



Medusa: How the Mythological Monster became a Feminist Icon

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Personal Thoughts

“I’ve been interviewing monsters lately.”¹

This line of Nikita Gill’s poem *Monster Mine* spoke to me after writing on this thesis for months. I felt like I had been interviewing Medusa, a monster of mythology, talking to her face to face. I had turned her story over and over, looked at it from every possible angle. I had become friends with the monster if you will. But what makes a monster a monster and why is Medusa being seen as one? And why do I see more and more posts on social media mentioning Medusa in relation to the #MeToo movement?

The reason why I picked this topic was because it represents what Liberal Arts means to me. The fact that an ancient myth still inspires people to write poems or make art shows how important literature and philosophy are still today. In LAS it is all about finding connections between different disciplines but also between different ages. What has always fascinated me, is how stories told thousands of years ago still have an impact today. In the last three years I learned to see how the past influences the present and to recognise these patterns. I learned to read antique and modern texts and find similarities and themes. This thesis is influenced by many classes of the Humanities Major and some personal interests.

¹ Nikita Gill, *Great Goddesses: Life Lessons from Myths and Monsters* (London: Ebury Press, 2019), 164.

Introduction

In recent years books about mythological figures, like *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, video games such as *God of War* or movies like *Clash of the Titans* made their way into pop culture. Greek myths still play a big part of modern media. One thing all the mentioned media have in common is one woman, the Medusa. She appears in all of them in different ways but always as a villain or monster. This is how most people know the Medusa, as a monster with snakes for hair and a petrifying gaze. Some might know her from the fashion brand *Versace* which uses her head as its logo.

But it seems the Medusa has become more than a villain recently. Books with retellings of myths are being published, and poems on social media are being posted that paint her as something different a monster, as a woman that survived sexual assault. This thesis will try and find out where the connection from the original sources such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to modern art like a statue of Medusa holding Perseus' head comes from. It will do so by first looking at the source texts and finding out how they influenced different versions of the myth. After that it will try and deduce why myths are being retold and what a reclaimed version of an ancient story adds to a modern canon. In the last chapter different modern interpretations of the myth will be used to showcase how the story is influencing modern feminism. These points will be supported by an analysis of a retelling of the Medusa myth, different other retellings, some social media posts and an example of modern art.

All of the chapters will try and answer the overarching research question of this thesis:

“Why is the ancient myth of Medusa being reclaimed and rewritten by modern feminists?”

1. Ancient Origins of the Myth of Medusa

Original Sources

Before getting into all different versions and interpretations of the myth of Medusa, a brief summary of the most well known elements of the story is needed. The most popular version that is also referenced in many pieces of modern media is the one on which Medusa is being cursed with snakes as hair and her gaze turns people to stone. There are other versions that tell of three Gorgons, hideous and dangerous monsters - one of them being Medusa-, no curse is being mentioned here, but they are not as popular. For some reason, that is never explained, Medusa is also the only mortal one of the three. In the first variant mentioned above, Medusa is a beautiful woman, sometimes she is called a priestess of Athena, - in the versions that only deal with Medusa alone and not with the other Gorgons, which are, as said before, also the more famous and influential ones- she is at least mentioned as visiting Athenas temple. Medusa is described to have long blond curls and being rivalling in beauty to even some goddesses. This becomes her pitfall. This beauty attracts Poseidon who rapes her in Athenas temple. Athena, who herself is a virgin goddess, is enraged about this, but unfortunately not angry at Poseidon but at Medusa. She curses the woman, probably also out of jealousy of her beauty, and Medusa's hair turns into snakes and she becomes an ugly monster. In addition her gaze becomes deadly as it turns people to stone. After this not much is written about Medusa's life but she appears again in a story about Perseus. Perseus is tasked with retrieving the head of the Gorgon. He does so with the help of Hermes and Athena and multiple magical weapons and tricks. When Medusa is killed in her sleep, two creatures spring from her neck. Her children, probably fathered by Poseidon, are Chrysaor, a warrior, and Pegasus, a winged horse. Perseus takes her head back home and defeats multiple enemies with it as it keeps its petrifying powers even after Medusa's death. After his arrival he gives Athena the head who ultimately puts it on her shield and uses it to defeat her foes.² This summary consists out of the most important elements of antique versions and the ones portrayed in modern media. In this paper other versions and details will be mentioned and it will be explained why the differences are important.

² Stephen R Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2000).

Different versions of the myth

The most publicly known versions of the myth of Medusa are the ones written by Ovid and Pseudo-Apollodorus. Those two versions become the standard of the myth upon which other retelling and variations were based.³ The version written by Pseudo-Apollodorus was originally thought to be written by Apollodorus of Athens but his authorship has been disproven. The *Metamorphoses* by Ovid were written around 8 AD, following the *Bibliotheca* by Pseudo-Apollodorus written around 100-200 BC.^{4/5}

Of course those two are not the only versions of the story but the ones that were carried through history. One of the defining features of those variants is the appearance of the Gorgon Medusa with her hair made of snakes, “making its literary debut in Ovid's *Metamorphose*.”⁶ But the oldest source available to us is written by Homer, which is most likely the main source for both versions discussed in this chapter. Homer's version is a lot less famous, mostly because it is less detailed. In this version Perseus, who in Ovid's myth kills Medusa, is barely even mentioned and Gorgons are monsters of the Hades, the Greek underworld. Medusa is mentioned as “*the Gorgon, whose head is ‘a thing of fear and horror’*.”⁷ The story of why she got cursed with a head full of snakes is relatively similar in the mentioned accounts but has a couple of defining differences. In all versions Medusa's ugliness the result of a curse by Athena. She was holding a grudge against Medusa, the reason being that Medusa's intercourse with Poseidon in a temple of Athena. The differences between the version are that according to Apollodorus this happened with Medusa's consent and in Ovid's version it was an act of rape.⁸

“Ovid may be the first extant author to explicitly identify Medusa as a sexual assault survivor, but he is not particularly sympathetic towards her. In less than a line of text, he reveals that Athena, the supposed protector of her priestess Medusa, instead

³ Stephen R Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴ Aubrey Diller, “The Text History of the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 66 (1935): 296–313, <https://doi.org/10.2307/283301>.

⁵ For readability this paper will refer to Pseudo-Apollodorus as Apollodorus.

⁶ Wilk, 2000, 21.

⁷ David Adams Leeming, *Medusa : In the Mirror of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 10.

⁸ Leeming, 2013

immediately punishes her.”⁹ This punishment is a curse that turns Medusa into an ugly, snake-covered woman so she could never attract a man again. It is reasoned that Athena punished Medusa but not Poseidon because firstly she had no power over the much more powerful god and secondly was angry at Medusa because she had compared herself to the goddess in terms of beauty.¹⁰

But punishing Medusa with her curse apparently was not enough for Athena so she and her brother, the god Hermes, supported Perseus in his task to kill the Gorgon in her sleep. Many of the stories end with Perseus giving Athena the head of the Medusa so she could place it on her shield.

But in other, less mythical accounts the head of Medusa is not magically transformed into a shield but buried close to Argos, a town in the South of Greece. Pausanias, an author who travelled throughout ancient Greece to write about connections between archeology and mythology, mentions Medusa as a Libyan queen.¹¹ “She stood up to Perseus, who had invaded her country with a force of men from Greece. She died, not honorably in battle, but treacherously murdered by night.”¹² The head ended up in Argos because Perseus took it with him to show her beauty to the Greeks.

Coming back to the famous versions of the story, Ovid's, it is not only interesting to look at the differences in the content of the story itself with other descriptions of this myth, but also to look at some of his choices of words to find different interpretations of the myth. In regards to Medusa's rape Ovid uses the Latin verb *vitiare*, which literally translates to *to damage* or *to spoil* and the verb can relate to buildings as much as to people.¹³ With the choice of this word Ovid points out that “Medusa's body is violated in the same regard as Minerva's temple is violated”¹⁴. But Ovid does not condemn the act of violence as one but brushes over it like he does with so many other cases of sexual assault in the

⁹ William S. Duffy, “Medusa as Victim and Tool of Male Aggression,” *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice* 7 (February 29, 2020), <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol7/iss1/1>, 6.

¹⁰ David Adams Leeming, *Medusa : In the Mirror of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

¹¹ David Adams Leeming, *Medusa : In the Mirror of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

¹² Stephen R Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2000), 25.

¹³ “ONLINE LATIN DICTIONARY - Latin - English,” www.online-latin-dictionary.com, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/latin-english-dictionary.php?lemma=VITIO100>.

¹⁴ Nikki Bloch, “Patterns of Rape in Ovid's Metamorphoses” (2014), https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/m039k530v, 37.

Metamorphosis. He talks about it so lightly that some translations even do not take into account the literal meaning of the verb he uses but translate it with “deflowered”¹⁵ where others use the word “violated”¹⁶. The fact that some translations change the meaning of the verb could be a reason why later version of the myth even picture Medusa as a seductress that is rightly punished for profaning Athenas temple. Apollodorus mentioned Poseidon laying with Medusa but does not put any value on this interaction like Ovid does. He mentions Medusa first as the mother of the flying horse Pegasus, the child of Poseidon, and second as the monster that’s being killed by Perseus.¹⁷ After Ovid, Apollodorus's version is the second most influential one on later variants of the myths so it seems these translations of their versions are what’s mostly responsible for the two ways Medusa’s story is being told.

Following this, the way her punishment is being seen is also different depending on the variant. Apollodorus mentions that “Medusa was beheaded for Athena's sake”¹⁸ which hints at the goddess holding a grudge against Medusa even after she cursed her. She helps Perseus kill her with the only reason for this being a personal vendetta against her. This makes more sense in Apollodorus’ version where Medusa willingly slept with Poseidon but way less when compared to Ovid's version where she is being punished even after being cursed for being the victim of sexual assault. Athena is being presented as a woman who acts out of internalised misogyny where she blames the other woman for being too seductive and too beautiful instead of looking at the perpetrator. But she is also a victim in this story by Ovid. Even if she had realised that the fault does not lie with Medusa she had no power over the mighty Poseidon. Profaning her temple cannot go without any consequences but she does not have the ability to punish the god so instead Medusa has to take the curse. But something interesting is being pointed out by Nikki Bloch in her work *Patterns of Rape in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. While being cursed with snakes for hair Medusa is also undeniably powerful and can kill a human with just a gaze. “Medusa’s power in some regard is retaliation, a poetic justice whereby men physically

¹⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (translation by Thomas Riley, *Metamorphoses, by Ovid* (Project Gutenberg, 2007), 322.)

¹⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (translation by Stanley Lombardo, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Hackett Pub. Co, 2010). Book IV, 897.)

¹⁷ Apollodorus, *The Library*.

¹⁸ Apollodorus.

become the stone statues into which they symbolically turn women with their gaze.”¹⁹ Some modern feminists took this power and look at Athenas curse as a blessing which protect Medusa from her being violated again. This paper will look into this view later more deeply.

Themes and motifs

For the story of Medusa to be rewritten as feminist it is also necessary to look at the themes it already contains and identify the patterns in it. The most obvious one is of course the pattern of rape that continues through Greek mythology as discussed earlier. But it is not the only motif that is repeated through myths or even fairytales. Other themes that are part of the Medusa myth, as well as other stories, are her beauty and her hair that turns into snakes, which also carry their own meaning. Jerome J. McGann wrote on her beauty and the dichotomy of it and the terror she spreads and calls it the “Medusan theme”²⁰. He refers to classical writers when looking at the development of this theme and points out that they do not agree on some part of the myth when it comes to Medusa’s powers. It seems that some lead her power to petrify people back to her beauty, some to the horror of her face with the snakes as hair. It is already interesting to see that there is no agreement on this point amongst the classical writers, as it leads to the conclusion that the myth must have been retold many different ways before the modern retellings. He quotes multiple authors referring to “the painting of the Medusa ascribed to Leonardo”²¹, describing it as “the fascination of [...] [and] the tempestuous loveliness of terror”²². This duality seems like a red thread throughout many interpretations and versions of the Medusa myth. On the one hand she is portrayed as a very beautiful young woman and, on the other, as an ugly witch. According to McGann, Medusa “was innocent of the horror she generated”²³. She should not be seen as anything else but a victim of tyranny and the power wielded by the Gods. He states that she is the “symbol of victimisation, of a beauty

¹⁹ Nikki Bloch, “Patterns of Rape in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (2014), https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/m039k530v, 39.

²⁰ Jerome J. McGann, “The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology,” *Studies in Romanticism* 11, no. 1 (1972): <https://doi.org/10.2307/25599824>, 3.

²¹ McGann, 1972, 4.

²² Ibid, 4.

²³ Ibid, 4.

cursed through no fault of her own”²⁴. This victimisation comes mostly from the horror she inflicts and is not responsible for. Her beauty plays a big part in the story as it is her most prominent feature, which is being taken away from her through Athenas curse. In a sense the act of rape makes her less beautiful which is not an uncommon theme. The young virgin is often presented as the more desirable woman compared to older women. But even though the cursed Medusa is the victim of her story, she has undeniable power. Even in her death she is portrayed as powerful by birthing the Pegasus and by Athena placing her head on her shield. The head of the Medusa keeps her petrifying powers even after her death. It makes her immortal in a sense.

Medusa’s Hair

Another mentioned motif is that of Medusas hair. There is no reason mentioned why the curse that Athena put on her manifests in snakes in hair other than that Medusa was too beautiful. Now this introduces two questions. First, is someone with snakes for hair really less powerful and cursed? Second, why did Athena target the hair and not any other feature? The first question is easily answered, Medusa becomes more powerful through her curse which will also be discussed later on. The second one leads to a look at the theme of female hair in myths and fairytales. One of the most famous stories in modern Europe about hair is of course Rapunzel. It was first published in 1812 by the Brothers Grimm but this story had been told already years before it.²⁵ The connection between those two stories seems rather vague, both have something to do with hair, but will become clearer. In analysing works by Charles Dickens, Galia Ofek points out this connection.²⁶ Dickens wrote many female characters and also often focuses on hair. In Ofeks words, the women in his stories “become valuable for their hair while hair acquires dynamic forces of its own”²⁷. One of Dickens’ female characters is described to have wild black hair that later is being tamed, something that stands for her coming into her status as “sexual property”²⁸. The hair of a woman, according to Ofek, stands in relation to her

²⁴ Ibid, 8.

²⁵ “Rapunzel - New World Encyclopedia,” www.newworldencyclopedia.org, n.d., <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Rapunzel>.

²⁶ Galia Ofek, “‘Tie Her up by the Hair’: Dickens’s Retelling of the Medusa and Rapunzel Myths,” *Dickens Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (September 3, 2003): 184–99, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45291925>.

²⁷ Ofek, 2022, 186

²⁸ Ofek, 2022, 186

sexuality and is a symbol for her womanhood. Now looking at the Medusa this becomes very interesting. In the beginning of the story she is often described as very pretty with a special focus on her beautiful hair.²⁹ The curse Athena put on her specifically targets her hair, changing it to “snaky locks”³⁰. It seems the change in her hair also represents the change of Medusa losing her virginity and with that her beauty.

The importance of snakes

"Snakes are significant in many cultures from the goddess Cōātlīcue and Quetzalcoatl of Central America to the Naga in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain dharma tradition snakes have represented a variety of things through time, they have been both a symbol of transformation and healing as well as judgement and temptation."³¹ The curse Athena puts on Medusa is a very specific one, as mentioned because it targets her most beautiful feature but also because of the significance of the snakes. The snake has a meaning in almost every culture, from the snake in the garden Eden that tempts Eve to the snake in logos of apothecaries that stands for wisdom. It can mean a variety of different things. In the case of Medusa the snakes are given to her by Athena. Snakes were a sacred animal in Greek mythology, they were sacred to Athena specifically.³² In other stories she uses snakes to heal or even give immortality to an infant.³³ It seems somewhat strange to give Medusa snakes as part of the curse if the animals are sacred to Athena. Why give someone something holy as a response to the desecration of her temple? There are some interpretations that try to paint Athena in a better light, they speculate maybe she was not able to punish Zeus so she had to make it seem like she cursed Medusa but in actuality she gave her the snakes as protection. This paper will get back to this idea later, as it is also part of the feminist re-interpretation of the story.

Another explanation of why the snakes as hair are part of the story stems from a possible origin of the figure Medusa. Miriam Robbins Dexter, author of *The Ferocious and the*

²⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

³⁰ Ovid, Book IV, 865.

³¹ Eliza McCall, “Mythos and Monstrosity: Encountering and Reframing the Modern Medusa” (2021), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/056c92619080f59660c0f1fe555a5c73/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar&parentSessionId=BxCXzJuukaMmKRttGDxStAotgW0DMObzVzs%2BTF8peds%3D>, 9.

³² Stephen Fry, *Mythos : A Retelling of the Myths of Ancient Greece*. (Penguin Books, 2018).

³³ Fry, 2018

Erotic: “Beautiful” Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake, points out multiple snake and serpent related goddesses which could be part of Medusas’ origins. “In the Neolithic period, throughout Europe and the Near East, there appear figurines which represent bird/women, snake/women, and bird/snake/ woman hybrids. Since Goddesses with bird and snake iconography appear in early historic religions, such as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, scholars have theorized that the figurines represent powerful divine female figures in the Neolithic cultures of Europe and the Near East.”³⁴

The fact that multiple cultures have references to those goddesses could also be part of why the myth is still so popular today. Something about those deadly powerful, feral women still speaks to us humans. The dichotomy of the snakes comes back also in this theory. Both deadly and healing, those goddesses represent different aspects of life. The blood of the Medusa is mentioned as having healing properties, even bringing people back from the dead but her gaze can take life just as easily. Like the venom of a snake she can both heal and kill.³⁵

The story of Asclepius, “the world’s first physician”³⁶, shows the positive power Medusa still had after her death. Asclepius studied surgery and medicine and according to the myths saved many lives. To thank him Athena gifts him a vial of the Gorgons blood and it turns out it has the power to heal. To honour Athena for this gift Asclepius’ symbol later becomes “a wooden staff with a snake twined round it, seen to this day on many ambulances, clinics and (often disreputable) medical websites.”³⁷

³⁴ Miriam Robbins Dexter, “The Ferocious and the Erotic: ‘Beautiful’ Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake,” *Source: Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010): 25–41, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2979/fsr.2010.26.1.25>, 32

³⁵ Stephen Fry, *Mythos : A Retelling of the Myths of Ancient Greece*. (Penguin Books, 2018).

³⁶ Fry, 2018, 141.

³⁷ Ibid, 141.

2. Reclaiming of Myths

Retelling of myths

The story of Medusa is only one of many myths that is being retold on many different variants. Many modern movies and books are based on ancient myths. As this paper should lead to the insight, that Medusa and her story are still so extremely alive in our days - or was revived again in the last decade, in the beginning of this chapter I want to look into, why actually myths are still so present in literature today and give some examples for that.

Obvious ones are *Ulysses* by James Joyce or *Mythos* by Stephen Fry, less obvious ones are *Girl Meets Boy* by Ali Smith or the *Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins. The *Hunger Games* trilogy for example is very interesting as it brought a story rooted in Greek and Roman mythology to the cinemas. Some connections of the movies to antiquity are easy to spot like the names of some characters, Plutarch Heavensbee or Caesar Flickerman, other connections are harder to make. According to Collins, Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the *Hunger Games* books, is meant to be a modern version of the Greek hero Theseus.³⁸ In the myth, Theseus and other Athenians were sent as human sacrifices to King Minos, the ruler of Crete. He needed them for the minotaur living in a maze on the island. Theseus managed to kill the beast and saved their lives.³⁹ Katniss is also inspired by the Greek goddess Artemis and the Amazon warriors. Suzanne Collins was inspired by an ancient myth to write something that comments on many modern issues and is even being studied in schools. Her books deal with the inequality between the rich and the poor, corrupt governments and suffering as a form of entertainment for others.⁴⁰ Now the interesting part is why she based this story on an ancient myth. One could think it would not matter if the story was not based on anything and this might even be true. If you look at her book you might not even recognise the antique material that it is based on. When Collins first had the idea for her story she might not even have gotten it directly from the myth of Theseus but used it later as inspiration. This is an interesting observation, as the influence of the myth does not even need to be intentional in the

³⁸ Barry Strauss, "The Classical Roots of 'the Hunger Games,'" *WSJ* (Wall Street Journal, November 13, 2014), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-classical-roots-of-the-hunger-games-1415897640>.

³⁹ Strauss, 2014

⁴⁰ "SparkNotes: The Hunger Games: Themes," www.sparknotes.com, n.d., <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/the-hunger-games/themes/>.

beginning to be recognisable. Ancient myths touch upon so many topics and themes that it seems almost impossible to write anything in Western literature that is not somewhat influenced by the classic texts. In the case of the Hunger games trilogy Barry Strauss, professor of history and classics, points out that another of the main themes is rites of passage for the youth.⁴¹ He takes college entry exams as an example of modern rites of passage, comparable not in deadliness to boot camps of Athenians soldiers but in their demanding ways, “which perhaps explains why the life-or-death stakes of “The Hunger Games” strike such a deep chord among our decidedly nonclassical teens”⁴².

Now one could think that if so many stories are somehow based on ancient myths, people would get bored of them at some point. Why is it that these old stories still speak enough to us to be rewritten over and over? Neil Gaiman, author of books like *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*, both fantasy books based on mythology, writes about his thoughts on the topic in his article *Reflections on Myth*.⁴³ He explains in the article how this love for myths inspired his works and why he thinks humans need myths: “Mythologies have, as I said, always fascinated me. Why we have them. Why we need them. Whether they need us.”⁴⁴ His position is that retellings of myths are important because they lead to the myth being reevaluated and inspected from a new point of view. He also points out that the versions of the myths that survive say something about the time they were being retold in. Disney did a lot in this respect with promoting certain versions of fairytales and myths and leading to other versions being forgotten. “Red Riding Hood ends these days with a rescue, not with the child being eaten, because that is the form of the story that has survived”⁴⁵ and it survived because it is the more child-friendly version that can be told in modern kindergartens. According to Neil Gaiman it is important when dealing with those myths to keep in mind that they are not old, dead stories that do not concern us anymore. His opinion is that myths have power and this power should not be forgotten or overlooked. It is this power over people that leads to the myths being rewritten and told and told again and it lies in the reflections they offer.

⁴¹ Barry Strauss, “The Classical Roots of ‘the Hunger Games,’” WSJ (Wall Street Journal, November 13, 2014), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-classical-roots-of-the-hunger-games-1415897640>.

⁴² Strauss, 2014

⁴³ Neil Gaiman, “Reflections on Myth,” *A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 31 (1999): 75–84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41807920>.

⁴⁴ Gaiman, 1999, 79.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 81.

Having such universal topics like shown with the example of Hunger Games, ancient myths speak to humans century after century.

Besides the themes also the protagonists of Greek mythology seem to be timeless. In ancient Greece the myths were stories of human behaviour as much as stories about gods and heroes. The characters of mythology are often based on so called archetypes.⁴⁶ Virginia Beane Rutter describes these archetypes as part of a collective unconscious. She defines them as symbols that put a “personal problem in the wider context of the archetypal world.”⁴⁷ A person relating to an archetype connects themselves to humanity. The archetypes of the Medusa myth have been mentioned before, Medusa can be seen both as the virgin and the witch and Perseus fulfils the role of the hero, Athena is a patron. Versions of these archetypes are part of almost every piece of literature. It seems as long as humans have told stories they fall back to those archetypes and this is what keeps myths relevant. They have survived so long because it is easy for people to relate to the archetype and they will probably stay relatable for a long time. Rewriting those myths adapts the archetypes to our modern society and ensures there are stories people can relate to.

Feminist retellings

Other examples of rewritten myths are the books *Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood or Madeline Miller's *Circe*. Both are dealing with and retelling the story of respectively Penelope or Circe, two women from Greek mythology. It is interesting to see how many modern retellings focus on female characters, something that distinguishes them from the originals which are often inherently misogynistic.⁴⁸ Those books seem to stem from a similar idea as the reclaiming of Medusa as a feminist icon. Both Circe and Penelope originally are characters in a man's story and their viewpoints were not the relevant ones in those stories. By rewriting the myths, those characters gain more depth and can act as the protagonist of their own stories.

⁴⁶ Virginia Beane Rutter and Thomas Singer, eds., *Ancient Greece, Modern Psyche: Archetypes Evolving* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

⁴⁷ Rutter & Singer, 2015, 21.

⁴⁸ Harriet M. MacMillan, “‘The Stories We Tell Ourselves to Make Ourselves Come True’: Feminist Rewriting in the Canongate Myths Series” (2019), <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/37119>.

So, to break it down, many modern retellings of myths can be seen as feminist stories, which also leads us on the way, how and why Medusa is such an important figure in the feminist movement of our days. According to Harriet MacMillan, author of *'The Stories We Tell Ourselves to Make Ourselves Come True': Feminist Rewriting in the Canongate Myths Series* those rewritings "can offer liberating pathways for the female writer."⁴⁹ "Given such a persistent interest in the act of female mythmaking, I ultimately hold that feminist engagements with myth can, given its power as a dominant metanarrative at a time when our literary culture is renegotiating our relationships to such discourses, speak to broader questions about contemporary literature and the woman writer's place within that context."⁵⁰ She discusses multiple reasons why retellings of myths are so interesting to modern female authors and feminists in general, one of them being the search for foremothers in those stories. The search for repressed foremothers to identify with is explained as a necessary instinct. Rewriting the myths to give these characters a voice simultaneously gives women a new canon to turn to when searching for these foremothers. In *The Laugh of the Medusa* Hélène Cixous writes: "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement."⁵¹ Essentially in order to support female writers and create a more feminist society women have to write about themselves and other women. But this is true for any kind of writing so why focus on myths when trying to create a more feminist canon? MacMillan suggests that this is because while feminists try to change the present society they also need to look into the past. The past informs our society, vocabulary and culture. It is necessary to consider where certain stereotypes and parts of cultures come from to be able to change them. Looking into the past and the way cultures have developed ultimately leads to looking at the stories being told over time. Values are being taught through stories and especially myths and fairytales often contain a message that is conveyed to younger generations. Diane Purkiss points out in her essay *Women's Rewriting of Myth* published in *The Women's Companion to Mythology* that "ever since myths came into existence, women have been involved in writing and

⁴⁹ MacMillan, 2019, 13.

⁵⁰ MacMillan, 2019, 13.

⁵¹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>, 875.

rewriting them.”⁵² Women were mostly the ones raising the children and telling them those stories. Purkiss mentions “that it is misleading to speak solely of women’s ‘rewriting’ of myth, since the term implies that man was its prime maker.”⁵³ The goal of rewriting myths should also be a change of this conception.

As one example this thesis will look at the aforementioned *Penelopiad* by Margret Atwood. It “is a clear example of a feminist rewrite, whose chief goal is to give voice to those unheard in the original work (The Odyssey) by means of the creation of a revisionary and postmodern rewrite of the classic myth of Odysseus and Penelope.”⁵⁴ Ioana-Gianina Haneş points out in her work *Margaret Atwood: The Penelopiad – Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature* that the term rewriting is being used when something that had already been written needs to be corrected or completed.⁵⁵ In this case this means that Atwood apparently saw a flaw with the original story of Penelope in the Odyssey and corrected it with her rewriting. She “uses rewriting not for lack of themes, but out of the necessity of outlining an identity that has been broken.”⁵⁶ The outline of the story stays the same, Atwood even references specific scenes of the Odyssey but changes the setting and gives insight into those scenes from a female perspective. Atwood's story begins in the underworld, Penelope is long dead. She starts telling her own story out of necessity because the versions that are being told are not truthful. Penelope is angry in Atwood’s book, she is tired of being seen as “a stick used to beat other women with.”⁵⁷ Her character is often described as the perfect wife and mother.⁵⁸ But she warns the reader not to follow her example how it is shown in the Odyssey. She admits to being silent when she should have spoken up and praising her husband even when he didn’t deserve it.

⁵² Carolyne Larrington, *The Woman’s Companion to Mythology* (London: Pandora, 1997), 441.

⁵³ Larrington, 1997, 441.

⁵⁴ Fin de Grado, “Rewriting the Odyssey: Margaret Atwood’s the Penelopiad” (2017), https://gredos.usal.es/bitstream/handle/10366/135776/TG_SeguraArnedoS_RewritingTheOdyssey.pdf;jsessionid=16F2A687F9BDA4CDC6F6277CEDEB CACC?sequence=1, 3.

⁵⁵ Ioana-Gianina Haneş, “Margaret Atwood: The Penelopiad -Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature,” n.d., accessed May 15, 2022.

⁵⁶ Haneş, n.d., 10.

⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Penelopiad*. (Canongate U.S, 2019), 10.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Gregory, “Unravelling Penelope: The Construction of the Faithful Wife in Homer’s Heroines,” *Helios* 23, no. 1 (1996): 3–20, [http://elizabethgregory.net/images/pdfs/EG_UnravellingPenelope_070409\[1\].pdf](http://elizabethgregory.net/images/pdfs/EG_UnravellingPenelope_070409[1].pdf).

The Penelopiad not only focuses on Penelope's story but also on twelve of her maids. They have a relatively small part in the Odyssey, most of them are not even named. The maids come up as part of Penelope's ploy on a group of suitors. Odysseus had been gone for years and the group of men decided it was time for Penelope to remarry and make someone new master of her household, but she still believes in Odysseus's return. She comes up with a plan to stall the suitors and sends the twelve maids to spy on them.⁵⁹ The last part of the plan is added by Atwood to explain why the maids mock Penelope when talking to the suitors and gives them an active role instead of the passive girls they portray in the Odyssey. But their conspiracy leads to the rape of multiple of the maids and the execution of all of them. This is a detail that is quickly brushed over in the original work, something Atwood explains with its focus on the male perspective.

The story of Penelope is just one other example of many female stories that are told from a male perspective. In her paper *The seen and unseen: How the image of Medusa in art reflects women in law and society* Piper Keel explains how this male focus is also represented in the legal system. She explains the many rapes in ancient myths that are not being condemned or even recognised as sexual assault with the male eyes through which those stories are being told. "Women in Greece 'could not bring cases ... and could not appear before the court or even give evidence in any direct way', thus most accounts of rape were conveyed second-hand."⁶⁰ She goes on to explain that a focus on mythology when trying to claim a feminist narrative is important because art and specifically also literature mirrors society. "Representation in art is a reflection of representation in society—politically, socially, and legally—and thus representation, being seen, is ultimately linked with having a voice in society."⁶¹ Keel mentions the Medusa specifically as an important character to be reclaimed as she has been used throughout history both to condemn women for their sexuality and to promote strong women - and this is where we come back to our main topic. Earliest art of Medusa shows her as a hideous figure, not a human who derives justice but more of a monster that needs to be killed. This depiction mirrors the position on rape the Ancient Greek society held. A woman who was raped did not automatically deserve justice. The depiction of Medusa as

⁵⁹ Atwood, 2019

⁶⁰ Piper Keel, "The Seen and Unseen: How the Image of Medusa in Art Reflects Women in Law and Society," *ANU Undergraduate Research Journal* 11, no. 1 (2021), <https://studentjournals.anu.edu.au/index.php/aurj/article/view/721>, 31.

⁶¹ Keel, 2021, 29.

a monster served the oppression of women as she was shown as a threat that needs to be controlled. “Women’s use of power in mythology was often destructive and served to justify the exclusion of women in real life.”⁶² This means the way the myth was told directly influenced the way women were treated in vice versa. As mentioned before, stories hold actual power that can manifest in real life. Now this is also supported by the example of the term *Medusa* being used for powerful women nowadays. Because myths, especially the Greek ones, are so deeply intertwined with modern Western culture, almost everyone has a picture in their mind when someone calls a woman a *Medusa*. A monstrous, maybe even crazy woman, who should be more under control. This is also part of the explanation why the focus on myth is so vital while rethinking modern stereotypes. The witch or *crazy woman* can be seen as one of many before mentioned “Classical archetypes”⁶³ of mythology. These archetypes are still reflected in many parts of our modern culture, literature, art or other media. The Greek myths are the basis to so many of our stories and expressions that changing and reclaiming them is necessary to change the media based on them. During the 2016 presidential campaign a picture circled the internet of Trump holding Hillary Clintons head in a fashion that clearly resembles Perseus with Medusas cut off head.⁶⁴ The image of Medusa is being used to point out women that for some reasons or another are being seen as a threat that must be eliminated by a male hero.

If Medusa was not associated with a mad woman whose powers must be controlled, then calling Angela Merkel or Hillary Clinton Medusa would not be a misogynist insult anymore.⁶⁵ This leads also back to the importance of myths for our time. As long as language is being influenced by those myths they will stay relevant and need to be rewritten to fit in modern society.

The girl behind the myth

After giving several examples of retold ancient myths in modern literature, we should now look into how the myth of Medusa is used in these contexts. One example for a retelling of the actual story of Medusa is *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* by Jessie Burton. It is

⁶² Keel, 2021, 31.

⁶³ Keel, 2021

⁶⁴ “TrumpAndTriumph: About on Zazzle,” Zazzle, accessed June 5, 2022, <https://www.zazzle.com/store/trumpandtriumph/about>.

⁶⁵ Keel, 2021

a book aimed at younger readers, it is categorised as a Young Adult novel.⁶⁶ Jessie Burton wrote this rethinking of the myth of Medusa to change the point of view of her story. The original stories are not told from Medusa's standpoint so it adds a new spin to have her personally be the narrator of the book. It is written in the first person which puts the focus on her and only her. This book changes a lot about the source materials, it is really a reimagined version which also adds a lot of new parts to it. The story begins with Medusa taking a walk on the island she fled to with her sisters. Why she fled is being explained later, the reason is taken directly from the original tale. Medusa was raped by Poseidon and punished by Athena with the snake hair. She and her Gorgon sisters, who had been turned into Gorgons also by Athena, had been living on the island by themselves for four years when the book starts. Medusa opens with the question: "If I told you that I'd killed a man with a glance, would you wait to hear the rest?"⁶⁷, challenging the reader already from the first sentence on. This question encapsulates the point of the book very well. Medusa does not get the chance to tell her story in the source materials, it is always other people talking about her and taking away her voice, in the end even literally by killing her. Burton's book gives Medusa a voice and the opportunity to tell her story how she wants. The story continues with Perseus arriving at the island and him and Medusa forming a friendship through conversations on opposite sides of a cave wall. She tells him a fake name, Merina, and they start sharing details about their childhoods and fears. The two form an unlikely bond and even though a reader who knows a little about Greek mythology is aware that it probably will not work out well, their friendship and later love story is very compelling. Perseus was sent away from his home and mother to kill the Medusa, but he does not share this detail until the end of the book. He tells Medusa about his mother Danaë, and how he tried to defend her from the king of his island, Polydectes, and she starts to relate to his mother. Danaë has been trying to fight Polydectes off for years but he did not stop courting her. Medusa recognises her own story in Danaë and realises how much rage she carries in her. She says something that rings true for her whole life story. "When beauty's assigned you as a girl, it somehow becomes the essence of your being. It takes over everything else you might be."⁶⁸ In Burton's story that main reason for Athena's curse does not seem to be the rape but

⁶⁶ Hephzibah Anderson, "Greek Myths: A New Retelling by Charlotte Higgins; Medusa: The Girl behind the Myth by Jessie Burton – Review," the Guardian, November 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/28/greek-myths-a-new-retelling-charlotte-higgins-review-medusa-the-girl-behind-the-myth-jessie-burton>.

⁶⁷ Jessie Burton, *Medusa: The Girl behind the Myth* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022), 8.

⁶⁸ Burton, 2022, 60.

mostly that fact that one of Medusa's sisters points out that the girl is more beautiful than Athena. Her beauty had attracted Poseidon attention and incited Athena's jealousy. From the moment on that the people of her town had decided she was beautiful her body had become something like public property that can be discussed and commented on by anyone. "Perseus, when you're a girl, people think your beauty is their possession. As if it's there for their pleasure, as if they've got something invested in it. They think you owe them for their admiration."⁶⁹ She compares her experiences to Perseus who points out that he was also being called *handsome*, but that did not have any other consequences for him. Perseus instead points out that he can relate to her because instead of beauty people expected strength from him, the strength to protect his mother. He felt forced to display brutality, just as Medusa felt forced to be seen as beautiful. Medusa again draws a parallel between Danaë and herself, hearing how Polydectes only stopped bothering her after Perseus, a man, told him to. During the story Medusa does eventually tell Perseus that it was Poseidon who raped her and Athena who cursed her and he starts reevaluating his relationship to those two gods, who had only been good to him. Towards the end Medusa is almost ready to actually meet Perseus face to face, she wanted to tell him everything and show him who she actually was. "I'd been taught for so long to ignore what was in me – my own fire, my own voice wanting to be heard. And now it was time. I wanted to tell my story."⁷⁰ But just before she gets to walk around the wall and face him, he opens up and reveals that his mission is to kill the Medusa. The wording of his statement is particularly interesting as he calls her *the Medusa* not just *Medusa*. "The Medusa. What did he mean, the Medusa? My name was Medusa, and I was a girl. Perseus had made me sound like a mythical beast. I didn't want to be a myth. I wanted to be me."⁷¹ The way Perseus talks about her makes her seem like she is already a myth but she is sitting just next to him, a girl with dreams and hopes and a story, not just a mythical beast that is there to be slain by him. He reveals that he is not allowed to return home to protect his mother unless he brings the head of the Medusa with him. Medusa listens to him talk about the monster that she is supposedly and then reveals the beast he is taking about is her. Now one could expect Perseus would realise he had heard false stories about her, he had talked to Medusa for days and heard her whole life story, he knew her pain. She hopes he would recognise that she and his mother are both just women trying

⁶⁹ Ibid, 60.

⁷⁰ Burton, 2022, 99.

⁷¹ Ibid, 121.

to exist around powerful men who have the ability to ruin their lives with one decision. But the moment she compares herself to Danaë he gets angry and starts to attack her. The thought that his mother and this monster he heard about could have something in common makes him angry, he does not understand the pain they share. Now this part of the story is reminiscent of Perseus' original story, he sets out to kill the Medusa and confronts her. But instead of being killed in her sleep, this Medusa is awake and can decide herself what happens next. She remembers Athenas curse "Woe betide any man fool enough to look upon you now"⁷² and decides that she does not want to hurt Perseus. She runs and hides inside the cave while yelling at him to stay back. Now Perseus has a choice to make. He can either trust the girl he got to know so well or let the opinions of others about her take over. The decision seems easy for him, he goes after Medusa, ignoring her begging not to get too close. In going after her he seals his own fate and probably that of his mother. Just like in the original story Medusa's gaze turns people (in this case probably only men) to stone. Perseus invades Medusa's space and pays with his life. Even though she feels bad for it, Medusa decides to face him instead of giving up. She says about this decision: "I was not going to let him destroy me for who I was, or who he thought I was, for his own ends. It was simply unacceptable."⁷³ After realising what her gaze did to Perseus Medusa feels regret and like it was her fault but her sisters reassure her that she was only defending herself. Medusa comes to terms with her own power, she realises the snakes had become part of her. "I was proud of who I was, and I had as much right to be alive as Perseus did."⁷⁴ The book ends with the three Gorgons leaving the island, Medusa not afraid of the ocean and with it not afraid of Poseidon anymore. On the boat Medusa thinks about her own story and calls it a myth herself. "And a strange thing: perhaps it's all the time I spend with my sisters, for whom time means nothing, but I feel as if I might go on forever, or at least that my myth will. I could break into a million pieces and stalk a million minds. I could drive women to feats of fame and liberty and wonder. I might live for hundreds of years to come, crossing continents and oceans, empires and cultures. Because, unlike a statue, you cannot break up a myth or wedge it on top of a cliff. A myth finds a way to remember itself. It makes a new shape, rising out of a shallow grave in glory."⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid, 47.

⁷³ Burton, 2022, 141.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 145.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 148.

And she turned out to be right, the myth of Medusa has survived thousands of years to keep inspiring people. It seems very poetic that Medusa realises in the end that her story will be remembered as a myth, she is aware how many women will be able to relate to her story. In her article about the book Hephzibah Anderson explains that the book is obviously rooted in #MeToo and points out how the story shines a new light on an ancient story. The fact that the book is aimed at young adults already shows how important these kinds of stories are, it helps teenagers to understand why feminism is needed. The way Burton describes her Medusa is almost too innocent. She is 18 when the story begins, in exile already for 4 years. A young woman, a teenager, who is learning to deal with the trauma the more powerful gods have left her with. Many girls can relate to her and can learn to understand that they are not to blame for what a misogynistic society does to them. A victorious and strong Medusa, who is not painted as a villain or monster, can help to overcome the female fear of speaking up and standing up for oneself.

3. Modern feminist interpretations

Medusa and #MeToo

As explained in the previous chapter, retold myths hold power and can change historical narratives. The myth of Medusa is prevalent in multiple areas of modern media and influences movements like #MeToo. Now first of all it is interesting to see why especially Medusa and not any of the other many characters of Greek mythology is experiencing this renaissance. Of course Greek mythology and mythology in general is becoming more popular through movies and books like the Thor movies by Marvel or the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan currently. But the Medusa is especially interesting as she is not just part of a literary rediscovery but also part of political and societal discourse. Her new role as for example a feminist icon is not obvious when looking at the original myth and this connection will be the subject of this analysis.

But before this connection can be understood it needs to be clear what the myth of Medusa means nowadays. It is a story written thousands of years ago that somehow still has relevance and the ability to say something about our modern society. Something in this story obviously still speaks to us. As David Leeming put it in his book *Medusa in the Mirror of Time*, “to explain that universal and seemingly eternal fascination, an approach that emphasizes common motifs and archetypal constructs would seem to be the most promising. There are elements in the Medusa myth that strike chords in us even though we are not ancient Greeks. They do this because they respond to universal human concerns”⁷⁶. Now what are these motifs and constructs? As mentioned before the story of Medusa includes a lot of themes and symbolisms, the witchy woman and the virgin, snakes, and the story of the hero in Perseus who defeats the monster. But the overarching theme is the struggle of a woman against a more powerful force, in this case Medusa against the rape of Poseidon and also the power of Athena. This focus on power is prevalent in many versions of the story.⁷⁷ This is probably what speaks to us still. The struggle of minorities and suppressed groups against bigger powers is something that happens around us everyday. Almost every woman can relate to the feeling of being

⁷⁶ David Adams Leeming, *Medusa: In the Mirror of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 106.

⁷⁷ Eliza McCall, “Mythos and Monstrosity: Encountering and Reframing the Modern Medusa” (2021), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/056c92619080f59660c0f1fe555a5c73/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar&parentSessionId=BxCXzJuukaMmKRttGDxStAotgW0DMObzVzs%2BTf8peds%3D>.

overpowered in some way or another. “Modern research in rhetorical and cultural criticism is often focused on structures of power that attempt to maintain control and often lead to discrimination or violence by dominant groups onto others.”⁷⁸ Eliza McCall writes about this in her paper *Mythos and Monstrosity: Encountering and Reframing the Modern Medusa*. She points out the patriarchal nature of our modern society as a basis for issues like the male gaze and generally ingrained misogyny. She quotes Susan R. Bowers’ *Medusa and the Female Gaze* to show the relevance of mythology in relation to this patriarchal nature. “The patriarchal images of women from Greco-Roman mythology will continue to oppress as they remain “encoded within our consciousness.”⁷⁹ That is also why Medusa is being used as an icon in the #MeToo movement. #MeToo is a global movement, the term was coined by Tarana Burke. Australia’s Macquarie Dictionary “defines it as an adjective, describing a relation of or to ‘the Me Too movement ... [or] an accusation of sexual harassment or sexual assault’”.⁸⁰ Women, and also men, participating in the movement often share personal stories of sexual assault and the movement helps them to feel less alone with their situations.⁸¹ Sexual assault is a widespread topic in Greek mythology and also a big part of Medusa’s story. Using her as an icon helps sexual assault survivors also to feel more seen as they recognise themselves in her.

Beverly Tan’s paper *Medusa: How the Literary Muse Became an Emblem for Feminism* also deals with the influence of the Medusa myth on the #MeToo movement. “Medusa was the emblem of female power back in Ancient Greece and a symbol of both protection and aggression.”⁸² She calls the myth “the perfect gateway into the contemporary

⁷⁸ Eliza McCall, “Mythos and Monstrosity: Encountering and Reframing the Modern Medusa” (2021), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/056c92619080f59660c0f1fe555a5c73/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar&parentSessionId=BxCXzJuukaMmKRttGDxStAotgW0DMObzVzs%2BTf8peds%3D>, 1.

⁷⁹ Susan Bowers, “Medusa and the Female Gaze,” *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 2 (1990): 217–35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316018>, 217.

⁸⁰ Van Badham, “The Power of MeToo: How Feminism Changed the Dictionary,” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/15/metoo-is-clearly-a-word-we-needed-which-is-why-its-been-added-to-the-dictionary>.

⁸¹ This paper will refer to the members of the #MeToo movement as women or female and mention expressions such as “female rage”. This is done to point out the importance of the Medusa as a foremother for those people, not to exclude male or non-binary members of the movement.

⁸² Beverly Tan, “Medusa: How the Literary Muse Became an Emblem for Feminism,” *The Interdependent: Journal of Undergraduate Research in Global Studies* 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.33682/nzgc-1pxs>, 113.

discourse of rape culture, the rising trend of sexual assault cases coming to light, and the vilifying of sexual assault victims.”⁸³ She mentions the cases of sexual assault by former U.S. president Trump and Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh as examples that can be compared to Medusa’s story. The parallel here is being drawn between Poseidon and the two powerful modern men. All of them assaulted women and none of them lost their positions of power or standing because of it. This is unfortunately nothing unusual in sexual assault cases. Very often if someone tried to press charges about a sexual assault it leads to little to no consequences for the perpetrator.⁸⁴ The statistics of sexual assault cases can be very depressing or intimidating. Often women do not even report sexual assault because of the bad odds for an arrest or other consequences. The feeling of helplessness silences women just like Medusa is being silenced in her own story. “In addition to being the voice of the silenced, Medusa represents the accumulated rage of sexual violence victims.”⁸⁵ This rage seems to also be an important part of the #MeToo movement.

This rage is another factor why the myth is being reclaimed today. In her paper *Anger: Embracing the Medusa Trope as an Act of Resistance* Myisha Cherry talks about female anger and how the story of the Medusa acts as a cautionary tale. She establishes something called “the Medusa trope”⁸⁶. This trope shows “angry women as dangerous, and society concludes that these angry, blameworthy women must be conquered and controlled through patriarchal norms, laws, expectations, and hostility.”⁸⁷ This is the eternal story of Medusa and so many other women. A woman who is angry about the injustice done to her is seen as less of a victim even though the injustice does not change. It is definitely a big enough part to dedicate whole papers to it. Cherry also sees Medusa as an exemplification of the abused woman and adds that this abuse leads to rage which is seen as dangerous. She takes the petrifying gaze of the Medusa as a metaphor for her rage, her anger makes people around her freeze still in fear. Her anger is not seen as an appropriate response to the crime but as something irrational and dangerous. “If women were valued and respected in the same way that men are, they

⁸³ Tan, 2021, 114

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid, 123.

⁸⁶ Myisha Cherry, “Anger,” *Philosophy for Girls*, October 22, 2020, 219–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190072919.003.0017>, 1.

⁸⁷ Cherry, 2020, 2.

would be justified when becoming angry in response to mistreatment and violence, as well as the dismissal of their reports of such.”⁸⁸ But female rage is being seen as a danger, so women are being taught to self-police this rage. #MeToo is a possibility for women to express this anger, which one could even call inherited anger. By calling women a witch or Medusa or something similar, they are being branded as irrational and someone who needs to control herself better. “The Medusa trope operates to ensure that women are and remain subservient, silent, and never a threat to patriarchy.”⁸⁹

One of the most famous works on this rage and the need for feminist writing is the aforementioned work *The Laugh of the Medusa* by Hélène Cixous. Her work is full of the female anger, the anger felt by Medusa when she is being silenced, her head cut off. Cixous writes about the importance of women writing stories about women, one of the reasons why the Medusa myth has become so popular again recently. “It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak.”⁹⁰

This sentiment is being represented in the modern interpretations discussed in this chapter. They go beyond retellings and showcase how far the reach of the reclaiming of the Medusa goes.

Medusa with the head of Perseus

Medusa's story was also used by Luciano Garbati, an Argentine-Italian sculptor, to create a piece that resembles the well known statue *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* by Benvenuto Cellini.⁹¹ Cellini's sculpture “is a classic image of male victory and the destruction of the ‘female monstrous’”⁹², so Garbati asked himself “in 2008: ‘What would

⁸⁸ Cherry, 2020, 3.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁹⁰ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>, 880.

⁹¹ Julia Jacobs, “How a Medusa Sculpture from a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2020, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/arts/design/medusa-statue-manhattan.html>.

⁹² Piper Keel, “‘The Seen and Unseen: How the Image of Medusa in Art Reflects Women in Law and Society,’” *ANU Undergraduate Research Journal* 11, no. 1 (2021), <https://studentjournals.anu.edu.au/index.php/aurj/article/view/721>, 30.

it look like, her victory, not his? How should that sculpture look?”⁹³ and created a statue called *Medusa With the Head of Perseus*. It depicts, as stated in the name, a naked Medusa with her hair as snakes holding Perseus’ head. But instead of holding it triumphantly into the air like her counterpart statue, she carries it low, “her gaze low and intense”⁹⁴. In this piece Medusa had won the fight against Perseus and with this also against Athena. She conquered her oppressors. This Medusa is not only someone that people can relate to. She is also an angry woman who represents the suppressed anger of generations of women.⁹⁵ She is not happy about her victory like Perseus, “she is determined, she had to do what she did because she was defending herself”⁹⁶. Annaliese Griffin calls this Medusa “the perfect avatar for women’s rage”⁹⁷. According to the artist his piece had reached thousands of women who wrote to him about how his art was cathartic to them.⁹⁸ But not everyone agrees with this portrayal of the Medusa. Shortly after the unveiling of the statue in 2020 a debate started on social media whether an art piece created by a man should be the centre of attention of the #MeToo movement. Another argument was that a statue of Medusa overcoming her oppression should show her holding Poseidon’s, her rapist’s head, and not Perseus’. But regardless of the controversy, the art piece clearly spoke to many people and inspired a part of the #MeToo movement.

Great Goddesses

“Perhaps the truth about Gorgons is they are just women, women who do not bend to the world or fit into the narrow mould you want them too.”⁹⁹ This is a line of the poem *Gorgon (A Letter to the Patriarchy)* by Nikita Gill. The poet wrote a whole book about Greek monsters, gods and heroes. She says about her own work that she wrote it to add

⁹³ Badham, 2019

⁹⁴ Jacobs, 2020

⁹⁵ Annaliese Griffin, “The Medusa Statue That Became a Symbol of Feminist Rage,” Quartz (Quartz, October 3, 2018), <https://qz.com/quartz/1408600/the-medusa-statue-that-became-a-symbol-of-feminist-rage/>.

⁹⁶ Griffin, 2018

⁹⁷ Griffin, 2018

⁹⁸ Jacobs, 2020

⁹⁹ Nikita Gill, *Great Goddesses : Life Lessons from Myths and Monsters* (London: Ebury Press, 2019), 162.

nuance to the well known versions of the myths.¹⁰⁰ Gill mentions Madeline Miller, the author of *Circe*, as a source of inspiration. “She doesn’t change what the characters do to make them sympathetic, but she changes their motivations.”¹⁰¹ In Gill’s poem the Gorgons still have the power to petrify people but it is not out of ill intention. She asks: “Did her gaze turn you to stone because she was so completely unafraid?”¹⁰² Medusa and the other two Gorgons are not presented as monsters but simply as women who are not afraid to be themselves and use their voice. They are not dangerous per se, only to people who do not want women to be powerful and are afraid of them. The poem ends with two very meaningful lines. “Maybe that’s why you demonise them, turned them into monsters, because you think monsters are easier to understand than women who say no to you.”¹⁰³ This directly references a part of the #MeToo movement, which is the phrase *no means no*.¹⁰⁴ #MeToo has influenced the conversation about consent and the phrase became part of a lot of discourses. With this last line Gill points out again the connection to the source material and Medusa’s rape. Medusa said *no* and was ignored and instead of seeing her as woman who tried to keep the agency over her own body she is being called a monster.

Gill wrote a second poem referring to the Medusa and her connection to Athena. As already mentioned before, some believe the curse put on Medusa was meant to be a way of protection. Nikita Gill picks up on this thought and wrote *Athena to Medusa*. In this poem Athena calls Medusa “sacred, one of [her] own”¹⁰⁵ and tells her she will “turn [her] into a Goddess.”¹⁰⁶ The snakes that are mostly being seen as a punishment are actually there to protect Medusa from future assault.¹⁰⁷ In this poem this is also being shown with the use of the word *sacred*. As discussed earlier, snakes were sacred to Athena and the

¹⁰⁰ Bérénice Magistretti, “Nikita Gill on Her Latest Book, *Great Goddesses*,” *Vanity Fair*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/london/2020/02/nikita-gill-re-examines-the-role-of-women-through-a-fearless-lens-of-modern-feminism>.

¹⁰¹ Magistretti, 2020.

¹⁰² Gill, 2019, 162.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 162.

¹⁰⁴ Katie Mettler, “Analysis | ‘No Means No’ to ‘Yes Means Yes’: How Our Language around Sexual Consent Has Changed,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soloish/wp/2018/02/15/no-means-no-to-yes-means-yes-how-our-language-around-sexual-consent-has-changed/>.

¹⁰⁵ Gill, 2019, 157.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 157.

¹⁰⁷ Magistretti, 2020.

question was posed why she would give her sacred animals to someone as a punishment. Gill's poem answers this question. Athena promises that Poseidon's crimes will not be the ruin of Medusa, she has a Goddess on her side, even if she is not able to show it. No matter if this interpretation is academically proven, it gives hope to sexual assault survivors that the injustice done to them does not have to be the end.

Gill states that her book was specially written to point out what needs to change in our society. Rape culture is still very much part of our everyday lives and the fact that Gill's books are becoming more and more popular show that poetry like hers is a vital part to changing this. "Feminism is a lot about unlearning some of the things you learned," she says. "There is so much that women in those stories have to say... If you just let them."¹⁰⁸

Social Media



The Profane Feminist and 2 others liked

Wicked Witch of the West Coast
@PdxPestle

Medusa is my bitch.

She was a beautiful priestess who was raped in a place of worship where she served. And what did that the deity who she gave her whole life to do?

Victim shamed her and turned her into a monster.

I am medusa. All my friends are medusa. She is us.

10:18 PM · 3/23/20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

84 Retweets 510 Likes

This part will, among other things, deal with poems, posts and pictures from social media platforms like Pinterest and Tumblr. Those might not be as academic as the sources used in previous chapters but the main social media platforms are where most people publish their opinions and in order to get a clear picture of how the myth of Medusa is being used in everyday feminism they are the best sources. "If sexual violence silences women in the moment, online spaces create the conditions under which that silence and its concurrent shame can be overturned because they are, at least ostensibly, safe".¹⁰⁹

Paine, *Medusa*.

The first post is one found on the social media platform Pinterest.¹¹⁰ It is a screenshot of a twitter post, the author of the post talks about how they can relate to Medusa. "I am

¹⁰⁸ Bérénice Magistretti, "Nikita Gill on Her Latest Book, *Great Goddesses*," *Vanity Fair*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/london/2020/02/nikita-gill-re-examines-the-role-of-women-through-a-fearless-lens-of-modern-feminism>.

¹⁰⁹ Beverly Tan, "Medusa: How the Literary Muse Became an Emblem for Feminism," *The Interdependent: Journal of Undergraduate Research in Global Studies* 2 (2021): 112, <https://doi.org/10.33682/nzgc-1pxs>, 122.

¹¹⁰ Kimberly Paine, *Medusa*, accessed June 9, 2022, <https://www.pinterest.de/pin/574490496226361631/>.

medusa. All my friends are medusa. She is us.”¹¹¹ The author points out that Medusa is a victim of sexual assault who is being shamed for it, like so many other women who are being vicim shamed. They also condemn Athena for cursing Medusa, something that many others do in posts or poems.

Some others defend Athena for her actions. The second post from Pinterest discusses the possibility that the curse Athena put on Medusa could actually have been a

 awkward-dark-mori-girl

That's actually a really intetesting intpretation of it I hadn't thought of. Most people seem to think Athena turned Medusa into a gorgon as punishment for defiling her temple, but thinking that she did so to protect her from being abused again is interesting and I like it!



xenaamazon

Athena's hands were tied. Yes, she was a powerful Goddess, but she was very much a woman in a "boys club", and the true offending party (don't think for a moment that Athena blamed Medusa for being raped in the temple, Athena knows better) held all the cards. There was nothing that Athena could do to punish the true criminal, and she was expected to punish Medusa by everyone else. What's a Goddess to do when she cannot punish those who need to be punished and is expected to punish not only the truly innocent party, but her most beloved follower? Use that incredible brain power she had to protect Medusa at all costs, and of course the men would see it as punishment, to be have her beauty stripped from her and sent to live in the shadows. Medusa should have been KILLED for supposedly defiling the temple, whether she truly did or not, but she was given the gift of life, and the ability to protect herself and her daughters (who she bore thanks to Poseidon). This is why Medusa's image was used to signify woman's shelters and safe houses.

Medusa means "guardian; protectress", and she was.

Couper, *Medusa*.

blessing.¹¹² In this post one of

the authors points out that

Athena had no choice but to

put the curse on Medusa. She

is a god but with a lot less

power and influence than

Poseidon, who is one of the

three chief deities next to his

brothers Zeus and Hades.¹¹³

This means she might not have

been in the position to punish

the actual perpetrator and had

to make an example of Medusa.

Unfortunately there are no other

sources supporting this author's

claim that the symbol of

Medusa was being used on

women's shelters but her head

was actually a symbol of protection. Athena herself wears it on her shield and shields with

Gorgons' heads were quite popular as a protective symbol.¹¹⁴ There are other examples

of people speaking in favour of Athena, defending her and claiming her as a protector of

¹¹¹ Paine, 2022

¹¹² Couper, *Medusa*, accessed June 9, 2022, <https://www.pinterest.de/pin/ATmsKsdxcIOcbTHMGWi4LM2wdWxTkkt8DoDCypqNSvOCjoO1UIKsn9o/>.

¹¹³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Poseidon | Myths, Symbols, & Facts," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Poseidon>.

¹¹⁴ Chiara Torre, "Ekphrastic Games: Ovid, the Gorgoneion, and the Invisible Shield," *Classical Philology - a Journal Devoted to Research in Classical Antiquity* 116, no. 3 (July 2021): 369–91, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/714534>.

Ask any man about the story of Medusa
and he will speak of Athena's jealousy.
How she, enraged, cursed the gorgon
after she seduced Poseidon with her beauty.

Ask any man about Medusa and Athena
and he will speak of the glorious Poseidon.
An innocent God, so powerful and great
that no woman, Goddess or mortal, could resist.

Ask any man about jealous women
and he will liken some imaginary
Woman Scorned
to a snake, red-eyed and hysterical,
lashing out at a hapless man.

But ask Athena about Medusa's story
and she will tell you of how Poseidon
trapped a woman in her temple
left her at Athena's doorstep, raped.

Ask Athena and she will tell you
of the fear in Medusa's eyes,
washed away only when Athena gave
a gift of snakes, powerful and deliberate.

And, finally, ask Medusa.
She will tell you of her beloved Athena
who gave her strength when she
thought she had none.

Ask Medusa to tell her story
and she will speak of stone men,
unable to enact the violence she faced.

Ask Medusa and she will tell you
that a woman's love for another
can put the fear in the God of the Sea.

Medusa. This is interesting because just as Medusa is being rewritten from monster to woman, Athena is as well. She is no longer one of the villains in some of the versions but on Medusa's side.¹¹⁵ This is of course always dependent on the person rewriting the story, the moment the source material is being rethought new versions become very subjective.

The poem shown here is a perfect example of a reclaiming of the figure of Medusa. The author took the story and put their personal spin on it. It describes a loving relationship between Athena and Medusa, she builds Medusa up after the crime committed by Poseidon. The poem also references the stereotype of the crazy woman mentioned earlier. She is described as a "Woman Scorned to a snake, red-eyed and hysterical, lashing out at a hapless man."¹¹⁶ This is the original image of Medusa which is being replaced by a Medusa that is not a monster anymore but a survivor.

for sappho, *versions* || *h.r.o*

¹¹⁵ forsappho, "Versions || H.r.o.," *Tumblr* (blog), April 18, 2018, <https://poeticfemmelesbian.tumblr.com/post/173054667754/versions-hro>.

¹¹⁶ forsappho, 2018.

Conclusion

Medusa's story saw many twists and turns since it was first written down. From a monster in the Hades to a symbol for sexual assault survivors, she has changed a lot. One thing this thesis showed is that her story is still very applicable and powerful. Medusa has become an icon for many and her story is not finished yet. She represents women all over the world and stands for the pain they have to endure in a society that is still not as supportive as it should be of sexual assault victims. Medusa also represents the power women can have if they find their voice and express their anger about this society. While the reclaiming of the myth will not end sexual violence it can still support female empowerment. As discussed myths are still very prominent in modern media and the way Medusa is being reclaimed could lead to many more female stories being rewritten. This thesis mentioned the need for foremothers for women to look back on, Medusa and many other female figures can become those foremothers if their stories keep being told. The thesis started out with the original source of the myth, a version where Medusa is being blamed for a crime committed to her and it ended with an empowered version of the same woman. This transition is what the reclaiming of myths are trying to provide for all women who are afraid to speak up in fear of being blamed or silenced. The myth itself is timeless, it needs authors to retell it in every new age.

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