

Metamorphoses of Medusa

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Doubleness and ambiguity are aspects of the myth of Medusa that persist from its classical origins and that are evident in versions of the myth as interpreted by Freud and then successively by three women writers: Louise Bogan, May Sarton, and Hélène Cixous. Gender and specifically the development of feminist thinking determine important differences among these interpretations, culminating in Cixous's complete reversal and repudiation of Freud. Freud, consistent with the classical tradition, looks at Medusa from the point of view of the male beholder, a point of view that the three women writers successively feminize until Cixous's Medusa transforms a female threat whose debilitating weaknesses make heroism possible into the triumphant patron of a feminist millennium.

According to Ovid, Medusa was "once most beautiful in form" (4.794), until Athena turned her into a hideous and terrifying monster to punish her for her fornication with Poseidon in Athena's temple (Ovid 4.798-801). It is of some importance in relation to her later manifestation as a feminist heroine that the episode with Poseidon may have been a rape: the word *vitiassse* (4.798) is ambiguous. Medusa, human and female, and not the male god Poseidon, pays for the sacrilege. Athena transforms the beautiful woman into a scaly monster with snakes for hair (Hamilton 146), and anyone who looks at her becomes another of the stones that mark the approach to her dwelling (Ovid 4.779-81). Eventually the hero Perseus manages to decapitate Medusa by approaching her indirectly, guided by her reflection in Athena's shield, which Athena has given him for his mission (Hamilton 145-46).

Even in her transformation into a monster whose look is lethal, Medusa enjoys associations with both poetry and healing, as well as with beauty. She became pregnant by Poseidon, and at the moment of her death she gave birth to two horses, Chrysaor and Pegasus, the winged horse (Ovid 4.784-86), who endeared himself to the Muses when his stamping hoof brought forth the spring Hippocrene on Mount Helicon, the mountain sacred to them (Graves 1: 253; 75b), and her blood has the power to heal (Bennett 250). Thus Medusa becomes a thoroughly ambivalent figure with the capacity to kill or cure, and the ambivalence persists throughout her metamorphoses in the twentieth century.

Freud picks up on the ambivalence in the myth in his presentation of Medusa as a problem who resolves herself and other problems as well (1922; 1940). He sees Medusa's head first as an overdetermined symbol of castration on the basis of the severed head; the serpentine hair, which, by multiplying

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symbols of the penis, negates it; and the monster's property of turning beholders to stone, which he associates like decapitation through the castration complex with a male child's first view of female genitals as confirmation of the seriousness of parental threats of castration (18: 273-74). Freud continues:

This symbol of horror is worn upon her dress by the virgin goddess Athene. And rightly so, for thus she becomes a woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexed desires – since she displays the terrifying genitals of the Mother. (18.273-74)

In Freud's reading however the symbol of Medusa deconstructively mitigates its own effects. The multiple serpents replace the penis they have annihilated. The stiffness that accompanies petrification reassures the threatened spectator (18: 273). The display of the female genitals becomes "an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself" (18: 274). The symbol retains an uncanny doubleness.

In the twentieth century literary women have discovered in Medusa a source of empowerment. Scholars have explained the recuperation of Medusa as an attempt on the part of women to transvalue negative stereotypes whether as part of a general effort to counteract "the internalized gynophobia we have come to recognize as part of our patriarchal 'inheritance'" (Elias-Button 204; cf. Bennett 245-46) or more specifically:

Aware that the creative woman has traditionally been considered "unfeminine," even demonic, many women rebel against this stereotype by turning to malevolent goddesses as symbols of their creativity. As the individual seeking wholeness struggles with a shadow figure, so the poet confronts these projections of the "Terrible Mother," transforming them from negative demonic forces to positive, balanced figures. (DeShazer 35-36)

Castration is obviously less of a threat if it is a threat at all for the women who reinterpret Medusa in the twentieth century. Medusa's strength becomes an inspiration, although only gradually and only after a great deal of anxiety and struggle.

Louise Bogan in "Medusa" (4 [1921]), for example, associates the mythological figure with creativity, although not without considerable tentativeness and tension, insofar as the woman poet as a poet identifies herself with the male gender, perhaps all the more so in writing on a classical subject because of the connection of the classical languages, not only with poetry, but with an educational curriculum traditionally restricted to men and boys. The glance of Medusa stops time by producing the preservative stasis of art. The Persean speaker heroically or suicidally approaches Medusa's "house, in a cave of trees," a description that connotes both cozy domesticity and sinister threat, like the witch's house in a fairy tale. As the speaker advances toward her destination, nature is normally mutable: "Everything moved, – a bell hung ready to strike, / Sun and reflection wheeled by" (3-4). After the appearance of "the bare eyes ... / And the hissing hair / Held up at a window, seen through a door" (5-7), the scene changes in its cessation of change. Medusa figures the artist's uncanny power to suspend flux:

The water will always fall, and will not fall,
And the tipped bell make no sound.
The grass will always be growing for hay
Deep on the ground.

And I shall stand here like a shadow
Under the great balanced day,
My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in the wind,
And does not drift away. (14-21)

The infinitives "fall" and the reference to hay, a later stage in the interrupted cycle in which grass becomes flesh and returns to grass, call attention to the contrast between process and stasis, as does the motionless yellow dust that remains lifted by the wind. In Mary De Shazer's reading of the poem the silence makes possible the emergence of the poet's voice: "Although Bogan calls this a 'dead scene,'

life flourishes amid the stasis ('the grass will always be growing for hay / Deep on the ground'), and her description conveys a tentative resolution. ... the poet ... becomes a new Medusa. [She] confronts her goddess as a same-sex equal ... and ... redefines strong silence as creative energy" (63-64). Medusa's gaze becomes the preserving and focusing gaze of art for a poet for whom gender transvalues the monstrosity of female power and whose relatively small body of work (Bennett 247) is characterized by a finicky precision.

Paula Bennett's reading of "Medusa" as an expression of the failures of the poet and of her era is however worth noting. She writes that its "nightmare vision of the terror latent in female power" freezes the speaker:

and everything around her [...]. In its death-like stasis, "Medusa" is a poem that, for all its artistic perfection, seems in retrospect tragically appropriate for a poet of extraordinary gifts who believed only 105 of her poems worthy of permanent record and who appears to have despised the very idea that she might be considered a woman poet. (247; cf. 250, 286n10)

It is significant on the one hand that Bogan chooses the subject of Medusa at all and that she writes about Medusa in a way that opens a woman's perspective on the myth. On the other hand her recuperation of the myth is tentative and incomplete. Although as a poet the speaker assumes some of Medusa's power, it is as if that power, together with the speaker herself, remains sinister. The speaker becomes a privileged observer who pays for her privilege by exclusion.

For May Sarton, Bogan's younger friend and protégée (DeShazer 199-204), the encounter with Medusa in "The Muse as Medusa" (38 [1971]) becomes a liberating encounter with the self. Sarton responds to Bogan's poem by making the stasis associated with Medusa the means by which her speaker achieves movement and fluidity in contrast:

I saw you once, Medusa; we were alone.
I looked you straight in the cold eye, cold.
I was not punished, was not turned to stone -
How to believe the legends I am told?

I came as naked as any little fish,
Prepared to be hooked, gutted, caught;
But I saw you, Medusa, made my wish
And when I left you I was clothed in thought ...

Being allowed, perhaps, to swim my way
Through the great deep and on the rising tide,
Flashing wild streams, as free and rich as they,
Though you had power marshalled on your side. (5-12)

The encounter, rather than petrifying life, restores life where there was stasis before. By a narrative that makes the process more personal, Sarton extends and transforms Bogan's suggestion that silence enables speech:

your silence is my ocean,
And even now it teems with life. You chose
To abdicate by total lack of motion,
But did it work, for nothing really froze?

For Sarton's speaker the woman's face is inseparable from the face of the monster, creativity from petrification. In an apotropaic gesture:

I turn your face around! It is my face.
That frozen rage is what I must explore -

Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!
This is the gift I thank Medusa for.

Here as in Bogan's poem exposure and resistance to the silencing force of Medusa result in its appropriation, which becomes the source of artistic power. The confrontation with Medusa "straight in the cold eye, cold," becomes an acknowledgement and acceptance of the speaker's own "frozen rage" that liberates her from it (Cf. DeShazer 36). She sacrifices her past and future power as a legendary monster for the freedom of a little fish.

With Cixous the recuperation of Medusa is complete (1975). Her gaze at Medusa is free of the doubts, inhibitions, and hesitations of Bogan and Sarton. In fact for Cixous the ominous aspects of the mythological Medusa become the epitome of masculine slander. Cixous adopts Medusa as the patron of opposition to "the phallogocentric sublation" (255). Thus her Medusa moves from the inward and private confrontations of Bogan and Sarton into the public sphere. The personal becomes political.

"The Laugh of the Medusa" is a prophetic poem in prose. In the anthology *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, the essay concludes the final section, titled Utopias. The Utopia of Cixous is one in which women, the repressed force in history and language, finally break through the barriers that constrain us. This emergence is Medusan in its ambivalence: it must simultaneously destroy and create, destroy in order to create:

Since these reflections are taking shape in an area just on the point of being discovered, they necessarily bear the mark of our time – a time during which the new breaks away from the old, and, more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old (*la nouvelle de l'ancien*). Thus, as there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project. (245)

The arid millennial ground is of course language, thought, and culture as we have inherited them. The unforeseeable that must be foreseen is the emergence of the feminine as the force hitherto suppressed, which Cixous identifies with the body. Psychoanalysis is a manifestation and symbol of the arid millennial ground, and Cixous proposes men's liberation as a corollary of women's freedom:

As a woman, I've been clouded over by the great shadow of the scepter and been told: idolize it, that which you cannot brandish. But at the same time, man has been handed that grotesque and scarcely enviable destiny (just imagine) of being reduced to a single idol with clay balls. And consumed, as Freud and his followers note, by a fear of being a woman! For, if psychoanalysis was constituted from woman, to repress femininity (and not so successful a repression at that – men have made it clear), its account of masculine sexuality is now hardly refutable; as with all the "human" sciences, it reproduces the masculine view, of which it is one of the effects.

Here we encounter the inevitable man-with-rock, standing erect in his old Freudian realm, in the way that, to take the figure back to the point where linguistics is conceptualizing it "anew," Lacan preserves it in the sanctuary of the phallos (φ) "sheltered" from *castration's lack!* Their "symbolic" exists, it holds power – we, the sowers of disorder, know it only too well. But we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack, to consider the constitution of the subject in terms of a drama manglingly restaged, to reinstate again and again the religion of the father. Because we don't want that. We don't fawn around the supreme hole. We have no womanly reason to pledge allegiance to the negative. The feminine (as the poets suspected) affirms.... (254-55)

Asserting the power of women, Cixous argues that obsessions irrelevant to women dominate psychoanalysis, as they do the language and culture that produced psychoanalysis and which psychoanalysis epitomizes. Women need not defend themselves against the fear of a lack. Cixous proceeds to introduce Medusa:

The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. – It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on. For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and it's militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts!

Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? 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.

Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard-on! for themselves! They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes. What lovely backs! Not another minute to lose. Let's get out of here. (255)

Clearly Cixous has Freud's paper in mind here. Myth and history rivet women between the Medusa and the abyss. We represent both the threat of castration and the proof of it as victims. Religion and philosophy, including Freud's, have neurotically theorized the masculine desire for reality in an effort to give form and substance to a wish.

Cixous's coinage *sexts* fuses the castrating vision of the mother's genitals in Freud's paper with feminist texts, the works of art in which, as Cixous urged earlier in her essay, women have written the body from the body and done so to such an extent that text and sex are inseparable. Her own text "The Laugh of the Medusa" is self-referential, a Medusan text. The priests tremble because every page of the open book assumes Medusa's terrifying power. As sext the words equal the genitals. The beautiful Medusa laughs at the precautions taken by nervous men confronting an imaginary threat: the "trembling Perseuses ... clad in apotropes" come straight from Freud's paper. They advance backwards toward Medusa, the challenge of the feminine, daring only to look at her reflection in their own shields, rather than, as Cixous advocates, "straight on," undoing by defying it the costly myth on which their sense of their own importance depends.

Cixous dismisses the woman's compensation together with the man's lack: "in the child it's not the penis that the woman desires, it's not that famous bit of skin around which every man gravitates" (261), and she asks "Whose degrading do you like better, the father's or the mother's?" (263). She concludes: "everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. In one another we will never be lacking" (264). The terrors that Medusa represents arise from the masculine fantasies and illusions of which they are symptoms. For Cixous psychoanalysis, Freudian or Lacanian, is an epitome of all the intellectual and cultural forces that erase and distort the feminine.

These four writers reinterpret classical myth for the twentieth century. They explore and exploit the multivalence of the old stories, which associate Medusa with beauty and monstrosity, petrification and art, death and recovery. For Freud Medusa's head provides apotropaic reassurance against its threat of castration and so begins to suggest its own recuperation. Bogan's speaker confronts a powerful female figure directly, rather than in the mirror of a shield, and herself becomes Medusa's reflection, sharing her esthetic power at the cost of sharing her alienation. Sarton's speaker also sees herself in Medusa, but chooses creative freedom at the cost of destructive power. As Sarton replies to Bogan, Cixous replies to Freud. Her writing completes the recuperation of Medusa by transforming, transvaluing, and in effect reinventing her. With a long scholarly look back at history, Freud's paper observes the ability of Medusa's decapitated head to mitigate its own sinister powers and even to make them available to others. Cixous on the other hand celebrates an intact Medusa, immune to the Persean anxiety about "cap crown, and

everything connected with the head” because “woman couldn’t care less about the fear of decapitation” (259). In her optimistic essay Medusa’s laughing body reflects the human future.

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