

THE KILLING OF APSYRTUS IN APOLLONIUS RHODIUS' *ARGONAUTICA*

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ARGONAUTICA 4.338–521, which deals with the killing of Apsyrtus by Jason and Medea, has long been a problematical episode for scholars and critics. There is much that is cryptic, or passed over in silence, in the poet's narrative of events. Largely as a result, it is difficult to interpret the words and behavior of the characters. The love between Jason and Medea that was so important in the third book of the poem seems here to be called into question. It is not clear whether the idea of tricking and killing Apsyrtus is Jason's from the start, in order to save Medea, or whether, intending to betray Medea in order to save himself and the Argonauts, he is forced into proposing it by Medea's anger and suspicions. And the Medea that we saw earlier in the poem, the tender young maiden in love, seems to have metamorphosed into a murderous witch.

For the most part, despite the difficulties that the episode places in the path of the interpreter, scholars and critics have assumed that there is an underlying psychological coherence and continuity in the characters, and that their thoughts and intentions can, in principle, be reconstructed. They have sought to determine Jason's underlying motives, to explain (or explain away) inconsistencies in Medea's words and behavior, and to sort out the degree of responsibility, and reprehensibility, to be assigned to Jason and Medea for their part in the murder.¹

Recently, however, Hunter has argued that Jason's thoughts and intentions in this episode cannot, in fact, be reconstructed, and that Medea's character is essentially divided and inconsistent; and he suggests that Apollonius' characters in this and other episodes should be read not as "Aristotelian" or mimetic characters, but rather as discontinuous, theme-driven intertextual constructs whose words and actions can often be understood only through other texts.²

I agree with Hunter that Jason's motives are unresolvably ambiguous, and I can agree that there are inconsistencies between the Medea of the third book and the Medea of the fourth.³ I am not convinced, however, that we must therefore forego responding to, and trying to understand, these characters in this fictional

References to the *Argonautica* are to Vian 1976–81.

¹ E.g., Hübscher 1940: 15–38; Paduano 1972: 212–229; Vian 1976–81: 3.20–23 and notes on the episode; Beye 1982: 159–164; Natzel 1992: 96–106.

² Hunter 1993: 12–15, 18–20, 59–68; cf. Hunter 1988 and 1987. Cf. also Dyck 1989, who argues that Apollonius' narrative choices in his depiction of Medea in the fourth book are determined by his wish to foreshadow later events in the story of Jason and Medea, as that story is told by Euripides.

³ Some of those who have sought to clear Apollonius of the charge of inconsistency in his depiction of Medea and of presenting us, in fact, with "two Medeas" have, I think, rather exaggerated the

world in human terms—indeed, I believe that the poet insists upon our doing so, and depends upon it for much of his effect.

In his recent study of the treatment of the gods in classical epic, Feeney (1991: 89) speaks of the “complex pessimism” of the *Argonautica*, due in large part to “the clammy atmosphere of uncertain confusion” produced by the ambiguity and unclarity of divine action and human motivation in the poem. He finds the fictional world of the poem to be characterized by “the clouded, imperfect knowledge of motive, purpose, and even fact; the oppressive sensation of inextricable consequence, by which few actions have clean issue; and the failure of codes of practice, with norms of morality made difficult and obscure It is a world where even the narrator finds it hard to discern a pattern” (94). The Apsyrtus episode, I argue in this paper, shows us aspects of the same phenomena. I suggest that much of the obscurity in the poet’s narrative in this episode, and much of the ambiguity of character and motivation, can be seen as part of the poet’s intricate narrative rhetoric, by which he explores and develops the themes of love and powerlessness that are interwoven in the poem and invites us to share a profoundly pessimistic, and cynical, view of human life.⁴ Apollonius withholds crucial pieces of narrative information about the events and characters of his story so that we, the audience, are kept guessing about what they are doing, and why; we cannot fully understand or assess their actions. He varies the distance between himself and us, and between us and his characters,⁵ so that he perplexes our emotional involvement with them, and shifts and modulates our attitudes towards them. He raises moral issues only to suggest that they are irrelevant; he begins to draw a sharp contrast between Jason and Medea, on the one hand, and their victim, Apsyrtus, on the other, only to blur that contrast and suggest that, in fact, Apsyrtus is not so unlike them after all. What Apollonius presents us with, finally,

sinister aspects of Medea’s character prior to the Apsyrtus episode; for a balanced view, see Phinney 1967: 333–334.

⁴On the themes of love and powerlessness in the poem, see Toohey 1992: 70–79. On the pessimism of the *Argonautica* in connection with the Apsyrtus episode in particular, cf. Lawall 1966: 167–169; Zanker 1979: 66–69.

⁵On the “distance” of the audience from the narrator, of the audience from a character or characters, of the narrator from a character or characters, etc., in terms of spatio-temporal location, emotional involvement, or moral or intellectual values see Booth 1983: 155–159. Booth (1967: 97) notes that this concept of “distance” subsumes “aesthetic distance,” a term which “should be reserved to describe the degree to which the reader or spectator is asked to forget the artificiality of the work and ‘lose himself’ in it.”

Jackson (1987) elaborates on Booth’s analysis of the levels of narrative communication that may be distanced from one another along various axes; he distinguishes, on the side of the “sender,” between the real author, the implied author, and the narrator, and on the “receiver” side, between the real reader, the implied reader, and the fictive reader (generally termed the *narrataire* or the “narratee” in critics writing in French and English). For the most part, I do not believe that these distinctions are particularly useful or necessary for analysis of distance in the *Argonautica* (cf. Fusillo 1985: 382 and Byre 1991: 216). I shall therefore generally refer to the narrative “sender” simply as “the poet,” and to the “receiver” as “the audience.”

is a vision of the world in which everyone is somehow both actively involved and passively implicated in the havoc wrought by love; a world in which everyone is both victim and victimizer, a mixture of innocence and culpability.

The circumstances that give rise to the murder are narrated in a dense, rapid, and elliptical summary (338–349), a summary that emphasizes the distance that separates us from story and characters. The Colchian fleet is in pursuit of the Argonauts, and the contingent led by Apsyrtus has blocked the passage of the Argonauts at the mouth of the Ister in the Adriatic Sea; the latter have disembarked on one of the two Brygean islands sacred to Artemis, which the Colchians have left unoccupied out of respect for the goddess (323–337). There, the poet tells us, the Argonauts would have been defeated in an armed conflict (338–339); but he goes on to tell us that they instead make a compact (συνθεσίη, 340) with the Colchians. As Fränkel (1952: 155) has noted, it is characteristic of Apollonius to require much labor from his audience in reconstructing the details of his story. The poet's account of the making of the compact is a good case in point: there are many gaps in this narrative summary, gaps which the audience is left to fill in.⁶ Some of the gaps may be filled in without too much difficulty with the aid of the details that are provided by the poet, so that we can construct the main facts of the situation: Apsyrtus sends heralds to the Argonauts; in the course of their negotiations with them, the Argonauts' right to keep the Golden Fleece is recognized, since Aeetes had promised it to them if they completed the trials, however they may have gotten it. It is Medea, however, who is the real point of contention (τό<δε> γὰρ πέλεν ἀμφήριστον, 345): she is to be separated from her companions and placed on the other island of Artemis, the one with the goddess's temple on it, until one of the local kings passes judgment as to whether she shall return to her father's house or go with the Argonauts to Greece.⁷ Other gaps, however, are more serious and much more problematic. They force us to ask questions about what is going on in the fictional world, questions to which we cannot find definitive answers.⁸ We are not granted access to either the words or the thoughts of any individual; the terms of the agreement are reported in indirect discourse dependent on the third person plural verb ἐτάμοντο (340). Thus, we do not know what intentions Apsyrtus communicates to his heralds (whose very existence must be inferred from the text; this inference does not receive confirmation until lines 417 and 435 [Vian 1976–81: 3.21]). The Colchians vastly

⁶ Händel (1954: 75–77) explains the narrative gaps in the Apsyrtus episode as the result of the poet's technique of highlighting what is most important (here, the reactions of his characters) and downplaying what is of lesser importance (here, the external events); cf. Fusillo 1985: 264. This, as I shall argue, is only a partial explanation: Apollonius has not provided us with some details precisely because it is important that we do not know them.

⁷ See Vian 1976–81: 3.21.

⁸ On the function of such gaps in controlling and directing the reader's progressive attempts to make sense of a narrative text, and often in preventing the reader from deciding between alternative interpretations of what is going on in the story, see Perry and Sternberg 1986; cf. Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 125–129.

outnumber the Argonauts; why then does Apsyrtus so readily concede the fleece to them and submit the fate of Medea to arbitration? Is he indeed conscious of the justice of the Argonauts' claim to the former, and so confident that he will be awarded jurisdiction over Medea (a confidence that would seem to be well-placed, judging by Jason's words in 398–400) that he is content to give up the one and to wait for a bloodless victory for the other? Or does he have more devious aims in view?⁹ And what is Jason's own role and intention in the negotiations? Is he really willing to let a third party decide whether Medea will stay with him or return to an almost certain death in Colchis?

Not only is Medea apparently left out of the process, she seems to be left quite in the dark about it; why this is so, what she does, or thinks, or feels during the negotiations, and how she finds out what has been going on, the poet does not tell us—another significant narrative gap. When she considers what has occurred, she is heartsick with care; she calls Jason aside from his companions and they walk a long way away (352b–354a). The poet thus emphasizes their separation from the group upon which Jason is so dependent; his isolation parallels, and is a pale shadow of, the far more complete and far more real isolation that Medea is experiencing, and which she expresses in her words to him as she opens the emotionally charged dialog (350–420) to which much of the episode is devoted.

Although we are permitted to eavesdrop on this very private conversation, we find ourselves considerably distanced from the characters. We are not vouchsafed the same close-up views of Medea's inner thoughts and feelings as we were in Book 3 and in the beginning of Book 4, views by which the poet ensured that our sympathies were firmly engaged by her attachment to Jason, despite the deceptions rather ominously practiced by her upon her sister, her handmaidens, and her father.¹⁰ We have been prepared for this greater psychic distance from Medea by the poet's invocation to the Muse at the beginning of Book 4, where he says that he does not know whether Medea's flight from Colchis with the Argonauts is due to the torments of her love-sick passion (ἄτης πῆμα δυσίμερον, 4) or to fear (φύζαν δεικελίην, 5); it is as though a barrier has arisen between the poet (and his audience) and the character.¹¹

Medea and Jason each present his or her own version of what has happened; the outcome of their colloquy is their decision to entrap and kill Apsyrtus. The poet's occasional comments give us no certain guide as to how to interpret their words, and we are provided with little direct access to their inner thoughts and feelings. As a result, we remain uncertain how to fill in some of the narrative gaps that I have mentioned; we have been brought suddenly into the scene and allowed to overhear a dialog whose situational context we cannot fully grasp. We

⁹ As Vian believes (1976–81: 3.21).

¹⁰ As Booth (1983: 246) points out, "the sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for good fortune for the character with whom he travels, quite independently of the qualities revealed"; cf. Stanzel 1984: 127–128.

¹¹ Cf. Hunter 1987: 134–135; Feeney 1991: 89–91; Beye 1982: 17.

are left somewhat off-balance, not knowing how to understand and evaluate their reactions to the situation.

In her first speech, Medea accuses Jason of betraying her so that he can keep the fleece and get away to Greece in safety. Jason, however, explains that it is Apsyrtus whom he is betraying: he has made the agreement with the Colchians simply to buy time in which to devise a trick to destroy him. With him out of the way, the Colchians will lose support among the inhabitants of the area, and it will be easier for the Argonauts to oppose them in combat.

Scholars are divided on the question whether it is Medea's suspicions or Jason's explanations that correspond more closely to the truth. Deliberately, I believe, the poet furnishes support for both hypotheses, and does not permit us finally to decide between them. On the one hand, Medea's version is made plausible to us by the fact that events and arguments in this episode and elsewhere in the poem recall Euripides' *Medea*,¹² and suggest the hypothesis that the motives and conflicts of that play are also operating here. Medea's accusation that Jason has gained everything through her assistance—success in the contest, possession of the fleece, return home—whereas she has lost everything through giving it—home, parents, reputation—is patently, and pathetically, true, and reminds us of her later desolation and dependence on the faithless Jason in Greece. The continuous tension throughout the episode between agreement and promise, on the one hand, and trickery and deceit on the other,¹³ lends further credibility to Medea's accusations that Jason is playing her false. Moreover, Jason's explanation of his actions seems to be forced from him by the violence of her outburst, which threatens destruction to herself and to the *Argo*. He addresses her fearfully, with soothing words (μειλχίοις ἐπέεσσιν ὑποδδείσας, 394), wheedlingly (ὑποσσάινων, 410); the repeated prepositional prefix ὑπο- hints at a disparity between what he says and what he thinks and feels. All of this suggests that, caught out by Medea, he hastily improvises a plot against Apsyrtus as a way of allaying her fears and assuaging her wrath.¹⁴

On the other hand, if Jason were really only interested in keeping the fleece, he could have simply given Medea up to the Colchians without going through the charade of third-party arbitration. In itself, moreover, Jason's explanation of his actions and his sketch of a plot against Apsyrtus sounds less like a panicky and deceptive ad-lib than like an exposition of a cool decision based upon a careful and accurate assessment of the Argonauts' situation. Like the poet himself, Jason insists that armed opposition to Apsyrtus and his contingent could not be

¹² See, e.g., Hunter 1993: 61–63; on p. 123, he says that “the action of Euripides’ tragedy hangs over the epic like a cloud about to burst, so that the later poem becomes almost an explanatory commentary on the terrible events of the drama.”

¹³ See Hunter 1993: 63.

¹⁴ Cf. Hunter 1993: 15. Those who argue for the hypothesis that Jason is trying to deceive Medea include Fusillo 1985: 264–265 and Margolies 1981: 191–194. Cf. Natzel 1992: 99–101; Hutchinson 1990: 125–126; Paduano 1972: 223–225.

successful, and his prediction of the effects of the removal of Apsyrtus is similar to that of Peleus after the murder has been accomplished (495–502).¹⁵ Indeed, Medea herself seems to find his explanation satisfactory.

There is also the question of the role of the other Argonauts in the episode. The poet uses the plural in 340 to refer to the Argonauts' coming to terms with the Colchians, and so does Medea in 355. And Jason himself says to Medea that, while he is personally not happy with the compact (τὰ μὲν ἀνδάνει οὐδ' ἐμοὶ αὐτῷ, 395), "we sought" (διζήμεθα, 396) to postpone battle by means of it; the compact will bring about a trick by which "we will bring him [Apsyrtus] to destruction" (μιν ἐξ ἄτην / βήσομεν, 404–405). It does seem likely that the Argonauts acted in concert in concluding the compact: Jason does not usually come to any decision alone, without being pushed or pulled into it by others (Rosenmeyer 1992: 184–192). Furthermore, although the other Argonauts are deliberately kept far in the background throughout the episode, they are deeply involved in carrying out the plot against Apsyrtus (Fränkel 1968: 488, n. 66), and they seem to be well-satisfied at its success; all of which suggests that the intention of double-crossing Apsyrtus was part of their original design in concluding the compact. Jason, therefore, could well be telling the truth.¹⁶

The discord that we have seen between Jason and Medea, the bitterness of Medea's anger, which grows to a fever-pitch of rage, and the ambiguity of Jason's motives increase our distance from them. We know that Jason is contemplating treachery, but we do not know who is its primary object, Medea or Apsyrtus; nor whether Jason is motivated chiefly by love for Medea or by concern for the success of his expedition and the safety of himself and the Argonauts. Nor do we know how much of Medea's violent passion stems from her love for Jason, how much from her fear of her father and her instinct for self-preservation. At the same time, we are also moved to a greater distance from them as we see more clearly how Medea's love for Jason entails betrayal of her family, and as we see Apsyrtus, the representative of that family, apparently in sharp contrast with the pair.

When she fell in love with the handsome foreigner in Book 3, and became passionately interested in his survival and success, Medea was torn by an inner conflict between loyalty to her family (particularly to Aeetes, the head of her family) and her love for Jason. In that book, we saw the conflict from the point of view of Medea, and our sympathies fell heavily upon the love side of the scale rather than upon the side of loyalty to her thoroughly unsympathetic father.

What is at issue in Medea's inner conflict, however, although it was half-obscured in the third book by the intensity of her erotic feelings for Jason, is a moral and legal code to which the ancient audience certainly subscribed: the code whereby a woman remains under the power and protection of her father or

¹⁵ Cf. Ibscher 1939: 83–84.

¹⁶ Vian 1976–81: 3.21–22 believes that Jason is being honest with Medea; on the undecidability of the question, see Hunter 1993: 15; cf. Beye 1982: 162 and Fränkel 1968: 484.

guardian until she passes into the power and protection of her husband. Although this code does not become fully explicit until Alcinous deliberates upon the couple's fate later in Book 4, it pushes its way nearer the surface in the present episode. The code is clearly implied by the terms of the compact between the Argonauts and the Colchians who have them surrounded. It is implicitly rejected by Medea when she tells Jason that she is now his daughter, wife, and sister (κούρη τε δάμωρ τε / αὐτοκασιγνήτη τε, 368–369); a pathetic, and moving, appeal for protection that also shows that her real family, Apsyrtus included, is now nothing to her. And it is implicitly acknowledged by Jason when he refers to Apsyrtus as Medea's protector and brother (ὅς τοι ἄσσοστήρ τε κασίγνητός τε τέτυκται, 407).¹⁷

In trying to get Medea back, Apsyrtus is acting *in loco patris* and also as Aeetes' deputy-in-command in leading the fleet. But he is no mere stand-in for the malevolent and terrifying Aeetes. Apsyrtus is a remarkably shadowy figure in this often murky epic. Neither his words nor his thoughts are ever directly quoted; he is shown only briefly before the present episode, and even here he does not occupy center stage until just before he is cut down by Jason. We have no direct view of him in the account of the forging of the compact, and thus cannot be certain of his motives in agreeing to it. Nevertheless, what we have seen or heard of him thus far rather disposes us to like him and to sympathize with him. In an authorial comment apropos of this πᾶσις Αἰήταο (3.241) in 3.245–246, the poet says that the young men of Colchis gave him the surname "Phaethon" because he was so distinguished among them. It is by this surname that the poet pregnantly refers to him in the first of his two brief appearances in the story before the episode in which he is murdered, when on the morning of Jason's contest he is attendant upon the panoplied Aeetes, holding his horses and chariot in readiness (3.1235–1236). And he is his father's charioteer when Aeetes in high choler enjoins the Colchians to find and bring back Medea, who has just escaped with the Argonauts (4.224–225).

The fact that the Colchians under Apsyrtus do not occupy the islands sacred to Artemis out of respect for the goddess (4.334) suggests that he is pious—a trait that hitherto has been a characteristic of Jason,¹⁸ who now does occupy one of them. In conceding the fleece to Jason and in agreeing to submit his claim to Medea to arbitration when both right and might are clearly on his side, he would seem to be both just and fair. So, when Medea in her second speech to Jason (411–420) gives concrete form to his vague plan, and proposes that they entice Apsyrtus into meeting her alone and then kill him, her brother seems to have strong claims upon our sympathies because of the moral correctness of his position, his apparent uprightness, and his youthful excellence.

¹⁷ See Paduano 1972: 215–221; cf. Natzel 1992: 100–101.

¹⁸ Hübscher 1940: 18–20. For Lawall (1966: 147, 167), Jason's killing of Apsyrtus before the temple of Artemis represents his renunciation of piety in the interests of success and survival.

Medea's first speech to Jason began with lamentation (στονόνενα, 354) and ended in a towering, destructive rage. Her second speech to him is calm and "deadly" (οὐλοόν, 410), with a tone of fatalistic resignation. She says that her shameful deeds make it necessary for them to contrive the death of Apsyrtus.¹⁹ She admits her sinful infatuation, but says that her actions are the result of the evil designs of some divinity (θεόθεν). This is self-justifying; and yet we know that, ironically, it is true: we have been privy to the machinations of Hera, who has enlisted the help of Eros to make Medea fall in love with Jason in order to thwart the will of Aeetes, Jason's opponent; and we know that she has done so in order ultimately to destroy Pelias, who also happens to be the opponent of Jason.

The next section of the episode, which deals with the setting of the trap (421–449), the μέγαν δόλον (421), is that in which the poet's presence is most overt, for much of it is given over to extensive authorial comments and to direct appeals to the audience's feelings and emotions. The poet himself lends powerful support to Medea's justification of her actions, while at the same time he expresses horror at her murderous designs. In this section, too, he begins to place Apsyrtus in a somewhat different light, and to subtly qualify our attitude towards him.

The section concludes with the poet's apostrophe to Eros as the hateful bane of human existence and the source of strife and countless other woes (445–449). This sweeping generalization, made apropos of the events that are unfolding in the fictional world, is at the same time a statement about the real world, the world of the poet and his audience; it thus has the effect of linking these worlds and heightening our emotional involvement in the former.²⁰ The emotional outburst is highly unusual in Apollonius.²¹ He tells Eros to arm himself "against the children of my enemies" (δυσμενέων ἐπὶ παισὶ) as he did when he "cast hateful *ate* into the heart of Medea" (448–449). The reference to Medea is as applicable to the moment in Book 3 when Eros, there depicted as a willful urchin, shoots his arrow into her breast (3.280–298) as it is to her present situation;²² it shows that Medea is as much a victim of Eros as Apsyrtus is.²³

But what is most significant about the apostrophe is the fact that it takes the form of an *apopompe*, a prayer that a harmful divine power will visit its destruction upon others rather than upon oneself.²⁴ We see here the poet himself, upon whose

¹⁹ Natzel (1992: 102–103) sees it as Medea's tragic error that she equates her earlier infractions of social norms with her present decision to break moral laws in the murder of her brother. Zanker (1979: 65), however, is far more accurate when he says that Medea's "dilemma is tragic, for she can either remain passive and be destroyed or reap the evil consequences of action."

²⁰ Cf. Harland 1980: 132–133.

²¹ Fränkel 1968: 493–494.

²² Cf. Fränkel 1968: 494–495.

²³ On the apostrophe as expressive of the poet's sympathy for Medea, and as absolving humans of responsibility for acting under the compulsion of Eros, see Paduano 1972: 227–229. As Phinney (1967: 335, n. 30) observes, the apostrophe shows that "Medea, like everyone in the *Argonautica*, is victimized by fate and its agents the gods."

²⁴ For a brief discussion of this type of prayer, see Fraenkel 1957: 410–411.

voice we depend for our knowledge of the story and whose values and judgments we are supposed to share, seeking to deflect onto others the terrible destruction brought on by Eros. He is enacting on the level of the narration what Jason and Medea are enacting on the level of the story, and out of the same instinct for self-preservation. For what else are they doing when they send Apsyrtus the peplos of Hypsipyle (423), seeking to entangle him in a fatal web of erotic allure in order to escape the consequences of their love?

The poet's lengthy commentary on the peplos sent to Apsyrtus as a *xenion* also illustrates the inevitability of the linkage of love with tragedy, and the universality of subjection to it. What the poet tells us of its history—how the Charites made it for Dionysus on Dia, how Dionysus gave it to Thoas, and Thoas to Hypsipyle, who gave it to Jason as a *xenion*, and how its divine scent remained after the tipsy Dionysus lay with Ariadne, whom Theseus had abandoned on Dia (423–434)—shows that love and betrayal, ecstasy and sorrow, are interwoven with the very fabric of the garment. Medea is also implicated in this tragic history, for the dénouement of her story is hinted at in the references to Ariadne and to Hypsipyle.²⁵

Apsyrtus, too, is implicitly present in the long excursus on the peplos. He is never shown actually receiving the garment (another narrative gap). But his reaction to it is suggested indirectly, through the reaction that the poet hypothesizes of his audience. Interrupting his account of the history of the object, the poet, in one of his rare direct addresses to his audience, says that “neither in touching it nor in looking at it would you satisfy your sweet desire” (οὐ μιν ἀφάσσω / οὔτε κεν εἰσορώων γλυκὺν ἕμερον ἐμπλήσειας, 428b–429).²⁶ In context, the experience of touching and seeing the peplos is implied to be an overpoweringly erotic one, an experience that no one has been or could be proof against. It is suggested that not only Ariadne and Hypsipyle and Jason and Medea, but also the audience of the poem, and by implication Apsyrtus, are susceptible to this voluptuousness and are real or potential victims of the erotic power of which it is a part.

But there are overtones in this address which also suggest that the experience of those who have contact with the peplos is not altogether innocent. The image of the audience's/Apsyrtus' ecstasy in handling and viewing the peplos recalls the similarly erotic image of Jason a little earlier in the book, when he has finally got possession of the Golden Fleece (4.167–188). His face reddened by the light radiating from it, he rejoices in it like a young girl catching moonbeams on her robe; he rolls it up, feeling it (εἶλει ἀφασσόμενος, 181), and fears that someone, god or mortal, might take it from him. When the Argonauts see it, they are eager to touch it and hold it in their hands; but Jason keeps it from them and

²⁵ Cf. Fusillo 1985: 308–310.

²⁶ For an analysis of this and of the other instances of direct address by the narrator of the *Argonautica* to his audience, see Byre 1991.

covers it with a cloak. Explicit in the case of Jason,²⁷ implicit in the hypothetical case of the audience/Apsyrtus, is a self-absorbed, erotically-charged covetousness in the possession of an object of sensuous delight that is at once charming and repellent. The implied covetousness of the audience/Apsyrtus towards the cloak is not simply that of a passive and innocent bystander caught up incidentally in Love's machinations, but that of one who is in some sense an acquiescent participant in them.

In this part of the episode, then, the poet suggests that Apsyrtus, the intended victim of Jason and Medea, is, like them, the victim of Eros. He also begins to suggest that Apsyrtus is not, in fact, Jason's antithesis, but rather his faint mirror-image, and imbued with the same ambiguity. Hunter (1993: 16–17) has called attention to what he calls the "ephebic" qualities of Jason, to the poet's emphasis upon his youth, upon his reliance on deceit and cunning as well as upon strength and prowess, etc., and to Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece as a *rite de passage*, a *rite* that is re-enacted in the killing of Apsyrtus. But Apsyrtus, too, as now becomes clearer, possesses these same "ephebic" qualities. Like Jason, he is a leader of ships and men, and he is at the same time a man-child poised precariously between tender youth and mature adulthood.²⁸ He, too, is involved in a quest, and is willing to use deceit to complete it. Thus, Jason's ambushing Apsyrtus becomes more than a simple ambush: it becomes something of a contest for Medea and the Fleece; an unequal contest, to be sure, but a contest that is not altogether unfair.

Various means are used to prevail upon Apsyrtus to meet Medea at the temple of Artemis: the gifts (above all the peplos) that Jason and Medea send to him with the returning heralds, Medea's message that she will join forces with him and that she had been forced to go with the Argonauts against her will,²⁹ and the magic drugs that Medea scatters to the winds. We are not shown the effect that each element has upon him. But the poet remarks that Apsyrtus comes tricked by dread promises (αἰνότητησιν ὑποσχέσῃσι δολωθεῖς, 456). He comes, then, it

²⁷ Cf. Rose 1985: 38–39.

²⁸ Faerber (1932: 43, n. 1) sees in the comparison of Apsyrtus to an ἀταλὸς παῖς in 4.460 vestiges of the more common version of the Apsyrtus myth, in which he was a little child, killed and dismembered in Colchis or on board the *Argo*. Hübscher (1940: 34–35) argues that Apollonius has given the version that he has in order to lessen the abhorrent blameworthiness of Medea's role in the killing, and so that Jason will share responsibility for it; cf. Dyck 1989: 460–462; Natzel 1992: 101.

Also important, I believe, is that this version permits the poet to make of Apsyrtus an ambiguous figure, one who is similar to Jason and who is at once victim and would-be participant in treachery and betrayal.

²⁹ The message that Medea tells the heralds to convey to Apsyrtus is reported by the poet in indirect discourse. I cannot agree with Hunter when he finds this indirect discourse to be an iconic sign of the deceit being practiced by Medea, an indication of "a possible gap between 'what is said' and 'what is meant'" (Hunter 1993: 144–145). The gap, rather, is between the words "really" spoken by Medea and the poet's report of those words; it emphasises our distance from the events and characters of the story and heightens our sense of the eerie unfathomability of what is going on in it. Cf. Beyé 1982: 25.

appears, above all because he is tricked by Medea into believing that he will be joining her in tricking Jason and the Argonauts (δόλον συμφοράσσεται, 438) so that he will get not only her, but also the Golden Fleece.³⁰

The poet compares Apsyrtus' attempt to sound out his sister about tricking the Argonauts to that of a "tender child" (ἄταλὸς παῖς, 460) trying to cross a winter stream which not even strong men cross. The imagery is full of implicit pathos; but it is also meant, I believe, to call Jason himself to mind.³¹ Jason, who crossed the winter stream of Anaurus, losing his sandal, on the fateful day when he went to the court of Pelias (1.9–11) and who at the same winter stream won the lasting gratitude of Hera, who was disguised as an old woman, when he carried her across it (3.66–73). Whereas Jason is spectacularly successful in his crossings, Apsyrtus will meet with dismal failure in his.

The killing itself, narrated in 464–479, is horrible; but the horror is almost impersonal. The poet takes up a spatial point of view at some remove from each of the three characters, a point of view in keeping with the tone of cool, impartial objectivity and emotional detachment that he adopts here. No speech, no thoughts or feelings are reported; the characters are shown acting only, in a sort of surrealistic dumb show. The poet continues his suggestion of the essential similarity of Jason and Apsyrtus, giving them a patina of might and valor. Each of them is termed ἥρως, Apsyrtus in 471 and Jason in 477.³² Jason strikes Apsyrtus as a *boutupos* ("ox-slaughterer") strikes a great strong-horned bull (βουτύπος ὡς τε μέγαν κερεαλκέα ταῦρον, 468), a phrase that suggests the might and power of both,³³ and Apsyrtus "fell to his knees" (γνὺξ ἤριπε, 471)—a phrase redolent of Homeric combat. More significantly, perhaps, the poet suggests that both Jason and Apsyrtus are similar to the brutal Amycus by applying the word βουτύπος to the one, and the phrase γνὺξ ἤριπε to the other: both are used of Amycus in his fight with Polydeuces in 2.91 and 2.96, respectively.³⁴

³⁰The perfidy of Apsyrtus has received little attention in the scholarly literature; but see Zanker 1979: 66, n. 40 and Hutchinson 1990: 126.

³¹Cf. Natzel 1992: 105.

³²Herter (1973: 46) is rightly doubtful that the term can be meant ironically in Apollonius; cf. Hutchinson 1990: 127.

³³Hurst (1967: 112) says that through this phrase "le meurtre conserve un aspect héroïque." The poet's comment that the drugs that Medea scatters to the winds to charm Apsyrtus into meeting her would have brought a savage beast down from a high mountain (442–444) also suggests Apsyrtus' strength and might.

³⁴The repetitions are noted by Beye (1982: 150), but he takes them as indicating that "the second book's victory of light over darkness, good over evil is ironically compared to a brutal and unheroic murder." Porter (1990: 260–267) sees in the account of the murder of Apsyrtus allusions to Orestes' killing of Aegisthus in Euripides' *Electra*; he concludes that Apsyrtus, like Aegisthus, is presented as a "sympathetic character killed by deceit in a sacral context" (p. 264). *Pace* Porter, I think that the allusion would in itself suggest an ambivalent attitude toward Jason and Apsyrtus; in any case, what I think has not been sufficiently noticed is the extent to which Apsyrtus is presented in the same terms as Jason.

When Jason performs the grisly rite of *maschalismos* and laps and spits his victim's blood as killers do, the poet explains, to expiate murder by treachery,³⁵ we are grimly reminded of the nature of the deed. When Medea averts her gaze from the blow falling on her brother, and he stains her veil and mantle red with his gushing blood, we are reminded that blood-guilt has been incurred.³⁶ And that the murder takes place in front of the temple of Artemis, and that the Erinyes looks with displeasure on the deed, reminds us of the moral law and divine ordinance that have been transgressed.

As Hunter (1993: 111) says, the killing of Apsyrtus "is condemned outright" by the poet. But of the agents and agencies involved in the deed, it is Love, not Jason or Medea, that is condemned outright. The poet's attitude towards the human agents—including Apsyrtus himself—is complex, nuanced, and ambivalent. What Apollonius has shown us and told us in this episode is that such acts of treachery, and such transgressions, are part of the inevitable and inscrutable scheme of things. We cannot unravel the complex web of inner desires and external compulsions that draw people into these acts. We can only see that this is a world in which everyone is a potential victim of Love and its aftermath, and that everyone must survive as best they can, becoming, it may be, an instrument of the destruction of others.³⁷

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³⁵ ἡ θέμις ἀθένῃσι δολοκτασίας ὑλάεσθαι (479), a comment which I would characterize as cynical rather than as ironically condemnatory: the poet is saying that such murders inevitably occur in human affairs, and such measures are taken to expiate them. I cannot agree with Hutchinson (1990: 96, n. 15) that "the arch ἡ θέμις ἀθένῃσι 'as is the custom for murderers' only heightens the sense of distance. The Homeric sense of θέμις (cf. especially *Il.* 9.134) is intended to conflict harshly with its usual sense, 'law, right'"; cf. Goldhill 1991: 331–332.

³⁶ Several scholars, including Fränkel (1968: 498), Beye (1982: 164), and Hutchinson (1990: 127), interpret lines 471–474 as meaning that Apsyrtus takes up his blood in his hands and deliberately stains her clothing with it. But this, I think, strains the Greek and creates an effect quite different from what Apollonius is aiming at. ὑποίχοιτο in 473 simply means that Apsyrtus "tries to catch and to stem the blood gushing out of his wound" (Bremer 1987: 425). Both the staining and the being stained are involuntary; the point is the ultimate helplessness of both Apsyrtus and Medea.

³⁷ I am grateful to the two anonymous referees of *Phoenix* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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