20-sided monsters: The Adaptation of Greek Mythology to *Dungeons and Dragons*

Given its status as a source of many of the greatest monsters to enter the human imagination, it is little surprise that Classical Mythology has a noticeable impact on *Dungeons and Dragons*, still arguably the most famous tabletop role playing game (RPG) in the world. Parties of adventurers ride pegasi, battle minotaurs, and seek treasure and excitement in the realms of Elysium and Hades. However, while *Dungeons and Dragons* (D & D) contains characters and places taken from the Greco-Roman tradition, it is not set in antiquity, or indeed in a world where Greece or Rome ever existed. As a result, the gaming system allows us a unique opportunity to see investigate the allure of figures and locations based in antiquity without the pressure and influence of a larger Classical tradition, most often noticeably in its use of monsters drawn from Greek mythology.

First, while *Dungeons and Dragons* utilizes Classical monsters, it freely adapts them to fit the rules and needs of its gameplay, to make them functional as challenges for the player-characters. While these shifts are gameplay-driven, they often, perhaps unconsciously, provide interpretation of and insight into modern visions of these ancient characters. For instance, when forcing players to actually cauterize a hydra's wounds proved logistically difficult, D & D required fire damage to defeat the hydra, which echoes Heracles' famed method of destroying the beast; however, the Hydra does *not* have a poison bite, suggesting that the means of Heracles' death is no longer in the public consciousness.

If *Dungeons and Dragons'* changes to Classical monsters' abilities shows how the game's ability to alter classical tradition, its measurements of the beasts' abilities reveals how the game can change the way the monsters are described. Unlike mythical tales, which are largely descriptive in nature, D&D is an intensely quantitative game (Chrulew 2005). In *Dungeons and*

Dragons, the physical and mental abilities of every monster (and hero) are given specific numerical scores. This enables a comparison of monsters' abilities that was remarkably difficult in ancient myth, which largely kept monsters isolated from each other. While a chimera may not be, as D & D suggests, stronger than a centaur but weaker than a sphinx, the game has nevertheless changed the way people talk about monsters and heroes generally; modern games and popular culture now regularly attempt to quantify the abilities of fantastic beings, reflecting *Dungeons and Dragons*' influence.

Dungeons and Dragons' changes to ancient monsters are not limited to their abilities. The game also rewrites the monsters' histories to better integrate into its (mostly non-Classical) narrative universe. To cite one example, medusas are now a race of monsters who were once humans seeking eternal youth, distinct from gorgons, who are now iron plated bulls. This unusual splitting of classical figures from their Greco-Roman context allows us to see these characters from a new perspective, particularly as parallels with figures from other mythic and literary traditions.

While the changes that *Dungeons and Dragons* makes to Classical monsters have different purposes, they are all enabled by a single, unique trait: it is a world that contains classical beings, but is not deeply influenced by or beholden to Classical culture generally. The game therefore gives us a chance to see how individual examples of Greco-Roman culture hold up when not supported by the larger tradition. As it turns out, they remain captivating, and sometimes capable of eating your heroes.

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