

Overstepping Boundaries: Transgression and the Female Monster

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Abstract

A monster is a fictional creature that is ugly and frightening. The fear is generated by the fact that the monster might have a familiar shape, yet it is an aberration from everything we consider normal. This is even truer in the case of women, who are assigned specific fixed roles in society. Transgression of their boundaries brought immediate censure. However, some women do not care about social condemnation. Their attempt to take control of their own lives generated the fear that they might attempt to control the superior race of men. Such women gave rise to the idea of the female monster.

Keywords: Monster, Women, Transgression, Mythology.

How can a monster be defined? Broadly, it is a fictional creature that is ugly and frightening and, most importantly, an aberration from everything we consider 'normal.' Sometimes it is entirely unfamiliar, but mostly a monster is a hybrid, a mix of the familiar and the strange. When the known becomes the unknown, it is more frightening than the merely new. Timothy Beale defines the word 'monster' as a derivation from a Latin word. According to him, "..... 'Monster' derives from the Latin 'monstrum,' which is related to the verb 'monstrance' ('show' or 'reveal') and 'monera' ('warm' or 'portend')." Mythology and folk narratives of all countries provide countless tales of monsters that challenge our concept of normalcy. Horror literature, as well as modern horror films, does the same. Such monstrous figures are often shown to result from the transgression of some world order. It could be said that the monster is something ".....which unsettles or challenges established cognitive categories...."

Monsters may be figments of human imagination, but they have often helped people of various societies define cultural boundaries. Also, somewhat significantly, a large number of these monsters are female.

Debbie Felton, in "Monsters and Monstrous: Ancient expressions of Cultural Anxieties," mentions that early travels were considered unsafe and only because of practical concerns like shortage of food and shelter or fear of bandits, but fear of monsters- many of whom were predatory women who mainly preyed on young and non-disabled men.

Fear of women is often reflected in the works of ancient writers. If it is possible to categorize monsters, female monsters are worse than their male counterparts.

According to Yazbel Leal, male writers in ancient times often visualized monsters as being female because myths often contained the fantasy of conquering and controlling

women, which in turn made it clear that women were, at least to some extent, creatures to be feared.

In "Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology," Jess Zimmerman said that the female monsters in ancient Greek and Roman culture continued to appear in Renaissance art and Literature. That influence continued till comparatively modern days when the idea of the monstrous female was strongly present. Those fostering the ideas are male, white, and heteronormative. She quotes the example of Lamia, who searches out and devours children. Zimmerman finds in her the symbol of errant women. Giving birth and nurturing children was supposed to be an integral part of womanhood. The woman who did not embrace motherhood was not considered a complete woman. Creatures like the Lamia, who supposedly devoured children, represented the non-motherly and, therefore, unwomanly woman.

Most female monsters represent the misogyny that has been a way of life for all societies throughout the ages and till today. By dehumanizing women who subverted traditional general gender roles, patriarchy has depicted women as monstrous creatures throughout the ages. Whether witches or Sirens, these women, in a male-dominated world, have acquired power by exerting control, especially sexual control, over men. 'Powerful women' by whatever means constitute a challenge to patriarchy and are therefore obnoxious and unacceptable. Patriarchy defines women as weak, unintelligent, and lacking rationality; consequently, they are to be guided by men, who are represented as strong and intelligent. Patriarchal norms assign the role of decision-maker to men, while women are expected to be submissive creatures. So, a woman who will protest against societal norms or defy them becomes unpleasant or even fearsome. She becomes a monster.

Like all ancient cultures, Greek and Roman mythology abounded in monsters. Apparently, they were colorful products of the human imagination, but they had a message. A beast would often represent a particular fear, whether it was the inversion of order, revenge of nature against human civilization, or any other. Since patriarchy was a significant force then, as of now, confusion over rebellious female behavior was one of these fears. Since monsters are often "culturally determined," each society has fears and preoccupations.

However, fear of female rebellion was a common denominator in all cultures. In legends, Monsters are almost always defeated at the end, an allegory for the desire to suppress whatever seems threatening to a particular culture.

Since cultural history throughout time has chiefly been recorded by men, the male inability to understand women and specific fears about them have been reflected by the creation of many female monsters. Many monsters in classical mythology are females; as stated, they prey on men. Generally, in mythology, women are often depicted as unreliable and deceitful, thus deserving of the oppression that a male-dominated society subjected them to. They were also considered to be creatures with strong sexual appetites which had to be controlled. According to Felton, "Because the Greeks regularly identified women with the wildness of nature-defined by the Greeks as whatever existed beyond the boundaries of an ordered civilization- it is not surprising to find that a substantial proportion of monsters in Greek mythologies are female." Being so different from the male body, the female body was

a source of wonder. It could entice men and cause them to lose control, and most surprisingly, it could bring forth new life. Women's bodies, thus, were mysterious areas that could make them more potent than the male if they chose to ignore the conventions of society. It is this fear that creates female monsters. Lilith is a prime example of this.

In Judaic mythology, Lilith is a recognized demon. She was supposedly Adam's first wife, not created from his rib but made from the same soil. She was described as sexually demanding and refusing to be subservient to her husband. So, naturally, she lost her status as a 'wife' and became a demon who threatened children and women in childbirth. She was demonized because she went against the so-called 'natural' order of the man's superiority, and her threat against women and children represents her 'unnatural' quality.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, there are many monsters, each having specific characteristics unsuited to a 'gentle' feminine nature. There is Circe, the wise woman, who exerts control over men and, by her magic medicine, turns them into tame animals. She had turned the sailors of Odysseus into swine, and he had to live a year with her in exchange for their transformation back to human form. Then there are the 'Sirens.' They are half-women, half-birds, who sing so beautifully that men are lured to them and die. Odysseus tells his crew to plug their ears when they pass the rocks of the Sirens. He ties himself to a mast and listens to their song. Driven mad with desire, he regains his sanity when they go out of hearing. Scylla and Charybdis try to trap the sailors in the strait of Messina. Charybdis was possibly a whirlpool personified, but Scylla was described as a terrible female monster. She had 12 feet and six heads on snake-like necks, with which she tried to devour sailors who passed by. Each chair had three sets of Shark teeth, while below her waist were the heads of baying dogs. She ate 6 of Odysseus' companions.

Charybdis on the opposite shore drank and belched water of the sea three times a day, creating a deadly danger for the passing ships.

The idea of troublesome women as monsters was continued through the concept of the Harpies.

Medusa — the Gorgon is one of the most fearsome monsters ever to be described. There are many references to her in classical mythology. From Homer to Hesiod to Pinder, Medusa has been described as a female with writhing snakes for her hair. She could turn people into stone by looking at them. In legend, she had been a beautiful maiden raped in the temple of Athena by Poseidon. Culturally, rape is a crime against women, where the victim is doubly marginalized. First, she was violated physically and punished for her violation by being transformed into a monster, which Perseus later killed. Another terrible monster, the Lamia, was also changed for no crime of her own. In Greek mythology, she had an affair with Zeus, the king of gods. In revenge, Hera, the wife of Zeus, kidnapped Lamia's children, who Zeus had fathered. The loss of her children drove her insane, and she was transformed into a shape-shifting monster who stole and devoured small children. The Lamia also supposedly seduces young men and later feeds on their flesh.

In *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, the Sphinx is a terrible female creature with the head and bust of a woman and the body of a lion. She challenges travelers, asking them to solve a riddle. If they fail to answer, she kills them. In shame and anger, Oedipus solves the

mystery, and the Sphinx throws herself from a cliff to her death. Here, the Sphinx is destroyed for her excessive knowledge, which is unsuitable for a woman.

The legacy of female monsters continues. In medieval times, there were the idea of the Succubus, sexually predatory female demons; and, of course, there were the witches, who were also called 'wise women'. Witches were women who possessed little knowledge of medicine and herbs. Sometimes, they were thought to have evil powers, so society deemed it necessary for them to be ostracized and, sometimes, destroyed. Their crime knew more than the average person. Knowledge is power, and knowledgeable women were dangerous because it was difficult to control them. This is why 'witches deserved to die.

There is one common factor in the presentation of all the female monsters. They present a state of cultural anxiety about women who dare to rebel against their contemporary social constraints. Traditionally, a woman was the passive partner in a domestic arrangement serving the needs of her husband, family, and the community at her own cost. Patriarchy conditioned women to be subservient because that would be for the greater good of society, in general. However, there were always women who rebelled and went against the norm. They rebelled and defied the standards that society imposed upon them. The thought of women, who wanted to take control of their own lives, led to the idea that they would also like to control men, the traditional masters. It is not difficult to see how the thought of 'controlling women' would frighten society. The female creatures, behaving unnaturally by exerting control over themselves and others, would thus become monsters. When women attracted men, their loss of control was attributable to women— she was the one who had tempted the man; she, therefore, was Lilith, the Sirens, or Circe. The fear of knowledgeable women is reflected by monsters like the Sphinx and, of course, witches. Women, who could not conform to traditional maternal roles, were represented by the likes of the child-killing Lamia. Mythology and folklore are full of frightening female creatures, which refuse to do in one way or another, and are therefore viewed as aberrant, ugly creatures or monsters.

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