The Historical Enigma of the Snake Woman from Antiquity to the 21st Century

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For my mother

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INTRODUCTION

MEDUSA AND THE "THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPENED BUT ALWAYS ARE"

A fatal stare, a protruding tongue, a horde of slithering snakes and a rivulet of blood among petrified bodies—is this dark consternation not the very essence of our nightmares, something we all fear? Something we are powerless to look away from?

Turn off the television, forget the pre-packaged figures you have seen on the screen, and imagine a mythological world in which an unexpected snake-woman could appear out of nowhere, overturning the natural order of things. And let yourself be tempted by a simple question: do the ancient myths have swift or broken wings?

Especially in front of Medusa, surrounded by scattered wreckage and debris—witness to some remote shipwreck, do we delude ourselves that we belong to the worthy company of treasure hunters? Or are we faced with the looming doubt that we have actually joined a band of grave robbers?

Whatever the case, the bleak sensation of being sucked into a bottomless vortex of questions is undeniable. Do the myths bubbling to the surface of literature and art reflect life? Human imagination? Or both?

The trajectory of these myths throughout history is never linear—they transform, overlap, and veer off in countless directions, intersecting and entangling with each other until the task of unpicking their threads seems impossible.

It is no coincidence that the Roman historian Sallust (Gaius Sallustius Crispus), in the mid-first century BCE, soberly suggested that such myths are among the strange "things that never happened but always are". Indeed, how could we ever deny the traces of these "things that never happened" and yet were frequently devised, recounted, felt, learned, imagined and overheard by men and women throughout their individual and collective experiences?

These "things that never happened" stir the soul and collective unconscious; they live and die as symbols, myths, metaphors, images, emotions, fairy tales[1] and archetypes. And the archetype is no mere concept. It provides proof of humankind's psychic structures, structures that their inventor Jung[2] believed were ever-present in our inner worlds. Symbolic activity, a fundamental element of the idea of collective unconscious, conceals impulses that are decisive in shaping the development of our personalities, identities and socialisation processes. Although Jung postulated archetypes to be innate or inherited universal structures, they serve as a crucial nexus between the social and the individual. From the moment we are born, we, as individuals, proceed down the road of life through a forest of these particular types of "things" in a manner dependent upon, among other factors, our sex.

Indeed, historians of mythology and religion, alongside anthropologists, have recognised that every group in each historical era has had its own symbolic language, a language that assumes various nuances depending on the social organisation and population in question. In particular, it is influenced by ethnic exchanges, the historical period, and the circumstances of the time. Archetypes posses a dual power, taking over the heart of both individuality and social life; without them it is impossible to discover the plot of an age, society, civilisation or *paideia,* or the inner life of a man or woman.

Interpretations on symbolic thoughts warn us that age-old mythologies cannot be deciphered with the traditional tools of reason and explanation. Instead, they suggest that we explore myths as alternative forms of intelligibility. And so the exploration of the *paideutic* value of the myth provides a decisive point of departure, because the myth has met our emotional and intellectual needs since time out of mind.

Take the case of Medusa. She became, among other snake-women, a prototype and archetype in the Western imagination—the earliest visual and written sources (Homer and Hesiod) painted her as the first female monster. Since then her awful gaze and poisonous tresses have been

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[1]For the representation of heroines and their archetypes in narratives according to the principles of Jungian analytical psychology, see Marie Louise von Franz, *Problems of the Feminine in Fairy Tales* (New York: Spring Publications, 1972).

[2]Carl Gustave Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, [1948] in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Volume 9 (Part 1) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969) 207–254.

pervasive in art, religion and culture, and have therefore been the subject of much reflection in numerous fields of the humanities and social sciences (literature, philology, science, archaeology, art, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis). Nevertheless, there has thus far been a lack of a thorough investigation from a historical-educational perspective.[3]

In order to scrutinise public instruction on behaviours that have developed in parallel with stories and beliefs regarding Medusa's destructive powers, therefore, we must look at how she has been portrayed in the stories passed down through the generations, focusing in particular on the idea of diversity, and the emotional dynamics in the history of gender.

Historians of recent decades (especially women) have viewed Medusa, by virtue of her absolute and terrifying difference, as an emblematic symbol of Otherness—an allegory for the conflictual relationships between masculinity and femininity. We need to retrace how the myth of Medusa was used in the informal educational sphere in the Classical and Medieval periods. We must also focus on the literature of the sixteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, looking in particular at the works of Francis Bacon, François Fénelon, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Although meandering, this path will reveal both the mutations and permanent features of the Western emotional tradition through a mythological figure that has long influenced social representations of womanhood. By following the tracks of this figure we will pursue many strands of inquiry—themselves evidence of the ongoing interest this icon has elicited across the humanities and social sciences[4].

This book, which has a thematic, rather than chronological approach, focuses on the various identities of the snake-woman, who, over the centuries has come to symbolise the sub-humanity of the female. Our attention will turn to the visual clichés employed to suggest the Otherness of the 'second' sex, and the symbolic sleight of hand that attributed powers

[3] I made a brief foray into this topic in 'Medusa e le «cose che non accaddero mai ma che esistono da sempre»', in Franco Cambi (ed.), *Archetipi del femminile nella Grecia classica* (Milan: Unicopli, 2008)

[4] The deconstruction of patriarchal symbolism was launched in the twentieth century through critical studies by Frazer, Harrison, Graves, Vernant, Marrou, Gimbutas, Durand and Knight, and produced a large body of research proposing explanations for the various phenomena associated with the Gorgon.

of petrifaction to the female gaze, in line with the contemporary and contextual theories on menstruation.

My exploration of the metamorphoses of Medusa seeks to approach the social history of emotions in our vision of gender, and, among other issues, it raises a specific question: in the periods explored here, which social models did men and women learn from the snake-woman?

The association of women with the legend of deadly gaze has gathered strength since the Archaic period, going on to become a consternation to Classical and Hellenistic societies, and a sort of fixation in the Middle Ages. The Western obsession with serpentine creatures, so distinctly embodied by the Gorgons, originated in the Greco-Roman myths and permeated the art and literature of the centuries that followed. The womanly gaze had been weighed down with varied and complex messages associated with magical and symbolic forces, and was portrayed as such in the visual and written sources. The reverberating alliances between women and reptiles went on to float on the dark surface of menstrual blood, and fuelled belief in Medusa's signature power: the evil eye.

European folklore has long been kept busy engaging with this belief, and many tales revolve around the peculiar affinity between women and snakes. Medusa's glaring gaze is thus the *leitmotif* of a phenomenon that represented a wide variety of emotional threats to Medieval society; in keeping with the theological and moral framework of the time, Dante believed that her paralysing glance led to spiritual death, while she inspired terror in Walter Map's stories of necrophilia, and aroused blind sensuality in Jean de Meun's poetic impressions.

There are many possible approaches to this topic, but most would have been unsuitable or even dully repetitive; I therefore opted to show how Medusa's eye and snakes have shone oddly in the imagination of various societies of the past. By reflecting largely negative social emotions (fear, anger, scorn, shame), this bond has functioned to preserve the sexual hierarchy.

In the first two chapters we will analyse the process behind these *paideutic* functions, combining narrative works on the Medusa mythology and scientific theories on physiognomy with archaeological evidence and artistic images from the Greco-Roman period. The long and complex history of the Medusa character, from the Neolithic to Classical Antiquity through to present-day Europe, has been incorporated into the imaginary of collective sensibilities. Anthropological, philosophical, psychological and scientific research, combined with the historical literature, therefore,

can serve to clarify certain aspects of the association created in the Western mentality between the dangerousness of the female gaze, the *malignitas* of the snake, and the toxic powers of the menstrual cycle. Indeed, a brief examination of the emotional content of the visual arts reveals their implicit ethical duties.

The ancient stereotype of the killing gaze, amalgamated with allusions to feral traits—conventionally correlated with reptiles—has slowly but surely converged into the modern, contemporary imaginary of artists and scientists, furthering the idea of female monstrosity. From its remote origins, this type of imagination has led historical and contemporary perspectives to explore the functions played by fear in societies. The thrilling history of female hybrids—from Echidna to Mélusine, from the Amazons to the Basilisk, from the Poison-Damsel to the Catoblepas, and from the Serpent-Fairy to Sadako/Samara—sheds light on the meanings of male fears. It explains conflict with Otherness, and how mental and artistic images join forces in the construction of stereotypes.

Medusa herself first became depicted as a monstrous snake-woman in the visual and written sources from the turn of the seventh century BCE, and since then variants of this image have been cemented in the public consciousness. Indeed, art played an indispensable role in defining Otherness in Greek culture, and helped to guarantee that the Gorgon would remain prominent in European allegorical symbolism from the seventeenth (Cesare Ripa) to the nineteenth century.

The endless telling and retelling of these stories ensured that this mythical creature would impregnate the educational ideas of the past, leaving substantial clues and traces. Fénelon, Bacon and Hawthorne provide obvious examples of the wealth of pedagogical messages that have been borrowed and re-adapted from the complex workings of the Western imaginary and ideology over the centuries. These three representative cases are enough to lead us into temptation: which educational needs did the snake-woman meet? And, therefore, what impact has the image of her hissing mane had on the educational processes that have transformed women into women and men into men in the Western world?

Although the multiplicity of entangled threads make tracing a single coherent perspective of Medusa in the history of education seem difficult, or even impossible, I am not one to shirk her responsibilities or to shy away from a challenge; in any case a wave of curiosity has led me to pick my way, not without a certain degree of caution, through the fabric of her creation. I have chosen to follow—or rather *chase*—the educational

intentions of the Medusa myth, knowing full well that any story I might tell has already been told. However you read it, her head has reigned for centuries, offering a metaphorical pretext to anyone who needed it: from Homer to M.me de Staël—who held it up in 1818 as an effective prop for staging the upheaval of the ominous French Revolution, and from Hesiod to Dickens, who, unlike M.me de Staël, used Medusa to expose the nobility as a petrified and petrifying social class (*A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859).

Thus this mythological creature became an archetypal virus that has left its mark on the West. Her legend provides a key for our interpretation of gender relations throughout the centuries, and brings within our grasp the compelling theme of a gaze that leads, inevitably and without hesitation, to the warm flow of menstrual blood.

Following these lethal eyes is remarkably enlightening. In Chapter Three, for example, we dive into the Middle Ages, which brings us face to face with "the things that never happened but always are." Here, we will take a look at the Medieval revisions of this legend, and the captivating paths that granted the weight of real, lived experience to the common belief in the dangers of the female gaze, dragging it into the hidden spiral of menstruation. In the nocturnal regime of the medieval imaginary, as proposed by Durand, water, the moon phases, flowing hair, snakes, the gaze and menstrual blood all became integral parts of stories featuring evil femininity. The teachings of the Christian tradition and the Medieval church contributed to increasing the fear of the female stare. With the emergence of the system endorsing witch-hunts in Christian Europe, theologians, physicians and clerics all agreed that the eyes of a woman, imbued with harmful poisons, had the power to impede knowledge, ruin health and sap the sentiments—in a word, to bring about physical and/or spiritual death.

Perhaps this explains the ongoing appeal of the hidden dangers of the snake-women in British, German, French and Italian folklore. The implausible yet effective snakes—which quietly conceptualised natural and social hierarchies and moral conflicts in the ancient and Judeo-Christian traditions—were likewise both admired and dreaded. The serpentine seduction of Eve in the Garden of Eden, the reptilian Beast of the Apocalypse, and the legion of hissing creatures—like the unsettling Basilisk—that slithered across the pages of the Medieval Bestiaries from the early twelfth century onward, were all dramatic embodiments of what Medieval societies perceived as Other.

As such, the personification of a snake camouflaged as a female humanoid triumphed in the art of the Late Middle Ages (Hieronymus Bosch) and Renaissance (Michelangelo). During the thirteenth century, snakes underwent a medieval metamorphosis into womanly figures, and the fantastical descriptions of the Basilisk, Salamandra (the salamander) and Hydra began to overlap with those of menstruating and menopausal women. According to the language of the time, all of these creatures were stuffed to bursting with "the most deadly humours".

The conscious cultural spectres of the artistic, religious, literary and scientific imaginary included an ever-increasing aversion to feminine creatures perceived to have an alliance with reptiles, namely—Eve, Mélusine, the Poison-Damsel and menstruating women. This idea firmly established itself, and coincided quite effectively with the label of monster.

Even the aesthetic ambition of the French courtly poets and romance-writers to know and love Otherness, along with their complete acceptance of the primacy of sight, was insufficient to make much of a dent in these picturesque psychological barriers that elevated men so far above women.

However, three exceptional female writers, namely Hildegard of Bingen, Trotula of Salerno and Christine de Pizan, tried to provide an antidote to the corrupting phenomenological contamination of the snake-woman, and found some ingenious solutions to the problem. In the early fifteenth century, for example, de Pizan completely reinvented the murky Medusa, transforming her into a precious ray of light, whose splendour surpassed even that of the "beautiful" but doomed Medusas of Classical art.

Ultimately, the Medusa myth forces us to confront these dead and living symbols, and in Chapter Four I ask whether this story, no longer so strongly resonating in the individual and collective consciousness of humankind, might not have taken refuge instead in the minds of psychologists, historians, archaeologists, literary authors, scholars of myth and philosophers.[5]

In an effort to successfully preserve this type of "things that never happened but always are" in the spheres of collective memory, it is likely that Sallust chose not to ignore those invisible models of behaviour that, century after century, have influenced the imagination of entire generations.

[5]Jean Chevalier and Alain Gherrant, 'Introduction' to *Dictionaire des Symboles* (Paris: Seguers, 1973) Tome I, XXVI.

After all, is it not perhaps true that most of us whose scholastic learning about myths was standardised and dogmatic have found ourselves helpless and resigned in the face of traditional teachings, with their gender-based prejudice and intolerance in the face of the things that make people different?

What impact have the thousands of artists eager to portray Medusa as a snake-woman had on our emotional lives? Even in this day and age many images of Medusa are all around us—engraved in marble, carved in stone, sculpted in clay, tessellated in mosaics, painted in oils or acrylics, or transformed into a cyborg. She glares down at us from ancient antefixes on the roofs of public and residential buildings. Among myriad examples, we can look to Etruscan Campania of the sixth century BCE, in which Medusa's head was used to decorate and protect people's homes. We may also happen across the merry and mischievous Medusas of Minoan art, and the disturbing Medusas made in the sixteenth century. Medusas big and small, colourful and golden. For one unconscious moment, we could cross the generations raised in the protective shadow of the Snake Goddess, and those who allowed themselves to be gripped by her supposed cruelty.

The journey to Medusa's lair that we are about to embark upon will not be easy or even pleasant, but it will be full of excitement and suspense. Like an underground river, her thrilling story disappears, only to suddenly resurface further on. Her myth testifies to untold transitions in social organisation, and inner transformations. At times Medusa fuelled an allegory of vitality, at other times an allegory of destruction. Even her gaze was manifold: sometimes welcoming, and at other times threatening, warlike or pained, sad or seductive, wise or painfully cynical. When she allowed it to be captured, this superior and eternal gaze ranged from primitive and deranged to beautiful and cruel, suave and dangerous, full of unbridled madness, alongside vast intelligence.

These different versions of the Medusa are full of significance, reflecting as they do our interior radar, and raise a thousand hypotheses. The post-modern imagination strives to use the great oracle Google to reanimate the art of deciphering this elusive symbol on the public platform of information exchange.[5] In the digital ether, Medusa has achieved star

[5]See "Il sito di Medusa" website (University of Bergamo, Visual Arts Centre), which since 2006 has collated literary, iconographical and artistic contributions on this imaginary figure, providing a showcase for essays, authors, critical analyses and projects on the theme.

status. Her name and/or image have been appropriated by film companies, publishing houses, makers of eyeglasses, and many more commercial ventures. She even has her own websites, forums and blogs dedicated to preserving her memory. And so her shadow extends over electronic networks in which girls and young women—in a sort of national and international self-help project— set forth into the legendary labyrinth in search of a sense of their own identity.

But Medusa seems to extend well beyond the 'authorised personnel' in question. Why is this ancient myth so appealing to the new generations? Why do these ghosts of the past still resonate with the "Daughters of Medusa"?[6] They hold her up as a kind of guardian of the premenstrual phase, and celebrate her as a kind of sacred symbol of self-knowledge. Would it be right, therefore, for us to dismiss the snake-woman as a mere myth? Or would it be more fitting for us to attempt to trace the tangled threads of her history? Why struggle to understand "the things that never happened but always are"?

Although it might seem foolish to concentrate on a primordial age and persist stubbornly to grasp an uncharted imaginary, although it may not seem worthwhile to search for something that appears out of *thin air,* these spectres of the past never cease to materialise. Sometimes fearsome shades and sometimes playful creatures, they are continuously resurrected, slipping in and out of time. And in any case, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, it is our personal inalienable privilege to support the proper occupation of the historian—to provide an accurate description of what has never occurred.

[6] The expression "Daughters of Medusa" ("*Figlie di Medusa"*) was coined by Barbara Coffari, in *Medusa*, 2007; http//www.ilcerchiodellaluna.it (now offline).

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT DOES MYTH TEACH US?

Myths take us by the hand, suddenly drawing back the curtains on a scene that is familiar, but has long been forgotten.

What is the ideal tension that gives mythical accounts their fascination and power? One of the factors in a long list—that which unites all the infinite versions of the story—is a collective experience. The telling and retelling of such tales meet unpredictable needs; they teach us important lessons, kindle emotions, and shape shared memory, guiding our history, science and nature, as well as our sacred sphere and the mysteries of the world, giving clues as to their origins and meaning.

They also seduce and entertain, but myths are no mere pastimes; Giambattista Vico (1668–1774), in defence of the autonomy of myth with respect to *logos* in his *New Science*, interpreted them as a kind of metaphorical language that can tell us many things about the experiences and values of our primitive forefathers[1].

Many myths have been interpreted and classified in different ways throughout the centuries as a means of furthering our understanding, but it is the various renderings of the Medusa story which for me hold the most appeal. Through word-of-mouth teachings and shared rites of passage, tribal societies used such stories to guide their youth through the difficult transition into adulthood—a transition that would shape the rest of their lives.

On the topic of the origins of behavioural models adopted in European education, the historian of religion Mircea Eliade considered how the real historical figures of ancient Greece strove to emulate their archetypes

[1]Vico believed in "sweeping primitive fantasies", arguing that they could not be interpreted on the basis of the logic of reason. See Book II of *New Science,* trans. David Marsh (Current edition, London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 35–145.

(gods and mythological heroes), thereby becoming paradigms themselves.[2] They modelled their gender self-image on examples from Greek- and Roman-era legends, and layer upon layer of these teachings of innumerable fantastical events and supernatural beasts forged the sexual and cultural identities of the ensuing generations, laying the foundations of the way in which men and women perceive and treat each other today.

Throughout the ages, the ancient myths—conduits of wisdom rather than knowledge—have helped us make sense of themes that still frame how we see the world; they shape our views on life, death, the gods, interpersonal relationships, conflicts and gender identities. The myths passed down in the epic poems—codified accounts of tribal conflicts from human history—survive even today in our collective consciousness and memory; this living legacy functions as the fount of all our human emotions.

In this fabric of our educational history, Medusa is a highly symbolic thread—a call to our primitive and instinctual selves, a mythological figure that still today resonates in every fibre of our imaginations and internal lives.

The Gorgons and the *gorgoneia*

So, who exactly was Medusa?

Well, Medusa was a strange hybrid creature known as a Gorgon. Today the word '*gorgon*' is used in the Italian language to signify an ugly, unkempt and repellent woman; indeed, the Gorgon is the first, perhaps vague, but stereotypical notion we have of a female monster. The Greek word '*gorgos'* (terrible) was pressed into service in the *Iliad*—the oldest masterpiece of Greek literature—to convey the idea of a repugnant creature, and even today it is difficult to imagine a more terrifying idea made flesh.

At its inception the term 'Gorgon' referred to a single snake-woman, but she later found universal fame as one of the three hideous sisters with poisonous serpentine tresses who turned the unwary to stone in ancient Greek and Roman lore. Paradoxically, though her immortal sisters, Stheno

[2] Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth,* trans. Willard R. Trask (Current edition: Woodstock, Conn.: Spring Publication, 1995), 266.

and Euryale, have all but faded from memory, Medusa ("queen" or "guardian"), who was mortal, still lives on. Her decapitated head, itself preserved as if in stone by the myth of Perseus, and continuously reproduced in monstrous form, has achieved its own type of eternal life. In this semblance her grisly countenance has endured not as a mere mask, nor the emblem of a terrifying story, but one of the most effective and firmly entrenched amulets of all time.

Throughout history, Medusa's head has been portrayed on coins (from the Eastern Asia of the 8th century BCE to the Roman empire of the 3rd century CE)[3], ceramics, arms, and in stone, on public and private buildings. The so-called *gorgoneion* was a stone head portraying the face of the Gorgon, often surrounded by writhing serpents, which took on both decorative and apotropaic functions in ancient Greece (8th–6th century BCE).

At the beginning of the past century, Jane Ellen Harrison[4] hypothesised that this image was the mortal aspect of the cycle of the Great Mother-Goddess, who had been worshipped in North Africa since Prehistoric times. Several decades after the publication of Harrison's work, the early European traditions involving the Great Goddess were investigated by the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas. Delving into the various symbolic systems introduced by the Indo-European patriarchy,[5] Gimbutas unearthed the prototypes of *gorgoneia* with other meanings; decorating anthropomorphic vases, sculptures and terracotta masks, these testify to her worship in Neolithic Europe (7000/6000–3000 BCE).

Like a corridor of fairground mirrors, the 'Gorgonesque' genre stretches back in time to that dim and distant past. Although distorted by the passage of time, the image has prevailed until the present day, and we can discern glimpses of the different stages of this journey—sometimes

[3]See, for instance, Fiorenzo Catalli, *Numismatica greca e romana* (Rome: Libreria dello Stato. Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca, 2003).

[4] Jane E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* [1903], in particular Chapter V 'The Ker as "Gorgon"' (London: reprinted by Princeton University Press, 1991), 187.

[5]Gimbutas preferred the term 'Great Goddess', as opposed to 'Mother Goddess', believing that it better explained the multiple facets of her significance as a custodian of not only birth, life and fertility, but also death, regeneration, and the harvest. See Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: 7000 to 3500 BC myths, legends and cult images* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 236–37.

ordered and sometimes randomly scattered—that enable us to trace a rough outline of her history.

Having originated as a male Assyrian deity,[6] the Gorgon was transformed by the vestiges of ancient female influences in Libya (which sources in Classical antiquity considered the homeland of the Amazons); she took on an entirely female guise on funeral masks, in apotropaic symbols, and, most famously, as the monstrous snake-woman of the ancient Greek literature (the *Odyssey*). She then took her place in the Attic tradition (Euripedes), and as the occasional alluring maiden in the work of artists from the fifth century BCE. Later on, in Sardinian legends from the Late Middle Ages, she made an even greater departure from the prevailing image of the times, being held up as an icon of liberty.[7]

After the chilling metamorphoses she underwent in the modern age, Medusa has now emerged as a feminist icon—the personification of rape, as well as female subversiveness and creativity.

Although there are gaps and inconsistencies in the transformational history of the Gorgon, of her many faces, those adopted in the ancient Greek hierarchy of sacred imagery were particularly monstrous. Alongside her male counterparts, like centaurs and the Cyclops, she embodied a terrifying mix of animal species. These powerful figures, derived from oral accounts, had gradually taken on definite visual aspects, not to mention their own personalities and symbolic and educational roles.

The Gorgons made their first appearance in ancient Greek art after the geometric period. Inspired by fantastical Egyptian and Syrian symbolism, which also spawned a colourful host of Sphinxes, Sirens and griffons, the *gorgoniea* assumed a separate identity from those that took hold in other places[8] in the hands of ancient Greek artists.

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[6] Clark Hopkins, 'Assyrian Elements in the Perseus Gorgon Story', *American Journal of Archaeology*. Vol. 38, 3, July–September (1934), 341–358. Also see Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, *The Medusa Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

[7] Various accounts have painted Medusa as a beautiful and courageous queen who fought for the freedom of the Sardinian people, who, after her death, raised her up as a goddess; see Dolores Turchi, *Leggende e racconti della Sardegna* (Rome: Lucarini, 1989), 30.

[8] Cf. Humfry Payne, *Necrocorinthia: A Study of Corinthian Art in the Archaic Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931) and Thalia Phillies Howe, 'The Origin and

One of the oldest and most frightening of the Gorgons in Archaic Greek art was depicted in the eighth century BCE, and her dreadful appearance was consistently reproduced until the fifth century BCE, when her characteristic features were once more scrupulously detailed in the *Shield of Heracles*, an epic poem thought to have been written in 555 BCE—the post-Hesiodic period. Here her description is very similar to those depicted in the art of 7th- and 6th-century Greece; the surviving Gorgons (Stheno and Euryale) are pictured in pursuit of Perseus, after he has beheaded their sister, whose terrifying visage overlooks the scene, as follows:

> "And after him rushed the Gorgons, unapproachable and unspeakable, longing to seize him: as they trod upon the pale adamant, the shield rang sharp and clear with a loud clanging. Two serpents hung down at their girdles with heads curved forward: their tongues were flickering, and their teeth gnashing with fury, and their eyes glaring fiercely. And upon the awful heads of the Gorgons great Fear was quaking."
>
> (Hesiod, *The Shield of Heracles,* 230–238)

Fervid imaginations have portrayed the Gorgons in numerous guises—with wings of gold, sharpened claws, long boar's tusks or teeth—but the one unifying theme is the snake: the guardian of the Oracles and the source of our most primitive fears. Poets and artists alike were bewitched by these nightmarish sisters, whom Hesiod's patient hand ascribed to the primordial generations of divinities in his *Theogony*. Daughters of marine deities Phorcys and Ceto, themselves the offspring of Pontus (a sea-god) and Gaia (the Earth), the Gorgons had, by virtue of their genealogy, been shaped by primitive forces. They were, however, overthrown by the second generation of the Olympic pantheon, which brought order to the universe and steadfastly defended patriarchal law.

By the time of Diodorus Siculus (1st century BCE), the three Gorgon sisters had been relegated to the status of savage creatures or fantastic beasts, but in the fifth century BCE they underwent an unexpected transformation into deliciously nubile young blondes, adorning the occasional sculpture, painted vase and prose of the age (from Pindar to Ovid).

In Classical times, it was sometimes Medusa alone of the three sisters that was portrayed as beautiful, providing more than sufficient motive for

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Function of the Gorgon-Head', *American Journal of Archaeology.* Vol. 58, 3, July (1954), 209–221.

arousing the rampant lust of Poseidon, who finally managed to have his way with her in the temple of Athena. This, at least, was the version of the story invented by Ovid, according to whom the Goddess of the temple was so affronted that she transformed the alluring young woman into a repulsive monster.

Nevertheless, it was through the works of other celebrated writers and artists, from Leonardo da Vinci to Picasso (not to mention Fidia, Cellini, Rubens and Rodin) that the image of the three Gorgon sisters was cemented in the collective imagination, albeit in various guises. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that from their origins in the minds of the European Neolithic people, who worshipped them as deities, the Gorgons have made frequent but troubling apparitions in our pedagogical landscape as history has marched and meandered on.

Venerable monsters

Imaginary monsters are assured a place in universal human history if they foment both fear and fascination—two sides of the same emotional coin.[9] From the tales of ancient Egypt to the films of today, such fantastical creatures have long enacted our relationships with Otherness—the non-human, the non-being—meeting some primal human psychological need and intertwining with our education throughout time and space. Indeed, the complex creation of monsters is common to all cultures, ensuring that children the world over have all felt that delicious thrill of fear that such figures provoke, and that the attraction of these ferocious anti-heroes persists in their minds even into their old age. However, unlike the mythological heroes, their monstrous adversaries received scant attention from scholars until the anthropological studies of David D. Gilmore, who broke through the invisible barriers and pronounced that monsters were a product of psychological and social symbolism.

Although often larger than life, gratuitously violent, sexually sadistic or even cannibalistic, these super-human symbols are not alien entities or existential anomalies; rather they are the unfettered creations[10] of the

[9]See, for instance, Stéphane Audeguy, *Les Monstres. Si loin, si proches* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).
[10]David Gilmore, *Monsters, Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 6.

deepest part of our individual and social imaginations, monstrous externalisations of all that is dangerous and frightening in our internal lives. It is may come as no surprise to some of us, therefore, that the bogey-men used to scare and control the behaviour of children in Archaic Greece (Lamia, Akko, Mormo, Baubo—similar to the Italian Babau—Gello, and, of course, Gorgo) were, in fact, predominantly women.[11] Children in ancient Athens were 'educated' by scaring them with the threat of being bitten, dragged off and/or swallowed by such entities, armed with serpents in their hands or at their belts; as if that weren't terrifying enough, these Gorgonesque monsters were also ready to expose their disconcertingly ferine vulvas at the drop of a hat. Nursemaids, maidservants and mothers across the civilised world all regaled children with these terrifying tales; in the Libyan desert there lived seductive damsels whose lower bodies were buried under the sands to hide the fact that they were, in fact, half serpent. The captivating and inviting glances of these damsels would act as bait to draw in the unwitting passer-by, who would soon find himself devoured by the large-headed, sharp-fanged female reptile—gobbled up in a single bite.[12]

Plato set out to debunk these fairy tales, which in his opinion distorted the truth and unleashed obsessive fears (*Republic*, Book 2, 376 d). But pleasurable wallowing in fantasy and imagination did, in fact, trigger very real emotions and furnish convenient solutions to real-world problems. Analysis of the protagonists of the Greek fables has shown how they served to gradually mould children's behaviour by inducing a spasmodic state of fear;[13] the children's nightmares continued to be nurtured by the iconic narrative progenitors of the Wicked Witch of European folklore. "Don't do that, otherwise the Gorgo will whisk you away and/or eat you up," was an excellent counter-measure against wakefulness, lack of appetite, and all the other potential threats to the survival of infants. Even though the Gorgon was tailored to inculcate very adult fears, her sisters

[11]Carla Mainoldi, "Mostri al femminile" in Renato Raffaelli, (ed.), *Vicende e figure femminili in Grecia e a Roma* (Ancona: Commissione per le pari opportunità fra uomo e donna della Regione Marche, 1995), 69–92.

[12]Enzo Pellizer, 'Lamia e Baubò. Figure di spauracchi femminili nella Grecia arcaica' in Berliotz et al.: Jacques Berlioz, Danièle Alexandre-Bidon (éds), *Le croquemitaines. Faire peur et éduquer* (Grenoble: Le monde alpin et rhodanien, 2-4 trimestres, 1998), 141–151.

[13]Enzo Pellizer, *Favole di identità. Favole di paura.* (Rome: Istituto Enciclopedico Italiano, 1982), 14–62.