

Petrifyin': Canonical Counter-Discourse in Shara McCallum's "Madwoman as Rasta Medusa"

Emily Greenwood writes, "A dominant theme in the existing literature is the apparent incongruity of classics in the context of the Caribbean, where the discipline would seem to be on the wrong side of the racial, imperial, and political oppositions that have divided the region historically" (Greenwood 2005, 65). However, Jamaican author Shara McCallum's poem "Madwoman as Rasta Medusa" redeploys the Medusa myth to challenge both imperialist and patriarchal ownership of the Gorgon's story. McCallum's poem engages in canonical counter-discourse, claiming a kinship with Medusa from a feminist and post-colonial perspective through the poem's language and the agency given to Medusa by the speaker.

Canonical counter-discourse is a subversive literary strategy which contests the power structures that traditionally derive authority from Greco-Roman classics—and in the context of the West Indies, those power structures include both British colonialism and patriarchy. As Helen Tiffin argues, however, canonical "counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'" (Tiffin 1987, 23). In other words, by utilizing classical myth, literature, drama, or visual arts to challenge the imperialist and/or patriarchal power structures, post-colonial and feminist authors not only present sophisticated analyses of power structures and cultural capital, they also simultaneously offer critiques and counterpoints to those structures.

McCallum's poem is fully engaged in this project of post-colonial and feminist canonical counter-discourse. McCallum's speaker, Madwoman, identifies with Medusa, speaking in the first person as the woman whose anger "go turn all a Babylon to stone" (McCallum 2017, 1). In

this sense, McCallum's poem follows a trend of feminist Medusa poems going back through the 1970s, where Medusa is presented in the first person and speaks feminist rage. These authors turn Medusa from the object to whom things are done in the classical myths, to a subject who is empowered and active in meting out punishment for the sexual violence she suffers. However, unlike writers like Mary Sarton (1971) or Ann Stanford (1977), McCallum's poet persona remains distinct from Medusa—the speaker remains Madwoman. Only for this poem does Madwoman make sense of her experience through the lens of Medusa's story.

The other strand of canonical counter-discourse in McCallum's poem is a post-colonial claiming of classical mythology on behalf of the Jamaican subject. The poem is written in Patois—the Jamaican folk language that evolved in resistance to the standard English imposed under British colonialism—and it is run through with apocalyptic Rasta theology. When Madwoman says, "I-woman is the Deliverer and the Truth" (McCallum 2017, 2) or "I-woman is the Reckoning and Judgment Day" (McCallum 2017, 15), she utilizes theological concepts central to the Rastafarian worldview—especially the conflict between oppressive evil and the liberatory potential of the sufferer redeemed. Rasta theology is anti-colonial and stridently resists the power structures at the heart of global inequality, especially as those inequalities typically break down along racial lines. So, when McCallum associates Medusa with Rasta's liberatory ideology, she deploys the Gorgon to resist the imperialist and racial hierarchies that initially taught Greco-Roman myth and literature in Jamaica as part of the British education system meant to impose metropolitan culture and values on the colonies.

Because modes of oppression, disenfranchising, and silencing frequently work along multiple planes, we must be aware of the multiple systems of oppression many subjects find themselves with. As a female poet of color from the Caribbean, McCallum faces multiple axes of

historical forms of oppression—gendered, racial, geographic, and as an immigrant to the US. In order to effectively pursue the project of dismantling matrices of power and domination, canonical counter-discourse must be understood to be intersectional, resisting multiple-axes of oppression within and between societies. McCallum’s poem perfectly models this intersectionality.

Bibliography

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