

A Brief History of the Audience



I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. —Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

The nature of the audience has changed throughout history, evolving from a participatory crowd to a group of people sitting behind an imaginary line, silently observing the performers. The audience is continually growing and changing. There has always been a need for human beings to communicate their wants, needs, perceptions and disagreements to others. This need to communicate is the foundation of art and the foundation of theatre's relationship to its audience.

In the Beginning

Theatre began as ritual, with tribal dances and festivals celebrating the harvest, marriages, gods, war and basically any other event that warranted a party. People all over the world congregated in villages. It was a participatory kind of theatre; the performers would be joined by the villagers, resting on the belief that villagers' lives depended on a successful celebration—the harvest had to be plentiful or the battle victorious, or simply to be in good graces with their god or gods. Sometimes these festivals would last for days, and the village proved tireless in their ability to celebrate. Many of these types of festivals survive today in the folk history of areas such as Scandinavia, Asia, Greece and other countries throughout Europe.

It's Greek to Me

The first recorded plays come from the Greeks (fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E.). Their form of theatre began in much the same way as previous forms did. It stemmed from the celebration of the wine harvest and the gods who brought citizens a fruitful harvest—specifically Dionysus, the god of wine. Spectators had a great deal of respect for their gods, and thousands would flock to the theatre to experience a full day of celebration. The day of drama and song made for a lively crowd. Staff-bearers patrolled the aisles to keep the rowdies under control. While theatre was free, your seat was determined by your station in life. The rich had cushioned seats at the front, while the peasants, artisans and women were forced to take seats at the back. In the later years, after a full day of drink, Greek audiences were not above showing disapproval at a less-than-spectacular performance. Stones were thrown, as well as other sloppy objects, hissing was popular, and loud groanings of discontent could usher any actor into early retirement.

The Romans, or the inspiration for *Gladiator*

The Romans took the idea of "spectator" an inch or so further. Their theatre (first through third centuries B.C.E.) developed in much the same way as the Greeks—with comedy, tragedy and festivals—but unfortunately ended

with what the Christians called "morally inappropriate" dancing mimes, violent spectator sports such as gladiator fights, and the public executions for which the Romans were famous. The Romans loved violence and the audience was a lively crowd. Because theatre was free, it was enjoyed by people of every social class. They were vocal, enjoyed hissing bad actors off the stage, and loved to watch criminals meet large ferocious animals, and; soon after, enjoyed watching those same criminals meet their death.

The Far East

In Asia, theatre developed in much the same way it has elsewhere, through agricultural festivals and religious worship. The Chinese and Japanese audiences have always been tireless, mainly because their theatre forms, such as the Japanese "Kabuki" and "Noh" plays and Chinese operas, could last anywhere between a full day, if not three days, beginning between *six to nine in the morning!* In China, the audience was separated; the higher classes sat closer to the action of the play, and the lower classes, generally a louder, more talkative bunch, would be placed in stalls at the back. The audience expected a superior performance, and if it lacked in any way, the audience could stop the production and insist on a different presentation. In Japan, theatre began with all-day rice festivals and temple plays sponsored by priests. These evolved into "street performances" where the performers led the audience on a trip through the village. In theatre houses, the upper classes sat in constructed boxes, and women in disguise (it was not considered proper for a respectable woman to be seen at the theatre) and lower classes would stand below with the "inspector" standing on a high platform in the middle, keeping a strict eye on everyone.

A Couple of Hundred Years Without Art

Tolerance takes a holiday during the period of European history known as the Dark Ages. During this time period culture of all kind goes on hiatus—most especially that frivolous, godless display of lewd and licentious behavior

known as theatre. Fortunately it reemerges with some severe restrictions during the Middle Ages.

Pageant Wagons

Western theatre further develops from the Greek and Roman traditions through the Middle Ages with "Mystery Plays" sponsored by the church. Organized theatre was frowned upon, as it was a place for congregation of the lower classes, encouraging disease and immoral behavior. Church leaders would allow performances of bible scenes, however, for the people who could not read. These productions moved to different locations much like traveling the "stations of the cross." To spread the good word to the broadest section of the population, these plays left the confines of the church building and began to travel on what were known as "pageant wagons." These wagons held one entire location and a series of wagons hooked together permitted a company to tell an entire story just about anywhere. Troupes of actors would roam the countryside setting up make-shift theatres in inns, pubs, public squares, pretty much anywhere they could park.

Within This Wooden O

During Shakespeare's era—the Elizabethan period—theatre companies were awarded status and privilege based on patronage from wealthy landholders or the royal family. With patronage came money, so the companies began building theatres. The theatre of Shakespeare's day was attended by all, was inexpensive, and was known to be an incredibly good time. Surrounding the stage was the lower "pit" where the lower classes congregated—called the "groundlings"—and above, octagonally surrounding the pit, were the stalls reserved for the upper classes. If you were stationed in the pit, it was not uncommon to have a goblet of wine dumped on your head, to be drooled upon, or spat upon by the "more civilized" people above you. Elizabethan audiences did not know what it meant to be quiet for a performance and would talk back to the actors. Thought to be involved in spreading the "black plague," the theatres were closed in 1592.

Look at me, look at me...

During the Restoration, theatre became a luxury. For the almost entirely upper-class audience, the purpose of going to the theatre was "to see, and to be seen." The stage was a rectangular area between a long hallway of boxes. The best seats in the house were often right on stage! The house lights were up full so the audience could see *each other* better, not the action on stage. The theatre of the Restoration consisted mainly of light, fluffy comedies performed in an oratory style—actors posing, wearing BIG costumes and practically screaming over the din of the audience. Theatre companies still existed on the patronage

of the very wealthy and often performed plays exclusively in the salons of the rich, famous and powerful. A few hundred years later, Opera composer Richard Wagner figured out that to focus the audience's attention away from themselves and onto the stage, the lights needed to be off—forcing the audience to watch the performance. Since that time, the audience has taken its cue that the performance is about to begin when the lights overhead begin to dim. This small adjustment in lighting effectively erected a permanent barrier between the action onstage and the audience.

Freud ... Tell me About Your Mother

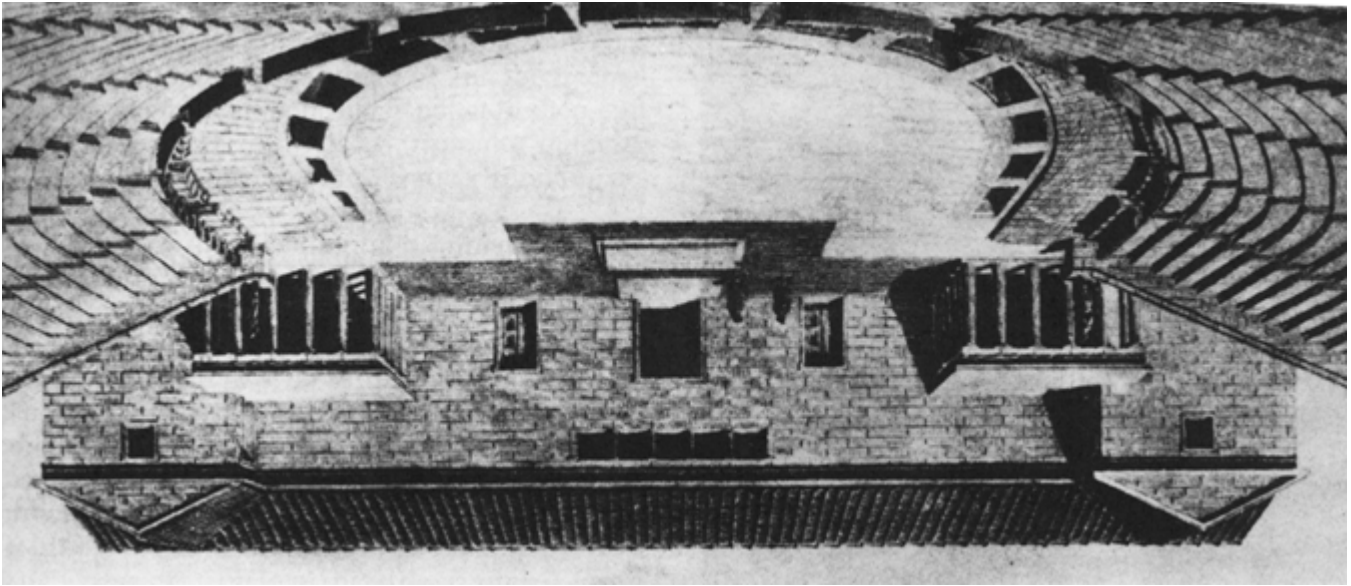
While dimming the house lights has drastically changed the overall aesthetic of theatre another modern movement has had even greater impact on theatre in the 20th century. Psycho-analysis—Id, ego, super-ego and subconscious desires—made theatre more introspective in its search for truth. As theatre became more psychological, more a representation of real life, the audience felt as if they were eavesdropping. Twenty-first century theatre goes spend a great deal of time and thought pondering the psychological motivations of characters. There is now an imaginary wall, called the "fourth wall," separating the performers and the audience. It affects how we view the performance and how actors' portray characters—we can observe the people onstage as they relate their problems, fears and desires without them noticing us at all.

Now the Options Are Endless

Today, for the audience, just about anything goes. History has shared with us many types of theatre, and we, the spectators, bring our own experiences and histories to the event causing us to react differently to different productions. Unlike movies or television, the actor-audience relationship is a "live" relationship: each is in the other's presence, in the same place at the same time. It is the exchange between the two which gives theatre its unique quality. As audience members we have an obligation to be attentive, allowing the performers to fulfill their obligation—to entertain and enlighten us. There is always a dialogue between audience and performer, whether visual or vocal. All individuals participating in the theatrical event, whether as audience or performer, bring to it a personal background and experience which becomes vital to their response, to the interaction. In the same way, every participant leaves the performance enriched both by their own individual experience and that of the larger community to which they belong for a brief moment within the confines of the theatre walls. We must listen to capture and understand what the performers are trying to communicate, and, at the same time, they must listen to us.

The History of

Greek Drama



Frickenhaus: Die Altgriechische Bühne, 1917.

A reconstruction of the Theatre of Dionysus, birthplace of Greek theatre, as it appeared in the late 4th century B.C.E.

Greek Theatre forms many of the foundation of Western performance traditions and likely grew out of a combination of dance, epic storytelling and choral singing. The word “orchestra” comes from the Greek *orkestra*, which referred to a circular performance space that was used for group dances. The Greeks built their arts and festivals around the agricultural calendar, and both planting and harvest seasons were times of celebration. The festivals expanded as fertility dancers were joined by storytellers, who retold mythological stories. As the festivals grew larger and more elaborate, the dancers and storytellers were joined by singers and musicians who arranged the legends into choral pieces called *dithyrambs*. At some point a single choral member stepped out of the chorus and performed the part of a single character. Theatre was born from this melding of dance, story and song.

According to legend, the singer Thespis was the first to perform a single character—actors are called thespians in his honor. The agricultural festivals grew as Greece expanded and prospered, and by 530 B.C.E. the city of Athens was hosting the Festival of Dionysus, a week-long celebration that featured five days of performances. The festival took place every year at the start of the planting season—about the same time as modern Mardi Gras festivals. It was a religious festival to pay homage to the god Dionysus—the god of wine and harvest. He was seen as a promoter of peace and was the patron god of agriculture and theatre. The festival was planned, managed and run by an elected official known as the Archon. Every year, at the end of the festival, a new Archon would be elected and would immediately begin planning for the next year’s festival. It was the

Archon’s responsibility to select the playwrights and judges who would view the plays and determine a winner. The Archon selected three playwrights to present works of tragedy and five playwrights to present comedies.

The plays were presented in one of the first theatre structures, the Theater of Dionysus. This theatre was located near the Acropolis, which was a major structure in Athens comprised of several religious temples. The theatre space itself resembled a modern day baseball stadium and was made up of three parts: the *orkestra*, the *skene* and the *theatron*. The *orkestra* was where the actors performed and was made up of a large circular space with buildings behind it. These buildings were called the *skene*, which was a backstage area for the actors. It was here that actors would change their costumes or rest between scenes. *Skene* may have been painted and used to represent the setting of the play. The modern word scenery comes from the word *skene*. Finally there was the audience, who sat in the *theatron*, a word which means “seeing place.” Later theatres would refer to this same space as the auditorium, or “hearing place.” Greek audiences surrounded the *orkestra* on three sides.

The festival started with a grand processional into the Theater of Dionysus. As people processed into the theatre, they would carry baskets of bread and other foods along with jugs of water and wine as offerings to Dionysus. A statue of the god would also be paraded into the theatre, where it would be blessed by a priest and then placed on an altar within the theatre, where Dionysus could watch over the plays done in his honor. After the procession, audiences

would spend the rest of the evening singing and dancing. On the second day of the festival, the three playwrights selected to present tragic plays would announce the titles of their works to both the people and the judges, and then the next three days would be dedicated to the performance of their plays. Greek plays weren't spoken, they were sung much like operas. Modern opera was actually an attempt to recreate classical Greek theatre, with an emphasis on sweeping stories and musical performance.

Tragedies consisted of three different plays, which all explored a single theme, story or mythological family. This collection of three plays would often be followed by a fourth play, the Satyr. Satyr plays were short, comic pieces filled with burlesque and overtly sexual references that usually contained characters from Greek myth. Sometimes a character from the previously performed tragedies would appear in the Satyr play to engage in various forms of debauchery. On the sixth day of the festival, five Comedies would be performed. Comedies were considered to be less sophisticated than the tragedies; however it was still a great honor to win for best comedy.

At the end of the festival, the judges would determine a winner. Along with receiving a tripod and wreaths of ivy, the most prized reward for winning the play competition was not money or a trophy, but a goat. The playwright who won the goat had the opportunity to sacrifice that goat to the gods, specifically to Dionysus for whom the festival was named. In fact, the literal translation of the word tragedy in Greek is "Goat Song." The goat was what you won in exchange for your song or play for the gods. The golden age of Greek theatre was the fifth century B.C.E., during which the great playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides wrote their major works. According to the few records that scholars have found from that time period, Aeschylus won the prize for best tragedy more than any other playwright. There were hundreds of other playwrights whose plays we have lost over time, and today we have only a single complete trilogy, a single Satyr play and only 31 plays by three authors.

Originally, the structure of a Greek play included a large chorus singing in unison about the life of a god. After Thespis stepped out of the chorus, playwrights developed new ways to build dramatic tension. The author Aeschylus allowed a second actor to step out, which provided for direct confrontations between characters. Sophocles added the third actor. While Greek plays may have had several characters, they were meant to be performed by only three actors supported by the chorus. To differentiate characters—who were often played by multiple actors—the Greeks used signature masks, costumes and gestures. Although actors didn't have a very high status in Athenian society, they received rigorous training and were often fed special diets to ensure that they would perform well during the festival.

When viewing a classical Greek play, the audience would see a chorus of anywhere from 4 to 30 people on stage with the actors. The chorus performed elaborate dances and sang the choral interludes—usually discussions by the citizens within a story. Sometimes playwrights wrote the choruses to embody the Furies, or a chorus of Frogs or ghosts in the afterworld. As Greek theatre developed, the number of people in the chorus became less and less. In addition to the spectacle of the choruses, Greek theatre employed at least two stage machines. The first was the *ekkyklema*, which was a wagon that was rolled on stage to reveal tableaux—often the violent conclusions of stories. The second scenic device was the *machine*, which was a crane used to fly in actors—usually playing divine characters. The expression *deus ex machina* means "god from the machine," and refers to the endings of Greek plays in which deities came in and fixed the problems that humans could not.

Athenians took great pride in their theatre festival and looked forward to it every year with great anticipation. Although the tragic plays performed at the Festival of Dionysus were the most celebrated performances, there were smaller festivals at other holidays, and playwrights traveled to have their plays performed at these other celebrations. For some reason, Greek tastes changed in the fourth century, and both Satyr plays and the tragedies fell out of favor as comedies became more popular. After the Peloponnesian Wars, Athens rose as a cultural center; but individual city-states never regained the power or finances that they had before the wars. Theatre forms continued to develop and change, and, as they required different staging, the theatres that had been built for fifth-century festivals became obsolete. Greek tragedy gave way to Roman comedy, but the plays survived in Roman and Medieval schools as an entertaining way to teach students Greek. It was in this form that Shakespeare would have come across the great classical playwrights.



Photo by Carol Rosegg

Avery Brooks and Petronia Paley in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 2001 production of *The Oedipus Plays*.

On Greek Society and Culture

Classical Greece was not the first great Mediterranean culture, but it was the most successful, giving birth to much of Western culture, philosophy, politics and language. In the millennia before Greece rose to power, the mainland Mycenaean and island Minoan civilizations were military, cultural and economic powers. Both collapsed somewhat mysteriously, Mycenae by the 12th century B.C.E. and Minos by the 13th century B.C.E. because of external invasion or internal political failure.

Divided by the wine-dark seas of the Mediterranean, the Greek populations developed around port cities. These city-states set up loose alliances and bitter rivalries, centering on the western Dorian population centers (Sparta and Corinth) and the eastern Ionian city-states, especially Athens. Originally ruled by kings, Sparta emerged as the most powerful military and political power, while Athens developed a vibrant artistic community. Around 508 B.C.E. Athens established Europe's first democracy. Under this system, offices were awarded either by lot or by election, although only a few jobs such as military posts were actually elected. Citizens were allowed to speak and vote in the Assembly, but the designation "citizen" was narrowly defined: women, slaves and foreign aliens were not eligible to participate.

The success of Athens and the flourishing of Greek culture had much to do with the wars with Persia throughout the fifth century B.C.E. While Sparta was the acknowledged military and political power, and head of the Greek alliance, it was Athens that helped break the Persian military strength at the battle of Marathon in 490. While Sparta had a legendary victory over the Persian army at Thermopylae in 480, the city-state's reliance on slave labor and emphasis on

militarism led to its decline during the fifth century. Strained thin by the Persian wars, and with a slave population that vastly outnumbered the citizens, Sparta was forced to withdraw from Greek politics to deal with internal problems.

Because of its own military success and the diminished power of Sparta, Athens rose to undisputed prominence in Greek politics. Already a crucible for arts, the rise in political fortune was a boon to Greek poetry, dance, theatre and music. The great triumvirate of Greek philosophers—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle—all lived and taught in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries. The balance of reason and religion neatly symbolizes the Classical mindset: a confidence in the powers of human rationality codified in philosophy, and the unpredictability of life embodied by mythology.

The *Argonautika* was written in the third century B.C.E. and serves as a literary link between the older Homeric epics and tragedy, and the later classical era of Rome. Before Apollonius of Rhodes wrote his version, the Greek world had expanded significantly under Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E.). This conquest brought Greek culture to a wide empire that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to India, and also brought those cultures in contact with each other through Greece. The period after Alexander, in which the *Argonautika* was written, is referred to as Hellenistic, because the Hellenic culture of Greece was spread to non-Grecian cultures. The *Argonautika* reflects this expanded empire, traveling through multiple geographies that were unimaginable to the Mediterranean-based stories of Homer. By the time of Apollonius, though, Alexander's empire was shrinking. The Hellenistic period would end in 31 B.C.E. when the Roman Army defeated the Greeks at Actium and one great civilization gave way to another.



About the Authors of Myth and Play

Museo Archeologico, Florence



Bust of Apollonius of Rhodes, rescued from the sea near Livorno, Italy.

The story of Jason and the Argonauts almost certainly existed for generations as an oral tradition before anyone wrote it down. The first classical writer to assemble elements of the story into an epic narrative was Apollonius of Rhodes. Apollonius was not actually from Rhodes, but rather from Alexandria—named for Alexander the Great—which at the time was part of the Greek Empire. Little factual information survives about Apollonius, but it is certain that he was the Librarian of the magnificent Library of Alexandria, which was the largest library in the world and the center of learning. At some point Apollonius traveled from Egypt to live in Rhodes: some stories suggest that after an unsuccessful public recitation of the *Argonautika*, he fled there in disgrace.

The Romans loved to emulate Greek culture, including its literature, and the hexameter in which Apollonius wrote *Argonautika* was a popular poetic form. As a result, his story became a well-studied, well-copied and well-known epic for Roman readers. In the first century A.D. a poet named Gaius Valerius Flaccus wrote his own adaptation of the story and dedicated it to the emperor Vespasian. The poem was unfinished when Titus succeeded Vespasian as emperor, and, because the version we have today ends with Medea joining Jason, it is unclear whether Flaccus even finished the poem himself. Most critics saw Flaccus' version as an inferior copy of Apollonius' original.


The most recent author, Mary Zimmerman, a member of the Chicago-based Lookingglass Theatre Company, is known for her innovative staging and playwrighting. A recipient of the MacArthur "genius grant," she has also received numerous Joseph Jefferson awards and a Tony award for her 2002 adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Zimmerman directed her celebrated adaptation of *Pericles* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in 2004, where it was nominated for four Helen Hayes awards. Having received three degrees from Northwestern University, Zimmerman now teaches as part of their Performance Studies program. 



Photo by Joshua Chen

Mary Zimmerman speaks at the Goodman Theatre after her production of *The Trojan Women*.

Synopsis of *Argonautika*

Greek stories were well known before poets and playwrights wrote their own versions of the stories. As a result, many stories are told slightly differently depending on what the author wanted to communicate. Homer's *Odyssey* does not include every story of the character Odysseus, and different plays and poems of the Trojan War or the Argonauts include different scenes or emphasize different characters. Some versions are radically different: the character of Iphigenia, who was the daughter Agamemnon sacrificed so that the Greek fleet could sail to Troy, is either sacrificed, saved at the last second by the gods, or is replaced by a deer and lives to meet her brother after the war.

Mary Zimmerman's adaptation of the *Argonautika* continues this tradition of carefully selecting which pieces of a Greek story to emphasize, where to begin and end the story, and which characters to feature. Her version focuses on Jason and Medea and begins with an invocation by the chorus that summarizes the story of Helle and Phrixus. The action starts as Jason returns to Iolcos to claim the throne from his uncle, Pelias, who is celebrating his birthday. The goddess Hera, disguised as an old woman, asks Jason to carry her across the river, and in the crossing he loses a sandal. Hera and Athena bless Jason on his quest to restore the throne for his family.

King Pelias, meanwhile, has dreamt that a man with one bare foot will come to kill him. Recognizing it is a prophecy, Pelias is afraid when the one-sandaled man arrives and turns out to be an heir to the throne. Although Pelias' servants plot to kill Jason, Pelias spares his nephew only to send him on an impossible quest. Pelias tells Jason of the story of the fleece and orders him to recover it to prove himself worthy of the crown.

Jason gathers a band of the heroes for the journey. The great carpenter Argos builds an enormous boat to hold them all, including some of the greatest heroes of Greek mythology: Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus who can fly; the mighty Hercules; the swift huntress Atalanta; and the seer Idmon. In all, 50 heroes join the quest, including Pelias's son. Before the heroes sail, Jason asks them to choose a leader. Although Hercules is chosen by the crew, the great son of Zeus defers leadership and chooses Jason instead. Finally, Idmon offers a vision of the fate of the quest: although the *Argo* will succeed and return home, many of the heroes will die along the way.

On the voyage, Jason and his heroes run into many obstacles. The first is the god of wind, Boreus, who threatens to destroy the *Argo*. The Argonauts face sea monsters and harpies, temptation and giants,



Photo by Rich Heirn.

Dan Kenney and Angela Walsh in Lookingglass Theatre Company's production of Mary Zimmerman's *Argonautika*.

clashing rocks and the loss of heroes—including Hercules. On the journey, Jason learns of the dragon that guards the golden fleece.

The Argonauts arrive in Colchis, home of King Aites and the golden fleece. Knowing that Jason will be unable to retrieve the fleece alone, Hera and Athena conspire with Aphrodite to have the powerful daughter of the king, Medea, fall in love with Jason. Aites requires several tasks of Jason before he can approach the fleece: he must tame two wild bulls, plough a field with them, and plant dragon's teeth in the field. The bulls, of course, breathe fire and the dragon's teeth sprout magical warriors. With the help of Medea's magic and advice, Jason accomplishes the tasks. At the fleece itself, Medea helps Jason by lulling the dragon to sleep so that Jason can retrieve the prize. Knowing the fury of her father, Jason promises to take Medea away with him and to marry her.

Aites pursues the Argonauts as they sail away with both the fleece and Medea. The giant *Argo* is overtaken by the Colchian fleet, but Medea again saves the quest by tricking her brother Aspertos into meeting her. She sacrifices and dismembers him, tossing his body parts into the sea. Aites stops his pursuit in order to retrieve and bury his son. By murdering her brother, Medea has saved her husband and is bound to him forever. On returning home, though, Jason places his throne above his love and marries another princess.

The gods help the Argonauts return home, and Zimmerman's play ends with the goddesses Athena and Hera—who put the whole quest in motion and for whom so many died—placing the heroes into the night sky as constellations. **S**

The Myth Behind the Play: Jason and the Argonauts

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that the best tragedies were based on the stories of a few families who had done or suffered something terrible. Most Greek epic poetry and tragedy explores the same families through multiple generations, and the origins of the characters' fortunes, quests and curses often start with conflict between gods and men. The *Argonautika* is no exception.

The beginnings of the story of Jason and the Argonauts must be traced back several generations. Athamas, king of Orchomenos, was married to the goddess Nephele, and the couple had a daughter, Helle, and a son, Phrixus. Athamas eventually left the goddess and married the mortal Ino, who was jealous of her stepchildren. In an elaborate plan to dispose of the children, Ino arranged a famine in Orchomenos. When the farmers sent to the oracle for a solution to the punishment, Ino bribed the Oracle's messengers to announce that the gods demanded the death of Phrixus and Helle. Before they could be killed, Nephele sent a flying golden ram to rescue her children and carry them to safety.


In the journey, Helle fell from the ram and drowned. The sea where she was lost was named the Hellespont (Sea of Helle) in her honor. Phrixus survived and arrived in Colchis, where he was taken in by king Aites. The king gave Phrixus his daughter in marriage, and in return Phrixus honored his father-in-law by giving him the golden fleece of the ram; the king hung the fleece on a tree in a grove sacred to Zeus.

The second family in the Argonaut story is that of Kretheus, king of Iolcos. The king and his wife, Tyro, gave birth to a son, Aison, but Tyro was secretly in love with the river nymph Enipeus. The god Poseidon disguised himself as Enipeus in order to seduce Tyro, and the fruits of this union were Neleus and Pelias. As the first and lawful son of Kretheus, Aison was next in line for the throne, but on the death of their father Pelias usurped the throne. As punishment for this treason, the oracles foretold that a kinsman wearing one sandal would return to kill Pelias. In fear Pelias killed as many of Aison's family as he could find, but Aison and his wife Alkimedede hid the birth of their son by pretending he was stillborn. The son, Jason, was smuggled out of the country and given to the centaur Chiron to be brought up.

When he came of age, Jason journeyed back to Iolcos. Along the way he helped an old woman across the river Anauros, losing a sandal in his efforts. The old woman was the goddess Hera in disguise, who sought revenge on Pelias for dishonoring her temples. Recognizing the one-sandaled man as his nephew, Pelias assigned Jason the impossible task of recovering the golden fleece, and offered to return the throne to Jason if he was successful.

Jason gathered an impressive band of heroes to join him in his quest: Hercules, Castor and Pollux (brothers of Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife), the poet Orpheus, and Argos (builder of the ship that would bear the heroes on their quest and a son of Phrixus). The journey to Colchis to capture the golden fleece is full of adventure along the way, the Argonauts (sailors of the ship *Argo*) contend with Amazons, kidnappings by nymphs, the danger of the Clashing Rocks and the deadly birds of Ares.

In Colchis, King Aeetes is suspicious of his story, but the gods Hera and Aphrodite conspire to help Jason in his quest by making Medea, daughter of the king, fall in love with him. Aeetes offers Jason the fleece if he can accomplish three tasks: harness bulls with bronze hooves, plow the fields of Ares, and there plant a serpent's teeth. Aided by Medea's magic, Jason accomplishes all three tasks, defeating even the army that grows from the serpent's teeth. A dragon guards the golden fleece, but Medea promises to put the monster to sleep if Jason will take her away with him. Jason promises to marry her, and with her magical help claims the fleece. Aeetes chases the pair, but they escape to Iolcos. King Pelias refuses to give up the throne, and again it is up to Medea to help Jason's quest. She convinces Pelias' daughters that she can make their father young again if they cut him up and put him in a pot with magical herbs. Convinced, the daughters do so, but Medea does not add the enchanted ingredients, and Pelias is killed. Driven away again, Jason and his queen finally settle in Corinth.

The story of the Argonautika ends with the triumphant return to the homeland and the restoration of power. However, the story of Medea and Jason continues on tragically. In Corinth, Jason marries Creusa, the daughter of another Corinthian king, to strengthen his political ties. In doing so he breaks his oath to Hera, and the goddess exacts her revenge. Medea gives Creusa a poisoned dress as a wedding gift and then murders her own children to punish Jason. Jason dies alone, ironically while sleeping in the shade of the rotting hull of the *Argo*. 

Direzione Generale Musei Vaticani



A Douris cup illustrating Jason and the dragon.

The Hero's Quest

Classical hero mythology from Jason and Odysseus to Luke Skywalker and Harry Potter centers on a journey. Often unaware that they are the hero, the central characters are called to action and sent on a quest. Supernatural aid is often required and arrives in many forms: heroic companions, the favor of a god, a magic wand, a powerful ring or maybe a mystical sword. Armed but unprepared, the hero is challenged by trials and minor tasks, all obstacles in the way to the ultimate goal. These serve to test the hero and provide them with the skills they will later need. Temptations are placed in the hero's path—will Frodo succumb to the ring, or will Odysseus forget Penelope and settle with Calypso? Love is a common discovery along the journey and often serves as a necessary part of the hero's success. Theseus would not survive the labyrinth without Ariadne's help, Jason needed Medea to achieve the fleece, and even Neo required the assistance of Trinity to defeat the Matrix.

For the Greeks, the gods took an active interest in the lives of mortals—especially their favorites. Lustful, petty, jealous, proud—the divine shared the emotional weaknesses of humans. For the Greeks, it was necessary to honor the gods, but excessive favor to one or deliberate disrespect was often likely to inspire anger and punishment. Hercules was punished for disobeying Zeus' laws of hospitality; Odysseus was punished for wounding Poseidon's son; Orestes honors Apollo by avenging his father's murder, but he is pursued by the Furies for killing his mother. Often success is possible only by appeasing one god or asking for their help, and many trials are passed with this divine aid.


Even after initial success, heroes are often unable to return home. Although Jason returns with the fleece, Pelias does not honor his oath and hunts Jason and Medea. Although he defeated both Grendel and the monster's mother, Beowulf has tasks yet to complete before he is finished with his quest. This "refusal of return," as Joseph Campbell called it, anticipates the final act of sacrifice or effort necessary to restore the world as it was before. Only after the ring is returned, the kingdom is restored, and the gods appeased, is the hero's quest over.



An illustration of "Jason and the Golden Fleece." By A. Tassos, from *Argonautica, or, the Quest of Jason for the Golden Fleece* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1960).

The *Argonautika* joins other classical epics that center on a hero: the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* and the Latin *Aeneid*. Greek epic poems were collections of episodes concerning the life or fate of individual heroes. Out of these sprawling narratives the later playwrights of Greek tragedy would choose single incidents to explore in plays, and different playwrights often saw different meaning in the hero's actions or told the stories slightly differently. Because quest stories are by their nature episodic, they lend themselves to continual variations, retellings, and contributions.

The hero's journey is a common thread in world literature. The basic structure of journey, task and redemption marks the stories of Arthur and his knights' quest for the grail, the West African hero Sundiata, or the Nordic Volsung saga and Germanic Nibelung stories.

From *The Odyssey* to *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter*, each myth cycle follows a hero through a similar path: called to adventure; aided by friends and tools; tested by gods and monsters; and finally successful because they alone have the strength, wisdom and love necessary to restore a broken world. 

Fate and Free Will

Greek citizens, and the heroes they told stories about, were trapped between the forces of fate and destiny. The three Fates, or Moirae, were represented as stern old women who controlled the lives of both gods and men: Klotho spun the thread of life, Lakshesis measured the thread, and Atropos cut the thread. While the Moirae guided fate, heroes were able and expected to take control of their own destiny. The Greeks did not see the human condition as helpless or passive: heroes were expected to take advantage of opportunities, to rise to occasions, and to live up to their prophetic fortunes rather than shrink from responsibility.

To further complicate the issue of fate, gods regularly interfered in the lives of humans. They interacted in disguise, granted boons, punished enemies, and put words into the mouths of mortals. Humans were powerless against the gods, and characters often served as messengers or agents of the gods, to help or hinder mortals. Hera punished Hercules, conspired to make Medea fall in love with Jason, and used Jason as a weapon to destroy Pelias. We may ask whether Hercules, Medea or Jason chose their destinies or lived up to their fates?


Like much of Greek poetry and tragedy, the *Argonautika* turns on a series of prophecies. The most famous prophet was Cassandra, who was given the gift of foresight by Apollo. Because she rejected his love, he also punished her so that no one would believe her prophecies. Although she foresaw the fall of Troy, the death of Agamemnon after he captured her, and finally her own death, she was powerless to stop any of it from happening. Prophecies served

more as warnings than predictions and were often wrapped in a riddle. Because they came from the gods, prophecies would eventually come true.

The Greeks sought guidance from Oracles, the most famous of which was at Delphi. Oracles were people, usually priestesses, who delivered messages and prophesies by mediating between the divine and the mortal worlds. Their messages could be cryptic, but often they were straightforward warnings: Ino created a false message to get rid of Helle and Phrixus, Pelias is twice warned by Oracles to beware punishment, and

Jason is told how to dress when he journeys to Iolcos—fulfilling the prophecy. At the beginning of *Oedipus Rex*, the citizens of Thebes suffer from a plague, and the king has sent to the Oracle for a cure. In the *Argonautika*, Idmon can see the fate of the journey and Phineas twice helps Jason with riddles—first with the clashing rocks and again with a mysterious clue about how to win the fleece. It is up to the heroes of Greek mythology to solve the riddle or suffer disappointment.

The questions of fate and free will affect our understanding of the *Argonautika*. Jason did not have the ability to retrieve the fleece alone, so Aphrodite inspired love in Medea, whose considerable magic was necessary to finish his quest. Medea's divinely inspired passion for

Jason led to banishment from her homeland. Jason married her while she was still under Aphrodite's spell, but he was later punished severely for breaking his promise to love only her. Was Medea fated to love Jason or did she choose him freely? Did the gods curtail her free will to make her an instrument of their revenge on Pelias or was it her fate to end her days in a strange land, alone? 



The Three Fates (ca. 1510-1520), a Flemish tapestry, depicts the fates standing over death. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England.

Mythology: More than just a good story

Myths are at the core of human storytelling. They serve many functions, often explaining the origins of humanity and the world, rationalizing natural phenomenon, or serving as supernatural metaphors for human experience. As Joseph Campbell observed in his seminal book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the same stories recur in different ages and different cultures, as if there is a strong and eternal appeal to the structure and form of mythologies. Because of the importance of Greeks to Western culture, when we say “mythology” we are often referring to the Mediterranean stories and characters—however all cultures have their own creation legends or myths conveyed in various artforms and stories. For the Greeks, the mythological world was divided into several categories: gods, demigods, mortals and supernatural creatures.

Greek mythology begins with the Chaos, out of which the primal forces were formed: Gaia the earth mother, Eros the divine love, Tartarus the underworld, and Erebus the shadow world. Gaia created Uranus (the sky), who impregnated her and fathered the Titans. The greatest of the Titans was Cronus, who castrated his father, became ruler of the gods and fathered Zeus. His own son would go on to replace Cronus as the most powerful divine figure, and after an epic war among immortals the Titans were cast down into Tartarus.

Zeus oversaw a loosely knit family of gods with decidedly human vices and personalities. The gods were free to interact with mortals, although there were always consequences on both sides of Olympus—the mountain on which the gods lived. The frequent sexual affairs gave birth to a race of demigods—half human and half immortal—including Hercules, Orion, Helen of Troy, Perseus and Theseus. The range of supernatural creatures in Greek mythology is impressive, and covers centaurs, satyrs to the Minotaur, Pegasus and Hydra. Beasts guard treasure, serve kings, shelter heroes and escort gods. Their function in mythology is often the most symbolic, as they embody love, ecstasy, wisdom, terror, and evil.

In the *Argonautika*, the key gods were Hera, Aphrodite and Athena. The wife of Zeus and constantly vexed by his unfaithfulness, Hera helped Jason to recover his father’s throne but also used Jason to punish Peilas. The king and his sister were technically demigods—offspring of a mortal and a god, in this case their mortal mother, Tyro, and their

father, the sea god Poseidon. Pelias was raised not by his natural mother but by his grandfather’s second wife, Sidero, who as stepmother to Tyro had treated her terribly. To avenge his mother’s treatment, Pelias pursued Sidero and murdered her on the steps of Hera’s altar, where she had fled. This dishonor doomed Pelias and spurred the goddess to revenge. As the goddess of marriage, Hera would eventually reject her champion when Jason failed in his oath to love only Medea.



Petronia Paley and Opal Alladin in the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s 1999 production of *The Trojan Women*.

Photo by Carol Rosegg

Athena, armed goddess of wisdom and champion of heroes, aided Hera in her quest to punish Pelias and guide Jason. Athena’s major contribution was to guide Argos in the construction of the ship that bore his name, and which the myth derives its name. The *Argo* was the most magnificent ship of its age, with enough room for 50 sets of oars and the 50 Argonauts. Athena’s most prized gift to the Argonauts was timber from the sacred grove of Dodona, which was built into the prow of the ship and gave the boat itself the power of prophecy. The second half of the *Argonautika*, in which Jason is aided by, marries and escapes with Medea, is prompted by the work of a third goddess: Aphrodite. Under Hera’s guidance, Aphrodite caused Medea to fall in love with Jason and to use her considerable magic abilities to aid him.

For the Greeks, the division between the divine world and human world was often blurred, and power often shifted between gods and man. Gods had human emotions, human faults and human desires—and interacted frequently with mortals. Humans were necessary to carry out the gods’ plans, or to act as judges when gods disagreed, or to ally with one deity against another. For Greek audiences, humans were not just the playthings of gods but active participants in a mythological life in which the supernatural and the mundane existed side by side. Just as stories today help us interpret and understand our world, the epics that fueled the poetry, drama and song of Greek society also served as entertainment, education and culture. **S**

Glossary of Terms

AITES (also spelled Aetes): The king of Colchis and guardian of the Golden Fleece. Father of Medea and Apsyrtos, he tells Jason to complete three tasks before he can retrieve the Fleece, but he reneges on his promise once Jason has the Fleece. Jason and Medea flee from her father, who abandons his pursuit only after she has dismembered her brother and the King stops to recover his body.

ANAUROS: The river in Iolcos across which Jason carried Hera, disguised as an old woman. In the crossing, Jason lost a sandal and thus traveled with one bare foot to the capitol. This fulfilled a prophecy told to King Pelias that a one-shoed man would try to take his throne.

APHRODITE: Greek goddess of beauty and love, she was born as an adult rising from the sea. She was married but frequently unfaithful to Haphaestus, the blacksmith god of technology.

APOLLONIUS: Alexandrian librarian who wrote the first formal version of the *Argonautika*. Late in life he moved from Egypt to Rhodes, for which he is now known as Apollonius of Rhodes.

ARGO: The ship of Jason and the heroes of the Golden Fleece. Constructed by Argos, with a magical branch built into it (or, in some versions, strapped to the bow), the boat carried the Argonauts (literally, “sailors of the Argo”) throughout their entire voyage. Ultimately it was abandoned and left to rot: while sleeping in its shade, an aged Jason was killed when the stern broke and crushed him.

ATHENA: Goddess of wisdom, Athena was born fully formed from the head of her father, Zeus. Always armed and attended by an owl, she was the protector and guide to such heroes as Perseus, Odysseus, Jason and Hercules.

ATALANTA: The only female Argonaut, and great hunter. Abandoned at birth, she was protected by the goddess Artemis. In some versions she is wounded at Colchis and healed by Medea.

CASTOR and POLLUX: Demigod sons of Leda and Zeus, the brothers of Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra. Also known as Polydeuces, Pollux serves his fellow Argonauts by killing the king Amycus in a boxing match when the ruler refuses to let the Argo sail on without answering his challenge.

COLCHIS: Historical kingdom on the eastern Black Sea, in what is now Georgia, and home of King Aites, Medea and the Golden Fleece.

DODONA: Sacred grove in western central Greece, which served as an oracle. Wood from the oak trees of the grove was used to bless the Argo.

FLACCUS: First-century Roman poet who wrote a version of the *Argonautika*, of which today we have only a fragment.

HERA: Primary goddess, and both wife and older sister of Zeus. King Pelias earned the fury of Hera when he murdered Sidero in a temple dedicated to the goddess. Hera used Jason as her instrument of punishment, first offering to help him as he carried her across a river. Hera offered continual support to the hero throughout his quest, enlisting the help of Aphrodite and Athena, and encouraging the love of Medea. As part of her conflict with Hercules, Hera inspired the hero to leave the Argonauts.

HERCULES: Greek demigod, son of Zeus and Alcmena. Although his Greek name—Herakles—means “glory of Hera,” the goddess was envious of him and angry at her husband’s infidelity. She repeatedly punished Hercules, inciting him to kill his own sons. In penance, Hercules performed the famous twelve tasks for King Eurystheus. Hercules had a companion in the young Prince Hylas, who joined him as an Argonaut. When Hylas wandered off and was bewitched by river nymphs, Hercules refused to return to the ship until the prince was found. Unable or unwilling to stay, the Argo sailed and left both behind.

IDMON: Seer who sailed with the other Argonauts. The demigod son of Apollo and Asteria, he foresaw his own death if he chose to travel with Jason, but he accepted his fate to sail with the other heroes.

IOLCOS: Historical city on the east coast of Greece, and home of Aison, Pelias and Jason.

JASON: son of Aison, and rightful king of Iolcos. Saved when Pelias hunted all of Aison’s heirs, Jason was raised by the centaur Chiron. One of the few mortal Argonauts, Jason broke an oath to love only Medea when he took Creusa as a second wife. Having helped Jason through the Fleece quest, Hera then punished her champion by abandoning him and stripping him of power. Jason died alone, when the rotting hull of the *Argo* fell on him while he slept in its shade.



Greek postage stamp depicting an artist's rendering of the Argo.



An illustration of "Jason and the Argonauts about to Embark on the Argo." Illustration by A. Tassos, from *Argonautica, or, the Quest of Jason for the Golden Fleece* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1960).

LEMNOS: Greek island in the northern Aegean, this was the mythological home of women who had neglected the worship of Aphrodite. As punishment, all of the men were killed, and the women were left alone until the arrival of the Argonauts. The questing men stayed on the island for a year, fathering a number of male children who would repopulate the island, but the *Argo* and her crew finally sailed on at the suggestion of Hercules.

MEDEA: Daughter of Aites, the most powerful sorceress of the Greek world. Hera and Aphrodite conspired to have Medea fall in love with Jason and help him achieve the Fleece. Medea is the key to the Argonauts' successes from their arrival in Colchis to their triumphant return home. Medea chooses Jason over her father and elopes with him, killing her own brother to aid their escape. After being cleansed of this murder by the goddess Circe, Medea and Jason return to Iolcos. In some versions, Medea ultimately kills their children when he takes a second wife for political reasons.

MOIRAE: The three Fates, who spun the thread of life and therefore guided the destiny of all mortals.


ORPHEUS: The son of muse the Calliope, and greatest musician of Greek mythology. Orpheus was an Argonaut, who helped the quest to pass the deadly Sirens. The beautiful nymphs sung music that lured sailors and their ships to crash on the Sirens' rocks, but Orpheus played music more beautiful than theirs and silenced them.

PELIAS: Uncle to Jason, and wrongful king of Iolcos, and son of Tyro. Because his mother was mistreated by Sidero, Tyro's mother-in-law, Pelias murdered the older woman while she sought sanctuary in a temple of Hera. Later, Pelias usurped the throne from his half-brother, Aison, and killed as many of Aison's family as he could find. For this treachery, Hera cursed Pelias and sent Jason to avenge the double wrongs. Pelias sent Jason on the quest of the Golden Fleece, but ultimately it was Medea who tricked Pelias' daughters into murdering their own father.

PHRIXUS and HELLE: Demigod children of Athamas and the goddess Nephele. Their stepmother Ino was jealous and plotted to have them killed. Nephele sent a flying, golden ram to save the children. In their escape, Helle lost her grip and fell into the sea, while Phrixus landed in the Colchis, where he married the princess and presented the fleece of the golden ram to the king.

PHINEAS: Blind prophet guarded by harpies who provides clues to Jason after the Argonauts rescue him from the harpies. Phineas reveals the location of Colchis and tells Jason how to pass the Clashing Rocks.

SYMPLEGADES: Greek name for the Clashing Rocks, which slam together and crush ships that try to navigate between them. Jason passes through with Phineas' advice, letting a dove fly ahead—if the dove passes through, the Argonauts will survive.

ZETES and CALAIS: demigod brothers and sons of Boreas, god of the north wind. The brothers had the gift of flight, and in some versions of the *Argonautika* they save Phineas by driving off the harpies. 

Questing

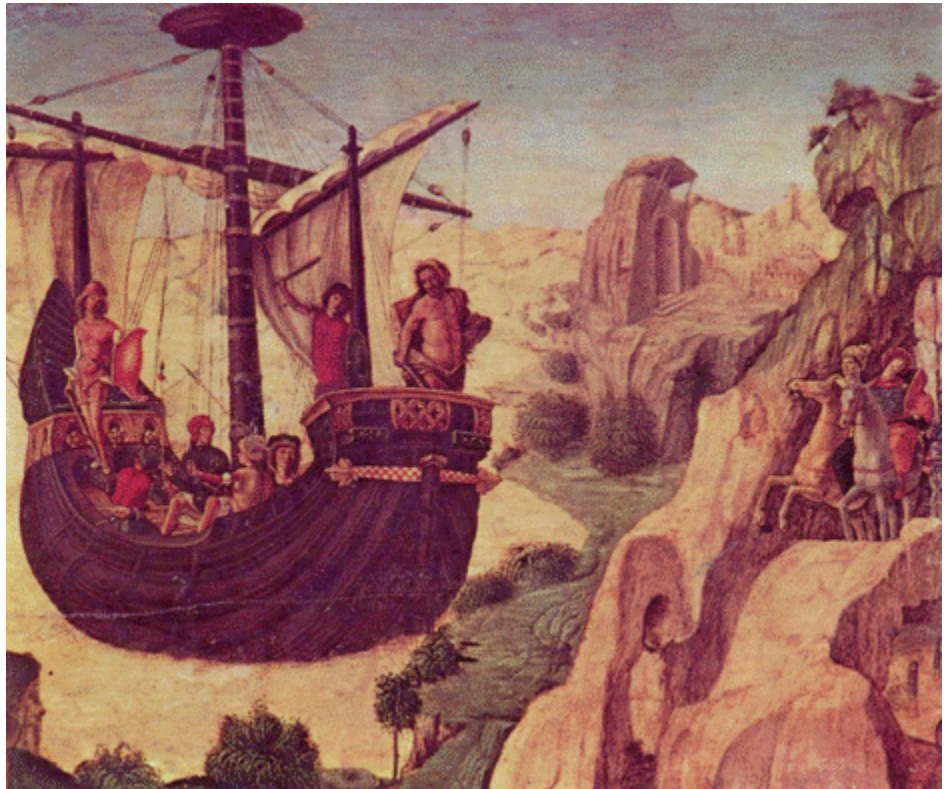
The Aegean and Mediterranean Seas shaped Greek society and are almost characters in the epic stories. Ships and journeys play a key role in almost all of the extant Greek tragedies: the *Odyssey* is an extended sea voyage, and Helen's face launches a thousand ships. It is significant that the story of Jason is still referred to as the *Argonautika*, for it is the story of the ship as much as any of the heroes.

Apollonius' version of the story is far-ranging, and the crew of the Argo sail her first past the North Aegean islands of Samothrace and Lemnos, past the Clashing Rocks and through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles (the Hellespont) to the Black Sea. On the far eastern coast lies Colchis, home of the fleece. Medea and Jason flee the fleet of Colchis all the way back across the Black Sea, across what is now Bulgaria, and eventually around the Italian peninsula. Not yet

finished touring, the Argo would touch North African soil near Libya before finally returning to Iolkos. Mary Zimmerman's version of the story truncates the journey substantially, focusing on the Aegean and Black Sea portions of the tale.

The ultimate fate of both Jason and the Argo, alone and forgotten, begs the question of whether the quest is worth the trouble. Many Greek heroes achieved greatness only to pay for that glory with terrible punishment: Achilles was greatest among warriors but was fated to die young; Agamemnon led the Greek armies to victory in Troy, only to be murdered in his own bathtub on his return; Jason recovered the throne of his father but lost his wife and children to ambition. In Mary Zimmerman's play, Idmon knows that he will die on the quest but goes anyway.

Ultimately the fleece itself is not important—it has no intrinsic value and is an arbitrary prize for both



A painting of the Argo, *Argonautenschiff*, by Lorenzo Costa from the early 16th century. Courtesy of Museo Civico in Padua, Italy.

Jason and Pelias. The fleece is worthy because it is a goal. It starts Jason on the journey in which he will become the hero he was destined to be, and acquire the skills and knowledge that will help him later. The hero's journey is one of maturation and growth, but that growth is never a lonely experience. Although the great epics are built around single characters, they are always the story of groups. It is no accident that democracy was born in the same culture as the great epic narratives, for both emphasize the strength of groups over individuals. Jason needs all of his companions—from the gods, Medea, the Argonauts in order to complete his task. The hero's journey is never taken alone.

Finally, heroes are defined by action, not by result: they restore the world so that others may live the better for it, and are often destroyed or prevented from enjoying the fruits of that labor. The hero's journey—from Gilgamesh to King Arthur and Moses to Frodo Baggins—is one of sacrifice for a higher ideal. 