Elizabeth Hale, "Entry on: Jason and the Argonauts: The First Great Quest in Greek Mythology by Robert Byrd", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/660. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Robert Byrd

Jason and the Argonauts: The First Great Quest in Greek Mythology

United States of America (2016)

TAGS: Argo Argonautica Argonauts Colchis Heracles Hercules Jason Medea





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
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Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
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ISBN	9780803741188
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Author of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators



Robert Byrd , b. 1942
(Author, Illustrator)

Robert Byrd is an American artist, illustrator and writer of children's books. He was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and studied at Trenton Junior College and the Philadelphia College of Art, where he now also teaches illustration. He lives in Haddonfield, New Jersey, and with his wife, Ginger, has two grown children. Byrd has illustrated numerous children's books, often focusing on figures from history (including books on Leonardo da Vinci, Benjamin Franklin, Saint Francis, and Heinrich Schliemann), or retelling myths and folktales (*Brave Chicken Little*, *Finn MacCoul and his Fearless Wife: A Giant of a Tale from Ireland*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, *Theseus and the Minotaur*).

Sources:

Profile at en.wikipedia.org (accessed: February 18, 2019)

Profile at goodreads.com (accessed: February 18, 2019)

Profile at biography.jrank.org (accessed: February 18, 2019)

Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

Questionnaire

1. **What drew you to writing/working with Classical Antiquity, what drew you to particular myths, and what challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular myths or stories?**

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The myths can be seen as just really good stories, and some of them great adventures. The challenge is staying true to the original story, which can't be altered as they were considered to be of religious significance to the ancient Greeks. Dealing with all of the violence was always an issue for young readers.

2. Why do you think classical / ancient myths, history, and literature continue to resonate with young audiences?

I think part of he interest lies in the way the myths parallel our culture's fascination with super heroes and monsters, and their quests. This seems to be about power and dominance. They are everywhere there is imagery. I see it with art students. Look at our entertainment.

3. Do you have a background in classical education (Latin or Greek at school or classes at the University?) What sources are you using? Scholarly work? Wikipedia? Are there any books that made an impact on you in this respect?

My only background in mythology is what books I read as a child. I use every source I can; picture books, the internet, books, photography for pictorial reference. All of the versions of the myths for young readers were useful. I read as many "classical myth" collections as possible. Robert Graves collection of the Greek myths were very important, and his novel, *Hercules My Shipmate* was the finest written source (for Jason and the Argonauts). Graves himself points out the various discrepancies in the early tellings by the Greeks and Romans of the same myth.

4. How did you devise your particular artistic style/idiom/aesthetic for your works inspired by Classical Antiquity?

I did try to incorporate the Greek style into my work. The Greek vases were the most important source. I used the ancient Greek artists works for reference, and tried to merge their way of seeing things with how I draw. It is interesting to see how stylized the vases are,

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compared with the realism of some of their sculpture

5. Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers?

I hope a good story will connect with any generation. I hope my art enhances these stories.

6. How concerned were you with "accuracy" or "fidelit"' to the original? (another way of saying that might be — that I think writers are often more "faithful" to originals in adapting its spirit rather than being tied down at the level of detail — is this something you thought about?)

As I mentioned, accuracy to the original story line was essential, but I had a lot of freedom in the drawing, composition, color, etc. We still don't know exactly what everything looked like.The ancient myths of course must be simplified for young readers, but I do try not to talk down to my audience. Children get it.

7. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

At some point, another myth could be fun. Today publishing markets are always changing, and they dictate direction for children's books.

8. Anything else you think we should know?

My next book is *Liberty Arrives*, Dial, Penguin Random House 2019, the complete story of the Statue of Liberty.

Prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

A lavishly produced illustrated retelling of the Jason myth, including explanatory material in boxes and footnotes. *Jason and the Argonauts: The First Great Quest in Greek Mythology* retells the myth in some detail, on pages packed with text and illustrations. Summarising this book requires an entry of some length.

After handsome endpapers, which show a map of the Mediterranean, and trace Jason's journey, the first section, *The Golden Fleece* (pp. 1–2) opens by setting up the back-story – the rule of King Athamas, and the escape of his children Helle and Phrixus on the winged golden ram. Illustrations show Zeus, sending thunderbolts towards the flying golden ram; Helle is falling from it, while Phrixus holds on. An information box provides explanation about Zeus's stature as the king of the gods, and information about the Oracle of Delphi, who had proclaimed that king Athamas must sacrifice his children to save them from famine caused by his jealous wife.

The next section, *The Cave of Chiron* (pp. 3–4) explains Jason's history: how Pelias usurped the throne of Jason's father, Aeson, and how Jason's mother hid him in safety where he was raised and taught by Chiron, the king of the centaurs. Jason's famous encounter with Hera, and his return to his kingdom are chronicled, and the conditions of his quest laid out. Illustrations show Chiron teaching a young Jason archery, and Jason carrying Hera (in her disguise as an old woman) across a flowing stream. An information box provides context on Centaurs, and on Hera.

In *The Speaking Tree* (pp. 5-6), Jason seeks advice from the oracle at Dodona, an oak tree sacred to Zeus. The oracle advises him to find Argus, the shipbuilder, to build a boat with oars for fifty men. The oracle donates a branch for a figurehead, and it is carved into an image of Athena. As she is fitted onto the prow of the ship, the figurehead speaks, advising Jason to gather "the best, the bravest, the strongest, and the most cunning – the greatest heroes in all Greece." (p. 6) A nearly full-page image of the tree slants across the page 6; on page 7 beneath it, is an image of the ship and figurehead being built. An information box explains the relationship of Zeus and Hera.

The Heroes Gather (pp. 7–8) explains how Jason sought out the heroes. On page 7 we see Hercules towering over Jason with the boat

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in the distance; on page 8 twelve "notable heroes" are presented in "small vignettes" Calais and Zetes, Orpheus, Atalanta, Ancaeus, Meleager, Periclymenus, Euphemus, Nestor, Mopsus, Lynceus, Tiphys, and Theseus.

The Argo Sets Sail (pp. 9–10) follows. The image of the boat, with its red sail bearing the symbol of the golden ram, spreads across the lower two thirds of both pages. The winds are at its back; Poseidon raises his head from the sea to look on, and the image of the boat has a cutaway section showing some of the crew arranging amphorae. The figurehead Athena points the way, and dolphins cavort alongside the boat. The text explains the loading of the boat, and the casting off, while Orpheus plays his lyre to make smooth passage. An information box provides explanation about Poseidon, and about how Greek ships managed their provisions, showing how amphorae were lined up at the side of the keel as ballast.

Hercules, Our Shipmate (pp. 11–12) conveys some of the adventures of the crew as they travel across the Aegean on the Argos. At Bear Island, King Cyzicus asks them to help fight besieging ogres, giants with six arms and bear paws for hands. Hercules' strength means that he can block the horde, until Jason and his crew can return with arrows to see them off. On their way to Chios, Jason and Hercules compete in a rowing race, result inconclusive as Jason passes out and Hercules breaks his oar. At Chios, Hercules' attendant, Hylas, is kidnapped by nymphs who pull him into a pool of water. Hercules is beside himself at the loss of his friends, going mad with grief. The Argonauts agree that he is a liability and sail on without him. Hercules returns to his famous Labours, which are explained in an information box on page 12.

Phineas and the Harpies (pp. 13–14) takes the Argonauts to an island near Thrace, where they meet the soothsayer king, Phineas, made blind by Zeus as a punishment for his amazing ability to see the future. Whenever he tried to eat, harpies would sweep from the sky and steal his food. Jason sends Calais and Zetes, who are the winged sons of the wind, Boreas, to chase the harpies away, until Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, asks them to spare them. Jason heals Phineas' blindness, and the grateful king shares the best route to Colchis. An information box explains about Iris, and the Harpies. The illustration on this page takes nearly the full double spread, showing Phineas and the Argonauts on a beach amongst jagged rocks, chasing away the harpies with spears. Iris is approaching in the far right background.

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Next is the *Clashing Rocks* (pp. 15–16), in which Phineas explains that the Argonauts must sail through the Symplegades, or Clashing Rocks, two huge boulders that smash into one another. He explains how to do it, and the Argonauts set sail, making it through with the help of Athena. A double-page image of the Argo, the rocks, the waves, and Athena's heron who provides guidance, takes up the lower half of the page; an information box provides explanation about Athena.

The text for the next piece, *The Stymphalian Birds* (pp. 17–18) is surrounded by the artwork depicting the orange birds, flinging themselves at the Argonauts, who are on the island belonging to Ares (Ares can be seen chatting with the figurehead of Athena in the background). The Argonauts fight off the birds, banging their shields in accordance with Hera's instructions. On the beach, they meet the sons of Phrixus, who have been shipwrecked, and tell Jason they can help him get to Colchis. An information box explains Ares.

The Argonauts Arrive in Colchis (pp. 19–20) shows Jason's meeting with Aeetes, the wicked kind of Colchis, and his beautiful daughter, the sorceress Medea. An image on page 17 shows Eros shooting an arrow of love into Medea's heart, while Aeetes tells Jason about the trials he must undergo. First, he must harness the fire breathing bulls, to plough the field of Ares, then plant the field with dragon's teeth. An image on page 18 shows Jason grabbing each bull, one black and one white, in front of Aeetes' palace, having taken magic salve from Medea who has sought advice from Hecate. An information box provides explanation about Aphrodite and Eros.

Next Jason ploughs the field, in *Jason and the Earthborn Warriors* (pp. 21–22). The image shows him sowing the seeds by night, while the fiery bulls snort flames in the background. An information box provides explanation about Hephaestus and the Dragon's Teeth.

In *Jason Takes the Fleece* (pp. 23–24), we are greeted by a full-page image (p. 23) of Jason climbing up a sleeping serpent by night to reach for the fleece, with Medea advising from the ground. The text, on page 24, explains how Medea helps Jason find the fleece in the sacred grove, and lulls the serpent to sleep with singing and a potion. They sneak off to the Argo, and escape. King Aeetes sends his warships after them, led by his son, Apsyrtus, who is then ambushed by Medea and Jason. The Argos escape. An information box gives information about Hermes; the illustration shows Medea meeting Apsyrtus by night, while Jason lies in wait, ready to kill him.

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Following this dark story, is the bright daylight imagery for *Circe and the Island of the Sirens* (pp. 25–26); the gods are enraged by Medea's treachery, and they inflict a storm on the Argonauts until they land on Circe's island of Aeaea. We see the sorceress Circe surveying her land, and a number of bearded animals (men whom she has transformed) while Medea and Jason approach from the beach. Medea and Jason seek forgiveness from Circe, who pardons them with Zeus's approval. An information box gives context for Circe.

Leaving Aeaea, the Argonauts now encounter *Scylla and Charybdis* (pp. 27–28), both of whom are depicted in bright colours and some detail. The Argo charges past them, with the help of Nereids, and their leader Thetis, who is described in the information box.

Next, they are *Lost in the Desert* (pp. 29–30), and are forced to carry the Argo following the tracks of a giant Hippocamp, sent by Poseidon as a guide, until they reach the sea again. The information box gives information about the Anemoi, the gods of the four winds, and the goat-headed nymphs who symbolize the triple goddess.

Further adventures await, in *The Bronze Giant* (pp. 31–32), when the Argonauts encounter the automaton, Talos, whom Medea entrances and kills. A full-page image of the shining bronze giant, twisting in agony as Medea releases his molten blood, dominates the scene and the Argonauts hiding behind rocks watching. The information box discusses Apollo, who has helped the Argonauts at Hera's request, and discusses how Ancient sailors used the stars to navigate.

The Argonauts Come Home (pp. 33–34) finally, and Jason learns that Pelias has murdered his parents. Medea takes vengeance for her husband, and tricks Pelias into leaping into a cauldron of boiling water held by his daughters, in vain hope of eternal youth. Jason is now able to ascend the throne. But the gods blame Medea for tricking Pelias' daughters into murdering their father. Medea and Jason flee to Corinth, but Jason is now afraid of his wife and tells her he will divorce her for the daughter of King Creon. Enraged, Medea murders the children she had with Jason, and escapes. The image shows Jason brandishing his sword as Medea flees the scene in a magnificent chariot pulled by two dragons, which was sent by her grandfather, Helios (who is explained in the information box).

Finally, Jason arrives at *The Hero's End* (pp. 35–36). Devastated by the death of his children, he roams the world as a wanderer. He

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returns eventually to Iolcus, and comes upon the beached Argos. Resting against its prow, he is killed by the figurehead which tumbles onto him. The story concludes: "Jason's story is a classic tale of bravery and valor, but also deceit, trickery, and vengeance. It shows how the whims of the gods played with the lives of mere mortals for their own pleasure and gain." The final image shows an elderly Jason, resting against the wreck of the Argo, a tattered figurehead above him, both gazing out at a peaceful sunset scene. The Argos is visible in the sky also, traced against the constellation that bears its name, Argo Navis.

The book concludes with *The Olympians* (pp. 37–38), providing images of the gods of Olympus, with brief explanations, and a short contextual note. An Author's note explains the attractions of the myths, and a Bibliography provides references and sources, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Hamilton, Robert Graves, and Padraic Colum.

Handsome endpapers trace Jason's journey over a map of the Mediterranean.

Analysis

This exquisite picture book shows the appeal of classical myth to inspire lavishly illustrated picture books. Byrd comments in his Author's Note, that the "Greek myths have always attracted me with their power, scope, and imaginativeness, and their possibilities of visual expression," and the visual presentation of this book does indeed emphasize the richness of the Argonautica. Detailed, brightly coloured images take over the pages, and offset the brevity of the text; they encourage readers to linger, finding the characters discussed, and seeing the action depicted.

The information boxes come with images, inspired by vase painting, giving a different context and highlighting the antiquity and specificity of Greek mythology. Each figure is accompanied by his or her signal characteristic or power (i.e. Zeus is clutching thunderbolts; Artemis carries a bow and chases a deer; Hermes has his winged cap and carries a caduceus), and the succinct descriptions provide context for readers unfamiliar with the myths.

Byrd highlights the research he did for the book, in a bibliography including Padraic Colum: *The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived before Achilles*, Robert Graves: *The Greek Myths*; Edith

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	Hamilton: *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne: *Tanglewood Tales*. Interestingly, Medea's wickedness is not shied away from, but one gets the sense that Byrd approves of her ingenuity and power. The final lines of the book suggest that if anyone is to be held accountable for their actions, it should be the gods: "Jason's story is a classic tale of bravery and valour, but also deceit, trickery, and vengeance. It shows how the whims of the gods played with the lives of mere mortals for their own pleasure and gain" (p. 35).
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Argo Argonautica Argonauts Colchis Heracles Hercules Jason Medea
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Knowledge

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