Aphrodite in Apollonius' *Argonautica*

As Denis Feeney (1991) argued long ago, an argument Clauss recently revisited (2016), the gods in Apollonius' *Argonautica* are far more distant from human activity than in the Homeric poems. To be sure, the narrator includes mention of their interests and behind-the-scenes activities, but these are largely unknown by the characters in the epic (on the relative ignorance of the characters, see Byre 2002 and Morrison 2007). They can only surmise what transpires beyond what they see and hear. Aphrodite provides a case in point. The goddess is present in two major episodes: the sojourn on Lemnos in Book 1 (609-909) and in the famous episode in which Hera and Athena ask for her help in Book 3 (6-166). I would point out that the name Aphrodite does not occur in the poem; the goddess is identified as Cypris or Cytherea.

In the paper, I will look at both episodes and argue that, in tune with the way in which other gods are described in the poem, Aphrodite maintains a distance from human agents and actions, and to the point where it is even difficult for the reader to ascertain any concrete engagement. In the Lemnian episode, the narrator talks about Aphrodite punishing the Lemnians for neglecting her worship, but the subject of the verb noting the offense (ἄτισσαν, 615) is undefined (the women? the men? everyone?) and all we learn is that, as a result, the Lemnian men took Thracian concubines and the women killed them and the entire male population (save one, Thoas, Hypsipyle's father). Hypsipyle's version of the story, described as "wily words" (μύθοισι … αἱμυλίοισιν, 792), blames Aphrodite for making the men fall in love with their captive women and reject their wives and children. Not only are Jason and the Argonauts unaware of what really happened (Hypsipyle says that the men and their sons withdrew to Thrace with the concubines), but neither do we fully understand the entire situation. The only view of the goddess that the Argonauts and Lemnian women have is embroidered on Jason's

cloak: Aphrodite looking at herself as reflected in Ares' shield (742-46), an artistic rendition and not the goddess herself. We are indeed told that Aphrodite aroused desire in the men for the women of the island on order to repopulate the male population as a favor for her husband Hephaestus (849-52), but there is no need for recourse to divine intervention under the circumstances: sailors on shore leave invited into the homes of desperate women. And propitiation of Hephaestus and Aphrodite is readily explained by the cult of the former on the volcanic island. There is smoke but no fire.

Book 3 begins with an address to Erato, a Muse who is associated with Aphrodite, but not Aphrodite herself (n.b., minor divinities do play direct roles in the epic). Hera and Athena go to the house of Aphrodite to ask her to send Eros against Medea so that the Colchian princess will help Jason secure the fleece. We were prepared for this eventuality because Phineus mentioned the assistance of Aphrodite as part of his predictions (2.424; cf. 3.549, 553, 559, 942). After Hera explains her reasons for assisting Jason, Aphrodite agrees to help but is hesitant to ask Eros who pays her no attention. The goddess does ask her son, but needs to bribe him with Zeus' toy, a golden ball that resembles the universe (3.131-41). So while Aphrodite intervenes in the action of the quest, she does so indirectly through a non-Olympian mediator, similar to Erato. As Feeney 1991: 67-68 noted, it is sometimes uncertain whether to print Ἔρως or ἔρως because of the difficulty of determining definitively whether it is a divine force or human passion that is engaged. Yes, Eros shows up with his bow and arrows and strikes Medea (3.275-98), but the scene seems like a humorous metaphor for love at first sight; the same could be said about the nymph who fell in love with Hylas (1.1221-39), where Aphrodite is mentioned as source. In any event, Aphrodite is not actually present during the event in Colchis.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that the epic that features love as an essential component of the success of the Argonautic expedition represents the goddess of love on the sidelines, similar to all the gods who look down upon the heroes from Mt. Pelion as the Argo sails toward Colchis. The only figure they appear to see is Cheiron, holding the infant Achilles (1.547-58).

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