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Aetiology and Evolution in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius

Wherever the Argonauts go, they leave behind traces of their passage in a variety of ways. These include the erection of cult sites and the founding of new cults; they can even involve changes in the surface of the earth such as the appearance of a new fountain, the stabilization of previously moving rocks, or the creation of a new land mass. In short, Apollonius' *Argo* witnesses, or causes changes in, the physical and cultural terrain it passes, changes that became fixed in time and could still be observed in his day, as the poet avers.

When discussing the *Argonautica* within its Ptolemaic context, Richard Hunter (*The Argonautica of Apollonius: Literary Studies* [Cambridge 1993] 162–69) observed that the Argonautic voyage was associated with the history of the world on the basis of elements scattered throughout the poem (Orpheus' cosmogony, the presence of Empedocles' primeval monstrosities, etc.). Hunter argues that this evolution leads toward a "positively evaluated Greek culture" and is to be read "in the context of the Ptolemies' self-projection as the heirs and transmitters of traditional Greek culture in a changed world" (168). In this paper, I shall expand on the list of evolutionary moments mentioned by Hunter and argue (1) that the many passing aetiologies encountered in the poem are to be subsumed under, and support, the larger aetiological category of evolution and (2) that the direction toward which this process leads us is not positive, but negative. By examining these cosmogonical events in as chronological a fashion as the poem allows, we can observe that the development from primordial chaos, through a period of monsters and skin-clad heroes of brawn, to an orderly, monster-free world run by fashionably dressed heroes of limited skills is accompanied by a moral disintegration; as a result of both developments, the newer generations of mortals turn out to be more human, but less humane.

As we observe flashbacks to the prehistory of the epic adventure, extending back to creation, and encounter the many relics left behind by the Argonauts, the overwhelming sense we get is that the Argonautic expedition culminated in an evolutionary endpoint. The poet and his audience are thus in the position of inhabiting a post-heroic age that Jason and his men did much to establish; it was a time in which, as Catullus said, siblings killed siblings, fathers killed their sons, mothers lusted after their sons, and the gods refused to visit the earth (64.397–408).