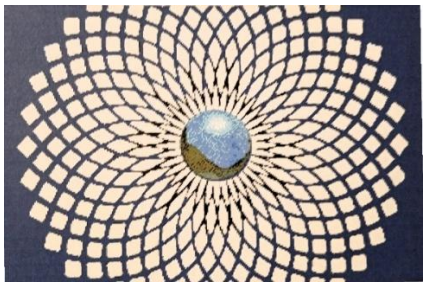
"From Gorgo to Medusa. The Trajectory of Abuse: A Reflection on a Timeless Story"

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Abstract

This article offers a systemic and psychodynamic reading of the myth of Medusa as a narrative of the trajectory of abuse. Starting from the ancient sources (Hesiod, Pindar, Apollodorus, Ovid) and using the genogram as a tool, it traces the transgenerational pattern of incest in Gorgo's family, the instrumentalisation of the female body through the gaze of the other, the rape by Poseidon, the betrayal of trust by Athena, and her transformation into a "monster" that turns to stone whoever looks at her. The transformation is interpreted as a symbolic death of the self and as a vengeful withdrawal of eroticism. Finally, the myth is transposed into the therapeutic setting: the therapist as a "corrective other" who can bear to see the trauma rather than the monster, so that Medusa's "gifts"

— the unscathed aspects of the self — may be released and give new meaning to life.

Keywords: Medusa, abuse, rape, trauma, genogram, transgenerational transmission, self-fulfilling prophecy, gaze, corrective experience.

Introduction

In the myth of Medusa, two different bodily and psychic forms of the same person appear: Gorgo and Medusa. In the present text, following Kerényi's observation that "Gorgo" was also a name given to little girls (Kerényi, 2012:60), we conventionally call "Gorgo" the maiden before the transformation and "Medusa" the form that results from it. Vulnerable beauty, sensitive innocence and boundless childlikeness are transformed into a repulsive, aged figure of ugly and fearsome appearance. Through the decoding of the myth's symbols, concepts such as "perpetrator", "victim", "fate", "destiny", "justice", "trust", "betrayal", "punishment", "death", "transformation", "genesis" and "psychic gifts" are revealed.

The faces of Medusa and Gorgo are present in contemporary society. They wander among us — at times as silent presences bearing the weight of their history on their shoulders, at times as resounding news items that transfix us and excite curiosity and imagination, and at times in the therapist's consulting room, hoping for redemption and release from captivity (to the past) and from the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948).

The Myth of Medusa

Myths are not lies. They are narratives about the creation of natural, supernatural, and cultural phenomena. Myths contain symbols and symbolisms, archetypes of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1959). They are a particular kind of story which, on the one hand, attempts to interpret the world through values and rules and, on the other, to help human beings understand themselves.

In Greek mythology, Medusa — according to the ancient Greek mythographer, author and poet Hesiod, in his Theogony — was the daughter of the god Phorcys (or Phorkys), the wise old man of the sea, and of the deity Ceto, who embodied the dangers of the sea. Phorcys and Ceto were children of Pontus and Gaia, and siblings of each other (Hes., Theog. 233-239). From their union were born the Graeae, the Gorgons (Sthenno, Euryale and Medusa), Echidna, and the serpent that guarded the golden apples. The Gorgons dwelt far away, at the edges of night, beyond Ocean, where the sweet-voiced Hesperides also lived (Hes., Theog. 270-336).

Pindar calls Medusa "fair-cheeked" (Pind., Pyth. 12.16), as Hesiod does her mother Ceto (Hes., Theog. 238). She was a mere mortal, whereas Sthenno and Euryale were ageless and immortal. In Hesiod and in archaic art, Gorgo is from the outset a primordial, pre-Olympian monster; in the later tradition, however, she develops into an incredibly beautiful young woman, whom the sources describe as proud and vain, who dared — according to a version preserved by Apollodorus — to compare her beauty with that of the goddess Athena and to consider it superior (Apollod., Bibl. 2.4.3). All who had seen her were left dazzled by the

strikingly intense features of her sweet face and, above all, by the length of her hair, with its golden curls that rippled and shone with grace.

Medusa's outward appearance had charms that aroused the erotic desire of Poseidon. "With her lay the Dark-haired One [the dark-haired Poseidon] in a soft meadow amid spring flowers" (Hes., Theog. 278-279, trans. Evelyn-White) — without her own will, as discussed below. According to the Roman version of the myth, as rendered by Ovid in his Metamorphoses, Poseidon defiles her inside the sanctuary of Athena (Ov., Met. 4.798-803).

The goddess Athena is enraged. But with whom? Who was it that failed to respect her sanctuary? Would she clash with Poseidon? What would a rupture with him mean? Venting her anger on Medusa, the exquisitely beautiful maiden (a priestess, according to the more recent renderings of the myth), seems the only way open to her — and she transformed her into a loathsome monster. In Ovid, the goddess turns her hair into snakes; the full monstrous image comes from Apollodorus (Bibl. 2.4.2), and the two traditions merge in modern reception: "Snakes coiled around her head, from her mouth protruded great teeth like those of wild boars, she had hands of bronze and golden wings with which she flew, sparkling eyes and a piercing gaze" (Mitta, 2012). According to Hesiod, Medusa was killed by Perseus, son of Zeus and Danaë (Hes., Theog. 280). According to Apollodorus, Polydectes, king of Seriphos, assigned Perseus the labour of bringing him the head of Medusa. His real aim, however, was to remove Perseus from the island so as to clear the way for his own amorous pursuit of Perseus's mother, Danaë. Perseus, nonetheless, aided by the gods and above all by Athena, reached the Ocean and found his way to Medusa (Apollod., Bibl. 2.4.2).

It was the goddess Athena who helped him, guiding his hand and turning his gaze towards the bronze shield in which Medusa's head was reflected, so that he could behead her. The birth of Medusa's children took place at the moment of her death. From her severed neck and her miraculous blood — which was believed capable of healing or killing human beings: the blood from the left vein killed, that from the right healed, and it was given to Asclepius (Apollod., Bibl. 3.10.3) — sprang the children she was carrying by Poseidon: a winged horse, Pegasus, and the hero Chrysaor, a giant with a golden sword in his hand.

The much-coveted head of Medusa — the famous "Gorgoneion" — was finally delivered by Perseus himself to Athena. The goddess placed it on her shield as a weapon in battle, because — even dead — it turned to stone whoever looked upon it. The head of Medusa was used as an apotropaic symbol, an amulet that keeps evil away. For this reason it adorned temples and houses as an antefix, and decorated armour, weapons, shields and chariots. To this very day, however, it continues to be a symbol of protection, power, trauma, rebirth and transformation.

Myth, Story, Fact or News

The symbols of myths become tools that allow us to move timelessly between realism and imagination. Past, present and future. Symbols conceal meanings that give us the possibility of another reading of reality.

People's stories, too, conceal symbols and symbolisms. Myths and stories run through the past and, through their power, become desperately contemporary, imprinted as facts and news items in the topical present.

"And again, Ceto bore the Gorgons who dwell beyond glorious Ocean in the frontier land towards Night where are the clear-voiced Hesperides, Sthenno, and Euryale, and Medusa who suffered a woeful fate: She was mortal, but the two were undying and grew not old" (Hes., Theog. 274-277, trans. Evelyn-White).

Gorgo, daughter of Phorcys and Ceto, themselves children of Pontus and Gaia. An incestuous erotic relationship — siblings and, at the same time, parents. Can an incestuous relationship be erotic? "Eros is the possibility of understanding, through experience, the meaning of one's existence. It is the invitation to transcend our individual inadequacy in order to meet the core of life. Erotic unto death, and then death is abolished" (Karagiannis, 2014:13).

Incestuous relationships: well-hidden secrets within closed, entropic human systems, where the boundaries towards the outside are closed while internally they become unbounded and blurred, with loss of functionality, confused flow, absence of eroticism and renunciation of all hope. In this sense, incest is stillborn and anti-erotic.

A secret in a community defined as the edge of night. The last, the marginalised, the remote. Where secrets are well kept and, at the same time, shared. Whispered but never spoken. Beyond the Ocean, on an island that the sources call Sarpedon (Cypria, fr.) or the Gorgades (Pliny, Nat. Hist. 6.200)... It does not matter. Her sisters, untouched, immortal, timeless yet also enduring across time. Gorgo is vulnerable. Destined, according to the myth, to suffer woes. A self-fulfilling prophecy?

The genogram: the map of the family tree, a tool for tracing the biological chain of generations but also for recording the events that run through people's stories. Secrets, assumptions, recurring patterns of relationships, behaviours, rules and situations. Through the genogram we can search for the hidden — potentially self-fulfilling — prophecies. Yet it does not determine us; it is not fate. "The genogram does not simply remind us of what we know, but also warns us about what we do not know" (McGoldrick, 2002: p. 51).

Exploring Gorgo's genogram, we find a transgenerational pattern — incest — which is repeated in two successive generations: a transgenerational transmission in Bowen's sense (Bowen, 1978). Gaia bore Pontus without mating and then lay with him, giving birth to Phorcys and Ceto. From the union of the two siblings were born the Gorgons: Sthenno,

Euryale, Medusa-Gorgo. A different child, a child of an incestuous relationship, the only mortal one, destined to suffer woes, she seems to carry burdens on her shoulders. As if this difference and her mortality become the inevitable price? Among the Gorgons she is almost always mentioned in third place, the third child in the sequence. How would we imagine her? Carefree, pampered, vulnerable, tragically beautiful, her wavy curls fluttering in the wind. She ran in the meadows, swam naked in the sea of her island, enjoying the sun, the scent of the flowers, the beauty of her youth. Kerényi comments on Medusa-Gorgo: "this is why we cannot believe that Gorgo meant only something ugly and abominable, for this name was also given to little girls of whom their parents did not expect anything terrible to come" (Kerényi, 2012:60).

Gorgo has already begun to write her story, as she has been destined to write it. The image of the self is shaped by the gaze of others — parents, siblings, significant others (Sullivan, 1953). Gorgo's beautiful image was sculpted by the gaze of others upon her, at the very moment that her own gaze was reflected in them. Tragic irony! How decisive a role the gaze played in her life. The gaze that introjects and reinforces the other, and ultimately alienates, transferring ownership of the self to someone else.

Gorgo is gradually instrumentalised; she comes to know herself through the eyes of the other; she is led to serve that for which she was destined — her woes and her mortality. Beautiful, innocent, carefree and — as the tradition would have her — vain. Her body is gradually sculpted into that of an incredibly erotic adolescent, exuding her mortal femininity. She is destined to die. She does not know it... Will she fall victim (as the myth says) to her vanity? Or victim to her history? We see it, but she herself does not — tragic irony. She surrendered herself to the mirror of others. Her undifferentiated identity and her innocent side allowed her vanity to become her dominant self. Was she to blame? What else could she have done? This boundless childlikeness will become a self-fulfilling prophecy because it holds within it the secret of the end. Here the myth loses its thread... How did things happen? Does it matter? Perhaps not.

Athena

The beloved daughter of Zeus. Goddess of war, of wisdom, of the olive tree, of the arts.

Gorgo, a priestess in the temple of Athena — so the more recent renderings of the myth would have it. Why did she end up there? What led her there? She withdraws from the gaze of others. In the goddess's temple, she is offered safety, and she tends the sanctuary. An opportunity? Is this the possibility of a reversal? How will her story unfold? Who will show her? Or is this precisely what had to happen, so that the story could be led to its end (as Hesiod wrote)? Precondition: that Gorgo trust Athena.

Poseidon

Son of the Titan Cronus and the Titaness Rhea, brother of Zeus and Hades. As we imagine him here: terrible in appearance, gigantic, violent. Lord of the sea and the oceans, he held absolute power; he could raise a storm or bring calm, and split the earth, causing earthquakes. No one resisted his will — not even Gorgo.

“With her lay the Dark-haired One in a soft meadow amid spring flowers” (Hes., Theog. 278-279, trans. Evelyn-White).

Why? Why the god Poseidon? Why her? Some will say “It was your fault, you were vain!”, others, “You provoked the god!”, “You swam naked…”, “You knew it, you saw it, you could see it coming…”. And did Poseidon become the perpetrator, or perhaps (also) the instrument of her story? But is she, too, a victim of Poseidon or a victim of her own history?

Gorgo was no longer a girl. But no, she had not dreamt it this way. She had not wanted it this way. This encounter was violent. It was not with her consent. She did not fall in love, she did not desire, she did not exchange caresses and kisses in the fragrant meadows and among the spring flowers. It was not a boyish, adolescent body — like her own — smelling of sun and flowers, whose caresses she would fall in love with, so that together they would pass into the adulthood of their sexuality. Only when bodies and souls are in harmony in the erotic act does eros become nourishing. No — for Gorgo — it was a monstrous, aged, slimy and terrifying body that overpowered her every resistance.

Now her body is wounded. Her clothes have been torn to shreds and bloodied. Her hair is no longer those exquisite curls. The temple of Athena has been defiled. She is seized by fear, shame, disgust, anguish. She hopes that the goddess will take pity on her, will protect her, will care for her. Perhaps she will do so now. Perhaps she invoked her, perhaps not. But it does not matter. Athena appears, and then Gorgo understands that one does not make deals with the gods. Such deals have fine print and special terms, which she had not read.

For it is the other who decides. Athena has decided, and now she is very angry. How dare she defile her temple! How could she lie with Poseidon! Such vanity! She even led the god astray, made him want her. She did not protect the sanctuary. Vulnerable Gorgo trusted the mighty goddess Athena. But it was not her fault — Poseidon truly raped her. Unjust! Betrayal! And how did she not see it? The goddess Athena would never clash with Poseidon — her uncle, and a god of almost equal standing with her father, mighty Zeus. Poor Gorgo! That would never happen…

Nor would Athena’s father, Zeus, concern himself with an injustice done to a mortal. Then, without doubt, she is to blame. “Foolish, vain little girl! You were not raped — you wanted it! And you shall be punished for your disobedience, your sacrilege and your blasphemy!” Perhaps this is the end. Now Athena will punish her with a symbolic death.

Medusa

A Monster. Old, repulsive, aged, desiccated. Mouth gaping wide with horror, pain, shame, rage, guilt. Behind the sparkling, piercing gaze of the myth, empty eyes, a blank gaze. Snakes frame her head. Her beautiful curls have been transformed into snakes that coil and writhe in the air, hissing menacingly. Gorgo died, and with her died vitality, innocence, eroticism, the thirst to know, to live, to fall in love. In her place is a creature enraged at the injustice it has suffered — vengeful, hard and heartless. Now she wants — and is able — to take revenge. From victim she becomes perpetrator.

Why do they look at her? She knows that others see a monster... She would so much like to say "I am not a monster, I am like this because...", but they do not listen. Then she, too, becomes as they see her... a monster. She turns to stone whoever dares to look at her. Fear seizes the others; it freezes them. They lose their warmth, just as she lost hers. The gaze of the other is reflected in her own. Again that gaze... "You see me as a monster? Well then, I am a monster — hard, heartless and punishing!"

They have admired her and they have accused her for her femininity and her eroticism. So now she will have the power to strip eroticism from others. As they meet her gaze, they will be turned into frozen creatures, sapless, anti-erotic, petrified. The savage look, the look of the trauma of rape, is what spreads death. She will allow no more pain. They will no longer harm her with their gaze. She will not allow them to consume her. Enough! The trauma remains mute, closed, sealed; she shares it with no one, she entrusts it to no one, no one hears it.

Now, yes... Now death is near. She can almost see the end, or even longs for it. Like this, life has no meaning. Meaning must be created through death. She herself knows that she is carrying children — her own, but also Poseidon's. The secrets of her life, repeating themselves. The transgenerational pattern of incest; her own rape. She was born of an incestuous relationship. She herself will give birth after a rape. Everyone wants to know. Not because they love her, but because it stimulates and provokes them.

She was targeted; they look at her, they discuss her, they pity her, they blame her, they accuse her, they judge her. Behind closed doors they examine in detail whether she, too, bears some responsibility.

Who will lead her to death, setting her free? Who will release her from the unbearable vindictiveness she feels for the injustice she suffered, the betrayal, the rape, the hatred for the uncontrolled way others look at her, for their consumption of her, for the repetition of her trauma? Perseus, in our interpretation, is not the killer, but the therapist. A person who has no interest in consuming the image of her pain — because they know.

A person who will protect their own eroticism, who will not look directly at the vengeful frenzy and the hatred, but at her trauma. Who will bear to see it bleed, to see the warmth of its

scarlet blood well up. Blood that will breathe life into what has long been immobilised and dead. A person who will bear to hear the howl of her pain and to make use of her gifts.

“And when Perseus cut off her head, there sprang forth great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus who is so called because he was born near the springs of Ocean; and that other, because he held a golden blade in his hands” (Hes., Theog. 280-283, trans. Evelyn-White).

Her “children”, her inner gifts — unscathed aspects of her self — are what may reintegrate her into this world that contains abuse, secrets, victims and perpetrators, contracts (with special terms), promises (that are not kept), injustices, betrayals, the weak and the powerful.

Medusa dies; her terrifying vindictiveness dies. With her death, the good elements are released and revealed — spirituality, elevation and creative imagination, strength, the idea of light running through the darkness — which, in the end, are offered to whoever can make use of them.

Gorgo-Medusa in the Therapist’s Consulting Room

Within the timelessness of the myth, let us dare to see Gorgo in the therapist’s consulting room. How does one imagine her? What is the main emotion that overwhelms her after the rape, the injustice, the betrayal of trust by Athena? Others did not see in her something beautiful, worth admiring and safeguarding. Their gaze transformed her into a lifeless body, an instrument onto which they could project their sexual fantasies. The body, when it is not invested with meaning and with the value of life, resembles a vessel, an object that reflects its own death. And she was turned into what others saw — that is, into an instrument, a vessel.

The therapist can become for her a corrective other — in the sense of the corrective emotional experience (Alexander & French, 1946) — who will look at her as a real body with meaning, as a person with values. This is another reading and a choice beyond, and through, the terrible gaze of the trauma of rape. In this way she can be freed from entrapment in the gaze of the other, find the real beauty that the responsibility of adulthood offers, and discover her authentic self and the eroticism that will allow her to form an honest relationship with the other.

Is there hope for Medusa? It depends on the strength she will have to see herself in a therapist’s consulting room.

What would she wish for? To die as Medusa, or to make use, for herself too, of her gifts, her unscathed aspects? She was flooded with the desire for revenge and punishment after what happened to her: rape, betrayal, instrumentalisation. She was turned into an old woman, a

creature without allure; she suspended — or rather withdrew — her sexuality as revenge upon others and (at the same time) as her own self-destruction.

The zero point is here: it must be decided whether she will remain in the destruction of self and other, or whether another construction will be permitted, metabolising revenge into creativity and spirituality, and drawing on her personal history through a new reading that will encompass her determination by the gaze of the other, the offence against her, the revenge, the self-destruction and, finally, her beauty and her uniqueness — the allure of consciously defining the meaning of her life on the basis of who she wants to be.

All of this takes place within a society that contains secrets, myths and reality, disposable loves, perpetrators and victims, justice and institutional injustices, and which at the same time hides at its core the ugliness of abuse and the innocence of the beautiful.

From Gorgo to Medusa runs a painful trajectory that does not allow the assumption of responsibility for the self, the joy of adulthood, or the freedom to define one's own boundaries; a direct passage from the undifferentiated eroticism of adolescence to the draining of the aged self, to withdrawal and to the shrinking of all erotic desire.

Within the therapeutic process there is the possibility of a corrective experience — of redefining oneself and giving new meaning to one's life. In his book Return to Jean-Paul Sartre, Recalcati writes: "...for Sartre, the subject has the task of continually surpassing the past it carries, by assigning to it a new meaning" (Recalcati, 2024:104).

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Translator's note

Quotations from Hesiod's Theogony, which the Greek text cites in the modern Greek translation of S. Girgenis, are given here in the standard English translation of H. G. Evelyn-White (Loeb Classical Library, 1914), listed among the ancient sources. The bracketed gloss in the first citation of Theogony 278-279 reproduces the authors' own gloss. Quotations from Karagiannis, McGoldrick, Kerényi and Recalcati have been rendered into English from the Greek editions cited by the authors; for McGoldrick (1995) and Kerényi (1951), whose originals exist in English, the wording should be checked against, and if possible replaced by, the original edition before publication. The English designation of the authors' institution should be verified against its official name.