Definition: **Medusa (Greek medousa, ‘ruler’, ‘queen’)** from Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable

In classical mythology the chief of the GORGONS, whose face was so terrible that all who saw it were turned to stone. PERSEUS avoided this fate by looking only at her reflection; he was thus able to kill her by striking off her head. From Medusa’s spilt blood arose her offspring by POSEIDON, Chrysaor and PEGASUS.

Summary Article: **Medusa**

From Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory

Traditional representations of this female figure from Classical Greek mythology emphasize her head of serpents and her power to immobilize those who meet her gaze. Twentieth-century feminist literature and criticism, however, reclaims Medusa from this stigmatized position by eradicating her horrifying image and positing her as a liberatory icon.

In considering the following account, one must be aware that there are many conflicting representations and versions of the Medusa myth. The origins of some can be traced to long before the Classical period. For a detailed account of the evolution of these numerous images, see Judith Suther’s scholarly account as well as that of Joseph Campbell.

The classical myth presents Medusa as a beautiful young woman—endowed with an exceptionally lovely head of hair—who is raped by Poseidon in Athena’s temple. Jealous of Medusa’s beauty and enraged by the sexual desecration of her temple, Athena subsequently turns Medusa’s hair into a mass of snakes, curses her with a petrifying stare, and banishes her to the earth’s end with her two sisters. These three Gorgons are then surprised by Perseus, who manages to chop off Medusa’s head while she sleeps, avoiding her dangerous eyes by watching her reflection in his shield. Perseus then escapes with the severed head that Athena eventually puts upon her shield to stun her enemies. From Medusa’s severed neck, Pegasus bursts forth. Her blood is taken by the god of healing, Asclepius, who uses the blood of her left side to kill and that from her right side to cure and resurrect.

Beginning with the late Middle Ages, literary representations of Medusa focused on the conquering of her monstrosity by a virtuous hero, explained Joan Coldwell. Romanticism cultivated this motif by seizing upon the Medusa as the “embodiment of the dark lady, the contaminated and irresistible beauty whose real name was Death,” writes Judith Suther, of which Coleridge’s Geraldine and Keats’s Lamia are examples. See Mario Praz’s *The Romantic Agony* for a discussion of the place of the Medusa myth in the nineteenth-century’s eroticization of horror.

Many feminist critics, such as Coldwell, attribute the persistence of a negative Medusa motif in the twentieth century to Sigmund Freud’s reading of the figure as a castrating female. Twentieth-century feminist literary interpretations, however, have done much to celebrate and redeem the Medusa. Hélène Cixous, in her manifesto “The Laugh of the Medusa,” sees the Medusa as a “beautiful” “laughing” figure, a woman who rejects Freud’s notions of castration. And Coldwell points out that poets such as Sylvia Plath and May Sarton have identified with the Medusa figure or positioned her as a Muse. Adrienne Munich’s *Andromeda’s Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* reexamines traditional patriarchal representations by studying British nineteenth-century
fluctuations in Medusa imagery as they appear in relation to the Perseus and Andromeda legend.

Feminist literary revisions of the Medusa myth have succeeded in destabilizing its male-centeredness. In many feminist circles, Medusa has become a vehicle for expressing the position of women battling patriarchal subjugation.

References


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