

# JASON

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## & THE GOLDEN FLEECE

By John Olive  
Directed by Rita Giomi  
Ages 10 and up/Grades 5 and up  
October 13 – November 26, 2006

EALRS:  
Reading 1.1, 1.2  
Writing 2.2

Jason ERG  
articles by  
Torrie McDonald  
& OyamO

### SYNOPSIS

Years before coming to the land of Thessaly, Jason heard tales of familial treachery and betrayal. King Pelias, his uncle, killed Jason's parents and sought to kill Jason himself. Back in Thessaly to avenge his parents' deaths and reclaim the throne, Jason is captured by Pelias' soldiers. Quick of wit as well as brave of heart, he makes a bargain with his scheming uncle—Jason will sail in search of the famed golden fleece, which imbues its wearer with vitality and power. Pelias promises to make Jason king if he delivers the fleece. The prize lies across the unforgiving sea in the land of Colchis, where no one dares go. Pelias grants Jason a wreck of a ship, but with the help of the skilled ship-builder Argos, Jason and his young crew, the untried Hercules and budding poet Orpheus, set sail. For the inexperienced sailors, this is the chance to become the heroes of legend, if only they knew what that meant or how to go about it. Never fear, they're sure that once faced with mighty foes, they will each know exactly what to do. Right?

The voyage begun, the three new friends, untrained in the art of sailing, manage to find their footing on the sea and with each other just as they run aground on a strange island. This is the land where the great scer, Phineus, is doomed to spend the rest of his days, suffering at the hands of a harpy sent by an enraged Zeus. The sailors capture the winged creature and free Phineus, who gives them a glimpse of their journey ahead and the rites of passage Jason must endure in his quest to be king. Back on the sea, there is no sign of land and nothing to do but bicker—until Lemnos looms ahead. Once they stop on this honeyed shore, the women, the sole inhabitants, try to keep the crew captive. Escaping the temptations of Lemnos, the Argonauts head back out to sea.

The sailors are desperate, with out food or fresh water. They fear the worst as their ship is sucked into a fissure in a cliff face. Guided by a small bird sent by the goddess Atalanta, they sail out alive—and directly to Colchis. Here they meet the young Medea, who allies herself with Jason in defiance of her father King Aetes. Jason, in a mighty struggle with the giant serpent who guards the fleece, finally finds his strength and captures his treasure. Chased by the king's soldiers, the crew hastily set sail once again. They flee into the mysterious swamp of Myphis. With the help of a strange creature, they make their way out of the murky swamp and on to Thessaly. Once back in their homeland, a decrepit King Pelias arrives on the shore and Jason honors their agreement, giving Pelias the fleece. When the treacherous Pelias, newly invigorated by the power of the fleece, tries to murder Jason, he is surprised to find himself unable, despite the promise of the magical garment. After a pitched battle, Pelias falls. Jason who discovers that he has become a hero after all, is finally crowned king. In a noble gesture, Jason has the fleece destroyed, determined to rule his people by his own even hand.

### BOOKLIST

Prepared by Michelle Angell,  
Pierce County Library System

#### For Children

*The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles*  
Padraic Colum

*Hercules: The Man, the Myth, the Hero*  
Kathryn Lasky

*Atalanta's Race*  
Shirley Climo

*Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece*  
Sara Fanelli

*d'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*  
Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire

*Mythweb: Greek Mythology*  
[www.mythweb.com](http://www.mythweb.com)

*ABC Arts Online: Winged Sandals*  
[www.wingedsandals.com](http://www.wingedsandals.com)

#### Spotlight

*Jason and the Gorgon's Blood*

Jane Yolen and Robert J. Harris

A wicked centaur named Nessus steals the Gorgon's blood from Jason's mentor, Chiron. This action-packed novel features a young Jason and his friends on a quest to retrieve the stolen blood.

#### For Adults

*Ancient Greece!: 40 Hands-On Activities to Experience this Wondrous Age*

Avery Hart & Paul Mantell

*Beyond the Edge of the Sea: Sailing with Jason and the Argonauts, Ulysses, the Vikings, and other Explorers of the Ancient World*  
Mauricio Obregon

*Kidipede History for Kids: Ancient Greece*  
[www.historyforkids.org](http://www.historyforkids.org)

#### Spotlight

*Hercules: Greece's Greatest Hero*

[www.perseus.tufts.edu/Hercules/index.html](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Hercules/index.html)

This website is a short and uncluttered online introduction to Hercules, his life and travels. Brief descriptions of the Labors of Hercules are illustrated with photographs of ancient Greek pottery.

# THE GOLDEN FLEECE

The land of Thessaly was ruled by King Athamas and his wife, the nymph Nephele. Together they had two lovely children, Phrixus and Helle. However, Athamas also had a second wife, Inos. Inos was horribly jealous of Phrixus and Helle. Her deepest desire was for her own children to be the only heirs to the throne of Thessaly. But with Nephele's offspring in favor, her ambition would never come to pass.

Luckily for Inos, Thessaly began to suffer from a crippling drought that lasted many months. His land parched and people dying, Athamas became desperate. He sent messengers to the Oracle at Delphi for an answer to his woes. In this, Inos saw her chance to finally rid herself of the only obstacle to power, Phrixus and Helle. Inos paid the messengers sent to the Oracle to return with the news that it was prophesied that the two children must be sacrificed in order to free Thessaly from disaster. Distraught over this revelation, Athamas felt he had no choice. He placed his precious children on an altar to be slain.

Fortunately, Nephele, the children's mother, was a favorite of Hermes, the fastest of the gods. Hermes sent a magical, flying, golden ram to save the children from their doom. Before they could be sacrificed, Phrixus and Helle managed to climb on the ram's back and off they flew to safety. They journeyed for many a mile. The trip was so exhausting that the young and delicate Helle could hold on to the ram no longer. She fell away, off into the sea, in what is still called the Hellespont. Eventually, the ram, with Phrixus still clinging to his back, arrived in the land of Colchis. Once his charge was safely on land, the brave ram died. (It is this very ram that many believe to be the constellation Aries, put amongst the stars as a tribute to his courage and goodness.) The people of Colchis were so proud of the ram's deed that they removed his fleece, hung it from a tree, and set a great dragon to guard it, for such a creature's hide must surely have great and awesome powers within. There in the tree the fleece remained, imbuing the new king of Colchis, Phrixus, with vast power, some even said immortality. For years, the fleece and its owner remained undisturbed, until a young warrior from Thessaly, Jason, and his Argonauts, came to fetch it.



*The famed ram and the dragon set to protect its magical hide.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

This article gives you a glimpse of part of the story leading up to our play. Seeing the show, will give you a look at the next chapter in the life of the fleece. Where do you think the story goes from there? Does Jason have more adventures? Does he become a great and just ruler of Thessaly? Do he and Medea have a happy life together? Have your students research the myth of Jason to see what they can discover.



*Jason as he captures the fleece from the land of Colchis.*

# THE OLYMPIAN GODS & GODDESSES

In the beginning was Chaos. Somehow in the midst of Chaos, Eros, or Love, was created and order began. From Love and Light and Day, came Gaea, Mother Earth, who created Uranus, Father Heaven. Together, Gaea and Uranus made the Titans, the Cyclops, and the Giants. Uranus feared and hated these creatures and locked them in Tartarus, the lowest level of the Underworld. This enraged Gaea who cajoled their son Cronos into overthrowing Uranus. With his sister/wife, Rhea, Cronos fathered 6 of the 12 Olympian gods and goddesses. Prophesied to be overthrown by one of his children, Cronos swallowed the first 5 at birth. For the sixth, Rhea substituted a great stone, hiding the child, Zeus, in Crete. When he was older, Zeus returned and forced Cronos to regurgitate his siblings who, having grown inside their father, stood with Zeus in a war against the Titans. The Olympians were victorious, with the aid of the Giants and Cyclops, and banished the Titans to Tartarus. Once the Titans were gone, Zeus and his two brothers, Poseidon and Hades, drew lots to parcel out shares of the world. Poseidon drew the seas and Hades the Underworld, while Zeus assumed leadership over all the gods.

## THE 12 OLYMPIAN GODS & GODDESSES

**Zeus**—the father of the gods and god of the sky and rain. His weapon is the thunderbolt, his bird the eagle, and his tree the mighty oak. Zeus is famous, or infamous, for his many affairs, but cannot abide liars.



*Ares*

**Ares**—son of Zeus and Hera, is the god of war and conflict. Often considered cowardly despite his murderous nature.

**Athena (Pallas Athena)**—virgin goddess of wisdom, arts, industry, justice, and skill, she sprang fully formed from her father, Zeus', head. She is often acknowledged to be his favorite child. Courageous and ferocious, she fights only to protect home from outside enemies. Her icons are the helmet, spear, and aegis (fringed cloak), and her bird is the owl.

**Poseidon**—wielding his fearsome trident, Poseidon, god of the sea, is second in power only to Zeus.

In an attempt to win the hand of Demeter, Poseidon created the first horse. He is understood to be bad-tempered and greedy.



*Apollo playing to his muses.*

**Hades**—lord of the Underworld, Hades rules over the dead. Ever eager to increase his subjects, he favors any who cause death. Hades is also the god of wealth due to the riches found in the Earth.

**Hera**—the sister/wife of Zeus, is the goddess of marriage, and she especially protects married women. She is extremely jealous of Zeus many dalliances. Hera's sacred animals are the cow and peacock, and her favorite city is Argos.



*A relief of Hera and Zeus.*

**Hestia**—sister of Zeus and a virgin goddess, she is the goddess of the hearth. Each city of ancient Greece had a public hearth in honor of Hestia, and families ceremonially carried their newborn children around their own hearths in honor of her.

**Apollo**—twin brother to Artemis, is the son of Zeus and Leto. Apollo is the god of music, healing, light, and truth. He often grants his favorite mortals the gift of prophesy. The famous Oracle of Delphi, to which people traveled from all over to hear about their futures, was blessed by him. It is Apollo's task to drive the Sun across the sky each day.

**Artemis**—a virgin goddess and goddess of chastity, she is the patron of wild things and the hunter of the gods. Artemis protects the young and presides over childbirth, and she is associated with the moon. All wild creatures are sacred to her.

**Aphrodite**—vain and ill-tempered, she is the goddess of love, desire, and beauty. She also has a magic girdle that causes any she wishes to desire her. She is the wife of Hephaestus, and her tree is the myrtle, her birds the dove, swan, and sparrow.

**Hermes**—is the son of Zeus and the god of thieves, commerce, boundaries, shepherds, orators, literature, poets, athletics, and invention. He is also the fastest of the gods and their messenger. Hermes guides the dead to the Underworld. He invented many things, including: the lyre, the pipes, the musical scale, astronomy, weights and measures, boxing, and gymnastics.

**Hephaestus**—is said, by some, to have been created by Hera alone therefore having no father. Others believe he is the son of Zeus and Hera both. God of fire and the forge, Hephaestus is the smith to the gods, using a volcano as his forge. He is said to be peace-loving and kind. Although the only god to be physically unattractive, he is the husband of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty.



# ON WRITING AND JASON

## BY JOHN OLIVE, PLAYWRIGHT



*The Argonautika* is a poem in the Homeric style written in the 3rd century B.C.E. by a man now known as Apollonius of Rhodes. Initially it was badly received, causing Apollonius to flee from Alexandria (where he had been a scholar in the famous library) to Rhodes where he labored at length to revise his epic. Succeeding, he returned to Alexandria a celebrated author. Still, the ages have not been kind to Apollonius. *The Argonautika* is considered by many scholars to be stilted, static, and dull, compared to Homer's marvelous *Iliad*. Certainly, it is a slog to read, filled with dense verse and lots of static campfire stories ("That night Hercules spoke at length and this is the story he told...").

Ah, but what a grand adventure: Jason, the impressionable and angry young man struggling to reclaim his royal birthright, traveling with his boon companions to the end of the known world – and beyond. Battling amazons, the vast sea, the Harpies (well, Harpy, in our production), the guardian serpent, clashing cliffs. Embarking on one of the most, shall we say, interesting love relationships in all human literature, with Medea. Returning in triumph with the golden fleece. It doesn't get better than this.

To adapt this material I strayed pretty far from the Apollonius source poem. Instead of a boatload of Argonauts, I gave Jason two, Hercules and Orpheus, the strong man and the poet. This allowed me to focus on these two warring aspects of Jason's personality, his sensitivity (Orpheus) and his desire for power (Hercules). A small boat containing three equals, bobbing on the vast sea, gives the story more humanity than would a large ship commanded by a stern captain. Similarly, I left out much of *The Argonautika's* melodramatic violence (for example Jason's struggle to the death with Medea's brother). I wanted to keep the play focused on Jason's human evolution. I added some nifty stuff, too; Inos the swamp man is entirely my creation, and the ending, with Jason forgiving Pelias and allowing him to die in peace is mine as well. For all the changes I made, though, I believe the essence of the story is still there: the mysterious fleece, the journey into new worlds where familiar rules don't apply, and of course, the hero's triumphant return.

### ACTIVITY:

Mythology has been around since stories were first told. Every culture has its own cast of characters, adventures, and morals that pass along through generations. Have your students bring in or find a newspaper article on a topic of interest to them today. Now, have them use the people and places involved in that story to create their own adventure tale. Remind them that myths often involve quests, challenges, battles of will and/or force, and heroic deeds. How does their myth compare to the story of Jason? Does their hero do good deeds or live a moral life? How do all of the different tales fit together to create a classroom mythology?