

MEDUSA'S METAMORPHOSIS IN VICTORIAN WOMEN'S ART AND POETRY

EMILY MCCONKEY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master's degree in English Literature

Department of English

Faculty of Arts

University of Ottawa

© Emily McConkey, Ottawa, Canada, 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	vi
Medusa's Cultural Meanings in the Victorian Era.....	vii
Medusa and Metamorphosis	x
Some Questions and Considerations	xiv
Structure of the Thesis.....	xv
Mythological Images.....	xvi
CHAPTER ONE	1
Medusa as Fallen Woman and Woman-Artist in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's <i>Aurora Leigh</i> ...	2
Medusa in Ovid's <i>Metamorphoses</i>	4
Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Reading of Ovid.....	12
Medusa in the Portrait of Aurora's Mother	16
Marian Erle, Medusan Victim	18
Aurora Leigh, Medusan Artist	26
CHAPTER TWO	35
Destroying the Idol: Medusa and Petrification in Christina Rossetti's Poetry	36
Medusa in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature	38
Rossetti's Devilish Medusa Figures.....	39
The Dantean Medusa.....	43
Dantean Petrification in Rossetti's Poems.....	47
The Petrarchan Medusa	52
Rossetti's Reading of Petrarch.....	60
Petrification in Monna Innominata	63
CHAPTER THREE/CONCLUSION	72
Evelyn de Morgan and the Spiritual Transformation of Medusa.....	73
Ovidianism in De Morgan's Paintings of Classical Women	75
De Morgan's Medusa Bronze.....	79
De Morgan's Gilded Medusa.....	83
EPILOGUE.....	91
WORKS CITED.....	96

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the figure of Medusa in the works of three Victorian women: the poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), and the artist Evelyn De Morgan (1855-1919). For many in an era that sought to categorize women according to rigid social boundaries, Medusa embodied all that is suspicious, dangerous, and alluring about women. But in subtle and unexpected ways, these three women reimagined the Medusa archetype and used it to explore female experience and expression, as well as the challenges and complexities of female authorship. In their works, Medusa, like other hybrid personae such as the mermaid and the lamia, became a figure through which to explore liminal spaces and slippery categories.

I argue that these women prefigured the twentieth-century feminist rehabilitation of Medusa. I also suggest that this proto-feminist transformation of the myth draws, directly and indirectly, from the tradition of Ovid, the first poet to suggest that Medusa's monstrosity resulted from her victimhood and that her power is not merely destructive, but also creative. My analysis contends that, contrary to common understanding, women were revisioning Medusa's meaning well before the twentieth century.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must first thank Professor Mary Arseneau, whose generous and attentive mentorship has guided me throughout my thesis and academic development, and who kindled my love for all things Pre-Raphaelite. I am also indebted to Professor Geoff Rector, whose rigorous instruction has refined me as a writer and a scholar, and who incited my devotion to Ovid during my undergraduate years. To Roxanne Lafleur for her collaboration on the photographic elements of this thesis; to Charlene, Bridget, and my mom for beautifully modelling Medusa. To my ever patient and dedicated readers, Logan and my dad. If I can address a place, I would like to express gratitude for the Gatineau hills for becoming a source of inspiration and refuge over the duration of my thesis year. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends who believed in me every step of the way.

To the women-and-artists of my family:

my grandmothers, Molly and Teresa;

Monica, my mom; (Aunt) Marg;

and my sisters, Kelly and Bridget.

INTRODUCTION

As Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers explain in the introduction to their *Medusa Reader* (2003), “[r]ather than ‘evolving’ over time from one set of interpretations to another, the Medusa myth [...] includes, from its very beginnings, all the conflicting elements that have fascinated audiences and readers” (7). The essence of her story is straightforward enough: the goddess Athena transforms a beautiful woman named Medusa into a deadly monster with snakes in her hair and a gaze that turns men to stone. Perseus, son of Zeus, must kill the Medusa as part of his heroic quest. Warned not to look directly into Medusa’s eyes, Perseus views her reflection in his shield and cuts off her head, using the decapitated head in his ensuing tasks to vanquish his enemies. Artists and writers have mused upon this core narrative for millennia. Medusa’s meanings are myriad: she is an allegory of temptation; she is a sympathetic victim; she is an apotropaic token; she is even the insignia of a fashion designer.

Over the last century, feminists have taken up the figure of Medusa in poetry, art, and criticism as an emblem of women’s experience and liberation. Their interpretations have drawn particularly on Ovid’s account of the myth for two reasons: first, because it emphasizes that Medusa became a monster only after and because Poseidon raped her; and second, because it suggests that her petrifying power is creative as well as destructive. In 1976, the French poet, philosopher, and critic Hélène Cixous famously used Medusa as a central metaphor for the link between women’s sexuality and language in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” exhorting women to “write about women and bring women to writing” (875). Poets such as Louise Bogan, Sylvia Plath, and Patricia Smith inquired into these and other complicated facets of the myth as they explored Medusa’s complex femininity. In addition, Dorothea Smartt and Colleen McElroy have identified Medusa as a racialized figure, excavating the myth as an African legacy and

drawing comparisons between the ways that Medusa and Black women are perceived. In recent years, Luciano Garbati's 2008 sculpture of Medusa holding Perseus' severed head has monumentalized her popular meaning today: an "icon of justice," Medusa has taken on new life as an emblem of the #metoo movement.¹

Though Medusa transformed into a feminist icon over the last century, scholars have largely neglected the myth's meaning for women before the dawn of the modernist era. Even Garber and Vickers' brilliant *Medusa Reader* includes only one instance of a female interpretation of Medusa in poetry before 1921.² I suggest that earlier women's art and writings reveal other interpretations that broaden our understanding of Medusa's meaning. In this thesis, I investigate the meaning of Medusa in the literary and artistic works of three Victorian women: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Evelyn De Morgan. Each of these artists variously used the Medusa myth to probe the complexities and challenges of female authorship.

Medusa's Cultural Meanings in the Victorian Era

John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788) provides a general summary of Medusa's cultural meaning at the turn of the nineteenth century. According to Lemprière, Medusa was celebrated for her personal charms and the beauty of her locks. Neptune became enamoured of her, and obtained her favors in the temple of Minerva. This violation of the sanctity of the temple provoked Minerva, and she changed the beautiful locks of Medusa, which had inspired Neptune's love, into serpents. According to Apollodorus and others,

¹ Julia Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art," *The New York Times*, 13 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/arts/design/medusa-statue-manhattan.html>.

² In her 1405 *Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan describes a Medusa with radiant golden curls instead of snakes, suggesting that it is her "striking beauty" that "seem[s] to make people immoveable" (57).

Medusa and her sisters came into the world with snakes on their heads, instead of hair, with yellow wings and brazen hands. Their body was [sic] also covered with impenetrable scales, and their very looks had the power of killing or turning to stone.

(Lemprière)

Lemprière's characterization of Medusa speaks to her contradictions; though her terrifying gaze and snaky hair define her, Lemprière uses the present tense when he notes that she is "celebrated for her personal charms and the beauty of her locks." Even more strikingly, Lemprière quite euphemistically describes Medusa's relations with Neptune. That Neptune "obtained her favours" insinuates that he had sex with her, but it veils the nature of such relations and averts the issue of rape Ovid posed.

Jerome McGann's 1972 essay "The Beauty of the Medusa" has become the standard critical study on how Romantic and Victorian poets interpreted Medusa's contradictory elements. In it, building on Mario Praz's 1933 *The Romantic Agony*, McGann examines the Romantic vision of Medusa born of Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" and echoed in works by predominant Victorian writers such as Walter Pater, Algernon Charles Swinburne, William Morris, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.³ McGann suggests that for Shelley, and by extension, the Victorian writers, Medusa was a fascinating and sympathetic figure who allegorized "the prophetic office of the poet and the humanizing power of poetry" (7). To Shelley, the "sympathetic process" her fascination evoked transfers "the creative power of the imagination from the Medusa to the sympathizing gazer" (McGann 8). For the Romantics, as for

³ See Walter Pater's 1873 *The Renaissance*; Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Notes on the Designs of the Old Masters at Florence" from *Essays and Studies*, 1875; William Morris' "The Doom of King Acrisius" from *The Earthly Paradise*, 1868; Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1870 "Aspecta Medusa."

the Victorians, says McGann, Medusa became an allegory for the Sublime, through which artists and poets contemplated their own creative power.

This relationship between Medusa and poetic and artistic creation is important to my discussion of the Victorian women who rendered her image. McGann's essay, however, underestimated the wide range of meanings Medusa bore to Victorians. As Nina Auerbach concludes in *The Woman and the Demon*, McGann's essay "fails to note [Medusa's] vital significance in Victorian culture as a whole, perhaps because he allegorizes the femaleness of this magical figure out of existence" (232n8). Most significantly, while McGann's account of the Romantic vision of Medusa certainly acknowledges her femininity, it ignores the prevalent view of Medusa as an archetype of emphatically *dangerous* femininity.

Adrienne Munich's *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* (1989) demonstrated the frequency with which male artists and poets depicted Medusa as a tangential yet ominous figure in the Perseus and Andromeda narrative.⁴ In that narrative, Medusa played the role of a femme fatale. Edward Burne-Jones' *Perseus Series* (c. 1877), for example, contrasted the innocent, radiant beauty of Andromeda with the alluring, yet threatening, attraction of Medusa. Frederic Leighton's "Perseus on Pegasus Hastening to the Rescue of Andromeda" (1895-1896) portrayed Perseus as an ideal hero holding Medusa's head, her mouth frozen in mid-scream. Victorian artists tended to represent Medusa only after Perseus defeated her; she was usually rendered as only a head. Portraying her in this way ensured that her agency was restricted, and her power controlled by the male hero. Munich explains: "Her serpentine hair, like that of the Lamia, represents her as having appropriated male activities. By

⁴ The basic structure of this myth is as follows: Andromeda, a young, innocent maiden, is chained to a rock and about to be eaten by a monster. Perseus, who has just cut off Medusa's head and taken it as a weapon, defeats the monster, rescues Andromeda, and takes the maiden as his wife.

killing her and keeping her head, Perseus reclaims whatever masculine power she had stolen” (32). That Medusa is so frequently represented as a lifeless auxiliary figure demonstrates the implicit threat she poses while alive.

The Victorian Medusa fits within and even encapsulates a web of mythic types that project the dangerous and seductive aspects of female nature, her hair, in particular. Citing a multitude of Victorian artists in *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Art*, Galia Ofek demonstrated that “Medusa’s hair proved an unerring detector of high anxiety levels among the Victorians, who kept reproducing images of it. Medusa’s hair became a popular prototype, serving to characterize not only Medusa herself, but other threatening women too” (70). Lamias, mermaids, demon-women and serpent-women proliferated in Victorian art and literature, and Auerbach suggested that these hybrid creatures “may typify the restoration of an earlier serpent-woman, the Greek Medusa” (9). Ofek also remarked upon the connection established between Medusa and the Biblical Eve in works such as Spencer Stanhope’s *Eve Tempted* (1877). Their apparent erotic danger for the men with whom they interact links these suspicious types; they all promote the overarching Victorian myth of the fallen woman.

Thus far, this survey has exclusively considered Victorian men’s portrayals of Medusa and her mythical counterparts. But how did women view Medusa during this period? Scholars have only occasionally addressed that question, and even then, only briefly within wider critical studies of Victorian culture.

Medusa and Metamorphosis

In one of the rare scholarly examinations of a female Victorian’s use of Medusa, Ofek discusses George Eliot’s preoccupation with the myth as an example of how women authors

represented women's hair. Ofek noted several instances across her writing in which the author refers to Medusa. Well-versed in the classics, Eliot read the various Greek and Latin sources of the Medusa myth. Ovid's version of the myth, however, captivated and influenced her most; in the index of her commonplace book, under the letter M, Eliot wrote "Medusa, Ovid's version of her story" (Eliot, qtd in Ofek 160). Ofek argues that the Medusa references in Eliot's works originate from Ovid's complex Medusa (Ofek 159). Ofek suggests that Eliot even identified the Ovidian Gorgon with the self-sacrificing Christ (Ofek 159).

Eliot's interest in Ovid's version of the Medusa myth was characteristic of other women in that era who thought about Medusa. All three women chosen for this project, in various ways and through varying degrees of separation, developed Ovid's specific revisionist and metamorphic interpretation of the Medusa myth. Barrett Browning and De Morgan both draw on Ovid directly. Rossetti likely did not read Ovid herself, but closely read two of his most famous imitators: Dante and Petrarch.

The reception of Ovid in the nineteenth century is relatively understudied. In a review of Charles Martindale's 1988 collection *Ovid Renewed*, Richard Jenkyn writes that "Norman Vance wrestles manfully with the *ungrateful topic* of 'Ovid in the Nineteenth Century'" (152, my emphasis). Vance's chapter searches an apparently vacant landscape to extract a few exceptional revivals of Ovid. His argument presupposed Ovid's relative lack of popularity in the Victorian world. Similarly, the more recent *Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (2014), edited by John F. Miller and Carole E. Newlands, skips the nineteenth century entirely. In his study of Ovid in the twentieth century, Theodore Ziolkowski observes that "Ovidian ages" alternate regularly with the ages of Virgil. Virgil is most in favour, Ziolkowski notes, in golden ages of stability, prosperity, and faith, whereas "in times of political and cultural upheaval Ovid, who has been

widely recognized as the ‘ur-exile’ and whose works exemplify change and metamorphosis, has offered comfort to readers and models to writers” (Ziolkowski 455). As one would expect from this model, Ziolkowski emphasizes Ovid’s prominence in the twentieth century while dubbing the nineteenth century a Virgilian age.

These analyses are certainly persuasive in chronicling Ovid’s broadscale influence on western literature, but they gloss over subtle – yet compelling – instances of Ovidian reception in Victorian art and culture. Pockets of women were deeply interested in Ovid, perhaps because they were better positioned than men at that point to appreciate Ovid’s model of transformation and flux. To this point, Michele Martinez’s 1999 dissertation, *Pygmalion's Image: Ovid, Sculpture, and Women's Poetry, 1770-1880*, makes a compelling claim that may explain the dearth of scholarship on nineteenth-century Ovidian reception. Like Vance, Martinez observes that while Ovid’s reception was abundant in eighteenth-century England, he appears to fall out of favour in the nineteenth century. But Martinez’s closer look at this curve notices that Ovid’s surge in popularity among women occurred alongside this decline in his general reputation. She argues:

as women readers became better acquainted and more outspoken about classical authors, Ovid’s reputation in turn came to be associated with effeminacy, error, and even derivativeness, particularly after Greek poetry and culture came into vogue in the middle of the eighteenth century. (12)

An 1821 review of an unnamed woman’s series of published letters entitled “Rome in the Nineteenth Century” testifies to the relationship between Ovid’s fall from favor and women’s growing interest in him. Discussing the woman’s extensive study of Latin literature, the reviewer asks: “What female mind can read the sixth satire of Juvenal, or the fourth book of Lucretius, or

adopt Ovid, as this lady has done, into the circle of her literary friendships, without becoming tinged with their filth and feculence?" (417).

While few girls enjoyed access to a classical education, some had the opportunity to study Latin and Greek through homeschooling or their brothers' tutors. This was true of both Barrett Browning and De Morgan, as I will discuss in their respective chapters. Women who did not read Latin or Greek could, however, still read Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in translation. For women like Rossetti, who did not appear to have read Ovid in Latin or in translation, the tradition of Ovid traced through Dante and Petrarch could still transport glimmers of his metamorphic myths.

Building on Martinez's suggestion about Ovid's readership among Victorian women, I will explore the relationship between Victorian women, Ovid, and the figure of Medusa as it pertains to female authorship. A small anecdote illustrates the point this thesis will develop. In an 1813 review of a new translation of *Metamorphoses* by a Mr. Orger, the reviewer draws attention to the Perseus and Andromeda narrative and complains about the translator's poetic style:

The adventure of Perseus and Andromeda is rendered happily enough; and we have little to object to the subsequent narrations of Perseus, except the manner in which he celebrates the former beauties of Medusa: '*Men have I heard, who once admir'd the fair/Dwell with peculiar rapture on her hair.*' (260, his emphasis).

The reviewer continues curtly: "This is exactly the style of a very feeble female novelist, put into doggerel of ten feet by her only reader. Indeed we must insist on the dismissal of all such couplets from Orger's Ovid." (260). The reviewer insults Orger's poetry by comparing it to the work of a "feeble female novelist." It is a fascinating coincidence that in this obscure little review, Ovid's version of the Medusa myth becomes ground on which to belittle female

authorship. The women who engaged with Ovid's revisionist mythmaking and the Medusa story shared a similar concern with the position of the female author, but of course approached the Ovidian Medusa and their own work from a very different perspective.

Some Questions and Considerations

Several questions drive my investigation. How did these women engage with the Medusa myth? What were their sources for the Medusa myth, and what did they do with them? These women's complex treatments of Medusa speak to her broader, multivalent and often paradoxical meanings. Each in her own way, Barrett Browning, Rossetti, and De Morgan ask the fundamental question: is Medusa a villain or a victim? Part of the problem of categorizing Medusa is that we do not know the extent of her agency in or her underlying motivation for petrifying people. Is it her gaze that petrifies, or is it the reaction of the beholder as he meets that gaze? Is Medusa culpable, or does she have no choice when and whom she turns to stone? The literary evidence from the classical period is ambiguous, perhaps because the Greeks do not seem to care whether Medusa was good or evil, innocent or guilty, excused or justified. Ovid introduces the possibility of her victimhood before her transformation, and afterwards, he portrays her power as more a natural process than a willful act, one that both destroys and creates. Christian authors attached greater importance to Medusa's moral culpability, but even they rarely provided any indication of her interior motives: all they clearly show is the peril of her eyes. My chosen poets, by contrast, consistently address this question of her moral culpability when portraying Medusa. They also often moved beyond it to explore how the villain/victim debate evolves when Medusa speaks for herself.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One examines the meaning of Medusa in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 long poem *Aurora Leigh*. An allusion to a frightening, and yet vulnerable, Medusa at the beginning of the poem marks the starting point of Barrett Browning's revision of the Medusa myth. The two heroines of the poem, Marian Erle and Aurora Leigh herself, each embody fundamental elements of Ovid's Medusa. Marian Erle is the victimized Medusa, prone to misunderstanding, a woman traumatized by sexual assault and shut out by society. Aurora Leigh epitomizes the creative Medusa as she embraces her authorial voice and subverts the masculine tradition in which she writes. Barrett Browning's use of Ovid's Medusa is telling, considering the overall project of the poem articulated by Aurora Leigh herself: "unscrupulously epic," it is a poem that imbues the masculine epic tradition with feminine subjects and experiences. In this way, *Aurora Leigh* echoes and innovates the gendered and generic experimentation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from which we receive Ovid's revisionist Medusa. My argument will begin with a detailed analysis of Ovid's version of the Medusa myth and a discussion of how EBB read Ovid. The remainder of the chapter will involve a careful analysis of the Medusan themes carried throughout *Aurora Leigh*.

In Chapter Two, I explore the shadowy, recurring Medusa-like figures found throughout the poetry of Christina Rossetti. In such figures as a woman with "subtle serpents gliding in her hair" in the 1854 poem "The World"; a seductive milkmaid whose hair twists in "shining serpent-coils" in "The Prince's Progress" (1863); a male Medusa in "The Convent Threshold" (1855); and a Biblical queen with Medusa-like traits in *Monna Innominata* (1881), Rossetti's Medusan images are distinct and often unexpected. Though these images resist precise interpretation, they generally suggest a concern with the moral and interpretive implications of

petrification. Rossetti drew this concept of petrification from Medusa's treatment in the works of Dante and Petrarch. Moreover, Rossetti's Medusa images become more complex when analyzed in the context of her love poems, in which the dynamic of lovers' gazes can cause the "petrifying" sin of idolatry. While Rossetti's references to Medusa are not as overt as those in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, they deliver a sophisticated criticism of how male poets represent Medusa's erotic fascination. Rossetti illustrates that the meaning of petrification is complicated when it is a female poet who both identifies Medusa in the male subject and identifies with Medusa herself.

The final chapter and conclusion of this thesis brings my exploration of Medusa in the female Victorian imagination to the realm of visual art. Evelyn De Morgan created two Medusa works during her career: a sculpted bronze and a gilded shield. Through the bronze, De Morgan highlights the tragedy at the heart of Ovid's version of the Medusa myth. Upon the shield, De Morgan places a spiritualized Medusa who transcends physical affliction. These works echo the techniques and styles of the popular Medusas in art by the likes of Caravaggio, Cellini, and Watts. However, they also return the viewer's attention to elements of the Medusa myth often forgotten: her victimhood before her transformation, and her protective, apotropaic status after death.

Mythological Images

My thesis, at its core, revolves around the theme of metamorphosis. Its primary subjects, Medusa, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the reception of both, are characterized by their multi-sidedness. This project also has a multivalent, interdisciplinary nature, contributing to the fields of Victorian Literature, Art History, and Classical Reception. The metamorphic nature of both

my subjects and my methodologies prompted my desire to experiment with the form of the thesis. The hybrid works of writers and critics such as W.B. Sebald, Elif Batuman, Jenny Slate, Brian Dillon, and David Shields influenced my use of alternative modes of criticism. The intersections of literary criticism, collage, and memoir interest me because they introduce new challenges to the thesis: the risk of losing something of the original genres; the difficulty of maintaining seriousness; and the danger of solipsism in critical writing. But they also allow new possibilities: bridging the gap between academic and public discourse; bringing awareness to how we actually experience art and literature; and divulging the process and not only the result of academic research.

Mine is a cautious attempt to experiment with the genre of the thesis. The unconventional modes of criticism I include surround the primary components of the thesis rather than reworking them from within the text. Photographs paired with epigraphs precede each of my chapters. These, in juxtaposition with each other, highlight and recontextualize the themes of their respective chapters. The reader may wish to look at them before and after reading the chapters to which they correspond. I conclude the thesis with an epilogue that reflects on my own experience as a female author writing about Medusa. By inserting these interpretive para-texts, I wish to present a continuum between the women of the Victorian period, women of the modernist and twentieth-century feminist movements, and women today such as myself, who find in Medusa creative purpose and inspiration. My hope is that, by shifting into these alternative modes, I can provide the reader with moments of pause to think about authorship and the endurance of art through time.

CHAPTER ONE



Woman for women. [...] There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor [...] my body— shot through with streams of song; I don't mean the overbearing, clutchy 'mother' but, rather, what touches you, the equivocal that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laugh you [sic]; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable; body (body? bodies?), no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other; that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style.

Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

I know you have a little life in you yet/I know you have a lot of strength left

Kate Bush, "This Woman's Work"

Medusa as Fallen Woman and Woman-Artist in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

I begin to believe in Ovid, or look for a metamorphosis.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning to James Martin, Feb. 6. 1843

In a letter addressed to Robert Browning in February of 1846, months before they married, Elizabeth Barrett, soon to be Barrett Browning (EBB), evoked the Gorgon sisters in a cryptic metaphor: “And for that letter ... do you fancy that in *my* memory the sting is not gone from it? – and that I do not carry the thought of it, as the Roman maidens, you speak of, their cool harmless snakes, at my heart always?”⁵ The letter to which EBB refers was one that Robert had written “long since,” in a time of “crisis.” In it, EBB writes to Robert, “you showed yourself awfully, as a burning mountain, and talked of ‘making the most of your fire-eyes,’ and of having at intervals ‘deep black pits of cold water’! – and the lava of that letter has kept running down into my thoughts of you too much” (EBB to RB, Post-mark, February 2, 1846). She continues, “How you frightened me with your ‘fire-eyes’! ‘making the most of them’ too! and the ‘black pits,’ which gaped ... *where* did they gape? who could tell?” This vivid image of gaping eyes is the most perceptible connection to the “Roman maidens” EBB describes in her subsequent letter. She compares the effect of Robert’s letter – the way that it has etched itself into her imagination – to her recurring thought of Gorgons. She goes to great pains to persuade Robert not to feel remorse for writing the letter; she blames herself for her strong reaction. Furthermore, she is

⁵ The poet’s maiden name was Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett and she published under the name Elizabeth Barrett Barrett; thus the initials EBB are a continuous identifier throughout her writing career, consistent with her married name Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

insistent that the Gorgons, like the letter itself, were not malicious – she holds that their snakes are “cool” and “harmless.” The metaphor ultimately compares two unsettling yet decidedly benign images that have imprinted themselves upon EBB’s mind. Indeed, the Medusa image would recur in EBB’s imagination over the course of her poetical career.

Hélène Cixous’ 1976 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” famously transformed the snaky-haired, monstrous gorgon of old into the emblem of female creativity. Cixous’ essay sought to reclaim an image that, across Western revivals, had been used against women, intended to represent the dangerous threat of a woman in power. Other twentieth-century feminist reimaginings of Medusa, such as those in Louise Bogan’s “Medusa” and May Sarton’s “The Muse as Medusa,” present her petrifying power not as dangerous but creative, and born out of great suffering. This interpretation sprung from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which Medusa receives her petrifying power only after being raped by Poseidon; in which death leads to new life; in which even her decapitated head is capable of changing seaweed into coral, and titans into mountains. Bogan and Sarton’s modern renderings took Medusa into a feminist aesthetic of flexibility and resistance. As Heidi Morse comments, “Cixous’ pivotal transformation of Medusa into a muse for female authorship galvanized a new wave of feminist theorizing regarding the condition of women in language and myth” (182-183). Medusa transformed into both an embodied muse and a symbol of the autonomous artist.

While this revisioning of the Medusa myth appears to be a twentieth-century invention, it was prefigured in EBB’s 1856 poem *Aurora Leigh*. Like Ovid, EBB imbued her epic with female voices. Following an explicit reference to Medusa that treats her as a complex archetype of maternal womanhood, the women in *Aurora Leigh*, particularly Aurora herself and Marian Erle, embody fundamental elements of Medusa’s tale in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: rape and unjust

punishment; threatening and powerful vision; death and rebirth; the mirroring moment before petrification; the gaze of the artist; the relationship between perceiver and perceived. Modelled after Ovid's Medusa, who is both a rape victim and a disrupter of masculine epic convention, *Aurora Leigh*'s heroines give voice to women's experiences of sexual trauma and feminize the work of the epic poet.

In what follows, I will discuss the key elements of Ovid's version of Medusa in the *Metamorphoses* that are fundamental to EBB's configuration of Medusa in *Aurora Leigh*. Next, I will trace the two trajectories of EBB's reconstruction of Medusa in *Aurora Leigh*. The first deals with Marian Erle as the misunderstood, victimized Medusa, echoing Ovid's preoccupation with the societal position of raped women. The second treats Aurora Leigh as Medusa-the-artist, building from Ovid's uniquely sculptural conception of Medusa's petrifying power, which is a foil to his Pygmalion myth and a subversion of the epic claims of Perseus. As EBB adopts Ovid's innovations on the Medusa myth, she also takes them further, writing a Medusa with a voice that declares her artistic authority.

Medusa in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Ovid innovated the Medusa myth in his *Metamorphoses* in two major ways. The first has to do with her origin: how and why did she receive her treacherous snaky hair? Before Ovid, other authors spun their own versions of the event that were usually attached to the myth of Perseus. These accounts generally amalgamate to the lore that a love affair between Poseidon and Medusa angered Athena and inclined her to punish Medusa. Hesiod's *Theogony* notes that Poseidon "lay with" one of the Gorgons "in a soft meadow and among spring flowers" (280). In his *Bibliotheca*, Apollodorus writes that Athena guided Perseus' hand when he cut off Medusa's

head. At the moment of her decapitation, “there sprung from the Gorgon the winged horse Pegasus and Chrysaor, the father of Geryon; these she had by Poseidon” (24). That Medusa had sexual relations with Poseidon had become a commonplace in the Greek canon; however, it was Ovid who suggested that Poseidon raped her. In Ovid’s poem, the epic hero Perseus explains these circumstances after he has returned from his quest to save Andromeda. His friends gather around him, eager to hear of the Gorgon’s origin, and he responds:

What you ask is worth
 The telling; listen and I’ll tell the tale.
 Her beauty was far-famed, the jealous hope
 Of many a suitor, and of all her charms
 Her hair was loveliest; so I was told
 By one who claimed to have seen her. She, it’s said,
 Was violated in Minerva’s shrine
 By Ocean’s lord. Jove’s daughter turned away
 And covered with her shield her virgin’s eyes,
 And then for fitting punishment transformed
 The Gorgon’s lovely hair to loathsome snakes.
 Minerva still, to strike her foes with dread,
 Upon her breastplate wears the snakes she made.” (IV.791-803)⁶

Notice that in Perseus’ description of the rape, he appeals to an earlier authority: “She, *it’s said*, / Was violated in Minerva’s shrine.” Perseus, and by extension Ovid, attributes this

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, I use A.D. Melville’s translation, *Metamorphoses*, Oxford World Classics, 1986.

aspect of Medusa's story to an earlier source. "It's said" implies that Perseus is referring to the earlier sources of Medusa, perhaps those of Hesiod and Apollodorus, though the detail of rape appears to be Ovid's own invention. "It's said" is Ovid's sneaky way of legitimizing his own innovation on the myth, establishing Medusa's rape as a canonical part of her lore.

Rape is a near constant in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The bodily transformations that make up the *Metamorphoses* are often heavily charged: Daphne flees Apollo's seduction by imploring the gods to change her into a laurel tree; Io is raped by Jupiter and subsequently transformed into a cow. In "Gender and Sexuality," a chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, Alison Sharrock observes that all Ovid's works reflect upon contemporary cultural notions and performances of gender and sexuality, wherein male and female sexuality would be defined by the dynamic of "active penetrator and the passive penetrated" (97). She continues, "Real men are not penetrated; women are, as the notorious phrase *muliebria pati* ('to suffer female things') eloquently proclaims" (97). The *Metamorphoses* pays close attention to the possible consequences of such a binary. Sharrock writes,

Women are 'meant' to be silent. The suppression of women's voices, bodies, and sexuality is an all-too-common story in (ancient) culture and in the Ovidian corpus, where it is one of the meanings of metamorphosis. We can see how the loss of humanity, autonomy, and speech is tied in with sexuality for women. (100)

Once they have been silenced, some of these women resort to other means of indicating their trauma, nonverbal acts of communication that Sharrock names "para-speech" (100): Philomela, violently raped and silenced by the removal of her tongue, expresses her anguish on a tapestry; Io, unrecognized in her cow form by her father, attempts to identify herself by writing her name in the sand. The surrounding environments of Ovid's heroines often transform in

empathy towards their plights; when Proserpina is abducted by Pluto and her friend Cyane searches for her in vain, crops fail and the land is left desolate. Nevertheless, the stories of rape in the *Metamorphoses* offer little real consolation; rather, they expose the consequences of a system that promotes the suppression of women's voices and bodies.

Ovid's telling of Medusa's trauma through Perseus likewise limits her agency and voice: the story itself is told not by the victim, but instead by the epic hero who has already killed her. Moreover, Ovid presents the extent to which onlookers, including other women, are often complicit in the subjugation and silencing of rape victims. Perseus contrasts Medusa with the chaste Minerva (the Roman Athena), who "covered with her shield her virgin's eyes" when she discovered Neptune (the Roman Poseidon) and Medusa in her temple. Minerva covers her eyes to defend her own purity, but by doing so she also willfully ignores Neptune's violence against Medusa. Minerva's "fitting punishment" is not for the culprit but for the victim. Minerva's turning a blind eye to Medusa also foreshadows the fate that will become central to Medusa's identity in the mythos that surrounds her to this day: that since she cannot be seen directly without death to the viewer, she consequently cannot be completely understood.⁷

The problem of rape and its consequences for women are linked to Ovid's broader interest in genre, gender, and the changeability of both. All through the *Metamorphoses* in particular, Ovid explores the gendered features of generic forms and places them in dialogue

⁷ This feature of the myth also has aesthetic implications. Thomas Albrecht's theory of the "Medusa effect" suggests that poets and artists who attempt to render her image must grapple with this problem of representation. Through the Medusa effect, "an external threat is mitigated by means of its representation, which in turn prompts in the representation a critical insight into its own nature. It suggests that while the act of representing a dangerous object or insight may protect a subject from the threat of that object or insight, it is not without inherent dangers of its own" (Albrecht 16).

with one another. In the opening lines of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid introduces the tension that will underscore the poem as a whole:

Of bodies changed to other forms I tell;
 You Gods, who have yourselves wrought every change,
 Inspire my enterprise and lead my lay
 In one continuous song from nature's first
 Remote beginnings to our modern times. (I.1-5)

This translation indicates that the poem's subject is transformation, and it will be explored through a "continuous song." In the original Latin, however, Ovid identifies the form of the poem as both "*perpetuum* [continuous]" and "*deductite* [finely-spun]." These words bear conflicting associations: *perpetuum* is strongly associated with epic, implying a narrative that is unbroken and constant; *deductite* is specifically linked to the elegies of Callimachus, works characterized by their episodic, discontinuous form. On a figurative level, *deductite* means to remove, to lead out, or to draw out; on the literal level, it means "finely-spun," as in spun wool: the word links episodic digression to women's work. These two words indicate that Ovid has a paradoxical aim. The *Metamorphoses* is, on the surface, an epic poem (a masculine tradition) written in hexameter and of a grand scale, endeavouring to retell the great stories of epic heroes; at the same time, its structure is fluid and often episodic, composed of diverse, independent stories, often regarding the plights of women, that interrupt and often undermine the overarching epic narrative. On the level of form, then, the dynamic of male-penetrator and female-penetrated is constantly overturned; feminine themes and genres regularly interrupt – penetrate – the flow of the male-dominated epic narrative. The episodic tales themselves – the sequences of powerful gods raping vulnerable women – undermine the grand claims of the epic. They cast heroic men,

Apollo and Perseus, for instance, as impulsive, misguided by their emotions, softened by “love” and infatuation, distracted from their primary tasks.

The feminine subversion of male epic convention underpins the *Metamorphoses*, and it brings us to the other major innovation Ovid contributes to the Medusa myth. Ovid links Medusa’s ability to change heroic men into stone to the artistic creation of sculpture. As Perseus tells the story of Medusa’s defeat, he hints at her creativity. He describes the area leading to her dwelling as something of a statue garden: “everywhere in fields and by the road/He saw the shapes of men and beasts, all changed/To stone by glancing at Medusa’s face” (IV. 776-803). Immediately after he recalls this story, Perseus battles against Phineus. Perseus attempts to fight by sword, but, realizing that he is surrounded by Phineus’ thousand-man army, he sees that “valour could not vie/With weight of numbers” (V. 170-171). He needs a more powerful weapon, so he pulls out the Gorgon’s head. Here again, Ovid employs aesthetic language to describe the soldiers’ transformations into stone: “there he stayed/Stock still, a man in armour turned to stone” (V.198-199); “Astyages, [...] gazing aghast,/Took the same stoniness, caught there and fixed/With blank amazement in his marble face” (V.203-205); and Phineus

tries to turn

His eyes away, but now his neck is stiff,

His moist eyes fixed and hard and stony. There

With frightened pleading face and abject hands,

In cringing pose the marble statue stands. (V.232-235)

The poignancy of the scene, the posing of the men as their bodies stiffen, the attention to their materiality – the marble, the stone – Ovid’s wondrous depiction transforms the scene from one of battle and aggression to one about art and beauty.

This tension generated by the Gorgon's power is also saturated with sexual metaphor. Perseus' "curving sword" is rendered impotent in battle and he brandishes the Gorgon's head to harden into stone the bodies of men; the euphemisms make a parody of Perseus' masculine heroism. Reflecting the broader pattern of *Metamorphoses*, the battle scene subverts the male/female dynamic as a woman penetrates male bodies with her gaze.

In *The Epic Gaze: Vision, Gender and Narrative in Ancient Epic*, Helen Lovatt argues that "Ovid's Perseid is the episode of the *Metamorphoses* in which the poem engages most vigorously with epic" (347). She demonstrates that "moments of humour ([Perseus'] wings are waterlogged, he almost forgets to fly when mesmerised by Andromeda), his unsympathetic portrayal and his eventual reliance on the head of Medusa to extricate him from an impossible battle all serve to problematise his heroism" (Lovatt 348). After the battle is over, Perseus is said to have "returned in triumph with his wife," yet his personal victory continues to rely on his possession of Medusa's head. Polydectes, a neighbouring lord, "belittle[s] Perseus' praise" and "claim[s] Medusa's death a lie," a disparagement to which Perseus responds with indignance: "I'll give you proof conclusive," Perseus cries, "and with Medusa's face/He changed the king's face to a bloodless stone" (V.248-250). Medusa's characterization as a powerful sculptress undermines the epic heroism and authority of Perseus. While Perseus had previously claimed victory over her both with his sword (his physical defeat of her) and his voice (his inscribing of her story), Medusa's ability to change men into stone means that, even after she is dead, she becomes both the true vanquisher over Perseus' foes and the one who directs Perseus' story.

Ovid's emphasis on Medusa's creativity links her to another creative figure in the *Metamorphoses*. Pygmalion, repulsed by real women, crafts his ideal from marble and falls in love with his creation. At his request, Venus changes the sculpture into a woman made of flesh.

Like Medusa, Pygmalion is a mythic creator who, with the help of the gods, becomes an agent of metamorphosis. What differs between their creations is the trajectory of the transformations. In an inversion of Medusa's power to petrify men by changing them into stone, a stony body becomes living and soft in Pygmalion's story. This transformation leads to prosperity and new life: Pygmalion's statue becomes his wife. Venus "graced the union she had made," allowing Pygmalion and his bride to bear a child. Medusa's power, by contrast, is disruptive. Hal Foster notes that "the Gorgon is the anti-artist par excellence; the opposite of Pygmalion, she turns animate bodies into inanimate statues" (181). Yet Foster also argues that "this very power makes her the master artist, for she produces sculptural images by her gaze alone" (181). Pygmalion is a man rewarded by the gods for his creativity; Medusa's creativity, a power with a woman as its source, is a constant source of anxiety that undermines the gaze of the heroic Perseus. It is held in suspicion; its power is unyielding. In *Ovid's Lovers*, Victoria Rimell calls Medusa a "Pygmalion-nemesis who *intends* to stamp out life and presence, without remorse" (16). Yet Rimell also comments on the mirroring aspect of Medusa's power, how her reflection in Perseus' shield re-presents his own monstrous image:

The identities of Perseus and Medusa overlap as well as collide: in their first meeting, when Perseus uses a mirrored surface to look upon the head of his enemy, he risks coming face to face with his *own* Medusan reflection, that of the bulging-eyed, snarling, enraged warrior rushing to attack. (18)

While the Pygmalion myth commemorates the sexual and artistic authority of men, Medusa calls that authority into question with a gaze that reveals the depravity—the impotence—of the gazed-upon.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Reading of Ovid

EBB's reception of Greek poets is more explicit and consequently more often studied than her reception of Roman authors.⁸ Yet there is evidence to suggest that she was not only reading Ovid; she also drew on him in her work, particularly in *Aurora Leigh*. Unlike most women of her time, EBB had the opportunity to study Latin and Greek with her brother's tutor and developed an extensive knowledge of classical literature. Throughout their correspondences, EBB and her friends and family would reference Ovid among other classical authors, casually dropping phrases from Ovidian works such as the *Ars Amatoria*, the *Heroides*, the *Fasti*, and the *Tristia*.⁹ Over and above these works, however, EBB seems most fond of the *Metamorphoses*. Around her fifteenth birthday, she quotes the *Metamorphoses* to her father: "You may perhaps exclaim with Apollo 'Magna petis Ba' but cannot add 'Non est mortale quod optas'" (EBB to Edward Moulton-Barrett, March 1821).¹⁰ In that first phrase, EBB inserts herself, using her own nickname, Ba, in place of Phaethon; as early as her teenage years, she imagined herself in an Ovidian role. In a letter to her longtime friend James Martin from February 1843, she affectionately invokes the *Metamorphoses* once again:

Now I count the buds of my primrose with a new kind of interest – and you never saw
such a primrose! I begin to believe in Ovid, or look for a metamorphosis. The leaves are

⁸ See, for example, Isobel Hurst's chapter "Unscrupulously Epic" in *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer*.

⁹ For references in EBB's correspondences to the *Heroides*, see Uvedale Price to EBB, 1827; EBB to Hugh Stuart Boyd, 1830; EBB to Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1844. For references to the *Fasti*, see EBB to Robert Browning, 1846; Robert Browning to EBB, 1846; EBB to Arabella Moulton-Barrett. For reference to the *Tristia*, see EBB to Robert Browning, 1846.

¹⁰ *Metamorphoses*, II, 54–56: "Magna petis Phaethon [you ask too much Phaethon]" and "Non est mortale quod optas [not for mortals is that which you ask]"

turning white & springing up as high as corn. Want of air, & of sun I suppose! I shd be loth to think it for want of friendship to me! (EBB to James Martin, Feb. 6. 1843)

EBB would allude to the fictitious, episodic stories of the *Metamorphoses* with that same fondness in her 1851 poem “Casa Guidi Windows”: “we[...] Who loved, in brief, the classic hill and brook,/And Ovid's dreaming tales and Petrarch's song” (1187, 1195-1196). These allusions demonstrate that EBB was more than familiar with Ovid’s works, including and especially the *Metamorphoses*. She wove Ovid’s phrases into conversation and verse and drew connections between her life and his poetry.

Ovid’s influence on EBB’s poetry would be realized during the height of her literary career in Florence. Living there, EBB had the opportunity to explore Ovid’s significant presence in Italian art.¹¹ Even more, it was in Florence that EBB became close friends with American sculptor Harriet Hosmer, whose life and artistic craft appeared to influence EBB’s growing thought of Ovid as she wrote *Aurora Leigh*. In “Sister Arts and Artists,” Michele Martinez writes that “From the time Hosmer met the Brownings in the winter of 1853 until EBB’s death in 1862, both Elizabeth and Robert were two of her biggest fans” (218). At the time that the two women met, Hosmer was completing two Ovidian sculptures, one of Daphne and the other of Medusa (See Figure 1 below), both victims of rape and bodily transformation. Hosmer described these sister busts as her “marble daughters” (Hosmer, qtd in Martinez, 206). Her maternal affection towards them is reflected by the dignity with which she represents their tragic stories. She casts them in the midst of their transformations; Martinez observes that in doing so, she “preserves their physical integrity as maidens” (131). Her 1854 *Medusa* leaves only a subtle hint of terror or

¹¹ In a letter to Anna Brownell Jameson in 1847, EBB describes seeing Cellini’s statue of Perseus and Medusa for the first time “in a sort of flash”; a year later, she writes to Mary Russell Mitford that “Robert & I go out after tea in a wandering walk to sit in the Loggia & look at the Perseus.”

monstrosity. The snakes on Medusa's head are intertwined with her own wavy hair, and her face is placid, dignified, undisturbed. The snakes wrapped symmetrically around her breast allude to her rape, but do not diminish her dignified posture.



Figure 1: Harriet Hosmer's "Medusa"¹²

EBB's admiration of Hosmer was immense, and their shared interest in Ovidian myth may have been a contributing factor. In her PhD dissertation, *Pygmalion's Image: Ovid, Sculpture, and Women's Poetry, 1770-1880*, Martinez argues that EBB saw Hosmer as a real-life female Pygmalion, an image that would influence the conception of her epic protagonist, Aurora Leigh. Examining earlier drafts of the poem, Martinez demonstrates that EBB drew directly from Ovid's story of Pygmalion: "In the first manuscript draft, Barrett Browning originally had

¹² Hosmer, Harriet Goodhue. *Medusa*. c. 1854. Minneapolis Institute of Art. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/81074/medusa-harriet-goodhue-hosmer>

written at line 48 [in Book V] ‘some sweet saint’s blood must quicken at our thumbs’ instead of ‘in our palms,’ alluding to Ovid’s specific simile of Pygmalion’s statue softening beneath his molding thumbs” (127). The recurring allusions to Pygmalion come to a head in Book VIII, when Aurora describes the “shadowy image of a female sculptor” whose “imagined exhibition of Apollo [...] resolves many of the heroine’s doubts about being a woman artist” (Martinez 127, 130). This image of a female artist who sculpts classical subjects closely resembles Hosmer. Meeting Hosmer when the sculptor was only twenty-one, EBB was struck by her “masculine independence, her feminine modesty, and, most of all, her complete commitment to the art of sculpture” (Martinez 129). Hosmer, who begets a Daphne and a Medusa, offers EBB a model of the female creator who renders mythological subjects and takes a masculine artistic tradition for her own.

While Martinez has drawn important connections between EBB, Hosmer, and the Pygmalion myth, these figures are also connected by Medusa. Medusa is a foil to Pygmalion in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Hosmer sculpted an Ovidian Medusa and called the finished work her “daughter.” And while Pygmalion plays a pronounced role in EBB’s *Aurora Leigh*, the figure of Medusa becomes a model for Aurora’s developing understanding of the relationships between artist, woman, and mother. Considering EBB’s familiarity with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, I suggest that her treatment of Medusa interacts with Ovid’s two innovations on her myth. Marian Erle’s suffering parallels Medusa’s rape and confronts the mythological treatment of female rape victims more broadly. Aurora Leigh’s own identification with Medusa – particularly, the Medusa that subverts the epic claims of Perseus – contributes to her development as an artist and woman. Both resemblances to Medusa stem from a direct reference in Book I, which presents Medusa as an archetype of motherhood, a theme that is central both to Marian and Aurora’s narrative arcs.

Medusa in the Portrait of Aurora's Mother

When Aurora recalls her childhood in Book I, she describes in detail the death portrait of her mother that had haunted her as a young girl and would continue to haunt her throughout her life. For Aurora, images of archetypal womanhood always harken back to that elusive portrait:

And as I grew
 In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously,
 Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
 Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
 Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,
 With that still face... which did not therefore change,
 But kept the mystic level of all forms
 And fears and admirations; was by turn
 Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,—
 A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
 A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
 A still Medusa, with mild milky brows
 All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
 Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or, anon,
 Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
 Where the Babe sucked; or, Lamia in her first
 Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked,
 And, shuddering, wriggled down to the unclean [...] (I.146-163)

This catalogue introduces motherhood as foundational to Aurora's development as a woman and artist. Having lost her mother at such a young age, Aurora sees herself more as a child of cultural tradition than of her actual mother, collecting and internalizing images of womanhood found in art and poetry. The loss of her biological mother leads Aurora to seek that maternal presence everywhere, including in these cultural images.

Scholars have generally read this long list of archetypes as fragmented, caricatured semblances of womanhood to be more fully explored over the course of the poem. Zonana, however, makes the compelling case in "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Feminist Poetics" that "In her childhood experience of the portrait, Aurora sees how the apparently competing images of woman as heavenly and earthly cohere" (248), as is suggested when Aurora claims that her mother's image "did not therefore change,/But kept the mystic level of all forms." I suggest that in this early passage, in which Aurora looks back on her younger years, she is already developing an awareness of the innate complexity of each archetypal woman. Each image contains a paradox. Psyche and the Virgin Mary typically represent pure innocence and love; yet Aurora highlights the moment when the "loving Psyche [...] loses sight of Love," and of all the Marian devotions, Aurora chooses Our Lady of the Passion who is "stabbed with swords/Where the Babe sucked." By presenting these difficult, contradictory images, Aurora introduces a chief aim of the poem, that is, to depict complex, embodied experiences of motherhood and womanhood.

Centered in this catalogue of archetypal women is a peculiar description of the classical Gorgon. While Medusa is often fashioned as an archetype of dangerous womanhood, and while scholars such as Laura Faulk regard the Medusa of this passage as the monstrous foil to the

angelic Psyche and Virgin Mary, I suggest that this Medusa is not only monstrous.¹³ Though the overall Medusa image is grotesque, Aurora describes Medusa's snakes as distinct from her actual person; her "mild milky brows," a suggestion of innocence, are "all curdled and all clothed upon with snakes/Whose slime falls fast as sweat will" (I.157-159). The strange dairy metaphor – Medusa's hair as milk *curdled* by snakes – implies an innate purity distorted by an exterior force. "Milkyness" also suggests her maternal femininity by implying lactation; moreover, the snakes that curdle her milky brows are phallic, masculine forces intruding upon her body. "Curdled" also calls to mind the word "blood-curdling," and while Medusa is often presented as a monster who provokes fear, here it is the snakes that terrorize her. Though the Medusa archetype generally exemplifies the "abhorrent," "ghastly," or "grotesque" (I.149-150) as a cultural symbol, Aurora's description of Medusa is still closely aligned to the "pathetical" portraits of Psyche and Our Lady of the Passion, each inherently innocent but afflicted with terrible suffering. Following this complex reference at the start of Book I, Medusa becomes a recurring motif throughout the poem, accompanying Aurora as she scrutinizes cultural perceptions of marginalized women, and as she herself claims a space among the great artists who influence and shape the cultural imagination.

Marian Erle, Medusan Victim

After her mother's portrait, Aurora perceives Medusa in the person of Marian Erle. Marian's appearance is Medusan, especially – paradoxically – since Aurora struggles to describe it. On her first encounter with Marian, Aurora writes:

¹³ In "Destructive Maternity in Aurora Leigh," Laura Faulk argues that the figures in Aurora's catalogue represent contradicting elements of motherhood: "The mother's portrait [...] suggests that the perfect mother is an impossibility – no mother can be an angelic Virgin Mary just as no woman can be a cold-blooded Medusa" (44).

She was not white nor brown,
 But could look either, like a mist that changed
 According to being shone on more or less:
 The hair, too, ran its opulence of curls
 In doubt 'twixt dark and bright, nor left you clear
 To name the colour. (III.810-815)

Like the portrait of Aurora's mother and the Medusa archetype in particular, Marian's ambivalent appearance creates anxiety for a viewer who desires to elucidate it. After finding herself unable to name the colour of Marian's hair, Aurora merely criticizes it: "Too much hair perhaps/(I'll name a fault here) for so small a head" (III.815-816). As I noted in the introduction, women in Victorian art and literature with abundant hair were typically taken to be dangerous or suspicious. That Aurora introduces Marian as a protean woman with "too much" hair suggests another echo of Medusa, the precursor of wild-haired mythical women. Following her disapproval of Marian's hair, Aurora describes Marian's "milky little teeth" that dissolved her mouth "to so infantine a smile" (III.822-823), a suggestion of her youthful innocence. The word "milky" harkens back to Medusa's "milky brows" in Book I, and foreshadows Marian's own motherhood. The depiction of Marian as a young woman with soft features yet excessive hair echoes Aurora's description of Medusa as an innocent woman "curdled upon [...] with snakes." Aurora views Marian as both fallen and innocent, an observation similar to that which she made earlier of Medusa.

Aurora Leigh's overarching narrative consists of embedded stories, sometimes flashbacks from the lives of the main characters. Marian's origin story in many ways mirrors those of the fleeing metamorphic women in the *Metamorphoses*, particularly that of Daphne. In the Apollo

and Daphne story, Cupid shoots Apollo with an arrow of love and Daphne with an arrow of hate, and Apollo's desire overcomes him: "love's fire/Consumed the god, his whole heart was aflame,/And high the hopes that stoked his fruitless passion" (I.495-496). In like manner, Marian's parents attempt to coerce their daughter into prostituting herself for another predatory suitor: "there, a man stood, with beast's eyes/That seemed as they would swallow her alive/Complete in body and spirit" (III.1050-1051). Terrified, Marian rejects her parents' wishes and runs into the woods, her parents and suitor chasing after her. The language describing this chase matches that of the Apollo and Daphne story: Ovid describes Apollo as "a beagle [that] sees across the stubble/A hare and runs to kill" (Ovid I.533-534); Marian's parents "yelled at her,/as famished hounds at a hare" (EBB III.1069-1070). In their pursuit of a woman that they "love," Marian's parents, like Apollo, figuratively transform into animals of the hunt.

Like Ovid's heroines, Marian slips between categorical boundaries, even rendering her environment unstable, though here it is also worth observing how EBB uses metamorphosis differently than Ovid. As Marian runs away, her environment transforms, described through pathetic fallacy:

Mad fear
 Was running in her feet and killing the ground;
 The white roads curled as if she burnt them up,
 The green fields melted, wayside trees fell back
 To make room for her. Then her head grew vexed;
 Trees, fields, turned on her and ran after her;
 She heard the quick pants of the hills behind,
 Their keen air pricked her neck. (III.1073-1080)

Like Ovid's Phaethon who drives the sun too close to earth, Marian scorches the ground; as in the Ovidian stories in which nature reacts to the tribulations of women, Marian's surroundings transform and participate in the chase scene. While Ovid's landscapes tend to take the side of his suffering women, as in the case of Proserpina, EBB initially emphasizes Marian's isolation; the land – the trees and fields – join her parents and suitor in the chasing. Marian is alone in her suffering, yet EBB demonstrates her inner strength with a powerful metaphor:

[...] she had lost her feet

Could run no more, yet somehow went as fast,

The horizon red 'twixt steeples in the east

So sucked her forward, forward, while her heart

Kept swelling, swelling till it swelled so big

It seemed to fill her body, – when it burst

And overflowed the world and swamped the light. (III.1080-1086)

On the one hand, it appears on the surface that Marian “had lost her feet” and “could run no more,” but the “yet somehow” in the sentence suggests that, mysteriously, Marian “went as fast,” maintaining her strength. What follows is a striking metaphor for female agency and sexuality. Marian is “sucked” forward by the horizon between steeples – breast-like, perhaps – and, as though nourished, her heart swells. The repetition of “swelling” suggests that the experience is erotic – her heart swells “so big/It seemed to fill her body” before “it burst/And overflowed the world and swamped the light.” The bliss of escape is cast in the language of sexual climax. Instead of finding her sexuality suppressed, stolen, or squandered, Marian still possesses it. The landscape transforms into yet another maternal force that guides the heroine forward, nourishing

and strengthening her. With the help of this powerful maternal force, the suffering woman maintains her voice and agency even after she has been threatened by male violence.

After Book III, Aurora does not see Marian for a long time. Over their time apart, however, she recalls Marian's face in the same way that she recalls the portrait of her mother. These two images seem to become confused with one another:

That face persists.

It floats up, it turns over in my mind,

As like Marian, as one dead is like

The same alive. (VI.308-311)

As this passage continues, Aurora proceeds to see in Marian those Medusan qualities she had recognized at their first meeting. Her face, now a memory, is even more obscured: "In very deed a face/And not a fancy, though it vanished so" (VI.311-312). It eludes definition even more now that Aurora has not seen it for so long. She vaguely recalls its contrasts, the "small fair face between the darks of hair" (VI.313). The only parts of Marian's face that Aurora remembers clearly are her eyes:

Now I remember perfectly

Those eyes, today, – how overlarge they seemed,

As if some patient passionate despair

(Like a coal dropt and forgot on tapestry,

Which slowly burns a widening circle out)

Had burnt them larger, larger. And those eyes,

Today, I do remember, saw me too,

As I saw them, with conscious lids astrain

In recognition. (VI.320-328)

Aurora once again finds Marian's eyes too large for her face, made larger by her suffering. The comparison of her eyes to burning coal suggests Marian's suffering but also the idea that her eyes scorch; like Medusa's treacherous gaze, they threaten to harm those who behold them. Aurora's vivid memory of Marian's burning eyes echoes EBB's letter to Robert discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the memory of Robert's "fire-eyes" and "black pits" that stuck with EBB like the Gorgons long after. Indeed, Aurora sees that Marian's gaze is "conscious" and "astrain in recognition." This reciprocated gaze she describes is forceful – it has captured Aurora. In the process of the passage, Aurora realizes that her imagination and her reality have combined; while she is thinking of Marian, she also realizes that she has seen her in real life, on the streets of Paris.

Aurora finally reunites with Marian soon after this strange encounter and learns of the tribulations Marian has undergone since they last saw one another. While Marian may have narrowly escaped sexual violence in Book III, she is not so lucky by Book VI. After Marian was convinced by Lady Waldemar to leave Romney, to whom she was betrothed, Lady Waldemar had sent her away to France, where she was left in a brothel, and soon Marian found herself drugged, raped, and impregnated. When Aurora reunites with Marian, she finds her with child, and her immediate reaction is one of judgement. Marian's likeness to Medusa comes to a head in this moment when she discloses the story of her rape. Like the Medusa in Ovid's story, she is raped by a man for whom there are no consequences. Women who could have protected her betray and abandon Marian, just as Minerva turns a blind eye to Medusa's sufferings and even punishes her for desecrating the temple. Both Marian and Medusa find themselves doomed to isolation, understood by no one. Marian is initially blamed and ostracized for her rape, but as she

shares her story with Aurora, explaining the complexity of her trauma and defending her inherent dignity, she begins to live out a healing process that Medusa cannot receive in the *Metamorphoses*. Marian Erle gives voice to the rape victim, challenging even the title protagonist in her own ignorance surrounding sexual assault.

Aurora is quick to judge Marian when she discovers her with a baby born out of wedlock. She calls her

Complaisant,
 [...] to a wrong you've done,
 [...] When you left
 The pure place and the noble heart, to take
 The hand of a seducer (VI. 743-746)

In response to this condemnation, Marian focuses on the word “seducer”:

What, ‘seduced’'s your word?
 Do wolves seduce a wandering fawn in France?
 Do eagles, who have pinched a lamb with claws,
 Seduce it into carrion? So with me.
 I was not ever, as you say, seduced,
 But simply, murdered. (VI. 766-771)

While Aurora scolds Marian for falling for a *seducer*'s charm, Marian demonstrates the inadequacy of the word by comparing her predicament to that of a fawn or a lamb targeted by a predator. This dialogue is important to Aurora's own growth and also to the aim of the poem at large, because it demonstrates that even other women can be complicit in blaming the victim. Aurora is like Minerva, averting her eyes from Marian's suffering. But though Aurora initially

acts as Minerva, she ultimately comes to recognize the injustice of Marian's circumstance. Marian speaks up for herself, helping Aurora to understand her plight and creating solidarity between them.

Marian frequently refers to herself as dead, as early as in the scene in which she runs away from her parents. Laura Falk notes that Marian "describes her own life as composed of two deaths; both occur when she is faced with uncontrolled male sexuality and, by conjunction, potential pregnancy" (45). Yet Marian's "death" does not mean her end or completion. She says herself, "death's a change," reminiscent of Pythagoras' doctrine in the final book of the *Metamorphoses*: "There is no death – no death, but only change/And innovation" (XV.229-262). In a sense, this kind of transformation occurs after Medusa's death as well. Immediately after Medusa's death, when Perseus cuts off her head, her outpoured blood produces "Swift-flying Pegasus and his brother [Chrysaor]" (IV.780). Both EBB and Ovid play with archetypal expectations; Marian and Medusa suffer greatly and at the same time bear life, illustrating the tricky relationship between rape and motherhood we have seen developing throughout the poem.

The relationship between Marian's new life and her motherhood proves complicated. Marian's child offers her a sense of purpose to persevere in life, but apart from her motherhood, she still sees herself as dead:

Only for the child
 I'm warm, and cold, and hungry, and afraid,
 And smell the flowers a little and see the sun,
 And speak still, and am silent, — just for him! (VI.824-827)

Motherhood is a step but cannot be the sole means of Marian's restoration.

Rather, it is through female community that Marian grows and heals. Marian and Aurora move together to Florence, in a house “on the hill/of Bellosguardo” (VII.515-516). One day, while Aurora sits on the terrace above Marian and her child, she is startled by the sound of laughter coming from below:

The laugh of sad and innocent souls, that breaks

Abruptly, as if frightened at itself.

’Twas Marian laughed. I saw her glance above

In sudden shame that I should hear her laugh [...] (VIII.16-19)

Marian’s embarrassment reveals the sincerity of her joy – she laughs almost in spite of herself – a sign that she is recovering. Aurora pretends to read her book to relieve Marian of any shame, but she is quietly pleased: “Laugh *you*, sweet Marian, – you’ve the right to laugh,/Since God himself is for you, and a child!” (VIII.25-26). Aurora’s observation of Marian in this intimate moment demonstrates that, finally, Marian can be seen. This is another of EBB’s transformations of the Medusa myth: now, Aurora can look directly at Marian, beholding her as she is.

Aurora Leigh, Medusan Artist

Florence, the motherland for Aurora, becomes a place of retreat, a pastoral space that nurtures both Aurora and Marian. When Aurora writes about her Florentine upbringing while living in England, she yearns for that space the way that she yearns for her mother: “As it was, indeed,/I felt a mother-want about the world” (I.39-40). Aurora’s “mother-want” is fulfilled by her return to Florence, but also by the love of Marian, who transforms into a maternal figure by the end of the poem.

Aurora's own relationship to motherhood transforms throughout the poem. Aurora's thought of mothers, beginning with the description of her mother's portrait and its cultural likenesses in Book I, is tied to her thought of women's art and creativity. In Book V, as she deliberates upon her vocation as an artist and woman, she envisions the legacy she wishes to leave behind with a maternal metaphor:

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon a burning lava of a song,
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
'Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked!
That bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets our own beating. This is living art,
Which thus presents, and thus records true life. (V. 213-222)

The image here is subversive; Aurora imagines the epic tradition, a fundamentally masculine inheritance, through a feminine metaphor: the nourishment of breastfeeding. The recurring image of the nourishing, maternal landscape comes to also represent a literary landscape, to which Aurora hopes to contribute as a woman artist.

Aurora's realization of her artistic aspirations, while deliberated upon in Book V, is dramatized over the course of the entire poem, and as Martinez argues, Aurora models herself as something of a female Pygmalion. I suggest that, at the same time as she casts Marian as a Medusan victim, she also models her own development as an artist after Medusa, the inverted

Pygmalion of the *Metamorphoses*. Aurora's own resemblance to Medusa is made early on in the poem, not long after the description of her mother's portrait. Just as she is initially disturbed by Marian's Medusan appearance, Aurora is at first anxious towards her own resemblance to Medusa. Wishing to appease her strict aunt, Aurora "broke the copious curls upon my head/In braids, because she [her aunt] liked smooth ordered hair" (I.385-386). Later, in confrontation with her aunt, Aurora finds herself "passionate,/Too passionate perhaps" (II.721-722) and when she breaks down into tears, her aunt

let fall my hands
And took her smile off, in sedate disgust,
As peradventure she had touched a snake,—
A dead snake, mind! (II.723-726)

Aurora's disorderly hair and inability to suppress her emotion liken her to Medusa, as does the suggestion that she is snake-like. Her aunt's harsh gaze renders Aurora self-conscious of those qualities, persuading her to tame them.

Aurora's resemblance to Medusa develops greater consequence through her relationship with Romney. Her encounter with Romney in Book II introduces a central theme in the poem: the conflict between Aurora's poetic ambition and her desire for romantic fulfilment. Romney makes for a troublesome prospect, however, as he initially stands as an obstacle to Aurora's poetic vision. If Aurora is the creative, subversive Medusa, Romney is Perseus, the closest to a male epic hero in this poem. In "'Tulips on Dunghills': Regendering the Georgic in Barrett Browning's 'Aurora Leigh,'" Karen Hadley discusses Romney's "masculinist" vision that opposes Aurora's. She argues that Aurora "challenges masculinist Greek and Roman views of history and offers instead a history inspired by her own vision" (Hadley 466). While Hadley does

not mention Ovid in her article, her argument suggests a dynamic at play in *Aurora Leigh* much like Ovid's project in the *Metamorphoses*: the challenging of masculine, epic ideals with subversive, feminine forms and subjects. In a parallel sense, EBB situates Romney's vision in opposition to Aurora's vision.

Before Romney and Aurora quarrel about these opposing views, EBB presents the theme of vision through Aurora and Romney's actual gazes. In particular moments, Aurora and Romney echo the idea of the mirroring moment in the story of Perseus and Medusa. When Aurora is just beginning to conceptualize her poetical career, she finds herself caught and restricted by Romney's gaze, both literally and figuratively. It is Aurora's twentieth birthday, and in her aunt's garden she makes for herself an ivy crown. Imagining herself among the "worthiest poets," Aurora lifts the crown to her head just as Romney enters the scene, facing her "with a mouth/Twice graver than his eyes" (II.57-58). Captured by his gaze, she narrates:

I stood there fixed –
My arms up, like the caryatid, sole
Of some abolished temple, helplessly
Persistent in a gesture which derides
A former purpose. Yet my blush was flame,
As if from flax, not stone. (II.59-64)

Aurora is ashamed to have been caught in this posture. She is not yet a published poet. Romney's gaze draws attention to Aurora's inexperience as an artist and her perception of herself as merely the helpless object of another's gaze.

The conversation that proceeds from this first glance is motivated by Romney's proposal of marriage, but becomes a debate about whether women ought to pursue art. The conflict

revolves around Aurora's desire to be both woman and artist, and Romney dismisses her by presenting her with abstract ideals of what a woman should be:

Mere women, personal and passionate,
 You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives,
 Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
 We get no Christ from you, – and verily
 We shall not get a poet, in my mind. (II.221-225)

Romney's appeal to gender norms and perfect, simplistic versions of womanhood contrasts with Aurora's far more nuanced view of womanhood, which materializes during their argument as she continues to think of these more complex archetypes.

At the end of Book II, Romney and Aurora have had their battle of wits and stand at an impasse, which Aurora describes as a kind of mutual petrification:

But so,
 Even so, we let go hands, my cousin and I,
 And, in between us, rushed the torrent-world
 To blanch our faces like divided rocks,
 And bar for ever mutual sight and touch
 Except through swirl of spray and all that roar. (II.1243-1248)

In this mirroring moment, Aurora and Romney both become like Medusa and the stone sculpture she creates. They both petrify and are consequently petrified, reproducing the mirroring moment caused by Medusa's glance.

As Aurora begins to form her poetic and aesthetic principles, she begins to embrace this likeness she shares with Medusa. Such acceptance begins as early as Book II, when her rejection

of Romney's proposal leaves her feeling isolated: "Some tears fell down my cheeks, and then I smiled,/As those smile who have no face in the world/To smile back to them" (II.765-766). Her decision to pursue art renders her a solitary person, in terms that echo Medusa's loneliness as a woman who cannot safely reciprocate another's smile. Over time, Aurora becomes more comfortable in this solitude; after socializing has rendered her exhausted, she returns home: "I drop my cloak,/Unclasp my girdle, loose the band that ties/My hair... now could I but unloose my soul!" (V.1037-1039). As in the case of Marian, such long, unruly hair reflected the fallen woman trope in the Victorian imagination, but for Aurora it marks her path to self-acceptance and self-discovery. Soon after, it begins to resemble Medusa's sentient coils: "My loose long hair began to burn and creep,/Alive to the very ends, about my knees" (V.1126-1127). That her hair begins to "burn" and "creep" suggests Aurora is still somewhat ambivalent toward it, but the act of letting out her hair gives Aurora a new sense of freedom.

Though Aurora succeeds as a poet, she still finds in herself an ache for more. In Florence, finding sisterhood with Marian and continuing to write poetry, she cannot help but think of Romney. Here, Aurora has found a sense of wholeness that makes marriage more plausible to her. In Book VIII, Romney comes to Aurora, a sign that he is now receptive enough to cross the threshold into the female domain. Aurora declares to Romney without hesitation: "I'm an artist, sir,/And woman" (VIII. 825-827). She proceeds to explain her ability to be both artist and woman using sculptural imagery once again, allying herself with an imaginary female sculptor:

[...] if another sat in sight,
 I'd whisper, – Soft, my sister! not a word!
 By speaking we prove only we can speak,
 Which he, the man here, never doubted. What

He doubts is, whether we can *do* the thing

With decent grace we've not yet done at all.

Now, do it; bring your statue, – you have room!

He'll see it even by the starlight here; (VIII. 828-834)

Now that she has proven herself a poet, Aurora stands firm in her new identity as a Medusa-like creator.

Romney and Aurora confess their love for one another in Book IX. It is also in this concluding book that Romney reveals that his political project has failed and a fire that destroyed Leigh Hall has left him blind. Romney describes his new condition harshly, and repeatedly likens himself to a sculpture frozen in place:

To be blind,

Turned out of nature, mulcted as a man,

Refused the daily largesse of the sun

To humble creatures! When the fever's heat

Dropped from me, as the flame did from my house,

And left me ruined like it, stripped of all

The hues and shapes of aspectacle life,

A mere bare blind stone in the blaze of day,

A man, upon the outside of the earth,

As dark as ten feet under, in the grave,—

Why that seemed hard. (IX.563-572)

Romney views his blindness as a kind of death that makes him stone-like – almost as if he were petrified.

His gaze “mulcted,” his ambitions hampered, Romney, like Perseus, seems to have failed as an epic hero. Romney becomes like the soldiers of Phineus’ army, his change described by Aurora as sculpture:

he, the man, appeared

So pale and patient, like the marble man

A sculptor puts his personal sadness in

To join his grandeur of ideal thought. (EBB, VIII.1099-1102)

As in Ovid’s epic, the male gaze is rendered inadequate; what remains is the female gaze. But unlike Perseus, who uses the Gorgon’s gaze for his own gain and without respect for her dignity, Romney’s weakness humbles him and instills in him an opportunity to love Aurora as she wishes to be loved:

For, though as powerless, said I, as a stone,

A stone can still give shelter to a worm,

And it is worth while being a stone for that:

There’s hope, Aurora. (IX.598-601)

It is in response to this line that Aurora responds with her own confession of love. Romney’s humbled posture, his willingness to support Aurora in her poetic call, allows Aurora to assume her calling as both woman and artist through romantic partnership.

Martinez has commented on the reversal of “artistic blindness” in the poem – echoes of Milton’s poetry liken Romney to the trope of great poets who lose their physical sight yet continue to write through a spiritual or prophetic sight. Here, Aurora and Romney become one in that Aurora proves herself the poet-prophet who leads her beloved. This is a great deviation from Romney’s earlier opinion, that “we get no Christ from you.” Now, Romney calls her “my

Miriam,” (VIII.334) a reference to the prophetic sister of Moses, and “my morning star” (IX.908). In the very last stanza, Aurora describes to Romney a vision of the New Jerusalem. While these images of prophecy are based in the Christian imagination, they integrate with the classical archetypes that recur throughout the poem. Aurora’s development into a visionary is the fulfilment of her embodiment of the Medusa. Like Medusa, her gaze commands the poem’s trajectory. Aurora’s unity with Romney corresponds to Rimell’s idea that Perseus and Medusa become one in the mirroring moment, and that Perseus ultimately adopts her gaze. Unexpectedly, however, *Aurora Leigh* takes the mirroring moment further and gives her Medusa a love story.

CHAPTER TWO



Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?

Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

Devotion bent me broken/So I rebelled/Destroyed the icon

Björk, "Black Lake"

Destroying the Idol: Medusa and Petrification in Christina Rossetti's Poetry

Dolores Rosenblum relates Rossetti's stony and vigilant female poetic personae to her experience as an artist's model to members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. While my view of Rossetti's early poetry does not discount this reading, I suggest that Petrarch's lyric speakers may have inspired her to find solace in this pose.

Michele Martinez, footnote 12 in "Christina Rossetti's Petrarca"

In *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (1986), Dolores Rosenblum makes an unusual comparison between the Victorian poet and a classical figure, a comparison that has seldom been picked up by scholars since. It relates to a theme that Rosenblum finds across Rossetti's poetry: the "Otherness" experienced by the female subject through her experience of seeing and being seen (110). "Expressed as a visual metaphor," Rosenblum explains, "female otherness takes the form of action frozen in a pose; the woman whose beauty or monstrousness transfixes the beholder is herself immobilized" (111). Relating this motif to Rossetti's experience as model for Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings, Rosenblum suggests that Rossetti became something of a Medusa figure when represented by her artist brother, describing a tension "between exposure and concealment" (116) caused by Rossetti's stony, elusive expression. Rosenblum argues that in this position,

Rossetti saw herself as the repressive/repressed virgin who doubles for the mother in the begetting of art; as the terrifying Medusa-mother who possesses herself at the cost of appearing monstrous; and finally as the female Christ who witnesses the sufferings of

[her] sex: her brother's failure to love the woman as she 'is'; her own reification as a female icon. (119)

Simultaneously artist and model, poet and muse, subject and object, Rossetti found herself in the position of Medusa, a mythical figure known to petrify men and yet herself petrified by the dozens of men who rendered her image.

While Rosenblum employs the Medusa myth as she discusses Rossetti's conflicted identifications as active poet and passive model, echoes of Medusa are also prevalent across Rossetti's poetical works. Rossetti's many uses of this classical image are shadowy, complex, and ambivalent. This argument aims to assemble and interpret veiled yet recurring allusions and suggestions regarding Medusa that can be found throughout Rossetti's work. These veiled allusions take the shape of, among others, a fiendish woman in "The World"; a duplicitous milkmaid in "The Prince's Progress"; a Faustian male spirit in "The Convent Threshold"; and, unexpectedly, the Biblical heroine Esther in *Monna Innominata*. Such veiled suggestiveness is indeed typical of and consistent with Rossetti's expressions of poetic meaning, which are very often insinuated through reserved expression rather than explicitly declared.

Rossetti's references to Medusa appear to be born out of her reading of Dante and Petrarch, who employed the myth in various though related ways. Dante allegorizes Medusa in the *Commedia*; there, petrification represents obduracy, or the hardening of one's heart, to divine truth and salvation. Petrarch applies this connection between petrification and sin to the erotic context of the sonnet tradition. Throughout the *Canzoniere*, he portrays Laura, his beloved muse, as a Medusa who petrifies him with the sin of idolatry. Like Dante, Rossetti often appears to regard Medusa as a symbol of temptation, a dangerous figure that threatens the speaker's soul. But like Petrarch, Rossetti also delves into the possible meanings of petrification in the context

of love poetry. Considering in particular how petrification is complicated by an active speaker who both petrifies and is petrified, Rossetti weaves Petrarch's notion of petrification into her poetics of renunciation. As she grapples with Petrarch's projection of Medusa onto his beloved, Rossetti attempts to reconfigure Laura into a poet in her own right who resists the beloved's threat of petrification and comes to terms with her own capacity to petrify.

Medusa in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature

Male-created images of Medusa surrounded Rossetti. The Pre-Raphaelite concept of Medusa emerged from the broader (masculine) Victorian preoccupation with the myth, which was centred on her dangerous erotic attraction. Medusa's petrifying gaze would suggest that not only are men themselves attracted to her, but she deliberately attracts them. Her gaze demonstrates her terrifying agency.

For the Pre-Raphaelites, who for the most part would take increasing interest in the unorthodox and profane, the eroticism of this terrifying gaze would become a subject of intense fascination. Ofek claims that "The Medusa myth was central to Pre-Raphaelite art" (70). Direct renderings of Medusa by the likes of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones followed in the Romantic tradition, treating Medusa as both beautiful and monstrous, sympathetic and terrifying.¹⁴ More generally, Pre-Raphaelite images of dangerous women often incorporated dark, coiling locks and piercing gazes reminiscent of the Gorgon.¹⁵

¹⁴ As Jerome McGann demonstrates in "The Beauty of the Medusa," Medusa in the (male) Pre-Raphaelite imagination follows in the legacy of Percy Shelley's poem "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" (1819), which was both an assertion of Romantic belief and a vision of Medusa as both terrifying monster and a beautiful, suffering victim.

¹⁵ See, for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "La Pia De' Tolomei" (1868-80); Edward Burne-Jones' "The Beguiling of Merlin" (1872-1877); William Holman Hunt's "The Lady of Shallot" (1886-1905).

Medusa seemed to absorb the life and works of Rossetti's brother, Dante Gabriel. He famously called the beautiful models with whom he worked "stunners," a suggestion that these women could immobilize a viewer with their intense beauty. His sonnet and painting duo "Aspecta Medusa" also conveyed an anxiety about women's gazes.¹⁶

Scholars have paid close attention to Rossetti's subtle criticisms of her brother's memorializing of the women in his life and, as Rosenblum suggests, she seems to have also maintained a vigilant possession over her own image when she modeled for him. Likewise, her Medusan figures are not romanticized like those of the male Pre-Raphaelite artists. While influenced in some ways by these cultural images of Medusa, Rossetti's Medusan figures more so emphasized female subjectivity and the mirroring facet of the petrifying gaze. At the same time, that she would come to identify with Medusa in certain moments does not mean that she always took a more sympathetic view. On the contrary, Rossetti associates her more conspicuous Medusa figures with Biblical temptation and evil.

Rossetti's Devilish Medusa Figures

Rossetti's simpler, more conspicuous Medusas are fairly characteristic of the Victorian emphasis on Medusa as a suspicious, threatening figure. In Rossetti's "The World," composed in 1854, a duplicitous, mysterious Medusa figure preys on the speaker. The temptress' appearance is, like Medusa's, frighteningly unstable: "By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair:/But all night as the moon so changeth she" (1-2). At nighttime her appearance changes, and she becomes "Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy" (3). What is more, there are "subtle

¹⁶ For more detailed analyses of this poem, see Jerome McGann's "The Beauty of the Medusa." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1972, pp. 3-25; Thomas Albrecht's *The Medusa Effect*. SUNY Press, 2009; and Sibylle Baumbach's "Medusa's Gaze and the Aesthetics of Fascination." *Anglia*, vol. 128, no. 2, 2011, 225-245.

serpents gliding in her hair” (4). This line hints at the Pre-Raphaelite treatment of Medusa, emphasizing the woman’s femininity as much as her monstrosity.

For Rossetti, though, the woman’s changing, duplicitous appearance has perilous, spiritual implications. False promises of “Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety” give way to the “naked horror of the truth,” her monstrosity that manifests in the night (6, 10). These false promises liken her not only to Medusa, but also to the seductive serpent of Eden. The woman is next described devilishly, “With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands” (11). This poem reflects Rossetti’s tendency to mix classical and Biblical significations: the woman is both a gorgon and a devil.

This figure is all the more terrifying because, though separate from the speaker, she is mirror-like, and threatens to reveal the speaker’s potential for his or her own inner depravity. The speaker nearly succumbs to the woman’s temptation by the end of the poem: “Is this a friend indeed, that I should sell/My soul to her, give her my life and youth,/Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell?” (12-14). That the speaker concludes the poem with a question suggests irresolution; the speaker describes the very real possibility of corruption without any sign of hope in the possibility of deliverance from the duplicitous lady’s clutches. In fact, in the last line, the speaker imagines his or her own feet “cloven too,” as though beginning to share in the temptress’ monstrosity. The speaker’s identification with the monster alludes to the mirroring aspect of the Medusa myth, which Jerome McGann suggests was emphasized in “the Romantic treatment of the legend [whereby] the mirror borne by Perseus becomes the manifest symbol of the equivalence between the hero and his victim” (23). The mirroring aspect of this Medusa foreshadows a pattern in Rossetti’s more complicated Medusa images: for this poet, the boundary between the petrifier and petrified is fluid and ambiguous.

Another ambiguous Medusa figure is found in Rossetti's 1866 narrative poem "The Prince's Progress." This poem tells the story of a prince's journey to a princess. A number of temptations and distractions delay the prince's arrival, to the point that, when he finally reaches his destination, the princess is dead. Only about a mile into his journey, the prince encounters "A wave-haired milkmaid, rosy and white" (58). Like the woman in "The World," however, her initially pleasant appearance is unstable; on behalf of the prince, the narrator asks: "Was it milk now, or was it cream?/Was she a maid, or an evil dream?" (67-68). As in "The World," the lady's victim is highly susceptible to her ploys. The prince's judgment clouds in the milkmaid's presence. The milkmaid coaxes the prince into staying with her overnight as payment for a draught of her cow's milk:

You may give the full moon to me;

Or else sit under this apple-tree

Here for one idle day by my side;

After that I'll let you go free,

And the world is wide. (80-84)

Instead of requesting material payment, the milkmaid wants the Prince's company. That she coerces him to sit under an "apple-tree" connects the seductress to the serpent in Eden; she ensnares the prince in the quintessential scene of Biblical temptation.

It is during this time spent with the Prince that the milkmaid's appearance becomes Medusa-like. Lying with the Prince under the apple-tree, she

[...] twisted her hair in a cunning braid

And writhed it in shining serpent-coils

And held him a day and night fast laid

In her subtle toils. (93-96)

The diction here is strange. Braids might normally imply the domestication or taming of a lady's hair; as Jan Marsh explains in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, "normally, hair was covered or neatly braided and pinned and only in the bedroom was it loose and long [...]" culturally, too, hair was symbolic of vanity and wantonness: unbraided hair signalled sex and abandon" (208). Here, however, the milkmaid's braid is itself "cunning," likened to Medusa's snake hair by its "serpent-coils," and it is instead the prince who is passively "held," or constrained. The use of the word "writhe" is peculiar, too; "to writhe" is commonly a reflexive verb, often used to describe a snake that twists or contorts its own body. Here, it is transitive, meaning "to twist or coil (something)" or "to fashion into coils or folds" (writhe, v.1). It is the milkmaid's deliberate action that causes her to appear Medusa-like. Her serpent hair is a weapon of her own creation. The suggestion of her erotic charm, that she manipulates her appearance as she passes the time with the Prince, is also implied to be of her own malicious design.

The Medusa figures in "The World" and "The Prince's Progress" share a certain resemblance to those in the broader Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian imaginations: her erotic charms, her connection to the serpent of Eden. Another influence, however, seems to have more deeply shaped Rossetti's mode of translating the Medusa myth into a Christian context: Dante, who more than any other poet influenced Rossetti's literary framework, was also the first to substantially treat Medusa as a Christian allegory.

As a number of scholars have already demonstrated, Dante pervaded Rossetti's life and work.¹⁷ Dante fascinated the entire Rossetti household, and Christina's individual, serious study of Dante began as early as 1848; by 1850, she had the opportunity to read at least portions of Charles Cayley's translations (Harrison). In "'May My Great Love Avail Me': Christina Rossetti and Dante," a chapter in *Christina Rossetti in Context*, Mary Arseneau discusses Rossetti's two articles on Dante, "Dante, an English Classic" (1867) and "Dante. The Poet Illustrated out of the Poem" (1884), as well as Rossetti's annotations in her sister's Dantean study, *A Shadow of Dante*. Across these works, Arseneau observes Rossetti's focus on the concrete; the annotations in particular attempt to demonstrate that "when read most attentively the literal level does not fade to insignificance but rather opens itself to layers of other meanings as well" (35). Rossetti's close textual readings of these meanings, conveyed in her annotations and in the allusions to Dante throughout her poetical works, would, unlike her father's and brothers' interpretations of Dante, consistently take a Christian and biblical emphasis. It is this lens that I will take in examining the Medusa episode in Dante's *Inferno*.

The Dantean Medusa

Medusa does not actually appear in the *Commedia*, but in Canto IX of the *Inferno* the three Furies threaten Dante and Virgil by invoking her: "Just let Medusa come; then we shall turn/him into stone" (IX.52-53). Virgil instructs Dante: "Turn round and keep your eyes shut fast, for should/the Gorgon show herself and you behold her,/never again would you return

¹⁷ See, for instance, Mary Arseneau's "'May My Great Love Avail Me': Christina Rossetti and Dante." *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, Ohio UP, 1999, 22-45; Antony T. Harrison's "Intertextuality: Dante, Petrarch, and Christina Rossetti." *Christina Rossetti in Context: A Victorian Web book*, VictorianWeb, <https://victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/harrison2/5.1.html>.

above” (IX.55-57). Here Virgil explains the ultimate consequence of seeing Medusa: to be turned into stone would be to fall permanently from grace, to be deprived of salvation and to remain in hell. Dante notes that Virgil not only instructs him to cover his eyes, but “he himself turned me/around and, not content with just my hands,/used his as well to cover up my eyes” (IX.58-60). In “‘Cupiditas,’ the Medusean Heresy of Farinata,” Florence Russo notes the sense of immediate danger that fills the scene:

Nowhere else in the *Inferno* is Dante faced with so dire a peril. The other infernal guardians threaten the pilgrim from a distance. They shout at him, demanding an explanation of his presence, but there is never a threat so powerful as to jeopardize his progress [...] But here, in spite of Virgil's assurances that the three Ladies from Heaven stood behind him and that no real harm could come to him, Dante is in real danger. Had he been somewhat careless or slow to heed Virgil's command and had the Medusa shown her face, his journey would have ended right there. (443)

The gravity of this scene is linked to Medusa's sensual fascination; in “Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit,” John Freccero reminds us of the tradition in which Medusa represented a “*pulchritudo* so excessive that it turned men to stone” (115). Freccero finds that “In Dante's text, there seems to be a survival of the theme of fascination, for it would be difficult to imagine why Virgil does not trust the pilgrim's ability to shield his own eyes if the image were not an entrapment (115). The intensity of Medusa's near-appearance suggests that it bears significance in Dante's theological allegory.

Dante interprets the concrete events of the scene immediately after they take place through a narratorial aside to the reader. He instructs: “O you possessed of sturdy intellects,/observe the teaching that is hidden here/beneath the veil of verses so obscure” (IX.61-

63). This passage is a strange response to the scene that comes before; Virgil *covers* Dante's eyes, and Dante commands the reader to *uncover* the teaching hidden beneath the verses. Yet this gloss does not actually reveal what the teaching is. The words "hidden," "veil," and "obscure" reveal the difficulty of interpretation in this situation. As Freccero observes, "the *dottrina* referred to here remains as veiled to us as it was to the poet's contemporaries" (109).

Petrification – and even the mere threat of petrification – seems to present an obstacle to allegorical interpretation. Indeed, Freccero argues that

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. It is *because* the pilgrim averted his eyes from the Medusa that there is a truth to be seen beneath the veil; because seeing it is a way of understanding a text, however, the implication seems to be that the Medusa is an interpretive as well as moral threat.

(111)

Medusa is an opposing force, a threat to literary interpretation and also to *dottrina* and divine revelation. Freccero further proves this claim with a passage in *Purgatorio* that gestures to this same notion of petrification. In Canto XXXIII, Beatrice tells Dante: "I see your intellect is made/of stone and, petrified, grown so opaque –/the light of what I say has left you dazed" (73-75). Freccero explains: "If we apply this imagery to the episode of Canto IX, then it is clear that petrification can mean the inability to see the light of truth in an interpretive glance" (112). We can also note that Beatrice's observation conveys her position pertaining to Dante's petrified state; she identifies it and calls him beyond it.

Medusa's near-appearance in the *Inferno* and the issue of interpretation are both significant when we consider the gravity of Canto IX in the grand scheme of the *Commedia*. It is

in this canto that Dante begins to distance himself from Virgil, who is both his guide through *Inferno* and Dante's link to the literary tradition in which he desires to participate, and establishes his own authorial voice. He signals this transition when Virgil begins to stumble over his own words: "'We have to win this battle,' he began, / 'if not ... But one so great had offered aid. / That help seems slow in coming: I must wait!'" (IX.7-9). Dante observes of Virgil:

But I saw well enough how he had covered
his first words with the words that followed after –
so different from what he had said before;
nevertheless, his speech made me afraid,
because I drew out from his broken phrase
a meaning worse – perhaps – than he'd intended. (IX.10-15)

Both in the earlier petrification images and here in Virgil's stuttering, we see the issue of veiled language and meanings. Dante not only betrays a lack of confidence in his guide; he interprets through Virgil's fragmented speech an alarming hidden meaning of which Virgil himself is not aware. In the verses that follow, Virgil explains that he has been to this realm before, and shares with Dante a dark backstory in which he was coerced by the sorceress Erichtho to venture from the first circle to lower hell. In the *Commento Baroliniano*, Teodolinda Barolini argues that the menacing backstory given to Virgil is an integral part of the narrative "in which Dante undercuts Virgil's authority while at the same time affirming his love for him" (28). When Medusa threatens to appear, Virgil shields Dante, but it is Dante who addresses the reader with authority in his command to "observe the teaching that is hidden here." It is in response to the threat of Medusa that Dante frees himself from the classical tradition and establishes his own poetic voice.

Dantean Petrification in Rossetti's Poems

Turning back to “The World” and “The Prince’s Progress,” we can identify the specifically Dantean aspects of Rossetti’s Medusa images. This is true on both the concrete and figurative level of narrative. First, the speaker in “The World” is well aware of the imminent threat posed by the Medusan woman. As in *Inferno*, to be seduced by her would be to lose one’s soul to hell forever. And in “The Prince’s Progress,” the prince’s involvement with the Medusa-like milkmaid is the first and foremost mark of his failure to fulfil his princely purpose of reaching his bride. Secondly and even more tellingly, in both “The World” and “The Prince’s Progress,” the prospect of petrification is a direct threat to the obligation to look beyond stony, abstruse exteriors and interpret hidden meanings.

For Rossetti, this idea of petrification may be linked to her interest in and use of Tractarian reserve in her poetry. In her article “Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve,” Emma Mason explains that according to this doctrine,

God’s scriptural laws should remain hidden to all but the faithful [...] Devotional poetry and biblical exegesis alike were thus meant to render religious truth through metaphor, figure and allegory in a manner only the initiated believer could understand. (Mason 197-198)

Though Rossetti’s application of Tractarian reserve has not tended to be discussed in relation to her treatment of Dante, it may be a connection worth exploring, especially with regard to the Medusa episode. Those enigmatic verses, “O you possessed of sturdy intellects,/observe the teaching that is hidden here/beneath the veil of verses so obscure,” express a command only to those of a particular capacity to uncover the *dottrina*. The issues of gazing and veiling, covering and uncovering moral and theological meaning link the Medusa episode to Tractarian concerns

with the communication of religious knowledge. Considering Rossetti's commitment to the theological-poetic doctrine of reserve, she would probably have been receptive to Dante's allegorical treatment of Medusa and petrification as antitheses to *dottrina* and interpretation.

Indeed, the interpretive implications of petrification arise alongside the Medusan images in "The World" and "The Prince's Progress." The serpent-haired woman in "The World" deceives the speaker with false promises and "By day she stands a lie"; by night "she stands/In all the naked horror of the truth" (9-10). The speaker is meant to interpret the symbols – the "ripe fruits" and "sweet flowers" and the "subtle serpents" gliding in her hair – and recognize their connection to the Edenic scene of temptation. The drama of the poem lies in the speaker's struggle to resist the woman's verbal and visual deceit.

"The Prince's Progress" can be read in the tradition of both John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress" and Dante's *Commedia*, structured on the process of pilgrimage and concerned with symbolic meanings. In "Pilgrimage and Postponement: Christina Rossetti's 'The Prince's Progress,'" Mary Arseneau argues that the poem "is primarily concerned with the individual for whom incorrect interpretation of symbolic events and figures has dire and mortal consequences" (279). As readers, we are intended to immediately interpret the symbolic meanings of the events and characters in the story, but the prince remains foolishly ignorant of those meanings. Arseneau cites the milkmaid as a key example of this issue:

[the Prince] does not see the milkmaid as a symbol of earthly temptation, though the interpretation is not particularly difficult and the association is not lost on the reader; and so we are, once again, compelled to question the Prince's symbolic and moral sense.
(282)

As noted previously, while Rossetti indeed uses the Biblical signifiers of the apple-tree and the serpent to identify the milkmaid as a Satanic figure, she also likens the milkmaid to the Medusa with her “serpent-coils.” That the reader is intended to immediately recognize the symbols in the story and their moral implications, even as the prince overlooks them, suggests that Medusa can easily be linked to the wicked serpent. The Medusa image, once again, hovers in the background of the moral issue of interpretation.

Dante’s interpretive and moral treatment of petrification can be found in other of Rossetti’s works as well. In her chapter “Burying the Medusa: Romantic Bloodlines in Christina Rossetti’s Gothic Epistle,” Susan Conley discusses the Medusa figures that surface in the dramatic monologue “The Convent Threshold” (1858). Here, a woman preparing to enter the convent physically, mentally, and spiritually *looks* back to an old flame, asking him to renounce their past sin. Throughout the poem, the novice categorizes herself and her beloved in moral opposition to one another: “I choose the stairs that mount above,” the novice claims, “Stair after golden skyward stair [...] Your eyes look earthward, mine look up” (4-5, 17). She is upright and repentant; he is worldly and unprincipled. This dichotomy yet again echoes Dante’s concern with sight and the moral implications of reading and interpretation. The gazes of the ex-lovers – hers that is heavenward, his that is earthward – convey their differing lines of interpretation.

Continuing along this idea, the novice presents two dreams – two visions – that she attempts to interpret. In the first dream vision, she identifies her beloved with Medusa. She writes: “I saw him/drunken with knowledge, take/From aching brows the aureole crown –/His locks writhed like a cloven snake” (100-102). As Conley explains in her article, the male Medusa’s “sin is hubris, and his resemblance [...] to the Medusa suggests, as it does in Dante, the hardening of his heart in the sacrifice of love to knowledge” (108). I would specify that the

“knowledge” this male spirit seeks is earthly knowledge, as distinct from the *dottrina* that Dante commands his reader to seek beneath the veil. The speaker interprets the dream in much the same way that Dante glosses the Medusa episode:

For what is knowledge duly weighed?
 Knowledge is strong, but love is sweet;
 Yea all the progress he had made
 Was but to learn that all is small
 Save love, for love is all in all. (105-109)

Conley notes that these final lines “discard the florid pitch for the simplicity of Rossetti’s Biblical mode” (108). The change in tone suggests the novice’s lucid, upright gaze as she interprets the hidden meaning beneath the strange dream. By providing this interpretation, the novice attempts to establish her authorial voice over her unenlightened beloved.

Conley suggests that by virtue of the mirroring aspect of the Medusa myth, the male beloved is not the only one who appears Medusa-like over the course of the poem. Conley explains:

In terms of the poem’s narrative the male beloved is a Medusa-figure because he represents the World and all its temptations for the speaker; he incarnates that from which she must turn her gaze. There is also a sense in which the male beloved represents a mirror-image of the woman herself as Medusa: given that Perseus could only gaze on the Medusa and live by looking at her reflection in his shield, the ‘spirit with transfigured face’ becomes a mirror in which the woman glimpses the transgressive horror and beauty of her own position. (110)

This mirroring aspect causes problems for the novice attempting to distinguish herself as morally superior to her beloved. It also reflects the deeper tension running through the poem; as much as the novice desires to sublimate romantic love into divine love, she ultimately seeks a way to have both, as in the final stanza she imagines her reunion with her beloved in heaven: “There we shall meet as once we met/And love with old familiar love” (147-148). For all her criticism of the beloved’s earthward gaze, the novice attempts to shape her “upward” gaze so that it may include the earthly attachment of this love. Her gaze seems ultimately to rest on her beloved; in fact, in that final stanza, imagining herself at last in paradise, the novice yearns for the moment when her beloved once again sees her face, that he “shall lift the veil thereof” (144). “The Convent Threshold” introduces another dimension to the interpretive issue of petrification: the mirrored gazes of lovers can cause a mutual petrification, an inability to look beyond the beloved toward the divine.

The Rossetti poems I have discussed thus far demonstrate that Rossetti’s idea of Medusa bears a close resemblance to the Medusa of Dante’s *Commedia*. Both Dante and Rossetti interpret Medusa through a Christian allegorical lens, linking her to the problem of gazing and interpretation. In “The World,” “The Prince’s Progress,” and “The Convent Threshold,” an encounter with a Medusa figure signals that the speaker or protagonist is in danger of petrification; that is, they risk having their hearts hardened to moral truth. My brief analysis of “The Convent Threshold” and Conley’s close reading of its Medusa figures also introduce ways in which Rossetti begins to innovate upon Dante’s idea of petrification. For one, it is a male Medusa who tempts the woman speaker. Second, the mirroring aspect of the Medusa myth becomes of greater significance as the relationship between petrifier and petrified becomes ambiguous.

The mirroring aspect of the Medusa myth is consequential for Rossetti because, as a woman writing largely women speakers, she is prone to identify or be identified with Medusa. This dynamic ties to Rosenblum's observation of Rossetti as both artist and model, subject and object, and it manifests in Rossetti's great sonnet sequence, *Monna Innominata* (1881). This sonnet sequence explores the identity of the female poet through the sonnet tradition developed by Petrarch and Dante, by inquiring into the legacies of their respective muses, Beatrice and Laura. In her preface, Rossetti argues that these women "paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charms, but (at least, to my apprehension) scant of attractiveness." Attempting to give voice to these voiceless muses, Rossetti demonstrates the difficulties of writing from the position of one who is normally the object of another's poetic vision. Embedded in *Monna Innominata*'s response to the Italian sonnet tradition is a subtle reshaping of Dante and Petrarch's notions of petrification as they pertain to love. Before I elaborate further, I will attend to Petrarch's use of the Medusa myth in his collection of love poems, *Il Canzoniere*.

The Petrarchan Medusa

Freccero argues that Petrarch provides a "definitive gloss on Dante's Medusa" throughout his *Canzoniere* (118). Whereas Dante leaves Medusa behind in *Inferno* and is led by his beloved Beatrice towards *Paradiso*, Petrarch encounters Medusa *in* his unrequited love and muse: Laura. This identification may seem strange, considering Laura is, as Mark Musa describes in the introduction to his translation, "the epitome of excellence, one that never changes" (xvii). Still, Petrarch weaves a number of allusions into his characterization of Laura, many of which are drawn from Ovid: she often resembles Daphne, occasionally Diana and Echo,

and, in a number of significant instances, Medusa.¹⁸ In her essay “Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch,” Jennifer Rushworth argues that Laura is “ultimately identified in the *Canzoniere* with Medusa,” and connects the Medusa allusions to Petrarch’s sin of idolatry (80). Laura is the unchanging ideal, but through Petrarch’s idolatry of her she appears to transform into Medusa. Like Dante, Petrarch perceives the spiritual consequence of petrification. Unlike Dante, Petrarch succumbs to it, unable to sublimate erotic love into divine love.

Petrarch’s idolatry of Laura is tied to his gaze upon her beauty. The theme of gazing runs all through the *Canzoniere*; Petrarch popularized the literary *blazon* through his frequent cataloguing of his beloved’s physical attributes. In an earlier sonnet, though, Petrarch laments his inability to see beneath the veil she wears:

I have not seen you, lady,
leave off your veil in sun or shadow,
since you knew that great desire in myself
that all other wishes in the heart desert me. (11.1-4)¹⁹

The hidden face absorbs him: “the veil so governs me,” he avows, “that to my death, and by heat and cold,/the sweet light of your lovely eyes is shadowed” (11.12-14). Whilst it conveys Petrarch’s devotion to this woman and his desire to behold her beauty, the motif of the woman’s veil also reflects the Dantean idea of veils as concealments of or obstacles to correct interpretation. Petrarch is conscious of this spiritual meaning of interpretation; in rime 28, he notes that it is “grace” that turns one’s “eyes/to the sacred place where one hung on the cross” (28.23-25). He entreats his reader: “Now is the time to throw off the yoke/of ancient slavery, and

¹⁸ For examples of comparisons of Laura to Daphne, see rimes 5, 34, 52, 60, 64, 188, 197; to Diana, see rimes 23, 52; to Echo, see rime 23.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise stated, I use A.S Kline’s translation, *The Complete Canzoniere*, Poetry in Translation, 2001.

the thick veil/that has long been draped over our eyes” (61-63). Petrarch understands the ultimate end of interpretation is the light of God, and looking upon Laura’s beauty and goodness should compel him to see beyond her towards the beauty and goodness of the divine. Rightly ordered, she would be an icon and not an idol. Yet throughout the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch is stubbornly devoted only to Laura. For all the agony her concealed face causes him, it is when she unveils her face that he is in real danger of idolatry.

In sonnet 179, Petrarch describes the consequence of looking beneath Laura’s veil: “the sight of her would be no different than the sight of Medusa’s face/that made all the people there turn to marble” (179.9-11). Gazing upon Laura’s face leads to Medusan petrification. This transformation first occurs in rime 23. Personified Love pursues Petrarch, assisted by a “powerful lady” (23.35), transforming Petrarch first into green laurel (an unusual gender-changing allusion to Daphne), then a swan. Petrarch fully changes into stone via Laura’s gaze:

She who maddens men with her gaze,
opened my chest, and took my heart in her hand,
saying to me: ‘Speak no word of this.’
Then I saw her alone, in a different dress,
so that I did not know her, oh human senses,
and full of fear told her the truth:
and she turning quickly back
to her usual guise, made me, alas,
semi-living and dumb stone. (23.72-80)

In this passage, Laura quite literally captures Petrarch’s heart in a violent act. Petrarch describes her as a duplicitous woman, her appearance changing so that he “did not know her,” before she

turns “quickly back/to her usual guise.” Once again, gazing and concealment are linked to the problem of interpretation and meaning. Struck dumb, “baffled,” in Musa’s translation, Petrarch is rendered unable to interpret what he sees as Laura, Medusa-like, turns him into stone.

While he is mindful of the consequence of his own gazing, Petrarch is more deeply preoccupied with the thought of Laura’s lovely though dangerous eyes. This theme begins in his first sight of her: in the third sonnet, he tells Laura: “I was captured, and did not defend myself,/because your lovely eyes had bound me, Lady” (3.3-4). In the ninth sonnet, Petrarch writes: she “[shines] the rays of her lovely eyes on me” (9.11); in sonnet 11, “the sweet light of your lovely eyes is shadowed” (11.14); in sonnet 37, “All places sadden me,” he says, “where I do not see/those beautiful bright eyes” (33-34). In these and many other moments, he associates her eyes with light and loveliness, but at other times finds them cold and distant. The light in Laura’s eyes that so moves Petrarch can be cruel and dangerous: “she turns her disdainful eyes/(hoping by light to rob me of life?) (179.5-6). In *Petrarch’s Metamorphoses*, Sara Sturm-Maddox argues that “it is specifically Laura’s eyes that are capable of effecting the lover’s transformation; to the conventional praises of the lady’s eyes he adds the new and frightful power of reversing the order of nature” (33). We see Petrarch’s keen awareness of this power in sonnet 39:

I’m so afraid of those lovely eyes’ assault
 in which Love and my death exist,
 I run from them like a child from the rod,
 and it’s long since I first took that step.
 There is no difficult or high place
 from now on, I would not reach

to avoid what scatters my senses

leaving me as if I were cold enamel. (39.1-8)

The “lovely eyes” assault; they punish; they scatter the senses; finally, they leave their victim stonelike.

Though Petrarch repeatedly bemoans Laura’s petrifying eyes, he also finds himself endangered by her hair, which itself contains Medusan qualities. In sonnet 196, he describes the contrast between Laura’s hair that she had previously loosened and has now gathered, “fastened [...] with gems and pearls” (7). He continues: “time twisted it in a still tighter knot/and tied my heart with so strong a cord,/that Death alone can free me from it” (12-14). In the next sonnet, the poet explains that Laura

had the same power on me as Medusa had

when she turned the old Moroccan giant to flint:

nor can I now be free of that lovely knot,

that exceeds the sun, not just amber or gold:

I mean the blonde hair, and the noose of curls,

that binds the soul, armed with humility

not weapons, so gently and so tightly.

Her shadow alone turns my heart to ice,

and paints my face a fearful white:

her eyes have the power to turn me to marble. (197.8-11)

Medusa’s hair, though serpentine, is not usually described to bind and trap her victims; normally her petrifying gaze alone is sufficient. Sonnet 197 offers this subtle innovation on the myth, as

Petrarch laments that his soul has been captured by the paradoxically beautiful and malevolent, gentle and tightening hair of Laura-as-Medusa.

That his soul that is bound up in Laura's Medusan hair reflects, yet again, the spiritual consequence of this entrapment. By the end of the poem, all that is left for Petrarch to do is to present his contrite heart to the Virgin and humbly ask for forgiveness from her Son. In the final rime, Petrarch's "Prayer to the Virgin," he admits to his failure: "Medusa and my error turned me to stone" (513). This phrase substantiates Rushworth's claim that Laura is ultimately identified with the Gorgon. The word "error" reminds us again of the issue of correct interpretation and reading. While Musa uses the word "sin," Kline's translation more accurately resembles the original Italian: "Medusa et l'error mio m'an fatto un sasso." Still, the equivalence of "error" and "sin" speaks to the nature of Petrarch's demise: his idolatry of Laura marks his failure to correctly interpret her meaning in the grand scheme of creation; where she should have been an icon into the light of God, she remains, for Petrarch, an idol.

Scholars have debated the extent to which Petrarch grants agency to Laura through her identification with Medusa. Petrarch's frequent emphasis on the power of her eyes and hair would suggest that he is helpless in her presence. In *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism*, Mary Moore argues that Petrarch's "choice of Medusa, a female maker who is both desirable and monstrous, specifically picks out and highlights the creative power, not merely the erotic and reproductive power, of a female" (50). Given that Laura's eyes are of such significance in the poem, capable of rendering Petrarch powerless, Moore highlights that Petrarch perceives Medusa's power not as involuntary; rather, he emphasizes her "agency and subjectivity," supposing that she petrifies her victims of her own volition (49). Petrarch is threatened by this female agency and subjectivity. When Laura casts Petrarch into stone in rime

23, he states that she “spoke with so much anger on her face, [...] ‘Perhaps I am not what you think I am’” (23.81, 83). In this evocative line, Laura suggests that not only is she more powerful than him, visible in her ability to turn him to stone; she also possesses herself in a way that Petrarch cannot comprehend.

Still, other details in the *Canzoniere* suggest a limit to Laura’s agency and subjectivity. While claiming to be petrified by Laura, Petrarch ultimately petrifies her by making an idol of her and immobilizing her through his poetry. He hints at this idea in rime 30, when he calls Laura “my idol sculptured from living laurel” (30.27). Moore suggests that Petrarch’s creation of Laura out of “living laurel” is a deliberate contrast to the “dead stone” created by Laura’s gaze (Moore 50). Elsewhere, Petrarch refers to his own crafting of Laura’s image. Musa’s translation of rime 50 communicates suggestive details:

Why day and night must my eyes still be wet?
 Oh what I did that time
 when I fixed them upon
 the beauty of her face
 to carve it in my heart's imagination
 whence neither by coercion nor by art
 could it be moved – not till I am the prey
 of one who all does part! (50.62-69)

Whereas Laura carves Petrarch in stone, Petrarch carves her in his “heart’s imagination.” In case a reader would conjecture that the heart’s imagination is less permanent of a medium than stone, Petrarch insists that “neither by coercion nor by art/could it be moved.”

There is also a sense in which Laura's agency is limited in that Petrarch's stony persona exists before he has been petrified by Laura. In her article "'Volto di Medusa': Monumentalizing the self in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*," Aileen A. Feng notes the pun Petrarch makes on his own name (*Petra*-, rock) in rime 129, "a dead stone on living stone" (129.51), and asks: "What is his fear of being turned into stone when he was always already a rock?" (498). In rime 23, Petrarch suggests that before he had succumbed to love, he already exhibited his own kind of stoniness: "frozen thoughts about my heart/had almost made a covering of enamel,/so that its hardness left nothing lacking" (23.24-26). The original Italian describes this stony material as "quasi adamantino smalto." The most literal translation of this passage is "an almost adamantine enamel." The proverbial hardness of adamantine suggests that Petrarch's heart is covered by an unbreakable surface. The medieval sense of adamantine suggests a diamond-like rock, which was often said to be used in marvelously constructed objects. Before he encounters Laura's petrifying power, Petrarch has already conceived of his own heart as a stony, aesthetic object. Petrarch's description of his own heart in this way complicates our understanding of Laura's Medusan role.

Feng also shows that a number of Petrarch's Medusa rimes draw on specific episodes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which figures are turned to stone not by the living Medusa, but by her decapitated head as wielded by Perseus. In sonnet 197, for example, Petrarch exclaims that "The heavenly aura [...] has power like Medusa's when the old/and famous Moor she transformed into rock" (197.1, 5-6); here, Petrarch seems to compare himself to Atlas, the brawny titan petrified into a mountain, but Petrarch veils the detail that Medusa's head is at this point disembodied and used by Perseus. Feng suggests that Laura's power may be strong, but it is ultimately directed and appropriated by someone else (502). Ultimately, says Feng, "It is not Medusa's power of

petrification that characterizes Petrarch's appropriation of the myth; it is his ability to harness and wield her power" (505). In that final prayer in which Petrarch laments that he has been turned to stone, there remains the possibility that his stoniness translates to immortality, the memorialization of himself through his poetry.

Rossetti's Reading of Petrarch

Rossetti's devotion to Petrarch has received increasing attention in recent years, and I would develop it further to suggest that she appears to have been thinking about Petrarch's expression of the petrifying, idolatrous gaze. Michele Martinez's essay "Christina Rossetti's Petrarca" discusses Rossetti's biographical article "Francesco Petrarca" (1857-63) and considers it a testament to Rossetti's rigorous study of Petrarch and invocation of his work in her early poems. Martinez notes that "in researching her biographical entry, Rossetti clearly mined her father's library, which contained various editions, commentaries, and biographies of Petrarch" (104). She and Charles Cayley discussed his translations of the *Canzoniere* in 1878 (Harrison). Rossetti's interpretation of the *Canzoniere* emerges from her theological treatment of Dante. As Martinez argues, Rossetti regarded Petrarch's real achievement as "the use of Italian lyric forms – the sonnet, canzone, and sestina – to represent the soul's struggle to transform cupiditas into caritas" (101). To Rossetti, Petrarch's *Rimes* were oriented ultimately towards the divine, though the poet-narrator ultimately falls short of that goal of transcendent love.

Rossetti was fascinated with the figure of Laura. Towards the end of her article on Petrarch, she moves away from discussing the poet altogether and states: "The question remains – who was Laura?" She was uninterested in purely political and allegorical readings of her; she was concerned with understanding Laura as an embodied person. Martinez suggests that

“Rossetti adopts a Christian interpretative framework not only to claim that Petrarch had struggled to be devout in his life and poetry, but also to suggest that Laura had been an ideal Christian in a proto-Anglican mold” (102). Interestingly, Martinez repeatedly notes Rossetti’s appreciation of Laura’s “restraint,” “inaccessibility” and “mystery,” suggesting that Rossetti read it as a “function of her reserve” (102-103). These qualities associated with Laura are reflected throughout the *Canzoniere*, but they are particularly felt when she is compared to Medusa, her cold and inaccessible persona. They are also qualities for which Rossetti strives in her own poetry, and they are also, of course, linked to the problem of interpretation articulated in Dante’s Medusa episode and explored in Rossetti’s Medusan images.

In the conclusion of her article, Rossetti makes a case for Laura’s historical existence. The first piece of evidence comes from the eighteenth-century aristocrat Abbé de Sade, who claims Laura as his ancestress. Rossetti writes:

The question remains – Who was Laura? and is answered by the Abbé de Sade: She was the daughter of Audebert de Noves, syndic of Avignon, and the wife of Hugh, son of Paul de Sade; and was, in fact, my own ancestress as family documents prove. This assertion has been endorsed by common opinion. (544)

The lack of quotation marks around the passage quoted from the Abbé has caused some uncertainty among Rossetti scholars: in *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, Jan Marsh assumes that it was Rossetti who claimed Laura as her ancestress; in a footnote to *Recovering Christina Rossetti*, Arseneau refers to Martinez’s clarification in a 2001 presentation that “it is Sade and not Rossetti who claims Laura as ancestress” (210, n. 25). The clarification is logical, though the lack of quotation marks may mark a deliberate ambiguity. The possibility that Rossetti would herself claim this birthright accords with the poet’s profound investment in the

person of Laura. Though Petrarch writes the lyrics, Rossetti is keen to emphasize Laura's fundamental role in inspiring them. Martinez speculates that Rossetti was attracted to the Abbé's biography because of its emphasis on Laura's powerful influence on Petrarch's verse (109). The Abbé writes:

In a word, without Laura, without the desire to please her that spurred him on, not only would Petrarch never have written the poems that have made his name immortal, but he also would perhaps have sunk into debauchery, never to achieve the fame that we shall see him enjoy with such distinction, setting so to speak the tone for his age. (Abbé de Sade, qtd in Hayes, 121, qtd in Martinez, 109)

I agree with Martinez's suspicion that Rossetti favoured this bold assertion of the Abbé's.

Whether or not Rossetti believed herself the biological descendent of Laura, she, like the Abbé, saw Laura as the palpable influence of Petrarch's lyrics.

The other piece of evidence Rossetti presents to prove Laura's existence is an anecdote about a sculpture of Laura that Petrarch supposedly carried with him through his wanderings. Rossetti calls it "the alleged veritable effigy of Laura" (544), citing an 1821 pamphlet that names the painter Simone Memmi as the creator of this sculpture, which purportedly resides in the Casa Peruzzi at Florence. Martinez locates several other sources that share the same contents as the pamphlet, one of which indicates that there were two marble sculptures inscribed with the names F. Petrarca and Diva Laura, but finds no recent evidence of the authenticity of the sculpture (113-114). Still, Martinez observes that Rossetti presents an evocative image of "Petrarch as a wandering devotee, carrying a stony icon [...] from place to place" (Martinez 114). The image echoes that line in rime 30, when Petrarch calls Laura "my idol sculptured from living laurel" (30.27). Whether or not there is any truth to this anecdote, it concretizes the problem of

petrification found throughout the *Canzoniere*. Rossetti suggests that Petrarch not only idolized Laura in a figurative sense; he commissioned and carried around with him a Laura icon. For all his emphasis on Laura's petrifying power over him, he allegedly carried with him throughout his wanderings a petrified Laura.

These two pieces of evidence of Laura's historical existence put forward by Rossetti – Laura's alleged genealogy and the fabled Laura icon – may also tell us about Rossetti's reading of petrification in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. On the one hand, Laura is idolized, monumentalized, even petrified by Petrarch; on the other, she is flesh-and-blood, self-possessed, and the vital inspiration for Petrarch's poetic power. In a footnote on this subject, Martinez alludes to Rosenblum's discussion of Rossetti as Medusa, connecting the characterization back to Petrarch:

Dolores Rosenblum relates Rossetti's stony and vigilant female poetic personae to her experience as an artist's model to members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. While my view of Rossetti's early poetry does not discount this reading, I suggest that Petrarch's lyric speakers may have inspired her to find solace in this pose. (103n12)

I suggest that we look more closely at these “stony and vigilant poetic personae” in Rossetti's poems. In *Monna Innominata*, building from Petrarch's idea of petrification, Rossetti draws our attention to how a lover and beloved mirror one another, each taking on in different moments the roles of petrifier and petrified.

Petrification in *Monna Innominata*

Monna Innominata opens with a woman describing with great fervour her love for a man. In the first sonnet, she participates in the conventional language of the sonneteer who is enamoured of the beloved: “For one man is my world of all the men/This wide world holds; O

love, my world is you” (1.7-8). Yet in subtle ways, Rossetti plays with our expectations of how this love is to be conveyed. While Petrarch’s sonnets famously and frequently employ the *blazon*, Rossetti deliberately avoids cataloguing the male beloved’s physical attributes. In the second sonnet, the woman speaker claims that she cannot remember the first time she saw her beloved:

I wish I could remember that first day,
First hour, first moment of your meeting me,
If bright or dim the season, it might be
Summer or Winter for aught I can say. (2.1-4)

She wishes she could remember that first sight, but her inability to remember it does away with a very essential component of the conventional sonnet. Unable to describe that first encounter, she takes a vastly different approach to Dante and Petrarch. For Dante, that first vision of the beloved Beatrice is life-altering; it is the catalyst for his *Vita Nuova*. Dante becomes a poet at the moment he sees Beatrice for the first time, but for Rossetti’s speaker, this moment is far less consequential. In this typically pivotal moment of first sight, Rossetti downplays the importance of the lover’s gaze.

The speaker’s reflection on that first sight (or lack of) continues: “So unrecorded did it slip away,/So blind was I to see and to foresee, [...]” (2.5-6). She describes her blindness as a barrier, but it sets her up to take a less idealized approach to love than that of Petrarch or another conventional sonneteer. The fourth sonnet continues to play on this idea. Here she is beginning to see that her love for her beloved is surpassed by his love for her. Yet she raises a question about the nature of this love. She acknowledges, as in sonnet 2, that her vision of him is not quite clear: “I loved and guessed at you” (4.6). On the other hand, she tells him, “you construed

me/And loved me for what might or might not be” (4.6-7). This dichotomy between their gazes – hers that is tentative, unassuming; his that is fanciful, unrealistic – suggests that there is something problematic about a gaze that determines to construe the beloved into a particular image. The *Oxford English Dictionary* specifies that to construe can mean to “interpret,” to “give a meaning to,” or to “put a construction on” (“construe, v.”). Here Rossetti echoes Dante and Petrarch preoccupations with concealment and interpretation; yet she also subtly criticizes the way that these poets assign their muses with meanings that conceal their real selves. The speaker is afraid to be changed from the real, embodied person that she is into a construction of her beloved’s ideas.

Gazing becomes a moral issue through a Biblical allusion in the sixth sonnet. As the speaker casts doubt upon the possibility that her love for a man could bring her closer to God, she implies a dispute between herself and this man: “Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke” (1), she tells him. She continues: “I love, as you would have me, God the most;/Would lose not Him, but you, must one be lost” (2-3). Sensing that she must choose between God and her beloved, she knows that God must take precedence. She compares herself to Lot’s wife, who “cast back a faithless look/Unready to forego what I forsook” (4-5). The comparison to Lot’s wife is interesting; Lot’s wife is another *donna innominata*, nameless, yet a classic Christian symbol of the sin of an earthly gaze. Lot’s wife, famously turned to salt for looking back at Sodom, the ancient city destroyed by God for its wicked inhabitants, represents in Rossetti’s poem the failure to renounce earthly attachment. Here, a Biblical version of petrification is associated with a hardening of one’s heart to God. The speaker, however, determines not to look back, distinguishing herself from Lot’s wife. This decision affirms her attempt to depart from Petrarch, whose gaze upon Laura is his downfall.

Alongside the speaker's fear of her beloved's gaze is her awareness of the power of her own gaze as poet: her capacity to make a stony monument of the beloved through her poetry. The speaker attempts to avert this poetic power by emphasizing her own silence. Whereas in the traditional love sonnet, the speaker pines after a beloved out of reach, Rossetti's speaker is emphatically reticent throughout the sequence, both in speaking about her beloved's appearance and even in expressing her devotion to him. In sonnet 4 she tells her beloved: "I loved you first: but afterwards your love/Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song/As drowned the friendly cooings of my dove" (4.1-3). The middle sonnets explore God's part in this earthly love, as the woman questions whether a continuity between earthly and divine love is possible. Finding it impossible to unite earthly and divine love, the speaker begins the process of renouncing earthly fulfillment, and in the last three sonnets she detaches herself entirely from worldly desire. The process through which the speaker renounces her beloved parallels the poem's trajectory from song to silence.

Though Rossetti declares in the preface that the *donna innominata* will speak for herself, by the final sonnet, she writes:

The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
 A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
 The silence of a heart which sang its songs
 While youth and beauty made a summer morn,
 Silence of love that cannot sing again. (10-14)

The reticence in this sonnet sequence is striking, considering Rossetti presents *Monna Innominata* as the awaited response of the previously silenced Beatrice/Laura figure. Yet there is a sense of the speaker's resignation to and acceptance of this ending, affirmed by the Dante

epigraph that accompanies it: “E la Sua Volontade è nostra pace” (And Your will is our peace).

The turn to silence may be Rossetti’s way of hampering the impulse of the poet to petrify her beloved into a poetic monument. Thus, the speaker’s process of renunciation leads her not only to renounce earthly love, but also, perhaps, poetic aspiration.

Throughout the poem, the speaker seems to reject her own possible resemblance to Medusa, and that of her beloved, in order to safely renounce this love and unite herself to God. The final sonnet also implies a renunciation of the poetry itself. There is, however, one distinctly Medusan image in the sequence that muddles this path to renunciation. In the eighth stanza, as she makes her resolve to renounce earthly fulfillment, she finds a female model of this virtue who unexpectedly evokes Petrarch’s very specific Medusan image. The speaker describes Queen Esther, the Jewish heroine of the Hebrew Bible who protects her people from annihilation. The sonnet opens with a forceful line spoken by Esther in scripture: “I, if I perish, perish” (8.1). Esther famously puts her beauty to use as she dresses herself in her royal attire and presents herself to her husband, the King of Persia, begging him to spare the lives of her people:

She put on pomp of loveliness, to take
 Her husband thro’ his eyes at unaware;
 She spread abroad her beauty for a snare,
 Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake.
 She trapped him with one mesh of silken hair,
 She vanquished him by wisdom of her wit,
 And built her people’s house that it should stand. (8.5-11)

The juxtaposition of the “snake” and Esther’s “silken hair,” with these words emphasized by their completion of their respective lines, may insinuate another of Rossetti’s subtle Medusa images.

Before delving into this passage, I want to stress that it renders a distinctly Petrarchan Medusa image, and it is one that Rossetti uses in other works. As we have already seen, Petrarch compares Laura to Medusa by referring to his beloved’s hair as a “noose of curls,/that binds the soul” (197.9-10). The hair itself contains Medusa’s contradictions: it binds “so gently and so tightly” (197.11). We have also seen this image of hair that binds in Rossetti’s “The Prince’s Progress,” when the milkmaid

twisted her hair in a cunning braid
And writhed it in shining serpent-coils
And held him a day and night fast laid
In her subtle toils. (93-96)

That the milkmaid’s braid itself is “cunning” suggests that it plays an active role in holding the prince captive. A similar image is found in one of Rossetti’s later poems, “Babylon the Great” (1892). Referring to the Whore of Babylon, the speaker warns the reader: “Gaze not upon her till thou dream her fair,/Lest she should mesh thee in her wanton hair” (2-3). In this poem, the speaker also emphasizes the danger of looking upon the woman, that “her dancing whirl/Turns giddy the fixed gazer presently” (9-10). The Whore of Babylon is another Satanic figure that Rossetti connects to Medusa, by means of her liability to entrap an unsuspecting victim. Thus, as Esther makes a “snare” of her beauty and traps her husband with “one mesh of silken hair,” she becomes like these other Medusan women.

Unlike the overtly malicious examples of women who trap men with their hair, the construction of Esther's resemblance to Medusa is built upon Biblical virtue. The line "Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake" is an allusion to Matthew 10:16: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." Here, Christ warns his disciples of the persecutions to come and teaches them how to respond. In this context, snakes represent wisdom rather than evil or corruption. The placing of this line of scripture within Esther's story is an example of Christian typology, wherein Esther's brave defense of the Jewish people prefigures Christ's disciples who are encouraged to safeguard their faith in the face of oppression. Yet this subtle comparison of Esther, an archetype of female virtue, to the entrapping, tempting Medusa, complicates her moral position, and so do several other descriptors in the passage. While several of Rossetti's poems condemn excessive concern with physical beauty, here, Esther leverages her beauty and, in particular, her long hair, in order to fulfill her Godly mission.²⁰ The verbs in the first two lines of the sestet are combative: "She trapped him with one mesh of silken hair,/She vanquished him by wisdom of her wit" (9-10); the third, however, completes the parallelism with unequivocal praise: "And built her people's house that it should stand" (298). All through the sonnet, the speaker complicates Esther's heroism with pernicious language.

²⁰ See, for example "Beauty is Vain" (1864):
 While roses are so red,
 While lilies are so white,
 Shall a woman exalt her face
 Because it gives delight?
 She's not so sweet as a rose,
 A lily's straighter than she,
 And if she were as red or white
 She'd be but one or three.

The suggestion of Medusa in this sonnet is subtle, but it so closely resembles the Petrarchan Medusas in Rossetti's other poems that it is worth asking what kind of purpose it may serve here. If the speaker is going to draw inspiration from a Biblical heroine, why describe Esther with such ambivalence? On the one hand, the resemblance of Esther to Medusa allows for the possibility of a Medusa that saves her beloved by way of her powers. After describing Esther in this way, the speaker makes her own resolution to renounce earthly fulfillment: "If I might take my life so in my hand,/And for my love to Love put up my prayer,/And for love's sake by Love be granted it!" (298). The woman attempts and perhaps succeeds in renouncing earthly love by resisting petrification, but she also seems to embrace herself as Medusa insofar as the persona allows her to repel the beloved. Yet this Medusa allusion also undermines the speaker's attempt to silence herself, to resist the poet's temptation to petrify the muse into a poetic monument. In a sense, the problematic doubleness of this Medusa allusion suggests that the speaker's final act of renunciation *is* one of petrification, though not a petrification of the beloved. Acknowledging the Medusa within, the speaker uses her poetic power and petrifies herself.

Monna Innominata remains one of Rossetti's most important poems for its willingness to probe and appropriate a male literary tradition, but it does not simply resolve the issues it identifies. Rossetti is transparent about the difficulties of writing the female voice in a genre so defined by male desire and subjectivity. The elusive presence of Medusa in the sonnet sequence is suggestive of the kind of Medusa Rosenblum and Martinez affirm may be found in Rossetti's own poetic persona; "stony and vigilant," she simultaneously relinquishes her poetic power and retains it. The shadowy Medusa figures I explored earlier in this chapter capture glimmers of this poetic persona, their ambivalence and complexity apparent. The duplicitous demon woman, the

milkmaid, the male spirit, the Whore of Babylon; the Medusan subtext of each of these figures is also a Rossettian subtext: the poet's terror of her own transgressive position as artist and woman. The Medusan Esther is a sublimation of those other Medusas fallen from grace; through Esther, Rossetti presents the possibility of a kind of Medusa – a visionary, divinely-inspired, authoritative Medusa – that saves.

CHAPTER THREE/CONCLUSION



I-woman, escapee

Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

On I go, not toward or away

Up until now it was day, next day

Up until now in a rush to prove

But now I only move to move

Fiona Apple, “On I Go”

Evelyn de Morgan and the Spiritual Transformation of Medusa

By way of conclusion, I will consider one more woman who portrayed Medusa. A visual artist rather than a poet, Evelyn de Morgan painted and sculpted at the threshold of the Victorian and modernist periods. Her artistic development reflected many of the struggles of the woman artist expressed in the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. This was natural, considering De Morgan's background and the social environment of the day.²¹ She rebelled against her family's expectation in order to pursue art as a profession; her mother complained of her, "I want a daughter – not an artist" (174).²² De Morgan created art in a cultural milieu in which debates about the "nature" of women's art often distracted from its serious discourse. De Morgan's work proved no exception. In *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body*, Elise Lawton Smith notes that the patronizing reviews of De Morgan's work often followed two patterns: condescending flattery and dismissal for derivativeness. Despite De Morgan's success, critics often belittled her as no more than an "imitator" of Burne-Jones and other (male) second-generation Pre-Raphaelite artists (Smith 36). Because De Morgan was "clearly caught in the confining rhetoric about the nature of women, she struggled throughout her life with a variety of misconceptions of her work" (Smith 36).

De Morgan biographers and scholars alike have long defended De Morgan against such belittling comments. One of the first, Wilhelmina Stirling, De Morgan's sister, attempting to

²¹ I will refer to the artist as De Morgan throughout this chapter, though her last name was Pickering when she created the two Medusa pieces. As Elise Lawton Smith explains in the preface to her book *Evelyn Pickering de Morgan and the Allegorical Body*, choosing what to call this artist in a critical study is difficult. For most of her life the artist bore the "unwieldy full name" of Mary Evelyn Pickering De Morgan (Smith 10). Though she did exhibit as Pickering from 1876 until 1887 – the timeframe upon which I will focus – I will follow the leading scholars on the artist in calling her De Morgan, as it is by this name that she is widely known. It is not a perfect choice, but the issue speaks to the tension at the heart of this thesis: the struggle of female authorship and the divided identity of the woman artist.

²² This quotation comes from *William De Morgan and his Wife* (1922), written by Wilhelmina Stirling, De Morgan's younger sister.

rebut accusations of derivativeness by specifying the nature and extent of influence on De Morgan's work from artists such as Burne-Jones, argued that "only a superficial inspection can link such dissimilar work; for the art of Burne-Jones, with its calm, passionless beauty, is more Byzantine in character, while that of Evelyn never wavered from her early allegiance to the glowing and more animated Italian School of the Renaissance" (174). In *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn agree that De Morgan's work was distinctively her own: large and symbolic in conception, with an evident disregard of passing fashion. Marsh and Nunn contend that "De Morgan seems to have believed in the uniqueness of the artist's vision, and there exist few, if any, examples of her seeking or responding to criticism" (111).

My interest lies in the debate between those who view De Morgan's work as derivative and those who see it as inventive. In this chapter, I suggest that an important facet of De Morgan's originality lies in the way that she imitates and revises existing subjects and forms. Throughout her career, De Morgan used popular mythological subjects and traditional artistic techniques to articulate a distinct authorial vision. In this way, her work echoes Ovid, who remains, as Andrew Feldherr proclaims in "Modeling Reception in *Metamorphoses*," "a perpetual model and inspiration for artists asserting the capacities of the 'individual talent' against the power of tradition" (22). I refer to De Morgan's "echo" of Ovid in a quite literal sense; De Morgan painted several female Ovidian subjects and paid careful attention to the way that Ovid told women's stories.

During the early years of her creative output, she created a bronze bust of Medusa around 1876 and a gilded shield depicting Medusa's face between 1873 and 1885. Smith mentions that De Morgan also portrayed Medusa in "several early drawings," but these I have

been unable to locate (66).²³ I suggest that De Morgan's Medusa works are, like the poetry of Barrett Browning and Rossetti, distinctly Ovidian, both in form and content. They represent proto-feminist interpretations of the Medusa myth, attending to its spiritual as well as social meaning for women. De Morgan's Medusa works speak, in particular, to the vocation of the woman artist. De Morgan interpreted Ovid's Medusa to suggest a particular symbolic trajectory: a female metamorphosis from oppressive death to liberated new life.

Before I analyze these works, I will demonstrate the influence of Ovidian transformation on De Morgan's *oeuvre*. In my discussion of the Medusa bronze, I highlight De Morgan's reliance on Ovid's version of the myth to memorialize the tragedy of Medusa's story. Like Harriet Hosmer before her, De Morgan exercised the creative authority of a sculptor by rendering mythological subjects. Tellingly, De Morgan chose to memorialize the tragedy of Medusa's story rather than depicting her as a decapitated head or a terrorizing monster. Furthermore, I discuss the elusive Medusa shield, which De Morgan may have created while working on the Angel panels at All Saints Church. Using materials and techniques typically reserved for sacred art, De Morgan casts her second Medusa in the language of Christian iconography, transforming her into a spiritual, feminist icon for the age.

Ovidianism in De Morgan's Paintings of Classical Women

De Morgan's mythological subjects indicate that she was interested in Ovid's transformation of preexisting stories. While the dearth of written archival material on and by De Morgan restricts our knowledge of precisely how she read Ovid (though we do know that she read Latin and studied classical myth in general), her artwork demonstrates an acute awareness

²³ De Morgan's two known Medusa works also pose a mystery: the whereabouts of the bronze currently remain unknown, and the roundel, though currently located in the De Morgan Collection, is rarely discussed in archival material, and so the history of its composition is difficult to trace.

of distinctly Ovidian subjects and themes.²⁴ Her 1877 painting *Cadmus and Harmonia* takes its inspiration from the version of the tale found in the *Metamorphoses*.²⁵ Written on a plaque on the painting's original frame are lines from Ovid's poem that De Morgan may have translated herself: "With lambent tongue he kissed her patient face,/Crept in her bosom as his dwelling place/Entwined her neck, and shared the loved embrace." Three other of De Morgan's paintings, *Ariadne in Naxos* (c. 1877), *Deianira* (1878), and *Medea* (1889) portray classical women in moments of isolation and abandonment that echo Ovid's versions of their stories in his *Heroides*, a collection of epistolary poems giving voice to heroines and heroes of epic myth. Her selection of these three figures in particular is striking, as they appear in the first cluster of letters – the original collection written earlier in Ovid's career – which, unlike the later epistles, are not paired with responses from men.

In addition to depicting distinctly Ovidian scenes, these paintings also demonstrate De Morgan's awareness of Ovid's interest in female voices and experience. As I discussed in Chapter One, Ovid's work pays unique attention to the emotions and experiences of women. Scholars debate the extent to which Ovid expresses genuine sympathy for women, but as Sharrock explains, "More than any other non-dramatic ancient poetry, male-authored as it overwhelmingly is, Ovid's work gives space to a female voice, in however problematic a manner, and to both male and female voices which reflect explicitly on their own gendered identity" (95). The *Metamorphoses* experiments with the gendered aspects of generic form and renders categories of gender and genre unstable: "feminine" themes and genres – episodic,

²⁴ According to Stirling: "Evelyn profited by the same instruction as her brother; she learnt Greek and Latin, besides French, German and Italian; she studied classical literature, and became deeply versed in mythology" (144).

²⁵ In Ovid's tale, Cadmus transforms into a serpent as punishment for killing a sacred serpent. Watching her husband amid his transformation, Harmonia begs the gods to grant her the same fate.

elegiac tales – regularly interrupt the flow of the overarching “masculine” epic narrative. These episodic tales often explore the plights of women, particularly sexual assault, and they reveal the way that control over women’s sexuality is tied to the suppression of their voices and agency. This kind of generic innovation likely interested De Morgan, who, from a young age, encroached on genres of painting typically reserved for men and encountered the social limitations of her gender within her own home.

There are also various kinds of gendered and generic transformation in the *Heroides*. Written in elegiac couplets, these poems break from the conventional epic form associated with the voices of male epic heroes to instead express the subjective female voice in intimate epistles. De Morgan’s painting *Ariadne in Naxos* revolves around a figure included in several ancient texts, but depicts a moment most recognizably drawn from lines in Ovid’s *Heroides*. Patricia Yates indicates that “whereas most artists concentrated on the dramatic aspects of Ariadne abandoned, here we are shown her after the frantic raging and crying, solitary and desolate” (57). Yates ties this subject to lines from the *Heroides*: “Alone, with my hair unbound, I wandered [...] or I sat on a rock to watch the surf, / cold, a rock like that on which I sat” (X.51, 53-54). Similarly, De Morgan’s later painting *Medea* does not cast the classical anti-heroine as an evil sorceress as she is portrayed in most classical texts. Instead, it conveys Medea’s tragedy and suffering, aspects that are treated most thoroughly in Ovid’s *Heroides* and Euripedes’ *Medea*.²⁶

De Morgan often made further innovations on Ovid’s transformations of the myths to emphasize the heroism of her chosen female figures. Yates notes of *Ariadne in Naxos* that “the artist [likely] was using Ovid as her source but adding a heroic dimension in her own

²⁶ Yates again cites verses in the *Heroides* that correspond with De Morgan’s depiction (58). In *Heroides* XII Medea laments: “Now I am alone, deprived of all, my throne, / my country, my home and my husband / Who was more than all I ever wanted” (XII.217-219).

interpretation, probably intending to convey the idea of martyrdom by the deep red robe” (57).

We can also see this kind of innovation in De Morgan’s centering of the female rather than male figure in *Cadmus and Harmonia*. Whereas Ovid’s myth revolves around the transformation of the husband, Cadmus, De Morgan’s painting makes the wife, Harmonia, the primary subject. De Morgan painted Cadmus already transformed into a snake, but depicted Harmonia in the process of transformation, her legs beginning to match the silvery, metallic hue of her serpent husband.

De Morgan's Medusa Bronze

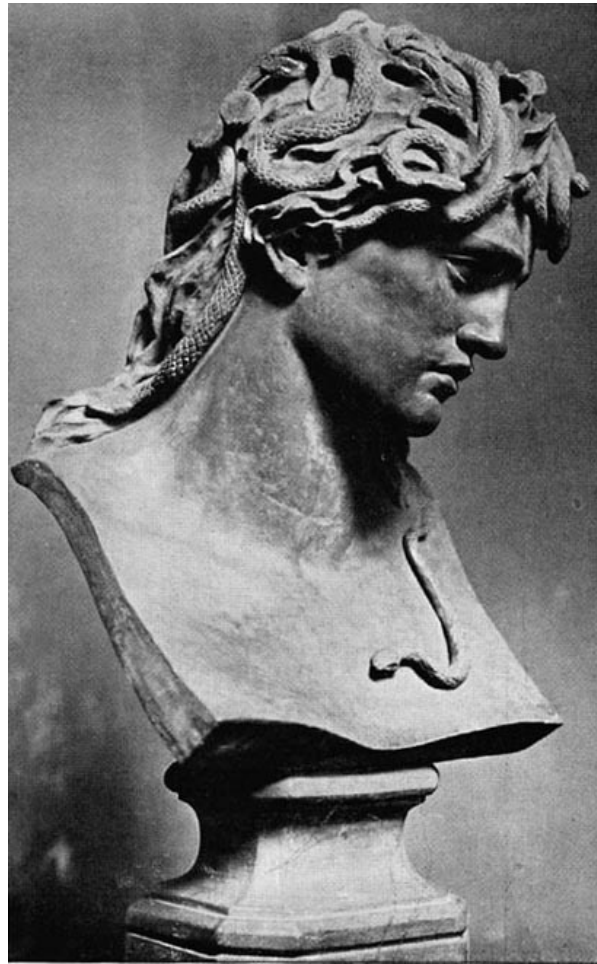


Figure 2: De Morgan's Bronze "Medusa"²⁷

In her biography of De Morgan, Stirling describes a trip to Italy that greatly influenced the artist's creative development:

Alone in lodgings she studied, or paced the ancient city lost in dreams of an impersonal Past and a personal Future. She dwelt, absorbed on the glories of the Renaissance; she drank in the poetry, the pageantry, the haunting antiquity of her surroundings. The beauty of Italy satisfied her soul-hunger; the love of it was to leave her only with life itself. (185)

²⁷ De Morgan, Evelyn. *Medusa*. c. 1876. *The Victorian Web*, <https://victorianweb.org/sculpture/demorgan/2.html>

Here, Stirling notes, De Morgan created her Medusa bronze (Figure 2), “a work of great power, which it is difficult to conceive was executed by so young a girl” (186). Larger than life size, according to Smith (67), the bronze is a serious, ambitious work evidently influenced by the art of the Italian masters that De Morgan encountered at the time she created it.²⁸ According to the Old Battersea House catalogue, the novelist Maurice Hewlett wrote of this sculpture that “Donatello might have been proud to sign it” (qtd in Old Battersea House and the De Morgan Collection of Pictures & Pottery 19).

In her analysis of De Morgan’s Medusa bronze, Stirling observes that it expresses a tragic story. She writes:

The massive head is majestic in its pose; its gaze is full of a brooding melancholy. The snaky locks entwined above its brow are full of a nauseating lissomness, while to add to the realism, one reptile has become detached and lies, apparently writhing, at the base of the neck. The whole conveys a sense of evil, of strength, of relentless force – yet mingled with a tragedy so profound that it provokes a horror which is akin to pity. (186)

While captivated by the bronze’s fearsome qualities – the “nauseating lissomness” of the snakes, the overall sense of “evil” and “relentless force” – Stirling also noted the bronze’s “brooding melancholy” and “tragedy so profound that it provokes a horror which is akin to pity.”

Conflicted between feelings of fear and pity, Stirling recognizes Medusa's paradox.

In its tragic elements, De Morgan’s bronze Medusa shares some of the qualities of the artist’s other Ovidian subjects. Her melancholy gaze evokes Ovid’s version of the story, in which her monstrous transformation occurs only after she has been raped by Poseidon. Turned to one

²⁸ She did not exhibit it until 1882 at the Grosvenor Gallery.

side, she appears contemplative, melancholy, resigned. Medusa's mournful expression may signify her reflection on the event (in Ovid's version of her story) that caused her monstrosity in the first place. The simplicity of the bust prevents a substantial symbolic analysis, but the snake slithering across the woman's breast may evoke Neptune's rape of Medusa in Minerva's temple. This symbolic imagery appears in William Morris' *Earthly Paradise*, published only a decade earlier; in Morris' tale, Medusa

moaned aloud, and shrieked in her despair:

Because the golden tresses of her hair

Were moved by writhing snakes from side to side,

That in their writhing oftentimes would glide

On to her breast, or shuddering shoulders white. (Morris 259)

Adrienne Munich argues that in this passage, "The snakes perpetually reenact her rape, her transformation from a virtuous maiden to an alluring monster" (203). There is a suggestion of this idea in De Morgan's bronze, emphasized by the snake's apparent movement in contrast to Medusa's stillness. This Medusa seems caught in recollection, as though her monstrous transformation has become a constant reminder of the fateful day of her rape.

While Ovid's version of the myth treats Medusa's ability to petrify as a creative power, to represent Medusa could, in a sense, mean to wield her power against her, to transform her into an object frozen in time. Sculpted renderings of Medusa capture this phenomenon more clearly than paintings or poetry, for the obvious reason that they are literal sculptures like Medusa's petrified victims, but also because they cannot portray more than an isolated moment or expression. A narrative painting may capture several characters and events at once and a poem can convey the entirety of a scene or more; a sculpted bust, however, limits the narrative not only to a single

moment, but even to the immediate response of the subject in that moment. This sense of immediacy or temporal brevity could be connected to the *Heroides*, where each letter is an expression of the woman's experience at a singular moment in time. In each of these cases, as in the Medusa bronze, the woman is unaware of what is to follow, whereas the reader or viewer knows her fate. This quality of sculpture – as of poetic epistles – heightens the tragic irony of the scene; in the case of Medusa, we know that her sorrow will soon give way to her demise with the arrival of Perseus.

The tragic demeanor of De Morgan's bronze distinguishes it from most other popular sculptures of Medusa. Many, if not most sculptors depict her at various moments in Perseus' defeat of her. Cellini and Canova depict Perseus holding up her head in victory; Watts renders the head after it has rigidified from decapitation. As the *Old Battersea House* catalogue notes, "Most sculptors have conceived the Gorgon's Head as something horrible, which turned everyone to stone who gazed at it; but this is a beautiful face expressing the tragedy of evil" (19). While she does, in a sense, appropriate Medusa's sculptural power, De Morgan's rendering of Medusa memorializes her tragic origin. Depicting Medusa in contemplation and lamentation of her fate, De Morgan restores her dignity, reminding the viewer of her subjective experience of suffering.

De Morgan's Gilded Medusa



Figure 3: De Morgan's Gilded "Medusa"²⁹

Whereas the bronze conveys a tragic, resigned Medusa frozen in remembrance of her terrible fate, De Morgan's other major Medusa work (Figure 3) presents a hopeful vision of the Gorgon. In painting the Medusa head on Minerva's shield, De Morgan may have drawn inspiration from Caravaggio's *Medusa*, held at the Uffizi; the spirit of the work, however, is markedly different. Caravaggio's Medusa is depicted in the moment of her decapitation; blood spills from her neck, and her expression is one of horror, her mouth gaping and brows furrowed

²⁹ De Morgan, Evelyn. *Medusa*. c. 1873-1885. The De Morgan Collection, <https://www.demorgan.org.uk/collection/medusa/>

in shock. Though De Morgan's painting also renders Medusa's head fixed to Minerva's shield, it is not clearly decapitated. Only the face is shown, with no neck to bring attention to Medusa's beheading, and she stares blankly at the viewer. Her thick, red, Pre-Raphaelite hair mingles with serpents, a reminder that before her monstrous transformation she was a beautiful woman. Her facial features affirm this; while she is rendered more cartoonishly than De Morgan's other subjects, she maintains a sympathetic countenance with her cool blue eyes and serene expression. The positioning of Medusa on a shield also insinuates other figures in the narrative. Who is she gazing at? Who does she protect? In this last section, I want to explore De Morgan's most radical revisioning of the Medusa myth. I suggest that De Morgan transforms – through religious imagery, interestingly enough – Medusa from an embodied, victimized woman into a spiritual icon of feminine strength and power.

In multiple classical accounts of the Perseus and Andromeda narrative, Perseus ultimately gives the Medusa head to Minerva, his patroness, the goddess who caused Medusa's monstrous transformation in the first place. Garber and Vickers comment:

Thus the head of Medusa [...] becomes, under Athena [also known as Minerva]'s sign, transformed into a beneficial emblem and a source of civic and martial strength. Indeed, Athena, by some accounts, invented the art of weaponry: she was regarded as the goddess of heralds. The first and most ancient of armorial signs is the head of the Medusa, often emblazoned on a proud warrior's breastplate as well as on his shield. Medusa's head thus becomes apotropaic, literally warding off or turning away the evils it embodies. (2)

As this passage demonstrates, Minerva's shield marks Medusa's final transformation into protector. In this role, her gaze becomes not only destructive or creative, but also protective.

De Morgan created the shield partially in relief, modelling Medusa's face in gesso so it gently protrudes from the panel. The background is rendered by water gilding, a process in which wood is made to look gold, and it is decorated with snakes through punching and *sgraffito*. These techniques were unusual for De Morgan, whose completed paintings were almost exclusively rendered in oil. Water gilding is a particularly lengthy and intricate process: glue is applied to the wood panel; gesso forms a base and is painted with a layer of yellow ochre; once the pigment has dried, a clay mixture called "bole" is applied; the bole is brushed with water so that it is sticky and gold leaf is carefully applied and burnished; and finally, the gold leaf is coated with glue for an even finish.³⁰ After the gilding is complete, punching and *sgraffito* techniques create ornamental patterns. Punch work, or granito, is an early Italian technique that uses metal stamping tools to create texture and patterns in the gilded background ("Punch"). *Sgraffito*, a technique developed in the Italian Renaissance, is a process in which egg tempera is painted over the water gilded panel and then scratched off with a sharp wooden stylus to create patterns.³¹ These are techniques that De Morgan likely would have studied during her trips to Italy. Such an intricate and expensive process makes for a sumptuous work of art, and the Medusa shield is no exception.

The only other extant De Morgan work using relief, gilding, punching, and *sgraffito* techniques is the set of angel panels installed at All Saints Church in Cawthorne. As described on the De Morgan Collection website, these panels were installed as part of a refurbishment project planned and funded by De Morgan's uncle, Walter Spencer-Stanhope, and designed by the

³⁰ This summary is assembled from a video by the Victoria and Albert Museum and a reference entry on "Gilding" in the *Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques*.

³¹ See "Sgraffito" entry in the *Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques* and William Bruce Adair's article "Sgraffito & Granito: Revitalizing an Ancient Technique" in *Picture Framing Magazine*.

Gothic Revival architect G.F. Bodley. De Morgan's panels, installed in 1883, depict four angels each holding a symbol of one of the four evangelists. De Morgan decorated the panels in relief with gesso, painted them with tempera and gold leaf, and punched and incised them to create floral patterns. According to the De Morgan Collection website, Stirling wrote in her diary on December 24, 1883 that "Evelyn's angels were put up in church either side of the communion table." Used in the preparation of Holy Communion, the communion table occupies a prominent position in the nave of the church. Proximate to the communion table, De Morgan's panels occupy a hallowed place.

The materials and techniques shared between the panels and the Medusa shield suggest the possibility that these works were made in conjunction. Although the De Morgan Collection lists the shield's composition date between 1873 and 1885, it is reasonable to conjecture by its resemblance to the panels that De Morgan may have completed the Medusa shield closer to 1883. De Morgan perhaps created the shield as a template to experiment with unfamiliar techniques before setting to work on the commissioned panels. Alternatively, she may have created the shield afterwards, using leftover materials to work on a subject of her own choice. She may also have created the shield while she was working on the panels, experimenting with mythological subjects as she devised the look of her angels. Whatever the case may be, the technical link to the All Saints panels provides us with a particular way to read the Medusa shield.

In her chapter on gilding in *The Materials and Craft of Early Iconographers*, Mihaela D. Leonida discusses the meaning of gold in medieval art:

It suggests richness, light, power, homage, permanence. When used in religious artifacts, the presence of gold was meant to impart to the object its noble characteristics (and

increase the commercial value) but also to suggest the splendor and perfection of the world “beyond.” (41)

Punched backgrounds, often used in religious works, “[allow] for a greater play of light, as well as the differentiation of such elements as haloes [...]” (“Punch”). John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke discuss gilding and punching techniques in their description of panel painting in *Art in Renaissance Italy*. After relaying the process of gilding and punching a painted panel, they testify to the effect of these techniques when viewed in sacred spaces:

This decorative surface, like the raised plaster areas of the panel, caught and reflected the light from candles and oil lamps in a shimmering manner intended to intensify the otherworldly quality of the images and, more practically, to make them legible in the darker areas of churches. (31-32)

These techniques, with which De Morgan became familiar as she toured the churches and museums of Rome and Florence, carry a distinctly religious, mystical association.

The technical similarities between the Angel panels and the Medusa shield invest the latter with religious, iconographic significance. Like the angels, Medusa is centered and faces the viewer head-on. The snake pattern behind her parallels the floral patterns on the panels. The golden background encircles her like a halo. These likenesses to De Morgan’s sacred art imbue Medusa with a status of holiness, drawing several possible comparisons between the Gorgon and the mystical beings of Christian Paradise.

De Morgan depicts Medusa’s defining features in a controlled and idealized manner, comparable to how saints and martyrs are often portrayed with their defining symbols. De Morgan portrays Medusa as only a head but without a neck, hinting at her deathly fate but not dramatizing it. The snakes in her hair remind us of her tribulations, but they are now controlled,

entwined in her fiery hair like a decorative wreath. This kind of symbolic signaling echoes that found in icons of Christian martyrs, who were often depicted with the instrument of their martyrdom and often wearing a crown.³² Of the martyr's crown Ferguson explains, "When the crown is used as the attribute of a martyr, it signifies victory over sin and death, or denotes that the saint was of royal blood. The crown is sometimes merely a circlet, but it may be a chaplet of flowers or a magnificent circle of gold and jewels" (101). Comparing this Medusa to the Medusa bronze, we see that the snakes no longer violate her in reenactment of her rape. That they now adorn her hair and even extend into a golden halo around her suggests a kind of reconciliation with these entities that had previously signified her oppression. They are now subsumed into her iconography and arranged into a martyr's crown of victory as Medusa transcends her suffering state.

The resemblance of De Morgan's gilded Medusa to her Angels also augments her transformation into a protective, spiritual being. In my discussion of De Morgan's Medusa bronze, I noted that Medusa's plight is emphasized by the rigidity of sculpture. Here, however, sculpture has a different effect. Medusa's face, modelled in relief, pushes forward out of the panel, creating a sense of movement and vitality. Without a neck to mark her decapitation, her head floats, transcending physical limitation. This is a transcendent, spiritual, and protective Medusa. Painted atop Minerva's shield, this Medusa harkens to her apotropaic status. With her hypnotic gaze and the mesmerizing snaky pattern surrounding her, she protects the one who bears the shield. De Morgan sublimates the apotropaic component of the Medusa myth into

³² For example, in *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, George Ferguson explains that St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is commonly depicted with stones, the "instruments of his martyrdom"; St. Sebastian, another martyr, is almost always portrayed with his body "transfixed by arrows" (Ferguson 85).

Christian iconography. The three-dimensional face atop a two-dimensional background evokes a Medusa in motion, coming to new life as a guardian angel.

The trajectory of De Morgan's two Medusa works – from the tragic, rigidified bronze to the spiritual, liberated Medusa – prefigures a motif that would interest De Morgan throughout her later works. In *Hope in the Prison of Despair* (c. 1887), *The Prisoner* (1907-1908), and *The Gilded Cage* (c. 1905-1910), for example, Smith has discerned “Allegories of female imprisonment” (109). Those works function on two levels. “On one level,” Smith explains, “De Morgan was visualizing the bondage of materialism and embodiment, earthly trappings that fetter us all” (109). The paintings visualize a universal struggle against those things of the physical dimension that bind us. On another level, Smith suggests that these images respond to the late-Victorian social and political discourse on “a woman’s search for autonomy and for the physical and psychic space needed for independent action” (109). The Medusa shield conveys these two levels of allegory. On the level of universal allegory, its tie to Christian iconography presents the universal transcendence of the soul. While she bears the marks of her earthly struggle, this Medusa has overcome her physical plight and reached the status of magnanimous, self-giving spirit. As an allegory of female independence and strength, she has become the emblem of Minerva’s shield; having escaped the bounds of her physical suffering, she is now the quintessential protector of women.



In the earlier chapters of this thesis, I discussed two female Victorian poets whose allusions to the Medusa myth take different approaches to shared concerns about female experience and female authorship. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Medusa appears as a complex feminine archetype wrapped up in the image of motherhood but coming to

signify even more. Manifest in Marian Erle, Medusa transforms into a liberated victim; in the title protagonist, Medusa becomes the pioneering female artist. In Christina Rossetti's poetry, Medusa takes up an even more ambivalent space: she is Christianized as a dangerous temptress; she possesses the lover and the beloved who petrify one another with the sin of idolatry; she haunts the conflicted woman who is at once poet and muse. Barrett Browning and Rossetti alike apply the myth to their examinations of female voice and experience, and we see this treatment in De Morgan's work as well. In the Ovidian tradition, each of these women-creators, themselves Medusa-like, subtly transform the subjects and forms at their disposal.

Returning one last time to De Morgan's Medusa shield, which I have come to regard as the ultimate emblem of this project, I want to suggest its prefiguring of the feminist revisioning of the Medusa myth that would occur over the ensuing century. As I have already shown, Medusa's gaze on this shield is striking in that, while it faces the viewer head-on, it looks strangely serene, even benign. That we look at Medusa's gaze suggests either that we have been petrified or we are immune to its power. Since women are often said to be unaffected by the Gorgon's gaze, the serene and innocuous gaze of this Medusa suggests that De Morgan's projected viewer is also a woman, or possesses a female, not a male, gaze. De Morgan invites her viewer to look upon Medusa the way that Cixous would later look upon her: "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" (885). While this Medusa is not yet laughing, she is certainly not deadly. Hers is a gaze that knows suffering and yet basks in the hope of a liberating future.

EPILOGUE

Now I count the buds of my primrose with a new kind of interest – and you never saw
such a primrose! I begin to believe in Ovid, or look for a metamorphosis.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

I wish to be attentive. To the cool breeze slipping through the window; the way my little lemon tree leans ever so gently towards the light. To those I love: the shape of their letter “p’s”; the way they dry a cup – do they dry the inside or the outside first? How they react to the ending of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and whether they dog-ear their books or use a bookmark.

I began thinking seriously about Medusa in December of 2018. I was stuck in the waiting room of a doctor’s office for an unusually long time and I was reading A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*. My patience was waning, and by about the second hour or so I was ready to crack. Just before the nurse called me into the doctor’s office, I read the following passage from a poem by the fictional Christabel LaMotte:

But let the Power take a female form
And ‘tis the Power is punished. All men shrink
From dire Medusa and her writhing locks. [...]
The siren sings and sings, and virtuous men
Bind ears and eyes and sail resolved away
From all the pain that what she loves must die,
That her desire, though lovely in her song
Is mortal in her kiss to mortal men. (Byatt 317)

It was the part about the sirens that brought tears to my eyes, which I quickly suppressed as I was called in for my appointment.

When I left the doctor’s office my mind was spinning as I thought about the sirens. Before, I had only considered them in passing. I knew that Odysseus had his men bind him to the mast of his ship so that he could listen to the siren’s song without succumbing to its trap. But suddenly I was thinking about sirens as though they were real women. I imagined them yearning for a connection with the world above the ocean’s surface. I thought of their songs as pleas for tenderness. I remember meeting up with my then-boyfriend after my doctor’s appointment,

crying to him with absurd fervour about the sirens, lamenting the frequency of narratives in which “monstrous” women exist solely for the sake of a male protagonist’s character arc.

The sirens made me think about archetypes more generally. I was asking questions like, are archetypes genuinely stable and unchanging? Is there room for new archetypes, or new means of understanding existing ones? As I thought about this, my attention focused on Medusa, who seemed to me a more essential archetype than the sirens. I was aware of Ovid’s story; I felt that she was misunderstood. I thought a lot about *attentiveness* and how Medusa’s story pivots on how she is seen by men. To gaze upon her is dangerous, and so she is only seen in glimpses.

I soon became absorbed in the compendium of feminist Medusa literature. Hélène Cixous, Patricia Smith, Louise Bogan, Colleen McElroy, Sylvia Plath. I started to see (hear, feel) Medusa everywhere. The sounds of FKA twigs, the heart of Jenny Slate, the iconoclasm of Forugh Farrokhzad, the sorrow of the Virgin Mary.

At the beginning of 2019, I met up with some friends in New York City. I arrived before the rest of the group, and I went straight from the airport to the Met, where I stumbled upon Canova’s “Perseus with the Head of Medusa.” I observed it from all angles. I stood there for a while, eavesdropping on the conversations around me, trying to piece together how others interpreted it. Most passersby talked about Perseus, attempting to recall his story; one or two noted “the Medusa head.” I contemplated writing “IT WASN’T HER FAULT” on a piece of paper and dropping it in front of the statue. (My neurosis both prompted this desire and prevented me from carrying it out.)

When I started my master’s that fall, I took the opportunity to write about Medusa in my graduate courses. In a seminar on Pre-Raphaelite art and literature, I began compiling some of the Victorian references that would eventually become part of my thesis. In a seminar called “Artful Criticism,” I made my first foray into alternative modes of criticism by creating an artist’s book, an accordion structure that explores Medusa’s contradictory elements through collaged images and texts. It was also during this time that Medusa became, for me, a metaphor for heartbreak, loneliness, and grief.

On July 19, 2020, I was in the midst of writing my thesis proposal and studying for the GRE. The pandemic was in full swing, I was living with my parents for the summer, and I was still getting over a breakup that happened six months earlier. That night I wrote in my diary:

I've been reading and thinking about Ovid so much, I wonder if I'm beginning to transform in Ovidian fashion. I'm so sad when I think about love. I wonder if I will ever experience true, steadfast, human love or if the end of my relationship with ____ marks the beginning of my metamorphosis into a fish or a bird or even a star in the sky. Maybe I feel more capricious, protean, ambivalent than usual because my next state is about to manifest itself. I have felt so much these last few days. Would it maybe be nice to just become a tree?

My preoccupation with Medusa has become entwined with my sense of self. I know it's a dangerous thing, mixing academic research with personal experience. Yet I have always thought about my life through books, even literary criticism. Reading Ovid, I find myself at times enraged, moved to tears, *petrified* by the stories that explore the cultural position of women, the often troublesome social relationship between men and women. I know what it feels like to wish for the transformation of one's body.

The Medusa story makes me think intensely about what it is to be a woman. I have often felt drawn to Medusa by her contradictory elements: destructive and creative, impenetrable and vulnerable, beautiful and ugly. I've felt comforted by these contradictions. When I first began my thesis, I was consumed by the conflict I felt between two sides of myself: my desire for romantic love and family and my ambitions for research and writing. These two sides parallel the two facets of Medusa's story introduced by Ovid and developed by Cixous: the ambivalent state of her sexuality and her voice.



It might surprise the reader to know that I'm terrified of snakes.

For most of my life, this fear hasn't been all that relevant. I rarely saw snakes except at the zoo. Over the duration of writing my thesis, I've seen six. Almost every time I tell someone about this fear, they remind me that if I see a snake in the Gatineau wilderness, I have nothing to be afraid of; it's almost definitely not poisonous. *Yes, I know that*, I say. They're just little garter snakes. What I wish they would understand is that of course my concern is not whether the snake will hurt me. I don't know how to explain that what terrifies me is the snake's movement, the hypnotic pulse with which it writhes. I know that a little garter snake in the Gatineau hills is not going to hurt me, but I also know that what seems like a primordial instinct urges me to run away

at the sight of them. I tell myself that I will keep walking in the woods until I become comfortable with snakes, but I also know that I will never become comfortable. We are visceral enemies, destined to recoil at one another.

Writing my thesis started out as a lonesome activity. I live alone; my apartment has become my world over the last year. When my family drove me back to my apartment last September, I was reluctant to let them leave. Living beside the entrance to Gatineau Park, I started walking in the forest every day. I noticed that, strangely, it was the repetition and familiarity that made the experience of walking so pleasant. The longer I spent in this forest, the more I became attentive to how it would change day by day, season by season. I saw bunnies and skunks and all kinds of birds: sweet creatures. I once made sustained eye contact with a fox. More and more I felt romanced by this sweet, daily pleasure of walking. My forest became precious to me; I didn't want to share it with anyone else.

I still remember the day the snow began to melt. I felt a pang of sadness, because I loved the winter, but the smell of soil invigorated me. The spring, however, brought snakes out of the ground. I saw two on a walk with my grandparents when I visited home for Easter. When I returned to Gatineau and went for another walk, I saw one in my forest. I was so mad that they would encroach upon my place of refuge. Over the next few months, I would see another, then another, then another. I saw one on my 25th birthday. I was dreaming about them, too. Eventually I stopped walking in the forest and switched to biking on the trails.

In an essay for the Metropolitan Museum on Medusa in ancient Greek art, Madeleine Glennon writes that "Alterity is at the foundation of Medusa's force, which was alive and present in the minds and memories of ancient viewers. Her very presence is foreign, dangerous, and potent, as are her specific characteristics."

What is often lost in various constructions of Medusa is that there is not one "original" origin story. What is challenging about studying Medusa is the task of holding all her contradictions and her mystery at once: the willingness to not claim one narrative as the whole picture. This is a troublesome thing for writers who attempt to contribute to her narrative, and for those who identify with her.

I have been trying to figure out what is the meaning of these snakes that keep appearing in my forest and my dreams. The sensory experience they evoke is disarming and isolating;

whereas rabbits have let me photograph them and foxes look me in the eye, the snake refuses connection as much as I do. The snake tells me that I am alone.

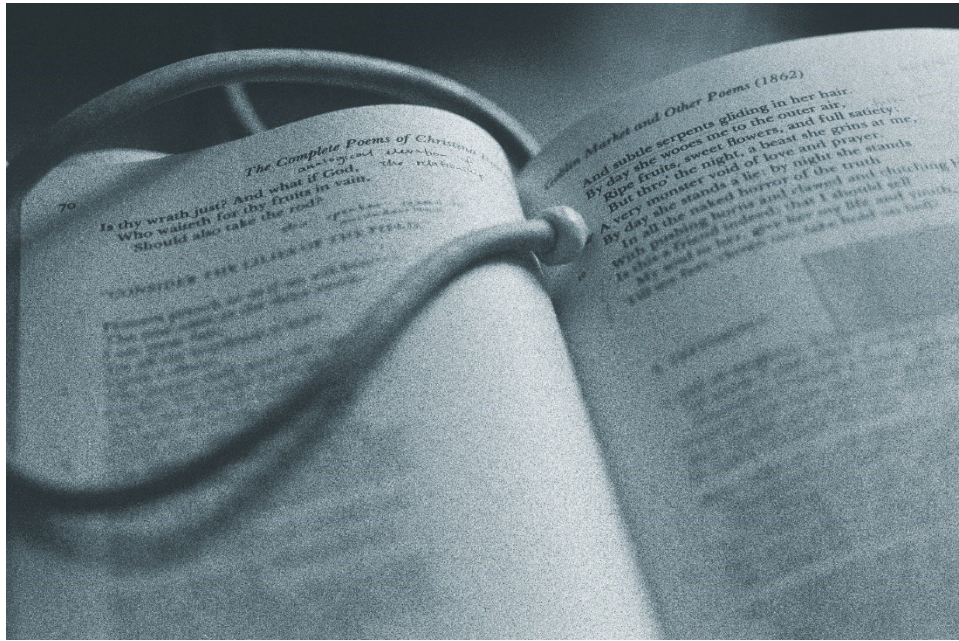
A friend reminded me that snakes are symbols of metamorphosis. I had forgotten that last fall, long before I saw snakes in my forest, I saw a snakeskin while hiking. In its ability to completely shed its exterior self, the snake becomes a symbol of rebirth and transformation.

Last night at dusk, I decided to walk in the forest for the first time in two months. I was reflecting on my own transformation over the last year. I realized that the dichotomy that I had once created for myself – this idea that I must choose between my professional and romantic aspirations – was no longer a conflict in my mind. I know now that I can encounter love and attentiveness in all of it – and if I do not find these things in one place, I am allowed to leave and go elsewhere.

I entered the woods along a path that I have grown wary of in recent months. It leads to a wide expanse overlooked by tall, majestic power lines. The paths here are normally grassy and narrow in the summer; this is where I'd seen several snakes sneaking in and out of the bushes. When I arrived, I discovered that all the bushes had been cut down and lay in great heaps around me. I don't know why this was done, perhaps as a safety precaution for the power lines. Nonetheless, I was struck by how beautiful it looked: the rich colours of decay expanded for acres below a balmy, purple sky. Treading across this transformed landscape, I forgot to keep my guard up for snakes. A deadened terrain became for me a rebirth, a new subject for exploration.



WORKS CITED



Albrecht, Thomas. *The Medusa Effect*. SUNY Press, 2009.

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum. Everyman's Library, 1995.

———. *Vita Nuova*. Translated by Mark Musa. Oxford World's Classics, 2008.

Allen, Virginia. *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*. The Whitson Publishing Company, 1983.

Apollodorus. "The Beauty of Medusa." Translated by James George Frazer. *The Medusa Reader*, edited by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, Routledge, 2003, pp. 23-25.

Arseneau, Mary. "'May My Great Love Avail Me': Christina Rossetti and Dante." *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, Ohio UP, 1999, 22-45.

———. "Pilgrimage and Postponement: Christina Rossetti's 'The Prince's Progress.'" *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 32, no. 3/4, West Virginia UP, 1994, pp. 279-98.

———. *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004.

Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Harvard UP, 1982.

Barolini, Teodolinda. "Virgilio's Dark Past: From Erichtho to Medusa." *Commento Baroliniano*, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-9/>. Accessed 9 July 2021.

Barolsky, Paul. "Ovid's Metamorphoses and the History of Baroque Art." *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, edited by John F. Miller and Carol E. Newlands, John Wiley & Sons, 2014, pp. 202–16.

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2015.

———. *The Brownings' Correspondence: An Online Edition*. Wedgestone Press, <https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/>.

Byatt, A.S. *Possession*. Random House USA Inc., 1991.

Chapman, Alison. "Poetry, Network, Nation: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Expatriate Women's Poetry." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2013, p. 275, doi:10.2979/victorianstudies.55.2.275.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93.

Conley, Carolyn A. "Rape and Justice in Victorian England." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4, Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 519–36.

Conley, Susan. "Burying the Medusa: Romantic Bloodlines in Christina Rossetti's Gothic Epistle." *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry*, edited by Barbara Garlick, Rodopi B.V., 2002, pp. 97–115.

"construe, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/39912. Accessed 26 August 2021.

“Evelyn De Morgan’s Angel panels, All Saints Church, Cawthorne.” De Morgan Collection, <https://www.demorgan.org.uk/evelyn-de-morgans-angel-panels-all-saints-church-cawthorne/>. Accessed 22 August 2021.

Fantham, Elaine. *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*. Oxford UP, 2004.

Faulk, Laura. “Destructive Maternity in Aurora Leigh.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2013, pp. 41–54, doi:10.1017/S1060150312000216.

Feldherr, Andrew. “Modeling Reception in the Metamorphoses.” *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, edited by John F. Miller and Carol E. Newlands, John Wiley & Sons, 2014, pp. 22–35.

Feng, Aileen A. “‘Volto Di Medusa’: Monumentalizing the Self in Petrarch’s *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*.” *Forum Italicum*, vol. 47, no. 3, Nov. 2013, pp. 497–521. *SAGE Journals*, doi:10.1177/0014585813497334.

Ferguson, George Wells. *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*. Oxford University Press, 1959.

Foster, Hal. “Medusa and the Real.” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 44, 2003, pp. 181–190.

Freccero, John. “On Dante’s Medusa,” from “Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit.” 1972. *The Medusa Reader*, edited by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, Routledge, 2003, pp. 109–121.

Gaisser, Julia Haig. “Cupid and Psyche.” *A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017, pp. 337–51. *Wiley Online Library*, doi:10.1002/9781119072034.ch23.

Garber, Marjorie, and Nancy J. Vickers, editors. *The Medusa Reader*. Routledge, 2003.

- Gerdts, William H. "The 'Medusa' of Harriet Hosmer." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1978, pp. 96–107. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41504612. Accessed 30 Aug. 2021.
- Glennon, Madeleine. "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Met, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hd_medu.htm. Accessed 31 August 2021.
- Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques*, edited by Gerald Ward, Oxford University Press, Oxford Reference, 2008.
- Hadley, Karen. "'Tulips on Dunghills': Regendering the Georgic in Barrett Browning's 'Aurora Leigh.'" *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 52, no. 3, Oct. 2014, pp. 465–81, doi:10.1353/vp.2014.0020.
- Harrison, Antony T. "Intertextuality: Dante, Petrarch, and Christina Rossetti." *Christina Rossetti in Context: A Victorian Web book*, VictorianWeb, <https://victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/harrison2/5.1.html>.
- Harrison, Stephen. "Ovid and Genre: Evolutions of an Elegist." *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, edited by Philip Hardie, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 79–94, <http://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-companion-to-ovid/ovid-and-genre/6A21A681F2C80FEAE9E5C169175009D2>.
- Hesiod. "Medusa and Perseus." Translated by Richmond Lattimore. *The Medusa Reader*, edited by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, Routledge, 2003, pp. 11–13.
- "How was it made? Water gilding | V&A." YouTube, uploaded by Victoria and Albert Museum, 16 Mar. 2021.

- Hurst, Isobel. "Victorian Poetry and the Classics." *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, Oxford UP, 2013, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199576463.013.017.
- . *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- Jenkyns, Richard. "Review: [Untitled]." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 41, no. 161, 1990, pp. 151–152. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/516641. Accessed 27 Aug. 2021.
- Keith, A. M. *Engendering Rome: Women in Latin Epic*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. *ProQuest Ebook Central*,
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ottawa/detail.action?docID=164765>.
- Kingsley, Charles, et al. *The Heroes, or, Greek Fairy Tales for My Children: By Charles Kingsley*. MacMillan and Co., 1868. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*,
<http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CEGIFQ193838042/NCCOu=otta77973&sid=zotero&xid=22555372>.
- Lemprière, John. *Bibliotheca Classica; or, a Classical Dictionary*. 3rd ed., printed for T. Cadell, junior, and W. Davies, (successors to Mr. Cadell,) in the Strand, 1797. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*,
<http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0125397728/ECCO?sid=primo&xid=2597db5f&pg=49>
 9.
- Leonida, Mihaela D. *The Materials and Craft of Early Iconographers*. Springer International Publishing, 2014, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-04828-4.
- Lovatt, Helen. *The Epic Gaze: Vision, Gender and Narrative in Ancient Epic*. Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Lyne, Raphael. "Ovid in English Translation." *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, edited by Philip Hardie, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 249–263.

- Marsh, Jan. *Christina Rossetti: A Writer's Life*. Viking, 1995.
- . *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999.
- Marsh, Jan and Pamela Gerrish Nunn. *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*. Virago, 1989. *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/womenartistsprer0000mars>.
- Martinez, Michele Carol. "Christina Rossetti's Petrarca." *Victorian Women Poets: Essays and Studies*, 2003, pp. 99-121.
- . *Pygmalion's Image: Ovid, Sculpture, and Women's Poetry, 1770-1880*. Yale University, 1999.
- . "Sister Arts and Artists: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and the Life of Harriet Hosmer." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2003, pp. 214–26, doi:10.1093/fmls/39.2.214.
- Mason, Emma. "Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, Jan. 2002, pp. 196–219. Silverchair, doi:10.3366/jvc.2002.7.2.196.
- McGann, Jerome J. "The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1972, pp. 3–25, doi:10.2307/25599824.
- Miller, John F., and Carole E. Newlands. *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014.
- Miller, Paul Allen. "Sidney, Petrarch, and Ovid, or Imitation as Subversion." *ELH*, vol. 58, no. 3, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, pp. 499–522. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/2873453.
- Moore, Mary B. *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism*. SIU Press, 2000.
- Morris, William. "The Earthly Paradise: A Poem." *Project Gutenberg*, 2009, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30332/30332-h/30332-h.htm>.

Munich, Adrienne. *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art*. Columbia UP, 1989.

Musa, Mark. "Introduction." *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*. Translated by Mark Musa. Oxford World Classics, 2008, pp. ix-xix.

Musa, Mark and Barbara Manfredi. *Petrarch: The Canzoniere, or Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*. Indiana University Press, 1996. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gz9mj. Accessed 16 Aug. 2021.

Ofek, Galia. *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009.

Old Battersea House and the De Morgan Collection of Pictures & Pottery. 1900. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/oldbatterseahous00unse/mode/2up>.

Ovid. *Heroides*. Translated by Harold Isbell. Penguin Books, 2004.

———. *Metamorphoses*. Translated by A.D. Melville. Oxford UP, 2008.

Paoletti, John T. and Gary M. Radke. *Art in Renaissance Italy*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997.

Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance*. Oxford World Classics, 1998.

Peteghem, Julie Van. "Petrarch's Scattered Ovidian Verses." *Italian Readers of Ovid from the Origins to Petrarch*, Brill, 2020, pp. 223–87, doi:10.1163/9789004421691_007.

Petrarch. *The Complete Canzoniere*. Translated by A.S Kline. Poetry in Translation, 2001.

Praz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony*. Oxford UP, 1933.

Reeds, Eleanor. "Voicing an Epic for the Age in The Prelude and Aurora Leigh." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 57, no. 2, West Virginia University Press, Sept. 2019, pp. 225–46. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/vp.2019.0010.

- Rimell, Victoria. *Ovid's Lovers: Desire, Difference, and the Poetic Imagination*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Roberts, Deborah H. "The Metamorphosis of Ovid in Retellings of Myth for Children." *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature*, Brill, 2015, pp. 233–56, doi:10.1163/9789004298606_012.
- Rosenblum, Dolores. "Casa Guidi Windows and Aurora Leigh: The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Visionary Aesthetic." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 4, no. 1, University of Tulsa, 1985, pp. 61–68. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/463805.
- . *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*. Carbondale, 1986, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015013283364>.
- Rossetti, Christina. *The Complete Poems*. Penguin Classics, 2001.
- . "Dante, an English Classic." *The Churchman's Shilling Magazine and Family Treasury*, no. 2, 1867, p. 200.
- . "Dante. The Poet Illustrated out of the Poem." *The Century*, vol. 5, no. 27, 1884, pp. 566-73.
- . "Francesco Petrarca." *The Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography: A Series of Original Memoirs of Distinguished Men, of All Ages and All Nations*, edited by John Francis Waller, vol. 2, 1863. *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/universalbiograp03ead>.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Jerome McGann. Yale University Press, 2003.
- Rossetti, Maria Francesca. *A Shadow of Dante: Being an Essay towards Studying Himself, His World, and His Pilgrimage*. Roberts Brothers, 1872.

- Rushworth, Jennifer. "Icons and Idols in Dante and Petrarch." *Romance Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, Routledge, 2017, pp. 73–84. *Scholars Portal Journals*, doi:10.1080/02639904.2017.1341197.
- Russo, Florence. "'Cupiditas', the Medusean Heresy of Farinata." *Italica*, vol. 89, no. 4, American Association of Teachers of Italian, 2012, pp. 442–63.
- Sharrock, Alison. "Gender and Sexuality." *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, edited by Philip Hardie, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 95–107. *ProQuest*, doi:10.1017/CCOL0521772818.008.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery." 1919. *The Medusa Reader*, edited by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, Routledge, 2003, pp. 75-76.
- Smith, Elise Lawton. *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body*. Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2002.
- Stirling, A. M. W. *William De Morgan and His Wife*. Henry Holt, 1922. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924013606318>.
- Sturm-Maddox, Sara. *Petrarch's Metamorphoses*. University of Missouri Press, 1985.
- Taylor, Beverly. "EBB among the Nightingales: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Felicia Hemans, and Generative Rivalry in the Poetess Tradition." *Women's Writing*, vol. 26, no. 2, Routledge, 2019, pp. 149–67. *Scholars Portal Journals*, doi:10.1080/09699082.2019.1534650.
- van Eck, Catherine. "The Petrifying Gaze of Medusa: Ambivalence, Explexis, and the Sublime." *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, vol. 8, no. 2, Summer 2016, <https://jhna.org/articles/petrifying-gaze-medusa-ambivalence-explexis-sublime/>.

Vance, Norman. "Ovid and the Nineteenth Century." *Ovid Renewed*, edited by Charles Martindale, Cambridge UP, 1988, pp. 215–31.

Yates, Patricia. "Evelyn De Morgan's Use of Literary Sources in her Paintings." *Evelyn de Morgan: Oil Paintings*, edited by Catherine Gordon, De Morgan Foundation, 1996.

Ziolkowski, Theodore. "Ovid in the Twentieth Century." *A Companion to Ovid*, edited by Peter E. Knox, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, pp. 455–68.

Zonana, Joyce. "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Feminist Poetics." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2, University of Tulsa, 1989, pp. 241–62. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/463737.