

# The Monsters of Mythology

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Academus Mythology Crash Course 2021

# Monster Theory

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*The monster's body is a cultural body. Monsters are culturally specific, constructed in a particular moment.*

*The monster is the harbinger of category crisis – you can't categorise a monster. It refuses to accept binaries and disturbs familiar boundaries between human and animal, male and female.*

*Monsters tend to reflect fears of 'the other'. That can be the fear of a different gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, or anything that isn't included in the dominant identity of a culture.*

*The monster polices the borders of the possible – it patrols the behavioural limits both between and inside social unites that we cannot cross if society is to continue.*

*The monster stands at the threshold – as monsters return from our attempts at banishment, they tell us what it is to be human. We define ourselves against their monstrosity.*

Liz Gloyn, 'Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture' (2019)

# What is a Monster?

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Much like how hero means a slightly different thing in modernity as it did in antiquity, concepts of monsters have also changed throughout time. A general definition of a monster is: a non-human creature whose appearance or abilities deviate from the accepted social or moral order.

However, colloquially a 'monster' can be used to refer to something, or someone, who is human by nature but whose behaviour is abhorrent, immoral, or deviant in some way. Monsters have also been commonly employed as an allegorical motif to mock or criticise dangerous or alarming groups of people, such as fascists or communists.

The motif of the 'monster' has a history of being weaponised against marginalised groups, as deviation from white supremacist and hetero-patriarchal ideals have historically been seen as subhuman and equitable to monstrosity.



'Out of the slimy depths' World War II cartoon depicting a sea monster labelled 'Nazi Saboteur' (June 1942)

# Modern Monsters

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Modern media has complicated the traditional concept of the monster. Non-human creatures have long been associated with the pejorative 'other' and non-human form is historically used as visual shorthand for not only the physically deviant, but also the morally deviant. The fantasy genre has received many valid criticisms for the racialisation of non-human monsters, where morally deviant or otherwise inferior monster creatures are imbued with features that, while non-human, draw upon human stereotypes of marginalised people.

However recent developments in media have created stories featuring not only sympathetic monsters, but also monsters that have been protagonists or even love interests. Modern monsters are far more nuanced and complex than ancient monsters.



Sally Hawkins and Doug Jones in 'The Shape of Water' (2017) dir. Guillermo del Toro

# The Human Monster

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Not all modern monsters are monstrous looking. An innovation of the monster genre for the modern age is the advent of the 'human' monster. This can either be a monster that is primarily human looking, but with supernatural monstrous abilities, or a monster that is grappling with human morality. This concept of monster has its roots in the literary horror or gothic genre, notably Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)

These works were highly influential and expanded the reach of the monster concept out of the realm of the mythological and into the growing genres of horror and science fiction, concepts which are very far removed from the ancient mythological precedents.



Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster, 1935.

# The Ancient Monster

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The concept of the monster predates written history and is a staple of folklore and mythology tales from around the world, ancient Greek culture is no exception. However, as noted in *Monster Theory*, monsters defy categorisation and unlike heroes are almost impossible to organise into strict parameters or criteria.

Monsters in ancient Greek mythology have diverse and complicated origins. There are monsters who are born monsters, and those that become monsters through transformation. There are monsters that represent a race of creatures, and those that are an example of a unique creature. There are monsters that are sentient and of human intelligence, and those that are closer to animals in behaviour. Some monsters exist as part of a natural order, and some are created as punishment for some kind of transgression. Some monsters serve a particular purpose, whereas others exist freely and cause chaos. Like most aspects of Greek mythology, there is often no singular uniform explanation for how or why a certain type of monster became the way it is.

# Echidna and Typhon

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This fearsome pair are often called the ‘mother and father’ of all monsters. Typhon was a monstrous giant with serpentine features, who is in some traditions the offspring of Gaia and in others of Hera.

Echidna was a half woman, half serpent monster, possibly the offspring of the primordial sea God Phorcys. Her human half was said to be extremely beautiful, but she was a terrible flesh eating creature.

Echidna and Typhon’s offspring include: Orthus, a two headed monstrous dog, Ceberus, a three headed monstrous dog, the Lernaean Hydra, the Chimera, the Sphinx, the Nemean Lion, the Caucasian Eagle, the Ladon, and the Colchian dragon. Some ancient authors add many more to the list while others are of ambiguous origins.

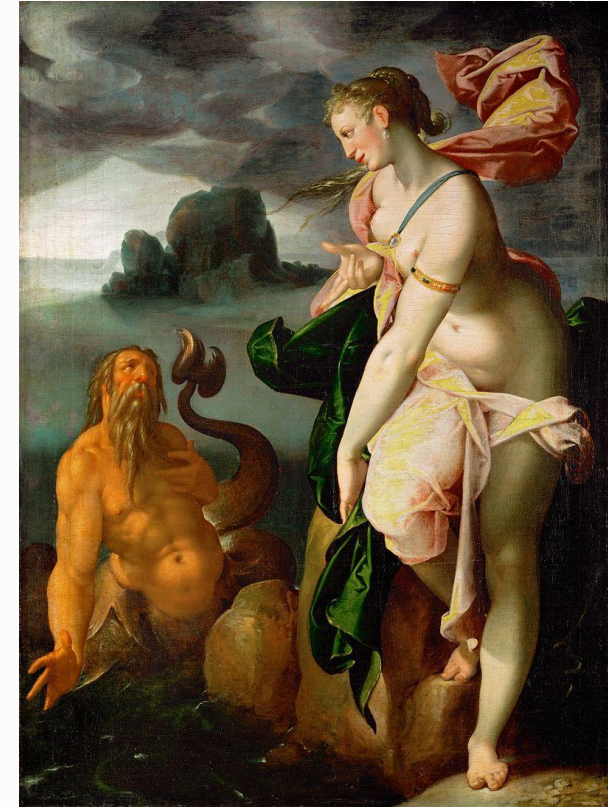


Zeus aiming his thunderbolt at a winged and snake-footed Typhon. (540–530 BC)

# Scylla and Charybdis

Scylla and Charybdis are counterpart monsters that guard the Strait of Messenia, between Sicily and Calabria in Italy. The pair are one of the monstrous challenges that Odysseus famously traversed during his journey home. Scylla's parentage is dubious, she is sometimes the offspring of Echidna and sometimes the primordial sea god Phorcys. In some versions Scylla was once a beautiful nymph transformed into a monster by the jealous Amphitrite, or by Circe.

Scylla's physical description varies, but the most detailed suggests that she had four eyes and six long snaky necks equipped with grisly heads, each of which contained three rows of sharp shark's teeth while her body consisted of 12 tentacle-like legs and a cat's tail, while six dog's heads ringed her waist. In some versions Charybdis is just a whirlpool, not a monster, while in others she is a fearsome monster, offspring of Poseidon, that creates whirlpools.



Glaucus and Scylla by  
Bartholomeus Spranger (1581)



# Centaur

Centaur is a type of ancient Greek monster. There are several variations of their origin myth, one version suggesting they were fathered by Ixion, King of the Lapiths (a Thessalian tribe) while another suggests they were fathered by Centaurus, a man who mated with Magnesian mares.

Centaur is most famed for their legendary war against the Lapiths, their kinsmen. The Lapiths were a human tribe who, according to legend, invited the centaur to celebrate a wedding feast. Unused to wine and celebration, the centaur became too rowdy and when one centaur attempted to abduct the bride the party dissolved into battle. Centaur is often characterised in Greek myth as bawdy and sexually aggressive. An exception to this is the centaur Chiron, an intelligent and respected centaur who educated the young hero Achilles.



Attic red-figure kylix depicting a scene from the Centauromachy, c. 480 BCE.

# Cyclopes

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Cyclopes are a race of giant one eyed monsters. Cyclopes appear in various different myths from ancient Greece and are often categorised into three types: The Hesiodic, The Homeric, and the Wall-Builders.

Hesiod introduces Cyclopes in the form of three brothers, Brontes, Steropes, and Arges. These Cyclopes were the offspring of Uranus and Gaia and had a role working in the godly forge, helping to create Zeus' thunderbolts.

The Homeric Cyclopes are detailed in the Odyssey when Odysseus and his crew encounter Polyphemus, perhaps the most famous cyclops. The Homeric cyclopes are shepherds and are unintelligent, unsophisticated, and have no understanding or respect for social codes of conduct.

The Wall-Builders are credited with creating the so-called Cyclopean walls of Tiryns, Mycenae, and Argos and share some similarities with the Hesiodic Cyclopes.



A first century AD head of a Cyclops from the Roman Colosseum

# The Origins of the Minotaur

One of the most famous monsters from ancient Greece is the Minotaur. Although Minotaur originally referred to the singular specific offspring of Pasiphae and the Cretan bull, in later antiquity it became a term used for any monster that was part man and part bull.

Unlike other monsters, the Minotaur has a fairly cohesive origin story. After becoming King of Crete, Minos had asked Poseidon for a symbol of victory. Poseidon had sent the brilliant Cretan bull, expecting that Minos would sacrifice the bull in his honour. Minos instead decided to keep the bull on account of its beauty.

This act of hubris angered Poseidon and so to punish Minos he cursed his wife, Pasiphae, to fall in love with the bull. With the help of the master craftsman Daedalus, Pasiphae was able to mate with the bull and the monstrous Minotaur, originally named Asterius, was the result of the abhorrent union.



Attic red-figure kylix depicting Pasiphaë and the Minotaur, c. 340 BCE.

# Theseus and the Labyrinth

The Minotaur craved human flesh and was confined to a labyrinth under the palace of Crete. Minos had waged war on Athens after his son, Androgenus, had been unlawfully killed by the Athenians. To compensate the Athenians were compelled to send seven Athenian youths and seven maidens to be devoured by the Minotaur.

Theseus, the mythical king of Athens, volunteered to slay the Minotaur and stop this cruel practice. Theseus arrived in Crete under the guise of a youth to be sacrificed and with the help of Ariadne, the Minotaur's sister, and a length of thread to navigate the labyrinth Theseus was able to slay the Minotaur and lead the Athenian sacrifices safely home.

The motif of Theseus and the Minotaur was extremely popular in Classical art and there are many examples of scenes depicting their fight to the death.



Attic red-figured plate depicting Theseus and the Minotaur, c. 520–510 BCE

# Early Medusa

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Perhaps the most famous monster from Greek mythology is the snake-haired gorgon, Medusa. Medusa was a wildly popular figure in antiquity and has remained an influential figure subject to various interpretations throughout the centuries. Medusa's origins vary, but in an early version she was one of the three Gorgons, along with her monstrous sisters Stheno and Euryale, with serpentine attributes who were the offspring of Phorcys and Ceto.

Medusa's image was a powerful apotropaic symbol. As Perseus had used her severed head as a form of protection for himself, Medusa became used as a symbol to repel misfortune and offer protection. There are several examples from antiquity where you find the face of Medusa embedded in architectural features such as flooring and antefixes to offer protection for the household. In depictions of Athena also Medusa's face can often be spotted emblazoned on her armour.



Terracotta antefix with head of Medusa, 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

# Later Medusa

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By the early 5<sup>th</sup> century poets and artists were describing an alternative version of Medusa where she was a beautiful woman. Ovid's rendition of the myth, which detailed Medusa's violent assault at the hands of Poseidon and her subsequent transformation into a monstrous form, popularised the image of a beautiful Medusa later in the early Roman Empire. The dichotomy of beauty and monstrosity has always been a deeply alluring notion and Medusa remains a popular symbol to this day.

Modern developments in feminist theory has led to a resurgence of interest and interpretation of the Medusa myth. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Medusa became symbolic of specifically female rage that resonated with second wave feminism of the 1960's – 1980's. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Medusa has become an important symbol in the #MeToo movement as an important icon as a victim of sexual violence and subsequent injustice.



Medusa by Arnold Böcklin (1878)

# When is a Monster Not a Monster?

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*In 'Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths' (2021) Natalie Haynes asks: Why do we make a monster of Medusa and not of Midas?*

*Is Midas' destructive transformative power any less monstrous than Medusa's?*



Illustration by Walter Crane (1893)