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Nelis, Damien Patrick

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A Companion to Ancient Epic
Edited by John Miles Foley

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Apollonius of Rhodes

D. P. Nelis

Long considered to be a literary failure, a would-be Homer who dared to imitate the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by writing a version of the ancient, pre-Homeric story of Jason and the Argonauts and their quest for the Golden Fleece, Apollonius Rhodius has only since the 1960s or 1970s begun to be recognized as an epic poet of great merit and considerable influence. His *Argonautica*, a poem of 5,835 verses arranged in four books, the only epic poem to survive in its entirety from the long period between Homer and Virgil, quickly became the canonical version of this most ubiquitous of Greek myths. Numerous papyri and frequent imitations and adaptations by both Greek and Roman writers (Theocritus, Catullus, Varro Atacinus, Virgil, Valerius Flaccus, Dionysius Periegetes, the author of the *Orphic Argonautica*) testify to its impact and popularity. Apollonius was also the author of scholarly treatises devoted to the study of Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus, as well as a number of other hexameter poems that related the foundations of cities, including Caunus, Alexandria, Naucratis, Rhodes, and Cnidus. In all, he was one of the leading lights of one of the most brilliant periods in Greek literary history, the third century BCE in Ptolemaic Alexandria.

Author and Date

Our sources for the life of Apollonius are few in number and of disputable value (Hunter 1989: 1–12; Rengakos 1992; Lefkowitz 2001). They provide us with "a labyrinth of self-contradictory statements" (Pfeiffer 1968: 141), but some details seem to emerge. He was probably from Alexandria, probably spent part of his life in Rhodes and, most importantly for the understanding of his literary career, was the Librarian of the great Library of Alexandria (on which institution see Fraser 1972:1, 312–19), between about 270 and 245 BCE. It is during this period that he will have composed the *Argonautica*.

For a long time, one of the single most influential "facts" about Apollonius' career (confusedly transmitted by the two *Lives* which accompany the manuscripts of the *Argonautica*) was that he quarreled with his former "teacher," Callimachus, over the composition of his epic and went into exile in Rhodes, before eventually returning to Alexandria with a second, successful version of the poem. As a result of this story, Apollonius was identified as one of the Telchines attacked by Callimachus in the prologue

to his *Aetia*. This famous text (on which see Stephens and Acosta-Hughes 2002) is an important statement of poetic principle and is of vital importance for our understanding of the reception of Homeric and post-Homeric epic poetry in third-century Alexandria. It is therefore necessarily a passage of key importance for any attempt to understand the development of the epic tradition and the literary context in which Apollonius' *Argonautica* was written (though for a very different view see Cameron 1995); but it should not be used to fill gaps in the life of Apollonius, and today, rightly, the biographical reconstruction of a bitter literary dispute between Apollonius, the archaizing epic poet, and Callimachus, the anti-epic modernist, is rejected by most scholars (Lefkowitz 2001; see, however, Green 1997a: 8–13, 1997b). Its origin can probably best be explained by the attempt of an over-zealous biographer to combine knowledge of the Rhodian period of the poet's life with the existence of an alternative version of at least the first book of the *Argonautica* (the so-called *proekdosis*; see Schade and Eleuteri 2001: 29–33), mention of which is made several times in the ancient scholia on the poem. Instead, it is now generally agreed that the *Argonautica* is in an important sense an epic that is in step with Callimachean poetic theories and practice and, more generally, in fine tune with the literary trends prevalent in Hellenistic Alexandria (see Margolies DeForest 1994), even if he does not go quite as far as some of his contemporaries in experimenting with Homeric metrical, lingustic and stylistic norms.

In this context, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the fact that Apollonius was Librarian of the great center of scholarship founded and promoted by Ptolemy I. Not only does tenure of this position place him right at the heart of the vibrant literary world of the mid-third century BCE, it also sees him holding the most influential position of royal patronage open to a poet. The foundation of such a great library was in no way a sign of intellectual withdrawal into an ivory tower cut off from the realities of contemporary politics and society. It was instead a gesture of considerable political and cultural importance. To be at the head of such an institution was to occupy a post not only of great intellectual prestige, but also one of considerable cultural influence (Cameron 1995: 1–70). That a man in such a position wrote an *Argonautica*, an ancient saga about Greeks involved in a journey overseas and their encounters with non-Greek civilizations all around the fringes of the Mediterranean world, should be an essential detail for readers of this quintessentially Hellenistic epic. It would, however, be a mistake to underestimate the other key fact arising from Apollonius' tenure of the post of Librarian: that he had access to a great collection of books. The *Argonautica* is the highly learned, bookish product of a bookish age (see Bing 1988 and Cameron 1995, who emphasizes continuities with the traditional oral culture, and appreciation of this fact must be central to any interpretation of the work. In particular, Apollonius was a student of Homer, and his epic poem is based on long and detailed study of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Both on the level of large-scale narrative patterns and of detailed verbal interaction, the ideal reader of the *Argonautica* should be engaged in deciphering the traces of a fascinating dialogue between the texts of the *Argonautica* and of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Apollonius was in fact a Homeric scholar in his own right (Rengakos 1994), and the elaboration of his epic style may be read as a kind of commentary on Homeric epic as it was studied in third-century Alexandria. To a greater or lesser extent of course, all Hellenistic poets are involved in this process (Rengakos 1993), and in interpreting the work of such writers as Apollonius, Callimachus, Theocritus, Aratus, and Nicander, appreciation of a constant and complex intertextual engagement with Homer must be a key element.

Unfortunately, full access to the complexities of this process of rereading and rewriting is denied us by our ignorance about relative chronology. It is generally believed that the *Argonautica* post-dates the *Aetia* (or at least its first two books) and the *Hecale* of Callimachus, and that it predates Theocritus' *Idylls* 13 and 22, two poems that deal with

episodes from the story of the Argonauts. But it would be unwise to base too much critical weight on this chronology, and there are heavyweight counter-arguments (Köhnken 1965 and 2001; Cameron 1995: 247–62). In any case, the *Argonautica* stands out as one of the most fascinating creations of the Hellenistic age.

The Poem

The *Argonautica* recounts the mythical voyage of the Argonauts who, on the order of King Pelias, undertake a long and dangerous voyage to Colchis, located on the southeast corner of the Black Sea (modern Georgia), in search of the Golden Fleece and, eventually, succeed in returning with it to Greece (for an overview of the myth see Gantz 1993: 340–73). They are led by Jason, a young hero who succeeds in winning the Fleece from Aeetes, king of Colchis, with the help of Medea, the Colchian princess expert in magic powers with whom he gets involved in a love affair, and who accompanies him back to Greece, thus providing the setting for Euripides' great tragic play of betrayal and infanticide, *Medea*.

In length the poem may be said to fit perfectly Aristotle's prescription that an epic should be "about as long as the number of tragedies presented at one sitting" (*Poet.* 1459b 21f.). It is without question meticulously structured. Books 1 and 2 give the reasons for the voyage, describe the gathering of the crew and relate the voyage to Colchis. They include the encounter with Hypsipyle and the Lemnian women (*Arg.* 1.609–914); the crew's loss of Hylas and Herakles (1.1207–357); the boxing match between Polydeuces and Amycus (2.1–97); the encounter with the Harpies and Phineus, and his prophecy (2.178–447); the passage through the Clashing Rocks, or Symplegades (2.549–606); and the long voyage along the southern coast of the Black Sea (2.619–1261). Book 3 is dedicated to the story of Jason and Medea and the completion of the hero's trials. It includes a memorable depiction of Aeetes, father of Medea and tyrannical ruler of Colchis (3.302–438; also 4.212–40); a dramatic account of the young princess falling in love with the foreign hero (3.275–98, 439–824); and the *aristeia* of Jason when he yokes the bulls and defeats the earthborn men (3.1246–407). Book 4 relates the actual taking of the Fleece (99–182) and the return journey, which follows a quite different route from the outward voyage, bringing the Argonauts home to Greece via the Danube, the Rhone, the western coast of Italy, Corfu, North Africa, and Crete. It includes the murder of Apsyrtus (410–81), the encounter with Circe in Italy (659–752), Orpheus' singing match with the Sirens (885–922), the stay in the land of the Phaeacians (982–1223), the beaching of the "Argo" on the Libyan shore and the subsequent carrying of the ship back to the sea (1232–587), and eventually the return to Greece via Crete, where the giant Talos is defeated by Medea's magical powers (1638–688). The poem ends with the Argonauts setting foot safely back in Greece, and the poet looking forward to future recitations of his work (1773–774). In the final line he addresses his heroes: "and happily did you step out onto the beach of Pagasae" (4.1781). The reader is thus offered both easy, natural closure and the possibility of endless repetition of the poem and its story. Apollonius here draws attention to issues such as the relationship between his poem and the Argonautic myth as a whole and the very difficulty of deciding on a beginning and an end in order to mark out his poem within that whole.

The structure of the work as a whole is on the one hand straightforward, recounting the events of the voyage in chronological order. But it is also elaborately and intricately worked out, with numerous subtle thematic patterns offering the reader several ways of finding cohesion within the events actually narrated in the poem (see Hurst 1967; Pietsch 1999; Clare 2002). At the same time, Apollonius also creates connections between his poem and those events that form part of the myth as a whole but that he decides not to

relate (e.g., How did a Golden Fleece end up in Colchis? What happened to Medea when she arrived in Greece?). And so by the way in which he draws attention to this process of selectivity he is able to emphasize both the arbitrary nature of his chosen beginnings and ends and his control over the many versions of story he has inherited (see Hunter 1993b: 122–4; Wray 2000; Clare 2002: 9–32; Goldhill 1991).

In dealing with these questions, Apollonius' technique suggests both a familiarity with Homeric book divisions and a close engagement with literary criticism concerning narrative form and poetic unity (Hunter 2001). Apollonius offers subtle play on his readers' expectations concerning the poetics of narrative, combining Homeric form, characterized by a strong sense of epic scale and comprehensiveness, with modernist techniques favoring a more selective or discontinuous approach. Similarly, as a narrator he subtly reworks Homeric norms, moving away from the essentially univocal and distanced Homeric mode to a more uneven and intrusive narratorial role. A good example of both Apollonius' reliance on and deviation from Homeric style may be seen in the use of the Muses. Strikingly, they do not appear in the opening line of the poem, as they do in the Homeric epics, but are first mentioned only in line 1.22, where the poet says, "Let the Muses be the *hypophêtores* of my song." The term *hypophêtores* is difficult, and debate has raged over whether it means "producers" or "interpreters." The latter seems more likely, since it suggests that initially the voice of the poet assumes responsibility for the story and, subsequently, allows us to see a subtle development in the handling of the Muses (Feeney 1991: 90–3). By the opening of Book 3, Erato is asked to "stand beside" the poet and tell the love story of Medea and Jason. By the opening of Book 4 the poet admits his inability to continue the narrative and transfers full responsability for knowledge and recounting of human motivations to a Muse, probably Erato again. When the Muses appear for the final time in the poem, the poet sings in obedience to them (4.1381f.). These changes in the relationship with a Muse or the Muses chart an intense engagement with such key issues as the fictionality of the narrative, its status as truth, and the very act of narration itself; such experimental variation is a feature of Apollonius' technique on all levels. And here, as everywhere else in the *Argonautica*, Homer is the starting point for gauging the nature and extent of Apollonian experimentation.

Apollonius and Homer

In the absence of the Muse, Apollonius' *Argonautica* opens with a strong declaration of its generic status: "Beginning with you, Apollo, I will recount the deeds of the heroes of old." The words "deeds of heroes" (*klea phôtôn*, *Arg.* 1.1), allude to the Homeric formula *klea andrôn*, the subject of epic song in Homer (*Il.* 9.189, 9.524; *Od.* 8.73). At the same time, Apollonius "begins from Apollo," just as does the *Iliad* (*Il.* 1.8), before filling in, again in Iliadic fashion (*Il.* 1.12–42), enough of the relevant background detail necessary to bring the story up to his chosen starting point, the catalogue of the heroes who gathered to set sail on the "Argo." But even as the *Iliad* seems to provide the dominant frame of reference, Odyssean elements also appear, with the emphasis on voyaging and suffering (*Arg.* 1.15–17) clearly inviting the reader to compare the Argonauts' journey with the wanderings of Odysseus. (On the Homeric poems generally, see Chapter 21, by Edwards and Chapter 22, by Slatkin.)

Subsequently, it is in fact the *Odyssey* that functions as the key model, and Apollonius uses it in a number of ways (Dufner 1988; Knight 1995). On one level, the *Argonautica*, like the *Odyssey*, recounts a journey in which the hero's ultimate aim is the completion of a safe return to Greece; each is in fact engaged in a hazardous *nostos* ("homecoming"). On another level, Apollonius reworks the *Odyssey* in Books 1 and 2 for the outward voyage and then again, but this time much more obviously, for the return journey of Book 4, when his

heroes sail past Calypso, encounter the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, Circe, and Alkinoos and Arete. In doing so he locates the wanderings of Odysseus on the map of the Mediterranean and indulges in a learned commentary on the efforts of Homeric geographers to locate the story on a map of the known world (Delage 1930; Meyer 2001). On yet another level, the *nekuia* of *Od.* 11 turns out to be a key model as Apollonius casts the whole voyage of the "Argo" as a *katabasis*, a journey to Hades, setting up Colchian Aia, the goal of the expedition, as the land of the dead, and the winning of the Golden Fleece as a safe return from Hades (Hunter 1993b: 182–8; Dräger 2001: 80–4; Nelis 2001: 228–55). Even as he indulges in displaying the relevance of Homeric precedent, Apollonius also takes care to emphasize that Jason's voyage predates that of Odysseus and the Trojan War as a whole when, at 1.558f., the baby Achilles watches his father Peleus, one of the Argonauts, sail away. Overall, Apollonius is clearly interested in combining key aspects of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in a single poem, even if the very nature of the story as a tale of voyaging privileges the role of the latter.

In addition, Apollonius' exploration of the nature and value of heroism and his complicated and allusive depiction of Jason both involve a turning away from the *Iliad*'s picture of warriors obsessed with *kleos* ("renown") won on the battlefield. Nevertheless, key Iliadic moments and themes are very carefully reworked. The poem contains a number of battle scenes that, while few in number, represent a remarkable concentration of Iliadic moments, culminating in the almost hyper-Iliadic description of Jason's struggle with the fire-breathing bulls of Aeetes and the earthborn men at the end of Book 3. The conflation of Homeric type-scenes into a single representative example is a cornerstone of Apollonian technique. A clear example is provided by the sacrifice described at *Arg.* 1.402–49, a scene that contains close imitation of the Homeric language of sacrifice and reveals traces of the influence of a number of different Iliadic and Odyssean passages, but resonates particularly with *Od.* 3.430–63 (in Nestor's palace) and *Il.* 1.446–66 (the sacrifice to Apollo on Chryse; see Knight 1995: 49–62).

Many scenes in the *Argonautica* show similar fusion of Homeric precedents: Olympus scenes, shipwrecks and storms, descriptions of sailing, arrivals and departures, scenes of welcome and hospitality, similes, assemblies and exchanges of speeches – all show Apollonius' desire to adapt Homer's use of type-scenes but to avoid excessive repetition. At the same time, the *Argonautica* contains a number of detailed and brilliantly inventive imitations of particularly famous Homeric passages: to take two examples, a catalogue modeled on the catalogue of ships in *Il.* 2 and an *ecphrasis* of Jason's cloak, which reworks Achilles' shield in *Il.* 18. By the same token, Apollonius also enjoys setting up the expectation of large-scale Homeric borrowings only to disappoint, as when the games the Argonauts play on Circe's island manage to compress the games of *Il.* 23 into one line (*Arg.* 4.851), and when descriptions of a River Acheron and an entrance to Hades seem to set up an actual descent into the Underworld, only for the Argonauts to do no such thing (2.727–51). At all times, therefore, the *Argonautica* declares itself to be a complex reworking of both *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and Apollonius in so doing shows himself to be an insightful interpreter of many aspects of Homeric poetic technique.

Attention to Homeric detail can be taken to surprising extremes, placing enormous demands on the attention and learning of the audience, thus highlighting the highly bookish quality of the *Argonautica*, as of so much Hellenistic poetry. For example, Apollonius, whose scholarly work on Homer included a work entitled *Against Zenodotus* (an important redactor of the Homeric poems), works into the *Argonautica* allusions to Homeric *hapax legomena* and many other highly arcane aspects of Homeric language and style (Rengakos 1994; Kyriakou 1995a). At *Arg.* 3.942, the parallel suggested between Aphrodite's help for Jason, in the form of Medea, and Athena's support for Nausikaa, another princess, is supported by the use of *sunerithos*, a *hapax* (a word said once) at *Od.*

6.32, where the goddess assures the girl of her help. Unsurprisingly, therefore, readers of the *Argonautica* are also expected to be aware of trends in Homeric scholarship. A remarkable example of this technique occurs early in Book 1 in the song of Orpheus. Both the narrative context in which his performance is set and the content of his song are modelled on elements in *Od.* 8 (Nelis 1992). There, Demodocus sings for the entertainment of Odysseus and the Phaeacians a song about the adulterous love affair between Ares and Aphrodite, a scandalous subject which was later allegorized as a precursor of Empedoclean theory concerning the cosmic forces of Love and Strife. Apollonius shows his awareness of this allegorical interpretation when his Orpheus, in a context full of allusion to Demodocus and *Od.* 8, sings a song of cosmogony in which *neikos*, strife, is responsible for the creation of the world. The self-conscious nature of the work is nowhere more visible than in this song of Orpheus, which provides guidance, on a number of levels, on how to interpret the work as a whole. Orpheus is a figure of the ideal poet, possessor of scientific knowledge and producer of enchanting song. On the simplest level, that of narrative time, the subject of Orpheus' song, the creation of the cosmos, provides the temporal and physical setting within which the Argonautic adventures take place. It therefore situates them in time and makes the process of history a key theme in the work. As such, the *Argonautica* becomes bound up in a complex way with the past, the narrative present (that is, the world in whch the Argonauts live) and the narrative future (the contemporary world of the reader, for whom the Argonautic saga becomes a crucial part of his or her past as a Greek).

This relationship helps to explain the aetiological nature of the work, the numerous individual *aetia* (on which see Valverde Sanchez 1989) providing illustrations of the links between the reader's present and her or his past and adding up to an explanation of the relationship between present and past. It is thus not so remarkable that the Hellenistic period saw a remarkable interest in the myth of the Argonauts, with a number of authors such as Theocritus, Callimachus, Dionysius Scytobrachion, Euphorion, and Nicander all adapting the story or parts of it – and all this following the numerous references to the myth in the many local histories produced during the fourth and third centuries BCE. Apollonius himself wrote works about the foundations of cities and local history (Krevans 2000). In this context, Apollonius' role as head of the Library and the very nature of the Argonaut myth, a story of Greeks overseas, suggests that the tale has enormous historical and cultural relevance for the contemporary audience in third-century Alexandria. In the hands of Apollonius the tale becomes for third-century Greeks a culture history, an exploration of the nature of Hellenism and of the very presence of Greeks in Egypt.

This historical dimension of the poem was for a long time ignored in readings of Hellenistic poetry, when it was seen as a product of the ivory tower and as *l'art pour l'art*, divorced from conetmporary realities. But towards the end of the twentieth century the emphasis has swung towards historicizing interpretations and our reading of the *Argonautica* has been correspondingly enriched (Hunter 1993b: 152–69; Stephens 2002: 171–237). As a result, readers must face the possibility that Apollonius' epic recounts not an obscure archaic myth but rather a tale of contemporary historical and cultural significance. To a great extent this is due to the profound and pervasive cultural values that were attached to the Homeric epics, and so due attention must be paid to the fact that Apollonius, both as poet and librarian, chose to write an epic at all.

In the Hellenistic age Homer was thought of as a figure of divine authority, the author of canonical texts that preserved information about Greek history and who in important ways could be used to define what it was to be Greek. He was also seen as the founder of literature itself, an idea illustrated through the image of him as primal Ocean, from which

all other literary forms flow down to the present day. The whole issue of the post-Homeric epic tradition is fraught with difficulties, and uncertainty hovers over much of what we would like to know about the epic poems composed between Homer and Apollonius. The fragments of the Epic Cycle (on which see Chapter 24, by Burgess) are notoriously difficult to date, both in terms of the original date of composition of individual works and of the combination of these works into a Cyclic format aimed at completing the set of stories of early Greek "history" by including all those Homer had chosen not to relate. To this extent the Cycle may be considered Homeric in spirit and intention, but Aristotle's *Poetics* 59a–b contains searching criticism of the Epic Cycle, which by his day obviously had a reputation as poetry of low quality, far inferior to that of Homer. Similar views of Cyclic inferority are found in Callimachus, and the inimitabilty of Homer becomes a strikingly common topos.

Apollonius writes his poem, then, at a time when the status of epic as a genre is in some sense problematic, at the very least to the extent that the very existence of the model of excellence and the perceived inferiority of subsequent efforts means that Apollonius had to confront the idea that his poem might be received as another Cyclic failure. There are indeed some who see the *Argonautica* as a genuinely conservative attempt to recreate an archaic worldview, but it seems much more likely that Apollonius takes up the challenge of trying to create an epic poem which would be meaningful both as an attempt to invite comparison with Homer (by choosing to write about an ancient Greek myth), while at the same time speaking to the social and cultural concerns of his contemporary readers. Controversy exists over his originality in doing so. Some scholars believe that the Hellenistic period saw an enormous outpouring of large epic poems, especially on historical subjects (Ziegler 1966), but others argue that hardly any epic of any kind can be proven to have been written in the century before Apollonius (Cameron 1995: 263–302; for discussion see Kerkhecker 2001). On either view, Apollonius' 'mythological' epic looks like an original experiment aimed at producing a new epic for Hellenistic Alexandria, and the ambition involved in attempting to do so must not be underestimated.

Apollonius and Other Sources

While Homer is the key model throughout the *Argonautica*, we must not underestimate the depth and breadth of Apollonius' reading. In origin, the myth lends itself easily to analysis in terms of folktale patterns. It conforms to the story-type in which a young hero undergoes a series of trials assisted by a number of helpers with magical gifts of various kinds (cf. Lynceus and his fabulous eyesight, Orpheus the singer, the winged Boreads, and others). An early version of the story was well known to Homer (*Od.* 12.69–72, *Argo pasimelousa*; cf. *Il.* 7.468 f., 21.41, 23.748) and may have even provided the model for a number of episodes of the *Odyssey*, most probably Circe, but also perhaps also the Sirens, the Planctae ("Wandering Rocks") and the voyage to Hades (see Meuli 1921; for discussion see Scherer 2002: 10 f.). No such early versions of the story will have survived as texts for Apollonius. He will, however, have consulted both references to and fuller versions of the Argonautic saga by Hesiod, Eumelus, Mimnermus, Simonides, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Antimachus, and Callimachus; and the ancient scholia also name a series of more or less obscure prose writers who also transmitted the tale, for example, Hecataeus, Acusilaus, Pherecydes, and Timaeus.

Pindar's fourth Pythian ode, the earliest surviving complete work that treats the myth, is certainly a key model (Scherer 2002: 22–5), but tragic sources also form a crucial element in Apollonius' revamping of the story (Nishimura-Jensen 1996). The poem as a whole can be read as the prelude to Euripides' *Medea* even as it is profoundly influenced by it,

especially in its depiction of the key figures of Jason and Medea. We also have some access to fascinating, but unfortunately fragmentary, glimpses of Apollonius' reworking of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Book 3 of the *Argonautica* may well be particularly rich in allusion to lost tragedies. Aeschylus, for example, at *Arg.* 3.851–53, looks like a possible source for the description of the "drug of Prometheus," while at 3.845, 858, and 865 (see Hunter 1989: 187 f.) Sophocles' *Colchian Women* and *Rhizotomoi* both seem to provide models for the help given to Jason by Medea in order to enable him to survive the trials set by Aeetes. That said, Aeschylus wrote plays called *Argo*, *Hypsipyle*, *Cabeiroi* and *Lemnian Women*, a possible tetralogy, while Sophocles, in addition to his *Colchian Women* and *Rhizotomoi* also composed plays entitled *Phrixus*, *Lemnian Women*, and *Amycus*, plus two more on *Athamas* and *Phineus*. Tragic influence on the *Argonautica* in general must have been more pervasive than we can now directly establish, and its influence is certainly felt not only in the use of particular plays for individual scenes or episodes, of course. The relatively un-Homeric nature of Book 3 as a whole may be explained by much of its subject matter, particularly the erotic elements, but Apollonius adopts tragic techniques in the confrontations between Medea and Chalciope and between Jason and Medea, while throughout the book knowledge of the events described in Euripides' *Medea* creates a highly tragic atmosphere. The resultant fusion of epic and tragic elements may reflect the influence of Aristotelian criticism, which saw the *Iliad* as a tragic epic. The generic experimentation was certainly to prove influential, since *Argonautica* 3 provides the key model for the tragedy of Dido in the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Nelis 2001: 125–80).

Excessive emphasis on imitation and allusion, however, may lead to a failure to appreciate innovation and invention. These are also important aspects of Apollonius' art. Given our relatively patchy knowledge of earlier versions of the myth and of the individual episodes and themes within it, this is an area in which it is difficult to offer definite conclusions. Overall, though, the impression gained from study of the relevant sources is one of superb control of the material on the part of the poet and of significant freedom in the reworking of the myth, and that the *Argonautica* is indeed a highly original and innovative version of an old story. At the beginning of the poem, Apollonius highlights his relationship to his forerunners when he says, "The ship is sung in the songs of earlier poets, who tell how it was constructed by Argos, on the orders of Athena" (*Arg.* 1.18 f.). It is not by chance that these words come immediately before the catalogue of Argonauts (1.23–233). Lists of those who sailed on the "Argo" were numerous in antiquity, and while certain names were fixed by Apollonius' day, there was also considerable room for variation, and it is certainly the case that anyone who studied the tradition could easily draw up a list of many more than the fifty Argonauts required to fill the fifty-oared ship the "Argo" was assumed to be. Opening the *Argonautica* with the catalogue thus gives Apollonius an immediate opportunity to stamp his authority on the tradition by stating who has been included and excluded, marking himself both as faithful transmitter of culturally important knowledge and as an original, learned scholar-poet. Following the catalogue, the entire episode of the "Argo"'s departure shows clear traces of both traditional scenes (the launching of the ship) and Apollonian invention, as the poet highlights crucial themes and characters. The short, intriguing scene in which Iphias, an old priestess of Artemis, kisses Jason's hand and tries to speak to him, but fails to do so as he is carried along by the excited crowd, looks like an Apollonian invention (Nelis 1991). Similarly, the quarrel involving Idas, Idmon, and Jason leading to the song of Orpheus contains traditional aspects (cf. the epic quarrels between Hektor and Polydamas, Tydeus and Amphiaraus, Odysseus and Euryalus, and, in the song of Demodocus, Achilles and Odysseus (see Vian 1976: 72 n. 3)) combined with the striking content of the song itself, a cosmogony and theogony in strikingly Hesiodic and Empedoclean mode.

In a number of other key areas, Apollonius confidently adapts standard elements of the epic genre in new ways. The role of the gods, for example, is deeply complex (see Feeney 1991: 57–98, Hunter 1993b: 75–100). On the one hand, the poem lends itself to interpretation as a realistic narrative of historical events that, despite happening in the distant past, are inextricably related to the contemporary world of the reader. The way in which the poem contains fragments of a history of the divine by incorporating different aspects of traditional succession myths firmly links this realistic narrative to the divine action in the poem. By this process the story may be read as an aetiological account of the coming to power of Zeus and of the divine dispensation in place in the world "today." Read thus, the poem can be seen, despite his absence from the actual narrative of the poem, to privilege the role of Zeus, and his anger has been seen as the key motor of the action in response to the role of Achilles' anger in the *Iliad* (Dräger 2001). On the other hand, Apollonius was only too aware of the vast amount of scholarship devoted to investigating the Homeric gods, and so his text consistently alludes to the different ways of reading divine forces in an epic narrative, whether as real deities like those of religious cult, as symbols, or as moral or physical allegories (e.g., Eros = the human sensation of erotic infatuation, Zeus = wisdom and knowledge, Hera = air, Apollo = the sun, and so on).

Furthermore, the poet is often deliberately ambiguous as far as divine motivations are concerned, and in the opening sections of the poem he flaunts the absence of Zeus, whose will had been highlighted at *Il.* 1.5. Instead, it is the human Pelias who first motivates the action (*Arg.* 1.15f.), until Hera's anger is revealed as a key organizing principle behind events (hinted at in 1.14; cf. 3.1133–6). Similarly, the idiosyncratic handling of Zeus and his absence from the narrative of the poem may be seen not as acknowledging his untouchable majesty, but rather as drawing attention to the problematic nature of a supremely inscrutable authority based on the possession of force and the threat of violence. On this reading the poem may be read metatextually as a commentary on the nature of narrative fictions involving the divine and as an extended meditation on the role of the gods in the Homeric epics, indeed on the very nature of traditional Greek epic and on the very feasability of composing an epic narrative in which the gods play a central role. Yet such a highly literary approach to the text does not of course preclude any sense of its promoting a moral or philosophical seriousness in its handling of the nature of the relationship between the human and the divine. The world depicted by Apollonius is one in which divine power and human ignorance combine to suggest a bleak and pessimistic view of the human condition.

Like his handling of the gods, Apollonius' depiction of his hero, Jason, has long perplexed scholars. He has been seen as a failed attempt at the portrayal of a traditional Homeric hero (whatever that may be thought to be), as an anti-hero, as a "love" hero, or as an ordinary man. To some extent, each of these categorizations is in some way useful and true, but as before, any overall interpretation based on an overly realistic or naturalizing reading must fail to do justice to the complexities of the text. There is no doubt that Apollonius is intent on exploring the very concept of heroism, but the frame of reference within which he attempts to do so is intensely literary. From one point of view, Jason is the hero of the *Argonautica* in the same way that Achilles is the hero of the *Iliad* and Odysseus of the *Odyssey.* But we must be wary of assuming that an epic must have a single hero who dominates the action (Feeney 1986a). Apollonius also allows his reader to see the whole crew of the "Argo" as embodying the virtues necessary for heroic status, and it seems clear that he thus raises the question of the value of individual action in comparison with communal action. It is not irrelevant that the Argonauts build (2.717–19) an altar to *Homonoia* (Concord), a powerful symbol of their functioning as a team. Similarly, when faced with meeting Aeetes, Jason prefers to adopt the power of words and diplomacy

instead of outright force, and in a key scene set up to resemble a typical epic *aristeia*, it is his words which help seduce Medea (3.976; see Goldhill 1991: 301–5). This scene in Book 3 is directly related to another example of variation on Homer in Book 1 (1.721–67), where Jason, before going to meet Hypsipyle, shoulders a cloak that resembles in many ways the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18. Whereas the Homeric hero required the shield to return to war in order to kill Hektor and avenge Patroklos, his Apollonian counterpart ends up under a cloak in bed with Hypsipyle (on the symbolism of the cloak see Scheid and Svenbro 1996). The rewriting of the Iliadic shield in the *ecphrasis* of the cloak acts as a symbol for Apollonius' composition of a new kind of epic, one in which the depiction of love and erotic motivations plays a key role.

The crucial importance of love as a central theme of the poem becomes particularly clear when Jason eventually faces the bulls and the earthborn giants at the end of Book 3. He does so under the protection of magic spells acquired from Medea because of her love for him and her desire to protect him from supernatural dangers. The confrontation with such monstrous enemies can hardly be described as a traditonal *aristeia*, yet it is described in such a way as to recall Iliadic battle scenes, and the whole episode has an intensity that sets it apart from the rest of the poem. That said, Jason here clearly does show traditional heroic virtues of bravery and skill as a fighter in this scene, and any attempt to deny him martial heroism founders on this passage. Certain characters within the epic resent their presence in this new kind of poem, particularly Idas (Fränkel 1960, with the comments of Glei 2001: 6f.) and Herakles (Feeney 1991: 95–8, Hunter 1993b: 25–36). While it is simplistic to say that they are meant to be seen as adherents of a traditional heroic code, their presence does help to highlight the originality of Jason as an epic hero, and their words and actions throughout the poem provide a frame of reference within which Jason's behavior may be judged.

Another important aspect of Jason – and of almost all the Argonauts – is their youth. Their adventure is obviously to be seen a kind of traditional tale about the initiation of young warriors. Jason represents the type of the young man on the edge of manhood who must prove himself in order to assume his rightful place in adult society. Telemachus, Orestes, and Theseus are comparable figures from within the same mythical tradition (Vidal-Naquet 1996). This background also provides a setting for Jason's relationship with Medea, as their story becomes one of sexual initation for both man and woman (cf. Hylas and the nymph at *Arg.* 1.1221–40 and Beye's suggestion (1982: 155–7) that the Fleece represents Medea's virginity).

Just as the character of Jason has perplexed readers and critics, so has that of Medea. It has often been remarked that when she first enters the poem she is a shy young girl, but that soon after she is depicted as an experienced magician, her final act in the poem being the destruction of the giant Talos. She loves Jason and is speechless in her innocence when she meets him, but at the same time she is capable of cleverly deceiving both her sister Chalciope and her brother Apsyrtus. Medea may be seen in the light of a number of epic paradigms: she is a lover, like Helen; a magician, like Circe; a nubile princess, like Nausikaa and Ariadne; and a plotter of the murder of Apsyrtus, like the deadly Clytemnestra. And, overall, she is the Medea of Euripides, whose earlier play all Apollonius' readers presumably have already read, but which the Hellenistic poet turns into a sequel to his own work. Apollonius may partly be reacting here against the Aristotelian idea that a character should be "whole" and consistent, but Medea is also thus depicted in order to enable Apollonius to link her to a number of models and to explore a number of key issues in the poem. Medea is of course the focus of the erotic, and Apollonius provides a famous description of her nascent passion for Jason, detailing both her physical sensations and mental torments.

The power of love has been a key theme in the poem since the Lemnos episode in Book 1, but in Book 3 it comes to dominate the narrative, leading to the murder of Apsyrtus

and culminating in the narrator's bleak comment following that character's death: "Frightful Eros, great curse, hated by all, source of deadly strife, sadness and troubles, and many other pains in addition" (*Arg.* 4.445–7). These words may suitably be thought typical of Apollonius' whole epic, a subtle, brilliantly complex and troubling work that has at last come into its own and is receiving the kind of detailed scholarly interpretation it deserves. Strikingly, its status in the view of some scholars seems finally to reflect the reputation the poem enjoyed in antiquity. The *Nachleben* of the *Argonautica* is a topic whose surface has barely been scratched, but to judge from the evidence of its reception in second- and first-century BCE. Rome it was considered something of a classic. The profound debt owed by Virgil to Apollonius in the writing of the *Aeneid* (the subject of Nelis 2001) testifies to the central role of the *Argonautica* in the reception of the Greek epic tradition at Rome and to its pivotal importance in the elaboration and development of the later Roman epic tradition.

FURTHER READING

The standard text of the *Argonautica* is that of Vian and Delage in the French Budé series (1976–96). It contains a translation and abundant notes on all aspects of the poem. Fränkel's Oxford Classical Text (1961) must still be consulted by all those who read the poem in Greek.

More recently, a number of excellent translations have appeared in several languages. For anglophone readers the versions by Hunter (prose, 1993a) and Green (verse, 1997a) provide reliable translations and useful introductions to the major aspects of the work.

Important background studies of Alexandrian society and literature are Fraser 1972, Hutchinson 1988, Goldhill 1991, Cameron 1995, and Fantuzzi and Hunter 2002.

There are now many book-length studies, for example Hurst 1967, Beye 1982, Fusillo 1985, Clauss 1993, Hunter 1993b, Rengakos 1994, Albis 1996, Pietsch 1999, Dräger 2001, Clare 2002, and at least two major commentaries are in progress, by Cuypers on Book 2 (1997) and Campbell on Book 3 (1994). Two more recent collections provide useful surveys of the state of current scholarship and will no doubt serve as platforms for further study: Harder, Wakker, and Regtuit 2000, and Papanghelis and Rengakos 2001.