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Apollonius of Rhodes' *The Argonautica* as Frivolous Ludic Falsetto

Abstract: *Though Argonautika can be read as a classical epic poem with competing heroes, the poetical grill leaves room for doubt: Does the heroes truly follow the rules of conduct demanded by his status? We propose a new reading grill that underlines certain negative traits of the characters and their actions. Indeed, the epic poem is a poetical banter through which Apollonius mocks the epic and tragic models of the age. The mise en scène of the Apollonian expedition is ludic and has a minimalist character. As a worthy disciple of the School of Alexandria, he condemns the Classical epic poem for being tributary to long and tiring heroic cycles or phantasmagorical digressions. The conclusion of our research is that the author of the Argonautika had the intention, from the very start, to minimize the heroic status, the personal merit and the social institutions of hospitality, purification, sacrifice, and marriage. Moreover, the constant 'values' in Apollonius's poems are non-values: lying, illusion, ruse, chiaroscuro and derision. Odysseus' polymetis "many counsels" praised by Homer thus turn into perverse farce-like acts. The tragic couple of Jason and Medea is reduced to infants oblivious of the significance of their acts, always confuse and keen to playing tricks, sneaking away from under their parents' nose, ever anxious for new adventures. The epic poem springs from the hypothetical game that is the landmark of childhood: the game of "I could play Mother and you could play Father".*

Key words: *Apollonius Rhodius, couple Jason - Medea, hypothetical game, ruse, chiaroscuro, derision*

Argument

The reason that compelled us to engage ourselves in a more unusual interpretation of Apollonius' *Argonautica* was the Prelude itself that presents Jason in a somewhat embarrassing situation due to the loss of one of his sandals. The image, it seems, stands out from the very beginning as a "warning" about how *The Argonautica* should be read. It is no less true that our first impression was strengthened by countless embarrassing situations that featured Jason and his followers as protagonists. Towards the end of the story, we were able to fully appreciate the wholehearted laughter hidden underneath the folds of an exciting story and to realize that we were looking at a truly *poetical joke*, a so-called *badinage*. In this study, we propose to gather and analyze most of the circumstances, the

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characters, sentiments, thoughts and gestures that compelled us to take up such a hermeneutical approach concerning the epic poem *The Argonautica*.

I. The illusory heroic mode

a) *The first impression*

Jason's first occurrence in the poem is arguably ridiculous, as the hero shows up at the court of his uncle Pelias, having only one sandal ("coming forth from the people with but one sandal": δημόθεν ὀπέδιλον, I, v. 7; "saved one sandal from the mire, but the other he left in the depths held back by the flood." ἄλλο μὲν ἐξεσάωσεν πᾶλῦος, ἄλλο δὲ νερθεν/

κάλλιπεν ἀθιπέδιλον νισχόμενον προχοῖσιν, I, vv. 10-11.). Jason was thus limping because of this loss, and the image itself brings to mind famous tragical characters who suffered afflictions at one of their feet (or body parts), as Labdacos did (the one with a limp, similar to the letter la(m)ba, or Oidipous (swollen foot), or gods of the likes of Hephaistos, limp-legged and, by extension, of One-Eye and One-Arm etc. Jason, however, was not really suffering because of one of the disabilities listed above, and his limping derives from **his lacking a shoe, a mimetic object** by excellence, imitating only the form of the foot, but failing to replace the function and role of the organ itself. We are faced with the illusion of a missing body part, with the mocking and minimization of tragic and epic models of the character in suffering. On the other hand, the image of Jason's being stuck is one of utmost ridicule; one gets the image of a neophyte, a person "stuck" who wants to become the people's hero.

b) *The aim of the expedition*

A constant of the heroic mode illusion is the search for the golden fleece which is, in our opinion, a frivolous goal. But this should not surprise us, as many Greek heroes pursued such frivolous goals to probe their virtues. The golden fleece stands for powerlessness and frivolity, its search a means of obtaining pleasure (*hedone*) and repose (*hesychia*). It offers the prospect of a mirage, a fascinating reality blur that draws attention away from truth and opens the gates of an imaginary world. The location of the fleece neighbours the mirific yet perplexing Orient.

The golden fleece is a frivolous **erotic object** used to cover the nuptial bed of Jason and Medea, carried out in secret (IV, vv. 1141-1143): νῦθ' ἄστόρεσαν λέκτρον μέγα: τοῦ δὲ περθεν/ χρύσειον ἀγλαῖον κῆρας βάλλον, φραπέλιτο//τιμήεις τε γάμος καὶ

οἰδῖμος “There at that time did they (the heroes) spread a **mighty bed; and thereon they laid the glittering fleece of gold**, that so the marriage might be honoured and praised”.)

c) An action carried out in secret, in darkness or by using a devious path

The third and fourth chants of *The Argonautica* relate to actions hidden from the eyes of gods and humans, thus implying mystification and mock-heroism. The heroic is compromised either by delusion or by the illusion of virtue. In Chant Three, the Argonauts arrive at the mouth of the Phasis river at night-time. They disembark “unseen by anyone”: νοῖστος, v.6. The text stresses the nuance of secret action - the Argonauts “were waiting in ambush amid the thick reed-beds”: πυκνοῖσιν ... δονάκεσσιν, vv. 6-7. Also in Chant Three, the goddesses Hera and Athena elude the vigilant eyes of Zeus and the other gods when they decide to take counsel concerning Jason’s fate and the golden fleece (III, vv. 8-10: ῥη ῥηναίη τε, Δις δ’ ατοο κα’ ἄλλων/ θανάτων πονόσφι θεῶν θάλαμόνδε κιοῖσαι/βούλευον (...), “Hera and Athena took note of them, and unknown to Zeus and the other immortals, took counsel in a chamber” (...). Elsewhere (v. 211), Hera shrouds Aeetes’ city in a “thick mist” (ἔρα πούλων) in order to let the Argonauts “fare unseen” (φρα λάθοιεν) by Colchians’ curious eyes.

Also in Three, Medea *secretely* falls in love with Jason: “destroyer Love burnt **secretly**” (...αθετο λάθρο/ολος ρως, III, vv. 296-297). Medea **cunningly** (δόλο, III, v. 687) gives her sister Chalciope a false reason for her crying before Jason’s first fight with Aeetes’ bulls. The virgin told her sister that she feared her sons would be accidentally killed by Aeetes and the Argonauts (III, vv. 688): «Χαλκίόπη, περί μοι παίδων σέο θυμῶς ῥηται», “Chalciope, my heart is all trembling for thy sons, lest my father forthwith destroy them together with the strangers.” In another section of the poem, Medea sneaks away from the palace to help the Argonauts (III, vv. 843-886). Soon, Medea will meet Jason face to face, far from the eyes of her escorts. In turn, Jason will meet Medea far from the eyes of his slave Mopsos. (III, vv. 934-941).

Before the first battle, Jason performs a sacrifice in honour of the infernal i.e. unseen deities. Dressed in black, the privileged colour of these deities of the unseen world, he remains unseen, not unlike a dead man, by the warriors rising from the ground and will only join the battle at the end, aided by a magic potion (III, vv. 1258-1444).

The killing of Apsyrtos (cf. Byre 3-16) in Chant Four by Jason and Medea takes place in the dark of the night, hidden from the eyes of their bretheren (IV, line 437): νυκτός τε μέλαν κνέφας ῥμφιβάλλουσιν: “and the darkness of night surrounded them”; as for Apsyrtos, we are told that he arrived “cloaked in the darkness of the night” at the fatal encounter, tempted by his sister Medea (νύχθ’ ῥπο, IV, v. 458). Medea² herself resorts to the same trick when she murders her own brother (cf. Byre 14; DeForest 129; Beye, *Epic and Romance* 152, 161): she covers her face with a veil to avert her eyes from crime ((IV,

² On Medea’s monstrous behavior, briskly transformed into a witch guilty for killing her brother, see Byre. On the gravity of Medea’s fratricide and the psychological interpretation of the monstrous deed, see DeForest and Beye.

vv. 465-467): (...) ἀψα δὲ κούρη/μπαλιν ἄμματ' ἄνεικε, καλυψαμένη
 ἄθόν'σιν./μὲν φόνον ἄθρήσειε κασιγνήτοιο τυπέντος “and quickly the maiden turned her
 eyes aside and covered them with her veil that she might not see the blood of her brother
 when he was struck”. The unwillingness to face the facts is childlike. The motif of the veil
 is widely used in *The Argonautica*: it may be a **veil proper**, as in the episode above, it may
 be the **night** of Apsyrtos’ murder or of Medea’s concoction of magic potions, it may be the
fog in which Hera shrouded the Argonauts during their voyage through Northern Italy or
 their disembarking at the mouth of Phasis, it may be a **hiding place** for a crime from Circe,
 a **simulation** (the crime-sacrifice against Apsyrtos in front of Artemide’s temple), a
deception of the evil-doer according to the principle of the anti-phrase e.g., when Orpheus
 undoes the malefic effects of the syrens’ songs or a way of **pacification** (Zeus, The
 Erinnyes, Hephaistos, Eol, the Wandering Rocks etc.) At the end of the day, the veil motif
 translates the deceitful argument expressed both verbally and non-verbally, an illusory
 world of lies proclaimed by both men and gods.

Jason and Medea’s³ wedding in Chant Four took place at night, without the knowledge
 of Alcinous, the guest-king, in the shelter of Macrida’s cave. It is a deed accomplished in a
 deceitful way (cf. Rieu 65), (IV, vv. 1131-1132): ἄντρον ἄν ἄγαθέ, τόθι δὴ ποτε Μάκρις
 ἄβαιεν./ κούρη ἄρισταίοιο μελίφρονος, “in the sacred cave, where once dwelt Macris, the
 daughter of Aristaeus, lord of honey”, where “necessity led them to wed”, χρεὲν ἄγε
 μὴ ἄναι (IV, v. 1164). However, unfolding Alkinoos’ decision not to hand over Medea to
 Aeetes unless her virginity proved untainted is due to Hera’s artfulness, which allowed
 queen Arete to communicate Alkinoos’ decision to the lovers through a messenger at night
 time (IV, vv. 1999-2000): σὺ γὰρ καὶ ἄπ' φρεσὶ θῆκας/ῤήτῃ, πυκινὸν φάσθαι
 ἄπος, “Hera, in thy honour; for it was thou that didst put it into the heart of Arete to
 proclaim the wise word of Alcinous”. As in *The Odyssey*, Arete holds pride of place. She is
 the one that announces Jason, by means of the messenger, about the husband’s decision.
 Further, she is the one that makes the wedding possible, as Arete embodies, in our view, the
 Virtue of obeying the laws of hospitality. The ‘implementation’ of these laws is
 downplayed, as it is carried out in secret or without the acknowledgement of one of the
 hosts. Moreover, one of the guests is turned into an accomplice to an almost unlawful deed.

The Argonautica features characters that compel one to either embrace a subversive or
 wicked attitude, like the prophet Phineus, or legitimize this type of action like Hera,
 Athena, Aphrodite or, indirectly, Eros and Erato. In Chant Two, the prophet Phineus, whom
 the Argonauts had freed from the hellish harpies that had been driving him to starvation,
 fortells their future in exchange and offers them some clues to successfully face the
 challenges ahead. Thus, they were to ask for Aphrodite’s help, as she is the key to success
 (II, vv. 423-425): ἄλλά, φίλοι, φράζεσθε θεῶν δολόεσσιν ἄρωγ'ν//Κύπριδος. ἄκ γὰρ
 τῶν κλυτῶν πείρατα κεῖται ἄθλων, “But, my friends, think of **the artful aid of the
 Cyprian goddess**, for she holds the key to **the glorious victory** of your venture.” Phineus
 thus suggests to the Argonauts that challenging Eros is, to put it bluntly, **a necessity**; in the
 end, the victory depends on Eros’ craftiness.

In Chant Three, the divine accomplices Hera and Athena agree that only a crafty act
 (dovlon tina, III, v. 12) can help Jason get his hands on the golden fleece from the Aeetes.

³ On Medea’s wedding, the unhappy bride: “a peerless but unhappy bride” (Rieu 65).

Athena (III, v. 20) acknowledges that boosting the heroes' courage relies on *this artfulness* (τοῦτον δόλον) that she had not yet discovered. Hera is the one who, finally, indicates that Aphrodite only could help them. The aid is awaited in surprise, as the golden fleece is the symbol of the Oriental mirage, a blinding illusion that could not be obtained either legitimately (Hera) or rationally (Athena). The unexpected visit of the two goddesses to Aphrodite allows for a digression-portrait of naughty Eros as the mistificator by excellence or as the ludic trickster. Eros sees mistification as a challenging game, possibly a mistification of the mistification by the principle of the anti-phrase. Eros had just tricked the child Ganymede at the game of jacks, and was also behind the mistifying relationship of Jason and Medea - he shot his venomous arrow at the virgin, making her fall in love with Jason against her will and more importantly, against her father's will. Eros thus also influenced the relationship of Jason and Aetes, as the king's fury was ignited by Eros'⁴ arrows (cf. Campbell 3; Hunter, *The Argonautica of Apollonius* 59; Knight 250). Aphrodite herself, knowing that her son was fidgety and undisciplined, tricks him into accepting to target Medea with an arrow and make her fall in love with Jason. In exchange, Aphrodite promises Eros a beautiful toy⁵ (cf. Campbell 134). Here we have an example of tricking the trickster by means of the anti-phrase. It is important to note that the aid of Aphrodite is indirect (she could do nothing by herself). This reminds one of derision, of childish ludic gestures. **Eros**, the fidgety child by excellence, always keen on playing tricks and even capable of evil, becomes the guarantor of Medea's deeds (herself a child) and of Jason's (an untutored youth). In fact, Chant Three is entirely devoted to the goddess Erato (a simile of Eros), whom the poet invokes from the very beginning. she. The invocation is not of Aphrodite as a love goddess, but as a ludic creature, defined by a subtle kind of violence, recklessness and craftiness embodied as Eros, the god-child archer. Immaturity thus is shared by Eros, the whimsical divine child, with both Jason and Medea. Hera describes Medea as being "full of wiles" δολόεσσα (III, v. 89), using the same adjective employed by Phineus to characterize Aphrodite (II, v. 423). Further (III, v. 687), Medea addresses her sister Chalkiope "with guileful words" (δόλιχα), "for the bold Loves were pressing her hard" θρασέες γὰρ ἰπεκλονέεσκον ἰρωτες (III, v. 687). In turn, Jason mimetically embraces Medea's slynesses when he accepts the potion prepared to appease the bulls θελκτήρια φάρμακα ταύρων (III, v. 738) and when he receives the magic potion (φάρμακον) to become invincible (III, vv. 843-848). But Jason's sweet talk is also a cunning weapon to trick his enemy and appease his anger (the furious Aetes, for example III, v. 385: ἑμείψατο μειλιχίσιον "he himself first made gentle answer").

⁴ On Eros' destructive power see Campbell; Hunter; Knight who maintain that the narrative about Eros' contribution to the love union is one of destruction, evincing that the unfolding of Jason and Medea's wedding would not be a happy one.

⁵ Kypris realizes she cannot afford to appear impolite in front of Eros. Also, Eros is described in IV as an agent of destruction (IV, 445 sqq.).

d) Slyness as lack of personal merit

A significant episode from the perspective of the illusory heroic mode is that of the attack against the Argonauts by the warrior birds on Aretias Island (Chant Two). We think that these aggressive birds protected by Ares announces the subsequent attack of king Aetes, himself under the protection of Ares. The Argonauts defeat the birds not due to their strength, but to their slyness: they stirred up a great racket, waving their helmets, shouting strongly and raising their spears to simulate a counter-attack. Finally, they hit their shields to raise havoc among the warrior birds. The language used is clear in this regard: “let us contrive” (ἐπιφραζόμεθα, v. 1058), some other “device” (μῦτιν, vv. 1050, 1058) etc. The comparison with Herakles, who had similarly eluded the Stymphalide birds by spinning a sounding brass, is not amiss. However, the difference between the two situations is striking: whereas Herakles does not consider the facts as challenging his heroic virtues i.e his physical force (a hero does not fight birds) but only as an opportunity to apply his practical abilities to escape an awkward situation, the Argonauts consider the birds as true combatants. As for slyness, which is the method employed here, it takes the form of a mock-battle announcing a future episode at king Aetes’ court, where the Argonauts (Jason) will create the illusion of a battle with the aid of Medea’s witchcraft.

In Chant Four, Medea employs her alluring charms to send the dragon to sleep (ἐπιπνον ἐβαλλε), thereby allowing Jason easy access to the glittering golden fleece. Jason took the golden fleece from the oak, as urged by the girl (ἐνθα δὲ μὲν χρύσειον ἐπιδρυῖς ἀνυτο κῆρας/ κούρης κεκλομένης, “hereupon Jason snatched the golden fleece from the oak, at the maiden bidding” vv. 162-163). Not the slightest hint of effort or fatal encounter with the monster, no courageous deed enlivens Jason’s spirit; he is pleased to be able to acquire the valuables without proving his virtues. In fact, Apollonios brings forth a comparison, drawing on subtle irony, when he associates the joyful and satisfied look on Jason’s face upon seeing the golden fleece with that of a maiden happy to touch her glittering garments. (ὡς ... παρθένος... / ... ὡς τότε ἦσων, “as a maiden ... so did Jason”, vv. 167,170). Jason is not really a hero of the Argonauts, who had gone in the search of the golden fleece after leaving everything in the care of a woman⁶ (oa poor girl really - cf. Nyberg 123; Beye, *Epic and Romance* 90; Beye, “Jason as love-hero” 43) who had run away from her father’s house for the sake of her lover. However, Jason returns as a victor, clad with the golden ram’s fleece hanging down his shoulders all the way to his ankles, proud of his trophy (ὡς δὲ ἄλλοτε μὲν λαὸν ἐπειμένον μὲν/ἀχένος ἕξ ἐπάτοιο ποδηκεῖς, “he strode on now with the fleece covering his left shoulder from the height of his neck to his feet”, IV, vv. 179-180). The image is similar to that of the hero Herakles, victorious after the merciless grappling with the lion of Nemea, wearing its skin on his shoulder as trophy and therefore appears taunting and ironic, very much in Apollonios’ style. The emphatically displayed scene of mock-heroism is followed by that of another Jason, fearful for his life and deprived of his precious adornment (...δῖεν, ἔφρα μὴ τις/ἐνδρῶν ἢ θεῶν νοσφίσσεται ἐντιβολήσας, “he feared exceedingly, lest some god or

⁶ On Jason’s dependence of women’s aid and his sexual attraction towards women see Nyberg and Beye.

man should meet him and deprive him thereof", vv. 181-182), as if to remind us of the true mold of our hero. The contradictory images are purposefully adjacent like the pieces of a puzzle for the reader to solve and uncover Jason's personality: hero or false hero?

e) *Fear*

The unsettling feeling of fear makes its mark throughout the entire epic canvas of the Chants Two and Four. It was fear that took over Jason upon successfully completing the dreadful challenge of sailing past the Symplegade rocks (II, vv. 627-630): νῦν δὲ περισσὸν δεῖμα καὶ ἄτλήτους μελεδῶνας/ἄγκειμαι, στυγέων μὲν ἄλλοις κρυόεντα κέλευθα//νηὶ διαπλώειν, στυγέων δὲ, ἅτε πᾶσι πείροιο/βαίνωμεν. πάντ' ἄρ' ἄνῆρες ἄσιν, "now I am wrapped in **excessive fear and cares unbearable, dreading** to sail through the chilling paths of the sea, and **dreading** when we shall set foot on the mainland, for on every side are unkindly men". Fear is what the Phrixians felt upon confronting king Aeetes (II, v. 1203): τὸ καὶ περιδείδια ναυτίλλεσθαι, "wherefore exceedingly do I dread this voyage", says Argos, one of Phrixus' sons, while Argonaut Peleus' appeasing and encouraging answer is meant to gently chide him for this not hero-like fear (II, v. 1219): μηδὲ οὐτως, ... λίην δειδίσσο, "be not so **fearful** in spirit! ..."). Similarly, Medea - the maiden who confronted her father for Jason's sake - is wrapped in fear. The devastating feeling besieges her unexpectedly, spurring suicidal thoughts (IV, vv. 11-23). τὸ δὲ ἄλγεινότατον κραδί' φόβον ἄμβαλεν ἄρη/τρέσσειν δὲ, ὅτε τις κούφη κεμάς, ἔν τε βαθείης/τάρφεισιν ἔν ξυλόχοιο κύνων ἄφόβησεν ἄμοκλή./ ἀτίκα ἄρ' νημερτῶς ἄίσσατο, μή μιν ἄρωγῶν/ληθέμεν, ἀψα δὲ πᾶσαν ἄναπλήσειν κακότητα./ τάρβει δὲ ἄμφιπόλους ἄπίστορας: ἔν δέ οἱ ἄσσει//πλῆτο πυρός, δεινὸν δὲ περιβρομέεσκον ἄκουαί/πυκνὸ δὲ λευκανίης ἄπεμάσσατο, πυκνὸ δὲ κούρη/ἄλκομένη πλοκάμους γοερῶ βρυχήσατο ἄνι/καὶ νύ κεν ἄτο τῆμος ἄπῶρον ἄλετο κούρη/ φάρμακα πασσαμένη, ἄρης δὲ ἄλίωσε μενοινάς./ εἴ μὴ μιν Φρίξιο θεῶ σῶν παισὶ φέβεσθαι//ῶρσεν ἄτυζομένην (...) "Into Medea's heart Hera cast **most grievous fear**; and she **trembled** like a nimble fawn whom the baying of hounds hath **terrified** amid the thicket of a deep copse. For at once she truly foreboded that the aid she had given was not hidden from her father, and that quickly she would fill up the cup of woe. And she dreaded the guilty knowledge of her handmaids; her eyes were **filled with fire** and her ears rung with a **terrible cry**. Often did she **clutch at her throat**, and often did she **drag out her hair by the roots and groan in wretched despair**. There on that very day the maiden would have tasted the drugs and perished and so have made void the purposes of Hera, had not the goddess driven her, all **bewildered**, to flee with the sons of Phrixus".

The meeting between Argonauts and Phrixians is not devoid of symbolic significance. Two elements are particularly noteworthy: on the one hand, their **kinship with Jason** by means of Kreteu (Athmas' father, their brother) and on the other hand, the feeling of **fear** displayed by the Phrixians. This fear appears to be perfectly legitimate, if we are to think of their ancestor, Phrixus, whose symbolic name is a derivation of the denominative verb *phrisso* (to tremble/ to quiver with fear) and of the noun *phrike* (skin crawling, goose

bumps, hectic shivering) or *phrix* (hair standing on end, shudder, quiver) refers to the effeminate, slack, mellow and coward-like nature of the character, standing in fact for the existence of a hereditary and fundamental feeling of fear that characterizes the Phirixian brood and implicitly, Jason. Hence, the scene where Jason meets the Phirixians is illustrative of the hero facing his past with anxiety and fear. He takes these feelings to his bosom when deciding to accompany his relatives on the road to king Aetes. These images of fear from despondency and despair to horror and suicidal thoughts witness the anti-heroism or false heroism that arises from the palimpsest message of *The Argonautica*.

II. Converting hospitality into inhospitality

After their sojourn on the Isle of the Doliones (ὄυξείνοισι Δολίοισιν, I, v. 1018) led by King Cyzicus, the Argonauts embark on their ship Argo and leave behind these hospitable places. But during the night, the wind make them unwittingly return to the island (οὐδέ τις ἀτὺν ἄσπον πῖφραδέως ἄνῳσην/μμεναι, “Nor did anyone note with care that it was the same island” (I, v.1021). In the dark (ἄπ νυκτιν, I, v.1022), neither the Argonauts nor the Doliones recognize one another, so the hosts arm themselves and kill their supposed enemies, the Macrians. The pseudo-conflict breaks out in wild rage (σὺν δὲ ἄλασαν μελίας τε καὶ ἄσπίδας ἄλλήλοισιν “And with clashing of ashen spears and shields they fell on each other” I, v. 1026). In the ensuing havoc, **Jason kills no other than King Cyzicus** (ἄλλά μιν ἄσονίδης τετραμμένον ἄθῆς ἄοἰ/πλῆξεν ἄπαῖζας στῆθος μέσον, ἄμφῶ δὲ δουρῶ/στέον ἄρραίσθη, I, 1032-1034) “But Aeson’s son leapt upon him as he turned to face him, and smote him in the middle of the breast, and the bone was shattered round the spear”. This episode marks the transition from hospitality to inhospitality: the hosts turn into attackers, while the guests become their victims. The reason for their fight is darkness (*nyx*), synonymous with the ensuing havoc. Darkness personifies the ignorance that annihilates shape and the capacity to think wisely (ἄπφραδέως), thus empeaching the ritualistic game of hospitality. **The ritual transforms itself into transgression.** We think of darkness as a divinity striking in anger (*ate*) those whom (s)he wants to kill, by determining one to act out of ignorance. The episode casts an unfavourable light on the Argonauts and especially on Jason: they are guilty of lacking lucidity. This reminds us of the lack of memory or remembrance that constitute mock-heroism – the landmark of true heroism is the will to remain in people’s memory. Divine punishment will readily sanction this lacking in wisdom. On leaving Mysia, which is the next halt, the Argonauts lose three of their mates, Herakles, Hylas and Polyphem. At dawn, both sides become aware of their horrific mistake.

Jason, the main hero of the epic poem blends into the mass of warriors, unable to prove any virtue that would distinguish him from the people he was leading, as the text notes that none of the Argonauts manage to ponder with care (οὐδέ τις ... ἄπφραδέως ἄνῳσην). The only time when Jason is singularized is when he carries out his most foolish action – that of killing Cyzicus, king of the Doliones and his benefactor. In these circumstances, his deed appears brave and worth mentioning, hence an occasion for the poet to ironies Jason. The hero thus distinguishes himself by being more reckless than any of his men. The poet

tries, albeit without success, to come up with a plausible reason that would justify the Argonauts' mistake e.g., the darkness and the fact that the Doliones were the first to attack. But the two pseudo-causes appealed to by the author merely stress the lack of professionalism of the so-called heroes (mostly a bunch of unknown youth) and implicitly, of Jason. Even the reference to ἄρως νημερτός, "the true heroes" is laden with subtle irony. The scene is characterized by a reversal of the rules of hospitality out of ignorance and by that *qui pro quo*, which translated first as pseudo-conflict, then by an ensuing havoc, deception of the two warrior camps and, finally, mock-heroism. The tragic appears is distorted, as disillusionment becomes dominant to the point that the heroic mode becomes minimized. Not only does the hero fail to guarantee strict observance of the rules of hospitality, but he fails to show heroism on the battle-field, overcome by that Achillean *furor heroicus* and animated by clear principles. No sign of any desire to obtain military glory (*kleos*) or becoming enshrined in the memory of the offspring. Jason's only wish is for him and his comrades to make it alive. A frivolous aim indeed for such a great hero!

Yet another example of reversal of the hospitality ritual is the episode of **cowardly murder of Apsyrtus**. From the very beginning, Jason and Medea are no-gooders (τόγε ξυμβάντε μέγαν δόλον, "So they two agreed and prepared a great web of guile", IV, v. 421) who killed Medea's brother Apsyrtus. The laws of hospitality are again despised, as the accomplices avail themselves of them to fool and trap young Apsyrtus. They sent Apsyrtus several expensive gifts (πολλὰ ... ξεινία δόρα), including Hypsipyle's sacred veil (πέπλον ... ἔερπον ψιπυλείης) inherited from Thoas, Dionysus's son, and that had been offered to Jason on his leaving Lemnos Isle. The text insists on the details of the veil in the language of seduction: πορφύρεον "of crimson hue", Χάριτες "the Graces", γλυκὸν ἔμερον "sweet desire", ἄμβροσὴ ἄδμη, "divine fragrance", ἄκρογάλιξ οἶνον καὶ νέκταρι „(Dionysos) "flushed with wine and nectar", μύθους "a cunning plan", θελγέμεν "to induce", μέλαν κνέφας "the darkness of night", νυκτός "night", θελκτήρια φάρμακα (α) "witching charms". One can notice the prevalence of terms that signal seduction through sight, touch and hearing, as well as those that refer to the seduction of the senses, as is the case of ἄκρογάλιξ.

Yet another element that calls for our scrutiny is a significant detail, not unintentionally reminded by Apollonios among the gifts of hospitality destined for the fate-stricken Apsyrtus, namely Hypsipyle's erotic outfit. We think it is an erotic outfit because it was offered by the beautiful woman to Jason in remembrance of the voluptuous moments spent together. The eros motif has a perfect place within the larger context of slyness and tricking. We may assume that the gift of hospitality is converted into a mischievous bait. Once again Jason appears to us, along with Medea⁷ (cf. Byre 14) his female accomplice (who, in our opinion, is nothing but a mask for his perverse and effeminate⁸ side, given in to adultery and mistification) as a mock-hero, inclined to perverting any kind of principles,

⁷ Byre opines that ultimately Eros and not Medea is guilty for the killing of Apsyrtus.

⁸ Ingrid Holmberg notes that the main issue of *The Argonautica* is centered round Jason's femininity and Medea's masculinity. Medea represents the first heroic female character (the first fully realized, complex, utterly sympathetic and – finally and most importantly – heroic female figure to appear in Greek literature ... more active and decisive than Jason is anywhere) (Beye, *Epic and Romance* 132, 135; Dyck 470). The powerful and feared Medea embodies the sole epic, central, epic character of the poem (DeForest 11, 1, 107, 109).

as well as social and moral values (cf. Holmberg 135). Disrespecting the laws of hospitality can be just as well illustrated by **Medea's accomplice-like incentives at the moment of stealing the golden fleece** in the night "against the will of Aeetes" (παρὰ κ νόον Αήταο, IV, v. 102). Thus the guests are encouraged to act inappropriately, against their status, thus turning into traitors against the host. It is noteworthy to notice the manner in which the Argonauts are systematically presented, be it indirectly (through incentives to mischievous deeds coming from the outside) as mock-heroes.

We find no less compelling the fact that the very character who facilitates these incentives to break with the deeply-rooted laws of hospitality is the daughter's host, Medea, who becomes accomplice to the betrayal. In this manner, the relationship between host and guest is altered from the inside, as the role of the host is presented in a no less unusual way:

Aeetes is the bad host, nosy and warlike, while his daughter, Medea, becomes a mystifier of the concept of host; in other words the host herself ends up acting against herself, before the guests themselves betray her. To conclude, the laws of hospitality, as they are portrayed in *The Argonautica* are mocked, ridiculed, themselves turning into the stake of deceit.

III. Phineus, the treacherous and garrulous prophet

Another element that contributes to the cristalization of the minimized image of traditional epic models is the influencing of the Argonauts actions by the treacherous prophet Phineus (Bouvier, Moreau 1983: 5-19). He is portrayed from the very beginning as a villain, guilty of *hybris* against Zeus, whose mysteries he had defied, revealing them to the mortals without his permission. Thus, Phineus stands out as a unique character among those of the same rank, if we consider that none of the consacrated epic prophets of the time (for example Calchas, Teiresias etc.) had given in to similar subversive practices aimed to deceive divinity. But presenting the prophet's past is not accidentally inserted in the story, as it further substantiates his advice to the Argonauts not to underestimate Cypris' (Aphrodite's) aid that would guarantee their success. (II, vv. 423-425): ἄλλά, φίλοι, φράζεσθε θεῶς δολόεσσαν ἄρωγῶν/Κύπριδος. ἄκ γῶρ τῶς κλυτῶ πείρατα κεῖται ἔθλων, "But, my friends, take thought of **the artful aid of the Cyprian goddess**. For on her depends the glorious issue of your venture." Mentioning Cypris only leads to the reintegration of Phineus within his essential characteristics as mystifying prophet who approves of and encourages mischievous deeds, since Aphrodite was the charming and mystifying goddess par excellence. Therefore, the epic model of the prophet is altered, rendering him to nothing more than a mock version of the epic, grave, god-fearing, wise and savior-like prophet. Phineus proves to be the garrulous prophet-type, unaware of his mission, who, in the end defies the boundaries between man and divinity through his demythologizing and even disconcerting attitude. Despite having been severely punished by Zeus himself, he doesn't come around, but persists in deceiving from a different perspective, promising the Argonauts a pseudo-glory. But Phineus appears to be the mock replica of another blind prophet, Teiresias, whom Odysseus meets in the Inferno and who prophesies his future fate, offering him some clues that would warn him about his long trip coming to a close end. Hence, we are again confronted with the mocking of a traditional

epic model: the grave look of the blind prophet of the Inferno, who becomes the treacherous and garrulous prophet who had fallen into misery in *The Argonautica* of Apollonios. He seems to be living in the world of shadows even in his earthly existence, damned by fate and witness to the repelling vision of the harpies.

IV. Simulating sacrifice

In Chant Four, Jason and Medea plot against Medea's blood brother, Apsyrtus. What strikes us firstly is the apparently strange association of two divinities: Dionysus, the orgy god of the extremes, of actions performed in a state of mental confusion, the wild god who encourages actions situated at the threshold of two kingdoms: the human and the animal, and who is a threshold god by excellence, and Artemis, the maiden-goddess, wild and lunar, who acts mostly at night time, by moonlight, in the dark hideouts of the forest, and thus indirectly, not in plain sight, a nightly goddess, patroness of witch charms carried out in the dark. Thus, the two divine creatures share a wild nature, nocturnal and confusing, but are drawn apart by the fact that the former acts within an orgiastic frame, at twilight, while the latter acts within a nocturnal, hidden frame. The two are purposefully mentioned as their role is to create a wild, nocturnal and semi-divine frame, suitable for the plotted kill. Even the temple of Artemis is mentioned (νηοῦ σχεδόν "in the vicinity of the temple", IV, v. 469), the sacred space in the vicinity of which the fratricide would take place. Moreover, it would function as a pseudo-guarantor of a so-called sacrifice. On the other hand, we notice a subtle ironic similarity between the killing of Apsyrtus near Artemis' temple and the tragic scene of preparing Iphigenia's sacrifice for the same wild goddess in Aulis. Thus, the crime and the sacrifice are presented in a certain contiguity, as they appear interchangeable. The sacrificial scenario, therefore, is thrown into ridicule, minimized and sanctioned.

V. Conclusions

Therefore, the difference between the epic Medea and the tragic Medea is that between assuming and non-assuming or indeed that between despair and mad courage. If the epic Medea signifies the little girl who flirts with the game of seduction, thus assuming all risks and getting her and others into trouble for the love of Jason, in the case of the tragic Medea, the tragic fate of the character results from her incapacity of assuming the condition of a cheated wife, abandoned and despised by the beloved husband. The killing of her children is equivalent to a radical refusal of her whole being and of everything organically related to her (her children), thus equivalent to her decision to quit the game of seduction that threatened to end unhappily for her.

Similarly, the difference between the epic Jason and the tragic one is that between the inexperienced youth, under the spell of a girl skilled in the art of seduction and, on the other hand, the adult male, experienced and outside the protectorate and even outside the influence of the skilled, enamoured woman, as he is master of his own decisions.

In our opinion, the couple Jason – Medea could be compared to other famous Homeric couples such as Odysseus – Calypso or Odysseus – Circe, both women being charming and extremely skilled in the art of seduction, of veiling, of hiding (*kalyptein, to hide*), whose role is that of condemning the hero to oblivion, to anonymity. However, Odysseus, as every authentic hero conscious of his status succeeds, in the end, to put them at a distance, while Jason not only fails to do this, but doesn't even intend to change his status. Moreover, he is complacent in his being charmed, in being fancy man, a mock-hero (cf. Lawall; DeForest 9-10; Beye, *Epic and Romance* 45; Dyck 455; Beye, "Jason as love-hero" 42).

We can thus conclude that this couple, tragic in its origin, Jason – Medea, is reduced or minimized by Apollonios to the dimension of an infantile couple, playing games and tricks whose consequences they are not aware of, and because of which they go as far as accomplishing the supreme blunder, the killing of Apsyrtus, doing this for the fear of paternal punishment. The couple is faltering as it acts hidden from the eyes of the parents, forever willing to engage in dangerous games and extreme sensations, for risk's sake. For these very reasons, the dominant feeling of *The Argonautica* is **fear**, and the preferred modality of action is the **devious path**, sheltered from the vigilant eyes of adults. Even the event that could have surprised us given its solemnity, a characteristically adult event, as is the wedding between Jason and Medea, translates into a hidden childish act akin to playing Mom and Dad, while the ram's golden fleece, that should have been praised as a true heroic trophy serves as an object of mimetic erotic fantasies in the eyes of these children. What is more, from this point of view, the golden fleece might serve the same purpose as that of Hypsipyle's erotic garment offered by Jason as a reminder of moments of erotic voluptuousness during his stay on the Isle of Lemnos.

Values thus suddenly turn into non-values, as their symbolic status is minimized, thrown into ridicule and defied - a tendency generally characteristic of children, certainly not of adults, for whom meanings carry serious overtones, and personal merit is valorized and gratified accordingly; even Odysseus' defining trait, *polymetis* (very smart), becomes, in Apollonius' *The Argonautica metis* (simple craftiness, stratageme, cunningness) whose attribute is *doloessa* (cunning, guilefull). To put it shortly, the capacity to be smart is altered into craftiness, cunningness.

We believe that the epic poem *Argonautica* minimizes both erotic status and personal merit, as well as any social institution (such as hospitality, marriage etc.). The pillars on which the *Argonautica* rests are lies, illusion, artfulness, chiaroscuro and derision. The epic poem always appears to be marked by the hypothetical game similar to those that have in one way or another influenced our childhood: playing „Mom and Dad”, where „I am Mom and you are Dad”, while Apollonios' intention behind creating this ludic and minimalist frame where the famous adventure unfolds could be explained by the general tendency of Alexandrian poets to mock and condemn heavily dense epic plots, tributary to the lengthy heroic cycles as well as the countless, long and tiresome fantasmagorical digressions.

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