²⁴ Hunter (1988) 438-9; *cf.* Williams (1996: 26) and Henrichs (1994: 193-4) who also notes how the Argonauts' anguish in Libya (ἄχος δ' ἔλεν εισορόωντας, 4.1245) matches that felt by archaic heroes prior to a divine intervention (e.g. *Il.*11.88: Πηλείωνι δ' ἄχος γένετ'; *Meropis* fr.2.4-5 Bernabé: πικρὸν δ' ἄ]χος ἔσχεθεν Ἡρακλ[ῆα] | [ῶς] ἴδεν). His reading, however, is less positive: he contrasts the immediacy of divine intervention in these other poems with the delay that faces the Argonauts: "the ἄχος of the heroes is prolonged, magnified, and internalized for more than sixty lines until it becomes a symbolic death (4.1245-1304)."

²⁵ Hunter (1988) 437.

²⁶ Hunter (1988) 448-453, esp. p.452 for the Orestes link.

²⁷ Hunter (1988) 445; Williams (1996) 27 also compares the lies and testing words of the Odyssean Odysseus.

²⁸ It is also worth noting that when Jason undertakes Aetes' trial, the role of magic is de-emphasised, as the Homeric quality of the scene comes to the fore: *cf.* Campbell (1983) 78; Fantuzzi/Hunter (2004) 271.

²⁹ Williams (1996) 19; *cf.* Bulloch (1985) 51.

³⁰ Major differences between Homer and Apollonius which affect the perception of Jason include the absence of death's looming spectre in the *Argonautica* and the greater prominence of inescapable fate and necessity; the fact that the Argonauts are not defending a community like Iliadic heroes (whatever Jason claims at 4.195-205) and that Jason's relationship with his crew is entirely different to that of Odysseus with his anonymous crew; *cf.* Hunter (1988) 439-442.

³¹ Goldhill (1991) 313-6; *cf.* Hunter (1993: 10): "Apollonius did not inherit from Homer a monolithic and fixed picture of 'heroism', but rather a series of contesting models in which 'heroic values' were always matters for dispute."

³² Mori (2008) 70.

³³ Hunter (1988) 441-2. For Jason, "it is better to rely on πολλέων μῆτις (4.1336) than on one πολύμητις individual." (p.442)

³⁴ Hunter (1988:444-5); Mori (2005), (2008).

pointedly echoing the opening word of the *Iliad*.³⁵ I would perhaps go further and suggest that μῆνιν ἄεξεω evokes in sound, sense and metre (bar the last syllable) the poem's first two words, μῆνιν ἄειδε: whereas the Homeric Muse sang of anger over mere possessions (κτεάτεσσι, 1.1341) – for that is all Briseis really was – the Apollonian Jason will not stoke the flames of his own wrath, even though the conflict is about a more valiant cause, a lost comrade (ἐτάρου...φωτός, 1.1342).³⁶ Indeed, Jason's avoidance of conflict here finds a closer match in the *Iliad*'s divine framework, recalling Hephaestus' speedy calming of the quarrel between Hera and Zeus in Book 1.³⁷ Hephaestus there urged the use of gentle words (ἐπέεσσι...μαλακοῖσιν, *Il.*1.582), and this is precisely what Jason employs throughout the expedition.³⁸ Jason can thus sometimes be read as a fairer, calmer and superior leader than any Homeric warrior, so much so that his closest Homeric parallel might even be found in the divine ease and tranquillity of the *Iliad*'s gods.

Further Contexts: (b) Political, (c) Philosophical and (d) Metaliterary

Moving beyond purely literary horizons, however, numerous scholars have also sought parallels in the broader context of the Hellenistic world to legitimise Jason's divergences from the literary tradition, appealing to contemporary Hellenistic trends in philosophy, politics and metapoetics.³⁹ Starting with philosophy, Anatole Mori has explored how the feud between Jason and Telamon mentioned a moment ago reflects contemporary philosophical views on anger and its causes, as evidenced in Aristotle;⁴⁰ while others have seen in Jason an emblem of different philosophical outlooks: Williams regards Jason's rationality and constant reflection as an evocation of Stoic values,⁴¹ while Klein conversely suggests that "Jason's apparently compromising epithet *amechanos* is in fact a Skeptic virtue."⁴² More political in his approach, by contrast, is Norman Sandridge, who sees in Jason reflections of the fourth century ideologies of kingship as found in Isocrates, Xenophon and others; while Ross Jaffe extends Sandridge's interpretation by suggesting that the emphasis on farming in Jason's *aristeia* is a nod towards the ideology of the farmer-king.⁴³ Perhaps Jason's strongest recent advocate, however, is Anatole Mori, who sees in Jason's actions numerous reflections of contemporary Hellenistic politics: as just two examples, she diffuses the tensions in the election scene, where Heracles refuses leadership and forces it back onto Jason, by seeing the episode as a reflection of the Macedonian acclamation process, while

³⁵ Thus Mori (2005:231), (2008:88). The use of μῆνιν in relation to Jason is strikingly unusual here: it and its cognates are almost exclusively used of divine anger in the *Argonautica*: Cyprus' anger at the Lemnians (a variant for 1.802's μῆτις), Zeus' anger at the sons of Aeolus (in hendiadys with χόλον, 3.337), and the gods' anger at Phineus (μηνιώσιν, 2.247). It is also used of Aetes' wrath (μῆνιες, 4.1205), but he is a near-supernatural figure as the son of Helios and is constantly characterised by his anger (ἐπεχώσατο, 3.367; χόλω, 3.368; ἐπαλαστήσας, 3.369; μενέαινε, 3.369; χαλεψάμενος, 3.382; κεχόλωται, 3.403; χωόμενος, 3.607; ὀλοὸν χόλον, 3.614; κεχολωμένος, 4.9; χόλον, 4.235; χόλον ἄγριον, 4.512; βαρὺν χόλον, 4.740).

³⁶ To this, we could also add Glaucus' insistence on the Διὸς...βουλήν (*Arg.*1.1315), a rare collocation in the *Argonautica* and its first appearance in the poem. Given that Apollonius' first uses of Homeric formulae often bear allusive force [see Fantuzzi/Hunter (2004: 269)], this phrase could also evoke the opening of both the *Iliad* and the Cyclic *Cypria*; cf. Collins' observation that Heracles' departure is framed by words recalling the Homeric prologues: ἕρις ἄνδρα 1.1153, ἄνδρός 1.1338, μῆνιν 1.1339 (1967:107-8). Alongside these Homeric echoes, we could also accept Jackson's suggestion (1992:156) that the reference to flocks and possessions in 1340-1 obliquely alludes to the fate of Telamon's son Ajax, another traditional hero who killed the Achaean flocks in anger for losing out on mere possessions: Achilles' arms.

³⁷ Thus Williams (1996) 30.

³⁸ μειλιχίους ἐπέεσσι (1.294); μειλιχίους ἐπέεσσι (2.621); μειλιχίοισι καταψήχων ὄαροισιν (3.1102); μειλιχίους ἐπέεσιν (4.394). Cf. already Pindar's Jason: ἀγανοῖσι λόγοις (*Pyth.*4.101) and μαλθακᾶ φωνᾶ (*Pyth.*4.137).

³⁹ Cf. Williams (1996) 20: "Instead of considering Jason...only in comparison with the Homeric, it would be more constructive to consider Jason also from the point of view of the Hellenistic."

⁴⁰ Mori (2005), (2008: 87-90).

⁴¹ Williams (1996) 39: "Jason is driven by rationality, the subordination of emotion, self-control, awareness of necessity, a concern for decision-making, eloquence, and the desire to accomplish his ultimate goal. Since these elements also correspond to tenets of Stoic ethical philosophy, it is perhaps valid to conclude that Jason is quite similar to a Stoic in many respects."

⁴² Klein (1983) 125.

⁴³ Sandridge (2005), cf. Sandridge (forthcoming); Jaffe (forthcoming). This kind of approach was already suggested by Goldhill (1991: 316).

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she also explains the prominence of female helpers in the poem as a reflection of the political realities of Apollonius' day, where queens seem to have played prominent roles in and beyond the court.⁴⁴

As for metaliterary redemptions, Mark Heerink – building on the earlier arguments of DeForest – has argued that the *Argonautica's* opposition between Jason and Heracles, far from discrediting Jason as a weak and pathetic figure, actually celebrates him as a representative of modern-day Callimachean poetics, in comparison to Heracles, the archetypal Homeric and Cyclic hero.⁴⁵ For whereas Jason seems to display a close affinity with Apollo, the patron of Hellenistic poetics *par excellence*, Heracles proves an inappropriate member of the expedition, too heavy for the boat itself, which sinks down under his weight (*Arg.*1.532-3). Of course, as many scholars have noted, there is no complete dichotomy between Jason and Heracles – for the latter can also exhibit μῆτις, such as when he overcame the Stymphalian birds through skill rather than force (2.1052-7),⁴⁶ but the basic differences between the two do seem clear, and Heerink's arguments may well be an attractive proposition for those partial to metapoetic readings.

IV: Character and Text: A Shared Fate?

From this short survey, it is thus clear that Jason is increasingly on the up, finding defenders from an ever-increasing number of angles, his behaviour and actions validated through intratextual and intertextual parallels, alongside comparisons with the Hellenistic world of politics, philosophy and metapoetics. What's striking, however, is how this re-evaluation of his character and heroism have generally coincided with an increasing awareness of the *Argonautica's* complexity and sophistication: back in the 1950s, as Carspecken observed, Apollonius was "as a rule, briefly and lightly dismissed as an almost ideal representation of the faults of a degenerate period, erudite but uninspired,...one who lacked [the] poetic skill and imaginative vision necessary to restore epic poetry to the heights."⁴⁷ Half a century later, however, such critical views are rarely to be found and the *Argonautica* is instead regarded as a complex epic, which engages in Ptolemaic ideology, scholarly disputes and questions of social and cultural identity.⁴⁸ It seems, in a way, that the assessments of both Jason and the *Argonautica* are inextricably intertwined – is this just coincidence?

Such increasingly positive assessments have also, of course, coincided with the upsurge in scholarly attention directed to the poem, which seems to be receiving an ever-increasing number of monographs and articles, as well as a fresh series of Anglophone commentaries on the horizon.⁴⁹ I often wonder whether this increased attention is the result of the *Argonautica's* higher esteem (people realise it's good, so more study it), or on the contrary, whether this re-evaluation of the poem is the result of the amount of attention it's receiving (if we study a text long enough, will it – and its protagonist – inevitably rise in our estimations?). If we go looking for sophistication, skill and success, is that eventually what we force ourselves to find? I have no firm answers myself, but I am certainly not complaining – a sophisticated text and a successful protagonist, seem far more satisfying to read and study than an incompetent poem filled with inept characters. On this point, though, I am reminded of Liapis' recent commentary on pseudo-Euripides' *Rhesus*, which is unusually pessimistic throughout, a negativity which starts with the opening words of its preface: "*Rhesus* is an embarrassment, both for its

⁴⁴ Mori (2008) 64-70 for election scene; 91-139 on women. Cf. also pp.187-223 on the murder of Apsyrtus, perhaps the most problematic passage for any redeemer of Jason. Mori re-interprets this as a diplomatic coup, fitting not only literary precedent (namely Achilles' killing of Troilus), but also contemporary historical practice, in the form of early Hellenistic assassination attempts.

⁴⁵ Heerink (2010). Heerink's metaliterary perspective effectively follows that of DeForest (1992), although her reading was less charitable to Jason.

⁴⁶ cf. Levin (1971: 26); Hunter (1993: 32).

⁴⁷ Carspecken (1952) 35; cf. Bulloch (1985: 46): the *Argonautica* is "one of the finest failures in the whole of Greek literature" and Fraser (1972: I.625, 640): "[t]here can be no doubt that structurally the *Argonautica* is weak" and that the poem is "far from flawless" and rife with plagiarism.

⁴⁸ cf. Hunter (1993: 1-7) on shifting perceptions of Hellenistic Poetry and the *Argonautica* in particular, with reasons for its former malaise.

⁴⁹ cf. Gleii (2008) 1: "In the last 10-15 years the stream of scholarly studies on Apollonius has swollen considerably."

defenders and for its detractors." One reviewer asked why Liapis could devote so much of his time to a text that he viewed so negatively,⁵⁰ while also suggesting that "the repeated references to the play's poor quality...seem to me to have the potential to mask some rather intellectually lazy scholarship." For "L[iapis] attributes flaws of plot and characterisation to the author's lack of skill rather than making any attempt to understand them as artistic choices...in their own right."⁵¹ Implicit in this comment seems to be the idea that we as scholars have to do everything we can to redeem a text and its characters of their failings, to interpret them as a success. Apollonius and Jason certainly seem to have undergone such a transformation, and (on the basis of recent scholarly developments) it looks like Imperial and Late Antique Greek Literature is next on the redemptive hit-list. We appear, in short, to be in a never-ending spiral of increasing optimism as the canon of 'quality' ancient literature constantly expands: I can't help but ask whether this is a passing fad, or whether we will eventually reach a time when every text and protagonist is as good as any other and any thoughts of failure are consigned to the past: where then would we go?⁵²

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⁵⁰ Zuckerberg (2013) 30: "I found myself wondering why he kept working on a play that he so obviously considers to be second-rate craftsmanship".

⁵¹ Zuckerberg (2013: 30-1); cf. too Heath (2012: 250), who regards Liapis as somewhat "uncharitable".

⁵² cf. Barchiesi's musings on classicists' value judgements (2001:150-1): e.g. "The language of criticism has become objective," or "Whether we like it or not, in order to appreciate the memory of the poets we must put a little trust in their skills."

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From Zero to Hero: Jason's Redemption and the Evaluation of Apollonius' Argonautica

[I] Zero?

(a) ἀμηχανία

ἀμήχανος Jason: *Arg.*1.1286; 2.410, 2.623, 2.885; 3.423, 3.432; 4.1308, 4.1318.

(b) Shameful violence

- Killing Cyzicus: *Arg.*1.1026-1077
- Murdering and mutilating Apsyrtus: *Arg.*4.451-81

(c) Unconventional aristeia:

- Helmet as a bowl for dragon's teeth (*Arg.*1.1321-2) & drinking vessel (*Arg.*1.1348-9)
- Spear as a goad (*Arg.*1.1322-4).

(d) Heracles

- Election scene: *Arg.*1.331-362
- Lemnos delay: *Arg.*1.861-78
- Heracles' lingering shadow: e.g. *Arg.*2.145-53; 2.775-9; 3.1232-4; 4.1458-9. cf. Philbrick (2011)

(e) Proem: Arg.1.1-8

ἀρχόμενος σέο, Φοῖβε, παλαιγενέων κλέα φωτῶν
μνήσομαι, οἱ Πόντοιο κατὰ στόμα καὶ διὰ πέτρας
Κυανέας βασιλῆος ἐφημοσύνη Πελῖαο
χρῦσειον μετὰ κῶας ἐύζυγον ἤλασαν Ἀργῶ.
τοίην γὰρ Πελῖης φάτιν ἔκλυεν, ὥς μιν ὀπίσσω
μοῖρα μένει στυγερῆ, τοῦδ' ἀνέροσ, ὄντιν' ἴδοιτο
δημόθεν οἰοπέδιλον, ὑπ' ἔννεσίησι δαμῆναι.
δηρὸν δ' οὐ μετέπειτα τεῆν κατὰ βᾶξιν Ἰήσων ...

Contrast:

Hom.II.1.1: μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος

Hom.Od.1.1: ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον

Virg.Aen.1.1-2 Arma **virum**que cano, Troiae **qui**
primus ab oris | Italiam...**venit**

[II] A Hero Yet?

(a) Intratextual Context

(i) Others' ἀμηχανία

- Ἀμήχανοι Argonauts as a group: 2.681, 860; 3.504; 4.825, 1308, 1701.
- Argonauts inspire ἀμηχανία in others (on Lemnos, 1.638; and at Colchis, 3.893).
- Other individuals: Hylas' water nymph (1.1233); Phrixus' son Argus (2.1140); Medea (3.772, 4.107; Circe (4.692); Peleus (4.880); Ancaeus (4.1259); and Mopsus (4.1527).

(ii) Reassessing ἀμηχανία:

- κατηφιόνωντι ἐοικώς, "like a man in despair" (*Arg.*1.462)
- πειρώμενος, testing (*Arg.*2.638)

(iii) Leading by example:

- *Arg.*1.363 ἦ ῥα, καὶ εἰς ἔργον **πρῶτος** τράπεθ'...

(iv) Piety

- cf. Mori (2008) Chap.5

From Zero to Hero

(v) Fitting the Job Description

Arg.1.339-40: ὄρχαμον ὑμείων, ὧι κεν τὰ ἕκαστα μέλοιτο
νείκεα συνθεσίας τε μετὰ ξείνοισι βαλέσθαι.

cf. Arg.1.461 προφύρεσκεν ἕκαστα; 2.633 φραζόμενος τὰ ἕκαστα

(vi) Better model than representatives of old-fashioned military brute force (Heracles, Idas, Peleus)

cf. Fränkel (1960), Lawall (1966) and Clauss (1993)

(b) Intertextual Contexts

(i) Homeric ἀμηχανίη

- Odysseus in Cyclops' cave: *Od.*9.295
- Weeping: Agamemnon (*Il.*9.13-14), Patroclus (16.2-4) & Achilles (18.22-35); Odysseus (*Od.*10.495-500)

(ii) Euripidean ἀμηχανίη

- Eur.*Med.*551-4: πολλὰς...συμφορὰς ἀμηχάνους

(iii) Homeric behaviour

- e.g. Testing one's men: Arg.2.638 πειρώμενος: cf. Agamemnon: πειροῖται *Il.*2.193

[III] Explaining Differences?

(a) Better than Homer

(i) Telamon-Achilles link:

- Flaming eyes: Arg.1.1296-7 τῶ δέ οἱ ὄσσε | ὄστλιγγες μαλεροῖο πυρός ὦς ἰνδάλλοντο
cf. *Il.*1.104: ὄσσε δέ οἱ πυρὶ λαμπετόωντι εἴκτην

(ii) Jason's response: Arg.1.1337-1343:

ὦ πέπον, ἦ μάλα δὴ με κακῶ ἐκυδάσσαο μύθῳ,
φὰς ἐνὶ τοῖσιν ἅπασιν ἐνηέος ἀνδρὸς ἀλείτην
ἔμμεναι. ἀλλ' οὐ θῆν τοι ἀδευκέα μῆνιν ἀέξω,
πρὶν περ ἀνηθείς: ἐπεὶ οὐ περὶ πῶεσι μῆλων,
οὐδὲ περὶ κτεάτεσσι χαλεψάμενος μενένηνας,
ἀλλ' ἔταρου περὶ φωτός. ἔολπα δέ τοι σὲ καὶ ἄλλω
ἀμφ' ἔμευ, εἰ τοιόνδε πέλοι ποτέ, δηρίσασθαι.'

cf. *Il.*1.1 μῆνιν ἄειδε

κτεάτεσσι: like Briesseis?

"My good friend, you certainly did revile me with a harsh rebuke, claiming in front of them all that I betrayed a man who was kind to me. But **I shall not for long harbour bitter wrath** against you, although before this I was pained, because it was not over flocks of sheep or over **possessions** that you flared up in anger, but for a man who was your comrade. Indeed, I hope that you would oppose another man as well on my behalf, if a similar situation ever arose." (trans. Race)

(iii) Echo of Homeric "divine frivolity"?

- Hephaestus urges the use of gentle words (ἐπέεσσι...μαλακοῖσιν, *Il.*1.582)
- cf. Jason: μελιχίους ἐπέεσσι (Arg.1.294); μελιχίους ἐπέεσσι (2.621); μελιχίοισι καταψήχων ὄαροισιν (3.1102); μελιχίους ἐπέεσσι (4.394).
- See already Pindar's Jason: ἀγανοῖσι λόγοις (*Pyth.*4.101) and μαλθακᾶ φωνᾶ (*Pyth.*4.137).

(b) Philosophical Contexts

- Mori (2005) – Aristotelian views of anger reflected in Jason/Telamon feud
- Williams (1996) – Jason as Stoic?
- Klein (1983) – Jason as Sceptic?

(c) Political Contexts

- Sandridge (2005): Jason and fourth century kingship ideology
- Ross (forthcoming): Jason as farmer-king
- Mori (2008) – Macedonian acclamation, Female/Queen prominence

(d) Metaliterary Contexts

- Heerink (2010): e.g. ship sinks beneath Heracles' weight: *Arg.*1.532-3
- NB Opposition not absolute: Heracles too can display μήτις – Stymphalian birds: *Arg.*2.1052-7

[IV] Character and Text – A Shared Fate?

- Carspecken (1952, 35): Apollonius was “as a rule, briefly and lightly dismissed as an almost ideal representation of the faults of a degenerate period, erudite but uninspired,...one who lacked [the] poetic skill and imaginative vision necessary to restore epic poetry to the heights.”
- Not any more...

Is failure not an option? A comparison:

Liapis (2012, i): “*Rhesus* is an embarrassment, both for its defenders and for its detractors.”

Zuckerberg (2013, 30-1): “the repeated references to the play’s poor quality – aside from being in and of themselves rather wearing to the reader – seem to me to have the potential to mask some rather intellectually lazy scholarship. Too many times, L[iapis] attributes flaws of plot and characterisation to the author’s lack of skill rather than making any attempt to understand them as artistic choices. Not so long ago, scholars were treating the works of Euripides in the same fashion, dismissing him as a second-rate playwright and carping on the poor quality of the tragedies rather than trying to understand them in their own right. Might not the author of the *Rhesus*...deserve the same consideration?”

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AMPAL 2014: Failure Abstract

From Zero to Hero: Jason's Redemption and the Evaluation of Apollonius' *Argonautica*

Is there a connection between the success or failure of a text and the success or failure of its central protagonist? To answer this question, I shall explore the issue of 'heroism' in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, a constant bugbear of modern scholarship, especially in its attempts to determine Jason's suitability and success as a leader of the Argonautic crew. While he was once commonly lambasted as a weak figure (e.g. Wright 1932, Bowra 1933), recent scholarship has found many ways to rehabilitate Jason as a worthy hero of Apollonius' epic: his journey imitates that of an ephebic rite of passage (Hunter 1988), his qualities reflect the ideal attributes of fourth-century kingship (Sandridge 2005), and his characteristics embody the qualities of Apollonius' new modern epic, in contrast to Heracles, who reflects the outmoded nature of Homeric and cyclic epic (Heerink 2010). Jason has, in short, been transformed from a failure into a success.

In this paper, I propose to explore these shifting perceptions of Jason and set the increasingly optimistic assessment of his character in the context of the re-evaluation of the *Argonautica* as a piece of literature. Once the *Argonautica* was no longer regarded as "a magnificent failure" (Wright 1932), but recognised as a sophisticated epic, its protagonist could no longer be dismissed as a failure either: he too had to be redeemed. The assessment of text and protagonist thus seem inextricably intertwined. After tracing these developments, I shall conclude by exploring their consequences for our approaches to ancient literature: does the assessment of a character really have to follow that of its text, and for a text to be successful, does it really need a successful protagonist? Ultimately, is failure a problem that has to be explained away at any cost to justify a text's or a character's worth?

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