

Arts & Letters

THE ARGONAUTIKA.

By Apollonios Rhodios.

Translated, with introduction, commentary, and glossary, by Peter Green. Univ. of California Press.

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Seven centuries separate Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from Virgil's *Aeneid*. The Roman epic of the first century B.C. is almost as distant from the Greek epics as we are from Chaucer. Yet these three poems, too often carelessly lumped together, define what even the most curious contemporary reader is likely to know

of the Greco-Roman epic tradition. Between Homer's age and Virgil's, epic poetry continued to be written, but time and chance, the most absolute of critics, called the shots, and these poems are almost entirely lost. What survives—with one great exception—is in tatters: titles, fragments, traces of what did exist, hints about what might have existed. The exception is *The Argonautika* of Apollonios Rhodios, from the middle of the third century B.C.,

an account of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece and the beginnings of his ill-fated dalliance with Medea. The poem was sufficiently strong to influence Roman poets hundreds of years later, and, in *Medea*, Virgil found one model for his Dido.

In rough outline, the story is simple enough. Wicked King Pelias sets the young Greek prince Jason an impossible task to block his succession to the throne: bring back the Golden Fleece from Kolchis, at the eastern edge of the Black Sea. Jason assembles a crew of heroes from throughout Greece and sails on the god-built *Argo*. Books I and II describe the voyage out, up through the Hellespont and along the southern coast of the Black Sea. Book III is an extended treatment of the stay in Kolchis (in modern Georgia) and Medea's passion for Jason; in antiquity this was the most famous portion of the poem. Book IV sends the heroes home, by a new route that takes them across a goodly part of Europe and the Mediterranean.

The legend of the *Argo's* voyage was already familiar to Homer and probably originated in accounts of ancient Greek maritime exploration and commercial advance. (Achilles is, charmingly, a baby in his mother's arms in *The Argonautika*, watching the ship depart.) Apollonios the poet breathed life into the traditional story, even as Apollonios the scholar (he was head of the library at Alexandria) sorted out the details of its many, and often contradictory, episodic strands. The process of finding causes and explanations was a supremely

Alexandrian preoccupation, and inquiry into the roots of custom and ritual and geographical oddity crowds the poem. Apollonios set all the panoply of myth in a realistic landscape, as if the legend were history, and he gave the characters the emotions of individuals in whom his first audience would have had no difficulty recognizing themselves.

Apollonios's tale of grand adventure—of meddling gods and compromised heroes, of harpies, giants, dragons, perilous seas, magic, passion, and betrayal—is now as accessible to the English-reading public as it will ever be, thanks to a splendid new edition by Peter Green, a professor of classics at the University of Texas. His verse translation, using a stress line of the sort Richmond Lattimore developed for his translations of Homer, is lucid, engrossing, and fast moving, adjectives that do not necessarily apply to the original Greek. Hundreds of pages of additional materials frame the translation—an introduction up-to-the-minute in its scholarship, a commentary on all four books of the poem (which scholars will value as highly as lay readers), a glossary of names, and, blessedly, a set of maps. For English-readers, the wind to Kolchis now blows fair, and with something like the force Apollonios himself once conjured for it.

—James M. Morris

