

The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction

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The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction:

*Petrifying, Maternal
and Redemptive*

By

Gillian M. E. Alban

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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Petrifying, Maternal and Redemptive

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To my beloved Toker Alban, the crown of my earth

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Painting by Fatmanur Göksel

Photograph by Meg Dreyer

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Photograph by Hermann Wagner

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Illustration by Meg Dreyer

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Photograph by Hermann Wagner

FOREWORD

In *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Gillian Alban once again becomes a multidisciplinary detective who utilizes both a magnifying glass and a telescope to look intently into certain enduring stories that we Westerners have told and continue to tell ourselves. Through the symbols of Medusa and mirrors within the mediums of feminist literary fiction and psychoanalysis, Alban examines the often harsh gaze of the Other toward the self as well as the self toward the Other. Readers will find that her passion as well as her academic knowledge ignites a bright light of feminist analysis within these pages.

The two symbols of Medusa and mirrors are especially apropos. As an ancient Mediterranean goddess of Fate, Medusa has had an exceptionally enduring vibrancy throughout the ages in our collective consciousness. Furthermore, her mythology is rich and deep. Alban employs one form of Medusa in particular—the *Gorgoneion* (the visual depiction of Medusa's head—either beautiful or repellant, fierce or simply otherworldly) to serve her overarching examination into both patriarchal and feminist gazes. The word “mirror” derives from the Latin *mirari* meaning “to wonder at.” On the surface, mirrors seem to be a particularly female object that appears to point only towards attraction, self-reflection, physical examination, or vanity. However, in numerous cultures worldwide, women have also used mirrors for significant purposes such as prophecy, visions, protection, and as a potent representation of the sun. Here in *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Alban takes these two symbols and deftly uses them to give the reader a timely investigation into how we look at ourselves and others.

Currently we are subjected to increasing and pervasive voyeuristic surveillance, narrowed perspectives, and visual profiling. Alban reflects throughout this book on the myriad ways women and girls are gazed upon within patriarchal cultures as well as examples of how women assert their right to look, stare, or claim an apotropaic gaze of power and anger as a way of asserting female or feminist agency. In patriarchies, women's anger or defiance is typically disallowed publicly and privately. Emotionally, anger can serve as movement toward action and change. Suppressed or thwarted anger can result in deep depression or, in certain

cases, madness. Oftentimes when a woman displays any righteous defiance, protective fierceness, sharp anger, flaming fury, or steamy venting of suppressed frustration arising from oppression, she is labeled monstrous, mad, hysterical, or dangerous.

As a remedy to this common state of affairs, Alban comments in chapter one that

In societies that commonly place women under the power of a panoptic gaze, the Medusa gaze is an inspiring force available for women to claim for themselves [... in order to] remain strong against assault under the public eye, which values women as more or less attractive objects. (16)

Within this detailed, scholarly, yet accessible investigation of “the power of the gaze” on and by women (which may empower, alienate, protect, or destroy), Alban offers insights gleaned from the novels, short stories, and poetry of several female feminist writers. Additionally, she pulls in Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic “mirror-gaze theory” of human development as yet another lens in which to scrutinize, deconstruct, critique, and re-imagine this social “power of the gaze.” As a reader, I found that the psychological and psychoanalytic gazes of Lacan, Sartre, Freud on the topics of looking, subject, object, ego, and self to feel, at times, as if I was caught in a carnival hall of mirrors because of these men’s twisty visions and privileged blindness to their own sexism, classism and racism. Turning her own powerful gaze back onto these theorists, Alban offers keen insight into common psychoanalytic and therapeutic biases against mothers.

Helping the reader find her way out from the fragmented and restrictive mirroring that women endure, Alban wisely introduces a chorus of female voices through her feminist literary selections. By doing so, Alban also exposes the gaze of patriarchy that distorts and freezes human sexuality and violence as concretized forms of interlaced intimacy. Chief among these literary selections are many works by Angela Carter (*Heroes and Villains*, *The Sadeian Woman*, *Nights at the Circus*, *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Bloody Chamber*, and *The Passion of New Eve*). Carter specialized in writing original and revised folktales and fairytales, often paired with mythic elements. Additionally, Alban gives the reader a rich smorgasbord of authors who directly reject, adopt, or reframe Medusa’s or the mirror’s gaze. These include Iris Murdoch (*A Severed Head*, *The Time of the Angels*); A. S. Byatt (*Possession*, *Still Life*, “Medusa’s Ankles” in *The Matisse Stories*); Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, *Sula*); Jean Rhys (*Wide*

Sargasso Sea); Sylvia Plath (“Medusa”, *The Bell Jar*, *Journals*), and Margaret Atwood (*Cat’s Eye*).

All of these writers engage strongly, smartly, and honestly with the painful social restrictions placed upon women. This particular collection of authors showcase noteworthy female protagonists who struggle to obtain empowerment either against or within patriarchal strictures. Ultimately however, these female battles offer the reader no shattered glass ceilings and certainly no revised paradise. Rather, through the power of literature, we stand as witnesses to these protagonists using their bodies and sexuality as deliberate weapons that break, destroy, or demolish the objectifying patriarchal mirrors they are caught in and as power tools to construct new images of self, autonomy, and agency amongst rubble. As any woman alive can attest, these narratives reflect shared intense yet redeeming struggles toward freedom and agency. Thankfully, as Alban shows us, just to be able to steadily look upon oneself as a Self who determines her own fate may be the most powerful Medusa gaze of all.

Margaret Merisante, Ph.D.
Feminist Comparative Mythologist

PREFACE

This writing grew within the matrix of various creative encounters, particularly my wonderful book club friends, with whom I discussed several of these works, as well as a host of other novels. This rich, strange project took root and was borne through multiple collegial and student interactions. I taught many of these exciting narratives in literature, gender and mythology classes, at Aydın, Doğu, Bosphorus Universities, and Üsküdar American Academy. The ideas blossomed and flourished through challenging international conferences, as I developed the concept of the Medusa gaze mirrored between characters, along with the redemptive Medusa figure of Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*; *Mosaic* and *Victorian Newsletter* published such writings.

The vulnerabilities and strengths of female characters remain my central research obsession throughout. The relations of life and literature appear at times indistinguishable, as the one melds into the other. Everything becomes grist for the mill of personal interactions, as seen in the schema I present here. I have been inspired by numerous writers, including my foremother, Virginia Woolf, and more recent muses like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich, Hendrika Freud and Bracha Ettinger. Angela Carter has been a constant illumination, not least through her *New Woman* Fevvers, setting off undiminished into the stratosphere. And as Toni Morrison's Pilate (or even Pilot) asserts: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all" (*Song of Solomon* 336); she has scattered her imaginative, dynamic wealth on her readers. Such inspirations have contributed to my understanding of humanity, as well as of being a woman, which are at times the same thing.

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The Medusa Mosaic from Kibyra, Turkey
Painting by Fatmanur Göksele
Photograph by Meg Dreyer



INTRODUCTION

This book claims the empowering force of the Medusa gaze for women, in a world that still places women under an alienating, patriarchal gaze. The aim of this book is to reflect four aspects of the Medusa archetype within the contemporary fiction of nine women writers. Castigated as a dreadful Medusa monster under misogyny, women are now appropriating the dynamic potential of Medusa's terrifying gaze for themselves. The Medusa gaze has beamed out her petrifying look from prehistoric times. But what exactly is the Medusa archetype? Miriam Robbins Dexter defines Medusa as "the ruling one" ("The Ferocious and Erotic 'Beautiful' Medusa" 25). The monstrous Medusa was an adjunct to the dread powers of Persephone in the underworld, with whom Homer advised his readers to evade any perilous encounter (Dexter 27).

The myth of Medusa recounts how she fell victim to the predatory sexual desire of Poseidon. He brutally rapes her in the temple of Athena, in consequence of which Athena, the right hand of Zeus, condemns her for desecrating her temple. The victim being made to suffer the penalty of what is inflicted on her is an all-too familiar story for women, who are still being subjected to sexual rape and personal outrage around the world; they are often punished, while the men guilty of such brutal acts may walk away free. An outraged Athena turns her fury against Medusa rather than Poseidon; rape is a familiar story in Greek myth, euphemised into

cohabitation and even marriage. In her rage, the asexual Athena turns Medusa's beautiful hair into snakes. In fact, while this has been viewed as punishment, serpentine qualities also empower, as seen in the story of Melusine, whose snake tail is not only a curse but also a gift, enabling supernatural "empowering beyond the limits of mortal power" (Alban, "The Serpent Goddess Melusine" 32). The mythic Medusa gains powerful snakes for hair, together with her petrifying gaze, so terrifying that anyone who dares to face her is instantly turned to stone. The goddess Athena takes the monstrous Medusa head as aegis onto her shield in order to protect herself with Medusa's forceful gaze in battle. This interaction indicates the close connection between the goddess Athena and the monstrous Medusa as ego and alter ego, reflecting Medusa as the dark aspect of the goddess, in a binary with Athena accessing Medusa's dread power. Throughout history or herstory, Medusa's force reverberates in multiple artefacts, her head placed on shields, temples, tombs and ovens, in order to protect with her evil eye, turning away and deflecting any hostile force.

Medusa has frequently been the subject of poetry, as seen in Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony*, which starts from Percy Bysshe Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci;" Praz regards Medusa's beauty and "loveliness of terror" as a deadly, corrupt and painful force (Praz 45). The petrifying Medusa becomes monstrous, while also representing the power of the "Neolithic Goddess of birth, death, and regeneration" in her bird/snake representation (Dexter 25). Medusa's story contains a plethora of double aspects; she is actually queen and monster of doubles. Victim as well as predator, her petrifying gaze destroys while it also protects, as a powerful yet at times helpless force. Her blood kills as well as saves (30), like the venom of snakes, which similarly contains its own poison's antidote. Frequently cast in the role of the woman as a dreadfully gorgeous victim, the female icon of Medusa is now reconstructed as an "electrifying force representing the dynamic power of the female gaze" (Bowers 235), enabling women to rise above oppression through her inspiration.

In the Medusa myth, the unheroic Perseus sets out armed to the teeth to bring back her head to Polydectes, accomplishing this feat with the supernatural help of Athena and Hermes, who enable him to resist Medusa's fatally destructive gaze through their gifts, including a reflective shield; they guide his very hand in destroying her. Pegasus the winged horse and Chrysaor the warrior are born from Medusa's neck as she is decapitated. Pegasus' connection with the Muses brings Medusa, or Musa,

into relation with the Muses as inspiration, especially with poetry. Reduced to a severed head, Medusa loses none of her power, in the deadly, irresistible gaze that she retains. As Athena places the Medusa head on her shield or aegis to deflect enemy forces and gain victory in battle, so the Medusa head is placed on temples, shields and sarcophagi in order to turn away, to deflect apotropaically, the very force she embodies. She thus becomes an amulet or talisman, with the capacity to revert the negative force away from the bearer, saving those who place themselves under her protective evil eye. Her gaze overwhelms any counter gaze, yet when claiming the force of her evil eye as a protective amulet or talisman, attack is deflected away from the user apotropaically, which is precisely what that means, to turn back or revert the evil by use of a like force.

The sight of the Medusa head is so petrifying, psychoanalysts since Freud have regarded her as the genitals of the terrible mother; he saw this head as representing the woman's lack of penis, even as the penis is represented through her snaky hair. For Freud the petrifying sight of the Medusa head freezes a man to death, while also thrilling him into an erection. Dexter describes his logic as convoluted, although his response may represent a male perspective on female sexuality. Hélène Cixous responds to his remark by declaring the power of the Medusa gaze to be sexually stimulating as well as terrifyingly deadly, as she claims this force for women. Far from representing lack, or debilitated by castration, she shows women under the inspiration of Medusa turning their defiantly laughing gaze back onto men and terrifying them into a reaction before "the jitters that gives them a hard-on!" (885). The multi-faceted Medusa archetype gains extraordinary power, both for good and evil, as her force persists in myth, literature, art and artefacts. A beautiful ruler or goddess, she is turned into a frightful monster. Victim of the gods while herself goddess, she becomes a ruthless predator against all who attempt to face her down, in possessing the powerfully castrating and debilitating gaze and the sexual threat of the phallic mother or woman.

This book uses literature to interpret the metaphorical power of Medusa, reflecting how women perceive themselves in society, revealing female desires and traumas, and presenting imagined possibilities through selected female narratives. Angela Carter sees fiction as a form of social reportage thus: "It is possible to be a great novelist—that is, to render a veracious account of your times—and a bad writer—that is, an incompetent practitioner of applied linguistics" (in Clapp 74), suggesting her works as presenting an account of her times. Despite Roland Barthes'

assertion that the writer is dead once they add the final full stop, they retain vitality as long as their writings address us. Whether novels influence their readers, or whether life creates the raw materials that novelists use, such possibilities interact. Life is reflected in fiction, whether novels are sociological assessments or gothic exaggerations with magic spilling over the realism, as novels exercise “the mirroring of life in art, but also the normative impact of art on life” (Kolodny, in Warhol & Herndl 100). Margaret Atwood suggests that: “What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can see it” (in Howells 62-63). Through creative works we vicariously appreciate the lives of others who, for all that they have never inhabited this world, at times may be as close to us as our neighbours, like Jane Eyre or Antoinette Mason, on their fraught journey through life. Literature offers the prospect of understanding our current situation through the refracted rays of imagination; fiction lifts the restraints from reality and enables the impossible to become feasible. Alison Hennegan states: “People learn from fiction. They look to it for information, reassurance, affirmation about the ways in which other (fictional) people feel, believe, act, and—most important of all, it sometimes seems—love” (in Palmer 6). How far do women find themselves in fiction, or do we still discover “whores, bitches, muses, and heroines dead in childbirth where we had once hoped to discover ourselves” (Kolodny 97)?

This book examines literary works to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of women in fictional interactions. Whether imaginative characters reflect or affect women in the world, the lives of women characters in novels present significant female roles. Virginia Woolf wrote a century ago in *A Room of One's Own* that it is possible to gain an entirely elevated conception of the status of women through reading literature. Her list of imagined women includes the vilified Clytemnestra, caught between her son, daughters and husband, and heroic Antigone, trapped between the demands of father, uncle and brothers; also the betrayed and betraying Cressida, the versatile Rosalind and Portia, the loving and victimised Desdemona, the self-willed Duchess of Malfi, and the tragic Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary. Woolf states that these characters have “burnt like beacons” through the literature of the ages, even if the lives of their real counterparts have been far more subdued (44). Escaping Thackeray, the incorrigible Becky Sharp hijacks his hero-less *Vanity Fair*, vitalising its tedium while earning herself the reputation of femme fatale or siren. Cleopatra's personality inspires and seduces Antony, Caesar and Pompey away from wife and state responsibilities,

and her fame reverberates to this day. Lady Macbeth clearly exercises power, persuading her husband into the fatal regicide. In the real world, where women have often lived in obscurity, abjection, or insignificance, they have also blazed forth in Joan of Arc and Queen Elizabeth, Saint Teresa and Mother Teresa. However partially we may see their portraits in literature, it is possible to understand the situation of a woman better through fiction. This study presents women through the writing of nine contemporary writers, who show us female characters at times destroyed, but also splendidly asserting themselves in societies that still confine them. A. S. Byatt suggests through her character: "you can both destroy and create reality with fiction. Fictions—fictions are lies yes but we don't ever know the truth. We see the truth through the fiction—our own, other people's" (*The Game* 225), reflecting as well as forming our perceptions of life. Novels reflect the world of reality in the mimesis they offer of life. "One of the axioms of traditional literary study has been that 'great literature' represents 'universal' experiences" (Warhol & Herndl 191).

Medusa exerts a powerful thrall. Her snaky, invincible gaze retains its power even after she undergoes destruction. Slighted and attacked by patriarchal forces, women are now appropriating the powerful Medusa gaze as they grasp their own agency. Gaze theory by Laura Mulvey and others shows women as object of the male gaze, influenced by psychoanalytical views of women seen as a monstrous or terrible mother, threatening castration, even as this view itself suggests a certain female power. Embracing the psychic force of the Medusa archetype, women may be empowered, while this very force can operate against others in destroying them. While men have seized the Medusa gaze in history, this book shows the insidious power of Medusa's gaze as grasped by women. Jacques Lacan in his discussion of the mirror stage does not mention Medusa; his later theories consistently objectify and even obliterate women. However, his contemporary, Jean-Paul Sartre, actually calls the petrification of the other's look "the profound meaning of the myth of Medusa." (430) While gaze theory has not claimed the female Medusa Gaze as its own, I stake my claim in this book on the Medusa gaze as a female force.

This book traces the Medusa archetype through three pairs of mirroring chapters. The first pair of chapters contextualise the gaze in Jacques Lacan's Ego-Forming Mirror theory. Lacan shows how the child's psyche is created from the outside. He presents a child creating herself as she sees herself reflected by others, exerting her Medusa gaze while also subject to

the gaze of others, which forms as well as destroys her. Sartre literally describes the stare of the other as the Medusa gaze, as it objectifies the subject into an inanimate object or doll, shaming them as their own gaze is reverted back onto them. Under this debilitating gaze, the subject's only resource is to revert the gaze apotropaically onto the gazer, redeeming herself from the objectification that often destroys women. This gaze may trap both subject and object in a reflective, destructive cycle. Such reflections lead to intimate relationships between doubles, *doppelgängers* or ideal others. Where one is caught under the other's gaze, a powerful symbiosis develops that may eventually drive the subject into madness or suicide. One may only avert objectification and free oneself from petrification by the other in achieving empathy or compassion for them. In this book, instead of showing women as vulnerably passive objects of the gaze, I present them objectifying others, both men and other women, and destroying them through the force of their own gaze. Hence the gaze expresses an aspect of personal power. The first two chapters show that while women may be subjugated beneath an external gaze, they also exert power over both men and women through their own gaze. Women are by no means merely the passive object of the other's gaze; these writings show them exerting agency in extending their look against others. I thus reclaim the gaze for women as active agents in their own right.

The third and fourth chapters of this book assess Medusa as a dread mother, pondering on psychoanalysts' and mythologists' reflections regarding how dreadful women as mothers actually are. Freud sees the Medusa head as the female genitals, castrated and decapitated, while also possessing the power to make "the spectator stiff with terror, turn[ing] him to stone," petrifying the man into an erection. He states that women's genitals have the power to turn away horror as an apotropaic force, quoting Rabelais' statement that the view of the vulva drove the devil into flight (in Garber & Vickers 85). Writers like Erich Neumann regard women as the "Terrible Mother" (in Garber & Vickers 96-9), although it may well be the demands of their maternal role that toughens them into monstrosity. This writing presents the daughter's view of the mother as a terrible Medusa, as suggested in the writings of Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Hendrika Freud and others. Matriarchs exercise tough control through their maternal duties, and can only at times share this task with other mothers or surrogates, as well as fathers. Bracha Ettinger suggests the daughter's phantasies of the mother as "Not-enough, Devouring and Abandoning," condemning the mother however fondly she attempts to mother. This writing evaluates the daughter's hatred for her mother, called

the Electra syndrome by Karl Jung, alongside her desire for her father, even as this desire masks her symbiotic longing for her mother. These chapters evaluate the mother/daughter relationship from both perspectives, considering the pitfalls and strengths of generational bonding, and aspiring to move beyond the castigations of maternal monstrosity. Mothering echoes the creative power of Gaia or mother earth, an ancient symbol of birthing and nurturing her child in love and sacrifice. Mothers may also present the traumatised Demeter, who longs for her child when confiscated by a phallocratic society; or Persephone, who longs for her mother as she is snatched down into the underworld. The interaction of this pair was widely celebrated in Ancient Greece by women. These chapters present a range of mothers, breaking free of Freud's debilitating and obfuscating views of women and his androcentrically perceived monstrosity. Illustrating the spectrum of maternal experience, this book shows mothers' struggles to nurture as well as their failures in their maternal concerns.

The fifth chapter of this book illustrates the apotropaic power of Medusa who becomes a source of inspiration in turning her destructive look against her foes. When Athena places the Medusa head on her aegis to destroy her enemies, she appropriates Medusa's protective force as deflecting evil. In this way, Medusa becomes a talisman or amulet, operating as a vertical or divine force in rescuing those in need, her redemptive potential protecting against attack and offering divine inspiration. As shown by Luce Irigaray and in goddess mythology, women seek inspiration through a female divinity. This chapter offers a spectrum of female power and goddess reverence, while also suggesting the pitfalls and excesses of such views.

The final chapter shows Medusa as destructive demon, with women trapped in monstrous enmity or rivalry through rage and jealousy against each other and society, abased and destroyed through the very venom they project onto others. Women embrace the double-edged Medusa gaze, in the aggressive self-assertion necessitated in societies that disempower them, causing them to become monstrous. Through the symbol of the powerful Medusa, this work asserts the multifaceted power of women, whether positive or negative, in literature as well as in life.

Through Medusa's gaze, one may comprehend what it is like to come of age in our relatively enlightened times; how far can a woman achieve her goals today, amongst the remaining prohibitions and prejudices surrounding her? A century ago, Virginia Woolf, with all her privilege,

expressed the limitations hedging women, and it remains an open question as to how far we have surpassed this position. In today's society, men still dominate, while women juggle public achievements against domestic responsibilities. In *The Financial Times* Weekend, Life & Arts Supplement of 13 February 2016, Sarah Gordon's discussion of gender expectations in "Beyond Bias" states that women still earn considerably less than men in a world where they continue to "trade being seen as likeable for being regarded as competent" (8). Whether affluent or struggling, amongst family or unsupported, in whatever part of the world, the biggest influence on a child is surely her lack of a Y chromosome and hence her destiny to become a woman. One is not born a woman, as Simone de Beauvoir famously states in *The Second Sex*, one becomes one after much social adaptation and shaping (295). Yet certain differences between men and women persist, whether physical, psychological or social. This book evaluates women in literature, seeing how they shape themselves within competing passions and struggles. Tracing the interactions of women navigating life, through the writings of nine significant contemporary women novelists of the second half of the twentieth century, this book seeks to recover the force of women's Medusa gaze. The writers discussed here are Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, A. S. Byatt, Jean Rhys, Jeanette Winterson, Michèle Roberts and Iris Murdoch. It features women's literature from England, America and Canada, including African American, Caribbean, and lesbian writing of the last forty years of the twentieth century. This era has seen significant advances in female achievement and self-realisation as women have gained agency and status; yet women still fall short of social and professional equality with men in societies that largely remain patriarchal.

My analysis of the latter half of the twentieth century aims to be recent enough for proximity, yet distant enough for perspective on women and their writing. How have the chosen writers envisioned the situation of female characters through their imaginative works? How much have women broken free of second-sex status, expressing their own integrity in unique voices, while remaining excluded from the masculine circles of society's movers and shakers? Women writers are the clearest exponents of their position and can best express their own desires, aspirations and frustrations. Do woman's only options remain polarised between innocent victim/ angelic virgin/ sacrificing mother on the one hand, and ruthless exploiter/ whore/ wicked crone on the other? Carter suggests such a duality in *The Sadeian Woman*, her study of the Marquis of Sade, showing

women falling into traditionally passive roles, or radically subverting such clichés to become powerful predators in their own right. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* presents nineteenth century writers and their characters as struggling to rise above the fate of debilitated victims; how far have we advanced beyond this situation? In Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* of 1988, this fictional castigation of men states outrageously that

Others have been discriminated against at work, passed over or ignored; or their art been ridiculed, dismissed as too feminine. Others have begun to compare their salaries with those of men and have found them to be less.

[...Men] are violent, wage wars, commit murders. They do less work and make more money. They shove the housework off on women.

They are insensitive and refused to confront their own emotions. They are easily fooled, and wish to be: for instance, with a few gasps and wheezes they can be conned into thinking they are sexual supermen. (Atwood, *Cat's Eye* 364)

And as Naomi Wolf states in *The Beauty Myth* of 1990, "While women represent 50 percent of the world population, they performed nearly two-thirds of all working hours, received only one-tenth of the world income and own less than 1 percent of world property" (23).

Virginia Woolf states in *A Room of One's Own* that male writers often obscure female lives behind a strident male ego, viewing women from their own limited perspective, relegating women's issues to secondary status. Certainly some male writers have presented the world through the eyes of female subjects. Shakespeare sheds light on characters as varied as Lady Macbeth, Juliet and Cleopatra. Thackeray presents the magnificent Becky Sharp, while representing the dangerous attraction of womanhood from a male perspective; certainly it is dangerous to fall into the clutches of such femmes fatales, the Cleopatras of each age. The original of such types is our first mother, Eve, biting the apple of experience in the Garden of Eden and thereby taking the initiative and jump-starting time and our story or history. Without her, we would still be wandering under the apple trees. Even more is she Lilith, Adam's first wife, who refused to lie down passively under him and left him in order to live an independent life on her own terms. Myth has awarded terrifying names to such women, like Medusa, Medea or Kali, castigated in patriarchal societies because of their insubordination and freedom. When women have not grasped power as witches and whores, they have suffered as vulnerable virgins and doormat mothers, or have also been affirmed through myth as a parthenogenetic

goddess matrix or mother earth. Girls in the past have grown up to live vicariously through such prototypically feminist heroines as Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, struggling towards fulfilment in the nineteenth century. We are less likely to imagine ourselves as the gorgeous but heartless Estella, or the crazed and embittered Miss Havisham of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*; such eccentric women offer a far more partial reflection of women's experience than Brontë's depiction of Jane Eyre from childhood to marriage. Rather than expressing himself through his women characters, Dickens uses them as mere foils for his male protagonists. It is easier to empathise with the snobbish Pip than the weird women who face him on the road to maturity.

Writers like Carter, Morrison, Byatt and Winterson show their characters, whether human, bestial or supernatural, as transcending behavioural norms in a full range of activities. Whether they are mothers or witches, or perhaps both, unprotected foundlings, femmes fatales, vampires or vamps, these characters deconstruct and defy social roles and expectations. Within their significant differences, such twentieth century writers have reflected both the plight and the powers of the women they present, insightfully involved in their situations, whether overwhelmed, or rising above the obstacles placed in their path. In her picaresque, magic-realist and deconstructive works, Carter demythologises fairy tales and utilises the outrageous insights of the Marquis de Sade to champion the victimiser over the passive victim. However, a gentler coda of love softens her message of woman's need to appropriate power through violence. From the timid Melanie of *The Magic Toyshop*, to the forceful Marianne of *Heroes and Villains*, her characters seize the opportunities they encounter, and where they are crushed by men, they return their gaze forcefully back upon their oppressors. In "Wolf-Alice" and "Tiger's Bride" Carter relates a twilight world of women in interaction with the beasts, showing such women as undefeated, indefatigable, in works like *Nights at the Circus*, *Wise Children* and *The Passion of New Eve*. She mocks patriarchal appropriation of female flesh, finds surrogate parenting to be superior to biological, compares mother love to a shroud, dismisses paternity as a fiction, and exposes gender as a masquerade. Carter is famously in favour of putting "new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" ("Notes from the Front Line"). She thus advises a radical shake up of the old mythic perceptions and deceptions regarding women. Beyond her interrogation of gender, she questions humanity itself.

Byatt transcends the quotidian through her allusive use of myths and archetypes, deconstructing and illuminating classical tales, and allowing flight beyond expectations. Her early fiction is often realistic; *The Game* immerses the reader in a world of sibling rivalry, and *Still Life* and its sequels presents characters growing up to love, to mother and to work. Her writing also creates fantastic interactions with djinns in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*. Her writing thus spans social history while also embracing romance and fantasy through powerful female characters. Roberts also reflects both realistic and mythic figures in her reflective narratives, from the early domestic *Daughters of the House*, the historiographic metafiction of *The Wild Girl*, to the imagined fantasies of *Flesh & Blood*. Spanning realism to whimsically reflective fantasy, her characters often achieve self-expression beyond their hopes. Murdoch enriches her fiction with her philosophical insights and mythic perspective on human relations. Her early fiction, including *A Severed Head* and *The Time of the Angels*, has been described as schematic, as she struggles to present the potentially devastating interactions of good and evil through characters in domestic settings within her convoluted plots. Not generally regarded as a feminist writer, her women contain hidden, surprising strengths, emerging against the backdrop of her abstract thinking.

Morrison's dense writings offer a mythic or historic view of outcast and oppressed people of colour in their struggles to lead a decent life against brutalising cruelty. Her women characters act within the parameters that cripple their freedom of expression, leading to heroic, and also outrageous self-expression even under slavery, as well as defeat. In epic works like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*, Morrison shows the plight of the victims and those disadvantaged by race, whether her characters rise above, or become crushed beneath their challenges. Atwood is a highly vocal spokeswoman in today's world not only for women but also humanity's struggle to survive in a world wherein we are irrevocably destroying our environment and imperilling our common lives. Atwood embodies human as well as female concerns in the characters of her speculative and realistic fictional worlds, from *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale* to *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. Offering deep insight into what it means to be a woman today, her imagined scenes and horrors expand our sense of reality.

Primarily famous as a poet, Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, presents the extraordinary tale of a sensitive girl's struggle for self-expression against overwhelming odds. Her writings, both poetry and prose, offer sharp

insights, dry wit and terse verbal interweaving of creative, compelling language. Rhys presents the view of the underdog or the other in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Her spare, prescient prose speaks from the margins of society as she recreates her revenant tale in response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, vocalising the outsider who was silenced in the founding text. Both these works, enriched by autobiographical accounts, offer poignant views of women weakened by their tough plights, often achieving action only in desperation, yet these women continue to address us powerfully, enabling our empathy. Winterson, the youngest writer included here, offers considerable insight into the position of the mother and daughter, upon which topic, amongst many others, she focuses in her first novel, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* and her recent memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*. Her work offers an alternate perspective through piquant narratives and tales that probe the assumptions of gender.

The significant possibilities of such refreshing and striking insights enable the reader to "re-vision" established mindsets, as Adrienne Rich suggests. The intensely creative work of these women writers offers fresh approaches to the lives of women in today's world and that of the recent past. The early writings of these women often trace their perspectives on their own development in life. Generational interactions, bonds and conflicts between women have been a source of strength as well as bitterness. Women have inspired vertically as divine goddesses, while also seen as monstrous. The vicarious experience of such works releases the expectations of readers beyond normal boundaries, presenting us with endless possibilities, both hopeful and fraught. Iris Murdoch, Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter and A. S. Byatt have dealt specifically with the Medusa archetype in their writing, while Toni Morrison and Jean Rhys, Michèle Roberts and Margaret Atwood approach Medusa and her gaze interactions obliquely. Insights culled from the kaleidoscope of these women's writings, creates the canvas on which to present the riches and perils of women's lives.

The literature presented in these pages includes fairy tales, which offers micro perspectives on women's lives by illuminating a universal type through a shaft of insight. Myth enlightens our view of women through archetypes, promoting understanding while transcending clichés to reach deeper insights. Byatt suggests that myths and fairy tales are an integral part of the novels of our times (*On Histories* 130). Thinking through non-realistic, archetypal tales unshackles our thought patterns from habitual paradigms, enabling us to reread ideology or fantasy and radically to