

Villainy and Women: A Critical Edition of James Baldwin's "The Quest of Medusa's Head"

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Medusa has traveled through centuries of mythology and folklore. Numerous versions have appeared over time, with origins in both Europe and North America. In 1895, American author James Baldwin wrote an anthology of short stories based upon famous Greek myths. Included in these stories was "The Quest of Medusa's Head," a tale recounting Perseus's supposedly heroic quest to slay Medusa and claim her head as a prize. Baldwin's recounting of Medusa's death is problematic in many ways. Perhaps the most notable problem with Baldwin's tale is his distinct separation of women into two types: the "ideal" or "good" woman, one who will marry well and become a devoted mother, and the "monstrous" or "bad" woman, one who is not respected in society and is exiled due to differences. Analyzing this dichotomy reveals the ways in which Medusa's story acts as a vessel for Baldwin to perpetuate society's sexist views, not only through defining specific types of women as monsters, but also through defining *some* women as good.

The most commonly remembered part of Medusa's story is the frightful appearance of Medusa: she is "awful to look upon" and has "hair that was full of living serpents" (Baldwin, "The Quest of Medusa's Head" 94). However, Baldwin's version, like many others, overlooks the sympathetic reading of her origin, in spite of the fact that various translations encompass the origin story of Medusa. These


ABSTRACT

Tales of Medusa typically end in her death, but, if all she does is die, why are the stories about her? Through analyzing Medusa's story with a feminist lens, readers can see that her life is dictated by the men around her—she is hideous because a man rapes her and is killed because a man desires her head. Medusa has become a comparative symbol for women who break from gender roles and defy the patriarchy. This edition analyzes restraints placed upon Medusa, and all women, with particular focus on literature from the nineteenth century.



versions note that Medusa was one of three sisters, but the only one who was mortal. Before she became the monstrous figure permeating Greek mythology and popular culture, Medusa was human. Her transformation into a monster actually stems from her rape at the hands of Poseidon. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medusa is described as "being a beautiful maiden. Her eye caught the eye of Poseidon, who desired her and proceeded to ravage her in Athena's shrine" ("The Legend of Medusa and the Gorgons"). Athena, enraged by this, turned Medusa's hair into snakes and bestowed on her the infamous curse: anyone she looks upon will turn to stone. Through this reading, one that includes details of her rape, Medusa becomes a highly sympathetic character rather than a monstrous one. The circumstances leading up to her curse—being punished by Athena for being raped at her shrine—frame Medusa as a victim who was unjustly cursed for actions forced upon her ("The Legend of Medusa and the Gorgons"). This becomes even more striking when considering the fact that, in Baldwin's tale, Athena is one of the two gods who aid Perseus in his quest to defeat Medusa. Baldwin's neglect of this origin story only perpetuates the continued monsterization of Medusa historically, thereby contributing to a patriarchy that preserves harmful rape culture, reinforces gender roles, and silences victims.

In spite of Medusa's brutal origin, she has been demonized throughout history, and other powerful women have been demonized in her shadow. In her article, "The Original 'Nasty Woman,'" primarily about former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Johnston reminds her readers that depictions comparing women in power to Medusa can be traced back to Marie Antoinette, as well as the suffragette movement in the United States. Several textual examples are included in the article to illuminate this familiar trend of vilifying powerful women with Medusa's image. First, in "The Two Are But One (Les deux ne font qu'un)," an anonymously drawn political cartoon from the late eighteenth century, Marie Antoinette is depicted as bestial, having the body of a hyena and a head covered in serpents. Johnston also notes that, in 1868, around the same time women were gaining educational autonomy through the opening of the first women's colleges in the United States, "painter Elihu Vedder imagined Medusa as a self-absorbed woman who petrifies herself by looking into a mirror" (Johnston). Even more telling is the prevalence of Medusa during the women's suffrage movement, which held its first conference at Seneca Falls in 1848 ("Seneca Falls Convention begins"). With this movement in full swing, Baldwin, whose collection of stories were released in 1895, would have been well aware of the progressive shift. Postcards titled *The Feminine Jekyll and Hyde*, created by Udo J. Keppler in 1913, feature triumphant women holding flags brandishing the words "Women's Suffrage";



however, these images are disrupted by a Medusa-like monster in the center of the card (Keppler). With Baldwin reviving such an iconic creature in mythology just years before the creation of these postcards, could it also be possible that he encouraged the misogynistic tradition of portraying women as Medusa?

When considering the historical trend of portraying powerful women as Medusa, the ramifications of telling Medusa's story in a way that demonizes her becomes evident. In the preface to Baldwin's *Old Greek Stories*, he states that his intention in writing these stories was to bring joy to children. However, he also comments on how children should read these stories: "I have carefully avoided every suggestion of interpretation. Attempts at analysis and explanation will always prove fatal to a child's appreciation and enjoyment of such stories" (Baldwin, "Preface" 3). Through the stereotypical depiction of Medusa in these stories, Baldwin is continuing a harmful tradition that bestows traditional gender roles and ideals on children subliminally, a direct result of his neglect to analyze these texts and their implications. Baldwin makes it clear that children should not scrutinize these stories, but, in order to understand the meaning behind these stories, they must.

One illustration of the ways that these subliminal messages affect children can be found in the book *Woman Hating*, by Andrea Dworkin. Dworkin defines these fairy tales and stories as "the primary information of the culture. They delineate roles, interactions, and values which are available to us. They are our childhood models, and their fearful, dreadful content terrorizes [women] into submission – if [women] do not become good, then evil will destroy us" (34-35). Because these fairy tales act as our cultural guides, they also maintain harmful gender roles that permeate society; for example, in the context of Victorian America, when Baldwin's stories were published, there were strict cultural roles defined for men and women. For instance, this is portrayed in the etiquette guide, *The Bazar Book of Decorum*, written by Robert Tomes in 1870, in which ways of dress, beauty ideals, hygienic recommendations, poise, expressions, and more are meticulously detailed. Women are instructed on anything from how to act to how to maintain the cleanliness of their ears. The beginning of this guide states, "Universal cleanliness and good manners are essential to a democracy. This must be generally recognized and acted upon, or the refined will seek in other countries the exclusiveness which will secure for them that nicety of life essential to its enjoyment, and we shall be left alone to wallow in our brutality and foulness" (Tomes 13). When comparing these societal ideals to the behaviors of two prominent women in Baldwin's stories, Medusa and Atalanta—another powerful female character in Baldwin's stories who is forced to conform to societal




pressures—readers can see how these women, through their refusal to conform to the ideals of their society, are made wild, brutal, and foul.

Furthermore, Victorian England's views of single women as a social problem were echoed by the colonies in the United States. The phenomenon was noticed and described by William Rathbone Greg, who published the essay "Why Are Women Redundant?" in 1862. The author argues with genuine concern that, according to statistics, "There were, in England and Wales, in 1851, 1,248,00 women in the prime of their life, i.e. between the ages of twenty and forty years, who were unmarried, out [of] a total number of rather less than 3,000,000" (Greg 12). Greg anticipates a "miserable life of celibacy, struggle[,] and privation" to single women and, as a solution, suggests a shipment of thousands of women to the newly formed colonies, as the pickings were slim for the unmarried men across the Atlantic Ocean (Greg 17). Much like the women of 1851, Medusa, ostracised due to her recent transformation, lives far from society only to be forced back into the role of serving a man, suggesting that even spatial distance from patriarchal society is not always enough to escape its influence.

In order to portray the ways in which deadly patriarchy may affect women who live on the fringes, like Medusa, Dworkin discusses the concept of the female monster defining the prince, who is often the hero of the story. For Dworkin, the hero of the story oftentimes resembles someone

handsome and heroic. He is a prince, that is, he is powerful, noble, and good. He rides a horse. He travels far and wide. He has a mission, a purpose. Inevitably, he fulfills it. He is a person of worth and a worthwhile person. He is strong and true. Of course, he is not real, and men do suffer trying to become him. They suffer, and murder, and rape, and plunder. . . . What matters is that he is both powerful and good, and that his power is by definition good. What matters is that he matters, acts, succeeds. (Dworkin 43)

While the prince may embody these ideals and noble concepts, he is not defined until juxtaposed by a feminine evil. In fact, Dworkin states, "The truth of it is that [the prince] is powerful and good when contrasted with [the feminine villain]. The badder she is, the better he is. The deader she is, the better he is. That is one moral of the story, the reason for dual role definition, and the shabby reality of the man as hero" (Dworkin 44). Perseus encapsulates this hero Dworkin defines: he travels a long distance for the purpose of slaying Medusa, and he completes this task, but, in doing so, Perseus defiles the Gray Sisters—three haggish women who Perseus uses to advance in his quest—threatening to steal the only eye and tooth they share to "see what is going on in the busy world" and "feel young and handsome



again” unless they aid him in his task (Baldwin, “The Quest of Medusa’s Head” 98). What is supposed to be seen as Perseus being clever is actually more indicative of this “rape” and “plunder” Dworkin describes. When considering the origin story of Medusa, as well as her rape, Perseus becomes even more monstrous in his efforts to confront Medusa and defeat a woman who has been made a monster as a result of rape. Therefore, Perseus becomes a personification of patriarchal society, treating Medusa, a woman on the fringes, as “other” and in need of controlling.


Readers of “The Quest of Medusa’s Head” might be surprised by how little is said of Medusa. There is no fight scene, no explanation of Medusa’s origin, nor is there any stated reason why she is a monster worth killing besides her appearance. A reader could argue that Medusa is a monster simply for having a nontraditional female appearance. Similarly, the argument could also be made that, by this time, Medusa was already a widely recognized and vilified character in classical tradition. As mentioned previously, she is also a figure that has been historically linked to women in power. Furthermore, the women valued most within this story are beautiful, such as Danaë, Perseus’s mother, and Andromeda, Perseus’s wife. While Athena, the Gray Sisters, and the Maidens are all noted and respected, they are ultimately admired for their usefulness towards Perseus. This becomes even more troubling when examining the ways in which the prince or hero is often defined in fairy tales alongside women. The prince is more heroic when contrasted with the wickedness of the female figure he must vanquish. His successes are defined by the women he can use, marry, or rape along the way, with no regard for the women themselves. The existence of these women in the story is solely to further Perseus’s journey.

“THE QUEST OF MEDUSA’S HEAD” BY JAMES BALDWIN, 1895¹

I. THE WOODEN CHEST.

There was a king of Argos who had but one child, and that child was a girl. If he had had a son, he would have trained him up to be a brave man and great king; but he did not know what to do with this fair-haired daughter. When he saw her growing up to be tall and slender and wise, he wondered if, after all, he would have to die some time and leave his lands and his gold and his kingdom to her. So he sent to Delphi and asked the Pythia about it. The Pythia told him that he would not only have to die some time, but that the son of his daughter would cause his

¹ This story comes from a collection of Baldwin stories originally published in 1895, but this text comes from the *HathiTrust*. This text is also accessible through *Project Gutenberg*.



death.

This frightened the king very much, and he tried to think of some plan by which he could keep the Pythia's words from coming true. At last he made up his mind that he would build a prison for his daughter and keep her in it all her life. So he called his workmen and had them dig a deep round hole in the ground, and in this hole they built a house of brass which had but one room and no door at all, but only a small window at the top. When it was finished, the king put the maiden, whose name was Danaë, into it; and with her he put her nurse and her toys and her pretty dresses and everything that he thought she would need to make her happy.

"Now we shall see that the Pythia does not always tell the truth," he said.


So Danaë was kept shut up in the prison of brass. She had no one to talk to but her old nurse; and she never saw the land or the sea, but only the blue sky above the open window and now and then a white cloud sailing across. Day after day she sat under the window and wondered why her father kept her in that lonely place, and whether he would ever come and take her out. I do not know how many years passed by, but Danaë grew fairer every day, and by and by she was no longer a child, but a tall and beautiful woman; and Jupiter amid the clouds looked down and saw her and loved her.

One day it seemed to her that the sky opened and a shower of gold fell through the window into the room; and when the blinding shower had ceased, a noble young man stood smiling before her. She did not know—nor do I—that it was mighty Jupiter who had thus come down in the rain; but she thought that he was a brave prince who had come from over the sea to take her out of her prison-house.

After that he came often, but always as a tall and handsome youth; and by and by they were married, with only the nurse at the wedding feast, and Danaë was so happy that she was no longer lonesome even when he was away. But one day when he climbed out through the narrow window there was a great flash of light, and she never saw him again.

Not long afterwards a babe was born to Danaë, a smiling boy whom she named Perseus. For four years she and the nurse kept him hidden, and not even the women who brought their food to the window knew about him. But one day the king chanced to be passing by and heard the child's prattle. When he learned the truth, he was very much alarmed, for he thought that now, in spite of all that he had done, the words of the Pythia might come true.

The only sure way to save himself would be to put the child to death before he was old enough to do any harm. But when he had taken the little Perseus and his mother out of the prison and had seen how helpless the child was, he could



not bear the thought of having him killed outright. For the king, although a great coward, was really a kind-hearted man and did not like to see anything suffer pain. Yet something must be done.

So he bade his servants make a wooden chest that was roomy and watertight and strong; and when it was done, he put Danaë and the child into it and had it taken far out to sea and left there to be tossed about by the waves. He thought that in this way he would rid himself of both daughter and grandson without seeing them die; for surely the chest would sink after a while, or else the winds would cause it to drift to some strange shore so far away that they could never come back to Argos again.

All day and all night and then another day, fair Danaë and her child drifted over the sea. The waves rippled and played before and around the floating chest, the west wind whistled cheerily, and the sea birds circled in the air above; and the child was not afraid, but dipped his hands in the curling waves and laughed at the merry breeze and shouted back at the screaming birds.


But on the second night all was changed. A storm arose, the sky was black, the billows were mountain high, the winds roared fearfully; yet through it all the child slept soundly in his mother's arms. And Danaë sang over him this song:

“Sleep, sleep, dear child, and take your rest
Upon your troubled mother's breast;
For you can lie without one fear
Of dreadful danger lurking near.

Wrapped in soft robes and warmly sleeping,
You do not hear your mother weeping;
You do not see the mad waves leaping,
Nor heed the winds their vigils keeping.

The stars are hid, the night is drear,
The waves beat high, the storm is here;
But you can sleep, my darling child,
And know naught of the uproar wild.”

At last the morning of the third day came, and the chest was tossed upon the sandy shore of a strange island where there were green fields and, beyond them, a little town. A man who happened to be walking near the shore saw it and dragged it far up on the beach. Then he looked inside, and there he saw the beautiful lady



and the little boy. He helped them out and led them just as they were to his own house, where he cared for them very kindly. And when Danaë had told him her story, he bade her feel no more fear; for they might have a home with him as long as they should choose to stay, and he would be a true friend to them both.

II. THE MAGIC SLIPPERS.

So Danaë and her son stayed in the house of the kind man who had saved them from the sea. Years passed by, and Perseus grew up to be a tall young man, handsome, and brave, and strong. The king of the island, when he saw Danaë, was so pleased with her beauty that he wanted her to become his wife. But he was a dark, cruel man, and she did not like him at all; so she told him that she would not marry him. The king thought that Perseus was to blame for this, and that if he could find some excuse to send the young man on a far journey, he might force Danaë to have him whether she wished or not.²

One day he called all the young men of his country together and told them that he was soon to be wedded to the queen of a certain land beyond the sea. Would not each of them bring him a present to be given to her father? For in those times it was the rule, that when any man was about to be married, he must offer costly gifts to the father of the bride.

“What kind of presents do you want?” said the young men.

“Horses,” he answered; for he knew that Perseus had no horse.

“Why don’t you ask for something worth the having?” said Perseus; for he was vexed at the way in which the king was treating him. “Why don’t you ask for Medusa’s head, for example?”


“Medusa’s head it shall be!” cried the king. “These young men may give me horses, but you shall bring Medusa’s³ head.”

“I will bring it,” said Perseus; and he went away in anger, while his young friends laughed at him because of his foolish words.

What was this Medusa’s head which he had so rashly promised to bring? His mother had often told him about Medusa. Far, far away, on the very edge of the world, there lived three strange monsters, sisters, called Gorgons. They had

² The king does not respect Danaë as an equal, so he cannot accept her refusal of him. The king’s denial of Danaë’s basic human right to say “no” foreshadows his later attempted kidnapping and potential rape of her. To him, she is simply a beautiful woman, a prize, and a challenge to conquer.

³ It is important to note this is Medusa’s first mention in a story about her. The male hero has been the main focus thus far. When Medusa is finally mentioned, it is to frame her as a prize worthy only of one who can conquer her.



the bodies and faces of women, but they had wings of gold, and terrible claws of brass, and hair that was full of living serpents.⁴ They were so awful to look upon, that no man could bear the sight of them, but whoever saw their faces was turned to stone. Two of these monsters had charmed lives, and no weapon could ever do them harm; but the youngest, whose name was Medusa⁵, might be killed, if indeed anybody could find her and could give the fatal stroke.

When Perseus went away from the king's palace, he began to feel sorry that he had spoken so rashly. For how should he ever make good his promise and do the king's bidding? He did not know which way to go to find the Gorgons, and he had no weapon with which to slay the terrible Medusa. But at any rate he would never show his face to the king again, unless he could bring the head of terror with him. He went down to the shore and stood looking out over the sea towards Argos, his native land; and while he looked, the sun went down, and the moon arose, and a soft wind came blowing from the west. Then, all at once, two persons, a man and a woman, stood before him. Both were tall and noble. The man looked like a prince; and there were wings on his cap and on his feet, and he carried a winged staff, around which two golden serpents were twined.

He asked Perseus what was the matter; and the young man told him how the king had treated him, and all about the rash words which he had spoken. Then the lady spoke to him very kindly; and he noticed that, although she was not beautiful, she had most wonderful gray eyes, and a stern but lovable face and a queenly form. And she told him not to fear, but to go out boldly in quest of the Gorgons; for she would help him obtain the terrible head of Medusa.

"But I have no ship, and how shall I go?" said Perseus.


"You shall don my winged slippers," said the strange prince, "and they will bear you over sea and land."

"Shall I go north, or south, or east, or west?" asked Perseus.

"I will tell you," said the tall lady. "You must go first to the three Gray Sisters, who live beyond the frozen sea in the far, far north. They have a secret which nobody knows, and you must force them to tell it to you. Ask them where you shall find the three Maidens who guard the golden apples of the West; and when they shall have told you, turn about and go straight thither. The Maidens will give you

⁴ Readers should note Medusa is the first woman mentioned besides Danaë and the nursemaid. Danaë is a woman in need of protection from the corruption of man, but, as is evident from her physical description, Medusa is clearly not in need of protection from the typical man. She instantly serves as a monster because of her non-traditional feminine form and the power she holds over men.

⁵ Here, Medusa is described as grotesque and far from human, and she is the perfect monster for Perseus to slay. In order to save his royal and pure mother, he must destroy this abomination of a creature.



three things, without which you can never obtain the terrible head; and they will show you how to wing your way across the western ocean to the edge of the world where lies the home of the Gorgons.”

Then the man took off his winged slippers, and put them on the feet of Perseus; and the woman whispered to him to be off at once, and to fear nothing, but be bold and true. And Perseus knew that she was none other than Athena⁶, the queen of the air, and that her companion was Mercury, the lord of the summer clouds. But before he could thank them for their kindness⁷, they had vanished in the dusky twilight.

Then he leaped into the air to try the Magic Slippers.

III. THE GRAY SISTERS.⁸

Swifter than an eagle, Perseus flew up towards the sky. Then he turned, and the Magic Slippers bore him over the sea straight towards the north. On and on he went, and soon the sea was passed; and he came to a famous land, where there were cities and towns and many people. And then he flew over a range of snowy mountains, beyond which were mighty forests and a vast plain where many rivers wandered, seeking for the sea. And farther on was another range of mountains; and then there were frozen marshes and a wilderness of snow, and after all the sea again,--but a sea of ice. On and on he winged his way, among toppling icebergs and over frozen billows and through air which the sun never warmed, and at last he came to the cavern where the three Gray Sisters dwelt.

These three creatures were so old that they had forgotten their own age, and nobody could count the years which they had lived. The long hair which covered their heads had been gray since they were born; and they had among them only a single eye and a single tooth which they passed back and forth from one to another.

⁶ It is important to note that, while Athena is a goddess, her attributes are not feminine. She is described here as “not beautiful” and “stern.” Unlike many women, she is not noticed because of her beauty, a feminine characteristic, but rather because of her wits and intelligence, characteristics that are typically considered more masculine. It is because of these masculine characteristics that Athena can be so easily respected and trusted.

⁷ Perseus acknowledges Athena’s “kindness” toward him, but it is important to understand Athena is not necessarily a kind goddess. As noted in the introduction, she cursed Medusa, along with the woman’s sisters, to appear as hideous Gorgons. This curse was placed because Medusa was raped by Poseidon (“The Legend of Medusa and the Gorgons”). Knowing this context allows readers to realize Athena is not necessarily a benevolent goddess. Instead, she is seeking further revenge on Medusa, implying that cursing a beautiful woman to become a monster is not enough of a punishment after a woman suffers from sexual assault.

⁸ These women are also referred to as the Graeae and are sisters to the Gorgons (“Graeae,” “Perseus”).



Perseus heard them mumbling and crooning in their dreary home, and he stood very still and listened.

“We know a secret which even the Great Folk who live on the mountain top can never learn; don’t we, sisters?” said one.

“Ha! ha! That we do, that we do!” chattered the others.

“Give me the tooth, sister, that I may feel young and handsome again,” said the one nearest to Perseus.

“And give me the eye that I may look out and see what is going on in the busy world,” said the sister who sat next to her.

“Ah, yes, yes, yes, yes!” mumbled the third, as she took the tooth and the eye and reached them blindly towards the others.

Then, quick as thought, Perseus leaped forward and snatched both of the precious things from her hand.

“Where is the tooth? Where is the eye?” screamed the two, reaching out their long arms and groping here and there. “Have you dropped them, sister? Have you lost them?”

Perseus laughed as he stood in the door of their cavern and saw their distress and terror.

“I have your tooth and your eye,” he said, “and you shall never touch them again until you tell me your secret. Where are the Maidens who keep the golden apples of the Western Land? Which way shall I go to find them?”

“You are young, and we are old,” said the Gray Sisters; “pray, do not deal so cruelly with us. Pity us, and give us our eye.”

Then they wept and pleaded and coaxed and threatened. But Perseus stood a little way off and taunted them; and they moaned and mumbled and shrieked, as they found that their words did not move him.

“Sisters, we must tell him,” at last said one.

“Ah, yes, we must tell him,” said the others. “We must part with the secret to save our eye.”

And then they told him how he should go to reach the Western Land, and what road he should follow to find the Maidens who kept the golden apples. When they had made everything plain to him Perseus gave them back their eye and their tooth.

“Ha! ha!” they laughed; “now the golden days of youth have come again!” And, from that day to this, no man has ever seen the three Gray Sisters, nor does any one [sic] know what became of them. But the winds still whistle through their cheerless cave, and the cold waves murmur on the shore of the wintry sea, and the ice mountains topple and crash, and no sound of living creature is heard in all that desolate land.

IV. THE WESTERN MAIDENS⁹.

As for Perseus, he leaped again into the air, and the Magic Slippers bore him southward with the speed of the wind. Very soon he left the frozen sea behind him and came to a sunny land, where there were green forests and flowery meadows and hills and valleys, and at last a pleasant garden where were all kinds of blossoms and fruits. He knew that this was the famous Western Land, for the Gray Sisters had told him what he should see there. So he alighted and walked among the trees until he came to the center of the garden. There he saw the three Maidens of the West dancing around a tree which was full of golden apples, and singing as they danced. For the wonderful tree with its precious fruit belonged to Juno, the queen of earth and sky; it had been given to her as a wedding gift, and it was the duty of the Maidens to care for it and see that no one touched the golden apples.


Perseus stopped and listened to their song:

“We sing of the old, we sing of the new,--
Our joys are many, our sorrows are few;
Singing, dancing,
All hearts entrancing,
We wait to welcome the good and the true.

The daylight is waning, the evening is here,
The sun will soon set, the stars will appear.
Singing, dancing,
All hearts entrancing,
We wait for the dawn of a glad new year.

The tree shall wither, the apples shall fall,
Sorrow shall come, and death shall call,
Alarming, grieving,
All hearts deceiving,--
But hope shall abide to comfort us all.

⁹ While a description of the Maidens' appearance is not provided, readers are led to assume these women must be beautiful. Maidenhood was greatly valued in both classical times, when this story is set, and in the nineteenth century, when this version of the story was written. By naming these women simply as “Maidens,” they have no identity other than their purity. These women exist as things unattainable, much like the golden apples they protect.



Soon the tale shall be told, the song shall be sung,
The bow shall be broken, the harp unstrung,
Alarming, grieving,
All hearts deceiving,
Till every joy to the winds shall be flung.

But a new tree shall spring from the roots of the old,
And many a blossom its leaves shall unfold,
Cheering, gladdening,
With joy maddening,--
For its boughs shall be laden with apples of gold.”

Then Perseus went forward and spoke to the Maidens. They stopped singing, and stood still as if in alarm. But when they saw the Magic Slippers on his feet, they ran to him, and welcomed him to the Western Land and to their garden.

“We knew that you were coming,” they said, “for the winds told us. But why do you come?”

Perseus told them of all that had happened to him since he was a child, and of his quest of Medusa’s head; and he said that he had come to ask them to give him three things to help him in his fight with the Gorgons.


The Maidens answered that they would give him not three things, but four. Then one of them gave him a sharp sword¹⁰, which was crooked like a sickle, and which she fastened to the belt at his waist; and another gave him a shield, which was brighter than any looking-glass you ever saw; and the third gave him a magic pouch, which she hung by a long strap over his shoulder.

“These are three things which you must have in order to obtain Medusa’s head; and now here is a fourth, for without it your quest must be in vain.” And they gave him a magic cap, the Cap of Darkness¹¹; and when they had put it upon his head, there was no creature on the earth or in the sky--no, not even the Maidens themselves--that could see him.

When at last he was arrayed to their liking, they told him where he would find the Gorgons, and what he should do to obtain the terrible head and escape alive. Then they kissed him and wished him good luck, and bade him hasten to do the dangerous deed. And Perseus donned the Cap of Darkness, and sped away and

¹⁰ Some sources claim the sword belonged to the god Hephaestus (“The Legend of Medusa and the Gorgons”): the god of blacksmiths, crafts, and volcanoes (“Hephaestus”).

¹¹ This cap is typically referred to as a helmet. The helmet of invisibility belongs to Hades (“Perseus”).



away towards the farthest edge of the earth; and the three Maidens went back to their tree to sing and to dance and to guard the golden apples until the old world should become young again.

V. THE DREADFUL GORGONS.


With the sharp sword at his side and the bright shield upon his arm, Perseus flew bravely onward in search of the dreadful Gorgons; but he had the Cap of Darkness upon his head, and you could no more have seen him than you can see the wind. He flew so swiftly that it was not long until he had crossed the mighty ocean which encircles the earth, and had come to the sunless land which lies beyond; and then he knew, from what the Maidens had told him, that the lair of the Gorgons could not be far away.

He heard a sound as of some one [sic] breathing heavily, and he looked around sharply to see where it came from. Among the foul weeds which grew close to the bank of a muddy river there was something which glittered in the pale light. He flew a little nearer; but he did not dare to look straight forward, lest he should all at once meet the gaze of a Gorgon, and be changed into stone. So he turned around, and held the shining shield before him in such a way that by looking into it he could see objects behind him as in a mirror.

Ah, what a dreadful sight it was! Half hidden among the weeds lay the three monsters, fast asleep, with their golden wings folded about them. Their brazen claws were stretched out as though ready to seize their prey; and their shoulders were covered with sleeping snakes. The two largest of the Gorgons lay with their heads tucked under their wings as birds hide their heads when they go to sleep. But the third, who lay between them, slept with her face turned up towards the sky; and Perseus knew that she was Medusa.

Very stealthily he went nearer and nearer, always with his back towards the monsters and always looking into his bright shield to see where to go. Then he drew his sharp sword and, dashing quickly downward, struck a back blow, so sure, so swift, that the head of Medusa was cut from her shoulders and the black blood gushed like a river from her neck. Quick as thought he thrust the terrible head into his magic pouch and leaped again into the air, and flew away with the speed of the wind.

Then the two older Gorgons awoke, and rose with dreadful screams, and spread their great wings, and dashed after him. They could not see him, for the Cap of Darkness hid him from even their eyes; but they scented the blood of the head which he carried in the pouch, and like hounds in the chase, they followed him,



sniffing the air. And as he flew through the clouds he could hear their dreadful cries and the clatter of their golden wings and the snapping of their horrible jaws. But the Magic Slippers were faster than any wings, and in a little while the monsters were left far behind, and their cries were heard no more; and Perseus flew on alone.

VI. THE GREAT SEA BEAST.


Perseus soon crossed the ocean and came again to the Land of the West. Far below him he could see the three Maidens dancing around the golden tree; but he did not stop, for, now that he had the head of Medusa safe in the pouch at his side, he must hasten home. Straight east he flew over the great sea, and after a time he came to a country where there were palm trees and pyramids and a great river flowing from the south. Here, as he looked down, a strange sight met his eyes: he saw a beautiful girl chained to a rock by the seashore, and far away a huge sea beast swimming towards her to devour her. Quick as thought, he flew down and spoke to her; but, as she could not see him for the Cap of Darkness which he wore, his voice only frightened her.

Then Perseus took off his cap, and stood upon the rock; and when the girl saw him with his long hair and wonderful eyes and laughing face, she thought him the handsomest young man in the world.

“Oh, save me! save me!” she cried as she reached out her arms towards him.

Perseus drew his sharp sword and cut the chain which held her, and then lifted her high up upon the rock. But by this time the sea monster was close at hand, lashing the water with his tail and opening his wide jaws as though he would swallow not only Perseus and the young girl, but even the rock on which they were standing. He was a terrible fellow, and yet not half so terrible as the Gorgon. As he came roaring towards the shore, Perseus lifted the head of Medusa from his pouch and held it up; and when the beast saw the dreadful face he stopped short and was turned into stone; and men say that the stone beast may be seen in that selfsame spot to this day.

Then Perseus slipped the Gorgon's head back into the pouch and hastened to speak with the young girl whom he had saved. She told him that her name was Andromeda, and that she was the daughter of the king of that land. She said that her mother, the queen, was very beautiful and very proud of her beauty; and every day she went down to the seashore to look at her face as it was pictured in the quiet water; and she had boasted that not even the nymphs who live in the sea were as handsome as she. When the sea nymphs heard about this, they were very angry and asked great Neptune, the king of the sea, to punish the queen for her pride. So



Neptune sent a sea monster to crush the king's ships and kill the cattle along the shore and break down all the fishermen's huts¹². The people were so much distressed that they sent at last to ask the Pythia what they should do; and the Pythia said that there was only one way to save the land from destruction,--that they must give the king's daughter, Andromeda, to the monster to be devoured.

The king and the queen loved their daughter very dearly, for she was their only child; and for a long time they refused to do as the Pythia had told them. But day after day the monster laid waste the land, and threatened to destroy not only the farms, but the towns; and so they were forced in the end to give up Andromeda to save their country. This, then, was why she had been chained to the rock by the shore and left there to perish in the jaws of the beast.

While Perseus was yet talking with Andromeda, the king and the queen and a great company of people came down the shore, weeping and tearing their hair; for they were sure that by this time the monster had devoured his prey. But when they saw her alive and well, and learned that she had been saved by the handsome young man who stood beside her, they could hardly hold themselves for joy. And Perseus was so delighted with Andromeda's beauty that he almost forgot his quest which was not yet finished; and when the king asked him what he should give him as a reward for saving Andromeda's life, he said:

"Give her to me for my wife."¹³

This pleased the king very much; and so, on the seventh day, Perseus and Andromeda were married, and there was a great feast in the king's palace, and everybody was merry and glad. And the two young people lived happily for some time in the land of palms and pyramids; and, from the sea to the mountains, nothing was talked about but the courage of Perseus and the beauty of Andromeda.¹⁴


VII. THE TIMELY RESCUE.

But Perseus had not forgotten his mother; and so, one fine summer day, he and Andromeda sailed in a beautiful ship to his own home; for the Magic Slippers could not carry both him and his bride through the air. The ship came to land at the

¹² Hubris, excessive pride that often led mortals to claim they were as good as or better than the gods, was a common cause of conflict in Greek tragedy ("hubris, n.").

¹³ It is important to note that nothing is told of Andromeda besides her beauty. Perseus, after only knowing her for a few short minutes, requests to wed her because of her physical appearance.

¹⁴ Perseus now has two prizes from his quest: a beautiful wife and the head of Medusa. He has now proven himself a brave hero and becomes the husband to a beautiful princess.



very spot where the wooden chest had been cast so many years before; and Perseus and his bride walked through the fields towards the town.

Now, the wicked king of that land had never ceased trying to persuade Danaë to become his wife; but she would not listen to him, and the more he pleaded and threatened, the more she disliked him. At last when he found that she could not be made to have him, he declared that he would kill her; and on this very morning he had started out, sword in hand, to take her life.

So, as Perseus and Andromeda came into the town, whom should they meet but his mother fleeing to the altar of Jupiter, and the king following after, intent on killing her? Danaë was so frightened that she did not see Perseus, but ran right on towards the only place of safety. For it was a law of that land that not even the king should be allowed to harm any one who took refuge on the altar of Jupiter.¹⁵

When Perseus saw the king rushing like a madman after his mother, he threw himself before him and bade him stop. But the king struck at him furiously with his sword. Perseus caught the blow on his shield, and at the same moment took the head of Medusa¹⁶ from his magic pouch.

“I promised to bring you a present, and here it is!” he cried.

The king saw it, and was turned into stone¹⁷, just as he stood, with his sword uplifted and that terrible look of anger and passion in his face.


The people of the island were glad when they learned what had happened, for no one loved the wicked king. They were glad, too, because Perseus had come home again, and had brought with him his beautiful wife, Andromeda. So, after they had talked the matter over among themselves, they went to him and asked him to be their king. But he thanked them, and said that he would rule over them for one day only, and that then he would give the kingdom to another, so that he might take his mother back to her home and her kindred in distant Argos.

On the morrow therefore, he gave the kingdom to the kind man who had

¹⁵ Danaë is continuously shown as the damsel in distress. First, she is held captive by her father; next, she is rescued from the chest by a kind man who takes her in; and, now, she is being chased by the king. While she is a strong woman for raising a son alone, she is shown as a fragile, beautiful woman who must be saved and protected, much like Andromeda, the woman her son chose to marry.

¹⁶ This is the last mention of Medusa within the story. After Perseus's quest, he gives Medusa's head to Athena. The goddess chooses to place the head on her shield, aegis ("Medusa").

¹⁷ Turning the king into stone makes Perseus the true monster of the story. Medusa lived far from civilization in a land no one could find without divine help, so she was not hurting or killing anyone. Since Perseus slayed Medusa, he turns both the sea monster and the king to stone. In addition to these two events, Perseus also turns the Titan, Atlas (the man cursed to hold the world on his shoulders), into a stone mountain with the aid of Medusa's head. This occurs on Perseus's journey home when Atlas refuses the young man a place to rest ("The Legend of Medusa and the Gorgons"). While on his noble quest, Perseus ends four lives, but these stories do not tell of Medusa willingly turning any to stone while she was alive. She is a monster because she is a hideous, powerful woman who partook (albeit unwillingly) in sex before marriage.



saved his mother and himself from the sea; and then he went on board his ship, with Andromeda and Danaë, and sailed away across the sea towards Argos.

VIII. THE DEADLY QUOIT.

When Danaë's old father, the king of Argos, heard that a strange ship was coming over the sea with his daughter and her son on board, he was in great distress; for he remembered what the Pythia had foretold about his death. So, without waiting to see the vessel, he left his palace in great haste and fled out of the country.

"My daughter's son cannot kill me if I will keep out of his way," he said.

But Perseus had no wish to harm him; and he was very sad when he learned that his poor grandfather had gone away in fear and without telling any one where he was going. The people of Argos welcomed Danaë to her old home; and they were very proud of her handsome son, and begged that he would stay in their city, so that he might some time become their king.


It happened soon afterwards that the king of a certain country not far away was holding games and giving prizes to the best runners and leapers and quoit throwers. And Perseus went thither to try his strength with the other young men of the land; for if he should be able to gain a prize, his name would become known all over the world. No one in that country knew who he was, but all wondered at his noble stature and his strength and skill; and it was easy enough for him to win all the prizes.

One day, as he was showing what he could do, he threw a heavy quoit a great deal farther than any had been thrown before. It fell in the crowd of lookers-on, and struck a stranger who was standing there. The stranger threw up his hands and sank upon the ground; and when Perseus ran to help him, he saw that he was dead. Now this man was none other than Danaë's father, the old king of Argos. He had fled from his kingdom to save his life, and in doing so had only met his death.

Perseus was overcome with grief, and tried in every way to pay honor to the memory of the unhappy king. The kingdom of Argos was now rightfully his own, but he could not bear to take it after having killed his grandfather. So he was glad to exchange with another king who ruled over two rich cities, not far away, called Mycenae and Tiryns. And he and Andromeda lived happily in Mycenae for many years.

JAMES BALDWIN'S "THE STORY OF ATALANTA" CONTEXTUALIZED¹⁸

Baldwin's collection, *Old Greek Stories*, has little focus on strong, independent




women. Despite this lack of focus, the story of Atalanta, a young woman who is left in the woods for dead as an infant and is then raised by a mother bear, made its way into the collection. Atalanta proves herself a brave warrior and is unparalleled in skill by any man. Despite her strength and independence, the idea of marriage still looms over her. As a woman, it is Atalanta's role in society to become a wife and mother. While this perception existed during the height of Greek civilization, it is well-known that this concept fueled society during the Victorian era, the time period in which Baldwin published his collection. According to an article by Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The Victorian Studies Reader*, "Women who were unmarried had failed to fulfill their destiny, both biologically and psychologically" (214). In other words, Atalanta, while remaining unmarried, is an incomplete woman. However, Atalanta's flippancy towards marriage only makes her courtiers want her more, and she goes on to make a game of being husbandless. While she, being an atypical woman due to her independence, might not be devoted to the idea of marriage and motherhood, she finds her own way to attempt conquering the issue:

After the death of Meleager, Atalanta went back to her old home among the mountains of Arcadia. She was still the swift-footed huntress, and she was never so happy as when in the green woods wandering among the trees or chasing the wild deer. All the world had heard about her, however; and the young heroes in the lands nearest to Arcadia did nothing else but talk about her beauty and her grace and her swiftness of foot and her courage. Of course every one of these young fellows wanted her to become his wife; and she might have been a queen any day if she had only said the word, for the richest king in Greece would have been glad to marry her. But she cared nothing for any of the young men, and she liked the freedom of the green woods better than all the fine things she might have had in a palace.

The young men would not take "No!" for an answer, however. They could not believe that she really meant it, and so they kept coming and staying until the woods of Arcadia were full of them, and there was no getting along with them at all. So, when she could think of no other way to get rid of them, Atalanta called them together and said:

¹⁸ This story was published in the same James Baldwin book, *Old Greek Stories*, as "The Quest of Medusa's Head." The original publication date is 1895, but this text comes from the Kindle eBook release of 2004. This text is accessible through *Project Gutenberg*.



“You want to marry me, do you? Well, if any one [sic] of you would like to run a race with me from this mountain to the bank of the river over there, he may do so; and I will be the wife of the one who outruns me.”

“Agreed! agreed!” cried all the young fellows.

“But, listen!” she said. “Whoever tries this race must also agree that if I outrun him, he must lose his life.”

Ah, what long faces they all had then! About half of them drew away and went home.

“But won’t you give us the start of you a little?” asked the others.

“Oh, yes,” she answered. “I will give you the start by a hundred paces. But remember, if I overtake any one before he reaches the river, he shall lose his head that very day.”


Several others now found that they were in ill health or that business called them home; and when they were next looked for, they were not to be found. But a good many who had had some practice in sprinting across the country stayed and made up their minds to try their luck. Could a mere girl outrun such fine fellows as they? Nonsense!

And so it happened that a race was run almost every day. And almost every day some poor fellow lost his head; for the fleetest-footed sprinter in all Greece was overtaken by Atalanta long before he could reach the river bank. But other young men kept coming and coming, and no sooner had one been put out of the way than [sic] another took his place.

This passage makes it appear as though Atalanta has avoided marriage while still opening the gates for potential courtship. By inviting young men to race her in order to win her hand in marriage, Atalanta is engaging in a ritual of courtship: she is narrowing the pool of candidates without completely disregarding the idea of marriage as a whole. However, it is still apparent from this seemingly impossible race that Atalanta is not interested in marrying any of the men: she is simply humoring them in their quest for her. The continuing strife of these men for Atalanta shows they do not respect her decisions or her desire to remain free of marriage. At the end of her tale, despite her efforts to remain an independent woman, Atalanta is tricked into marrying one of the suitors:

One day there came from a distant town a handsome, tall young man named Meilanion.

“You’d better not run with me,” said Atalanta, “for I shall be sure



to overtake you, and that will be the end of you.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Meilanion.

Now Meilanion, before coming to try his chance, had talked with Venus, the queen of love, who lived with Jupiter among the clouds on the mountain top. And he was so handsome and gentle and wise that Venus took pity on him, and gave him three golden apples and told him what to do.

Well, when all was ready for the race, Atalanta tried again to persuade Meilanion not to run, for she also took pity on him.

“I’ll be sure to overtake you,” she said.


“All right!” said Meilanion, and away he sped; but he had the three golden applies [sic] in his pocket.

Atalanta gave him a good start, and then she followed after, as swift as an arrow shot from the bow. Meilanion was not a very fast runner, and it would not be hard for her to overtake him. She thought that she would let him get almost to the goal, for she really pitied him. He heard her coming close behind him; he heard her quick breath as she gained on him very fast. Then he threw one of the golden apples over his shoulder.

Now, if there was anything in the world that Atalanta admired, it was a bright stone or a pretty piece of yellow gold. As the apple fell to the ground she saw how beautiful it was, and she stopped to pick it up; and while she was doing this, Meilanion gained a good many paces. But what of that? In a minute she was as close behind him as ever. And yet, she really did pity him.

Just then Meilanion threw the second apple over his shoulder. It was handsomer and larger than the first, and Atalanta could not bear the thought of allowing some one [sic] else to get it. So she stopped to pick it up from among the long grass, where it had fallen. It took somewhat longer to find it than she had expected, and when she looked up again Meilanion was a hundred feet ahead of her. But that was no matter. She could easily overtake him. And yet, how she did pity the foolish young man!

Meilanion heard her speeding like the wind behind him. He took the third apple and threw it over to one side of the path where the ground sloped towards the river. Atalanta’s quick eye saw that it was far more beautiful than either of the others. If it were not picked up at once it would roll down into the deep water and be lost, and that



would never do. She turned aside from her course and ran after it. It was easy enough to overtake the apple, but while she was doing so Meilanion gained upon her again. He was almost to the goal. How she strained every muscle now to overtake him! But, after all, she felt that she did not care very much. He was the handsomest young man that she had ever seen, and he had given her three golden apples. It would be a great pity if he should have to die. And so she let him reach the goal first.

After that, of course, Atalanta became Meilanion's wife. And he took her with him to his distant home, and there they lived happily together for many, many years.


Meilanion's victory is problematic because he distracts Atalanta from fully exerting herself in the race. While "she let him reach the goal first," Meilanion still has to have the aid of a goddess before he can stand a chance against Atalanta. Atalanta concedes to him, but she does not do so out of respect. She considers him "the handsomest young man," and this artificial description of him shapes her decision to become his bride. Even in the conclusion of her own story, Atalanta, a strong warrior who seems unconcerned with the trivialities of common life, can only find happiness through marriage. In the end, she is conquered by Meilanion and domesticated.

ELIZA LESLIE'S *THE LADIES' GUIDE TO TRUE POLITENESS AND PERFECT MANNERS* CONTEXTUALIZED¹⁹

Over a hundred years after the end of the Victorian Era, many find the societal expectations outrageous. During the Victorian Era, women's suffrage was gaining momentum, America was facing Reconstruction after the Civil War, and industrialism was influencing the Western world. Immigration into America and Western European countries was also shaping the way culture and class were viewed. All of these events were fashioning the world, but society was not becoming more accepting. As is exhibited in the following excerpt from *The Ladies' Guide to True Politeness and Perfect Manners*, an American guide published in 1864 by T.B. Peterson & Brothers, rigid structure was still emphasized:

When you hear a gentleman speak in praise of a lady whom you do not think deserving of his commendations, you will gain nothing by attempting to undeceive him; particularly if she is handsome. Your

¹⁹ The original publication date for this guide is 1864, but this text comes from the Kindle eBook release of 2011. This text is accessible through *Project Gutenberg*.




dissenting from his opinion he will, in all probability, impute to envy, or ill-nature; and therefore the only impression you can make will be against yourself.

Even if you have reason to dislike the lady, recollect that few are without some good points both of person and character. And it will be much better for you to pass over her faults in silence, and agree with him in commending what is really commendable about her. What he would, perhaps, believe implicitly if told to him by a man, he would attribute entirely to jealousy, or to a love of detraction if related by a woman. Above all, if a gentleman descants on the beauty of a lady, and in your own mind you do not coincide with his opinion, refrain, on your part, from criticizing invidiously her face and figure, and do not say that “though her complexion may be fine, her features are not regular;” that “her nose is too small,” or “her eyes too large,” or “her mouth too wide.” Still less disclose to him the secret of her wearing false hair, artificial teeth, or tinging her cheeks with rouge. If she is a bold, forward woman, he will find that out as soon as yourself, and sooner too,— and you may be sure that though he may amuse himself by talking and flirting with her, he in reality regards her as she deserves.

This excerpt shows that women were expected to behave in specific ways, especially in ways that flattered their sex as a whole. This guide lists behaviors for seemingly every situation: when at dinner, when with female company, when with male company, when at a hotel, when with children, when at church, etc. *The Ladies' Guide* exists to “educate” women on how to behave; it acts as a literary charm school. Contemporary readers of “The Quest of Medusa’s Head” can benefit from *The Ladies' Guide* excerpt because it sheds light on what was expected of women during the Victorian time period when Baldwin published his collection of stories.

Perhaps the most important thing that can be derived from this excerpt is how women were expected to behave while in the company of men. All thoughts and opinions should be silenced if they disagree with the man’s opinion, especially differing opinions involving women the man admires. If voiced, these opinions will only make the criticized woman discussed a point of disagreement. Furthermore, by saying “he would attribute [this opinion] entirely to jealousy,” *The Ladies' Guide* blatantly accuses men of sexism. Instead of finding this sexism problematic, the sexism is being pointed out solely to remind women to mind their opinions and comments in order to avoid confrontation with men.

This excerpt emphasizes how important it was for women to be liked by



the men with which they keep company, even if the men admired these women for solely physical reasons. However, in addition to implying that men only kept the company of women because of the women's supposed beauty, this excerpt accuses women of being beautiful due to artificial applications such as false teeth, wigs, and makeup. This snide comment attacks women who have the attention of men. Essentially, women can do nothing right in regards to associating with men. If these women have opinions, they can be accused of jealousy; if the women dress to impress, the women will be accused of deceiving those around them.

J. ROGER REES'S "WOMAN—A MAN'S IDEAL" CONTEXTUALIZED²⁰


A major issue within "The Quest of Medusa's Head" is the demonization of Medusa and the elevation of the devoted, feminine mother/wife figures. This view is appropriate for the time in which the story was published: 1895. During this time, women were expected to marry, raise children, care for the home, and devote themselves to their husbands. Today, these expectations are considered sexist, but, during this time period, men based their interests upon whether or not a woman adhered to these ideas. This is best exemplified within the following passage from English author J. Roger Rees's article, "Woman—A Man's Ideal":

Nothing more truly reveals a man's character than the picture he forms of the maiden he would find and win. . . .O maidens! fair to behold, tender and true, see to it then that you maintain yourselves ever worth of this worship we men hunger and thirst to pay you—this devotion of our best thoughts, our choicest imaginings, our highest achievements. By you own priceless truth and purity—your womanhood, in short—continue to hold power over us, as the moon o'er the mighty waters of the deep.

This passage reveals the expectations and pressures placed upon women in order for them to embody the ideal of "the perfect woman." As is evident from the language of this passage, one of the requirements of this ideal is maidenhood and purity, qualifications Danaë and Andromeda both exemplify. Both women are helpless on their own, evidence of their innocence and need for a man such as Perseus to care for them.

However, it is not enough just for these women to be pure and maidenlike: they must also "maintain" themselves and ensure that they are "ever worth of this worship." The author of this passage, J. Rogers Rees, places an unrealistic amount of pressure on women, essentially likening them to the virgin goddesses, such

²⁰ The original publication date for this article is 1890. It could be originally found in *The Girl's Own Paper*.



as Athena. By idealizing and placing these women on a pedestal reserved nearly exclusively for goddesses, Rees explains why Perseus is attracted to Andromeda and idealizes women like his mother, Danaë: these two women are pure, beautiful, helpless, and worthy of worship. Their beauty becomes a siren's song, requiring men to "worship" them, and ultimately, to rescue them. This is yet another narrative trope that feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin illustrates. Andromeda and Danaë represent one of "two definitions of women. There is the good woman. She is a victim." Dworkin continues, saying, "The good woman must be possessed [by men]" (Dworkin 48). Both women need Perseus to survive and will worship him for his bravery, but the worship will forever remind him of his debt to Athena for aiding him on his quest, essentially guiding him to Andromeda and saving his mother's life. Meanwhile, as women rely on men, men find a spiritual purpose in worship too, albeit through the dehumanization and objectification of women. Men devote themselves to women not for the woman's personhood but for her beauty and her need to rely on men to survive within the patriarchy. This begins to foster male ego and pride while simultaneously disenfranchising women in society. Similarly, a woman's dependence on a man prevents her from acting on her own and taking charge of her identity or destiny. Therefore, Andromeda and Danaë foil Athena: they embody the purity and beauty the goddess has, but they also highlight Athena's wits and ability to accomplish anything without the aid of man. While Athena is untouchable because she is a virgin goddess, she is also untouchable because she will never need to be saved by a man like Perseus; she can never stroke and promote his ego like mortal women.

To Rees, Medusa would also become the foil of Andromeda and Danaë because she lives independently with her sisters. She also would not be worthy of devotion due to her appearance. As the antithesis of a "fair maiden" or a goddess, Medusa becomes what Dworkin considers "the bad woman. She must be destroyed The bad woman must be killed, or punished" (Dworkin 48). Medusa, as someone living on the fringes of society and monsterized for her appearance, would not be presenting the notion of Rees's ideal womanhood. Baldwin portrays Perseus as doing his part by murdering Medusa, ridding the world of a creature that creates a perverse vision of what it means to be a woman. In contrast, Andromeda, the "good woman," is "rewarded" through her marriage with Perseus, a mighty hero and king. Through the murder of Medusa, Perseus "rights the wrong" of Medusa's existence, proving Dworkin's analysis of literary tropes surrounding feminine monsters.



CONCLUSION

“The Quest for Medusa’s Head” misleads readers into believing the story is about Medusa herself. Instead, the story focuses on defining Perseus as a hero and worthy king. Rather than providing an origin story about Medusa, the story defines her as a villain and provides Andromeda and Danaë as Medusa’s polar opposites. Medusa is portrayed as a villain despite no obvious wrongdoing, while Andromeda and Danaë are beautiful, good women. Andromeda and Danaë comply with the standards of perfect women that are described in Rees’s article and Leslie’s *The Lady’s Guide*.

Through contextualizing Rees and Leslie, readers of Baldwin’s stories can better understand the problematic sexism that plays a key role in how these women are described. Andromeda and Danaë are good women because they are beautiful and helpless. Atalanta, while she is not fully portrayed as a villain like Medusa, is neither praised nor admired. A key part of her story is her reckless and unfeminine behavior. It is not until Atalanta is tricked into marriage that she becomes an admirable, female figure. With this dichotomy between good and bad women supported through the historical contextualization of Rees’s article, the sexism of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century is evident. Through the examination of “The Story of Atalanta” and the reading of “The Quest for Medusa’s Head” provided here, it becomes clear that, although Baldwin attempted to present a children’s book of Greek tales that avoids interpretation, Baldwin has actually compiled a collection of stories that reinforce gender stereotypes, perpetuate rape culture, and contribute to the vilification of women in power.

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