

# THE QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN FLEECE: JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS



## Unit Overview

One of the most famous stories in Greek mythology is that of the *Quest for the Golden Fleece*. The fleece from the Golden Ram that saved Phrixus and Helle became a well-protected item of King Aeëtes. Jason and his friends, the Argonauts, set out on an adventure in order to retrieve the Golden Fleece and return it to Pelias. The individuals he meets along the way make his life very interesting.

## The Golden Fleece

This story begins with a Greek king named Athamas. Athamas grew tired of his wife, Nephele, and put her away. He then married a new woman named Ino. Nephele was frightened for her two children. She thought that the new wife might try to harm them so that her own children would inherit the kingdom. Nephele was right.

Nephele had a son named Phrixus. She also had a daughter named Helle. Ino developed an elaborate plan to cause Phrixus' death. She gained possession of all of the seed corn before the men went out to sow it. She **parched**, or dried, this corn, resulting in no harvest at all. The king sent a man to the oracle to ask it what he should do in this time of distress. Ino bribed the messenger to tell the king that the oracle said no corn would grow again unless they offered up Phrixus as a sacrifice. The messenger delivered this news and word spread around the kingdom.

The people of the kingdom quickly learned of this message, and they pressured the king to permit the death of his son. When Phrixus was taken to the altar, a ram with fleece of pure gold appeared. This ram snatched Phrixus and his sister Helle up and they flew away. This ram was an answer to Nephele's prayer. The ram had been sent by Hermes.

When the ram and the children were crossing the strait that separates Europe and Asia, Helle slipped and fell into the water. Unfortunately, she drowned. That strait, or narrow passage of water, is now named for her – the Sea of Helle or the Hellespont. The boy made it safely to land in the country of Colchis on the Black Sea. The Colchians were a fierce people, but they were kind to Phrixus. Their king, Aeëtes, let him marry one of his daughters. In a very odd turn of events, Phrixus sacrificed the golden ram to Zeus. This sacrifice was to show his gratitude, or thanks, for being saved. He gave the precious Golden Fleece to King Aeëtes.

## **Pelias**

At this time, Phrixus had an uncle who was, by right, the king of Greece. He had had his kingdom taken from him by his nephew, a man named Pelias. The king's son, Jason, was the rightful heir to the kingdom. Jason had been sent away to a place of safety. When he was grown, he returned to regain his kingdom.

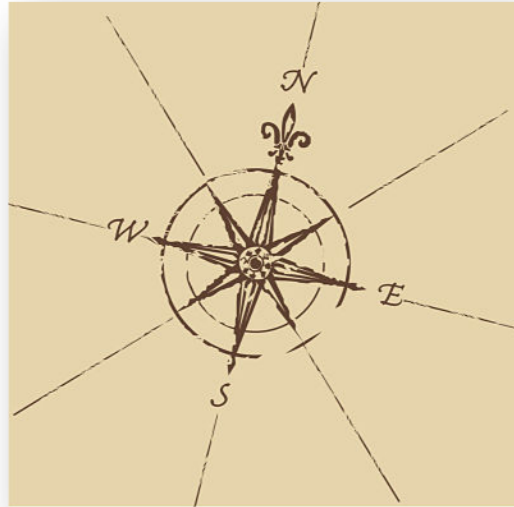
Pelias had been told by an oracle that he would die at the hands of a relative and that he should beware of anyone he saw wearing only one sandal. Eventually, a man came to town matching that description. He only wore one sandal, but he was dressed very well otherwise. No one in town knew who he was. Pelias walked up to him, even though he was terrified, and asked him where he was from and who his father was. The one-sandaled gentleman replied that he had returned to the land of his father in order to regain control of what was rightfully his. He identified himself as Jason, cousin of Pelias.

Jason then told Pelias something that surprised Pelias greatly. He said that they should rule themselves with the law of right and to not turn to violence or swords. Jason instructed Pelias to take everything that he had, including wealth and livestock, but to leave the throne to him. If Pelias did this, Jason promised that no evil quarrel would arise from them.

Pelias agreed under one condition. He said that the dead Phrixus commanded him to bring the Golden Fleece back to his home. Pelias then said that he was too old to take on such an adventure but Jason was just the right age. This was very deceptive of Pelias. He felt that no one could make this attempt and come back alive. He said that if Jason completed this task, he would not have any trouble from Pelias.

Jason was delighted with the idea of such an adventure. He quickly spread the word that he would be making the voyage and young men from all over the area came to join him. Hercules, Orpheus, Castor, Pollux and Peleus were among the many men who came to help Jason. Hera was helping Jason at this time. She spread the desire to participate in such an adventure to the great young men in the area. The men set sail in the ship Argo, calling themselves Argonauts.

Jason poured a libation of wine into the sea and called upon Zeus to give them speed on their way.



## The Adventure Begins

Their first stop was at Lemnos. This was a strange island where only women lived. They had risen up against the men and killed them all. The only man they spared was the old king. His daughter, Hypsipyle, had been a leader among the women. She spared her father and set him afloat on the ocean in a hollow chest. This chest carried him to safety. The women, despite their previous behavior toward men, welcomed Jason and the Argonauts. They helped them and provided them with food, wine, and garments.

Soon after leaving Lemnos, Hercules left the Argonauts. His armor bearer, Hylas, had been pulled under water. Hylas had dipped his pitcher into a spring. At that time, a water nymph was passing by and wanted to give him a kiss. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him under water. He was never seen again. Hercules looked for him everywhere. He did not return to the Argos. The ship had to set sail without him.

The Argonauts' next adventure was with the Harpies. The Harpies were flying creatures with hooked beaks and claws. They left behind a stench wherever they went. When the Argonauts had beached their ship for the night, they encountered a man to whom Apollo had given the gift of prophecy. He was in the process of being punished by Zeus for telling the future. His punishment was that every time he was about to eat, the Harpies swooped down and defiled the food. They left it so disgusting that no one could be near it, let alone eat it.



When the Argonauts saw this old man, named Phineus, they felt badly for him. He welcomed them to the island and asked them to help him. He knew, through his gift of prophecy, that two men on the ship could defend him against the Harpies. Those two men were the sons of Boreas, the North Wind. Everyone on board the Argo listened to his story and promised to help him.

The others sat food down for Phineus. At the same time, Boreas' sons stood beside him on either side. They drew their swords. The Harpies swooped down the minute Phineus put a bite to his lips. When they flew off, leaving their smell behind them, the sons of the North Wind followed them. They struck at them with their swords. Iris, the rainbow messenger of the gods, warned them that they should not kill the "hounds of Zeus." She swore by the river Styx that the Harpies would not bother Phineus again.

In thanks, Phineus gave them advice about their journey. He told them about the Clashing Rocks. The way to pass between them, he said, was to first make a trial run with a dove. If the dove passed safely, then the chances were that they too would pass through without harm. If the dove was crushed, they would need to turn around and forget about the Golden Fleece.

That next morning, the Argonauts set sail with a dove. Soon they were in sight of the Clashing Rocks. It appeared that it would be impossible to cross between the two rocks. The dove flew through safely. Only the tips of her tail feathers were caught between the rocks. The Argonauts followed her as quickly as they could. The rocks parted and the ship went between them. From the time the Argonauts passed through the rocks, they never brought disaster to sailors.

Nearby was the country of the Amazons. The Amazons were the daughters of Harmony, the peace loving nymph. Their father was Ares, the god of war. The Amazons took after their father, loving battle and unrest. Luckily, the Argonauts were able to sail past this area without harm.

## Medea

Little did they know, there was an important meeting taking place on Mt. Olympus. Hera was worried about all of the trouble the Argonauts had already come into contact with. She asked Aphrodite for help. Even though Hera and Aphrodite did not usually get along, Aphrodite agreed to help. Together, they planned that Cupid, Aphrodite's son, should make the daughter of the Colchian king fall in love with Jason. The king's daughter was named Medea. Medea knew how to work powerful magic. Aphrodite thought that if the Argonauts needed her help, Medea would be able to use her dark magic to keep them safe. Aphrodite went to her son and told him that in return for his help, she would give him a golden ball. He was delighted and quickly swept down from Mt. Olympus to Colchis.

In the meantime, the Argonauts had started toward the city to ask the king for the Golden Fleece. Hera wrapped them in a thick mist during this trip; this kept them hidden from others, and they arrived at the palace unseen. When they approached the entrance, the mist disappeared. They had arrived in Colchis.

The king ordered his servants to make the Argonauts as comfortable as possible. He ordered water to be warmed for baths, fires to be started, and food to be prepared. Princess Medea snuck into the excitement; she was curious about the visitors. When her eyes fell on Jason, Cupid drew back his bow and shot Medea with an arrow.

Once the Argonauts had bathed and eaten, King Aeëtes was able to ask them who they were and why they had come. Jason answered that they were men of noble birth, including sons and grandsons of gods, and that they were there with the hope that he would give them the Golden Fleece. The Argonauts agreed that they would do whatever King Aeëtes asked of them in exchange for the Golden Fleece.

Suddenly, King Aeëtes was filled with anger. He did not like foreigners and the Argonauts were from Greece. He wanted them to stay away from his country and leave him alone. He wanted to kill the Argonauts. However, he had already made them guests in his home and so this was out of the question. He started to devise a plan.

He told Jason that he did not hold a grudge against brave men; if they proved themselves he would give the Fleece to them. He told them that the trial of their courage would be a feat that he himself had accomplished. He told them they would need to yoke two bulls that he had. Their feet were made of bronze and their breath was fire. They would need to yoke the bulls and plow a field with them. Once the field was plowed, the teeth of a dragon would be cast into the furrows, like seed corn. At once, a crop of armed men would spring from the ground. They must be cut down as they advanced in attack. He claimed that he had accomplished all of this himself previously and that no one else would be worthy of the Fleece.

Jason was speechless. The trial seemed impossible and beyond the strength of anyone. He thought about the trial and finally told King Aeëtes that he would attempt to complete the task. He knew that if he died, then that was his fate. Medea heard this brave claim. All night, she

worried about him and about what could possibly happen to this man she had just fallen in love with.



The Argonauts returned to their ship for the night. The other Argonauts begged Jason to let someone else attempt the trial. Jason refused. During this time, a young man approached Jason. It was the king's grandson. He told Jason of Medea's magical powers. He said that there was nothing she could not do and that if she was persuaded to help, she would be able to make Jason capable of yoking the bulls and killing the men.

This seemed like the only plan that could be successful. The Argonauts urged the king's grandson to return to the palace and try to convince Medea to help. Little did everyone involved know, Medea had already been convinced by Cupid.

Medea, although completely infatuated with Jason, was torn. Should she go against her father to help this stranger? She even considered suicide. She thought about all of the great things life and living had to offer. She was then determined to help the man that she loved. She had a magic ointment that, when rubbed on the body, would make someone safe for that day. She took the ointment and went to find her nephew, the young man who had gone to see the Argonauts on their ship.

She agreed to help Jason and sent the young man to tell Jason to meet her in a certain location. As soon as he heard this message, Jason went to her. Hera shined radiant grace upon him so that anyone who saw him would marvel at his appearance. When Jason met Medea, the two stood face-to-face and did not move. It was as if the wind stood still.

Jason began to speak. He asked Medea to be kind to him. He complimented her on her beautiful looks. Medea did not know how to speak to Jason. She was overwhelmed by his appearance and the love she felt for him. Silently, she gave him the ointment. At last, Medea spoke to Jason. She told him how to use the charmed ointment. She also said that if he sprinkled it on his weapons they too would become invincible. If too many of the dragon-teeth men approached Jason, he would need to throw a stone toward them. The stone would make them turn against each other and they would fight until they killed one another.

Before they parted, Jason and Medea pledged their love to one another. Jason told her that if she would come to Greece, she would be worshiped for her help. He also told her that nothing but death could part the two of them.

Medea left and went to cry in the palace. Although she loved Jason, she still felt badly for betraying her father. Jason went to the ship and then sent two of the Argonauts to the king to get the dragon teeth. Jason applied the ointment. At once, a rush of power came over him.

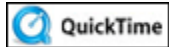
When they reached the field where the bulls lived, the king was waiting. The bulls were ready as well, breathing fire. Jason was not afraid of the king or of the two beasts. He first forced one bull, then the other, onto its knees. He fastened the yoke on them. Everyone watching this was in awe of Jason's strength and bravery. He drove them across the field, pressing the plow down into the ground and casting the dragon's teeth into the dirt. By the time the plowing was finished, the crop began to spring up. The men, armed with weapons, began to approach Jason and attack him. Jason remembered Medea's advice and threw a stone near them. With that, the warriors turned upon each other and fought to their deaths. Jason was victorious. King Aeëtes was bitter.

The king quickly returned to his palace and began plotting. He swore that they would never get the Golden Fleece. Hera, however, was still supporting the Argonauts. She made Medea go to Jason that night. The Argonauts were celebrating on their ship. She fell on her knees and begged the Argonauts to take her with them. She said that they needed to get the Golden Fleece at once or they would all be killed.

A terrible serpent guarded the fleece. Medea said that she would soothe the serpent to sleep so that it wouldn't hurt them. Jason promised her that they would be married when they returned to Greece. They followed her to where the Fleece was kept. The serpent was right where she said it would be. Medea approached it and sang a sweet song to it. The serpent quickly fell asleep. Quickly, Jason grabbed the Golden Fleece and ran to the ship. The crew set out for sea.

Pretty soon, everyone learned what had happened. Apsyrtus, Medea's brother, was sent by the king to pursue the Argonauts. He led an army that was so great it seemed impossible for the Argonauts to remain successful. Medea, however, made sure that her beloved Jason and the Argonauts remained safe. Medea sent for her brother. She told him that she wanted to meet with him at night. When Apsyrtus arrived at the secret location, he was surprised by Jason. Jason caught him off guard and attacked him. The army, after learning about the death of their leader, scattered and did not pursue the Argonauts.

To see an animated version of Jason's adventures, watch the video segment below.



Jason and the Golden Fleece: The Myth (6:40)

## The End of the Trials

The trials and adventures of the Argonauts were almost over. One of the most difficult trials that remained ahead of them was passing between the rock of Scylla and the whirlpool of Charybdis. Hera made sure that the Argonauts passed safely; she had the sea nymphs help guide them through.

The ship was quickly approaching Crete. They planned on landing there, but Medea talked them out of it. She said that Talus, the last man of the bronze race, lived there. He was made completely of bronze with the exception of one ankle. This was his vulnerable spot. The Argonauts saw Talus from their ship. He threatened to crush the ship with rocks if they came any closer. The Argonauts stopped rowing. Medea prayed to the hounds of Hades to come and destroy Talus. Just as Talus lifted a rock to throw at the Argo, he grazed his ankle. The blood gushed forth until he died. This made it safe for the Argonauts to land and refresh themselves for the rest of their journey.



## Back in Greece

Upon reaching Greece the Argonauts disbanded. Each hero returned to his home. Jason and Medea took the Golden Fleece to Pelias. When they arrived, they found that horrible events had taken place. Pelias had forced Jason's father to kill himself. Jason's mother had died of grief. Jason decided that he must punish Pelias for this wickedness. He turned to Medea for help.

Medea brought about the death of Pelias with a cunning trick. She told Pelias' daughters that she knew how to make old people young again. To prove that she knew how to do this, Medea cut up a ram. This was a very old ram. She put the pieces of the ram into a pot of boiling water.



She said a charm and instantly a lamb sprung from the pot. The daughters of Pelias were convinced that this charm would work.

Medea gave Pelias a sleeping potion. This was when his daughters were planning on cutting him into pieces in order to give their father back his youth. Even though the daughters did not want to see harm come to their father, they knew that he was getting older. They also thought that they were doing him a great favor. So, reluctantly, they killed him. When they were finished putting the pieces into the pot of water, they looked at Medea and waited for her to say the magic charm. When they turned to where Medea had been standing, they found that she had vanished. Medea left the palace and the city. The daughters were horrified that they were, in fact, the murderers of their own father.

Some say that Medea used her powers to bring Jason's father back to life. Some also say that Medea told Jason the secret for never-ending youth. Medea loved Jason. All that she did of good and evil she did for him. Unfortunately, he repaid her by betraying her.

Medea and Jason arrived at Corinth after the death of Pelias. They had two sons. Because of her love of Jason and her sons, she wasn't as sad as you would expect someone who had left her home country and family behind. Soon, however, Jason showed her how mean he could truly be. He engaged himself to be married to the daughter of the King of Corinth. It was a marriage of ambition to him; he did not care for this girl. Medea was crushed. She was so amazed at Jason's treachery. While she was upset, she said many things. The King of Corinth became nervous and uneasy around Medea. He felt that she could bring terrible things upon him, his daughter, and his country. The king sent word to Medea that she and her sons must leave Corinth at once. This was a heartless thing for the king to order; he sent a woman and her two young children out into the wilderness with no protection.

Medea was not going to let this situation get the best of her. She spent a lot of time contemplating the events of her life, including the things she did to help Jason capture the Golden Fleece from her father. At one point, she wished for death to relieve her of the anguish she was feeling. It was at that moment that Jason appeared to her. She didn't speak to him; she just looked at him. He was beside her, but she was far away from him at the same time. She was so outraged at him and how he had ruined her life. Jason then spoke to her to tell her his side of the story.

Jason told Medea that he knew she had a wild temper. He also wished that she would think before she acted and spoke. He said that if she hadn't spoken poorly about his new bride she would have been allowed to remain in Corinth and she would have led a comfortable life there. Jason said that he had talked to the king and convinced him to only exile Medea and her sons. Jason told her that the king had first intended to have her killed.

Jason also told Medea that although they were no longer together, he wanted to make sure that she was provided for. He said that he would see that she had enough gold and everything necessary for her journey. She became very angry with him. She accused him of using her and her magical abilities to regain the Golden Fleece. She couldn't believe that he would abandon her like this after all she had done for him.

Jason replied that Medea was not responsible for saving him. He said that Aphrodite was the goddess who made her fall in love with him. He said that Medea owed him a great debt for bringing her to Greece, which he considered to be a more civilized country. He also said that she should be thanking him for making it known that she helped the Argonauts. Members of the general public had praised her for this. He again repeated that it was her actions alone that made her be exiled.

Medea refused Jason's gold. She said that she would take no money and no help from him. Jason said that her stubborn pride not only put her in bad situations but also drove others away from her. From that moment, Medea decided that she would get revenge on Jason. She decided that she would kill Jason's bride.

First, she took a lovely robe from her closet. She anointed it with deadly drugs. Placing it in a box, she sent the robe with her sons to greet Jason's new bride. Her sons were told that she must show her appreciation by wearing the robe at once. When the boys arrived at the palace, the Princess eagerly agreed to put on the beautiful robe. No sooner had she put it on that a fire enveloped her. She dropped dead and her flesh had melted away.

Once Medea knew that the Princess was dead, she then focused on her sons. She knew there was no help for them. She did not want to see them live as slaves. Medea made the horrible decision that if she had given the boys life, she would be the one to give them death.

Jason returned to Medea and he was furious for the death of the Princess. He knew that she was responsible. Jason was determined to kill Medea. When he arrived, he found his two sons dead. Medea was on the roof of the home. She was stepping into a chariot that was drawn by dragons. As they carried her away, he cursed her for all of the events that had occurred. He never blamed himself.



**Now answer questions 1 through 29.**

## **Writing about Literature**

One of the major characters in this unit was Medea. She was faced with an internal struggle of whether to help Jason, the man she loved, or support her father. Use the writing process to write a five paragraph essay describing a time when you had an internal struggle. Begin by completing one of the gathering information tasks listed below. This task should generate important details about you and your internal struggle.

<b>Gathering Information Tasks</b>	
<b>Brainstorming</b>	A technique in which you come up with as many ideas as possible on a subject
<b>Clustering</b>	A technique in which you break down a subject into smaller parts – Place the subject in the middle and circle it. Write related ideas around the subject, circling them and drawing lines to the subject.
<b>Asking Questions</b>	A technique in which these questions are used to gather information: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
<b>Direct Observation</b>	A technique in which the writer relies on the five senses – sight, touch, smell, hearing, tasting.
<b>Indirect Observation</b>	A technique in which the writer examines the experiences of others by asking questions, watching, interviewing, etc.
<b>Imaging</b>	A technique in which the writer uses his imagination to generate ideas

Next, using the information you gathered in the prewriting activity, write an introductory paragraph for your essay. Remember that a successful introductory paragraph should state the main idea of the essay. It should capture the reader’s attention.

Once you have your introductory paragraph completed, write the three body paragraphs of your essay. These paragraphs should support the main idea that you stated in your introductory paragraph. The body paragraphs should include information about your struggle, how you handled it, and the outcome.

End your rough draft with a conclusion paragraph. The conclusion paragraph should bring your essay to a close. It should leave the reader with a sense of closure.

After writing the rough draft of your essay, evaluate your work. Determine any weaknesses, and then revise your rough draft. Remember that no writing is perfect. There is always room for improvement.

After revising your rough draft, complete one final proofreading of the essay. Then submit the final draft in the questions section of this unit.



**Now answer questions 30 through 35.**

## Become a Designer

The Argonauts volunteered to help Jason with his mission. They worked together as a team to accomplish the goal. Your next task is to design a t-shirt for the Argonauts. Think about their experiences, their leader, and their dedication to the mission. Create a design that includes these elements. You will also be asked to explain the design and how it depicts the adventures of the Argonauts.

You can do this task on paper or on your computer. If you choose to create your t-shirt design on paper, you'll need to either scan the image or take a digital photo of it. Then you will need to upload the scanned or photographed file in the questions section of this unit. If you choose to create your file digitally, you can use the free Paint program that is on your computer, or you may use another illustration program. If you want to download software, there are some free illustration programs available. Paint.net is one of those programs. You may download it by clicking the button below. This is not a requirement for this course, but it is an option if you do not have illustration software.



After you have created your t-shirt design, you will submit it in the questions section of this unit.



**Now answer questions 36 and 37.**