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The Argonautica: Apollonius' New Epic

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During the Hellenistic period, Alexandria was one of the major intellectual centers of the Western world. Here writers and poets were emphasizing the imitative role of the poet. Poets who could produce the best imitative work were greatly admired. One of these poets was Apollonius of Rhodes. His imitative work, the *Argonautica*, was patterned loosely after Homer’s *Odyssey*. However, the differences between the works are as informative as their similarities. The *Argonautica* expresses trends and ideas of the time by making use of such predecessors as Homer, Euripides, Hellenistic art, Epicureanism, and the natural sciences; Apollonius uses Homer and the epic tradition as a general pattern for the poem, but often diverges from traditional paths and institutions to show trends in Greek art and life.

One of the most striking differences between the *Argonautica* and earlier epic poems is the difference in the structure of the poem. Earlier epics tend to use ring composition, which is absent from Apollonius’ story of the Argonauts. This prompts one to ask what ring composition implies. Ring
composition brings one back to the beginning, bringing the cycle full circle, giving the reader a sense of resolution, of order emerging out of chaos. The Greeks liked the stability that this brought to literature, the almost “happily ever after” feeling if you will. According to J.J. Pollitt, “The Archaic period... ...was characterized by a search for a universal order and by an anxiety about the inexplicable mutability of human fortune (Pollitt, 1972).” The Greeks were constantly searching to bring order out of chaos. For example, at the end of the Odyssey all conflicts are resolved and a long peace lies ahead for Odysseus. By contrast at the end of the Argonautica the reader is aware that many ugly events lie just beyond the horizon, including the murder of Pelias, and the death of Jason and Medea’s children. This hardly gives the reader a sense of stability, resolution, or order.

Despite the fact that epics begin “in the middle of things,” they usually end in a fashion that tells the audience, “It’s going to be all right.” Why would Apollonius Rhodius have spurned the more accepted structure in favor of the one he used? What does it tell us about Greek society when even the entrenched and traditional “rules” of art are set aside? It indicates that there were strong currents of change at work in Greek society at that time. They couldn’t even have certainty in their literary works anymore. Social norms were constantly being brought into question by the works of Euripides, who, although he wrote some two hundred years earlier, still was an important influence in Greek theater, art, and society in general. Euripides had a profound influence on the plots of the New Comedy of Menander, and Satyrus included a Life of Euripides among his biographies; both of these men were writing at roughly the same time as Apollonius (Grant, 1980). According to Michael Grant, “...(Euripides) continued to be enormously popular after his death.” Euripides completely threw the norms of theater out the window. My point is that there really was no certainty in Greek art or literature anymore. Greek literature was beginning to move away from closed formal esthetic statements (circular, ring composition) and toward open-ended linear dynamic statements (Wheeler, 1991). The beginning of this movement is usually credited to the birth of Christianity, but clearly it dates at least to Euripides. Apollonius uses
Euripides as a predecessor, someone to liberate him from the old closed circular form. Even the story line gives off a feeling of uncertainty. The journey of Jason is a story of constant encounters where none of the characters (except Medea) really knows what lies around the next corner. Would a format of resolution and certainty really be appropriate here?

The Gods of Olympus play major roles in earlier epics. They are quick to intervene in the affairs of man, and a significant part of the plot usually is made up of "God vs. God" action. However in Apollonius' re-telling of the quest for the Golden Fleece the role of the Gods is at best minor. There are no moments of "God vs. God" interaction, and very little intervention on the part of the divine in the affairs of man. The Gods seem to be replaced by encounters with the supernatural or bizarre. For example, the argonauts encounter Harpies, six-armed men, Giants, Amazons, birds that talk, more giants that come from dragon's teeth, fiery bulls, a dragon, the Sirens, Scylla, Charybdis, and Talos the Giant, during their quest. This trend was being mirrored in Helenistic art, where artists were beginning to take less interest in portraying the divine and a greater interest in normal men (or even subnormal men and women) in new poses, or exploring the bizarre and supernatural (Pollitt, 1972). The supernatural appears in the Odyssey, but not with nearly the frequency that they appear in the Argonautica. One explanation for this is that Apollonius was influenced by Hellenistic art. For some time Apollonius lived in Alexandria, a major center for Hellenistic culture, where he would have seen the trends in the art around him. Another explanation, is that if Apollonius was going to write an epic in which the divine assume a lesser role, then something had to fill that hole. Put more bluntly, the story still has to be interesting and flow well. In the absence of the divine, the supernatural is effective to this end.

Another interesting scene missing from the Argonautica is the descent into Hades which is seen in the Odyssey. Rather than descending into Hades to discover the future from a soothsayer, the Argonauts freed the great seer Phineus from the Harpies in order to receive a prophecy. Here yet another avenue to the divine is cut off. Why would Apollonius replace the common use of the Gods with the
perhaps this was a trend that was being seen throughout Greek culture at this time. In the days of earlier epics, certain Greeks could still trace their lineage back to specific Gods in only a few generations. This implied a closeness between the gods and man and justified interaction on the part of the divine because they had a stake in the affairs of man. As time went on this lineage became “watered down” and the divine became more abstract, or more distant from men. Also, in addition to the gods becoming more distant, man saw himself as of a lesser stature. The entrenched Greek value of “you can never be what your ancestors were,” as Nestor of the Iliad was so fond of reminding us, must have taken its toll on its youth. The descriptions of these great men of the past make them out to be closer to the gods because of their great stature. Contemporary men were not as good as their ancestors so they were more distant from the gods. The boxing match during Anchises’ funeral games in the Aeneid is an excellent example of this ideal. During the Hellenistic Period art was beginning to take less interest portraying the divine and a greater interest in normal men in new poses, or exploring the bizarre and supernatural.

Another influence in Apollonius’ work could well have been the concepts of Epicureanism. An Epicurean asserts that even if there are gods of some sort, they do not interfere in the affairs of men, so sacrifices are useless. There can be no interaction between the cosmos and the world of man. Thus religion is useless, irrelevant. The Epicurean does not believe human existence is validated by anything other than human existence itself, and death the only certainty for the Epicurean. Thus they believe that one should pursue pleasure (which in no way to them means that you will actually find it) to the degree which one can. This philosophy would explain the diminished roll of the gods in the text. In the text we get no sense of Jason’s destiny, or even that Jason has a destiny. Not even Phineus gives the reader any indication that Jason has a great destiny, or a meaningful existence. In other epics the reader is told that the main character has an important destiny or a meaningful existence. The reader is told of the destinies of Aeneas in the Aeneid, Achilles of the Iliad, and Odysseus of the Odyssey. There is no indication whatever that Jason’s existence is in
any way meaningful. His search for the fleece is only for his own immediate benefit rather than a higher purpose, as seen in other epics. Jason is not seen as a hero with a destiny, but rather as a normal person who "lucks" into the fleece. There are no certainties (except for the general skeleton of the plot) for the characters or the reader; there is no sense of a meaningful existence or greater purpose for the main character, and virtually no divine intervention in the poem. These characteristics of the text tend to point to an Epicurean attitude that I see as a predecessor to this work.

Another possible "predecessor" for this work would be the emergence of the natural sciences. Out of the famed Greek pastime of finding order in chaos came the natural sciences, where man began to search for non-mythical, non-divine related explanations for natural phenomenon. As man began to be able to find working explanations for natural phenomenon, the need for the divine began to diminish. This trend could very well be reflected in the literature of the time.

Some literary critics have argued that the *Argonautica* is a poorly written epic. They point to the weakness of Jason's character and its failure to hold up to the epics of Homer or Virgil. I, however, differ with such views. The *Argonautica* has a completely different purpose than earlier epics. Jason's character is supposed to be weak, as well as completely meaningless. Appolonius was creating a new epic, of new literary form, with new ideas. When held up against Homer, it is inappropriate to say one is better than the other; they have completely different purposes. Appolonius uses the epic tradition as well as new artistic forms of expression, Epicureanism, Hellenistic art (and culture), and the fading of the Olympian deities, to make a statement about his culture. This statement is one of liberation of expression, liberation from the divine, and liberation of the mind.
Works Cited


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