



Terracotta relief roundel with head of Medusa. 2nd century BCE (Hellenistic).

Metropolitan Museum, New York. Public Domain.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/246742>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

The above is only one example of many from Hellenistic and Roman periods that show Medusa as a beautiful human woman, seemingly happy and at peace. By contrast, a great deal of our oldest Greek art depicts the Gorgons (not necessarily Medusa) as hideous monsters. A different but similarly illuminating contrast can be found in the later European depictions, which reflect the reception history of victim blaming and dehumanizing Medusa by often showing her face as contorted, ugly, angry, and/or screaming. One must imagine Medusa peaceful.

Reconsidering Medusa's Punishment in Ovid's Metamorphoses

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Abstract: The popular understanding of Medusa today is largely based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which recounts Minerva transforming Medusa from beautiful maiden into snake-haired monster due to Neptune's rape. Both academic translations and popular receptions of this story typically feature the view that Medusa was the one punished, at least in part due to her perceived role in Neptune's sexual assault, understanding Medusa as a key figure in the history of victim blaming. However, attention to Ovid's original description of the episode demonstrates that Minerva was not punishing Medusa but rather the deed itself, perpetuated by Neptune. Furthermore, attention to the wider context of the story as well as Ovid's other accounts of divinities sexually assaulting mortals suggests that Medusa's transformation should be understood as distinctive, and was not intended as a punishment but rather as a deterrent against such attacks in the future.

Keywords: Medusa, rape, victim blaming, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Introduction

Medusa is arguably one of the most well-known Greek mythological figures. Thanks to her presence in mainstream media, ranging from popular films such as *Clash of the Titans* (2010, a remake of the 1981 version) to young adult novels like *Percy Jackson and The Olympians* (2005-2024), anyone with a basic knowledge of Greek myth can tell you about the woman with snakes for hair who turns men to stone. In no small part due to her popularity, her story provides ample room for misinterpretations. Our purpose with this paper is to comment on what we believe to be a widely mistranslated passage regarding Medusa's transformation, in order to correct a history of misinterpretation that leans towards victim blaming. While victim blaming is widespread in both academic and popular accounts of the primary source, we argue that this interpretation is not grounded in the primary source itself.

With this reinterpretation in hand, we also aim to highlight how Medusa's transformation differs from that of other victims in the *Metamorphoses*. This paper thereby contributes to an important and complex debate on the extent to which Ovid depicts his rape victims sympathetically, and if/how readers should understand these stories as optimistic or pessimistic. While some (re-)readings of Ovid have attempted to argue that he is sympathetic to certain or many of the rape victims described (an optimistic reading), others have argued that Ovid's depiction is not sympathetic and perhaps even glorifies the act of rape given the sheer amount of attention and poetic detail he devotes to it. While this duality is an over-simplification of a complex debate, our position tends toward the optimistic side with respect to Ovid's story of Medusa, highlighting how at least this episode grants Medusa greater agency than has been previously recognized.

At the same time, our perspective takes a more pessimistic view of the reception tradition, both scholarly and popular, which we argue has overwhelmingly and uncritically accepted a translation and misinterpretation of the story that assigns blame to Medusa, thereby contributing to a history of victim blaming in both Ovidian studies and otherwise. While we argue that Medusa's rape is unique, it still must be acknowledged that Medusa's

tale takes place within a much larger body of work that includes numerous instances of sexual violence. The difficulty of teaching and interacting with Ovid because of the prevalence of rape within the *Metamorphoses* and the rest of his body of work has been highlighted by numerous scholars, and this paper's central aim of reinterpretation is closely aligned with a corollary aim of engaging with scholarship on this reception tradition.¹ As we will see, retellings of Ovid that reproduce a victim blaming narrative occur nearly universally, from traditional Ovidian scholarship to more explicitly feminist scholarship attempting to critique the previous reception tradition, and from children's literature to adult novels to online popular discourse found in blogs. This results in a harmful sort of circularity in discourses across academic scholarship, news media, literature, and popular discourse: victim blaming is common, which becomes read back into Ovid, whose Medusa episode is seen as a key example of victim blaming, which in turn underpins subsequent views around sexual assault. We argue that ascribing victimhood is often viewed as the only way to engage with a text through a feminist lens, and ask the reader to consider the ways in which ancient stories are being sold to them to fulfil a specific agenda.

Medusa's most popular origin story occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which he tells the story of a beautiful woman who is raped by Neptune in the temple of Minerva, and transformed into a powerfully dangerous creature as a result. The general interpretation and reception of this story from classicists and non-classicists alike paints Medusa as a victim of *both* Neptune and Minerva, in the former case as a victim of sexual assault and in the latter as a punishment for her role as victim in the assault. This view generally understands her transformation into a snake-haired creature as a specific punishment against Medusa.

This paper takes the opposite view. A close read of Ovid's Latin reveals three things: first, that Ovid's language does not specify that Medusa is the one punished but rather, in fact, the punishment is directed against Neptune's misdeed; second, that Medusa's transformation differs from that of other rape victims within the *Metamorphoses* in the maintenance of her agency, as she remains human and does not become a "creature"; and third, that Medusa's transformation can be plausibly understood not as punishment of her as victim but rather as something of a corrective gift, or even protection from subsequent sexual assault.

This reading accords in some ways with other attempts to reread and reclaim Medusa as mythological figure. Beginning most prominently with Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" in 1975, a line of thought has understood Medusa as a key nexus for feminist (re)understanding.² Some thinkers in this lineage have even narrowed in on Ovid's telling in ways similar to our own, noting that while the original language is itself ambiguous, it is the later reception of the story that attributes the punishment to Medusa's role: "Minerva's actions, particularly her adoption of Medusa's severed head on the very aegis with which she

¹ Relevant scholarship on the Medusa passage in question is engaged more specifically throughout, but a summary of scholarship around this broader hermeneutic can be found in Melissa Marturano's contribution to Melanie Racette-Campbell and Aven McMaster, eds., *Toxic Masculinity in the Ancient World* (2023), 229 n. 28: "A synthesis of arguments for more pessimistic, resisting readings and more optimistic, releasing readings can be found summarised in Salzman-Mitchell 2005, 17–21; McAuley 2016, 26; Rimmel 2018; Sharrock 2020; Marturano 2023; and Ranger 2023a. In addition, Ranger and Richlin (2014, 33) discuss the liberal (as opposed to radical) feminist wave of scholarship after Richlin's first publication of 'Reading Ovid's Rape' in 1992, which in various ways attempted to reclaim Ovid and his representations of women. Rimmel (2018) endeavours to find the space between the liberal and radical feminist critiques. Sharrock, likewise, attempts an optimistic and pessimistic reading of metamorphosis."

² Cixous (1976), 875–893.

covered her face, warn against similar transgressions, but the symbolism is violently displaced, making Medusa the monstrous face of the deed as well as of the goddess's own wrath."³ It is the displacement of Medusa's original role, in other words, that creates this later tradition of victim blaming. A recent volume specifically engages Cixous' essay and this feminist tradition in order to provide a wide set of re-readings that usefully reorient the mythological stories that we think we know, but may have become distorted over their reception history.⁴ Our reading of Medusa sits squarely within this line of scholarship, reminding us that while myths always evolve, sometimes this evolution is not of the positive kind that maintains a story's relevance but rather the negative kind that distorts the original in a harmful, ongoing way. We hope that this paper has contributed to this history of scholarship by not only correcting the record with respect to Ovid's original account but also in showing the importance of this correction in both reclaiming a modern Medusa and undermining an ideological history of victim blaming.

A final note before proceeding with our analysis. This project is a collaboration between an undergraduate major in classical studies (Woolley) and a professor in that department (Robertson). It thus reflects an attempt to link together the current and explicitly social concerns of a recent graduate with the philological and scholarly concerns of an instructor. It is our view that this partnership has resulted in mutual benefits: by grounding critiques of victim blaming in primary sources and specialized academic scholarship, and also by applying philological and narratological analyses to matters of concern well beyond the field of classical studies. What follows is an argument around how to re-read the Medusa episode and its consequences, but at a meta-discursive level it also advocates for more deliberate collaboration between professors and students in any field in order to link wider contemporary issues to academic scholarship. Attempts to disentangle and deconstruct the complex ties of scholarship, reception history, popular media, and capitalistic appropriation of feminist hermeneutics require firm grounding in proper scholarly analysis, but no less important is a perspective that looks outward and apart from academic discourse to how the consequences of these analyses around topics such as victim blaming continue to shape and influence young people today. This project would not have started without a late night deep dive by Woolley following a TikTok fueled epiphany, so we argue the value in looking beyond the widely accepted scholarly canon.

Ovid's Account

There is direct, textual evidence within Ovid's account that suggests that Medusa's transformation was not a punishment for her victimhood, and was a response to the violence enacted by Neptune. Ovid's story is straightforward, both concise in narrative and simple in Latin. His account of the action is rather short (4.798-803):⁵

It is said that the ruler of the sea [Poseidon] raped this woman in the temple of Minerva. The daughter of Jupiter turned away and covered her chaste face with the aegis. And this deed was not unpunished, she [Minerva] turned the

³ Morse (2018), 184.

⁴ Zajko and Leonard (2006).

⁵ The Latin text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* follows Tarrant (2004); translations are our own unless otherwise noted.

Gorgon's hair into serpents. Now she also, to overwhelm her enemies with terror, displays on her chest the snakes of her own creation.

*hanc pelagi rector templo vitiasse Minervae
dicitur; aversa est et castos aegide vultus
nata Iovis texit, neve hoc impune fuisset
Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros.
nunc quoque, ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes,
pectore in adverso, quos fecit, sustinet angues.*

The verb here, *vitiasse* ("raped"), is in the active voice, thus making Neptune (epithet *pelagi rector*) the acting agent in the rape. This stands in contrast to other instances of this word in the text where *vitio* is used passively. The previous account of Jupiter's rape of Europa sees the verb used in a passive form (2.826): *inlaesas vitiatis addere partes* ("to add the unharmed parts to the corrupted ones"). In the book following the Medusa episode, the verb is used as a passive when the nymph Cyane is transformed into a spring after witnessing and failing to stop Pluto from abducting Persephone (5.436-437): *denique pro vivo vitiatas sanguine uenas / lympa subit, restatque nihil quod prendere possis* ("finally water in place of living blood flows through her violated veins, and there remains nothing that you could take hold of"). And then again just later, referring to the seeds of the earth when Ceres decides to cause winter, again following Pluto's abduction (5.480): *vitiataque semina fecit* ("she made the seeds become corrupted"). Linguistically, then, Ovid thus has no problem using the verb in the context of the victim or object of metamorphosis itself, and when he does so he elsewhere uses the passive form.

What is more, *vitiasse* is a rather rare form. Commenting on line 798, Bömer notes that "Kurzform -asse sonst nicht in der klassischen Dichtung."⁶ In his comparanda literature contextualizing Ovid's choice of word and its form—looking to Terence, Tacitus, and Suetonius—Bömer notes that *vitio* is often paired with violence against virgins, but not in the same form that Ovid uses with Medusa; it tends to be passive elsewhere.⁷ By comparison, the special form of the verb in Ovid (and there are no proposed emendations in the critical editions) thus signals that Ovid is framing Medusa's rape differently.

Terence's *Adelphoe* ("Brothers"), a comic play dating to circa 160 BCE, provides one of the few noteworthy grammatically active examples. It merits mention that Terence's play was widely read during Ovid's time and certainly well-known by Ovid himself. Indeed, Terence was admired by Ovid, who understood Terence's writings as authentic representations of cultural mores. We could well infer, then, that Ovid would have picked up on Terence's language and narrative context in his own writings. Terence's text is a Roman comedy whose genre would have elicited expectations of sex, sexual exploitation, and an interrogation of gender roles. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the verb makes an appearance there. In this example, two characters are discussing how Aeschinus raped Simulus' daughter, and the subsequent consequences. Here, however, the verb *vitio* occurs in a different grammatical form (465-468):

⁶ Bömer (1976), 226.

⁷ Bömer (1976), 266, notes the following: Ovid, *Epistle* 11.37: *tumescebant vitiati pondera ventris*, a passive form. He also points to the following comparanda for active forms of *vitio* in Terence (*Adelphoe* 465-468), discussed here; Suetonius (*Life of Augustus* 71.1), which uses *vitiantas*; and Tacitus (*Dialogue de oratoribus* 35.5), which uses *vitiarum*.

Demea: What has he been up to? Hegio: You knew our friend and classmate Simulus? Demea: Why wouldn't I? Hegio: Aeschinus raped [*vitiavit*] Simulus' daughter. Demea: Wow! Hegio: Hold on, Demea, you haven't yet heard the worst part. Demea: Is there anything worse than that?

Demea: *quid istuc est?* Hegio: *nostrum amicum noras Simulum atque aequalem.* Demea: *quidni?* Hegio: *filiam eius virginem vitiavit.* Demea: *hem!* Hegio: *mane; nondum audisti, Demea, quod est gravissimum.* Demea: *an quid est etiam amplius?*

The passage continues to describe Aeschinus' shame and attempt to come clean and ask for forgiveness. The passage manifestly uses this verb to highlight the shame of the misdeed, the innocence of the girl, and the fault of Aeschinus. Terence's use of the active verb thus occurs in the context of blame and an attack on the aggressor's character, and the consequences that resulted. The closest comparandum for Ovid, in other words, underscores the fault of the aggressor and not the victim, who is otherwise seen as blameless. The other similar uses noted by Bömer (*vitiandas* in Suetonius, *vitiarum* in Tacitus) provide little other additional context. Tacitus' usage is a noun ("violations") and not especially relevant. Suetonius' passage, meanwhile, refers to the charge that Augustus was "eager to violate virgins" (*ad vitiandas virgines promptior*), perhaps a useful parallel in that Suetonius describes the verbal form as a clearly negative polemic.

There are narrative and interpretive consequences of Ovid's word choice, since when the word portraying the act of the rape itself is in the passive voice, some of the responsibility for the rape is placed on the victim. Translations of "ravish" attempt to get at such ambiguities possible in the verb *vitio*. Rather than Jupiter raping Europa, Europa is ravished by Jupiter, which thereby might simply suggest an active male sexual role and a female passive one that is ambiguous regarding consent. Brewer's 1933 translation of Ovid uses exactly this verb: "Neptune ... ravished her [Medusa] in a temple of Athena."⁸ Stephanie McCarter has touched on the importance of translating rape actively, especially noting how audiences are more likely to ascribe blame to the victim when passive language is used.⁹ There is no such ambiguity in the case of Medusa and *vitiasse*. This crucial linguistic differentiation of the active voice is often missing in translations around the violence against Medusa, and this difference in sense is significant: the entire agency and responsibility for the rape is given to Neptune.

With the voice of the verb already establishing the party responsible, Ovid's Latin continues to paint an even clearer portrait of who is to be blamed for this deed. Regarding Minerva's vengeance in the wake of Neptune's rape, Ovid writes (4.800): *neve hoc inpune fuisset*, something like "and in order that this deed might not be unpunished." Crucially, *hoc* here is neuter, and thus can refer to neither Neptune nor Medusa; the former and latter would respectively be *hunc* or *hanc*. Therefore, *hoc* must be referring to *vitiasse*, the (active) act of rape itself. Minerva's subsequent vengeance thus refers solely to Neptune's action, and it cannot be a punishment of Medusa herself, as much of the reception history has claimed. It is not linguistically possible to claim that Minerva was punishing Medusa for some kind of perceived violation of her own chastity, but rather the act (by Neptune) that violated this

⁸ Brewer (1933), 179.

⁹ McCarter (2022).

chastity.¹⁰ The interpretation that Medusa herself is being punished further finds no other support in the text, and apparently arises from mere inference which moves it outside of Ovid's text and into wider cultural frames more liable to victim blaming.

The Commentary Tradition

This is no straw man argument. The reproduction of a victim blaming interpretation of the Medusa episode persists across translations both academic and popular, scholarly commentaries, specialized classical studies research, post-classical and medieval work, modern fiction re-tellings, popular media, and even children's literature. All of these together readily illustrate the breadth and depth of the problem.

In the most obvious place for learned Medusa interpretations—academic translations and commentaries—we found no current, widely circulated *Metamorphoses* commentaries that note the difference between Medusa's transformation and that of other rape victims, much less those with an attention to the difference in the voice of *vitio*. Commentaries typically either breeze past Medusa's story or describe the transformation as a punishment specifically of Medusa. J.D. Reed's commentary asserts that "Medusa was *victim* of two gods: raped by Neptune in a shrine of Minerva, she (rather than her assailant) is punished by the latter for this impiety."¹¹ Gianpiero Rosati's recent commentary notes "that an offence, real or presumed, should not remain unpunished is a recurrent demonstration of force demanded by a powerful person or divinity."¹² True as this general claim may be with respect to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there are no specifics here on Medusa's case and this general statement seems to imply that the framework is simply general punishment—by powerful beings against lesser ones (e.g., Minerva against Medusa). William S. Anderson's commentary is even more direct: "As usual, the *deity punishes the innocent victim of rape*, and the rapist goes unscathed."¹³ Michael Simpson references Anderson's interpretation that this section is an example of a victim being punished for a rape.¹⁴ Bömer's commentary similarly interprets Medusa's rape and transformation as no different from other such instances where the victim's role merits punishment or atonement.¹⁵ Mostly recently, Miriam Kamil's article on trauma and recovery in Ovid's rape narratives likewise reproduces this same view: "Minerva punishes Medusa for being raped by Neptune."¹⁶

¹⁰ Anderson (1998), 496, on lines 798-801 notes that Medusa did nothing wrong and the violation was wholly that of Neptune: "we should probably assume that she [Medusa] was acting reverently and modestly. Of Neptune, though, we have to think the worst: his lust has defiled the temple and a worshipper." Yet Anderson continues that "he [Neptune] has made her vulnerable to the angry goddess," a subsequent interpretive conclusion we dispute in this paper.

¹¹ Ovid *Metamorphoses* translated by Humphries, annotated by Reed (2018), 431, emphasis added.

¹² Rosati (2024), 470.

¹³ Anderson (1998), 496, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Simpson (2001).

¹⁵ Bömer (1976), 266: "Ovid vertritt auch sonst (VI 541) die Ansicht, daß eine Frau durch das Erleiden einer Vergewaltigung einen Makel auf sich lädt, der der Sühnung bedarf."

¹⁶ Kamil (2024), 505-536, 510n. 19. Kamil interprets this as an example of Minerva preserving traditional "power structure"; true as this may be in other mythological contexts, especially at the hands of different male authors, we argue by contrast that Ovid is here exploring something different in the case of Medusa.

Other commentaries avoid explaining the passage entirely. The notes in David Raeburn's translation does not comment on the punishment or the rape itself.¹⁷ Wilmon Brewer's commentary does not offer any insight on Medusa's transformation and merely discusses that her story was retold by later authors.¹⁸ E.J. Kenney does not offer any comment on Medusa's treatment in his notes on A.D Melville's translation.¹⁹ Commentators, in sum, either ignore the particulars of this passage (both linguistically and narratively) or insert their own views that diverge from the text in describing it as Minerva punishing Medusa for being a victim of rape. Victim blaming, in other words, is widespread in academic accounts of the primary source, but not grounded in the primary source itself.

This view also occurs in the post-classical world and the reception tradition, for instance in both post-medieval art and the commentators who explicate it. To pick one example, Jane Davidson Reid's entry on "Medusa" on classical mythology in the art of 1300-1990 writes that "Medusa's transformation was the punishment of Minerva (Athena) for *allowing Neptune (Poseidon) to violate her* in the goddess's temple."²⁰ Here we see that Medusa's only agency was in "allowing" the rape, as if she were doing something or refused to do something that allowed a vastly more powerful deity "to violate her," and thereby Minerva was justified in punishing her as bearing no small part of the blame.

This treatment in academic contexts influences and parallels popular readings and work directed at a wider audience. Robert Graves, for instance, synthesizes various ancient accounts to retell the story,²¹ mostly following Ovidian lines: "one night Medusa lay with Neptune, and Athene, enraged that they had bedded in one of her own temples, changed her into a winged monster."²² While Graves' reputation is not that of a careful scholar, he was popularly influential and his retelling here is paradigmatic in the modern imagination for attributing some of the misdeed to Medusa herself. The punishment was for the coupling itself, not for Neptune's rape, reflecting Minerva's interest and focus on chastity, especially in her temple.

More recently, even the pre-eminent classicist Mary Beard reproduces this general frame in her work for a non-academic audience. In promotion for her book *Women & Power* (2017), Beard appeared in a piece for the *London Review of Books*, where she describes the story straightforwardly along Ovid's lines: "One famous version has her as a beautiful woman raped by Neptune in a temple of Minerva, who promptly transformed her, *as punishment for the sacrilege*, into a monstrous creature with a deadly capacity to turn to stone anyone who looked at her face."²³ Here it is a neutral description at best (similar to Graves'), or an implication that it is the "her" that is receiving the punishment for her part in the sacrilege. In a video piece for *Aeon*, Beard summarizes her *LRB* article's argument that Medusa has remained a proxy to attack women despite efforts by some to reclaim her. Beard's interview

¹⁷ Raeburn (2004).

¹⁸ Brewer (1933), 179-181.

¹⁹ Ovid *Metamorphoses* translated by Melville, annotated by Kenney (2004), 402.

²⁰ Reid (1994), "Medusa," 650, emphasis added.

²¹ Graves (1955), 33n. 2, cites Hesiod's *Theogony* 270f. and 333f., Apollodorus 2.4.3, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4.792-802, scholiast on Apollonius' *Argonautica* 4.1399, and Euripides' *Ion* 989 ff.

²² Graves (1955), 33.

²³ Beard (2017), emphasis added.

and video is tellingly summarized thusly: “nearly every leading female politician has been at some point depicted as Medusa—that beautiful woman of Ancient Greek myth who was transformed into a hideous beast *as punishment for her own rape*.”²⁴ Beard herself states that “this unfortunate creature, she’s been turned into this because she was actually raped, and *as punishment for being raped*, she gets turned into this horrible thing.”²⁵ Beard’s perspective is intended to be sympathetic to Medusa, yet despite Beard’s deep knowledge of Ovid and expressly political frame polemicizing against the sexist use of such passages and symbols, Beard still reproduces the view that Medusa is the one being punished. While we recognize that these statements were made in connection to her feminist manifesto, *Women & Power*, and are not necessarily scholarly deep dives of Ovid, we feel that it is significant to note that even modern, critically feminist scholars reproduce this view.

The reproduction of this view even in sympathetic and critical feminist scholars can be found elsewhere. Holly Ranger, for instance, has written forcefully on problematic attempts at re-interpreting ancient figures and authors as sympathetic from a modern perspective, critiquing the underlying structures at play in studying ancient Greek and Roman literature as part of the Critical Ancient World Studies group.²⁶ Yet Ranger herself, in a piece for Bloomsbury Academic, writes that “Ovid teaches the feminist philologist that women who refuse to perpetuate cycles of misogyny are always punished.”²⁷ Even a scholarly perspective that takes a carefully critical perspective on the so-called optimistic view of Ovid, and one that might well sympathize with the current paper’s argument especially around reception history, reproduces the view that Ovid’s stories blame the victims of misogyny with punishment.

A variety of other popular media operates along similar lines, either neutral about Medusa’s role or blaming her explicitly. Around the culmination of the 2016 US Presidential election, Elizabeth Johnston’s *Atlantic* article noted the widespread use of Medusa iconography, with Donald Trump acting as Perseus and Hillary Clinton as the decapitated Medusa. Johnston describes the episode as a punishment of Medusa specifically: “In Ovid’s story, the god Neptune sees Medusa, desires her, and decides that, because he is a god, he is entitled to her body (sound familiar?). He rapes her in Minerva’s temple, and Minerva, incensed that her temple has been defiled, *punishes the victim* rather than the perpetrator (again, sound familiar?).”²⁸

This essay was influential, and a host of other media accounts followed. To pick but two, Christobel Hastings’ piece for *VICE Magazine* seems neutral at best with respect to Medusa, though part of the article’s title (“a Rape Victim Turned Into a Monster”) seems to suggest Medusa was punished as a result of being the victim: “Her beauty caught the eye of the sea god Neptune, who proceeded to rape her in the sacred temple of Minerva. Furious at the desecration of her temple, Minerva transformed Medusa into a monster with the deadly capacity to turn whoever looked upon her face to stone.”²⁹ Even more strongly, Nick

²⁴ Beard (2019).

²⁵ Beard (2019), 2:24-2:38, 2:39-43 emphasis added.

²⁶ Ranger (2024).

²⁷ Ranger (2023), 33-47.

²⁸ Johnston (2016), emphasis added.

²⁹ Hastings (2018).

Iakovidis' piece in *Medium* blames Medusa for the temple's desecration and rape: "This is the myth that explains the origins of Medusa and how she was transformed into a monster after *being blamed by Minerva* for getting raped by Neptune."³⁰ Iakovidis locates this view in his reading of Ovid's description of "punish the outrage as it deserves" (see more below): "This phrase states that Minerva believed *Medusa deserved punishment* for letting Neptune rape her. ... [Minerva] chose to blame Medusa for being too pretty and thus driving Neptune to lust. In some versions [e.g., Apollodorus *Library* 2.4.2-3], Minerva's actions are the result of the goddess being jealous of Medusa for being adored by the people and thus refusing to aid her." Iakovidis concludes: "For women like Minerva, *rape victims are the only ones to blame*."³¹ A great many similar readings can be multiplied in magazines, blogs, social media, and so on, including even trauma centers specifically devoted to aiding the victims of rape and rejecting narratives of victim blaming.³²

The Reception Tradition

Pushing back against this interpretive line is important, because it is so often reproduced in cultural mediums outside of academic or political discourse. A great deal of popular fiction, both adult and children, follows the typical and traditional view that Medusa was the one punished. Because this assumption gets internalized and reproduced in popular fiction, the trope of victim blaming—an erroneously interpreted trope, we contend—becomes further and more deeply embedded in cultural consciousness. We feel that this thus perpetuates a school of thinking in which the only way for a text to be worthy of feminist engagement is if it features victimization.

This embedding occurs early in modern readers' engagement with the story, as Robin Diver demonstrates how it is a prominent feature of children's literature on Medusa.³³ This has downstream effects on popular understandings of the myth, such that "to most modern readers, it is clear Medusa is an innocent victim unfairly punished by Athena."³⁴ There are occasional other accounts, both ancient and modern, that push back against this interpretation and are available to the modern reader: "In ancient accounts such as Apollodorus and Lucian, Medusa's monstrosity did not take away her ability to be beautiful, and perhaps enhanced it";³⁵ while in modernity, a rare few analyses and retellings focus on Medusa's vengeance and at least interpret Minerva's transformation as "deliberately

³⁰ Iakovidis (2021), emphasis added.

³¹ Ibid., emphasis added.

³² E.g., the Avalon Healing Center, which on its website describes the rape of Medusa thus: "Athena, hearing of the incident, punished Medusa by banishing her to an island, turning her hair into snakes, and making her facial features so unattractive that it turned anyone looking at her to stone. She is isolated and banished from all society. She is silenced and punished. She is blamed ... We can take the story of Medusa and apply it to several current cases pertaining to sexual assault." <https://avalonhealing.org/rape-in-art-history>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

³³ The discussion here closely follows Diver (2020).

³⁴ Diver (2020), 66.

³⁵ Diver (2020), 74.

ambiguous.”³⁶ Yet the primary vector for children’s literature is Ovid, and specifically the view that Medusa is punished by Minerva, usually called Athena within the stories, as victim:

“As Roberts (2015) showed, Ovid is the ancient literary source who has been the most influential in modern children’s literature. The ancient Medusa narrative being drawn on in many children’s books is therefore the version which centres her status as a rape victim, even when other ancient versions available do not.”³⁷

Diver outlines a series of highly influential retellings in children’s literature, such as “Charles Kingsley’s 1856 anthology” as well as “later children’s authors generally (Murnaghan and Roberts 2018)” who were influenced by Kingsley, which led especially to the children’s anthology of James Reeves (1969) which elaborated on Kingsley’s characterization of Medusa’s “sin” by “linking it directly to Athena.”³⁸ The Reeves reception in particular bridges an older view about Medusa’s “sin,” glossing over the sexual assault for a younger audience, to a more recent view that blames Medusa for a different reason, namely her beauty that she unduly flaunts before Minerva and therefore receives punishment. “There is thus a pattern in which modern children’s literature has transformed the virginal Athena’s disgust at Medusa as a rape victim into a competition of femininity.”³⁹ We can see that the misreading of Ovid as “punish the victim” gets translated even to children, who are offered the view that Medusa’s worth is distillable to her physical beauty and that unduly flaunting one’s beauty leads to punishment; in both, women are punished for not properly conforming to patriarchal frames of proper behavior.

The trope of victim blaming continues in young adult and adult fiction, which has boomed in recent years. Perhaps surprisingly, this reproduction occurs in the most recent retellings with an intentionally feminist hermeneutic. The stories discussed below, in other words, take an expressly feminist perspective and attempt to re-tell the Medusa stories in ways that are attempted to elicit sympathy, further flesh out her character, grant her additional agency beyond Ovid’s version, and/or highlight Medusa’s special qualities and power. Yet nonetheless they generally reproduce a narrative that depicts Medusa as the one punished for the rape, and the transformation as a clearly undesirable punishment. While not exhaustive here for reasons of space, we see examples of this in works such as Haynes’ *Stone Blind* (2022), Gruender’s *Medusa* (2024), and Dexter et al.’s *Medusa: New and Ancient Greek Tales* (2024).⁴⁰

The last of these, *Medusa: New and Ancient Greek Tales* is a collection of short stories on Medusa, some retelling her ancient story through a new lens, others bringing her into the

³⁶ Diver (2020), 66, discussing Enterline (2000): “Enterline...argued Athena transforms Medusa into a Gorgon to punish *mankind* for their rapacious ways. She points out that Medusa’s powers in Ovid are used only against men.” See further Diver (2020), 68, on Ann Stanford’s *Medusa* (1977), which “does focus on Medusa as rape victim, and follows a line of thinking similar to Enterline’s, where Medusa becomes a Gorgon to avenge herself.”

³⁷ Diver (2020), 66, referencing here Roberts (2015).

³⁸ Diver (2020), 67, referencing Kingsley (1889 [1856]); Murnaghan and Roberts (2018); Reeves (1969).

³⁹ Diver (2020), 68.

⁴⁰ Other examples can indeed be multiplied; from just the last half dozen years we could add Nina McLaughlin’s *Wake, Siren* (2019), Heywood’s *The Shadow of Perseus* (2023), Lynn’s *Athena’s Child* (2023), and Patel’s *A Drop of Venom* (2024).

current day. Omitting the stories not relevant to our argument for their different foci (e.g., her mother, Medusa as allegory for race and racism, her ability to find love), many of these stories at least touch on Medusa's transformation and her relationship with Minerva. These stories take obvious inspiration from Ovid, but they all diverge from (our reading of) Ovid by directly proclaiming that Medusa's transformation was punishing her, rather than just implying it. Minerva (most often referred to as "Athena" in the majority of the stories) is frequently the villain in these stories.

The first story, "The Wise Look For All of The Stories," follows a modern Athena as she converses with an archaeologist inside the replica Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee.⁴¹ In an attempt to reconcile origin stories, Athena notes that she "[knows] the overarching story about Poseidon's act and her own vengeance wrought" and that it "never sat right with her" (119). The understanding here is that Athena punished Medusa, which results in Athena traveling to Medusa's home to apologize for her "destruction" (124), perpetuating the idea that Medusa is a victim of both Athena and Poseidon, even as Athena is self-aware of her role in victim blaming. The second story, "How to Tame a Head of Snakes", follows a humanized version of Medusa as she lives a relatively normal, albeit secluded, life on an island full of loneliness and depression—a reflection of her view of her transformation as punishment. After finding a man she loves and managing to avoid killing him, Poseidon sweeps him away to his death, and Medusa waits for "[her] killer, [her] savior" to arrive (141). Medusa's stance is that of lamenting her condition, explaining that the gods left her isolated and stating that "beauty does not go unpunished in this covetous world" (128). While not directly present in Ovid (see discussion below), this story perpetuates an idea that Athena was jealous or upset by Medusa's beauty and therefore transformed her—again, a punishment.

"The Toll of The Snake" follows Medusa (Mei-Ko, in the story) through the form of a young Hollywood actress who stands up to the overbearing director Minerva and reveals her true "monstrous" form in turning him to stone. Again, the theme is Medusa and Minerva at destructive odds, with the former being transformed as monstrous punishment, and the latter worthy of retribution for her role in doing so. We also see the theme of beauty as a reason for Medusa's punishment: "her beauty made her bold. Too bold. The gods had to put her in her place. They turned her hair into snakes, and she became a monster so ugly that one look at her face turned men to stone" (165). Athena "put [Medusa] in her place" by virtue of monstrous punishment.

We can compare these stories to the account in Natalie Haynes' *Stone Blind* (2022), a longer version of the Medusa story that links together many stories for a complete birth-to-death narrative. Medusa is the primary narrator, thus giving her own perspective on her transformation, and Haynes also gives insight into Athena's mental state and motivation. Athena's reaction receives wider treatment:⁴²

"Poseidon had taken some girl-mortal, nymph, she wasn't sure. But he had done it in her temple. Hers. Where her statue could look down and see it all. She felt an encompassing rage. How dare he? How dare he when his temple was being built next door? He could rape or seduce whoever he liked there, Athene wouldn't interfere. But to profane her temple, and not even to

⁴¹ Here and elsewhere "Athena" is used if that is the authorial choice; thus we use "Minerva" in our discussion of Ovid and more broadly.

⁴² Haynes (2022), 116-117.

consider the insult worth an apology? She would have to find a way to get her revenge on him later. He was—as so often—away in his ocean kingdom: she could not harm him there. There would be an opportunity to humiliate him later, she was quite sure. But in the meantime, her anger was roused and she needed to expend it. The girl. The girl would do.”

This narrative more closely follows Ovid’s account than the short stories above, and indeed both Ovid and Haynes make it clear that Poseidon is deserving of the punishment. Yet Medusa is still the target of her anger, and very much understood dismissively as a pawn within wider Olympian conflict. Haynes also makes it clear that Medusa was a victim of Athena through Medusa’s own reaction to her punishment, when she returns to her cave and describes to her sisters how the snakes appeared. It was “a goddess ... She was angry with me,” to which Euryale replies that they “know who it was ... Vengeful and cruel, always blaming women for what men do to them. She has always been like this” (138). Athena is manifestly anti-woman and victim blaming, and performed the transformation with the specific intent to punish based on her anger directed toward Medusa as proxy for Poseidon.

Finally, Nataly Gruender’s recent *Medusa* (2024) hews most closely to the Ovidian account, while adding some agency and personality to Medusa’s character. Following Medusa’s rape, she and Athena have a confrontation where Athena explains that “Poseidon cannot be punished. For me to call for his atonement for this crime would be to instigate the same war I have been trying to avoid. Many more mortals would suffer in the skirmish” (109). Medusa responds that she does “not give a damn about other mortals. I am the one who was raped at the foot of your altar and you are the one who allowed it to happen. Don’t I deserve justice?” (109). Athena continues to explain to Medusa that she knows Medusa is not to blame, but that the mortals and other gods needed to see that she will not be made a fool (110). Like Haynes, Gruender follows Ovid in noting that Poseidon was ultimately the one to blame, but Athena nonetheless feels as if she has to punish someone, and therefore settles on Medusa. While we therefore see some nuance in this account, Athena is still understood as punishing Medusa. The transformation itself is understood as punishment, and Athena does not care for Medusa in punishing her.

All of these stories, then, understand Minerva and Medusa as opposed. They vary in the extent to which Minerva directly blames Medusa, ranging from full blame for Medusa’s role and/or her beauty to simply seeing Medusa as the only available recipient for punishment. Regardless of the extent to which they unpack the complexities within and between the two characters, the transformation of Medusa is depicted as a manifestly negative punishment, meted to Medusa for her unfortunate role in Neptune’s rape. Though the goal of the feminist authors of these modern retellings seems to be aligned with this paper, in that they are created with the intention of reclaiming Medusa’s story and highlighting voices that have historically been ignored, the stories themselves are manifestations of trends from the ancient world through the modern day, seen in popular media, children’s stories, and even feminist adult fiction. Yet these themes, we argue, stem from a fundamental misreading of Ovid, and this misreading, in turn, leads to the harmful reproduction of views on victim blaming. A wider attention to Ovid’s treatment of Medusa and other rape victims is merited, then, in order to explore more deeply how this particular story functions both in and of itself and within Ovid’s wider work.

It is necessary to note that these modern retellings are being written with the specific intention of being sold to as many people as possible—just take a look at the general fiction section of every Barnes and Noble and you’ll see how many of these feminist retellings are

being pushed out by publishers. It is the job of the author to determine how to essentially “translate” these ancient stories into tales that are digestible and interesting to a modern audience. We argue that the authors of these retellings are caught up in the same vicious cycle as the translators and commentators we previously discussed, in which victim blaming is societally common, therefore relatable to a wide audience, and the view of Medusa as victim is reproduced continually.

Divine Punishment or Gift?

We argue that Medusa's transformation is fundamentally different from that of other transformations within Ovid's work. The Greek and Roman gods certainly have a track record of punishing humans generally and rape victims specifically, which likely explains the aforementioned commentary tradition and their subsequent popular retellings. Within the *Metamorphoses* alone there are numerous instances of rape victims undergoing a transformation by the gods as a punishment for their purported misdeeds, i.e. being sexually assaulted. As Leo Curran writes in his paper about rape victims in the *Metamorphoses*, these punishments have multiple motivations ranging from jealousy to a reaction stemming from a perceived violation of the so-called “cult of virginity.”⁴³

The stark difference between the other punishments in the *Metamorphoses* and Medusa's experience is that the other women were entirely transformed in a way that strips them of their personhood and makes them unable to continue living their normal life. These complete transformations include Daphne turned into a tree after Apollo attempts to rape her, Io turned into a cow after she is raped by Jupiter, and Callisto turned into a bear by Diana, to name but a few. Although Medusa is physically changed, the change occurs only to her hair. Unlike the others, her humanity is maintained and she is able to continue living as Medusa, keeping her identity. While the ancient myths are lamentably spare on her daily life or character (in contrast to, for example, the development of the male Cyclops and his subsequent myth retellings), it seems that her everyday actions were largely unchanged by her transformation: she lives with her fellow Gorgons in a presumably somewhat normal life in a faraway cave.

One commentator has noticed this difference. Stanley Lombardo's “Catalogue of Transformations” describes the stories of Io and Callisto as “transformations from human to animal” and Daphne is listed as a “transformation into flora” due to the complete nature of their transformations.⁴⁴ Lombardo doesn't describe Medusa herself as transforming, but rather notes more limited aspects: drops of her blood to vipers, her hair to snakes, and her blood to Pegasus. Medusa's lack of total transformation in Ovid—and the maintaining of her personhood—thus signals that her story is qualitatively different from Ovid's other victims and transformations in a key way, and the reader is thereby signaled to interpret and perhaps judge her differently than the others too.

It is worth noting that while Minerva can be a vindictive goddess instead of a supporter of women, for instance in her treatment of Arachne, Minerva does not have a history of punishing victims. Minerva is not afraid of lashing out at women, but when she does it is always women that she perceives as a direct threat or that have spoken out against

⁴³ Curran (1978).

⁴⁴ Ovid *Metamorphoses* translated by Lombardo (2010), 450-455.

her. She does, however, have a history of assisting the victims of rape. In cases such as that of Cornix, Minerva even helps them escape (2.576–88). After Ajax’s rape of Cassandra, also in her temple, Minerva went out of her way to hunt down and kill Ajax. Minerva’s exact method varies—either she wrecked his ship via Neptune⁴⁵ or thrust his body against rocks, so named in the *Aeneid* “the rocks of Ajax”⁴⁶—but in both cases she punishes the aggressor and not the victim. A punishment of Medusa for being a victim of rape would be outside of her typical treatment and would be a major deviation of how she is typically portrayed.

It is thus worth looking more carefully at how Ovid describes Minerva’s response to Neptune’s rape. When Neptune rapes Medusa, Ovid writes that Minerva averts her eyes (4.799–800): *aversa est et castos aegide vultus / nata Iovis texit* (“The daughter of Jupiter turned away and covered her chaste face with the aegis”). Rosati’s commentary on *Metamorphoses* Book 4 notes that “Minerva’s gesture of turning and covering her eyes so as not to see Medusa, victim of Neptune’s rape, is an innovation of Ovid and does not seem to have parallels in the other sources for the myth.”⁴⁷ As a novel addition to the poem, it is therefore a window into Ovid’s own view of the myth and character. Rosati further points out that the best parallel is one cited just above and generally “ignored in the commentaries,” namely:⁴⁸

“the violence done by the Lesser Ajax to Cassandra in the very temple of Athena-Minerva at Troy. To avoid seeing the act, which will condemn Ajax to ruin, ‘the goddess raised her eyes from the image to the ceiling.’ A temple as a space of protection from sexual violence is an element that recurs in the familiar circumstances of Perseus himself [around his mother and Polydectes] ... It is evident in any case that Ovid rereads Minerva’s gesture as an anticipation of what will be necessary for anyone who wants to avoid the ‘death in stone’ produced by the sight of Medusa.”

Ovid’s most direct source here is the Ajax/Cassandra episode, where as noted above Ajax is swiftly punished, but not Cassandra. The violation there—and also in the case of Medusa, we would argue—was of Minerva’s temple and her support of chastity, and is inherent in the nature of sexual assault itself. Minerva averted her eyes because of the heinousness of the Lesser Ajax’s crime, not because of Cassandra’s role. The same should be said of Medusa: Minerva averted her eyes because of the terribleness of the crime perpetuated by Neptune; Medusa herself was innocent. Anderson notes how Ovid’s line placement underscores this interpretation, regarding *templo vitiasse Minervae* (“raped in the temple of Minerva,” 4.798–801):

“The verb, carefully set in the middle of the phrase about Minerva’s temple, emphasizes the shocking affront to the goddess and her essential chastity. What Medusa was doing in the shrine, Perseus does not say, but we should probably assume that she was acting reverently and modestly. Of Neptune, though, we have to think the worst: his lust has defiled the temple and a worshipper, and he has made her vulnerable to the angry goddess.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Homer’s *Odyssey* 4.499–511.

⁴⁶ Vergil’s *Aeneid* 1.39–45.

⁴⁷ Rosati (2024), 468.

⁴⁸ Rosati (2024), 468–469, cf. *vultus avertite vestros* and *avertitur* at 5.179 and 214.

⁴⁹ Anderson (1998), 495–496, on lines 798–801.

Furthermore, because Minerva was forced to avert her eyes to avoid seeing the terrible rape of a chaste woman in her sacred temple, Minerva decided that so too would everyone who approached Medusa—undoubtedly men, as Ovid lists both men and beasts in Perseus' account of his approach to the cave but not women (4.779-781)—be forced to do the same. Rosati is right that this parallel is rarely noted in the commentary, a fact that, we suggest, reflects the general pattern of victim blaming in the reception tradition of Ovid.

What is more, the nature of the punishment itself is rarely discussed and similarly overlooked. The pre-Ovidian mythical tradition has Neptune and Medusa procreating (Hesiod, *Theogony* 278-279) while Apollodorus preserves a tradition of a beauty competition and rivalry between Minerva and Athena (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.3) that would better fit the Minerva-Arachne parallel in Ovid.⁵⁰ By contrast, the focus on Medusa's hair is unique to Ovid and therefore can shed particular light on his own distinct understanding and telling of the myth. It is clear that Medusa is beautiful (4.794-795, *clarissima forma*, "most beautiful appearance"), a thread shared with the Hesiod and Apollodorus traditions, but Rosati notes that "the principal thing to admire in Medusa—really the part of her that is 'most seen'—is her hair" (4.796, *conspetior*, "more noticeable").⁵¹ Rosati understands Ovid's novel addition here as focusing on this particular feature as an "excess of gaze," namely a highly beautiful feature that draws the male gaze, "which is obviously the basis for the retribution to which Medusa is condemned."⁵²

While Rosati again falls into the common trap of seeing Medusa herself as the person "condemned"—that is, punished or blamed for the rape—a more careful consideration of Medusa's pre- and post-rape circumstances belie this view. Medusa's beauty is what draws Neptune's attention to her. This is common in Ovid, where the male gaze is what precipitates the act of rape: "Beauty is dangerous. The victim's beauty is an invitation to and a justification for rape."⁵³ Medusa is distinctive in that what is especially beautiful to such a gaze (Rosati's "excess gaze") is her hair, and thus Medusa's beautiful hair is what precipitates Neptune's rape. Minerva's response to this rape is the transformation of Medusa's hair: away from something that attracts an "excess of male gaze" to something that repels and even destroys the male gaze. Perseus himself describes the snakes as *turpes* ("ugly", 801), showing the change in frame from the perspective of the male narrator. Anderson similarly highlights this change, noting that Ovid has us "focus on the once-outstanding beauty of Medusa, which forms such a sharp antithesis with her fearsome ugliness as Gorgon."⁵⁴ The antithesis is the key point here, as the object that attracted the male gaze has now been completely inverted: no such male gaze of unwanted attraction is now possible given the purported "fearsome ugliness" of Medusa. The parallel with the case of Daphne is instructive, as Daphne explicitly begs that her father transform her in order to destroy her beauty, since it was the thing that attracted the unwanted attention to begin with (1.546-547).

For Medusa, however, this theme goes even further. The object that so undesirably attracted attention and Neptune's sexual assault is now a feature of Medusa's power: it can

⁵⁰ See discussion again in Rosati (2024), 468.

⁵¹ Rosati (2024), 468.

⁵² Rosati (2024), 468.

⁵³ Curran (1978), 226.

⁵⁴ Anderson (1998), 495, on line 794.

literally destroy those who gaze upon it, especially any potential suitors or heroes.⁵⁵ Minerva has entirely inverted the traditional structure of the male gaze leading to sexual assault. Whereas before Medusa's hair attracted unwanted attention, now Perseus' entire narration leads with the physical description that "explain[s] the snake hair, so he artfully focuses on it as especially worth attention from the start."⁵⁶

To this we can add that Medusa's power has similarly inverted the role of fear. Ovid's rape victims often fear and flee their assailant. This fear, however, only serves to heighten the sexual attraction of the aggressor, with hunting and flight metaphors abounding in Ovid's stories as the powerful god runs down and then violently takes the innocent human. As Amy Richlin notes, "[Ovid] stresses how visually attractive the disarray of flight, and fear itself, made the victim."⁵⁷ Medusa's transformation, however, has flipped this dynamic completely. With her newly granted deadly powers, she need not fear the aggressive, sexual pursuit of men as she did before. What is more, it is now *she* who strikes fear into *men*: Perseus' approach to the Medusa's cave (4.779-781) is one of terror and fear, with a blasted landscape of death visited on others.⁵⁸ Perseus' narrative is full of dramatic tension, recounting his approach and how he managed to kill Medusa, who was so powerful and terrible that she could only be killed in her sleep. That is the transformation that Minerva has given Medusa: not a hideous existence, but a ferocious power to destroy all those who come uninvited and with ill-intent.

In a similar way, we can reconsider the common view that Medusa's banishment to the cave and isolation from society removes her ability to marry, procreate, and thus participate in traditional female virtues.⁵⁹ First we must recognize that such virtues are male constructions: the virtues of marriage and procreation in the Roman period especially reflect the frame of male elite authors, who use these mythological narratives to reinforce "how a patriarchal society conditions women to punish their own sisters."⁶⁰ This view gives rise to the interpretation that Medusa's banishment to her cave and loss of potential motherhood is a reflection and manifestation of society punishing the woman for flouting its sexual mores.⁶¹ Yet the result of Medusa's transformation is that she both flouts this traditional path of marriage *and* maintains the ability to reproduce. Her hair—so frightening to men that she is no longer desirable as a wife and mother—has removed her from the expectations of marriage and motherhood.⁶² But even in death she shows her fundamental fecundity, giving

⁵⁵ Anderson (1998), 495, on line 795, who describes a "formulaic reference to the many suitors who, in fairy stories, vie for the hand of the beautiful princess."

⁵⁶ Anderson (1998), 495, on line 796.

⁵⁷ Richlin (1992), 158-179, 162.

⁵⁸ Keith (2018), 145-167, esp. 147 where Keith argues that Perseus' story of his approach to the cave is meant to evoke fear because of the "images of men and beasts transformed, at the sight of Medusa."

⁵⁹ Cf. Freas (2018), 60-84, esp. 61 regarding the case of Caenis/Caeneus, discussed further below, whom Freas discusses within the framework of the traditional male view of a woman's worth stemming from "her reproductive capacity as a mother in the service of genealogy."

⁶⁰ Curran (1978), 226.

⁶¹ So Curran (1978), 226, 229.

⁶² Cf. Curran (1978), 224.

birth to Pegasus and Chrysaor (4.785), both understood in Ovid as manifestly positive.⁶³ And while she has been banished from society, she finds new community and family in the other Gorgons. This prospect is one that Perseus as narrator clearly finds repulsive, but only through his male frame privileging traditional female roles within male society—roles that Medusa's transformation has rendered completely moot. Medusa has thus lost her femininity from the perspective of the elite male frame (marriage; human motherhood) but has maintained her agency and perhaps femininity from another frame (sisterhood with the Gorgons; birthing of powerful mythological children).

Finally, we can take a step back to note intriguing parallels to another atypical story in Ovid, that of Caenis/Caeneus, one that similarly explores “the implications of the physical vulnerability of women.”⁶⁴ The beautiful Thessalian maiden Caenis was walking along the ocean when she was seen and raped by Neptune. Afterward, however, the god offered her a boon. Caenis accepts the boon, to transform from a woman (Caenis) into a man (Caeneus) (12.202). “The crime just committed against her determines her greatest desire, that she lose her womanhood,” that is to say, Ovid uses the case of Caenis/Caeneus to show how their agency actively turned away from womanhood in order to preserve their dignity.⁶⁵ As Curran well describes the episode, the transformation renders Caeneus “immune from any kind of penetration ... So far from womanhood is Caeneus now that he is impregnable to even that one kind of rape that makes a man like a woman.”⁶⁶ Because of the terrible violence—physical and social—caused by rape, Ovid understands that his victims can and must change, as they no longer recognize who they are. But unlike most such transformations in the *Metamorphoses* that involve the complete loss of humanity,⁶⁷ the case of Caenis and Medusa shows that Ovid also entertained situations where personhood was not lost, but rather transformed. In the case of Caeneus, this change crucially occurred in order that Caenis/Caeneus “never be able to suffer such injury again” (*tale pati iam posse nihil*, 12.202). Caeneus was not punished, in other words, but granted a boon by the god that prevented further such sexual assault. There is precedent in Ovid, in other words, for both distinct pieces of Medusa's story: transforming someone after a rape not into an animal (as with Io, Callisto, et al.) and also doing so in a way that gave them additional power in order to prevent further such assault.

Of course, both figures meet their ends via metaphors of sexual assault. As Debra Freas has noted: “Neptune's gifts fail to protect Caeneus' impenetrable body from masculine violence as the Centaurs defeat him with tree trunks, which in this context serve as phallic symbols.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Medusa's beheading by Perseus serves as a metaphor for further sexual assault and exploitation. This is no unequivocal story of female empowerment. Yet in

⁶³ See discussion in Rosati, 466. Pace Keith (2018), 153, who reads the production of “monstrous offspring and thus, again, the very incarnation of abjected flesh and blood at her death”; yet Pegasus and Chrysaor are no terrible monsters like the other Gorgons but highly esteemed mythological creatures.

⁶⁴ Curran (1978), 228.

⁶⁵ Curran (1978), 228.

⁶⁶ Curran (1978), 229.

⁶⁷ Curran (1978), 229: “Change from human to non-human is a constant occurrence in the *Metamorphoses* ... uniquely appropriate in the case of rape, for the process of dehumanization begins long before any subsequent metamorphosis of the woman's body.”

⁶⁸ Freas (2018), 60-84, 61.

an intriguing parallel, Ovid depicts both characters' transformations as explicitly leaving behind traditional womanhood, with all its expectations of marriage and procreation.⁶⁹ Caenis' gift was not manliness per se, but rather the inability to be penetrated or killed; so too with Medusa, where the gift was not loss of womanhood per se, but rather the ability to destroy anyone who would again approach her.⁷⁰ The case of Caenis/Caeneus thus provides an important comparative example of how Ovid explores a rape victim gaining power to avoid subsequent sexual assault and specifically departing from traditional notions of femininity.

The Head and the Aegis

Indeed, there is a modern interpretation, albeit a minority one outside of the academy, that Medusa's transformation was actually a gift in that it allowed Medusa to protect herself. One blog post, for instance, writes that "Minerva did not *punish* Medusa; she *protected* her."⁷¹ Such a view is symbiotic with our above re-reading, and its possibility is strengthened when one considers how Medusa's power is used by other figures following her death. Indeed, it shows how non-academic voices can be productive conversation partners in pushing analyses in novel and insightful directions.

After describing the transformation, Ovid writes of Minerva's use of Medusa's head (4.802-803): *nunc quoque, ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes / pectore in adverso, quos fecit, sustinet angues* ("now, in order that she might frighten her enemies numbed with fear, upon her breast she wears the snakes which she made"). Key here is the purpose clause, *ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes*, which describes both the function of the snakes she created as well as how Minerva herself views them. The function is clear, namely to frighten enemies, which is certainly how they functioned in the case of Medusa. The area outside of Medusa's cave was littered with men and beasts turned to stone by her gaze (4.779-781), and Medusa was as a result largely left alone in what had become a "ghostly landscape" unpopulated by man, beast, or god.⁷² The effect of the transformation, in the most practical sense, was to remove and protect her from her enemies, which included both sexual assault and violence generally.

Minerva, for her part, did not view the snakes terribly. We can recall that Perseus is the narrator at this juncture in the story, and it is his (masculine) frame that depicts the snakes as terrible (4.801): *Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros* ("she changed the Gorgon's hair into ugly snakes"). Minerva herself, by contrast, freely uses the symbol after Medusa's death, placing it upon her aegis in a position of power. Instead of an object of revulsion as described by Perseus (*turpes ... hydros*, "ugly ... snakes"), for Minerva it becomes "the symbol of the

⁶⁹ Freas (2018), 70, notes that "Ovid's Caenis does not ask to become a man; she demands not to be a woman (*Met.* 12.198-203)."

⁷⁰ Freas (2018), 70.

⁷¹ See the discussion on a Reddit wiki titled: "Did Athena transform Medusa to protect her from being raped again?": https://www.reddit.com/r/GreekMythology/wiki/bestanswers/monster/medusa/#wiki_did_Minerva_transform_medusa_to_protect_her_from_being_raped_again.3F; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026. This Reddit wiki cites the blog post "Medusa Was Defending Herself," on *Black Dog Diary*; emphasis original: <https://diaryoftheblackdog.blogspot.com/2017/10/medusa-was-defending-herself.html>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

⁷² Rosati (2024), 465, on lines 779-781.

goddess' terrifying power that paralyses everyone who looks upon it," as a form of protection.⁷³ Medusa was not harmed by her own snakes, we can recall, but rather those who approached her. Minerva herself does not shun Medusa and the snakes as an object of punishment and revulsion, but rather Minerva continues, after Medusa's death, to use her transformed power to petrify, terrify, and defeat her enemies.⁷⁴ Given Minerva's status as virginal goddess and protector of chastity (*parthenos*), reclaiming Medusa's power to ward off sexual assault is fully within Minerva's character. Such a view stands against some recent interpretations, such as Anderson's view that Minerva "conceals her irate embarrassment, before that part of her armor became decorated with Medusa's head."⁷⁵ It makes little sense to claim that Minerva is so deeply embarrassed by the symbol of something—that she herself created—that she places this symbol on her own armor/aegis and features it as a key feature of her own identity. In our reading, by contrast, Minerva places Medusa's head there, at least in part, as a warning against those in the future who might oppose her desire for chastity, the sacrality of her temple, and her stance against sexual assault.

For Perseus, meanwhile, the head and snakes become a deadly weapon, as his underhanded execution and beheading of Medusa reproduce undertones of sexual assault and rape. Yet Perseus' action was "not, properly speaking, a heroic action," as Perseus kills Medusa in her sleep, and then wields her head against others in his quest for power.⁷⁶ That Perseus was seen as unheroic was picked up by other ancient authors. Nonnus, for example, "also emphasises this non-heroic aspect in order to devalue the figure of Perseus," as Nonnus interprets Ovid's telling as unsupportive of Perseus—and, we could thus infer, more in support of Medusa and Minerva.⁷⁷ Perseus' subsequent use of Medusa's head and snakes in Book 5 is also relevant here, as he primarily uses them against men forcing themselves on women—just as Minerva originally intended—defeating first Phineus who tried to seize Andromeda by force and then later Polydectes who had been forcing himself upon Perseus' own mother Danaë.⁷⁸ Eventually, having vanquished all the threats—sexual and violent both—to members of his family, along with killing many members of the aggressors' respective courts, Perseus offers the head back to Minerva, bringing the episode full circle (5.177-267).

It might be a stretch to consider Medusa's transformation as something so strong as a gift, as some readers have taken it. This is no proto-feminist story of empowering women, given Medusa's victimhood and Neptune's avoidance of punishment. But there is a real difference in Ovid's account of Medusa's story from others in the *Metamorphoses*, and therefore we can find useful nuance in how we understand Medusa's transformation as something decidedly other than the traditional "punishment for being raped" reading.⁷⁹

⁷³ Rosati (2024), 470, on lines 802-803.

⁷⁴ Anderson (1998), 496, on line 803: "the aegis 'now' becomes a frightening decoration. The head of Medusa, prominently placed on it, looks at the foe and petrifies him." The head of Medusa is innately powerful and destroys enemies; it is not a symbol of shame as discussed below.

⁷⁵ Anderson (1998), 496, on lines 802-803.

⁷⁶ Rosati (2024), 465, on line 776.

⁷⁷ Rosati (2024, 467). Nonnus (*Dionysiaca* 25.64) describes it as "a womanish attack against an unarmed Medusa."

⁷⁸ See discussion in Barchiesi (2024), 468-469 on lines 799-800, including Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* 2.4.3 [45].

⁷⁹ Curran (1978), 213f.

Ovid clearly describes Minerva's transformation of Medusa as pertaining to the rape itself, and the transformation, if not quite as a gift, then certainly as offering future protection against many forms of subsequent violence. Even after Medusa's beheading, her power continues to be used against men in similar contexts until it is returned and displayed with honor upon Athena's own breast.

Conclusion

While Minerva did grant Medusa some protection, this story is by no means a perfect feminist tale by modern standards. Medusa was still transformed without her consent, in a way that no real person might want; maybe, though, a survivor in Medusa's position would be hungry for such a change and power. However, it is important to note that Minerva, as a goddess lower in the Olympian pecking order than Neptune, would have had no way to exact vengeance directly upon him as she did Ajax. Instead, she grants terribly deadly power to Medusa to ward off subsequent assaults, while leaving Medusa's personhood intact.

We are by not arguing that Minerva, much less Ovid, are particularly concerned with women's rights. However, Medusa's transformation is undoubtedly different from other transformations of women within the *Metamorphoses*, both narratively and linguistically. The result of her transformation is that she receives *more* power and agency over her own life rather than losing her identity and human nature. Because of Minerva's forced transformation, Medusa now has the power to protect herself from anyone, man or god. What happened to her in Minerva's temple can never happen to her again, at the hands of anyone.

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