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Monsters in Graeco-Roman Mythology

Many works of Graeco-Roman mythology feature monsters, fantastical creatures set apart from mortals, gods, heroes, and other beings found in the tales, but the boundaries of what define a monster are rather unclear to contemporary readers. The original writers of these myths may have had a universally understood conception of what made a monster and even a precise criteria that separated them from the other figures of myth, but the modern understanding of the texts leaves such distinctions up for some debate. A few scholars have tried to determine their own definition of a monster from Greek and Roman mythology, even fewer have had their definition widely accepted. Apart from the challenges of defining a monster of Graeco-Roman myth, there is also the challenge of representing them in art. It is the purpose of this essay to define what makes a monster in Graeco-Roman mythology and discuss the artistic challenges in representing them.

In attempting to define a monster in Graeco-Roman mythology, one must first look to how they have been defined in the past. One attempt to define the word 'monster' in these myths comes from the figure of Jenny Strauss Clay, a Jr. Professor of Classics at the University of Virginia. Clay states that "by definition, the monstrous is the anomalous, that which does not fit into usual classifications or transgresses normal limits, and hence may be considered dangerous" and that "generally speaking, Greek monsters are hybrid creatures that unite normally disparate

elements, for example, the human and the bestial, or combine distinct species” (Clay 106). In these quotations, Clay explains that monsters are hard to classify, by definition, but that they are usually hybrid creatures. This is an appropriate but loose definition. Here and throughout her article, Clay draws on a variety of sources, paraphrasing several quotes that amount to a vague impression of what a monster is in this mythology. The issue with the definition that Clay provides is that some classic ‘monsters’ are excluded or not blatantly included in her language. When considering this loose definition of monstrosity, famous monsters like the Minotaur, Medusa, the Sirens, and the Harpies come to mind, as they are all generally described as monsters and each have a combination of human and bestial parts. However, some may not see all of the creatures on this list as monsters and some might think that many other well-known monsters don’t quite fit this definition. Another attempt to define a monster in Graeco-Roman mythology comes from Paul Murgatroyd, a Professor of Classics at McMaster University in Canada. He proposes a similarly vague definition to Clay, however he also looks into the Etymology and meaning of the word ‘monster’ itself. He states that “The word [monster] is derived from the Latin monstrum (which is connected with moneo, meaning ‘advise, warn’). Monstrum originally denoted a supernatural phenomenon (like a rain of blood) which constituted a portent or omen sent by the gods, but it came to be applied to any uncanny person, creature or thing (especially someone or something wicked and menacing)” (Murgatroyd 1). Alone, these quotes give an even more unclear sense of what the word ‘monster’ means in Greek and Roman mythology. However, Murgatroyd then tries to explain this and further define the word, stating that;

The definition of 'monster' is a tricky business, but in this book the word will cover mythical, fabulous and imaginary creatures which are extraordinary, alien and abnormal. They are often malformed, having multiple limbs (such as three heads) or combining elements from different forms (e.g. a man's body with a bull's head), and sometimes they can change their shape (like a werewolf). Frequently they are of vast size, and very powerful, at times supernaturally so (they breathe out searing flames etc.). Usually they are terrifying, malevolent, savage and evil; but there are also harmless and beneficent monsters...Sometimes in a search for precision scholars attempt to classify these beings in categories based on size, form, function, habitat and so on, but such classification does not work too well, because monsters notoriously cross boundaries. (Murgatroyd 1)

Here, Murgatroyd admits that defining the term is difficult, but he puts forth a working definition for the rest of his book and further clarifies how to recognize a monster by detailing familiar characteristics of monsters from Greek and Roman myths. Murgatroyd's description of the physical attributes and capabilities of 'monsters' is more varied and therefore seems more inclusive than Clay's. Monsters such as the Minotaur, Medusa, Sirens, and Harpies are still validated by this definition, but other well-known monsters such as Cerberus, Chimeras, and the Hydra are now described as well. And finally, in the last sentence, Murgatroyd warns against a more precise definition, pointing out that monsters can not be neatly categorized. He is arguing for a certain level of vagueness, for as soon as one becomes too concrete in their definition, there becomes an outlier to break the assigned conditions. In reality, Clay and Murgatroyd's definitions are worded quite differently, but they are functionally very similar to one another. The commonalities between the two definitions include the distinction that monsters are

anomalous or abnormal and a description of physical characteristics. I think this is important to acknowledge when defining the word monster in Greek and Roman mythology. I also believe the definition of monster in Graeco-Roman myth should describe not only their physical shape, but their supernatural or otherworldly capabilities. I agree with Murgatroyd's assertion that while most monsters are "terrifying, malevolent, savage and evil" some can be "harmless and beneficent" (Murgatroyd 1) as well. It also seems useful to define a monster by what they are not. In short, I would define monsters in Greek and Roman myths as abnormal creatures that are not mortals, gods, or heroes and are often multi-limbed, possess characteristics of multiple creatures (often human and bestial), likely have some supernatural power, and can be either evil or good.

When it comes to representing these Greek and Roman monsters in art, artists of the time faced similar challenges representing monsters as they did representing other scenes and figures from Greek and Roman mythology. For example, early vase painters of Greek and Rome struggled to depict the scale of monsters as they struggled to depict the scale of the gods and other beings. Artists were also challenged by the amount of monsters or figures in a scene, how to properly show details of the monsters and scenes they were depicting, and the difficulty of choosing a visual version of a monstrous figure that has conflicting descriptions. For example, some artistic depictions of medusa show an otherwise average looking woman with snakes for hair, some show a woman with a beast's face and a head of snakes, and some depicted her as a woman with the body of a horse, etc. Greek and Roman vase painters of the time also faced other logistical challenges, such as when depicting creatures with too many limbs or features to paint on such a small surface. Artists had to make sure to depict a recognizable version of a monster in

a way that was feasible, and they had to ensure that the scene and role of the monster were distinguishable. All Greek and Roman artists did face some unique challenges when it came to depicting monsters. One example is the difficulty for artists to represent creatures they had never seen before (because they did not exist). Some artists struggled to visualize what a monster with the head of three different animals or a creature with snakes for hair might look like. In early depictions of monsters, artists generally went for the most gruesome look they could get, likely trying to equate ugliness with their monstrosity. Alastair Sooke, with BBC Culture, shows that this depiction later shifts. According to his article, artists moved away from the gruesome, ferocious depictions of Greek and Roman monsters to a more ‘realistic’ depiction of them, eventually representing some of them as beautiful. Sooke writes that;

Fantastical creatures in ancient Greek art now had their utmost ferocity and bristling, bare-fanged power. But a century or two later, artists would present monsters in a radically different fashion. “In the Greek world,” explains Joan Mertens, curator of Greek and Roman art at the Metropolitan Museum, “many creatures that start off ferocious and ugly evolve into beautiful figures or animals. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the gorgon Medusa who in early Greek art is all fangs and wrinkles and by the mid-Fifth Century is a beautiful woman.” As ancient Greece shifted into the classical era, says Stewart, “The most noticeable trend is that the monsters become more realistic. As artists become more interested in realistic bodies, and more able to represent them, it perhaps becomes a challenge to show fantastic creatures in a plausible way.” We find a good example of this in the satyrs – mischievous, often sexually aroused and inebriated human figures with pointy ears and horses’ tails – that appear on so many painted pots in ancient

Greece. “On Athenian painted pots of the late Sixth and Fifth Centuries BC,” says Stewart, “satyrs are often shown as wild, chaotic creatures beyond the civilised world of the city. But at least as often they perform human roles, introducing an element of anarchy into otherwise very urbane activities like symposia (drinking parties). Occasionally they actually behave like refined Athenian citizens. These are very ironic images, no doubt intended to provoke thought or amusement, but they do exhibit a lot of sympathy for the satyrs...But a recurring trait of Greek art is that monstrous creatures seem to be held up as a foil to the Greeks’ concept of civilisation – a sort of distorting mirror in which the Greeks could look at themselves. The Greeks seem to have found these monstrous or semi-human creatures useful to explore and express their world-view, their ideas about humanity and civilisation, the mortal and divine. Fantastical beings were part of the furniture of the Greek mind.” (Sooke)

This portion of the article explains a bit about why and how Greek and Roman artists moved from one model of monsters to another. It is clear that artists were first challenged with depicting imaginary, non-realistic creatures, then as people became intrigued with realistic bodies they struggled to represent monsters realistically as well. They may have also been challenged with representing certain monsters as symbols. Many scholars now understand that some monsters possibly originated to symbolize certain societal values, psychological concerns, or basic human anxieties. Greek and Roman artists would have been challenged to present a realistic, recognizable version of a mythological monster that could also serve as a symbol. An inverse issue to the ones presented by Sooke, is the issue of depicting ugly, ferocious monsters as good. There is occasionally an awful looking monster that happens to be good, serving the gods, or on

the side of the hero in Greco-Roman mythology. Artists likely struggled depicting the intentions of a monster through visuals alone, and likely had to rely on knowledge of the myth for that to be understood.

In conclusion, I would define monsters of Graeco-Roman mythology as abnormal creatures that are not mortals, gods, or heroes, are often multi-limbed, possess characteristics of multiple creatures (often human and bestial), likely have some supernatural power, and can be either evil or good. I still maintain that the original writers of these myths may have had a universally understood conception of what made a monster and even a precise criteria that separated them from the other figures of myth, but the modern understanding of the texts leaves such distinctions up for some debate, and we may never know the original definition of a monster from the ancient Greeks and Romans. However, I largely agree with the definitions of the scholars Jenny Strauss Clay and Paul Murgatroyd. As for the challenges of depicting a monster of Graeco-Roman myth in art, I agree with Alastair Sooke, Joan Mertens, and Stewart. I maintain that they faced the same challenges representing monsters as they did representing other mythological figures, as well as some unique ones such as the difficulty for artists to represent creatures they had never seen before (because they did not exist) and the challenge of representing certain monsters as symbols.

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