

Monster Menageries of Homer and Hesiod

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Liberally populating ancient Greek poetry, monsters cannot be taken for granted and should not be treated as preposterous irrelevancies. Their function, 'meaning', and the way in which Homer and other poets describe or fail to describe them are of particular theological/religious, anthropological, and compositional interest. In this talk I shall examine basic traits of a number of Homeric and Hesiodic monsters (*terata, pelora*) and touch on the *apophatic* (negative, privative) language of wonder, abomination and estrangement with which they are often evoked.

Main passages for discussion

Book of Job 41 (description of Leviathan, cited below)

Theogony 80-333, esp. 105-7 (monsters as a subject of song); 147-53 (Hundred-handers); 270-333: the clan of the Phorkids, esp. the two Graiai and three Gorgons (esp. 270-81); ***Echidna ('Viper', 295-305); ***Chimaira (319-25); Kerberos (306-12); *** 820-38 (Typhoeus & the *Chaoskampf*).

Iliad 6. 123-9, 139-43, 179-83 (Chimaira)

Odyssey 9. 105-15 (Cyclopes); 9. 288-93 (Cyclops eats men—cf. angry fantasy in *Iliad* 22.345-8, etc.)

Texts

Job 41

Job 41, esp. 5-26 (ESV Bible=English Standard Version 1971)

41 [1](#) “Can you draw out Leviathan² with a fishhook

or press down his tongue with a cord?

2 Can you put a rope in his nose

or pierce his jaw with a hook?

3 Will he make many pleas to you?

Will he speak to you soft words?

4 Will he make a covenant with you

to take him for your servant forever?

5 Will you play with him as with a bird,

or will you put him on a leash for your girls?

6 Will traders bargain over him?

Will they divide him up among the merchants?

7 Can you fill his skin with harpoons

or his head with fishing spears?

8 Lay your hands on him;

remember the battle—you will not do it again!

9 [3](#) Behold, the hope of a man is false;

he is laid low even at the sight of him.

10 No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up.

Who then is he who can stand before me?

11 Who has first given to me, that I should repay him?

Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.

12 “I will not keep silence concerning **his limbs,**
or his mighty strength, or his goodly frame.

13 Who can strip off **his outer garment?**

Who would come near him with a bridle?

14 Who can open the doors of his face?

Around his teeth is terror.

15 **His back is made of 4 rows of shields,**

shut up closely as with a seal.

16 One is so near to another

that no air can come between them.

17 They are joined one to another;

they clasp each other and cannot be separated.

18 **His sneezings flash forth light,**

and his eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.

19 **Out of his mouth go flaming torches;**

sparks of fire leap forth.

20 **Out of his nostrils comes forth smoke,**

as from a boiling pot and burning rushes.

21 His breath kindles coals,

and a flame comes forth from his mouth.

22 In his neck abides strength,

and terror dances before him.

23 The folds of his flesh stick together,

firmly cast on him and immovable.

24 His heart is hard as a stone,

hard as the lower millstone.

25 When he raises himself up the mighty⁵ are afraid;

at the crashing they are beside themselves.

26 Though the sword reaches him, it does not avail,

nor the spear, the dart, or the javelin.

27 He counts iron as straw,

and bronze as rotten wood.

28 The arrow cannot make him flee;

for him sling stones are turned to stubble.

29 Clubs are counted as stubble;

he laughs at the rattle of javelins.

30 His underparts are like sharp potsherds;

he spreads himself like a threshing sledge on the mire.

31 He makes the deep boil like a pot;

he makes the sea like a pot of ointment.

32 Behind him he leaves a shining wake;
one would think the deep to be white-haired.

33 **On earth there is not his like,**
a creature without fear.

He sees everything that is high;
he is king over all the sons of pride.”

Hesiodic passages

Theogony 80–333, esp.

105–7 (monsters as a subject of song);

105 Give *kleos* to the holy *genos* of the immortals who have always been, who were born of Ge [Gaia] and starry Ouranos and of dark Night - the gods who were nurtured by the salty *pontos*.

147–53 (Hundred-handers);

But again, from Earth and Sky sprung other three sons, great and mighty, scarce to be mentioned, Kottos and Briareus and Gyas, children exceeding proud. **150** From the shoulders of these moved actively a hundred hands, not brooking approach, and to each above sturdy limbs there grew fifty heads from their shoulders.

270–333: the clan of the Phorkids, esp. the two Graiai and three Gorgons (esp. 270–81);

270 But to Phorkys next Keto of-fair-cheek bore the Graiai, gray from their birth, whom in fact immortal gods as well as men walking on the ground call Graiai; namely, Pempredo handsomely-clad, and Enyo of saffron-vestment, and the Gorgons, who dwell beyond famous Okeanos, **275** in the most remote quarter night-ward, where are the clear-voiced Hesperides, Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa having-suffered sadly. The latter was mortal, but they, the other two, were immortal and ageless, and it was with that one [Medusa] that the azure-

haired god lay in the soft meadow, and amid the flowers of spring, **280** From her too when, as the tale is, Perseus had cut off the head, up sprang huge Khrysaor and the steed Pegasus. To the latter came his name because he was born near the springs of Okeanos, while the other had a golden sword in his hands. And he indeed, winging his flight away, left Earth, the mother of flocks, **285** and came to the immortals; in Zeus's house he dwells, bearing to counselor Zeus thunder and lightning. But Khrysaor, by union with Kallirhoe, daughter of famous Okeanos, begat three-headed Geryon. Him indeed then mighty Herakles spoiled, **290** amidst his trailing-footed oxen in sea-girt Erythia, on the very day when he drove the broad-browed oxen to sacred Tiryns, having crossed the path of Okeanos, and having slain beyond famous Okeanos Orthos, and the herdsman Eurytion in a dusky stall.

***Echidna ('Viper', 295–305);

295 And she brought forth another monster, irresistible, in no way like mortal men, or immortal gods, in a hollow cavern; the divine stubborn-hearted Echidna, half nymph, with dark eyes and fair cheeks; and half, on the other hand, a serpent huge, and terrible, and vast, **300** speckled, and flesh-devouring, beneath caves of sacred Earth. For there is her cavern, deep under a hollow rock, far from immortal gods as well as mortal men: there have the gods assigned to her famous abodes to inhabit. But she, the destructive Echidna, was confined in Arima beneath the earth, **305** a nymph immortal, and all her days insensible to age.

Kerberos (306–12);

With her they say that Typhaon associated in love, a terrible and lawless ravisher for the dark-eyed maid. And she, having conceived, bore fierce-hearted children. The dog Orthos first she bore for Geryon, and next, **310** in the second place, she brought forth their irresistible and ineffable flesh-devourer Cerberus, dog of hell, with brazen voice and with fifty heads, a bold and strong beast. Thirdly, again she gave birth to the Lernaean Hydra subtle in destruction, whom Hera, white-armed goddess, reared, **315** implacably hating the mighty Herakles. And it Zeus's son, Herakles, named of Amphitryon, along with warlike Iolaos, and by the counsels of Pallas the despoiler, slaughtered with ruthless sword.

***Chimaira (319-25);

But she [Echidna] bore Chimaera, breathing resistless fire, **320** fierce and huge, fleet-footed as well as strong; this monster had three heads: one indeed of a grim-visaged lion, one of a goat, and another of a serpent, a fierce dragon; in front a lion, a dragon behind, and in the midst a goat; breathing forth the dread strength of burning fire. **325** Her Pegasus slew and brave Bellerophon. But she, compelled by Orthos, brought forth in sooth the destructive Sphinx, a destruction to the Kadmeians; and the Nemean lion, whom Hera, Zeus's glorious consort, reared, and settled in the corn-lands of Nemea, a woe to mankind. **330** There abiding truly used he to devour the tribes of men, while he held sway over Tretos of Nemea, and over Apesas: but him the might of strong Herakles subdued.

*** 820–38 (Typhoeus & the *Chaoskampf*)

820 But when Zeus had driven the Titans out from Sky, huge Earth bore her youngest-born son, Typhoeus, by the embrace of Tartaros, through golden Aphrodite. Whose hands, indeed, are apt for deeds on the score of strength, and untiring the feet of the strong god; and from his shoulders **825** there were a hundred heads of a serpent, a fierce dragon, playing with dusky tongues, and from the eyes in his wondrous heads fire was gleaming, as he looked keenly. In all his terrible heads, too, were voices **830** sending forth every kind of sound ineffable. For a while they would utter sounds, so as for the gods to understand, and at another time again the voice of a loud-bellowing bull, untamable in force, and proud in utterance; at another time, again, that of a lion possessing a daring spirit; at another yet again they would sound like to whelps, wondrous to hear; **835** and at another he would hiss, and the lofty mountains resound..

Homeric passages

Iliad 6. 123–9, 139–43, 179–83 (Chimaira)

123–9

Diomedes of the loud war-cry was the first to speak. “Who, my good sir,” said he, “who are you among men? I have never seen you in battle until now,

[125] but you are daring beyond all others if you abide my onset. Woe to those fathers whose sons face my might.

139–43

Then the gods who live at ease were angry with Lykourgos and the son of Kronos struck him blind, nor did he live much longer

[140] after he had become hateful to the immortals. Therefore I will not fight with the blessed gods; but if you are of them that eat the fruit of the ground, draw near and meet your doom.

179–83

he first commanded Bellerophon to kill that savage monster, the Chimaera,

[180] who was not a human being, but a goddess, for she had the head of a lion and the tail of a serpent, while her body was that of a goat, and she breathed forth flames of fire;

Odyssey 9. 105–15 (Cyclopes); 9. 288–93 (Cyclops eats men—cf. angry fantasy in *Iliad* 22.345–8, etc.)

9. 105–15

[105] We sailed hence, always in much distress, till we came to the land of the lawless and inhuman Cyclopes. Now the Cyclopes neither plant nor plow, but trust in providence, and live on such

[110] wheat, barley, and grapes as grow wild without any kind of tillage, and their wild grapes yield them wine as the sun and the rain may grow them. They have no laws nor assemblies of the people, but live in caves on the tops of high mountains; each is lord and master

[115] in his family, and they take no account of their neighbors.

9. 288–93

The cruel wretch granted me not one word of answer, but with a sudden clutch he gripped up two of my men at once and dashed them down upon the ground as though they had been puppies.

[290] Their brains were shed upon the ground, and the earth was wet with their blood. Then he tore them limb from limb and supped upon them. He gobbled

them up like a lion in the wilderness, flesh, bones, marrow, and entrails, without leaving anything uneaten.

Footnotes

[1] 41:1 Ch 40:25 in Hebrew

[2] 41:1 A large sea animal, exact identity unknown

[3] 41:9 Ch 41:1 in Hebrew

[4] 41:15 Or *His pride is in his*

[5] 41:25 Or *gods*

‘The form of God is ineffable and indescribable, and cannot be seen with eyes of flesh. He is in glory uncontainable, in greatness incomprehensible, in loftiness inconceivable, in strength incomparable, etc.’

—Theophilus of Antioch (late 2nd century)

... τον παράδεισον οπου ουκ ανέμων βία, ουκ αμετρία [‘excess’] ωρων, ου χάλαζα...ου λαίλαπες, ου σκηπτοί [= ‘thunderbolts’], ου χειμερινη πηξις, ουχ υγρότης ηρινή, ου θερινή πύρωσις, ου φθινοπωρινή ξηρότης **αλλ’** ευκρατος [= ‘temperate’] και ειρηνικη συμφωνία των ωρων...και εκάστης [=των ωρων] μη **επιβουλεομένης παρα του γείτονος**. Και η γη δε εκείνη **πίων και μαλακή**, και όλως ρεύουσα μέλι και γάλα, και προς **πασαν καρπογονίαν επιτηδεία**.

—‘St Basil’, Περὶ παραδείσου, PG 30.64 B–C

Recommended reading

Davies, M. (1987), ‘Description by negation: History of a thought-pattern in ancient accounts of blissful life’, *Prometheus* 13: 265–84.

Ogden, D. (2013), *Drakon*, Dragon myth and serpent cult in the Greek and Roman world, Oxford, esp. 80–2, 98–110.