

THE MYSTERY OF MEDUSA: WHY THE GORGON MATTERS IN *PARADISE LOST*

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But fate withstands, and to oppose th' attempt
Medusa with gorgonian terror guards
The ford and of itself the water flies
All taste of living wight, as once it fled
The lip of Tantalus.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

I

John Milton's blending of the classical world into his supposedly prophetic vision of Christianity at times proves challenging to reconcile. Furthermore, the narrative of *Paradise Lost* operates on varying levels, often venturing into the allegorical and complicating the interpretation of Milton's spiritual vision. These factors lead to an altogether fascinating, and at times, truly strange Hell that appears more like the classical underworld than a Judeo-Christian Hell.¹ Considering these circumstances, the brief appearance of Medusa in Book 2 presents two interesting issues in Milton's presentation of Hell: first, in what capacity and for what purpose does Medusa exist within Milton's Hell, and second, what does the mythology surrounding Medusa contribute to an interpretation of *Paradise Lost*?

Often overlooked by critics or simply dismissed as a mostly insignificant nod to Classical horror, Medusa's presence in Hell deserves attention and examination as both a literal character as well as a theoretical concept. Without doing so, one bypasses a very interesting character that offers a unique interpretation of God's role in *Paradise Lost* as well as Milton's role in the creation of the epic and its portrayal of women. In *Paradise Lost*, Medusa provides a lens through which we discover that Milton, along with creating an epic to surpass all epics, have perhaps also perpetuated the cycle of overthrowing belief systems in the name of creation or establishment of a new hierarchy. The Gorgon and her mythos provide a view into the complications of creation,

¹ John Rogers states that the first books of *Paradise Lost* are "steeped in the entire literary tradition of the underworld journey that stretches from *The Odyssey* of Homer up through Virgil's *Aeneid*, and of course up through all of the Renaissance romance epics."

especially regarding the place of women in certain hierarchies. Heavily invested in the secular and political affairs of England through much of his career, Milton turned his literary focus to the divine later in life. Writing and presenting his ideas in the midst of scientific and philosophic advancement from the likes of Descartes, Hobbes, Newton, Bacon, Galileo, and others most certainly infused Milton with a sense of purpose and fervor concerning his supposedly divinely inspired message. From the onset, Milton invokes his “Heav’nly Muse” so that he himself may act as a vessel for the Holy Spirit and in doing so “assert Eternal Providence, and justify the ways of God to men” (1.6, 25). Establishing his desire to “pursue/ Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,” Milton nonetheless seems unable to curtail the temptation of classical literature (1.15-16). Realizing this, his choice of Medusa as the guardian of Lethe seems fitting given her importance in Greek and Roman mythology. Through Medusa, Milton can place himself in the classical tradition, but her placement in Hell allows Milton to retain his stance of superiority of the classical tradition.

In brief, Milton desired to be a conduit through which God may assert his sovereignty. Knowing this as well as understanding Milton’s appreciation of antiquity, Medusa may be viewed as a bastion of the classical world, making her stand in a Biblical world. Milton certainly could have utilized Death as a guardian if he so desired, but instead chose to leave Sin and Death in their tenebrous plane of allegory and dedicated instead to Satan’s journey. By employing a character outside the Biblical tradition, Milton reveals the dilemma concerning his desire to both supplant yet utilize Classical myths.

Before exploring Medusa’s complex role within Hell, one must have some understanding of the structure of the universe of *Paradise Lost*. Milton presents locations such as Heaven, Earth, and Hell as separate and distinct realms existing outside Chaos, the material from which God has removed Himself.² Hell, as conceptualized by Milton, exists as a mix of a classical representation of the underworld including mythological rivers and creatures while also maintaining the tortuous climate and desperation of Hell in the Christian tradition. It is precisely this blending of antiquity and Christianity that allows Medusa’s presence in *Paradise Lost*.

² Gordon Teskey explains that “space is therefore not empty but filled with the substance of God, his essential being. God withdraws from totality to the place of his presence in Heaven...leaving a residue, which was formerly God’s substance...the substance of chaos.”

II

Even critics deeply entrenched within the discussion of *Paradise Lost* often render Medusa inconsequential. James Dougal Fleming, a critic who views such dismissals as a mistake, considers the limitations other Milton scholars have had in analyzing the Medusa character. He explains that critics such as Julia Walker “devotes a chapter of her *Medusa’s Mirrors* to Eve in *Paradise Lost*, [but] fails to mention that the Gorgon appears as a functional narrative figure in the poem” (1014). Fleming furthermore notes that other established Milton critics such as “Stanley Fish, Dustin Griffin, and William Kerrigan, quote the passage in which Medusa appears while editing Medusa out...” (1014). Through this statement, Fleming suggests that while critics make note of Medusa in their works, any reference spends a little time analyzing her, effectively ushering the reader past her while “covering our eyes, as Virgil covers Dante’s” (1014).³ What makes Medusa such an obstacle to be avoided when analyzing the narrative? I propose the answer lies in the difficulty of reconciling how she inhabits Hell without being a fallen angel or simply an allusion to the terror experienced within Hell. Medusa ultimately serves a greater role within *Paradise Lost* than simply functioning as another Classical reference or merely contributing her “Gorgonian terror” (2.611) to an already grim and torturous Hell. By Fleming’s account, blurring the line between allegory and actuality, Medusa “has in fact been brought through Milton’s iconographic scrim, to take up a position on the poem’s main stage” (1010).

Most simply analyzed, Medusa functions as a guard over the river Lethe in Milton’s Hell. Satan’s followers, scouring the “gloomy deep” to find a “Clime [that] might yield them easier habitation” (1.152, 2.572) cross the infernal rivers Styx, Acheron, Cocytus, and Phlegethon before approaching the markedly different Lethe. The previous four rivers all serve to reaffirm the hate, sorrow, lamentation, and suffering from Hell as the fallen angels encounter them. Lethe, however, provides a different offering to the desperate hordes: the oblivion of one’s former self and state of mind. Milton reveals that should one drink from Lethe, “forthwith his former state and being forgets / Forgets both joy and grief, pleasure and pain” and becomes in a way, unmade and renewed (2.585-86). Milton’s use of this concept holds true to the Lethe described in the Greek

³ Gordon Teskey comments on the “monsters of Hell” but pays no special attention to Medusa. William Kerrigan references Medusa’s mythological importance but does not explore her role in *Paradise Lost*.

underworld embodied in its power of erasure in texts such as the *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses*.

Why, in a place such as Hell, would the ability to forget one's previous attachments and convictions be present? In the *Aeneid*, Virgil presents Lethe's ability to induce forgetfulness as the catalyst to reincarnation or redemption. Anchises reveals to Aeneas that "souls, for whom second bodies are destined and due, drink at the wave of the Lethean stream" (70) to attain a new consciousness. Before one may be reborn, the former life must be erased. This concept evokes another sort of rebirth relevant to *Paradise Lost*, specifically through the Holy Spirit. How interesting then, that within Hell what seems to be an alternative source of "redemption" somehow separate from God's divine will exists. Should the fallen angels drink from the river and oblivate their memory, they would find themselves unaware of why they are present in Hell and experience punishment without understanding why. Sin reveals to Satan upon meeting that "out of thy head I sprung" (2.758) and place the origins of rebellion strictly in the mind, and therefore the knowledge of one's actions. The same temptation of knowledge brought ruin to Adam and Eve through their rebellion and mental awakening. The temptation of Lethe to the fallen angels then becomes even more punishing; knowledge exists as the ultimate cause of their downfall, yet they are unable to banish such knowledge in Hell, forever stuck in between enlightenment and punishment. Shortly encountering Medusa, Milton references the "lip of Tantalus" and invokes the image of a torturous temptation from yet another Greek myth (2.614). Tantalus, a Greek mythological figure, was made to stand in a pool of water with the branches of a fruit tree hanging overhead for his transgressions against the Gods, including the theft of ambrosia, the famed immortality-providing sustenance of Olympus. The fruit tempted Tantalus and his desire to eat and drink brought overwhelming anguish. As he would reach for the fruit or water, both would move out of his grasp, forever eluding his desire to attain them. While the fallen angels may desire to drink from Lethe, they will forever be denied the relief of doing so by Medusa's gaze. Milton, in creating Hell, seems to rely on the classical underworld to provide torment instead of a Judeo-Christian sense of torture often ascribed to Hell.

Through the fallen angels' plight, we find another perversion, specifically, the perversion of free will and Medusa's role of denying it to the fallen angels. To understand this, we must view Hell as a perversion of Eden. Within Eden, the forbidden fruit offers the attainment of knowledge; within Hell, Lethe offers the oblivion of knowledge. Considering this, the lack of a guardian for the forbidden fruit seems to imply that free will functions outside of possession of knowledge. In Hell, those who have challenged God and attained knowledge

through their rebellion are no longer free to abandon what they have acquired. The plight of the fallen angels seems even more tragic considering that they now exist as pawns by which God may produce good from evil. Humanity is at least offered the possibility of redemption and salvation, whereas the fallen angels must forever suffer.

In his desire to pay tribute to outshine the epics of antiquity, Milton repurposes Lethe in Hell. Lethe appears to be a source of relief for the suffering and trials of the fallen angels, but exists in Hell, a place Milton spares no effort in presenting as a literal and symbolic counter to Heaven. Perhaps then, Milton's inclusion of Lethe represents what he viewed as flawed beliefs concerning rebirth or redemption present in classical society or myth as seen in texts such as the *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses*. Milton supplants the classical purpose of Lethe and its role in rebirth and reincarnation. Concerning Medusa and Lethe's purpose, Fleming does not distinguish between the types of oblivion offered by Medusa and Lethe, stating "Medusa, by guarding Lethe, provides Lethe. Her effect becomes self-canceling, and the scene utterly incoherent" (1015).⁴ This interpretation disregards what I consider being the positive oblivion of Lethe as opposed to the negative oblivion of Medusa. The solution offered by Fleming is to consider Medusa as a "symbol exiled to the narrative real" (1015). In regards to this idea, Fleming proposes that Medusa is seen "as text, text in text" and that the "right Medusa-text will make her cameo make sense and will also explain her place in the ontology of Hell" (1015). At this point, what I see as the distinction between the types of oblivion both Lethe and Medusa produce must be clarified. Medusa's petrification reduces one to an inanimate state, a state implying finality and the cessation of both living body and mind. Lethe, however, offers oblivion that enables the rebirth of mind and spirit and by extension represents the redemption and forgiveness of God. Both aspects of God's judgment exist within both Medusa and Lethe. Thus, Milton both provides a means of torment for the fallen angels through longing and temptation for redemption while ensuring their perpetual anguish.

Understanding Lethe's impact to the story as well as Medusa's terrifying power, we must explore the manner in which Medusa exists in Hell. Fleming ponders this question, proposing that Medusa "would not be able to guard the river against herself or anybody else" if, being an actual character residing in Hell, she exists in a fallen state as the other denizens (Fleming 1010). Since Medusa

⁴ Fleming considers Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin* and its argument that "the story of *Paradise Lost* is not supposed to make sense" (Fish) and that many contemporary Miltonists "shrug their shoulders [and] would say that Medusa is not a narrative anomaly—or that it doesn't matter if she is because *Paradise Lost* is not centrally concerned with narrative" (Fleming 1013).

does not exist only as an allegorical character, removed in a way from a certain plane of the story, a dilemma occurs.⁵ Medusa, being present in Hell, may be one of three things: fallen entity tasked with barring other fallen souls from redemption, an “unfallen” being somehow *in* Hell but not *of* it, similar perhaps to Sin and Death, or something different altogether. Watchful in her terror, Medusa stands ready, guarding the “tempting stream” and allows not even “one small drop to loose in sweet forgetfulness all pain and woe” forcing the fallen angels to press on. If Medusa inhabits Hell as simply another fallen entity, she too would desire to drink from the “slow and silent stream” (2.607, 582). Fleming rightfully concludes that because she does not seem to desire to drink from the river, Medusa is not fallen.

Given her petrifying visage and the specific purpose of her placement in Hell, one continues to consider that Lethe poses a threat to God’s plan to “out of [their] evil seek to bring forth good” (1.163). If Satan’s legions found oblivion through Lethe, their cause for rebellion would fall away, and they would instead become the unaware inhabitants of a torturous reality. Does this mean then, that Medusa acts a warden within Hell appointed by God? Fleming posits, “if a trusty’s uniform means that she no longer craves oblivion, then, ipso facto, she is no longer fallen” (1010). While Medusa acting as a God-ordained warden supports the previous conclusion of Medusa not being fallen, it does not explain how or why Medusa attained a state in between fallen and unfallen. Medusa existing as a special creation meant to guard Lethe produces what Fleming views as a contradiction. He argues that “a divine creation of a less than good Medusa, who then lives and guards the river ‘with Gorgonian terror’ just because God made her do it”, insinuates that God *created* an evil being rather than repurposed evil for good, and therefore, “violates the cosmology of the poem” (1011). Understanding that Medusa exists in a state separate from the fallen angels, Fleming argues that “the tableau of Medusa at Lethe quite closely resembles the hydraulic automata (animated statues) and *giocchi d’acqua* of the Italian Renaissance garden” (1015). Fleming considers Italian gardens chiefly because “much has been written on Milton and the Italian garden, which has usually been taken as the model for his description of Paradise” (1015).⁶ In the same manner, that Medusa blurs the line between allegory and actuality, the concept of Italian Gardens blurred the line

⁵ Fleming reminds us that “Medusa looks like a member of Milton’s allusive background—that shadowy domain, full of shadowy types, with which the poet augments his narrative. She is, however, clearly in the foreground, inside the narrative” (1009).

⁶ See Hannah Disinger Demaray, “Milton’s ‘Perfect’ Paradise and the Landscapes of Italy,” *Milton Quarterly* 8.2 (1974): 33-40; Stanley Koehler, “Milton and the Making of the English Landscape Garden,” *Milton Studies* 15 (1981): 81-105.

between art and nature, the human and the divine. “If in Book 2,” posits Fleming, “Hell is an Italian garden, then [Medusa’s] role at Lethe raises no issues for Milton’s narrative. Medusa is a narratological problem only as a being” (1017). Medusa, as a sort of hellish “stone garden object”, can serve a purpose in Hell (1012). Considering such an idea, I propose we consider those within *Paradise Lost* who encounter Medusa’s terror. Rather than the hero Perseus or any “good” beings encountering Medusa, the inhabitants of Hell are repulsed and repelled by Medusa. Only fallen characters interact with and eventually evade her, not the innocent or righteous. In Deuteronomy 10:17, God is presented as “God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible,” reminding us, along with the entirety of the book of Revelation, that fear and overwhelming influence are qualities of God the same as mercy and forgiveness.

I would argue that Medusa acts not as a sentient and independent being within Hell, but instead, as a vessel by which God is present within Hell and ensures His goal of turning Satan’s evil into good. When considering Medusa as a vessel for God in *Paradise Lost*, the Greek story concerning Medusa’s death provides some interesting insight to why Milton may have placed Medusa as guardian of Lethe. The story of Perseus gazing upon the sleeping Medusa through his shield is certainly familiar, but an important detail exists within his slaying of the Gorgon. The Greek scholar Apollodorus (or pseudo-Apollodorus) recounts the heroics of Perseus in the *Bibliotheca* and reveals that “Perseus stood over them as they slept, and while Athena guided his hand and he looked with averted gaze on brazen shield, in which he beheld the image of the Gorgon, he beheaded her” (Garber 24). Athena, vengeful and desiring to punish Medusa further, possesses Perseus at the moment of action and utilizes him as a vessel for her divine purpose. A divine entity inhabiting a mortal relates to God’s “inhabitation” within the Son as well as my proposition concerning God’s inhabiting of Medusa in Hell. One facet of Medusa’s mythos concerns her slaying at the hands of a mortal possessed by the divine; in *Paradise Lost*, Medusa’s role reverses and she serves as the vessel to torment those who have fallen away from the divine.

III

At this point, we may move forward from how Medusa exists in Hell to why and what her mythology provides to an interpretation of *Paradise Lost*. I would suggest that Fleming, in his description of Hell as an infernal garden, established a very helpful insight into Milton’s inspiration of Paradise as well as Hell that

does not fall apart when requiring Medusa's actual presence. Well-established perversions and parallels between Milton's Heaven and Hell occur throughout the narrative. The perversion of the Holy Trinity through Satan, Sin, and Death as well as the contrast of Heaven's splendor to Hell's "darkness visible serv'd onely to discover sights of woe" arise (1.64). It seems then that a Hellish garden to parallel Eden does not stretch the bounds of possibility.

Furthermore, God utilizes another vessel, one that counters Medusa's destructive abilities: the Son. While Milton seemingly establishes the Son as a separate entity from God, viewing the Son as a vessel for God makes more sense considering the Son's purpose of enacting God's will. Why then, when presented with a character such as Medusa that seems to at times contrast all structure and logic of a Christian Hell, should we not be able to view her presence in Hell as a contrast to the Son's presence in Eden? The perversion of beauty, wisdom, and redemption all exist in the agonizing prison of Hell. Medusa extends this contrast as a perversion of the holy trinity. Medusa, one of three Gorgon sisters and the only mortal sister, parallels the trinity of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Son. While the Son sacrifices himself for humanity's sins and their attainment of knowledge leading to sin, Medusa repels and guards a source of mental oblivion and forgetfulness. Both the Son and Medusa function as mortal guardians serving a purpose related to knowledge. Whereas the Son redeems and frees humanity from its mental trials and physical suffering, Medusa either assures that mental anguish continues in Hell or hardens any being unfortunate enough to meet her gaze into lifeless, thoughtless stone. The importance of protecting the river Lethe and its powers of mental erasure reflect both the importance and danger of the mind within *Paradise Lost* and therefore would necessitate the attention of God. Establishing a justification for Medusa's presence within Hell only provides part of the answer concerning her role in *Paradise Lost*. Why, given that Milton could have theoretically chosen any number of methods to guard Lethe, does he settle upon Medusa? The duality of God's wrath and benevolence is one explanation, considering that Medusa "is the image of despair which so hardens the heart that it becomes powerless to repent" and ensures the type of destructive oblivion previously presented as explanation (Sayers 127). However, many other facets of Medusa's mythos align with themes present in *Paradise Lost*.

In the Classical tradition, Medusa's downfall most often sorts into two different causes: her arrogance and feelings of superiority towards Athena's beauty or her rape and victimization by Poseidon in the temple of Athena. As a rape victim, Medusa lacked any control over her fate yet suffered at the hands of Athena as well as Poseidon for her supposed transgressions. Medusa's beauty, the same "redeeming" quality Eve possesses, leads to her suffering. The

overwhelming feeling of helplessness concerning Medusa's situation when viewed through patriarchal oppression coincides with the fate of humanity after the fall. Humans, apparently born into sin, hold no control or choice in the matter of their supposed wrongdoing. In this sense, Medusa functions as a constant representation of both the arrogance and rebelliousness of God's creations while also portraying the ultimate lack of power or control over the actions of a divine entity.

Returning to the idea of beauty, Milton places great emphasis on the concept of a representation of holiness and worthiness as well as loss and temptation. The fallen angels, "changed in outward luster," (1.97) lost their beauty and "transcendent brightness" (1.86). Medusa represents one of the greatest transformations and falls of Classical mythology and parallels the lost luster of the fallen angels. Adam and Eve's "golden tresses" (4.305) and the emphasis on their pre-fallen beauty contrast the writhing vipers and the petrifying gaze of Medusa. However, the tragedy surrounding Medusa does not bode well for Eve. When Satan first spotted Adam and Eve, they are described as "not equal as their sex not equal seemed" (4.296). Whereas Adam was "for contemplation and valor formed," Eve's purpose as a created being rests in her "softness and sweet attractive grace" (4.297, 298). Furthermore, Eve exists in a secondary state to Adam when concerning God. Adam lives "for God only, she for God in him" (4.299). Such a disparity suggests Eve exists as a lesser being while somehow her beauty redeems her lack of intellectual equality. This lack of respect or inequality renders Eve alienated from the relationship she witnesses between God and Adam.

The same lack of power Eve experiences due to hierarchy exists with Medusa. Beauty functioned as a primary factor in Medusa's downfall, both as a victim of lust or her arrogance concerning such beauty. Knowing this, Milton's insistence upon placing Eve's value strictly in her beauty becomes all the more disconcerting. Specifically, the descriptions of Eve's hair and her initial reaction to her reflection attempt to place her value strictly in her physical beauty. Adam ultimately chooses Eve for her beauty, in a way valuing her over God, and the suspicion that Eve's beauty will be both a gift and curse occur. Sadly, both Eve and Medusa suffer at the hands of their gods and made victims. Their beauty, given by their creators, becomes their curse and source of blame. The problem of such a curse presents Medusa and Eve as simultaneously powerful yet helpless, victims of inequality yet somehow a threat to their creators.

Eve and Medusa's inequality appears to be a tragic byproduct of their respective god's insistence upon enforcing hierarchy. God's justification for why evil occurs in Book 3 while God speaks to the Son and the Heavens. Addressing

the heavens, God states he made his creations “sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (3.99). Such a claim seems to place the blame of sin squarely on the fallen angels or humanity *choosing* their wrongdoing out of arrogance or disdain for God’s “sole Command, sole pledge of obedience” (3.95). The argument appears to make sense, and coincides with Milton’s argument from *Areopagitica* that “reason is but choosing” and that without reason Adam would have been “else a meer artificiall Adam, such and Adam as he is in the motions” (354). Adam existing without reason as a sort of puppet to be manipulated by God again produces the imagery of God using His creations to enact his will. Milton then goes on to say the following concerning reason’s purpose for humanity and God’s justification concerning His actions:

This justifies the high providence of God, who though he command us temperance, justice, continence, yet powrs out before us ev'n to a profusenes all desirable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety (*Areopagitica* 354).

The same thought process regarding the desire for knowledge arises in *Paradise Lost*. Again, we see the conflicting nature of God’s declaration. Either we deny our minds satiety for the purpose of following God’s command, or we choose to pursue knowledge given the desires of our God-given design. Either way, God’s creations seem destined to lack any real choice concerning their mental sovereignty.

The dilemma regarding a lack of choice is reflected in Medusa’s tragic situation. Either she submits to the will of an imposing deity or falls victim to a deity’s judgment, all the while lacking any real option to avoid either outcome. Medusa had no say in the acquisition of her beauty. Likewise, to act against Poseidon’s advances would most likely bring a different form of punishment. The dilemma between these outcomes leads to a desperate situation for Medusa and when transposed to Eve makes one wonder if God’s creations were destined to fall, regardless of the freedom God supposedly offered. If created with “minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety” yet be expected to remain resistant to their innate purpose, it seems to follow that humanity never stood a chance (*Areopagitica* 354). By creating humanity in a doomed state, God affords Himself the opportunity to “redeem” humanity through the Son and thereby exercise his power, supposedly out of mercy and love. How, though, does this differ from Athena enacting her will through Perseus and vanquishing the Gorgon? To whose benefit does Medusa’s death serve if Athena did not curse Medusa in the first place? To answer such a question as well as better understand its implications for

Eve in *Paradise Lost*, we may turn to Catherine Keller's work in *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*.

In her book, Keller presents the trials women have faced concerning individuality and agency in regards to men. She presents the issue that, according to Aristotle, "woman is the beginning of the category of monster" (Keller 48). Her reasoning for this follows the idea of Aristotle that "the female deviates from a generic type [human] because she does not resemble her parents" (48). While this seems an odd thing to posit, one must remember the origin of Adam and Eve. Adam, created in God's image, holds superiority over Eve. As Gordon Teskey notes in his commentary of *Paradise Lost*, "we are to recall that Adam, not Eve, is made in God's image. Eve is made in the image of Adam's desire" (Norton 211). This deviation sets Eve up as an outsider, one who exists outside any true equality with Adam. Returning to the idea of the female as a monster, we can begin to see the challenges Eve faces in *Paradise Lost*.

At least three female characters are established in the story: Eve, Medusa, and Sin, all of which are either dreadful monsters (in the case of Sin or Medusa) or become monstrous through their actions (Eve). Furthermore, all three characters have ties to what Keller refers to as "paternal supremacy" (48). In mythology, Medusa falls victim to Athena, the goddess notoriously "born" from her father Zeus' head. Paralleling this, Sin reveals to Satan that "out of thy head I sprung" (2.758) and in the context of *Paradise Lost* represents the fall of humanity and angels after the attainment of knowledge and wisdom, attributes tied to Athena. Finally, Eve is created from Adam, contributing yet another "male birthing" of a female. This concept is prevalent even from the beginning of *Paradise Lost* when God "dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss/ And mad'st it pregnant" (1.21-22). Remembering that, to Milton, God and all in existence are material and the "abyss" or Chaos is simply the matter from which God removed Himself, we witness another masculine birth through God's creation of the cosmos. In the context of *Paradise Lost*, this becomes important precisely because only *after* the fall does maternal birth occur through Eve. Indeed, the Son enforces God's will, expelling Adam and Eve from Eden and telling Eve "Thy sorrow I will greatly multiply / By the conception: children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth and to thy husband's will / Thine shall submit: he over thee shall rule" (10.193-97). Compared to Eve's punishment, Adam's charge upon being expelled seems much less dire; he is forced to continue his labor, albeit as a mortal facing death rather than a steward of Eden. While this certainly departs from the joy of Eden, Adam and Eve already "toil[ed] / Of their sweet gardening labor" (4.327-28) to "follow [their] delightful task / To prune these growing plants and tend the flowers / Which, were it toilsome, with thee were sweet" (4.437-39). The

important thing to take from this statement is that Adam seems fine laboring, even if it proves difficult, so long as he has Eve.

In relation to the concept of creation both in *Paradise Lost* as well as Milton's creation of the epic, the implementation of a hierarchy/patriarchy occurs. In the case of Medusa and Athena, Keller suggests that a patriarchal origin of Athena stems from the desire or need to supplant the matriarchal cultures present in pre-Hellenic Greece. Most interestingly, Keller brings into discussion the icon of the serpent, originally a symbol linked to pre-patriarchal societies and representing "wisdom and prophetic counsel" among goddesses rather than the symbol of evil or deception now prevalent (53). By slaying Medusa through Perseus, Athena continues a cycle of oppression that she created. By transforming Medusa into the viper-haired monster, Athena perpetuated the desire of Zeus to "overthrow the primal, mother-identified powers" (76). The idea of goddess worship as sexual and immoral arises in Michael's message to Adam, especially concerning women who resemble "goddesses so blithe, so smooth, so gay, / Yet empty of all good wherein consists / Woman's domestic honor and chief praise, / bred only and completed to the taste / Of lustful appetite" (11.615-18). Following such a statement, one again questions the role of beauty concerning women. If a woman is beautiful but not submissive to "domestic honor," then surely she must be a seductive temptress out to pervert the souls of men. However, the very beauty that causes this predicament is either God-given, both in the case of Eve and pre-transformation Medusa or a reduction to objectification due to another's lust or image of what attractiveness, as was the case of Medusa and Poseidon. Adam laments at this vision, stating to Michael "still I see the tenor of man's woe, / Holds on the same from woman to begin" (11.632-33). It is at this moment, through Michael's response, we find evidence that in the cosmos of *Paradise Lost*, to be female is to be lesser than man: "From man's effeminate slackness it begins, / Said th' angel, who should better hold his place / By wisdom and superior gifts received" (11.633-36). In essence, Michael, speaking for God, reveals that to avoid further downfall, man must both reign over women as well as not allow themselves to succumb to female qualities or become effeminate.

When presented with the circumstances outlined above, Eve seems destined to play the role of monster in Eden, along with the Serpent, so that God may come full circle in His plan to turn evil into good and establish His sovereignty. Milton presents Eve as optimistic before leaving Eden. Finding temporary hope, Eve states, "though all by me is lost, / Such favor I unworthy am vouchsafed, / By me the promised Seed shall all restore" (12.621-23). While the thought of Eve's redemption as the matriarch of humanity leading to Christ's birth appears comforting, something still seems off. Eve only attains the role of

matriarch *after* the fall, and even then, Milton presents such a role as tarnished. As Michael revealed to Adam, (in Eve's absence, no less) the "misery the in'abstinence of Eve shall bring on men" (11.476), Milton places Eve's choice to partake of the fruit as somehow more monstrous than Adam's involvement. Even if Eve's reproduction leads to the birth of Christ, she seems destined to be remembered instead for her shortcomings.

Through *Paradise Lost*, Milton seems to perpetuate the idea that creation either causes or coincides with destruction. Whether the destruction concerns the fallen angels and their rebellion or the establishment of a hierarchy/patriarchy resultant from humanity's sin, God seems to require a fall to fulfill His divine plan, culminating in the sacrifice of the Son. God's sacrifice of the Son for humanity acts as the ultimate example of paternal love as opposed to the maternal source of downfall, establishing His dominance of both humanity as well as His hierarchy of the sexes. It is precisely this cycle of creation and destruction, specifically concerning gender, that reveals Medusa as such an important character and concept. Much has been said by critics to determine Milton's stance as a feminist or otherwise. By analyzing Medusa and her surrounding mythology, we may add something new to the debate. Whether intentional or not, Milton weaves his religious vision amongst the confines of a literary and religious tradition that far too often place women in a role unequal to men. To surpass all before him, Milton created an intriguing world reliant upon hierarchy, not unlike those of his predecessors he so desperately wished to rise above.

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