Myth and the Fantastic: *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963)

Introduction

Greek mythology has proved itself both highly suitable and somewhat problematic for cinema. Mythology offers stories and characters that have been very widely retold. Embedded in the traditions of western literature, they have often accrued the capacity for multiple signification. Mythic narratives and characters can be appreciated on a variety of interpretive levels. The name Achilles, for example, invokes (at the very least) warriors, weaknesses, and wounded heels. Those with more knowledge of classical literature may think of his rage in Homer's *Iliad* and his brutal treatment of the Trojan prince Hector; some will note his cultural status as a gay icon for the (much-debated) nature of his relationship with his friend Patroclus. Such ready-made narrative scaffolding made it possible for filmmakers to cut down on background explanation: especially useful for early films like *The Fall of Troy* (1911), which were at the same time very brief, and had to mostly rely on visual storytelling.

Myth's inclusion of supernatural beings like gods and monsters can be more problematic. On paper, or in the imagination, fantastic creatures enable us to tell stories that go beyond the limits of everyday experience. Even in static visual arts like sculpture or painting, they retain their capacity for inspiring awe. However, as moving, speaking figures on stage or on the cinema screen, fantastic creatures can seem absurd rather than awe-inspiring, silly rather than sublime. This was especially the case in pre-CGI films. Traditional cinema consumption, informed by the hegemonic classical Hollywood style, assumed belief in the reality of on-screen worlds, and peopling those worlds with fantastic creatures puts this belief in jeopardy. Consequently, it is in the genre of fantasy films, where the questioning of reality is a central theme, that myth finds a more natural cinematic home.

Defining fantasy films as a genre is not an easy task. In the cinema, fantasy has been popularly linked with horror and science-fiction. Well-known examples might include *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and *Army of Darkness* (1993) – plus, of course, epic series like the *Star Wars* films (1977-2005), and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003). Horror and sci-fi genres showcase fantasy as a matter of course, with their supernatural events and extra-terrestrial

locations. However, they do not exhaust the range of genres which can include fantastic elements. Classic fantasies include romantic fantasies such as *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); revisionist fairytales like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *The Company of Wolves* (1984); martial arts films in the tradition of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2003) and *House of the Flying Daggers* (2004); and other less easily classifiable films like *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Big Fish* (2003). Films with fantasy elements that are inspired by Greek myth include *Orpheus* (original French title *Orphée* 1950), *Jason and the Argonauts* (the case study for this chapter), *Medea* (1969), *Hercules in New York* (1970), *Clash of the Titans* (1981), and *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995). These films present their narratives in very different styles, from arthouse opacity through slapstick comedy and family adventure film to post-modern morality tale. Combined with the variety of genres listed above, this diversity suggests that fantasy functions broadly and serves a variety of purposes.

At its core, fantasy depicts a departure from the real whether it is a violation of the laws of physics, the inclusion of animals unknown in nature, or the creation of impossible connections between cause and effect. However, the important issue is not so much the content of the fantastic, but its effect on the viewer. This has been most effectively studied by the structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov, who provides a more formal definition of fantasy based on the idea of 'hesitation'. According to Todorov, one can recognise fantasy because it produces 'hesitation' in the interpreter (i.e. the reader or viewer). This hesitation occurs when an inexplicable occurrence produces the need for a decision, either on the part of the reader, or a character within the narrative: was it imagined or real – and if the latter, are the rules that govern reality different from those that were previously assumed? Todorov argued that it is in the hesitation that occurs between these two positions (between a commitment to the real and a desire to pursue the irrational) that the fantastic resided. The question that fantasy provokes is 'do I believe what I just saw?'.

Although Todorov's analysis was predicated on a small number of literary texts, and has been much criticised and debated, it offers a useful jumping-off point for thinking about the way we process what we see on screen when we view fantasy films. Consider, for instance, the moment in *Orphée* (1950) when the eponymous poet discovers that he can access the underworld through the mirror in his room using a mysterious pair of gloves. Viewers are cued to the supernatural status of the gloves by the curious manner in which Orphée puts them on – appearing to be made of rubber, they fly onto his hands, miraculously turning themselves inside-out in the process. As Orphée breaches, then enters the mirror-glass, his gloved hands pass through the mirror as if it were water. Both cinematic events, the behaviour of the gloves and the ability to pass through a solid mirror, are created through the manipulation of film technology to produce

a 'special effect' (sometimes referred to as FX). In the first, the actor has been filmed taking the gloves off, and then the film has been reversed. In the second, a shot of Orphée's gloved hands passing through water is intercut with shots of him looking in a real mirror, and walking through an empty frame. Despite – perhaps even because of – the naïvety of these effects, a moment of fantasy viewing is produced as the viewer tries to simultaneously process the extra-cinematic question of how the refutation of reality is achieved by the filmmaker, and the intra-cinematic question of whether the character is dreaming.

The tension between realism and fantasy has been a source of inspiration for filmmakers ever since the earliest days of cinema. Filmmakers were quick to note the medium's dual potential for extraordinary reproductions of reality, and for making the extraordinary seem real. The Lumière brothers exploited the former, astounding audiences in 1895 by transporting them from a Parisian salon to become invisible eavesdroppers on scenes in other lives; allowing them to see, for example, workers exiting a factory at the end of their shift or trains leaving a station. Georges Méliès, working at the same time, took the other path, realising film's capacity for fantasy. A Parisian magician and showman, Méliès was filming in a Parisian street when his camera jammed and had to be restarted. When the film was played back, the pause in continuity had turned men into women, carriages into hearses: the first examples in live action cinema of the stop-motion effects described earlier in *Orphée*. As a successful conjurer, Méliès recognised the value of such a trick, and used it to present on screen the kind of stories that provoked wonder: tales of space travel, fairy tales, and often accounts of ancient myth. Fantastic sequences held Méliès' audiences in thrall, a visual representation of what ancient mythographers presented in words.

Travelling forward over a hundred years, the enthusiasm of recent cinema audiences for the kind of films listed above has shown that fantasy can still enthral an audience. However, for one of the most recent examples of mythology in cinema, *Troy* (2004), fantasy was eschewed. Instead a pseudo-historical approach was taken, removing the Olympian gods from the narrative and offering rational explanations for other mythical elements such as the weakness of Achilles' heel. *Troy*'s attempts to historicise myth may have been at least partly responsible for the film's rather tepid reception at the box-office. Filmmakers should have noted audience resistance to their historicising process when a pre-release attempt to change the film's title to *The Trojan War* was withdrawn following highly negative feedback from film fans. Reviewers' responses to the decision of director Wolfgang Petersen to excise the gods from this retelling of the Trojan War narrative were more mixed. Although some critics castigated the film for its departure from Homer's *Iliad* (the canonic retelling of the myth and the film's acknowledged inspiration), others applauded it, with one critic dismissively pointing to the unmissed absence of 'snowy-haired Brit ac-

tors, wandering round up to their ankles in dry ice carrying thunderbolts'. The criticisms bring into focus the problems and choices that are associated with putting the immortals on screen. What *does* a god or goddess look like, for instance, and how are their divine commands enacted? Or, perhaps more pertinently, what will audiences accept in these matters?

Gods, heroes and monsters are the features that divide ancient myth from other narratives as far as adaptation to cinema is concerned. The least problematic of these figures for cinema are heroes and heroines. As we shall see in the discussion of Disney's *Hercules* (Chapter 9), modern and ancient notions of heroism are fundamentally incompatible. However, on a superficial level, the two discourses share enough features to allow audiences to accept the reality of heroes. All one needs is an attractive young man or woman with a good figure. They don't have to be extremely muscular (Hercules is the most notable exception), but they do have to have a touch of 'star quality' about them (even if they aren't already stars). The mythic hero isn't a role for the everyman. Extra-cinematic factors help blend notions of ancient and modern heroism. For example, pre-release publicity may draw the reader's attention to heroic aspects of the actors' lives outside the world of this particular film; to previous roles, or even post-film employment. Todd Armstrong who played Jason in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) went into US army training after completing the film; editorials in the UK pressbook compared this with his onscreen role, describing him as 'a practising warrior'. The casting of Diane Kruger as Helen in *Troy* was preceded by a lengthy press campaign on the search for someone to play 'the most beautiful woman in history (sic)', repeating the same tactic used when casting Rossana Podestà as Helen in the 1956 film *Helen of Troy*. Often the task of portraying iconic heroes is given to relative unknowns, the cultural accretions of myth seemingly easier to carry by actors who have not accumulated too much baggage of their own. The sometime champion bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, for instance, had his first film role in *Hercules in New York* (1970), where his name appears in the credits as 'Arnold Strong'.

If heroes can be created through good looks and some studio publicity, monsters demand more technical responses in their creation. Conveying the otherness of monsters can involve the application of a variety of techniques, from low-tech solutions like costume and make-up, to stop-motion filming, and the superimposition of a number of images using mattes. In *Ulysses* (1954), for instance, the giant Cyclops, Polyphemus, was played by the actor (and former Olympic wrestler) Umberto Silvestri, with effects created by the use of extensive make-up to indicate his single eye and low angle camerawork to create the illusion of height. These images were then combined in post-production with film of Ulysses and his companions shot from a high angle. In *Jason* and *Clash of the Titans* (1981), an alternative strategy was used, with fantastic creatures (including the Harpies, the Hydra, and Medusa) portrayed through the use of

animated 3D models, filmed separately then integrated in post-production with live action sequences. Their animator, Ray Harryhausen, has argued that it is the technique of animation that 'liberates the fantasy in the story' (Wells 2002: 95). Certainly animation's capacity to create worlds where natural laws are completely absent encourages an anarchic spirit of freedom, and can enable the discussion of more sensitive topics: adoption in *Hercules* (1997), homosexuality in Barry Purves' *Achilles* (1995), agnosticism in *Jason* (see Chapter 9 for more on animated films). However, the notion of a fully animated fantasy produces problems for Todorov's definition. With animation unreal by definition (whether drawn or 3D), there is no moment of hesitation. Fantasy's capacity to make us pause and question what we have previously accepted as reality is therefore not present: the liminal qualities of the fantastic world tip into outright escapism. In *Jason*, this problem is avoided by blending animated sequences with live-action, re-igniting the hesitation of the fantastic, and foregrounding debates about the role of both fantasy and the gods in human culture.

Background to case study

Jason and the Argonauts has become widely known for its special effects and animated sequences, used to put gods and fantastic creatures on-screen, and created by Ray Harryhausen (1920-). Harryhausen's Dynamation system used mattes to integrate live-action footage with 3D models. These were animated through tiny changes of position, shot one frame at a time: the laborious stop-motion technique. Produced many years before the introduction of computer-aided techniques, all animation and other special effect sequences in the film were designed and enacted by Harryhausen himself. Such extremely labour-intensive production meant that only short sequences could be produced. As a result, the gods and fantastic creatures in *Jason* are mostly not a continuous presence in the narrative, but are used to punctuate the action with spectacular setpiece sequences.

Harryhausen himself is now one of the most discussed and respected figures in animation, lionised by critics, fans and the industry, and the recipient of an Academy Award for lifetime achievement in 1991. But in advertising at the time of the film's original release in 1963, he was scarcely mentioned. Potential viewers would have looked elsewhere for the film's attractions: to the cast, the characters, the story, and the spectacle. They would not have known from the credit hidden at the foot of the posters for 'Associate Producer Ray Harryhausen' the extraordinary extent of Harryhausen's involvement in the origination and formation of this cinematic Argonautica.

Harryhausen's interest in animation and fantasy began when he saw *King Kong* as a teenager in 1933. Animating the eponymous primate was the work of Willis O'Brien, and in 1949, Harryhausen's (largely self-taught) skills of animation were rewarded with the position of assistant

animator to O'Brien on another gorilla movie, *Mighty Joe Young.* The film won an Academy Award for its special effects which, although credited to O'Brien, are now widely acknowledged to have been mostly the work of Harryhausen. Moving on to work on a series of monster and science fiction films with titles like *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* (1956), Harryhausen developed his special contribution to animation techniques which he named Dynamation. This technique filmed animated models as the filling in a sandwich of two separate pieces of live-action film, one used as a background and one as a foreground. Through this technique Harryhausen achieved his aim of realistically integrating models and live actors and so maximised the viewer's suspension of disbelief in his fantasy worlds.

In his early career, Harryhausen's role was as enabler of other people's fantasies through his masterful and imaginative use of special-effects techniques. However, in 1955 he began a collaboration with producer Charles H. Schneer in which his animated creations and effects took a greater role in driving and defining the narratives of films. Their first film was *It Came From Beneath the Sea* (1955), which depicted a giant octopus terrorising San Francisco; later films like *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* and *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957) translated the 'monster' theme to a sci-fi setting. In 1958, Schneer and Harryhausen turned their attention to another fantastic milieu, the world of fairy tales and legend. These presented advantages over the earlier monster movies. They possessed widely known stories and had greater appeal for a larger, and potentially more profitable, mainstream family audience. At the same time, they still allowed Harryhausen to showcase his ability to blend realism and fantasy. The first film in the series was the first Sinbad film, *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad.* It was released in 1958 (two more were released in 1974 and 1977) and it was followed by *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* in 1960. For Harryhausen, who found Greek myth 'a vivid world of adventure with wonderful heroes, villains, and most importantly, lots of fantastic creatures' (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003: 151), it was a short step from these legendary tales to the narratives of ancient mythology. The mode of film production which had now been established by Harryhausen and Schneer entailed that the form of their mythological retellings should be driven by the animations and effects that the narrative facilitated.

Evidence for Harryhausen's use of ancient mythology as inspiration for his fantastic creations can be found in many of his films. Besides *Jason* and *Clash of the Titans* (1981), Harryhausen claims to have a number of other uncompleted mythological projects including a film on Atlantis, another retelling the story of Daphnis and Chloe, and an adaptation of the Roman poet Virgil's epic work, the *Aeneid* (which was to have been produced after *Clash of the Titans*). Myth-inspired creatures also appeared, including a giant Cyclops in the first Sinbad film and a Siren in *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1974). According to Harryhausen, he and Schneer saw Greek myths as 'the type of stories ... where you had to use every trick that you could possibly conceive in order to render the mythological concept on the screen' (Wells 2002: 97). For their first fully-realised adaptation of Greek myths, Harryhausen and Schneer considered narratives about Perseus (which they later filmed in *Clash of the Titans*) before settling on Jason and his quest for the Golden Fleece because it seemed the most flexible myth for adaptation.

Jason is one of the oldest Greek mythological heroes and (inevitably) each of the retellings we have revises his story. The film collates elements from various versions, adding its own interpretations to suit Harryhausen's effects and the target family audience, which he had been cultivating ever since his fairytale films. Perhaps the best-known version of the myth for modern audiences is the *Argonautica,* an epic poem by Apollonius of Rhodes, written in Alexandria in the third century BC. Apollonius' version includes many of the incidents, characters and monsters found in the film (albeit in different forms), including Talos the Man of Bronze, the Harpies, and Aeëtes' earth-born warriors. The film also drew inspiration from another source, Pindar's *Fourth Pythian Ode* in having Pelias usurp the throne from Jason's father Aeson. Another incident in the same sequence adapts a story from other myth collections (most notably the so-called *Library of Apollodorus* and Diodorus Siculus), in which Pelias murders Jason's family. The film presents this episode early in the film, with Jason's young sisters as the victims. This alteration establishes the moral schema for the film, with Pelias an uncontentious villain from the start for a modern family audience, as the murderer of a young girl and baby.

Although his poem remains the major source for the film, Apollonius' portrayal of heroism is far from the classical Hollywood norm. His Jason is a famously 'helpless' hero, who relies on the other Argonauts and (strikingly) the magic of the Colchian princess Medea. She helps him achieve the tasks her father Aeëtes sets him, and overcome the serpent that guards the fleece. In the film, Jason and Medea adopt more conventional attributes for adventure film hero and heroine. Jason is resourceful and brave, and a natural leader of the Argonauts. Medea is highly decorative (a key sequence has her performing an erotically-charged temple dance, covered in gold paint), has to be rescued from the sea by Jason, and gets herself shot trying to save her man. More interesting is the film's portrayal of Hercules, played by the theatrical actor Nigel Green. Harryhausen has stated that he wished to distance his retelling of Greek myth from those produced in the peplum films. For this reason, the film eschews the typical bodybuilder Hercules. Green's Hercules is quite different from these. He is bulky rather than muscled, greying, and clearly older than the peplum hero. He enters the narrative arrogant and reckless, and leaves it (after provoking a sequence of events which prove personally catastrophic) thoughtful and grave. This is a Hercules clearly more complex than the

often one-dimensional peplum heroes and, in his flaws, closer to the Heracles of ancient Greek myth.

A brief survey of other films that include Jason illustrates how anticipated audiences can dictate what is included and omitted from the mythological variants. *Jason and the Argonauts'* commitment to family values is brought into relief through comparison with these other versions. The 1958 *Hercules* (discussed in Chapter 3) showed parts of Jason's quest in its narrative, explicitly crediting Apollonius as a scriptwriter. To cater for its slightly more mature audience, it included an extended scene involving the Argonauts' seduction by the Amazonian women, a scene entirely omitted in *Jason and the Argonauts*. Similarly, another film retelling, Pasolini's *Medea* (1969), played to an adult arthouse audience, so was able to present even more explicit sexual and violent scenes. These included the episode where Medea murders her own brother to delay her father's pursuit. The 2000 television film *Jason and the Argonauts* added contemporary references for its multi-cultural, post-feminist audience with a black Orpheus (perhaps referencing the 1959 film *Orfeu Negro*), Atalanta as a female Argonaut, and an implied incestuous relationship between Medea and her brother Apsyrtos.

As we can see, there is a fair degree of flexibility in the Jason myth and this flexibility enabled the narrative in the 1963 film to be restructured around Harryhausen's special effects sequences. These sequences allowed Harryhausen to promote his vision of ancient Greece as a realistic world inhabited by magical creatures. However, they also had the effect of prioritising a reading of *Jason* in film criticism and fan writings as a vehicle for showcasing animation and special effects. The disadvantage here is that reading the film simply as a spectacular visual and technical achievement diverts attention from its highly sophisticated narrative. This narrative was first sketched out, in conjunction with Harryhausen and Schneer, by Jan Read (whose previous scriptwriting credits included an adaptation of Tennessee Williams' play, *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone*), and developed by Beverley Cross (a successful dramatist who had won awards for his adaptation of H.G. Wells' *Kipps* as the musical *Half A Sixpence*). It is a mistake to underplay the narrative in this film as it offers, amongst other elements, an intelligent and complex discussion of the relationship between men and the gods – a genuine cine-mythography.

We first encounter the film's desire to explore the relationship between the mortal and divine early in the film when Jason declares to Hermes that he does not believe in the gods. Hermes then transports Jason to Olympus 'so that you will believe', but as Jason's encounter with Zeus and Hera unfolds, it is the gods' intentions towards humanity that appear more in question and Jason seems right in his doubts. Jason's wavering 'belief' is not about the existence of gods, but whether they are benevolent protectors of mankind, or callous chess-players with men as their pawns, fit only for sacrifice. Intriguingly, this theological question is one to which Harry-

hausen could especially relate. In the documentary film *The Harryhausen Chronicles*, Harryhausen compared the role of the animator with the ancient gods:

> [the animator is] putting on screen images that appear to be alive, and you're controlling exactly what they do, and that's why this concept in Greek mythology appealed to me so much – that the gods were manipulating humanity.

Thus Harryhausen makes the identification between the intra-cinematic relationship between the gods and men, and the extra-cinematic relationship between the animator and his models. If myth is, as has been argued, always ultimately about the relationship between man and the gods, who better to understand that relationship than the animator, who regularly invents, directs, and enacts the 'life' of his models?

The other factor that drove this project was Harryhausen's self-declared missionary zeal to restore the place of fantasy in a cinema he saw as becoming obsessed with anti-heroes and the mundane. In finding a place for fantasy, he was particularly keen to distinguish his cinematic Greece from peplum films which he noted 'seldom visualised mythology from the purely fantasy point of view' (Harryhausen 1972: 85.) In 1963, these were beginning to run out of creative steam with increasingly absurd hybrids like *Hercules Against the Mongols*. However, there were other reasons Harryhausen may have wished to distance Jason from the Italian genre. The pepla's association with B-movie values, both in their low budget production quality and their focus on eroticism and (often sadistic) violence was similar to the monster movies Harryhausen had worked on in the 1950s. This was not likely to attract the more mainstream family audience which had made *Sinbad* an international success. Besides profit though, there was also the matter of principle. The fantastic elements of the pepla were firmly situated in their heroes' implausible, but still undeniably human, muscled bodies while the gods, creatures and monsters of myth were largely ignored. For Harryhausen, fantastic cinema was about escapism rather than aspiration: 90 minutes of suspending disbelief in the idea that giant gorillas could threaten New York, or that gods and winged creatures existed on the earth.

Harryhausen may have wanted to distinguish his film from peplum cinema, but studio publicists had other ideas. Both spectacle and eroticism – the standard clichés of pepla – were prominent in publicity for the film, and this undeniably had an effect on how critics reacted to it. *Jason and the Argonauts* was marketed to potential viewers primarily as an action adventure film rather than a fantasy. We see this most clearly in the pressbooks for the UK release. These pressbooks were published by United Artists and offered ready-made articles for inclusion in film fan magazines and local newspapers. Written editorial pieces here stressed the film's

adventure aspects and its exotic locations. Cinema managers were advised that '*Jason and the Argonauts* is based on one of the world's great tales of adventure, and a major part of your promotion of the picture should be based on this angle'. And, as has already been mentioned, articles noted the involvement of the actors in previous adventure films, and drew an extra-cinematic parallel between Todd Armstrong's US military training and his role as ancient Greek warrior. Additionally, the standard 'authenticity' ploy in promoting cine-antiquity was not overlooked. So Schneer's travels around Europe to seek out authentic locations ('places believed to have been described by the soothsayers of ancient Greece') are duly noted and much is made of the fact that the Harpies sequence is actually filmed in the remains of a Greek temple in Paestum in Sicily.

While the fantastic creatures were overlooked in written editorials, they do find their place in the visual publicity for the film. But again we notice that the publicity can't make up its mind whether this film is a type of peplum film or something else. Talos, the man of Bronze, one of Harryhausen's most distinctive fantastic creations might appear in the background of the film poster, but the insert pictures all show action shots more reminiscent of peplum films, such as Jason rescuing the helpless Medea and leading the Argonauts into battle. We notice a similar ambivalence in the lobby cards for the film. All the famous Harryhausen creations are there (Talos, the Harpies, the Hydra, Triton holding back the Clashing Rocks, and the skeleton warriors), but they are joined by images such as a gold-painted Medea from the dance sequence – a scene straight out of classic peplum cinema. Even the theatrical trailer refuses to escape from peplum conventions so while it includes most of Harryhausen's animated sequences, it also can't resist a reference to Medea as 'the temple dancer – mysterious, exciting – and exotic'. Most interesting is the inclusion in the trailer of the end of the battle with the skeleton warriors, showing Jason escaping by jumping off a cliff into the sea. As a strategy for promoting a narrative this is akin to printing the last page of a novel; it's a literal cliffhanger. It also confirms the primacy of spectacle over narrative, at least in the eyes of studio publicists.

On its original release, the film failed to achieve the success enjoyed by *Sinbad,* performing well in the UK (in the top ten box-office successes of the year), but less well in the US. Press reviews were varied. *Variety* (5/6/1963) picked up on the family viewing angle, noting its 'moppet appeal', and calling it 'a sure delight for the kiddies and a diverting spectacle for adults with a taste for fantasy and adventure'. The British *Monthly Film Bulletin* (Sept. 1963) described it as 'fun', though 'enjoyable more for its special effects than any directorial flair,' and located it in the tradition of 'Méliès and Flash Gordon'. However *The New York Times* (8/8/1963) was less complimentary, grudgingly concluding that 'this absurd unwieldy adventure ... is no worse, but certainly no better, than most of its kind', suggesting the feared comparison with the pepla may have

indeed had a negative effect. Despite this unenthusiastic reception on release, the film has since gained iconic status as well as the great affection of many. It was given a theatrical re-release in 1978, and it is a constant presence on television schedules, often being shown on satellite television on the Sci-Fi Channel (fantasy providing the link here between mythology and science-fiction). Through such widespread and continuous exhibition, *Jason and the Argonauts* has become one of the best-known and most popular films inspired by the ancient world. In 1991 when Ray Harryhausen received his Oscar for Lifetime Achievement, the actor Tom Hanks told the audience, 'Everybody thinks that *Citizen Kane* was the greatest movie ever made. But if you were young in 1963, you know the real answer is *Jason and the Argonauts*.'

Plot summary

The film opens with Pelias' (Douglas Wilmer) attack on Thessaly, in which he murders Jason's father Aristo and incurs the wrath of Hera by killing Aristo's daughter Briseis in the goddess's temple where she has sought sanctuary. Hera (Honor Blackman) decides to help the then-infant Jason to regain the throne.

Returning as a grown man, Jason (Todd Armstrong) declares his intention to travel to far-off Colchis to find the Golden Fleece, and prove to the people of Thessaly that 'the gods have not deserted them'. However, Jason has his own doubts about the gods and their intentions towards humans, as he tells the seer in the ruined temple of Hermes. The seer (Michael Gwynn) is revealed to be Hermes himself, and transports Jason to Olympus where Hera tells him that she will help him in his quest, despite the opposition of Zeus (Niall McGinnis). In order to retrieve the fleece, Jason challenges the shipbuilders of Greece to construct the finest boat ever made. To crew it, he holds an athletic competition to select the finest and strongest sailors. Those successful in the competition for a berth on the Argo (the boat is named after its maker Argos) include Hercules (Nigel Green) and Pelias' son Acastus (Gary Raymond), sent by his father to sabotage the mission.

Hera guides them to the Isle of Bronze where Hercules angers Talos, the island's Man of Bronze, who destroys the ship before Jason defeats him. But Hercules' protégé Hylas (John Cairney) is lost in the struggle and Hercules decides to stay on the island. The Argonauts, provoked by Acastus, threaten to revolt but are placated by the appearance of Hera who tells them to sail to Phrygia. Here they find the blind seer Phineas (Patrick Troughton) being tormented by the Harpies. The Argonauts capture and imprison the Harpies, and in return Phineas directs them to Colchis, giving Jason a talisman of the god Triton as a token of gratitude.

At the Clashing Rocks, they are threatened with shipwreck, but when Argos tells him to pray, Jason declares his lack of belief in the gods and

casts the talisman into the sea. The god Triton emerges and holds the Rocks apart for the ship to pass through. Safely reaching the other side, they rescue a survivor of a previous wreck, the priestess Medea (Nancy Kovack), who sails with them to Colchis. Before they arrive, Jason and Acastus fight and Acastus disappears overboard. Reaching land at Colchis, Jason goes alone to visit its king Aeëtes, who invites the Argonauts to a feast, but then imprisons them. It emerges that Acastus has reached Aeëtes first and persuaded him that Jason is planning to attack. Medea helps them to escape and takes Jason to the Fleece where he kills the Hydra guarding it. However Aeëtes collects the Hydra's teeth, and sows them in a field where they emerge from the earth as skeleton warriors. In the battle that ensues, two of the Argonauts are killed but Jason escapes and is reunited on the Argo with Medea who joins them for the journey home.

Key scenes and themes

Myth into fantasy

The model animator Barry Purves explained the difference between Computer Generated (CG) animation and model animation: 'CG is good for making the fantastic seem real, whereas puppets are more suited for making the fantastic seem credible, which is not the same at all' (Purves 1998). In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Harryhausen uses model animations to persuade his audiences to believe in ancient Greece as a natural location for fantasy. Our introduction to this fantastic 'reality' is found in the Argonauts' first halt at the Isle of Bronze, where they encounter Talos, the Man of Bronze. There are two further creatures borrowed from myth to fuel the fantasy agenda in *Jason and the Argonauts*, the Harpies and the Hydra. In all three cases, Harryhausen adapts and revises the mythological versions to suit his animating techniques and the demands of the narrative.

For example, just as in myth, the Harpies appear in the film as Phineas' tormentors. However, the scaly blue skin and webbed bat-like wings of the cinematic Harpies contrast dramatically with the bird-like feathered wings seen in ancient vase paintings of these mythical creatures. Harryhausen's Harpies appear more like aliens than mythical creatures. They seem to have come straight out of science-fiction. In fact a test reel made by Harryhausen for an earlier unrealised film project called *The Elementals* in which 'giant humanoid bat-creatures' invade Paris shows strikingly similar figures, suggesting that an earlier model may have been 'recycled' for this retelling. In contrast, the film's representation of the Hydra as a many-headed snake-like guardian is true to classical depiction, but not true to standard mythic accounts, where it occurs, not in the Jason cycle of myths, but as the object of one of Hercules' Labours.

In the case of Talos, Harryhausen takes the mythological character and adds popular signifiers for ancient Greece and elements from science fiction to create the Man of Bronze. In Apollonius' version of the myth, Talos is the watchman of Crete, who tries to prevent the Argonauts from landing on the island. In the film, he is one of a group of giant statues forged by the gods, who comes to life to seek vengeance for a blasphemous theft by Hercules.

Talos, Man of Bronze

Hunting for food, Hercules and his protégé Hylas arrive at a valley of bronze statues on plinths and, inside one plinth, discover the treasure house of the gods. Despite Jason's warning that the Argonauts should take nothing from the island but food and water, Hercules helps himself to a giant brooch pin to use as a spear. He and Hylas start to leave, but run when they hear an eerie metallic creaking as the bronze statue begins to move. Seeking vengeance for the blasphemous crime, the statue first chases the pair, then attacks the rest of the Argonauts who flee to the ship and try to leave the island. Their way is blocked by Talos standing astride the harbour. The ship is wrecked, and Jason calls on Hera for help. She tells him about Talos' weak spot – the plug at his heel. The Argonauts manoeuvre Talos into position, and Jason unscrews the plug, venting Talos' lifeblood of molten metal into the sand. As Talos falls, he takes one final victim – Hercules' protégé Hylas, crushed beneath his huge body.

Talos is one of the best remembered features of *Jason and the Argonauts* [Fig. 12]. His imagery is an interesting confection of Greek and science-fiction iconography. On posters for the film, he is shown in poses that utilise two key cultural signifiers for ancient Greece. The first is his distinctive helmet. The crested helmet is one of the most commonly deployed props in films set in Greece. The silhouette of Talos' crested helm recalls publicity for other films set in Greece including *Alexander the Great* (1955) and *The 300 Spartans* (1962). The other signifier is even more potent. As the Argonauts attempt to flee the island, Talos is shown striding the harbour entrance in a reprise of popular ideas about the Colossus of Rhodes, a figure specifically mentioned by Harryhausen as an inspiration for the scene. The Colossus also influences the size of Talos, over 100 feet high onscreen. In case the significance of the pose was not clear, the identification was reiterated in the tagline that often accompanied promotional shots of Talos: 'The Epic Story That Was Destined To Stand As A Colossus Of Adventure'. Finally, as a piece of statuary, Talos represents the remnants of antiquity most familiar to popular audiences from museums, ruins and public architecture.

There is a second set of signifiers attached to Talos, this time more modern, and situating the film in a secondary discourse of cinematic science fiction and fantasy. Talos' metal construction recalls that modern marvel (and threat), the robot: the identification supported by the creak-

12. Talos the Colossus. On the Isle of Bronze, *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963).

ing sound effects and its jerky stop-motion movement – described by Harryhausen as 'deliberately stiff and mechanical' (Harryhausen 1972: 90). Its mask-like face and sightless eyes are a standard conceit in the science-fiction of the time, denoting inhumanity. Anxieties about robots arise from the idea that we might lose control over the technology we create; that the machines might turn out to be superior. This contemporary fear is enacted in Talos' attack on the Argonauts – but at the same time it also draws us back to antiquity. The statue's literal 'animation' gives notice to the viewer that they are now in a magical land where the remnants of the ancient world may come to life. Unpicking the significations of Talos we can see the richness of Harryhausen's creation and also appreciate that these fantasy figures do not come from a vacuum, but are the product of a number of conscious decisions by the animator to produce a multi-layered result.

Fantasy into myth

The last of Harryhausen's animated creatures are perhaps also his best-known: the skeleton warriors. Appearing at the climax of the film for a battle with Jason and two of the Argonauts, the skeleton warriors are a fantastic import, replacing the Earth-born men of the myth. The sequence

> **Battling the skeleton warriors**
> Having killed its guardian the Hydra, Jason, Medea and the Argonauts are escaping with the fleece when they are cornered by Aeëtes and his men. Aeëtes sows the teeth of the dead Hydra, and skeleton warriors sprout from the ground, attacking Jason and his crew. Sending Medea, Argos and most of the Argonauts back to the ship, Jason and two companions battle the skeleton warriors amid temple ruins [Fig. 13]. While his companions fall to their opponents, Jason escapes by leaping from a cliff into the water, followed, lemming-like, by the skeletons.
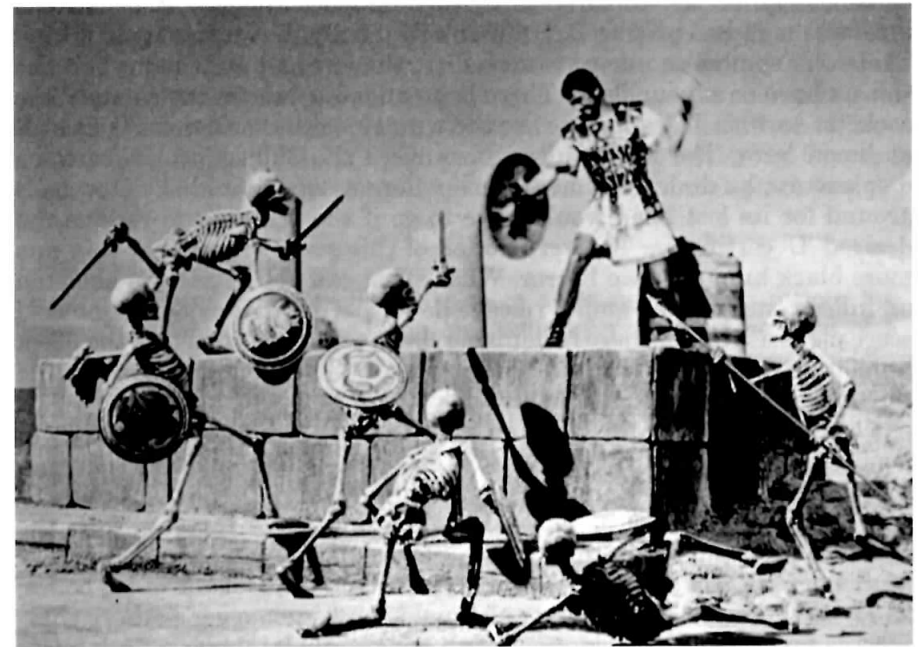
13. Battling the skeleton warriors. Jason in Colchis, *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963).

has become so well-known that it has spawned its own 'mythology' about the time taken to produce the animation, while the iconography of the skeleton warrior has been successfully reproduced in a variety of popular cultural texts.

Much has been made of the labour and time taken to produce the sequence: four and a half months for four and a half minutes of film, with Harryhausen single-handedly animating seven individual models and integrating them in fight scenes with live actors. However, the skeleton warriors are (like the Harpies) actually an example of Harryhausen's economical practice of importing creatures from other narratives: the original skeleton warrior was created for *Sinbad*. One great advantage a

skeleton has for stop-motion animation is its paucity of expression. Animating expressions on seven individual models would have been an additional burden on Harryhausen's animating skills. Even so, the animation is so persuasive it is impossible not to see them seeming to wear the most ghoulish of grins.

If the Harpies introduced a science fiction element into mythology, the skeleton warriors are rather creatures of horror films. For the viewer, an animated skeleton produces all sorts of anxieties about human mortality. Like the homicidal bronze statue Talos, it is an apparently lifeless object, turning against us, the living. In this instance though, it is not the artefacts man has produced, but man's own body that turns against him. Skeletons symbolise our own mortality: they are what is left when the worms have eaten our flesh. There is an added horror in their empty eye sockets. As with Talos, if eyes are the window to the soul, there is no soul at home here. The skeleton warriors were the subject of the censor's displeasure; he declared that a scene where a decapitated skeleton feels around for its lost head would have to go if the film was to receive the desired 'U' certificate. The very notion of this scene shows that this was more black humour than horror. What effect can decapitating a skeleton or, indeed, stabbing an empty ribcage have? Bernard Herrmann's musical score plays a vital role here in defusing the horror and promoting the black humour of this scene, with staccato strings, brass and percussion echoing the *danse macabre* enacted on screen.

The iconography of the skeleton warrior has retained its popularity in popular culture, featuring in various texts since Harryhausen's sequence first appeared. In Sam Raimi's *Army of Darkness* (1992), the black humour and apt musical score of *Jason* is taken one stage further, with the skeleton army marching into battle playing composer Danny Elfman's *March of the Dead* on drums made of skulls and flutes made of leg bones. In *Terminator* (1984), the horror of Arnold Schwarzenegger's cyborg character is revealed as he strides out of an apparently fatal blaze, flesh burnt away: a skeleton warrior indeed. There was even a children's cartoon series for television, *The Skeleton Warriors*, which screened in the USA from 1993-94. Like many other elements of films inspired by the ancient world, the skeleton warriors have more recently also made the crossover into gaming, appearing in the *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing games, and in video games including *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo). For many consumers of popular culture, one of the least authentic features of Harryhausen's retelling of the Jason myths is also the best-known.

Man and the gods

Although critical and audience attention has largely focused on Harryhausen's model creatures, the film also includes other special effects, sometimes using live actors. Many of these are used to show man's interactions with the Olympians. Putting the gods onscreen means wrestling with some key iconographic issues. What should the gods look like? How do they communicate with mortal men? In the film, Harryhausen offers a number of solutions. On the occasions when gods openly appear to men, they are shown as men made huge. For instance, when Hermes first appears to Jason, and again when he meets Zeus and Hera in Olympus, or when Triton appears to hold apart the Clashing Rocks, scale indicates divinity. At other times when they appear in the mortal world, gods are in religion-related disguise: Hera appears to Pelias as a temple priestess, while Hermes opens the film's narrative as Pelias' seer, reading the omens before his attack on Thessaly. The third, and perhaps most interesting solution proposes a scheme of symbolic exchange between the Olympians and men. In the mortal world, the gods are represented by inanimate cult objects: the temple statue of Hera, the bronzes on the Isle of Bronze, Hera as ship's figurehead [Fig. 14], Phineas' talisman of Triton. In Olympus though, the situation is reversed – gods appear like mortals, men are clay figurines.

Jason visits Olympus

Having declared to Pelias his intention to seek the fleece to restore the people's belief in the gods, Jason meets the king's seer in the ruins of a temple, in which he recognises one of the fallen statues as Hermes. He tells the seer that he does not believe in the gods, upon which the seer grows in size and reveals his true identity as the messenger god Hermes. Hermes transports Jason to Olympus, where Zeus and Hera are moving pieces on a game board. Zeus mocks Jason to the other Olympians and challenges his self-reliance, saying that 'no man calls upon the gods unless he wants something.' However, Jason refuses his assistance, though he accepts Hera's offer of help, limited to five times.

There is an obvious contrast here between the ruined temple – the home of the gods in the mortal world – and the perfection of Olympus. The fallen statues stand as a metaphor for man's loss of belief, while Olympus is conservatively portrayed as a pillared marble temple set in the clouds, all in white and gold. In this scene, as in many others in the film, associations are created by appropriate use of sound design: the home of the Greek gods connotes notions of a Christian heaven by the use of harp music and triumphal organ chords during Jason's transit with Hermes. The game of strategy played by Zeus and Hera, in which heroes, monsters, and a model Argo are moved around a board like chess pieces, provides a powerful metaphor for the gods' power over the lives of men. The metaphor has an important cinematic afterlife in fantasy films with the imagery reused in *Clash of the Titans* (1981 and 2010), and Disney's *Hercules* (1997).

The importance of the gods to the narrative is confirmed by their structural position in the film. Gods form a frame for the film's narrative: the opening shot is of Hermes disguised as the seer, reading the portents

14. Man shapes the gods. The shipyard at Thebes,
Jason and the Argonauts (1963).

for Pelias' invasion; the film closes on Zeus' ominous declaration: 'I have not finished with Jason.' Theology is central to this film. The language of belief suffuses the dialogue. The film constantly seeks to calibrate the relationship between god and man. It is a complex relationship. On the one hand, the absolute power of the gods is shown through the chessboard. On the other hand, the belief of man seems crucial to the gods' existence. Zeus, for all his omnipotence, seems curiously concerned about what mortals think of him. Hera explains his concern when she remarks to Zeus that he is 'the god of many men. Yet when those men no longer believe in you, then you will return to nothing.' In offering this novel, and distinctly un-classical, formulation, the film ventures into new territory. By giving a degree of agency and power to man, it solves the problem of how men can be held responsible for their actions. At the same time, it provides a motive for the intrusion of the supernatural into the mortal realm; the gods need to appear because they need men to continue to believe. It is only with such a theological superstructure that a film like *Jason and the Argonauts* can work. Few films theorise the fantastic as explicitly as *Jason and the Argonauts* and the film is all the stronger for it.

There is a second point to this discussion of the lives and motivations of the gods. As we have seen, the gods also work meta-cinematically as a metaphor for the animator. As the controlling influence on the film, Harryhausen might be read as playing out the role of Hermes who, as the first onscreen character, is structurally identified as our primary point of contact with the divine. The messenger god Hermes is the conduit between mortal and immortal worlds, just as Harryhausen negotiates the bridge between reality and fantasy, live action and animation. As the animator transports his audience to a land of magical fantasy, his apotheosis Hermes delivers Jason to the home of the gods. Most tellingly, Hermes describes himself in the film as a 'bringer of dreams', a phrase that alludes to Harryhausen's own description of animation as something that 'creates the illusion of a dream' (Wells 2002: 96). Thus, as Hermes transports Jason to Olympus so that he will believe, Harryhausen asks the cinema audience to abandon their taste for reality and the mundane, and believe for a while in fantasy: in gods, heroes and monsters. When Hera warns Zeus that he will be finished if people stop believing in him, it is not hard to see the anxiety that must attend every animator or producer of special effects.

Suggested further viewing

Hercules in New York (dir. Seidelman, 1970)
The film opens in an Olympus oddly conceived as a formal (and quite suburban) English rose garden with clipped box hedging, utterly different from Harryhausen's grandiose vision in *Jason and the Argonauts* or *Clash of the Titans*. Hercules (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is bored in Olympus, and following a father-teenage son argument about this, Zeus accidentally casts him down to Earth. Here he is befriended by a New York pretzel seller (Arnold Stang), becomes a celebrity through his prowess at wrestling, courts a professor's daughter and gets involved with the mob, before returning to Olympus.

Schwarzenegger's movie debut saw him following in the footsteps of his own bodybuilder heroes, Steve Reeves and Reg Park, in playing Hercules. The contemporary New York setting took the anachronisms of the later peplum films (see Chapter 3 for a brief survey) to their logical extreme. The film is now viewed mainly for the novelty value of Schwarzenegger's first film performance. Already a champion bodybuilder, Arnie had no previous acting experience, and retained a dense Austrian accent, revealed in the recent original voicetrack DVD releases of the film (in the theatrical release, his voice was dubbed throughout). In fact the film was produced as a vehicle for Stang, a bespectacled New York Jewish comedian. Schwarzenegger was cast as his physical opposite, and punningly renamed 'Arnold Strong' in the credits. Despite its low-budget aesthetics, it often does a good job of subverting the conventions of Hercules films. For instance, in many of the films, Hercules is first found by water; in this

subverted version he is *in* the water, dredged up by a fishing boat out of New York harbour. Other subverted conventions include javelin-throwing, a wonderfully staged chariot race (Arnie drives a hot dog stand), and a 'Labour' in which Hercules defeats a wild beast in combat – a man in a bear suit in Central Park.

Clash of the Titans (dir. Davis, 1981)
Perseus (Harry Hamlyn) falls in love with the beautiful princess Andromeda (Judi Bowker), and succeeds in winning her hand. However, she has been promised to the monstrous Calibos, son of the goddess Thetis. In revenge, Thetis declares that Andromeda must be sacrificed to the Kraken. On the advice of the Stygian witches, Perseus seeks out and kills the Gorgon Medusa, and uses her fatal gaze to destroy the sea-monster.

Another of Harryhausen and Schneer's productions, *Clash of the Titans* appeared almost twenty years after *Jason and the Argonauts*. Its style owes more to the fairytale narratives of the two Sinbad films that immediately preceded it, with fantasy the driving force and anachronistic (for ancient myth) themes of forgiveness, pity and mercy. Elements of the myth cycle are thoroughly reorganised to serve the romantic quest narrative, and (as with *Jason*) to showcase the special effects. For instance, rather than using the winged sandals of myth, Perseus travels on the winged horse Pegasus in his quest to slay Medusa, although in myth Pegasus appears only after Medusa's death, when he is born from her corpse. Other special effects include a helmet of invisibility, a mechanical owl (Bubo), a two-headed dog (Dioskilos), and the sea-monster Kraken (imported from Scandinavian myths). Most impressive is Medusa, with her serpentine body and animated snake-hair. Rather than the discrete sequences of *Jason*, some of the animated elements and effects appear for extended periods. The complexity of this animation meant that Harryhausen could not accomplish it alone. Instead, a team worked on the special effects. The film is aimed at a more adult audience than *Jason*, with partial nudity, failed suitors burnt alive, and a cruel and merciless Zeus played by the renowned British theatrical actor, Laurence Olivier. Other distinguished casting for the gods included Claire Bloom as Hera, Ursula Andress as Aphrodite and Maggie Smith (wife of the scriptwriter Beverley Cross) as Thetis.

Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief (dir. Colombus, 2010)
Percy Jackson (Logan Lerman), a 17-year-old living in modern-day America, discovers that he is in fact the son of the Olympian god Poseidon (Kevin McKidd), and finds himself accused of stealing Zeus' lightning bolt. With his best friend Grover (Brandon T. Jackson) who turns out to be a satyr, he is taken to Camp Half-Blood, a training camp for demi-gods, and meets Annabeth (Alexandra Daddario) daughter of Athena and Luke (Jake Abel) son of Hermes. With Annabeth and Grover, Percy embarks on

a quest to rescue his mother Sally from the Underworld. However when they meet with Hades (Steve Coogan), he reveals that Luke is the lightning thief, and a battle between Luke and Percy ensues. Percy triumphs and returns the lightning bolt to Zeus (Sean Bean) before returning to the camp.

The film was adapted from Rick Riordan's novel for young adults, *The Lightning Thief*. Riordan wrote the story for his own son who had been diagnosed with dyslexia and Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder. The book's hero, Percy, is also dyslexic, the suggestion being that there is a supernatural and heroic reason why he perceives the world differently. Percy stands for Perseus, and aspects of the relevant myths are incorporated, including the beheading of Medusa. The film was widely read by reviewers as an alternative Harry Potter (especially as the director Chris Columbus had also directed the first Potter films), and some of the interrelationships between generations certainly play out similarly, with the gods often as disparaging of mortals as Voldemort's followers were of Muggles. Unlike the gods in *Jason* though, these Olympians generally stay away from manipulating events in the mortal realm. Gods and mortals alike are portrayed as flawed, with the suggestion that the future lies in the hands of the young demi-gods, who may (or may not) combine the best of both worlds.

Notes

6. Myth and the Fantastic: *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963)

Jason and the Argonauts on film: Elley (1984): 60; Solomon (2001a): 113-15; Nisbet (2006): 61-2; Wells (2002): 53-4; Jackson and Harryhausen (2005): 96-115; Harryhausen and Dalton (2003): 149-74; Harryhausen (1972): 85-91; Rickitt (2006): 190. On the difference between CGI and model animation: Purves (1998).
Myth on film: Elley (1984): 52-66; Solomon (2001a): 101-31; Winkler (2007a): 43-68.
Fantasy films: Fowkes (2010); Butler (2009). The fantastic in literature: Todorov (1975).
Georges Méliès: Ezra (2000).
Gods on film: Winkler (2009b): 70-121; Shahabudin (2007): 114-16.
Special effects and animation: North (2008); Rickitt (2006); Wells (1998) and (2002): 1-29.
Ray Harryhausen – career and films: Harryhausen and Dalton (2004): esp. 286-7 (Harryhausen and ancient myth); Harryhausen (1972): 85 (Harryhausen on peplum films), 141 (on fantasy); Harryhausen et al. (2006): 96-127; Wells (2002): 90-101.
Primary sources for Jason and the Argonauts: Apollonius, *Argonautica*; Pindar, *Fourth Pythian Ode*; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.9.16-28; Diodorus Siculus 4.40-52.
Medea on film: Christie (2000): 144-65; McDonald (1983): 3-88; MacKinnon (1986): 146-54, 156-60.

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