

VITAL GORGON

Celeste Olalquiaga on Medusa

ONE OF THE OLDEST #MeToo episodes dates back more than two thousand years, and would have entered the canon of great Greek tragedy had the forefathers of Western patriarchy deigned to give it the appropriate status. But they did not—instead, they rewrote the main character's story. For Medusa, she of the serpent mane and petrifying fame, is an interpretation of the *Gorgoneion*, or “Gorgon head” (*gorgós* being Greek for “dreadful”), an archaic protective emblem that was plastered on pottery, architectural and carriage ornaments, coins, and protective armor throughout Asia Minor and the Mediterranean from the seventh century BCE through the sixth century CE. “Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art,” an exhibition now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, offers a fascinating glimpse of the Gorgoneion's evolution.

Enthralled by this winged creature with exorbitant eyes, fangs, a protruding tongue, and snakes for hair, Hellenic culture concocted the myth of Medusa, a contrived and asymmetrical clash between the goddess Athena and one of her priestesses. According to this story, the priestess Medusa (whose name, says the poet Hesiod, means “I rule,” making her a queen) was one of three Gorgon daughters of the sea deities Phorcys and Keto. She served in the temple of Athena and aroused the jealousy of the so-called goddess of reason with her beautiful hair. Raped by Poseidon in the goddess's shrine, Medusa was left at the mercy of Athena, who, instead of chastising Poseidon for sullyng her sacred sanctuary, transformed Medusa's lovely locks into vipers so no one would ever dare look at her again, lest they turn to stone from sheer horror.

Violated, disfigured, and sacked, Medusa sought refuge with her two sisters in the confines of the earth, where she spent her days and nights “among rain-worn shapes of [petrified] men and wild beasts.” Yet her fame spread, and her head became a sought-after trophy, which Perseus managed to acquire with Athena's help. True to his epithet, “the destroyer,” Perseus then used the head to permanently immobilize whatever bothered him, including kings, entire royal courts, and even the giant Atlas:

... big as he was,
Atlas was all at once a mountain: beard
And hair were forests, and his arms and shoulders
Were mountain-ridges; what had been his head
Was the peak of the mountain, and his bones
were boulders.

As for his partner in crime, Athena, she flayed the slain Medusa and hung the skin on her aegis, or shield,



Greave, Greece, ca. 400 BCE, bronze, 15¾ × 4⅞".

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after the bloody decapitation. Greek warriors followed suit, placing Medusa as an emblem on their own armor to terrify their enemies, as can be seen in two leg greaves exhibited at the Met.

And so Medusa became an icon of deadly females that Western art and literature replicated through the centuries. Freud sealed her fate with an infamous half-page, “*Das Medusenhaupt*” (The Medusa Head, written in 1922 and published in 1940), which cast her as the quintessential castrator. Yet the original Gorgoneion had little to do with this avatar of modern sexism, the femme fatale. In these early images (represented at the Met by several renderings on terra-cotta, as well as an appliqué and a funerary stele), the head is hybrid, mixing human and animal elements, and also quite androgynous: It often appears with a beard, although its mouth—open, tongue dangling—is considered a symbol of the vulva by anthropologists and Freud alike. Hardly alone in the category of mythical female hybrids, the Gorgon is accompanied by several others, including sphinxes and sirens, in this exhibition.

Scholarly studies of the Gorgoneion began to proliferate in the late nineteenth century, fueled by the archaeological discoveries that were shedding new light on the ancient world (and that in turn inspired Freud to conceive of a layered psyche, full of buried secrets). In *The Evil Eye: An Account of This Ancient and Widespread Superstition* (1895), English philologist and folklorist Frederick Thomas Elworthy recorded several of the emblem's appearances, discussing the Gorgoneion as a mask and a protector from the malefic gaze of his title. A negative energy that the ancients depicted as ocular rays, the evil eye was believed to have the power to spoil pregnancies, harvests, health, or anything worth coveting.

In the early twentieth century, the classicist and linguist Jane Ellen Harrison presented the Gorgoneion as a “ritual mask misunderstood,” relating its apotropaic function to archaic fertility rites in which women had played a predominant role. She opened a can of worms (or snakes), writing that the Gorgoneion “is a potent goddess, not as in later days a monster to be slain by heroes.” Basing her analysis of myths on rituals and archaeological findings, Harrison turned classical studies upside down in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903), where she proposed the then-revolutionary idea that the classical sources of Western culture, Greek literature and mythology, were in fact a distorted rewriting of pre-Hellenic traditions.

The poet, critic, and classicist Robert Graves continued this argument, suggesting in *The Greek Myths* (1955)



Left: Relief fragment, Greece, ca. 600 BCE, terra-cotta, 16½ × 9⅞ × 1½".

Above: Stand, Greece, ca. 570 BCE, terra-cotta, 2¼ × 3⅝ × 2¼".

Right: Ring stone, Roman Empire, ca. 100 BCE–300 CE, peridot, ¾ × ¾".

that Medusa's violation in the temple of Athena was an allegorical enactment of the Greek patriarchal seizure and replacement of pre-Hellenic goddess rituals. According to Graves, the Gorgons were actually moon priestesses who wore prophylactic masks to scare strangers away from their mysteries and rites. Like Harrison's before him, Graves's ideas were met with a mix of enthusiasm and resistance from the academic establishment. Nonetheless, this return to the foundational mask paved the way for what would become one of the most popular interpretations of the Gorgon Medusa, that of the dark double that lies dormant, then reemerges and unleashes its wrath.

Historian and anthropologist Jean-Pierre Vernant's work, particularly his book *La mort dans les yeux: figures de l'autre en Grèce ancienne* (Death in the Eyes: Figures of the Other in Ancient Greece, 1985), developed this understanding of the Medusa. Vernant presented the Gorgon, or *Gorgô*, as "the terrifying horror of that which is absolutely other, unspeakable, unutterable, unthinkable—pure chaos . . . the confrontation with death." Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Vernant addressed the central issue of specular identification, proposing that the Gorgoneion acted as a mirror for the beholder by showing us an intolerable part of ourselves. It is the horror of this recognition of our own otherness that petrifies us.

While second-wave feminists engaged in a vigorous critique of the misogyny that characterizes Freudian gender theory, Hélène Cixous offered an early example of empowering reappropriation in her famous manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975): "Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that gives them a hard-on!" Since then, the Gorgon Medusa has been often adopted as an icon of female power and agency in pop culture and in the discourse of "goddess feminism," such as in the work of the anthropologist Marija Gimbutas. That the latter remains so marginalized, if not outright stigmatized, is perhaps evidence of how strong the fear of powerful females remains.

No matter where one stands on the Gorgon/Medusa divide, the one thing on which everyone seems to agree is that it was during the classical Greek period that the Gorgoneion's dramatic transformation took place. The mask was softened and feminized until it became unrecognizable. One by one, the beard, tusks, and even the telltale tongue and wide-open eyes were gone, leaving only the serpents as a sign that something might be amiss with this otherwise ethereal female face. Given that the serpents were an obvious phallogocentric choice, it is no surprise that Hellenic

culture eventually replaced the Gorgoneion with the phallus as its preferred *apotropaion* against the evil eye. All that was left of the archaic Gorgoneion was an angry woman.

What is so scary about female anger? True, if the person in question has deadly powers—if the sight of her is so terrifying that the onlooker is paralyzed—she can be construed as a threat to humankind. Yet it seems that what renders women dangerous *femmes fatales* is either an unwillingness to play the gender game or a galling talent for playing it too well by turning sexist tropes and expectations to their advantage. Daring to show her fury at being taken for granted, or taken in any way, may also be cause for regarding a woman as a she-beast. This is hardly news, but it is constantly forgotten. Female anger is a form of resistance, and is therefore demonized or fetishized as a force that transforms women into seductive monsters whose beauty is just a trick to lure innocent victims. The punishment for all of the above? Getting your head chopped off so some arrogant male can use it as a weapon and become a hero. □

"*Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art*" is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through January 6, 2019.

CELESTE OLALQUIAGA IS THE AUTHOR OF *THE ARTIFICIAL KINGDOM: A TREASURY OF THE KITSCH EXPERIENCE* (PANTHEON, 1998). SHE IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON A BOOK ABOUT PETRIFICATION. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)