The Greek myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece is one of the oldest myths of a hero's quest. It is a classic story of betrayal and vengeance and like many Greek myths has a tragic ending. It begins when Jason's Uncle Pelias kills Jason's father, the Greek King of Iolkos, and takes his throne. Jason's mother brings him to Cheiron, a centaur (half man, half horse) who hides him away and raises him on the Mountain of Pelion.

When Jason turns 20, he journeys to see Pelias to reclaim his throne. At a nearby river, Hera the Queen of the Gods approaches him disguised as an old woman. While carrying her across the river he loses a sandal and arrives at court wearing only one. Pelias is nervous when he sees Jason missing a sandal, for an oracle has prophesied that a man wearing only one sandal shall usurp his throne.

Jason demands the return of his rightful throne. Pelias replies that Jason should first accomplish a difficult task to prove his worth. The task is for Jason to retrieve the Golden Fleece, kept beyond the edge of the known world in a land called Colchis (modern-day Georgia in Southwest Asia). The story of the fleece is an interesting tale in itself. Zeus, the King of the Gods, had given a golden ram to Jason's ancestor Phrixus. Phrixus later flew on the golden ram from Greece to Colchis, whose king was Aietes, the son of Helios the Sun God. Aietes sacrificed the ram and hung the fleece in a sacred grove guarded by a dragon, as an oracle had foretold that Aietes would lose his kingdom if he lost the fleece.

Determined to reclaim his throne, Jason agrees to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Jason assembles a team of great heroes for his crew and they sail aboard the Argo. The first stop of the Argonauts is the Greek Isle of Lemnos, populated only by women. Unknown to Jason and his crew, the women have murdered their husbands. The Argonauts fare much better though; in fact the women use the occasion as an opportunity to repopulate the island.

After many more adventures, the Argo passes Constantinople, heading for the Straits of Bosphorus. The Straits of Bosphorus are a narrow passageway of water between the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. To the ancient Greeks, this was the edge of the known world. The Straits are extremely dangerous due to the currents created by the flow of water from the Black Sea. The ancient Greeks believed that clashing rocks guarded the straits and that the rocks would close together and smash any ship sailing through. Jason had been told by a blind prophet he assisted how to fool the rocks. He was to send a bird ahead of him. The rocks would crash in on it and then reopen, at which point he could successfully sail through.

When Jason finally arrives in Colchis he asks King Aietes to return the golden fleece to him as it belonged to his ancestor. Reluctant, the king suggests yet another series of challenges to Jason. He must yoke fire-breathing bulls, plough and sow a field with dragons' teeth and then overcome the warriors who will rise from the furrows. Aietes is confident the tasks are impossible but unbeknownst to the king, his daughter Medea has taken a liking to Jason. She offers to assist Jason if he will marry her. He agrees. Medea is a powerful sorceress and Jason is successful.

Jason and Medea return to Greece where Jason claims his father's throne, but their success is short-lived. Uncomfortable with Medea's magic, the locals drive Medea and Jason out of Iolkos. They go
into exile in Corinth where the king offers Jason his daughter in marriage. He agrees and so violates his vow to the gods to be true only to Medea.

**From Oxford UP’s “Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts”**

Aeëtes set Jason a series of impossible tasks before he would let him take the Golden Fleece. He was to yoke a pair of brazen-footed, fire-breathing bulls (the gift of Hephaestus to Aeëtes) and plough a field. In the furrows he was to sow dragon's teeth and kill the armed men who would spring up from the teeth. Helped by Medea, daughter of Aeëtes, Jason performed these tasks and took the fleece.

A priestess of Hecate, MEDEA [me-de'a], or MEDEIA, was as skilled in magic as her aunt, Circe. Hera and Aphrodite made her fall in love with Jason, to whom she gave a magic ointment to protect him from fire and iron, and drugs to tranquilize the serpent that guarded the fleece. Euripides makes Medea kill the dragon, so that she may claim that she, not Jason, is the dragon-slayer; on a vase by Douris (ca. 470 B.C.) Jason is swallowed by the dragon and disgorged, while Athena looks on.

**The Return of the Argonauts**

The Argonauts set sail with the fleece and the princess, pursued by the Colchians. Their leader, APSYRTUS [ap-sir'tus], or APSYRTOS, brother of Medea, was killed on land by Jason: some say that Medea killed him on the Argo and threw him piecemeal into the sea to delay the pursuers.

**The Return Route.** Pindar has the Argonauts sail by the River of Ocean (i.e., at the edge of the world) to the "Red Sea," then to Lemnos and so home.

In the Argonautica of Apollonius, the Argonauts sail from the Euxine up the Danube, across to the Adriatic and up the Eridanus (a mythical river sometimes identified with the Po), and across to the Rhone, down which they sailed to the Mediterranean.

**The Phaeacians.** In this version the Argonauts confronted many of the dangers later faced by Odysseus (see M/L, Chapter 20) and came to the land of the PHAEACIANS [fee-ay'shi-anz], or PHAIAKIANS. Here Medea appealed to Queen Arete for protection from the Colchians, and the king, Alcinoüs, promised not to give them up if Jason and Medea were already married. There they celebrated the marriage, and the Colchians gave up the pursuit.

The Argonauts sailed to Libya and were stranded on the Syrtes (shoals off the Libyan coast). They carried the Argo on their shoulders for twelve days to Lake Tritonis (Mopsus died in the desert) and from there made their way back to the sea.

**Talus.** Continuing their voyage, they killed the bronze giant, TALUS [ta'lus], or TALOS, who guarded the island of Crete, by opening a vein above one of his ankles, through which his life-supporting ichor (the divine equivalent of blood) leaked out.

**Jason and Pelias.** Finally they sailed back to Iolcus. Jason handed over the fleece to Pelias and dedicated the Argo to Poseidon at the Isthmus of Corinth. But Pelias refused to give up his throne to Aeson, Jason's father, as he had promised.
Medea and the Daughters of Pelias. Medea tricked the daughters of Pelias into trying to rejuvenate him by cutting him up and boiling him in a cauldron. They succeeded only in killing him. For this murder Medea and Jason were driven out of Iolcus and went to Corinth.