

## Visions of Medusa in Patricia McKillip's "The Gordan in the Cupboard"

Medusa had many forms, even in ancient times. The earliest version of her myth appears in Hesiod's *Theogony* and describes her as the only mortal of the gorgon sisters (Hes. *Th.* 270). Ovid altered her myth by making her monstrosity a punishment for her sexual assault (Ov. *Met.* 4.794–803). Both version, monster and victim, appear in Patricia McKinley's novella "The Gordan in the Cupboard." There are multiple versions of Medusa present, all of whom are resolved into normal women as the protagonist learns to see past his own expectations. McKillip uses the Ovidian theme of feminine passivity in the objectifying gaze of a masculine hero but turns it on its head (Keith 2018, Lovatt 2013, Salzman-Mitchell 2005), so that Medusa herself becomes a product of the male gaze's distortion.

"The Gordan in the Cupboard" is inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood of mid 19th century England. McKillip's male protagonist, an idealistic young painter named Harry, can only "see" the women in his life as romanticized visions, just as Perseus can only see Medusa's distorted reflection in his bronze shield. Aurora, his mentor's wife and the object of his adoration, "turns him to stone," so that he becomes unable to interact naturally with her (McKillip 6-7). Jo, the model for his own painting of Medusa, he sees only as his artistic vision, so that he willfully forgets her humanity. Each woman becomes Medusa through Harry's inability to see them as individuals.

Medusa herself plays the unexpected role of muse to Harry's artistic endeavor. Hesiod's monstrous gorgon speaks out of an unfinished painting of Persephone to which Harry has just added Aurora's mouth. After she inspires Harry to paint her, she continues to inhabit the painting to teach Harry how to see past his own distorted vision. Despite her Hesiodic persona, her voice

has Ovid's subversive perspective (Lovatt 2013). She counters his Pre-Raphaelite interpretation of Medusa as a beautiful young woman with a cheerful description of her and her sisters' ugliness and deflates the Epic version of Perseus's conquest with her own caustic commentary.

At the Gorgon's prodding, Harry begins to take enough of an interest in Jo to recognize that her Medusa-like gaze is the thousand-yard stare of a trauma survivor, and that she was the original model for the unfinished Persephone painting who disappeared after she became pregnant out of wedlock. The realization drives Harry to pay attention to the social undercurrents of his Pre-Raphaelite circle and to hold his first real conversation with Aurora. She reveals that her real name is Olive, and she is the daughter of an innkeeper who does not love being idealized, permanently shattering Harry's false vision.

McKillip counters her theme of the distorted male gaze with an insightful female gaze born from shared experiences, an idea common in contemporary feminist retellings of the Medusa myth (Garber and Vickers 2003). The gorgon painting recognizes Jo as her original, Persephone turned into Medusa, and correctly interprets the reason to be the same as the one that turned Ovid's Medusa from a virginal beauty into a dangerous monster. Harry's housekeeper, Mrs. Grommet, likewise recognizes Jo from her previous modeling work and proves that she understands why Jo left because a friend of hers had similarly abused. Her ability to "see" Jo allows Jo to openly grieve for the loss of her innocence and the death of her baby. Her tears banish her "Medusa" thousand-yard stare, so that even Harry can recognize her. Mrs. Grommet's understanding, her ability to see Jo as a person and sympathize with her trauma, transforms Jo from Medusa back into herself.

Patricia McKillip's "The Gordan in the Cupboard" uses the various versions of the Medusa myth, coupled with the theme of the gendered gaze from the classical myth to create a

story about the power of art to both transform and reveal the truths about the feminine experience. All of Harry's visions of Medusa are only monstrous when seen through the distortion of the male gaze. Seen clearly, through the lens of a shared gaze of feminine experience, they all prove to be human.

#### Bibliography

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