

Unmasking a Monster: Development of the Gorgon Visage and the Changing of Fear in the Ancient World

Ancient depictions of the Gorgon are highly stratified in both literary and artistic sources. While it is impossible to determine the exact origins of Gorgon mythology, evidence suggests this figure existed long before its literary debut in Homeric epic. Rather, this creature is likely derived from a multitude of sources from far-reaching regions, each reflecting unique notions concerning fear in the ancient world. Through analysis of the conceptual, visual, and theological development of this creature, specific and tangible fears held by individuals within ancient societies can be better understood. Many scholars (Alban 2013, Feldman 1965, Howe 1954, Zolotnikova 2016) have analyzed the development and interpretation of Medusa either in particular instances or the implications of the Gorgon as a physical representation of fear itself. However, comparing the origins of this creature to the culmination of her development in Ovid's retelling in which she becomes a beautiful and tragic human character demonstrate a continuous change in Greek and Roman culture and their relationship with fear. What do these changes represent in society, and what is it that these changes show regarding shifting senses of identity and their relationship to individuals in the ancient world?

Many archaic sources depict the Gorgon not as a snake-haired woman, but rather a bearded, tusked monster, occasionally embroidered with snake motifs. In many cases, the snake imagery is not present, and in other depictions, the Gorgon is shown as having wings, at times on both its back and feet. In its primordial state, the Gorgon is simply the head of a creature, adorned with animalistic and "wild" physical characteristics. The tusks of a wild boar, the hanging tongue reminiscent of that of a wolf, as well as the snake imagery all represent active physical dangers faced by the nomadic shepherds that made up much of the population of

Archaic Greek culture. In this sense, the Gorgon can be viewed as a scarecrow character, apotropaic in nature, and meant to be more intimidating than the beasts it was intended to ward off. Here, the Gorgon appears around the Greek world as a layered creature, displaying a diverse array of physical characteristics depending on regional and cultural factors in each example. These traits all reflect tangible threats that would have posed daily risks to people's lives and livelihoods. The Archaic Gorgon, as well as her subsequent iterations demonstrate a direct representation of the fears of each generation who changed her interpretation in both literary and artistic form.

By directly comparing the Archaic forms of Homer and Hesiod with the Ovidian depiction of the Medusa-Gorgon, the fear itself remains, while changes or similarities in the form can indicate specific things feared by ancient people, both in the form of physical and societal threats. In altering the Gorgon to become the beautiful and tragic Medusa who has her own autonomy stripped away by the vengeful divine, the changing nature of fear in the ancient world is revealed. Ovid's inspirational sources from which he draws from allow modern and ancient readers to fill in the gaps regarding what was feared within Greco-Roman society. It also directly reflects how fear changes over time as culture and society changed around them. Medusa has almost always served as an embodiment of fear, however a careful analysis of the transition from a fearsome creature of nature to a being with thoughts, feelings, and a unique story represents changing ideas of identity in the ancient world.

Bibliography

- Alban, Gillian M.E. "Medusa as Female Eye or Icon in Atwood, Murdoch, Carter, and Plath." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 46, no. 4 (2013): 163–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030714>.
- Feldman, Thalia. "Gorgo and the Origins of Fear." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 4, no. 3 (1965): 484–94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20162978>.
- Howe, Thalia Phillis. "The Origin and Function of the Gorgon-Head." *American Journal of Archaeology* 58, no. 3 (1954): 209–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/500901>.
- Zolotnikova, Olga A. "A Hideous Monster or a Beautiful Maiden?: Did the Western Greeks Alter the Concept of Gorgon?" In *Philosopher Kings and Tragic Heroes: Essays on Images and Ideas from Western Greece*, edited by Heather L. Reid and Davide Tanasi, 1:353–70. Parnassos Press – Fonte Aretusa, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbj7gjn.23>.