

Medusa in the 21st Century: *Clash of the Titans* – 2010

The recent film *Clash of the Titans*, the 2010 remake of the 1981 film of the same name, presents a unique version of the Gorgon, Medusa – a figure that has from ancient times been variously represented and interpreted. In the earliest references she is simply a terrifying and apotropaic head (or mask), as she appears on shields and Athena's aegis (Vernant). Through the ages, however, there have been many interpretations of the Gorgon, ranging from earth mother goddess, to female genitalia, castration, and female rage, to a cephalopod, to simply death in the form of a corpse (Wilk). The topic of this paper is Medusa's reception with the 2010 film – what unique interpretation of Medusa it has to offer.

The Medusas of both the 2010 remake and the 1981 original film certainly have a very strong association with death. Both are placed in the Underworld, replete with a Charon and a Cerberus, and both bring about the deaths of all they encounter – except Perseus, of course. The Medusas in these films, however, are a departure from previous renderings, both ancient and modern, and have something to say about what she now represents.

Both these Medusas, in addition to having snakes for hair, are given from the waist down the body of a very large snake, including the rattles of a rattlesnake – a representation first found in the 1981 film version and then adopted and accentuated in the remake. Also, for the first time in the 1981 film Medusa has weaponry – that is, weaponry beyond her traditional petrifying gaze. She is given a bow and arrows, which are likewise present in the 2010 remake.

Arguably the only reason for the transformation of Medusa in these two films to half snake is to heighten her deadliness, frightfulness, and audience appeal (snakes are typically used in film to that effect). Certainly in the remake, where Medusa is amazingly fast and agile, her serpent form is very effective in making her more frightful and deadly; likewise her bow much

increases her deadliness. For, although her petrifying gaze is deadly, it loses its frightening effect (for the viewer) and novelty after two or three instances of it. Thus, the action made possible by her weaponry and serpent-form make Perseus' encounter with her much more action-filled and engaging for the viewer, and could be the sole reason for the director's unique rendering of her.

There seems to be more to it, however. For example, the serpent carries strong associations for Western audiences from the biblical story of Adam and Eve, where the female comes to be connected to temptation of a sensual nature (eating forbidden fruit) and evil. Another unusual feature of the Medusa from the 2010 remake reinforces a possible connection of her with sensuality as a deadly evil. The 2010 film has captured both aspects of Medusa's representations through history – namely, both her grotesque side and her beautiful side. Depictions of Gorgons, which first appear around the eighth century B.C.E., begin as figures with a broad face and over-large, staring eyes, and a leering mouth with an outstretched tongue and tusks. By the fourth century B.C.E. Gorgons have largely transitioned to beautiful young women (Furtwängler).

The Medusa in the 2010 film has the torso and head of a beautiful young woman – with high sensual appeal (modeled after supermodel Natalia Vodianova). When she uses her petrifying gaze, however, she transforms into a screeching, fanged, and reptilian monster. This is in contrast to the 1981 film version of her, where she appears as reptilian and hideous throughout. Moreover, the 2010 Medusa is presented with a distinct arrogance, also lacking in the 1981 version – there she is deadly cold and emotionless. You get the sense that the director in the 2010 version is using sensuality as the gateway to death – as deadly bait, so to speak, with the further edge of arrogance added as a goad to the men pursuing her. For example, she more than once laughs at them and is called a “bitch” by Perseus.

This representation of Medusa in the 2010 film, with her serpent form, her deceptive combination of beauty and heightened sensuality with the deadly monster hidden within, and her arrogance presents death – in a recall of Ovid’s Medusa, the beautiful priestess raped by Neptune in Minerva’s temple and then changed into a monster by Minerva (*Met.* 4.1080-94) – as a femme fatale that must be bested by the hero.

References

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