

Ovid's Jason:
Heroism, Farming, and Monstrosity in *Heroides* VI and XII

By the time of Homer's *Odyssey*, the voyage of the Argo was Ἀργὸν πᾶσι μέλουσα, "of interest to everyone," and the tale of Jason and his Argonauts remains a mythic staple even today (*Ody.*, 12.70). As part of one of the Greeks' oldest stories, Jason's narrative and characterization have appeared in myriad mythic variations, perhaps most memorably in Euripides' *Medea* and Apollonius' *Argonautica*. However, despite (or possibly because of) the popularity and breadth of Jason's story in our extant classical literature, scholars have come to no kind of consensus as to what sort of hero Jason is. This broad discourse likely stems from several sources, such as the variety of Jason's mythic sources themselves (e.g. Graf, 1997), Jason's debated lack of a singular heroic quality (e.g. Clauss, 1997), or the magnetic pull of Medea on scholars studying these texts (e.g., Verducci, 1985), which has been the case with the study of Ovidian texts in particular (the *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides*, and the constructions of his *Medea* tragedy). Though scholars have long recognized Ovid's particular interest in Medea, much less attention has been directed at the poet's portrayal of Jason.

Ovid's *Heroides*, a collection of letters from distraught heroines to the mythical figures who abandoned them, only once features two letters being written to the same addressee: both Hypsipyle (*Her.* VI) and Medea (*Her.* XII) address their letters to Jason. By reading the two letters against each other, and against the mythic tradition, we may attempt to triangulate the "true" identity of Ovid's Jason. In this paper, I will argue that these letters reveal not a formidable epic hero performing feats of bravery, or even an elegiac *amator* serving his mistress, but instead an ordinary farmer. The Jason that Ovid depicts in the *Heroides* brings order to

barbarian Colchis by taming fields and fighting monstrous beasts; however, by the end of his story, Ovid suggests that Jason has perhaps himself become a monster in need of taming.

Both heroines discuss at length their own perspectives on Jason's contests with the fire-breathing bulls, the earth-born warriors, and the fleece-guarding dragon (Her. VI. 9-38, XII. 39-50, 93-102). Further, Hypsipyle's letter presents the reactions to the events at Colchis from Greeks around the Mediterranean, who through their shame over his performance deprive Jason of any honor and attribute all success to Medea (Her. VI. 23-39, 99-104). Medea's account of Jason's tasks occludes her own role, however, and places their agricultural nature front and center, characterizing Jason as a *cultor* and an *agricola* (Her. XII. 15-18, 39-50, 59-60, 93-96). Perhaps the most surprising feature the two heroines include in their letters is the similarity of Jason to the beasts he tames with Medea's magic (Her. VI 97-98, XII 163-172).

Works Cited

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