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Research Portfolio

What makes someone a monster? How prevalent are monsters from the medieval ages? In our society, we often associate scary animals and evil beings with being monstrous, but were these same beings thought of as "monstrous" a thousand years ago? During class, we spent a substantial amount of time thinking about what makes something monstrous, but I wanted to take it a step further. I want to discover how and why we create monsters and the impact these stories have on marginalized groups in society. It's important to think of what symbolic values these monstrous animals had in the medieval ages. Storytelling was a critical way to pass information, and monsters were often used to enhance and provide these stories with underlying messages.

On top of their practical use in storytelling, animals and monsters often enhance the stories they're in. As someone who used to love fictional bedtime and campfire stories, I can promise that whenever a monster was involved, my imagination would run wild. In hindsight, these monsters were often the means of conveying an underlying message. Whether that message pertained to not judging a book by its cover, not to trust strangers, or really anything the storyteller could come up with, monsters fascinated me. All of this led me to formulate the question: How are wild animals and monsters in medieval literature used as symbols to tell stories and lessons of religion, morality, and social order?

Originally, I framed my question around wild animals and household pets, but as we discussed in class, monsters have a much deeper story to unpack. I began to recall stories I had

heard in the past. In most Disney plots, the monsters are often misunderstood, which I believe shows an evolution of storytelling. Researching this question, I expect to find that most medieval monsters were vessels of hatred towards individuals or groups of people. I hope to uncover an idea of what it means to be a monster, and how storytellers create monstrous narratives.

Animals play an important role in the creation of monsters, as the distinction between the two often becomes muddy. For example, looking at the movie *Jaws*, werewolves in general, or even humans (which will require a deep exploration), storytellers took ordinary animals and created an aura of fear around them. I hope to uncover why these animals were chosen to bear the negative narratives they hold. Completing valid research on this topic will require me to prevent my understanding of what animals and monsters are in today's society from influencing my research as I explore the use of monsters and animals in the medieval ages. There may be similarities and crossovers between the time periods, but knowing that monsters are a vessel for storytelling, the stories and belief systems of the two eras will be vastly different. That being said, it will also be important to synthesize what I know today and what I find out in my research, to ultimately find out how our past stories have influenced our present monstrous figures.

Works Cited

Classen, Albrecht. "The Monster Outside and Within: Medieval Literary Reflections on Ethical Epistemology. From Beowulf to Marie de France, the Nibelungenlied, and Thüring von Ringoltingen's Melusine." *Neohelicon (Budapest)*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2013, pp. 521-42.

In "Monsters Outside and Within," Classen discusses how true monsters depict struggles within us rather than representing some sort of external evil. By exploring medieval texts, such as "Beowulf," "The Nibelungenlied," and "Bisclavret," Classen argues that monsters are windows into our internal struggles and true monstrosity lies in our actions and beliefs, not appearances. In all the stories Classen brings to light, the main characters' pride, greed, and sin are the thing that ends up destroying them as their moral corruption parallels monstrosity symbolically. Instead of focusing on how the protagonist in these stories slays the monster, Classen looks to answer the question: Does a monster's appearance correspond with the creature's internal beliefs and values, or can positive ideals be hidden behind a monstrous physical shape? This method of thinking helps us clarify the purpose of the creation of monsters in stories. Beastly animals often take the physical appearance of our fears and negative traits. In a method of projecting internal anxieties outward, the storytellers associate their worst traits with monsters and ultimately marginalized groups. I interpret Classen's argument to be that when Christian storytellers depict Jews as monsters, they are actually finding a scapegoat for their negative traits instead of addressing these traits themselves. Synthesizing Classen's and Shyovitz's argument, in the medieval ages, monster creation was just as much a form of belittling others in an attempt to find a scapegoat for unwanted characteristics as it was a storytelling method. Classen has studied at many European universities, receiving his Ph.D. from the

University of Virginia, and now teaches Medieval German Studies at the University of Arizona, making him a credible source on analyzing medieval texts.

"The Cleveland Museum of Art presents Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders." *La Presna--NE OHIO* [Toledo], 12 July 2019, p. 11.

This newspaper article from 2019 details an exhibit from *The Moran Library & Museum* called Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, and Wonders. The exhibit's subgroup of "terrors" explains how elites used stories of monsters to maintain their power by keeping the hierarchy unchanged. By deeming a monster an "alien," the storyteller further ostracized marginalized groups–such as Jews, Muslims, women, the poor, and the disabled. However, the "wonders" section explores monsters that incite the listener of the story with a sense of awe, painting the beasts in a positive light. The article highlights how monsters during the Middle Ages were utilized in stories much differently than today. While today's monsters are used to frighten and entertain, just like in the stories I heard as a child, monsters in the Middle Ages were used to maintain social order and attack people with cultural differences. I think the "aliens" and "terrors" subsections of monsters from this source are a great culmination of Classen's and Shyovitz's arguments of the use of monsters to maintain social order. People's undesirable attributes and the attributes of culturally differing people are projected onto monsters in the effort to both keep the hierarchy rigid as well as to alienate these individuals. I believe this source to be credible because it describes exactly what the museum exhibition displays, as the author must have been in contact with museum staff.

Holmes, Matilda. "The 'Lamb of God' in the early Middle Ages: a zooarchaeological perspective." *Journal of Medieval History*, 2 Sept. 2023, pp. 701-11.

This journal article explores the cultural, religious, and economic roles of sheep in medieval England. Sheep were not valued as high as cattle or pigs for their products in medieval England; however, in Christianity, they had a deep symbolic value of innocence and peace. This is evident due to the unusually high number of sheep bones found at monasteries through zooarchaeological evidence. Additionally, sheep's wool was valuable in the production of parchment, giving them an economic value as well as a spiritual one. Part of the reason monasteries owned so many sheep, besides the religious symbolism, may have been to reap the economic benefits of not only domestic parchment production, but the international wool market as well. As for social order, when a religious symbol also has economic value, it reinforces the prevailing ideology that positions Christianity as superior. Holmes's work as a consultant archaezoologist makes her a credible source for discussing the remains of sheep in monasteries. While the source did not offer a lot of analysis of the reason for the influx of sheep bones, it offered concrete evidence that my other sources' analysis will build on.

Keywords: Sheep, Monastery, Symbolism

Oswald, Dana M. "Paternity and Monstrosity in the Alliterative Morte Arthure and Sir Gowther." *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, Boydell & Brewer, 2010, pp. 159-95.

In chapter 4, Oswald discusses how in both *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gowther*, the monsters in these texts have appetites for dominance, violence, and sex, ultimately leading them to disrupt their communities. Focusing on giants, the author states their appearance is somewhat human; however, they present themselves as much less civilized, with grotesque features. Oswald says they "act as the limit of undisputed masculinity" (Oswald 161), causing mortal men to try and

measure up to giants, ultimately failing and in the process losing their humanity. The Giant of Mont St Michel's and Gowther's size, masculinity, and desire for sex negatively impact the women they target. While the Giant of Mont St Michel and Gowther are fictional characters, their traits of extreme masculinity are something mortal men try to achieve, leading to their demise and monstrous traits. Oswald's argument of saying humans become monstrous when they try to embody traits of nonhuman beings adds another layer to the research question. Just as Classen highlighted the fact that greed is a primary catalyst for the creation of monsters, Oswald takes this a step further, stating that men who are greedy in their masculinity are monsters. This chapter shows how, on top of regulating religious social order, the symbol of monsters is weaponized within the patriarchy to regulate male moral conduct. The qualities that make men more masculine must be kept in check, or it could result in the formation of a monster. Serving as the director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Wisconsin Parkside, Oswald is qualified to dissect how the symbol of giants feeds into masculinity and the effects it has on communities.

Shyovitz, David I. "Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Werewolf Renaissance." *History of Ideas*, vol. 75, no. 4, Oct. 2014, pp. 521-43.

This source discusses the use of werewolves in Christian and Jewish storytelling, often as mirrors into our own lives and experiences. While many historians highlight the differences in Jewish and Christian teachings, Shyovitz argues that both religions use monsters not just as folklore, but as symbols for ethical ideas. For example, when the werewolf transforms from human to beast, the same soul is present. In Judaism, this is an example of "Tselem Elohim," meaning even during transformations of the body, we still hold God's values and image. While in Christianity, this transformation can be closely tied to the Eucharist, when ordinary bread turns to

Christ's body during communion. Shyovitz also tackles the pressing issue of Christian teachings utilizing monsters to diminish Jewish culture. While Christians associated Jews with monsters, such as the werewolf, Jews reclaimed these monsters for their own theological teachings, showing how marginalized groups can challenge social order through storytelling. This source helps provide a deeper understanding of the research question in the sense that it challenges the status quo of Christian control over monsters. Both Judaism and Christianity used monsters as symbols in religious tales to explore identity, transformations, and ethical lessons. On the social order side, Christians may have twisted the identity of Jews to that of the werewolf, yet Jews reinterpreted this symbol to further their religious teachings. Shyovitz is a credible source as he is a professor at Northwestern for Jewish History in Medieval Europe. This source will be useful in figuring out the close ties in storytelling between morality and religion.

Keywords: Werewolf, Christianity, Judaism

Conclusion:

While I thought my research question would have three separate components–religion, social order, and morality–I found all three to intersect with each other through storytelling in the Middle Ages. Across both Christianity and Judaism, monsters were used as methods to institute religious and gender based social order, as well as offer people outlets for stories on their morality. When I say “their morality,” I am referring to the reflections of human characteristics monsters embody, and how often these monsters are physical visualizations of the traits people fear the most. However, terrifying monsters were not the only creatures that played a role in maintaining social order. Everyday animals, such as sheep from Holmes work, also played a role in power, both economic value and symbolic value. These power schemas kept people out of

power below those in power, and this was only reinforced by stories that depicted Jews, women, the poor, and other marginalized groups as monsters.

As I researched, I realized that during medieval times, social order and religion were very closely tied together. This connection caused me to focus primarily on monsters in religious stories as I looked to see how different religions depicted each other. Shyovitz's connection of the werewolf to both Christian and Jewish teachings correlates directly with Classen's argument that medieval storytellers utilized monsters as embodiments of our personal anxieties. I'd imagine the negative stereotypes associated with Jews were qualities Christians deemed undesirable for themselves, and therefore projected them onto another religion. This, in turn, dehumanized Jews as they became closely associated with beasts, such as the werewolf.

During my research process, I thought it would be difficult to find a credible, relevant, popular source, so I saved that for the end. However, I believe *La Presna's* article, which described the medieval exhibit on monsters, was a perfect connection to modern-day monster creation. While monsters in the Middle Ages were utilized to dehumanize minority groups and to maintain social order, today's monsters are used as sources of entertainment. One common theme I noticed between monsters today and in the Middle Ages was that they carried an underlying message. Whether that message is an outward projection of our undesirable traits or a life lesson, monsters often have deeper symbolic messages than their physical appearance.

Oswald's book chapter highlighted a key quality of medieval monsters: their presence in stories illustrated to people what not to become. Just as many beastly animals were used to dehumanize marginalized groups, fantasy creatures, such as giants, helped keep humans' behaviors in check. The giant symbolized an excess of masculinity, showing men at the time how an indulgence in greed, sex, and violence can negatively impact communities. In this case,

monsters served as a warning and were used to limit the negative side effects of masculinity. All in all, I believe stories that used monsters to depict human morality led to the tight intersection between medieval social order and religion. A hierarchy dictated by gender and religion needed inhumane beasts to depict those lower in society to keep social order rigid.