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A Multimodal Exploration of Female Hybridity in the Monster
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Yara Csillag BA

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1. Introduction

For decades, *Dungeons and Dragons* has been shaping pop-culture and fantasy spaces. In this collaborative game, players usually encounter a variety of monsters that are inspired by mythology, fairy tales, and other stories, and are listed and presented in a book called the *Monster Manual*. They are given monstrous characteristics or markers that the players recognize and should be afraid of. However, in some cases these markers are not only distinct in terms of Otherness, but they are both explicitly and implicitly female and feminine coded. Especially in contrast to the exponentially high number of male-presented monsters in the 2014 edition of the *Monster Manual*, a trend in those that appear female becomes apparent. Several of the female monsters showcase markers of hybridity, more specifically, a mix of animal(istic) and human body parts. Through such nonhuman features, they are already predisposed to be perceived as monstrous, or in Kristeva's words, 'abject', as the abject "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). In this project, then, such posthuman figures comprise the primary material for analysis. In the light of the joint effect between femininity and monstrosity, Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine forms the main theoretical basis for the analysis of these figures. I will ask how, on a multimodal level, female hybrid monsters in the *Monster Manual* are implicitly and explicitly categorized as monstrous feminine, especially via their visual presentation and textual description. Further, I will ask how their nonhuman characteristics contribute to a reading as monstrous-feminine symbolically on an individual level. I argue that these hybrids' monstrosity is explicitly linked to their femininity; it is the interplay between, and relationship of, these hybrid aspects and the feminine traits of their human body parts that makes them fearsome and abject.

Six specific monsters that are presented as female and possess animal(istic) body parts – the cambion, the marilith, the erinyes, the drider, the lamia, and the harpy – are the focal figures of this thesis. While it is Creed's whole work *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* that informs my theoretical background, it is specifically the second edition published in 2024 that served as a major inspiration and impetus to pursue this project. In this edition, Creed expands her work in the form of a chapter on the nonhuman monstrous-feminine. Describing her understanding of nonhuman, she writes of figures that are supernatural in nature, although it is only singular figures such as the werewolf that showcase hybridity similar to the figures of this project. The concern that the monstrous-feminine is not perfectly applicable outside of the genre it was developed with, i.e., horror, is a concern that Sarah Stang also raises

despite repeatedly utilizing it herself for analyses in the field of game studies. She rightfully notes the discernible difference between monsters in horror and those in the fantasy genre as “in horror media there is generally a single monster, or a single kind of monster, who disrupts normative society and must be slain, controlled, or contained to restore the symbolic order” (Stang, “Broodmother” 237). In fantasy, however, monstrosity is almost normalized due to the high number of ‘monsters’ or nonhuman creatures that often comprise the general population (Stang, “Broodmother” 237). Similar to Stang’s project though, the six selected creatures exhibit many of the aspects that Creed identifies as monstrous-feminine and move in an abject space, making it possible to apply Creed’s theory regardless. Further, the visual representation of the monsters elicits a *to-be-looked-at-ness* and follows certain patterns Mulvey identifies in film. Moreover, I will also examine to what degree the selected monsters can be read as femme fatales, i.e., deadly/lethal women, as their categorization as ‘monsters’ predisposes lethality.

To begin, it is necessary to define and justify the definition of ‘hybrid’ that leads to the primary data pool of this thesis. To fall under the hybrid category, for this purpose, a figure must visually exhibit both humanoid and animal body parts. In what relativity these two occur is of lesser relevance, but they must be explicitly visually definable. Therefore, to be a hybrid can range from ‘merely’ having horns sprouting from the head to the complete lower body of an animal. Further, all figures in *Dungeons and Dragons* are divided and defined via a so-called alignment chart. According to this chart, a figure can be either good, neutral, or evil, in addition to a second attribute. All monsters that are part of this project are categorized as evil, accentuating their initial perceived status as a monster. For example, while the merfolk, who is reminiscent of a mermaid, would fulfill the parameters of hybridity and perceived femineity, this figure is of neutral alignment. Therefore, the merfolk is to be excluded from this analysis. Similarly, the medusa also seems to fulfill all the required parameters. However, the manner of her hybridity is in question. I argue that this figure’s hybrid state moves in a grey area due to the fact that the snakes protruding from her head present as almost separate entities that are merely connected to her humanoid figure. The animal parts of the selected monsters, in contrast, form one whole body together with the humanoid. As a last example, I must address the succubus/incubus. These figures also fall under the evil alignment and the female counterpart, the succubus, fulfills all parameters to qualify for selection. However, I exclude the succubus from the analysis due to the fact that she is visually presented side by side with her male counterpart, the incubus. To avoid unnecessary overlap, I chose to focus on the cambion instead. This monster bears many bodily similarities with the incubus as this creature is the result of the union between succubi/incubi and humanoid creatures (Perkins et al. 284). I however write this with full

awareness that all the accompanying texts are supposed to refer to the represented creature of any gender variety, if not explicitly stated otherwise. The conscious choice though to have the image *not* be male connotated, i.e., the apparent standard in the *Monster Manual*, greatly influences how the text, i.e., the entry consisting of image, text, and statistics, is received and interpreted.

Since I have now explained how I selected the specific monsters, I must also comment on why I am using specifically the *Monster Manual* from 2014 as a primary source. In the initial phases of this project, the 5th edition 2014 *Monster Manual* was the most recent edition of this sourcebook. However, in early 2025, a new revised version was released. This new edition features major changes in gameplay and statistical makeup as well as a complete renewal of the visual presentations. The publishers seem to have indeed worked towards an equilibrium in terms of gender presentation, although, for the lack of a better expression, missed the mark in some cases. The six monsters chosen for this project are affected by the redesign as well. Some now seem visually more gender-ambiguous or even male-presenting while other monsters that in the 2014 version were typically presented as male now seem to have additional female artworks. For example, within the genus of giants, the visuals only featured male examples in 2014, while the new artworks feature a representative of two opposite gender expressions. Further, the 2014 cambion (figure 1) is an example of a rather masculine presenting, but nevertheless female figure, representing a divergence from stereotypical gender expressions. In the 2025 version, however, the cambion visually falls back on typically female stereotypes. The 2025 *Monster Manual* seems to now disregard those creatures for whom femininity is essential to their nature and whose gender has previously been inscribed into their lore by adding the representative of a different gender. For example, hags and the banshee, both creatures that historically have been represented as and defined via their gender now have an additional male or gender-ambiguous counterpart. In terms of most accurate presentation of the more ‘relevant’ sourcebook then, I chose to move forward with the initial plan of analyzing the *Monster Manual* from 2014. Moreover, this version would be the one reflected on and referenced in recent scholarly literature, and would be the version that for the last decade people all around the world have used as a source for their own games of *Dungeons and Dragons*. As such sourcebooks are the result of the collaboration between numerous people, artists, authors, developers, and designers alike, it is difficult to ascribe specific entries/artworks to specific authors/artists as the copyright belongs to the publisher *Wizards of the Coast*. Therefore, throughout this project, when referencing and quoting this sourcebook, I am referring to Christopher Perkins, the ‘lead’ of the development of the *Monster Manual*.

The first section of this thesis is comprised of a review of preexisting literature as well as an investigation and explanation of relevant theoretical writings. To begin, I define what monstrosity means in the context of this project as well as how monstrosity is represented in a gamified manner, i.e., statistically broken down for video games. This is followed by an exploration of Barbara Creed's concept of the *monstrous-feminine*, how she has applied it to hybrid creatures in the past, as well as related gendered aspects that are reflected in the *Dungeons and Dragons* monsters. Further, how the abject (Kristeva) functions and influences what we fear, i.e., the monstrous-feminine, is touched upon as well. Subsequently, I explore how both the monstrous-feminine and monstrous female hybridity, sometimes in combination, have been presented in the past. This survey moves from general classical mythology onto those mythological creatures that are most likely to have inspired the ones in the *Monster Manual*, continues onto how women have been represented in digital gaming spaces, explores examples of female (hybrid) monstrosity in fantasy video games, and finally evaluates previous examinations of women and female monsters in *Dungeons and Dragons*.

The next major chapter is concerned with the theoretical framework and different lenses. A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) enables me to focus on how the monstrous-feminine is constructed on different levels. Moreover, it is the interplay between and effects of different modes that allow for a rich and detailed analysis by examining and comparing different perspectives. While mainly developed in context of film, both Laura Mulvey's writing on the male gaze and spectatorship as well as the archetype of the femme fatale serve as additional lenses through which the monsters can be considered.

The main analysis is comprised of four chapters, each divided into further subchapters. I begin with examining the visual elements, featuring aspects such as attire, symbolism in stances, positioning, and weapons, as well as the practice of gazing at the female creatures on the page. While these visual elements are analyzed with minimal influence of the accompanying textual features, starting with the second chapter, the modes bleed into one another due to overlap and/or disparity between the visuals and text. An examination of lexical choices relating to dehumanization, depersonalization, as well as word connotations is followed by the theme of poison and how it relates to the monsters' characterization. Further, lexical choices reveal previously hidden hierarchies of importance between the animal and human. Finally, references to mothering functions play into the trope of monstrous motherhood and how the female reproductive system can evoke fear. The next chapter is guided by the femme fatale archetype and revolves around the statistical makeup that defines the abilities of the monsters. In addition to being charming and deceptive, magic expands the possibilities of manipulation and illusion.

Those monsters that are not defined as femme fatales via their deceptive abilities evoke the phallic woman instead. The analysis comes to a close in the form of a brief examination of the cultural associations and potent symbolism that two of the animal halves evoke, followed by a summary and final conclusion.

2. Theory of Female Monstrosity

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of monstrosity as a cultural phenomenon, how and why the female monster terrifies, and the effects of the interplay between the female and the monstrous in the form of the monstrous-feminine (Creed). Further, I trace how female monsters have been and still are perceived in mythology and popular culture to facilitate a better understanding of the monsters in the *Monster Manual*. Finally, I provide a brief introduction to the tools, e.g., MCDA, and theoretical lenses, the femme fatale and the male gaze, at my disposal.

2.1. Monstrosity Defined

Throughout history and to this day, monsters have been and still are a persisting accompaniment of humanity. To understand them, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen provides a suitable point of departure when analyzing the monster from a cultural perspective. In his book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, J. J. Cohen introduces seven theses about the connection between culture and monstrosity. He not only proposes that monsters are reflections of their (cultural) times, but that “[t]he monstrous body is pure culture” (4). The monster always returns. It is an endless cycle of the same tales of the same creatures reappearing throughout history: from the Middle Ages to modern science fiction movies. This constant movement necessitates that monsters are examined within the context of their creation (4-5). This idea is especially pertinent considering that in this thesis, I examine monsters as they are portrayed in *Dungeons and Dragons* at this moment in time, informed by the ‘blueprints’ that came before them. I especially focus on how their characteristics are used in the present to evoke reactions such as fear and desire.

Gender and sexuality have always shaped the way that monstrosity is constructed. As the female gender is an important space of intersection in this thesis, I also consider how, on a cultural level, female, but not necessarily hybrid, monsters operate. Historically, the construction and maintenance of gender identity proves difficult, culturally speaking, due to the fears a deviation of the norm elicits. Therefore, when the woman “oversteps the boundaries of her gender role [she] risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith [...] or Gorgon” (J. J. Cohen 9). Similarly, a sexual identity that diverges from societal expectations and norms makes the subject susceptible to being read as monstrous (J. J. Cohen 9). He later draws together the writing

of Michel Foucault and Susan Stewart to define the understanding of the monster's sexuality and concludes that the monster allows for the possibility to commit, or at the very least observe, those sexual practices that are considered taboo (J. J. Cohen 14). These ideas about transgressions in terms of sexuality and gender concur with J. J. Cohen's "Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire." The monster and its body are interwoven with the prohibited and taboo. It offers a form of escapism, it attracts. While the monster elicits fear and maybe even hate, one cannot help but envy its freedom and its movement outside the common dichotomies (J. J. Cohen 16-17). He further explains that the monstrous body offers a safe space for negative/dangerous fantasies in a predetermined liminal space. This escapism, however, can transform into horror when this defined space and its boundaries are transgressed (17). In *Dungeons and Dragons*, the player is (in)directly confronted with such monsters. As their character, they have the opportunity to stand opposite what we fear and/or desire. It is especially this intersection between the desirability of the female body and the envy and simultaneous fear of the monster that becomes relevant in this thesis.

Imagining monsters is a transhistorical practice as its "corporal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice" (J. J. Cohen 19). This grey area that the monster inhabits, J. J. Cohen describes, is reminiscent of Kristeva's abject (19). Kristeva's writing, in isolation as well as in context with Creed's monstrous-feminine, is a key part of my theoretical approach. The abject, which is defined by its disruption of "identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4), is more closely explained in the subsequent chapter. Therefore, as J. J. Cohen connects his statements with Kristeva's proposition, his ideas about how the monster behaves (in culture) form a sound place of departure for this theoretical part. As long as humans exist, monsters will continue to exist as well; always shaped according to present cultural trends as well as archaic and new fears alike. Especially in the case of the *Monster Manual*, a collection written with the intent to induce fear in a fictional setting, the manner in which such monsters are presented matters. As J. J. Cohen puts it concisely: "[m]onsters are our children [...] They ask us why we have created them" (20). The danger of the (unknown) feminine in a patriarchal system will always persist as long as the system does.

2.2. Monstrosity and Gender: Creed and Kristeva

Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* is the most important theoretical cornerstone of this thesis. Her work is especially relevant to the project as *The Monstrous-Feminine*, first published in 1993, was republished in 2024 with an additional section on the monstrous-feminine in the light of the recent transhumanist turn in the humanities. In the chapter titled "Revolt of the

Monstrous-Feminine: Embracing the Nonhuman,” Creed explores the more recent trend in horror (films) to portray the female protagonist as nonhuman, be it as (animal) hybrids, aliens, or something beyond, and argues that it is exactly this otherness that allows the female monster to revolt against a patriarchal structure (*Monstrous-Feminine* 187-189). In the preface of the second edition, Creed writes that in this new wave of contemporary horror, the nonhuman monstrous-feminine “draws on the power of her monstrosity – her radical abjection – to change the narrative and ask new questions” (*Monstrous-Feminine* xvi). It is the female hybrid monster, either modelled on ancient archetypes or something new and unknown, that enables the spectator “to explore issues of social justice and what it means to be ‘human’ in the twenty-first century” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* xvii). Creed states that this new monstrous-feminine now sources all those parts of her that used to be the cause of her abjection in earlier horror for strength and power (*Monstrous-Feminine* xvi). Similarly to how Creed describes a historical shift in trends in horror, the *Monster Manual* is regularly reworked and republished, indicating that it, too, might move and produce its monsters within the context of their time. Before delving into Creed’s newer findings in more detail, however, I must first ‘go back to the basics’ and take a closer look at her theory as she wrote it in the 1990s.

To begin, I would like to highlight Creed’s remark that the monstrous-feminine, or more specifically the female monster, cannot be treated as the simple antithesis to the male monster. Instead, “she is defined in terms of her sexuality” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 5). Therefore, to showcase this difference, the new term *monstrous-feminine* stresses the significance of her gender, as the female monster does not horrify the spectator in the same way the male monster does. Creed summarizes how the female monster has, historically speaking, seldom been taken seriously in scholarly debate. It is necessary to note here though that she is in this case referring to academic work from the time of publication, i.e., 1993. Creed regularly refers back to Freud and his proposition that the fear of the woman stems from her castrated state, implying that it primarily seems to be male fear that is reflected in the female monster (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 7-8). Creed proposes that a woman’s monstrosity is inherently connected to either her “mothering and reproductive functions” or her sexual desire (*Monstrous-Feminine* 9). This monster can take on different manifestations such as “the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman” as well as “the deadly *femme castratrice*, the castrating mother and the *vagina dentata*” representing the woman as castrator (*Monstrous-Feminine* 9). This is prefaced by an exploration of Julia Kristeva’s ‘abject’, into which I will subsequently go into more detail about.

Kristeva's writing and what she terms 'abject' is essential to understanding what makes us feel uneasy, unsafe – what makes us fear. Kristeva describes the root of abjection as follows: that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. [...] Abjection [...] is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles” (4). Creed builds her first main chapter on Kristeva's writings, more specifically on “Kristeva's discussion of the construction of abjection in the human subject in relation to her notion of (a) the ‘border’, (b) the mother-child relationship and (c) the feminine body” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 10-11). Creed concludes from Kristeva's work that in modern horror, the monstrous is similarly constructed to what was/is found to be abject, i.e., religious ‘abominations’ such as “sexual immorality and perversion; corporal alteration; decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 11). It is especially the corpse that signifies ultimate abjection. It knows no boundaries; it contains bodily fluids and wastes that a living body would normally expel. In its continuous decay it is inherently abject (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 11). This notion also aligns with the religious belief, more specifically the biblical one, that the corpse is impure due to the absence of the soul (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 12). Soulless figures have always struck terror in humans and will continue to do so. Vampires, zombie, ghouls, robots, or androids are classical representative figures of the soulless body (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 12). Still today, such classical abject figures are part of modern (horror) cinema. Creed adds that “[w]ere-creatures, whose bodies signify a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal, also belong in this category” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 12). I, by extension, argue that it is not just were-creatures that shift from human to animal or nonhuman that can be included in this categorization, but also hybrid creatures, where the border between their different hybrid parts is blurred. The idea of the soulless body which cannot be properly contained goes hand in hand with the line of thought that to construct the abject, a border and its subsequent transgression are necessary. In horror, such a border can take different forms, e.g., between “human and inhuman”, “normal and supernatural”, or “good and evil” and it is often the female body that is essential to its construction (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 13). Creed concludes that these aforementioned ideas all converge in the maternal body or the woman's reproductive functions. A fundamental element of the abject is its ambiguity – while it disturbs, it also elicits desire (*Monstrous-Feminine* 16). Kristeva's abject therefore informs, shapes, and is vital to Creed's ideas on the monstrous-feminine and is a central thought that I will also continuously return to throughout this thesis. Abjection as a double-edged sword of fear and attraction is what allows me to use the monstrous-feminine to examine

these monsters from such a specific viewpoint. These monsters are supposed to attract and entice, but they are also still *monsters*, i.e., a threat.

In her first major chapter which mainly revolves about Kristeva's abject and the role of the mother in monstrosity, Creed introduces five archetypes accompanied by filmic examples: the "archaic mother", "woman as possessed monster", "woman as monstrous womb", "woman as vampire", and "woman as witch." (*Monstrous-Feminine*). While it would go beyond the scope of this project to present and explain all these archetypes in detail here, some of their aspects are reflected in my primary material and therefore necessary to consider. The archaic mother, for example, describes a figure which represents "the image of the mother as sole origin of all life" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 19). Creed also refers back to Kristeva who considers the archaic mother not only as the origin of life, but also as the abyss (*Monstrous-Feminine* 26). She notes that historically there have been positively connoted representations of an archaic mother, e.g., the Spider Woman in Northern American Indigenous mythology¹ who is responsible for the creation of the universe (*Monstrous-Feminine* 26). In her essence, the archaic mother is completely devoted to "the generative, procreative principle", is able to procreate without an outside force, and stands "outside morality and the law" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 27). Horror, though, tends to present a more negative phantasmagorical side of this figure, especially those texts belonging to the science fiction genre (*Monstrous-Feminine* 27). Here, female genitalia are metaphorically represented as, e.g., "the mysterious black hole" and "the voracious maw", threats that either bring life to more horrors or consume everything in their path (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 27-28). Since horrific life, in this context, grows in the womb, the archaic mother is special in the sense that she usually does not require a male counterpart for procreation and allows for a conceptualization outside of a binary gendered space, independent from the concept of the masculine (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 28). The archaic mother is more than simply *a* source of life, she is *the* source of life.

Continuing with the theme of motherhood, Creed introduces another archetype, that of the "woman as monstrous womb". Here she refers to the following idea by Kristeva: "[f]ear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing" (78). Creed notes that the womb/uterus has not only historically been depicted as devilish, but that this connection between the monstrous and the womb is also regularly depicted and utilized in (contemporary) horror (*Monstrous-Feminine* 43). With the example of the 1979 film *The Brood*, Creed illustrates how woman's reproductive functions can be portrayed as repulsive, especially to a man. When the male

¹ This figure can be found in both Hopi and Navajo mythology, for example (Lenhardt 346-347).

counterpart is not involved, a woman is implied to only be able to create “a race of mutant, murderous offspring” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 43). Even in ancient times it had been suggested that monstrosity comes into existence through the “maternal imagination” and “maternal desire” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 43-44). In horror media, there are usually two different methods of representing the womb and its abject nature. On the one hand, it might be used symbolically in the form of a location, i.e., “intra-uterine settings [that] consist of dark, narrow, winding passages leading to a central room, cellar or other symbolic place of birth” (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 52). On the other hand, it might be used in a more literal sense – as a uterus of a “woman or female creature” that has the capacity or is in the process of birthing something monstrous (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 52). In contrast, the creation of monsters by men, more specifically male scientists, oftentimes happens in an artificial environment while female scientists in this context are rarer. As Creed appropriately asks: “Why should they? Woman possesses her own womb” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 55). The gender divide in creation mythology is thus particularly salient in horror.

In addition to this mothering function, Creed also considers the intersection, or more specifically the convergence of the human female and the animal. The remaining three archetypes from the first major chapter are not as applicable to the monsters that I will analyze in this project. However, a consistent theme of nonhumanness and animality accompanies these archetypes and thus a pattern Creed’s definition of monstrosity emerges. I use this approximation of woman and animal as a theory focus for my own thesis. In “woman as possessed monster” and “woman as vampire” Creed points to the animalistic features of both archetypes respectively. For example, she groups the possessed woman together with the iconic figure of the werewolf, a prime example for a monster exhibiting hybridity, as they are both under the umbrella of “dual personality horror figures” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 32). She notes that “[t]he possessed or invaded being is a figure of abjection in that the boundary between self and other has been transgressed” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 32). In a similar vein, the vampiric woman is animalistic in the sense that she is trapped between an animal and human state, the former expressed in her (animalistic) fangs and bloodlust. She is abject because of this exact reason: because she is neither, because she is both, because she cannot be fully categorized as one or the other (*Monstrous-Feminine* 60). Instead, I want to highlight Creed’s reiteration and repeated emphasis of her understanding of the “association of woman’s maternal and reproductive functions with the abject as a construct of patriarchal ideology” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 81-82). It is always her difference that marks her as abject. Additional references to and explanations of Creed’s work, e.g., fears of castration, will be made during the analysis.

In her final and newly added chapter, Creed picks up on similar topics as in her book *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*. She correspondingly introduces the monstrous-feminine as being in revolt, but here focusses on the nonhuman specifically. Radical abjection, as Creed terms it, in combination with the nonhuman is a distinguishing and essential characteristic of contemporary feminist horror cinema (*Monstrous-Feminine* 187-190). These new monstrous-feminine figures, however, are defined by their attempts to, in a wider sense, actively challenge the “male symbolic order” and to subsequently “decenter the human, specifically the anthropomorphic male” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 199). While I would argue that unlike the many films directed and/or written by women Creed examines, the *Monster Manual* is not constructed from an explicitly feminist perspective. This introduction to a new revolting and emancipatory figure allows another and closer perspective onto the nonhuman monstrous-feminine in media. In three subchapters, Creed analyses several movies to illustrate this rebellion by the female ‘monsters’. The latter two center “the monstrous-feminine as sentient zombie” as well as the “uncanny creatrix”, i.e., as “the originator of new nonhuman life-forms (*Monstrous-Feminine* 213, 225). Hybridity as part of these figures’ monstrosity, therefore, is not the most examined factor, despite it being briefly addressed in the form of the offspring that the creatrix brings to life.

The modern monstrous-feminine seems to move from a more passive role in which she was defined via her stereotypically female functions and is allowed to actively subvert and rewrite her story for her own benefit. Especially in the case of hybridity, Creed states that “[t]he transformation of the monstrous-feminine into human animal hybrids is particularly uncanny, drawing attention to what should remain hidden – the close relationship of the human and non-human” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 192). What triggers the revolt in such contemporary films, though, according to Creed, is that the monstrous-feminine actively interacts with her difference and nonhumanness (*Monstrous-Feminine* 192). Creed showcases this emergence of the “virginal dentata” and the interaction between the human and animal with the aid of John Fawcett’s *Ginger Snaps* (2000) as well as other movies. Creed describes *Ginger Snaps* as a coming-of-age story that revolves around a young girl that transforms into a werewolf but defies stereotypical expectations by fully embracing her “animal self” and “her newfound aggressive sexuality and the sense of power she is experiencing” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 208). It is important to note that Creed also suggests a certain masculinization of the character with every step of venturing into the sphere of the nonhuman, the animal (*Monstrous-Feminine* 209). Especially in the case of the dehumanizing *vagina dentata*, which contemporary filmmakers now actualize instead of representing it symbolically, this new monstrous-feminine’s “in-between status highlights her uncanniness along with the misogynistic values that assigned her a borderline

existence in the first place” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 202). Therefore, even though the monstrous-feminine found in the *Monster Manual* might not be able to be called fully emancipated or to be in revolt, Creed offers a glimpse of what they *could* become.

Published in 2022, decades after the first edition of Creed’s first book, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* also explores many different ways of representing the monstrous woman. While her first book is significantly denser and thus more useful to my own theoretical prism, her second book contains important supplementary theses, which I briefly sketch below. This work mainly revolves around Feminist New Wave Cinema from the twenty-first century, which would at least in a time-context align with the publication and creation of the primary material. However, Creed demonstrates that this new wave of the monstrous-feminine is based on cinematic works predominantly directed by women (*Return* 1), which greatly diverges from the gender and gendered perspective of the (original) creators of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and in turn, the *Monster Manual*. Among other aspects, Creed also turns her attention on the abject male in this work. She states that such roles can be reversed in contemporary cinema, explaining how a man’s abjection can be “tied to his intentions and deeds (*Return* 10). While not as extensively as in the newly added chapter in her original work, Creed does indeed explore aspects of the nonhuman and supernatural in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* as well. In the form of “vampire, siren, witch, alien, posthuman, and other nonhuman animal figures”, the monstrous-feminine continues to live out this particular bodily abjection in Feminist New Wave Cinema (Creed, *Return* 7-8). Therefore, chapters five and six, which revolve around the nonhuman and the femme fatale respectively, will briefly be elaborated on to expand on the understanding of said topics as they are presented in Creed’s main work.

Creed illustrates each of her chapters with a single film example. She notes that the female vampire, for example, has historically been, from the silent era to contemporary media, portrayed by actresses that evoke a cultural foreignness, i.e., actresses that either appear or are non-white or come from outside of the United States. Utilizing this trend in contemporary media “opens up the origins of ethnic prejudice that has informed the image of the female vampire over the decades” and in turn successfully Others the supposed monster on screen (Creed, *Return* 86). In the case of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) by Ana Lily Amirpour, which Creed uses as an example of the genre, the subversion presents itself in the fact that the vampire is not a ‘typical’ monster. In revolt, the female vampire uses her nonhumanness to fight the “violent, exploitative men, who have abused women and other outsiders [...] [that] represent the worst of male abjection” (*Return* 85). The alien female character in Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2013), in contrast, embodies, or rather poses as, a femme fatale (Creed, *Return* 95).

Not only is the appearance of the seductive woman a “body suit of human skin”, but the alien learns to mimic human behavior and utilizes her supposed sexuality to lure and kill male victims. This movie again subverts its trope by having the female main character leave behind the persona of the femme fatale to pursue a human life for herself. Inevitably, though, she is still unmasked as alien, as Other, and is burned to death. It is a story about what lies under the seemingly human skin, that which is Other and for which female characters can be demonized (Creed, *Return* 95-96). While both examples showcase a very contemporary, feminist, and subversive take on female monstrosity, they are not necessarily reflective of the figure found in the *Monster Manual*. However, it is still important to consider how female monsters *could* have been represented, how harmful tropes can be utilized to raise questions about prejudice and injustice.

2.3. Gamified Monstrosity

Despite concerns that (video) gamified monsters must be treated differently than ‘traditional’ monsters, there is a validity in applying the monstrous-feminine and accompanying concepts to the monsters of *Dungeons and Dragons*. In an article about monstrosity in video games, Jaroslav Švelch describes the monster manuals of *Dungeons and Dragons* as a precursor and early model of how monsters are operated in video games nowadays (197). In both the *Monster Manual* and video games, the monster adheres to certain (artificial) laws such as stat blocks or numerical representations (197). Though I would like to note here that while a computer must adhere to these rules, in *Dungeons and Dragons* such instructions can be seen more as suggestions as it is, at its core, a game of improvisation. As the *Monster Manual* nevertheless is, as Švelch states, “monstrosity squeezed into a database” (197), his concern about analyzing such predetermined and coded monsters is very much relevant and must be taken into account. In this particular article, Švelch comes to the conclusion that monstrosity in (video) games has moved away from the premise that the monster is something we do not know and therefore fear, and instead lures the player into a state of security as such predetermination makes the monster predictable and knowable – it becomes something to control (202). Via his claim, Švelch argues that the very nature of such video game monsters would not adhere to Kristeva’s definition of the abject anymore, as opposed to traditional monsters that move in a liminal space of the unknown. He (boldly) claims that society’s perception of and interaction with monstrosity is undergoing a tremendous shift – from the abject to the object – as “informatic control has now colonized even the things we fear” (195). Švelch primarily seems to inspect this issue from an

intense player perspective and does not take the designs and backgrounds of the monsters themselves into account. The latter is the focus of my thesis.

While Švelch's warning about analyzing monsters that are predetermined and clearly defined by a system are valid, several scholars (e.g., Stang and Trammell; Blomquist) have successfully proven that psychoanalytic concepts can still be applied to the monsters of *Dungeons and Dragons* (see chapters 2.4.4. and 2.4.5). Furthermore, as described by J. J. Cohen earlier, the monster always emerges within a cultural context. Conclusively, Švelch pleads for people to understand and consider how a monster is bound to a set of rules, so that the monster can return to something unknown in (video) games (203). While the author's concern is not unreasonable, his tonality is overly absolute. As mentioned earlier, the *Monster Manual* is not bound to a computer or code and therefore, his claims can only be applied partially. I instead use its intense and meticulous categorization to my advantage, as it will allow for a deeper level of analysis.

I must address the aforementioned claim that gamified monstrosity has to be treated with caution and analyzed with the awareness of the possible restrictions their nature brings. Several scholars have successfully applied the monstrous-feminine to video game and *Dungeons and Dragons* monsters alike. Gregory Blomquist, for example, has the advantage that the character he analyzes is not an opponent, but a playable character. This enables him to focus on the actual monstrous characteristics, the narrative, and the relationship between the character's human and hybrid side. In this case, the female body is displayed and heavily sexualized, turned into a monster but still forced to partly adhere to conventional beauty standards. It is the forced physical hybridization of her character that takes the spotlight (Blomquist 890). Sarah Stang, a prolific author on the matter of monsters in *Dungeons and Dragons*, also in connection with the monstrous-feminine, has convincingly shown how Creed's concept can be applied in this medium. For example, in context with the figure of the hag in both a video game and *Dungeons and Dragons*, Stang and Trammell argue that this additional numerical breakdown is what enables a deeper understanding of the figure's monstrosity (741). The divergence between the statistics and the assumptions that can be made based on the visual presentation reveal the figure's cunning nature and their defiance of expectations (741). In the subsequent chapter, I provide a more detailed examination of previous research in this field and will elaborate on how such monsters have been examined and analyzed previously.

2.4. The Monstrous-Feminine and Hybrid Monsters

Monsters are all around us: they always have been and perhaps always will as long as we exist to imagine them. In this chapter, I aim at a summary of how female monsters, both hybrid and not, have been depicted and utilized in games of different mediums. I will also trace the historical roots of female monstrosity and establish where the inspirations for the monsters in the *Monster Manual* came from. J. J. Cohen states that “[t]he monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection” (4) and that the monster “can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse [...], but they always return” (20). Therefore, it is impossible to pin a monstrous origin to a specific place and point in time. I reiterate this because the scope of this project does not allow for a discussion of all female hybrid monsters/creatures of history that bear similarity to those in the *Monster Manual* and I am aware that lesser-known mythological creatures will have to be excluded. Hence, the following discussion less serves to discover which mythological creature was the exact blueprint for those in the sourcebook, but to gain an understanding of how such hybrid creatures are constructed culturally.

2.4.1. Mythological Female Hybrid Creatures

One of the most well-known and stereotypically female hybrid creatures seems to be the mermaid, who is part human, part fish/water creature. While I ultimately decided to exclude the *Monster Manual* equivalent, the merfolk, from the analysis due to their non-evil disposition, this monster’s design follows similar trends to those reflected in this project. Due to this creature’s popularity and presence in different cultural circles, the mermaid therefore serves as a great example for the monstrous feminine in mythological history. The mermaid, in her most basic definition, i.e., a half-woman/human, half-fish creature has existed for thousands of years in mythologies from all around the world (“Mermaid/Merman”; Drewal 84). It is also due to European conquests in the 1400s that the idea of this mythical creature was spread along the Atlantic’s sailing routes (Drewal 84). Therefore, depending on the mythology and point of origin, the characteristics of the mermaid will vary. In the Western imagination, she exhibits several fixed attributes and characteristics. A duality is inherent to the mermaid (Farnell and Noiva 55). She is not just a hybrid in terms of physicality, but also twofold in character: “both beguiling and dangerous,” “beautiful but can cause storms and shipwrecks” (Wood, “Mermaid/Merman” 411, 412), with “terrifying yet seductive powers” (Drewal 80), “alluring and dangerous” (Oswald 352). The contemporary (and Westernized) image of the mermaid has been shaped by that of the siren, a creature that was originally one of flight but has an inherent association with the sea (Wood “Mermaid/Merman” 411). In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is

also noted that especially in earlier records, the terms mermaid and siren were sometimes used interchangeably (“Mermaid”). When describing the ever-developing imagination of sirens, Dana Oswald notes that while classical, i.e., Graeco-Roman, depictions adhere to the ‘original’ half-human, half-bird division, ever since the Middle Ages, the siren’s image has been conflated with that of the mermaid (352). She argues that in the creature’s essence, it is not the specific animal part that precedence however, but it is her hybrid state that defines her (352).

Both sirens and mermaids are traditionally female; they are “always alluring and dangerous, affiliated with the water and effluvia, but strangely absent of sexual capacity, as their nether regions are those of birds or fish, feathered or scaled, and impenetrable” (Oswald 352). Oswald, in comparing the siren to the centaur, another hybrid creature, suggests that the siren can be described as having a “hypersexual monstrous gender” which is based on her “excessive sexuality” and her “function as seducer[]” instead of showing primary sex characteristics (352). In response to Jefferey Jerome Cohen’s sixth thesis, as discussed earlier, Farnell and Novia suggest that the mermaid as a symbol is inherently eroticized not only “because of her nymph-like upper half”, but especially “because of her sinuous lower half, an uncomfortably alluring call toward bestiality” (61). Thus, the gendered and sexual aspects of the mermaid/siren historically have been essential in the construction and imagination of the creature. The mermaid though, is not the only female hybrid monster that functions in this manner.

Historically speaking, sexuality, eroticization, and gendered symbolism are an integral aspect of female hybrid monsters. As seen in the example of the mermaid, the allure and seductive power of the female monster are frequently her greatest weapons. Morgan summarizes that oftentimes the connection between femininity/the female gender and monstrosity in hybrid monsters stems from male fears. It is female sexuality that is difficult to ‘control’ by a patriarchal society and this exact fear is expressed in the imagined monsters such as the siren who “is a seductress before she turns murderess,” or the harpy, whose “insatiable hunger can [...] be interpreted as a metaphor for unbridled lust” (110). Further, Farnell and Novia ascribe to the stereotypical mermaid the function of “temptress” (64). While death may ultimately wait for the (male) victim, it is often portrayed as secondary. It is the sexual aspect, the seduction and luring towards a certain end, i.e., the possibility of death, that makes these monsters exponentially dangerous. This is similar to the (medieval) Spanish belief in the that a siren might devour her male victim should he not satisfy her sexually, portraying the siren as a creature that values ‘good’ sex more than a human life (Braham 34).

Another example of a clearly gendered monstrosity are the Graeco-Roman harpies. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the harpies are described as being dichotic: while their faces are sweet and

innocent, they are also “filthy,” release “a horrible odor,” and have “discharge dripping from their bellies [that] suggests menstruation” (Felton 122). Felton describes the “monsterization of this essential female function” as a “blatant expression of [male] fear of the feminine” (122). The connection between the monstrous, the ‘disgusting’ and the feminine is certainly no new phenomenon, as seen in the historical/mythological examples of mermaids and sirens as well as in Creed and Kristeva’s writing respectively. Evidently, this effect is still utilized in contemporary horror and fantasy works such as the *Monster Manual* for the reason that such fears are not easily let go of in a patriarchal society. J. J. Cohen states that “[f]eminine and cultural others are monstrous enough by themselves in patriarchal society, but when they threaten to mingle, the entire economy of desire comes under attack” (15). While I am aware that the “cultural others” J. J. Cohen here most likely refers to are meant to be people that are non-European, i.e., outside the circle that recorded most of (mythological) history, I read this statement slightly differently to highlight my thesis: Especially monsters that are hybrids and transgress the boundaries of the ‘normal’, a hybrid that is part ‘Other’, i.e., nonhuman, and part woman, i.e., the Other to patriarchy, poses a threat from two different avenues that a patriarchal society cannot fully understand on their own, but even less so in combination.

2.4.2. Inspiration for the *Monster Manual*

A number of monsters that I selected for analysis in the *Monster Manual* seem to utilize mythological creatures as their source material in name and visual presentation. The harpy, the erinyes, and the cambion exhibit significant overlap with preexisting mythological creatures in terms of features and characterization. In traditional art and stories, harpies are typically represented as hybrids between a bird and a woman, though the ratio between the two varies. Felton, for example explains the monsters from Greek myth were described as either birds with a female visage or women with attributes such as talons and wings of birds of prey (117). S. Cohen describes a hybrid stage between the two in which a harpy looks like a vulture with a female face and breasts (244). Wood explains that these differences in appearance have to do with a temporal development, the classical and older depictions being more bird-like with ‘just’ a human/female face, shifting towards a physicality of a female head and torso while still retaining the carrion bird’s talons and wings in post-classical literature (“Harpy” 308-309). In terms of character, the harpy is described as overwhelmingly negative. She is known for her “insatiable hunger,” is a “temptress, seductress and tormenter of victims” (S. Cohen 248-250), associated with gluttony (Morgan 105), and “is constantly screeching, filthy in appearance and habits, and pollutes everything it touches” (Wood “Harpy” 308). Morgan notes that especially in the

Renaissance, the symbolic connotations of the harpy and other hybrid monsters were predominantly negative (105). According to S. Cohen, the harpy is one among several hybrid monsters in which “[t]he threat of female sexuality of the male victim is reasserted as a *leitmotif* [...] from classical antiquity until the Renaissance” (250). Finally, harpies are also closely linked to death and retribution, similar to other monsters from Greek myth such as the furies (Wood “Harpy” 308). Roman furies, called erinyes in Greek, are goddesses of revenge with snakes in their hair that are sent out from hell, more specifically Tartarus, as punishers and avengers (“Fury” def. 5.a). They are a personification of the anger of those in the afterlife, but their appearance does not always reflect this attitude. A number of descriptions make them out to be rather frightening or unappealing, having bloody eyes or an aged, hunched body surrounded by snakes, while others paint them as more beautiful. Ancient Greek art often depicts them as “winged and dressed as hunters in short tunics and boots, to emphasize the swiftness of their retribution” (Wood, “Furies” 243). It is said that they are beyond the command of even the gods, as it was their duty to carry out cosmic justice against violations of “sacred or social norms – for example, perjury, the murder of parents and supplicants, and any violations of the obligations of hospitality” (Wood, “Furies” 243).

Due to their broad categorization and loose definition, cambions are most variable in terms of appearance and character. Cambions are the result of a union between an incubus and a human woman who must carry out the pregnancy (Humm “Succubus/Incubus” 343). By a Christian definition, this ‘unnatural’ offspring would belong to the demonic world. Not only would this child be considered Other because of their parentage, but due to the sometimes-complicated process in which this life is created, the cambion would be spiritually and/or physically marked. Historically, these flaws were sometimes used to explain “birth defects and nasty people” (Humm “Incubus/Succubus” 343).

These more traditional attributes and imaginations of the three monsters are heavily reflected, though somewhat adapted, in the *Monster Manual*, indicating how heavily the franchise of *Dungeons and Dragons* is built upon mythology and popular stories. How exactly these monsters function in this context, though, will be explored in the analysis at a later point.

In contrast, to the harpy, the erinyes, and the cambion, the other monsters selected for analysis – the drider, the marilith, and the lamia – find inspiration in several mythological creatures as their names and bodily forms do not coincide with a particular mythological figure. Not only do the names of the drider and the marilith not correspond to any known mythological creature, but their category names are entirely fictional and unique to the world of *Dungeons and Dragons*. The drider, a lexical blend consisting of the words ‘drow’ and ‘spider,’ describes

a creature that from the torso upwards is humanoid but otherwise arachnoid. Several (hybrid) arachnoid monsters exist in stories from several different cultural circles. A prime example here would be the story of Arachne from classical, i.e., Greek and Roman, myth. Most famously known from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Arachne was a weaver that challenged the goddess Athena and kills herself in despair due to the goddess's negative reaction to her work. Athena, in turn, transforms her into a spider for her to continue her craft of weaving for ever after ("Arachne" *Britannica Academic*). Arachne, in these terms, is therefore not a stereotypical and evil 'monster.' From a different place in the world, there is, for example, the Spider Woman in North American Hopi and Navajo mythology, where she is regarded as a prominent actor in the creation of the universe and all life (Lenhardt 346-347). In contrast, an evil manifestation of a female human-and-spider hybrid can be found in Japanese mythology. Noriko T. Reider calls the mythological "Earth Spider," appearing in a medieval tale about Samurais and their journey, a "killer female shape-shifter" (62). In the story called *Tsuchigumo zōshi*, this creature is described as a "gorgeous female figure" that has spider-like powers and later transforms into a gargantuan arachnean form (63). Accordingly, the name of the earth spider, i.e., *tsuchigumo*, was frequently used in ancient Japanese literature to demonize those – often Indigenous – people, that "defied imperial (central) authority" (66). While the *tsuchigumo* seems to not be exclusively female in Japanese mythology, many of her female manifestations are inherently connected to motherhood and/or mothering functions (Reider 67). A Japanese mythological spider that seems to be exclusively female though is the *gorōgumo*, a shapeshifting spider demon that uses the form of a beautiful woman to lure in victims (Reider 68; Beattie "Shapeshifter" 510). While there is little that matches the description of the spider perfectly, the spider as a hybrid and, though not exclusively, monstrous figure is present in mythologies around the world.

Another *Dungeons and Dragons* monster whose name seems to have been created in context of the game is the marilith. This creature has the upper body of a human woman with several pairs of arms protruding out of her torso and the lower body of a snake. Disregarding the surplus of arms, half woman-half snake creatures can be found in Greek mythology. For example, the Echidna is not only the mother of several iconic monsters in Greek mythology, but she is also portrayed as a woman-serpent-hybrid ("Echidna" *Britannica Academic*). I would like to highlight her monstrosity is mainly tied to her mothering function as she brings forth other, quite gruesome, monsters in Greek mythology.

Similarly portrayed as a hybrid between woman and snake is the Lamia. In earlier Greek myths, she "was the best-developed figure from the world of child killing spirits in Greek thought" (Skene "Lamia" 368). In later stories, around the beginning time of the Roman

Empire, the image of the Lamia shifted slightly. Instead of devouring children, she now lured on men. Using the appearance of her upper human body to trick and seduce men, as soon as they were close enough she would poison and ravage her prey (Skene, “Lamia” 368). In this sense of the myth, the Lamia’s monstrosity and wickedness lies in her hybridity itself as she uses both halves, the human and animal, to hunt her victims. Interestingly enough, the Lamia is also a monster in the *Monster Manual*, although only by name, as her appearance and nature does not coincide with those in the aforementioned myths. The depiction of the *Dungeons and Dragons* version of the Lamia is reminiscent of the Sphinx as this monster is portrayed with the torso of a human merged with a leonine lower half. The Sphinx, a “mythological creature with a lion’s body and a human head [is] an important image in Egyptian and Greek art and legend” (“Sphinx” *Britannica Academic*). From legend, the Sphinx that Oedipus encounters is portrayed as an intellectual creature. She poses riddles to those that come before her and the punishment for incorrect answers would be death by consumption. Diverging from a classical Egyptian portrayal, as can be observed by the Great Sphinx of Giza in Egypt, her appearance varies in other parts of the world as she is sometimes portrayed as winged (“Sphinx” *Britannica Academic*). Though many of the monsters created for the *Monster Manual* are original, it is clearly stated in the introduction of the *Monster Manual* that “[s]ome of the creatures that inhabit the world of D&D have origins rooted in real-world mythology and fantasy literature” (Perkins et al. 4). Such ‘real-life’, i.e., mythological influences, whatever they may be, are tainted with associations, connotations, and biases. Pop-culture thrives by borrowing certain blueprints because they *work*.

2.4.3. Gendered Tropes and Female Characters in Video Games

Not only, as discussed earlier, do video game monsters and the ones categorized in the *Monster Manual* function similarly, but they are oftentimes connected. Especially the RPG (role-playing-game) genre in video games heavily sources *Dungeons and Dragons* for its monsters (Forest, “Video Games” 567). Therefore, I will now also explore how first, female characters, and second, female monsters have been portrayed in video games before moving on to the significantly smaller research question regarding female monsters in *Dungeons and Dragons*. While video game studies are a fast-developing field and new work is continuously being published, the 2017 article “Bridging Game Studies and Feminist Theories” by Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant serves as a valuable introduction to the matter. They discuss several stereotypes and tropes concerning female video game characters, playable or not. Among those discussed tropes and stereotypes is a particular way in which female characters are ‘marked.’ This issue is

especially highlighted by Anita Sarkeesian, an acclaimed feminist media critic, in her video-essay series “Tropes vs Women in Video Games”. Even in rather early and ‘simple’ video games, developers and designers have always made a point to mark their female characters in a specific manner in order to differentiate them from their male counterparts. Sarkeesian calls one of these tropes that are employed to create female characters the “Ms. Male Character Trope,” a design choice in which the female characters are “defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via their visual properties, their narrative connection or occasionally through promotional material” (“Ms. Male” 00:03:19-00:03:34). A prime example for this practice, and among the first playable video game characters that was female, would be Ms. Pac-Man. Her appearance is quite rich in gendered markers such as exaggerated makeup and fashion accessories like a bow/hair ribbon or jewelry, all atop the blank male template of the original Pac Man that audiences were already well familiar with (Sarkeesian, “Ms. Male” 00:04:26-00:04:54). While such “Ms. Male” characters can also exist without explicitly gendered signifiers, it is their presence that differentiates a character by their gender rather than other attributes. Thereby, video games that employ this trope reinforce a binary way of thinking about gender by presenting the male character as the default and the female character as a ‘marked’ opposite (Sarkeesian “Ms. Male” 00:08:47-00:10:00).

In another video, Sarkeesian elaborates on an additional way in which female characters, specifically monsters and villains, are portrayed, ostracized, and defined via their gender. Reminiscent of one of the monsters I will be analyzing in this thesis is one of Sarkeesian’s examples from the *Doom 3* game: the Vagery, a monster that has the upper body of a (naked) woman and the torso and legs of an arachnid. According to Sarkeesian, the Vagery was developed with the aim to combine something “sexy” with something “gross” to achieve a “creepy” effect. Combined with the fact that this monster is the only female-coded one among many male-coded ones in the game, the idea that it is this monster’s femaleness that is evil is reinforced (Sarkeesian, “Seductress” 00:00:54-00:01:42). Such characters, which Sarkeesian calls “grotesquely female,” appear in a number of fantasy video games in several forms: one transforms in a woman-spider-hybrid, one gargantuan villain has multiple breasts across her whole body, and another births nefarious demon babies through her nipples (“Seductress” 00:03:52-00:04:35). As opposed to many male characters she observed, Sarkeesian describes a pattern in the design of such female villains: it is often the secondary sex characteristics, in this case breasts, that are twisted from something that can elicit arousal, usually in a stereotypical heterosexual male spectator, into something revolting (“Seductress” 00:04:42-00:05:12). Another archetype in which a female villain can pose a threat is that of the temptress. This archetype

uses her sexuality as a weapon, and it is this ‘sexual power’ and threat that identifies her as dangerous (Sarkeesian, “Seductress” 00:06:55-00:07:46). Sarkeesian also emphasizes that such stereo- and archetypes are in no way a new phenomenon. That the sexual expression of a woman can and should be perceived as a threat has been perpetuated by, for example, various folkloric and religious stories, dating back millennia (“Seductress” 00:10:34-00:11:16). There are, of course, several other archetypes of women that are employed in video games, but it is especially these two that are intrinsically connected to the character’s gender.

Similarly, *Dungeons and Dragons* is also littered with gendered tropes. For example, one of the most well-known gendered and female archetypes/motifs in pop culture media is the ‘damsel in distress.’ The stories of King Kong or the plot of Super Mario are staples of the contemporary movie and entertainment industry, and it is therefore no surprise that this motif has also been employed in early versions of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Miley Brennan examines the first version of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* which displays a rather clear scenario of a stereotypical damsel in distress on its cover. Brennan concisely summarizes why the artwork in a *Dungeons and Dragons* sourcebook is of such importance: “Artwork in the D&D community has shaped and continues to shape how players understand aspects of the game, primarily because the game is one of pure imagination” (225). The cover art of the first *Dungeon Master’s Guide* depicts a gargantuan red humanoid figure with demonic attributes and a phallic-looking weapon that has a scantily clad and seemingly helpless female figure clutched in one of his hands. The captured woman is holding a knife and is indicated to be in moving as to resist the grip of the creature (Brennan 231-232). In the front of the painting, two male figures fitting the “non-descript representations of the masculine norm” have their backs turned to the spectator and seem ready to rush into action towards the monster (Brennan 233). These figures, in contrast to the woman, are fully clothed in muted colors and the focus is on their weapons, magic and a sword, respectively (Brennan 233). Via several characteristic stereotypes and connotations, the creature holding the woman, is established as a figure of power in opposition to the player characters (Brennan 236-237). While the two humanoid male characters are portrayed as relatively stereotypical fighters, the female character is not: her struggle is in the foreground. It is precisely because of the foregrounding of struggle and helplessness that, in context of the situation depicted in the painting, implies that it is the male heroes’ task to rescue the woman (Brennan 239). Over the decades, the game design has improved in that respect as, for example, the cover design for the 2014 version of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* does not feature “an overtly gendered image, and there are no problematic power hierarchies” (Brennan 244). Brennan’s analysis is merely one example of how gender-essentialist *Dungeons and*

Dragons used to be. While this is mainly in the past, today, or at least in the 2014 versions of the *Monster Manual*, such implications about gender are made more covertly. What implications are made exactly, I aim to showcase in this thesis.

2.4.4. Female Hybridity in Video Games: Some Examples

Female characters in video games have, in terms of development and presence, come a long way. Female hybrid monstrosity in video games, however, still lacks in terms of positive representation. Seldomly are players of video games allowed to embody an empowered female hybrid character, with the exception of the subsequently described Sarah Kerrigan, perhaps. Most often, the mutated female monster is the player's opponent and must be eliminated and/or fought.

A prime example for a female hybrid figure in a video game is Kerrigan from *StarCraft*. While in *Dungeons and Dragons*, as well as in many video games, the 'monsters' often serve as opponents, Kerrigan is a playable character with a fleshed-out backstory that both Stang ("Broodmother" 2019) and Blomquist (2021) examine and identify as monstrous-feminine. Let me return to Švelch's claim that abjectivity cannot (easily) be mapped onto video games (195). In response, I want to highlight that it is indeed possible to read such monsters that follow set rules as abject, especially in the case of hybrid characters: According to Kristeva, the abject is at least partly rooted in the blurring of the identity line between human and animal (213). Stang, for example, follows this notion with the argument that in the particular 'monsters' she has examined, "hybridity, liminality, and categorical breakdown all signal the abject" ("Broodmother" 239). What I would also like to note is that, while Kerrigan is indeed a playable character, she is "like many powerful nonhuman or hybrid female characters in science fiction, fantasy, and horror media [...] villainous, deceitful, violent, and cruel" (Stang 249). It seems almost natural for hybrid monstrosity to be accompanied by villainy. What is therefore even more important to note is that Kerrigan does not start her journey as a hybrid, but as a human. Blomquist describes her bodily form post-transformation as a "feminine-coded Zerg creature with monstrous claws, tendril/antennae hair, skeletal wings, and insectoid-like carapace" (889-890). Referring back to arguments Stang made in her article, Blomquist comes to the conclusion that "Kerrigan's monstrosity hinges upon her hybridity in a multitude of ways, especially her humanity. The human aspect of the monstrous-feminine hybrid is crucial to her horrific nature" (887-888). Considering Kerrigan's storyline, design, and presentation, Stang argues that she can be read as an empowered female character. Her empowerment though, ultimately comes "at the cost of her own agency" ("Broodmother" 249) as well as the controversial circumstances

of her death and implied rebirth as a human, in which “like most monstrous women she is not allowed to remain monstrous *and* get a happy ending” (“Broodmother” 251). Her death is not the only problematic aspect about Kerrigan’s character, though. Blomquist highlights that her character is rather hypersexualized in its visual portrayal (890). Accentuated “breasts, hips, and buttocks” (890-891) and “feet [that] are shaped to resemble stiletto high heels” (891) are supposed to form an alluring counterpart to her otherwise monstrous features (Blomquist 891). Therefore, “[t]he female/monster hybridity ostensibly emphasizes both aspects of Kerrigan, revealing the ostensibly paradoxical sexual nature of her hypersexualized body while also trying to obscure her feminine form by fusing it with alien and animalistic anatomy” (Blomquist 892). There is a great overlap in the manner in which monsters or monstrous characters are portrayed in video games and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Therefore video games provide a suitable starting point for an analysis of the *Monster Manual*. In a more specific context, oftentimes in combination with video game studies, scholars have indeed written about the *Monster Manual* and its content as well. Despite the little scholarship in this rather small field, their findings grant valuable insight into how female stereotypes are perpetuated in this medium.

Sarah Stang is by far the most prolific scholar regarding to representation of the monstrous-feminine and female monstrosity in video games and *Dungeons and Dragons*. With Stang, let me move on to more specific cases of non-playable female monsters, as opposed to Kerrigan from *StarCraft*. It is first important to understand why monsters in (some) video games and sourcebooks of *Dungeons and Dragons* are categorized in the manner and style they are. In a joint research project, Stang and Trammell argue that all the editions of the *Monster Manual*, as well as in the in-game statistical presentations of monsters in video games such as the *God of War* and *The Witcher* series, can be considered modernized forms of bestiaries (735-737). Traditionally, a bestiary is a “treatise or descriptive work on (real or imaginary) animals or beasts; *spec.* (in earliest use) a treatise of this kind with a moralistic purpose” (“Bestiary” def. 2.). Stang and Trammell identify two prominent similarities between what they call “ludic bestiaries” and “medieval bestiaries:” for one, creatures portrayed in such a work are often demonized and are therefore othered. Next, such a work shows statistical characteristics, functions as a database, and it “catalogues, separates, and differentiates monstrosity, so that it can be better understood or controlled by the designer, reader, or player.” It is this particular “design of the bestiary [that] produces abject bodies” (731). Such fixed structural elements, which in the Middle Ages were of “graphic [...], stylistic, [...], or citational” nature, greatly contributed to these (fictional) beasts “persist[ing] from one edition to the next” (Stang and Trammell 735). This is now in turn mirrored in contemporary media such as the standardized entries in the

Monster Manual, as well as the blueprint used in certain video games (Stang and Trammell 735). As they note, even the ludic bestiaries place their monstrous bodies in a particular moral order, albeit not a traditional Christian one, by ascribing the labels such as ‘evil’ (Stang and Trammell 731). They examine one creature – the hag – in three different sources, namely the *Monster Manual*, CD Project RED’s *The Witcher* series, and Sony’s *God of War* series. This particular creature is usually presented as an older female figure and is riddled with ageist and sexist stereotypes (Stang and Trammell 732). Via this exemplary creature, they showcase how the *Monster Manual* builds on traditional bestiaries that usually display a visual and behavioral description, “construct[ing] monstrosity through image, behavior, and statistics, thereby superimposing a quantitative layer alongside the mythic and fantastic” (736). It is this numerical and statistical categorization that adds to the abjection of the female monstrous body. Abjection is not only invoked via a superficial description, but through fixed values. Such “nonnormative or nonconforming bodies [are positioned] as monstrous in comparison to a typical human norm that remains unwritten and invisible” (Stang and Trammell 741). Throughout their project, Stang and Trammell continuously draw on Creed’s work on the monstrous-feminine, as well as Kristeva’s abject, and show that femininity and monstrosity are inextricably linked in the case of the hag (738-740). While the observations made by Stang and Trammell are valuable and revealing, their conclusion appears somewhat generalizing considering that their findings are based on a case study of one single type of creature. They claim that “women are depicted deliberately and routinely in the *MM* as vicious, deceitful, and wicked” (Stang and Trammell 742), not taking the other female presented monsters in the *Monster Manual* into account. Stang convincingly argues in several different projects, though, that there is indeed a trend of misogyny in the sourcebook. What remains is the manner in which these monsters are then interpreted by the individual players of the game, as it would be quite reductive to call every single game and application of *Dungeons and Dragons* inherently misogynistic. Stang and Trammell do therefore acknowledge that, due to the game’s performativity, “misogynist monstrosity may be played up or down on a group-by-group basis” (731), referring to how players handle and interpret the presented material. In the case of the hag, who is not a playable character but an opponent, however, any encounter with her would already be negatively tainted due to the possibility of hostility. Ultimately though, they present a convincing argument regarding a dehumanizing and misogynist portrayal of the hag in the *Monster Manual*.

Female monsters that showcase markers of hybridity or are explicitly marked as hybrids also seem to be a rather popular trope in fantasy (video) games. In addition to the figure of Kerrigan from the *StarCraft* series, Stang also elaborates on the more stereotypical

“broodmother” who is even further removed from humanity than Kerrigan. For example, in the game *Dragon Age: Origins*, Stang observes the Broodmother to be “an animal-human hybrid, with tentacles and a spider-like protrusion” (“Broodmother” 239). Stang’s echoes Kristeva’s construction of the abject (see chapter 2.3.). In another game of the same series, *Dragon Age: Origins - Awakening*, the player encounters another broodmother, named the *Mother*. She, too, is designed as a “half human-half tentacle/spider monster hybrid with multiple breasts,” as per Stang’s formulation (“Broodmother” 241). In the earlier examined project Stang and Trammell note that in these fantasy worlds, “while monsters can certainly be of any sex, giving birth to monsters is an inherently female act, and one which traditionally placed the responsibility for the child’s monstrosity squarely with its mother” (739). This statement seems especially important when considering the lexical makeup of ‘broodmother’ as she is, even in her categorical name, defined by her mothering function. What might be even more important is that these broodmothers were not born, but *reborn* as monstrous. Stang writes that in *Dragon Age: Origins*, it is explained that captured women are forced to undergo a transformation to become the Broodmother. She is transformed in both body and mind and seems to lose all autonomy (“Broodmother” 240). Not only is the (Brood)mother the source of other monsters, it is the “process that turns her into a mother also makes her monstrous (or vice versa)” (Stang, “Broodmother” 240).

In another essay, Stang examines the actions and defense practices of female hybrid monsters. As opposed to the mothering function of the broodmother, some (video) game monsters are more rooted in mythology and showcase abilities that can be interpreted as rather gendered. In two video games series – *The Witcher*- and the *God of War* series – feature the mythological, but adapted, siren that exhibits deceptive features and a unique fighting style (Stang, “Shrieking” 21-23). Sirens in both video games are presented as half-human, half-animal; their monstrosity is only revealed when the player is in close proximity to them. Stang connects this deceit and revelation of their monstrosity to their femininity as they appear “as graceful, floating, scantily-clad young women” (“Shrieking” 21) and “beautiful, naked women” (“Shrieking” 22) before showing their sinister side. She further connects their monstrosity to womanhood with the argument “[t]hat 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” (“Shrieking” 25). Not only do they use deception and subsequent transformation for psychological warfare, but these monsters must almost always “embrace[] their primal physicality and use[] their bodies as weapons” (Stang, “Shrieking” 20). The sirens in the *God of War* video game series do not showcase explicit markers of hybridity, i.e., an overtly non-human body

part, but Stang describes them as having “claws” and “fanged mouths” (“Shrieking” 21). Similarly, Stang describes the Sirens in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* as “half-woman, half-serpent creatures with wings” (“Shrieking” 22) who also transform from a beautiful female humanoid into a monstrous hybrid. The sirens from *The Witcher* series, as they typically have in mythology, also weaponize their voice by shrieking/screaming and therefore stunning their victims (“Shrieking” 23). Going back to the *God of War* franchise, one other hybrid monster utilizes her voice to stun: the banshee. Banshees “appear as beautiful women with decaying flesh, desiccated stomachs, and brown serpent tails instead of legs” (Stang, “Shrieking” 21). Aside from animalistic body parts, i.e., a hybrid form, all these monsters also have something else in common: the use of their voice in a subverted manner. Cinematically speaking, a “woman’s scream, then, reveals her weakness and fear – she cannot act, she can only utter a non-linguistic, involuntary scream” (Stang, “Shrieking” 25). As a defense-strategy, then, these monsters use loud shrieks as a stunning weapon instead (Stang, “Shrieking” 25). Their feminine/female nature is therefore not only marked via secondary sex characteristics, but also via the way they choose to utilize their voice as a weapon. Stang’s close analysis of how such female monsters fight and use their talents and bodies in a clever way is extremely valuable to use as a point of departure for my analysis: Since in *Dungeons and Dragons* the abilities and fighting tactics of a monster are arguably their most important features in the, it is important to consider how even those features can be inherently gendered.

However, while Stang often focusses on the *grotesqueness* of the mutated female body and the transformative factor, she seldomly considers the animal hybrid part as an essential constituent, if applicable. I, in contrast, argue that while all these monsters are clearly portrayed as monstrous-feminine, their hybridity and animal features are not merely a tool for dehumanization or a marker for their transformed monstrous state, but aid in the establishment of the monstrous-feminine. In another work, as described in the subsequent chapter, despite arguing for the reading of several female monsters as femme fatales, Stang predominantly identifies them as such via a close reading of their visuals and description, disregarding the possible implications of the monster’s statistical makeup. In my thesis, however, the statistics and magical means of the monsters are one of the most abundant sources for information and possibilities of interpretation.

2.4.5. Female Monstrosity in *Dungeons and Dragons*

Despite my criticism, I would like to move on to one of Stang’s projects in which the primary material is solely taken from *Dungeons and Dragons* and does not include video game material.

It showcases how female monsters are/were depicted in this TTRPG genre in isolation. The monsters Stang examines in the online article titled “The Fiend Folio’s Female Fiends: Kelpies, Vampires, and Demon Queens” are not completely humanoid in appearance, can shapeshift, or are even explicitly named hybrids. The primary material of Stang’s analysis is a sourcebook called the *Fiend Folio*. This book was published in 1981 and is one of the earliest published source materials that was released subsequent to the first *Dungeon Master’s Guide* in 1979 (Forest, “Dungeons & Dragons” 192). Stang notes that in the *Fiend Folio*, a majority of the featured monsters are either “male-coded or gender-neutral” and it is only the three monsters she selected for this analysis that are “overtly female-coded”: the kelpie, the penanggalan, and “Lolth, the demon queen of spiders” (“Fiend”). Stang references her work with Trammell, as discussed earlier, and uses findings of her previous work as a basis for her close reading of the three monsters. The vampire figure of the three, the penanggalan, appears as a disembodied head with her organs trailing below. Like many other female monsters, she owns the power of disguise as she usually appears as a beautiful woman and her vile and monstrous form is only visible during the night (Stang, “Fiend”). Stang also notes that this vampire’s “entry almost exclusively uses masculine pronouns when referring to the penanggalan’s victims” (“Fiend”). Should a man fall victim to the penanggalan, his death is final. In the case of a female victim, however, the killed only remains dead for three days and then transforms into a penanggalan herself (“Fiend”). This sole power to create new (female) life echoes Creed’s writing on monstrous motherhood and the *archaic mother*, a notion that is also present in some of the monsters from the present day 2014 *Monster Manual*.

Another monster analyzed by Stang is the kelpie, which, in the *Fiend Folio*, just as in Celtic mythology, can shapeshift between a humanoid and an equine form. In contrast to the mythological source material, though, the humanoid form of the *Fiend Folio*’s kelpie is explicitly female and alluring, her design “sexualizing the creature and making it appealing (and therefore dangerous) to a heterosexual male viewer” (“Fiend”). The kelpie’s prey consists of exclusively men, as women are said to be immune to this monster’s magical charm (“Fiend”). The kelpie’s fighting style, i.e., charming her victims, is again a very stereotypical female power that is reminiscent of many of the monsters described earlier.

Most important of the three monsters is the spider queen Lolth, who is often presented as a hybrid and can also be found in today’s sourcebooks (Stang, “Fiend”). This figure is most important for my own analysis, as she is inextricably connected by likeness and lore the drider. In the *Fiend Folio*, Lolth is described as shapeshifter who switches between a gargantuan black widow and a humanoid, elven form. In the accompanying artwork, however, she is depicted in

a hybrid form containing thorax, legs, and abdomen of a spider fused with the torso of a female elf (Stang, “Fiend”). Stang notes that in all subsequent source materials and representation of Lolth, who because of her status as a deity has been a persisting figure in *Dungeons and Dragons* lore for decades, her most common form is that of a drider (the human-spider hybrid described above). Aside from the fact that the society which is devoted to her is a matriarchy, her direct disciples are all female, and her unambiguous labelling as evil, Stang explains that Lolth’s incentive is “vengeance against a man, which undermines her positioning as a potentially empowering goddess figure” (“Fiend”). The fact that the non-human half of Lolth is that of a spider, more specifically a black widow, will be discussed in more detail in the analytical part of this thesis. Looking past the spider’s connotations, Stang concludes that “[a]n extremely effective way of dehumanizing someone is to make their body hybrid, transformative, or grotesque” (“Fiend”). Therefore, Stang interprets the hybridity of the female monsters in this specific monster manual as serving as a (rather effective) othering technique.

Finally I would like to address Stang’s rather concise but impactful conclusion: all three monsters she examines can be labelled as femme fatales, underlined by overarching theme of an aversion towards men, expressed either by a matriarchal society, prey being exclusively men, or a simple aversion to them – all while being the only explicitly named female monsters in this sourcebook (“Fiend”). In reaction, Stang appeals not to erase of female monsters, but for fairness in the gendered design of monsters overall. Stang is concerned how femininity and gender are utilized and weaponized to signal monstrosity. She encourages the creation of “female monsters that are not monstrous in relation to their sexuality, are not deceptive and seductive traps or lures for presumed male players, do not draw on mythological creatures that serve patriarchal ideology [...] and do not adhere to the *femme fatale* archetype” (“Fiend”). My thesis supports her appeal – while I acknowledge that there has been a lot of progress in the last decades, some stereotypes still prevail today. It is my hope that I can, at least to a small degree, contribute to uncovering how such stereotypes are still a regular occurrence in the gaming world today.

3. Methodology

In my analysis, I examine not only the written description of the selected monsters, but rather all aspects of how they are presented: visual and verbal representations, as well as statistical classifications that stat blocks offer. As I focus on these different aspects and how they interact and interrelate, I rely on a multimodal approach to analyzing this sourcebook. I will conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to critically examine and expose the underlying misogynist implications behind these monsters. As these two methods are quite frequently applied together,

their combination, a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), provides the most fitting theoretical framework for my analysis. An MCDA is especially fitting as it “reveal[s] the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in the images as well as texts [...] [and] the kinds of power interest buried in them” (Machin and Mayr 9-10) in a piece of media. Texts do not merely reflect the ideologies and stances of the author, but function as an active “means of social construction [and] [t]herefore, discourse [...] is itself seen to contribute to the production and reproduction of these [social] processes and structures” (Machin and Mayr 24). There are a several approaches to multimodally conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis. In the following chapter, I provide an overview of these approaches and present how I examine my primary material.

3.1. Combining Different Research Methods: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

One of the most important proponents of Critical Discourse Analysis, the linguist Ruth Wodak, describes why CDA can be such an ideal and effective approach for a project such as my own. As “a research program with many facets and numerous different theoretical and methodological approaches” (Wodak 186), its flexibility allows me to perfectly tailor CDA to my project and to combine it with different lenses as well as a multimodal approach. Wodak also makes sure to clearly define the word *critical* and what it means for CDA. It is my aim to uncover negative implications regarding the connections between gender and monstrosity. Therefore, it is important during the analysis to be aware that “[c]ritical means distinguishing complexity and denying easy, dichotomous explanations. It means making contradictions transparent” (Wodak 186). Further, as can be deduced from the previous chapter, mythological context is especially important for the analysis of fantastical creatures and monsters; patterns emerge from *somewhere* and can be traced back in history. According to Wodak, “[discourse] is always historical, connected synchronically and diachronically with other communicative events that are happening at the same time or have happened before” (187). Despite CDA being initially developed and used in linguistics to study language and language interaction, over the years, as Tan et al. argue, “traditional divisions in discourse studies [...] have become somewhat blurred” (263). Not only are “multidisciplinary theories and methods [...] necessary in critical research” (Wodak 187), but “multimodality is [also] fundamentally a *transdisciplinary* field of research and application” (Tan et al. 266). The introduction of multimodality as an approach to CDA has “been found to offer more robust sets of tools than those available for the analysis of

language alone [such approaches] have been adapted and applied to the critical analysis of a range of multimodal discourses” (Tan et al. 269).

As for how to approach a critical discourse analysis, multimodal or not, Norman Fairclough suggests four basic stages of the research and writing process. The first stage consists of the selection of and focus on the social wrong that “can productively be approached in a trans-disciplinary way” (Fairclough 15). The second stage concerns itself with the identification of the point of entry into the matter, the selection of the primary material, and finally the analysis itself (16). After these two stages, the analysis itself is complete, but Fairclough suggests two additional stages that round off a CDA. The third stage, Fairclough admits, is not as clearly defined as it deals with the question “whether the social order ‘needs’ the social wrong” (17). He elaborates that one must ask “whether the social wrong in focus is inherent to the social order, whether it can be addressed within it, or only by changing it” (17). It is also at this stage in which the question of ideology becomes rather prominent. If the social wrong is indeed ‘needed’ in the social order, what ideals and power relations is it upholding? The fourth and final stage aims to end such an analysis on a positive note. It is comprised of the “possibilities within the existing social process for overcoming obstacles to addressing the social wrong in question” (17). Fairclough’s approach provides a great point of departure, especially due to the reminder that it is essential to not only focus on the ‘negative’ findings but also have a positive outlook and an optimistic hope for change.

Gunther Kress and Jeff Bezemer also discuss the basic elements of a Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Despite their approach lacking the ‘critical,’ they offer some valuable insight into how multimodality affects a (Critical) Discourse Analysis. While I regularly use the term ‘textual description’ to refer to the words on the page regarding my primary material, Kress and Bezemer highlight that, in this context and their understanding, *text* refers to “the material *site of emergence* of immaterial *discourse(s)*” (140). Moreover, they note that “[t]he etymology of the word *text* draws attention to the *result* of processes of ‘weaving’ together different ‘threads’ – usually assumed to be either *speech* or *writing* – into a coherent whole” and what remains is “the question of who the ‘weaver’ is, and what forms of ‘coherence’ are shaped by her, him, or them” (Kress and Bezemer 140). The length of the analytical subchapters will vary depending on the individual monster and mode, consisting of the entries of six monsters – the cambion, the erinyes, the marilith, the drider, the harpy, and the lamia – that provide visuals, sometimes additional sketches, statistical values, and descriptive texts varying in length. As Kress and Bezemer state, “[i]n a multimodal approach, all modes are framed as one field, as one domain. [...] All are seen as equal, potentially, in their capacity to contribute meaning to a complex

semiotic entity, a text” (142). Therefore, even if one mode should seem less ‘important’ or valuable at first glance, it is necessary to award all modes equal importance because “discourses, crucially, [...] are realized in all modes” (Kress and Bezemer 142).

David Machin and Andrea Mayr brilliantly and comprehensively bring together and combine the various (multimodal) approaches to (Critical) Discourse Analysis. Their breakdown of the different elements of such an analysis guides my own, as already indicated earlier. Machin and Mayr step away from an entirely linguistic perspective and offer a variety of tools and methods for a visual analysis (1). In the case of the *Monster Manual*, one could argue that the drawings accompanying the textual descriptions are merely that – accompanying pictures to better visualize what is written. When analyzed with the aid of MCDA, whose purpose it is to “show[] how images, photographs, diagrams, and graphics also work to create meaning” (Machin and Mayr 9) though, it becomes clear that the meanings created by the visuals is equally important to the meanings expressed in the written text. As noted earlier, it is the ultimate purpose of a CDA to uncover ideologies within a text. Ideology can be found in most aspects of life and is a constitutional part of society (Machin and Mayr 25) and it would therefore be logical that ideological patterns are present in a sourcebook of *Dungeons and Dragons*, a game that has been developing over the last decades and encourages players to build and create new social structures.

3.2. The Interplay Between and the Effects of Different Modes

Every single seemingly miniscule choice is significant, which vocabulary is used, and in turn, which is not. By either highlighting or avoiding certain words or images then, an implicit signal of is sent to the reader (Machin and Mayr 30-31). In a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, several semiotic choices are considered, which I will briefly introduce according to how they are explained by Machin and Mayr. Word connotations, for example, can effectively elicit a range of associations within the reader. Words usually have a plethora of synonyms, and it is necessary to question why *that* one particular word out of all the options is chosen. This choice can, for example, influence how distant or closely entangled the reader feels to the matter at hand (Machin and Mayr 32). In addition to the choice of vocabulary, the frequency in which a word or a word group is used can be rather telling as well. On one hand, there is overlexicalization, “an abundance of particular words and their synonyms” indicating “where the persuasion was taking place and the area of ideological contention” (Machin and Mayr 37). On the other hand, the antithesis to an overlexicalization would be a suppression “where certain terms that we might expect are absent” (Machin and Mayr 38). Another feature is that of structural

oppositions. While words carry their own individual meanings, they are also a “part of a network of meanings” (Machin and Mayr 39). Machin and Mayr explain this as follows:

In language, these oppositions are opposing concepts such as young-old, good-bad, or democracy-communism. Often only one of these may be mentioned, which can imply differences from qualities of its opposites without these being overly stated. Or this particular word can bring with it associations from its related clusters of concepts. So, if a particular participant in a news text is described as ‘militant’ or an ‘extremist’, we can fathom that such a person acts in the opposite manner expected of a ‘citizen’ or a ‘member of a community’ (39)

Even though such linguistic choices by the author might seem deliberate, their accumulation across the different features allows scholars to draw out the implicit ideologies of the text and its author.

In addition to word choices, it is also necessary to consider a variety of visual choices. How is the text formatted? What font is used? Is the background blank or does it have a particular design? What colors are present? It is quite useful to ask oneself how a particular text would be read and received had it been formatted in a different manner (Machin and Mayr 49). As for imagery, Machin and Mayr refer to Roland Barthes’s writings on semiotic theory to investigate the iconography of images. They highlight the connotations of an image rather than the ‘simple’ denotation (49). To ask about connotations is to ask about the “ideas and concepts” behind an image as well as the “values [that] are communicated though what is represented” (Machin and Mayr 50). When analyzing an image, one must also ‘zoom’ into the picture and consider “the ideas and values communicated by objects and how they are represented”, what Machin and Mayer term “attributes” (51). When a subject is depicted with certain attributes or interacting with certain objects, each of these details carries meaning. Such objects are sometimes part of the setting, another semiotic choice Machin and Mayr describe. The setting not only concerns ‘objects in the background,’ as one might say, but also artistic choices such as lighting and background design (52). Lastly, the salience of an image can greatly influence how efficiently a reader’s attention is drawn to the features the author wants to foreground. Salience can be achieved in a variety of ways. One could, for example, rely on “[p]otent cultural symbols” or the sizing of visual features. In the latter, how well importance is evoked depends on the size of the highlighted feature in opposition to others. Similarly, the brighter, more contrasting, and saturated a feature is, the more it stands out (e.g. in comparison to pastel colors). Additionally, tone and brightness can both successfully direct the attention of the reader. Focus, and in turn blurriness, also greatly contribute to an image’s salience. And finally, foregrounding and overlapping are two features that operate in a similar fashion. The former creates a hierarchy of importance of the visual elements and establishes the intensity of their salience. The

latter employs the same *modus operandi*, but more easily enables features to be portrayed on an equal level of importance (Machin and Mayr 54-56).

Since the aim of my thesis is the analysis of specific monsters in the *Monster Manual*, Machin and Mayer's chapter on "Representing People: Language and Identity" is immensely helpful as they explain how social actors can be portrayed both linguistically and visually (77). There always exists at least one identity aspect that accompanies the description of a social actor as "there exists no neutral way to represent a person" (Machin and Mayr 77). Social actors can be classified via a variety of ways. Impersonalization and personalization, for example, can influence the received significance of a situational statement, while individualization, the opposite of collectivization, can increase the empathy felt for certain social actors (Machin and Mayr 79-80). People can also be "represented as specific individuals or as a generic type" (80), the latter opening the option to demonize a whole people or group when used in a negative context. Further, the functionalization of a social actor, i.e., them being "depicted in terms of what they do" instead of being named, i.e., nominalized, can lead to dehumanization, but also legitimize someone's identity (Machin and Mayr 81).

The following representation strategy is especially important in the case of my thesis: Objectivation describes representation through and reduction to features of a participant. A common occurrence would be for women to be reduced to their appearance or their gender (Machin and Mayr 82-83), similarly to how a specific type of monster could be referred to as 'the monstrosity,' disregarding any possibility of individualism and humanity. Lastly, just as it is important to consider the words that are used, it is imperative to 'read between the lines' and consider which linguistic features are avoided (85). Similar strategies exist for visual communication. Some of the representational strategies Machin and Mayr list are not applicable in my analysis due to the rigid and repetitive pattern in which all monsters usually are depicted in the *Monster Manual*. There is, for example, no negligible variation in the distance between the social actor and the reader. However, angling the depicted body towards different viewpoints can indicate different levels of closeness or detachment, or force the reader to take the social actor's point of view. These effects are of course enhanced when combined with other features (Machin and Mayr 98-99). In addition to the positioning of the depicted person, other strategies revolve around either collectivization or individualization. Depending on the context, portraying someone as an individual and lone social actor in a picture, as opposed to a homogenous anonymous group, can either heighten the underlying signals or aid in concealing uncomfortable truths (Machin and Mayr 100-101). Moreover, a stylized depiction of people is used to

portray someone as “specific people” rather than individuals and to “make the individualist of people disappear behind elements that categorize them” (Machin and Mayr 101).

3.3. Looking at the Woman: The Male Gaze and Femme Fatales

I would like to briefly introduce two concepts which will accompany the subsequent analysis. Well-established in film studies, Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze will partly guide the visual analysis of the pictorial portrayal of the monsters. The archetype of the femme fatale and how this figure utilizes and weaponizes her femininity will be relevant throughout all modes, i.e., the visual presentation as well as the textual description.

If we assume, as Sarah Stang does, that the intended and implied audience of the *Monster Manual* is a stereotypical cisgender, heterosexual, white man, Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, which she introduced in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” (1975) serves as a fitting lens to analyze the visual representation of the monsters. Creed herself mentions Mulvey’s work, stating that the concept of the male gaze and invoked fear due to the woman as castrated is helpful when describing the (horrifying) female victim in horror film (134-135). Nevertheless, Creed also states that “Mulvey’s theory of the sadistic male gaze” is not as fitting for the analysis of horror media as it is in other genres (163). I want to clarify that I do not consider this as an indication that Mulvey’s work is unable to be applied to the monstrous-feminine, only that it does not provide a fitting lens through which to consider women in horror media specifically. The entries in the *Monster Manual* were created to be looked at and to be studied closely. This format certainly evokes what Mulvey describes as a to-be-looked-at-ness, in which “[t]he determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (“Visual” 62) and “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (“Visual” 62). The spectator/reader is “in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment” (“Visual” 64), but the effects that the female figure has on the spectator go beyond the effect of simple pleasure and enjoyment. Relating back to Freud’s psychoanalytical theory, as described via the writings of Creed earlier, Mulvey also roots her concept in psychoanalysis. In the female figure it is what is absent in the look, i.e., the penis, that invokes castration anxiety, and in turn, fear (Mulvey, “Visual” 64). The male spectator sees in the woman their sexual difference and “the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (Mulvey, “Visual” 65). When considering the type of primary material for this project, i.e., unmoving images that were created to be displayed and looked at, the female figure becomes even more

passive than it might become in film. After all, it is the “actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man” (Mulvey, “Visual” 68). While Mulvey’s concept is rather fitting for my own analysis, I must also acknowledge the shortcomings of Mulvey’s writings. In this particular version, Mulvey leaves out the prospect of a queer gaze of any kind. Neither does she consider that for the male spectator the displayed woman might not be a desirable subject, nor does she consider a feminine queer gaze, i.e., a female spectator.² Moreover, Mulvey’s writing comes from the perspective of white spectatorship. bell hooks, for example, introduces and contrasts black female spectatorship opposite the predominantly white space of Hollywood film and in which manner white feminist spaces have excluded this gaze (207-210). The limitations of her original article are even acknowledged and corrected by Mulvey herself in “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by ‘Duel in the Sun’ (King Vidor, 1946).” In response to why the male perspective is dominant in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey explains that she “was interested in the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the ‘masculinisation’ of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex” (“Afterthoughts” 12) and explains that masculinity is often forced onto the spectator. This notion is especially interesting when considering the original intended audience of *Dungeons and Dragons*. There is no doubt that the viewpoint of the original creators and the original, predominantly white male, audience still taints this game today. Thus, the assumed male spectator is indeed applicable to my project as the male gaze can be considered representative of an overarching issue, i.e., the patriarchal and white power structure under which media was and still is produced. Therefore, Mulvey’s initial writings resonate with this project.

The figure of the femme fatale describes the female monsters of *Dungeons and Dragons* and their blending of feminine attributes and danger rather well. Hence, I will also consider how this female archetype is reflected outside of film in such a sourcebook format. Despite this figure being a prime cinematic and literary character, certain attributes and essential features have been reflected in various fictional and mythological women throughout history (Grossman 10-11). In film, a femme fatale is typically “a beautiful woman who seduces a male protagonist into criminality and a web of deceit, causing his demise and, when film-industry production codes required, her own death too” (Grossman 1). While this description is intertwined with narrative, Grossman also introduces the femme fatale via certain features that transcend the filmic medium: “[i]ntelligent, witty, able to role-play and perform, deceptive enraged, frustrated, mercenary, seductive, overtly sexual, fearless and tough as nails, physically self-

² For a more in-depth insight into a queer gaze in cinema, consult, for example, Jack Halberstam (1998).

confident with a striking appearance” (1). The performative and deceptive talent of the femme fatale is among her most important features and is the most threatening to men (Grossman 6-7). While Grossman mainly describes the classic femme fatale of film noir, many scholars have examined this figure in a more contemporary context. Katherine Farrimond, for example, analyzes the femme fatale and her relationship with monstrosity in two subchapters of her book *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*. In the context of science-fiction, she describes the femme fatale’s monstrous body and its origins or lack thereof. In this specific genre, this archetype presents itself “as a kind of cyborg, a mixture of human and non-human” that blends the impressions of sexuality and threat (Farrimond 131). For Farrimond, a cyborg exhibits “a hybrid body, combining human and non-human elements, including alien and animal DNA, mutations and mechanical parts” (131). I want to highlight this, albeit rather obvious, definition due to Farrimond’s inclusion of animal and alien DNA, going beyond the ‘simple’ human-mechanical cyborg. As for this thesis, Farrimond’s understanding of such a hybrid body influenced the selection of the monsters based on their hybridity.

According to Farrimond, monstrous femme fatales are usually depicted in two different manners. For one, the femme fatale’s monstrosity is of a parasitic nature and inhabits the female (host) body. It is therefore possible to read ‘woman’ and ‘monster’ as separate entities and attribute the usually powerful features of a femme fatale to an alien, outside force (146). The other version of this figure is presented as inherently monstrous and/or other. This version can be read “as subversive, durable, and resistant to the patriarchal narratives that surround them” (148). In her case study of science fiction, Farrimond argues that “the femme fatale emerges repeatedly as the primary method of representing the female monster who combines human female with mutant, alien or technological elements” and that “[t]he effect of this is to present such figures as dangerous, sexually threatening and in need of containment” (150). It is the refusal to explain this femme fatale’s nonhuman origin that allows the figure to be empowered (Farrimond 162). It is especially this latter version of the femme fatale, whose hybridity is an essential and inherent part of her, that can also be observed in the monsters of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

4. Analysis

The previous chapters provide a good point of departure to move on to the analysis part of this thesis. Examples of female hybrid characters in both video games and past editions of *Dungeons and Dragons* allow and justify the application of both the abject and the monstrous feminine

(Kristeva; Creed). These concepts form a red thread throughout all the following chapters and, when applicable, Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze as well as the figure of the femme fatale are reflected on. The six figures that are examined – the cambion, the erinyes, the marilith, the drider, the harpy, and the lamia – can be grouped into two major categories regarding their basic appearance: the first group exhibits a mostly humanoid-shaped body and may have minor animalistic features such as claws, a tail, or horns, and most importantly, a pair of wings sprouting from their back. The second group is defined by a bodily form that is comprised of the lower body of an animal and the torso of a human. The following chapters are arranged according to the three major categories: visuals, text, and statistics. While the first section concerning the visuals is rather contained in itself, the subsequent sections are more interrelated and will also refer back to the visual aspects.

4.1. Visual Elements

In a typical entry of the *Monster Manual*, the first thing that catches one's eye is the artistic depiction of the monster. While the text can and often does offer additional information about the looks of the character in question, it is this first impression made by the visuals that will influence one's subconscious reading the textual information. The background of the pages in the *Monster Manual* is not merely blank, but held in brown and green tones and gives the illusion of parchment paper that has been painted on. The illustrations of the monsters are in color and painted in a watercolor style. The watercolor-stained background gives the figures a space to exist on the page without appearing out of place and anchors them while not taking away their spotlight. Some monsters are accompanied by background elements to add dimension, such as shadows, rocks, or foliage, but most appear to be free-floating on the page. Four out of the six monsters are accompanied by fictional anecdotes by homodiegetic writers. They are formatted as if notepaper had been laid in-between the pages and typically describe an encounter with or impression of the monster. For two of the monsters, the marilith and the lamia, additional sketches adorn the page, providing close-ups of weapons, features, or an in-action dynamic shot. All figures except one, the harpy, take up space in their stance by positioning body parts and/or weapons in an outward angle to convey confidence and assert themselves as threatening. Different elements such as clothing, stance, color, and facial expressions work together create an overall threatening impression.

4.1.1. Armor and Attire

All of the six monsters are wearing armor to varying degrees of cover and effectiveness. Most heavily armored are two of the fiends, the cambion and the erinyes, as can be seen in figures 1 and 2, respectively.



Fig 1 Cambion (Perkins et al. 36)



Fig. 2 Erinyes (Perkins et al. 73)

The erinyes (figure 2) is wearing the most sturdy-looking suit of armor, offering a maximum amount of protection. The heavily stylized horned helmet adds height to her stature, and the high number of spiked metal parts on the helm, as well as the back of the heel and the endings of the arm bracers, make the figure appear dangerous and abrasive. The accompanying text also states that this suit of armor and the helmet adorned with horns are staples of an erinyes (Perkins et al. 68). Despite the armor pieces not necessarily being exaggerated in design or size, due to the dynamic posing of the erinyes, the metal parts that cover the knees as well as the upper thighs and hips make the body appear bigger than it is. Simultaneously, the tasset (i.e. hip cover), protrudes out of the silhouette in a way that imitates and exaggerates the shape of the buttocks. Continuing the imitation of the stereotypical curves of a female body, the armor piece of the chest area is heavily stylized to suggest the shape of breasts. Due to the body being twisted sideways, the form is immediately recognizable in its silhouette. These elements merge typically soft, feminine features with cold, strong and weathered metal, creating an immediate association between the female body and danger. The cambion's armor pieces (figure 1) also feature several spikes and sharp elements. These armor pieces less enhance the figure's feminine features but take on a predominately intimidating and practical function. Arm, knee, and

shin bracers feature spikes that could also function as weapons themselves, while a part of the vital organs in the upper body seem unprotected. The shoulder pauldron of the cambion in figure 1 fulfils a similar function as the horned helmet of the erinyes in figure 2: they enlarge the space the figure is taking up. The cambion gains the illusion of broader shoulders and therefore a more masculine silhouette, and the erinyes gains the illusion of height via the helmet. In the case of these two figures, this illusion is achieved via functional armor pieces. The lamia (figure 3), in contrast, wears a more decorative shoulder piece that achieves a similar effect by widening the shoulders. The lamia's clothing and armor choices reflect their description of usually "fight[ing] from the fringes, beguiling foes with magic" and rather "springing away to safety" (Perkins et al. 201) should they be engaged in direct combat.



Fig. 3 Lamia (Perkins et al. 201)

The shoulder piece (figure 3) does not appear to be made of metal but rather of some organic material that blends in with the lamia's overall color scheme. Her arm bracers similarly blend in in terms of color and shape and barely disrupt the natural silhouette of her arms. Soft material cascades from the chest piece and seems to be the only element effectively covering the lamia's breasts, though the outlines are still very much visible. This rather dainty and alluring upper body stands in stark contrast to the muscular and mighty lower leonine body, as can also be seen in figure 3.

For those monsters that have a lower animal body – the marilith and the drider – the armor they wear takes on a supplementary function aside from protection and intimidation. In addition to the shoulder-chest-piece of the lamia, this figure also wears an, arguably thin, leather harness that conceals the exact physical transition between the female humanoid upper body

and the lower animal body. In the case of the lamia, the physical transition between the two body parts is not on full display but partly concealed by a type of leather harness. The border between the human and animal is therefore blurry and at least visually remains a mystery. This blurred line between human and animal manifests these figures as abject when interpreting Kristeva's statement that "[t]he abject confronts us [...] where man strays on the territories of animal" (13) not only in a behavioral, but a literal physical sense. Ultimately, apocalyptic texts, or in this case figures, are anchored "on the fragile border [...] where identities do not exist or barely so" and are "double, fuzzy, heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (Kristeva 213). Such a concealment of the human animal border is even more present and important for the marilith (figure 4) and the drider (figure 5):



Fig. 4 Marilith (Perkins et al. 61)



Fig. 5 Drider (Perkins et al. 120)

The marilith (figure 4) is similarly dynamically posed as the erinyes, though less armored. Her protective plates achieve a similar effect, accentuating stereotypically female curves, such as the breasts and the waist. The drider in figure 5, in contrast, does not have her chest area accentuated, but a fully exposed lower abdomen as the protective metal layer ends along the line of her ribcage. The transitional area between the human and the arachnoid, due to the rapid increase in circumference of the latter, emphasizes the waist area and imitates broader hips. Not only does clothing or a piece of armor cover the space in which the genitalia would be but also creates suspension in the reader by not clarifying if they are present in their human form. The clothing, therefore, serves as suspension. It covers a liminal space that could potentially decide,

in the eyes of the reader, ‘how human’ the monster is. The figures allude to a *vagina dentata* (cf. Creed), wielding enough blades and sharp objects to invoke castration anxiety in a male spectator. Not only do they have the potential to elicit fear, especially in male spectators, because of the concrete danger they pose, but also because they cannot be clearly defined: the covering of the physical transition area further pushes these creatures into the abject as described by Kristeva.

The style and amount of attire can also be an indicator of hierarchy in a hybrid creature. Except for the harpy (figure 6) all characters are at least partly armored:



Fig. 6 Harpy (Perkins et al. 181)

In the illustrations of the lamia, marilith, and the drider, see figures 3, 4, and 5 respectively, it is only the humanoid part of the body that is clothed or covered/armored. As discussed earlier, the lamia’s clothing is not very protective to begin with, but rather serves a decorative function. While there is a harness visible on the leonine back of the lamia, accompanying sketches suggest that this serves a practical carrying function similar to a saddlebag. The marilith, who is described as a fierce combatant (Perkins et al. 53) and the drider, who is a skilled hunter (Perkins et al. 120) should wear some form of protection. Of course, it could also be argued that the humanoid half is covered due to typically human clothing conventions, but when considering the danger of being wounded, it would be logical to assume that they would want to protect their whole body, human and animal alike. Does this imply that the animal body is beneath the humanoid, that it is less worthy? Or less in need of protection? In comparison, animal hide, scales, and the carapace are naturally stronger and more resistant than human skin. The humanoid torso and head, as well as its protection, indicate its importance. Anatomically speaking,

although these creatures are clearly supernatural and can therefore not be accurately compared to real-life biology, all three animal halves (figures 3, 4, and 5) would assumably contain vital organs. However, it is only the human organs, or more specifically the heart, that is always in some other way shielded. Despite the animal halves being essential to the overall portrayal and nature of each of the monsters, they seem to be secondary, and never equal, to the human minds and torsos. The harpy, the only completely naked figure, does not adhere to this pattern of how clothing is utilized. An absence, though, especially such a stark and obvious one, is not without reason, as will be explored in chapter 4.1.3. in context with the spectator's gaze.

4.1.2. Symbolism and the *Vagina Dentata*

As hinted at in the previous chapter, despite it not being explicitly stated or shown, several of the monsters, especially the drider and the marilith, implicitly evoke the *vagina dentata* (cf. Creed 115-130) via several design choices. The *vagina dentata*, i.e., the toothed vagina, is connected to the woman in the role of the castrator and “points to male fears and phantasies about female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces. The *vagina dentata* is the mouth of hell – a terrifying symbol of woman as the ‘devil’s gateway’” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 116). According to Creed, it is the fear of (genital) castration and dismemberment that is most frequently conjured by the *vagina dentata* (117). The marilith carries a blade in each of her six arms (figure 4), and with them creates an oval opening around herself, the borders of which are sharp and potentially dangerous, threatening to pull the victim inside. Further, the anecdote on the marilith’s page describes not only the creature’s brutality, but also its fable for dismemberment (Perkins et al. 61). A homodiegetic writer reports of a space “strewn with body parts” and “not wanting to get hacked to pieces” themselves (61). Since the *vagina dentata* can also manifest symbolically, i.e., in the “loss of the mother’s body, breast, loss of identity” and be “experienced by both female and male” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 117), the general threat of dismemberment that the marilith is explicitly said to pose supports my reading of this figure as a representation of the *vagina dentata*. Similarly, when considering the arachnoid body of the drider (figure 5), the *vagina dentata* is reflected in the figure’s limbic arrangement. The eight legs of the spider are sharply pointed and echo the threat of the sword that the drider holds in her hand. With their perceived sturdiness and implied texture, the drider’s legs are rather reminiscent of the sturdier shell of a crab. Despite the legs not being listed in the text as one of their attack options, the visual presentation implies them to be. The two front legs are pointed to the space below the humanoid torso where the female genitals would be, while the other six legs frame the rest of the figure. If the drider

were to attack someone with their legs, it would most likely use her forelegs to pull the victim close to the main body and to then continue with a weapon attack. This action of using sharp, spiky extensions of the body to pull a victim towards the visually dark center of the body (figure 5) echoes Creed's textual description of the *vagina dentata*.

Fragments of the *vagina dentata* can also be found in the other monsters, though not as obviously or as prominently. The utilization of animals as a stand-in or symbol for the *vagina dentata* is no contemporary invention but is present throughout classical art, in which "the figure of a beautiful woman was often accompanied by an animal companion with the open jaws and snapping teeth; the creature represented her deadly genital trap and evil intent" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 118). While, similarly to the drider in figure 5, paws with visible claws are placed in front of the center of the lamia's body (figure 3), it is the sketch in the background of the lamia's main artwork which evokes the *vagina dentata* more clearly.

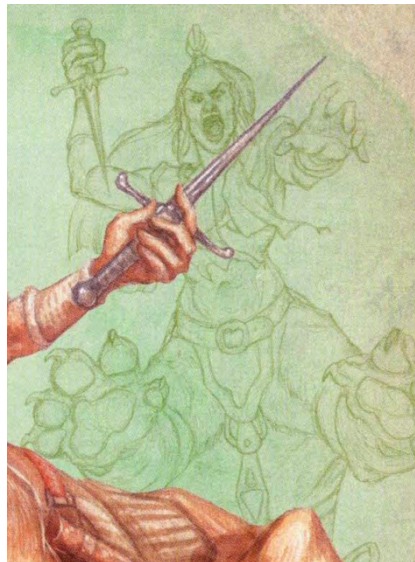


Fig. 7 Lamia version 2 (Perkins et al. 201)

Mid-jump (figure 7) the figure positions her front legs to lead the attack, similar to how the drider would utilize her front legs. Albeit not a gaping leonine maw, the position of the claws in figure 7 again reflect the *vagina dentata* and can be read as a reference to the practice of animal symbolism to emphasize the potential danger the female figure poses. Textually, the lamia also threatens with a loss of the body as this creature is described to consume humanoids (Perkins et al. 201). Similarly, a devouring and dismembering habit is repeatedly mentioned in the textual description of the harpy. Originating from a curse that transformed the first harpy's "love into a hunger for flesh" (Perkins et al. 181), this creature takes joy in the slow dismemberment and torture of a person before ultimately consuming them and afterwards collecting body parts as souvenirs (181). Parted lips that offer a glimpse into a, sometimes sharply, toothed

mouth also evoke the *vagina dentata* (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 117). Though not strongly represented visually, the harpy's visible teeth and suggestively opened lips (with implied action of shouting or creating noise, see figure 6) are reminiscent of the mouth as a stand-in for this image. However, the *vagina dentata* is most present when considering the visual in combination with the hunger for humanoid flesh and hunting habits (Perkins et al. 181). It seems to be especially those monsters that have a humanoid torso and lower animal body that symbolically evoke the *vagina dentata*, as the erinyes and the cambion, for example, do not seem to suggest such an image.

4.1.3. To-Be-Looked-At-Ness

All six monsters are posed in a manner which invites the gaze of the spectator. One might argue that this is a genre-specific requirement of a bestiary but considering that these monsters not only display their physical and magical powers, but also their femininity and sexual appeal, it is necessary to take this aspect into further account. While I already touched upon some similar aspects in my discussion of clothing and proportions, their stance and the way their bodies are positioned on the page aid in establishing dominance. Due to the *Monster Manual's* function as a bestiary, pages which are the background for the various creatures provide a high contrast in most cases, especially since the illustrations are the only elements in bright colors, beyond the sepia tones on the individual pages. This is in concurrence with Machin and Mayr's explanation that a higher level of saturation improves the salience of a visual element, and, in contrast, how elements lower in salience are usually more muted and less saturated (55). The harpy almost disappears in the foliage of the background and is an outlier in this case. Despite this, as can be seen in figure 6, due to the great use of color the harpy as a visual element is still high in salience. The lamia though (figure 3), is colored in rather similarly to the background page, i.e., brown and sepia tones, and is therefore less salient than her more colorful peers. Disregarding the color palette of the lamia, the illustrations are generally intended to be among the first elements considered by the spectator. Further, except for the erinyes and the harpy, whose illustration is partly overlayed by the stat block element, the monsters themselves are clearly in the foreground of the page. Lastly, those that are given weapons are portrayed in an active, dynamic, and/or interactive manner. The cambion (figure 1) and the drider (figure 5) actively seek the spectator's gaze and initiate eye contact through the page. In a similar vein, the marilith and the drider (figures 4, 5), have their blades raised as if they were about to strike and the erinyes in figure 2 is swinging her rope, implying the presence of an opponent, e.g., the spectator. The lamia, in turn, invites the viewer to look *with* her at the blade in her hand (figure 3)

and guides the gaze towards the threatening and far more active sketch depicted in figure 7. Hereby, the lamia retains her regal composure while implicitly revealing her threatening side to the spectator. Therefore, the monsters' active stances aid in establishing the figures as dangerous and potential enemies to engage in a fight in.

The harpy (figure 6) is again the exception in this aspect. On the page, she does not take up as much space as possible but rather is curled in on herself and reduces her torso and limbs to one small area. Instead of proudly displaying her wings like the cambion and erinyes do, she seems to almost wrap them around herself in a protective manner. This might coincide with the textual label of "[s]adistic [c]owards" that describes the harpies' non-offensive nature, i.e., their habit to "never attack unless they have a clear advantage" and that "[i]f a fight turns against [the harpy], it lacks the cunning to adapt and will flee and go hungry rather than risk straight-up combat" (Perkins et al. 181). Despite this textual explanation for the less offensive bodily stance, it is also important to note that the harpy is the only of the six monsters that is completely naked, without any barrier to protect her from harm or a spectator's gaze. Not only is the depicted harpy not given protection in the form of clothing or armor, but she is also the only creature depicted without any weapons. According to the accompanying text, though, the harpy usually fights with a bone club (Perkins et al. 181). The harpy in figure 6, however, must rely on her claws and magical voice alone. I read the harpy's magical abilities and how they are interpreted as being enhanced by her naked depiction. The harpy's magic lies in her "[l]uring [s]ong" which charms the victim, i.e., magically influences their free will, and forces the listener to move towards the harpy and potential subsequent death (Perkins et al. 181). The harpy's magical weapon being her allure justifies her enthralling visual portrayal. Despite being textually described as having "the body, legs, and wings of a vulture with the torso, arms, and head of a human" (Perkins et al. 181), the harpy in the illustration to be more humanoid than avian in nature though and centers a naked female body. This discrepancy might relate to the magical allure that the creature is supposed to possess. Therefore, in the case of the harpy, her typically 'feminine' traits, both physical and magical, are highlighted and implied to be the predominantly dangerous aspect of this monster.

4.1.4. Facial Expressions and a (False) Sense of Security

Initially, without context of the text or deeper consideration of the visual implications, many of the monsters' facial expressions do not exude hostility per se. The exception is the cambion, who gazes directly at the spectator while her lowered head and scowling grimace match her wide and confrontative stance (figure 1). She openly signals her hostility. Only one other

monster, the drider, also directly gazes at the viewer. This creature's projected attitude, however, already has the potential to be interpreted in different ways. Even though her face is rather small in relation to her body and therefore not as easily scrutinized in all its details, a close examination reveals that her expression is rather neutral. Further, her cheeks appear to be flushed pink which is an unexpected and warm detail that contrasts with her otherwise dark, gray skin (figure 5). To the male gaze, flushed cheeks might aim to signal a sexual connotation and make the creature seem more innocent. Subconsciously, however, the direct and intense eye contact and the rosy cheeks could support the signaling of the *vagina dentata*, as discussed in chapter 4.1.2., and foreshadow the ultimate demise of the drider's victim.

The other monsters, in contrast, turn their gaze away from the spectator, although to varying degrees. The erinyes (figure 2) and the marilith (figure 4) only slightly avert their gaze while still being portrayed in an active stance and generally turned towards the spectator. Neither grimace or indicate hostility via their facial features. A female spectator, for example, might feel empowered by the calm, poised, and powerful expressions these creatures have, as both also have rather stereotypically pleasing facial features and wear makeup, e.g., the red lip of the erinyes in figure 2. However, this calm and non-hostile expression can quickly turn threatening. As discussed in chapter 4.1.2., the marilith also evokes the *vagina dentata*. This subconscious signaling might be concealed at first by this non-threatening look, before transforming into the notion that the marilith is hyper-aware of her surroundings and does not need to always track her opponent to have the upper hand(s). The same notion, except for the evocation of the *vagina dentata*, applies to the erinyes as well. They are characterized via the "swift death" they bring, despite not directly having to look at their opponent.

Lastly, the most passive monsters in terms of expression and 'interaction' with the intended spectator are the lamia (figure 3) and the harpy (figure 6). Not only is the lamia's gaze fully turned away from the spectator, but her eyes appear to be almost closed. Nevertheless, the spectator automatically follows the imagined line of sight of the creature which leads to the dagger in her hand. The implications of the dagger and the duality between the illustration and the sketch behind are discussed in chapter 4.1.3. The danger of the lamia is hidden behind an initially poised and calm façade that could lure a victim into a false sense of security, especially considering the lamia's magical and illusory talents which are discussed in chapter 4.3. In addition to the harpy's (figure 6) line of sight and face turned to the off side of the page, her body is also completely non-confrontative and hunched over, see also chapter 4.1.3., generally exuding non-hostility. In context with her magical voice/song, however, her calm and still manner might lure the spectator or opponent into a false sense of security. As discussed in chapter

4.3.3., the danger of the harpy is not necessarily a visible one but lies in the acoustic sphere. Additionally, her open mouth simultaneously refers to her vocal talent while also suggesting the *vagina dentata*, see chapter 4.1.2. To conclude, even though a majority of the monsters to not seek direct eye contact with the spectator, their facial expressions are rather potent signifiers and enhance the effects of the remaining visual aspects.

4.1.5. Weapons

The weapons used by these monsters and how they are carrying them influences their image and, in some instances, acquires a gendered function. In the marilith's illustration (figure 4), I already described how the arrangement of the blades evokes the *vagina dentata*. Additionally, however, the blades seem to be treated as a physical extension of the marilith. This is reflected in the text which states that she³ is “[w]ielding a wicked blade in each of its six hands” (Perkins et al. 53). This description is in concurrence with the complementary illustration (figure 4), as all six hands actively carry a sword and, at least from this specific angle, no sheaths or carrying options for the swords are visible. Moreover, in the simple sketch next to the main illustration, the sword and hand are portrayed as one element, (figure 8).

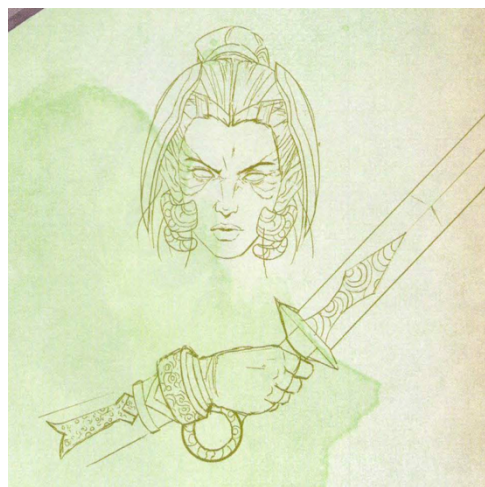


Fig. 8 Marilith details (Perkins et al. 61)

Not only do they form one line visually, the adornments on the marilith's wrist and forearm mirror the design on the base of the blade and connect the two thematically as if it was one single flowing element. Therefore, the marilith is not just a creature that has sword fighting capabilities, but she essentially *is* her “wicked blade[s]”, they are part of her nature. This reading enhances the visual suggestion of the *vagina dentata* when considering the blades as part

³ The disparity between the pronouns in the indirect and direct quotation, i.e., the pronoun choices made by myself and the *Monster Manual* respectively, are discussed in chapter 4.2.1.

of the creature herself and not a separate visual element. The other creature whose visual presentation invokes the *vagina dentata* is the drider (figure 5). The spider creature's blade seems to take a secondary role to her weapon-like legs, despite being listed as one of the three attack options available (Perkins et al. 120) and actively raised in the illustration. On the physical page, the tip of the blade is cut off. While the general shape might be intended to mirror the pointed end segments of the spider legs, the weapon seems to almost be presented as secondary to the implied *vagina dentata* created by the arachnoid elements. Other monsters do not have their weapon raised as if being ready to attack but rather use it to send implicit messages to the spectator. For example, the central illustration of the lamia seems to be calmly and stoically posed while presenting the dagger in her hand (figure 3). The creature's line of sight leads the viewer to the dagger which, in turn, can be read as interacting with the sketch behind the main illustration in figure 7. With this dagger, the lamia points us towards the danger she *can* pose, as the figure in the sketch is in an active attack towards the viewer, showcases aggressive features in comparison to her counterpart in color, and seemingly presents all the different manners in which she is dangerous, i.e., touch via the outstretched hand, the dagger, and the leonine claws (figure 7). Simultaneously, the main dagger crosses the throat of the lamia in the sketch, as if indicating that the lamia is in full control of her dangerous abilities, i.e., consciously containing her own power and/aggression. Simultaneously, however, this arrangement might also suggest that she would not hesitate to betray another lamia, if necessary, i.e., cut someone's throat for her own gain. The choice to portray two very different aspects of this creature is concurrent with the two-faced characterization femme fatales or women in general are often subjected to.

As discussed earlier, the twisted sideways position of the erinyes (figure 2) shows the figure's feminine features and enables her to dynamically take up space. Additionally, this position allows the sheathed sword to imitate a phallus with its hilt. In media, the phallic woman is also repeatedly represented in fetish spaces, an image which is reminiscent of the erinyes in the *Monster Manual*. With how the erinyes is positioned and presented, she evokes the image Creed describes of "woman fetishistically draped in a fur coat, her long legs [...] on display. [...] adorned with phallic objects and may be dressed in leather, carrying a whip or gun" (*Monstrous-Feminine* 126). The 'double' presence of a phallus in the case of the erinyes, once in its physical shape and the silhouette, and once in the objects themselves, i.e., the sword and rope of entanglement (figure 2), constructs the figure as a counterpart to those monsters that evoke the *vagina dentata*. The femme fatale is a prime example of a phallic woman, the phallus metaphorically present in the form of, for instance, a gun in a purse (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*

165). Creed, however, notes an important distinction, especially related to monstrous women: castration anxiety does not necessarily coincide with the image of the phallic woman. Yes, women can be castrators, but

[t]he penis, as such, is not an instrument of incorporation or castration but of penetration. In representations of the penis as an instrument of violence, it does not threaten to castrate but rather to penetrate and split open, explode, tear apart. It is the mythical *vagina dentata* which threatens to devour, to castrate via incorporation. (Creed *Monstrous-Feminine* 165)

The erinyes (figure 2) can thus be read as a representation of a femme fatale and a phallic woman as according to Creed. In contrast to the marilith, who I propose as a representation of the *vagina dentata*, the erinyes is not described to dismember literally or symbolically, but to simply and efficiently “bring swift death” with “exquisite swords and bows” (Perkins et al. 68). In the case of the other monsters, the femme fatale is predominantly reflected in the statistical makeup. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.3.

4.2. Textual Elements

While it was possible to consider the visual aspects and the illustrations in isolation, the following chapter, which revolves around the textual description, interacts with the other modes of representation to a higher degree. Similar to the viewing/reading path of a stereotypical reader, the first visual impression influences the written text, and a second, textually informed, viewing of the visuals enables a deeper understanding of the figures. Some aspects are in concurrence with the visual information, while others are not. Ultimately though, these two modes combined work to reinforce the female hybrid monster as evil monstrous-feminine.

4.2.1. Instances of Dehumanization and Distraction: Pronouns and Repetition

As the six monsters are visually depicted as female, it is reasonable to expect gendered language in their textual description. While this does hold true for adjectives and adverbs, which I will go into more detail about soon, the pronouns that are employed are rather dehumanizing, non-gendered, and purposefully create distance between the human spectator and the monsters. As I have done in the previous section, and will continue to do so throughout this project, I use a mixture of gendered and impersonal pronouns. Throughout all entries, the neutral and non-human pronoun *it* is used to describe the figures (Perkins et al. 36, 53, 73, 120, 181, 201). As many of the examined creatures have male counterparts, one might think that this pronoun is employed to account for more than one gender. The marilith though, whose humanoid part is explicitly named as “female”, is also referred to by *it*. While this trend is not exclusive to these

specific monsters but is present throughout the whole *Monster Manual*, it does indicate a general stance towards the all creatures in this sourcebook. They are purposefully alienated beyond their inherent nature by removing human(oid) descriptors. In the introduction of the *Monster Manual*, it is defined what or who can be a monster. It is stated, though, that the term ‘monster’ may not only be applied to “any creature that can be interacted with and potentially be fought and killed”, but that this “term also applies to humans, elves, dwarves, and other civilized folk who might be friends or rivals” (Perkins et al. 4). The harpy’s description, for example, includes the creature’s origin story. It is said that the first harpy, originally a female elf, was created via a curse by the gods that “worked its magic on the elf’s spirit as well as her body, turning her desire for love into a hunger for flesh, even as her beautiful song continued to draw creatures into her deadly embrace” (Pekins et al. 181). Not only is this elf referred to by she/her pronouns in the beginning of the story, but she retains these gender signifiers even after her transformation into the first harpy. Throughout time and distance to the origin story, the ‘generic’ harpy loses the dignity to be referred to by these pronouns, seemingly having lost her humanity over the course of her existence. In contrast, the drider’s humanoid part is treated differently. Driders are created by the Spider Queen Lolth by transforming a drow, a sub-species of elves in the *Dungeons and Dragons* universe (Perkins et al. 126), as a punishment for failing her trials. In contrast to the first harpy though, who was also an elf, the drow is referred to as *it* both before and after the transformation into the drider. It is therefore unclear where exactly the boundary between human and in-human lies. The *Monster Manual* might lean towards dehumanizing its entries, but throughout my analysis, I refer to the one specific female figure that is depicted on the page and since gender is an important aspect in this project, I will use appropriate pronouns throughout.

Negative descriptors for the different creatures are present in all six instances. In some instances, the effect of these negatively connotated words is dampened by the repetitive emphasis on the monsters’ ‘beautiful’ appearance or traits. By the presence of both, in this descriptive manner, the attractiveness of the creatures becomes a weapon itself as it is described similarly to fighting skills, ruthlessness, or monstrous features in the text. A prime example for weaponized beauty is the erinyes. Despite being described as very competent and highly dangerous warriors, the erinyes is introduced as “the most beautiful and most striking of all lesser and greater devils [...] with statuesque builds” (Perkins et al. 68). It is also stated that in appearance and aura, the erinyes resemble celestial beings, a group that would also be associated with beauty and serenity. Lastly, their visual depiction (figure 2) follows a stereotypically Western beauty standard, from body proportions to sculptured facial features, and the classic red

lips. Next to this image is an intratextual anecdote stating that “they live by the sword and kill by the sword. Their beauty is nothing compared to their wrath” (Perkins et al. 73) aiming to stress their physical prowess and sword fighting skills by not downplaying their beauty but utilizing it as a qualitative point of comparison that establishes them as highly dangerous. Similarly described is the lamia (figure 3), as this creature is said to have a “beautiful humanoid upper body that merges into a powerful four-legged leonine form” (Perkins et al. 201) while simultaneously emphasizing their wickedness, their fable for seduction and corruption, vanity, and magical controlling and illusory power. Having access to illusory magic, there would be no ‘need’ for their inherent beauty, seeing as they could utilize false images for their seductive endeavors. In combination, this lamia’s beauty and charming character enables her to be read as a femme fatale, an aspect that I examine in more detail at a later point. Two more monsters exhibit a similar tendency, though to a much lower extent. The cambion, for example, possesses an “unearthly beauty” (Perkins et al. 36), though only when sired by a specific demon lord. The harpy, in contrast, is not physically described as beautiful, but her divine singing is described as such repeatedly. In this case, it is not physical beauty that is equated to fighting skills or weapons, but her “music [that] is more beautiful than anything else in the world” (Perkins et al. 181) is introduced as this creature’s preferred and main weapon. Further descriptions of the harpy’s song include “sweet”, “beautiful”, “entrancing”, and “luring” (Perkins et al. 181). This beautiful feature is positioned opposite the harpy’s rotten and foul character and “eyes [that] reflect the absolute evil of its soul” (Perkins et al. 181). Even those texts that do not include descriptions of beauty, a discordance between the literal ‘bad’ and superficial ‘good’ is present due to the stereotypical beauty standards the images often adhere to. An example for this instance would be the marilith (figure 4), whose ‘attractiveness’ of her humanoid half is completely omitted textually, but present visually. Some textual elements, however, go beyond negative associations but evoke ancient figures and have broader, culturally agreed upon, connotations.

4.2.2. Word Connotations: Woman As Evil

Women, or female monsters, are predominately given attributes or defined via adjectives and descriptors that are also historically connected with the (evil) feminine. From a Christian perspective, evil, original sin, temptation, and accompanying features can be traced back to Eve in the Garden of Eden. Kristeva describes that sin in “its basic root and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation” (128). She observes an instance in the Bible in which sin in its essence is ascribed to the flesh, to Eve (128), and when considering how women, or in this case monsters, are written about, it becomes apparent that this original evil role of woman

is evoked. Therefore, while also relevant for the femme fatale, words suggesting sin, temptation, corruption etc. also evoke Eve in a Christian tradition.

Most prominent is this biblical allusion in the text about the lamia. Strengthened by words quantifying morality, e.g., the lamia being “decadent” and enforcing a “hedonistic rule” (Perkins et al. 201) that weaken the possible purity of their character, sin, especially of the flesh, takes prominence throughout the text. Lamias are attributed “Tyrants of Pleasure” as one of their main characteristic traits, which is comprised of, for example, an “intoxicating touch [...] [that] weakens the mind of its enemies, making them more susceptible to its enchantment spells” (Perkins et al. 201). Further, the important Christian quality of virtue is what the lamia seeks to actively corrupt. This creature is said to be “fond of seeking out adventurers with pure hearts to seduce and corrupt to evil, savoring the destruction of their virtue” (Perkins et al. 201). The repetition of the ‘good’ qualities of the victims, i.e., their pure heart and their virtue, forms the direct dichotomy to the lamia’s corrupt, impure, and evil soul, reflected in not only the practice of corruption, but also the enjoyment of it. In this notion, the biblical figure evoked might not just be the one of Eve, but also the one of the serpent with its penchant for temptation and deception. The erinyes evoke similar religious imagery. While classified as devils (Perkins et al. 68), they share many physical characteristics with celestial beings and the first of their kind were said to have been “angels that fell from the Upper Planes because of temptation or misdeed” (Perkins et al. 69). Not only is one of their missions to corrupt good beings, but their holy ancestor’s vice was the act of temptation. Whether they were the tempters or the tempted is not clarified, however. With the Upper Planes mirroring the Garden of Eden, the first erinyes were banished as were Adam, and more importantly, as she was also both the tempted and temptress, Eve. Deducing from the pattern emerging from both these creatures, it becomes clear that beauty and allure plays an important part in the manner in which victims are tempted. The harpy, for example, tempts unknowing victims with her song (Perkins et al. 181). She is presented as less active and her text, in contrast to the one of the lamia and the erinyes, is not as focused on the aspects of physical beauty and temptation.

Another noteworthy trend is the use of *wicked*, albeit in different forms in four of the six entries: the cambion, marilith, harpy, and lamia (Perkins et al. 36, 61, 181, 201). Considering that there are overall only twenty pages in the *Monster Manual* that mention the word *wicked* in some form (Perkins et al.) and how low the number of female-connotated monsters is in comparison to those that appear to be male or completely ambiguous, it is quite striking that four out of the six chosen are ascribed this label in some manner. ‘Wicked’ is not without its own associations. For example, in a contemporary fantasy context, the word ‘wicked’ often

evoked the ‘wicked stepmother.’ Katharine Young states, for example, that the wicked stepmother is one of the essential narratological building blocks of fairy tales (216). While for the marilith and the harpy, *wicked* is used in reference to their respective weapons, i.e., blades and claws (Perkins et al. 53, 181), for the other two monsters it is used to describe their very being. *Wicked* is the first adjective overall that is attributed to the lamia before moving on to her other characteristics, calling her species “wicked lamias” followed by “decadent monsters” in the subsequent sentence (Perkins et al. 201). The cambion’s evilness, on the other hand, is amplified by a quantification of *how* wicked they are. It is said that their “wickedness and perversion horrifies even the most devoted mortal parent” (Perkins et al. 36). Although, while amplified, the cambion’s wickedness seems less strictly connected to her specific species or even the depicted female cambion, but more connected to their devilish heritage. A cambion is usually the child of a succubus or incubus and a mortal and will always reflect the nature of their nonhuman parent as “the fiendish offspring is as wicked as its fiendish parent” (Perkins et al. 284). Despite the uses of *wicked* being rather isolated and hyper-specific occurrences, overall, the presence of the word does affect how the depicted creatures are received in their femininity due to the cultural associations with the word. Beyond textual associations, features listed in the stat blocks, such as magical talents and fighting styles, also conjure specific images.

4.2.3. Poison as a Woman’s Weapon

Poison related features enable some of the monsters to be perceived as physically weaker and less active in their fighting. As poison as an instrument of murder and/or harm does not necessarily require any physical strength, but rather cunning and/or quickness, it is often read as a ‘woman’s weapon’. While the cambion and the marilith merely have a resistance and immunity against poison damage respectively, meaning that they are less or not hurt when attacked with poison, two other figures utilize poison as a weapon themselves. It is not my intention to imply that a female creature using poison in her fighting must mean that she is physically weaker or less capable. Instead, I am concerned with how a female-coded monstrosity might be perceived, and over/underestimated, when she relies on poison to injure her enemies. Therefore, the drider and the erinyes, the two monsters that engage in such a tactic, set themselves apart from the other four monsters. In *Dungeons and Dragons*, how well someone fights or if an individual attack lands is determined by adding up different statistical numbers that vary on a case-to-case basis. For fighting abilities, it is usually either the strength or the dexterity score that is decisive, depending on the creature’s weapon of choice and fighting style. How exactly a stat block works and is read will be explained during the analysis for the *femme fatale* archetype in chapter 4.3.,

as now it is only the strength and dexterity statistics as well as the poison related features that are relevant. The strength and the dexterity modifier of the drider are both equally good, i.e., their base scores are several points above the neutral average of ten, adding an individual bonus of plus three each (Perkins et al. 120). Therefore, their bite attack has the same statistical chance to ‘hit’ their opponent as if they were attacking with their longsword or their longbow. If they do manage to hit their opponent, their bite attack causes an average of two hit points of piercing damage, and an average of nine points of poison damage. The average of nine points of poison damage is higher than the average weapon damage of both the longsword and the longbow respectively. While an attack with the longbow also delivers an average of four points of poison damage in addition to the weapon’s base damage, the drider’s poisonous bite is clearly higher in potency as opposed to the poison that is applied to the arrows before firing them (for all numerical and statistical references to the drider, see Perkins et al. 120). To reiterate, the driders’ use of poison does not diminish the damage they are able to deal with weaponry, but it can pose the question in the reader whether the creature has to rely on poison to make up for a lack of physical capabilities. The manner in which the drider delivers the poison, though, adds an interesting layer onto their human/nonhuman nature. The female drider (figure 5) is clearly one-half spider and one-half humanoid with a semi-covered transitional area where the two sides merge. However, each respective half does, at least visually, not diverge from the ‘normal’ appearance of a spider and a drow, i.e., a humanoid. Therefore, since the main attack that causes poison damage is the bite of the drider, since spider part of the creature is lacking its fangs, the venom/poison must be deployed from the humanoid part of the hybrid. The depicted female figure (figure 5) does therefore not only have the visible weapons and physical features available to her, but must hide behind her humanoid lips dangerous and deadly fangs. This insinuation adds an additional layer to the already symbolically evoked *vagina dentata* described earlier.

Similarly to the drider, the erinyes also use a longbow and arrow as well as their longsword as a medium for poison (Perkins et al. 73). The poison’s effect and how the creature is physically connected to poison diverges though. The erinyes are not implied to produce poison themselves but carry magical weapons that cause poison damage. The poison used on their longsword delivers a higher average damage than the sword itself and aligns with the poison effect from the drider’s arrows. The poison stemming from the longswords though also delivers the same initial amount of damage but has an additional longer-lasting effect that benefits the erinyes by incapacitating their opponent (figure 9). If the poisoned condition does take effect, it “lasts until it is removed by the *lesser restoration* spell or similar magic” (Perkins et al. 73). The poisoned condition is an effect that causes statistical disadvantages as “[a] poisoned

creature has disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks” (Crawford 292), i.e., forcing the poisoned creature/the player to use a lower base number when calculating an action’s outcome. This maneuver, therefore, has more strategic value in a combat context as it lasts either beyond the confrontation or until the opponent is dead. There is no doubt that the depicted erinyes (figure 2) is physically capable as her more than above average strength, dexterity, and constitution scores imply (Perkins et al. 73). Similarly to the drider, though, an image of poison as a woman’s weapon can be evoked. For example, a gendered bias would allow a (male) spectator to assume that the erinyes is strategically compensating for strength by utilizing a poison effect. Beyond the application of poison, the erinyes also benefit from not being affected by poison themselves as they are immune to poison damage, i.e., they would not lose hit points, as well as the poisoned condition, i.e., they would not face a statistical detriment. While poison as a weapon is only utilized by two of the monsters, its application and potency points towards certain stereotypes that are not necessarily correct but can be exploited should a spectator underestimate the monsters.

4.2.4. Hierarchies Within a Single Body

As already established earlier, the physical border between the humanoid and animal parts is often visually obscured and kept vague. Lexical choices and other linguistic features as well as their interplay with the visuals, however, reveal a certain bias and hierarchy between the parts that comprise the hybrid body. For example, the marilith (figure 4) is said to have “the lower body of a great serpent and the upper torso of a humanoid female with six arms” (Perkins et al. 53). While colloquially the distinction between lower body and upper body/torso can be applicable to animals as well, a snake, to a layperson and average spectator, does not have a clear boundary where either begin or end. The “lower body” in the text must therefore be made in relation to the humanoid reference point the upper body constitutes. This is in concurrence with the usual practice of locating the center of the body in terms of importance around the heart and head, i.e., the humanoid half in the case of the marilith. Further, the creature’s silhouette (figure 4) is defined by the section of the serpent’s body that ‘stands up’ and carries the humanoid torso upright to proportionally imitate humanoid legs, foregrounding a basic humanoid shape despite the marilith’s decidedly nonhuman physiology. The drider, the lamia, and the marilith are visually grouped together due to their similar formula of their hybridity. However, the marilith is an apparent outlier. While visually all three are depicted as female-presenting, only the marilith as a species is exclusively female (Perkins et al. 53). As demonstrated below, the lamia and the drider’s hybrid parts seem to be valued at a similar level. The marilith’s humanoid part,

however, is somewhat prioritized both textually and visually, pushing the human female side of this monster into the initial perception of the spectator. This allows her, the marilith, to embody all her monstrous and evil traits as a woman first, and part snake second.

The lamia's depiction, in contrast, does not prioritize one or the other hybrid half. This creature's physical description is kept short relative to the length of the full descriptive text. According to her description, the "lamia has a beautiful humanoid upper body that merges into a powerful four-legged leonine form" and "vicious black claws" (Perkins et al. 201). Here, the animal half seems to be ascribed more importance, as it has its own adjective, 'powerful,' in contrast to the other two creatures that are half animal, the marilith and the drider, whose non-human halves are described in a more neutral manner. The 'powerful' mirrors the 'beautiful' that is used in reference to the humanoid half. To therefore ascribe the animal half, the lion, a positively connotated adjective enables the two halves to be read as almost equal in terms of value. This is also reflected in the fighting style of the lamia in which she "shred[s] flesh with claw and dagger" (Perkins et al. 201), combining the natural weapons of a lion and the human-made practice of fighting with metal blades. A similar equality in terms of value is present in the description of the drider who is defined as "a horrid hybrid of a drow and a giant spider" (Perkins et al. 120). The *horrid* is attributed to the hybrid creature as a whole, its halves neutrally named without any pejorative or ameliorative descriptors. What could indicate a difference in value between the humanoid and animal parts is the possible double meaning of driders as "twisted and debased creatures" (Perkins et al. 120) though. While likely referring to their state of mind, as it is also stated that they are "[d]riven by madness" (Perkins et al. 120), this description could simultaneously refer to their corporeal disfiguration. Both the physical and mental state of their original form, i.e., the humanoid drow, is used as a reference point to describe the worsened state that is caused by the hybridization with a giant spider's body.

Visually, the six monsters can be separated into two groups: one shaped mostly humanoid with additional animal features such as wings, and the other hybrids that are comprised of equal parts humanoid and nonhuman. In its textual description though, the appearance of the harpy diverges from the illustration (figure 6). Visually, the only animalistic features visible are the harpy's claws on her hands and feet, hardened and textured shins, her large feathery wings, as well as her uncanny facial features. The text though claims that "[a] harpy combines the body, legs, and wings of a vulture with the torso, arms, and head of a human" (Perkins et al. 181). Why then, does this illustration diverge from the textual description and promote the, at least physiological, humanity of this harpy? As opposed to some other monsters, harpies are not described to be stereotypically beautiful and the only alluring aspect about them is supposed

to be their magical song. The harpy's "eyes reflect the absolute evil of its soul" (Perkins et al. 181), highlighting the creature's monstrous and inhumane nature as well as their inherently bad character. To then depict the female and mostly humanoid body of this harpy as fully naked is reminiscent of a *to-be-looked-at-ness* that Mulvey describes, which enables and promotes the male gaze. While the genre conventions of a bestiary such as the *Monster Manual* presuppose that the depicted creatures will most certainly be looked at and closely studied, the harpy's (figure 6) portrayal is fundamentally different to the other five monsters. Apart from her lack of clothing and hunched posture, as discussed earlier, this harpy is illustrated as far more passive, having turned her body and gaze away from the presumed male spectator. If, as can be inferred from the history of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the average stereotypical spectator is intended to be a man, the relationship that arises between the harpy and said spectator parallels Mulvey's role allocation of the "pleasure in looking [...] between active/male and passive/female" ("Visual" 62). The harpy's design and lack of clothing also coincides with description that "[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey, "Visual" 62). I argue that despite the nature of this harpy as a monster and established threat, she can still serve as an erotic image due to her presentation. While I earlier read the harpy's wings (figure 6) as protecting the vulnerable unclothed body, it is also possible to interpret the wings as framing and teasingly revealing the naked body. Instead of closing around her, they allow the spectator to gaze at the subject of allure, similar to how the harpy herself uses her magical song to enchant and pull in her victims. This contradiction can, according to Mulvey be traced back to more archaic feelings as "the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox" ("Visual" 62). Therefore, while still inherently a monster, the harpy's visual design enables and encourages her to be considered in an erotic context. Even though the harpy is described as repulsive, her magical song is one of beauty and appeal, and the deliberate design choice of the illustration might aid in making this magical attraction more believable to the reader.

For the erinyes, an effort is made to ascribe them only positively associated hybrid features and stress their humanoid physiology for the sense of allure and to support the claims about their beauty made in the accompanying textual description. As opposed to the other winged fiend, the cambion (figure 1), whose wings are leathery and torn around the edges, the erinyes carry "large feathery wings" (Perkins et al. 68). This contrast supports the believability of the intratextual lore that they are descended from fallen angels, celestials stereotypically having positive associations and historically embodying an ideal humanity should strive

towards. This ‘ideal humanity’ is further supported by the fact that the illustrated version of the erinyes (figure 2), appears to be horned, but the text reassures that this feature merely part of the armor (Perkins et al. 68) and therefore most likely serves as an intimidation tactic. Again, similarly to the marilith earlier, the supposed humanity is centered. The erinyes, then, whose posing allows for her femininity to be on full display (figure 2), allows her womanhood to be among the first reference points for her categorization as a fiend and monster.

4.2.5. Monstrous Motherhood

While none of the six monsters are characterized via their own mothering function or explicitly said to be producing offspring, the entries of the drider and the cambion each portray motherhood and the female reproductive system as inherently monstrous. The archaic mother is defined by “her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle. She is the mother who conceives all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation. She is outside morality and the law” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 27). Further, she is often symbolically suggested via a “black hole that signifies female genitalia which threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 27-28).

The figure of the archaic mother in the *Monster Manual* then, is present in the entry of the drider. She is not embodied by the depicted figure, however, but essential in the drider’s origin story. The descriptive text does not solely focus on the drider itself, but highlights the creature’s connection to Lolth, the Spider Queen. This female deity is a prominent and important figure in *Dungeons and Dragons* lore and while she is a shapeshifter and has a humanoid as well as an arachnoid appearance, she is most frequently presented in her drider form (Stang, *Fiend Folio*). Unlike the other five descriptive texts, the drider’s begins by establishing Lolth as the creator of the hybrid creatures, positioning them not necessarily as emancipated monsters, but in their function to be a “living reminder of Lolth’s power” (Perkins et al. 120). Further, it is stated that Lolth is the only goddess and force in general that can create these creatures. This coincides with Creed’s description of the archaic mother as the original parent. As for the metaphor of the black hole, Lolth as a deity invokes fear in the drow people, as the driders are “living representatives of Lolth’s will, and a reminder of the fate that awaits all who fail the Spider Queen” (Perkins et al. 120). While there is not a threat of incorporation, there is the threat of transformation; a rebirth as what Creed calls “equally horrific offspring” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 28). The mother, in this case Lolth, is painted as the origin of the drider, the origin of monstrosity.

The drider is not the only instance in which the birth or origin is directly connected with the mother. The cambion's entry features an intratextual anecdote by the famous Baba Yaga who states that cambions "crawl from their mothers' wombs to spread corruption throughout the multiverse. What's not to love?" (Perkins et al. 36). Stemming from Russian folklore, the Baba Yaga is a magical female figure that "lives deep in the woods in a hut standing on chicken legs" and is occasionally said to be "a mother of monsters", despite always being on her own (Fialkova, "Witch/Wizard" 606). In this variation, the Baba Yaga herself is reminiscent of the archaic mother. As per her intratextual comment though, the cambion is evil from to her core, her villainy being part of born nature, and not nurtured. The image of a newborn *crawling* out of the womb is brutal in itself and implies an abnormal physiology as opposed to a 'normal' humanoid newborn who is rather helpless and less mobile in their infancy. In addition, the main text also highlights this inherent evilness by attributing the cambion the label "Born to Be Bad" (Perkins et al. 36). Despite it being clarified that the monstrous, or in this case, fiendish parent can be either the mother or the father, physiologically speaking, the circumstance of birth and the mother's womb take the spotlight. Especially in horror, "the womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 48). Moreover, another dichotomy emerges in the question of the lovability of the cambions. While Baba Yaga rhetorically asks what there would not be to love about these creatures, the text describes that the cambions' "wickedness and perversion horrifies even the most devoted mortal parent" (Perkins et al. 36). These fiendish children are, from their birth on, metaphorically distanced from humanity and move in an abject space throughout their life.

4.3. The Fantastical *Femme Fatale*: Charisma, Charm, and Webs of Illusion

It is important to note that the six monsters evoke the femme fatale in different manners. Hanson and O'Rawe write that this archetype is "read simultaneously as both entrenched cultural stereotype and yet never quite fully known: she is always beyond definition" (1). Further, they state that not every version of the femme fatale can be read and analyzed identically, but that it is important to consider the "context and history" of each manifestation. Moreover, one must take the various historical and temporal influences that shape the creation of the figure into account (3). Therefore, as the inspirations for all these female figures come from different mythological sources, divergences in the manifestation of the femme fatale are not only possible, but rather presupposed.

All six female hybrid monsters are to some degree characterized as femme fatales. While some characteristics are recognizably described in the text and some alluded to visually, many skills of the stereotypical femme fatale are reflected in the so-called stat blocks that accompany every monster. In the *Monster Manual* itself, the reader is referred to one of the other sourcebooks, the *Player's Handbook*, to learn how to read such a stat block. While I have already referred to some statistical numbers from this element at an earlier point, this chapter requires more in-depth understanding of the interplay between the different numerical values. The stat block of the erinyes, see below, will serve as an example:

ERINYES <i>Medium fiend (devil), lawful evil</i>					
Armor Class 18 (plate) Hit Points 153 (18d8 + 72) Speed 30 ft., fly 60 ft.					
STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	16 (+3)	18 (+4)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)
Saving Throws Dex +7, Con +8, Wis +6, Cha +8 Damage Resistances cold; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks not made with silvered weapons Damage Immunities fire, poison Condition Immunities poisoned Senses truesight 120 ft., passive Perception 12 Languages Infernal, telepathy 120 ft. Challenge 12 (8,400 XP)					
Hellish Weapons. The erinyes's weapon attacks are magical and deal an extra 13 (3d8) poison damage on a hit (included in the attacks).					
Magic Resistance. The erinyes has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.					
ACTIONS					
Multiattack. The erinyes makes three attacks.					
Longsword. <i>Melee Weapon Attack:</i> +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. <i>Hit:</i> 8 (1d8 + 4) slashing damage, or 9 (1d10 + 4) slashing damage if used with two hands, plus 13 (3d8) poison damage.					
Longbow. <i>Ranged Weapon Attack:</i> +7 to hit, range 150/600 ft., one target. <i>Hit:</i> 7 (1d8 + 3) piercing damage plus 13 (3d8) poison damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 14 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned. The poison lasts until it is removed by the <i>lesser restoration</i> spell or similar magic.					
REACTIONS					
Parry. The erinyes adds 4 to its AC against one melee attack that would hit it. To do so, the erinyes must see the attacker and be wielding a melee weapon.					

Fig. 9 Stat block of the erinyes (Perkins et al. 73)

As figure 9 shows, the six foundational abilities of strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma are always listed in the beginning section of a stat block. Each ability is represented by two elements: the base number which can range from one to thirty and an either positive or negative modifier. This modifier is determined by how far removed the base number is from the average score of ten. Based on this modifier, the aptitude level for individual skills such as athletics, history, perception, deception, etc., is determined (Crawford 174). For my analysis, the ability score of charisma, especially relative to the scores of strength and dexterity, is most relevant.

Depending on the weapon and type of attack, it is usually either the strength or dexterity score that is used to calculate the outcome. Strength would, for example, be used for heavier hand-to-hand weapons such as battleaxes or longswords, which many of the analyzed monsters use. The dexterity score, in contrast, corresponds with lighter weapons that are classified as “finesse,” or with ranged weapons such as bows (Crawford 176-177). For the femme fatale, however, another important weapon is her skill of deception. This is reflected in the charisma

score and its derived skill of deception, which can range from white lies and misleading someone, to deliberate lying, as well as the skills of performance and persuasion. Further, if they possess magical means, some creatures can use the charisma score to determine the success of their magical attacks or effects (Crawford 178-179). Despite determining the probability of a successful physical attack, the strength and dexterity scores might be lower or on par with the femme fatale's charisma score or associated skills. These skills and their values determine the probable success or failure of a, for example, deceptive maneuver or allow the femme fatale to magically charm a creature and control their mind. Deception and charm are essential to the femme fatale, and in the following chapters I therefore explore how these statistics are combined to reflect this archetype. I must note, though, that the only monster without any charming, deceptive, or illusory qualities is the drider. This creature (figure 5), however, still evokes the femme fatale via phallic symbolism.

4.3.1. Charisma

In the statistics of almost all of the six monsters, the charisma score is statistically on a similar level to the physical scores, implying that the femme fatale's verbal and charismatic 'weapons' are equally as important as physical prowess. Only one of the monsters, the drider, see figure 5, diverges as this creature's charisma score is the lowest of all their ability scores. Even though their modifier is still positive, i.e., it does not impact the outcome of an action related to it negatively, the drider's strengths lie in other categories (see Perkins et al. 120). The other monsters, in contrast, wield their charm as a weapon. The harpy, for example, might not have 'high' scores in general (Perkins et al. 181), but her charisma and dexterity bases are on par with a score of thirteen, followed by a strength score of twelve. This results in a positive modifier of plus one in all three categories, meaning that the harpy is equally as likely to succeed in deceiving someone as they are in completing a physical maneuver. The erinyes and the marilith's statistical scores are arranged similarly. The erinyes's charisma and strength scores are equal in both base and modifier, i.e., eighteen and plus four, while their dexterity score is one level below with a score of sixteen and corresponding modifier of plus three (figure 9). Similarly, though at a slightly higher level, the marilith's charisma and dexterity score have an equal score of twenty each, followed by a base strength score of eighteen (Perkins et al. 61). In contrast to the erinyes though, who uses both strength and dexterity as a base for weapon attacks, the longsword and longbow respectively (figure 9) the marilith's statistics mainly seem to use the strength modifier to calculate both the longsword and tail attack (Perkins et al. 61).

Therefore, in terms of statistical value, a marilith's metaphorical tongue can indeed be sharper than her swords.

In addition to exhibiting a similar statistical makeup, the cambion and lamia also rely on their charisma to carry out magical attacks and effects. In their cases, charisma is not only utilized as a tool in conversation but is an integral part of their fighting style and nature. Similarly to the creatures discussed above, the charisma scores and modifiers are on par with or on a similar level to at least one physical score for both the cambion and the lamia. The lamia's strength and charisma scores are both equaling out at a sixteen, while the cambion's charisma of sixteen is slightly lower than both the strength and dexterity scores of eighteen (see Perkins et al. 36, 201). The cambion, however, benefits from its charisma modifier in a protective sense, as the feature "Fiendish Blessing" allows for the charisma modifier to be added to the base score of the armor the creature is wearing, i.e., making it more difficult to successfully execute an attack on them (Perkins et al. 36). The cambion and the lamia are the only two creatures out of the six which have charisma-based skills separately listed in their stat block. To a deception skill check, the cambion is listed to have a bonus of plus six, and the lamia one of plus seven. This number is inconsistent with the base modifier that is listed for their base charisma, implying that an additional bonus is added that demonstrates their expertise in the matter (see Perkins et al. 36, 201). To have the charisma score as a basis for one's magical abilities raises this score in importance, as it is now a true equal to either physical score which is used to wield a physical weapon. In the following chapter, I will explore what exact spells these monsters have access to and how they further signal their nature as femmes fatales.

4.3.2. Magical Charm and Manipulation

In addition to a high charisma score, some creatures are given magical features that enable them to charm, enchant, and/or control other creatures. In the light of a deadly woman's manipulative nature and talent, such magical features are part of this monstrous femme fatale's arsenal.

Not only does the cambion innately have access to the spell "command", which allows the caster to compel creatures via one-word commands such as "drop", "grovel", "halt", etc. (Crawford 223) but she also possesses a feature named "Fiendish Charm". If a humanoid creature fails to resist the magic of this feature, they are "magically charmed for 1 day" and must "obey[] the cambion's spoken commands" (Perkins et al. 36). Grossman highlights that the femme fatale often seduces or manipulates her victim into criminality (1). The access to magical means of influence offers another dimension of possibilities to the manipulation of one's actions, where 'evil' monsters can seduce the 'good' adventurer to do their bidding or turn them

against their companions. The lamia has access to a similar selection of spells, further illustrating the aspect of magical manipulation. The feature called “Intoxicating Touch” allows the lamia to curse any creature she touches, increasing the chance that a later spell successfully takes hold on her victim (Perkins et al. 201). Three spells in the manipulative category are at the lamia’s disposal: “charm person,” “suggestion,” and “geas.” The spell “charm person” merely makes the affected creature amicably inclined towards the caster (Crawford 221), but “suggestion” operates on a similar basis as the cambion’s “Fiendish Charm”. Such a magical suggestion is constricted by several parameters, however: “it must be worded in such a manner as to make the course of action sound reasonable” and a suggested “harmful act,” damage to the affected creature by the caster, or the completion of the suggested course of action end the spell (Crawford 279). The most powerful spell of the ones available to these femme fatales, geas, is also among the lamia’s capabilities. Affecting a creature for thirty days, geas not only forces someone to follow any command, with the exception of ones that might cause death, but also punishes attempts of disobedience (Crawford 244-245). This spell represents the pinnacle of magical manipulation and is a heightened version of the femme fatale’s manipulative practices as such magic offers the possibility to go far beyond merely ‘seducing’ someone into criminality.

The harpy, in contrast, does not actively cast a spell, but charms her victims via a magical song. This effect is said to only be active while the harpy is continuously singing. Any affected creature is forced to move towards the source of the song, ignoring any potential dangers on their route. This might lead them over the edge of a cliff or into traps which the harpies utilize to more easily kill their prey (Perkins et al. 181). The relatively low threshold of eleven that is required to fight off this charm effect is most likely due to the low power level of the harpy as a creature (see Perkins et al. 181) when compared to more challenging foes such as the cambion and lamia. The challenge rating of a creature aids as an orientation to how many monsters it is realistic to fight at a certain skill level (Perkins et al. 9). Therefore, while the harpy might seem more harmless and her song easy to resist, it is important to consider that an opponent with a weak mind a lower skillset might just as easily fall victim to a harpy as to a lamia. One might argue that merely the luring song of the harpy is a weak representation of the femme fatale as it lacks the physical element of beauty, for example. Historically speaking though, the femme fatale is embodied by other mythical creatures with a similar skillset.

4.3.3. Acoustic Allure

The harpy allows a focal shift from the stereotypical physical beauty of the femme fatale into an acoustic sphere. Despite being named ‘harpies’ in the *Monster Manual*, their skillset and characteristics showcase a significant overlap with the portrayal of sirens in the Homeric tradition. As I have discussed earlier, the harpy is the only creature whose illustration and textual description are in discrepancy; she is painted to be more sexually alluring than she is textually described. Similarly, in a Western tradition, the Homeric siren’s image has been ameliorated over time. In her essay on how the femme fatale must not necessarily be embodied physically but can be constructed acoustically, Griselda Pollock examines the Homeric sirens and their representation as a prime example for a femme fatale that does not require physical presence to be dangerous.

In context of the sirens, Pollock raises an important aspect about the construction of the feminine as the Other and its relationship with the cultural masculine:

[t]he Sirens, always plural, introduce into the imaginary of western culture a radical alterity that binds the feminine, as what is excessive to social order, and hence linked with the non-human but also the prehuman/prehistoric, with nature, material and imaginative domination of which alone produces the identity between the social, the cultural and the masculine. If the Sirens represent otherness to Man, the danger attributed to the allure of that otherness consolidates a particular construction of the human subject as he who can resist their dangerous seduction. Thus the *human* subject is produced firstly in terms of gender, that is, in the masculine, but also in terms of a historically specific mode of a widespread socio-political-economic system: heterosexual patriarchy (10)

Not only does Pollock’s statement support my reading of the assumed spectator as male but suggests that the female monsters examined are further Othered due to their femininity in addition to their monstrosity. Especially the decision to depict the harpy (figure 6) as female allows for a similar identity and assumed gender construction between the visual subject and the spectator. It is essential to the siren that they do not enchant because of their appearance, but through their sound. Therefore, a siren, and in turn the harpy, must be able to enchant despite of their appearance as it is “[t]heir sound [that] suggests not only what comes forth from the body’s orifice but also what is made within its throat, that cavity that is associated, transposed with the genital cavity with the female body” (Pollock 11). Due to its transgressive quality, sound, i.e., the siren’s or harpy’s song, Pollock utilizes Lacan’s theory of extimacy, to describe the intrusive character of this magical song as “sound travels from outside as other, yet, entering into the subject through the ear, vibrates and envelopes from within” (20). These perspectives offer a more intimate reading of the harpy’s luring song, implying a use of sexuality in all ways except physical to enchant victims.

The rather eroticized image that the harpy (figure 6) portrays is in concurrence with a stereotypically Western amelioration of the siren myth, which Pollock explains in reference to a painting by Herbert Draper from the Victorian period. Pollock describes a mistranslation “of the power of the Sirens’ sound into their erotic appeal to vision” that diminishes the original ambiguity of the creatures (18). Draper depicts his exclusively female sirens in the nude with slightly non-human features and as physically closing in on the sailors. Therefore, “a pressing physicality of eroticized bodies replaces the Homeric image of the hauntingly *distant*, alluringly acoustic *unseen*, never seen, Sirens” (Pollock 19). While also explicitly depicted as nonhuman due to their hybrid features, the harpy in the *Monster Manual* is also depicted as more eroticized and beautiful than the descriptive text would suggest. Similarly to the sirens referenced above, the depicted harpy’s main feature is acoustic in nature and her visual appeal is secondary, if not irrelevant. Textually, the focus lies on the beauty and the enchanting nature of the harpy’s song and how victims follow sound rather than visual beauty (see Perkins et al. 181). Moreover, the text describes the harpy in a rather factual manner and as less human, less sexualized, than she is depicted as. Negative qualities such as sadism and “eyes [that] reflect the absolute evil of its soul” are also attributed to her character (Perkins et al. 181). This inconsistency speaks toward the intention to highlight the eroticized female figure instead of, or as a symbolic stand-in for, the harpy’s actual *modus operandi*. This is supported by Pollock’s statement made in reference to the painting of the Homeric sirens by Draper where “the viewer is inevitably caught up in the eroticized act of gazing that is entirely alien to the textual source and thus to what is inserted into culture as the problem” (19). The usual fatal beauty of the *femme fatale* is attempted to be evoked in the visual, while its core is anchored in the acoustic.

4.3.4. Illusions

Due to the existence of magic in this fictional universe, which already supports many of the creature’s spellcasting and enchantment, the disguise and illusion aspect of the *femme fatale* can be taken a more extreme and literal level. The usual deceptive quality, oftentimes related to theatrics and lies as described by Grossman earlier, is enhanced and gains broader possibilities with the aid of magic. Deception is allowed to move from a verbal into a more physical sphere. Not only does the *femme fatale* deceive, but she also escapes clear definition. By definition, the “*femme fatale* is the figure of a certain discursive unease, [...] she never really is what she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, manageable” (Doane 1). This supports the reading of the *femme fatale* as a shapeshifter or illusionist, and moreover explains the lack of clear parameters with which to define and identify her. The

femme fatale can appear in many different variations, as the six monsters of this analysis showcase. Especially in a contemporary science fiction context, the unknowability of the deadly woman is allowed to reach a new dimension, as this genre allows the investigative “metaphor [to] become[] actualised, as the mystery within is unknown, alien and dangerous” (Farrimond 135). In such a fantastical environment such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, it is presupposed that the spectator/player is aware of the wide range of danger due to the presence of magical disguises and the tangible monstrous bodies. This notion suggests an inherent stance of mistrust as any monster and/or encounter may not be what they appear to be. In a non-magical manner, the erinyes is one monster that exploits such a disguise aspect, albeit indirectly. Due to their origin, the erinyes bear similarities to angelic beings and it is described that they “are always willing to take advantage of being mistaken for celestials in their missions of conquest and corruption” (Perkins et al. 69). For one, this references the ‘evil’ intentions behind their actions. Second, even though the erinyes do not need to actively cast a spell or change aspects of their appearance, they abuse their opponent’s naïveté that allows them to temporarily take on the guise of a celestial/good being.

Two other monsters, the cambion and the lamia, actively utilize magic to further mask their true nature and intentions. The cambion has one single disguise spell available called “alter self” which can be applied up to three times a day (see Perkins et al. 36). This creature’s magic is labelled as “innate spellcasting”, meaning that it is not learned, but part of their nature. This particular spell gives the caster the ability to change their appearance, ranging from “facial features, sound of your voice, hair length, coloration, distinguishing characteristics” to the possibility of “appear[ing] as a member of another race” (Crawford 212). Therefore, it is not merely an altering of specific features in relation to recognizability, but this feature enables an illusionary amelioration of their fiendish character. Concealing recognizable fiendish features such as the leathery wings, the tail, and horns (figure 1) might aid in establishing a relationship of trust immensely. The lamia has access to a similar spell that allows for a change in appearance, called “disguise self,” to take any other humanoid form (see Perkins et al. 201). Mechanically speaking, this spell changes appearance only illusionary, i.e., not physically (Crawford 233). Beyond the physical deception, the lamia heavily relies on visual illusions to tempt and lure their victims. Textually this can be observed in the description that a lamia’s servants are “concealed by [...] [their] magic as they attack,” that they “use magic to further accentuate their lairs, masking decay with illusion,” and that “[t]hey use their magic to lure potential victims into their lairs, relying on illusion and their thralls to capture hapless foes” (Perkins et al. 201). The lamia’s web of illusion ultimately leads to the horrid realization of the victim that they are trapped,

aligning with Doane's claim that, in the end, the secret threat of the femme fatale "must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered" (1). These two creatures are prime examples how in this specific genre, magic can enhance the final reveal of the femme fatale and how this archetype's skillset can adapt according to her surroundings.

4.3.5. Magical Exceptions: The Phallic Woman

The drider is the exception in terms of charm and deceptive qualities, but nevertheless represents the femme fatale in a different manner. As already referenced at an earlier point during the visual analysis, the phallic woman can embody the femme fatale archetype, especially when femininity and sexuality are represented in reference to the phallus and symbolic objects (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 164-165). For example, as Kourelou describes in relation to the femme fatale, swords can stand in as "a potent phallic symbol of male power" (117). Therefore, the drider (figure 5) stylistically represents the deadly woman, as do many of the other monsters. I want to note, however, that Creed claims that the phallic woman is created to reject the castrated and castrating woman (*Monstrous-Feminine* 126). I earlier described the drider, among others, as evoking the *vagina dentata*. Despite this, I argue that the presence of the symbolic phallus can indeed exist simultaneously with this specific evocation, intentionally misleading the spectator initially to reveal the *vagina dentata* on a more symbolic and secondary level. Other monsters which are given a symbolic phallus are the cambion, erinyes, and marilith (figures 1, 2, 4), out of which the erinyes is especially striking due to the position of the sword handle to enunciate the phallus.

4.4. Animal Symbolism and Associations

As a last addendum and additional factor that might influence the spectator's perception of the hybrid creatures, two of the animal halves carry a strong historical and mythologized connection with (dangerous) femininity. To begin, both spiders and snakes as animals have, depending on the location, the potential to be dangerous to humans via their venom. Aside from this, both animals have a rich collection of associations and cultural symbolisms, in which the latter, from a Western perspective, are often negatively connotated. While I must acknowledge that in different cultural spheres, the reactions to these animals might differ, I want to take those associations into account which are regionally and culturally relevant to the primary audience of the sourcebook.

In a literary sense, the spider as a creature is most often connected with the practice of weaving and has rather neutral associations, but the webs it produces are usually used to

symbolize decay (Ferber 198-199). Therefore, in the case of the spider, I want to refer to the specific biological case of the black widow. Due to the genre conventions of a bestiary such as the *Monster Manual*, it is its purpose to showcase potential enemies that the player is supposed to fight. Therefore, a spider figure such as the drider (figure 5) can be immediately categorized as a threat and as malevolent. The drider's poison attribute, i.e., its venomous bite (see Perkins et al. 120), further aligns the creature with real-life associations of arachnids. When the spectator gazes upon this drider (figure 5), they combine two things: the arachnoid and the female nature of the monster. One highly present and global association this could trigger is the one of the black widows. This aligns with Stang's observation that in earlier sourcebooks of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the Spider Queen Lolth is part black widow ("Fiend Folio"). Not only is this a term used to describe (human) women that kill their spouse, i.e., another negative association, but the nature of the spider itself evokes the monstrous feminine. Found globally, it is particularly the female black widow which is famous for its venomous bite and the tendency to devour the male spider after copulating ("Black widow." *Britannica Academic*). The behavior of venomous spiders, or more specifically the black widow, is indeed mirrored in the portrayal and description of the drider. On the one hand, as already discussed earlier, the drider evokes the *vagina dentata*. This image is therefore strengthened when incorporating the knowledge about the real-life cannibalistic behavior of the black widow, as she embodies the *vagina dentata* in its essence "threaten[ing] to devour, to castrate via incorporation" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 165). On the other hand, the fighting tactic of the drider via poison effect (Perkins et al. 120), mirrors the behavior of such a venomous spider, especially when considering this attribute in combination with the female presenting depiction in figure 5.

Snakes however, especially in a Western Christian context, are predominantly negatively connotated in terms of symbolism. As Creed notes, the snake is a "Christian symbol of woman's disobedience, unbridled sexual appetite and treachery" (*Monstrous-Feminine* 33). This is in reference to the Garden of Eden, in which the serpent corrupts Eve, and indirectly Adam, to commit sin (Ferber 186). This inherent connection between the snake and Eve, the first woman, and corruption/lying reveals an underlying bias in the decision to portray the marilith as being an exclusively female species (Perkins et al. 53). When observing this monster, then, the snake in a Christian context is already connected to women's deception in the spectator's consciousness. Moreover, snakes from a biological and factual perspective offer rich possibility for symbolism as they "can be extremely dangerous, being both venomous and "subtle", or sneaky; they strike without warning from grass or coverts; they can look beautiful in their glittering multi-colored skin" (Ferber 186). Many of these features, both the Garden of

Eden's snake's and the animal's, are reminiscent of the femme fatale as these creatures also rely on unpredictability, (literal) deception, and pose an inherent threat that might already be too late to escape from once revealed.

5. Summary and Conclusion

As the analysis of the different modes showcases, all monsters' perceived womanhood/femininity influences the manner in which they are perceived as monstrous. Attire and armor is either used to accentuate beauty, as it is the case with the erinyes, to broaden a stereotypically feminine frame for intimidation purposes, or used to indicate a level of importance by prioritizing the protection of the humanoid female body over the animal part. Other visual elements such as the stance and arrangement of weapons, e.g., the drider and the marilith, evoke the *vagina dentata*. Especially in the case of the drider, this image is further accentuated by the associations with the real-life spider of the black widow. The supposed center or "mouth of hell," as Creed (*Monstrous-Feminine* 116) calls it, always seems to form around the female humanoid part of the monster, or where her genitals would be. It is surrounded by metaphorical teeth in the form of pointed blades, bodily protrusions, or claws that form the *vagina dentata*'s maw. The nature of the *Monster Manual* as a bestiary presupposes that the depicted figures are to be looked at intensely. Several techniques to heighten the visual elements' salience are employed. High saturation and contrast as well as an active and visually interactive stance engage the spectator. The harpy, however, is less active and the exception due to several design elements. Instead, the focus is guided towards her feminine and seemingly vulnerable features, forewarning the spectator about the danger she hides behind a carefully crafted facade. The final visual element, weapons, has at this point already influenced other aspects such as the construction of the *vagina dentata*. Especially in the case of the marilith, who evokes this image with her blades rather than her own body, a closer examination implies an inherent connection between the marilith and her blades which allows them to be read as extensions of her body rather than tools at her disposal. This implication strengthens the image of the *vagina dentata* beyond the mere visual arrangement on the page. The blades and weapons, which every visual representation except the harpy bears, also evoke the image of woman as castrator, especially prominently reflected in the figure of the erinyes. This visual construction of the phallic woman also contributes to a reading of the monsters as femme fatales.

While some of the textual elements can be analyzed in isolation, some aspects are strengthened/weakened by, or in conflict with, the accompanying illustrations. It is a general

trend in the *Monster Manual* to employ dehumanizing language, even for creatures that appear mostly humanoid. This is expressed by the continuous use of the nonhuman pronoun *it*. While one could argue that this is used for the sake of convenience and to be gender inclusive, even those monsters that are said to be exclusively one gender, e.g., the marilith, are referred to via this pronoun. This demonization is implicitly continued by using descriptors of beauty as a misdirection, intrinsically linking beautiful and alluring traits with ‘evil’ monstrosity. In addition to the establishment of these figures as monstrous, which happens due to both genre conventions and the initial visual impression, the text further links these monsters with features typically associated with women or femininity. For example, the first sin, the Garden of Eden, and Eve are evoked in the entries of specific monsters such as the lamia and the erinyes via words associated with sin, pleasure, and temptation as well as parallelism. Further, the lexical choice to use *wicked* to describe some of the monsters implicates their evilness to be rooted in their womanhood due to lexical connotations. This trend reaches beyond lexical choices though. As reflected in the stat blocks, many of the analyzed monsters possess features connected to poison. Often associated with women, as it does not require as much physical strength in a fight, this aspect strengthens the feminine connection with the monsters on a surface-level while simultaneously granting the monsters an advantage in a fight. Especially aspects such as poison and the female word associations are where an important interplay between the visuals and textual elements becomes apparent. While in the case of the drider, for example, the spectator could assume the creature to possess poison features due to the spider association, for other creatures such as the erinyes it becomes a covertly cunning advantage. Similarly, as the text of the lamia is strongly evoking (female) sin and wickedness, it forces the spectator to consider this particular example of the lamia as the prime example for the species, despite male counterparts existing.

A bias or certain hierarchy of importance between the animal and human parts can not only be observed in the manner clothes/armor are worn, but it is also implied textually. The marilith is aimed to be primarily perceived as a female figure as her human half is used as the primary reference point and forms the visual center of the illustration. This is especially striking as the marilith is the only monster that exists exclusively in a female form. The two halves of the drider and the lamia, in contrast, are not as strongly pitted against each other. In the case of the harpy, a female humanoid form is clearly prioritized visually, as her hybrid makeup (figure 6) heavily diverges from the textual description. Depicted in a naked form with stereotypically female features accentuated and teased at, the harpy is a prime example of the passive female subject that is to be gazed at by the active (male) spectator and evokes what Mulvey terms a

certain *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Hierarchy is also relevant in the circumstance of the monsters' origin. What stands above these creatures and who has the power to create such monstrosities? In two cases, the answer to this question is an archaic mother. While none of the analyzed monsters are defined by their own mothering functions, both the cambion and the drider are defined by *their* creator/parents. This is reflected in the godly figure of Lolth, a being that is responsible for the creation of all driders and strongly evokes the archetype of the archaic mother. Further, in the cambion's entry, the mother's womb, the wicked fiendish parents, and the bloody circumstances of birth are highlighted.

The femme fatale archetype is, in one manner or another, strongly reflected in all the monsters selected for analysis. In most instances, the femme fatale's talents manifest in the statistical makeups of each monster as well as their magical abilities. The charisma score is often either on par with or equal to the primary statistical number used to calculate physical attacks, i.e., strength or dexterity. In the stat block of the lamia, for example, it is indicated that a deception check, which is charisma based, is further strengthened by a bonus, making it numerically higher than any physical attack this creature could execute (see Perkins et al. 201). Overall, this implies an equal or even higher efficiency of charisma-based skill checks and/or attacks in comparison to the creatures' physically based skills and allows the typical arsenal of the femme fatale to take the spotlight. The realm of the possibilities of the femme fatale's talents is further expanded by the existence of magic in this universe. Manipulative, charming, deceptive, and illusory qualities are manifested in their most extreme form, i.e., magic. This enables the femme fatales to fall back onto certain spells that might enhance their natural charisma-based abilities or magically force their victims into action. The siren however, moves this magical alluring feature into the acoustic sphere. As also described by Pollock, in this instance the femme fatale's visibility is not presupposed, but her allure can be expressed via her voice. This, as can be observed in the siren as one of the mythological inspirations for the harpy, coincides with the rather eroticized depiction of the figure in order to correspond with the acoustic expression. The one singular creature that does not exhibit talent in the charismatic sphere is the drider. This creature, instead, manifests the femme fatale via the evocation of the phallic woman. While this image is also present in other monsters, it is particularly striking in the case of the drider due to her lack of charisma. However, the spider as the drider's animal half further supports her to be read as a femme fatale. The spider and the snake as animal halves are both rich in cultural associations and directly influence the perception of the monsters they constitute. A close connection to the femme fatale in name and habit alike is present in the black widow spider. This association reinforces a reading of the drider as a femme fatale, its

utilization of poison and its subsequent connection to the female black widow. Similarly, the snake as a deceptive creature in nature and its close connection to femininity in a Christian context supports a reading of associated hybrid creatures as femme fatales.

This project aimed demonstrate that the portrayal of the six hybrid monsters – the cambion, the erinyes, the marilith, the drider, the harpy, and the lamia – in the 2014 *Monster Manual* is purposefully employs the monstrous-feminine. They are portrayed as such because their femininity enhances their monstrosity, both visually and textually. When gazing at any of these six figures, be they defined as exclusively female or not, the spectator is confronted with the monstrous-feminine. The female-presenting figure in the illustration forces the viewer to consider her background information, personality, statistics, in dialogue with her gender. She evokes ancient figures such as Eve when she committed the first sin and was both the tempted and the temptress, she transgresses boundaries and uses her appearance to deceive and distract. The femme fatale, although best known for her appearance in film noir, can in her essence be found throughout history and mythology. Having inspired the figures in this sourcebook, the femme fatale manifests in all these female figures, using magic and fantastical elements to her advantage. While this sourcebook does not portray these figures in such an explicitly misogynistic manner as they were decades ago, there is still reason behind them being portrayed as they are. Femininity still has the potential to terrify and as long as it threatens patriarchal structures, it will continue to do so.

Word count: 33786

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7. Appendix

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7.2. English Abstract

This thesis investigates the interconnectedness of the human female and the animal in hybrid creatures found in the *Monster Manual* (2014). More specifically, it explores how such creatures embody the monstrous-feminine as according to Barbara Creed and how both parts, the human and the animal, contribute to a reading as such and enhance the features of each other. Via a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), I examine six female hybrid monsters, defined by and selected because of their visual and/or textual presentation as a female humanoid body merged with animal features. Additionally, the genre-conventions of the *Monster Manual* as well as several design choices evoke a *to-be-looked-at-ness* in the monsters and enables a reading through the lens of the male gaze (Mulvey). Finally, as *Dungeons and Dragons* is a game of numbers, the statistical makeup and the ‘talents’ of each monster reveal their natures as femme fatales. All these features work together and converge in the monstrous-feminine.

7.3. German Abstract

Diese Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der wechselseitigen Verbundenheit zwischen weiblicher Menschlichkeit und dem Tierischen in hybriden Kreaturen aus dem *Monster Manual* (2014). Ich untersuche wie genau solche Kreaturen das monstrous-feminine nach Barbara Creed verkörpern und wie beide Teile, der menschliche und der tierische, solch eine Interpretation unterstützen und sich gegenseitig verstärken. Mit einer Multimodalen Kritischen Diskursanalyse erforsche ich sechs verschiedene weibliche hybride Monster die wegen ihrer visuellen und/oder textuellen Darstellung als weiblich, fusioniert mit tierischen Elementen, ausgewählt wurden. Zusätzlich fördern die Genre Konventionen wie auch einige Designentscheidungen des *Monster Manuals* das intentionelle Betrachten der Monster und ermöglichen Laura Mulvey's male gaze als Lupe zu benutzen. Da *Dungeons and Dragons* durch eine mathematische Spielweise ausgezeichnet ist, sind auch die statistischen Werte und die Talente ausschlaggebend und enthüllen die wahre Natur der Monster als femme fatales. All diese Eigenschaften arbeiten zusammen und vereinigen sich unter dem monstrous-feminine.

7.4. Statement about the Use of AI

During no stage of this Master Thesis was Artificial Intelligence used or consulted, neither generative nor analytical.