
Scholarly work on the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius in recent years has grown both in the number of articles, dissertations, and books devoted to the epic and, more important, in the openness of attitude on the part of the authors. More and more the poem is rightly seen as an important and interesting piece of writing in itself. In the past, the majority of readers who decided to pick up the Argonautica no doubt skipped directly to the third book, watched with some interest as Medea fell desperately in love, and then hastily set the book down, satisfied to have read dutifully one of the Aeneid's sources. Poor old Apollonius! He has long been the victim of post-Classical let down, Vergilian teleology, or both. But, thanks to the flourishing interest in things Hellenistic, Apollonius's readership has expanded considerably, as is evident from an increase in academic publications, the appearance and promise of several new translations (B. H. Fowler, P. Green, and, as advertised recently by Oxford University Press, Richard L. Hunter), and now by a comprehensive book-length study of the
Argonautica by the same Hunter, the author of several important articles on the Argonautica as well as an elegant text and commentary on Book 3 (Apollonius of Rhodes, Argonautica Book III [Cambridge 1989]).

Hunter lays the foundation for his book in the first chapter by looking for the reasons why Alexandrian poetry in general and the Argonautica in particular have experienced such a poor critical reception. This rendition of the well-worn Apologia Apollonian is particularly useful since Hunter accurately identifies the causes that explain the underwhelming attention shown Apollonius's poem: (1) the tendency to see Hellenistic literature merely as a transition from Classical Greece to Augustan Rome; (2) the distaste for poetry that appears to be the product of royal patronage; (3) the lack of appreciation of the poem's "self-conscious 'textuality'" resulting in its "perceived epigonality;" and (4) the preference for Aristotelian unity and consistency, which the Argonautica does not possess. In this new study, Hunter desires to set the epic in its social and intellectual context, with the hope not so much of giving a definitive interpretation of the poem as much as prompting others to have a close look at a poem that invites several readings, and in this he succeeds.

In the second chapter, "Modes of Heroism," Hunter takes on what for many readers of epic is one, if not the, central issue: the role of the hero. As he notes, modern readers of the Argonautica tend to deny "heroic" status to the Argonauts, Jason in particular, who is often called an anti-hero, love-hero, or life-like hero (among other such designations). It is Hunter's contention that the reader cannot construct a unified, consistent, and convincing picture of Jason's character from the narrative for several reasons. First, his actions are too morally layered for a simple construction of 'heroism.' Second, not only did the epic tradition contain different modes of heroism for imitation, but Apollonius looked to specific earlier versions of Jason (those in Pindar and Euripides, for example), thus complicating any unitary reading of this figure. Third, with the exception of Medea, the poet purposefully withholds his characters' thoughts, forcing us to interpret their words and deeds through others' perceptions. Apollonius, Hunter strives to show, is not interested in creating a consistent character as much as "to lay emphasis upon the nature of literary story-telling" (22).

I agree with many, if not most, of the specific observations made in this chapter. My major objection to Hunter's view of heroism in the Argonautica lies in the insistence that a unified view of Jason cannot be derived from this densely intertextual narrative. While I agree that Jason's words and actions should not be explained simply by appeal to his 'character' or 'psychology' (21), other tangible elements in the text—in particular, the many literary subtexts—can (and I believe do) lead us toward unitarian readings of Jason, however complex and ambiguous such readings must be. In my view (expressed in The Best of the Argonauts: The Redefinition of the Epic Hero in Book 1 of Apollonius's Argonautica [Berkeley: University of California Press 1993]), Apollonius can have a consistent (or consistently inconsistent) character and at the same time emphasize the nature of literary story-telling by calling attention to the multifarious elements that underlie the narrative.

Heracles, Hylas, and Death in the Argonautica are also touched upon in this chapter. Of the three, I shall discuss only the first. Following D. C. Feeney
Hunter lists the places in the text where the actions of Jason and some of the other Argonauts parallel those of Heracles (e.g., both Heracles and Jason acquire golden objects hanging in trees that are guarded by serpents and situated at the edge of the world). With great care he shows how Jason and Heracles are both similar and different. The statement, however, that Heracles is not, as many see him, Jason’s polar opposite (32), is undercut by the (correct) observation that Heracles’ mode of heroism is individualistic, while the poet insists upon the “collective virtues” of the crew (26). It is in fact Jason who articulates and encourages this approach at 1.336-340 and 3.171-175. I thoroughly agree with Hunter that “Apollonius’s poem proves to be a meditation upon the problems of ‘epic’ leadership, within the parameters bequeathed by Homer” (36); but I do see Jason and Heracles as representatives of opposite modes of leadership and consequently of heroism: both men attain the golden objects of their quests—Heracles alone and by brute strength, Jason with and through others’ skills. I would add that at the heart of this contrast lies a striking irony: when Heracles acts alone, he always seems to benefit the larger group, wittingly or unwittingly, (e.g., his creation of a spring in the Garden of the Hesperides that will provide water for the Argonauts after he is gone); Jason, on the other hand, when all is said and done, enlisted the help of others for his own advantage.

In the third chapter, “Images of Love,” we confront another major theme in the Argonautica. As in the case of the hero, Hunter insists that we not look for verisimilitude in Medea’s encounter with eros; that is, Medea’s experiences do not reflect “the real erotic practices and experiences of the third century” (47). Hunter is surely correct to highlight the poem’s intertextuality, and particularly with regard to Medea, whose words and actions engage the words and actions of characters, male and female, from the Iliad to the Aetia. Yet, interest in realistic portraiture need not be thought at odds with the allusive style (in fact, Hunter rightly argues for the intersection of these interests in his analysis of Jason’s cloak in this chapter [52-59] and elsewhere in the book [e.g., 100]). Rather, it is the seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition of the mundane and the erudite that enlives through its dynamic tension much of Hellenistic literature.

There is no way of summarizing Hunter’s view of Medea since, in line with his reading of the poem, Apollonius does not set about to provide one. Once again, I would say that Hunter offers many excellent observations on individual passages, especially when identifying the various models that lie behind Medea’s words and actions, while refusing to pin Apollonius down. In fact, Hunter is at his best when handling the literary subtext. He has a fine ear for hearing the Homeric undertones in Apollonian verse. For instance, in his analysis of the episode on Lemnos (47-52), he seems to have been the first to note the echoes of Iliad 3 and 6 and their relevance to the Argonautic context (i.e., Jason’s encounter with Hypsipyle is modeled in part on Hector’s visit to Troy and his meeting with Helen in particular). While one might argue that other Homeric scenes are more to the fore in this episode, Hunter has successfully shown the relevance of this Iliadic sequence and reminds us in general not to become too secure in the belief that all the relevant models have been accounted for.
When dealing with the gods in the fourth chapter, Hunter returns once again to the theme of the characters' relative ignorance of what is happening around them and reasonably identifies the source of their problem: the reduction of the gods' interference in the action, especially as compared with their Homeric counterparts. Moreover, as Hunter points out, in his handling of the gods the poet also reveals his interest in the problematics of epic composition by underscoring the uncertainty of how we are to read the gods—as divine figures or as metaphors. The chapter concludes with special focus on Phineus (Book 2) and Hera's conversation with Thetis (Book 4). In both cases, though for different reasons, Hunter finds that here too Apollonius is concerned not with creating a cohesive and realistic psychology, but with the articulation of a "complex and multi-layered text" (98).

In Chapter 5, Hunter turns to the larger issues regarding "The Poet and his Poem," where he explains from four different perspectives why and how he sees the Argonautica as "a demonstration (an epideixis) of the techniques and challenges of epic narration" (101). First, employing narratological technique Hunter listens for the voices that the poet reveals in the epic. While the Homeric narrator reveals a remarkable continuity of voice (rarely does he color the narrative proper with his own profession of feelings), Apollonius often obscures the distinction between narrator and character, intrudes with emotive and evaluative comments, and thereby creates an overall lack of a consistent voice. The diversity of voices observable in the Argonautica, a phenomenon paralleled in Callimachus, contrasts also with Roman poets, who by and large preferred one among many Hellenistic voices (i.e., the subjective voice).

Second, Apollonius provides the Argonautica with several different frames of reference. In addition to recalling both the Iliad and the Odyssey at the beginning of the poem in his addresses to the Apollo and the Muses (1.1, 1.22) and to the wandering of the Argonauts (πλοτ' Τόιεντιν, 1.22), the poet also alludes to other aspects of the various traditions within which he writes: e.g., Callimachus' Aetia, Euripides' Medea, and Pindar's Pythian 4. Contrary to other scholars who see 4.1781 as a reference to Od. 23.238—the τέλος of the epic identified by Aristophanes of Byzantium and Aristarchus—Hunter argues that Apollonius has Od. 23.238 in mind and its wider context, in which Odysseus tells Penelope that "measureless struggle awaits in the future, great and difficult" (119-120); as such, this is an allusion to Jason's future troubles with Medea. A very intriguing suggestion.

Third, Apollonius's similes are seen to question the nature of the epic trope by calling attention to its artificiality, to the disparity between narrative and simile, and to the technique of composition itself. The analyses of individual similes are penetrating and instructive, although in a couple of cases the author ends on a rather fanciful note (cf. "The simile flies in relentless pursuit of the narrative" [131]; "The Argonauts in the text must confront not only the terrors of Libya but also of the simile itself [136]; and "this simile 'enacts itself'" [138]).

Finally, in his analysis of speeches in the Argonautica, Hunter argues that Apollonius employs an un-Aristotelian approach in his use of indirect speeches, an approach possibly suggested by Plato (Rep. 393e-4b). Through the frequent use of indirect speech (which like much else contrasts sharply with Homeric
practice), Apollonius does not allow the characters to speak for themselves and, in this way, often confounds the reader's understanding of what is said and what is meant. Hunter concludes this stimulating and challenging chapter with a brief glance at Orpheus' 'Hymn to Apollo' at 2.703-713, which, he argues, in concentrated form replicates the experience of reading the whole poem: "at the center of both stands the powerful poet, controlling a complex pattern of competing voices" (151).

In Chapter 6, "The Argonautica and its Ptolemaic Context," Hunter looks at the poem in its Alexandrian context. Different from Callimachus, Theocritus, and many other Alexandrian writers, Apollonius includes no direct reference to the Ptolemaic regime in the course of his epic, and while scholars usually study the epic in its relationship with the literary scene of the day, few have ventured an interpretation other than literary. Hunter establishes a prima facie case for locating topical references on the choice of subject (Colchis, which was thought to have racial and cultural ties with Egypt), the imitation of Pythian 4 with its Cyrenean connections, and the conclusion of the poem that celebrates the origin of Thera whose inhabitants went on to found Cyrene. Several possible readings thus emerge. For instance, since the Dioscuri were honored in royal cult, Polydeuces' defeat of the wicked Amycus, a man who flouts the Greek rules of hospitality, thus reflects, albeit in a reserved fashion, Ptolemaic ideology. Another example: Alcinous (a king concerned with justice) and Arete (a skillful controller of events and sympathetic toward the Greeks) are analogues for the royal couple (in some traditions, Alcinous and Arete were siblings). Hunter next shows, quite persuasively, that in Book 4 Apollonius takes us from primitive chaos (as seen in the cases of Circe's animals, Talos, and Anaphe) to Apolline order, with this progression culminating in the action of Thera—and by implication Cyrene—a progression paralleled by Orpheus' cosmogonical song in Book 1. Hunter argues that in this very subtle way Apollonius celebrates the Ptolemies' "self-projection as heirs and transmitters of traditional Greek culture in a changed world" (168). Here too, I find the strengths of the argument in the details, not in the overall conclusions. The chapter concludes with the suggestion that this is how Vergil read the Alexandrian epic, the topic of the following chapter.

While Vergil's debt to Apollonius has been the subject of many articles and several book-length studies, most of these have tended to view the Greek epic as an inferior model and, more importantly, most have focused on individual passages, avoiding a more systematic approach. Hunter offers an overall view of Vergil's use of the Argonautica that, like Knauer on the Aeneid and Farrell on the Georgics, tries to establish the Roman poet's strategy of imitation, though understandably restricted to imitations of the Argonautica. In his brief foray into this topic, Hunter observes that Vergil invokes the Alexandrian epic mostly to "direct us more generally, to a different, un-Homeric, aesthetic" (175) so that he can underscore Aeneas' abandonment of an Argonautic landscape that threatens the future of Rome. In particular, Dido's association with Circe and Medea links her respectively with a life of luxury or a dangerous confusion between the personal and private spheres. On the other hand, Hunter argues, the Argonautica can also authenticate. By showing how the underworld scene in the Aeneid re-
calls in various ways Jason’s journey to Colchis, Hunter establishes as a significant link between Jason and Aeneas that both must secure golden objects in trees which in different ways validate their struggles. While the issue broached here is too large to treat fully in 19 pages, Hunter has indeed provided a good starting point. I would add, however, that Vergil’s use of the Argonautica as described does not validate the suggestion offered in the previous chapter that Apollonius had the Ptolemaic context in mind. The issue that Hunter raises requires (and indeed merits) further exploration.

The book concludes with a brief appendix on the celebrated Callimachean phrase ἐν ἀεισμοι δηνεκές and the age-old question regarding the relationship between Apollonius’s and Callimachus’s approaches to poetry. Hunter argues that the Telchines, from whose mouth this phrase emanates, were literary theorists who knew “poetry only as a set of stylistic criteria and not as a creative act” (191); he has two in mind—Plato and Aristotle. First, Callimachus’ comment involves a quasi-philosophical paradox not only in the contrast between the one song and the many thousands of lines (mentioned in the next verse), but particularly in the contrast between a poem which is both “one” (i.e., unified) and “continuous” (i.e., like the many Heracleids that comprise a chronological sweep lacking discretion). Understood in this way, the phrase represents opposed styles of composition, especially from an Aristotelian point of view, making such a criticism incoherent. After suggesting that the Aetia was, along this line of reasoning, both and neither “one” and “continuous,” Hunter turns to the Argonautica and posits that the same is true of this poem, which, on the one hand, proceeds continuously, while its author and his characters eschew telling stories “continuously” (1.649, 2.391, 3.401). This is an ingenious reading that also merits further consideration.

All in all, Hunter has made a splendid contribution to Apollonian scholarship that is sure to stimulate further discussion on the Argonautica and enlarge its already growing readership. The epic is, as Hunter demonstrates so well, an exciting and innovative literary production of a fascinating era.

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