

Shrieking, Biting, and Licking: The Monstrous-Feminine in Video Games

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Abstract

This article examines examples of the monstrous-feminine in the form of abject female monsters in a selection of critically acclaimed and commercially successful video games. Various female monsters from CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher* series (2007-2015), and Santa Monica Studio's *God of War* series (2005-2013) are considered as examples of the abject monstrous-feminine which fall into a long tradition in horror media of making the female body and body movements into something horrific and repulsive. These female monsters use shrieking, biting, licking, and spreading disease as weapons against the male protagonist, who must slay them to progress in the games. This article concludes that these games contribute to a long popular culture tradition of framing the empowered female body as monstrous and threatening, and calls for more scholarship on female monstrosity in games.

Keywords

Monstrous-Feminine; Abject; Female Body; Vampires; Sirens; Monstrosity; Vagina Dentata



Introduction

The representation of women in video games has been a heated topic of discussion within the industry, academia, and public discourse for decades. Scholars and critics have long noted that video game developers overwhelmingly privilege heterosexual, white, male subjectivities and systematically under-represent female characters (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kennedy, 2002; Miller & Summers, 2007; Dunlop, 2007; Jenson & de Castell, 2008; Consalvo et al., 2009; Hayes & Gee, 2010; Sarkeesian, 2013-2017). The majority (roughly 75%) of game developers are heterosexual white men, and most mainstream video games are marketed to that same demographic, regardless of the fact that almost 50% of game players are women (IGDA, 2016; ESA, 2015). These facts help explain the overabundance of heterosexual white male protagonists, and the gender-based game scholarship cited above has revealed that when female characters are present in games, they generally function as motivation for the male protagonists, are framed as damsels-in-distress, and are often hypersexualized. Although much gender-based game scholarship has analyzed female characters as hypersexualized or infantilized damsels-in-distress, there are very few studies which address the other side of problematic video game representation: female villains and monsters (for some examples of work which does address this, see Spittle, 2011; Sarkeesian, 2016; Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). This gap in scholarship is especially surprising given how thoroughly female villains and monsters in literature and film have been studied (for example, Creed, 1986 & 1993; Doane, 1991; Caputi, 2004; Pulliam, 2012; Hollinger, 2015; Stamp, 2015; Young, 2015; Zimmerman, 2015).

This article seeks to contribute to this understudied area of video game scholarship by discussing and analysing a selection of female monsters featured in two critically-acclaimed and commercially-successful video game series: *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt RED, 2007-2015) and the *God of War* series (Santa Monica Studio, 2005-2013). This analysis is underpinned by the foundational work of film theorist Barbara Creed (1986; 1993), who utilized the psychoanalytic concept of the abject to theorize about female monsters. The abject, as developed by Julia Kristeva (1982) and based on the work of Jacques Lacan, is that which disrupts, disturbs, and is rejected by normative, dominant social reason, represented by the "symbolic order." This article follows the textual analysis methods utilized by Creed in order to perform close readings of the female monsters in these games and situate them within scholarship on monstrosity in popular culture. This article is also embedded in psychoanalytic theory, as it has provided the most common critical approach to the intersection of horror and gender in popular culture.

As Creed (1986) stated "[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (p. 44). The abject exists in the liminal space

between the subject and object, the self and the other, and is powerful precisely because of its ability to disrupt and disgust the symbolic order, which is also understood as the hegemonic, patriarchal realm of law, order, and propriety. Activities or substances which invoke disgust are all part of the abject, such as bodily fluids and excrement, disease, open wounds, death and decay, cannibalism, bodily alteration, dismemberment, and even sexual perversion. The abject is, paradoxically, associated with both fear and *jouissance*, as we are often both disgusted by and drawn to that which is abject. While many scholars have focused on male monsters or killers and their female victims (see, for example, Clover, 1987 & 1992; Rieser, 2001), female monsters who prey on men require a distinct approach because, as Creed (1993) argued, “[t]he reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience” (p. 3). She found that it is the female physicality of cinematic monsters that was so disturbing and abject: their horror is inextricably tied to their gender. Although Creed was focusing on horror films, the ubiquity of these archetypes in horror, science fiction, and fantasy media means that her methods and concepts can be fruitfully applied to the study of video games (for more on this, see Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017, p. 42-44).

Using the abject and the monstrous-feminine as conceptual frameworks, this article focuses on female monsters who use their bodies, bodily fluids, or their voices as weapons, specifically shrieking, biting, licking, and spreading infectious diseases. These monsters invoke disgust and horror, yet they also represent that which most disrupts normative, patriarchal symbolic order: powerful, uncontrollable, and dangerous female bodies. By embracing their primal physicality and using their bodies as weapons, these female monsters challenge the masculine realm of cold, disembodied logic as well as the male protagonists who use metal weapons to fight them. These female monsters must all be slain by the player for symbolic order to be restored and for gameplay to proceed, punished for both their visceral, feminine physicality and for daring to wield phallic body parts as weapons. As such, these monsters fall into a long popular culture tradition of framing the empowered female body as monstrous and threatening – a discourse which contributes the marginalization of women within patriarchal society.

Shrieking and Biting

Much contemporary Western popular culture repeats and remixes stories from classical Western mythology, and the misogynistic association of women with evilness, corruption, deception, and chaos stems from antiquity. For example, in his book *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, Allan Johnson (2005) noted that the ancient Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras identified the “evil principle” as that which “created chaos, darkness, and woman” (p. 63). Indeed, connecting women with monstrosity was a common practice: as Creed

(1986) observed, “[c]lassical mythology was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female” (p. 2). The narrative structure of male hero and female monster has remained popular in Western literature and cinema (Karlyn, 2011), and in contemporary video games. In mythology and popular culture, these female creatures are almost always killed by the male protagonist, punished for their unchecked sexuality, fecundity, and feminine power. One of the ways that female monsters manifest that feminine power is by using their voices and bodies as weapons. This section will discuss female video game monsters which shriek and scream to stun the protagonist, attack him with their claws, and bite him with their fangs.

Perhaps the archetypal shrieking female monster in Western mythology is the Banshee, an Irish spirit who heralds the death of a family member with her piercing cries. The *God of War* series of action-adventure hack and slash video games are based on Greek mythology and follow the violent, constantly enraged Spartan warrior Kratos as he battles monsters, gods, and titans. Although based on Greek mythology, these games do not hesitate to borrow monsters from legends based in other cultures. In *God of War: Chains of Olympus* (Santa Monica Studio & Ready at Dawn, 2008), Banshees appear as beautiful women with decaying flesh, desiccated stomachs, and brown serpent tails instead of legs. These monsters move around quickly, whipping and stabbing at Kratos with their tails, scratching at him with their claws, and shrieking loudly to momentarily stun the protagonist.

Another female monster from classical mythology famous for her voice is the Siren. Sirens were beautiful women, sometimes depicted as part bird, who would lure unwary sailors with their enchanting voices to shipwreck on the rocky coasts of their islands or lull the men to sleep so they could feast on their flesh. Sirens originated in Greek mythology, so their presence in the *God of War* series is unsurprising. In *God of War I* (Santa Monica Studio, 2005) they appear as graceful, floating, scantily-clad young women with their long hair covering their faces. However, when Kratos approaches them, they reveal their enormous gaping mouths with rows of sharp fangs (see figure 1). In *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studio, 2007) they appear as Siren “Widows,” which are more corpse-like; In *God of War III* (Santa Monica Studio, 2010), they are called Siren “Seductresses”; and in *God of War: Ascension* (Santa Monica Studio, 2013), Kratos encounters Siren “Sybil” who are completely topless and wear a “Glasgow smile” with sharp fangs (see figure 2). Like the Banshees, all Sirens attack with a powerful shriek that stuns Kratos and then slash at him with their claws and bite him with their fanged mouths.



Figure 1. A Siren from God of War I (Santa Monica Studio, 2005)



Figure 2. Siren Sybil from God of War: Ascension (Santa Monica Studio, 2013)

In CD Projekt RED's acclaimed dark fantasy role-playing game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), the protagonist is a professional monster slayer (or "Witcher") named Geralt of Rivia. Much of the game involves Geralt slaying various monsters for money, and each monster is based on classical Western mythology or European folklore. Sirens appear as half-woman, half-serpent creatures with wings (see figure 3). Although they appear as beautiful, naked women at first, once the protagonist

approaches them they transform into horrific fish-like monsters with gaping, fang-filled mouths (see figure 4). They, too, deliver an ear-piercing shriek which stuns Geralt, allowing them to swoop from the air to bite him and slash at him with their claws and tails.



Figure 3. A Siren from The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt RED, 2015)



Figure 4. A Siren's true form in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt RED, 2015)

The vampire is another traditional monster from classical mythology that has a prominent place in Western media. Throughout their literary and cinematic existence, vampires have been sexualized, gendered monsters, embodying cultural anxieties around class, homosexuality, and female empowerment (Stevenson, 1988; Senf, 1999; Doerkson, 2002; Domínguez-Rué, 2010; Wood, 2015; Zimmerman, 2015). In

cinematic adaptations of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), the vampires often follow the gender hierarchy established within the novel. As film theorist Robin Wood (2015) discussed, male vampires like Dracula are often portrayed as stylish, refined, seductive, and powerful, whereas female vampires, like Dracula's companions and the female vampire Lucy, are portrayed as weaker and more emotional (p. 390-391). Dracula and the male vampires designed in homage to him prey on everyone, whereas female vampires, modelled after Lucy, have traditionally preyed on other women and children (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 432; Wood, 2015, p. 395). Within a psychoanalytical framework, this hierarchy helps to negate the potential danger of the female vampire as a penetrative, phallic monster: as a lesbian or a child-eater, the female vampire is less of a threat to men who fear penetration by a more powerful woman. This gendered vampire hierarchy is upheld in *The Witcher* series: the only female "Higher Vampire" Geralt encounters, Orianna, is in *The Witcher 3*, featured in the downloadable content entitled *Blood and Wine* (CD Projekt RED, 2016). Orianna owns an orphanage full of children who she uses as her personal blood supply when her thirst overtakes her. Orianna is presented as simultaneously more monstrous and weaker than her fellow vampires, because she preys exclusively on children.

Other than Orianna, female vampires in the series are almost exclusively encountered as Bruxae: weaker, more animalistic, and less intelligent versions of the typically male "Higher Vampires." Like many of the female monsters previously mentioned, Bruxae initially appear as mysteriously shrouded, beautiful young women but reveal their true monstrous nature once approached. Upon sensing Geralt's presence, the Bruxae transform into ghastly naked vampire women with sharp claws and fangs, with white, translucent, wrinkled skin stretched taught across muscle and bone (see figure 5). Although the Bruxae slash at Geralt with their claws and bite him with their fangs, as *The Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings* (CD Projekt RED, 2011) bestiary entry for the Bruxa states, "[t]he greatest threat to a witcher is the bruxa's voice ... [since it] can screech with such force that the shockwave will knock even a huge man down, making him easy prey for the vampires." The pattern is consistent between Bruxae, Sirens, and Banshees: they use their voice to stun, paralyze, or knock down their adversary and then use their claws, fangs, and tails to penetrate him.



Figure 5. A Bruxa from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015)

Screaming or shrieking rarely damages the protagonist, rather it is used to temporarily paralyze him. That a woman's scream could be so stunning or shocking as to render the protagonist immobile and therefore vulnerable speaks to its power as a feminized weapon. As Michel Chion writes in his book *The Voice in Cinema* (1999), a man's cry is often called a shout rather than a scream, suggesting aggressive power or primal marking of territory. The man's shout is therefore voluntary, calculated, and purposeful, whereas "[t]he woman's cry is rather more like the shout of a human subject ... in the face of death" (Chion, p. 78). The cinematic woman's scream, then, reveals her weakness and fear – she cannot act, she can only utter a non-linguistic, involuntary scream. What of these female monsters, then, who voluntarily use their shrieks as weapons to disarm the men who threaten them? Using their voices as weapons demonstrates how these female monsters are empowered and echoes a tactic taught in many women's self-defence courses: victims are encouraged to shout and scream to startle their attackers and give them an opportunity to escape or fight back. While female monsters in these games never try to escape, they do use the moment in which the protagonist is stunned to fight back.

As we have seen, Sirens in both series and Bruxae in *The Witcher* series appear initially as beautiful, underdressed or naked young women but transform into hideous monsters once approached. This suggests that they prey only on men, using their deceptive beauty to lure their victims towards them, and the descriptions of the Sirens and Bruxae in *The Witcher* series confirms this. As Anita Sarkeesian noted in her video entitled "Sinister Seductress," female monsters in many video games

are grotesque and horrifying because of the combination of a monstrous element with their femaleness and sexuality. She connects this to the formula "sexy + gross = creepy" which was used by the developers of *Doom 3* (id Software, 2004) when they were designing the only female monster in the game, a naked half-woman half-spider creature (Sarkeesian, 2016, 00:50 minutes). This formula explains why many of these female monsters first appear as beautiful women and then change into monsters, or are designed as alluring naked women but with monstrous aspects, such as desiccated stomachs or huge mouths with sharp fangs. This deceptive "bait-and-switch" relates back to Pythagoras' "evil principle" and the "ancient and modern beliefs that women are inherently evil and a primary cause of human misery" (Johnson, 2014, p. 63). This cultural narrative of woman as evil, deceptive, and dangerous explains why these female monsters must always be punished by the male protagonist – the hero who resisted her deception.

This narrative framing reveals the fear within patriarchal culture of empowered women. In popular culture and mythology, these women commonly take the form of the *femme fatale* or the castrating woman. The most ubiquitous symbolic manifestation of the castrating woman is the *vagina dentata*: a toothed vagina which will castrate any man who tries to penetrate it. As Joseph Campbell (1969) noted in his book *The Masks of God*, "the toothed vagina' – the vagina that castrates" is a common motif which occurs across cultural mythologies and is found in artwork and folklore (p. 73). In many of these myths, the *vagina dentata* belongs to a beautiful woman who lures men to her only to kill and/or castrate them, or is used to protect the woman from would-be rapists. The *vagina dentata* is a particularly important manifestation of the monstrous-feminine, and Creed demonstrates its centrality in both literal and metaphorical terms. The female mouth and the vagina are commonly conflated spaces of sexual penetration, and the ubiquitous dark, damp, cave-like environments in horror media expose anxieties around both orifices (Creed, 1986, p. 56-57). Indeed, Creed (1986) connects the recurrence of female monsters with large, gaping, fanged mouths – exemplified in the Sirens and Bruxae – to the male psychological fear of castration (p. 63). Their deaths at the hands of the male protagonists symbolically represent the victory of the normative, patriarchal symbolic order, thereby alleviating the anxieties these female monsters represent.

Licking and Spreading Disease

While the fanged female mouth is a clear site of castration anxiety, the fear of powerful, or "phallic" women is also symbolically represented through the motif of the long, phallic tongue which threatens penetration. Creed cited Campbell's (1969) discussion of the "phallic mother" as being a counterpart to the *vagina dentata*: "a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch." (p. 73). Although

Campbell spoke of the fingers and nose, this motif could be easily extended to include the tongue. Many video games feature monsters with long, phallic tongues used to lick or stab their victims, and *The Witcher 3* is no exception. In *The Witcher 3*'s bestiary, the Grave Hag is described as resembling "aged, deformed women" who "loiter near graveyards and battlefields" and devour human corpses (see figure 6). These Grave Hags have long, venomous, prehensile tongues which they use to stab, lick, and whip the player.



Figure 6. A Grave Hag from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015)

Along with Grave Hags, Bruxae, and Sirens, Geralt must face and slay female wraiths – angry spirits which take the form of ghostly, floating, decaying corpses. Their stomachs are desiccated and their skulls are jawless, leaving their abnormally long tongues free to hang out of their mouths. These wraiths, such as Noonwraiths, Duskwraiths, and Nightwraiths, are described in *The Witcher 3*'s bestiary as "the spirits of young women and girls who died violent deaths right before their weddings. Driven mad with pain or anger, they wander the fields searching for their unfaithful lovers or backstabbing rivals, though they will kill anyone who does not get out of their way in time." These women have become evil and vicious because they were either murdered before their wedding nights, or because they were abandoned, jilted, or betrayed by men. They are the horrifying, monstrous embodiment of male anxiety about female madness and vengeful, castrating women. Like the *femmes fatales* in Film Noir, these angry, bitter women who wield phallic weapons must be punished, tamed, or, in this case, slain by a calm, detached, paternal authority figure like Geralt (for more on this, see Doane, 1991).

The most abject of the female wraiths Geralt faces is the Plague Maiden, or Pesta. This creature is the tormented spirit of a young woman who was eaten alive by rats and seeks vengeance against her lover who left

her to die. She appears as a skeletal woman covered in rotting flesh, scabs, and boils, with rats scurrying around her, and, of course, with a long, phallic tongue hanging out of her jawless face (see figure 7). She spreads pestilence and disease, and according to *The Witcher 3's* bestiary entry, "it is certain that she delights in dealing pain and suffering, in hearing the howling and moaning of men." Although she has a similar design to the other female wraiths described above, the Pesta is a particularly abject because she spreads disease. She is also a vengeful, backstabbing woman: to appease her spirit, Geralt brings her lover to her so he can apologize and explain that he only abandoned her to the rats because he thought she was already dead. She tests his love by forcing him to kiss her – a revolting scene made even more disgusting as she caresses her lover's cheek with her long tongue. Even though he kisses her with little hesitation, she murders him anyway, causing him to gasp and collapse before she kneels over his dead body, exultantly exclaiming "at last." This betrayal fulfills her vengeance and she can finally rest in peace. If Geralt instead chooses to remove her bones from the tower rather than bringing her lover to her, the Pesta is set free to roam the world and spread disease and death. Between her motives, her appearance, her choice to specifically target men, and her "kiss of death," this creature clearly embodies the revulsion towards the abject and fear of the monstrous-feminine, including death and decay, bodily alteration, bodily fluids, and disease.



Figure 7. *The Plague Maiden, or Pesta, from The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt RED, 2015)*

The monster is an important site of analysis because it speaks to the fears of the culture that produces it. Stephen Neale (1980) discussed horror and monstrosity in his book *Genre*, arguing that the monster

signifies the boundary between the human and the nonhuman (p. 61). According to Kristeva (1982), boundary crossing is a sign of the abject (p. 75). It is unsurprising, then, that these monsters are all *almost* human. Their similarity to human women makes them uncanny – an important component of horror and abjection. The corpse is the most liminal of the abject as it literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between human and nonhuman, subject and object. We are traumatized when we see a human corpse because it shows us our own eventual death. Indeed, As Kristeva (1982) states, “[t]he corpse ... is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (p. 4), a statement which was later echoed by Creed (1986): “[t]he ultimate in abjection is the corpse” (p. 47). The corpse is abject and uncanny precisely because it is the nearest thing to a human while not being human. The most abject of the monstrous-feminine would be, then, the living female corpse which preys upon men. Although this certainly describes vampires, it is a strikingly apt description of the female wraiths in *The Witcher* series.

Although she does not have a long, phallic tongue, Megaera, one of the Furies – the main antagonists of *God of War: Ascension* – can release a swarm of parasites from diseased holes on her chest (see figure 8). Flying from these holes in her flesh, her parasites bury into the skin of her enemies, possessing them and forcing them to fight for her. This spider-like monstrous woman is ostensibly a goddess, though she serves Ares, the male god of war. Goddesses often become monsters as mythology gets interwoven into religions, folktales, literature, and other media. As Jane Caputi (2004) states in the introduction to her book *Goddesses and Monsters*, patriarchal rewritings of myths “recast goddess as devil, monster, and whore” (p. 13). Powerful female figures, connected to the earth and fertility and so representative of life itself, must be disempowered, since powerful women signify a threat to patriarchal society and so must be made monstrous and evil (Caputi, 2004, p. 315-341). Female monsters who spread disease could also be interpreted metaphorically: they infect patriarchal society with thoughts of female empowerment and matriarchy, and often kill men in the process.



Figure 8. *Megaera from God of War: Ascension (Santa Monica Studio, 2013)*

Conclusion

The monsters discussed in this article – Banshees, Sirens, Bruxae, Grave Hags, Wraiths, Plague Maidens, and Furies – are all deadly female creatures who attack the male protagonists Kratos and Geralt using their own bodies as weapons. Shrieking, biting, clawing, stabbing, licking, and spreading infectious diseases are the ways in which these monsters fight. Some of these monsters specifically threaten men, and most of them appear to be beautiful at first before revealing their true, hideous forms. These female monsters, while often nearly naked, are grotesque and so probably not intended to titillate the assumed male player; rather, they speak to fears of female power embedded in patriarchal culture. As Sarkeesian argued, because the femaleness or sexuality of these monsters is central to their danger and horror, “when male heroes defeat them, their victory is often explicitly gendered, emphasizing that the male protagonist has overcome the female threat and reinserted his dominance and control” (Sarkeesian, 2016, 09:00 minutes). Given this article’s limited space, only a handful of monsters from two series have been discussed; however, there are many more examples of the monstrous-feminine and abject female monsters in other science fiction, fantasy, and horror video games. In the late 1980s, Creed lamented the fact that feminist film scholarship had focused primarily on woman-as-victim, and wondered why woman-as-monster had been so neglected. This is an important question because female monstrosity is a fruitful area of analysis and intervention across all media. The portrayal of the monstrous-feminine in popular and commercially successful video game franchises such as *The Witcher* series and the *God of War* series fall into a long tradition in Western

popular culture of using the female body and female sexuality as sites of horror and abjection. Just as the problematic portrayal of female physicality in horror films was critiqued thirty years ago, more critical scholarship is needed to analyse the monstrous-feminine in video games.

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