

WILLIAM H. RACE, (ed., trans.), Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*. Loeb Classical Library 1, Cambridge, Mass. - London: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. xxxii + 511, ISBN 9780674996304.

“It is useless, then, to read Greek in translations. Translators can but offer us a vague equivalent.” This is the conclusion to which Virginia Woolf is led in her essay “On not knowing Greek”, thus acknowledging that ancient Greek literature and all its formal characteristics cannot be communicated in a language other than that of the original. Apollonius’ Rhodius *Argonautica* is a case that clearly proves this point: erudite style, elaborate diction, lexical rarities, Homeric language, a wealth of *glossai*, and all these combined in a poem that aspires to be an epic on a grand scale and a neoteric poem at the same time, render the *Argonautica* almost untranslatable.

Yet, many scholars specializing in the study of Hellenistic poetry, have relished the challenge of translating the *Argonautica*. Among them Barbara Hughes Fowler has translated a good part of the *Argonautica* in her 1990 Anthology of Hellenistic poetry, a book in the same spirit with her study on Hellenistic aesthetic published in 1989 (both by the University of Wisconsin Press); Richard Hunter has met the same challenge in 1993 by offering a modern translation for the pocket-sized Oxford World’s Classics, yet confessing the difficulty by stating that “the *Argonautica* was never an easy read”;¹ Peter Green has attempted to give his own poetic version of Apollonius’ epic in his 1997 edition (with detailed commentary) published by the University of California Press.²

The translation under review comes from an equally distinguished scholar, an expert on the style and rhetoric of Greek and Latin literature and an experienced translator of ancient poetry (he has also translated Pindar in two volumes for Loeb Classical Library in 1997), William H. Race. In accordance with the Loeb standards, the volume is comprised of a brief introduction, basic bibliography and a list of manuscripts, the original text and the translation,

1 R. Hunter, *Apollonius of Rhodes. Jason and the Golden Fleece*, Oxford 1993, v (*Preface*), who furthermore remarks that: “The *Argonautica* is a difficult poem: the Greek is often obscure, and understanding the poem’s aesthetic framework and meaning requires coming to terms with poetic traditions which are alien (and some times alienating) to many modern readers.”

2 On which see the very enthusiastic review by James Clauss in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (1998.12.09). Green’s translation was released also as an audio edition by Highbridge in 1996.

explanatory notes and an apparatus criticus with variants on the Greek text, and an Index of names. A welcome addition to the *Argonautica* is also the translation of Apollonius' extant fragments after the text of J.U. Powell *Collectanea Alexandrina*—the fact that the translation of the fragments is not mentioned on the front cover is a notable omission on the part of the editor.

The volume is intended to replace the 1912 translation of the *Argonautica* by R.C. Seaton in the Loeb series, as indicated by the symbolic marking of Race's volume as nr.1(!) of the Loeb Classical Library. Thus, a vague comparison between the two editions, that of Seaton and that of Race, is inevitable.³ For example, a very useful addition by Race are the 5 maps which graphically represent the route of the Argonauts, whereas Seaton has none.⁴ Both offer summaries of the content of each book: Seaton is more detailed and places ca. 1 page with a description of all major episodes at the beginning of each book, whereas Race provides a much briefer yet comprehensive 'Plot Outline' for the entire epic. A notable difference is that Race frequently enriches the text with footnotes that contain brief mythological and textual comments, and, more originally than any of the other translators, he systematically explains his translatorial choices—I will return to this shortly.

The original text follows Vian, although Race carefully notes variants, either found in the manuscript tradition or proposed by other editors. For example, in 1.712 Vian adopts Fränkel's emendation ἴη ἴε instead of ἰήιε in the MSS. Race restores the word in the text as Ἰήιε, an epithet of Apollo, by explaining (p. 171 n. 63) "The MSS' ἰήιε is the common invocation of Apollo expressing the ritual shout 'iê, iê.' Fränkel's emendation (ἴη ἴε) would emphasize its supposed etymology: 'shoot, shoot.'" "For all the variants that give an alternative, yet reasonable, meaning, Race provides both translations. Thus, when in 3.294, in the famous simile about the woman of toil that lights the fire at home, Race adopts the reading ἐζομένη and translates "...so as to furnish light under the roof at night as she *sits* close by...", he notes that for the reading ἐγρομένη the translation would have been "...when she *awakes* very early...". Examples that show Race's intention to comment on detail about his choices in the text may easily be multiplied.

3 A similar method, but on a large-scale, is applied by Thomas Hubbard in his review of William Race's Pindar in the Loeb series which is constantly compared to the older translation of Pindar by Sir John Sandys published in the same series in 1915 (in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 97.7.29).

4 The maps in Race's edition are labelled as follows: 1. The Voyage of the Argo, 2. The Mustering, Departure, and Return, 3. The Propontis, 4. The Black Sea and 5. The Adriatic. A nice addition is also the genealogical chart of Jason's ancestors.

But what merits special consideration is the style of Race's new translation. Instead of using Seaton's Victorian English (outdated though it may sound) which helps the reader sense the distance between everyday language and the elevated, learned style of Apollonius' epic, Race does exactly the opposite: he gives a modern, smooth, fluent English prose translation.⁵ In the *Preface* he frankly admits (p. viii): "The translation aims at clarity and attempts to follow the word order of the Greek as faithfully as proper English will allow...My goal is always to let the translation show how I am constructing the Greek"—at the expense, of course, of a more 'poetical' reconstruction of the original.⁶ Race's strategy (and/or Loeb's editorial practice) is very clear: he aims at providing students or scholars with a word for word guide to Apollonius' *Argonautica*.

This strategy has obvious advantages. The English text is accurate and reliable to such an extent that it may help those unfamiliar with epic Greek to approach (and appreciate) the original; it is a valuable tool in the hands of those studying Apollonius; it allows the expert to catch a glimpse into the translator's laboratory, especially through the recurrent explanatory notes on controversial passages. Indeed, Race engages the reader in conversation about doubtful choices; for example, he notes in regard to ἄγκειμαι in verse 2.628 which he renders as 'I am given over to...' that (p.163 n.52) "other translations are 'I am wrapped in' (Seaton) and 'I have laid on me as a burden' (Mooney)."

Before closing, I would like to give a small sample to illustrate Race's style. The passage derives from the end of Book 4, when the Argonauts are immersed into an extremely dark night (the so-called κατουλάς). This is how Race translates verses 1694-1700: "But suddenly, as they were hastening over the wide Cretan sea, the kind of night men call "the shroud" held them in terror. No stars penetrated that deadly night, nor beams of the moon, but from the sky came black chaos or some other kind of darkness arising from the deepest depths. They themselves had not the slightest idea whether they were drifting in Hades or on the waters". In translating the same passage, Seaton is old-fashioned: the night is 'fatal', darkness 'rises from the nethermost depths' and the confused heroes 'knew not one whit'.

⁵ The same effect is felt in Race's 1997 translation of Pindar for the Loeb Classical Library. As Thomas Hubbard (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 97.7.29) has remarked on that occasion "Race has given us a Revised Standard Version: a translation which is modern, accurate, streamlined, and comprehensible, by most quantifiable and objective standards superior to its predecessor".

⁶ Thus, Race and Green, whose verse translation of the *Argonautica* brings the stylistic complexity and musicality of the original to the fore, are poles apart as regards their translatorial intensions. Cf. Clauss' review of Green in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 1998.12.09.

Hunter communicates something of Apollonius' learned style in rendering μέγα λαῖτμα as 'the great expanse' and by retaining the glossa 'katoulas' in the English text. Green is poetical when he transforms the idea of the black night of the original into 'night suddenly fell, a terror they call the Shroud of Darkness' and the emerging chaos into 'the black void out of heaven'.

Race's *Argonautica* is accurate, simple, straightforward—a text that captures the meaning, albeit not always the tone, of the original.⁷ Race's achievement through this scholarly, well-argued translation is to make Apollonius, a difficult poet to read, accessible to contemporary audiences. An achievement worth praising and admiring.

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⁷ That 'Aesonides' or the 'son of Aeson' are rendered as simply 'Jason' further downplays the epic tone of the original; Race argues for this choice in the *Preface* (p. viii).