

MARIANNE ISABELLE HOPMAN—*The Maiden of the Straits: Scylla in the Cultural Poetics of Greece and Rome*

THIS WORK TAKES THE FIGURE OF SCYLLA, the sea-monster first known to us from the *Odyssey*, as a point of entry into the concerns, fears, and values of the contexts where she appears from Homer to Augustan Rome. By focusing on the semantic development of a fictional, non-referential being, the dissertation also contributes to the current debate about the nature of mythical thinking.

A survey of the texts and images associated with Scylla shows that the figure eludes definitions in terms of narrative function or physical description. Scylla appears in different types of stories, including the “combat tale” and the “girl’s tragedy”; textual and visual sources differ strikingly in their description of her appearance. The identity of the figure thus seems to reside in the abstract combination of three *signifiés*—sea, dog, female—that distinguishes Scylla from other figures of Greek myth and can be actualized in a variety of ways.

In Homer, Scylla is one of the many opponents who delay Odysseus’ homecoming; the episode is cast as a failed combat tale and sanctions Odysseus’ inability to go through Scylla’s straits unscathed. The Homeric crystallization of the story engages specifically Odyssean concerns including the role of *mētis*, the importance of direction in navigation, and the fear of being devoured. In 5th and 4th century texts and images, Scylla takes on a more distinctively human component; the anthropomorphic, female hybrid that results from this approach often channels anxieties about female sexuality and offers a counterpart to the figure of the *vagina dentata* evidenced in other cultures. Roman poetry displays a new interest in the monster’s perspective. Most memorably, Ovid’s version casts Scylla as the victim of a love story, a maiden who shuns sex and thus gets transformed into a monster. The changes in the semantics attached to Scylla are symptomatic and can be tied to broader cultural phenomena. The success of the figure comes from the metaphoric coherence of its three defining *signifiés* and their ability to address a variety of anxieties connected with hazardous passages and transitions.

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