

Reclaiming a Feminist Rhetorical Agency by Resisting Ovid's Narrative of Medusa and Reinterpreting Her-Story from Cixous's Perspective

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Abstract: In my paper, I aim to explore the critical endeavor of reclaiming feminist rhetorical agency through a subversive resistance against Ovid's entrenched narrative of Medusa and its reinterpretation through the lens of Helene Cixous's feminist perspective. Analyzing Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa", I demonstrate how female writers and interpreters can resist Ovid's oppressive narrative of Medusa and rewrite her-story using Cixous's lens. Ovid's depiction of Medusa characterizes female experience as powerless and objectified, utilizing her sexuality as a means of punishment. I critically problematize Ovid's narrative, exposing the oppressive gender dynamics embedded in classical mythology. Contrasting Ovid's perspective, Cixous's work celebrates women and advocates for reclaiming their bodies, sexuality, and dismantling patriarchal discourse. Drawing from Campbell's notion of rhetorical agency, I claim that Cixous, through *Écriture féminine* advocates for a feminist rhetorical agency by reinterpreting Medusa's story. Her ideas provide a pathway for women to reclaim power and challenge established male narratives. Building upon Cixous's insights, I advocate for reimagining, rewriting, and reshaping female experiences to reclaim their rhetorical agency in narratives. To support my claim, I will follow a text-based qualitative method and analyze the primary and secondary sources to encourage reinterpreting and rewriting the myth of Medusa for the contemporary audience who, as I believe, are conscious about the gender discrimination and gendered narratives. I believe that my paper seeks to contribute to the field of feminist literary analysis by reinterpreting Medusa's story from Cixous's perspective and highlighting the empowerment of potential female authorship.

Keywords: Feminist Rhetorical Agency, *Écriture féminine*, Medusa, Her-story, Reinterpretation

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Introduction

Patriarchal images of women are likely to persist in our collective consciousness as long as we adhere to the male narrative of female experiences. Referring to Greco-Roman mythology like the myth of Medusa, we can see how authors from the classical period like Ovid developed a female blaming and women bashing narrative while describing Medusa's story in *Metamorphoses*. It is important to go back to these classical and timeless literary artifacts. These old narratives created a hegemony of discourse that is still prevalent in the contemporary world. I proclaim that his-story now needs to be reinterpreted, if not rewritten, to create her-story in which female experiences will be narrated from female perspectives. A feminist lens is crucial to read Medusa's story and create a feminist interpretation. I have used Helene Cixous's idea of *Écriture féminine* to reinterpret Medusa's story in relation to her sexuality and re-member her selfhood. I argue that the narrative that has historically oppressed women for centuries has the potential to liberate them when approached from a feminist perspective.

Nevertheless, Ovid's narration followed by a male interpretation stands as a firmly established historical account. However, as Jeffery Jerome Cohen writes, "history is just another text in a procession of texts, and not a guarantor of any singular signification" (5). Therefore, Deconstructing and rewriting the myth of Medusa through a Cixousean feminist perspective is essential to craft her-story. By crafting her-story, we can attribute rhetorical agency to Medusa, a move that has the potential to exert a tangible impact on the patriarchal world, fostering positive changes in it.

Though Helene Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine* encourages women writers to write Medusa's story from a women-centric perspective, I believe as a woman researcher, it is important to rewrite, and retell Medusa's story with a feminist ink. Otherwise, in the 21st century, it is not possible to claim the rhetorical agency of an old mythical story. Hence, my objective is not merely to rewrite Medusa's tale, but to reinterpret it and construct a new narrative with the potential to influence both patriarchal and feminist audience. By using Campbell's concept of rhetorical agency, I will build a new narrative of Medusa from the old and well established Ovidian story.

Medusa as Depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Ovid, in his epic *Metamorphoses*, misogynistically composes the myth of Medusa. His version of Medusa's story has become one of the most popular

and widely accepted versions. This is a story of a woman who first becomes an object of desire and then is cursed to become a monster. For centuries, readers have admired the way the Roman poet Ovid unfolds the narrative of Medusa for an audience entrenched in patriarchal perspectives. His target audience and purpose are clear from the way he weaved the narrative. I acknowledge Ovid's greatness, recognizing that exceptional writers tailor their work to resonate with their audiences. His adept introduction of Medusa to readers is a testament to his skill.

However, Medusa is a mythical figure who existed in the textual spaces created by writers like Ovid. She is a mythological character who has been viewed, portrayed and presented mainly by male writers. Medusa, an exceptionally beautiful maiden, turns into a monstrous woman, one of the three gorgon sisters, after being raped by the sea god Neptune in Minerva's temple. The war goddess, Minerva is Neptune's enemy and Medusa is the worshipper of Minerva. Medusa takes a vow to remain a virgin and retain her chastity for the rest of her life to prove her celibacy to Minerva. This represents a male projection of female sexuality, suggesting that the loss of virginity equates to the loss of purity. To appease a goddess, societal expectations dictate that a woman must embody sexual sacredness, maintain chastity, and remain untouched, as prayers were traditionally linked to notions of purity. Medusa attempts to gain Minerva's piety at the cost of her natural and biological sexual desire.

Nevertheless, Medusa fails to hide her physical beauty in the eyes of male gazes. When Neptune is drawn to her by what is perceived as 'seductive' beauty, he forcibly rapes her. Observing the shameful scenario, Minerva becomes angered, believing that she has violated her vow of celibacy. As a result, the war goddess blames and curses Medusa and turns her into a mortal gorgon with serpents as her hair. Her punishment is that she must live on an isolated island with two other gorgon sisters. She is given the power to turn people into stone whoever looks into her eyes with lust and wants to come close to her. This is how her sexuality is curtailed, her body is deformed and censored, and the normalcy of her life is dismantled. She is put in exile with no human contact—alone, distressed and degraded. In Ovid's words,

“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” (117).

Ovid writes that Medusa “deserved” such treatment. Minerva “changed her into a winged monster with glaring eyes, huge teeth, protruding tongue, brazen claws and serpent locks, whose gaze turned men to stone” (Dolmage 15). Her beauty turns into monstrosity. Her gaze petrifies any man who meets her eyes, turning them into stone. Since Medusa becomes a terror for the “man” world, Perseus, the son of Zeus, claims a gift from the gods to kill Medusa. The popular male interpretation says that a woman threatening to the patriarchal gazes must not live. Perseus, the proclaimed hero in Ovid’s narrative, holds a mirror in front of Medusa and turns her into a stone. Medusa’s own gaze becomes the reason for her destruction. She internalizes male gaze as the mirror is held by a man. The man holds the mirror but blames Medusa for looking into it. When Medusa becomes a stone, Perseus decapitates her head and offers the serpentine head of Medusa to goddess Minerva. The goddess puts it onto her shield as a protective amulet. Medusa, the slut-shamed cursed woman, becomes an apotropaic symbol.

Literature Review

Re-interpretating Medusa myth can be challenging especially when the story remains the same. However, analyzing Cixous’s groundbreaking work “The Laugh of the Medusa” prepares the ground for the re-telling of the old story. In her work, Cixous urges women to write for themselves. She resists a male narrative of a woman’s story as the story is molded by how a man sees the woman and fictionalizes her miseries by using such patriarchal language. Also, female writing was compared to “masturbation” which makes women writers’ journey more complicated. For this, women researchers, while emerging, did not pay much attention to re-interpretation. Rather, they attempted to write a new story. Writing was a man’s job. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar question, “Is a pen metaphorical penis?” (3). The question is legitimate because history proves, men wrote both men and women. Men interpret both men and women’s stories. The fear of being misunderstood and misjudged held women writers back as much as it did with women researchers. Elizabeth J. Ordonez writes, “As women writers struggle to rewrite texts from their own point of view, the quest for maternal relations and matrilineal roots often becomes crucial, for setting up an alternative to paternal logic and discourse” (52). Critics like Cixous played crucial role in dispelling the fear from women writers’ minds.

Cixous empowers women writers saying “Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives

handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself" (877). With her encouragement, critics in the late 20th century deconstructed Medusa myth from a feminist perspective. Georgia C. Collins acknowledges that "the idea of a feminine sensibility has often functioned as a stereotype with negative connotations" (11). Female sensibilities are attributes given by the male-dominated discursive system. Therefore, as Collins claims, "Medusa's ugliness and power were not self-report anymore than the traditional concept of a feminine sensibility with its negative connotations represent the self-report of female artists" (13). She was called ugly, monstrous and promiscuous by the male narrator and analysts because "The Medusa myth communicates male fear of women's power" (Dolmage 16). Dolmage alludes to Cixous and changes the rhetoric of Medusa's beauty. He writes, "Medusa's beauty lies in her ability to threaten and shake up a male-dominated society, that this is in fact where her "monstrosity" and beauty come from" (17). By implementing the idea of feminist writing, Dolmage offers a feminist interpretation of the story and enables a rhetorical agency to Medusa.

Jay Dolmage also comments that "The Medusa myth communicates male fear of women's power" (16). He further writes, "Cixous uses the myth to show how women have been forced to participate in discourse, and to shape and be shaped by language" (Dolmage 16). Though Ovid narrates Medusa's irresistible physical beauty, to Cixous, "Medusa's beauty lies in her ability to threaten and shake up a male-dominated society" (Dolmage 17). New generation analysts have redefined beauty.

Susan R. Bowers analyzes diverse versions of Medusa myth and claims that "Medusa is a strong mythological image of the powerful women" (230). She recognizes that women writers who have decoded and understood the power behind Medusa's dangerous gaze could differ from their male counterparts. Cixous and Clement, in their book *The Newly Born Woman*, emphasizes that "there will not be one feminine discourse, there will be thousands of different kinds of feminine words . . . until now women were not speaking out loud, were not creating their tongues—plural" (39). Therefore, more analyses from feminist perspective are anticipated in Medusa discourse. Medusa has been positively adapted by poets and writers in the 20th century. May-Sarton embraces Medusa's gaze in her poem as she writes,

I turn your face around! It is my face. That frozen rage is what I must explore—

Oh, secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place! This is the gift I thank Medusa for.

Sarton recognizes Medusa in herself. She celebrates the oneness with Medusa by calling her a muse. Her poetic expression is a retelling of Medusa's Ovidian story. She refers to Medusa's power of petrifying men as portrayed in Ovid's myth. However, she refuses to conform to the story and comes up with her own interpretation and gives agency to Medusa through herself. Medusa, in Paula Bennett's words, "became the passionate symbol for the woman poet's liberated self" (Bowers 230). When women like Sarton and Bowers write, "Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (Cixous 889). When "women write women", they claim their rhetorical agency in the prevailing power structure.

Theoretical Framework

Karyln Kohrs Campbell defines rhetorical agency as "the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one's community." Based on her concept, the later rhetoricians built different definitions of rhetorical agency. Based on Campbell's idea, Reynor writes, "rhetorical agency means voicing counterhegemonic ideas, or resistance to dominant discourses" (8). According to Reynor's definition, the marginalized Medusa, after claiming her rhetorical agency, will become capable of resisting Ovid's misogynistic narrative.

Les Belikian adds more dimension to Campbell's subjective notion of rhetorical agency as he defines rhetorical agency from both interior and exterior perspectives. He writes, "Rhetorical agency is an assemblage made out of subjectivity, conventionality, materiality, and transcendence, each of which is still under construction" (Preface i). All these are "nonassimilable considerations" (Belikain 26). However, they complement each other and complete the idea of rhetorical agency by creating an interconnected exchange of power and influence to cause social change. On this basis, I advocate for a reconstruction of the Medusa myth.

Deviating from Campbell's notions, Miller, in her "What Can Automation Tell Us About Agency?", points out that agency is an "ideological construct", and thus an illusion (153). She suggests that "We should be concerned less about empowering subaltern subjects and more about enabling and encouraging attributions of agency to them by those with whom they interact" (153). Since it is a matter of attributions from both ends, Miller suggests that educators should focus on inculcating both technical and moral education as "agency is ultimately moral judgements" (153). If it is an ideological construct, those who are in possession of power are the ones who

can enable agency in those who lack it. In that case, since Medusa cannot speak for herself, it is the scholars who can provide rhetorical agency to Medusa by interpreting her story from feminist perspective. In this case, Helene Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine* is a tool to reconstruct the base narrative.

Leslie Rabine writes, "For Cixous and other practitioners of *écriture féminine*, the very structures of Western language exclude women and can function only through the silencing of women and the repression of feminine sexual drives" (21). Cixous's *écriture féminine* is a way of voicing women with their own narrative, empowering their body with the self-referential speech. Cixous targets the "centrality of language in the construction of feminine identity in her work" (Cordoan 42). The language of narration and interpretation has been predominantly oppressive towards women. So, she writes, "I write women, woman must write woman" (877). The writing is not limited to storytelling, but expanded to retelling and reinterpreting a dominant story that has misogynistic history of interpretation. It requires practice and a credible ground to continue female writing.

However, Cixous also acknowledges that "It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized enclosed, coded-which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (883). Women need to write women because, as Ann Rosalind Jones writes, "women's physiology has important meanings for women in various cultures, and it is essential for us to express those meanings rather than to submit to male definitions of our sexuality" (254-5). This is particularly important to understand how Medusa's body can become an autonomous zone of agency which has a meaning of its own and can influence the perspectives of the readers. The deformed and decapitated body becomes an empowered nexus of rhetorical agency when it is analyzed through a feminist lens.

Methodology

I have employed a multi-faceted approach that integrates literary analysis of the scholarly texts, conceptual analysis of rhetorical agency and feminist theory, and a critical examination of classical mythology. The aim is to deconstruct the traditional narrative of Medusa as presented by Ovid and reconstruct her story through the feminist lens of H el ene Cixous. First, I have done a meticulous literary analysis of Ovid's rendition of the Medusa as depicted in *Metamorphoses*. By delving into the nuances of Ovid's language, I have uncovered the underlying patriarchal elements that have endured

victim-blaming narrative surrounding Medusa. A thorough examination of Ovid's works becomes the foundational step in identifying and critiquing the narrative structures that have historically marginalized the female protagonist.

My paper also involves a profound theoretical grounding of rhetorical agency and feminist theory. Rhetorical agency, unlike power, shows how the marginalized group can claim their agency and cause a radical change in the predominating patriarchal discourse. Also, drawing inspiration from H  l  ne Cixous's feminist perspective of *  criture F  minine*, I have proved how feminist understanding of the story of Medusa can be empowering for feminist writers and interpreters. The lens provides my target audiences with an opportunity to reconstruct the narrative. As narratives play a crucial role in persuasion, I have used these two theoretical concepts to analyze the primary texts.

Finally, based on the theories, I have analyzed scholarly texts and synthesized the arguments to support my claim. Since I advocate for changing the interpretation instead of the story, I will provide my own interpretation using Cixous's lens to prepare the ground for my readers and future researchers. By providing rhetorical agency to Medusa, I claim my own rhetorical agency by crafting my own interpretation of Medusa myth. My objective is to empower Medusa as a symbol of resilience and defiance who can claim her rhetorical agency in the narrative by challenging traditional narratives and contributing to the broader discourse on feminist literary criticism.

Feminist Interpretation of Ovidian Medusa Myth

The male-narrative of Medusa's myth raises a few questions that challenge male-dominated sociocultural structures: is looking alluringly beautiful a fault of a woman? Who defines "allurement"? In Ovid's narrative, Medusa is sexually assaulted by Minerva's enemy Neptune. Instead of punishing the rapist, Minerva, like many other men and women in our society, blames her for being seductive for which Neptune falls out of control and has sex with her forcibly. This victim blaming discourse is created by the male narrator and interpreter. The language chosen for the content is deeply patriarchal, women-bashing and humiliating. Cixous writes, "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executant of their virile needs" (878). She urges to "liberate the New Woman from the Old" (878). Embracing a new

interpretation is the pathway to breaking free from the old, stereotypical shackles.

Ovid is the old male discursive authority who turns a woman (Goddess Minerva) against another woman (Medusa). Medusa becomes a reason of terror and thus is called a "femme fatale". Her monstrous body is "a pure culture" (Cohen 4). Cohen writes that "Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them" (5). The questions arise: Who created Medusa in a literary space? Ovid the author or the author function that prevails even after removing the author's identity from the text? I believe both because the narrative has created a long-lasting hegemonic effect on the readers' minds. The author function constructs a longstanding image of women in the form of Medusa.

Judith Butler writes, "the body is only known through its gendered appearance" (522). In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", she cites Beauvoir and points out that "woman is an "historical situation rather than a natural species" (523). Historically, a woman has been defined as "an incidental being" who, as Aristotle defines, "is a female by virtue of a certain lack of quality" (Beauvoir 15). Ovid's narrative highlights Medusa and Minerva's lack and confirms their gender identity by normalizing the lacks. Medusa's lack is the absence of her protest voice whereas Minerva's lack is to look at the incident of rape through nonjudgmental lens. Cixous, on the other hand, acknowledges that "Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak" (880). Medusa urges the women researchers to speak for her.

When Minerva curses Medusa and turns her into one of the monstrous gorgon sisters, she eventually empowers her with a bodily agency. Cixous writes that when Medusa resist luscious male gazes, "She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of hers" (881). She uses her body to claim her rhetorical agency as "she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body" (Cixous 881). This is how, by changing the interpretation, a woman-against-woman changes to a woman-for-woman situation. As Medusa is enabled to turn the seductive men into stones, Ovid's male narrative celebrates it as an incident of curtailing female sexuality. On the other hand, Bowers think that by doing so Medusa becomes "the icon of the female gaze" (219). By turning potential rapists into stones, she not only protects her body but also becomes a terror of other vicious men. She further comments that "Medusa myth is the terrifying power of her

own gaze” (219). The reinterpretation from feminist perspective embraces female gaze which empowers Medusa and later Minerva though male interpretation finds joy in the event when Medusa’s head was decapitated and submitted to Minerva.

Changing the interpretation, Medusa’s decapitated monstrously serpentine head becomes Minerva’s weapon. Since serpents are phallic symbols, Ovid refers to the “phallic power” which, in Mari Ruti’s words, “is a collective fetish, a magical totem pole that’s meant to protect us from danger, including any and all enemies of the state” (Ruti xi). Though Minerva holds the shield, metaphorically it is the “phallic power” that protects the state. The power is now held by a woman through a woman and her female gaze. This is how both Minerva and Medusa claim their rhetorical agency and change the interpretation and reception of the story.

Historically, it is evident that most of the discourses about women have been produced by men. They are discourse makers who also shape women’s ideologies. The obvious man-woman binary shapes the consciousness of women unconsciously. They are taught to be in darkness and be afraid of it as Cixous writes women “have internalized this horror of the dark” (Cixous 878). And the dark is unexplored “only because they’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable” (Cixous 885). Women, after a longstanding era of silence, return with vengeance. Cixous calls for contradicting phallogocentric rationalism. When women put their bodies on the pages, they are liberated from their longstanding servitude. Women should free their bodies, organs and words from male authority. Cixous writes, “when the “repressed” of their culture and their society returns, it’s an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions” (886). Even if we cannot change Ovid’s narrative, we can hold the console and direct the interpretation towards women by creating new scholarly discourses for new generation readers. The console is the rhetorical agency which I claim through my paper.

However, as Cixous realizes that “There’s no room for her if she’s not a he” (888) which makes Virginia Woolf’s claim for a room relevant. Woolf writes in “A Room of One’s Own” that a woman must have a room of her own and money to become a writer. She also urges women writers to kill the “angel in the house” (Showalter 210). The angel creates a binary opposition in women. When the angel sustains, women who write become monstrous. This is how we get Minerva who chooses to remain a Goddess in the eyes of her male

enemy and a monstrous Medusa who is punished for not willingly conforming to Neptune's sexual call. The "angel" in Minerva represses Medusa's body, sexuality and thoughts. The angel is the creation of the male discourse that wants women to think of an ideal self before they put their thoughts and words on page. The angel is the creator of the monstrous body. Woolf writes that "Killing the angel in the house is part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Showalter 212). By killing the angel, she dismantles the judgments, claims her room, and becomes a writer who can write for herself and rewrite her-story.

Also, Jaffery Jerome Cohen asks us to "re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them" (20). If we find out the whys, we can claim a room of our own and write for ourselves. The time has come for a reevaluation, reinterpretation, and, if necessary, a rewriting of the myth of Medusa in a non-hegemonic discursive language. Numerous female poets have already reshaped Medusa's narrative, depicting her as an empowering female figure. They have compared Medusa with other classical and contemporary symbols of women empowerment; However, I offer this reinterpretation of Ovid's story by problematizing a phallogocentric interpretation and finding out the ironical representation of powerful feminism. I recommend a future study of a pedagogical approach for the teachers and researchers who would teach Medusa's myth from a new feminist angle, giving Medusa her long cherished feminist rhetorical agency.

Conclusion

Retaining the story as it is, if we change the interpretation and narrative in written forms, the effect will change in new readers. Anything documented has a value in terms of credibility and authenticity. When we write Medusa's story with the link of *écriture féminine*, we redocument the story and claim our rhetorical agency. Minerva's punishment is a blessing in disguise as it empowers Medusa with the power to resist the male gazes full of lust and malevolence intentions. By seeming to punish Medusa, Minerva has her own way of punishing potential abusers and rapists in the state. Her emulate might resemble a phallic power, but the head is Medusa's. Medusa proves to be Minerva's true worshipper because the war goddess considers her to be the most powerful weapon to dismantle patriarchal gaze. If the serpents on Medusa's head symbolize the phallus of men, it is surprising to consider how many men it would take to collectively match the power embodied by a single Medusa. In this way, Medusa succeeds in radically revising a symbol

of justification for female oppression, the fearsome seductress, into a female-identified, female-empowering figure.

Cixous points out that women used to write, but in secret. Writing, for women, was something that they did “in secret” and then punished themselves for writing something, even a little thing. Cixous writes, “the act of writing is equivalent to masculine masturbation” (883). Women lacked rhetorical agency to change their positionality in the male dominated society. In this era of women empowerment, it is important to present the old stories to new generation readers in new ways to motivate them to fight against all odds the way Minerva and Medusa did. Medusa is no longer a monster, rather a symbol of empowered women.

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