

Female Nature or a Patriarchal Threat? Female Sexuality and Agency Construction in Graeco-Roman Myth

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Abstract

This essay explores the construction of female sexuality and agency in Graeco-Roman myth as destabilising forces. Specifically, the study examines how female autonomy is often framed as threatening to the established patriarchal boundaries through analysis of four case studies: the Erinyes in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Hera's parthenogenetic birth of Typhaon in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*, and Medusa. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic scholarship, the essay argues that monstrosity in these myths does not necessarily derive from physical hybridity, but from the perceived threat of autonomous female power. While the threat is often imminent in these myths, a crucial pattern is analysed. Once contained and subordinated to the patriarchal *cosmos*, this female power becomes useful. Ultimately, the essay argues that Graeco-Roman myth does not depict femininity as inherently monstrous, but constructs it as such when beyond patriarchal borders, reflecting deep cultural anxieties surrounding female autonomy.

Keywords: Greek mythology, monstrosity, sexuality, patriarchy

Introduction

From early modern witch-hunts to modern-day laws restricting women's healthcare, women's agency and sexual sovereignty have terrified men. Could the Graeco-Roman tradition, often referred to as the cornerstone of Western culture, offer us more insight into this topic? And what does the idea of "monstrosity" have to do with female agency?

The destabilising force to the asserted patriarchal system in the Graeco-Roman world is, as I argue in this essay, the unregulated feminine that often represents "the other". Following the Aristotelean thought of the female as a "strange man", Graeco-Roman authors inevitably construct the feminine as ultimately different from the powerful and virtuous masculine. This diversion from norms, particularly beyond the patriarchal order, terrifies men to an existential extent, resulting in a depiction of the untamed feminine as monstrous.

The objective of this piece is to explore the fear of female subjectivity and sexuality as depicted through mythology, and when this monstrosity as a destabilising force ultimately begins and ends. Analysing destabilisation through the lens of monstrosity will allow for a clear demarcation of what is acceptable and what is threatening. Through the exploration of four female mythological characters and the portrayal of their monstrosity, I hope to determine the extent to which female agency and sexuality act as a destabilising force in Greek myth. Firstly, we shall explore the female hybridity and its relation to public law through the Furies, followed by the dangers of maternal imagination in Typhaon's birth story, dangerous female autonomous sexuality as evidenced by Circe's meeting with Odysseus and his crew, and, finally, Medusa's story will be explored in relation to the utility of the monstrous for the patriarchy.

‘The Monstrous’

In order to effectively explore the extent to which ancient Greek myth portrayed the feminine as a destabilising force within the case studies, it is crucial to first assert a definition of the monstrous. Waterhouse’s (1996) definition of the monstrous as inherent evil toward humans, physically large in size and deformed works only to an extent, since Hera and Circe are not portrayed as physically monstrous or hybrid. Campbell’s definition of monsters as “horrendous presence that explodes all standards for harmony, order, and ethical conduct,” (Campbell, 1968, p. 222) on the other hand, provides a basis for a framework I wish to adopt for this essay due to its emphasis on morality (or lack thereof) instead of visual distortion. The framework I wish to work with was established by Jessica Decker (2016), who describes the feminine monstrosity as a result of the female link with *bios* as opposed to *techne*, often understood as the male domain. This dichotomy between *bios* and *techne*, where *bios* lacks intellect and is spontaneous and *techne* can only be practiced by humans and gods, never animals, will prove crucial, especially in the case of the Furies and Medusa, animal hybrids. Moreover, the monsters’ geographical marginality, reflecting the closeness to *bios*, also represents the liminal space of society (both physical and metaphorical), which they often occupy (Decker, 2016).

Therefore, this essay does not necessarily see monstrosity as a visually frightening creature, but a symbolic challenge to the patriarchal order due to its “otherness” and diversion from patriarchal norms. As Aristotle claims in *Politics*, women lack the necessary moral awareness of men (Decker, 2016). Since most of the analysed myths would have preceded Aristotle, we can see that the Ancient Greek society operated with the same idea surrounding

women for centuries, and his formulation only crystallises anxieties already embedded in earlier structures. Indeed, it is this instability and lack of morality that creates monstrousness when untamed by the patriarchal system, i.e. instilling the idea that monstrous is the female natural state.

The Furies – Monstrous Lawfulness

The Furies, visually apparently implacable divinities with snakes hanging from their hair, embody both the abhorrent physicality of monsters and the monstrous feminine character. The latter is alluded to within their name. Despite the English translation “Furies”, etymologically clearly stemming from fury/anger, the original Greek reveals ambiguity, and arguably their two sides – the monstrous and the lenient. We shall delve into the monstrous first, as implied by the name Erinyes. The discussed extracts are from Aeschylus’s *The Eumenides*, during Orestes’s court for matricide, which could result in the disinheritance of his father’s throne as punishment.

Most likely stemming from the Greek *erinuô* (=I am angry), their name hints towards their angry nature as hybrids. Their abhorrence is exponentially increased through Aeschylus’s convincing description as: “completely disgusting, they snort unapproachable breathings, and from their eyes they leak a revolting ooze” (Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, lines 52-54). This description evidences the monstrous physical hybridity, and, as Simone suggests, such “configuration of the breathing, flowing, boisterous body that is monstrous and gendered feminine” (Simone, 2024, p. 519) evokes chthonic embodiment. This creates space for a dichotomy between chthonic and Olympian, but most importantly male and female, as the next part pays attention to Apollo. By describing him as “Loxias, (...) prophet of healing

(...) purifier,” (Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, line 63) the Priestess directly defines the god as the prophet or interpreter of Zeus and a purifier called to extract the Erinyes’ unwanted, polluting presence (both physical and moral). Essentially, Apollo plays the role of male supremacist, as suggested by Moss (1988), by protecting the audience from the unregulated female monsters. This use of juxtaposition, therefore, enhances the visual characteristics with traits imperative to portray their unregulated nature later.

To punish this matricide, they attempt an oath-challenge, which can be read as a seed of potential resistance against the legal institution’s perpetuation of injustice, especially when based on gendered inequalities (Slupek, 2024). Erinyes consistently enforce right and order, concerning themselves with *dikê* (justice), meaning they are not anarchistic in nature, but once they divert from the patriarchal system and try to enforce justice for Clytemnestra, they are perceived as destabilising and in need of stopping. This can be evidenced when Athena perceives Erinyes’ warning of dire consequences if the matricide goes unpunished as a threat to her community (Slupek, 2024, p. 136). Their portrayal as getting revenge for matricide, rather than pursuing a just trial, is crucial for our understanding of how the Erinyes are ultimately stripped of their own agency by being overvoted by the democratic civic order and in opposition to Athena and Apollo. Indeed, their failure and eventual subordination provide a glimpse into Athenian society’s classification of matricide as a personal vengeance, instead of a communal and political matter. From the patriarchal perspective, the Erinyes’ goal to destabilise the order and turn to a matriarchal system of private vengeance dominating the public sphere has failed, reasserting dominance over the law.

After Erinyes' failure, we shall turn to the name Eumenides, used in the name of Aeschylus's piece itself, creating etymological duality of the Furies. Meaning "fair-minded or kindly ones," (Mitchell-Boyask, 2009) we notice a major shift in what their name reveals about their nature. Slupek argues that Athena's exchange with the Furies sets about establishing further boundaries, restricting the goddesses' sphere of influence to the household and firmly domesticating their ancient powers under the ground of Areopagus homicide court, part of the patriarchal domain (Slupek, 2024). This restriction to *oikos* evidently reflects the Greek fears around female agency in the public sphere, with the household containing and regulating these possibly destabilising forces. Stripped of their former powers, Athena turns them into guardians of the patriarchal state (Slupek, 2024, p. 120). With that, the Erinyes hereafter become Eumenides in their behaviour, due to a re-establishment of patriarchal order and redirection of their power into a manageable domain, *oikos*.

Thus, the Erinyes provide a perfect example of the duality of feminine monstrosity. The Erinyes are destabilising because they privilege maternal bonds over paternal lineage, a direct threat to patriarchal inheritance. Thus, the Erinyes' agency is constructed as a threat to a great extent, but as something tameable, which can, in the end, serve in alignment with the patriarchal order, here embodied by Athena and Apollo. Once this process is established, their powers and agency are not perceived as destabilising and vengeful, but helpful and fair-minded. Regarding their vengeance, Zeitlin suggests that Aeschylus alludes to Erinyes as parthenogenic offspring of Nyx, supposed to represent vengeance, synonymous with the Furies, as a "wholly female" phenomenon (Zeitlin, 1978, p. 163).

Hera and Gaia – the Vengeful Wives and Monstrous Mothers

To fully understand this idea of vengeance as wholly female, though, we shall analyse the parthenogenic birth of Typhaon by Hera, aided by Gaia. Hera is an example of an unregulated female body, resulting in the birth of monsters out of vengeance towards the patriarchal order, in this case represented by Zeus. The focus will be on the context and consequences of this birth, answering to what extent myth portrays the maternal body as monstrous and destabilising. The primary source analysed is the myth description in *Homeric Hymn 3 to Apollo, to Pythian Apollo*.

Introducing the conception of Typhaon as “Once on a time Hera bare him because she was angry with father Zeus, when the Son of Cronos bare all-glorious Athena in his head,” (*Homeric Hymn 3 to Apollo*, line 307) the author depicts it as a result of an unregulated, raging female body with a goal to contest and overthrow Zeus’s rule. This spite is multiplied by Hera’s following monologue:

Beware now lest I devise some evil thing for you hereafter: yes, now I will contrive that a son be born me to be foremost among the undying gods —and that without casting shame on the holy bond of wedlock between you and me. (*Homeric Hymn 3 to Apollo*, lines 325a-329)

Hera’s declaration is not framed as an emotional outburst, but as a logically calculated act of revenge. Drawing attention to diction, particularly, the verbs “devise” and “contrive” uncover Hera’s forethought and scheming, traditionally associated with the masculine *techne*, rather than feminine *bios*. Moreover, Hera’s insistence on obeying the ‘holy bond of

wedlock' ultimately remove sexual transgression as the source of danger to Zeus. In other words, she does not threaten the order by transgressing the prescribed structures while conspiring with Gaia. Instead, she becomes revolutionary *within* the patriarchal system thanks to both her reproductive nature connected with *bios* and the adoption of the male domain through autonomous subjectivity, eventually destabilising the cosmic order (embodied by Zeus). The monstrosity of her actions is further enhance in Typhaon's description:

She bare one neither like the gods nor mortal men, fell, cruel Typhaon, to be a plague to men. Straightway large-eyed queenly Hera took him and bringing one evil thing to another such, gave him to the dragoness (Drakaena); and she received him. And this Typhaon used to work great mischief among the famous tribes of men. (*Homeric Hymn 3 to Apollo*, lines 351-355)

This excerpt is particularly striking due to its illustration of the threatening maternal imagination's offspring as plaguing men. It is indeed the result of Hera's "imprinting of images and desires," (Decker, 2016, p. 746) in this case motivated by the desire for revenge, that produces a hybrid continuously working to threaten the cosmic order. Furthermore, the author enhances the audience's perception of the feminine as destructive and monstrous when Hera, the monstrous mother, gives Typhaon to another female monster, Drakaena, who nurtures him. Similarly, it is no coincidence that "Hesiod makes him [Typhaon] son of Gaia, Stesichorus son of Hera," (Stesichorus, *Fragment 239*) since Gaia was the previous destabilising mother of monsters. Hera, therefore, assumes the same role by receiving Gaia's help in conception. Indeed, the similarities between Gaia and Hera's parthenogenetic births

and their role as the female counterpart to Uranus and Zeus, respectively, are crucial to uncovering the perceived danger of female unregulated sexuality and reproductive system in Greek society. Even though Cronos, tasked with overthrowing Uranus, was born out of conception, the role of Gaia is indisputable in scheming Uranus's demise. This can be assigned, once again, to the maternal imagination inflicting random qualities onto her progeny, as described by Decker (2016, p. 746). Both Typhaon (and Hephaestus), born out of Hera, and Gaia's children are displaying the mothers' desire to overthrow the patriarchal rule. The narrative thus encloses monstrosity within female reproductive genealogy, equating the unregulated female agency and fertility to an ongoing threat when out of control.

Gaia's story further reveals the need for repression of said maternal body in order for patriarchy to function (Decker, 2016, p. 746). While Hera does not face the same bodily repression as Gaia, the myth of Typhaon's birth ultimately showcases the real danger to the patriarchal system. It is not Hera's (or Gaia's) reproductive ability or the "female body qua body" (Decker, 2016, p. 746) that is inherently monstrous, but rather the transgression of their passive role, as imposed by the patriarchal system.

Therefore, in contrast to Zeus's celebrated parthenogenetic birth of Athena, Hera's analogous act produces chaos, revealing a gendered logic in which male reproductive autonomy generates civilisation, while female autonomy produces monstrosity. The myth thus exposes a profound cultural anxiety. It is not reproduction itself, but female control over it, that threatens the patriarchal order. Therefore, Graeco-Roman myth constructs female sexuality (and fertility) as destabilising only to some extent. This extent fundamentally depends on the purpose and context of this sexuality.

Circe – Beautiful Feminine

Similarly to Hera, Circe is never portrayed as a monstrous hybrid. Quite distinctly, she is explicitly seen as beautiful and young. It is this beauty, together with her societal positionality as an outsider, that breeds deception and danger to the male hero, and in translation, patriarchal Greek society as a whole. Therefore, Circe is monstrous because she violates the logic of the *oikos* with her deviousness.

Firstly, we shall focus on Circe's gendered deception as part of her destabilisation of the patriarchal system. She is seen as a "fair-tressed goddess, (...) singing with sweet voice, (...) such as is the handiwork of goddesses, finely-woven and beautiful, and glorious" (Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.221-223). Quite clearly, Homer introduces Circe through visual and auditory description, through symbols of innocence and submission and praising her handiwork, suggesting Circe's domestic domain. Furthermore, she is situated inside the *oikos*, further reassuring the men of Circe's containment within the female domain. These signifiers of domestic order conventionally signal safety, but here, they serve as false assurances of her submission. Even though she is at first portrayed as "accepting the banishment to the domestic sphere," (Moss, 1988, p. 518) essentially giving Odysseus's men the courage to attempt to intrude her space since she is not seen as a threat, Circe later proves that this is mere deception. Her mastery of domesticity as a pure performance serves as a trap for the men relying on social cues to assess danger.

Interestingly, when juxtaposed with the surroundings, the audience recognises the lack of *techne* (male domain), and domination of *bios*, with her house being the only sign of culture: "Within the forest glades they found the house of Circe, built of polished stone in a

place of wide outlook, and round about it were mountain wolves and lions” (Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.210-212). This dichotomy that Homer constructs, of an isolated island and predators surrounding a safe-looking *oikos* with a seemingly domesticated goddess, serves to warn the audience of potential deception and inversion of the domestic order. Particularly, the animals are of interest, since, evoking Creed, “beautiful woman was often accompanied by an animal (animals here) with open jaws and snapping teeth; the creature represented her deadly genital trap and evil intent” (Creed, 1993). Indeed, the fear of emasculation dominates this scene, and the tame predators represent Circe’s imminent power over *bios*. This inversion of *oikos* is most prominent in the line: “whom Circe herself had bewitched; for she gave them evil drugs,” (Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.213) where Homer affirms Circe’s diversion from the female domain, as “women were thought to possess no manual skill (...) except in the domestic area” (Moss, 1988, p. 516). Circe, portrayed as knowledgeable in the sphere of magic and drugs, has agency, which she uses to transgress her intended role, and thus destabilises a set order.

Her skills are, however, not purely a source of destabilisation. As Moss rightly points out, it is once women express their natural inclinations that they affront men’s dignity (Circe bewitches Odysseus’s men into swines), however, once these are suppressed, women can be helpful and agreeable companions (Moss, 1988, p. 518). This submission is evident once Odysseus reasserts the order with Hermes’s divine aid and by directly threatening her with his (phallic, representing the masculine power) sword. The aftermath reveals crucial context: “Then Circe knew that this had not happened without the will of the gods, and so, promising that she would not do the like to him, she restored his comrades to their earlier forms” (Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 125).

This passage from the Roman tradition follows the same narrative as the Homeric myth, however, it reveals a crucial line that can help us in understanding the power dynamics at play. This essentially puts Odysseus under the protection of the cosmic order and Circe's knowledge of god's involvement influences her actions, significantly taming her and making her disenchant her victims. Moreover, the line: "She herself lay with him, conceived, and bore two sons, Nausithous and Telegonus" (Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 125) effectively illustrates her subsequent subordination to Odysseus and the patriarchal system, as she reclaims the role of a caretaker and a mother, losing her destabilising agency.

Thus, Circe's agency is destabilising not because it is violent, but because it operates autonomously from male authority, exposing the fragility of patriarchal structures designed to contain it. Once they reestablish power over her and she is subdued, her power is not destroyed but instead redirected to serve them and become useful in their quest.

Medusa – Dangerous Victim

A similar utility of feminine powers is evident in the story of Medusa. Medusa constitutes a crucial case study in the construction of a destabilising force, as she is visually monstrous, a symbol of the female rage, and capable of petrification. However, Medusa's case reveals that female sexuality does not have to be autonomous in order to be perceived as dangerous and deserving of punishment.

Her exceptional beauty before her curse showcases how even violated female sexuality, virtually lacking agency, can be reframed as destabilising. Her rape by Poseidon, a polluting act in Athena's temple, endangers the cosmic and religious order. However, it is her beauty that is constructed as the cause of the crime, instead of the interpretation of the myth

as an act of male sexual violence. This fundamentally reveals how sexual disorder is perceived as a cause of women, regardless of consent. Even though her sexuality is not autonomous, but rather violated, she is seen as dangerous and worthy of punishment in the eyes of Athena (embodying the patriarchal system).

Athena's attempt to control this sexuality with Medusa's metamorphosis, however, fails. Particularly due to her unregulated nature as a maiden, who has been violated through a sexual act outside societal expectations, she does not fit within any acceptable categories of purity, making her gaze terrifying and something that ought to be controlled.

The question is whether her gaze is an embodiment of agency and protection. I argue it is not, as she does not have power over who she petrifies. This clearly reveals Greek anxieties about the instability of the untamed feminine, a force that destroys everything in sight. Nonetheless, there is space for appreciating Medusa's gaze as an embodiment of female subjectivity, (Bowers, 1990, p. 219) as suggested by Bowers, especially once explored through her victim's perspective. According to Bowers, Medusa is not horrifying by herself, but it is the look that disturbs, since the victims realise Medusa is looking at them, returning the gaze (Bowers, 1990, p. 219). At the same time, Medusa, both before and after her decapitation, evokes anxieties concerning emasculation. Dexter imagines Medusa's head as the vulva, which, as she argues, can be terrifying to men due to their fear of decapitation and castration and the fear of overpowering female sexuality (Dexter, 2010). Similarly, Hera is monstrous for her fertility and birthing abilities that directly threaten Zeus's sovereignty, and Circe is explicitly described as beautiful and warned against due to her sexual charm. The

female body thus becomes monstrous when it challenges masculine dominance, whether through reproduction, desire, or trauma-induced power.

Worth exploring is that despite this destructive power, Medusa's head is still used after her death. While her paralysing qualities whilst living displayed her as a "deflator of masculine strength," (Dexter, 2010, p. 26) she ultimately becomes useful after her death, despite her abilities still present and powerful. As Perseus wields her head as a weapon, (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V. 178-199; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 2. 45; Strabo, *Geography*, 10. 5. 10) or the subsequent appropriation of Medusa's head on Athena's shield (Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 2.46) or breastplate (Pseudo-Hyginus, *Astronomica*, 2. 12) convincingly show, the importance of the patriarchal system's positionality towards the powerful feminine is crucial. Her monstrosity lies in the body's refusal to remain passive, but this becomes acceptable only once controlled by male or Olympian authority.

Conclusion

This essay presented four case studies, revealing means of endangering the cosmic order, equal to patriarchal Greek society. The endangerment lies not in the powers in themselves, but in a woman's transgression of acceptable boundaries and usage of these powers through her subjectivity. This activation of the passive female bodies results in the construction of either monstrous behaviour or monstrous appearance, and sometimes the combination of both.

This autonomy, however, is not stable as opposed to the masculine ideal (Moss, 1988). Female subjectivity exhibits destabilising forces, such as spite, jealousy, treachery, and promiscuity, as examined in the four monstrous females. Through these myths, we can

see that while the feminine was portrayed as monstrous when unregulated, the Olympian deities provided the reassertion of cosmic order, in this case, patriarchally prominent. Once the order was re-established, we see that the feminine powers are apotropaic and aidful in patriarchal structures, as evidenced above.

This is a recurring theme in all case studies explored in this essay. Therefore, femininity itself does not seem threatening to the cosmic order. It is constructed as destabilising only when transgressing patriarchal structures. This ultimately reveals anxieties around females in Ancient Greek society that translated into mythology, and the extent to which female sexuality and agency are portrayed as threatening and monstrous is dependent on their level of containment.

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