

## Passing the Burning Torch: Meleager, Medea, and Achilles' Legacy

The hero Meleager packs a busy career into a short life. A participant in two premier events of the Heroic Age, the Calydonian boar-hunt and the Argo's voyage, Meleager's greatest deed—the slaying of the boar—is inseparable from his early demise, when his mother Althaea burns the log to which the Fates tied his life span at birth. Part triumph, part tragedy, part love story, with a good dose of family betrayal thrown in, Meleager's mythology offered fertile ground for ancient authors to explore.

While the Calydonian hunt is the centerpoint of Meleager's story, this paper examines his role in another setting, the Argonauts' expedition to Colchis. In Apollonius' *Argonautica* Meleager is a minor character, marked for his youthful ambition; as Apollonius says, he would be second only to Hercules, if he had just one more year to grow up (AR. 1.192). In Valerius Flaccus' Flavian *Argonautica*, however, he claims more of the spotlight. In this paper, I explore Valerius' expansion of Meleager's role, suggesting that he figures Valerius' response to the interpretive ambivalence surrounding the Argo's voyage. A harbinger both of civilization's progress and its moral decline, Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece marks a turning point in world history, one that Meleager's journey from heroic deed to tragic downfall well reflects.

Meleager's first literary appearance is in *Iliad* 9, where, as Burgess (2017) and Alden (2000) have shown, Phoinix presents Meleager's story as a negative *exemplum* of the consequences of *menis*, anger, taken too far and held too long. Meleager's refusal to fight out of rage at his mother's curse comes at the price of his honor and the suffering of his community, an adumbration of the devastation caused by Achilles' own withdrawal from battle. Heroic status, Phoinix seems to say, may cost more than it is worth.

Meleager provides a different sort of *exemplum* in Seneca's *Medea*. Not only does Althaea's revenge anticipate Medea's murder of her sons, but Seneca also represents Meleager's fate—along with the premature deaths of several other Argonauts—as punishment for the voyage's violation of natural law. The unnatural specter of filicide runs through both myths, illustrating the breakdown of family ties that occurs in tandem with the advance of civilization: heroic achievement comes at the price of social ties.

Turning to the *Argonautica*, Valerius exploits this twofold interaction with the Argonautic myth to comment upon the destructive effects of the heroic quest. Although just as committed to glory as Achilles, his Meleager is decidedly less heroic. He takes center stage in *Argonautica* 3, in a moment of crisis, when Hercules—the crew's greatest hero—has been lost and the Argonauts are unsure of whether to continue without him.

Like Achilles, Meleager defines the heroic quest in opposition to peace and quiet with his parents (VF. 3.657-60; cf. *Il.* 9.410-16), and asserts his willingness to fill Hercules' shoes (VF. 3.672). This thought process immediately raises some alarm bells. Not only is Meleager's description of safety at home wildly ironic, but he also accuses Hercules of excess pride and, effectively, withdrawal from the company because of it: “puffed up with the fame he has already won, he scorns to share in our deeds...” (VF. 3.677-8). In contrast to Apollonius' eager youth, this Meleager looks a lot like the one who will later fight over spoils, hold a grudge, and turn on his own for love of a woman. No longer content to be “second to Hercules”, he illustrates the thought process behind an Iliadic zero-sum game of heroic glory.

It is in this last point that Valerius' Meleager becomes an *exemplum* not only for Phoenix's story, but also for the *Argonautica*. Valerius draws a direct line from Hercules' abandonment to Meleager's death (VF. 4.33-4): his betrayal of Hercules anticipates that of his

family (Manuwald 2015: 239). And this is not all. By persuading the Argonauts to desert Hercules, Meleager necessitates Jason's reliance on Medea to accomplish the tasks he will face in Colchis. Valerius directly links Meleager's rhetoric (VF. 4.33: *furiis et voce nefanda*) to the tragic turn of the epic's second half (VF. 5.219-20: *ventum ad furias infandaque...foedera*), through the introduction of another competitor for glory, Medea, whose assertion of her own worth will culminate in a very Althaea-like murder of her children. Here, we see, is the fracturing of loyalties that characterizes the transition from Heroic to Iron Age. From the *Iliad* to the tragic stage, Valerius' Meleager represents the conflict between self-interest and collective progress that lies at the heart of the Argonautic myth.

#### Bibliography

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