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THE MYTH OF THE MONSTROUS FEMININE: A VIEW ON MESOPOTAMIAN, ANCIENT GREEK AND ALBANIAN FEMALE MONSTERS

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This paper analyses the expression of the monstrous-feminine in Mesopotamian, Ancient Greek and Albanian myths and folklore, while connecting them with and interpreting them through ideas expressed by Barbara Creed (1993) in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. In this paper we can notice matters of the monstrous-feminine that connect between different cultures and geographies, what these matters show us about the cultural perception towards femininity, and how these matters have often been used to portray the danger and risk perceived by a male-dominated society, and the connection these myths and mythological creatures have with Creed's interpretation of the monstrous-feminine in horror films. By studying this topic, we will better understand how the mentioned cultures, but not only, have portrayed female monsters and monstrous beings, what role they have had in the culture-building of these societies, how they reflect general psycho-social tendencies, and how they continue to be influential to this day in our understanding of gender-roles, societal duties and metaphysical views.

Keywords: mythology, the monstrous-feminine, monsters, gender, culture-building

МИТОТ ЗА МОНСТРУОЗНАТА ЖЕНСКОСТ: ВИДУВАЊЕ ЗА МЕСОПОТАМСКИТЕ, АНТИЧКО-ГРЧКИТЕ И АЛБАНСКИТЕ ЖЕНСКИ ЧУДОВИШТА

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Студијата го анализира претставувањето на монструозната женскост во месопотамските, античко-грчките и во албанските митови и фолклор, притоа поврзувајќи ги и интерпретирајќи ги низ идеите на Барбара Крид (1993) во нејзината книга „Монструозната женскост – филм, феминизам, психоанализа“. Во студијата се разгледуваат прашањата за монструозната женскост и начинот како тие се поврзани во различни култури и географски простори. Се разгледува што ни посочуваат овие прашања за културната перцепција на феминизмот, се анализира како овие прашања често се користат за да ги портретираат опасноста и ризикот во општествата доминирани од мажите, а се разгледува и врската помеѓу овие митови и митолошки суштества со интерпретацијата на Крид за монструозната женскост во хорор- филмовите. Проучувајќи ја оваа тема, се добива појасен увид како овие култури, но и не само тие, ги портретираат женските чудовишта и чудовишни суштества, каква улога имаат во создавањето на културите на овие општества, како ги рефлектираат општите психосоциолошки тенденции и како продолжуваат да влијаат до денешен ден врз нашето разбирање за родовите улоги, општествените обврски и метафизичките гледишта.

Клучни зборови: митологија, монструозна женскост, чудовишта, род, создавање култури

1 Introduction

As long as culture has existed in human societies, monsters and frightening creatures have accompanied almost every boundary of the known, or the understood. Four main theories have been born to explain the existence and functions of myths, although viewpoints differ on the exact ones: 1) the rational or aetiological myth theory – which explains the existence of myths as mechanisms to better understand and make sense of natural events and forces that occurred in the everyday lives of people; 2) the functional myth theory – which relates their existence to morality and social behaviour; 3) the structural myth theory – which corresponds myths with language and the structure of human mind and intellectual dichotomies; and 4) the psychological myth theory – which views myths as expressions and projections of the unconscious mind, reflecting desire, fears, and internal processes. This paper aims to harmonise viewpoints from different myth theories, mainly focusing on aetiological, functionalist and psychological ideas, merging the study of cultural, social and psychological elements to have a broader understanding of the monstrous feminine, as presented by Barbara Creed, and its effects on individuals and cultures. Thus, it would be of use to shortly mention differences with theories that relate to Sigmund Freud's and Carl Jung's views on myth, and their effects on societies.

When Sigmund Freud published *The Ego and the Id* in 1923 he outlined a revolutionary way of thinking not only about psychology, but for psycho-social and cultural phenomena in general, including myths, by dividing the human psyche into three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego. In his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (2010) uses the myth of the king Oedipus to correlate unconscious and deep psychological desires, based primarily on the dynamics between the Id, the Ego and the Superego, with myths (ibid, 280), setting a trend of explanation which would later influence even Creed (1993) in her viewpoints. This view on myths explained them as products of the deep relations between elements of the human psyche, often viewed as parts of a general human trend to perceive and understand the world through these structures and psychological desires. Freud's views on myth allow us to see them as explanations and projections of the deeper fears, thoughts and feelings of our minds, often *shameful* to be brought to light in an *intellectual* discourse, yet omnipresent in the daily mechanisms of our existence, behaviour, and understanding and interpretation of our relationships and the natural world.

Another important viewpoint which would create an interesting discourse on the topic of the monstrous feminine would be that of archetypes of the Collective Unconscious, postulated by Carl Jung (1981) in the book *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. These archetypes expand the Freudian concept of the unconscious to a collective one, introduce layers of shared human experiences and archetypes, as well as reveal universal patterns and symbols common across all cultures, not in a personal sense, but as transcultural truths across the whole of the human experience. Although we can find that elements of this theory may be found in Creed's book (1993) and consequently this paper, it is insufficient to create a

total Jungian picture relating to the monstrous feminine and its expression on the transcultural collective unconscious; thus, it could be theorised that such an approach would create rather fresh and interesting findings, in combination with a socio-cultural study.

Nevertheless, from fairy tales told to the young to scare them from being rowdy to legendary tales of heroes fighting and overcoming monsters to create cities or defend their people, and furthermore to terrifying explanations surrounding natural and unknown phenomena, monsters and terrifying creatures have played a crucial and irreplaceable role in building, structuring and preserving cultural norms, behaviours, and morals, wherever and however they were presented. Historically they have functioned as an early version of propaganda and social manipulation, regardless whether people actually believed in their existence or not. As Atherton (1998: x) states: "(monsters) get defined in relation to communities and to their standards of what is good, acceptable, normal, or natural… In different times, places, and cultures, or from different viewpoints within a single culture, different answers will emerge."

At the same time, we find the philosophical idea of *the Other,* personified in monsters (*real* or imaginary), expressed as a dangerous figure of malevolence, oddity, and abjection, as expressed by thinkers like Kristeva (2024), and expanded upon by Creed (1993). It is through monsters that humanity has personified its challenges, fears, and the unknown, even possibly, as to bring them closer as a psychological defence mechanism against the unexplainable, irrational, gruesome, and paradoxical nature of the multi-layered and multiform unknown that has always surrounded humanity. By bringing *closer* the unknown, by making it *earthlier* and more explainable, human cultures have managed to use the unknown as a tool of culture-shaping. Whilst still being an *other*, the monster has become a more recognizable *other*, while the unknown has lost its ability to be an infinite and untouchable abyss.

For all cultures, like with the Greek and Roman cultures, the cultural realisation of monsters often expressed their anxiety over essential antagonisms of life and human existence (Felton 2013: 131). In a world predominantly controlled and directed by physical power – political and cultural power was predominantly expressed by the ability to have a strong army and conquer or destroy your enemies – women were in a disadvantage. Men, being generally stronger physically, controlled and directed societies and cultures, through wars, violence, terror, and conflict. They brought people into power, and they took that power away, generally through violent and aggressive means. That has been historically the nature of power, which finally changed with the expansion of democracy and liberalism, which changed the focus of social power from physicality to psychology and the ability to influence human decision-making. This allowed for a fairer *playing field* for all in a society, which was not the case in ancient cultures and civilisations where women were undermined, controlled, and policed by male society. This ostracisation means that as much as women were part of the human world, they nevertheless were *Others* from the civilised, cultured, and social world, dominated

by male presence. This *otherness* of the female has undoubtedly been expressed throughout civilisations through monsters expressed so often as female, often even as hybrids of women with different animals, as were the majority of hybrid monsters of Greek mythology, and even as a way to accent the intrinsic *otherness* of the female in society (Karoglou 2018: 4).

The female world has nevertheless been a very important and *mystical* part of the male-dominated society. Seen as different from males, they expressed all that was mysterious about nature and humanity, but again, in a society centered on the male citizen the feminisation of monsters served to even demonise women (Karoglou 2018: 5). The Greek myths, for example, repeatedly showed male heroes and gods winning over monsters (most of them female), asserting a dominance of the male thought, reason, and civilisation over the female unknown and tendency towards the natural (Felton 2013: 103).

It is undoubtedly interesting to ponder on the reasons behind the gradual but sure femininization of a lot of monster figures in Greek mythology for example. The Greeks adapted many of their monsters from the Near East (Felton 2013: 103), through contact with Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations, during the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C. At the beginning of the fifth century B.C., the grotesque and terrifying monsters of the Archaic period of Ancient Greece, which were often portrayed in an agendered manner – such is the case, for example, with Medusa and its archaic representation – began to be softened, beautified, humanised and consequently feminised (Karoglou 2018: 5). One idea, proposed by classicist Woodford (2003: 133–134), is that this change happened to suit these figures with the sensibilities of the classical period, yet I would argue that this change in representation of the monstrous-feminine in ancient Greece was also pushed and warranted for by the gradual establishment and consolidation of Greek city-states during the seventh century B.C., establishment of laws and civil duties, and the subsequent stratification of societal and cultural gender roles, the consolidation of male dominance in political and cultural manners and the following alienation of the female from those tools of power which, as stated beforehand, pushed for the demonisation of the feminine in a more structured and controlled manner – through the arts, rhetoric, and politics.

Nevertheless, this representation of the monstrous-feminine is not reserved only to the Greek and subsequent Roman civilisation. It is a trope found all around cultures and traditions, and can be very well be presented through the *seven faces of the monstrous-feminine* (Creed, 1993). These *faces* of the monstrous-feminine – the Archaic Mother, the Monstrous Womb, the Vampire, the Witch, the Possessed Body, the Monstrous Mother, and the Castrator – provide a good map for analysing not only female figures in horror movies, as Creed (1993) has employed it, but it can also be used to interpret mythological figures throughout history. In the following sections, by exploring a few of these Mesopotamian, Ancient Greek, and Albanian female monsters, we will unveil ways through which these figures connect with each other, how they were portrayed in a male-dominated world, and what symbols, fears, doubts, and messages these figures expressed.

2 Mesopotamian mythology

Mesopotamia bore a fruitful and detailed mythological structure. As one of the cradles of civilization, Mesopotamia provided the perfect fruitful ground for myths, traditions and cultures to flower, and ultimately to spread their influence in other regions. Ancient archaic Greek civilizations and cultural centres were influenced and inspired by the Near East, and Mesopotamian civilisations, political structures and, consequently, cultural products. Early Linear B texts reveal that the Greek civilizations of Knossos, Pylos, and Mycenae were highly similar and influenced by the Near Eastern Kingdoms of their times (Posthumus 2011: 16). This same influence can be witnessed in the prevalence of the Sphinx, a monster thought to have spread to Ancient Greece through the Near East, where it is found in numerous manners, styles, and depictions. The Early Dynastic period of Mesopotamia preceded the Mycenean Age by more than a millennium, thus the already established mythology and cultural structure of the Mesopotamians would have provided a rich and endless stream of influence and inspiration, yet decentralised contact before and after the Greek "Dark Age" would have provided and created various variations of motifs for these monsters (Posthumus 2011: 20). One such example of a clear influence which can be witnessed on a cultural level can be that of the Mesopotamian goddess of love, war, and fertility, Inanna, also known as Ishtar (Breitenberger 2007: 8–12), and the important role that she had in building the mythology, symbolism, and message surrounding Aphrodite, as a goddess of sexuality, fertility, and love. This influence should not come as a surprise accounting to the important role that Phoenicians played in connecting these two civilisations.

Mesopotamia has a rich history of monsters, demons, and terrifying and abject beings. And as with most cultures, they too are present in the female form. One such example is Lilith, the supposed first wife of Adam, which was banished from the Garden of Eden for not obeying and not becoming subservient to Adam. This episode is mostly known from the Abrahamic tradition, yet a Mesopotamian demonological origin is proposed, although scrutinised (Kvam et al. 1999: 174), thus I will not be focusing too much on her figure, even though I would argue that she could be understood as one of those *witches* of ancient humanity, for fighting against and escaping from the grasp of male dominance (nevertheless, this is a topic for another discussion).

Of great interest to the topic explored in this study are the ancient figures of the demon/monster Lamashtu, and the goddess Tiamat, the symbol of the primordial chaos. Lamashtu is one of those figures more akin to typical monsters in the way that we understand them. She is a mythological hybrid – with the head of a lion, the body of a donkey, holding snakes with her hands, i.e., one of the symbols most associated with the feminine. The symbiological connection between snakes and women will be even more noticeable in the following section, when we speak about ancient Greek mythology and the connection it adds to the monstrous female and chthonic figures like serpents.

In her function, Lamashtu was presented very similarly to the Ancient Greek Lamia, a monster which was described as a half-woman half-snake hybrid, which snatched kids and devoured them. Creed (1993) provides a convincing and interesting *face* which connects deeply with the figure of Lamashtu and Lamia – both can be understood to represent the *power* of the *castrating mother*, the power and the connected fear of the male-dominated society that a mother, when gone rouge, presents a danger and risk to the newborn and to the weak children. The castrating mother's perversity can be understood to be grounded in possessive, dominant behaviour towards her offspring, particularly the male child (Creed 1993:139). The figure of the castrating mother is one of the biggest horror tropes in human societies. In some ways, it can be understood as the totalitarian power that a mother has over her children, especially when considering that throughout early human civilizations, that power could have been even more pronounced through the periodical absence of the male on the family scene. Even today, I believe that the disproportionate absence of the male in the family structure continues to play on this fear, creating a *fearful* power for the female towards the children and the newborns. Lamashtu exists around this human fear, the fear that if the woman bearing a child does not behave appropriately, is not morally fit, does not raise the child as she is supposed to, she will come and take that child and bring travesty to that family. This becomes even scarier when the risk is focused on the male child, the child that in a patriarchal society is supposed to inherit and continue the familial structure, power, and hierarchy. In a patriarchal society, Lamashtu can also be understood to function as a moral judge and a controller of women, putting emphasis on the moral duty of women and their ability to guard and raise their children; however, this is only a hypothesis and cannot be proven by the existing evidence. Kristeva, for example, sees the mother–child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free, but the mother is reluctant to release it (Creed 1993: 11). Yet, this complex relationship of breaking apart and dependence, when taken to its extremes, always portrays the feminine as monstrous, dangerous, and troublesome to the symbolic placement of the child in the symbolic world of the male-dominated society.

Another important yet revered figure from Mesopotamian mythology is that of Tiamat, the primordial goddess of the sea, and the embodiment of *primordial chaos* (Dalley 1987: 329). Tiamat is the mother of monsters in the Mesopotamian pantheon, creating them in a fit of anger against the killers of her husband, very akin to the Greek figure of Echidna, which is also known as the creator and birther of most of the monsters in Greek mythology. Some sources identify her with images of a sea serpent or dragon (Jacobsen 1968: 104–108), again very similarly connected to Echidna which was represented as a half-woman and half-snake monster (Syropoulos 2018: 70). What can be understood to make her monstrous and abject, is her connection to what Creed (1993) calls the *Archaic Mother*. When Kristeva (2024, as cited in Creed 1993: 25) discusses the archaic mother, she stresses her double signifying function as both source of life and abyss, easily connectable to Tiamat's powers to create life (through her union with Abzu), yet

also with her power to endanger and destroy life (through her ability to create monsters which endanger the *civilised* and *structured* nature of the patriarchal society). This abyss is symbolised by her association with primordial chaos, the birthplace of everything, and maybe most terrifyingly the end of everything. In this sense, Tiamat can also be understood as a figure of *castrator*, the fearful image of the mother that has the power to deconstruct and destroy the male-centric world, and therein lies the abject and monstrous properties of Tiamat. Dadoun (1989: 53–54, as cited in Creed 1993) describes the archaic mother as:

> A mother-thing situated beyond good and evil, beyond all organized forms and all events. This is a totalizing and oceanic mother, a 'shadowy and deep unity', evoking in the subject the anxiety of fusion and of dissolution; a mother who comes before the discovery of the essential *beance*, that of the phallus. This mother is nothing but a phantasy inasmuch as she is only ever established as an omnipresent and all-powerful totality, an absolute being, by the very intuition – she has no phallus – that deposes her… (ibid, 25)

Tiamat greatly fits this narrative – she is goddess of the sea, the primordial birthplace of life, the unknowable vastness, the primordial chaos. With her lies the unknowable vastness of cosmic unity, the unimaginable abyss, the power to *be created* and *be destroyed*. In the end of her story, explained in the creation epic *Enuma Elish*, Tiamat is slain by Marduk, killed as a figurative explanation of the conquest of the natural world by the symbolic one, but she doesn't die without leaving behind a sort of continuation of her presence, i.e., the monsters of the world who remind the man of its impossibility to overcome the unknown and the *abyss* of life.

This is a trope greatly presented in mythologies around the world and through which we can speculate that the symbolic world of the male divinely deserves the right to direct society by its killing of the natural world, heavily represented by the monstrous feminine. This connection of the feminine with the natural world, as opposed to the symbolic world of the male, is not a coincidence. The woman is associated with natural events, even those that are as primordial to life, such as birth and sex, which in itself are seen as quintessentially grotesque (Miles 1989: 147, as cited in Creed 1993: 43), probably because of its distance from the male world. Being as distant as they are from the male world, these phenomena lurk on the edges of the monstrous as actions of abjection, disgust, and the unknown.

These two figures of Lamashtu and Tiamat represent only a very small fraction of the monstrous feminine present in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. Its mythology is filled with dragons, serpents, demons, and evil forces presented in the manner of the monstrous feminine. It is filled with a sense of mystery and abjection, which finds it way in the representation of goddesses and monsters, which translate the unknowable fears of a very old tradition in a more *graspable* and *known* form. These tropes, symbolisms and *faces* are even more evident in the mythology of ancient Greece, where the mysterious and sometimes missing information of

ancient Mesopotamian mythology, is replaced with a more structured, full, and comprehensive mythology.

3 Ancient Greek and Albanian mythology and folklore

The Balkans has a rich and ancient culture of myths, legends, and tradition. Of all the ancient civilisations of humanity, probably none is known and understood better, in its details and ordeals, than the mythology of Ancient Greece.

As mentioned beforehand, many Near Eastern myths and cultural traits influenced the Ancient Greek understanding of their own pantheon. Many Near Eastern religions were built on the origin myth of a man battling a monster. In these cases, a warrior-god who represents harmony and order battles against a chaos-monster which threatens the world (Felton 2013: 107). In the Mesopotamian context it plays out as the battle between Marduk and Tiamat, but the ancient Greek equivalent of this is the battle between Zeus and Typhon, sent as his main and final adversary to circumvent the male rule of the universe – Typhon in this sense, imagined as a snake-like being, represents the old female, chthonic order of the world (ibid, 108). This battle can be understood to represent the final struggle for dominance between the *natural* world of the female, often portrayed with the chthonic figure of the snake, and the *civilised* world of the male, often represented by a sky-figure, such as Zeus in this case, or Marduk in the earlier example.

An important question arises as to the historical and prevalent connection between women and the female-world with snakes and serpent-like beings. Syropoulos (2018) attributes this connection to the "mesmerizing, lethal charm in snakes," to "the calm, rhythmic uncoiling of their lean bodies" that can be seductive and dangerous, "just like a woman to the view of the ancient Greek males" (ibid, 70). This explanation connects the figure of the snake with the seductive and *slithering* nature of the feminine and females in a male-dominated society. I would argue that it also represents a viewpoint often connected with the female power – the inability to fight their danger in a direct manner (by the lack of representation in societies dominated by physical force), but fighting in slyer ways, in an indirect manner, through influence, seduction, manipulation, and in hiding. These are images often connected to the snake, and it is possible that the same images connect very well with the way women were seen and went through life and society in a patriarchal world, i.e., slithering carefully through it. Creed (1993) adds another context to this imagery:

> Some ancient cultures also associated the full moon and woman's monthly bleeding with the snake. All three – the moon, snake and woman's cycle – move through stages in which the old is shed and the new reborn: the moon moves through its cycle from the old to the new moon; the snake sheds and renews its skin; woman sheds and renews her blood. Many early myths state that the young

> girl begins to bleed when the snake-goddess, or god which lives in the moon, bites her. (ibid, 64)

This interpretation builds on the established notion of the feminine as a representation of the natural world. The woman as such, is the most direct and influential connection of the human world with the natural world – they are the connection to life itself, as the forthbringers of life itself. In this sense it is women through which nature manifests itself, but it is also in this sense that snakes, as chthonic figures, are related to women. Snakes lie and live in a direct connection to the ground, to Earth itself – they hide in it, eat in it, live in it, and in this sense can also be viewed as *extensions* of Mother Earth itself. Even the menstrual cycle – the process of bleeding and of excreting parts of oneself to the outside – are in a deep-rooted imagery, connections with the process of snake-biting and the releasing of venom. From a male viewpoint, menstruation is one of the clearest *symptoms* of nature bearing a hold on the human world; it is a process entirely controlled and stimulated by nature and its laws, contrary to the male form of excretion i.e., semen, which is normally stimulated only by human-led processes of masturbation or sexual intercourse. Menstruation reminds man of his *debt* to the natural world – a debt which he has to repay (or destroy) in order to be fully free and independent from the natural, and in a mythological standpoint, this battle has taken the forms mentioned beforehand.

Albanian folklore also has an interesting connection between the feminine world and snakes, often seemingly related to the Ancient Greek mythology. A figure which embodies these phenomena in Albanian folklore is that of the *kulshedra,* often represented as a demon of some sorts, a female in being, often imagined as a combination of a woman with that of a snake (Doja 2005: 451). As Doja (2005) explains, her figure is often contaminated by myths surrounding Circe or the Sphinx, or by the Andromeda theme. However, what is also of interest in this context is the prevalence of the *creation myth* explained beforehand, also present in Albanian folklore, but of a less cosmogenic nature – presented often as a battle between a male hero and this female monster, but without cosmic consequences. This could very well be a cultural residue of a creation myth centered around this act of heroism; however, one that could be hard to prove. The kulshedra is a representation of the monstrous feminine, very similar in description to the ancient Greek Hydra, yet her enemy – the hero of the myth – is called the *dragua* (depicted in early records in a similar manner to the Romanian dragon and the hydra). Nevertheless, the dragua, a hero born with two or four little feathers under his arms, aims to destroy the kulshedra in order to save and protect humanity. When they fight, the dragua uses natural phenomena and weapons to fight the kulshedra, while she is sometimes even depicted as fighting only with her urine and her poisonous breast milk. When the dragua beats the kulshedra it is often said that he throws her in a source of water so she never gets up again (Doja 2005). Here again we notice the general narrative-building of a male-dominated society towards the feminine: the kulshedra herself is the embodiment of the *abject*, expressed even explicitly by

the use of her bodily fluids in her fight with the dragua. As expressed by Creed (1993): "Constructions of the primal phantasies in horror narratives involve images associated with weapons, bodily disintegration in one form or another, blood, an array of abject bodily wastes, pain and terror." (ibid, 154).

Modern constructions of horror narratives are only built on ancient concepts of the monstrous, thus I overstate the importance that bodily presentation has in creating a figure of the monstrous-abject-feminine. In the case of the kulshedra this is expressed even more clearly when she, in some Albanian populated areas, is presented with her breasts hanging to the ground, a horrendous face and in a generally terrifying manner (Doja 2005: 451). In her end, the kulshedra, through her connections with monstrosity and waters, reminds us of another monster from ancient Greece, that of Charybdis, interpretable as a cautionary tale to women: hunger, or the desire to want more, to have more, to experience more, is destructive (Zimmerman 2021: 33). In this context the kulshedra returns back to her place, the mysterious (often mythologically feminine) waters, where she is bound to never get what she wants.

One figure of Albanian folklore that shares similarities with an ancient Greek counterpart is the figure of Llamja, which is a rendition of the ancient Greek she-monster Lamia. Lamia used to be a beautiful queen, taken by Zeus, who fancied her. After finding out about this affair, Hera took her children and either kidnapped or killed them, depending on the version. This was the moment that *turned her mad*, creating the monster we today know as Lamia. As mentioned before, Lamia can be understood as a *face* of the mother as castrator, the ever-existing threat and power that mothers have over life and humanity. From another viewpoint, Lamia (and Medusa as well, as will be shown in the following section) is seen to represent some sort of a modern *femme fatale*, especially when connected to the *lamiai* – seducers of young men who satisfy their sexual appetites and feed on their flesh afterward. It is in this context that the figure of Lamia developed in modern history (Karoglou 2018: 45), and it is through this imagery that Lamia is very akin to Barbara Creed's *face* of the *woman as vampire.* In her contextualization as a seductive and very dangerous figure in mythology, Lamia/lamiai represent(s) a grave danger of the feminine, the ability to control and manipulate men to their downfall. Yet again, she is made abject because she disrupts order, is driven by her lust for blood, and doesn't respect the laws of proper sexual conduct (Creed 1993: 61). But in her role as vampire, Lamia also suits her description as killer of children and younglings – she sucks the life out of them, much like a vampire does with the blood of her victim. Lamia is an abject in her animalism as well, not only presented in her physical imagery as half-snake, but also represented by her vampiric bloodlust and behaviour (ibid). Yet again though, the vampiric image of Lamia is connectable with another prevalent vampiric element: blood. Woman's blood specifically has been historically represented throughout society as more abject than mans for numerous reasons (ibid.) and this concept is pronounced societally through the depiction of vampiric figures like Lamia. By *giving life* to a monster like Lamia, a patriarchal world keeps in check and terrifies the figure of the feminine, as a mother

that (possibly) castrates and brings risk to the new generation of children, as a femme fatale that seduces and consumes (sexually and literally) men through her manipulative and sexual powers (one of the rare ways through which women could express power in a patriarchal society), and as a vampiric being that sucks life and destroys the well-being of humanity and the world. Through these images Lamia becomes a monster, and through her image, women become even more monstrous.

Another terrifying and ever-present female monster in ancient Greek mythology is the monster Scylla. First depicted in Homer's *Odyssey*, Scylla was initially a being that was imagined as female, but very similar to a six-necked monstrous dragon which howled and made sounds of puppies (Syropoulos 2018: 73). Gradually however, Scylla began to be identified specifically as a beautiful and attractive woman that unintentionally attracted the rage of the witch Circe, who loved the man who loved Scylla. Clearly this theme of women directing their rage towards other unsuspecting women is a prevalent one – no retribution can happen to the man in a male-oriented society. From Circe's retribution, Scylla's body was made monstrous – her upper half has a woman's form, while her waist-down grows canine heads which devour and kill every passer-by. This imagery is used most profoundly to represent Scylla and her terrifying attributes, but this representation can be directly connected to the imaginary *vagina dentata* as explained in Creed's book: "In classical art the figure of a beautiful woman was often accompanied by an animal companion with open jaws and snapping teeth; the creature represented her deadly genital trap and evil intent." (1993: 108)

Scylla is often expressed as devouring and destroying travellers, cutting them to pieces and eating them for her pleasure, and as this is a process which physically happens through the mouth, it is easy to see the connection between the monster and the idea of the vagina dentata – although the woman herself doesn't eat her prey, her *lower part*, which has canine heads on it, destroy and eat the flesh of travellers, figuratively and symbolically expressing the myth of the dangerous vagina that cuts the penis of an unexpecting sexual partner. An even stronger imagery of the sexual act and its consequences is built when we recreate the area surrounding Scylla and her *partner* Charybdis, which seen as an *ever-sucking* hole can also be viewed as another representation of the vagina dentata – the fear that the mother will eat (destroy) her young, or the dyadic mother will symbolically incorporate the infant (the man) (Creed 1993: 109).

In some sense the pass itself that stands between Scylla and Charybdis can be seen as a vagina dentata – certain and unexpected death and demise – while the very act of passing through it, the act of entering the vagina, which for an unsuspecting traveller spells certain doom from either monster. While Charybdis is surely going to destroy all the ships, Scylla's power is lesser and she endangers only six people at a time, but nevertheless they both kill and destroy, whether by physically killing the travellers by consuming them, or by physically and metaphorically sucking them in, taking them back to the primordial state of being – to the womb of the world, the same womb that nurtured them when they were being created, and the same womb that could've been the end of them. As such, the

figures of Scylla and Charybdis can also be seen through the lens of the omnipotent castrating mother, the mother that eats their young, that destroys their symbolic powers, that returns them back to nature, a fear of the all-devouring woman that is related to infantile memories of early relations with the mother and the fears created by it (Creed 1993).

In some sense Scylla represents a version of the monstrous-feminine which played on countless deep-rooted fears surrounding women in a patriarchal society. She is a monster, but her reported beauty allows us to imagine her as some sort of a femme fatale which preys on the men that cross her path. Greek mythology is filled with cases of beauty-turned-femme-fatale, be it princesses or everyday women, none is too safe from her beauty, and it is often they who receive the punishment for something that is not their fault. This fixation with beauty and attractiveness could be a message of threat for a male society. A woman who is too beautiful brings the worst in men, creates the worst of misfortunes – as Helen of Troy could teach us. Thus, in a society where male dominance needs to be reassured and never threatened, women who are too beautiful need to be *taxed*, controlled and subdued, so that their ability to use their power of beauty is never fulfilled and satisfied.

A gradual metamorphosis towards a more beautiful and anthropomorphic form of female monsters befell not only Scylla, but others like Medusa and sphinxes (Karoglou 2018: 3), and the fascination with between beauty and horror continued to captivate artists and people even after antiquity, mainly through the figure of Medusa (ibid, 5). As mentioned in the introduction, Medusa's form was archaically almost entirely agendered, as is the case with Scylla and the sphinxes.

Medusa is one of the most attested and culturally used figures from any mythology in the world. Her figure is used prominently even in modern days, let us take as an example the logo of the famous clothing brand *Versace*, through which the imagining of Medusa as a femme fatale and as seductress only spread more. In the imagery surrounding Medusa we find present many tropes related to the monstrous side of the feminine, and the fears it created in a male world. Medusa became the archetypal femme fatale, perceived to be both enchanting and dangerous (Karoglou 2018) also correlated with her ability to *turn to stone* whoever threw her gaze at her – the ability to render someone speechless and inspire awe has been often attributed to beauty, but especially female beauty. As with Scylla, in some versions of the myth, it is Medusa's beauty that defines her life and her mythological duty. Her beauty attracted Poseidon's lust, who then continued to rape Medusa in the temple of Athena (Syropoulos 2018: 35). Disgusted by this act, Athena acted against Medusa, turning her in the monster we know today. Here again we witness the trope of beauty playing against the female, presented as a danger and threat, and again it is the woman's fault for attracting the man, and not the contrary – thus she is punished without fault and for no reason.

As with many female mythological figures, Medusa is deeply connected with chthonic imagery and elements, such as the snake – her scalp houses snakes, not hair, again linking her to the natural and original world before the dominance of

manhood. In this sense she represents man's fear of women's destructive potential (Felton 2013: 105) yet her myth, and her death by Perseus also symbolises and recreates the early myth of the younger patriarchal society replacing the older, natural world of the matriarchy (ibid, 114). It symbolises the overcoming of this *evil* and the transition towards a society directed by order, hierarchy and structure. I do not take it as a coincidence that the force that cursed and created this monstrosity was the goddess Athena, goddess of war and strategy, who often represents a woman in mythology who is less sympathetic towards the "female world" rather choosing to frequently support and forgive her male counterparts and to work on their behalf.

Medusa also terrifies in a different manner. Freud (1955: 273-274) used the myth of Medusa to express his theory that the woman scares because she is castrated. By connecting Medusas snakes (hair) with the pubic hair of the female genital area and as substitutes for the penis, the child creates a fear of decapitation which connects to castration, by imagining the female genitals as decapitated, the child fears that figure. Creed, on the other hand, argues that Medusa terrifies not because she is castrated, but because she castrates: "With her head of writhing snakes, huge mouth, lolling tongue and boar's tusks, the Medusa is also regarded by historians of myth as a particularly nasty version of the vagina dentata. Erich Neumann claims that the Gorgons symbolize the mother goddess in her 'devouring aspect'." (1993: 111).

Medusa as such, is another representation of the elemental fear of humanity generally, and male society specifically: the fear of the all-powerful mother. In its terrifying form, Medusa's figure has been used historically as apotropaia to turn away evils, as similarly occurs with her in the myth, when her figure is used on Athena's shield. Medusa's figure reminds the viewer to be careful, for she might castrate, and in this form, it's been believed that it's a useful tool not only against evil spirits, but even, as Athena proves, in battle, where the fear of castration through decapitation is as real as ever.

Medusa's connection with castration is also evident in the way through which Perseus cuts her head, although this can be seen in a more symbolic manner, as the decapitation of female power (power is often presented phallically in a male society) and the birth of male dominance. A great scene connecting Medusa to the female organism and the abject is also evident in the moment of her death – when Perseus cuts her head off, two beings jump out of Medusa's neck: the winged horse Pegasus and the warrior Chrysaor. In this scenario the cutting of Medusa's head brings forth birth and life, just as birth and life would come from a vagina, reiterating the connection between her head and the image of the vagina dentata. The two beings born in their full-grown form, give the impression of being swallowed and trapped inside her, reminding others of the threat of the vagina dentata, and the generative force that becomes when she is destroyed. Medusa's blood also plays an important and interesting role in ancient Greek mythology: the blood from her veins in her left side are deadly and poisonous, while the blood from her right side has the ability to bring someone back from the dead, to bring them

back to life (Syropoulos 2018: 37). Even in this, we see the imagery the female genitals play out: the vagina has the ability to create blood which brings someone to life, to give birth, to produce offspring, while at the same time it has the ability to release menstrual blood, blood often seen as one of the most virulent of all taboos because of its association with putrefaction, and consequently death and the unconscious (Creed 1993: 112), and all the mentioned interpretations.

Thus, Medusa can be understood as one of the most terrifying forms of the monstrous-feminine through its association with all the above-mentioned elements and *faces* of the feminine. This is also supported by the fact that even in modern times, it continues to be a symbol associated with the feminine-went-rouge, in all its nuances and paths. It is noticeable from the branding behind *Versace*, from Caravaggio's earlier depiction in *Medusa*, and even from ancient cups and goblets which would have Medusa's face on the bottom of the cups' inside, as to remind the drinker: *Be careful how much you drink, for she's always there to get you*.

4 Conclusion

The monstrous-feminine plays a tremendous role in monster-building throughout cultures, societies, and mythologies of the world, as witnessed by the numerous representations of that monstrosity in different forms and through many symbols.

In a male-dominated society, women have been seen as *outsiders* and *others*, often representing the natural, untamed, uncontrollable aspects of humanity and nature itself. This contact with the unknown and the unintelligible has resulted in creatures and figures which make these elements more touchable and closer to the rationalizing nature of our species. This is clearly witnessed in numerous creation myths throughout the world which often portray the unknown by a feminine figure which fights with a masculine hero, who kills the former as to bring civilisation, order, hierarchy, and structure to human societies. As seen in this paper, these feminine figures were often portrayed as, or connected with, chthonic figures such as snakes and serpents, as to symbolise the deep connection that they share with Earth, the mother of all beings. This chthonic connection serves to connect even the physical human woman to the more mysterious and natural elements of life, as opposites to the artificial and symbolic elements of the male world. In this connection of the feminine, the male world often finds the monstrous and terrifying, because it reminds him of the *world before man*, the world where chaotic and natural forces ruled. This trope has been used to create a scary aura around the feminine and women in particular, portraying them as dangerous and as abject. As explained, this abjection also took the traits associated with biological processes, often portraying female biology, such as their genitals, menstrual cycles, the process of birth etc., as disgusting, scary and monstrous. Throughout history these elements of abjection were used to downplay and degrade female presence in society, politics, and decision-making, shunning their sexual, political and

democratic needs, and portraying them as a threat to the dominance of the established societal formation, finding use as moral and ethical examples and *judges* for the greater good of a patriarchal society.

This paper does not include numerous other cases from world mythologies where the feminine, mothers, young women, widows, and single women are expressed as dangers to society, as troublemakers and threats. However, such examples can be easily found in all cultures: we only need to remind ourselves of the numerous witch-trails during Medieval history, stories our parents or grandparents told us about old croons or magical vampires found all around the world. They are all around us and they have built, and continue to build, our everyday perception of reality and truth. Monsters and monstrosity play a crucial and irreplaceable role in culture-building, and in reverse, cultures use these monsters to reinforce and reiterate old tales of sexism, misogyny, discrimination and prejudice in a loop that even in modern times, has proven hard to break.

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