

# **The Argonautika: The Story of Jason and the Quest for the Golden Fleece Study Guide**

**The Argonautika: The Story of Jason and the Quest for the Golden Fleece by Apollonius of Rhodes**

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# Book One: Preparation and Departure

## Book One: Preparation and Departure Summary

King Pelias, of the city of Iolcus in Hellas, sends Jason and the Argonauts up the straits into the Black Sea in search of the Golden Fleece. Pelias is compelled to do so because of a prophecy that haunts him. An oracle warned him that a man appearing before him with one shoe would herald his death. Jason, who lost a shoe in the muddy bank of a river, appears before the King confirming his fears about the prophecy. Hoping that he will never see Jason again, he sends him off to sea.

Jason gathers his crew which includes, among others, Orpheus, son of Calliope; Polyphemus, a brave fighter in his youth; Tiresias, trained by Apollo; Iphiclus, Jason's own uncle; Nauplius, the finest sailor of his day; the mighty and stout-hearted Heracles; Acastus, son of King Pelias; and, Argus, the builder of the Argo.

The Argo is primed, equipped and ready to sail as the crew makes its way to the ship which is banked on the shore called Magnesian Pagasae. The townspeople do not support the King's decision to send these noblemen on this treacherous journey and pray for the crew's safe return. As Jason readies himself to leave home, he is surrounded by his parents and servants. His mother clings to him and his ailing father moans, fearing he will not see his son again. Jason does his best to soothe their fears and worries. Jason's mother, Alcimedea, is the most distressed and finds it difficult to come to terms with what Jason's fate may be. Jason calms his mother and asks her not allow her fears to place a bad omen upon his journey.

As Jason makes his way to the ship, Iphias, the aged priestess of Artemis, honors and prays for Jason. After Jason boards the Argo, he calls his crew of noblemen together for a conference. Jason tells the group that the ship is sea-worthy and ready to sail on their voyage to Colchis in the quest for the Golden Fleece. Jason asks the crew to choose the best man as their leader. Everything will rest on this man and he will make all the decisions about their venture. The men choose Heracles leader but he defers to Jason as the true leader. The men eagerly support Jason as their commander.

Jason tells his crew that they should depart as soon as possible but first will pay homage to Phoebus by offering a sacrificial feast and to Apollo, the god of embarkation, for a safe journey. The crew is enthused by Jason's leadership and proceeds to drag the great ship into the waters. The men position the oars and select Tiphys to be the helmsman of the Argo. Two oxen are brought to the shore as sacrificial gifts to the gods. Jason prays to Apollo for good weather and a safe journey to Colchis, as well as a safe return for all to Hellas.

Idmon has a prophecy that the crew will return with the fleece but that he, Idmon, will die in a remote area in Asia. The men are happy to learn that they will return but sad for Idmon's fate. As the banquet ends and the men are laying sleepily on the bank, Idas



notices that Jason looks gloomy. Idas assures Jason that he will be safe and successful in the journey and that he, Idas, will defend him with his spear—a weapon that helps him more than Zeus. Idmon tells Idas that he is blaspheming the gods and should have chosen a better way to lift Jason's spirits. The two start to quarrel but are stopped by Jason and Orpheus who distracts them with a song. The charm of Orpheus' music calms the men and soon all are asleep.

The next morning, Tiphys wakes the crew who board the Argo, take their places behind the oars and set sail. All the gods look down on the Argonauts and are pleased with the brave noblemen. Tiphys takes the helm, steering the Argo and keeping it on course. The sail is unfurled as Orpheus plays his lyre, causing fishes of all sizes to follow the Argo. Soon the Argo is leaving the rich Pelasgian land behind them. The first night they beach on the coast of Magnesia and stay two days. On the third day, they set sail and pass many lands including Homole, Eurymenae and Mount Athos in Thrace.

The Argo arrives on the rugged island of Lemnos where, in the previous year, the women had rioted and slaughtered all the men. The Lemnian women had failed to pay homage to Aphrodite, causing their husbands to abandon them in favor of young girls they had captured on the high seas. The women had killed all the men except Thoas, King of Lemnos, who was allowed to escape. The women have taken on the roles of the men. They have learned how to be warriors and are ready for battle when the Argo sails into their sights.

Aethalides is dispatched to speak with Thoas' daughter, Hypsipyle, and persuade her to allow the Argonauts to stay the night. Hypsipyle meets with the other women and asserts her opinion that they should supply the men with food and drink to be taken on board. If these men learn of their great crime, they will be in danger as word spreads around to other lands. The aged nurse Polyxo feels the men should be allowed to be in their land and mingle with the women. Perhaps it will be a way to gain salvation for their sins. Polyxo is old and feels she will die soon—her concern is for the future of the younger women who need men to marry and have children with.

Jason is sent for and, with spear in hand, dons a brilliant purple robe as he makes his way into the island. The beautiful robe depicts the gods: the Cyclopes are working on a thunderbolt for Zeus; Amphion and Zethus are laying foundations for the town of Thebes; Aphrodite is wielding her her bronze shield; and Pelops and Oenomaus are competing in a chariot race, while Apollo is shooting an arrow. The women in the town, starved by the lack of men, are charmed by the stunning appearance of Jason, but he does not engage with them.

Hypsipyle lies to Jason, telling him that the men of the island are away, farming in Thrace. She tells them that the men had all abandoned the women in favor of the trollops they found in other lands. While the men were gone, the women had shut the gates not allowing the men to re-enter until they came to their senses. However, the men refused to let go of their obsession with the young women and took all their sons with them to Thrace. Hypsipyle invites Jason and his men to stay on the island and offers Jason her father's sceptre and the honor of becoming the new King. Jason



refuses the offer, telling Hypsipyle that they must finish their journey. However, he does accept her offer of hospitality.

The young women of the town hurry to the boat and bring the men back to their homes. Cypris, the goddess of desire, has done "sweet work in their hearts." Jason himself finds himself in the arms of Hypsipyle. Heracles is the only man to stay on the Argo. After days of celebrating, Heracles summons the men back to the Argo, admonishing them about losing sight of their mission to find the Golden Fleece. The men ready the Argo for departure as the women of the town come moaning and weeping. Hypsipyle wishes Jason a safe journey and tells him that he is always welcome back on Lemnos as King. She asks what she should do if she bears him a child. If it is a son, Jason tells her to send him to Pelasgian Iolcus to comfort his parents should he perish on his travels.

The Argo departs the island and is back on its journey. The Argo stops at Samothrace, the island of Electra, daughter of Atlas. Perhaps Jason learns some secret rites that may prepare him for safe passage. The narrator, if he knows, cannot reveal what Jason learned. Before dawn of the next day, they have sailed successfully through the swirling waters of Hellespont. In the Propontis, there is a place called Bear Mountain where aborigines, earth-born monsters with six arms, live. The people of the land, the Doliones, are protected from these beings by Poseidon. The Doliones and their King, Cyzicus, welcome Jason and his men. Later, the beasts attack but Heracles kills several of the monsters and is helped by other crew members in killing all of them.

After they sail away, a headwind sends them back. In the darkness of night, the Doliones do not realize it is the Argonauts returning and the Argonauts did not realize they have returned to their island. A major battle ensues in which Jason kills Cyzicus. Others are slain as well. In the daylight, they all realize their mistake and are greatly dismayed. After twelve days of bad weather, a halcyon heralds good weather and, after honoring the gods, the Argo sets sail again.

After a short stay on Mysia, the Argo unintentionally sails off without Hylas and Heracles. Telamon is enraged and accuses Jason of plotting to leave Heracles behind so that his fame will not eclipse Jason's. The sea-god Nereus emerges from the waters informing the men that returning for Heracles would be defying Zeus, who does not want Heracles to continue the voyage. Heracles will be tested by the gods to determine if he should join the immortals. Jason accepts Telamon's apology and the two are friends again.

## **Book One: Preparation and Departure Analysis**

Jason is the proverbial young man who strikes out in the world in search of himself and for the "ideal" in his quest for "The Golden Fleece." The term "The Golden Fleece" has been used since in other literary works as a metaphor for one's dream or ultimate goal in life. King Pelias who dispatches Jason on this dangerous voyage represents the



older, fading man who is trying to hold onto his power but is challenged by the youth and strength of the younger man.

The prophecy that warns King Pelias about Jason represents the old man's own fears about his future, in particular his mortality and death. The prophecy in ancient Greece was considered a direct message from the gods interpreted by an oracle and taken very seriously as the genuine plans of the gods. By Pelias trying to avert the inevitable—his demise—he fights against his fate by sending Jason on a voyage to his death. Pelias represents man's conflict with his own mortality. By sending Jason away, Pelias deludes himself into thinking he is delaying death or in fact defeating it. Jason represents the youthful man who feels immortal and is not particularly concerned with his future (the prophecies). He is the young man who lives his life like there is no tomorrow, despite warnings from elders who fear for his safety.

As the narrator describes the Argonauts who gather to sail with Jason, there is consistent emphasis on each man's lineage, noble birth and his relationship to the gods. In ancient Greece, such lineage was an important element of society; this is reflected in the author's careful attention to heritage and class. The inference in this story is that men of noble birth possess the necessary characteristics of loyalty and ethics to succeed in the face of the life's inevitable challenges. The journey through life is represented metaphorically by the voyage of the Argo.

The ancient Greeks revered the concept of pathos as witnessed by the abundance of "Greek tragedies." To Greek society, the term "pathos" referred to the belief that for one to truly experience life, one must suffer through pain and adversity. For those of high order, "noble suffering" was an essential element of character building. Jason's treacherous journey on the Argo is the epitome of this concept.

In Greek society, men had great love and admiration for one another. The great ship, the Argo, represents the fraternity of man. The allegiance that the men of the Argo feel for each other, and especially for their leader Jason, is an important aspect of the tale. While men are almost uniformly held in high regard in this work, many of the women are depicted as flawed and lacking in character. On the rugged island of Lemnos, the women have murdered all the men for infidelity. The author "punishes" the women by depicting them as miserable and fearful and longing to be back in the arms of men. Perhaps this story would have resonated in the Greek society of the day, convincing women that they should refrain from protesting too much about their husbands' wayward tendencies.



# Book Two: Onward to Colchis

## Book Two: Onward to Colchis Summary

The Argo pulls into a bay and as it lands is greeted by Amycus, the arrogant king of the Bebryces, who immediately challenges the best man on the ship to a fight. Polydeuces takes on the challenge and steps forward. The two are quite a contrast—one beautiful like Zeus' son and the other like a monster. Although the battle is close, in the end Polydeuces lands a deadly blow. The Bebryces, armed with spears, rush at Polydeuces who, joined by the other Argonauts, defeats them. The Argonauts lament about the absence of Heracles who would have frightened Amycus away without a fight.

The Argo next sails into land where the home of the oracle Phineus, son of Agenor, resides. However, Phineus was not appreciative of his gift and abandoned Zeus, who punished him with blindness, starvation and old age. By prophecy, Phineus knew that Jason and the Argonauts would be visiting him and would save him from starvation—two of his men, Zetes and Calais, would kill the harpies that keep stealing his food. Phineus assures Jason that killing the harpies will not bring the ill will of the gods upon him and his men. The two men are not able to defeat the harpies but are visited by the goddess, Iris of the Swift Feet, who warns them not to kill the harpies but vows that she will keep them away from Phineus.

The Argonauts have a feast and Phineus eats ravenously. The old oracle explains that he once angered Zeus by revealing a prophecy from start to finish but later realized that the gods never entirely disclose their plans so that man does not know all of heaven's design. Phineus tells Jason that when the Argo sets sail, the first things they will see in the straits are two large rocks, known as the Clashing Rocks. The rocks are unstable and no one has ever gotten past them. Phineus tells Jason to fly a dove through the rocks first. If the dove makes it through, then the Argonauts should follow and will be able to make it through the strait to the Black Sea.

Phineus tells Jason of all the lands and islands and waterways that the Argo will pass through after reaching the Black Sea. He cautions Jason to stay a few days on an island where the Queens of the Amazons, Otrere and Antiope, built a marble shrine for Ares. A godsend will come to Jason from the sea there. After sailing on, they will come to the farthest corner of the Black Sea and the land of Cyatis where the River Phasis runs. The oracle tells Jason to sail the ship into the mouth of the river to the walls of King Aetes' city where the fleece is spread atop a tree, guarded by a serpent that never sleeps.

Jason asks the oracle if he and his Argonauts will return safely home to Hellas. Phineus responds that once they make it through the Clashing Rocks, a power will lead them back home. The goddess, Aphrodite, is their ally. The oracle can reveal no more. A neighbor, Paraebius, visits Phineus to have his fortune told. However, because the oracle has visitors he tells Paraebius to fetch two sheep as part of a feast and sacrifice



to Apollo. Paraebius had escaped the wrath of the gods by atoning for the sins of his father who had angered a forest nymph. A strong headwind that lasts 40 days, created long ago by Zeus, delays the voyage of the Argonauts. After they finally depart, the Argonauts reach the Clashing Rocks. The crew is terrified but are calmed when the dove is sent aloft and is able to fly through the rocks.

The Argo proceeds through the Clashing Rocks but is sent to near destruction in the turbulent waves created by the moving rocks. The ship becomes lodged on one of the rocks when Athene intervenes and pushes the rock backwards allowing the Argo to pass through the straits. Tiphys recalls Phineus' prophecy that the Argo would have special powers for a safe journey after passing through the rocks. Jason is inconsolable in his concerns about the safety of his crew and regrets having agreed to make the journey. Jason is soon uplifted by the support of his courageous crew.

The Argo stops on the isle of Thynias where they see a vision of Apollo. Orpheus names the island Apollo of the Dawn since the vision appeared in the early twilight. The crew builds an altar in honor of Apollo and has a sacrificial feast in celebration of the god. The Argo lands at the Acherusian Cape where they are warmly greeted by the people. Polydeuces is treated like a god for slaying Amycus and the Bebryces. King Lycus is enthralled with the travels of the Argo but is dismayed that Heracles was left behind. Heracles' power would have helped them to their journey's end. Lycus is grateful that Amycus was slain and announces that he will send his son, Dascylus, on the journey who can act as a great ambassador for the Argo.

During their stay, Idmon is gored by a boar and dies from the wounds. His death delays the Argo's departure as the crew mourns their loss. A funeral rite is held on the fourth day after his death. Another tragedy strikes the crew as Tiphys becomes ill and dies. The crew is in deep despair and loses all hope of ever finding their way back home. The goddess Here intervenes and fills Ancaeus with courage. He speaks to the crew and encourages them to continue on their voyage by reminding them that he and other crew members are skilled sailors. Jason fears that they are doomed but Ancaeus perseveres and the Argo sets sail once again.

On the Assyrian coast, the Argo takes on new crew members Deileon, Autolycus and Phlogius. The Argo runs ashore at the mouth of the Thermodon River. Had the Argonauts stayed there for a longer period, they would have been caught in a bloody battle with the Amazons who were preparing to fight. However, Zeus has other plans and sends forth a strong northwest wind which allows the Argonauts to launch their ship. As birds begin swooping down on the Argo, Amphidamas tells the crew that the birds are signs that the ship is nearing the island of Ares where Phineus had told them to land.

At the same time, two sons of Phrixus are shipwrecked and float ashore on a beam of their demolished ship. They ask for help from the Argonauts but Jason first demands to know where they were headed and what their lineage is. One of the sons, Argus, explains that their father Phrixus came to Aea from Hellas on the back of a ram which Hermes had turned into gold—the Golden Fleece—which is still spread on an oak tree.





The brothers, Telamon and Aegias, are seeking to settle their father's estate—their grandfather is Aetes who has possession of the Golden Fleece and their mother, Chalciope, lives on Colchis. The Argonauts are delighted and are certain that the gods brought these two men to them. Jason asks the brothers to help them on their quest to bring the Golden Fleece back to Hellas. The brothers are reluctant, fearing that Aetes and his warriors will prove to be a powerful and deadly enemy and will not allow the fleece to be taken. The serpent that protects the beast will prove a mighty adversary as well. The Argonauts are deflated on hearing what lies ahead of them. Peleus offers a spirited response, declaring that the Argonauts are more than up for the challenge. They sail on and finally reach their destination—Colchis and the River Phasis.

## Book Two: Onward to Colchis Analysis

A battle of the wills between the gods and men are often at the forefront of the tale of the Voyage of the Argo which represents man's inability to come to terms with his own reality. For example, the Argonauts are upset that Heracles was not present for the battle with the Bebryces. Although Zeus has other plans for Heracles, the Argonauts do not readily accept the will of the gods and long for his return. The oracle Phineus is another example of one not accepting his own reality. He had been unable to come to terms with his gift of prophecy. His ungrateful attitude angered Zeus who punished Phineus by blinding and starving him. This theme is illustrative of man's ultimate failure by not accepting his lot in life.

Phineus tells Jason that the gods do not want prophecies to be completely revealed so that man does not know the complete plans for his future. By not knowing his ultimate destiny, man does not live under pre-conceived notions that may prohibit him from exercising his free will and living life to its fullest. Phineus tells Jason that although there are dangers ahead in the journey, Jason must hold fast to his goal in finding the Golden Fleece so that he can endure the hardships that will come before. By keeping one's focus on an ultimate goal, one is able to endure the inevitable adversities that are part of everyone's life. Phineus goes on to tell Jason that once they finish their journey to the Golden Fleece the road home will be easier. The assertion is that attaining one's goals in life will bring a sense of peace and accomplishment. The Clashing Rocks is one of the most difficult points of the voyage and is representative of the nadir of one's journey through life. Through focus on their goal, belief in themselves and perseverance, the Argo successfully passes through the dangerous rocks. The inference is that these qualities are necessary to withstand the adversity that one undoubtedly will encounter in his life.

When Jason is inconsolable after the death of two crew members, his spirit is uplifted by the support of his crew members. This episode epitomizes the importance of friendship and fraternity on the voyage of the Argo as well as on the voyage through life. Just as important as friendship is heritage as illustrated when Jason eagerly explains the lineage of his crew members to King Lycus. By emphasis on lineage, the author is emphasizing the paramount importance of one's family and birthright within the society at the time this story was written. To show his friendship and good intentions, Lycus



suggests that his son, Dascylus, joins the crew of the Argo. Lycus, by offering the services of his son, is paying the ultimate homage to Jason—what more priceless gift could one give than his own flesh and blood.



# Book Three: Jason and Medea

## Book Three: Jason and Medea Summary

The gods gather to discuss how the Argonauts should proceed. Here asks Athene if they should steal the fleece or if they should ask Aeetes for his permission to take it. Athene is perplexed as well. Finally Here suggests they ask Aphrodite to have her boy, Eros, shoot an arrow at Aeetes' daughter, Medea, to make her fall in love with Jason. Here tells Aphrodite that she is devoted to Jason who was kind to her when she was disguised as an old lady. As for King Pelias, she does not want him to be allowed to escape his destiny. Aphrodite vows to help in any way she can. Her boy has been somewhat rebellious but she feels he will help and make Medea fall in love with Jason.

Aphrodite speaks with Eros, promising him a new toy—a golden ball that belonged to Zeus when he was a child—if he succeeds in shooting a love arrow into Medea's heart. Eros is delighted with the prospect of a new toy and agrees. Meanwhile, Jason addresses the Argonauts and tells them that since they are risking their lives, they have the right to speak up and decide how to proceed. It is decided that Jason will approach King Aeetes in a friendly manner and hopefully be able to take the fleece without conflict. The rationale is that Aeetes, like most men, probably fears Zeus, the god of hospitality, and will not want to break his laws by being warlike. If, on the other hand, Aeetes is hostile, the Argonauts will have to choose whether to fight or flee. Jason and Phrixus' sons make their way to Aeetes' elaborate castle where the boys encounter their mother, who is joyful at their reunion.

The goddess Here makes sure to keep Medea in one place so Eros can easily find her. Eros flies in unnoticed and shoots an arrow directly in Medea's heart. When she sees Jason, she throws bright glances at him and forgets the pain from the dart. She immediately falls in love with Jason. King Aeetes meets with Jason and his grandsons. Argus tells his grandfather that the Argonauts saved them when their ship wrecked. He explains that the evil King Pelias sent Jason on the journey to find the fleece because Jason is the most powerful man in the kingdom and posed a threat to Pelias. Argus tells of Jason's fine lineage which makes him a distant relative and of the family ties of many of the other Argonauts who are all noblemen and descendents of the immortal gods. He explains that Jason does not want to take the fleece by force and that he will recompense Aeetes by eliminating some of his enemies.

King Aeetes is in a rage and does not take the offer well. He tells Jason and the others to get out of his sight and out of his country. He suspects Jason is trying to take over his kingdom. Jason tries to reason with him but the King will have no part of it. Aeetes will only give him the fleece if he can past a test of courage. He must yoke two bronze-footed bulls, use the oxen to plow the earth, sew the teeth of a monstrous serpent into the plowed earth and defeat a legion of soldiers that will then rise up from the earth. Despite the peril and preposterous terms, Jason feels trapped and accepts the challenge. Aeetes has no mercy and tells Jason that if he cannot withstand the



challenge, he himself will take it on and by his victory will ward off any future annoying pretenders such as Jason. Medea fears for Jason's life and prays to the gods for his safe return home.

Argus plans to seek Medea's help. She is under the tutelage of Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. The Argonauts are dismayed about the challenge Jason must face. Peleus tells Jason to undertake the challenge only if he has no doubts. Peleus and five other crewmen volunteer to take Jason's place if he chooses not to take the challenge. Argus calms the crew by revealing that he is trying to elicit the help of Medea. The men regain their confidence except Idas, who shuns their dependence on women instead of fighting like men. Aetes calls the townspeople together and tells them that as soon as Jason is dead that the Argo, with all the men on board, is to be burned. He will cast out his own grandsons to another land as punishment.

Medea is having nightmares about Jason's plight. She wants to save Jason but does not want to betray her parents. Chalciope comes to her sister and asks for her help in saving her sons and the stranger. Medea is reluctant to tell her sister about the feelings she has for Jason. Medea promises to get a magic medicine from Hecate's temple for the bulls. However, Medea is still having second thoughts. She sees evil on both sides and considers suicide. If Jason's destiny is to die, she will be miserable, yet she has guilt about the prospect of betraying her father. Medea begins to drink poison to end her life but Here saves her. With this intervention, Medea is resolved to help Jason.

Medea brings a magical salve with her when she meets Jason the next morning. He assures Medea that she need not fear him and asks for her help in winning his battle. He vows to spread the good news of her kindness throughout the land. Medea gives Jason the salve and tells him that after Aetes gives him the serpent's teeth, he should rub the salve all over his body and on his spear. It will give him powerful strength and confidence. The power of the salve will last only one day but he will be able to win the challenge and take the fleece back to Hellas. Medea tells Jason that the soldiers who emerge from the earth can be defeated by throwing a large boulder into their midst. Medea tells Jason of her feelings for him at the same time he realizes his love for her. She asks that he always remember her. Jason tells Medea that if she comes to Hellas, she will be honored as a goddess and they will marry. Medea views the events as Here's plans to send her to Hellas to punish Pelias.

The next day, Jason receives the teeth from the Aonian serpent which he is to sew in the earth. Jason travels to the open field and sprinkles the magic potion on his body and weapon. Immediately, he feels overwhelming strength and confidence. Aetes and the townspeople, as well as the Argonauts, gather to observe Jason take on the challenge. Two fire-breathing bulls appear but Jason is able to defeat them, yoke them and use them to plow a furrow in the ground. He tosses the teeth into the furrow and a legion of soldiers soon come forth. He heeds the advice of Medea and hurls a huge boulder onto the advancing army. Many are slain by the weapons of others as they are thrown into a large pile. Through Jason's magical power, he is able to defeat the earth-born army.



## Book Three: Jason and Medea Analysis

When Jason tells the other Argonauts that as friends who all share the same dangers, they all "share the right of speech," he is telling them to speak out and share their opinions. Jason is telling the men that even though he is their leader, they are all equals because they are all taking the same risk and have the same right as he to voice their opinions. Even though some in society are deemed to be "more important" than others, all individuals are on the same voyage, trying to get through life, and have the right to voice their opinions and feelings. This episode has a political tone; what the author is describing is a free, open and democratic society. It is not surprising that democracy would be a focal point in this saga since the region in which the story takes place is considered the cradle of Western civilization and where the concept of democracy first emerged. In modern terms, when one "speaks," he is asserting his opinions and ideas by voting. There is strength in the diversity of thoughts and ideas. The varied opinions of a society will foster the best results and nurture creativity. By refraining from expressing one's thoughts, the overall plan, or society, will suffer. An individual with the confidence to fully participate in a plan or a common cause makes for better results and an improved world.

When the Argo is nearing their destination, there is debate about how to approach King Aetes, who is the holder of the Golden Fleece. Jason asks for the opinion of all the Argonauts on whether to approach Aetes in a civil manner and ask him for the fleece, attack him or steal the fleece. When Jason decides to first approach King Aetes in a peaceful and open manner, the author is declaring the virtuousness of being honest and peaceful. He depicts stealing and violence as unsavory choices.

When Jason is challenged by Aetes to pass a test of courage with preposterous conditions, he agrees to proceed because there is "no harsher mistress than Necessity." This passage represents the notion that man has little control over his life and the undesirable challenges he may encounter. These challenges cannot be avoided but must be surmounted in order to enrich one's character and reach one's ultimate goal.

Medea shows her laudable character by focusing on the hope that Jason remembers her in his heart and mind. The author is declaring his view that lust is secondary to true love, which resides in the heart and mind and not in the physical body. The risk and sacrifice that Medea takes is also a testament to the strength of love.



# Book Four: Homeward Bound

## Book Four: Homeward Bound Summary

Aeetes is furious that Jason is victorious and still plots against him. He suspects his daughters had a hand in Jason's triumph. Medea is dismayed and flees her home for the banks of the river where she calls to Jason. She tells Jason that Aeetes knows she was involved in helping him and that they all must sail away. She will drug the serpent and take the Golden Fleece. She asks him to profess his love for her in front of the Argonauts. Jason vows to marry her as soon as they return to Hellas.

In the dark, the Argo proceeds down the river to the sacred wood where the Golden Fleece is kept. Jason and Medea walk up the path from the bank and are confronted by the non-sleeping serpent who hisses so loudly at them that it is heard throughout the land. Medea confronts the serpent and begins enchanting it with a soothing song. While she casts a spell on the serpent, she douses it with a magical potion which sends it into a deep sleep. Jason snatches the fleece and is joyful in his victory. When they rejoin the Argonauts, the men are delighted and surprised by the beauty and size and weight of the fleece. Jason tells the crew that they have Medea to thank for their success. They are to immediately set sail for home but must be ready to face Aeetes' forces, which will try to block their passage from river to sea.

Aeetes is readying his soldiers and tells the townspeople that they will all suffer unless Medea is captured and brought back to him. In response to Aeetes' angry demands, the Colchians launch an armada of ships commanded by Medea's brother, Apsyrtus. However, the goddess Here is overseeing the events and creates a strong wind that allows the Argo to flee the river. Three days later they come to the River Halys where Phineus had told them to land. Argo tells the crew that just as Phineus prophesied, they will return to Hellas by a different route, one that travels through Orchomenus. However, the Colchian vessels take a short cut and reach the delta of the Ister River first and station men at every outlet to block the Argo from entering the Cronian Sea.

After the two factions encounter each other, they manage to avoid a battle by agreeing that Jason won the right to take the Golden Fleece. The Argonauts agree to place Medea in the safekeeping of the goddess Artemis until one of the kings decides whether she should return home or go on to Hellas. Medea feels betrayed and confronts Jason. After all his promises and all she did for him, how could he abandon her? She vows revenge and wishes bad luck on Jason and the Argonauts.

Jason tries to reason with her—they are avoiding a bitter battle in which they would all be killed. By negotiating with the Colchians, they at least have a chance to survive and return home. He and his crew are planning on how to defeat Apsyrtus. As a ruse, Medea will arrange a secret meeting with her brother, Apsyrtus, at which time Jason can kill him and declare war on the Colchians. Medea sends a message to Apsyrtus that she



will steal the fleece back and return to Aeetes' palace. She claims to her brother that she had been lured by the Argonauts to join them on their ship.

Medea meets Apsyrtus on the Island of Artemis. Jason, hiding nearby, ambushes Apsyrtus and murders him. The Argonauts slay the rest of the Colchian crew. When news of Apsyrtus' death reaches Colchis, the townspeople vow to follow the Argo and avenge his death. The goddess Here again intervenes and creates a severe thunderstorm preventing them from sailing.

Zeus is angered by the heinous deed and punishes the Argo by forcing it to sail through faraway lands where they are confronted with many hardships. Here obeys the plans of Zeus and causes a headwind that sends the Argo backwards to the Island of Amber where the Argonauts are all in deep despair. Next they travel down the treacherous Rhone and only escape disaster with the helping hand of Here who rescues them. The Argo travels to the famous haven of Aea and anchor there.

There the Argonauts see the goddess Circe who is washing her hair and is surrounded by half-man/half-beast creatures. Circe is washing away memories of a terrible nightmare about blood and death she had the night before. Circe beckons the men to come with her but only Jason and Medea follow her. Circe senses that they were involved in a murder. She performs a ritual and prays to the gods for their salvation. Medea tells Circe of the Argonauts and their quest. Although Medea does not mention the murder of Apsyrtus, Circe knows what occurred and demands that Medea leave, telling her that her father will surely avenge his son's death and will seek her out in Hellas. Here is watching and pleads with Iris to make sure the path for the Argo is safe and clear of danger and obstacles.

Here summons the sea goddess Thetis imploring her to help Jason and Medea and guide the Argo through the dangers in the sea. Here reminds Thetis that she arranged for Peleus, one of the Argonauts, to be her husband. Here tells of the prophecy that Thetis' son Achilles is to marry Medea, arguing that her future daughter-in-law must be saved. Thetis agrees to help and promises to get help from her sisters of the sea. She is confident the Argo will be brought safely through the waters. Thetis gathers the other sea goddesses and appears to Peleus, her husband, on the Argo, though no one else can see her. She tells him of the plans to bring the Argo safely through the sea and that the Argo should set sail in the morning.

The Argo safely passes through the rough seas and the Wandering Rocks, helped by the swimming sea nymphs circling it. They pass through the seas of Sicily to the Phaeacian isle where they are welcomed visitors. A large force of Colchians, who had been pursuing the Argo, appear and demand the return of Medea. They vow to wage a fierce battle if Medea is not returned to them. However, the Phaeacian King Alcinous demands that the feud be ended without bloodshed.

Medea begs Queen Arete to help her and appeals to the Argonauts that they rescue her out of a sense of gratitude and decency. She fears her father will murder her. The Argonauts vow to defend her. Arete appeals to Alcinous to help Medea. He decides that





if Medea is a virgin she will be returned to her father. If she is a married woman, she will stay with her husband. Arete sends a message to Jason to marry Medea immediately so she will not be sent back to her father. The ceremony takes place immediately and the two are wedded. Alcinous informs the Colchians of his decision the next morning and although they put up an argument, the King is steadfast in his decision.

After the Argonauts depart, they sail to Libya and the Gulf of Syrtis. A wind sweeps them deep into the gulf where it is so shallow and rocky that they will not be able to sail out. The land they find is covered with a mist and seems dead and empty. Ancaeus weeps, telling the crew that they are doomed to spend the rest of their days there. The Argonauts each find a spot on the sandy beach, cover their heads and wait to die. Sea nymphs visit Jason, reminding him that the Argonauts are the heroes of the Golden Fleece and that they will survive. They foretell of Amphitrite unleashing Poseidon's horses from his chariot. When the men of the Argo see the horses, it will be a good omen and a sign that they all must repay their mothers for bearing them in their wombs. Just then a huge horse with a golden mane comes bounding out of the sea.

Peleus explains that the goddesses are referring to the Argo as their womb and that they must repay the Argo for taking them so far and for such a long time. They must heave the Argo up on their shoulders and follow the hoof prints of the horse across the island. There, Peleus assures them, they will find a bay from which they can set sail. The men take nine days to carry the Argo across the island. They are helped by the goddesses in finding fresh drinking water and a lagoon on which they can sail. However, they have trouble navigating the unknown waters and are visited by Poseidon's son, Triton, who pulls them through the lagoon to the open sea. Near Crete, in the haven of Dicte, they are attacked by a bronze giant who lobbs large boulders at them, which stops them from continuing on. Medea casts a spell on the giant and kills him. The Argo proceeds through the Cretan Sea on a dark, moonless night, referred to as the Pall of Doom. The Argonauts are frightened of the darkness but are relieved when the god Phoebus dispatches Leto's Son, who lights the way with a dazzling golden bow.

Euphemus has a dream in which he holds a clump of earth close to his chest. The clump turns into a virginal woman who is of Triton's stock. Jason tells Euphemus to throw the clump of earth into the sea from which a land will grow. Euphemus throws the earth into the waters and the island of Calliste forms. Jason and the Argonauts continue on and face no further hardships or dangers and return safely to their home.

## **Book Four: Homeward Bound Analysis**

There is a great conflict and distrust between Aeetes and his daughter, Medea. She is fearful to declare her love for Jason at the risk of angering her father. There is a sense that Aeetes is jealous of his daughter's affections for another man and may have unnatural feelings for his young, attractive daughter. He is so outraged by her feelings for Jason and her escape from his kingdom, that he threatens to murder all the people in his land unless his daughter is returned to him. His obsession with his daughter is unnatural and depicts a disturbing perversion. Another man, King Alcinous, decides that





if Medea is still a virgin—that is, not sinful—she will be returned to her father. If Medea is married, she will be allowed to stay with her husband. The underlying message is that the father did not want Medea if she had sinned and that King Alcinous sensed that he would be sending her to her death if she was not pure. The underlying sense is that Aetes wanted the virginal Medea for himself.

For her part, Medea is afraid of her father. When the chance for love and escape present themselves to her, she debates what action she should take. Although she fears retribution from her father, she elects to flee and pursue love and the chance to live free from oppression. Medea's abnormal fear of her father points to the potential that he was abusive to her or had perhaps pursued an incestuous relationship with her. Based on his anger and outrage at her romance, he was obviously not someone she could talk to about her feelings for another man.

Even though King Aetes is threatening the Colchians that they will perish unless Medea is returned to him, the author's view that peace is superior to violence is apparent when they encounter Jason. They are surprisingly reasonable about Jason's possession of the Golden Fleece. Jason passed the challenge and won the fleece by living up to the terms of the challenge; this underscores the author's sense of fairness and its resulting rewards. The Colchians, rather than attacking Jason and the Argonauts, negotiate in a reasonable and civil manner.

The desperate Medea fears for her life if she is returned to her father. These fears, along with her love for Jason and her dreams of a life with him, compel her to make some questionable choices. Medea uses deception to lure the leader of her father's advancing forces, her brother Apsyrtus, to his death. Jason ambushes Apsyrtus, who thinks Medea is set to return the Golden Fleece to him. For his part, Jason is so focused on returning home, that he reduces himself to murder to realize his goal. Their actions anger the peace-loving Zeus, who punishes them with more hardships on their journey home. This passage points to the notion that by making unfortunate choices, one's ultimate goal may be threatened or delayed and that society—or in the case of Medea and Jason, the gods—may hand down punishment. Electing to take a dubious path that appears to hasten and secure one's goals may be fraught with unintended consequences. It is more beneficial to take a course that may not be as promising but that is more virtuous.



# Characters

## Jason appears in All four books

Jason is the protagonist in the story of The Voyage of Argo. King Pelias of Hallas is fearful when he is told by prophecy that his death will occur after a man with one shoe enters his land. Jason, who loses a shoe in the mud by the river, appears before the frightened Pelias. To escape his fate, Pelias sends Jason on a voyage to Colchis where the Golden Fleece is kept. Jason is to take the fleece and return it to Hallas. Jason takes on the mission and gathers the bravest noblemen of the land to accompany him on this voyage. Their ship is the Argo and his crewmen are called the Argonauts. Jason allows the crew to pick their leader. Heracles is chosen first; however, Heracles defers to Jason as the true leader. The other Argonauts all offer their support to their young leader.

Jason and the Argonauts set sail on the long and treacherous journey and encounter many obstacles and dangers along the way. Jason respects his crew and prays to the gods that they are able to complete their mission and more importantly that he and his men all return safely home to Hallas. The Argo runs into adversarial situations that run the gamut from rough waters and Clashing Rocks to evil Kings and frightening serpents. Jason and his men never fail to honor and pray to their gods on whom they rely to help them through to journey's end.

If it were not for Medea, a beautiful witch and daughter of the evil King Aeetes, Jason and the Argonauts could not have completed their voyage. She uses spells and potions to defeat Jason's enemies and gain access to the Golden Fleece. Jason lauds the help of Medea whom, he tells his crew, makes their triumph possible. Jason vows to take Medea home to Hellas as a heroine and as his wife.

## Medea appears in Book Three: Jason and Medea and Book Four: Homeward Bound

Medea is the daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis, the land where the Golden Fleece is being kept. She is tutoring under Hecate, who is the goddess of witchcraft. Medea is well-versed in magical spells and potions. The goddesses Here, Athene and Aphrodite conspire to have Aphrodite's son, Eros, shoot an arrow in Medea's heart to make her fall in love with Jason. The goddesses want Medea to help Jason with her magic and know that if she falls in love with him, she will help him to his journey's end.

Eros shoots the arrow in Medea's heart and she does fall deeply in love with Jason. She is conflicted, however, knowing that if she helps Jason, she will be betraying her father who will be enraged with her intervention. Heart wins out over mind, as Medea decides to help Jason and flee her father's land. She tells Jason of her love for him and he succumbs to her charms and falls for her as well.



Medea casts a spell on the serpent that guards the Golden Fleece so that Jason is able to take it. After Jason, Medea and the Argonauts flee, King Aetes sends an armada after them. He demands that they capture Medea and return her to him. Medea fears that her father will murder her and, with the help of the gods, is finally able to convince Jason to marry her. She is then allowed to return home with Jason on the Argo.

## **The Argonauts appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure; Book Two: Onward to Col**

The Argonauts are the crew members of the Argo. The Argonauts, who are of fine lineage and are noblemen, choose Jason to be their leader.

## **King Pelias appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

King Pelias, reacting to a prophecy, fears that Jason is the harbinger of his death and sends him off to sea in the great ship, the Argo, in search of the Golden Fleece.

## **Orpheus appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

Orpheus is one of the Argonauts, the crew members of the Argo. Orpheus is known for his beautiful singing voice and magical songs.

## **King Aetes appears in Book Three: Jason and Medea and Book Four: Homeward Bound**

King Aetes is the cruel ruler of Colchis who is the keeper of the Golden Fleece. After Jason and Aetes' daughter flee the land with the Golden Fleece, an enraged Aetes pursues them with an armada of Colchian vessels.

## **Hypsipyle appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

Hypsipyle is the ruler of the all-female island of Lemnos. Jason sleeps with Hypsipyle during a short stay on the island. He tells her if she has a son to send him to Iolcus to comfort his parents in case he perishes on his journey.



## **Phineus appears in Book Two: Onward to Colchis**

Phineus is the old, blind oracle who is punished by Zeus for rejecting his gift of prophecy. Phineus is to be starved by the harpies (birds) that Zeus sends down to steal his food.

## **Heracles appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

Heracles was an Argonaut but is accidentally abandoned on Mysia. This abandonment is part of the gods' plans. They are going to test Heracles to join them as an immortal.

## **Athene, Here, Aphrodite appears in All four books**

Athene, Here and Aphrodite are the goddesses who keep a watchful eye over Jason's voyage on the Argo to find the Golden Fleece.

## **Eros appears in Book Three: Jason and Medea**

Eros, son of Aphrodite, is the god who shoots a love arrow in Medea's heart, making her fall in love with Jason.



## Objects/Places

### **Hellas appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

Hellas is the homeland of Jason and the Argonauts. Jason and all the men of the Argo are dedicated to finding the Golden Fleece but want to return home to Hellas more than anything.

### **The Argo appears in All four books**

The Argo is the great ship that King Pelias sends out to sea with Jason as commander. Jason's mission is to find the Golden Fleece.

### **The Golden Fleece appears in Book Four: Homeward Bound**

King Pelias sends Jason and the Argonauts out to sea in search of the Golden Fleece.

### **Magnesian Pagasae appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

The great ship, Argo, begins its journey in the Magnesian Pagasae. It is anchored there waiting as the crew comes aboard.

### **Island of Lemnos appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

The island of Lemnos is an island of women who slaughtered all the men the year before. The Argo lands there and the love-starved women almost make the crew forget what their mission is.

### **Mysia appears in Book One: Preparation and Departure**

Mysia is the land where the Argo anchors for an evening break. When they take off the next day, they inadvertently leave Heracles on there. They do not return for him because the gods want him to stay in Mysia.



## **The Clashing Rocks appears in Book Two: Onward to Colchis**

The Argonauts have to pass through the straits of the Clashing Rocks to the Black Sea. On each side of the straits are two large, unstable rocks that crash down on ships trying to pass through. The Argonauts are finally able to bypass the dangerous rocks.

## **Colchis appears in Book Four: Homeward Bound**

Colchis is the land where the Golden Fleece is being kept. Jason and the Argonauts sail on their treacherous journey with Colchis as their destination.

## **King Aeetes' Challenge appears in Book Three: Jason and Medea**

In order to take the Golden Fleece, King Aeetes decrees that Jason must yoke two fire-breathing bronze bulls and use them to plow the earth, sew the teeth of a serpent in the ground and defeat an army of powerful soldiers that emerges from the earth.

## **The Guardian Serpent appears in Book Three: Jason and Medea**

The Golden Fleece is being guarded by a non-sleeping, giant serpent. Medea is able to cast a spell on the serpent to allow Jason to take the fleece.



# Themes

## Destiny vs. Free Will

In the story of *The Voyage of the Argo*, destiny or man's fate is represented by the plans and design of the gods. In Ancient Greece, man was privy, at times, to at least a hint of his destiny in the form of prophecy. King Pelias of the land of Hellas is alarmed when he hears about a prophecy that a man who is wearing only one shoe will enter his kingdom and ultimately lead to his own death. Jason, who had lost one of his shoes in the mud by the river, appears before the King. Pelias is fearful that this man will lead to his demise and sends Jason off on the hazard-filled quest to find the Golden Fleece. Although Pelias, like all the ancient Greeks, believed in the veracity of the prophecies, he chooses to fight his destiny by trying to defeat Jason and thereby delay, or indeed, defeat death.

The concept of free will versus destiny in a world removed from the fantasy of Jason and the Argonauts would not be one in which an individual is fighting a destiny that he cannot know. Rather, it would relate to a person who has not come to terms with his own reality. A person who lives the life of a criminal without repentance or remorse, may deny for a time that he is doomed to isolation from society unless he changes his ways. Like Pelias' futile reaction to his destiny, an individual who repeatedly perpetrates crimes makes the wrong choices in reaction to his reality. Pelias' plans are defeated because Jason, who he thought would perish on the treacherous voyage, returns in triumph. A serial criminal will eventually earn society's wrath and be sent off to prison.

Medea's actions are additional examples of will over destiny. Medea is lovestruck by the arrow of Eros and falls in love with Jason. Medea is in conflict over what actions she should take. She understands the ramifications of helping Jason against the wishes of her own father but she wants to help the man she loves. She finds herself in a quandary about what to do. Her destiny as the daughter of a King has been carved out for her since birth. However, her love for Jason is stronger than her desire to live the life she was born and raised to live. Medea draws upon her inner strength and uses her free will to follow her heart.

When Jason tells the Argonauts that they should help decide what action to take in accessing the Golden Fleece, he reminds them that they have as much right to speak as anyone. Regardless of rank, the author tells us that everyone has a voice, or in today's lexicon, a vote in the actions a community should take. In essence, Jason is declaring that every man, no matter what his rank or status, has a right to exercise his free will.



## Betrayal

The premise of the main story of *The Voyage of the Argo* is fundamentally one of betrayal. Due to King Pelias' fear that Jason is destined to take over as ruler of his land, Pelias is desperate to exile Jason. The King's plan is to send Jason off on a voyage that is doomed for failure before it begins. The King orders Jason to sail the *Argo* to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. The King is obviously not interested in actually attaining the fleece since he feels certain that Jason will fail and perish during the course of the hazard-filled journey.

Medea is central to the betrayal theme in the story. She is under the tutelage of Hecate, goddess of witchcraft, and is familiar with creating magic potions and casting spells. She is tricked by the gods to fall in love with Jason. She is conflicted between her love for Jason and her loyalty and responsibility to her father. She follows her heart and chooses Jason and thus betrays her father and family. Later, her brother, Apsyrtus, heads an armada to chase down the *Argo* and capture Medea to bring her back to Colchis. Medea lures her brother to a rendezvous on the ruse that she will return the fleece to him and return with him to her homeland. Jason, who is hiding nearby, ambushes Apsyrtus and murders him. Medea cannot watch while her brother is slain; however, it is her betrayal that has led to her brother's death.

Medea herself is betrayed when the Argonauts decide to let another ruler, King Alcinous, decide whether she should return to her father or stay on the *Argo*. She is hurt and angered. She has helped Jason and the Argonauts succeed in getting the Golden Fleece only to be abandoned by them. Jason in the end marries Medea to save her from the fate of returning to her father. However, Medea is in agony at the prospect of returning to her homeland and being betrayed by her lover.

Fate itself betrays King Pelias when Jason successfully completes his mission. More than its own value or worth, the Golden Fleece in essence becomes a metaphor for Jason's triumph over the calculating King Pelias. In the end, Pelias' plot to send Jason off to his death backfires. Not only does the man who, according to prophecy, will take over the kingdom return, but he does so triumphant and a hero. It is an ironic twist to the adventure story that not only does the conclusion fail to give Pelias the result he desired, it further entrenches the reputation of Jason as a brave and wise leader.

## Fraternity and Lineage

In the society of ancient Greece, men had great admiration for one another. Loyalty and brotherhood were consistent and important elements of the community. The noble birth and the lineage of men were of great significance as well. This factor is reflected many times throughout the story of Jason and the Argonauts in their quest for the Golden Fleece. After King Pelias orders Jason to man the ship, the *Argo*, Jason must gather a crew. As scores of men volunteer to take part in the voyage, their qualifications are based on their families, lineage and relationships to the gods and are depicted in great detail.





The men who become the crew of the Argo, known as the Argonauts, are all of noble birth. The superior character of noblemen was deemed necessary to withstand the hardships that would face them on this treacherous journey. These laudable traits would include loyalty, perseverance, skill, bravery and wisdom. The Argonauts served the trip and their leader Jason well as they often were compelled to support one other physically in times of danger and psychologically when stress and despair from the rigorous voyage threatened one of their own.

There are many examples of the fraternity and esprit de corps that was an important aspect of the successful journey. When the crew is first amassed, Jason allows the men to choose their leader. The Argonauts first choose Heracles for this honor. However, Heracles defers to Jason as the true leader and the other Argonauts fully support him. Jason has no bitterness for not having been their first choice. When one of the crew members, Hylas, is left stranded on Mysia, Heracles stays behind to find him. The others do not know their two comrades are not on the ship and leave without them. When the other Argonauts realize that they have left Heracles behind, they are in despair even though they realize that it was the gods' plan for Heracles to stay behind.

Several times during the journey, the crew loses a member to death by accident or illness. The men genuinely mourn and weep openly for their losses, considering each companion as close as a family member. When Jason is inconsolable about the treacherous journey and whether he will be able to bring his crew safely back home, he is uplifted by his shipmates who profess their confidence in his abilities as their leader. There are many other such instances during the long and harried voyage where the Argonauts elevate the spirits of one another. Without the fraternity that existed among the men, the successful journey would not have been possible.



# Style

## Point of View

The Voyage of the Argo is written in first-person, unreliable narrative; that is, stylized fiction that appears to be based partially on first-hand knowledge and partially from the second-hand accounts of others. The narrator, who is not named, often stresses that he is not certain about the veracity of a certain passage or that it was "something he heard." The author uses dramatic flourishes. The narrator, without explanation, declares mysteriously that he is not allowed to tell the full details of an episode thus leaving the reader curious and wanting to know more. This style lends a touch of realism to the overall narrative.

The unnamed narrator is apparently telling the story of Jason and the Argonauts to an unnamed group of muses. In Greek mythology, muses were believed to be lesser gods but nonetheless immortal beings. They were enjoyed and utilized by the gods for their creativity and artistic and musical talents. The author elects to have the narrator tell the account of the Voyage of the Argo to muses since they are beings who will never perish and, through their artistry, will be able to recount the tale for eons to come.

## Setting

The story of the Voyage of the Argo begins in Hellas which was also known as the Hellenic Republic. King Pelias is the ruler of the region known as Iolcus. The Argo sets sail from the shore called Magnesian Pagasae. When the Argo departs, they leave the "the rich Pelasgian land behind them." The first night they beach on the coast of Magnesia which is in the Thessaly region of southeastern Greece. The Argo travels through the Pagasitic Sea which is dotted with dozens of islands. They pass many regions including Homole, Eurymenae and Thrace which is home to Mount Athos. The Argo sails without Heracles who is inadvertently left in Mysia while trying to find a missing Argonaut. The Argo stays several days on the rugged island of Lemnos where, in the previous year, the women had rioted and slaughtered all the men.

The Argonauts stop to rest at various locales including the coastal home of Phineus, an oracle who helps them with several important prophecies about their voyage. He tells them the route to take after they set sail. He counsels them on how to traverse the deadly Clashing Rocks located in the strait which leads to the Black Sea. During their travels on the Black Sea, the Argo is often beset with rough waters and crashing waves. The gods are watching overhead and often rescue the ship from being destroyed by the waters.

Their destination is a land called Colchis where the Golden Fleece is being kept. After Jason takes the fleece, the Argo must travel down narrow rivers and is caught in the low waters of an island bay. They must carry the ship across the island to a lagoon from



which they are able to sail. They eventually reach the Cretan Sea from which they wend their way home through rough waters.

## Language and Meaning

The tale of Jason and the Argonauts is, in the main, written in lyrical and flowery language. For example, during their voyage back to their homeland, one of the lands the Argo passes is described in poetic terms: "All around, the Daughters of the Sun, encased in tall poplars, utter their sad and unavailing plaint. Shining drops of amber fall from their eyes on to the sands and are dried there by the sun," (p. 163).

The author uses a healthy number of rhetorical flourishes including irony, simile, personification and metaphor. What follows are a few examples: King Pelias considers Jason a threat to his power. He reasons that by sending Jason off on a doomed mission to find the Golden Fleece that Jason will perish during the treacherous journey. In the ultimate irony, Jason not only survives the mission but is able to obtain the Golden Fleece and return to his homeland as a hero and brave and wise leader. By sending Jason on a mission that the King views to be a death sentence, he inadvertently strengthens Jason's position.

When Amycus, the arrogant King of the Bebryces, challenges the Argo's best fighter to a match, he is depicted with a simile, as glaring at Polydeuces "with rolling eyes, like a lion who is hit by a javelin when they hunt him in the mountains, and caring nothing for the crowd that hems him in, picks out the man who wounded him, and keeps his eye on him alone," (p. 73).

The personification of night time is depicted in a passage in Book Four: "'Night with her gentle ban on man's activities descended on the company. She put the world to sleep; but not Medea,'" (p. 176).

The author, Apollonius of Rhodes, uses the metaphor most frequently. The "Golden Fleece" itself is a metaphor for man's dreams or goals in life. The Argo is a metaphor for the wombs of the Argonauts' mothers who carried them as fetuses. The rugged Clashing Rocks that the Argo must circumvent represent the difficulties that one encounters during life.

The supernatural abilities of the gods are interwoven into the story as they toy with the humans: "Thetis dropped from the sky and plunged into the turmoil of the dark blue sea. There she called all her sister Nereids to help her," (p. 170). The goddess Here is planning how she can help Jason on his voyage: "'Listen,' she said. 'We must have a word with Aphrodite. Let us go together and ask her to persuade her boy to loose an arrow at Aetes' daughter, Medea of many spells, and make her fall in love with Jason,'" (p. 110).

The names of the gods and the ancient Greeks present a sometimes challenging read. Although the story is a translation, probably many times over, there still remains an



element of archaic phrasing and words—words which do not exist in any present day lexicon.

## Structure

The story of *The Voyage of the Argo* is fashioned via the overall structure of a framing device. Using this structure, the anonymous narrator is telling the story to an audience that is apparently made up of muses. The story within that frame is the narrator's account of Jason's voyage on the *Argo*. By using this construct, the author is able to lend a degree of authenticity to his work of fantasy.

The story itself is divided into four books. "Book One—Preparation and Departure" provides the premise for the journey of the *Argo* to a land called Colchis. The purpose of this voyage is to find the Golden Fleece which is being kept in that land. It also depicts the lineage of the noblemen who are chosen to become Argonauts on the ship. "Book Two—Onward to Colchis" is an account of the many lands that the crew visits and of the hazards and obstacles that delay and threaten them on their journey.

"Book Three—Jason and Medea" tells the uncommon love story of Jason and Medea, who is the daughter of the evil King Aetes who has charge of the Golden Fleece. The gods plot to have Eros strike Medea's heart with a love arrow so that she falls in love with Jason and, with her witchcraft, helps him obtain the Golden Fleece. "Book Four—Homeward Bound" tells of the struggle of Jason and the Argonauts to return home after succeeding in their mission.



## Quotes

"They say that with the music of his [Orpheus] voice he enchanted stubborn mountain rocks and rushing streams. And testifying still to the magic of his song, there are wild oaks growing at Zone on the coast of Thrace, which he lured them down from Pieria with his lyre, rank upon rank of them, like soldiers on the march." (Preparation and Departure, p. 36)

"Alas! I wish I could have died, forgetting all my cares, on the very day when I heard King Pelias make his evil proclamation, so that you [Jason], my child, might have buried me with your own dear hands. That was the only service I hoped you still might render me; apart from that, you have long since repaid me for all a mother's care." (Preparation and Departure, p. 43)

"Their blades were swallowed by the waves, and on either side the dark salt water broke into foam, seething angrily in answer to the strong men's strokes. The armour on the moving ship glittered in the sunshine like fire and all the time she was followed by a long white wake which stood out like a path across a green plain." (Preparation and Departure, p. 50)

"Cyzicus sank down on the sands; he had had his span of life, and more than that no mortal can command—we are like birds trapped in the wide net of Destiny. And so this man was caught: he thought he had escaped the worst that the Argonauts might do to him, but that very night he fought them and died." (Preparation and Departure, p. 64)

"There stand the wolves, inspecting their assembled prey and wondering which to pounce on first and carry off, while all that the sheep can do is to huddle in a mass and trample on each other's backs. Such was the terror that the Argonauts inspired in their presumptuous enemies." (Onward to Colchis, p. 76)

"You are not entitled to know every detail, but I will tell you what the gods permit. At one time, in my folly, I was rash enough to disclose the plans of Zeus from start to finish. I now realize that he himself intends a prophet's revelations to be incomplete, so that humanity may miss some part of Heaven's design." [Phineas the oracle to Jason] (Onward to Colchis, p. 82)

"Here began by sounding Athene. 'Daughter of Zeus,' she said, 'let me hear you first. What are we to do? Will you think of some ruse that might enable them to carry off Aetes' golden fleece to Hellas? Or should they speak him fair in the hope of winning his consent?'" (Jason and Medea, p. 109)

"My friends,' he said, 'I am going to tell you what action I myself should like to take, though its success depends on you. Sharing the danger as we do, we share the right of



speech; and I warn the man who keeps his mouth shut when he ought to speak his mind that he will be the one to wreck our enterprise." (Jason and Medea, p. 115)

"A working woman, rising before dawn to spin and needing light in her cottage room, piles brushwood on a smouldering log, and the whole heap kindled by the little brand goes up in a mighty blaze. Such was the fire of Love, stealthy but all-consuming, that swept through Medea's heart." (Jason and Medea, p. 117)

"Unconscionable Love, bane and tormentor of mankind, parent of strife, fountain of tears, source of a thousand ills, rise, mighty Power, and fall on the sons of our enemies with all the force you used upon Medea when you filled her with insensate fury." (Homeward Bound, p. 159)

"Whereupon the god emerged from the depths, no longer in disguise but in his own true form, and grasping the stem of their hollow ship drew her on towards the open sea." (Homeward Bound, p. 190)

"The next night caught them well out in the wide Cretan Sea, and they were frightened, for they had run into that sort of night that people call the Pall of Doom. No star, no moonlight, pierced the funereal dark. Black chaos had descended on them from the sky or had this darkness risen from the nethermost abyss?" (Homeward Bound, p. 193)

## Topics for Discussion

What prophecy made King Pelias believe he was going to die? Why did the King think Jason was part of that prophecy and thus felt compelled to send Jason off to sea in the Argo? By sending him out to sea, what fate did the King hope would befall Jason?

After accidentally abandoning Heracles on Mysia, why did the Argonauts not return to retrieve him? Who told the Argonauts to leave Heracles on Mysia? What did the gods have in mind for Heracles?

What were some of the prophecies that Phineus related to Jason? What did Phineus say about not revealing an entire prophesy? Why did Zeus punish Phineus with blindness and starvation?

What debate did the goddesses Hera and Athena have over Jason's plight? What did they ask Aphrodite to do to help Jason succeed in his quest?

Why did Medea fall in love with Jason? What conflict did she have about whether she should help Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece? How did she help him?

What feat did King Aetes challenge Jason to in order to possess the Golden Fleece? After Jason was triumphant in this challenge, how did the King react?

How did Medea and Jason defeat the advancing armada of Colchian ships pursuing them after they took the Golden Fleece? Who was the Colchian leader who was murdered? What jeopardy was Medea in later when another Colchian vessel trapped the Argo?