MONSTROUS WOMEN: ADAPTATION AS HUMANIZATION

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a rise of retellings of Greek myths which have recaptured the imagination of contemporary readers, greatly propelled by social media. Many of these retellings center female and LGBTQIA+ voices which have previously been silenced by ancient authors. This thesis focuses on two of the most maligned women in Greek mythology, Helen of Troy and Medusa, in two recent novels, *Daughters of Sparta* and *Stone Blind*. Through an application of monster theory and adaptation, both characters are given voice and made "human".

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is difficult to walk into a major book retailer and not see the tables piled high with mythological retellings and reimaginings. The trend has taken popular literary culture by storm, with every myth being retold or repackaged to appeal to modern audiences. Whether set on a faraway planet or in ancient Greece, this new genre takes an expansive view of Greek mythology. Madeline Miller's 2011 novel *The Song of Achilles*, for example, was one of the first novels of this genre to gain popularity in 2021, primarily through TikTok when female readers raved about the storytelling and LGBTQIA+ representation. Despite being published ten years earlier, the "discovery" of *The Song of Achilles* by online groups led to a rise in modern mythological literature, most of which is centered on marginalized groups.

Mythological retellings in and of themselves are not new, in fact they cycle through the popular consciousness every few decades. Nathaniel Hawthorn's *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* and *Tanglewood Tales for Boys and Girls*, published in 1851 and 1853 respectively, both repackage and recount Greek myths for children. The 20th century saw more theorical works on mythology, including Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* (1942), Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), *The Power of Myth* (1988), and *The Hero's Journey* (1990), along with Campbell's numerous broadcasts, journal publications, and lectures. And more recently, Neil Gaiman has written a staggering amount of works involving several different mythologies, including *American Gods* (2001) and *Norse Mythology* (2017). Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series, both first published in 2005, saw a small popular resurgence in interest in Greek mythology, including a film adaptation of Riordan's work. However, the amount of mythological works being published in just the last few years is overwhelming. This phenomenon could be attributed to a combination of several factors. First,

there is a rise in readers who are interested in mythological retellings, particularly from the point of view of women as they are the target audience. Second, there has been a similar growth in the number of female authors who are interested and trained in the Classics, making them an authority on these subjects, and giving them the ability to immerse readers in the mythological worlds of antiquity. These two major factors combined with the expansion of online platforms designed to share personalized book reviews has led to substantial growth in mythological retellings.

Almost every Greek mythological story you can think of has been retold by someone, and the majority of authors choose to focus on mythological women. "Some modern writers and artists were finding these women… and putting them back at the heart of the story" as a means of retelling old stories with a new focus and giving voice to female characters who had previously been dismissed or ostracized (Haynes 3). Madeline Miller built upon the success of her first publication by following it up with her highly rated novel *Circe* in 2018. Jennifer Saint is one of the major players in this genre, publishing *Ariadne* (2021), *Elektra: A Novel* (2023), and *Atalanta* (2023), while Euripides' *The Trojan Woman* has been adapted in Pat Barker's in *The Silence of the Girls* series (2018-2024). This is not to mention the immense number of stories centered around Hades and Persephone including the popular webcomic *Lore Olympus* (2018) by Rachel Smythe[1], *A Touch of Darkness* (2019) by Scarlett St. Clair, and *Neon Gods* (2021) by Katee Robert, just to name a few. Dangerous, maligned, or silenced women are the main inspirations for these retellings. Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008), *Clytemnestra* (2023) by Costanza

[1] Smythe's series has also flooded book retailers and is currently on its seventh volume with more to come.

Casati, and *Queens of Themyscira* (2022) by Hannah M. Lynn all explore the lives of Greek mythological women who have previously been seen as threatening or who have never been given the chance to tell their side of the story. Lillian Doherty believes Greek mythology is missing "a body of folklore, including versions of myths, produced by women for women" especially in comparison to other global cultures (21) [2]. This new genre of modern mythology assists in filling this gap which Doherty recognized over twenty years ago by centering female authors and female subjects.

Maligned female characters are popular subjects in the genre, with authors working to humanize and make ancient figures appear realistic to readers. Claire Heywood's novels *Daughters of Sparta* (2021) and *The Shadow of Perseus* (2023) both explore some of the most hated women in Greek mythology: Helen of Troy, Clytemnestra, and Medusa. Natlie Haynes is one of the most popular authors in this regard, earning acclaim for her novels *The Children of Jocasta* (2017), *A Thousand Ships* (2019), and *Stone Blind* (2022), as well as her two theoretical works, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (2020) and *Divine Might* (2023) which explores the building mythology of female goddesses. It is with this extensive, though not exhaustive, list in mind that I examine two of the most popular novels in this genre which explore the inner lives of some of the most monstrous women in Greek mythology, Helen of Troy and Medusa. Through these works I argue that the authors humanize their monstrous subjects by giving readers a glimpse into their psyche and allowing these mythological women the space to exert their autonomy, vocalize their pain, and author their own stories.

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[2] Doherty also elaborates on the anthropological fieldwork of women and the increased number of discoveries and knowledge uncovered due to their access to male-phobic spaces.

Throughout this thesis I will examine novels by two authors, Claire Heywood and Natalie Haynes, and show how they shape the most monstrous women of Greek mythology into fully realized beings who are able to assert their wills and give voice to their innermost thoughts. Heywood and Haynes use these adaptations as a tool to recontextualize the actions of Helen and Medusa in order to unmake the monsters of antiquity. These novels, as well as the works they are based off of, reflect the fears of the society in which these women lived, whether it be sexual deviancy or violence against women. Monstrous women are considered monstrous for a reason, and I argue that they are usually not made monstrous of their own accord. Through an application of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory, I examine how these women have changed and adapted to a new understanding of "monster."

In Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta*, the novel follows the dual lives of Spartan sisters Helen and Klytemnesta from their early childhood to the immediate aftermath of the Trojan War[3]. Heywood focuses on portraying the inner thoughts of two of the most hated wives in mythology as they struggle with marriage, children, and war. Heywood works to unravel the intentions of the major players of the Trojan War, leading to a heartbreaking novel which explores sexual deviancy, autonomy, and guilt. The second novel I examine is Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind*, which retells the story of Medusa from several perspectives, ranging from humans to gods to the serpentine hair of the monster herself [4]. Haynes emphasizes the part each character

[3] Claire Heywood graduated with her B.A. in Classical Civilization and her M.A. in Ancient Visual and Material Culture from the University of Warwick.

[4] Natalie Haynes studied Classics at Christ's College, Cambridge and currently works as an author, broadcaster, and journalist.

plays leading up to the murder of Medusa and explores the interiority and anger of the Gorgon's severed head as it is made into an instrument of death.

Both authors portray their subjects as victims of wrongdoing, nearly always at the hands of men. It is the showing of these wrongdoings and the characters' reactions to them which humanize them to a modern audience. Helen is forced into her marriage to Menelaos without her input, Menelaos attempts to coerce her into having more children against Helen's insistence after she nearly dies in childbirth, she is wooed by Paris and taken to Troy, and finally she returns to Sparta with Menelaos after Troy falls. The men around her are not interested in her opinion, only in her beauty and in the glory that comes from claiming Helen as their wife. Meanwhile, Medusa experiences wrongdoing at the hands of the gods and a mortal "hero." First Medusa is raped by Poseidon as she offers herself in exchange for a pair of mortal girls' safety, then she is mutated into a monster by Athene which results in her self-isolation, so she does not kill anyone by turning them into stone, and lastly, she is murdered in her sleep by Perseus without provocation. After Medusa is murdered, her head, in the form of the Gorgoneion, is used against her will as a weapon. Where Helen lacks agency Medusa lacks a voice, both of which are direct reflections of the ancient texts from which they are sourced.

Three major ancient texts serve as the basis of my analysis as a way to understand the differences contemporary authors are making to the source material. Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* written about 2,700 years ago, both feature Helen as either a main player or as a significant background character. The third text to serve as a foundation for my analysis is Publius Ovidius Naso's, or Ovid's, *Metamorphoses*, written 2,819 years ago. Despite being a Roman poet, I have chosen to use Ovid's version of the Pereus and Medusa myth instead of a Greek poet for three reasons. First, it is one of the first texts which devoted more than just a

handful of lines to not only Medusa but also the entire myth. Second, Ovid's version is more well known by the general public and therefore could be known by readers before they begin reading *Stone Blind*. Lastly, Ovid's version is one of the major inspirations for *Stone Blind*, notably in the context of Medusa and Poseidon's interaction.

While no one myth is the "true" version, in fact they vary spectacularly by region, these collections are some of the most popular versions of ancient myths by modern standards. The works of Ovid and Homer give contemporary readers a glimpse into the popular stories of ancient Greece and Rome as well as to the belief system of those peoples, however contemporary authors have changed the point of view in their retellings. "Retellers ancient and modern have freely altered the motives of the characters, the sequence of narrative events, and the point(s) of view from which they are told" (Doherty 19). This is not a condemnation, but an appeal for readers. They are interested in hearing classic stories from a new perspective, particularly those of women.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory is fundamental to my argument as it illuminates the core of these novels: the monstrous women that inhabit them and how they have been misrepresented and misjudged in the past, and how they may be made less monstrous through a deeper understanding of their motivations. Previous critics of Helen focused on the differences between different ancient portrayals, not how she is currently perceived or her motivations. Critics of Medusa are more varied, with no overarching theme to the scholarship, but also no examination of her portrayal in modern media. By applying Cohen's theory to both women I find a nuance in character and a deeper understanding of their motivations which previously has been disregarded. A "monster" is a person or creature who engages in conflict with the mainstream and actively defies convention by "question[ing] binary thinking and introduce[ing] a crisis"

(qtd. Cohen 7). Cohen further asserts that a monster is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment- of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy… giving them life and an uncanny independence" (Cohen 4). Cohen sees monsters not as something to fear but a mirror to the fears of the society which the monster inhabits; Frankenstein's monster reflects fears of scientific advancement, Dracula reflects fears of sexuality and the wild East, so too do Helen and Medusa reflect the fears of Greco-Roman antiquity. It is through Cohen's definition of monster, blended with Helene Cixous' concept of women telling their own stories that my argument fully takes shape.

Helene Cixous groundbreaking work, "The Laugh of the Medusa" focuses on several facets of second wave feminism, however I am most interested in her call for women to "write her self" and "put her self into the text… by her own movement" (875). These contemporary retellings allow maligned women of mythology to do just that, inserting themselves into the text, and telling their own stories with the assistance of contemporary authors. Cixous declares that "in woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history" as a way to connect women across not only physical boundaries, but also across time; Haynes and Heywood bring their monsters into the future through this connection and make them relatable to contemporary women (882). Other scholars hold similar views on the role of contemporary retellings. Muskaan Kapoor uses Cixous' work to inform his own, stating "women in literature, especially in mythologies are either silent or have been largely misrepresented and portrayed negatively" (89). Much of the draw of these retellings for readers is the chance to experience an old story from a new perspective, from the viewpoint of a character who previously was forced into silence or has historically been portrayed as a villain in a situation where they are not in control. These monstrous women reflect societal fears, both in

antiquity and today. Contemporary authors let these silenced women write themselves into the text and “if history has taught us anything, it is that women making noise-whether speaking or shouting-tend to be viewed as intrinsically disruptive” (Haynes 100). Authors and characters disrupt the old way of doing things, they do not sit by as characters of antiquity are wronged. They now scream about it for all to hear.

Chapter 2: The Whore- Helen of Troy

Her life had never been her own. She had been foolish to think it could be.

-Claire Heywood, *Daughters of Sparta*

Despite being the most famous woman in Greek antiquity, Helen of Sparta/Troy is a surprisingly difficult figure to pin down. She has no one standardized story: sometimes she is the demigod daughter of Zeus, sometimes King Tyndareus of Sparta is her father, in some iterations she goes with Paris willingly, in some she is kidnapped by the Trojan prince, and there is even one account where she never makes it to Troy and instead takes a trip to Egypt. Possibly the only consistent ideas about Helen are that she is beautiful and that the Trojan War, and subsequent deaths, are solely her fault. Helen has lived on through time, consistently characterized as a duplicitous woman and cheating wife. It is Helen's unknowability which makes her of interest not only to me but also to modern readers. She has been burdened with the Trojan War for centuries and turned into a monster for following a man across the sea when it may have not been her choice. I argue that Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta* humanizes Helen by recontextualizing her actions, removing the influence of the gods, and turning her into a person, not an adulterer. Helen is given the space to write her self into her own story, instead of letting others define her.

Helen has appeared in a handful of ancient texts, *The Iliad* being the most known to modern audiences. Written by Homer around the seventh century BC, *The Iliad* is an account of the Trojan War told from the various perspectives of gods and men as they wage war against each other. *The Odyssey* recounts Odysseus' return home to Ithaca, in which Helen plays a small part. Euripides' 415 BC play *The Trojan Woman* focuses on the lives of the women in Troy

during the Greek siege as they attempt to escape their fates. Euripides paints Helen as a sympathetic character who defends herself against Menelaus and Hecuba's accusations and blame, freeing herself of the guilt and responsibility for the war. Euripides' play *Helen*, performed only three years after *The Trojan Women*, is the most prominent version of the story where an apparition of Helen follows Paris to Troy while the original Helen finds herself in Egypt. In this version Helen is assisted by Zeus and Hermes and never sees the walls of Troy; instead, she spends the war in Egypt with Proteus and stays faithful to Menelaus. Homer's *The Iliad* serves as the inspiration for all of these versions.

The Iliad starts in media res, with the Greeks already outside the walls of Troy, having been at war for nine years and now bickering internally. Despite the entirety of the Trojan War being her fault, and therefore the reason *The Iliad* exists at all, Helen appears little in the Homeric text. While there may be errant curses upon her name, she only makes two significant appearances as the majority of the text is focused on fighting. The populace of Troy wishes for Helen to leave Troy, despite also remarking upon her goddess-like beauty, and predicts she will bring catastrophe for the city (Homer, bk. 3, lines 191-197). Although this is the general view of Helen, her father-in-law, King Priam, and brother-in-law, Hector, do not seem to fault Helen for the deaths of their citizens. Priam blames "the gods who roused the tears of war, / in conflict with the Greeks" while Hector blames Paris for his thoughtless abduction[5] of Helen (bk. 3, lines 204-

[5] "Abduction" is a difficult word to translate from ancient Greek. While it could mean to take someone against their will, there is also a definition which implies the consent of the person being taken. Therefore, it is unclear whether Helen willingly left Sparta with Paris or if she was taken forcefully, not to mention the murky interference of the gods.

205, bk. 6, lines 439-440). However, Helen takes on most of the guilt for the war, replying to Priam “I wish that I had chosen painful death/ the day I came here with your son and left/ my bedroom, kinsmen, late-born precious daughter/ and cherished group of women friends” (bk. 3, 212-215). This is not the only instance of Helen lamenting her part in the war, when she makes a return in Book 6 she wishes “that at the start right when my mother/ gave birth to me, a cruel gust of wind/ had borne me to the mountains, or the waves/ of loud-resounding sea, and swept me off, / before all this could happen” (lines 463-467). Helen’s remorse here reinforces her show of remorse to not only the Trojans but to the audience as well.

Despite many of the Greeks’ focus on glory and gold, it is Helen’s marriage that is at the center of the conflict. While the fighters may not highlight why they have come to Troy, Helen is aware of the struggle for her hand. In disguise, the goddess Iris tells Helen to come to the city walls to watch Menelaus and Paris fight, after which she “will be called the winner’s *loving* wife” (bk. 3, line 173, emphasis mine). The emphasis of “loving” here could imply not only that Helen has no choice in who she marries but also that she is expected to act wifely towards the victor regardless of her own feelings. Helen herself does not understand this, arguing with Aphrodite, “Now Menelaus has defeated Paris, and wants to take me home with him again, / although I am so hateful” (bk. 3, lines 502-503). Helen knows she is hated by all and yet she is still coveted as a trophy for whomever wins the duel.

Helen does not place blame only on her shoulders, but also on Paris’s. As Paris hides from the fight, she declares to Paris and Hector “I wish I shared a bed with someone better, / a man who understood the condemnation/ his actions would incur from other people” (bk. 6, lines 468-470). She does not think that Paris fully comprehends the consequences of his actions, the catastrophic effect they would have, or the rancor the couple faces due to them. In her first

appearance in *The Iliad*, Helen hurls insults at her Trojan husband, asserting “I wish that you had died out there, defeated/ by that strong man who used to be my husband” (bk. 3, lines 539-540). Despite her initial love for him, Helen now finds Paris lacking and is even disgusted by his cowardly ways. Helen’s attempts to share culpability for the war with Paris fails as the prince refuses to take accountability for the inciting incident of the Trojan War, the Judgement of Paris[6]. Paris is not the only person to blame for Helen and Troy’s circumstance, there are also the gods who are deeply invested in the outcome of the war and its players.

In Book 3 during Helen’s first appearance, Aphrodite commands Helen to go to Paris after she saves him from his duel with Menelaus. Fed up with Aphrodite’s orders, Helen questions the goddess,

> Why do you want to trick me in this way? / Will you keep leading me to yet more cities, / … if any other mortal takes your fancy? / Now Menelaus has defeated Paris, and wants to take me home with him again, / although I am so hateful. Is that why/ you come to me now with these tricks of yours? / Then go to him yourself and sit beside him! / … Spend all your time on taking care of Paris, / crying for him, until he makes you either/ his slave girl or his wife! But I will not/ ever go back. It would bring retribution. / And I will never service that man’s bed. / All of the Trojan women in the future/ will blame me if I do, and in my heart/ I will endure more pain than I can measure. (bk. 3, lines 498-516)

[6] This will be addressed in a later section of this chapter at greater length; however, it was important to mention the Judgement of Paris at this time as it will become pivotal.

Aphrodite's direct interference in Helen and Paris' relationship is emblematic of the influence the gods have over mortals. *The Iliad* is filled with godly intervention on both sides, they pull the strings of the fighters like puppets, helping their favorites and condemning their enemies. Aphrodite influences Helen not because she cares for her, but because she holds affection for Paris. If Helen's outburst here is read literally, then she had no choice in leaving Sparta with Paris, making her as much of a victim of the war as the other women. The Greeks and Trojans alike are acutely aware of this manipulation with Helen stating to Hector "But the gods ordained these troubles as they came to pass. / …Zeus set an evil lot upon us all, / to make us topics of a singer's tale/ for people in the future still unborn" (bk. 6, lines 467-481). She knows that they have no control over the outcome of this war and understands the historical implications of the situation unfolding. Helen is right to be aware of her historical interpretation, especially because she also appears in Homer's *Odyssey.*

Helen makes one notable appearance in *The Odyssey*, though she is mentioned several times, usually with a curse upon her name. In Book 4 Helen and Menelaus host Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in Sparta as he searches for a sign of his father. In *The Odyssey* Helen is acutely aware of the part she played in the war, stating, "They made my face the cause that hounded them", she understands that she is the origin of the Trojan War and the immense amount of death which ensued from the campaign to take her back to Greece, though she does not phrase it that way (Homer, bk 4, line 148). This version of Helen's character is also possibly the root of the perception of Helen as a two-faced wife who switches between Paris and Menelaus as it benefits her. Helen confesses to Telemachus, "The Trojan women keened in grief, but I/ was glad-by then I wanted to go home./ I wished that Aphrodite had not made me/ go crazy, when she took me from my country,/ … and the bed/ I shared with my fine, handsome, clever husband" (bk. 4, lines

260-265). If this reading of Helen is to be taken at face value, then she is not culpable for her abduction or for the war; however, if the audience believes her to be conniving then Helen only went back to Menelaus because the Trojans had lost the war. Homer complicates Helen's narrative with this contrasting characterization, leaving readers and critics to come to their own conclusions[7].

While modern readers may not be familiar with ancient iterations of Helen, they may be aware of her appearance in more recent years or in other famous works. Helen's fickle and flirtatious nature has been of great interest to artists and writers throughout the centuries. Playwrights of the past, such as Christopher Marlowe and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, featured Helen in their tales of Doctor Faustus/Faust. It was Marlowe who coined the phrase "the face that launched a thousand ships" which has haunted Helen through the ages ever since (line 99). More recently Margaret Atwood featured Helen in *The Penelopiad*, her 2005 retelling of *The Odyssey* from Penelope's point of view. The cousins occasionally cross each other's paths in the Asphodel Fields, with Penelope consistently degrading her, "Helen the lovely, Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes" (Atwood 102). Atwood's Penelope, like many others, perceives Helen as the solitary cause of the Trojan War. Hollywood has not been kinder to Helen. Wolfgang Peter's *Troy* (2004) does not focus on Helen, but she is still largely blamed for the war,

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[7] It should be noted that Homer is himself a complicated character. *If* the blind poet Homer existed, he was most likely akin to our idea of a travelling bard. The most prevalent theory currently is that "Homer" is a name assigned to someone or several people who collected the stories of many bards and were the first to write them down. This accounts for the discrepancy in characters and well as the different writing styles in each of his texts.

and even initiates it by going with Paris willingly, though she acts clueless about the reasons Troy and Greece are fighting. Like all monsters, there is usually at least one creator who sees them in a different light. The television show *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-2022) follows DC characters through time where they come across significant historic and comic characters and attempt to keep the world from ending. Helen appears in two episodes of *Legends*, "Helen Hunt" and "The Good, the Bad, and the Cuddly." In "Helen Hunt" Helen has found her way to 1937 Hollywood where she starts a war between two movies studios. Taking pity on Helen after she expresses misery and regret at the loss of life during the Trojan war, the time traveling team drops her off at Themyscira, DC's Island of the Amazons. In a later episode, "The Good, the Bad, and the Cuddly," Helen makes a reappearance, now decked out in full Amazonian armor and ready to help the time travelers defeat a demon army. Despite being an odd show, this is one of the only iterations of Helen which not only shows her regret for causing the war but also allows her to grow into a more fully realized being. Heywood understands the perception of Helen by modern readers and works to complicate the character of Helen, not unlike Euripides, taking great inspiration from the playwright and from Homer's works.

Much of the available criticism surrounding Helen within mythology is a hefty list of comparisons of her portrayals by different authors, which are more in-depth than what I have currently provided. On the other hand, little work examines her autonomy in marrying either husband, her role as a mother, or her accountability in general for the Trojan War. When examining Greek myths, it has been found that women "in mythologies are either silent or have been largely misrepresented and portrayed negatively. The lack of male characteristics and qualities make women inferior, according to the general patriarchal beliefs…" (Kapoor 89). Helen's inherently feminine characteristics, the importance of her marriages, of bearing children,

her beauty, her sexuality, make her “inferior” to men of antiquity. Much of Helen’s negative portrayal is due to her femininity and status as a trophy as her only value is in being possessed by others.

Helen’s transformation into a monster is brought about by her sexual deviancy. As Cohen states, “monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, [or] *sexual*” (7 my emphasis). Helen’s role as the mythological Whore is fueled by her connection to the sexual, both as herself and in her connection to and embodiment of Aphrodite. The goddess initiated Helen’s adultery and brought her to Paris, initiating the Trojan War. Adultery, when viewed as masculine, is a neutral act; many men in antiquity and in modernity do not face legal or social consequences for adultery. However, for women, they were and still are condemned for straying from their marriages. In antiquity, there was a “double standard of sexual conduct, which permitted some kinds of extramarital sex to men but not to women” (Doherty 26). Menelaos is socially and lawfully permitted his affair with a slave, but Helen is eternally condemned for running away with a man she claims to love. By overstepping the “boundaries of her gender role [Helen] risks becoming a… Weird Sister, Lilith, [or] Bertha Mason” it is her “‘deviant’ sexual identity [which] is… susceptible to monsterization” (Cohen 9). Helen’s “deviance” has pushed her into the role of adulterer, whether by choice or by divine force.

Helen’s sexuality is also fueled by her close connection to Aphrodite. Meagher claims, “[Helen] sees Aphrodite in everything she… is made to do; and so, presumably, does Aphrodite. Helen is… possessed… Helen had no choice. Like Aphrodite, she *is* desire. Helen can no more resist the power that defines her than can others resist her” (27). This view of Helen as a conduit for Aphrodite releases her from the culpability and guilt of starting the war, because she was used

as a puppet, just like the Greek and Trojan armies [8]. If we shift accountability to Aphrodite, Helen is free of the culpability of not only the war, but also her title of Whore. However, the murkiness of Helen's autonomy and intentions are what complicate her character.

The truest statement about Helen may have been made by Natalie Haynes in *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths*, "the more we try to understand her, the more she seems to elude us: Helen of Troy, Helen of Sparta, Helen of joy, Helen of slaughter" (84). Helen embodies multiple dichotomies which she has no control over. The lack of clarity surrounding her allows for ambiguity where other mythological characters maintain a clear sense of self and character. Odysseus is clever and always in the right even when he makes a thoughtless decision, Heracles is always the strongest hero, King Midas is always brought down by his own greed. It is this murky characterization which Heywood embraces as she attempts to bring clarity to Helen's choices and understand the complex system of interpersonal relationships which lead to the Trojan War.

In *Daughters of Sparta,* Heywood retells the lives of Helen and Klytemnestra[9] from their childhoods in Sparta up to the fallout of the Trojan War. Heywood attempts to complicate the character of Helen, making her both a young wife who feels no affection from or towards her husband and a naïve queen who runs away with a foreign prince. She does cause the Trojan War,

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[8] This will be addressed later in this chapter as blame shifts between mortals and gods.

[9] Heywood uses the spelling "Klytemnestra," as opposed to the more popular "Clytemnestra," as it is more aligned with Bronze Age ancient Greek in order to embrace the "spirit of historical authenticity" (vi-vii). "Menelaus" is similarly changed to "Menelaos."

but she is not the only figure complicit in the bloodshed. Heywood's Helen takes on the ambiguity of her predecessors, as well as the pain and guilt of her decision.

First portrayed at the age of eight, Heywood includes Helen's first abduction by a young Theseus[10]. Even as a child, others are concerned with her perceived sexuality: Klytemnestra takes offense when Theseus compliments Helen's hair and imagines her in "full bloom," later King Tyndareus and Klytemnestra both show frantic concern to whether Theseus "touched" Helen or not (9, 14). After Helen assures them, Theseus only kissed her, both show relief that Helen's purity is still intact (15). This early interest in Helen's sexuality, even as a child, was not unheard of in antiquity or even now; however, the consequence of more than a kiss would be the termination of Helen's future marriage prospects. As a daughter the only value she gives her family is in the future marriage and alliance she can secure through it. Her family is not concerned with Helen's emotional wellbeing after a possible assault, but whether she is still eligible to be wed, elevated her sexuality to a place of importance. After she marries Menelaos, Helen becomes concerned with her sexuality and the lack of fulfillment in her marriage. "She wanted love and passion… a connection… But sometimes she felt as though she were married to a stone wall" (95). The deprivation of affection Helen experiences from Menelaos, despite being the most wanted woman in the Greek world, is what fuels Helen to consider Paris as a lover and a husband and allows Paris to manipulate Helen into leaving with him.

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[10] Mythologically, Helen's age during this episode ranges anywhere between six and twelve depending on the source. In most versions of this abduction Theseus planned on Helen living with his mother Aethra for several years before the two wed due to her immature age. In contrast Theseus was a teenager.

Leaping forward in time to the siege of Troy, Helen's internal monologue gives voice to the guilt she feels[11]. "She knew the war was her fault, that so many men's lives were on her hands... If she could take it all back, she would… all she could do was to endure her punishment- their hatred and her own terrible guilt" (298). Much of Helen's character in *Daughters of Sparta* revolves around guilt: guilt for not loving Menelaos, guilt for not feeling a connection to her child, guilt for her deceptive use of birth control, guilt for running away with Paris, and guilt for the war. Heywood's Helen, as opposed to Homer's in *The Odyssey*, feels an immense amount of remorse for the actions she has taken and the pain she has caused others. Due to this guilt being so prevalent, Helen's inaction throughout the war may come into question for modern readers. Mirroring the scene from Book 3 of *The Iliad* with Aphrodite, Heywood's Helen slowly grows to resent Paris, not only for serving as the catalyst of the war, but also for his unwillingness to fight in the conflict he started. Despite her dislike of Menelaos, Helen recognizes his bravery in leading an army to reclaim his wife while Paris sits safely behind the walls of Troy, not lifting a finger to help his people or protect his wife, "to think that she had caused so much strife and horror for his sake" (Heywood 299). As the war drags on Helen internally questions the purpose of the war. If Helen did not cause it on purpose and Paris is not fighting to protect her or their love, what else is there? When a Trojan soldier asks "'How does it feel?... To see men bleed for

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[11] The timeline of events from Helen's abduction to the fall of Troy is unclear in every iteration of the story. In accordance with the information Homer gives, most critics would guess that it took Helen and Paris about ten years to sail to Troy and the war raged for ten years after their arrival, with *The Iliad* covering the last year. Heywood does not fully follow this perceived timeline, instead shortening the journey from Sparta to Troy but keeping the ten year long war.

you?'" she hesitates, "They do not bleed for me was what she wanted to say… They fought for the *idea* of her, but did that really make any difference to the men lying dead in the sand? To the widows waiting at the gate" (Heywood 324). Here Helen begins to question why the war is being fought and what her part in the carnage is if they do not fight directly for her. Helen never asked Menelaos to fight for her or for her suitors to swear an oath which would take them to war; and yet she is held accountable for their actions. As the siege finally comes to a bloody close, Helen reflects on the part she has played in the struggle.

After the fall of Troy, Helen ponders why the war had been fought, wondering "what did men ever sacrifice for the sake of a woman?" (Heywood 350). Concluding that Helen herself was never the true prize, she is left wondering what was her actual role in the conflict and what was the desired outcome for the fighters? Ultimately, Helen was a pawn, an excuse, something easily sacrificed for the true treasures of war: glory and gold. If men never "sacrifice for the sake of a woman," what else is left (350)? If Cohen considers monsterization to also be political, then Helen's fluctuating status as Queen of Sparta and Princess of Troy also serve to make her a monster in the eyes of others, though she may not have a say in either title (7). Just like for the fighters at Troy, Helen was never the goal for either of her husbands. Paris only views Helen as a prize; he does not treasure her for her personality or her heart but for her looks and the superiority he gains by possessing her. "I won you and I took you. The most beautiful woman in the world is mine, and no other man shall have you while I live," Helen is a trophy to Paris (Heywood 310). As for Menelaos, when the pair are reunited at the end of the novel Helen confronts him about his own adultery. In return, Menelaos "spoke so plainly, without apology, as if his infidelity were nothing... No one condemned him for it. No blood had been shed for his unfaithfulness. No widows cursed his name" (Heywood 355). Helen attempts to make Menelaos

similarly monstrous for his infidelity, but it is his lack of remorse or the acceptance of wrongdoing which reveals the discrepancy in the treatment of extramarital sex between genders. As a man Menelaos is allowed, and even expected, to have affairs while Helen is eternally condemned for it. Helen's sexual deviancy makes her monstrous in the eyes of others, however Heywood leaves another crucial factor out of the novel.

One thing not seen directly in *Daughters of Sparta* is the interference of the gods. They do not become corporeal and, aside from Artemis' distanced role in Iphigenia's death, they do not make their wills known to mortals; they play no direct role in the story. However, I believe it would be foolish to overlook the role the gods played in the original Homeric text and what their exclusion does for this retelling. *Daughters of Sparta* frames the narrative of the Trojan War as a complex human issue initiated by a foreign prince's desire for a beautiful woman and a queen's desire to feel wanted and loved, backed up by Odysseus' clever agreement to prevent this very thing from happening (Heywood 75). A major plot point which is left out of Heywood's interpretation is the Golden Apple of Discord, the Judgement of Paris, and the interference of the gods in the battles of the Trojan War.

Originally deployed by Eris, the Golden Apple of Discord labeled "tē kallistē" or "to the most beautiful" was thrown into the middle of Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, where the goddesses fought internally over who it was meant for. Finding no peaceful resolution, they take the matter to Zeus who pawns the decision off to Paris, prince of Troy. The three goddesses each offer Paris a gift for choosing them as the fairest: Hera will bestow him a kingdom, Athena will grant him victory in battle, and Aphrodite promises him the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife. Paris chooses Aphrodite as the fairest, gaining Helen as a reward for his decision.

The Judgement of Paris is not present in *The Iliad* beyond a few lines in Book 24, "[Hera and Athena] still retained the same hostility/… because of the deluded recklessness/ of Paris Alexander, who insulted/ those goddesses…/ and praised the other goddess, Aphrodite, / who gave him catastrophic lustfulness" (Homer lines 34-40). The most detailed version is in the *Kypria* which is believed to have been written by Stasinus around 700 BCE, as a lost text not much is known about the composition. What little is known of the text is it was part of the Epic Cycle with tells the complete story of the Trojan War and precedes *The Iliad*. Small fragments of the text exist, as well as a review, which point to the *Kypria* being written after *The Iliad* but proceeding it chronologically. According to this review, the *Kyrpia* ends with a more obvious statement of Zeus' plans to "relieve" the earth; in other words, Zeus plans to use the war to cull the population (Marks 9). It is this lack of godly interference which makes the reading of *Daughter of Sparta* both unique and complicated.

The Iliad features the gods of Mount Olympus fighting amongst themselves for the victory of either the Greeks or Trojans, aiding either side in the subsuming battles. According to the *Kypria* Zeus and Thetis planned the war as a way to keep the human population under control, leading Thetis to cause chaos between the goddesses with the Apple of Discord. It is unclear why Zeus leaves the decision to Paris in particular, though an assumption can be made that he was most likely to choose an outcome which resulted in a long and bloody war. Between both the *Kypria* and *The Iliad*, the gods play a major part in the Trojan War, making their exclusion by Heywood of note.

Daughters of Sparta is rooted in historical realism, there are no gods or deus ex-machina. While characters may pray there is no evidence of the gods hearing such prayers or existing whatsoever: even the rumor of Helen being the daughter of Zeus is never substantiated

(Heywood 20). By removing the gods from the narrative Heywood gives all agency over to the characters, they are granted autonomy in their decisions and are free of divine intervention. As a result, Helen no longer has the excuse of madness for leaving with Paris as she did in *The Iliad,* now she has no one to blame but herself. In a similar fashion Paris now has to work to court Helen instead of her being bestowed upon him like a gift. By removing the gods from the narrative Heywood allows characters to make their own decisions and feel the direct consequences of their actions, resulting in a new understanding of the characters' motivations.

Daughters of Sparta is a novel which seeks to recontextualize Helen not as an unfaithful wife, but as a young woman who desperately sought affection and companionship with a man who ultimately did not value her for anything other than her beauty. While Homeric Helen may be chiefly known for her sexual deviancy, Heywood's Helen is wracked with guilt over the loss of life brought about due to her mistake. Heywood shifts the sole blame of the Trojan War off of Helen's shoulders and distributes culpability to all of the major players of the war: Helen, Paris, Menelaos, Agamemnon, King Tyndareus, and even Odysseus. The Trojan War is complicated through this distribution, de-monster-fying Helen in the process and turning her back into nothing more than a human being. Now, she more realistically embodies the fears of antiquity: female sexuality and autonomy. Helen's sexual deviance would occasion great fear for men in ancient Greece as it reflects the biased patriarchal practices in place and leaves confusion in its wake. Any resulting children from such a deviance raises the question of paternity and blurs the clear lineage of the husband due to the unknowability of the child's father. Now viewed by contemporary audiences, Helen is reduced from a monster to a desperate woman who was pushed into making a difficult decision which had unforeseen consequences. Similarly, female autonomy in antiquity would not allow women such deviances or the ability to disagree with

their husbands and fathers. In modernity, Helen is allowed to make her own decisions and not be condemned for the act of choosing, whether it be to leave her husband or to not have more children. Helen's ability to choose her own future humanizes her, allowing her the space to write her self into the story and give voice to her desire.

Chapter 3: The Mutant- Medusa

Men call you monsters because they don’t understand you.

-Haynes 272

Medusa, possibly more than any other Greek figure, has gone through an immense amount of change throughout the centuries. She begins her journey of endless transformation as a consenting mortal turned monster, morphs into a victim, then an acolyte of Athena, a villain, before finally becoming a modern symbol of protection for women against sexual assault and male aggression. In the previous chapter, we saw Helen as an undefinable character who exists in shades of grey. In contrast, Medusa always has a clear and definitive character, though it has changed many times throughout the centuries. Medusa is possibly the most transformative figure in Greek mythology, and one of the most mentioned, however, she has never been the primary focus of any story until recently. I argue that Haynes uses her novel, *Stone Blind*, to expand on Ovid’s own retelling of the Perseus myth, showing her at her most vulnerable, and giving Medusa the opportunity to speak which in turn unmakes the monster and turns her human.

Ancient Greek and Roman texts mention Medusa extraordinarily little in comparison to Perseus despite being featured in the same story. Hesiod is the first to briefly mention her in *Theogony* around 750-650 BCE, however, the most detailed tales of Medusa come from the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE-17 CE) and Greek writer Pseudo-Apollodorus (100-200 CE). While Pseudo-Apollodorus has a more detailed description of Perseus’s tale, I have chosen to focus on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as it is the most well-known to modern readers and aligns more with Natalie Haynes’s novel, particularly in the changes made to Medusa and Poseidon’s relationship.

Medusa first appears in the Greek poet Hesiod's *Theogony* between 750-650 BCE. He describes her and her sisters,

> Sthenno, Euryale, and Medusa who suffered a grim fate. She was mortal, but the other two immortal and ageless; and with her the god of the Sable Locks lay in a soft meadow among the spring flowers. And when Perseus cut off her head from her neck, out sprang great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus. (Hesiod 11)[12]

These are the only lines the Gorgons received from Hesiod, though it may be one of the only ancient examples where Medusa receives more attention than Perseus. Her mortal status is one of the main points of note from Hesiod and separates her from her deathless sisters. While many other storytellers featured Medusa in their tales, the Roman poet Ovid's version is best known to modern Western audiences.

Ovid divides Perseus's tale into two sections; the first is the best known where he tricks the Graiae out of their eye, murders Medusa, and rescues Andromeda from a sea monster (bk. 4, lines 602-806). The second section outlines Perseus's fight with Andromeda's uncle, Phineus, as well as the rescue of his mother and defeat of King Polydectes (bk. 5, lines 1-253). It is only at the end of "Perseus (1)" that readers are given more information about how Medusa became so

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[12] There is also some debate about Hesiod's wording. Either it can be taken at face value and the relationship between Medusa and Poseidon is consensual, or it serves as an entendre where Medusa's genitals are the "soft meadow" and the "spring flowers" may be a reference to her virginity (Haynes, *Pandora's Jar* 88). This interpretation is murky at best when it comes to consent and no other information is provided.

well known, “the story goes that [Poseidon][13] the sea god raped this glorious creature inside the shrine of [Athena]. [Zeus’s] daughter screened her virginal eyes with her aegis in horror, and punished the sin, by transforming the Gorgon’s beautiful hair into horrible snakes.” (bk. 4, lines 798-803). In Ovid’s telling Medusa’s transformation is a punishment for an act which she did not willingly commit. This is a common occurrence in mythology, as already outlined with Helen, where women are punished for their sexuality, whether they choose to be sexually active or not, while men are not even admonished for the equal role they play in the act. It is this assault that has redefined Medusa’s story and morphed her from a monster to a victim.

If we are concerned with a reader’s prior knowledge coming into *Stone Blind*, it is helpful to first understand where they may have encountered Medusa previously. In contemporary stories where Medusa is featured, she has often been a villain. Louis Leterrier’s 2010 film *Clash of the Titans* is a bastardized version of the Perseus story where Medusa serves as a plot point and MacGuffin to defeat the Kraken[14]. The video game 2018 *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* features Medusa, known in-game as the Writhing Dread, and is the most difficult of the mythical monsters to defeat, but receives no further characterization outside of the stone statue garden the protagonist walks through on the way to kill her. The new *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series on Disney+ features Medusa in the episode “We Visit the Garden Gnome Emporium”

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[13] Due to Ovid’s Roman origins, he labels the gods using their Roman names of Neptune, Minerva, and Jupiter. I have changed them to their Greek monikers for ease of reading.

[14] The depiction of Medusa is the least of the film’s problems. *Clash of the Titans* depicts the Norse mythological Kraken controlled by Hades who has no connotation with the ocean or its monsters. The mythological work being done is muddy at best and disrespectful at worst.

where Percy must behead her to not be turned into a statue[15]. Medusa is still a villain in this version, though she does garner some sympathy from the protagonist as she attempts to relate to the derision Percy feels for the gods. Despite the majority of her depictions being unfavorable, Medusa has also gained some recognition with modern audiences as a survivor of sexual assault.

The 2018 show *Charmed* features Medusa as a monster of the week in the episode "Switches and Stones" when a character accidentally summons her after being slut shamed by a frat boy. Medusa proceeds to turn assaulters, harassers, and those complicit in their actions to stone. Instead of defeating her with magic or beheading, the female characters sympathize with Medusa as an assault victim and she disappears after a moment of katharsis ("Switches and Stones"). This plays off of a more modern interpretation of Medusa as a sexual assault victim and survivor, turning her into a symbol of protection for those who have suffered a similar fate. Within the last few years, many women who have been assaulted have chosen to receive Medusa tattoos as a way to protect them against future assaults or male aggression ("The Medusa Tattoo"). This new interpretation of the myth brings the Medusa story into the modern day and keeps it in the popular zeitgeist.

In transitioning the Medusa story to the twenty-first century, we are unable to disregard the rise in the naming of rape culture. In "Rethinking Rape Culture: Revelations of Intersectional Analysis" Alisa Kessel states, "while 'rape culture' has been widely invoked in mainstream US

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[15] This episode has some noteworthy changes from the original 2005 book series, including keeping Medusa beautiful, her warning the kids against the motivations their godly parents (Poseidon and Athena) and calling herself a "survivor" instead of a monster, implying her assault to the teenage son of the god who assaulted her, though she is not explicit in what she survived.

discourse in recent years, 'rape culture' … is typically defined as a milieu that normalizes aggressive heterosexual male violence toward women" (131). Using Kessel's definition broadly and taking nods from Ovid, Haynes frames Medusa as a victim of assault and rape. These products of normalized "aggressive heterosexual male violence" have deep roots in other Greek mythological stories: Zeus often assaults mortal women, including Perseus's mother Danaë, Apollo is seen as a tragic lover due to many of his partners dying, but the nymph Daphne turned into a tree because she feared violation by him, the Greek Army claims war brides after razing Troy and they are considered heroes in epics and plays, the list of mythological assaults is indisputably long. Medusa is a victim of rape culture on three fronts, though only two are male. Poseidon's assault most closely adheres to a more popular definition of rape culture, Perseus's beheading is a more general male violence, and Athena's transformation of Medusa, while not male, invokes rape culture through the ways it is perpetuated by women[16].

Victim blaming by women for being in the wrong place at the wrong time or wearing clothes deemed inappropriate has persisted since ancient times and is rampant in many modern conservative spaces. As a victim of rape culture, "Medusa is ultimately indistinguishable from Athena herself, who enacts patriarchal power in the female guise, using Perseus as her male

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[16] There is a long history of godly women perpetuating rape culture in Greek mythology. Hera is the most culpable figure, cursing the women her husband slept with, examples range from Io whom she tormented in the form of a gadfly after Io was turned into a cow, and Leto whom Hera tried to prevent from giving birth to Zeus' godly progeny, Artemis and Apollo, and even Artemis herself who demanded Iphigenia's sacrifice as recompense for the actions of her father, Agamemmnon.

instrument of punishment" (Schlutz 337). Athena upholds the standards put in place by those around her, punishing not the aggressor but the victim and using another man to do so. Returning to Kessel, "if rape were a feature of the landscape of heteropatriarchal control, then it must be nurtured by a culture that simultaneously normalizes and valorizes sexual violence as a masculine ideal" (131). Athena assists in this normalization by choosing to punish Medusa instead of Poseidon for the act he committed in her temple and assisting Perseus in Medusa's murder. Rape culture is nurtured further in the myth with the expectation for Perseus to commit murder to save his mother who is similarly being threatened.

The moral of Medusa's story has been debated by critics and philosophers for centuries. Charlotte Currie in "Transforming Medusa" claims those who have tried to interpret the Medusa story in the past have been "unsuccessful in their efforts, and through attempting to find the true meaning of Medusa, they have simply forced her to become a mere reflection of their own beliefs, fears, and aspirations" (Currie 170). Freud viewed Medusa as a castration myth, believing Medusa's head to be symbolic of female genitalia, with her snakes signifying pubic hair, and reminding young men of their mothers[17] (202). He continues that to meet Medusa's gaze is to become "stiff with terror… becoming stiff means an erection" stretching his interpretation of the myth even further (202). If Currie's theory is applied then it can be assumed that Freud fears genital mutilation, though exclusively for men. Haynes posits a different idea, that "it represents an abiding fear of the power of the female gaze" (*Pandora's Jar* 110). This can certainly be taken literally in Medusa's case, but applied more broadly to a modern audience the

[17] It is also of note that Freud used a myth about a woman being assaulted and beheaded to personify a *male* fear when the danger is directed towards women and enacted by men.

female gaze represents feminine power and autonomy, creating fear in men and strength in women[18]. If women are allowed autonomy, then they are able to make their own decisions and more importantly are able to accuse and condemn men for the violent actions they perpetuate against women.

Haynes has produced her own criticism of the character of Medusa which predates *Stone Blind*. In *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* Haynes explores the myths, influences, and interpretations of ten mythological women which was influenced primarily through her changing understanding of Medusa (1-3). One of the leading criticisms Haynes puts forth is Medusa's status as a tool. She claims, "Medusa is objectified to such an extent that her head becomes nothing more than a tool" (102). In modernity, we may think of Medusa's objectification through film adaptations that portray her as an attractive woman, such as in *Clash of the Titans* (2010) where she is portrayed by a scantily clad supermodel, Natalia Vodianova. Instead, Haynes argues that Medusa literally becomes an object, more specifically she is subjected to instrumentality, where someone "treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes" (Nussbaum 257). Medusa's experience of instrumentality by Perseus dehumanizes her. Haynes continues, "[Medusa] is more valuable to [Perseus] as a weapon than she was as a living creature" (103). The objectification of Medusa not only adds to the pains she has suffered from Perseus and the gods but elevates her to the status of monster.

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[18] This statement is heavily steeped in gender binary; however, I chose to only distinguish the two sexes in order to follow the examples of the previous critics and this distinction more clearly illustrates my point.

Cohen posits that "through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space" (17). Medusa's pre-transformation body allows for such a space for Poseidon while her post-transformation form gives this space to Perseus; both men are allowed to act out fantasies of aggression on Medusa and it is this aggression which makes Medusa monstrous, not her "monstrous" features of snake hair or her stony gaze. What is more, the space of her body is "permanently liminal" due to the lack of repercussions faced by her assaulters for the violence, their violence and aggression do not affect anyone other than Medusa. Cohen also postulates "behead the corpse, so that, acephalic, it will not know itself as subject, only as pure body" (Cohen 4). After her mutation, Medusa becomes a "pure body," no longer cognitive of anything but her fear, she is more concerned with her newly weaponized sight and her new monstrous form then with processing the harm done to her. Haynes embraces this "acephalic" nature by further exploring Medusa's murder through the Gorgoneion.

Natalie Haynes's 2022 novel *Stone Blind* explores the Medusa myth from not only her viewpoint but from twenty-three unique perspectives ranging from goddesses to monsters, to even plants. Told exclusively through female points of view, the novel recounts Medusa's life, the Perseus myth, godly squabbles, and the observations of the Gorgoneion, Medusa's severed but conscious head[19]. The novel broadly follows Ovid's version of the Perseus myth, framing Medusa as a victim of power and circumstance rather than a monster in need of slaying. Haynes

[19] "Gorgoneion" in definition is more akin to the Gorgon faces on the outer walls of temples, however Haynes uses it in *Stone Blind* as a more elegant name for Medusa's severed but sentient head.

uses the novel to bring the Medusa myth into the twenty-first century by emphasizing her transformation from protector to victim, to survivor, and finally to weapon. Through Haynes's narrative Medusa becomes more human while the Gorgoneion becomes a personification of Medusa's rage as she witnesses Perseus's choices and passes time on Athene's aegis[20].

Traditionally Medusa's story is instigated by Poseidon. In Hayne's interpretation, Poseidon frames his rape of Medusa as a "privilege," saying she should feel "honoured that [he] is singling [her] out in such a way" (53). His use of such language attempts to elevate Medusa to a station he believes her to be unworthy of in an attempt to flatter her into submission. The inherent power imbalance of this exchange points to Poseidon's position as not only an Olympian god, which he reminds Medusa of as a means of coaxing, but also his physical strength. His ego attempts to chip away at Medusa's resolution before coercing her to give false consent in an attempt to save a pair of mortal girls Poseidon threatens to assault if Medusa does not submit (58). Medusa sacrifices herself to save the mortal girls, succumbing to Poseidon's wishes, and seeing her own body as monstrous in return for the godly transgression.

Medusa is not the only victim of Poseidon's actions; he also transgresses against Athene. Despite not being present for Medusa's assault Athene feels a deep connection to her temple and has knowledge of what occurs there at all times, "it was something he had done somewhere else, to someone else. But it had also been done to her" (116). For Athene, this transgression is not centered around Poseidon's assault but instead focused on her distinction as a virginal goddess. As one of the virginal goddesses Athene is granted a status which can only be achieved by a

[20] Haynes uses the spelling "Athene" instead of "Athena." This difference comes down to personal preference and regionality.

female goddess maintaining their chastity. While not wholly uncommon, remaining virginal was somewhat rare in ancient Greece and usually only pursued by women who worked as priestesses in the temples of the virginal goddesses: Athena, Artemis, and Hestia. This continued abstinence made these women and goddesses revered and gave them status and privileges not afforded to other women at the time. It also made sexual transgressions against them more offensive than to other gods. As a direct result of Poseidon's actions, Athene punishes Medusa by transforming her hair into snakes and turning her gaze deadly. Instead of taking her aggression out on the assaulter, Athene instead focuses her anger on the victim, stating, "the girl would do" (117). Misplaced revenge is not new for Athene, and this is one of many instances where she specifically targets women[21]. Haynes does include one chapter from the point of view of Iodame, a young priestess in Athene's temple who she turns to stone using her aegis, which contains the Gorgoneion (361). Athene's punishment of Medusa perpetuates the aggression already done against Medusa by Poseidon and she continues to use the Gorgoneion to perpetuate violence against other women.

Medusa has been violated by gods twice and denied the autonomy taken by them, changing not by her own volition but by theirs. Feeling distorted first from her assault by Poseidon, and then from her transformation via Athene, Medusa wonders to her sisters if she is "still Medusa" as she feels disconnected from her body (271). Medusa's body feels suddenly foreign to her, it is no longer a safe space, and she considers herself monstrous despite now

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[21] The most well-known myth is of Arachne, who Athena turns into a spider for being too good at weaving. A chapter from Corvix's point of view is also included in the novel. Athena turned Corvix into a crow to help her escape from Poseidon.

matching her sisters' appearance. It is common for assault survivors to feel as though their bodies are battlegrounds for their assault and to feel paralysis or disassociation within themselves as a result. Euryale assures Medusa that she is still herself, despite what has been done to her, because of the "ways [she] stayed the same," through her kindness and gentle nature (271). The Gorgon sisters come together in solidarity to help Medusa heal from her trauma and adjust to her new appearance. In contrast to the gods, the Gorgons are exceedingly close, their show of sisterhood aids Medusa in coming to terms with the violence continually enacted against her. The sisters muse over Athene's punishment, believing she would be proud to have made Medusa just as monstrous as her sisters (272). Medusa pushes back against this assertion, claiming her sisters are not monsters, to which Euryale replies, 'Neither are you. Who decides what is a monster?' 'I don't know… Men, I suppose… Men call you monsters because they don't understand you'" (272). A lack of understanding is common when it comes to monsters, their unknowability leads to fear and confusion which results in violence. Monsters are not born but created, either through ill intent or by bestowing the title of monster.

Haynes emphasizes one part of Medusa's story which is consistently overlooked in modernity despite its inclusion by many classical authors: Medusa was asleep when Perseus killed her. Approaching the Gorgon's cave in the middle of the night, Perseus uses the cap of Hades to make himself invisible while Athene guides his hand to strike the blow against Medusa (282). As her Herpeta[22] put it, "there is no battle to be had between an armed man and a sleeping

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[22] There is not a direct translation of this word, however, it broadly means a group of reptiles. Haynes uses "herpeta" as a collective term for Medusa's snakes who she distinguishes using the Greek alphabet so they can converse with each other.

girl" (279). The disparity in their physicality and age denotes yet another power imbalance for Medusa, another one which she does not stand a chance against, as Medusa is a young teen and Perseus is a young adult. Medusa consistently has her bodily autonomy taken from her and the wills of others enacted against her. One of the Herpeta laments that "everyone will forget" Medusa was asleep during her murder (283). She and Perseus were not engaged in a battle, or a game of cat and mouse as so often portrayed in modern media, in reality she had no opportunity to defend herself. However, the Herpeta offer one new piece of information that complicates her death, Medusa had her eyes closed "'until the final moment she was asleep. β: 'If what you're saying is true, why didn't she open her eyes?'... α: 'Because she wouldn't kill him'" (285). Medusa has been shown throughout the novel to have a soft spot for humans, she is intensely interested in their lives and their wellbeing, and some part of her will even intercedes with the Gorgoneion's disdain for humans. Even with the slightest knowledge of her impending death, Medusa refuses to open her eyes and save her own life, refuses to become the monster others claimed her to be, she continues to put the wants of humans above her self-preservation, which the Gorgoneion deeply resents.

Haynes does not give the reader much time with Medusa pre-assault, only about fifty pages. Instead, much of the remainder of the novel is told from the Gorgoneion's perspective. Self-described as the "the Gorgon head, the head of Medusa, born (or perhaps I should say created) in the moment she died," the Gorgoneion comments on Perseus's actions as he journeys through Ethiopia before going to save his mother, judging and hating him every step of the way (291). The Gorgoneion's quick rumination on whether she was born or created calls into question her agency in both Medusa's death and the Gorgoneion's, well, creation. The context of birth implies a familial connection and belonging; Medusa and her sisters were born out of affection,

or even love, between Phorcys and Ceto. In contrast, to be created implies *someone* doing the creating, a singular will being enacted. The implication of a Creator allows for distance between them and the creation, the only link between the two is an implied ownership. In the Gorgoneion's case, Perseus is her creator, he has no link to her other than his objective of obtaining a Gorgon head to save his mother and the opportunity to use the head as a weapon. The Gorgoneion is a device for him to use at will to destroy those who stand in his way; recall Haynes' criticism "[Medusa] is more valuable to [Perseus] as a weapon than she was as a living creature" (*Pandora's Jar* 103). The Gorgoneion is used to kill Andromeda's uncle, numerous wedding guests, and Medusa's mother, Ceto, all against her will (332). Throughout Perseus's adventures, the Gorgoneion is unable to voice its protestation at its use, it has no say in how it is used or where it is taken.

Historically, Medusa has remained silent despite being one of the oldest mythological figures. This long history is portrayed through the Gorgoneion's sentiment "I have been waiting a long time to have my say so I'm not giving it up now" (293-294). Medusa/the Gorgoneion have always been silent characters, either a monster to be slain or a symbol of fear on a breastplate. Recalling Cohen, "the woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, Bertha Mason, or Gorgon" (9). It is not a coincidence that Gorgon falls under Cohen's list of monstrous, deviant women. To be outspoken is to be perceived as difficult, as masculine, and the Gorgoneion oversteps this boundary repeatedly. In the end, it proclaims, "I feel like opening my eyes and taking in everything I can see whenever I get the chance. I feel like using the power the goddess gave me. I feel like spreading fear wherever I go, wherever Perseus goes. I feel like becoming the monster he made" (304). The Gorgoneion has made the reclamation which Medusa has been denied, embracing the title of monster and the

power of her mutation. This claiming of “monster” is empowering for the Gorgoneion, a realization of what Medusa was forced to endure, the violence that created the Gorgoneion, and its use as a weapon.

If the goal of a mythological adaptation is to update a story for a new, modern audience, then Haynes updates Medusa’s by finally letting her speak. Medusa’s historical silence, despite being one of the best-known mythological figures, has led her to be perceived as conniving, dangerous, and monstrous, although she is never a direct threat to anyone. With her new voice, she is able to express affection for her family, disdain for the gods, and protectiveness for mortals while the Gorgoneion is finally able to let its rage and grief be heard. This updated story of an assault survivor may not be empowering in the way we would traditionally expect, not every story can embody Garbati’s “Medusa” statue[23], but the depiction of the mental impact and disassociation of one’s own body after an assault is not often portrayed in modern media with nuance. Haynes’s portrayal of Medusa works to not only finally give her a voice, but also shed light on a deeply misunderstood mythological figure who has often been seen as monstrous. This modernization of the power of feminine rage shown through the Gorgoneion projects this story across time and uplifts those who have experienced similar circumstances. Haynes allows Medusa to speak to modern readers and connect with them across time and space in a way which makes her story timeless.

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[23] Luciano Garbati’s 2008 sculpture “Medusa with the Head of Perseus” portrays a proudly naked Medusa, holding a sword in one hand and gripping Perseus’s head by the hair as she stares resolutely ahead. Neither arm is raised in victory, this was not an act of glory but of defense. The statue gained popularity around 2018 for its mythological role reversal and feminist messaging.

Haynes concludes *Stone Blind* with this bittersweet sentiment,

> And what happened to the Gorgon head? The final part of the story. It was carried out to the sea eventually. It is enmeshed in seaweeds and coral, which have hardened around it, like stone. The Gorgoneion is lost beneath the waves, and no one can reach it, not even the creatures of the sea. It has closed its eyes, one last time. (368)

While Medusa's story will never be laid to rest, Haynes has given her a voice which demands to be heard. Medusa's stony gaze serves now as a reminder to never cross the gods but also to let your rage ring in the ears of your enemies and wrongdoers. The Gorgoneion finds peace and even autonomy in its watery resting place, never to be used for violence again.

Stone Blind brings new light to the character of Medusa, portraying her not as a monster but as a young woman who feels deep affection for her sisters, protectiveness over mortals, and fear over her own power. On the other hand, the Gorgoneion is given the chance to speak, which had been denied by previous authors. Together, Medusa and the Gorgoneion become one entity and plot a story of transformation which unmakes the monster to reveal, if not a human, a person. Through the Gorgoneion, Medusa is able to find peace from the violence and objectification which she endured and is now able to tell her story in a way which highlights her best features and the worst of those who wronged her. Haynes allows Medusa to write her self, all aspects of her self, into a long mythological tradition which has previously kept her mute. Medusa becomes human through her acceptance of her "monstrous" form and through her death while the Gorgoneion becomes human through its voice.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

I have argued throughout this work that modern authors use adaptation as a method to redeem monstrous women of mythology in order to recontextualize their actions and allow them the space to tell their own stories. Most importantly, these retellings work to unmake the monsters of antiquity. I have outlined how Claire Haywood and Natalie Haynes have adapted mythological stories for a contemporary audience, reflecting the values found in their predominantly female readership, and assisting these monsters in writing themselves into the narrative. This project highlights an emerging contemporary genre which is often overlooked due to the subject matter and intended audience; however, they also continue the cyclical tradition of storytelling.

Daughters of Sparta and *Stone Blind*, and the larger genre of contemporary mythological retellings, give their monstrous women the opportunity to tell their sides of the story by writing themselves into it. Helen is able to convey the guilt and remorse she feels for her part in the Trojan War as well as the helplessness she feels in her marriages. Medusa is able to express her previously unheard rage over her continual mistreatment and violence through the Gorgoneion. Cixous says, "by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display… the act will also be marked by woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak*" (880). By writing themselves into their own stories, Helen and Medusa expand beyond their bodies, both the beautiful and the monstrous, to become people who have been misunderstood and misrepresented in the past. These retellings also allow readers the opportunity to see themselves in mythology where they may have been previously absent or overlooked. Ancient mythological stories are almost exclusively focused on men and these novels give women the space to see themselves in these stories, for better or for worse. "In a society centered

on the male citizen, the feminization of monsters served to demonize women" (qtd. in Zimmerman 2). Authors of antiquity made these monsters, now authors of modernity are giving them new life and work to make the monster, if not a hero, then a human.

These retellings also bring the wrongdoings against monstrous women to the forefront of the narrative. In comparison to Homer, Helen's lack of agency in her marriages is made the focus of *Daughters of Sparta* as opposed to the individual battle between the Greeks and the Trojans or the part that the gods play in the conflict. Similarly, *Stone Blind* is more concerned with Medusa's inner life and her connection with her sisters as opposed to Perseus's journey. By focusing on how these women are wronged, the authors bring awareness to previously overlooked transgressions and allow the culprits to join the protagonists in their monstrosity.

If a monster is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment" and reflects the fears of the society in which it lives, then these novels act as a reflection for the fears of today's society, the most prevalent being female autonomy and violence against women (Cohen 4) [24]. Ancient Greece kept men and women separated and women had to be under the care of a guardian, whether it be a father, husband, or son. This lack of autonomy leaves women to be infantilized or treated as property and did not allow them to the ability to make their own choices regarding how they live their lives. While not nearly as common in modernity, lack of autonomy is still a concern for modern women, particularly in conversations surrounding motherhood and medical

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[24] I am more specifically concerned with Western English-speaking countries in this particular case.

decision making[25]. This lack of autonomy leads to dehumanization and monsterization of women. There is certainly a general fear of violence against women which has persisted from antiquity to modernity. Seen particularly with Medusa's sexual assault and murder, women have had and continue to have fears of male aggression. Many women will not walk alone at night, they will not be in an enclosed room with a man they are not related to, and on dates they share their location with friends in case they are murdered. Women live in a state of ambient fear which results in them taking what appear to be drastic measures to ensure their safety[26]. These acts dehumanize women, causing them to turn to tales of monsters where they have a certain amount of control.

Heywood and Haynes actively work against the monsterization of Helen and Medusa by humanizing them through their novels. Both authors allow their protagonists to take an active part in their decision making, for better or for worse, whether it is Helen's choice to leave Sparta with Paris or Medusa's choice to sacrifice herself in order to protect a pair of mortal girls. Similarly, the authors allow the monsters the ability to speak. Helen actively criticizes Paris about his cowardice and confronts Menelaos over his own adultery. Meanwhile the Gorgoneion

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[25] To clarify, I mean both of these examples both separately and in combination with each other. Motherhood incurs a myriad of unwanted opinions and lack of accommodation, medical practitioners tend to not take women's pain seriously, and there is a lack of choice when it comes to the termination of pregnancy.

[26] Cohen defines ambient fear as "a kind of total fear that saturates day-to-day living, prodding and silently antagonizing but never speaking its own name" and in turn it manifests as a "cultural fascination with monsters".

ruthlessly criticizes Perseus's every decision as he carries her across two continents. In regard to the genre of mythological retellings, in *Pandora's Jar* Haynes asserts, "we have made space in our storytelling to rediscover women who have been lost or forgotten. They are not villains, victims, wives, and monsters: they are people" (3). This emphasis on humanization gives life to these figures and makes them relatable to a modern audience. Humanization works to unmake the monster, instead leaving them a flawed character with few options or someone who is deeply misunderstood.

Ultimately these novels, and others within the genre, uphold the ancient tradition of cyclical storytelling. Stories from every culture are retold and changed slightly depending on the time and place they are inhabiting. As Haynes puts it, "every myth contains multiple timelines within itself: the time in which it is set, the time it is first told, and every retelling afterwards" (3). This can be seen even in antiquity, Homer's Helen and Euripides's Helen are characterized very differently. Similarly, the way Hesiod writes about Medusa is not the way Ovid portrays her. Each author gives new life to the myth each time it is retold, and it is no different for contemporary authors working within mythology. Heywood and Haynes join a long line of mythological storytellers who have changed and updated mythic stories for a new audience to reflect their values. Antiquity valued heroism as reflected in the individual heroics of the Trojan War or the defeat of several monsters by Perseus. In contrast, modernity values transparency and justice; the authors illustrate this through the inner thoughts of their characters and the clear sequence of consequences shown in each novel. If no one myth is the definitive version, then these novels are able to join the lengthy canon of mythology. The genre works to create a new mythology which more directly reflects its readership and continues the tradition of myth making.

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