Medusa's choice: Agency and the Medusa Myth in Matthew B.C.'s *Medusa*

Abstract

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* gave Medusa little agency, which has prompted numerous feminist reclamations of the gorgon. The tension around agency shapes Matthew B.C.'s feminist horror movie *Medusa* (2021), in which Carly Beacon transforms into a serpent-like creature after being bitten by a snake. Evoking simultaneously the gender-ambiguous figures of monster and final girl, Carly acquires increased power and autonomy as she kills her pimp and violent johns. However, her agency is undercut by both a lack of choice about being bitten and a failure to resolve the cultural conditions driving prostitution and drug addiction. *Medusa* troubles Carly's empowerment by reinforcing her lack of choice and ignoring the failure to change larger socio-cultural conditions—raising questions about what genuine feminist liberation might mean.

In his book *Medusa: In the Mirror of Time* (2013), David Leeming asks the question: who is Medusa? He traces receptions of Medusa from ancient times through the modern era, exploring how the gorgon has taken on different cultural and artistic meanings at various times. On a basic level: Medusa is a monster from Greek mythology, with snakes for hair and the ability to petrify mortals by looking at them. While these details vary in some versions, this description provides a good baseline understanding of the mythic figure. However, the question might be better formulated: what does Medusa signify? What role does she play or what values does she reflect to different people at different times? In this essay, I discuss British director Matthew B.C.'s feminist horror movie *Medusa* (2021), which is not an especially good film, but which does engage the question of Medusa's agency—a concept that is central to feminist politics of self-determination. In most versions of the myth, Medusa has little control over what happens to her, being primarily an object acted upon by others. Similarly, horror as a genre has generally been seen as indulging in misogynistic depictions of violence, rape, and the punishment of women's sexuality. Women's graphic deaths are often featured in horror films, particularly following sexual activity. It is against these two backgrounds that B.C.'s feminist horror movie attempts to build agency for a woman who simultaneously embodies the gender-ambiguous figures of monster and final girl.

B.C.'s movie follows Carly Beacon (played by Megan Purvis), a sex worker who transforms into a serpent-like creature. As the movie opens, Carly returns to sex work in a tightly controlled trailer park brothel to feed her heroin addiction. Addiction and powerlessness ensure that Carly complies with her pimp Jimmy's restrictions. But after being bitten by a client's snake, Carly undergoes dramatic physical and psychological changes. She develops fangs, begins shedding her skin, acquires massive strength, and embraces a casual use of extreme violence which she uses to defend herself and other women in the park against Jimmy and a violent john. Although Carly becomes increasingly capable of protecting herself and others, she cannot control this transition. Finally, at the end of the movie, the members of a Medusa cult reveal that Carly will be their new deity. In this essay I contend that this movie reflects ongoing contradictions

facing women in Western societies like the UK and the US, particularly in the "postfeminist" era. While the movie suggests that Carly acquires increased power and autonomy, this is simultaneously undercut by her lack of choice about being bitten and made into a cultic deity on the one hand, and a failure to resolve the cultural conditions driving sex work and drug addiction on the other.

Medusa as object

Of the three most detailed ancient sources—Hesiod, Ovid, and Pseudo-Apollodorus[1]—Ovid's influential retelling in *Metamorphoses* remains the best-known ancient telling of Medusa's story, and therefore the version I rely most heavily on. In this version, Medusa has virtually no control over her own fate. Ovid recounts how Medusa was a beautiful mortal woman until Neptune rapes her in Minerva's temple, and, in Ovid's words, "on the ravish'd virgin [Minerva] vengeance takes, / Her shining hair is chang'd to hissing snakes. / These in her Aegis Pallas joys to bear, / The hissing snakes her foes more sure ensnare." In this telling, Medusa is forced to have sex against her will before being turned into a monster. While some, like Lynn Enterline (2009, 82) and Doris K. Silverman (2016, 121–122), suggest that this is also a punishment for men because Medusa *only* petrifies men, I don't see any evidence of this in Ovid. Outside of Ovid, in the *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus recounts that Perseus used Medusa's severed head to turn the female Ariadne to stone (1940, book 47, lines 664–666). Further, it's not clear whether Medusa has the ability to *not* petrify those who look upon her, and so even the attribute that might be seen as a defense limits her actual choices.

Medusa's troubles don't end with being turned into a hideous monster. Later on, Minerva helps male hero Perseus overcome Medusa's ability to petrify mortals. He kills the gorgon and delivers her head to Minerva, who uses Medusa's visage to petrify her own enemies. Because Minerva engineers Medusa's death at the hands of a man, I find unconvincing the argument that Ovid's Minerva gave Medusa her attributes to protect the gorgon against men. At every turn, Medusa is used, manipulated, transformed, raped, or killed by others, and Ovid never reflects on her perspectives, her desires, or how she might experience the world. In Ovid, as in Hesiod and Pseudo-Apollodorus, Medusa therefore exists primarily as an object.[2] In these narratives, Medusa is helpless in the sense that she never has demonstrable influence over what happens to her, nor does she have the ability to make any choices.

In the early portion of Matthew B.C.'s *Medusa*, this helplessness, this objectness, defines Carly's existence. Her will is constrained both by addiction and by the highly controlled conditions of sex work in this caravan park. As the film opens, we see Carly arriving at the park in Jimmy's car. The pimp takes her phone so she cannot communicate with the outside, giving her a new phone without her previous contacts saved. This prevents her from contacting the man who had previously gotten her out of sex work—though this backstory and Carly's earlier time in the trailer park are never developed in detail. Jimmy establishes his dominance and ownership over Carly by demanding that she repeat the phrase "He didn't care about me like you do." Jimmy's control over Carly and the other women is therefore overt and external—often backed by threats of violence, including sexual violence. Although Jimmy says he's trying to look out for her, he also

makes his power clear when he threatens to sell Carly to “some fucking sheikh with five chins.” Jimmy has isolated these women in a remote trailer park where he supplies their housing, food, clothing, etc.—at a monthly rate of GBP 400 for rent and GBP 150 for everything else—all of which could be taken away if they refuse to comply.

Additionally, Jimmy supplies Carly with heroin, limiting her ability to refuse him because her physiological need for the drug ensures compliance. As she arrives back in the park, Jimmy hands her a bag, thereby feeding her addiction and increasing her dependence on him as her supplier. He continues to supply her later in the movie. Daisy Manning, Radiya Majeed-Ariss, and Catherine White note that “within health publications a recognized driver of entering the profession [sex work] is financial gain, notably to fund substance dependencies” (2020, 1). The film’s depiction of prostitution to feed a drug habit is grounded in the real-world experience of sex workers in the UK. Drug addiction constrains Carly’s freedom, dominating much of her decision making in the early portion of the film. She left what seemed to be a healthy relationship to go back to sex work in exchange for heroin. In two later scenes, we see track marks up the inside of her thigh, signaling long-term dependence on the drug. This foreshadows the snake that will bite the inside of her thigh: the small, round puncture wounds from the needle visually parallel the fangs that will sink into her flesh, as we see when Carly checks the still oozing wounds the day after being bitten. Simultaneously, taking a Freudian reading, the phallic needle entering between Carly’s legs parallels Neptune’s rape of Medusa. In each case, a female character is rendered powerless against forces that constrain her agency in ways intricately tied to her sexuality/physicality.

Sexual violence is especially problematic for sex workers because they exist on the fringes of society in countries like the UK, the country where the camp in *Medusa* is located and most of the women hail from. Prostitutes and other sex workers are less likely than the general population to report sexual violence to the police, and they are more likely to experience sexual violence because of cultural conceptions of sex workers as sexually available and/or unable to legitimately withhold consent. In their 2020 article, Manning, Majeed-Ariss, and White report that between 41 and 61 percent of sex workers in their sample population experienced violence linked to their profession, with street workers experiencing higher rates (2020, 1). Back in 1995, Jody Miller and Martin D. Schwartz’s reported even higher numbers (though their sample size was only sixteen): 93.8% experienced sexual assault, 75% were raped at least once by johns, 62.6% raped by non-clients, 87.5% experienced physical assault, along with further breakdowns of the data (1995, 7-8).

Both Barbara Sullivan and Eric Sprankle et al. list common reasons why prostitutes are both more likely to experience sexual violence and less likely to report it: shame over being raped; a (well-founded) belief that rapists often won’t be charged, let alone convicted; and fear of being arrested for prostitution (Sullivan 2007, 127–128; Sprankle et al. 2018, 243). Miller and Schwartz identified four “rape myths”—false and dangerous narratives that men (in particular) use to justify sexual violence against sex workers as not “real” rape (1995, 9). These myths hold that prostitutes cannot be raped because they sell sex (1995, 10-12), that rape doesn’t harm prostitutes because they are sexually active anyway (1995, 12-14), that prostitutes deserve any violence they

experience because their profession is illegal and often seen as immoral (1995, 14–15), and that all sex workers/women are sex objects for men (1995, 15–16). Given the pervasive and problematic ideology surrounding sexual violence, bodily autonomy, consent, etc. for sex workers, situating a latter-day Medusa as a prostitute perfectly aligns her with the Ovidian myth in which Medusa is an object of lust for Neptune and violence for Minerva and Perseus. However, Medusa does not always figure merely as object.

Medusa and feminism

In modern readings, particularly by second-wave feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, the helpless Medusa is replaced with an empowered woman resisting sexual and patriarchal violence. Perhaps more than any other group, second-wave feminists identified with Medusa as a symbol, deploying her to reflect their rage against a patriarchal social order that refused to comprehend them. To take just a few examples, Mary Sarton's 1971 poem "The Muse as Medusa" ends with the lines, "I turn your face around! It is my face. / That frozen rage is what I must explore— / Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place! / This is the gift I thank Medusa for" (2003, lines 25–28). Here Medusa becomes a benefactor, gifting the poet-persona a rage able to petrify a patriarchy that oppresses and objectifies. Ann Stanford's 1977 poem "Medusa" makes even more explicit the link between patriarchal/sexual violence, Medusa's rage, and feminist self-determination:

> It is no great thing to a god. For me it was anger—
> no consent on my part, no wooing, all harsh
> rough as a field hand. I didn't like it.
> My hair coiled in fury; my mind held hate alone.
> I thought of revenge, began to live on it.
> My hair turned to serpents, my eyes saw the world in stone. (2003, lines 9–14)

Particularly in Stanford's treatment, Medusa very obviously becomes an agent choosing to adopt the serpentine locks and stony stare that mythically define her. These characteristics are not, as in Ovid, forced upon the gorgon by Minerva, but are instead chosen by her as defenses against rape. Here Medusa acts, rather than merely being acted upon.

While B.C.'s movie does not directly reference these 1970s versions of Medusa, it does continue the feminist project of empowering Medusa in her own right—though not entirely successfully, as I will demonstrate. B.C. evokes the gorgon's ability to act in self-defense against male violence as Carly transforms into the Medusa deity. As she begins coming into her serpentine powers, Carly defends herself and the other sex workers. When she refuses Jimmy's orders, he attempts to rape her in his car—an assault he's committed against her before. However, with her new strength, Carly strangles Jimmy, bites into his jugular, and finally breaks his neck. This killing represents her symbolic liberation. Jimmy was both directly and indirectly responsible for constraining Carly. The serpentine transformation even apparently ends Carly's dependence on heroin, as she dumps out the remainder of a bag after returning to her trailer following the murder.

Thus, with Jimmy dead and her addition apparently overcome, both sources of domination have been eliminated.

Carly wields defensive or retributive violence against those who used violence or coercion against her and the other sex workers. In the film’s climax, Carly petrifies Jimmy’s second-in-command Val, who lives with and maintains control over the women in the trailer park. The trigger comes when Val confronts Carly for murdering Jimmy. Throughout the film, Val does try to look out for the women, trying to keep them as safe as possible by enforcing the rules, and even opposing Carly’s heroin use. But these rules nonetheless limit the women’s agency. Petrifying Val is an extension of Carly’s attack on Jimmy’s power to coerce the prostitutes. Similarly, Carly uses this power to protect her co-workers when a john beats her friend Maura. Initially, Carly tries to choke him to death using her supernatural strength, but she cannot yet control her power and is consequently beaten herself. However, Carly tracks him down in the city and kills him by spitting venom in his face. Carly explains this killing to Maura as a form of liberation: “People like that, they’re nothing. They use you to make money, and that’s it. They don’t give a shit about you. You’re not special. Or important. You’re disposable. They do whatever the fuck they want. They’ll eat you alive, Maura”. The defensive violence in these scenes protects herself and her companions. And while Ovid’s Medusa certainly can defend herself following her transformation, it remains unclear that she can control whether others are petrified—and ultimately, she is unable to protect herself from Perseus.

Scream queens and final girls: Women in horror

Among horror scholars and fans, it’s no secret that a specter haunts the horror film: the specter of SEX—yes SEX, in all caps. A significant body of work analyzes depictions of women in horror films, examining female monsters, scream queens, slutty teens, and final girls.[3] Sex and sexuality are so pervasive that in her canonical essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” feminist scholar Carol Clover evokes Brian De Palma’s 1981 film *Blow Out*, in which “‘tits and a scream’ are all that is required of actresses auditioning for the role of victim” in the metacinematic frame story (2015, 84). Following a similarly psychoanalytical argument, Chris Dumas suggests that “horror films may perhaps be typified by the idea that their violence is motivated by sexual aberrations with roots in the past” (2017, 21). Women do indeed occupy a disproportionate amount of the psychological and cinematic space of horror movies. From Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), in which Norman Bates murders women who arouse him because he has internalized his late mother’s jealousy, to Michael Myers killing his sister shortly after intercourse and then escaping to kill sexually active teens again in *Halloween* (1978), to rape-revenge films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), horror has a pervasive fascination with the penalties for female sexuality. For this reason, the genre poses a problem for feminists seeking positive depictions of women and women’s power. For a film like *Medusa*, the horror movie’s traditional prohibition of (illicit) sexuality cannot but be ominous for Carly given her work as a prostitute.

At least on the surface, horror seemingly reflects a pervasively misogynistic attitude, though many critics have also come to contest this appearance. Katherine

Farrimond opens her meta-critical article about responses to *Teeth* (2007) by noting how "Horror has long held a reputation as a genre inhospitable to female audiences" (2020, 150). This sense of horror's troubled gender politics comes at least partly from how often women (and to a lesser extent men) are murdered for being sexually active, while the final girl who overcomes the killer to escape in slasher films is usually a virgin. In the horror film, being sexual or even suggesting sexuality represents a virtual death sentence for women. In her comprehensive look at the politics of gender and violence in slasher/horror movies, Clover concludes that *Psycho* largely set the pattern for penalizing women for sexuality/sexual desirability, with Marion engaged in an illicit affair and drawing the desire of Bates (2015, 82). This becomes more overt in the slasher film genre that emerged in the late 1970s, with its tendency to center sexually active teens as the primary victims. As Clover puts it, "The genre is studded with couples trying to find a place beyond purview of parents or employers where they can have sex, and immediately afterwards (or during) being killed" (2015, 82). This pervades films like *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), in which teens who have sex tend to meet a gruesome end.

This focus on sex reflects psychological preoccupations and anxieties in the horror film—anxieties and preoccupations deeply tied to gender performance. In part, these anxieties are rooted in the unsettling experience of the uncanny: that which seems familiar but is marked by a small but unsettling difference. In horror films, the uncanny is often embodied in the thing that *appears* human but somehow is not properly human: the living dead zombie, the vampire feeding on human blood, the seemingly unkillable murderer relentlessly stalking victims. This sense of the uncanny often connects to gender performance. The terror caused by Norman Bates is as much about his shared identification with his mother as it is about the knife. This formula is reversed in the original *Friday the 13th* film, in which the killer appears male throughout the movie, only to be revealed at the conclusion to be Pamela Vorhees, rather than her son Jason. Strikingly, in a clear castration allusion, Pamela is beheaded shortly after being revealed as female. In subsequent films, Jason has preserved the head (echoing Norman Bates' preserved mother), thereby enshrining the mother's lost phallus. Simultaneously, this highlights his own lack of healthy masculinity/gender identity, which drives him to keep the phallic head and murder sexually active teens. In *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Buffalo Bill's serial killing is intricately tied to his own apparently uncertain gender identity and performance. Indeed, the horror genre seems to almost anticipate (a perverse version of) third-wave feminism's insights into gender as performative rather than innate or biological. These insights were expressed most directly by Judith Butler: "Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (1988, 522). Frequently, one uncanny source of anxiety in the horror film are characters who "fail" to do their gender "right," to properly perform gendered behaviors society assigns them.

This failure to perform gender properly may be rooted in illicit/teenaged/unmarried/adulterous sexual activity, or in a killer's gender confusion, or in the female monster's problematic lack. It is this latter category where horror most closely aligns with Ovid's Medusa story. In psychoanalytic thought, *lack* is linked to the

lack of the phallus, which may not mean lack of a physical penis. The phallus is associated in psychoanalytic thought with power and authority. As we have seen, Medusa has little power or authority over the events in her story. Initially, she has a kind of hypnotic power in her beautiful hair: "They, who have seen her, own, they ne'er did trace / More moving features in a sweeter face. / Yet above all, her length of hair, they own, / In golden ringlets wav'd, and graceful shone" (Ovid). While this beauty might at first seem like power, again Medusa has no apparent ability not to attract men, including Neptune, who "lustful, stay'd, / And seiz'd, and rifled the young, blushing maid" (Ovid). What might otherwise have been a positive attribute becomes a curse, both as her beautiful hair attracts her rapist and as Minerva changes the ringlets to serpents. Similarly, after the transformation, the snake hair and ability to petrify would seem to make Medusa powerful, but Perseus and Minerva seek the gorgon's death specifically because of these abilities. Medusa's powerlessness is thereby ironically vested in the symbols that should reflect her power. This same dilemma affects female monsters in horror films.

In horror, both female monsters and final girls typically have attributes marking them as lacking a phallus—and Carly becomes a blend of the female monster and the final girl as she turns into Medusa and takes revenge on those who threaten her. As Casey Kelly writes, "In horror cinema, the recurrence of women-as-monster (witch, vampire, succubus, possessed body, primal mother, femme fatale) suggests that the dread of woman arises not from her lack but from her eviscerating power" (2016, 86). In each instance, the excessive power or physical attribute (e.g. the vampire's fangs, the femme fatale's sexuality, the primal mother's generative abilities) gestures back to the physical body's lack. The penetrative power of the vampire's fangs, for example, echoes the phallus' penetrative power, but also highlights by contrast the female vampire's lack of a penis. Clover makes the same argument about the final girl, who, she claims, appropriates the phallus when she gains control of the killer's weapon and plunges it into his body, thereby taking on the penetrative/masculine role. However, this is only the outward appearance. In contrasting the original *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), Clover points out that Stretch—the sequel's final girl—ends the film waving the chainsaw over her head in a triumphant gesture mirroring Leatherface's final appearance in the original. Now in command of the phallic chainsaw, Stretch appears to have overcome her gender's prescribed social role as victim. However, Clover asserts, "Whatever else it may be, Stretch's waving of the chainsaw is a moment of high drag. Its purpose is not to make us forget that she is a girl but to thrust that fact upon us" (2015, 104). The final girl or the female monster's acquisition/use of the phallus thus gestures toward her physical lack of a phallus/penis because it does not properly belong to *her*.

For *Medusa*, this visual and psychosexual economy of acquiring phallic power is linked to Carly's transition from victim of prostitution and addiction to her power as Medusa. On the one hand, as Carly comes into her powers, she is aligned with the female monster whose horrific power to destroy points decidedly to the violence of the lack. As Dumas suggests, "one does not need to look very far (in horror films, or in culture in general) to see evidence of male fears of the female body, which is seen to be already

castrated and, therefore, potentially castrating to men who encounter it. Indeed, one might say that *all* violence in horror films is always about castration and punishment, and therefore always about gender" (2017, 26). If this is true, then we should read the closing scene of *Medusa*, in which snakes emerge from Carly's head, as the image *par excellence* of the film's terror. The earlier horror of Carly's transformation is supplanted by the horror of her unnatural taking on of the phallic snakes.[4] As the serpents spring from her head, Carly visually develops multiple phalluses, contrasting both with her lack of a physical penis and with her lack of agency earlier in the film. This is a monstrous reversal of the film's earlier phallic economy in which both penises and power were vested in Jimmy the pimp and the johns patronizing the caravan park. As Dumas suggests, her power allows her to castrate perpetrators of male violence, symbolically adding their severed phalluses to her collection of snakes.

Carly's adopting of the phallic snakes therefore contributes to her status as uncanny female monster. She becomes the woman with myriad penises. And yet, it also contributes to her status as final girl, because the final girl's boyishness mirrors the slasher's failed masculinity as she gains control of the phallic weapon with which she kills him. As Clover points out, what links the final girl and the killer is "a shared masculinity, materialized in 'all those phallic symbols'—and it is also a shared femininity, materialized in what comes next…the castration, literal or symbolic, of the killer at her hands" (2015, 96). Carly takes revenge on those who have disempowered her by symbolically claiming the source of phallic authority. As she gains the power that will culminate in the snakes, Jimmy loses his potency when he fails to rape Carly and is then murdered by her. And the john Carly kills is "feminized" both when she mocks him during the initial confrontation and when she spits translucent white venom in his face, visually echoing the pornographic money shot. In becoming Medusa, Carly thus sheds some of her femininity, coming to occupy an in-between space that fundamentally challenges gender roles within patriarchal society. It even appears that Carly has gained full phallic power. However, this appearance also gestures back to the continuing lack of power reflected in the limitations of the Medusa cult, limitations linked to the contradictory conditions of postfeminism.

Medusa and the bind of postfeminism

Carly's "liberation" in Matthew B.C.'s *Medusa* is, at best, imperfect. She does tell her friend Simone: "I've finally taken responsibility over my own life." However, while Carly appears liberated, it's not clear that her actual agency has meaningfully increased. She tempers her claim to personal responsibility with, "I don't think anyone knows what they want. And sometimes your hand just has to be forced." Indeed, Carly's "responsibility" only exists because her hand was forced when the bite began her transformation. This paradox prompts questions about whether her liberation meaningfully moves Carly away from the Ovidian Medusa who exists only as an object for others. Yes, she defends herself against Jimmy and takes revenge for her friend. But Carly has little control over the metamorphosis into Medusa and is ultimately going to be worshipped by the Medusa cult, whether she wants to or not. When she first meets Alexis in human form, Carly asks if she and the john with whom she was bitten are dating.

Alexis replies, “He’s not my boyfriend, he was chosen, but for a different purpose.” The logic of the film is, thus, one of determinism rather than free will—though it’s not clear whether Alexis does the choosing or whether she is also subject to some kind of higher plan. Carly similarly finds herself chosen for a mysterious purpose without having been consulted.

This film’s feminist project exists in tension with the problematic conditions of postfeminism, an ideology that emerged primarily in the mid-1990s and early-2000s. Postfeminism abandoned the traditional feminist project of collective social equality in favor of an ethic of individualism inspired by neoliberal ideology. Young people embraced feminist ideals of gender equity and equal opportunity while rejecting any feminist labels or philosophies. Deborah L. Siegel recounts that in 1995 she was “baffled to find that my assumption that [Gloria] Steinem mattered was not necessarily shared by a new generation of women,” adding that she felt “dissatisfied with the number of polls that showed young women supporting feminist issues but rejecting the label” (1997, 55). Similarly, Toril Moi wrote in 2006 that her female students in a liberal US university consistently said they support freedom and equality, but “would never *call* ourselves feminists” because they fear “that if they were to call themselves feminists, other people would believe they must be strident, domineering, aggressive, and intolerant and—worst of all—that they must hate men” (2006, 1736). As Seigel points out, one problem with postfeminism is that it characterizes victimization as a personal weakness within a society assumed to have achieved gender equity (1997, 59). This undermines organizing meaningful political movements and confronting systemic social problems. Postfeminism is therefore, at least in part, an embrace of the neoliberal status quo under the impression that society is no longer hierarchically organized, or that any oppression is the individual woman’s failure rather than a systemic problem.

Medusa reflects the power of postfeminist ideology because Carly’s ostensible liberation is limited by a lack of agency and free choice. This thematic is perhaps most evident in the scene where she is bitten:

> Tank Top: What do you think of instruction? Is it crass?
> Carly: It depends.
> Tank Top: On what?
> Carly: Intention.
> Tank Top: What’s mine?
> Carly: Control.
> Tank Top: [Shakes head “no”] Freedom.

Carly knows the snake is present because she and Tank Top discuss it, but she does not consent to being bitten. As she performs a lap dance for Tank Top, the snake lunges between Carly’s legs—another visual evocation of Neptune’s rape of Medusa in Ovid. Through this symbolic rape, Carly gains the strength and petrifying ability that she eventually uses to protect herself and others. This echoes some second-wave feminist assertions that Minerva gives Medusa the snaky locks and her petrifying gaze not as punishment for the rape but so that Medusa may defend herself against future sexual

violence.[5] Additionally, as with Stanford's poem quoted above, some feminists imagine Medusa's transformation as self-driven—a kind of spontaneous development of defensive abilities. B.C.'s movie capitalizes on this reception of the myth, in which Medusa's transformation is indeed a form of empowerment.

The problem, however, remains that Carly never genuinely consents. She is symbolically raped, following the Ovidian pattern, and then she undergoes transformations where her eyes become reptilian. She temporarily develops fangs with which she bites a john, vomits up what appears to be acidic venom, sheds her skin, etc. In the final moments of the movie, as she's being adored by the cultists, serpents emerge from her head, again apparently regardless of her will. She is unable to either prevent these changes or to effectively control the benefits—as we see the first time she attempts to kill the john who beat her friend. The metamorphosis appears empowering, but because she cannot refuse, Carly remains a tool for others—namely the Medusa cult. Although she apparently embraces her role as snake goddess at the end of the movie, it isn't clear that she could really have refused given her physical transformations. What kind of normal life could Carly lead while undergoing spontaneous physical mutations? The alternatives to being a snake cult goddess seem limited at best.

Further, although Carly does kill a few people who exploit her and the other women, she doesn't alter the conditions that drive people into prostitution or addiction. Her individual actions have little impact on the systemic issues of poverty and addiction that often motivate people to become sex workers (Manning, Majeed-Ariss, and White 2020, 1). While she may have freed this individual trailer park of Jimmy, Carly has not in any sense moved towards securing a financially stable or drug-free future for the other women. In the end, the other sex workers flee rather than join Carly and the Medusa cult, further problematizing the idea that Carly's new powers are liberatory. And beyond the boundaries of this individual trailer park, Carly's actions will of course have virtually no impact on the wider systems of inequality, poverty, and exploitation.

Indeed, from the perspective of the Medusa cult, Carly's liberation from prostitution seems incidental. Their objectives are not clear, but there is little reason to think that they seek an end to sex work or patriarchal oppression as such. In a blog review of *Medusa*, Don Anelli takes issue with the Medusa cult's inclusion in the movie at all, writing, "rather than spell things out this inclusion ends up asking more questions about what the purpose behind them is, where they've been the whole time, how the girl falls in line with their plans, and what their overall goal is which is way too much to put on the final moments of the film" (2021). Carly has gotten a certain amount of personal liberation through her newfound ability to use defensive violence, but the larger systemic problems of capitalism, patriarchy, addiction, hopelessness, etc. remain. And there is no indication in the film that either Carly individually or the Medusa cult collectively intend to confront those problems in any way.

Johanna Isaacson argues that there is an intertwining of contemporary horror with the anxieties of labor under late capitalism. She explains that the neoliberal shift to a service economy has meant a "feminization" of labor, increasingly tied to the affective, supporting, and flexible forms of work traditionally associated with women's labor in the home and in traditionally "feminine" industries like nursing or primary education (2019,

436–438).[6] She argues that these changes in labor conditions make their impact felt in horror movies, especially those—like *Medusa*—that have explicitly feminist themes: “Contemporary horror film insists that feminized reproductive work is not ancillary but central to contemporary capitalism, and that immiseration and exploitation must be understood through this expanded account of contemporary labor” (2019, 436–437). The interconnection between gender issues and labor is clearly at the forefront of *Medusa*, centered as it is in a brothel trailer park in which the women work on command and have few if any resources with which to defend themselves or demand just treatment. Without making any attempt to confront these larger scale power dynamics, the Medusa cult and Carly end the film without substantially resisting the forces that initially pushed her into prostitution. Even Carly’s freedom does not genuinely reflect a liberatory ethos, because this liberation extends only as far as Carly herself.

Conclusion: Taking a lesson from Medusa

At *Medusa*’s closing, the Medusa cult seems focused primarily on worshipping their snake deity for its own sake. While Carly is liberated from Jimmy and the threat of immediate violence by johns, it’s unclear that she develops any genuine agency of her own. Again, she can exert power outward, but she has little to no choice in gaining or controlling that power. This gap between defensive violence and the choice to use that violence links back to Ovid’s Medusa. Ovid describes the “wasteful havock dire Medusa made. / Here, stood still breathing statues, men before; / There, rampant lions seem’d in stone to roar” (Ovid). Medusa can petrify anything that comes near her, but if that petrification is automatic, then it is less a power and more a curse. Similarly, nothing about the movie suggests that Carly has gained or will gain any degree of control over her abilities. Carly remains an object for others, with the only difference being that she goes from being an object for Jimmy to being an object for the cultists. Without the ability to control her own fate, or even her own body, can we say that she has achieved genuine liberation? In *Medusa*, the film ends suggesting that Carly’s freedom has been realized—no immediate or long-term goals are set, and there’s nothing she seems intent on accomplishing.

However, even with these limitations to Carly’s liberation and the liberatory potential of the Medusa cult, there are ways in which Matthew B.C.’s *Medusa* can and should prompt our thinking about feminist politics. As Farrimond points out, feminist horror is often seen as pushing viewers toward feminist thought (2020, 154). In particular, it’s worth returning to the question of Carly’s troubled gender performance and how that reflects her status as both female monster and final girl. I argued earlier that part of the horror film’s central affective power derives from the uncanny, which is often linked to failed performances of heteronormative gender roles. Understanding what “failures” of gender performance mean, and why they may unsettle, opens up possibilities of transcending the gender binary that structures much of western patriarchal culture. As Butler writes:

> In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender

> regulation and control. Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated. (1988, 528)

With both the final girl and the female monster, recall, their wielding of an unauthorized phallus—often appropriated from a killer whose masculinity is in some way already suspect—simultaneously marks them as masculine and highlights the female bodies from which they wield phallic power. Embracing the blurred gender lines of the final girl or the female monster can help break down the seemingly natural barriers of gender and allow for the reconstruction of society without (or with less prominent) gender hierarchies.

One caveat to this positive third wave feminist reading, however, is that the masculinity of the final girl is mirrored by the femininity/failed masculinity of the killer. In this sense, horror movies problematize the liberatory ideal that gender performativity can be used to break down systems of oppression. It would be difficult to argue that the villains of horror—including Jimmy and the violent john in *Medusa*—reflect a movement toward gender equity. In this sense, as many critics of horror have noted, the genre’s feminist efforts are at best only partially successful. Even horror movies that have been identified as feminist continue to bear within them symbols of patriarchal oppression and fear of castration. As Farrimond notes in her analysis of *Teeth*, “The pleasures that a vagina dentata fantasy provides to reviewers are contingent on the contexts of rape culture and its accompanying fears and frustrations. The bad object of the horror film is made feminist in these readings but also becomes a tool for imagining that things might be otherwise” (2020, 162). In other words, while the horror movie frequently foregrounds graphic violence against women, expresses angst over the failures of “proper” gender performance, and runs on a psychosexual economy of castration anxiety, horror films nevertheless can gesture toward a world in which these things might not structure our unconscious fears. The horror film can point toward liberation, even if that pointing is done with phallic power tools, blood, tits, and a scream. Perhaps, in this context, B.C.’s movie provokes the question: what would a proper liberation for Medusa actually entail? What would it mean for Medusa to control her own fate?

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[1] Traditionally attributed to Apollodorus, scholars now believe the *Library* (2008) was written in his style by someone else, hence *Pseudo*-Apollodorus.
[2] Hesiod's phrasing (at least in Martin L. West's translation) is ambiguous: he says of Medusa that "with her the god of the Sable Locks [Poseidon/Neptune] lay in a soft meadow," phrasing allowing either for Medusa's consent or the rape as reported by Ovid (1999, 11). Pseudo-Apollodorus' account is more self-contradictory as he initially describes all three gorgons as hideous monsters, but then claims Medusa angered Athena/Minerva by claiming to be more beautiful (2008, 66–67).
[3] For more, see, for instance, Dumas, Farrimond, Grant, Humphrey, and Kelly.
[4] Similarly, in *Teeth*, the horror of rape takes a back seat to the graphic violence of castration through Dawn's vagina dentata (Farrimond 2020, 156).
[5] See, for instance, Emily Erwin Culpepper (2003), who links the Medusa story with her feelings of power in defending her apartment from a man who tried to break in. See also, Enterline and Silverman.
[6] For more on the intertwining between gender, labor, and political economics, see, for instance, Brown and Ghodsee.