The Spectral Medusa Head in Euripides' *Bacchae*

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Abstract: In this article, I read Euripides' play *Bacchae* as a site of undermining the masculinist epistemic supremacy of the head in discursive formations of the body. I argue that the motif of decapitation running through the text resists the machismo of Western logos represented by the phallic signification of the head (as opposed to the rest of the body which, in turn, is feminised towards a subordinate status), and by extension, upends the masculine systems of reason, order and control the head holds up. To substantiate my argument, I zero in on how the figuration and function of Dionysus in the play conjures up the spectral presence of Medusa who represents an Oriental, feminine, bodily Other to the Hellenic subject. Dionysus and Medusa become two sides of the same coin as they both individually act as an Other to the masculine-minded Athena. Bringing together ideas from Plato, Sigmund Freud, Hélène Cixous and Genevieve Lloyd, I examine the ways in which the Medusa head offers a scope feminist subversion of the masculine characterisation of thought, knowledge and intellect symbolised by the head. As the play ends with the beheading of Pentheus as orchestrated by Dionysus, Bacchic frenzy ushers in the breakdown of patriarchal epistemic frameworks, the body overrides the head, and the fate of Medusa is intertextually avenged. In connection to my reading of *Bacchae*, I also study Luciano Garbati's sculpture *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* (2008) within the contemporary feminist discourse of violence and victimisation to show how Garbati turns the Medusa myth on its head by echoing Dionysus' retaliation against Pentheus, and I look into the alternative mode of initiation into feminine subjectivity the artwork offers.

Keywords: Medusa, head versus body, decapitation, madness, reason, the Other

Introduction

This article reads Euripides' play *Bacchae* as a site of deprivileging the head's epistemic primacy in the body, and by extension, of challenging the masculine as well as phallic signification of the head in contradistinction to the rest of the body which has historically been conversely feminised and relegated to a cultural status secondary to the head. The figuration of Dionysus in the dramatic plot acts, I argue, as a phantasmal double of Medusa whose absent presence is conjured up in the text through the motifs of snakes and decapitation. Not only does the visual appearance of Dionysus bear resemblance to that of Medusa, but, as evoked by the god of wine and harvest, the haunting of the Oriental snake-haired Gorgon who is also the feminine Other disrupts the machismo of Western logos represented by the character of Pentheus in the play. The trajectory of the play intertextually avenges the fate of Medusa when Dionysus orchestrates the decapitation of Pentheus, an incident that parallels, or rather acts as a reversal of, Medusa's beheading, while also potentially presenting itself as a feminist subversion of the macho essence of the head, and along with it, the rationality, control and order the head glorifies.

I shall study the role of Dionysus in the play through the referential framework of three interconnected levels of binaries: the head and the body, the masculine and the feminine, and the Hellenic

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and the Oriental. *Bacchae* sets the stage for an ideological duel between Pentheus, the king of Thebes, and Dionysus, the son of Zeus and Semele whose sister, Agave, is the mother of Pentheus, making him and Dionysus cousins. As Pentheus and Agave dismiss Dionysus' divine ancestry, refuse to acknowledge him as a god and reject his cult which involves intoxicated frenzy and transgressive ecstasy, the effeminate god of fertility plots a gruesome punishment for them, a mystifying act of retribution that will perpetuate his worship and lore in Thebes.

In the first part of my article, I delve into how through the plot of *Bacchae*, the figure of Medusa is visually and thematically invoked as a spectral double of Dionysus and as an antithesis of Dionysus' archenemy, Pentheus. In this segment, I lay out how the machismo of the head is reinforced by Pentheus and in what ways the feminised, Oriental and chaotic manifestation of Dionysus, and through him, of the phantasmal presence of Medusa, poses a threat to the masculinist order, reason and stability that are central to Western thought. Following this, I show how the fate of Medusa is intertextually avenged by Dionysus as the plot takes a gory turn towards the beheading of Pentheus. Here, frenzy drowns reason, the body overrides the head, and femininity destabilises patriarchal epistemic systems. Finally, in connection to my reading of *Bacchae*, I study Luciano Garbati's sculpture *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* (2008) within the contemporary feminist discourse of agency and victimhood in relation to violence, and I examine how Garbati offers a radical reversal of the Medusa myth by echoing Dionysus' revenge against Pentheus.

How Medusa is Conjured up in *Bacchae*

In *Bacchae*, the visual bearing of Dionysus calls to mind the appearance of Medusa. Dionysus is described as

> the god with ox's horns,
> crowned with wreaths of snakes—
> [and] that's why the maenads
> twist in their hair
> wild snakes they capture. (Euripides, lines 131–135)

Like the snake-haired Gorgon, Dionysus has an abundance of serpentine hair tangling down from his head. But Dionysus' link to Medusa goes far beyond visual cues as both of them are connected to Athena in key ways – they both individually act as an Other to Athena. As the classical myth goes, Dionysus was "delivered / by a fiery midwife—Zeus's lightning flash" (Euripides 3–4). Hera was enraged by Zeus' affair with Semele who bore his child in her womb. Hera orchestrated the death of Semele by tricking Zeus into hitting Semele with his divine lightning. Untimely removed from his dying mother's womb, Dionysus was sewn into Zeus' thigh to hide and shield him from Hera's wrath. Zeus' thigh became his second womb where Dionysus grew until he was ready to be born. The very lore of Dionysus' conception and birth from Zeus' thigh associates his identity with the body as opposed to the head. Athena is famed to have been born out of Zeus' head. Dionysus thus turns into a bodily Other to the heady Athena. While Athena was born from the head of Zeus and represented masculine order, intellect and discipline, Dionysus came out of Zeus' thigh, acquired an effeminate figuration and represented an undoing of the head's epistemic dominance over the body.

Athena is the one who had punished Medusa by transforming her hair into snakes, and this punishment was unfairly given to her because Poseidon had violated Medusa in Athena's temple. Medusa was held accountable for the violation of the sanctity of Athena's temple as if her beauty which attracted Poseidon is what caused the desecration. Athena is also the one who sets up the conditions for Medusa's decapitation. Perseus is fabled to have beheaded Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, the other two being Stheno and Euryale. Medusa's beheading occurred following Athena's instruction to Perseus to use the head of the snake-haired Medusa whose stare could turn anyone into stone as a weapon. Perseus then gave the Medusa head to Athena who placed it on her shield, the Gorgoneion, a device to avert evil.

Medusa's fate thus reflects the subjugation of the body to the head. Athena, who represents the head, punishes Medusa by transforming her head into a hideous image, making her head "less" than what it is, relegating it to the body which is what Medusa is made to stand for. Medusa is de-headed even before she is beheaded. Medusa's Oriental femininity also becomes like the body to the masculine head of the Hellenic subject. Added to this is the positing of the Orient as the body to the West which is constructed as the head in epistemic discourses. In *Bacchae*, Dionysus is characterised as an "effeminate stranger" (Euripides 449) who has "left the fabulously wealthy East" (Euripides 16) to come to Thebes. Therefore, through the persona of Dionysus, the foreign body of Medusa is woven into the text of *Bacchae*, as if Medusa has metamorphosed into the figure of Dionysus to exact revenge for her subjugation.

Camille Dumouli writes about how the identity of Medusa is mythically constructed as the flipside of Athena. The snakes and the hypnotic gaze are also associated with Athena. Dumouli remarks how Athena punished Medusa because she felt the desire to "to set herself apart from her negative double in order to assert her 'own' identity" (Dumouli 781) but after Athena affixes the Medusa head to her shield once Perseus beheads the latter, Athena, in a fit of rage or in the battlefield, cannot but assume Medusa's monstrous appearance. The surfacing of the monstrous Other marks the return of the repressed. Dumouli writes, "Athena and Medusa are the two indissociable aspects of the same sacred power" (Dumouli 781). Dumouli also mentions the tale of Athena finding out that her face distorts into a Gorgonian image as she plays the flute – an instrument associated with Bacchic frenzy (Dumouli 785). Medusa thus becomes Athena's Narcissistic reflection. Taking from the Nietzschean dichotomy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in conjunction with the Medusa myth, Dumouli says "when Apollo placed an apotropaic Medusa's head in front of Dionysus, he was not frightened by a monstrous mask of himself" (Dumouli 786). Medusa's alignment with Dionysus, and Dionysus' polarity with Athena also makes Medusa an Other to Athena. The Medusa head thus turns into a signifier of disorder, the loss of control, the sway of thanatos and the breakdown of structures. It, then, represents a subversion of the masculine-phallic aspect of the head itself.

What Medusa's Decapitation Signifies

When Pentheus sees Dionysus in disguise of a foreign worshipper who claims to have come to preach the lore of Dionysus and put into practice Bacchic rituals, Pentheus singles out the foreigner's "sweet-smelling hair in golden ringlets" (Euripides 293), and says to him:

> As for your hair,
> it's long, which suggests that you're no wrestler.
> It flows across your cheeks
> That's most seductive. (Euripides 566-568)

Molly Myerowitz notably makes the connection between the hair of Medusa and that of the Maenads, the worshippers of Dionysus: "the Maenads who head for the wilds with streaming hair are, like their leader Dionysus of the flowing locks, an expression-often threatening to male authority – of revolt against the strictures of culture through reversion to a state of rampant, unfettered nature" (Myerowitz 92). Myerowitz recounts how the portrayal of feminine sexuality hinges on the motif of wildly flowing hair that symbolises the breakdown of patriarchal indoctrination of inhibitions that vilify unbridled female desire. Such an imagery implies a figurative association of the hair on the female head with her genitalia, and decapitation would thus entail a form of desexualisation that cuts down the unruly abundance associated with femininity. But feminine sexuality without any teleological inclination towards procreation, and carried out solely for bodily pleasure, is what irks heteropatriarchy which then tries to limit the cultural trope of maternity in a way that it doesn't encroach upon erotic territories. Myerowitz points out how the hole left by Perseus' beheading of Medusa turned into a fertile birth canal as the winged horse Pegasus then springs forth from out of this cut on Medusa's headless, desexual, mothering body (Myerowitz 93).

While Pentheus expresses his erotic fascination with the hair of Dionysus in disguise, the former's cerebral masculinity, so intent on control, reason and order, is caught in a simultaneity of fetish and phobia of the hair. Pentheus threatens Dionysus by saying, "First, I'll cut off this delicate hair of yours" (Euripides 615). Pentheus also boasts he will punish Dionysus for bringing chaos to his kingdom: "I'll chop off his head, / slice it right from his body." (Euripides 299–300). Pentheus' threat to cut off the unruly presence of Dionysus through his decapitation brings to mind the myth of Medusa who suffered a similar fate in the hands of Perseus. Beheading the effeminate Other acts as a means of pacifying the disorderliness represented by the errant feminine.

Freud sees the head as a repository of repressed libido from the lower body. He reads the Medusa head as a figurative vagina that evokes castration anxiety in men. For Freud, possessing a penis is a form of defiance and an exhibition of perseverance in the face of fear (Freud 273). The Medusa head which stands in for the vagina has a similar apotropaic function. Freud writes

> This symbol of horror is worn upon her dress by the virgin goddess Athene. And rightly so, for thus shé becomes a woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexual desires—since she displays the terrifying genitals of the Mother…[and] a representation of woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated. (Freud 272)

Here, one could argue that (phallic) castration is paralleled by (vaginal) decapitation. In response to Freud, Hélène Cixous puts forth her idea of the decapitation anxiety, a female equivalent to the castration complex, and she views it as the threat of a symbolic removal of the female head resulting in the loss of her voice, subjectivity and potential of defying patriarchal order (Cixous, "Castration" 42–43). Cixous writes

> Silence: silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body. (Cixous, "Castration" 49)

For Cixous, the "feminine textual body" is powered by a "female libidinal economy" unconstrained by the heteropatriarchal cultural apparatus, an "endless" textuality that turns "difficult to read" because it trades its limit or closure for the power of driving the reader "into the void" (Cixous, "Castration" 53).

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz remarks that the female head "threatens to unmake and disrupt the classic gender distinctions that have linked men to speech, power, identity, and the mind" (Eilberg-Schwartz 1). As the head gives the female body individuality and a voice against patriarchal institutions, decapitation reduces the female anatomy only to a sexual and/or reproductive system devoid of identity. On top of that, an argument could be made regarding how eroticising the female head, sexualising the face, mouth, hair and voice, and textualising the female head itself as genitalia robs the woman of a well-rounded selfhood and functions as a form of beheading as well. Once relegated to the state of an erotic object, almost to being a sexual organ for the male gaze, the female head is made to relinquish the role of a desiring subject and is thus figuratively ripped off, left to be passive. Hence, decapitation is the denial of the privilege of thought and speech to the woman. Dionysus' effeminacy along with his physical resemblance to Medusa, as well as the threat of beheading made to him by Pentheus, anchors *Bacchae* to the philosophical juncture of the phallic domination of the phallic head over the feminised body.

How Medusa is Avenged

The character of Dionysus is not the only component that harbingers the spectral persistence of Medusa throughout the text. How the play ends also mirrors the fate of Medusa. As the spectacle of Pentheus' head being torn off by the Maenads unfolds towards the climactic sequence of the play, his decapitation acquires a secondary connotation of intertextual retribution. On the one hand, Pentheus

is punished by Dionysus for dismissing the latter's stature and resisting his influence, on the other, the visual aspect of Pentheus' fateful ending toys with the imagery of the Medusa head. As Pentheus' loss of head marks the triumph of the Oriental, effeminate Other and its resistance to masculinist order, the subtext of Medusa rises from the margins of the play, acting like its textual unconscious, as if Dionysus, in his penalising approach towards Pentheus, avenges of the wrongs done to Medusa by both Athena and Perseus.

The blind seer Tiresias speaks of the fabled Dionysian rites in the following manner:

> [In] the Bacchic celebrations and the madness—
> a huge prophetic power is unleashed.
> When the god fully enters human bodies,
> he makes those possessed by frenzy prophets. (Euripides 378-381)

Dionysian frenzy entails the loss of reason for the Maenads who, in a state of trance as they are engrossed in the ritualistic worship of Dionysus, lose control over their bodies. Bacchic madness causes the loss of decorum, control and reason. In a rather carnivalesque turn of events, the body becomes privileged over the head as the former overpowers the faculty of conscious decision-making and rational cause-and-effect trajectory of thinking. Without the vanguard of the head, the body becomes a zone of chaos.

Bacchic frenzy is subversive in the way it opens up a bodily abyss that drowns the supremacy of the head over the body. As the mind's grip over the body dissipates, the privileging of the head, along with its insistence on constructive order, psychosomatic cohesion and subjective autonomy, is reversed. Bacchic frenzy counters the creative, generative harmony of the Apollonian divine madness which induces knowledge, unlocks revelations, and holds up logos. Divine madness as mentioned in Plato's *Phaedrus* sublimates the individual's consciousness and drives it up to a higher realm where there is the promise of special knowledge and revelations. The mad-wise persona commands authority because it has access to the truth which plays a key constructive role in the creation and perpetuation of civilization. For example, in the Oracle of Delphi, Apollo's shrine, Pythia delivers prophecy in an elevated psychic state and Pythia's revelations merit a certain gravitas due to their alignment with the Apollonian logic. Bacchic frenzy, on the other hand, disrupts the very idea of madness being conducive to knowledge because the state of frenzy dissolves restraint and rational decisiveness. Primal and chaotic at its core, the frenzy induced by Dionysus implodes the very symmetry and balance of the intellect. Bacchic frenzy also acts as a metaphorical decapitation as it overrides the agency of the head in the Meanad's corporeal existence. As Agave tears off Pentheus' head towards the end of the play, any resistance towards Dionysus is destroyed, the masculine ego is cut off, the feminine Other engulfs the head. When Tiresias claims, "Yes, indeed, / for we're the only ones whose minds are clear. / As for the others, well, their thinking's wrong" (Euripides 247-249), he asserts that Bacchic frenzy has steered their head towards clarity by loosening up their inhibitions and rallying them towards divine ecstasy. Here, frenzy is privileged over reason as a means of arriving at a higher cognitive ground. Pentheus' beheading is the finale of the masculine-phallic head losing its battle against the feminine, Oriental, bodily Other which promises an alternative epistemic pathway.

The Head versus the Body

The head has historically been upheld as the locus of thought, intellect and reason. Genevieve Lloyd has articulated how Plato in *Timaeus* and *Phaedo*, and following him, Aristotle in *Metaphysics*, have privileged form and the soul, as opposed to matter and the body, in their explorations of the nature of knowledge. Lloyd says, "the very nature of knowledge was implicitly associated with the extrusion of what was symbolically associated with the feminine" (Lloyd 4). In ancient Greek thought, the form is the father/male and the matter the mother/female as laid out by both Plato and Aristotle

(Lloyd 4). Rationality prevails in culturally validated notions of truth, knowledge and goodness of human character. Reason and femininity have been constructed through the exclusion of each other and to say that reason is male is to claim that what is reasonable for men is not so for women. Whereas the aspiration to rationality has been historically held up as a humanist telos, "maleness remained associated with a clear, determinate mode of thought, femaleness with the vague and indeterminate" (Lloyd 3). The knowing mind which has access to the elemental and eternal forms hinges on rationality while matter which is feminised is treated as something to be transcended to achieve knowledge. It is here where the form/soul/male unit acquires the privileged stance in Western thought while the matter/body/female becomes inferior. Lloyd's key proposition remains this: "From the beginnings of philosophical thought, femaleness was symbolically associated with what Reason supposedly left behind — the dark powers of the earth goddesses, immersion in unknown forces associated with mysterious female powers" (Lloyd 2). The philosophical exercise of pondering on the superiority of form and the soul takes place in the head itself which is culturally viewed as the seat of thought and logical reasoning.

The head's masculine characterisation also appears in *The Symposium* where Plato mentions the generative power of the mind but frames it in a way that downplays female bodily associations in favour of masculine modes of creativity. Diotima's speech about the spiritual pregnancy - the pregnancy of the mind - ends up prioritising the masculine ideal. According to Diotima, those who are pregnant in their souls more than in their bodies conceive and give birth to beauty. Her speech goes, " What offspring are these? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, of which the poets are all procreators, as well as those craftsmen who are regarded as innovators" (Plato 47). What is thus begotten through the pregnancy of the soul is far greater in beauty and immortality. E. E. Pender writes about the lack of emphasis on the female experience of pregnancy and childbirth in Plato's *The Symposium*. The text's preference for the metaphor of pregnancy to refer to male ejaculation as well as intellectual companionship among male same-sex partners is what interests Pender:

> The male has spiritual sex with his partner, that is, he has conversations with him, and finally ejaculates the seed (intelligence and the rest of virtue) with which he has been pregnant for so long. It is a nice touch that, in contrast to the physical level, the spiritually pregnant man can have sex with his partner both in his presence (live discussion) and in his absence (remembering discussions, mulling over ideas etc. (Pender 78)

Pender believes that the downplaying of female role in the framing of procreative symbolism to denote pederastic intercourse, companionship, and the perpetuation of beauty and virtue is a result of Diotima's awareness of her audience's homosexual preferences and experiences (Pender 79). The Platonic metaphor of impregnation and childbirth, due to its emphasis on the spiritual and intellectual aspect of creative companionship between men and its elimination of the essentialist biological-cultural marker of the female body as a medium of perpetuating progeny, thus minimises the agency of the female body within logos. The masculine-minded Athena's domain being wisdom and the intellect, and the myth of her being born from Zeus' head validate this argument. Standing on the other end of Plato's heady, macho symbiosis of philosophy, Hélène Cixous presents her notion of *ecriture feminine* or feminine (bodily) writing.

In her seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous writes, "They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss" (Cixous, "Laugh" 885). On the one hand, femininity is made to be associated with thanatos through the Medusa myth, hence Perseus comes shielded by apotropes to protect phallocentrism from dismantling; on the other, femininity has been constructed to be "too dark to be explorable" (Cixous, "Laugh" 885), like the abyss. The very inability to define femininity does not reveal the obscurity of the female subject as such but rather exposes the limits of patriarchal modes of definition and representation. According to Cixous, "Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason…[which] has been one with the phallocentric tradition" (Cixous, "Laugh" 879). At the opposite end of the rational mind's machismo

stands the female body. "Women must write through their bodies," writes Cixous (886). Writing originating from the female body, as opposed to the male mind, with all its autoerotic glory which has historically been driven out of masculine textuality can herald socio-political change and through feminine writing, women can avert the fate of silence doled out to them. Cixous concludes,

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display-the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. (Cixous "Laugh" 880)

The silencing of Medusa through decapitation can only be avenged through a return to the body itself, by turning the body into the source of writing, by letting it become a textuality where patriarchal means of meaning-making are made defunct.

In *Bacchae*, the fate of Pentheus is detailed by the Messenger in the following manner:

> As for the poor victim's head, his mother
> stumbled on it. Her hands picked it up,
> then stuck it on a thyrsus, at the tip.
> Now she carries it around Cithaeron,
> as though it were some wild lion's head. (Euripides 1414-1418)

Pentheus' decapitation, as devised by Dionysus, creates a scene of dramatic irony which serves as a reversal of the fate of Medusa. Pentheus, who champions rationality, represents the head, and embodies Hellenic masculinity, ends up losing his own head, the centre of his very identity. Dionysus' revenge plays out as a form of decapitation that champions the body itself. The frenzy swallowing up logic parallels the body overpowering the head, the Oriental overtaking the Hellenic, the feminine driving out the masculine. As the play wraps up, there is a final intertextual link to be found between Dionysus and Medusa. Dionysus, after getting his way into establishing his worship in Thebes, says to Cadmus who witnessed the tragic end of his grandson, Pentheus:

> Your form will change, so you become a serpent.
> Your wife, Harmonia, Ares' daughter,
> whom you, though mortal, took in marriage,
> will be transformed, changing to a snake. (Euripides 1700-1703)

For a reader of classical mythology, Dionysus' curse lives on as a reminder that the wrongs done to the likes of Medusa will not go unpunished, for what happened to her will be the destiny of those who oppressed her. Her fate will be avenged, somewhere else, by someone else, albeit in some other textuality.

Garbati's Medusa

Luciano Garbati's sculpture *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* from 2008 has, over the years, become an internet sensation symbolising a feminist reversal of the Medusa myth in the wake of the Me Too movement. Garbati's artwork inverts the Medusa myth, showing the snake-haired Gorgon with Perseus's head in one hand, a sword in the other, as she herself looks resolutely ahead. Garbati was responding to Benvenuto Cellini's sculpture *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (1545-54), located in the Piazza Della Signoria in Florence, Italy. For Garbati,

> This difference between a masculine victory and a feminine one, that was central to my work. The representations of Perseus, he's always showing the fact that he won, showing the head…if you look at my Medusas…she is determined, she had to do what she did because she was defending herself. It's quite a tragic moment. (Griffin)

Garbati's sculpture champions the breakdown of masculinist orientation of desire predicated upon violence and the flouting of the agency of feminine sexuality. In the radical rewriting of the myth itself, in turning the known imagery on its head, in showing the armed Medusa standing with the

head of her attacker, the sculpture denotes the de-privileging of the phallic mastery of the head. It can be read as a response to the victimisation inherent to the Medusa myth, intertextually avenging Medusa who was raped by Poseidon and punished by Athena, going so far as to ask what could Medusa do to defend herself, what the alternatives to her fate might be, and how that could be visually represented. While "some have taken offense at the statue's lack of pubic hair, which they say reflects idealized beauty conventions" (Cascone), it offers the scope of a further layer of reading that encapsulates a victimised (hairless/snake-less) Medusa pursuing the means to avenge her fate.

The Medusa myth reveals the patriarchal conditioning implicit in the constitution of feminine sexuality in some of its depictions. Being the one to be desired, victimhood is sewn into the very fabric of Medusa's existence – as if the presence of the beautiful woman is there to be exploited and punished in order for myths to progress. She is either the epitome of unrivaled beauty who is eventually victimised or she becomes the monstrous Other who haunts men with her stare. But what happens to *her* desire? How can that be disentangled from the networks of masculinist blueprints of sexuality? How far can she go to stand up for herself in the making of her own myth?

Interviewing several women about their first sexual encounter with a man, Holland at al. weigh in on the heteropatriarchal conditioning of female sexual subjectivity as constituted through sex. The authors use the term the "male-in-the-head" to refer to a framework of thought that upholds the continuum of the privileging of masculinity within desire itself. The context is heterosexual intercourse where the "loss" of virginity for the woman (which conversely is a "gain" for the man) plays into the binary construction of gendered experience that instills a heteropatriarchal point of view among young people who thus see the cultural primacy of the male/female dualism and the hierarchy within the binary but fail to understand its constructedness. Many of the sexual rites of passage are discursively built upon male dominance whereas subordination of feminine desire is incorporated into the private act of heterosexual sex. The "male-in-the-head" becomes this devil on the shoulder that whispers the heteronormative constraints of femininity into the woman's ears. The authors also point out how feminist resistance itself can slip into the wily masculinist modes which allow certain resistances to play out and silence others:

> The limits of female empowerment and the containment of women's attempts to resist and disrupt heterosexual gender convention indicate the extent to which gender is constituted unequally within heterosexuality. Not only do female and male resistance have very different meanings, but many of the women's strategies of resistance are contained either within the confines of femininity or in private relationships. Strategies of resistance that are unfeminine or which seek to disrupt or engage in more public notions of sexual conduct seem elusive and unstable. (Holland et al. 171)

The "female-in-the-head" would thus be a way of perceiving and constituting desire that overrules the epistemic sowing of the "male-in-the-head" during the intimacy of heterosexual intercourse. It will also extract desire from the fate of remaining enmeshed in the logic of domination and violence. Female agency would then entail the release of sexuality from the structures ruled by and with phallic machismo. Thought, itself constructed to be male through its insistence on reason, order and structure, has to be reworked into a fluid mechanism that incorporates all that has been driven out of the masculinist depiction of the head. The Medusa head, in all its subversive glory, offers a stepping stone for arriving at fresh, dissident modes of feminine subjectivity in art as well as lived experience.

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