

Monstrous Bodies as Cultural Text: The Grotesque, the Abject and the Embodied Difference in Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind*

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Abstract

Monstrous bodies are culturally coded, reflecting the anxieties, expectations, fears, and desires of the culture within which they are produced. This article seeks to study monstrous corporeality in an attempt to understand the interface between culture and monsters by looking at the Greek mythical monsters as represented in Natalie Haynes's novel *Stone Blind* (2022). By examining the embodied difference as well as the grotesque and the abject that inhabit the liminal space, we explore the corporeal otherness of monsters, the cultural cues entrenched in their non-normative bodies and their discursivity. The study, probing into the liminal nature of monstrous bodies that resist categorisation, seeks to highlight the subversive potential that deviant bodies offer and how Haynes seizes this opportunity to challenge the human penchant to monsterise difference for a re-evaluation of the cultural construction of monstrous bodies.

Keywords: monstrous bodies; Natalie Haynes; *Stone Blind*; embodied difference; grotesque; abject; liminality

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Introduction

Monsters are universal. As evidenced by their ubiquity in different forms and shapes, monsters transcend geographical, social, and cultural boundaries. Their pervasiveness, however, is also characterised by cultural specificity, for each culture has its own take on monstrosity. A monster is inseparable from the culture that creates it and can neither be studied nor understood properly unless viewed within the context of the culture that begets it. Monster studies, which became a coherent field of scholarship with the publication of Jeffrey Cohen's essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" (Weinstock 2020, 1), explores the "unreal" monsters in tandem with cultural reality, for their conception is anchored in the normative values and ideologies that the culture prescribes. They act as cultural agents not by blindly adhering to cultural norms, but rather by deviating from them. Traditional monster narratives use this violation to shape, correct, and modify behaviours, as well as to enforce cultural norms and thus serve as a cautionary tale. While the representations of monsters have largely been dominated by those that affirm cultural mandates, there have also been renderings that deviated from the norm. Subversive representations of the monstrous are now becoming more prevalent and nuanced, partly owing to the development of monster studies. Natalie Haynes's Greek mythological retelling *Stone Blind* is one such subversive effort that turns the conventional understanding of monstrosity on its head. Monsters, as Jeffrey Cohen (1996, 4) asserts, are "pure culture" and their bodies are cultural bodies. In line with this assertion, this article attempts to study corporeal monstrosity and its cultural entanglement by examining the monstrous bodies represented in Haynes's novel, *Stone Blind*. It will do so by drawing on theories of the grotesque and abjection developed by Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, respectively. More importantly, the article seeks to showcase the disruptive quality inherent in the monstrous bodies, which the novel draws on for its subversive portrayal of Greek mythical monsters in an attempt to expose the cultural biases that inform traditional Western conceptions of monsters.

Natalie Haynes, a British writer who is also a renowned broadcaster and journalist, is one of those novelists who dares to redo and revise the timeless classical tales from ancient Greece and Rome. Much like her preceding novels, *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) and *A Thousand Ships* (2019), Haynes's *Stone Blind* revisits and reinvents the Greek mythological narrative, by adopting a different vantage point. It centres around the story of Medusa, the notorious monster in Greek mythology, tracing her transformation from a mortal baby, adopted by the Gorgons, to a beautiful young maiden, who was assaulted and wronged for no fault of hers, to a "monster," blind and deformed, and finally to Gorgoneion, a severed head turned into a weapon and an apotropaic symbol. The novel, which has multiple narrators who present the Gorgons' story from various perspectives as well as multiple subplots that contextualise the central narrative of the monster who is "assaulted, abused and vilified" (Haynes 2023, 3), offers insights into the complexity and ambivalence that the cultural category of the monster constitutes.

Monstrosity and Embodied Difference

Although monster studies is a relatively new area of scholarship, monsters have long been a source of fascination in academic discourse. Over the ages, they have provoked countless academic discussions and inspired a plethora of efforts to define what the category entails. Aristotle based his idea of monstrosity on the divergence of a living being from normal, natural development (Sowa 2016), while Pliny the Elder located monstrous in bestial creatures and in certain groups of people from India and Ethiopia on account of their strangeness. Grounded on Christian belief, St. Augustine's *The City of God* ([426] 2015) and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* ([600–625] 2006), belonging to the encyclopaedic tradition, employed the epithet “monstrous” to refer to aberrant individuals, though they did not see them as contrary to nature. *Mandeville's Travels* (Mandeville [1357–1371] 1967), a travel memoir, records the alien ways and bodies of men that the narrator encounters in India, China and Jerusalem as “monstrous.” During the Renaissance and Reformation, the concept of monstrosity expanded to include moral deviation. Western conceptions of monsters, as evidenced in the cultural accounts of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions and in the works that attempted to theorise “monstrous” from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages to the modern period, are contingent on the concept of difference. However, it is important to note that not every conception of monsters hinges on the condition of alterity. Asian narratives of monsters, for instance, reject the absolute binarism that the West subscribes to, as their monsters, mostly emerging from categorical confusion, are regarded as part of a continuum of beings that does not involve any process of “othering” (Hock-Soon Ng 2012, 56). Conversely, their Western counterparts view monstrosity as the condition of difference, with monsters arising from and existing in a specific relation of difference to what constitutes normative identity, form, behaviour, and practice. A closer examination of Grecian monsters reveals their status as outsiders owing to this state of difference. *Stone Blind*, with its slew of Greek mythical monsters, demonstrates how monstrosity is grounded in the concept of difference and is, hence, a discursive construct.

The monstrosity that emerges out of the cultural perception of difference manifests mainly through physical and/or moral transgression; that is, monsters can either be those who are differently formed in terms of their corporeality or those who commit immoral actions, or both.

The body is central in the conceptualisation of monsters, for it often serves as the primary and obvious marker of difference and, in turn, of monstrosity. Many accounts of monsters start by alienating or othering them through an elaborate description of the “monstrous” body, underscoring its difference from everything “natural” and “human.” Haynes's retelling of Greek mythology shows how deviation from the normative body creates monsters. The immortal Gorgons, Sthenno and Euryale, are monsters feared and avoided by men because of the tales of their “huge mouths, vicious tusks, leathery wings ... manes like lions, or hair made from snakes, or bristles like wild boar” (Haynes 2023, 20). When Medusa, as a baby, turns up on their shore, the Gorgons are confounded as

to why a mortal being would be left to their care. Their confoundment, however, turns into recognition upon the discovery of her wings, which expels an otherwise “normal” being from the realm of the acceptable to that of uncanny, and demonstrates how morphologically different bodies can be othered and even subsumed as monstrous.

The differences that turn bodies monstrous manifest through excess, deficiency, distortion, or hybridisation. Greek mythology has a wide range of monsters, most of which are hybrids. The Gorgons are hybrid monsters. Haynes’s retelling, detailing the particularities of the Gorgons’ bodies, highlights their hybrid nature. Both Sthenno and Euryale have a set of tusks and wings, and snakes for hair. Medusa, who has a winged mortal body and serpentine hair, too has a hybrid constitution. Medusa has been portrayed variously in different classical and contemporary versions of her story—as a monster from birth, a beautiful maiden, a priestess in Athene’s temple, a mortal woman who became a Gorgon after undergoing a transformation, to name a few. Haynes presents Medusa originally as a mortal Gorgon with a composite physique that becomes increasingly hybrid after Athene’s curse. Medusa’s head gets wreathed with snakes, leading to her being labelled as “monstrous” alongside her sisters. The Graiai, another trio of sisters named Deino, Enyo and Pemphredo and siblings to the Gorgons, are not always considered monstrous. Their lack of hybrid bodies, most of the time, absolves them from monstrosity. Hesiod’s “Theogony,” for example, marks them as abnormal but does not present them as monstrous (Mitchell 2021, 28). While *Stone Blind* does not specifically refer to the Graiai as monsters, its detailed description of their grotesque bodies that exceed the well-defined corporeal boundaries and elicit terror clearly implies their monstrosity.

How Different Is Different?—Relative Monstrosity in *Stone Blind*

The idea of monstrosity being constructed through difference invariably begs the question of the extent of deviation that relegates a being into the realm of the monstrous. The monster theory of relativity holds that “a monster’s body is only monstrous relative to other bodies. ... What is monstrous to one might not be monstrous to another; it all depends on perspective and individual morals and values” (Mercil 2022, 5). The varied responses that diverse monstrous bodies elicit in the novel attest to the theory of relative monstrosity. A winged mortal is different enough for Ceto and Phorcys, the Gorgons’ and the Graiai’s parents, to leave Medusa at the Gorgons’ shore and monstrous enough for humans that Medusa is careful not to scare them with her presence. However, to the mighty Gorgons, Medusa, with a body susceptible to time, harm, and hunger, is not monstrous but rather vulnerable and fragile, one who needs to be protected. Medusa, on the other hand, recognises that she has little in common with her fierce sisters but does not translate those differences into monstrosity. Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, who singles out Medusa for sexual assault, distinguishes her from her monstrous sisters. He bases the monstrosity of the immortal Gorgons and Medusa’s lack thereof on their physical attributes: “There is only a pair of wings differentiating you from any other girl. Your sisters are monsters, with their tusks and their snaking manes of hair. You

have very little in common with them at all” (Haynes 2023, 55). The novel’s depiction of monsters showcases their relative monstrosity, hinting at the discursive quality of the category of monster. Moreover, the relative nature of monstrosity, built on the premise of difference, locates the monstrous not in the monster but rather in the observer’s perceptions. *Stone Blind* demonstrates how different characters have disparate conceptions of what makes something monstrous. Sthenno and Euryale, despite being appalled by Medusa’s mortal body and its “upsetting development” (Haynes 2023, 17), and Medusa, despite having little in common with her sisters, do not regard one another as monstrous, while Poseidon and later Perseus, Greek god Zeus’s son on the quest for a Gorgon head, label the immortal Gorgons monstrous on account of their appearance. This further underlines that it is not simply any difference that creates monstrous bodies but the difference from the normative condition, once again reinforcing the cultural significance of the category of monsters.

“Grotesquely Monstrous”: Transgression of Hybrid and Fragmented Bodies

A recurring feature of the culturally constructed monsters that engage in corporeal transgression is grotesquerie. Operating in and around the ideas of unnatural, excess and distortion, “monstrous” and “grotesque” share the same semantic space, making their separation impossibly difficult. The inter-special bodies of the Gorgons and the unusual body constitution of the Graiai in *Stone Blind*, exhibiting excess, distortions and resistance to the “natural” order of things, exemplify the conflation of these categories. While Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 303) holds “exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness” as the “fundamental attributes of the grotesque style,” Cohen (1996, 6) notes how monsters with “externally incoherent bodies” resist “systematic structuration” and threaten the “order of things.” Both the monstrous and the grotesque, riddled with inconsistencies, transgress boundaries and thus disrupt formal unity of body. Mark Dorrian (2000), in his article “On the Monstrous and the Grotesque,” though arguing for the distinction between these two categories, points out the fundamental commonalities that they share and that inevitably tie them together. One such concern is the “fear of the ‘many in the one,’” that is, the fear “of the fragmentation of the body, of multiplicity within unity” (Dorrian 2000, 310). *Stone Blind*’s tripartite Graiai and Gorgons do not simply deviate from the normative unity and fixity of the body but severely violate them. The multiplicity that plays out through their hybrid and fragmentary bodies exiles them to the realm of the grotesque and the monstrous or what could be called “grotesquely monstrous.”

Stone Blind illustrates how the hybrid, excessive, and fragmented qualities of the bodies translate into something grotesquely monstrous. In Greek mythology, the children of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto have unusually strange and abnormal bodies, which consequently place them in the category of monsters. Though we encounter only the Gorgons and the Graiai in the novel, the narrative makes a brief but illuminating reference to these gods’ other children and the particularities of their monstrous bodies:

“They had many offspring besides Euryale and Sthenno: Scylla, a nymph with six dog heads and their six vicious mouths ... Proud Echidna, half-nymph, half-snake” (Haynes 2023, 15). The hybrid corporeality resulting from the unnatural combination of the attributes of humans, gods, and animals renders them transgressive. In her examination of the origin of Greek monsters in Hesiod’s cosmogonic poem “Theogony,” Fiona Mitchell (2021, 29) notes the transgressive hybridity in the genealogy of Phorcys and Ceto, whose descendants “incorporate characteristics usually associated with the gods, humans, and animals.” Although the novel’s passing mention of Echidna and Scylla alludes to their transgressive hybridity, it does not explicate their grotesquerie or monstrosity. Its extensive portrayal of the bodies of Gorgons and Graiai, however, provides insight into their incorporation into these categories.

The Gorgons, whose representation often combines anthropomorphic features with “the motifs of the lion, the eagle, the serpent, and the bird” (Jesi 1959, 88), are hybrid monsters, transgressing animal/human boundaries. Haynes’s (2023, 13) Gorgons, with their “powerful wings,” swoop up and down the skies. They have the tusks of a boar, huge and sharp enough to “crunch your bones” (254), “bearded cheeks” (20) resembling the manes of a lion and serpentine hair. Perseus adjudges the Gorgons as monsters before meeting them, on account of their serpentine hair, tusks and wings. Hermes, the messenger God, challenges this presumption, arguing that snakes, boars, and birds are not monsters. Perseus does not consider snakes or boars or birds monstrous but regards their amalgamation as such. This exchange demonstrates how the categorical violation that a hybrid body engages in becomes the premise for monstrosity.

A composite body that amalgamates disparate objects/attributes, resulting in a state of excess, exaggeration, and flux, also forms the condition of the grotesque. A Gorgon’s body, which combines disparate appendages of diverse beings, is a case of corporeal excess. Exceeding the corporeal borders, it becomes “more than” a boar, a lion, an eagle, or a serpent. The combination of these attributes further adds to corporeal excess in terms of size and capabilities. “The size of the Gorgons ... the strength, [and] the speed” (Haynes 2023, 293), which Perseus was not prepared for, mark the exaggerated quality of their bodies. This excess and exaggeration make them “excessively” different, “excessively” abnormal and, in turn, grotesquely monstrous. Another characteristic feature of a grotesque body is its perpetual evolution. It is “a body in the act of becoming” (Bakhtin 1984, 317). The Gorgon’s hybrid form, which is not fully realised, is perpetually in the act of becoming. The Gorgons thus fall into the categories of the grotesque and the monstrous due to their transgressive hybridity, characterised by excess, exaggeration, and flux, which render their bodies strange, incongruent, and unclassifiable.

Unlike their siblings, the Graiai, with the exception of their portrayal in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, do not have a hybrid constitution. Their physiological abnormality and consequent monstrosity instead emerge from the fragmented nature of their bodies, which share a tooth and an eye. The episode of Perseus’s encounter with the Graiai in

Stone Blind demonstrates their grotesquery. The exchange of the eyeball among the sisters, constantly fixing it in and pulling it out from their sockets, is an act of “degradation” that highlights the materiality of the body, which is displaced from the “high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (Bakhtin 1984, 19). Challenging the idea of a closed, individual body, Bakhtin defines a grotesque body as that which “protrudes, bulges, sprouts or branches off” (320) and emphasises its orifices and apertures. The Graiai’s shared eye and tooth, moving from body to body, and the orifices, repetitively created while sharing, well-exemplify this definition. Perseus’s realisation of what he was staring at underscores this grotesque monstrosity: “He had assumed that their eye sockets were wrinkled because they were old, but now that he knew he was looking at empty space” (Haynes 2023, 151–152). It is also worth noting that Hesiod (2022, 103) depicts the Graiai as “fair-cheeked” and “saffron-robed,” with hair “gray from their birth”—neither monstrous nor grotesque. They violate the categorical separation of age/youth, which, while making them abnormal, is not sufficient to condemn them as monsters. Their escape from monstrosity in the absence of a fragmented body, again, suggests the centrality of body in the Western conception of monstrosity.

Abjection and Affective Ambivalence of the Monsters

The grotesquely embodied monstrosity that the novel depicts is all the more important considering its affective impact on perceivers. The Graiai, who debate the palatability of Perseus when he walks into their lair, who take “turns using one eyeball between them” (Haynes 2023, 152), simultaneously terrify and disgust him. He “shudders” at the thought of the communal eye, tries not to “retch” upon hearing “the jellied scoop of an eye being pulled from its socket,” and is revolted by its “slimy texture” and “warmth” (152, 155, 156). He goes “rigid to disguise his horror” (154) when Enyo takes out the tooth and turns to hand it over. Perseus’s visceral reaction to the grotesque bodies of the Graiai constitutes what Julia Kristeva calls “the abject.”

Drawing from Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories, Kristeva (1982, 2) theorised the abject as that where “meaning collapses,” which “disturbs identity, order, system” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Abjection involves the horror at the breakdown of meaning at the separation between self and other. The tooth and the eye, which the Graiai share between them, have existence both inside and outside of their bodies, breaching the boundary between the inside and outside, between the closed, self-contained body and the external environment, rupturing the normative fixity and organic unity of the body. The communal eye and tooth represent a blurring of the distinction between the self and the other, and the vacant eye and tooth cavities become the orifices that open up the self to the outside. The grotesque body of the Graiai, here, is an instance of the abject. The grotesque body that challenges the conception of “body as a separate and complete phenomenon” (Bakhtin 1984, 318), that seeks to branch off, finds resonance in Kristeva’s abject body that rejects any attempt to establish a coherent, distinct, and independent identity. The grotesque somatic constitution of the Graiai becomes the abject for Perseus, who struggles to contain his disgust and horror.

Kristeva delineates the state of abjection not only as a threat but also as a defence mechanism. Confrontation with the abject can elicit a number of physiological responses, including gagging sensations, spasms, perspiration, tears, nausea and vomiting. These affective bodily responses to the abject constitute an act of protection. Haynes's Perseus struggles to suppress retching at the sight of the Graiai's communal eye and tooth and the open wounds they leave behind. The nausea that Perseus experiences represents both his psychological unrest as well as his biological response when confronted with the abject bodies, which threaten the boundaries that enable a distinct self. It is an act of self-preservation—an attempt to expel the abject from himself, to re-establish the imaginary boundaries that were breached, and recover his sense of identity.

The experience of abjection, as Kristeva contends and as exemplified by Perseus's encounter with the Graiai in the novel, involves both disgust and fear, that is, an aversion towards the "improper/unclean" (Kristeva 1982, 2) and horror that emerges from the threat to one's sense of self. While Perseus, at the sight of the Graiai, exhibits both horror and repulsion, his response is predominantly one of disgust. The Graiai, with their warm, slimy eyeball, wrinkled eye sockets and open wounds and apertures, remind Perseus of the "materiality" of the body and evoke disgust, which "present[s] itself with the kind of power that would trigger fear" (Korsmeyer and Smith 2004, 18). The predominance of revulsion over horror in Perseus's response is because of the breach of inside/outside that the Graiai's bodies signify. Jela Krečič and Slavoj Žižek (2016, 64) explain this connection between disgust and disintegration of the corporeal limit that determines the inside/outside: "The object of disgust 'threatens the stability of our corporeity'; it destabilizes the line that separates the inside of our body from its outside. Disgust arises when the border that separates the inside of our body from its outside is violated when the inside penetrates out." The novel further demonstrates this abject disgust caused by the breach of inside/outside and the corporeal materiality with the gagging reflex Perseus had when a drop of blood from Medusa's head drips onto his foot.

Perseus's confrontation with Sthenno and Euryale, when trying to escape after killing Medusa, forms another instance of the encounter with the abject:

Perseus is terrified when he catches sight of them both ... gods prepared him for his violation but they have not warned him of the size of Gorgons, or the strength, the speed. He is shaking as he stands there, terrified to move in case they hear him. He wants to run but he doesn't dare. ... Perseus is numb with fear as he stands unseen before Euryale. (Haynes 2023, 293)

Perseus, here, is overwhelmed by horror more than disgust. The incongruity and contradictions that the bodies of Sthenno and Euryale encompass, the ambiguity and permeability their composite nature represents, and the propriety they breach, rendering them formidable in size, strength and speed, make the immortal Gorgons the objects of abject terror for Perseus. The cry that emanates from Euryale's wide mouth leaves him

“stupefied” and his “body shaking” (Haynes 2023, 295). Her “bellows” of “rage and grief” and “curdling roar” (294, 296) represent the “affect that bursts out” (Kristeva 1982, 204), an emotional excess that is indescribable and glossolalic and thus transgressive, contributing to Perseus’s abject terror. He snaps out of the stupor only when Athene, the goddess guiding him, tells him to run. The instant crushing terror that consumes Perseus, essentially paralysing him mentally and physically, constitutes his reaction to the monstrous and grotesque abject.

Kristeva, in her theory of abjection, identifies a paradox in the affective quality of the abject, for it is a source of disgust and horror as well as of fascination. The abject is “a vortex of summons and repulsion” (Kristeva 1982, 1), “a composite of ... condemnation and yearning” (10). “For Kristeva, the grotesque-abject body is a body of fear, but fear tempered with fascination. ... One cannot bear to look upon it, but cannot bring oneself to look away from it either. Mary Shelley’s monster is one of Kristeva’s ‘composites’” (Hurley 2007, 138), and so are Haynes’s monsters. When confronted with the abject that the composite bodies of the Gorgons engender, Perseus does not turn away. He, instead, is rooted to the spot. The “horrified trance” Perseus finds himself in, upon hearing Euryale’s “mighty cry” (Haynes 2023, 296, 295), hints at the perverse fascination the abject monstrous bodies evoke. Another “fascinated victim” (Kristeva 1982, 9) of the abject cry of the Gorgons is Athene, who guided Perseus to safety: “she heard a noise so remarkable that she longed to be able to emulate it so she could hear it again. The flute, then, was inspired by the Gorgons. Specifically, it was inspired by the sound Euryale made when they found the body of Medusa. Piercing, atonal, bellicose” (Haynes 2023, 299). Athene becomes so enchanted that she fashions a flute out of the reeds to emulate the cries. Athene’s longing and obsession, which culminated in the invention of the flute, imply the pleasure associated with the experience of abjection. Drawing from Lacan, Kristeva (1982, 9) refers to this paradoxical pleasure as “jouissance” and identifies it as the reason “why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones.”

The emotional ambivalence that the monstrosity provokes, however, does not end there. The bodies born out of the conflation of the monstrous and grotesque, in addition to fear, disgust and intrigue, can also inspire sympathy. Perseus finds the predicament of the Graiai sisters, who have to take turns to see and eat and fight for it, pitiful—“For the first time since he had walked into the cave Perseus felt something other than fear and disgust. To have so little, to live so pitiable a life that a partial share in a single tooth and eye could seem like everything” (153). So depraved and debased is their existence that the suffering of the abject object incites sympathy. Perseus’s sympathy, however, is short-lived—“just as he felt the surge of pity, he knew what to do” (153). Perseus takes advantage of their plight to extract information regarding the Gorgons, promising them eyes and teeth. He persuades them to hand over their eye and tooth, which he tosses into the sea, rendering them blind, hungry, and more miserable than ever. It is no coincidence that Perseus concocts this plan at the same moment he experiences a surge of sympathy. Perseus’s sympathy, which emerges upon his realisation of the way these

creatures have to live and function, diminishes the abject terror and aversion, giving him the clarity to devise a plan to outsmart the Graiai. The brutality of Perseus's actions in this episode, moreover, raises the question of who the actual monster is.

Monstrous Metamorphosis

The transformation of a being from ordinary and acceptable to abnormal, intolerable, and grotesque is a trope that most monster narratives play with. Such metamorphosis, which dislodges a being from within the established order of things to the outside of it, is a partial, incomplete process that leaves it stranded in-between. Figures in transition are a concern shared by the Bakhtinian grotesque and the Kristevan abject. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the transformation involved in the grotesque image as an "unfinished metamorphosis" (1984, 24). Rejecting the idea of the body as smooth, closed, and complete, Kristeva's theory emphasises its incompleteness. Metamorphosis forms a central motif in Haynes's account of monsters. The monstrosity of the Graiai lies in the constant flux in which their bodies are engaged. Interchanging the eye and the tooth, the Graiai are constantly becoming and unbecoming blind and edentulous. Their transformation is never complete, for they are always in a state of lack, as none can have both the eye and the tooth at once. The incongruence of Sthenno's and Euryale's hybrid bodies, which combine features of multiple animals, situates them between taxonomies, making them forms in transition. The bodies of these monsters that remain incomplete, never fully realised, echo Kristeva's abject body and Bakhtin's grotesque image.

Transmogrification forms a central motif in every account of Medusa, and the same is the case in Natalie Haynes's reimagining, which details Medusa's transformation from a beautiful maiden to a grotesque monster and finally to a weaponised head. Athene's curse transforms Medusa from a beautiful mortal with wings to a hideous serpentine-haired monster with a blind but lethal gaze. While the set of wings she originally had set her apart from others, the curse Athene places on her inarguably pushes her into the realm of monstrosity. The novel uses Medusa's transformation to challenge the physiognomic prejudices that inform the cultural notion of monstrosity by highlighting the incongruity between her "monstrous" body and her behaviour.

The rhetoric of monstrosity is very much entrenched in the theory of physiognomy, which propounds the belief that the temperament of a being can be inferred from its somatic traits, particularly its facial features. Physiognomics, whose roots trace back to Ancient Greece, is pervasive in ancient Greek culture and distinctly manifests in the monsters it engendered. Haynes's Grecian monsters, however, deviate from their traditional counterparts in this respect. *Stone Blind* questions the cultural subscription to the quasi-science of physiognomy to monsterise difference. It presents Medusa's transmogrification as only skin-deep, superficial, for it never changes her internal self. Haynes's Medusa binds her eyes and retreats to the cave to protect her sisters and everyone who could potentially fall victim to her lethal eyes. Medusa's snakes are not vicious, venomous predators but serve as her eyes, guiding her and even warning her of

the lethality of her gaze before she realises it herself. The severed head of Medusa, referred to in the novel as Gorgoneion, asks:

I'm wondering if you still think of her as a monster. I suppose it depends on what you think that word means. Monsters are, what? Ugly? Terrifying? Gorgons are both these things, certainly, although Medusa wasn't always. ... And is a monster always evil? Is there ever such a thing as a good monster? Because what happens when a good person becomes a monster? I feel confident saying that Medusa was a good mortal: has that all disappeared now? Did it fall out with her hair? (Haynes 2023, 204)

Referring to the compassion Medusa displays even after her transmutation, Gorgoneion directs these series of questions at the readers, essentially questioning the criteria that push one into the realm of the monstrous. With the barrage of questions directed towards the readers and society at large, it challenges the presumption of monstrosity, often made in relation to the non-normative bodies, for Medusa's actions show that her goodness did not, in fact, fall out with her hair.

The novel also details the aberrant Gorgonian bodies, which contribute to their ostracisation. Haynes's winged and tusked Gorgons, remaining true to their traditional depiction, are physically "deviant." This "deviance," however, does not extend beyond their physicality. Sthenno and Euryale take Medusa under their wings, care for her, worry about her safety, avenge Poseidon's assault, console her when she is cursed, and finally grieve her death. The novel's characterisation of the Gorgons, whose actions, behaviours, or attitudes are inconsistent with their embodied monstrosity, their "leathery hides, fearsome faces, long sharp teeth" (Haynes 2023, 164), problematises the physiognomics that underlies the cultural construction of monsters. Its ascription of emotions deemed exclusively "human" to the monsters challenges the theory of physiognomy, negates their monstrous quality, and provokes a rethinking of the category of monsters and the differences that allow its construction. It throws into question the configuration of the monstrous body, here also grotesque and abject, as the dialectic other.

Subversive Liminality of the Grotesque-Abject Monsters

While the uncharacteristic emotional engagement that Haynes's reimagined Greek monsters display dismantles the binary opposition of the human and the inhuman other, the subversive function that the novel performs with regard to the cultural construction of monsters is more apparent in its representation of the monstrous bodies. By highlighting the abject and grotesque nature of monstrous bodies, *Stone Blind* underscores not only the way the bodies that differ are othered but also the subversive potential they present by emphasising their liminality.

Monsters are simultaneously "of this world" and "out of this world." They emerge from human imagination but are intricately enmeshed with socio-cultural realities, thus occupying the space between the real and the imaginary. Monsters also create a

metaphorical liminal space with their contradictions, simultaneously embodying cultural fears and forbidden desires. *Stone Blind*, however, is concerned with the liminality that the physical configuration of the monsters represents. Through the excess, deficit, or hybridity manifested in their physical form, monsters become “the harbinger of category crisis” (Cohen 1996, 6). The interspecies somatic constitution of the Gorgons, for instance, demonstrates this crisis. The Graiai’s ambiguous bodies, which contest bodily divisions and integrity, also defy classification. Liminal in their physical constitution, monsters thus refuse any attempts at their incorporation into the predefined categories. The entanglement of the grotesque-bject with the monstrous in the novel’s representation of these bodies and the response they elicit, particularly in Perseus, further intensifies this liminality. The abject body, characterised by “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982, 4), and the grotesque body that exceeds and exaggerates are interstitial bodies, and the paradoxical aversion and attraction that the grotesquely formed monstrous abject bodies inspire add to their ambivalent status.

The trajectory of the story of Medusa marks varied modes of liminality, and Haynes’s narrative turns the spotlight on them. The pre-curse mortal Medusa is neither fully a monster nor a human. She was a winged Gorgon who “looked like an ordinary human girl” (Haynes 2023, 137), thus inhabiting the threshold between humanity and monstrosity. The morphological deviation she undergoes, when cursed, displaces her from this threshold firmly into the realm of monstrosity. She moves from the space between the human and the monster to yet another indeterminate space, with her newly acquired monstrous status.

Medusa, after decapitation, goes from a Gorgon to Gorgoneion, a monstrous figure to a severed monstrous head, retaining the power to petrify. Gorgoneion turns into a weapon in the hands of Perseus, who uses it to petrify his enemies, before Athena fixes the head onto her breastplate. Haynes makes Gorgoneion one of her narrators, who relates to the readers the events after Medusa’s death. Medusa’s head, separated from the body, comprehends and articulates the events unfolding before its eyes. It senses Perseus’s fear and feels discomfort when placed upon the hard, sandy shore. Anticipating the reader’s confusion at this strange state of affairs, Gorgoneion explains:

If you’re wondering how come I am able to see and hear and tell you what happened after Medusa died, the answer is simple. I was a Gorgon, a child of Phorcys and Ceto.

...

I was, I am the daughter of a sea god, and even though I was fated to die, I was hardly an ordinary mortal, was I? I had wings, for a start. ... Here’s something else I have: the ability to retain my memories, my faculties, even after death. (Haynes 2023, 292)

Reminding readers of the decapitated body Perseus has left behind, Gorgoneion claims, “this isn’t life. It’s death” (Haynes 2023, 301), dismissing any notion of Medusa escaping death. It, at the same time, also claims, “I feel warm and alive, though I know I am neither. I see everything at once: the vast sky, the rock-strewn ground, the fluttering

trees. I feel the warmth of the sun and the cooling breezes and the finger of Perseus gripping my snakes” (303). The Gorgoneion-Medusa, neither fully dead nor alive, is thus ontologically liminal. Another factor contributing to Gorgoneion’s liminal nature is the ambiguity that arises from its uncertain identity. *Stone Blind* vividly illustrates this ambiguity by giving voice to the severed head. Gorgoneion is Medusa, for it is literally the head and face of Medusa. It, at the same time, is not Medusa, for Gorgoneion encompasses a self that is very distinct from the one we have come to know as Medusa. The contradictory statements that the severed head makes further complicate the matter. The Gorgon head separates itself from Medusa, claiming to have been created the moment Medusa ceased to exist and referring to her in the third person. When Perseus kills a shepherd who annoys him, Gorgoneion reveals that it feels no remorse, even though it could have spared his life by simply looking away. Gorgoneion’s indifference towards mortals, about whom Medusa deeply cared, further strengthens this claim of separation. Yet it repeatedly refers to Sthenno and Euryale as “my sisters” and wonders, “Are they still my sisters, now I am just a head?” (292). The Gorgon head identifies Medusa’s body as “my decapitated body” and then corrects itself, “not my body any more, her body” (293). This alternation between the use of first-person and third-person pronouns as Gorgoneion narrates the events after Medusa’s beheading encapsulates the suspended identity of the Gorgoneion-Medusa.

The liminal state, being a transitional phase, implies a period before and after the transition. As far as Medusa’s monstrous in-betweenness is concerned, pre-curse Medusa was in the pre-liminal stage. The “ontological liminality” (Cohen 1996, 6) that the accursed, monster-Medusa embodies situates her in the middle transitory phase. Even after her decapitation, Medusa remains a transitional monster as the Gorgoneion-Medusa retains the head full of still-writhing snakes and petrifies everyone its gaze lands on, initially as a weapon in Perseus’s hands and later from Athene’s breastplate. Medusa enters the post-liminal stage, that is, stops being a liminal monster, when the head is finally carried out to the sea, where it becomes part of the undergrowth and “closes its eyes, one last time” (Haynes 2023, 368).

Stone Blind, thus, draws attention to the interstitiality of its Grecian monsters, whose bodies mark the interplay of the abject, the grotesque, and the monstrous. With its representation of the categorically interstitial, grotesque-abject bodies, the novel illustrates how those who embody difference that threatens the established order are rejected, expelled, or “abjected” and subsequently deemed monstrous. At the same time, the novel, by emphasising their liminality, as seen in Perseus’s encounters with the Graiai and the Gorgons and the transformations Medusa undergoes, shows how these aberrant bodies that deviate from the norm dismantle binarisms at the heart of Western thought and everything it conceives. The abject and grotesque bodies of the monsters that the novel depicts call into question the binaries of self/other, inside/outside, human/animal, and death/life and herein lies their subversive potential.

Conclusion

Stone Blind is subversive in its representation of the Greek mythical monsters, for it counters the dominant binarisms and destabilises the system of difference central to the construction of monstrosity. Monstrous bodies that simultaneously encompass anxiety and desire, resist categorisation, and whose grotesqueries elicit paradoxical reactions form a significant part of the novel's narration. These bodies, though, act as the primary signifier of difference and contribute to otherness; their deviation from the culturally stipulated norms makes them a site of emancipation. Ambivalence that the liminal identity of the monsters engenders is at the heart of the novel, inviting readers to reconsider the idea of normalcy and deviancy. Rejection of the parallel between the inner character and the physique is another subversive strategy that the novel adopts to pry open the cultural construction of monsters. Haynes's monsters who refuse to act according to the rules of physiognomy that govern the Western conception of monsters are not behaviourally deviant. The novel, while highlighting the embodied differences, also goes beyond them to explore the inner lives of these monsters. Departing from the usual portrayal of monsters as the "dehumanised other," deprived of emotions and voice, incapable of having an existence independent of those they haunt, Haynes accords her monsters emotions, voices, and a life of their own and makes the readers privy to their fears and anxieties, their affectionate, empathetic and vulnerable selves. Such a subversive literary exploration of the figures of monsters, by giving insights into how the monsters are culturally conceived, illuminates the culture that creates them, and the humans they haunt, and that is what Haynes's Gorgoneion does when it poses the question of what makes a monster.

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