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Editors

Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

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Contact

Principal Contact

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

Support Contact

PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

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HELEN LOVATT

(University of Nottingham)

Resurrecting the Argo

Supernatural Re-makings in Robert Holdstock's *Merlin Codex*

Abstract This paper analyses the relationship between the figure of the Argo (ship and character) and the supernatural in the mythic fantasy of Robert Holdstock's *Merlin Codex*. It shows how Holdstock's re-writing of the *Argonautica* draws on various versions from the Argonautic tradition, including Euripides' *Medea*, Apollonius, Valerius Flaccus, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Treece and the 1963 film *Jason and the Argonauts*. It sets Holdstock's Argo alongside other representations, as divine herself, possessed by divinity, and a channel of communication with the divine, and in the context of Holdstock's previous work, particularly *Mythago Wood*, *Lavondyss* and *Merlin's Wood*. The paper argues that Holdstock uses the Argo as a reflection of myth itself, a version of the forest in *Mythago Wood*, as well as a metapoetic image for the challenges and complexities of adapting a well-known story, bringing multiple mythological traditions (Arthurian, Finnish and Argonautic) together. It reflects on Holdstock's relationship to the ancient genres of epic and tragedy, as well as Argo as plot facilitator and mechanism of transformation and transition. Holdstock's relationship with ancient literature is richer and deeper than previously acknowledged; his self-conscious plays reveal a deep understanding of the polymorphous nature of mythical traditions.

Keywords Holdstock, *Merlin Codex*, Argonauts, Argo, myth

INTRODUCTION

Robert Holdstock was well-known for his powerful *mythopoesis*, particularly in his breakthrough novel, *Mythago Wood* (1984), and its sequel, *Lavondyss* (1988), in which an ancient British woodland enables and activates the mythic archetypes of those living in the vicinity, bringing them to life as ‘mythagos’. His much later trilogy, *The Merlin Codex* (2001–2006), melds Arthurian legend with Greek mythology, and uses the Argo as an alternative image for the woodland, a vector of myth.¹ This paper outlines Holdstock’s portrayal of the Argo in the first volume of the trilogy, *Celtika*. By looking at the process of searching, diving, raising, reanimation and revival, it shows how Holdstock uses the Argo to reflect on the process of rewriting myth. The paper puts *The Merlin Codex* into the context of his earlier writings, and gives some indication of which versions in the Argonaut tradition shape Holdstock’s Argo-myth. It compares the focus on British mythology and history in *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss* with the encounter between Celtic, Finnish and Greek mythological figures (among others) in *Celtika*. Overall, it shows the richness and complexity of Holdstock’s meta-poetic mythological self-fashioning and his engagement with complex ideas about genre, belief and the power of story.

The paper will begin by introducing Holdstock, then give a brief survey of the representation of the Argo as divine or supernatural in several influential versions of the Argonaut story, show how the trilogy starts from the ending of Euripides’ *Medea* but with strong echoes of Hera in the 1963 Ray Harryhausen film, and continue with a detailed reading of the sections of *Celtika* in which the Argo is rediscovered, raised, resurrected, rebuilt and reanimated. The paper finishes with a brief summary of the Argo’s supernatural agency later in *Celtika*, demonstrating how the Argo becomes gradually divorced from her material identity, operating as threshold between spiritual worlds and narrative locations, and enabling a generic shift from epic quest narrative to tragic recognition, reversal and destruction. Argo and her divine sponsors guard transitional moments, allowing movement from one scene or narrative level to another, not unlike the gods of ancient epic. The importance of ancient texts and genres (particularly Greek epic and tragedy) in shaping the narrative mechanics of Holdstock’s fantasy has not been fully recognised.

1 Holdstock (2001); Holdstock (2002); Holdstock (2006).

INTRODUCING ROBERT HOLDSTOCK AND THE MERLIN CODEX

The British science fiction and fantasy writer, Robert Holdstock (1948–2009), is well-respected in the SFF community but as yet not much studied by academics.² The *Mythago Wood* cycle is called ‘a central contribution to 20th-Century fantasy’ by John Clute, co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*.³ Holdstock’s work won numerous awards, especially for *Mythago Wood*.⁴ The *Merlin Codex* trilogy, also award-winning, consists of *Celtika* (2001), *The Iron Grail* (2002) and *The Broken Kings* (2007).⁵ This trilogy continues to draw on the mythology of the Mythago sequence, looking at it from a different angle: where the central character of *Lavondyss*, Tallis, carves ten masks that represent Holdstock’s key mythological archetypes, Merlin of the *Merlin Codex* embodies one of these archetypes and looks at the human world through his extremely long-lived but forgotten experiences. The *Merlin Codex* weaves together two key quest narratives, the *Argonautica* and the Holy Grail, via the historical encounter between Celts and Greeks in 279 BC (Brennus’ raid on Delphi). The quest is primarily focused around the resurrected Jason, who comes back to life in order to find his sons, who have been hidden in time by Medea, one of Merlin’s fellow-travellers along the paths of immortality. Alongside him, crew member Urtha, king of Alba,

2 Holdstock died suddenly at 61. A memorial issue of *Ansible* is available online at: <https://news.ansible.uk/a270supp.html> (accessed 30. 12. 2022). Obituary from the Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/dec/02/robert-holdstock-obituary> (accessed 30. 12. 2022). The edited volume *Morse and Matolsy* (2011) is the main study to date; Manwaring (2018), accessible at <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/articles/ways-through-the-wood-the-rogue-cartographies-of-robert-holdstocks-mythago-wood-cycle-as-a-cognitive-map-for-creative-process-in-fiction.html> (accessed 30. 12. 22), deals with Holdstock’s topography in the *Mythago Wood* cycle as a metapoetic landscape. Kincaid (2022) is an excellent introduction to *Mythago Wood*, as well as reflecting on Holdstock’s oeuvre, although the section on the *Merlin Codex* is relatively brief.

3 Manwaring (2018) citing Clute and Grant (1999) 475.

4 *Mythago Wood*: BSFA Best Novel (1984), World Fantasy Award (1985); *Lavondyss*: BSFA Best Novel (1988).

5 Holdstock’s work also achieved wide international recognition, and the awards for the *Merlin Codex* included the Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire 2004 for *Celtika*, and the Czech Academy of SFF and Horror Award 2002 for *The Iron Grail*.

seeks to find out why his kingdom is under threat, and to restore it, while Merlin himself is seeking his own forgotten past. The supernatural plays a key role both in Holdstock's overarching mythology (the beliefs of communities shape archetypes which can manifest as mythagos and aid communities in times of threatened survival) and in the *Merlin Codex* in particular (motifs of *katabasis* recur, alongside prophecy, and wider interest in the religious beliefs, folklore, magical practices and mythologies of various European countries, not just Britain).⁶

THE DIVINE ARGO

Where Ryhope Wood, the wood of the novel *Mythago Wood*, contains and enables the mythological narratives of the *Mythago Wood* series, shaping, expanding, powering, crossing borders and historical periods, engulfing and threatening the people it draws into itself, but remaining located in the British countryside and imagination, the Argo plays something of this part in the *Merlin Codex*, enabling the narrative to go beyond the boundaries of the British imagination but take something of Britain with it. In this, Holdstock draws on ancient traditions about the Argo as embodiment of myth, *numen* and poetry, as well as wider traditions about the Argonauts as founders and vectors of identity, in British as well as other retellings. Reviewers have seen the importance of Argo as a character: Keith Brooke at calls the Argo 'One of the central mysteries in *Celtika*', 'alive and very much a character in this novel – a wild and unpredictable presence.'⁷

The Argo is frequently used as an emblem for the Argonaut story and features in artistic representations from very early in the surviving materials, for

⁶ In *Mythago Wood*, there is a reference to a similar ancient mythological woodland in France, encountered when Harry is shot down during World War 2, which implies that the phenomenon of Ryhope Wood is not purely British, but the focus is squarely on local mythology (Roman Britain, the Civil War, prehistory). The *Merlin Codex* broadens to include characters from Ireland, Wales, Finland, Romania and Germany, as well as Greece. The implication remains, however, that there is a special connection between British and Greek mythology.

⁷ Keith Brooke in an online review at <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/celtika.htm> (accessed 31. 12. 2022).

instance in the metopes of the Sikyonian treasury.⁸ Circe in the *Odyssey* calls the Argo ‘*pasi melousa*’, ‘well-known by all’.⁹ Apollonius represents the Argo as the subject of former poets:

As for the ship, the songs of former poets still tell how Argos built it according to Athena’s instructions.¹⁰

The relationship between Argo and the divine is also early: Athena either designs or actually participates in building the Argo.¹¹ A first century CE relief from Porta Latina, now in the British Museum, shows Athena and Argos working together on the ship. The Argo is frequently represented as an innovative or transitional ship, allowing new types of travel; in Latin poetry Argo becomes an image of the beginnings of marine travel, the first ship.¹² In his catalogue of heroes, Apollonius credits Athena with inspiring Hercules to join the crew, and describes the Argo as the most outstanding (*proferestate*) of ships that have challenged the sea.¹³ This divine construction explains the Argo’s importance, but does it also give the ship its own transferred divinity?

Another ancient element of representations of the Argo is the incorporation of a prophetic branch from the Oak of Dodona, which allows the ship to speak and communicate the intentions of the gods. This is likely to be an early part of the myth, because there is early evidence: a fragment of the tragedian Aeschylus, from a play entitled either *Argo*, or *Kopastai* (Oarsmen), refers to the ship’s voice and its associations with the gods: ‘The holy speaking beam of the Argo groaned aloud’.¹⁴ The context in which this fragment is quoted, by Philo, gives a stronger

⁸ Metopes of the Sikyonian treasury, Doric frieze, ca. 570–550 BCE, Delphi Archaeological Museum. For details see the useful information at <http://data.perseus.org/artifacts/sculpture/Delphi%2C+Sikyonian+Treasury+%28Monopteros%29+Metopes> (accessed 26 April 2023).

⁹ Hom. *Od.* 12.70.

¹⁰ Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 1.18–9.

¹¹ On Argo and the gods, Gaunt (1972) sees Apollonius as removing magical elements associated with Argo in earlier traditions, and instead substituting dignified Olympian interventions in a Homeric manner.

¹² On Argo as first ship, see Jackson (1997); in Latin poetry, Fabre-Serris (2008).

¹³ Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 1.113.

¹⁴ Aesch. Fragment 20, Sommerstein.

sense of an ancient idea of the ship itself as a character with agency and intentionality: Philo says that the Argo, 'being endowed with soul and reason, would not allow slaves to step aboard her'.¹⁵

Key versions in the intervening Argonaut tradition show that the Oak of Dodona and the ship's role in communicating divine will remain a popular part of nineteenth and twentieth century retellings. One of the most widely read children's versions, *Tanglewood Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1853), returns more than once to the voice of the Argo.¹⁶ In this version, when Jason is initially confronted with the quest of the Fleece, he turns to the Oak of Dodona for advice,¹⁷ and it tells him to commission Argus to build the ship. There is no mention of Athena, and when the ship is finished, Jason returns to the Oak which instructs him to cut off a branch to use as figurehead.¹⁸ The carver 'finds that his hand was guided by some unseen power' and produces an image of a beautiful woman, with a helmet and a shield, on which is displayed 'the head of Medusa with the snaky locks', essentially an image of Athena. Later, when Jason cannot work out how to launch the Argo, he turns to the 'galley's miraculous figurehead', which he calls 'daughter of the Talking Oak',¹⁹ and which instructs Orpheus to play his harp '(for it had known what had ought to be done from the very first, and was only waiting for the question to be put)'.²⁰

At the first ringing note of the music they felt the vessel stir. Orpheus thrummed away briskly, and the galley slid at once into the sea, dipping her prow so deeply that the figure head drank the wave, with its marvellous lips, and rising again as buoyant as a swan. [...] the vessel seemed to dance over the billows by way of keeping time to it.²¹

15 Philo, *That Every Virtuous Man is Free* 143. The Oak of Dodona is also mentioned by the probably fifth century BCE mythographer Pherecydes at 3F111. On early Greek mythology, see Fowler (2000).

16 Hawthorne (1950 [1853]).

17 *Tanglewood Tales* 222–5.

18 *Tanglewood Tales* 226.

19 *Tanglewood Tales* 232.

20 *Tanglewood Tales* 232.

21 *Tanglewood Tales* 232–3.

Throughout Hawthorne's retelling, Jason frequently appeals to the figurehead for help.²² Later Medea claims to be the one who was watching him and speaking to him through the figurehead (245), inserting herself into the position of Hera and Athena as his advisers. This version thus plays complex games with causation, where Hera, who in Apollonius motivates the expedition in order to bring Medea back to Greece and punish Pelias, is over-written by Medea herself. Hawthorne's version was very popular and widely read, and I would argue that children's versions encountered early in development can become unconscious influences on adult creators.²³

The prominence of Argo's role as communicator of divine will is cemented in the twentieth century by the 1963 *Jason and the Argonauts* film (dir. Chaffey, legendary special effects by Ray Harryhausen), the most influential version of the story in that period. The film also features a figurehead carver driven by unseen inspiration to create an image of a beautiful woman with ringlets but makes it clear that Hera is the goddess concerned. The figurehead has a strong resemblance to Honor Blackman, echoing her hairstyle, braided around the head and descending into ringlets, and her prow-like crown. The figurehead is located on the stern, allowing Jason to consult her more easily. The influence of the 1963 film can be seen in the prominence of a figurehead that looks like Hera in various later versions. Two children's picture books show the cultural pervasiveness: Yomtov and Sandoval's 2009 graphic novel, *Jason and the Golden Fleece*, includes a double-page scene at Dodona, and a figurehead which visually recalls the 1963 image of Hera, with its golden hair and position in the stern;²⁴ Malam and Antram's 2005 picture book also has a figurehead clearly located in the stern, although the ship itself looks more like Noah's Ark as it is pictured during construction.²⁵

An alternative way of portraying the Argo's divine connections and communication is exemplified by Robert Graves' 1944 novel *The Golden Fleece*. His telling of Jason's visit to Dodona and the gift of the branch closely resembles that

22 *Tanglewood Tales* 229 (how to find a crew), 232 (how to launch), 237 (for help with the Stymphalian birds).

23 On Argonauts in children's literature as influential on the wider tradition: Lovatt (2020); Lovatt (2021).

24 Yomtov and Sandoval (2009), *Jason and the Golden Fleece* 18–9.

25 Malam and Antram (2005), *Jason and the Argonauts* 14.

of Hawthorne,²⁶ and the branch is incorporated into the prow during his detailed description of Argus' building process.²⁷ The Argo influences the direction of the narrative at least twice: when the Argonauts quarrel after accidentally abandoning Hercules, Mopsus the soothsayer resolves the disagreement by listening to the branch and relaying its instructions ('The branch says').²⁸ After Jason's killing of Apsyrtus, the crew are anxious to avoid pollution: 'The creaking voice of Ascalaphus of Orchomenos broke the long silence. "I hear a strange singing sound from the prow".²⁹ Again, Mopsus listens intently and relays the instructions of the gods, that Jason and Medea should leave the ship and travel back by land (here Graves uses the divine message to introduce his own tendentious variant on the usual wanderings of the whole crew). So Graves incorporates the supernatural beliefs and motivations, but allows a rationalising interpretation in which the prophets are manipulating those around them into following their own preferred course of action. As the paper will show, these versions are also influential for Holdstock's interpretation of the Argo in the *Merlin Codex*.

EPIGRAPHS OF GROWTH AND DISTANCE

The two epigraphs of Holdstock's *Celtika* assert the importance of *Argo* and her importance in shaping ideas of heroism and masculinity addressed in the series (she is called 'Ship of Heroes' in the 'Afterword'³⁰).

It was so old a ship – who knows, who knows?
– And yet so beautiful, I watched in vain
To see the mast burst open with a rose
And the whole deck put on its leaves again.

From *The Old Ships* by James Elroy Flecker

²⁶ Graves (1944), *The Golden Fleece* 63.

²⁷ *The Golden Fleece* 73.

²⁸ *The Golden Fleece* 195.

²⁹ *The Golden Fleece* 350.

³⁰ *Celtika* 326.

The age of the ship creates its beauty, as with the age of the Argonaut story, but the desire of the poet is to renew it, bring the wood itself back to life, not just rebuild the ship. The idea of connecting with a life force through ancient story is central to Holdstock's poetics. He pairs this with a quotation from Tennyson's *Ulysses*, which emphasises the distance between ancient heroism and later achievement, but also asserts continuity.³¹ Holdstock sets himself in a long tradition of adopting and drawing power from Greek myth, suggesting that he, like Tennyson, operates with the same striving as Homer in connecting with greater men of past ages.

ARGO, HERA AND EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

In an interview with Paul Kincaid, Holdstock describes why he decided to write about Jason and Medea.³² He was at the theatre watching ('the delectable' *sic*) Diana Rigg play *Medea*, a performance so good it left him 'shaking with delight'. After *Medea* murders her children, however, the two child actors were 'talking and giggling' and he has the idea for a continuation of the story in which the killing was an illusion: 'And I thought, what a great idea! That she didn't kill her sons at all, she just sham-killed them, hid them in time – back to time – and then Jason himself finds out what she's done.' Later, he points out that a key relationship in the trilogy is that between *Medea* and *Argo*.

The prologue of Holdstock's trilogy begins from the end of Euripides' *Medea*, with what is traditionally the death of Jason, as predicted by *Medea*: 'And you as is proper for a bad man, will die badly, hit on the head by a remnant of the *Argo*.' (Eur. *Med.* 1386–7) This is also the last moment of Henry Treece's 1961 novel, *Jason*, which ends with the death of its narrator.³³ Holdstock starts from this moment of ending, setting it at a plausible historical date of 978 BCE, in 'Iolkos'. Jason has been living on the rotten hulk of the *Argo*, when the ship orchestrates his death:

³¹ Importance of war context: Kincaid (2022) 30–51.

³² Kincaid (2011), included in the 2011 memorial booklet posted out to members of the British Science Fiction Association, 'The Memory of Stories', and kindly sent to me in pre-publication form by Tony Keen.

³³ Treece (1961), *Jason* 336.

As if his words had broken a charm, a rotten spar cracked away from Argo's mast, crashed down to the deck of the ageing ship, striking the hero who sat there in a dream. The wound was mortal, by the sounds of the cracking bones and the sudden flow of blood and pain from Jason's mouth.

Tisaminas turned to run, to raise the call, but a voice whispered to him, 'Stay here. Remember what you see.'

He glanced behind him. A dark-eyed girl stood there, wrapped in a green cloak. She smiled at him, then drew his attention back to Argo.³⁴

The Argo seems deliberately to kill Jason, while the girl evokes the appearance of the goddess Hera at the beginning of the 1963 film, as Pelias kills Jason's sisters, violating the statue of Hera where they beg for protection. There, too, she is wrapped in a dark cloak, and seems initially to be an anonymous slave girl.

Holdstock's beginning death scene gathers the Argonauts back together to send off their dead comrade; it is the ship that has called them. Readers might initially assume that the girl, too, represents the Argo, but Jason's friend Tisaminas reveals that she is Hera: 'the goddess who had protected Jason for the better part of his life.'³⁵ The Argo's decomposition is only partial and she takes him 'to a safe place of burial'.³⁶

The prologue shows the importance of Argo for Holdstock, the complex relationship between goddess and ship, the starting point from Euripides' *Medea* and the influence of the 1963 Argonauts film. The ship itself begins in *Medea* and moves to its new narrative context, taking charge of stage-managing *Celtika*.

³⁴ *Celtika* 3.

³⁵ *Celtika* 3.

³⁶ *Celtika* 4.

DIVING: THE SEARCH FOR ARGO

The Argo is a ship of quests, which itself inspires quests.³⁷ The first section of narrative proper in Holdstock's *Celtika* skips forward to the time and space of the main narrative: 'The Northern country of Pohjola [Finland], 700 years later'. This is the historical setting, the 'reality', from which the characters will venture into various supernatural times and spaces.³⁸ The central focalising character, currently going by the name of Merlin, is immortal, has forgotten much of his past, but remembers his journey as Antiokus, a crew-member of the Argo. He has had an epiphany that Medea's murder of Jason's children was a theatrical and magical illusion, and now he is deep in a Finnish forest, searching for the Argo, 'only half remembering'.³⁹ Merlin's initial purpose is unclear to the reader and perhaps to the character. We know he is on a quest, but not why and what for. The sense of reaching into a mysterious past about which our understanding is fragmentary is characteristic of Holdstock's mythopoesis, and of both ancient history and the study of early Greek myth.

Merlin is an avatar of the author, who also had an epiphanic experience about Medea's murder of her children, and has also decided to resurrect the Argo along with Jason in order to find them. Kincaid points out how the initial scenes echo the imagery associated with the primal myth-generating forest in *Mythago*

37 *In Search of the Argonauts* – title for Lovatt (2021), chosen by Alex Wright of I. B. Tauris) – packages mythological research as quest; the book tells the cultural history of various episodes of the Argonaut myth, showing how complex and multiplicitous this particular tradition was from its beginning, and still remains. Holdstock's conception of myth equally emphasised multiplicity: in *Mythago Wood* the material of myth interacts with each character's absorption of and response to it, producing unique *mythagos* (myth-images).

38 Kincaid (2022) 111 argues that the *Merlin Codex* puts into practice the theory of mythology developed in *Mythago Wood*, although he acknowledges that Holdstock was 'uncomfortable' with this idea. I see the *Merlin Codex* as operating in the same storyworld but at a different temporal point, with central characters that have different understandings of the relationship between 'myth' and 'reality', because they come from different cultural contexts. Holdstock's model of myth and myth-making becomes more complex and subtle during his career; for instance, he rejects any straightforward embrace of 'archetypes' or the Jungian collective unconscious, and moves on from 'racial memory', perhaps focalised through the early Twentieth century context of George Huxley, towards cultural memory, less bound by the unconsciously Anglo-centric framework of his earlier books.

39 *Celtika* 4.

Wood and the other novels of the cycle;⁴⁰ I note its special affinity with the winter sequences in *Lavondyss*. What seems to have changed, as Holdstock moves further into his mythical storyworld, is the closeness of the focalising character to the arguably divine figures at the centre of that world. The Huxleys study the primal myth and are drawn into it; Tallis creates her masks and is able to use them; but Merlin is part of the mythic world and always has been. As Holdstock grows in confidence and commitment to his world, so he allows his avatar to identify more strongly with it. While George Huxley's immersion leads to his wife's suicide and the destruction of his family life, Merlin's refusal to immerse himself, to use his magic as part of the story, is characterised as selfish and self-limiting.

At the same time the scope of the material and of the journeys has increased: Holdstock always maintained that his mythopoiesis was European, not just British, and Kincaid has well outlined the anti-nationalist thrust of *Mythago Wood*.⁴¹ The *Merlin Codex* reflects on similarly complex and problematic British appropriations of historical epic mythology from other traditions (Finnish and Greek). Merlin, as immortal prehistoric archetype, is an outsider to all of these traditions, Celtic Britain, Hellenistic Greece and Pohjola, but the crew of the resurrected Argo are noticeably more multi-national than the original.

In this section I argue that Merlin's search for and raising of the Argo, like the journey into and attempts to map Ryhope Wood in Holdstock's earlier books, is a metapoetic representation of the writing process, in which first the forest, then the lake and finally the ship itself embody the stuff of *mythos* ('story').⁴²

40 Kincaid (2022) 111: 'For instance, the first novel in the codex, *Celtika*, opens with an extended scene that could almost have been lifted from any of the *Mythago* novels.'

41 In Kincaid (2011), Holdstock mentions a convention in the US, where he was gently questioned about the Eurocentric nature of his storyworld, at which he took no offence, and seemed interested in learning about and incorporating other cultures. On Holdstock's anti-nationalism, see for instance Kincaid (2022) 82, on George Huxley: 'Holdstock allows us to step back in time, only to demonstrate that the old traditions and customs are crueller and more brutal, and precisely not an illustration of the pride and nobility of the nation.'

42 Kincaid (2022) argues that Ryhope Wood itself functions as the protagonist in the *Mythago Wood* cycle. Manwaring (2018) makes a strong case for its metapoetic nature as model of creative writing praxis.

Merlin's search takes him through a series of barriers or tests, a liminal or initiatory process, which has both mythological and metapoetic resonances.⁴³ The first threshold is the 'barrier of grim-faced wooden statues', which are implied to be local religious artefacts, but also reflect the immortal figures that recur throughout the *Mythago Wood* cycle. It is the Pohjolans, however, who control the barrier, and have to choose whether or not to admit him past the thorn gate. The imagery of initiation is intensified by the event taking place at the same time: the initiation of the character Niiv, who turns out to be his descendant, as a sorcerer or shaman.

Once he has been accepted, somewhat reluctantly, as a guest by the Pohjolan community, he faces further challenges in reaching the Screaming Lake and finding Argo: an arduous journey, ice and extreme cold, the difficulty of physically entering the lake and surviving in the cold temperatures, dangerous spirits and mysterious monsters that inhabit the water (*voytazi* and *Enaaki*), numerous corpses of failed questers, and a time limit imposed by the approach of summer. More unexpected, perhaps, is the crowd of competing wannabe-shamans, which perhaps reflects Holdstock's awareness of the well-travelled nature of Greek mythology retellings, even as he takes an unusual route to it, via the far North.⁴⁴ Uncertainties and risks dog Merlin's tasks, mirroring authorial anxieties: Is he in the right place? Is Argo actually there?⁴⁵

Merlin's fear of imposture and exposure is manifested in the description of the lake, with its multiple layers of inaccessibility, dangers and challenges:

The centre was guarded by ice statues, ten in all, [...] that stared towards the encircling forest through melting features. [...] holes to the water below had been carved, scraped, boiled and burned, but they closed up [...] below the lid of ice the lake was

43 On thresholds and polders (contained special spaces, with anachronistic temporality) in Holdstock, see Ekman (2013) 99–128.

44 The Argonaut story does have an association with the far North: the *Orphic Argonautica* (edition by Vian (1987), probably written in the fifth century CE) brings the Argonauts back from Colchis via a hazy Northern route, which may refer either to the English channel or the North of Scandinavia. Graves (1944) and Treece (1961) were both fascinated by a theory that the Clashing Rocks represented ice bergs that had floated South. On traditions of the Clashing Rocks, see Lovatt (2021) 96–104.

45 The antagonist of *Mythago Wood*, George Huxley, is modelled on the father of John Middleton Murry, Jr., who wrote as Richard Cowper, a novelist friend of Holdstock, whose father dismissed with scorn his first novel. See Kincaid (2022) 18.

fish-belly white with the naked dead, mostly visitors to the area, drawn by legend rather than applying local magic. Pohjolan men used long poles to reach through narrow holes and haul the corpses to the surface. Below the dead, though, were those who had managed to control their bodies. They floated as if suspended in the lake, arms crossed on chests [...] ⁴⁶

The melting features of Holdstock's ten archetypes, here ice statues, represent both the threatening time limit and the instability and ephemerality of tradition. Penetrating the lake's ice is equally temporary, and the 'fish-belly white' corpses create a contrast between fertile fishing for food and futile fishing for power (and stories?). The danger of immersion and initiation can only be survived by authentic understanding of the local context and sufficient self-discipline. ⁴⁷

Powerful bodily imagery describes immersion, diving as if into a watery underworld:

Prepared for the spirits that inhabited the water, [...] the cold was not just shocking it was almost predatory. I screamed as I plunged downwards, wasting breath for a moment, convinced that a thousand teeth were ripping my flesh. I watched as my body grew extensions of ice. It was all I could do to remember my purpose here as I hung, suspended in the lake, among the slowly turning shapes of shamans and priests, their bodies eerily illuminated from above, where the ice was alive with torchlight. Below, there was a stranger glow, but even my young man's body was being defeated by the pure, hellish chill. ⁴⁸

The cold shock is expressed through imagery of violence, fragmentation and surrealism: the teeth evoke piranhas, while ice growths suggest uncontrolled interpenetration with the landscape. Purpose lost, the creative project is either

⁴⁶ *Celtika* 37.

⁴⁷ Merlin's brief reference to this Finnish setting in *Merlin's Wood* is a first tentative step into this cultural context, while Holdstock and Merlin both go much deeper in during *The Merlin Codex*. In *Merlin's Wood*, Merlin is immersed in a shaft grave, buried in soil and trapped by the enchantress Vivien (an avatar of Niiv and Medea in *The Merlin Codex*). The novella ends with the resurrected Merlin possessing the body of the narrator Martin, who is searching for his lost wife and child. In story-time *The Merlin Codex* comes before this, and explains it further, like a prequel. In writing-time, it comes afterwards, and operates as a development or sequel.

⁴⁸ *Celtika* 37.

devoured into nothingness or distorted into unrecognisable baroque excess. The accretions and fragmentations of myth are only made more uncanny by attempts to illuminate them. The shock of the alien threatens Merlin's conservation of his own power (here represented by his continuing youth: using his magic ages him).

Archaeological imagery emphasises the layered nature of past tradition:

There were ruins below me, [...] and faces that watched me, [...] I saw the glitter of gold, the gleam of bronze and the sheen of iron, a wasteland of trophies, offerings and secrets cast into the lake over the ages. And the masts and prows of ships that had sunk here and lay at all angles, weed-covered and broken, ransacked for their timbers.⁴⁹

The underwater hell-scape is inhabited by hostile watchers; the treasure acts as lure. The multiplicity of myth is represented by the layers of shipwrecks, as in a notorious shipping danger zone. The 'trophies, offerings and secrets' repeat the imagery of small archaeological finds in the shaft graves of *Merlin's Wood*, covering a range of different motivations for keeping, abandoning or hiding treasured objects. 'Secrets' emphasises the underlying desire for knowledge. The ruined ships and timber re-use encapsulate the constant reappropriation and transformation of myth.

I had prepared for this descent for three days [...] I had sung and chanted in the groves, and I followed carefully the instructions of the young shaman [...]

Now I felt a certain confidence, and at last I put a name to my quest. Air bubbling from my lungs, I called to the old ship, the grave ship, the ship that screamed [...] 'Argo!' I called [...]⁵⁰

The density of the described ritual and its sensory details insist on the authenticity and commitment of both Merlin and Holdstock. Merlin's refusal to name his quest mirrors the way Steven Huxley circles around Ryhope Wood, hesitates, initially refuses even to read his father's journals, in *Mythago Wood*. The act of naming goes unheard, but Merlin reveals that the screaming of the Screaming Lake is that of the Argo: the circularity of the attribution of supernatural power

⁴⁹ *Celtika* 37–8.

⁵⁰ *Celtika* 38.

(the lake makes the ship powerful, the ship makes the lake powerful) reflects ironically on the self-generated narrative energy of Merlin's quest and Holdstock's reworking, a repetition powered by dislocation.

Throughout Merlin's dive, the difficulty and uncertainty of the project of revival remains central: first there is no response, and he wonders if Argo is there, then he is rejected, pushed back against the ice; he has to repeat the summoning and bargain by offering information in order to gain a reaction:

Perhaps she had not come here after all but lay elsewhere in the deeps, in another lake or a hidden sea, guarding her captain's remains.

But then: that whispering voice with which I had become so familiar in my time with Jason, [...] the voice of sentience that was the ship herself:

'Leave us in peace. [...]

'Argo?' The water below me pulsed. The lake seemed angry. I could see a shattered vessel, dark and indistinct, its hull fringed by twisted branches that reached out like tendrils. The branches of the sacred oak that formed her keel, I realised – she had kept on growing!⁵¹

Merlin's uncertainty recalls the Argonauts' quest in many versions, and the uncertainty about many aspects of the myth (was Colchis really located in Georgia?).⁵² The distance of time and space, the secret nature of the location, is presented as a deliberate way of honouring and guarding human remains. The Argo's voice is either over-intense (a scream, a roar) or intensely quiet (a whisper), both extremes emphasising the difficulty of understanding and communication. Argo's rejection emphasises the violation in digging up remains, reviving the dead. Retelling myth becomes a sort of necromancy. The lake and the ship are identified with each other; in her divinity, Argo becomes one with the landscape. The ruined state of the ship ('shattered') is offset by the living nature of the sacred oak (the Oak of Dodona here is envisaged as keel). The growing 'tendrils' bring out the supernatural speed of growth, similar to the threatening, overwhelming encroachment of the forest in *Mythago Wood*, both symbolising the continuing vitality of mythical tradition.

⁵¹ *Celtika* 38–9.

⁵² The association between Aea, city of Aetes, and Colchis, in the Black sea, is uncertain in early evidence: see West (2005), and Braund (1994).

Merlin is pushed back against the underside of the ice by the hostile spirits, almost loses breath control and has to be fished out of the ice alongside the corpses. The passage into the ice, ‘feet first through the tunnel’ (37) figures birth, alongside death, surrounded as he is by corpses. Holdstock is fascinated by *katabasis*, and frequently sends his characters into underworlds or lands of the dead. Arguably the whole *Mythago Wood* cycle is katabatic, and the *Merlin Codex* too contains numerous underworld visits.⁵³

This section, with its emphasis on underwater archaeology, shows the way Holdstock engages with myth as a dangerous quest into an uncertain landscape, itself supernatural. It shows that the forest is only one image for this, that the frozen lake further intensifies it, and that landscape, artefacts, stories and beliefs are all woven together to reflect on the process of storytelling as a magical act of power and creation.

SUMMONING, PERSUASION, RUPTURE

After his rescue, Merlin himself is resuscitated, and his determination is modelled through repetition and perseverance, an avatar of Holdstock approaching deep time through multiple stories and images:

[...] revived from my lazy, arrogantly ill-prepared excursion downwards, I lay on the ice, [...] and again called to Argo [...]

‘It’s Antiokus. You must remember me. I was with you when you sailed on the quest for the fleece of gold. Jason, please hear me. Your sons are not dead! [...] Argo, tell him what I’ve said.’

I kept trying. [...] staring down through the hole, which was already beginning to melt at its edges as the sluggish sun crept, worm-like, above the southern ho-

⁵³ The topographical vagueness of Ryhope Wood, its constant transformations, layers and pockets of time, is perhaps most like Virgil’s underworld in *Aeneid* 6, which itself is entered through woodland, with the golden bough. On Virgil’s underworld and its reception, see Gladhill and Myers (2020); on katabasis imagery in classical reception more generally, see Fletcher (2019). The importance of the river crossing as a boundary between the edge zones and deeper ones reinforces the Classical imagery, with Sorthalan featuring as a sort of Charon.

rizon. Pike-faced voytazi taunted me, [...] teasing me with the threat to drag me down.

‘Argo!’ I persevered. ‘You must believe me! The world has changed in a very strange way. But the news is good for Jason. Argo! Answer me!’⁵⁴

The emphasis on Merlin’s lack of preparation augments the epic difficulty of his katabatic quest (‘excursion downwards’), as well as modelling authorial anxiety. Intense meteorological phenomena often accompany epic beginnings: the storm in *Aeneid* 1 is the classic example, taken up by later epic poets (Valerius Flaccus, Statius *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*) as a way of generating, avoiding or making ambivalent, the energy needed to start a literary enterprise of this magnitude and ambition; other examples include the flood and destruction by fire in Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1 and 2.⁵⁵ Other epics start with the immobilisation of the protagonist: Achilles’ withdrawal, Odysseus’ detainment by Calypso. Holdstock combines these tropes with Merlin overwhelmed by the power of ice and Jason literally frozen, while Argo retains the energy to scream, grow and burst free.

Communicating through the hole in the ice, Merlin attempts to persuade, or perhaps seduce, Argo into giving up her hold on Jason. The melting ice hole and the ‘worm-like’ sun suggest the sluggishness of narrative progress. Merlin remains at risk of becoming the Argonautic Hylas, dragged down for ever into a supernatural realm. His insistence on the strangeness of modernity in the Hellenistic age creates further temporal complexity and dislocation but acts a lure for Jason the explorer.⁵⁶

Finally, Merlin’s pitch succeeds in gaining attention:

And then at last the voice, again, whispering to me from the icy depths. ‘He does not wish to return. His life ended when Medea killed his boys.’ ‘I know,’ I said to her. ‘I was there. [...] The blood on their bodies was just illusion.’ I felt the ice shake beneath me, as if the whole lake below had pulsed with shock.

54 *Celtika* 39.

55 On Virgil’s storm and epic energy, see Hardie (1986) 90–7; on winds and narrative in Homer, see Purves (2010).

56 The Argonaut tradition often plays with complex temporal perspectives: both Gardner’s *Jason and Medea* – Gardner (1973) – and Christa Wolf’s *Medea* – Wolf (1996) – suggest character awareness of times beyond their own, and a far-reaching prophetic awareness of deep future, as with Valerius Flaccus’ Jupiter and his worldplan; on which, see Manuwald (2002).

There was only silence from Argo, but I intuited that she was puzzled, and that my words were seeping through the wood of her hull and into Jason. [...]

A moment later, the ice below me bucked. Then cracked open with a sound like a whiplash [...] ⁵⁷

Argo polices the boundaries of the story, tries to impose closure and refuse Holdstock the use of the mythical material. However, Argo is also connected to, or part of, Jason, and Jason too hears Merlin's message. Character, divinity, artefact, landscape, and author blur together. Holdstock's revelation about Euripides' *Medea* becomes Merlin's decoding of the trickery of Holdstock's *Medea*. The metalepsis of renewal takes powerful physical shape in the rupture of the ice, as Argo bursts out. Beginning becomes a violent outbreak of energy.

RAISING, EMERGENCE, COST

The marvellous in Holdstock always comes at a cost, sometimes an unexpectedly horrific one. Merlin pays for his use of magic by ageing. In *Merlin's Wood*, he is mutilated and buried alive. George Huxley loses his identity and dies, becoming only his son's monstrous memory. Tallis Keeton becomes a tree and lives through millennia of pain. Argo, like the *Mary Rose*, must be raised, but the act of raising is itself destructive.⁵⁸ The image of building a ship can reflect both identity formation and the creation of a narrative programme. When Odysseus creates his raft on which to escape from Calypso, he remakes himself.⁵⁹ Valerius Flaccus' Argo features an ekphrasis of images which tell stories featured in his key poetic predecessors, Peleus and Thetis from Catullus 64 and the Lapiths and Centaurs from Ovid.⁶⁰

The violence of Argo's emergence continues, tempered by the dawn, which had been a source of time pressure, but is now a symbol of hope for renewal:

⁵⁷ *Celtika* 40.

⁵⁸ The raising of the *Mary Rose* was a key cultural event of the early 80s (1982): see Rule (1983) and Marsden (2003).

⁵⁹ Hom. *Od.* 5.234–61, with Christensen (2020) 9–14.

⁶⁰ Ov. *Met.* 12.210–535. On Valerius' ekphrasis of the Argo at 1.130–48, see Heerink (2014).

The rising of Argo was coinciding with the first true passage into dawn. Even as we stood, the brightness grew stronger over the bleak forest to the south, dawn fire rising in a steady arc.

And then she struck the ice. The surface of the lake exploded upwards, a fountain of glittering shards falling around the dark hull as the old ship, mast-shattered and weed-wracked, nosed up from the deeps, the tall prow draining water, rising with solemnity, almost dignity, branches snapping off like oars, until it had half stretched out from the lake [...] then falling back, the stern coming up, the crouching figure of the goddess draped in longfronded weed, the whole boat shuddering like a waking beast on the cold water, then settling and becoming still.⁶¹

The explosion of ice is at once destructive, terrifying and inspiring. The compound words give a flavour of oral epic ('mast-shattered', 'weed-wracked', 'longfronded'). The still growing wood parodies ship-building, as the protruding branches evoke oars, fragile and friable. The Argo is personified as a water creature tentatively emerging ('nosed', 'shuddering like a waking beast'), characterised by 'solemnity' and 'dignity'. Argo brings with her the equally ruined figure of Jason, presented as if he were a figurehead or a statue on a crucifix:

Hanging from the mast in a web of ropes and weeds was the shape of a man, his head stretched back as if he had died screaming to the heavens. [...] Dawn light caught the living glitter of his eyes. Even from the edge of the lake I sensed that he was watching me.

'I knew you would survive [...]' I whispered to him. [...] He wasn't dead, but he was in deep cold.⁶² (*Celtika* 41)

Between life and death, Jason embodies anguish. The water pouring from him replaces or extends the screams of his long tragic grief and apparent death. However, the light touches him too, and Holdstock makes clear that he is not fully dead. Even in cryonic fugue, he remains threatening.

But something was wrong with Argo. She was too still, now, too quiet for the vibrant, urgent ship. When she had been launched she had strained at the ropes. More than sixty men had been needed to hold her on the slipway. She had writhed and

61 *Celtika* 40.

62 *Celtika* 41.

wrestled to get free, to find the ocean, and when she had finally been released she had struck the water of the harbour with such speed and energy that she had sunk for a moment before surfacing and turning to open water. The argonauts had been hard-pressed to get aboard her, swimming out and crawling up the ropes to find their benches and their oars, to slow the impatient ship and turn her back to the docks.

She had been such a strong ship. So alive! But now [...]

Merlin's remembered ship, the one from the 'original' journey, was full of energy, life and power. Rather than needing to be pushed, she needed to be held back. This is an intensification of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Argo, who cannot be pushed in by anyone, even Hercules, but only moves when Orpheus plays, figurehead drinking from the waves.⁶³ In Holdstock, fifty Argonauts striving to push her in become sixty men holding her back; the dipped figurehead becomes a complete dive underwater. The Argonauts are not in place waiting to row but instead become like insects themselves, swimming and crawling over the Argo to catch up. However, the intense life of the mythical Argo is introduced to mourn the energy and life completely expended by the explosive emergence from the frozen lake and the re-animation of Jason.

'She's dead. The ship is dead.'

Poor Argo. She had sailed so far with her precious cargo. She had taken Jason to the deepest grave she could find, a place of memory and magic. She had not expected to rise again, but my voice, my message, had set the heart in the oak at work once more and she had striven to return to the surface. The effort, it seemed, had been too much, and she had perished even as she passed life back to the captain.

'I'm sorry,' I whispered. 'I didn't know how hard it would be for you.'⁶⁴

The ship has the power to bring the character to life and re-animate the story. However, the cost of restarting the story is not paid by Merlin, or Holdstock, but by the previous Argo. This new Argo must overwrite the old ones.

Jason is revived, 'his words rambling and incoherent, his mood occasionally violent', and still bearing the wound caused by the falling spar of the ship.⁶⁵ He

⁶³ *Tanglewood Tales* 232.

⁶⁴ *Celtika* 41.

⁶⁵ *Celtika* 43.

embodies continuity: the scars are pale ‘but he was otherwise as burnished as when I’d last seen him alive, in Iolkos’;⁶⁶ his eyes are ‘as sharp as ever’.⁶⁷ His hands shake but ‘his smile was as beguiling and ambiguous as ever’.⁶⁸ Holdstock clearly signals the tension between continuity and change, making his Jason recognizable but also shaped by the experience of coming back from the dead.

The ship gave her vitality for Jason, but her generosity contrasts with the self-absorption of Jason and Merlin, both conserving their energy for their own objectives. Merlin uses a little of his life force to show Jason magically what Medea really did with his children. This reanimation, a recreation of Medea’s illusion, allows Jason to see through it. This enables a divine perspective, not just re-living the past, like a traumatic flashback, but seeing it differently.

Holdstock is fascinated by the cost of power, and the balance of one life, or story, against another. Argo raises herself, but in beginning of the new story, loses her divine power. The description reverses Hawthorne’s divine launching while transferring life force to Jason and requiring Merlin to make difficult decisions about investment of power.

RE-BUILDING AND RE-ANIMATING: RIVERS AND BOATS OF MYTH

The second section of *Celtika*, entitled *The Spirit of the Ship*, begins with a description of the (mostly) dead Argo. Argo, and the reinvented story, retain a spark of life. Here, Holdstock evokes Valerius Flaccus’ ekphrasis (1.130–48) of the newly built ship:

I had never forgotten Argo’s beauty. Even now, as she lay listless on the lakeside, rotting, weed-wracked, her slender hull streaked with bright colour and images of the gods and elementals of Jason’s Greek Land, she was wonderful to witness. [...] from the sharp prow to the elegant curve of her stern, rising to the split and quiet-eyed wooden image of Hera. She almost shuddered when touched, a memory of life,

66 *Celtika* 43.

67 *Celtika* 43.

68 *Celtika* 43.

and seemed to whisper [...]: build me back. Build me better. Build me for the quest. I've been dying too long.

I had thought the ship had died [...] I felt the final spark of life still glowing, [...] as she had held on for nearly a thousand years.⁶⁹

The phrase 'gods and elementals' suggests Valerius' description of the images on Argo's hull, especially Thetis and the sea nymphs accompanying her to her wedding (VF *Arg.* 1.130–9), but also perhaps the centaurs in battle with the Lapiths (1.140–8). However Holdstock's phrase allows a looser interpretation, suggesting wider and more complex connections with the divine, Greek and beyond. The wooden image of Hera marks the connection with Harryhausen's figurehead, the split symbolising Holdstock's decision to move away from her guardianship.

The trade-off between life force and supernatural power, vitality and the sublime, encapsulated in Merlin's central tragic dilemma (magic or ageing?), operates for the Argo. The effort to break out of the lake and revive Jason from suspended animation (or resurrect him: it is not wholly clear which) cost the ship her own supernatural sentience:

'The ship is dead. Argo is dead. The goddess has left her.'

'I know. The effort of resurrection was too much.'

[...] 'Perhaps Medea had blinded the goddess as much as she had blinded us.'

[...]

'But the ship is still useful. [...] we'll tow Argo to the shore and rebuild her. [...] perhaps we can call the goddess back.'

[...] 'But if not, we'll have to sail without her.'⁷⁰

Jason blamed Hera/Argo for their failure to intervene against Medea's killing of his children. Here, instead, he accepts that there are limits to the divine power of Argo. Argo is not straightforwardly identified with the goddess but inhabited by her for a time. Jason's attitude to the divine sentience of Argo is bluntly opportunistic: he wants to use her. Divine sponsorship is a tool, but dispensable.

The narrator presents his attitude without comment, but displays greater reverence and emotional engagement: 'I had never forgotten Argo's beauty [...] she was wonderful to witness.' (67) Merlin feels both wonder and regret: he empha-

⁶⁹ *Celtika* 67.

⁷⁰ *Celtika* 52–3.

sises the beauty even in dissolution ('slender', 'bright', 'wonderful', 'sleekness', 'flowing', 'elegant'). The echo of sentience ('listless', 'quiet-eyed', 'almost shuddered', 'whispering') may be Merlin's denial, but, as with Jason, suggests a continuing life even in apparent death. The story is both a reworking and a new life. No matter how distant, broken and fragmentary, a myth can always come back to life. The gendered representation of both ship and story material suggests a rape victim recovering from trauma ('almost shuddered when touched'). Holdstock often sexualises his story material: Guiwenneth in *Mythago Wood* is a prime example. As the love interest of George Huxley and both his sons, she also symbolises the desire to enter the mythology itself. She also forms the subject matter of one of the key stories, that of Peredur.⁷¹ In Holdstock's myth-making, taking ownership of a story does not just risk cultural appropriation, but can even feel like violation. The fantasy is that myth will consent, will actively aid the storyteller. The fear is that the myth will take vengeance for the violation.

Jason's initial indifference to Argo's sacrifice represents denial or bravado. When he orders the local shipbuilders to take her to pieces before they rebuild, he expresses loss, grief and love, as well as hope for the future:

'Goodbye, Old Ship. Goodbye, Old Swan. But now I will see you put on flower again. I will see leaf spring from your deck. New life to this great old ship. I loved you once, Argo, when you were guided by Hera, greathearted Hera. I will love you again with a new guardian spirit. I promise this with my life!'

Then he turned to Lemanku and Jouhkan and said, '[...] Break her down to the inner ribs and inner ship. But stop there. We start again from there. Don't touch anything of the old ship inside.'⁷²

Holdstock combines bird metaphors ('Old Swan') with plants ('flower again', 'leaf spring') to suggest a cyclical temporality which arises from the natural world, as well as love poetry. Divine power remains animistic in Holdstock's understanding of ancient religion. Jason's instructions to Lemanku and Jouhkan indicate a sort of skeletal humanity to Argo, in addition to the multi-layered nature of myth, religion and culture. We might, however, be suspicious of Jason's

⁷¹ Tallis Keeton's obsession with Scathach in *Lavondyss* complicates the gendered structures of Holdstock's stories, in which protagonists are mostly men, and objects of desire (sinister, unreliable, uncanny) are usually women.

⁷² *Celtika* 68.

promise, given the Euripidean tradition. Argo as goddess remains vulnerable to changeable human emotions.

When Merlin recounts the building of Argo, from the Greek myth, he implies that Argos himself was an incarnation of a god:

I had seen nothing of the construction of Argo, those centuries ago in Greek Land, when Jason had first ordered it and the boat-builder Argos had emerged from the night and nowhere and offered his services. [...] The silent boat-builder had finished his work; the rotten and ancient hulk that always lay at Argo's heart had been encased in fine new wood and bright paint, decorated with symbols of sea and sky and the protecting gods. Jason himself had gone to Zeus's oracle at Dodona and cut a branch from the sacred oak for Argo's new keel.⁷³

Argos, who 'emerged from night and nowhere', preserves his mystery by remaining silent, and the prehistoric 'heartwood' of Argo remains unseen. In this version, the oak of Dodona is not the determining aspect of Argo's sentience, forming only the keel, not the heart. Holdstock implies that Greek myth is only one layer in a tradition of storytelling and building that goes back as far as the existence of hominids, perhaps even before. The supernatural is not Greek in particular, but comes closer when people go further back in time.

Later, Merlin remembers his first encounter with the sacred heart of the ship:

[...] this was no ordinary vessel. There was nothing that I could identify, and I was not prepared to open my soul to a deeper understanding, but below the deck, somewhere to the fore, there was an older heart than the massive oak beam that had been shaped to form her keel.

I ducked down into the bilges, started to move forward, and was *warned away!* I could think of it in no other terms than that. Not a voice, not a vision, just the most intense feeling that I was entering a place that was not just private or out of bounds, but was *forbidden*.⁷⁴

Merlin, who shares Argo's temporal continuity and longevity, is aware of the ship's deeper heart. As with the human protagonists and Ryhope Wood in the *Mythago* series, he is 'warned away'. Deep time is for initiates only, forbid-

⁷³ *Celtika* 68–9.

⁷⁴ *Celtika* 72.

den to others. This passage shows Argo acting as a microcosm of the primal forest, incorporating its layers in her various construction materials. The ship too has *penetralia*, sacred inner areas or parts, another aspect of the sexualisation of supernatural spatio-temporality in Holdstock.

The danger of attempting to enter or even understand this secret depth is made clear:

Mystified, thrilled, I decided to go back on to land, intending to find Argos, the shipwright who had constructed this galley, and ask him about his creation. But as if she sensed my curiosity, and had been made angry by my presence, Argo began to strain at the rope tethers. [...] The ship twisted and slid about on the mud ramp, like a throat-cut pig thrashing in its own blood. [...] Argo bucked and protested below my feet.

Launch me, she seemed to be saying. Test me in the water. Hurry!

The air was filled with a sound like Furies screaming. [...]

Released, Argo streaked down the ramp, stern-first into the harbour water, plunging deep below the surface, almost drowning me. When she came up she shuddered, an animal refreshing itself after a cold swim.⁷⁵

Holdstock intensifies still further the imagery of the launch scene: Argo is not just like an animal but ‘like a throat-cut pig thrashing in its own blood’.⁷⁶ Again she ‘shuddered’, but this time the sexual implications are displaced onto further animal imagery. The urgency to depart becomes a way of protecting herself from Merlin’s curiosity, or even becomes a threat to Merlin (‘almost drowning me’). The ‘sound like Furies screaming’ connects with the ‘Screaming Lake’. The female supernatural transforms from divinity to terrifying chthonic personification.

The re-building of Argo in Finland requires dangerous exposure, and there is a specific sacrifice, paid by the builder. The process of stripping down and reconstruction reveals the deep structures of the mythic vessel:

⁷⁵ *Celtika* 72.

⁷⁶ He does not go as far as Henry Treece, who uses child sacrifice to get his Argo launched. Hercules tells Jason later that he greased the rollers with the blood of a child: Treece (1961) 106. Lemanku’s reference to greasing the logs for hauling ships overland with fish guts may be a tangential side-swipe at Treece.

Argo was not one ship, but many, and a fragment of each, even the oldest, was locked in the prow, the ship's heart, hidden in the slender double hull. Hera had been only the latest in a long line of guardians of this Otherworldly vessel. To crouch in her prow was to feel the flow of rivers and seas that had persisted through time, to smell old wood, old leather, old ropes, shaped and stretched into vessels that had drifted, sailed, rowed and ploughed beyond the known worlds of their builders.

So much life in one cold hulk.

Now, lifetimes later, the skin was ripped from the rotting remnant of that proud and vigorous ship. In the frost-sheened, rosy dawn, and under Jason's supervision, Lemanku tore away the planks of the hull to expose part of the hidden heart of Argo. I watched in fascination as the ship-shaped cage of branches was revealed, a tangled network of growth from the old oak that had been laid by Argos, filling the hull like veins. The growth had split the planking, but held it together too, in a protecting embrace.⁷⁷

Holdstock's mythical landscapes included from the beginning rivers that shifted shape and boats that travelled through time as well as space: the Sticklebrook flows through *Mythago Wood* and transforms from stream to enormous stately river. A small wooden boat, which the Huxley boys send through it, becomes figuratively the barge which Sorthalan, the Charon figure, steers. The river acts as a passage deeper in as well as a crossing point from one level to another. Here Holdstock expresses clearly his conception of bodies of water and water vehicles as images of temporality: lakes, rivers and seas, barges, ferries and ships, all reflect the fluidity and instability of time and story, as well as being places of refuge and rescue.⁷⁸ The emphasis on growth (and later ropes) as both constraining, splitting, veining and protecting reflects a similar ambivalence about the structures of storytelling. The changes of myth, its new growths, can both energise, and if they go too far, obliterate. Barthes replaces the Ship of Theseus with the Argo, and the idea of the ship that can be completely reconfigured and replaced

⁷⁷ *Celtika* 73.

⁷⁸ Holdstock and Kincaid discussed the importance of rivers in American culture: Kincaid (2011). Holdstock's treatment of rivers as boundaries and escape routes, sites of challenge and threat, as well as hope and escape, are similar to those of Black American readers and scholars, for whom rivers are both sites of danger (rape, drowning) and salvation (baptism, escape, travel to non-slave states).

lurks under Holdstock's description of reconstruction.⁷⁹ At what point does the myth become a new story altogether? Is *The Merlin Codex* an *Argonautica* or something else? Holdstock wants to hold onto the power of ancient story while making room for his own creativity, agency and innovation.

A symbol of this creativity, linked to the temporality of the seasons, is the re-animation of Argo with a goddess from a new culture:

Life came back to Argo suddenly and unexpectedly, when the spark of the new sun was at its brightest.

Lemanku and two others were working inside the hull. The new keel had been laid, a fine piece of Pohjolan birch, beautifully carved and trimmed, part of it hollowed to contain the stub of the old Dodonian oak whose strength had taken Jason on his earlier voyage. Lemanku had gone to the spirit grove of Mielikki herself, the Lady of the Forest, and after a long ceremony, and the involvement of much drumming and singing, had cut down one of the tall ancestor birches. Mielikki would be our new protectress.⁸⁰

The unexpectedness of Argo's reanimation indicates the shipbuilder/creator's lack of final control. In the end, only a reader can bring a text to life in their mind. Argo's new keel, incorporating the remains of the Oak of Dodona in its hollow interior, symbolises belonging to a new place and time: now she is built around the sacred birch from the 'ancestor' trees of the Finnish goddess Mielikki, goddess of forest and hunting.⁸¹ This, too, comes at a cost:

Everything stopped, all movement, all sound, when Lemanku's howl of pain and fear split the cold air. Startled, I stared at the half-hull of the ship. Lemanku came tumbling over the side, still howling. His eyes were raw, bloody pits.⁸²

⁷⁹ Maggie Nelson's memoir *The Argonauts* uses Barthes' image of the Argo as a version of the ship of Theseus, and hence renewal, discussed in Lovatt (2021) 183–4; Nelson (2015) 5; Barthes (1977) 46.

⁸⁰ *Celtika* 86.

⁸¹ Holdstock's Mielikki resembles the Mielikki of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*; there are resemblances to the translation of Crawford (1888): Holdstock calls her 'Lady of the Forest', portrays her in bear fur, and with a lynx, for instance at *Celtika* (196), cf. 'Mistress of the Woods', Crawford (1888) 140; association with bears, 498.

⁸² *Celtika* 86.

Lemanku, the Finnish boat-builder, is blinded. Either the ship punished him for violating her inner space, or Mielikki punished him for cutting down her tree. He must complete the project without sight. Blindness as punishment inevitably evokes Oedipus, but also Phineus, who in the Argonautic tradition was best known through Apollonius' version, in which he was punished for revealing too much, helping people too much.⁸³ Where Apollonius' *Argonautica* shows Athena and Hera taking charge of building and recruitment, following Hera's desire for vengeance against Pelias, and Zeus' plan to open up the Bosphorus, here Jason seems to coerce the gods into cooperating with his plan. Holdstock's gods are more distant, capricious and threatening, but his human characters also have more agency.

Lemanku later clarifies what happened. Her lifespark has been exchanged for the spark of his vision:

'The spark has gone,' he whispered, shuddering, as he sipped a bowl of broth. 'She was so fast. She came out of nowhere. Such shimmering, brilliant woods. She came out of nowhere and took the spark away. Only night. Only dark. She'll kill me if I go back aboard [...]'

She? Did he mean Argo? Gentle, protecting Argo had done this terrible thing? I couldn't believe it, but Lemanku added, 'I must go to her grove. I must beg for my life [...]'

'Whose grove?'

'Mielikki. Mielikki is in the ship, now. Jason wanted such good wood, and birch from that grove is the finest. [...] I thought I'd done everything right. I'll pay for that mistake with my life as well as the dark. You all will. You'll need gentle gods to help you if you sail in that ship now.'⁸⁴

The potential vengeance and anger of Mielikki hangs over the Argo, and the negative prophecy of Lemanku's own death and that of others matches those of Idmon and Mopsus in Apollonius and Valerius. Propitiating and atoning to Mielikki, building a new relationship between Argo and the divine, now becomes

⁸³ Kincaid (2022) discusses the 'Oedipal conflict' in his chapter on war, but does not connect his Freudian reading to Oedipus tragedies. On the tragic and epic ancient Phineus variants, destructive father in the former, victim of the gods in the latter, see Lovatt (2021) 88–95.

⁸⁴ *Celtika* 87.

a central structuring aspect of the rest of this first volume. Where the Hera of the 1963 film is benign but limited in her ability to counteract Zeus, Holdstock's Mielikki is powerful but uncertain in her loyalties.

When Jason and Merlin discuss the dangers of the ship's new divine sponsor, they reflect on the traditions of divine intervention in the Argonaut myth:

'Capricious? They're all capricious! Tell me something I don't know. Do you think we couldn't have sailed to Colchis, stolen the fleece and returned to Iolkos in less than a season and without loss? We could have done it easily if the goddess had been so inclined to let us. She wanted her fun. She was playing an elaborate game with other gods, other spectres, other shadows on the mountain! I learned about such games before I even had my beard. It's a risk we take on any voyage, and the reason why so few among us are born suited to the challenge. How old did you say you were, Antiokus?'

'Very old.'

'So don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about.'

I knew very well what he was talking about. I murmured, 'Odysseus shared your view.'⁸⁵

Jason is typically bitter and 'dismissive' of the dangers. His reference to Hera as 'playing an elaborate game' evokes the 1963 film once more, with its table top game board, on which Jason features as a live game piece, also ironically referencing the unusually bearded 1963 Jason. Merlin, and Holdstock, also enjoy connecting Jason with Odysseus, who he increasingly resembles: old, experienced, wily and ruthless. Merlin also invokes the Trojan Horse, which he envisages as a repurposed ship, compared to Argo herself:

He had been young, when he had quested for the fleece; and Odysseus had been older and wiser and more arrogant. Now Jason was older still, and angry. He had aged, but like wine in a wreck on the sea bed, without sampling life, or being sampled by it. He was a man in two parts: still young for the fight, yet old with thought and cunning. His middle years were hollow, like that broken but cunningly hollowed ship, tethered to horses, which the Trojans had dragged through their walls, only to have it spill out murderous Greeklanders from between its double hull; hollow, perhaps, like Argo herself, with her secret space that so far was denied to us, yet

85 *Celtika* 88.

which contained a ghost in a ghostly world of brilliant forest, that could strike and blind any man or woman who came too close.⁸⁶

Merlin suggests that Jason has outgrown Odysseus. The image of wine aging on the sea bed suggests the complexity of myth, growing deeper and more valuable with time, but also a directness in Holdstock's engagement with the past, which is ironised by the references to the 1963 film. Holdstock also gives an interpretation of the Trojan horse as a ship with a double hull, which further associates Argo's rebuilding with the layered reception of Greek myth, itself becoming a kind of treachery or betrayal. He implies that the doubleness of the hull gives room for spatial complexity, like the Tardis of *Doctor Who*, which is bigger on the inside. Holdstock uses the Argonaut story to draw readers into his own imaginative world, where, he warns, violence awaits.

The Argo's re-dedication and re-animation is accompanied by an animal image that evokes epic similes as well as Hawthorne's children's version, which compares the launched Argo to a swan (see p. 5 above):

The rebuilding of Argo was finished, though she had not yet been dedicated to her new, protecting goddess. And as if aware of this moment of transition from dead wood to new ship, the first flights of swans came, emerging from the glow of the slowly rising sun itself, silent but for the murmur of their wings. They passed over us, wave after wave of them, black-throated, redbilled, circling out over the frost-speckled forest then gliding in formations back towards the lake. Hundreds of them, aerial spirits signalling the coming of spring. They continued to come down on the water for an hour or more, fighting, squabbling, noisy, waiting for fish and spirit-fish to rise, so that they might feed.⁸⁷

The sublime impact of the glories of the natural world, bathed in dawn light, evokes traditions of swan imagery, complete with vivid compound epithets, connecting the divine Argo with bird migration.⁸⁸ Argo as wild creature is both beautiful and able to transport herself with apparent supernatural power.

⁸⁶ *Celtika* 89.

⁸⁷ *Celtika* 90.

⁸⁸ On bird imagery in epic, see Manolaraki (2012). On the sublime in Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*, see Oziewicz (2008).

The act of propitiation, the ritual ratification of Mielikki's sponsorship (or perhaps possession) of Argo, demonstrates Holdstock's multicultural European refashioning of Greek myth. Jason has used tales of his miraculous ship to gather a new miraculous crew of heroes from many different European traditions. The difficulty is that each needs their own launch ritual:

I sympathised with him. 'Since there's no question that you're leader and captain, why not pull rank and just sacrifice to Apollo and the Lady of the Forest? She'll be our protecting goddess, after all.'

'Each of them needs his charmed guardian,' Jason sighed. 'Rubobostes wants to sacrifice to someone who is bringer of fire, guardian of travellers, and healer of wounds taken in battle [Istarta]. He needs a living bat and the front paws of a wolf! The Cymbrii want to sacrifice to Indirabus, warlike watcher over the traveller and bringer of eloquence. They won't sail unless we can find a piglet. The Germanii want a snow hare for their fire-god and protector. The Cretan, Tairon, is proposing we sacrifice an infant by roasting it alive inside a metal urn! What madness!'⁸⁹

Jason first suggests that Argo herself contains everything needed to unify them:

'Argo herself, of course. She has fragments in her that are so timeless I can hardly bring myself to think of those long gone days. If the world began in fire, there is still a spark in her prow. If it began in flood, there is mud and moisture down below the deck. If it began in winter, we'll find a shard of ice deep in her heart! She has been there all the time and I hadn't seen it.'⁹⁰

Jason brings his crew together, on Merlin's advice, by using Argo herself as a symbol of unity, through the artefact of an oar, which 'whispers *eloquently* through the water',⁹¹ carved and blooded by every Argonaut, and burnt on a sacrificial fire.⁹² Argo thus functions as a symbol of wider European culture, history,

⁸⁹ *Celtika* 92.

⁹⁰ *Celtika* 93.

⁹¹ *Celtika* 93.

⁹² This oar evokes celebratory oars that symbolise victory in rowing races, but might also draw on Herakles' breaking of his oar and his unfinished attempt to make a new one in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, where the oar-making process is interrupted by the loss of Hylas.

religion and mythology, as well as incorporating uncountable chronological layers of divine guardianship, alongside symbols of apocalypse and creation.

The moment of launch is marked by the swans taking to the air again, and apparently this time Argo will remain calm. But fog rises, the lake begins to freeze. Jason has refused the Finnish sorcerer, Niiv, the right to join the voyage, as Apollonius' Jason refused Atalanta (Apollonius *Argonautica* 1.768–73). Now they bring her aboard, thinking the resistance to leaving is her doing. But she tells them it is the local spirits, *Voytazi*, trying to prevent them removing Mielikki.

This moment confirms that the goddess is actually aboard, part of the ship. While Merlin concentrates on magically melting the ice, Jason throws Niiv overboard, as retaliation against her trickery. Merlin rescues her; it seems that everything is freezing; Jason, Merlin and Niiv will all die and the story will stop in its tracks.

But Mielikki as Argo intervenes to rescue them all, relenting her anger because of Merlin's self-sacrifice on behalf of her servant Niiv. Afterwards, Merlin approaches the dangerous sacred inner part of the ship:

'No closer,' whispered Mielikki.

'You blinded her uncle, you tried to kill the girl, you tried to kill us all. Is this what we can expect from Mielikki, Argo's new protector?'

'The man was blinded because he came too close,' the whispered voice came back. 'The girl belongs to me. Yes, I tried to kill you all; why would I want to leave my land? What are you all, if not just cold spirits from cold lands? [...] So I have let you go. [...] And one more thing: I am at the edge of the world this ship contains, not within it, and someone deeper is aware of you, and wishes you dead. This for the girl's life; the rest I will decide as we sail.'

[...] We were on our way, but it was clear to me, now, that we were as much in danger from Argo as under her protection.⁹³

The first hundred pages of *Celtika*, then, function as an extended metapoetic re-launch of the Argonaut myth, with Holdstock reflecting on the costs, difficulties and rewards of adapting myth, and the complexities of representing the supernatural. Holdstock's adaptations are alive to multiple cultural constructions of supernatural activities and communications with the supernatural, both sanctioned by communities (religion) and unsanctioned (witchcraft). He builds

93 *Celtika* 100.

drama from live disputes around, dangers and risks of ritual activity, and emphasises the blurred boundaries between gods, mortals and other supernatural entities. He succeeds in combining the mystical, the ominous, the terrifying and the joyful, presenting a powerful experience of the supernatural, as well as a penetrating analysis of it.

ARGO IN THE REST OF *CELTIKA*: AGENCY AND RELATIONSHIP

The rest of *Celtika* features Argo, Mielikki and Niiv in various ways, as the initial emphasis on the ship's agency, power and danger has led us to expect. The Argo's first port of call is Alba, Urtha's kingdom, where Argo helps Merlin go to the Otherworld to find out what happened to Urtha's family, by 'shedding a ghost' from 'the time of the stone sanctuaries'.⁹⁴ Mielikki welcomes them and guides them into this shadow world:

'This is my place,' Mielikki said from behind the dark veil. 'The threshold place. I keep it as I like it. Walk on and you will have entered the land of your own shadows, and your children are there, Urtha.' She was young. Her eyes gleamed from behind the thin veil. This was not the sinister crone who watched over the deck of Argo.⁹⁵

Later she shows Merlin some of his own deep past by allowing him into her secret inner sanctuary:

I couldn't focus; I couldn't see clearly. Had I been home, albeit briefly?
Or just seen a glimpse of home, a world within the world, made possible by passing through Argo's spirit heart?⁹⁶

Argo mediates between worlds and times, becoming psychopomp and narrative facilitator. She also encourages Merlin's relationship with Niiv, speaking through her and taking them to a private space for lovemaking:

94 *Celtika* 144.

95 *Celtika* 145.

96 *Celtika* 150.

The oak barge slid into that hull as easily as dye into water, mist into a forest, absorbed and devoured, leaving Niiv and me wrapped together in the hold of the bigger ship, among the bales and sacks and stowed oars.⁹⁷

We see Argo's multiplicity in a different way, not as layers, but as avatars or detachable parts, which nevertheless also carry her intelligence and awareness, rather like a space ship with shuttles connected to the ship's central computer. There is also conflict, however: Jason becomes angry that Argo does not help him the same way she did during Hera's sponsorship, and urinates in the sacred heart of the ship (166–7). Mielikki also gives information about the relationships between Argo and her divine sponsors:

'The one who was here before,' she said, 'only visited. She was not always here. She came at her whim, or when this one you call Jason summoned her.'

Mielikki was referring to Hera; Hera had only promised limited advice to Jason, on that voyage. She had been part of a bigger, tighter game being played beyond the mortal realm.⁹⁸

As they undertake the Argonauts' Northern wanderings in reverse and Holdstock has to negotiate the difficulties of the journey (how did the Argo get from one unnavigable river to another?), Argo offers a miraculous solution, in which Niiv channels Mielikki's power, and they sail through a tiny stream, perhaps miniaturised, as Merlin looks out for predators and is worried about a crow.⁹⁹ This refracts the effects of the Sticklebrook in *Mythago Wood* which changes size dramatically and facilitates travel as well as psychological development of characters. Argo as ship of song is engaged in all aspects of the story, particularly the spiritual.

When they arrive in Greece and need to go overland, Mielikki instructs Jason to hide the carcass of the ship, and extract and bring with him the key parts: 'the figurehead of the forest lady' and the heart:

⁹⁷ *Celtika* 158.

⁹⁸ *Celtika* 198.

⁹⁹ *Celtika* 170–3.

Jason alone entered the Spirit of the Ship and under Mielikki's guidance hacked out the heart. The chunk of blackened wood looked no more than a lumpy raw-edged piece of shipwreck as he carried it to the wagons, but it echoed with ancient days.¹⁰⁰

At Delphi, when Medea disappears into the labyrinth of caves, also apparently connecting to the Otherworld or underworld, and distracts Jason with dead men raised and shaped to look like his sons, Jason calls on Apollo, Mielikki and Argo to grant him passage into the underworld.¹⁰¹ Merlin cannot follow, the Argonaut Tairon, the Cretan with the special ability of labyrinth walking, follows some of the way, to recognise the scent of Dodona. Jason's connection to Dodona and to the oak branch in Argo is fundamental, like a son:

The oak that had been crafted so carefully into the ship had claimed her captain as its son. There were a thousand spirits wandering inside Argo and Jason was one of them.¹⁰²

This passage suggests that Argo embodies the Otherworld, is the inner space of mythological history, as well as being an offshoot of the forest of Dodona (itself another primal forest like Ryhope Wood?). At 310–1 Merlin asks Argo for passage to Dodona, and Mielikki obliges, taking him again into her threshold place, and emphasising her feeling of wrongness and separation. Like Medea in Euripides, she is out of place, in the wrong landscape, or anxious about imminent threats: 'This place is too strange. I am out of my world.'¹⁰³

At Dodona the final confrontations of the first volume take place: Merlin and Medea; Jason and his first son, Thesokorus. Merlin remembers that he had loved Medea, Medea recognises and remembers Merlin; Thesokorus, taught by or even enchanted by Medea to hate his father, attempts to kill him, but at the last minute Medea releases him from the compulsion and he leaves. Jason rejects Merlin as a betrayer, who did not warn him of Medea's presence, and hobbles away, badly wounded. Merlin is left to return to Mielikki/Argo, who like him has been

100 *Celtika* 218.

101 *Celtika* 308.

102 *Celtika* 309.

103 *Celtika* 311.

watching unable to intervene, and who offers to take him home. Arbitrarily he chooses Alba, the country of Urtha (and Holdstock).

Merlin as narrator and character feels unmoored: ‘Nothing has turned out right. [...] I don’t know where to go next. I’ve lost the Path.’¹⁰⁴ Mielikki/Argo is no *deus ex machina*, and offers only potential for further instalments: ‘You can’t know that. Not yet. Not until everything is finished.’¹⁰⁵ Argo and her goddess provide Merlin and the reader with solace, comfort and hope for the sequel ([The Forest Lady] ‘embraced me gently’, ‘soothed me’, ‘held me’).¹⁰⁶ The stream shifts shape, the landscape changes, and the ‘small, beautiful ship’, a ‘spirit from Argo’, appears, leaving Merlin, Holdstock and us ‘Free for a while, to breathe and dream’.¹⁰⁷

Over the course of *Celtika*, Argo and her sponsoring goddesses have performed a wide range of narrative functions. The ship of myth, created from the fabric of forest, becomes a central character in the plot, with close emotional connections to Merlin as well as Jason, and operates as both plot space and mechanism.

GENRE AND MEANING

A central tension in Holdstock’s work is that between epic and tragedy, glory and kin-killing, making a name for oneself (creating and preserving a reputation as king, hero, sorcerer, historian, musician) and caring for or protecting one’s family.¹⁰⁸ George Huxley in *Mythago Wood* abandons his family in his obsession

104 *Celtika* 324.

105 *Celtika* 324.

106 *Celtika* 324.

107 *Celtika* 325.

108 This is to some extent simplified: it can be an imaginary family trumping the needs of a real one (Christian and Steven’s love for Guiwenneth in *Mythago Wood*), or the desire to recreate or mend a family that sends a character away from their broken and flawed family (Tallis Keeton in *Lavondyss*, who is motivated both by her desire to help Scathach, and to find Harry and to satisfy her curiosity), or the desire to bring a family back to life (Martin in *Merlin’s Wood*, where his wife and child have been possessed and destroyed by the spirits of Merlin and Vivien respectively). However, all three characters also desire to prove themselves and develop self-knowledge in the process.

with his research, as does Edward Wynne-Jones. This tension becomes more important in the *Merlin Codex*, perhaps because of its prominence in the *Argonautica* tradition (Jason abandons his mother, Medea abandons her family and even kills her brother, both Jason and Medea betray and bring about the death of their own children). Merlin's obsession with Jason and his family seems ultimately to be driven by his loss of connection to his own siblings. Urtha's trip away from Alba leads to the loss of his family. The epic journey, into the woods, into the deep, into distant lands or supernatural realms, otherworlds or underworlds, with its connotations of transcendence, initiation and the achievement of renown, contrasts with the difficulty of staying at home, keeping connections, having a meaningful life with close family. The tragic matter of family conflict both drives epic alienation and creates meaning in the process of striving for knowledge and achievement (Jason's quest for his sons, Merlin's rediscovery of his own past). Holdstock has a profound suspicion of heroism both epic and tragic; however, family relationships also provide little comfort or security. The sublimity of suffering and survival against the odds alongside the power of intense experience are the rewards of his worlds.

The joy of the *Merlin Codex* comes in the resurrection of old stories, the creation of new life from dead wood. In this, Argo is central. The intensity comes from multiplication of tragic models, refracted through an epic framework, in which Argo acts as the divine apparatus. At key moments the ship mediates between the mortal characters and the supernatural, not the only character to do this, but one of the most important, both viewing divinity, acting as liminal space, and ritual instructor. The supernatural Argo in her union with the Finnish goddess Mielikki symbolises the renewal of myth by hybridization. The ship is a site of generic crossing, as well as multiplication: the ancient genres of epic and tragedy compete with and intensify each other, underlying Holdstock's play on modern genres of fantasy, horror, historical fiction and romance. The ship is in some ways an outcropping, a new offshoot of Holdstock's earlier work, in which the forest performs a similar role, but in others a new development, more complex, varied and flexible to enable a multiple tragedy that takes on and becomes a worthy successor to both Apollonius' *Argonautica* and Euripides' *Medea*.

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Helen Lovatt

University of Nottingham

Department of Classics and Archaeology, Humanities Building, University Park,
Nottingham, NG7 2RD.

helen.lovatt@nottingham.ac.uk

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