

Medusa and the Impact of the  
Villainization of Women in Ancient Mythology

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TW: discusses rape, sexual violence against women

Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome were both male-dominated cultures that pushed women into the margins of society. Women were not given central roles in government, academia, or the military. If a woman managed to have rights or privileges, they were often granted through her husband or father. It was inevitable that given women's lack of status, autonomy, or power in Greco-Roman culture, women were given supporting roles in the mythology. Women were used in Greek and Roman myths to support male characters in their quests, to be their wives, or to be their villains. The women who were villains in Greek and Roman mythology were often cursed at the hands of the gods which was a sign to women to fear the gods. Throughout the Ancient world, mythology has evolved as understandings and attitudes about people, and cultures have changed. It was important to note that mythology not only informed a culture but it would also reflect the attitudes and values of a culture. The mythology of Greece supported an ideology that placed Greece and Greekness as supreme. The depiction of women in many Greek and Roman myths was used to establish archetypes for women that created lasting standards for how women were to behave and how women were to be treated if they failed to meet those standards. Women in mythology were created as a cautionary tale to other women about the dangers of being a woman with her own autonomy.

The myth of Medusa was a perfect example of this phenomenon. Medusa was a Gorgon and a daughter of Phorcys. While she was first recorded in Greek mythology, making her an inherently Greek figure, she was also well documented in Roman mythology as a part of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the myth, there were different interpretations of how the story happened. In most versions of the story, Medusa was a

beautiful woman while her two sisters were hideous monsters. She remained a beautiful woman until she had sex with Poseidon in Athena's temple. Athena was offended by this and punished Medusa by turning her into a hideous monster with snakes for hair. Athena's punishment made Medusa turn any mortal to stone when she looked in their eyes.<sup>1</sup> There are some versions of the myth where Medusa was seduced by Poseidon whereas in other versions, she was raped by the sea god. Medusa went to Libya, though it could be argued that she merely fled to escape the society that now rejected her. Athena then sent Perseus, a Greek hero, to kill Medusa in the hopes of obtaining her head to use as a weapon. Perseus murdered Medusa by decapitating her. He returned the head to Athena and Athena put her head in her shield to be used in battle.<sup>2</sup> There are versions of the myth that stated that Athena used the head in her shield as a warning to her enemies. The underlying message of this was a warning to mortals who offended Athena that they would be brutally punished. Medusa was turned into a villain in her story as the result of other's actions. The gods manipulated her and used her for their own good. In short, Medusa is one example of the many women who were villainized throughout Greek mythology, and how it created narrow interpretations of women and their actions which perpetuated unfair narratives of women.

While there are some versions of the myth that described Medusa being born a monster, there are more interpretations that described Medusa as a beautiful maiden. In one of Pindar's odes in 490, he writes "the head of beautiful Medusa".<sup>3</sup> It was Medusa's beauty that first attracted Poseidon to her. However, after Medusa had sex with

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Corretti. "1 The Story of Perseus and Medusa, an Interpretation of Its Meaning, and the Topos of Decapitation". In *Cellini's Perseus and Medusa and the Loggia dei Lanzi*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Coretti. "1 The Story of Perseus and Medusa, an Interpretation of Its Meaning, and the Topos of Decapitation".

<sup>3</sup> Pindar, Pythian 12 Fore Midas of Acragas Flute-Playing Contest. Lines 15-16.

Poseidon in Athena's temple, she was cursed and became a hideous monster. This was a key turning point of the myth as it was this time that Medusa lost her virtue and became the villain of her own story. Her transformation into a monster was indicative of the infamous virgin versus whore complex which created narrow archetypes for women. The virgin versus whore complex glorified women that remained chaste, demure, and pure and it crucified women that were promiscuous and bold. In the case of Medusa, she was crucified by another woman. Athena was the one who punished Medusa for her behavior. It was an interesting point to note that Athena was cast opposite of Medusa. Athena was the virginal goddess, pure and above all mortal women. They were the only two women in the myth. From this, it could have been deduced that these were the only kinds of roles that women were allowed to play in Ancient Greek mythology. Therefore, it was implied that women in Ancient Greece were only allowed to be those two kinds of women. This was a strong indicator that Ancient Greece was not open to the idea of female sexuality, and went so far as to punish women for their promiscuous behavior and intimacy.

Athena having punished Medusa was compelling because it perpetuated an archetype where women were pitted against each other rather than supported when they were met with challenges from men.

It was important to note that there were later interpretations of the myth in Roman times that argued that Medusa was not seduced by Poseidon but rather she was raped. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book IV, he writes "They say that Neptune, lord of the seas, violated her in the temple of Minerva."<sup>4</sup> Neptune is the Roman form of Poseidon and Minerva is the Roman form of Athena. This difference in language made by Ovid made

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<sup>4</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Book IV. Lines 753-803

a difference in the perception of the myth as a whole. In this version, it was clear that Medusa had been raped. It spoke to a larger issue of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome and its respective mythologies that there were two narratives proposed and the version where the man, in this case Poseidon, did nothing wrong was the one more widely accepted. This alone spoke to a phenomenon in the Ancient World where men were considered more reliable and trustworthy than women, especially those women who may have had sexual relationships with men. This again reinforces the “virgin versus whore” complex that forced women into strict gender roles. It also reinforced the Greco-Roman idea of male domination.

However, the interpretation of her being raped taken into account shifted the narrative of Medusa dramatically. This issue of rape culture, and the idea of a society that allowed or encouraged violence against women was highly problematic. This myth, when it detailed a rape, made the myth much darker in tone and message. When that was taken into account, the narrative shifted from Athena having punished Medusa to Athena shaming Medusa for having been raped. This created a narrative that shamed Medusa for having been a victim of sexual violence. This highly problematic narrative reinforces a culture that silenced and alienated women who had been the victims of sexual violence. It lent itself a clear interpretation that this behavior would be tolerated, as Poseidon is a god. Since Poseidon was a god and therefore worshipped and praised, it could be understood that this behavior would not only be tolerated but encouraged and glorified. Furthermore, in the myth, Poseidon does not face any consequences for his actions. Instead, it is the woman who is punished. This imposed

an ideology on the Greco-Roman world that men could be absolved of any guilt when it came to use of violence against women.

The final split in interpretations of the myth of Medusa came from her origin itself. There was a difference in where she lived, and what ethnicity she was. Hesiod and Lucan both claim that Medusa did not come from Greece but rather from Libya.<sup>56</sup> Other historians and authors have white-washed her, and left her ethnicity ambiguous. However, her ethnicity was a critical detail of the story that should not be diminished or left out entirely. When her ethnicity was understood to be non-Greek, it added another layer to her myth. The Greeks believed in a Greek supremacy to other cultures. If this story was to be understood as a rape narrative, it should have been vital to understand that this story could be viewed as a story not just about the domination of women, but about the domination of other cultures. In that way, it could be clear that Ancient Greek values believed in their own supremacy, and their right to commit violence against women or those who were non Greek.

In conclusion, Ancient Greece was a patriarchal society that consistently limited women's abilities and rights. There was much evidence of this found in Ancient Greece's own mythology. In the case of several female characters, they were villainized, alienated, and isolated, because they did not match the narrow expectations of women in the ancient world. In the case of Medusa, she was seduced by Poseidon and then punished by Athena. As Medusa became alienated and isolated, she warped from a beautiful woman to a vicious monster who turned anyone who looked into her eyes into stone. She is then murdered by Perseus and her head was used by Athena as a

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<sup>5</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*. Line 270-275.

<sup>6</sup> Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9. Lines 619-699.

weapon. Athena placed the head on her shield as a fear mongering tactic to instill terror in the hearts of her enemies. Medusa was killed at the mercy of the gods thus becoming a cautionary tale to other women about the dangers of female sexuality and rage. The message of the story was that women were demonized once they were no longer pure and those who dared interfere with the gods. The story of Medusa was a story of rape culture and victim shaming. The split in interpretation of the myth by different authors is indicative of a culture that blurs the line between passion and violence against women while simultaneously valuing a man's word over a woman's. The story is also indicative of a culture that glorifies itself and its gods over the cultures of others.

The mythology not only denoted the past attitudes of the Greeks and Romans but it would influence the attitudes of societies that glorified the Greco-Roman world and modeled their societies after them. Much of the modern Western world modeled their government, culture, and ideologies after these Ancient societies. While the Greek myths were not taken as fact by the modern Western states, the strong influence of Greek and Roman ideologies, including the belief in the oppression and control of women, on the establishment of their societies strongly indicated a continuation of these attitudes throughout the modern world. This would have meant that women were continued to be placed under these strict standards and given little room for error. In summary, women were forced to be continuously pushed into narrow roles that were not autonomous or independent from men. In effect, it reinforced women's dependence on men and women's place as secondary to men.

## Bibliography

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