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Medusa as Victim and Tool of Male Aggression

Cover Page Footnote

This paper is an expansion of a presentation given at the UIW Conflict and Aftermath Conference Symposium

Medusa as Victim and Tool of Male Aggression

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Abstract

While Medusa, like many monsters from Greek Mythology, has multiple origin stories, the one arguably best known to modern audiences is the one related in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4.773-803, in which Medusa is raped by Neptune in Minerva's temple and subsequently punished by the goddess by being turned into the monster we all know. This means that Medusa is, in modern parlance, a survivor. Furthermore, Medusa's experience after her violation echoes common elements of the survivor's experience even millennia later. This suggests that many of the institutional responses to sexual assault that bedevil survivors today existed in some form centuries before European culture had defined the issue.

Monster, snake-haired woman, weapon of gods and heroes: all of these are words used to describe Medusa, arguably the most famous monster of Greek Mythology and an object of interest and study to hundreds of societies.¹ However, there is one word that should be added to the list: survivor. By the 1st century BCE, and likely before, one strand of the Medusa tradition included an origin story in which she is sexually assaulted by the sea god Poseidon (Neptune in Roman texts).² This story also reveals that Medusa's trauma was followed by further marginalization and punishment. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4.799-802 has the most famous account:

*Hanc pelagi rector templo uitiasse Mineruae
dicitur. Auersa est et castos aegide uultus
nata Iouis texit; neue hoc inpune fuisset,
Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutauit in hydros.*

The ruler of the sea is said to have violated her

¹ Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, "Introduction," in *The Medusa Reader*, eds. Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Psychology Press, 2003), 1-14, 1.

² For convenience's sake, I will be using the Greek names of the Classical gods everywhere except in direct translations of Latin.

in the temple of Minerva. The daughter of Jove
turned away and covered her chaste face with her
shield; and then, so that this deed might not go unpunished,
she changed the Gorgonian hair into horrid snakes.³

For modern audiences, Medusa's rape and subsequent punishment is likely distressingly familiar, as is seeing her rapist escape with minimal consequence. The beliefs that sexual violence is an expected part of male behavior and that women are at least partially culpable for their own assaults are common, if often unspoken, beliefs in societies now connected to "rape culture" or "rape-prone culture."⁴ Seeing these phenomena so prominently and directly displayed in the *Metamorphoses* leads one to wonder if Medusa's story generally is a tool through which we can contextualize and illustrate the social issues surrounding issues of sexual violence in a patriarchal society. This paper will use the Medusa myth for exactly this purpose, and will further prove that Medusa's status as a survivor has significantly warped the reception of her story in comparison to other women, and monsters, of myth, focusing specifically on her reception in 20th and 21st century American media, where discussions of her relationship to sexuality are most numerous and diverse.⁵

Despite the tragically large number mythical, historical, and literary figures who are rape survivors, there is value in focusing on Medusa specifically along these lines for several reasons. First, Medusa remains a vital figure in modern culture, appearing regularly in virtually all forms of media.⁶ Second, modern narratives surrounding assault and survivorship are both in flux and

³ All translations are my own. For Ovid quotations I have used P. Ovidi Nasonis, *Metamorphoseon*, ed. R. J. Tarrant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ Yumi Suzuki, "Rape: Theories of," in *The Encyclopedia of Theoretical Criminology*, ed. J. Mitchell Miller (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, 2014), 703-05.

⁵ For discussions of Medusa and sexuality in other eras, see, *inter alia*, David Leeming, *Medusa: In the Mirror of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

⁶ To lay out just a small subset of genres with a single example (of many) for each, Medusa appears in literature (the *Percy Jackson* series), comic books (as a DC comics villain and as the source for the name of a Marvel Comics hero with different abilities), *Dungeons and Dragons*, Video Games (the *Castlevania* series), high fashion (as the Versace logo), and is an extremely popular subject for tattoos and hair stylist storefronts. A Google Search for Medusa Hair

intermingled with other contemporary issues, making it valuable to seek out stories that are removed from us which may make it possible to address the issue at hand with less interference from other factors. Third, while there were and are differing legal structures that affected the circumstances of survivors, many of the issues that make the aftermath of sexual assault so painful are due as much to cultural norms that exist across multiple cultures, as well as specific legal circumstances.⁷ The presence of such norms in the Medusa narrative may help to explain where some of the issues besieging modern survivors come from, and why they are so hard to alter.

Let us begin with the start of Medusa's story. Like many mythic figures, there are multiple versions of her tale, but they typically follow two threads: Medusa is either the mortal member of the already monstrous Gorgon sisters, or a woman transformed into a monster for the crime of defiling Athena's temple due to (consensual or non-consensual) sex she has with Poseidon. Both stories are referenced in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the first source we have on the subject:

Φόρκυϊ δ' αὖ Κητῶ Γραίας τέκε καλλιπαρήους
 ἐκ γενετῆς πολιάς, τὰς δὴ Γραίας καλέουσιν
 ἀθάνατοί τε θεοὶ χαμαὶ ἐρχόμενοι τ' ἄνθρωποι,
 Περφορηδῶ τ' ἐύπεπλον Ἐννώ τε κροκόπεπλον,
 Γοργούς θ', αἱ ναίουσι πέρην κλυτοῦ Ὠκεανοῖο
 ἐσχατιῇ πρὸς Νυκτός, ἴν' Ἐσπερίδες λιγύφωνοι,
 Σθεννώ τ' Εὐρυνάλη τε Μέδουσα τε λυγρὰ παθοῦσα.
 ἦ μὲν ἔην θνητή, αἱ δ' ἀθάνατοι καὶ ἀγήρω,

Salons reveals nearly 5 million hits and salons with Medusa in the name in nearly every state, and thousands of images of Medusa tattoos along with multiple tattoo-focused sites and journals with specific advice about seeking Medusa tattoos. Notably, almost all Medusa tattoos utilize a modern image of the monster as a beautiful woman with snake hair, not the tusked monstrosity of traditional Greek art.

⁷ Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, "Greek Tragedy: A Rape Culture?" *EuGeStA: Journal on Gender Studies in Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1-21. Rabinowitz discusses the cultural values around sexual violence in the Modern and Ancient Greek worlds, and how they impact the way that sexual violence was discussed. For a discussion of rape and sexual violence focused specifically on the ancient world, see Susan Deacy and Karen F. Pierce, *Rape in Antiquity: Sexual Violence in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Providence: Bristol Classical Press, 2002). Deacy and Pierce 1997.

αἱ δύο: τῇ δὲ μῆϊ παρελέξατο Κυανοχαίτης
ἐν μαλακῷ λειμῶνι καὶ ἄνθεσιν εἰαρινοῖσιν.

And again Ceto bore to Phorcys the beautiful-cheeked Graiae,
red-haired from birth, and both the immortal gods
and the men walking the earth call them Graiae,
and well-dressed Pempredo and Eno with the yellow veil
and the Gorgons, which live beyond the farthest edge
of glorious Ocean, towards night, where the clear voiced Hesperides live,
Sthenno, Euryale, and Medusa who suffered mournful things. She was mortal, but
the other two were immortal and ageless: the Dark Haired god lay with her in the
soft grass amongst the spring flowers.⁸ (*Theogony* 270-8)

The *Theogony* depicts Medusa's encounter with Poseidon as consensual, or at least does not explicitly describe any coercion; the line about the mournful things she suffered is typically linked to her decapitation and the monsters that come from it, not the encounter with the sea god.⁹ Miriam Dexter does discuss Medusa's desirability to Poseidon in the discussion of this scene, but even here the emphasis is on the perceived impact she has on the god, not on her own desire or lack thereof.¹⁰ Indeed, it is not until the *Metamorphoses* that Medusa's encounter with Poseidon is depicted as assault, and even afterwards it is not common to see the act described as rape in Classical works.¹¹ While this is likely the result of general mythic evolution (and Ovid's own desire to innovate), in the context of Medusa it also reflects a common and painful truth for sexual assault survivors both ancient and modern.

⁸ For Hesiod quotations I have used *Theogony*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Loeb 57 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1936).

⁹ Jenny Strauss Clay, "The Generation of Monsters in Hesiod," *Classical Philology* 88, no. 2 (1993): 105-116, 108-09. Clay focuses on the effects of Medusa's death in addition to the death itself, connecting it to the tale of Zeus's traumatic birth. It is possible that the "mournful things" may be an oblique reference to assault, but Hesiod's general lack of regard for women in his stories argues against this.

¹⁰ Miriam Robbins Dexter, "The Ferocious and the Erotic: 'Beautiful' Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (January 2010): 25-41, 26-7.

¹¹ See Charlotte Currie, "Transforming Medusa/*Transformando a Medusa*," *Amaltea, Journal of Mythcriticism* 3, no. 1 (2013): 169-181. There is always the possibility that Ovid is alluding to a lost tradition about Medusa depicting her as a sexual assault victim, but there are no extant literary or artistic materials describing Medusa's encounter with Poseidon in any detail. It is more likely that this is the result of Ovid's own interpretation of the text, which is consistent with multiple other examples of his sympathetic readings of women victimized by gods in myth.

Survivors of sexual assault frequently feel that disclosing what happened to them will lead to their being disbelieved, shamed, and disrespected, while their assaulter will endure little if any consequences for their actions.¹² This often leads to these survivors not reporting the crime, and the initial event becoming, from a legal perspective, either consensual or non-existent. The result is that sexual assault survivors go through a process similar to what we see in the mythic Medusa. What survivors experience is initially described, if it is described at all, as a consensual encounter, and survivors bear the brunt of any moral judgment arising from the act. Even if the assault eventually does become public knowledge, as in Ovid's retelling of the Medusa myth, it often happens late and becomes just one of several accounts of the event, an ambiguity that accused rapists often take advantage of. Indeed, one of the most common and successful defenses against a charge of rape is that the survivor actually consented to the encounter, and the need to "prove" lack of consent is such a difficult and traumatic process that it is believed that only two percent of rapes reported to police result in convictions.¹³ As Medusa is a mythical figure, in her case the late and disputed account of her rape functions largely as an example of the variety that marks mythology as a narrative tradition.¹⁴ For real assault survivors, on the other hand, the time it takes for their stories to become known, and the difficulty in getting their accounts to be taken as legitimate, magnify their risk and pain.

Ovid may be the first extant author to explicitly identify Medusa as a sexual assault survivor, but he is not particularly sympathetic towards her. In less than a line of text, he reveals

¹² Audrey Miller, *et al.*, "Stigma-threat motivated nondisclosure of sexual assault and sexual revictimization: A prospective analysis," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2011): 119-128, 119-120.

¹³ Christina M. Tchen, "Rape Reform and a Statutory Consent Defense," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 74 (1983): 1518-55, 1518-19. This number does not include the rapes that are not reported, which would make for an even lower count.

¹⁴ Roger D. Woodard, "Introduction: *Muthoi* in Continuity and Variation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-14.

that Athena, the supposed protector of her priestess Medusa, instead immediately punishes her. Ovid claims that the goddess of wisdom turns her priestess's hair to snakes so that her sexual assault may not go unpunished (*Metamorphoses* 4.801), a phrasing that suggests that Medusa is the only person to be held responsible for her assault. Modern readers may well wonder why Medusa rather than Poseidon was the target of the goddess's wrath. However, Medusa's fate is representative of that of other women from Classical mythology; gods regularly had nonconsensual sex with mortal women without suffering punishment or damage to their reputation.¹⁵ In many of these situations, the women are punished severely for attracting the gods' attention, often at the hand of angry goddess. It would also be familiar to modern survivors of sexual violence, who regularly find that they, rather than their assailants, are punished by society for what happened.

Coming forward with claims of sexual harassment and assault is often a risky proposition, particularly if the accused is powerful. To cite one recent example, since accusing now-Supreme-Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault, Christine Blasey Ford has dealt with such severe harassment (including death threats) that she has had to move four times and had to leave her work for a significant period of time.¹⁶ Even when the perpetrator is punished, the repercussions can be significantly higher for the survivor than the perpetrator, as evidence collected by Rituparna Bhattacharyya suggests.¹⁷ Even when people in this position do not come forward, simply not acquiescing to the desires of their abuser carries significant personal and

¹⁵ Mary R. Lefkowitz, "Seduction and Rape in Greek Myth," in *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, ed. A.E. Laiou (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 17-37, 20-21.

¹⁶ Tim Mak, "Kavanaugh Accuser Christine Blasey Ford Continues Receiving Threats, Lawyers Say" *National Public Radio*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/08/665407589/kavanaugh-accuser-christine-blasey-ford-continues-receiving-threats-lawyers-say>.

¹⁷ Rituparna Bhattacharyya, "# MeToo Movement: An Awareness Campaign," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 3, no. 4 (2018): 1-12.

professional risk. While current legal systems (mostly) do not favor powerful men as openly as legal codes in the Ancient Greek and Roman world did, it is still extremely clear that the power structures are nearly as effective as a goddess's curse in isolating and punishing women who survive sexual violence.

Up to this point, we have discussed what Medusa the woman endured as a sexual assault survivor. However, Medusa the monster is far better known. An investigation into the monster Medusa's story from a survivorship perspective improves understanding of her tale, while (sadly) providing further parallels to the modern survivorship experience. The first issue that a survivorship-focused analysis of Medusa helps address is her relationship with the larger society. In contrast to most other monsters of myth who obstruct human life in some way, be it by killing travelers (the Sphinx), destroying livestock (the Chimera), or some other means, Medusa does not interact with other humans after her transformation. In the narrative mythic tradition, the only way for someone to be harmed by Medusa is to actively seek her out.¹⁸ Medusa's reputation for monstrosity therefore greatly outstrips her monstrous actions. While this separates her from monsters, it sadly makes her similar to many people who report sexual harassment and assault, who regularly find themselves smeared with allegations of looseness, wickedness, and unwillingness to be a "team player." Snaky hair or no, all too often, a tragic side effect of suffering sexual assault is becoming known as monster, regardless of what one actually does.

If Medusa does not attack people, how does she come to turn people to stone? In the mythical tradition, she does not. Rather, the hero Perseus uses her severed head to destroy his

¹⁸ In Greek art, particularly pottery, Gorgons are shown out of a narrative context, and often have a winged form, so they could potentially travel into human spaces to attack them. However, no such extant image exists to my knowledge.

political and personal enemies, often after killing the monster in her sleep.¹⁹ Later on, Medusa's severed head continued to be used by others, whether by Athena on her aegis or by historical Greeks and Romans, who regularly set forward-facing *gorgoneions* on various artworks for many serious and comedic purposes.²⁰ When we combine this with the account of Medusa as a rape survivor, we end up with an even more tragic narrative. She is (literally) dehumanized as a result of her assault, isolated from the world until the reaction to her suffering (the petrification that comes from viewing her transformed visage) becomes useful to others, and then is transformed into a tool or weapon independent of her wishes.²¹ While the modern sexual assault survivors are not physically turned into monsters, they all too often find that their pain is only valuable to people who want to use it for their own purposes, and who interpret it accordingly.

The practice of using someone else's sexual assault for one's own personal or political game is a longstanding practice. In the United States sex scandals have been used in attempts to derail presidents and presidential candidates since Thomas Jefferson, although his relationship with Sally Hemings was (and often still is) viewed through the lens of a forbidden romance rather than rape, as we would define any similar circumstance today.²² In the 21st century, the accusations are more direct, but are still often driven at least as much by the desire of a third party to achieve an outside end than any desire for the survivor to receive justice. In some cases, as in Hannibal Buress's attack on Bill Cosby during a stand-up routine, the third party's goals are

¹⁹ Kathryn Topper, "Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction," *Hesperia* 76, no. 1 (January 2007): 73-105. Perseus regularly uses Medusa's head as a weapon, whether it be against his would-be father in law Polydektos (Pseudo-Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.46), the earlier betrothed of his wife Andromeda (Phineus in *Metamorphoses* 5.178-300, Agenor in pseudo-Hyginus' *Fabulae* 64), or any other enemy he came upon.

²⁰ Topper, "Perseus," 73.

²¹ It is worth noting that virtually anyone who would craft or display a *Gorgoneion* would be male, except for Athena, who famously represented and supported masculine interests and punished Medusa in Ovid's telling.

²² For an effort to refute the depiction of Jefferson's encounters with Hemings as rape, see Annette Gordon-Reed, and Midori Takagi, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 109-10.

relatively small (there is no evidence Bures's jokes were intended to spur action) and the results that followed are actually driven by the desires of the sexual assault survivors, whose experiences are publicized by these outsiders, albeit often without their preclearance.²³ However, in many if not most cases, the needs of the actual survivors of sexual assault are sidelined to the interest of these third parties, with their experience interpreted through the lens of these outsiders' beliefs. To cite a recent example, the sexual assault claims made by a host of women against Donald Trump and Bill Clinton were largely publicized by partisans trying to discredit either Trump or Hillary Clinton, and the sympathy the public had for those claiming sexual assault was largely determined by who they supported in the presidential election. While they got to keep their heads, these women, none of whom received renewed legal action in connection to their claims, were ultimately used as a weapon just like Medusa was; their trauma was also brushed aside just as quickly, as soon as it ceased to be useful.

A review of the mythical account of Medusa reveals both that her story can be more fully explained by interpreting it through the lens of survivorship and that, sadly, many survivors will still undergo an experience analogous to the events in a millennia-old myth. The next question is what impact, if any, sexual assault survivorship has had on the reception of Medusa's myth. This is particularly important in Medusa's case because of the number and variety of modern materials in which she appears. An investigation into this phenomenon reveals that, unfortunately, Medusa has suffered a similar fate to what flesh and blood survivors have experienced for the "monster's" millennia-long experience: her story has been erased or minimized, and the vision of her in the eyes of her abusers has become reality.

²³ Larissa Terán and Tara M. Emmers-Sommer, "'The Destruction of a Legacy': Agenda Setting and the Bill Cosby Sexual Assault Allegations," *Sexuality & Culture* 22, no. 1 (2018): 63-89.

From the mid-20th century until today, and particularly recently, the women of mythology have received significant updates. The silent Lavinia has gotten a voice in Margaret Atwood's *Lavinia*, Circe humanity and agency in Madeline Miller's *Circe* (ironically by taking on a history of sexual assault largely absent from her mythical character),²⁴ and Helen morality and justification in a wide variety of materials. Medusa, on the other hand, rarely if ever gets a story that truly acknowledges her trauma, although Ann Stanford's 1977 *In Mediterranean Air* is an exception.²⁵ Far more often, she is depicted as a straightforward monster with no more claim to sympathy than the hydra or chimera, a metaphorical threat to male potency using interpretations often derived from Freud, or a symbol of either female power working from a tradition defined by Cixous or a symbol of feminine sexual power, often including images that depict her as a conventionally attractive woman with snakes for hair.²⁶ Even these feminist readings largely ignore and elide Medusa as a human and a survivor of rape, leaving behind only the monster. Modern popular culture in particular has often revisited Medusa in ways that minimize her pain and maximize the usually male hero's justification for killing her.

In arguably the best-known retellings of the Perseus Myth, the 1981 and 2010 *Clash of the Titans* films, Perseus seeks the gorgon's head not to take revenge on a would-be father in law but to save Andromeda from the monstrous Kraken. The *Clash of the Titans* films also typically give Medusa a Bow and Arrow and aggressive hand-to-hand combat tactics, which along with her inhumanity do a successful job of framing her as a monster on the hunt rather than the object

²⁴ Circe is in fact sometimes known for attempting to rape mortal men, although she is not documented to have succeeded. See Walter R. Johnson, "The Rapes of Callisto," *The Classical Journal* 92, no. 1 (January 1996): 9-24, 22 n.17.

²⁵ Currie, "Transforming Medusa," 177.

²⁶ For Freud, see Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 273-74. For Cixous, see Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-893.

of aggression she actually is.²⁷ If the *Clash* movies morally justify the violence against Medusa, video games normalize it. Even the few works that do acknowledge Medusa's human past do so in ways that largely prevent audiences from considering her humanity. In the film adaptation of *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief*, Medusa (Uma Thurman) references her mythical relationship with Poseidon by saying to his son, Percy "I used to date your daddy!"²⁸ In the 2010 *Clash of the Titans*, Io (Gemma Arterton) recounts a version of the Medusa story that includes her rape by Poseidon, but the story only serves to explain why she cannot assist the male heroes in battling her, not to build any sympathy for the monster. The lack of sympathy for Medusa is further proven by her death, in which her beheaded body comically swings her (non-mythical) claws at Perseus before falling off a cliff into a pool of magma and inexplicably exploding (Johnston 2017).²⁹ However, the concept of the modern Medusa as a being to be destroyed and used instead of sympathized with is best shown in the genre of video games.

In multiple video games, including many not set in the Greco-Roman world, Medusa appears as either a monster to be defeated (*God of War*, *Kid Icarus*, *Bookworm Adventure*, the *Castlevania* series, and innumerable others) a creature to be summoned in a deckbuilding game (*Rise of Mythos*, *Magic: The Gathering*), or occasionally as a playable character (*Smite*). In most of these cases, Medusa is given no backstory at all, and appears solely as a monster for the player character to kill to prove their ability. Even *Smite*, the game that allows players to use Medusa as

²⁷This vision of Medusa has proven remarkably enduring in modern popular culture, particularly video games. See Dunstan Lowe, "Always Already Ancient: Ruins in the Virtual World," in *Greek and Roman Games in the Computer Age*, ed. Thea Thorsten (Trondheim, Norway: Akademika, 2012), 53-90, 54-55.

²⁸ Percy later hides Medusa's head in a freezer, where his loathsome stepfather Gabe Ugliano finds it and is turned to a statue which Percy's mother later sells to finance her education. Once again, Medusa is used as a weapon without her consent, although in this case she serves not only to accomplish the hero's task but to protect him from the moral responsibility for his stepfather's death.

²⁹ For more on this, see Elizabeth Johnston, "'Let Them Know That Men Did This': Medusa, Rape, and Female Rivalry in Contemporary Film and Women's Writing," in *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film*, eds. Julie Chappell and Mallory Young (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 183-208.

their avatar, describes her as an unsympathetic monster, although it does acknowledge the pain of her encounter with Poseidon:

All monsters are hideous and fearful, but some are worse than others. There is only one whose hair is made of slithering serpents, only one with skin of scales, and only one whose very gaze can turn man, beast, or God to stone. Medusa, the Gorgon. Stories claim she was beautiful once. A priestess of Athena. Loyal and devout in action, but Poseidon was determined to make her his own. It was the fairness of her features, the golden [sic] of her hair, that attracted the Sea God. Medusa, a mortal maiden, could not refuse. When Athena learned of Medusa's betrayal, she punished the priestess. Those fair features were hideously wrought and those golden locks twisted to hissing vipers. Anyone that met her eyes was petrified – a statue for all eternity. Medusa fled, frightened, ashamed and furious. For years she hid from the world, nursing a festering hatred for all things, craving beauty but having none, seeing none, until she became the monster she appeared to be. She slithers now to the field of battle. Those wretched features concealed behind a cruel mask of porcelain perfection, eyes burning from within. All that she perceives, all that is wonderful in this world, she seeks to destroy. Perhaps then she will be the fairest monster of them all (“Medusa the Gorgon: Lore”).

In most cases, one need not play as Medusa to utilize her abilities; many games allow players to use Medusa's severed head as a weapon after killing her, and occasionally one can purchase her head just as one would a sword or potion. In all of these cases, the active role of the player in killing Medusa and weaponizing her corpse underscores the degree to which she has been dehumanized. Furthermore, the player is virtually never asked to question the morality of killing Medusa, further setting her as a being who exists only to prove and enhance the player's heroism.³⁰

³⁰ One potential exception is *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, where “Medusa” is a friend of the player character transformed into a monster, and the friend is remembered even as the player character keeps the weapons earned by defeating her. However, even here, “Medusa” is only made sympathetic by erasing and replacing her human past.

As Johnson (2018), the idea of Medusa as a monstrous threat in 21st popular culture is challenged by feminist scholars, who often use her as an icon of female power and sexuality. However, even these feminist imaginings typically interact with the monstrous Medusa, not the virginal, restricted human that she was before her violation. In this way, feminist scholars and misogynist video games actually agree: Medusa is not useful until her monstrous transformation, is a being on whom we can project our aggressive fantasies of “dangerous” females regardless of her behavior, and is so defined that by post-violation monstrosity that there is no need to even consider her pre-trauma humanity.

While there are many potential explanations for why the modern receptions of Medusa so rarely engage with her identity as a survivor, a simple, albeit depressing interpretation is most persuasive. Medusa’s humanity and status as a survivor are minimized because the cultural tools designed to make us do so *worked*. Minimizing the account of Medusa as a human made it easier for later cultures to further ignore, or even erase, her humanity. Focalizing the “monstrous” Medusa through her heroic slayer made masculine- and feminine-focused thinkers accept Perseus’s image of her as a dangerous monster uncritically, without questioning whether a being who never leaves her home is a risk to others. Finally, her placement in a tradition where her dead body, and many living female bodies, existed only to further male goals, normalized the practice to the point where people thought nothing of doing the same in digital form. Through these means cultural beliefs, narratives, and practices turned a woman into a monster, and prevented her transforming back. She was not the last. Far too many sexual assault survivors, famous and otherwise, have found that unwritten cultural norms, narrative patterns that privilege authority, and the willingness of even well-meaning people to use them and their pain as a means to an end have reduced them from humans to monsters, objects of sympathy or objects of scorn,

from agents to weapons. In 2019, we do not have the divine power of an Athena, but if we are careless we are every bit as capable of turning survivors of sexual assault into monsters in the public consciousness.