

Apollonius' Construction of Ekphrastic Narrative

Apollonius is often praised for his masterful use of visual language in the *Argonautica*, especially when it reflects his refined sense of Hellenistic aesthetics. Yet, philological explications of his technique in this regard (in the truest sense of τέχνη) are often bypassed in favor of larger concerns. More conventional ekphrases, such as Jason's cloak (1.721-67), have received due attention (e.g. Shapiro 1980), but such descriptions are not the only means (nor the most common) by which Apollonius draws upon the visual arts. I wish to examine several passages in which Apollonius uses the language of ekphrasis to describe narrated events themselves, explicitly marking them as visual and inviting us to view them as works of art (Goldhill 1994; Webb 1999; Elsner 2002; Zanker 2004). In doing so, I hope to supplement previous, wide-reaching studies of Apollonius' interaction with Hellenistic art (e.g., Phinney 1967, Elvira 1977-78, Lombardi 1985, Zanker 1987, and Fowler 1989) with a closer analysis of the poem's vocabulary. Detailed comparison of the *Argonautica*'s most self-consciously visual episodes reveals a system of language that contributes to the poem's celebrated visuality.

For the sake of time, I will limit this discussion to five episodes (four to establish certain aspects of Apollonius' language and one to demonstrate briefly its variability). In each of the episodes selected, as in many others throughout the poem, Apollonius provides internal audiences who view and react to the events of his narrative with some variation on the Homeric θαῦμα ιδέσθαι ("a wonder to behold"): the Pelian nymphs "marvel to gaze" upon the Argo as it launches (ἐθάμβεον εισορόωσαι, 1.550), "fear grips [Juno] while she watches" it navigate the Wandering Rocks (μιν ἔχεν δέος εισορόωσαν, 4.960), the Boreads are "a great marvel to behold" as they flit through the air (μέγα θάμβος ιδέσθαι, 1.220), Triton is a "dread wonder before [the Argonauts'] eyes," (τέρας αἰνὸν ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν, 4.1619), and they "are astounded when they see

[Phineus],” (οἱ δέ μιν ὥς εἶδοντο... τάφον, 2.206-7). Apollonius’ repeated association between internal audiences and *thauma*-language draws attention to both the visual qualities of his descriptions and their intended effect on us, the “viewers.”

Apollonius then draws upon common motifs of ekphrasis to heighten the visual impact of these episodes: contrasts of color/light, compositional balance, anatomical details, and movement/directionality. For example, the Argo’s departure (1.536-58) is frequently cited for its play with color and light, but it includes marked compositional balance, as well. In fact, the Argo’s departure, its later voyage through the Wandering Rocks (4.924-63), the Boreads’ flight (1.219-23), and Triton’s epiphany (4.1602-19) all share at least one phrase used toward this end: ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα (“on this side and that”). The Wandering Rocks episode then includes vivid descriptions of movement and directionality, as well, and the Boreads display each of these in addition to a number of anatomical details (in just five lines!). Other episodes, however, seem to showcase a particular element of Apollonius’ art. The bulk of Triton’s visual impact, for example, relies on anatomical details alone. The description Phineus (2.197-207), too, is remarkable for its anatomical specificity, but also shows how Apollonius is able to differentiate his specific descriptions to suit individual images. As the body of each comes into view, Triton is marvelous and monstrous, but Phineus is distinctly grotesque.

Some of these scenes are climactic moments, but often they are brief, even fleeting, vignettes. Nonetheless, they consistently contribute to the poem’s characteristic visual quality. By drawing upon a system of shared (yet versatile) motifs for these episodes, Apollonius interweaves his ekphrases and crafts not just a series of related images, but a coherent work of art that we, like the many viewers within the *Argonautica* itself, are meant to look upon and marvel.

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