

Appropriating Ancient Greek Myths: Strategies and Caveats

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ABSTRACT

In her essay on Medusa (this issue) Doris Silverman proposes an anthropological reading of the myth in its times. She argues for its utility in psychoanalytic practice as a myth that illuminates the mother-daughter dynamic. She claims to be delving into the history of females at the time the myth became established and elaborated but mistakenly assigns the myth, which first appeared in art and literature of the Archaic Period (800–480 B.C.E.), to the Classical Period (480–323 B.C.E.). This error undermines the entire anthropological section of her article. Silverman's essay moved me, as a classicist, to propose that anyone attempting to appropriate classical myths for psychoanalytic insight and practice (a) specify the version being analyzed and the context, in which the myth arose or later resurfaced; (b) use classical scholarship on that myth judiciously; (c) avoid reductionism and over-generalization (e.g., "Greek women"); and (d) use clues or gaps within the text as a basis for subversive readings. With these cautionary strategies and caveats in mind, I pondered how a classicist and psychoanalyst might join forces, creatively and meaningfully, in an effort to fathom, animate, and appropriate ancient mythic figures and their stories?

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In an essay on Medusa's decapitation and the effect of her severed head on the viewer, published posthumously, Freud (1922/1923) wrote the following:

An interpretation suggests itself for the terrifying, severed head of Medusa. Cutting of the head = castration. ... The terror ... happens when a boy, who formerly refused to believe in the threat, sees female genitals. Probably adult genitals, surrounded by pubic hair, in principle the mother's. ...

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The sight of Medusa's head makes one rigid with fear, turns the viewer into stone. The same source in the castration complex and the same emotional reaction! Growing rigid means erection, and so in the original situation it is the consolation of the viewer. He still has a penis, and confirms it through getting an erection.

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Athena, the virgin goddess, carries this symbol of horror on her clothes. Rightly, since by it she becomes an unapproachable woman who wards off all sexual advances. She therefore displaces the fearful genitals of the mother. This depiction of woman threatening man with his own castration is only to be expected of the thoroughly homosexual Greeks [pp. 47–48].

Freud's interpretation is that of the male viewer, as is generally understood. His equation of decapitation with castration and attribution of a castration complex to the viewer of the severed head of Medusa have not gone unchallenged. In her now classic essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," a cornerstone of French feminist criticism, Hélène Cixous (1975) reconfigures the myth of Medusa from the perspective of an all-inclusive "you":

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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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In a much admired essay, "Death in the Eyes" (Vernant 1985), classical scholar of ancient religions J.-P. Vernant explores the image of the Gorgon Medusa as a representation of radical difference or

extreme alterity that operates through the mask. He writes, “The alterity Gorgo incarnates ... is one that, at any moment and in any place, wrenches humans away from their lives and themselves ...” (p. 211). His reading of the myth looks for universal significance for humans, male and female, significance that transcends male fright and illuminates the human condition: 45

In Gorgo’s face a kind of doubling process is at work. Through the effect of fascination, the onlooker is wrenched away from himself, robbed of his own gaze, invested as if invaded by that of the figure facing him, who seizes and possesses him through the terror its eye and its features inspire [p. 211]. 50

All three of these efforts to understand the perplexing image and myth of Medusa are assembled in *The Medusa Reader*, a 2003-comprehensive collection in chronological order of ancient versions of the myth and modern interpretations and creative appropriations. In their short introduction, the editors Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers are intrigued by “Medusa’s intrinsic doubleness: at once monster and beauty, disease and cure, threat and protection, poison and remedy.” They see the tension between the beautiful Medusa and the monstrous one as “intrinsic to the story, to the figure of Medusa herself, and to the twin strands of feminism and misogyny that have attached themselves to re-tellings of the Medusa myth throughout the ages” (p. 1). Yet no ancient evidence supports their claim that “doubleness” is intrinsic to *any* early version of the myth. Far from intrinsic, the original beauty of a virginal Medusa—and hence Medusa’s “doubleness”—is first attested in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* IV.883–893, a Roman poem of circa 8 B.C.E. (trans. Raeburn, 2004). Someone at the wedding banquet of Perseus and Andromeda asks the bridegroom, who has slain Medusa, why she, alone of the Gorgon sisters, had snakes entwined in her hair. He responds with an account of her original state, her rape by Neptune (Poseidon), and her transformation at the hands of an enraged Minerva (Athena): 55 60 65

... Medusa was once an exceedingly beautiful maiden, whose hand in marriage was jealously sought by an army of suitors. According to someone who told me he’d seen it, her marvelous hair was her crowning glory. The story goes that Neptune the sea god raped this glorious creature inside the shrine of Minerva. Jove’s daughter screened her virginal eyes with her aegis in horror, and punished the sin, by transforming the Gorgon’s beautiful hair into horrible snakes.” (That explains why, to startle her foes into terror, the goddess always displays those snakes on the front of her bosom.) 70

Ovid attributes the cause of the goddess’ outrage not to Medusa’s challenge to the goddess in a beauty contest but to the rape itself in Minerva’s shrine.

Medusa’s competition with Athena in beauty first appears, almost as an afterthought, in the so-called *Library of Apollodorus* (Simpson, 1976). This 2nd-Century C.E. compendium of ancient Greek myths recounts how, under Athena’s guidance, Perseus decapitated the Gorgon Medusa and then rescued Andromeda and punished his mother’s oppressors by turning them to stone. Perseus gave the Gorgon’s head to Athena, who inserted it in the middle of her shield. The author adds, “But it is alleged by some that Medusa was beheaded on account of Athena; and they say that the Gorgon dared to match herself with the goddess even in beauty” (Simpson, 1976, 2.43). It is possible that this detail, recorded so late in the mythic tradition, derives from earlier sources, such as Pherekydes of Athens (5th C. B.C.E.); but there is no evidence to that effect.¹ It belongs to a traditional tale type in which a deity severely punishes a human offender—a tale-type that serves Ovid’s purposes in the *Metamorphoses*.² 75 80

In “Medusa: Sexuality, Power, Mastery, and Some Psychoanalytic Observations,” however, perhaps drawing on the introductory remarks of Garber and Vickers, whom she cites, Doris Silverman (this issue) relies on the centrality of the beauty contest motif as she explores “the historical features of females in their physical, sexual, social, and cultural lives at the time the myth became established and elaborated” (p. XX). She claims that, by offering an anthropological reading of the Medusa myth 85

¹But for Medusa’s initial beauty we find no early evidence; rather, the statement in the *Library* (“that the Gorgon dared to match herself with the goddess even in beauty”) seems to be retrofitted into a traditional tale type.

²Compare Minerva’s transformation of Arachne into a spider for boasting that she outdid the goddess in weaving (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI, 8) and Apollo’s flaying of the satyr Marsyas for challenging him in a musical contest (VI, 574ff).

in its times, she can illuminate the status of women and girls in Classical Athens (490–323 B.C.E.). 90
 But her claim is based on a fallacious premise. She erroneously ascribes the origin of myth of Perseus
 and Medusa (along with other ancient Greek authors and artifacts of an earlier era) to the Classical
 Period (480–323 B.C.E.). That myth did not originate in the fifth century, much less in Classical
 Athens; rather, our earliest examples in art and in literature date to the preceding Archaic Period
 (800–480 B.C.E.) (Gantz, 1996, pp. 20–22, 303–310). Indeed, the myth probably dates back to 95
 Mycenaean times [1600–1100 B.C.E.] as part of the oral tradition, with likely Ancient Near Eastern
 antecedents. Furthermore, all the Archaic and Classical artistic representations of the Medusa myth
 feature Perseus' decapitation of Medusa or Perseus' flight with Medusa's head in his satchel. None
 includes the detail of Medusa's initial beauty or of Athena's anger leading to the maiden's transfor-
 mation into an ugly, snaky monster. Nor does this detail appear in literary texts of Homer, Hesiod, 100
 Pindar, or in Greek drama.

The analysis is flawed for other reasons as well, despite some intriguing observations. Silverman
 (this issue) has a reductive view of the unity of the ancient Greek world and its culture. Greece was
 not culturally unified across time and space—from the Mycenaean age (1600–1100) down to 105
 Hellenistic times (323–31). This makes classicists today (including feminist classicists) wary of any
 generalizations about “Greek women”: How can one reasonably define and then analyze Greek
 women, when we are dealing with diverse women who lived in a changing and varied set of
 circumstances (e.g., in terms of social class and gender relations) and in populations that span
 more than a thousand years and that inhabited a large geographical space, from Asian Minor (the
 Ionian coast) to Southern Italy and Sicily, and from North Africa to Thrace and Macedonia. There is 110
 no such entity as Greek women that can serve as an object of analysis even in the historical periods
 of Greek history—i.e., from the 8th century, when the Greek alphabet was invented based on the
 Phoenician script, till the end of the reign of Alexander the Great (323 BCE). Sarah Pomeroy's
 ground-breaking book of 1975, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, draws together much
 evidence of historical women's lives, but it must be used with caution, after taking into account 115
 more recent studies of Greek women of various classes, locations, and time periods. Methodologies
 for investigating the material have evolved over the forty years since its publication, and new data
 has been amassed. Reissued but not revised in 1995, Pomeroy's overview cannot serve as a founda-
 tion for recapturing the social history of Greek women.

The Perseus-Medusa myth was certainly *known* to girls and women in Classical Athens, and we 120
 can't rule out an early mention, now lost, of Medusa's initial beauty or of her defiance of Athena.
 But, with no evidence for the reception of the myth in Classical Athens, it is impossible to use the
 myth to speculate about the plight of girls and women in Classical Athens. In any case, Silverman's
 (this issue) anthropological statements about Greek female rage, mostly gleaned from an array of
 secondary sources, are oversimplified and reductive. To consider the topic of female rage in 125
 ancient Greece—if it is recoverable at all—one would at least have to situate actual women in
 their specific periods and locations and recognize that representations of women's rage (as seen in
 Greek tragedy, for example) may not reflect real women's lived experiences. In Sappho's Lesbos,
 for example, and in other island cultures of the Archaic Period, and even in the culture of Ionia
 that produced the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we either do not have sufficient information to make such 130
 claims or we have literary and artistic artifacts that suggest a high status for aristocratic women
 who were integrated to some extent within the social fabric of their fictionalized worlds (cf. Felson
 and Slatkin [2004]).

We are left in a state of some *aporia* about the connection between the Perseus-Medusa myth and
 the cultures in which it arose and was received. Does the myth reveal anything at all of real-life 135
 women? Could it not be the case that it is representing precisely what did not happen in real life?
 And how do we know what happened in real life in ancient Greece, especially in the prehistoric
 periods?

Medusa and Athena

Suppose that, setting aside the analysis of the myth in its ancient Greek context, we turn to the myth 140
is its late manifestation—in the Roman Ovid and the Late Antique pseudo Apollodorus. Both texts
mention the initial loveliness or beauty of Medusa, in Ovid with an emphasis on her most beautiful
hair, her many suitors, and her rape by Neptune in Minerva's temple and in the *Bibliothèque* on her
rivalry with Athena “even in beauty.” Do these renderings of the myth lend themselves to the 145
interpretation Silverman (this issue) sets forth with its focus on the mother-daughter relationship
between the virgin goddess and the beautiful maiden?

Classicists do not normally associate Athena with the maternal role except as the mother of the first
Athenian earth-born king, Erichthonius, who was conceived when Athena spurned the seed of
Hephaestus, which he ejaculated on her thigh as he pursued and attempted to rape her. Hephaestus' 150
seed, which the goddess hurled to the ground in disgust, led to the birth from the earth of Erichthonius.
Toward him and his descendants, and the population of Athens, Athena could perhaps be construed as
maternal, although that is not her predominant attribute. In the *Bibliothèque* version, Medusa's rivalry
with Athena has an adolescent tonality (cf. the goddesses' rivalry in the Judgment of Paris). Athena is
uncharacteristically the coquette, concerned with her appearance. Moreover, Athena's angry response 155
resembles that of the jealous stepmother, as in *Snow White* and many other folktales. In Ovid, on the
other hand, Medusa's only crime is her beautiful hair. When he tells of her metamorphosis, he
emphasizes her allure to dramatize the difference between her initial and final state.

If (for the sake of argument) we grant some plausibility to Silverman's (this issue) “mother-
daughter” interpretation, how might we interpret Athena's appropriation of her daughter's head and 160
the power of its gaze over her foes? Does the identity of Medusa persist even when she is reduced to
a monstrous head on the goddess' aegis?³ In what way could this interpretation serve as a metaphor
for the personal narratives of female analysts? Do Silverman's patients themselves speak of
Medusa (in which case this has nothing to do with Greece but with how modern media has
“given them” the image to their own usage) or is the female rage Silverman sees akin to what 165
Medusa represents in a pair of late versions of the myth? Or is Silverman trying to do a feminist
reading of sorts about the figures of Medusa and Athena?

As a professor of Classics, I have on many occasions tried out with my students feminist readings of
conventionally unappealingly powerful females, such as Gaia in Hesiod's *Theogony* (700 B.C.E.); Helen
and Clytemnestra; and in another key, even the mostly exemplary and admired Penelope. I asked 170
whether there were openings in these ancient texts for recovery of the perspective of these often maligned
or ultimately subordinated characters: did they have voices and agency even though they had to operate
within a patriarchal hierarchy? In my investigations, through close readings of the texts in which they
appear and of the times, many ancient Greek fictionalized, apparently voiceless figures do have voices
that are recoverable to some extent—even in cases where the rebellious figure, often female, divine or
human, is eventually relocated at a hierarchically lower level than her usually male counterpart. 175

Gaps in the representation of the female character in question give room for subsequent
revisionary readings. I believe there are always such gaps, even when the female does not have a
speaking voice. Judith Fetterley's (1978) notion of the resisting reader is useful here and could
accommodate a positive reading of Medusa's grimace as a smile.

Take the exemplary Penelope, who is praised as the paradigm of the faithful wife. Do we know 180
what other designs she had in mind? Are there clues in the Homeric text?⁴ Or consider the case of

³Contrast Demeter/Persephone—a literal mother/daughter pair. There's no sign of a positive bond between Athena and the virgin
Medusa. In fact, the goddess has collaborated with the male hero, helping him decapitate her “daughter.”

⁴I developed this inquiry in Felson (1994). The topic of what Penelope knew and when continues to perplex and intrigue readers.
Some have taken her reunion with Odysseus as a coincidence of her desire with his, whereas others see that reunion in the
context of a resubordination of the wife in the patriarchal institution of marriage. Note, for example, how, in her novel *The
Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood (2005) not only gives Penelope her own voice but also makes that voice subversive and nuanced
as the ghost of Penelope interrogates the text in which she was a major character. (On Atwood's “unraveling” of the *Odyssey*
narrative, see Emily Hauser, 2016.)

the Furies-turned-Eumenides in the third play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Greene et al., 2013): they are given a place in the Athenian polis and "tamed," in a sense; but will their anger erupt again? Although now included, they continue to be subordinate. According to Helen H. Bacon (2001) in her essay, "The Furies' Homecoming," even after their transformation and incorporation into the polis, "these spirits of blessing still have the terrible Gorgon face" (p. 58). 185

Given all the strategies and caveats that I have set forth—regard for the context in which a myth first appears and later resurfaces; specification of the version one is analyzing and the context, if known, in which it arose or was received; judicious use of classical scholarship; avoidance of reductionism (e.g., "Greek women"); and use of gaps or clues in the text as a basis for a subversive reading⁵—what strategies remain for the psychoanalyst eager to creatively and meaningfully utilize ancient myth? 190

As a tale of conflict between a rebellious daughter and a repressive mother, the resolution does not appear to be favorable for the daughter. First, Medusa is decapitated by an overzealous hero, Perseus, who realizes his power (and comes of age) by appropriating hers. Then the hero transfers his trophy—that is, her decapitated head—to his helper Athena, who in turn appropriates the powers embodied in the Gorgon's gaze. At this point, does the once beautiful Medusa still *have* an identity? Could one not say she has been tamed and thus placated, in a sense, like Metis, the goddess Zeus swallowed in his quest for supremacy over the other gods? After all, Medusa's head is now an emblem on the aegis of a goddess who supports cosmic order and who herself, at her birth, caused cosmic trembling until she removed her armor (Felson, 2011). Athena, the goddess of self-restraint, harbors the dangerous head/mask of Medusa and uses it selectively and, it seems, judiciously. In Vernant's (1996) terms, Athena subdues a symbol of Alterity but gives it appropriate expression on occasion as an instrument for maintaining cosmic order. 195 200

We are left with this pressing question: Once Athena has appropriated and wears the head of Medusa, is the decapitated head still laughing? Does Medusa have the last laugh?⁶ 205

Notes on contributor

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⁵One might add two strategies: (a) track examples of subversive receptions of the myth in cultures other than ancient Greece and analyze the basis for those receptions and (b) bolster your own observations about the myth's actual or hypothetical contemporary use(s) with material from patients in an analytic situation.

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