

Scylla: Hideous monster or femme fatale? A case of contradiction between literary and artistic evidence*

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Abstract: When we look at iconographical representations of various episodes of the *Odyssey*, we find out that the case of Scylla is quite particular. She is described by Homer (*Od.*12, 85-100) as an evil monster with twelve feeth and six necks, each one finished in a dog head with a triple row of teeth. But that is not her appearance in iconography. The earliest Greek representations show Scylla as a hybrid creature, half woman and half fish, usually with one or more dog heads around her waist.

This paper aims to show that in any case, and with any appearance, it is by her character that we can include Scylla among the series of «dangerous women»; women who, like Circe, Calypso and the Sirens represent that evil charm, that ambiguous danger, both charming and terrible at the same time and which could be fatal to the hero Odysseus.

Keywords: Scylla, sea monster, Odyssey, «dangerous women», iconography.

Resumen: Este artículo intenta revisar las diferencias entre la descripción homérica del monstruo Escila y sus representaciones artísticas. Según éstas, Escila es una criatura híbrida, mitad mujer mitad pez, normalmente con una o más cabezas de perro en torno a su cintura. En cualquier caso, por su carácter podemos incluir a Escila en esa serie de «mujeres peligrosas» que Odiseo encuentra en su viaje de regreso a Ítaca y que representan ese peligro a la vez terrible y encantador que puede resultar fatal para el héroe.

Palabras clave: Escila, monstruo marino, Odisea, «mujeres peligrosas», iconografía.

Although Greeks were always very fond of beauty and perfection, they created in their myths a large number of monsters. These monsters could be hybrids composed of parts of different animals, or could have some other

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hideous characteristics¹. Many of them were immortals, divine race, offspring of gods. Others, already degraded, would be born as mortal creatures. So, Hesiod presents us with an authentic catalogue of monsters in the passage of the progeny of Forcis and Ceto, whose successive children show all kind of monstrous traits².

Some of these monsters —those who are mortals indeed— will be killed by famous heroes: Herakles, Bellerophon, Perseus. And their existence seems to be actually connected to that fact in order to offer potential heroes the occasion to prove their heroic mettle³. However, not only heroes, but also gods had to fight occasionally with monsters: Zeus with Typhaon, Apollo with Pytho etc. In these cases, the fight symbolizes the superiority of anthropomorphic and rational gods over monstrous, primitive and chthonic powers. But not all monsters are mortal and not all are connected with an individual hero, but they can appear in the context of one story: The Erinis with Orestes, The Sirens with Odysseus, Oedipus with the Sphinx etc.⁴

Literary sources depicting these monsters are not always too explicit in explaining their physical appearance. So, the earliest evidence of the Gorgons⁵ do not indicate that monstrous appearance that we can find in later sources⁶. And the case of the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*⁷ is similar because —as we will see later— we know their physical appearance in later sources or in iconographical representations. For that reason, when we delve into the character of one of these monsters in Greek mythology, we sometimes find a divergence between literary sources and artistic representations.

The aim of this paper is to study the case of Scylla, a sea monster who offers a metamorphosis, a change in her physical appearance according to the different sources (literary or artistic), a female creature who menaces sailors

¹ According to K. Shepard, *The fish tailed monsters*, New York 1940, 4, many of Greek hybrid monsters and some winged beings were originated in Eastern and were borrowed by Greeks. See also P. Gonzalez Serrano, «Animales míticos en el mundo clásico», *Éspacio, Tiempo y Forma* 11 (1998), 138-142.

² *Th.* 270-336.

³ Cf. P. H. von Blanckenhagen, «Easy monsters» in A. E. Farkas et al., *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, Mainz on Rheine 1987, 85.

⁴ Cf. P. H. von Blanckenhagen, *op. cit.*, 86. In some of these cases the hero conquers the monster in a different way: it is not his force but his wisdom or a superior power which helps him to defeat it.

⁵ Hesiod, *Th.* 274-281.

⁶ Aeschylus, *Pr.* 798-800; Pindar, *P.* XII, 6 ff.; Euripides, *Ion* 988.

⁷ *Od.* 12.39-40 and 166-191.

on their journeys and symbolizes the sea and its dangers, the horror of sea depths, where Amphitrite breeds thousands of monstrous beings⁸.

In Homer's *Odyssey*⁹ we find the description of the monster Scylla, one of the dangers which Odysseus has to face on his journey back to Ithaca. This is the most ancient literary source describing her and there is not ambiguity concerning her lethal character and her terrifying shape. Besides, Homer presents us with a creature, that even the immortals could not conquer, so the hero can do nothing to fight against her, because ultimately it seems that he can not kill her¹⁰.

The development of Scylla in Greek art is quite particular. Unlike the other episodes of the *Odyssey*, such as the meetings with Polyphemus or Circe, the Scylla episode has not been depicted in the same manner in early art. The earliest representation of her would seem to be the image of an etruscan ivory box with reliefs dated about 600 B.C. On the box there appears a monster like an octopus or giant squid next to a ship; and besides the Scylla image there is a scene with the Cyclops¹¹.

In the fifth century BC there appears an image of Scylla very different from that described by Homer: she is now a hybrid creature, half woman half fish, frequently with one or more dog heads protruding from her waist. So, now her physical appearance is quite dissimilar to the Homeric source, really it is only the detail of the dogs that are attached to her human body that reminds us of Homer. Remember that the poet describes her voice as that of a newborn puppy.

This image of Scylla is also described by later authors, like Apollodorus¹², or Higinius¹³. Here the myth tells us that Scylla's hybrid appearance was due

⁸ *Od.* 5. 420. For the sea and its dangers, for example: E. Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, London 1979, 179 ff.

⁹ *Od.* 12. 85-92.

¹⁰ *Od.* 12. 118-120. Her evil character is emphasized by other authors who compare Clytemnestra (Aeschylus, *A.* 1232-33: τί νιν καλοῦσα δυσφιλῆς δάκος τύχοιμ' ἄν ἀμφίσβαιναν ἢ Σκύλλαν τινὰ «What an odious monster shall I fitly call her, an amfisbaena? or a Scylla?») or Medea with her (Euripides, *Med.* 1343: τῆς Τυρσηνίδος Σκύλλης ἔχουσαν ἀγριωτέραν φύσιν «...a fiercer nature than Tyrrhenian Scylla»). Scylla is also a πῆμα βροτοῖσιν «a plague to mortals» (*Od.* 12.125) and a similar expression —πῆμ' ἀνθρώποις «a plague to men»— is used in Hesiod's *Theogony* (329) referred to another monster, the Nemean lion.

¹¹ Cf. D. Buitron-Oliver, «Between Scylla and Penelope: Female characters of the *Odyssey* in Archaic and Classical Greek Art» in B. Cohen (ed.), *The Distaff Side. Representing the female in Homer's Odyssey*, New York 1995, 34. However, the etruscan iconography of Scylla will be later similar to Greek iconography (cf. M. A. del Chiaro, «Scylla on a caeretan red-figured vase», *AC XXI* [1969], 210-215).

¹² *Ep.* 7. 20-21.

¹³ *Fab.* 199.

to Circe's jealousy. The witch, spurned by Glaucos who was in love with Scylla, poured a magic potion in the water where her rival was bathing and because of this potion Scylla was transformed into a female in the upper body, with a fish tail and six dog heads around her waist¹⁴. The earliest representations in Greek art (dating from the mid-fifth century BC) show this same female upper body, nude down to the waist, usually in profile, and then a fish or sea snake tail coiled up around her¹⁵.

In the terracota relief from Melos (to be found in the British Museum, and dating from mid-fifth century BC) we can see the naked female upper figure wearing a short *chiton* with a pleated skirt and with her hair bound with a band. She has one hand on her hip and the other one touching her chin. The fish

tail is long and coiled up and two dog heads issue from her waist¹⁶.

In the second half of the same century we frequently find images of Scylla on the coins of several cities of South Italy. The reasons that are usually given to explain these images on coins from Akragas or Syracuse is the relation between these cities and the Straits of Messina where the monster was traditionally located¹⁷. On these coins the image is also of a woman in profile with a long and coiled fish tail; the dogs can emerge from her waist, but they can also protrude from her shoulders, and frequently she is accompanied by some other marine creatures.



Scylla on a silver coin from Akragas,
ca. 420-410 BC.

¹⁴ We also find this version in Ovid (*Met.* XIV, 40-70) and Virgil (*Aeneid* 3, 427-428).

¹⁵ G. M. A. Hanfmann, «The Scylla of Corvey and her ancestors», *Dunbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), 258 and K. Shepard, *op. cit.*, 7 ff. propose a Near Eastern origin of this Scylla with her mixture of human-animal forms. For example the Syrian goddess Derketo (known by Lucian, *De dea Syria*, 14) could be a possible precursor of her.

¹⁶ A detailed description of this relief in P. Jacobstahl, *Die melischen reliefs*, Berlin 1931, 54.

¹⁷ Cf. D. Buitron-Oliver & B. Cohen, *The Odyssey and Ancient Art: An epic in word and image*, Annandale on Hudson 1992, 35. Scylla became a personification of the Sicilian Straits, cf. G. M. A. Hanfmann, *op. cit.*, 251.

We find a similar image on a campanian crater and on an apulian hydria of approximately the same date.

On these South Italian images and on some similar artefacts dated to the fifth and fourth centuries BC, Scylla is always depicted alone, without the hero Odysseus, or any other elements which recall for us the Homeric episode. However she is usually represented accompanied by other marine creatures: fish, octopus, crabs etc. She is here just another inhabitant of the sea, on scenes associated with the sea and in marine *thiasoi*.

In an apulian pelike (dated to 360-350 BC and in Naples) we can see Scylla with her female body decorated with jewellery. She raises an arm and her face and her body are seen full on. She has two dog protrusions and a long fish tail finished off by a *ketos*-like head. She is carrying the goddess Thetis on her fish tail who is bringing the arms made for Achilles. In front of her, another Nereid is also riding a sea-beast.

In an apulian amphora with the motif of Perseus killing the *ketos* and Andromeda exposed to the monster, there appears a further example of Scylla. Here her body and face are also shown frontally, she has a long fish tail and three dog protrusions. She swims next to the monster *ketos* and she is again accompanied by Nereids¹⁸.

A Paestan krater (dated to 340-330 BC and now in Malibu at the J.P. Getty Museum¹⁹) is decorated with the Europa myth. Here Europa is on the bull Zeus as



Paestan crater, 340-330 BC. Europa on the bull, Scylla, Triton etc.

¹⁸ We frequently find images of the sea-monster *ketos* connected with Scylla images: on the one hand, the Scylla and the *ketos* are represented on the same artefact as two inhabitants of the sea; on the other hand, the *ketos* can be a part of the body of Scylla, for instance in some apulian vases (dated from the fourth century BC) or in the handle of a bronze mirror dated from the same century. Cf. J. Boardman, «Ketos», *LIMC* VII, 1, 731 ff.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Jentoff-Nilssen, *CVA. The J.Paul Getty Museum*, Malibu 1990, p. 1.231.



Apulian pelike, 360-350 BC. Scylla and Thetis.

he gallops over the sea; and this aquatic scene shows us also an image of Scylla. Again she is nude down to the waist with only a fish tail and two dog protrusions, her body is shown frontally but her face, in profile, is looking back, to Europa. In one hand this Scylla brandishes a trident, and the other hand is raised in the expression of greeting or surprise that we usually seem to find in other representations.

On scenes such as these Scylla seems to be a representation of the sea. She is totally independent from the Homeric episode, and we have seen that she has even been related and interwoven into representations of other myths concerning marine goings-on. Nothing in these scenes seems to indicate the dangerous character that Homer described. In fact she even appears kind and benign. The dogs protruding from her waist may well allude to the character of her voice as detailed by Homer, but they do not exactly reflect any great danger in dealing with her. A newborn puppy is not really the image of a hideous and terrible monster!

In the fourth century BC some artists have created a slightly different image of Scylla on some objects such as bronze mirrors, lids of silver or ceramic boxes etc. On these artefacts she is shown frontally with two twin fish tails—one to each side. The other symbols are similar to what we have already seen: she can hold a trident or a sword in her hand and can be surrounded by some other marine elements.

Sometimes this type of Scylla—who coexists with that with only one fish tail—is depicted as a woman with a seductive appearance, long hair and perhaps a menacing gesture. In these representations there appears a man who is being menaced by Scylla with a rock or a rudder, but it is not very clear whether a representation of the scene with Odysseus is implied or whether it is a

generic scene that is independent of Homer. These Scyllas can also have wings and in some representations each fish tail is finished by a *ketos* head²⁰. Because some sort of human victim is being represented and her attitude and aspect is menacing, there is certainly a reflection in of her original dangerous character.

Around the third and second centuries BC we find Scylla repositioned into the context of the Homeric adventure: here she is found with the ship and Odysseus' companions. And in Roman art we find sculptural groups such as that from Sperlonga which shows Scylla attacking the ship and the sailors in it²¹.

After this brief survey of the iconographical evolution of Scylla, we should ask what is the reason for this change from the terrible monster who is described in the *Odyssey* to the lovely hybrid woman in some of the vase paintings and other artefacts. Some commentators have argued that Greek artists tended to avoid representing monsters and unpleasant creatures and tried to rationalise them²². However, we find other monsters which are always depicted as monsters in Archaic and Classical Greek art just as they are in ancient epic poetry²³.



Silver lid, III BC.
Scylla with two fish tails.

²⁰ Cf. Note 18.

²¹ A study on the Sperlonga group for instance in B. Andreae & B. Conticello, *Skylia und Charibdis: zur Skylia Gruppe von Sperlonga*, Stuttgart 1987 and B. Andreae, *Odysseus: Mythos und Erinnerung*, Mainz 1999. See also G. M. A. Hanfmann, *op. cit.*, 251.

²² Cf. D. Buitron-Oliver & B. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 137.

²³ The Chimaira, whose representations (the earliest dating from the seventh century BC) match the description of this monster found in Hesiod's *Theogony* (319-325). And also the images of the Cyclops Polyphemus in Greek art (again dating from the seventh century BC as well) all seem to match with the idea of a giant, some sort of terrible monster with a single eye on his forehead such as we find in most of the ancient literary texts. For a discussion about the earliest Polyphemus images in early Greek art, see, for instance, A. Snodgrass, *Homer and the artists*, Cambridge 1998, 92, ff.

We can suggest that the new and evolved image of Scylla could be derived of a substratum of folklore: some prehomeric legends related to the sea which concerned fantastic women who represented the dangers of sea journeys for ancient sailors²⁴.

With this type of appearance, Scylla does indeed look like other hybrid creatures of Greek mythology. For example she is similar to Echidna, described in Hesiod's *Theogony* as a beautiful female with a snake tail²⁵. No definite depictions of Echidna are known in Greek art, although, as we have already said, she would surely recall the later images of Scylla: a beautiful female down to the waist with a sea snake tail. Similarities between these monsters do not finish here: both, besides that ambivalent appearance, live concealed in a cave, under the earth, and are remote of that world thought normal for gods and mortals. Both creatures are immortal —unlike many other mythical monsters such as Medusa, the Hydra, the Chimaira etc. —and both seem to have a relation with the Underworld²⁶. Perhaps as a consequence of these similarities and because Echidna —in Hesiod's *Theogony*— gives birth to a whole progeny of monsters, some traditions actually consider Echidna to be Scylla's mother²⁷.

On the other hand, Scylla has a double shape like the Sirens who are depicted in the earliest representations as bird women. Nevertheless, later their image as mermaid women with one or two fish tails will become the most common. The case of the Sirens has parallels with that of Scylla, because

²⁴ A folkloric tradition is proposed by some authors to explain the divergences between art and text in some of the iconographical representations of the *Odyssey* episodes. See for instance : O. Touchefeu-Meynier, *Thèmes Odysseens dans l'art antique*, Paris 1968, 122 and 238; R. M. Cook, «Art and Epic in Ancient Greece», *BABesch* 58 (1983), 1-10. For Homeric subjects in early Greek art, see A. Snodgrass, *op. cit.*, 129 ff. and G. Ahlberg-Cornell, *Myth and Epos in Early Greek Art*, Jonsered 1992.

²⁵ *Th.* 298-299.

²⁶ They are both related with the deep of earth. Echidna lives in a cave (Hesiod, *Th.* 297, 301) and Scylla's cave is as deep as it connects up with Erebus (Homer, *Od.* 12.80-81). Referring to the relationship of caves with the Beyond and fertility cf. A. Motte, *Prairies et jardins de la Grèce antique*, Brussels 1971, 18 ff.; M. Aguirre, «Ambigüedad y otros caracteres en las divinidades remotas de la épica arcaica», *CFC* 6 (1996), 143-157.

²⁷ There are some different traditions about Scylla's genealogy. Homer tells us that Scylla's mother is Crateis (*Od.* 12.124-126), a no definite female character who has been identified with the sea waves. However, other sources propose different mothers: Lamia, according to Stesichorus (in his poem *Scylla*, cf. D. Page [ed.], *Poetae Melici Graeci*, Oxford 1962, 118, n. 220), or Hekate according to Acusilaos (*FGr Hist* I, 57) and Hesiod (fr. 262 Merkelbach-West), or Echidna according to Higinius (*Fab.*125, 14,151.1).

their earliest images, as we have just said, feature a female torso with wings like a bird, and either appear independent, or in the context of the Homeric episode. The artistic interpretation of the Sirens here, demonstrates another divergence from the *Odyssey* (their earliest literary source²⁸) and an evolution in their own right, as Homer does not actually describe their physical appearance. He does not give us any information about their shape, but only mentions the dangerous charm of their voices. Indeed it is Euripides who is the first extant author to refer to them as winged women²⁹.

Several reasons have been given to explain the Siren's later evolution to female figures with fish tail, whose earliest literary evidence comes from the sixth century AD and with some uncertain artistic depictions in Greek art of the third century BC³⁰. As the Sirens are also a symbol of that tempting danger which could lead sailors to their deaths, they recall for us many similar creatures of other mythologies and folkloric traditions. We should consider a strong relationship between them and that beautiful and charming Scylla whose physical appearance could have adopted because of their similar beguiling character and by being both marine creatures closely associated with the sea. In fact, almost all marine mythical creatures will be depicted in art with a fish tail.

Therefore it seems possible that many themes and motifs were mixed up together in which a series of dangerous women, hybrids or not, are menacing the sailors on their voyages. And, although Homer is particular in describing Scylla as a monstrous being with many tentacles like a giant octopus, artists could have decided to depict a more generalised marine creature with the same fish tailed shape as other mythical characters related to water (especially male figures such as Triton, Acheloo, Nereus etc.). It is the feature of the dogs protruding from Scylla that make sure the Homeric description is not completely forgotten.

In either way, whether in the shape of a monster with six necks, twelve feet and sharp teeth as enjoyed by Homer or in the shape of a woman with fish tail as in the many artefacts, we should include Scylla among the series of dangerous women whom Odysseus meets and who all attempt to detain our hero on

²⁸ *Od.* 12.39 ff. and 158 ff.

²⁹ *Hel.* 167. But maybe Euripides has been actually influenced by the art form of the Sirens, see G. K. Gresseth, «The Homeric Sirens», *TAPhA* 101 (1970), 211.

³⁰ Cf. O. Touchefeu Meynier, *op. cit.*, 181. There are some studies about the Sirens, their character and appearance, for instance: J. Pollard, *Seers, Shrines and Sirens*, London 1965; G. K. Gresseth, *op. cit.*; P. Rossi, «Sirènes antiques. Poésie, philosophie, iconographie», *BAGB* (1970), 463-481; E. Hoffstetter, *Sirenen in archaischen und klassischen Griechenland*, Würzburg 1990.

his journey home to Ithaca. There are *femmes fatales* like Circe or Calypso who, in spite of their beautiful and seductive appearance, hide something sinister or terrible³¹; or there are the Sirens with their charming voices. Are all these females not equally man devouring-albeit in another sense? Do they not all represent for Odysseus the same danger: the danger of not coming back home? They are all females with an ambiguous character, potentially harmful enchanteresses who all happen to live far away from the usual sphere of gods and humans. All of them are located in passages that lead us to the Beyond. Homer is explicit when he describes the cave where Scylla lives: it is tremendously deep as it connects up with Erebus. And there is something infernal and other-worldly too about the Sirens: they live on their flowery meadow surrounded by the bones of their victims³². And Circe and Calypso live on their far distant islands at the very end of the world³³. All these females represent the dangers of the sea, its most sinister and terrible shape, but disguised with charm and beauty.

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³¹ Cf. J. Neils, «Les femmes fatales: Scylla and the Sirens in Greek art» in *The Distaff Side*, 174-184 and M. Aguirre, «El tema de la mujer fatal en la Odisea» *CFC* 4 (1994), 301-317.

³² *Od.* 12.44-46.

³³ *Od.* 12. 3-4; *Od.* 1.50 ff. and 7. 246-247.