

## Real Monsters in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*

The portrayal of monsters in the *Argonautica* echoes earlier epic models, but this paper will show that it diverges from traditional epic in ways that have not been fully appreciated. As is well known, tales of terrifying monsters are limited in Homeric epic to Odysseus's account of his wanderings. Whether or not we see this limitation as intentional, my claim is that Apollonius adopts an alternative strategy and rationale for integrating reality and fantasy. In contrast to the *Odyssey*, otherworldly monsters appear and threaten the Argonauts throughout the epic, but their agency is limited: they are consistently defeated or subdued and harm none of the heroes aboard the *Argo*; they are effectively less monstrous.

This shift is in keeping with a long-recognized tendency toward naturalism in Hellenistic poetry (e.g., Hunter 1993, Zanker 1987). The hybridity of Apollonius' gods and monsters has alternatively been attributed to the poem's Ptolemaic context: Stephens 2003 traces oppositions that blend Egyptian and Greek myths and signal the cultural heterogeneity of the epic (cf. Mori 2008, Thalmann 2011). Scholars have also studied these supernatural and/or fabricated life forms as an independent genre. Sistakou 2012 situates Apollonius' monsters within a broad Hellenistic trend toward dark and fantastic romanticism, while Mayor 2018 links Apollonius' constructed automata with other ancient precursors of modern science fiction: stories of *biotechne* that explore immortality from a technological perspective.

I combine these approaches by evaluating Argonautic monsters from multiple perspectives: the epic tradition, the poem's major themes, and the context of Ptolemaic political cult and ideology. Like other elements in the poem, Apollonius' monsters recall their Homeric counterparts, but they also serve as Hesiodic chronological markers of an older era as well as the

mythic foundation for (the future) Ptolemaic control of North Africa and the Aegean (see Hunter 1993, 128). I focus on three main points:

Safer sea travel: In this poem benevolent sea divinities (Thetis, Glaucus) are effectively at odds with natural elements as they ensure safe passage for the Argo. Then too, neither sea monsters (commonly depicted in ancient Greek literature: Papadopoulos 2002) nor sailors lost overboard are featured in the epic (Aphrodite saves Butes, who nearly dies swimming towards the Sirens; 4.914-19). The Zephyr (a troublesome wind in the *Iliad*), is beneficial throughout; in my view these and other details reflect the influence of Arsinoe II's cult role as the protector of sailors (Arsinoe-Aphrodite-Zephyritis).

Realistic dangers: Those Argonauts who do perish on the voyage are not crushed, drowned, or devoured by monsters. Four perish from smaller scale dangers: illness, animal attacks, and a fight with a herdsman. The Argonautic narrator projects uncertainty and unreliability (Morrison 2007), sometimes adding mythological pedigrees to explain or perhaps add dramatic interest to these realistic and even unheroic ends: e.g. the serpent that kills Mopsus descended from scattered drops of Medusa's blood (4.1516-17). Finally, Hylas' abduction by a water nymph raises unanswerable questions: does he drown or become an immortal consort, and is this encounter a metapoetic nod to a Callimachean sensibility (Heerink 2015)? In my view the erotic ambush on land not only offers an alternative to a death at sea, but also foreshadows and draws attention to Medea's dangerous love for Jason.

Subordinate monsters: The poem uses another strategy to reconcile and integrate reality with fantasy. The Argonauts do not face unpredictable monstrous adversaries. Some are guards or guardians (the Harpies and Phineus; the dragon and the fleece; Ladon and the apples; Talos and Crete); others are constructed to serve royal interests and ward off challengers (Aietes'

bronze fire-breathing bulls and Earthborn men). The subordination of these relics of an earlier age effectively foregrounds the greater threat of the very young and intractable Eros: Σχέτλια Ἔρωος, μέγα πῆμα, μέγα στύγος ἀνθρώποισιν (3.445).

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