Of Monsters and Misogyny

In ancient Greek society monsters can be found around virtually every corner. There is the Minotaur of Crete, the Sphinx of Thebes, and the Sirens lurking in the waves, waiting to sing sailors to their death. Though these monsters may exist at the periphery of the Greek landscape, they are fairly obvious and easy to observe. Much more difficult to spot are the monsters that have neither face nor form. These insidious demons dwell within the cultural body. The Ancient Greeks, as can be seen through their plays *Medea* by Euripides, *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, and *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, as well as the epic tale *The Odyssey* by Homer, were riddled with misogyny, from microaggressions to murder.

To understand fully the issue at hand, a solid definition of misogyny and how such a belief is monstrous must be examined. For the first part, look no further than the nearest dictionary. "Misogyny (n.) – a hatred of women" (Merriam-Webster). Taking that idea further, misogyny is the hatred of women due to a belief system that women are inferior, subservient, and unequal. Also, acting on misogynistic values can be a microaggression, "a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group" (Merriam-Webster), or a large show of dominance.

To fulfill the second part, Jeffery Jerome Cohen has a list of seven theses that clarify and simplify what makes a monster that can be used to analyze the concept of misogyny. First, and most fitting, the monster is a cultural practice, or the representation of a cultural practice. This is made evident by the Greeks' patriarchal society, where even the lowliest beggar, if male, had more rights than any woman. By being hostile towards women that stray from the path laid for them, male dominance and power is secured. Second, the monster must leave evidence, but never

actually be caught. Because misogyny is a way of thinking, it never leaves physical evidence. It can, however, be seen in the depiction of women in Greek stories; what they are punished for and how they are punished. Many are turned into hideous monsters, like Medusa or Arachne. Third, the monster must exist almost as a paradox. Misogyny creates gender roles and labor division; in ancient Greece, the women weave clothing, clean, and bear and rear children. Even though they are a second class, and looked down upon, society would crumble without their involvement. At the same time they are mistreated, they are absolutely necessary. Fourth, Cohen points out that the monster must act as a scapegoat. The best example is the men of Greece blaming Helen of Troy for all the woes that befall men. Fifth, the monster prevents people from "overstepping" their bounds. The female monsters in myth act as warnings against women expressing pride, ambition, or independence, and keep them subservient. Sixth, a monster must be both repulsive and attractive. While Greek men looked down on all women, they especially abhorred women who were unfaithful or powerful. Despite this, Menelaus still fought for Helen and Odysseus stayed with Circe for seven years. Also, while a misogynistic man should not be desirable, Helen returned to Menelaus. The seventh and final thesis states that monsters challenge society. The reaction of women to misogynistic behavior in the ancient Greek epics and plays forces the audience to reflect on how they treat others.

In the Greek play *Agamemnon*, by Aeschylus, most characters display misogynistic attitudes, even toward Clytemnestra, their queen. During their first interaction, the Chorus condescends to Clytemnestra and repeatedly doubt her report:

CHORUS: A god? Were you persuaded by a dream?

CLYTEMNESTRA: A dream! I am not one to air drowsy imaginings.

CHORUS: Surely you feed yourself on unconfirmed report?

CLYTEMNESTRA: You criticize me as you would a foolish girl! (*Agamemnon*, pg. 21. ln. 274-277)

The chorus blatantly disrespects her authority and knowledge as queen. She is the leader of their state in Agamemnon's absence, and they accuse her of getting her reports from dreams. Later the Chorus tells her "Lady, your words are like a man's, both wise and kind./ Now we have trustworthy proof from your own lips" (*Agamemnon*, pg. 23, ln. 351-352). This is an excellent example of a microaggression. Here, the Chorus is letting Clytemnestra know that she is almost as good as a man because she spoke more intelligently and rationally than they would have thought a woman could. And after Agamemnon's murder and the exposure of Aegisthus as a conspirator, the Chorus thinks to insult him by shouting "You woman!" (*Agamemnon*, pg. 65, ln. 1625). That is the height of misogyny: believing the worst insult to a man would be to call him a woman; to link femaleness with cowardice. Of course, the Chorus is far from the only guilty party. Agamemnon himself shows blatant disregard for women when he takes Cassandra and forces her into sexual slavery. Not only that, he arrives home flaunting her to Clytemnestra's, his wife's, face. Agamemnon also scolds Clytemnestra for greeting him, saying "And do not feminize me with these soft attentions" (*Agamemnon*, pg. 41, ln. 919). Throughout the play, the characters around Clytemnestra constantly remind the audience of what an offense it is to be compared to a woman, or even be one.

The play *Medea*, by Euripides, contains similar examples of misogynistic behaviors, but in equal measure has characters pointing out the issues that arise from such a course. Jason, the great hero, exclaims:

> But you women
>
> Have reached the stage where, if all's well with your sex-life,
>
> You have everything you wish for, but if *that* goes wrong, then all that's best and noblest turns at once to dust.
>
> If only children could be got some other way,
>
> Without the female sex! If women didn't exist,
>
> Human life would be rid of all its miseries! (*Medea*, pg. 153, ln. 569-575).

This shows how little of the female condition Jason knows or even cares to know. Men were allowed, even expected to cheat on their wives. Women, however, had to remain faithful, or else face the consequences. Jason also diminishes Medea's contribution to his return voyage, saying "I give/ Credit for my successful voyage solely/ To Aphrodite – no-one else divine or human." (*Medea*, pg. 152, ln. 526-528). He adds "Your services, so far as they went, were good enough;/ But in return for saving me you got far more/ Than you gave" (*Medea*, pg. 152, ln. 532-534). These words are wholly untrue and serve only as an expression of his disregard for women. Medea was bewitched by Aphrodite to save him, and in doing so betrayed her father, killed and desecrated her brother, and now is being put aside for wealth. That is her reward for being manipulated by outside forces. Medea herself points out how powerless she is over her own fate "When, for an exorbitant sum,/ We have bought a husband, we must then accept him as/ Possessor of our body" (*Medea*, pg. 141, ln. 231-233). The entirety of the play is focused on how limited the options of women are, and how when under such extreme pressure someone in that state will lash out. It shows the toxicity of misogyny at its worst.

Oedipus Rex by Sophocles further illustrates the invisibility of women with even the highest status. When Oedipus, king of Thebes, accuses Creon, his brother-in-law and co-ruler, of treason, Jocasta, the queen, tries to tell him how ridiculous it is and he merely brushes her aside. Only the all-male chorus manages to convince him that he was mistaken. Later, as Jocasta questions the Chorus as to what caused the argument, they shut her down "Ask no more./ Enough our stricken country's shame./ To let this matter rest/ Where it is, seems best" (*Oedipus*, pg. 99, ln. 686-689). Again Oedipus refuses to listen when Jocasta begs him to stop searching for his true history. The entire play gives the impression of everyone treating Jocasta like a buzzing gnat: acknowledging the sounds it makes, then batting it swiftly away. Not only does she not have power over her person – she was "given" to Oedipus when he defeated the Sphinx – her voice is useless as well in a male-dominated government. When the truth about his birth and his incestuous relationship comes to light, Oedipus sets out to kill Jocasta.

'A sword, a sword!' he cried,

'Where is that wife, no wife of mine – that soil

Where I was sown, and where I reaped my harvest!'

While he raved in this way some demon guided him –

None of us dared to speak – to where she was (*Oedipus*, pg. 120, ln. 1255-1259)

The Gods prophesized the events that would happen, and Laius, his father, is the one who ordered Oedipus' fate, but he chooses to blame the one woman in the affair, Jocasta. Oedipus also begs for his daughters to be cared for and ignores his sons entirely, assuming that they, being male, will of course be the stronger of the siblings. However, one cannot assume character

traits based on gender, positively or negatively. A girl could be bold and a boy could be sensitive, or vice versa. This shows how misogyny not only harms women, but men also.

Homer and his tale *The Odyssey* delves deeper into the disparity of gender representation in Ancient Greece. Homer himself has an intrinsically sexist view in the telling of the story. Athena, the goddess of strategy, disguises herself as a man when communicating with Odysseus, the protagonist, or Telemachus, his son. This seems unnecessary, as she is an immortal, incredibly powerful being. It simply shows that no matter how powerful you are, if you are female you and your advice are still worth less than a man. Homer also skips over what seem to be fascinating back stories about the women who help Odysseus on his way. For example, Homer says:

> But someone saw him – Cadmus' daughter with lovely ankles,
>
> Ino, a mortal woman once with human voice called
>
> Leucothea now she lives in the sea's salt depths,
>
> esteemed by all the gods as she deserves (Homer, bk. V, p. 162 ln. 366-369)

Instead of informing the audience as to why Ino deserves to be loved by the gods, he continues to speak of how she helped Odysseus. Additionally, the reader never discovers why Circe the sorceress turns men into pigs, or why the nymph Calypso remains on her island. Homer also continuously mentions "women's work." He is especially careful to point out that even Helen, the face that launched a thousand ships, wove.

> Now Phylo her servant rolled it in beside her,
>
> heaped to the brim with yarn prepared for weaving;

the spindle swathed in violet wool lay tipped across it.

Helen leaned back in her chair, a stool beneath her feet,

and pressed her husband at once for details" (Homer, bk. IV, p. 128, ln. 148-152)

This is Homer implying that all women are subservient and shallow. Helen may have brought her weaving, but the first thing she did was put her feet up and press for gossip. Not a very flattering image. Helen herself has internalized this negative perception; all the hate and criticism heaped upon her by the men of Greece, demonstrated later in conversation when she says "shameless whore that I was" (Homer, bk. IV, p.129, ln. 162).

Odysseus also perpetuates misogyny. On his voyage home, he sleeps with both Circe and Calypso. The first, Hermes instructed him to do so and he enjoyed it, and the second he was forced into. However, upon his return home he is filled with rage seeing his maids run off to rendezvous with the suitors. From his point of view the audience sees:

awake, alert, as the women slipped from the house,

the maids who whored in the suitors' beds each night,

tittering, linking arms and frisking as before.

The master's anger rose inside his chest,

torn in thought, debating, head and heart –

should he up and rush them, kill them one and all

or let them rut with their lovers one last time?" (Homer, bk. XX, p. 410 ln. 8-14).

He later rounds up the "unfaithful," has them clean up his mess, and then allows Telemachus to sentence them to hanging. In all likelihood the maids were only trying to survive. Having far fewer rights than a man like Odysseus and being surrounded by the awful, powerful suitors, they probably had no choice. Odysseus doesn't see that they are doing exactly what he did with Circe and Calypso. As for Telemachus, not only did he demonstrate his cruelty and hatred with his sentence for the maids, he is also harsh toward Penelope, his own mother. He yells at her for begging the bard to play a different song as the stories of heroes returning from Troy upset her. He then says

> So, mother,
>
> go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,
>
> the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
>
> working hard as well. As for giving orders,
>
> men will see to that, but I most of all:
>
> I hold the reins of power in this house" (Homer bk. I, p.89 ln 409-414).

Here Penelope is completely and thoroughly brought low. Her own son sends her to her room. Again the audience is shown that no matter how old or high ranking a woman, a man of any age or status has more power and say.

These works clearly show the misogyny that dominated ancient Greek culture, from their depiction of women as monsters in their mythology to their treatment of women in their literature. Though the world has changed, and in many cases improved, misogyny still lurks in the corners of humanity. For every success – female enfranchisement, protection against

domestic abuse, the ability to work, drive, and live independently – there are more challenges, like the many heads of the mythical hydra. Today, women's rights to their own bodies and medical treatment are under attack, and in a vast array of settings rape culture endures. However, more and more people are becoming aware of misogyny and microaggressions and are bringing these issues into the light. Like any good monster, misogyny is forcing societies to face themselves. Only through acknowledging, discussing, and learning from these issues can these monsters vanquished for good.

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