A Melancholy Look from Fearless Eyes

Metamorphoses of a 'Dangerous' Heroine of the Romantic Period

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> I know those are the eyes of someone dead,
> Eyes that no loving hand has closed.[1]
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> —Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*

This study focuses on the visual and literary symbolism of the type of 'dangerous' heroine found in the first half of the nineteenth century. I understand 'dangerous' heroines to be such female heroes whose actions broke the period's gender stereotypes and challenged man's authority in society as a whole. I will argue that the real, active power of this type of heroine was weakened by styling her into the role of a physically passive and melancholy martyr, an icon of virtuous femininity in order to 'pacify' her, as it were. The heroine's diverse metamorphoses and stylisations do more than reveal the period's gender stereotypes; they are also a revealing probe into artistic endeavours to articulate a primeval essence of art, its influence on human fantasy and emotion, and the reciprocal relation between the spectator and the image.

As a central source, I chose ekphrastic (literary) descriptions of visual art, period literary records, and popular stories. Methodologically, the main point of departure is a type of ekphrasis which James Heffernan designates as "the Medusa model of ekphrasis".[2] According to Heffernan, this type of ekphrasis is one of several ways of expressing the antagonism of word and image. If the opposition between word and image becomes a conflict between narrative and stasis, and ekphrasis transforms a static image into a story, we can interpret the process from the gender perspective: a male authority functions as the mover, the creator of the story, and the female as image, "as fixed and fixating object of desire".[3]

The classical myth of Medusa represents one of the symbols of the archetypal fear of gazing at an image. The terrible Gorgon Medusa, able to turn onlookers to stone, was killed by the hero Perseus. Her head, severed from her body, was by this act transformed into an image. The power and terror of her look, persistent

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1 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust, Part I, Vol. 2: Goethe's Collected Works. Trans. by Stuart Etkins, Princeton/Oxford 2014, p. 107. German original: "Fürwahr es sind die Augen eines Toten, / Die eine liebende Hand nicht schloß." (ll. 4195–4196).

2 James A. W. Heffernan, Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery, Chicago 2004, pp. 108–109.

3 Ibid., p. 109.

even after her death, is symbolically transferred to the ability of an image to attract and control onlookers' gazes and emotions.

The archetypal power of Medusa to petrify a (male) viewer thus makes ambivalent the image to which this type of ekphrasis relates. On the one hand, there is the beauty of a certain image able to draw to itself the gazer's sight; on the other hand, there is the horror of the image and its power to bind and take possession of the gazer's spirit.[4]

In modern theoretical studies examining the relation between visual art and the gazer, the gazer is largely viewed as a male spectator, whose power to control his gaze in relation to the observed image becomes equivocal and in many respects problematic.[5] In some cases, the gazer's sight is threatened by an image that dares to look back at the spectator.[6] If the image depicts a woman, fundamental gender issues and taboo themes may enter into the relationship between the male spectator and the gazing Medusa-like image.

Medusa's Power of Sight

When turning our attention to the iconic figure of Medusa and her image in romantic literature of the nineteenth century, we first have to go back to this motif in Goethe's *Faust*.[7] A quotation from Goethe's *Faust* introduces this article. It relates to the chapter "Walpurgis Night" in part one of *Faust*, in which Mephistopheles transports Faust to a high mountain peak where a witches' Sabbath is in progress. In the midst of the wild and chaotic witches' dance, Faust is suddenly bewitched by a slowly moving figure of a pale and lovely girl who reminded him strongly of his dead lover, Gretchen. However, Mephistopheles discourages Faust from looking at the girl, saying she is but a lifeless spectre with the lethal force of Medusa's gaze. Mephistopheles says:

> Leave that alone – it only can do harm!
> It is a magic image, a phantom without life.
> It's dangerous to meet up with;
> its stare congeals a person's blood

4 For the recent literature on the motif of Medusa gaze, see, for example, Sibylle Baumbach, Medusa's Gaze and the Aesthetics of Fascination, in: Anglia – Zeitschrift für englische Philologie 2, 2010, pp. 225–245.

5 The question of the relation between sight and power or powerlessness in visual art is explored in the influential study by John Berger, Ways of Seeing, London 1972, pp. 45–64. For an analysis of Medusa's gaze in relation to visual art or political power, see Horst Bredekamp, Theorie des Bildakts (Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen; 2007), Berlin 2010, pp. 233–243.

6 Heffernan, Museum of Words (Fn. 2), p. 121.

7 It should be noted that in the case of Goethe's *Faust*, the archetypal figure of Medusa has several different semantic strata. For more details, see the study by Ernst Osterkamp, Re-Defining Classicism: Antiquity in *Faust II* Under the Sign of the Medusa, in: Hans Schulte [et al.] (Ed.), Goethe's *Faust*: Theatre of Modernity, New York 2011, pp. 156–174.

and almost turns him into stone –
you've surely heard about Medusa![8]

Innocent Gretchen, seduced by Faust, is treated symbolically as a dangerous Medusean image, an undead apparition strongly attracting the male spectator and putting him in mortal danger. The contrast between narrative and stasis, between word and image, is heightened here by the immobility of Gretchen, who, amid dramatic scenes of a wild and chaotic dance, "is slowly moving away, dragging her feet as if they were in fetters".[9] This Gretchen, seen by Faust in the form of Medusa, can be understood as an augury of the approaching tragic end for Gretchen – her execution turning the living girl into an undead static image haunting Faust's imagination.

Another classical example of a magic Medusa image is Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous ekphrastic poem *On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery*, first published posthumously by his widow in 1824.[10] The poem was inspired by a painting that was erroneously regarded as one of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpieces in the nineteenth century.[11]

The scene depicts Medusa's severed head with an assemblage of slithering snake bodies in place of hair. The head with half-open eyes, gazing upwards, is lying abandoned in the midst of a rocky landscape vista by the mouth of a dark cave. Medusa is surrounded by various hideous creatures, such as toads, bats, lizards, and rats. Shelley sets this melancholy scene on a dark night, as he begins his poem with the verse: "It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky."[12] He concentrates on the ambiguous face of Medusa, in which opposite qualities – beauty and horror – are unified in perfect harmony. Feelings of fear, anxiety, suffering, and pain blend together here with unearthly beauty and constitute one whole in the spirit of the Romantic aesthetics.[13]

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8 Goethe, Faust, Part I (Fn. 1), p. 107. German original: "Laß das nur stehn! dabei wird's niemand wohl. / Es ist ein Zauberbild, ist leblos, ein Idol. / Ihm zu begegnen, ist nicht gut: / Vom starren Blick erstarrt des Menschen Blut, / Und er wird fast in Stein verkehrt; / Von der Meduse hast du ja gehört." (ll. 4190–4195).

9 Goethe, Faust, Part I (Fn. 1), p. 107. German original: "Sie schiebt sich langsam nur vom Ort, / Sie scheint mit geschloßnen Füßen zu gehen." (ll. 4185–4186).

10 For a detailed analysis of the iconography of Shelley's ekphrastic poem, see Jerome J. McGann, The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology, in: Studies in Romanticism 11, 1, 1972, pp. 3–25, or Carol Jacobs, On Looking at Shelley's Medusa, in: Yale French Studies 69, 1985, pp. 163–179.

11 The *Head of Medusa* painting from the collections of the Uffizi Gallery Museum in Florence is ascribed today to an anonymous Flemish artist, active ca. 1600, oil on wood, 49 × 74 cm, inventory number: P 1472.

12 Percey Bysshe Shelley, On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery, in: Marjorie Garber / Nancy J. Vickers (Ed.), The Medusa Reader, New York/London 2003, pp. 75–76.

13 In his classic iconographic study dedicated to European literature of the Romantic period, Mario Praz characterises the figure of Medusa as a manifesto of the conception of beauty in the Romantic period. For him, Medusa is a symbol of a dark and terrifying beauty,

Of great importance in this context is the connection of the contrasts between life and death. Medusa is a creature standing on the boundary line between life and death. She was killed, but her active power lives on in an iconic image. This close connection in Medusa's archetypal figure between the opposites of life and death in combination with simultaneous divine beauty and abject horror triggered a response from Shelley, as well as from many other authors of the period. As the English essayist and literary and art critic Walter Pater wrote about this work ascribed to Leonardo da Vinci,

> The subject has been treated in various ways; Leonardo alone cuts to its centre; he alone realises it as the head of a corpse, exercising its powers through all the circumstances of death. What may be called the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch its exquisitely finished beauty. About the dainty lines of the cheek the bat flits unheeded. The delicate snakes seem literally strangling each other in terrified struggle to escape from Medusa's brain […]. [14]

The power of Medusa's gaze was associated with Leonardo da Vinci's most famous work, the *Mona Lisa*. 'La Gioconda', as the Mona Lisa is frequently called in Italy, began to compel the rapt attention of artists and men of letters in the 1840s.[15] Like Medusa, she was perceived as a fabulously ambivalent figure. On the one hand, she was worshipped almost as a Madonna, and, on the other, her beauty and mystery were highly provocative. The viewer felt enthralled and lost under the influence of her equivocal gaze, which became a symbol of the deep mystery of the remote origin of life and death.[16] For Walter Pater, 'La Gioconda' "is older than rocks among which she sits", and "like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave".[17]

It was Hans Belting who succinctly characterised the extraordinary effect of the *Mona Lisa* on the viewers of that period as follows: "The *femme fatale*, a creation of Romanticism, was all sensuality and feeling and thus posed a threat to the rationality of the male, tempting him with an allure that was further intensified by an apparent passiveness."[18]

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which considerably pares down the polysemous symbolism of this figure. Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, transl. by Angus Davidson, London 1933, pp. 26–27. Also of importance in this context is the original antique myth of Medusa, a beautiful young woman with golden hair turned into a monster by the jealous goddess Athena. For an analysis of the original antique mythology on Medusa, see, for example, David Leeming, Medusa: In the Mirror of Time, London 2013, pp. 9–19.

14 Walter Pater, The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry, London 1973, p. 104.

15 Hans Belting, The Invisible Masterpiece. Transl. by Helen Atkins, Chicago/London 2001, pp. 137–138.

16 Mona Lisa fits the symbolic conception of famous women of the past representing, as Mario Praz writes, a great fascination for writers of the Romantic period. They were one of the types of femme fatale who was reborn in all ages and in different lands and became a symbol of all female vices and, at the same time, pleasure. Praz, The Romantic Agony (Fn. 13), p. 209.

17 Pater, The Renaissance (Fn. 14), p. 121.

18 Belting, The Invisible Masterpiece (Fn. 15), p. 138.

Death Becomes Her

If a beautiful woman is to change into an image, her physical existence (physical body) must first be destroyed following the example of the archetypal Medusa. In such a scenario, a male hero typically acts as an ambivalent symbolic figure – destroyer of the woman's physical body and creator and observer of her static magic image.

Let us recall the famous short story by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Oval Portrait*, first published in 1842, which in many respects symbolically perpetuates the Medusa myth.[19] The story begins with an injured traveller and his valet seeking refuge in a mysterious abandoned mansion. The traveller goes into a chamber with antique decorations and a great number of paintings. After a thorough examination of the room, the traveller discovers, in a half-hidden, candle-lit niche, an intriguing picture that had escaped his attention: a painting in an oval frame, perhaps an allusion to Athena's aegis bearing the head of Medusa, depicting the head and shoulders of a young girl with radiant hair melted imperceptibly into a vague yet deep shadow, which forms the background of the whole. The gaze of the woman's eyes is so strong that the traveller cannot bear it at first:

> I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes. Why I did this was not at first apparent even to my own perception. But while my lids remained thus shut, I ran over in my mind my reason for so shutting them. It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought – to make sure that my vision had not deceived me – to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze. *In a very few moments I again looked fixedly at the painting.*[20]

The traveller is fascinated by the painting, evoking the feeling that the girl is a living being rather than a painting. He finds a book in the chamber relating the history of the painting's creation. A tragic story revolves around the girl's portrait, the story of her fiancé, who was a painter. Enraptured by his art, the painter decides to do a portrait of his wife. Overindulging his artistry and the effort to portray, as truthfully as possible, the physical appearance of the young woman, he does not realise that her beauty and vital energy are gradually drained from her physical body. When the painting is finished, the painter cries in a loud voice, "This is indeed life itself!"[21] But as he looks at his wife, who had sat for him for long hours and weeks, he sees that she is dead.

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19 The symbolism of this short story is analysed in terms of gender and the dead woman's body by Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic, Manchester 1992, pp. 111–117. Bronfen bases her analysis on a study by Theodor Ziolkowski, Disenchanted Images. A Literary Iconology, Princeton, NJ 1977, pp. 78–147.

20 Edgar Allan Poe, Life in Death (The Oval Portrait), in: id., ed. by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, Tales and Sketches, Vol. 1: 1831–1842, Urbana, IL/Chicago 2000, pp. 659–666, here p. 663. My emphasis.

21 Ibid., p. 666.

The omnipotence of the beautiful woman's image and her strange vampire-like existence between life and death is vividly depicted in an Orientalist short story, *Bliss in a Garden of Apricots in Bloom* by the Czech neo-romantic writer Julius Zeyer.[22] Loosely inspired by Chinese literary tradition, the tale recounts the story of a father and a son dealing in art and antiques. The son falls in love with a lovely, mysterious woman who enchants him with nothing but her gaze: "She was gazing at me like the Evening Star, her gaze holding all that enthrals: grandeur, dreaminess, sadness, enthusiasm."[23] The young man meets the girl regularly in secret until he finds out that it was the soul of a long-deceased princess.

The protagonist's father was under a similar curse. As a young man, he fell in love with the countenance of a beautiful girl in an ancient painting he had found in an old, abandoned house. The picture depicted a garden with a lotus lake, and a golden palace in the background. Beneath a peony shrub sat a beautiful girl playing with a peacock. The man sat every evening in front of the painting, watching the girl and playing the lute for her. One day, the girl moved, spoke to the man, and pulled him into the picture. Together they lived in the landscape painting that seemed to be the very centre of the universe, from which the girl could watch the whole world and see the thoughts and deeds of all people. The only condition for staying in this landscape was to not interfere with real events and people's lives. The young man once violated this prohibition, losing his lover and being condemned to remain forever outside the image in the physical world, which represents a barrier to the fulfilment of personal feelings and ideals.[24]

Medusa-like images or portraits of women function here as icons of sorts, imbued with the physical and spiritual primeval essence of the depicted figure. The fact that these are images with magical power is intimated by various narrative situations which are regularly repeated with the theme of beautiful women's portraits coming to life. The formation of such works of art is either due to an artist of genius, such as Leonardo da Vinci, whose God-given talent succeeded in fathoming the most profound mysteries of life and art, or they are paintings of doubtful and baffling origin. In the story by Poe, the protagonist discovers a por-

[22] The story *Blaho v zahradě kvetoucích broskví* was first published in the Czech weekly literary magazine Lumír 10,11,12, 1982, pp. 146–149, 161–165, 177–182.

[23] All English translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. "Hleděla na mne jako večernice, v pohledu tom bylo vše, co uchvacuje, majestát, snivost, smutek, nadšení." Julius Zeyer, Blaho v zahradě kvetoucích broskví (Bliss in a Garden of Apricots in Bloom), in: Ivan Slavík (Ed.), Tajemné příběhy v české krásné próze 19. století (Mystery Stories in Czech Literature of the 19th Century), Prague 1976, pp. 222–267, here p. 235.

[24] Julius Zeyer was known for his life-long fascination with non-European, and in particular, Asian (Oriental), art and literature. In this story and several others, he combined in a thought-provoking fashion the Western theme of pictures of beautiful women come to life with a very similar and extremely popular motif from Chinese literature. For more thematic details, see Wu Hung, The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting, Chicago 1996, p. 102 and pp. 121–125.

trait of a beautiful young woman in an abandoned haunted mansion, while in the Julius Zeyer story, a man acquires a painting with the figure of a fine-looking princess from an abandoned house previously owned by an old man.

It Is the Toilet of Death, but it Leads to Immortality

Another important motif for the creation of Medusa-like images of dangerous women is the process of creating pre-death portraits of famous historical (and sometimes pseudo-historical) heroines. In this situation, there usually appears the character of a renowned painter who is able to visually capture the heroine's mysterious inner power and emotions.

An example of this involves one of the greatest heroines in European history, Charlotte Corday. Corday, a Girondist, was executed in 1793 for the murder of one of the protagonists of the French Revolution, the Jacobin Jean-Paul Marat. As a result of her deed, Corday became one of the best known personages of her time. Her life, her personality, and the assassination – all of this was scrutinized by the general public. Paintings, drawings, and prints appeared depicting Corday murdering Marat or in prison awaiting execution.

In the European tradition, beautiful young women sentenced to death were a source of general fascination and sometimes even mass hysteria. Their physical beauty was often visible and this sexualisation of the female body was closely connected to general compassion and empathy.[25] An example of the sexualisation of Charlotte Corday's image is visible in a drawing by the artist Barry, depicting Charlotte Corday in a red prison chemise with partly exposed left breast.[26]

Corday's final days are related in the story of her portrait done in prison. When she was in prison, Corday sent a letter to the revolutionary tribunal with a request that her portrait should be painted before her execution. "I would like to leave this remembrance of me for my friends; while we cherish images of good citizens, curiosity sometimes leads us to seek images of great criminals, which serves to perpetuate the horror of their crimes."[27] The tribunal granted Corday's

[25] According to period accounts, young women could even arouse strong emotions in their fellow prisoners or executioners. Through this, they acquired a hallmark of exceptionality and superiority, which turned them into markedly idealised figures, sometimes comparable to angelic beings. Ursula Hilberath, Ce sexe est sûr de nous trouver sensible. Studien zu Weiblichkeitsentwürfen in der französischen Malerei der Aufklärungszeit (1733–1789), Alfter 1993, pp. 214–215.

[26] Barry, *Charlotte Corday revêtu de la chemise rouge* (Charlotte Corday Dressed in a Red Chemise), red chalk in black, white highlights on vellum paper, 1794, 26 × 20.5 cm, Musée Lambinet, Versailles, France, inventory number: 889.

[27] "Je voudrais laisser cette marque de mon souvenir à mes amis; d'ailleurs, comme on chérit l'image des bons Citoyens, la curiosité fait quelquefois rechercher ceux des grands criminels, ce qui sert à perpétuer l'horreur de leurs crimes." Nina Rattner Gelbart, The Blonding of

request, and the painter Jean-Jacques Hauer was assigned the task, as he had sketched Corday's face during the trial; he finished the portrait in her cell only a few hours before her execution. This portrait depicts Charlotte Corday's head and shoulders, with her face turned towards the viewer (Image 1).[28] She is wearing a plain light garment, her head covered with a high bonnet from which wisps of hair have come loose (Image 2).[29] When the jailer cut Corday's hair just before the execution, she gave, according to legend, one wisp to the painter as a reward for his work. According to Nina Rattner Gelbart, Charlotte Corday's hair took on a life of its own after her death and became one of the fundamental iconographic elements of her posthumous legend.[30]

The relation between the legend of Charlotte Corday and that of the archetypal Medusa began to evolve at the very moment of Corday's execution.[31] After her decapitation, the executioner's assistant allegedly lifted her head from the basket by the hair, showed it to the crowd with a gesture like a victorious Perseus, and slapped it on the face. According to eyewitnesses and period accounts, Charlotte Corday's head opened its eyes at that moment and flushed crimson.[32]

The question is, to what extent did the story of Charlotte Corday's last days inspire the literary destiny of another 'dangerous' heroine of European history, Italian noblewoman Beatrice Cenci? Beatrice went down in history for complicity in the assassination of her father, Francesco Cenci, for which she was beheaded in 1599 together with her stepmother and elder brother. The Cenci case was one of the momentous events of the late sixteenth century, and news of the trial spread throughout Italy due to the unsavoury reputation of the assassinated Francesco Cenci, who had been tried for a number of crimes and suspected of corruption at the Holy See. As it was widely believed that Pope Clement VIII had ordered the execution to seize the property of the Cenci family, on the day of the execution,

Charlotte Corday, in: Eighteenth-Century Studies 38, Issue 1, 2004, pp. 201–221, here pp. 218–219, endnote 13.

28 Hauer was probably the only artist to draw or paint Charlotte Corday while she was alive. Gelbart, The Blonding (Fn. 27), p. 210. Hauer's original portrait of Corday is today located in the Musée du Chateau de Versailles. Jean-Jacques Hauer, *Charlotte Corday*, oil on canvas, 1793–1794, 60.5 × 47 cm, Chateau de Versailles, Versailles, France, inventory number: MV 4615.

29 As an accompanying illustration documenting the renown of the portrait of Corday by Jean-Jacques Hauer, I chose a photo of the actress Clara Marion Jessie Rousby (née Dowse) from the 1870s stylised as a pre-death portrait of Charlotte Corday. Unknown photographer, *Clara Marion Jessie Rousby (née Dowse) as Charlotte Corday*, Woodburytype, 1870s, 90 mm × 55 mm, National Portrait Gallery, London, inventory number: NPG Ax 7606.

30 Gelbart, The Blonding (Fn. 27), p. 201.

31 On the symbolism of the head of Medusa as a figure representing the threat of revolt in the period of the French Revolution, see the essay by Neil Hertz, Medusa's Head, in: Marjorie Garber / Nancy J. Vickers (Ed.), The Medusa Reader, New York/London 2003, pp. 173–195.

32 Gelbart, The Blonding (Fn. 27), p. 206. This purportedly true event even made some contemporary scientists and physicians seriously consider whether victims of the guillotine may in fact retain consciousness for a short while.

Image 1: Jean Jacques Hauer, *Charlotte Corday*, oil on canvas, 1793–1794, 60 × 47cm, Versailles, Château de Versailles, inventory number: MV 4615.

Image 2: Unknown photographer, *Clara Marion Jessie Rousby (née Dowse) as Charlotte Corday*, woodburytype, 1870s, 90 × 55mm, London, National Portrait Gallery, inventory number: NPG Ax 7606.

the sympathy of all of Rome went out to Beatrice and her family. As in the case of Charlotte Corday, her imprisonment and execution gave rise to enduring legends celebrating her as a heroine or martyr rebelling against the patriarchal authority of her father or the Roman Pope.[33]

It is likely that Caravaggio was among the crowd of Romans watching the execution of the Cencis, and he later portrayed the emotions he felt about this event, as well as the expression on the face of a person being executed, in his painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.[34] Innovatively, he depicted Holofernes as being fully conscious and aware that it was the moment of his death.[35] Some scholars are of the opinion that this painting could be a veiled allusion to the patricide in the Cenci family, construing the figure of Caravaggio's Judith as a crypto-portrait of Beatrice Cenci.[36]

At any rate, Beatrice Cenci's countenance is historically associated with a totally different picture, which is currently identified as a portrait of an unknown young woman by an anonymous painter in the Galleria Nationale D'Arte Antica in Palazzo Barberini. This picture began to circulate in the late eighteenth century when the caption "Portrait, believed to be of Cenci girl, artist unknown" appeared next to it in the catalogue of paintings of the Roman Colonna family in 1783. From that time on, the picture began to be wrongly interpreted as a portrait of Beatrice Cenci.

The picture shows the head and shoulders of a young woman looking at the spectator over her shoulder (Image 3).[37] She is wearing a simple white dress and her hair is covered with a strip of white fabric wrapped around her head.[38] The background is an abstract dark surface. After 1794, one year after the execution of Charlotte Corday, this picture began to be associated with the name of the painter Guido Reni.[39] The connection between the legendary figure of Beatrice Cenci and

33 In the story of the Cenci case, it is important to mention the counsel for the defence, Prospero Farinacci, who tried to excuse Beatrice's complicity in the murder, arguing that she had been sexually abused by her father. Although this accusation was never proven, it became an important part of Beatrice's posthumous legend.

34 Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, oil on canvas, 1599, 145 × 195 cm, Galleria Nationale D'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome, inventory number: 2533.

35 Helen Langdon, Caravaggio, Prague 2002, p. 128. Caravaggio succeeded in capturing the boundary between life and death. Holofernes is almost dead, as shown by his eyes rolled backwards in his head, while his taut body convulses, struggling for the last seconds of life. As the scene is remarkably accurate, both anatomically and physiologically, it is believed that it was based on Caravaggio's actual observations of executions.

36 Charles Nicholl, Screaming in the Castle. The Case of Beatrice Cenci, in: London Review of Books 20, 13, 1998, pp. 23–27, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n13/charles-nicholl/screaming-in-the-castle-the-case-of-beatrice-cenci, 10 November 2017.

37 Guido Reni attr., *Ritratto di Beatrice Cenci*, oil on canvas, 64.5 × 49 cm, Galleria Nationale D'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome, inventory number: 1944.

38 This plain, unembellished garment was believed to be the jail garb in which Beatrice went to her execution. Corrado Ricci, Beatrice Cenci, Milan 1923 (Repr. Milan 1941), p. 380.

39 Reni's association with this work eventually became so strong that the painting came to be regarded as one of Reni's masterpieces, despite lack of evidence warranting the association.

Image 3: Guido Reni attr., *Ritratto di Beatrice Cenci*, oil on canvas, 64.5 × 49cm, Rome, Galleria Nationale D'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, inventory number: 1944.

one of the greatest masters of Baroque Italian painting from the first half of the seventeenth century soon gave rise to new legends attempting to describe the circumstances under which the portrait was allegedly painted. The dramatic story surrounding the painting of the portrait of Beatrice Cenci is similar in many respects to that of Charlotte Corday's portrait. According to one version circulated widely in the nineteenth century, Guido painted Beatrice in her cell on the eve of her execution, at a moment when she was praying and begging for the forgiveness of her sins.[40] According to a more dramatic version recounted by Charles Dickens that again recalls the power of Medusa's gaze, Guido Reni stood among the crowd watching the execution. When the cart carrying Beatrice to the place of execution passed by him, she suddenly turned her face to him. Her look was so enthralling and haunting to the painter, that he later succeeded in painting it in his studio from memory.[41]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the purported portrait of Beatrice Cenci, in conjunction with the dramatic story of its origin, became one of Rome's main tourist attractions and a source of inspiration for eminent writers such as Charles Dickens, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Stendhal, Alexandre Dumas, as well as the famous American novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville.[42]

The Radiant Heroine

The story of Beatrice Cenci is analogous to that of Charlotte Corday, not only due to the assassination of men who, in the respective women's eyes, were tyrants, but also due to the women's youth, bravery, motives to murder, and, last but not least, their physical beauty (though in the case of Corday, this was disputed by her sympathisers and adversaries).

With their deeds, both heroines flagrantly violated the period's patriarchal rules, which rendered it impossible to view their actions and distinct personalities within the bounds of general gender stereotypes. Ambiguous approaches to the historic and later, legendary, lives of these heroines evince diverse metamorphoses, oscillating between the archetype of a dangerous femme fatale and that of a martyr or a saint.

The transformation of dynamic, socially and politically active female historical figures into Medusa-like static images was fundamental. In the case of Beatrice Cenci, the transformation into a static, passive image was crowned by her

40 For literature on the Reni myth, see, for example, Rossella Vodret, Un volto per un mito, il "ritratto di Beatrice" di Guido Reni, in: Mario Bevilacqua / Elisabetta Mori (Ed.), Beatrice Cenci, la storia il mito, catalogue, Rome 1999, pp. 131–138.

41 Charles Dickens, Pictures from Italy, London 1846, p. 212.

42 For a detailed analysis of visual and literary representations of Beatrice Cenci from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, see my study: Petra Polláková, The Case of Beatrice Cenci: From Guido Reni to David Lynch, in: Umění/Art 59, Issue 5, 2011, pp. 380–395, here pp. 386–391.

identification with the historic picture; in Charlotte Corday's case, the transformation was gradual. Whereas initial visual representations often depicted Corday at the moment of Marat's assassination, or later, as a woman of intellectual disposition, by the end of the eighteenth century, all action began to vanish from depictions of her and Charlotte Corday began to be portrayed largely as a passive figure. As in the case of Beatrice Cenci, writers[43] and artists of the nineteenth century emphasised her gentleness and self-sacrifice.[44]

The symbolic emphasis on the physical and intellectual passivity of the heroines was supported visually with various motifs. The heroine's static figure, torn away from the dynamic and the narrative nature of their own story, became a 'fixed and fixating object' exposed to the public view. Dozens of paintings or graphics made in the nineteenth century show Charlotte Corday in her jail cell, going to her execution, or watching her last portrait being painted.[45] The heroine's dominant static figure becomes the central point in this type of painting and represents absolute fascination with the walk-on actors surrounding her. However, the dangerous heroine is not only bound symbolically, but also physically. The most frequent motifs are not scenes in the prison cell, but pictures of Charlotte Corday with her hands tied. A very similar iconographic repertory is also associated with visual works of art of the nineteenth century depicting the last days of Beatrice Cenci.

An effort to suppress the original dynamic stories of the two heroines associated with aggression and murder, deeds that run contrary to ideas of natural feminine fragility and innocence, was manifested in physiognomy. Literary descriptions of Beatrice differed widely from the young girl's appearance in the purported portrait of Beatrice. Similar divergences appeared in physical descriptions of Charlotte Corday. The two heroines' eyes and hair underwent the most profound transformations, which we can consider a sort of symbolic reference to the most dangerous weapons of the mythological Medusa. Although the Rome portrait of Beatrice shows a young woman with dark eyes and brown hair, and Charlotte Corday was demonstrably a brunette, in the literary stories, their eyes are described as blue and their hair as light to golden. Blonde hair, as one of the

43 Charlotte Corday as a romantic literary character was created by the French writer and politician Alphonse de Lamartine, who dedicated to her fate and personality the 44th book of his collected works, *Histoire des Girondins*, dating from 1847. Lamartine admired Corday for her courage, resolve and personal charm. He described her as an angel commanded by God to dispense justice, as a Joan of Arc of freedom. But Corday was also an angel, with wings covered in Marat's black blood.

44 Elisabeth R. Kindleberger, Charlotte Corday in Text and Image: A Case Study in the French Revolution and Women's History, in: French Historical Studies 18, Issue 4, 1994, pp. 969–999, here pp. 990–992.

45 For an overview of the best known visual representations of Charlotte Corday from the end of the eighteenth to the first half of the twentieth century, capturing the changing iconography of this heroine, see Guillaume Mazeau, Corday contre Marat: Deux siècles d'images, Versailles 2009.

Image 4: Hihara You, *Joan of Arc Fireworks*, female hero in the Japanese video game *Otogi: Secret Spirit Agents*, illustration.

symbols of feminine charms and virtues,[46] is associated here with the iconography of an ambivalent woman, a heroine whose deeds ran contrary to the traditional gender conception of femininity. A similar metamorphosis was typical of other famous heroines of European history, for example, Joan of Arc, often portrayed in the nineteenth century with light or golden hair (Image 4).[47]

46 The symbolism of light woman's hair is an important theme running through all of the Western visual and literary iconography. It was of paramount importance in the nineteenth century when figures of women with blonde hair were often inspired by archetypal fairy tales of golden-haired princesses. Although blonde hair had a complex ambivalent iconography, it was one of the symbols of the woman as an innocent angelic being. For more details, see Elisabeth G. Gitter, The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination, in: PMLA 5, 1984, pp. 936–954, here pp. 943–948. On the symbolism of Medusa's golden hair in Victorian literature, see ibid., pp. 950–953.

47 Marina Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers, London 1994, pp. 368–369. The iconic appearance of a light-haired Joan of Arc also persists in the present-day popular culture. A case in point is a strikingly light-haired Joan of Arc in the

With regard to Charlotte Corday, period accounts circulated that she had reportedly had her hair lightened by a hairdresser just before Marat's assassination. As another reason for the later descriptions of Charlotte Corday as a blonde, it is said that she was wearing a powder wig at the time of Marat's assassination as a symbol of her support for the royalists.[48] However, it was only the posthumous legend of Charlotte Corday that proved the symbolic power of her light hair. As Gelbart convincingly shows, many subsequent commentators on the life and personality of Charlotte Corday described her hair as long, wavy, and distinctly light. Even the memorable wisp of hair that she gave to the painter Hauer was described by later eyewitnesses as light.[49] After all, Hauer's famous portrait of Charlotte Corday shows her as a blonde with bright blue eyes. The motif of Beatrice's light hair appears, for example, in descriptions of her purported jail portrait, or in literary descriptions of Beatrice in the works of the famous French novelists Stendhal and Alexandre Dumas, to whom Beatrice's light hair meant a matchless quality, reserved in the Italian tradition for paintings of Madonnas by Raphael.[50] Beatrice also has light hair in Charles Dickens' description of her 'portrait': "[…] the *light hair* falling down below the linen folds." [51] A typical example of her as a light-haired heroine with blue eyes is a description of this picture in the Cenci story from 1902 by the American writer Francis Marion Crawford, where the author, allegedly referring to the Rome painting, describes Beatrice as "[…] a lovely girl, *her hair gleaming in the sunshine like treads of dazzling gold*, her marvellous blue eyes turned up to heaven".[52]

In this context, the essential description of the 'portrait' of Beatrice Cenci is that by Percy Bysshe Shelley,[53] who introduced the motif of her golden hair in an interesting manner in his play about the Cenci case.[54] A detailed analysis of Shelley's play from the perspective of current gender issues was carried out by

film *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* from 1999 featuring the American Milla Jovovich, or dozens of contemporary comic strips and video games presenting Joan of Arc as a series of sexually provocative, long-haired blondes.

48 Gelbart, The Blonding (Fn. 27), p. 204.

49 Ibid., p. 211.

50 See, for example, Belinda Jack, Beatrice's Spell. The Enduring Legend of Beatrice Cenci, London 2004, p. 151.

51 "The portrait of Beatrice di Cenci, in the Palazzo Berberini, is a picture almost impossible to be forgotten. Through the transcendent sweetness and beauty of the face, there is a something shining out, that haunts me. I see it now, as I see this paper, or my pen. The head is loosely draped in white; the light hair falling down below the linen folds." Dickens, Pictures from Italy (Fn. 41), p. 211. My emphasis.

52 James W. Mathews, The Enigma of Beatrice Cenci: Shelley and Melville, in: South Atlantic Review 49, Issue 2, 1984, pp. 31–41, here p. 34. My emphasis.

53 "Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape, and fall about her neck [...]." Young-Ok An, Beatrice's Gaze Revisited: Anatomizing "The Cenci", in: Criticism 38, 1, 1996, pp. 27–68, here p. 29.

54 Shelley's drama *The Cenci* is a verse drama in five acts, written in the summer of 1819 during Shelley's stay in Rome. As taboo themes of incest and patricide run through the play, it was staged in England for the first time only in 1922.

An Young-Ok, who pointed in a stimulating way to the association between Shelley's character of Beatrice and the archetypal Medusa.[55]

In Shelley's drama, the motif of Beatrice's rich, light hair is repeated, serving as a symbol of her momentary frame of mind. The motif of light hair had its literary justification in Shelley. It served as a means for highlighting and enhancing the pathos of Beatrice's suffering, and was equally an instrument of her revenge.[56] At moments when Beatrice must suffer her father's violent deeds or when she assassinates him in deadly anger, her hair is loose and chaotic, recalling the angrily writhing bodies of the snakes on Medusa's head.

A similar symbolism is that of the Medusa-like look of the golden-haired Beatrice, which gives to her tyrannical father and other male antagonists the impression that she controls an unmanageable and uncontrollable power.[57] A mysterious inner radiance, manifested in the form of the tragic heroine's light hair, becomes a symbolic demonstration of her suppressed and concealed power.

The inner glow of these heroines is often expressed visually through their attire. The image associated with Beatrice Cenci shows her in a white (purportedly prison) dress like the one in Hauer's portrait of Corday. Also, a full-length portrait of Corday painted by the French artist Tony Robert-Fleury in 1874 depicts her in a white dress contrasting with a darker surrounding landscape.[58] A similar tradition is kept alive around the figure of Joan of Arc, who is frequently shown in a golden or shining suit of armour.

Likewise, Shelley's head of Medusa, dropped somewhere in an abandoned nightscape, is characterised in several parts of the poem *On the Medusa* with the symbolism of light and radiance. Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołdys critically analyses the interconnection between light and shadow in this poem. Medusa's head is the only source of light in a dark nightscape originating from her pain and agony.[59] Medusa's 'glare of pain' may be perhaps understood in the sense of a transcendental radiance issued from pain and suffering, which takes her away from earthly life and makes her an archetypal icon of a romantic heroine.

This sublime quality of an internally radiant female icon seems to be a culmination of an extensive synthesis of heterogeneous parts making up the story and the character of the heroine. Her original, active social force, intellect, strong emotions, and the narrativeness of the dramatic story are frequently transformed into a static image. These disquieting female traits challenging gender stereotypes and endangering male social power thus come to the surface in the form of di-

55 It is significant that Shelley's play inspired by the famous Censi case and his ekphrastic poem *On the Medusa* were both written in 1819.

56 An, Beatrice's Gaze Revisited (Fn. 53), p. 49.

57 Ibid., pp. 51–54.

58 Tony Robert-Fleury, *Charlotte Corday at Caen in 1793*, oil on canvas, 1874, 210 × 125 cm, Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, France, inventory number: inv. CM 177.

59 Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołdys, Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century, Newcastle upon Tyne 2013, pp. 125–126.

verse primitive symbols. The woman's real power and social authority are turned symbolically into a magical, terrifying (Medusa-like) power hidden in the very 'physical' existence of the heroine's image.

Conclusion

> What ecstasy, and yet what pain!
> I cannot bear to let this vision go.[60]

In the preceding sections, I attempted to illustrate the depiction of a heroine in the period of Romanticism of the first half of the nineteenth century, with several examples drawn from literature, history, and visual art. I was particularly interested in the dangerous heroine whose story defies the period's gender stereotypes in many respects.

One of the fundamental contradictions my analysis highlighted is the stark contrast between the dynamism of a heroine's story and her period artistic depiction as a passive, timeless idol. The figure of a fictional or real-life heroine was torn from the real world and abstracted into the form of an immobile icon affecting the onlooker with the power of her Medusa-like gaze.

Mythological Medusa was beheaded by the hero Perseus, losing her physical body but retaining her primitive strength in her petrifying gaze. In the same way, the heroine's active 'body' is transformed into a transcendental idol, encompassing not only the latent danger of physical strength but also the threat posed by her gaze. This silent, wordless gaze of Medusa conceals, deep inside, diverse archetypal threats as well as desires springing from the depths of our social experience.

As Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołdys pointedly remarks, the only way to know the essence of Medusa is to expose oneself to her gaze.[61] Medusa's returned gaze, which was quintessentially a reflection of various traumas and social and gender taboos, was often hard to bear for the nineteenth-century onlooker or reader. This complex relationship between an active (male) onlooker and, in many respects, simultaneously, a creator of the iconic image of Medusa was frequently narrated in the literature and art of the nineteenth century through the story of a painter of genius able to artistically capture the magical, all-pervasive inner strength of this iconic heroine.

Literary works describing fictitious, miraculous icons of heroines often feature an element of mystery and the supernatural, where an ancient picture of unknown origin is discovered by a young man who is fatally attracted by the gaze of a woman in the picture. The reciprocal relationship between a male onlooker

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60 Goethe, Faust, Part I (Fn. 1), p. 107. German original: "Welch eine Wonne! welch ein Leiden! / Ich kann von diesem Blick nicht scheiden." (ll. 4200–4201).

61 Łuczyńska-Hołdys, Soft-Shed Kisses (Fn. 59), p. 124.

and the "fixed and fixating" image of a woman is regularly described as being traumatic and unable to be fulfilled in real life.

Another way of transforming an active heroine into an immobile icon could have been mediated by posthumous legends of famous heroines of the past. In this study, I treated the iconography and the popular stories associated with Charlotte Corday and Beatrice Cenci in more detail. I was particularly interested in the elements common to the two legends. In the stories of these two heroines, a violent act occurs: the assassination of a male authority figure, be it a leading politician of the time or a tyrannical father. Both stories feature the figure of a talented painter who visits the heroine in prison and paints her pre-death portrait, capturing her almost supernatural inner strength in the form of Medusa's gaze. However, neither the portrait of Charlotte Corday nor the alleged Reni prison portrait of Beatrice embody any attributes referring to the dramatic deeds of these women, that transcended all limitations of the contemporary social rules. The figures are again taken out of the context of the original stories and transformed into iconic images of passive martyrs.

However, the period's visual and literary depictions of these heroines shift their deeds and subsequent suffering to a completely new level. The symbolic radiance that became physically imprinted in the physiognomy of these figures – in particular, in the symbols of golden hair and blue eyes – transformed the original threatening figure of Medusa into an almost Apollonian being. The returned gaze of this radiant Medusa symbolises a humanist hope for overcoming dark traumas in our cultural memory.[62]

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Image 4: © Hihara You, *Otogi: Secret Spirit Agents*, Japanese video game, URL: http://otogi.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Illustrators?file=Joan_of_Arc_Fireworks.png, 6 February 2018.

[62] The humanist denotation of the Medusa symbol, especially within the context of Shelley's poem and his translation of Goethe's *Faust*, is developed in studies by Dana Van Kooy, Shelley's Radical Stages: Performance and Cultural Memory in the Post-Napoleonic Era, London/New York 2016, p. 101 and Łuczyńska-Hołdys, Soft-Shed Kisses (Fn. 59), pp. 130–131.