RECLAIMING MEDUSA FROM MALE HEGEMONY: FEMINIST REVISIONIST MYTH OF CHRISTINE DE PIZAN AND FEMINISTS IN THE FOURTH WAVE

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ABSTRACT

Reclaiming Medusa from Male Hegemony:
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The prevalence of the male-hegemonic narrative, a dominant societal influence that has perpetuated power differentials, is evident throughout the history of Western civilization. Male supremacy, normalized and reinforced over the ages, has found a significant sphere of influence in mythology. The sustained narrative of Western mythology, particularly the Medusa myth, stands as a potent example of patriarchal expression: the threatening female mortal monster who can turn men to stone. This powerful imagery referenced historically, further reinforced a patriarchal script of masculinist ideals. This androcentric narrative that has been in place since the early Greco-Roman era, into the Middle Ages, and modern day provides a means to explore, analyze, and question the misogynistic male writing that is vividly expressed in mythological depictions. Disrupting the storyline, feminists have taken ownership of the Medusa myth to challenge traditional interpretations, known as feminist revisionist myth.

Grounded in feminist theory and inquiry, this research focuses on the representation of Medusa in patriarchal and feminist outputs as symbolic rhetorical agents, the latter as a means of feminist reclamation from the hegemonic interpretation of the mythological figure. This scholarly exploration highlights the 15th-century writer Christine de Pizan as one of the first feminist authors to transform the Medusa myth into a positive female model in her allegorical work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In the modern era of fourth-wave feminism, the rhetorical landscape of feminist discourse has

expanded in dismantling the foundational ideals of patriarchy with Medusa being reclaimed and reimagined in various cultural products such as fashion, arts, film, social media, and literature. Contributing to feminist theory, this dissertation is a conceptual springboard for understanding the relevance of Medusa depictions, patriarchal and feminist, as historical and cultural constructs, especially feminist revisionist mythmaking.

DEDICATION

To my beloved sister Susan, a different flower from the same garden, and to our loving mother, Julie, who helped plant the seeds.

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ABBREVIATIONS

FEP (female-endorsed patriarchy): the indoctrination of male deference; women dutiful to patriarchal ideals of masculine/feminine; support patriarchal power differentials to uphold sexist gendered ideals; aligned with power; women project an identity of the dutiful daughter, wife, mother, etc. for male approval; act as agents of misogyny, especially against women perceived as not adhering to the patriarchal script.

INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal narrative of Western mythology, historically dominated by male perspectives, portrays Medusa as a marginalized female character, disregarding her experience and perspective. There is no interiority for Medusa—no perspective, no voice. As a scholar, researcher, and feminist in the new millennium, it is vital to recognize revisionist feminist mythmaking as a feminist script to claim her agency, symbolic power, and forward female ideals. As Enloe declares, "How we tell and retell stories determines whether we sustain or challenge patriarchy."[1] Over fifty years ago, feminist poet, Adrienne Rich, in her essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," underscores the need for reclamation, for revision from the mythmaking tradition: "…this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society."[2] In 1982, Alicia Ostriker, feminist poet and cultural critic, wrote a foundational essay, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." Although focusing on the importance of female poets' writing as "defining a female self as a major endeavor,"[3] Ostriker defines revisionist mythmaking as a "significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture."[4] For Ostriker, "The core of revisionist mythmaking for women lies in the

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[1] Cynthia Enloe, *Big Push: Exposing and Challenging Sustainable Patriarchy* (University of California Press, 2017).

[2] Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 1972): 18.

[3] Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1982): 70, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173482.

[4] Ostriker, "Thieves of Language," 71.

challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth."[5] In order to explore feminist revisionist mythmaking, central to the theme of this dissertation is tracing the historic and cultural context of the patriarchal Medusa myth, depicting the evolution from a symbolic misogynistic metaphor to modern day imagery of female strength and resilience.

For millennia, men have created myths, including ones that depict Medusa as a monster made of the male imagination—the gorgon with a deadly glare who turns men to stone. In control of a male-centric narrative, ancient Greco-Roman poets are the progenitors of this single story of Medusa. In her TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," the Nigerian feminist and writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us of the danger of a single story: it is a narrative that presents only one perspective, repeating generalizations and stereotypes "used to dispossess and malign."[6] Adichie's modern perspective of the single story aligns with the potency of myth by the ancient Greco-Roman poets. The ancient mythmakers began a literary tradition of depicting Medusa through a patriarchal lens: Medusa as *other*[7] —the woman who disobeys the patriarchal script[8] — an ultimate villainess warranting patriarchal discipline.

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[5] Ostriker, "Thieves of Language," 73.

[6] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story, The Danger of a Single Story," filmed July 2009 at TedGlobal, video, 18:33, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

[7] In scholarly research and mainstream content, *other* is commonly used without reference to the woman who coined it. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir defined what this means in her seminal feminist opus, *The Second Sex* (New York, 2011). For de Beauvoir, females are oppressed since they are situated as the Other, the object, while men/males are the norm of society, the Self, the subject. This offers the grounding of a sexist rationale for subjugation.

[8] This researcher defines patriarchal script as a male-centric social and cultural construct that communicates idealized gendered expectations of masculine (superior) and female (inferior) for a given time and place; the patriarchal script is omnipresent in all societal domains.

The mythological character represents the depiction of hegemonic order and masculine superiority by establishing a symbolic pattern of Medusa as anathema to patriarchal ideals of masculine and feminine natures. Cultural critic Elizabeth Johnson recognizes this: "Medusa, like all cultural myths, functions as a mirror of the values and beliefs of the culture in which she is produced and interpreted."[9] The inherited patriarchal depictions of Medusa are rooted and germinate a continuous biased script. For Jess Zimmerman, in her book, *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*, mythological narratives are the most "complicit" as "tight little packages of expectation seeded into the culture."[10] Beginning in the ancient era, one of the major themes in patriarchal Medusa discourse is that women perceived as not adhering to the patriarchal script are deserving of retribution and obedience to male hegemony. Female fidelity to gendered ideals are expected. As will be explored in this dissertation, myth, code of conduct, and patriarchy are intertwined. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, "By the time humankind reaches the stage of writing in mythology and laws, patriarchy is definitely established: it is males who write the code."[11]

Early in my doctoral studies, I was enrolled in a course, "Tools of the Titans." Classmates and I were afforded rich insight and understanding of Greco-Roman myth through the analysis and interpretation of epic poems and plays. It was in this course via a

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[9] Elizabeth Johnson, "'Let Them Know That Men Did This': Medusa, Rape, and Female Rivalry in Contemporary Film and Women's Writing," in *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film*, eds. Julie A. Chappell and Mallory Young (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 183–208.

[10] Jess Zimmerman, *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology* (S.L.: Beacon, 2022), 8.

[11] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 88.

classmate's comment that I first became aware of the Roman iteration of the Medusa myth via *Metamorphoses*, the multi-volume epic poem by Ovid, who provides her backstory. Ovid's work was not required reading, so one evening during a class discussion about the symbolic power and influence of the ancient male gods, when a classmate uttered: "And of course, there's Medusa, who was raped by Poseidon," I was gob smacked. Completely unaware of this narrative thread, when I questioned my classmate of Medusa as a rape victim, he provided a truncated version of Ovid's tale: Medusa, a mortal and beautiful gorgon, was raped in Minerva's temple (Athena in Greek myth) by the sea god, Poseidon. It was Athena who turned Medusa into the beast of common imagination. Perseus, promising Medusa's head as a wedding gift to the king about to wed his mother, is aided with godly tools of invincibility to behead her. In simple terms, Medusa was raped, blamed, demonized, then decapitated by Perseus.

Until that moment in class, my primary reference point, the dominant, single-story narrative of the Medusa myth I consumed as a cultural product was the 1981 film, *Clash of the Titans*. As an eleven-year-old girl, I was enthralled by this film with a cast of mythological figures personified on screen, such as Perseus on his hero quest to kill the monstrous, snake-haired Medusa. But in the instant of hearing this different version, I had a visceral reaction to this tale: I had been duped. At the time, I was a 43-year-old woman. Educated. Well-read. Feminist. Pursuing my doctorate. Albeit a mythological tale, why had I not been aware that Medusa was a rape victim? The only version of Medusa I knew was as the mythological beast who turned onlookers to stone. Perseus, the demi-god who slays the snake-haired gorgon, a hero. Athena and Poseidon, merely the goddess of wisdom, and god of the seas, not complicit in Medusa's demise. That night in class was a

watershed moment for my scholarship as a feminist. Henceforth from that moment in class I was determined to understand the production of the Medusa myth; throughout history, whom has she been imagined by and why? How has Medusa been perceived across time and place through a patriarchal lens and a feminist lens? Medusa sparked in me what feminist theorist, writer, and professor, Cynthia Enloe refers to as "feminist curiosity"[12] —feminism is about the questions you ask, not just the answers you give.

The Medusa myth provides a means to explore, analyze and question the history and culture of women from a historiographic perspective: women as marginalized, women as other, and power differentials, especially, the quest for female agency within the confines of male hegemony across time and place. To understand the context of historic and current Medusa depictions evolving from a patriarchal to a feminist lens, this research provides a critical analysis illustrating the first feminist reclamation of the Medusa myth by medieval writer Christine de Pizan and how the mythological figure is depicted by modern day feminists in the fourth wave of feminism (2010s – present). This researcher acknowledges the fourth wave, characterized by its focus on empowering all women, acknowledging intersectionality (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation), and utilizing the power of the Internet and social media to communicate feminist ideals.[13] While de Pizan's work may not directly influence contemporary feminist imagination, there is a significant link of congruence in the rejection of Medusa symbolizing male hegemony:

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[12] Enloe, *Big Push*, 125.

[13] Although there are scholarly debates on the specificity of the fourth wave emergence, for a comprehensive understanding of traditionally recognized canons of the four waves of feminism, read *The Feminist Book.* https://www.dk.com/us/book/9780241350379-the-feminism-book/

the reclamation of her image through a lens of respect, morality, virtue, and dignity. To underscore the relevance of feminist reclamation, I chronicle how patriarchal and feminist depictions of Medusa reflect cultural and historical constructs of gender and power differentials as rhetorical agents of meaning.[14]

This dissertation contributes significantly to a specific body of scholarship: Medusa feminist theory. It is a work of nonfictional prose, firmly based on theoretical and empirical evidence, and takes a historical, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary approach. By drawing on historical and contemporary feminist theory and inquiry, the analysis and interpretation of patriarchal and feminist depictions of Medusa underscore the crucial role of feminist revisionist mythmaking in reshaping our understanding of Medusa. As an advocate for the legacy of feminist inquiry, delving into a wide range of feminist scholarship has afforded a deep appreciation of the significance, achievement, and impact of women's role in shaping critical thought, both in the past and the present. Their perspectives prove relevant when applied to the Medusa myth in terms of feminist theory and application. Germane to this research, Kate Manne, feminist philosopher, professor, and author of *Down Girl, The Logic of Misogyny*, provides a methodological framework by thoroughly defining the dynamics of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. According to Manne, patriarchy is the overarching and dominant ethos we live by (*It is a man's world*). Propping up the patriarchy are the supportive, conceptual pillars of misogyny, representing systems or mechanisms that enforce and uphold patriarchal

[14] Albeit there are second-wave and third-wave feminist Medusan outputs, notably second-wavers who significantly reimagined and rewrote the patriarchal Medusa myth via poetry, essays, and artistry, my research on fourth wave feminism is significant as it bookends the first and most recent historical feminist outputs, contributing to the existing body of feminist literary criticism and cultural analysis.

norms and expectations. Lastly, for Manne, sexism, grounded in prejudicial and stereotypical ideals, justifies and rationalizes a patriarchal order and ideology.

Contributing to feminist theory, this dissertation is a conceptual springboard for understanding the relevance of Medusa depictions, patriarchal and feminist, as historical and cultural constructs, especially revisionist mythmaking. In the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminist scholars, as an act of overt rejection and resistance to patriarchy began referring to Medusa, not as a monster but as a muse of inspiration and female agency.[15] Although they reclaimed Medusa as an emblem of female power, in the current literature there is not an exploration of the first feminist Medusan output by Christine de Pizan. In terms of the validity, applicability, and analysis of the existing scholarly works that trace Medusa's ideological imagery, rarely do the authors/researchers/scholars approach the subject matter linking de Pizan as the first to reclaim her and the modern interdisciplinary perspective of a shared rejection of male hegemony.

A limitation in Medusa-centric works is that for each Medusa depiction, the content is descriptive rather than providing depth to explain or interpret meaning and symbolism.[16] Another limitation of prior Medusa scholarship is the need to illustrate the interdisciplinary relevance of the Medusa myth within the context of specific times

[15] A significant feminist Medusan output is by French writer and cultural critic Helene Cixous. In her seminal essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," she writes a scathing revolt of Freud and his misogynistic view of Medusa, who, according to Freud, symbolizes male castration. For Cixous, Freud's essay relies on masculine-coded language to propagate misogyny. See Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93.

[16] For example, *The Medusa Reader* (2003), by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, is a go to compendium for Medusa research. The edited work of 73 short chapters traces the Medusa myth and imagery from Greco-Roman antiquity to modern day through art, literature, pop culture and fashion, among other cultural touchpoints, but are merely descriptive, informational, and not grounded in feminist theory.

and places throughout history. Rather than simply describe their attributes or list chronologically, each depiction in this dissertation exemplifies what historian Joan Wallach Scott refers to as "small histories," cultural markers that signify gender and power dynamics throughout history.[17] This research fills the gap as a feminist catalog of Medusa. And as a feminist inquiry, this dissertation research also contributes to a better understanding for the scholarly domains of the Classics, Medieval Studies, Gender Studies, and Teacher Preparation.[18]

This research also contributes to the existing canon of Medusa scholarship with new insight into the first feminist Medusan output, modern feminist Medusan outputs, and the feminist Medusan ethos they share.[19] I and other feminists hold the same curiosity as we are in era of significant interest in feminist revisionist myth, a new consciousness about the malignment of mythological women.[20] In the representational

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[17] UC Berkeley Events, "Conversations with History - Joan Wallach Scott." YouTube. March 9, 2009, video, 55:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrknwNl818Y&t=2s.

[18] For example, first published in 1995, now in its 9th edition, *Classical Myth*, by Barry B. Powell, is a much-utilized textbook for high school and college students that adheres to the patriarchal script. The text includes a chapter, "Perseus and Myths of the Argive Plain" framing Perseus as a hero, Medusa to be conquered. Offered through Oxford Press, it is "a best-selling text." See https://global.oup.com/academic/product/classical-myth-9780197527986?cc=us&lang=en&

Also, according to a colleague of this researcher, Ana Pairet, Associate Professor for the Department of French, her department that is affiliated with the Rutgers University Global Medieval Studies Program uses de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* as a requirement in the Master of Arts (MA) reading list; it is not used for undergrad Medieval Studies courses or any others.

[19] To comprehend and analyze the feminist reinterpretation of Medusa in relation to gender and the patriarchal narrative, I draw on the works of second-wave theorists like Joan Wallach Scott, Adrienne Rich, Cynthia Enloe, Judith Bennett, Doris Silverman, and others.

[20] For example, an important shift has been underway during the fourth wave of feminism: female authors are reimagining, reviving, and providing the untold stories of iconic figures like Medusa, Circe, Medea, Clytemnestra, Penelope, and Hera. See the May 25 2024 article in the *New York Times* by Alexandra Alter, "The Women of Greek Myths Are Finally Talking Back," https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/25/books/greeks-myths-adaptions.html

archive of feminist revisionist mythmaking, Medusa is one of the most prominent figures. From a research perspective, no one has named the feminist outputs that aim to reclaim or disrupt the cognitive structure of patriarchal Medusa, nor the patriarchal outputs that spur responses. For feminists, the use of what Scott refers to in her seminal essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", as "…conceptual language, that at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination"[21] is needed to buck the status quo. I claim that within the discipline of feminist revisionist mythology there needs to be a definition for what these outputs are. Two new terms are necessary to clarify the distinction surrounding the perceptions of the meaning of the Medusa myth:

- **Patriarchal Medusan output:** the imagining of Medusa that is instructive of gendered power differentials; Medusa as an expression the patriarchal script through a misogynistic lens indicating/expressing/revealing any or all masculine properties of power-over, violence, competition, and domination.

- **Feminist Medusan output**: a reimagining of Medusa that rejects and deconstructs the misogynistic standard perpetuated via the patriarchal script through a feminist lens indicating/expressing/revealing any or all attributes of female agency, female solidarity, power-with, and an overall rejection of patriarchy.

The Medusan feminist outputs in this dissertation are a prescriptive effort to redefine the mythological figure. Rejecting sexist beliefs, biases, and gendered stereotypes, the Medusan feminist outputs offer a new cultural narrative, a departure from patriarchal ideals that have dominated the representational archive of this mythological figure. Aside from her beheading, Medusa is also victimized by Athena. The virginal goddess of war and wisdom, dutiful to patriarchal ideals, is emblematic of female indoctrination to

[21] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 42.

male deference. Transforming Medusa into the snake-haired monster is a performative act of propping up the patriarchy. I have coined this warped gendered dynamic as female-endorsed patriarchy (FEP). This terminology is useful for this research and further studies as it relates to contemporary feminist lexicon.

- Female-endorsed patriarchy (FEP): women dutiful to patriarchal ideals of masculine/feminine; the indoctrination of male deference; support patriarchal power differentials to uphold sexist gendered ideals; aligned with male power; women project an identity of the dutiful daughter, wife, mother, etc. for male approval; act as agents of misogyny, especially against women perceived as not dutifully adhering to the patriarchal script.

Rejecting sexist beliefs, biases, and gendered stereotypes, Medusan feminist outputs signify recourse by offering a new cultural narrative and represent Medusa as a locus of creative expression. As symbolic rhetorical agents, the feminist Medusan outputs are portrayed through different modes of cultural production.

Prose Depictions: written products of prose include poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.[22]

Material Depictions: material products of culture (human made) that represent meaning or symbolism include artistry (sculpture), fashion, accessories, jewelry, and housewares.

Performance Depictions: visual and auditory cultural products via high culture mediums of dance and low culture mediums of film/movies.

Technology Depictions: online/web-based cultural products on websites and social media platforms.

Chapter One explores how a patriarchal Medusa script was established by ancient Greco-Roman poets. For over 2000 years Medusa has been a cultural marker of misogynistic imagination, a rhetorical symbol to frame women as other. In antiquity, the mythmakers were men who controlled the narratives – the stories that continue to shape

[22] For this dissertation, the methodological framework focuses on patriarchal Medusan outputs of prose to be analyzed. For continued research, there is a voluminous canon of material, performance, and technology depictions of patriarchal Medusa.

ideas about gender. Their stories reflect a cultural reality, a gendered construct in their prose that rippled to other areas of politics, art and eventually, in modern day, popular culture. Through the cultural production of myth, Greco-Roman poets ushered in a patriarchal discourse that would last for millennia. In the classical Western canon, Greco-Roman male mythographers generalized gender differences and gendered expectations of being feminine and masculine, reinforcing the overarching social and moral order of patriarchy. The Greco-Roman Medusa monster myth stands as a vivid depiction of how early male narratives sought to vilify females not dutiful to the patriarchal script. This myth effectively reinforces a patriarchal narrative of perpetuating the belief in female inferiority and male dominance. The chapter delineates the poems as patriarchal Medusan outputs, linguistic evidence of gender norms dominated by male interests and positions of power. The ancient patriarchal Medusan outputs are what influenced and affected de Pizan and feminists in the fourth wave, primarily the narrative of mortal females as inferior.

Chapter Two turns the attention to European medieval patriarchal Medusan outputs. The ancient poets immortalizing Medusa as an archetypical malevolent, monstrous woman persisted into the medieval era. The medieval examples in this chapter historicize the connection between the ancient Medusa products of prose, continuing the narrative of male hegemony. In European medieval texts, there is an intersection of ancient and medieval gendered ideals, the intertextuality of the patriarchal script with medieval writers mining and repurposing ancient prose. This chapter continues to explore the single story of Medusa, how malevolent Medusa became a locus of women-hating men in the medieval era. In medieval literature, the religious/Christian interpretation was

uniquely applied by authors with the disdain for Medusa as analogous to the societal disdain for women. From a religious standpoint, women were maligned as evil, immoral, and the root of all sin. What we see in medieval prose depictions is emergence of the misogynistic Medusa trope, a signifier of idealized male superiority and female inferiority: women *as* Medusa.

In Chapter Three, in analyzing Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, attention is shifted to de Pizan countering the patriarchal Medusa discourse. A literary pioneer who directly engaged with the oppressive power structure/pillar of misogyny, in writing the *City of Ladies*, de Pizan defied the misogynistic pillar of prose. By situating Medusa in The *City of Ladies*, as a cultural production of prose, de Pizan provides the first feminist reclamation of the mythological character from the patriarchal script. This chapter explores why de Pizan wrote *The City of Ladies*, why she included Medusa as a valued and protected citizen, and how she depicts the mythological figure through a feminist lens of respect, morality and virtue, and dignity. The de Pizan Medusa is the first Medusan feminist output, a revisionist mythmaking strategy to reject the patriarchal myth/narrative.

Bookending the past and present, Chapter Four examines the reclamation of Medusa in the fourth wave of feminism. Like de Pizan, the first feminist voice who challenged the patriarchal portrayal of Medusa through a lens of humanistic ideals, feminists in the fourth wave are doing the same with modern versions of feminist Medusan outputs. Wrestling the cognitive structure from patriarchal control, feminist writers, visionaries, and sexual assault victims engage with the Medusa myth to reclaim the hegemonic narrative. Via cultural production modes of prose, materialism,

performance, and technology, feminists in fashion, the arts, film, social media, and literature they have responded with creative outputs of indignation.[23] In the fourth wave, the Medusan feminist outputs are transformative forms of feminist resistance and symbolic referents rejecting the patriarchal narrative grounded in male hegemony; the mythological figure is an emblem of female agency. The final chapter explores the pursuit of feminist ideals within a contemporary context of revisioning, rewriting, and repurposing patriarchal Medusan outputs. Moving away from the androcentric scripts deemed fixed, they, like de Pizan, present Medusa through a lens of respect, morality, virtue, and dignity.

The concluding chapter synthesizes how this dissertation research contributes to the body of knowledge of feminist thought. Culturally produced outputs of Medusa allow a reader to understand how patriarchy has persisted and transcended time, as well as those who have rejected the patriarchal depictions and reclaimed her through a feminist lens. Feminist retellings of the Medusa myth challenge patriarchal perspectives by conveying the rejection of female marginalization and otherness. As feminist scripts, feminist revisionist narratives play a crucial role in continually challenging societal norms and dismantling the foundational ideals of patriarchy. By criticizing the hegemonic interpretations of Medusa, feminists offer a new way of understanding the myth, motivating us to envision a future where the patriarchal portrayal of Medusa becomes a remnant of the past. As Classicist Helen Morales writes in her book, *Antigone Rising:*

[23] Beyond the scope of this research is the commodification of Medusa. Future research can assess and analyze consumerist feminism about the expansion and evolution of feminist Medusan outputs, including how consumer culture influences the consumption of these outputs, how they serve as a means of empowerment and promotion of feminist ideals, as well as any limitations as expressions in public discourse.

The Subversive Power of Ancient Myths, "…we're due for a fresh understanding of how ancient Greek and Roman myths, and their characters, can be claimed and defined by all of us who want to resist the current movement toward greater patriarchal control and who are working to make this a more equal, empathetic, and enlightened world."[24]

[24] Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths* (Hachette UK, 2020), xvi.

CHAPTER ONE
ANCIENT POETS: PATRIARCHAL MEDUSA SCRIPT ESTABLISHED

Ancient Greek and Roman literature set the foundation for the generative presence of the Medusa image, embedding it in narratives that were structured by patriarchy. In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne helps us understand the potency of the ancient mythmakers' hegemonic masculinity as it relates to the ideological framework of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny. Patriarchy, a coarse cultural thread woven into the fabric of society, is an overarching ideological, social order of men holding power in the ancient city-states; in modern parlance, *it is a man's world.* The culture of the ancient polis, the city-state of democracy, created by men, institutionalized patriarchal norms and ideals, which continued for millennia. Spurred by ideals of what it means to be masculine and feminine, sexism is a mental model or perception grounded in the belief that females are inferior to males, thereby supporting a rationale to marginalize and oppress women; sexism is foundational to the gender norms expressed by the ancient poets. *Misogyny* is the structural system that upholds patriarchy and foments sexist beliefs. Prose, as a symbolic cultural output, has historically been used to enforce male dominance and power over women, as evidenced in early extant Western myths crafted by male mythmakers to uphold the social order and moral authority of men. Perpetuated as a single story in the patriarchal script, a grand narrative of hegemonic order and masculinity, the Medusa myth is a supporting pillar of misogyny.

In the Greco-Roman era, male mythographers, acting as *agents of misogyny*[25], adhere to the patriarchal script of hegemonic masculinity: male power over women,

[25] Patriarchal Medusan outputs are what Manne refers to as *agents of misogyny* – enabling mechanisms of institutions and individuals who rely on scripts, narratives, artworks, artifacts, and social

especially women deemed as disobeying male order. Although there are variations to the Medusa myth, the following provides the contours of her story according to ancient mythmakers. Medusa, one of three Gorgonian sisters, was born mortal. As a beautiful young maiden, she caught the eye of Poseidon, a powerful male god, who, depending on the mythmakers' version, partook in a sexual act that was consensual or violent, which occurred in a sacred temple. That temple honored the powerful female goddess Athena, who blamed Medusa for the illicit sex act and turned her into a monstrous beast with snakes for hair whose gaze could kill. The story's hero is Perseus, a demi-god who hunts down Medusa to lob off her head and uses her power for his benefit. These are common elements that support the notion of the Medusa story as a "single story."

Recognizing the singular narrative, as the first written output of feminist revisionist mythology, Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a significant departure from how the mythological character was depicted in patriarchal texts. Though Medusa is feared, ravaged, and maligned in classic literature, de Pizan invites her to her imagined "City of Ladies." As an intellectual, de Pizan had access to reading the historical genesis of patriarchal Medusan outputs. Women's History scholar Susan Groag Bell provides insight: "Concerned with moral philosophy, history, poetry, and education, humanists were eager to study classical texts from Roman and Greek authors in pursuit of the acquisition of knowledge."[26] Although de Pizan imagined Medusa through a feminist lens, it is essential to understand how the ancient mythographers devalued and

practices that enforce patriarchal ideals. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, reprint edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 66-67.

[26] Susan Groag Bell, "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430): Humanism and the Problem of a Studious Woman," *Feminist Studies 3*, no. 3/4 (Spring-Summer 1976): 173-184, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177735

dehumanized the mythological figure. De Pizan's scholarly curiosity crystallized her understanding of pervasive misogyny and patriarchal behavior throughout history. The Medusa monster myth stands as a vivid depiction of how early male narratives sought to vilify females not dutiful to the patriarchal script. This myth effectively reinforces a patriarchal narrative of perpetuating the belief in female inferiority and male dominance. This was not just a theoretical concept, but a harsh reality, carried over within the writings of her contemporaries, that attempted to define women's lives, including de Pizan. In this context, Medusa was not just a character but a natural, if not an essential, resident in de Pizan's *City of Ladies*. The following examples are of the oeuvre of Medusa depictions, each ancient mythographer contributing to the single-story archetype of the patriarchal Medusa myth. Beginning with the oral tradition of storytelling and then through written texts, Medusa was a maligned woman.

GREEK SOURCES

The Homeric Gorgon

Although there is a universality of gorgoneion across ancient cultures, this research relies on Medusa's imagery as a gorgon beginning in ancient Greece with Homer.[27] For David Leeming, a specialist in the comparative literature of mythology and the author of *Medusa: In the Mirror of Time*, the gorgonian head is a direct precursor to the Medusa character in Greek mythology.[28] In the epic poem attributed to Homer (750

[27] For the genesis of the gorgoneion, read Stephen R. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Wilk analyzed interpretations of the gorgoneion across different cultures.

[28] David Leeming, *Medusa in the Mirror of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 22-23.

BCE),[29] *The Iliad* is a narrative account of the ten-year Trojan War, believed to have been fought between the Greeks and Trojans from 1194–1184 BCE (twelfth century BCE).[30] Considered the foundation of the male-centric canon of Western literature, this massive androcentric work is 12,000 lines and twenty-four chapters; most characters are male with narrative devices depicting male might, prowess, and valor—the vast majority of heroes analogized to males. For Greek mythographers, a cultural construct of masculinity is heroism. The virginal warrior goddess Athena figures prominently in myth, as in Homeric narrative, but men are the predominant roles for this Archaic mythographer. For Homer, Athena, the virginal Greek goddess, is virtuous and chaste, symbolic of a valued gender norm of patriarchal expectation.[31] Born as a whole woman from Zeus' head, Athena is a physical and philosophical extension of male might—what this researcher refers to as the *Athena paradox*. On the one hand, Athena is a powerful female goddess; on the other, as an agent of misogyny, she is inherently an extension of male power—Athena's allegiance and obedience is to the patriarchal power structure. *The Iliad* book V

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[29] Homer as the author is a myth in itself. It is improbable that he is the sole author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* because during the Archaic period in Greece (eighth century BCE to 480 BCE), poems were composed then performed orally by rhapsodes (oral poets.) These epic poems, known as Homeric poetry, are more likely a compilation of imaginative verse and meter over the years, a collective telling with multiple authors. The oldest extant written manuscript of *The Iliad* is *Venetus A*, written in the tenth century AD. *The Odyssey* was first printed in 1488, forty-eight years after the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1440. From a historiographic perspective, the final versions of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are a collective of male imagination—not a single author, a gradual narrative, built upon by a compilation of male contributors over time and place—varying versions eventually cobbled together. In essence, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* embody a 200+ year male-centric worldview.

[30] In 1998, the UNESCO's World Heritage Committee deemed Hisarlic, in Turkey, the archeological site of the ancient city, Troy.

[31] In the mythological family tree, Medusa is the granddaughter of the divine earth goddess Gaia. Was early Greek myth emblematic of a backlash and dismissal to a prior archaic earth goddess worship of matriarchal reverence of a Gaian order? See Marija Gimbuta, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989). Gimbuta, an anthropologist, argued that the gorgons, which appear on Neolithic amulets and shields, are evidence of an early goddess culture in which figures like Medusa were worshiped.

provides a description of the Athena's aegis: the virginal Greek goddess of war and wisdom has affixed the fearsome gorgon head to her aegis to protect her in battle.

> And Athena, daughter of aegis-great
> Zeus, on the floor of her Father's palace, shed
> the soft robe that she herself had made and embroidered,
> put on instead the tunic of stormy Zeus,
> and armed herself for tearful war.
> About her shoulders she slung the terrible tasseled aegis
> encircled with Fear, inwrought with Hatred and Force
> and the chilling War-charge and crowned with the head of that horrible
> Monster the Gorgon, most dread and awful emblem.[32]

The Homeric Gorgon is a destructive force. Athena using the gorgon's power for military might, the gorgoneion head serves an apotropaic function: to protect Athena from warring men.[33] For historian Mary Beard, the gorgon's decapitated head is proudly paraded as an accessory by this "decidedly un-female female deity."[34] Aside from Athena, most of Homer's female characters are powerless and physically and psychologically dominated by men. Bárbara Alvarez-Rodriguez, scholar of Homeric poetry, referred to the early works of Western literature, namely *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as "incipient forms of what we understand today as patriarchal society."[35] In

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[32] Homer, "Book V: The Valiant Deeds of Diomedes," in *The Iliad*, trans. Ennis Rees, ed. Bruce Michael King (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 92–133. https://archive.org/details/isbn_2901593082320/page/n1/mode/2up

[33] For information about the history of Gorgonian imagery, read Karoglou, *Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018). Publication issued in conjunction with the exhibition "Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art" on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from February 5, 2018, to January 6, 2019, which this student attended on March 21, 2018. Ancient artifacts include bowls, vases, water jars, sarcophagi, etchings, architectural flourishes (e.g., terracotta tiles), paintings, and jewelry.

[34] Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 71.

[35] Bárbara Álvarez Rodríguez, "Alterity in Homer: A Reconceptualization of Female Marginalization," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 7, no. 1 (2017): 84.

Homeric poems, the female gorgon is merely a head, an apotropaic means of protection and to elicit fear. For Beard, Medusa's head is one of the most potent ancient symbols of male mastery over the destructive dangers that female power represented.[36] As a gorgon to be feared (I contend, alluding to female power), she is objectified, her head an apotropaic marker of warfare. The powerful imagery of terror, hatred, fear, and horror assigned to the female head defined a dehumanized monstrous weapon clearly for use to forward a narrative of male control and power.

Later, in book XI of *The Iliad*, in a section entitled, "The Valiant Deeds of Agamemnon," the gorgon is on the king's shield.[37] Homer does not link the gorgon with Perseus, but again, we see a Homeric Gorgon head as an apotropaic device, this time for male protection:

> Then he took up his warlike, richly wrought shield,
> man covering and splendid
> To see, for inlaid upon it ere ten bright circles
> Of bronze and twenty bosses of shining tin
> Surrounding a central boss of blue lapis. And set
> In the lapis, the awesome head of the Gorgon glared grimly
> Forth, flanked by the figures of Panic and Rout.[38]

In *The Odyssey*, the gorgon makes a related appearance in book XI, "The Land of the Dead," instilling fear in Odysseus as he journeys to return home from Troy. When

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[36] Beard, *Women & Power*, 71.

[37] Aside from myth, Greek soldiers' breastplates and shields were adorned with gorgon iconography, an apotropaic emblem for protection. See Karoglou, *Dangerous Beauty*; Garber and Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*; and Leeming, *Medusa*.

[38] Homer, "Book XI: The Valiant Deeds of Agamemnon," in *The Iliad*, trans. Ennis Rees, ed. Bruce Michael King (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 176–177, https://archive.org/details/isbn_2901593082320/page/n1/mode/2up

Odysseus reaches the gates of Hades, the Greek hero is fearful of the gorgon whose head lingers upon the entrance:

> Pale terror seized me; I thought perhaps the Gorgon head of some fell monster lest Persephone might send out of the house of Hades. So, turning to my ship, I called my crew to come on board and loose the cables. Quickly they came, took places at the pins, and down the Ocean stream the flowing current bore us, with oarage first and then a pleasant breeze.[39]

The three Homeric passages symbolize the potent power of the gorgon's head to be feared, an early representation of feared female power. The examples of female gorgon power allude to evil and the female deadly nature, threatening the power and stature of mortal kings and courage of heroes. With Homer as a foundational androcentric literary aesthetic, we begin to see the contours of the Medusa myth through the lens of masculine subjectivity, the male mythographer's purview of gendered ideals: the gorgoneion symbolism as a potent force to be appropriated and feared. The passages are early narrative threads of the single story, depicting a starting point for a continuum of the gorgon as the ultimate, fear-based myth, which male characters thereafter, such as Perseus, wanted to dominate when the gorgonian had evolved into a full-bodied woman: Medusa. Stories about figures such as Medusa are a way to "encode expectations about women and pass them on."[40] What will pervade is the single story of Medusa as an extension of male might with the Greek poet Hesiod.

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[39] Homer, "Section XI: The Land of the Dead," in *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. George Herbert Palmer (New York: Random House, 2002), 150, https://archive.org/details/odysseyofhomer0000home_u1l8/mode/2up?q=gorgon

[40] Zimmerman, *Women and Other Monsters*, 8.

The Hesiod Medusa

The earliest extant writing referencing Medusa by name, not as an apotropaic gorgon, begins with Hesiod in 700 BCE,[41] when Hesiod entered the public discourse with his works *Theogony* and *Herakles*.[42] Hesiod provided a foundational patriarchal Medusan output that is symbolic of misogynistic expression. In his Medusa character, we see the contours of gendered stereotypes emerge. The narrative of male dominance and female subjugation is emblematic of the cultural context when Hesiod documented gender ideals from the perspective of the male imagination and expectation. One such ideal is the notion of sexual purity: women are to be virginal and chaste. “Myths reflect the society and culture of the times—men’s perception and translation through myths dominated.”[43] Outside the purview of Medusa analysis, it is crucial to recognize that Hesiod employed derogatory language when lamenting marriage in a different segment of the *Theogony,* referring to all women operating as evil. This misogynistic viewpoint reflects the portrayal of Medusa in Hesiod's works. As noted by Lemming, Medusa expresses "a patriarchal attitude of the Greeks toward women.”[44] In the modern parlance of a poker tell, Hesiod indicated his biased opinion of women masked in the character of the most potent pantheon god, Zeus: *"Zeus who thunders on high made women to be an evil to*

[41] Hesiod and Richard S. Caldwell, *Hesiod’s Theogony* (Cambridge, MA: Focus Information Group, 1987), 1.

[42] As a woman of intellect, Christine's reading repertoire likely included Hesiod’s poems, a fact not explicitly mentioned in *The City*.

[43] Doris K. Silverman, "Medusa: Sexuality, Power, Mastery, and Some Psychoanalytic Observations," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (2016): 115, https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2016.1172926

[44] Leeming, *Medusa*, 101.

mortal men, with a nature to do evil."[45] For Hesiod, women are a curse to humanity and stand for the other, the alien, that which is extraneous and brings difference, plurality, disharmony, conflict, and ultimately destruction into the world.[46] According to de Pizan scholar Earl Jeffrey Richards, who translated *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine's reading aptitude would have encompassed a wide range of classics translated into French, such as Hesiod, Ovid, and others.[47] De Pizan, who provided the first feminist Medusa output would have read that Hesiod's story purposely focuses on the subordinate female mortal character, per godly instruction defining the natural, hierarchical order. As will be explored in Chapter Four of this dissertation, the Hesiod Medusa is a direct reference for feminist revisionist myth in reclaiming Medusa in the modern era.

Hesiod's *Theogony* is a 900-line poem that describes the origins and genealogies of the Greek gods and goddesses. For the ever-expanding patriarchal script, Hesiod provided the first draft of the canonical Medusa myth, in which the malevolent Medusa emerges. Hesiod provided a brief origin story of Medusa as mortal and scarcely introduced her gorgon sisters, Stheno and Euryale:[48]

> Keto bore to Phorcys the fair cheeked hags,
> grey from birth, who are called the Graiai
> by immortal gods and men who go on earth,
> fine-robed Pemphredo and saffron-robed Enyo,
> and the Gorgons, who live beyond the famous Okeanos,

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[45] Hesiod and Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, 61

[46] Vigdis Songe-Möller, "The Greek Dream of a Womanless World," in *Philosophy Without Women: The Birth of Sexism in Western Thought*, trans. Peter Cripps (London: Continuum, 2002), 12, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472547309.ch-001

[47] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, xxvii.

[48] Stheno and Euryale are Medusa's gorgon sisters; Hesperides is a mythological nymph, not a gorgon but also born from Phorcys and Ceto/Keto.

> at the limit toward Night, with the clear-voiced
> Hesperides, Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa who suffered grievously;[49]

Medusa, a gorgon, yet mortal woman, was born into a world of ambiguity. Her lineage, offspring of sea monster parents, contrasted with her immortal sisters of monstrosity. The mix of mortal and divine origins, coupled with the influence of godly sexual prowess and a sexist perception of female nature, ultimately determined Medusa's fate as a mortal woman.

Hesiod continued briefly describing Medusa's sexual dalliance with Poseidon, providing a foundational narrative of Medusa: the androcentric theme of morality to be re-imagined across millennia.[50] Sarah Pomeroy, the author of *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, informs us that classical myths are men's attempts to impose a symbolic order of male–female relationships.[51] Hesiod informed us of the inequitable sexual economy that favors male prowess and feminine purity: Godly sexual assault is not framed as an injustice against women but normalized as seduction:

> She was moral, but they were immortal and ageless, both of them;
> the Dark-Haired Poseidon lay with her
> in a soft meadow and flowers of spring.[52]

Medusa's actions (*lay with Poseidon*) are not aligned with the expectation of virginal purity—the sexual act, a confirmation of female disobedience deserving of female

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[49] Hesiod and Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, 44

[50] Although there are parallel mythological characters who could have influenced the early bards' imagination (Bes from Egypt and Humbaba from Mesopotamia), Hesiod provides an origin story: Medusa as a danger.

[51] Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992),

[52] Hesiod and Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, 45.

punishment. De Pizan may have included the Medusa character in *The City*, as the very origin of the myth portrays the female mortal as inherently other and the cause and consequence of willful male action. When Hesiod introduces the reader to Perseus, the subtext sets a moralizing tone for the perceived wrongdoing of the sexual act—patriarchal discipline warranted. Poseidon is a suave paramour; Medusa, an errant woman, is tainted. No longer chaste and virtuous, Medusa not adhering to the patriarchal script is an antagonist, an unchaste woman harshly judged.[53] A major revision of the Medusa myth in the modern era is a flipping of the script: Medusa as protagonist, Perseus as antagonist. Medusa hunted down by Perseus is emblematic of misogynistic operating devices of the moralizing and silencing and women, evident when Hesiod makes a narrative jump from the sexual act to Medusa's beheading.

> And when Perseus cut off her head,
> out jumped great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasos
> who has this name since by the springs of Okeanos
> he was born, and the other holds a gold sword in his hands;
> He (Pegasos), flew off and left the earth, mother of flocks,
> and came to the immortals; he lives in the house
> of wise Zeus and carries his thunder and lightening.[54]

Perseus' violent act against a woman, framed as powerful masculinity, aligns with the misogynistic mechanism to maintain patriarchal order. The notion of sexual purity derives from patriarchal thought to control women's bodies. Regarding the cultural context of the era, men in power and authority codified the patriarchy to be enforced, evidenced by rape and adultery laws favoring men. For classical languages scholar,

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[53] Although Hesiod's version reads as consensual, based on the preponderance of male gods raping unsuspecting girls and women, Medusa was likely raped, which Ovid explicitly noted in the Roman era.

[54] Hesiod and Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, 45.

Casey Due, "…it is essential for any student of the Athenian *dēmos* to understand the authority of poetry in the civic discourse of Athens"—poems as "authoritative evidence" of civic life.[55] One such practice is the Athenian moicheia, a part of Solonian law that granted a father or brother to sell into slavery a daughter or sister found partaking in illicit sex.[56] Hesiod's brief description of the sexual act between Poseidon and Medusa reads as a consensual, clandestine act: 'lay in a soft meadow.' Based on the historical context, if so, Medusa, unmarried, had committed moicheia (adultery), which "opens the threat of corrupting patriarchal bloodlines in the polis' oikos,"[57] the implication being that an adulterous affair could produce offspring not of the husband.[58] Interestingly, Hesiod's Medusa is dutiful to the oikos in adhering to the gendered ideal of the polis: the expectation of motherhood. Highly revered in ancient Greece, a woman's value was based on her capacity to procreate. Albeit illegitimate, upon her beheading, it is revealed that Medusa bore two fully grown sons: Pegasus, a winged stallion who served Perseus on his continued hero quest, and the giant Chrysaor, a sword-wielding warrior. According to Hesiod, Medusa is a mother, but why is she never noted as such in any of the ancient myths? The need for a patriarchal narrative thread usurps the valued role of motherhood, namely, the male hero to conquer the dangerous female and to secure Poseidon's male

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[55] Casey Due, "Poetry and the Dēmos: State Regulation of a Civic Possession," in *Dēmos: Classical Athenian Democracy*, ed. Christopher W. Blackwell (The Stoa Consortium, 2003), 4, https://stoa.org/demos/ Males were encouraged to have sex before marriage; for females, not so.

[56] C. Carey, "Rape and Adultery in Athenian Law," *The Classical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1995): 407–408, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0009838800043482

[57] Carey, "Rape and Adultery," 413.

[58] Medusa, unmarried, would still be guilty of moicheia. See Carey, "Rape and Adultery," 408.

lineage. The male gods exercise what Pomeroy describes as a "patriarchal prerogative of promiscuous intercourse, fathering numerous offspring"[59]

Espousing male authority, prowess, and dominion in this short section, Hesiod made clear that Medusa's male offspring were gloriously emancipated at the instance of her murder. De Pizan most likely read this passage understanding the dichotomy of extremes: dead woman/free men. De Pizan's writings, as well as modern depictions by feminists in the fourth wave bear the imprint of a profound purpose to document female worth. The Medusa narrative, as told by Hesiod, could have been a catalyst for de Pizan to create the first feminist Medusan output—her frustration and subsequent motivation, compelling her to confront the stark contrast between his glowing depiction of female demise and the enduring legacy of male heroes. Evolving from an apotropaic head, Hesiod edited the patriarchal script with a new narrative thread, a subset of hegemonic masculinity: male power over women who possess sexual power. Medusa is depicted as a wanton woman, threatening the male order. "Women in the poems are Others, and therefore the relations with them are determined by the alterity they represent."[60] As a dangerous *other,* Medusa is to be destroyed—the threat of moral authority averted. This is a significant aspect of the patriarchal Medusa myth modern feminists wrestle with when reimagining the maligned figure. Hesiod's masculine subjectivity creates a situation for Medusa that frames her with disdain; she is devalued and dehumanized. Although Poseidon has an affair, the consequence does not apply to him; masculine ideals blame the woman. Medusa (female) lacks the societal pedigree or position of power, and Hesiod

[59] Pomeroy, *Goddesses,* 7.

[60] Álvarez Rodríguez, "Alterity in Homer," 107.

offers no option for Medusa to alter her situation. De Beauvoir's notion of *other* is emblematic in Hesiod's depiction of Medusa concerning Poseidon: Women are second to man—he is the subject; he is the absolute. She is the other.[61]

In Hesiod, we see the misogynist bias in ancient Greece manifested in Medusa as immoral and violating expected gender norms of chastity. Embedded in Hesiod's poem is a moral imperative: Sexually active women such as Medusa are tainted. In the moralization of Medusa, she is complicit; it is Medusa who "misbehaved indecently, her punishment a necessary consequence."[62] Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether expresses the frustration of hypocrisy that often sparks feminist revisionist mythology: "Women are asked to accept the guilt for their victimization by patriarchy."[63] Poseidon, married to Amphitrite, committed *moicheia* by having illicit sex with someone other than his wife—did he not breach his marital relationship? According to Hesiod, there is no punitive action against Poseidon; as a powerful man, he is protected. The subtext is gendered condemnation: Medusa is immoral, unchaste, and of ill-repute. For Sylvia Huot, scholar of medieval French literature, perceived through the eyes of stern rationality, seductive feminine sexuality is a danger that can only be fled from or destroyed.[64] The sexual act is transgressive; Medusa is a ruined woman, and her reputation in the polis is tainted and

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[61] Poseidon, and his two brothers, Zeus and Hades, are apex sexual predators in the polis.

[62] Silverman, "Medusa," 119.

[63] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4 (1985): 703–13.

[64] Sylvia Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose: Mythographic Program and Ovidian Intertext," *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 874, https://doi.org/10.2307/2851784.

deserving of retribution. For Poseidon, his male mythos is a protective barrier against any blame; he is immune from punishment.

Hesiod's "Shield of Heracles"

Indicating her range of ancient poetic knowledge, de Pizan directly referred the tale of Hercules in *The City*, suggesting she was familiar with the shorter poem by Hesiod. In this work of nearly 500 lines, in one section, Hesiod wrote about Medusa as a mortal, briefly referenced her gorgon sisters, and introduced the reader to Perseus' hero quest. In this section, Hesiod is the first to inform us how Perseus was assisted with godly interventions of winged sandals, a cap from Hades, and a shield that helped secure Medusa's demise.[65] Upon beheading Medusa, as Perseus escapes with the head, her two grieving sisters attempt to catch him:

> On his feet he [Perseus] had winged sandals,
> and his black-sheathed sword was slung across his shoulders
> by a cross-belt of bronze.
> He was flying swift as thought.
> The head of a dreadful monster,
> the Gorgon, covered the broad of his back,
> and a bag of silver—a marvel to see— contained it:
> and from the bag bright tassels of gold hung down.
> Upon the head of the hero lay the dread cap of Hades
> which had the awful gloom of night.
> Perseus himself, the son of Danaë, was at full stretch,
> like one who hurries and shudders with horror.
> And after him rushed the Gorgons,
> unapproachable and unspeakable,
> longing to seize him: as they trod upon the pale adamant,
> the shield rang sharp and clear with a loud clanging.
> Two serpents hung down at their girdles with heads curved forward:
> their tongues were flickering, and their teeth gnashing with fury,
> and their eyes glaring fiercely.

[65] To slay Medusa, aside from Athena's shield, winged sandals were lent to Perseus by Hermes, the messenger of the gods and god of travel, and an invisibility cap by Hades, god of the dead/underworld.

And upon the awful heads of the Gorgons great Fear was quaking.[66]

Perseus now controls the deadly gaze, and the reader/audience are to interpret the hero's quest to relish valor. Perseus who is fleeing with Medusa's head did so out of extreme fear, although having the advantage assured by the assistance of godly protection. Male roles in classic poems, such as Perseus, are an example of a dominant identity: "Women do not appear as free agents; rather they are subordinate to others' capacity for action."[67] In mythological storytelling, such as Hesiod, Medusa is the antagonist in Perseus' quest. Situating Medusa and her sisters as malevolent shows us how powerful women who threaten the status quo of male hegemony suffer the indignity of patriarchy's wrath. The passage highlights the terror and fear of Perseus, and the hopelessness of Medusa's sisters. Perseus, running for his life, dependably protected by a female monster whom he just killed—the distraught sisters pursued their hopeless quest due to the paradoxically weaponized deadly female head of their sister. A feminist reading of this passage renders a realization of Medusa and her sisters' hopelessness, symbolic of the inherent disadvantage of women in society deemed as other.

In Hesiod, Medusan symbolism of malevolence centers on the need for male conquest and superiority and a rejection of Medusa's vice: immoral feminine behavior. Hesiod informs us that sexual prowess is a marker of uber-masculinity and virility, but wanton female sexuality is a transgression to be punished. The Hesiod Medusa, no longer a virgin, is a tainted woman—the idealized feminine spoiled. Adding to the patriarchal

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[66] Hesiod, *Hesiod: Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, vol. 57 (London: William Heineman, 1914), 237, https://ia800605.us.archive.org/13/items/hesiodhomerichym00hesi_0/hesiodhomerichym00hesi_0.pdf

[67] Álvarez Rodríguez, "Alterity in Homer," 89.

script is a dictum of morality: if one acts or behaves in a manner unsuitable for women, you are deserving of wrath, unlike the triumvirate of male gods who rape virgins with impunity.[68] Poseidon and Perseus, complicit in Medusa's downfall, represent male might.

The Apollodorus Medusa

Estimated to have been written between 100–200 BCE is a three-book volume entitled *The Bibliotheca* (The Library), a study of Greek genealogical heroic myth attributed to the Athenian scholar, Apollodorus.[69] The Apollodorus Medusa myth provides a new narrative thread to the patriarchal script regarding the gender dynamics of male superiority and female acquiescence in relation to Athena. De Pizan did not directly refer to this poet in *The City*. However, given that she cited Athena (Minerva) five times, it is essential to include Apollodorus' work due to her inclusion of the goddess. In the current feminist fourth wave, the Apollodorus Medusa is a direct reference for revisionist myth in reclaiming Medusa, to be explored in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

In Apollodorus' story, "The Beauty of Medusa," Athena is a supporting but pivotal character assisting the son of Zeus, Perseus, in his quest to behead Medusa, the tidy female antagonist disempowered, solidifying the demi-god's heroism. The virginal goddess is complicit when she "guided his [Perseus] hand" to behead the gorgon, abdicating her power to the male order. Athena is a prime example of how the patriarchal script is extended to women with a term this researcher has coined, female-endorsed

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[68] In the collective of Greco-Roman myth, numerous female characters are raped by Poseidon, Zeus, or Hades, including but not limited to Liriope, Metis, Helle, Nemesis, Aegina, Europa, Callisto, Theophane, Antiope, and Alcmene. Interestingly, the rapes all result in impregnation; the divine male line is perpetuated.

[69] According to Garber and Vickers, he may not have authored this work, but for convenience in the literary canon, his name is still used. For more, see Garber and Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*, 21.

patriarchy (FEP).[70] Indirectly condemning Medusa to death, Athena's FEP toward Medusa informs us of the goddess's dutifulness to the patriarchal order:

> Having received also from Hermes an adamantine sickle,
> he [Perseus] flew to the ocean and caught the Gorgons asleep.
> They were Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa.
> Now Medusa alone was mortal;
> for that reason Perseus was sent to fetch her head.
> So Perseus stood over them as they slept,
> and while Athena guided his hand
> and he looked with averted gaze on a brazen shield,
> in which he beheld the image of the Gorgon, he beheaded her.
> When her head was cut off,
> there sprang from the Gorgon the winged horse Pegasus and Chrysaor;
> these she had by Poseidon.[71]

We see Perseus reinforcing androcentrism with the female-endorsed assistance from Athena to uphold the patriarchal script. Perseus' fear of the mortal female, albeit sleeping, was powerful enough to avert his eyes from the sleeping gorgon not to risk any form of physical contact. Athena's allegiance to the male order secures Perseus' safety and Medusa's demise. Like Hesiod, Apollodorus outfits Perseus with godly tools of invincibility, such as the invisibility cap of Hades, winged sandals, and an adamantine sickle from Hermes, armed by Olympians to slay the powerful woman. Although Hesiod informs us that Perseus is the son of Danaë, it is Apollodorus, in a segment before 'The Beauty of Medusa' who offers Perseus' origin story, noting the rape of Perseus' mother

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[70] FEP: indoctrination of male deference; women dutiful to patriarchal ideals of masculine/feminine; support patriarchal power differentials to uphold sexist gendered ideals; aligned with power; women project an identity of the dutiful daughter, wife, mother, etc. for male approval; act as agents of misogyny, especially against women perceived as not adhering to the patriarchal script.

[71] Apollodurus, *Apollodorus. The Library*, trans. Sir James George Frazier, vols. 121 and 122 (New York: William Heineman), 157–159, accessed February 3, 2022, https://archive.org/details/apollodorus-library-loeb-frazer/mode/2up. This version includes corresponding text in Latin.

Danaë by Zeus: "…some say that Zeus had intercourse with her in the shape of a stream of gold which poured through the roof into Danaë's lap." [72]

The impregnation by Zeus was not depicted as nonconsensual or rape but poetically described as a gift (shapeshifting into a stream of gold). The female Danaë, asleep and defenseless, who was easily and self-righteously dominated, bore the demi-god Perseus, the half-brother of Athena. King Polydectes, to be betrothed to Danaë, also figures prominently in Apollodorus' version. As a means of ridding his future stepson, Polydectes orders Perseus on a quest to fetch the gorgon's head knowing this will cause Perseus' demise. Successful in his hero quest, Perseus then seeks vengeance for Polydectes thwarted plan. By appropriating Medusa's power, Perseus seeks retribution and kills Polydectes and his men by turning them to stone with her deadly gaze:

> His mother had taken refuge at the alters on account of the violence of Polydectes; so, he gathered his friends, and with averted face he [Perseus] showed the Gorgon's head; and all who beheld it were turned to stone, each in the attitude which he happened to have struck.[73]

Emboldened with this capability to kill, Perseus proceeds to commandeer Medusa's potent power. After Apollodorus introduces the reader to Andromeda, Perseus' wife, the demi-god appropriates Medusa's power by killing Phineas, Andromeda's scorned fiancé, and his men with Medusa's deadly gaze.

> However, Phineas, to whom Andromeda had been first betrothed, plotted against him; but Perseus discovered the plot, and by showing the Gorgon turned him and his fellow conspirators at once into stone.[74]

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[72] Apollodorus, *Apollodorus*, 155.

[73] Apollodorus, *Apollodorus*, 161.

[74] Apollodorus, *Apollodorus*, 161.

Upon her beheading, Medusa's personal power was nullified, but not so for Perseus. His rampage of revenge killing, using Medusa's head as a weapon, further exemplifies male dominance wielding female power to easily eliminate enemies, thereby bolstering personal stature.

Reading Apollodorus through a feminist lens, we see the sheer hypocrisy of male hegemony—Medusa turns men to stone; she is a monster—Perseus turns men to stone; he is a hero. Apollodorus' depictions of the mortal females, Medusa and Danaë, as less than and dispensable, in contrast to the female goddess Athena, by her godly superiority, presents a narrative thread for the patriarchal script. The character portrayals project a dominant male role, with Perseus at ease with the omnipotent masculine goddess while terrified by the inherently dangerous and mortal female; the mother/son dynamic depicts males in the role of protector. *The Bibliotheca* allows us to consider male power, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it.[75] After Perseus appropriates Medusa's power to kill his enemies, he gives the head to Athena:

> The Gorgon's head he gave to Athena.
> Athena inserted the Gorgon's head in the middle of her shield.
> But it is alleged by some that Medusa was beheaded for Athena's sake,
> and they say that the Gorgon was fain to match herself with the goddess even in beauty.[76]

For Apollodorus, Medusa is beautiful but vain; she flaunts her attractiveness, which angers Athena. Is flaunting one's beauty such a transgressive act as to warrant such wrath? What is a woman to do when she feels rivalry toward another woman?

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[75] Molly Abel Travis and Jamie Barlowe, "Dialogue of the Imaginary," *Women and Language* 18, no. 2 (1995): 48.

[76] Apollodorus, *Apollodorus*, 161.

According to this male mythographer, practice hostility. In the case of Athena, this results in a woman's demise. This rivalry has an essential caveat in ancient Western mythology: the goddess figures are distinctly powerful and dominant by nature; female mortals were always at an inherent disadvantage: inferiority and subservience were their nature. Athena is a handmaiden of patriarchy, an extension of maleness; her father, her power, and her place in the polis circumscribed by the mighty Zeus.[77] Medusa is the pawn for Athena and the prey for Perseus. What we see in Apollodorus is the weaponization of gender ideals: When women threaten the patriarchal order, dutiful women do the bidding of men to denigrate and destroy. This version of the Medusa myth adds a narrative thread to the single story: male expectations of women turning against women. As Manne attests, "We should be concerned with the rewarding and valorizing of women who conform to gendered norms and expectations, those who engage in certain forms of patriarchal virtue signaling."[78] From a psychoanalytical perspective, Dr. Beth Seelig theorizes that Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, the epicenter of Greek culture, is a "male-identified Daddy's girl, born from her father's head, she is both her father's agent and the patroness of chosen male proxies."[79] The devaluing and dehumanizing of Medusa in ancient poems continue, as they are the "fruit of oral tradition, and containers of collective memory, and demarcate hierarchical relations that function as structures of

[77] Hesiod, in *The Theogony*, informs us that Zeus, in an aggressive act, swallows the pregnant Metis into his belly (nedus) and births Athena from his own head. Hesiod and Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, 11.

[78] Manne, *Down Girl*, 192.

[79] Beth J. Seelig, "The Rape of Medusa in the Temple of Athena: Aspects of Triangulation in the Girl," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 83, no. 4 (2002): 899. https://doi.org/10.1516/3NLL-UG13-TP2J-927M

domination of one group above others – a system that has defined all societies, at least Western ones, up to present times."[80] Thus far in the chronology of patriarchal Medusan outputs, there is no interiority for Medusa—no perspective, no voice, which continues into the Roman era.

ROMAN SOURCES

The Ovid Medusa

In 8 CE, the Roman poet Ovid wrote *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem of fifteen books. This collection of mythological stories includes "The Story and Perseus" and the "Fighting of Perseus," both of which include Medusa. De Pizan took umbrage with Ovid's oeuvre of mythic imagination that reflected ancient society. In *The City*, she referred to Ovid four times, critical of his sexist perception of women and the emboldening of bad behavior by men. Her observation is astute because Ovid's literary outputs reflect the long-held cultural value of male hegemony, which has rendered ideological implications to the modern day with feminists situated in the fourth wave directly referencing Ovid as a source to reclaim and revise the Medusa myth.[81]

Donna Zuckerberg, the author of *Not All Dead White Men*, informs us that in the current misogynistic "manosphere" of pickup artists (PUAs), Ovid is considered a revered forefather in the art of the pickup.[82] *Metamorphoses* demonstrates a dramatized

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[80] Álvarez Rodríguez, "Alterity in Homer," 107.

[81] The ancient male mythographers of Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Ovid are directly referenced by some female, feminist authors whose Medusa outputs in prose have been written and published in the feminist fourth wave (2010-present).

[82] Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 90. In a sexist backhanded compliment, Medusa also briefly appears in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, his guidebook to woo women. In a section called, "Favour Her and

version of Greek myths, an amalgamation of the prior classical Greek works, hence continuing the patriarchal script. Pomeroy wrote, "...through the ages, the traditional elements of the epics have not only been preserved but have also taken on the values, mores, and biases of each generation of poets."[83] This is evident when Ovid provides us with the story of Medusa's transformation, promulgating Perseus' hero quest, Neptune's (Poseidon in Greek mythology) godly prowess, and Minerva's (Athena) female-assisted patriarchy.

Book IV: The Story of Perseus

Hence the story's title, the narrative focus is Perseus, the protagonist, who is once again framed as a hero. Ovid regales in Perseus hunting Medusa down and describes the context of Medusa's rape by Neptune (Poseidon). Again, we see Medusa as other, a literary device to differentiate the power elite and solidify a *blame-the-victim* ethos. Ovid's story begins with Perseus already in possession of Medusa's head. Perseus is more autonomous in his quest to kill Medusa—no mention of godly interventions from Athena, Hermes, or Hades, but we learn more about Athena transforming Medusa. Ovid informs the reader of Perseus' hero quest, bringing back the "wonderous trophy of the snake-haired monster."[84] After saving the virginal Andromeda from sacrifice, Perseus regales

Compliment Her," when referring to women skilled in lovemaking, he compares their sexual appetite as "more violent than fierce Medusa" (Book II).

[83] Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, 16.

[84] Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Cambridge: Indiana University Press, 2018), 101.

his wedding guests with his valorous conquest, how he, the "Conqueror of the snaky-haired Gorgon,"[85] slew her:[86]

> Going by trackless country,
> Rough woods and jagged rocks, to the Gorgons' home
> On all sides, through the fields, along the highways,
> He saw the forms of men and beasts, made stone
> By one look at Medusa's face. He also
> Has seen that face, but only in reflection
> From the bronze shield his left hand bore; he struck
> While snakes and Gorgon both lay in slumber,
> Severed the head, and from that mother's bleeding
> Were born the swift-winged Pegasus and his brother[87]

In this section, we can see the repetitive nature of the ancient poets, how they build on the foundational patriarchal script of hegemonic masculinity. Once again, we see how Perseus, attacks a defenseless, sleeping, and pregnant Medusa, with no provocation on her part. "Perseus' account of his conquest speaks volumes about the various methods men have used to silence and disempower strong, threatening women."[88] Ovid then provides first-person narration from Perseus, regaling his wedding guests about what he knew of the woman he slayed. Perseus informs the reader of Medusa's transformation from a beautiful mortal to a beast. It is Neptune, as if lured by her attractiveness, rapes her, and it is Minerva who transforms Medusa into the beast of common imagination—a performative act of propping up the patriarchy:

> She was very lovely once, the hope of many
> An envious suitor, and all of her beauties
> Her hair most beautiful–at least I heard so

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[85] Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphoses*, 103.

[86] The cause for sacrifice is that Andromeda's mother, Cassiopeia, bragged she was more beautiful than the Nereids, the sea nymphs associated with Poseidon.

[87] Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphoses*, 106.

[88] Travis and Barlowe, "Dialogue of the Imaginary," 47.

> From one who claimed he had seen her. One day Neptune
> Found her and raped her in Minerva's temple,
> And the goddess turned away, and hid her eyes
> Behind her shield, and, punishing the outrage
> As it deserved, she changed her hair to serpents,
> And even now, to frighten evil doers,
> She carries on her breastplate metal vipers
> To serve as awful warning of her vengeance.[89]

It is here we see the emergence of rape culture that "thrives in both Ancient Greece and Rome."[90] According Zuckerberg, rape culture exists within a social group that normalizes rape to the degree that consequences for rapists are minimal or nonexistent.[91] With male gods as sexual predators, women as submissive sexual objects are available or to be conquered at the whim of godly male desire. Like Apollodorus' focus on Medusa's beauty as a biological misdemeanor, Ovid evokes a similar correlation of beauty and attractiveness subverting men's will. Medusa is too beautiful, too alluring, and made responsible for male lust; the modern-day version of questioning a rape victim ("What were you wearing?"). "The Latin epic poet Ovid treats Medusa's gaze as a powerful image of the desiring female and wrestling with the threat it poses to masculinity"[92] Minerva (Athena) averts her eyes as Medusa is raped. Her sacred temple desecrated; the goddess then transformed the victim into a deadly beast—Medusa's trauma doubled. In *Metamorphoses*, Medusa's assault by Neptune is instructive of a dual metaphor of gendered power differentials: (a) cultural complicity in response to violence against

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[89] Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphoses*, 106.

[90] Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 155.

[91] Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 154.

[92] Alison Keith, "Medusa's Gaze in Imperial Latin Epic: In Memoriam R. Elaine Fantham (1933–2016)," *Helios* 45, no. 2 (2018): 145. https://doi.org/10.1353/hel.2018.0007

women and (b) Athena acquiescence of Neptune's rape of Medusa as female dutifulness to male power: FEP. One can easily distinguish between Hesiod and Ovid—Hesiod's brief description of the sexual act between Poseidon and Medusa reads as consensual. Still, Ovid's version reveals a violent rape and subsequent blame-the-victim ethos that too often protects male perpetrators. In a position of power, to satiate Neptune's sexual appetite, Medusa's virginity is sacrificed. Ovid knew that in Greco-Roman society, rape was ruinous for a female.[93] Still, for Neptune, there appears to be no moral implications or consequences, as if the assault is merely godly or imperative. "Although a rapist, he is regarded as entitled to satisfy his sexual desires, even forcefully, and Medusa is to blame for attracting his desire."[94]

Male figures, such as Neptune as a "rapist god," are regarded as entitled to satisfy sexual desires, even by force.[95] In simple terms, Medusa was raped, blamed, demonized, then decapitated by Perseus. This is not a case of "he said"/ "she said" because there is no narration from the victim. We never hear Medusa's voice; no scream, no detail of her pain, no testimony from Medusa—no rebuttal. The cultural message is: Accept sexual objectification and violence toward women, both ideological functions of patriarchy. In the seminal text, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner informs us that, "The victims of rape are guilty; they are dishonored by being dishonorable."[96] For both mythographers, Medusa is anathema to a patriarchal feminine ideal of virtue. Once the epitome of beauty,

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[93] Silverman, "Medusa," 120.

[94] Seelig, "The Rape of Medusa," 903.

[95] Seelig, "The Rape of Medusa," 903.

[96] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 8.

Medusa's perceived immoral behavior subjects her to punishment; she is turned into a monstrous beast, then hunted and decapitated for the potentiality of transgressive power, a foreshadowing of women's bodies controlled by men, and in some cases, women who prop up the patriarchy.

In book five of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in a second story entitled "The Fighting of Perseus," he continues the narrative thread of Apollodorus weaponizing Medusa's power for Perseus' benefit. The appropriated power of Medusa's gaze transformed to both represent and effect one's own act/s of vengeance – both Perseus and Athena/Minerva do this. The festive wedding reception of Perseus and Andromeda is interrupted by Phineas, Andromeda's scorned fiancé. A melee soon breaks out between Perseus and his men and Phineas and his. Exhausted after fighting with hands and traditional weapons, Perseus, who "knew his strength at last would fall," took Medusa's head to immobilize his foes:

> He cried, "I call my enemy to help me
> If any friend is here"—he raised it high,
> The Gorgon's head— "If any friends are here,
> Then turn away your faces."
> To tell the names of all those who perished;
> Two hundred men survived; at least as many
> Looked at the Gorgon and were turned to stone.[97]

But Phineas, who was still alive, seeing all the men turn to stone, pleaded with the demi-god:

> You win, O Perseus! Take away that monster!
> That face that makes men stone, whoever she is,
> Medusa, or no matter; take her away!
> No hate for you, no lust for power drove me
> Into this fight; it was my bride I fought for[98].

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[97] Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphoses*, 112.

[98] Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphoses*, 113–114.

In control of the deadly gaze, Perseus appropriates Medusa's power, swinging the head directly toward Phineas, changing him into stone. The section ends with Perseus turning to Polydectes, the king who was to wed his beloved mother, Danaë: "And one more enemy was turned to stone."[99]

FEP in Ovid

In Ovid, we continue to see FEP. Minerva's (Athena) acquiescence to Neptune (Poseidon) raping Medusa is a metaphor for female dutifulness to male power. The shorthand version of FEP is internalized misogyny—women not supporting women and being beholden to patriarchal ideals to the detriment of female agency and self-worth. Manne informs us that women "police other women" by engaging in gendered norm-enforcing behavior[100] Silverman agrees: "I view her [Athena's] aggression [toward Medusa] as displaced onto females."[101] Transforming Medusa from a maiden to a monstrous beast, Minerva is absolute and righteous, per Ovid's perspective. Minerva's wrath implies that Medusa is guilty. In Minerva (Athena), we see what Manne defines as misogynist hostility, "...anything suitable to serve a punitive, deterrent, or warning function targeted at women."[102] Minerva places dire punishment upon Medusa; her attractiveness and sexuality are a liability, so her fate is doomed. Is flaunting one's beauty a justifiable cause for rape? Medusa's rape is not deemed an assault or crime by Neptune; it is a crime *against* Minerva. Neptune is guilty, but his status of innocence is

[99] Ovid, *Ovid Metamorphoses,* 114.

[100] Manne, *Down Girl,* 256.

[101] Silverman, "Medusa," 123.

[102] Manne, *Down Girl,* 68.

"bequeathed by patriarchy."[103] Signifying maiden virtue, the sanctity of sacred space that espouses virginity is desecrated. Rather than accusing Neptune of sexual assault, Minerva decides to safeguard the male-centric oikos, blame the victim, and rid Medusa of her sexual nature via monstrous transformation. Ovid rationalizes Minerva's wrath against Medusa—the punishment justified, symbolizing the cultural complicity of violence against women. Although a powerful goddess, Athena's fidelity is to Poseidon, his divine stature. There is no female solidarity with Medusa, a victim, which Manne calls a "perverse moral role reversal."[104] As will be explored in Chapter Three and Four, female solidarity is a feminist narrative thread when reimagining Medusa.

Mary Beard refers to ancient works such as Ovid as "well-springs of Western misogyny."[105] For Ovid, raping is not a transgressive act; being *raped* is. Ovid framed Medusa's rape as akin to a spoiled woman. Minerva acts as a misogynistic operating device of blame and punishment, a female character who assists the patriarchy, dutiful to patriarchal ideals. "The worship of Athena goes hand in hand with a fear and devaluation of the sexual and powerful woman represented by Medusa."[106] For Neptune, masculinity is exalted by exercising physical and sexual might over Medusa, a mere mortal, vulnerable and without agency in the male-dominated realm of the ancients. Although Neptune assaults Medusa physically, the goddess Minerva is complicit in victimizing Medusa's totality of womanhood by siding with the sea god, both responsible for the

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[103] Manne, *Down Girl*, 235.

[104] Manne, *Down Girl*, 210.

[105] Beard, *Women & Power*, 97.

[106] Seelig, "The Rape of Medusa," 905.

downfall of a woman with potential. And then Perseus kills her. The ancient myth exemplifies a cultural narrative that "encompasses valorizing patriarchal portrayals."[107] In one tidy Ovidian myth, Medusa is violated three times.

Lasting Effect of Ancient Poems: Single Story of Medusa

Ancient poets were rhetoricians, their persuasive prose injecting perception and meaning with gendered expectations of what it means to be masculine and feminine.[108] The male Greco-Roman mythographers perpetuated a patriarchal script, a universal narrative of male dominance, providing an ideological framework of hegemonic masculinity grounded in sexist ideals (prejudiced) of female behavior and expected conduct. Envisaged as violating patriarchal norms of purity and power, Medusa is ascribed the single story of a disobedient and dangerous woman (a lasting image perpetuated today). Anchoring her as an object of scorn, misogynistic mores condone Medusa's exploitation by Poseidon, Athena, and Perseus; Medusa is immoral and too alluring; her beauty makes men besotted. The Medusa myth is an early parable: Men, uncomfortable with female sexuality, will demonize it and, when needed, will gain the assistance of women who are dutiful to the patriarchal order. Men, not critical of their own behavior, are critical of female beauty and sexuality. Because Medusa is disobedient to the male order, she must be dealt with. In these ancient works, gendered characteristics of masculine authority and female oppression prove to be foundational. For the patriarchal order to be preserved, blame the woman. The ancient poets were in a position

[107] Manne, *Down Girl*, 79.

[108] Aside from Medusa, Hera, Medea, Circe, and Clytemnestra are in narratives as being destructive, vengeful, ruthless, and/or vindictive.

of generative power to propagate misogyny, imagining and then constructing Medusa into a villainess, a powerful woman to be silenced/destroyed, her head functioning as a talisman. The ancient poems represent a patriarchal ordained code of conduct that will be expanded upon. By the late Middle Ages, a patriarchal blueprint, a single story about Medusa, was firmly established with male writers creating texts to mirror a patriarchal society. What we will see in the European medieval era is the emergence of the misogynistic Medusa trope, a signifier of idealized male superiority and female inferiority: woman *as* Medusa. The following chapter explores the narrative shift in the patriarchal script: Using the single story of Medusa as other, the mythological character was used to caricature and malign medieval women.

CHAPTER TWO
EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL PATRIARCHAL MEDUSAN OUTPUTS

In the classical Western canon, Greco-Roman male mythographers generalized gender differences and gendered expectations of being feminine and masculine, enforcing the overarching social and moral order of patriarchy. We see this continued in European medieval texts, the intersection of ancient and medieval, and the intertextuality of the single script with medieval writers mining and repurposing ancient prose. As a well-read and educated noble, de Pizan read not only the classics from these poets but also male writers in religious, philosophical, and academic domains. The influence of the ancient poets immortalizing Medusa as a dangerous woman threatening the patriarchal order had a lasting effect. Given the literary influence of the classical Medusa myth, the sexist ideals (prejudice) of female behavior, and expected conduct, how does she appear in medieval texts; what is the meaning and interpretation of her presence? What narrative parallels do we see in the medieval era, or do new depictions emerge in the patriarchal script? As cultural products of prose, medieval literary outputs build upon the foundational patriarchal script of hegemonic masculinity, maintaining the repetitive nature set forth by the ancient poets.[109]

Medieval farces by male authors are antifeminist polemics.[110] These written works act as an enforcement mechanism to propagate and maintain patriarchal norms and expectations—the patriarchal discourse serves to uphold the patriarchy. Medieval

[109] It is important to note that in the modern era of fourth wave feminism, the reference points for the creators of modern feminist Medusan outputs do not include medieval sources, only ancient patriarchal Medusan outputs, such as Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Ovid.

[110] F. Douglas Kelly, "Reflections on the Role of Christine de Pisan as a Feminist Writer," *SubStance* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1971): 63–71, https://doi.org/10.2307/3684605.

patriarchal Medusan outputs frames women as deserving defamation for not adhering to the single script of male ideals. During the Middle Ages, we see a literary coterie of misogynistic male authors who will expand upon the ancient poems representing a patriarchal ordained code of conduct, namely, the behavior of women criticized.[111] The expectation of gendered codes of behavior continues. Aside from the works of Hesiod, Ovid, and other ancient poems, Western male writers in the medieval era relied on philosophical and religious texts as authoritative of gender differences. What is interesting about this era is that although women in society did not have the same rights as men, female agency was very present. We see women who exercise their opinions, attempt to influence matters of the home, and act with deliberation. However, as depicted in European medieval literary works, female agency is met with indignation. Manne helps us understand how misogyny operated at this time in terms of moralizing, objectifying, blaming, punishing, and maligning women as a means of *enforcing* patriarchal norms and expectations. According to Manne, when male privilege/place is challenged, violated, threatened, thwarted, or betrayed, misogyny is triggered. The ways that misogyny *operates* by men (and women, FEP) is that they condescend, moralize, blame, punish, silence, lampoon, satirize, sexualize, belittle, caricature, exploit, and cancel women—what we see in the medieval Medusa depictions. In the late Middle Ages, there was a shift in perception. As an effective and efficient trope, the disdain for Medusa is analogous to the societal disdain for women. Men continued imagining Medusa

[111] The following time periods of the Middle Ages are referenced in this chapter when referencing medieval works: early (sixth to tenth century), high (tenth to thirteenth century) and late (thirteenth to fifteenth century).

through a lens of "misogynistic hostility" but with a narrative shift: callous, nagging, and manipulative women who threatened the male order: women *as* Medusa.

Expanding on the poems of the ancient forefathers, European medieval writers use the maligned mythological character to make their point about women in general. Medievalist Eleanor Janega refers to medieval patriarchal notions about women as "classical concepts of women."[112] Women are perceived as untrusting, conniving, wicked, wily, and suspecting. In the medieval era, we see the same patriarchal script but with different iterations; Medusa signifies maligned women, and, in some cases, women are worse than the deadly Gorgon. Given that ancient myths are pernicious for women, what did de Pizan read in the era, mainly influenced by the ancient poets? In this chapter, I explore the intertextuality of classic and medieval works as the intersection of the single story of Medusa—how malevolent Medusa became a locus of women-hating men in the medieval era. We continue to see the misogynistic Medusa trope, a signifier of idealized male superiority and female inferiority, moreover, we see how the classic Medusa myth has been mined to malign women.

Influences of the Single Story in the European Medieval Era: Authoritative Texts Perpetuating Gendered Stereotypes

Before exploring Medusa's depictions in specific medieval texts, it is imperative to explore written works that perpetuated gendered stereotypes as authoritative "voices." Janega stresses the importance of recognizing how influential ancient sources are on medieval thought and action, the "reverence for ideas" and the "constant process of

[112] Eleanor Janega, *Once and Future Sex: Going Medieval on Women's Roles in Society* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2024), 16.

rebuilding of ancient thinkers and philosophers' sense of universal truth about what it means to be a woman."[113] Janega also informs us that the medieval education system was constructed around and upon the work of classical texts from ancient Greece and Rome, including Homer, Aristotle, and Ovid.[114] "Medieval people were much attached to the idea of themselves as the successors of the glorious ancient empires, which provided a mythic element to their reverence of the ancients."[115] A prominent authoritative voice is Aristotle, who gave male medieval authors a reductive diagnosis of femaleness. Medieval thinkers "lionized" this philosopher above all others.[116]

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher of politics, ethics, and science during the Classical period in ancient Greece. Aristotle is significant in perpetuating patriarchal ideals. Aristotelian thinking faultily codified the patriarchal script about women's nature, ripe for interpretation from male writers in the medieval era. "Aristotle insisted that societal roles are based on human nature: men ruled, women were ruled."[117] In Aristotle's treatise, "Generation of Animals," he theorized the origin of animal and human life: male/paternal contribution of offspring as superior, females/maternal as inferior. As an influential contributor to the patriarchal script, Aristotle propagated the gendered

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[113] Eleanor Janega, "Medieval Women with Eleanor Janega: Gone Medieval," *Gone Medieval*, March 6, 2023, https://shows.acast.com/gone-medieval/episodes/medieval-women-eleanor-janega , Time Stamp 6:40.

[114] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 3, 15.

[115] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 14.

[116] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 9.

[117] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 10.

stereotype of women/females as lacking and naturally defective and ushers in biological justification to further rationalize women as inferior. In simple terms, to be human is male, and to be female is other/less than. For Aristotle, the mere nature of physical inferiority affects females. Women are cold and wet, men are hot and dry, by this nature, women are lacking mentally and suffering psychologically.[118] Morrin Rahman and Anne Witz, in their work, "What Really Matters: The Elusive Quality of the Material in Feminist Thought," discuss Aristotle's dominant essentialist account legitimized gender/sexual inequalities as "natural" and thus "inevitable and immutable"[119]—a potent framework for male writers to work with. As will be explored in the forthcoming medieval writings, women's perceived imperfections cause suspicion.

The writings and teachings of Aristotle do not mention Medusa or mythology. Even though Aristotle does not depict or refer to Medusa, it is important to consider him as an authoritative voice regarding women who influenced the imagination of male writers. His view on women is not surprising because, during his time of philosophizing, women's subordination was already in effect. Feminist philosophy scholars argue that Aristotle is the "chief spokesman, if not the founder of sexism in the philosophical tradition."[120] Where did Aristotle's imagination spur from? De Beauvoir informed us of Pythagoras (c. 570–c. 495 BC), the Greek philosopher and mathematician who influenced

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[118] Aristotle. *Generation of Animals*, trans. Arthur Leslie Peck (Internet Archive: Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1943), 458-459, https://archive.org/details/generationofanim00arisuoft/page/n3/mode/2up.

[119] Momin Rahman and Anne Witz, "What Really Matters? The Elusive Quality of the Material in Feminist Thought," *Feminist Theory* 4, no. 3 (2003): 244. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001030043001

[120] Daryl McGowan Tress, "The Metaphysical Science of Aristotle's 'Generation of Animals' and Its Feminist Critics," *The Review of Metaphysics* 46, no. 2 (1992): 307.

Aristotle, Plato, and Western thought: “There is a good principle that created order, light, and man, and a *bad principle* that created chaos, darkness, and woman.”[121] According to Aristotle, women are “incomplete and damaged human beings of an entirely different order than men.”[122] This ethos manifests for centuries to come.

De Pizan referred to Aristotle in *The City of Ladies*, directly and indirectly, refuting his faulty misogynistic notions by praising female nature. A woman’s nature is addressed twelve times in *The City*, refuting male authors' views that women are weak, irrational, lack moral fortitude, and not worthy of being educated. In the next chapter, “Analysis of the City: Medusa as Citizen,” de Pizan rebuked Aristotle as an authorial voice for women’s nature: “It seems to me that neither Aristotle’s philosophy, which has been useful to the human mind, nor all other philosophers who have ever lived, have given the world any blessings that are comparable to the benefits accrued from the ingenuity of these ladies.”[123] In Part II, the character Lady Rectitude reminds Christine, the protagonist to be proud of her feminine nature and to revel in its amazement. A departure from the fixed Aristotelian perspective, de Pizan reframed female nature: “What Nature gives you, no one can take away.”[124] While biological differences made a significant impact on gender perceptions, so too did theology.

Christian Paternalistic Writings

The patriarchal ideology that propagates feminine and masculine, differing roles,

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[121] de Beauviour, *Second Sex*, 89

[122] Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 10.

[123] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 83.

[124] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 141.

rights, responsibilities, and expectations assigned to women and men continued in the medieval era, with religion as a significant pillar of misogynistic ideals. With the rise of Christianity, there is a rise in paternalistic writings. Many medieval poets and intellectuals' perceptions of women stemmed from ancient literature and Christian dogma. “Throughout medieval Europe, an overall concept of women was constantly being refined and argued over, but all Christians could agree on one immutable truth: women were responsible for the existence of sin and the immorality of humans.”[125] Simone de Beauvoir informed us that “Men’s opinion in the Middle Ages is not favorable to women,” as evidenced by “pitted bourgeois-inspired writings that cruelly attack women: fabliaux, farces, and plays criticize women for their laziness, coquetry, and lust. Their worst enemies are the clergy.”[126] From the influence of the ancient mythmakers and the rise of Christian ideology grounded in rigid gender ideals in the medieval era, the intersection of myth and morality continues but with reductive sentiments for women and Medusa. Like the early bards perched high on the powerful pillar of misogyny, medieval male writers do the same within a cultural and societal sphere of male-centrism grounded in Christian religiosity. With the rise of hegemonic Christian dogma that champions men and is critical of women, the morality turn from gendered expectations of ladylike behavior differs from the Middle Ages.

Christian beliefs, which associated sex with original sin, influenced sexist attitudes toward women’s sexuality. In Christian texts maligning women, we see the

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[125] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 16–17. For Janega, this directly relates to the doctrine of original sin with Eve being the locus of culpability. Women, by nature, are more prone to sin (p. 20).

[126] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 115.

emergence of sin and damnation, with Eve as a prominent figure attributing generalized notions about women's cunning and crafty ways. The demonization of the female sex is typical in misogynistic texts of the Middle Ages that discussed "other" women by associating them with wickedness, sin, and malevolent forces.[127] Women were directly associated with desire and consistently contrived as temptresses as the descendants of Eve. In effect, women disproportionately bore responsibility where temptations of the flesh were concerned. Aside from biblical sin and damnation, there was a determined plan to malign women.[128] Monks needing to market celibacy to fellow Monks wrote horrible stories about women's flaws.[129] Why did such propaganda machines against women emerge in the early Middle Ages? Historian Sara Butler provides the answer: "To convince priests to abandon their wives, to abandon women entirely, they wrote horrible stories about women to exaggerate their flaws and essentially make them walking sin, a constant danger to a man's soul, and that's one of the major reasons why the Middle Ages seem so misogynist; these monks wrote terrible stories about women."[130]

The Saint Augustine Medusa

Aside from ancient sources, a text of immense popularity during the medieval era continues a single story of women as others. Although not written in the medieval era, de

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[127] Nancy M. Frelick, "Woman as Other: Medusa and Basilisk in Early Modern French Literature," *French Forum* 43, no. 2 (2018): 287.

[128] In 1075, Pope Gregory instilled the Gregorian Reforms, religious guidelines that included a push to ban priests from marrying. Early propaganda manuscripts were copied by hand, replicated by monks as skilled scribes, to be distributed and circulated. This is also why we see different versions of medieval texts.

[129] Sara Butler, "Medieval Women's Rights: Setting the Stage for Today," *YouTube*, March 11, 2021, educational video, 18:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=3cGPdiqV-4s

[130] Butler, "Medieval Women's Rights: Setting the Stage for Today," 18:48.

Pizan referenced Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354–430), two times *The City of Ladies*.[131] The *City of God* (426 AD) is Saint Augustine's treatise on Christian philosophy that criticizes Roman paganism and the characters representing the narrative. From a patriarchal gendered bias, the tangible interpretation of early theologians, such as Saint Augustine, defined Eve's temptation of Adam as rooted in sexual allure. The dire consequences of original sin were the banishment of humankind from the Garden of Eden, Eve is to blame. For St. Augustine, the immoral corruptness of women is linked to original sin. Considered an original "Church Father," Saint Augustine's written works provided the framework for Christian theology.[132] The themes in *The City of God* are that man is fallible (the City of Man can collapse, such as the sack of Rome, not the City of God), and God is the most prominent presence in one's life. Christianity/monotheism is superior to polytheism, which he considers paganism. As noted in the anthology, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, "The influence of St. Augustine's teaching in Western Christendom was enormous for well over a thousand years."[133]

What we see from Saint Augustine is the othering of women. Although "St Augustine knew very little about the Aristotelian corpus,"[134] he "envisaged for women a second ranking, a lower tier than men, that women should serve men, children, and their

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[131] A major seat of early Christian church councils, Hippo in Roman Africa is where Augustine served as a bishop. Hence the name, as an influential Church father, Augustine was granted sainthood.

[132] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, xii.

[133] Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt, and C.W Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 77.

[134] Bonnie Kent, "Reinventing Augustine's Ethics: The Afterlife of City of God," In *Augustine's City of God: A Critical Guide*, ed. James Wetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2012), 225–244, 226.

parents because it is just that the weaker mind should serve the stronger."[135] Regarding sexuality, women are the initiators of sex—"the bad gender"—and the good men are the ideal humans and know how to restrain themselves; hence, the "reigning in of women, the policing of women," perceived as overtly sexual creatures requiring men controlling the immoral behavior of female sexual desire.[136] Propagating a foundational Christian dogma about women, "Augustine's message was that even when a man disobeyed God, it was probably because a woman had convinced him to do so."[137] When writing about the Garden of Eden, Eve's temptation by the serpent, Augustine wrote, "For we must believe that even before her sin, woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him."[138] That is, women are sinful and men are deserving of dominion over them. St. Augustine wrote, "…it is not by her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master."[139]

Saint Augustine combined the ancient myth imagery of Medusa with the origins of Judeo-Christian account of female evil and sinfulness. Although he did not refer to Medusa by name but briefly as a gorgon, the Saint Augustine Medusa may be a direct reference to Hesiod or Ovid, given the imagery of the snakelike visage and deadly gaze. In *City of God*, Book XVIII, Chapter 18, titled, "What Fables were Invented at the Time When Judges Began to Rule Hebrews," he wrote: "In those times were invented the

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[135] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 77.

[136] Janega, "Medieval Women with Eleanor Janega: Gone Medieval."

[137] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 17.

[138] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 79.

[139] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 80.

fables…about the Gorgon, whose hair was composed of serpents, and who turned all who beheld her into stone…[140] Albeit a single line, his depiction elicits the dangerous nature of women. Aside from the Gorgon, Saint Augustine was critical of Greek myth, namely Zeus (Jupiter), Athena (Minerva), Hercules, Apollo, and Perseus, referring to them as "fables" that were "men's inventions so drawn from the truth of history."[141] Although polytheism is sacrilege for Saint Augustine, the mighty Zeus is not fallible. Using Zeus's sexual predation as his example, Saint Augustine blamed the ancient myth makers, the "fable-forgers" who were blasphemous for imaging such "ungodly slanders of their gods"; he believed the ancient poets, lacking virtue, warrant punishment.[142] He further doubled-downed by vilifying the poets (aforementioned fable-forgers) for depicting the male gods as wrongful for submitting to the all-powerful, sinful allure of women. Aside from Saint Augustine's *City of God*, his 400 CE work, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, an autobiography recording his righteousness of God, he also communicates his contempt of poets who promulgated polytheistic ideals. Saint Augustine's dislike for the "empty fables" of Greek literature and learning came late since as a boy he "erred" by preferring "vain studies" that are a "spectacle of vanity."[143] Only those who speak the

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[140] Saint Augustine, "What Fictions got Footing in the Nations When the Judges Began First to Rule Israel," in *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, trans. John Healey (John Grant Publishing, Vol. 2, 1909) https://archive.org/details/cityofgoddecivit0000augu_q1x6/page/n5/mode/2up?ref=ol%2C+170

[141] Saint Augustine, "What Fictions got Footing," 171.

[142] It is important to note Saint Augustine's perception of Zeus's sexual predation. According to ancient myth, the god turned himself into a shower of gold, impregnating the sleeping and unsuspecting Danaé. Saint Augustine wrote, "He came down to lay with Danae in a shower of gold (the woman being tempted by gold unto dishonesty)" See p. 171 in *City of God*. In this brief sentence, Zeus is exonerated; the unsuspecting and nonconsensual Danaé. is blamed for the act as deserving and greedy.

[143] Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, ed. J.G. Pilkington (Internet Archive, January 1, 1970), 16, https://archive.org/details/confessionsofsta00augu/page/236/mode/2up?q=Ovid.

word of a Christian God speak the truth; his disapproval of educating young men on the "wickedness" of pagan ideology is akin to teaching blasphemy.[144]

De Pizan, citing Saint Augustine as the "ecclesiastic author" and "Doctor of the Church,"[145] indicates she read his works, namely *The City of God*, given the name of her work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*. As a prominent philosophical and theological writer of his age, a man of moral authority propagating patriarchal narratives about women, de Pizan would have read how he rationalized a place for women as subservient to men, evident by their nature and expressed by their sin that only when under control of men can women lead an authentic Christian life. As an influential theologian, Saint Augustine tied original sin's origin to female nature, which was perceived as suspect and inferior, not so for men (who have original sin, too, but it originated with women). For de Pizan, being female is not a marker or natural characteristic of an original sinful female, which will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

Marbod of Rennes Medusa

During the high Middle Ages, the French bishop and scholar, the Marbod of Rennes (1035–1123), wrote *The Book with Ten Chapters*. As a bishop, his written works were educational tools for the next generation of clergy, a "continuous recycling of received misogyny."[146] Chapter Eight is a misogynistic rant entitled "Femme Fatale" where Rennes likens women to a "scheming enemy," "envious," "capricious,"

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[144] Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 88-89.

[145] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 39-40.

[146] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 99.

"avaricious," "evil and arrogant.[147] For Rennes, "Women the unhappy source, evil root, and corrupt offshoot, who brings to birth every sort of outrage throughout the world."[148] With the Marbod of Rennes Medusa, we see a significant turning point in analyzing patriarchal Medusa depictions. We begin to see the contours of Medusa, who is no longer a singular character from ancient myth but reimagined: Medusa as a woman.[149] In section 7 of the chapter, he warns men of beautiful women who lure with charm, comparing these women not to Medusa by name but to the "gorgon."

> Oh race of men, beware the honied poisons,
> the sweet songs and the pull of the dark depths.
> Do not let the charm of contrived appearances seduce you;
> be in dread of the destructive flames and the fierce serpent.
> If a beautiful woman courts you aiming to deceive you,
> and if you have such confidence in yourself that you stoutheartedly prepare to enter the fray, you will deceive yourself with ignorance, if you scorn the darts of the enemy.
> It is not the rule in this type of struggle that you can win by close combat.
> It is better to undertake retreat and attain safety with your feet.
> If you run, you will get away: if you approach, you will be caught.
> But I warn you not to look back at her, since anyone who toys with desire can be turned to stone by the very sight of the Gorgon.[150]

Men must be constantly on guard because he is no match against the treacherous allure of women. He must not confront the deceitful intention of women, which, if not heeded, will be at his mortal peril. When faced with unruly wives or maidens not bending to the will of men or the ones in control, stereotypes justify and rationalize male ire toward women.

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[147] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 100–101.

[148] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 100.

[149] We will see women in society depicted as Medusa up to modern day: *woman as Medusa*. This is prominent in the misogynistic pillar of modern politics: Hilary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Angela Merkel, and other prominent female politicians on the receiving end of the patriarchal Medusan treatment.

[150] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 102–03.

An influential writer well-known during this period and beyond, he is regarded as "one of the most important literary minds and influential Latin poets and scholars of the early twelfth century."[151] De Pizan did not directly refer to the Marbod of Rennes in *The City*, but he could be one of the writers she refers to broadly because his barbed prose is so offensive to women. As de Pizan wrote in *The City of Ladies*:

> Oh my lady, now I understand even better what you say about the immense ingratitude and ignorance of these men who say so many bad things about women. It seems to me that they have enough reason not to criticize them, since every man's mother is a woman, and it is quite obvious how many good things women do…Let them be silent. Those writers who malign women, all those who have criticized women and who talk about them in their books and poems.[152]

As we know from de Pizan scholar Earl Jeffrey Richards, who translated *The Book of the City of Ladies*, given her aptitude for reading, de Pizan would have been familiar with a range of classics translated into French, such as Hesiod, Ovid, and others. The same can be applied here.

De Secritis Mulierum (Of the Secrets of Women)

Composed during the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the author of *De Secretis Mulierum (Of the Secrets of Women)* is unknown but commonly cited as Albertus Magnus, a theologian and philosopher.[153] Although *De Secritis Mulierum* was a primer for female biology and disposition, the underlying theme relies on maligning women. The treatise's intended audience was the "monastic milieu," and was also utilized as a medical

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[151] Melissa B. Lurio, "A Proposed Genealogy for Marbode, Angevin Bishop of Rennes, 1096-1123," *Medieval Prosopography* 26 (2005): 51–76. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44946465 51

[152] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 82.

[153] Because the author's identity is yet unknown, scholars and researchers refer to the work as authored by Pseudo-Albert, which I continue to do.

text in scholastic/university settings.[154] The misogynistic work was widely circulated, given the expanse of clerical influence in politics and economics. Just the title elicits that women are untrustworthy. Helen Rodnite Lemay, in *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries*, notes that "A strong subtext of *Secrets* is the evil nature of women and the harm they can cause to innocent victims; young children and male consorts—clearly then, another purpose of this treatise is to malign the female sex, a tradition that extends back in Christianity to second-century misogynistic writings."[155] Given the popularity and circulation, there are eighty-three extant manuscripts to date.[156]

Written by a man, *Women's Secrets* is a manual *for men* to ascertain women's character, appearance, attitude, behavior, and bodies, including virginity. Reminiscent of Greco-Roman ideals and expectations of sexual purity, of the twelve chapters in *Women's Secrets* maligning women and praising men, there is an entire chapter providing men with telltale signs to determine if a woman's virtue has been corrupted: "On the Signs of Corruption and Virginity." Overall, this popular work depicted women as evil and polluted based on Aristotle's biological determination of women as inferior—female biology as broken.[157] Aristotle is heavily relied on as a "main authority,"[158] referencing

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[154] Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's de Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries (SUNY Series in Medieval Studies)* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 7.

[155] Lemay, *Women's Secrets*, 16.

[156] James Gray Booksellers of Princeton, Massachusetts is selling an extant copy for $8,800.00. https://www.jamesgraybookseller.com/pages/books/880/albertus-magnus-pseudo/de-secretis-mulierum-cum-commento

[157] Aristotle is pseudo-Albertus' "main authority" per Lemay, *Women's Secrets*, 5.

[158] Lemay, *Women's Secrets*, 4

the philosopher over a dozen times relating to women's inferiority, pain threshold, libidinous nature, poisonous humors, being the weaker sex, and general corrupting and evil nature. Aside from Aristotelian influence, Lemay provides the sobering insight that the incendiary patriarchal script of *Women's Secrets* "directly influenced the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of the Witches)[159] as an ideological basis for concluding that women are prone to witchcraft, for which crime they deserve death."[160]

In *Women's Secrets*, there is no direct reference to Medusa (or Gorgon), but this written work is essential to note because de Pizan directly referenced it in *The City of Ladies.* In part I, chapter 9, in conversation with Lady Reason, Christine excavates the grounds where the City will be built, referred to as the "Field of Letters."[161] In dialogue with each other about the ways men slander women, Christine tells the Lady about what she has read: "I read another little book, my lady, written in Latin and titled, *De Secretis mulierum*, which says many things about women's bodies."[162] Lady Reason replies, "If you look at your own body, you won't need further proof to know that this book was purposely written to deceive because if you have read it, you know that it is full of lies."[163]

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[159] The German publication, "Malleus Maleficarum" (Hammer of Witches), written in 1486 by two male Inquisitors of the Catholic Church, spurred the witch hunts in Europe. Women were the primary targets, and resulting executions were eventually outsourced to the new colonies, beginning with Salem, Mass. Read Hans Broedel, The "Malleus Maleficarum" and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief, Manchester University Press, 2013), https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/35002.

[160] Lemay, *Women's Secrets*, 50.

[161] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 31.

[162] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 35.

[163] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 36.

The prevalent theme in male writings from ancient times to the late Middle Ages, particularly in *Women's Secrets* and the works of Aristotle, Saint Augustine, etc., is the portrayal of women as inferior and potentially dangerous to men. The evolution of this thinking began with the classical philosophic certainty that women were defective by nature and, therefore, must be under male control; that women were the originators of evil, thus inherently nefarious; and finally, women's heightened immorality mobilized by her all-powerful sexual allure is a morality threat to destroy men. De Pizan more than likely surmised that the classical myths of pre-medieval Christian stories were only different contextual narratives that said the same thing: Women are inferior, dangerous, and deserving of male control. "Most medieval thought about women was thus written by men for men based on readings of work by men."[164]

The Influence of Ancient Poets: Intertextuality in the Medieval Era

From ancient myth, Medusa has been mythologized to represent an amalgamation of female stereotypes: malevolent, disobedient, and deserving of punishment. In the medieval era, we continue to see how agents of misogyny, the enabling mechanism of male writers whose outputs of patriarchal Medusan narratives enforce patriarchal ideals, are a continuation of the single story with some edits. The Medusa depicted in medieval works is like those of the ancient imagination—the same foundational symbolism—women who disobey the patriarchal script but with different iterations. Medusa is no longer a singular, fictional character, but used as a narrative tool for male writers to depict women as the mythological beast or worse. Medusa, as a woman, is representative of vice, unruliness, and disobedience. Like the patriarchal Medusan outputs dating over two

[164] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 25.

millennia, medieval manuscripts by male writers depicted male superiority/female inferiority, hostility toward women (notably powerful women), violence against women, women objectification, and male entitlement. Aside from the works of ancient poets, male writers in the medieval era relied on philosophical and religious texts as authoritative of gender differences.

To gain a deeper understanding of the importance of the first feminist reclamation, de Pizan's incorporation of Medusa in *The City*, it is crucial to examine how the mythological character was portrayed in patriarchal texts during the medieval era. De Pizan was influenced by the following works, some directly referenced, with others that influenced her thinking. The inclusion of these works bridges the distressing, negative female narrative on display throughout the ages, providing de Pizan a constant and clear target to refute in *The City of Ladies*.

The Romance of the Rose

The medieval poem, originally written in Old French, *The Romance of the Rose* (La Roman de la Rose), is a composite work by two authors written separately. In 1230, the first author, the French poet Guillaume de Lorris, wrote an allegorical love poem in the style of a dream vision about courtly love. The protagonist, Lover, is searching for romance with the rose as allegorical for his intended lady love. Guillaume's portion ends with the Lover gently kissing the Rose. Four decades later, between 1269 and 1278, Jean de Meun, a French intellect who had studied at the University of Paris, continued the poem, not with a singular notion of courtly love, but of male dominance. De Meun ushered in a sarcastic narrative tone as a standard paradigm of patriarchal affection. In his book, *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, distinguished Professor Emeritus David F. Hult

informs us that the text, "provocatively laced with misogynistic, antireligious, and obscene passages, became a huge success, a 'best-seller' that dominated and influenced the literary world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—with Jean de Meun acquiring a 'near cult following.[165] In modern parlance, the best-seller was widely circulated through medieval Europe, translated into English, Dutch, and Italian.[166]

In de Meun's anti-woman polemic, a central theme of his work is ire against women. With themes of female inferiority, immorality and sexual violence against women via defamatory and veiled language, *The Rose* is considered to be "anti-feminist."[167] The male protagonist is still prominent, but the Lover's dream vision is no longer a quest for romantic love; his focus is sexual conquest.[168] Akin to a hero quest, de Meun frames himself as a protagonist in pursuing the Rose, the woman he desires. In short, in a dreamlike experience, the Lover is at the entrance of an Eden-like garden encased by a large wall. Upon seeing a beautiful rosebud, he feels compelled to pluck it, although protected by a thorny thicket (subtext: strategize to have sex with a chaste/virginal maiden). To fulfill his desire, the Lover can succeed in his romantic pursuit through cunning and deceit. De Meun completed the poem with a sinister and satirical twist aimed at women—that of the male protagonist's quest to "pluck" the

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[165] Christine de Pizan and David F. Hult, *Debate of the Romance of the Rose* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010), 12.

[166] Charlotte Cooper-Davis informed us that during the Medieval era and continuing into the Renaissance, the popularity of *The Rose* is illustrated by the number of surviving manuscripts; over 300 survived, "an extraordinary number for a non-devotional text," in *Christine de Pizan: Life, Work, Legacy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2021), 95.

[167] Cooper-Davis, *Christine de Pizan: Life, Work, Legacy*, 97.

[168] Guillaume de Lorris wrote 4,058 lines; taking a narrative turn as a misogynistic rant, de Meun added nearly 18,000 lines (17,724) to the existing poem.

unsuspecting and passive maiden personified as a flower, the rosebud, a double entendre of sexual conquest. This conquest of plucking the unsuspecting rose reads as a nonconsensual sexual encounter, akin to rape, reminiscent of Ovidian Medusa; metaphorically, the mortal Gorgon, like the rosebud, is so beautiful that Poseidon rapes her and is immune from guilt. Although the entire segment of de Meun's poem is an ongoing dialogue between himself and a host of characters, the rosebud, who is according to the intention of the Lover's conquest to be penetrated, is never heard from—no voice or dialogue.[169] The rosebud embodies no agency for both poets; it is merely an endpoint for male desire. Guillaume depicted the rosebud as an allegorical female figure, but de Meun used the deflowering to represent male conquest.

> In spite of Wealth, that villainous creature who showed no pity
> but refused me entry to the path she guarded (she paid no heed
> to the path by which I came here in secret haste); in spite of my mortal
> enemies who caused me so many setbacks; in spite particularly of Jealousy…who
> protects the roses from lovers (much good her guard is doing now!), before I left
> that place in which, had I had my way, I would have remained to this day, I
> plucked with joy the flower from the fair and leafy rose-bush. And so I won my
> bright red rose. Then it was day and I awoke.[170]

In *Reading Myth: Classical Mythology and Its Interpretations in Medieval French Literature,* French medieval specialist and scholar, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski interprets de Meun's last passage as "violent" and "callous", the "final assault on the Rose" expressing male sexuality.[171] The irony is that female chastity is highly revered as

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[169] On the Lover's journey, he encounters different symbolic characters personifying the human condition such as Idleness, Wealth, Dignity, Cupid, Fear, Shame, Reason, Honesty, and Pity.

[170] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 335.

[171] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate. *Reading Myth* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 88.

a societal ideal (for females), yet de Meun casually depicted an aggressive and calculated quest to define that ideal, the poem "culminated in the lascivious uncovering" of the rosebud .[172]

In de Meun, sexist ideals and gendered stereotypes about women are depicted; his version is about pursuit and conquest, using lazy generalizations and stereotypes about women. Like the ancient patriarchal Medusan outputs, "The Rose was just another text in a long line of works that propagated and encouraged behavior that was damaging toward women."[173] For de Meun, what tethers the ancient depictions is an Aristotelian narrative thread of biological determinism: male as superior, women as inferior. Relying on an Aristotelian doctrine of gender, he praises Aristotle: "…man should take the trouble to become a disciple of Aristotle, who made better observations of nature than any man…"[174] de Meun also read works by Albertus Magnus.[175] As we know, during this time, religious theologians and clerics wrote against women, their prose crafted to question female intellectualism based on anatomy. Jean de Meun's hostile view of women is not surprising because, during this time, women's inferior status was already in place. In this poem, he propagates the gendered stereotype of women/females as lacking and naturally defective and used biological justification spurred by Aristotle to further rationalize women as inferior. Although de Pizan is conservative and highly devout in her views on Christianity and love, another attitude prevailed during this time: Our medieval

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[172] Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Jean Le Fèvre's Livre de Leesce: Praise or Blame of Women?" *Speculum* 69, no. 3 (1994): 714. https://doi.org/10.2307/3040848

[173] Cooper-Davis, *Christine de Pizan: Life, Work, Legacy*, 122.

[174] de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, 278.

[175] de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, 348.

ancestors enjoyed hearing and reading about sex and obscenity. Janega informs us that in the medieval era, "bawdy" and "lewd" tales of "smut" had an almost universal appeal; people were eager to share "lusty puns" and "dirty stories."[176] But typically at the expense of women as the butt of the joke.

The de Meun Medusa

In *The Rose*, de Meun directly referenced Zeus, Circe, Penelope, Hercules, Jason of the Argonauts, and Helen of Troy, among other Greco-Roman characters. His pagan references are likely derived from Ovid.[177] In some versions, a common addition to many thirteenth and fourteenth-century manuscripts was the inclusion of Medusa's head atop the Tower of Jealousy.[178] De Meun's Lover, the protagonist narrator, on his quest for the Rose, arrives at the Tower of Jealousy and atop the tower is Medusa's head. The Lover sees Medusa's visage as a sign of caution: be wary of romantic love that can petrify the male (loss of power). Medusa's imagery on the tower guarded by Lady Jealousy, is symbolic of purposely recognizing the Gorgonian iconography with the negative qualities of jealousy, including destruction and suspicion. Medievalist Sylvia Huot referred to this passage as the "Medusa Interpolation," a larger mythographic program extending throughout the conjoined Rose, exploring the nature of feminine sexuality and its effects on men.[179] Perseus, referred to by Huot as the "protege of Athena" is a model for the

[176] Janega, "Medieval Women with Eleanor Janega: Gone Medieval," 28:01–29:02.

[177] de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, 344–45.

[178] Leeming, *Medusa*, 37. It is uncertain if this was included by de Meun or an anonymous transcriber. In an Oxford University Press version of *The Rose* that I purchased, Medusa is not noted.

[179] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 865.

Lover.[180] Beginning with the acknowledgment of Medusa's deadly glare and her demise by the demi-god, for Huot, Perseus also symbolizes a suggestion by de Meun's character Reason, that the Lover could escape petrifaction and narcissistic attractions if he used Reason's mirror (akin to Athena's aegis).[181] Given Medusa's deadly power (female power), the Lover would in effect become a Perseus, arming himself with the mirror of reason to resist the dangerously feminine, to neutralize the erotic power that threatens to immobilize him.[182]

Medusa Interpolation

> Greater than Medusa's power
> It performed wonders profuse
> Though put to far better use.
> Gainst Medusa none might survive
> For they were turned to rock, alive.
> Twas her gaze, ill she did there,
> With her evil, snake filled hair;
> For all who looked toward her
> Haf no sure defense against her,
> Except for Jove' son, Perseus,
> Who made this Medusa yield
> By Gazing at her in the shield
> That Pallas his sister gave him;
> And thus that same shield saved him.
> By its means, the Gorgon's head,
> He took and kept, once she was dead.
> He hld it close, and used it well,
> In many a conflict that befell;
> Many a foe he changed to stone,
> Or slew with them his sword alone.
> The head he gazed at in the shield;
> Else to stone he'd have congealed,
> Remained a rock there, in that place,
> Merely from looking on her face;
> Using his shield as a mirror,

[180] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 876.

[181] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 871.

[182] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 874.

So great was the Gorgon's power.[183]

If we understand the passage as a representation of the Ovidian source and the details of the *Metamorphoses* to bring Medusa's relevance to *The Rose*, it is clearer that Medusa figures the dangerous aspect of feminine eros.[184] As a personified character, Jealousy hindered the Lover's quest to access the rosebud, protecting her virginal modesty and chastity. After attacking Jealousy's tower, the Lover's lust and desire are no longer defeated, the rosebud ripe for plucking. The Lover succeeding in overpowering the rosebud is depicted as a positive source of strength and power, as is the shield of Perseus. Both the Lover and Perseus are depicted as dominant and superior in their quests. The Lover's conquest, by deceit, results in rape. Perseus' conquest, by wielding Medusa's deadly gaze, resulted in his personal gain.

Querelle de la Rose

Although de Meun died in 1305, nearly 100 years later, he still represented the exclusive male writing sphere with highly reputable society members praising the poem. What was irksome for De Pizan as a humanist intellectual was how women were depicted and maligned. De Pizan's reading of *The Rose* prompted her to take a proactive role in this discourse, highlighting the wrong, unfair, and unjust treatment of women in deference to male power and dominance. The highly provocative misogynistic theme of the poem created a robust series of discussions and debates in the form of letters amongst the powerful and influential members of French society. Upon reading de Meun's

[183] Jean de Meung, "Jean de Meung," in *The Romance of the Rose, The Continuation: Part XI, The Lover Wins The Rose*, trans. A.S. Kline and Jean de Meung (c. 1240–c. 1305), Poetry in Translation, 2019, https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/LeRomanDeLaRoseContinuationPartXII.php.

[184] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 874.

contribution, de Pizan "took a conscious stand in opposition to male defamation and mistreatment of women"[185] and embarked on a letter-writing campaign to those praising the misogynistic prose, aiming to engage male thinkers and invite them to dialogue about sexist work. What evolved into a nearly two-year debate on the merits of De Meun, the *Rose de Querelle* (Quarrel of the Rose) would become the first recorded literary debate in French. De Pizan's goal was to diminish the impact of *The Rose* narrative on society's powerful, intellectual, and, notably, men in general. This exercise informed her writing of *The City of Ladies* and inclusion of the Medusa myth as an apparent reference highlighting pervasive antifemale sentiment.[186]

Embroiled in a literary quarrel to refute the misogynistic discourse, de Pizan is a "more-than-worthy opponent" in the first recorded literary debate in French history.[187] Hult writes, "What distinguishes Christine is her adamant staking out of a position as a woman in the male-dominated world of letters—the debate is an active counterassault against an entire intellectual establishment to which women were solely the object of discussion and which greatly limited their ability to take up the subject position in speech."[188] In the letter exchange, de Pizan directly engaged with the misogynistic pillar of royal administration and academia as a voice of dissent.[189] In one letter, she informed

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[185] Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the 'Querelle Des Femmes', 1400-1789," *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1982): 7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173479

[186] There were two sides in the debate, those in support of the Rose: Jean de Montreuil, Provost of Lille University, and two royal secretaries (brothers), Pierre and Gontier Col. de Pizan had an ally on her side, Jean Gerson, the Chancellor of the University of Paris.

[187] Cooper-Davis, *Christine de Pizan: Life, Work, Legacy*, 102–03.

[188] de Pizan and Hult, *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, 1.

[189] In modern parlance, she is not "cancelled" because she has allies who support her position of defending women. Also, during this time, Phillipe of Burgundy asked her to write the official biography of

de Montreuil, "And it is precisely because I am a woman that I can speak better in this matter than one who has not had the experience, since he [de Meun] speaks only by conjecture and by chance."[190] De Pizan closed her letter by stating, "And may it not be imputed to me as folly, arrogance, or presumption, that I, a woman, should dare to reproach and call into question to subtle an author [de Meun], and to diminish the stature of his work, when he alone, a man, has dared to undertake to defame and blame without exception an entire sex."[191] In this public discourse, de Pizan was audacious in offering her opinion and the female perspective; in this discursive space, she held her own. Amazingly, de Pizan would publicly critique these powerful men given her place in society; going against the hegemony of the elite was audacious.[192]

Nearing the end of *The Rose*, understanding that his female readers may be displeased with his defamation of women, De Meun wrote, "…any words that seem to be harsh and savage attack on feminine behavior, please do not censure me or speak ill of my writing, which is intended only to instruct."[193] He then referenced his literary predecessors: "worthy men who wrote the ancient books" who were "well acquainted

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his late brother, King Charles V. Because this honor is traditionally bestowed to males (masculine genre), as a royal historiographer, her status as a writer was further elevated.

[190] Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane, *La Querelle de La Rose: Letters and Documents* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 53. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469642840_baird.13

[191] Baird and Kane, *La Querelle de La Rose*, 56.

[192] At the close of the Querelle in 1402, not one to be intimidated, de Pizan sent copies of the letters to Isabeau, the Queen of France. Not only did sending the letters directly to the Queen share de Pizan's disdain for *The Rose*, but to any supporter of this misogynistic work, Christine, in an audacious and bold move, wielded her privileged status as a lady in waiting/noble member of the queen's court. See de Pizan and Hult, *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*.

[193] de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, 235.

with feminine behavior," which concurs with his similar views.[194] Rejecting *The Rose* and his literary predecessors, in the next chapter, I explain how, in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, de Pizan argued that women are virtuous, intelligent, and capable, and also how de Pizan, rejecting "The Rose" and its literary predecessors, argues in *The Book of the City of Ladies* that women are virtuous, intelligent, and capable. The *City of Ladies* is a rebuttal, a long form work to voice her dissent of a major narrative thread of the patriarchal script: women deemed as other and deserving of malignment.

The Dante Medusa

In the late Middle Ages, Dante Alighieri, the Italian poet, wrote *The Divine Comedy* (1308–21). Regarded as one of the most prominent theological writers whose most noteworthy work became a definitive, descriptive, and visual reference of Hell, the Medusa character, by name, was an occupant of the most hideous places in the Christian imagination. De Pizan did not reference Dante or *The Inferno* in *The City of Ladies*, but she was familiar with his work.[195]

The Dante Medusa is an amalgamation of ancient and Christian depictions. Dante drew from the authorial voice of Homer's *Odyssey*, instilling fear in Odysseus as he journeys to return home from Troy. When Odysseus reaches the gates of Hades, the Greek hero is fearful of the Gorgon, whose head lingers upon the entrance. For Dante, a

[194] de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, 278.

[195] In de Pizan's 1402 work, "Livre du chemin de long estude" (The Book of the Path of Long Learning), the character Christine, who voyages across the world and meets a heavenly tribunal of ladies, was influenced by Dante. See the Introduction of *Othea's Letter to Hector*, edited and translated by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Earl Jeffrey Richards (Toronto, Ontario: Iter Press, 2017), 4.

medieval poet "steeped in the Augustinian tradition,[196]" his Medusa is depicted as a mortal woman with potent power through a Christian lens. However, that power can be averted through men's will and actions of protecting themselves. The idea that Medusa, a monstrous woman, has ultimate control over any man depicts their helplessness in the face of women's fury. The implication is that Medusa is an interpretive and moral threat.[197]

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, specifically in the "Inferno" (the first part of the trilogy), we find Medusa in Hell, symbolizing her damnation. Medusa is a fearsome creature guarding the entrance to the seventh circle of Hell, where the sinful reside. In Canto IX of the Inferno, Dante journeys through Hell with Virgil, the Roman poet, as his guide and protector and is confronted by the Furies, threatening the men that Medusa is at the gates of Dis, the city of lower Hell.[198] The Furies symbolize *malizia (*malice*)*—for the whole class of sins within the City of Dis—or state of impenitence, and Medusa the Gorgon of despair, or a loss of the light of truth, that is, the knowledge of God's infinite mercy and the possibility of forgiveness and ultimate salvation.[199] 'Let Medusa come, and we'll turn him to stone,' They cried, looking down."[200]

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[196] John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 130.

[197] Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, 121.

[198] Referenced in Hesiod's Theogony, the Furies are wrathful female creatures that seek vengeance.

[199] Margaret Nossel Mansfield, "Dante and the Gorgon Within," *Italica* 47, no. 2 (1970): 148–49, https://doi.org/10.2307/478331

[200] Dante Alighieri, Robert Hollander, and Jean Hollander, *Inferno* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 169.

The female mythological figures are cast as sinners in Dante's Hell. Medusa, explicitly connected with this barrier between lesser and more grievous sins, represents such a danger to Dante that, even with Virgil as his guide through Hell, his journey could not survive the direct sight of the Gorgon.[201] The threat that Medusa represents is so potent that unless Dante's eyes are shielded from her by Virgil, his sight of her will enable the Furies to paralyze his further movement toward grace.[202] "Turn your back and keep your eyes shut, For if the Gorgon head appears and should you see it, All chances for your return above is lost."[203] Here, Virgil covers Dante's eyes to prevent him from catching sight of the petrifying/deadly Medusa, akin to Athena providing Perseus her shield to protect the hero from death. "While my master spoke, he turned me around and, placing no trust in my own hands, covered my face with his hands also."[204] Virgil protects Dante by shielding his eyes from Medusa, "a diabolic threat"[205] because Medusa symbolizes "the sin of despair."[206]

Virgil's version does not allude to the pagan goddess' aegis; Virgil's emphasis is on completely shielding one's eyes with their own hands, rather than risk the deflection of the potent mirrored gaze. There is no reliance on a protective object; man's physicality is protection from the extreme power of Medusa; the sinful female is avoided. For John

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[201] Mansfield, "Dante and the Gorgon Within," 144.

[202] Mansfield, "Dante and the Gorgon Within," 145.

[203] Alighieri, Hollander, and Hollander, *Inferno,* 171.

[204] Alighieri, Hollander, and Hollander, *Inferno,* 171.

[205] Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion,* 125.

[206] Mansfield, "Dante and the Gorgon Within," 151.

Freccero, author of *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, "The threat of the Medusa lends a certain moral force to the command to see beneath the strange verses, just as the address to the reader lends to the Medusa a certain hermeneutic resonance."[207] I agree with Freccero that Dante chose Medusa because she "represents horror to the male imagination."[208] Medusa is also the epitome of immorality, commanding a heightened curiosity in understanding the "strange verses." The Dante Medusa is sin personified, a character who provides a message of caution. For Virgil, he protects Dante from being turned to stone; for the reader, Medusa is a figurative warning, a cautionary figure of the dire consequences of sin and damnation.

The Ovide Moralisé Medusa

For medieval theologians and intellectuals, Ovid was ancient Rome's authoritative and influential voice. A prime example is the *Ovide Moralisé* (dated between 1315–1325), written anonymously in fourteenth-century France. With over 2,000 pages of 72,000 lines of verse, this late-Middle-Ages work is the French translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* written for a Christian audience, hence the title, *Moralized Ovid*. With the addition of 60,000 lines, a significant amount of content was added, including interpretations of ancient myths, characters, and content based on scripture. The *Ovide Moralisé* is a biblical rendering of the Roman poet's work. Theorized to be the work of a single poet, a Franciscan friar, the interpreted text represents a Franciscan mode of Augustinian confidence that Christians can grow in wisdom through engaging not only the book of scripture and book of the Aristotelian cosmos but also the imaginative and

[207] Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion,* 121.

[208] Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion,* 125.

philosophical literature of pagan antiquity.[209] The *Ovide Moralisé's* goal is to interpret the *Metamorphoses* in light of Christian doctrine and, more specifically, to reveal the hidden meaning beneath the surface of Ovid's stories.[210] With verses steeped in Christian patriarchal ideology, the translated stories malign women as manipulative and deceitful. Medieval Europeans, building on the classical and biblical basis created by their predecessors, adapted it to their world, expanding the classical framework accordingly.[211]

Like the allegorization in the *Romance of the Rose*, allegory is prominent in the *Ovide Moralisé* with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* interpreted through a Christian lens layered with moral lessons. "Books of vices and virtues were a popular form of literature that cataloged what ideal Christians strove to avoid and to emulate."[212] It is a significant written work that indicates how Ovid influenced the perceptions of male writers, in this case, relying on Ovidian prose to purport morality. In yet another continuation in the ever-expanding patriarchal script, the purpose of the *Ovide Moralisé* is to use the classical, ancient philosophic narrative that women are naturally evil as confirmation that females were capable and most certainly the perpetrators of hideous sin. This theological commentary provides a historical continuum and solidifies a foundational Christian

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[209] David Lyle Jeffrey, Daniel H. Williams, and Phillip J. Donnelly, *Transformations in Biblical Literary Traditions: Incarnation, Narrative, and Ethics: Essays in Honor of David Lyle Jeffrey* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 6, https://archive.org/details/transformationsi0000unse_h3p9/page/62/mode/2up

[210] K. Sarah-Jane Murray and Tyler F. Walton, "Books and Their Readers: Visual Storytelling in the Copenhagen Ovide Moralisé," in *Transformations in Biblical Literary Traditions: Incarnation, Narrative, and Ethics—Essays in Honor of David Lyle Jeffrey* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 63, https://archive.org/details/transformationsi0000unse_h3p9/page/60/mode/2up?q=Ovide

[211] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 37.

[212] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 84.

societal norm of patriarchy and misogyny.[213] To date, twenty extant manuscripts have survived.[214]

Classical Greco-Roman mythology is often a cultural touchstone and metaphorical reference used to highlight and clarify understanding to support a writer's narrative. The ancient Roman Ovidian Medusa myth is a powerful example, representing the pure, beautiful female Medusa as an irresistible sexual temptress causing her rape by Poseidon in Athena's temple.[215] Her defilement was her fault, deserving of punishment from the powerful goddess, turning her into a hideous beast. What we see in the *Ovide Moralisé* Medusa depiction alludes to female sexual purity, hence the Ovidian depiction, but Medusa warrants consequence as a representative of moral vice. The subtext is as follows: Be wary—beautiful women pose a danger as sinful beings. Medusa is not depicted as a snake-haired gorgon but as a beautiful woman who is cunning and lustful. She ensnares men with her beauty; her lustful and sinful behavior is immoral, and her punishment is warranted. Anathema to biblical scripture, the unholy and unchaste woman must be slain. Thus, the Ovidian Medusa is punished for the sinful characteristics of women. Perseus represents might; Medusa is vice. For Leeming, "The association of Medusa with sexuality develops from the views of medieval Christian thinkers on sex

[213] The *Ovide Moralisé* influenced and shaped the reception of Ovidian myth by such notable literary figures as Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Machaut, Gower, and even Shakespeare. See: "Funded Projects Query Form," National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed February 4, 2024, https://apps.neh.gov/publicquery/AwardDetail.aspx?gn=RQ-50569-11

[214] Murray and Walton, "Books and Their Readers," 62.

[215] According to Ovid, Medusa's beauty attracted the powerful Poseidon who raped her in Athena's temple. Blamed by Athena for the indiscretion (blame-the-rape-victim ethos) results in Medusa being transformed into a monstrous beast and eventually hunted down and killed by Perseus.

and their need to allegorize pagan texts."[216] Let us be reminded of Saint Augustine, his linkage of sexuality and original sin; a major focus in the *City of God* is that of female immorality linked to sexual expression.

In the *Ovide Moralisé* Medusa, we see a gendered antagonist: woman *as Medusa.* Regarding a moral facade, in the *Ovide Moralisé*, Medusa is a wanton woman: "putain ... sage et cavilleuse, /Decevable et malicieuse," translated to "whore... wise and callous, /Deceivable and mischievous."[217] The allegorical reading interprets Medusa as "charnel delice" and "carnal delight" and Perseus as Christlike.[218] Who better to come to the rescue to maintain societal order than Perseus? Described as "de grant savoir"…" of great knowledge"[219] Perseus, Medusa's slayer, is the savior who righteously doles out punishment, who conquers Medusa to symbolize being the epitome of wisdom, virtue, and reason.[220] The image is a miniature from an *Ovide Moralisé* manuscript. In the foreground, the illustration depicts a mountain landscape with Medusa, not as the monstrous beast of ancient lore, but as a beautiful maiden. Dressed in medieval battle garb, Perseus has one hand tightly gripping Medusa by her long blond hair as she lays sleeping. Although the narrative theme of violence toward women continues, it would not shock readers. Medieval historian Hannah Skoda informed us, "Domestic violence was such a pervasive element in medieval society that it provided a common trope for

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[216] Leeming, *Medusa*, 63.

[217] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 874.

[218] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 874 and Leeming, *Medusa,* 34.

[219] Huot, "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose," 874.

[220] Frelick, "Woman as Other," 287.

contemporary popular literature."[221] In the background is Pegasus, Medusa's son, according to Hesiodic myth. The narration has shifted from Hesiod; rather than being born from Medusa's head upon her decapitation, he looks on passively as his mother is about to be killed.

Figure 1. Perseus Kills Medusa from *Ovide Moralisé*. This miniature image is from a 1385 manuscript attributed to Chrétien Legouais [222].

In the text and miniature image of this Christian allegory, Medusa's beauty, presented as a trap for unsuspecting male victims, warrants discipline. Frelick asserts that the work presents Medusa as lascivious, malicious, and deceptive with irresistible charms.[223] Perseus and Medusa represent the chasm between Christian virtue and vice. The Christ-like Perseus who conquers the fiend is considered the epitome of wisdom,

[221] Hannah Skoda, "Domestic Violence in Paris and Artois," in *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270-1330*, 193–231 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 197.

[222] "Perseo e Medusa," ICONOS, Sapienza University of Rome, July 4, 2013, http://www.iconos.it/le-metamorfosi-di-ovidio/libro-iv/perseo-e-medusa/immagini/13-perseo-e-medusa/

[223] Frelick, "Woman as Other," 287

virtue, and reason.[224] Perseus can be prideful, not Medusa. As a devout Christian and humanist intellectual, the allegorization and moralization of Ovid through a Christian lens would have greatly interested de Pizan. Because the intended audience for this massive work was a Christian one and given her interest and the female-related subject matter covered in the *Ovide Moralisé*, it would most likely been an influential reading reference for her. Given that the manuscripts of this work were commissioned and owned by public patrons and widely available in French court circles,[225] de Pizan would have likely read the interpretation given its circulation. Emerita professor of late Medieval French literature Rosalind Brown-Grant theorized that Christine reworked the literal or narrative level of her source material, taken principally from the *Ovide Moralisé*, to cast a favorable light on female figures whom earlier male mythographers had vilified.[226] Also, in *The City*, de Pizan generalized male authors, which may include the *Ovide Moralisé*. Lady Reason informs Christine, "…the truth is that regardless of what philosophers and other authors say about women's capriciousness, you will never find a woman as thoroughly perverse as many men."[227]

The Boccaccio Medusa

The Italian poet and humanist Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) wrote *De Mulieribus Claris (Concerning Famous Women)* (1361–62), a biographical catalog

[224] Frelick, "Woman as Other," 287.

[225] Murray and Walton, "Books and Their Readers," 60, 63.

[226] Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 54.

[227] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 153.

including 106 short biographies of notable women, historical and mythological. In this work, Boccaccio wrote an "unfavorable presentation of certain women" and "recycle[d] the commonplaces of misogynous literature."[228] A significant theme for Boccaccio is that he maligned women's nature with "rakish cynicism."[229] Boccaccio opined about women through a Christian lens, a moralizing directive based on gendered ideals and biological determinism. With a nod to Aristotelian theory, Rosalind informs us of Boccaccio's medieval penchant for essentializing male and female nature on pseudo and etymological grounds. In the first few pages, readers quickly understand his purpose: to perpetuate the patriarchal script of male hegemony. For Boccaccio, it is women who are "endowed with tenderness, frail bodies, and sluggish minds by Nature," and some, albeit few, have a "manly spirit."[230] He "reinforces a male value system" by generally "reproaching women."[231] Paradoxically, he included famous women who should "be praised for overcoming their weakness of mind and body."[232] However, although he was unsettled by the lack of virtue in many men, he still "castigated the female sex for its failure to be more like men.[233]"

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[228] Roberta Krueger, "Towards Feminism: Christine De Pizan, Female Advocacy, and Women's Textual Communities in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2013), 590–606, 595, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199582174.013.031

[229] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 166.

[230] Judith Lillian Kellogg, "Christine de Pizan and Boccaccio: Rewriting Classical Mythic Tradition," in *Comparative Literature East and West: Traditions and Trends*, eds. Cornelia N. Moore and Raymond A. Moody (University of Hawaii and East-West Center, 1989), 124–31, 125.

[231] Kellogg, "Christine de Pizan and Boccaccio," 125.

[232] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 138.

[233] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 139.

In *De Claris Mulieribus*, there is a biography of Medusa as a mortal queen overpowered by Perseus but also in a "dalliance" with Neptune (Poseidon). In chapter XX, titled, "Medusa, Daughter of Phorcys," Boccaccio makes no mention of Medusa's matrilineal heritage: the daughter of Cato and the granddaughter of the mighty Gaia.[234] In his depiction of Medusa, she is a mortal of great beauty, wealth, and intelligence—red flags in medieval patriarchal society. Boccaccio wrote of Medusa:

> Medusa was the daughter and heir of Phorcys, a very wealthy ruler whose rich kingdom was in the Atlantic Ocean. Some believe that it consisted of the islands of the Hesperides. If we can believe the ancients, Medusa was of such marvelous beauty that she not only surpassed all others but, like something wondrous and supernatural, attracted very many men to see her. Her hair was golden and abundant, her face was of special beauty, and her body properly tall and straight. Among other things, her eyes had such great and pleasant force that if she looked kindly at someone, he remained almost motionless and beside himself. Through this she not only preserved her wealth with marvelous shrewdness but greatly augmented it, so that those who knew her believed that she surpassed all the western kings in wealth. And so because of her great beauty, as well as her riches and sagacity, she acquired great renown even among the most remote nations.[235]

Like the ancient poets, Medusa has golden hair and is of great beauty. Still, Boccaccio's focus was on Medusa's wealth based on her business acumen in the kingdom, which is more successful than any regional king. As a wealthy and powerful woman, Medusa does not adhere to the patriarchal script: Women should not hold such power in society. In this passage, we see a common theme in medieval literature: the moral corruption of women. Boccaccio layered a rich description of Medusa's beauty and mesmerizing allure,

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[234] For more on the demise and lack of recognition of female deities, such as Medusa's mother and grandmother, read Mara Lynn Keller, "Gimbutas's Theory of Early European Origins and the Contemporary Transformation of Western Civilization," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12, no. 2 (1996): 73–90, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002288. Gaia is a powerful earth goddess of Greek myth.

[235] Giovanni Boccaccio and Guido A. Guarino, "Introduction," in *On Famous Women* (Revised, Italica Press, 2011), 43, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tqxvtn.25.

drawing from both the classical notion of female evil and the Christian sinful nature of women—controlling and dominating men, even kings. "Boccaccio introduces a slightly different set of criteria since not all women in his text have been chosen for their glorious deeds—some of them were included because of their extraordinary character, or the spectacular nature of their rise, and fall at the hands of fortune."[236] Vast wealth corrupts Medusa, but not so for Perseus. The Boccaccio Medusa represents avarice, anathema to a humanist's worldview, and is deserving of domination from Perseus. In Boccaccio's version, Perseus does not behead Medusa but conquers the king's daughter:

> Her fame reached Greece, where Perseus, the most excellent among the young men of Achaea, heard these reports and became desirous of seeing that beautiful woman and taking her treasure. Thus, boarding a ship whose emblem was the horse Pegasus, he arrived in the West with wonderful speed. In that region he used his skill and his arms to kidnap the queen and returned home laden with gold and booty.[237]

Boccaccio takes a departure from the ancient myth, presenting a hegemonic perspective. Here, Perseus is not just a hero on a quest, but a symbol of morality enforcement. The act of kidnapping Medusa is warranted in the context of gendered morality, suggesting a cultural norm where such conquests are seen as part of the natural socio-economic order, with wealth being a privilege not extended to women.

According to Boccaccio:

> These deeds inspired the stories of the poets where we read that the Gorgon Medusa often changed into stone men who gazed upon her and that her hair had been changed into serpents because of Minerva's anger since she had desecrated her temple by sleeping in it with Neptune, and that she then gave birth to Pegasus, and that Perseus, mounted on that winged horse, flew to her kingdom and

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[236] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 139.

[237] Boccaccio, Giovanni, and Guido A. Guarino, *On Famous Women*, 43.

conquered it by using the shield of Pallas.[238]

Referring to the mythological figures by the Roman names indicates Boccaccio's reference to Ovid, but, curiously, he did not refer to Medusa's rape. Boccaccio framed Medusa's perceived dalliance with Neptune (Poseidon in Greek myth) as consensual, desecrating Minerva's (Athena) temple by illicit sex with the God. Akin to the ancient mythographers, Boccaccio's Medusa continues to inform us of the normalization of gendered violence, not sexual, as in the ancient texts, but physical, as a means for Perseus to enhance his personal wealth as a male.

> To possess gold is an unhappy thing. If it is kept hidden it does not give any comfort to the owner, and if it is shown it gives rise to the attacks of many who covet it. Even if violent hands should be tied, the troublesome worries of the owner will not cease, so that, peace of mind gone, he loses sleep, falls prey to fear, lacks faith, becomes suspicious, and in short, all the actions of wretched life are hindered. And if his wealth should happen to be lost, as a poor man he is tormented by anxiety while the miser gloats, the gentleman laughs at him, the envious poor are cheered, and the whole populace chants the story of his grief.[239]

With Perseus's successful acquisition of Medusa's wealth, Boccaccio implied that her wealth brought unhappiness, but the same does not apply to Perseus: the rightful notion of conquering such women. Because women are inherently sinful and evil, succeeding and taking their wealth and power is a triumph.

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[238] Boccaccio, Giovanni, and Guido A. Guarino, *On Famous Women*, 43.

[239] Boccaccio, Giovanni, and Guido A. Guarino. *On Famous Women*, 43-44.

Figure 2. Wikimedia Commons Image: Woodcut illustration from Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris,* of Medusa and Neptune embracing beside a winged boar, Chrysaor, with Perseus mounted upon Pegasus.[240]

One would think a title such as *Concerning Famous Woman* would be a reverent nod, but as professor and medievalist Rosalind Brown Grant informs us, "Boccaccio castrates women, both of the past and the present."[241] Here, we have a man who wrote a book about women, whereas de Pizan wrote a book about women by a woman. Oddly, Boccaccio wrote the "first history of women," calling on the "power of intellect of ancient women" to acknowledge the value of women.[242] This work is twisted rhetoric: He praises and belittles, often perpetuating a hegemonic ideal. Boccaccio never defined *De Claris Mulieribus* as a rehabilitation of women nor defended them against the

[240] "File:Woodcut illustration of Medusa and Neptune embracing beside a winged horse (either Pegasus or Chrysaor), with Perseus mounted upon Pegasus (following later developments of the Perseus legend) in the background - Penn Provenance Project.jpg," Wikimedia Commons, a free-media depository, accessed August 10, 2023, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Woodcut_illustration_of_Medusa_and_Neptune_embracing_beside_a_winged_horse_(either_Pegasus_or_Chrysaor),_with_Perseus_mounted_upon_Pegasus_(following_later_developments_of_the_Perseus_legend)_in_the_background_-_Penn_Provenance_Project.jpg&oldid=769285374

[241] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 158.

[242] Boccaccio, Giovanni, and Guido A. Guarino, *On Famous Women*, xxx.

misogynistic tradition (famous, not virtuous).[243] As we see in the next chapter of this dissertation, "Christine speaks, not as an external authorial voice by which to admonish her contemporaries, as Boccaccio does, but rather as a model working from within her text for her female readers, who must be brought back from the brink of theological error"[244] Grant informs us that Boccaccio recommended that his female readers should follow his examples, which is highly problematic by his equation of virtue with manliness; Christine acts as a model for her female readers by showing how to emulate the virtue of women whose stories are recounted in *The City of Ladies*.[245] Boccaccio used biographical examples of women (de Pizan did this in *The City*), but Boccaccio's narrative theme is pessimistic, with a the-world-is-on-fire ethos (the ills of vice figures prominently). De Pizan was more optimistic, arguing that "…history has been marked by progress and that women have played a key role in the development of civilization."[246]

The Matheolus Medusa via Jean Le Fèvre

Around 1295, Matthew of Boulogne, also referred to as Matheolus, a disgruntled French cleric and poet, wrote *Liber Lamentationum Matheoluli, The Book of Lamentations of Matheolus.* Between 1371–72, the Latin poem was translated into French by writer Jean Le Fèvre, the likely version Christine referred to on the opening

[243] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Jean Le Fèvre's Livre de Leesce," 709.

[244] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 154.

[245] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 153.

[246] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 155.

page of *The City*.[247] On the first page, she singled out Matheolus: "The book's content did not seem very appealing unless you enjoy invective, and it seems of no use whatsoever in terms of ethical and moral edification."[248] De Pizan continued, "…the text prompted in me an extraordinary thought: why is it that so many men—clerics as well as others—have always been so ready to say and write such abominable and hateful things about women and their nature?"[249] Written in first person as an autobiographical tirade against women and wives, at nearly 10,000 lines, Matheolus wrote a treatise of life's observations in four books. Although not all sections lament women, he also opined the cosmos and clerical politics; his ire at women is the primary focus. "Indeed, the devil was told concerning women that God, in whom all good abounds, would have made the world a peaceful place if he had removed the cursed tones of women."[250]

In yet another form of clerical misogyny, Matheolus' *Lamentations* is a compendium of rants against women and marriage using sexist tropes, reducing them to offensive stereotypes. In this work, women are described as shrewd, ugly, shrill, quarrelsome, nagging, cruel, madness, pitiless, wicked, relying on sophism, deceptive, manipulative, hussy, scornful, evil, wily, perverse, treacherous, second-class citizens, guilty, a gossip, slanderer, foolish, and a cruel viper. "Dear reader, make sure that you rid yourself of women…condemn them…women are always quarrelsome, a nag, cruel, and

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[247] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 177, 421. Blamires and Pratt both agree that it is le Ferve's Lamentations Christine refers to.

[248] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 21.

[249] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 21.

[250] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 184.

shrewish."[251] For Matheolus, "…if the truth could only be told, for there's nothing worse than a woman."[252] The Matheolus narrative is an all-encompassing vivid depiction of female malevolence. In this work, we see the continuation of male writers mining prior misogynistic texts. The classical poets and philosophers depicted women as flawed, inferior, and disobedient.

As we know, Aristotelian philosophy (logic) is a root source of androcentric insight for the medieval era. In essence, Aristotle is a mythmaker about women as biologically and intellectually inferior to men. In his sexist criticism of women, he provides the foundational bias against women: Being female is a disadvantage. In Matheolus' early medieval writing, he defined female nature as one of the roots of all evil and espoused the Aristotelian view about gender: Women are defective males. In a section of *Lamentations,* "Monstrous Woman," espousing the "evils of the female sex," Matheolus informed his readers, "Nature shows and teaches us that every woman is a real monster, and she is quite happy to put up with her own faults."[253] Matheolus praised Aristotle and lamented the treatment the ancient philosopher received from women. "My exposition is clearly valid, for women has, and there is ample evidence of this, deceived all the greatest men in the world…Who has ever heard of greater men than Solomon or Aristotle? …these men were both outmaneuvered by women, deceived, vanquished, and tamed."[254] By framing women as "monstrous hermaphrodite[s]" who "[bear] the mark of

[251] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 182.

[252] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 179.

[253] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 195.

[254] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 194.

a monster," Mathieu was critical that "their sex" is virtuous or deserving of respect and praise: "indeed they are predisposed to do the very opposite."[255] With direct references to Ovid, Matheolus' depictions of women in *Lamentations* are "vitriolic excesses of blatant misogynistic excursuses."[256] Le Fevre's *Lamentations* also invokes the *Roman de la Rose* as its main intertext, thereby intensifying the antifeminism of Matthew's work.[257] Similar to Hesiod, who used derogatory language when lamenting about marriage, Matheolus followed the same cue: Encouraging men to avoid marriage because of the vileness of women, he and Jean de Meun were "harnessing misogyny to the teaching of misogamy."[258]

Regarding religiosity, it is no surprise that in another chapter in his ongoing rant, entitled "Termination of the Female Sex," Matheolus, in conversation with his "omnipotent" and "glorious" God, was adamant that all women are beyond godly salvation given women's ancestral ties to Eve ("the cause of our fall").[259] He proclaimed that on judgment day, while Adam is resurrected, "the whole female sex, which is full of venom, will revert to nothingness and thus disappear."[260] Ridiculing women, Matheolus vilified an entire gender as a dreadful creation by God. Aside from generalizing all

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[255] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 195–196.

[256] Monica Green, "Traittie Tout de Menconges: The Secres Des Dames Troutoula," essay, in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 152.

[257] Karen Pratt, "Translating Misogamy: The Authority of the Intertext in the Lamentationes Matheoluli and its Middle French Translation Jean Lefevre," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* XXXV, no. 4 (October 1999): 421, https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/XXXV.4.421

[258] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, 144.

[259] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 197.

[260] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 197.

women as lazy, harmful, stupid, irrational, untrustworthy, and foolish, "…she [woman] is the mother of all calamities; all evil and all madness stem from her. Her sting is more venomous than a snake's; there isn't anyone who has anything to do with her who doesn't live to regret it."[261] This gendered perception highlights how Medusa is depicted. Used by Matheolus in Book I to signify the dread of marriage, lamenting his status as a married man, he would rather have looked at the deadly Medusa than meeting his wife. This depiction highlights how Medusa was an easy reference to underscore female harm in this era.

Matheolus was a highly regarded cleric who married a beautiful widow, Perrette. Because Canon Law forbade clergy to marry, his title was stripped. Disappointed that before meeting his wife, he did not encounter Medusa, who could have turned him to stone; instead, he encounters his wife, as if entrapped by the Medusa-like gaze of a deceptive woman, whom he refers to as a dragon:

> Recite what I have said before to the associates to whom I am sending this. Let them not be forgetful, that they bear the pains of a bigamist.
> I fell into the snares with a groan of destruction, When I first saw the dragon's throat, why Medusa herself was not long before me and though to be turned into stone? Alas, for me! if I had foreseen the monster mentioned desposing our race purely burdened by it,
> I would not perceive myself, because I myself lacked senses.
> But let this pain be heavy, which I will leave only by death;
> This pale color shows me well, I say.[262]

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[261] Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 195.

[262] Jehan le Fèvre, "Les Lamentations de Matheolus et Le Livre de Leesce de Jehan Le Fèvre, de Resson (Poèmes Français Du Xive Siècle). Édition Critique, Accompagnée de l'original Latin Des Lamentations, d'après l'unique Manuscrit d'utrecht, d'une Introduction et de Deux Glossaires, Par A.-G. Van Hamel : Jehan Le Fèvre, De Resson, 14th c. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming," Internet Archive, December 28, 2014, https://archive.org/details/LesLamentationsDeMatheolus1/page/n49/mode/2up.

Although the ancient mythographers villainized Medusa for her unladylike behavior, in the medieval era, this misogynistic male writer villainized his wife as worse than Medusa. His use of the Medusa myth as only second to the horror of being married to his wife, is, again, an example of how sustaining Medusa was used as a reference from early ancient times through the Middle Ages as an easily understandable symbol of female inferiority and wickedness, especially for wives. Blumenfeld-Kosinski refers to *Lamentations* as "one of the most infamous anti-women and anti-marriage treatises."[263]

Reading Matheolus, it is easy to understand de Pizan's exposure to this narrative would incense and bewilder her primarily because she viewed marriage as sacred and sacrosanct. Matheolus' writing was a rationale depicting women as one of the most reprehensible, earthy creatures whose power to destroy was at the heart of his failure as a clergyman. This female expression of vileness to wholly dominate and manipulate men was the full context of female nature. The sexual, carnal allure and even the Medusa gaze, the first being real-world and the second metaphor, are both potent examples of how females exercise their power. It is Matheolus's *Lamentations*, the "notorious misogynistic diatribe that was at once the impetus and a major source for Christine's *Cité des dames*."[264] Matheolus maligned women as he protested marriage, so Christine protested Matheolus. In *The City*, de Pizan took particular umbrage with Matheolus. Christine amounted his work as "pure heresy"[265] and "lewd and dishonest."[266] In a

[263] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Jean Le Fèvre's Livre de Leesce," 706.

[264] Green, "Traittie Tout de Menconges," 154.

[265] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies,* 22.

[266] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies,* 33.

section of Lady Rectitude in conversation with Christine about the slanderous things men wrote about married life and the "miserable failings of women," Christine declared, "My lady, it certainly seems to be a great honor to the female sex to hear the stories of so many outstanding ladies. Let them go back to sleep and keep quiet, Matheolus and all the other malicious slanderers who have told so many lies about women."[267]

A narrative shift with a sexist firmament emerged during the late Middle Ages. Mining and repurposing earlier sources, these European medieval written works act as an enforcement mechanism to propagate and maintain patriarchal norms and expectations—the androcentric discourse upholding the patriarchy. Medusa was no longer a singular character but used as a narrative tool for male writers to depict women *as Medusa* or worse than the mythological beast for their disobedience to the patriarchal script. As if all women were somehow ancestrally connected to the ancient mythological figure, these writings are instructive about how Medusa was interpreted and melded with cultural ideals about women. The medieval examples and ancient predecessors revealed how patriarchal Medusan images pop up in literature at times when perceived female disobedience to the patriarchal script is at the fore. The following chart depicts the historic writers, classical and medieval, who have referenced Medusa within the context of their cultural, philosophic and theological hegemony representing the disdain for Medusa as analogous to the societal disdain for women. Any woman reading the misogynistic Medusa tropes would indeed feel a sense of disappointment, insult, frustration, disheartenment, and indignation. For de Pisan, reading a doctrinaire of

[267] de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 119–120.

antifemale sentiment, the tropes as signifiers of idealized male superiority and female inferiority, a response was warranted.

Author	Year/Era	Ancient and Medieval Misogynistic Medusa Tropes
Homeric Medusa	750 BCE	Gorgon of protection, power appropriated for aegis (battle shield) such as Athena's.
Hesiodic Medusa	700 BCE	Medusa is immoral for violating expected chastity norms of virginity. Promiscuous sex with Poseidon. Beheaded by Perseus. Medusa, a symbol of vice.
Apollodorus Medusa	2nd Century BCE	Medusa's vain beauty is deserving of wrath from Athena (FEP), male superiority and female acquiescence with Perseus killing Medusa, assisted by Athena.
Ovidian Medusa	8 CE	Medusa's beauty too alluring. Raped by (Neptune) Poseidon and victim blamed. Perseus the hero is assisted by Minerva (Athena). First to depict Medusa as snake haired.
Saint Augustine's Medusa	426 CE	Female gorgon of pagan religion is dangerous. Snake-like visage. Eve (females) responsible for original sin, women as suspect and inferior.
Marbod of Rennes Medusa	Late 11th century	Woman as gorgon – treacherous allure of beautiful women is dangerous/morally threatening. Medusa (woman), a symbol of vice.
The Rose (De Meun) Medusa	1269-78	Medusa's snaky head on the Tower of Jealousy symbolizing destruction, envy, and vice; female power to petrify, usurping male dominion in romantic conquests.
Dante Medusa	(1308–21)	Medusa in hell, symbolizes horror to the male imagination.
Ovide Moralisé Medusa	(1315-1325)	Beautiful women are sinful, a trap for men. Women *as* Medusa, symbolic of vice.
Boccaccio Medusa	(1361–62)	Medusa as a mortal, beautiful and wealthy, yet too rich and powerful. Perseus conquest needed to maintain male order. Women *as* Medusa, symbolic of vice.
Matheolus' Medusa per Jean le Fèvre	(1371–72)	To signify the dread of marriage, looking at the deadly Medusa is more fortuitous than meeting a wife. Beautiful women are snakelike: evil and venomous.

Given that the narrative framework of the ancient and medieval patriarchal Medusan outputs poses Medusa as an allegorized personification of disobedience, unwieldy power, vice, and deceit threatening the male order, de Pizan took on the authorial responsibility of setting the historical record straight. De Pizan wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies* to defend women against misogynistic rhetoric. Her biography includes Medusa as a valued citizen, the first feminist reclamation of the patriarchal Medusa myth, to be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE
ANALYSIS OF THE CITY OF LADIES: MEDUSA AS CITIZEN

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us of the danger of a single story: a narrative that presents only one perspective, repeating generalizations and stereotypes. A single story of patriarchy that has manifested not only in the ancient Medusa myth but also in medieval outputs is framing women as the *other*, a characterization (typically) by men to malign based on gender. Optimistically, Adichie informs us, "Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."[268] Upon reading the scores of stories and tales about maligned women, de Pizan, an intellectual woman of letters, a medieval author, and early historiographer, advocated for women to be viewed as equally intelligent, virtuous, and capable as men. Frustrated with the literary barrage of male insults, de Pizan wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1405 to defend women from defamation and infuse the male-centric literary sphere with a positive depiction of women. Kellogg refers to *The City of Ladies* as a "feminist rewriting of human history" with de Pizan providing an "authoritative discursive voice for herself and women in her society."[269] Written over 600 years ago, de Pizan's crucial work functions to contest, counter, and refute the misogynistic writings and groupthink of male writers and their adherents regarding women.[270] The ancient poets immortalized Medusa as an

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[268] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story," filmed July 2009 at TedGlobal, video, 17:24, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

[269] Judith L. Kellogg, "Transforming Ovid: The Metamorphosis of Female Authority," essay, in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, first (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 181–94., 191-92.

[270] Although there are a few modern English translations of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, I chose to use the Bourgault and Kingston text since their translation is based on a manuscript that was commissioned by Queen Isabeau. Prepared under de Pizan's supervision, it was presented to the Queen in

archetypical malevolent woman, with this trope evolving into the medieval era. De Pizan was defiant to the misogynistic pillar of prose by situating Medusa in *The City of Ladies,* the first feminist reclaiming of the mythological character from the patriarchal script. Christine de Pizan was a writer during a time that "the misogynist tradition was still so influential."[271]

A literary pioneer who directly engaged with the oppressive power structure/pillar of misogyny, in writing *The City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan countered the patriarchal Medusa discourse with what I have termed a Feminist Medusan Output: a reimagining of Medusa that rejects and deconstructs the misogynistic standard perpetuated via the patriarchal script through a feminist lens. Leeming refers to de Pizan's Medusa as the "earliest indication of a feminist view."[272] As Sophie Bourgault and Rebecca Kingston, the editors of *Christine de Pizan*: *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings* attest, "Far from shunning classical and theological texts in light of their misogynistic failings, Christine proposes to return to them—reinterpreting particular passages in light of the writers' moral deficiencies and underscoring overlooked ones."[273] Christine de Pizan's *The City of Ladies* is a rare example of female agency in the canon of Western literature. Associate Professor of Humanities, Mirabella Bella declares that de Pizan had "the audacity to seize the power of language, a privilege they believe is rightfully

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1414. Harley 4431, as the manuscript is referenced, can be viewed online, text and images via the Edinburgh University Library http://www.pizan.lib.ed.ac.uk/

[271] Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 129.

[272] Leeming, *Medusa*, 71.

[273] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, eds. Sophie Bourgault and Rebecca Kingston, trans. Ineke Hardy (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2018), xxii.

controlled by men."[274] This chapter explores why de Pizan wrote *The City of Ladies*, why she included Medusa as a valued citizen, and how she depicts the mythological figure through a feminist lens.

Christine de Pizan: A Brief Background

Christine de Pizan was fortunate to have been born into a noble family. Born in 1364 in Venice, Italy, in 1368, de Pizan's family moved to Paris, France. Her father, Thomas (Tommaso) was hired by King Charles V as his physician and the Valois court astrologer. De Pizan scholar Charity Cannon Willard explained that although at an early age Christine had shown an interest and aptitude for intellectual pursuits, the gendered expectation in the form of the conventional ideal for girls to be educated on domestic duties (e.g. spinning, housework) and rudimentary reading and writing, resulted.[275] In 1379, at the age of 15, she married fellow noble, Etienne de Castel, a court notary, and royal secretary. She became widowed 10 years later (her father died in 1387) with three children and her mother to take care of. It was not until after she was widowed that de Pizan became "self-educated" on the books that became "her most important sources."[276] As an adult, access to historical and religious manuscripts, including literature, would shape her worldview about gender. Aside from her intellectual curiosity, as a widow, de Pizan experienced the misogynistic pillar of economics and jurisprudence. According to Willard, de Pizan was not fully informed about Etienne's financial affairs, per, the

[274] M. Bella Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 12, https://doi.org/10.1177/135050689900600102.

[275] Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works* (New York, NY: Persea Books, 1990), 33. In France, girls' elementary education was not mandatory until the Ferry Laws of 1881.

[276] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 34.

custom of denying wives information about a husband's finances, resulting in a series of lawsuits to access her rightful funds as a widow.[277] Women of the medieval era could not be landowners, inherit wealth, or serve in positions of leadership in the church, cities, and university. What de Pizan could do was write. Foregoing remarriage, de Pizan bucked gender norms by becoming the breadwinner and supporting her family as a professional writer. It was after Etienne's death that de Pizan began to write courtly love poems that generated income with support by members of the French royal court and nobles who commissioned her work.[278] Tracy Adams, Professor of European Languages and Literature, refers to Christine de Pizan as "the first person in France, male or female, to have earned a living by her pen."[279] Becoming a professional writer, she proved the legitimacy of women's intellect. Aside from her intellect, de Pizan was opinionated and needed a literary outlet beyond the bounds of love poems. Over the span of 36 years, de Pizan wrote in a variety of genres; her literary oeuvre includes poetry, prose, political treatises, and a commissioned biography of King Charles V.[280]

What Influenced Christine de Pizan to Write *The Book of the City of Ladies*?

Scott underscores the point of feminist inquiry: the refusal to accommodate the

[277] Willard, *Christine de Pizan,* 39.

[278] Embroiled in lawsuits associated with Etienne's estate, de Pizan was able to stay financially sound by selling property inherited from her father. Willard proposed the possibility that de Pizan may have copied manuscripts for others for a fee, thereby furthering her own education. See Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 45.

[279] Tracy Adams, "Christine de Pizan," *French Studies* 71, no. 3 (July 2017): 388–400 https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knx129. This is also supported by Margaret Walters in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

[280] For an in-depth perspective of de Pizan's works, read Willard, *Christine de Pizan*.

status quo.[281] Recognizing the potency of the misogynistic pillar of prose, and angered at the antagonism directed at women, de Pizan countered it with *The City of Ladies*. She attacks the misogynist writers by turning them into the other, entering their male discourse and using it to refute the criticism of women.[282] For Groag Bell, de Pizan was "not merely a scholar, but a female scholar; not merely studious, but a studious woman."[283]

Feminism

A foundational criterion for feminism is a consciousness, an ever-present awareness about women's place and need for emancipation from misogyny in society. In the 15th century, de Pizan promoted a feminist ideology and expressed a modern female modernity. Akin to the feminist waves of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, she set forth on a crusade to defend women. Embedded in the misogynistic literary sphere of male writing are ancient and medieval Medusa depictions that ascribe a pejorative "other" and characterization of animus for women. In de Pizan we see an early feminist discourse. *The City of Ladies* is an indictment of misogyny, a refutation of patriarchy but also about female emancipation. Did de Pizan write *The City of Ladies* to fight for equality as modern feminists do? No, given the cultural context of separate gender spheres and religious doctrine, she was advocating for women to be viewed and treated with dignity and respect afforded to men, a moral equity, if you will. Brown-Grant agrees in that, "Christine seeks to convince misogynists of women's intellectual and moral potential for

[281] Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, xii

[282] Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning," 16.

[283] Groag Bell, "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430)," 183.

exercising virtue, rather than to propose the reform of society, so as to grant women equal access to all social parts."[284] De Pizan is not a feminist in modern terms, but feminist jurisprudence scholar Mary Anne C. Case, as does this researcher, considers her an "early female feminist."[285] I contend that it is not anachronistic to refer to de Pizan as a feminist; warring against patriarchal ideals is feminism. Blumenfeld-Kosinski agrees that de Pizan's *City of Ladies* is a feminist text. Firmly grounded in myth and history, de Pizan provides a "feminist vision" by embracing her womanhood and expressing herself as an educated woman.[286] The term "feminism" was not coined until the 19th century but de Pizan's advocacy for women's respect and significance as valued members of society, she put forth a feminist consciousness.[287] Medievalist historian and feminist, Judith M. Bennett's definition of feminism is the conviction that women, like men, should be afforded the opportunity to realize fully their humanity.[288] As a rhetorical tool, a means of personal, hence female empowerment, a feminist current runs through *The City of Ladies,* with the female characters lamenting the defamation of women and countering the misogyny of popular texts with specific examples of worthy women's actions and accomplishments, their humanity actualized. For Bennett the women in de Pizan's City

[284] Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*," 152.

[285] Mary Anne Case, *What Turns on Whether Women Are Human for Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 81.

[286] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 178.

[287] From an etymological perspective, Karen Offen informs us that the 1837 attribution of féminisme, coined by the French philosopher Charles Fourier is not definitive; the exact origin of the word feminist is ongoing. On the French origin of the words feminism and feminist. See "On the French Origin of the Words Feminism and Feminist," *Gender Issues* 8 (1988): 45-47, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685596.

[288] Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 8.

are "a feminist tool for celebrating women's past accomplishments, rebutting the accusations of those maligned women, and urging women to greater goals."[289] In simple terms, de Pizan wrote to defend women.[290] For Bourgault and Kingston, "Christine was striking against what she considered to be excessively narrow readings of history and intellectual culture."[291]

The social strata of women of this era were royalty, nobility, merchants (merchant wives) and peasants. As a privileged member of the French nobility, de Pizan was a voice of dissent condemning the sexist ideals of women. "Given the time in which she lived and the social forces at work on women, Christine did not have the choice of calling herself and other women to revolution against male oppression."[292] So she wrote. Rather than conceding to the hegemonic view of make writers, de Pizan, with ink, quill and parchment, wrote herself and women of renown into the discourse. Bennett considers de Pizan crafting *The City of Ladies* as "…the first major feminist tract the Western tradition, who turned again and again, to the feminist promise of history."[293] Fighting against the patriarchal ideology of male writers, de Pizan was foundational in challenging the pervasiveness of sexist rhetoric.[294] De Pizan's *City of Ladies* is an example of *écriture*

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[289] Bennett, *History Matters*, 6.

[290] Not only does de Pizan refute the criticisms aimed at women in writing *The City of Ladies*, but also in her works, *Epistle to the God of Love* (1399) and *Epistles on the Tale of the Rose* (1402) –all criticize de Meun. In 1399-1400, de Pizan wrote, *Epistle of Othea*, a basis of *The City of Ladies*, her take on ancient myth with no mention of Medusa by name but as Gorgon, allegorical for avoiding temptation.

[291] De Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, xix

[292] Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning," 16

[293] Bennett, *History Matters*, 6.

[294] Written 387 years before Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, de Pizan's *The City of Ladies* is a public condemnation of the patriarchal script.

feminine long before the French feminist Hélène Cixous popularized the phrase nearly 600 years later.[295] Situating herself in the male-dominated sphere of writing, de Pizan wrote about what frustrated her about female oppression, marginalization, and gendered stigma. Kellogg refers to de Pizan's approach to writing about the women in *The City of Ladies*, as "workings of feminist mythology" with de Pizan utilizing an "original feminist application of mythography, the mythography being the Christian moralization and allegorizing of pagan myth."[296] Given the predominance of patriarchal Medusan prose, de Pizan provided the first Medusan feminist output to represent Medusa as a cultural critique/opposition to the misogynistic imagination of male writers. If feminism is a rejection of patriarchy, Medusan feminism is a rejection of the patriarchal depictions of Medusa. For de Beauvoir, de Pisan's prose is "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex."[297]

Humanism

De Pizan is situated in France during the impetus/beginning of the intellectual movement of humanism, evolving as a writer during the transition from the late Middle Ages to the dawn of a humanist culture and climate in France. Groag Bell considers de Pizan as a "strong link in the chain of humanistic thinking during the late fourteenth

[295] In the Cixous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," aside from criticizing Freud's sexist interpretation of Medusa's visage, Cixous criticizes patriarchal language and advocates for feminist usage: women must write. Cixous ushered in a modern cultural vocabulary of feminist thought and imagination, coining the term/concept of 'eciture feminine' (female writing), a means of reclamation for women in the face of misogynistic literary structures and language. Rather than focus on Medusa's deadly glare, for Cixous, Medusa is laughing as if to mock the patriarchal perception long associated with her, what Morse refers to as a "masculine-identified symbol in language and myth." See Heidi Morse, "Feminist Receptions of Medusa: Rethinking Mythological Figures from Ovid to Louise Bogan," *Comparative Literature* 70, no. 2 (2018): 180, https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-6817398.

[296] Kellogg, "Christine de Pizan and Boccaccio," 128.

[297] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 117.

century."[298] De Pizan's lived experience and depth of knowledge afforded her a unique perspective to formulate a gendered moral reasoning, but declaring oneself a female writer in the 15th century was radical especially since "at the time in which she lived and wrote, womenkind, in general, was held in singularly low esteem."[299] De Beauvoir recognized the value of de Pizan, the remarkable ability to write professionally since "men's opinion in the Middle Ages is not favorable to women."[300] Defending women and advocating for women's education, "places her squarely into the forefront of humanist thinking."[301] Aside from being a feminist text, de Pizan's *City of Ladies* is a humanist treatise; her inquiry providing a revisionist perspective of historical and mythological interpretation. Groag Bell considers de Pizan a humanist based on her concern for moral philosophy, history, poetry, education and language, "buttressed by firm Christian values."[302] De Pizan was pious but a humanist, her humanism, a marker of her feminist thinking.

Reclaiming women from the patriarchal script, de Pizan was an authorial voice: a woman writing about women. "Christine is clearly unwilling to have feminine virtue relegated to a mythological past."[303] Groag Bell considers Christine de Pizan a "renaissance humanist" who was "eager to read original classical, and early Christian

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[298] Groag Bell, "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430)," 174.

[299] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 15.

[300] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 115.

[301] Groag Bell, "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430)," 177.

[302] Groag Bell, "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430)," 173.

[303] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 139.

sources in order to rediscover (or have a re-naissance) of these ancient ideas and ideals."[304] Writing *The City of Ladies*, is what Willard referred to as "moral literature," Christine offered something new in accordance with developing humanistic ideals, by "drawing lessons for the present on the basis of examples from the past…nothing of this sort had ever been attempted for women."[305] De Pizan's *City of Ladies* was a moral imperative. Ancient and medieval male writers demonized women, but in writing *The City*, de Pizan humanizes them.

Misogynistic Male Literature

As a privileged noblewoman, Christine de Pizan had the unique opportunity to read misogynistic writings that shaped her view about the injustice of defamed women in society, including the mythological character Medusa. The source material of patriarchal literary outputs of the ancient and medieval era influenced de Pizan's writing. The examples thus far, ancient and medieval patriarchal Medusan literary outputs are what Scott refers to as *artifacts of knowledge production*, prose that has been "produced" as a means of "ordering the world" – specifically relationships of power and subordination.[306] Thus far across the span of over 2000 years, we see how male writers — ancient poets and medieval thinkers have documented ridicule and criticism against womankind using Medusa as a misogynistic trope. This reflects Scott's idea of language "the usage insists that the world of women is part of the world of men, created in and by it."[307] What de

[304] Groag Bell, "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430)," 173.

[305] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 145.

[306] Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 2.

[307] Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 32.

Pizan read is the de rigueur of Medusa as monstrous, women included. Including Medusa as a valued citizen, de Pizan created, albeit not a world, but a city of women. With men perched atop the misogynistic pillar of prose, de Pizan attempted to create a revised women's history from the margins.[308] Critical of the misogynistic texts from male literary establishment, academic and clerical, Mirabella underscores Christine's moxie to write given the prevalent misogynist attitudes of the day, "established on the authority of the ancient writers and pervaded medieval society which demanded female silence."[309] For Grant, "The originality of Christine's text resides in its attempt to employ arguments to combat misogyny in the generic context of a catalog of virtuous exempla."[310] As a well-read critical thinker, de Pizan recognized how women were cast as the pejorative other, Medusa included.[311] Medieval scholar Judith Kellogg considers Boccaccio's *Famous Women* a "primary source" for the de Pizan's *City*.[312] Blumenfeld-Kosinski suggests that "Christine's *horizon d'attente* as a reader and writer of myth was primarily shaped by the *Roman de la Rose* and *Ovide Moralisé."*[313] Christine's bid for literary authority is based

[308] Before writing *The Book of City of Ladies*, de Pizan deeply contemplated the unjust status of women and the prevalent misogynistic writings, as evidenced by her 1399 poem, "Epistre au dieu d'amours" (The God of Love's Letters). De Pizan penned the poem, written as an official courtly letter, in response to the defamation faced by women via male written works, naming Ovid and Jean de Meun, specifically. The sequel to *The City of Ladies*, also written in 1405, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, focuses on the value of educating women on par with men to be part of an informed populace for society.

[309] Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning," 10.

[310] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 148.

[311] In *The City of Ladies*, de Pizan includes the mythological characters of Circe and Medea but in a humanist light.

[312] Kellogg, "Christine de Pizan and Boccaccio," 124.

[313] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 172.

not simply on inserting her text into the pre-existing catalogue genre [Bocaccio] but also on attacking the anti-feminist tradition.[314]

Given the gendered ideals interpreted and mined by generation after generation of male writers, in opposition of the defamation against women, de Pizan's writing is astute and defiant. Antagonized by the hegemonic sphere of writing, de Pizan's frustration is directed at male writers. In solidarity with women, she confronts and challenges the prejudicial thinking against women and steadfastly defends them. For Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Christine tackles the problem of misogyny head on offering and alternative view of history, and which women's contribution as historical figures is fully recognized."[315] I agree with Grant, when she writes that Christine de Pizan wrote "a commemorative catalog of women's audible deeds addressed to female readership,"[316] but I also feel that *The City of Ladies* was pointed at men in religious, philosophic, noble, and academic spheres. I contend that de Pizan clapped back at the men who supported *The Rose* and other misogynistic literary works. Distressed by these works, when writing *The City of Ladies*, de Pizan applied a feminist, humanist, and moral argument to the compositional framework of Saint Augustine's allegorical *City of God* and the biographical catalogue of Boccaccio's *Famous Women (*"De mulieribus claris"). Using themes and characters from them and other male writers as source material, *The City of Ladies* reads as a creative long form dissent of misogyny.[317] "Christine made extensive

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[314] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 141.

[315] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 128.

[316] Brown-Grant, Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women, 118.

[317] Saint Augustine's *City of God* was written as 22 books (akin to chapters); he opined/philosophized about theology, history, and paganism in over 1000 pages. Boccaccio's *Famous*

use of Boccaccio's examples of famous women."[318] Nearly 75% of the women in Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* are in *The City*, including Medusa, but unlike Boccaccio, de Pizan is truly defending women. "The overarching message in Christine's work is accurately pro-women, whereas many of Boccaccio's examples recycle the commonplaces of misogynistic literature."[319] Christine de Pizan was sending a strong message in her written work: value and respect women.

The Book of the City of Ladies: Narrative Themes

Critical of the misogynistic literary machinations of ancient and medieval texts so intertwined in male writing, de Pizan's *City of Ladies* is a female-centric work of prose fiction, crafted as an allegorical, imagined city of virtuous women. The book is designed as a Q&A between Christine and three noble ladies, moral paragons of virtue: Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. De Pizan wrote *The City of Ladies* in three sections, in which she developed 136 subheadings to address the extent of the harm of misogynistic writing that include over 120 women from classic mythology, contemporary history, and biblical verse.[320] De Pizan the writer, developed Christine, the character, to recognize how misogyny festered within the sphere of prose. Advocating for women's respect and dignity, in conversation with the three celestial ladies, de Pizan mixed history, myth, and language. De Pizan's inquisitiveness fosters a humanistic moral

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Women included 106 biographies of notable women, historical and mythological; Each biography can be considered a chapter. Editions vary; the page count ranges between 200-300 pages.

[318] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 135.

[319] Cooper-Davis, *Christine de Pizan*, 92.

[320] 136 is the number of chapters according to the Bourgault and Kingston edition and the Richards.

writing approach. By confronting sexism through a posture of curiosity, she reassesses male writing from a feminist standpoint. The three ladies are indicative of what de Pizan needs to think critically about her status and that of other women. Reminiscent of the exchange of letters in the "Querelle of the Rose," in *The City of Ladies*, de Pizan wrote with an air of indignation, but it is important to note that in defending women, she is not defensive; she is contemplative of misogynistic writing by posing questions.

With a sense of agency and purpose, de Pizan set forth a narrative to refute the slanderous claims. I propose that de Pizan crafted the *City of Ladies* into three thematic sections: respect, morality and virtue, and dignity. To examine the sexist machinations of male writers, each chapter begins with Christine posing a question or assumption about women with a lady refuting the faulty perception with a biographic and anecdotal example of a woman to counter the literary outputs. As Christine poses questions to the Ladies, in an indirect way, she interrogated writers of these cultural narratives. In the *City of Ladies*, Christine is a narratorial figure, what Brown-Grant refers to as, "in propria persona" —a protagonist in her own text.[321] In dialogue with the celestial mentors, de Pizan the writer, offers an educated opinion. As Christine the protagonist learns about the virtues of maligned women, so too do the readers. Given that women were not permitted to hold leadership positions in the Church, and not afforded a proper/formal education, the fact that three saintly women visit Christine is telling. Reading the dialogue between Christine and the three ladies, there is a reverence to the divine women, as if they are matriarchal mentors or role models. The three celestial virtues are authorial voices to counter the male script. "Christine appropriates for herself the authority of a God sent

[321] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 140.

prophecy, thereby placing her catalog of women under the sign of theology."[322] With an overt gender imbalance in her City, there are no men, but that is her point: women exist in a realm of agency and eminence without the fear of conquest. In conversation with the three virtues is what Brown-Grant refers to as "a hierarchy of discourses in order to point out the philosophical authorities are not necessarily immune from error."[323]

Part I: Respect

In Part I, the focus is on over 40 women of antiquity, historical, and mythological who are deserving of acknowledgement and respect. Noted women include characters from Greek and Roman (pagan) myth, royal queens and princesses, and female saints of intellect. *The City of Ladies* begins with Christine, the narrator and protagonist, sitting in her library, lamenting about sexist and misogynistic literature; a specific writer she takes umbrage with is Matheolus (Jehan Le Fèvre's *Lamentations of Matheolus)*. Reflecting on her library filled with books by men maligning women, Christine ponders, "I could hardly find a scholarly book, regardless of its author, that did not contain some chapters or lines criticizing women."[324] Lingering on this thought, she continues, "As the authors would have it she [women] is a vessel filled with all sorts of evil and vices."[325] Of all the misogynistic male writings, why did de Pizan begin by referencing Matheolus? Blumenfeld-Kosinski provides insight: "The Lamentations as a whole is so repetitive and spiteful that one can well understand Christine de Pizan's dismay when she first came

[322] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 154.

[323] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 143.

[324] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 22.

[325] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 22.

upon it.[326]" In the prologue, de Pizan also provides the modern reader with a prime example of the insidiousness of FEP (female endorsed patriarchy). De Pizan takes an unsettling authorial pose of self-deprecation when Christine questions the value of herself as a woman and women, in general. Christine ponders to herself, "I wondered if what so many illustrious men say about women could be true. But regardless of how long I thought about it and how much I turned the matter over in my mind, I could find no truth in their condemnation of women's nature and moral character."[327] "The prologue of the City shows the effects which misogyny can produce even on a female reader, in this case Christine herself."[328] Reading male texts defaming women, Christine doubts her self-worth and agency as a woman, the mental model of misogyny has taken hold. She questions women's worth since so many men have maligned women. As a marginalized member of a patriarchal society, de Pizan has been culturally conditioned, the gendered slander embodied. Christine says to herself, "Generally speaking, nearly all essays by philosophers, poets, and orators too numerous to mention offer a similar view and draw identical conclusions, describing female nature as beset by vice."[329] Christine, experiencing a lack of self-worth and agency of being a woman, questions the perceived inferiority of women. According to Brown-Grant, "misogyny is presented in the city as an all-pervasive doctrine, since Christine, the protagonist complains of being unable to

[326] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Jean Le Fèvre's Livre de Leesce," 711.

[327] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 22.

[328] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 152.

[329] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 22.

open any book without immediately coming up across some derogatory remark about the female sex."[330]

In response to her distraught nature, as if by divine intervention, Christine is visited by three wise women who inform her that she, with their guidance, will build a city of ladies. Like *The Rose*, de Pizan used a dream vision for first-person narration, as well as symbolic figures of de Meun and Boccaccio.[331] Unlike de Meun's pursuit of male conquest, de Pizan's intent is to defend women and advocate for their respect and dignity. The three personified virtues have arrived to help the protagonist untangle the cognitive knot of anti-feminist rhetoric. In quelling Christine's dismay at the misogynistic writings, Lady Reason upon noting Aristotle, Matheolus, and the *Romance of the Rose* tells Christine, "My advice to you is to turn their words to your advantage by interpreting the passages that speak ill of women the way they are meant to be understood. For you should know that bad things said about women do not dishonor women, only those who utter them."[332]

Upon meeting the three virtues, de Pizan's method of composition is a creative way of refuting the male writers, a rhetorical litigation to defend women and affirm their value. De Pizan introduces Lady Reason as a character to critique and counter the flawed reasoning of male writers who malign women. She actively engages in challenging male writers, employing reason through a dialogue with the virtuous deity, questioning and answering about men's defamation of women. Early on, a reader begins to see how she

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[330] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 141.

[331] In *The Rose*, the virtue of Reason is a personified female; Boccaccio used the allegorical figure of Fortune to guide him; de Pizan uses the same technique.

[332] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 24-25.

bucked the single story: Lady Reason tells Christine, "One should not denounce all women because some fools seek to harm their reputations. But those who have made a habit of voicing these opinions, whatever their intention, have generalized merely to make their point."[333] Lady Reason informs Christine, "We have come out of compassion to tell you about a certain building project in the shape of a strong, well-constructed city that you are destined to erect with our help and guidance and that will be inhabited only by illustrious, meritorious ladies. For the gates of our city will be closed to those lacking virtue."[334] Representing the importance of mentally purging the sexist notions that have been written about and internalized by women, Christine must clear the land, and begins to build the city with three high-powered women. Over the course of three parts, the three personified virtues offer Christine divine inspiration while addressing the ills of misogyny. Lady Reason: "I assure you that any man who readily slanders women has a mean spirit, because he acts against reason and against nature."[335] The women in Part I, described as brave, intelligent, ingenious, inquisitive, courageous, wise, and prudent are also a foundational jab at the misogynistic male writers.

Aristotelianism was fervent during this time, namely the hegemonic perception of female inferiority. Aristotle insisted that societal roles should be based on human nature: "men ruled, women were ruled."[336] From a moral-humanist perspective but also a veiled critique of Aristotle, Lady Reason informs Christine, "The superior being is he or she

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[333] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 32.

[334] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 27.

[335] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 34.

[336] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 10.

who is the most virtuous. People's superiority or baseness does not depend on their gender but on the perfection of their morals and virtues."[337] Taking another slight at Aristotle, Lady Reason says, "It's beyond doubt that women are as much part of God's creatures and the human race as men. They are not a different kind of species."[338]
In yet another exchange with Christine, Lady Reason tells her, "God, who does nothing without a purpose, has wanted to show men that He doesn't disdain either the female sex or their own, since it has pleased Him to endow women's brains with the ability not only to learn and assimilate the sciences but also to discover new ones themselves."[339] And at the end of Part I, in yet another narratorial dig at Aristotle, Lady Reason tells Christine, "I have provided enough evidence to prove my point, to show you through reason and concrete example that God had never condemned, either the female or male sex, as should be obvious to you by now."[340] In this section, Lady Reason serves as an authorial voice of vindication. "She [Lady Reason] shows how anti-feminism is not an unassailable doctrine."[341] As Lady Reason facilitated Christine's clearing of the land, de Pizan cleared the perception of female inferiority and the faulty sexist beliefs about women held by male writers. With the City built, it is time to populate it with virtuous women.

Part II: Morality and Virtue

Given the misogynistic rhetoric depicted in literary themes from ancient and

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[337] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 37.

[338] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 54.

[339] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 80.

[340] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 96.

[341] Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, 142.

medieval writers, Christine, with the guidance of the three Ladies, continue to make a bold inspection of male bias. Part II is the longest section of the book, with de Pizan including over 60 women, describing their morality and virtue to counter the sexist and misogynistic tropes and stereotypes from male writers. With the protective walls built, this section describes how the city was constructed and the "eminent, illustrious ladies who will inhabit the city and dwell in prosperity."[342] In Part II, the reader is introduced to the second virtuous lady:

> My name is Lady Rectitude. I reside more in heaven than on earth, but I dwell among the just like a ray of light from God and a message of His goodness. I encourage them to do the right thing, to give each person his or her due as far as possible, to speak and uphold the truth, to defend the rights of the poor and the innocent, to refrain from stealing from others, and to uphold the reputation of those unjustly accused.[343]

Lady Rectitude, emblematic of women's moral character and virtue, continues to facilitate the Q&A with Christine.

With the foundation laid, Christine and Lady Rectitude build up the city with homes, roads, and official buildings. This section describes most selected inhabitants, including Medusa; the women are figurative building blocks, the foundation for the City. Medusa makes a brief appearance but not as a monstrous beast, simply as a beautiful woman living in solidarity amongst the other women. In this section, the reader will sense that Christine's sense of self is evolving, the self-degradation chipping away with each female biography explained by Lady Rectitude. "I have learned so much from the two of you! I understand that all things that can be done and known, whether they

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[342] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 97.

[343] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 28.

involve the body or the mind or any other faculty, can all be managed by women with ease."[344] In another epiphanic moment, Christine tells Lady Rectitude, "My lady, your words make it very clear that the accusations against women are completely unfounded, and I realize more than ever that they do them an enormous justice."[345] Lady Rectitude tells Christine, "I don't believe there have been as many malicious tongues in all the times gone by as there are today, nor as many men ready to target women with baseless slander.[346]" Christine is no longer exasperated but emboldened that so many ladies must endure "the devastating criticisms leveled against them by various men without contradicting them, when they were well aware that those criticisms were completely unwarranted."[347] Lady Rectitude responds, "As to the length of time that has passed without them (women) contradicting their accusers and slanderers, let me tell you that in the eternal scheme of things, there is a time and place for all things to come to a good end."[348] As if to make a public declaration, Christine tells Lady Rectitude, "…all of my questions have been answered. It seems you have completely refuted the slanderous things so many men say about women."[349] Christine and the ladies continue building the City arguing in favor of women's bravery, fortitude, intelligence, as if they are the

[344] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 112.

[345] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 106.

[346] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 145.

[347] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 165.

[348] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 165.

[349] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 183.

building blocks of the allegorical city.

Part III: Dignity

In Part III, de Pizan's writing takes a religious turn, the most religious-centric section with a focus on saints, sibyls, apostles, and blessed virgins. Over 20 women are included to highlight the utmost dignity and value of women in society. In the last section, the reader is introduced to Lady Justice:

> My dear Christine, I am Lady Justice, God's most special daughter, for my essence flows directly from His own. I reside on Heaven, on Earth, or in Hell: in Heaven for the glory of the saints and blessed souls, on Earth to divide and allot to all their portion of good and evil as they deserve it, in Hell to punish the wicked.[350]

Deemed by Lady Justice to defend the City from the misogyny of men, she helps Christine build a protective wall around the city; the Virgin Mary, mother of God is chosen as the queen.[351] In a figurative nod to matriarchal leadership, it is women who built the city, occupy the city, and govern the city. Willard astutely observed, "The Virgin graciously accepts the invitation, expressing her willingness to dwell among the others as the leader of the feminine sex, as it has been God's will from the beginning."[352] With a wall built to protect the female citizens from the siege of misogyny, and a queen selected, in the city there are pagan, noble, and monotheistical devout women in community together.

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[350] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 29.

[351] It is interesting that de Pizan situated the Virgin Mary to lead the women. When she wrote *The City*, the Great Schism, which began in 1378, was ongoing, the vying for male papal power in Europe. It was not until 1417 that Pope Martin V was finally elected.

[352] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 44.

In this section is a fully-evolved Christine—self-actualized, recognizing her self-worth and that of other women; the FEP voice has been shed. De Pizan broke the cycle of disparaging authoritative male voices to rewrite the patriarchal script about women; she advocated for women's respect when being female was disadvantaged. Informed readers can see the connection that when Christine questioned the three virtues, she had, in fact, questioned and challenged male hegemony—the ancient texts and her contemporary sources. De Pizan utilized a savvy rhetorical strategy of using three powerful and influential women to guide her awareness and enlightenment. Reason, Rectitude, and Justice personified wisdom to guide Christine in building a haven for women. In the ongoing dialogue between Christine and the three ladies, with the literary diatribes aimed at women countered, a female consciousness was revealed. De Pizan (via Christine) extricated herself and fellow females from the misogynistic pillar of male writing, rewriting, recreating anew. Women's struggles, strength, moxie, loyalty, bravery, and overall virtue and morality were allegorically interpreted to convey women's worth. "Throughout her writing she is conscious of fashioning herself as a female speaking to other females."[353] Christine's purpose was clearly didactic: to illustrate certain feminine traits to which she wanted to call her readers' attention.[354] As Case sees it, the dialogue between Christine and the three Ladies "may be deemed a consciousness-raising session with other women, the great discrepancy between the authorities' view of women and women's own experience."[355]

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[353] Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning," 17.

[354] Willard, *Christine de Pizan,* 136.

[355] Case, *What Turns on Whether Women Are Human for Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan,* 85.

Christine's City (de Pizan's), built by Lady Reason, populated with the guidance from Lady Rectitude, and defended by Lady Justice is one of inclusion: pagans, peasants, nobility, royalty, and religious women, living in commune. In a patriarchal society, with women typically marginalized as other, Medusa and her fellow female citizens are afforded the societal safe space, that all too often excluded them. Through a lineage of women, real and fictitious, de Pizan countered the faulty otherness of women. In the final chapter, "Christine Addresses Womankind," de Pizan writes, "And you, young virgins, be pure, sober, and tranquil, but do not lack confidence, because evil men will spread their nets to catch you…Be armed with the strength of virtue against the tricks of those seeking to seduce you and avoid their company."[356] In a satisfying conclusion; women are safe from the misogyny of male writers. Christine tells her fellow citizens, "Ladies from the past, the present, and the future: you may all live here, because the City has been established and built for all ladies of honor."[357] Critiquing the single stories about the female citizens, including Medusa, de Pizan, proved them false through a dialectical exchange with each of the three Ladies.

The de Pizan Medusa: Citizen of the City of Ladies

As Medusa's depictions wended their way across time and place, Medusa became a proxy for misogynistic imagination and references towards women and about women in the late Middle Ages. De Pizan read Medusa as malevolent, a model or signifier of men's disdain for women and go-to recipient for misogynistic hostility. By the end of *The City of Ladies*, the reader understands that Medusa's humanity, devoid from the ancient and

[356] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 220.

[357] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 219.

medieval male-centric narratives is restored. The de Pizan Medusa lives amongst the Virgin Mary, Sappho, Amazonians, queens, princesses, and saints— all the women, honored and protected. De Pizan is the first female writer to introduce Medusa into feminist discourse, but why include Medusa, a woman of utmost malignment by male writers? That is the point. De Pizan recognized the single story of Medusa as other, a commonly mined narrative tool for gendered condemnation by male writers. De Pizan read how ancient male mythographers and medieval writers, acting as agents of misogyny, adhered to the patriarchal script of hegemonic masculinity, namely male power over women, and women deemed as disobeying the male order. The form in which the myths appear further conditions their meaning and contribute to their signification.[358] I contend de Pizan understood that the mythology surrounding Medusa was based on misogynistic perceptions, portraying women as disrespectful, immoral, lacking virtue, and undignified, which is why a feminist reinterpretation of the patriarchal Medusa myth was necessary. By including Medusa, albeit in a short passage is what Kellogg notes, as a way for de Pizan to identify underlying assumptions about mythology and incorporate feminist principles to reinterpret and reconstruct "fresh symbolic associations around traditional pagan figures."[359] De Pizan, in her critique of the classical and medieval mythological material that often portrayed women negatively, undertook a revision that Blumenfeld-Kosinski characterizes as a "process of remythisization."[360]

[358] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 12.

[359] Kellogg, "Christine de Pizan and Boccaccio," 124.

[360] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 172.

As a persistent misogynistic trope, the disdain for Medusa by male writers was analogous to the societal disdain for women; this is what de Pizan recognized, Medusa as other: punished for her disobedience to the patriarchal script. Notre Dame medievalist, Astrik L. Gabriel recognized de Pizan's concern, not necessarily for Medusa but women: "The emphasis in Christine's moral teaching is on the reputation of women."[361] Case stresses that unlike men, women authors, such as de Pizan, became feminists by necessity, in self-defense."[362] Reminiscent of the "Querelle de la Rose", and *The City of Ladies*, by defending women, de Pizan, in defending Medusa, is, in essence, defending herself. In simple terms, de Pizan wanted to protect Medusa, along with the other women who were safe and cloistered from men who harm. Including mythological figures in her writings, "transforms Christine's voice into that of a moralizing mythographer."[363] As feminist discourse, de Pizan's reclamation of the patriarchal Medusa myth was a significant act of resistance within the context of *The City of Ladies*, a symbolic space for recognizing the worth and value of women. Medusa, as a citizen, is the first feminist revision of the patriarchal mythical figure, a testament to de Pizan's critique of male hegemonic narratives. In *The City*, de Pizan embarks on a narrative aptly described by Kellogg as an "original feminist application of mythography."[364] The de Pizan Medusa is a marker of female solidarity.

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[361] Astrik L. Gabriel, "The Educational Ideas of Christine De Pisan," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (1955): 13, https://doi.org/10.2307/2707524.

[362] Case, *What Turns on Whether Women Are Human for Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan*, 82.

[363] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 178.

[364] Kellogg, 128.

The de Pizan Gorgon

The classics of Greco-Roman myth are rife with male gods and demi-gods of omnipotence, with Athena (Minerva) primarily depicted as an arm of masculine justice, a masculine goddess as an extension of the triumvirate brotherly gods of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. For de Pizan, Minerva is not dutiful to male power.[365] In Part I of *The City of Ladies*, in a biographic section about the powerful goddess, de Pizan first refers not to Medusa but to the Gorgon. In a segment about intelligent and enlightened women, Lady Reason informs Christine about Minerva, the Roman goddess of arms and warfare, describing her battle shield, reminiscent of but a departure from Homer's description:

> In the center of this shield was an image of the head of the serpent named Gorgon, which meant that a knight, like a snake, must always be farsighted and vigilant toward his enemies. It also symbolized that a wise person is always aware of any malice that may harm him or her.[366]

Unlike the aegis' snakelike visage of Homer (*the head of that horrible Monster the Gorgon, most dread and awful emblem),* de Pizan imagined the shield as emblematic of clarity and circumspect. The last line of this segment is also telling. In terms of the affixed gorgon representing an astute awareness of potential harm, de Pizan infers needed protection. Given that de Pizan's opinion of this poet was not favorable, she may have been referring to harm against women. In Part III, when Lady Rectitude recounts the honorable ten sibyls, female seers from Greek myth, she notably singles out Herophile,

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[365] Aside from The City, de Pizan includes Athena (Minerva) in the *Epistle of Othea* and *The Book of Deeds of Arms of Chivalry*. Referenced as Minerva, not Athena, this signifies de Pizan's reading of Roman myth, such as Ovid.

[366] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 78.

who warned about the destruction of Troy. However, de Pizan does not shy away from critiquing Homer, whom she believes "would produce false accounts of these events."[367] Aside from inviting the reader to question Homer, this short passage reflects de Pizan's motive for writing *The City of Ladies*: to counter the deep-seated fear of real and perceived female power; women were protected *under the aegis* of a metaphorical locale that acknowledged their dignity and worth.

The de Pizan Minerva does not prop up the patriarchy. Unlike ancient depictions where Athena is dutiful to patriarchal ideals, emblematic of female indoctrination to male deference, this is not the case for de Pizan. Manne reminds us that misogyny often stems from "the desire to take women down, to put them in their place"– by both men and women.[368] Unlike Apollodorus who imagined the sexist trope of female jealousy and competition between Athena and Medusa, there is no FEP in de Pizan's City. De Pizan explicitly makes no mention of any men from the polis, such as Poseidon, Perseus, or Zeus. Minerva is valued for her intelligence, wisdom, ingenuity, and chastity; there is high regard for the pagan goddess. In de Pizan's City, Minerva's power is not expressed through dutifulness to the patriarchy, she is a selected citizen of the City, a figurative building block. The powerful goddess is not depicted as a harbinger for anti-feminist sentiment but as a model of wisdom, intelligence, and ingenuity. In Part I, Lady Reason informs Christine,

> Her great knowledge was superior to that of any other woman of her time. She was very astute, and her wide knowledge was not limited to one particular field but extended to all subjects…her mind was so enlightened with knowledge that she developed a number of skills and techniques that had not been known

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[367] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 98.

[368] Manne, *Down Girl*, 77.

before.[369]

Lady Reason also notes Minerva's "exemplary chastity" and that "This highly intelligent lady remained a virgin all her life."[370]

The de Pizan Medusa

In Part II, when Lady Rectitude announced that with the city's construction built, it was time to look for inhabitants of the "new Realm of Women," Christine was informed that that "illustrious ladies," "valiant women of great beauty and prestige" who are "noble, good and virtuous" are to be the chosen inhabitants.[371] In search of selecting the ladies, Lady Rectitude includes Medusa. In a chapter entitled, "Christine Asks Lady Rectitude whether it is true that few women are faithful in love as some men claim, and Rectitude's reply," de Pizan delves into the biographic narratives of a wide range of women, both historical and mythological. This includes the likes of Dido, queen of Carthage, Medea of Greek myth, Thisbe of Babylon, Ghismonda of Salerno, Lisabetta of Messina, and Juno (Hera) of Greco-Roman myth, among others. The chapter title is somewhat inaccurate when Christine discloses her true concern to Lady Rectitude: "Ovid and his fellow authors say that the reason why they express their views on women and their deceitful ways and malice is to serve the common good, to warn men about female wiles so they will be better prepared to avoid them like snakes hiding in the grass."[372]

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[369] De Pizan lists numerous inventions attributed to Minerva derived from Greco-Roman myth: The Greek alphabet, numbers for arithmetic, wool making into cloth, weaving, oil-pressing fruits and olives, wagon and cart making, iron forging, and musical instruments. See de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 77-78.

[370] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 78.

[371] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 111.

[372] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 166.

Lady Rectitude continues, "I can only conclude that if these authors were acting for the common good, meaning both sides, they would have also warned women to beware of the traps laid by men, the same way they warned men to beware of women."[373] It is only pages after this defense of women that de Pizan includes a short biographic narrative of Medusa.

> Medusa, or the Gorgon, was famous for her outstanding beauty. She was the daughter of the very wealthy King Phorcys, whose prosperous kingdom was surrounded by the sea. As the ancient stories have it, this Medusa was so strikingly beautiful that she surpassed all other women. She had a lovely body and face and long, blond curly hair like spun gold, but what is even more amazing and even supernatural is that she had such a bewitching gaze that she attracted and completely mesmerized all mortal creatures she looked at. That gave rise to the myth claiming that she turned people to stone.[374]

De Pizan devotes just five lines to the Medusa myth, and although it is a brief narrative, it is significant for interpretation since Medusa is (and stays) human. De Pizan's decision to humanize Medusa informs us that she implicitly rejects patriarchal depictions. For de Pizan, there is no ordained patriarchal code of conduct and subsequent misogynistic hostility. Like the Athena biography, the de Pizan Medusa is not associated with any man from the polis, there is no narrative attachment to Poseidon, Perseus, or Zeus. De Pizan makes no mention of Medusa's demise. Of major significance: Medusa is no longer the antagonist in Perseus' "courageous" hero quest.

The de Pizan Medusa: Three thematic threads of beauty, chastity, and honor

The motive for de Pizan including Medusa in *The City of Ladies* is to provide salvation from the vilification of misogynistic male writers. As a means of restoring

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[373] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 167.

[374] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 179.

respect, morality, virtue, and dignity, the de Pizan depiction of Medusa (by name) functions in three ways: to reclaim Medusa's beauty, chastity, and honor from harm. Given Medusa's misogynistic depictions in ancient and medieval literary works, one would think that de Pizan would have viewed her unsuitable as a resident of the City. Including Medusa takes on a particular resonance given the gorgon's prominent depiction as a monstrous beast. Rather than excluding Medusa, as de Pizan did with other female characters of myth: the Sirens, Furies, Harpies, Echidna, and Scylla, Medusa was deemed a worthy citizen of virtue.[375] Countering the pervasive anti-female sentiment, by including Medusa, de Pizan provides a tacit sense of aggrievement for the male perspective. Medusa is a featured figure to symbolize de Pizan's indignation.

Medusa's Beauty

In revising the myth, de Pizan chose a dominant image of beauty, but not deadly. In maintaining Medusa's beauty, the de Pizan Medusa is not turned into a monstrous beast; thus, providing her with a moral transformation of a lady worthy to be an inhabitant in the City. For de Pizan, there is also no hero reference or valorization of Perseus, but feminine beauty. Including a beautiful Medusa in the illustrious City signals de Pizan's awareness of the ancient and medieval misogynistic Medusa tropes of Apollodorus, Ovid, Marbod of Rennes, Ovide Moralisé, Boccaccio, and Matheolus.[376] In *The City of Ladies*, Medusa is no femme fatale, she is beautiful but not destructive; she is

[375] In Greco-Roman myth, Sirens, Furies, Harpies, Echidna, and Scylla, are female creatures of symbolizing chaos and destruction.

[376] It is important to note that although de Pizan is critical of male writing, she does not always name the author. As Charlotte Cooper-Davis informs us, as times, de Pizan favors "a subtle, implicit form of criticism that does not outwardly name and shame the texts to which she is responding." See page 94.

not a dangerous beauty compromising men's moral fortitude.[377] With beauty as a focus, akin to patriarchal Medusan depictions, did de Pizan reinforce a gendered stereotype? As a means of salvation from vilification, why did Christine de Pizan focus on Medusa beauty? I contend that from a Christian context, for de Pizan, Medusa's beauty is virtuous. Janega offers insight for this Christian contention, "because nature was conceived of as divine those who were holiest, and therefore closest to God were also in harmony in nature. Thus, they were necessarily beautiful."[378] Janega informs us that during the Middle Ages, beauty was esteemed, "seen as proof of God's favor."[379] Regarding de Pizan's notation about Medusa's golden locks like gold, from a cultural perspective, de Pizan would have been aware of this beauty ideal. With all the variations within the beauty standard of the medieval era (small breasts, pot belly), the hierarchy of "blondes as firmly on top" was an ideal found from England to Spain throughout France and into Rome (Western Christendom)."[380]

De Pizan notes Medusa's beauty but not pejoratively, diverting from the patriarchal depictions of dangerous beauty. For de Pizan, the allure of women's physical beauty, explained by male writers as immoral and sinful, was not the fault of women but a gift of the gods: pagan and Christian. De Pizan's beautiful Medusa is suitable and

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[377] The term dangerous beauty is attributed to the exhibition, "Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art" on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from February 5, 2018, to February 24, 2019, which I attended on March 21, 2018. Ancient artifacts included: bowls, vases, water jars, sarcophagi, etchings, architectural flourishes (e.g. terracotta tiles), paintings, and jewelry, as well as clothing from designer Gianni Versace, who used Medusa for his line's logo. See https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/dangerous-beauty

[378] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 63.

[379] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 41

[380] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 52-53.

acceptable to be a valued citizen. Janega informs us that medieval people believed that physical beauty represented spiritual purity.[381] In medieval society, vanity was perceived as a sin. A woman's excessive concern with her outward appearance was seen as neglect of her immortal soul and religious duties.[382] De Pizan, abhorring vanity, had to make sure that Medusa was beautiful but not vain (reminiscent of Athena's wrath toward Medusa in Apollodurus' *Bibliotheca*). When discussing prudent women, Lady Reason informs Christine, "She [woman] despises false glory and vain beauty. Such a woman fears our Lord."[383] While the de Pizan Medusa has golden hair and is of great beauty, the depiction is a departure from the male writers of Apollodorus, Ovid, Ovide Moralisé and Boccaccio; Medusa depicted as too beautiful, too alluring, and made responsible for male lust by subverting men's will. De Pizan rejects the notion that Medusa cajoles or coaxes men with her attractiveness. Medusa's beauty is not considered a biological misdemeanor.

Medusa's Chastity

The de Pizan Medusa needs to be defended by predatory men. As a chosen woman for the City's citizenry, it is reasonable to read the de Pizan Medusa as virginal, hence not corrupted for having unwedded sex. As a daughter of a king, the implication is that the de Pizan Medusa is chaste. Christine tells Lady Rectitude, "Chastity is women's supreme virtue."[384] Janega informs us that in the medieval era, "ideal women were those

[381] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 71

[382] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 89.

[383] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 90.

[384] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 141.

who avoided the pitfalls of sex, and retained a holy chastity to have sex was to surrender to the corruption of the mortal world."[385] For de Pizan, chastity and virtue are highly revered.[386] In the Medusa passage, she is beautiful but not threatened by male dominance or to be punished; de Pizan reclaims safety for Medusa. The de Pizan Medusa does not stoke lust in men or must lay siege to their advances. According to Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Ovid, Medusa, disobedient to the patriarchal script of chastity and virginal purity, her virtue was stripped. For Hesiod, Ovid, and de Meun, women are prey. The de Pizan Medusa represents her disdain of immoral men who hurt women. Lady Rectitude notes how male desire toward women resulting in force is "evil."[387] The de Pizan Medusa is not villainized for the actions of men and women (FEP of Athena).

Partaking in a sexual act with Poseidon, the Hesiodic Medusa's promiscuity is deemed immoral, her chastity tainted. Blumenfeld-Kosinski offered insight as to why de Pizan would want to counter the Hesiodic Medusa. As a Christian in the medieval era, de Pizan would have been aware of the "moral meaning," that one's virginity was representative of spiritual purity.[388] For medieval women, sexual modesty was deemed the highest virtue.[389] Did Christine de Pizan image her City as a neighborhood, one that women would not have to be concerned with violence and rape? If so, the Ovidian Medusa would have resonated with de Pizan. Given that de Pizan's opinion of Ovid was

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[385] Janega, *Once and Future Sex*, 61.

[386] De Pizan wrote about the exemplary chastity of virgins and their esteemed virginity in 15 separate sections in *The City of Ladies*.

[387] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 143.

[388] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 107.

[389] Green, "'Traittié Tout de Mençonges,'" 147.

highly unfavorable, it is reasonable to conclude that when reading of Medusa's violated chastity by Neptune (Poseidon), this would have caused her dismay. Lady Rectitude refers to the rape of married women, widows, and virgins as "unbearable."[390] De Pizan omits the rape and monstrous transformation since there is no transgression on Medusa's part. By doing so, de Pizan not only counters the Ovidian depiction but "defuses Ovid's uncomplimentary portrayal."[391] By omitting rape and subsequent transformation into a deadly beast, Christine rejects the misogynistic interpretation of Ovid. "Her [de Pizan's] mastery of literary technique combines with her authentic experience to create a new kind of story that is indebted to Ovidian fable and its interpretations yet independent from it."[392] De Pizan may have been dismayed that Medusa's body was transformed into a monstrous beast, viewed as an immortal assault on women created in God's image. Christine bemoans to Lady Reason, "How can anyone dare slander the vessel that bears such a noble imprint?"[393]

From antiquity, rape culture and gendered violence is normalized and often excused due to male prowess and entitlement, a sexist norm to this day.[394] Medusa is sexually objectified by Poseidon, victim-blamed, punished for the act, then her head becomes an object, a trophy of male conquest. Aside from objectification, in the canon of

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[390] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 148.

[391] Kellogg, "Transforming Ovid," 191.

[392] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 179.

[393] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 37.

[394] In 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a report stating that globally, one in three women will experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, underscoring the scale of gender inequality and discrimination against women. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/07/improvement-in-the-status-of-women-in-the-united-nations-system-2023

ancient and medieval Medusan prose, tonally, the narrative theme is that violence against women is normalized, a cultural complicity writ large: powerful gods rape with impunity. This is what Manne refers to as the dismissal of a victim of misogynistic violence.[395] Was de Pizan distraught about Medusa's pain, anguish and dishonor of being raped? Lady Rectitude tells Christine "…don't believe for a moment that chaste, respectable women take any pleasure whatsoever in being raped. Indeed, it is an ordeal that is worse than anything else…"[396] In de Pizan's City, Medusa is not subjected to violence. "Christine offers a corrective to many classical and medieval texts because they failed to do justice to the nature, capabilities, and aspirations of women."[397] While it may seem that de Pizan adhered to the patriarchal script of a women's value based on chastity, she advocated for choice; a woman must decide, not conquered by man. "Christine does not advise chastity in the service of men; rather she seeks the well-being of women."[398] Medusa could not defend herself from the ancient and medieval literary agents of misogyny, *The City of Ladies,* a locale of female sovereignty, does.

Medusa's Honor

Understanding the recklessness of men, perhaps de Pizan empathized with Medusa, not being able to defend her honor. In conversation with Lady Rectitude, Christine criticized Ovid and "his fellow authors" about their supposed moral teachings that frame women as deceitful and malicious. Lady Rectitude replied, "These authors

[395] Manne, *Down Girl,* 217.

[396] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 146.

[397] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, xix.

[398] Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning," 14-15.

don't address women to warn them to beware of traps laid by men, yet they certainly deceive women on many occasions with tricks and lies."[399] In all the ancient and medieval misogynistic Medusan tropes, the underlying sentiment is that of disrespect, derision, and scorn for Medusa, or women depicted as her. In a section about worthy ladies of the past and the men who malign them in books, Lady Rectitude tells Christine, "To think that men have the nerve to say that all women must be good and those who aren't should be stoned! I would ask them to first look at themselves and let he who is without sin cast the first stone. They should examine their own conduct. I tell you, when men become perfect, women will follow their example."[400] Medusa maligned as the female mythological antagonist has been blamed for violating expected chastity norms of virginity, being too vain, symbolizing vice, being too beautiful and alluring, eliciting fear in males, and being too powerful—an overall disobedience to the patriarchal script. De Pizan provides Medusa salvation from defamation. Lady Reason tells Christine, "…from now on, ladies and all other worthy women will have refuge and a place where they can defend themselves from all these assailants. These ladies have been defenseless for too long now, like an unfenced field, without a champion to take up their cause."[401]

It is reasonable that in deeming Medusa a valued citizen to reside in *The City*, de Pizan posed a direct critique against the Christian paternalistic writings of Saint Augustine, Marbod of Rennes, the *Ovide Moralisé*, and Matheolus. This may be likely since Hult informs us that, "Christine opposes the clerical establishment by her

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[399] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 167.

[400] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 166.

[401] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 26.

tendentious definition of the female voice as the "other" voice, speaking against the characteristic mistreatment of women."[402] For example, in the *Ovide Moralisé* interpretation, Medusa is defined as a lustful woman, using her diabolic power to engage men in sinful behavior. The de Pizan Medusa is not solely a Christian interpretation but morally humanist through a feminist lens. Regarding the 'remythisization' or the reception of myth for de Pizan, as Blumenfeld-Kosinski notes, "Received as texts, not as religion, the ancient myths provoked not worship but commentary."[403] To de Pizan's effort of revising myth, Kellogg adds, "Christine seeks to disengage her mythic figures from their traditional associations, the male mythic framework and to retrieve the goodness, richness and astuteness of essential female nature."[404]

For Saint Augustine, Christian faith is superior and in opposition to any reverence of ancient paganism and myth: Christian doctrine as the authority of morality. In *The City of God*, albeit brief, he condemns the female gorgon, with snake-like visage, pagan religion as dangerous. Unlike Saint Augustine, de Pizan is not anti-paganism. Willard made an astute point about de Pizan's character development: quite different from well-known theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, Lady Reason, Rectitude, and Justice are primarily secular virtues.[405] For Medusa, a woman with pagan ancestry, the contrast with Saint Augustine, who despised her ilk, is stark. She is safe in the walled city of women, unlike religious texts of societal divisions based on gendered prejudices. For

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[402] de Pizan and Hult, *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, 1.

[403] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 107.

[404] Kellogg, "Christine de Pizan and Boccaccio," 128.

[405] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 136.

Bourgault and Kingston, de Pizan's *City of Ladies* is akin to Saint Augustine's *City of God* since both serve as a community with members spanning ages, but "Christine is not offering a theory of divine justification…the women are admitted to the city based on moral qualities and noble deeds, not directly through divine grace"[406] Readers can imagine that on the grounds of the walled city are women of nobility and pagan ancestry in commune, anathema to Saint Augustine.

Refuting the Marbod of Rennes, the *Ovide Moralisé*, and Matheolus, Christine speaks to Lady Rectitude, who refutes men's claim, namely medieval writers accusing women of vice:

> Yet beyond all the vices women are accused of by men, particularly in writing, is one they unanimously proclaim, that is, that the female sex is fickle and inconsistent. Women are unpredictable and flighty, they say, women are weak hearted, they vacillate like children, and they are unsteady.[407]

While Christine recognizes "corrupt women" who do "wicked things," she obviously does not see Medusa in this light.[408] As a pious woman, it seems reasonable that de Pizan would be dismayed by the indignity of Medusa per patriarchal depictions such as Virgil's Dante, with Medusa at the gates of Hell with the Furies. For Boccaccio, Medusa's wealth is not a testament to Medusa's intellect or business acumen; it is merely an opportunity for Perseus to exploit, the praise bestowed to the demi-god. Where Boccaccio sees Medusa as passive, an easy conquest for male dominance, de Pizan focuses on virtue. Lady Rectitude tells Christine, "It's not true that the majority of women lack virtue…the

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[406] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, xxiii.

[407] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 149.

[408] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 139.

terrible things and the evil that keep occurring in this world are not committed by women."[409] In many of her works Christine underscores the importance of a woman's guarding her good reputation."[410] Lady Rectitude tells Christine, "…if a woman commits the slightest lapse (for which men are themselves to blame through their perpetual scheming), they are immediately ready to accuse her of weakness…and continue to offend and hurt women in word and deed."[411]

Christine De Pizan: Foremother of Feminist Thought and Action

In *The City of Ladies,* Christine de Pizan bore witness to the defamation of women. She challenged the misogyny embedded in prose, providing one of the first written works of women writing women. Disheartened by the portrayal of women, including Medusa, de Pizan boldly stepped into the male writing domain, a significant act that allowed her to reclaim the depictions and defuse the rhetorical power of the ancient and medieval writers. With an astute observation about male writing breaking the dignity of women; her *City of Ladies* was an attempt to restore it. As a citizen of the City, Medusa is the first Medusan feminist literary output and the first feminist reclamation of the patriarchal myth. Given the pervasiveness of the Medusan patriarchal script for over 1000 years, de Pizan situated Medusa in the illustrious city of Ladies, not as the proverbial other to be feared or disciplined, but as a valued citizen in a community of sisterhood. As a feminist and humanist, de Pizan, empathetic to Medusa, offered her salvation from the vilification of the agents of misogyny.

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[409] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 165.

[410] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 178.

[411] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 150.

Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* is inspirational and aspirational, unlike the gendered pessimism of male writers for whom she relied on as a narrative framework; de Pizan's *City of Ladies* is revisionist history. In a literature culture built on patriarchy, de Pizan's feminist dissent is also inspiring. A trailblazer of feminist thought and action, de Pizan's *City of Ladies City* was her clarion call for women's respect and rebuttal of male writing, namely misogynistic literature and letters. But to whom was de Pizan writing for? It is not until the last few pages of *The City of Ladies* that de Pizan revealed her intended audience: "…may all you women, whether aristocrat, bourgeois, or lower class be on your guard at all times and ably defend yourselves against those who threaten your honor and chastity."[412] De Pizan encourages women of all social classes to "stand on their own feet, to make some sort of contribution to society, to dominate the conditions of their lives that make or break them."[413] For Bennett, de Pizan "turned to these historical women to inspire ordinary women in her own day."[414] De Pizan provides a rich tapestry of women's narratives, each offering a unique perspective on the female experience. For modern feminists, we should turn to Christine de Pizan for inspiration—our ancestor of feminist thought and action should be lauded.

[412] de Pizan, Bourgault and Kingston, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, 220.

[413] Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 146.

[414] Bennett, *History Matters*, 6.

CHAPTER FOUR
RECLAMATION OF MEDUSA IN THE FOURTH WAVE OF FEMINISM

Central to the theme of this dissertation is tracing the historic and cultural context of the Medusa myth, depicting the evolution from a symbolic patriarchal, misogynistic metaphor to modern day imagery of female strength and resilience. The commonality throughout history, although incongruent, that fostered change toward the modern feminist revisionist myth are the pursuit of the ideals of respect, morality, virtue, and dignity. The incongruity of this evolutional dynamic is especially noted in the lack of direct reference by modern feminists to the earliest feminist writing of Christine de Pizan. Writing in the early 15th century, de Pizan felt and understood the plight of women. The *City of Ladies* portrays a safe place where women are respected, virtuous, and dignified. Medusa as an invitee to the *City* signifies her deserving of a life in a noble, civilized society. Medusa's residency in the *City* is de Pizan's direct assault on the patriarchal Medusa script. In 1405, it was apparent that societal ideals were not afforded to women and that a marginalized *otherness* defined them. Modern feminists in the fourth wave are still battling this historic plight.

Modern feminists and de Pizan have much in common. The binding force across nearly seven centuries is a consciousness and frustration regarding male hegemony. Like de Pizan, modern feminist creators are distressed with the status of women as proverbial *other*, and with that distress, there is defiance to the patriarchal script. De Pizan was the first feminist voice pushing back against Medusa imagined through a misogynistic lens. Like de Pizan, who recognized the harm of antifemale sentiment by misogynistic medieval men, feminists in the fourth wave are attempting to reconcile the harm of modern men including U.S. President Donald Trump, Supreme Court Justice Brett

Kavanaugh, Harvey Weinstein, Jair Bolsonaro, and others too numerous to name. Feminists in fourth-wave cultural spheres such as the arts, fashion, film, prose, and social media are responding with creative Medusan feminist outputs of indignation. This final chapter explores their pursuit of feminist ideals within a contemporary context.

Affording Medusa Respect

The feminist Medusan outputs that reflect a narrative of respect in the 21st century communicate empowerment, agency, and honoring oneself in the face of adversity. Popular culture and influence-driven social media are proving to be high leverage modes of communication, education, motivation, and solidarity, generating a clear understanding and unified path to achieving feminist ideals. This respect central to the ancient Medusa myth layered with humiliation and degradation is being completely turned around portraying Medusa as a powerful symbol of strength and resiliency. The modern Medusa imagery as a brand and social media touchpoint powerfully highlights respect due to women in light of patriarchal injustice.

Donatella Versace Medusa

For over four decades, Medusa has not just been a symbol, but a powerful emblem that defines the luxury fashion brand Versace. This iconic figure was handpicked by the brand's original designer and namesake, Gianni Versace, a respected clothing designer who laid the foundation of the Versace brand in Milan in 1978. In 1993, he selected the image of Medusa as the logo for his fashion line for women, a decision that would shape and define Versace's brand identity. For Gianni, choosing the Gorgonian image elicited, “A sense of history, classicism—Medusa means

seduction…a dangerous attraction."[415] The Versace clothing designs were bold and captivating, as his selected brand icon.

Figure 3. Image of the original 1993 Medusa logo. See History of the Logo: Versace. https://medium.com/@darar.11des/history-of-the-logo-versace-b805f0ff629b

Throughout the evolution of the Versace brand, the concept of f*amilism*, the norms, values, and behaviors of encompassing kinship that underscore family obligation, was a pivotal force. This cultural cornerstone, as Susan G. Berkowitz articulates in her article, "Kinship and Sex Roles in Southern Italy: Contradictory Ideals and Real Contradictions, "…proclaims the ultimate authority of the male —decision maker and spokesman to the outside world."[416] In line with this cultural norm, Donatella, Gianni's sister (and head designer), for years, accorded Gianni with deference and respect, recognizing him as the sole authority of the Versace brand.

Tragically, in 1997, Gianni was gunned down by a serial killer on the front steps of his Miami home. After Gianni's untimely death, Donatella quickly realized her own power and leadership abilities. Taking over the Versace fashion house, she continued its

[415] Kiki Karoglou, *Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 26.

[416] Susan G. Berkowitz, "Familism, Kinship and Sex Roles in Southern Italy: Contradictory Ideals and Real Contradictions," *Anthropological Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1984): 86.

success by making influential decisions as the creative director and matriarchal figure. Donatella, who had been by Gianni's side for years, both literally and figuratively, transformed the House of Versace into a billion-dollar brand.[417] With a visionary approach, Donatella continued to champion the idea of the powerful Versace women while introducing a design philosophy that embodies inclusivity and empowerment. Taking the reins of Versace during the third wave of feminism (1990-2010), she embraced a feminine yet fierce persona, leaving an indelible mark on the brand's evolution. Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, the author of *Dressed for Freedom: The Fashionable Politics of American Feminism*, writes, "Just as their forebearers, they did not reject fashion and beauty practices but saw them as a path for liberation and self-expression."[418]

No longer her brother's muse but in a position of influence and power, Donatella moved beyond the patriarchal purview of female seduction. In leading the Versace brand, Donatella's experience as a woman has influenced the fashion house—according to her, making is "more feminine and more feminist."[419] Under Donatella's creative direction, in a convergence of fashion and feminism, as a material product of culture, the Versace Medusa has transitioned from a symbol of dangerous beauty to a striking emblem of female strength embodied in the Donatella Medusa. There is duality in the Donatella

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[417] In September 2018, the Michael Kors brand bought Versace for 2.12 billion US dollars with Donatella assigned as the Chief Creative Director. Since August 2023, Versace has been owned by the fashion company Tapestry. Donatella's position remains. See https://www.reuters.com/markets/deals/tapestry-merger-with-versace-owner-capri-gets-eu-japan-approval-2024-04-15/

[418] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, *Dressed for Freedom: The Fashionable Politics of American Feminism* (University of Illinois Press, 2021), 188, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv20hcvnz.

[419] Jess Cartner-Morley, "Donatella Versace: 'My Brother Was the King, and My Whole World Had Crashed around Me,'" *The Guardian*, September 14, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/sep/14/interview-donatella-versace-my-brothers-death-made-me-strong

Medusa: the affirmation of female strength and agency for Donatella and the Versace Medusa as a means of reclamation—the Versace Medusa as a personification of Donatella. This Versace symbol now represents female power and resilience.

What prompted Donatella's significant shift towards a more feminist Versace brand, with Medusa as a powerful feminist symbol, a representation of female strength for the brand to embody? As Scott explains, "Experience is always an interpretation, *and* at the same time it needs interpretation."[420] In a 2008 interview for *Financial Times*, we can begin to see the evolution of introspection. Donatella admits, "For a few years I felt that I was really impersonating Gianni's style. After all, he had taught me everything I knew about design. In recent years I have become more confident in my abilities and have found my own voice."[421] But a significant reason for a feminist-forward Versace brand is Donatella's concern about American politics, particularly the 2016 election of the 45th President Donald J. Trump. His sexual swagger, stream of insults about women's looks, and infamous taped boast of forcing himself on women shattered every political taboo that decades of feminism had labored to put in place.[422]

As a declared feminist who values women, respects women, and advocates for women, Donatella's concerns were made public one year into Trump's presidency. Rejecting the American politics of Donald Trump, in an interview for *Attitude Magazine*, Donatella says, "It's so horrible. This is like going back to the past, looking back in

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[420] Joan Wallach Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott (New York, Routledge, 1992), 37.

[421] Emily Backus, "I Am Fascinated by the Medusa," *Financial Times*, February 8, 2008, https://www.ft.com/content/dbbae01e-d50c-11dc-9af1-0000779fd2ac.

[422] Susan Chira, "Donald Trump's Gift to Feminism: The Resistance," *Daedalus* 149, no. 1 (2020): 72, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01774.

history. We live in a very scary moment for our freedom, for the freedom of everybody. So, this is a moment to talk about it and say, "Guys, listen: don't be seduced by what you think is a strong man. That's not a strong man; that's a weak man using those words to put fear in you."[423] With a consciousness and concern for the status of women, Donatella expressed concern: "Today, we have so many problems: #MeToo, discrimination, going backwards in history, so I think your clothes need to be a weapon while you achieve your goals. This is how I think about clothes now; like a language."[424] As Rich notes, for women, "…we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into."[425] Fashion scholars Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett argue that the material and visual nature of fashion adds "new ways of seeing" feminist politics.[426] The Gianni Medusa was of seductiveness, a beauty of allure; for Donatella, Medusa is an empowering emblem of the fashion house

In the cultural sphere of high fashion, a *way of seeing* is using the Donatella Medusa to express and promote feminist ideals. Reclaiming the narrative of Perseus appropriating Medusa's power to kill his enemies, Donatella appropriates Medusa's power to embolden women as an emblem of feminist consciousness. Feminist messaging in the digital age relies on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn and Pinterest, all social media platforms utilized by Versace as well as the brand website. Actively utilizing technological spaces to convey feminist

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[423] Will Strode, "The Queen of Fashion," *Attitude Magazine*, no. 305 (January 2019), 43.

[424] Strode, "The Queen of Fashion," 47.

[425] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 19.

[426] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, *Dressed for Freedom*, 4.

messages with Medusa in the forefront, for Donatella, Medusa is the ultimate symbol of unapologetic female authority and power—fearless and bold.[427]

Fashion can be a means of transgression and empowerment, a dynamic cultural language and political strategy for feminists— fashion as a vehicle for the mainstreaming of feminism in public discourse.[428] Aside from the Donatella Medusa adorning clothing, accessories, housewares, jewelry and perfume, Donatella's use of the internet as a primary mode of communication to promote the reimagined cultural product of the Versace Medusa is a clear demonstration of the brand's commitment to digital marketing. "You need to know what's going on in the world because we are no longer divided into countries, we are one world now through social media and the internet."[429] The current brand's strategic use of technology goes beyond promotion, it is a platform to cultivate a feminist message and aesthetic of female empowerment, resilience, and agency.

During the Trump administration, Donatella created "The Medusa Story" (2018) an 11-chapter video series communicating what Medusa means to the fashion house: feminist values, beliefs, and ideals. The videos are short (under 60 seconds) narrated by Donatella or one of her models wearing Versace clothing and accessories adorned with Medusa iconography that retells the myth, depicting Medusa as a muse for female agency and self-worth. The 2021 video, "The Story of Medusa" summarizes the 11-chapter series in a 72-second video using a rapid montage of Medusa imagery. The video aims to remind viewers of Medusa's portrayal as a "protagonist," symbolizing "unapologetic

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[427] Hannah Warren, "Versace's Medusa Power Talks Lean into Female Power," *The Outlet,* April 15, 2021, https://www.the-outlet.com/posts/versace-medusa-power-talks

[428] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, *Dressed for Freedom,* 4-5.

[429] Strode, "The Queen of Fashion," 47.

authority and female empowerment," and as “an iconic signifier of the powerful Versace woman.”[430] To date, the video has nearly 100,000 views.

In a continued commitment of fostering digital feminist activism, in 2021, Donatella launched the “Medusa Power Talks” on the Versace website and social media sites. The female-led eight-part video series explores the role that power plays in the lives of 21st century women. Donatella has not only asserted a new understanding of Medusa but of herself at the helm of the Versace fashion house. In the first video of ‘Medusa Power Talks,’ Donatella informs the viewer, “What Medusa means to me is a refusal to be defeated. Is a Medusa in me? I feel I am Medusa.”[431] For Donatella, being fashionable is not in opposition to feminism; fashion is a means to promote gender equity and inclusion—for Donatella, inclusion is solidarity.[432] The project aims to amplify diverse voices to promote gender equality and female agency. Aside from Donatella narrating the first video, seven models representing of a spectrum of identities also narrate: Ghanian American, Black (African American), Vietnamese, Russian, and an Afro-Taino model that is transgender and non-binary.

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[430] Versace, “The Story of Medusa,” YouTube, video, 1:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5gJGupD_HY

[431] Godfrey Deeny, “Donatella Versace Launches Medusa Power Talks,” *FashionNetwork.com*, March 30, 2021, https://ww.fashionnetwork.com/news/Donatella-versace-launches-medusa-power-talks,1291304.html.

[432] Donatella is a champion of diversity and inclusion. In marketing campaigns, runway shows, and the Medusa Power Talks series are women and those who identify as women of different ages, sizes, races, sexual orientations, and ethnic backgrounds.

Figure 4. Image from The Versace You Tube page, "Medusa Power Talk: Donatella https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bymzIes46Ng&list=PLxViQyEiEuWFZ50Xps3gTkqMAoSWixHyM&index=2

A critique some may have is the commodification of Medusa as a product, that *wearing feminism* can be seen as reductive for the feminist movement, noted by Fox as "the cooption of the feminist agenda into commercial interests."[433] Yet Fox makes an interesting point that fashion statements can be powerful, not always the most meaningful way to advance women's rights, yet "we should not dismiss ways in which fashion can open a space for activism and resistance."[434] Rather than perceiving the Medusa video series as a marketing stunt, as Fox notes, "Feminists carve spaces of freedom and power within the boundaries of consumerism and conventional feminine appearance."[435] The Donatella Medusa conveys feminist ideology and promotes a political ideal of inclusion. Donatella, effusive about women in power, uses Medusa to symbolize that strength. "Fashion can be a useful vehicle for articulating feminist ideas and attitudes, and

[433] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, *Dressed for Freedom*, 186.

[434] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, *Dressed for Freedom*, 193.

[435] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, *Dressed for Freedom*, 3.

feminism can promote fashionability."[436] For Donatella, Medusa is emancipatory, a liberating icon of female strength. Always respectful of Gianni's talents and worth, Donatella has now stepped into her own as a leader for the Versace fashion house. The iconic Medusa, a powerful symbol of Donatella's evolution, stands as a testament to her leadership; the Donatella Medusa is a profound acknowledgment.

TikTok Medusa Tattoos

Against the backdrop of #MeToo and the rise of TikTok popularity, beginning in 2021 (post COVID-19 lockdown), the social media site was flooded with video images of women with Medusa tattoos. To date, searching #medusatattoo and #medusatattooexplained yields thousands of videos with over 100 million views.[437] When accessing the hashtag videos, the Medusa imagery is more than the classical story about a monster. The technological platform allows users to share short video clips and accompanying captions, which are personal testimonials from survivors of sexual assault. These clips highlight their strength, healing, and resilience. For numerous women and some men, the bodily adornment of a Medusa tattoo symbolizes a way to regain power and autonomy after experiencing sexual assault and trauma.[438] Through the medium of tattooing, women are reclaiming ownership of their bodies and expressing the physical and mental pain they have endured. The Medusa tattoos also serve as an emotive connection in fostering a supportive community; there is a deep sense of solidarity for

[436] Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, *Dressed for Freedom*, 193.

[437] As #MeToo illustrates, today's movements can obtain an audience of millions in hours and adjust to sociocultural norms and conditions as they grow, spread, and change (Jubas, 136).

[438] It is important to note that for some people, choosing Medusa imagery for a tattoo is merely aesthetics.

survivors of sexual assault and those who support them. This researcher argues that Medusa tattoos symbolize feminism, the timelessness of violence against women represented in the ancient myth. Medusa's story of being assaulted, blamed, shamed, and punished resonates with victims of sexual assault whose bodily autonomy has also been violated. Both Medusa and the women TikTokers are survivors of a patriarchal rape culture. In an indirect way, the ancient mythological Medusa is having her #MeToo moment. For the TikTokers, the Medusa tattoo is emancipatory, a catharsis of female storytelling via ink and skin. In an ironic twist, the Medusa tattoo is akin to a protective shield like Athena's.

The video representations of Medusa create a context of awareness and understanding of how Medusa is a locus of creative expression of resiliency. Morales writes, "Myths resonate because they are perceptive about the psychology of trauma, highlight victims' strength and strategies of survival, and guide our attention toward aspects of experience of sexual assault." [439] For these women, the act of tattooing oneself with Medusa imagery is emancipating – the act of posting is liberatory. In the post era of #MeToo, Medusa has become a muse, the ancient narrative reflective of the contemporary struggle of sexual assault and victims of rape, what Jane Caputi refers to in *Goddesses and Monsters* as "patriarchal force."[440] A shift in perspective of oneself, affords reinterpretation. Using the harsh reality of their sexual assault, women are tattooing Medusa to reclaim their sense of self. #TattooMedusa is healing, a preservation

[439] Morales, *Antigone Rising*, 74.

[440] Jane Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2004), 121.

of the self. It is a way for victims to contextualize the harm against them and the ability to counter it, an emboldened virtual discourse of healing. As Rich writes, "This drive to self-knowledge for women is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society."[441] Women, such as Tik Toker @_jkerly often share a video including images of the tattoo in progress, the completed Medusa tattoo, overlay them with textual testimonial to support fellow victims. In response, a fellow TikToker responded, "I need to get mine. I need to show not myself but my accuser he didn't win. Especially in family get togethers. This was my sign. Thank you."

Figure 5. Image from @_jkerly posted to TikTok on September 26, 2021.[442]

Although the women posting the videos are emboldened, sensing a solidarity in honoring one's pain, there are detractors: men who troll the safe space with misogynistic

[441] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 18.

[442] J. Kerly, "Make Your Day," TikTok, September 21, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@_jkerly/video/7012345088936267013?embed_source=121374463%2C121433650%2C121404359%2C121351166%2C72255952%2C121331973%2C120811592%2C120810756%3Bnull%3Bembed_share&refer=embed&referer_url=www.capitalfm.com%2F&referer_video_id=7012345088936267013.

taunts. Relevant to the power of social media, Kaela Jubas informs us that on a sociopolitical level, a "feminist snap" signals an end to patience for injustice, a refusal to continue accepting the unacceptable.[443] This term was coined by Sara Ahmed, the author of the book, *Living a Feminist Life*. In a chapter dedicated to explaining the origin and application of feminist snap, she writes that it is "a way of thinking more creatively and affirmatively about breaking points."[444] A snap can tell us when it is too much, after it is too much, which is how a snap can be feminist pedagogy.[445]

A TikTok user that goes by the name @itsmarg0t posted a three-minute video lamenting the ignorance of men posting comments about the meaning and symbolism of the Medusa tattoo. In a tone of outrage and frustration, she explains how she has had her Medusa tattoo for many years, long before TikTok, and knowing the symbolism: being a victim of sexual assault. She then counters the male internet/TikTok trolls who post faulty claims in her video's comment section about the Medusa tattoo as merely "trendy," wanting attention, promoting victim-complex, and questioning how it is possible that so many women could have been assaulted and raped. The male backlash warranted @itsmarg0t's feminist snap.

> The meaning of a Medusa tattoo in the sense of it being used for protection, a symbol of survival, allyship, and for people who have experienced or have people in their lives, loved ones who have experienced SA [sexual assault] goes beyond the last two years of the "trend" on TikTok. This has been a symbol for decades.

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[443] Kaela Jubas, "More than a Confessional Mo(ve)ment? #MeToo's Pedagogical Tensions," Adult Education Quarterly, 73, no. 2 (2023): 133-149, https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136221134782

[444] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 187, muse.jhu.edu/book/69122.

[445] Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 198.

> There are a lot of grossly ignorant men commenting on this post and I have been deleting them all. Bullshit! I don't want to hear it. I don't want to see it.[446]

Aside from feminist pedagogy, the informative nature of the online Medusa videos is an example of public pedagogy. Akin to the #MeToo Movement, the TikTok Medusa hashtags act as an educational movement due to its online, viral nature, and the revealing, truth-telling nature of content.[447] Public pedagogy in an online space can involve the telling of new stories to engage marginalized voices and the retelling of old stories to disturb and disrupt familiar narratives.[448]

Social media, a significant technological marker of modernity, affords an awareness of Medusa as a rape victim, and women's tattoos derive from a sense of solidarity with her, but why would women utilize the public space of social media?[449] Manne provides insight regarding the power of "crowdsourcing" in the age of social media: "Drawing attention to the ways in which one has been wronged as a subordinate group member may sometimes be the best, or even the only viable way to foster solidarity with other people in a similar position."[450] Journalist Sasha Weiss proposes

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[446] Margot, "Make Your Day," TikTok, January 28, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@itsmarg0t/video/7193620519499861249.

[447] Sara Clarke-Vivier and Clio Stearns, "MeToo and the Problematic Valor of Truth: Sexual Violence, Consent, and Ambivalence in Public Pedagogy," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 34, no. 3 (2019): 55.

[448] Clarke-Vivier and Stearns, "MeToo and the Problematic Valor of Truth," 61. Public pedagogy is educative work that operates in extra institutional spaces, sites of learning beyond the classroom, formal education, and curricula, 61.

[449] It is not only TiKTok that has Medusa tattoo content; Instagram, Pinterest, and X (formerly Twitter) do too.

[450] Manne, *Down Girl*, 239.

that, if sexual violence silences women in the moment, online spaces create the conditions under which that silence and its concurrent shame can be overturned because they are, at least ostensibly, safe. If one cannot call out their assailant in the darkness of a subway station for legitimate fear of physical violence, one can do so publicly on social media, backed by a chorus of women who have lived through the same.[451] For Weiss, the digital environment is anonymous enough to create a semblance of safety yet offers just enough exposure to allow for the formation of a meaningful community for many.[452] Akin to de Pizan's diversely populated *City of Ladies*, the online community affords victims a sense of protection with thousands of posts from across the globe.[453]

The TikTok Medusa hashtags afford victims of sexual violence an opportunity of engagement in an online space with those who have had a similar experience — to bear collective witness to their trauma but also to their resilience. Myth such as Medusa "offer hints of women's empathy toward one another and the empowerment possible through those seemingly moments of solidarity."[454] Moreover, "Both the victimization and anger experienced by women are real and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society. They must go on being tapped and explored by poets, among others."[455] Those "others" we see are utilizing TikTok as a means of redress. These women are drawing attention to a shared experience, a viable way to foster solidarity.

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[451] Clarke-Vivier and Stearns, "MeToo and the Problematic Valor of Truth," 57.

[452] Clarke-Vivier and Stearns, "MeToo and the Problematic Valor of Truth," 57.

[453] As of June 2024, there are 114.8 million Medusa tattoo posts. See https://www.tiktok.com/discover/medusa-tattoo?lang=en

[454] Morales, *Antigone Rising*, 74.

[455] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 25.

Evoking memories of second-wave feminist consciousness-raising groups, a hashtag such as #Medusatattoo can open a dialogue about sexual violence.[456] What we see in many of the TikTok Medusa hashtags is a collective snap. As Ahmed writes, feminist snap is also a history of resistance, of not being willing to put up with something.[457]

Medusa is symbolic for the victims of masculine societal constructs of power and domination, all too often experienced by women. The abundance of videos shared under the Medusa hashtags are not just individual expressions but a collective voice of empowerment. The visuals and written commentary in these videos, focusing on strength, healing, and resilience, ignite a broader discussion in the public discourse about the Medusa myth as a potent symbol uniting women in their shared experiences and struggles. Rich reminds us that "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new direction is more for us than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival."[458]

Affording Medusa Modern Morality and Virtue

Manne reminds us that feminism must prevail to counter patriarchal ideals, norms, and actions: "Feminist progress has been rapid and impressive in many ways. But this has led to resentment, anxiety, and misogynistic backlash. We see this coming out under the mantle of moralism."[459] What we see in the fourth wave of feminism is a

[456] Jubas, "More than a Confessional Mo(ve)ment?," 139.

[457] Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 199.

[458] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 18.

[459] Manne, *Down Girl*, 101.

modern morality, a new narrative and conceptualization of *her*story. For Manne, "As we see time and again, misogyny frequently involves moralistic takedowns or the unforgiving shaming of women for their moral errors."[460] In the 21st century, feminist visionaries and their allies recognize the men and institutions that are agents of misogyny, the voices of moral authority controlling the narrative with gendered notions of patriarchal ideals. Modern feminist creators counter these ideals. The following feminist Medusan depictions reflect a narrative of modern morality and virtue, encompassing creative outputs that reflect environmental ethics, the moral imperative of addressing sexual assault and climate change, social justice for victims, and moral relativism as opposed to religious doctrine.

Jasmin Vardimon's Medusa

During the #MeToo movement, Medusa became an emblem of feminist resolve, considering women's experiences of pervasive misogyny and victim shaming. Jasmin Vardimon (1971 - present), a London-based Israeli choreographer, dancer, and director of the Jasmin Vardimon Dance Center developed and produced a high-culture feminist Medusan output of performative dance, "Medusa," a full-length production that premiered in September 2018 and toured the UK into 2019. The press release for the "Medusa" dance production reads, "Vardimon examines the gendered historical significance of Medusa, the myth, the symbolism and the philosophical idea of reflection. The new full-length production not only looks back to deconstruct the myth but will also look forward and

[460] Manne, *Down Girl*, 28.

explore her aquatic symbolism in the environmental future of our seas."[461] On the dance production's You Tube channel, Vardimon explains the production's origin: "While creating Medusa I was reflecting on our socio-political climates and looking at where we are as a society but also environmental issues that concern us at the moment. Through the research process, reflecting on the myth of Medusa, and its kind of wider connotations in our contemporary society and reflection into where it's influencing politics and history and how the story been used throughout history."[462] The central themes in the Vardimon Medusa are the rape by Poseidon, FEP of Athena, and environmental destruction.

After Donald J. Trump was elected president, women's revulsion for the president was a central focus in the public discourse. The Vardimon Medusa is imbued with political meaning related to the gender politics of #MeToo and the 2016 US Presidential election. In an interview published by the Berlin-based magazine, *Sleek,* Vardimon said she was inspired to create the Medusa production due to the political climate, to explore how the Medusa myth can be seen through a modern lens, highlighting the parallels between sexual politics and the assault on the environment. Vardimon stated, "Gender and injustice are subjects I have previously explored in my work over the years, but perhaps the current climate brought me back to explore this old story in a much wider reflection. Throughout history, the image of Medusa has often been used in association

[461] Jasmin Vardimon Company Presents the World Premiere of MEDUSA (Co-Commissioned by Sadler's Wells, Gulbenkian, Kent County Council, Dance East and Institute of the Arts Barcelona, 2018), Jasmin Vardimon Company, https://jasminvardimon.com/works/medusa/

[462] Jasmin Vardimon Company, "What Is the Inspiration Behind Medusa, and What Are the Central Themes?" 2019, 1:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DvFgqU1iOw.

with strong female figures to silence them."[463] In the interview, Vardimon adds, "Another reminder was the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when Donald Trump supporters were seen wearing t-shirts of Trump as Perseus, holding the chopped head of Hilary Clinton as Medusa."[464] What Vardimon astutely addresses is how modern women, especially politicians who wield power, are mockingly compared to and caricatured as Medusa.[465]

Figure 6. TrumpAndTriumph, the Zazzle online marketplace sold pro-Trump merchandise during the 2016 election and after.[466]

As an ascribed characterization of animus, Medusa is often portrayed as representing a threat requiring male conquest and control. This portrayal, deeply ingrained in our cultural narratives, has a profound impact on how women are perceived with Medusa (and women) frequently immortalized as the gendered idiom of *the nasty woman*.[467]

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[463] Emily May, "Medusa's Makeover for the #MeToo Moment," *Sleek*, December 2018, https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/medusa-me-too/.

[464] May, "Medusa's Makeover for the #MeToo Moment."

[465] Aside from Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Angela Merkle, Theresa May, and Dilma Rousseff have all received the sexist Medusa treatment. For example, the "Impeach Nancy Pelosi" silver coin on eBay. See https://www.ebay.com/itm/164750547695

[466] In 2021, The Medusa Project successfully pressured Zazzle to remove products with this imagery from their site.

[467] "Nasty woman" is a common slur Donald Trump uses toward powerful women. See Aaron Blake, "'Nasty' is Trump's Insult of Choice for Women, But He Uses it Plenty on Men, Too," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/08/21/nasty-is-trumps-insult-choice-women-he-uses-it-plenty-men-too/

Elizabeth Johnston, in the *Atlantic* article, "The Original Nasty Woman" writes, "In Western culture, strong women have historically been imagined as threats requiring male conquest and control, and Medusa herself has long been the go-to figure for those seeking to dehumanize female authority."[468] Vardimon recognizes how the patriarchal Medusa myth serves as a metaphor: the dangerous gorgon symbolizing the threat of a powerful female, such as Hilary Clinton, in a male-ordered society. Dianne Purkiss and Carolyne Larrington, in their essay, "Women's Rewriting of Myth," refer to symbolism such as this as the voicing of "masculinist terms."[469] Art historian Christine Corretti believes that Medusa's imagery in popular culture materializes whenever male authority feels threatened by female agency.[470] This sentiment is also expressed by Beard: "…this beheading remains even now a cultural symbol of opposition to women's power"[471] An unsettling material depiction of said beheading is the Cellini Medusa, "Perseus with the Head of Medusa" (1545-1554), a bronze lifelike sculpture of a heroic Perseus holding Medusa's severed head. Crafted by Italian Renaissance sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, the patriarchal output is considered a masterpiece.[472] During the election, online markets such as Zazzle hosted anti-feminist content creators such as "Trump and Triumph,"

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[468] Elizabeth Johnston, "The Original 'Nasty Woman,'" *The Atlantic*, November 6, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/the-original-nasty-woman-of-classical-myth/506591/

[469] Diane Purkiss and Carolyne Larrington, "Women's Rewriting of Myth," in The Feminist Companion to Mythology (London: Pandora, 1992), 445, https://archive.org/details/isbn_9780044408505/page/456/mode/2up.

[470] Johnston, "The Original 'Nasty Woman.'"

[471] Beard, *Women & Power*, 75.

[472] The Cellini Medusa is housed in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, Italy. See https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/hitchcock-directing/QAFJ_2t8wOHGQg

selling men and women's apparel, coffee mugs and rally signs with a visual misogynistic Medusan trope, the Cellini-esque Perseus/Medusa imagery.

Relying on Ovidian myth, a thematic focus Vardimon explores is the dynamic of FEP (female-endorsed patriarchy), with Athena punishing Medusa as a rape victim; she depicts Medusa being raped by Poseidon with violent choreography.[473] The assault of Medusa is akin to the assault of Mother Earth, of climate change.[474] In her review of Vardimon's "Medusa" in *The Guardian*, "A Snake-haired Gorgon for the #MeToo era," Lindsey Winship observed, "Vardimon is reminding us that the snake-haired gorgon was not a monstrous man-hater for no reason, but a woman subjected to abuse and left bitterly vengeful."[475] Winship also notes the FEP of Athena: "Medusa is raped by Poseidon – that's the origin story Vardimon wants to highlight. Yet women are not only victims. Here is a goddess, presumably Athena, bending the world at her whim, swooping her arms with great flourish and flooring all in her path. It is Athena, after all, who punishes Medusa for Poseidon's actions. It's an early honour crime that shuts down any idea of sisterhood."[476] In a dramatic closure, Vardimon reimagines Medusa as the subject of

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[473] Vardimon directly sites Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a resource (Jasmin Vardimon Company, "What Is the Inspiration Behind Medusa," 1:07).

[474] Vardimon does not note Trump's specific policies, but his administration dismantled over 100 major climate policies and rolled back many more rules governing clean air, water, wildlife and toxic chemicals. See Nadja Popovich, Livia Albeck-Ripka, and Kendra Pierre-Louis, "The Trump Administration Rolled Back More Than 100 Environmental Rules. Here's the Full List," *New York Times*, January 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks-list.html

[475] Lindsey Winship, "Medusa Review – A Snake-Haired Gorgon for the #Metoo Era," *The Guardian*, October 23, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/oct/23/medusa-review-a-snake-haired-gorgon-for-the-metoo-era.

[476] Winship, "Medusa Review."

immoral scrutiny. The dancer portraying Medusa takes the coiled rope from her own head and wraps it around Athena's, an intended revision to Ovid's myth; Medusa oppressing her oppressor. Rich writes, "If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment."[477]

Figure 7. from Vardimon's "Medusa" with Medusa on the left, Athena, on the right. Source: Lucy Writers (2018)

MWTH (Medusa with the Head)

In 2018 when Brett Kavanaugh was undergoing hearings to be a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, his sexist display of contempt of being accused of sexually assaulting Christine Blasey Ford was concerning for those watching the proceedings. Kavanaugh, in response to the allegations of sexual assault displayed "patriarchal condescension"[478] where he behaved like an unruly Greco-Roman god: privileged, protected, and immune from consequence. What we saw in Kavanaugh is as Manne describes: "When men are

[477] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 23.

[478] bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1995), 101.

privileged, or long have been, they may proceed with a sense of not only legal impunity but also moral entitlement—secure in the idea that what they seize is theirs for the taking, and sometimes trying to wreak revenge on women who fail to uphold their end of history's bad gendered bargain."[479] On October 6th, the day Kavanaugh was confirmed, Bek Andersen, an NYC artist, was scrolling Instagram and came across the viral image of a potent material product: the sculpture "Medusa with the Head of Perseus" (2008) by Argentinian-Italian sculptor Luciano Garbati. Deeply dismayed by the Kavanaugh hearings and in a palpable antagonism toward Brett Kavanaugh, she contacted the artist in Argentina to bring the sculpture to New York. Turning dismay into a catalyst for action, the MWTH (Medusa with the Head) Project was founded by Andersen with the goal to publicly display the Garbati Medusa.

Figure 8. Image of the meme Bek Andersen saw on Instagram. See https://www.lucianogarbati.com/prensa

[479] Manne, *Down Girl*, 217.

For the artist, his sculpture is a statement: Medusa's history is "a tragedy, that's the key."[480] In another interview for *Quartz News*, Garbati refers to classical myth, namely Medusa's characterization as a monster who was "raped, cursed, and killed" and how the Renaissance Cellini sculpture he saw often growing up as a child in Florence, "astonished" him.[481] For Garbati, the Cellini Medusa depicts the myth "at its worst," he wondered, "How should that sculpture look…"her victory, not his."[482] Garbati's sentiment aligns with bell hooks' view that the cultural model of patriarchy is flawed since it is about domination.[483] Surveying the Medusa image in the Cellini sculpture, we can see how the patriarchal images carry the history of violence against women across time and place.

After two years of organizing, Andersen's vision was achieved. On October 12, 2020, in downtown New York City, strategically placed across the street from the courthouse where Harvey Weinstein was tried for sexual assault, MWTH (Medusa with the Head) was temporarily erected.[484] The life-size sculpture, Medusa gripping Perseus' head is a form of political expression and contemporary retelling, a visual condemnation of Perseus' hero quest. As if Medusa was seeking justice, standing seven-foot tall was an inverted image of the Cellini Medusa. But what inspired Garbati to create this modern

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[480] Editions MWTH, "Conversation with Bek Andersen and Luciano Garbati," YouTube, video, 20:19, December 20, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Wx4MwLMBV4.

[481] Annaliese Griffin, "The Story Behind the Medusa Statue That Has Become the Perfect Avatar for Women's Rage," *Quartz*, October 3, 2018, https://qz.com/quartzy/1408600/the-medusa-statue-that-became-a-symbol-of-feminist-rage.

[482] Griffin, "The Story Behind the Medusa Statue."

[483] hooks, *Killing Rage*, 73.

[484] The Medusa statue was removed in April 2021.

Medusa? In a 2018 interview with Andersen, Garbati said that he was thinking about the "traditional victories made by men" — he wanted to depict "a consciousness of this being [Medusa]…a tragic situation, a tragic event. I created it ten years ago, but it makes sense the structure has acquired significant importance."[485]

Figure 9. Image on the left of the bronze Garbati "Medusa with the Head of Perseus" with the dissertation researcher, and on the right, the Cellini sculpture "Perseus with the Head of Medusa" (1545–1554).

[485] Editions MWTH, "Conversation with Bek Andersen and Luciano Garbati," 14:06.

Seeing the Garbati Medusa in person, there is symbolic weight since the sculpture challenges traditional mythology by shifting the narrative and presenting Medusa not as a victim but as an empowered figure. As if avenging the insults and accusations of immorality that the ancient Medusa experienced, the MWTH redresses them. Medusa's historical marginality of a passive victim and Perseus as victor is inverted with patriarchal masculinity flipped to reveal a solemn female rage. As an ally, Garbati is engaged in a feminist critique of the Medusa myth as a course corrected visual. Medusa is humanized as a critique of patriarchy, her redemption and wrath on public display.

Since collaborating with Garbati to publicly display MWTH, Andersen has launched the Medusa With The Head Project, "an innovative and artist-led initiative that "breathes new life into classical narratives, shaping their significance in modern culture and future visions."[486] The project draws inspiration from ancient myths, with a focus of reinterpretation through modern, artistic expressions. The aim of the project is to "bridge historical narratives with contemporary societal themes."[487] For Andersen, the themes that the MWTH Project explores go beyond Medusa: "Our project explores themes of transformation, gender dynamics, power structures, and the impact of mythology on contemporary society."[488]

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[486] "About | MWTH Project," MWTH Project, https://www.mwthproject.com/about

[487] "About | MWTH Project." The landing page of the MWTH Project specifically notes the story of Medusa as depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

[488] "FAQ | MWTH Project," MWTH Project, https://www.mwthproject.com/faq

Aside from the project's mission and proclamation of project themes, prominent on the project website are products for purchase: t-shirts, sweatshirts, tote bags, posters, miniature bronze or resin sculptures, devotional candles, air fresheners, keychains, and necklaces. Melding gendered consciousness and consumer culture the MWTH Project provides the opportunity to purchase the MWTH Medusan feminist output.[489]

Anita Rocha da Silveira's Medusa

The Medusa myth, transcending its Western origins, is reimagined through the lens of a Brazilian feminist screenwriter and director, Anita Rocha da Silveira, offering a unique and compelling perspective. In 2021, Rocha da Silveira took on the challenge of interpreting the Medusa myth: the result was the horror film *Medusa,* a testament to her feminist creativity as she directed and penned the script. Written and directed through a feminist lens, Rocha's Medusa narrative was deeply informed by socio-political events, specifically Brazilian conservative, religious politics and the rise in right-wing populism. By naming the film *Medusa* Rocha da Silveira metaphorically sets the tone for viewers to consider the themes explored in the film: intersections of modern Christian hegemony, gendered ideals of women, and the need for female agency. Situated in a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, the film presents a narrative that resonates with the experiences of young women, who often find themselves conforming to the rigid expectations of evangelical Christianity. Rocha da Silveira's exploration of the contemporary discourse surrounding the system of oppression of Christian ideals of femininity, and how women are controlled

[489] Shop Medusa with the Head. See https://www.mwthproject.com/shop

through notions of beauty, modesty, and Christian faith, is a timely and thought-provoking Medusan output. According to Rocca:

> I started writing 'Medusa' in 2015, way before Bolsonaro was elected, even before the impeachment (of Dilma Rousseff), but in Brazil we could feel a conservative rise since 2013. I started to see young people on social media and on YouTube developing a very conservative point of view. I started to follow a girl, she was an upper middle-class journalist, and the theme of her channel was "I fight for the end of feminism." She was saying that women should be submissive to men, and this was a girl from the city who was very pretty and articulate. Then I was also struck by reading news articles about girls ganging up to beat up another girl. There were a lot of these episodes happening in Brazil, and also in Argentina and Chile.[490]

A major narrative overtone of Rochas's *Medusa* is the masculinism portrayed by the male actors and the FEP response. When asked about the purpose of creating the film, Rocha stated:

> I started to think about how machismo, how sexism is injected into the structure of our society. It's a myth from, two or three thousand years ago and it's about a woman punishing another woman. Yet still today we can find women trying to control other women. Sometimes we can be labeled as hysterical, as crazy very easily. We have to control our bodies, what we eat more than men. A woman's sexuality is much more controlled than a man's. Their loss of virginity is scrutinized. The main theme of "Medusa" for me is control and the lack of control, being able to lose control.[491]

The lack of control that Rocha refers to is what Caputi references as patriarchal hegemony, the insistence upon "the primacy of a solely male principle" that affords males divine legitimacy, ruling society and women.[492] This is what we see in *Medusa* by

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[490] Thorne, "How Anita Rocha da Silveira Coils Mythical and Real-Life Violence."

[491] Thorne, "How Anita Rocha da Silveira Coils Mythical and Real-Life Violence."

[492] Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters*, 344.

Rocha, the male congregants are put on a pedestal, revered for their uber-masculine traits and roles; the patriarchal ideals enforced by a group of pious teenage girls called, "The Treasures." Against the backdrop of the misogynistic pillar of evangelical religion, the director shows us the potency of patriarchal power, the male church congregants exercising the power to moralize female behavior. The young women in the film are *other*, less than, dutiful to the patriarchal constructs in Brazilian culture, what Caputi notes as "Christianity's antagonism" and "concomitant" hostility to women.[493] This notion sets the narrative Rocha depicts, the hyper masculinization in a sacred space, evoking the moral authority of patriarchal gender roles. Young males in the church are called the "Watchmen of Sion," their appearance and choreographed workouts are militant, their toxic masculinity on display when criticizing their fellow female congregants' beauty regiments and holy devotion in a threatening tone and physical posture, what bell hooks refers to as "the taunt of immorality."[494] Corrupted by the patriarchal script of gendered moral codes, the girls form a vigilante group and hunt down and beat fellow females deemed sinful due to their immoral promiscuity. Rocha da Silveira depicts modern-day Athenas who champion patriarchal ideals of chastity with physical violence. In one scene, the girls hold down and punch a victim telling her she is a "whore, slut, and ridiculous feminist."[495] Rocha communicates the sentiment of Manne, "We should be concerned with the rewarding and valorizing of women who conform to gendered norms and expectations, those who engage in certain forms of patriarchal virtue

[493] Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters*, 348.

[494] hooks, *Killing Rage*, 77.

[495] https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/amzn1.dv.gti.d98476f0-3b76-4812-802e-258cd20e17a0?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb 1:24:15.

signaling."[496]

Throughout the film, Roche underscores the perils of upholding a rigid feminine and Christian ideal of womanhood, a compliance to a gendered notion. The mounting pressure of societal and cultural ideals of beauty, purity/chastity, and deference to the males in the congregation comes to a crescendo when viewers finally see female resistance in the form of female rage. In a 2021 interview for *Variety Magazine*, Rocha explains how Medusa symbolizes female rage.

> For me, it [Medusa] represents releasing this anger that women have been putting aside for years, for generations. We can release this anger that we have to keep inside because you're told you can't speak out loud, you can't be crazy, you have to be this controlled woman that speaks in a low voice and doesn't lose control. There's a feminist point of view to the film that's important. Maybe part of the audience won't like that, but I wanted to make a film about girls rediscovering themselves and trying to at some point lose control and be the owners of their own bodies.[497]

At the end of the film, the young women see themselves and each other in solidarity. In her article, "Medusa: How the Literary Muse Became an Emblem for Feminism," Beverley Tan, provides insight about this way of seeing: "The female gaze is the antidote combatting centuries of male violation."[498] The film concludes with a rebuke of male control, women scream at the patriarchal system they have been beholden to. For hooks, "All marginal groups in this society who suffer grave injustices, who are victimized by

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[496] Manne, *Down Girl,* 192.

[497] Thorne, "How Anita Rocha da Silveira Coils Mythical and Real-Life Violence."

[498] Tan, "Medusa." In her article, Tan references second-wave feminist, Laura Mulvey, who, in 1975, coined the term, 'female gaze' as a film criticism in response to the leering male gaze (she coined in 1973). The female gaze views women as fully human and dimensional people, rather than a focal point for male desire.

institutionalized systems of domination are faced with the peculiar dilemma of developing strategies that draw attention to one's plight in such a way that will merit regard and consideration without reinscribing a paradigm of victimization."[499] For this director, she wants women to be heard. The young women's rage is spurred by anger, frustration and defiance from religious and androcentric hegemony. The howling women at the end of the movie are critical counterpoints to the meek and modest representation as "Treasures." As Manne explains, when women attempt to disrupt existing power relations, "Oftentimes, the women who are subject to misogyny draw attention to their moral injuries, in relation to the men who have made this the reality."[500] By releasing the constraints of patriarchal pressure, rage is emblematized for the viewers in a collective, liberating scream. The rage depicted in the Rocha Medusa is defiant, cathartic, and reads as a barometer of a collective *feminist snap*. *Medusa,* the director's personified clarion call, stands as a powerful symbol rallying against far-right religiosity, women not supporting women, and advocating for the reclamation of female agency.

The modern feminist Medusa narrative capitalizes on the attention-grabbing monstrous Medusa imagery to skillfully and artistically craft a storyline twist communicating Medusa's horrific abuse and indignation at the hand of the male oppressor. The feminist Medusa, in these narratives, are portrayed as holding the moral and virtuous high ground, advocating for justice and equality in a society that often overlooks or dismisses the experiences of women.

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[499] hooks, *Killing Rage*, 58.

[500] Manne, *Down Girl*, 248.

Affording Medusa Dignity: Medusa in Fourth Wave Feminist Novels: *Medusa, Stone Blind,* and *Medusa's Sisters*

Women were all too often silenced in the creation of Western myths, relegated to passive roles in the stories that unfolded, resulting in one-sided, manipulated narratives. The skewed patriarchal Medusa depictions of poetic prose were crafted to perpetuate a prejudicial telling that vilifies Medusa and her sisters. The ancient poets ushered in a patriarchal discourse depicting Medusa and her sisters as malevolent, that powerful women who threaten the status quo of male hegemony should suffer the indignity of patriarchy's wrath. Manne underscores this, "Misogyny's primary manifestations may be in punishing bad women and policing women's behavior."[501] Modern feminist writers recognize the Medusa monster myth as an early example of the patriarchal narrative vilifying the female, with its relentless need to reinforce the idea of female inferiority and absolute male dominance. Reconciling the historical and mythographic tradition of maligning women with Medusa's perspective (her sisters, too), their voices long suppressed, are now being heard. Disrupting the classical narrative, feminist Medusan outputs in prose are a direct means of challenging the misogynistic hegemony of ancient texts. What the modern feminists do is restore the dignity of these mythological figures. In the three novels explored in this chapter, Medusa is exonerated of all unjust vilification deemed by the androcentric imagination. Aside from the novels, a poem is included to underscore the modern perception of Medusa from a member of the Gen Z cohort.[502]

[501] Manne, *Down Girl*, 71.

[502] The Generation Z (1997-2012) cohort, known as "digital natives," are socially, racially, and environmentally conscious and value racial and ethnic diversity. For more on generational cohorts, see the Pew Research Center: https://rb.gy/nlge2x

What we see in the fourth wave of feminism is a modern Medusa discourse grounded in the legacy of écriture feminine — women writing women, albeit mythological characters, into the script of humanity, worthy of dignity. Unlike patriarchal antecedents, feminist writers are flipping the Medusa myth script of the Gorgon immortalized as the monstrous woman. For Ostriker, feminist mythical revisions recognize that the gendered inequalities palpable in Western myth and literary tradition are still in cultural operation and that a break in the cycle requires an intervention into the myths themselves.[503] The following feminist Medusan outputs reflect that intervention with narratives of dignity communicating inherent worth/worthiness, integrity, and assertiveness. The different depictions accentuate how the Medusa myth is a continued clarion call: the need to restore dignity for Medusa (and her sisters, too). "We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."[504] To counter Medusa circumscribed as a monstrous character firmly set in a misogynistic mold, feminist writers counter the patriarchal imagery of Medusa; she is not a monster but a sympathetic, dignified character deserving of empathy. For Purkiss and Larrington, the classical mythography of Western literature that has been transmitted by male writers, the narratives themselves, and the language they use are produced by and complicit in, perpetuating forms of patriarchy.[505] This is what fourth-wave feminists recognize and attempt to refute.

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[503] Morse, "Feminist Receptions of Medusa," 180.

[504] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 18.

[505] Purkiss and Larrington, "Women's Rewriting of Myth," 441.

Modern Medusan feminist outputs in prose are prescriptive tools that reimagine the mythological figure symbolizing female agency and empowerment. Medusa had no voice in de Pizan's *City* nor ancient and medieval texts; modern feminists have given her voice. There are similar narrative themes in all three Medusa novels restoring her dignity as a maligned mythological figure. What we read in each novel is Medusa's moral impunity as a rape victim.[506] In these novels, she is no longer blamed, shamed, and punished. The modern feminist writers' reference point for reimagination are the ancient texts/depictions but they approach the myth from a feminist vantage point, explicitly evoking a rejection of Medusa as monstrous (albeit retaining monstrous physicality). Purkiss and Larrington underscore "…for feminists, the rewriting of myths denotes participation in the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators."[507] Invoking Medusa and her sisters as protagonists, not antagonists, modern feminist novelists amplify their voices; there is finally interiority for these female figures. Another similarity in the contemporary novels is the FEP of Athena, still depicted as a female who endorses patriarchy. It is curious that modern writers would not reframe Athena's character and omit any wrongdoing toward Medusa as de Pizan did, but Mary Valentis and Anne Devane provide insight from their book, *Female Rage,* "There is a cultural tradition that encourages women to vent their rage on other women, who seem to be easier targets than the men who actually betrayed them."[508] Burton, Haynes, and Bear recognize the potency of FEP. A significant rewrite from ancient texts

[506] In each of the novels, there is no literary allusion to Hesiod (Medusa as licentiousness).

[507] Purkiss and Larrington, "Women's Rewriting of Myth," 441.

[508] Mary Valentis and Anne Devane, *Female Rage: Unlocking Its Secrets, Claiming Its Power* (Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1994), 145.

(and medieval) is to challenge the valorization of Perseus as a hero. In their retelling of classical myth, Perseus is no longer valorized. Lastly, a theme that all three novels share is the explanation of Medusa's matrilineal heritage as offspring of the sea gods Ceto and Phorcys, the granddaughter of the powerful primordial goddess, Gaia. This is a significant difference from the Greco-Roman poems that prominently figure the patrilineal lines, namely the titans, gods and their offspring. Altering the perceptions of their readers from a prior lens of misogynistic tropes to feminist ideals in their novelizations of myth, there is a course correction.[509]

Jessie Burton's YA Medusa

The first example of Medusa as the central figure in a feminist narrative of reclamation is Jessie Burton's YA (young adult) novel *Medusa* (2021). Medusa deserving punishment rather than deserving agency as a rape victim is the patriarchal narrative that has been normalized and assimilated throughout history. Burton sets forth with a revisionist mindset, an emboldened Medusa. In revising the classic myth, Burton retells the story from Medusa's point of view in first-person narration. Directly referencing ancient texts as patriarchal, Purkiss and Larrington write, "By rewriting myth, changing the narrative, changing the position of the speaker, changing the spaces available for identification, you are held to be at once making a dynamic break with the myths as told by the father..."[510] A significant narrative thread is a departure from

[509] With the increased publication of feminist revisionist myth, there is a critique of the written works as imposing a feminist agenda. This researcher finds it frustrating that there is opposition to the feminist rewritings given that male writers have been writing and rewriting the mythological Medusa story for millennia, up to modern day, evidenced by films, political propaganda, and video games. It is as if only men are privy to reimagining Medusa. See Alter, "The Women of Greek Myths Are Finally Talking Back."

[510] Purkiss and Larrington, "Women's Rewriting of Myth," 444.

Perseus, the alpha male, as protagonist and Medusa, as the antagonist, a narrative repeated for millennia. Further rejecting the classic androcentrism of Perseus, this contemporary Medusan novelist redefines the demi-god's masculinity. Perseus, on a reluctant quest for Medusa's head is curious, empathetic, and thoughtful toward Medusa. Burton craftily manipulates the myth and transforms Medusa into the victor. In an interesting plot twist, as Medusa's interiority as a snake-haired girl is expressed, she eventually kills Perseus with her visual power to petrify before he can kill her.

In a 2017 interview for *Bookseller Magazine,* Burton announced *Medusa*, as "empowering," exploring themes of "toxic masculinity and the meaning of consent."[511] Burton explained that given the gender politics following the sexual harassment claims faced by US film director Harvey Weinstein and many other powerful men, she "wanted to reclaim Medusa's story and invite the reader into her mind."[512] With a disdainful nod to the ancient patriarchal depictions that malign Medusa, Burton stated,

> So often [Medusa's] robbed of agency, turned into a monster, and used as a stepping stone for heroes. The myth of Medusa is a tale of objectification and toxic masculinity, and the meaning of consent. Given the continuing revelations about men like Weinstein and (US president Donald) Trump, and others we have each encountered on our way through life, Medusa's myth is ripe for the retelling.[513]

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[511] Heloise Wood, "Burton to Reimagine Medusa Myth in 'Empowering' YA," *The Bookseller Magazine*, December 7, 2017, https://www.thebookseller.com/rights/burton-reimagines-medusa-myth-context-toxic-masculinity-687471

[512] Wood, "Burton to Reimagine Medusa Myth."

[513] Wood, "Burton to Reimagine Medusa Myth."

The Burton Medusa is no passive victim; she is righteous and has agency. Through this work, Burton amplifies the voice of Medusa, no longer silenced through Athena's complicity. Burton's *Medusa* is feminist writing as an act of defiance and determination against patriarchal strictures. By un-silencing Medusa through a feminist lens, Burton contributes to a female-centric canon. As a YA author whose feminist Medusan prose refutes the gorgon as a dangerous threat, for the adult contemporary reader, another output adds to the public Medusa discourse.

Natalie Haynes' Medusa in *Stone Blind*

Another example of feminist revisionist myth is Natalie Haynes novel, *Stone Blind* (2022). Before writing Medusa as fiction, Haynes wrote a brief chapter about Medusa in her non-fiction work*, Pandora's Jar, Women in Greek Myth* (2020). Reflecting on both written works, during a presentation for the Harvard University Bookstore, Haynes admits that as a classics student, she had "bought into the idea that she [Medusa] was a monster."[514] In researching Medusa for the *Pandora's Jar* chapter, Haynes realized that she was treating Medusa "as a monster when in fact she is literally monster-ed, a survivor of sexual assault. I was still really angry about what had happened to her when I finished her chapter. I owed her a novel."[515] Recognizing the reductive misogynistic Medusan tropes from the classics, rather than focus on Perseus' hero quest, Haynes wanted to give voice to Medusa and to provide a modern context of her as a loving sister. In the Harvard

[514] Harvard Book Store, "Natalie Haynes Discusses 'Stone Blind,'" YouTube, video, 3:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsZ8tZSidJM.

[515] Harvard Book Store, "Natalie Haynes Discusses 'Stone Blind,'" 6:32.

interview, Haynes makes a direct reference to Medusa in the works of Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Ovid, as well as ancient art.[516]

Haynes uses their ancient texts as a framework with similar narrative contours (Medusa, born moral, is raped, transformed, hunted and killed) but focuses on the plight of Medusa and her sisters, in which their perspective as foundational. In this sense, is there a fidelity to the classic version? Yes and no. For Haynes, Medusa's death does not validate Perseus' heroism since he is denounced as a cowardly, fumbling idiot, the recipient of godly intervention, namely from Athena whom Haynes frames through an FEP lens as scornful, sly, and cunning. Haynes declares, "I really wanted to write a novel to say she's not a monster. Long before she is thought of as a monster, she is a sister, she is a daughter, she is a protector. She's sexually assaulted, and it just seems like another insult too far, doesn't it? It's bad enough that she's turned into something scary to look at, it's worse to assume that she's morally defunct at the same time for the fact that Medusa has been raped."[517]

Lauren J.A. Bear's *Medusa's Sisters*

A modern feminist reworking of the ancient Medusa myth in literature that situates Euryale and Stheno as the primary protagonists is Lauren J.A. Bear's novel, *Medusa's Sisters* (2023). This is the first novel to provide the interiority of the mythological sisters who barely get a mention in classical texts.[518] In providing the

[516] For examples of ancient art Haynes refers to see: The MET brochure, "Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art," https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/dangerous-beauty

[517] Harvard Book Store, "Natalie Haynes Discusses 'Stone Blind,'" 29:15.

[518] For example, Hesiod refers to Euryale and Stheno in one line in *Theogony*; Ovid does not mention them at all.

sisters' experience of witnessing their little sister brutally raped by Poseidon, Medusa and themselves being transformed into snake-haired creatures by Athena, and seeing Medusa beheaded for Perseus' hero-quest, Euryale and Stheno's subjectivity is valued.[519] After Medusa's death, the sisters are utterly distraught. Stheno laments, "I do not want to exist without her."[520] Through her prose, Bear recognizes and expresses the sisters' emotions, vocalizing their humanity. After years of the two remaining immortal sisters' coexistence on a remote island, Euryale, heartbroken not only from the loss of Medusa but also from the loss of her son Orion, decides to confine herself to the sea.[521] Before wading into the water, she tells Stheno, "Gods and humans, monsters and earth, everything originates from the same life force. And there are an infinite number of unlikely outcomes when these forces are brought together. Which is why lovely women descend from beasts and beasts sire gods that raise men out of earth…I'm ready Stheno. To go home, to *be* home. This is my freedom."[522] Releasing her sister's hand, Euryale disappears into the sea.

To gain insight into Bear's motivation for writing *Medusa's Sisters*, here are excerpts from an email exchange with the author.[523] It is important to note that in a prior

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[519] In Bear's version, all three sisters were beautiful, albeit, Medusa, the only one born mortal. After Medusa's rape in Athena's temple, it is Stheno who attempts to defend Medusa from Athena's wrath. Angered by the perceived audacity to question the goddess, Athena turns all three sisters into snake-haired beasts; all three have the deadly gaze.

[520] Lauren Bear, *Medusa's Sisters* (New York: Ace Books, 2024), 275.

[521] In describing the mythological figure of Orion, a giant hunter, Hesiod briefly notes that he is the son of Euryale and Poseidon; there is no backstory of the union. See Hesiod, *Hesiod: Homeric Hymns*, 71.

[522] Bear, *Medusa's Sisters*, 346-47.

[523] Curious about all three novelists' awareness about the de Pizan Medusa as a possible reference point, I contacted them three times over the course of 10 months via email, website contact, and Instagram messenger; Bear was the only response.

email inquiring about the author's awareness about the Christine de Pizan Medusa; Bear stated that she was not aware of de Pizan or her written work, *The City of Ladies.*

Who did you write *Medusa's Sisters* for?

> For adults like me who grew up on these stories but didn't understand the implications. It is so easy to get swept up in the magic, the beautiful people and locations, and gloss over the brutal treatment of humans, usually women, in these tales. And perhaps a bit for people who have experienced trauma or betrayal, for an opportunity at catharsis. I think when writers tell the truth about what hurts, about the unbearable, we are trying to show the reader (and ourselves) that we can survive.

Do you consider yourself a feminist writer; is *Medusa's Sisters* feminist revisionist literature? (For this question, if so, why, and if you do not, why?)

> Yes. To do this work, you must ask new questions of old texts and thus, reclaim lost voices (the oppressed and ignored). Women in antiquity are especially silenced because they lived in a world organized and controlled by men, then the record of that life is also organized and controlled by men. These women – the real and the fictional – are so easily lost. To find them, you must use your imagination and your compassion. Even though women aren't allowed the same agency in the original telling of these tales, they are ever present. Is there a Greek myth where a mother or daughter or sister or lover isn't essential to the plot? It is the artist's duty to bring them back to life in a way that feels powerful and authentic.

To what extent did the MeToo/Time's Up Movement foster contemplation about Medusa?

> The idea for the novel came to me at the end of 2017, during the Trump presidency and as the MeToo movement first began to spread on Twitter. My own daughter was six months old. I think that our oldest stories are their own species, like the rest of us, they need to adapt to survive. The stories need to evolve in response to changing times – new questions, new demands for perspective. MeToo/Time's Up, but also Black Lives Matter, forced us to reexamine both our history and our current cultural understandings. These movements similarly asked readers to reexamine the source of all the stories we have been told. When we rewrite these stories from another perspective, we undermine the storyteller – typically the patriarchal white man. It is an act of subversion, of rebellion. It says, *I was there, too. What I saw, what happened to me, matters.* We carry so many collective wounds as a modern society. We can grow from them, be changed and bettered by them, but only if we are honest. Truth, whatever that means, is most clearly illuminated when every point of view is considered.

When (or how) did you first become aware of Medusa as a rape victim (was it Ovid)?

> Not even in college, where I took Classics as an English major, did I understand that Medusa was a rape victim. Because Medusa's story features almost entirely in Perseus's myth, her backstory is deemed negligible – she just appears, monstrous and petrifying, the necessary body (or head) for Perseus's hero's journey, objectified so he can make his name. I learned that the Gorgons were three from Hesiod, then used the *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca* for more information on who they were originally and how they ended up in the Perseus story, Medusa was objectified then and she is objectified now. So often I see her used as a conduit for female rage – and I totally understand why. But her rage isn't just with men, it's with power. I don't think Athena was helping her by transforming her into a vengeful beast, though I've read that interpretation more than once (the theory that Athena gave Medusa her power back, her power over men, through transformation). No, I've always believed that Athena judged Medusa. That Athena participated in the institutions that blame victims and because she could not act against Poseidon for desecrating her temple, she laid all the punishment on Medusa. Athena is not a feminist, do not be mistaken! Furthermore, it is Athena who assists Perseus in his quest to kill Medusa. To me, Medusa is doubly brutalized – first by Poseidon, then by Athena. By the institutions of absolute power, who act and punish with impunity.

When (or how) did you first become aware of Stheno and Euryale? If it is a classic text, by whom?

> I always knew there were others because I remember the illustration "Perseus holding Medusa's Head" in the 1942 Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* which shows the Gorgons screaming on the rocks after Medusa's decapitation, as Perseus makes his escape. But that's as much as I knew. This is embarrassing, but I did not know the other Gorgons' names until I looked them up on Wikipedia! On the page, there was a quote from classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison describing the other Gorgons as "mere appendages" (from *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, 1908). I read this insult, holding my infant daughter, and felt gut-punched. Because I could not accept the sentiment that any woman – any human – is an appendage to someone more important, I began to cultivate the idea for a novel. So, I created a narrative where the Gorgon sisters are not peripheral but an integral part of the story. In my book specifically, Medusa is not the narrator, but her sisters are. I've always felt that the Classical writers treat the "other Gorgons" as even more soulless objects than Medusa. Not anymore![524]

[524] Lauren Bear, *Interview for My Dissertation*, May 23, 2024.

Taye Tibble's Medusa

In yet another example of the cultural intersection of the Medusa myth beyond a Western perch is a poem by Māori New Zealander, Tayi Tibble. As a young woman and emerging poet of cultural consciousness, Tibble used social media tools of Tumblr and Instagram to post her poems about ancestral trauma, colonization, popular culture, and womanhood. Recognized for her unique writing style, in 2018, at the age of 24, her book of poems, *Poūkahangatus*, was published.[525]

Figure 10. Image of Tayi Tibble's 2018 book of poems, *Poūkahangatus* See: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/705716/poukahangatus-by-tayi-tibble/

The cover of Tibble's book is the poet as a modern Medusa. In her homage poem to the maligned gorgon, "How Not to Be Dead in a Year of Snakes," it is as if Tibble is hissing back. Rich writes, "For a poem to coalesce, for a character or action to take shape, there

[525] The title of her book signals her criticism of colonial forces in the US, an intentionally written neologism referencing Pocahontas.

has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive."[526] On the first page of the book is the following poem, written in free verse, about Medusa.

"How Not to Be Dead in a Year of Snakes"

> According to Greek mythology, according to Wikipedia, Medusa was a 'monster'; she is generally described as a winged human female with venomous snakes in place of hair. Gazers upon her 'hideous' face would turn to stone. However, it is less known that Medusa was a master carver, engraving her existence in bone forever. Anything else said about her is rumour and a violent appropriation. In fact, it must be difficult not to sprout a head of snakes in a society that constantly hisses at you.[527]

Tibble writes in an authoritative voice about Medusa, rendering the reader with an understanding of her perception and rejection of classic myth. Refuting the ancient writers as operatives of misogyny, is what Scott refers to as the "importance of textuality" — how arguments are structured and presented.[528] With each line, Tibble constructs her interpretation and infuses a modern culturally constructed meaning. Tibble's language poses direct statements that evokes dissent in poetic form, which Marsha Rowe and Carolyne Larrington refer to in a review for *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, as poets "raids on the mythic domain" by bringing "new meanings of mythologic figures under the poets control."[529] Tibble referencing Wikipedia for her knowledge about Medusa is not surprising. As a member of the Generation Z cohort, she and her peers are known as 'digital natives,' raised in a cultural

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[526] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 23.

[527] Tayi Tibble, *Poukahangatus: Poems* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2022), 3.

[528] Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 7.

[529] Marsha Rowe and Carolyne Larrington, "The Feminist Companion to Mythology," *Feminist Review*, no. 46 (January 1994): 97, xi.

context of rapid technological advancements. On a somber note, this researcher argues that Tibble's portrayal of Medusa as a master carver, her violent appropriation, and societal bias are allusions to Tibble's Māori heritage. The Māori Kaupapa is a distinctly Indigenous approach featuring the importance of cultural knowledge, relational ethics, and the lived experiences of Māori given a colonial legacy spanning 150 years of economic and cultural subjugation.[530] For Tibble, Medusa has not only been misrepresented and maligned, but also serves as a poignant symbol of the ongoing misrepresentation and bias against the poet's Māori descendants, master carvers in bone, wood, and stone. As noted by Purkiss and Larrington, "Rewriting myth extends beyond the mythic literature; the place of the woman writer in relation to mythographic discourses is a 'buried truth of culture.'[531] Members of Generation Z also tend to value diverse identities, evidenced in their consciousness for social justice. Morales writes, "New adaptations change not only the plots of the ancient tales but also what they have to say about women, about race, about human relations; in other words, in changing myths (stories), artists subvert the myths (false ideas and beliefs) too."[532]

After her book of poems was published, Tibble wrote a 2019 article for *Fashion Quarterly* about her writing inspiration as a young woman, feminist and generational power:

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[530] M. Rua, D. Hodgetts, S. Groot, D. Blake, R. Karapu, E. Neha, "A Kaupapa Māori Conceptualization and Efforts to Address the Needs of the Growing Precariat in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Situated Focus on Māori," British Journal of Social Psychology 62, Suppl 1 (2023): 40. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12598

[531] Purkiss and Larrington, "Women's Rewriting of Myth," 445.

[532] Morales, *Antigone Rising*, 147.

> Women are multifaceted. We just want our cake and a snap before we eat it too.[533] We're not entitled, but we did grow up with expectations that the world would be willing to work with us. We're the generation born into third-wave feminism, whose mothers went to work. As soon as we started school, we were encouraged to have career ambitions. All our hopes seemed possible and elevated by our location. We felt fortunate to have been born in progressive, green New Zealand, the first country to give women the vote. Despite the diet of *Spice Girls'* messages of girl power we've been raised on, we still exist in a world where men like Trump are put in positions of power. Where one percent of the population owns more than 50 percent of the world's wealth. Where the damage done to the planet is near irreversible.[534]

What reads as pessimistic and dire in 2019, there is a sense of hope and optimism in 2024. When Tibble was interviewed about her poetry, she replied, "I remember an elder Māori poet told me that when we read our poems, we should read them with the mana they deserve. That way you honor your poem, you honor the audience, and you honor yourself. Mana is sort of like our concept of true integrity."[535] Tibble stresses that her artistry is not about fame or money; it is, "Everything for the kaupapa always (the cause)."[536] In the spring of 2024, Tibble's second book of poetry, entitled *Rangikura* was published.

For Burton, Haynes, Bear, and Tibble, their feminist Medusan discourse is grounded in a sense of resistance, rejection, and an overarching protest for female agency. Their cultural products of prose, both fiction and non-fiction documenting the

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[533] The "snap" reference may be to Ahmed's notion of feminist snap. See section "Respect" of this chapter, subsection, "Medusa and TikTok Tattoos."

[534] Tayi Tibble, "Poet Tayi Tibble on Young Women, Feminism and Power," *Fashion Quarterly*, December 17, 2020, https://fq.co.nz/poet-tayi-tibble-on-young-women-feminism-and-power/.

[535] Eloise King-Clements, "Even Tayi Tibble Is Insecure about Her Instagram Captions," *Interview Magazine*, April 8, 2024, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/literature/even-tayi-tibble-is-insecure-about-her-instagram-captions.

[536] King-Clements, "Even Tayi Tibble Is Insecure about Her Instagram Captions."

feminist imagination, are historical and cultural acts of defiance against the patriarchal script and misogynistic tropes. These female writers shift the vantage point, shift the perspective of Medusa – the depictions historically written by men. As cultural narratives, the feminist writers attempt to flip the script. As Manne declares, "If we want to change the world, we need to conceptualize it differently."[537] All of the feminists in this chapter are actively considering ways to represent Medusa through a lens of respect, morality, virtue, and dignity, moving away from the androcentric scripts deemed fixed. This shift, through the revisioning, rewriting, and repurposing of ancient patriarchal Medusan outputs, is a means of liberating Medusa and her sisters from the margins of historical imagination, offering a more balanced and inclusive cultural script.

[537] Manne, *Down Girl*, 42.

CONCLUSION

In a patriarchal society, consuming culturally produced outputs of Western myth provides a way of knowing, a way of understanding culture and society, and most importantly, affects our perceptions as humans. Myth shapes a culture's ethos. In that Western mythology is a product of male perspective, its narrative is a patriarchal script that has been fostered throughout history as the "classics" of Western society. Spurred from the male imagination, the patriarchal Medusa myth is indicative of the dominance of a misogynistic discourse: women as other. Embodied by the personified archetype of the evil woman, a lasting trope, template, and model of the proverbial nasty woman, Medusa symbolizes the disobedient woman who must be slayed, literally and figuratively. The Medusa monster myth vividly depicts how early male narratives sought to vilify females who were not dutiful to the patriarchal script. This version is emblematic of a lasting cultural framework for the structural and systemic institution of patriarchy/gender and power differentials, upheld through millennia as a propulsive force.

A patriarchal narrative emerged during the ancient Greco-Roman era, Medusa as a wicked manifestation of a single story that was normalized and assimilated throughout history: victim blaming, female-assisted patriarchy (FEP), and pseudo-hero conquest. The narrative of male hegemony continued with the ancient Medusa myth mined by male writers to create European medieval patriarchal Medusan outputs. In this era, a narrative shift occurred to malign women, that of the misogynistic Medusa trope, adding to the notion of male superiority and female inferiority, women were viewed as sinful, immoral and dangerous: *women as Medusa*.

The literary pioneer, 15th century writer Christine de Pizan, directly engaged with the oppressive power structure/pillar of misogyny. In writing *The Book of the City of Ladies* through a feminist lens, de Pizan was the first to reclaim Medusa from the misogynistic pillar of prose by situating Medusa in the city protected from male harm. Reference and acknowledgment of de Pizan's work is an important contribution to modern day feminist discourse and enlightened understanding. As a cultural production of prose, the first feminist Medusan output, the de Pizan Medusa is a valued citizen afforded respect, morality, virtue, and dignity. Over 600 years later, feminists in the fourth wave continue to wrestle the cognitive structure from patriarchal control and engage with the Medusa myth to reclaim the hegemonic narrative. Revisioning, rewriting, and repurposing the androcentric script deemed fixed, they, like de Pizan, present Medusa through a lens of humanistic ideals. Despite second-wave feminist reclamation of the medieval author, although forth-wave feminists do not appear to be familiar with de Pizan, the link of congruence is a rejection of Medusa symbolizing male hegemony.

This research is a powerful testament to the growing body of feminist inquiry, critical thought, and the application of feminist revisionist myth. The academic study of the Medusa myth serves as a historiographic lesson, illustrating the shifting tides of cultural perceptions: patriarchal and feminist. By diverging from the dominant narrative of ancient myth, which was heavily influenced by patriarchal ideals, this research, focusing on the Medusa myth, challenges the assimilation and normalization of a single story. The scrutiny of Medusa's depictions uncovers the enduring influence of patriarchy and the defiance of those who have rejected her patriarchal portrayal, choosing instead to reinterpret her through a feminist lens. As a scholar, researcher, writer, and feminist in

the new millennium, the act of revisionist feminist mythmaking as a feminist script, not only crafts a new narrative for Medusa but also propels forward female ideals. Referencing Medusa as an emblem of female agency and resistance, originally reclaimed by Christine de Pizan, and now, modern feminists, this powerful revision has made significant contributions to the representational archive once dominated by male hegemony.

Feminist reinterpretations of the Medusa myth serve as a powerful tool to challenge the androcentric framework of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism by rejecting the otherness of women. A principal reason why the Medusa myth resonates for this researcher and other feminists is that her historic storyline parallels the lived experiences as women: framed, blamed, ostracized, assaulted, victimized by female endorsed patriarchy (FEP), and threatened. With each new generation of feminism, a culture shift ebbs toward progress, and these shifts are not just theoretical, but tangible as recognized in the modern feminist Medusan outputs. These revised stories have the transformative potential to question cultural norms and contribute to dismantling the foundations of patriarchal ideals that cause harm. Christine de Pizan and modern feminists engage with the Medusa myth to challenge the patriarchal script, recasting the often-maligned gorgon in new stories and new narratives. In her essay, "We Should All Be Feminists," Adiche writes, "Culture does not make people. People make culture."[538] By critiquing the patriarchal interpretations of Medusa, feminists provide a new way to understand the

[538] Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), 46.

myth, inspiring us to envision a future where the historic portrayal of Medusa is a thing of the past.

Feminist curiosity has afforded insight and awareness to the production of the Medusa myth—who she has been imagined by, why, and how so through patriarchal and feminist lenses. Enloe writes, "Patriarchy is a searchlight, a concept that can enable us to see what we otherwise might miss: the connective tissue between the large and the small, subtle and blatant forms of sexism, gendered misogyny, and masculinized privilege."[539] With a newfound awareness of Medusa's narrative, primarily shaped through a hegemonic male lens, the "aha" moment that night in class was a transformative experience, creating a new consciousness about Medusa and, subsequently, the malignment of women, past and present. Feminist reclamation of Medusa has been what Rich refers to as an "awakening of consciousness."[540] It is important to examine how Medusa has been viewed through both patriarchal and feminist perspectives. This exploration is crucial for understanding the role of Medusan depictions in shaping historical and cultural narratives, as well as serving as rhetorical agents of meaning. This dissertation sheds light on the significance of Medusa in relation to patterns of patriarchal power, providing insight from ancient times to the present day. Notably, it focuses on the de Pizan Medusa, the first undoing of the patriarchal Medusa in history.

A current feminist telling of the Medusa story as an icon of female power against the backdrop of male-centric hegemony can provide symbolism and functionality for a new 21st-century Medusa myth. Patriarchy may be stubborn, but feminism, too, is

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[539] Enloe, *Big Push*, ix-x.

[540] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 25.

unwavering. As beneficiaries of the Medusan feminist outputs, it is our duty as scholars, researchers, academics, and feminists to recognize the significance and urgency of continuing to reclaim Medusa as our own.

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