

## Unheroic Deaths in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*

The Hellenistic *Argonautica* differs from conventional Homeric epic in many ways, but perhaps most notable is the transformation and potential devaluation of the traditional epic model of the hero. Apollonius' heroes appear unusually lacking in effectiveness and accomplishment throughout the epic despite their sterling lineages and deeds outside of the poem; barring a few exceptions, most of their success during the voyage derives from either the intervention of the gods or from the magical assistance of Medea. Scholars have discussed this phenomenon at length, hypothesizing that Apollonius sought to write a Skeptic manifesto, a dithyrambic chorus of heroes, and even an anti-epic (Klein 1983; Nishimura-Jensen 2009; Pike 1993). Jason in particular, as leader of the expedition, is lacking in heroic traits and actions, to such an extent that Valerius Flaccus' Latin *Argonautica* sees the need to completely rewrite his character, remolding him into a hero in the style of Aeneas (Herschkowitz 1998). Apollonius' Jason has already been discussed at length by a number of scholars (Beye 1968; Jackson 1992); in this paper, I discuss the author's portrayals of other Argonauts who have not received as much attention in the scholarship, focusing in particular on the deaths of four heroes.

I argue that Apollonius uses the deaths of these heroes to devalue further the conventional model of the hero which he has already subverted through his depiction of Jason and the living heroes. Not a single Apollonian Argonaut dies in battle, the typical and most honorable teleology for the epic hero: Instead, Tiphys dies from disease (2.851-863), a cause of death present in *Iliad* 1 (where it consumes no named heroes); Idmon is wounded by a boar in the thigh (2.815-850), a wound type associated with impotence or castration (Felton 2016); Canthus is killed by a peasant farmer in retribution for cattle theft (4.1485-1501); and Mopsus succumbs to a snakebite

(4.1502-1536), a misfortune reminiscent of that which brings Philoctetes great disgrace during the Trojan war. Valerius Flaccus amends this by having two of his Argonauts die in battle with the Scythians, altering the death of Idmon, and removing the deaths of Canthus and Mopsus altogether, further suggesting that these fatalities do not meet the standards for a heroic death in epic.

In addition, conventional Homeric heroic virtues and activities are subverted by these deaths: Mopsus the seer, despite knowing that he will die on the voyage, is unable to do anything with this power, thus diminishing the ability of prophecy; Idmon is killed by a boar wound, which is not atypical for hunters in myth, but he is not even hunting when he suffers this wound. Canthus perishes in the typical heroic pastime of raiding and looting, an activity considered trivial and safe for a Homeric hero; finally, the dignity for Tiphys to die any sort of meaningful heroic death is removed from him as he succumbs to a short and unexplained fever. The deaths in Apollonius' *Argonautica* thus further contribute to the poet's composition of an untraditional epic; by examining these deaths we learn that the author's reshaping of the conventional heroic model is reflected not only in how a hero behaves, but also how he meets his fate.

## Works Cited

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