

# Introduction

Mothers rarely appear in Shakespeare's plays. However, there are several texts in which mothers feature prominently, including *Titus Andronicus*, the First Tetralogy of history plays (1–3 *Henry VI* and *Richard III*), and *Coriolanus*. In each case, these powerful maternal figures appear unexpectedly: not in domestic contexts, but in martial-heroic ones, in plays otherwise focused on the traditionally masculine ideals of war and legacy. Monster theory can help us understand why.

## Monster Theory

In his 1996 essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen formally introduced the field of “monster studies.” This critical discourse suggests that “reading cultures from the monsters they engender” is an important way of understanding how the people of that culture think, what they fear, and how they understand the world around them.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, readings in this critical mode have had two things in common: first, a general set of characteristics that define monsters and the monstrous, and second, an analytical emphasis on the relationship between these monsters and “normal” humanity.

The most important characteristic of the monster is its difference: its transgression(s) of accepted standards, boundaries, and/or values of the human culture that confronts it. These transgressions manifest themselves physically—in hybrid human-animal bodies, supernatural size or strength, or prodigious features—and behaviorally—in horrific violence,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 1. For a comprehensive overview of this discourse, see Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory,” in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). See also Asa Simon Mittman, “Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

or destructive, inhuman appetites. As a number of scholars have explored, another closely related characteristic of the monster is its indeterminacy: to be monstrous is to be hybrid, liminal, or ambivalent; irreconcilably in-between, indistinct, or otherwise uncategorizable.<sup>2</sup>

Monster theory is usually applied to systems in which monsters like these are an exception, where their meaning is defined by contrast with the human societies they confront. In such contexts, the “what” and “how” of the monster’s deviation from the cultural norm dictate their semiotic or epistemological significances. As embodiments of difference, monsters are seen to reflect “culturally specific anxieties and desires,” refracting and *demonstrating* key political, moral, religious, natural, or social preoccupations of a particular group at a particular point in time.<sup>3</sup>

This book deviates somewhat from these traditional applications of monster theory. First, and most significantly, it does not focus on a specific monster or monsters. Instead, I identify monstrosity—the defining traits of alterity, liminality, and ambivalence—as a feature that unites women, especially mothers, and the elite warriors of the Trojan War. Beginning with this previously unrecognized common ground, I use the language of monstrosity to articulate a new understanding of Iliadic glory: one that unites culture and biology, war and reproduction, and identifies the mother’s ambivalent, birth-giving body as sole source and arbiter of the warrior’s immortal heroic legacy.

Also unlike most monster studies, this project considers the monstrous largely without contrast to normal humanity. Women, mothers, and warriors

2 See, e.g., D. Felton, “Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome,” in Mittman and Dendle, *Monsters*, p. 104; Noël Carroll, “The Nature of Horror,” in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrate*, vol. 1, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Leeds: Arc Humanities, 2018), pp. 49–50; Michael Uebel, “Unthinking the Monster,” in Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 266; Cohen, “Preface: In a Time of Monsters,” in Cohen, *Monster Theory*, pp. ix–x; Cohen, “Monster Culture,” in Cohen, *Monster Theory*, pp. 6–7; and Chapter 1.

3 Weinstock, “Introduction,” p. 25. See, e.g., for monsters and early modern Protestantism, Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). For monsters “in early modern Europe’s imagination of itself” (12), see Wes Williams, *Monsters and Their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For the monster as disturbing, portentous reflection of “local circumstance” and “acute instability” (187), see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), esp. pp. 174–181. For the theological and semiotic significance of monsters in medieval Christian discourse, see David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), pp. 5, 6–9, and *passim*. See also R. Po-Chia Hsia, “A Time for Monsters: Monstrous Births, Propaganda, and the German Reformation,” in *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

are all defined as monstrous by their distinctions from physical, social, and behavioral norms—as monsters are. However, once their shared monstrosity is established, the remainder of the study considers these figures mainly just in relationship to one another. This book explores what monstrosity can tell us on its own terms, in a system where it functions as a formative ideal, rather than an aberration. In the Iliadic pursuit of heroic immortality, monstrosity is the rule, not the exception.

## Maternity, Monstrosity, and Heroic Immortality

Part I of this work establishes monstrosity as the common ground that unites mother and warrior in traditional narratives of the Trojan War. This initial section demonstrates how the woman/mother (Chapter 1) and the Iliadic warrior (Chapter 2) can be characterized as monstrous, according to criteria established by monster studies. Recognizing this common denominator helps destabilize the gender binarity that frequently defines scholarship on the Iliadic-heroic ideal, and opens the way for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between women and warriors in this epic-heroic tradition. Chapter 3 demonstrates how and why this shared monstrosity gives women—particularly mothers—primary control of the fallen warrior's posthumous glory and preservation in cultural memory.

Part II shows how these monstrous paradigms shape ancient Greek representations of Helen (Chapter 4), Clytemnestra (Chapter 5), and Hecuba (Chapter 6), three women who feature prominently in narratives of the Trojan War and its aftermath. As I demonstrate, the Iliadic patterns I call “belly-monstrous” cluster around these women with remarkable consistency, through a broad selection of Greek and Greco-Roman narratives about Troy. This semi-ahistorical persistence is the basis for a more in-depth consideration of how and why Shakespeare used these inherited patterns in response to his own contemporary concerns.

An introduction to Part III identifies some of the ways these Iliadic motifs would have been available and appealing in Shakespearean England. The subsequent chapters explore the shaping influence of these ancient paradigms on Shakespeare's mother-warrior plays: *Titus Andronicus* (Chapter 7), the First Tetralogy (Chapter 8), and *Coriolanus* (Chapter 9). Each chapter reconsiders the play(s) in belly-monstrous terms, offering new perspectives on the works themselves, and on their particular relevance in the final years of Queen Elizabeth I's life and reign.

Ultimately, this book uses monstrosity as a new way to think about the relationship between mothers and warriors in the Iliadic world, to blur the categories that shape traditional thinking about the heroic ideal, and to push our understanding of war and warrior beyond the purely androcentric. Monster theory helps identify the mother's ambivalent womb/stomach as the point where two seemingly separate worlds—maternity and heroic immortality—become one.