Making Monsters

A Speculative and Classical Anthology

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Caught in Medusa's Gaze: Why does the ancient monster survive in the modern world?

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I think it is reasonable for me to guess that most readers of this book will, at some stage of their lives, have watched a film featuring the special effects of Ray Harryhausen. He was the mastermind behind the stop-motion animation in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), the original *Clash of the Titans* (1981), a host of Sinbad films, and many more monster movies. The monsters Harryhausen created have become iconic, occupying a special place in the hearts of those who grew up watching those films on wet bank holiday Mondays, when they used to be reliable fixtures in the television schedule. His visions of monsters (or, as he puts it in his 2009 biography *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life*, 'creatures, always creatures, never monsters') have shaped the imaginations of a generation of classicists and film-makers. The Medusa he created for *Clash of the Titans*, the first as far as I know to be depicted with a snake's tail as well as snaky hair, has become canonical for how contemporary Western society visualises Medusa.

Yet Harryhausen's monstrous interests did not lie exclusively within the classical—he brought a whole range of compelling creatures to life, including dinosaurs, the mythical eastern Roc, various aliens and a giant octopus (even if it did only have six arms). His Kraken, for some the epitome of his monstrous oeuvre, is not even a classical monster, despite the fact that it appears as part of the retelling of the Perseus myth in *Clash of the Titans*; the Kraken originates in Norse mythology, but the screenwriter felt that the name was too good to pass up just because of that. Given that Harryhausen had a global range of monstrous traditions available to him, as well as the possibilities science fiction offered to imagine the life forms of other planets, why did he keep on returning to classical monsters? For that matter, why does anyone in the modern world keep coming back to them? What has allowed them to survive into the twenty-first century with such cultural power that, for instance, viewers of *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017) were treated to the sight of a Lego Medusa (Fig 1) among the massed ranks of villains that the Joker tries to recruit to his cause in the Phantom Zone?

How precisely one defines a monster is a complicated business, illustrated by the fact that in 2008, connoisseurs of Barbie dolls could purchase Barbie® Doll As Medusa—albeit pre-transformation. The doll was more reminiscent of the famous Mycenaean snake goddess statue than a horrific monster, yet it evoked expectations of the form still to come through luxurious curly hair, twin armcuffs and a necklace in the shape of snakes, as well as a sinuous fish-tail skirt that hid the doll's feet

before spreading out onto the floor. This monster was not yet a monster, but her success relied on the consumer knowing she was a monster *really*. This example makes it clear why it is not enough to list monsters (the Minotaur—check; the Cyclops—check; the Sirens—check…), or to itemise its body parts (although as Valeria Vitale shows in her essay, this can be a good way to create them). Instead, we need to think about how you can tell that something is a monster in the first place. Indeed, what is considered monstrous changes over time. Intersex people are now understood and recognised within a medical framework; in the Roman world, a hermaphrodite was considered a *monstrum* or omen to be thrown into the sea in order to avert bad luck.

Fig 1. Artist's impression of Lego Medusa

The word 'monster' comes from this Latin word *monstrum*, which in its turn comes from the Latin verb *monere*, meaning 'to warn'—a monster is a portent, a monster warns. What generates a monster is the deepest fears of society. As Jeffrey Cohen has noted in his influential

essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," a culture defines what shape the monster it gives birth to takes. What generates the monster can be the fear of the uncategorised, that which does not fit into a neat box; it can be the unfamiliar, the ever-present 'Other' against which we define ourselves, that which we both fear and desire; it can be the need for something to police boundaries and punish those who step over the line, marking the limits of the acceptable and the normal.

But with all that in mind, what are we to make of creatures like the Minotaur, the harpy, the siren and the centaur, who sprang first from the minds of the ancient Greeks? What do the fears and concerns that preoccupied them have to say to the modern world? How does the chronological development that Maria Anastasiadou traces in her contribution to this volume continue to progress? If, as Cohen argues, monsters come into existence because of the anxieties deep within the culture that creates them, when does a Minotaur stop being truly monstrous and instead become a curious creature, a sideshow from a past age?

I think the answer is found in another feature of the monster, namely its endless flexibility and resilience—just think of the vampire forever returning from the grave in fresh reincarnations, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to the *Twilight* saga and beyond. The monster can reshape itself to haunt the culture that is using it, not just the culture that created it. So there is a fine line between a classical monster being used because it is a necessary evil—you can't have your Theseus without your Minotaur— and a monster who is fearsome because it is allowed to become that reconstituted embodiment of ghastliness rather than a fascinating oddity from an 'Introduction to Myth' class.

Yet fascination is as important as fear; the monster is an object of desire as much as it is of revulsion. We see this tension in the deeply ambivalent relationship that Victor Frankenstein has with his monster in Mary Shelley's classic novel—Frankenstein both longs for the fulfilment of his scientific ambitions and recoils from the being who results, caught in the paradox of fearing and never being able to escape his creation. Similarly, classical monsters draw us in at the same time as they repel us; we read ancient myths wanting to encounter these beasts up close, but not *too* close. Cinema offers the perfect place for us to come even nearer to the monster, to see its slavering jaws and shudder at its hybrid transgression, comforted by the sure and certain knowledge that we are only in a movie theatre, and the film will be over soon. Video games let us come closer still, so that we not only see the monster in close-up but conquer it with our very own sword, all from the comfort of our living room.

Twin frissons of pleasure and horror are thus combined in the monsters created by the brains of people who lived over two millennia ago. The question that now arises is what a classical monster in popular culture is trying to do—is it there to frighten us, fascinate us, or both? Our experience will always depend to some extent on the nature of the place where we encounter the monster; seeing a Harryhausen creation is very different to reading a novel featuring a monster, seeing one on a videogame screen, or viewing a film featuring a monster created by CGI rather than by Harryhausen's trademark Dynamation technique (in essence the same as the Claymation method used in the Wallace and Gromit films).
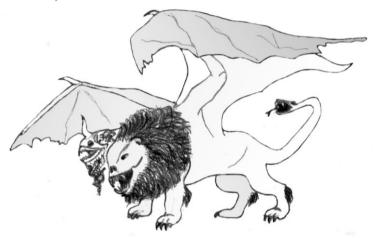

Fig 2. Artist's impression of *Wrath of the Titans* chimera

In fact, the danger of being seduced by CGI is neatly illustrated by the chimera from *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), the sequel to the *Clash of the Titans* reboot. In their creative process, the designers have carefully read the early Greek poet Hesiod's description of the Chimera as having a lion's head at the front, a dragon's head at the back and a goat's head somewhere in the middle; the result is a two-headed monster which breathes petrol from one mouth and fire from the other to create fireballs which it hurls at its enemies (Fig 2). Yet the film entirely abandons the rich background of the myth in which the Chimera originally features. Instead, it is dumped into the narrative so its appearance can function as a generic sign that something is wrong. Despite the fact that an entire YouTube featurette video titled 'Meet The Chimera' shows the production team emphasising how frightening they wanted this monster to be, the word 'chimera' is never actually said on screen; in the end, the creature is dispatched within about four and a half minutes of its initial appearance.

What seems to have happened in *Wrath* is that, instead of allowing the chimera to come to life, CGI has in fact frozen it. Each lovingly realised feather, tooth and claw is generated by the desire to be hyper-realistic and ultra-faithful to the 'original' myth. But what actually happens is that the monster becomes bathetic; as a fetish of the digital artist, it fails to serve any narrative function. It thus becomes the victim of the desire to show off esoteric knowledge about the monsters of a long-dead culture. Its sole purpose is to be displayed, freak-like, and then killed—at which point the film moves inexorably on.

By contrast, *Hercules* (2014), which featured Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson in its title role, took a rather different approach. The plot of the movie is comparatively monster-free, since it focuses on the adventures of Hercules and a team of mercenaries. They are hired by King Cotys of Thrace, ostensibly to train up his army for the purposes of self-defence, but (as soon becomes clear) Cotys in fact intends to overpower Greece with his souped-up fighting force. The 'monsters' mainly appear in an opening sequence which lays out some familiar Labours of Hercules featuring the Hydra, the Erymanthian Boar and the Nemean Lion; however, these soon turn out to be part of a story that Hercules' nephew is telling to pirates who are holding him captive. The rest of the film intermittently punctures the idea that monsters are real. For instance, on one occasion Hercules returns with a bag full of 'hydra heads', which turn out to be the heads of soldiers wearing snake masks. In another scene, squinting into the sun, Hercules thinks he sees a centaur riding over the brow of a hill, only for the figure to resolve into an armoured man on horseback as the light changes. The film thus advocates for what might be called a rationalising approach to ancient monsters—there is always a perfectly sensible explanation for anything supposedly supernatural that humans encounter.

Yet the film performs a volte-face at its conclusion. Hercules has just performed a feat of truly super-human strength which opens up the possibility that he actually *might* be the son of Zeus, an option the film has consistently hedged around, aided by the convenient absence of the gods from the screen. The visuals which accompany the closing credits return to the sequence of monsters which we saw as the film opened, but rendered in a monochromatic wireframe style meant to evoke CGI work in progress. As each of the stories is retold in this way, indicating that the visuals both are and are not true, it becomes clear that the untold element of each story was not that the monster did not exist, but that Hercules did not succeed on his own—members of his team each play a critical part in the defeat of whichever creature Hercules is facing.

By never actually showing a 'real' monster encounter, but instead

showing visualisations of a tale told by Hercules' publicist before reimagining these stories explicitly using the visual language of CGI-in-progress, *Hercules* gives classical monsters the space to exist in the ambiguity between reality and story. This tactic also means that the film avoids the distancing effects of CGI which other filmmakers are beginning to reject. For instance, in the hugely successful *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), the gripping car chase scenes were performed live by stunt drivers rather than manipulated into being by technology. The main contribution of CGI to the film was instead enhancing the landscapes and colours, and generating large crowds. It is not only classically influenced films which are finding that being hyperreal is not always in a monster's best interests.

Let me return to the question with which I began—why do ancient monsters survive in the modern world? I think the most helpful solution is to think about them like Medusa's hair. All versions of Medusa, the Minotaur and so on spring from the same place, but are independent creatures in their own right. They are restricted by their roots—the snakes on Medusa's head cannot go crawling off wherever they fancy—but they have some autonomy in finding new ways of existing. Ancient monsters survive because they are supremely adaptable. Rather than becoming tied to the fears of the ancient Greeks and Romans which generated them, they have found ways to come through the shadows of the modern world. Sometimes the fascination that they exert means we look at them too closely, causing them to freeze in our fervour to 'get things right'; they allow us to explore ideas of truth, fiction and the boundary between our world and the supernatural; or they draw on deep contemporary social fears to recreate themselves as the familiar faces of our modern terror.

One final example comes from December 2013, on the front cover of *British GQ*. Damien Hirst acted as art director for the magazine's twenty-fifth anniversary issue; he organised a shoot featuring the singer Rihanna in the *persona* of Medusa (Fig 3). Her face looked out of the cover with a coiffure of unashamedly photoshopped snakes, followed inside by a sequence of images in which she often wore not much more than a sequined thong. On the one hand, this representation repeated a familiar misogynistic trope, connecting Rihanna's sexuality and race with monstrosity, and feeding into *GQ*'s own deeply ambiguous attitudes to women and their sexual agency. However, there is a sting in this monstrous serpent's tail. For Rihanna to adopt the face of Medusa in the light of her own past history is not a neutral act. Her relationship with the singer Chris Brown had made her, willingly or otherwise, the public face of women experiencing domestic violence in the United States.

Fig 3. Artist's impression of Rihanna as Medusa

After a brief reconciliation at the start of 2013, in May Brown confirmed that their relationship was finally over. The shoot for *British GQ* took place in September 2013, after Rihanna's identity as a victim of domestic violence had been widely publicised, debated and dissected in the celebrity gossip press for many months.

The significance here is that, of course, Medusa's transformation into her monstrous self takes place after she has been raped by Poseidon, god of the sea. Medusa is visibly monstered as a victim of sexual violence, shamed by Athena and punished by becoming horrific. Thus for Rihanna to deliberately become Medusa offers a quietly pointed way of commenting on what it is like be so completely defined and embodied in terms of your sexual past—and, in turn, a way of owning that monstering and turning it into power. Even though we can feel certain that we 'know' how a particular deployment of a classical monster is going to turn out, monsters have a habit of never staying where you think you have put them.

Suggested readings

Jeffrey Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in Jeffrey Cohen (ed.) *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 3-25.

Liz Gloyn, "'The Dragon-green, the Luminous, the Dark, the Serpent-haunted Sea': Monsters, Landscape and Gender in *Clash of the Titans* (1981 and 2010)," *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 1 (2013), pp. 64-75. Available:
<http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/newvoices/proceedings/volume1>

Marjorie Garber & Nancy J. Vickers (eds.), *The Medusa Reader*, Routledge, 2000.

Ray Harryhausen & Tony Dalton, *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life*, Aurum Press, 2009.