

The Gaze of the Gorgon

A recent performance of a contortionist called to mind one alleged origin of the Medusa figure. The contortionist, a young, attractive woman, bent herself into such a position that her head, framed in long hair, was up between her legs, giving the appearance of a Hellenistic Medusa figure. Medusa, like the other gorgons, was originally horrendously ugly and frightful, but Hellenistic art turned her into a beautiful though snake-haired young woman. Was this simply one of the ancient fantasies of feminine evil? Many Greek monsters are female and most the product of sea-deities or of earth (as opposed to Olympian). Cf. handout #3 and 6.

Ferenczy in his psychoanalytic studies in the 1920s interpreted the Medusa head as “the terrible symbol of the female genital region” with the snakes signifying “the absence of a penis” and “the phantom itself” as “the frightful impression made on the child by the penis-less (castrated) genital”. Freud localizes this as the mother, though the revulsion to pubic hair (the serpents) is a common reaction of children to their first sight of naked adults of whatever gender. The fear held by immature men of engulfment in the womb, and the perhaps-consequent legends of the vagina dentate, may account for the fanged or heavily toothy gorgon face. This interpretation may be weakened by the unlikelihood that Greek boys would have seen their mothers naked and by the fact that the serpent coiffure is not an original element of gorgon faces.

The evidence of art also leads away from this interpretation. Gorgon (or gongoneion) denotes a bodiless frontal face of a particularly grotesque kind, whereas Medusa, from as early as 600BC, is shown on Greek sculpture and vases being beheaded by Perseus. So the face came first, then the creature. David Napier, in *Masks, Transformation and Paradox*, has shown and discussed many visual representations of the gorgon face from Greek and other cultures, and notes that “the salient features”...are its bulging eyes, gnashing tusks, a protruding tongue and snakelike hair, or at least the appearance of snakes in some aspect of her decorations.” The various gorgon faces (on vases, shields, pediments, etc.) are similar, but differ from each other especially from the Medusa being shown being beheaded by Perseus. (The gorgon snakes are sometimes merely ornate symmetrical curls over the forehead.) The protruding tongue and bulging eyes are the face of anger, lips curled back over gnashing teeth. The frowning brow, and flattened noses, curiously trim at the bottom, seem feline. Gorgonoid near Eastern faces are strongly leonine. IS the gorgon then a kind of humanoid lion, with the hair representing the mane?

But early gorgons also have beards. A male bogey? Closely resembling the gorgon face is that of the Egyptian god Bes, a friendly demon with protruding tongue and eyes and a snub nose, who serves as a protective device in homes, perhaps as early as 2100BC. But Bes is always shown with a complete body, thus closer in that to Medusa than to the Gorgon face. Napier points out that children use face painting as an instrument of fright, as do aborigines, often with dots around the facial contours and the forehead – frequently giving a feline look or a suggestion of the oriental concept of the third eye or supernatural vision. A similar effect comes from masks, but when you put on the mask, you become what you wear, as Romans did who put on the wax imagines of their ancestors when they marched in funeral processions. Recently discovered 4th century AD Peruvian masks have the same feline/gorgon features seen above, presumably an independent recurrence of the same phenomenon.

In the literary evidence, Homer in the Iliad (see #1 and 2) links the Gorgon with the Aegis (the goat-skin breast covering of Zeus, also borrowed by Apollo and, especially, Athena), used to strike fear into the hearts of the enemy. And Odysseus hurries out of Hades because he fears the Gorgon head may appear. Hesiod (#3) distinguishes the mortal Medusa from her two immortal sisters and documents dichotomy between gorgon head and Medusa. Medusa must be mortal because Perseus killed her, as Hesiod expects the reader to know already. (Seen again in #4.)

The Perseus story is well-known (cf. #5a-c), a labor from which the hero (like James Bond) would not have returned without the aid of expert advice (Athena-Minerva and Hermes-Mercury) and high-tech equipment (flying sandals, cap of invisibility, magic wallet – through which the gorgon gaze could not penetrate, pruning-hook scimitar). Hesiod (#4) depicts the moment after Perseus has beheaded the gorgon (not her e called Medusa) and is being pursued by her equally fearsome sisters, whose snakes (note) are around their waists, not on their heads. The Perseus legend keeps alive interest in Medusa long after the urbanization of Greece has displaced the use of the Gorgon decoration on shields. Perseus then goes on to rescue Andromeda from the sea-monster (according to Fontenrose, Python, originally Medusa's partner), using not the gorgon head but his winged sandals and his sword. After that, Perseus' further victories come through petrifying his numerous foes with Medusa's head. Ovid adds the Just-So Story of the drops of blood from Medusa's head infesting Africa with snakes (Seen later in Lucan, #6) and the transformation of seaweed into coral (when Perseus sets the head down on the sand so he can wash off his hands after stabbing the sea-monster), which shows how the magic powers attributed to Medusa became extended by the invention of writers. Ovid also is the only one who claims that Medusa was punished with snaky hair for having intercourse with Poseidon (father by her of Chrysaor and Pegasus) in front of a virgin goddess' altar.

Lucan makes the gorgon a thing of real horror but still a beautiful woman, just as in the representation on the aegis of Athena Parthenos of Pheidias. He exaggerates her petrifying effect, so that at her gaze even birds fall from the skies. Both Lucan and Ovid have Perseus use Medusa's head to turn the giant Atlas into a mountain for his inhospitality.

The disembodied Gorgon head on the Aegis represents the early tradition that Athena helped Perseus in his labor, but requested the head after he completed his work. In Pindar (Pyth 12), Athena even sings a triumph song on the death of Medusa. Could Athena, the virgin war-goddess, untouchable by man, be a doublet of Medusa? And the Greek counterpart of the Indian war-Goddess Durga, who is represented with the face of a gorgon: round angry face, bulging eyes, wrinkled brow, snarling mouth and fangs? Durga plays a role in the battle of the gods and demons comparable to that of the aegis-bearing Athena in the Gigantomachy and both goddesses have an association with fire (for Athena, lightning). The rage of both goddesses is terrible to the enemy but a protection to their friends, as when one is fighting behind its symbol on shield or breastplate.

When the Greeks built their shrines, they included the Gorgon face to drive off ill-wishers with its apotropaic stare. The female monster, loathsome and subject for heroic triumph at her death, is nonetheless an ally that the Greeks are not willing to forego.