

The Destruction of the Ash-born Race: Severing Social Ties in Apollonius' *Argonautica*

This paper explores the use of tree-related imagery surrounding the death of Talos in Book 4 of the *Argonautica*. Apollonius' description is reminiscent of the Homeric heroes in the *Iliad* struck down like trees felled by the hand of man. Previous scholars have debated whether Apollonius seeks to continue or subvert the Homeric tradition, particularly with his use of similes (Effe 2001). The debate, however, has yet to take into consideration how Apollonius' use of non-human characters where one would expect humans subverts the Homeric framework to highlight the damaged social ties within the *Argonautica*. Through this study, Talos' death emerges as a vital symbol for the state of Medea's familial ties and foreshadows the future destruction of any nascent ties.

In the *Iliad*, Homer compares the death of prominent individuals to the felling of trees. These similes highlight the role of human hands in the felling and the reincorporation of the tree into cultural objects such as chariots (Rood 2008). Beyond the metapoetic approach, the comparison between trees and humans indicates deep connections of family and community. The death of Simoesius (4.480ff) offers an example of how the loss of a person damages the social fabric of their family just as the loss of a tree has lasting effects on surrounding saplings (Wohlleben 2016) and how the reincorporation into the cultural framework aims to reconcile the loss.

Apollonius, however, subverts this framework to highlight the irreparable damage done by Medea to her own familial ties. By replacing the human soldier with the bronze Talos, Apollonius parallels Medea's attempt to replace her severed familial ties for uncertain ties to Jason. Medea alters the human connection present in the hand-to-hand combat prevalent in the

Iliad by using magic and attacking Talos from afar (4.1673ff), creating a parody of war. Medea's actions ensure the complete destruction of the ash race with Talos' death (4.1638ff), a detail unique to Apollonius (Kauffmann 2016), a further parallel to her own destroyed familial bonds.

This destruction is made more devastating with Apollonius' further subversion of the Homeric framework for death similes utilizing trees. While Homer implies hope for future social ties of the dead through cultural reincorporation, Apollonius removes definitive evidence of such a future for Talos in death. When the pine tree representing Talos is abandoned only half-felled, left to the intervention of nature (4.1682-1688), no mention of the woodcutters return is made overtly by the author and the audience is left to wonder what will become of the tree.

Lastly, by placing this scene near the close of the *Argonautica*, Apollonius asks readers to draw comparisons between this final appearance of Medea in the *Argonautica* and depictions of her character in the works of well known authors who write about her later life (Cassidy 2018). Apollonius foreshadows the future destruction of social ties for both Jason and Medea by interjecting upon the scene of Talos' death: "if indeed death seeks not only through sickness and wounds, but even from afar someone can harm us" (4.1674-5). This statement reminds the reader of Medea's future crimes and its placement has a lasting effect on the reader as it is the final scene where Medea is present in the narrative.

Scholars such as Effe, Hunter, and Kauffman have discussed at length the reception of Homer and Homeric similes within the *Argonautica*. This paper argues for a more nuanced look at the reception of natural imagery, specifically the felling of trees as they relate to the death of an individual. Ultimately, Apollonius' similes go beyond being merely "incongruous" (Effe 2001) but rather indicate the underlying disruption of the social fabric inherent in the

Argonautica. This study aims to highlight Apollonius' use of Talos' death as a commentary on Medea's personal relationships both present and future.

Works Cited

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