

## Furies, Witches, Monsters and Sorceresses: Fantastic Women in (and out of) the Classical Past

Classical literature, art, and material culture are filled with fantastic, magical, vengeful, prophesying, and monstrous women. Their place in the Classical past is enormous, and their influence on later literature and art is equally significant. As Felton (2013) has pointed out, many fantastical creatures in Classical culture are women; they are presented as “the Other”, and their inevitable subjugation, conquest, and control by the male-dominated hierarchy of law, society, and civilization is certain. They are created and exist to confirm man’s control of his world (Cohen. 1996; Zimmerman. 2021).

But the very variety and number of these women present another issue: if the creation of the monstrous establishes liminal and cultural boundaries between the human and the non-human (the Other), these many boundaries can become blurred and transgressed simply *because* of their variety and number (Sperber. 1975; Kertzer, 1988). While Homer’s Scylla is unambiguously monstrous (Hopman. 2012), his Circe, and Euripides’ Medea, for example are harder to “otherize” completely, given their interactions with male humans (Circe) and the provocations they experience (Medea; Karoglou. 2018). And how to describe the machinations of Homer’s Penelope, the archetypal faithful wife who is allowed to pass/applauded for passing (by her male author) into the realm of “magic” (at least to her suitors) when her weaving appears to shape-shift and time-shift magically so that it is never complete? Recent works of reception have expanded upon, interrogated, or completely reconfigured women of the Classical past. These works themselves raise interesting questions about how contemporary society perceives women, both ordinary and “monstrous.”

The papers in this panel explore Classical women from the quotidian human to the fully immortal in order to understand how they are “otherized;” constrained within – or ejected from – the male, patriarchal world. Panelist #1 analyzes how the enchanting nymph, Circe, is transformed from divine sorceress to scorned temptress to degraded woman in her literary progression from Homer to Ovid to Petronius, not only diminishing her powers, but reducing her to an object of ridicule and contempt. Panelist #2 discusses three monstrous “hitwomen” in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, showing how their destructive behavior towards mortals recalls the behavior of similar monstrous women in earlier works, while their appearance evokes comparisons not only to these mythological creatures, but also to the human-like grotesques excavated all over the Mediterranean, thus amplifying their frightening effect. Panelist #3 maps Lucan’s “dipsas,” the venomous viper of the Libyan desert in *Civil War*, Book 9, that kills Cato’s soldiers, onto Ovid’s Dipsas, the equally venomous procuress, who teaches girls how to seduce men and thus similarly – monstrously – disrupts the moral order of their masculine universe. Panelist #4 examines women with supernatural powers in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* to demonstrate how they are allowed to be “divine” if they use their powers to benefit men and uphold or restore the “natural order,” while those women who use their powers for their own benefit are thereby deemed to be harming men and thus damaging that natural order; in that case, they are considered “monstrous.”

The respondent, a prominent scholar in this field, will offer an illuminating perspective on these papers, and it is anticipated that a lively discussion with the audience will bring additional observations and insights to bear on the topic of fantastic women of the Classical world.

## Bibliography

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ed. 1996. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minnesota.

Felton, D. 2013. "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Ashgate

Hopman, Marianne Govers. 2012. *Scylla: Myth, Metaphor, Paradox*. Cambridge.

Karoglou, Kiki. 2018. *Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art*. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Kertzer, David. 1988. *Ritual, Politics, and Power*. Yale.

Sperber, Dan. 1975. *Rethinking Symbolism*. Cambridge.

Zimmerman, Jess 2021. *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*. Beacon.