

Scylla: Myth, Metaphor, Paradox. By MARIANNE GOVERS HOPMAN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. [xix] + 300.

Like the mythical character that it examines, Marianne Govers Hopman's study of Scylla is a challenging hybrid. In part, it is a work of literary history: a detailed diachronic account of the reception and development of a particular myth from Homer to Ovid. H. traces Scylla's complex evolution with impressive learning and acumen, beginning with an extensive analysis of her memorable first appearance as the seething conglomerate of feet, necks, and tooth-filled mouths to which Odysseus must sacrifice six men as he sails home from Troy. Considered in relation to other early epic traditions, the *Odyssey* episode stands out as a difficult setback that shows the limits of Odysseus' powers and epitomizes the threats he faces from the engulfing sea and from mysterious, changeable female figures. In the Classical period, the plot thickens as other, quite different versions of Scylla appear. One is a figure found on vases, coins, and small reliefs that features a woman's upper body, a fish's tail, and dogs attached at the waist. For all its unnatural hybridity, this visual type tends to be peaceful and attractive, unlike the rapacious Homeric monster. In tragedy and other mostly textual sources, Scylla is, by contrast, invoked as a paradigm of explicitly female destructiveness, with a new stress on her dangerous sexuality. These qualities are shared by the unnatural Homeric fiend to whom Clytemnestra and Medea are both compared and by the quite different human Scylla introduced in the first stasimon of the *Choephoroi*, the daughter of the Megarian king Nisus who betrays her father out of love for his enemy Minos.

An important shift in Scylla's treatment begins in the fourth century BCE, as myths become topics of study and analysis, whether as targets of rationalization or as material to be collected and systematized by mythographers. H. identifies three ways in which Scylla's fantastic, contradictory nature was rationalized: (1) historically, as a later elaboration of an actual pirate ship (by Aristotle's probable student Palaephatus) or a notorious courtesan (by Heraclitus the Paradoxographer); (2) allegorically, as a figure for the unity of opposites (in Plato's view of the soul) or for shamelessness (by Heraclitus the allegorist); and (3) geographically, as a reflection of Sicilian topography or fishing conditions (by Polybius and others). Mythographers (and the poets who embraced their practices) prized consistency within the mythic corpus rather than conformity to reality and regularized the stories attached to Scylla's name accordingly. They generated variants that connect Scylla to the Heracles myth (she snatches the cattle he brings home from Geryon) and that follow the familiar paradigm of the maiden transformed into an animal in a failed transition into adult sexuality (in Scylla's case, changed by Circe out of jealousy when the sea god Glaucus falls in love with her). And they sought to eliminate discrepancies among various versions, reconciling the different genealogies given by Homer and Hesiod and distinguishing as two unrelated, homonymous individuals the Odyssean monster and the treacherous daughter of Nisus (whose story also comes to involve transformation, as she ends up changed into the bird *ciris*).

Versions of the myth in Hellenistic and Roman poetry were shaped by these scholarly and theoretical treatments. One of the most interesting developments treated by H. is the deliberate and pointed conflation of the two Scyllas distinguished by mythographers in works by Vergil, Propertius, and Ovid. Her survey ends with a perceptive reading of Ovid's account of Scylla in Books 13 and 14 of the *Metamorphoses*, a version

that illustrates and deliberately accommodates the myth's complex development. As H. shows, Ovid's narrative knowingly reverses literary history; the pursued maiden of Hellenistic invention figures as the original Scylla, who then becomes through metamorphosis the raging monster of the *Odyssey* (as well as the rocky cliff later skirted by Vergil's Aeneas); here Ovid picks up on the observation of philosophers, such as Plato and Lucretius, that the impossible composite creature first met in Homer is the product of poets' imaginings. A key point of H.'s analysis is that—in keeping with the double valence of metamorphosis throughout the poem—Ovid presents Scylla's transformation into the canonical monster of tradition both as a process of reconfiguration that is imposed on her arbitrarily from the outside and as the realization of her essential nature. Scylla's grotesque final form is an expression of Glaucus' lust and Circe's jealousy, but it also reflects an element of wildness that is inherent in her identity as a maiden.

Ovid's double vision is echoed in H.'s own project, which seeks to understand Scylla both as the outcome of a transformative process and as the expression of an essential identity. H.'s historical survey makes Scylla an instructive case study for the shifting fortunes of myth in classical culture, all the more so because she gives considerable attention to relevant parallels (Polyphemus, the Sirens, Typhoeus, Medusa, etc.) at each stage. But she also aims to identify the stable underlying meaning that unites all of Scylla's diverse manifestations. In this way, H. takes on a basic question about the nature of myths: given that mythical characters appear in such widely different, even contradictory guises, how can we locate the core identity that distinguishes them from uniquely-appearing literary characters and allows them to signify simply through a reference to their name, or to a well-known detail of their story? And what role should that residual identity play in our encounters with particular versions? Is there something essential in a myth that outweighs the particular purposes of any reteller, beyond the fact that it belongs to a tradition? This is an important question for the field of reception within antiquity, which is H.'s focus, but also for modern reception, where myth has a privileged role as one of the most widespread, durable, and adaptable manifestations of antiquity's ongoing legacy, and where critical studies are founded on the claim that modern versions tell us something essential about their ancient sources as well as their modern authors.

In her lucid introduction, H. lays out an approach to this question inspired by semiotics (drawing on such theorists as Ferdinand de Saussure, Algirdas Julien Greimas, and Claude Brémond, among many others) that avoids more familiar ways of identifying what she calls mythical "figures"—whether through a set of attributes, a physical manifestation, a story, or a narrative—none of which adequately captures the range of associations summoned up by Scylla's name. Instead, H. defines myths as "symbols" constituted through sets of intersecting conceptual fields, and argues that, in the case of Scylla, the myth consistently unites three basic notions: the sea, dogs, and women. While these ideas are on the surface so disparate that their combination is figured through a monstrous hybrid, they are united as important symbols of the external realms against which Greek men defined themselves: the natural, the animal, and the quasi-human. These ideas are combined with varying emphasis: in the *Odyssey*, an epic of maritime voyaging, Scylla embodies in particular the mystery and danger of the sea; in fifth-century tragedy, with its focus on overlapping domestic and political conflicts, she is an emblem for the untamable nature of women. In her account of Scylla as the alluring *parthenos* of the material record, H. argues for a persistent concern with

the undomesticated that is present in all three domains and so fortifies her argument that this iconography developed on its own within the visual tradition, rather than (as some have argued) being inspired by a lost poem of Stesichorus.

As this last example indicates, H.'s approach is deployed most fully and most fruitfully in relation to the versions of Scylla that appear in the Archaic and Classical periods without a clear ancestry. As she herself notes, once we get to the fourth century and find variants generated in a discernible relation to earlier versions and critical investigations, intertextual strategies take over as the most salient source of meaning. When myth is encountered as a literary phenomenon, the semiotic approach, with its affinities to structuralism, seems less informative, and common reference to a shared tradition serves as another, possibly more cogent, source of unity among variants. When there is a reception history to study on its own terms, it tends to displace the search for transhistorical essences.

H.'s methodology provides an effective tool for explaining how the phenomenon of Scylla came into being, but we are left with the question of how far this explanation pertains to Scylla's ongoing significance. In the contemporary world, Scylla is not generally remembered for her curious mixture of attributes, but for her position in relationship to Charybdis. In the common formulation "the Scylla of X versus the Charybdis of Y," it is clear that Scylla represents something bad to which the only alternative is also bad. Does it make any difference at this point that, in her classical manifestations, her particular form of badness represented a combination of phenomena that Greek men feared they could not control? Another, more focused question that emerges in H.'s conclusion is whether her model of intersecting conceptual domains applies better to monstrous hybrids like Scylla than to the gods and heroes whose actions generate most mythical narratives. Readers of this book may have different answers to these questions, but all stand to benefit from the clarity with which they are posed by H.'s suggestive study, as well as from the meticulous, wide-ranging scholarship and sharp critical intelligence with which she assembles and interprets the multiple manifestations of Scylla that survive from antiquity.

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