APOLLONIUS AND THE GOLDEN FLEECE: A NEO-MYTHOLOGICAL SCREEN LEGACY


Abstract: A number of ancient poets and painters described or showed the Golden Fleece, one of the most intriguing supernatural objects in classical myth. But the poets were not as specific as their modern readers may wish. By contrast, cinema and television show the Fleece in all its specific aspects. Moving-image adaptations of classical myths always change their sources, a phenomenon usefully termed “neo-mythologism,” but they display the Fleece to good effect, if often in a variety of recreations. The seven European and American films examined here show us why the Fleece deserves the Homeric epithet thauma ıdesthai.

Keywords: Golden Fleece, Apollonius, Jason, Medea, films.
Among all the supernatural objects found in classical mythology, the Golden Fleece may be the most famous and influential in inspiring poets, dramatists, and painters since antiquity. The Fleece is the reason for an arduous journey to Colchis, a kingdom at the ends of the earth. A golden-fleeced ram had once saved Phrixus and his twin sister Helle from the machinations of their evil stepmother by carrying them east. The ram’s father was Poseidon in animal shape; its mother, a nymph temporarily in animal shape as well, was a granddaughter of the sun god Helius. In the best-known version of the myth, the ram had wings and could talk. Either its fleece was naturally golden, or Hermes had made it so. (On this Fränkel, 1968, p. 293-294.) Helle fell off the ram’s back and drowned in the Hellespont, the sea named after her. The ram then gave verbal encouragement to Phrixus and took him to Colchis, where it was sacrificed. Its fleece became a symbol of power, royalty, and authority. It was kept in a tree inside a grove sacred to Ares. Colchian King Aeëtes kept the Fleece in his possession. In the best-known versions it was guarded by a dragon. (A concise recent summary of the myth and its variants is in Boyle, 2014, p. lx1-lxxviii, with references.) According to Diodorus Siculus 4. 48. 3, the never-sleeping dragon was coiled around the Fleece. Such a version would look particularly arresting on screen but has never been filmed. Diodorus tells the whole myth at 4. 40-55.

In Greece, evil Pelias had killed his brother Aeson, the legitimate ruler of the Thessalian kingdom of Iolcus, and usurped his throne. When Aeson’s son Jason came to reclaim the kingdom that was rightfully his, Pelias sent his nephew to obtain the Golden Fleece for
him. To undertake his dangerous task, Jason gathered about fifty heroes and sailed to Colchis. Jason’s companions were called Argonauts after their ship, the Argo. But King Aeëtes would not willingly relinquish his greatest possession and imposed deadly tests upon Jason. The Argonauts’ quest was thus meant to be a mission impossible: Pelias intended to get rid of Jason and keep the throne; Jason and the Argonauts were never to return. But with the help of Aeëtes’ daughter Medea, who possessed magic powers and was in love with Jason, the best of the Argonauts succeeded. He got the Fleece—in some versions Medea got it for him—he got the girl, and he got back home. But Jason and Medea did not get to live happily ever after.

1. The Golden Fleece in Apollonius’ Argonautica

What did the Golden Fleece look like? We may be able to imagine the golden look of a ram’s fleece, but is that enough to impress on us, or on ancient Greeks and Romans, a sense of its inherent or symbolic value? The Fleece has to be supernaturally beautiful to function in a credible manner as the object of a quest as dangerous as the Argonauts’ and remarkable enough to deserve being called a *thauma idesthai*: “a wonder to behold.” This expression is Homer’s and occurs several times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Hom. *Il.* 5. 725 is its first occurrence. Ancient visual artists depicted the Fleece on several occasions, but they could not do justice to its golden sheen. Nor, apparently, could poets. Classical descriptions of the Fleece are too brief adequately to convey a sense of its beauty; they consist mainly of summary statements or assertions. A case in point is Apollonius of Rhodes, whose *Argonautica*
is the most detailed retelling of the myth about Jason and the Fleece in classical epic. Apollonius was not only a poet but also a literary scholar; he may also have been the head of the famous Library of Alexandria in Egypt, one of the greatest centers of learning in the Hellenistic Age.

Apollonius does not have all that much to say about the appearance of the Fleece, as if its extraordinary quality defied him. The ram was “that wondrous creature, all gold.” In the Ram’s Rest, a meadow in Ares’ grove, stood “that vast oak on which the Fleece / was spread out, just like some cloud that blushes ruddy gold, / caught by the fiery rays of the sun at its rising.”2 Once Medea has put the dragon to sleep, Jason takes down the Fleece, which is as large as an ox hide. And “the bright glint of its texture / cast a ruddy blush like a flame.” Its thick wool is “golden throughout.” And: “Brightly the earth / gleamed ever in front of his feet as he strode on forward.”3 Jason’s men “were amazed” at “the great Fleece gleaming / like Zeus’s lightning.”4 Later, Jason and Medea spread “the bright Golden Fleece” on their marriage bed: “A glow like firelight shone round them, / so bright the light that glittered from the Fleece’s golden tufts.”5 Apollonius echoes the archaic poet Pindar, who centuries earlier had Pelias speak of “the deep-fleecedhide of the ram” and had Aeëtes call it “the imperishable coverlet, / the fleece fringed with gleaming gold.” Pindar then speaks of “the shimmering fleece.”6

What do we learn from all this? The Fleece, Peter Green states, looked “a deep metallic red-gold” so strong that it illuminated its environs (Green, 2007, p. 40). The imperial Roman poet Valerius Flaccus, in