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## Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media



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## Classical Monsters and Hero(ines) in *InSEXts*, *Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain*

**Abstract** This paper applies Monster Theory to the use of Greek mythology in three creator-owned comic series by female writers: *InSEXts* (2016–2017) by American comic writer Marguerite Bennett and Indonesian artist working in America Ariela Kristantina as well as *Eros/Psyche* (2021) and *Porcelain* (2021) by Maria Llovet, a comic writer and artist from Barcelona. In the first volume of *InSEXts*, set in Victorian London, there are allusions to the Furies and Pandora, linked with the discourse of the repression of women. In the second volume, set in the late nineteenth century Paris art world, the representation of classical subjects in art becomes a means to repress women, and a goddess with a Gorgon-like appearance takes revenge on the male repressors. In *Eros/Psyche* the story of Eros and Psyche and broken statues forms the backdrop and context for a tale of love and deception at a girls' school, and in *Porcelain* a girl is faced with a choice of paths towards Eros or Thanatos, like Herakles at the crossroads choosing between the paths of virtue and vice. With reference to Cohen's seven theses of Monster Culture I examine how Bennett and Lovett subvert the idea of the monster and the hero.

**Keywords** Comics, Eros, Psyche, Pygmalion, Medusa

## CLASSICS, COMICS AND MONSTERS

Some of our best-known Western comic book heroes have their roots in mythology, a world of gods and heroes with supernatural powers: Wonder Woman the Amazon, Superman with his god-like (or Herculean) superhuman powers,<sup>1</sup> Thor the Norse god of thunder – the list goes on. Originally created by male writers but also adapted and reinvented by female writers, the adventures of these heroes sometimes take them directly into the mythological worlds from where they originate, in terms of theme, location or storyline. The adversaries of these heroes can also originate from ancient myths: Wonder Woman and the Amazons are faced with Medusa, and Cheetah's human surname is Minerva, an anthropologist who, in an incarnation by Greg Rucka, searches for evidence of the Amazons.<sup>2</sup> In the world of the X-Men, Proteus has the power to shapeshift (like the god whose name he takes), and Cassandra Nova's mental abilities outmatch those of The Trojan princess, as she has the powers of telekinesis and telepathy. Some notable examples from the broader world of mythology are Loki from Marvel and Lucifer Morningstar from Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* universe.

The lines between hero and villain/monster can be blurred, so that Cheetah can team up with Diana, for example in the *Wonder Woman: Dead Earth* series from 2020,<sup>3</sup> and we might prefer the mischievous Loki, as played by Tom Hiddleston in recent film and television incarnations, compared with his rather bland brother Thor (Chris Hemsworth). In Graeco-Roman mythology we might similarly be more attracted to the monster over the hero, where Medusa offers more possibilities than the uninteresting Perseus, like Liz Gloyn, who ends her book *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture* with the affirmation to the reader that 'We *can* be tired of heroes. We *can* turn to the monsters'.<sup>4</sup> However monsters are slippery; they evade categorisation, even when we attempt to classify them. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his 'seven theses towards understanding cultures through the monsters they bear', posits that 'the monster is the harbinger of category crisis' (thesis three), as monsters are 'disturbing hybrids', resisting 'classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition', and 'the monster

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1 See Dethloff (2011).

2 Rucka (2016).

3 Johnson (2020).

4 Gloyn (2020) 196.



dwells at the gates of difference' (thesis 4), it is 'difference made flesh', the personification of the 'Other', where 'monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual'.<sup>5</sup> But ultimately, in Cohen's final, seventh thesis, the monster is on the verge of 'becoming' something else,<sup>6</sup> and this could mean the monster becomes the hero, or vice versa.

In their introduction to the exhibition catalogue for *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* at the British Library in 2014, curators Paul Gravett and John Harris Dunning state that comics can 'question conventions, challenge acceptability, provoke debates and sometimes court controversy. For this can be a subversive genre'.<sup>7</sup> In a world of comics where difference reigns, a world that is, according to literature and popular culture scholars, queer theorists and writers Ramzi Fawas and Dariek Scott, inherently queer,<sup>8</sup> comic writers can explore the blurring of boundaries between hero(ine) and monster, overturning patriarchal cultural norms as represented in classical mythology. With respect to my examples of creator-owned comics by female writers Marguerite Bennett and Maria Llovet I argue that patriarchal, heteronormative myths are switched to become stories of female power and lesbian desire, and the idea of the female monster is subverted, so that the heroine and monster are merged. As George Kovacs states in *Classics and Comics*, fulfilling the potential for 'deeper and more meaningful levels of engagement between the classical world and comics'<sup>9</sup> than is found in the mere naming of superheroes and villains.

American writer Marguerite Bennett's *InSEXts*, with artwork by Ariela Kristantina, is a story of metamorphosis, where lesbian women change into monstrous insects. The first volume is set in nineteenth-century London, where real monstrosity is revealed behind a façade of virtue, and the second volume is set in the male-dominated Paris art world, where male artists use an ancient monstrous female to silence women, until she returns to her origins as a benevolent goddess. Comic writer and artist from Barcelona Maria Llovet's *Eros/Psyche*, published in a new English edition in 2021, is set in a girls' boarding school, where the girls are left alone at a school with expansive grounds, presided over

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5 Cohen (1996) 3–7.

6 Cohen (1996) 20.

7 Gravett and Dunning (2014) 6.

8 Fawas and Scott (2018).

9 Kovacs (2011) 5.

by headless statues of Eros and Psyche. The new girl falls in love with an experienced schoolmate, but as they continue to complete strange tasks and their schoolfellows disappear one by one, the monstrosity and deception inherent in the Eros and Psyche story in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius breaks into this seemingly idyllic world.<sup>10</sup> Llovet follows this comic with *Porcelain*, also published in English in 2021, which can be read as a journey to the underworld, where the heroine must face an outwardly beautiful yet inwardly monstrous version of death, like Herakles in Euripides' *Alcestis*, after first navigating a crossroads, like Herakles' choice between the easy path of vice or the difficult path of virtue. This monster can be defeated when she is revealed to be a mirror image of the heroine herself. Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody state that 'in patriarchal cultural contexts, wherein men are assumed to be representative of the normative, universal subject [...] women frequently become monsters'.<sup>11</sup> However, in the hands of female comic writers and artists interested in depicting queer female characters, female monsters can become female heroes.

## MONSTROUS WOMEN AS HEROINES IN *INSEXTS*

Marguerite Bennett worked for DC and Marvel before she created *InSEXts*, her first creator-owned comic published by Aftershock from 2016–2017, but her work in the field of superhero comics also includes female-centric stories about diverse female characters. For example, in an interview about *DC Comics: Bombshells*, first published in 2015, Bennett states:

I wanted queer characters, women of color, women of different faiths, women of different nations, women of all ages and from all places in life. In so many teams, there are only one or two women and their experiences must stand for the experiences of *all* women. In the world of "Bombshells," we have enough female characters that no one has to be the role model, the romantic interest, the badass – an archetype. No woman has to be everything. No woman, indeed, has to be anything.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The story of Eros and Psyche is embedded within books 4–6 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*.

<sup>11</sup> Lansdale and Coody (2020) 3.

<sup>12</sup> Barksdale (2015).

As Ramzi Fawas states in *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* from the 1960s onwards 'the ecstatic visual culture of women's and gay liberation' has left its mark on mainstream Western comics, so that 'superhuman powers' could become 'an expression of female sexuality, pleasure and agency'.<sup>13</sup> Bennett, then, is writing within a subversive superhero tradition. For Fawas and Dariek Scott the 'alternate mutant kinships of superhero stories' is 'the epitome of 'queer worldmaking', and independent comics offer 'queer antinormativity', so that in *InSEXts* Bennett can further her project beyond the boundaries imposed by DC. *Bombshells* is set in an alternative universe 1940s, in a wartime society where options for women were limited, and *InSEXts* takes us back further to nineteenth-century London and Paris, and societies where women were even more constrained. Bennett chose this period as she wanted to 'corrupt the imperialist narrative' and show diversity: 'London in the Victorian era was a tremendously diverse place, and queer people were not invented in the 1980s'.<sup>14</sup> *InSEXts* can be read as a lesbian horror comic, a story of monsters, and also as a superhero comic, with the heroines, Lady and Mariah, coming to terms with their growing powers: Lady with the strength and ability to kill that comes with her transformation into her mutant insect form, and Mariah with her psychic/witchcraft and transformational powers that enable her to control others. Fawas's term 'fluxability',<sup>15</sup> coined to describe the ever-changing nature of modern superheroes as they negotiate their evolving (monstrous) powers and identities, together with Cohen's thesis that monsters resist categorisation and highlight that difference 'is mutable',<sup>16</sup> show us that monsters and (super)heroes are interchangeable. In *InSEXts* we are confronted with monstrous interiors and exteriors, and the female monster and the heroine coalesce.

The first volume of *InSEXts*, originally published as seven issues, is a story of repression, love, horror and metamorphosis, set in London in 1894, in a divided world of society parties and brothels, three years after the last recorded murder by Jack the Ripper. As Keri-Crist Wagner states in her chapter on *InSEXts* in a collection of essays on *Monstrous Women in Comics*, the 'narrative is outside the typical comic book or horror storytelling conventions in its displays of un-

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13 Fawas (2016) 10.

14 Carroll (2016).

15 Fawas (2016) 11.

16 Cohen (1996) 3–12.

checked power, violence by women, and same-sex relationships'.<sup>17</sup> The beautiful British-born Brahmin-heritage dark haired and skinned Lady Lalita Bertram (who chooses to be called Lady), gains the ability to transform into a winged creature, both beautiful and butterfly-like as well as monstrous. Indonesian artist Ariela Kristantina's artwork is gorgeous, erotic and horrific, drawing on classical and art nouveau tropes, with cupids, flowers and butterflies, and naked beautiful female bodies in acts of lovemaking, which are juxtaposed with monstrous creatures, severed heads and bloody bodies. In the introduction to the second volume of *InSEXts*, Kristantina comments that she 'love[s] drawing backgrounds and environments', and these stand out in the comics, and she finds the story Bennett wrote to be 'tender, sensual, emotional, intense, ingenious, violent and powerful',<sup>18</sup> which she matches and complements in her artwork, so that story and image defies the categories of beauty and beast.

Transformation occurs after Lady is bitten by a winged insect and has a round ball of pus-like substance transferred into her mouth by her maid and lover, the Irish redhead Mariah, as they make love. Mariah has the power of witchcraft and promises Lady that this will give them a child, and so Lady transfers the ball of pus into the mouth of her abusive husband, after pretending to initiate sex. As Lord Bertram becomes sick and Lady bemoans the double standard whereby he could use and abuse slum girls while his wife must act with decorum, Mariah vows 'we will be the revenge' that they and all the girls abused by such men 'could not take'.<sup>19</sup> Lord Bertram dies as a monstrous egg bursts out of his stomach, revealing the baby who is Lady and Mariah's son. The image is a horrific one, reminiscent of the birth of the alien in the *Alien* film franchise, and the comic intersperses scenes of love and beautiful images with exotic flowers and butterfly wings with scenes of monstrosity and horror. In this monstrous, queer birth scene the human host is the monster, for his abuse of women, and the egg produces the perfect child of Lady and Mariah's love. If we return to Cohen's seven theses and the monster as a harbinger of category crisis, then this birth, creating a new type of family, questions the 'norms' of heterosexual marriage, and posits an alternative. Queer feminist theorist, J. Jack Halberstam, in *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal*, published in 2012, writes of a fem-

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<sup>17</sup> Crist-Wagner (2020) 101.

<sup>18</sup> *InSEXts* Vol. 2 introduction.

<sup>19</sup> *InSEXts* 1.15.3.



inism that ‘examines how new forms of family, intimacy, and belonging emerge, slowly and surely from the wreckage of marriage [and] the nuclear family’.<sup>20</sup> Mariah, Lady and their son Will personify this new feminism, as the women refuse ‘the categories that have been assigned to them’,<sup>21</sup> refusing the barriers of class (mistress/servant) and race (Brahmin/Irish) as well as heteronormativity and patriarchy.

In her introduction to the volume Bennett states that she is writing ‘erotic body horror’ because ‘to be a woman is to live a life of body horror’ and goes on to explain the many ways in which women are constrained and punished by and because of our bodies. She concludes that *InSEXts* is ‘a story all about the horror and power and sensuality and rage of the bodies of women, metamorphic’.<sup>22</sup> Through Mariah and Lady, Bennett is writing a *Metamorphoses* where the seemingly monstrous transformation of women finally makes them powerful, counteracting the transformation of female victims of gods and men in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* into powerless trees, or birds, or spiders, or monsters, like Medusa, whose power is eventually curtailed by a male hero. Classicist Helen Morales has highlighted the subversive power already inherent in Greek myths, including Ovid’s retellings,<sup>23</sup> but Bennett’s story takes this idea further by examining the prejudices in the myths then rewriting the story completely to put women front and centre, and valorising their monstrousness. To quote from Amy Richlin’s seminal article on Ovid’s rape narratives, Bennett is able to ‘speak the blood off’ the names of the women victims through appropriation, resistance and the spilling of the blood of the male characters who would repress, hurt and silence the women.<sup>24</sup>

The comparison of Lady with a vengeful winged and Gorgon-like fury from Greek tragedy is hinted at by her spiteful, bigoted sister-in-law Sylvia, who calls Lady a ‘dog-faced bitch’,<sup>25</sup> like the ‘dog-faced’ (*kunōpides*) Furies in Euripides’ *Elektra* and *Orestes*.<sup>26</sup> However, the real monster here is the seemingly virtuous

<sup>20</sup> Halberstam (2012) xv.

<sup>21</sup> Halberstam (2012) xiv.

<sup>22</sup> *InSEXts* Vol. 1 introduction.

<sup>23</sup> Morales (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Richlin (1992) 179.

<sup>25</sup> *InSEXts* 2.19.2.

<sup>26</sup> Eur. *El.* 1252 and *Or.* 260.

and religious Sylvia, in a heterosexual relationship with Lady's dead husband's brother, who is revealed to be host to a female monster, the Hag, who has enslaved the city's prostitutes. Sylvia uses patriarchal discourse on the nature of women to chastise Lady and Mariah, blending the Victorian ideal of woman as an 'angel in the house' from Coventry Patmore's mid-nineteenth century poem about an idealised marriage with a diatribe against women that could have come from Hesiod, using Pandora as an example of bad women, alongside the biblical Eve, Delilah and Jezebel.<sup>27</sup> However, it is the physically attractive, blonde Sylvia who is Pandora-like, '*kalon kakon*',<sup>28</sup> with a beautiful exterior and a monstrous interior. Sylvia's hidden monster, the Hag, feeds on pain and hatred, and she teaches her female victims 'to hate themselves and each other'.<sup>29</sup> As the Hag transitions into her fully monstrous form, she grows black wings and her mouth widens, filled with sharp teeth, resembling a Harpy in Kristantina's artwork. As a monster the Hag is amorphous and no longer specifically female, all teeth, eyes, claws and tentacles. In the end she is no match for Lady in her mutant insect but still female, monstrous form, a 'better monster' who does not 'prey on the weak and the wounded'.<sup>30</sup>

Another type of monster included in the story are the Cynocephali, an ancient brotherhood of men who can change into wolves and hunt monsters in the name of 'the Lord'. Lady and Mariah join forces with them to defeat the Hag, but then Asher, leader of the brothers, turns on Lady and Mariah, ordering his men to kill 'the monstress' (Lady), the 'witch-woman' (Mariah) and 'the whores, for they were servants of sin'.<sup>31</sup> It is his supposedly Christian hatred of women that makes him monstrous, not his ability to change into a dog, and his brothers kill him, as they see the good in the women, and invite the women to join them in their quest as there are 'many more monsters to hunt'.<sup>32</sup> Monstrosity in this story is defined as hatred of and violence towards women, something that can be perpetuated by women and men, and seemingly monstrous insect women and

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<sup>27</sup> *InSEXts* 3.12.1. For the story of Pandora, followed by a diatribe against women, see Hes. *Theog.* 570–610, and more on Pandora in *Op.* 59–105.

<sup>28</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 585.

<sup>29</sup> *InSEXts* 6.14.1.

<sup>30</sup> *InSEXts* 7.8–9.

<sup>31</sup> *InSEXts* 7.11.2–3.

<sup>32</sup> *InSEXts* 7.17.4.

wolf men can do good, so long as they respect and include women. It is monstrous intent, and not monstrous appearance, that defines the monster. At the end of the volume the theme of the second volume of *InSEXts*, the silencing of women, is also subtly introduced. Elsie who ‘do[es] not speak much’, shares with Mariah that she ‘was told it was my most charming quality among the men’.<sup>33</sup> Elsie and Mariah agree that the only way to defy those in power who would bring suffering is to ‘speak’, and ‘sing’.<sup>34</sup> Female monsters and female (rape) victims may be silenced in Graeco-Roman mythology; Medusa, who is both, is not given her own voice in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; but *InSEXts* insists on the female voice being heard.

In the first volume of *InSEXts*, there is a small number of allusions to the classical world (namely to the Furies and Pandora), and these are linked with the discourse of the repression of women. The Christian brotherhood of Cynocephali is also given an ancient name, from the Greek *kynokephaloi*, dog-headed, rather than the more familiar name of werewolf, and their ancient shapeshifting ability can be used for good, it is only through twisting Christian doctrine against women that one of their number becomes monstrous. In the second volume, first published in six issues as ‘The Necropolis’ and set in the Paris art world, the representation of classical subjects in art becomes a means to repress women, and questions about what constitutes monstrosity, and specifically the use of ancient monsters, continue to be asked. The comic primarily engages with the stories of Pygmalion and Medusa, and Natalie Swain has argued successfully that these stories are retold ‘through a feminist, Cixousian lens’, with H el ene Cixous’ 1976 article ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ as intertext.<sup>35</sup>

The story starts in a cemetery in Paris in 1897 with male grave robbers stealing jewellery from a corpse. As a head is toppled from the statue of an angel, blood squirts from the severed neck, and in the place of the stone angel’s head a woman’s head with snakes for hair appears. Then her full body is revealed; she has green skin, four arms, discernable breasts covered by a vaguely classical white top, and from the waist down she has a snake-like tail. Readers familiar with the monstrous, serpent-tailed Medusa created by Ray Harryhausen for *Clash of the Titans* (1981), which has been influential on later depictions of

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33 *InSEXts* 7.14.2–3.

34 *InSEXts* 7.15.5.

35 Swain (2023) 145.

Medusa,<sup>36</sup> including in *Clash of the Titans* (2010), are now likely to be reading this female character as a Gorgon, and when she tells one of the grave robbers ‘Thou Shalt Live Forever’,<sup>37</sup> we expect the man to be turned to stone. The robber appears as a statue outside Lady and Mariah’s house, an unusual ‘gift’.<sup>38</sup> The necklace he had stolen is made large around his arms, resembling stone chains, perhaps mixed with his own innards, in a visual display of the crime that he has been punished for. In classical terms the Gorgon-like creature is adopting the role of a Fury, rather than a Gorgon, in punishing the guilty and maintaining the natural order (the robber was caught stealing and desecrating a grave).

The monstrous female has made her home in a necropolis and has created an ‘army’ or a ‘cult’ of living female statues, once women who have been turned to stone on the orders of the male artists, or as she calls it, ‘a gallery’.<sup>39</sup> Within this realm Lady addresses her as ‘ancient queen’, and Phoebe reveals she was a smuggled ‘relic’, but the female creature says that she is ‘No relic. No parasite. No monster... I am a god. A goddess of protection from a distant land. And sometimes a goddess of revenge’.<sup>40</sup> The goddess speaks of her capture from Java at the hands of men in terms of colonisation and the Greek and Roman world:

They took me for a Medusa. A statue of their own pantheon. Pillaged art. The spoils of empire. Carried me away like a Sabine woman. Brought the Trojan Horse into their city.<sup>41</sup>

Like the classicising art the male artists have used to dominate women, they have also made the goddess into a classical monster, denying the multiplicity of roles she held as a goddess. As Swain states, this female monster, at the hands of men, threatens ‘to become all that she had once opposed and to become a weapon to serve a patriarchal white-supremacy that once made “Medusa” a victim’.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Gloyn (2013) and (2020) 144.

<sup>37</sup> *InSEXts* 8.5.3.

<sup>38</sup> *InSEXts* 8.20.1.

<sup>39</sup> *InSEXts* 10.20.1.

<sup>40</sup> *InSEXts* 11.5.1–3.

<sup>41</sup> *InSEXts* 11.6.1–3.

<sup>42</sup> Swain (2023) 142.

Alongside this Gorgon figure we are introduced to another powerful female, in Phoebe de Azais, Will's new governess, an attractive black artist. Phoebe is called 'witch' and 'Haruspex' by three white male artists who threaten her with knives as she leaves Mariah to fetch her possessions, after accepting the position as governess in the first issue of Volume 2.<sup>43</sup> These terms are used as insults, marking Phoebe out as unnatural and monstrous, and as 'Haruspex' she is linked with the ancient world and the Roman practice of divination using animal entrails. It is later revealed that as an artist she is a taxidermist, and she is also a prophetess, with supernatural abilities.

It is in the male world of art that true monstrosity can be found. The theme is introduced with a bedtime story Mariah tells to Will:

Pygmalion was a sculptor, and carved of ivory a snow-white girl, perfect in his eyes and pristine in his heart... He loved the statue more than any living woman, and prayed to Aphrodite, goddess of love, to make her as real as you or I.<sup>44</sup>

Mariah then pauses and asks 'Do you like this story, Will?' Will replies 'No, Mama' and Mariah realises 'Nor do I, my heart, now that I read it again'.<sup>45</sup> The classical story of male subject and female object, as told by Mariah, jars with the world of Mariah, Lady and Will. In the simplified story told by Mariah, Pygmalion the artist loves the 'perfect' and 'pristine' silent statue rather than women of flesh and blood.<sup>46</sup> For many modern readers this is a 'creepy' story, highlighting the moral question of creating a perfect partner, and dismissing the unnamed statue/woman's character and opinions as irrelevant. A participant in my research on a televisual representation of the creation of the perfect woman read the Pygmalion passage from Ovid for the first time and found that 'her own identity doesn't appear to be an important factor in the story; to the author and the protagonist, her importance is only in the fact she represent an "ideal" form of womanhood in all the ways she is different from the Propoetides', the promis-

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43 *InSEXts* 8.10.1–3.

44 *InSEXts* 8.13.1–2.

45 *InSEXts* 8.13.3.

46 *InSEXts* 8.13.1.



cuous local women.<sup>47</sup> As classicist Paula James states, ‘Pygmalion is motivated to make himself a life partner because of his revulsion to real women with their innate vices’.<sup>48</sup> The comic turns this idea around, so that when Mariah awakens Lady with blood from one of Phoebe’s captured assailants, Lady, complete with her butterfly wings, awakes and emerges from her chrysalis, a mobile, active naked figure reaching for the arms of her lover, compared to the static, naked, unnamed Pygmalion’s statue coming to life a few panels earlier.<sup>49</sup> Lovemaking between these two women is pictured as a beautiful mutual act, and not a female ‘vice’.

The gendered hierarchy set up by the story of Pygmalion is promulgated by the white male artists in Paris, although instead of creating silent, perfect women from statues, they are subduing unruly women by turning them into statues. The next issue, number 9, is entitled ‘Pretty Pictures’ and the opening panels contain images from ‘Le Musée Silencieux’, the silent museum, where a male artist is admiring a white statue of a naked Persephone being abducted by Hades.<sup>50</sup> Holding Persephone’s white stone face in his hand he says to himself ‘Perfect. Pale and pure and perfect. Silent. Still. Beautiful. Seen and never heard. Tender, wilting – chaste. [...] The perfect woman’.<sup>51</sup> Like Pygmalion he looks for chaste perfection, and like Pygmalion’s statue in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* she is silent and passive.<sup>52</sup> For this artist that is part of her perfection. He moves to a statue of the three Graces, again all naked, ‘a harem of perfection’. Suddenly the three Graces get down from their plinth, source weapons from the museum, and run after the fleeing curator, with the words ‘Silent...? Still...? Seen and never heard... Tender, wilting...Chased’.<sup>53</sup> A snake speaks from the plinth it shares with the statue of a bearded male figure: ‘Do not run’.<sup>54</sup> The goddess in female snake-headed, ser-

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47 From viewer and reader responses obtained in 2009, which fed into a podcast available at [https://archive.org/details/podcast\\_pygmalion-meets-buffy-vamp\\_pygmalion-popular-culture\\_1000411473845](https://archive.org/details/podcast_pygmalion-meets-buffy-vamp_pygmalion-popular-culture_1000411473845) (accessed 9 April 2023).

48 James (2013) 13.

49 Swain (2023) 136 finds that this image is based on a painting by Gérôme.

50 *InSEXts* 9.1–3.

51 *InSEXts* 9.1–3.

52 Ovid *Met.* 10.243–97.

53 *InSEXts* 9.3.2–6.

54 *InSEXts* 9.4.1

pent-tailed Medusa shape appears and tells him 'I shall not kill thee... Indeed I shall give thee what thou desirest... I shall give thee...The perfect woman'.<sup>55</sup> The man pleads that he only 'watched' and 'touched',<sup>56</sup> and so was not the real perpetrator of whatever crime against women had been committed. His pleas go unheeded, and the statue of Persephone reaches out to hold his face in her hand, calls him 'my love', kisses him, then eats his face so that a bloody mess remains, called 'a pretty picture' by the snake-haired goddess.<sup>57</sup> This inversion of the Pygmalion story could be read as a cautionary tale for men, like Pygmalion, who look for the woman who is perfect according to their own criteria, or aim to silence women. The silencing man is the real monster here, hiding his monstrosity behind a human face, which is peeled back in order to match the horrifying inside with the outside.

The second part of the issue follows Lady, Mariah and Will on their visit to the gallery at Le Jardins des Violets, a salon presided over by Phoebe's mother, Dorothee de Azais, which is filled with very different works of art. Instead of white marble the gallery is filled with paintings of colourfully-clothed women brandishing swords and holding up severed bearded heads, perhaps Judith and Holofernes, together with less-recognisable images of other myths, partially obscured within their panels. These paintings feature mobile, active, colourful female subjects, unlike the passive white statues of women in Le Musée Silencieux (until, of course, they became active as members of the goddess' army). The artists at work here are women and men, of different ethnicities. Dorothee explains that her pupils at the salon are not 'permitted entrance to the grand academies of the arts' and they cannot exhibit at the 'great museums'.<sup>58</sup> Phoebe reveals to her friends that artists from the salon who protested against their exemption from these institutions have been going missing, but their images have been discovered within paintings to be exhibited at Le Musée Silencieux, 'stalked, hunted and transformed' into art by the men who would deny them as artists.<sup>59</sup> Art, then, is being used to silence real women, as Pygmalion used art to bypass real women in creating his perfect artificial woman.

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55 *InSEXts* 9.4.2-5.

56 *InSEXts* 9.5.1.

57 *InSEXts* 9.5-7.

58 *InSEXts* 9.10.3.

59 *InSEXts* 9.15.2.

Three of the female artists discuss a new sculpture by Dorothée of Artemis and Acteon, so that the female subject is the hunter, rather than the hunted, and a scene of female action replaces one of male voyeurism:

While everyone else depicts Artemis naked and bathing while Acteon leers from the bushes [...] Madame's statue had the hounds tearing Acteon limb from limb while Artemis drew her bow to –<sup>60</sup>

Like some of the other images in Dorothée's gallery, this unseen sculpture depicts a scene of violence, but the active female characters are not seen as monsters for their violent acts. It is the men who deserve to be killed for their crimes against women, or for assuming that females only exist for male voyeuristic pleasure. This simplistic view of Artemis as depicted by male artists works within Bennett's story, but there are examples of male artists who chose to paint different aspects of the myth of Actaeon, just as Ovid concentrates on Artemis as hunter as well as viewed object.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps most famously Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (1556–59) shows the scene where Acteon is discovered spying on the bathing Diana, but his *The Death of Acteon* (1559–75) depicts an active Diana drawing her bow in the foreground, with Acteon being torn apart by his dogs to the right of the goddess (both at the National Gallery in London).

The women are accosted by men, drugged with chloroform, and wake up to find themselves chained up and naked in Le Musée Silencieux, where the 'artist' Monsieur Roderick tells them that 'we are going to help you serve your true purpose'.<sup>62</sup> As a candle goes out and Roderick holds up a lamp the three naked women have become part of a painting; three classicised naked female figures holding hands in a landscape, another version of the three Graces, with Roderick's comment: 'Silent. Chaste. Perfect'.<sup>63</sup> For the reader these words (and actions) against women condemn the artist as monster. In the first panel of the next issue a crowd of admirers, men and women, cluster before the painting, describing it as 'beautiful', 'classical', 'clean', 'silent', 'elegant', 'perfect'.<sup>64</sup> The

<sup>60</sup> *InSEXts* 9.16.1.

<sup>61</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 3.231–52.

<sup>62</sup> *InSEXts* 9.18.3.

<sup>63</sup> *InSEXts* 9.20.1–2.

<sup>64</sup> *InSEXts* 10.1.1–3.

classical woman, then, is a silent woman, and this is the woman the patriarchy prefers. None of the viewers seem to notice that one of Adrienne's empty eyes is shedding a tear, they see only the art, not the woman. Mariah quietly swears revenge on Roderick in horrific terms: 'Roderick will hold his guts in his hands before he dies. He will pop his own eyes between his teeth and feel the jelly run, salt-sweet, down his throat'.<sup>65</sup> More publicly, Lady chastises him for not valuing 'women of flesh and bone',<sup>66</sup> but he believes that women's 'voices are unnecessary'.<sup>67</sup> His views mark him out to be a monster, deserving of the monstrous revenge Mariah envisages for him.

Lady, Mariah and Phoebe join forces with the goddess, and destroy the mirror that Roderick is using to trap the women as art, and he and his men are pursued by the living female statues. They tell him that he could not make the perfect woman as 'there is *no* perfect woman. There are only *women*'.<sup>68</sup> As they tear him to pieces, the women reclaim the classical past, which thus far has been aligned to the male purview in silencing women:

All the many monsters who women became... *Gorgons* not *Graces*. *Witches and Bitches and Banshees*... *Maidens* like *Maenads*, who reveled, wild in the woods. *Maidens turned Maenads*, when they would not dance upon command. Whose parties grew so *wild*, they killed the starry-eyed dreamers who crossed their paths. *Hags and Harpies and Whores. Sirens. Succubi. Furies. Fates*.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout the comic the male artists have used some of these words to describe Lady, Mariah and the female artists, and they are claimed by the women, fulfilling the need articulated by Phoebe to 'tell our stories as our own' so that 'unquiet women' and 'deviant women' are no longer 'reduced to monsters'.<sup>70</sup>

However, once the men are destroyed, the goddess turns on Phoebe to complete her revenge, as Phoebe had helped Roderick in the past. She turns Phoebe to stone, but Phoebe's mother Dorothée uses magic to swap places with her

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<sup>65</sup> *InSEXts* 10.2.2.

<sup>66</sup> *InSEXts* 10.4.2.

<sup>67</sup> *InSEXts* 10.5.2.

<sup>68</sup> *InSEXts* 12.1–2.

<sup>69</sup> *InSEXts* 12.2–4.

<sup>70</sup> *InSEXts* 10.17.4–5.

daughter, and Phoebe is reborn from the stone in a white robe, with a spear in her hand, surrounded by an army of animals brought to life again from taxidermy. Phoebe has become a classical goddess, or an earlier deity, the Minoan and Mycenaean mistress of the beasts. The goddess is also transformed, losing her snake-haired form, the ‘monster’ that men had made her, instead appearing as a beautiful woman. She says that ‘our lives are our stories, are they not? ...and our stories are our lives. We shall be made better than before’,<sup>71</sup> made for themselves as women, not as what men want or expect them to be, so neither monster nor angels in the house. The art in the museum has also been transformed, so that Mariah finds ‘the lady smiling in the portrait now stands and commands... The maidens devoured now fight back... The nymph being carried off... *Now she shoves the satyr away*’.<sup>72</sup> Women are finally being given an active role in art and myth. The goddess, no longer the monstress Medusa, leaves with the words ‘The story changed. We shall be so much better than before’.<sup>73</sup> As Swain argues, ‘through Phoebe’s artistic agency (her “writing her self”), she returns “Medusa’s” confiscated body to her, a body that has been made a stranger through her kidnapping, thus rescuing “Medusa” from becoming little more than an icon of rage’.<sup>74</sup> It is not monstrous rage, but art and co-operation between women, and goddesses, that will bring about a positive future, where women are free to create their own stories and own their bodies.

At the end of the comic, Lady, Mariah and Will board a ship to take them to a new life in America. The final panels show Lady and Mariah making love in their cabin, but a man has tried to steal their jewels and spies on their lovemaking. Mariah’s witch powers come to the fore in a series of panels showing the faces of the two women, the man unseen, as Mariah speaks:

I scent something. I can see it in the air... *A trespasser... With prying eyes.* Oh, did you think we were *for you*? Did you think we were for your pleasure? All for your enjoyment? Here, the comb in my hair, my lady, it’s as sharp as a hatpin... Tell me – do you think that what is ours was *yours to take*. Oh *sir*. *You were wrong*.<sup>75</sup>

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71 *InSEXts* 13.9–10.

72 *InSEXts* 13.10.5.

73 *InSEXts* 13.14.1.

74 Swain (2023) 145.

75 *InSEXts* 13.19–20.



The final image of the comic is of a stylised butterfly, symbolising the duality of the women as monsters and heroines, asserting their right to lesbian desire and their right to own their property, without interference from the men who are human on the outside and monstrous on the inside.

In the second volume of *InSEXts*, Marguerite Bennett uses the classical world, and specifically the story of Pygmalion, to set up the male ideal of the perfect, passive, silent women, muse to the male artist, in direct contrast with the active heroines. Lady and Mariah, and the goddess, are depicted as beautiful in their monstrosity, in panels of artwork filled with flowers and butterflies alongside blood and gore, while the men who would silence women are the real monsters hiding behind their art, which is an illusion. The women use violent means, killing the male artists who spy on them, to use their blood, first to wake Lady from her chrysalis, and later to help Phoebe with divination. However, this violent behaviour is justified rather than monstrous, and only perpetrated against those who would harm women and uphold the patriarchy. This justified female violence was also seen in the first volume of *InSEXts*, where a sisterhood of women bands together to oppose the men and the female monster supporting the patriarchy who would abuse and constrain them. The brothel girls of London and the female artists in Paris work together to defeat their oppressors, and to write their own stories. These stories are a reclamation of the active, monstrous females of Graeco-Roman mythology, who, like Lady and Mariah, can be both *monsters* and *heroes*.

### DECEPTIVE MONSTERS AND THE HERO'S CHOICES IN *EROS/PSCYCHE* AND *PORCELAIN*

Maria Llovet is an artist and writer from Barcelona who grew up reading European comics and also manga,<sup>76</sup> and the influence of manga is evident in *Eros/Psyche* in the portrayal of girls in school uniforms as protagonists of the story. She is also interested in mythic subjects, so in an interview on her comic *Luna*, set in the 1960s and featuring characters who are gods, and influenced by 'Egypt' and 'Alchemy texts', Llovet comments: 'about Greek mythology, I remember asking my parents to buy me a book about it when I was quite young, I thought

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<sup>76</sup> Llovet interview with *Grimoire of Horror* (2021).

it was fascinating'.<sup>77</sup> A book of Greek myths, including the story of Apollo and Daphne, is also read by schoolgirl Sara in the comic, leading to her learning about the story of Eros and Psyche, which is retold by her female lover Silje.

After working with comic writers as an artist, *Eros/Psyche* was Llovet's first creator-owned comic. Originally issued in French and Spanish in black and white in 2011, Llovet created a coloured English version published by Ablaze in 2021. She describes the comic as 'the story of two girls who fall in love in a very strange and surreal boarding school.'<sup>78</sup> As Sara Palermo notes, the story of Eros and Psyche is used by Llovet to structure the comic, via images and words. While Bennett created and wrote *InSEXts* while artist Ariela Kristantina created the artwork, Llovet is both writer and artist, and while *InSEXts* relies heavily on text to tell the story through the speech of the protagonists, *Eros/Psyche* is text-light, often relying on the pictures to tell the story, which adds to the mysterious and ambiguous nature of the tale. As Palermo states:

*Eros/Psique de Maria Llovet es una obra que podríamos definir como “en equilibrio”: en equilibrio entre dos géneros – el manga y la novela gráfica –, entre un mundo real y un espacio mágico, entre la amistad y el amor, entre el blanco y el negro, entre lo acabado y lo inacabado, que deja al lector con una serie de preguntas que requieren de una segunda lectura atenta para encontrar respuestas.*<sup>79</sup>

*Eros/Psique* by Maria Llovet is a work that we could define as “in balance”: in balance between two genres – the manga and the graphic novel –, between a real world and a magical space, between friendship and love, between white and black, between the finished and the unfinished, which leaves the reader with a series of questions that require a careful second reading to find answers.

Readers are alerted to the story of Eros (or Cupid) and Psyche from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* in the title of the comic, but the story is not told until it is narrated by Silje in issue 2. Up until this point clues are oblique, and readers may see the images of two partially headless statues of naked male and female forms with wings as merely part of the background, until Sara remarks on them, prompting Silje to relate the story. The statues are standing apart, and both have wings, un-

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<sup>77</sup> Cordas (2021).

<sup>78</sup> Cordas (2021).

<sup>79</sup> Palermo (2021) 494, translation is author's own with assistance from *Google translate*.

like most images of the pair where they stand close together. Also only Cupid usually has wings, as in the famous Canova statue of *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss* in the Louvre Museum.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to this visual clue, there is also another link with the theme of the story of Eros/Psyche, that of Beauty and the Beast. The tale of Eros/Cupid and Psyche is seen by folklorists as an early version of this folktale, where

[t]he girl accepts a monstrous husband, but loses him: she must seek him out and with the final confiscation of his bestial outfit or the like they can live happily ever after.<sup>81</sup>

From the beginning of the comic, those familiar with this story may be alert to the name of the school Sara is to join, 'the Rose'. It is the rose stolen from the Beast's garden by Beauty's father, which leads to her voluntary imprisonment in the Beast's castle. The Rose, then, is set up to be a prison, even though it is a seemingly pleasant one, and Sara narrates that she was 'very happy' there.<sup>82</sup> And if Sara is set up to be Beauty, who is the Beast? As Beauty falls in love with the Beast, so Sara falls in love with 'key student' Silje,<sup>83</sup> but both Sara and Silje are attractive young girls on the outside; it is the hidden, monstrous inside that we as readers should beware of.

Silje is the first person Sara meets at the Rose school, after she has consumed pills printed with the word 'god', and their meeting place is in front of the two unnamed winged statues. Silje's unusual and unexplained name is a Scandinavian form of Cecile, from the Latin word for blind, *Caecus*. Like other emblematic words and images in the comic the knowledgeable reader may speculate on Psyche's enforced blindness to Cupid's outward appearance, hidden to her as he comes to her in the darkness. Cupid uses the dark to disguise his form as a god, though to the curious Psyche he could be disguising a monstrous appearance. The strange and seemingly meaningless tasks the school girls have to complete,

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**80** Palermo (2020) 496 also compares the statue to the famous headless statue of Nike from Samothrace, also at the Louvre; however, this statue is of a clothed rather than a naked figure, and Cupid and Psyche are naked in the Canova statue and most other representations.

**81** Anderson (2000) 68. See also Bottigheimer (1989).

**82** *Eros/Psyche* 1.6.3.

**83** *Eros/Psyche* 1.20.2

such as threading coloured beads and placing stones in a field, also seem to be like the tasks Aphrodite sets Psyche (sorting grains and collecting golden wool and black water).<sup>84</sup>

In issue 2, as Sara starts to fall in love with Silje, they sit together on a bench in front of the statues, and holding a book Sara says 'I love the story of Daphne and Apollo',<sup>85</sup> and she wonders if the statue is of Daphne. This is an unusual story for a girl to 'love'; the story of a rape thwarted by a nymph being turned into a tree. Silje says her favourite story is that of Eros and Psyche, which is not in their book. Her favourite story was told to her 'a long time ago'. In the largest piece of text in the comic, Silje tells the story of Eros and Psyche to Sara:

Psyche was the youngest daughter of the king of Anatolia and the most beautiful among her sisters. Jealous of her beauty, the goddess Aphrodite sent her son Eros to sling a golden arrow that would make Psyche fall in love with a hideous and detestable man. However, Eros fell in love with her, threw the arrow into the ocean, and once she slept, took her up to his palace. Eros kept his identity a secret to avoid the wrath of his mother and only visited his beloved at night. But Psyche, deceived by the envy of her sisters, decided to find out about who he was. One night she lighted a lamp of oil while her lover slept. One drop of the boiling oil fell on his skin, awakening him and he fled, and though she tried to pursue, he flew away leaving her despondent. Not knowing what to do, Psyche asked Aphrodite for help. She tasked Psyche with four impossible missions. If she could accomplish them then she would see Eros again. In the last of her missions, Psyche had to go down to hell to collect a chest belonging to Persephone for Aphrodite. Psyche, again tempted by curiosity, opened the chest and fell into an eternal dream. But Eros searched without rest, finally found her, and managed to wake her and so they remained together on Olympus forever.<sup>86</sup>

This summarised version of the story highlights themes of monstrosity, deception and love. Aphrodite wants Psyche to fall in love with a monster, a 'hideous and detestable man',<sup>87</sup> but instead she falls in love with Eros, who deceives her in

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<sup>84</sup> Apul. *Met.* 6.10–6.

<sup>85</sup> *Eros/Psyche* 2.8.1.

<sup>86</sup> *Eros/Psyche* 2.10.1.

<sup>87</sup> *Eros/Psyche* 2.10.1.

order to keep their love secret, and Psyche is deceived again by her sisters, and by Aphrodite. Is Sara (and also the reader) being similarly deceived?

New girls arrive and leave until finally only Sara and Silje are left at the school. They take the exam to find out who the next key student will be, and Sara is surprised to find that it is her, not Silje. Silje finally reveals that she has been at the school for twenty years, but aging is stopped by the 'god' pills the girls take.<sup>88</sup> It has now become clear that Silje has deceived her lover through her deceptively young outside, compared with her older monstrous inside, with Sara marked out as her replacement even before they met. Silje leaves, and Sara hopes she will find her lover again, as Eros and Psyche found each other. She says to herself 'Silje, will we meet again some day? Will we meet again like Eros and Psyche? I firmly believe it'.<sup>89</sup> Silje has been Eros all along, hiding her identity from her lover, and also the Beast, who has hidden his true identity as a Prince from Beauty, but the roles of Eros and Psyche are interchangeable in *Eros/Psyche*. For Sara the Rose has been a paradise, a world of gardens and lakes where she can feel free, while Silje felt like a prisoner. Finally it is Sara who must take the active role once she leaves the Rose in order to find her lover, as Eros does; 'I'll search for you. I'll wait for you. I love you'.<sup>90</sup>

In Apuleius' version of the story of Eros and Psyche, the female character Psyche twice almost fails to reach a happy conclusion through acting on her curiosity, encouraged by the jealousy of other female characters. First her sisters encourage her to shine a light on her enigmatic lover, who she has only met in the dark, and then Aphrodite sends her to obtain a beauty potion from Persephone, which is actually a substance that will send Psyche to sleep. Conversely, Sara's seeming inability to act on her own curiosity means that she only learns the truth about Silje and the Rose school when it is too late for her to do anything about it. Instead of directly asking questions of Silje, Sara always 'respected her silence'. While Psyche becomes an active heroine on her own quest narrative, first trying to find Eros when he leaves her, then taking on the tasks assigned by Aphrodite, finally to be reunited with Eros after he seeks her out, there is no similar resolution to Sara's story.

We do not know whether or not Sara and Silje will be reunited, or even if Silje wants this, even though she does seem to regret having to pass on the role

<sup>88</sup> *Eros/Psyche* 5.13–4.

<sup>89</sup> *Eros/Psyche* 5.27–30.

<sup>90</sup> *Eros/Psyche* 5.25.2.



of key student to her lover, saying ‘I wish it wouldn’t have been you who came into the garden’ and ‘I hope you forgive me someday’.<sup>91</sup> I agree with Palermo that to read Silje as the deceptive Eros and Sara as Psyche is problematic, and instead these roles appear interchangeable. Silje implies she was taught the story of Eros and Psyche by a previous student who the reader infers to have been the previous key student and her lover, and so in this relationship it seems that the unnamed previous student took the Eros role and Silje the Psyche role. This is reversed with Silje and Sara, and will be reversed again as Sara chooses a future student to be her Psyche, when she moves into the Eros/Beast role. While the stories of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* and the story of Beauty and the Beast end happily for the united heterosexual couples, the lesbian students are not granted an unambivalent conclusion in *Eros/Psyche*. However, if we agree with Palermo that the story of Eros and Psyche is here used as a paradigm for any loving relationship, whether lesbian or heterosexual, then perhaps we should read the end of the comic as the general impossibility of a conclusive fairy tale happy ending.<sup>92</sup> Sara looks at her reflection in an elaborately framed mirror, and this mirror, empty of any reflection, is the final image of the comic. Sara and Silje are both the hero(in)es and the monsters of this story, whereas the mirror is the blank space, the unwritten future. Sara as the hero and monster of the future ‘stands on the threshold of becoming’ something new.<sup>93</sup> Llovet’s primary intention in creating *Eros/Psyche* may not have been to ‘ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression’,<sup>94</sup> in line with Cohen’s thesis 7, however it may prompt the reader to do so.

Llovet followed up her English language colour edition of *Eros/Psyche* with another comic, *Porcelain*, also featuring a threshold-crossing heroine. Published earlier in Spanish in 2012, and again with Ablaze in 2021, then collected as a hardback edition without issue breaks in 2022, this beautifully drawn horror comic mixes ideas from classical mythology, deceptive exteriors and monstrous interiors as well as a katabasis-like journey with the journey of Dorothy from

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<sup>91</sup> *Eros/Psyche* 5.11.3 and 5.18.3.

<sup>92</sup> Palermo (2020) 17.

<sup>93</sup> Cohen (1996) 20.

<sup>94</sup> Cohen (1996) 20.

*The Wizard of Oz*, and motifs from *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>95</sup> The comic starts with a montage of images of blood and doll parts, followed by an epigram; “There are always two choices, two paths to take. One is easy. And its only reward is that it’s easy.” – Anonymous.<sup>96</sup> This parable is familiar to classicists from the choice of Herakles between the paths of virtue and vice, reported in book two of the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon and attributed to Prodicus, and picked up by later writers and artists.<sup>97</sup> Llovet does not specifically mention this, and her heroine, Beryl, is a figure drawing on Dorothy, rather than Herakles, leaving her Aunt Milly’s house in the desert and taking a winding path with her cat, Raubritter, in tow, on a journey with the dark undertones of *Return to Oz* (1985), one of Llovet’s favourite films, which she finds ‘scary and weird’ and ‘revered’ as a child.<sup>98</sup>

Returning from an errand for her aunt, Beryl hears music coming from a moving life-size ‘dollhouse’ with a massive, monstrous female head as the entrance. A huge tongue appears from between a set of pointed teeth, and this tongue pulls Beryl and Raubritter inside. We can read this head as ‘the mouth of hell’ with ‘*vagina dentata*’, as described by Barbara Creed in her seminal work on the Monstrous Feminine in film, with Beryl as the potential ‘final girl’ who must destroy the cannibalistic mother.<sup>99</sup> Creed links the cannibalistic mother with Medusa, but Beryl as hero is set up initially as Herakles rather than Perseus. The great mouth leads into a chamber surrounded by archways, two of which are named, one with the sign ‘Eros’ above it and the other ‘Thanatos’.<sup>100</sup> Beryl is now faced with the choice between love or death. In the chamber is a table surrounded by monstrous doll figures, some with the heads of animals and bodies of women, others wearing masks, who instruct Beryl to ‘eat, please’.<sup>101</sup> Like Alice in Wonderland and Persephone on the cusp of being tricked into staying in the underworld, Beryl takes a cupcake, but as she bites she finds this is filled with

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95 Janice Siegel drew some interesting comparisons between *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Greek mythology in an unpublished paper presented at the Celtic Conference in Classics in Dublin in 2016.

96 *Porcelain* 2.

97 See Stafford (2017).

98 Llovet interview with *Grimoire of Horror* (2021).

99 See Creed (1993) 105–21.

100 *Porcelain* 15–6.

101 *Porcelain* 18.1–4.

maggots. One gestates inside her body and a butterfly appears, followed by a beautiful young woman who introduces herself as ‘Valentina, the Sculptress’.<sup>102</sup>

In another inversion of the Pygmalion story that we saw in *InSEXts*, Valentina wants to turn Beryl into a sculpture, a ‘beautiful’ porcelain doll.<sup>103</sup> However, here it is the female character/artist, Valentina, who is hiding the monster behind her beautiful human exterior. Escaping Valentina, Beryl is faced with a room full of shards of broken mirrors, followed by a dream-like sequence. Panels containing images drawn in red on a white background reveal Valentina as a young girl, alone and crying, asking for a companion to ‘stay with me’.<sup>104</sup> The mirrors have shown Beryl that Valentina could have been a hero rather than a monster and that it is the choices made that make all the difference. The powerful monster within Valentina has fed on her fear and loneliness, choosing to ‘harm others’ rather than the ‘wonderful things’ Beryl suggests she could have done.<sup>105</sup> Beryl must have the courage to choose the path of Thanatos, despite warnings from Axel, the androgynous boy in a cat mask and her would-be helper, who has survived in the dollhouse by hiding and evading Valentina. Axel takes Beryl through the door of ‘Eros’, but she does not find love here, only sculptures of Valentina’s previous victims. While Axel warns Beryl against taking the path of Thanatos as ‘it’s the closest path to the sculptress, to her heart’,<sup>106</sup> Beryl realises that ‘sometimes the risky option is the only one possible, the only one that really means choosing’.<sup>107</sup> Readers familiar with Euripides’ *Alcestis* may now infer that Beryl must fight with death, or Thanatos, personified by the sculptress/Valentina, by taking the difficult path, just like Herakles fights Thanatos to bring Queen Alcestis back to life.

Valentina adopts different guises in order to capture Beryl, none of them outwardly monstrous. She appears Aphrodite-like, rather than death-like, naked and swathed in roses. She also takes the role of Aphrodite when she sends Beryl to sleep, as the goddess sends Psyche to sleep once Psyche opens the box from

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102 *Porcelain* 23.2.

103 *Porcelain* 23.3.

104 *Porcelain* 55.3.

105 *Porcelain* 97.2.

106 *Porcelain* 34.3.

107 *Porcelain* 56.3.

the underworld. Beryl wakes up on a cross attended by skeletons, confronted by Valentina, now dressed in underwear and wearing an eye patch emblazoned with a red cross, knife in hand. Valentina's face is still that of a young girl, but she and Beryl now wear matching green underwear, monster and hero as mirror images. Beryl recognises the monster within Valentina, who fed on the fear of Valentina the little girl and the fear of all the children that have followed her and been turned to stone statues or macabre living dolls within the dollhouse. When Beryl takes Valentina's knife and stabs her opponent, swathes of matching green cloth frame both of the girls, like Medusa's snakes appearing out of their bodies. Their previous clothes appear beneath, reframing their separate identities; Valentina in the dress she had worn as a young girl, and Beryl back in her own black top and red shorts. Valentina falls and is impaled on the spire of a dolls house, turning to stone and crumbling into pieces. Beryl uses the power of a classical monster to defeat the new monster, and as the sculptress becomes stone, her dolls become children again. Axel tells Beryl 'you left the easy path, you chose to face the obstacles that the sculptor wove into your mind, looking her in the eye, you fought for what you wanted until the very end!'<sup>108</sup> Axel then reveals that his limbs are jointed, like the limbs of a doll. He had not evaded Valentina, and his path to love was just as illusory as the rest of the dollhouse. Axel and the children are left behind. Only Beryl, the final girl, and Raubritter the cat are able to leave.

In the epilogue Aunt Milly receives a letter from Beryl, who has moved to the city, leaving the desert as her aunt had urged her to do. The last panel shows Beryl surrounded by smiling young helpers and two cats with a newly created statue. It appears to be a metallic, steampunk version of a statue of Psyche, with the same hair and wings as the Psyche statue at the Rose school in *Eros/Psyche*, but this time complete with her head. Beryl writes that this 'project [...] has a good chance of being chosen for the capital city'. Beryl, who has taken the roles of Dorothy, Persephone, Alice, Psyche and Herakles in turns, finally takes the right path and becomes the artist herself, with her group of friends as helpers and fellow artists, not subjects. Better than Pygmalion, Beryl has found a real life with real people, boys and girls, men and women, with different skin tones and clothes. She does not need to create her own version of perfection, as humanity is variety. Difference need not be monstrous. Although Beryl has lost her potential love, Axel, she has found a fulfilling life for herself by choosing the difficult

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108 *Porcelain* 112.4.

path towards death. By returning to the image of Psyche, this offers an upbeat ending to both *Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain*.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Pygmalion and the artist's wish to create a perfect, silent, chaste woman when he despised the real women for their vices is interrogated by Marguerite Bennett in *InSEXts*. This disturbing myth is replaced by a story of women who love and support each other, where love and sex between women is portrayed as a beautiful thing, and where the violent female monster succeeds against her male adversaries, so that hero and monster are one and the same. Maria Llovet takes a myth where the female character, Psyche, is both victim of Aphrodite and active heroine, completing her own quests and finding happiness with her male lover, and makes this into a more ambiguous love story. Living in a paradise-like world of deceit where time has been stopped, love may be real, but monstrous lovers cannot be trusted, despite their beautiful outsides. However, while Silje is deceived and left alone in the school in *Eros/Psyche*, in *Porcelain* Beryl breaks through the monster's deception and takes the right path to become an artist in her own right, both a mirror image of what the monster could have been, and brave heroine. By applying Monster Theory to these texts by female comic writers written in our current times of category crisis, where difference may be the new normal, we can see how the lines between monstrosity and heroism are blurred. Moving beyond Cohen's seventh thesis that 'the monster stands at the threshold of becoming',<sup>109</sup> we could say that the monster is becoming the hero (or the hero is becoming the monster).

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109 Cohen (1996) 20.

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