UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

TRAVELLING MYTHS: READING, REWRITING AND RECEIVING MEDUSA IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Culture Studies, specialization in Literary Cultures

By

Filipa Alexandra Bispo Rodrigues

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the modern-day representations of classical female characters in literary retellings, specifically focusing on the figure of Medusa. The study explores the impact of social media in promoting these retellings and analyses the contemporary appropriation of Medusa in various cultural contexts, including fashion, social media movements, and memes.

Qualitative analysis, including textual and visual analysis, as well as ethnographic research, are utilized to delve into the ways in which Medusa is reinterpreted and reimagined in contemporary culture.

Ultimately, this research sheds light on the significance of classical female characters in shaping contemporary cultural narratives and the role of social media in disseminating and reshaping these interpretations. The analysis of these female characters and of Medusa in particular in these various cultural contexts offers valuable insights into the ways in which ancient myths continue to resonate in today's society.

Keywords: retelling; feminism; intertextuality; social media.

RESUMO

Esta dissertação examina as representações contemporâneas de personagens femininas do período clássico presentes em reescritas literárias, com foco particular na figura de Medusa. Estudou-se também o impacto das plataformas de rede social na promoção destas reescritas e fez-se uma análise da apropriação da figura de Medusa em vários contextos culturais, incluindo moda, movimentos de sensibilização nas redes sociais e memes.

Recorreu-se a uma análise qualitativa, incluindo estudos textuais e visuais, assim como pesquisa etnográfica para entender de que maneira a Medusa é reinterpretada na contemporaneidade.

Em última análise, esta dissertação procura dar visibilidade ao papel que personagens femininas do período clássico têm na construção de narrativas sociais na contemporaneidade, assim como mostrar o papel das plataformas de rede social no propagar destas interpretações. O estudo destas personagens femininas e da figura de Medusa em particular em vários contextos culturais oferece um entendimento sobre os modos como estes mitos clássicos continuam a estar presentes na sociedade de hoje, influenciando muitas áreas, desde tendências de moda ao discurso *online*.

Palavras-chave: renarrar; feminismo; intertextualidade; redes sociais.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to start out by thanking my parents who, despite never truly understanding the subject matter of this dissertation no matter how many times I've explained it, did not stop supporting me. If I made it this far it is because I know that, should I falter, you will hold my hand and give me the space to figure out how to move forward on my own. To my dog, who *definitely* does not understand what this dissertation is about but never ran away when I started talking to him as I rationalized my way through paragraphs.

Secondly, I would like to thank my friends for their unwavering support. To Francisco, Patrícia and Telmo for the help, the constant reality checks and validation of my frustrations and feelings when it all got be too much. To Ana, Cristiana, Julia, Mariana and Tânia who always supported me when I complained and who always went along when I made jokes to cope when things seemed too hard. I am so lucky to live in a world where the eight of you exist.

Thirdly, I would like to thank Professor Alexandra Lopes. Your continuous support and insight have been invaluable and I will never be able to thank you enough for it. I am also deeply grateful for your kindness and warmth, as well as for your constant reassurance that I have not scammed my way into this programme and that I am not, in fact, as dumb as I perceive myself to be.

Lastly, to Medusa, you are remembered, I know your face and I know your story. Thank you for wrapping your arm around my shoulders and walking with me during this process.

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INTRODUCTION

An extraordinary, but not new, phenomenon has emerged in the enormous tapestry of storytelling, weaving together the threads of past and present, as modern literary retellings breathe new life into old cherished narratives. The main goal? To share new interpretations, to answer "what ifs", to offer representation to marginalized communities, and to lend voice to previously silenced characters. While these retellings often take the romance route, making a love story the centre of the narrative, some have emerged whose primary focus is to place a feminist twist on the narrative by giving female characters the chance to share their stories. These are not the only kinds of retellings that are published, some offer other types of social commentary for example, but these are the ones that seem to catch the attention of the reader community.

This dissertation has three main objectives. One, it is interested in examining the representation of female characters, mainly the character of Medusa, in modern literary retellings of classical myths in an effort to answer the following question: in what ways do authors re-imagine and reinterpret the character of Medusa in their retellings, and how do these retellings challenge traditional narratives? Two, this dissertation also seeks to analyse the contribution of social media in the publicizing of these retellings and to study the interest of the reader community in retellings. And finally, this dissertation aims to answer the question of: what are the ways in which Medusa is appropriated as a figure outside of literature?

In the context of culture studies, modern retellings usually endeavour to investigate and critique past and present social, political, and cultural aspects. They shed light on prevalent ideas, power relations, and cultural standards in various cultures by recontextualizing old narratives. Moreover, these retellings frequently question existing literary canons and present a variety of perspectives on what literature is. The study of modern literary retellings provides insight on a multiplicity of things but this dissertation will be paying close attention to the following: representation and inclusion, the enabling of intercultural and intertextual discourses, and cultural consumption and popular culture dynamics.

As already stated, diverse voices and viewpoints are frequently incorporated into modern retellings. They offer a way to investigate the inclusion of marginalised communities, which were previously underrepresented in traditional canons. In the retellings in question, the rethinking of well-known stories from other countries and backgrounds challenges established assumptions of "acceptable" literary narratives, developing a more inclusive understanding of culture and supporting social justice.

The comparison of the ways in which Medusa is represented in the classical texts and now in the retellings can be inserted in this diversification of the voices that now are making themselves heard. While the use of the term “marginalised communities” usually invokes discussions about race or sexuality, that is not the case with Medusa. According to the classical texts, Medusa is, besides being a woman, a monster in some versions of the myth. It was rare for the perspectives of beasts to be taken into account, let alone for their own voices to be allowed expression. Medusa is perhaps not a member of a marginalised community but someone who was silenced and spoken for.

As for the enabling of intercultural and intertextual discourse, literature often reflects the society in which it is produced, and modern retellings build on previously written literature. By referencing and interacting with literary classics, folklore, mythology, and other cultural artefacts, these stories brim over with intertextuality. Through this dialogue and the study of these retellings, it is possible to track and analyse relationships across cultures, societies, and time periods. There is much that can be learned about cross-cultural contacts and exchanges by examining how different cultures interpret and adapt existing stories.

Finally, the interest and consumption of these modern retellings allow for the investigation of how literary narratives are processed and interpreted by a larger audience. Modern retellings are becoming increasingly popular among readers, reflecting the continued fascination with familiar stories reinterpreted in a modern context and through a modern perspective. By examining these retellings, we can better understand their appeal and analyse how they speak to and reflect the interests and concerns of those who are reading them. The role of social media in the publicity of these retellings is extremely important since it brings this genre to a much wider audience.

This dissertation is divided into two sections: section one consists of four separate chapters while section two includes five chapters. Looking at section one, chapter 1 is able to find a timeline of the existence of the gorgon and of Medusa through literature, art and fashion across antiquity and to today. Chapter 2 addresses the translation, revision and revisiting of classical texts done by women and their reasons for wanting to reread these texts and paying special attention to female characters. Chapter 3 will go into detail regarding the phenomenon of booktok and how it influences the literary marketing, as well as looking to answer why there is such an interest in the sub-genre of retelling, and especially in retellings of classical myths. The final chapter of this section will address the topic of feminist retellings in an analysis of their true need to exist.

As for section two, the first three chapters will be heavily analytical and commentary based. Each chapter will focus on a different contemporary retelling of the myth of Medusa. These novels were chosen because of their popularity on the social media app TikTok. Chapter 4 will take into consideration the visual representation of the figure of Medusa in cinema, while chapter 5 will focus on the appropriation of the figure of Medusa as the face of social movements and as a tool of villainization, especially *online*.

In order to achieve the answers to the questions placed in these chapters, a mostly qualitative analysis was utilised. Three specific different types of analysis were employed: textual, visual and ethnographic. For the textual examination, a selection of novels, classical texts, essays and articles, both academically published and published in the culture section of magazines or newspapers, was taken into account. As for the visual, various relevant pieces of art were selected to be examined in tandem with the texts. And a film was also selected to be used as a different medium of representation of Medusa and her story in particular. Ethnographic analysis was used to study social media posts not only about Medusa but about literature, specifically retellings, and how it is received, consumed and propagated in the age of social media.

These forms of investigation were chosen due to being the most useful in terms of responding to the questions that were raised in the context of this dissertation.

After looking at the methodologies, it is also important to address the challenges that were encountered in the production of this dissertation. The main issue arose when looking at a medium like the Internet. It is of the popular belief that nothing ever really disappears from the Internet after deletion. There is always the possibility that a screenshot or a screen recording exists somewhere. But here is where it becomes troublesome. If nobody records it for posteriority, just in case, it is gone from the reach of an average user. The Internet in itself is an extremely paradoxical medium where there is the notion that it is forever but this forever is dependent on the actions taken by the people who frequent online spaces or big data collection corporations. As a consequence of this, certain videos, mainly posted initially on the platform TikTok, that had been saved in-app with the intention of retrieving screenshots later, were deleted before that could be done making it impossible to reference them properly.

Also worthy of note is the bias that will be encountered throughout this dissertation. Everything that is written here comes from a Eurocentric stand-point and therefore it is analysed through that perspective. Although it was attempted to be as objective and as inclusive as possible, it is impossible to speak on experiences one does not have nor understands or to use them to make a point in the analysis.

It must also be highlighted that most social media platforms work on the basis of an algorithm that caters to each of its users in a different way. Based on the interactions with a post (viewing a video to completion, pressing the like button, leaving a comment, or saving the post), the algorithm then suggests similar posts that create a personal experience tailored to that user. With that in mind, the posts that are mentioned in this dissertation as well as the data collected are entirely based on the interactions its author had with their own personal social media accounts while doing research. This research was conducted over a period of more or less six months, starting at the beginning of October and continuing on until the last day of March. Due to the fact that the author's personal account was used, and because I am an avid reader and consumer of videos about literature, the algorithm was already used to the patterns and tastes of this particular user.

To recapitulate, the goal of this dissertation is to discuss Medusa as a key figure and example of the various ways women are represented in literature and how that has evolved through time. This will be accomplished by examining classical texts in tandem with modern literary retellings [*Medusa* (2021) by Rosie Hewlett; *Stone Blind* (2022) by Natalie Haynes; *Medusa* (2023) by Jessie Burton] as well as looking at the role of social media in promoting this type of writing. While literary studies and culture studies often walk hand in hand, studying modern literary retellings may work as a tool to better understand cross-culture discourses, identities and their need for representation, and a phenomenon which excites audiences into high levels of consumption.

PART I

Chapter 1: To know her face is to know her story

When it comes to iconic figures and characters, writers and artists have often turned to mythology as a source of inspiration, and the public usually looks at these figures with curiosity and appreciation. The mythologies of various cultures of the globe are all filled with interesting monsters, tragic romantic pairings, out of the ordinary families, and singular lone heroes who have accomplished astonishing feats. From a Eurocentric perspective, it seems that no mythology continues to capture the love and interest of the masses in the way that Greek mythology does. It is impossible to say with certainty why that is, but Greek mythology is made up of outstanding characters, swoon worthy love stories, anger inducing tales and interesting explanations for natural phenomenon and historical events. It could be that we, as readers and consumers of televised media and as curious minds, look to mythology and all that it encompasses in search of something. We are perhaps not searching for the next story to keep us entertained, we are instead searching for guidance. Mythology and its characters act as examples and they work to build our characters and to help us develop. It stays with us as part of we are, because we have lived with these stories for so long.

Classical mythology is filled with impressive beasts and distinguished heroes and gods who have either birthed those beasts or killed them. Sometimes, even a combination of the two. One such beast—possibly one that is occasionally overlooked or hard to recall by that name—is the gorgon. A name that rings much more familiar to one's memory, though, is the name of Medusa. Even if unfamiliar with what she is or her tale, one can still recognise her name, and even more people will recognise her appearance. A snake-haired monster with eyes that turned humans to stone if they dared to gaze upon her, decapitated by Perseus, son of Zeus, in a most heroic act, Medusa's name is well-known, as is her physical appearance. What she is, what type of beast she is, not so much. But one must never forget that first came the gorgon, and then Medusa.

As we will be seeing throughout this chapter, the figure of the gorgon, more specifically the head, was a symbol that has been prevalent in art, fashion, literature and architecture in

Ancient Greek society with various purposes and meanings. The gorgon has also been associated with various religious cults in various communities and cultures beyond Greece, and with other deities such as Apollo and Artemis. The religious connotations of the gorgon will not be addressed in depth, however, they are worthy of being briefly discussed since they add another layer to a figure that may be seen as one-dimensional. The article "Medusa, Apollo, and The Great Mother" (Frothingham 1911) goes into copious detail regarding this aspect of the gorgon. A.L. Fronthingham writes that "the Gorgon myth is an early, broad, and important nature myth quite different from the usual conception of it, and that its plastic expression included elements taken from Egypt, Crete, the Hittites, Assyria, and primitive Asia Minor" (Frothingham 1911: 377). Frothingham also adds that the myth of the gorgon and of Medusa as it is known now is possibly an amalgamation of the stories and cults of these various places (Frothingham 1911: 377). The author furthermore claims that "the Gorgon is merely a monstrous bogey used as a charm to frighten and to avert evil, and she is primarily a mask for whom a body, a slaying hero, and a myth were afterwards invented" (Frothingham 1911: 350). Frothingham is here referring to the creation of the story of Medusa and her slayer, the hero Perseus, that did not exist at first. Even though Perseus was a well-known and worshipped hero, his association with gorgons was nowhere to be found, neither was the name Medusa, in writings prior to Homer.

Before we move on to look at a selection of poets (Homer, Hesiod, Pindar and Ovid)[1], it is important to give reason as to why these were the four poets chosen. They were selected because, based on their bodies of work, one was able to ascertain that they have all added something new to the myth of Medusa and reimagined it in their own ways. Ultimately, each of these poets has rewritten the myth by adding his own spin on it, even if what they have added is a small detail, and by using what had come before them as inspiration.

As for each of the particular reasons for these choices, they are as follows: Homer was chosen due to his early mention of the gorgon as a mythical figure and of Perseus as a well-known hero, as well as his recording of the gorgon as a symbol used in weaponry and

[1] For the purposes of this dissertation, English translations of the selected works were used. They are as follows: *The Iliad* translated by Robert Fagles (1990), *The Odyssey* translated by Emily Wilson (2018), *Theogony* translated by Glenn W. Most (2006), *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes* translated by William H. Race, and *Metamorphoses* translated by David Raeburn (2004).

protection. Hesiod was chosen due to the belief that he was the first to connect the gorgon and Perseus, as well as giving her a proper name and familial lineage. As for Pindar, he was selected due to his mention of Perseus using Medusa's head as a weapon after her murder, and due to his mention of how Athena created a new instrument by taking inspiration in the cries of grief of Medusa's sisters. Lastly, Ovid was picked because of his addition of the detail of rape into the story of Medusa and Poseidon's encounter, also introducing Athena's disgust and consequent punishment.

Firstly, there is Homer. The name Homer is in itself a pool of endless discussion in the classical community. There is no agreement as to who Homer really was, or if the name refers to just one single human being or if it may have been a name given to a collective of poets (West 2011: 383). Some academics believe that Homer was a real man and support the notion that he created the epics that were to be transmitted orally, as was tradition. It is believed by these researchers that these epics were much shorter upon creation and that they have reached us in their current extensive size because other poets added to them every time they performed them (West 2011: 385). This theory finds some traction due to the evidenced differences in vocabulary, structure and pacing in some sections of the poems. Other scholars doubt that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were produced by the same author, again due to differences in language and in overall theme (West 2011: 388). Nonetheless, Homer is the name that was attributed to the author, or at least to the person who wrote down these poems, and for the purposes of this dissertation we will accept him as such.

Homer (c. 8th century BC) wrote verses in the epic *The Iliad* about the hero Perseus. The famous hero is mentioned in Books 14 and 19 of the extensive poem. The verses in question may seem insignificant in the context of the whole text, as they simply highlight the hero's lineage. But given the importance ascribed to the feats of heroes in association with their ancestry, it is noteworthy that no reference is made to the one thing Perseus is most known for. Especially in a poem where the gorgon is mentioned a couple of times.

The first mention of the gorgon in *The Iliad* is associated with the goddess Athena, a most curious choice given Athena's role in the later story of Medusa and Perseus. In quite a long stanza present in Book 5, the section of the poem where the gods join the battle at Troy,

Athena's armour and weapons are described. In the description of her shield, the narrator informs the reader that there is a gorgon head in the centre: "and right in their midst the Gorgon's monstruous head,/that rippling dragon horror, sign of storming Zeus" (Homer 1990: 849-850). The gorgon head is referenced again in Book 11, once more at the centre of a shield, but this time the shield belongs to the Greek king Agamemnon: "and there like a crown the Gorgon's grim mask –/the burning eyes, the stark, transfixing horror -/and round her strode the shapes of Rout and Fear" (Homer 1990: 39-41). On both occasions, the descriptions of the gorgon head mention the ugliness and horror it causes, signalling those two things as a major part of the figure itself.

The narrator calls it gorgon, but never gives it a proper name. However, in a poem where we have references to both Perseus and the beast he slayed, it is interesting that they are never mentioned together or close to one another. It could be argued that the narrator simply forgot this small detail or chose to omit it but, given the importance attributed to the accomplishments of heroes, it is highly unlikely that this was a stylistic choice or simply a case of a forgetful mind. It is much more likely that the link between Perseus and the gorgon was merely inexistent at the time of the writing of *The Iliad* (Dexter 2010: 27).

Homer also references the gorgon and the gorgon's head in his other famous epic, *The Odyssey*, but the mention of it in this poem is rather peculiar. In *The Iliad*, the gorgon is part of a stationary object so to speak. It is a relief, something engraved on a shield, it is not sentient. While in *The Odyssey*, the gorgon head is very much alive and, strangely, maybe floating around the underworld. In Book 11, the wayward Odysseus performs rituals in order to attract the souls of the dead and ask for their advice and guidance so that he may get home safely. In the end, after he sees many of his fallen comrades, deceased family members and legendary figures, he flees in terror when souls of people he has never met swarm him. What he says as he flees is curious and of importance:

But masses of the dead came thronging round
with eerie cries, and cold fear seized me, lest
the dreadful Queen Persephone might send
the monster's head, the Gorgon, out of Hades. (Homer 2018: 632-635)

Based on what Odysseus is experiencing here, the reader is led to believe that Persephone and her husband, Hades, keep a gorgon head in the underworld, alive, and use it to scare off people who overstay their welcome or slight them in some way. Here we see once again that the narrator still refers to it as a gorgon. No name or association with either heroes or gods, only the specification of what kind of beast it is.

Given all this, it is safe to assume that narratively Perseus had not been anywhere near the gorgons yet, and Medusa did not even exist with this name and that story. Where did she come from then?

Hesiod (c. 8th century BC) is known as the author of two very important texts. He wrote the *Theogony*, in which he recounts the origins of the universe and the lineages of the gods, and he also wrote the *Works and Days*, "which includes reflections on social and religious conduct as well as a farmer's calendar" (Giesecke 2020, "Hesiod": 360). We shall be looking at his extensive poem the *Theogony* for the information we need about the gorgon. In just one stanza, Hesiod elaborates greatly on the gorgon's existence. She is given a name, Medusa, and she is given parentage, Phorcys and Ceto. We are told she has sisters, two other gorgons and the graiae[2], who are also named. Hesiod also shares that she had a divine lover, Poseidon, and she is given a curse: she is mortal while her sisters are immortal. Her killer is named, Perseus, and we learn that she had children born after her death, Pegasus and Chrysaor. The stanza is as follows:

Then to Phorcys Ceto bore beautiful-cheeked
old women, gray-haired from their birth, whom both the
immortal gods and human beings who walk on the earth
call the Graeae, fair-robed Pemphredo and saffron-robed
Enyo, and the Gorgons who dwell beyond glorious Ocean
at the edge towards the night, where the clear-voiced
Hesperides are, Sthenno and Euryale, and Medusa who
suffered woes. She was mortal, but the others are immortal

[2] The graiae are described as being a trio of women, also daughters of Phorcys and Ceto, who were born old and amongst the three, they are said to share one eye and one tooth (Giesecke 2020, "The Graiae", 286).

and ageless, the two of them; with her alone the dark-
haired one lay down in a soft meadow among spring
flowers. When Perseus cut her head off from her neck, great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus sprang forth; (Hesiod 2006: 270-281)

Dating ancient authors and literature is no easy task, dating the "birth" of a mythical figure is just as hard if not an even trickier task. But given that Hesiod is thought of as being a contemporary of Homer, it is safe to assume that the earliest introduction of Medusa as Medusa, and her association with Perseus, came from Hesiod (Dexter 2010: 27). Additionally, in her essay collection titled *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myth* (2020), Natalie Haynes states that "most ancient authors follow Hesiod's lead" (Haynes 2020: 87) regarding Medusa's lineage and her mortality in comparison to her sisters, further illustrating the point that Hesiod was the first to write about this connection.

The last Greek poet we will look at is Pindar (c. 518 BC - c. 438 BC). Although his lyrical poetry varies in themes, he is mostly remembered for writing poetry to honour the winners of competitions which he called victory odes (Giesecke 2020, "Pindar": 362). In the poems he wrote, heroes and their respective myths were often brought forth as a way to praise the victors by comparison. Medusa and Perseus are mentioned in two of his odes, *Pythian Ode 10* and *Pythian Ode 12*. In *Pythian Ode 10*, Pindar directly references the slaying of the gorgon at the hand of Perseus, who was aided by the goddess Athena, and how he used her head as a weapon after the fact:

Breathing courage in his heart,
the son of Danae once came – Athena led him –
to that throng of blessed men. He slew
the Gorgon, and, bearing her head adorned
with locks of serpents, came to the islanders,
bringing them a stony death. (Pindar 1997: 44-49)

In *Pythian Ode 12*, the reader is offered further information regarding what happened after the slaying took place. Pindar writes that Athena was so enthralled by the sound of the cries that spilled from the throats of Medusa's sisters when they discovered their mortal sister decapitated, that she invented an instrument inspired by it. While the poem is dedicated to

the winner of a pipe playing competition, it is understood that the instrument in question is an aulos (Fig. 1). This piece of information will be looked at in detail in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Fig. 1: a fragment of a vase depicting a young man playing an aulos, a sort of two-handed wind instrument.

Now that we have looked at the selected Greek writings about Medusa, let us focus on what the Roman Ovid (43 BC - 17/18 AD) wrote about it. Ovid wrote verses about Medusa and her slayer in his extensive narrative poem, *Metamorphoses*. In Book 4, Ovid dedicates an entire poem to the myth of Perseus. The reader is told in the third stanza that Perseus has killed the gorgon Medusa and has taken her head as trophy. The poet then goes into extensive detail regarding what happened to the hero after slaying Medusa. Perseus gets into an altercation with Atlas, and ends up using the gorgon head to turn him into a mountain range after being denied hospitality in the home of the Titan. He then comes across princess Andromeda, who had been condemned to be sacrificed to appease Poseidon[3] after an offense committed by her mother. He saves her, using the head of Medusa, and becomes betrothed to her afterwards.

The verses that follow this long description of events are what matters most in this context since they shine a light on how Perseus treats the valuable trophy of the gorgon head:

Fearing to bruise the Gorgon's snake-covered head on the hard sand,

[3] Since Ovid is a Roman poet, he refers to Poseidon and Athena by their Latin names: Neptune and Minerva. Throughout this dissertation they will always be referred to as Poseidon and Athena for clarity reasons unless when quoting.

he softened the ground with leaves and covered it over with seaweed,
to serve as a mat for the head of Medusa, the daughter of Phorcys.
The fronds which were fresh and still abundant in spongy pith
absorbed the force of the Gorgon and hardened under her touch,
acquiring a strange new stiffness in all the stems and the foliage. (Ovid 2004: 741-746)

Worthy of note here is the description of how Perseus treats the head that he has now in his possession as not only a trophy to save his mother, but also as a weapon that can be very useful in order for him to achieve any objective or ambition he may have. The gentleness and extra care with which he treats something that he now understands as a powerful object show that he is aware of its value, but it also contrasts with the savagery and brutality with which Medusa was taken from the world of the living. While it can be argued that her being slayed in her sleep was an act of mercy, so that she may have felt nothing, being denied a fighting chance was just as cruel as being branded a monster in the first place. And to then have her head weaponized? That adds another layer of cruelty to the story.

Indeed, she is treated only as a weapon. There are no traces of the young woman she could have been. This lack of humanity towards Medusa could perhaps invoke some type of sadness in the reader but, as consumers of literature and other media, we are conditioned to root for the hero, and Medusa is a monster, is she not? Haynes (2020) states the following:

> It scarcely needs saying that by separating Medusa from her family (…), we make her seem more disposable. A family of monsters may not seem like much of a family (…), but they are part of who she is. Modern versions of the Medusa story have tended to focus on Perseus (…). Because of this shift in focus, we have lost sight of who Medusa is and what she means to those closest to her. (Haynes 2020: 99)

Medusa is a monster because we are told she is and we are told she has turned people into stone thereby killing them, therefore, she also deserved to die. And we believe it, because Perseus is a hero, heroes do not commit atrocities unless compelled to do so. It is all a matter of perspective, after all. When we are being made privy to the hero's side of the story, it is only natural to believe in him and support his motivations.

Another important piece of information that Ovid gives the reader is related to how Medusa came to be the creature with the snakes for hair. Perseus recounts that "Medusa was once an exceedingly beautiful maiden" (Ovid 2004: 794) and that her hair was her most beautiful and enticing feature. Medusa was so beautiful that, simply by existing, she tempted the sea god Poseidon. Perseus tells his adoring audience that "the story goes that Neptune the sea god/raped this glorious creature inside the shrine of Minerva" (Ovid 2004: 798-799). It is interesting to point out here that Ovid's retelling of this encounter between Medusa and Poseidon takes on a much darker nature than the encounter Hesiod described. What Hesiod narrated in his poem sounds almost romantic and consensual, as consensual as an encounter between a mortal being and a god can be, while what Ovid writes on the page is a barbaric act even when expressed with so little words (Haynes 2020: 88). Hesiod also does not mention any relation between Medusa and the goddess Athena, that famously would punish her by giving her snakes for hair. As Athena would have no reason to punish her since her temple was not soiled in his version of the tale, Hesiod had no need to introduce the goddess into the story he is telling. Ovid finishes the poem with Perseus explaining that the gorgon head, this time on Athena's breastplate, is directly related to Medusa and to the involvement of the goddess in this tale (Dexter 2010: 31). This is a direct reference to what we had previously found in Homer's *The Iliad* regarding the weaponry of Athena and Greek king Agamemnon.

Through their writing, it is as if these poets have brought a story full-circle and as readers, we have seen the birth and development of Medusa's story. Homer refers firstly to the use of the gorgon on armour and weaponry, the recording of a fearsome beast with no association to heroes or gods, but whose purpose is to incite terror in a war scenario. A beast that had no story or purpose besides its use as decoration and a symbol of protection. While Hesiod gives the gorgon a name and genealogy, the beginning of a story with the connection he draws between Medusa and the hero Perseus. Ovid, while also adding his own new information and twisting the tale into a darker tone, brings it back to a military context related to the goddess of wisdom and her armour, the beast once again being used as decoration and as a symbol of protection in a direct reference to Homer. As for Pindar, what he adds to the story is less about what is new and what makes it interesting, and more about what those details

mean on a narrative level (the weaponizing of her head, and the appropriation of the grief of her sisters).

Now that we have gone through the selection of literature, we will move on to analyse some representations of Medusa and the gorgon in art. We will be using the essay written by Kiki Karoglou, associate curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018, as main source for this portion of the chapter. Karoglou wrote the paper as a companion to an exhibition that focused on Medusa and other female-coded monsters of mythology. Both exhibition and piece share the title of *Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art.* The first part goes into copious detail on the symbolism, use and presence of the gorgon head and of Medusa in art and ancient culture, and also in contemporary times.

Karoglou (2018) starts by explaining the protective nature of the symbol of the gorgon and other similar beasts. She states the following: "Imbued with protective powers, these figures functioned as *apotropaia*, or talismans that turn away evil, and as such were frequently employed on sepulchral monuments, sacred architecture, military equipment, drinking vessels, and the luxury arts" (Karoglou 2018: 4) (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). We can look here once more at the references made in *The Iliad* to the gorgon. The gorgoneia, the head of the gorgon, appears in a military context in this case and one can assume that, due to the horror and ugliness of it that is referred to in the verses, its purpose is to scare the enemy that gazes upon it. It can also be interpreted to be a symbol of protection in a situation of battle and war as the one being described in the epic.

Fig. 2: statue of a rider holding a shield with the face of a gorgon, reminiscing of the shield of Athena and the shield of Agamemnon described in *The Iliad*.

Fig. 3: drinking cup with the face of a monstruous gorgon adorning the bottom. Karoglou, although in a joking manner, speculates in her essay that it perhaps warned of the effects of too much alcohol (Karoglou 2018: 14).

Medusa and the gorgoneia were also represented in coins and fashionable objects such as personal amulets, jewellery and broches worn by women in Ancient Greece and Rome, and then again in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Karoglou 2018: 22) (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). The choice to wear accessories and what type of accessories at that, is very personal and it varies from individual to individual. One cannot say for certain why each of these women chose to wear a variety of accessories with Medusa's face on it but in the grand context of

the time period, the appearance of Medusa in accessories is not surprising. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a resurgence of interest in Greco-Roman literature, art, and mythology and its characters, the movement referred to as Neoclassicism. Thanks to her unique look, Medusa became a popular motif and, since fashion often walks hand in hand with societal status, it is possible that by wearing accessories with the motif of Medusa, these young women were attempting to single themselves out from the crowds by using the distinctiveness of the looks of the gorgon. Or, it is possible that these women were reviving the beliefs of the ancient periods. By wearing jewellery with the face of Medusa, women living in Ancient Greece and Rome were invoking her protective nature and using her and her gaze of stone to ward off the unwanted attention of men (Djoric 2023).

Fig. 4: piece of jewellery (ring) with the relief of a gorgon head.

Fig. 5: piece of jewellery (brooch) with the design of a gorgon head.

Also worthy of note are the different types of representation of this figure that have appeared across time. Medusa, whenever art was made retelling her woes, was always represented as a beautiful young maiden. While the gorgoneia started out as being represented with large tusks, bulging eyes, grinning mouth, and sometimes beards (Karoglou 2018: 7) (Fig. 6). It is an interesting juxtaposition that, while the gorgon was nothing but a nameless creature, it was allowed to be represented as ugly and monstruous, but when it carries the name of Medusa, she must be beautiful as to remind the person looking at her that she is but a fragile maiden.

By making her a beautiful young woman, she was humanized, made more appealing to the eye. As a figure who is presented as beautiful and appealing to a viewer, maybe even welcoming, it is assumed that if she were still represented as the monstruous gorgon and going by the name of Medusa, her story would not be worthy of attention or pity. She needs to be beautiful in order to be worthy and relatable since if she were ugly, she would just be another monster with a story that does not matter. However, "since attractive faces cannot easily incite fear" (Karoglou 2018: 12), artists found a way to still bring out her monstruous side. According to Karoglou, "artists portrayed Medusa's head with wild, snake-infested hair; a pathetic, agonized expression; and other unnerving elements such as exposed teeth" (Karoglou 2018: 12) (Fig. 7). It is interesting to look at this sort of duality represented, or attempt at duality perhaps would be the better way to call it.

What was chosen by artists to remind the viewer that Medusa is monstruous does not perform what it was meant to do. A dishevelled head of hair, even with the snakes, a look of struggle and the showing of teeth are far from a combination of things that incite fear. Perhaps curiosity or confusion as to why she looks like that, but fear? It would perhaps elicit pity towards this poor creature that is still, to the person looking at her, a young and beautiful maiden. Perhaps that was the idea all along. Perhaps it was always the intention to contrast these two representations since it bears repeating, if she were fully represented as the beast it is described in *The Iliad* for example, she would scarcely be worthy of attention. But look at her now because she is beautiful, listen to her now because she is appealing to the eye, and still frightful.

Femininity and monstrosity seem to be intrinsically connected and incapable of being symbolically dissociated in Western tradition. Isabel Capeloa Gil wrote in Volume II of her book *Mitografias: Figurações de Antígona, Cassandra e Medeia no Drama de Expressão Alemã do Século XX* (2007) that, according to Aristotle, the woman is the product of something wrong happening during the biological development pre-birth (Gil 2007: 127). On a deeper level, this can be interpreted as the woman being viewed as a monster as soon as she is born. She is the opposite of a biological man characterized by the absence of the masculine reproductive organ; she is an anomaly therefore she is a threat for the cultural order (Gil 2007: 129). It is interesting to think about it like that since Medusa does, in fact, become a threat of sorts: a monstruous woman.

However, Gil also states that, although she is speaking about Medea here in this instance, because "a monstruosidade não é uma característica essencial (…), mas sim uma figuração conjuntural, determinada por acontecimentos que vão despoletar essa transformação" (Gil 2007: 126). This also applies to Medusa. Physically, if we are to imagine her pre-metamorphosis, she is not monstruous and there are no records of her committing crimes or any type of atrocity. It is after a series of events we are already well acquainted with that she becomes a monster physically and, if we are to take Ovid's word for it[4], a monster that has committed atrocities.

It bears repeating: it is impossible to separate monstrosity from femininity, whether one follows Aristotle's line of thought or view Medusa as a victim of a series of events. The decision to imbue Medusa-related art with traits that are typically feminine show just that. She is not allowed to just be a monster that looks somewhat androgynous, or, at a first glance, to look like a masculine figure. She must remind everyone that she is a beautiful young woman by looking the part.

[4] Ovid references in his poem that on the path to Medusa's lair, there are the statues of her victims (Ovid 2004: 780-781). The existence of these victims evokes in the reader the idea that a crime was committed.

Fig. 6: terracotta stand with the design of a monstruous Gorgon.

Fig. 7: painting done by Peter Paul Rubens, depicting the decapitated head of Medusa.

Medusa and the gorgoneia have been used as highlights and a statement-pieces in fashionable objects as seen above, and when one mentions Medusa and fashion in a contemporary context, it is impossible to erase from memory the high-fashion brand Versace and its respective logo (Fig. 8).

Creator Gianni Versace stated that he chose Medusa as the logo for his brand after seeing an image of her as a child in Italy, and being incapable of forgetting about her (Layne 2021) (Fig. 9). An article about the Versace founder claims the following: “Gianni pulled this image from his childhood memory, like the myth, unable to look away from Medusa for too long. The pool at his Miami mansion even featured a mosaic of Medusa, reminiscent of traditional depictions of the gorgon in ancient Greek and Roman art” (Layne 2021) (Fig. 10).

While it is unclear if the creator of the brand knew the story before seeing the image, the impact it had on him was clearly of great magnitude. Seeing Medusa in that ruin as a child became such a core memory for Versace that he had to bring her along as he built his legacy and fashion empire. The impression she left on young Gianni Versace shows how this imagery and these stories continue to leave a mark and contribute to the construction of one's identity and sense of not only self, but of the world.

Fig. 8: logo of the popular high-fashion brand Versace, to who Medusa is to this day muse and symbol.

Fig. 9: mosaic floor with the design of the head of Medusa.

Fig. 10: the mosaic in the pool area of the home previously owned by brand creator Gianni Versace, located in Miami.

As muse of the brand, Medusa is not only part of their logo, she is to this day incorporated in the designs that are launched. Commonly, one is able to see her head as embellishment on dresses, shirts and skirts (Fig. 11), as well as hardware on shoes (Fig. 12) and on bags and other accessories (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14). This inclusion in the design makes her head the piece that makes the ensemble "pop". The collection of bags that feature her head is even named after her, *La Medusa*, and there is an entire collection of clothing and shoes named *Medusa '95*.

Fig. 11: up-close shot of Versace's *Medusa '95* Mini Shirt Dress, with the head of Medusa pressed into the belt detail.

Fig. 12: Versace's *Medusa '95* Mid Slingback Pumps, the golden statement hardware on the side features the head of Medusa.

Fig. 13: Versace's *La Medusa* Small Handbag, with the statement piece being the golden head of Medusa working as the clasp of the bag.

Fig. 14: Versace's Safety Pin Brooch with the head of Medusa pressed into it, reminiscent of the brooches worn by young women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is interesting to see Medusa still be very much a part of fashion, and a part of high-fashion at that. There is something to be said about the contemporary commodification of Medusa's visage via something like high-fashion. While in the past accessories with the face of Medusa could be worn with the intention of giving oneself protection, one cannot deny that owning a Versace piece nowadays is a symbol of status, perhaps a different kind of shield.

To put it in perspective, the cheapest bag up for sale on the Versace website is priced at 790€ while the most expensive one is available for purchase for the value of 19,800€. As for jewellery, the cheapest item (a ring) has the price of 200€ and the most expensive piece (a necklace) can be a part of one's wardrobe for the price of 2,200€.[5] As for the other sub-sections (clothes, shoes, undergarments and beachwear, other accessories), there is no item priced below 30€[6].

It is impossible to deny that owning a Versace piece, even something as small as a ring, comes with the assumption that one is well-off enough to pay such a high price for something like an accessory, which may be seen as frivolous and unnecessary. Medusa has become a symbol of wealth and status for as long as her face is associated with the brand Versace. This

[5] At the time of writing, the first item up for sale in the jewellery section is a pair of earrings priced at 150€. That piece is part of the Pride collection and available only during the month of June as celebration of the LGBTQIA+ Community and as part of a partnership between Versace and the Elton John AIDS Foundation. These earrings were not taken into consideration since they will be removed from the website after Pride Month is over.

[6] For the sake of time, only the women section was looked at. Left out were the men, children, and home & lifestyle sections, as well the sections available on the website for specific items or collections.

does not mean that she has lost her protective facet, though. While contemporarily she is most recognized as the face of Versace and a symbol of luxury, there are others who know her as a symbol of something else entirely and who still look to her as a protector. Such a notion will be addressed in chapter 5 of part II.

Chapter 2: On translation, revision and remembering

While Medusa is a figure with a very tragic life, and even in death she is not allowed to rest properly, she is not the only woman to have suffered in mythology. Often, whenever a female character is the object of a story, she is put through the most brutal of acts. Abused, insulted, used and discarded, ignored, enslaved, murdered and then used again. Not even goddesses and the women in the higher classes are exempt from such violence. And then, when they do dare to speak up, they are punished by other characters, writers and readers for doing just that. They are branded as crazy as if their anger and sorrow had no reason to exist. Women in Greek mythology and Greek texts seldom have their voices heard, and when they do, they are often written off as villains or are wholly misunderstood, or even mistranslated. I argue that the desire and need to know more and to see more about these women is at the root of the interest in and love for literary retellings.

Thinking about translation, one immediately assumes that the subject under scrutiny is the traditional act to translate: from one language into another. Although translating in its literal sense will not be the broader theme addressed in this dissertation, it is important to briefly highlight the way female characters are translated by specifically male translators.

Classicist Emily Wilson was the first woman to translate the Homeric epic *The Odyssey* into English[7], a translation which was critically acclaimed. Wilson has found, upon consulting previous translations done by men, that certain choices that may be considered biased have been made. In an interview, she points out, however, that:

> I'd say that actual misogynistic language is relatively rare (…). But I don't think counting insult terms is the way to go here. I'm really more interested in the more subtle kinds of choices that translators make that impact gender roles and other social roles. (…) I think the Greek text allows a lot more sympathy here, and a lot more multivocality in general, a lot more narrative complexity, than many translations seem to do. (Giannarou 2018)

[7] Wilson has since then translated and published the other Homeric epic, *The Iliad*, in 2023.

Wilson is referring here to choices made in translation that may take away the nuance or interpret the purpose of the narrative in a misogynistic way. She is pointing out what is lost between the lines during the process of translating, specifically translating from a language that is considered to be a dead one.

She also states the following about a certain sensitivity regarding gender when it comes to translations of these types of texts: “These things are complex and not predetermined. Some women, yes. Some men, too, in theory, could be more sensitive, and it’s a shame that in this case, so far, English-speaking men haven’t been” (Giannarou 2018).

It is important to note that all of this comes down to the situatedness and the temporal context in which the translation was made and released to the public. In the interview mentioned above, Wilson singles out, due to their critical acclaim and influence, the translations done by Robert Fagles and how she found that some of those terms that could be seen as misogynistic were present in those translations. For context, Fagles translated and published both Homeric epics in the 90s: his translation of *The Iliad* was published in 1990, while *The Odyssey* came out in 1996. At the time, the care regarding the use of language was different from nowadays. While it is important to keep in mind what Wilson states regarding what may be lost from the original language, it is also important to keep in mind that different time periods will influence writings in different ways.

This does not mean that the use of derogatory terms should be ignored, regardless of the understanding of the time period in which it was chosen to be included in a translation. By translating them in any way that may be deliberately or accidentally gender biased, one is forcing the mind of the reader to construct a pre-made image of these characters. Readers rely on the translation since they do not speak the original language and by using such words, as Wilson states, perhaps something is lost or completely changes the intended tone of the narrative and skews the perspective of a character.

Now that we have covered the matter of language and translation choices, we must turn to the subject of the role of women within myth. And for that, we will turn to Vanda Zajko, researcher and professor of Classics. She asks in her chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* (2007): “are we concerned here with myths in which women are

regarded as the main protagonists or myths that have been creatively interpreted by or for women?" (Zajko 2007: 387). And she follows up with the answer:

> Although both [myths with female protagonists and myths interpreted by or for women] have continuously provided a resource with which writers and artists have explored the relations between the sexes, either within the landscape of myth itself, or in relation to the particular social and historical contexts of its various instantiations, the latter category has become particularly associated with the feminist interpretation of myth and thus with its explicit positioning as either liberating or oppressive for women. (Zajko 2007: 387)

Zajko then approaches the topic by separating the question into two different parts, the camp concerned with myth alone and the camp that is connected to women as participants in myth. Although the part relating to women in myth is what is of importance here, Zajko does say something regarding myth alone, which is very important for what is to come in this dissertation. She writes that different narratives produced by different authors are "likely to be designated a 'version' of a Greek myth" (Zajko 2007: 388). What Zajko is highlighting here is that these different narratives will be taken into popular culture and perhaps even academia and be designated as another version or interpretation of a myth, enhancing its reach and propelling further discussions about it. She also points out that a version by one author may be held in higher regard than the version of another. Although this is also an interesting discussion to have, the point here is the recognition of the existence of different versions of various myths by a wide range of authors. Different versions of myths are contemporarily categorized as retellings and rewrites since they take hold of the same characters and of the bones of the familiar myth, and twist them in different directions.

While the authors of the classical period that we have taken a look at added something new to the myth, contemporary retellings of Medusa and her myth take on a different tone entirely. This may be due to the fact that the world has changed radically from the classical period to nowadays. Different time periods, different cultures, different people have different experiences and most importantly different interests and views. It is not out of the ordinary that, for example, a female author born and raised in the United Kingdom in the 21st century has a different view of a myth and wishes to explore distinct themes from the ones that were explored and written about by a man in Ancient Greece or Rome. Temporal and spatial context as well as world experiences are what dictates these differences between the

retellings. A general analysis of the selected contemporary retellings will be found in section two of this dissertation.

Focusing now on what Zajko writes about women who are part of myth, she states that "these women [Ancient Greek women] are less visible in the historical and archaeological record (...), and there are only a few textual fragments that we can confidently assert were produced by a woman's hand" (Zajko 2007: 389). She is speaking about very real women here, women that have existed and about whose lives tragically we know very little. She goes on to say that:

> There are significant effects of this absence: despite the exhaustive collation of the sources relating to women, which span a wide time frame and a variety of genres, the impression still dominates of women being the absent presence of the ancient world, and a frustrating sense of lack often seems to characterise the endeavours of those wanting to form a connection with them. (Zajko 2007: 389-390)

Her subsequent argument, however, is what is most relevant for us since she finally makes the connection between being a woman and being present in myth. Zajko puts it in a very beautiful way as she says the following:

> As a result of this, myth becomes a haven of plenitude, a place where women thrive and behave in provocative and interesting ways; myth helps fulfil the fantasies of those who are unwilling to face the prospect of a past inhabited by cowed and sequestered women and allows the possibility that women then, in their imaginations at least, participated in more contemporary kinds of defiance. Alternatively, an excavation of the 'mythic imagination' has been seen as providing a way of exposing the deep roots of the misogyny that continues to contribute to the inequity of the world; once exposed, there is the opportunity for regrowth and change. (Zajko 2007: 390)

The myths and stories and records of those times translate the ways in which their coeval society understood women. The emphasis she places on the misogyny present in these old myths, and how we can and must learn from them in order to evolve as people and as societies and cultures is particularly important. While we all as humans have our own particular struggles and difficulties that come with being alive, living in a patriarchal society is especially hard for someone who identifies as female. And this is with removing sexuality,

race and other aspects of identity from consideration altogether since those labels also play a part. A patriarchal society is built to benefit men and put unnecessary hurdles in the paths of women. Zajko claims that by looking at myths and stories, women find comfort in the existence of other women that may have had agency and lived their lives fully and defiantly, when historical documents or artifacts may claim differently by exhibiting an absence of the female voices and presence.

Retellings and rewrites play a huge role in this idea of looking at the past in order to propel the future forward, but they play an even bigger role in the understanding of women. Although there are male writers that venture on to pen retellings, it seems that the majority of authors that write and publish these kinds of retellings identify as female. These authors tend to take over myths and stories and rewrite them from the point of view of a female character who had no voice prior to this. Although other changes are made, such as the gender, race or sexuality of characters, and the setting, the objective seems to be to give the spotlight to a character that was silenced, misunderstood or, in the opinion of the writer that is retelling the story, mistreated.

Zajko provides in this text a perfect summary on the why of retellings and the need of retellings, especially written by women: "mythological women also take on a life of their own and provide modern women with personae with whom they can identify" (Zajko 2007: 388). By identifying with these characters, one is further developing a sense of self and building character with the guidance provided by what is written. And further down she argues:

> When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a 'negative' female role-model becomes a positive one. (Zajko 2007: 396-397)

This debate is reminiscent of Adrienne Rich and her text, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972). Zajko also mentions this essay in the chapter we have just been looking at, recognizing the relevance of what Rich is putting forward. Rich argues in her text that the myths and stories from the past continue to influence the present and will influence the future and its development. She writes the following: "It's exhilarating to be alive in a

time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful. This awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness has already affected the lives of millions of women, even those who don't know it yet" (Rich 1972: 18). Rich is saying that to be a woman living in contemporary times and awakening to realize that the writings done about your kin, so to speak, have influenced you and your life and place in the world, but that is not always a good thing.

The degree of effect that this sudden consciousness regarding this matter has on someone who intentionally seeks it out, or is suddenly face to face with it, is very interesting, but the effect it has on those who are unaware is even more curious. Those who are unaware for the time being are wholly in the hands of those who are in the know. It is an incredible act of trust, even if an oblivious one, to trust these other women to lead the charge in the further propelling of discussions, and to trust them to come back to you and to share their knowledge and outrage. And the trust they in turn place on those who are unaware cannot be overlooked. They trust that, if they are to turn back around with all this newly acquired knowledge and outrage, they will have another woman join their ranks in hopes of changing how society is built.

Rich writes further on: "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter of cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (Rich 1972: 18). It is about identity and about knowing where the roots of being a woman are buried, but it is more than that. Rich does not negate that the searching of an identity is a big part of it but it "is more than a search of identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (Rich 1972: 18). It is a mechanism of defiance against the patriarchy. By revising these canonical texts, a woman is doing deconstructive work in an effort to extricate herself from the perpetuated idealistic visions and stereotypes that have, unfortunately, played a role in the shaping of her identity and influenced her beliefs.

Rich also states that a woman "goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world" (Rich 1972: 21). And while on that search "she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men"

(Rich 1972: 21). She does not dismiss the various types of women present in these writings but she does say that "what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together" (Rich 1972: 21). She argues that a woman rarely sees herself in the writings done by men and calls out the damage that this absence may do the unsuspecting reader.

It is a curious thing that is present here. Rich claims that a woman rarely sees herself in the writings of men because she simply cannot identify with the character on the page. But what happens when one does happen to find a woman much like yourself, written in the words of a man? If we take Medusa into consideration, the object in question here, and her story, it is a tragedy to have yourself or someone you know see themselves in the Ovid version of the myth. It is such a tragedy that perhaps when one is looking at retellings of Medusa, the expectation would be to find the story completely changed. One would think that upon rewriting, a female author would choose to erase Medusa's assault or change her death, to save her and give her some manner of peace or even revenge.

And yet, Medusa retellings and rewrites rarely ignore, omit or change those parts of the myth. Her assault still happens and she is still punished for it and killed. But that is not the point of rewriting Medusa's story. Medusa has become a symbol for women and for survivors. A large number of people "have identified with the grimace and the rage of Medusa" (Dexter 2010: 40). To change her story would be disrespecting her and all that see her as a kindred spirit. When it comes to Medusa, it is not about changing and rewriting her story by making her a triumphant hero who overcame her trauma and slayed her abuser. It is about giving her a voice that she was not given in the older writings, and about understanding the woman behind the monster we are led to believe that she is.

Chapter 3: The Titan of Social Media vs The Beast of Human Curiosity

Social media, and the internet in general, have always been a place where fan communities have found each other and connected around their interests and views. There is a wide variety of small and large pockets of fans for the most varied things, and literature is no different. Popular platform TikTok seems to be leading the charge when it comes to the book community, called booktok community[8]. Thousands of creators make posts[9], sometimes daily, that range from dressing up as their favourite characters to offering various suggestions of what to read next and reviews of their latest favourite, or most disliked, book. Margaret K. Merga, a professor at the University of Notre Dame in Australia, conducted a study in 2020 in which she created an account on the app TikTok in order to gather information about booktok. The subsequent article, published in 2021, shows a section dedicated to the recurrent topics she came across the most. Merga reports that she encountered eight themes the most and presents her findings as: "videos focused on recommendations (40.5%), reader experience (24.1%), emotional reader response (14.6%), reader community and identity (13.8%), characters and places (11.2%), writer (6.9%), personal library management (6%), and reader in the family (4.3%)" (Merga 2021: 4). This shows that readers tend to look to booktok for their next recommendation, while creators are more than happy to oblige to those requests and to share their opinions.

An article for *The Butler Collegian*, an independent periodical run by students at the Butler University in Indiana, states that, thanks to booktok, "book lovers have their own section of the internet where they can indulge in their reading pleasures with no fear of judgment and can interact with people who have the same interests as well" (Wood 2022)[10]. Merga

[8] The term "booktok community" is being used here to describe the overarching community of creators and consumers. Within the community there are different sections dedicated to specific genres and to the discussion of specific topics within those genres, or topics relevant for the community as a whole. Booktok is open to anyone who loves literature, however "spats" amongst community members are common and triggered by matters ranging from a simple opinion regarding a book to more serious topics like racism, homophobia, transphobia and misogyny inside the community and within the literary industry.

[9] "Creators" here is being used to refer to people who partake in the hobby of reading and post about it online. Although, "creators" is also an overarching term that can also include the authors and publishing houses mentioned, as well as other industry professionals who take to social media to share tips about how to catch the attention of an editor and how to market ones work, for example.

[10] It has to be kept present that there are some that claim that the existence of "booktok" in its current form is damaging to the publishing industry as a whole and that the existence of "booktok" has reduced the hobby of reading to an "aesthetic". That is not the point of this dissertation but it should still be addressed. The articles "In the shallow world of BookTok, being 'a reader' is more important than actually reading" (Barry Pierce

supports this claim by saying that "young people interact with the shared social purposes of book discussion on a proliferation of social network platforms such as in the Booktok community" (Merga 2021: 1). Furthermore, research conducted by academics in the Aalborg University in Denmark recognizes the value in this online community. Grøn and Albrechtslund (2020) report that "like-minded readers are virtually connected to express their reading experiences, negotiate literary value and meaning and construct individual as well as collective identities" (122)[11].

This is true even for authors. Both well established and up and coming, they have taken to using social media to engage with their readers through inside jokes about their work and their ups and downs as authors, and to also keep them updated on what's to come next[12]. Worthy of note is also the popular video sharing platform YouTube where lengthier and more detailed videos are posted. These range from reviews of various books to rankings of the works read throughout the month, or year, and reading vlogs, where the person in the video films themselves reading a book and making comments and annotating as they go. The length and detail of the videos is the most notable difference between YouTube and TikTok, although it must be noted that a great portion of creators posts on both platforms as well as to Instagram, where the posts are more geared towards being visually pleasing and showing off special editions and beautifully organized shelves (Maddox and Gil 2023: 2-3). However, it is reductive to think that all there is to this corner of the internet is a way to exchange suggestions and to keep up to date with one's favourite authors. The influence that the book community on social media, especially on TikTok, has on the book market is not something to be ignored.

As an example, several books have been reported to have had a "second chance" on the platform. An article written for *Deutsche Welle* states that through the various types of posts, books that had been published years prior to relatively low success became overnight

2023) and "BookTok: The Renaissance or the Ruin of the Publishing Industry?" (Audrey Bolin 2024) are a good starting point for this discussion.

[11] The matter of building identity through being a member of a fan community is one that is very interesting and very important, but cannot be addressed in this dissertation.

[12] Victoria Aveyard, Chloe Gong and Alex Aster can be seen as examples of authors who are using TikTok in such ways. All three authors are known bestselling writers who mostly write for a Young Adult audience, although their recent posts have alluded to their next works being targeted towards a more adult readership. Rosie Hewlett and Natalie Haynes, whose books we will be analyzing, are also frequent posters on the app.

bestsellers after being mentioned on TikTok, as is the case of the novel *The Song of Achilles,* written by Madeline Miller and published originally in 2011 (Sánchez 2022). In the same vein, thanks to the popularity of TikTok "Olivie Blake's self-published novel *The Atlas Six* was so successful on TikTok that the author was signed by Tor Books, an imprint of Pan Macmillan. The publishing company released in 2021 a newly revised and edited version of her novel, along with the following books of the trilogy" (Sánchez 2022). The article then claims that "hypes created through TikTok are having a real impact on sales figures and bestseller lists" (Sánchez 2022). So, not only is social media impacting sales and giving books a "renaissance", it is also a gateway for authors to be signed or to partner with a publishing house in order to advance their career and give their self-published work a new life.

Publishing houses "have also set up their own TikTok account to publish BookTok content, whether videos promoting new publications or short interviews with authors" (Sánchez 2022) in order to boost and promote their business by taking advantage of the popularity of the platform and the hashtag[13]. Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gil of the University of Alabama reported that "publishers use these social media reading cultures as predictive tools harness already existing audience interests" (Maddox and Gil 2023: 2).

Bookstores have also not sat idle and they have recognized the power of the platform and its benefits for their business model:

> Bookstores across the nation [United States of America] have taken to making entire shelves or displays of recommendations based on BookTok, including Barnes & Noble. Upon entering a Barnes & Noble retail location, one of the first displays a customer's eyes are drawn to is a large BookTok sign and a table with its entire surface covered in the most popular BookTok books at that time. (Wood 2022)

The use of tables and displays inside bookstores is something Maddox and Gil also address and comment on in their article, noting the impact the digital has in an offline context (Maddox and Gil 2023: 2).

[13] As examples, one can look at Penguin, Simon and Schuster, and Pan Mcmillan as frequent posters. As for Portuguese publishing houses, out of curiosity, one can look at Grupo Infinito Particular and its subsidiaries, as well as the Portuguese office of Penguin.

Popular bookstore chains like the American Barnes & Noble and the British Waterstones have also opened accounts on TikTok where they post a wide variety of content ranging from their employees taking part in trends, suggesting books and content with authors as a way to connect with their client base and to boost sales and engagement.

Although it is impossible to predict the future, "booktok is still going strong after almost three years since it has been established, and it seems like it will continue to be loved. Hopefully, it continues to encourage readers to turn a new page in their reading adventures and keep their love of books alive" (Wood 2022).

One specific type of book that seems to be extremely beloved by readers and content creators alike is that of "retelling". And within that type of book, there is a large variation of liberties the author can take while retelling an already known story. While we will be looking specifically at retellings of classical myths and why those are so appealing to a reader, it is worthy to note that there is a wide range of tales that authors choose to take and retell.

For instance, retellings of fairytales are extremely popular with some of the most beloved on the platform being *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015) by Sarah J. Maas, initially marketed as a *Beauty and the Beast* retelling, and *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012) series by Marissa Meyer, in which each book retells the story of a popular fairytale princess, like Cinderella and Snow White, in a sort of sci-fi fantastical setting. Author Chloe Gong debuted with the acclaimed *These Violent Delights* (2020) duology, in which she retold the popular Shakespearean play *Romeo and Juliet* by placing the characters in the Shanghai of the 1920s and in rival drug dealing gangs. S.T. Gibson became a household name on the platform with her retelling of the story of the brides of Dracula, *A Dowry of Blood* (2021).

The books listed above are based on another piece of literature and use that as their basis. On the other hand, there is the retelling/rewrite of a character instead of a story per se. By taking one character and their most known features and characteristics, the author places them into a completely new story, usually a romance situation with a romantic partner that is usually a mask for the reader to self-insert themselves in some way. An example of this is

the *Never After* series (2021) by Emily McIntire, in which every book is dedicated to a known villainous character, some of them popularized by Disney adaptations, and their chance at romance with a female character. While often times in this series the story is also the "original" story of the book or film to which this villain belongs, the focus is the romance between the characters. It is important to note that this series is marketed as "spicy", meaning that it contains explicit sexual content or "smut", as it also is referred to amongst readers.

If it appears that these books are too disparate, that is because they are. There is no formula to write a retelling and, while there may be common tropes or trends, it is their differences that makes them appealing. The "umbrella of retelling" is broad and it harbours many diverse genres, some more popular than others, but in the end, it is that diversity of content that makes retellings so appealing and so interesting to be immersed into. As already stated, many of these retellings have the end goal to explore a romance between characters, their love story being the central focus of the narrative and weaved into an interesting plot[14]. But while the romance is the main focus, it does not mean that other topics are not addressed. Retellings, especially those in which the characters are placed in futuristic dystopias or in a world similar to ours, often address topics like politics and injustice[15]. And even within the retellings focused solely on romance, serious topics like toxic relationships, identity inside a relationship and mental health are addressed[16].

With the act of retelling a story, many of these authors choose to change a number of things in the name of offering representation to minorities. As an example, the aforementioned *These Violent Delights* (2020) duology writes the main character of Juliette as a Shanghainese Asian, along with making several of the side characters Asian as well, Chinese and Korean namely, as a way to diversify the "cast". There are also various mentions of the presence of several other nationalities, British and American and French, while the main character of Roma, an echo of the original Romeo, is a Russian, as a way to illustrate the mixing pot that was Shanghai in the 1920s.

[14] Of the examples given above, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015) fits best within this claim.
[15] For this, one can look at *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012) also mentioned above.
[16] *A Dowry of Blood* (2021) is perfect to illustrate a toxic and abusive relationship, and to watch the main character fight her way out of it.

Another set of often made changes are the introduction of LGBTQIA+ characters and the genderbending of characters, once more as a way to offer representation to the readers. *A Dowry of Blood* (2021) mentioned above offers both. While the most widely known version of the brides of Dracula offers three female characters as the titular brides and they do not seem to engage with one another romantically, the author of this novel turns one of the brides into a groom and writes a polyamorous, equal-parts loving relationship between the three of them. As for genderbending characters, the recently published *Orphia and Eurydicius* (2023) by Elyse John rewrites the myth of Orpheus and his beloved Eurydice and switches the genders of the characters, sending the female character on the hero's journey that was once only reserved for male characters.

Lastly, a lot of retellings and rewrites take on a feminist approach by exploring the perspective of female characters who previously had little voice or none at all. Retellings of this sort seem to be amongst the most popular searches with readers, and it appears that, based on observation of booktok, classical myths are the ones who are mostly retold through a feminist lens. Authors like Jennifer Saint, Claire North and Natalie Haynes have taken upon themselves to write novels that retell myths or known pieces of literature by telling them through the eyes of the female characters who did not previously have a chance to speak for themselves. Saint's *Elektra* (2022) is written from the points of view of Clytemnestra, Elektra and the Trojan princess Cassandra, characters that are prevalent in the play collection *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus (5th century BCE). North has started a series titled *The Songs of Penelope* (2022) in which the first book offers the perspective of Penelope, wife of the hero Odysseus, while he is away at war on Troy.

Retellings and rewrites are interesting and captivating, but the question of "why are readers so interested in them?" is always present in the back of one's mind. I believe that readers continue to look for retellings because of the variety, as well as the comfort, they offer, as well-known stories which get a new reading in different circumstances. YouTube creator The Book Leo's most recent video was titled "a retrospective on fairytale retellings", and she goes into some detail regarding that inquiry. While the video is a very interesting piece of research and brings forth some well-thought-out arguments, albeit focused on fairytale retellings which does not fit into this dissertation, she finishes it in a way that perfectly

summarizes the general interest in retellings/rewrites. She states: “I think humans just can’t stop retelling old stories. I think we will always have this need to tweak familiar stories to give us what we need at that moment” (The Book Leo 2024: 31:47-31:59). This can be applied to retellings of classical myth as well. It goes back to finding comfort and enjoyment in stories and characters that are so well-known and dear to us.

Furthermore, why are readers still so interested in classical mythology as well? While the reflex may be to answer that it is related to some hyper fixation from childhood or a genuine interest and love in mythology rooted in watching Disney’s animated *Hercules* (1997) on a loop, it goes deeper than that. Classical mythology and classical literature are full of female characters that are nothing but footnotes in the stories of men, characters that are simply there to facilitate the hero on his quest, or to be villains and monsters in the hero’s path. To have novels who take into consideration these women’s perspectives and feelings, maybe even perspectives and feelings that align with the ones of the reader, satisfies the curiosity left by centuries of silence. But, as we will see in the following chapter, there are some who disagree that certain characters need voice or were ever silent to begin with.

Eva Ontiveros of the BBC had the opportunity to speak to Natalie Haynes in 2020 for the publication of her novel based on the Trojan war, *A Thousand Ships*, and included excerpts of their conversation in an article. In this interview, Haynes expresses what she believes to be the reason for the popularity of feminist retellings. She starts off by saying that “one of the things which has remained pretty persistent through millennia is the focus on men: male authors writing about male characters” (Ontiveros 2020). Virginia Woolf tackles the topic in her book *A Room of One’s Own* (2015) in which she questions many things under the topics of women and their relation to literature. Immediately on chapter 1, Woolf states that women who wish to express their thoughts and creativity through writing must be financially liberated and stable (Woolf 2015: 3). This lack of financial freedom and stability can be seen as a possible cause for why texts by women have been so few and far in between, and texts by men have been prevalent. In chapter 2, Woolf notes that, during a visit to the library section of the British Museum, texts about women were also mostly written by men and that, on the opposite side, women had no such interest to write about men themselves (Woolf 2015: 20). This may seem contradictory because Woolf has found all these men, qualified or not as she also points out (Woolf 2015: 20), writing about women and found that women

are not writing about men so they must be writing about women as well, amongst other topics. So, if everyone is writing about women, where are all these alleged men writing about other men? It is most likely implied that, when Woolf states that women are not writing about men while consulting a catalogue, she found that men were the ones writing about men too. Furthermore, Woolf finds that the representations of women put to paper by men are idealized versions of womanhood and femininity, and their roles are diminished when contrasted with those of men (Woolf 2015: 20). We are reminded of the damage these idealized versions, diminished roles, and assumptions and stereotypes do to women who read them as we have seen above with Rich.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with authors writing about what they know and about people that look like them. But after centuries of only men being allowed to have their words immortalized, it is certain that many other authors and readers would like to be seen and heard as well.

Female characters written by men are often criticized as being one-dimensional, sexualized or often times just plain "dumb". They are criticized for being not only inaccurate representations, but also hurtful and damaging in the way they perpetuate stereotypes. There are discussions online in which commentators, usually female or part of minority communities, will ask their favourite book influencers if a book written by a man "is safe to read". What they mean by this question is that they wish to know if the female characters are treated with care and grace, given full narrative arcs, characterized realistically and respectfully, and not used as the butt of a joke or simply as a sexualized object.[17] The same logic applies if the person posing the question is part of a minority community: "is my race represented without the use of hurtful stereotypes?"; "is my sexuality not used as the butt of a homophobic 'joke'?"; "is my disability represented in a realistic and respectful way?". The question of a book being safe may also relate to themes present in the writing that may be triggering and how they are handled, but we are focusing only on the treatment of the female characters by male authors.

[17] For examples of this, one can visit the popular subreddit "r/menwritingwomen" where commentary and memes, along with excerpts of books are posted. The book excerpts are posted with the intention, to put it bluntly, of being torn apart and made fun of for being nonsensical, unrealistic and silly.

It is not my intention to illustrate and generalize all male authors as incapable of writing realistic women but there has to be little sliver of light shone upon this matter. Many readers who frequent online spaces and post content and who happen to identify and present themselves as female or part of minority communities refuse to read books written by men altogether. And when "men" is used, it has to be specified that most people are referring to straight cis white men. Annabelle Wagner, a contributor for the online platform *Medium*, wrote that she has stopped reading books by men due to several disappointing and triggering reading experiences (Wagner 2021). And although she specifies that there are a few male authors she enjoys, those authors "are, and always will be, on thin, fucking ice" (Wagner 2021). In this context, books written by women and minorities writing about the things they know and have lived through take precedent over books by men[18] who, upon writing these characters, are only going by assumption or research. Or at times, lack of research which is very often obvious.

What better way to tap into this want and demand for representation, as well as curiosity, than to give voice to the women of the ancient myths and texts, this time in texts written by fellow women? An article written for *The Indiependent* states the following regarding the presence, or lack thereof, of female characters in classical text:

> Previously, women were relegated to a couple of lines in between stories about male heroes and were often described through misogynistic and objectifying language. They were treated—and depicted—as subservient doormats, villains to be defeated or objects to be won and traded in war for a man's honour. (Mactaggart 2021)

The same article says that "it's clear that readers desire to know more about female characters from Greek mythology" (Mactaggart 2021) and there are many authors putting in the work so that readers can have their fill. While retellings are now extremely popular on all fronts, it "first began as a niche literary trend in the mid to late 2000s, after Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin and Amanda Elyot each wrote novels focusing on women from popular Greek myths" (Mactaggart 2021). The BBC article mentioned above goes on to say

[18] However, it has to be said that this does not mean that books written by women or minority authors are automatically labelled as safe. No book is free of criticism and no author is free of slipping up or of intentionally perpetuating hurtful stereotypes or narratives. This was simply meant to illustrate that books written by straight cis white men are usually under more scrutiny online.

that “most of the authors reading between the lines, picking out characters so thoroughly ignored, are women” (Ontiveros 2020). This further illustrates that it is the female authors who are leading the movement which is not only offering new perspectives on beloved tales, but wholly reshaping the way we speak about these characters and stories.

To finalize, the article for *The Indiependent* says the following:

> The influx of feminist Greek myths into the mainstream market is nothing short of a literary movement. This demand for feminist interpretations of Greek myths not only shows how imperative it is for women’s voices to be heard, but also just how much a contemporary audience wants and needs to hear them. They are more than just exciting new ways to retell ancient stories; they have become poignant social commentaries. Women’s voices being silenced by men feels all too familiar, so finally reading narratives about female characters who have been silenced and ignored for centuries has a significance that cannot go unnoticed. (Mactaggart 2021)

This can be seen as more than a literary movement, or a social media trend that will disappear in a few years and will be replaced by something else. It is changing academia as well. The author of the BBC article also had a chance to speak with the classicist Emily Wilson. Wilson claims in the article that it is not only casual readers and authors who are changing how things are looked at, but female translators and scholars are finally being heard when pointing out past misogyny, both in the texts and in academia (Ontiveros 2020).

As for what the readers of these retellings think of this debate, there is much they have to say and many reasons as to why they are so interested in classical myth retellings and rewrites. Meg Donahue wrote for the *Literary Hub* that she believes retellings are so popular and interesting because readers want something new at the same time that they want to experience the comfort of an already known story (Donohue 2019). She goes on to say:

> Or perhaps what is most fun about retellings is the moxie it takes for an author to retune a book that feels so canonized as to be nearly untouchable. Retellings breathe exciting, new life into classic tales, letting us rediscover stories that we read long ago, and allowing readers to interact with classics in a way that feels playful, provocative, and illuminating. (Donohue 2019)

YouTube content creator Princess Weekes has also posted a video titled "Why We Needed To Relearn The Classics", in which she discusses classical retellings and the fascination with them, amongst other interesting topics. Early on in the video she says that what she finds interesting is "the way we keep reimagining and asking 'what if' about these stories and these narratives, especially as we grow into a better understanding of the holes that exist within the classics" (Princess Weekes 2023: 1:21-1:33). By suggesting this, this creator is arguing that raising questions, can provide a new understanding of a myth. In other words, to ask questions and to provide new possibilities of what may have happened or why it happened offers a brand-new way to interpret a story and opens up new routes of discussion. She continues to say that "if you walk into a bookstore and look at new releases, you are likely going to see at least one to two feminist retellings of Greek mythological figures" (Princess Weekes 2023: 1:33-1:42). She then explains that there are retellings of several other kinds and with other mythologies in mind "but more than others you can see a leaning towards the Greek. But it's not new, people have been retelling Greek stories forever" (Princess Weekes 2023: 2:00-2:09). The leaning towards the Greek retellings is not new information as we have already seen above, but what is interesting here is what she says regarding how long Greek stories have been retold and reimagined. It is also interesting to see certain comments suggesting that retellings came out of nowhere as if most writers had not taken from others in the past and imbued writings with new information and details.

Retellings have always existed; the only difference now is that the focus is on someone other than the hero we are accustomed to see and know. Even retellings of the stories of men, are now being told from the perspective of anyone else but them. An example of this is the title *Herc* (2023) by Phoenicia Rogerson. This retelling is, of course, about the story of inarguably one of the most famous heroes there ever was, Heracles. But now his story is told from the perspectives of the women in his life, such as his wife and mother, and, curiously, from the viewpoints of the men in his life, his lover and his half-brother.

Princess Weekes then criticizes the double-standard in criticism by saying that men have been transposing their ideals on to Greek figures since forever and "yet if you're a woman or a person of colour trying to put empathy into a text or playing with different ideas, it's an

agenda" (Princess Weekes 2023: 32:23-32:31). The argument of "it's woke feminist/LGBTQIA+/racial propaganda" is often heard nowadays regarding almost anything that does not fit with the white and straight patriarchal norms we have been raised with. Princess Weekes concludes: "I love every single one of these new texts that comes out. (…) [T]heir existence means that we have options to ask the questions and get some answers" (Princess Weekes 2023: 33:03-33:20).

Academia and literature are not single monoliths frozen in time, incapable of moving forward and of making space for new people to share their studies and ideas. The fact that the criticism of being "woke propaganda" or of tarnishing legacies is being made in the first place does nothing except show the fear of change of the upper echelons of these fields. They are not afraid that a legacy is being destroyed or wrongly interpreted. The pushback comes from feeling threatened of being pushed out of the positions of control of these disciplines. To ask questions, to study, to imagine, and to provide different answers for ourselves and others are essential and crucial in order to push forward real change and to move academia forward. The existence of these texts is exciting and the fact that it scares a given group of people, be it conservatives on a political level or the more conservative classicists, shows just how necessary these texts and these conversations are. To see these new novels and ideas and academic texts and accuse them of destroying a legacy of beauty, and reducing their importance, is just another form of silencing a large group of people who have constantly been excluded.

To conclude this short introductory chapter, I would like to quote classicist Gilbert Highet. He writes that "the myths live on" (Highet 1949: 99). And then further down on the same page: "at the present time, the most interesting development of classical influence in modern thought is the reinterpretation and revitalization of the Greek myths" (Highet 1949: 99).

Chapter 4: Feminism? In my Greek Myth Retelling? It is more likely than you think! (Or is it?)

Before moving on to the second part of this dissertation, there is one final thing that must be addressed regarding the retellings of classical myths with a feminist twist: what makes them feminist and are they really as feminist as they are marketed out to be?

This is a discussion that is mostly being carried out on social media by pockets of users/consumers and content creators, as well as some think pieces being posted on personal blogs. There are, at the time of this dissertation, no news articles, studies or thorough analysis regarding the other side of the *boom* of classical myth retellings.

The main source used for this chapter will be a video posted to YouTube by creator Kate Alexandra, which she titled "The Problem with Greek Myth Retellings" (2024), while one of the think pieces mentioned above will be used as further illustration of the discussion, when appropriate.

Kate Alexandra starts off by claiming that, based on her own consumption of literature and online content, and on her own experiences when she visits bookshops, she has noticed that retellings of classical myth are extremely popular (Kate Alexandra 2024: 1:11-1:23). But then she also says something we have touched upon in chapter 3: that the existence of retellings of classical myth is not something recent and has in fact been a part of literature and televised media for a while now (Kate Alexandra 2024: 1:44). She exemplifies this by mentioning the romantic poets in the 19th century who drew inspiration from the myths[19], Mary Renault and Robert Graves writing their own reimagining of myths in the mid-20th century[20], the interest on part of Hollywood in making "sword-and-sandals" films based on myths in the 1950s and 60s since they did well in theatres[21], and Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin publishing retellings in the early 2000s[22] (Kate Alexandra 2024: 1:44-2:13).

[19] She references specifically the Romantic poets John Keats and P.B. Shelley.
[20] *The King Must Die* (1958) by Mary Renault and *I, Claudius* (1934) by Robert Graves.
[21] In the video, films such as *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *Hercules* are referenced, although it is hard to say which of the movies starring the popular hero Hercules she is referring to since there were many released in the timeframe she provides.
[22] *The Penelopiad* (2005) by Margaret Atwood and *Lavinia* (2008) by Ursula K. Le Guin.

Following this very brief contextualization, Kate Alexandra immediately dives into what she believes to be the crux of the problem regarding feminist retellings of classical myth:

> One aspect of this recent *boom* of Greek Myth retellings, which sets them apart from previous iterations, is the focus on re-centring women or otherwise marginalized voices. Many of these novels are marketed as feminist retellings. Over the years of reading retellings like these, I've noticed and have often agreed with reviewers who point out that simply focusing on women in Greek mythology doesn't necessarily equate to giving them agency. That's the irony inherent in retelling a Greek myth. Though women are the narrators, they are still constrained by the trappings of their original stories. (Kate Alexandra 2024: 2:21-2:58)

One online think piece posted on the *nerds of a feather, flock together* blog addresses this issue with feminist retellings as well. The author of the post writes:

> And then for another, a large proportion of the ones [retellings] published and heavily marketed in recent memory are billed as "feminist retellings"... while having the blandest (…) version of feminism imaginable. In the year of our common era 2023, I submit it to you that "making a woman the protagonist" is not actually all that much of a feminist statement anymore. (Pendleburry 2023)

Both these statements address the broader question of "what makes a retelling feminist?" and make it sound like to these publishers and to some degree to the authors it is enough that a woman is a protagonist for the text to be deemed feminist. Does that mean that every book, retelling or not, that has a female protagonist can be considered feminist? Is that truly all it takes?

Kate Alexandra follows up in the video by explaining she will be looking at some of the more popular retellings and claims that:

> I'm not interested in bashing these novels, but I think it's a great opportunity as the sub-genre becomes more and more profitable to consider whether retelling famous stories from women's perspectives is really changing anything about how we understand these myths. And also, whether these female characters were ever really silent in the first place. (Kate Alexandra 2024: 3:14-3:33)

While the specific analysis (plot, characterization, writing style) of the novels she has chosen cannot be discussed here, she touches upon some general concerns and topics that are of

much interest for the present discussion. Right at the beginning, Kate Alexandra states she takes issue with how the marketing surrounding *A Thousand Ships* (2019) by Natalie Haynes was carried out. She emphasises that most of the promotion was done under the umbrella that the stories of these women have been untold for centuries[23], which is something Kate Alexandra wholeheartedly disagrees with. She argues: "The issue I take with Haynes's framing of her book is that, put simply, these women's stories are not untold. They are told numerous times in some of the most ancient texts that survive" (Kate Alexandra 2024: 5:55-6:07). And after, she shares in which texts these women's stories are told, and suggests that, in fairness to Haynes, whose interview she references, "she most likely meant that these women's stories aren't told at all, just that they aren't told well" (Kate Alexandra 2024: 6:30-6:35).

The publicization of this novel in particular, in terms of the language used and witty catchphrases to draw the attention of the reader, is not reserved to this book alone. Many novels of this kind are marketed under the notion that they are, as Kate Alexandra puts it in the pinned comment under her video[24], "fixing, amending, or correcting myths". She goes on to clarify that she truly has no issue with retellings and that she simply believes that the original sources are often misunderstood and misinterpreted, which takes away from the "complexity" of the stories being told and of the female characters who are, in her opinion, not at all silent.

But then this raises another set of questions: what is a well-told story in the context of these characters and how do these authors decide which character is deserving of "finally" being heard properly?

During her more in-depth analysis, she goes on to ask which sides of these female characters are we, as readers, being shown that we have not already seen in the original text? (Kate Alexandra 2024: 8:00-8:08). It is a matter of gaining a new interpretation but perhaps losing the so-called essence and complexity that already existed within the character. Kate Alexandra states that often, when making a comparison between the women of these retellings and the women in the original texts, she has found that they are completely

[23] The issues with the marketing of these books are something she opens the video with by reading out to the viewer the "selling pitch" of a plethora of retellings, showing the similar language and buzz words.
[24] In order to view this comment, one would have to visit the link of the video presented in the references list of this dissertation, which makes it impossible to properly reference in the body of text above.

different people (Kate Alexandra 2024: 13:15-13:45), and sometimes for the worse, which is, again, a disservice to them.

Another question she raises is the matter of the speech that we get from these characters, their thoughts and ideals and beliefs. Kate Alexandra raises the question of what is lost when a myth is being told to a modern audience. And she immediately answers that the characters feel modern, they speak about modern issues and use modern language, and they feel like it is the author speaking through the character, and not the character at all (Kate Alexandra 2024: 21:28-21:45).

The post on the blog *nerds of a feather, flock together* addresses this modernity issue as well. The author writes:

> For one thing, the way many of them are adapted to modernity, in format, but critically in tone, does them a disservice. The originals have guts and teeth and claws, and they may not be the ones we want now, but they have them. But, unfortunately, the majority of the retellings take them out, make them... more palatable, but less substantial. (…) Even when meant in the best possible way, some of the modern simplification erases the glorious complexity of the original. (Pendleburry 2023)

Additionally, Kate Alexandra addresses the proverbial elephant in the room: most of the more popular retellings are written by female authors:

> It is frustrating that female authors can't write about ancient history in an uncomplicated way but must always be speculating, reimagining or critically analysing their source material (…) I just don't think that Greek mythology requires the level of reimagining and retelling some of these authors are giving it. (Kate Alexandra 2024: 28:38-29:03)

Kate Alexandra remains of the firm belief that these women were not silent and to believe that they were it is to make them a disservice and to erase their mark on history and literature[25]. It is almost like the other side of the question posed above regarding what makes a book feminist. Is it perhaps that the fact that the text is written by a woman, focusing on a female character, automatically brands it as thought provoking and essential reading for

[25] It is important to note that the creator of this video enjoys (most) of the novels she has referenced, which is something she repeats throughout as to not make it sound like she is nitpicking and attacking the authors and their work. She believes they are interesting pieces of literature and that, for many, they will be the introduction to mythology.

feminists? As she says, there is an inherent issue with female authors writing about such topics, there is always baggage, but then there is also the question of necessity. Did this character need to be heard? Which is what she is questioning throughout the whole video.

Now, what does this all mean in the context of this dissertation and, more importantly, when looked at in tandem with the novels that will be analysed in the following chapters? Medusa is an interesting character to look at side by side with the questions and issues Kate Alexandra and the author of the blog post raise. She is interesting because she is present but she is, in fact, silent. In the Classical texts that were selected, Medusa does not speak. Kate Alexandra says in her video that "the women that are truly silent are the ones we don't hear about" (Kate Alexandra 2024: 30:21-30:25), but what does that make Medusa then? We know her name, her family genealogy, what she looked like before and after her transformation, what happened to her. All this without hearing her at all and as we receive this information from the narrators. It is a paradox. She was silent, but we know her. But then does this mean her story was told wrong until now, because it did not come from her own voice? Does this mean we have a duty to tell her story right? It raises question after question without arriving at a proper answer.

Kate Alexandra leaves the question of "are these novels feminist?" unanswered, perhaps purposefully, since she may believe the video itself, with its arguments, is enough in the way of an answer.

I will finish this section with this: Kate Alexandra states that, while she believes authors are more than allowed to write about myths, they carry with them a responsibility because they are introducing these stories to new readership who may not have read the original texts, and who may never wish to read them[26]. To negate the voices present there is to do these characters, and the text in general, a disservice.

With this video and the questions it raises in mind, the next section will delve in detail into the selected retellings, all of which were branded and marketed as "feminist".

[26] This is once again clarified in the pinned comment of the video that can be viewed by clicking the link in the reference list.

PART II

As we move on now to look at how contemporary authors adapt and rewrite Medusa, it is important to once again keep in mind that there is no version of the myth that is truer than the others. One can argue that there might be a version that is more accepted by scholars or by the general public, but that does not mean that that version is the ultimate truth. At the end of the day, we are discussing the existence and demise of a mythical figure, who cannot be proven to have existed at all and whose sources consist of literature, often fragmented and sometimes mistranslated, and art that might also be damaged or misinterpreted. It must also be remembered that even though some details of these versions converge, no version is identical and sometimes it takes one simple change to make them differ from one another.

These differences and gaps in information caused by loss or mistranslation leave an opening for one to retell and rewrite a particular myth one finds interesting. But, as we have already seen, these myths have survived due to being written down by a predominantly male group of writers, poets and artists, which translates to these myths being reported on with a male lens, taking into consideration male perspectives, and not having the same degree of care towards how female stories are told. While having a story told, or translated, by a man is not the sole reason as to why there are some gaps in the how female stories are told, it is one big part of it. Rosie Hewlett, one of the authors we will be looking at, had Medusa as the narrator say the following:

> But history is written by the winners. Or, more simply, history is written by men. People seem to forget that as well. And this is why my story has never really been 'my' story. How could it be, when my voice never had a place in its retelling? I, like so many others, have fallen casualty to the narrative of men. My life has been ground down by their words, forcing me into the stifling confines of a cliché, a prop to bolster their own egos. An endless echo of lies, ringing throughout generations, haunting me. (Hewlett 2021: 7-8)

As said in the introduction to this dissertation, the three initial chapters of this section will be looking at three contemporary novels that retell the story of Medusa[27] and look at some

[27] The commentary and analysis of the novels are organized by year of release.

key and notable moments. At the end, before we move on to chapter 4, a brief comparative analysis of how all authors portray Medusa and retell the myth will be provided.

Chapter 1: Medusa (2021)

To start off, we shall look at the novel titled *Medusa* (2021), written by Rosie Hewlett. According to the author's biography, Hewlett holds a degree in Classical Literature and Civilization and she "has studied Greek mythology in depth and is passionate about unearthing strong female voices within the classical world" (https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/21362862.Rosie_Hewlett). This is her debut novel which she self-published and her most recent novel, a retelling of the story of Medea, was just published in March of 2024. In the author's note of the novel, Hewlett states that myths have always been passed on through a tradition of retelling and reimagining, and she "followed this same tradition of myth, to retell but also reimagine. Therefore, there will be parts of this story that are very familiar and parts that will be entirely new" (Hewlett 2021: 6).

First of all, it must be noted that the Medusa in Hewlett's novel is speaking directly to the reader as a first-person narrator. She starts by explaining that she is talking from the underworld and her goal is to "set the record straight" (Hewlett 2021: 8) regarding her life story.

Medusa is mortal as we already know, and she was given to her sisters to raise because her parents did not want her, for she was a blight on their lineage (Hewlett 2021: 13). She tells the reader that her mother even said things such as "do you think I would degrade myself to raise a mortal child?" and "it is no child of mine" (Hewlett 2021: 14). Euryale and Stheno, her sisters, are portrayed as young (perhaps teenagers or very young adults) due to how they act throughout the novel as per Medusa's narration, so it is not surprising that they do not want the responsibility of raising a child and choose to leave Medusa with her "own kind. Mortals" (Hewlett 2021: 14). They decide to give Medusa to an old woman, who we are then told is named Theia, who lives alone in an abandoned temple to the goddess Athena as its only remaining priestess (Hewlett 2021: 15-16). Theia takes the baby in, names her Medusa and raises her to be a priestess of Athena (Hewlett 2021: 17-18).

The idea that Medusa was a priestess of Athena before her assault is not exactly new but it is impossible to track it down to its point of origin. It is possible that it started with an interpretation of texts or art or simply because someone thought it would be interesting if that were the case and it just gained traction. By adding this to the myth, one adds a specific layer of something that can only be classified as heart-breaking. Medusa describes in the novel that she was committed to her duties of priestess, and fully dedicated to the goddess she considered to be her patroness. Athena is a virgin and pure goddess, so Medusa herself took a vow of purity and celibacy. Even though she had wished to be a mother one day, she was to remain a virgin priestess for not to do so would be to dishonour and offend Athena (Hewlett 2021: 36-39). She explains that since the temple was positioned in an area where not many visitors came, her duties as priestess were not many and mostly included keeping the temple clean and tidy (Hewlett 2021: 19). What is even more heart-breaking here is that Medusa says that the chore she cherished the most was to dust the statue of the goddess (Hewlett 2021: 19). Theia had imbued in to her that this statue being kept in pristine condition was their priority, for the statue was the embodiment of Athena and "to neglect this statue would be to offend our Great Goddess" (Hewlett 2021: 19). So Medusa took her job seriously. She reverently dusted the statue twice every day and due to being so lonely, she started speaking to it and imagining that Athena was talking back, encouraging her to go on. She had foolishly thought of the goddess as a friend (Hewlett 2021: 19-20). But now, as the narrating voice, Medusa rationalizes that she was so infatuated with the idea of Athena that everything she did was to please her (Hewlett 2021: 19) and that now she knows "Athena did not listen nor care. She never had and never would" (Hewlett 2021: 20).

To take this route with the myth, and to hear it from Medusa's own mouth, is devastating in the overall context of the story. It is not just the shattering of the innocence of a young woman through a brutal assault. The lack of action on Athena's end and the consequent punishment she put Medusa through bring forth the complete destruction of not only a religious ideal but of the image of a goddess who was supposed to be good and protect her priestesses, someone who was supposed to be a source of comfort and a friend.

The next moment of importance is an occasion that feels extremely contemporary. Medusa describes in heavy detail the first occasion in which she noticed a man lusting after her, at

only seventeen years old. When she starts retelling this event, it is interesting that she begins by saying that she "never cared about being beautiful. I never even liked it. If I had the option to be beautiful again, I would not take it" (Hewlett 2021: 40). She credits this moment with the man as the moment her innocence started to be stripped from her (Hewlett 2021: 40-41). It is worthy of note that since the temple was fairly isolated not many people came by and Theia always dealt with the ones that did, meaning that Medusa is inexperienced in how to interact with visitors or, as she puts it, "I was painfully inexperienced with the customs of *Xenia,* the ancient laws of hospitality which bound all beings together" (Hewlett 2021: 41)[28]. Due to this inexperience, she is caught even more off guard when the first thing the man says to her is "Goddess" (Hewlett 2021: 41), explaining then that he just thought she was Athena herself due to how beautiful she was (Hewlett 2021: 41). To compare oneself to the gods in any way is usually frowned upon and considered to be an act of *hybris* that is worthy of punishment. It is important to note here that Medusa does not make this comment herself, however, this comparison is a reference to what is written by Apollodorus in his text *The Library*. In it, Apollodorus wrote that "it is alleged by some that Medusa was beheaded for Athena's sake; and they say the Gorgon was fain to match herself with the goddess even in beauty" (Apollodorus 2010: 161)[29]. Apollodorus is suggesting here that Medusa gloated over her physical beauty and dared to name herself an equal to Athena in that sense, so the goddess sent Perseus to punish her. In the overall context of the novel, this exchange with the man marks, as Medusa herself said, the beginning of the loss of her innocence (Hewlett 2021: 40-41), but it also gives her a scale from which to gauge every other interaction she may have with men.

After he asks for her name and she gives it to him, he repeats it back to her and she makes the following comment:

> I had never heard my name said like that before, charged by an unfamiliar intensity. It was as if this man had given my name a whole other meaning. I suddenly felt uneasy, though I wasn't sure why. All the man had done was call me beautiful, yet I could not deny my

[28] The custom of "xenia" dictated that if a stranger visited your home, regardless of their social status, you were bound by religious law to offer hospitality. If hospitality was not given, one would be risking enraging the Gods since the patron of this custom was Zeus Xenios (https://www.princeton.edu/~aford/terms.html).
[29] The English translation used here of Apollodorus's works was made by James George Frazer and published in 2010.

> discomfort, it was right there, squirming in the pit of my stomach. I remained silent, not knowing how to ease this strange tension building between us. (Hewlett 2021: 41-42)

Her discomfort is even more palpable when she recognizes that the man has suddenly started looking at her with lustful eyes when before he seemed to only be surprised to find such a beautiful creature in a lonely temple. This sudden change in his eyes happens upon her reveal that she is alone, vulnerable, innocent (Hewlett 2021: 42). He offers to keep her company and here Medusa divulges she had the final revelation, the *click* if you will:

> And suddenly, all at once, the pieces slotted into place and I understood. He *wanted* me. The realisation tightened in my chest, causing my cheeks to flush deeper. His desire suddenly felt like a tangible heat between us, burning my skin. He moved to take a step closer as a gasp caught in my lungs. (Hewlett 2021: 42)

But nothing happens to Medusa as Theia interrupts whatever the man had intended to do if he had managed to get his hands on the young woman. Theia issues the man a warning that he is not to bother Medusa or attempt to interact with her in any way; if he needs or wants something, he should ask her for it. The older woman does not mince words and accuses the man of being lustful and wanting to not only desecrate the virginal priestess, but to desecrate the temple of Athena (Hewlett 2021: 42-43). Medusa takes note of two different things during this interaction between her caregiver and the man. Firstly, she notices that the man tries to hide his intentions immediately after Theia walks in. She makes a point of singling out his surprise at being caught and his immediate change as he tries to look innocent as exemplified by her description of his reaction: "The man jumped, recoiling backwards as if he had been physically stung, the longing in his eyes quickly masked by a look of greasy innocence" (Hewlett 2021: 42). The use of the adjective "greasy" is especially interesting here when associated with innocence. Innocence usually invokes a sense of purity and righteousness. By using this adjective, Medusa is showing that she is aware that this image of innocence he is pushing forward is a sham and not only that, it is obviously disingenuous.

She then observes that, after realizing his faux innocence did not sway Theia, his response is to turn defensive once she accuses him of exactly what he intended to do. He only falters in his resolve after Theia threatens him with the wrath of the goddess at such thoughts and acts being performed inside her temple and towards her devoted priestess (Hewlett 2021:

43). The foreshadowing of what is to come is very obvious here. Theia threatens him with punishment because he had intended to desecrate the temple in an act of lustful blasphemy, which is exactly what will happen later as we well know. It is just that the person who will be punished for that offensive act is not the one who should be taking the brunt of the blame. But more on that later.

It is also important to address the way in which masculine sexuality is portrayed in this novel. In every instance it appears on page, right now with this man and later on with Poseidon as we will see, it is shown as a form of aggression. It is never seen as something harmless that may evolve into romance, or at least into a pleasurable encounter between two consenting parties who find each other attractive. There is almost joy on the part of this man that Medusa is apparently alone in this temple and, while he is joyful, Medusa is wary. Her fight or flight instinct is activated and it is very clear she will be choosing to take flight. This is not only an almost sexual aggression against Medusa, but it is also an aggression towards whatever beliefs she may have had regarding human interaction and, more importantly, regarding male/female interactions. This interaction scarred her in such a way that she is surprised later on when Hermes visits her, and he seems to not care for her in that manner.

The second thing she takes note of is Theia's reaction to the situation. There is the obvious silent communication between the two that can only exist through a deep bond between Medusa and her mother-figure. Medusa explains that "an unspoken understanding passed between us" (Hewlett 2021: 42) when her eyes met Theia's upon the older woman's entrance in the temple, disturbing the man. There are no further details but as a reader, one can gather enough context to perhaps realize what was happening here. Medusa is afraid so it is possible that this fear showed on her face and Theia not only recognized that, but understood the man's intentions based on her own experiences as we can then ascertain by the things the older woman says. Here is a clear example of the community we will be looking at that in more depth in chapter 2 with *Stone Blind* (2022). There are no words exchanged, and yet Theia is too well aware of what is going on, not only in Medusa's mind but also regarding the man's intentions. She protects Medusa in the one way she can: by calling upon the authority of the goddess and by using her title of priestess in a temple as leverage. And the reaction the older woman has after she finishes telling the man off and ushering him away only contributes further to this conviction. Medusa tells the reader that "when she finally

turned to look at me, there was something in her eyes that unsettled me. She looked apologetic, mournful even" (Hewlett 2021: 43). The empathy on Theia's end reveals that not only has Medusa been forever changed by this but that this will be something she will have to deal with constantly as a woman, and seals the beginning of the loss of Medusa's innocence. It is devastating as a reader to decode the realization in Theia that she will not always be able to keep Medusa safe from such things and while she had been successful until now, she cannot do it any longer because Medusa has been "woken up" to it.

And Medusa recognizes that after this eye-opening experience, she had become more aware of the way people (men) looked at her whenever she visited the town nearby and she explains it succinctly, and it harkens back to the matter of beauty:

> Everything changed once my innocence had been stripped from me, leaving my body bare for men to shamelessly ogle. Where I had once been excited by the rare company of others, now I was afraid of it. I dreaded our trips into town, as I knew I would be met with longing looks and hungry eyes, the kind that stained my skin, making my body no longer feel safe, no longer feel like my own. When you are beautiful everyone thinks you owe them something and that they have the right to simply reach out and take it – to stare, to touch, to claim. The world around me became ugly and frightening, as if a candle had been struck, illuminating the dangers I had been so blind to before. I hated all of it and wanted nothing more than to hide away inside the temple, under Athena's protective gaze. (Hewlett 2021: 43-44)

Judith Butler writes in her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) that, based on what was written by Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, one can ascertain that "the body comes to bear cultural meanings" (Butler 1988: 520). And then further down she argues that according to Beauvoir "the body suffers a certain cultural construction, not only through conventions that sanction and prescribe how one acts one's body, the 'act' or performance that one's body is, but also in the tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived" (Butler 1988: 523-524). The focus here is the use of the words "cultural meaning" and "the way the body is culturally perceived". Simply by existing and presenting herself in a certain way, Medusa and her body are perceived by the eyes of others, and this perception comes with expectations not only of how she should behave but also expectations of what she may need to do or say

to others because of her culturally perceived body. The “cultural meaning” and the cultural perception of Medusa’s body also rob her of her agency. She says so herself by pointing out that now that she is aware of the desires of men, she fears going out in public when before she earned for it desperately. She is condemned to either endure the gawking and suffer through maybe catcalling or attempts of assault, or be condemned to lock herself away. Although she can choose one or the other, is the choice not already made for her?

Moving forward several pages, the readers find themselves now in the presence of one of the Olympian Gods. It is not yet Poseidon, coming to commit the atrocity we know him for, but it is one of his nephews, Hermes. Very briefly, I will introduce this character: Hermes is a son of Zeus and a nymph, whose powers are many and he was worshipped and beloved throughout Greece. He is mostly known for being the messenger of the Gods and for being the guide of souls to the underworld as one of his titles dictates: Hermes Psychopompus. Hermes is also known for being a bit of a trickster God (Giesecke 2020, “Hermes”: 62-63).

The trickster visits the temple after Theia passes away, an event that truly devastates Medusa as she had never experienced loss until then. It is unclear how much time has passed since Theia’s death, but we do know that Medusa is focusing on her priestess duties even harder than before, most likely in an attempt to not only honour the memory of the older woman but as a way to maintain routine. And the reader also knows that she is all alone since her sisters, who at this point had been visiting often, had grown bored of her and her grief and had not shown up in a while (Hewlett 2021: 47). Although she is startled by Hermes’s sudden presence, she obliges his requests to sit with him and play his lyre so as to not cause him offense (Hewlett 2021: 50). Before we move on, the power dynamic that is here at play must be mentioned. Not only is Hermes a God and she a mortal, therefore insignificant in comparison to him, Medusa is still a very religious young woman at this point of the story. Throughout this interaction she mentions time and time again how she is shaking and nervous to be in his presence, fearing making a mistake or saying the wrong thing. It must also be said that Medusa recognizes that Hermes appears to have no sexual interest in her like other men do, the encounter with the man early on very obviously scarred her in many ways, which causes her to relax slightly (Hewlett 2021: 49). Let us keep that power dynamic in mind as we look further into this interaction.

At the beginning, their interaction is innocent enough with Medusa trying to cater to his requests and Hermes speaking in riddles he surely considers to be amusing and that she cannot understand, until he says that something as beautiful as Medusa could never commit any acts of violence (Hewlett 2021: 50). This tips Medusa off that there is something else at play, that Hermes knows something and, like the trickster he is, is using it to taunt her. Although at the time she never finds out what it was that he knew, in hindsight she very obviously knows what it was that he was hiding and recognizes that he was taunting her for his own amusement. Then, after another innocent interaction, he asks her if she has heard about the creature known as the Minotaur. The creature is a "character" in the myth of another famous hero, Theseus, and interestingly the Minotaur came to be due to Poseidon's involvement. The story of the Minotaur is an interesting one in itself but in the context of this novel, Hermes brings it up and holds the Minotaur up to Medusa as a sort of mirror.

Now we must clarify, as Hermes does, that the Minotaur does not yet exist. Medusa is confused as she does not know what the Minotaur is, and Hermes explains that "of course not! Silly me, he hasn't even been born yet, has he? I sometimes get my pasts, presents and futures mixed up" (Hewlett 2021: 52). Hermes's clairvoyant proclivities aside, he describes the Minotaur as a creature of great ugliness but that despite this ugliness, this physical monstrosity it possesses, the Minotaur never did anything wrong. He goes on to say that the Minotaur "was just the collateral damage, punishment for the actions of a greedy king. And yet, despite this, the creature will be treated as a monster its entire life, hated and condemned, forced into violence and ultimately... killed" (Hewlett 2021: 53). Hermes then asks what Medusa thinks of a creature that was otherwise innocent being forced to become a monster due to the actions of someone else, to which Medusa replies that, if the Gods decided to enact this punishment on an innocent creature, surely, they must have had a good reason. And Hermes counters this by saying "remind me to ask you that again in a few months" (Hewlett 2021: 53).

Looking back on it, Medusa understands what Hermes was attempting to tell her, but back then she had no way of knowing what he meant. As a reader, one can surmise that Hermes was testing her regarding the matter of innocence in relation to creatures that are perceived as monsters. He was curious to see what she would say and gather information to maybe

down the line return to throw those same words back in her face as a form of amusement to himself.

Equally, she had no way of knowing what Hermes meant when he tells her he "wanted to meet the famous Medusa" and that he is "a big fan of your work... or else, I will be a big fan. One day" (Hewlett 2021: 54). He leaves after this, claiming that he already revealed too much, but not before saying that Poseidon asked him to tell Medusa that he is watching her and is interested (Hewlett 2021: 55). In hindsight, of course she knows what all this was about and she has a reason as to why Hermes did this. As a trickster as well as a messenger of the Gods, and a bit clairvoyant, Medusa believes Hermes lives for the drama and havoc he causes in other people's lives. He only reveals what he wants to reveal and only answers questions with half-truths. When she says this, it is very obvious she holds Hermes in some sort of grudge but she makes a point of saying that he is not the worst of them [the gods] all (Hewlett 2021: 55-56).

What follows is the description of the assault she suffered at the hands of Poseidon. While we will not be going into detail regarding this episode, there is one thing that must mentioned that has been a recurring theme until now. And that is the eyes. Medusa pays special attention to the eyes of the men she meets; it is how she guesses their intentions towards her and how she decides on how she should act. We have seen the lustful eyes of the man that visited the temple before Theia's death and the eyes of the men in the town, and we have seen Hermes's eyes who are curious and playful instead of full of desire. As for Poseidon, he is smart enough to lull Medusa into a false sense of security by being kind and playful with his words and making her smile. He pretends to be harmless, a friend. Until Medusa "caught his gaze and saw the ugly, unapologetic hunger that burned there" (Hewlett 2021: 61) and she is immediately on guard and terrified, but it is too late.

Here is another example of the masculine sexuality being seen as a form of aggression. It is important to keep in mind that the expression of one's sexuality, male or female, or the expression of desire should never be viewed as something to hide or as something to be ashamed of. Poseidon very obviously believes that, differently from the man from earlier who tried to hide it, and most importantly, he believes that he is owed what he wants, hence this is why the use of the adjective "unapologetic" is so interesting. And while the expression

of masculine sexuality from the earlier interaction stayed in the territory of a moral aggression perhaps, this one was moral and physical sexual aggression.

Worthy of note is also the fact that in the novel Medusa acknowledges the different versions of her myth that have reached her in the underworld. She makes a point of singling out the version in which she and Poseidon were in love, popularized by Hesiod, and the versions in which she, the insignificant mortal, was the one seducing poor powerful God of the sea Poseidon. She reasons that these versions are popular because they are more palatable and it is easy to shove the blame on to her because it "frees them of any accountability. They can remain blind to the realities of the world" (Hewlett 2021: 68).

It is interesting that she has these moments throughout the novel in which she moves away from the story per se and speaks to the reader directly about something that happened *after* she died, something that happened as her story was passed along and retold. From the way she speaks, it is clear that she has spent much of her time thinking about and analysing everything in order to better understand not only herself and why she acted the way she did, but also in order to understand the impacts of her story. One can only imagine what a victim of the brutality she suffered feels upon hearing she was in love with her abuser or that she was the temptress in it all.

Following her assault and the punishment we have grown so familiar with, Medusa once again addresses the reader with a reflection on gender and how gender relates not only to what happened to her, but to Athena as well. She fantasizes about a reality where Athena defended her and punished Poseidon, but recognizes that Athena would never because "Athena is not capable of such compassion towards other women. In fact, I have reason to believe Athena hated women altogether" (Hewlett 2021: 75). She goes on to say the following:

> Perhaps because she never identified as one herself. Born from the head of Zeus, in full battle gear, Athena never had the gentle touch of a mother, or the softness of youth. She entered the world a cold warrior and that is how she will forever be. However, I must add that she was not entirely devoid of feeling. She did have a certain fondness for heroes, I think because they were the only mortals she felt an affinity with. Heroes were men chosen by the Fates to live courageous and valiant lives, faced with epic adventures on their quest for *kleos,* glory.

> Athena would all too readily save her beloved heroes from the wrath of the other Olympians. But, of course, it was *far* too much to expect her to save a pious, vulnerable, young woman like me. (Hewlett 2021: 75)

Let us speak about Athena for a moment. According to myth, Athena sprouted from Zeus's head, fully armoured and ready for war (Giesecke 2020, "Athena": 27). She then became the goddess of wisdom, warfare and crafting associated with women such as needle work and weaving (Giesecke 2020, "Athena": 27). Having been birthed, so to speak, by Zeus, she enjoys a privileged position at his side in Olympus as his favourite daughter. He often favours her in arguments by taking her side and supporting her, as evidenced in Book V of *The Iliad*, where the god Ares accuses Zeus of doing that very thing (Homer 1990: 1015-1018; Haynes 2023: 217). Athena often favours men over other women; this having become one of the things she is most criticized for in contemporary interpretations and analysis. She is most notoriously known for being the protector of Odysseus throughout both Homeric epics, favouring him above anybody else, and for forgiving the prince Orestes after he committed matricide (Giesecke 2020, "Athena": 27-28), and, evidently, for punishing Medusa for her own assault, angered by the desecration of her temple. As for Minerva, the Roman counterpart of Athena, she is also known for an episode in which she chose to punish a woman. Minerva is known for beating the mortal Arachne over a weaving contest, when the young girl refused to admit that her tremendous skills had been taught by the goddess. In Minerva's eyes, this was an act of *hybris* and an offense to her (Giesecke 2020, "Arachne": 139-140).

Natalie Haynes references in her essay collection *Divine Might: Goddesses in Greek Myth* (2023), in which she dedicates an essay to Athena, the lack of a motherly figure in Athena's life. She touches upon the circumstances of Athena's making, she is herself a product of something that can be interpret as rape, and of her birth from her father's head (Haynes 2023: 212). But Haynes takes it to another level when she addresses what this absence of a mother did to Athena. Firstly, she explains that Zeus swallowed Athena's mother as a precaution. Zeus had been told that at some point, one of his divine children would be born and overpower him, which caused great fear in the father of the Gods. Swallowing Athena's mother while she is pregnant proves to be fruitful in a way. While it did not prevent Athena's birth altogether, it caused her to be born with less power than Zeus (Haynes 2023: 213).

Haynes questions if Athena had been born under more normal circumstances, so to speak, and raised by a mother, she would in fact be stronger than her father, but also how different altogether would she have been? (Haynes 2023: 213) Would the presence of a mother have made Athena gentler and more prone to helping women instead of favouring men? That is speculation and material for, perhaps, a retelling about Athena herself. But in this context, it is a speculation in line with what Medusa herself is wondering.

It is interesting to see the circumstances of Athena's birth and her favouritism towards men being used as perhaps a justification for her behaviour and actions. Although it is an explanation, and something that Medusa clearly sees as a rational explanation, it is not an excuse and it is also very clear that Medusa does not see it as such nor does she forgive Athena. Every time she speaks of Athena, her voice is full of latent rage and, although she never insults the Goddess, she makes a point to directly address Athena and say that she is nothing now that mortals have forgotten the Olympian pantheon (Hewlett 2021: 74).

Further on into the novel, Medusa and her sisters, who have been punished along with her, have become something akin to vigilantes. While this could be interpreted according to the original classical writings that Medusa's victims were accidents or self-defence, the same cannot be said in the case of the novel. Medusa and her sisters go out of their way to attack and kill men under the banners of "cleansing the land" and "it's all men" (Hewlett 2021: 98). Once again addressing the reader, Medusa clarifies that she knows this was not right and that to fight violence done upon her with further violence was not and never would be the answer, but she does not regret it (Hewlett 2021: 98). She was turned into a monster and a villain, so she would be that monster and that villain if that was what they (Athena, the world) wanted her to be. But she now struggles with the idea that perhaps she was simply victimizing the world as a way to forget that she could never punish Athena and Poseidon, and as a way to forget that she had been a victim herself (Hewlett 2021: 100). This is a vicious cycle in which nobody comes out the winner and all she accomplished was to make herself a villain, even if by her own choice, and to push down pain that should have been looked into and acknowledged. As she puts it herself "and no matter how many lives I ended, I could never change my own. My narrative had already been set and all I could do was fall helplessly into

the future the Fates had decided for me. You see, we are all the Fates' victims in the end" (Hewlett 2022: 100)[30].

The final key component of this novel we shall be looking at is Medusa's interactions and consequent relationship with her murderer, Perseus. She had mentioned him in passing at the beginning when she shared with the reader that he is one of the few men she does not hate (Hewlett 2021: 74). But now we finally have the meeting of two beings whose fates have been intertwined for a while now. She starts by wanting to share with the reader Perseus's background as told to her by the man himself (Hewlett 2021: 135), and what she shares first is very interesting. We know that Perseus came to be from a union between Danaë, his mother, and Zeus. It is worthy of note that Medusa shares with the reader that Perseus is a child of rape himself and he was the one to tell her this. In her own words: "I have heard fanciful retellings of this myth, where Zeus supposedly transformed himself into golden rain and seeped into the skin of Perseus' mother, Danaë. It makes it sound so innocent, almost whimsical, doesn't it? But Perseus assured me that this was not the case" (Hewlett 2021: 135).

Danaë is rarely ever seen as a victim of Zeus. Medusa is right in saying that there is a whimsical connotation in how we look at this connection and it is whimsical enough that one can squint and pretend it is romantic, forgetting Zeus is a God and Danaë is a mortal captive princess. There is no description of the act itself, so one can only speculate what was said, what was the mood in the cell, how did Danaë feel during and after. But if Perseus is telling Medusa that his mother is a victim of rape, it is possible that it was Danaë herself who told him this. If Danaë shared this with him, it is because she knows that this encounter with Zeus, even though it gave her a son she loves, was an act of pure uncontrolled lust that she was in no position to say no to. Once again there is a power dynamic at play. An immortal being felt like he could take because he wanted to, and the mortal princess had to say yes because she feared for her life. A coerced yes is not consent.

[30] The Fates, or The Moirae as they are referred to in myth were three sisters in charge of destiny. They each had a different job. Clotho measured and cut the thread of life, Lachesis decided the fate of a person, and the third sister, Atropos, made sure the fate that was weaved was not changed (Giesecke 2020, "The Moirae":78-79). At this point, Medusa is letting the reader know that she is aware that her own story was out of her control and decided long ago.

It is very obvious that Medusa sees herself in Danaë, or she at least knows what she went through and understands her better than anyone else ever could (Hewlett 2021: 135-136). Not only are they both victims of sexual assault, they are victims of the gods who took from them what they wanted and then moved on with their lives as if this meant nothing. And it most likely did not. Medusa was a blip in Poseidon's long life in the same way that Danaë was a blip in Zeus's. We can argue that Zeus did end up caring for Danaë because he asked Poseidon to intervene and save her and Perseus, he would not do that if he did not care, right? Zeus intervened to save Perseus, Danaë just happened to be there. The gods only care about their children with mortals when there is the possibility that they will become *someone,* because then they will always be remembered as, using Perseus as the example, Perseus the son of Zeus. If Perseus the son of Zeus becomes a hero to the people, it is just another reason for Zeus to be adored for he fathered this hero who did all these great things. Perseus would be irrelevant if he was simply known as Perseus the son of Danaë. Although it appears that the Perseus in Hewlett's work would much rather be known as that and not as the son of Zeus, the god who raped his mother (Hewlett 2021: 136).

The moment of their first encounter is described as them meeting outside the cave Medusa had been staying in and having a conversation in which Perseus is portrayed as anything but a hero. In this novel, Perseus is depicted as only a boy who wants to save his mother and who is confused when what he encounters is not what he was told he was going to find. He had been expecting "a crazed, ravenous monster... I mean, a monster I can kill easy, no problem...but an unarmed, pregnant...woman…"[31] (Hewlett 2021: 152), meaning that he cannot bring himself to do what he had come to do. He had been told a few stories and because of those stories he had built an image in his head of what he was to expect. Now that he is face to face with a Medusa who is not what he had been expecting to find, the image in his head is shattered and his morals come into play. The dichotomy between woman and monster that we have looked at is once again present here. Perseus is incapable of marrying the two things in his mind: woman and monster. To him, these are two different things, or entities one could say.

[31] In Hesiod's version of the myth, Medusa had become pregnant after the rape and after she is decapitated, her children, Pegasus, the winged horsed, and Chrysaor, a giant, sprout from the blood falling from her severed neck.

Medusa takes advantage of this and offers him a deal in which she will willingly allow him to cut off her head, if he allows her to give birth since her due date is approaching. With this deal, Perseus can not only save his mother but also not injure his beliefs by murdering a pregnant woman, and Medusa can make sure her child lives (Hewlett 2021: 152). So, Medusa and Perseus become friends (Hewlett 2021: 153).

Their interaction from the moment they strike the deal to the moment Medusa dies is described in a very endearing and at times amusing, but still heartfelt way. Although they butt heads at first by making assumptions about each other's stories and by their refusal to share them with one another (Hewlett 2021: 154-161), they develop a bond built on their similar trauma after they decide to open up. Their bond and friendship became so strong that Perseus attempts to challenge Athena because he does not want to be the one to kill someone who has already suffered so much, and in a way similar to his own mother, and who is now his cherished friend (Hewlett 2021: 167-168).

Needless to say, the story ends as it always ends. As we knew it would end since we are aware from the start that Medusa is speaking to us from the underworld. She and Perseus remained friends until her death and even beyond that as she still considers him a friend and holds their time together as one of her most beloved memories (Hewlett 2021: 195). As a reader and as someone who is aware of the original versions of the myth, this twist on the relationship between Perseus and Medusa is a refreshing and thought provoking one. Not only does it humanize Medusa further, it humanizes Perseus as well and places him at Medusa's level and not on the pedestal of a hero. It makes the reader see them both as victims in one common point. Both of them are casualties of the Gods and their whims. The idea of them being able to hold a civil conversation with one another and finding common enough ground is not as farfetched as it may appear at first sight or as one might wish for it to be.

Chapter 2: Stone Blind (2022)

This chapter will focus heavily on *Stone Blind* (2022) by Natalie Haynes, and look at key characters (Medusa, her sisters, Athena, Cassiopeia and her daughter Andromeda, and Danaë, Perseus's mother) as well as important concepts present in the narrative. The novel is divided into five separate sections with their own numbered chapters. Most chapters are titled after the character who is the focal point of that particular section, i.e., after the persona whose point of view is being shared with the reader, but that is not always the case. Other chapters offer the reader the perspective of someone else interacting with the title character. This means that the interaction is the point of interest, and not the thoughts or feelings of the title figure.

It is also important to note that the story Haynes wants to tell starts much earlier than the poetic writings usually do. Since the story is normally told from the perspective of Perseus and focusing on his journey and motives, we are not usually acquainted with the details of Medusa's birth and girlhood. By taking advantage of that gap in information, Haynes is able to weave moments into this retelling that could not easily be addressed if the story was still being told from the exclusive point of view of Perseus. Through the introduction of these moments, Haynes explores the lives and relationships of various women who had no opportunity to speak for themselves before, or were simply glossed over quickly.

The relationship between Medusa and her immortal sisters is described in extensive detail throughout the novel up until her death, making that relationship and bond one of the focal points of four out of the five sections of the novel. This introduces the concept of sisterhood into Haynes's work. Sisterhood is presented here in the rawest meaning since it is being shown as a bond between real sisters who share the same biological parents. However, sisterhood extends beyond bloodline, but more on that later. First, let us focus on how the bond between Medusa and her sisters is represented.

The initial chapter is written from the point of view of Medusa's sisters, Stheno and Euryale, who have lived together isolated from everyone and everything for many years. Unlike the sisters in Hewlett's novel, the Stheno and Euryale presented here feel more adult. They have a set routine and they live peacefully until the day they discover a baby lying "on its back in

the sand, its head propped up on a tuft of grass" (Haynes 2022: 13-14) far enough away from the reach of the water. After the initial confusion as to where the baby had come from and who had left it there, the two gorgons realize that there is a trail of damp sand drawing a path from the baby back to the sea. Based on this, the two sisters conclude that Phorcys, their father, must have brought the child to them, although whatever reason he may have had for doing so is unclear to them.

There are two pieces of important information given to the reader in this part of the chapter that are worthy of looking at. Firstly, the two gorgons can immediately tell that this baby is mortal unlike them who are immortal. It is not explained how they know this or reach this conclusion. The fact that she is mortal only adds to the confusion since they wonder for a short moment if their father rescued a human baby from a shipwreck or otherwise stole it from somewhere (Haynes 2022: 14). Medusa's mortality is a pivotal point in her story and of her existence for, if she happened to be like her sisters, Perseus would never have been able to kill her.

Secondly, even though this baby looks human and is mortal, the two gorgons observe that it has wings on its back, like they do (Haynes 2022: 16). Medusa's appearance in comparison to her sisters is the second piece of information that is of great importance here. The wings are the only thing that marks Medusa as similar to her siblings, as both Stheno and Euryale are described almost in an animalistic way right in this first contact with the reader. Both are described as having big heads and tusks (Haynes 2022: 14) protruding out of wide mouths (Haynes 2022: 16). They also have talons on their hands (Haynes 2022: 16) and bearded cheeks (Haynes 2022: 20). Medusa's sisters are reminiscent of the representations of the monstruous gorgon we briefly looked at in chapter 1 of part I (Fig. 3 and Fig. 6). The reader is being told two things here, one that was already known if one had been in contact with any of the classical writings, and another that seems to be new information. Medusa is mortal and she looks human, as described by poets, but she has wings like her sisters. Although the existence of wings is something that we have not seen in the poets we have looked at in a previous chapter, they are not a creation of the author of this novel since Medusa was often represented with wings in art such as vases (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16).

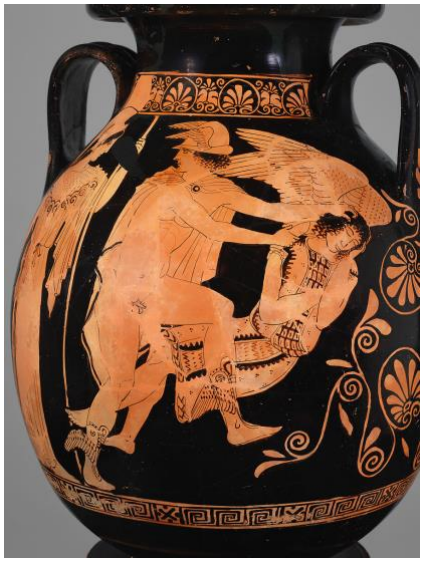

Fig. 15: vase painting depicting Perseus killing a sleeping Medusa, here seen with wings.

Fig. 16: vase with a relief of the head of Medusa where she is represented with two snakes and a pair of wings on her head.

By portraying Medusa with wings, Haynes is giving the sisters a physical familial connection no different from someone having the same eye colour as their mother and grandparents, or someone who has red hair and whose siblings all have red hair as well. But, and most important, Haynes is facilitating a bond between the sisters because they have similarities. It is easier for Stheno and Euryale to accept Medusa as their sibling because she has wings which brand her as a family member and most importantly, as a sister.

Wings and physical appearance aside, Medusa is *still* different from them. She is mortal. And along with the one similarity, it is this crucial difference in mortality that brings the sisters together instead of pushing them apart. Medusa comes to them as a surprise above all, and she is a stranger that was not expected to be around. Georg Simmel wrote that the position of a stranger within a particular group "is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself" (Simmel 1950: 1). Stheno and Euryale are in this case, obviously, the group (or better, the duo), and Medusa is the stranger who is then introduced into the group. Because Medusa is there and she is different, the two gorgons learn things they never had the need to know or thought they would ever feel. Gil also references the introduction of the stranger in her work and she describes the encounter with someone new as a transitional space, existing in between acceptance and refusal (Gil 2007: 27-28). This we see exemplified by the confusion and questioning the sisters go through. We shall look at this more in depth below. But it is important to reiterate that this physical difference is what makes them love and care for Medusa when it could just as easily have made them push her away.

Going back to the novel, the two gorgons are very confused as to why they were entrusted with this strange baby who is, against all natural odds, their younger sister but what choice do they have except to care for it? While "it took them several more days to learn not to kill her by accident" (Haynes 2022: 16), they learned to care for Medusa all the same. The detailed description is heart-warming and not at all different from what one would imagine new, unexperienced parents would go through. And, not unlike what new parents would do with parenting guides, Stheno and Euryale turn to the humans in the nearby settlement for advice on how to properly raise their sister. They do not ask them for guidance outright as they say humans avoid them out of fear (Haynes 2022: 18), but they watch and copy them, along with watching and copying the behaviour of animals that have babies of their own. In fact, when Medusa cries out the first time because she needs sustenance, Euryale points out that she's seen a cormorant feed its babies whenever they cried out, deducing then that Medusa needs to be fed in order to stop her crying (Haynes 2022: 16). She flies away to the nearest human settlement and returns with two stolen sheep, claiming that "they [the humans] give babies milk" (Haynes 2022: 16). From these two, they start a small flock that they use to feed Medusa. Later, Stheno claims she does not remember a time before the flock

was living with them, while Euryale, surprisingly, took to becoming a natural shepherdess, thoroughly enjoying looking after and protecting the animals (Haynes 2022: 16-17).

While adjusting to a growing child and its presence is a journey that is not easy, another part of this new experience includes the feelings that Medusa's presence evokes in her sisters. The birth of a bond of love and sisterhood that up until then they had never felt is undeniable. Although Stheno loved Euryale before Medusa had come along (Haynes 2022: 17), this new love and fondness is different from what she had felt. This different kind of love may be explained by the clear contrast between Medusa and Stheno and Euryale themselves. As we have seen, apart from the wings, Medusa looks like any typical human, whereas her sisters look monstruous and akin to something that one would imagine when trying to conjure up a mythical creature. She also lacks the skills and capabilities her sisters have, and, most importantly, she is devoid of their gift of immortality. Looking human and being mortal means that Medusa is much more fragile than her sisters, and she requires much more attention and care. This fragility that comes with being mortal becomes the basis for their love for Medusa. While the wings, their one similarity, made them accept her, the fragility made them love her all the more because perhaps they feel they have been given a purpose: to raise and protect this delicate thing.

As for Medusa's constant need for attention and care, whereas Stheno and Euryale do not need to eat often if at all (Haynes 2022: 13), Medusa needs food to stay alive. As we have seen, the sisters find a way to provide her with milk but growing children and, subsequently, teens and adults cannot survive on milk alone for the rest of their lives. They are forced to learn how to feed Medusa in order to keep her satisfied, and most importantly, alive and healthy. From the milk they start making bread based on the instructions Euryale brought from watching human women in the nearby settlement (Haynes 2022: 18).

Stheno and Euryale take on these roles as providers and caregivers to a sister who is essentially the opposite of what they are: mortal, human-looking, weak and fragile. They love their younger sister despite the difference or perhaps *because* of that difference. And because they accept that difference, they grow as individuals.

On top of all this, Medusa is unable to defend or hunt for herself in the ways her sisters can. While her wings grew along with her, and she would eventually learn to fly with them, she

had no talons or tusks. Her skin would burn if she stood in the sun for long (Haynes 2022: 20), and her skin broke easily and she bled if she bumped into something, scratched herself or fell (Haynes 2022: 21). It bears repeating, Medusa is as fragile as humans often are and, in comparison to the two gorgons, she is on a completely different level of physical vulnerability. This vulnerability confuses her sisters at first since they had had no real contact with humans up until this point, but then it simply morphs into love and anxiety, much like parents and families feel for their younger loved ones. They worry that she will get hurt, they fuss over every scrape and bump, ponder over the gravity of every injury and how that will affect Medusa in the long term.

This sense of love and protection is so new and foreign that it goes full circle: Medusa is not their sister, she is their child. Stheno expresses that she thinks of Medusa as her own daughter and she muses over this anxiety and these feelings in the following quote:

> Sthenno had no daughter, but she felt like the mother of Medusa and she knew Euryale felt the same. And although she hadn't chosen the emotions she now experienced, she tried not to be appalled by them. The confusion and revulsion that Medusa had first provoked in both sisters had ebbed away. The anxiety, however, had not. Sthenno had never felt a moment of fear in her life before she was responsible for a child. What should she be afraid of, a Gorgon like her? Of men? Of beasts? The idea was absurd. And she had never experienced fear for another creature until Medusa. She had never felt the slightest worry when Euryale was away hunting or exploring: her sister could defend herself against any attack, just as she could. And then there was Medusa, who could be hurt by anything, even a stone.
>
> Did all children have such unsteady limbs when they were small? Did they all collapse with no warning? Did they all spout blood when they came into contact with anything hard? (Haynes 2022: 20-21)

Being a sister and being a mother, in the hierarchy of the traditional family, are two completely different things. A sister could be seen as a companion and, if an older sister, some of the responsibilities to help raise the younger sibling could be passed along but never on the level of what is expected from a parent. Since Medusa's mother rejected her, along with the rejection of her father, and she was given to her sisters, Stheno and Euryale had to "step up" and take on the roles of mothers as well as sisters. In fact, based on their behaviour,

although they make sure that Medusa knows she is their sister, they behave like parents more than siblings towards her.

Regarding the mystery as to why they were entrusted with Medusa in the first place, the sisters still struggle with the why and they reach several different conclusions, never really settling on a definitive one. At first, Stheno wonders if their father gave Medusa to them hoping they would fail to keep her alive, while Euryale seems to be happy that they are held in such trust by their father and is proud to take on this "job" (Haynes 2022: 17). While Euryale seems to be the idealistic one, Stheno seems to be more realistic, or at least a bit more pessimistic, depending on how the reader interprets it.

Her reasoning for this is rooted in Medusa's fragility and mortality and how that would disgust their parents and make them see their newest daughter as a freak of nature and a nuisance. Stheno states that "it was impossible for gods to look at mortals and not feel some revulsion" (Haynes 2022: 17), and she confesses that she does feel some disgust and confusion towards Medusa herself, evidenced by the constant confusion as to why Medusa looks different and gets hurt so easily. But "Sthenno loved her new sister as much as she loved Euryale" and "even if something had gone wrong with her birth, Medusa was a Gorgon too" (Haynes 2022: 17), showing that she does accept and feel for Medusa. According to this, the very thing that makes both sisters love Medusa is, in their eyes, the most likely option for the rejection on the part of their parents.

It is interesting to see the admittance that these thoughts of disgust have not gone away as the love for Medusa grew stronger. It is even more interesting how logical Stheno is capable of being on this matter. She is intelligent enough to surmise that Medusa's mortality is the reason their parents shun her. And in turn, she is honest enough to acknowledge that same disgust in herself and Euryale since both of them are immortal like their parents. But Stheno and Euryale, despite sharing immortality with their mother and father, are not the same as them either. While their parents are ancient sea gods, Stheno and Euryale have no deity or godlike title or power of their own. The repulsion and confusion caused by Medusa's mortality comes from a different place for them. One can ascertain that the revulsion felt by their mother and father comes from shame and fear of being not taken seriously as a powerful entity now that they have birthed a child who is, at lack of a better word, defective. Stheno

says so herself that gods have a difficulty not feeling disgust towards mortal humans (Haynes 2022: 17). Stheno and Euryale are not divine entities and therefore, they have no reason to feel like they are above humans in the way a god would. So their disgust is simply caused by the strangeness of Medusa's whole existence which is easier to accept, even if those feelings of disgust are still present within them.

There never was any doubt that Stheno and Euryale cared for one another before Medusa came along but, as already mentioned, the care and love they felt for one another was a different thing from the love and care they feel for Medusa altogether (Haynes 2022: 17). While the love they felt for one another was simply based on the comradery they developed after living together for so many years and based on blood relations, their love for Medusa is predicated on protection. Medusa is younger, smaller, weaker, and different from them. They love her because she is theirs to protect and she has given them some semblance of purpose in their long immortal existence. To overcome the initial confusion and their own feelings of disgust, and open themselves up to learn from the humans nearby in order to better provide for Medusa, this could only come from a place of deep love and from a deeper bond.

Another possible conclusion they reach comes about during a conversation between the three sisters when Medusa is grown enough to ask questions about the subject of her parentage. Medusa expresses confusion as to where her mother is and who she is, since she has now learned that Stheno is not her mother like she thought she was up until then (Haynes 2022: 23). After some more questioning and explaining Medusa reasons that their parents live in the ocean because they cannot live on land, and she and her sisters live on land because they would not be able to live in the ocean, to which the sisters agree (Haynes 2022: 24-25). After the conversation ended, "her sisters hoped once again that they had kept her from feeling what they knew to be true: that she was a freak whose birth had horrified both parents" (Haynes 2022: 25). It seems that now the older gorgons seem to choose to believe they were entrusted with raising Medusa simply for her own good and protection, even if the motivation behind their parents' choice had been some form of disgust. Medusa is still considered a stranger, the other. It is evidenced here that, even with all this love they feel for her, the thought that she is an aberration is still present as being the reason she was given

away. It is ironic to think that Medusa was already a monster to her parents, and to some extent to her sisters, before she was a monster to Perseus.

There is never any real confirmation in the novel as to why they were entrusted with Medusa in the first place and, as stated before, the writings that have survived about her and her family do not go into any kind of detail regarding this part of the myth. From the authors and classical texts that were selected for this dissertation, only Hesiod mentions that the three gorgons lived together (Hesiod 2006: 270-277). But even he does not go into further detail about how they got there or how Medusa was entrusted to them, if she was at all. It is possible that Haynes has created this interesting plot point regarding how Medusa came to be with her sisters as a way to not only illustrate how powerful entities treat their offspring when they are deemed less than others, but to, most importantly, explore their bond and love for one another as siblings.

Stheno reasons that the intense love she feels for Medusa has made her and Euryale softer than they had ever been before because they were now constantly worried for Medusa's safety, and that love might have contributed for her parents to send her away:

> But somewhere in her body was a strange new ache, which she eventually concluded was fear. Fear! In a Gorgon! The idea was absurd, infuriating. But that was what it was; she could not keep pretending to herself it was anything else. She lived with this throbbing, this constant nagging twinge that Medusa might not be safe. So not only was she – a Gorgon – experiencing fear, but she was feeling it on behalf of another Gorgon who should be as impervious as she herself once had been. Euryale felt it too, though she was too ashamed to mention it. Sthenno could see the same fluttering anxiety in her sister that she saw in herself. No wonder Phorcys had deposited the baby with them. No sea god would want to feel so weakened. A shudder ran through Sthenno as she thought of what she had lost: the sweet sense of owning herself and her feelings, of having no concerns at all, or only the very mildest kind. All of this was gone, exchanged without warning for a cold, gripping panic whenever a child stumbled or hid or cried. (Haynes 2022: 25-26)

She resents feeling what may be read as bitterness for having been given a task she did not ask for and that had turned her peaceful life upside down while also making her feel weak. She struggles with these feelings but in the end, she loves her sister all the same and she has grown accustomed and extremely fond of this new life.

While Stheno seems to be the worrier of the trio, Euryale is without a doubt the doer and the protector. Every time she is mentioned, be in a chapter from her own point of view or that of others, she is almost always acting as a protector of sorts. She defends the flock they keep to feed Medusa like a warrior and she takes revenge against nature when Medusa is hurt as a child. In an episode narrated by Stheno, she recounts that one day their younger sister had been climbing the cliff wall only to fall and hurt herself. She had bled from her wound and cried out in pain and "stared at the rock that had hurt her. Euryale didn't need words to understand. She drove a clawed foot into it, watching her sister as the rock fractured and smashed beneath her" (Haynes 2022: 22).

Further along in the novel after Medusa is assaulted, Euryale is the one to reach out to her when she confines herself to a cave, to comfort her, and to avenge and protect her in the only way she could. While Stheno worried, Euryale took it upon herself to make sure Medusa was eating while also respecting her privacy and wishes to be alone (Haynes 2022: 60). In fact, she only approached the younger gorgon because Stheno asked her to, not being able to bear the silence and absence of their sister any longer. It is a heart-breaking short conversation in which Medusa continues to try and push away her sister, not wanting to tell her what happened in order to not worry her and Stheno, while Euryale continues to push for an explanation with a gentleness that is surely only reserved for Medusa. The younger gorgon hesitates, she simply says she is afraid of the sea which confuses Euryale for Medusa had always loved the water and would play in it, and she had come from it since their parents were ancient ocean entities. Medusa only replies that she is "afraid of him", and Euryale "stopped dead. She asked nothing more; she knew who Medusa meant and what she had endured" (Haynes 2022: 62). What follows is an embrace between the sisters as Euryale comforts her and convinces her to step outside the cave to see Stheno. The other gorgon is standing at the entrance, waiting for them, and she wordlessly takes the crying Medusa into her arms as Euryale flies away from them, "unrecognisable from the softened creature she had become in the darkness" (Haynes 2022: 63). Euryale purposefully flies to an area of the beach where there are rocks and she smashes a large one, forcing the sea to retreat and making the shore bigger. She angrily proclaims to the ocean that "you will never touch her again" before flying back to her sisters and promising Medusa that from now on she would never have to be afraid of him (Haynes 2022: 63).

By “him” she means Poseidon. His name is never uttered as the aggressor but as evidenced, his exploits are well-known enough that Euryale is quick to realize what Medusa means. To destroy part of the shore in order to push back the sea, Poseidon’s domain, as a small gesture to help Medusa feel safe is all Euryale can truly do. Poseidon is a god, one of the more powerful ones at that, and in comparison, Euryale has no true power beyond her physical strength and immortality.

Another detail of importance regarding the different ways in which Stheno and Euryale express their love for Medusa is evident in the chapters addressing Medusa’s ordeal and her consequent punishment at the hands of Athena[32]. The chapter describing the moment her sisters find her is written from Euryale’s point of view, and once more the older gorgon goes into protective mode. While still unaware of what has happened, she squashes an innocent scorpion just in case it was the cause of Medusa’s cries of pain (Haynes 2022: 136). But first, we must address what Medusa looks like.

While there was never a doubt that Stheno was protective of Medusa and would comfort her, Euryale was always the one seen doing the protecting and the comforting, or at least initiating it. Now, Stheno is the one that takes Medusa into her arms first while Euryale stays back, confused and almost mesmerized by the metamorphosis her sister underwent. The sudden change in Medusa’s physical appearance gives her pause, and Euryale cannot help but think that “she looked right. She looked like her sisters, like a Gorgon, like an immortal creature” (Haynes 2022: 137). She no longer looked like the stranger, like the other, like the anomaly. Although still mortal, Medusa finally looked like something their parents could perhaps love and as something that could at least instil fear into mortals as a form of protection. This is enough for Euryale to feel some joy. The thought is quickly gone though, since she can see immediately that “although she preferred the snakes, Medusa did not” (Haynes 2022: 137). Euryale does eventually join in on the comforting of Medusa and she notes that the snakes in Medusa’s head have entangled, content, with the snakes both she and Stheno have on their own heads mimicking hair (Haynes 2022: 137) further reenforcing their bond.

[32] Haynes, like Hewlett in the past chapter, follows Ovid’s lead here and takes from his original text that Poseidon’s rape of Medusa took place inside the temple of Athena, which greatly disrespected the goddess. Athena, in turn, opted to punish Medusa by turning her locks of hair into writhing snakes and giving her this ironic gift of the gaze of stone.

The chapter we have been looking at above ends with Medusa claiming that, even though her head has stopped hurting, her eyes are still in great pain and she cannot open them (Haynes 2022: 138). A knowledgeable reader may already be guessing what this pain in her eyes may mean, but Medusa and her sisters are still unaware of its meaning at this point of the novel. Medusa starts binding her eyes with a wet cloth, at the suggestion of her sisters, to maybe help the pain subside and offer her some sort of relief (Haynes 2022: 163). But she still spends her days in the cave, missing the faces of her sisters and watching the nature she knew and loved (Haynes 2022: 163-164). It all comes to a head when in the privacy of the cave, Medusa decides to remove the bandages from her eyes. Since the bandages had been applied to her eyes almost immediately after Athena's punishment, Medusa had not known what to expect. She did not know if she still had eyes to begin with or if her eyelids had been ripped out of her face (Haynes 2022: 194). The bandages had been on for such a long time she struggles to adjust, even not knowing in which part of the cave she is actually in. Medusa does note that "they [the eyes] still hurt. But the more she tried to see, the less she felt the pain" (Haynes 2022: 195). She does eventually make her way to the entrance of the cave and for a moment, she is able to gaze upon the horizon and the ocean and feel the daylight, for a moment she is at peace and happy (Haynes 2022: 196). But the bubble of contentment she found herself in after so much pain is burst very quickly.

Her sister calls out to her and before she can answer, "with no warning, the snakes became a hissing writhing mass of fear and anger" (Haynes 2022: 196). Even though she does not understand why and any attempts to communicate with them fail, she does not question or try to argue with them for "they were a part of her now" (Haynes 2022: 197). Because she and the snakes were now connected, Medusa knew that "they wanted her to cover her eyes again" (Haynes 2022: 197). And so she did, only stopping when all the bandages were wrapped around her head and over eyes and "she was completely in darkness again" (Haynes 2022: 197). Once more, she does not yet know what her eyes can do but the snakes seemingly do, having warned her to cover her eyes in order to protect her approaching sister from a possible horrible fate. It is interesting to see here that the roles are reversed, even if all involved parties are unaware of the larger scale of the situation. Medusa is, for once, the one doing the protecting even if she is doing it unconsciously and without being aware of what she is now capable of.

Sometime after Medusa's transformation, Stheno and Euryale are seen having a discussion, out of Medusa's earshot, about their sister's newly found power. At this point, they have discovered what Medusa's eyes are capable of doing since the reader has been provided with hints throughout past chapters that Medusa had accidentally turned animals to stone. It is also shown that her sisters encourage her to try and focus her eyes, in an attempt to understand how this power works: if the creature needs to lock eyes with her or if her gaze upon something is enough. They suggest she try it on a bird but Medusa refuses, claiming the bird did nothing to deserve to be turned to stone, showing then that she is above all a caring and kind young girl (Haynes 2022: 244). She insists that she will not remove the bandages for that reason, and because she does not know for sure she will not harm her sisters even though they insist they are immortal and cannot be hurt (Haynes 2022: 243). Again, Medusa is portrayed as some type of protector.

Referring to Medusa's new abilities as "having a power" would be misleading, however. There are two sides to this. On one hand, there is power, of course. The power to defend oneself, the power to cause harm to the ones who have caused harm on to you, the power to protect your loved ones. In the eyes of the elder gorgons, Medusa is no longer weak and defenceless. On the other hand, there is incapability and isolation.

On the subject of isolation, there also are two possible sides in this discussion. In one camp, there is the self-imposed isolation. This is the side Medusa chooses for herself, and the self-imposed isolation comes from a wish to protect those around her. On the other camp, there could exist a type of isolation that would be pushed on to Medusa by others. Her gaze of stone aside, despite still having a human looking body and face, the combination of the wings and the snakes in place of her hair could cause others to alienate her out of fear. But if we factor in the gaze of stone, the moment an accident happened, Medusa would possibly be shunned. Any relationship she may have been able to form would instantly be destroyed. So she is incapable of forming and maintaining relationships and she chooses to isolate herself as a precaution.

As for the elder gorgons, they take two different positions in this discussion. While Stheno seems to understand Medusa's pain and her wish to keep her eyes closed and bandaged, Euryale is who is excited with this newfound power. As we have seen, Euryale seems happy

that Medusa now looks more like her and Stheno, even though she recognizes that her younger sister is not happy with her new appearance. This puts her own feelings for her sister at odds. While the difference made her so deeply love Medusa, the newly acquired similarities seem to be winning over this capability of loving despite the difference. In this chapter, she is seen trying to explain to Stheno why she is so pleased with this, before Stheno manages to make her see what is wrong here. This does not mean that Stheno is not able to see the possible advantage that might come with this power, after all "it had always been painful to the two of them to see their sister as a fragile creature who needed their protection" (Haynes 2022: 245).

Euryale celebrates the fact that Medusa is finally able to protect herself, and that she is as strong as her sisters. For a moment it all seems well, until Stheno says that even though she is able to defend herself and not rely on them, "she can't do anything else" (Haynes 2022: 245). She explains to Euryale that "power is something you can control" (Haynes 2022: 245) and being able to defend herself is not the end all, be all for Medusa for she will never be able to do anything else like make friends or fall in love unless she keeps her eyes closed (Haynes 2022: 245-246). This seems to finally make Euryale understand and change her stance, both of the sisters then reverting back to worrying about the mental wellbeing of their younger sister. Here is present the other side mentioned above, incapability and isolation.

Medusa is incapable of ever living an existence that can be considered "normal", even by mythical creature parameters. She is simultaneously powerful in a way, and incapable in another. She is strong now and capable of fighting for herself, but at what cost? And what does that mean to her even? Should Medusa embrace this power, how would she adjust to it and how would this power change her? What influence could her sisters have over her? These questions are left unanswered in the novel because there simply does not exist enough time spent with Medusa in order to answer these inquiries. If we take into account the number of chapters spent with Medusa and her sisters after Athena punishes her, they amount to five chapters in total. The chapters vary in length but they focus more on Medusa adjusting to what happened to her and on her relationship with her sisters and how the sisters are adjusting as well. There are no comments or even allusions to any thought Medusa may have for vengeance or wish to embrace this "power".

Tingting Qi credits the feminist movement of the 70s for the propagation of sisterhood and along with it, solidarity[33]. She writes that "(…) the second-wave feminist movement appealed to "sisterhood" to forge widespread solidarity among all women. Since then, the term sisterhood has moved beyond the kinship bond between female siblings, and extended the supportive ties between women across differences" (Qi 2010: 328). The rest of the article focuses on the deconstruction of the collective identity of "woman" and singling out the issues that come with that blanket identity, encouraging the acceptance of the perspectives of different women. A Black woman has not the same struggles or experiences a Latina has, and those experiences are different from the ones had by an Asian woman, who in turn is different from a White woman. And this is without taking into consideration religious beliefs, sexual identities, disabilities, the way the women present themselves, etc. Qi argues that by using the blanket term of "woman", one is erasing all of these little nuances that make up one single person and states that the use of "a universal gender identity for all women is problematic" (Qi 2010: 329).

This is a sentiment shared by bell hooks in "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women" (1986). hooks states that "the vision of Sisterhood evoked by women's liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression", and she goes on to explain why this idea of commonality is an issue (hooks 1986: 127). She argues further that sisterhood cannot exist if the only thing that binds women is their common victimization, and that instead women should bond through shared strengths and through the exchange of resources: "It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood" (hooks 1986: 128). hooks concludes by, much like Qi, stressing the importance of these differences that exist under the umbrella of the general term "woman":

> Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one

[33] More contemporarily, one may be reminiscent of the term "girl code". It is rare that one hears the exact words "girl code" nowadays, but its roots run deep in modern society due to the idea that women should look out for one another, strangers or not. At its core, the "girl code" constitutes of a set of unwritten rules that emphasize loyalty, respect and solidarity in female friendships and towards strangers, rooted in the recognition of shared experiences, struggles and triumphs. By following these rules, women can attempt to build a sense of community and support, providing the feeling of being safe and looked after even if surrounded by strangers.

> another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity (Hooks 1986: 138).

Similarly, Seitisho Rammutla, currently working as director for a UN volunteer programme, wrote that through the bond of sisterhood one further grows and she stresses the unity of women, in this case under the blanket term of "woman", in the face of gender oppression (Rammutla 2005: 149). However, she also emphasizes how difficult it is maintaining this unity due to the differences Qi and hooks have pointed out. Rammutla specifically brings up the bias created by the situation in which one was raised as the major obstacle (Rammutla 2005: 150). And much like Qi and hooks, she encourages the acceptance of these differences and, more importantly, she urges growth through the recognition and disavowing of past problematic behaviours that could endanger the sisterhood and its solidarity (Rammutla 2005: 150). She goes on to say that "although our experiences may not necessarily be the same, if we stand together with women being discriminated against (…), we are laying a strong foundation for sisterhood" (Rammutla 2005: 151). And further down, she states "it is when we show our concern for the collective that we strengthen our solidarity" (Rammutla 2005: 151).

Sisterhood is arguably one of the major topics in Haynes's novel. Let us look at some examples.

The first involves Danaë, Perseus's mother. Danaë was the daughter of a king who one day, after returning from the Oracle in Delphi, locked his daughter away in fear of the prophecy he was given. At Delphi, he was told by the Oracle that his grandson would kill him and his response was to lock his daughter away so she could bear no children (Haynes 2022: 67-68). Danaë, although sympathizing somewhat with her father's reasoning, lives a miserable existence in darkness and in solitude. The only difference between Medusa and Danaë is that the latter had this solitude thrusted upon her, while Medusa chose it for herself after her assault and consequent punishment.

And then Zeus appeared to her in her cell, claiming to have rained down through the gaps in the roof (Haynes 2022: 69). Several writings and art support the notion that Zeus is an entity that enjoys his affairs, with both men and women, so his encounter with Danaë ending in a

sexual act is no surprise. From this affair, Danaë became pregnant with Perseus, and Zeus made sure she was free from the prison. Danaë was taken in by her maid, who had always been kind to her, and allowed to spend the remaining months of her pregnancy living with her, her mother and her mother's sisters who did not have husbands, and enjoying the company of the women who lived nearby (Haynes 2022: 71). Even though the description of what her days were like is short and not very detailed, one thing is abundantly clear. Danaë feels a comfort in this new life with these women she had not had the fortune to experience yet:

> In many ways, she preferred life in this bustling little home – always full of women and children and food and laundry spilling outside to bleach in the sun – to the empty life she had known in the palace. (...) Surrounded by these women who understood her pregnancy better than she did herself, she felt nothing but joy when she contemplated the birth of her child. (Haynes 2022: 71).

The reader is not made privy as to why the maid and the other women chose to assist Danaë. One may assume it was perhaps due to pity or maybe they feared retaliation since Danaë is still a princess and she carries the child of the father of the gods, punishment for any slight against her would not be too absurd to consider. But kindness and perhaps an understanding that if she does not look out for Danaë most likely no one will are what moves the maid to open up her home and offer to the princess a companionship she did not have with anyone else, especially with someone who understood her and her pregnancy.

In the second instance, there is a moment that may initially just be looked at as something with no deeper meaning that does not warrant a deeper analysis or interpretation. It may even come across as a couple of throwaway paragraphs. In a chapter dedicated to the point of view of the Hesperides, nymphs known for being mischievous, Perseus visits them because he is told they can help in his quest by supplying information and objects that will give him the upper hand against the gorgons. While there and after explaining to the nymphs what he seeks and why, the nymphs have a rather interesting conversation amongst themselves in which they ask very logical questions. One asks why would a man want a gorgon head and how that could be an equivalent exchange for a bride, questioning the true purpose of this quest Perseus is on (Haynes 2022: 184). Another nymph wonders what the gorgons may have done to become targets, while the others agree that they most likely did nothing (Haynes

2022: 184). They conclude that Perseus “did not seem to have thought about the Gorgons at all” (Haynes 2022: 184). He had been given an order and “he had simply set out to do so with no thought for how the Gorgon might feel about giving it [the head] up” (Haynes 2022: 185).

They do end up helping Perseus, aware that the presence of Athena and Hermes as aids in this quest must mean that Zeus himself is invested in it and knowing that the graiai, who we will address further down, would simply not give their help to just anyone. It is hard to question if they would have helped him if they knew what he had done to the graiai since the presence of the gods seems to be enough to force their hand in deciding to help. Even though they do give Perseus what he had come for, the simple act of them worrying about his reasons and worrying for the wellbeing of the gorgons is very poignant. While their motive for questioning might be rooted somewhere else, in simple curiosity for example, what is important here is that they ask the questions in the first place and have a discussion about it. It matters that they wonder if they should “send him away empty-handed? That was the most obvious response” (Haynes 2022: 185).

In the hierarchy of mythological creatures, nymphs are usually closer to the bottom of the pyramid. They are not particularly powerful or relevant in the grand scheme of things. Nymphs of importance whose names have been recorded through writing had that happen either because they gave birth to someone of importance, Thetis the sea nymph who gave birth to beloved hero Achilles comes to mind (Giesecke 2020, “Thetis”: 100), or because their entanglement with a god ended badly, Echo is the perfect example of that as she was punished by Hera for covering up Zeus’s affairs with multiple other nymphs (Giesecke 2020, “Echo”: 43; Ovid 2004: 362-368). There are also the few who are remembered for who their parents were or for whom their husband was. The other nymphs are almost treated like a collective entity.

In the face of two mighty gods and with the information that Zeus himself is involved and invested in this quest, what choice do they have but to help? Despite all their rational questions and their arguments underlined with concern towards the gorgons and surprise at how Perseus has found himself in this predicament to begin with, they have to help.

While the previous example was of something akin to a community of women coming together to help another, this is more of an example of the foundation for said community. Nothing is truly done besides showing concern and asking questions, but the intention is there and even though the gorgons will never know of the Hesperides hesitation, the reader does and is able to see that they were seen as innocent by others.

Now that we have looked at some examples of what may be considered a positive representation of sisterhood, the novel also includes a few that can be seen as lacking in solidarity. What is meant by this is that there are scenes where women are seen turning on other women in order to benefit themselves or simply because they feel like they maybe have no other choice.

We shall start by looking at a later example of lack in solidarity since it is a shorter portion of the novel. Before finding his way to the playful Hesperides, Perseus visits the graiai. As we have seen in a previous chapter, the graiai were born old to Phorcys and Ceto, making them sisters to the gorgons, and they live in a cave sharing one eye and one tooth amongst the three of them. While they refuse to help Perseus at first without being given something in return, claiming they have no interest in mortals they do not care about (Haynes 2022: 150-151), Perseus manages to convince them. He tricks them into giving him their single eye and tooth, claiming it is only so he knows what he is looking for, and he promises to go and fetch more so they never have to share again. Swayed by this promise, one of the sisters reveals that he needs the help of the nymphs, while another cries out that the gorgons are their siblings and she should not share that with him (Haynes 2022: 156). The first then chimes in that the gorgons never visit them and they have never offered to solve their eye and tooth problem (Haynes 2022: 156), and the third one agrees that this is enough reason for them to help Perseus. This does not end well for them as Perseus throws the eye and tooth into the ocean and walks away, never to return (Haynes 2022: 156). They were no longer important or of relevance to Perseus now that he had the information he wished for, so he did what he did to get rid of them and get out of there swiftly.

The next example of the absence of sisterhood or solidarity comes in a series of actions - all of them focused on the same entity, the goddess Athena. We have looked at Athena's particularities extensively in a past chapter so now we shall just focus on her favouritism

towards men. Her preference of men, her beloved heroes, is so evident that even Euryale and Stheno are aware of it and comment on it after Medusa's transformation. When Euryale proclaims that they know who did this without Medusa elaborating further, saying that the goddess is "vengeful and cruel, always blaming women for what men do to them", Stheno agrees and the narrator comments that Medusa was also aware of this favouritism (Haynes 2022: 138).

Athena as a goddess can be considered to live a privileged immortal life in many ways, so it can be argued that she simply does not need to care about protecting other women, least of all women that by all accounts are beneath her since they are mortals or minor entities, or related to other entities. There is perhaps also the additional factor that Athena is, to use a contemporary term, a woman in a boy's club. On the one hand, she seems to thrive in this boy's club due to her father's support and her own raw power. On the other hand, perhaps she thrives because she has no other choice. As a goddess associated with warfare, a typically masculine coded activity, she does not seem to have much in common with the other goddesses who appear almost as a stereotypical representation of femininity, save perhaps for Artemis who is portrayed as a huntress. The other goddesses are no strangers to war and they are strong and powerful in their own ways but perhaps Athena feels different since it is quite literally her job to be involved in warfare while the others can just bow out if uninterested[34].

The Olympic pantheon as a community or even a family unity is a complicated subject matter in itself with many ramifications, so we will simply focus on Athena in relation to the other gods. She is almost coddled by her father, and Ares does not seem to like her due to that very thing[35], and one can assume that other gods may also have an issue with that favouritism. Hera despises her[36] because she is a goddess born from Zeus's first wife, Metis. And, by her own choice or otherwise, Athena does not find kinship in the other goddesses and barely

[34] It is important to note that these goddesses are women written about by men in a patriarchal society.
[35] Haynes also points out in her essay about Athena that perhaps Ares harbours some type of distaste towards Athena due to how similar their "jobs" are: both entities are associated with war (Haynes 2023: 217).
[36] It should be pointed out, however, that when it suits them, the gods will put aside their differences. Hera is shown to be "teaming up" momentarily with Athena in *The Iliad* and breaking off this partnership when it no longer benefits her (Haynes 2023: 218; Homer 1990: 23-25).

finds it in the gods. She does not have a community to fall back on or a community to learn from, so she has no concept of sisterhood and supporting other women.

The disgust and anger Athena feels upon finding out her temple was desecrated is understandable, as is the need she feels to punish someone for such an afront. What is hard to rationalize and agree with is whom Athena chooses to punish for it. It may be argued that Poseidon, as one of the oldest and more powerful gods, not to mention Zeus's brother, could and would easily overpower her. But "her anger was roused and she needed to expend it" (Haynes 2022: 117), so she decided to punish Medusa, simply because she could and because she needed to squash her fury and get her revenge.

However, the way this is reworked in the novel is not as black and white as we may assume. Athena is shown to blame Poseidon entirely for this, "the girl", as she addresses Medusa, is but an afterthought. She is irrelevant, as the text seems to show that Poseidon does this type of thing very often (Haynes 2022: 117). But as referred to above, she is aware that she cannot go after Poseidon, and she chooses to bide her time since "there would be an opportunity to humiliate him later, she was quite sure" (Haynes 2022: 117), and to turn her sights on the victim. There is no evidence in the text that Athena at any point blamed Medusa for whatever role she may have had in what happened. In Athena's eyes, Medusa is simply easier to harm and to punish, she is the only solution and she is only worth one single line at the end of the chapter: "The girl. The girl would do" (Haynes 2022: 117). The focus of her anger, and by default the focus of the chapter, is always Poseidon and what he did. Thus, it is less about Athena believing Medusa has put herself in this position or that she deserved it, it is entirely about her being the easier target for Athena to deal with her fury and affront.

But speaking about sisterhood without speaking about the women that make up this bond, or lack thereof, would leave a void and a feeling of incompletion. The representation of the various women is diverse since all of these women are represented as having their own personalities, feelings and quirks. This variety leaves much up to be discussed about how exactly each of them is portrayed.

As we have just finished looking at Athena and commented briefly on her actions, it is time now to address the way she is depicted. As a goddess, Athena benefits from something the other women in this analysis do not. As a goddess, Athena is portrayed as someone who is

volatile and as someone who shows no concern for the wellbeing of others, especially mortals. To her credit, she is not alone in this as all the other gods who appear in the novel are shown to act in similar ways. And Haynes is hardly the first author to represent them in this way as so many of the writings that have survived to this day show them as selfish entities that want nothing but their own good and pleasure.

While Athena is shown to have all those bad qualities, she is undeniably a strong and powerful goddess. As already mentioned, she is Zeus's favourite daughter and that is not something that should be taken lightly. His favour towards her goes a long way and gives her authority and a privileged position that she would not have otherwise. However, her own godlike raw power as daughter of Zeus and of Metis, one of the ancient titans and personification of wisdom (Giesecke 2020, "Athena": 27), should not be ignored either. What is curious about her is that she has her own moments of weakness, she falters, she doubts herself and lashes out as someone who does not know how to compartmentalize or deal with emotions properly. She falters especially when she feels like she will not be getting her way or when her image has been threatened. In every instance in which Athena does something moved by anger, like the punishment of Medusa and the beating of Arachne as Minerva, she has either felt disrespected and that her image has been tarnished, or she has felt a great offense. She lashes out and takes back her own power by punishing, not only because she can but also because that is how the other gods act as well.

However, she too finds herself in a weakened position where she knows she will not be able to hurt or punish anyone in order to get the reparations she feels she is owed. Athena herself is sexually assaulted, both in myth and in the novel, and her reaction as is shown in the novel tells the reader much of what Athena is like as a female coded character.

According to myth, Hephaestus, god of the forge, became enamoured with Athena and one day when she visited his forge to ask for new weaponry, he tried to rape her. She ran, in an attempt to preserve her virginity, and he chased her and, after they both fell to the ground, she fought him off. Some of his semen ended up on her thigh regardless and she wiped it off in disgust. The semen ended up falling to earth and from it sprouted Erichthonius, who Athena then adopted and raised, who ended up becoming one of the kings of Athens (Giesecke 2020, "Athena": 27). Such an encounter is described differently in the novel.

Athena does visit Hephaestus one day to ask for something and immediately notices that he is acting strangely (Haynes 2022: 158). Throughout the conversation, she grows bored with his weird ways but she entertains him and obliges when he asks her to test a chair he made in order to evaluate how comfortable it is, revealing after that he crafted it for her (Haynes 2022: 159). Athena starts to feel uneasy when he sits next to her, touching her, and she shifts away which causes Hephaestus to ask her to not run, to which she says: "I'm not running anywhere. I'm moving because you're sitting so close that your hip was touching mine and I didn't like it" (Haynes 2022: 160). She sets a boundary, she expresses that she feels uncomfortable by their closeness, and Hephaestus does apologize, but the reader can note that he is much more interested in moving the conversation along in order to express to her his own agenda. Hephaestus does this immediately bringing up Poseidon without as much as a second thought, which makes his apology sound disingenuous (Haynes 2022: 160). He tells her that Poseidon advised him to ask Athena to become his wife, something Athena rejects immediately not believing her uncle would say such a thing (Haynes 2022: 160). And then he grabs her hand, breaking the boundary she had set and that he had apologized for trespassing previously. She repeats that she does not like to be touched, further enforcing the boundary, and he strangely says that the fact she does not like to be touched is "one of a thousand things" he loves about her (Haynes 2022: 160).

Athena reiterates her boundary once more, saying that he is still touching her when he knows that she does not like it, and Hephaestus explains that he wants to be the only one whose touch she likes (Haynes 2022: 160). Athena becomes more and more distressed and enraged as the conversation proceeds, and she reaches a breaking point after he tells her that her father approves of the marriage (Haynes 2022: 161). When he finally lets her go, the episode with the semen on the tunic takes place, and all at once she is hit with a barrage of awful feelings:

> She wanted to scream that she hated him, and would never marry him, would never marry anyone, would go straight to Zeus and tell him what Hephaestus had done to her. But as she opened her mouth to say all this, she knew it was only half-true. She hated him and would never marry, but she was not going to tell Zeus what had happened, because she was too ashamed. She knew she was being ridiculous, because she had done nothing to be ashamed of. And yet, looking down at the slumped body of Hephaestus – his eyes closed, unworried

> – she could see that he felt no shame at all for what he had done. And yet, it was a shameful act and disgust and contempt were the proper response. If Hephaestus did not feel these things, then she must. They had to go somewhere.
>
> And so she ran away from the forge, away from Olympus, hating Hephaestus and Poseidon and Zeus and herself. (Haynes 2022: 161-162)

While goddesses are not immune to being sexually assaulted, judging by her reaction, Athena thought herself to be safe of this. She was the daughter of Zeus, his favourite daughter, a goddess who was powerful and loved by mortals all around, who would dare to attack her? Perhaps she thought she would not have to worry about Hephaestus since he was handicapped and awkward. And, perhaps a bit more arrogantly, she thought she was strong enough to ward off his advances. Her immediate reaction to want to tell Zeus followed by the wave of shame is a much more layered issue, however. Athena may have felt that her father would berate her for allowing it to happen and in turn be ashamed of her, or worse. Her father might simply try to tell her that this is nothing, that she is exaggerating, and judging from what it is known about Zeus's character and what he himself enjoys doing, this reaction seems very plausible. Thus, she feels anger towards the men in her life, and towards herself for allowing it to happen and for feeling such shame. In a following chapter from her point of view, she ponders possible revenge - "She must hurt Hephaestus because he had hurt her, and honour demanded it" (Haynes 2022: 209) - but she knows she could not harm him "because Hera and Zeus protected him" (Haynes 2022: 209). She finds her hands tied and so she is doomed to wallow in her shame and in her anger. Athena's shame and her feeling of helplessness can be read as almost a violent reminder of what she is: a goddess, but still a woman living in a patriarchal society, built to cater to and protect men.

The nuance and complexity that is given to Athena's character is truly fascinating because, in the story of Medusa, Athena may not be the main villain but she is certainly an antagonistic force. And yet here she is, struggling with her own traumas and her own conceptions of how her family and community function. She is not simply a vengeful goddess or a one-dimensional villainous character. She is the way she is for a reason and she does what she does because she does not know what else to do.

We will now move on to a different character in the novel: Cassiopeia. She is the queen of Ethiopia, married to king Cepheus and she is the mother of princess Andromeda, who will later become Perseus's wife. Cassiopeia is not present in the novel for long, but she does have a chapter dedicated to her and she is present in the chapters dedicated to her daughter's point of view. But the chapter that is hers specifically is the one that tells us more about her as a woman. Cassiopeia is portrayed as someone who thinks highly and exclusively of her looks. She has been taught that all her worth was predicated on the way she looks, and she believes this to be true. Her mother urged her to become pregnant quickly in order to prevent the king from throwing her to the side once he grew tired of her, for beauty was not enough to keep a husband interested (Haynes 2022: 125). Cepheus dotes on his wife and spoils her, perpetuating her belief that her looks are equal to her self-worth, even though the way Cepheus is described seems to hint at the fact that he would not care if she would lose her looks (Haynes 2022: 125-126; 128). Cassiopeia views her beauty as "her proudest possession" and she strives to preserve it through ointments and other beauty treatments (Haynes 2022: 126-127). She is aware, however, that "nothing could stop her own looks from fading" (Haynes 2022: 127), so she found another way. Cassiopeia asks the gods to give her a daughter when she becomes pregnant because "she wanted to watch another iteration of her beauty growing up" (Haynes 2022: 127).

When she does in fact give birth to Andromeda, she is pleased to find that the baby is "a miniature perfect echo of herself" (Haynes 2022: 127). She is even more delighted that visitors "always say that Andromeda looked just like her" (Haynes 2022: 128). She places in her daughter all her wishes and expectations, as a way to elevate herself further and to perpetuate her love for her own looks. This is an act of living vicariously through her child. A common trope in media is the trope of the mother who resents her child for their beauty and youth, but Cassiopeia is the opposite. She sees her daughter as an extension of herself and of her beauty, as "another way of looking at herself and finding nothing wanting" (Haynes 2022: 128). This could also be interpreted as Cassiopeia looking at Andromeda as a mirror for memories. Once she grows old, she could just be able to look at Andromeda and remember the beauty she once had carried in her own youth. Or, it is very likely that Cassiopeia is basking in the fact that suitors would look to her in order to gauge how beautiful Andromeda would become as she grew older, giving her the attention she craved so much (Haynes 2022: 128). On the other side of the matter, there is Andromeda.

Andromeda "found her mother's obsession with beauty – her own and Andromeda's – to be a burden" (Haynes 2022: 128), but she is fully aware of the privileges and advantages she enjoys because of it. The first glimpse the reader has of Andromeda appears still in the chapter dedicated to her mother, and she is shown to be someone who is sure of herself and who stands up for her interests when she is betrothed to her uncle, of all people. She believes that this betrothal happened because her mother asked her father to make the match in order to protect herself, and Andromeda, from being thrown out on the street should Cepheus die unexpectantly (Haynes 2022: 130-131)[37]. She calls out her mother for being horrible to others whenever she does not get her way and for being too spoiled by everybody who are tired of dealing with her tantrums, and she proclaims she wants suitors of her own age and to choose her own husband (Haynes 2022: 131).

This is where Cassiopeia's obsession with her looks backfires in the most horrible way. The moment Andromeda speaks up for herself by stating what she wants for her own future, Cassiopeia begins feeling anxious at the thought of losing her status and also the control over her daughter. Due to this incredibly stressing situation, she commits the egregious mistake of proclaiming herself and her daughter more beautiful than the Nereids and in doing so, she enrages the sea entities. Such is their anger at this offense that they demand the death of Andromeda for "the best way to punish a mortal woman is through her child. Mortal women love their children. Even Cassiopeia – the most selfish of women – loves Andromeda" (Haynes 2022: 192). Cassiopeia's own chapter ends with her telling the reader that "it was anxiety rather than arrogance that made her say the words that ruined her life" (Haynes 2022: 132). Even if she does say that it was not arrogance, readers may have a hard time believing this since Cassiopeia has been presented as a woman who is selfish and shallow, and in being like that she condemns her own daughter to death.

The Nereids make their grievances known to Poseidon and, as a solution to appease the nymphs, the sea god decides to send a monster that will destroy Ethiopia if Andromeda is

[37] It is important to keep the line of succession in mind here. As a princess, Andromeda cannot inherit the throne. It is the law. Since Cepheus has no male heirs of his own, this means that his younger brother is his heir as he is Cepheus's closest male relative. Should Cepheus die without a son, the throne would go to his brother, and the fate of Cassiopeia and Andromeda, as well as their social status, would be uncertain. The issue of the transmission of law in a patriarchal society is a common topic in literature, especially in literature penned by women. However, the novel does not go into too much detail regarding this. No further comment is made about it past Cassiopeia's concern and no attempt to change the law on behalf of Andromeda is undertaken.

not offered up as sacrifice to rectify the grave affront. It is important to note that the detail that Andromeda's death is the key to end this is not yet known by Andromeda herself and her parents. Poseidon starts by sending out floods as a warning of what is to come and those floods cause great destruction and pain upon the people of Ethiopia. In the midst of this devastating tragedy, Andromeda is seen stepping up as princess in order to provide her father with advice regarding the people who had been affected by the floods (Haynes 2022: 227-228). She is portrayed as smart, practical and kind, while also being shown being a tad insecure about her actions since she is inexperienced in such royal obligations (Haynes 2022: 228).

Priests then reveal the reason behind the floods, claiming that Poseidon told them a crime was committed by someone in the royal palace. Upon this revelation, Cassiopeia cries out because she knows it was her fault (Haynes 2022: 230), and the priests then confirm that she was the one that offended Poseidon (Haynes 2022, 239-240). In a rare demonstration of unselfishness, Cassiopeia recognizes that she has made a serious mistake and offers up herself as sacrifice to appease the floods and save her people (Haynes 2022: 241). Such an act causes Andromeda to briefly look at her mother differently, thinking of her as someone who is not selfish or self-centred but as someone who is capable of being a selfless queen who offers up her life to save her country. This does not last long, however, for the priests reveal that Andromeda is the sacrifice demanded to atone the offense that was committed.

Andromeda finds herself shackled to a rock, waiting for her life to be claimed, and her feelings towards her mother turn right back around to where they were previously. To her, Cassiopeia is *still* selfish and self-centred. Now perhaps more since the queen is screaming and crying, begging for Andromeda's life, while Andromeda herself vowed that she would not cry. In her eyes, Cassiopeia is presenting herself as the true victim here, and putting all the attention on herself, when all of this had been her fault to being with (Haynes 2022: 259). And this causes Andromeda to resent her mother greatly.

At the end of the novel, after Perseus rescues her, the reader is shown the last change in Andromeda. She is scared. She had been scared before, of course, when she had come face to face with Poseidon's monster, but now she seems to realize she might be married to the monster. At their wedding, Andromeda's uncle who everyone thought to be dead, appears

to claim his betrothed and a fight ensues. At this point, Perseus has become fully aware of the power he has as long as he has the head of the gorgon and after Andromeda explains (lies) to him that her uncle wants to harm her, he uses it. It turns everyone at the wedding celebration into stone, save Andromeda and her parents. Andromeda is terrified and tries to make sense of "the loss of almost everyone she knows. The girls with whom she had planned weddings are all dead. Their brothers and parents are dead. Her uncle and all his men are dead" (Haynes 2022: 352). She is scared of her husband, scared of this weapon he carries and wields so easily, perhaps scared of what he might do to her and her parents should he feel slighted or upset. Sadly, this the last time the reader sees Andromeda and her parents, and Perseus for that matter. The novel does not go into any detail regarding their future together as husband and wife. Although Perseus does wonder if Andromeda would like to leave Ethiopia and go to Seriphos, where Danaë and Dictys live (Haynes 2022: 353), such a thing is never shown to the reader. Other sources do tell us that Perseus did end up taking her to Greece and they had six children together (Giesecke 2020, "Andromeda": 136), but just from that information, one cannot gauge levels of happiness and fulfilment. The last image we have of her and Cassiopeia are of them being terrified for their lives and futures. This underlines the vulnerability at the heart of female existence.

At a first glance, these two women may come across as stereotypes of what a woman is thought to be like. Especially Cassiopeia. They may not appear as nuanced as Athena but these women have their own reasons to act the way they do. Cassiopeia is told by her own mother that her looks are everything. She is taught this. She was not born with this conception of the importance of her looks in her own head. And although there is evidence that her husband would not care if she would lose her beauty (Haynes 2022: 125-126; 128), everything he does for her tells her that he would in fact care if she were ugly. It is a cycle of sorts. Cassiopeia is gorgeous and her husband tells her so and spoils her, but he does not tell her that he would not care if she were ugly. He does not tell her that he loves her for reasons other than her looks, so Cassiopeia believes she is spoiled by him because she is pretty and this constant spoiling has made her selfish. It is an ouroboros serpent caused by lack of communication.

As for Andromeda, it is not surprising that she is the way that she is. Andromeda could very well have turned out just like her mother: a beautiful spoiled princess who believes that all

she has are her looks. But instead, she has turned the other way and grown resentful and always carrying some sort of distaste towards her mother and her attitude and values. To have Andromeda be like this shows that she has her own values and beliefs that she may have learned from someone else or developed herself as she grew into a young woman.

Finally, let us now look at Danaë, the woman who gave birth to Perseus. We have discussed her swiftly above in the context of sisterhood, and we even touched briefly on how she reacted to her father's prophecy and how she came to be pregnant with Zeus's son. Danaë appears in a total of five chapters throughout the novel and she remains somewhat consistent in who she is through them all. Let us focus back for a moment on how Danaë's reaction to being locked away sets the tone for the kind of woman that she represents.

Danaë has no agency or choice at this point, so saying she allows her father to lock her away would not be right. She cannot be said to allow something that was not asked of her. It would be more appropriate to say that she went without arguing. Danaë is portrayed as "a loving daughter and a kind-hearted woman" and for that reason, "she sympathized" with her father's reasoning (Haynes 2022: 68-69). But although she recognizes that she loves him and is even capable of rationalizing why he did what he did, she allows herself to feel angry and resentful. She accepts that the love for her father and the bitterness it has started to fester within her towards him can coexist. This further illustrates Danaë's kind-hearted and understanding nature, and also her maturity in accepting the coexistence of these complicated emotions.

It is important to comment, however, on this apparent kindness and goodness of heart that is present in Danaë. These qualities that are seen as good can also be seen as somewhat of an inherent characteristic that is associated with her gender. Women in this society are meant to respect their fathers, or whoever is their closest male relative, so the lack of argument when she was imprisoned is not surprising. And it is also not surprising that she only challenges her father when Zeus, the father of the gods, offers to help her.

After she is freed and lives happily with the maid and her family, as we have already discussed, her father puts her and Perseus in a chest, and tosses them in to the ocean. Zeus, of course, intervenes by asking Poseidon to keep her safe and the chest safely drifts ashore on the island of Seriphos. She is then rescued by the fisherman Dictys, with whom she and

her son live for many years until Perseus goes on his quest. What is of importance throughout this period of time in which she lives in Seriphos is her development into a caring but fearful mother. No one can blame her for being wary, her main fear being that her father would come after her and her child, should he find out they are still alive. She is so fearful that she is reluctant to even let Perseus accompany Dictys and the other fishermen out to sea. But she reasons that "her son had no memory of any man but Dictys and the other fishermen" (Haynes 2022: 85), so this fear was hers alone and thrusting it on to her son would only harm him and push him away. She relents and allows Perseus to go, watching from the house in fear as the boat sailed away, and feeling an intense relief whenever it returned. As time went on, and seeing how happy both Perseus and Dictys are, "her fear had subsided, and she watched from habit as much as anxiety. Her boy went to sea, unafraid. His mother was unafraid too, until the day the men arrived" (Haynes 2022: 87).

"The men" who have caused her fear to resurface are the king Polydectes and his guards. Polydectes reveals himself to be the brother of Dictys and through their interaction, it is clear they do not have a very close relationship. Polydectes criticizes the fact that Dictys and Danaë are not married, even insinuating that he could be engaging in a sexual relationship with her, since she is so beautiful (Haynes 2022: 108). Upon Dictys reiterating that he only sees her as his own daughter, and Perseus as his grandson, Polydectes says he is going to take her with him then. Danaë watches helplessly as this king not only berates the family she had made for herself, but also decides that she is just something to be taken. She is never once addressed directly when Polydectes is speaking about her, it is "as though she could not hear" (Haynes 2022: 107). She is powerless and she is thrust immediately back into being afraid of her own future and of the future of her son, who is now sent on this quest. Even though it is shown throughout her chapters that she believes and trusts that Zeus is looking out for their son, she cannot help it but be scared.

Her final chapter focuses on Perseus's return with the head to rescue her. Not only had she trusted and believed that Zeus was looking out for Perseus, she believed he was looking out for her as well. But even though she was trying not to feel anxious about the situation "she was not as young as she had been when she first caught his eye, and (unworthily, she said to herself, trying not to offend him even in her mind) she worried that she was now too old to have his attention and thus his help" (Haynes 2022: 342). In a way, with this train of thought

regarding her appearance, Danaë is slightly reminiscent of Cassiopeia and her own concerns regarding her beauty. For all of Cassiopeia's faults and perceived shallowness, her fears of losing her looks are rooted in guaranteeing security. It is not so different for Danaë since she trusts Zeus will protect her, but he will only do it if she is still beautiful. There is something to be said about how the value of a woman is so often predicated on how attractive she is in the eyes of a man. Danaë believes that Zeus will simply leave her to fend for herself if he finds her ugly and old, and she prays that is not the case.

In the end, she is rescued by her son. Danaë spends most of her chapters balancing being understanding, caring and kind with being terribly afraid and anxious for one thing or another. The last time we hear from her in a chapter that is dedicated to her, she is truly happy and relieved that Perseus has returned. And yet, there is no hint as to how she may have reacted to Perseus returning with this prize and effectively having committed murder on her behalf. Based on how she is portrayed, and especially how she is shown to care about and love her son, one may make the assumption that she would not be too bothered by this. But I believe it is much more layered than that. Throughout the chapters she is seen almost babying and spoiling her son with her attention and love. Even though he has grown taller than her and is by all accounts a man now, she may see this new side of him as the death of the sweet innocent boy she knew and raised (Haynes 2022: 84-87).

Finally, let us return to Medusa and her two sisters. While we have already seen quite a bit regarding their depiction in the section of this chapter pertaining to sisterhood, I would like to speak about them again while focusing on a particular aspect. Medusa and her sisters are gorgons, meaning that they are descendants from mythical entities but their physical appearance, more specifically that of Stheno and Euryale, brands them as monsters.

Thinking of monsters in a general sense nowadays, it is easy to construct the image of something evil. However, the perception of monsters, what they look like and who they are and why are they evil opens up the doors to very different replies. The image of the traditional bogeyman that lives in the dark might appear as an answer if the person being asked is a child. Or the image being conjured up might be the one of a particular politician whose rhetoric may be extreme and instigate violent actions. To a survivor, their abuser may be the monster. There is a reason for these monsters to be monsters. The bogeyman lives in

the dark and it represents the fear of the unknown. The politician with the dangerous rhetoric is a very real threat on the livelihood and safety of a community, for example. Whilst the abuser represents evil and a past where the victim feels unsafe. Whilst the bogeyman is by all means an abstract, imaginary thing, one can understand why it is scary and one may sympathize. The politician and the abuser, these are real people that pose real threats, real monsters. It bears repeating, there is a reason for these monsters to be monsters. There is no reason, however, for the three gorgons to be monsters other than the fact that they look like monsters.

Stheno and Euryale have their monstrosity predicated on their physical appearance. They look inhuman and that is the sole reason why they are labelled as monsters. The novel specifically lets the reader know that Stheno and Euryale do not engage with the humans in the village nearby, and the humans avoid them out of fear of their appearances and not because of anything they had done. The surviving writings also do not offer any information related to anything that they may have done that may warrant their labelling. There is no reason for Stheno and Euryale to be called monsters other than they do not look like humans and, while female, they do not look like beautiful women. But if we go back to the dichotomy of woman and monster, perhaps the fact that they are identified female and ugly is enough for them to be abnormalities in a patriarchal society.

Being a goddess or a nymph or anything in between, being related to deities, creates in the reader an expectation that is supported by the descriptions left to us in writings and propelled forward by the various representations of those entities. Both Greek gods and goddesses are described as beings that are physically perfect - with minor exceptions if we take into consideration Hephaestus - and above all they are beautiful, and they are represented as such in art and in media such as movies or tv shows. Stheno and Euryale and their family, except for Medusa, are not described as such. As we have already looked at what Stheno and Euryale look like, let us briefly look at their family lineage before moving on.

Their parents are Phorcys and Ceto as we have already seen, they are old sea entities, brother and sister believed to be the offspring of Gaia and Pontus, two of the primordial titans, according to Hesiod (Hesiod 2006: 233-239). Phorcys's physical description has reached us mostly through art. He is portrayed as a creature reminiscent of a merman with a fishtail and

crab legs on each side of his body, and red skin. His physical description is also mentioned in the novel when Stheno and Euryale discover Medusa. Stheno points out that there is a path left by "the marks of his claws, each side of the wide path made by his fish tail" (Haynes 2022: 15), leading from Medusa back to the sea. While this alone is not enough to qualify him as a monster as we have no indication of what his facial features may look like, he is certainly not the quintessential looking deity.

As for Ceto, her appearance is a harder enigma to decode. While she is represented as a human-looking maiden in surviving art, her representation in writing tells another story. Natalie Haynes presents an interesting proposal in her essay titled "Medusa" present in the essay collection *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myth* (2020). The saving of Andromeda from the sea monster sent to collect her as a sacrifice is well documented in the texts that report this episode, but Haynes chooses a specific version on which to base her proposal. She writes the following:

> In his description of this scene, Pseudo-Apollodorus rather pleasingly refers to Andromeda as *boran thalassiō kētei* – 'food for a sea-monster'. The word *kētos* (meaning 'sea-monster') is particularly resonant in this story, because ancient Greek sea-monsters share this name with Cētο (in Greek, she is spelled Kētο), the mother of the Gorgons, and indeed also the Graiai. (Haynes 2020: 98)

This comment regarding the innerworkings of language comes about in the essay during Haynes's discussion of the film *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and how it represents the monster sent by Poseidon. In the film, whose 2010 remake we will discuss in a later chapter, the monster is shown as an octopus like deep-sea monster, something we would equate to a traditional kraken, as it is called in the film. It is a fearsome and large beast and one that we have certainly seen many representations of and heard many stories about, especially stories related to sailing. It is, by all means, a monster. What Haynes proposes here is that Ceto, the mother of the gorgons, and the monster that came for Andromeda share the same name, or a variation of it. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether Ceto, the mother, was named such a thing to illustrate her monstruous appearance. If we choose to use language as a base and take "yes" as the answer to this question, we may perhaps infer that Ceto is also not a conventionally attractive deity.

Phorcys and Ceto are also believed to be the parents of "Scylla, a nymph with six dog heads and their six vicious mouths, who lived in a high cave over the sea from which she would appear to eat passing sailors" (Haynes 2022: 15), as well as the parents of "proud Echidna, half-nymph, half-snake" (Haynes 2022: 15). And, as we have also seen, they are considered to be the parents of the graiai, who were born old and share one eye and one tooth amongst all three. It is possible that they may have sired other children, either with each other or with other partners, as well as being grandparents to other monstruous beings such as the cyclops Polyphemus (Giesecke 2020, "Phorcys": 88-90), but the writings are inconclusive and the genealogy of deities is sometimes very hard to trace.

We have a monstrous-looking father and a monstrous-looking mother, who have sired monstrous-looking children, who in turn sire monstrous-children of their own. This family tree is made of inhuman-looking creatures, some of which have done monstrous things that have been documented by poets and artists, but this is not the case of Stheno and Euryale. Both of these women who are coded beasts are not associated with any act of evil or of *hybris* that led them to commit any offense or any atrocity against fellow divine creatures or humans. In actuality, their only crime seems to be that they are, for lack of a better descriptor, ugly. They are avoided by humans simply because they look monstrous, therefore the humans expect them to do monstrous things.

To very briefly make a comparison to another monstrous character, let us take a look at the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). As a character, the creature is described as looking grotesque which in turn not only makes his creator reject him, but makes the local villagers shun him despite him starting out as a gentle natured being. There is no reason for him to be shunned other than the fact that he looks different from others so he is expected to act differently, to act wrong. "Looking monstrous" equals "doer of monstrous things".[38]

However, unlike the creature in Shelley's work, it has to be pointed out that the sisters were the first to avoid the humans. There was not any attempt to integrate themselves into human lives and society. They express that they had no interest in mingling, befriending or even attacking humans until Medusa came along and they started looking to the nearby settlement

[38] It has to be kept in mind though, that the creature was made by a human and made to look like that. It is different from the gorgons since they were born like that from other monstruous beings.

for guidance on how to raise their younger sister (Haynes 2022: 16). And, as we have seen, they do not directly ask for help, they simply watch from a distance and copy what they do. This could be read simply as a lack of interest on the sisters' end. Since they are immortal, what would be the point of befriending humans that will get sick or injured, grow old and die? They would simply be opening themselves up to the grief of watching generations upon generations of friends passing away. It could also be that they believe that humans are not interesting enough to befriend. What could they have in common with immortal beings? However, their avoidance of the humans seems to be more related to precaution against hatred and attacks than with grief, pain or overall indifference on their end.

They are aware of what they look like and they are aware that humans are afraid of them for that reason alone, hence their choice of place of residence. By avoiding the settlement at all costs, they are protecting themselves against any possible lashing out coming from humans who are easily dominated by fear of what they do not know. And one may assume that they would lash out in response and possibly harm or kill some of the humans which, in turn, could create issues with the remaining humans or with more powerful deities. On the other hand, there are no mentions of any kind of relationship, good or sour, between the gorgons and the Olympian gods. It is possible that the Olympians see the gorgons as being beneath them and minor entities in comparison to them. If humans were harmed, whichever Olympian god was worshipped in the region would feel compelled to punish the gorgons.

On the other hand, there is Medusa. She is the only one that looks human in a family filled with beings that look like anything but humans. In the novel, she is described as having wings, and those wings are the only thing that brands her as a member of this family. Were it not for those wings, Medusa could easily pass for human. She could blend in a village if she so wished, she could marry and have children, and then she would grow old and die. And, of course, one cannot ignore that Medusa is oftentimes described as a beautiful young woman. Even with the wings, she could most likely easily blend in a village and befriend humans in exchange for resources, for example. Medusa's so-called monstrosity is something curious and different from her sisters'. While Stheno and Euryale's monstrosity is something they have always lived with, Medusa's more physical, more obvious monstrosity is thrusted upon her only after a severely traumatic event, adding further into this ordeal she is experiencing.

While Stheno and Euryale have no record of vile acts they committed, Medusa does. Ovid writes in his version that on the path to Medusa's lair, lay the bodies of the people she has turned to stone, almost like a warning for whoever chooses to "visit" her. Through the device of Perseus recounting his adventure, Ovid describes that the hero "travelled through rocky regions remote and secluded, littered/with broken trees" (Ovid 2004: 788-789) on his way to the place where it was said the gorgons resided. He continues to say that "across the fields and along the tracks he had seen the statues/of men and of beasts transformed to stone at the sight of Medusa" (Ovid 2004: 780-781).

The inclusion of this piece of information, this evidence that Medusa has committed acts deemed evil and monstrous, could serve the purpose of justifying her death. She has killed many people and animals, and Perseus is the hero, therefore her death at his hands is justified. But it is interesting to note that in the same stanza in which Ovid describes the statues on the path, he also informs the reader that Perseus killed her while she slept. This is not anything new that Ovid has added to the myth. Perseus ending her life while she slept had been documented previously in other writings and in art made of the myth. But murdering her in her sleep may be seen as less of a heroic deed and more as one of cowardice since there was no epic fight worthy of a hero. Reminding the reader that she was killed in her sleep may simply be a stylistic choice to call upon everything that was written before him, but it is interesting to look at it from a perspective of Ovid allowing the reader to feel two things at once: validated in thinking she is evil while also feeling pity towards her. It is complicated to speculate what the readers at the time would have felt regarding this myth in general. Would they have felt pity towards her and her ordeal, or would they have simply seen her as a monster who died for a good reason at the hands of a righteous hero? But then again, do monsters not deserve at least a fair fighting chance? It is a difficult discussion to have while taking into consideration both the original audience and the current readers. However, one can ascertain that Perseus was, in a way, defending himself. He acted based on advice he was given so that he would not run the risk of being turned into stone.

There is also something to be said about what exactly the monstrous physical appearance that is thrusted upon Medusa takes from her. Athena punishes her by destroying what many women see as a symbol of their womanhood and femininity: Athena destroys her hair. Different cultures of the world treat hair with different levels of reverence and associate it

with different things, and even within those cultures there are particularities. Race and gender also impact the way hair is viewed and treated, as well as different ideologies expressing different things through hair. Angela Rosenthal wrote on the topic of the body and hair:

> The body has been viewed as a key medium for the communication of social meanings, the expression of erotic desire, and the enunciation of symbolic values. Cosmetic and sartorial practices, fashionable accessories, and corporeal prostheses - such as beauty spots, tattoos, feathers, and fans - have been discussed as articulating the body in terms of gender, generation, class, ethnicity, and 'race'. (Rosenthal 2004: 1)

This further proves the notion that hair adds to the performance of gender, in particular towards women. Furthermore, "hair has so often been thought of as containing the essence of individuality and personhood" (Rosenthal 2004: 2), meaning that by using one's hair to express something, one is also expressing oneself and one's own identity, personal or in a group. By destroying her hair, her symbol of womanhood, Athena is also making sure that Medusa's so-called crime is on display for all to see since hair is something so public.

While hair is treated differently by different communities, we shall be focusing on the topic of hair relating to women and to the expression of femininity. Anthony Synnott states that, sociologically and biologically, speaking "women tend to identify far more closely with their head hair than men do" (Synnott 1987: 383), while further down he argues that, for women, head hair is closely tied to gender identity (Synnott 1987: 383). So, it is not surprising that women will generally go through great lengths to care for and preserve their hair by adhering strongly to fashion trends, colouring it to hide imperfections and adorning it with hats, colourful ties or clips, or extensions and wigs. Once more, hair adds to the bigger puzzle that is gender performance.

Returning to Medusa now with this notion of hair associated with femininity and womanhood, is it really that surprising that Athena took it away from her? If a woman's feminine qualities are predicated in her long hair, if her womanhood and identity are tied to her locks, by removing her hair Athena turned her into something else. She is no longer a woman; she is something else entirely. It adds to her strangeness and monstrosity.

Natalie Haynes also writes in her essay “Medusa” that the act of taking away Medusa’s hair is reminiscent of the punishment given to French women who, during the Second World War, had their hairs shaved under the assumption they had collaborated with the Nazi forces. Haynes states: “The punishment for having been considered beautiful by the enemy is to be turned into something less beautiful, as viciously as possible” (Haynes 2020: 89). It bears repeating, Medusa is punished with the removal of the more obvious characteristic of typical femininity, the thing that arguably made her more appealing.

In the novel, Medusa’s assault happens under a threat Poseidon poses against a group of human girls she had been watching with wonder and curiosity. She agrees to let Poseidon have her in order to protect the innocent girls (Haynes 2022: 58). This is an act of female solidarity. And her punishment comes in the form of taking away her hair. By stripping Medusa of her hair, the thing that is perceived as the mark of a feminine woman, Athena is dehumanizing her. In fact, the story of Medusa may be interpreted as the journey of dehumanization of a woman. She is treated as an object through her assault and then further dehumanized through her punishment. And her story ends with her unwilling weaponization, the final act of dehumanization. Gil also touches upon this in her work regarding the character of Medea. She writes that trauma and pain lead to the dehumanization, which is an inevitable and necessary consequence (Gil 2007: 134). And that is exactly what happens to Medusa: her traumatizing assault is the beginning of her process of dehumanization.

Chapter 3: Medusa (2023)

Let us move on now to the final novel also titled *Medusa* (2023), written by Jessie Burton. Burton has published other novels but she is mostly known for her book *The Miniaturist* (2014)[39]. Like Hewlett's work, this novel is also narrated by Medusa and it is very short. Instead of chronicling Medusa's entire life, it focuses on her meeting Perseus and their relationship developing throughout the novel, climaxing in an unexpected ending.

Medusa has been living on an island alone with her sisters for four years, having made the choice to move here after her assault and after Athena's punishment made her what she is (Burton 2023: 1), upon her first encounter with the hero. Perseus is the first person, the first man at that, that she has seen and interacted with in the last four years, so when she sees him, she is overcome with curiosity, and her loneliness bares its fangs viciously. She allows the curiosity and loneliness to rule her decisions and ignores the warnings of one of the snakes who points out the fact that he has a sword. Medusa states that "Echo [the snake] hissed, but I closed my mind to her warning. I'd been without company my own age for four long years, and the boy was so beautiful. I'd risk the sword if it meant I could keep looking" (Burton 2023: 8).

Medusa and Perseus develop a relationship, as they did in Hewlett's work, however it is different here in some key ways. Firstly, Perseus does not know who she is. She keeps out of sight as they speak and she lies about her name (Burton 2023: 15-19). Secondly, Perseus only reveals he is on a mission to kill the Gorgon after they start talking and building rapport (Burton 2023: 134). Thirdly, they are not friends. Instead, they persuade themselves that they are in love with one another (Burton 2023: 105-106). This idea of love is what I want to focus on since it will lead to the ending of the book.

Since we are not aware of what Perseus is thinking, we are only aware of what Medusa is thinking and struggling with, we can only assume what is going through Perseus's mind based on his choice of words. With those "clues", as a reader, we can ascertain that this love

[39] Burton's *The Miniaturist* (2014) seems to have started off as a standalone novel, however, in 2022 she published a sequel titled *The House of Fortune* making this a series/duology.

Perseus claims to feel is mostly based on a sense of newness and wonder. He tells Medusa that speaking with her, holding conversations full of honesty and raw discussion, is different from speaking with his mother and with Driana, a young woman who he once called his girlfriend (Burton 2023: 104). And immediately after this, he confesses he might be in love with Medusa even though he knows it sounds crazy (Burton 2023: 105).

To use a more contemporary approach, Perseus is putting Medusa under the umbrella of "she is not like other girls". The "I-am-not-like-other-girls" girl is a well-known trope used in literature and televised media. To put it shortly, it defines a woman as different from the others because she is not typically feminine and does not typically engage in traditionally feminine activities (shopping, gossiping, doing make-up), which makes her more appealing to some men. When used by men, this label is to be taken as a compliment. When used by women to define themselves as such, it is meant to show compliance with the idea of making yourself desirable for male romantic attention.

Perseus does not consciously use this label, but judging by his choice of words he is meaning to make this sound like a compliment towards Medusa. When he says "talking with you… Oh, by the gods, it's incredible. You've lived such a life. It's not like being with Driana, or even my mother" (Burton 2023: 104), he says so in a tone of awe as if no other woman he had met until now was a real woman because they had not lived enough by his own standards. Again, Perseus has no second intentions nor is he being malicious in what he says regarding these other two women in his life, but by saying this he is showing that he does not understand the world of women. His own mother and Driana have not had similar experiences to Medusa, by Perseus's own standards, because they cannot have them. As women, their liberties differ greatly from the ones he himself has, and they must worry about what the outsider perception of whatever they do will be (McRobbie and Garber 1991: 14). Medusa immediately rejects this compliment by saying she would rather he would not say that because it is unfair towards Driana and his mother, "they'll have their stories too" (Burton 2023: 104).

As for Medusa, we do not have to go too far to understand why she is so immediately taken with this boy she has just met. She is lonely. She has only her sisters but by her own

admission, she wishes she could share her story with others besides them (Burton 2023: 51). She is so lonely that, when Perseus confesses he might love her, she says that "until I heard those words, I didn't know how much I'd been wanting them. They were only words, of course, and anyone can speak words. But in his mouth and in my ears they felt just right" (Burton 2023: 105-106). Medusa has never felt this type of love. She is loved by her sisters, and she knows she is, but she had never felt the love of a man, so pure and lovely. In another of her own admissions, Medusa says that perhaps she sees in him "a slim chance to reclaim some of the happiness and magic the gods had taken from me" (Burton 2023: 108).

But there is a small problem here, and it is not the fact that Perseus is tasked to kill her or that she has been lying to him. The issue here is that Medusa is in love with an idealized version of Perseus, and he is in love with an idealized version of her. While Perseus is in love with the idea of Medusa being different from the other women in his life because she lived through and survived a horrific ordeal, Medusa is in love with the idea of Perseus looking past her story and her looks. She fantasizes about it:

> I pictured a possible future: Perseus and me, walking hand in hand along the shore, our dogs bounding ahead, the wind in our hair – or in my snakes – and everything whole and safe and fine. Or another future: maybe we'd take his boat and go travelling on the high seas? Or yet another: two small cribs, a homestead, sheep grazing on a hill, simple dinners under the stars. (Burton 2023: 109).

But she is at least aware that these are fantasies that will never come true. And her bubble is burst further when she is confronted by one of her sisters on the matter. Stheno visits her and claims to know that not only is Medusa in love, she also knows that Perseus is on the island. Although she is not angry, she has questions and when she asks who he is, Medusa thinks to herself:

> I realised then that there was not much I could tell. Of course I felt I knew Perseus. I'd made him a mix of a real boy and the fantasies I couldn't resist building in my mind, as if I were a god, and my life a celestial canvas. But the truth was, when faced with a question like that, I simply did not know that much about him. It was not a pleasant realisation. The small world that Perseus and I had been constructing together now seemed made of gossamer in the face of an outsider's scrutiny, even an outsider as gracious as my sister. (Burton 2023: 123-124).

It is a fantasy. And Medusa is now further aware of it. But the final awakening takes place in two sections. First when Perseus reveals what his mission is, second when Medusa reveals to him who she is. Both illusions are shattered in a matter of moments with different reactions from both of them. While Medusa is confused but committed to the idea of coming clean and being honest, wishing to be seen and loved as she is, Perseus seems to lose his grip on reality. Perseus is incapable of understanding that the monster whose stories he had been told (Burton 2023: 135-137) and the sweet girl he had fallen in love with are one and the same person (Burton 2023: 142).

This brings us to the ending of this iteration of Medusa's story, and to the biggest divergence with the myth. Medusa is meant to die for she is the solution to not only save Perseus's mother, she will also be the salvation of Andromeda and her kingdom. Perseus is meant to be victorious and kill her while she sleeps or after a fight or because she allows him to, as we had seen in Hewlett's work. This we know, this is what we expect to find on the page as readers. But that is not how this book ends.

Perseus storms off in his upset and confused state after the reveal, leaving Medusa to ponder what his next move will be. And then Perseus appears the next morning in full armour and equipped with Hermes's sandals, Hades's helmet and Athena's sword and shield, ready to complete his mission. While Medusa is very obviously afraid and Perseus is very obviously still confused, Medusa tries to talk him into leaving her alone and when that proves useless, she starts fighting back (Burton 2023: 149-155). And she successfully turns Perseus to stone (Burton 2023: 155), coming out victorious for once. By doing this, Burton is giving us another version of the myth and one in which a victim comes out victorious. It completely flips the myth on its head. Perseus is no longer the hero; it is most likely that he will be forgotten about. What is going to happen to his mother now, a question Medusa herself poses (Burton 2023: 167-168), as she wonders if she should go see her and attempt to explain. The novel ends with Medusa directly addressing the reader in two paragraphs about the power of memory. She states that, no matter what happens, she knows that she and her myth will always be remembered and it is something impossible to run away from (Burton 2023: 170-171).

So, how do these novels differ and converge when retelling the myth of Medusa? When it comes to converging, the myth is relatively told in the same way with little to no alteration, safe for Burton's work as we have just seen. It seems that all three authors chose to follow Hesiod's genealogy and Ovid's version of the myth, more specifically the detail of rape. However, Haynes also uses one of Pindar's Odes to illustrate the dehumanization of Stheno and Euryale, as well as the appropriation of their grief (Haynes 2022: 299-300). In the same vein, Hewlett takes from Hesiod's version the pregnancy and the two children Medusa has after her death, although Hewlett changes it by having Medusa give birth *before* she dies. And both Hewlett and Haynes write that Athena was gifted the head after the fact and sewed it either into her shield or breastplate, which brings us back to Homer and *The Iliad*. Each author weaves interesting topics and interesting interpretations of characters, events and relationships into their work, which in turn make each novel rich and an interesting piece of literature in their own right.

As for where they differ, that is a much broader discussion. Despite the stories being relatively similar, the way the novels are constructed could not be more different. Starting with *Stone Blind* (2022), Haynes's wrote her novel in a third-person style of narration, which is directly opposed to what Burton and Hewlett do in their own works. This is something that sometimes felt like it was detrimental for the novel. While we are aware of Medusa's thoughts, her struggles, her feelings, her grief and pain, it feels impersonal. She feels distant from the readers, as if we are eavesdropping on a story being told to someone else. Besides being written in the third person, the addition of other characters also affected the book as a whole. And she feels extremely absent from her own story due to the presence of so many other characters, with more chapters dedicated to them, which is a critique many of the reviewers had to offer (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61102615-stone-blind). While we have spent much time analysing the other women present in this novel, it is important to acknowledge that, in a novel that was marketed as telling the story of Medusa, they felt strangely out of place, even if their stories are related to Medusa's in some way.

Both Hewlett and Burton's books are written in the first person, which immediately brings Medusa closer to the reader. As a reader, one never "escapes" from her thoughts or feelings

or from her story. *Medusa* (2021) in particular made her feel like a friend to the reader, with the tone and language used, opening up about her story and trauma with too much honesty and willingness to be seen as a villain (Hewlett 2021: 90-95). The author stated in an interview that "Medusa is arguably the most infamous monster in mythology and yet her voice has remained so absent" (Grayson 2021). More than telling her story and setting the record straight, as Medusa claims she wants to do after such a long time of having her story misinterpreted and told wrong, she is reflecting on it. Medusa thinks about her actions and the actions of others, the why of those actions and her feelings towards them, as well as her regrets or lack thereof. But above all, she is honest. She is honest even to her own detriment by sharing with the reader something that might make her look bad or worse, make her look like the monster history says she is (Hewlett 2021: 90-95; 101-104). This book is more than just telling and regurgitating the same story and changing the ending for shock value or in order to offer Medusa some peace, it is an act of sharing and reflecting on one's life, as bad and as good as it may be.

As for *Medusa* (2023) the first-person narration invokes in the reader a sense of intimacy, similar to Hewlett's work, in this relationship we are developing with a character who is speaking to us directly. The writings that have survived from Ancient Greece and Rome, as we have seen, never offer her point of view so as readers we are unaware of how she perceives what happened, how she feels, or what she has lost. About having Medusa as the first-person narrator, Burton has stated in an interview that she "wanted to reclaim Medusa's story and invite the reader into her mind" (Wood 2017). The reader is being made privy to her story and feelings because she chose to tell it in her own words. Burton goes on to explain that, as a character, Medusa is repeatedly "robbed of agency, turned into a monster, and used as a stepping stone for heroes" (Wood 2017). Not only does Medusa survive, she manages to be the one slaying the man who came for her, and tell the world.

Briefly going back to the question (are these novels feminist?) Kate Alexandra raised in her video that we looked at in chapter 4 of part I, what is the answer then? Are these three novels feminist? They were certainly marketed as such, and "tagged" as such on the website goodreads. While I had expected to have an answer at the end of reading them, I find that I

do not. The question is, though: what makes a novel feminist to begin with? Is it that female characters speak up and have a voice, or perhaps what makes it feminist is that Medusa flips the myth on its head and kills her would-be murderer? Perhaps it is a combination of the two. Additionally, all these three authors choose to tell a century-long story from the perspective of female characters who were presented as powerful but minor supporting characters in the myths. Only the story of the male hero mattered, and Medusa and other female figures were reduced to being stepping-stones in the hero's quest.

Notwithstanding this, marketing strategies have to be taken into account as well, and branding the novels as "feminist" sells, even if it is hard to establish just what a feminist retelling may be.

Chapter 4: Visually representing Medusa on film

We now move on to address the film *Clash of the Titans* (2010) directed by Louis Leterrier. The point of this section is to analyse the ways in which Medusa is represented in other media, in this case in film.

The story is told from the perspective of Perseus who sets out on his hero journey to save the princess Andromeda and the city of Argos from a beast named kraken, a difference from the original myth. Similar~~ly~~ to the myth, however, Perseus visits the graiae for information on how to defeat the beast. But what is told to the viewers is also different from the myth.

Perseus is told that Medusa is the solution to save Andromeda and her people, and that she is imprisoned across the river Styx at the edge of the underworld, so that is where he needs to go in order to succeed in his endeavours (Leterrier 2010: 55:30-55:55). Monsters in the underworld and the journey of the hero into the underworld are not uncommon themes when we look at myths. It is interesting to see this theme here as it adds a new layer to the story of the gorgon. The idea that Medusa is imprisoned suggests that she was taken forcefully and is being kept there in order to protect the rest of the world from her. Furthermore, this permanently brands her as a monster like the others that wander the underworld[40]. Due to this, the viewer of this film would be more receptive of the idea that Medusa must die at the hands of Perseus since the idea of monstrosity is presented immediately.

Following this, Perseus and his companions set out on their journey to the underworld, and the viewer is given the details of who Medusa is and how she came to be in the underworld through a conversation between the characters. One of Perseus's male companions refers to Medusa as "just another beast to kill" (Leterrier 2010: 01:03:18) in order to encourage the group who is in low spirits at the moment. This causes the only female companion of the group to become upset and correct him by explaining the story of the gorgon. She says the following:

[40] One must note, of course, that the underworld is not only reserved for imprisoned monsters. In mythology, the underworld, looked after by the god Hades, is the final resting place of the souls of the dead.

> "A beast? 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 felt nothing but disgust. She made sure no one would ever want Medusa again. One look at the creature she has become will turn any living thing to stone. I cannot assist you there [inside the temple]. A curse prevents me. It was Athena's one bit of solace to Medusa so that Medusa would not harm a woman. Only men are allowed in the temple. Though no man has ever made it out." (Leterrier 2010: 01:03:19-01:04:07)

There is much to dissect and comment in this explanation. Firstly, there is the subtle but no less unsettling comment regarding Medusa's beauty. The way the line of dialogue is constructed implies that all Medusa did was dare to exist while being beautiful and that alone imbued Poseidon with the desire to take her, even if she did not want it. The perils of existing as a beautiful woman are once again at play here as we have seen in the three novels.

Secondly, we must look at the construction of the dialogue regarding Athena's punishment. The viewer is told that Athena "made sure no one would ever want Medusa again" (Leterrier 2010: 01:03:45). On a first glance, this line has no greater meaning other than being a poetic way to share with the viewer the punishment that was enacted by Athena but if one wants to look into it further, there is another interpretation. There is a hint of possible jealousy woven into the construction of this explanative line. This puts into action the notion that Athena was jealous of Medusa's beauty, popularized by Apollodorus, and that jealousy was the driving force behind this punishment rather than the disgust at the desecration of her temple.

Lastly, the viewer is told that only men are allowed to face Medusa and women are prevented from walking into the temple altogether. The idea that Medusa harms no woman, possibly in solidarity and understanding of the plight of being born and living as female, has gained popularity more recently. Although it is easy to justify the birth of this idea by marking it as feminism or as pure lies and inventions, that is not entirely true. The poet Ovid wrote in his collection *Metamorphoses* that on his path to find Medusa, Perseus encountered "the statues of men and of beasts transformed to stone" (Ovid 2004: 780-781). The emphasis is on the word "men" here. While Ovid most likely used this word to illustrate the fact that only men went after Medusa, one can interpret this in two other ways. One, the use of this word is a

blanket term that encompasses both male and female victims, the word “men” in this case references the “race of men” or “mankind”. Two, women were not allowed to venture out on their own travels without being accompanied by men, nor were they allowed to attempt to enter the hero business of slaying beasts. But the interpretation the film seems to be following: there are only statues of men because Medusa is either incapable of due to Athena’s curse, or she chooses to not harm women.

The treatment of Medusa in this scene is not the treatment one would expect her to get. It does start off like that, though. Medusa is seen as just a monster they need to kill to accomplish something else, until the only female character on the screen speaks up. The performance of the actress, who is crying as she recounts the ordeal Medusa was put through, and the way she delivers these lines adds something to the story. Pity, understanding and respect, three things that monsters seldom get, and three things Medusa never got whenever she was spoken about.

The next sequence of events is completely divergent from the traditional source materials (poems and art). Perseus and his companions enter the temple Medusa is confined to, while the female character, true to her explanation, remains outside waiting patiently for their return. Immediately, characters and viewers hear a distant sinister laugh and realize that Medusa will not go down without a fight. She is hunting them as they are hunting her (Leterrier 2010: 01:09:00). As we have already seen in past chapters, sources say that Perseus attacked Medusa in her sleep and was successful in killing her because he had help from the gods, and because she did not fight back. In this film, we get a Medusa that fights back, brandishing bow and arrow, and even attacks the group first.

There are two things that I want to look at in this section of the film. Firstly, I would like to comment on this change from a Medusa who is passive and asleep at the time of her death to a Medusa who fights back and seemingly takes pleasure in hunting these men who came for her. The reasoning for this change can be analysed through two different lenses. On the one hand, Medusa is now a fighter because she was victimized before and she now can and chooses to defend herself. She will not be a victim ever again. On the other hand, Medusa is now a fighter in order to justify her murder at the hands of Perseus. She is a monster, she

attacked the hero and his companions first, she has killed other men, she deserves to die. There is no clear answer as to why that change was made and all these interpretations work depending on the type of discussion that is being had. The speech about what happened to her, filled with care and understanding, coupled with the visual of this monster who is trying to kill our hero, in self-defence might I add, leaves it up to the viewer to decide what they want to see Medusa as. She can either be fully a monster with no remorse, or she can be a victim who was pushed too far and is now taking back her life and agency.

The second thing I want to look at is the physical portrayal of Medusa, i.e., the way she appears on the screens. Although she had a face model, Medusa's presence in the film is accomplished entirely through Computer Generated Imagery (CGI). The team on the film explains that they scanned the face of Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova and filmed her performing some actions to have as reference[41]. From there, they built Medusa through CGI and placed her in the film with the other actors who, upon filming the scene, were acting opposite to a green screen. The use of CGI may seem irrelevant at a glance since it is something so common in modern films, but it is of importance here due to the stylistic choices that were made regarding the physical representation of Medusa's character.

Medusa is portrayed as more of a humanoid type of beast than a human altogether. In fact, the only part of her that is human like is her torso and arms and even those have elements of monstrosity. Her legs have been replaced completely and she was given a snake's slithering body in order to move around the temple. A body that she uses to her advantage when fighting her enemies (Fig. 17). As for her torso and arms, as well as neck region, the only human characteristics, they are covered in snake-like scales. From the neck up, she has the face of a beautiful woman, she is modelled after a supermodel after all, but what is interesting regarding her face is that it changes whenever she attacks someone. Her eyes glow, her nose all but disappears, her jaw seemingly unhinges itself and she grows pointy fangs similar to snakes (Fig. 18). The team on the film stated that this was done on purpose in order to give her snake characteristics since that is the animal she is mostly associated with. It can also be said, however, that this was done in order to make Medusa more like a monster than human.

[41] This explanation is present in the bonus features of the DVD of the film along with other 'making of' clips. The video is posted online on the platform YouTube by a third party not associated with the studio that produced the film (https://youtu.be/rctmJmOH5E0?si=NmLAYQeZRy0CUwce 2020).

There is something to be said about the shock of a beautiful woman suddenly turning into a monster with the face of a snake before our very eyes. As for the top of her head, as it is to be expected, she has the snakes where her hair should be. The snakes are alive, hissing along with her whenever she transforms upon attacking someone.

Fig. 17: screenshot obtained from the film *Clash of the Titans* (2010), showing Medusa using her snake tail to her advantage upon stalking an enemy.

Fig. 18: screenshot obtained from the film *Clash of the Titans* (2010), showing Medusa's face as she is petrifying someone.

The different interpretation of Medusa's physical appearance present in this film is interesting because it balances the beauty she was said to have with the monster she now, apparently, is. But there is something else that should be touched upon regarding what she looks like, and that is her clothing, or lack thereof. Medusa wears little clothing in the scene in which she is present. Her outfit, that I believe is meant to imitate some sort of "armour", is more similar to a bikini or a bra. Only her breasts are covered and the only other piece of "armour" she sports is present on her forearms as a protective barrier from the string of her bow. Her stomach, neck, back, and upper arms and shoulders are left uncovered and

unprotected (Fig. 19). She also has no care for her lower body. Of course, that one may think that this is simply because she is too confident and she believes that no one will be able to come close enough to stab her in the back or drive a sword through her stomach. But what about archers? Someone with a long-distance weapon can easily incapacitate her.

There is something interesting in the fact that a creature that is built to look sensual and beautiful is also dangerous, something that can be the death of the righteous hero. It is reminiscent of the first woman, Eve, who was beautiful and sensual but whose curiosity condemned not only her male partner, but all of mankind. The association with snakes is also not to be missed.

The stereotype of female characters in action films, and also in shows and video games, must also be kept in mind. Characters such as Lara Croft, in her so well-known tank top and booty shorts, and Mystique from the X-Men franchise, who walks around naked, come to mind immediately. Both Lara Croft and Mystique are smart, capable, driven, and above all, they are deadly, but we must never forget that they are women who also just happen to be sensual and beautiful.

Fig. 19: screenshot obtained from the film *Clash of the Titans* (2010), showing Medusa's full body and "clothes", as well as her weapon of choice: a bow and arrow.

This raises the question of what is the relevancy for these characters to be wearing skimpy outfits or the relevancy for these characters to be "feminine" or sexualized since it seems to be serving no purpose, and it may even be considered unrealistic (Fogle 2021). There is no discussion that men expect these characters to be designed a certain way in order to still be "sexually appealing even if it doesn't fit with their theme" (Fogle 2021). The male

gaze is the one that is always being catered to. Edward Snow wrote about the male gaze that "certain motifs are almost sure to appear: voyeurism, objectification, fetishism, scopophilia, woman as the object of the male pleasure and the bearer of male lack, etc" (Snow 1989: 30). What I wish to focus on here is the "scopophilia" and the "objectification". Scopophilia is described as the act of looking at something, object or person, and gathering pleasure from it. It is something that Freud discussed within his works, as well as Laura Mulvey in her essay titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999). She states that looking exists "as the erotic basis for pleasure" (Mulvey 1999: 835), and she then goes on to say that cinema satisfies that desire to look in a pleasurable way (Mulvey 1999: 836). Mulvey then takes it a step further and directly addresses the woman as the object for the looking pleasure. She writes that the "male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure" (Mulvey 1999: 837). The male gaze in question here is that of the audience instead of that of the characters, which is also something Mulvey references (Mulvey 1999: 840).

So, based on all this, what can be its purpose then? The armour/bikini/bra offers no protection and from, an aesthetic point of view, it is not anything special either. It is not overtly adorned or detailed or made out of gold or jewels, it is a simple dark "outfit" that appears to be made of leather. As for the realistic aspect, that is non-existent. Bikinis and bras were not a reality for the time period of this film. Modern bras became a hot commodity and popular amongst women in 1913, while bikinis as we think of them now were unveiled after the Second Great War in 1946. The film takes place sometime in the Classical Greek period. I am not claiming that women in this period did not wear any undergarments, but a bra such as the one Medusa sports was not a reality. There is, of course, the argument that this film has a heavy leaning towards fantasy and that alone is reason enough to throw out the "it-is-not-realistic" argument. However, in a film where at least some care was had regarding set dressing, male armour, weapons and dresses in order to make it look somewhat accurate to what we perceive the Classical Greek period to have looked like, why should this armour/bikini/bra get a pass?

Medusa could have very well been put in a chest piece similar to the ones most of the male characters wear throughout the movie. One would like to think that the impact of

this would have been the same, but the truth is that it most likely it would not have been. In a film belonging to a genre that typically caters to a mostly male audience, a female character who does not remind the viewer that she is sensuous will most likely be considered dull. The truth is, the producers have put Medusa in this "armour" in order to sexualise her further, to objectify her, to cater to the male gaze. This is an addition that is unnecessary as it serves no real purpose in the overall interpretation of the film. It passes along the message that while women are allowed to take back their power and fight, they have to remain desirable and remind the audience that they are still feminine and beautiful women. Desirable object first, fighter second. They cannot be one without being the other, forever trapped in this dichotomy in order to appeal to a male audience.

Chapter 5: Medusa Online

While we have just looked extensively at the various ways Medusa is represented visually and in literature, we have not yet looked at symbolism of her presence. Of course, in the first chapter of this dissertation we have briefly looked at how reliefs of Medusa were added to statues and city walls, and to jewellery and shields, as a symbol of protection and a means to push away evil, but there may be more layers to Medusa's use.

Currently, Medusa has become a symbol for survivors of sexual assault who often choose to tattoo a representation of her on their bodies. In an interview with *Parade*, Anita Astley, a therapist, claimed that she believes "the Medusa tattoo is the perfect visual depiction of a survivor's journey from pain to resilience, strength, empowerment and self-preservation" (Sager 2023). She also pointed out that for many survivors, Medusa "helps remove the stigma and the shame, guilt, self-loathing and self-blame commonly experienced by survivors of sexual assault" (Sager 2023).

In the same way that tattoos are accepted and even normalized in every sense, they can also be rejected for a number of reasons that can be cultural, religious or simply generational. When more and more people, mostly women, bravely started coming online to share their stories and show their tattoos, there was, unsurprisingly, backlash. Notably, in Egypt, a group of people named "Eza Boleetom Faestatero", which translates to "if you're afflicted, hide it", dominated the conversation and used it as a chance to victim blame and shame the women who had come forward by implying that they should hide their assault for it was shameful (El-Sayed 2022).

Also of note is the way that this tattoo has become so popular to the extent that, while most people know what it could represent, not everyone wants a Medusa tattoo for that reason. Some people have taken to the internet to express their frustration with wanting a tattoo of the gorgon simply because they love her as a character or think she is, at lack of a better adjective, "cool", but being unable to do so because everyone will assume they are survivors. It has to be noted that no tattoo has one singular general meaning. Tattoos mean different things for anybody who chooses to get them, and reducing a Medusa tattoo to a symbol of

survival is not only doing a disservice to the character, but assuming someone's story when one can simply ask and start a respectful conversation. Some have also taken to saying that survivors are wrong for doing this, because the version of the myth where Medusa was raped is "false". Historical accuracy regarding the narrative is something that is quite tricky when it comes to mythical figures, and if one prefers to take the *Theogony* for example as the one true version of things, that is their prerogative. But to say that survivors are wrong to take this version and make it mean something so dear to them is cruel. Frustration is understandable, disrespect towards survivors who have been victimized often more than once is not.

The representation of Medusa in the shape of a tattoo that can hold this symbolism can be seen as positive. Medusa is no longer a monster or a villain, she is a symbol of survival, of empowerment and female rage, and she is sometimes still interpreted as a symbol of protection. But there is yet another way in which Medusa is taken and used that is not so positive. Medusa has been taken by some, mostly supporters of political figures, and used to villainize powerful female government figures through photo manipulation, namely Hillary Clinton during her 2016 campaign for presidency (Fig. 20, Fig. 21 and Fig. 22).

Fig. 20: image of Hillary Clinton as Medusa

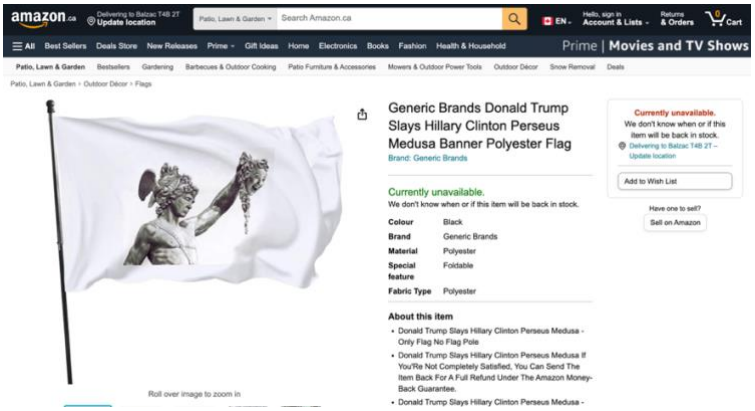

Fig. 21: screenshot of an Amazon storefront that at some point sold a flag with the design of Donald Trump as Perseus holding up the head of Medusa, designed to look like Hillary Clinton.

Fig. 22: a better look at the design printed above on the flag that was up for sale.

The interpretation of these images is obvious. Powerful women, who may or may not threaten the patriarchal norms by moving in ways in which their male political counterparts or the public disagree with, are nothing but snake-haired monsters and villains that must be defeated, they are something to be wary of. Here is a woman who has made a career in politics, something that is still very much dominated by men, and she is seen as a very polarizing figure be it for her ideas or simply because she identifies as a woman. Political satire, criticism of politicians and their ideas, the creation of drawings or other types of art as a way to poke fun at the political climate, these are things that have always existed and will continue to exist. But to manipulate photos of this woman to either make her look like Medusa is staring at you, waiting to petrify you, or appear as if she has been decapitated, is

taking it a step to far. It encourages further misogyny, further hate rhetoric and it discredits the work this woman has made, regardless of the political inclinations one may have.

As it has been attempted to show, Medusa is reinterpreted and reimagined in an abundance of ways across several media, and it bears repeating that there is no right or wrong way to look at this character or at her story. What must be bore in mind above all is the why. Why is Medusa being used like this? Why is Medusa being portrayed like that? These are questions that one should ask oneself and others that engage with Medusa and her story.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this dissertation was to study the representation of Medusa throughout time, and it ended up also being a study of the evolution of the figure as an icon. From a character who started as a face on a shield or on the wall of a city (Karoglou 2018: 4) to the face of female rage and acceptance of trauma (Sager 2023) as well as a tool to vilify women, Medusa has lived many lives. Some gentler than others, all of them surely gentler than the one she lived according to Ovid. And yet it was found that her story, her life, continue to raise curiosity and create a sense of kinship amongst those who care to look. The publication of novels such as *Stone Blind* (2022) and the novels titled *Medusa* written by Rosie Hewlett (2021) and Jessie Burton (2023) and their consequent positive and loving reception show that there is a demand for stories about Medusa. Medusa is received in a variety of ways and by a broad spectrum of people who look to her and think about her and her story in different ways. Questions such as "what were her sisters like?"; "did they have a good relationship?"; "was she scared after she was assaulted, or was she angry?"; "what did she feel when she was punished?", are on the minds of contemporary readers and demand to be answered. And retellings are the way. Retellings not only breathe new life into familiar stories, but offer studies in character and values as authors inject into these stories social commentary and interesting concepts.

In the studies of character present in these retellings, there are not only the answers to various questions but also the opportunity for diversity and representation, in this case, through the representation of various different types of women or female coded characters. They are not one-dimensional, they are nuanced and complex, serving as mirrors to the reader or the world.

The role of social media in promoting these retellings and in pushing these social commentaries forward cannot be ignored. The influence of "booktok" on the publishing industry (Sánchez 2022; Wood 2022) and on the tastes of consumers is a beast that is only now starting to be addressed. Consumers are curious but most of all they want to see themselves represented in these retellings through the voices of the previously silenced.

But these findings did not come about without issue. Whilst writing this dissertation, two different problems were encountered in the process of research. As already mentioned in the introduction section of this dissertation, one of those issues was related to working with a medium like the internet. To recapitulate, it is of general belief that, in the world of the internet, nothing is truly deleted and goes away. While there is some level of truth since screenshots and screen recordings are a precaution that can be taken in order to save information, as well as the existence of databases, how is it decided what should be saved for posterity? Do we as citizens of the online world apply the same level of value and interest to *every single post* and inject posts with enough worth that it warrants a screenshot or a screen recording? Such a task would be a tiresome one at the very least. Henceforth, it is impossible to know if a post will be there the next day and if it is not, the chance that someone else saved it is slim. While working with the internet in this dissertation, with social media to be more exact, the issue of finding a post of relevance and then seeing it be deleted off of the internet happened several times. While the posts had been saved in app with the intention of retrieving the screenshots relevant to then use in discussion, multiple of these posts were found to have been deleted for unknown reasons. It is not uncommon for creators to then repost the videos previously deleted with small edits but such a thing was not the case here and it would have defeated the purpose of the intended analysis since it was mostly the comments of the video that were of interest. This issue is easily fixable by immediately retrieving the screenshots instead of saving it for a later time. It was a mistake and a learning experience.

The other issue constitutes of the gap in literature regarding retelling of classical myth. While there are many studies and articles conducted on the revisiting and reviewing of myths, much of them are focused on specific works and only its more generalized claims could be used. Moreover, many of the articles that were addressing retellings as a whole, focused on the retellings of fairytales and once again, only the more general claims could be used. Most of the literature used was therefore articles of opinion or observations conducted by people outside of the academic community. Furthermore, due to this gap in literature, the spaces had to be filled by personal experiences and observations as well. Due to that, it is possible that what is shared in this dissertation may at times come across as surface-level observations and research, but I hope the discussion has compensated for these shortcomings.

One final thing worth addressing is the difference in the length of the chapters. *Stone Blind* (2022) is the longest of the three novels and includes multiple points of views of various characters. This diversity requires an in-depth discussion, as plurality complicates the narrative landscape. Both *Medusa* (2021; 2023) novels are more condensed and contained in the sense that there is no other point of view other than Medusa's. As readers, we hear about other characters but we do not see them or are made privy to their lives. As for the film, we are simply looking at one scene and not at the whole piece, that being the justification for the length of that chapter in particular.

Retellings seem to only be at the beginning of their renaissance in literary community as more and more versions of the same story retold over and over again with new perspectives and new commentary come out to various degrees of success and love. The best way to conclude this dissertation is to quote The Book Leo in her entirety:

> I think humans just can't stop retelling old stories. I think we will always have this need to tweak familiar stories to give us what we need at that moment. It's been happening thousands and thousands of years in past before the printing press was a thing and people just retold stories when we were telling them to each other. (…) And the way we decide to tweak these stories will always be a reflection of what we want at that time. (The Book Leo 2024: 31:47-32:23)

Readers will always search for their escape into a world where there is a sword and a handsome prince, or pretty queen, waiting to romance you. But above all, a reader will always search for the character that looks like them. The character that is nuanced, the character that is complex, the character who has agency and speaks her truth. As literary retellings continue to enjoy such popularity and continue to be held in such love by consumers, they serve as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and its ability to evolve with the times.

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