

Monsters from Myth, and Quests for a Scientific Rationale, Or, a Science Journalist's Take on Mythological Animals. An Exploration of Matt Kaplan's *The Science of Monsters*, with a Foray into Aetiologies and Cultural Uses of Medusa

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Abstract. We consider some of the chapters in Matt Kaplan's (2012) *The Science of Monsters* and his rationalising conjectures (some of them rooted in hypotheses by Adrienne Mayor), and discuss or provide supplementary data, including concerning occurrence in modern art or literature.

Keywords: mythical monsters; rationalising conjectures; gigantic animals; Chimera; Sphinx; Minotaur; Medusa; winged horses.

[es] Monstruos míticos y búsquedas para una explicación científica, o, la opinión de un periodista científico sobre animales mitológicos. Una exploración de *The Science of Monsters*, de Matt Kaplan, con una incursión en las etiologías y usos culturales de Medusa

Resumen. Teniendo en cuenta algunos de los capítulos de *The Science of Monsters* de Matt Kaplan y sus sus conjeturas racionalizadoras (algunas de ellas enraizadas en hipótesis de Adrienne Mayor), en este artículo se discuten o proporcionan datos complementarios, incluso sobre la ocurrencia en el arte moderno o la literatura.

Palabras clave: monstruos míticos; conjeturas racionalizadoras; animales gigantes; Quimera; Esfinge; Minotauro; Medusa; caballos alados.

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1. Introduction

Attempts to rationalise how some myths about monstrous animals came into being are nothing new. Palaephatus, apparently in Aristotle's days, tried to do that (see Section 6 below). More recently, it has been claimed that the myth of the *ouroboros*, the cyclical snake, a myth that occurs all over the world, originated in descriptions of an intense aurora (van der Sluijs and Peratt 2009). This review article is concerned with a book engaged in such rationalisations, although one that mentions neither of the two items I have just mentioned.

Matt Kaplan is a London-based science journalist. In a sense, he is intellectually indebted to Adrienne Mayor, a Stanford scholar in classics and history of science. That finding dinosaur skeletons² in antiquity gave rise to mythical dragons was already claimed by Adrienne Mayor, in her book *The First Fossil Hunters* (2000).³ Of course, Kaplan cites her. In her latest book, *The Amazons* (Mayor 2014), which I reviewed for *Fabula*, she likewise grounds myths about warrior women in historical reality. Kaplan, too, combines science history with folklorist skills, showing how some ancient motifs reappear in science fiction films: such a typology is important. This review article, being such, is mostly descriptive; when it comes to strengths and weaknesses, bear in mind that Kaplan's book is written by a science journalist for a broad audience; if I were to identify one weakness, it would be that it sometimes reminds of Palaephatus' starry-eyed rationalising urge, clad in blasé sophistication.

In his introduction, Kaplan muses about the persistence of scary monster stories: "one answer to this question lies with research on why people like spicy food" (Kaplan 2012: 2). "At their most basic level, monsters represent fears held by society, fears associated with dangers perceived in the surrounding world" (ibid.: 4). "Like lion cubs play-fighting in the safety of their den, monsters may be allowing threats to be toyed with in the safe sandbox of the imagination" (ibid.: 6).

The present review article, which is also a thematic survey and therefore covers more than the book under review — as well as less than the book because we omit from consideration a few chapters for space and thematic reasons — is structured as per this succession of themes: we begin with mythical animals that are either gigantic or weapon-resistant, and then turn to giant birds, before turning to two sections about the Chimera as aetiologised by Kaplan (and Adrienne Mayor) as mixed fossils in tar pits. After a section about the Sphinx and dealing with the Minotaur, several subsections about Medusa precede a section about winged horses such as Pegasus.

² Concerning cultural use of fossils in general, other than in the context of palaeontology, consider the following. Fossil vertebrates turn up in the visual arts, in decoration and ornaments; see Oakley (1975) on such use of vertebrate fossils, and Oakley (1985) on the use of invertebrates in decoration.

³ In her paper "Guardians of the Gold" about the griffin, Adrienne Mayor (1994) claimed (based on Greek and Roman descriptions) that the idea of griffins originated because gold-mining nomads in central Asia, in the seventh century B.C.E., found dinosaur fossils and believed these were animals guarding gold.

2. Gigantic or Weapon-Deflecting Mythical Animals

Kaplan's Chapter 1, "Giant Animals — Nemean Lion, Calydonian Boar, Rukh, King Kong", begins with humans as prey, then discusses how the Nemean lion was imagined in ancient Greece — large, quite mean, but not gigantic: "just a somewhat large lion with seemingly weapon-deflective skin" (Kaplan 2012: 12). "European lions lived in and around ancient Greece" (ibid.: 12). The boar of Calydon was claimed to be gigantic, and based on artwork on pottery in relation to depicted humans, "it would have been about a length of 11 feet (3.4 meters)" (ibid.: 11), as opposed to up to 5 feet (1.5 meters) in real-life male wild boars. Any human unlikely survivor of a night-time attack by a lion "would have seen glimpses of action" (ibid.: 13), but could not accurately describe the predator. "This is probably where the concept of invulnerability set in" (ibid.): lions could survive wounds, and then attack later on.

The Eurasian cave lion, which "grew as much as 25 percent larger" than "the lions of Africa and the recently extinct European lions" (ibid.: 14), no longer occurs "in the fossil record much after 11,000 BC", when human cultures presumably possessing oral storytelling were already in existence, and perhaps later small populations did not fossilise. Kaplan speculates whether in colder climates, such animals could be even larger; "the possibility is not mere fantasy. The presence of unusually large and powerful lions in remote mountain areas mixed with the adrenaline-influenced perceptions may well have been responsible for people coming to believe in a monstrous lion" (ibid.: 16). Then Kaplan discusses whether it is possible that a lion had such skin that weapons bounced off of its body, as claimed by Apollodorus (ibid.). Or did hunters make up the story to save face? (ibid.: 17, in a note).

The Calydonian boar is discussed next. Kaplan explains the occurrence of gigantism soberly: pituitary tumours in animals have different effects than in humans however (ibid.: 20), and moreover body mechanics changes with size. But Kaplan also mentions (ibid.: 17, in a note) the Hogzilla hoax from 2004 in Alabama (rather than a hoax, it was a hunter's claim as hyperbolic as a stereotypical angler's boast): a hunter claimed the boar he had killed was 12 feet (3.6 metres) long, but when dug up it was found to be only 7 feet (2 meters) long. Kaplan remarks that various "animals all have huge populations, yet try finding any giant versions of them in museum exhibits. There aren't any" (ibid.: 21)

As an aside, distinguish between the mythical Calydonian boar, and the literary Caledonian bear. Epigram 9 from Martial's *Liber spectaculorum* about early imperial Rome's arena games, in Kathleen Coleman's translation, begins thus: "Just as Prometheus, chained on a Scythian crag, fed the tireless bird on his prolific breast, so Laureolus, hanging on no false cross, gave up his defenceless entrails to a Scottish bear" (Coleman 2006: 82). "This reference to a Scottish bear is unique in ancient literature: [...] It may be a topical example of Flavian propaganda" (Coleman 2006: 88). "Whether the notion of an *ursus Calēdōnius* (native to Καληδονία) brought to the Roman mind the famed *aper Calyḏōnius* (the terror of Καλυδών) seems likely, if not certain; given that the Romans could confuse the Ἰόνian Sea with Ἰόνια, the difference in vocalic quantity probably did not hinder them from making this identification" (Coleman 2006: 90).

One can see then that in early imperial Roman times, a mythical notion along with lore from the periphery of the Empire could be brought together in a sophisti-

cated ideational play, and this as a commentary on gruesome entertainment that viewers were supposed to enjoy.

3. Giant Birds in Myth and Reality

Giant birds occur in various cultures (traditional, or scientific), e.g. the Talmudic *ziz* and *bar yokhani*. These two occur in tales about wondrous exotica, but in the 1520, in his Hebrew-language chronicles of the Ottomans, Elia Căpsali of Candia (an Italian-educated Venetian subject, and a rabbi) claimed that the *bar yokhani* is a prophetic allegory⁴ about the son of the Exilarch (the lay leader — claiming descent from King David — of Mesopotamia's Jews in Sassanian and early Islamic times) who, having become one of Muhammad's companions, went on to conquer and convert Turkic lands, hence the narrative about the giant bird's egg that fell and drowned hundreds of towns and many forests. The egg is the son of the Exilarch, and the giant bird is the Exilarch, of Davidic ancestry.⁵

Kaplan's Chapter 1 also comprises a section, "Feathery death" (ibid.: 23–29), discussing the gigantic bird Rukh, associated with the tales of Sinbad the sailor. (In the bird-name *Rukh* in Arabic, the consonant *kh* is doubled). "There is no possibility of a bird having ever existed that could fly off with an elephant in its talons. This is not a mere matter of paleontology having failed to turn up the bones of such a beast" (ibid.: 24): "the laws of physics get in the way" (ibid.), and Kaplan shows this with calculations. He turns to birds of prey attacking humans, then (ibid.: 25–26) to New Zealand's extinct Haast's eagle (*Harpagornis moorei*), before discussing the extinct, flightless elephant bird of Madagascar, *Aepyornis*: "the discovery of such large birds may have led to stories that these were the not-yet-fledged juveniles of a much larger predatory bird" (ibid.: 26).

Kaplan finds problems with chronology: the Rukh is mentioned centuries earlier than the Arabs' earliest known arrivals in Madagascar; Kaplan may have missed the likelihood of even earlier Arab and Persian landings along Africa's eastern coasts. At any rate: "It seems reasonable enough that the discovery of these birds may have increased belief in a monster that was already alive in the minds of sailors" (ibid.:

⁴ The standard view, in Judaism, is that the prophetic era was closed by the prophet Zechariah. Prophecy is not ascribed to Roman- or Sassanian-age rabbis. Căpsali however digressed, after telling the story of the son of the Exilarch who had supposedly become one of Muhammad's Companions, in order to argue with some bitterness that even far-fetched tales found in the *Talmud* are truthful, because even when it looks like a tall tale, it must be some allegory or prophetic allegory. (Actually, whereas the *Talmud* is mainly a legal code, especially in the *Babylonian Talmud* it is interspersed with all kind of lore, as well as homiletics.)

⁵ Jewish sources often dealt with the Ottoman Turks benevolently, because of their relatively tolerant treatment of the Jews, but especially and pointedly because the Sultan had welcomed Jewish refugees from Spain in 1492 and afterwards. This certainly was the case of Elijah Căpsali (b. ca. 1485–90 – d. > 1550), a Cretan-born, Italian-educated rabbi, and a leading figure among the Jews of Candia (Crete), then under Venetian rule. He authored in Hebrew *Seder Eliyahu Zuta: History of the Ottomans and of Venice* [1517] and *that of the Jews in Turkey* [1523], *Spain and Venice* (a critical edition has appeared, Căpsali 1975–1983). His other languages were Greek and Italian, not Turkish, and yet his Ottoman history is quite entertaining. Its style is a mosaic of fragments of verses from Scripture, recycled for the purpose of expressing new content. Căpsali also authored works in Jewish law. He "also wrote poetic works which are distinguished for their astounding use of rhetorical devices and poetic images and places" (Paudice 2006). His history of Venice was discussed by Ann Brener (1994). Also see on him Jacobs (2005).

26–27), itself partly inspired “from people encountering fossilized dinosaur footprints” looking “distinctly birdlike” (ibid.: 27).

May I add, *Aepyornis* egg remains still exist; a pieced together egg is as large as the chest of the man carrying it (thus, not as large as the Rukh egg in the tales of Sinbad). In text accompanied by a large picture of an elephant bird’s subfossil egg, pieced together from fragments and offered for sale, at the Web site of a business trading in fossils, one reads: “Eggs have been recovered, some weighing more than 20 lbs., measuring over a foot in length, and equal in volume to seven ostrich eggs or 183 chicken eggs”.⁶

Concerning the Rukh, I signal Kruk (2001). It begins: “In the *Kitāb Ṭabā’i ‘ al-Hayawān* [*Book of the Natural Features of Animals*] of Sharaf az-Zamān al-Marwāzī (*fl.* [floruit = active] around 1100 A.D. in Isfahān), a curious animal by the name of *rukḥ* is described. This is not the fabulous bird of the same name, but a mysterious quadruped.” Kruk related this to the *rukḥ* (rook) in chess.

It must be said that Kaplan (who does mention the Indian myth of a giant bird, the benevolent Garuda) missed a cogent explanation of the myth of the giant bird carrying off an elephant: “It is the fight between the Indian solar bird Garuda and the chthonic snake Naga. The Indian word Naga means not only snake but also elephant” (Wittkower 1938).⁷ Kaplan also mentions the enmity of birds of prey and snakes as an influence on myth.⁸

4. Fossilisation Mode Explaining Mythical Animal Blends

Consider Dan Sperber’s discussion of perfect animals, hybrids, and monsters (1975, 1986, 1996). In quite a different perspective, the book *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Farkas et al. 1987) comprises nine chapters, about magical and monstrous creatures from the art and literatures of various ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle East (Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece and Rome). One class of monsters is composite monsters. Themes include reptiles, crocodiles, lions, deformed humans, dragons, sea and land monsters, centaurs, satyrs,

⁶ Dated 10 Nov. 1997, <http://webm219d.ntx.net/fossils/eleegg.htm>

⁷ On p. 255 in Rudolf Wittkower’s (1938) “‘Roc’: An Eastern Prodigy in a Dutch Engraving”. Wittkower was citing de Gubernatis (1872, Vol. 2: 94). Cf. Vogel’s (1926) *Indian Serpent-lore: Or, The Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art*.

⁸ Concerning the enmity of snakes and such birds that feed on them (this is relevant for Kaplan’s discussion on p. 28), see Wittkower’s (1939) “Eagle and Serpent”. It is a classic. Also consider in “Ancient Statues in mediaeval Constantinople” by Richard M. Dawkins (1924): “Nicetas tells us what was the talisman in his time. ‘There was’, he says, ‘in the Hippodrome a bronze eagle set up, a device invented by Apollonios of Tyana and a magnificent example of his skill in magic’” (Dawkins 1924: 233; Dawkins has more to say on this). Tzetzes “tells us that the city was being attacked by barbarians and the empress by her enchantments procured innumerable pots each enclosing a snake; these were hurled against the enemy by means of slings, and so the city was delivered. The snakes were then consumed by a host of storks, but these dropped so many of the dead snakes into the cisterns that the water became poisoned, and Apollonios came to the rescue with the [stork-shaped] talisman against storks” (Dawkins 1924: 236). Even stags have on occasion been depicted as feeding on snakes (Ettinghausen 1955).

Richard McGillivray Dawkins was trained as an electrical engineer, yet became an archaeologist, meanwhile was director of the British School of Athens between 1906 and 1913, then became first Bywater and Sotheby Professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek Language and Literature at the University of Oxford.

and devils. In yet a different perspective, consider the *Manual de zoologia fantastica* by Borges and Guerrero (1957).

Kaplan's Chapter 2, "Beastly Blends — Chimera, Griffon, Cockatrice, Sphinx",⁹ is about "monstrous animals not of unusual size but of unusual form" (Kaplan 2012: 33). "In *The First Fossil Hunters*, Adrienne Mayor makes a persuasive argument that the half-eagle, half-lion monster known as the Griffin came about when ancient people discovered the bones of the dinosaur *Protoceratops* and tried to imagine what the animal would have looked when alive" (ibid.: 38).

"It is hard to think of a single extinct species that could explain Chimera, but there are still some possibilities if the fossilization process itself is taken into consideration" (ibid.: 39): one type is a catastrophic flood, another is tar pits. A Chimera blends a male lion, a goat's neck and head on the lion's back, and a snake as the lion's tail (ibid.: 34).

Kaplan suggests that "a thirsty goat wanders down to a quiet lake" not "staked out by predators" (ibid.: 41). It is a tar pit. The goat becomes stuck,

"its screams attract a lion" that pounces on the goat and gets stuck as well. Both the lion and the goat die, but before they sink beneath the tar, vultures come to feed. These vultures, because of their light weight, do not get stuck, but their presence attracts a bird-hunting viper that slithers over the edges of the tar pit without any trouble but gets stuck in the recently churned-up tar where the lion and goat died. All three, the goat, the lion, and the snake, slowly slide into the tar together, get preserved, and their bones are ultimately found in stinky blackened rock by people who can only wonder at what sort of creature would have left such a skeleton behind (ibid.: 41–42).

5. More About Tar Pits and the Chimera

After Pegasus, Kaplan turns to Scylla, and remarks that unlike Los Angeles, there are no tar pits in "Greece (and the rest of Europe)" (Kaplan 2012: 43), though these exist in Russia and the Near East. Kaplan thinks of Greek colonies along the coasts of the Black Sea as a conduit for the myth of beastly blends. As for Homer locating the Chimera in Lycia, and Homer and Hesiod claiming it was capable of breathing fire, Kaplan remarks that "Lycia is one of a few places where natural gas slowly leaks out", and when lighted by people, "the flame never goes out" (ibid.: 44). "Did those who saw strange mixtures of bones in stinking blackened petroleum-filled rocks in the Middle East make a connection with the stench of burning petroleum gas at Lycia and bring the two elements together in the form of the fire-breathing Chimera?" (ibid.: 45). No, I reckon: not the same people who found the bones: rather, people who got exposure to both accounts may have conflated them, because of the reported stench in both cases. Kaplan then discusses mixed monsters in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H.G. Wells (1896).

⁹ In Greek mythology, the Sphinx is famous for the riddles that a passer-by must answer, not to lose his life, until Oedipus defeats her: see a discussion in Lowell Edmund's (1981) *The Sphinx in the Oedipus Legend*.

6. The Sphinx

Sphinxes¹⁰ and Harpies also appear in Islamic art: Baer (1965) is an iconographical study. Cf. Gierlichs (1998), Otto-Dorn (1994). Concerning Kaplan's discussion of the Greek myth of the Sphinx, I would like to mention something Kaplan does not: Palaephatus (apparently a contemporary of Aristotle) tried to rationalise it. See Jacob Stern's translation from the Greek in *Palaephatus: On Unbelievable Tales* (1996), and James Romm's review (1996) in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*.

Romm wrote:

Plato in the *Phaedrus* shows Socrates playfully attempting to rationalize the myth of Boreas [...]. But Socrates quickly draws back from this sort of approach, anticipating that it would take vast amounts of time and ingenuity to similarly decode all the fabulous elements in the mythic tradition: centaurs, chimeras, gorgons, Pegasuses, and the like. As if taking this *Phaedo* passage as his challenge, Palaephatus set out to [rationalise] all of Greek mythology [...], even when this required performing bizarre, almost ludicrous linguistic or logical contortions.

As for the Sphinx: “when the victims of a female bandit named Sphinx, who happens to be accompanied by a pet dog, describe the speed with which their attacker moved [...] one can easily see how the image of a winged monster, part dog and part woman, took form.” Romm remarked that Stern's English version, “She doesn't run, she flies — she and her dog!” would have benefited from a note about ambiguity in the Greek text as to whether what is meant is “two different creatures or two combined into one, as singular verb suggests; but a footnote would have helped the Greekless reader understand just how natural an error led to the creation of the Sphinx legend.”

7. The Minotaur and the Medusa

7.1. Kaplan's Rationalisation, within a Multitude of Aetiological Attempts

Kaplan's Chapter 3, “It came from the Earth — Minotaur, Medusa”, tries to interpret “the ‘cruel bellowing’ that Callimachus describes as having come from below-ground” (Kaplan 2012: 54), and associated with Crete's mythical Minotaur. “Earthquakes have been common on Crete” (ibid.: 55): “As for earthquakes, Crete's position is a miserable one” (ibid.: 56), as “the ocean crust on the northern tip of the North African Plate is subducting” (ibid.), under the Aegean Plate. Another section tries to explain the petrifying Gorgon, Medusa. Kaplan prefers to interpret her gaze as how ancient people found a cause for fossils, “transformed from their original biological materials into stone” (ibid.: 66): “they tried to explain their findings by concluding there was a monster capable of turning things to stone” (ibid.: 67). Not only that: “the mineral pyrite, more commonly known as fool's gold, can accumulate

¹⁰ Chapters in Cherry's *Mythical Beasts* (1995) are concerned with ancient and medieval legends of such creatures as the unicorns, sphinxes, griffins, mermaids, and more. Bibliographies and iconography are of special interest.

inside bone and transform it into a glittering replica of its original form” (ibid.: 67, in a note); Kaplan wonders “if the discovery of such transformed bones inspired the story of Midas, the mythical king whose touch could transmute objects into gold” (ibid.).

The concept of Medusa’s petrifying gaze perhaps stemmed “from someone who felt the icy grip of [psychogenic] shock upon seeing something frightening or worse, had a seizure from the experience, and entered a state of severe rigidity” (ibid.: 69).¹¹ The effect of venom, according to Kaplan’s plausible explanation, motivated Medusa’s “hair of writhing snakes” (ibid.).

I must say that stark rationalisation like this one by Kaplan uncomfortably reminds me of this other one, given by Elworthy (1903: 215):

Upon seeing these [artefacts] all grouped together, it at once occurred to me that here was the real solution of the Gorgon myth, and that in these curling objects we may recognise what must have been as familiar as they were dreadful to the ancients living on the coast; not snakes, but the writhing tentacles of the horrible Octopus, no other than the Hydra, so familiar in the story of Hercules. Those who have studied that monster, the Octopus, at close quarters, as I have, will find no difficulty in appreciating the awfully fascinating glance, in the baleful eye of that odious creature, an eye in itself conveying the most frightfully malignant expression of any living thing upon which I have ever looked. The swelling bladder-like lips of the gill-chamber opening and shutting as it breathes, with its beak-like mouth, need but little stretch of fancy among people who personified everything, to recognise in these features the hideous grinning face and protruded cleft tongue of the Gorgon. Indeed it may be suggested that this latter feature is the direct indication or outcome in ideal vision of the well-known cruel parrot-beak mandible of the Octopus. To some, looking down through the clear sea, the awful eye and distended mouth would be most in evidence, and hence, when at rest with its tentacles coiled up behind and around its body, the aspect of the hideous face thus made by the body of the creature would exercise its full influence upon an imaginative person, and so fascinate the beholder as to hold him motionless as a stone, just as serpents are said to fascinate birds. In ancient times these monsters of the deep may have claimed many a victim by thus stupefying, and, as it were, turning them to stone; at any rate, it is very probable that it was one of the greatest dangers to human life, with which dwellers by the sea were acquainted. For any fisher or swimmer round whom the fearful tentacles were coiled, was indeed beyond chance of escape. [...]

In a paper in which he claimed to have detected Assyrian elements in the story of Perseus and Medusa,¹² Clark Hopkins wrote (1934: 341–342):

¹¹ I signal here a Zoroastrian claim to the effect that Zoroaster, in the final part of his life, had sacrificed his mobility and became as rigid as a stone: this may have been paralysis.

¹² “It can be then, I believe, no mere coincidence that Assyrian art brings us a demon resembling the Greek Gorgon much more closely in many respects than does the Egyptian Bes, and Assyrian tradition a most striking parallel to the Perseus-Gorgon story. This is, of course, the figure of Humbaba and the story of his death at the hands of Gilgamesh” (Hopkins 1934: 345). Humbaba used to be represented visually as a head alone, with a grimacing mouth, but not the protruding tongue typical of Bes but also of Medusa (ibid: 345–346).

[...] Ziegler in Pauly-Wissowa (VII, pp. 1645 ff.) gives an excellent summary of the hypotheses advanced before 1912: the various attempts to see the original Medusa in such natural phenomena as volcanic eruption, the ocean's roar, the sea waves, etc., the connection of the Medusa-head with the ghost-like character of the full moon, first developed by Gädechens; Roscher's famous theory of the Gorgons as thunder-clouds; the theory of Ridgeway, which Miss Harrison follows, that the Gorgoneion¹³ was the actual head of a hideous beast indigenous to the Libyan desert; and K. O. Müller's hypothesis that the Gorgon figure was the personification of an idea in which the chief elements were anger, rage and scorn. We might smile now at the hypotheses which saw the original Medusa in the ape, the gorilla or the countenance of the octopus, were it not for the fact that most recently a scholar armed the modern weapon of psychology¹⁴ has advanced the vision of a nightmare as the prototype of the Gorgon head. [...]

We may for convenience divide these theories into two groups, one seeking the origin of the Gorgon in natural phenomena, the other in actual zoological specimens or in animals of the imagination derived from these. When from these hypotheses, however, we glance back to the evidence of Homer, difficulties are at once apparent.¹⁵

The pervasiveness of the Medusa myth in Western civilisation was shown in the 73 chapters in *The Medusa Reader*, edited by Marjorie Garber and Nancy Vickers

¹³ The Gorgoneion, i.e., the motif of a circle containing Medusa's head, painted or in relief, turns up also in the history of British folklore. Fear (1992) explained that the survival of such a relief from the Roman temple of Minerva in the city of Bath, but with a male face sporting a moustache (because of *Typenkontamination* with the Celtic cult of the head), was apparently interpreted by Saxon conquerors as representing the founder of the city, and what they detected as feathers of wings in the background, as reflecting his mastery of the magic arts. The motif of Simon Magus' flight was combined with this, resulting in the myth, related by Geoffrey of Monmouth, of King Lear's father, i.e., Bladud, King of Bath, who supposedly managed to fly as far as the Temple of Apollo in Trinovantum (i.e., London), and crashed.

As Bath has hot springs, note that in an article asking why Medusa and Perseus were associated with the island of Seriphos, Croon remarked (1955: 11) that Seriphos has hot springs, and "it is remarkable that at very many places with thermal springs, representations of the Gorgoneion occur in the archaeological finds. This evidence should, however, be handled carefully. Not very long ago, the late M.P. Charlesworth warned [...] against uncritical conclusions about the transmission of ideas from the occurrence of identical art symbols. Moreover, one might say that it is no wonder if a considerable number of pictures of the Gorgoneion occur near hot springs, for there are very many of them in general, so why not accidentally near the θεράμῃ λουτρά?" Croon marshalled evidence leading to "the conclusion that the occurrence of the Gorgon or more usually the Gorgoneion on coins or major pieces of art of cities near hot springs is too frequent to be explained as a mere coincidence, and that there is a considerable chance that these representations are in many cases an echo of local cults" (ibid.: 12). Croon claimed (like J.E. Harrison had done earlier) that the Gorgon-head was originally an apotropaic mask worn in ritual dances (ibid.: 15). Lillian Wilson (1920) argued for the influence of Greek art on the Medusa myth. "The stock patterns of grotesque masks used on coins and gems, in relief sculpture, and in vase painting of the seventh, sixth, and even fifth centuries have been more or less loosely classed under the name of 'Gorgon masks'. It is evident that these masks did not always refer to Medusa or the Gorgon sisters, but were often intended to represent Phobos or some male demon. But a brief comparative study will make apparent the close relationship, artistically, between these decorative masks and the Gorgon faces in the archaic representations of the myth" (ibid.: 232).

¹⁴ Hopkins (1934) did not name Sigmund Freud, who interpreted Medusa's head by equating decapitation to castration. Rather, Hopkins (1934: 342) cited pp. 29–30 in H.J. Rose's 1928 *Handbook of Greek Mythology*. Psychoanalysis was combined with ethnography in Gananath Obeyesekere's book *Medusa's Hair* (1981), on religion and symbol systems.

¹⁵ Kathryn Topper (2007) interpreted the Medusa myth in relation to erotic abductions.

(2003). Introducing their guest-edited thematic issue “The Eternal Return of Myth”, González-Rivas Fernández and Lipscomb remarked (2017: 2):

In her article ‘Myth, Creativity and Repressions in Modern Literature: Refigurations from Ancient Greek Myth’, Lorna Hardwick reflects on the plasticity of the myth as manifested in works such as [...] Other works, such as Tony Harrison’s film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, emerge as examples of new memoryism, that resorts to myth as a tool to explore the darkest chapters of human History [...]

In fact, *The Gaze of the Gorgon* is about the First World War, and was first shown on television in the U.K. on BBC 2, on 3 October 1992 (see *ibid.*: 14–19).

7.2. The Narrative Motif “Women with Petrifying Powers”

Let us just mention two narrative occurrences of the motif of the woman who petrifies. An interesting variant of the Medusa theme appears in Vittorio Imbriani’s 1875 fantasy history novella about Cesare Borgia, the Duca Valentino, entitled *L’impietratrice* after the title character. She wants to help him unite Italy, even after in her native Mexico, she has inadvertently turned him to stone. Vittorio Imbriani (1840–1886) also was an important folklorist. In *L’impietratrice*, “The Woman Who Turns Men to Stone” (reprinted in 1983 in Milan by Serra e Riva, edited by G. Pacchiano), after his defeat in Renaissance Italy Cesare Borgia does not die in Spain, but meets in Mexico the Aztec princess Ciaciunena, a beautiful young woman who turns to stone any man who would stare into her eyes. He convinces her to fight on his behalf for Italy’s unification. She agrees. He falls in love with her, and she inadvertently turns him to stone. She wants to nevertheless carry on with his struggle, and seeks Pope Julius II, in order to turn to stone him and his courtiers. Alas, in the Old World her magic powers do not work. Imbriani concludes by remarking that at any rate Julius II already had a heart of stone, well before Ciaciunena’s visit. Unlike his father, Paolo Emilio Imbriani (1807–1877), a revolutionary minister of education in 1848 Naples, Vittorio Imbriani was a proud reactionary, advocating absolute monarchy, and hanging.¹⁶

Another Medusa-like character, but one who petrifies not by being stared at but by kissing, appears in the 1950 comedy film *Totò sceicco*.¹⁷ In its second part (a parody of Greg Tallas’ film *Atlantis* inspired by Pierre Benoit’s 1919 novel *L’Atlantide*), Totò and a young aristocrat whose butler he is, watch while in a hall full of statues, Antinea, the Queen of Atlantis, kisses a willing Italian man crazed with love, and turns him into stone. Atlantis is destroyed. In the final scene, back in Italy, Totò kisses Antinea after explaining: “L’ho fatta vaccinare” (“I had her take a vaccine jab”).

¹⁶ An anonymous referee asked, concerning my mentioning Imbriani, Totò, and the Trump-as-Perseus cartoon: “why *this particular example*, rather than a hundred other cases of the reception of the Medusa myth?” Well, the answer is implicit in the question: it could be asked regardless of the particular example I would make. For sure, it deserves mention that Medusa has been quite prolific a myth, in terms of multi-faceted cultural impact. Therefore, I have expanded my present treatment of Medusa.

¹⁷ https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totò_sceicco is fuller than https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toto_the_Sheik

7.3. Medusa in the Visual Arts, and Instances of Self-Identification

Kaplan traces Medusa in Renaissance paintings¹⁸ and various films. May I point out a few more examples. During the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, in a cartoon of pro-Trump propaganda, the upper body of a naked Donald Trump appeared in the role of Cellini's statue of Perseus, with a sad face and eyes closed, holding the head of Medusa, whose frighteningly extroverted face was that of the other presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton.¹⁹

In his paintings from the second half of the 19th century, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, a Pre-Raphaelite, painted some mythological paintings. One theme was the story of Perseus and Medusa, "which he illustrates between 1875 and 1878" (Cheney 2004: 203–204), but what he depicted is the head of Medusa and the use Perseus and Athena make of it, not the living Medusa. "The Medusa-Andromeda story attracted Burne-Jones the most in the Perseus cycle. He felt bewitched by the imagery [...]" (ibid.: 217). "[H]e rejects the depiction of Medusa as a monster, which was popular in Archaic art, for a more idealized classical conception" (ibid.: 218).

In *The Doom Fulfilled* [...], Burne-Jones represents Andromeda liberated from her chains. Perseus uses Andromeda as bait for the sea-monster, rather than flying away with her and exhibiting the Medusa's head. This would have brought the wrath of Poseidon down on the innocent people of Joppa (Java). He prefers instead to fight the sea-monster (ibid.: 221).

Of course, Joppa is Jaffa, not Java.

In the context of Victorian paintings, Medusa is an instance of painters' and literary authors interest in women's hair (Gitter 1984: 939):

But Medusa's hair says who she is, too, and Victorian painters and writers were fascinated by this range and contrast of values and significance. More intensely and self-consciously than any other generation of artists, they explored the symbolic complexities and contradictions of women's hair, at the same time developing and deepening its multiplicity of meaning. For them, Arachne, whether she spun a web of flax or hair, was an intriguingly ambiguous figure: victim and predator, trapped and trapper, Penelope and Circe, angel and mermaid.

This ambiguity was brilliantly epitomized by William Holman Hunt in his illustration of "The Lady of Shalott" [...]. In Hunt's painting, the Lady of Shalott, swirling, spiderlike, in the center of her circular loom, is either frenziedly weaving her web or fighting to get free of it. She may be using the threads that encircle her — as her hair does — to weave her circular tapestry, or she may be trapped by them.

Andrea Mantegna's self-portraits were deliberately disconcerting or intended to make viewers uncomfortable. Marzia Faietti (2010: 36–37) argues that he sought a

¹⁸ An important discussion is provided by Maurizio Marini (2004) with an added note by Sir Denis Mahon, of Caravaggio's versions of the head of Medusa.

¹⁹ Cf. Dennis (1997: 450): "Cellini's Perseus thrusts Medusa's head forward, bringing the spectator under its awful gaze while the demigod looks down and away [...]."

terrifying effect inspired by the Gorgon's head. I think I can corroborate Faietti's hypothesis, as Mantegna portrayed himself also as a face surrounded by vegetal ornamental motifs, and there exists a type of gorgoneion, indeed, being the gorgoneion with vegetation, on which, see Frothingham (1915). In fact, Frothingham (1911) has claimed "that Medusa was not an evil demon or bogey, but primarily a nature goddess and earth-spirit of prehistoric times identical with or cognate to the Great Mother, to Rhea, Cybele, Demeter, and the 'Mother' Artemis" (ibid.: 349).

Self-identification with Medusa occurs in recent art: in a women studies journal, in a thematic issue on the body and menopause, Margaret Tittmore (1998) described in "Medusa, myself" her interactive installation of 1994 by the same title, conceived of as a menstrual tent with a portrait and an altar for Medusa, and "where I sought to find connections between the myth and contemporary views about menopause" (Tittmore 1998: 81). Apart from his self-portraits, Mantegna depicted the head of Medusa on shields in some paintings (Faietti, ibid.).

7.4. Medusa, between Alternative Narrative and the Visual Arts

The American painter Elihu Vedder painted Medusa's head, but also wrote in 1872 an alternative fable, "Medusa Story", which he had published in London. Regina Soria related (1964: 604–605):

The Medusa myth, as told by Vedder, was preceded by an introduction, in which a wise old snake criticized the sketches left by the artist in his studio. The snake declared that the artist "had accidentally hit on the truth, as artists do sometimes", in his representation of the Medusa with serpents growing right out of her head and in showing the Medusa only as a reflection in a mirror. According to the serpent, Medusa had been a lovely baby, with two tiny rose-colored wings growing behind her temples. Later, she sprouted a wreath of little golden serpents around her forehead, which were greatly admired by the people of her city. "As thoughts began to circulate under her lovely forehead, these serpents would underline, as it were, her moods, raise their heads and move about restlessly". When she fell in love and because of slander was abandoned by her lover, she changed from Medusa the Beautiful to Medusa the Fiend. She finally had to flee to an island, where the Gorgons welcomed her as being more wicked and miserable than they. Her wings had been bitten off by the snakes, who, aroused by her terrible dreams, rose now fiercely upon her head all the time. Perseus came, carrying as a weapon the mirror of perfect truth. When Medusa looked into the mirror, she saw what she had become and the realization killed her.

7.5. Medusa as Metaphor and in Allegory: Envy, Truth, Revolution

Medusa occurs in metaphor, allegory, even as a commercial logo: Gianni Versace chose Medusa as logo of his fashion firm. Sometimes, traditionally, the Gorgon is a symbol of envy. Ben "Jonson often represents envy as the Gorgon, whose petrifying gaze imitates the noxious gaze of envy" (Meskill 2005: 186). Medusa standing for jealousy is found in an interpolation in the *Roman de la Rose*. Sylvia Huot writes (1987: 865):

In a fifty-two-line interpolation appearing towards the end of many *Romance of the Rose* manuscripts, the narrator compares the female image over the entry to the tower of Jealousy — the one at which Venus fires her burning arrow — to the head of Medusa. This passage entered the *Rose* manuscript tradition in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, possibly within the lifetime of Jean de Meun; it recurs throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Medusa has also been made into a symbol of truth, terrible as it is to stare at: “the Gorgon Truth”. “For [Giacomo] Leopardi, to use Geoffrey Hartman’s fable, was one of the first of modern poets to face the Gorgon directly, without the protection of Athene’s mirror” (Koffler 1971: 30). “The sustained achievement of the *Canti* [by Leopardi] consists in their unanswerable protest against the shattering of the mirror of mediating and hopeful illusion, and their wail of grief at the petrifying, destructive force of the Gorgon’s gaze of the *vero*” (ibid.: 31).²⁰

Medusa belonged in Romantic and Victorian literary iconology, appropriations discussed by McGann (1972). In Section 3, “The Medusa of Revolution”, of his article “Melville, Garibaldi, and the Medusa of Revolution”, Dennis Berthold writes (1997: 449): “When [Herman Melville’s] ‘At the Hostelry’ introduces Garibaldi as a ‘Red-shirt Perseus’ rescuing Andromeda, it implicates him in the slaying of Medusa, one of the most powerful emblems of revolution and emergent feminism in the nineteenth century”. Cf. Hertz (1983), Judson (2001). “Although Melville could have seen Leonardo’s painting at the Uffizi in 1857, his immediate source was probably Shelley’s poem” (Berthold 1997: 456, note 10). “Melville employed Medusan iconography throughout his career, as Gail H. Coffier’s compendium of Melville’s classical allusions indicate” (ibid.). Medusa’s head had been used, earlier on, as a symbol of state power; Hertz remarks (1983: 51, note 9):

The *politically* apotropaic effects of the Medusa’s head derive from its reappearance on Minerva’s shield and from the use of representations of that shield as symbols of the State’s power to defend itself against its enemies. See, for example, the ceremonial use of the shield in Rubens’s *Philip IV Appoints Prince Ferdinand Governor of the Netherlands* (Fig. 66 in John Rupert Martin, *The Decorations for the Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi* [London and New York, 1972]). In *Détruire la peinture* (Paris, 1977), Louis Marin discusses a notorious instance, Caravaggio’s Medusa’s Head painted on a circular shield, a work commissioned by a cardinal as a present to the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

²⁰ In contrast, Perseus’ manner of killing Medusa by using “Athena’s reflective shield as a mediating device” (Berg 1996: 72) has been made to symbolise technology, in Adam Berg’s multimedia installation of 1994, entitled *Perseus’ Hysteria*, discussed by Berg (1996), who claimed (ibid.: 72): “In so far as Perseus’s gaze also signifies the televised gaze, a gaze of coordinates, he kills Medusa technologically and not heroically; he is protected by scientific knowledge and not vulnerably exposed to nature. Thus, Perseus demonstrates to humanity that even the greatest monstrosity can be gazed upon, as long as it [sic] the gaze focuses on the monstrosity’s reflection alone”.

Suhr (1969: 5) claimed that “the medusa head was another way of presenting the total solar eclipse”, and Athena’s shield (on which, cf. Murray 1889) is interpreted as the heavenly aegis, a shield with a reticulated pattern, this being “a development from an old theory about the composition of the moon, comparing its translucent substance to a filter-like cloth through which the eclipsed sun shines with a subdued light” (Suhr 1969: 5).

Just as the Baroque poet Giovan Battista Marino celebrated Caravaggio's now still famous painting *Medusa* in a poem probably of 1602 (see Cropper 1991), likewise Percy Bysshe Shelley authored a famous poem, "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery". See, e.g., Jacobs (1985). Barbara Judson claimed (2001: 135):

As a symbol of insurrection, Shelley's Medusa operates predictably enough — depicting the Revolution's spiral through beauty, promise, and eventual terror — but as an emblem of Shelley's consciousness she breaks with the narcissism of conservative allegory, furnishing him with a self-critical representation of his own liberalism. Kelvin Everest has remarked the importance of the double in Shelley's poetry as a medium of self-analysis, and I argue that the Medusa, one of his most intriguing doubles, functions in that way.

7.6. Medusa's Association with Wisdom

Faietti (2010) suggests that apart from fear, resorting to Medusa also invokes, by association, wisdom, because of Medusa's head association with Minerva. And indeed, in the history of ideas one comes across the Order of Medusa (Carr 1963: 73):

In the British Museum there is a rare book, printed in Marseille in 1730, under the intriguing title, *Les Agréables Divertissemens* [sic] de la table, ou les Réglemens de l'illustre Société des Frères et Soeurs de l'Ordre de Méduse, an opuscul which makes quite clear that, being associated not only with Medusa but indirectly with Minerva also, the Order in question, composed principally of naval officers, was conscious of representing an intellectual *élite*. The very first *Chanson de Méduse* exhorts: 'Frères, célébrons dans nos chants, | Notre aimable Déesse, | Et respectons dans ses Serpens [sic], | Sa profonde sagesse', [...]

Jay Dolmage states (2009: 24, note 19):

Often, Medusa was seen to symbolize "artful eloquence". For instance, Coluccio Salutati in the fourteenth century and Nancy Vickers in the twenty-first both argue for this reading. As Salutati suggests, the snakes on her head might be seen as "rhetorical ornaments . . . instruments of wisdom" because snakes are "reported to be the most cunning" (55). In this interpretation Medusa turns an audience to stone not because of her looks but because of her rhetorical power — her audience "so convinced of what they have been persuaded that they may be said to have acquired a stony quality" (56). Vickers goes further, sourcing this connection back to Plato (254). She also argues that Medusa's "stoning" be seen as a rhetorical power, an ability to change the audience's state of mind, accompanied by a somatic effect. Finally, she suggests that Medusa's rhetorical power might represent the freezing of us all before the specter of the feminine — and she asks what we might do to reverse a legacy of neutralization and appropriation of the Other.

7.7. The Name of Medusa Invoked in Scholarly Debates

Medusa sometimes turns up in startling contexts, within Western civilisation, including in scholarly debate.²¹ For example, as the severed head of Medusa was placed, as a weapon, on the shield of Athena, Medusa was made to give her name to a debate about some ornamented shields from Oceania. It was the so-called “Trobian Medusa” anthropologists’ controversy, concerning how to interpret the design of some shields of warriors from the Trobriand Islands, east of New Guinea. Leach (1954) proposed the design shows a flying witch, and the shield is intended as a dangerous emanation. Another explanation (Berndt 1958) was that the shield is intended to insult the enemy, by referring to the intimacy of the enemy warrior and his wife. But see e.g. Tindale (1959).

Because of how Mario Praz began (with a quotation from Shelley’s poem on Leonardo’s *Head of Medusa*) the first chapter in *The Romantic Agony* (Praz 1956), both that chapter and a rebuttal of Praz’s argument by Jerome McGann (1972) were entitled “The Beauty of the Medusa”.²²

Medusa has even been creatively made into a symbol of science because of the wealth of its literature. “The New Medusa” is the title of law librarian from Columbia University in New York, Frederick Hicks (1920). It began by quoting two lines from Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* 1:279–280, “Index-learning turns no student pale, / Yet holds the eel of science by the tail”. Hicks claimed (1920: 145):

[T]he passage of time and the accumulating wealth of literature makes it certain that only by index-learning can one grasp and hold the tail of the eel of science. Science cannot today be likened to a single eel wriggling and twisting to elude our grasp, but rather to a Medusa whose locks are formed by numerous eels of this and that science and literature”.²³

²¹ And in the titles of scholarly works. A treatise by David Pierre Giottin Humbert de Superville (1770–1849), a draughtsman, curator, scholar, and art theorist, was entitled *Medusa*. In an article entitled “‘Medusa’ or the Physiognomy of the Earth: Humbert de Superville’s Cosmological Aesthetics”, Barbara Stafford explains (1972: 309): “In the ‘Medusa’, Humbert has left an aphoristic exposition of his ideas on Phorcys’s terrifying daughter and the role she played in ancient fables. He succinctly outlines the origin of man, his present world, and the foundation of the first religious cult. This foray into comparative mythologies, by no means unusual to the times, illustrates that his system of the arts, as devised in the *Essai*, is a cosmological one”.

²² Medusa appears as a symbol of a kind of sexuality in such titles as those of the novel *Il bacio della Medusa* by Melania Mazzucco (1995), the book of literary studies *Lo sguardo della Medusa* by Ferruccio Masini (1997), and a paper about Proust, “Marcel and the Medusa” (Viti 1994). The madness of the eponymous protagonist of Cervantes’ *Quijote* inspired a metaphor in the main title of an article, “Medusa en el laberinto”, by Joan Ramon Resina (1989). Curiously, neither Medusa, nor she as a Gorgon are mentioned again in that paper. In an article about Amos Oz, Wheatley (2010: 641) even felt able to propose of simile of Medusa for Jerusalem. Jay Dolmage (2009) resorted to rather inane wordplay on Greek *mêtis*, Medusa, and Spanish *mestiza*, and this in an “essay [that] will confront the idea that no woman and no body exist in the histories of thought that we have canonized” (ibid.: 5). “Looking quickly, but carefully, at two more recent mythical and rhetorical retellings — Hélène Cixous’s use of the Medusa myths and Gloria Anzaldúa’s stories of *mestizaje* — I hope to suggest that there are useful similarities across geographies and eras, all linked by *mêtis*” (ibid.: 13). Dolmage’s etymological claims (ibid.: 14) are questionable to say the least.

²³ “During the nineteenth century, the Fante of the central coastal region of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) faced two powerful adversaries: Britain and Asante”, says George Nelson Preston (1975: 36), before turning to discussing Fante military art. Preston gave his paper the main title “Perseus and Medusa in Africa”. Only the first column deals with that classical myth. “An ancient Fante or Akan institution is the construct that allows the Akan to visualize the state not in terms of its geographical boundaries but rather in terms of the holistic relationship be-

7.8. Uses of Medusa in Early Imperial Roman Literature

Let us consider two instances from the literature of ancient Rome in early imperial times. “Lucan makes extensive use of the Medusa myth from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 4, using it to test the possibility of creating a discourse that can adequately represent the history that haunts him” (Malamud 2003: 31). In Virgil’s *Aeneid* 6.273–294, the Gorgons have a Cerberus-like function (Clark 2003).

Among the horde of beasts in these are the Centaurs, the most horse-like of monsters, and also the Gorgons, on which we shall focus attention presently. What has never been pointed out is that these frightening apparitions of Hell clearly offered Aeneas no resistance as he entered the house but inspired terror only as he sought to make his exit through the same entrance-way. This in turn leads us to suppose that they were within their stalls at his moment of entry, but appeared at the stable-doorways (*in foribus*) in order to block his path as he tries to depart. No wonder Aeneas is terrified (290)” (ibid.: 308).

For comparison to Virgil, consider an instance of use of Medusa in the nether-world in early modern literature. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, 2.610–614, the damned are prevented by Medusa from reaching, in Hell, the river Lethe, of forgetting all pain (Fleming 2002).

7.9. Medusa’s Explicit or Implicit Presence in Literary Writing: Dante

In literary studies, one comes across some analysis that detects the presence of Medusa as a theme even as she does not appear explicitly in those passages they discuss. “In the ninth canto of the *Inferno*, the pilgrim Dante is threatened by the Furies who wish to summon up Medusa and turn him to stone” (Mansfield 1970: 143). Writing about Dante’s *Inferno*, Florence Russo argued (2012: 442):

I am referring to the figure of the Medusa who dominates Canto IX even though she actually never appears. The Gorgon is, in fact, a coordinate of the Siren and as an embodiment of *cupiditas*, understood as a symbol of the seductive power of earthly concerns. My analysis of the Medusa will shed light on the nature of the heresy shared by the two Florentines Dante meets upon entering the City of Dis, Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti.

Sara Sturm-Maddox (1987) has pointed out the relation between Medusa from Canto 9 of Dante’s *Inferno*, and how “the Medusa legend subtends the poet’s expression of his fate” (ibid.: 128) in the second of Dante’s “pargoletta” poems in the *Rime Petrose*: “In terms of the petrifying power of this female figure, the link between

tween the ancestors, certain venerable objects, a unifying and spiritual concept called *kra*, and the religious activities of certain elites who perform rites on behalf of the entire body politic. Although the Asafo, the para-military organization of commoners among the Fante, experienced numerous military reverses in the nineteenth century, it remained for the Fante the expression of this continuity” (ibid.: 36). “Under such circumstances the Asafo took on a role identifiable with that of our mythical Perseus” (ibid.: 38), but the paper does not elaborate: why Perseus? Why Medusa? It is testament to the presence of the particular classical myth in the Western imaginary, that sometimes Medusa is named in vain.

Pietra or the ‘pargoletta’ and the Medusa of the *Commedia* is immediately evident to the reader familiar with both texts” (ibid.: 129). Sturm-Maddox finds evidence that Dante “deliberately brought the experience of the *petrose* to bear on his representation of Medusa” (ibid.: 129) in *Inferno*.²⁴

8. Winged Horses

Kaplan also tries to explain Pegasus: “Some art even shows Chimera battling with Pegasus” (Kaplan 2012: 42). I signal here, based on “Cylinder seals and their use in the Arabian Peninsula”, by D.T. Potts (2010), that in the Neo-Babylonian, one finds winged horses (ibid., Fig. 12, p. 33, Fig. 12, no. 88), but also a row of winged and horned caprids (ibid., p. 34, Fig. 13, no. 91), depicted on cylinder seals.

Moreover: “Among the remains of Buddhist art at Min-ui (“Thousand Buddhas”) near Kizil to the west of Kucha in Sinkiang province, paintings on the walls of a cave show sea-horses with wings and double tails, and the lower half of their bodies shaped like serpents, leaping out of the water depicted in blue” (Eiichirō 1950, pp. 16–17).

Eiichirō (ibid.: 42, fn. 173) — quoting from Harrison’s *Mythology* (1924) — also wrote: “‘But on one monument, a Boeotian stamped amphora in the Louvre, Medusa herself has the body of a horse, though the face of a woman. She is a horse goddess and as such the fitting bride of the horse-Poseidon. The Boeotian horse-Medusa recalls the horse-headed Demeter worshipped at Phigaleia in Arcadia.’ — Harrison, pp. 42–43. Perhaps we may see a combination of the horse and the dragon-serpent in Medusa also.” Note however that Medusa with the body of a centaur, being beheaded by Perseus, was already discussed by Frothingham (1911: 373–376). “There are several small which show the Gorgon as a Hippo-gorgon at about this *i.e.* seventh century” (ibid.: 374).²⁵

²⁴ Of course, some other literary authors refer to Medusa quite explicitly. Arturo Graf, an Italian literary critic, also was a poet from the *poesia crepuscolare* school; refer to his collection of poems *Medusa* (1880, 1881, 1890, repr. 1990). Defendi (2000) examined Graf’s use of the Medusa myth. “Figuring Medusa as his rueful muse, an original poetic gesture in and of itself, the myth and its mythological conceits offer Graf a varied lexicon and a metaphorical terrain through which he meditates upon the abyss, melancholy, and the unknown. In addition, this study [(Defendi 2000)] will also consider how certain aspects related to the mythical Medusa, *i.e.*, specularity and liminality, further shape Graf’s poetic style and circumscribe the dominant themes explored in subsequent collections of verse” (ibid.: 27).

²⁵ Like Frothingham, Phinney (1971) considered Medusa as a mother goddess. But Phinney proposed an aetiology of Medusa that leaves me uncomfortable like Kaplan’s. Phinney’s explanation is rather weak, because had he been right, then Medusa’s peculiarities should have been a general feature found among at least a sizeable set of Greek deities. He stated (ibid.: 446–47): “It is preferable, I believe, to construe the Gorgon — particularly Medusa, whose name means ‘Queen’ — as a faded mother-goddess. The Gorgon would have been a goddess of the type of *πόντια θεῶν*, who of all Greek goddesses, as Nilsson observed, most resembled a demon. The universally known danger to mortals of seeing a deity face to face explains why the Gorgon was believed to destroy all who looked at her. Even the noisiness of the Gorgon that is implied in her name (cf. Sanskrit *garḥ* ‘howl’ and Greek *γαργαρίς* ‘noise’) is appropriate to the mother-goddess type, as no less a lady than Hera, for example, is said to have screamed (*ἰάχησεν*) in warning when her favorites, the Argonauts, nearly sailed into the stream of Ocean (A.R. 4.640)”. By the way, Anat from Ugarit was mainly a *potnia thērōn*, as argued by Peggy Day (1992: 181). Anat’s caused the death of Aqhat, out of spite (in Artemis’ fashion).

9. Concluding Remarks

In the short compass of this review article, I had to restrict myself to considering those chapters of Kaplan's book that come closer to classical mythology. Kaplan's book is not a scholarly book and it aims at a readership of educated lay readers. Nevertheless, it contains much that ought to be of interest to folklorists and to scholars who are specifically concerned with classical mythology.²⁶

In this article, I have given Medusa a more detailed treatment, as Kaplan's attempt at aetiology concerning that myth is one more instance of trying to rationalise it. Our section on Medusa is subdivided into several subsections, and is also the section densest with citations, as the scholarly literature touching upon the myth of Medusa is vast.

While reviewing Kaplan's book, I split an original draft of the review article in two. Here, I left out a number of sections that will hopefully appear as part of one or more different publications: "The Sea, the Sky, and Dragons"; "King Kong, and Abductions by Apes"; "Demons of the Night and Vampires"; "*Aliens, Aliens-like Parasites, and Other Monsters*"; "Nineteenth-Century Ideas about Sea Serpents"; "The Hoax of the Petrified Man"; and "Dinosaurs, Dragons for Today's Urban Children?". Also refer to my papers on the cyclical snake (Nissan 2012, 2013–2014) and on lethal plants (Nissan 2009a, 2009b).

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²⁶ As for typos in Kaplan's book, I only noticed the following: "Smyth" on p. 82, but "Smith" on p. 83. In p. 15, in line 25, "less resistant" should be "more resistant" (cf. in line 31). In the following instead Kaplan was being imprecise. On p. 27, he stated "Marco Polo wrote". Wasn't that Rustichello of Pisa, who wrote under dictation?

²⁷ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1576283>

²⁸ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2794156>

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