



Medusa's Gaze as a Tool for Criticism and Personal and Social Transformation

—The Role of Hades' Helmet, Athena's Shield, Hermes' Sandals, and the Muses' Bag in the Transformative Function of Imaginary Space/Time

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Abstract

The myth of Perseus and Medusa has stimulated the imagination of numerous artists, who have developed variations on both the reference symbols and the styles and content of its narrative, employing different languages, from poetry, sculpture, and painting, to contemporary cinema, beginning in the 8th century BC. This work, therefore, aims to identify the possible determinants of this persistence, employing a model that integrates psychoanalysis, anthropology, and semiotics, placing its use also in the context of the historical transformations that the symbols and content of the narrative have undergone over time and space.

Subject Areas

Anthropology

Keywords

Psychoanalysis, Anthropology, Semiotics, Perseus, Medusa, Athena, Personal and Social Transformation, Multidisciplinary Integration

1. Introduction

The myth of Perseus and Medusa presents many variations that follow one another in time and space, which have also given rise to different interpretations of its meaning from antiquity to the present day [1]. Furthermore, the versions of myths are often fragmented, and include pictorial testimonies that are not supported by written stories or their known fragments, thus creating an aura of indeterminacy that complicates and relativizes the analysis. Consequently, no inter-

pretation can be considered completely exhaustive, since it refers to the material analyzed, which becomes significant within the theory that tries to explain it.

Lazarou [2] has described the transformations of this myth starting from the 8th century BC, with Homer, who places Medusa's head on Athena's dress, and terrifying effects in her voice, rather than in her gaze, and Hesiod, who places Medusa's head on a shield, together with the magical gifts of the gods used by Perseus to defeat her. The description of Perseus's feat appears in the 5th century BC, with Pherecydes, who narrates the birth of Perseus and his adventure, with the guidance of Athena, the gifts of Hermes and Hades, and the use of a mirror that allows him to avoid the petrifying gaze of the Gorgon, whose severed head is always placed on Athena's robe. In the same century, Pindar describes the beauty of Medusa, and the petrifying power of her head adorned with serpents as a consequence of her decapitation, while other Athenian poets describe the Gorgon's feminine generative power as her blood gushing from the veins of her severed neck, which causes death or resurrection, granting such powers to the physician Asclepius, rather than generating Pegasus and Chrysaor, as had happened in previous centuries. In the Imperial era, Apollodorus, recovering the mythological legacy of past centuries, describes both the beauty and the terrifying aspects of Medusa's body, without, however, explaining their contradictory nature. He attributes the reflective function that allows one to escape the petrifying effects of Medusa's gaze to Athena's shield, on which, at the end of Perseus's feat, Medusa's head is placed. During the same period, Ovid explains both the beauty and the terrifying aspects of Medusa with the myth of her transformation by Athena, placing it within the retelling of Apollodorus's narrative. Finally, in the Late Antiquity period, Eumeristic rationalizations prevail, such as that of Malalas in the 6th century AD, which present themselves as a solution to the continuity and coherence of the transformations of the myth's content, which, in some respects, loses its power to activate the listeners' imagination. All the versions cited above also appear in different locations around the Mediterranean basin, scattered throughout Greece, North Africa, the Middle East, and Rome. Other gaps in continuity are found in other ancient versions presented by the author, which, however, appear spurious compared to those described, as they lack the symbols already mentioned. The author herself provides a summary of the various approaches to the interpretation of myths, from antiquity to the present day, and places the transformations of scientific approaches to myth, as well as those relating to its content, within cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, the same myth may exhibit both a certain continuity and coherence in its internal transformations, as well as discontinuities between versions and interpretative approaches.

Lotman [3] explains this singularity through the internal dynamics of cultural transmission, which constitute and give rise to the semiotic organism of the *Semiosphere*, composed of several texts and languages separate from each other, which however make the constitution of such an organism possible through their continuous interaction. In turn, the Semiosphere makes the development and use of

languages possible. The interaction between texts and languages structures the communicative activity, which in turn is constituted by the dialogue between entities present in the Semiosphere, which originates from the symmetry between the isomorphism of the contents of communication, and the asymmetry based on the differences between entities and contents, which in turn is the foundation and motivation of the necessity and immanence of the dialogue between them: isomorphism concerns the identification of the analogies that speakers recognise between the contents transmitted by the speaker, those found in the context, and those that are known to them, while asymmetry, on the contrary, consists in the identification and recognition of the differences that exist between them. Since each entity participating in the dialogue has its own unique internal coherence and a boundary with respect to every other, communication is always bilingual: each entity transmits its information using its own *language*, which is interpreted by the other entity using its own, regardless of whether they themselves use the same *mother tongue*.

Realities external to the Semiosphere can be processed and managed within it only after being translated into the language of the entities that constitute it. Thus, every cultural contact, technological innovation, and scientific discovery must be translated into the language used by the entities that constitute the Semiosphere, contributing to modifying its contents, attitudes, meanings, and interacting meanings within it during processes of horizontal cultural transmission, that is, between different entities, even those belonging to different territories. Likewise, the information derived from the cultural memory of the entities that constitute the Semiosphere is continually re-coded, adapting to both the innovations produced by the horizontal assimilation of content from extrasemiotic realities, and the transformations induced by recodings resulting from differences between entities during the vertical transmission of culture, that is, between different generations.

The Semiosphere prevents the risk of its disintegration, caused by continuous internal changes, by using *metalanguages* with both logical and mythopoetic structures. These metalanguages can construct metadescriptions of culture that allow it to exclude from internal dynamics any content and language that threatens its internal coherence and stability over time. Metalanguages with a logical structure come into play in situations where internal adjustments to the semiosphere are necessary, resulting, for example, from technical and scientific innovations, natural disasters, wars, and political changes, providing metadescriptions of culture capable of guiding the population's adaptation to new situations. Metalanguages with a mythopoetic structure enter substantially synchronously into the same situations, although in sectors and languages of human experience peculiar to them ([3]: pp. 55-145).

Consequently, being necessarily placed within the Semiosphere requires that interpretations of myths also be contextualized based on both the version of the myth and the scientific models used. The versions from the Imperial era, provided by Apollodorus and Ovid, present a wealth of symbols and a narrative complete-

ness and coherence that allows for a convincing and attractive decoding, especially recognizing that these versions were developed by the authors based on a synthesis and reorganization of older and fragmented versions, as deduced from the aforementioned work of Lazarou, which made their versions reliable for their audience and interesting for ours. In particular, these versions present a strong appeal and interest due both to the relationship they weave between the descriptions of the myth's main characters, Perseus and Medusa, and to the role that the magical objects received by Perseus, described as early as the 8th century BC by Hesiod, play in explaining the myth's symbolic content.

2. Decoding Myths between Anthropology, Psychoanalysis and Semiotics

Jung and Kerény [4] proposed that myths are generated by *mythologems*, that is, units generating senses and meanings that are activated in certain situations within the psyche synchronously with certain contexts, common to the entire human species, which allow us to signify the meaning of existence and of man's relationship with the world in a coherent manner, that is, by developing stories and conceptualizations that merge past, present and future in explaining both the world and man, and the relationship between the two. Since, therefore, the situations within the psyche, as well as the contexts within which people live, resemble each other, myths also present various similarities, in relation to both internal states and contexts, in time and space. It is not possible to exhaustively explain the contents of mythologems except through the myths derived from them, just as happens with music, which produces contents, in the listener, that cannot be exhaustively explained outside of musical language.

The analogy with music was also used by Lévi-Strauss [5], who proposed the concept of *mytheme* to describe the structural unit of the analysis of myths, which establish the sense and meaning of existence and of the relationship between man and the world, using these units because they are able to indicate *bundles of relationships* rather than *concepts*, unlike what happens with other *signifiers* of language: mythemes appear, in mythology, in a manner analogous to musical themes, motifs and refrains that appear in different sections of a musical score.

These two concepts have often been superimposed by various authors, although it can be concluded that mythologemes reflect widely diffused invariant forms of development of visions of man and his relationship with the world within mythological discourses, while mythemes represent invariant motifs that unfold in mythological narratives [6].

Using the same musical metaphor, we can conclude that the mythologem represents the experience produced by the interaction between a specific internal psychic state and a specific external context (such as the inspiration that precedes musical composition), while the mythemes represent the significant units used to translate the mythologem into narrative (such as language, musical style, and the motifs used to translate inspiration into a musical work). The same metaphorical

relationship, however, can also be used for other artistic languages: the difference with musical language lies in the possibility that mythemes drawn from mythological literature can also be used by painting and sculpture, as well as by writing.

The mythologem of the *Hero's Journey* is always structured according to the same pattern: the hero, a character endowed with exceptional characteristics, abandons the world in which he lives to venture into an extraordinary kingdom, populated by supernatural and hostile characters, whom he defeats thanks to the help of other characters who support him in the enterprise he is undertaking, which always ends in the conquest of objects, skills and knowledge that contribute to improving the living conditions of the community from which he comes. The characteristics of the journey, characters, objects, skills and of the knowledge acquired, vary according to the period and the culture of reference within which the story originates [7]; therefore, the sense and meaning of each myth, fairy tale or legend must be reconstructed by placing the narration within the historical-cultural contexts from which they originate, or by using the same interpretants used by the populations within which such narrations were produced.

This, however, necessarily entails going beyond the literal meaning of the terms used, which would lead to senseless and unrelated decodings, without being able to explain the persistence of such narratives over time in the reference populations, who would not be motivated to continue narrating stories that were considered senseless and meaningless by the listeners. The interpretants necessary for decoding and understanding myths should therefore try to explain something that would seem senseless and meaningless, interpreting it according to ordinary logic [8].

For this reason, psychoanalysis has always been interested in myths, because they use a language similar to that of dreams, which leads to the description of possible, though not real, human experiences and situations if decoded [9]. However, the approach of Classical Psychoanalysis [10] attributed to the symbols used in myths systematic representations of a limited number of repressed and removed contents (such as birth, love and death, Self and blood relatives, sexuality, incestuous desires) deduced from clinical experience gained in psychotherapeutic contexts. Such interpretations, however, could lead to dubious conclusions, when compared with myths that explicitly describe incest, parricide, matricide and castration [11], rather than veiling and distorting them, as happens in dreams and in patients' symptoms. Indeed, this approach would lead to the following conclusions [12]:

- a) since the symbols found in myths can be traced back to a few repressed contents, analyzing them according to the psychoanalytic method is reduced to a mere and ephemeral intellectual exercise;
- b) freeing ourselves from both repression and removal, psychoanalysis should lead to the disappearance of symbolic production (including that of dreams and works of art and intellect); and, as a consequence of a) and b);
- c) since it is not possible to psychoanalyze the communities from which myths

are generated, psychoanalysis is not useful to anthropology, and viceversa.

Going beyond these conclusions, Jung assigns Jones's proposed classification to symptomatic actions, rather than symbolic productions, which he believes are aimed at psychic transformation rather than veiling forbidden and repressed contents. In turn, symbols are also distinct from linguistic signs, which serve to regulate communication: in fact, symbols are created in situations in which the ego is absorbed in one strong conflict arising from its adherence to mutually negating theses and antitheses, to the point of a will blockage that suspends consciousness in favor of an activation of the unconscious, leading to the formation of the symbol through the integration of intellectual functions and lower, more primitive impulses. The symbol thus produced integrates previously irreconcilable contents, pushing consciousness toward change. From this perspective, the symbol therefore represents the tool for overcoming the psychic blocks that a person or social group experienced at the time it was produced. Consequently, the use of symbols in mythical narratives indicates social transformations that affected the communities that produced them [13].

Matte Blanco proposed an analysis model that allows us to decode symbols in order to understand their meaning: according to his proposal, every mental activity is produced by the interaction between *Ordinary Logic* and *Emotional Logic*. Emotional Logic, unlike Ordinary Logic, is governed by two principles: the *Principle of Symmetry* treats every relationship as identical to its opposite, therefore it explains all the empathic phenomena and identifications that manifest themselves in relationships, communication and symptoms; the *Principle of Generalization* places every percept or mental product in classes with increasing generality and tending towards infinity, associating aspects or functions to other percepts and mental products; in this way, every percept, sign, symbol or symptom functions as a metaphor, analogy or metonymy of something else, which is deposited in the imaginary or unconscious, and to which the perceptive or communicative field is connected through the linguistic string that is activated [14].

These two principles can therefore explain the ways in which a myth can transform itself over time and space, while maintaining a certain continuity and coherence of content, presenting its transformation as a development of imaginary scenarios and a practical adaptation of a predominantly emotional, rather than logical, nature. No mental activity is possible without the integration of Ordinary Logic and Emotional Logic: in fact, the former cannot determine any goal, and the latter cannot pursue one. The difference between sign, symbol, and symptom is therefore determined by the context of the ongoing linguistic interaction and the action of defenses on mental processes, while *Asymmetry Extraction* allows us to understand, in terms of *Ordinary Language*, mental products that are not immediately comprehensible, as symptoms, symbols, or signs.

The way in which the two logics are distributed in mental processes and products varies based on the ability of Ordinary Logic to manipulate objects, both real and imaginary, and the relationships they maintain with each other, and therefore

based on the knowledge, contexts, and mental states experienced by the individual. It can therefore give rise to discourses, scientific theories, works of art, dreams, delusions or myths, in one non-predefined and controllable manner.

Consistently, even the most recent classically oriented psychoanalytic developments have recognised unconscious contents different from those initially proposed by Jones [10] for mythical production, broadening its field of action beyond the projection of the repressed and removed contents of the Unconscious, and moving towards awareness of the Self and of the surrounding world, while continuing to treat Myths as if they were dreams [15].

However, myths are distinguished from dreams and symptoms by the prevalence of careful and organised use of narrative skills, which can structure the narratives coherently with the expectations of the audience, as generated by the changing socio-cultural contexts of reference.

Boskovic, associating myths with rituals, recognised the common belonging of both to the cultural effort of exploring possible worlds, indicating the narrative structure as the object of their anthropological analysis, without however giving indications on the basis of which it is possible to interpret the meaning, and therefore the value of stories that present unreal contents, apart from the generic one of using the same modes of understanding used by the population that produced them [16].

According to Barthes and Duisit, narrative structure can be analyzed by breaking it down into *Nucleuses* and *Catalyses*. Nucleuses are both consecutive and consequential (the existence of one Nucleus makes the occurrence of another possible), regardless of the logical order in which they are presented, and are both necessary to the narration and sufficient in themselves; Catalyses integrate the Nuclei and describe personality traits, feelings, atmosphere, and philosophy, which help decipher narrated contexts and situations, entering into a relationship with the Nuclei in a parasitic and chronological manner, expanding their contents. Consequently, it is not possible to delete a Nucleus without altering the Narration, and it is not possible to delete a Catalysis without altering its *Discourse* [17].

In stories, the Discourse is constructed from the set of communicative strata-gems used to give sense and meaning to the narration or communication, describing and contrasting values, characters, contexts, actions and purposes capable of orienting the listener or reader in their explicit or implicit evaluation, in such a way as to lead him to the recognition of the value of the contents exposed, and to the sharing of the meaning of what is narrated or communicated [18], accepting or rejecting its value, at an imaginary level. *On the contrary, the truth, in the Discourses constructed for the development of scientific knowledge, is recognized through proof of effectiveness to be found* [19].

The value of the Myth, therefore, is not sought in reality: in fact, it is recognized by the effects it causes in the imagination; therefore, in the experiences of the people who listen to it.

It is not possible, however, to go beyond this hypothesis, assuming that ancient

poets verified the validity of the myths they narrated by measuring it by the effects it produced on their audience; however, the permanence of the myth over time, and especially its variations, seem a good indication of the presence of evaluative activities on the part of the poets. Furthermore, psychoanalysis has long recognized the validity of myths in representing deep personality structures, in organizing their reorganization during moments of disorientation, and in orienting the growth of still immature personalities, in addressing developmental tasks that concern them [20]-[23].

This work will therefore interpret the myth of Perseus and Medusa by analyzing the versions provided by Apollodorus and Ovid in the Imperial era, as they maintain a certain continuity of content with the versions and variations of the myth from previous centuries. It will begin with the description of the symbols used in subsequent versions produced starting with Hesiod, introducing variations that represent content innovations capable of indicating representations and substantial changes in the culture of the population that produced and listened to them. These changes can be deduced by analyzing both the symbols and the narrative structure within which they are placed, as well as the characteristics of the characters and the social contexts in which they operated. In particular, the symbols will be decoded consistently with the consequential function of the nucleuses within which they appear, connecting their value within the description of the characters deductible from the catalyses introduced in the narrative nucleuses. The analysis will be conducted by valorizing or discussing the interpretative contributions from other authors and using other versions of the myth that support the decoding of the symbolism present in the analyzed versions.

3. The Journey of Perseus, in Life and Myth, and the Medusa's Role in the Cultural Transformation of the Ancient Greco/Roman World

Perseus' life is presented by Apollodorus (Library II, 4, 1-3) as exceptional from the moment of his conception [24]:

King Acrisius had no sons, and the oracle predicted that if his daughter Danae bore a son, he would kill him. Acrisius therefore locked his daughter in one prison with bronze doors, believing that this would prevent her from becoming pregnant. However, Zeus, transformed into a shower of gold, impregnated her, and thus Perseus was born. Acrisius locked mother and child in one chest and threw them into the sea, but Zeus washed the chest ashore on the island of Seriphos, one of the Cyclades, where Dictys, a fisherman, found them and brought them to her brother, King Polydectes, who fell in love with Danae.

Nucleus 1. Conception and growth of Perseus. Similar mythemes are used in different myths to describe the exceptionality of the hero, equal to the exceptionality of his conception and the conditions of his growth, which emphasize both the natural gifts, possessed due to an often mystical and miraculous birth, and

those acquired with the experience of having lived in difficult and dramatic circumstances, which have shaped his character. Therefore, the analogy with the impregnation of the Madonna by the Holy Spirit [25], and with the abandonment of Moses in one chest left in the Nile [26], is not surprising. Perseus, therefore, having grown up without a father, and with the exclusive care of his mother, did not benefit from male models with which to identify, remaining tied exclusively to his mother, who had also lived in one prison, and for this reason had not had the opportunity to develop skills consistent with the expectations of the psychosocial context of reference.

But Danae wanted no part of him, completely absorbed in her son Perseus, who was growing up. When Perseus grew up, Polydectes tried to separate the mother from her son by asking everyone to donate a horse for his daughter Hippodamia, whom he wanted in marriage. Perseus didn't have a horse to donate, so he told Polydectes he would give him anything else he asked for, and so Polydectes asked him to bring him the head of Medusa, a terrifying gorgon with hair made of snakes, who had the power to petrify anyone who looked at her with her gaze.

Nucleus 2. The journey towards Medusa as separation from the mother. Polydectes's request therefore functions as a push for the forced separation between mother and son, which had not occurred in previous years due to the lack of male figures with whom Perseus could identify. Furthermore, while it entails enormous risks for Perseus, it is not dictated by an act of paternal love: Polydectes, in fact, seeks to free himself from a cumbersome obstacle to his desire for Danae, rather than addressing the separation from his mother that would have allowed Perseus to grow and identify as an adult male, as a father would. Perseus's adventure thus begins in conditions of great disadvantage, which could be overcome only by people endowed with exceptional potential, powerful enough to enable the success of a grandiose undertaking.

According to S. Freud [27], the terrifying head of Medusa represents the fear of castration that upsets the boy at the sight of female genitals, presumably maternal, of which he fantasizes that the absence of penis is due to castration, which he fears could also be reserved for him with emasculation, which is equivalent to decapitation. Medusa would therefore be repellent because of this association, and the petrifying effect of Medusa's gaze would be a symbol of erection, which would reassure from the terror aroused by castration. The Freudian interpretation also attributes positive values to the terrifying effects of Medusa which are expressed in erection; therefore, it raises some doubts; in fact, it does not appear that her myth reserves the petrifying effect to males only, and coherently Pindar (5th century BC) attributes it to both sexes [28]. However, Freud concludes his short essay by stating that it would be necessary to investigate the origin of this terrifying symbol in Greek mythology and its possible parallels in other mythologies.

According to the historical examination of the symbolism of Medusa produced by Dexter, the Greek mythology relating to it originally attributed to it both posi-

tive and negative values, connected to the biological cycle of life and death present in nature, which, originating in the Neolithic and in the East for other female divinities, spread in ancient Greece, preserving these values also for Medusa, who was represented in her entirety, with a body equipped with wings or centaurized, and in the company of snakes: the presence of bird wings and snakes symbolized the cycle of regeneration of life, since birds and snakes are subject to the shedding of feathers and skin, while the horse's body, for centaurized Medusa, represented its belonging to the kingdom of Poseidon/Neptune. Starting from the 8th century BC, and with the appearance of the myth of Perseus, his decapitation separated the positive values from the negative and terrifying ones, which remained inscribed in the decapitated head, capable of petrifying males and females, humans and animals, as well as carrying out apotropaic protective functions, when his image was exposed in temples and homes, while the positive ones remained in the blood mythically flowing from his jugular veins, capable of causing death or healing and bringing life, or to give birth to Pegasus and the giant Chrysaor, depending on the version of the myth: the relationship with the cyclical regeneration of life remained represented in snakes, while the link with Poseidon/Neptune in the form of a love relationship or sexual violence, depending on the versions of the myth [29].

The presence of a relationship with a deity, however, suggests that Medusa, in addition to having terrifying aspects, also had attractive ones: in fact, Pindar (5th century BC), in his 12th ode, recognizes Medusa's attractiveness and beauty, and traces the creation of music with multiple melodic lines by Athena to the serpents surrounding her head and the funeral lament of her two sisters following her decapitation [28]. Subsequently, starting from the 4th century BC, the iconography dedicated to Medusa also reproduces her beauty [30].

Therefore, the split presented by Dexter is recomposed over time, making Medusa a symbol of both the attractiveness and beauty of life and its funereal and terrifying aspects: *Perseus's enterprise therefore consists in addressing the ambivalence of the bond with nature, which gives life and takes death.*

Kristeva places the symbolism of Medusa's decapitation within a broader context, which, by including castration, expands by inserting its symbolism into the broader cultural and psychosocial context, becoming representative of the frustrations and limitations imposed by society on all its members, regardless of gender. The author, in her treatise, also includes the evolution of the symbolism inherent in the possession of the severed head, which, dating back to the Paleolithic, represents the ritual appropriation of the qualities attributed to the person from whom the preserved head came, therefore an imaginary increase in power and prestige, as well as co-belonging to the mystical or symbolic dimension coming from the decapitated person or from the one who had carried out the decapitation: in this way, the head of Medusa, the images of the face of Christ and the Saints, as well as those of other famous decapitated people, are placed on a historical/cultural continuum that develops and transforms in time and space, becoming symbols of religious transcendence, as well as objects of identification, with the sev-

ered head or with the cutter, therefore also becoming activators of sadistic/masochistic mass projections, regardless of the severed head or the cutter [31].

Wilk, instead, focused on the head of Medusa, starting with an examination of the many variations on the myth present in ancient Greek/Roman literature. The presence of images of Gorgons across the planet is traced by the author to a single origin: the image would reproduce the decomposition of the face after death, thus also explaining the disgusting effects it would provoke in those who look at it; to this common derivation, he also adds the descriptions of the facial transformations undergone by hysterical women, reported by Charcot, similar to those described by Euripides (V century BC) as undergone by Heracles during his madness, without however grasping the symbolic association. Finally, he traces the origin of the image of Medusa's hair made by snakes to that deriving from the work done by caterpillars that eat the leaves starting from the external profile, whose image would have been superimposed on that of the human head in post-mortem putrefaction [30].

The author, however, fails to grasp the connection, according to the Principle of Generalization, between post-mortem putrefaction and facial disfigurement due to the pressures of mental illness, namely their common belonging to the *class of uncontrollable personal change*. Furthermore, he neglects the symbolic value that the serpents constituting Medusa's hair, although reproduced similarly to the ways in which caterpillars attack leaves, could have assumed within Greco-Roman mythology. As amply illustrated in his own work, although the image of the Gorgon may have a single origin across the planet, each population has constructed its own mythology around it, which must therefore be decoded using different interpretants, compared to those used to reconstruct the common origin of an image that has become the symbol of different myths. Indeed, although symbols spread across the planet may have a single material origin, the narratives that use them contain differences that cannot be explained by their common origin: mythical narratives represent modes of cultural adaptation to different natural and social environments; therefore, they reflect the differences between populations settled on the planet, both in time and space.

Athena and Hermes helped Perseus: the former by giving him a reflective shield, which allowed him to approach and gaze upon the Gorgon without being petrified by her gaze, and the latter by giving him a special sword, capable of cutting through Medusa's indestructible skin. Perseus then went to the Graeae, sisters of the Gorgons, to learn where the Nymphs lived. He obtained this information in exchange for the return of the single eye and tooth that the Graeae used for seeing and eating, which Perseus had stolen from them through a ruse. When Perseus reached them, the nymphs provided him with winged sandals (from Hermes) for flight, a bag to hold Medusa's head, and the helmet of Hades, which rendered its wearer invisible.

Nucleus 3. Athena's shield and Medusa's gaze. In myth, Medusa was the only mortal among the three Gorgons, and is reported as residing in Hades by various

authors [32], starting from Homer (VIII century BC). Her mythical killing by Perseus, necessary to move Medusa's residence to Hades, is reported first by Hesiod (VIII-VII century BC); therefore, it should be older than her placement in Hades: in fact, both authors elaborate their narratives starting from oral traditions, adopted in Greece from nearby Mesopotamia, from where the first myths concerning the killing of dragons by heroes come from [2]. According to Ogden ([33]: p. 115), Medusa is a *Drakaina*, due to her physical characteristics, which mix serpentine and human components, and due to the power of her petrifying gaze, similar to the peculiarities of the gaze of serpents and *Drakontes*. Ogden also reports various versions about the petrifying nature of this gaze, which owes its effect to the simple act of looking at the Medusa, or being looked at by her ([34]: p. 51).

However, the use of Athena's mirror by Perseus suggests that the effect may be due to the crossing of glances, and not to the gaze of Medusa or of the person who is petrified by looking at her. *Therefore, the petrification resulting from the crossing of glances should be caused by the transmission of information that can be deduced from the comparison between both glances, or from seeing oneself being seen, therefore from an image of oneself reflected and returned by the gaze of Medusa, which petrifies because it differs from the self-perceived one.* Coherently, the derivation of Medusa's image from the putrefaction of the bodies of the dead, as explained by Wilk [30], and therefore the belonging of the human race to the uncontrollable biological cycle of life, leads to a representation of a truth, concerning every sentient being, which cannot be directly perceived. It is, in fact, impossible to directly perceive the dynamics of one's own biological composition through consciousness and the normal perceptual channels, which represent a product of it: what we perceive, regardless of its location external or internal to the organism, represents a product of biological neuronal activity, in relation to events that remain unknown in their essence, except for what becomes manifest in the form of phenomena. Consciousness is therefore based on a split between mental processes and biological substrate, which cannot be overcome.

Consistently, Bateson ([35]: p. 446), has brilliantly demonstrated, using the metaphor of television circuits, that any attempt to arrive at an understanding of how it is possible to obtain the vision produced on the television screen starting from electronic circuits by means of other circuits, would lead to an increase in the number of circuits of which there is no understanding, increasing the level of unawareness, rather than decreasing it.

Therefore, awareness of the founding biological state of consciousness cannot be achieved except through a reflexive modality; that is, through inferences drawn from the phenomena detected by perception and consciousness. Athena's mirror, therefore, allows for a reflexive awareness of the inevitable transformations underlying biological life, represented by Medusa, over which no direct awareness is possible. This reflexive awareness, however, is produced by the intersection with the gaze of Medusa, who is a *drakaina*; therefore, she possesses both human and

reptilian characteristics.

According to Ogden ([33]: pp. 37, 238), the ancient mythopoetic imagination attributed to doctors qualities similar to those of snakes: having a proud and fixed gaze, immune from distraction, due to the impossibility of closing the eyes, which however allows to maintain a superior attention and concentration, not limited by the saccadic movements of the eyes and amplified by the sensitivity to infrared rays typical of snakes, necessary for doctors to be able to understand the causes of the diseases they had to cure (p. 377), and to observe things unobservable by the human gaze..

It follows that, according to the myth, *the gaze of Medusa/drakaina observes things that are unobservable to the human gaze, but which can nevertheless be grasped by “seeing that one is seen by her gaze”*.

This interpretation can represent a further development of what was proposed by Toscano [36], according to which the analysis of the vascular images relating to the relationship between Athena, Medusa and Perseus, refers to a relationship between myth and science that could also be of interest in the current era, dramatically struggling with the consequences that scientific and technological development is bringing about for the planet and for the Human Race, leading to the intersection of different modes of imagination that can cooperate, rather than proceeding in a split manner, as in the current era.

The relationship identified by Toscano, however, remains generic, while the reading proposed here suggests that the myth analyzed can describe an awareness regarding the relationship between Nature and Culture, using a mythopoetic language aimed at the transformation of internal objects, rather than a rational one, oriented towards the transformation of external objects.

Various interpretations of Medusa’s gaze have also been proposed from a feminist perspective: Bowers [37] describes Medusa’s gaze as a dynamic instrument, capable of conveying the identity of the people observed by objectifying the qualities of the male ideology that considers her expendable, despite her being a beautiful and fertile woman, therefore capable of generating creativity and beauty. Using the Lacanian model from a feminist perspective, Ali [38] believes that Medusa’s petrifying gaze presents itself as a violent subversion of the typical gaze of men who consider women a passive object of their desire, imposing itself as an eruption of the real into the imaginary male world, while Tabassum Banu [39] presents Medusa’s gaze as a female rebellion against male oppression, which is assumed by Athena as such.

Nucleus 3.1. The Helmet of Hades, the Sword of Hermes, and the Bag of the Nymphs. In Greek mythology, “Hades, lord of death and the underworld, is invisible” ([40]: pp. 32-33).

Furthermore, while someone else’s death can be represented by their corpse, one’s own death cannot be represented; therefore, it is invisible to the living. Finally, Hades, the realm of the Underworld, is not visible from the earthly world, nor are the souls of the dead who inhabit it. Consequently, the gift of invisibility

bestowed by the helmet of Hades consists in enabling Perseus to carry out his quest within the invisible dimension; therefore, to enable his soul to do so. *The effect conferred by the helmet of Hades, therefore, connotes Perseus's quest as a journey of the soul, and therefore as a mystical undertaking that involves conquests valid for the internal world of the person, rather than for the possession of goods and objects. Consequently, Perseus's body, as long as he wears the helmet of Hades, is dead.*

Consistently, Perseus' invisibility describes the object of Medusa's petrifying gaze as directed at the soul, rather than the body; thus, it attributes to the soul the ability to petrify the soul—that is, the psychic and mental activity condensed into personal identity—through a gaze that instead comes from the biological component, continually subject to uncontrollable transformations. In this way, *the myth creates a significant contrast between the continuous and uncontrollable change of biological processes and the stability of personal identity, which is symbolized as a petrification of cognitive and emotional functioning patterns: the perpetual mutability of the cycle of birth, death, and decay, represented by Medusa, is contrasted with individual identity, depicted as being as immutable as stone.*

In fact, Lucian of Samosata [41] explicitly attributes to the Gorgons the ability *to reach the soul of those who saw their beauty, arousing amazement and silence, to the point of causing their petrification.*

The special bag provided by the Nymphs to contain Medusa's head thus allows Perseus's soul to conceal and protect itself from the power to petrify the soul, emanating from Medusa's gaze, and to use it when necessary: in this way, the power to petrify the soul, represented by Medusa's gaze, becomes symbolically controllable. On the other hand, Hermes's sandals allow one to move quickly and easily reach unreachable imaginary places, such as the residence of the Gorgons, where the transformation of identity is possible.

According to Wilk, however, the helmet of Hades, rather than being paradigmatic, would not have been necessary for the accomplishment of the feat, unlike the sickle-shaped sword donated by Hermes, which arouses interest in the author because it has been used in other myths and by other characters to accomplish mythological feats emblematic of great changes ([30]: p. 28).

The sickle-shaped sword given by Hermes, therefore, should symbolize the great transformation following the decapitation of Medusa, the meaning of which the author does not describe, having considered the helmet of Hades insignificant.

Thus armed, Perseus went to the Gorgons' lair and beheaded Medusa, looking at her reflection in the shield Athena had given her. From the Gorgon's blood, Pegasus, the winged horse, was born, and Perseus flew away with Hermes' sandals, unseen by the Gorgons because he was invisible under Hades' helmet. Perseus then returned the sandals and helmet to Hermes, who returned them to the Nymphs and Hades, and gave Medusa's head to Athena, who imprinted it on her shield. Some say that Medusa was beheaded because of Athena; they also say that the Gorgon wanted to compete with her in beauty.

Nucleus 4. Athena/Medusa. Born from the head of her father, Zeus, after he had swallowed his wise wife Metis, Athena embodies the wisdom of her mother and the power of her father, proposing herself as a divinity who assists men and the State according to an ethic that protects the well-being of the populations, although she is also active during wars, which however she guides with prudence and wise advice, and always keeping in mind the advantages for the State, rather than for the war as an end in itself. Athena also protects crafts, the sciences and the arts, laws and justice, assists heroes in their memorable enterprises, and has also taken a vow of virginity and renounced marriage [42]; she is the protagonist, like all the other gods, in many myths [43], in one of which she is Poseidon's rival for the protection of the city of Athens [44].

The myth that details the relationship between Athena, Medusa, Poseidon, and Perseus is narrated by Ovid, who tells of the rape of the beautiful Medusa by Neptune (Poseidon), while she was a vestal virgin in the temple of Athena, who "so that the deed would not go unpunished, changed the Gorgon's hair into repulsive serpents" [45]: this transformation was followed, both temporally and logically, by her decapitation by Perseus, with the support of Athena.

This transformation has been the subject of feminist interpretations that emphasize the underlying paradox, emerging from a woman who is the victim of rape and is punished for her beauty, placed as the cause of the rape by the male-dominated and patriarchal logic that dominated Greek mythology [29], and also in many layers of contemporary Western culture [46].

However, tracing the current tendency to blame the rape victim, still sadly active in Western culture even during criminal trials, back to the transformation narrated by Ovid, does not do justice to what the poet actually narrated: the Gorgon's hair was transformed into snakes *so that the crime would not go unpunished*, and not to punish Medusa for the rape she suffered because of her beauty. Indeed, Ovid continues: "Even today the goddess, to frighten and terrify her enemies, carries before her, on her breast, those reptiles that she herself created." This means that the transformation of the beautiful Medusa into the terrifying Gorgon is determined by Athena's experience of identification with the rape, which she feels is directed at herself, since it was committed in her temple. Consequently, with the transformation, Athena transforms herself and integrates the ferocity of a beautiful woman who was a victim of rape. This transformation/integration is symbolized by the imprint of the Gorgon/Medusa's face on the reflective shield that Perseus used to behead her. The shield is returned at the end of the feat, completing the identification between Athena and Medusa through the imprint of the Gorgon's head on the shield. Medusa's gaze thus becomes Athena's gaze.

Sakulwattana [47] proposes a Jungian interpretation, in which Athena and Danae represent the "*Good Mother*", who prevails in the myth, and Medusa the "*Bad Mother*", while the placement of Medusa's head on Athena's shield represents the Archetype of the "*Great Mother*", as a recombination of its two aspects.

This interpretation, however, does not grasp the moral underlying the narra-

tive, the value of which can be learned from the discursive stratagems used in the narrative itself: *myths used mythemes and symbols to induce the exploration of possible internal worlds, and not to represent current scientific theories about their external referents.*

The transformation narrated by Ovid therefore concerns the change brought about by a beautiful woman, who experienced her rape from the perspective of a wise goddess endowed with a strong sense of ethics and respect for law and justice, albeit within an unfavorable hierarchical and political context, with male power prevailing over female power.

On the other hand, Ovid himself had reformulated the mythology inherent in rape that had characterized the mythological history of Rome, starting with the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, within which the role of raped women was that of sacrificing themselves, submitting to the logic of patriarchal power that identified male virility with the right to rape slaves and women belonging to ethnic groups conquered militarily, preferring to guarantee the stability of social and political relations and the prevention of civil and military unrest that would have led to bloodshed, rather than rebel. In fact, in his works, he goes beyond the ideal of the male who satisfies his desire by raping the women who attract him, proposing that of the seducer who courts and flatters them, dealing empathetically with them within a cultural context that had recognized greater sexual freedom for the women of ancient Rome, recognizing their right to oppose and denounce rape, which was punished with heavy sanctions already during the 1st century BC, although the laws continued to protect the value and integrity of the family nucleus structured according to patriarchal ethics [48].

Therefore, according to Ovid's account of Medusa's transformation, the decapitation and the imprinting of the Gorgon's face on Athena's shield converge to represent the rising synergy of two aspects of the same divinity. *Specifically, Athena's wisdom and ethical profile are complemented by the reflective function of Medusa's gaze.* Indeed, in the *Odyssey*, as in other ancient sources, Medusa's head appears on Athena's dress, rather than on her shield; thus, the versions of the Myth of Perseus reported by Apollodorus and Ovid narrate a symbolic transformation of the Myth of Medusa, that involves both male and female genders. Obviously, according to current moral and legal codes, it would have been right for Poseidon/Neptune to have been punished, but such an outcome could not have been within the reach of an ancient poet, who could not invent myths that contradicted the balance of power within the relationships between divinities and human beings, which were also established through mythology: Greek/Roman myths in fact tell of rapes and betrayals by male divinities, as well as betrayals and revenges against males by female divinities, representing a metaphor for human events that still occur today. Therefore, having to rework the vertically transmitted cultural heritage, the logic of containing the risks of internal explosion, typical of the Semi-sphere, could evidently not allow the development of meta-descriptions of culture that would allow mythopoetic languages to create alternative divine orders

[3] to those inherited vertically.

The feminist approach to anthropology, however, has broad and valid motivations in supporting claims of freedom to choose a female role, which most cultures, as Ortner noted, associate with reproduction and childrearing. This is derived from a presumed identification of femininity with the natural cycle, due to menstruation, pregnancy, and the caring bond that develops during breastfeeding and childrearing, contrasting it with the male one, linked to the production of works of high cultural value that compensate for the inability to generate children, which is therefore identified with culture rather than nature [49].

However, such motivations do not authorize the overlapping and confusion of political reasons and analytical approaches: myths must be studied for what they are and for what they have represented throughout history, distinguishing the value of their cultural legacy from current cultural and political responsibilities.

On his return journey, passing through Ethiopia, ruled by Cepheus, Perseus came across Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus, who was tied to be fed to a sea dragon because her mother Cassiopeia had rivaled the Nereids in beauty, boasting that she had surpassed them all. Consequently, the Nereids became furious, and Poseidon, equally enraged, sent a sea storm and a Ketos (sea monster) to the mainland.

The oracle of Ammon prophesied an end to troubles if Cassiopeia's daughter, Andromeda, was served as a meal to the monster, so Cepheus, urged by the Ethiopians, tied his daughter to a rock. When Perseus saw her, he fell in love and promised to slay the dragon and save the girl in exchange for her hand in marriage. An oath was then sworn, after which Perseus confronted and slew the monster and freed Andromeda. Cepheus's brother, Phineus, who had previously been engaged to Andromeda, conspired against Perseus, but Perseus learned of the plot and, showing Medusa's head to Phineus and his fellow conspirators, instantly turned them to stone.

On his return to the island of Seriphos, he took revenge on King Polydectes, who had sent him on his mission. He entered the royal palace where Polydectes was entertaining his friends and, with his face turned to the side, showed them the Gorgon's head. When they looked at it, everyone turned to stone, assuming the same pose they were in at that moment.

Nucleus 5. The fight against the dragon, the wedding and Perseus' return home. Perseus' adventure begins in the context of a collection organized by Polydectes to support the marriage of his daughter Hippodamia with the offering of horses, whose unavailability, on the part of Perseus, led to the assignment of the task of carrying the head of Medusa. Perseus, therefore, in a context in which marriages were regulated by the offering of gifts to be given and of assets on which to base the future marital cohabitation, did not have the resources required to support a marriage according to the conventions in force at the time: in fact, in ancient Greece women were considered to lack the ability to give or deny consent

[50], and they got married once they had started menarche, marriage being considered an obligation that guaranteed the prosperity of the city through the procreation of legitimate children, who inherited their father's assets. Therefore, fathers could make promises of marriage without consulting them [51], while for people of low social rank there was no single ceremony that could make marriage and procreation official, although they could access it [52]. Roman marriage rules were not so different from Greek ones [53]: in both cases, marriage was considered a tool to ensure the continuity of paternal lineage; therefore, it could be managed entirely by fathers, who had the obligation to provide a dowry to their daughters, who could not manage it autonomously [54].

Consequently, lacking his father's assets, and having entered adult life after being raised solely by his mother, Perseus lacked the wealth to marry, nor even a horse to contribute to the collection for Hippodamia. The promise of marriage obtained with Andromeda's release therefore represents a far-reaching psychosocial innovation, since Perseus wins the hand of the woman he has fallen in love with without possessing the wealth to justify and support the marriage. From a prospecting perspective, therefore, the marital relationship between Perseus and Andromeda would not have been mediated by the buying and selling that characterized conventional marriage agreements, unlike that envisaged between Andromeda and Phineus, her previous fiancé. The defeat of the dragon therefore represents the countervalue of the wealth that Perseus would have had to offer in order to marry Andromeda.

Ogden ([33]: pp. 161-173) reports that myths placed dragons mainly in caves, often guarding a treasure or a spring, and they were often identified with springs, rivers and landscapes, the latter being shaped by their existence, both past and present. In fact, in the most ancient versions of myths referring to dragons, the dragon often represented a river, a storm or both [55], and its defeat the mythological birth of the ethnic group that inhabited the territory bathed by the river, or by the sea that was affected by the mythical storm [56].

Similarly, the stormy sea, its limits, and the destructive, chaotic disorder it represents, have been recognized as elements of metaphors associating dragons with evil and moral decay, and their defeat by divinity as elements of the metaphor associating the struggle between good and evil with the connotation of the regulation of moral behavior indicated by biblical scriptures and human morality itself. The dragon metaphor was, in fact, constructed and used, in both biblical and Greco-Roman mythology, to represent a form of life that cannot be identified with real-world linguistic referents, because it surpasses them. For this reason, dragons were depicted as hybridized serpents with wings, legs, or beards, although they could also be identified with stormy seas or swollen rivers, or with real-life situations that could not be codified in such a way as to be understood and explained in their chaotic, violent, and powerful nature. This metaphorical relationship then led to the representation of the stormy and uncontrollable sea or river in the form of a dragon both in the Leviathan of Christian mythology [57], and in Greco-Ro-

man mythology, as the stormy river or sea that is tamed by the divinity or with a potion and with a formula repeated three times, “*as is done with dragons*” [58].

Jungian Analytical Psychology has traced the dragon metaphor back to a mode of symbolization indicating the powerful, violent and chaotic emotions, sensations and affects that emerge during the transition to maturity: the *Persona*, or the part of the personality most adapted to the environment and the psychosocial expectations of the context of reference, confronts, during this phase, its *Shadow*, or the parts of the personality repressed and removed during the process of cultural adaptation to the expectations of the society in which it lives, which represent its counterpart. These repressed and removed components, that is, attitudes, energies, talents and predispositions, with both negative and positive valence, give rise to psychic tensions and to *a real fight against the Dragon by the Persona*, which can result either in repression or in the transformation and integration of the repressed components: the re-proposition of repression always means that the Dragon can re-emerge, while the work of integration leads to the release from the archaic, fusional and omnipotent bond, structured with the mother during the first months and years of life, through the adaptation of the components that have been repressed and removed to build the *Persona*, in coherence with the expectations of society [59] [60].

Beneath cultural conditioning and the archaic fusional bond with the mother, finally, *the Dragon, for those who survive the struggle, can be perceived as a conglomeration of mass and energy, which, however, cannot be observed and represented from the outside, being experienced from within, nor experienced indirectly through the perceptions and mental symbolizations emerging from the relationship with the outside, being only organic life not organized into a mental form, which has not yet had access to perception and symbolization: ultimately, it is a question of energetic potentialities still unexpressed, which find it difficult to produce objects and behaviors that can integrate within the human context of reference.*

The lived experiences during this phase, common to the entire human species and independent of time and space, are then projected onto elements that could represent them, giving a cultural, and therefore socially shared, guise to experiences that are regularly lived individually, thus providing the tools necessary to process them within a socially defined framework [61].

The *Dragon* therefore represents violent and uncontrollable emotions, feelings, and sensations that are regularly experienced during maturation, and *the Fight against the Dragon* is the process that allows for their control, defeat, and/or assimilation. The same process of metaphorization of this Mythologem can then be projected onto the landscape, which can then become an imaginary indicator of the presence of a dragon, inhabiting a cave or agitating a river or the sea, assuming the same qualities, both positive and negative.

The petrification of Phineus and the other conspirators, therefore, represents the result of Perseus’s process of assimilating the potential of the drakaina/Me-

dusa, or rather, the recognition of their unworthiness through Medusa's gaze, perceived both sentimentally, due to the relationship Perseus had allegedly developed with Andromeda, and ethically, due to his failure to honor the agreements made between Perseus and Cepheus. The same fate is reserved for Polydectes, due to the unworthy manner in which he had attempted to approach Danae, pushing Perseus toward a deadly enterprise. Similarly, Medusa's gaze petrifies the giant Atlas, because he had refused to offer Perseus hospitality and had even attacked him, taking advantage of his enormous size, fearing that the prophecy foretelling his death by a son of Zeus would come true. Perseus, therefore, defeats and incorporates, by placing Medusa's head in the bag that contains it, a *drakaina*, that is, violent and uncontrollable emotions, feelings and sensations of a feminine nature.

Furthermore, the significant relationship between unworthy personal identity and the immutability of the rock appears reversed, in the same canto [45], as Perseus frees Andromeda from the rock on which she is chained to be fed to the Dragon, rather than petrify unworthy characters: the unworthiness, in this case, is represented by Cassiopeia, guilty of having boasted of the unsurpassable beauty of her daughter Andromeda, who therefore appears to be linked to the unworthy identity of her mother, who however is mythically punished by the gods in a different way, that is, by representing her reversed in a constellation.

The relationship between the immutability of the rock and the unworthy identity of the person is thus represented in the myth both directly, through the petrification caused by Medusa's gaze, and indirectly, through the rock that chains Andromeda, as a signifier of a limiting family relationship. *Medusa's petrifying gaze, therefore, represents a metaphor for the female critique that precedes social change, even though it is reworked and implemented by a male.*

In the same section of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid introduces a passage that presents itself as both a conceptual redundancy and a significant juxtaposition. The poet describes Perseus's attack on the dragon as the latter hurls itself against the hero's shadow, mistaking it for the body of his attacker. The narrative redundancy consists in the inversion of the psychic function of Athena's reflective shield, which the dragon lacks, thus preventing it from accessing the inferential decoding that would have allowed it to recognize the attacker's shadow as such, without mistaking it for the object from which it emanated.

Conversely, the significant juxtaposition represented by Perseus's attack contrasts this lack with the inferential cognitive capacity that enables the hero to distinguish between the perception of the object and that of its mirrored reflection, and to exploit the dragon's inability to do the same. Narrative redundancy provides a well-defined indication of the underlying meaning [62], because, differently from the mere and identical repetition of linguistic strings, the re-proposition of similar contents in different contexts and syntactic and semantic forms helps to disambiguate its understanding, especially if it deals with new and unusual contents [63], while the contrast between signs and meanings represents the condition that establishes and makes possible the communication and linguistic

understanding of a text [64]: the inferential capacity deriving from the reflective function therefore gives different results, if referred to the gaze of Medusa, that of Perseus, or that of the dragon, which is devoid of it.

Inference is present in every type of understanding or reasoning: in its abductive, inductive and deductive forms, it marks the transition from instinctive, biologically motivated and irrational behaviors to rational behaviors, based on thought and logic [65]. On the other hand, rationality, although it includes them, is not based solely on logical inferences, which must be evaluated, in their validity, by the metalogical and metacognitive awareness underlying the control and evaluation of one's own inferential processes; consequently, complete rationality can never be achieved, since awareness of one's inferences generates new inferences of which one is not aware [66].

The metalogical function possessed by Perseus therefore allowed him to infer the lack of inferential capacity in the dragon's attack on his shadow, allowing him to launch a decisive attack on the monster.

Finally, the inferential process is present in all behaviors [67], in learning, in memory [68], and in the understanding of texts [69], therefore it cannot be metaphorised, in one myth, in all its aspects: it is sufficient for the myth to provide a signifier of its value.

Another redundancy is present within the names of the main protagonists of the myth: as highlighted by Ogden [34], the sememe "*med*", which translates as "*regulator*", is present in the names *Medousa*, which means "*female regulator*"; *Andromeda*, which means "*man regulator*", and in *Eurymedōn*, that is the nickname that Apollonius of Rhodes [70] reports was given to Perseus by his mother, which means "*wide regulator*".

According to these meanings, and the way they are sequenced in the mythical narrative, Perseus attains the identity of "*broad regulator*," having traversed the dimensions of "*female regulator*," with the beheading of Medusa, and the "*man regulator*" with his marriage to Andromeda.

From a psychoevolutionary perspective, Perseus therefore went through the stage of primary identification with his mother, which he overcame by beheading Medusa (or, by self-beheading/castrating, as he was still identified with his mother and evolutionarily lacking identification with male objects). This identification with his mother is the symbolic representative of the natural feminine principle of birth, death, and regeneration. He separated himself from this by identifying with the masculine role of Andromeda's liberating hero, thus incorporating both regulatory modalities into the identity of "*broad regulator*," which he acquired by resolving his conflicts with Atlas, Phineus, and Polydectes.

According to what was proposed by Rothenberg & Foster [71], Perseus has therefore achieved, having acquired the ability to articulate and innovate social relations, a broad process of separation/individuation that allows access to sociality in a healthy way, overcoming the pre-symbolic development stage in which the inadequacy of the paternal function allows a vague perception of the limit and of

castration, which however does not allow separation from the mother, giving rise to a form of sociality that cannot be articulated due to paternal inadequacy, as it originates from forms of enjoyment generated by the original fusion with the maternal object, incompatible with the opening to the world of sociality.

Dexter [29] has however proposed a different translation for the name Medusa, which would mean “*the regulating one*”, suggesting a slightly different definition of Perseus’ transformation. The object of the regulation managed by Medusa, according to the author’s proposal, would in fact be the biological cycle of life, which contains beauty, attractiveness and the possibility of nourishment, together with terrifying and death-bringing aspects; therefore, her decapitation would imply a symbolic separation of the human race from the uncontrolled biological cycle of life, making Medusa’s head dangerous, since it is separated from the body.

Although, however, Dexter also referred to the writings of Apollodorus and Ovid, she does not refer to the names *Andromeda* and *Eurymedōn*, not grasping the significant potential of the contrast between the names. In interpreting this kind of text, in fact, one runs the risk of incurring unconscious identifications with the characters of the myth, sometimes misunderstanding their meaning [72].

The two different interpretations, however, cannot be considered alternative and mutually exclusive, since the meaning of words is never defined in a rigid manner, being itself constituted by nuances whose content varies according to the oppositional relationship established with other words, according to the grammatical rules established by the language, and according to the *Symbolic Order* that the language establishes, which can never be stable, being defined by the variability of the contents transmitted by communication, in time and space [73]-[75].

Indeed, they would have in common the psychic transformation that Perseus undertook in his enterprise: the transition from a mode of regulation based on the internalization of primary identification with the mother, that is, complete, undifferentiated immersion in the biological cycle of life and death, represented by Medusa, to one based on identification with the role of hero liberator of captive women destined for sacrifice, represented by Andromeda, and then finally with identification with the role of “broad regulator,” inherent in her nickname, Eurymedōn. *This transformation, in the myth, is made possible by the preservation of Medusa’s head in the kibisis that preserves the hero from her power to petrify regulatory patterns that impede the evolution and growth of a person’s identity and relationships.*

Otherwise, in fact, the blocking of the evolution of the personality would have occurred within “*Models of Self and World*” constructed during the primary phases of growth, which often prove inadequate to face the expectations and challenges that the inevitable changes that characterise life impose [76]-[80].

Perseus’s transformation therefore involved a shift from dual internalized regulatory modes, represented by his primary identification with his mother, and social regulatory modes, represented by marital conventions, to self-regulating modes

that allowed him to evolve into a liberating hero and ethical regulator of social relations. Obviously, it is possible to hypothesize a similar transformation for Andromeda, as she is freed from the petrifying bond with her mother's vanity, which could certainly have influenced the development of her *Model of Self and the World*. Unfortunately, however, there is not trace of such a possible transformation in the myth, beyond the meaning of her name.

Perseus's journey, therefore, although made possible by the hero's biological maturation, which provides him with the physical equipment necessary to accomplish the feat, represents the change resulting from the acquired ability to differentiate and separate the human existential perspective from the animal biological cycle, culture from nature, according to visions that elevate social relations towards broader and more rewarding models of coexistence, compared to the lack of perspective that characterizes merely biological life, which is expressed in the amorphous and uncontrolled energy represented by the dragon. It is also characterized by the acquisition of a cognitive function of extreme importance for human survival: in fact, the inferential function inherent in "*seeing oneself seen by the gaze of Medusa*" is, at the conclusion of the myth, imprinted on the shield of Athena, the patron goddess of Science and Technology, as well as of Ethics and the State. In conclusion, Perseus's feat symbolizes a form of culturalization of the dragon's energy, which Perseus incorporates, to the point of becoming *Eurymedōn*, after having acquired a cognitive function of extreme importance for human survival: *the inferential ability acquired by seeing oneself seen by Medusa's gaze through Athena's reflective shield*, which incorporates Medusa's head, in the end of myth.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Perseus' and Medusa's myth spread throughout the Mediterranean basin, persisting and giving rise to written texts for approximately 14 centuries, starting with Homer (8th century BC) and reaching Malalas (6th century AD). Subsequently, the mythologem of the hero's journey who defeats the dragon is also taken up in medieval Christian mythology, while the motifs extracted from the original myth are reworked starting from the Renaissance, until reaching the contemporary era, with re-propositions, adaptations, and developments that have affected the current cinematography [1] [30] [31] [33] [34], until reaching the creation of an alternative text that narrates the experience of Medusa, from her birth to her transformation, describing the injustice of which she was a victim, according to a feminist perspective [81], which however risks being branded as a historical fake, which has nothing to do with mythological research, although it testifies to the extreme validity of the myth in stimulating the imagination, even in contemporary times.

The exceptional persistence of this myth can therefore be traced back to its great ability to stimulate the public's attention and imagination, suggesting that the situations that gave rise to the mythologem that produced the various versions of

the myth may still be active, and therefore still relevant.

The interdisciplinary methodology proposed in this work has allowed us to examine the determinants of the myth's success from different perspectives, integrated in such a way as to produce convincing explanations, to the extent possible.

The subdivision of the myth into narrative nuclei [17] has allowed us to reconstruct the meaning of the narrative by articulating it in sequences capable of giving rise to recognizable results, while the analysis of the catalyses associated with them has allowed us to extract their value, estimating it based on the characteristics of the characters involved and the contents emerging from the psychosocial and historical context of reference. Finally, the analysis of both, together with that of the symbols used, has allowed us to extract meanings from the narration, which can be better understood by integrating the interpretants of psychoanalysis and mythology, according to the models proposed by Jung [13], Jakobson [8], and Matte Blanco [14].

The catalyses associated with the first nucleus allowed, using psychodynamically oriented interpretants, to delineate Perseus's personality as defined solely by identifications with his mother, having had no male figures with whom to identify during his growth. Furthermore, having grown up in conditions of imprisonment and marginalization, his mother had not had the opportunity to construct an identity consistent with the psychosocial expectations of her context, consequently providing her son with a female role model based primarily on the imaginary dimension. Perseus's separation from his mother would therefore have been extremely difficult even in the absence of the deadly task entrusted to him by Polydectes, having lacked a male role model to enable him to navigate relational contexts other than those he shared with his mother. Defeating Medusa is therefore a task that any male raised in the conditions experienced by Perseus must face during his maturation.

The symbol appearing in the second nucleus, Medusa, therefore represents an indicator of the path that Perseus must take to overcome the condition of identification with the female model provided by his mother, which was limited by the conditions of confinement that had conditioned its structuring, and therefore further limiting for Perseus, whose undertaking increases its importance also because of these limitations, as well as for its content: the separation from the condition of life defined solely by the automatic flow of the biological cycles of life, death and putrefaction, of which Medusa is a symbol, at once fascinating and terrifying.

Decoding the symbolism underlying the gifts received by Perseus, described in the third nucleus, helps us better understand the meaning of his journey: Hades' helmet, Hermes' sandals and sword, describe Perseus's endeavor as a journey accomplished by the invisibility of the soul, along a path that passes through imaginary places, and which concludes with the use of a weapon suited to exceptional feats. Athena's reflective shield helps us decode the meaning of petrification wrought by Medusa's gaze, whose power derives from being a negative signifier of individual identity, immutable like stone and in contrast to the mutability constitutive of

the biological cycle of life and death, originating from *drakaina's* eyes, capable of seeing things that the human eye cannot see directly, but can access through reflection: *the seeing of being seen by such a gaze*, which can petrify, when not controlled by the inferential cognitive function, which Perseus acquires using Athena's reflective shield. The decapitation of Medusa, moreover, is carried out by Perseus in a condition of sole identification with his mother, being devoid of male identifying models, therefore, by decapitating Medusa, he decapitates the feminine principle, according to the Principle of Generalization, and he also decapitates himself, according to the Principle of Symmetry: *in fact, self-castration represents the only condition that can allow an adult male without a father to identify with the mother, that is, the feminine principle of the circularity of the biological cycle*. The power of the bag donated by the Nymphs protects Perseus from the danger of remaining petrified in the female identification model, represented by Medusa's head, giving him the possibility of developing male models in which to identify himself, inventing them, thus overcoming both the primary female identification model and the dominant male models, with which he clashed during his adventure. *That is to say, Perseus, by keeping Medusa's head in the kibisis given to him by the Muses, removed the portion of his constructed personality by identifying himself with his mother, who, having conceived and raised him in the prison specially built by his father, would have had good reasons to transform herself/be transformed into Medusa. This possible different development of the narrative, however, would not have allowed the development of the myth, in the discursive form with which it has been handed down: in fact, consistently with the oracle's prediction from which the narrative begins, King Acrisius dies following a wound to his foot caused by a discus thrown by his nephew Perseus during an athletics competition that takes place at the conclusion of the enterprise, in the city of Larissa, as reported by Pherecydes, in the 5th century BC ([34]: pp. 7-8).*

The catalyses associated with the fourth nucleus allow us to weigh the value of the cultural transformation implemented with the enterprise, symbolically represented by the integration of the petrifying function of the gaze of the *drakaina* Medusa into the reflective shield of the goddess Athena: the value of individual identity is thus weighed, by Medusa's gaze, within the ethical dimension represented by Athena, the goddess also guardian of scientific and technological progress, of which the inferential function underlying *the seeing of being seen* is a fundamental component.

The fight with the dragon contained in the fifth nucleus therefore takes on a different value, compared to the decapitation of the *drakaina* Medusa: according to the Jungian perspective [59] [60], it is a fight against himself, which allows Perseus to modify and expand his personality, limited by the unavailability of primary male identifying models during his growth, and developing it to the point of allowing the overcoming of the dominant male models, symbolized by the marriage agreement with Andromeda, which does not take place according to conventional rules: in this way, the biological components of Perseus, which had not evolved

into male psychic functions due to the absence of identifying models suitable for this purpose, are transformed into the identity of *Eurymedōn*, the «broad regulator» who petrifies the unworthy identities of Atlas, Phineus, Polydectes and the dragon himself defeated by him, according to the versions of the myth spread during the Roman imperial period [32] [82] [83] [70], as a symbol of petrified raw male biological energy, not processed according to socially defined cultural parameters.

The decoding of the symbols used in the myth, as inserted in the diachrony of the historical variants known to us, also allows us to identify the cultural changes underlying the production of variants: with respect to the already cited versions of Homer and Hesiod, and to that of Pherecydes (V century BC), which describes the presence of a mirror ([34]: pp. 4-5), rather than a reflecting shield, the variants introduced by Ovid and Apollodorus (respectively 1st and 2nd century AD) introduce a relationship of identification between Athena and Medusa, symbolized by the integration of the petrifying gaze of the *drakaina Medusa* into the reflecting function of Athena's shield, and suggest the possibility of escaping the petrification of one's identity by regulating its transformation: in the myth, in fact, this possibility is made possible by the bag, the *kibisis* provided by the Nymphs and used by Perseus to protect himself from the petrifying power of Medusa's gaze, which allows the hero to free Andromeda, and, in the end, to identify himself in the role of *Eurymedōn*: *this transformation is therefore made possible by the de-removal, symbolized in the fourth nucleus by the return of the bag to the Nymphs, of the component of Perseus' personality built through self-castration and primary identification with the mother/ Medusa, whose gaze becomes a fundamental component for the construction of the personality of Eurymedōn. The return of Hades' helmet, on the other hand, symbolizes, in the same nucleus, the return of Perseus' soul to his body and to reality, with the abandonment of the journey into the imaginary accomplished with the feat, symbolized by the return of Hermes' sandals: such returns, in fact, are not present in the aforementioned older versions.*

The petrifications carried out by Perseus in the fifth nucleus, on the other hand, indicate an ethic in the regulation of social relationships: in fact, uncontrolled behaviors are regulated, which differ from the cultural norms that govern civil co-existence, because they are considered, by the myth, as emerging from the uncontrolled transformations of the biological cycle of life and death, which exclude the development of culture. Therefore, Perseus' journey and undertaking symbolize cultural growth, compared to the inadequate behavior of Atlas, Phineus, Polydectes and the dragon, which are petrified, giving everlasting memory to the users of the myth.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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