Chapter 10

“Let Them Know That Men Did This”: Medusa, Rape, and Female Rivalry in Contemporary Film and Women’s Writing

Elizabeth Johnston

Medusa has haunted the cultural imagination since Perseus cut off her head in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.[[1]](#endnote-1) Read sometimes as representative of castration anxiety and toxic usurpation of male authority, or alternately as a symbol of lost goddess culture and feminist resistance,[[2]](#endnote-2) Medusa’s meaning shifts depending on the ideological lexicon of the interpreter.[[3]](#endnote-3) In this respect, Medusa, like all cultural myths, functions as a mirror of the values and beliefs of the culture in which she is produced and interpreted. What, then, do contemporary representations of Medusa—one of the “baddest” women of myth—reflect about Western attitudes toward female authority and sexuality?

For most, Medusa’s name invokes the image of a green-faced, snaky-haired monster who turns men naïve enough to look upon her to stone. Immortalized in popular culture, she trolls sci-fi and fantasy literature, comics, television shows, film, and gaming culture.[[4]](#endnote-4) In addition to appearing in a number of independent and low-budget films and television series, she has also “starred” in three feature-length Hollywood blockbusters: as a stop-motion animated foe in *Clash of the Titans* (1981),[[5]](#endnote-5)played by a Russian supermodel in the remake of *Clash* (2010),[[6]](#endnote-6) and resurrected by femme fatale Uma Thurman in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief (*2010).[[7]](#endnote-7)Most recently, Medusa graced the 2013 cover of the 25th anniversary edition of *GQ*, this time impersonated by pop icon and “bad girl” herself, Rihanna. Given Medusa’s misogynistic past, her contemporary appropriation is worthy of feminist analysis. [[8]](#endnote-8)

Tracing the origins of Medusa’s history is beyond the scope of this paper. However, for our purposes here, it’s helpful for readers to know that, while remnants of her myth date back to Greek antiquity (and perhaps further), the fullest and most well-known representation of her story appears in thefourth book of the Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, c. 8 CE.. In sum, Ovid describes Medusa as the beautiful mortal sister of two gorgons, female monsters with bulging eyes and fangs who can literally petrify men. Neptune desires and then rapes[[9]](#endnote-9) Medusa in Minerva’s temple; an enraged Minerva then transforms Medusa into a monster. Perseus is tasked to retrieve Medusa’s head. Warned not to look on her lest he turn to stone, he is aided by Minerva who guides his hand and helps him to behead Medusa while she sleeps. Perseus then uses her decapitated head to turn his enemies to stone.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Since antiquity, historians, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, writers, and artists alike have grappled for control of Medusa’s meaning—some celebrating Perseus’s victory over the monstrous female, others empathizing with Medusa as a victim of male aggression. Following second-wave feminism’s impulse to reclaim a woman-centered “herstory,” which included reappropriating and revising stories of women from myth and fairy tale, feminist poets began to deploy Medusa as a powerful symbol of feminist rage, often using her story and voice to shift the blame for rape away from the victim and back onto the culture that fosters male sexual aggression. In contrast, and arguably in response to feminist gains, mainstream representations of Medusaappear to work toward the opposite end, pushing the specter of sexual assault to the margins, rendering it invisible, or rewriting it. Instead of providing Medusa with a voice, popular media often hypersexualizes her, presenting her as both titillating and terrifying, a threat implicitly inviting male conquest. This essay examines these contradictory attitudes, arguing that the contrast between them brings into relief compelling evidence of a thriving “rape culture” within contemporary film.

**Medusa in Second- and Third-Wave Feminist Poetry**

A victim of rape in Greco-Roman mythology, Medusa and her iconography are well suited for appropriation by contemporary feminists seeking to challenge the myths of modern rape culture. A number of texts have been credited with first coining the term “rape culture,” including Noreen Connell’s *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* (1974),[[11]](#endnote-11) Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975),[[12]](#endnote-12) and the groundbreaking documentary *Rape Culture* (1976).*[[13]](#endnote-13)* In their 1986 text, *Transforming a Rape Culture,* Emily Buchwald, Maria Roth, and Pamela Fletcher define the term as

a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm. In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes. This violence, however, is neither biologically nor divinely ordained.

It’s fairly clear that the culture from which the myth of Medusa derives was, by this definition, a “rape culture.” These ancient myths, wherein gods like Zeus and Neptune routinely rape and impregnate women, support a belief system within which violence against women’s bodies is understood as “divinely ordained,” and therefore established as a norm. While rape of certain women and men (widows, virgins, boys), could be punished by law in Athens, it was viewed as an act of dishonor, not against the victim, but against the victim’s family. On the other hand, rape of unmarried non-virgins and male slaves, was legal; further, the rape of those from lower classes was not punished as stringently.[[14]](#endnote-14) Moreover, the habitual rape of female prisoners was a martial norm, and, as some scholars have shown, even rape of free women was sometimes celebrated in literature and plays.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Despite the criminalization of rape in the United States since its foundation (the death penalty for rapists was in effect in many states until the mid-twentieth century), many feminists argue that we continue to live within a rape culture. In particular, the silence surrounding sexual assault and the shaming of victims has enabled rape culture to thrive. Thus, second-wave feminists engaged in a series of awareness campaigns to raise social consciousness, give voice to victims who have been silenced, and refocus the blame on the cultural mythologies perpetuating violence against women. At the same time, feminist literature began to reimagine patriarchal myths in an attempt to tell “*her*story” rather than “*his*tory.” In addition to reclaiming the voice of mythic women like Eve, Pandora, and the Virgin Mary, many poets gravitated toward Medusa and, in particular, to her story as a victim of rape.

*Ann Stanford, “Medusa” (1977)*

Although a number of second-wave feminist poets like Sylvia Plath and May Sarton[[16]](#endnote-16) employed the Medusa myth in the process of self-discovery, it is in Ann Stanford’s 1977 poem, “Medusa” that we first hear Medusa speak for herself.[[17]](#endnote-17) Importantly, she speaks as a survivor of rape. In the poem, Medusa makes clear that any translation of her relationship with Neptune as consensual is false. Instead, she says, “He seized and raped me” (line 8). As if anticipating denial from her listeners, she repeats: “no consent on my part” (9), then bluntly adds, “I didn’t like it” (11), a clear response to common myths about victims inviting and enjoying rape.

In addition to countering rape denial, Stanford also uses her poem to emphasize the impact of rape on women. Neptune’s rape is not simply a violation of her body; it is also a spiritual and emotional trespass that leaves her irreparably wounded. The transformation she undergoes, then, is not just to her physical looks, but also to the totality of her self:

My hair coiled in fury; my mind held hate alone.

I thought of revenge, began to live on it.

My hair turned to serpents, my eyes saw the world in stone.

Whatever I looked at became a wasteland. (12-15)

In Stanford’s revision, Medusa, not her victims, is immobilized. Consumed by fury and desire for revenge, she is alienated from the rest of the world. Having no one to tell her story to, finding no opportunity to confront her assailant, and seeing her story appropriated by male writers who glorify the hero who beheads her, her rage turns in on itself. Having internalized the story told about her by others, she sees everything around her—even her body—become a “a wasteland.” “I am alone/my ways divide me from the world,” she moans (27-28), and longs to “look for [her] self again” (34). However, she is imprisoned by the memory of the rape, “the stinking breath, the sweaty weight, the pain” (37). These visceral lines give body to the abstract, marginalized concept of rape, confronting the reader with its brutalizing effects. Medusa insists on recognition.

Stanford further deploys Medusa to implicitly argue for women’s reproductive rights. In the Ovidian myth, Medusa is impregnated with Pegasus and Chrysaor, both of whom spring from her blood when she is beheaded (which also symbolically situates Perseus as a rapist insofar as his phallic sword engenders life).[[18]](#endnote-18) Although three years before the publication of Stanford’s poem, the Supreme Court ruled in the momentous Roe v. Wade legislation to lift the ban on abortion, Stanford’s poem imagines a world in which the ban continues to exist and women are forced to carry and give birth to the product of rape. Stanford’s Medusa both bemoans her lack of choice and foreshadows her inevitable demise as a result. The “quickening thrust” (38) of rape becomes her own body’s “quickening,” a pregnancy that she says is “not the start”(39) of life, but rather an end. She can feel the “rude circling blood tide not my own…/steal[ing] from me bone by bone” (42). It is not a child but a “monster seed growing beneath [her] heart” (41). Like the god’s desire for and assault of her body, his seed is “despised, uncalled for, turning [her] blood to stone” (44). The poem ends on the birth of the unwanted offspring, symbolizing the patriarchal trajectory of the victim’s life. Turned to stone, she is a lifeless, voiceless statue—memorial to male power and privilege. While other poets had imagined Medusa as a source of feminine empowerment, Stanford’s identification with Medusa speaks to a shift in the discourse of feminism toward a consideration of the ways in which sexism and misogyny are institutionally and structurally reinforced in the laws and cultural norms of patriarchal society.

*Amy Clampitt, “Medusa” (1987)*

Amy Clampitt’s “Medusa” (1987) similarly exposes the iconography of Medusa as a memorial celebrating patriarchy. She accuses patriarchal culture of using Medusa as “a libel on the [female] sex” (line 5), claiming Medusa’s story is an “antique scare tactic” (4), a cautionary tale told by men about female sexuality.[[19]](#endnote-19) But Clampitt refuses to accept this version. Emphasizing the criminal and violating nature of Poseidon’s actions, she calls his rape of Medusa a “flagrant/trespass” (10-11). At the same time, she also makes clear the futility of seeking to criminalize or punish such a trespass, since, within a patriarchal system, “the dark/gods [are] not to be denied” (7). In a rape culture, after all, consent is always, already implied.

Moreover, Clampitt criticizes a system that turns women against each other rather than against their assailants. Clampitt writes of Athena, who punishes Medusa, “The sea-god might be her old rival, but the/woman/he’d gone to bed with was the one who paid” (16-18). Stylistically underscoring woman’s alienation and isolation, Clampitt places the word “woman” on its own line. Indeed, the problem of female rivalry is exacerbated in cases of rape. As argued by a number of feminist scholars, because women internalize the idea that their values lies only in relationship to men’s desire for them, they compete with other women for male attention. Because they have internalized misogynistic ideas about women in general, they separate themselves from female community. [[20]](#endnote-20) Moreover, because women want to believe they are safe from harm, they participate in victim blaming, assuring themselves that “other” women are raped because they invited it.[[21]](#endnote-21) Rather than empathizing with the victim, in the quest for self-preservation they reject all identification with her.

Clampitt makes clear that the misogyny implicit in the Medusa myth is passed down in history and appropriated again and again by male writers seeking to deny women the right to bodily integrity. She notes that the early modern writers who translated Ovid and revamped their own mythologies deployed Medusa to ends as cruel as those of the Greeks and Romans. For example, Medusa shows up in Milton’s canonical seventeenth-century retelling of the creation myth, *Paradise Lost.* Clampitt writes that in this text Medusa becomes

[t]he female ogre, for the Puritan

revisionists who took her over

had a new

and siren sliminess. John Milton

put her at the gate of hell. (23-25)

In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Medusa, bereft of her original backstory, appears as a gorgon who guards Hell’s exit so that no one may leave. Here she is not named Medusa, but Sin itself. In a conflation of Medusa with Athena, Milton has her claim she sprang fully grown from Satan’s head, then coupled with her demonic father; their incestuous offspring is the shadowy figure of Death. Milton describes his Medusa/Sin as beautiful to the waist, but with hideous genitals that repeatedly give birth to monstrous creatures that gnaw her insides. Notably, Milton’s Eve is just as guilty of monstrosity as Medusa, overreaching her God-given inferior position and causing mankind’s fall. Of course, this “puritanical” approach to female sexuality is a longstanding trope.[[22]](#endnote-22) Clampitt cleverly employs the syntactic effect of placing John Milton’s name next to the word “sliminess,” revealing her attitude toward those who deploy Medusa’s story to shore up patriarchal privilege.

However, Clampitt also recognizes her own role as a “revisionist” of Medusa’s myth. Not content to depict Medusa as either the sympathetic victim or the femme fatale, which would simply reinstate the virgin/whore binary, Clampitt draws attention to the complexity of Medusa’s story, asking, “What surgeon/can unthread those multiplicities…?” (51). In the end, Clampitt is much more interested in exposing those many threads than in resolving the myth which would, in turn, simply confine Medusa to another statue. Inasmuch, she is recalling Hélène Cixous’s landmark text, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in which Cixous calls for a heterogeneous understanding of femininity. Cixous writes, “[I]n spite of the enormity of that repression that has kept [women] in the ‘dark’—that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute—there is, at the time, no general woman, no one typical woman…[W]hat strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions…Woman’s imaginary is inexhaustible…” (875-76).[[23]](#endnote-23) In her poem, then, Clampitt rescues Medusa from the dark where the puritanical imagination has imprisoned her and calls attention to her inexhaustible reservoir of meaning and the potential for resistance within it.

*Emily Erwin Culpepper, “Ancient Gorgons: A Face for Contemporary Women’s Rage”* (1986)

The title of Emily Erwin Culpepper’s essay “Ancient Gorgons: A Face for Contemporary Women’s Rage” recalls May Sarton’s “The Muse of Medusa”; while Sarton does not write explicitly about Medusa’s rape, she does identify in Medusa a reflection of her own “frozen rage” (line 26). Culpepper identifies that rage as a response to the trespass against her bodily integrity. In her essay, Culpepper remembers taking a self-defense class and, afterwards, writing a poem in which she mused, “Gorgon myth lives for me in/Self-defense/from patriarchy” (242). Not long after writing the poem, Culpepper was attacked in her home while working on her dissertation. She describes fending off the intruder, recalling the assailant’s “gloved hand grabbing my mouth—his body pushing in the door, I immediately ‘came to’…I am staring him out, pushing with my eyes, too. My face is bursting, contorting with terrible teeth, flaming breath, erupting into ridges and contours of rage, hair hissing” (244).[[24]](#endnote-24) Culpepper says that the image of the gorgon came to her as a source of inspiration, transforming her as she fought back.

However, Culpepper extends the attack and her successful self-defense into a metaphor for the silencing of women. The intruder becomes symbolic of those who would not only attempt to conquer her body, but her voice as well. At the time of the intruder’s attack, she was writing: “Bitter irony too I feel to have opened up my guard to reach the writing places in me, and this very act makes me vulnerable” (243). She realizes that “[t]here *is* a reason why it [the attack] happened—I was *thinking,* I was *writing.*” Woman’s punishable “sin” is not just sexual desire; it is subjectivity. Culpepper’s rage, her realization of her own self-power, defends her. She recalls the effect of channeling the gorgon to stop her assailant: “I knew then why the attacker had become so suddenly petrified. And I knew with great shuddering relief that I would win the fight against self-blame and claim my ability and right to write” (245). Culpepper recognizes that rape is not about male sexual desire, but about the impulse to control and confine women. Medusa’s rape, then, becomes symbolic of “daily outrages” faced by women who threaten male authority with their voice.

The theme of female rivalry surfaces in Culpepper’s essay, as well. In her “fight against self-blame,” Culpepper calls on women to unite ~~together~~ in their rage and stop victim blaming. She quotes from another poet, Anne Forfreedom, author of “Medusa of the Snakes”:

The patriarchs wanted

to separate us.

And you

Were their weapon.

No more this lie. (lines 9-13)

Just as Stanford emphasized the rape victim’s loneliness and Clampitt criticized the ways in which women turn on each other, Culpepper exposes the “lie” that separates women from themselves, and moreover, the potential power of female community.

*Patricia Smith,* “Medusa” (1992)

Performance poet Patricia Smith also revives Medusa in her 1992 eponymous poem. In her poem, however, Medusa is not a victim of rape but of the patriarchal privilege that delimits her sexual agency and pits her against other women.

The first stanza of Smith’s poem imagines Medusa as a powerful woman who actively pursues and seduces Poseidon: “He fell beneath my fingers,/and wept when my robe fell from my shoulders” (lines 3-4).[[25]](#endnote-25) She revels in the god’s castrating desire, describing him as “easier than most” (1). Her behavior appears to be a role reversal: she pursues the male who is “easy,” a derogatory term typically reserved for sexually active women. Initially, then, Smith’s appropriation of Medusa appears to celebrate her sexuality as powerful.

However, Smith undercuts this power. As the poem continues, we realize Medusa is in the position of a defendant and that she is pleading her case to another powerful woman, Athena. The two are, as the myth has historically positioned them, rivals. As Medusa defends her case, she reevaluates her “victory” over Poseidon:

I'm not even sure it was worth it,

Poseidon pounding away at me, a madman,

losing his immortal mind

because of the way my copper skin swells in moonlight. (19-22)

The God’s “pounding” brings her no pleasure. Her recollection of the experience is one within which her subjectivity is missing; instead, she is a shell of a person, just swelling skin that he enters. She has exploited her body as an object of male desire, situated her own desire only in relation to the achievement of his.

Worse, she is now to be punished for attempting to attain some semblance of power or sexual agency—by another woman, no less. Smith’s Medusa is the much-maligned “other woman” whom Athena punishes for stealing her man. Medusa begs her judge and jury, “C'mon Athena, he was only another lay,/and not a particularly good one at that” (26-27). But Athena is unforgiving, perhaps because Medusa is so unapologetic about her own sexual agency. Medusa knows what is coming next: Athena will turn her into a snaky-haired monster no man will want. Medusa pleads for mercy to a deaf ear:

Dammit, Athena,

take away my father's gold.

Send me away to live with lepers.

Give me a pimple or two.

But my face. To have men never again

be able to gaze at my face,

growing stupid in anticipation

of that first touch,

how can any woman live like that? (47-56)

Rather than punish the philandering husband/god, Athena takes her anger out on another woman as disempowered within the system as she. After all, if the only authority women possess exists in relationship to male desire, then women must carefully guard their territory. Medusa has encroached on Athena’s singular claim to power and must be punished. It makes sense, then, that Athena will curse her to ugliness. Medusa bemoans the loss of the male gaze, without which she is powerless. Life becomes as much a wasteland for this Medusa as for Stanford’s Medusa. But it is not just Medusa who needs the fragile power of beauty. Smith’s final line asks, if stripped of their desirability, “[H]ow can any woman live like that?”

*Carol Ann Duffy, “Medusa” (1999)*

British poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy includes “Medusa” in *The World’s Wife,* a collection of poetry that imagines the voices of various wives throughout literary history.[[26]](#endnote-26) Although not about rape, Duffy’s poem reinforces what these other poets suggest about female agency and authority. Medusa narrates the poem as a wife driven to murderous rage by suspicions of her husband’s infidelity. She might easily be misread as a caricature of the shrewish wife, badgering her husband with accusations. And yet, the final lines of the poem summon empathy for the wife whose husband has “a shield for a heart/and a sword for a tongue” (lines 37-38) and who everywhere is surrounded by young women who desire his attention. The final question of the poem asks, “Wasn’t I beautiful/Wasn’t I fragrant and young?” (40-41) and ends with the ironic understatement, “Look at me now” (42). On one hand, these lines clearly refer to a sexual economy within which women’s value derives only from their youthfulness and beauty. Aging is Medusa’s curse, as foul a punishment as having snakes for hair. Her woeful plea that he “[l]ook at [her] now” signifies that she recognizes and internalizes the loss of her assigned value. His heart is shielded by cultural myths that assign her no value, so she cannot move him. She has lost all authority because her husband no longer wants her. The beautiful young women who steal her husband’s attention stand in for the punishing Athena.

**Medusa in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture**

Given the feminist reclamation of Medusa’s story, it is of interest to consider how mainstream culture represents Medusa, especially given that popular feminism has leaked into Hollywood film and television. Princesses karate-kick their way out of towers and witches and evil stepmothers reveal complicated pasts which justify their bad behavior (think Elphaba, the witch of the West in the Broadway hit *Wicked,* Angelina Jolie’s *Maleficent,* and Elsa in *Frozen*). Thus, one might expect screenwriters and directors to clamp onto Medusa’s story and similarly retell it, to attempt to unravel “the multiplicity” of meaning that Clampitt speaks of in her poem and that Cixous so famously has called for. Instead, the opposite is true. Medusa in popular film is singularly evil.

*Clash of the Titans* (*1981*)

The authorial and directorial choices in *Clash* can best be understood by considering the semiotic system within which the film emerges. As a number of critics have asserted, the 1980s became synonymous with a brand of hypermasculinity associated with films like *Rambo, Rocky,* and *The Terminator*.[[27]](#endnote-27) Perseus, played by Harry Hamlin, is clearly the 1980s male ideal; bare-chested and sword-swinging, he sets about winning the heart of Andromeda. Of course, the construction of Perseus’s ideal masculinity depends on an assertion of his authority over competing forces. Among these is the gorgon Medusa.

The Medusa plot in *Clash* is based on a patching together of variants of the Medusa myth from antiquity forward. Arriving on the cusp of second-wave feminism, the film’s conscious picking-and-choosing of the most misogynist threads of the Medusa myth is compelling.

First, the film completely erases the story of Medusa’s rape, instead selecting versions that imagine the relationship as consensual. Perseus is told that Neptune and Medusa “made love.” The film is, after all, the story of a good guy defeating the bad guys (and girls); the story of Medusa’s rape would complicate his victory—especially given the semiotic context in which conversations about rape are entering public discourse.

However, the film keeps intact the theme of female rivalry; indeed, it exaggerates it. Perseus is told that Medusa was once a beautiful priestess to Aphrodite and that Aphrodite became “jealous” and therefore punished her by turning her into “an apparition so horrible” that no one could look on her without turning to stone. The replacement of Athena with Aphrodite is especially interesting as it replaces the goddess of wisdom and war with the goddess of love, thus negating the “masculinized” Athena in favor of the “feminized” Aphrodite. Perseus also uses another female’s shield to deflect Medusa’s arrows: Hera, infamous for her jealousies, gives him her shield and tells him to use it against Medusa. As in ancient versions, the shield acts as a mirror in which Perseus can view Medusa’s reflection unharmed. Thus, Hera is also pitted against Medusa. Perhaps most important, though, is the implicit rivalry between Andromeda, the feminine ideal, and Medusa, the monstrous female; the latter must be beheaded to rescue the former.

Critics have argued that the Greco-Roman myth of Perseus represents a type of “battle of the sexes,” the beheading of goddess culture in favor of a male authoritarian culture. They have suggested that, originally, Medusa belonged to a triple-headed goddess figure, and that as part of their cultural conquest, the Greeks split and reduced their triple goddess into two opposing versions of femininity, Athena and Medusa (which is why, anthropologists argue, both are symbolized with snakes). In this separation, Athena is imagined as springing from her father’s head rather than from a mother’s womb; in turn, she is positioned against, and helps the male hero to behead, the independent and monstrous Medusa.[[28]](#endnote-28) Since Andromeda’s rescue demands the death of Medusa, the film appears to replicate this battle of the sexes, arguably in response to the rising threat of women’s agency following the gains made by second-wave feminism.

This re-deployment of the good girl/bad girl binary might also be why, in the film, Medusa’s monstrosity is exaggerated. The film chooses the Medusa of Miltonic myth in which Medusa is a serpent from the waist down; as noted, this puritanical archetype has historically worked to warn men against women’s sexual power, so the film’s choice to depict Medusa in this way suggests that the threat posed by the sexual revolution was palpably felt. However, in the 1981 film, unlike Milton’s version, Medusa’s face is not beautiful; instead she is grey and wrinkled with glowing eyes. Moreover, she slithers around her cave with a bow and arrow, an explicit allusion to those female warriors, the Amazons, of Greek myth.[[29]](#endnote-29) Thus, Medusa emerges in this film as an emblem of outright monstrosity whose threatening figure is tied to both her sexual carnality and her attempt to harness physical power. Notably, Medusa is not sleeping when Perseus arrives to kill her; the female threat is an active one against which male authority must be physically asserted.

Thus, although rape is absent from the narrative, it arguably haunts the margins of the film. Medusa’s threat, the danger of female authority, can only be contained via male conquest. That this conquest occurs via domination of her body is nowhere more present than in the closing shot of this scene. After killing Medusa, Perseus exits her underground lair—underground, of course, because a patriarchal mythology imagines the threat of women as beneath the surface, in the dark, outside the margins of civilization. Standing atop the ruins above her lair, he slowly raises Medusa’s severed head. The camera frames his male body holding her gruesome head between two phallic columns. Here is an explicit homage to two famous sculptures portraying the Medusa myth: *Perseus,* by Benvenuto Cellini, c. 1545-1555, and *Perseus Holding the Head of Medusa*, by Antonio Canova c. 1804-1806. Both sculptures feature Perseus naked—genitals prominent—clutching his phallic sword. Importantly, in both sculptures, Medusa’s is not the face of a monstrous gorgon but that of a beautiful woman. Cellini’s is particularly evocative of rape: Perseus straddles the naked, decapitated body of Medusa, hernipples erect, his foot planted firmly where her legs join her waist. Blood and gore stream from her neck. The sixteenth- and nineteenth-century depictions of Medusa’s death obviously reflect their respective historic periods and the misogynist cultural ideologies that positioned women as inferior to men and justified brutality against women.[[30]](#endnote-30) That the film would choose to explicitly reference these images adds to the argument that *Clash* is a response to the threat posed by second-wave feminism. The film’s final shot following Medusa’s beheading thus visually gestures to the specter of rape haunting the film. While the narrative refuses to acknowledge rape and the subjugation of the female body, symbolically this scene celebrates both.

*Clash of the Titans* (2010)

Nearly thirty years pass between the first version of *Clash* and its remake in 2010. In that timespan, many gains have been made for women.[[31]](#endnote-31) One would expect popular culture to reflect these achievements. Yet *Clash* (2010) is even more misogynistic, arguably in response to the threat women’s advances imply.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of this misogyny occurs in the addition of a new female character, Io. The 2010 film eliminates the love story between Perseus and Andromeda; instead, Perseus is a reluctant hero enlisted by Andromeda’s father to save her. Along his journey, Perseus meets Io, a beautiful immortal with whom he falls in love. One might argue that this coupling improves on the 1981 pairing of Perseus and Andromeda. Dressed in a white tunic and wielding her own sword, Io fights beside Perseus as his seeming equal, unlike the doe-eyed and helpless Andromeda. In this respect, Io resembles the popular Amazonian archetype, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena Warrior Princess, or even Disney’s Mulan.

However, under analysis, the film’s deployment of the Amazonian female works against, rather than in favor, of female agency. At first, however, it would seem that Io will give voice to women who have been assaulted by men. After all, Io is also a victim of sexual assault. While she does not appear in the ancient Perseus myths, Io is a character from Greek mythology, first appearing in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound,* and later in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses.* In those ancient myths, she is first raped by Zeus, then transformed into a cow by his wife Hera, after which she wanders the world, relentlessly stung by gadflies, until, eventually, her curse is overturned. However, in the film, Io describes herself, not as a rape victim, but as a woman with the authority to reject a god’s seduction. She tells Perseus that as a result of having refused a god’s advances, she was “cursed with agelessness.” Io experiences this punishment as traumatic, but Perseus, who is drawn to her beauty, quips, “That’s not much of a curse.” Here, the film misses an opportunity to complicate the “curse” of beauty, as we’ve seen expressed by feminist poets and even some Hollywood films. For example, in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), the evil stepmother/queen explicitly recognizes that her power within a patriarchal culture is tied to staying young and beautiful and that, in turn, she must behave ruthlessly toward other women to maintain that power. However*,* *Clash* encourages the viewer to agree with Perseus as he belittles and dismisses Io’s trauma—and she does not argue with him.

Further, the film reinforces the misogynist myth that women, if they really don’t want to be raped, won’t be, and implies that women who are raped must have actually desired it. If Io could fight off a god, what does this imply about Medusa? Did she invite rape? Strangely, it is Io who provides Medusa’s backstory to Perseus. As they cross the river Styx en route to kill Medusa, she explains to him:

Medusa was beautiful once, so beautiful as to tempt Poseidon. When he came for her, she ran to Athena's temple thinking that the goddess would protect her. She didn't. Poseidon took her on the cold floor. She prayed to Athena for comfort but the goddess found nothing but disgust. She made sure no one would ever want Medusa again; one look at the creature she has become would turn any living thing to stone.

It is noteworthy that Io expresses sympathy for Medusa as a rape victim and that she recognizes that Medusa’s beauty was also a curse. Further, Io also makes a point to implicitly condemn Athena’s lack of mercy. However, despite being a victim of sexual assault herself, and despite telling Perseus that Medusa is also a victim, she neither protects nor advocates for Medusa. In fact, she leads Perseus to Medusa’s lair.

First, however, Io teaches Perseus how to kill Medusa. Io, who in her white tunic and wielding a sword resembles every bit an Athena, spars and flirts with Perseus. As she does so, she reveals more about Medusa’s threat:

**Io**: Medusa's got a tail and that's how she'll use it. Listen. Hear her muscles coiling. Smell her skin. Feel her hunger in your gut! Medusa's killed you twice now [referring to their role-play and her outmaneuvering of Perseus]. Do you think she'll hand you her head...as a present? She won't be gracious about it. One look in her eyes and you'll turn to stone. Good [referring to the fact that he has taken the advantage and pinned her with his body].

**Perseus**: I'm trying not to enjoy this so much.

This scene is a strange and unnerving collapse of the binary virgin (Io) and whore (Medusa); as such, it implies that even within “good girls” lurks monstrous femininity. It is Io’s skin Perseus smells and Io’s sexual hunger he feels, yet they are talking about Medusa. The narrative confuses the reading: is it Io or Medusa he pins to the bed? Is it Io’s eyes or Medusa’s that will turn him to stone? Perseus enjoys conquering Io; will this same pleasure drive his murder of Medusa? The film suggests that Perseus’s fear about Medusa haunts his desire for Io and, perhaps, all women.

Indeed, in the new *Clash* Medusa is not the wrinkly-faced monster of the 1981 version. Instead, played by Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova, this Medusa is quite beautiful, or at least her face and upper body are. Her long neck descends into full and shapely breasts that uphold her armored bikini top. Her abdomen is firm and flat, and her waist small. However, beneath that she’s literally all snake. And like her 1981 counterpart, she wields a bow and arrow.

This hypersexualized version of Medusa, like that of Grendel’s mother played by Angelina Jolie in the 2007 *Beowulf,* echoes a longstanding trope that begins as early as thethird century with Tertullian’s warnings about women’s “pageantry of fictitious and elaborate beauty”[[32]](#endnote-32) and which Clampitt had accused Milton of perpetuating in theseventeenth century. The film’s choice to sexualize Medusa arguably represents a backlash against the threat posed by the sex positivity of third-wave feminism, wherein women have challenged the objectification of their bodies within patriarchal culture and celebrated non-binary forms of sexuality. It’s a threat Perseus, as idealized male, must decapitate.

Before they enter Medusa’s lair, Perseus gives his soldiers a pep talk, sounding very much like he has channeled Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* (1942). Perseus rallies his men: “I know we're all afraid. But my father told me: ‘Someday, someone was gonna have to take a stand. Someday, someone was gonna have to say enough!’ This could be that day. Trust your senses, and don't look this bitch in the eye.” Despite the knowledge that she is a rape victim, Perseus imagines Medusa flatly as the castrating “bitch” against which he and other men must assert their authority.Throughout the fight sequence, the men remind each other, “Eyes down,” literally and symbolically refusing to see her. In response, she flings arrows at them and knocks down phallic columns with her serpent tail. Significantly, before sacrificing himself to give Perseus an advantage, another soldier proclaims of Medusa’s impending death, “Let them know men did this.” Within the film’s narrative, he means that the legends that follow will emphasize the power of mortal men (she was not killed by a god). But it’s also notable that Io is not fighting alongside them; part of her curse, she explained earlier, is that she cannot go with them to the lair. The film and this line imply that *only* men can destroy the threat posed by Medusa; the exclusion of Io coupled with the emphatic line, “Let them know men did this,” underscores the idea that the battle between Medusa and Perseus is the archetypal battle of the sexes between castrating female sexuality and divinely ordained male authority.

Importantly, while Medusa is not entirely silent as was the Medusa of *Clash* (1981), she does not speak; she only makes very feminine sounds. Indeed, before he sees her, Perseus hears her laugh—a clear and significant allusion to Cixous’s *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976). Here, however, Cixous’s empowering laugh is rendered evil. Moreover, as the monstrous Medusa begins to lose the fight, her laugh subsides and we hear, instead, very human moans and screams. When Perseus beheads her, the camera focuses in on her pained and confused eyes. She is silent as her head topples from her body. Perseus, his back to her beheaded body and his gaze averted, refuses to acknowledge her even after he has killed her. Her silent, still struggling but headless body plunges into an abyss of exploding fire, presumably back to the Miltonic hell where the film implies female authority belongs.

The film does not repeat the 1981 homage to the famous sculptures of Perseus, but when Perseus emerges having killed Medusa---the woman whose trauma from rape visibly marks her body—he has effectively exorcised the narrative of rape and silenced the woman who would threaten male power by telling its story. He can thus return to his love interest, the virginal Io, and her story of rape-that-is-not-a rape, and curse-that-is-not-a-curse. Notably, in the 2012 sequel to *Clash of the Titans (Wrath of the Titans),* Io does not appear, having died in the interim, but not before giving birth to Perseus’s son.

*Percy Jackson and the Olympians*

Intriguingly, the same year that *Clash* was revived, 20th Century Fox released a film version of the young-adult series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, based on Greek myth. Although a story for adolescents, the film is perhaps the most misogynistic of the three.

Percy, a teenager suffering from ADD and the abuse of a drunken stepfather, discovers he is the son of Poseidon, not Zeus. This is an important revision as it makes him the son of a rapist—although in the film’s narrative, as I will discuss, the rape is rewritten as consensual sex. Percy’s best friend, Grover, a “horny” satyr disguised as a teenage boy, explains to him that they must save the world. Along the way, Percy meets Annabeth, who turns out to be the daughter of Athena. She is a modern Amazonian heroine, strong and bold. Like Io,Annabeth teaches Percy to fight, but also like Perseus, Percy bests his female trainer. Standing over her, he holds his sword to her throat, and she smiles, clearly enjoying his conquest of her. Layered within the contexts discussed so far and compared with the fight scene between Io and Perseus in *Clash* (2010), these adolescent versions of Athena and Perseus repeat the impulse to transform a story about rape into a story about women who invite their own subjugation.

This revision of the rape narrative continues in the film’s representation of Medusa’s story. Looking very much like a dominatrix and played by Amazonian Uma Thurman of *Kill Bill* fame, Medusa confronts the teensin a garden behind a shop called Auntie Em’s Emporium. Importantly, this is the only film of the three wherein Medusa is given a speaking role. However, what she says sounds little like what the feminist poets discussed have imagined she might say. Instead, Medusa has the power of those femme-fatale sirens of myth; her seductive voice can force those who don’t want to look at her to open their eyes and be turned to stone. Nor is Medusa interested in using her voice to detail the trauma of her rape. Indeed, in this version of the myth, the relationship between Poseidon and Medusa is consensual and she is the pursuer. When Medusa smells Percy nearby, she sniffs the air ravenously, calling to him, “You smell fresh, like the Ocean.” When she finds him at last among her statues, she snarls, “I used to date your Daddy.” She then grabs Percy, crooning, “I hear you have the Lightning bolt. May I see it?” Percy’s “Lightning bolt” is clearly a double-entendre and reinforces her role as a sexually ravenous monster, even a pedophile.

Further, in keeping with filmic tradition, Medusa is pitted against the virgin. Ambushing Annabeth alone and surrounded by stone statues, Medusa looks enviously on her youthful beauty: “You have such beautiful hair. I used to…. I was courted, desired by many. But that all changed, because of your mother—who cursed me….” There is no explanation as to why Athena cursed Medusa. What motivates Medusa’s actions in this film is her desire for revenge and for Percy’s “lightning bolt.” Significantly, the film most marketed to youth appears the most misogynistic: completely eliminating the reference to Medusa’s rape, depicting her as sexually ravenous, and establishing as her primary goal the “lightning bolt” of male authority. Of course, Percy manages to behead this version of Medusa, as well, and go on to save the day and win the (good) girl.

*Rihanna, Medusa, and* GQ

Thus far, the myth of Medusa has been examined within feminist poetic discourse and popular film. But what of other popular vehicles for her myth? In 2013 singer Rihanna appeared on the cover of the British *GQ Magazine* in the guise of Medusa.[[33]](#endnote-33) Acclaimed and notorious photographer Damien Hirst explains his desire to combine the two icons: "Rihanna is bad…Yeah, bad bad. If you're a mother, she's a proper terror.” [[34]](#endnote-34) While some might argue that Rihanna’s unabashed celebration of female sexual desire is a feminist reclamation of female sexuality, Hirst’s photos work much like the films already discussed to render invisible the narrative of sexual assault and contain the threat of female authority by eroticizing it.

Hirst’s choice of Rihanna is particularly noteworthy considering the rumors circling Rihanna’s personal life. In 2009 she made headlines when her boyfriend, Chris Brown, physically assaulted her and photos of her bruised face monopolized news stories. She parlayed the media frenzy into a musical collaboration with rap bad-boy Eminem whose own song lyrics routinely reference sexual violence against women. Rihanna and Eminem’s hit song “Love the Way You Lie” and its accompanying video blur the lines between sexual violence and consensual rough sex. Following the popularity of “Love the Way You Lie,” Rihanna released “S&M,” with lyrics like: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but chains and whips excite me," "I like it rough," "The pain is my pleasure," and "Maybe I'm a masochist." In magazine interviews, she has explicitly stated her desire to be spanked and tied up.[[35]](#endnote-35) Thus, she is already a “bad girl” icon inviting sexual conquest, making Hirst’s choice of her to represent Medusa particularly troubling.

The photos of Rihanna as Medusa tell a story within which the rape victim is not a victim at all but a willing participant coaxing the desiring gaze to subjugate her “bad” body. In one shot, a naked Rihanna licks the snake’s body while draping the rest of it over her head. In another, wearing slit-eye contact lenses and fangs, she chews hungrily on her finger while wrapping the snake around her head like a veil. In a third, the python coils itself around her naked body; in a fourth, she straddles it. Jonathan Heaf, who covered the shoot for *GQ,* marveled, “The gob smacked attendees don't know where snake ends and where pop star begins.”[[36]](#endnote-36) In other words, the woman and the monster are inextricably linked, both animal, both titillating and threatening, both inviting necessary subjugation.

Theoretically, one might argue that Rihanna’s performance of sexuality is evidence of sex-positivity. This theory would hold that she represents a recovery of the Minoan snake goddess or its later incarnations in Ishtar or Astarte. Perhaps, one might venture, she is a Lilith figure, rejecting the female subordination represented by Eve. However, the problem with reading Rihanna’s appropriation of the Medusa figure as empowerment is that her “power” is limited; like Smith’s and Duffy’s Medusa, her agency depends on her ability to elicit heterosexual male desire. Moreover, her desirability occurs only within the confines of heterosexual male fantasy. Indeed, Hirst was likely inspired by and paying homage to John Collier’s 1887 oil painting, “Lilith,” which features the creation myth’s first “bad girl” naked and pleasuring in the attentions of a python. Further, there is nothing really “dangerous” about Rihanna’s expression of sexuality because that “danger” is already safely quarantined. Walled in by the boundaries of the magazine pages, the threat of her “monstrosity” serves much the same function as the “Snake Lady” of freak-show fame; viewers pay their nickel, gaze, giggle, are briefly titillated, and then return to the comforting normalcy of their lives.

Perhaps, however, the real problem of the Rihanna spread, or even of the filmic portrayals of Medusa, is not that they feature a hypersexualized fantasy of femininity seeking male control, but that they occur within the vacuum of mainstream culture within which this version of female sexuality is the *only* version being told. Lacking any popular counter, it’s a version with dangerous implications. In *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*, Stephen Wilk says that for feminist poets in thetwentieth century, “Medusa [is] a muse and [a] symbol of female rage”; however, for boys “she’s just a really cool monster.”[[37]](#endnote-37) However, I have argued here that in popular culture Medusa represents more than “ a really cool monster.” Instead, mainstream depictions of Medusa represent a backlash against the very stories feminist writers have tried to tell, reinforcing misogynistic myths about rape and encouraging female rivalry. In 1976, Cixous wrote of the mythologies of gender perpetuated by patriarchy: “They riveted us [women] between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it’s still going on…. and it’s militant, regenerating the old pattern, anchored in the dogma of castration” (885). The only solution, she argues, is for women to write of women’s experiences and to flood the scene with their multiplicities. This paper, then, repeats Cixous’s forty-year-old call for more female voices to “write about women and bring women to writing.” Only then may we “refuse to strengthen [the effects of the past] by repeating them” (875).

**Notes**

1. While the myth of the gorgon and even remnants of Medusa’s myth predate Ovid’s text, his account is the first to call her by name and relate the origins of her birth, history, and death. For a concise overview of her full history, see Charlotte Currie, “Transforming Medusa,” *Almatea* 3 (2011), pp. 169-81. Also see the first chapter of Stephen R. Wilk’s *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007). A compilation of literary texts about Medusa dating from antiquity can also be found in Marjerie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers’ useful *The Medusa Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In 1922, Sigmund Freud famously posited that Medusa represents castration anxiety, the snakes on her head symbolic of the phallus. See “Medusa’s Head,” in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, (NY: Collier, pp. 212–213). ["Das Medusenhaupt," first published posthumously, Int. Z. Psychoanal., Imago, 25 (1940), p. 105; reprinted Ges. W., 17,47.] Philip Wylie’s misogynist text, *Generation of Vipers* (1942) decried rising feminist efforts, demanding that the cult of “momism,” made up of vipers and medusas, be overthrown. See Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Dalkan Press, 1996). Alternately, anthropologist Marija Gimbuta, author of *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) argues that the gorgons, which appear on Neolithic amulets and shields, evidence an early goddess culture in which figures like Medusa were worshipped. See Marija Gimbuta, *The Language of the Goddess* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001). Feminist writers since the 1960s, some of which will be discussed in this essay, have also latched onto Medusa as a powerful feminist figure. For a succinct overview of all feminist literary and artistic responses to Medusa’s iconography, see Miriam Robbins Dexter, “The Ferocious and the Exotic: ‘Beautiful’ Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake,” *Journal of Feminist Studies and Religion*,26.1 (2010), pp. 25-41. Also see the longer text, Sheryl Ann St. Germain, *Medusa and the Struggle Toward a Feminist Vision in Twentieth-Century American Women’s Poetry* (Dallas: University of Texas at Dallas, 1986). See also Garber and Vickers’ *The Medusa Reader* for a fairly complete compilation of these poems, short stories, and essays. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In using the term “lexicon,” I am situating my analysis within the framework of semiotic theory, in particular Roland Barthes’ 1957 text *Mythologies* (Harper and Collins, 1971). In his work, Barthes asserted that visual images, like language, retain both literal/denotative and symbolic/connotative meanings. Connotative meanings depend on the set of knowledge, beliefs, and values—or lexicon—possessed by the interpreter on both ends of communication. Thus, the concept of Medusa, when interpreted—whether in text or image—reflects the lexicon of the person producing the representation; at the same time, however, that text’s or image’s meaning is not stable but depends, in turn, upon the readers or viewers who may instill it with new layers of meaning. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A listing of the Medusa trope in gaming can be found on the *TV Tropes* website, which classifies various incarnations of Medusa into genres such as video games, table top games, web comics, and graphic novels, among others. See “Medusa,” *TVTropes.* TV Tropes Foundation, LLC. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Dir. Desmond Davis. Perf. Laurence Olivier, Harry Hamlin, Claire Bloom, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Peerford Ltd, 1981. Film. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dir. Louis Leterrier. Perf. Sam Worthington, Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes. Warner Bros, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dir. Chris Columbus. Perf. Logan Lerman, Kevin McKidd, Steve Coogan. Fox, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. According to the Internet Movie Database, more than fifty films and television shows have featured Medusa as a character, eleven since 2014 and several more slated for 2016-2018. See “Medusa.” *IMDb*. Amazon.com, 1990-2016. Web. 8 Jan. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Greek historian Hesiod and the poet Apollodorus, who earlier tell a more condensed version of Medusa’s story, both say that she “lay with” the god. However, translations of Ovid’s account define Neptune’s actions as rape. Arthur Golding’s *Metamorphoses (1904),* the version used by Shakespeare,describes how Neptune “abused” (line 74) Medusa in Pallas’ temple, a crime Athena punished by transforming Medusa “to put her foes in feare” (line 79). The 1717 Samuel Garth translation says that the “lustful” Neptune “seiz’d and rifled” Medusa, and that Minerva “on the ravished virgin took vengeance.” A.S. Kline’s 2000 interpretation of the text describes Neptune as “violating” Medusa and clarifies that Athena transformed Medusa’s hair to snakes so that she might terrify her enemies (Book 4, pp. 753-803). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ovid uses Roman names for the gods of the story, but many of the versions referenced in this paper will use the Greek names. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. New York: New American Library [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. London: Secker & Warburg [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Dir. Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich. Cambridge Documentary Films. Film. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Rita J. Simon, *A Comparative Perspective on Major Social Problems* (New York*:* Lexington Books 2001, pp. 4-5.) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Kathy L. Gaca, “Ancient Warfare and the Ravaging Martial Rape of Girls and Women: Evidence from Homeric Epic and Greek Drama,” and James Robson, “Fantastic Sex: Sexual Assault in Aristophanes” both in *Sex in Antiquity: Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, eds. Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, and James Robson (NY: Routledge, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Sylvia Plath, “Medusa,” *Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper, 2008). May Sarton, “The Muse as Medusa,” *Selected Poems of May Sarton* (London: Norton, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ann Stanford, “Medusa,” *Holding Our Own: The Selected Poems of Ann Stanford* (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), pp. 14-115. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Kathryn Topper makes a similar argument about Perseus as a rapist in her essay “Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction,” *Hesperia* 76 (2007), pp. 73-105. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Amy Clampitt, “Medusa,” *The Collected Poems of Amy Clampitt* (New York: Random House, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. I am speaking in very broad terms about female rivalry here. For canonical theoretical texts on the subject, see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987); Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 770–794. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. A number of sociological studies suggest that female jurors tend to disbelieve the claims made by female rape victims. See, for example, “Women’s Hostility Toward Women in Rape Trials: Testing the Intra-Gender Hostility Thesis,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 28.2 (2004), pp. 181-200. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This trope begins as early as thethird century with Tertullian’s warnings about women’s “pageantry of fictitious and elaborate beauty.” Medusean women ubiquitously reappear in early modern stories of demonic female monsters who ensnare men under the guise of beauty: Sin, in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*; Duessa, the beautiful witch in *The Faerie Queene* whom the heroic Red Crosse Knight catches bathing only to discover she is a monster from the waist down; aseventeenth-century French print entitled *The True Woman*, in which a beautiful woman passing by men reveals a monstrous backside. It is a trope that continues into theeighteenth century, for example in Jonathan Swift’s poem, “The Ladies Dressing Room,” and is still being touted in the earlytwentieth century, as in Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers*, in which the author warns men against Medusas disguised as Cinderellas. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1.4 (1976), pp. 875-893. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Emily Erwin Culpepper, “Ancient Gorgons: A Face for Contemporary Women’s Rage,” *Woman of Power: A Magazine of Feminism, Spirituality and Politics* (Spring 1986), 22-24. Rpt. in *The Medusa Reader, e*d. Margerie Garber and William R. Kerner (New York: Routledge, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Patricia Smith, “Medusa,” *Big Towns, Big Talk* (Zoland Books: Cambridge, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Carol Ann Duffy, *The World’s Wife* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See, for example, Susan Jefford’s *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Revolution* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2004). See also *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*, Eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Amy Aronson (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See Camille Dumoulié’s entry in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes, and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel (NY: Routledge, 1992). In the section entitled “The Disconcerting Strangeness of the Feminine,” Dumoulié writes, “The episode of Perseus' victory over Medusa represents the end of female ascendancy and the taking over of the temples by men, who had become the masters of the divine which Medusa's head had concealed from them,” p. 782. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Topper also references artistic conflation of Medusa with the Amazons in her essay, “Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction,” suggesting that one “justification” for Perseus’s murder of the sleeping maiden is that she is conflated with the warring Amazons, a threat to Greek stability. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. In another disturbing nineteenth-century sculpture by Laurent-Honoré Marqueste entitled *Perseus Slaying Medusa* (1876), the sculptor imagines Medusa moments before Perseus beheads her. Again, fully human, Medusa is featured naked with prominent breasts. Perseus stands over her, holding her by the hair and pressing her body down with his foot. His sword, again an image of phallic masculinity, is poised to behead her. Her mouth is open in a silent scream. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For example, Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act in 1993, the Violence against Women Act in 1994, ruled against women’s exclusion from the Virginia Military Institute in 1996, passed federal hate crime laws which included gender-based crimes in 2009, and outlawed sex discrimination by health insurers in 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *The Tertullian Project,* Christian Classics Electric Library, 3 Feb. 1998. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Of note: in 2008, the much-maligned Martha Stewart dressed as Medusa for a Halloween special on her television show. Stewart’s Medusa was painted white, as if the Gorgon herself was turned to stone (perhaps an allusion to popular imaginings of Stewart as a “cold bitch”). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Jonathan Heaf, “GQ’s 25th Anniversary Cover Star: Rihanna by Damien Hirst,” *GQ* *Magazine UK,* 2Dec. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Josh Eels, “Rihanna, Queen of Pain: Sexting, Bad Boys, and Her Attraction to the Dark Side,” *Rolling Stones.* 14 Apr. 2011. Web. 8 Jan. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997, p. 227. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)