



Crowned in Serpents, Not Sin

A Retelling of the Myth of Medusa

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Prelude: Crowned in Serpents, Not Sin

A poem

Poseidon's mind was divided, his dalliance excited, yearning deliberated by the crashing of waves, in the blackness of night, overcome by the sight, a fragile promise dangling just out of reach. Where ocean meets sky, he endeavoured to satisfy an ache that lingered in the spaces between his thoughts. He let out a groan; desperate hunger could not atone for that craving-chasm abyss set beneath the skin.

His wife, Amphitrite, caught unawares by inconsequential cares, was veiled by Luna's pale, feathery lace. All was lost by the throng of Aphrodite's bonafide song, skillfully threading its silk in the wind.

Phoebe divining foretold, in those writings of old, of that serpent's ravenous cravings consumed. Overcome by the flame, though hardly knowing her name, he quenched his thirst as he drank from her cup.

Athena's temple walls shook as her virtue he took, by Ovid's Metamorphoses, of origin, to note. Rendering Medusa unchaste to be a priestess of that space. Poseidon lay guiltless of the violation and the sacrilege he committed. In retribution for the law, which Athena now saw, no other choice but to change Medusa's hair into snakes. Her face once bemoaned, now turned onlookers to stone, a victim cast out for one man's irreligious disgrace.

The Story

The Braiding

At last, as tradition dictated, grandmother braided my glossy, freshly washed hair with leathery, arthritic hands.

I knew they hurt her constantly, as age often does, slow and cruel, when she weeded the garden. Or on crisp, damp mornings like the previous one, when she insisted on mounting the ladder despite my many requests to save her the trouble; in response, she turned her head, her lips stiffening as they always did when she set her mind to something. That wilful old fowl kept scaling, couldn't hear, and, in her strong, stubborn way, clambered to the highest rung. I had grown accustomed to this, watching in dismay as she wobbled, only to painfully pick the highest, juiciest apples because, of course, they made the best crumbles and pies; but somehow, that night, the air felt misty and exhilarating.

That very eve, her hands moved with knowing grace, as if by magic; in that moment, grandmother, kissed by the divine, didn't know she had grown old. Her eyes sparkled with enduring love, and her skin radiated as if light shone beneath it. I wasn't sure whether the lamp or my eyes were playing tricks in its flicker, but grandmother looked younger than she had in the many years since I came to know her. In that moment, we sat in the lamp's dim glow. I could feel the warmth radiating off the wood still burning in the kitchen stove.

I will always treasure the last living memory I have of her: the night before I left home. She pulled each strand tight, the way her mother had done for her and her grandmother before that, and while she worked, she told me the story. She said it was the oldest one she knew. She also said it wasn't finished, and that I was part of it now.

She began her story as if she had been holding onto it for a long time. She looked ahead and spoke beyond the light, letting her words float in the shadow. "They will tell you she was a monster," she said, crossing one plait over another.

“They will tell you she was punished. Don’t listen to the darkness, listen to me instead.”

She paused, then smiled softly into the black.

“She is here in this very room, and she has been patiently waiting for you to know the truth.”

She simply beamed, as if she had just told an amusing joke, her toothless grin crinkling the corners of her eyes. I loved it when she smiled like that; it was as if the most beautiful thought had touched her mind.

“Her magic is strong tonight.”

She spun her silken chronicle with the same skill she spun my hair.



The Temple

Medusa, a covet. Desired by all hot-blooded, aggressive masculinity, yearned for her girlish pink glow and her budding, plump taffeta flesh. Her face, as fair and radiant as the Gods, was framed by thick ebony braids interlaced with gold. No one had beheld such a fine personage that Athena hand-selected her to serve as a priestess in her temple. Athena wanted only the purest, most beautiful treasures contained within its sacred walls.

The fine maiden served fervently as a gentle, amenable handmaid. She tended the lamps and swept the marble, and she believed, as young women are taught to believe, that a sacred place is safe.

She did not know that out where the ocean meets the sky, a god lay awake with an ache he could not name or govern. His hungry passion crashed with the sea's waves, so much so that many fishermen were lost. Her shapely beauty persisted against his better judgment, so he confessed it to his wife, Amphitrite, who slept unknowing. Fearing she might know his thoughts, he prepared a grand favour for such an evening as this, and to ensure her slumber, gifted his elegant companion a veil of

Luna's pale, feathery lace. Somewhere on the wind, Aphrodite's song threaded its own silk, and he called that song his extenuation.

Long ago, Phoebe had read the old writings and foretold a serpent of ravenous cravings. Everyone assumed she meant a beast. No one thought she meant a god.

Though he barely knew her name, he swept that feverish nymph into a ravenous passion and devoured her purity under the veil of twilight. He drank from her cup as though it had been poured for him. The temple walls shook under the thunder of his fervour. The lamps fell and broke, and above them both, the goddess's statue looked on with ruby eyes.

Sated at last, he receded into the ocean with the turning tide, leaving the poets to write of his innocence. When the priests found her at dawn among the shards of the lamps, they whispered the old law: *She is unchaste. She cannot serve here. She has defiled this space.* Each knew who had done the defiling, and each said her name instead of his.

Medusa approached the altar, bracing for the goddess's rejection; she had always been taught that broken women are cast aside.



The Goddess

Then descended Athena, her presence a storm. The bards sang of her terrible fury, and truth was in their song, yet they blinded themselves to where her vengeance would fall. A second tremor seized the sanctuary, fracturing the sacred stone; this was no mindless tremor of ruin, but the heavy, deliberate strike of divine justice. "They will write that I punished you," Athena said, and she knelt, which gods do not do. "They will write that the law left me no other choice. Let them write it. Their ink cannot reach what I am about to give you."

"I am unclean," Medusa whispered. "The law says so."

“The law was written by men who drink from cups that are not theirs to sip,” said the goddess. “Hear my law instead. The sin belongs to the one who committed it. The shame belongs to him too. What belongs to you is what comes next.”

She laid her hands on Medusa’s head.

Medusa felt her hair lift and twist and come alive. When she raised her trembling hands, she touched cool, smooth scales and heard a soft hissing that sounded strangely like breathing. It sounded like *company*.

She screamed at first. Anyone would have.

“Look at them,” Athena said gently. “Truly look.”

Medusa saw a crown of serpents, bright-eyed and alert, each turned outward in every direction, like sentries facing the dark.

“Phoebe was right,” Athena said. “A serpent was coming. She simply did not see which one. He was the serpent of hunger. You will be the serpent of renewal. You have been crowned in serpents, not sin.”

Then she told Medusa what each coil meant. “The serpent sheds its skin and is reborn, and so you will shed what was done to you, as many times as you must. It lives close to the earth and remembers what the earth remembers. It waits through the winter and comes back. It never strikes first, but it never needs anyone’s permission to defend itself.”

“And my face?” Medusa asked, because something had changed in her eyes too. She could feel it, like a lamp being lit behind her silky soft skin. “They will say it is cursed.”

“Your face will show every man exactly what he is,” said Athena. “A man who comes to you with harm in his heart will be turned to stone, hard and cold, as he always was inside. A woman who comes to you in need will see only her sister, who survived.”

Last, the goddess pressed a single drop of her own blood into Medusa’s palm.

“From now on, your blood carries two powers. The blood on the left side of your body can end the lives of those who prey on others. The blood on the right side can heal and can even restore life. You will choose which to give. Choosing is the thing he tried to take from you. I am giving it back to you, and to every woman who comes after you.”



The Daughters in the Dark

The men who came looking for a monster found one, or so they said. They returned with stories of stone warriors in the courtyard and a woman with a crown of snakes. They named her a horror, because a woman who cannot be harmed has always frightened the men who wish to harm her.

The women who came found something else.

They came at night, quietly, with bruises hidden under their sleeves and secrets hidden in their silence. Medusa sat with them and listened. She asked no questions about what they wore or where they walked. When they finished speaking, she gave them the right-hand blood, and it healed. Then she taught them the thing Athena had taught her: *What he did is not who you are. Shed it. Grow back.*

Women began carving her face onto their doorways and shields. Scholars later called these carvings gorgoneia and said they were meant to frighten enemies away. That was true. But the women who made them knew the image also meant: *She is watching over this house. Whoever enters here with harm in mind will answer to her.*



The Journey of the Serpents

The poets say Perseus came with his mirrored shield and his borrowed sword and took her head. Some poets wanted that to be the end.

My grandmother said the poets were never told what happened to the blood.

As it fell, it did what blood does in the old stories. It scattered and seeded the earth. In Libya, the drops became serpents, and the serpents did not stay put. They travelled, as all great stories travel, by river and caravan and seed and wind.

Wherever they arrived, they discovered something wonderful: They were not strangers. The serpent was already sacred in those places. Long before Medusa, women and men, in their own ancient ways, had honoured the snake as a guardian. Her serpents did not bring the sacred. They simply recognized their kin.

In Egypt, they met Wadjet, the cobra goddess, who rose as the uraeus on kings' brows. They saw that a serpent poised to strike could also promise protection.

In India, they found that the Nagas, the serpent beings of water, fertility and guardianship, had always been there. They watched women pour milk at the shrines during Nag Panchami, honouring serpents and asking for their blessing.

In Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, they found many-headed Nagas coiled along temple stairways, guarding the waters and calling down the rain that makes rice grow.

In China, they found the snake among the twelve animals of the zodiac, honoured for intuition, transformation, and the patient intelligence of a creature that waits and watches before it acts.

In Japan, they found the white snake of Benzaiten, goddess of music, wisdom and fortune. Anyone who saw a white snake considered herself lucky.

In West Africa, they found Dan, the great rainbow serpent of the Fon, holding the world together in its coils and keeping the cosmos in balance.

On Crete, in the old Minoan stories, they found a woman standing with a serpent in each raised hand, her arms lifted not in surrender but in authority.

And in Greece, where they called their mother a monster, they found a single snake twined around Asclepius's staff, the healer. Someone had remembered the right-hand blood after all.

At every one of these places, my grandmother said, the snakes made the same discovery. Every culture, every colour, every way of knowing understood the serpent's power differently. No one tradition owned it, and none needed to borrow it from another. The serpent had guarded everywhere, long before anyone tried to call it a curse. Medusa's daughters were simply adding their own names to a very old and very long list.



The Crown, Shared

“So where are her snakes now?” I asked my grandmother eagerly.

She tied off the final braid and turned me to face the mirror.

“Count them,” she said.

There were nine plaits, hanging heavy and alive along my back.

“Every woman who has been told her pain is her shame and refused to believe it,” my grandmother said, “is carrying one of those serpents. Every woman who has shed a life that hurt her and grown a new one. Every woman who has looked at a dangerous man and seen him for exactly what he is. Every woman who sat with another in the dark and gave her the healing blood. That is Medusa's crown. It was never on one head. It was always meant to be shared.”

She kissed the top of my head, right where Athena's hands would have rested.

“They will tell you it was a curse,” she said. “But now, you will know better, as you go about the earth, take this with you. You cannot control the future, you cannot change the past, but you can choose your own peace. No matter where you go, and no matter what happens to you.

Granddaughter, I cannot go where you walk. But this gift I leave with you: if harm shall ever befall you, you will always have your own choice. Medusa has gifted it to you, and it's meant to be passed on. Someday you will braid someone's hair, and you will tell her the truth.”



I left home the next morning, and I have not cut my hair since.

When I walk at night, I can feel them, my serpents. I know they are watchful and coiled, and that every one of them faces outward, toward the dark.

They called her a victim cast out. But she was never cast out. She was sent out, crowned in serpents, not sin, and she is still walking the world in every one of us.

Notes on Setting

The myth. The story of Medusa unfolds in the legendary age of ancient Greece, a mythic past the Greeks placed before recorded history rather than a datable period. The ancient sources do not agree on its geography. Ovid sets the assault in a temple of Minerva (the Roman name for Athena) without naming a city; many retellings assume Athens, but that is a later convention. Hesiod places the Gorgons at the edge of the world, beyond the river Ocean in the far west. In Ovid, drops of blood fall from Medusa's severed head onto the sands of Libya as Perseus flies overhead, which is where this story's serpents begin their journey.

The frame story. The grandmother braiding her granddaughter's hair is deliberately left unplaced and timeless. It could be set anywhere and in any recent generation, reflecting the theme that this inheritance belongs to women everywhere.

The journey of the serpents. The serpents travel across Egypt, India, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, China, Japan, West Africa (the Fon people of present-day Benin), Minoan Crete (roughly 2000–1450 BCE), and back to Greece. Because these traditions span thousands of years, this part of the story moves through mythic rather than historical time. The serpents join traditions that already honoured the snake; they do not claim to have created them.

Classical Sources

This retelling reimagines the following ancient accounts of Medusa:

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 4 (approx. lines 770–803), ca. 8 CE. The source for the assault in Athena’s temple, the snake hair given as punishment, and the serpents born from Medusa’s blood in Libya. The poem *Crowned in Serpents, Not Sin* draws on this account.

Hesiod, *Theogony* (lines 270–283), ca. 700 BCE. The earliest account of the Gorgons, naming Medusa as the only mortal sister and mentioning her union with Poseidon, without a temple setting.

Apollodorus, *The Library* (2.4.2–3 and 3.10.3), ca. 1st–2nd century CE. Tells the story of Perseus and is the source for the two-sided blood: Athena gives Asclepius Medusa’s blood, which destroys from the left side and heals from the right.

Euripides, *Ion* (approx. lines 1001–1017), ca. 413 BCE. An earlier version of the two drops of Gorgon blood, one that kills and one that heals.

Descriptions of serpent symbolism in Egypt, India, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, West Africa, and Minoan Crete draw on general background research into world snake traditions rather than these classical texts.

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