

# Bitches and Witches: Grotesque Sexuality in Ovid's Scylla (*Metamorphoses* 13.730-14.74)

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## Keywords

Ovid; Scylla; fictionality; subversion; sexuality; monster; male gaze.

As paradigmatic emblems of fantasy and imagination, creative freedom and poetic license, hybrid monsters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* preside over the author's playful engagement with traditional aesthetic, moral, and societal values, and gendered ideals. This article aims at a subversive reading of one monstrous creature in the final pentad of Ovid's epic: Scylla (*Met.* 13.730-14.74). As a monster, Scylla incorporates several misogynistic stereotypes ("dog-gishness", *puella dura*, self-laceration, *vagina dentata*), but she eventually escapes the objectifying male gaze and finds rest in a stable, permanent shape that is no longer the feminine-gendered battlefield for male heroism. Breaking away from the conventional epic plot structure "male hero wins over feminized beasts and/or beautiful girls", Ovid considers the Roman national hero Aeneas with but a minimum of attention, while nymphs and women take center stage: Scylla's transformation from a girl into a monster and, finally, into a geological rock formation, is intertwined with tales about female solidarity and intimacy and about women's sexual desire, rage, and revenge. While Scylla's canine bloodlust and Circe's vengeful magic certainly reproduce typically patriarchal anxieties projected onto women, they are also traces of unruly, recalcitrant femininity within the canonical, male-dominated world of heroic epic.

## Fact or Fiction: Ovid's Feminized Monsters and the Roman Canon

As the *Metamorphoses* approach the onset of Roman history, Ovid, the *enfant terrible* of Augustan literature, enjoys privileging a monster, Scylla, over a legendary hero who happens to be considered very important in Rome: Aeneas. In his "little *Aeneid*", as the passage in focus is commonly referred to, Ovid refuses to reprise what his grand predecessors have already told, but he demonstrates his predilection for poetic novelty. Aeneas is remarkably absent for over 300 lines although his voyage from Troy to Italy (*Aen.* 3-6) provides the framework for Ovid's series of metamorphic entanglements, "grotesque love affairs and pathetic heroines" (Lowe 2011: 263).<sup>2</sup> The marvellous, amorous, and monstrous elements that do exist in Virgil, yet in a "fragmented, scattered, unresolved" form, become Ovid's raw material:

<sup>1</sup> Musgrove suggests that Ovid, by leaving Aeneas aside, emphasizes the detachment from the world that also characterizes the Virgilian hero (1998b: 102).

<sup>2</sup> Ellsworth (1986: 27) cites several judgments from the 1960s and 1970s that criticize Ovid's insertion of frivolous elements into the sublime *Aeneid*-plot, and shows subsequently that Ovid's allusions and creative reinterpretations, far from being indecent, represent a clever reworking of the standard motifs of the post-Trojan war period.