

Paula Bennett: On "Medusa"

In taking Medusa for their muse, women poets of the past two decades are owning themselves, that is, they are owning those aspects of their being that their families and society have invalidated by treating such qualities as unfeminine and unacceptable. And in repossessing these aspects of themselves they are repossessing the creative as well as the destructive energies to which they give rise. Two poems on Medusa, one by Louise Bogan, written in 1923, the other by Karen Lindsey, published in 1975, will illustrate my point.

With extraordinary brilliance, Louise Bogan's poem on Medusa perfectly captures a vision of the gorgon that both symbolizes and embodies Medusa's traditional horror. . . .

Forced to look upon the gorgon's monstrous visage, the speaker is paralyzed by the sight. Unable to escape the bald eyes and snake hair, or to embrace them, she is suspended where she stands and the world she inhabits is suspended with her. Her eyes are locked forever on the "yellow dust" that, lifted, "does not drift away." The "tipped bell" will "make no sound." Both she and everything around her are frozen by this nightmare vision of the terror latent in female power. In its death-like stasis, "Medusa" is a poem that, for all its artistic perfection, seems in retrospect tragically appropriate for a poet of extraordinary gifts who believed only 105 of her poems worthy of permanent record and who appears to have despised the very idea that she might be considered a woman poet.

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