Monsters, Manslayers, and Militant Women in Classical Greece

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The free male citizen stood at the center of Classical Greek civilization. In ancient art he is depicted as the ideal: courageous, controlled, noble, and good. Free, Greek men lived as the embodiment of *kalos kagathos*- the beautiful and virtuous. The elevation of the male form took on unique potency when defined in contrast to what it was not. Following the inception of democracy in the late 6th century and the Peloponnesian Wars in the 5th century, an oppositional worldview became a successful method of defining "Greekness." Threats to the fledgling democracy in the form of the barbaric, foreign, grotesque, and feminine obtained resonance as oppositional forms of Greek self-definition. This exhibition explores how the "othering" of women within classical Greek society manifested in depictions of of mythologized man-killers and their victims. These varied representations simultaneously reveal both the Greek cultural ideal and the taboo. Representations of feminized monsters, manslayers, and militant women that exist outside the classical ideal highlight anxieties and discomforts the Greeks felt towards other ethnic groups, irregular performances of gender, and female disobedience.

Representations of abnormal performances of gender and sexuality share a schema of iconography. Manslayers repeatedly adopt the characteristics of feminized monsters in literature and art. The victims of militant women and manslayers are frequently depicted collapsed backwards in similar poses of supplication and helplessness. To highlight the interwoven nature between monsters, manslayers, and militant women, this exhibition would be installed in one square room without dividers. Upon entry into the exhibition, a museumgoer would be able to view all the pieces at

once despite separate categories being primarily installed on individual walls. Pottery containing representations of manslayers would stand in the middle of the room and bridge the three distinct groupings. The layout intentionally places the selected pieces in direct conversation with one another. Collectively, these representations evoke different facets of Greek misogyny and a discomfort with females who defied the status quo.

As composites of negative and subversive female traits, monsters embody male anxieties surrounding the threat posed by female sexuality and the simulation of male behavior. Monsters exist as, "vivid fictional entities that live in people's imaginations," and lack an empirical subject.[1] Depicting monsters posed a challenge to classical Hellenic artists that led to the holistic and continuing development of monstrous iconography. Monsters are ascribed imagery through adopting previously established yet unnamed features or creating a bricolage of pre-existing fantastic characteristics.[2] In the 5th century, monsters are increasingly feminized. Representations of the furies, sirens, gorgons, and sphinx all assume feminine physiological features and traits. The heightening of monster's sexual characteristics and alluring beauty embody anxieties surrounding female sexuality and abnormal performances of gender. Monsters are, "arguably the most engaging embodiments of 'othenerness' in Greek art and myth,"[3] and are marginalized through their appearance and behavior.[4] In mythology, the monster stands in opposition to the ideal male hero. Likewise, in representations the monster stands in opposition to the viewer and ideal members of Greek society. Consequently, classical Greek artists depicted monsters with the threats posed by the "other" prominent

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[1] Marianne Govers Hopman, *Scylla: Myth, Metaphor, Paradox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 96.
[2] Ibid, 95.
[3] Beth Cohen, *Not the Classical Ideal: Athens and the Construction of the Other In Greek Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 86.
[4] Ibid, 86.

members of Attic society, females. The ascribed voracious sexual appetite and characteristics that subvert traditional gender divisions is a product of the gynophobia that was rampant in Classical Greece.

Scylla's transformation from the neutral monster of the *Odyssey* to a grammatically and anatomically female symbol is representative of the feminization of monsters across the Greek canon. Beginning in the 5th century, Scylla acquires the beauty and eroticism of a woman. In some early representations (fifth-century coins from Cumae in Compania and Cyzicus in Mysiaan, an early fourth century bronze mirror handle from Tarentum, and fourth century coins from Allifae[5]) Scylla is depicted with dogs emerging from her shoulders rather than her waist. This experiment in representation is brief and the majority of Scylla representations including the Melian clay relief (figure 1) feature dogs more suggestively emerging from her groin. The dogs' placement is indicative of Scylla's sexual aggressiveness.[6] In Greek mythology, dogs are considered, "man's indispensible hunting companion."[7] The animals also carry the associations of erotic pursuit" placing threatening mouths where female genitalia should reside.[8] Scylla consequently assumes the atypical role of female huntress combined with stereotypical sexual voraciousness. Scylla's erotic hunting via dogs attached to her groin evokes fears of male castration. Scylla therefore operates as a symbol that, "ties together the "mouth, genitals, voracity, and sexual aggressiveness."[9] The bodies of monsters including Scylla, "historically represented that which is disproportionate, or out of

[5] Hopman, *Scylla*, 92.
[6] Ibid, 123.
[7] Ibid, 125.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 135.

place."[10] Scylla's threat is her abnormal association with the male occupation of hunting for the purposes of sexual dominance.

Representations of the sphinx more explicitly invert the classical model for sexual and social dominance. In Greek mythology and art the sphinx is depicted, "lurking over the naked bodies of youths."[11] Sphinxes are most commonly found in, "the private arts…on engraved gems or painted pottery" where their portrayal likely held significance beyond recounting a Theban myth.[12] Sphinxes may have denoted bad luck and destruction due to their association as a harbinger of death.[13] The sphinx is a predatory creature that habitually abducted young men. Like the Scylla, Sphinxes are denoted as sexually insatiable. Depictions of the Sphinx, "clutching a youth to her belly"[14] possess an erotic connotation. On the red-figure kylix (figure 2) the sphinx holds her naked quarry and gazes down at him. The manner in which the youth is, "suggestively intertwined with her feline part,"[15] simulates copulation. However, the sphinx assumes the dominant role as she is mounted on top of her young prey, a position usually reserved for men. The monstrosity of the sphinx is the inversion of dominant gender roles coupled with sexual aggression. Emily Vermeule has stated that the sphinx "combines the clawed body of a man-eater with the wings of a raptor and a face made for love…"[16] Representations of monsters including the Scylla and the Sphinx are manifestations of anxiety surrounding the threat of female sexuality and dominance to social order of democratic Athens.

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10 Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster In Visual Culture* (London : I.B. Tauris, 2013), 49
11 Cohen, *Not the Classical Ideal*, 103.
12 Ibid, 105.
13 Ibid, 103.
14 Ibid, 105.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.

Manslayers similarly invert the Greek social order by acquiring power that the Greek's deem illegitimate through vengeance. Like the monster that defies the ideal through alluring sexuality coupled with excessive aggression, manslayers exist in a position of social disobedience due to illogical, female impulse. Their portrayal in classical art symbolizes the descent from the order of the polis to the chaos of power acquired through female corruption. While some images of manslayers fall outside this thematic canon, they are exception and generally portray goddesses like Artemis slaughtering men for their transgressions as depicted in Figure 7. However, all female manslayers exist in contrast to their opponents. Through their murder by women, these men are demoted from the status of ideal male citizen or hero. A prevailing emphasis on female aggression ignores that in the Greek view, these men deserved their fates. Rather, their cowardice (*anandreia*) is portrayed prominently with the male victims of manslayers assuming a position of supplication. Depictions of manslayers are political by nature; they deem their victims illegitimate citizens of Greek society and represent female desire as perverting.

Through the act of killing a supposedly dominant male, a manslayer inverts the status quo and renders her victim "other." In fifth-century and subsequent classical art, "the still intact, nude body of a youthful male transgressor"[17] indicates that the victim of female aggression lacked heroism and the Greek value of *andreia* ('manliness' or 'virility'). Orpheus's murder by envious Thracian women exemplifies how female vengeance and violence is indicative of social chaos. While Orpheus is not a perfect example of the ideal male since literary sources often describe him as coming from

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[17] Ibid, 107.

Thrace, during the classical period he is associated with Greek society through his lack of exotic dress.[18] As depicted on the red-figure stamnos (figure 6), Orpheus's Greek appearance is heightened in contrast to the surrounding Thracian women who are depicted as barbaric. A tattooed Thracian with unkempt hair gleefully stabs an exposed Orpheus while two other frenzied women with weapons frame the scene. Orpheus assumes the effeminate role of pleading victim while the, "exposure of his youthful male body and genitals…retains visual associations with the ideal masculine beauty of a hero."[19] One might assume that Orpheus is, "a supreme representative of civilization who was slaughtered by barbaric females,"[20] however, the ancient Greek audience would have been aware of Orpheus' disturbance of the proper order of Hellenic life. Orpheus's rejection of the female form and accordingly gender roles rendered him abnormal or "other."[21] His final gesture of supplication or cowardice (*anandreia*) indicates that his fate at the hands of jealous Thracians was deserved.

The veneration of the masculine nudity of Orpheus, even in death, stands in contrast to the treatment of the elderly King Pelias, another transgressive male slaughtered by a woman. Depictions of Pelias's dismemberment, including figure 4, rarely include Pelias himself. Rather, Pelias has been, "either 'euphemistically' omitted" as Medea and his daughters prepare for his mutilation or he is, "already cut up and thrown into the pot."[22] The Relief of Medea and the Daughters of Pelias (Figure 4) "others" Pelias by omission and through inversion of gendered power dynamics. As

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[18] Ibid, 108.
[19] Ibid, 109.
[20] Ibid, 114
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid, 110.

Pelias, wrongly denied Jason the throne, his tyranny was rightly met with, "dismemberment [a fate] worse than death itself undertaken by Medea and his daughters."[23] In Figure 4, the central Peliad is shown, "divesting one breast."[24] In a culture in which female nudity was suppressed, "the divesting of clothes always has a definite meaning in accordance with the subject represented."[25] The baring of the breast becomes fashionable in the later 5th century and can be used to denote eroticism and frenzied passion.[26] Classicist Beth Cohen explains that, "the strikingly ominous context" of these three figure reliefs demonstrated by, the central Peliad [who] bends over, absorbed in "busily readying the cauldron, while her right breast spills over the top of her garment."[27] This accidental exposure perhaps reveals the Peliad's unwitting corruption under the influence of Medea.

Unlike monsters and manslayers whose representations exist to diminish men, militant women are portrayed as worthy opposition to their Greek counterparts. Amazons serve the dual role of elevating the potency of Greek soldiers and "othering" their historical enemies through comparison to women. The Amazons were described by the historian Hellanikos of Lesbos (b.490) as, "a host of golden-shielded, silver axed, man-loving, boy-killing females."[28] In defeating an Amazon, a Greek warrior achieved sexual dominance of a difficulty won women and battlefield glory. In their barbarism, the Amazons are depicted as valiant foreign adversaries and highlight the Greek discomfort

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[23] Ibid, 106.

[24] Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons, *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality, and Gender In Classical Art and Archaeology.* (London: Routledge, 1997), 66

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid, 70.

[27] Ibid, 71-72.

[28] Adrienne Mayor, *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 85.

with foreigners and other ethnicities. As infamous female Greek enemies, the Amazons were equally feared and eroticized for their assumption of the male role of warrior.

The clothing of the amazons both "others" and feminizes the Greek enemies that Amazons represented. By the fifth century, Amazons are depicted as clad in the "exotic long sleeved and trousered garments" that geographically denote the equation of the female barbarians with the Persian enemy.[29] In the portrayal of "Amazonomachy" in Figure 9, Amazons are outfitted as competent archers and cavalry.[30] In depictions of Amazon battles in which the winner is not yet determined, "the short chitons of female warrior cover both of their shoulders and thus both of their breasts."[31] In contrast, defeated Amazons are clothed in garments that were violently ripped open at one shoulder exposing the breast.[32] The violent exposure of the breast appears to have been a symbol of defeat as underscored by the fact that the bare-breasted Amazon depicted in Figure 8 was facing upwards on the intact shield of the Athena Parthenos. That vignette was featured on a curved side of the shield where the torn garment of the amazon necessarily defies gravity to indicate her defeat.

Classical depictions of monsters, manslayers, and militant women are indicative of the discomfort the Greeks felt with individuals who existed outside the classical ideal in the form of women, individuals who subverted gender norms, or other ethnicities. The mythologizing of murderous women suggests how individuals who fell outside the status quo were perceived as threatening to democracy and the Greek way of life. Through

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29 Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons, *Naked Truths, 74*

30 Cohen, *Not the Classical Ideal*, 101.

31 Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons, *Naked Truths, 74*

32 Ibid.

their defiance of social norms, feminized monsters and man-killing women reveal the anxieties and overt misogyny of Classical Greece.

Exhibition Labels and Objects

Figure 1: Terracotta Relief Showing Skylla
Subject: "Melian" Relief: Scylla
Period: Classical
Date: Ca. 465-435 BCE
Culture: Greek (From Mílos, Aegean Sea; Found on Aegina)
Current Museum Collection: Lourve, Paris
Medium: Terracotta
Dimensions: Height: 12.500 cm

Scylla is a monster composed of the distinct forms of women, fish, and dog. In mythology she is described hunting men who sailed the straight between her and her counterpart Charybdis with the dogs that emerge from her body. Her human features are particularly alluring yet her animalistic lower half evokes the ghastly. This Melian relief depicts Scylla with dogs emerging from her groin. The replacement of female genitalia with hunting animals invokes the threat of male castration. Scylla is indicative of male anxieties surrounding female voraciousness and dominance.

Figure 2: Red-Figure Kylix Showing Sphinx
Subject: Flying Sphinx Carries Dead Youth Over the Sea
Period: Classical
Date: Ca. 500 BC
Culture: Greek (Attic)
Medium: Terracotta
Current Museum Collection: J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Dimensions: 8.3 x 26.7 x 19.7 cm

The Sphinx is a compound monster possessing the beautiful face of a woman, the haunches of a lion, and the wings of a raptor. The Sphinx abducted young Theban men and killed them. Her depiction on this red-figure Kylix is erotic with her feline parts suggestively intertwined with the dead youth she carries. The position in which the sphinx carries her nude male quarry implies sexual dominance- the sphinx rests in a position that men typically assume. In this way, the sphinx's violence and sexuality invert typical gender roles and consequently the Greek social order.

Figure 3: Athenian Hydria (Water Jar)
Subject: The Decapitated Head of Medusa
Period: Early Classical
Date: ca. 480 BCE

Culture: Greek, Attic
Current Museum Collection: British Museum, London
Medium: Red-Figure Pottery
Dimensions: Height: 41 cm.

In mythology, Medusa is a gorgon who can turn people who gaze upon her to stone. The Medusa presented on this hydria derives her power through her hybrid form of animal and woman. In classical Greece, snakes were associated with women due to their cold and wet demeanors. Medusa is fearsome in appearance as both reptile and violent female. Her toothed mouth is intended to invoke the vagina dentata- a toothed vagina capable of emasculation. The medusa's deathly stare and mouth express anxiety surrounding male castration and powerlessness.

Figure 4: Relief of Medea and the daughters of Pelias
Subject: Medea and Pelias' Daughters Work Over Cauldron
Period: High Classical/Imperial
Date: ca. Roman copy of Athenian original (410 BCE)
Culture: Roman/Greek (Attic)
Current Museum Collection: Altes Museum, Berlin and Pergamonmuseum, Berlin respectively
Medium: Marble Relief

These reliefs depicts Medea undertaking her revenge against King Pelias for refusing to give her lover, Jason, his royal inheritance as promised. The three-figure relief portrays Medea (left) with her strange headdress and impassive expression as a foreigner and barbarian. To her right the central Peliad drags a cauldron and her exertion has caused the accidental exposure of her breast. The divesting of the breast contains ominous connotations perhaps suggesting female corruption or perversion by Medea.

Figure 5: Mixing Bowl (Calyx Krater) with the Killing of Agamemnon
Subject: Aegisthos gets ready to plunge a sword into Agamemnon, Klytemnestra carries an ax to assist her lover
Period: Early Classical Period
Date: Ca. 460 BCE
Culture: Greek (Attic)
Current Museum Collection: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Medium: Terracotta
Dimensions: Height: 51 cm; diameter: 51 cm

Both sides of this vase depict scenes from King Agamemnon's return to his kingdom of Mycenae following the sack of Troy. While Agamemnon was at war, his wife Klytemnestra takes a lover, Aegisthos who she encourages to kill Agamemnon upon his return. In this scene, Klytemnestra hurries to help Aegisthos assassinate her husband in retribution for his sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. This scene is the embodiment of what the Greeks would have deemed the descent from order into Chaos. The assumption of power by Klytemnestra through her sexual

relationships and desire for vengeance is indicative of a larger perversion within Greek society in the form of Agamemnon's tyranny and human sacrifice.

Figure 6: Stamnos, with Death of Orpheus, Thracian Women with Spears
Subject: Murder of Orpheus by Jealous Thracian Women
Period: Early Classical
Date: ca. 470-450 BCE
Culture: Greek, Attic
Current Museum Collection: Lourve, Paris
Medium: Red-Figure ceramic
Dimensions: Height: 31.2 cm. Width: 33.2 cm. Diameter: 26.9

This stamos depicts Orpheus's violent murder by wild Thracian women. With unkempt hair and frenzied appearances, the Thracians represent barbaric, uncontrolled womanhood. Here, Orpheus assumes the status of Greek male and society destroyed by female barbarism. However, an ancient Greek audience would be aware of Orpheus' rejection of the status quo. Following the death of his lover, Eurydice, Orpheus rejects women and accordingly gender norms. His violent death at the hands of cruel women was viewed as a consequence of his chaotic refusal of Greek values.

Figure 7: Bell Krater
Subject: Artemis and Aktaion Attacked by His Hounds
Period: Early Classical
Date: Ca. 470 BCE
Culture: Greek (Attic)
Medium: Ceramic, Red Figure
Current Museum Collection: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Dimensions: Height: 37 cm diameter: 42.5 cm

In mythology, Aktaion is a hunter who stumbled upon Artemis bathing and is punished for gazing upon the goddess. This krater depicts Artemis shooting an arrow at Aktaion who is simultaneously being attacked by his hunting dogs. Artemis maintains her composure as she sentences Aktaion to death. Artemis differs from other manslayers as her role as goddess would have entitled her to the use of violence. However, as protector of the wild and a virginal goddess, Artemis defies the Greek ideal of social order through male dominance. Artemis powerfully inverts the norm and forces Aktaion into a position of supplication, traditionally the role of a female.

Figure 8: Athena Parthenos: Shield, convex side, Amazonomachy (copy)
Subject: Section of Athena Parthenos Shield with Defeat of Amazon by Greek Warrior
Period: Classical
Date: 2nd century CE copy of Greek original ca. 447-438 BCE
Current Museum Collection: British Museum, London
Culture: Greek (Attic)

Medium: Marble

A Greek warrior clutches the hair of an Amazon as she struggles to continue fighting. In Greek mythology, opposing a passionately resisting amazon aroused heroes to rape and dominate the threatening female warriors. The Amazon's exposed breast indicates her defeat at the hands of her enemy and heightens the erotic interaction between the two figures. The sexual dominance of the Greek warrior in this image translates to his dominance of enemies on the battlefield.

Figure 9: Terracotta Volute-Krater (bowl for mixing wine and water)
Subject: Amazonomachy (battle between Greeks and Amazons)
Period: Classical
Date: ca. 450 BCE
Culture: Greek, Attic
Current Museum Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Medium: Terracotta; red-figure
Dimensions: H. 25 in. (63.5 cm)

This variety of grand battle scene between the Amazons and Greeks was very popular during the first half of the fifth century following the Peloponnesian War. In response to the threat of the Persians, the Greeks became interested in portraying their barbaric enemy as the "other." Consequently, Amazons adopted the role of Persians and can be scene in this volute-krater wearing the exotic garb of the foreigner. Here, the Amazons are depicted as equal opposition to highlight the valor of their Greek opponents. However, by depicting the Persian enemy as feminine, the Greek artist simultaneously demeans their foreign rivals.

Figure 10: Silver *tetradrachm* of Athens
Subject: Silver coin: (obverse) Head of Athena wearing earring and crested helmet decorated with olive-leaves, (reverse) Owl with olive-spray and crescent.
Period: Early Classical
Date: ca. 480 BCE
Culture: Greek, Attic
Medium: Silver Coin
Current Museum Collection: British Museum, London

This coin depicts Athena in profile wearing her battle helmet opposite an image of an owl that represents the goddess and her wisdom. On this coin, which would have been regularly handled and viewed, Athena appears as fearsome protector of the city. Ironically, in a city and time that was determinedly misogynistic, Athenian citizens selected as their patron goddess Athena- a female warrior. Athena operates as a man's goddess. She is not associated with fecundity but instead wisdom, a trait that only men were believed to posses. Athena is born from Zeus's head and is devoid of female entanglements. Some scholars believe she can be seen as an extension of Zeus's male power and protection.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

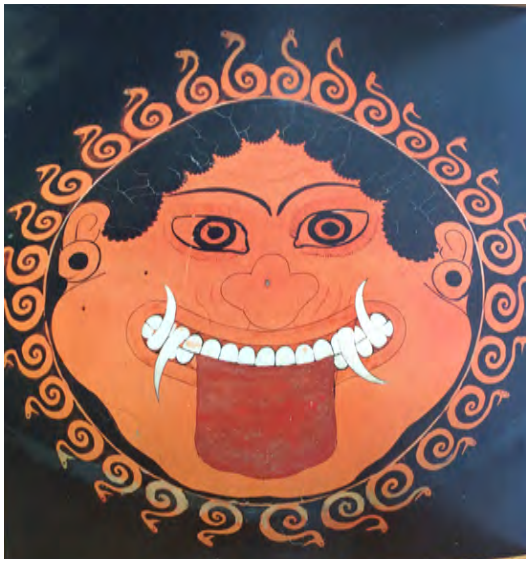

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Sources

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