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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Contra Naturam: The Paradox of Gender in 16th century Receptions of Ovid's
Metamorphoses

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

by

Ara Hernandez

Thesis Committee:
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Contra Naturam: The Paradox of Gender in 16th century Receptions of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*
by

Ara Hernandez

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Professor Lyle Massey, Chair

This paper discusses the reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through the lens of *contra naturam* (or actions "against nature") focusing on two case studies: Titian's *Venus and Adonis* and Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa*. It exposes the intricacies of gender within Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through the lens of sixteenth century Renaissance artists. On the surface, *Venus and Adonis* is presented as nature taking its course, rectifying the unnaturalness of Venus and Adonis' relationship, however, further analysis highlights the intricacies between Ovid's myths and the artist's intentions through their instability of gender. Similarly, the hero and villain paradigm in Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* is complicated by the nuances of the gendered power dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Myths are a product of people's beliefs, and the way people view and understand the world. They are passed down through generations, mostly orally, and become adapted by writers and artists. This is the obstacle when analyzing the historiography of myths— they “are not static, but they change through time.”¹ Greco-Roman mythology is a prime example of this. Numerous variations of the same myth reveal how creative liberties occur under different conditions of reception. This creative fluidity allows for intricate nuances that compound the original myth, and the decisions made by various artists or authors create multifaceted reception contexts. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* represents his reception of Greco-Roman mythology. His influence when writing these myths came from his own circumstances working in ancient Rome. Therefore, these stories already exemplify varied nuances that continue to intrigue scholars to this day. This also applies to later responses to Ovid's poems that are equally intricate.

This paper will demonstrate the way in which the reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in sixteenth century Italy emphasized aspects of *contra naturam* that emerged from certain tales. The Latin term *contra naturam* directly translates to “*against nature*” and it is this term, threaded throughout Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, that this paper will focus on, specifically the term's function within gender reversal. Examining two works of art produced within thirty or so years of each other, the painting of *Venus and Adonis* (dated to 1520, but known mostly through later copies created in the 1550s) by Tiziano Vecellio, known as Titian, and Benvenuto Cellini's bronze *Perseus and Medusa* (1545-54), this paper will explain the way these two artists confronted the problem of gender and desire as a thematic element of *contra naturam*.

In the same vein as Ovid who was influenced by his era, Titian and Cellini's artistic liberties are intrinsic to sixteenth century Venice and Florence— therefore, the artists'

¹ Wilk, Stephen R. *Medusa : Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* / Stephen R. Wilk. Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2000, 8.

actualization of these poems is influenced by their socio-political ideals. Focusing on the reception of Ovid's gender dynamics between these two couples, works by these two artists reveal the instabilities between the dichotomy of gender. *Venus and Adonis* present Venus as strictly feminine and Adonis masculine on the surface. However, with a closer look their gender seems to shift and switch with the poem's nuances in mind. Similarly, *Perseus and Medusa* present a struggle for the power dynamics that are inherent in gender, consequently destabilizing the rigidity of Perseus and Medusa's gendered relationship.

Renaissance textual Interpretations of Ovid

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is one of the most influential ancient pieces of literature reproduced verbally and visually in the Renaissance. Julia Brannan Perlman indicates that Ovid's tales provide rich poetic imagery that influenced the discourse of sixteenth century *paragone*, or the "comparison and competition among the visual and verbal arts."² Italian artists often did not know Latin, thus painters and sculptors "preferred to read vernacular editions" which were more often than not vulgarizations of the original text—leading to both positive and negative receptions.³ The fourteenth century Italian poet and grammarian, Giovanni del Virgilio, utilized and translated Latin poems such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* explaining them in great detail for easier comprehension for readers. The poems mirror Virgilio's historical and philosophical tastes creating a richer and more nuanced interpretation. Virgilio's transmission of this work would prove influential on artistic interpretations.

These vulgarizations were of interest for the wealthy and mercantile class, where premium productions of Ovidian texts possessed both allegorical commentary and woodcut

² Julia Branna Perlman, "Venus, Myrrha, Cupid and/as Adonis: *Metamorphoses* 10 and the Artistry of Incest," Essay. (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007) 224.

³ Giuseppe Capriotti, "The Fortune and Misfortunes of Vulgarized Editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Italy and Spain." in *After Ovid. Aspects of Reception of Ovid in Literature and Iconography*, (Brepols Publishers. 2022) 261.

illustrations.⁴ These collections created tension with the Christian church. The illustrated nudity caused a campaign of censorship by ink blotting genitals for modesty. Despite this, in 1553 Lodovico Dolce produced another vulgarized edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with woodcut illustrations by Giovanni Antonio Rusconi, which was so popular that "more than 1,800 copies sold out in just four months."⁵ Vulgarization was a vital component of the literature, and illustrations in this and other editions help explain how Ovid's tales became the focus of artistic interpretations.

One aspect of Ovid's tales that clearly interested humanists, artists, and others were their themes of desire and transformation. Often, the transformations involved moments in which the actions and desires of the protagonists went against what was understood as the natural order of things. That is, the tales are framed in terms of *contra naturam*.

Contra Naturam

As previously mentioned, the term *contra naturam* means "against nature" and it refers to someone, something, or an action, that is in contradiction with nature. Aneta Georgievska-Shine emphasizes the notion of love *contra naturam* when discussing the multidimensional tale of Ovid's Venus and Adonis.⁶ Venus and Adonis' love is unnatural. There are several factors for their love *contra naturam*, which will be explored later in this paper and there are many attributes that can be presented as against nature; however, the crux of this paper is the opposing binary genders. The concept of gender was understood to be interrelated with one's biological sex, which in turn, dictated one's role in society, temper, and appearance.⁷ This was often a form

⁴ Giuseppe Capriotti, "The Fortune and Misfortunes of Vulgarized Editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Italy and Spain." (Brepols Publishers. 2022) 263.

⁵ Capriotti, 267.

⁶ Aneta Georgievska-Shine, "Titian and the Paradox of Love and Art in *Venus and Adonis*," *Artibus et historiae*, 2012-01, Vol.33 (65), 97-113.

⁷ Jacqueline Murray and Nicholas Terpstra, *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Renaissance Italy* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 2.

of propaganda for politics, presenting the enemy (or monsters) as women and the hero as male. While the two genders are seemingly separate, however, many stories as well as attributes of significant characters in Greek and Roman mythology exhibit characteristics of both, and Ovid capitalizes on this.

The *Metamorphoses* deals with themes of hubris, love, anguish, and of course transformation. Some of the transformations are explicitly gendered such as stories of Tiresias and Hermaphroditus, while others are more subtle. Tiresias is most famous for being a blind prophet which was the consequence of a wager between Juno and Jupiter when discussing the pleasures of intercourse. In Book III in the *Metamorphoses*, the two gods sought out Tiresias to adjudicate their bet as to who experiences satisfaction more during intercourse, men or women.⁸ Tiresias, originally born a man, transformed into a woman when disrupting copulating snakes and reverted into a man when he encountered the same snakes again eight years later. His experience of being both a man and a woman granted him the authority to answer Juno and Jupiter's question. Tiresias explained that women experience the most pleasure during intercourse, granting Jupiter victor of the debate; consequently, Juno blinded Tiresias as punishment and Jupiter gifted him with the prophecy. This tale is presented as a humorous anecdote involving metamorphosis to explain how Tiresias became the blind prophet he is most known as. The story of Hermaphroditus presents a rare instance where the female rapes the

⁸ "They decided to seek the judgment of the wise Tiresias, since he had known both types of lovemaking. For in the verdant woods, he once had struck two giant mating serpents with his staff and was transformed (amazing!) from a male into a female. Seven autumns passed, and in the eighth he saw the same two snakes again and ... when he struck the snakes, his prior form- the likeness he'd been born with- reappeared. When chosen as the playful quarrel's judge, he favored Jove. It's said that Juno grieved excessively- more than the matter called for- and damned the judge's eyes to endless night. But the almighty father (since no god can void another's deeds) made him a prophet to soothe the pain of his lost sight with honor." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stephanie McCarter. (Penguin Random House, 2023) 79.

male.⁹ One of Diana's naiads, Salmacis, captures and rapes the young Hermaphroditus, and through her prayer, they are transformed into one— both male and female.

A less overt story of gendered transformation is Daphne and Apollo. In Book I, Apollo insults Cupid and his arrows, whereupon, Cupid strikes him with a love-tipped arrow and Daphne with an arrow that fills her with dejection towards Apollo.¹⁰ Consequently, Apollo chases lustfully after Diana's nymph and in desperation she prays to her father that she be stripped of what makes her most “pleasing”— her femininity, and thusly, she is turned into a laurel tree.¹¹ In this instance, Daphne became genderless in her transformation. The overtness of domination and submission within a male and female dynamic is seemingly the natural order in which the characters must abide, however, in the cases of Daphne and Apollo and Salmacis and Hermaphroditus their gendered roles are at odds— Salmacis being a dominant female, Hermaphroditus being a submissive male, and Daphne becomes genderless, and Apollo is impotent in his desire to rape Daphne, therefore this power shift within the relationship is against nature.

This type of dichotomy is what Italian artists such as Titian and Cellini focused on when creating depictions of Ovid's stories. The artists' goal during the sixteenth century was to interpret the poet's work, both as a sign of respect and artistic competition, and take creative

⁹ “[Salmacis] grips [Hermaphroditus], clinging as if her whole body fused to his. ‘Fight, wicked boy,’ she said, ‘you won’t escape! Decree, gods, that no say will let him part from me or me from him!’ Her prayer found kindly gods, for their two bodies merge and combined.” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 108.

¹⁰ “From [Cupid's] full quiver he took out two arrows with different tasks: one fends love off, one forms it. ... Then with the blunt dart the god struck Daphne and pierced the sharp one through Apollo's bones. One loves at once; one flees love's very name. Apollo is in love. When he sees Daphne, he wants their wedding night. ...Daphne fled in fear away from him and his half-wished words. ... Subdued by flight, she sees Peneus' waters and cries out, ‘Help father! If these streams if yours are holy destroy what makes me pleasing. Change my form!’ Her prayer just spoken, dull weight grips her limbs as slender bark enfolds her supple torso. Her hair sprouts up as leaves, her arms as branches. ... Apollo loves this too. ... ‘But since,’ he said ‘you cannot be my wife, you’ll be my tree! You will adorn my hair, laurel, and you my quiver...’ Ibid., 23-26.

¹¹ Ibid., 23-6.

liberties that engaged the artist's political or artistic agenda. Titian's interpretation of the story emphasizes Venus' sexual aggressivity toward Adonis which counters what might be perceived as the natural order of their relationship (This will be further discussed in Titian's *Venus and Adonis*). The artist then underscores this by making Adonis leave her, rather than vice versa. In addition, in the *Metamorphoses*, *contra naturam* is evoked by the story Venus tells Adonis about Atalanta and Hippomenes, and that sets a background for all the ways in which the story of Venus and Adonis goes awry. The intention between this shift from Ovid's tale to Titian's interpretation is artistic and will be further explored in the next section.

Cellini's reception of Perseus and Medusa is more complex. Medusa's existence is against nature due to her unruly power, therefore, Perseus killing her and harnessing her power returns dominance to him. Consequently, Cellini's work serves as propaganda for the claims of natural rule invoked by the Absolutist ideology of the Grand Ducal Medici court. In the end both stories are seemingly rectified by the death of the character that offends nature the most, thus restoring the natural order, both as a sign of respect and as a catalyst for artistic competition. Yet, there is an instability of the resolution— when a story like this demonstrates actions that defy nature, they do so based on gender and sexuality. The gendering of desire and the ways that it transcends *contra naturam* is confronted and quelled; The surface narrative is Perseus cutting off Medusa's head in heroism, however, due to their inherent allusions of the characters' being inextricably linked, their sub-narrative becomes multifaceted. Ovid challenges the permeability of gender through the shifting of power and that shifting destabilizes the idea of the resolution and therefore the natural order of things.

Ovid in Art

Artists' representations and receptions of Ovidian myths became widespread in the Renaissance partly due to the popularity and accessibility of the rich language and embellished

paraphrasing of popular texts. This accessibility would also affect artistic theory of the period. Put simply, as Paul Barolsky states, this is because in essence “all art is a transformation or metamorphosis of something into something new”¹²¹³ For example, Ovid utilizes many themes in his poetry, however, one of the most potent is the theme of desire. Writers and artists strived to capture the essence of desire in their work, rising to the challenge of representing Ovid’s difficult themes of transformation. Titian, Cellini, and other artists created multifaceted and nuanced artworks that proceed from Ovid’s original intention and understanding of the myths but also respond to the vulgarization of his prose. In addition, artists like Titian took artistic liberties with Ovid’s text that are a result of their contemporary socio-political narratives.

Titian’s *Venus and Adonis*

In his painting *Venus and Adonis* (1555-60), Titian (Tiziano Vecellio, 1487 - 1576) portrays the moment of the lovers' separation, enhancing Venus' angst and the paradoxical gender dynamic between the bold goddess and her beautiful lover through mythology and iconography. Titian took some artistic liberties to elaborate on Ovid's account, interlacing multifaceted nuances that express the complex vectors of erotic desire and the dilemma between gods and human lovers. Ovid presents ambiguity in gender and relationships in his poetry, and Titian emphasizes the portrayal of the erotic and the *contra naturam* relationship between Venus and Adonis.

The Getty Center’s *Venus and Adonis* is a copy of a painting that is part of Titian’s *Loves of the Gods* series (Figure 1). Titian and his workshop created a sequence of mythological paintings for Phillip II of Spain primarily between 1553 and 1562. All six works were Titian's *poesia* paintings based on tales from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. These poems were a popular

¹³ Paul Barolsky. “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the History of Baroque Art,” *In A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2014), 203.

inspiration during the Renaissance, yet Titian's interpretation of Ovid's tale creates a divergent narrative from the *Metamorphoses*. *Venus and Adonis* was the second work of the series, the first being *Danaë*, and Titian intended all six of the works to be paired or compared. Titian's first version of *Venus and Adonis* was damaged during transportation, consequently, he recreated and produced several subsequent variations due to its popularity, one of which is the Getty copy.

In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid recounts the origin and tragedy of the beautiful mortal Adonis. He was the product of deception: the incestuous relationship between his mother, Myrrha, and his father/grandfather, Cinyras.¹⁴ In Ovid's poem, Venus receives a vision of Adonis's fate: he will die while off hunting a wild beast. She instructs Adonis not to go hunting. She conveys her woes and warnings through the tale of Atalanta and Hippomenes. Venus uses this particular tale as a warning to foreshadow tragedy through the narrative of love *contra naturam*, while also pointing to Adonis' incestuous origins. After the lovers' argument, Venus returns to Olympus only to hear the death cries of Adonis. Ultimately, she laments over her lover's death and transforms his blood into anemones (flowers). This tragic but beautiful story of the unnatural erotic desires of a goddess and a human is continuously reproduced following the author's motif.

Titian strays from the original text by painting Venus being left by Adonis (rather than Venus leaving Adonis, as described by Ovid), providing a profound emotion from the two lovers evocative of erotic opposition and conflict.¹⁵ Titian changes the narrative by showing Venus from her back begging Adonis not to leave. His contemporaries were drawn primarily to the story "because of its erotic potential, rather than its tragic reversal of fortune, or its allegorical concerns with the brevity of life" and they were "focused on the lament of Venus over the dead

¹⁴ "That boy, the son of his own sister and his grandfather, who once was hidden in that tree and then born, is now the loveliest baby, now a youth, and now an even lovelier man whose looks charm Venus— payback for his mother's flame. For as her quivered son was kissing her, his arrow accidentally scratched her chest." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 298.

¹⁵ "Her warning done, she yoked her doves and left. Such warnings, though, conflict with manly valor." *Ibid.*, 304.

youth” which often “served as mere erudite backdrop for titillating displays of the female body in agony.”¹⁶ Ovid’s tale of the two lovers is set in a grove, thus the painted portrayal is just that, especially considering groves are typically a sacred ground for the gods. Yet Titian’s portrayal of the story is altered from Ovid’s original, not only does he obscure the typical view of the goddesses’ frontal nude, but the grove is further in the distance rather than in the foreground.

In the central plain of Titian’s *Venus and Adonis*, the beautiful and naked Venus desperately clings to her young lover Adonis, who is pulling and being pulled away by his three hunting dogs. The couple, the central focus, is also the brightest part of the composition. Titian brings the focus to Venus and her back. The goddess’s nude back, pale and fleshy, has been evoked carefully by the arch of her spine, the contour and dimples of her buttocks, and the definition of the strength in her right arm clasping tight to her lover. Her beautiful golden hair is partially composed in a braided bun and her feminine curves are stark against the background. However, the directionality of her body and gaze directs the viewer’s attention to Adonis.

Aneta Georgievska-Shine examines the importance of the goddesses’ marble flesh, alluding to the *contra naturam* relationship between Venus and Adonis. As mentioned earlier, Venus warns Adonis through a tale of Atalanta and Hippomenes.¹⁷ This tale conveys how the

¹⁶ Georgievska-Shine. “Titian and the Paradoxes of Love and Art in ‘Venus and Adonis.’” (2012): 100.

¹⁷ “Perhaps you’ve heard about a girl who could outrun swift men. That tale was not a rumor—she did outrun them! Nor could you have said if she excelled more in her speed or beauty. The god, when she inquired about a husband, replied ‘You need no husband, Atalanta—flee all enjoyment of a husband! Yet you won’t, and you will lose yourself, still living.’ Scared by this oracle, she lives unwed in shaded woods and violently repels her pressing throng of suitors with these terms: ‘I can’t be won unless I’m first outrun. Race me! The swift man gains a bride and marriage. The slow man pays with death. These are the rules.’ ... [A] young man, undeterred by their misfortune, came forth and locked gaze upon the virgin. ... Then, in a shaking voice, Hippomenes, grandson of Neptune, summons me: ‘Please, Venus, assist my darling—aid the flames you lit!...’ To keep my story shorter than the race: the virgin lost, the victor claimed his prize. ... He forgot and did not thank me or give me incense. Pained by this slight, I set myself against them, warning posterity through their example not to disdain me. I’m at once enraged. ... There was an ill-lit recess by the temple, cave-like and with age-old worship, where the priest kept wooden figures of ancient gods. Entering here, Hippomenes defiles that holy spot with taboo sex! ... The Mother, crowned with towers, thought she might drown those sinners in the Styx — revenge too mild. She wrapped their necks, once smooth, in tawny manes. Their fingers bend to claws. ... Those lions, dreadful to all others, grip the reins of Cybele with docile teeth. Flee these, [Adonis] —each kind of beast that shows its chest in battle, not its back in flight. Or else your manly valor will destroy us.” Ovid, 300-4.

lovers committed sacrilege by forgetting to thank Venus for their union and by consummating their love in the temple on the isle of Cyprus, a sacred site for the goddess Venus. This isle also holds a town called Paphos where Venus, in Ovid's telling, neglects her duties due to her infatuation with Adonis. Paphos is not-so-coincidentally "named after the mother of Cinyras, that is, the grandmother of Myrrha and Adonis alike."¹⁸ Paphos, like Adonis, was born from love *contra naturam*, being a product of Pygmalion, a sculptor who unnaturally loved his sculpture, Galatea, and succeeded in bringing her to life with the goddesses' help. Georgievska-Shine argues that the marble-like skin of Venus resembles the notion of Galatea brought into existence, and these are related examples that reflect the unnatural affair of Venus and Adonis's love that echoes a sacrilegious set of origins. Both Ovid and Titian's display of beauty mirrors (or perhaps contends with) life through their use of Galatea's "living likeness" and her "ivory hardness" in conjunction with Venus' marble-like portrayal.¹⁹

The Pygmalion myth can be seen "as an inversion of that of the Medusa and a variation on the myth of Narcissus, [and] it is no less a type of Ovid's fable of Deucalion and Pyrrha."²⁰ The fable of Deucalion and Pyrrha is as follows: the pair were the last humans on Earth during a great flood, when they prayed to the gods allowing them to repopulate the earth by throwing stones over their shoulders, forming people.²¹ The characters Medusa (a gorgon who turns people into stone through her stare) and Narcissus (who fell in love with his reflection) demonstrate that not only does Ovid's *Metamorphoses* lend itself to artistic self-reflection but also to the inherent desire to imitate life through art as well as equating human beings to sculpture— "roughed out in the block, still unfinished."²²

¹⁸ Georgievska-Shine, 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁰ Barolsky, "Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the History of Baroque Art." 456.

²¹ Ovid, 289-290.

²² Barolsky, "Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the History of Baroque Art." 456.

Titian's sensuous attention to detail of Venus's body opposes Renaissance ideals of modesty. Traditionally, gender roles during the Renaissance were rigid and dictated a person's humility. Female roles included modesty, loyalty, and mother/wifehood within the domestic sphere. While male virtue was demonstrated through participation in public life and men were expected to behave aggressively and assert their dominance.²³ Yet mythological adaptations allowed for the exhibition of unexpected gender confusion both in the telling of tales, but also in their reception which frequently invoked voyeurism.

Ovid reveals that Adonis does not have a happy beginning or end. Titian exploits the connection between Adonis's lineage and his current predicament in the mythology surrounding Venus through his use of motifs and iconography.²⁴ The connection that Ovid makes is that of an unnatural and incestuous conception of Adonis mirrored in his relationship with Venus. Adonis is conceived through *contra naturam* and in the end, nature reclaims him, correcting the wrong. Titian accomplishes this in two ways: through the act of Adonis fleeing and through the parallel relationship between Venus and her son/lover. Adonis fleeing is suggestive of Myrrha fleeing from her father's bed after the conception of Adonis to the forest where she transforms into a tree. This provides a full circle of Adonis's life as he similarly and ultimately goes through his transformation. Myrrha, as a tree, gives birth to the infant Adonis, where the Naiads who claim him remark on the beauty and likeness to Cupid.²⁵ Being synonymous with Cupid perpetuates the theme of love *contra naturam* as it invokes an erotic connection between Venus and her own son. Titian paints Adonis with a youthful, beautiful face furthering his connection to Cupid.

²³ Heather Graham, "Introduction to Gender in Renaissance Italy." *Smarthistory*. Accessed June 14, 2023.

²⁴ Georgievska-Shine, 103.

²⁵ "Her swollen belly bulged in the middle of the tree, its load stretching the mother. ... And yet the tree squats down as though in labor, frequently groaning, wet with falling tears. ... The bark splits, sending forth its living load, a wailing boy. Lying him on soft grass, the naiads daub him with his mother's tears. Envy herself would have extolled his beauty, like that of naked Cupids in a painting. Remove their little quivers or give one to him, and you could not tell them apart." Ibid.; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 297.

Furthermore, Titian places the child-like Cupid asleep by a tree in the background of the painting, linking the relationship between Adonis's birth and the child of love.²⁶ Cupid and Venus are often portrayed as lovers due to their complex nature of being gods of love. Consequently, affirming the inherent *contra naturam* relationship between Venus and Adonis, Titian compares the mortal's unnatural being and the goddesses unnatural love for a mortal by mirroring an incestuous relationship between Venus and Adonis/Cupid.

The complex and erotically charged nature of this mother/son relationship comes to light most prominently in the painting *Venus and Cupid* (ca. 1532-1533) by Jacopo Pontormo. This iconography was designed by Michelangelo Buonarroti according to Giorgio Vasari who wrote that it depicted "a nude Venus with Cupid who kissed her" (Figure 2).²⁷ Michelangelo actualized the art of *paragone* by showing how the written word and art competed to successfully convey nuances and amatory imagery. In Pontormo's adaptation, a pale Venus rests against a light blue fabric. Her nude body faces the viewers with her right hand pointing to her breast as the left caresses Cupid's arrow. Cupid's nude infant body is seated on Venus' hip as he leans in with his left arm holding onto his mother's face and his right hand holding onto his arrow. He pulls himself into her face with his lips pursed for a kiss while his eyes wander away from her (possibly staring at his arrow or gazing at her body), while Venus' eyes stare even more ambiguously, either at Cupid's face/lips, his arrow, or his body.

This depiction of Venus and Cupid's relationship is rarely supported by Classical and Latin visual sources, yet it became a prominent theme in Renaissance art. However, Cupid kissing his mother is evident in Ovid's verses "While the goddess' son, wearing a quiver, was kissing his mother, he chanced unwittingly to graze her breast with a projecting arrow."²⁸

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Perlman, "Venus, Myrrha, Cupid and/as Adonis: Metamorphoses 10 and the Artistry of Incest," 224.

²⁸ Perlman, 227.

Similarly to Titian, Michelangelo amplified and perverted the story to exploit the love shared between mother and child. What can possibly be taken as innocent kisses exchanged by a mother and her child has become an example of love *contra naturam*.

The love between classical deities rejected boundaries that humankind abided by such as incest. Incestuous relationships between the gods are not unique, in fact, they were often necessary for the production of the entire pantheon. Nevertheless, Venus and Cupid are a particularly evident pair—possibly because of the popular infant renditions of Cupid—making the erotic relationship between the two especially jarring. In Michelangelo’s depiction, the mother and child exuberantly demonstrate their amorous power through the sensual play with an arrow and their erotically charged entanglement. “Both deities’ hands definitely conceal [the arrow’s] tip and therefore, the core of its power,” thus, exhibiting a power play between the two gods of love.²⁹ This also highlights the ambiguity between the willful and unwitting penetration of Cupid’s arrow on Venus’ breast. This resolution is perpetuated by the ambiguity of their gaze heightening the sense of desire between the pair and its audience.

In Book X of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the relationship between Cupid, Venus, Myrrha, Cinyras, and Venus and Adonis become even more inappropriate and incestuous. As stated previously, the deception of Myrrha’s sacrilegious offense against her father is revealed and, as Perlman points out, Myrrha’s deceit toward her father is analogous to Cupid’s mischief towards his mother. In Perlman’s translation of Cupid’s crime against Venus:

Time glides by imperceptibly and cheats us in its flights, and nothing is swifter than the years. That son of his sister and his grandfather... is now a youthful, now man, now *more beautiful than his former self*; he excites even Venus’ love and *avenges his mother’s passion*. For while the goddess’ son, wearing a quiver, was kissing his [own] mother, he chanced *unwittingly* to graze her breast with a projecting arrow. The wounded goddess pushed her son away, but the scratch had gone deeper than she thought, and she herself was at first *deceived*. Now, smitten with the beauty of a mortal, she cares no more for the

²⁹ Ibid., 237.

borders of Cythera... She stays away even from the skies; Adonis is preferred to heaven.³⁰

The extent to which Cupid's arrow afflicts Venus is revealed when she catches sight of Adonis.

Consequently, the dynamic between a child deceiving their parent and conversely their deception being revealed by the parent's beloved reveals that Adonis is both the beloved and the child. Put simply, Adonis and Cupid are analogous to one another within their relationship with Venus.

Not only is this a tale of taboo and deception, but it also involves role reversal and blurred identities.³¹ Renaissance audiences would have understood the ambiguity and the "blurring of boundaries between Adonis and Cupid and between art and nature and even more insistently than Ovid had himself."³² At birth, Adonis was as beautiful as the god of love, thus, according to Perlman "Venus' mature, mortal lover may outshine even divine Cupid's beauty."³³ Renditions of Cupid as a younger adult, like Adonis, perpetuate their interchangeability. Perlman also notes that Adonis "avenges his mother's passion" towards her father by projecting it onto Venus, thus suggesting that his relationship with Venus is an incestuous one.³⁴ Michelangelo's use of *paragone* refers to "Cupid's quiver [threatening]... the goddess' thigh, not her chest (suggesting perhaps a witty allusion to Adonis' own fatal piercing)."³⁵ This quote exemplifies the paradox of gender through penetration and the incestuous relationship with her son/lover.

When looking at Titian's Adonis, his rosy-cheeked face is round with youthfulness but shadowed along the jaw and cheeks to allude to maturity. His skin is slightly tanned, and he is more muscular than Venus, yet smooth and beautiful. Adonis is at the fleeting age between being an adolescent and being a man, thus, eliciting more emotion when his life is stripped away. In addition, it is also at this point in a young Renaissance boy's life that he is at his prime attraction

³⁰ Ibid., 230.

³¹ Ibid., 232.

³² Ibid., 233.

³³ Ibid., 233.

³⁴ Ibid., 230.

³⁵ Ibid., 236-7.

to both sexes for his virility and gentleness. The fair-faced youth has short curly brown hair with sideburns that reach to the bottom of his jawline, giving him a more angular jaw as well as the allusion to a growing beard. Adonis is clothed with a white and pink toga, draped along his body with part of his chest and nipple exposed due to Venus' embrace, and a weapon in his right arm behind the goddess casts a shadow along her face. His left arm has a red wrap with a rope tethered around it, which attaches to his arms to two of his hunting dogs with the third at his heels.

Moreover, the dogs provide a significant temporal and directional narrative to *Venus and Adonis*. The first, closest to the ground, highlights Adonis's sandal, decorated with an ornamental sacrificial ram, alluding to his imminent death. Near it is Venus's bare foot, with a tipped-over vase, in front of a draped rock or tree stump. The second dog, in the middle, points at the far right to a shady grove where Adonis is to hunt and consequently perish. The hill on the left illustrates a sleeping Cupid under a tree in a shady grove. The Cupid conveys the absence of love's power over Adonis's fate. Cupid holds his bow while his quiver is full of arrows up in the trees in the foreground. The third and furthest dog from the viewer lurks behind the second, with its body reversed from the other two and opposing Venus's body in directionality. The dog points up to the sky guiding our attention to the burst of light beaming through the clouds with an anthropomorphic figure emerging from within, foreshadowing Venus' descent to meet her dying lover's cries. The three dogs pull Adonis towards his destiny, leading him away from Venus, like Pluto's Cerberus, guiding the dead into the underworld.³⁶

As Rona Goffen suggests, paraphrasing Ludovico Dolce, Adonis possesses a "handsome beauty... with certain femininity and grace without compromising his virility and Titian endows Venus with 'indefinable' masculinity to achieve that 'difficult and pleasing' blend of expressions

³⁶ Joanna Woods-Marsden and David Rosand, "Titian and the Paradoxes of Love and Art in *Venus and Adonis*," in *Titian: Materiality, Likeness, Istitoria*, ed. Joanna Woods-Marsden, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 89.

that can only be accomplished by the greatest of the masters of artifice.”³⁷ Dolce articulates the mastery with which Titian illustrates these characters embodying the paradoxical reversal of gendered traits. Aesthetically, the young hunter is both gentle and robust. His effeminate qualities and facial expression are highlighted in his grace in moving away from his counterpart.³⁸ Adonis possesses a beauty that is only achieved in art. Not only does this notion recall Ovid’s Pygmalion and Galatea, but it exploits the strange paradox of love that can only be achieved through art, not nature. Consequently, their relationship must end, and Adonis’s death is the correction to the paradoxical relationship and the couple’s transgression against nature.

An allegorical painting, Titian’s *Venus and Adonis* was constructed with purpose and intention, specifically in the choice to depict Venus’s back. The viewer is given a reverse female nude. This is peculiar, especially when it is the front of the goddess of beauty that is customarily depicted in the *pudica* pose. The attention paid to the goddess’s posterior is to compliment Titian’s *Danaë* (1544-1546), which is painted as a frontal nude. Shown together they would provide the full appreciation of the female body (Figure 3).³⁹ Venus is depicted sitting and in a contorted position perilously grasping for Adonis. Titian evokes the most passion through Venus’s facial and bodily expressions. In a juxtaposition with *Danaë*, whose calm composure fulfills traditional female expectations in the Renaissance, Venus is carnal, as the escaped lock of hair and over-turned vase both shows. She is carnal in both her love for Adonis but also her desperation registered by his impending absence.⁴⁰ Her passion is what elevates her from traditional precedents. Venus is a goddess, not a typical female human confined to societal practices, thus allowing her to exert some form of masculinity and control. Here she is shown without that customary control.

³⁷ Georgievska-Shine, 109.

³⁸ Rona Goffen. *Titian’s Women*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 245.

³⁹ W.R Rearick, “Titian’s Later Mythologies.” *Artibus et Historiae* Vol. 17, No. 33 (1996): 40.

⁴⁰ Woods-Marsden and Rosand, “Titian and the Paradoxes of Love and Art in *Venus and Adonis*,” 93.

Ovid's depiction of his female characters has multidimensional emotions and Titian emphasizes this in two ways. When Titian reverses Ovid's tale of Venus leaving Adonis, he illustrates the drama and chaos of Venus' distress due to Adonis' departure. The lock of hair that falls from her meticulous braids drops onto her shoulder. The goddess of beauty, who would otherwise take pride in her pristine appearance, has a strand come loose in her attempt to keep her Adonis, thus "effectively [conveying] her state of inner turmoil."⁴¹ The overturned vase at Venus's feet similarly reveals this uncharacteristic and unwieldy emotion. A vase is a multifaceted iconographic illustration in Renaissance art; when upright it refers to purity, however, when turned over it signifies upheaval, distress, and inner apprehension and *voluptas*—an "unbridled sensuality and moral dissoluteness."⁴² Thus, it helps convey the uncharacteristic emotions of the goddess for a human.

Adonis, the beautiful mortal human with whom Venus falls madly in love, has become subservient within the power dynamics of this god/human relationship and to his fate. He becomes the sacrificial ram hunted by the goddess of love, and in Ovid's poem, Venus is described as becoming more like the goddess of the hunt, Diana.⁴³ Venus pulls Adonis to continue his relationship with her while he is simultaneously pulled by the dogs toward the early end of his life. Even in choosing to leave Venus, he does not have control. It is fate that relieves him from the traditionally masculine action of having autonomy. Similarly to Ovid's Apollo and Daphne, Zeus, and Europa, and many more semi-divine relationships that come at the cost of the female's ruin, in this case, it is Adonis' demise which renders him effeminate in both the tale and the painting. Furthering this comparison at the end of the poem, Adonis is fatally penetrated by a wild boar imitating the "fatal reversal of rape."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Woods-Marsden and Rosand, 87.

⁴² Ibid., 88.; Georgievska-Shine, "Titian and the Paradoxes of Love and Art in 'Venus and Adonis.'" 102.

⁴³ Humphries and Reed. "Book Ten", 251.

⁴⁴ Goffen, *Titian's Women*, 245.

Adonis's "rape" is endured by the powerless Venus. In all her divine glory, she cannot control her attraction to Adonis any more than she can prevent his fate. Being the goddess of love, she relinquishes the power she once held, brought upon by the playfulness and mischievous behavior of her son, Cupid, and his poisonous arrows. She is caught between being an immortal being and succumbing to the deficiency of mere mortals in loss of love.⁴⁵ Despite this, she continues to wield power in a way only a goddess can. In Ovid's poem, she is likened to the goddess Diana, for her hunting nature after she falls in love with the mortal. Hunting is typically a male-dominated sport, thus, Venus's transformation into a huntress feed into the stereotypes of masculinity and prowess bolstering the paradoxical gender reversal dynamic. The goddess, disconnected from her traditional power, finds strength in her dauntless pursuit of her lover.

The goddess of love establishes her dominance through her physical imposition over the young Adonis. She demonstrates a more masculine power in this dynamic as Adonis's pursuer and aggressor while also losing her traditional power over love which is analogous to her femininity. Titian's articulation of the goddess's backside further supports the illusion of masculinity, excluding Venus's sexual organs, enhancing the provocative discourse of the reversal of gendered reception. Revealing Adonis's nipple while concealing those of Venus evokes an erotic reversal and juxtaposition between the two sexes. The detail of Venus's back and arm muscles are highlighted compared to Adonis's juvenile and beautiful face and exposed breast. This is an important piece of the puzzle because if the viewer considers this as well as the individual actions of the lovers, they will perceive both feminine and masculine characteristics creating a more profound understanding of their intertwined complexities.

From a visual perspective, the power dynamic is also in favor of the male protagonist. However, given a deeper look into Ovid's tale of love and Titian's portrayal of the myth, the

⁴⁵ Georgievska-Shine, 99.

gender dynamics are less absolute. In contrast to Venus, Adonis is a virile young man wearing traditional Roman hunting attire with his weapons and hounds prepared, yet, in conjunction with his youth, grace, beauty, and Venus' influence, the pair are host to an uncommon power dynamic. Both Venus and Adonis present paradoxical reversals of gendered characteristics that are "prevalent in Renaissance love poetry" and the pair acknowledges the gap between erotic desire and its fulfillment."⁴⁶ Consequently, Venus and Adonis are a unique production of a paradoxical situation in which a person or goddess embodies both feminine and masculine characteristics.

Both assert power and control in their own right but in contrasting forms. They embody femininity through their beautiful and sensual bodies, and their gaze upon one another creates a tension between beauty and lust. Adonis's gaze is being held by the seductive yet concerned Venus; their relationship is electric. Despite Venus's oppressive hold on Adonis and his rejection, unlike other depictions of the rape of gods against unwilling mortals, their reciprocal stare conveys the illusion of consent and evokes erotic tension. With a glance, Titian alludes to Venus trying to convince Adonis to stay with her. The blushing Adonis looks down towards Venus, with a hint of a smile across his face either in response to her beauty or to console her. Venus, however, looks at him in desperation, pleading for the mortal to heed her warnings. The two are anchored in this permanent cycle that has no solution.

The choices Titian made allow for the interplay of narration and subtle appreciation for the understanding of this myth in antiquity and the Renaissance, offering an alternative interpretation of Ovid's tale. His subtle integration of the Adonis' birth, ancestry and his relationship with Cupid and Venus, captured in this one scene elicits a respectful ode to Ovid and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 109.

his masterful weave within story telling. The discourse behind the gendered dynamic and love *contra naturam* continued to be a point of fascination in sixteenth century art.

Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa*

In a similar way, Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* (1545-55) also exploit the problems of *contra naturam* and gender reversal but to different ends. Commissioned by Cosimo I de Medici, it is publicly displayed in the Loggia dei Lanzi within the Piazza della Signoria in Florence, Italy, among many Republican Florentine and Ducal works. The statue depicts a nude Perseus standing on top of Medusa's decapitated body holding up her head (Figure 4). Cellini's interpretation of Ovid's myth was meant to exemplify Cosimo I's reign as the first Grand Duke of Florence. It epitomizes his power over a once republican state; however, it is Cellini's utilization of Ovid's Perseus and Medusa myth in *Metamorphoses* that gives the statue its strangeness and duality. Ovid's two characters serve as each other's opposites and alter egos forming an intriguing discourse on gender and *contra naturam*. Consequently, Cellini's utilization of this myth in a public Ducal artwork complicates the reception of the myth.

In Book IV and V of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid provides a narrative of Perseus's heroic feats, such as his encounter with Medusa and his utilization of her decapitated head as a weapon. Ovid explains that Perseus is the son of Jupiter who transformed himself into a golden shower to impregnate Perseus' mother Danaë, a mortal woman. From this fantastical birth, Perseus grew up to be a young man sent on an impossible mission to kill the gorgon, Medusa, and bring back her head as proof and trophy to save his mother from an unrequited marriage. Sometime during his travels, Mercury, the god of Travel, gifted the young demi-god winged sandals; Minerva, goddess of Wisdom, told Perseus how to find and kill Medusa; and Jupiter, god of the Sky and king of the pantheon, blessed the journey. In the story, Perseus explains how he snuck into the cave where the three gorgon sisters lived and beheaded Medusa while she slept, using only the

reflection from his shield to look at her. Then, on his journey back he noticed Andromeda chained to a rock, helpless against a sea monster— he saves her with his sword and marries her as his prize and comes home with Medusa in one hand and Andromeda in the other.

Through the reproductions of Bonsignore's *Metamorphoses Vulgare* artists like Cellini were able to have access to these myths. However, as previously noted in the introduction these myths were not *verbatim et literatim*, and thus nuances tended to get lost in translation or changed by the translator's choice. For example, in Bonsignore's rendition, he explains that it is the blood that drips from Medusa's severed head petrifying seaweed creating coral, however, in Ovid's Latin, it is her *touch* that brings about this transformation.⁴⁷ This alongside the Renaissance artists' ambition of transcending the myths birthed numerous mythological artworks that transform Ovid's words and sometimes the artist's intentions.

Cosimo I de Medici was born in 1519 and became the first Grand Duke of Florence at age 18 in 1537. On the eve of his dukedom, in 1537, he had paraded captured republicans who rejected his rule as Duke.⁴⁸ Victorious after the Battle of Montemurlo, Cosimo I executed his enemies through beheading in the loggia.⁴⁹ Beheading continued to be a pattern at the loggia even after Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* was erected, making this symbolic use of the piazza much more visceral. Cosimo I adopted Perseus and Medusa as his symbol for his ducal rule. He often utilized Medusa's face on his armor as an apotropaic (or a protective) figure as well as, employing Perseus' iconography as a symbol and likeness, consequently making himself synonymous with both the demi-god and the monster.

Benvenuto Cellini was born in Florence in 1500 and received this commission at age forty-five and did not finish until a decade later. He was initially trained for music; however, he

⁴⁷ Cole, Michael. "Cellini's Blood." *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (1999): 228-9.

⁴⁸ Bardi, 808.

⁴⁹ Corretti, Christine. *Cellini's Perseus and Medusa and the Loggia Dei Lanzi: Configurations of the Body of State*. Netherlands: Brill, 2015, 109.

rebelled and became a goldsmith. At the time, goldsmithing entailed commissions for metalworks such as creating inlay metal jewelry, fountains, busts, and statuettes. Cellini worked hard in this field, often working side jobs and traveling around France and Italy to study under masters and follow wealthy commissions. He was a very proud man who saw both his artistic and physical accomplishments as acts of valor and this statue was his most ambitious project. Cellini saw his accomplishments (artistically and physically) as demonstrating manly *virtus*.

Sixteenth-century Italian readers, specifically Cosimo I and Cellini revered Perseus' manly *virtus*: "Now, brave man, tell us, please, what manly [*virtus*] and skill it took to steal that snake-haired head."⁵⁰ *Virtus* is a Latin term that is often translated as "virtue" or "valor" referring to manliness— specifically, in this context of Perseus' "masculinity... particularly in his mastery of, and dependence on, the female gaze."⁵¹ In the beginning of the 16th century "there was a critical moment in the Italian Renaissance when masculinity became the public ideal, a moment for the revival of classical style and Roman civic virtue" and in 1504 Michelangelo's *David* was erected in the Piazza della Signoria, effectively replacing Donatello's female heroine, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, with a male hero.⁵² Despite the *David* being a Florentine Republican symbol, due to its artistic achievement the statue stayed even after Cosimo I came to power. However, Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* was intended to supersede *David's* hyper masculine values while also incorporating the classical style and pagan story, and juxtaposing Judith's beheading of a man with Perseus beheading a woman.

Perseus and Medusa is one of, if not the largest, single-cast bronze statues. In Cellini's autobiography, he explains the significance of his creation. Both due to the propagandic demands

⁵⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, transl. by Stephanie McCarter, 2023. 124.

⁵¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 523.

⁵² Garrard, Mary D. "The Cloister and the Square: Gender Dynamics in Renaissance Florence." *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, no. 1 (September 1, 2016):17-20.

of his regal patron, but also because it was his most significant contribution to art and his attempt to rival the great statues that stood already in the Signoria, Cellini understood Cosimo I's intention for this sculpture. According to his autobiography, Cellini explains that Cosimo I's only request was to have Perseus hold the head of Medusa and the rest of the creative liberty was up to him—granting Cellini creative license.⁵³ This work was Cellini's ticket to notoriety and intended to rival the great artists of the past such as Donatello and Michelangelo, whose sculptures continued to stand side-by-side in Florence. In his autobiography, Cellini describes a violent and destructive moment in his creation of the statue that aligns with his understanding of *virtù* and of Perseus's character.⁵⁴

From his facial features to his musculature, everything about Perseus is evocative of erotic sexual aggression, domination, and violence. For example, if we avoid the obvious brutal decapitation of a sleeping woman, we notice that not only is his sword parallel to his penis, but his left foot is planted on Medusa's navel (where her uterus would be), thus alluding to his physical and sexual domination over an already dying woman.⁵⁵ Medusa's body lies lifeless and headless with blood gushing onto the floor, reminiscent of the blood politically spilled on the loggia. Despite Medusa wielding greater power, Perseus is the dominant in this instance while Medusa is the submissive.

Medusa is one of the most famous monsters of mythology. Her monstrosity is represented through her serpent hair, yet her complex persona offers diverse perspectives allowing her story and symbol to progress and become adapted and integrated into political and social narratives. Her *apotropaic* significance originates from the Middle East and Egypt and was later adapted

⁵³ Karoglou, Kyriaki. *Dangerous beauty: Medusa in classical art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018., 4.

⁵⁴ Christine Corretti, *Cellini's Perseus and Medusa and the Loggia Dei Lanzi: Configurations of the Body of State* (Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 50.

⁵⁵ Bardi, 812.

into the Greek world during the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C.⁵⁶ According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, she is one of three gorgon sisters, Stheno, Eurale, and Medusa— Medusa, being the most famous of the three, is most often represented.⁵⁷ Due to their fearsome and ugly features they functioned as talismans that ward off evil— Medusa's head decorated (funerary) monuments, architecture, military equipment, (drinking) vessels and even luxury arts.⁵⁸ She was often portrayed with a swollen face, bulging eyes, a large nose, a fanged wide smile, and a protruding tongue.⁵⁹

In the beginning of the fifth century B.C., Medusa became more anthropomorphic and her “animalistic features were progressively softened, and female hybrids became more beautiful in appearance.”⁶⁰ Despite this, Medusa was still attached to the idea of ugliness due to the Greeks' notion of *kalokagathia*— the ideal that one's outer appearance correlates with their morality— thus, Medusa's horrid appearance aligns with her monstrous morality.⁶¹ Medusa became a dichotomy of boundaries, blurring binaries between ugliness and beauty, monstrous and maiden, mortal and immortal, villain and victim.⁶² In fact, “Medusa embodies ‘a fusion of gender’: sometimes bearded, with her tongue pendant like a penis, her face is rendered as genitals, both male and female, made into a mask; her hair is both penile and pubic.”⁶³ In effect, the gorgon threatened the order of nature and gender binaries.

Ancient Greek society was male-centered, thus, “the feminization of monsters served to demonize women” and the male hero's role was to dominate over the female while the female submits and subserves the male.⁶⁴ Thus, Medusa's iconographic features and domination over

⁵⁶ Karoglou, *Dangerous Beauty*, 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4, 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Foster, *Medusa and the Real*, 182.

⁶³ Foster, *Medusa and the Real*, 182.

⁶⁴ Karoglou, *Dangerous Beauty*, 5.

the male with just her stare perpetuates the villainization of women and the dissolution of the two genders. Medusa is such a threat that many gods and goddesses desperately wanted her to be destroyed. Whether it be because of her petrifying gaze, her power over men, or her innate crime against nature, a multitude of gods gave multiple gifts to Perseus in order to kill her. Consistently he receives help from Minerva and Mercury, however in other versions he receives Pluto's helmet of invisibility and the famous curved sword from Vulcan. However, in some variations the gifts were given to him by Nymphs.⁶⁵ Despite all the weapons at his disposal he only needed the sword because she was defenseless in her sleep. This begs the question as to why the excess was necessary in the first place, when it was not actually useful. Her very existence is against nature and therefore a threat that must be rectified to restore the natural order.

As previously mentioned, Medusa became less visually monstrous in the fifth century B.C., her beauty began to be referenced not only in art but also in poetry.⁶⁶ Ovid is the first author who provides a narrative of Medusa as a beautiful maiden. In *Metamorphoses*, he recounts the tale of Medusa being a beautiful woman and priestess of Minerva's whose hair was "her most striking feature."⁶⁷ She was raped within the temple of Minerva by the god Neptune and as punishment, Minerva transformed her into a hideous beast with dreadful snakes replacing her once beautiful hair and her deadly stare turned men to stone. Her tragic past makes her a victim and a damsel, thus, if Perseus' consent and aid from the gods makes him a hero then it begs the question why killing her while she is defenseless and asleep isn't deemed unheroic. Medusa's feminization and beautification, consequently, according to *kalokagathia*, made her a victim all over again at Perseus' hands. She is simultaneously the aggressor and the victim, making her a tragic figure that garners both fear and sympathy.

⁶⁵ Wilk, Medusa, 21.

⁶⁶ Karoglou, 11.

⁶⁷ Ovid, 125.

Despite this gendered power struggle, Cellini's Perseus and Medusa share androgynous features. Medusa's face is idealized and not the traditional monster depicted by the Greeks. She is defined closer to her beautiful female form, yet her facial features are not entirely feminine. Detached from her body, her face appears to be both feminine and masculine. In fact, some sources speculate that the same model, a young boy named Cencio, was the model for Perseus and possibly the model for Medusa's face.⁶⁸ This not only makes her face more androgynous, but it also provides an intriguing dynamic between the two figures. Mixing ideal features between separate models would not have been unheard of. During the mannerist movement artists would use beautiful assets pulled together from different figures to create an ideal figure. Conceivably Cellini would have used the most beautiful features from his male and female models, creating a synthesis of masculinity and femininity exhibited in both Medusa and Perseus.

Perseus stands erect with idealized male features. Upon his curly hair the young hero wears a helmet with feathered wings on either side of his head, and a chimera-like creature on the top, and on the back is another face making him into a Janus. The Janus face is a symbol of prudence, intelligence, present, past, and foresight and was adopted by Cosimo I as his personal symbol of virtue.⁶⁹ This duality stresses the significance of the head for both Perseus and Medusa.⁷⁰ The head is representative of the soul, thus, "beheading was believably a dignified form of punishment, the preferred mode of execution for rulers and others of rank, whose heads were the symbols of state in the first place and who could also lose those emblems."⁷¹ Therefore, Medusa's power and significance is contested, and Perseus is crowned victorious and reclaims power by her defeat, consequently making this a significant propagandic symbol for Cosimo I. The Janus creates a purposeful dichotomy between the beautiful face of Perseus and the

⁶⁸ Bardi, *The Myth of Medusa*, 811.

⁶⁹ Corretti, 24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

monstrous face of Janus that protects and scares away potential enemies, mirroring Medusa's monstrosity and beauty.⁷² According to Christine Corretti, Perseus' power is solar. She attributes this to several factors: his father being Jupiter, the god of the sky, his conception between his mother and Jupiter's golden shower (gold being an earthy symbol for the sun), and Cosimo I's astrological sign which aligns with a solar solstice, furthering their conflation.⁷³

Corretti also argues that Medusa similarly has connections to both the sun and the moon.⁷⁴ She explains that one of Cellini's models contained traces of gilded gold on Perseus' helmet and Medusa's snake hair aligning her with the sun while also being a symbol of the moon through her connection to Minerva. There is a duality and antithesis between Medusa and Minerva. Minerva is the goddess of wisdom and war craft and known for her commitment to chastity, while Medusa is an apotropaic figure, and invokes an erotic nature.⁷⁵ Serpents, and therefore consequently Medusa, are symbols of eternity, rebirth, wisdom, cunning, healing, and "female wiles," and the moon.⁷⁶ Corretti suggests that Medusa's face is akin to an eclipse: "dark as death... overpower[s] the gaze..." and "... a direct stare would cause blindness," therefore, Perseus' implementation of Minerva's mirror-shield was akin to ancient people using a mirror to indirectly gaze at the solar eclipse (which is alluded by the positionality Medusa's head in contrast to Perseus').⁷⁷ She also proposes:

[T]hat Cellini's Perseus and Medusa served as a means to compliment Cosimo I, who purportedly possessed God-given wisdom, but the statue also reminds one that the wisdom that brought the duke to power was a product of female agency. ...[Perseus] obtained wisdom from the divine force in the form of [Minerva]. However, the head of Medusa is nearly parallel to her captor's head and thus reminds one that Perseus obtained knowledge from the Gorgon as well; that is, he became aware of the limits of his power as a demi-god through his quest for Medusa's head. In this regard, their physical

⁷² Ibid., 26.

⁷³ Ibid., 26-8.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 7-9.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 7.

proximity, like the androgynous nature of Cellini's Perseus, suggests that without [mind] the hero may not unite with the divine.⁷⁸ Minerva is most commonly depicted with Medusa's snake head on her aegis (or shield). Cosimo I, like many Roman warriors, adopted this iconography as well. Like his godly sister Minerva, Perseus harnessed the power of Medusa's head perpetuating the link between the three of them. The duality between Perseus and Medusa is an aspect that Cellini compounds.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when Perseus flies over the water to fight Cepheus "[t]he monster sees his shadow on the waves and rages at it."⁷⁹ This parallels Perseus' defeat of Medusa: on the one hand the young hero does not look at the monster directly but at her reflection; in the other the monster does not look at the hero directly but at his reflection. The monster fails, however, and the hero is once again victorious. This creates a unification between the hero and villain sharing in her destructive powers.⁸⁰ They are synonymous with one another, consequently, Perseus is rarely seen without Medusa—slaying Medusa and saving Andromeda are his two greatest victories, ergo the two become inextricably linked. As mentioned previously, the likeness of Perseus and Medusa's facial features are strikingly similar. From the curve of their eyes, their furrowed brows, curves of their face, and even Perseus's curled hair mimics the coils of Medusa's snakes and the drops of blood.⁸¹ Their unifying characteristics create androgynous features ultimately combining the two, thus, suggesting a union of 'opposites' which "[h]istorically, the motif of physically juxtaposed male and female heads may signify shared temporal and spiritual power."⁸²

The body of Cellini's Medusa lies lifeless at the feet of Perseus. She lies on her back on a pillow where she would have been sleeping while her left hand grips her ankle alluding to an

⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁹ Ovid, 121.

⁸⁰ Corretti, 3.

⁸¹ Ibid., 26.

⁸² Ibid., 26.

Ouroboros.⁸³ An Ouroboros is a symbol of eternity and immortality represented as a snake eating its own tail. It also “symbolizes the sun’s revolution around the earth, its setting and rising, or ‘self-generation,’ which in Medusa’s case took the form of birth from her blood and severed head.”⁸⁴ Despite Medusa being dead her power continues to be eternally potent— her power is immortal.

According to Yael Even, Pope-Hennessy, an Italian Renaissance scholar, compares it to Bronzino’s *Exposure of Luxury* (or *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, c. 1545).⁸⁵ Even stresses that Pope-Hennessy makes this connection stylistically and does not infer a deeper connection between Venus and Medusa. She explains that he does not note the underlying eroticism nor the dichotomy between Venus’ power and Medusa’s powerlessness.⁸⁶ *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* is an intriguing painting that depicts Venus and her son Cupid erotically fondling with Cupid grabbing his mother's breast and embracing her face to his lips (Figure 5). Meanwhile, Venus rests on a pillow stealing Cupid’s arrow with her right hand while her left falls to her left leg that sweeps under her in a loose kneeling position. This pose is what Pope-Hennessy was alluding to; Venus and Medusa’s bodies are contorted in a way in which their feminine curves are accentuated. Both are imposed with an unnatural eroticism— Venus erotically caressing Cupid while Medusa creates a “titillating display of the female body in agony” similar to that of Titian’s *Venus*.⁸⁷

As explained above, Medusa is an inversion of the Pygmalion and Narcissus myth. Her power is associated with both creation and destruction— Medusa kills her victims with a stare and creates elaborate and realistic stone figures. Rather than animating a creation out of stone, like

⁸³ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁵ Even, 132.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Georgievska-Shine, 100.

Pygmalion, Medusa utilizes petrification as her artistic creation.⁸⁸ Consequently, Perseus utilizes Medusa's head as an instrument to create life-like sculptures akin to Cellini creating *Perseus and Medusa* "continuously overlapping themes of the creation of man and of artistic creation" which is "seen as defining the role of artists intent on evolving his art from *mechanica* to *liberalis*."⁸⁹ Equating artistic creation to creation of life appropriates the act of birth-giving and serves as a patriarchal mechanism to usurp women's power: the unique ability to create life in their womb. This is emphasized by Perseus standing on Medusa's womb.

Similar to Titian's *Venus and Adonis*, the visual power dynamic is in the young hero's favor, however, given the complexities in Ovid's tale and Cellini's reception, *Perseus and Medusa* exhibits paradoxical gender dynamics. Despite Perseus' control over Medusa's head, the power is ultimately hers, confusing the power struggle between the two figures. Their synonymy is entangled in Medusa and Perseus' respective femininity and masculinity— Perseus being the typical strong male hero archetype yet submissive to Medusa's power upon which he must wait until she is asleep to best her; and Medusa whose prowess and existence is dominant and threatens the natural order. Ovid's Perseus and Medusa's story, like the Ouroboros, is perpetually integrated and their destinies intertwined— they are both each other's alter ego. Despite the sculpture's propagandic objective, Cellini provides a visual representation of their reversal of gender and power dynamics by highlighting their androgyny, therefore, destabilizing the perceived natural order.

CONCLUSION

These sixteenth century Florentine artworks demonstrate the destabilization of gender that emerges from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Titian's *Venus and Adonis* and Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* carried social and political propaganda in their own right, however, due to the backdrop

⁸⁸ Cieri Via, 446.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

of Ovid's myths, the artists' receptions become multifaceted and even challenge traditional implications of gender. Through the lens of *contra naturam* and gender ambiguity Ovid's resolutions are more complex than the restoration of the natural order, ergo, the sixteenth-century Florentine reception of these tales for propagandic purposes become muddled in ambiguity. The artistic interpretations of *Venus and Adonis* and *Perseus and Medusa* attempt to show a resolve of gender tension through the death of Adonis and Medusa, however, in actuality, the couples share a dichotomy of identities in both femininity and masculinity.



Figure 1: Titian, *Venus and Adonis* (1555-60).

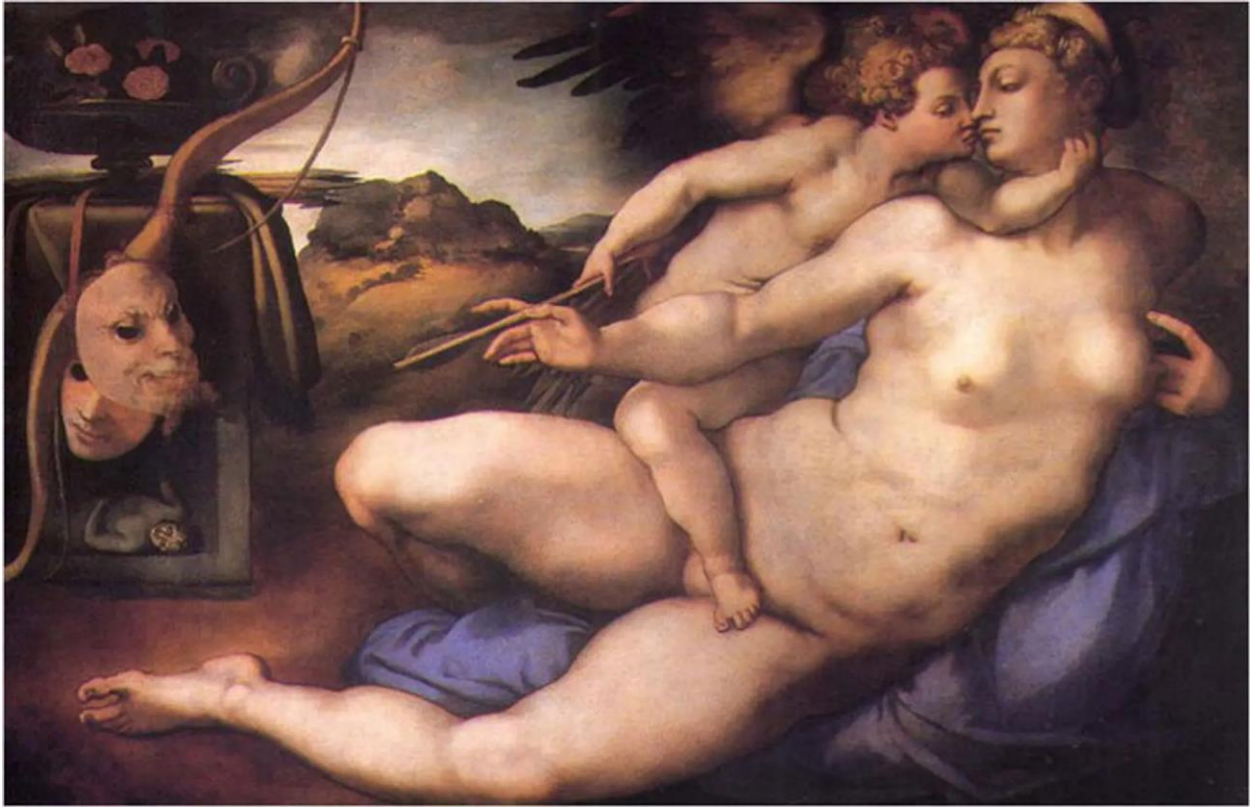


Figure 2: Jacopo da Pontormo, *Venus and Cupid* (ca. 1532-1533).



Figure 3: Titian, *Danaë* (1544-1546).



Figure 4: Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus and Medusa* (1545-55).



Figure 5: Agnolo Bronzino, *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (c. 1545).

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