

There are other Greek myths in which women covertly help protect each other—and in almost all of them, it's after a woman has been raped.



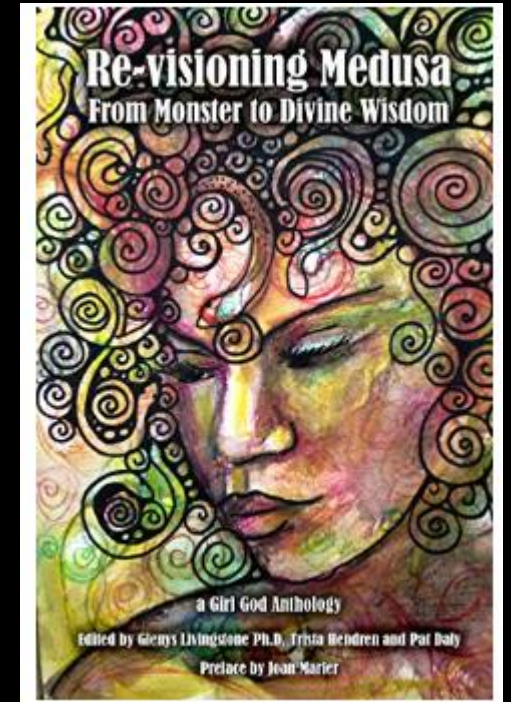
Μέδουσα



“Who feels sorry for a creature who has snakes for hair, and turns innocent men to stone?” the novelist Natalie Haynes asks. Medusa gets no respect, and who can hear her name without picturing those hissing snakes in place of hair, a horror to behold? And when we recall that the father of psychoanalysis equated the face of Medusa with the fear of castration, another layer of revulsion is added to the image. Medusa’s face exemplifies apotropaic magic, a charged symbolic image (like the evil eye) designed as a weapon to ward off harm. Medusa petrifies with her gaze, and so it is hard to imagine why Pindar would write about a “fair-cheeked Medusa.” But in fact, when we turn, again, to Ovid, we discover that Medusa was once a fair maiden of exquisite beauty. She was, in other words, not born that way.”

— from “The Heroine with 1001 Faces”

***Medusa, offspring of earth and ocean,
nurtured by the wellsprings of life.
Serpent tendrils crown you, whispering
wisdom and white noise to shield you from
the taunts of those maddened by your
power. Fecund Gaia and Oceanus course
through your veins, and the curse set upon
you is a circlet of enlightenment.
You speak the Oldest Truths and foretell
the futures of men, who have no stomach to
hear them.
For this, you are scorned;
for this, you shall be exalted.***



Oracle by Janet Guastavino

- **Sexual violence**
- **Betrayal**
- **Women who uphold the power structure**
- **Protection**
- **Personal sovereignty**
- **Reclaiming**
- **Banishment**
- **Fertility**





FIGURE 91. Goddess with snakes (faience, Minoan, Crete, c. 1600 B.C.)



Phorcys and Ceto, Greco-Roman mosaic, [Bardo National Museum](#)

Aspecta Medusa (for a Drawing)

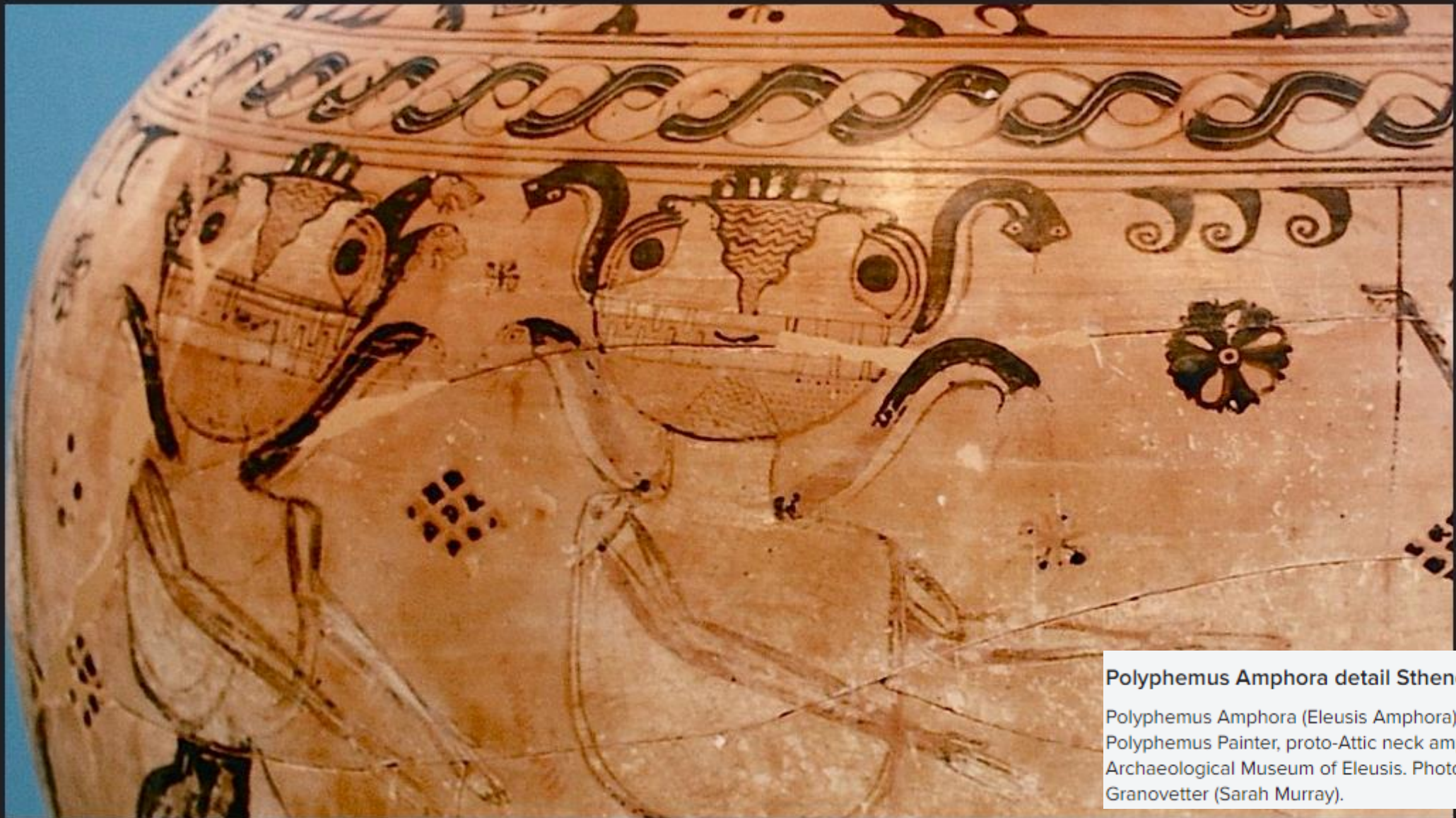
BY DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

Andromeda, by Perseus sav'd and wed,
Hanker'd each day to see the Gorgon's head:
Till o'er a fount he held it, bade her lean,
And mirror'd in the wave was safely seen
That death she liv'd by.

Let not thine eyes know
Any forbidden thing itself, although
It once should save as well as kill: but be
Its shadow upon life enough for thee.



English: Aspecta Medusa (model: Alexa Wilding
circa 1867



Polyphemos Amphora detail Stheno and Euryale

Polyphemos Amphora (Eleusis Amphora), name vase of the Polyphemos Painter, proto-Attic neck amphora, ca. 650 BC, Archaeological Museum of Eleusis. Photo by Panegyrics of Granovetter (Sarah Murray).

Around 700 BC, Hesiod imagines the Gorgons as sea daemons and increases the number of them to three – **Stheno** (the mighty), **Euryale** (the far-springer, or of the wide sea), and **Medusa** (the queen).

Euryale ([/jʊəˈraɪəli/](#) *yoor-EYE-ə-lee*; Ancient Greek: Εύρύαλη, lit. 'far-roaming'), in Greek mythology, was the second eldest of the Gorgons, the three sisters that have the hair of living, venomous snakes.



Luciano Garbati's "Medusa With the Head of Perseus"

“Because, O Stranger, it is your desire to learn what worthy is for me to tell, hear ye the cause: Beyond all others she was famed for beauty, and the envious hope of many suitors. Words would fail to tell the glory of her hair, most wonderful of all her charms—A friend declared to me he saw its lovely splendour. Fame declares the Sovereign of the Sea attained her love in chaste **Minerva's** temple. While enraged she turned her head away and held her shield before her eyes. To punish that great crime minerva changed the Gorgon's splendid hair to serpents horrible. And now to strike her foes with fear, she wears upon her breast those awful vipers—creatures of her rage.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Brookes More. Boston. Cornhill Publishing Co. 1922.

Μέδουσα



www.theoi.com

Gorgon Medusa, Athenian red-figure amphora C5th B.C., [Staatliche Antikensammlungen](#)

The goddess Athene, who was a virgin goddess of wisdom and intellect, also carried images of her darker aspect. The Gorgon's head was closely associated with Athene, being pictured on her shield or on her aegis. In legend, the Gorgon was Medusa, a woman with snakes for her hair whose deadly gaze turned men to stone. Her blood had the power to kill or to renew, depending on which vein it came from. The fact that her face was surrounded by writhing snakes, reflecting the image of the vulva, made her a symbol of sexuality, regeneration, creation, renewal and death. Athene was also depicted with the owl, with its associations with death and the powers of prophecy.

Red Moon, Miranda Gray



Luciano Garbati's sculpture "Medusa With the Head of Perseus" was unveiled Tuesday in Lower Manhattan. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Cellini's "Perseus with the Head of Medusa" in Florence.

Antonio Canova - Perseus with the Head of Medusa, 1804-06

Etruscan bronze chandelier, part of the permanent collection of Cortona's Etruscan Museum, created in the 4th century B.C. for a local sanctuary



Gorgon at Apollo's Temple in Delphi

representations of a theme are a bit of meaningless decoration.

There are, practically, three forms to consider: (1) The full figure of the Gorgon Medusa and of her two sisters, either alone or in the Perseus myth; (2) the head of Medusa, usually called Gorgoneion; (3) the aegis, with its decoration of serpents and Gorgoneion.

It was, in fact, nearly three years ago, while studying the

Medusa, Apollo, and the Great Mother

Author(s): A. L. Frothingham

Source: *American Journal of Archaeology*, Jul. - Sep., 1911, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1911), pp. 349-377



Head of Medusa. Antoine Bourdelle, 1925.

her fateful encounter with the Greek hero Perseus. A dishonorable king demanded that he bring him an impossible gift: the head of Medusa. Perseus set out with the aid of the gods, who provided him with divine tools. While the Gorgons slept, the hero attacked, using Athena's polished shield to view the reflection of Medusa's awful face and avoid her petrifying gaze while he beheaded her with a *harpe*, an adamantine sword. Such a violent act resulted in the birth of Medusa's children, the winged horse Pegasus and the giant Chrysaor, who sprung from her neck. The two immortal sisters pursued Perseus with fury, but the hero escaped with his prize using Hermes' winged boots and Hades' helmet of invisibility. Not even death, however, could quell Medusa's power, and Perseus had to keep her decapitated head in a special sack strong enough to contain it, called a *kybisis*. On his travels, he used the head to turn his enemies to stone and rescue the princess Andromeda from a sea monster ([20.192.16](#)), before giving it to Athena for her aegis ([34.11.7](#)).

Medusa in Ancient Greek

THE
MET

Art

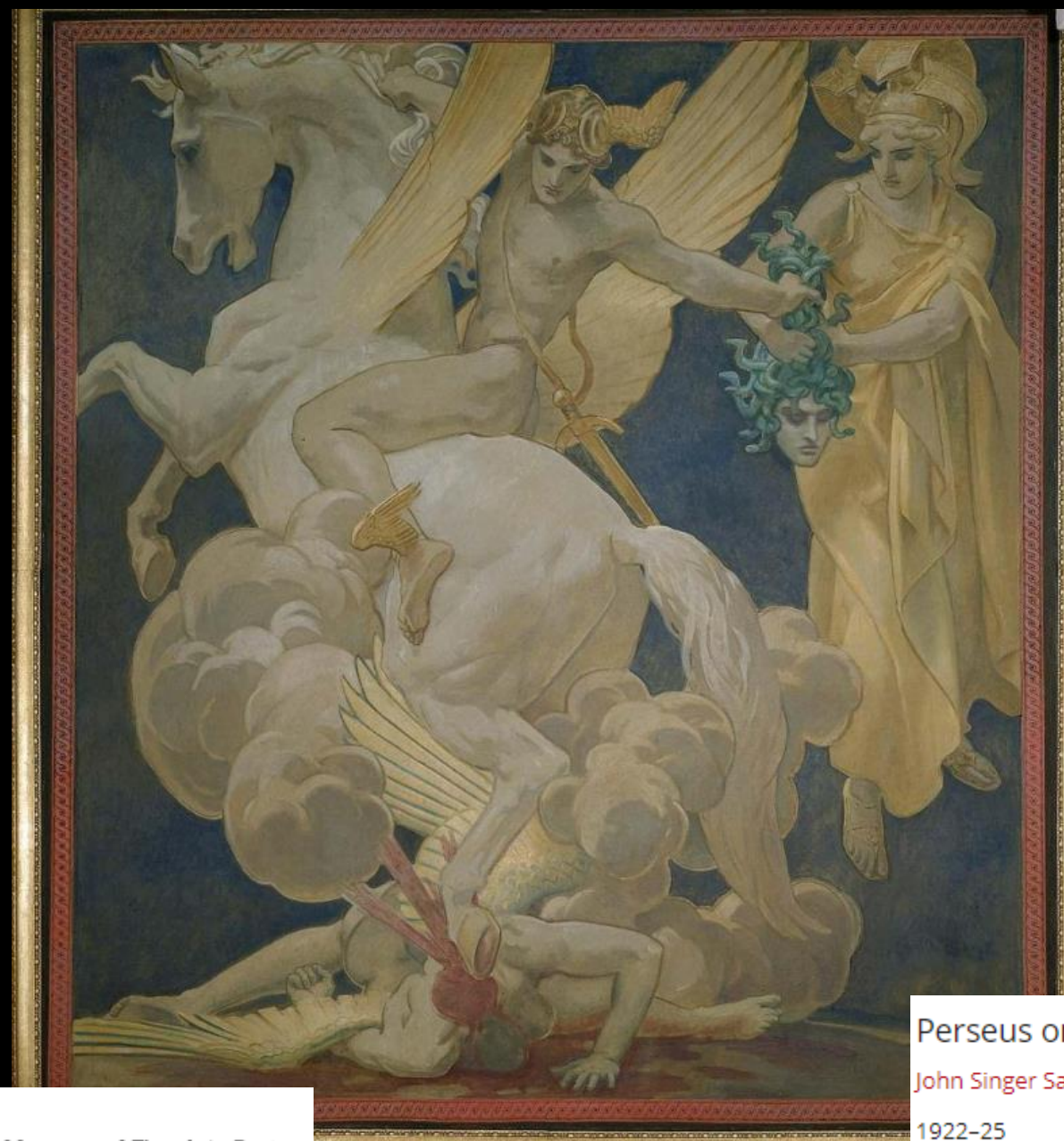


Some months later, in examining the wonderful sardonyx cup at Naples, the "Tazza Farnese," I was struck, for the first time, by a still stranger juxtaposition.² The inner face of the cup is filled with a charming idealistic scene; the Fertility of Egypt. Euthenia reclines on a sphinx, while above her Triptolemus, lord of the ploughed field, holds the horn of plenty, as he looks to Father Nile enthroned, and is accompanied by the crop-producing Etesian Winds and the fertilizing Nymphs. On the opposite or under side the entire surface is covered with a Medusa head or Gorgoneion, corresponding in area to the scene just described. What is she doing here? Is it possible that in the Cortona lamp the Gorgon was connected with heat and light and that there was a bond in the artist's mind between her and fertility in this Farnese tazza? In these two master-



Toledo 1963.26, Attic black figure calyx krater, c. 520-515 B.C.
Athena wearing her aegis, with its snake-fringe and gorgon head
Photograph by Maria Daniels, courtesy of the Toledo Museum of Art

The **Lemnian Athena**, or **Athena Lemnia**, was a classical Greek statue of the goddess **Athena**. According to geographer **Pausanias** (1.28.2), the original bronze cast was created by the sculptor **Phidias** circa 450–440 BCE, for Athenians living on the island of **Lemnos** to dedicate on the **Acropolis of Athens**.



Perseus on Pegasus Slaying Medusa

John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925)

1922–25



Just as Medusa exists in multiple types of stories in the mythological record, she is also portrayed in multiple ways in ancient art. Her appearance changes drastically through the centuries, but she is always recognizable due to her striking frontality. It is rare in Greek art for a figure to face directly out, but in almost all representations of Medusa, despite style and medium, she stares ahead and uncompromisingly confronts the viewer.

Medusa in Ancient Greek
Art



Medusa (Caravaggio)

Caravaggio - Medusa, 1597

In common parlance today, Medusa's name is synonymous with monster. But Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley, and other writers have all invoked her name in poems that celebrate the paradoxical logic of her image as capturing monstrosity and beauty, threat and defense, toxin and remedy. And feminists have reclaimed her, rehabilitating her as a figure who is not all "deadly," but beautiful. "She's laughing," Hélène Cixous tells us in an essay that urges women to assert their identity through writing.⁴

The Heroine with 1001 Faces, Maria Tatar



Medusa by Rubens (1618)

Hesiod, Theogony 280 ff (trans. Evelyn-White) (Greek epic C8th or C7th B.C.):

"But when Perseus had cut off the head of Medousa (Medusa) there sprang from her blood great Khrysaor (Chrysaor) and the horse Pegasos (Pegasus) . . . while Khrysaor is named for the golden aor, the sword he handles."





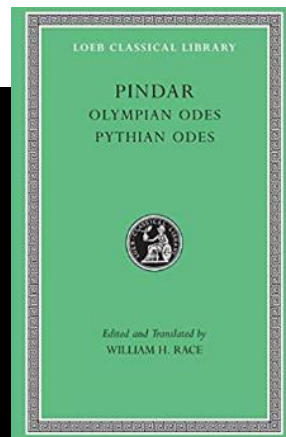
The Nessos Amphora from around 620-610. The neck shows Herakles battling the centaur Nessos while the belly shows the Gorgons chasing.

Pythian 12

For Midas of Acragas Flute-Playing Contest 490 B. C.

I beseech you, splendor-loving city, most beautiful on earth, home of Persephone; you who inhabit the hill of well-built dwellings above the banks of sheep-pasturing Acragas: be propitious, and with the goodwill of gods and men, mistress, [5] receive this victory garland from [Pytho](#) in honor of renowned Midas, and receive the victor himself, champion of [Hellas](#) in that art which once Pallas Athena discovered when she wove into music the dire dirge of the reckless Gorgons which Perseus heard [10] pouring in slow anguish from beneath the horrible snakey hair of the maidens, when he did away with the third sister and brought death to sea-girt Seriphus and its people. Yes, he brought darkness on the monstrous race of Phorcus, and he repaid Polydectes with a deadly wedding-present for the long [15] slavery of his mother and her forced bridal bed; he stripped off the head of beautiful Medusa, Perseus, the son of Danae, who they say was conceived in a spontaneous shower of gold. But when the virgin goddess had released that beloved man from those labors, she created the many-voiced song of flutes [20] so that she could imitate with musical instruments the shrill cry that reached her ears from the fast-moving jaws of Euryale. The goddess discovered it; but she discovered it for mortal men to have, and called it the many-headed strain, the glorious strain that entices the people to gather at contests, [25] often sounding through thin plates of brass and through reeds, which grow beside the city of lovely choruses, the city of the Graces, in the sacred precinct of the nymph of Cephisus, reeds that are the faithful witnesses of the dancers. If there is any prosperity among men, it does not appear without hardship. A god will indeed grant it in full today . . . [30] What is fated cannot be escaped. But that time will come, striking unexpectedly, and give one thing beyond all expectation, and withhold another.

Odes. Pindar. Diane Arnsion Svarlien. 1990.



How You Can Reattach Medusa's Head

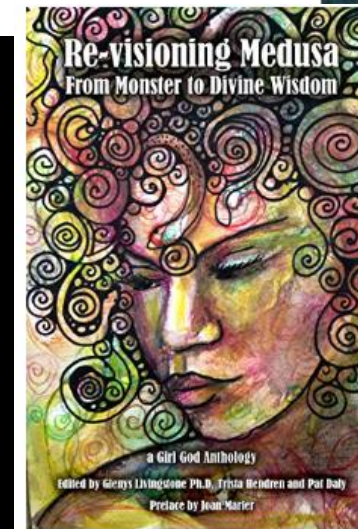
Marguerite Rigoglioso, Ph.D.

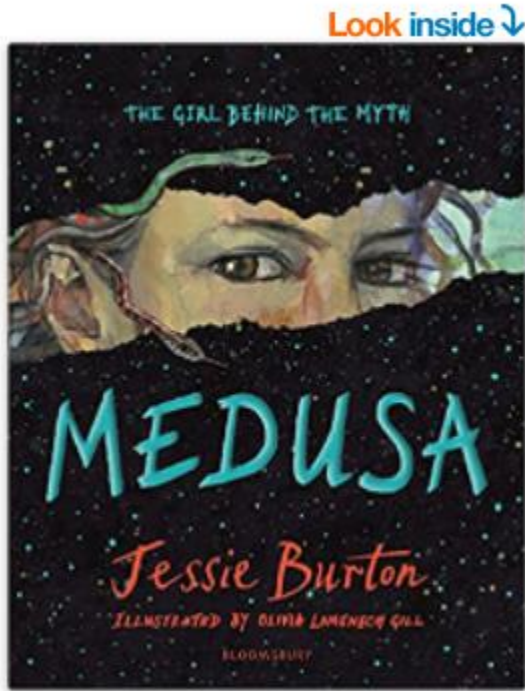
THIS ARTICLE IS A CALL TO ACTION and to healing for those who have felt deeply disturbed by the beheading of Medusa and know that the ripples of that event still affect us today.

LISTEN TO
HER



Medusa by Alice Pike Barney (1892)





1. In this reimagined story for the YA audience, Jessie Burton portrays a Kore Medusa, who longs for acceptance. In what ways have you hidden your truth in order to fit in?
2. Similar to Cassandra, Medusa is not believed by the powerful. How does she cope with this? What similar experiences have you had?
3. Like Circe, Medusa is on an island. Why do you think that the writers of myths, which were typically men of power, put “dangerous” women on islands? Have you been isolated for displaying your power?

