

The Golden Fleece Short Guide

The Golden Fleece by Padraic Colum

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Overview

The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles surveys the immense body of Greek mythology predating the Trojan War. Using the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts as his framework, Colum weaves into his tale many of the oldest Greek myths, including the legend of creation and the story of Prometheus's gift of fire to humankind. An educational book, Colum's work is also noteworthy simply for its entertainment value. Young readers have always enjoyed stories of heroism and adventure, subjects explored to great effect in classical myth.

About the Author

Patrick Collumb was born in Ireland's County Longford on December 8, 1881; respect for his heritage prompted him to adopt the Gaelic spelling of his name—Padraic Colum—at the age of seventeen.

Colum belonged to a group of writers who contributed to a movement known as the Irish Literary Renaissance around the turn of the century. These writers were inspired by Irish myth and folkways and produced a wealth of

literary material.

Colum was often overshadowed by the more famous writers of the movement: poet William Butler Yeats, dramatists Sean O'Casey, John Millington Synge, and Lady Gregory, and author James Joyce, most of whom were his friends and supporters. Over the years Colum gradually built a substantial and wide-ranging literary legacy of his own, consisting of poems, plays, short stories, and retellings of myths. He was an active participant in the development of Dublin's Abbey Theater, where his first play, *The Land*, was produced in 1905.

Colum wrote other plays for the Abbey, including *The Fiddler's House* (1907) and *Thomas Maskerry* (1910). All of these works are realistic studies of Irish country life. In collaboration with his fellow writer James Stephens, Colum founded *The Irish Review* in 1911 and was active in the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood.

Colum married Mary Catherine (Molly) Gunning Maguire, a literary critic, in 1912 and emigrated with her to the United States in 1914 because of financial difficulties. Colum continued to write about Ireland and maintained that people carry with them the essence of their home country throughout their lives.

Colum's interest in Irish mythology, combined with a desire to impress upon young readers the power of myth, encouraged him to write books such as *The King of Ireland's Son*. Colum's fascination with mythology extended beyond his Irish roots and led to his retelling of Germanic myth in *The Children of Odin*, and to the fashioning of his best-known work, *The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Came Before Achilles*.

The recipient of a number of awards— among them fellowship in the American Academy of Poets (1952); the Gregory Medal of the Irish Academy of Letters for distinguished work in Irish literature (1953); and the Regina Medal for distinguished contributions to children's literature (1961)—Colum continued to write and lecture well into his eighties.

He died of a stroke on January 12, 1972, in Enfield, Connecticut, at the age of ninety.



Setting

It is impossible to place the myths contained in *The Golden Fleece* within an accurate time frame. The events take place before recorded history and were already ancient when Homer composed his Trojan War epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in the eighth century B.C.

Whereas archaeological discoveries have determined that some mythological stories—such as that of the Trojan War—are grounded in historical fact, the tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece belongs with certainty neither to the world of fantasy nor to that of reality.

The social environment depicted in *The Golden Fleece* is typical of a period known as the Greek Dark Ages, a sort of "vacant" space in Greek history between the fall of great cities such as Mycenae about 1200 B.C., and the reflowering of advanced civilization several hundred years later. People live in relatively small groups, completely dependent upon a king—a term often applied to the leader of the community—and fellow townspeople for security. The exterior world is viewed as hostile; any place beyond the boundaries of town is a potential battlefield, and any stranger represents a threat.

The route of Jason's travels can, with the exception of a few excursions into imaginary territory, be traced on a real map. Jason hails from a region of central Greece known as Thessaly, and his quest to find the Golden Fleece involves a voyage across the Aegean Sea. In the course of its journey, the *Argo* touches down at real islands, such as Lemnos, and then passes through the narrow straits that lead into the Black Sea.

Throughout the tale, the physical setting is one of high mountains, dangerous beaches, dark forests, and seas alternately calm and stormy.

Social Sensitivity

To the Greeks, a hero was a warrior, and the ideal state of heroism was a state of war. Wars were fought not to restore peace but to win glory. If a warrior desired glory and no war were at hand, he would often instigate some sort of skirmish—a situation that recalls Jason's decision to sail to Colchis and retrieve the Golden Fleece. The dire results of Jason's selfishness and fickleness stand without comment; clearly, the call to glory that distracts many a hero from fulfilling social obligations often brings forth disastrous consequences. The Golden Fleece may stimulate student discussion about the changing criteria for the "hero" in ancient and modern civilizations.

Literary Qualities

Most young adults will probably find Colum's version of *The Golden Fleece* and the *Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles* uneven in quality; some passages are vividly and dramatically presented, while others seem lifeless. By their nature, epic stories demand a departure from the everyday idiom, and even Homer used a "literary" or elevated version of the Greek language to relate his epics. Colum too uses formal and dignified language, but some of his sentences depart so far from ordinary English speech that they are difficult to read. Colum's style may be explained, in part, by the fact that *The Golden Fleece* was written almost seventy years ago—a time when formality pervaded almost every aspect of life. Colum may also have felt hampered by the discrepancy between the age of his intended audience and the adult subject matter with which he was dealing. For example, in the 1920s a writer would have been reluctant to mention that Jason left Hypsipyle pregnant, although this is common fare in soap operas of today.



Themes and Characters

Colum's task in retelling the story of the Golden Fleece was to make Jason, Heracles, Medea, and the other familiar figures in the tale credible. The most interesting figure is Jason, whom Colum portrays as hungry for glory but easily distracted, especially by offers of pleasure and comfort. Essentially weak, Jason is often driven by fear—an emotion rarely displayed by heroes in classical literature. When his uncle Pelias indirectly challenges Jason to bring back the Golden Fleece—the most treasured possession of Aetes, the king of faraway Colchis—Jason sets forth on the Argo with a band of fellow heroes and explorers, primary among them the legendary strongman, Heracles (Hercules).

Colum's portrait of Heracles is convincing, especially when viewed against the weakness of Jason. A man of superhuman strength, Heracles demonstrates remarkable constancy and singleness of purpose. Colum's female characterizations are uneven; the sorceress Medea is far more engaging than Queen Hypsipyle of Lemnos, who never fully comes to life. The daughter of King Aetes, Medea risks all to help Jason obtain her father's treasured Golden Fleece. With Medea, Colum portrays an essentially evil woman who, through lust for power and ill-considered love for an unworthy man, ruins her life and the lives of many others.

By titling his work *The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles*, Colum shifts the emphasis of his tale away from Jason and toward the concept of heroes in general. The first Greeks to record their culture's legends for posterity believed that there had been a heroic age in Greek history, an era that boasted the likes of Jason and his companions on the Argo. These heroes lived for the sake of action—in this case, synonymous with fighting—and honor. Would-be heroes believed it better to live a short, glorious life than a long, uneventful life that would soon be forgotten. In keeping with this mentality, Jason realizes that he is unlikely to survive the quest for the Golden Fleece but, nonetheless, feels compelled to make the attempt.

Heroes were expected to respect their superiors and elders; to treat their guests with hospitality, their inferiors with kindness, and their prisoners with compassion. But occasionally, social expectations came into direct conflict with the quest for personal glory. Such conflict serves as the key by which Colum unlocks Jason's complex personality and, in the process, examines the true nature of heroism.

Early in their journey, the Argonauts land on Lemnos, an island inhabited solely by women. Jason and his companions intend to rest only briefly on the island, but the women welcome them and take several of the men as their consorts. Jason, however, abandons Queen Hypsipyle, leaving her pregnant.

To her tearful objections he responds, "On the Quest of the Golden Fleece our lives and our honors depend. To Colchis—to Colchis must we go!" Jason's actions on Lemnos are symptomatic of a general flaw in his character. Later in the book he is again guilty of faithlessness when he spurns Medea—whom he has made his queen—for Glauce, the



daughter of the King of Corinth. Medea's revenge is drastic; she casts foam from the jaws of a dragon upon Glauce, who dies in Jason's arms.

Colum also turns an eye to the relationship between gods and mortals, a common theme in Greek mythology.

The Olympian gods and goddesses were stronger, wiser, and more beautiful than mere humans, but they were infamous for their extreme wrath when crossed.

Attempting to place oneself on a level with the gods made a person guilty of hubris, the worst of all crimes. The story of Prometheus, sentenced to eternal punishment for bringing fire to humankind against the express wishes of Zeus, illustrates the dire consequences that awaited those who defied the gods.

Topics for Discussion

1. Does the Greek story of creation in any way resemble the creation story in the biblical Genesis? How do you account for any similarities you find?

2. Why does King Pelias want Jason to seek the Golden Fleece? Does he make a direct request? What is particularly effective about Pelias's method of encouraging Jason?

3. Why is Jason's father opposed to the mission?

4. Why does the Argo stop at Lemnos?

At the land of the Bebrycians?

5. What rules of heroic behavior does Jason break?

6. What finally happens to the Argo?

Are you satisfied with the ship's fate?

7. Why is the Golden Fleece considered such a desirable possession?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Rewrite a scene from Jason's story, leaving out all references to the supernatural. What characters are most dependent on the gods? What characters are most independent?
2. Jason breaks many of the rules of the heroic code yet eventually becomes one of the greatest kings in Greece. Does this fate match modern standards of justice? What would you consider a more fitting fate for Jason?
3. What are Medea's motives for helping Jason gain the Golden Fleece? For helping him regain his kingdom? Write a character analysis of Medea, pointing out her greatest strengths and flaws.
4. Using *The Golden Fleece* as one of your sources, research and report on the status of women in ancient Greece.
5. At times the *Argo* seems almost human. Is the ship as important as the human characters in the story? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

Bowen, Zack. *Padraic Colum: A Biographical-Critical Introduction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970. Bowen was a friend of Colum's as well as a student of his work, and Colum helped prepare this study. It contains an account of Colum's life and separate chapters describing and evaluating his poetry, drama, fiction, biographies, and essays.

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Bulfinch, Thomas. *Mythology: The Age of Fable*. Bergenfield, NJ: New American Library, 1962. The first volume of a famous and highly respected multivolume work. Contains other versions of the same myths re-told by Colum in *The Golden Fleece*.

Hamilton, Edith. *The Greek Way*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1932. Written by the outstanding Greek scholar of this century, this book describes the values by which the ancient Greeks lived.

Mythology. New York: W. W. Norton, 1965. A readable introduction to the myths of ancient Greece and other cultures.

Hook, Sydney. *The Hero in History*. New York: John Day, 1943. This academically challenging book examines the nature of heroism.

Sternlicht, Sanford. *Padraic Colum*. Boston: Twayne, 1985. This book, like Bowen's, is a comprehensive account of Colum's life and work. It includes a useful bibliography of works by and about Colum.

Related Titles

Colum published several collections of myths, spanning a wide variety of cultures and time periods. The Adventures of Odysseus is Colum's version of Homer's Odyssey, while The Children of Odin is a collection of Germanic myths.

Orpheus: Myths of the World, is a wideranging collection of myths, some of which date back to ancient Egypt and Babylonia. Colum published two volumes of Polynesian and Hawaiian myths, At the Gateways of the Day and The Bright Islands.



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