Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction
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PERSEUS, THE MAIDEN MEDUSA, AND THE IMAGERY OF ABDUCTION

ABSTRACT

Focusing on Classical red-figure vases, the author argues that the appearance of the beautiful Medusa, which has been explained previously as an evolutionary development from the monstrous Archaic type, is determined by discursive context rather than by chronology. Painters used the beautiful Gorgon to convey certain messages about Perseus's victory, though it is not always clear whether she is meant to evoke humor or pathos. The author further shows that Medusa's death was figured as a perversion of the erotic abductions common to many Greek myths, and points out the beautiful Gorgon's affinities with abducted maidens such as Persephone, Thetis, and Helen.

Among the events depicted on the Pseudo-Hesiodic shield of Herakles is the flight of Perseus from Medusa's sisters.[1] The poet renders the scene in unforgettably vivid terms:

> ταὶ δὲ μετ' αὐτὸν
> Γοργόνες ἄπλητοί τε καὶ οὐ φαταὶ ἐρρώοντο
> ἱέμεναι μαπέειν. ἐπὶ δὲ χλωροῦ ἀδάμαντος
> βαινουσέων ἰάχεσκε σάκος μεγάλῳ ὀρυμαγδῷ
> ὀξέα καὶ λιγέως· ἐπὶ δὲ ζώνῃσι δράκοντε
> δοιὼ ἀπῃωρεῦντ' ἐπικυρτώοντε κάρηνα.
> λίχμαζον δ' ἄρα τώ γε· μένει δ' ἐχάρασσον ὀδόντας
> ἄγρια δερκομένω. ἐπὶ δὲ δεινοῖσι καρήνοις
> Γοργείοις ἐδονεῖτο μέγας Φόβος.
>
> And after him rushed the Gorgons, unapproachable and unspeakable, longing to seize him: as they trod upon the pale adamant, the shield rang sharp and clear with a loud clanging. Two serpents hung down at their girdles with heads curved forward: their tongues were flickering, and their teeth gnashing with fury, and their eyes glaring fiercely. And upon the awful heads of the Gorgons great Fear was quaking.[2]

This description of the Gorgons as creatures whose monstrousness is so startling that the shield itself cries out under their feet seems a fitting

1. For useful suggestions on drafts of this article, I thank Guy Hedreen, Laurialan Reitzammer, Albert Henrichs, and the two anonymous *Hesperia* reviewers. I am also grateful to Melissa Haynes and to audiences at Rutgers University and Harvard University for their advice and suggestions, and to the Department of Classics at Harvard University, which covered the cost of the illustrations. I am especially indebted to Gloria Ferrari Pinney, who read numerous drafts and provided advice at every stage.

2. Hes. [*Sc.*] 229–237, trans. H. G. Evelyn-White, Cambridge, Mass., 1914.

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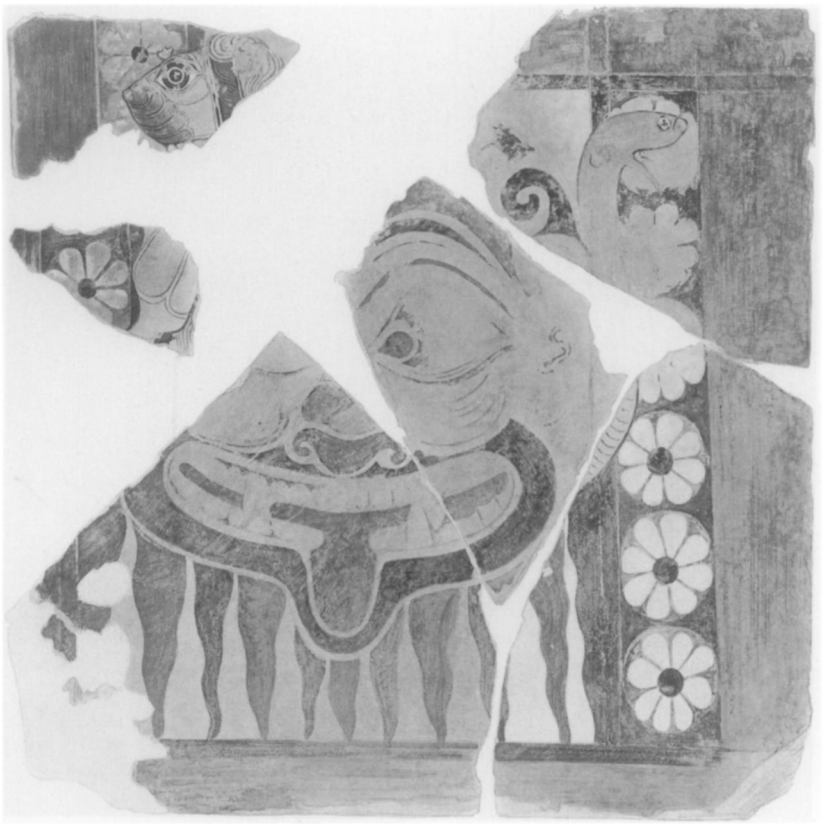

Figure 1. Gorgoneion, painted metope, Temple of Apollo at Thermon, ca. 625–600 B.C. Athens, National Archaeological Museum. *AntDenk* 2, pl. 52, Berlin 1908, after watercolor by E. Gilliéron. Courtesy Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library

literary counterpart to the numerous images in Greek art of bearded, fanged, and grimacing Gorgons whose heads are covered with snakes and whose penetrating frontal stare, as Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux has observed, seems to disrupt the very two-dimensionality of the surfaces on which the images are painted (Fig. 1).[3] It is no wonder that these creatures remain a source of fascination for commentators, especially those interested in issues of representation—for the Gorgon, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has perceptively remarked, presents herself as "a monster whose horror thwarts every attempt at figuration."[4]

Yet, even a glance at the images reveals that Medusa and her sisters sometimes assumed quite a different face from the one that has held so many scholars transfixed. Some images present the Gorgons as distinctly beautiful, virtually indistinguishable from goddesses or human maidens.[5] A good example appears on a red-figure pelike from the middle of the 5th century, which shows Perseus about to behead a Gorgon whose only extrahuman feature is a pair of wings (Fig. 2).[6] Her face, presented in three-quarter view, is that of an ordinary sleeping woman, and even her hair, which falls in tight curls around her face, is no more snakelike than

3. Athens, National Archaeological Museum. Frontisi-Ducroux 1988; 1995, pp. 65–74.

4. Vernant 1991b, p. 144; see also Mack 2002.

5. Partial catalogues of the images include Floren 1977; *LIMC* IV, 1988, pp. 285–330, s.v. Gorgo, Gorgones (I. Krauskopf and S.-C. Dahlinger). Occasionally, Medusa lacks even the wings or discreetly placed snakes that usually distinguish her from human women: Berlin, Staatliche Museen F 3022; *LCS* 487, no. 335. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum St. 1918.

6. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 45.11.1; *ARV*² 1032, no. 55; *Paralipomena* 442; *Beazley Addenda*² 318.

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Figure 2. Perseus beheading Medusa, Attic red-figure pelike, ca. 450–440 B.C., Polygnotos. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1945 (45.11.1).
Photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art

that of her attacker. As Rainer Mack has recently suggested, the Gorgons' transformation "from terror to beauty need not be taken as . . . an evacuation of the 'original' sense of the image," since beauty, no less than monstrosity, holds the power to fascinate.[7] Nevertheless, the logic underlying the variety evident in the representations remains obscure—that is, we are at a loss to explain why creatures famous for their horrible appearance should also appear as a bevy of beauties. It is this logic that I attempt to uncover here, focusing on what has come to be known as the "beautiful" type.

Previous scholarship on the Gorgons has framed their shifting appearance in evolutionary terms. Adolf Furtwängler's entry in the *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie,* which relied on a tripartite typology that showed monstrous Archaic Gorgons evolving gradually into Hellenistic and Roman beauties, set the course for subsequent scholarship, which has accepted this account almost without question.[8] Closer examination of Furtwängler's typology, however, shows it to be fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is the resistance of the three types—Archaic ("archaische"), middle ("mittlere"), and beautiful ("schöne")—to the neat chronological sequence he imposed. Though rare, Gorgons with ordinary human features appear in Greek art as early as the 7th century B.C. A fragmentary metope from the Temple of Apollo at Thermon shows Perseus carrying away a head that is mostly concealed

7. Mack 2002, p. 599, n. 4.

8. Furtwängler 1886–1890. Typological or iconographical studies that retain Furtwängler's system of classification include Floren 1977; *LIMC* IV, 1988, pp. 285–330, s.v. Gorgo, Gorgones (I. Krauskopf and S.-C. Dahlinger). Belson 1980 suggests modifications to Furtwängler's chronology but does not question the usefulness of his larger system.

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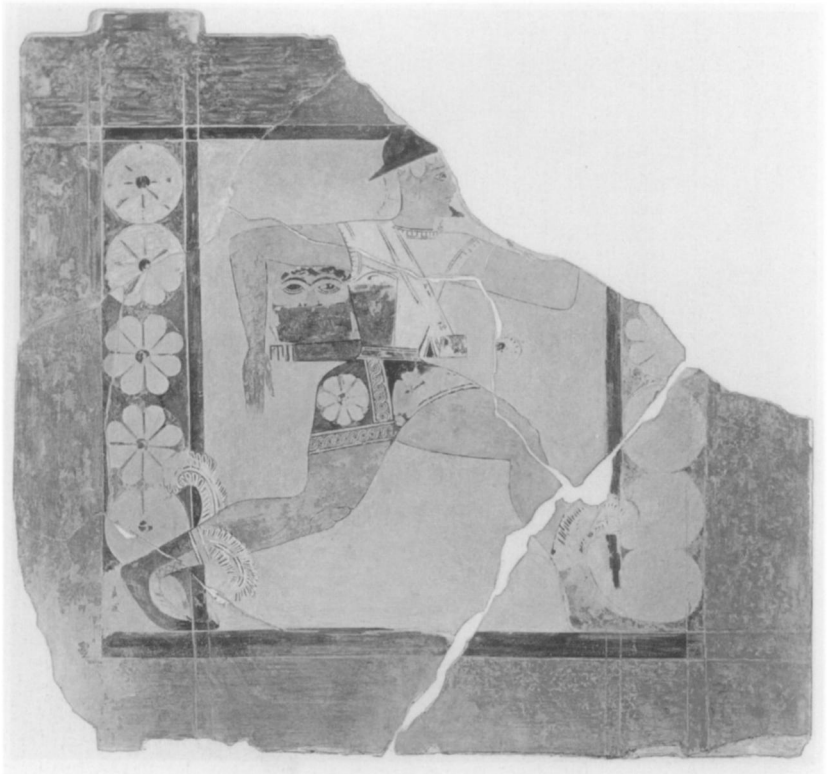

Figure 3. Perseus fleeing with gorgoneion, painted metope, Temple of Apollo at Thermon, ca. 625–600 B.C. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 13401. *AntDenk* 2, pl. 51.1, Berlin 1908, after watercolor by E. Gilliéron. Courtesy Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library

by the *kibisis* (Fig. 3),[9] but which forms a stark contrast to the grimacing, masklike gorgoneion preserved on a nearby metope (Fig. 1). The latter shows the Gorgon with beard, fangs, and protruding tongue, and her eyes are so wide that they form creases in her face. What is visible of the Gorgon in the *kibisis,* by contrast, is strikingly human, and her tranquil, half-closed eyes are remarkable not only because they differentiate her from her glaring counterpart, but also because the eyes were the primary source of the Gorgon's potency.[10] Although much of her face remains concealed in Perseus's pouch, the treatment of her eyes suggests that the early painters' conceptions of the Gorgons were not quite so rigid as Furtwängler's account would have us imagine.

In the Classical period, Furtwängler's transitional phase, the situation is even more complex, for now Gorgons with various types of appearances coexist in the images, sometimes defying easy classification. Turning our attention to two mid-5th-century bell kraters by the Villa Giulia Painter, we can see the difficulty clearly (Figs. 4, 5).[11] Both vases show Medusa sleeping peacefully as Perseus, flanked by Athena and Hermes and armed with the *harpe,* cautiously approaches her. In both scenes, the Gorgon has a wide nose and a protruding tongue, and her hair is bound neatly in two small buns on the sides of her face. Only on the London krater, however, has the painter given her fangs (Fig. 4). Using Furtwängler's terminology, we might safely label this figure a "middle" Gorgon, but it is less clear what we are to make of her more human-looking counterpart on the krater in Madrid (Fig. 5:c). Although this Gorgon may not strike us as beautiful, she is nevertheless very human in appearance; she has no fangs, so only

9. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 13401.

10. On the Gorgons' eyes, see especially Vernant 1991a, 1991b.

11. Fig. 4: London, British Museum E 493; *ARV*² 619, no. 18. Fig. 5: Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional 11010; *ARV*² 619, no. 19.

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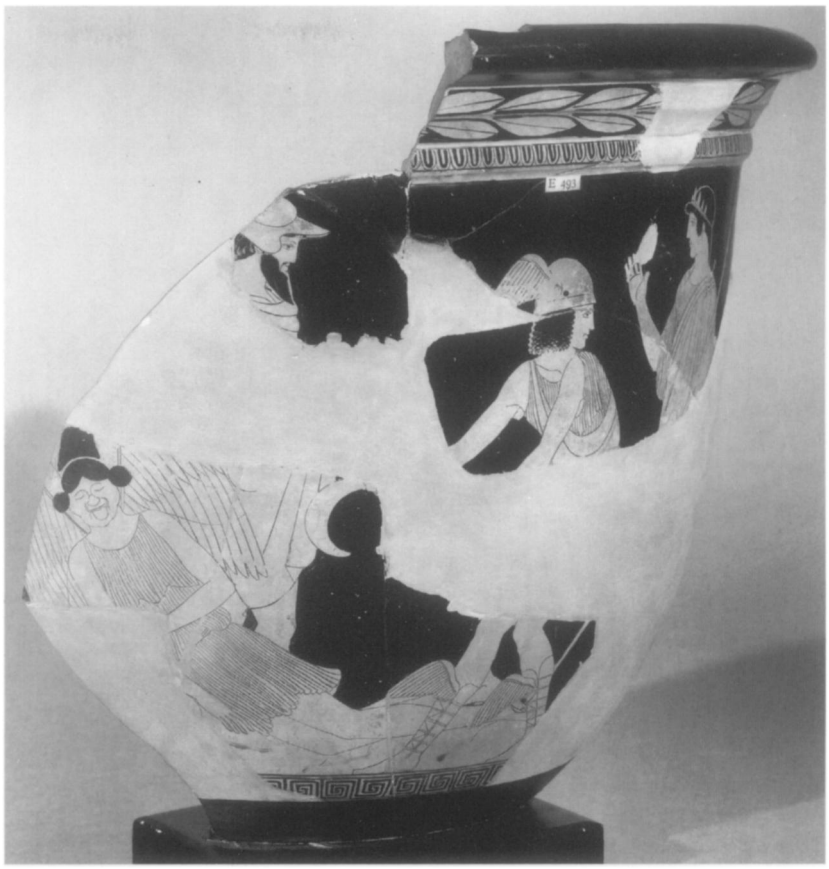

Figure 4. Perseus approaching Medusa, Attic red-figure bell krater, ca. 460–450 B.C., Villa Giulia Painter. London, British Museum E 493. Photo © Trustees of the British Museum

her wings suggest that she is something else. Applied to examples like the Villa Giulia Painter's Gorgons, Furtwängler's labels seem to lose their descriptive power—and even if we were to refine his criteria to such an extent that classifying the images became a simple task, we would be no wiser about why a particular Gorgon looks as she does.

Furtwängler's system, moreover, does not easily accommodate the wide variations among images of Gorgons produced in the same period. The Villa Giulia Painter's Gorgons may not seem beautiful, but they also lack the overtly masklike qualities we see in the Gorgon on a roughly contemporary hydria now in Richmond (Fig. 6).[12] There Medusa's face is round and oversized, with thickly painted eyebrows and an exaggerated grimace. The absence of a visible neck contributes to the impression of a mask, again in contrast to what we find on the Villa Giulia Painter's Gorgons. Both the Richmond Gorgon and the Villa Giulia Painter's Gorgons, moreover, differ markedly from the Gorgon we saw on Polygnotos's pelike above (Fig. 2), whose face not only is entirely human, but is shown in three-quarter profile, rather than confronting its viewer directly. The diversity among the Gorgons in these four scenes, which are all approximately contemporary, suggests that far from being subject to impersonal evolutionary forces, the painters had a number of options at their disposal when they were deciding how to depict the Gorgons. Furtwängler's typology does little to help us understand why painters chose to represent them as they did in any given instance.

12. Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 62.1.1; *ARV*² 1683, no. 48*bis*; *Paralipomena* 452.

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a

b

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c

Figure 5 *(opposite and right)*. **Perseus approaching Medusa, and old man with fleeing maidens, Attic red-figure bell krater, ca. 460–450 B.C., Villa Giulia Painter.** *(a)* **obverse;** *(b)* **reverse;** *(c)* **detail of obverse. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional 11010.** Photos courtesy Archivo Fotográfico, Museo Arqueológico Nacional

Figure 6. Perseus beheading the Gorgon Medusa, Attic red-figure hydria, ca. 450–425 B.C., attributed to the Nausikaa Painter. Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 62.1.1. Photo courtesy the Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The problem lies not only in the empirical challenges the images present to this typology, but in the assumption that an essentially descriptive typology constitutes an adequate explanatory tool. Within the system Furtwängler constructed, the Gorgon becomes a single entity that experienced a single gradual change over a period of centuries, and the beautiful type is nothing more than the end result of a long, and largely unexplained, process of transformation.[13] This account leaves no room for the possibility that we are observing several trends rather than a single evolutionary one, or that context—specifically, discursive context—rather than chronology determined how the Gorgon should look in a given situation.

13. Accepting that representations of the Gorgon follow a single evolutionary path, scholars have attempted to locate specific elements within these representations that may have prompted the Gorgon's transformation from monster to beautiful woman; see, e.g., Phinney 1971, pp. 450–451; Vernant 1991b, pp. 148–150.

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For all these reasons, I suggest that we can understand the beautiful Gorgon only by abandoning Furtwängler's typology—both as a system of classification and as an explanatory tool—and by inquiring, instead, how beautiful Gorgons operate within the discursive contexts in which they occur.[14] My argument focuses on the Classical period and draws on South Italian as well as Attic examples; while I do not wish to deny the differences that developed between the two artistic traditions, I am primarily concerned with what I believe was a trend common to both.[15] Most of my examples are scenes in vase painting, each of which (unlike the isolated gorgoneia found in architecture) clearly belongs to a larger narrative context that can furnish clues about how an image is to be understood.[16] The story of Perseus and Medusa does not exist outside of the specific instances in which is it represented—visual as well as verbal—and each representation is constructed according to a logic that must be uncovered if we are to understand any particular element within it. Just as we cannot understand a literary motif without an awareness of the conventions of the genre in which it operates, our interpretation of visual motifs depends to a significant degree on our ability to discern the generic conventions of the images in which they appear. An epic Cyclops is hardly the same creature as a satyric Cyclops; in the same way, I suggest, we cannot understand the images of the beautiful Medusa unless we know whether they are meant to glorify Perseus, to evoke sympathy for the monster, to provoke laughter, or to produce a different reaction altogether.

Beautiful Gorgons occur in a variety of scenes, the tone of which is not always possible to discern. The images, after all, do not announce their genres in the same ways that contemporary texts do, and as modern observers, we tend to be more skilled in dealing with the latter form of evidence—we generally find it easier, that is, to classify a play as a comedy or a tragedy than to recognize the humor or pathos of an image. I have adopted here Tzvetan Todorov's definition of genre as a codification of discursive properties, that is, elements that create for a reader or viewer expectations about how a particular representation is to be understood.[17] Todorov treats genre as primarily a verbal phenomenon, but insofar as it is a property of discourse, genre also belongs to nonverbal forms of representation, including images.[18] As Todorov notes, every culture has its own system of genres, and insiders to a culture become familiar with its generic system through everyday experience.[19] As outsiders, however, we must develop other ways of determining the genres to which given

14. Although I abandon Furtwängler's tripartite system, I retain—largely for the sake of convenience—his term "beautiful" ("schöne") to designate Gorgons whose facial features resemble those of human women (or goddesses) in red-figure vase painting, although the hair may be unkempt, the face may grimace, or small snakes may surround the head. Notions of beauty are culture-bound, and for my purposes, our own aesthetic judgments regarding the images are less important than our ability to recognize their close resemblance to images of human women and their distance from the monstrous type.

15. On the relationship between Attic and South Italian vase painting, see Trendall 1990, 1991; Taplin 1993.

16. Mack has recently addressed the question of whether every isolated gorgoneion belongs to the narrative of Perseus's victory, and he suggests that "the gorgoneion is linked to the Perseus legend through reference to the act of decapitation. Indeed, it would be possible to argue that the motif is nothing other than the image of the decapitated head of Medusa itself" (2002, p. 585). Although Mack may be correct, an analysis of isolated gorgoneia would require a set of methods different from those I employ in my analysis of the scenes on the vases and is best left for a separate project.

17. Todorov 1990, esp. pp. 10, 18–19.

18. For discourse as extending beyond language, see Ferrari 2002, pp. 23–25, 86 (relying on Benveniste 1971).

19. Todorov 1990, p. 19.

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representations—in our case, images—are likely to have belonged, and noting the ways in which they relate to comparable representations, literary as well as visual, is the first step in this process. Of the images that show the moments surrounding Medusa's death, three kinds of scenes emerge as especially good candidates for such an investigation; these involve Perseus's flight from Medusa's sister, his attack on the sleeping Medusa, and various actions that unfold in the presence of satyrs. Each type of scene evokes a rich network of associations that can help us understand the role of beauty in the Greeks' conception of the Gorgons.

In every case, the Gorgons' beauty, rather than marking a highly evolved phase in the iconography, introduced an element of incongruity into what had become a conventional image of Perseus slaying a monstrous Gorgon. This incongruity, moreover, acquired its significance from apparent affinities between the story of Medusa's death and the scenario of the maiden who is carried off by a god or hero from a circle of her peers, a paradigm that Claude Calame exposed in his detailed study of female choruses.[20] My argument begins with a small group of images that show Perseus fleeing Medusa's beautiful sister. I suggest that these images present Perseus's flight as a form of erotic pursuit, and the substitution of a beautiful Gorgon for a monstrous one is only one of several reversals that hint at the bizarre nature of the scene. These images show us a world in which monsters are beautiful and heroes flee maidens, and they belong, I argue, to a comic tradition of making heroes the objects of jokes.

The images of the attack on the sleeping Medusa, which make up my second case study, place Perseus in a similarly awkward position. Both her sleeping posture and her beauty contribute to the definition of Medusa as a desirable maiden, and the emphasis on her femininity renders the hero's actions questionable at best. The images of the sleeping Medusa, I argue, redefine Perseus's conquest as a victory of the strong over the obviously weak, a victory that may seem either laughable or pitiable, depending on the discursive context framing the scene. Although this context is lost to us in most cases, I consider both tragic and humorous readings of these images.

In the third case study, which consists of scenes in which satyrs accompany Perseus, the role of the beautiful Gorgon is clearer. These images surely belong to the world of satyr play, a genre that relied on the juxtaposition of incongruous elements to achieve a humorous effect. Within this context, the Gorgon's beauty functions as a humorous device, appearing in situations where we might expect to find a more terrifying creature. The unexpected juxtaposition of incongruous elements within the monster has a parallel in Euripides' *Cyclops,* the only complete satyr play to have survived from antiquity, and an awareness of the humor that characterizes the *Cyclops* can help us to understand the images of Perseus and Medusa.

20. Calame 1997. Already in 1954, Webster seems to have been aware of the pattern of "beautiful leader and less beautiful chorus" that Calame would treat in detail some two decades later (Webster 1954, pp. 11–12; Calame 1977). More importantly for my purposes, Webster further suggests "that there may have been a similar pattern, ugly leader and less ugly chorus" (p. 11). Interestingly, he places a Gorgon-faced Artemis at the head of such a chorus, but his arguments are otherwise unconnected to the myth of the Gorgons and rest instead on the appearance of such a figure—if she is in fact Artemis—on an early-6th-century Rhodian plate in London (British Museum A 748). Webster's main purpose in mentioning such choruses is to suggest a visual origin for the personifications of Ate and Litai at *Il.* 9.502; the choruses themselves, monstrous or otherwise, constitute little more than a passing reference.

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Figure 7. Apollo pursuing a maiden, Attic red-figure hydria, ca. 450–440 B.C., Coghill Painter. London, British Museum E 170. Photo © Trustees of the British Museum

THE PARADIGM: MAIDEN CHORUSES AND EROTIC ABDUCTIONS

Calame has shown that female choruses in Greek myth are configured according to a particular paradigm, and that certain features therefore recur: these groups consist of maidens who are close to one another in age, who are called by a collective name, and who share specific familial or geographical associations. One maiden (who corresponds to the figure of the *choregos*) stands out from the rest because of her superior beauty, and she is abducted from the group by a male aggressor as she is approaching marriageable age. Thetis, Helen, and Persephone are among the most prominent examples of maidens whose stories follow this pattern,[21] and representations of maidens' abductions are as consistent in the images as they are in the literature. The shoulder of a hydria in London carries a standard image of such an abduction, with Apollo and an unidentified maiden as the protagonists (Fig. 7).[22] The outstretched arm of the pursuer, the backward glance of the maiden, and the fleeing female companion are all typical features in this kind of scene, the iconography of which became so standard that even an excerpt consisting of one or two figures was sufficient to characterize a scene as an erotic pursuit (Fig. 8).[23]

21. Calame 1997, esp. pp. 19–88. On maiden choruses, see also Power 2000.

22. London, British Museum E 170; *ARV*² 1042, no. 2; *Beazley Addenda*² 320. In other scenes, the pursuer extends both arms; see, e.g., many of the images collected in Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1979.

23. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum B 194; *ARV*² 487, no. 61; *Paralipomena* 512. On visual representations of the "band of maidens," see Ferrari 2002, pp. 43–47. On scenes of erotic pursuit in vase painting, see

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Figure 8. Youth pursuing a maiden, Attic red-figure amphora, Early Classical, Hermonax. *(a)* obverse; *(b)* reverse. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum B 194.
Photos courtesy the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

It is against this background that we may begin to understand the pictures of Perseus fleeing from a beautiful Gorgon, such as we find on a late-5th-century kantharos in Strasbourg (Fig. 9).[24] This image shows the hero running with *harpe* in one hand and Medusa's head in the other, turning his head to glance back at the Gorgon who pursues him. The Gorgon runs with her arms outstretched; her face, like Medusa's, is human, her hair is bound in a tight bun behind her head, and only her wings mark her as something other than an ordinary maiden. It is not only the Gorgons' beauty that makes these images unusual; while Perseus's flight was a well-established theme in both art and literature by this time, the images that show him fleeing the beautiful Gorgon stand out because their formal composition places them firmly within the realm of erotic

Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1979; Zeitlin 1986; Sourvinou-Inwood 1987; Stewart 1995; Frontisi-Ducroux 1996; Osborne 1996; McNiven 2000; Lefkowitz 2002.

24. Strasbourg, Institut d' archéologie classique 1574; *ARV*[2] 1361, no. 2. I have found three other such scenes, all in red-figure. Two date to the last third of the 5th century: Taranto, Museo Nazionale; *ARV*[2] 1361, no. 1 (kantharos). Ferrara, Museo Nazionale di Spina 2512; *ARV*[2] 1206, no. 2; *Paralipomena* 463; *Beazley Addenda*[2] 344 (oinochoe). The third dates to about a century later: London, British Museum F 500; *LCS* 255, no. 194 (hydria). Scholars disagree as to whether the kantharoi in Strasbourg and Taranto—which are nearly identical in iconography—are Attic or early South Italian pieces. Beazley originally judged them to be Attic but later amended his opinion, and both are listed in the second edition of *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters* as South Italian; they are listed as Attic, however, in *LIMC* VII, 1994, p. 340, no. 142, s.v. Perseus (L. J. Roccos). If they are early South Italian vases, they are likely to have been heavily influenced by contemporary Attic pieces and to have reacted to Attic traditions; see Trendall 1990, p. 218.

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Figure 9. Gorgon pursuing Perseus, red-figure kantharos, ca. 420–400 B.C., Class of Bonn 94. *(a)* obverse; *(b)* reverse. Strasbourg, Institut d'archéologie classique 1574. Schauenburg 1960, pl. 17, figs. 1, 2. Courtesy Harvard College Library

pursuit.[25] The poses of both Perseus and the Gorgon align them with the protagonists in more traditional scenes of abduction, as does the profile view of the Gorgon, a creature for whom frontality is the norm.[26] Particularly telling in these scenes is the hero's backward glance at his pursuer: given the nature of the creature he is looking at, the gesture makes little sense except in the context of an erotic pursuit, where it is a standard element.[27]

It is important to recognize that these images are likely to have been as startling to their contemporary viewers as they are to us. Scenes of abduction are certainly numerous in vase painting—Andrew Stewart has counted over 750 on Athenian vases alone—but the only female aggressor, human or divine, who appears with any frequency is Eos, who pursues the Trojan prince Tithonos or the hunter Kephalos on a number of vases.[28] Like the scenes of Eos and her victims, the images of Gorgons pursuing Perseus reverse the typical order in which women were the figures pursued;[29] moreover, like the images that show Eos chasing a hunter, they reverse the patterns of victim and aggressor, showing an armed male fleeing an unarmed female.

25. The scene on the oinochoe in Ferrara (Museo Nazionale di Spina 2512; see above, n. 24) is slightly different from the other three, since the painter has added a third figure (Athena), and Perseus does not turn to look at the Gorgon. This painter does, however, sometimes include a stationary third figure in scenes of erotic pursuit, as on an oinochoe on which a youth pursues a young woman in the presence of a stationary old man (Ferrara, Museo Nazionale di Spina 2505; *ARV*² 1206, no. 3; *Paralipomena* 463; *Beazley Addenda*² 344). The fact that Perseus does not turn his head does not preclude the interpretation of this scene as one of erotic pursuit; while the turn of the head is a common feature of these scenes, it is not mandatory. In fact, as Frontisi-Ducroux (1996, p. 83) notes, this gesture occurs less often in scenes of Eos pursuing young men than in those that show a male pursuer.

26. Frontisi-Ducroux 1988; 1995, pp. 65–74.

27. The significance of the backward glance in scenes of pursuit is debated: Stewart 1995, pp. 79, 83–84; Frontisi-Ducroux 1996, pp. 83, 87–88; Osborne 1996, p. 66. Perseus sometimes turns to look at the monstrous Gorgons who pursue him, as well. In these scenes, however, the Gorgons tend to be shown frontally, so that he does not look directly into their faces. Without entering into a discussion of the ways in which one may or may not safely look at a Gorgon (a point on which Greek thought may not have been entirely consistent), we may observe that in the scenes that concern us here, Perseus is shown looking directly at the face of the Gorgon who pursues him—an action that in no event would have been safe.

28. Stewart 1995, pp. 74, 87–88.

29. On scenes of Eos pursuing young men, see especially Osborne 1996.

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The images of Perseus and the Gorgons incorporate yet another aspect of the imagery of abduction, the sisters (or other female companions) of the abducted maiden. These figures are standard in scenes of abduction, where they flee, run to their father, or make other gestures of alarm, as in the scene shown above on the hydria in London (Fig. 7). Although the girls' poses may vary, they commonly echo the pursuers' pose—on the London hydria, both Apollo and the fleeing girl at the far right run forward with the left arm outstretched. This potential overlap between the pose of the pursuer and that of the fleeing companion adds a further dimension to our understanding of the beautiful Gorgons whom Perseus flees (Fig. 9): although the Gorgons are undoubtedly the pursuers in these scenes, the painters have exploited the ambiguity of their poses in order to mark them simultaneously as pursuers of the hero and as sisters of the violated maiden.

Images of the beautiful Gorgon pursuing Perseus clearly violate the norms of erotic pursuit, but they leave us asking what might have inspired such a treatment of the story of Medusa's death. The answer must be found through an interrogation of the notion, suggested by the images, of Medusa as an abducted maiden. My insistence on the Gorgons' maidenly character is not wholly new; Emily Vermeule seems to have anticipated such a discussion when she remarked that the myth of the Gorgons resembled "a Cinderella story, three sisters with the interesting one marked out for love by the sea-king Poseidon who lay with her in a soft meadow among spring flowers." For Vermeule, the "Cinderella" format did little more than drain the interest from a story that belonged properly to an "old world of magic and fear"—that is, to Near Eastern myth.[30] I believe, however, that the tensions created by the story of a maiden killed by a hero were of utmost interest to the painters, for they heightened both the tragic and the humorous potential of the tale. I return to this point below, but first it is necessary to establish the nature of the connection between Medusa and the paradigm of the abducted maiden.

THE PARADIGM REVERSED: PERSEUS, MEDUSA, AND THE MYTHICAL ABDUCTION

Literary accounts of Medusa's death generally conform to the pattern of the mythical abduction, and the connection was already several centuries old by the time the images I have discussed above were produced. The elements of the mythical abduction are firmly in place in Hesiod's *Theogony* (270–281), where we are told that the Gorgons, daughters of Phorkys and Keto, live together in the borderlands between Ocean and Night. Two of the sisters, Sthenno and Euryale, are immortal and ageless, but Medusa is mortal, and she alone of the three "suffers a grievous fate" (λυγρὰ παθοῦσα, 276). She couples with Poseidon in a soft meadow among the spring flowers (ἐν μαλακῷ λειμῶνι καὶ ἄνθεσιν εἰαρινοῖσιν, 279), and when Perseus cuts off her head, Pegasos and Chrysaor—the children of her union with Poseidon—spring forth.

Several details in this account suggest an affinity with the paradigm of the mythical abduction. Though smaller than most of the groups treated by Calame,[31] the Gorgons are a group of sisters born in the same

30. Vermeule 1979, pp. 136–139, esp. p. 139 (quotation). Although Vermeule is not concerned with maiden choruses, she includes the Gorgons in "a series of lovely and dangerous creatures" (p. 136) who live on the borders of Ocean, implicitly suggesting their affinity with female groups such as the Sirens and the Hesperids.

31. Calame 1997, p. 23.

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generation (and thus contemporary with each other in age), who share a collective name (Γοργούς, 274) and live together. Of the three sisters, one is distinguished as exceptional, and she alone becomes the object of male attention. What is remarkable about this account is that the poet says nothing of either the physical appearance of the Gorgons or the dangers involved in looking at them—although he does not hesitate, some 15 lines later, to describe the monstrous Echidna in vivid detail (295–305). The Gorgons of the *Theogony* are simply three sisters, two of whom are immortal; the mortal one couples with Poseidon, is killed by Perseus, and through her death gives birth to Pegasos and Chrysaor. In fact, the only physical monstrosity that can be ascribed to Hesiod's Medusa is her unusual way of giving birth.

The most significant difference between Medusa's story and more traditional accounts of abducted maidens is its preoccupation with mortality, for Perseus does not rape or marry Medusa, but kills her. Still, we do not have to look far to find that the connection between death and marriage was strong in Greek thought. Perhaps the most apt comparison for our purposes is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter,* in which Persephone's seizure by the lord of the Underworld is equal parts death and rape.[32] Medusa, too, is raped by a god before the arrival of Perseus, and Vernant has noted the parallel between the flowery meadow (ἐν μαλακῷ λειμῶνι καὶ ἄνθεσιν εἰαρινοῖσιν, Hes. *Theog.* 279) that serves as the setting for that event and the soft meadow (λειμῶν'. . . μαλακὸν, *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 7) where Hades finds Persephone and her companions gathering flowers.[33] Despite its emphasis on mortality, Hesiod's account of the Gorgons contains a strong sexual element, and even Medusa's death resembles marriage in the sense that both produce children.

As the earliest surviving description of Medusa's death, the account in the *Theogony* attests to the antiquity of the Gorgon's association with the maiden who is raped by a god or hero. It also shows us that even in this early period, her death was figured as a perversion of the erotic abduction. Her fame rested on her mortality rather than her beauty; her fate, likewise, was a death that produced prodigious offspring. Subsequent accounts, both literary and visual, distorted the paradigm further: the maidens became hideous monsters deadly to behold, and Perseus turned from pursuer to pursued when he was forced to flee the dead Medusa's sisters. Despite their effect on individual elements of the story, these reversals did not violate

32. For other mythical maidens who die or are transformed (into animals or trees) at marriageable age, see Dowden 1989. Dowden argues that marriage, death, and transformation are connected because they all "serve to terminate maidenhood" (p. 3). On the conflation of the wedding and the funeral, see Rehm 1994. More recently, Ferrari (2002, pp. 190–194; 2004) has argued that the "bride of death" metaphor relied not on the structural identity of marriage and death, but on the fact that the two were construed as alternatives.

33. Vernant 1991a, p. 123. Calame (1997, p. 154) also includes the Hesiodic meadow in his discussion of eroticized meadows that serve as the settings for maidens' rapes. On eroticized meadows in Greek thought, see also Power 2000, p. 79.

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its basic framework, which remained consistent with the paradigm of the maiden taken from a circle of her peers, as I hope the following examples will show.[34]

If we consider that the practice of distinguishing the abducted girl from the others in her group may explain why Medusa sometimes appears physically different from her sisters in vase painting, we can begin to see evidence for the pattern in the early visual record. On the famous Proto-Attic neck amphora in Eleusis, all the Gorgons appear as monsters, but Medusa is much larger than her sisters and has a rounder torso.[35] Similar distinctions can occur when the Gorgons are beautiful maidens: although both Gorgons on a mid-5th-century white-ground pyxis in Paris have human faces, the Gorgon on the left (usually identified as Medusa, probably because of her proximity to Perseus), has a round, upturned nose, in contrast with her sister's straighter nose, and their *chitoniskoi* differ in color.[36]

The vase painters were not alone among their contemporaries in emphasizing Medusa's affinities with the abducted maiden. In Pindar's account of Perseus's victory in the Twelfth *Pythian Ode* (6–17), the parallels with the traditional erotic abduction are striking. Here Pindar specifies that the Gorgons are maidens (παρθενίοις, 9), and while noting the forbidding appearance of the two sisters (παρθενίοις . . . ἀπλάτοις ὀφίων κεφαλαῖς, 9), he singles out Medusa for her beauty (εὐπαράου . . . Μεδοίσας, 16). His focus on the Gorgons' dirge (θρῆνον, 8) for their dead sister strengthens the connection to maiden choruses: the *threnos* typically consisted of a monodic performance with choral accompaniment, and in Pindar's account of Medusa's death, the sisters' dirge accompanies Perseus's shout (ἄϋσεν, 11). Since the story of Medusa's death plays upon the theme of the maiden's abduction, moreover, we might even understand the *threnos* sung by Medusa's sisters as a replacement for the *epithalamium* they would have sung if her story had adhered to the traditional pattern of abduction for marriage.[37]

Pindar's definition of Medusa as an object of erotic desire corresponds to a larger pattern in epinician poetry that Timothy Power has recently explored with reference to Bacchylides 13. In this ode, the maiden *choregos* appears as a leaping, carefree fawn (ἠύτε νεβρὸς ἀπεν[θὴς . . . θρώισκουσα, 87, 90) dancing with her companions in a flowery landscape (ἀνθεμόεντας

34. The parallel between Perseus and the mythical abductor is strengthened by three 6th-century black-figure amphoras that show him, identified by the *kibisis* slung over his shoulder, standing between two fleeing women: Heidelberg, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität S 184; *ABV* 394.5, 696. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 41.162.179; *ABV* 373, no. 174; *Beazley Addenda*[2] 99. Würzburg, Universität, Martin von Wagner Museum L 213; *ABV* 395, no. 6; *Beazley Addenda*[2] 103. He thrusts his sword at one woman, and both raise their arms in terror, in a scheme familiar from black-figure images of abduction. The identities of the women on these amphoras have been disputed, but regardless of who they are, the images suggest that the connection between Perseus and the mythical abductor was of interest to Attic painters by the 6th century. For the women as maenads, see Howe 1954, p. 220; for the women as maenads or Gorgons, see *LIMC* VII, 1994, p. 231, s.v. Perseus (L. J. Roccos).

35. Eleusis Museum 2630. The flowers on the back of the amphora, where Medusa's body has fallen, call to mind the flowery meadows that serve as settings for maidens' abductions, on which see above.

36. Paris, Musée du Louvre 1286; *ARV*[2] 755, 1669.

37. On threnodies and *epithalamia,* see Calame 1997, pp. 82–85. For the vocal and aural aspects of Pindar's treatment of the myth, see Segal 1995, 1998.

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ἐπ[' ὄχθους, 88).[38] Power argues that the ode presents the *choregos* as an idealized marriage partner for the victor, and that their union has an analogue in one of the heroic labors narrated in the poem: "I propose that Herakles' subjugation of a person of *hubris hupsinoos,* figured as the defeat of the Nemean lion, in the ode's first myth narrative (44–49) is a model for the victor's subjugation and acculturation (through marriage) of the *hupsauches* (84) *choregos,* who is figured as a wild fawn. Indeed, the sexualized acculturation of 'wild women' (or women guarded by antisocial wild men) by god or hero is a fairly common theme in the epinikia."[39] Power goes on to list Pelops and Hippodameia (Pind. *Ol.* 1) and Apollo and Cyrene (Pind. *Pyth.* 9) as examples of such pairings, and to his list I would add Perseus and Medusa in *Pythian* 12. Equal parts maiden and beast,[40] Medusa is the perfect wild woman for the epinician hero to subdue, and it seems to be in keeping with this tradition of erotic subjugation in the *epinikia* that Pindar has emphasized her maidenly beauty.

Returning to the images of the beautiful Gorgon pursuing Perseus (Fig. 9), we are now in a position to see that their resemblance to traditional images of erotic pursuit, far from being coincidental, is rooted in an ancient understanding of Medusa's death as a variation on the theme of the maiden's abduction by a hero. This double characterization of the Gorgons made Perseus as much an abductor of maidens as he was a slayer of monsters, and the two roles did not fit together comfortably. Under these circumstances, Medusa's death could at best be envisioned as an erotic abduction with a series of horrifying twists: the maidens become fanged, bearded monsters able to kill with a glance; one of them, exceptional for her mortality rather than her beauty, is killed instead of abducted; and the hero himself turns from predator to prey when the surviving sisters, rather than fleeing in terror, pursue him. In its worst form, the story plays out as we see on many of the vases: a hero kills a maiden and, still armed, flees her beautiful sister.

We might ask at this point why the painters would have interpreted Perseus's actions in such a way—why, that is, would they have chosen to expose his opponents as creatures no more threatening, and no less desirable, than ordinary maidens? Neither the conquest nor its aftermath admits a flattering portrait of the hero, who—far from being a victorious slayer of monsters—appears barely capable of surviving a confrontation with young women. The key to understanding these scenes may lie in the recognition of their humorous potential: these images, I suggest, constitute parodies in which Perseus himself is the object of the joke. As such, they have a contemporary counterpart in mythological comedy, a genre whose fragmentary remains indicate that it targeted the deeds of particular heroes for comic mistreatment, the lives of Odysseus and Herakles being especially popular subjects.[41]

We need not find exact parallels in the dramatic fragments to suggest that the images of Perseus could function in the same way, but it helps to note that both the literary and artistic record reveal his life to have been a subject of at least occasional humorous treatment. Several fragments by Kratinos attest to his presence in Old Comedy, and a red-figure chous from the middle of the 5th century shows a figure who brandishes *harpe* and

38. Power (2000, p. 79) notes the parallel with the flowery *leimones* and *kepoi* that are typically eroticized in Greek literature. On choral dancers and animal metaphors, see Henrichs 1996, pp. 36–38, p. 70, n. 38.

39. Power 2000, p. 79.

40. On the Gorgon's animal associations, see Vernant 1991a, pp. 116, 123–125, 132–134.

41. See Phillips 1959; Hunter 1983. For parallels to this type of comedy in vase painting, see Ferrari Pinney 1984.

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kibisis dancing on a stage before a small audience.[42] Because the surface of the vase is badly worn, certain details of the dancer's features are difficult to discern, but E. Gilliéron's reconstruction of the figure as a dwarf is consistent with what remains visible.[43] Other scholars, such as Semni Karouzou and J. D. Beazley, have seen the dancing figure as a comic actor; less plausibly, Frank Brommer suggested that he was a satyr.[44] Their differences notwithstanding, these interpretations all agree that the figure's pose and physiognomy would have lent him a certain comic indignity in Greek eyes; the pose, in particular, has a counterpart in the dancing satyr on the slightly later Pronomos vase, who shares his frontal body, raised arm, and raised, bent leg.[45] One is perhaps also reminded of Xenophon's description of the buffoon Phillip flailing about for the amusement of the guests at Kallias's symposium (*Symp.* 2.21–23).

Whether or not an actor playing Perseus ever performed such a dance on a real stage, the painter's choice of the hero as a subject for comic treatment is significant. This scene is our clearest indication that Perseus himself could serve as a visual stimulus to humor: the dance, his physical form, and his presence on stage all invite us to see him as, literally, a spectacle. The humor of this image relies on the manipulation of his body, and to recognize it, we must be familiar with the conventions the Greek artists employed to represent the ideal heroic body. With the depictions of Perseus being pursued by a beautiful Gorgon, our ability to recognize the humor relies instead on our awareness of the artists' manipulation of his role in the narrative and of the conventions of erotic pursuit.[46] This interpretation acquires additional force when we consider that on the Strasbourg kantharos (Fig. 9), the hero and the Gorgon can never be visible to the viewer at once. The time required for the viewer to rotate the vessel and take in the entire scene allows for an element of surprise, as it becomes clear that, against all expectations, the creature that Perseus flees is no more threatening than a maiden, and the figure that the maiden pursues is an armed hero.[47] In fact, given the potential overlap between the pose of the fleeing maiden and the pose of the pursuer—as we saw on the London hydria (Fig. 7)—we cannot be certain whether the Gorgon is the pursuer or the pursued in this scene until we have turned the kantharos around to find Perseus, fleeing for his life.

42. Kratinos: frr. 218–232 KA. Chous: Athens, M. Vlasto; *ARV*² 1215, no. 1; *Beazley Addenda*² 348.

43. Pickard-Cambridge 1968, fig. 76. For Greek attitudes about dwarfism, see Garland 1995, pp. 84–86, 116–117.

44. Karouzou 1945, p. 42, pl. 5; Beazley, *ARV*² 1215, no. 1; Brommer 1944, p. 28. See also Green 1991, p. 31. To the extent that his features are legible, the figure appears to lack the round, upturned nose and bald head that characterize so many red-figure satyrs.

45. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 3240; *ARV*² 1336, no. 1; *Paralipomena* 480; *Beazley Addenda*² 365.

46. The scenes of Perseus fleeing beautiful Gorgons are not the only ones in which the painters exploited the humorous potential of the imagery of pursuit; see Mitchell 2004, pp. 19–21.

47. I thank Ann Kuttner for this observation, which also applies to the kantharos in the Museo Nazionale in Taranto (see n. 24, above).

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THE PARADIGM EVOKED: BEAUTIFUL GORGONS AND SLEEPING GORGONS

The scenes of the flight give us a glimpse of the profoundly destabilizing effect the Gorgons' beauty may have on our perception of Perseus's victory. By depicting Medusa and her sisters as beautiful maidens who are at home in narratives of pursuit and rape, the painters draw attention to their roles as particular kinds of victims, and in doing so, they place Perseus in an unexpected sort of danger. As visibly nonthreatening opponents, the beautiful Medusa and her sisters pose a clear threat to the hero's honor, and the threat has several potential consequences. In the scenes of Perseus's flight, which clearly overturn the norms of erotic pursuit, the effect seems to have been humorous: these pictures show us a world in reverse where monsters become beautiful, maidens turn aggressive, and their pursuer runs for his life. In the second type of image I consider, which shows Perseus's encounter with a sleeping Gorgon, the character of the threat is more difficult to establish.

The scenes of Perseus confronting the sleeping Medusa (Figs. 2, 4–6), as we have seen, present a particular challenge to Furtwängler's system of classification, and the variations they show suggest that an interpretation of these scenes that relies on the Gorgons' physical appearance as its sole criterion will be of limited value. In the images of pursuit, we saw that the Gorgons' appearance is only one factor that contributes to the message of a scene. The same, I believe, is true of the images of sleeping Gorgons, which are most profitably considered as a single group within the larger context of sleeping figures in vase painting.

Scenes of Perseus and the sleeping Gorgon consist, in their simplest form, of the hero approaching the sleeping Medusa, who usually rests under a tree or on a small hill. She occasionally sleeps in the company of one or more of her sisters, and Perseus is often accompanied by Athena, and sometimes also by Hermes and Poseidon. Typically, the hero bends or crouches over Medusa as he prepares to kill her (Figs. 4–6); one scene shows him in the act of beheading her (Fig. 2); and once he appears stealing away with Medusa's head while her sisters continue to sleep, undisturbed.[48]

Medusa's capacity to be represented as both a monster and a maiden is crucial to our understanding of these scenes. Sheila McNally has observed that sleeping figures in Greek and Roman art typically fall into two categories, women and beings she describes as "something more or less than human"; in vase painting, the latter category consists chiefly of giants and the Cyclops.[49] Frontisi-Ducroux, in a study focused on Athenian vases, summarizes: "the motif of sleep serves above all to make obvious the vulnerability of the sleeper or to ridicule him or her and applies thus only to weak creatures (woman, child, slave) or the marginal or alienated (barbarian, giant)."[50] We have seen that Medusa fits both descriptions at once. As Perseus's monstrous adversary, she resembles Alkyoneus and Polyphemos, who are attacked by Herakles and Odysseus, respectively, in their sleep (Fig. 10).[51] As a desirable maiden, however, she is in the company of the sleeping nymphs who are repeatedly ravished by satyrs (Fig. 11), and of the sleeping Ariadne, who is abandoned by one lover only to be found

48. Berlin, Staatliche Museen F 3022; *LCS* 487, no. 335.

49. McNally 1985, p. 154.

50. Frontisi-Ducroux 1996, p. 87.

51. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria 1730-D4; *ARV*² 125, no. 20; *Paralipomena* 333; *Beazley Addenda*² 176.

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Figure 10. Herakles approaching Alkyoneus, Attic red-figure cup, late 6th century B.C., Pamphaios (potter), Nikosthenes Painter (attributed to). Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria 1730-D4. Felton Bequest, 1957. Photo courtesy National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

moments later by the next.[52] All of these scenes are important components in our interpretation of the sleeping Medusa.

Unfortunately, much about the scenes described above remains poorly understood. Still, they should not be assumed to be any less nuanced than the scenes of Perseus and the sleeping Medusa. In fact, several considerations caution us against interpreting the images of Odysseus and Herakles attacking the sleeping giants as portraits of ideal heroic behavior. The satyrs that sometimes accompany Odysseus and Polyphemos suggest possible connections between these pictures and satyr play, and the images of Herakles attacking the sleeping Alkyoneus have long proven difficult to interpret, not least because they have no parallel in the surviving literary record.[53] It is also significant that the heroes who attack sleeping giants on the vases, Odysseus and Herakles, are the ones whose exploits are known to have provided especially rich fodder for comedy, a fact that suggests that their exploits were as potentially laughable as they were admirable.[54]

Although none of these factors points to a conclusive interpretation of these scenes, they do suggest some of the problems raised by the image of the hero's attack on his sleeping enemy; in particular, they caution us against assuming that to represent a hero's behavior is to endorse it. Yet,

52. Fig. 11: Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 01.8072; *ARV*² 461, no. 36; *Paralipomena* 377; *Beazley Addenda*² 244. On sleeping nymphs, see especially McNally 1984 and Lissarrague 1990a, who refer to these figures as maenads. I follow the arguments of Hedreen 1994, who argues that the satyrs' female companions are not maenads, but nymphs. For a list of scenes showing satyrs approaching sleeping nymphs, see Osborne 1996, pp. 78–80, nn. 30–31. On the sleeping Ariadne, see McNally 1985.

53. Satyrs with Odysseus and Polyphemos: London, British Museum 1947.7–14.8; *LCS* 20, no. 85. Andreae 1962 provides a survey of the images of Herakles killing the sleeping Alkyoneus.

54. Phillips 1959.

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Figure 11. Satyrs attacking a sleeping nymph, Attic red-figure kylix (detail), ca. 490 B.C., Makron. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, 01.8072. Photo © 2007, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

despite all these uncertainties, these pictures may bring us a little closer to understanding Perseus's encounter with the sleeping Medusa, for however we should understand the heroes' attacks on the sleeping giants, it seems clear that only the cowardly satyrs attack sleeping maidens. Once again we find Perseus in a precarious position, for although his actions may seem fitting when he is faced with a monster whose glance can kill, they look distinctly out of place when directed toward a sleeping maiden.

This situation has a parallel in epic tradition in the death of Thersites, who is slain by Achilles in the *Aithiopis* after taunting him for loving the Amazon Penthesileia, whom the hero has killed in battle (Procl. *Chrestomathia* 2).[55] As Josine Blok has demonstrated, Thersites' definition of Penthesileia as a desirable woman is dangerous because it undermines Achilles' status as triumphant hero, which remains intact only as long as his opponent is perceived as a formidable warrior—only as long, that is, as the Amazon's femininity is denied. It is all the worse for Achilles, then, that Penthisileia's femininity is doubly determined in this episode: as a living Amazon, she possesses a masculine *thumos* in a female body, but upon her death, the *thumos* departs, leaving only the body of a woman.[56] Here the parallel with Medusa becomes evident, for if death turns Penthesileia into a woman, sleep does the same for Medusa. Although she occasionally retains her broad face, grimace, or fangs (Figs. 4–6), a sleeping Gorgon resembles a dead Amazon in the sense that both lack the features that make them worthy opponents for a hero. In this respect, Perseus's adversary is unlike those faced by Herakles and Odysseus, for as a creature whose only weapon is her gaze, Medusa is singly disarmed by sleep. Whatever sleep may do to the opponents of Herakles and Odysseus, the giants' massive bodies, which

55. This tradition is also preserved in the *Posthomerica* of Quintus of Smyrna: 1.666–668 (Achilles' love for the dead Amazon), 1.722–747 (Thersites' mockery of Achilles).

56. Blok 1995, pp. 195–288.

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function as their chief weapons, remain visible, and Alkyoneus sometimes continues to clutch his club (Fig. 10). The immediate threat is diminished, but the source of the danger is readily visible. By contrast, a Gorgon with closed eyes appears at a clear disadvantage.[57] If the danger rests in her eyes, then sleep temporarily negates the threat and leaves her, the pictures seem to say, as harmless as a maiden.

Insofar as they expose Perseus's opponent as nothing more than a sleeping maiden, the images on the vases assume much the same role as Thersites, who defines Penthesileia as more woman than warrior when he mocks Achilles' alleged love for her (τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ Πενθεσιλείᾳ λεγόμενον ἔρωτα, Procl. *Chrestomathia* 2). As Blok observes, this taunt is an implicit challenge to the hero's honor, since "Thersites has represented him at less than his true worth."[58] As we attempt to understand the messages conveyed by the images of Perseus attacking the sleeping Medusa, which seem to represent Perseus at less than *his* true worth, it is important to note that the episode in the *Aithiopis* reveals a distinct ambivalence about the threat that the desirable female opponent poses to the hero's honor. What Thersites understands to be fodder for a good joke is for Achilles a matter of life and death, and it is crucial that we recognize that the conflict between them is not simply a quarrel that escalates to a fatal point. Rather, as Gregory Nagy has demonstrated, Thersites intrudes into epic as an unwelcome guest from another genre, blame poetry, and his quarrel with Achilles is therefore as much a clash of genres as it is a conflict between individuals. Trapped within the epic, the purpose of which is to celebrate the hero, Thersites and the tradition of blame poetry he embodies are bound to lose.[59] In a different genre, he might gain the upper hand, and then we, too, would be laughing at the hero who compromised his honor by killing a woman in battle. Our understanding of the Amazon's death is closely tied to the genre in which it is represented.

Returning to the images of Perseus and the sleeping Medusa, we find ourselves impeded by our ignorance of the genre to which the pictures belong. Unlike the scenes of pursuit that show the weak in pursuit of the strong, the armed fleeing the unarmed, and the maiden desiring the hero, the attack on the sleeping Medusa does not fit neatly into a scheme of comic reversals. The images of the sleeping Medusa are arguably far more unsettling, for they show the strong preying on one who is obviously weak, but whether they were intended to provoke laughter at the hero or sympathy for the maiden is unclear. We know from surviving fragments and summaries of Aeschylus's *Phorkides* that the sleeping Gorgon could be interpreted as a tragic figure, but these remains otherwise shed little light on how the theme might have been developed.[60]

It is also clear that in some situations, a sleeping Gorgon could be funny, for satyrs—who are generally accepted as markers of humor, even if there is no consensus about *how* they were funny—sometimes appear in pictures in which the closed eyes of the gorgoneion suggest that Medusa was sleeping when Perseus found her.[61] With the images of Perseus approaching the sleeping Medusa, however, we lack the cultural knowledge necessary to identify the clues that might otherwise help us to place the images in a particular genre (or genres). One might make a case for interpreting

57. On the Gorgon's eyes, see Vernant 1991a.

58. Blok 1995, p. 209.

59. Nagy 1999, pp. 259–264.

60. Radt, *TrGF* III 362–364 fr. 262 *(Phorkides)*. The theme was not, moreover, confined to tragedy; it also appears in Pherecydes' account (Wendel 1958, p. 320, lines 11–13).

61. Paris, Musée du Louvre CA 1728; *ARV*² 677, no. 10. Taranto, Museo Nazionale 8263; *LCS* 55, no. 280. On satyrs and humor, see below.

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some scenes as humorous: Perseus's occasional bent or crouching posture (Figs. 4–6) may be intended to liken him to the satyr,[62] the only other figure in vase painting who attacks sleeping women (Fig. 11). The conflation of the hero with the notoriously cowardly satyr is not unimaginable, since we have already seen him running fully armed from a beautiful maiden. This interpretation is at best hypothetical, however, and the most we can generally say about the pictures of Perseus and the sleeping Medusa is that they hold the potential to have been either humorous or pitiful, depending on nuances imparted by clues of which we remain unaware.

It is clear in any case that, like the scenes of pursuit, the images of the sleeping Gorgon play upon her double nature as monster and maiden, and although the principles that govern the pairing of images on vases are still poorly understood, one vase seems to make the thematic connection between the two types of scene explicit (Fig. 5). On the obverse of the Villa Giulia Painter's bell krater in Madrid, we find Perseus, flanked by Hermes and Athena, about to attack the sleeping Medusa; on the reverse, an old man with a scepter stands between two running women who throw up their arms in alarm, a gesture familiar from scenes of abduction where the maiden's sisters run to their father in terror. Francisco Alvarez-Ossorio suggested in 1910 that the women on the Madrid krater were Medusa's sisters fleeing after Perseus's attack,[63] but such a scene would be without parallel in the imagery, especially since Gorgons in this period are always shown with wings, and never in the presence of their father. Still, the scene clearly belongs to the iconography of abduction,[64] and it thus invites us to consider the possibility that the two sides are united by this theme. Alvarez-Ossorio understood the scenes to belong to the same narrative—Perseus attacks Medusa and her sisters flee—but if the women on the reverse are not Gorgons, his reading becomes difficult to sustain. It is conceivable, however, that the painter has emphasized the abnormality of Medusa's abduction by juxtaposing it with an excerpt from a more traditional one, placing the questionable nature of the hero's actions once again in high relief.

THE BEAUTIFUL GORGON AMONG SATYRS

The uncertainties that hinder our efforts to understand the sleeping Medusa are less of a problem in another set of images, in which the presence of satyrs alongside Perseus and Medusa assures us that these pictures were understood in some way to be funny. Although these scenes do not all depict the same moment in Perseus's encounter with Medusa, the presence of satyrs permits us to consider them together, because it suggests that the scenes are connected to satyric drama and may be interpreted accordingly. The idea that the scenes with satyrs reflect the influence of one or more satyr plays about Perseus is not new.[65] Nevertheless, because discussions of representations of satyr plays on vases have concentrated almost exclusively on the question of how these images should be identified—and then, sometimes, how they might be used to reconstruct the content of satyr plays known only from titles or textual fragments—relatively little attention has been devoted to identifying the elements of humor that should be present if

62. See also Athens, National Archaeological Museum 10459; Wolters 1940, pl. 24.1–3.

63. Alvarez-Ossorio 1910, p. 70.

64. Cf. Leroux 1912, pp. 93–94; *CVA,* Madrid—Musée archéologique national 2 [Espagne 2], p. 8.

65. Jahn 1847, pp. 289–292; 1868; Brommer 1937, pp. 38–48; 1944, pp. 25–29; Webster 1967, pp. 169–170; Trendall and Webster 1971, pp. 11–13, 38–39; Simon 1982, p. 139; *LCS* 55, no. 280; Sutton 1984, pp. 125–126; Schefold and Jung 1988, p. 114; *LIMC* VII, 1994, p. 346, s.v. Perseus (L. J. Roccos); Krumeich, Pechstein, and Seidensticker 1999, pp. 661–664.

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Figure 12. Hermes, Perseus, Athena with gorgoneion, and satyr, Apulian red-figure bell krater, ca. 380–360 B.C., Graz Painter. Leipzig, Universität, Institut für Klassische Archäologie und Antikenmuseum T 83. Photo M. Wenzel, courtesy Antikenmuseum der Universität Leipzig

these images do represent satyr plays.[66] The humor that was characteristic of satyr play, however, is crucial to our interpretation of these images.

I suggest not only that the images of Perseus, Medusa, and the satyrs are associated with satyr plays, but also that the satyric context is the key to understanding the beautiful gorgoneia in these scenes. Otto Jahn advanced a similar argument in an 1847 article about an Apulian bell krater in Leipzig (Fig. 12);[67] for him, however, the humor of the scene derived from what he believed to be not the actual gorgoneion, but a doll or effigy with which Perseus practiced for his task, and which frightened the cowardly satyrs. The satyrs' terror at such a harmless object, Jahn suggested, was in keeping with the principles of satyr play, which contrasted the hero's bravery with the satyrs' cowardice.[68] Neither the textual nor the visual record provides us with a compelling reason to hypothesize, with Jahn, about a version of the myth in which Perseus used an effigy of Medusa to prepare for his confrontation with the monster herself.[69] Still, the suggestion that

66. An exception to this general pattern is the work of Hedreen, who comments (1994, pp. 65–69) on humor in his discussion of a group of vases that may show a satyr play involving nymphs. Otherwise, most recent attempts to explain the humor associated with satyrs in vase painting have been made by scholars who do not accept that satyric drama had as direct an influence on vase painting as is often thought; see, e.g., Moret 1984, pp. 139–142; Lissarrague 1990b; Mitchell 2004, pp. 21–32.

67. Jahn 1847. Leipzig, Universität, Institut für Klassische Archäologie und Antikenmuseum T 83; *RVAp* I 161, no. 218.

68. Jahn 1847, pp. 289–292.

69. Jahn himself seems to have abandoned this interpretation by the time he addressed the subject again in 1868. There he refers to the head simply as the gorgoneion, and he cites parallels in Pompeian wall paintings in which Perseus shows the gorgoneion to Andromeda by reflecting it in a body of water (pp. 11–12).

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an ancient audience would have regarded such an image as funny—and, moreover, that it would have located at least some of the humor in the appearance of the gorgoneion—is probably more accurate than subsequent studies have recognized.[70] I return to this point below, after first outlining the connection between these vases and satyr play.

Images of Perseus with Satyrs

Satyrs appear in 11 red-figure scenes of Perseus's encounter with Medusa.[71] Of these 11 pieces, only a mid-5th-century lekythos that shows a satyr running with *harpe, kibisis,* and gorgoneion is from the Greek mainland.[72] The remaining pieces are South Italian and range in date from the late 5th century to the late 4th century B.C. In every case, the Gorgon's face is human.[73] Only the lekythos shows a satyr taking any significant part in the action of the scene; some scholars have identified the satyr as Perseus himself, but it is possible that he has simply stolen the hero's attributes, a prank that also occurs in images of Herakles with the satyrs, at least some of which can be associated with satyr play.[74]

In two cases, satyrs appear at (or shortly after) the beheading, both times as spectators, and once as witness to the birth of Pegasos and Chrysaor from Medusa's neck.[75] Most frequently, however, satyrs are shown simply reacting in horror—turning their heads, covering their eyes, throwing up

70. This point is occasionally noted but never developed. Schauenburg (1960, pp. 97–98), while not discussing humor in these images at any length, accepts Jahn's argument that the same principle of humor is operating here as in satyr play, although he himself does not believe that the Leipzig krater represents a satyr play.

71. The nude male figure holding a thyrsus on a fragmentary Apulian calyx krater in Bari (Museo Archeologico 12013; *RVAp* I 212, no. 248) may also be a satyr, but because only his lower half survives, and no tail is visible, the identification is not secure. The major argument for identifying this figure as a satyr is the thyrsus. Schauenburg (1960, p. 78) argues that the thyrsus identifies the figure as either a satyr or Dionysos, but since Dionysos is otherwise absent in scenes involving Perseus and the beautiful Gorgon, the figure seems more likely to be a satyr (whose frontally turned body may have made the inclusion of a tail unnecessary).

72. Paris, Musée du Louvre CA 1728 (see p. 93, n. 61, above), from Boiotia.

73. It should be noted that on two of the vases, the Apulian calyx krater in Bari (Museo Archeologico 12013; *RVAp* I 212, no. 248) and the Apulian bell krater in Leipzig (Fig. 12), Medusa's face is no longer visible. Jahn, who discusses the Leipzig krater in detail, also seems to have been somewhat uncertain about the appearance of the gorgoneion. Twice he mentions that it resembles "eine bärtige Maske" (1847, p. 289; 1868, p. 12), but the drawing of the vase that accompanies his description simply shows the face of a slightly grimacing old woman (1847). The drawing should probably be considered unreliable, since the lines are least certain in the portion of the scene that is missing today. Neither the image that survives on the vase nor the drawing explains what inspired Jahn's description of the gorgoneion as a bearded mask, and it seems best to consider the face as simply missing. We may note, however, that the head resembles Athena's head in its size and shape, as well as in the angle at which it is held. Monstrous gorgoneia usually have larger heads and broader faces (and are not shown with necks), so it is likely that this gorgoneion had human features. On the Bari krater, the face of the gorgoneion is slightly broader, and the hair is more unkempt, but both the size of the head and the inclusion of the neck suggest that the facial features of this gorgoneion, too, were human.

74. For the satyr as Perseus himself: *LIMC* VII, 1994, no. 31, s.v. Perseus (L. J. Roccos). On scenes of satyrs stealing Herakles' weapons, see Lissarrague 1995. The presence of a formally dressed *aulos* player in some of these scenes suggests that they belong to satyr play (e.g., Padula, Museo Archeologico della Lucania Occidentale; *ARV*² 1699). On the *aulos* player as an indicator of theatricality, see Beazley 1955.

75. Marseilles, Musée Borély 1427; *LCS* 151, no. 862. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 1767. I have neither seen the latter piece in person nor found a published photograph of the full scene, but the description of the piece by Jahn (1868, pp. 8–9) confirms that the Gorgons are represented as young women.

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their arms, or running away—at the display of the gorgoneion; in these scenes, they appear both alone with Perseus and as part of a larger group.[76] The presence of satyrs in these scenes suggests a connection with satyr play, but in the absence of scholarly consensus on how to identify the influence of satyr play in vase painting, some justification for this proposal is required. I begin by briefly summarizing the terms of the debate.

One popular position holds that a satyr play lies behind any image that shows satyrs with gods or heroes with whom they otherwise have no known association, or that shows them taking part in activities unassociated with the Dionysiac *thiasos*.[77] While the inclusion of formal theatrical detail, such as costume or a formally dressed *aulos* player, may strengthen the case for connecting these images to the theater, such detail is not considered necessary; it has been amply demonstrated that the inclusion of explicit theatrical detail had less to do with producing literal images of the stage than with emphasizing the theatrical context of the scene.[78] The more skeptical position, articulated most forcefully by François Lissarrague, grants the images a greater degree of independence from the stage.[79] In this view, the satyrs place the images not in the realm of theater, but in the world of the polis overturned. The key to this interpretation lies in the identity of the satyrs as "antitypes of the Athenian male citizenry [who] present us with an inverted anthropology (or andrology) of the ancient city-state."[80] They perform and parody the tasks of heroes and citizens, creating what Lissarrague calls "an anthropology of laughter." In this view, the images on the vases are connected to the theater only insofar as both

76. With Perseus: Baltimore, Art Market; Jahn 1868, pl. 1, fig. 3; Howe 1954, fig. 8; Brommer 1973, p. 288, no. D9, s.v. Perseus in verscheidenen Szenen. Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum 79; *RVAp* I 77, no. 83. Part of a larger group: Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum 2667; *LCS* 113, no. 584. Leipzig, Universität, Institut für Klassische Archäologie und Antikenmuseum T 83; *RVAp* I 161, no. 218 (Fig. 12). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 82039 (H 2562); *RVAp* I 198, no. 52. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum St. 1609; *RVAp* I 272, no. 77. Taranto, Museo Nazionale 124007; *RVAp* I 38, no. 18.

77. Jahn 1868; Brommer 1944, pp. 7–8; Simon 1982. The difficulty with this position is that we are less well informed than ancient audiences would have been about what constitutes a normal range of activities and associations for satyrs, and it is risky to speculate on the basis of such negative evidence (Webster 1950; Sutton 1984, pp. 119–120; Lissarrague 1990b, pp. 231–232). Nevertheless, the approach is not without foundation; the literary remains of satyr plays, while fragmentary, frequently show satyrs becoming involved in situations that are as apparently out of character for them as the scenes on the vases seem to be (Seaford 1984; Hedreen 1992, p. 105). Moreover, the assumption that the images of satyrs with strange gods or heroes refer to lost myths would require us to invent a whole host of mythical variants for which we have no attestation apart from these images—a move that is ultimately no less speculative than the invention of otherwise unattested satyr plays on the basis of these images. More cautious proponents of this hypothesis have focused on images whose content can be matched with surviving titles or fragments of satyr plays (Webster 1967, pp. 137–170; Simon 1982; Sutton 1984, pp. 119–120). Because of the fragmentary nature of both the literary and the visual remains, however, we cannot expect that every satyr play known from the literary sources will have a parallel in the visual remains, nor can we expect every suspected visual representation of a satyr play to correspond to a known title or fragment.

78. Green 1991. The so-called Pronomos vase in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples (see p. 89, n. 45, above), in which the details of the costume are shown with varying degrees of explicitness, is a good example of the painters' complex attitudes toward depicting the theater; on this piece, see especially Pickard-Cambridge 1968, p. 187; Seaford 1984, p. 3; Lissarrague 1990b, p. 230; Green 1991, pp. 44–45; Hedreen 1992, pp. 107–111. On the issue of costume and other theatrical detail, see also Hedreen 1994, pp. 67–68.

79. Lissarrague 1990b. For this position, see also Moret 1984, pp. 139–142; Mitchell 2004, pp. 21–32.

80. Lissarrague 1990b, p. 235.

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media produce comic incongruities through the manipulation of symbols, but one medium need not derive from the other.[81]

Without wishing to become entangled in the general debate over how to identify satyr plays in vase painting, I suggest that in the case of Perseus and the satyrs, we can say with reasonable certainty that the images belong to the world of satyr play. The literary and epigraphic record provides indirect support for this position: while no play on the Perseus theme survives in full, surviving titles and fragments attest that, beginning no later than the first half of the 5th century, playwrights (both comic and tragic) found Perseus's life to be a suitable subject for the stage.[82] Moreover, since we have seen that painters of vases found such performances to be suitable subjects for representation,[83] we should not be surprised to find references to satyr play among the images on the vases.

The images themselves bear out this expectation. It is true that Lissarrague's notion of parody could apply to some pictures, such as the satyr-Perseus on the Boiotian lekythos in Paris discussed above.[84] Even if we are meant to understand that this satyr is not Perseus himself, but a satyr who has stolen his attributes, we are still left with an image of a satyr that closely parallels known images of the hero.[85] More often, however, the satyrs do not seem to stand in for anyone in particular, and in such cases, the notion of parody is difficult to sustain.[86] The only person in vase painting to whom Perseus displays the gorgoneion as frequently as he shows it to the

81. Lissarrague 1990b, p. 232. For the relationship between image and theater (as well as other forms of literature) in Apulian vase painting, see Giuliani 1996, who also takes a skeptical view of what he calls the "philodramatic" position.

82. Comedy: Kratinos: frr. 218–232 KA. Tragedy: Aeschylus: Radt, *TrGF* III 161–174 frr. 46a–49 *(Diktyoulkoi),* 302 *(Polydektes),* 361–364 frr. 261–262 *(Phorkides).* Sophocles: Radt, *TrGF* IV 136–140 frr. 60 (57)–76 (73) *(Akrisios),* 156–160 frr. 126 (122)–136 (132) *(Andromeda),* 173–175 frr. 165 (168)–170 (173) *(Danae),* 334–336 frr. 378 (348)–383 (352) *(Larisaioi).* It is unclear whether these fragments belong to three plays or one. Euripides: Kannicht, *TrGF* V 233–260 frr. 114–156 *(Andromeda),* 371–380 frr. 316–330a *(Danae),* 381–389 frr. 330b–348 *(Diktys).*

In addition, a fragmentary inscription records that a *Perseus* took second prize at the Dionysia of 467 B.C. (*IG* II 977a; Snell, *TrGF* I 5 [DID C 4], 85). Less is known of the treatment of the theme by 4th-century playwrights, although a satyric *Phorkides* seems to have been performed at the Dionysia of 339 B.C. (*IG* II/III² 2320 ii; Snell, *TrGF* I 14 [DID A 2a, 30], 26). The possibility that earlier plays were revived in performance during the 4th century in South Italy and Greece also cannot be ruled out. Indeed, if Taplin (1993) is correct that the so-called *phlyax* vases show revivals of Attic comedies rather than local Italian *phlyakes,* then the relationship between Attic drama and South Italian vase painting is even closer than was once thought. For the appearance of Greek drama in 4th-century South Italian vase painting, see also Trendall 1990, 1991.

83. The best evidence comes from the so-called "Perseus dance" chous, discussed earlier (Athens, M. Vlasto; see n. 42, above). For scenes that have been connected (with considerably less certainty) to tragic tetralogies involving Perseus, see Howe 1953; Oakley 1982, 1988; Simon 1982, p. 139. The marginal location of the Gorgons' home may also have made the myth attractive to satyric playwrights; on the geographically marginal settings of satyr play, see Voelke 2001, pp. 37–51.

84. See pp. 93, 96, nn. 61, 72, above.

85. São Paolo, University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 67.1; *ARV*² 1668.

86. In fact, Lissarrague's (1990b) suggestion that the satyrs may be separated from the theater is potentially a problem. Hedreen (1992, pp. 155–157) has argued persuasively that the iconography of satyrs originated in the performative rather than the visual arts and that they therefore from the beginning carried connotations of performance. It is not impossible that this relationship changed over time and that the satyrs acquired other connotations within the context of the visual arts, but in the period with which we are concerned, when satyr play was a prominent part of life in the polis, it seems likely that the satyrs would have retained strong popular connections to theatrical performance. In the end, Hedreen's view brings us closer than Lissarrague's does to an understanding of the images of Perseus and the beautiful Medusa, although the two positions need not always be mutually exclusive.

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satyrs is Polydektes, but there is never any indication that a satyr is meant to be standing in for Polydektes. When satyrs appear at the beheading of Medusa, they play a subsidiary role in the action of the scene. In short, the satyrs in most of these scenes seem to fill much the same role that a chorus of satyrs would have filled on the stage.[87]

It is possible, moreover, that certain facets of Perseus's character made him especially suited to representation in satyr play.[88] Although the literary remains of the genre, particularly Euripides' *Cyclops,* suggest that in many cases the satyric hero retained his tragic dignity,[89] there is also reason to believe that some heroes of satyr play had a good deal in common with the satyrs themselves. The classic example is Herakles, who featured in satyr plays but also resembled the satyrs, with his boundless appetites, his boorish table manners, and his tendency to become enslaved.[90] Perseus, too, we have seen, shared certain features with the satyrs: like them, he could be construed as a (largely unsuccessful) rapist, and like them, he perpetrated sneak attacks on sleeping women. In other words, the very behaviors that could be construed as cowardly and laughable were the ones that he shared with the satyrs, which suggests that, like Herakles, Perseus was a prime candidate for representation on the satyric stage.[91]

While I argue for a theatrical connection in these images, I have admittedly defined the connection loosely. Such imprecision is, for my purposes, permissible; since I am not interested in attempting to reconstruct the content of lost satyr plays from the surviving images, the degree to which the vases provide literal representations of actual performances is unimportant.[92] In the context of the present discussion, the connection with satyr play matters because it provides us with clues about how to understand these images. Putting aside all questions of how literally the images reproduce what happened on the stage, we can still observe that if the images bear

87. The formally dressed *aulos* player in the lower zone of an early-4th-century Lucanian volute krater may provide additional evidence for a theatrical context of the images of Perseus and the satyrs (Taranto, Museo Nazionale 8623; *LCS* 55, no. 280). Because the *aulos* player and the dancers on this vase are represented in a zone below Perseus and the satyrs, we cannot be certain that the two scenes are related, although some connection does seem likely. On this point, see Beazley 1955, p. 315.

88. I owe many of the ideas in this paragraph to suggestions from Guy Hedreen.

89. Seaford 1984, pp. 51, 56; Lissarrague 1990b, pp. 235–236.

90. On Herakles and the satyrs, see Lissarrague 1995; Voelke 2001, pp. 329–339. On the complexity of Herakles in Greek mythology, see *LIMC* IV, 1988, s.v. Herakles (J. Boardman et al.); Loraux 1995, esp. pp. 123–125 (on his gluttony); Kirkpatrick and Dunn 2002. Also significant is Herakles' role in the "prosatyric" *Alcestis,* on which see Burnett 1971, p. 44; Marshall 2000, p. 234.

91. It is also possible that, in addition to their shared behaviors, Perseus had a narrative connection to the satyrs. We have late evidence for a tradition of antagonism between Perseus and Dionysos, in which the hero fought the god and his followers at Argos (Euphorion fr. 18 Powell; Paus. 2.20.4, 2.22.1, 2.23.7; Nonnus *Dion.* 47.498–741). A dithyramb of Pindar that seems to concern Perseus, Dionysos, and Argos (fr. 70a) may have dealt with this theme, although the fragmentary text makes it impossible to know for certain what its subject was. On this dithyramb, see van der Weiden 1991, pp. 34–51. It is difficult to argue that the images of Perseus and the satyrs show the battle described in the later texts, not least because Dionysos is absent from the images. If the tradition of the battle was not entirely late, however, the images may have been motivated at least in part by the antagonism between the hero and the god. On the possibility of a connection between this legend and the pictures, see Jahn 1847, pp. 290–291.

92. On this point, it should be sufficient to note that the image showing Pegasos being born from Medusa's neck (Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 1767; see n. 75, above) pushes us in the direction of a less literal reading of these scenes, a hypothesis that methodological considerations seem to support. On the nonliteral character of vase paintings that allude to theater, see Lissarrague 1990b; Green 1991; Hedreen 1994, pp. 67–69.

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any relation at all to satyric drama, they should be governed by the same principles of humor that governed satyr play.[93] Very little attention has yet been devoted to how these principles might manifest themselves in the visual record, since scholars are still largely caught up in the difficulty of establishing acceptable criteria for detecting satyr plays in vase painting. While admitting that this issue is far from resolved, we can nevertheless note that the scenes of Perseus and the satyrs do seem to bear some relation to the theater, and we may therefore ask where the humor in them resides. At this point, it becomes necessary to turn to the literary evidence, because it is there that we can begin to understand what made a satyr play funny to its ancient audience.

Humor in Satyr Play

The literary remains of satyr play consist of the full text of Euripides' *Cyclops,* about half of Sophocles' *Ichneutai,* and numerous fragments. From these remains, scholars have been able to draw some conclusions about the themes, meter, and language that characterized satyr play,[94] but most discussions of the humor of the genre have focused on analysis of the *Cyclops.* Since an awareness of the way in which humor operates in this play can bring us a step closer to understanding how it operates in satyric vase paintings, I begin by reviewing the major theories about humor in the *Cyclops.*[95]

In the *Cyclops,* Odysseus arrives at the home of the Cyclopes (here located on Sicily near Aetna) to find a band of satyrs who have been enslaved by Polyphemos. The play follows its Homeric model in its inclusion of the basic elements of Odysseus's arrival, his intoxication and subsequent blinding of the monster, and his escape from the island—which, in this version, includes the release of the satyrs—but it differs in its treatment of them. Richard Seaford has discussed in some detail the discrepancies in medium, social and intellectual environment, and genre between the two versions;[96] for our purposes, the most important difference lies in the treatment of the monster himself.

As Seaford and others have noted, the Euripidean Cyclops is considerably more sophisticated than his Homeric counterpart. His first words to Odysseus betray a concern for matters of the polis (275–276); he answers the hero's plea for mercy with a speech that replaces reverence toward traditional gods and *nomoi* with reverence for his own wealth and appetites (316–346); and he takes remarkable care in preparing his victims to be eaten (241–249). Seaford summarizes: "He is a man of substance, equipped with slaves, cattle in addition to his Homeric sheep, and a sophisticated ideology. And yet he is still the Homeric savage. Indeed, his intellectual, sacrificial, and culinary sophistication is actually employed in

93. Cf. Hedreen's (1994, p. 69) comments on a different group of images: "the painters . . . were thinking along the same lines as the playwrights, if not sketching an actual performance."

94. Seaford 1984, pp. 33–48.

95. For a summary and discussion of the major theories about the function of satyr play, see Griffith 2002.

96. Seaford 1984, pp. 51–59.

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the service of his cannibalism. The force of this caricature derives from the combination of these apparent opposites."[97] Incongruities like these seem to have featured prominently in satyr play, and it is generally agreed that the genre derived much of its humor from the juxtaposition of incongruous elements within individual characters (as in the Cyclops) or within the play as a whole (which often juxtaposes the dignity of the tragic hero with the irreverence of the satyrs).[98]

The specific ways in which the incongruities functioned to produce humor is less immediately clear. Dana Sutton, who considers the function of satyr play to have been one of comic relief from the seriousness of tragedy, understands the characterization of the Cyclops to be in keeping with this purpose. The reduction of a normally threatening giant to a creature full of comic inconsistencies, he argues, parallels the way in which satyr play deflates the seriousness of the preceding tragedies; for Sutton, the message of satyr play is simply that "menace is unreal."[99] As Seaford has pointed out, however, there is no evidence that satyr play was meant to provide comic relief, and since that could have been provided equally well by comedy, it follows that the role of satyr play was somewhat more complex than Sutton has hypothesized. Euripides' Polyphemos, Seaford suggests, is not simply a threatening figure brought down to the level of the comically ridiculous; rather, he is at the same time savage and sophisticate, perhaps even a caricature of a kind of contemporary aristocrat that Seaford finds exemplified in the Kallikles of Plato's *Gorgias*.[100]

In the absence of more examples like this one, we cannot know whether every monster in satyr play would have incorporated the political overtones that Seaford observes in the Cyclops. Since the Cyclops embodied a particular kind of primitivism, however, it is likely that he was a better vehicle than most ogres for the humorous exploration of concerns about the state and its *nomoi* that Seaford and others have found in the *Cyclops*.[101] It is difficult to say what kinds of serious messages other satyric monsters, including Medusa, may have conveyed. Nevertheless, Seaford's analysis of the *Cyclops* is useful insofar as it shows how the playwright's basic strategy in portraying the monster was the juxtaposition of incongruous elements. For a creature like the Cyclops, who plays an active role in the confrontation with Odysseus, the playwright might accomplish this juxtaposition by manipulating various aspects of the monster's behavior. With Medusa, the situation is different: in many respects, she is a passive threat with no behavior to manipulate. She never fights the hero in any way, nor is she portrayed as an imminent threat; in fact, Perseus must seek her out to kill her. Throughout the literary and visual record, Medusa is consistently identified not by what she does, but by what she is—and, more specifically, by what she looks like. If a playwright wished to manipulate some aspect of her in order to achieve a perceptible incongruity, it is reasonable to expect that he might begin with her appearance. In the same way that Euripides' Polyphemos appears as a civilized savage beast, a satyric Medusa might appear as a monstrous maiden, a creature with an ordinary female face that is deadly to behold. In other words, she might appear as the figure we see on the vases with Perseus and the satyrs.

97. Seaford 1984, pp. 51–53.

98. Arrowsmith [1959] 1989, p. 179; Sutton 1980, pp. 130–133; Seaford 1984, p. 56; Lissarrague 1990b, p. 236.

99. Sutton 1980, pp. 133, 167.

100. Seaford 1984, pp. 26–27, 52–56. Seaford (p. 52) summarizes Kallikles' argument: "strong individuals have a duty, based on φύσις, to satisfy their desires at the expense of νόμοι, which are to be despised as the creation of the weak majority."

101. Seaford 1984, pp. 52–59, with bibliography.

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CONCLUSION

I have attempted here to reorient the discussion of the Gorgon's beauty away from evolutionary models, suggesting that discursive context provides more fertile ground for analysis. This approach carries its own set of problems, for its success relies on the interpreter's ability to place the images within particular genres of representation—to decide, that is, whether they functioned like tragedies, comedies, epic poetry, or another genre of expression altogether. At present, we are less skilled at recognizing markers of genre in the pictures than we are at assigning literary fragments to tragedy or comedy or history or epic; for practitioners of the latter task, themes, language, and poetic meter may all serve as valuable clues.

We have seen that some images are more readily understood than others: the presence of satyrs tells us to look for certain kinds of humor in some images, and the systematic reversals that characterize others, such as the scenes of Perseus fleeing a beautiful Gorgon, suggest affinities with a kind of comedy that made heroes the objects of laughter. At other times, the message of the images is harder to understand, as we saw in the scenes in which Perseus attacks the sleeping Medusa. We may sense that there is something wrong with the image of a hero killing a sleeping maiden, but whether we are meant to laugh at the hero or feel pity for the maiden is unclear. What is needed is more detailed study of the devices used by the painters to convey particular moods, since there is no such thing as a neutral representation of an event.[102]

While one purpose of this article has been to argue for the necessity of paying attention to the genres to which images belong, a second is more specifically connected to the myth of Perseus and the Gorgons. Perseus's confrontation with Medusa was envisioned not only as a hero's confrontation with a deadly opponent, but also as a perversion of the type of abduction experienced by maidens such as Thetis, Helen, and Persephone. This point bears directly on our understanding of the iconography, for it allows us to see that the appearance of the beautiful Medusa signals not a radical change in the Greeks' conception of the Gorgons, but rather a shifting emphasis between two sets of characteristics—monstrous and maidenly—that coexist even in our earliest sources for the myth.[103] The emphasis on the Gorgons' beauty, moreover, was less a function of chronology than of discursive context; the beautiful Gorgon appeared when a painter or an author needed to make a particular point that involved her identity as a maiden.

By establishing Medusa's place in the paradigm of erotic abduction, I hope to have made room for more nuanced readings of the images. Scholars have long observed the pathos evident in some images of beautiful Gorgons,[104] but the recognition of their affinities with maidens like Persephone, Thetis, and their companions allows us to explore more fully the ways in which Medusa could be envisioned as a sympathetic figure. Our acknowledgment of the Gorgons' maidenly qualities also adds a dimension to our understanding of her confrontation with Perseus. Mack has recently explored the correspondences between Perseus's life and the Indo-European hero pattern;[105] Medusa, we have now seen, also corresponds to a pattern

102. Mitchell (2004) has recently brought to the fore the problem of discerning humor in the images on the vases.

103. See Hes. *Theog.* 270–281; Eleusis Museum 2630 (see n. 35, above).

104. Furtwängler 1886–1890; Phinney 1971, pp. 450–451.

105. Mack 2002.

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common in Greek thought, for she exists at the center of a complex web of associations that extends far beyond her role as a hero's monstrous adversary. What we find in Perseus's encounter with Medusa is a confrontation between two paradigms—the monster-slaying hero and the abducted maiden—and the tensions created by their coexistence must inform our understanding of monstrous and beautiful Gorgons alike.

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