



One With Her Shield

by Diveena



Medusa Rondanini. Photos 440 v. Chr. Photo ©Márcos Forlão-GML

Have you ever had an experience where you were at the wrong place at the wrong time? Or that something happened to you beyond your control? Perhaps you were in an environment that you felt at home with but still fell prey to circumstance. How did you feel? How did you react? How did you finally deal with it all?

Hopefully we don't have to confront such situations. Yet many have undergone these types of incidences and survived. The journey to a healing place of understanding is one that Medusa, in association with the goddess Athena, can symbolically reveal as a great transformational acquisition of wisdom. An image that ties these two beguiling ladies together is Athena's shield with Medusa's head upon it. I propose that this image be a focus and support to all people that have come from a place of violation. Not only women and children are victims of such occurrences, but so are many marginal groups of people that have not achieved esteemed identity in society. Some of us can overcome victimization through an integrating process of healing and power by taking up Athena's shield.

An Image to rule by:

Ancient history can support this concept with some insights. Before the 6th century BC, a powerful nation at the time, Libya, revered an earth goddess resembling the Greek Medusa. She was described as a Gorgon goddess of righteous wrath. Michael Graves, author of the *White Goddess*, refers to Medusa as a beautiful Libyan Queen who led her troops into battle (Graves 244). Graves, as did the ancient Greeks, associated snakes with death and destruction. Athena has been depicted with snakes near her and with snake haired Medusa's head upon her shield. This symbolically was to enforce Athena's power of victory through death and destruction of the enemy.

Yet, far before this and after were cultures that did not see the snake as destructive, but rather of a feminine, earthly power. The archeological discoveries of the 'Minoan Snake Goddess' from Crete support this idea of the feminine power as she stands grasping a snake in each fist. This image is used by contemporary feminist organizations today as a powerful metaphor of strength. Native American, South American, African, Japanese, Celts as well, have used the image of the snake as a sacred totem (symbol/talisman) of empowerment.

However, the world was being greatly influenced by the Greek's strength of the intellect and its strategy. Peaceful and graceful ways of the indigenous earth practices were devalued (as they are today) in keeping with this Greek desire to conquer and grow. I find that the myth of Medusa was introduced to not only symbolically overthrow the Libyans, but to symbolically phase out the matriarchal indigenous practices that were still a part of the Greek way of life. Medusa, with her ancient connection to other snake goddesses, represents the primal power of the earth's feminine essence. On the contrary, the Greeks imagined Athena as a warrior/conqueror goddess with strong attributes of the mind and intellect replacing the 'natural' elements of the feminine. Thus, this patriarchal influence became the symbolic representation of Greeks and their image. The Greeks eventually trampled and conquered Libya and 'Medusa' was replaced with Athena.

The tale From "Ovid, *Metamorphoses*," Book 4:1181-95 presents this thesis and the journey to Athena's shield.

From Ovid, Metamorphoses

Book 4:1181-95

from Dryden :

*Medusa once had charms; to gain her love
A rival crowd of envious lovers strove.
They, who have seen her, own, they ne'er did trace
More moving features in a sweeter face.
Yet above all, her length of hair, they own,
In golden ringlets wav'd, and graceful shone.
Her Neptune saw, and with such beauties fir'd,
Resolv'd to compass, what his soul desir'd.
In chaste Minerva's fane, he, lustful, stay'd,
And seiz'd, and rifled the young, blushing maid.
The bashful Goddess turn'd her eyes away,
Nor durst such bold impurity survey;
But on the ravish'd virgin vengeance takes,
Her shining hair is chang'd to hissing snakes.
These in her Aegis Pallas joys to bear,
The hissing snakes her foes more sure ensnare,
Than they did lovers once, when shining hair.¹*

¹Reproduced by Tracy Marks through the web. <http://www.webwinds.com/thalassa/medusa.htm>

Medusa Raped in The Temple of Athena:

A version I will use, for there are many, was that: Medusa was a beautiful mortal priestess with long prominent tresses that loved, honored, and revered Athena. Medusa daily delivered devotions at Athena's temple by the sea in which the god Poseidon noticed and fancied her. One fateful day he rapes her right there in the temple. The poem suggests that Athena (always present) witnessed the incident and appalled by the disgrace at her temple, turns Medusa' into a hideous monster. Athena had replaced Medusa's beautiful hair with snakes and banished her to a deserted island. Medusa not only is this monster, she becomes immortal with the power of changing anyone who looks upon her into stone. Eventually Athena finds a courageous Athenian, Perseus, and asks him to kill Medusa and bring back her head. Athena gives Perseus her mirror shield to use so he can look through the shield at Medusa instead of directly upon her. Perseus slays Medusa, and returns her head still retaining its power, back to Athena. Medusa's final resting place is upon Athena's shield.

The Medusa Complex in Analysis:

There have been many analogies of this myth in metaphor to reference in the psychological analysis of sexual anxieties. Specially noted views on the Medusa and what she represents in the early 1920's come from Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferencai (Barnes 10). Both of these psychoanalysts worked separately, but come to similar conclusions. They both felt that the snakes symbolically are phallic, and Medusa's horrific gaze in the myth, which causes one to turn to stone, is another metaphor of having an erection (stiffening). Through

these associations, Medusa is a purely sexual symbol that pertains to the sexual anxieties of women. Ultimately Freud and Ferenczi's conclusions are that women have anxieties because they do not have penises. If men have Medusa in their dreams, according to Freud and Ferenczi, it is the 'terrifying mother syndrome' with a castration suggestion (the beheading of Medusa). This suggests that men who are unable to establish an erection have sexual anxieties caused by a dominating mother.

Freud even analyzes Athena with her shield. He states, the virgin Athena holding this symbol on her shield becomes unapproachable and repels all sexual desires since she is displaying the terrifying genitals of the mother (Medusa's head). He also says that the Greeks were mainly homosexual and it was inevitable for them to find a representation of a woman who was frightening and repels because of her sense of castration (Barnes 12).

I find it interesting to note that, not only the myth written by men defiles Medusa, but the analysis also by men, defiles her centuries later. It seems through all the analyses by these men, that the sexual anxieties they reveal are those of their own. Perhaps in viewing a woman of power, they are anxious about losing theirs. They may fear that women will take their power away (i.e. castrate them).

Most interesting is that no one is acknowledging the fact that Medusa was raped. This act of violence would have repercussions of anger for Medusa, which Freud seems to partially offer in his 'anxiety' analysis. Instead of being understood as a victim, she was shamed and made a monster. The 'Medusa' rage is often observed with people that have been abused and consistently rebuked. So indeed, the idea of Medusa being a monster in her reasonable rage reigns true for a time.

For Medusa to be rightfully placed upon Athena's shield as a symbol of healing our view of the myth must be changed. Myth is a living legend and can be useful in any age; its transformation is what reveals its immortal power.

The intrinsic relationship of Athena and Medusa:

In reviewing the account of previous Greek politics in history and also psychological analysis of the myth, I would like to offer another viewpoint. I will review the myth regarding Athena and Medusa as two parts of the same person.

Firstly Athena was given her mirror shield from her father Zeus made with invincible metal. It revealed the truth, and was her prized possession. Athena's temple near the sea is an image of a serene and tranquil environment where Athena was at home and was more comfortable as her relaxed self 'Medusa'. Her long and unconfined hair, with garments of leisure is reasonable for private attire. Alone within the elements of nature she has a very different image than what she is usually seen as. This earthly beauty was too beguiling for her uncle Poseidon; he so over come by his desire for her, raped her.

In historical Greek myth Poseidon and Athena were competing for the patron status of Greece's Capitol in which Athena won. Could this rape be a jealous rebuttal? Athena, in shock refuses to accept or acknowledge what has happened to her. Not only did it happen in the privacy of her sanctuary, but by her uncle. This shock induced upon her a paralysis, (turning to stone) and the shame caused her to hide away (to a distant island). In addition, Athena turns away and doesn't want to see what had happened. This refusal to look at the situation because of the shock of a violation and the conjunction of shame causes anger and rage; which changes her into a monster (Medusa/Gorgon). She then rebukes anyone looking upon her whether they knew what had occurred or not. She is in great pain, and really wants someone to help, but doesn't know how to ask (the turning to stone-shock, the monster-rage and the isolation-shame).

Yet, in the myth Athena does ask Perseus, a man of truth and courage to help her. So deep within she calls upon her courage to deal with this pain and asks to be released from it. Athena then supplies Perseus with her magic mirror 'shield of truth' which he uses to reflect Medusa's image; and with his sword, severs Medusa's head. Out of Medusa's severed body flies Pegasus a winged stallion (incidentally, Medusa became pregnant by Poseidon). Pegasus releases all the anxieties and phantoms in her mind and allows the rebirth of joy and inspiration back into her life.

Athena asks Perseus to bring back Medusa's head, which would concur that Medusa is released from her pain and ready to go back home. Upon returning home Medusa, now Athena, places 'the' head upon her shield. This symbolizes her ability to truthfully look at herself and the situation that transformed her into a powerful goddess. Athena is now the goddess who is whole, complete, and ready to champion her life and those in which she honors.

John Barth's "Chimera" retells this myth as well. His hero is Perseus who grows tired of Andromeda and goes off in adventure seeking Medusa in a rather romantic venue (Barnes 41). Barth's 'Chimera' suggests there

are always ways to look at something in a different perspective and still give value to the story, such as giving it a change of heart. Instead of one that is killing a monster, loving the beauty of something within is what Barth implies.

The Shield as Symbolic Completion

Many folks that have experienced a violation in any way go through similar processing as Medusa. A young man's home was robbed and was unable to go back for some time because he didn't want to be in it. Rape victims don't want to talk to anyone about it or look at the person if they know who did it. Sometimes they just want to go away and not deal with it at all. Children harmed by someone they trust don't tell anyone because of shame and fear. Also, in a different but similar context a person of minority status after many attempts of trying to find acceptance will take on a blasé attitude and drop out of the community scene altogether. This "turning to stone" process (numbness) is the most deadly because many times this is harbored within a person their entire life. The most difficult action is to look at the situation and talk about it when one is a victim. This is the only way to move beyond the pain, anger and shame. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to seek out help and to look at what took place. "Taking up the shield" is the process of having courage that enforces the steps of healing towards home.

There is an actual non-profit accredited social service agency in Montreal Canada that provides information, referral, and support services to women and children that are victims of family violence called the 'Shield of Athena'². This organization started in 1991 to help women of the Greek community, but now services all ethnicities. The Shield of Athena has many services available that are dedicated to increasing public awareness about the impact of violence on society and information to help educate the public on the prevention and also solutions.

As Medusa, we all must gain the courage to be 'One with Her Shield'. In honoring our truthful selves we can move forward to our rightful place in healing, education and wisdom.

²women support organization on web <http://www.shieldofathena.com>

Her Shield

there is a sacred piece of raiment I've held dear
a reflective piece, a mirrored shield
reminding me of crystal clarity
this talisman resides upon my alter always near
on my throne, my temple, peaceful sanctuary by the sea
so far away from throngs of populace I reside my home
there loose I wore my hair and gown to dance amongst the airs
These elements of devas were with me well into the hours of my time
Then it was upon this incident ...
that altered my place and changed my face...
He who rules the sea a great brother in my heart
came unannounced within a mighty torrent
of crashing waves in omnipotent measure
So terrifying was this seizure I could not bare to see
I turned my face away and there upon my alter
what I was asunder my shield reflected me
Looking upon this shame of incompetence
I froze with this knowledge that imbued my circumstance
No peace could find within me here at home
So solitude and loneliness I found to roam
Though there was a part of me that wished to mend
I cried out to the gods to summon a seeker and send
to heal my wounds
and by and by one without fear did come

to confront the dis-ease of predicament
and with a cunning's surgeon's hand
cut the pain and sorrow from my mind
in turn ensued insights that like a mighty steed
with wings took flight in freedom from this anguish from within
and then, the muse of divine peace overcame my countenance
my healer knew I was in justice's balance once again
And journeyed us to the sea, to my temple, to my home
As I approached my alter I lifted up my magic mirror
that revealed the truth to ones that are not afraid to look
no matter how others may say it may be too hideous to see
as they divert their eyes to gaze at forms more pleasing and digestible
I drank this knowledge in and held this as strength within my heart
I wrapped my hair upon my head and girdle tight and firm
held up a spear and with my courage turned
to my mirror shield and wisdom preserver
ready for the battle to face .
what ever truth may be. ³

³poetry written by Diveena for this essay

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