

Demonizing Woman: The Myth of Medusa and Its Depiction on Works of Art

Kadının Şeytanlaştırılması: Medusa Miti ve Sanat Eserlerine Yansıması

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ABSTRACT

This compilation article interprets how the Myth of Medusa, which has ancient roots and which portrays a creature that turns those who look directly into her eyes into stone, has inspired various fields of art since ancient times, and how it is handled in different works of art, stories and images. Within the content of the compilation, this article claims that while the Medusa myth is interpreted in terms of gender inequality, social judgement and female identity, it is reflected in works of art as an indicator based on the prejudiced preferences of a patriarchal society. The main purpose of this article is to present the narratives of Medusa, who is often seen only as a symbol of evil, danger, or a simple object that men can have, and to show how the manifestation of these narratives indicates this in works of art. This article incorporates the following texts and graphics: the book of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's epic poem, Hesiod's *Theogony*, Judgement of Paris Myth, the Epic poem *The Iliad* by Homer, the Statue of Perseus with the head of Medusa by Benvenuto Cellini, the book of "*Paragone Delle Arti*" by Leonardo Da Vinci, Caravaggio Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio Shield, the logo of Versace brand, the poem *Aspecta Medusa* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and *Holding Our Own: The Selected Poems of Ann Stanford*. The basic principle of the article accepts that Medusa is a myth of social and cultural identity but claims that this myth is based on the prejudiced preferences of a patriarchal society. Medusa is a woman sentenced to death because of her identity and her actions against patriarchal norms. Such a situation caused Medusa's transforming gaze to become a source of threat and danger.

ÖZ

Bu derleme makale, antik zamandan beri çeşitli sanat alanlarına ilham olmuş, doğrudan gözlerine bakmaya maruz kalanları taş çeviren yaratık olarak da bilinen ve kökleri çok eskiye dayanan Medusa Miti'nin farklı sanat eserlerinde, hikayelerde ve imajlarda nasıl ele alındığını yorumlamaktadır. Derleme kapsamında, Medusa miti, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsiziği, toplumsal yargılar, kadın kimliği açısından yorumlanırken, ataerkil toplumun önyargılı tercihlerine dayanan bir gösterge olarak sanat eserlerine yansıdığı iddia edilmektedir. Makalenin temel amacı, sadece kötülüğün, tehlikenin sembolü ya da erkeklerin sahip olabileceği basit bir nesne olarak görülen Medusa miti anlatıları ve bu anlatıların bir gösterge olarak sanat eserlerindeki tezahürünü örneklerle sunmaktır. Bu hedefe uygun olarak makale kapsamında, the book of *Metamorphoses* Ovid's epic poem, Hesiod's "*Theogony*", Judgement of Paris Myth, the poem *Iliad* by Homer, art work *Perseus with the head of Medusa* by Benvenuto Cellini, the book of *Paragone Delle Arti* by Leonardo Da Vinci, Caravaggio Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio Shield, the logo of Versace brand, the poem *Aspecta Medusa* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Poem *Holding Our Own: the Selected Poems*, örnekleriyle farklı alanlarda Medusa miti yansımaları tartışılmaktadır. Makalenin temel prensibi, Medusa'nın bir toplumsal ve kültürel kimlik efsanesi olduğunu kabul etmekle birlikte bu mitin ataerkil toplumun önyargılı tercihlerine dayandığını iddia eder. Çünkü Medusa, kimliği ve ataerkil normlara karşı olan eylemleri nedeniyle ölüme mahkum edilen bir kadındır. Böylesi bir durum, Medusa'nın dönüşen bakışlarının tehdit ve tehlike kaynağı haline gelmesine yol açmıştır.

Keywords: Identity, Creature, Woman; Gender, Society, Culture, Art, Patriarchy, Biased, Phenomenon

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik, Yaratık, Kadın, Toplum, Cinsiyet, Kültür, Sanat, Ataerkil, Önyargılı, Olgu

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Introduction

From ancient times to now, Medusa not only has a side representing the reality of female identity, but she also exemplifies both human nature and a way of life. Her story offers interesting and controversial views on the ageless mythical female figure who continues to exist. Medusa is both a symbol of the victim and the victimizer, depending on one's perspective. She was created by patriarchal social norms, becoming the victim of socially constructed ideas. For centuries, she has been represented as demonized or dehumanized in the mindset of patriarchy. As a result of this, she is represented as a most deadly and gruesome universal woman character. Medusa is a great example of what happens to us when we walk outside the borders of socially accepted norms which somehow become lithified in culture, from ancient times to the present. Medusa's identity has been constructed by cultural and patriarchal norms. Her identity does not reflect a natural presence, in other words, does not match with innate gender genotypes. Her artificial cultural icons proliferate in line with certain patriarchal biases, presenting her concept as the subject of fantastic representations in paintings, as a muse for poems, stories, sculptures and more. As Alban said (2017:12), "Myth enlightens our view of women through archetypes, promoting understanding while transcending clichés to reach deeper insights".

Based on the mythical female figure of Medusa, it is possible to say that women are reflected in the same way at the present time due to acts contrary to society's specified norms. People believed the description of Medusa which represented her as a classical, rebellious female figure due to the image of her as depicted in ancient stories. Likewise, society neither accepts people who have their own voice and bright ideas, nor the people who contradict society itself. Society would like to put such people into a closed container, controlling their minds according to their own ideals. In this sense, a woman is not only condemned to be an evil source, something bizarre, or an outcast, but also a figure thought to be against the socially constructed norms as if she poses a threat, which is generally agreed upon even in some societies today.

Medusa, contrary to popular myth, is not actually a demonized female figure; she has been turned into that femme fatale character by a specific viewpoint which is called patriarchy. Portraying Medusa in the classical idea as a creature created as a slave for love and lust is humiliating. That is to say, myths are created as imposed by the patriarchal tradition, and Medusa is the victim of socially constructed norms and has been represented through the ages as a malevolent female figure. Rich (1972:23-25) suggests that all women share a common history which means they still live with the side effects of patriarchal norms, saying: "To be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination". Furthermore, Rich says that we should understand the myths of women completely in order to resist patriarchy, in that all myths were written under the influence of male-dominated societies. Yet, the figure of a woman's loyalty to specified roles has always been a suitably qualified norm, whereas women who started to move away from this norm in some way and for various reasons have been labeled subversive. What patriarchy demands is that the woman should take on the role of supporting, caring and giving birth to life without replacing the man. Patriarchy is a gender-based authority, discriminating between women and men to make the male sex the center of society, pushing one sex to live under the control of the other. The female sex is, so to speak, cursed with a life on the verge of death as one of the side effects of male supremacy. The qualities of women are mainly shaped as the expression of the dominant culture of society. Unfortunately, after individuals get used to this, women confront a strict gender role persistently presented in society. In this compilation article, the reader's attention will be drawn to the question of why Medusa has been regarded as a villain for centuries under the effect of patriarchy. With the examples from art, I will try to display how the perception of Medusa is reflected.

The mysterious, evil, and outcast gender figure complexity, starting with the account of the creation of Adam and Eve, has been used in different forms in society, art, and literature. The woman is constantly considered as a strange, mistaken, and completely inappropriate being since the power of the woman is believed to come from nature. The figure of the woman is associated with nature and is thus relatable with darkness and evil. People think that women are objects to be acquired as a visual pleasure, while men take the lead in culture, within positive norms. Women have been the focus of brutal criticism over time and, hence have been subject to degrading labels such as that of witches, monsters, or demons. In ancient Greek Mythology, Medusa was just one of the many misunderstood goddesses due to her splendid appearance and acts towards men. As told in the book of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's epic poem (1717:138-139), Medusa once had a proverbial beauty as she was the youngest mortal among the sisters of three Gorgons; Medusa, Stheno, and Euryale, such that even the goddesses would envy her. This is seen in the following:

"Medusa once had charms; to gain her love
A rival crowd of envious lovers strove.
They, who have seen her, own, they ne'er did trace
More moving features in a sweeter face.
Yet above all, her length of hair, they own,
In golden ringlets wav'd, and graceful shone".

After this point, the course of the classical myth changed. The beauty of Medusa began to be seen as the cause of problems for her and a threat to society, and she was sentenced to be ugly and an outcast all her life by the goddess Minerva or Athena. This was in return for what she had done with the god of the sea, Neptune or Poseidon, in Athena's sanctuary, on the grounds that

Poseidon broke the sacred marriage vow before Athena. To make matters worse, Medusa was not only ravished by Poseidon, but also each lock of her beautiful hair became a dreadful snake. Moreover, her eyes became very penetrating and those who looked at her directly turned into stone. She was put into the category of a demonized and seductive woman despite having been exposed to sexual abuse. Granted, in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Medusa is represented as a pitiful woman killed by the gallant hero Perseus for being a monster. No matter how splendid the depiction of Perseus as a bright, daredevil, epic hero who kills the monster in Hesiod's *Theogony* is, it would be better to understand the truth of Lamberton's (1988: 142) words "This is nevertheless a beautiful and suggestive adaptation of the traditional material".

"Her Neptune saw, and with such Beauties fir'd,
 Resolv'd to compass, what his Soul desir'd.
 In chaste Minerva's Fane, he, lustful, stay'd,
 And seiz'd, and rifled the young, blushing Maid.
 The bashful Goddess turn'd her Eyes away,
 Nor durst such bold Impurity survey;
 But on the ravish'd Virgin Vengeance takes,
 Her shining Hair is chang'd to hissing Snakes.
 These in her Aegis Pallas joys to bear,
 The hissing Snakes her Foes more sure ensnare,
 Than they did Lovers once, when shining Hair (Ovid, 1717:138-139).

To illustrate with another myth, the Judgement of Paris, the story is as follows. The evil goddess Eris was not accepted into the wedding banquet to which all the gods and goddesses had been invited, which was taken as a sign of great disrespect. Eris creates a golden apple and puts a price on it that only the fairest one among all the goddesses could have it, thereby creating chaos by sabotaging the banquet and taking her revenge. The three goddesses, Athena, Hera and Aphrodite, ask Zeus to make a choice to select the fairest one, but Zeus, preferring not to take part in the competition, instead requests them to ask the young prince Paris. All three goddesses force him to make a choice between them. Paris would become the Lord of Europe and Asia with Hera's gift. Athena offered him the head position leading the victory of the Trojans against the Greeks. And lastly, the most beautiful woman in the world would be given to him by Aphrodite. Of course, Paris chose the offering of Aphrodite (1955: 24.25–30). The "myth of beauty" which implies the ideal representation of gods and goddesses thus maintained its importance even in ancient times. Meanwhile, all the goddesses wanted to be thought beautiful, so they bribed Paris with gifts in order to make him choose them because the man who has everything is the one who decides who can be determined as beautiful. This tale from mythology clearly shows that the existence of a woman is nothing more than someone to support and glorify man. The role of women is connected with giving birth to new life, being beautiful and being under the control of man, meaning that her independence is surrounded by walls or borders. Even if she seems to have freedom, she acts upon certain given rights. Simone de Beauvoir (1989) illustrates this by portraying a woman defined by her children and housework. She attributed this to the fact that women still have to live narratives created by men's dreams because there has not been a myth crafted by women yet. Works of art and literature, though important means of communication, were not allowed to be produced by the hand of women; only men had the right to do so. Hence, women were not worthy to lighten up the darkness of society with their bright ideas. To clarify, the attributed responsibility of women was merely childbearing and housework, and the striking fact is that male society had a hand in the emergence of these misguided ideas which were beneficial purely for patriarchy.

Medusa was believed to be using her beauty to get male attention, which is why she was condemned to be punished. Further, Medusa's messy snakehead is allegedly connected with the absolute power of nature, representing the cycle of nature; birth, death and rebirth in relation to the life cycle. Thus women are mysterious creatures having the ability to give birth to life. Campbell (1988:48) defends the idea of "They represent life. Man doesn't enter life except by woman, and so it is the woman who brings us into this world of pairs of opposites and suffering". Here, Campbell puts forth that everything derives from the mystery of the fertility of women; obviously, problems and suffering are linked to the male sex coming out of the womb. Yet there was a time when women took the lead in authority and were called supreme due to their ability to bring new life into the world. Later, however, this thought was replaced with rooted ideas of society that all the sources of darkness originate from women. In truth, Stone argues that cursing Eve and the entire gender at this point is absolutely wrong. For Stone (1976), the past representation of Eve is not the symbol of women. Medusa and many miscomprehended goddesses do not deserve to share the same destiny as described in their origins. Misogyny should not be accepted as normal, but a woman can only overcome this biased thought by boldly asserting her own self. Simone de Beauvoir highlights that the biggest misfortune of the woman is that the meaning of her existence is not in her own hands. Also, she says that not only do men hold women down, but also women ignore themselves by giving up on being responsible for their own life.

This is a significant artwork in which Perseus, who decapitated Medusa by order of Athena, holds up Medusa's head in victory. This emphasizes the force of a male-dominated society. While Perseus was carrying the head of a woman in his bare hand, he also trampled down the body of the woman. By grasping the head of Medusa, Perseus tries to prove to us the superiority of male



Figure 1. “Perseus with the head of Medusa”, (1597), marble sculpture, Loggia Dei Lanzi, Florence, Italy

society over woman, thus man gain victory over women once more. Patriarchal society directly draws this image in asserting the fact that the woman is assumed to be the source of all evil. To Da Vinci, the emotional message the picture gives is more than a few sentences combined with words because, according to Da Vinci, painting is mute poetry and how can poetic art be blind? Both art and poetry imitate nature, while many sentimental values play a role in them. Words cannot totally reflect the message that visual works of art try to give us. What people say is shaped by what they see, otherwise believing only by reading and hearing without the visual appearing is just a story. Poets cannot express their thoughts genuinely unless they are free in words. As words are mostly a reflection of internal thoughts, they are blind, as is poetry. Thus, words could be risky; they may potentially change another person's life. Painting, however, enters into the recreating of forms and stands for expression, not to be entirely understood. It may be a way of communicating and a wish to convey thoughts.



Figure 2. Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1571–1610), Medusa (c 1597), oil on canvas mounted on wood, 60 x 55 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

This is a reflection of Medusa's painting on a shield representing a different angle via Caravaggio. Even though Medusa's serpentine image retains her presence as a monstrous creature, something more is being explained to us which lies beyond the image. When we look at the picture carefully, we see fear, deep sorrow, and astonishment in the eyes of Medusa which is far from how she has been represented to us for centuries. The question in our mind is, if Medusa has fear in her eyes, why should we be afraid of her? Hence Medusa is not different from other people based on these emotions. Considering that she lived like other human beings, she is far from being a monster.



Figure 3. The logo of (Versace brand, 1978)

However, the logo of the famous luxury world brand, Versace, was literally inspired by how Medusa appears with an image as a production of popular culture contrary to how she has been known. Medusa's snakehead is here replaced by a crown of designed hair. Versace's use of the Medusa figure, as if she is the only main character in the known classical myth, can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to show a reflection of female dominance.

View of the New Approaches to Medusa as Woman

A great deal has been written and said about the classical ideas about Medusa up to this point. She has been portrayed as the source of menace, as a monster, as the identity of a seductive woman and as 'Other' within the reflection of misogyny. Medusa played the role of an outcast; she was stained by the filthy mouth of society's assumed identities related with the burden of the cultural origins of patriarchy. Stuart Hall (1996) claims that the identity of the 'Other', born out of what the dominant culture is, continues to exist with the presented impositions. Women, aside from the dominant male sex, are categorized as 'Other' and sentenced to a dominated life under the auspices of the superiority of man. In this sense, Medusa lives an imitated life that comes with the indicated origins of women. It may be argued that the reason why Medusa has been categorized under the label of 'different' is just because she rejected the role of a weak woman which was given to her by prescribed norms which are the ideal norms constructed by society. For Homi Bhabha (1994), this situation is evaluated as follows; even culture itself is problematic and complicated, which means culture does not reflect reality; it is a biased concept having biased meaning, and its values are misrepresented in culture. The reason for this could be that culture consists of an institutionalized authority that claims to be true, but culture is merely and simply an imitation. We all so desperately want to believe something about what people are going to say. People accepting everything they hear could be a sign of a herd mentality, essentially demonstrating an instinctive need to align themselves with societal norms. If someone emphasizes anything, it will elevate its value and destroy the previous perception of that thing. In reality, culture also has no specific basis, it is a phenomenon constructed from assumptions. A given identity has been loaded upon Medusa and hence the identity of monster has been designated to her by culture. Her circumstance is merely a result of the cultural context that has been fixed or labeled within the societal framework.

Medusa has been forced to live with, and survive under, meaningless words with which society has described her, locked in a jar, yet she has never been depicted as an alluring woman thus far, nor has she been defined as a woman only; her deficiencies were defined in comparison with men, or the kind of woman she should be within the borders determined for men's independence. By following a different way, Rosetti prefers to use a heroine figure to the known Medusa figure. "Aspecta Medusa", the poem Rosetti wrote by looking at the picture, is related to the beauty of Medusa, which is so beautiful that Perseus' wife Andromeda is even affected. In this line, "Let not thine eyes know any forbidden thing itself", it is understood that it will not be for one's good to

learn the message given behind the portrayed image because the more you ask questions, the more you get the answers (1870:1). The secret behind Medusa's severed head is forbidden to be revealed because it says something to us contrary to what we know. In truth, we might agree that Perseus keeping the head only to himself shows that he would like to be the only one who seized control of Medusa's bright ideas within the mind, so he did not let anyone know that society considered the power of thought as only belonging to man. The beauty and body of Medusa cannot be described as a visual pleasure. Both femininity and masculinity are constructed thoughts and may be defined in the way Grosz argues (1994) in *Volatile Bodies*, namely, gender is specified depending on socially attributed characteristics. The look, status and behavior that society expects us to deliberately reflect within gender are completely shaped in the direction of cultural phenomena, hence they are not natural or pure. Certainly, Medusa's aim is to break down the boundaries that restrict her. The following lines from Stanford's "Medusa" poem, (2001:114-115) were written with a feminist approach on myth-making; we read the whole story through the eyes of the Medusa.

I have never seen a god before.
 He seized and raped me before Athena's altar.
 It is not a great thing to a god.
 For me it was anger - no consent on my part, no wooing, all harsh
 rough as a field hand. I didn't like it.
 My hair coiled in fury; my mind held hate alone.
 I thought of revenge, began to live on it.

In fact, she had to show her reaction somehow. She would take her revenge on those who were responsible for her bad reputation, even if justice must be served upon her. It was considered as normal for a god to do such an immoral thing because he was a god and moreover a man. The message that men remind us of and place in our heads is that they have the ability to do whatever they want because they are free. In addition, they consider themselves superior to women. "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous, in Leitch 2001: 2048). If you look directly at the Medusa, you see she is innocent; however, she is shown as yet another being who is stigmatized and oppressed even if she is not guilty. In this line, Cixous would like to say, a picture can therefore mean a lot more than the way you see it only with the eyes. Pictures are more valuable than you can imagine. Women do not deserve to be marked as ugly monsters, villains, weak creatures or witches and much more besides. In addition, "They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts" (Cixous, in Leitch 2001: 2048). Cixous (1975) would like to bring diversity to the writing regarding woman beyond culture since texts are reset to shape the mindset of patriarchy, as in most subjects. In return, the embedded thought in the mind is causing confusion from generation to generation. For that, she is against the idea of women always being identified as lacking in relation to men, hence, she refutes the idea of body. Our thoughts, symbols and writings form the entirety of our expression, giving substance and purpose; there is lack in their absence. These works represent the perspective I am trying to prove regarding who Medusa actually is while leaving aside the meanings others want to load onto her. I aim to deconstruct the classical idea which is affected by muddy thoughts that have been in our heads for centuries. To Derrida (in Güney, 1994), truth is always a 'play' which means there is no certainty. If we change the center, the meaning changes and at this point we get the impression that the truth is shaky because the center can change from person to person. Indeed, culture does not have any certainty. Since Medusa's monster identity is a part of culture, it is far from the ideal; the concept of culture is destroyed by the poststructuralist approach, and lastly — culture is entirely a myth.

Conclusion

In this compilation article I try to emphasize different perspectives of Medusa in different art works. These works such as the book of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's epic poem, Hesiod's *Theogony*, Judgement of Paris myth, the epic poem *Iliad* by Homer, the Sculpture of Perseus with the head of Medusa by Benvenuto Cellini, the book of *Paragone Delle Arti* by Leonardo Da Vinci, Caravaggio Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio Shield, the logo of Versace brand, the poem *Aspecta Medusa* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and *Holding Our Own: The Selected Poems of Ann Stanford*. The works mentioned above are the guiding elements of this article and they prepare a base to show that Medusa is the patriarchal presence of society.

In the light of these ideas, the greatest ignorance of our age is to judge and make someone look evil on the grounds of deviating from the commitment to the existing principles of society. A woman is neither a sex object nor any other object. In fact, women are much more powerful than flesh and blood. If they know how to control their ideas, people can surely prove their existence in this world only with their thoughts and ideas. It is in our hands to either break this existing patriarchal order or to live under its yoke. In my interpretation, if everyone subjects themselves to a mold, writing the same ideas over and over again, new ideas will never be born. Everyone has a place in this world with the power of their thoughts, and of course this world is a unique masterpiece including each person within all forms of works of art. Let us not be afraid to hear our own voice. Medusa is not just a woman; she is rare, with all her flaws and the flaws that make complete art, and she is a warrior who has created a new breaking ground in patriarchal society with her presence.

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