Jason and the Argonauts

Jason was the son of Aeson who was the rightful king of Iolcus in Thessaly. However, Aeson’s brother, Pelias, had usurped the throne. Failing to have any son, Pelias feared that Aeson, or Jason as son of Aeson, might reclaim the throne.

As soon as Jason was born, his parents, fearing that Pelias would kill him, pretended that he had died, and they darkened their home as if in mourning. Secretly, they sent him away at night, clothed in purple, to be reared by the famous teacher, the immortal Centaur Cheiron.

There he lived for twenty years.

At the time that Jason was growing into young manhood, Pelias consulted an oracle, which warned him of a dreadful fate: his death would be near if a stranger came toward him with one foot bare. At first, Pelias did not understand the oracle. However, while he was performing the annual sacrifice to Poseidon, its meaning became clear.

All the citizens of Iolcus and the surrounding countryside were invited to the sacrifice to the Earthshaker. Golden-throned Hera waited near the Evenus River, disguised as an old crone, testing all strangers to see if they would offer to carry her across its swollen waters. No one offered until Jason, arriving from Cheiron’s cave on Mount Pelion, did so. Golden-throned Hera, angry at Pelias for neglecting to sacrifice to her as well as to Poseidon, caused Jason to lose one sandal in the muddy river bank. In order to arrive promptly at the sacrifice, he hurried on without it.

Pelias immediately noticed the young man who had one bare foot and asked him his name. Jason revealed his identity, to Pelias’s secret horror. Jason stated that he had come to recover for his father the throne of Iolcus, which rightfully belonged to him.

Pelias pretended to acknowledge Jason’s claim but told him that the spirit of Phrixus summoned the Greeks to rescue the golden fleece from the barbarians. He swore by Olympian Zeus that he would relinquish his kingdom if Jason would retrieve the fleece. Jason was delighted because he knew that Perseus and others had gained glory from tasks they had performed in various lands, and he was eager to earn fame for himself.

What was this golden fleece that Pelias wanted Jason to seek? It had a fascinating history. Before Jason was born, a king and queen named Athamas and Nephele ruled in northern Boeotia. They had two children, a boy, Phrixus, and a girl, Helle. Later, Athamas married a second wife, Ino, who plotted against the life of Phrixus so that her own children could inherit the throne. In order to save the children from their cruel stepmother, their mother Nephele procured the aid of Hermes the Way-finder. By magic means, the god brought with him an immense, winged ram with golden wool. He placed the children on the ram’s back instructing it to carry the children to Colchis, a kingdom near the Black Sea.

While the ram was crossing the narrow strait of water, which separated Europe from Asia, the girl, Helle, fell off and was drowned. Ever since, this strait has been called the Hellespont in her memory. Phrixus managed to hang onto the ram and eventually reached Colchis. Its king, Aeëtes, gave him a royal welcome and decided to sacrifice the golden ram to gold-helmeted Ares, in honor of its successful flight.

First, of course, he carefully preserved its fleece and nailed it to a tree in a sacred grove, placing it in charge of an enormous, menacing dragon, which never slept.

From that time on, all brave Greeks longed to restore the golden fleece to Greece. They regarded it as a magnificent object, now lost to the barbarous King Aeëtes of Colchis.

Aeëtes was inhospitable to strangers because an oracle had told him that he would die whenever strangers arrived to remove the golden fleece. Therefore, Pelias, in deciding to send Jason to retrieve this valued object, believed that Jason would never return home. Hence, his own life and kingdom would be spared.

Proudly accepting his mission, Jason summoned Argus, the son of Phrixus, who, on Athena’s advice, built a fifty-oared ship, named the Argo after its builder. The ship was built near Mount Pelion, the site of Cheiron’s cave. Grey-eyed Athena had given Argus timbers from one of the oak trees in Dodona to use as the prow of the Argo. These trees, sacred to Zeus, would make sounds that could be interpreted as prophecies. Thus it was said that the prow of the Argo could speak. Moreover, it surpassed in size and equipment any other ship of its time.
When it was finished, Jason consulted an oracle that told him to gather together most of the renowned young men of Greece for his crew. Jason sought the best men he could find. They called themselves the Argonauts and there were fifty-four of them.

Among those who volunteered were: Heracles, the great mortal son of Zeus; the minstrel, Orpheus; Zetes and Calais, sons of Boreas, the north wind; Castor and Polydeuces, brothers of Helen of Troy; the brothers Telamon and Peleus, who would become the fathers of Ajax and Achilles; Laertes, one day to become the father of Odysseus; Atalanta, the maiden huntress; Admetus of Phere; Meleager of Calydon; and Argus. They all wanted Heracles to be their leader, but he declined because it was Jason’s expedition.

Jason stood upon the deck of the Argo and, holding a golden goblet in his hands, called upon Olympian Zeus to make their voyage successful. As a good omen, thunder pealed from the clouds and lightning flashed in response. The wicked Pelias glowed with delight when the Argonauts, with Jason as their captain, set sail for the island of Lemnos.

Lemnos was a strange place. No men lived on it. The women of Lemnos had murdered all their sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers because they wanted the island for themselves. Some writers say that because the Lemnian women had ignored gold-wreathed Aphrodite, she had caused their bodies to emit a foul odor, and for this reason their husbands had taken captive women from nearby Thrace and made love to them. In retaliation, the Lemnian women had murdered their men. Here the Argonauts spent a few days resting and relaxing.

Upon leaving Lemnos, the Argo ran into a ferocious storm, and the rowing was hard. Heracles, straining at his oar, broke it, and the Argonauts decided to make an emergency landing at Mysia, an island near the Sea of Marmara. There, Heracles went into the woods to cut a new oar from a tree. His best friend, Hylas, who was sent to fetch water, was seized by nymphs. Concealed beneath the water’s surface, they dragged him down to them. Heracles would not leave without Hylas Polyphemus heard Hylas shouting and thought that he was being pursued by pirates. While Heracles and Polyphemus searched in vain for Hylas, the ship sailed away. Heracles returned to King Eurystheus at Tiryns. Polyphemus founded a city in Mysia and became its king.

The Argo sailed to Bebryces, which was ruled by Amycus, son of Poseidon the Earthshaker. Amycus was a strong man who took great delight in compelling all strangers who arrived in his country to box, thereby killing them. He challenged the Argonauts to choose their bell boxer to fight him. Polydeuces accepted the challenge and struck him on the ear, thus killing him.

Next they came to Salmydessus in Thrace, where the blind prophet Phineus lived. Phineus was said to have been blinded by the gods for revealing the future to mortals and for telling the sons of Phrixus how to sail from Colchis to Greece. Not only was Phineas blinded; he was tormented by the Harpies. These were hideous birds with the faces of young girls, sharp claws, and the bodies of vultures. They were constantly hungry, and, since they had wings, whenever Phineus tried to eat a meal, they descended to his table and snatched most of his food, leaving the rest with a disgusting odor. Consequently, the unfortunate Phineus was always on the verge of starvation.

Phineus welcomed the Argonauts and promised to tell them how to find their way through the treacherous waters if they would free him from the Harpies. In order to trap the Harpies, the Argonauts placed Phineus’s dinner before him. When the Harpies flapped their wings over the table and snatched Phineus’s food, they had to reckon with Zetes and Calais, the two winged sons of the north wind. These two brave Argonauts fought off the Harpies and chased them into the heavens.

This so frightened the Harpies that they never returned, and Phineus was saved. Freed from the monstrous birds, he charted the course of the Argonauts and warned them about the dangerous, gigantic Clashing Rocks. Whenever the winds drove these rocks against each other, no ship could pass between them. When the rocks were shrouded by mist, not even a bird could penetrate the space between them. Phineus’s advice was to send a dove between the rocks, and to sail on only if the bird had flown through safely.

The Argonauts thanked Phineus for his advice and resumed their journey. Approaching the rocks, they released a dove given to them by grey-eyed Athena. The bird passed safely between the rocks, but lost the tip of its tail as they closed behind it. The Argonauts waited until the rocks had separated again and then rowed with all their strength in order to pass through safely. Since then, the Clashing rocks have not moved, for they were destined to remain fixed once a ship had sailed safely between them.
The Argonauts sailed past Mount Caucasus and arrived at Colchis. When the ship anchored, Jason found Medea, the daughter of Aeëtes, wandering by the seashore.

Medea was extremely beautiful and tall, with glowing, dark eyes and dark hair. As a young girl, she was well-known for her knowledge of witchcraft. A skillful sorceress, she was familiar with herbs and potions and their effects. She came to these arts partly by heredity, for she was the niece of Circe, the best-known enchantress of the age.

As part of her plan to take revenge against King Pelias for neglecting to sacrifice to her, golden-throned Hera decided that Medea’s magic could be useful to Jason. So she had the gold-wreathed Aphrodite ask her son Eros to cast a spell upon Medea, causing her to fall in love with Jason. Also at Hera’s request, love-inspiring Eros flew to Colchis, found Medea, and planted one of the invisible arrows in her heart. Immediately, Medea fell in love with Jason.

Meanwhile, Jason approached King Aeëtes and told him that King Pelias of Iolcus had commanded his to rescue the golden fleece. It was like Jason to ask for the golden fleece openly, instead of trying to steal it. Aeëtes, remembering the prophecy that he would die when strangers removed the golden fleece, was enraged by Jason’s request. Pretending to agree with Jason, Aeëtes told him that if he performed certain labors, the fleece would be his. Privately, Aeëtes expected that the labors would kill Jason.

Jason’s first labor was to yoke the fire-breathing bulls with bronze led Hephaestus had given these bulls to Aeëtes. Fortunately, Medea was there to help him. She covered his body with an ointment that would protect him from both fire and iron. As she did this, she explained to Jason how he could perform the tasks her father had demanded of him. Jason then vowed that he would marry her and keep her as his wife as long as he lived. The ointment kept the fire from burning Jason’s body, so he was able to seize the fiery bulls by the horns and yoke them to the plow. Without Medea’s help, he would have burned to death.

After the yoking of the bulls, Aeëtes commanded Jason to plant some dragon’s teeth. When he did this, Medea told him, men would spring up from the ground, fully armed, to attack him. This labor Jason also performed. When he saw the men spring from the dragon’s teeth, he followed Medea’s instructions to throw stones into their midst from a distance. While they fought each other, he attacked them, killing them as they fought among themselves.

Even though Jason had performed these three labors, Aeëtes withheld the golden fleece, intending to kill the Argonauts and burn their ship. He did not reckon with Medea, who had anticipated her father’s evil intentions. She led Jason to the sacred grove of Ares where the golden fleece was hung and drugged the dragon that forever guarded it. This permitted Jason to rescue the fleece. Then Medea boarded the Argo with him, taking her brother along with her. The Argo sailed that very night.

When Aeëtes realized what had happened, he took to a ship and pursued the Argo. As the ship drew near, Medea, fearing that Aeëtes would capture the Argo, realized that its capture would mean certain death for herself and for Jason. She would have to act quickly. Seizing her brother, who was standing nearby, she quickly killed him and cut up his body. The pieces of his corpse she threw into the dark sea.

Her ghastly deed accomplished its purpose. Aeëtes was forced to give up his pursuit in order to gather as many pieces of his son as he could find in the sea. He returned to Colchis in order to give him an honorable burial.

Not only Aeëtes, but the Argonauts as well, were horrified by Medea’s unspeakable act. They protested to Jason that Medea must be a demon and a murderess. Jason was so much in love with Medea that although he was deeply shocked by her violent deed, he forgave her. He reminded his comrades that if it had not been for Medea, they would all be dead. Moreover, without her, they never could have captured the golden fleece.

Meanwhile, Aeëtes had sent all the natives of Colchis to look for the Argo. He threatened them with the punishment intended for Medea if they failed to bring her back. Everyone took a different route and sought Medea in various places.

The Lord of Olympus, too, was enraged at Medea and battered the Argo with a furious storm, driving the ship far from its course. At this point, the prow of the Argo announced to the Argonauts that if they hoped to avoid further punishment by Zeus, they would have to be purified by Circe for the murder of Medea’s brother. The Argonauts agreed to the purification, and set sail. They travelled past many islands until they came at last to Circe, who purified them by her sorcery. Orpheus, the minstrel, sang a song as they sailed past the Sirens. These were
birds with women’s heads and voices. He sang to drown the sound of the beguiling songs that the Sirens used to lure men and then to kill them.

After their encounter with the Sirens, the ship reached the channel that separates Sicily from Italy. There, they had to contend with the monster, Scylla, and the monstrous whirlpool, Charybdis. Scylla was a six-headed monster who snatched sailors off their ships and ate them. Charybdis was another female monster, who swallowed the sea waters and any ships upon them three times each day, only to regurgitate the timbers and the dead later. The problem for the Argonauts was how to avoid one monster without becoming food for another. Golden-throned Hera, however, summoned the sea goddess, Thetis, who conducted them safely through the monstrous gates.

When Medea’s countrymen, the Colchians, were unable to find the ship, some settled in the countries in which their searches ended. A few came to the land of the Phaeacians, found the Argo there, and demanded Medea from King Alcinous. He told them that if Medea had already made love with Jason, he would not force Jason to give her up, but if they were not yet lovers he would send her back to her father. Alcinoüs’s wife, Arete, immediately saw to it that Medea and Jason were married.

Thereafter, the Argonauts again set forth upon their adventures. Initially, they were prevented by Talus from landing at Crete. Talus was a man of bronze, who had a single vein extending the length of his body to his ankle, where a bronze nail was driven into the end of the vein. He guarded the island by running around the coast three times each day. On one of these trips, he spied the Argo sailing toward the island and attacked it by hurling stones at it. Medea put a spell upon him that caused him to scrape the vein in his ankle, his only vulnerable spot, against a jagged rock. All his immortal blood gushed out, and he died.3

Pelias, meanwhile, had concluded that Jason was dead, and he wanted to kill his brother, but Aeson requested permission to kill himself. The method he chose was to sacrifice a bull to Olympian Zeus, so as to drink all of the bull’s blood and die. Jason’s mother hanged herself. When the Argonauts returned, Jason handed over the golden fleece. After he learned of the dreadful wrong that Pelias had inflicted upon his family, he was filled with desire for revenge and asked Medea for a way to punish the evil king.

Medea went to the palace and told the daughters of Pelias that they could make their father young again through the use of certain drug in order to convince the girls. Medea butchered an old ram and placed its pieces in a bronze pot filled with boiling water and certain drugs.1 A lamb jumped out of the pot, alive and young. The daughters, convinced that their father could be rejuvenated, attacked Pelias in his sleep, cut him up, and boiled the pieces.4 Infuriated by this unnatural deed, the people of Iolcus exiled both Jason and Medea.

Jason and Medea settled in Corinth, where they lived happily together for ten years and had three children. Jason adored his wife and children. In time, however, he became disenchanted with her beauty and ashamed of her previous deeds. He fell in love with the princess, Glaucus, the daughter of King Creon of Corinth and asked the king’s permission to marry her. Once the king consented, Jason tried to persuade Medea to leave him. He told her that this new marriage would be for the good of their children who would then be able to inherit the throne of Corinth. Medea refused and angrily called upon the immortal gods to defend her.

However, Jason married Glaucus anyway, and King Creon forced Medea into exile, giving her one day in which to make her preparations.

In revenge, Medea sent her children to the princess bearing special bridal gifts which had been steeped in invisible poisons. When Glaucus dressed herself in these lovely garments, they ignited and consumed her in their flames. King Creon, seeing his daughter’s plight, tried to smother the blaze with his own body, thereby perishing along with her.5

Medea then took a savage revenge upon Jason. She became determined to murder the children he loved so that Jason would be left alone. She did, indeed, perform this gruesome task in the middle of the night. Then she fled from Corinth, taking refuge with King Aegeus of Athens, where she was still living when Theseus arrived.6

Jason retreated to his ship, the Argo. While he sat there, remembering the days of his former glory, a rotten beam fell upon him and killed him.
REFLECTIONS

1. Discuss:
   a. Why did Jason make no effort to deter Medea from committing any of her crimes?
   b. What alternatives did he have?
   c. Who is more admirable, Jason or Medea? Explain.

2. Become Medea and write a letter to Jason explaining your murder of the children.

3. You are a newspaper reporter who has accompanied the Argonauts on their voyage. Write a front page story dealing with one of their adventures.

4. Using the introduction to this Heroes section, make a chart of the characteristics of the typical hero. Apply these characteristics to:
   a. Perseus
   b. Heracles
   c. Theseus
   d. Jason

Give each characteristic one point. Which hero accumulates the highest score?

5. What are the personality differences among each of the following heroes?
   a. Bellerophon
   b. Perseus
   c. Heracles
   d. Theseus
   e. Jason

6. Do you have to be self-centered to be a hero? Discuss.

7. Is there a price to pay for being a hero? If so, is it worth the price to be a hero? Discuss.