

Define what makes a monster in Graeco-Roman mythology. What are the artistic challenges in representing these monsters?

A monster in Graeco-Roman mythology can be hard to define, and modern scholars are not able to agree upon a set criterion to follow¹. Something which is malformed is not always a monster, the same sentiment being true for something with a malevolent nature². Though there is not one singular telling of any one story, or one set of criteria which encapsulates all the monsters within mythology, there are common themes which continue throughout all of those creatures which are defined as 'monstrous'³. Some attributes given to descriptors of monsters, such as appearance, are less important than others, like action. But to hold as complete a definition as possible would be to incorporate as many facets as possible without becoming too specific- this becomes especially true when considering that within art, appearance becomes the most important in terms of recognition⁴. In its most basic form, a monster can be defined as a being which presents a challenge in which the hero needs to overcome, but there are other qualities which need to be considered⁵.

Mythology and art are intrinsically connected, and support one another in preserving the longevity of a story⁶. However, not every story in which a creature appears is classified as 'mythology' and not every abnormal creature which appears within them is classified as a 'monster'⁷. This can be seen with griffins and how they are depicted in works that are considered 'non-fictional' in nature by authors such as Herodotus⁸. Furthermore, a myth is not simply a story- that would be the simplified view⁹. A myth, briefly speaking, tells a tale in a manner which allows an understanding in a form that differs from historical fact¹⁰. So, although a myth may not be factually accurate, those who believe in them would not call them false¹¹. Really, myths just allow a story to be told in a way which would hold great meaning for those who hear or read them, and monsters in that sense are just a conduit for the story to flow through¹².

In a more general sense, a monster can be viewed as something which is savage and not very aesthetically appealing¹³. This is true in a large number of cases, but is too broad a statement to encapsulate the intricacies of every monster found within Graeco-Roman mythology. To define a monster is a hard task because due to their nature, many defining boundaries set are ones in which are broken or crossed¹⁴. It further becomes a hard task to define due to the natural shift that language goes through over time¹⁵. The word itself derives from 'Monstrum', this is a Latin word which originally was used to describe a supernatural event created by the gods as a warning¹⁶. Over time the meaning evolved to encompass strange (and often malevolent) creatures¹⁷. But even that is not an apt enough description as it is too broad and unclear a statement to be useful in defining anything. With monsters,

¹ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1

² Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1

³ Hansen, 2004, p.14; Dowden, 1992, p.97

⁴ Shapiro, 1994, p.5

⁵ Dowden, 1992, p.95

⁶ Shapiro, 1994, p.7

⁷ Graf, 1993, p.6; Dowden, 1992, p.94

⁸ Hdt. 3.116.1

⁹ Graf, 1993, p.1

¹⁰ Dowden, 1992, p.3

¹¹ Dowden, 1992, p.2

¹² Dowden, 1992, p.2

¹³ Felton, 2012, p.104

¹⁴ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1

¹⁵ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1

¹⁶ Felton, 2012, p.104

¹⁷ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1

attempted definitions often use ‘most’ and ‘often’ as the existence of a monster within literature is one which is never concrete in its criteria¹⁸.

Artistic representations help to define what a monster truly is within the Graeco-Roman world because it helps to demonstrate in a visual sense how there is always something ‘other’ about them¹⁹. The challenges the artists face in keeping these features recognisable helps to demonstrate how important they are in what deems something a monster rather than just an adversary or abnormal creature²⁰. For example, the Hydra is often depicted as a many-headed monster, the numbers of heads and what those heads look like varying depending on who is telling or portraying the story²¹. Context is often invaluable when presenting such monsters in art for this very reason- their appearances are never set in stone²². Shifting interpretations of monsters over time also present a challenge to artists²³. This is because with a base knowledge and expectation of how a monster is commonly represented as appearing, any changes which are made would have to be done so in a manner that keeps the monster recognisable, but suitable for the current audience. For example, the Siren was most commonly depicted as ugly human-bird hybrids in earlier art, but developed into beautiful creatures²⁴. This is quite an extreme change, and to look at the two depictions side-by-side, they would be hardly similar at all²⁵. But they have remained recognisable throughout time due to the incorporation of symbolism which is unique to them, in this instance the associations towards them being song and the luring of sailors²⁶. However, because myths (and thus monsters) are ever shifting and are not a defined thing, the change is more natural than it might have been had the stories been rigid in their telling for there had always been differences in their descriptions from the beginning²⁷.

Furthermore, despite the seeming abundance of monsters within classical media, their importance is often overshadowed²⁸. This may be due to the fact that their sole purpose within the story is as an adversary for the hero to defeat- something which could be argued to define them²⁹. This facet is something that many modern scholars include within their attempts to define what a monster is, and it would not be inaccurate to say that the danger they pose to the hero is a common theme which is seen³⁰. Though, once more due to the common characteristics of monsters crossing boundaries put in place in an attempt to define them, this is not a fool-proof definition. For example, sometimes the monster is not ‘defeated’ in a literal sense and only avoided or outsmarted, such as is the case with the Sirens within the *Odyssey*³¹. They are still alive and able to pose a risk as the hero simply outsmarted the Sirens with rope or wax and sailed by³².

One of the more common ways in which a monster is defined, is with its appearance³³. In both the stories and the art that comes from it, the monsters presented tend to have abnormal and horrific features³⁴. They are often unnaturally formed- common distinctions being a multitude of limbs or a

¹⁸ Hansen, 2005, p.228

¹⁹ Shapiro, 1994, p.4

²⁰ Dowden, 1992, p.95

²¹ Graf, 2006

²² Dowden, 1992, p.97

²³ Shapiro, 1994, p.4

²⁴ Richardson, 2012

²⁵ Siren Painter, ca. 480-470 BC; Belly, 1867

²⁶ Richardson, 2012

²⁷ Hard, 2020, p.1

²⁸ Dowden, 1992, p.95

²⁹ Dowden, 1992, p.94

³⁰ Felton, 2012, p.105

³¹ Hom. Od. 12.153

³² Hom. Od. 12.153

³³ Felton, 2012, p.104; Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1; Hansen, 2005, p.228

³⁴ Felton, 2012, p.104; Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1

mix of characteristics from various creatures³⁵. Also common are large sizes and great power, both of which are often used in attempts to beat the hero or exact evil deeds³⁶. They provide a safe environment in which to cause a scare, and their use within literature is one which can be used to explore the real-life trials in a manner in which they can see them beaten³⁷.

However, these attributes are not always easily translated into art, and as such many artists may have found themselves challenged when trying to depict such a creature. For example, the Cerberus is most commonly depicted as a three-headed dog despite the literature describing a " fifty-headed, ruthless and mighty" creature³⁸. Reducing the heads in the artistic depiction is done so out of both necessity and aesthetic purposes- trying to include all of the heads in the work is not a realistic goal and as such, the challenge becomes one where they have to decide just how far they are able to simplify the creature³⁹. Oversimplified and they may lose just how far the monster is recognisable, but too complicated and the piece becomes messy and unfocused⁴⁰. A certain aesthetic is important if the intended story is to be portrayed correctly, as if the piece becomes too crowded then it may become more of a challenge to interpret what is being represented.

Another example of a creature with 'monstrous' features would be Typhon⁴¹. It is described as having "a hundred drakons' heads" and "wings all over his body"⁴². This indicates a pattern, and therefore demonstrates that such abnormal looks can help define what it means to be a monster within Graeco-Roman mythology. This is a clear example of a situation where the myth fully encapsulates the idea of 'other' within the monster being portrayed, and also where such a description would challenge an artist due to the lack of clarity. This is because "wings all over its body" does not translate cleanly into reality⁴³. It is unclear as to whether the wings are just numerous and on different body parts, or if the descriptor should be taken at face value, and monsters described as such would be a continuous challenge in artistic representation⁴⁴. This is because not only does the artist need to make the description make sense in their own mind, with a manageable design to create. But they also have to make the monster recognisable enough that even with the unclear and interpretive description contained in the literature or oral recounting, within their own art piece the viewer knows which monster it is and which story it comes from⁴⁵.

But, despite the clear evidence suggesting that an abnormal form equals that of a monster, this is not always the case⁴⁶. This is because creatures such as the Pegasus can be found within Graeco-Roman mythology but are not considered monsters, in spite of the fact that their form is clearly not one based on realism as seen in this instance by the wings and ability to fly⁴⁷. This helps define a monster because even if a creature's appearance fits the bill of what could be considered abnormal, their actions would prevent them from being defined as such. For example, Pegasus is a hybrid but is in no

³⁵ Felton, 2012, p.104

³⁶ Felton, 2012, p.104

³⁷ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.2

³⁸ Hes. Th. 312

³⁹ Dowden, 1992, p.95

⁴⁰ Shapiro, 1994, p.8

⁴¹ Dowden, 1992, p.95; Dowden, 2012

⁴² Apollod. 1.6.3

⁴³ Apollod. Bibl. 1.6.3

⁴⁴ Dowden, 1992, p.95

⁴⁵ Shapiro, 1994, p.4

⁴⁶ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.1

⁴⁷ Rose and Hornblower, 2012

way an obstacle in which the hero needs to pass⁴⁸. In fact, Pegasus actively helps Bellerophon in his quest to not only defeat the Chimaera, but also the Amazons and Solymi⁴⁹.

Another facet which is argued to be able to be used to define a monster, is their use in portraying very real fears⁵⁰. This argument is weaker than others due to the fact that monsters aren't the sole or even greatest ownership of this metaphor within Graeco-Roman literature, as evidenced simply by the fear of death and punishment which is so prevalent throughout all the myths⁵¹. The monster is never the sole reason for this fear- it often coming from human antagonists or defiance against the gods- but does allow the consumer to safely experience dangerous trials and thrills⁵². However, this does not mean that it can't be used to help define what a monster is. This is because many a monster within mythology represent an obstacle that may be faced within the lives of those who hear the story- but presented in a manner more befitting of its outlandish tale⁵³. For example, Charybdis and Scylla represent the dangers of sea travel with the danger being presented as two monsters⁵⁴. Charybdis in particular represents the fear people would have had for rough areas of the sea as her form is one of a whirlpool- scholars later having found the inspiration likely to have been drawn from the Straits of Messina⁵⁵. Therefore, it could be argued that a 'monster' is simply a manner in which a fear is portrayed through story and as such, the form it takes could hold very little difference to its definition.

Moreover, the complicated nature of monsters within literature and the challenges they pose for artists are not just confined to an abundance of physical features either⁵⁶. In the *Odyssey*, one of the monsters encountered is the Siren and despite a good description being given on how they pose a danger, with the Sirens described as creatures "who sit in a meadow, surrounded by a great heap of rotting men", their physical description is lacking⁵⁷. The challenge then becomes one of representation, as if no clear physical features are described, or if the physical appearance is not one of which the focus is laid upon, then the artist must use other means in which to ensure the monster is recognisable⁵⁸.

In fact, the idea that form is less important to what defines a monster than first thought, is continued with the existence of Sirens⁵⁹. The lack of textual description within the *Odyssey* (though their forms are described in other stories) reinforces the idea that it is not the appearance that defines a monster, rather it is the action that they take against the hero⁶⁰. The Sirens are very clearly malevolent creatures within the text, "If anyone draws near to them in ignorance and hears the Sirens' voices, there is no homecoming for him" and have clearly committed evil deeds in the past⁶¹. Their actions are ones which can be described as 'monstrous' and the clear threat they pose bolsters their status as monster- the lack of focus upon physical description notwithstanding.

Though, as mentioned earlier, later stories do detail a description of the Sirens, one of them from the 'Voyage of Argo' by Apollonius⁶². Within this tale they are depicted as being "partly like birds and

⁴⁸ Rose and Hornblower, 2012

⁴⁹ Rose and Hornblower, 2012

⁵⁰ Dowden, 1992, p.100

⁵¹ Graf, 1993, p.17

⁵² Felton, 2012, p.103

⁵³ Dowden, 1992, p.100

⁵⁴ Dräger, 2006

⁵⁵ Rose and Hornblower, 2012

⁵⁶ Dowden, 1992, p.100

⁵⁷ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.43; Hom. Od. 12.36

⁵⁸ Dowden, 1992, p.95

⁵⁹ Richardson, 2012

⁶⁰ Richardson, 2012

⁶¹ Hom. Od. 12.36

⁶² Apollon. 4.897; Murgatroyd, 2013, p.44

partly like girls in appearance'⁶³. This, though not taking away from the fact that a monster need not have a physical description to be defined as such, continues the common theme of abnormal appearances. Therefore, making it so that when defining what makes a monster, their appearance can play a large part in helping to create such a creature even if it is not a fully consistent criterion.

In conclusion, despite the fact that a monster within the Graeco-Roman world is not something easily defined, there are clear attributes which appear throughout⁶⁴. Although it is true that to define a monster solely by an abnormal appearance would be incorrect, it would also be incorrect to discount it completely. Overall, a monster within Graeco-Roman mythology can be defined as a creature having an abnormal aspect about it, (often resulting in a malformed appearance), which plays a role in challenging the hero's journey⁶⁵. To define a monster would be to include all of the ways in which they consistently affect the hero's story, and how they are represented outside of the confines of literature⁶⁶. These monsters not only live through the myths written down, but also through the art produced⁶⁷. And though the challenges the artist may face are numerous, a successful depiction is invaluable for the longevity of the story and the monster within it⁶⁸. A monster is something that not only challenges, but is representative of the fears of both the reader and the hero⁶⁹. They are a force which needs to be overcome in order for the journey or quest to be successful⁷⁰.

⁶³ Apollon. 4.897

⁶⁴ Felton, 2012, p.104

⁶⁵ Dowden, 1992, p.94

⁶⁶ Felton, 2012, p.104

⁶⁷ Shapiro, 1994, p.4

⁶⁸ Dowden, 1992, p.97

⁶⁹ Murgatroyd, 2013, p.2

⁷⁰ Hansen, 2005, p.228

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