

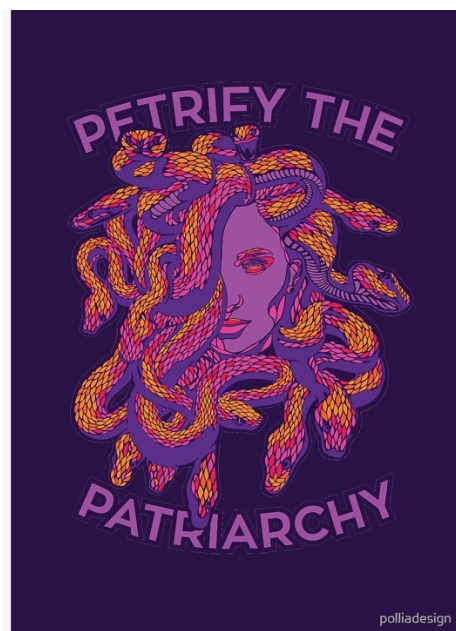
FINAL ESSAY: Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism

Feminist Literary Analysis of Medusa's Myth

“Reclaiming the Head of Medusa”

What is this name and what does it represent, when from the depths of history, it brings agitation and chills? This formidable and frightful head with the hissing snakes and the eyes that turn to stone anyone who dares to look at them? What is this primal female power, that even Goddess Athena herself carries as a trophy on her chest armor and shield? Medusa is well – known for her deadly female gaze and her slaughtered death that made Perseus the hero history knows today. However, behind this patriarchally structured myth that made Medusa the villain monster, lays her real story which feminists reclaimed and made her into the feminist symbol of female empowerment that she is for many women today.

In this essay I will be analyzing the multiple versions of Medusa's myth from Hesiod's *Theogony* to the pop culture and “Me Too” movement symbol she has become today, from a feminist perspective. A feminist literary analysis on the myth is offering an exploration on patriarchal power structures and gender dynamics, along with the portrayal of women on a literary and mythological male-oriented canon. In the process of analyzing the myth, I will be using Jungian psychoanalytical archetypal theories closely linked with literary archetypal patterns of female depictions throughout history, along with my own interpretative skills. Several archetypal patterns have been reported by feminist critiques regarding women's representation and in more detail, repression of powerful women by depicting them as devouring monstrous creatures will be discussed (Pratt et al, 1981, p.4). The broadest aim of this essay is to reclaim the patriarchal narrative surrounding Medusa and turn her into a symbol of empowerment and resistance, challenging gender norms and providing alternative perspectives on women's agency.



Petrify The Patriarchy digital painting by @polliadesign

The most dominant version of Medusa’s myth is the one presented in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and Pseudo-Apollodorus’ (as it was later revealed, it was not Apollodorus who wrote the book) *Bibliotheca*, where Medusa is depicted as the snake-headed monster who turns every man who looks at her to stone and is later slayed by Perseus with Athena’s help, as a quest for him to beat death and become a hero. In all versions, Medusa’s ugly appearance comes as a punishment from Athena because of her unconsented intercourse with God of sea, Poseidon. However, the origin of her story goes in a lot greater depth than that. It is of no coincidence that the dominant canonic texts determining her identity are male-oriented. Historically, the literary canon has been male dominated, like most sciences and humanitarian studies, and women’s exclusion from education has played a major role in shaping these dynamics. This results in male cultural dominance, where the views of men are taken as the norm, the universal truth. Thus, male versions of femininity are being authorized, “male illusions about women” are presented as reality and are even being falsely taught at schools. Such is the pervasion of literary sexism that portrays women as the over-emotional, irrational, and discipline-lacking Other, that even women come to read women as men do (Morris, 1993 p. 14-16).



Rihanna posing as Medusa for the 25th Anniversary issue of GQ Magazine, England, Dec

With snakes for hair and a gaze that petrified anyone who looked at her, Medusa is often used to represent the monstrous dimension of women in authoritative figures in a sense of social power. In her book *Women and Power* (Beard, 2017), Mary Beard highlights how Medusa embodies misogynistic fears about the dehumanized aspect of women in positions of power, and how the parallelism with Medusa are used to silence women and delegitimize their position, for example the nickname “Medusa-Clinton” that was used to describe Hillary Clinton during the 2016 elections (Beard, 2017, p.52). This archetypal representation of powerful women as monstrous figures is not a contemporary, but a historical phenomenon in literature. The Jungian terminology of an archetype is “the primordial forms that spring from the preverbal realm of the unconscious, where they exist inchoate and indescribable until given form in consciousness”. In the context of literature, archetypes can be images, symbols, narrative patterns, and they are characterized by cultural fluidity (Pratt, 1981, p. 3). An archetypal narrative in the novels of Eros involve the female characters who by committing the crime of feminine sexuality, they are punished as deviant and outcasts (Pratt, 1981, p.168). That’s exactly what happened to Medusa after she was punished by Athena for her feminine sexuality, being accused that she tempted the God of Sea into her lustful fantasies, even in the case of her rape. Medusa herself becomes a “dying goddess” of feminine eroticism punished by madness, unattractiveness, and finally death.

One of the most frequent plot structures of women-fiction is the “rape-trauma archetype” and it can be seen in the narrative of Medusa and Poseidon her punishment for breaking her purity promises to Athena (Pratt, 1981, p.5). The tale of Medusa with its archetype, describes cycles of power, abuse, jealousy and lust. Her snakes instead of her can be interpreted as a symbolism for knots of negative emotions and thoughts formed inside (and on) her head as a consequence of her abuse (Petric, 2019). Power dynamics play a major role in the myth, with Medusa being the young and beautiful woman and Poseidon being a more powerful position than her, who abuses his power over her to fulfill his lustful wishes. In some versions of the myth, Athena is present during Medusa’s rape but chooses not to intervene and still punish Medusa. A possible explanation for this behavior could be the Goddess’s lower power status to Poseidon and his word above hers.

The mentioned literary archetype of rape trauma has been evolved by Laura M D’Amore (2017) into the trope of “Vigilante Feminist”. Vigilante feminism is the performance of vigilantism by girls and women in modern fiction who have been abused in their past and have undertaken their own protection and the protection of others against violence, rape and abuse (D’Amore, 2017, p.391). Medusa appears to incarnate the Vigilante Feminist trope, using the

destructive powers that were given to her as a punishment, to turn every man that crosses her path into stone, as an act of revenge to every man because she was hurt from Poseidon. She may represent the traumatized rape survivor who is not able to forgive but transforms into the abuser. Wrong generalization is common among victims of sexual abuse and in Medusa's case, the wrong generalization is that all men deserve to be punished for what Poseidon did to her, especially because he is too powerful to beat and out of her reach (Petric, 2019).



Luciano Garbati- Medusa with the Head of Perseus, Italy, 2008

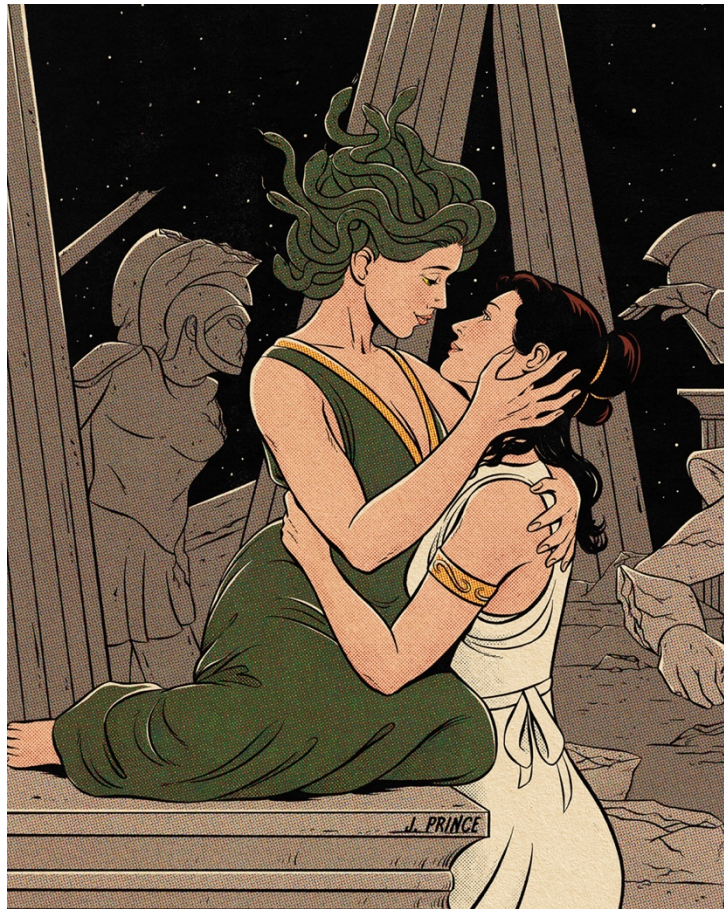
Patriarchal discourse is evident in multiple aspects of the Medusa myth. “Phallic criticism” is a term introduced by Mary Ellmann that refers to how literature and cultural representations reinforce patriarchal norms by assuming that the universal reader is a male. This gender blindness assumes that the proposed perception is the only real one and it is equally shared by all readers even if it is misogynistic (Morris, 1993 p.38). In Ancient Greece, in order for a woman to be a priestess in the Temple of Athena, the only virgin Goddess, she had to remain chaste, like Medusa did before Poseidon fell in love with her and because she wouldn't surrender to his lustful wishes, he raped her. When Athena found out about it, she chose to punish the rape victim, Medusa, by turning her into the monstrous figure we know today and take the side of her male abuser. Some versions of the myth even mention Athena being present during the rape and doing nothing to help Medusa. Here we see a known method of phallic criticism (and patriarchy in general) which is “divide and conquer”, in other words turning

women against each other. Women forming strong attachments with each other which may disincline them from (heterosexual) marriage has always been a real threat to patriarchy and it has been depicted in male literature by indulging characters into melodramatic conflicts (Morris, 1993, p.40).

It is of great importance for feminist scholars to try and reclaim historical and canonical pieces of literature in an emancipatory way and use them as symbols for female empowerment by re-reading them in a feminist way. In more detail, according to Morris (1993, p.16-18), “revision” for feminists is the act of looking back with fresh eyes, new critical direction and it is considered to be an “act of survival for women”. Through a feminist reading of Medusa, it will be unveiled that she is an “icon of the female gaze”, representing a powerful manifestation of female creativity and subjectivity. Paradoxically, Medusa has been reduced to a conventional symbol of female objectification, though the myth emphasizes the formidable power of her female gaze (Bowers, 1990, p.220-222). I will be quoting Alicia Vikander in the movie *Danish Girl* to make this point clearer: “*It’s hard for a man to be looked at by a woman. Women are used to it of course, but for a man to submit to a woman’s gaze, it’s unsettling.*”. Patriarchy then, had to turn Medusa, and extensionally all women, into the object of the male gaze and the monster of the myth as a means of male protection against being objectified themselves by her female gaze.

Additionally, an alternative feminist interpretation would be asking ourselves not why Athena chose to punish Medusa instead of Poseidon, but why did she choose the particular punishment for her? I would like to consider the possibility that Athena doesn’t punish but protects Medusa by releasing her from every aspect of vulnerability and fragility. By “cursing” her with such a power (or from a psychoanalytical point of view, a defense mechanism) so effective, that it guarantees that Medusa’s body will never be violated again by anyone. After all, in Apollodorus’ version of the myth, Athena herself recognizes the importance of this power by caring Medusa’s head on her shield as protection for herself and maybe as a tribute for Medusa. By looking at it from an even deeper psychoanalytical point of view, Fenichel has talked about the scopophilic instinct and the pleasure of viewing. The dimension of scopophilic instinct is twofold: (a) the desire to harm the object being viewed and (b) the desire to share, compassionately and empathetically, one’s experience (Fenichel, 1937, p.11). Here empathy intersects with aggression by blurring the lines between a moral identification with a rape victim and a hedonistic reception of the event, aiming to devour, objectify and sexualize their raped bodies. Thus, Athena's punishment for Medusa rests on an analogy that exposes the unconscious aspects of the male gaze falling on Medusa's body as a sexually abused woman.

Whoever looks at Medusa directly turns to stone, finds, unconsciously, the punishment of the crime they committed.



Jenifer Prince - Medusa and the Blind Woman in Love, 2024

Historically, Medusa has been employed to align with different political agendas, and interpretations of her character have changed dramatically. Nowadays, she has been transformed into a pop-culture icon, as the logo of Versace, and frequently appearing as a sex symbol in recent films, to being a symbol for female empowerment. This evolution of Medusa's portrayal and the reclamation of her name and story has mostly been done by feminist activists, artists and writers and her portrayal from a guardian figure to a villain and again to an empowering character holds significant implications regarding the connection of female sexuality and power. After finishing with this essay, the reason is evident. Medusa is not only a rape survivor but she is also portraying male power over women, demonized in order to fit into the male narrative. Medusa's story is parallel with the #MeToo narrative, showing that "the truth doesn't always lead to change". Whether it is Poseidon and Athena or Harvey Weinstein, history has shown that power structures come first and women's stories and justice

has always come second (Tan, 2021, p.122). Medusa as an emancipating symbol is unapologetically powerful and undoubtedly relevant and she definitely has a story that no one ever let her tell. Modern feminists and rape survivors give her justice by retelling her and their story, writing poems about her or even carrying her on their bodies as a tattoo. The re-writing and re-reading of Medusa's myth by feminist scholars contributed to the success of this female empowerment and the myth itself shows the potential that women hold and the power that is hidden inside them. Even if I could go on for hours about Medusa, I will finish this essay with a quote from Helen Cixous: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."

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