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Mere Image: Caravaggio, Virtuosity, and *Medusa's* Averted Eyes

Hana Nikčević

The *Medusa* (Fig. 1) is the only one of Caravaggio's works to which the writer Giovan Battista Marino dedicated an ekphrastic poem.¹ It is thought that Marino saw the work on a 1601 trip to Florence; by that time, the painting had been received in the armoury of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinando de' Medici.² Collecting a painting in an armoury makes sense, of course, when the painting counts as arms—Caravaggio painted his *Medusa* on a convex shield, and Marino's madrigal engages with just this aspect, addressing the Grand Duke:

Now what enemies will there be who will not become cold
marble in gazing upon, my Lord, in your shield, that Gorgon
proud and cruel, in whose hair horribly voluminous vipers
make foul and terrifying adornment? But yet! You will have
little need for the formidable monster among your arms: for
the true Medusa is your valor.³

Despite Marino's claim that the "true Medusa" is the Duke of Tuscany's acumen in battle, the poet nevertheless ascribes to Caravaggio's painting the capacity to petrify its onlookers. The "Medusa effect" as an allegory for lifelike sculpture was well known in antiquity—introduced, in fact, by Ovid himself—but the specific way that this conceit resurfaces in early modern poetry extends its meaning to the two-dimensional image, newly exploring the confusion of the boundary between the real and the represented in the practice of image making at large. In



Figure 1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Medusa*, 1598, oil on wood, 60 x 55 cm. Image courtesy of Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Ovid’s tale of Perseus and Medusa, in the first-century CE *Metamorphoses*, Medusa’s reflection cannot stun its viewer. In Luigi Groto’s 1587 poem “*Scoltura di Medusa*,”⁴ however—the poem thought to be the first in the Renaissance to revive the conceit of Medusa as a sculptor⁵—Medusa’s reflection *can* stun the viewer, expressed through the fact that Groto’s Medusa is figured as a sculptor of her *own* image: she catches sight of her reflection in a mirror and thus petrifies herself.

Caravaggio’s *Medusa* has frequently been commented on with regard to its nature as an image that blurs the line between the real and its representation.⁶ I agree with this interpretation, but I would like to suggest that Caravaggio’s execution of that theme in this painting is rooted in one formal quality that has thus far gone unconsidered: the *Medusa*’s averted eyes. I propose that Caravaggio likely engaged with the concept of Medusa as a metaphor for virtuosic image-making as measured by lifelikeness, and that he was likely aware, too, of Groto’s poem (or simply its conceit, which may precede Groto; we cannot know). I base this suggestion on a number of elements: Caravaggio’s known association with Marino; Marino’s great interest in Medusa’s significance as an allegory of virtuosic image-making, his quotation of Groto’s “*Scoltura di Medusa*,” and his suggestion that Caravaggio’s *Medusa* turns its onlookers to “cold marble”; and both men’s thematization of their own virtuosity. I suggest, thus, that the *Medusa* thematizes Caravaggio’s virtuosity by depicting a Medusa that purports to be equivalent to the



Figure 2 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Martha and Mary Magdalene*, 1597/8, oil and tempera on canvas, 100 × 134.5 cm. Image courtesy of Detroit Institute of Arts: 73.268.

real Medusa's reflection, which, in Grotto's conceit, is equivalent to the real Medusa herself; by averting his Medusa's eyes, Caravaggio renders it impossible for a viewer to disprove his Gorgon's—or, rather, his Gorgon-reflection's—power to stun. Grotto's introduction of the mirror image that is equivalent to its three-dimensional referent broadened the potential for rendering Medusa's "lifelikeness" in painting: Grotto allowed the two-dimensional image to gain in proximity to the real being it represents. Caravaggio thus had only to depict the Gorgon's reflection to produce an image of her that could be equivalent to the "real thing"—perfectly doable in the two-dimensional medium of painting and easily communicated by painting on a shield (Perseus's reflective medium of choice). That Caravaggio's Medusa depicts a reflection is still further supported by the fact that the painting was likely produced in the manner of a self-portrait, rendered with the use of a convex mirror, as depicted in Caravaggio's *Martha and Mary Magdalene* (of 1597/98 and thus contemporary to the *Medusa*) (Fig. 2).⁷

To understand how Caravaggio may have made his representational choices, it is necessary to consider the potential visual and textual precedents to which he could have referred. Theories about this tend to converge around one text: Giorgio Vasari's *Life* of Leonardo da Vinci. Vasari recounts two tales of

Leonardo that are frequently conflated. First, he writes of how the artist's father, ser Piero da Vinci, was asked by one of the peasants on his farm whether he knew of an artist in Florence who could paint on a round shield; Piero transferred the shield to Leonardo, who readied it for painting and then decided that he would adorn the shield such that it would "terrify anyone who saw it and produce the same effect as the head of Medusa." Vasari elaborates:

To do what he wanted Leonardo carried into a room of his own, which no one ever entered except himself, a number of green and other kinds of lizards, crickets, serpents, butterflies, locusts, bats, and various strange creatures of this nature; from all these he took and assembled different parts to create a fearsome and horrible monster which emitted a poisonous breath and turned the air to fire. He depicted the creature emerging from the dark cleft of a rock, belching forth venom from its open throat, fire from its eyes and smoke from its nostrils in so macabre a fashion that the effect was altogether monstrous and horrible. Leonardo took so long over the work that the stench of the dead animals in his room became unbearable, although he himself failed to notice because of his great love of painting.⁸

This shield, Vasari writes, then made it into the collection of the Duke of Milan. This story is often conflated with the following account:

The fancy came to [Leonardo] to paint a picture in oils of the head of a Medusa, with the head attired with a coil of snakes, the most strange and extravagant invention that could ever be imagined; but since it was a work that took time, it remained unfinished, as happened with almost all his things. It is among the rare works of art in the Palace of Duke Cosimo.⁹

So, for example, when Avigdor W. G. Posèq suggests that Leonardo's Medusa was "presumably" still in the collection of the Duke of Milan at the time of Caravaggio's early apprenticeship to the Milanese painter Simone Peterzano,¹⁰ he, as Sharon Gregory states, is actually (if unknowingly) referring "to the shield with the dragon or *animalaccio*, for Vasari states that the unfinished Medusa itself was in the collection of Duke Cosimo."¹¹



Figure 3 Cornelis Cort (1536–1578), Head of Medusa, engraving, 334 × 226 mm. Image courtesy of Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, Brussels.

John Varriano makes the case that Caravaggio’s *Medusa* was produced in dialogue with Leonardo’s unfinished painting and suggests that the “off-centered stare of the Caravaggio” is “clearly anticipate[d]” in Leonardo’s painting—this Varriano determines because he believes that an engraving by Cornelis Cort (Fig. 3) is “uncompromisingly Leonardesque” and based on the unfinished *Medusa*.¹² Varriano’s argument alone is not necessarily convincing, but what *is* suggestive is that the Cort engraving is identical to a circa 1540 drawing of Medusa by Francesco Salviati (Fig. 4). As Mary Garrard writes, “The attribution to Salviati and dating of this unpublished drawing in the Indianapolis Museum is that of the museum curators,” noting that the curator Martin Krause pointed out to her the drawing’s “relationship to the engraving of Medusa’s head by Cornelius [sic] Cort, for which the drawing was undoubtedly the source.”¹³ Salviati’s drawing may, in fact, be based on Leonardo’s *Medusa*—from 1543 to 1548, Salviati worked at the court of Cosimo de’ Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany,¹⁴ who owned Leonardo’s *Medusa*. In this case, Cort’s engraving *would*, in being based on Salviati’s drawing, preserve the image of Leonardo’s *Medusa* (and the dating of the drawing to 1540 would need to be amended by at least three years).¹⁵



Figure 4 Francesco Salviati, *Medusa*, c. 1540, red chalk on off-white laid paper. Image courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art: 47.13.

There is, however, no evidence that Caravaggio saw Leonardo's painting (or Salviati's drawing or Cort's engraving). Suggesting that it is unlikely that Caravaggio ever laid eyes on Leonardo's Gorgon, Sharon Gregory writes that it seems most likely that the link between Caravaggio's *Medusa* and Leonardo's Medusa is to be found in Caravaggio's own melding of the aforementioned two accounts in Vasari's *Life* of Leonardo.¹⁶ When he painted his *Medusa*, Caravaggio was residing in the household of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte; the finished *Medusa* was sent by Del Monte to Ferdinando de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, in, most likely, 1598. This connection might suggest that Caravaggio's painting was based on Leonardo's, but Gregory states that it is more likely that Caravaggio referred solely to Vasari's text. Spare though Vasari's description of Leonardo's Medusa may be ("a picture in oils of the head of a Medusa, with the head attired with a coil of snakes"), it gains in significance through occurring after the much more detailed account of Leonardo's experience painting a composite dragon-like creature, "most horrible and terrifying," intended to produce "the same effect as once did the head of Medusa" and, crucially, rendered on a shield.¹⁷ Caravaggio "must immediately have recognized the suitability of the shield support to the subject of the beheaded Medusa," Gregory suggests, noting that confluences of Vasari's descriptions are no mere Renaissance phenomenon—modern scholarship preserves



Figure 5 Andrea del Verrocchio (attributed to), *Medusa head*, c. 1480, from terracotta relief, Palazzo at Via dell'Arco de' Ginnasi, Rome (now destroyed). Image courtesy of Mary D. Garrard.

the trend, as, for example, when, like Posèq, “Catherine Puglisi asserts that Vasari describes Leonardo’s Medusa as ‘blowing poison from her open mouth, smoke from her nose, and fire from her eyes’—in fact, this is how Vasari describes Leonardo’s *animalaccio*, not his Medusa.”¹⁸

If Caravaggio *did* see Leonardo’s Medusa, and Salviati/Cort preserved its appearance and thus allows us to suggest that Caravaggio took his *Medusa*’s averted eyes from Leonardo’s image, it must still be noticed that Caravaggio’s *Medusa* significantly diverges from Leonardo’s model. Leonardo’s is alive (her neck is intact), while Caravaggio’s is decapitated; Leonardo’s looks up, while Caravaggio’s looks down—indeed, emphasizing her decapitation. The decapitation alludes to Perseus, explaining the shield and thus indicating that Caravaggio’s image depicts a reflection; this notable departure from Leonardo’s leads me to suggest that, even if Leonardo inspired Caravaggio’s averted eyes, Caravaggio’s *Medusa*’s slanted gaze should still be read as a choice on the part of the artist (as opposed to mere transcription from Leonardo) and in its context of representing a mirror image.



Figure 6 Andrea del Verrocchio, Giuliano de' Medici, c. 1475/1478, terracotta. Image courtesy of National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.): 1937.1.127.

This is also evident in light of the full corpus of visual references that could have been available to the artist. Varriano states that Leonardo's *Medusa* is the first recorded portrayal of the Gorgon in the Renaissance, but certain other images do precede Caravaggio's.¹⁹ A terracotta relief on the Palazzo at Via dell'Arco de' Ginasi, Rome, attributed to Andrea del Verrocchio and dated to around 1480, depicts Medusa in a frontal scream (Fig. 5); the same artist's bust of Giuliano de' Medici, from the 1470s, sports a similarly screaming Gorgon on his chest (Fig. 6). Michelangelo's Gorgon-head frieze from 1524–34, at the Medici Chapel in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, directs its many Gorgon gazes at numerous potential viewers (Fig. 7); if Caravaggio saw the ancient (be it Greek or Roman) *Tazza Farnese*, he would have encountered the same image: a tortured, frontal gaze and a gaping mouth (Fig. 8). Benvenuto Cellini's 1549–72 portrait bust of Cosimo de' Medici includes a Medusa, frontal albeit somewhat calmer, on the Grand Duke's chest (Fig. 9); Cellini's *Persus with the Head of Medusa* prefigured this calmness, depicting Medusa's head with its eyes nearly closed (Fig. 10). Raphael's *The School of Athens*, from 1509–11, features a Gorgoneion on Athena's shield; although Raphael turns the shield on an angle, Medusa is frontal on the shield itself (Fig. 11).



Figure 7 Michelangelo (executed by an assistant), “Gorgon Head Frieze” (detail), 1524–1534, Florence, San Lorenzo, Medici Chapel. Image courtesy of Mary D. Garrard.

Posèq suggests that Caravaggio was inspired by works from antiquity: in Caravaggio’s images, “numerous poses and gestures—sometimes entire configurations—are borrowed from Roman statuary, which at that time was ascribed to great Hellenistic masters.”²⁰ Del Monte, in whose household Caravaggio lived when he painted his *Medusa*, was reportedly “a discriminating collector of antique sculpture.”²¹ Posèq does not specify whether it is likely that Caravaggio encountered the Tazza Farnese, but he does note that the Tazza and Caravaggio’s *Medusa* bear a significant resemblance.²²

Most depictions of the Gorgon that precede Caravaggio’s render her with her eyes looking directly out; if Caravaggio had access to ancient sources, there, too, would he have encountered solely frontal Medusas. It seems, thus, that Caravaggio chose to depict his Medusa with her eyes averted in contrast to the ancient and early Renaissance adherence to frontality; Leonardo’s Medusa is the only potential precursor, but—if Caravaggio did indeed see it, and if Salviati/Cort do indeed preserve it—Caravaggio’s *Medusa* still differs from that image, and the direction of the eyes is changed. While increased emotional affect was likely the artist’s primary motivation,²³ I suggest that, on the basis of Caravaggio’s association with Marino, another, additional reason might be identified: Caravaggio averted the eyes of his Medusa in order to communicate his own technical skill, producing an image that maintains its own fiction—that the Medusa depicted can stun—in keeping with a new early modern understanding of the Medusean myth that links the power of her *image* to petrify with artistic virtuosity.



Figure 8 “Tazza Farnese,” sardonyx cameo bowl (exterior), 1st C. BCE, Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Image courtesy of Mary D. Garrard.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* offer the earliest account of Perseus beheading Medusa, whose decapitation is enabled by Perseus looking not at Medusa herself but instead at her reflection in a bronze shield supplied by Athena. As per Ovid:

Now tell us,
 Heroic Perseus, how you slew the Gorgon. . . .

Rough woods and jagged rocks, to the Gorgons’ home.
 On all sides, through the fields, along the highways,
 He saw the forms of men and beasts, made stone
 By one look at Medusa’s face. He also
 Had seen that face, but only in reflection
 From the bronze shield his left hand bore; he struck
 While snakes and Gorgon both lay slunk in slumber,
 Severed the head, and from that mother’s bleeding
 Were born the swift-winged Pegasus and his brother.²⁴



Figure 9 Benvenuto Cellini, Bust of Cosimo I, 1546-47, bronze. Image courtesy of Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

As Caroline van Eck writes, the landscape leading to the Gorgons' home "is described as a statue garden, full of the petrified victims of [the Gorgons'] gaze." The metaphor of the statue garden—and, thus, of the Gorgons as sculptors—is based not solely on this one passage, and on the fact of Ovid envisioning the Gorgons' "grounds" in a way that might coincidentally recall a sculpture garden. Rather, in the later episode wherein Perseus battles Phineus, Ovid describes the victims of petrification (effected by Medusa's disembodied head, now wielded by Perseus) in words undeniably evocative of statuary. Van Eck highlights: "Thescelus became a statue, poised for a javelin throw"; "there he stood; a flinty man, unmoving, a monument in marble"; "Astyages, in wonder, was a wondering marble."²⁵ Referring to Ovid's Medusa as "Pygmalion's dark double," Van Eck states that, of the stories in the *Metamorphoses*, "two among them explore the precarious borders between a lifeless image and the living being it represents, the viewer's desire that an image lives, and fear of its powers: those of Pygmalion and Medusa."²⁶ The aforementioned Astyages is "in wonder" because he mistakenly brought his sword down on a marble man, "mistaking rock for flesh, for living flesh."²⁷ If the metric of technical skill in image making is lifelikeness, and it



Figure 10 Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa (detail)*, 1545-1554, Florence, Piazza della Signoria. Image courtesy of Piazza della Signoria.

certainly was in antiquity,²⁸ Ovid characterizes Medusa's stunning power as that of not simply a sculptor but a singularly accomplished sculptor.

Van Eck theorizes the Medusean myth as an allegory for image making. Of the three (alleged) metaphors of image making present in the Ovidian myth of Medusa, Van Eck writes:

First, the Gorgon's petrifying gaze, changing living beings into lifeless statues; second, Medusa's figuration on the reflecting mirror of Perseus; and third, *the petrification resulting from a confrontation with that mirror image*. These three kinds of figuration, or image making, all thematize the agency of art and the dangers of looking. . . . Underlying these Medusean paradigms of figuration and petrification is an uneasy awareness that the relation between a living being and its image is not a matter of harmless distancing or abstraction through representation in another medium. It is an ambiguous, precarious relation, *in which inanimate images turn out to possess the same agency as the living being they represent.*²⁹



Figure 11 Raphael, *The School of Athens*, detail, 1509–11, *Apostolic Palace, Vatican City*. Image courtesy of *Musei Vaticani*.

The italics are my own, highlighting what are here unidentified as early modern interpretations of the Medusean myth. The second italicized sentence holds true in the case of Ovid’s Pygmalion, but it is less convincingly present in the context of Ovid’s narrative of Perseus and Medusa. At no point do Medusa’s petrified victims (re)gain life in the way Pygmalion’s Galatea does; while Pygmalion’s narrative explicitly attests to the presence of life in a sculpture, Medusa’s narrative only suggests it—what was once alive certainly still bears the formal trace of its erstwhile animacy (recall Astyages’s misguided blow), but there is no movement, voice, or reversion to flesh to unambiguously affirm the lingering presence of life. More important, an episode of “petrification resulting from a confrontation with that mirror image” is not only absent from the *Metamorphoses* but radically opposed to the events that do occur:

[Perseus] saw the forms of men and beasts, made stone
 By one look at Medusa’s face. He also
 Had seen that face, but only in reflection
 From the bronze shield his left hand bore. . .³⁰

Ovid could not be clearer on this point: Medusa's reflection in a mirror does not cause petrification. Medusa's gaze is powerful, but Medusa's reflection—her image—is utterly powerless. This is the very crux of the infamous episode of decapitation: the fact that Perseus is able to behead Medusa is a direct result of the fact that her image has no power.

The conceit of Medusa's "functional" reflection, the image with stunning power, as articulated through the Gorgon's self-petrification by regarding herself in a mirror—that is, the conceit that actually represents Van Eck's idea of "images that turn out to possess the same agency as the living being they represent"—does, however, occur in early modern poetry, as previously mentioned.³¹ The conceit is identified by Irving Lavin and Marc Fumaroli as having most likely originated in an ekphrastic poem from Groto's 1587 *Delle rime*:³²

Non è scoltura di colui, che'n sasso
 Cangiava questa, ma Medusa stessa.
 Però tien, chi quà giungi, il viso basso!
 Se di stupor non vuoi cangiarti in essa,
 Mentre a questa parete, il corpo lasso
 Appoggiav'ella, vi rimase impressa
 Che poi, che gli occhi in uno specchio tenne,
 Per se stessa mirar, sasso diviene.³³

The poem describes a particularly convincing sculpture of Medusa; as translated by Lavin, "This is not a sculpture by him who changed it into stone, but Medusa herself. Looking into a mirror to regard herself, she turned to stone."³⁴ Fumaroli suggests that this poem was published in 1610, but the poem is included in an edition of *Delle Rime* published in 1587.³⁵ Evidently, Groto's poem is intended to communicate the sculptor's skill—just as Ovid writes that Medusa's victims as sculptures are mistaken to be real men (confusing "rock for flesh, for living flesh"), so, too, does Groto suggest that the sculpture of Medusa in question is so lifelike that it can only have been made by Medusa's petrifying power itself—thus praising not only the lifelikeness of the sculpture but the lifelikeness of the mirror image, producing a two-pronged but clearly harmonious conceit: the virtuosic artwork and the powerful image.

Lavin and Fumaroli suggest that Groto's poem laid the foundation for Marino's meditations on Medusa included in his 1619/20 *La galleria*, an anthology of poems devoted to artworks. In Marino's first poem about a sculpture of Medusa, the sculpture itself speaks (here translated by Lavin): "I know not if I was sculpted by mortal chisel, or if by gazing into a clear glass my own glance made me so."³⁶

Clearly, here, too, the conceit of a Medusa that petrifies herself by regarding her reflection is invoked to praise the sculptor, whose virtuosity is identified on the basis of the lifelikeness of his art; again, however, it is not solely the sculpture that gains agency, but Medusa's reflection. The two-dimensional image of Medusa can now be fully equivalent to the being it represents—if the image in question is a reflection.

La galeria was first conceived in the years in which Caravaggio and Marino knew each other; in Rome, Elizabeth Cropper states, they became friends and admirers of each other's work.³⁷ *La galeria*, indeed, contains that aforementioned poem about Caravaggio's *Medusa* in particular: "Now what enemies will there be who will not become cold marble in gazing upon, my Lord, in your shield that Gorgon proud and cruel in whose hair horribly voluminous vipers make foul and terrifying adornment?"³⁸

Evidently, Marino was familiar with Caravaggio's *Medusa* and ascribed to it, if metaphorically, the petrifying power of Medusa herself. Considered alongside his other poetic treatments of images of Medusa and the fact that those likely took inspiration from Groto's "Scoltura di Medusa," however, the petrifying power of the image might carry greater significance. Marino's other poems that reference Medusa, as illuminated by Cropper, do so in order to engage with the idea of Medusa as an allegory for virtuosic sculpture. In addition to the poem excerpted above, Marino includes one poem about a beautiful sculpture of a woman, writing: "The figure portrayed seems like Medusa to me. The sculpture is made in such a way that it changes the limbs of others. Already, already, I feel myself changing little by little, outside all stone, and inside in flames. . . . And stupor so deprives me of sense that I am almost the statue, and she seems alive." The "Medusa effect" in sculpture, therefore, links lifelikeness with a power to petrify.³⁹

Caravaggio's first version of his *Medusa* (there are two, both on shields) is now named the *Murtula* in reference to the Italian poet Gaspare Murtola, who, in a madrigal of 1603, wrote of the painting: "Flee, lest awe of her eyes transfix you, turning you forthwith to stone."⁴⁰ Petrification as it indicates amazement, then, was undeniably an interpretation applied to Caravaggio's *Medusa*, but I would suggest that, in his painting, Caravaggio hints at the *real* capacity of his image to petrify, engaging with the "Medusa effect" as articulated by Groto and, later, Marino—the image of Medusa so lifelike, so virtuosically rendered, that it retains the power to turn onlookers to stone. If we consider that Groto introduced the conceit of the Medusean reflection with the power to stun but a few years prior to Caravaggio's production of his *Medusa*, and that Marino seems to have known of Groto's poem, deployed its conceit, and been good friends with Caravaggio, it seems, at least, not unlikely that Caravaggio, too, knew of Groto's poem. Furthermore, Cropper states



Figure 12 Red-figure eye-cup, c. 580 BCE; New York, Metropolitan Museum: 14.136. Image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum.

that “Marino’s undeniable thematization of his own virtuosity . . . lends support to the view, often expressed but never fully explicated, that Caravaggio also made the expression of the power of his own art into a conscious theme of his painting.”⁴¹ My suggestion is that Caravaggio depicts his *Medusa*’s eyes averted—in contrast to nearly all the visual comparanda he might have encountered at the time—expressly to “thematize his own virtuosity” by maintaining the fiction that his painted Medusa possesses the same power to petrify as does the real Medusa. I suggest this in relation to Rainer Mack’s theorization of how the ancient, frontal Medusa functioned, a model that Caravaggio seems to have deliberately avoided.

Ancient Greek images of Medusa were, indeed, nearly always frontal. As a singular exception to the contemporaneous pictorial convention of profile views, the method must have been systematic; indeed, it applied in every context of Medusa’s depiction. The Gorgoneion on Athena’s aegis; a shield device for a warrior; a head clutched by Perseus; a Gorgon midspint; a pediment sculpture; a tondo or exterior design on a symposiast’s cup—in all these cases, Medusa meets her on-lookers’ eyes (Figs. 12–13 for a kylix and a roof tile).⁴² The aforementioned Tazza Farnese similarly offers a direct glare.⁴³ The standard interpretation holds that these images of Medusa are apotropaic, acting as agents of protection for their bearers;



Figure 13 Terracotta painted gorgoneion antefix (roof tile), archaic, c. 540 BCE, Greek or South Italian or Tarentine; New York: Metropolitan Museum: 39.11.9. Image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum.

this makes sense, of course, in the context of Athena’s aegis or a shield device. The breadth of appropriate contexts for the glaring Gorgoneion, however—not just battlefield, but drinking party, too—suggests that its intended effects transcend the inspiration of fear and intimidation (indeed, some have even suggested comic connotations).

In his article “Facing Down Medusa (an Aetiology of the Gaze),” Mack seeks an explanation for the presumably desirable disjunction between the fiction of the ancient Medusean image (its gaze stuns you) and the inherent practice of its making and viewing (its gaze does *not* stun you). Understanding Medusa to be fundamentally a catalyst in the Perseus narrative, Mack suggests that these ancient frontal images communicate Medusa in the context of her definitive role in the context of Perseus’s hero narrative: “The hero’s critical victory is represented by Perseus’s defeat of Medusa.”⁴⁴ Thus Medusa is not simply a monster: she is a monster to be defeated, and she is defeated by way of her opponent, Perseus, claiming the position of the subject, not object, of the gaze—first, by looking at Medusa via a reflection, and then, by taking possession of the Gorgon’s head and its petrifying power, using it as his own weapon, his own gaze.⁴⁵ As we know, Ovid’s is the earliest recorded version that details the defeat: Perseus avoids looking at Medusa



Figure 14 Red-figure pelike, c. 450–440 BCE, attributed to Polygnotos, New York, Metropolitan Museum: 45.11.1. Image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum.

by viewing not her but her reflection in his bronze shield; Medusa becomes an image, and Perseus proceeds to take possession of her agential powers of gazing. This, Mack says, is the impetus behind the “failed” maintenance of the “fiction of the image” in frontal images of Medusa: the viewer is cast as Perseus.

Although not mentioned by Mack, three examples are known to me of nonfrontal ancient Gorgons: a pelike attributed to Polygnotos, a bell krater in Boston, and a hydria at the British Museum (Figs. 14–16).⁴⁶ Exceptions though these objects might seem to be, they quite literally prove the rule. If Mack is correct in his interpretation of ancient frontal Medusas, and the frontal composition was, indeed, intended to cast the viewer in the role of Perseus, then these three Medusas with their eyes averted or closed are depicted as such quite deliberately: Perseus himself is depicted in each of these scenes, thus negating the viewer’s ability to take on the role of the hero. Perseus’s presence (as well as the fact that he or Athena is depicted holding the head, or Medusa is depicted pre-decapitation) also indicates that the Gorgons depicted on these vases are not shown in their role as a reflection triumphantly viewed by Perseus. Instead, these are *actual* Medusas—Medusas with the power to stun. In this case, then, because the viewer cannot assume the role of Perseus, the fiction of the image is *not* negated.

My suggestion, then, is that these ancient vase painters could be said to prefigure Caravaggio, and that it is through Mack’s hypothesis about how ancient images of Medusas “worked” that we might understand how Caravaggio’s *Medusa* functioned: if the frontal Medusa negates the fiction of its image, a straightforward contrast suggests that the Medusa with eyes averted *maintains* the fiction of its image. In other words, the Medusa with whom you cannot make eye contact is the Medusa whose powers you cannot disprove. Identifying that from Groto’s poem



Figure 15 Apulian red-figure bell krater, c. 400–385 BCE, attributed to Tarporley Painter, Boston Museum of Fine Arts: 1970.237. Image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum.

onward, the image, the reflection, of Medusa was newly conceived of as an image that—in Van Eck’s words—possessed the same agency as the living being it represented, and noting that this deliberate shift from the powerless image to the powerful image was produced in the context of praising artistic skill measured by lifelikeness, we can interpret the averted eyes of Caravaggio’s *Medusa* as follows: in maintaining the fiction of the image, that the Medusa depicted can stun, images of Medusa that deny the viewer eye contact maintain the fiction that their artist is so technically gifted as to have been able to produce an image equivalent to the living being it represents (with, in Caravaggio’s case, the mediating function of the mirror, the image found within which is allowed by Grotto to be equivalent to the being it represents). As stated above: the Medusa with whom you cannot make eye contact is the Medusa whose powers you cannot disprove, which, in turn, situates the artist as one whose virtuosic technical skill you cannot disprove.

Cropper uses her analysis of the connection between Caravaggio and Marino to arrive at a similar conclusion about Caravaggio’s *Medusa*: “Destroying the distance between the model and its copy that representation respects, [Caravaggio] creates a simulacrum comparable to Marino’s beautiful statue.”⁴⁷ In other words, she says of Caravaggio’s *Medusa* what Van Eck says that the Medusean allegory suggests of the relationship between the real and the representation: “It is an ambiguous,



Figure 16 Red-figure hydria, c. 460 BCE, attributed to Pan Painter, London, British Museum: 1873,0820.352. Image courtesy of British Museum.

precarious relation, in which inanimate images turn out to possess the same agency as the living being they represent.”⁴⁸ Cropper subsequently suggests that “Marino’s epitaph for Caravaggio” also “expresses this shocking power. Death and Nature, he writes, conspired to kill Caravaggio, the one because he brought the dead alive with his brushes, the other because she was conquered in every image that Caravaggio created rather than painted (“da te creata, e non dipinta”). Caravaggio’s figures, even in action, are creations, not imitations; they are statues, models, simulacra.”⁴⁹ Cropper’s interpretation of Caravaggio’s intentions is fundamentally equivalent to my own, but the painting’s formal qualities on which she establishes her reading differ. I would suggest that this is because Cropper assumes the accuracy of Louis Marin’s reading of the *Medusa*—she terms it “brilliant”⁵⁰—which, I believe, is limited precisely in that Marin is not aware of the divergence between Ovid’s conception of the Medusean image and the later Grotto/Marino understanding (i.e., the powerless image vs. the powerful image).

Marin, in his 1977 *To Destroy Painting*, reads Caravaggio’s *Medusa* as an image representing two different moments in the Perseus–Medusa narrative. The first moment is that of what he calls “the story’s represented ‘content’: Medusa is stupefied and turned into a statue by her own reflection. The singular potency of her

own gaze is applied intransitively to herself, reflecting itself and thereby producing its own petrification. The first moment represented in the painting, then, is the moment of this singular metamorphosis, the moment when the Gorgon's violence is immobilized in its very expression, imprinting itself on itself."⁵¹ He qualifies this metamorphosis as a transformation of temporality: the "sculptural moment," the "most furtive, infinitesimal instant of time" that is simultaneously "the most permanent moment of all."⁵² The second "moment" is the more durational event of the Gorgon's presence on a shield: the "ornamental or decorative moment," when "the mirror, Perseus's defensive weapon, becomes a shield bearing an image of Medusa who is ready to go on repeating her deadly act."⁵³

While it might be said that Marin makes profitable use of the *Medusa* as a crucible for thinking through various theories, techniques, and effects related to representation and painting, his explanation of the Medusa as a multitemporal image is unnecessarily convoluted. He suggests that his reading is supported through reference to other contemporary depictions of the Gorgon, as an example of which he offers Annibale Carracci's Farnese Palace fresco of Perseus decapitating Medusa. Marin writes that, in this fresco, "Athena is shown holding up Perseus's shield like a mirror, while Perseus, positioned on one side, looks at the image—but not directly. Holding Medusa's head by the serpents, he aims his blow by keeping track of the head in the mirror."⁵⁴ The same issue arises in this interpretation as did in Marin's interpretation of Caravaggio's *Medusa*: in the latter, the shield both produces an image that can petrify *and* functions as "Perseus's defensive weapon," while, in the former, Carracci's Perseus reportedly both does and does not look at the image in the shield. One look at Carracci's painting, however, makes it clear that the complications of Marin's description are unnecessary: Perseus is, very simply, looking directly—indeed, intently—at the shield.

What appears to be the issue is that Carracci's fresco illustrates the Medusa–Perseus episode precisely as it transpired in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, depicting the shield as facilitating the powerless mirror image of Medusa, but Marin is unaware that there are two radically different Medusa–Perseus narratives: Ovid's version and the Grotto/Marino version. In the former, the defensive potential for the shield is rooted in the fact that Medusa's image is powerless; in the latter, her image/reflection in the shield can stun. In the case of Carracci's fresco, Marin attempts to read a straightforward depiction of Ovid's narrative as a depiction of the Grotto/Marino narrative; in the case of Caravaggio, in assuming that the Grotto/Marino narrative is the only narrative, Marin neglects to consider the conditions under which that narrative arose and, thus, how those conditions illuminate what the narrative suggests for contemporaneous representations of Medusa. This is to say: Caravaggio's *Medusa* does not need to depict two separate moments in

order to produce an image that conflates the representation with the real and thus vaunt its creator's representational powers. It is unlikely that Caravaggio's *Medusa* is supposed to represent Medusa when on Athena's aegis, because that Medusa is always frontal and is, presumably, not garishly bloody; she is also not shown at a moment when "her own gaze is applied intransitively to herself," petrifying herself, because she is clearly not looking at her own reflection (to say nothing of the fact that Marin explains that Caravaggio's *Medusa* is still of flesh and not stone because the painting depicts the previously unheard-of moment "between" gaze and petrification).⁵⁵ Instead, the shield-shaped mount alone allows Caravaggio to conflate the real with the representation, engaging Groto's conceit of the reflection with petrifying power: Caravaggio affects at having reproduced Perseus's shield, with the reflection of Medusa evident within it, and, in averting her eyes, renders it impossible for the viewer to disprove her power to petrify. In this way, Caravaggio conflates the representation with the real: his painting is so well executed, he implies, that he painted a Medusa with the same stunning capacity as the Gorgon's own reflection, which, in turn, is equivalent—thanks to Groto—to the real Medusa herself. Here, indeed, Caravaggio might be seen to conflate Vasari's two accounts of Leonardo's painting: an image rendered on a shield, promising "the same effect as once did the head of Medusa."

* * *

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Notes

¹ Mina Gregori, "Caravaggio's First 'Medusa,'" in *The First Medusa: Caravaggio*, edited by Ermanno Zoffili (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2011), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ Elizabeth Cropper, “The Petrifying Art: Marino’s Poetry and Caravaggio,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26 (1991): 204, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512912>.

⁴ Luigi Groto, *Delle rime di Luigi Groto, cieco d’Hadria, nuovamente ristampate, & ricorrette dal medesimo Autore* (Venice: appresso Fabio & Agostino Zoppini fratelli, 1587), 138.

⁵ Marc Fumaroli, “La *Galeria* de Marino et la Galerie Farnese: Épigrammes et oeuvres d’art profanes vers 1600,” in *Les Carrache et les décors profanes: Actes du colloque de Rome (2–4 octobre 1986)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1988), 174, www.persee.fr/doc/efr_0000-0000_1988_act_106_1_3291.

⁶ See, e.g., Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Cropper, “Petrifying Art”; Hal Foster, “Medusa and the Real,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 44 (2003): 181–90, www.jstor.org/stable/20167613; <https://doi.org/10.1086/resv44n1ms20167613>; and Michael Fried, “Thoughts on Caravaggio,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (1997): 13–56, www.jstor.org/stable/1344158, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448866>.

⁷ The idea that Caravaggio’s *Medusa* is a self-portrait is common: see Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 84; Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600–1750* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 22, 335n10; and Matteo Marangoni, “Note sul Caravaggio alla mostra del Sei e Settecento,” *Bollettino d’arte*, no. 5 (1922): 226. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer helpfully suggests the artist’s potential use of the convex mirror and that mirror’s depiction in *Martha and Mary Magdalene*. Ebert-Schifferer is also one of very few authors who point out that Medusa’s reflection cannot (or, rather, originally could not) petrify the viewer. See Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), 104–5.

⁸ Jurgen Pieters, “The Gaze of Medusa and the Practice of the Historian: Rubens and Huygens,” in *Speaking with the Dead: Explorations in Literature and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748615889.003.0003>.

⁹ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, translated by Gaston du C. De Vere (London: Macmillan and the Medici Society, 1912), para. 10, eBooks@Adelaide, University of Adelaide.

¹⁰ Avigdor W. G. Posèq, “Caravaggio and the Antique,” *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 21 (1990): 158, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1483388>.

¹¹ Sharon Gregory, “Caravaggio and Vasari’s ‘Lives,’” *Artibus et Historiae* 32, no. 64 (2011): 189, www.jstor.org/stable/41479760.

¹² John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 24.

¹³ Mary D. Garrard, “Michelangelo and the Gaze,” *Artibus et Historiae* 77, no. 39 (2018): 227.

¹⁴ Janet Cox-Rearick, “Friendly Rivals: Bronzino and Salviati at the Medici Court, 1543–48,” *Master Drawings* 43, no. 3 (2005): 293, www.jstor.org/stable/20444412.

¹⁵ Obviously, this point desires further inquiry. The Indianapolis Museum of Art’s online item information for Salviati’s drawing of Medusa does not explain the reasoning behind its estimated date, so there is no clarification as to why it is dated prior to Salviati’s employment in the court of Cosimo de’ Medici. The drawing’s link to Cort’s engraving is noted, but Leonardo’s Medusa is not mentioned. It is not clear, therefore, whether (1) the IMA curators are simply not aware of the potential connection between Salviati’s drawing and Leonardo’s Medusa or (2) they have looked into the matter and found the connection impossible or unlikely; similarly, it is unclear whether they somewhat arbitrarily dated the drawing to 1540, or whether 1543–48 would be just as plausible. (It was not possible to pursue this within the scope of this essay, but further research will be undertaken.)

¹⁶ Gregory, “Caravaggio and Vasari’s ‘Lives,’” 172.

¹⁷ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (New York: Random House, 2007), 233, 232, 232.

¹⁸ Gregory, “Caravaggio and Vasari’s ‘Lives,’” 172.

¹⁹ Varriano, *Caravaggio*, 24.

²⁰ Posèq, “Caravaggio and the Antique,” 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

²³ Paul Barolsky notes—accurately, I think—that Caravaggio’s *Medusa* is significant for its Gorgon’s self-awareness (see “The Ambiguity of Caravaggio’s ‘Medusa,’” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 32, no. 3 [2013]: 28, www.jstor.org/stable/23392422), <https://doi.org/10.1086/sou.32.3.23392422>; i.e., Medusa is shown conscious of her death, communicated by the fact that her eyes are averted toward her severed, bleeding neck. This is also true of Peter Paul Rubens’s *Medusa* (1618). Considering Maria H. Loh’s lens of “early modern horror” (“Introduction: Early Modern Horror,” *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 3 [2011]: 321–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41415621>), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ox-artj/kcr040>; the fact that Rubens’s *Medusa* was kept behind a curtain to increase its dramatic effect (see Ulrich Heinen, “Huygens, Rubens, and Medusa: Reflecting the Passions in Paintings, with Some Considerations of Neuroscience in Art History,”

Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 60 [2010]: 153, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22145966-90000758>); and Thijs Weststeijn's writing on the "moving image," the quality of *beweeglijkheid*, and the idea of the transmission of a painted individual's passions to the viewer (*The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age* [Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008], 182–197), <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089640277>; I would suggest that the averted eyes in both Caravaggio's and Rubens's paintings of Medusa could be *fundamentally* attributed to the artists' desires to increase their paintings' effects of horror and affective potentials (if the Salviati/Cort image preserves Leonardo's Medusa, and Caravaggio did indeed see Leonardo's painting, this would also explain why Caravaggio changed the direction of the eyes). It is Caravaggio's specific link to Marino and proposed thematization of his own virtuosity that leads me to suggest that his Medusa's averted eyes *also* communicate his own artistic skill.

²⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, as excerpted in Marjorie B. Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, *The Medusa Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 35.

²⁵ Caroline van Eck, "The Petrifying Gaze of Medusa: Ambivalence, Explexis, and the Sublime," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 8, no. 2 (2016), para. 20, <https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2016.8.2.3>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, paras. 26, 18.

²⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, as excerpted in Garber and Vickers, *Medusa Reader*, 38.

²⁸ Pliny, for example, praises Praxiteles's son Cephisodotus by stating that, in his works, "the fingers have all the appearance of being impressed upon real flesh rather than upon marble" (*Natural History* 36.4).

²⁹ Van Eck, "Petrifying Gaze," para. 22.

³⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, as excerpted in Garber and Vickers, *Medusa Reader*, 38.

³¹ Van Eck, "Petrifying Gaze," para. 22.

³² Fumaroli, "La *Galeria* de Marino," 173–74; and Irving Lavin, "Bernini's Bust of the Medusa: An Awful Pun," in *Visible Spirit: The Art of Gianlorenzo Bernini* (London: Pindar, 2007), 800, <https://publications.ias.edu/node/2252>.

³³ Fumaroli, "La *Galeria* de Marino," 174; see also Groto, *Delle rime*.

³⁴ Lavin, "Bernini's Bust of the Medusa," 800–801.

³⁵ Groto, *Delle rime*, 138. Mina Gregori, "The First Medusa," also dates the publication of *Delle rime* to 1587.

³⁶ Giovan Battista Marino, *La galeria del cavalier Marino: Distinta in pitture, & sculture* (Venice: Presso G. P. Brigonci, 1664), 277; Lavin, "Bernini's Bust of the Medusa," 800.

- ³⁷ Cropper, “Petrifying Art,” 193.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.
- ⁴⁰ Gregori, “Caravaggio’s First ‘Medusa,’” 12.
- ⁴¹ Cropper, “Petrifying Art,” 205.
- ⁴² E.g., skyphos, 500–475 bce, Athena with aegis (Berlin, Antikensammlung: 1970.9); amphora, 5th century bce, Gorgoneion shield device (Milan, Museo Teatrale alla Scala: 416); pelike, 5th century bce, Perseus and head of Medusa (Munich, Antikensammlungen: 8725); siana cup, ca. 565 bce, running Gorgon (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum: 1965.120); pediment, Temple of Artemis, ca. 580 bce, Corfu, and eye-cup, ca. 580 bce, Gorgon (New York, Metropolitan Museum: 14.136).
- ⁴³ Farnese Cup, 2nd century ce, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.
- ⁴⁴ Rainer Mack, “Facing Down Medusa (an Aetiology of the Gaze),” *Art History* 25, no. 5 (2002): 579, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.00346>.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 571–604.
- ⁴⁶ Three ancient Medusas without frontal gazes: red-figure pelike, ca. 450–440 bce, attributed to Polygnotos (New York, Metropolitan Museum: 45.11.1); Apulian red-figure bell krater, ca. 400–385 bce, attributed to Tarporley Painter (Boston Museum of Fine Arts: 1970.237); red-figure hydria, ca. 460 bce, attributed to Pan Painter (London, British Museum: 1873,0820.352).
- ⁴⁷ Cropper, “Petrifying Art,” 204.
- ⁴⁸ Van Eck, “Petrifying Gaze,” para. 22.
- ⁴⁹ Cropper, “Petrifying Art,” 204.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.
- ⁵¹ Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 136.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.