

6. *Typhoeus & Other Monsters*

Zeus (with his thunderbolt) and winged Typhoeus. Detail of Chalcidian black-figure hydria, c. 540-530 B.C., found in Etruria (Italy). Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.

Assigned Reading: Chapter I.7 in Mark Morford et al., *Classical Mythology* (11th ed.), pp. 169-173; Chapter II.21, pp. 542-545

“They are called ‘monsters’ [*monstra*] . . . because they reveal [*monstrant*].”
Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.42.93 (Roman, 1st cent. B.C.)

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Typhoeus

*Lest we think that, following the Titanomachy, the world was now completely safe for Olympian government, Hesiod introduces a violent encore: the battle between Zeus and a serpentine monster named **Typhoeus** (also known as Typh[a]on in other sources).*

1. “When Zeus had driven the Titans from heaven, vast Gaea brought forth the youngest of her children The hands of the mighty god were strong in any undertaking and his feet were weariless. From the shoulders of this frightening dragon [*drakōn*], a hundred snake heads grew, flickering their dark tongues; fire blazed from the eyes under the brows of all the dreadful heads, and the flames burned as he glared. In all the terrible heads voices emitted all kinds of amazing sounds; for at one time he spoke so that the gods understood, at another his cries were those of a proud bull bellowing . . . ; sometimes he produced the pitiless roars of a courageous lion, or again his yelps were like those of puppies . . . or at another time he would hiss; and the great mountains resounded in echo.”

Hesiod, *Theogony* 820-835

(Morford et al., p. 84)



(above) Statuette of Typhoeus (or snake-legged Giant). Hesiod’s version is far less anthropomorphic. Roman, A.D. 180-220, from Asia Minor. Bronze. J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California. The limitations of plastic art versus literary description are obvious here.

(below) Similarly, the painter cannot achieve the exact effects of the poet—if that was, indeed, the intention of the anonymous sixth-century B.C. vase decorator who seems to have taken Hesiod's description of Typhoeus as his model. He had room for only one of the monster's hundred heads; Typhoeus has also been endowed with wings, which are not part of Hesiod's repertoire. The result is, nevertheless, a masterpiece of archaic Greek art. Chalcidian black-figure hydria (water-pot), c. 540 B.C. Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.



Typhoeus represents the unbridled force of storm winds, especially those that arise at sea (cf. Theogony 869ff.; Morford, p. 85). He is analogous to a hurricane or 'typhoon' (a word that is actually from the Chinese tai fung, 'big wind', but whose spelling in English has been influenced from this character's Greek name). Of course, Zeus, with his thunder and lightning, is also a storm god, but one who is ultimately productive (watering the crops, for instance) rather than utterly destructive, like Typhoeus. Zeus' watchfulness is what gives him the edge over Hesiod's monster. "If [Zeus] had not taken swift notice"—the Greek *noēse* suggests not only perception but reasoning and thought (#2 below)—we would now be ruled not by a god who looks like us but by a hideous creature such as Hesiod describes. The difference between chaos and order is vigilance.

2. "Now on that day of [Typhoeus'] birth an irremediable deed would have been accomplished and he would have become the ruler of mortals and immortals, if the father of gods and men had not taken swift notice [*noēse*] and thundered loudly and fiercely; the earth resounded terribly on all sides and as well the wide heaven above, the sea, the streams of Ocean, and the depths of Tartarus. Great Olympus shook under the immortal feet of the lord [Zeus] as he rose up and earth gave a groan . . ." Hesiod, *Theogony* 836ff. (Morford et al., p. 84)

Once again, a cosmic battle comes close to destroying the universe. According to Hesiod, the defeated monster is imprisoned, along with the other Titans, in Tartarus (the Underworld), but a later author, (*Pseudo-*)Apollodorus (2nd century A.D.?), locates his final abode beneath Mount Etna in Sicily:

3. "As Typhon fled through the Sicilian Sea, Zeus hurled Sicily's Mount Etna upon him, a huge mountain that they say erupts fire to this day from the thunderbolts thrown by Zeus."

Ps.-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.6.3



Eruption of Mount Etna, Sicily, March 2017. It is a feature of later Greek mythography (from the Hellenistic and Roman periods) to situate Hesiod and Homer's stories in actual geographical locales. Pseudo-Apollodorus, for example, placed the imprisoned Typhon (Typhoeus) beneath Mt Etna, thus turning Hesiod's cosmological myth into an etiological one (explaining why that mountain still erupts).

Monsters & Chaos

It is a basic premise of Hesiod's cosmology that the world is not orderly on its own. Except for the vigilance and upkeep of the gods, its structure would be in constant danger of imploding (cf. the modern concept of entropy), reverting to the chaos from which it originally sprang. Indeed, chaos, in Hesiodic terms, is not strictly the 'opposite' of kosmos. They are not, after all, co-equal if contrary states of being. Chaos is far older than any cosmic order; it is the primordial condition of reality, one that is liable to swamp kosmos at the first instance of divine carelessness.

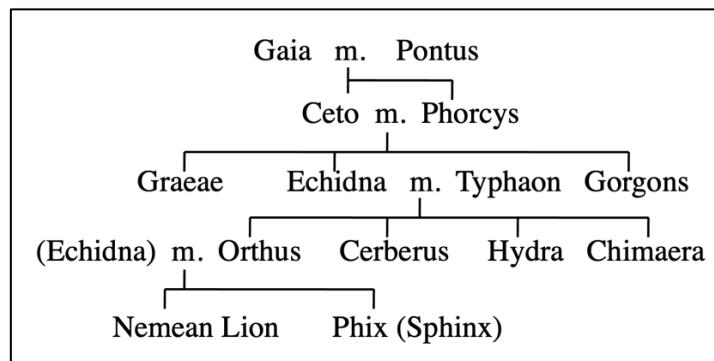
Monsters, therefore, represent the eruption of chaos into our orderly world. They are creatures one would never find in the normal course of nature, but that populate our fearful imaginations. Sometimes they are mutant versions of otherwise familiar figures (multi-headed serpents like Typhaon or the Hydra, or triple-bodied hounds such as Cerberus and Orthus); sometimes they are hybrid animals that violate the usual distinctions of species (the Chimaera, composed of a lion, goat, and snake; the serpent-bodied nymph Echidna; or the Sphinx, part bird, part lion, and part woman). A third category of monsters in Greek mythology, perhaps the most poignant, are those like Medusa, a once beautiful woman turned into the hideous, snaky-haired Gorgon by jealous Athena. All of the above-mentioned are offspring, so Hesiod tells us, of the sea (#4 below), which befits the element of the kosmos—deep, mysterious, often threatening—that comes closest to an image of chaos in nature.

Ceto's Children

4. “*Ceto* [a female sea-monster, daughter of *Gaia* and *Pontus*] bore to *Phorcys* [her brother] the fair-cheeked *Graeae*, / grey-haired sisters from birth¹. . . / and the *Gorgons*,² who dwell beyond glorious Ocean / near the border of night / . . . and dauntless *Echidna*, / half-nymph [*hēmisu nymphē*] with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half-monstrous-serpent [*hēmisu pelōros ophis*], great, terrible, / and nimble, who devours raw flesh beneath the depths of the sacred earth / . . . a deathless nymph and unaging all her days. / They say that *Typhaon* the terrible, violent and lawless, / mixed with her in love, / and she conceived and brought forth dauntless offspring: / *Orthus*, the hound of triple-headed Geryon³ . . . / and *Cerberus*, the brazen-voiced hound of Hades, / fifty-headed,

relentless and strong⁴ . . . / and the *Hydra* of Lerna,⁵ whom the goddess, white-armed Hera, nurtured⁶ . . . / and the *Chimaera* breathing furious fire, / terrible and great, swift-footed and mighty, / who had three heads, one of a fierce lion, / one of a she-goat, and one of a serpent / . . . And Echidna was overpowered by Orthus / and brought forth the ruinous *Phix*⁷ [=Sphinx] that destroyed the Cadmeans, / and the *Nemean lion*, which Hera nurtured.”

Hesiod, *Theogony* 270-336 (not in Morford)



¹Hesiod names two Graeae; later tradition turned them into yet another set of Greek mythological triplets (cf. Ps.-Apollodorus, *Library* 2.4.2). ²Hesiod names three Gorgons, viz. Sthenno, Euryale

and Medusa; only the first two were immortal. Later tradition also gives them snaky hair, boar’s tusks, and wings (cf. Ps.-Apollodorus, *op. cit.* 2.4.2). ³Aeschylus goes further, allotting this giant cattle-herder three bodies (*Agamemnon* 843). His snake-tailed dog Orth[r]us is typically depicted with two heads, occasionally with three (e.g. on a 6th-cent. B.C. Cypriot limestone relief of Heracles’ tenth labour, now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York). ⁴Cerberus has fifty heads in Hesiod, but in art and literature from the 6th cent. B.C. onwards, the hell-hound normally has three. ⁵The number of the Hydra’s heads, not specified by Hesiod, varies in later art and literature from six to nine to one hundred.

⁶It is remarkable how frequently Hera is associated with monsters (cf. her identification in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* as the mother of Typhaon also). Many of the monsters in this list were defeated by heroes, including three—Orthrus, the Hydra, and the Nemean lion—by Hera’s enemy, Heracles; the hero Perseus robbed the Graeae of their single eye and killed Medusa; Bellerephon slew the Chimaera; Oedipus sent the Sphinx to her death. ⁷Phix is Hesiod’s name for the *Sphinx*; the latter designation, which became more common, may have been influenced from the verb *sphingō*, ‘to squeeze’.



(left to right) The Gorgon Medusa (terracotta relief from Sicily, c. 625-600 B.C.; Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi, Syracuse); Cerberus (detail of Caeretan black-figure hydria, c. 525 B.C.; Musée du Louvre, Paris); Heracles and the Lernaean Hydra, with Athena (Corinthian black-figure perfume bottle, 600-575 B.C.; J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California); the ‘Chimaera of Arezzo’ (Etruscan bronze statue, c. 400 B.C.; Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence); colossal Sphinx (presented to Delphi by citizens of Naxos, 560 B.C.; Archaeological Museum of Delphi).

The Centaurs

One set of hybrid monsters not encountered in the pages of Hesiod (though they are mentioned by Homer) are the **Centaurs**. Homer says simply that they were “shaggy beasts” whom Peirithous, king of the Lapiths, had once driven away from Pelion, a mountainous region in northern Greece (Iliad 2.743). We do not learn that these creatures were half-man, half-horse, until they begin appearing as such in archaic Greek art, usually in combat with the hero Heracles (himself somewhat bestial in nature, as we shall see later in the course). Athenian art of the fifth century B.C. replaced Heracles with their own local hero, Theseus, on the metopes of the Parthenon, for example (see below). In this context, the Centaurs become emblems of barbarity versus Hellenic civilization. The poet Pindar provided the Centaurs a human grandfather, Ixion, who attempted to rape Hera but coupled with a cloud (Nephele) instead; their offspring, Kentauros, mated with mares on Mount Pelion and begat the Centaurs as we now know them (#5 below). Much later, the historian Diodorus Siculus attempted to de-mythologize these Centaurs by identifying them simply as the first human riders of horses (#6).



(above) *The Battle of the Lapiths (led by Pirithous and his friend, Theseus) and the Centaurs.*
Metopes (sculpted panels) from the Temple of Athena (Parthenon) in Athens, c. 447-433 B.C.
(left) Musée du Louvre, Paris; (centre & right) British Museum, London.

5. “Ixion once made an attempt on the wife of Zeus In his ignorance, the man lay with a cloud [*nephelē*] instead, fashioned in Hera’s image by the hand of Zeus as a sweet trap for him Nephele bore him Kentauros, who mated with the Magnesian mares in the foothills of Pelion. From them was born a marvellous brood, resembling both their parents, like the mother below, the father above.” Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 2.25ff. (5th cent. B.C.; not in Morford)

6. “Some say that offspring of Ixion and Nephele were called Hippokentauroi, because they were the first to attempt the riding of horses, and that they were then made into a fictitious myth, to the effect that they were of double form.” Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4.69.4
(1st cent. B.C.; tr. Oldfather, with adaptations; not in Morford)

Cheiron the Good

At least one of the centaurs, **Cheiron**, was unlike his brethren, who were addicted to wine and generally lusty in nature (cf. Nessus, who will attempt to rape Heracles’ bride in a myth to be discussed much later). Cheiron, on the other hand, was wise and temperate. Homer already knows him as the mentor of his hero Achilles (see #7). Cheiron was tutor to other famous men as well—Actaeon and Jason, to name two. Jason spent his youth in the wilderness under the hybrid creature’s tutelage before returning as an adult to civilization—in which case the centaur is not a symbol of barbarity but of a balanced blend of nature and culture.

7. [Eurypylus to Patroclus:] “But you, aid me, taking me to my black ship, / and cut the arrow from my thigh, washing the dark blood from it / with warm water, and sprinkle on it the healing drugs [*pharmaka*] / which, they say, you learned at Achilles’ side, / whom Cheiron, the most lawful [*dikaiotatos*] of Centaurs, taught.” Homer, *Iliad* 11.828ff. (8th cent. B.C.; not in Morford)

Roman Medusa

One would never know from a traditional Greek account (such as that found in Pindar's Pythian Odes, excerpted on pp. 542ff. in your textbook) that the Gorgon **Medusa** had ever been anything but a hideous monster, sporting, like her two sisters, a full head of snaky hair and possessing a terrifying gaze that turned humans into stone. The hero Perseus could approach her only by using his polished shield as a mirror, so that he did not have to look her in the face. He beheaded her and delivered the horrific trophy to the goddess Athena, who featured it ever after as an apotropaic symbol on her breastplate.

The Roman poet Ovid, however (#8 below) adds a romantic, even poignant, detail to the myth. Medusa had, apparently, been born quite beautiful, but fell afoul of Athena because Poseidon raped the Gorgon in the goddess' temple. Medusa's lovely hair was thereafter turned into vipers but, if we may judge from later Roman sculpture and mosaics, she never lost her facial comeliness. That paradox of beauty in ugliness (rather than beauty versus ugliness) has fascinated artists ever since.

8. [Perseus speaking:] “‘I arrived where the Gorgon dwelt. / Along the way . . . I saw on all sides men and animals— / like statues—turned to flinty stone at sight / of dread Medusa’s visage. Nevertheless / reflected on my brazen shield . . . / I saw her horrid face. / When she was helpless in the power of sleep / and even her serpent-hair was slumber-bound, / I struck, and took her head sheer from the neck. / To winged Pegasus the blood gave birth, / his brother [the giant Chrysaor] also, twins of rapid wing.’ / So did he speak . . . Then rejoined / a nobleman with enquiry why alone / of those three sisters, snakes were interspersed in dread Medusa’s locks. And he replied: / ‘Beyond all others she was famed for beauty, and the envious hope / of many suitors. Words would fail to tell / the glory of her hair, most wonderful / of all her charms . . . / Rumour declares the Sovereign of the Sea [Poseidon] attained her love / in chaste Minerva’s [Athena’s] temple. While enraged / she turned her head away and held her shield / before her eyes. To punish that great crime / Minerva changed the Gorgon’s splendid hair / to serpents horrible. And now to strike / her foes with fear, [Minerva] wears upon her breast / those awful vipers.’”

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.780-804

(Roman, 1st cent. A.D.; tr. Brookes More; not in Morford)



Two versions of the Gorgon Medusa:

(left) Etruscan gorgoneion, an antefix to the Portonaccio Temple at Veii;
painted terracotta, c. 510 B.C. National Etruscan Museum, Villa Giulia, Rome.

(right) Roman floor mosaic from Piraeus, 2nd cent. A.D.

National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

