

THE S. MARK TAPER FOUNDATION PRESENTS  
A NOISE WITHIN'S REPERTORY THEATRE SEASON

AUDIENCE **GUIDE**

Mary Zimmerman's  
**ARGONAUTIKA**  
*THE VOYAGE OF JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS*

March 20–May 5, 2019



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# CHARACTER MAP

## GODS AND CREATURES

### Hera

Queen of the gods.  
Vows to always love Jason

### Athena

The goddess of wisdom and courage.  
She watches over Jason

### Aphrodite

The goddess of love and beauty.  
Helps Hera in a scheme to make Medea fall in love with Jason

### Boreas

The god and personification of the North Wind

### Rumor

The goddess and personification of a spreading rumor or false tale

### Eros

Aphrodite's minion.  
Also known as Cupid

### Amycus

Poseidon's son and an infamous boxer

### Fury

Goddess of vengeance

### Ghost

Arrives to tell Alcimedede of Jason's journey

### Dryope

A water nymph

## ARGONAUTS

### Jason

The leader of the Argonauts.  
Charged with retrieving the Golden Fleece from King Aeëtes

### Hercules

Illegitimate son of Zeus. A demi-god and Greek hero known for his strength

### Tiphys

The pilot of the Argo

### Meleager

A young Argonaut. When he was born, the Fates placed a burning log in a fireplace and predicted Meleager would die when the log burned completely

**Idmon**  
A seer. He has a vision about the challenges the Argonauts will face

**Hylas**  
Hercules' aide and friend

**Uncle**  
Meleager's uncle

**Castor**  
Son of Zeus and brother of Pollux

**Pollux**  
Son of Zeus and brother of Castor. He volunteers to fight Amycus

**Euphemus**  
**Polyphemus**  
**Zetes**  
Crew members

**Atalanta**  
A huntress and the only woman to join the Argonauts

**Pelias's Son**  
King Pelias's son and Jason's cousin. Jason tricks him to join the Argonauts to spite King Pelias

# CHARACTER MAP

## IOLCOS

### King Pelias

King of Iolcos and Jason's uncle. It is prophesied that Jason will kill King Pelias, and in order to divert Jason, Pelias sends him on a mission to retrieve the Golden Fleece

### Aeson

Jason's father and King Pelias' brother

### Alcimedea

Jason's mother

### Cepheus

### Asterion

King Pelias' servants

## COLCHIS

### Aeëtes

King of Colchis and Medea's father. He owns the Golden Fleece

### Medea

Aeëtes' daughter. She falls in love with Jason

### Apsyrtos

Medea's brother

### Styrus

Medea's fiancé

### Andromeda

A princess who is chained to a cliff in sacrifice to Poseidon's sea monster

### Dymas

Prisoner of Amycus

### The Women of Lemnos

They welcome the Argonauts in Lemnos

### Phineus

A blind prophet, sentenced by Zeus to live out his life starving and among harpies

### Meleager's Mother

She guards the log fated to represent Meleager's life

## SYNOPSIS

**Greek stories** were well known before poets and playwrights wrote their own versions. As a result, many stories are told slightly differently depending on what the author wanted to communicate. Homer's *Odyssey* does not include every story of the character Odysseus, and different plays and poems of the Trojan War or the Argonauts include different scenes or emphasize different characters. Some versions are radically different: the character of Iphigenia, who was the daughter Agamemnon sacrificed so that the Greek fleet could sail to Troy, is either sacrificed, saved at the last second by the gods, or is replaced by a deer and lives to meet her brother after the war.

Mary Zimmerman's adaptation of *Argonautika* continues this tradition of carefully selecting which pieces of a Greek story to emphasize, where to begin and end the story, and which characters to feature. Her version focuses on Jason and Medea and begins with an invocation by the chorus that summarizes the story of Helle and Phrixus. The action starts as Jason returns to Iolcos to claim the throne from his uncle, Pelias, who is celebrating his birthday. The goddess Hera, disguised as an old woman, asks Jason to carry her across the river, and in the crossing he loses a sandal. Hera and Athena bless Jason on his quest to restore the throne for his family.

King Pelias, meanwhile, has dreamt that a man with one bare foot will come to kill him. Recognizing it is a prophecy, Pelias is afraid when the one-sandaled man arrives and turns out to be an heir to the throne. Although Pelias' servants plot to kill Jason, Pelias spares his nephew only to send him on an impossible quest. Pelias tells Jason of the story of the fleece and orders him to recover it to prove himself worthy of the crown.

Jason gathers a band of heroes for the journey. The great carpenter Argos builds an enormous boat to hold them all, including some of the greatest heroes of Greek mythology: Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus who can fly; the mighty Hercules; the swift huntress Atalanta; and the seer Idmon. In all, 50 heroes join the quest, including Pelias' son. Before the heroes sail, Jason asks them to choose a leader. Although Hercules is chosen by the crew, the great son of Zeus defers leadership and chooses Jason instead. Finally, Idmon offers a vision of the fate of the quest: although the Argo will succeed and return home, many of the heroes will die along the way.

On the voyage, Jason and his heroes run into many obstacles. The first is the god of wind, Boreas, who threatens to destroy the Argo. The Argonauts face sea



"The Capture of the Golden Fleece" by Jean-François Detroy, 1742-3.  
The National Gallery

monsters and harpies, temptation and giants, clashing rocks and the loss of heroes—including Hercules. On the journey, Jason learns of the dragon that guards the Golden Fleece.

The Argonauts arrive in Colchis, home of King Aeëtes and the Golden Fleece. Knowing that Jason will be unable to retrieve the fleece alone, Hera and Athena conspire with Aphrodite to have the powerful daughter of the king, Medea, fall in love with Jason. Aeëtes requires several tasks of Jason before he can approach the fleece: he must tame two wild bulls, plow a field with them, and plant dragon's teeth in the field. The bulls, of course, breathe fire and the dragon's teeth sprout magical warriors. With the help of Medea's magic and advice, Jason accomplishes the tasks. At the fleece itself, Medea helps Jason by lulling the dragon to sleep so that Jason can retrieve the prize. Knowing the fury of her father, Jason promises to take Medea away with him and to marry her.

Aeëtes pursues the Argonauts as they sail away with both the fleece and Medea. The Argo is overtaken by the Colchian fleet, but Medea again saves the quest by tricking her brother Apsyrtos into meeting her. She sacrifices and dismembers him, tossing his body parts into the sea. Aeëtes stops his pursuit in order to retrieve and bury his son. By murdering her brother, Medea has saved her husband and is bound to him forever. On returning home, though, Jason places his throne above his love and marries another princess.

The gods help the Argonauts return home, and Zimmerman's play ends with the goddesses Athena and Hera—who put the whole quest in motion and for whom so many died—placing the heroes into the night sky as constellations.

This synopsis originally appeared in *First Folio*, a Teacher Curriculum guide created by the Education staff at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. Visit [ShakespeareTheatre.org/Education](http://ShakespeareTheatre.org/Education) to learn more. ♦

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: **APOLLONIUS OF RHODES**

**Apollonius of Rhodes** is an ancient Greek poet known for composing *Argonautika*, an epic poem that details the quest of Jason and the Argonauts to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Apollonius was born in Alexandria—a city in present day Egypt that was founded by Alexander the Great—during the Ptolemaic period. Although the exact date of his birth is unknown, it is believed that he was born sometime between 296 and 260 B.C.E.

Most of what is known about Apollonius of Rhodes comes from two biographical written accounts (called “lives”) which were attached to the text of *Argonautika* as additional comments (called *scholia*). It appears that both of the “lives” written about Apollonius were derived from a third account that has since been lost.

From these accounts, we know that Apollonius was a student of Callimachus, a poet and prolific librarian at the Library of Alexandria, the largest library in the world and an academic hub in ancient Greece. It is thought that Apollonius also served as a librarian at the Library of Alexandria.

As a student, Apollonius composed his first version of *Argonautika* and recited the epic poem in public. It is said that his recitation was met with so much disapproval that Apollonius fled to Rhodes, a Greek island not far from the coast of present day Turkey. Of those who disapproved of Apollonius’s epic poem was Callimachus. Apollonius and Callimachus are known to have engaged in an intellectual quarrel. The two had differing literary tastes and disparate views on the goals of literature. Callimachus’ literary ideology fell in line with popular ideology of the time. By the Ptolemaic period in Ancient Greek society, academics were more interested in analyzing and commenting on extant works than writing original work. Epic poetry was out of fashion in Alexandria.

When Apollonius arrived in Rhodes, it appears that he rewrote his poem, and recited it there to great success. It is said that the success of his recitation in Rhodes led Apollonius to call himself Rhodian and is the reason we know him as Apollonius of Rhodes today. One of the “lives” states that Apollonius eventually returned to Alexandria, where his poem was met with a much more welcoming response.

Although it is not known where, or how Apollonius died, he is believed to have died sometime around 246 B.C.E. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the details of Apollonius’ life, his writing has certainly endured. While it is also evident in his verse and meter that Apollonius looked to Homer for inspiration for the writing of epic poetry, it is evident that the poet Virgil looked to Apollonius for inspiration after the Romans took over Alexandria and the Roman Empire began to flourish. ♦

Edited from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/830/830-h/830-h.html>

## ABOUT THE ADAPTOR: **MARY ZIMMERMAN**

**Mary Zimmerman** is a Tony® Award-winning director and playwright known for her theatrical adaptations of classical works of literature. She was born on August 23, 1960 in Lincoln, Nebraska. Both of Zimmerman's parents were professors and Zimmerman spent a significant time overseas as a child while her parents pursued their academic work. While in London at the age of five, Zimmerman stumbled across an outdoor rehearsal for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As Zimmerman watched a run of a scene, she was struck by the rehearsal's joyous and fun atmosphere. This experience seeing actors and theatre artists at work first sparked Zimmerman's interest in theatre.

Zimmerman went on to attend Northwestern University where she received a Bachelor of Science degree in theatre, as well as a Master of Arts and a Ph.D. in performance studies. She now a professor in Northwestern's Performance Studies department.

In the early 1990s, Zimmerman began adapting classical tales and works of literature for the stage. Her work has included theatrical adaptations of source material such as *The Thousand and One Nights*, *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Jungle Book*. In 1998, Zimmerman was named a recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship for her work.

Zimmerman is also prolific director—she often directs her own adaptations, and to much acclaim. She is a member of the Lookingglass Theatre Company and a resident director at the Goodman Theatre. In 2002, Zimmerman won a Tony for Best Direction of a Play for her adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Zimmerman adapted and directed Apollonius of Rhodes' epic poem, *Argonautika*, in 2006.

In 2015, Zimmerman discussed her process for staging an adaptation with *The Los Angeles Times*. When she is working on a new adaptation, Zimmerman often begins rehearsals without a script—she is interested in shaping the text along with the actors and other theatre artists involved in the project.



Mary Zimmerman 2016

"I write the text, bit by bit, the night before rehearsal [...] I'm very inspired by who's in the cast and the situation [of the world] at the time of our performance, the set we've come up with. There's a very vivid, lively, organic quality to the process. ... I love being present at the moment of discovery; I love figuring things out; I love the combustion of the idea in the room when it all falls together. ... We're growing up together in the text. It's being made by all of us." ♦

Edited from: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-ca-cm-mary-zimmerman-quotes-20151129-htmllstory.html>,  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Zimmerman>, and  
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-remarkable-mary-zimmerman-20140518-story.html>

## HISTORY OF JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS: A TIMELINE

### 2300-700 B.C.E.

The Bronze Age in ancient Greece. This historical period is characterized by the use of bronze to make tools and weapons, the specialization of jobs, and the invention of the wheel.

### 1500-1200 B.C.E.

Mycenaean Civilization began to flourish in ancient Greece. Early in this period, Greek explorers began to embark on expeditions to the east. The tale of the Jason and the Argonauts may have developed later in this period as an explanation for the start of these expeditions.

### c. 1300 B.C.E.

The approximate time setting for the story of Jason and the Argonauts. The story is thought to take place about one generation before the Trojan War.

### c. 762 B.C.E.

Epic poet Homer sets down the story of *The Iliad* in writing. Homer is credited as the first person to write down or compile these mythological stories.

### c. 750 B.C.E.

Homer references Jason's tale in *The Odyssey*.

### c. 750-650 B.C.E.

Hesiod, a Greek poet, references Jason and the Golden Fleece in his work

### c. 700 B.C.E.

The poet Eumelos sets the tale of the Golden Fleece in Aia, a land that was thought to be the eastern edge of the world.

### c. 570 B.C.E.

The earliest known physical depiction of the Argo is created. It is in a frieze sculpture at an ancient treasury building in Delphi.

### 462 B.C.E.

The Fourth Pythian Ode of Pindar is composed. It is the first written account that details the full story of Jason and the Argonauts.

### 431 B.C.E.

Euripides' play, *Medea*, is first performed as a part of the Dionysian festival, a theatrical festival in honor of Dionysus, the god of theatre and wine held in Athens. *Medea* tells the story of Medea's revenge on Jason after he betrays her.

### c. 296-260 B.C.E.

Apollonius of Rhodes is born. In his youth, he composes the epic poem, *Argonautika*.

### c. 50 C.E.

Roman playwright, Seneca, writes *Medea*, a retelling of the conflict between Medea and Jason.

### c. 70 C.E.

Roman poet Gaius Valerius Flaccus composes his own version of *Argonautika* based on the work of Apollonius of Rhodes. Valerius's version appears unfinished as it ends mid-speech during Jason's marriage to Medea. It is unclear whether the remainder of the poem is lost or if Valerius never finished it.

### c. 300 C.E.

An anonymous author writes *Orphic Argonautika*, a retelling of Jason's journey through Orpheus's eyes.

### c. 700-800 C.E.

Mythographers employed by the Vatican attempt to piece together Jason's journey.

### 1454-1467

Raoul Lefèvre composes an epic to commemorate the life of Jason called *Histoire de Jason*.

### 1635

French playwright, Pierre Corneille, writes a version of Medea's tragedy called *Médée*.

### 1853

Nathaniel Hawthorne presents the myth of the Golden Fleece in his book, *Tanglewood Tales*, a storybook for children.

### 1963

Don Chaffey directs a film adaptation of the myth called *Jason and the Argonauts*.

### 1973

John Gardner writes *Jason and Medeia*, a 500-page epic poem based on the myth.

### 2006

Mary Zimmerman adapts Apollonius of Rhodes' epic poem into the play, *Argonautika*.

Edited from: *Jason and the Argonauts Through the Ages* by Jason Colavito, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014



## ORAL TRADITIONS AND EPIC POETRY



"Ulysses deriding Polyphemus  
Homer's Odyssey" by Joseph Mallord  
William Turner, 1829. The National Gallery

**For centuries** before Greek myths were set down in writing, they were passed down from generation to generation through spoken word. Mythical stories were created in order to explain the phenomena of the natural world. These tales tell of gods and goddesses intervening in the trajectory of mortals' lives and helped to establish a common cultural vocabulary. Often, storytellers in ancient Greece would travel from town to town to tell common tales, usually setting their story to music. Eventually, myths and stories became woven into the cultural and collective conscious of ancient Greek society. Nevertheless, different versions of common stories existed, and often storytellers would add their own personal flair or embellishment to well-known tales. The story of Jason and Argonauts as well as the story of Jason and Medea existed as oral tales long before any poet or playwright wrote their stories down.

Around 800 B.C.E., however, a new form of storytelling emerged—that of epic poetry. Homer is credited as the first western epic poet for his work in setting down the

stories of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in writing. Epic poems are long, narrative poems that typically tell of some grand and difficult journey. They often are written in elevated language and meter, and center on a hero who has some connection to the gods and whose actions are important to history and humanity. It is thought that epic poems derived from episodic stories that were gradually unified into a singular narrative.

While myths were typically used as explanations for otherwise mysterious natural occurrences, epic poems tend to focus on a character's heroism. Epics typically open with an invocation of a muse in which the author or narrator of the epic calls upon a goddess to inspire the following story. Often, the poet opens the work by clearly stating the theme of the poem. Epics are known for their use of long formal speeches given by main characters. Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautika* uses epic poetry as the narrative form to tell of Jason's journey to recover the Golden Fleece from Colchis. ♦

Edited from: <http://www.auburn.edu/~downejm/epicbasics.html>

## ANCIENT GREEK SOCIETY

The legacy of ancient Greek philosophy, politics, and art is tremendous. Much of contemporary Western democratic systems of government, language, and philosophical thought is rooted in ancient Greek tradition.

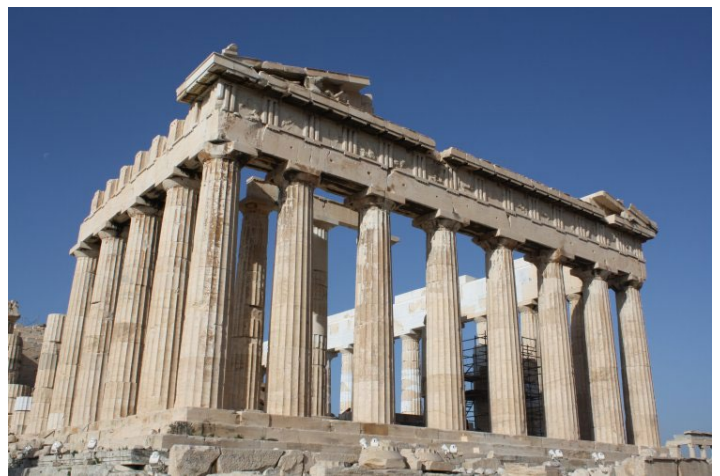
We can think of ancient Greek civilization as being broken up into a number of specific time periods, each characterized by different philosophical, political, and artistic thought.

Two early Greek civilizations were Mycenae and Minoan. These civilizations existed up until about 1200 B.C.E. and 1400 B.C.E. respectively. This was the time the great mythological warriors such as Jason as well as Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus are said to have lived. Both of these civilizations fell—perhaps in part because of the drain of the Trojan War and civil wars that followed.

Greece then entered a “Dark Age,” during which many former settlements were abandoned, and artistic production was limited. This period lasted from about 1200 B.C.E. until 800 B.C.E.

The Archaic period in Greek society lasted from approximately 800-500 B.C.E. This period saw great advances in art, poetry, and technology, but most notably, it saw the rise of Greek city-states. City-states—called *poleis* in Greek—were communities that developed their own forms of government, imposed their own taxes, and raised their own armies. These city-states emerged as older villages or kingdoms began to expand and evolve. Many hereditary kings lost power in the formation of city-states, and the governments that replaced them were typically comprised of a small group of aristocrats. In order to escape some of the political tensions that were building in larger, urban city-states, many of which were experiencing great population growth, many men and women turned to emigration. This led to a period of colonization in the Greek isles—many smaller city-states began to form throughout the Mediterranean, in North Africa, and in Asia Minor.

The Classical period followed. Athens had won a great victory over the Persian Empire, and their victory paved the way for a period of peace and prosperity. The Classical period was the golden age for Athens—the Acropolis was built, a democratic system of government was established, philosophical thinkers such as Plato began work, and playwrights such as Sophocles began to write. This age lasted from about 480 B.C.E. to 330 B.C.E. This period ended when conflict between the city-states of Sparta and Athens left Athens in ruins and Sparta financially drained.



TOP: “Vessel” Artist unknown, c. 1750-1500 B.C.E. (early Bronze Age).  
Metropolitan Museum of Art

BOTTOM: Parthenon, constructed in the Classical Age

Alexander the Great rose to power in the late Classical Period and began his quest to expand the civilization. He conquered Persia, invaded Egypt, and made territorial gains in Asia Minor. This was the start of the Hellenistic Age. In Egypt, Alexander had the city of Alexandria named after him. It was during this period that Apollonius of Rhodes wrote his epic poem about Jason—a man who was also exploring and expanding his knowledge of Mediterranean geography much like Alexander was spreading Grecian and Hellenistic culture to new territories. The Hellenistic Age continued until Romans began to take hold of Greek lands. By 31 B.C.E. Greece was part of the Roman Empire. ♦

Edited from: <https://www.ancient.eu/greece/>

## MYTHICAL FIGURES: **GODS AND MONSTERS IN GREEK TALES**

**The interaction** between gods, monsters, and men is characteristic of epic stories. Often, at least one god or goddess follows the hero of the epic to ensure their safe journey. Such is the case in *Argonautika* as both Hera and Athena watch over Jason and the Argonauts in their quest to return the Golden Fleece to Iolcos. The epic hero is also likely to encounter many mythical monsters on their voyage. These monsters challenge the hero, testing their will, strength, leadership, loyalty, and morality. In this sense, encounters with monsters provide the epic hero with opportunities for great growth as much as they present opportunities for peril.

Greek gods and monsters developed out of myth. In 1955, the poet and scholar Robert Graves wrote, "Myth has two main functions. The first is to answer the sort of awkward questions that children ask, such as 'who made the world? How will it end? Who was the first man? Where do souls go after death?'... The second function of myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs." Mythical gods and monsters played a significant role in both functions. The gods often create or manipulate the social structures of the humans, and monsters often uphold those structures or uphold natural phenomena. ♦



"Landscape with the Expulsion of the Harpies" by Paolo Fiammingo, about 1590. The National Gallery



"Boreas and Orithyia from 'Game of Mythology' (Jue de la Mythologie)" by Stefano Della Bella, 1644. Metropolitan Museum of Art

## THE HERO'S JOURNEY

**The main event in epic poetry** is the hero's journey. A hero sets out on a quest, whether to recover a stolen item, to return home, or to find a new home. In pursuit of their quest, the hero is met with many challenges and calls to action. They usually find a mentor or group of friends as they travel through unfamiliar territory, and they typically succeed, to some extent, in their quest. While the hero's journey is an archetype for epic poetry—one that is seen in *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, and *The Aeneid*—it has become an archetypal structure for all kinds of stories. Stories like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Moana*, all follow the structure of the hero's journey.

Joseph Campbell, a literary scholar who specialized in the study of comparative mythology, articulated an archetypal series of steps a hero must make in their journey:

### THE STEPS:

1. **The Ordinary World:** The hero's home, the safe place where the hero has a typical way of life.
 

At the start of *Argonautika*, we meet Jason in his Ordinary World as he travels to Iolcos to wish his uncle, King Pelias, a happy birthday.
2. **The Call to Adventure:** The hero is issued a challenge or a quest. This call sets the story into motion by disrupting the comfort of the hero's ordinary world.
 

In *Argonautika*, the call to adventure occurs when King Pelias issues Jason the task of retrieving the Golden Fleece in order to be considered next in line to the Throne of Thessaly.
3. **The Refusal of the Call:** At this stage, the hero is reluctant to accept the challenge or quest issued. The reluctance typically stems from fear of the dangers the quest presents and fear of failure.
 

In *Argonautika*, Jason is aware of the dangers this challenge represents. King Aeëtes in Colchis is known for his ruthlessness, and the sea trip to Colchis is thought to be unforgiving. In fact, Idmon has a vision that shows the voyage to be a deadly disaster.
4. **Encouragement to Take the Call:** The hero encounters a mentor who encourages the hero to take the call to adventure.
 

In *Argonautika*, Hera convinces Poseidon to grant the Argo permission to sail the sea.
5. **Crossing the First Threshold:** The stage in which the hero finally commits to the journey and departs from his Ordinary World.
 

In *Argonautika*, this is when the Argo sets sail.
6. **Tests, Allies, and Enemies:** No longer in their Ordinary World, the hero must learn the rules of the Special World. They face tests, encounter allies, and challenge enemies. In this stage, the hero learns who can be trusted.
 

In *Argonautika*, Jason and the Argonauts' journey to Colchis represents this stage in the journey. Jason and his crew face monsters, temptation, giants, and clashing rocks. They meet allies and enemies on the islands where they stop.
7. **Approach to the Inmost Cave:** At this stage, the hero prepares to enter the heart of the journey. They have withstood tests and challenges, and now strategize how they will attain the journey's reward.
 

In *Argonautika*, this stage commences when the Argonauts arrive at Colchis, and meet with King Aeëtes. Aeëtes issues Jason a challenge he must complete in order to retrieve the fleece, and Medea falls in love with Jason.
8. **Ordeal:** The central life-and-death crisis during which the hero faces real danger. It is the hero's most challenging test yet, and they teeter on the brink of failure.
 

In *Argonautika*, this happens when Jason attempts to complete the challenge Aeëtes has issued. Jason must tame fire-breathing bulls to plow a field, plant the field with serpents' teeth, and then fight the army of skeletons the planted serpents' teeth yield. While Jason is successful in this, Aeëtes still refuses to hand over the Golden Fleece..
9. **Reward:** The hero retrieves the reward they have sought.
 

In *Argonautika*, this is when Jason (with the help of Medea) sneaks past the dragons guarding the Golden Fleece and takes the Fleece back to the Argo.

## THE HERO'S JOURNEY CONTINUED...

**10. Road Back to the Ordinary World:** The hero must return to the Ordinary World. The road back may challenge the hero. An event should prompt the hero to begin their return and re-establish the central dramatic question of the story.

In *Argonautika*, this stage begins when Jason returns to the Argo with the Golden Fleece and with Medea. The event that sparks the return is when Medea kills her brother to protect Jason, the Fleece, and the Argonauts. The road back is not smooth for the Argonauts.

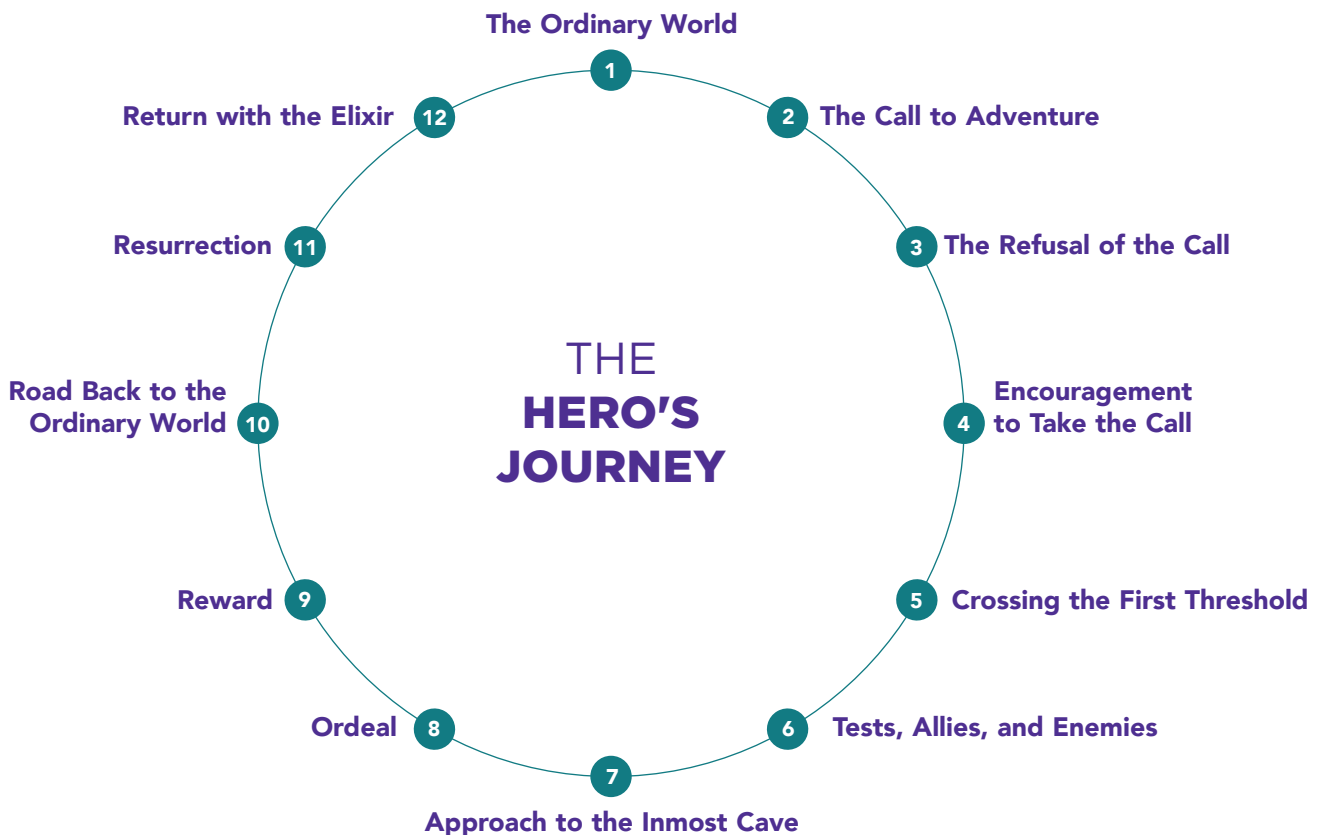
**11. Resurrection:** This is the hero's most dangerous meeting with death. The hero must apply all they have learned in their journey. Others' lives may be at stake, and the Hero must prove their heroic status. This stage also represents a cleansing. The hero is reborn as they re-enter the Ordinary World.

In *Argonautika*, this stage occurs when the Argonauts must carry the Argo across a desert. Many of the Argonauts perish during this phase of the quest—the desert proves to be unforgiving. Despite Jason's inability to save the members of his crew, Jason treks on with the ship and with the Golden Fleece.

**12. Return with the Elixir:** The final stage of a hero's journey. The hero returns to the Ordinary World and claims their greatest reward. During this stage, the hero shares the Elixir of their journey with others. This Elixir could be a physical potion or reward, or it could be newfound wisdom, love, or experience.

In *Argonautika*, Jason returns to Iolcos with the Golden Fleece. He eventually claims the throne to Thessaly, but only after betraying a promise he made to Medea. Here, Jason's story takes a tragic turn as Medea exacts a brutal revenge on Jason, and Jason ends up dying alone by the wreckage of the Argo. However, one could also consider immortality as the Elixir of the journey as each of the Argonauts who perished are immortalized in constellations in the night sky, to be remembered for their heroic feats. ♦

Edited from: <https://msu.edu/~jdowell/pdf/JosephCampbellPathHero.pdf>



## AFTER THE GOLDEN FLEECE: **MEDEA**

**Jason's journey** to retrieve the Golden Fleece is one that has endured since the Bronze Age. However, the journey of the Argonauts is only part of Jason's story. In *Argonautika*, King Pelias dies before Jason returns to Iolcos with the Golden Fleece. However, in other versions of the myth, King Pelias is still in power when Jason returns. In these versions, Pelias refuses to step down from the throne despite the promise he made that should Jason return to Iolcos with the Golden Fleece the throne would be his. In retaliation against Pelias' refusal to uphold his promise, Medea devises a plan to have Pelias killed. She tricks Pelias' daughters into killing him and cutting up his body under the false pretense that doing so would make Pelias younger. Medea's actions force Jason and Medea to flee from Iolcos and seek refuge in Corinth. Creon, the king of Corinth, embraces the couple.

In Corinth, Jason discovers that he could once again climb through the ranks and become a king if he were to marry Glauce, the daughter of Creon. By the time Jason discovers this, he and Medea already have two young children, and have established a life together in Corinth. Nevertheless, Jason becomes engaged to Glauce. Upon the engagement, Creon banishes Medea from Corinth. He allows her one final day in Corinth before entering exile. During this single day, Medea devises and exacts revenge on Jason and Glauce. Medea famously tricks Jason into giving Glauce an enchanted crown and cloak.

The crown and cloak catch fire the moment Glauce puts them on. Creon attempts to save Glauce from the flames of the crown and cloak but perishes with his daughter in the process. Medea then slays her own children as revenge against Jason's betrayal. Medea escapes from Corinth on a chariot drawn by dragons.

This tale is the subject and plot of Euripides' play, *Medea*. Euripides

was a tragedian born in Athens around the year 484 B.C.E. He was born to a well-off family and began his involvement in theatre as an actor. However, after some time, Euripides began to focus on playwrighting.

Every year, Athens hosted a large theatre festival in celebration of Dionysus, the god of theatre and wine. Part of this festival was a tragedy competition. Typically, three playwrights would mount productions of tragic plays for adjudication. Playwrights Sophocles and Aeschylus were often Euripides' competitors. Euripides' work was not particularly successful in these competitions. Over his lifetime, only four of his 90 plays ever won first-prize. Part of his unpopularity might have had to do with Euripides' manipulation of the structure of traditional tragedy writing.

Typically, the central characters in tragedies were society's elite. However, Euripides wrote significant roles for intelligent female characters and incorporated ordinary citizens as characters in his work.

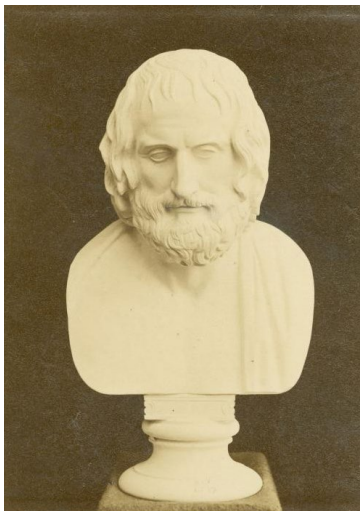
Euripides' version of Medea's story is the most well-known version of that part of the myth today, however he was not the only one to tackle the tale. Roman playwright Seneca wrote his own adaptation of the myth around 50 C.E.; French playwright Pierre Corneille wrote a version in 1635, and John Gardner wrote an epic poem entitled *Jason and Medea* in 1973 that paints Medea in a more sympathetic light. ♦



LEFT: "Marble Head and Torso of Athena" 1st-2nd Century C.E. Metropolitan Museum of Art



RIGHT: "Medea" by Charles Antoine Coypel, c.1715. Metropolitan Museum of Art



"Bust of Euripides" Artist and date unknown. New York Public Library Digital Collections

## THEMES

### FATE VERSUS FREE WILL

By the time the Argo sets sail, the fate of the Argonauts appears to be sealed. Just before the ship launches, Idmon has a vision in which he glimpses how each of the Argonauts eventually perish. This prompts the question: are the trajectories of the Argonauts' lives predetermined? The idea of predetermination plays a significant role in Greek mythology. In plays and epics, we often see characters fighting against or attempting to evade their prophesied ends. In fact, that is how the story of Jason and the Argonauts begins. King Pelias sends Jason on a quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece in an attempt to skirt the prophecy he has heard that indicates Jason may be the one who kills Pelias. In the play's version of the myth, Pelias's plan is successful to some extent: Pelias dies while Jason is on his quest. In this sense, the prophecy King Pelias has heard about how he will die is not correct and therefore does not appear to be predetermined in the same way that the fate of the Argonauts is.

However, one could argue that the Argonauts make their own fate—that it is the culmination of their acts of free will that lead them to their demise. After having a vision in which he sees his own death, Idmon decides to embark on the journey to the Golden Fleece nevertheless. Athena sees that Idmon is distraught after he describes his vision to the Argonauts, and she tells him that he may resign from the quest. However, Idmon continues on. In what appears to be an act of free will, Idmon seems to seal his fate.

Additionally, Jason appears to prophesy his fate when he makes vows to Medea. After retrieving the Golden Fleece, Jason says:

"I swear,  
if I ever forget this night, what you have done to  
save my life, your flight from your father and your  
home,  
then let my triumph over the bulls  
and the soldiers that spring from the earth and  
the Fleece itself



"Jason swearing Eternal Affection to Medea" by Jean-François Detroy, 1742-3.  
The National Gallery

be worthless and hateful to me.  
Let your magic turn against me in my own home,  
let me be terrified, and let no one be near to help  
me;  
and if you can think of more dreadful things to do,  
add them, for I shall have deserved the worst that  
you can do  
as you turn away from me."

This is exactly what happens. Jason appears to predict his own future in this proclamation—a proclamation that appears to be an act of free will.

The relationship between destiny and free will becomes blurred—the two forces appear to act together as the story of Jason and the Argonauts plays out.

## THEMES CONTINUED...

### HEROISM

The tale of Jason and the Argonauts takes place in what has come to be known as the Heroic Age—a time in which mythological champions such as Hercules, Achilles, and Odysseus also lived. A number of the heroes of the time were half-gods or god-like in their strength, determination, and skill. Jason is often considered to be a member of this heroic cohort for his journey to retrieve the Golden Fleece from King Aeëtes in Colchis. Heroes, by definition, are individuals who are worthy of admiration for their courage, achievements, or noble qualities. While Jason is technically successful in his challenging journey, he is not always the model of a hero. In fact, Hercules, one of Jason's Argonauts, seems to fit the mold for a hero more closely. While all of the other Argonauts make land in Lemnos and stay there for two months, Hercules stays with the Argo. He is the one who eventually reminds all of the Argonauts of the purpose of their journey. Furthermore, it is Hercules who saves Andromeda from a sea monster without any desire for reward, and it is Hercules who stays behind to search for Hylas after the Argonauts decide to continue to Colchis. While Hercules' selfless acts juxtapose with his outward appearance and bravado, they also serve as a foil to Jason's more selfish and unheroic actions such as betraying Medea in order to secure a higher status.

### LEADERSHIP

Before setting sail, the Argonauts elect Jason as their leader. The crew's inclination toward entrusting Jason with a position of leadership is justifiable, as Jason was responsible for recruiting the Argonauts, and his confidence in the ability of the quest to be a success is high. While Jason does succeed in his initial quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece and return it to Iolcos, the Argonauts do not—under Jason's leadership, most members of his crew perish on the return. In this sense, his success as a leader becomes marred by the fact that majority of those he led did not survive the trek.

Despite Jason's election as the formal leader of the voyage, some Argonauts prove themselves to be leaders in their own right. Hercules reminds the crew of their journey's purpose and boosts morale. Tiphys looks out for the greater good of the crew when he confronts Jason about the potential of endangering all of the Argonauts in choosing to enrage and engage in a battle with Medea's brother and fiancé. Pollux stands up for Dymas by fighting Amycus.



"Vision of Medea" by Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1828. Tate.

### LOYALTY

Despite the mammoth task in which Jason has asked the Argonauts to participate in sailing to Colchis and back, the Argonauts embark on the journey nonetheless, their loyalty to Jason and to the mission strong.

Stronger even than the Argonauts' loyalty to the journey is Hylas' loyalty to Hercules and Hercules' loyalty, in return, to Hylas. In Hylas' introduction, he says this of his relationship to Hercules:

"We are companions  
under the sky,  
and we'll be together  
till the day we die."

Hercules demonstrates his loyalty to Hylas when he chooses to stay behind and search for Hylas as Jason and the rest of the Argonauts continue on. Hercules gives up his ability to stake a claim on the achievement of returning the Golden Fleece to Iolcos out of a dedication to his friend and an unwillingness to leave Hylas.

Occasionally, loyalty entails sacrifice. In her loyalty and her love for Jason, Medea severs ties with her family, her fiancé, and her home. She assists Jason in passing Aeëtes' test and helps Jason steal the Golden Fleece. The tragedy of Medea's loyalty to Jason is that when the opportunity arises for Jason to be crowned King of Thessaly, his loyalties change, and he betrays Medea for another woman—one closer to the crown. Ultimately, however, Jason pays a heavy price for his betrayal of Medea's loyalty to him. ♦



## GLOSSARY

**AEËTES:** The king of Colchis and guardian of the Golden Fleece. Father of Medea and Apsyrtos, he tells Jason to complete three tasks before he can retrieve the Fleece, but reneges on his promise once Jason has the Fleece. Jason and Medea flee from her father, who abandons his pursuit only after she has dismembered her brother and the King stops to recover his body.

**ANAUROS:** The river in Iolcos across which Jason carried Hera, disguised as an old woman. In the crossing, Jason lost a sandal, and thus traveled with one bare foot to the capitol. This fulfilled a prophecy told to King Pelias that a one-shoed man would try to take his throne.

**APHRODITE:** Greek goddess of beauty and love, she was born as an adult rising from the sea. She was married but frequently unfaithful to Hephaestus, the blacksmith god of technology.

**APOLLONIUS:** Alexandrian librarian who wrote the first formal version of the Argonautika. Late in life he moved from Egypt to Rhodes, for which he is now known as Apollonius of Rhodes.

**ARGO:** The ship of Jason and the heroes of the Golden Fleece. Constructed by Argos, with a magical branch built into it (or, in some versions, strapped to the bow), the boat carried the Argonauts (literally, "sailors of the Argo") throughout their entire voyage. Ultimately it was abandoned and left to rot: while sleeping in its shade, an aged Jason was killed when the stern broke and crushed him.

**ATHENA:** Goddess of wisdom, Athena was born fully formed from the head of her father, Zeus. Always armed, and attended by an owl, she was the protector and guide to such heroes as Perseus, Odysseus, Jason, and Hercules.

**ATALANTA:** The only female Argonaut, and great hunter. Abandoned at birth, she was protected by the goddess Artemis. In some versions she is wounded at Colchis and healed by Medea.

**CASTOR and POLLUX:** Demigod sons of Leda and Zeus, the brothers of Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra. Also known as Polydeuces, Pollux serves his fellow Argonauts by killing Amycus in a boxing match when the ruler refuses to let the Argo sail on without answering his challenge.

**FLACCUS:** First-century Roman poet who wrote a version of Argonautika, of which today we have only a fragment.

**HERA:** Primary goddess, and both wife and older sister of Zeus. King Pelias earned the fury of Hera when he murdered Sidero in a temple dedicated to the goddess. Hera used Jason as her instrument of punishment, first offering to help him as he carried her across a river. Hera offered continual support to the hero throughout his quest, enlisting the help of Aphrodite and Athena, and encouraging the love of Medea. As part of her conflict with Hercules, Hera inspired the hero to leave the Argonauts.

**HERCULES:** Greek demigod, son of Zeus and Alcmene. Although his Greek name—Herakles—means "glory of Hera," the goddess was envious of him and angry at her husband's infidelity. She repeatedly punished Hercules, inciting him to kill his own sons. In penance, Hercules performed the famous twelve tasks for King Eurystheus. Hercules had a companion in the young Prince Hylas, who joined him as an Argonaut. When Hylas wandered off and was bewitched by river nymphs, Hercules refused to return to the ship until the prince was found. Unable or unwilling to stay, the Argo sailed and left both behind.



"The Argo" by Constantine Volankis, before 1907.

## GLOSSARY CONTINUED...

**IDMON:** Seer who sailed with the other Argonauts. The demigod son of Apollo and Asteria, he foresaw his own death if he chose to travel with Jason, but he accepted his fate to sail with the other heroes.

**IOLCOS:** Historical city on the east coast of Greece, and home of Aison, Pelias and Jason.

**JASON:** son of Aison, and rightful king of Iolcos. Saved when Pelias hunted all of Aison's heirs, Jason was raised by the centaur Chiron. One of the few mortal Argonauts, Jason broke an oath to love only Medea when he took Glauce as a second wife. Having helped Jason through the Fleece quest, Hera then punished her champion by abandoning him and stripping him of power. Jason died alone, when the rotting hull of the Argo fell on him while he slept in its shade.

**COLCHIS:** Historical kingdom on the eastern Black Sea, in what is now Georgia, and home of King Aeëtes, Medea, and the Golden Fleece.

**LEMNOS:** Greek island in the northern Aegean, this was the mythological home of women who had neglected the worship of Aphrodite. As punishment, all of the men were killed, and the women were left alone until the arrival of the Argonauts. The questing men stayed on the island for a year, fathering a number of male children who would repopulate the island, but the Argo and her crew finally sailed on at the suggestion of Hercules.

**MEDEA:** Daughter of Aeëtes, the most powerful sorceress of the Greek world. Hera and Aphrodite conspired to have Medea fall in love with Jason and help him achieve the Fleece. Medea is the key to the Argonauts' successes from their arrival in Colchis to their triumphant return home. Medea chooses Jason over her father and elopes with him, killing her own brother to aid their escape. After being cleansed of this murder by the goddess Circe, Medea and Jason return to Iolcos. In some versions, Medea ultimately kills their children when he takes a second wife for political reasons.

**ORPHEUS:** The son of the muse Calliope, and greatest musician of Greek mythology. Orpheus was an Argonaut, who helped the quest to pass the deadly Sirens. The beautiful nymphs sang music that lured sailors and their ships to crash on the Sirens' rocks, but Orpheus played music more beautiful than theirs and silenced them.

**PELIAS:** Uncle to Jason, and wrongful king of Iolcos, and son of Tyro. Because his mother was mistreated by Sidero, Tyro's mother-in-law, Pelias murdered the older woman while she sought sanctuary in a temple of Hera. Later, Pelias usurped the throne from his half-brother, Aison, and killed as many of Aison's family as he could find. For this treachery, Hera cursed Pelias and sent Jason to avenge the double wrongs. Pelias sent Jason on the quest of the Golden Fleece, but ultimately it was Medea who tricked Pelias' daughters into murdering their own father.

**PHRIXUS and HELLE:** Demigod children of Athamas and the goddess Nephele. Their stepmother Ino was jealous and plotted to have them killed. Nephele sent a flying, golden ram to save the children. In their escape, Helle lost her grip and fell into the sea, while Phrixus landed in the Colchis, where he married the princess and presented the fleece of the golden ram to the king.

**PHINEAS:** Blind prophet guarded by harpies who provides clues to Jason after the Argonauts rescue him from the harpies. Phineas reveals the location of Colchis and tells Jason how to pass the Clashing Rocks.

**SYMPLEGADES:** Greek name for the Clashing Rocks, which slam together and crush ships that try to navigate between them. Jason passes through with Phineas' advice, letting a dove fly ahead—if the dove passes through, the Argonauts will survive.

**ZETES and CALAIS:** demigod brothers and sons of Boreas, god of the north wind. The brothers had the gift of flight, and in some versions of the Argonautika they save Phineas by driving off the harpies. ♦

This glossary originally appeared in *First Folio*, a Teacher Curriculum guide created by the Education staff at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. Visit [ShakespeareTheatre.org/Education](http://ShakespeareTheatre.org/Education) to learn more.

## ADDITIONAL **RESOURCES**

### EPIC POEMS

*The Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius. Translated and edited by William H. Race. Published by Harvard University Press in 2008

*The Iliad* by Homer. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. Published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in 2004.

*The Odyssey* by Homer. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. Published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in 1998.

### BOOKS

*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell. Published by World Library in 2008.

*The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers. Published by Turtleback Books in 2012.

*Jason and the Argonauts Through the Ages* by Jason Colavito. Published by McFarland & Company in 2014.

### PLAYS

*Medea* by Euripides. Translated by Philip Vellacott. Published by Penguin Classics in 1963.

### FILM

*Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) Directed by Don Chaffey.

### PODCAST

Ancient Hero Podcast  
<http://ancientheroespodcast.com>

### ONLINE RESOURCES

Full text of *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes courtesy of Project Gutenberg

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/830/830-h/830-h.htm>

Ancient Hero Podcast Blog

<http://ancientheroespodcast.com/blog>

Crash Course World History: The Bronze Age

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErOitC7OyHk>

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Alicia Green .....	<i>Education Director and Editor</i>
Rebecca Wilson .....	<i>Education Associate</i>
Craig Schwartz .....	<i>Production Photography</i>
Teresa English .....	<i>Graphic Design</i>
Rachael McNamara .....	<i>Author</i>



Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez-Elliott  
Producing Artistic Directors

ADDRESS 3352 E Foothill Blvd  
Pasadena, CA 91107

TEL 626.356.3100

FAX 626.356.3120

EMAIL [info@anoisewithin.org](mailto:info@anoisewithin.org)

WEB [anoisewithin.org](http://anoisewithin.org)