

#1 - Myths

Introduction

I'm KS Brewer, and this is the 1st part of a 3 part series about the construction of female 'monsters' as seen through different lenses. In the context of these videos, when I say monster, what I mean is a framework that rationalizes a person or people as 'bad' - as evil, depraved, inhuman, animalistic, etc. All of these people that we are going to discuss are just PEOPLE - when I say monster, what I am referring to is the construction of those people's identity by a dominant culture that often characterizes them as monsters.

We fear monsters because they show us the things that we don't want to see. The word monster comes in part from the latin verb monstrare - to show, and also from monere - to remind, admonish, warn, and instruct. In this sense, to be a monster is to reveal and protest something. The fact that monsters are also characterized as 'abnormal' and 'abominations' might suggest something to us about what the "monster" is revealing, and who they are protesting.

The examples we'll focus on in each of these videos are meant to be cross-cultural, but do look especially at Western constructions, because I want to point out the mechanisms of Western/ white culture, how they've been operating in the construction of female identity, how they continue to shape us, and how they benefit Western/ white (straight male) interests.

In this first part we're going to look at this subject matter through a mythological lens, and use this as a baseline for understanding a lot of the themes and tendencies that are going to pop up in the other two parts.

Body and Voice

So, let's start with Baubo. Baubo is an Ancient Greek character (she may actually pre-date the Greeks and have Egyptian origin), that appears in a supporting role in the Homeric Hymns. The story goes that Demeter was wandering around in a state of absolute grief because her daughter Persephone was abducted into the underworld by Hades. She wanders around looking for Persephone and she won't eat, rest, or even communicate. Then she comes across Baubo -who's described as being a rather lewd old peasant woman, Baubo gets Demeter to laugh, and thereby pulls her out of the depths of her despair. Accounts differ as to how she does this - in some versions, she uses her VOICE, by telling Demeter crass jokes. In other versions, she uses her BODY, by pulling up her skirts and exposing herself to Demeter (in a crass gesture). So let's dig into some of the context surrounding this depiction of female sound and female form.

First, body: By exposing herself, Baubo *exposes what is supposed to remain hidden*. Her gesture is described, especially by Western scholars later on in history, as indecent, but the practice of lifting one's skirts and exposing your genitals was a ritual practice known as anasyrma, and it was meant to be a shock - it was a display of female power meant to frighten enemies. This combination of comedy and obscenity (which Baubo personifies) was thought to throw evil off its guard, and yet it also associates her with witchy, cthonic powers - she's sometimes associated with toads and with the night, which many of us probably colloquially associate with witches (we'll discuss witches more in part 2). You'll notice in this depiction that Baubo's body is short-circuited - her head is her torso, and her

chin is her labia. This conflates her belly with her whole personhood - it turns her entire self into essentially a womb with legs. This womb held a lot of space in the Grecian imagination - the philosopher Hippocrates provided the earliest written accounts of this idea of the wandering womb - essentially that a woman's uterus could move independently within her body, like "an animal w/ in an animal," and thereby affect her disposition and account for any number of ailments. To 'cure' a wandering womb, a strong smell would be placed around one of the woman's two mouths (the Greeks thought of women as having two mouths - oral or vaginal, so depending on the diagnosis a smell would be placed in front of one of these two orifices). This conception of the womb, although it sounds frankly ridiculous, has influenced Western culture for centuries. Even in Victorian times, women who fainted had smelling salts wafted under their noses to revive them, based on this theory. By equating Baubo with the womb, Baubo takes on all of its enigmatic, erratic, emotional characterizations.

Now, moving on to sound: Just like when Baubo confronts Demeter with gesture, her unrestrained language is used as evidence of her indecency. This idea that female speech is bad, and female silence is virtuous, is by no means exclusive to the Greeks, of course. But, it's one of the contradictions that the Greeks get themselves into regarding their characterization of women - female sound (and gesture, as we mentioned) had ritual purpose, often prescribed by the men in this patriarchal society, but it was viewed not only as unpleasant but as evidence of women's lack of self-restraint and rationality.

The Greeks had this idea, an 'ordering principle' of life called *sophrosyne*, which essentially translates to self-control and mental fortitude - a strong, disciplined mental constitution. It was thought that this was a particularly male virtue, and that women lacked it. Women were compared to 'leaky vases' - if you put something in, it immediately floods out (the idea of the two female mouths is applicable here). Thus, women can't contain their emotions or their voices, they can't be trusted w/ secrets, etc. Knowing this, it's clearer why the Greeks, and the Western men who revived their theories later on in history, thought of Baubo as indecent, and even grotesque - in body and voice, she exemplifies and incarnates this idea of female excess. As Anne Carson says, "woman is that creature that puts the inside on the outside. By projections and leakages of all kinds - somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual - females expose or expend what should be kept in. Females blurt out a direct translation of what should be formulated indirectly."

Animal Nature

So, the undercurrent to this conversation so far is this question of whether 'wild' women like Baubo are really basal and irrational creature, or whether they're actually just natural and intuitively expressive? This dichotomy we see time and time again, and which depiction we get generally depends on who's telling the story. So as a counterpoint, let's look at the differences in depiction between two different woman/ animal hybrid mythological creatures - harpies and selkies.

Harpies, on the one hand, are described by Ovid as 'human vultures.' They are an ancient Greek creation featuring bird bodies and female human heads, they work for the Furies (which are the female gods of vengeance), and they are generally seen as repulsive, insatiable, evil creatures meant to be defeated by (male) heroes.

Selkies, on the other hand, appear under different names in a few different cultures. The

gist of the tale often associated with them goes that a man steals a selkie's pelt, hides it, and uses that to convince her to live with him as his wife for many years before she finds it and returns to the water - her home. This story depicts the selkies as one with their environment - they know their innate natures and must be a part of them - fighting against them does not work. It relates and upholds the crucial importance of instinct and instinctual nature. So we see, by contrast, how the Greeks see wildness in women as something scary and grotesque, and how others might see it as natural and important - so I don't want us to think that all cultures universally demonize women, or that they do so in the same ways, because they don't.

Conclusion

The dichotomy between women as irrational/ undisciplined/ emotional/ animalistic and women as intuitive, creative, naturally wise, and caring can be seen over and over and over.

Although depictions of the latter sort exist, female power is more typically feared and made monstrous in order to undermine and control it. This barely scratches the surface, so I encourage you guys to look at the bibliography and further recommendations linked in my bio, but in the next two parts we'll call upon this dynamic to see how it impacts Western constructions of women for different sociopolitical purposes.