

Jason and Medea

NOTES

Jason is the rightful heir to a vast Greek kingdom that is being ruled by his cousin Pelias. Pelias worries that he will lose his control of the land, for it is prophesied that he will die at the hands of a usurper wearing one sandal. Jason, having been secretly banished from his kingdom for many years, finally heads home to claim a throne that is rightfully his. It comes to pass that on his way, he loses one sandal while helping an old woman cross a swift river, and therefore enters the town shod in only one shoe. He finds Pelias, who is paranoid at this turn of events, and Jason makes it known that he means to take back the rule of the land.

Pelias' fear is great, for he does not want to die at the hands of single-sandaled Jason as his oracle has predicted. He tells Jason that if he can complete a quest, the rule will be his. Pelias tells Jason of a certain "Golden Fleece," a beautiful ram's pelt of pure gold that had been offered up as sacrifice many ages ago. The fleece, holding much value and coveted by many, was being jealously kept by King Aetes who had been given it as a gift in exchange for the hand of his daughter. Jason is overjoyed and delighted at the thought of embarking on an adventure, and he agrees to find and bring back this much-coveted article. Pelias is relieved that Jason has accepted his challenge, for he believes it to be an impossible task.

Jason gathers the strongest and boldest of heroes for this quest, and together they set sail on the ship *Argo* and prepare for many adventures. With the help of Hercules, Orpheus, and many gods; this crew manages to escape a multitude of evils. Shored on a small island for the night, they first encounter an old man who has been cursed by Zeus to withstand the retched stench of the evil Harpies whenever he tries to eat. The Harpies are enormous winged beasts with long claws and sharp beaks that leave sickening smells in their wake, making it impossible for anyone to consume food in their presence. The poor, cursed man, finding it impossible to ingest food, is therefore on the brink of starvation, his body like a bag of bones held together with thin skin. The brave Argonauts are able to battle the Harpies, nearly kill them, and convince Iris, the rainbow messenger of the gods, to stop the Harpies from further bothering the old man.

Thankful to the Argonauts, the old man warns them of the Clashing Rocks that lie ahead. These rocks are constantly rolling against one another in the midst of a tumultuous sea, and there is no way to pass except between them. He tells them to first make a trial with a white dove, and if she passes safely, they can continue. The Argonauts take their leave, thanking the old man for his advice, and soon come upon the colossal rocks that seem impossible to navigate. They send a dove to pass through, and she makes it with only her tail feathers torn away between the rolling and crashing rocks. The Argonauts take it as a sign it is safe to pass, and with their rowers' putting forth all their strength, they make it through with only the rear ornament of the ship torn off. They only barely make it through without being totally destroyed.

Growing weary of so many adventures and near-catastrophes, the Argonauts consider halting on the peaceful-looking country of the Amazons. The Amazons are warrior-women whose mother is a peace-loving nymph but whose father is the

NOTES

battle-hungry Ares, the god of war. Stopping there would have certainly been disastrous for the crew, and luckily the wind is strong and they can continue. After all these adventures, the Argonauts are indeed lucky when they finally reach Colchis, the land of the Golden Fleece.

After being treated with many kindnesses by King Aeetes himself, Jason and the Argonauts tell him of their quest. This angers the King, for he does not want to lose his valued treasure, and he therefore concocts a near-impossible task for Jason to complete in order for him to obtain it. First, Jason must yoke two fierce, tameless bulls and plow a field. Then, he must take a bag of dragon's teeth that King Aeetes has acquired and sow them, consequently battling the army of warriors that sprouts up out of the soil. The King announces to Jason that he himself has accomplished these exact feats, and will hand over the Golden Fleece only to someone who can perform the same tasks. Jason, nervous and unsure, agrees to take on this challenge, even if it means he must die in his attempt.

It is here that Jason learns from his fellow Argonauts of Medea, the daughter of the demanding Colchian King. Medea receives the sting of Cupid's arrow as she gazes upon Jason, and from that point forth falls into a deep and tumultuous love with him that will undoubtedly only bring her pain. Jason, desperate for help with his seemingly insurmountable tasks, and Medea, in such love with Jason, simultaneously seek each other out. They meet, and Medea is speechless as Jason pleads with her for assistance. Finally she is able to speak, and she gives him a powerful ointment that will make him impervious to defeat for one full day. Jason, overjoyed, feels great passion for Medea, and agrees to take her back to Greece with him if he is successful in his task.

Medea is torn: She feels a passion for Jason like she has for no other and longs to help him, but she is devastated at the treachery she has committed against her father. Medea's potent salve works, and Jason is able to bravely withstand the trials set forth to him. King Aeetes' *hubris*, or arrogant pride, causes him to ignore their agreement and he resolves to never give Jason the Golden Fleece. However, Medea again is able to help Jason, this time by lulling to sleep the serpent guardian that her father has placed in front of the precious fleece. Jason takes the fleece, and as he and the Argonauts sail off into the night with Medea as promised, Jason embraces her and vows to marry her upon their return to Greece.

By this time, the King is aware of Jason's activities, and he sends his son and Medea's brother, Apsyrtus, in pursuit of the ship. The King's naval army is great, and as it nears the *Argo*, the valiant Argonauts fear that they will be defeated. Medea saves them yet again, this time by committing the greatest treachery of all: She kills her brother. All for her love of Jason has she done these deeds; giving Jason the gift of the powerful ointment, betraying her father, and finally killing her own brother. After she kills Apsyrtus, she tears him limb from limb and throws the parts of his body into the ocean so her father's ship will be forced to stop to collect him. Her plan is successful, and the remainder of the great army is scattered in confusion; now devoid of their leader.

The Argonauts escape, and they return joyously to Greece clasping the elusive Golden Fleece. Jason and Medea take the fleece immediately to Pelias so Jason can claim his throne. However, in Jason's absence, evil has occurred. Pelias has forced the suicide of Jason's father and the resulting death from grief of his mother. Jason once again turns to Medea for her unfaltering aid.

Medea is cunning in her revenge on Pelias. Promising eternal youth, Medea shows Pelias' daughters that by chopping up the body of a ram, boiling it, and placing a spell on it, she can create a youthful, frisky lamb. His daughters are convinced, and although still reluctant to voluntarily kill their own father they nonetheless drug him, chop him into bits, and place him in boiling water. As they wait for Medea to cast her spell, they realize that she has disappeared and deceived them into killing their father.

Medea's trick was indeed wicked, but she would have done anything to avenge Jason. After the death of Pelias, Jason and Medea are forced to flee to Corinth to escape the punishment for deceiving Pelias' daughters. There, they have two sons. They are happy, and although Medea often woes her exile and the betrayal of her father and brother, she is comforted by her great love for Jason. Jason, however, reveals the evil that is inside him by deciding to divorce Medea and marry another woman.

For Jason, the marriage to the daughter of the King of Corinth will be a powerful, political union rather than a marriage of love. This does not comfort Medea, however, who is devastated and vocally vows to kill Jason's new bride. This public declaration sends her into another exile by the King, who reduces her punishment of death only because of Jason's pleading words. Medea knows that being sent into exile with her two young sons is like a death sentence, and she refuses to freely surrender her sons to this fate. She plots revenge.

Medea is distraught as she recalls all the things she has done for Jason and all the times she saved him and the Argonauts during their great quest. She feels a new fiery anger brought on by the realization that her passionate devotion was for nothing. Despite this blind loyalty created by Cupid's arrow, Medea is a clever woman. She takes a long robe, laces it with poisonous drugs, and gives it to her sons to take to Jason's bride. Her sons, instructed by their mother to do so, tell Jason's bride that she must wear the robe immediately to prove that she has accepted the gift. The bride is pleased by the gift, and puts on the deadly robe.

As soon as she does so, the poison begins to work, setting her skin on fire and killing her. When Medea hears that it is done, she does the unthinkable: She kills her own sons. She cannot bear the thought of taking her children into a defenseless exile with her, and she protects them the only way she knows how. Jason is furious when he learns of Medea's terrible deeds, and vows to kill her. Medea escapes, however, by climbing into a chariot led by winged dragons that carry her off into the sky.

