

MEDUSA FIGURES AND SACRIFICES
IN THE POETRY OF BOGAN, PLATH, REKDAL, SCHIFF, AND SHAUGHNESSY

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Abstract

Medusa Figures and Sacrifices in the Poetry of Bogan, Plath, Rekdal, Schiff, and Shaughnessy

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This essay considers the use in contemporary poetry of the mythological figure of Medusa and the mythological practice of sacrifice. In Part One, “Medusa Figures in the Poetry of Louise Bogan and Sylvia Plath,” I provide a broad introduction to the Medusa mythology and its critical interpretations and then focus on two poems about Medusa or Medusa-like figures by each poet, considering Bogan’s “Medusa” and “The Fury” alongside Plath’s “Perseus, The Triumph of Over Suffering” and “Medusa.” The gorgon provides both poets an ambiguous and potent figure for exploring ideas ranging from female monstrosity to conceptions of self and the gaze. Together their poems illustrate pervasive themes in poetry about Medusa but also provide evidence for how even a single writer’s approaches to a single myth can resist generalization. In Part Two, “Mythical Sacrifice in the Poetry of Paisley Rekdal, Robyn Schiff, and Brenda Shaughnessy,” I first provide a brief overview of scholarship about sacrifice, touching on its role in religion and its other cultural roles, especially in relation to power, war, and hierarchy. I also consider the phenomena of female sacrifice and female self-sacrifice. I then discuss how Rekdal, Schiff, and Shaughnessy approach the mythology of sacrifice through retellings of classical mythology and through poems which use allusions to the sacrifice stories of classical myth to explore modern situations. I closely examine Rekdal’s “Horn of Plenty” and Schiff’s “A Hearing,” “A Doe Replaces Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar,” and “A Doe

Does Not Replace Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar.” Finally, I look at Brenda Shaughnessy’s “Our Andromeda,” a book within which there is scant mythical allusion and no retelling, but which is governed by the allusion in the title. Both sections of this paper illustrate how contemporary women poets use myth in ways as complex and multivalent as the mythology they explore.

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Medusa Figures in the Poetry of Louise Bogan and Sylvia Plath

Snake-haired temptress, beautiful female victim, and reflected, refracted symbol of both the triumph of the patriarchy and female survival, Medusa lives vividly in the imagination. Poets have found in her an ambiguous and potent figure for everything from female monstrosity to ideas of self and the gaze. The disparate approaches of twentieth century poets Louise Bogan and Sylvia Plath provide interesting ground for considering how poets can deploy mythical figures in their work. Together, their poems illustrate some pervasive themes in poetry about Medusa but also provide evidence of how even a single writer's approaches to a single myth can resist generalization. Both women are writing before the feminist and racial reclamation of Medusa which began in the later twentieth century and continues to this day. While their poems about Medusa do indeed center females, they are complex, contradictory texts which invite disparate readings, feminist yes, but also philosophical and literary.

Plath and Bogan were well-versed in classical literature. (Bogan went to Boston Girl's Latin School; Plath studied Latin in high school and Latin and Greek at Cambridge.) And both wrote many poems using mythology. The myth of Medusa is exploited by these poets for their own purposes, but essential fidelity to some core meaning holds. As Louise Bogan observes, myth "is saturated with meaning; no matter how deeply we explore it, an irreducible residue of unconscious allusiveness remains inexplicable in any terms but the original legendary ones." (Upton 124) Therefore, to understand what Bogan, Plath, and other poets are doing with the myth, it is essential to consider what the "original legendary terms" of the Medusa mythology might be.

Most people, if familiar with Medusa's mythology, know Ovid's version. However, there are several ancient versions. The etymology of the name Medusa, *queen* or *ruler*, implies origins of greater power than her diminished standing in Greek myth, an original potency which supports contemporary feminist reclamations of the myth. Scholars of paleomythology suggest that the gorgon Medusa is a consolidation of two different mythic traditions: first, the Neolithic goddess of the life cycle—represented as a snake/bird hybrid—who influenced birth, death, and regeneration, and second, the mythical Near-Eastern Humbaba, whose severed head is, like Medusa's, used as an apotropan to repel threatening or unwanted forces. (Dexter 25) From the earliest evidence of the Gorgon, she is an ambivalent figure: carrying the name Queen, but ruler of nothing, and while protective and linked with life, also destructive and linked with death. A connection to animals, especially but not only, snakes—an unstable but persistent animism—echoes animist aspects of Greek religion. In the Greek context, an affiliation of female, animal, and gorgon, connects female otherness to wildness and female relations to male power.

The first poetic sources for the gorgon are descriptions of battle shields carrying her image in *The Iliad*: Agamemnon's shield: "upon it, the ferocious-eyed Gorgon appeared, gazing dreadfully and all around were Terror and Flight." (Homer, *Iliad* 11.33-40) Later, there is a description of the decapitated head of Medusa on the aegis (breastplate) of Athena, "all about which Terror hangs like a garland, and Hatred is there, and Battle Strength, and heart-freezing Onslaught and thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgon, a thing of fear and terror." (Homer, *Iliad*, 5.733-742) Interestingly, even so early in literature, the gorgon is already figurative: in the *Iliad*, we see the Trojan hero Hector described as "Having Gorgon eyes or those of man-destroying Ares." (Homer, *Iliad*, 8.349)

Thus, the first known literary mentions of Medusa are ekphrastic representations of not the Gorgon herself but of shields depicting the Gorgon, as well as a metaphorical use of the gorgon. These ekphrastic representations are among the first preserved pieces of ekphrastic writing. Thus, not only is the Medusa myth's meaning concerned with the power of seeing, (Hector's gorgon eyes) but it is also deeply connected to artistic representation. Joan Hedley goes so far as to claim that "The tradition of poetic ekphrasis, inaugurated by Homer's description of the shield of Achilles is thus persistently haunted by the Shield of Perseus." (Hedley 44)

The physical characteristics of the Gorgon are barely described in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*: Homer describes the Gorgon as only "the terrible monster." There are numerous possibilities for why Homer's descriptions of the Gorgon are scant. Perhaps the poet wanted to leave the terrible imagining to his audience, perhaps the Gorgon was so well known that description was unnecessary, or there was something like a taboo against describing the gorgon. The latter seems unlikely: during the same period, iconographic representation of the gorgon was extremely common, appearing on everything from temple walls to drinking cups. The art historian Rainer Mark describes this iconography: The "gaze represented in and by these images is fashioned as threatening to a high degree...the iconographic type was marked by gross distortions and monstrous exaggerations all geared towards focusing our attention on the wide glaring eyes. The graphic power of their gaze is doubly and triply inscribed across the surface of the face: the fierce burst of air that blows out the distended nostrils, the screech of gnashing teeth, the compression of the grimace, and the animation of the hair as a writhing mass of snakes. These are clearly pictorial maneuvers that seek to create in the form of an image what happens in mythological discourse." (Mack 572)

So, to summarize the earliest literary material about Medusa: she is a female monster associated with snakes; she appears as a decapitated head with fearsome, terror-inducing properties; and she is associated both with the underworld, Athena, and war. Crucially, we also know that the image of the Gorgon has power; the Gorgon gazes on its viewers just as its viewers gaze on or avert their gaze from her.

Readers familiar with the myth will notice that in this iconography and literature, Medusa is not yet connected with Perseus. A connection between Medusa and Perseus is first made (in extant literature) in the Hesiod's *Theogony*: "the Gorgons who dwell on the other side of glorious Ocean in the most remote land, toward Night, where [live] the clear-voiced Hesperides Sthenno, and Euryale, and Medusa, suffering miseries: she was mortal, but the two were immortal and ageless. With this woman [Medusa] lay the dark-blue-haired one (Poseidon) in a soft meadow in the midst of spring flowers. Now, when Perseus cut off her head, both great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus leapt forth." (Hesiod 9-11)

Differences exist between the Gorgon of Homer and the Medusa of Hesiod. In the *Iliad* (750 BCE) and the *Odyssey* (725 BCE) the Gorgon is fearsome and monstrous, but in Hesiod's *Theogony* (700 BCE) she is attractive enough that Poseidon wants to "lay with her" in a field. Importantly, because rape becomes a major theme in the Medusa myth and artistic work inspired by it, (although interestingly rape is not a topic of Bogan's and Plath's poems) this episode is not described by Hesiod as a rape. Also interesting is that Medusa is sometimes pictured as a centaur with a female torso horse and a horse's body. This may be why, when Medusa is decapitated, the two children she "births" from her neck are the winged horse, Pegasus, and a young man, Chrysaor. In the birth of Pegasus, who became associated with poetry and other creativity, there is the

suggestion that art, especially poetry, required the death of Medusa. Many poets, including Plath and Petrarch, suggest that the poet is freed by figuratively slaying Medusa.

This birth via decapitation, birth in death, manifests the close, ambiguous, association of life giving and life taking in the Medusa myth. Similarly, in Euripides *Ion*, Queen Creusa describes Medusa's blood as both life giving and life taking: "Two blood-drops that the dying Gorgon shed... One medicines all disease, and one is death." (Euripides 78) And Appollodorus tells that "Asclepius...having received from Athena blood flowing from the veins of the Gorgon, used that flowing from the left side for the destruction of humanity, [while] he used that flowing from the right side for saving [humanity] and because of this, he roused the dead." (Dexter 30)

As time progressed, Medusa began to be portrayed as beautiful more often. Pindar describes Medusa as "fair-cheeked" and credits Medusa and her Gorgon siblings with originating a kind of popular music. However, in Greek and Roman versions, she is powerful, even after she is decapitated—unlike in some Medieval retellings which portray Medusa as a pretty, powerless girl, so weak there is no need to decapitate her. Is Medusa's double nature telling us something about how the ancients understood female beauty, monstrosity, and death? Does recent poetry about Medusa also interrogate or embody this correlation? Charlotte Currie observes that "the progression wherein what was once a hideous monster becomes a beautiful one makes clear that what was seen to be expressed in the figure was not simply the threat of the monstrous itself. What Medusa—in both her forms and her terrifying gaze represented to the ancient mind was something specifically female." (Currie 171) Does this specifically female aspect of Medusa's ancient mythology, along with her mythical origins in the ancient life-cycle Goddess, foreshadow or underlie feminist reclamations of the Medusa legend, such as those we find in Carol Ann Duffy's work? How do these ambiguously protective and destructive, ambiguously attractive aspects of Medusa manifest in poetry?

Medusa, as a powerful female human and animal hybrid, breaches the natural order, stirring wonder and fear. Her monstrosity lies in her polyvalent, unsettled, abnormal body and in her ambiguous powers. Already embodying contradictions, Medusa is, as Dunstan Lowe observes about monsters in general, "'good to think with,' not least because when old and new ideas conflicted, ... attitudes towards such bodies (whether emotional, aesthetic, philosophical, or political) could serve both sides." (Lowe 14)

Ovid's version of the Medusa legend comes within his retelling of the Perseus myth in *Metamorphoses*. Ovid makes a profound alteration in the myth which unites the beautiful and monstrous versions of Medusa into one character, and which provides her rape as the reason for her transformation. Currie observes that "The issues of monstrosity and beauty, as well as their role as two complementary sources of female power, are eventually brought together—though perhaps not for the first time—in Ovid, who presents the myth of Medusa as two halves." (Currie 171) In the first half of the legend, Medusa is a beautiful priestess who attracts the attention of the sea-god, Neptune (Poseidon). The moment of transition is when Neptune (Poseidon) rapes Medusa in the temple of Minerva (Athena), and Minerva responds by causing the beautiful girl Medusa to metamorphose into monstrosity. (Minerva punishes Medusa for being Poseidon's victim.) In the second half of the legend, Medusa is the well-known snaky-haired monster who petrifies everything with her gaze. Perseus succeeds in overcoming Medusa in Ovid's version because he cuts her head off while she's sleeping (which, frankly, doesn't seem very heroic). In Ovid's reworking of the myth, Medusa becomes a singular female figure who exists in two phases: beautiful and monstrous. The forms of power she possesses (attraction and petrification) are removed in turn as she is first

transformed and then decapitated. Ovid's version situates Medusa in the role of disempowered female. The epitome of her disempowerment is when she gives birth at the moment of her beheading to Pegasus and Chrysaor, who emerge from her decapitated neck. However, Ovid makes another alteration to the myth which complicates this role. In Ovid's account, Medusa's victims transform into marble statues of themselves, rather than just shapeless boulders. This innovation links Medusa's gaze to creativity and artistic generation. "Turning Medusa into an artist, one of many such metapoetic moves in the poem, creates more than one paradox involving the viewer becoming the viewed. The statue gallery involves men in the act of looking as well as being seen." (Lowe 108)

The Perseus legend is a hero myth, a story in which a hero conquers obstacles, proving his worthiness. Often hero myths result in the hero marrying, having an heir, and assuming a position of power. The myth of Perseus begins when Perseus's grandfather, king Arkirios hears an oracle that his daughter's son will kill him. Arkirios responds by locking his daughter, Danaë, in an underground chamber. However, even locked underground, Danaë is impregnated by Zeus who arrives in the form of a golden rain. From this union, Perseus is born. Arkirios responds by having his daughter Danaë and his grandson Perseus locked in a chest and dropped into the sea. The chest washes ashore on the island of Seriphos where the good brother, Dictys, of the bad king, Polydektes, raises Perseus. Perseus grows to manhood. Meanwhile Polydektes desires Perseus's mother, Danaë, but Perseus opposes the match. He tells Polydektes that he will bring him the head of Medusa in exchange for his mother's freedom from marriage to Polydektes.

In the next part of our story, Perseus, with the help of Athena and Hermes, sets off to find Medusa. He first meets the Graeae sisters, who share one eye and one tooth between them. By stealing their one eye and using it as leverage, he tricks them into telling him where Medusa is. (This incident provides further evidence that control of the gaze is pivotal in the Perseus/Medusa mythology.) Then, he finds Medusa and cuts off her head while she's sleeping by looking at the reflection of her head in a shield. Next, he takes Medusa's decapitated head and wields it as a weapon. When he discovers beautiful Andromeda chained to a rock as a sacrifice to a sea monster, he uses Medusa's head as a weapon to petrify the monster and then frees and marries Andromeda. Perseus and Andromeda have a son, Perces, whom they install as heir to the Egyptian throne, thus establishing Perseus as a patriarch. But, Perseus is not done. He returns to Seriphos, uses Medusa's head to petrify Polydektes, and then installs Dictys as king of the island. All this time, Perseus is still justifiably angry with his grandfather Arkirios (who, you will remember, put Perseus and his mother in a box and had the box thrown off a ship), so he heads back to Argos to kill grandpa. On his way, he decides to compete in an athletic competition in a place called Larissa. As it happens, Arkirios has fled to Larissa because he has heard Perseus is coming back to Argos. Perseus throws a discus that accidentally kills his grandfather. This accident conveniently saves him from the guilt associated with murder. The oracle which began the story fulfilled, Perseus returns to Argos and becomes king.

Detail about Perseus might seem extraneous to a discussion of Medusa, especially to contemporary poetic interpretations of Medusa, except that to a huge degree, Perseus's story is Medusa's story. Even modern reinterpretations or retellings centering Medusa are developments from this context. As Mack observes:

"If we approach Medusa from within the terms of the Perseus legend.... [It] is clear that we are faced with something other than a mere monster, something more than the embodiment of a fatal and terrifying power. At an anecdotal level (the level of

the story) we are faced with the monster that Perseus was able to defeat. Here, she provides the proof of Perseus's heroic stature, with her very monstrosity, her terrible power of petrification, acting as a kind of reverse index of the hero's own power. At a narratological level (the level of the folkloric hero pattern), we are faced with the monster whose function was only and precisely to be defeated....She may be classified, in other words, as a highly particular kind of cultural product, paired with Perseus just as Humbaba is paired with Gilgamesh, the dragon with the knight." (Mack 580)

Louise Bogan wrote numerous poems exploiting Greek and Roman mythology, including two thematically related poems about monstrous mythical females: "Medusa" and "The Sleeping Fury." Bogan wrote: "It [myth] is saturated with meaning; no matter how deeply we explore it, an irreducible residue of unconscious allusiveness remains inexplicable in any terms but the original legendary ones." (Upton 124) Lee Upton claims that Bogan's "poems mimic the symbolic condensations of myth, dramatizing change at the deepest levels of the psyche. Indeed, she saw the latter effect — the transformation of the individual — as the very heart of myth." (Upton 124)

Bogan's Medusa exemplifies change as insoluble mystery while her "Fury," shows a speaker's transformed life experience dramatized via the Fury. "Medusa" and "Fury" are complex poems supporting multiple interpretations, but both share a focus on transformation, which is of course one aspect of the Medusa mythology, as well as a focus on the nature of looking, seeing, and being seen which is at the heart of the mythology. In "Medusa," the second poem in Bogan's first collection, *Body of this Death*, Bogan captures the narrow moment when a glimpse of Medusa arrests the narrator, who becomes suspended and frozen in time, along with the entire scene.

Medusa

I had come to the house, in a cave of trees,
Facing a sheer sky.
Everything moved,—a bell hung ready to strike,
Sun and reflection wheeled by.

When the bare eyes were before me
And the hissing hair,
Held up at a window, seen through a door.
The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead
Formed in the air.

This is a dead scene forever now.
Nothing will ever stir.
The end will never brighten it more than this,
Nor the rain blur.

The water will always fall, and will not fall,

And the tipped bell make no sound.
The grass will always be growing for hay
Deep on the ground.

And I shall stand here like a shadow
Under the great balanced day,
My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in the wind,
And does not drift away.

(Bogan, *The Blue Estuaries* 4)

“Medusa” begins with an active narrator looking at an animated world. A speaker arrives at a dreamlike “house, in a cave of trees, / facing a sheer sky”. Before Bogan’s speaker glimpses Medusa, the scene is busy: “Everything moved.../ sun and reflection wheeled by.” There is life and possibility, but also unease: “a bell hung ready to strike.” In this stanza, as in every stanza except the second, the first and third lines are longer, syllabically and visually, than the second and fourth lines. This creates a sense of instability which Lee Upton proposes “mirrors the effect of foreshortening, contracting upon itself as the speaker in the poem experiences an abrupt halt in motion.” (Upton 93)

In the second stanza, the only quintain in a poem of quatrains, the unease created by the unstruck bell resolves as the speaker glimpses Medusa, described in a series of sibilants: “hissing hair, stiff bald eyes, serpents on the forehead. The scantness of Bogan’s description echoes the lack of detail about Medusa’s appearance in historical sources, a lack sometimes attributed to Medusa being too horrible to describe in detail. Here, this dearth frightens and leaves space for readers to imagine her horror.

At this point, the poem turns from life to stasis on the only line in the present tense: “this is a dead scene forever now.” Bogan follows that line with several subversive negative statements: “Nothing will ever stir / The end will never brighten it more...” (Subversive negation is an interesting technical feature of Bogan’s thinking and poetry; the mind will see what it is told is not there. Some other lovely examples are: “Where no sea leaps upon itself,” from “A Tale” and “In the country where to I go / I shall not see the face of my friend / Nor her hair the color of sunburnt grasses; / Together we shall not find / The land on whose hills bends the new moon,” from “Betrothed.”) From this point the poem speaks in a voice beyond death.

And yet, the fourth, penultimate, stanza moves to the *future* tense and continues the subversive negation of the third stanza with descriptions of suspended action: “The water will always fall and will not fall, / And the tipped bell make no sound.” This stanza also contains the very odd idea that “the grass will always be growing for hay / Deep on the ground.” Oddness grows from the alien preposition “on;” the effect is deep estrangement. This world is not merely suspended, it has become alien. In this stanza (as in the whole poem) rhyme and near rhyme hems us: the end rhymes on lines two and four: sky/by, hair/air, as well as the near rhymes bell/fall, etc. There is also consonance and assonance, all adding up, perhaps, to a sense of profound mirroring.

The poem ends as the speaker returns “like a shadow” (a shadow being another sort of mirror) to a static landscape full of “yellow dust” that “does not drift away.” The speaker endures as landscape, neither a triumphant hero like Perseus, nor utterly silenced. The poem ends in the future tense, creating a tension between the described stasis and the verbal progress, which echoes the

animated paralysis of the speaker and the world of the poem. Bogan's movement through aspect and verb tenses is fundamental to her meaning and effect, as Christine Colosurdo elegantly explains:

"The opening stanza, with its pluperfect "had come," establishes a past action that will be superseded by another, while the third lines anticipatory "a bell hung ready to strike" creates further suspense. This tension is answered in the second stanza with the appearance of the Gorgon: 'When the bare eyes were before me.' Surprisingly, the verbs in this stanza are passive constructions, "were," "held up," "seen through," "formed,---which suggest an indirect agency as if Fate, not the Gorgon, controlled the action. Then, suddenly, and in direct contrast to the passive voice, the present tense is dropped on the reader with a boom: "This is a dead scene forever now." This pivotal line comes at approximately the middle of the poem, with all succeeding verbs in the future tense. It is at this point that one recognizes again Bogan's negative affirmation "Nothing will ever stir." The negative verb constructions of the third stanza are contrasted with images of sight ("The end will never brighten it...Nor the rain blur"). Then the negatives are eliminated altogether, leaving only images of sight and touch. ("The water will always fall and will not fall"), sight and sound ("the tipped bell"), and sight and smell ("The grass will always be growing for hay")...This language both negates and affirms; the poem announces movement and paralysis at the same time. The final sentence, with its past action in the affirmative and present action in the negative, confirms a final, eternal (albeit conflicting) stasis." (Colasurdo 347)

Interpretations of this poem vary hugely. As I first read this poem, I formed the image of Medusa herself, holding up her snaky locks just as I hold up my long hair when I look in a mirror. Does my confusion point towards the heart of this poem, an essential ambiguity about self and other, observer and observed, speaker and spoken about? A straightforward reading of this poem suggests a person on a quest for Medusa. (In the first line, this speaker arrives at "the house, in a cave of trees" where the speaker glimpses through thresholds "hissing hair, / Held up at a window, seen through a door.") But does Bogan deliberately overlay or merge observer and observed? Is this poem interested in rhetorical subjectivity, in possession and control of the power of sight, in who is observer and who is observed?

In the meeting with Medusa, the poem's structure reduces (or expands) Medusa to the rhetorical construct of the gaze. This allows the Medusa figure to become metonymic for the power of subjectivity, that is the state of being the gazer rather than being the object of a gaze. In this representation, the borrowed ambiguity of the Medusa mythology—benevolent and malevolent, powerful and powerless—is echoed by the paradoxical way that objectification works in the poem: the poem is itself an object; the poet is the objectifier, but at the same time, in the poem Medusa is the objectifier, while the speaker, standing in for the poet, is the object paralyzed by seeing Medusa. As these ideas mirror, I am reminded of the optical phenomena infinite regress, in which two mirrors reflect each other. Medusa sees speaker; speaker sees Medusa; both petrify in infinite stasis. Should we read the speaker as the poet? Poet sees Medusa : Medusa sees poet; the act of objectification petrifies both.

Who is looking at whom? Who is the speaker of this poem? The speaker does not behave like Perseus. The speaker does not defeat nor decapitate Medusa. Furthermore, Perseus would never stand “like a shadow.” So, who is this unknown speaker and why does she seek Medusa? Bogan does not answer any of these questions. She just submits the moment of interaction.

In mythology, the essential characteristic of Medusa is that the power of her gaze petrifies and terrifies, her disembodied head continuing to have this effect even after she is killed. Thus, in the Perseus legend, her decapitated head becomes Perseus’s trophy and Perseus’s powerful weapon. As Rainer Mack observes: “This suggests that what was at stake in his [Perseus’s] encounter with Medusa was less the need to slay the monster (the normative function of such an encounter in the folkloric patter) than the need to take possession of her power.” (Mack 588) But, Bogan’s poem imagines a Medusa figure who, decapitated or not, retains her power to objectify independent of Perseus.

In Bogan’s poem, Medusa is the subject of the gaze, a terrifying, petrifying observer, but at the same time she is also observed by the speaker who retains, at least for the moment of the poem, powers of observation and communication. Thus, in this poem, Bogan has claimed the dual, really triple, statuses: writer, watcher, and watched. Does the petrified speaker’s retained ability to see and understand parallel the way Medusa’s gaze retains its petrifying powers, even after her head has been cut from her body? What might Medusa’s ambiguous sight after decapitation, sight from within petrification, suggest about the ambiguous seeing and objectifying that is the work of poetry? What might Bogan be trying to say about the (or maybe her?) experience of artmaking? Lowe suggests that the “great undiscovered allegory of monsters...is metapoetic: from unexpected birth to ambitious confrontation, monstrous beings often represent poetic creativity itself.” (Lowe 14) Does Bogan’s poem suggest that the position watcher who is being watched is the position of an artist, perhaps especially the female artist? Is Bogan proposing something subversive by occupying all positions in the structure of viewing?

Jane Hedley, in writing about Sylvia Plath’s “Edge,” another poem which depicts female stasis and death, suggests that in “Edge” Plath “filled both positions in the structure of the gaze” and therefore rendered her reader “superfluous to its exercise.” [She had] “occupied both positions in the structure that would otherwise have given others the power to hurt” her. (Hedley 72) Might Bogan’s intention in her “Medusa” be similar?

Bogan’s poem recalls Medusa before she was defined as Perseus’s foil, as she appears in Homer’s descriptions of the Gorgon on Athena’s and Agamemnon’s battle shields:

And across her shoulders she [Athena] threw the betasselled, terrible
aegis, all about which Terror hangs like a garland,
and Hatred is there, and Battle Strength, and heart-freezing Onslaught
and thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgon,
a thing of fear and horror, portent of Zeus of the aegis.
(Iliad 5.738-742)

He [Agamemnon] took up the man-enclosing elaborate stark shield,
a thing of splendor. There were ten circles of bronze upon it,
and set about it were twenty knobs of tin, pale-shining,
and in the very center another knob of dark-cobalt.

And circled in the midst of all was the blank-eyed face of the Gorgon
with her stare of horror, and Fear was inscribed upon it, and Terror.
(Iliad 11.32-37)

What is the rhetorical effect of writing a Medusa that, at least within Bogan's text itself, neither depends on nor responds to the Ovidian revision of the myth of Medusa, and instead recalls Medusa's monstrous, fear-inducing apotropaic origins? Of writing a Medusa that ignores Perseus and rape and places the locus of meaning within the gaze? One answer is suggested by Heidi Morse's claim that "what sets Bogan apart in her use of mythological figures like Medusa or the maenad(s) is that she typically eschews the woman's untold story (which most critics) have identified as a primary interest of the "revisionist" woman writer in favor of the rhetorical figure, honing in on the gendered linguistic ramifications of myth's symbolic order." (Morse 178)

Can the Medusa in Bogan's poem be interpreted as a rhetorical device to consider the power manifested in vision and in determining what is worth looking at? Rainer Mark observes that "within the legend, the power that Perseus gains in defeating Medusa is the power of petrification. As we have seen, though, it is possible to understand this as a mythological transcription of a much more general power, the power of objectification in the field of vision, or more broadly, the power of the gaze as such." (Mack 589) This power of gaze is the power of poets and poetry, the power to control the world by making and directing observation. How significant is it that in Bogan's Medusa poem both the stilled narrator and Medusa retain the power of sight? That Medusa and the speaker are caught between states: flesh and stone, suspended in the Now, stilled at the boundaries between life and death, seer and seen? Bogan's poem cleaves open the unbearable moment of being seen, Medusa will never stop seeing, the speaker will never stop being seen. The dust will hover in the air.

In Bogan's poem, boundaries between Medusa and the speaker, between self and other, blur. Lee Upton observes that in this respect, "Medusa' is marked by Bogan's central conflicts: a threateningly permeable consciousness; ruptures between will and action and ambivalence toward maternal power" (Upton 94) (I agree with the first conflicts that Upton finds. But, is this poem ambivalent toward maternal power specifically or power in general?) Permeable consciousness manifests in the fluid boundary between speaker and Medusa, time and identity folded, viewer and viewed layered, with Medusa both looking at herself and being looked at, a constant flickering of the gaze.

Was Bogan presciently contemplating Existentialism's suggestion that the gaze of others, especially those who do not know us well, reduces us to the status of things? Bogan wrote "Medusa" long before Sartre claimed in his *A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, that "the profound meaning of the Myth of Medusa" is the petrification of Being-for-itself by the Other's look," (Sartre, from *Being and Nothingness a Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* 93) a sentence in which "Sartre is saying that when another person looks at me, his look may make me feel that I am an object, a thing in the midst of things. If I feel that my free subjectivity has been paralyzed, this is as if I had been turned to stone, made like one of the lifeless statues in King Polydectes' court." (Barnes 124) In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre uses a Medusa metaphor to claim that awareness of one's state as a subject/object makes us human. "Sartre's entire discussion of human relations is developed within the conditions of the subject-object conflict which the Look initiates. 'Neither my looking at an object, nor my being looked at by a subject is sufficient by itself. The full experience of the Look requires that I am

aware of myself as being looked-at. My eyes must encounter those of the Gorgon who looks at me.” (Barnes 126)

Sartre’s proposition—that achieving the full power of sight, requires looking the Gorgon in the eye—is an intellectual predecessor to Hélène Cixous’s famous exhortation: “You have only to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly, she’s beautiful, and she’s laughing.” (Cixous 133) However, Bogan’s Medusa isn’t beautiful, and if you look her straight on, you are damaged. Bogan is not anticipating Cixous’s radical revision of Medusa myth *and* she hews closer to the terrifying and horrifying nature of Medusa’s otherhood than Sartre does.

Underneath this poem’s paralyzing ambivalence, its wavering between self and other, what cultural factors might be petrifying? Lee Upton claims that Bogan’s poems “investigate the very nature of difference. In condensed form, Bogan’s poems comment upon women’s peculiar position in culture” (Upton 93) Consider some basic distinctions sociologists have found between women and men in Western culture: “At the broadest level, women appear to be less individualistic and more collectivistic than do men....women are more aware of and sensitive to other’s needs, are more likely to provide social support to others...and describe themselves in terms of relatedness to others” (Shavitt and Lalwani 455) Are such distinctions between the experiences of men and women embodied in the poem?

Bogan’s writing frequently pushes subversively at cultural expectations around the behavior of women. (For example, Bogan’s rather controversial poem “The Women,” by its very existence as a product of female speaker undermines some of its own rather harsh sentiments about women.) Bogan expressed great ambivalence about the role of female poets, noting of women that “They are capable of originality and breadth of emotional and intellectual reference as soon as their background opens to any breadth and variety. They are often forced to waste their powers in an inadequate milieu, in social improvisation; to tack back and forth between revolt and conservatism.” (Upton 93) Does the situation of Medusa and the speaker, the hopeless stasis, work as a metaphor for “wasting powers in an inadequate milieu?”

Certainly, Bogan did not find the culture she was writing within entirely amenable. As Christine Colasurdo observes: “Inevitably, Bogan was profoundly influenced by the American male tradition that discounted her value as a ‘poetess....It is precisely the ambivalence arising from such a predicament as Bogan’s—the problem of being a woman and a great lyric poet in an age that excluded greatness from women’s lyricism—and her modernist bent towards compressed finely wrought verse that render her poetry dramatic.” (Colasurdo 340)

Perhaps the Medusa figure represents both social and internal pressures, including internalized societal expectations and norms. Upton suggests that Bogan’s “poem can be read as an allegory of the fate of the imagination when it goes forward to meet itself unprotected.” (Colasurdo 346)

Bogan’s Medusa has attracted an impressive range of critical attention. These interpretations are interesting both in themselves and in what they reveal about how mythological poems, especially those by women, are read.

One prominent interpretation of Bogan’s poem is that the Medusa figure represents a maternal figure, sometimes specified as Bogan’s mother, despite any direct textual support for this idea. In 1961 essay, Theodore Roethke interprets the poem via a psychoanalytic framework in which he identifies the cave house as a “womb within a woman”. (Frank 58) He also suggests that the Medusa is a “man-in-the-womb, mother — her mother, possibly.” In a similar vein, Bogan’s

biographer Louise Frank suggests that “Certainly it makes sense to see this terrifying figure as a much-transformed memory of the desired and destructive mother.” (Frank 58) Lee Upton also proposes a maternal reading for “Medusa,” claiming that it “features one of Bogan’s central conflicts, ambivalence towards maternal power, while ultimately forming “a paean to maternal power even when that power is dislocated and cut from its source.” (Upton 94) Upton adds that, “in ‘Medusa’ Bogan creates a testament to the frightening power of the maternal and, in subterranean form, intimates her own identification with her mother, for Gorgon and speaker assume similarities through sight as the ‘stiff bald eyes’ of Medusa are mirrored in those of the speaker” (Upton 94) “Medusa paralyzes beings who are then confined forever to her yard and, by extension, to the maternal.” (Upton 93)

Others have interpreted the poem as a metaphor for (sometimes specifically female) creativity. For example, Karen Elias-Button contended that the Medusa encloses "female creative energies." (Upton 94) Upton herself claims that Bogan’s "Terrible Mother" proves a "metaphor for the sources of our own creative powers." (Upton 94) Theodore Roethke describes Bogan’s Medusa as “a breakthrough to great poetry, the whole piece welling up from the unconscious, dictated as it were.” (Frank 58) (Roethke’s aetiology leaves open the question: *who* or *what* is the creative unconscious.) Such interpretations are in conversation with Lowe’s categorization “of monstrosity as metapoetic...portray[ing] the literary project as an application of skilled effort, sometimes involving risk, and usually producing a striking and even unique phenomenon. Monsters as dangerous novelties...have a connection with forms of artistry, such as Medusa’s statues.” (Lowe 35)

Bogan’s “Medusa” has often appeared in feminist analyses of Medusa figures in female-authored texts. For example, critic Paula Bennet, argues that women use the Medusa figure to validate “those aspects of their being that their families and society have invalidated by treating such qualities as unfeminine and unacceptable.” (Upton 18) On these terms, Bennet considers Bogan’s Medusa unsatisfying:

“Recast in contemporary poetry, Medusa becomes Bennett's symbol of the woman poet's self-empowerment. Nevertheless, such a self is seen as beyond the focal experience of Louise Bogan. Bogan's ‘Medusa,’ the earliest poem that Bennett draws upon, emerges in her analysis as devoid of "life" and "tragically appropriate for a poet of extraordinary gifts who believed only 105 of her poems worthy of permanent record and who appears to have despised the very idea that she might be considered a woman poet.... In Bennett's brief discussion, Bogan becomes a psychological victim of the Gorgon's paralysis.... Bennett casts Bogan...as a petrified specimen of repression.” (Upton 18)

Bennett’s analysis which seems to suggest that Medusa should be employed as a vehicle for feminist reclamation of myth, and psychoanalytic analyses which consider creative production through the lens of female reproduction are intellectually coherent, within themselves. However, are feminist validation and the link between creativity and maternity the main interests of this poem?

Bogan was concerned with the rhetorical “ramifications of the myth’s symbolic order.” (Morse 178) The Medusa myth is complex and multivalent, but Bogan’s poem suggests that for her,

the locus of meaning had something to do with the gaze and its ramifications for ideas of self and other, observer and observed.

It is true that in Bogan's "Medusa" the gaze ultimately paralyzes both speaker and observed. and from that one might conclude, as Bennet did, that Bogan's body of work represents women as repressed and paralyzed by monstrous females. But "Medusa" is not Bogan's only myth-derived poem profoundly interested in the gaze. Her much later "The Sleeping Fury" addresses a female mythological monster and the act of seeing with much different results.

"The Sleeping Fury," published almost twenty years after "Medusa," is the title poem of Bogan's third collection. This poem addresses a Fury, considering the mythological figure as a long-term and integral feature of the biographical world of the speaker. "You, my scourge, my sister." Bogan composed the first drafts after viewing "L' Erinni Addormentata"—a relief sculpture of a serenely beautiful female head with serpentine coils of hair, eyes closed and mouth half-parted in sleep. Bogan first saw the sculpture while in Rome on a fellowship, a break during a difficult decade in which she worked and wrote while dealing with a housefire, infidelity, divorce, her mother's illness, and two emotional collapses. Bogan's biographer Elizabeth Frank claims that for Bogan the serene sculpture becomes "a symbol of all she had gone through and still had to endure." (Frank 243)

Over ten stanzas, Bogan's speaker contemplates while watching the resting creature. This encounter echoes and expands upon the earlier "Medusa," but in this poem the meeting of female monstrosity resolves not to stasis, nor petrification. Instead, the poem closes with the speaker's declaration: "Alone and strong in my peace, I look upon you in yours." This poem grants full subjectivity to its narrator along with the power to look easily at her familiar monster.

The Sleeping Fury

You are here now,
Who were so loud and feared, in a symbol before me,
Alone and asleep, and I at last look long upon you.

Your hair fallen on your cheek, no longer in the semblance of serpents,
Lifted in the gale; your mouth, that shrieked so, silent.
You, my scourge, my sister, lie asleep, like a child,
Who, after rage, for an hour quiet, sleeps out its tears.

The days close to winter
Rough with strong sound. We hear the sea and the forest,
And the flames of your torches fly, lit by others,
Ripped by the wind, in the night. The black sheep for sacrifice
Huddle together. The milk is cold in the jars.

All to no purpose, as before the knife whetted and plunged,
The shout raised, to match the clamor you have given them.
You alone turn away, not appeased; unaltered, avenger.

Hands full of scourges, wreathed with your flames and adders,
You alone turned away, but did not move from my side,
Under the broken light, when the soft nights took the torches.

At thin morning you showed, thick and wrong in that calm,
The ignoble dream and the mask, sly, with slits at the eyes,
Pretense and half-sorrow, beneath which a coward's hope trembled.

You uncovered at night, in the locked stillness of houses,
False love due the child's heart, the kissed out lie, the embraces,
Made by the two who for peace tenderly turned to each other.

You who know what we love but drive us to know it;
You with your whips and shrieks bearer of truth and of solitude;
You who give, unlike men, to expiation your mercy.

Dropping the scourge, when at last the scourge advances to meet it,
You, when the hunted turns, no longer remain the hunter.
But stand silent and wait, at last returning his gaze.

Beautiful now as a child whose hair, wet with rage and tears
Clings to its face. And now I may look upon you,
Having once met your eyes. You lie in sleep and forget me.
Alone and strong in my peace, I look upon you in yours.

(Bogan, *The Blue Estuaries* 78-9)

As with Bogan's "Medusa," this poem incorporates multiple aspects of a complex mythology. The Furies—also known as the Erinyes and the Eumenides in Greek mythology — are female monsters, chthonic deities of vengeance, invoked by false oaths as well as transgressions against family. Female crones prone to metamorphosis, they are depicted with animal attributes including dog heads, bat wings, and snake hair. In her poem, Bogan may purposefully conflate Erinyes, Gorgon, and Maenad. (Maenads, whose name translates to *raving ones*, are female followers of Dionysus/Bacchus who, while dressed in animal attributes, hunt and kill with bare hands, and sometimes participate in war. One well known appearance of the Maenads occurs in the *Bacchae* when Agave, raving, kills her son Pentheus.)

Among the transgressions that Furies punish are those against norms of social relations, such as dishonoring a host, or famously, murdering one's own parent—the transgression of Orestes who is hounded by Furies after he murders his mother and stepfather. The Furies also punish false oaths. One understanding of the Furies/Erinyes is that "the Erinyes are simply an embodiment of the act of self-cursing contained in the oath." (Burkert 197-198) Does Bogan's poem, in part, depict a Fury embodying a self-curse hounding the speaker? Certainly, it is interesting that Fury does not leave, no matter what the speaker does, as if it is somehow a part of the speaker. Is the situation a metaphor for a person torn among familial transgressions?

The poem embodies a singular aspect of the Fury mythology, her ability to offer mercy: “You, who give, unlike men, to expiation your mercy.” The mercy of Furies is, in Walter Burkert’s words, “entirely archaic.” (Burkert 253) Able to be satisfied by acts of expiation such as sacrifice—think of Bogan’s huddled black sheep and cold milk—Furies also could be satisfied by purification oaths: “an act of self-determination: the debtor determines under oath the amount of the sum to be repaid.” (Burkert 253)

“The Sleeping Fury” is an apostrophe, mostly in stanzas of three lines, with the second and third stanzas four and five lines respectively. Each of the ten stanzas forms a separate image, often contained within a single sentence. The poem’s longer lines may evince its prose origins. Bogan, in a process unusual for her, took prose she had written about the “L’ Erinni Addormentata” sculpture and slowly worked it into a poem. The result uses long lines and has a prose sensibility in its sentences, but also is full of the music of consonance, assonance, and anaphora: “Alone and asleep, and I at last look long upon you.../...my scourge, my sister.” Many lines work as definitions of the Fury: “You uncovered... You with your whips and shrieks... You who know... You who give. “You” appears 14 times; it becomes strange, acquiring the feeling of a mantra, or prayer, or the soothing repetitive benedictions we repeat for those in pain. Other words are also repeated multiple times. Scourge, for example, occurs four times.

The poem had two subtitles which Bogan removed over the years. One was Megaera, the name of the jealous fury. The other was the name of the museum where she first saw the sculpture. The first removal might suggest desire to move the poem away from biographical interpretations. The second removal might suggest a desire to distance the poem from its ekphrastic origins.

Bogan’s poem opens with the speaker able to “at last look long” at the once loud and fearsome fury as she sleeps “in a symbol.” Several things interest here: first, like “Medusa,” this is a poem about the power of sight; second, Bogan announces that the Fury is a symbol. In the next two stanzas, Bogan describes the calmed Fury, then moves the scene to the preparations for a sacrifice. She begins with affirmation negation, “hair...no longer in the semblance of serpents.” The speaker’s attitude shows a close connection, something like tenderness, with “my scourge, my sister,” viewing her as “like a child” sleeping out tears after a tantrum. In the third stanza, the scene shifts to the Fury flying through a rough winter night. In the same scene, materials for expiation are ready: “The black sheep for sacrifice / Huddle together. The milk is cold in the jars.” There is an odd sense that the Fury does not have complete agency. The flames of her torches are “lit by others.”

The fifth stanza states that the sacrifice is “to no purpose.” Perhaps here Bogan is exploiting the family-centered mythology of the Furies, in which expiation does not always work, to describe how much we ask and fail to achieve, in our relationships. Like family, speaker and Fury are intertwined: “You alone turned away, but did not leave my side.” The next stanzas express deep dissatisfaction with a familial situation. The Fury is enraged by cowardice, slyness, mask-wearing, “Pretense and half-sorrow,” and “False love due the child’s heart, the kissed out lie, the embraces.”

But, the speaker’s perspective towards the Fury shifts. She is described as a positive force bringing truth and solitude, encouraging love, giving mercy.” Finally, in the penultimate stanza, the speaker is shown returning the Fury’s gaze, “dropping the scourge, when at last the scourge advances to meet it. The final, lovely stanza shows the Fury “Beautiful now as a child whose hair wet with rage and tears / Clings to its face” seen through the benevolent eyes of a speaker, finally able to *see* the Fury. Both are granted peace in the poem’s last line: “Alone and strong in my peace, I look upon you in yours.”

In addition to thoroughly exploiting the mythology of the Fury, Bogan seems to have given both speaker and Fury several valences. The speaker seems to view the Fury as a child, but also identifies with her as “my sister, my scourge.” At the same time, the mythology of the Fury suggests that the Fury is a response to maternal shortcomings and marital failures. The ambivalent Fury “bears characteristics evident in Bogan’s descriptions of her mother: violence and vacillation merge with a childlike temperament.” (Upton 110) (Of course, one wonders if the speaker also gestures towards Bogan’s own maternal shortcomings and temperamental failures; *I* immediately thought of my *own* failures as wife and mother as I read this poem.) Bogan describes her mother as “A terrible, unhappy, lost, spoiled, bad-tempered child,” but immediately continues: “A tender, contrite woman.” (Upton 89) Certainly, Bogan’s use of the mythological figure allows complex palimpsest, layers: ekphrastic inspiration, mother-daughter-muse-monster, guilt, rage, transcendence.

Bogan completed “The Sleeping Fury” just as her mother was dying. She wrote about the moment in two letters to her friend, the editor of *Poetry*, Morton Zabel. Zabel had recently sent her a postcard of the sculpture that was the poem’s inspiration:

The [picture of the] Fury came intact, and it is so beautiful that I cried. — I would have written you before this, but my mother took sick the night before last, and today I managed to persuade her to go to the hospital, and it is pneumonia.

If you could have seen the fight she put up, right to the last. But now she is a poor dying woman. I wish I could stop remembering her in her pride and beauty — in her arrogance, that I had to fight so — and now I feel it would have been better if I hadn’t fought at all. Because under it all was so much love, and I had to fight that too.

I’ll write soon, after this is over — after I stop feeling that Lucifer should have won. The damned, niggardly, carrot, begrudging world! (Upton 112)

In “The Sleeping Fury,” the powers of speech and sight, subjecthood, are achieved and the female monster is allowed rest. Perhaps Bogan revises and resolves the drama of sight from “Medusa.”

Evidence of the importance given mythical female monstrosity by Bogan is found in an essay written shortly after “Medusa.” *The Springs of Poetry* argues for work originating in profound, desperate emotion, what Bogan describes as “necessary intensity.” Bogan writes: “Even though at its best, poetry cannot come straight from the heart, but must break away in some oblique fashion from the body of sorrow or joy—be the mask, not the incredible face, —yet the synthetic poem can never be more than a veil dropped before a void. It may sound, to change the images, in ears uninitiate to the festival, but never to those, who, having once heard, can recognize again the maenad cry.” (Bogan, *The Springs of Poetry*) Bogan uses the cry of a female monster as a metaphor for the artistic drive of the poet who should be “blessed by the power to write behind clenched teeth...blessed too, by a spirit as loud as a houseful of alien voices, ever tortured and divided within itself.” (Bogan, *The Springs of Poetry*) Bogan’s association of poetry and creativity with female monstrosity, raises many questions. First, does the ambiguity of both Bogan’s Medusa and Fury echo the essential ambiguity

of the Maenad—paradoxically both a specifically female destructive force and the source of poetic creation—at the roots of Bogan’s poetic vision? What kind of a Maenad cry do her poems make?

Bogan’s use of mythological female monsters is distinctive. Reflecting or exploiting the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the mythical material, her monsters are not simple; her Fury is a faithful avenger, a merciful hunter, a scourge, and a sister. Her “Medusa” is, arguably, an embodied abstraction of an incomplete struggle for sight and subjecthood. While Bogan does use complex figures of mythical female monstrosity to mythologize her personal experience, Bogan also uses these figures to rhetorically embody aspects of female experience: otherhood, repression, paralysis, rage, limited choices, and the tether and mercy of family. Finally, unlike poets from Ovid to Petrarch to Plath, Bogan does not employ mythological female monsters principally as foils for her heroes to defeat or resist. Her Medusas and Maenads and Furies have their own complex, ambiguous heroic roles.

Sylvia Plath, like Louise Bogan, wrote two poems around (or near) the Medusa myth: “Perseus, The Triumph of Wit Over Suffering” and “Medusa.” “Perseus” is an early ekphrastic poem inspired by an eponymous etching by Paul Klee. “Medusa” is from her last book, *Ariel*. In “Perseus,” the figures of Klee and Perseus are somewhat fused or conflated and the poem celebrates both Perseus’s defeat of the Gorgon and the triumph of the hero/artist. In “Medusa,” Plath merges the images of Medusa, a jellyfish, and her mother in the context of an interaction between the speaker and the mythical conflation.

“Perseus” is sometimes printed without any stanza breaks, although at intervals it is broken by pairs of short lines indented far from the left. The poem resulted from a commission by Art News. It forms an address to Perseus, although in the first section of the poem Plath seems to be speaking to a figure with attributes of both Klee and Perseus.

Perseus
The Triumph of Wit Over Suffering

Head alone shows you in the prodigious act
Of digesting what centuries alone digest:
The mammoth, lumbering statuary of sorrow,
Indissoluble enough to riddle the guts
Of a whale with holes and holes, and bleed him white
Into salt seas. Hercules had a simple time,
Rinsing those stables: a baby’s tears would do it.
But who’d volunteer to gulp the Laocoön,
The Dying Gaul, and those innumerable pietàs
Festering on the dim walls of Europe’s chapels,
Museums and sepulchers? You.

You
Who borrowed feathers for your feet, not lead,

Not nails, and a mirror to keep the snaky head
In safe perspective, could outface the gorgon-grimace
Of human agony : a look to numb
Limbs : not a basilisk-blink, nor a double whammy,
But all the accumulated last grunts, groans,
Cries and heroic couplets concluding the million
Enacted tragedies on these blood-soaked boards,
And every private twinge a hissing asp
To petrify your eyes, and every village
Catastrophe a writhing length of cobra,
And the decline of empires the thick coil of a vast
Anaconda.

Imagine : the world

Fisted to a foetus head, ravined, seamed
With suffering from conception upwards, and there
You have it in hand. Grit in the eye or a sore
Thumb can make anyone wince, but the whole globe
Expressive of grief turns gods, like kings, to rocks.
Those rocks, cleft and worn, themselves then grow
Ponderous and extend despair on earth's
Dark face.

So might rigor mortis come to stiffen
All creation, were it not for a bigger belly
Still than swallows joy.

You enter now,
Armed with feathers to tickle as well as fly,
And a fun-house mirror that turns the tragic muse
To the beheaded head of a sullen doll, one braid,
A bedraggled snake, hanging limp as the absurd mouth
Hangs in its lugubrious pout. Where are
The classic limbs of stubborn Antigone?
The red, royal robes of Phèdre? The tear-dazzled
Sorrows of Malfi's gentle duchess?

Gone

In the deep convulsion gripping your face, muscles
And sinews bunched, victorious, as the cosmic
Laugh does away with the unsticking, plaguey wounds
Of an eternal sufferer.

To you

Perseus, the palm, and may you poise
And repose until time stop, the celestial balance
Which weighs our madness with our sanity.

(Plath 82-84)

In this poem, Medusa becomes the “gorgon grimace of human agony” while Perseus represents human intelligence and creativity, using absurdity (the fun-house mirror) to subvert and overcome “the unstitching plaguey wounds” of suffering. Plath employs serpentine figures to establish Medusa as a metaphor for misery: “every private twinge a hissing asp...every village catastrophe a writhing length of cobra...the decline of empires, the thick coil of a vast Anaconda.” Later in the poem, the grief-filled world is compared to Medusa’s “foetus head, seamed with suffering” and we are told that the “whole globe’s grief turns gods and kings to rocks.”

The fun-house mirror metaphor suggests the apotropaic power which Medusa’s decapitation transfers to Perseus. The mirror allows a refusal of suffering and provides a way of managing life’s horror by taking comfort in its absurdity—absurdity represented here as “the beheaded head of a sullen doll.” Jane Hedley contends that Plath also applies this refuist, fun-house mirror approach to suffering in later poems: “in poems like *Medusa*, *Lady Lazarus*, and *Daddy*, she would contrive to transform the conflict between Perseus and Medusa into a paradoxical, unholy alliance.... In poems like *Daddy* and *Medusa*, Plath has taken this approach to her own suffering: the ‘gorgon-grimace / Of human agony belongs to Plath herself in those poems.’” (Hedley 61)

Plath’s speaker warmly congratulates Perseus on his defeat of Medusa—and thus congratulates by implication Klee and other artists on their artmaking: “To you / Perseus, the palm.” “Perseus” encodes many of Klee’s ideas about the myth. In passages translated by Plath while working on the poem, Klee explains that he was attempting to depict the action of the story “physiognomically in the features of Perseus whose face enacts the deed.” Klee was trying to depict in Perseus’s expression the moment when “a laugh is mingled with the deep lines of pain and finally gains the upper hand.” (Hedley 58) Klee wanted to reduce “to absurdity the unmixed suffering of the Gorgon’s head.” (ibid) Plath similarly reduces Medusa to absurdity in her poem.

In Klee’s etching, described by Sherry Lutz Zivley as “a portrait of two grotesques,” (Zivley 46) Perseus is depicted half figure in three-quarter profile, looking directly at the viewer. In contrast, Medusa is smaller and depicted in profile. This is a reversal of the way the figures were portrayed on ancient vases. In ancient works, probably to convey both narrative and Medusa’s power, Medusa is depicted frontally while Perseus is depicted looking down or away from Medusa. Klee depicts Perseus “as a giant who looks like an ogre in a fairy tale.... His ugliness is compounded by both his face’s sneer and the startled, almost cross-eyed sidelong glance of his eyes. (Ziveley 46). Medusa is described as overwhelmingly hideous: “nothing alleviates the ugliness of the Medusa. The top of her head is missing, and she has no nose.... Each large, lidless eye contains only a small dot of an iris. She looks less like a cruel Gorgon than like a hideously deformed, not-quite-human creature.” (ibid)

Plath shows little interest in gender within this poem. This is striking in an ekphrastic work about Medusa, whose defeat represents (among many other things) a triumph of the patriarchy. It is also notable because, to quote Jane Hedley, “the European tradition of visual art, especially painting, is one that has authorized and could even be said to have batted on women’s objectification. It would not be surprising to find women poets either avoiding ekphrasis altogether...or else writing ekphrases that are self-consciously feminist in their choice and treatment of subject matter.” (Hedley 46). Of course, Plath wrote *Medusa* before a lot of feminist scholarship about both Medusa and ekphrasis had occurred.

Is it useful to read this poem as an allegory celebrating Perseus's intelligence, an allegory which advocates for living creatively and intelligently in world? Does the poem, albeit with secular intent, echo Christian allegorical approaches to the Medusa myth? Consider this selection from John Harrington's 1591 "Allegories of Man and Earth": "Perseus, a wise man, sonne of *Jupiter*, endewed with vertue from above, slayeth sinne and vice, a thing base and earthy signified by *Gorgon*, and so mounteth up to the skie of vertue. It signifies in one kind of Allegorie thus much: the mind of man being gotten by God and so the childe of God, killing and vanquishing the earthlinesse of this Gorgonically nature, ascendeth up to the understanding of heavenly things, of high things, of eternal things, in which contemplacion consisteth the perfection of man; this is the natural allegory, because man, one of the chiefe works of nature." (Harrington 67)

In addition to the metaphorical pair of Medusa as suffering and Perseus as human intelligence, there is another metaphor, present in the first section of the poem, wherein artmaking is compared to digesting the "lumbering statuary of sorrow" a category which seems to include mythology, poetry, and visual art: "to gulp Laocoön, / The Dying Gaul, and those innumerable pietas".

Plath's poem is ungainly, possibly because it uses so many metaphors, pointing in different directions. In the last few lines of the poem, Plath takes us yet another direction:

To you
Perseus, the palm, and may you poise
And repose until time stop, the celestial balance
Which weighs our madness with our sanity.

In this new equation, the gorgon grimace is madness, while Perseus's heroism is sanity. Plath was very excited about this poem and considered it the best work she'd written to date. It succeeds in providing insight into Klee's etching, which is after all what it was commissioned to do. It does not, however, form Plath's only approach to the Medusa mythology.

The "Medusa" in Sylvia Plath's poem by that name is quite different from the Medusa in her own "Perseus." In "Medusa," Plath's speaker, in the implied position of daughter/poet, fends off a Medusa/mother figure. Plath's relationship to the Medusa of "Medusa" is essentially Perseus's relation to the head of Medusa: To achieve a triumph of wit over suffering, Plath creates a monster which combines three sets of characteristics: natural imagery based on the moon jellyfish, *Aurelia aurita*; mythological imagery based on the Gorgon; and biographical details about Plath's mother, Aurelia. Plath also establishes a strong connection between the Medusa/mother and Christian imagery; Medusa is called "God-ball" and "Lens of mercies," while the snaky tentacles are "dragging...Jesus hair." Also, the speaker asks the Medusa/mother figure "Who do you think you are? / A communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?" These references connect the Medusa/mother figure to both maternal sacrifice and Christian martyrdom.

In her poem, Plath fuses these elements and ideas into a coherent Medusa/mother/martyr figure using language from different registers and domains of knowledge: scientific, literary, and religious. In essence, this poem presents the struggle to define a self, especially a poetic self, against an other, here taking the form of a Medusa/mother hybrid.

Plath employs the fused Medusa/mother figure to consider her relationships, familial obviously, but possibly also artistic and literary relationships. Plath poem has often been read with

an extremely biographical view, as if it is literally about the poet feeling paralyzed and oppressed by her own mother. However, as Jane Hedley observes, “Plath’s poems in *Ariel* often transcend their biographical origins....the social situation or story that seems to have generated the poem in the first place becoming distorted and fractured almost beyond recuperation, by temporal compressions and distortions, rapid shifts in perspective, and metaphoric patterns that “erupt from narrative details” to take on a life of their own.” (Hedley 65-6) The critic Nephic Christodoulides argues that the Medusa “may not even be emblematic of Plath’s biological mother, Aurelia, but [of] all the various females in Plath’s life who played a motherly role in her linguistic development, literary predecessors and contemporaries.” (Tresca)

Is Plath’s Medusa terrifying not primarily because she’s a mother or female? Is the primary terror because the Medusa figure denies Plath’s speech? Is Plath creatively exploiting the Medusa figure by asserting herself against it and with it? Certainly, Plath deploys Medusa as an apotropan, a fun-house mirror, a mythic shield, wielded to protect the speaker.

In her “Medusa,” Plath joins a long tradition of using Medusa as a foil for the poet to create, give life, and then destroy. In Petrarch’s *Laura* poems, for example, he uses Medusa as a symbol for Laura’s allure and her danger, until ultimately the poet manifests his strength by turning from the Laura/Medusa figure: “[Laura] has the power over me that Medusa had over the old Moorish giant, when she turned him to flint;” (Petrarch 53) At the end of his poem cycle, Petrarch turns from Laura, whom he now considers a monstrous female, his love for her a mistake: “Medusa and my error have made me a stone.” But by that point, Laura has made him as a poet: Petrarch has been writing about her obsessively and fruitfully. Nancy Vickers writes: “It is indeed that fixity of vision, Petrarch would suggest, that turns him to petria (‘stone’); but it is also that self-glorifying fixity that makes of him Petrarca: Medusa is, like the lady of stone, no historic character at all, but the poet’s own creation.” Petrarch’s fragmentary and reifying descriptions not only neutralize, but also appropriate the threat of Medusa for the poet’s own purposes. Likewise, is one of Plath’s rhetorical achievements deploying Medusa as an object to be negated by the poet’s triumph?

One further interesting and distinctive aspect of Plath’s “Medusa” is its animism. Of course, there are many links between the mythological Medusa and animals, including her proposed origins in the Neolith life-cycle goddess portrayed as an animal-human hybrid. But Plath’s animism, as Marjorie Perloff observed in her early and interesting essay “Angst’ and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” extends far beyond the layering of mother and jellyfish we find in “Medusa.” Perloff generalizes (possibly overgeneralizes): “The central paradox at the heart of Sylvia Plath’s poetry is thus that all human beings are dead, inanimate, frozen, unreal, while everything that is non-human is intensely alive, vital, potent.” (Perloff 57) In considering Plath’s late work, Perloff looks at the poem “Tulips,” observing that in this poem: “the tulips are not symbols in the conventional sense; the focus is not on the tulips as natural objects with such and such connotations, but on the process whereby the “I” finally becomes the hated tulip so that her heart “opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms.” (Perloff 70) In Plath’s poetry of animism, objects including plants—such as tulips and the yew in the poem “The Yew Tree and the Moon” —and animals—such as the horse in “*Ariel*”—merge with the human. In “Medusa,” Plath is directly and obviously merging the animal and the human. Plath’s active animal-object hybrids contrast with the strangely passive speakers of her poems. In *Medusa*, the speaker says to the Medusa: “Your stooges ply their wild cells...pushing by like hearts...riding the red tide,” while the speaker passively observes of herself: “I didn’t call you...I shall take no bite.”

Plath's imaginative projection into the alien presence of the Medusa jellyfish allows her to dehumanize, monsterize, and ultimately, to reject the Medusa/mother hybrid, without decapitation and without killing...actually, without *doing* anything. Rather than being petrified or silenced by the Medusa, Plath's speaker verbally reduces her to an impotent hiss, easily repelled: "Off, off, eely tentacle." In "Medusa," Plath's animate-object, the jellyfish/human hybrid, ultimately withdraws its reach as the poet asserts her independent humanity.

Looking over Plath and Bogan's Medusa poems, in every case, the poet seems somehow to be considering voice, that ability to speak which appears in literature as the inseparable kin of sight. At the same time, in all four of these poems, ideas of the female and the monstrous, self and other, are omnipresent and inescapable. Both poets explore ideas at the heart of the Medusa mythology, ideas around the gaze, around the possession of the right to see and be seen, around female monstrosity, and around gender politics and roles. But, just as the myth is ambiguous and multivalent, so are their uses of it.

Years after Bogan and Plath wrote their Medusa poems, the feminist revolution made a huge impact on poetry and scholarship. From its currents and in its wake, interesting poems about Medusa were written. For example, May Sarton's "The Muse as Medusa" and Carole Anne Duffy's "Medusa" show Medusa transformed not by rape, but by her own anger. Colleen McElroy's "A Navy Blue Afro," celebrates natural black hair by juxtaposing Medusa's serpentine curls against "fake Furies /their Medusa hair tamed." Recent poetic efforts on Medusa include Melissa Monroe's "Medusa Beach," a work which, in her publisher's words, "interweaves an account of the life and thought of the great German philosopher and marine biologist Ernst Haeckel with a meditation on the many historical and natural historical avatars of the figure of Medusa." (New York Review Books) Clearly, Medusa is an almost inexhaustibly rich figure in poetry, and no wonder. At the heart of her mythology is a mediation of who gets to be the subject, who gets objectified, and who gets to tell the story.

Mythical Sacrifice in the Poetry of Paisley Rekdal, Robyn Schiff, and Brenda Shaughnessy

Contemporary poetry abounds with poems using the sacrifice stories of classical myth to consider modern situations. Paisley Rekdal, Robyn Schiff, and Brenda Shaughnessy each memorably approach the mythology and practice of sacrifice in polyvalent, resonant poems. Their formal approaches to sacrifice and mythology differ: Rekdal alludes to myth in a poem about a contemporary situation. Schiff does the same in her poem, “A Hearing,” but her two Iphigenia poems are retellings in which she uses extremely similar poems to tell different versions of the myth. Within Shaughnessy’s *Our Andromeda*, there is scant mythical allusion and no retelling. However, the whole book is governed by the mythical allusion in the title. All of this diverse mythological sacrifice poetry encodes an interest in social and political power, which reflects the cultural place of sacrifice.

Scholars of religion consider sacrifice—human and animal—a complicated practice, with purposes ranging from feasting to providing opportunities for young people to meet. However, scholars agree that one primary motivation is communication and connection, with gods and with other humans, often to send messages about social dominance and control. In the 1960’s, Walter Burkert argued that “Society is built on impulses of aggression controlled by ritual.... So precisely in communities familiar with agriculture, in which meat is of secondary importance as a source of food, rites involving bloodshed become the center of religion.” (Burkert 112) Later, the sociologist Nancy Jay observed that “one purpose of sacrificial rituals, such as those prescribed in the Old Testament... is to maintain the social structures in agricultural and pastoral societies that ensure the continuity of inheritance of property—land and flocks—through the male line.” (Golden 83). In recent years, Joseph Watts and his collaborators have sought anthropological and archaeological support for the social control hypothesis of sacrifice, which claims that “human sacrifice legitimizes political authority and social class systems, functioning to stabilize social stratification.” Watts and collaborators have conducted a quantitative analysis of sacrifice within Austronesian cultures, finding that two thirds of the highly stratified societies sacrificed humans while only one quarter of egalitarian societies did. They consider this finding “strong support for models in which human sacrifice stabilizes social stratification once stratification has arisen, and promotes a shift to strictly inherited class systems.” (Watts, Sheehan and Atkinson 228) They further suggest this finding shows a “darker link” between religion and modern hierarchical societies. Social hierarchy and religion are important issues in or context for poems about sacrifice.

Although sacrifice may seem remote from contemporary life, all three poets and the vast majority of their readers, whatever our personal beliefs, are immersed in cultures that include the sacrifice of a child as a foundational myth: The central metaphor of Christianity is the sacrifice of Jesus. Likewise, all three Abrahamic religions retain versions of a story in which Abraham sacrifices a son (in later versions averted by the intercession of angels; in earlier versions completed). Within English-speaking cultures, there are also expectations of and cultural tendencies towards female sacrifice epitomized by the ideal of the self-sacrificing female and mother. But it is important not to be overly reductive: women writing about sacrifice are not always writing about gender and certainly not always considering religion.

In Paisley Rekdal's poem, "Horn of Plenty," a modern-day artist working on a project protesting war, goes to a farmer to buy fresh goat blood. The farmer slaughters a skinny goat in the presence of a blind old goat, the knife dull, the slaughtered goat suffering, the onlooking goat smelling the death of its friend and bleating. "Horn of Plenty" describes an animal sacrificed for art. In the poem, Rekdal references the mythical origins of the horn of plenty, a story in which baby Zeus with his super strength breaks the horn off the goat who is nursing him. In response, his foster mother Amalthea (who is either the goat or a nymph who fed Zeus the milk of the goat) fills the broken-off horn with flowers and fruit and gives it to Zeus. Rekdal asks her readers: "Would you have chosen to stop? because it was a goat / who nursed the god who snapped this horn off / once in play? And blessed it later to be / forgiven." (Rekdal 26-7) She reckons with the responsibilities of art making and our responsibilities to other creatures. Rekdal's poem concludes with the artist soothing, clucking at, the second doomed goat. Again, her readers are asked what we would do. Would we choose to soothe the goat, "because you're tired of watching / such frantic suffering, and because / it is not your knife carrying the pain." (ibid)

Rekdal juxtaposes myth and the modern word to reckon with spectating and culpability. What does this achieve? In a different poem, "Nightingale," she observes: "the reader of myths knows what is left out: my silence then, is not a revision but an invitation to imagine, to remember, this violence for yourself." (Rekdal 42) Myth, because we have to connect the allusion, involves us. Beneath the idea of sacrifice, there are ideas of spectatorship and imagination as participation; in order for a killing to be a sacrifice and not merely murder or slaughter, must it have spectators? Why is the verb we attach to the noun sacrifice perform? If we are an audience, Rekdal asks, are we responsible? To what degree? Does spectating, because it provides catharsis, relieve some of the stress and tension that exists in a hierarchy, making the inequality more stable?

As Rekdal's poem wrestles with the morals of violence enacted on art's behalf, it suggests the etymology of the word tragedy, which comes from the Greek *tragodia*, formed of *tragos*, goat, and *oide*, song. (Thus, a tragedy is a song sung at the sacrifice of a goat.) (Our word sacrifice comes from Latin *sacrificium*, *sacer*, holy/consecrated" and Latin *facere* to make.) At the root of tragedy is sanctioned violence, with art sanctifying—or at least accompanying—the brutality. This close association between art and violence is echoed in a moment towards the end of Rekdal's poem when we learn that the sculpture was commissioned for an exhibit that

will be titled after a line from *The Iliad*
"Freighted with Dark Pains, a description of the arrow
shot by one soldier into the heart of another.
The curators chose the title for the beauty
of that line, perhaps for its suggestion
that the body giving and the body receiving pain
were equally blameless: only the arrow
delivers sorrow, only the arrow aches
as it rips through skin and muscle into the tender
flank of the animal you are even now
stroking in your arms." (Rekdal 27)

Homer's arrow 'freighted with dark pains suggests that the pain the arrow will cause is "contained in and carried by the object." (Scarry 16) This mental habit of assigning agency to the violent object, is a kind of euphemism common between sacrifice and other forms of state-sanctioned violence, especially war. This mental habit deflects and obscures the agency and culpability of the humans in the violent act. This is far from the only ambiguity in the ideology and the very words we use to describe sacrifice.

In English, the antonym sacrifice means offering or killing something or someone *and* offering oneself as a sacrifice. Similarly, Walter Burkert observed that in ancient Greek, the same expression "means 'to sacrifice on one's own behalf' and 'to be sacrificed.' Sacrificer and victim are so correlated as to be nearly identified." (Burkert 112)

The myth of Iphigenia's sacrifice, which Robyn Schiff explores in her "twin" Iphigenia poems, famously embodies troubled correlation between sacrificer and victim: In the myth, Iphigenia's father kills Iphigenia. This myth also raises the slippery idea of self—voluntary—sacrifice: In some versions, Iphigenia (although she has no choice) eloquently offers her life on behalf of the Athenian state.

The religious historian Jan Bremmer states that "the willingness of the victim was an important part of Greek sacrificial ideology, which stressed that the victim was pleased to go up to the altar, sometimes it could hardly wait to be sacrificed." (Bremmer 135) Great pains were taken to maintain this farce, for example, giving bulls biscuits so that they would bow their heads in assent to being sacrificed. If a victim assents to their sacrifice, they become complicit in their victimization. Karl Meuli calls this the "comedy of innocence." Perhaps it is reasonable to consider the "willingness" of the victim to be sacrificed a helpful fiction that justifies the maintenance of a power structure. A modern example of this might be the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother.

Schiff's poems: "A Doe Replaces Iphigenia at the Sacrificial Altar" and "A Doe does not Replace Iphigenia at the Sacrificial Altar" are almost twins; the poems share many lines. This twinning reminds us of Claude Levi-Strauss's claim that all versions of a myth are simultaneously present. Schiff's poems explicitly invoke multiple versions of a myth. This interesting device highlights Schiff's choices and the flexibility of myth as a cultural artifact. Schiff substitutes and swaps individual words and phrases—choosing segments carrying a lot of semantic weight—between her two poems. This has the effect of creating a dialogue within her manuscript about the myth and its meaning. In this dialogue, Schiff questions, among other things our society's tendency to organized violence—in this case war and sacrifice, the possibility and effect of substitution, and mother-child relationships.

In Schiff's book, *A Woman of Property*, the poem in which the doe is slaughtered instead of Iphigenia precedes by forty pages the poem in which there is no intervention by Artemis and Iphigenia dies. The first Iphigenia poem faces "Fourth of July, 1982," a poem partly about Antigone, juxtaposing two myths in which women sacrifice themselves or are sacrificed on behalf of the men in their family. Schiff writes in "Fourth of July, 1982" of (I believe) Antigone's suicide, which followed her committing the capital crime of leaving the city to bury her brother: "Antigone needed something / to do with her hands / and she did it." (Schiff 16) (It is also possible that Schiff is referencing the act of burying the brother.) In contrast to Iphigenia, Antigone has agency, thus the poems create a conversation within the manuscript about agency and sacrifice. In both myths and both poems, the lines between being sacrificed and sacrificing oneself are blurry and confused.

Schiff's Iphigenia poems are in the voice of a doe who has aspects of the girl Iphigenia. Thus, the doe is a surrogate for Iphigenia, and both are surrogates of the poet. Colleen Morrisey sees a "crisis of representation" repeating across Schiff's collection, writing that Schiff is interested in, "the skin-thin line between 'I' and 'not I.'" In the Iphigenia poems, this takes the form of partial and imperfect surrogacy. They both begin:

There was a need
to be weak and I met
it. I appeared in the
confusion between strength and
surrender, as if out of nowhere,
that's the illusion.

(Schiff 17 & 47)

The phrase "there was a need / to be weak" reminds us of how Iphigenia arrived in her awful position. Iphigenia was the daughter of Agamemnon, the Greek commander at Aulis. Agamemnon angered the goddess of hunting (and unmarried girls) Artemis, either by bragging that he was a better hunter than the goddess or by killing one of her sacred deer. As punishment for his transgression, Artemis trapped his fleet in the harbor at Aulis. Desperate to sail for Troy, Agamemnon accepted the opinion of his seer that he must sacrifice Iphigenia to appease Artemis, who will then let the Greeks sail. Agamemnon then writes to his wife, Clytemnestra, asking her to bring Iphigenia under the pretext that the girl is to marry the warrior Achilles. Iphigenia becomes a war sacrifice. The "confusion between strength and surrender" gestures towards the impulse to war, here closely correlated with sacrifice.

In writing Iphigenia's story, Schiff sets herself within a rich lineage. Iphigenia's myth is part of the House of Atreus myth, a "multi-generation story of murder, cannibalism, incest and adultery." (Vandiver) As well-known as the House of Atreus myth remains, within it there is a lot of ambiguity concerning the behavior and motivations of women and female goddesses. In the myth, as in Schiff's poem, the alternate versions expose very different views. For example, the versions of the myth differ regarding whether Helen deserts her husband or is kidnapped, and whether Artemis ultimately rescues Iphigenia. In this poem, and elsewhere, Schiff uses this ambiguity to examine the experience of women.

In both poem's next sentence, broken across 7 lines, one word differs. That word is mouth/mother:

I was reared
ruminating
in a thicket of
sorrow with a beautiful
string of drool
hanging out the side of my
mouth/mother like a loose
phosphorescent

tether.

Drool hangs out of the mouth in the poem in which Iphigenia lives, and drool hangs out of the mother in the poem in which Iphigenia dies. Clytemnestra, like Iphigenia, has no agency to save her daughter although she tries, giving an eloquent speech that changes nothing, her pleas no more effective than a string of drool.

After this, in both poems, Iphigenia wonders “How will I know / what to do?” Is Schiff suggesting that Iphigenia is trying to be “good,” even going so far as trying to be a “good” sacrifice? In Euripides’s play, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, after begging her father for her life, Iphigenia “volunteers” herself to be sacrificed to save Greece, saying: “Here is my life—I give it to my country. Sacrifice me, and take down Troy. That will be my everlasting monument, my children, my marriage, my reputation.” (Euripides Scene 5) Is Schiff pointing to parallels between Iphigenia’s ultimate “acceptance” of her own sacrifice and the larger phenomena of female self-sacrifice?

The next line in both poems answers Iphigenia’s question, “How will I know what to do? / No one does, my mother/mouth said.”

The phrase “my mother said” emphasizes the mother-child bond. The phrase “my mouth said” implies that the speaker does not feel she controls her voice and reminds me of other ways that women are separated from their voices in myth—as in the stories of Echo, Philomela, and Medusa.

The greatest divergence comes in the next lines. In the poem “A Doe Replaces...” Iphigenia is swept away to Tauris, unharmed. However, in “A Doe does Not Replace Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar,” there is an echo of Karl Meuli’s “comedy of innocence” which displaces guilt from sacrificers to the sacrificed. In this poem, Iphigenia says, “Don’t touch me. I want to stand, / for once, on the bed / and flip the switch on the fan / that reverses the direction of / the blades myself...” This moment echoes the moment of “agency” in *Iphigenia at Aulis* when Iphigenia offers her life and her future for Athens, declaring that a man’s life is worth the lives of 10,000 women.

Does the contrast between these two poems suggest the limits of agency of women within fundamentally hostile stories? As director and playwright Edward Einhorn observes, for Iphigenia “to make the transition from sacrifice to willing martyr, she has to truly believe and buy into everything she has been taught by her father and her society. That the Trojans are barbarians. That war means freedom. That a human sacrifice is a heroic martyrdom.” (Einhorn)

I find the way Schiff suggests the reckless, propagandized agency of Iphigenia—with a modern description of a girl standing on a bed, looking at a ceiling fan—remarkable. I am reminded of how Sylvia Federici observes that: “the supremacy of the will allows for the interiorization of the mechanisms of power.” Is it possible to understand Iphigenia’s willful martyrdom as an interiorization of the mechanisms of power?

The next two lines involve another exact reversal of the word pair girl/beast. In “A Doe Replaces Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar,” Schiff writes: “I feel like a girl in heaven / but I am a beast in a clearing.” Whereas in “A Doe does not Replace Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar,” Schiff writes “I feel like a beast in a clearing / but I am a girl in heaven.”

There is something almost metonymic in the substitution: girl for beast, beast for girl. Is Schiff gesturing towards an association between girlhood and wildness, or a longing like that of Emily Brontë’s character Cathy, who yearned, “I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free?” (Brontë 153) Or is Schiff linking modern ideas which associate girls and wildness with much

older themes? There *is* an association between young girls and wildness in the myths of Artemis. Roughly every four years, young Greek girls would go into the woods to make sacrifices to Artemis, run and dance and be wild—sometimes, in Athens, playing the roles of little she bears called *arktoi*. This ritual took place at Brauron, the exact site where Iphigenia, in the version of the myth told in Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Tauris*, establishes a temple to Artemis. There are no charming *arktoi* in Schiff’s poem, but there is that swap of girl and animal, and the question: Why. The religious historian Ken Dowden, writing about Artemis, asks the same question: “Why is it that the nubile maiden Iphigenia must be sacrificed to her at Aulis, or swapped for a deer?” (Dowden 51) Dowden believes Artemis’s “myths bring together themes of importance for the dynamics of a successful society. It is only through confrontation with the wild, if usually in myth rather than cult, and through a dangerous but protected transition, where their normal roles are inverted, that young girls can become tamed in subjection to men through the institution of marriage. . . . Artemis, then, is the goddess of the transition.” (Burkert 51) Schiff’s poems with their twin structure, with their swapped terms, create a transitional zone, delimited by the swapped terms, a formal shape for the encoded idea.

The last few lines of Schiff’s poems differ in just one word: automatic and animalcrude.

an automatic/animalcrude wind
 to war, toward
 war, untoward
 toward war
 took my breath away with it.

Both automatic and animalcrude winds lead inexorably to war. Neither grants agency or mercy to Iphigenia. Our word automatic comes from the Greek word *automatos*: made of *autos* “self” and *matos* “thinking.” Both words raise questions: if the wind to war is automatic, “self-thinking,” are humans fated to war? Is anyone then responsible? Does the word “automatic, in the sense of self-thinking suggest an interiorization of the mechanisms of power to the degree that we do not have the cultural space to imagine a different way? Usually, I would read the term animalcrude to reflect a belief that humans are capable of being more refined than animals, but here, the *human* impulse to war is termed animalcrude. Schiff’s simple, formal device submits two means to war, both inexorable. At the same time, she is playing with the heteronyms wind (noun) and wind (verb). As Linda Bierds observes: “That Schiff intended this word to be read as wind—as in strong breeze—is undeniable, but I couldn’t help but see under that overt intention the image of the girl on the bed wanting to reverse the direction of the fan which will then wind (as in spiral) differently—and take her breath away.” (Personal communication, February 12, 2021)

Frances Cannon, in an interview for *Iowa Review*, asked Robyn Schiff about what motivated this pair of poems. Schiff said:

“My point in thinking through both possible sacrifices was that the outcome was the same in both cases: the wind picks up, the fleet sails, and war commences. . . . The real alternative history isn’t the question of whether Artemis intervened or not to save Iphigenia—one child of privilege—it’s what would have happened if Artemis had been so moved by Clytemnestra’s instinct as a mother to save her child, that as a

result she never, never, never turned the wind in Agamemnon's favor. That would be an origin myth about a different, peaceful world, not this violent one we live in.”
(Cannon 189-90)

In the same interview, Schiff also considers the meaning of Artemis’s intercession.

“I was thinking of the slaughter of the doe as a comforting alternative for Iphigenia's mother dovetailing with how I think I would have handled the same deception as a parent: hoping against hope that the child sacrifice was replaced by a sacrificial animal, but probably knowing it was not.... If I think of myself as the poet-god doe proxy, I also must admit that protecting, rescuing, or hiding my own interests deeply endangers the children of others, for whom there is absolutely no doe, forty pages later, intervening. There's utterly no getting out of that truth in contemporary America, and there is apparently no doe whose sacrifice can save all children, or even most.” (ibid 189)

While I am deeply interested in what Schiff says about how protecting the interests of one’s own child may endanger the children of others, I do not see that idea in these Iphigenia poems. However, when I look elsewhere in her book, I do see the endangerment of the future emerge as a theme. I also find a great deal of thought, often unresolved, given towards what for lack of a better term, I call structures of power.

For example, “Nursey Furniture” combines motherhood and abstract thinking about power,

I rest my rest on the baby’s head which
has an opening and
consider Justice. The First
Mistake was issuing her
a two-pan balance.... (Schiff 14)

I am not sure what Schiff means, but I like the sense of aphorism in “The first mistake was issuing Justice a two-pan balance.” Does that imply a rejection of the firm dichotomy of right vs. wrong, of the “justice system”? At any rate, this passage provides a good example of how Schiff’s poetry works, how it tends from the grounded mundane towards deep abstraction. Some of Schiff’s most successful moves into abstraction come when she uses mythical material (or less often biblical material) highlighting the unseen that is at stake in the quotidian. The poem quoted above, “Nursery Furniture” is more-or-less about a series of faulty chairs that the speaker bought from the Land of Nod, an upscale children’s furniture store. The stakes of a faulty chair are low, and the poem itself embodies the known privilege that her collection’s title hints at. (Schiff is writing, after all, about “A Woman of Property.”) And yet, when within that poem, Schiff grounds the speaker’s worries about the future in a reference to a biblical story, the broken chair is situated within a context of essential concerns. I find this move sometimes profound and sometimes funny.

the manager who deals with me,
gave me a gift certificate I am afraid

to redeem. Wary of what dream?
Nod does mean sleep,

but only as a pun on the state Cain
fled to after slaying
Abel—a waking sleep part
denial, part self-righteousness,
a neutralizing hallucination. (ibid 9)

Schiff uses allusion to weight the quotidian and contemporary with (or into) the persistent cultural truths/mysteries/problems encoded both Greek myths and Christian stories. This interweaving occurs throughout the collection, notably in “A Hearing,” a long poem written in nine-line stanzas. “A Hearing” reminds, in its erudition and discursiveness as well as its inclusion of material from multiple sources, of Marianne Moore. Although “A Hearing” looks formally quite different from Schiff’s columnar, monostrophe Iphigenia poems, it is thematically related.

The poem’s speaker is a contemporary adult woman. Clytemnestra and Artemis are mentioned, but not Iphigenia. “A Hearing” shares some preoccupations of other poems that borrow myth: the relationship of women to power, gender, the relation of human to animal, sacrifice, etc. But this poem is also interested in the legal system, the position of mothers, the idea of property, possession, dispossession, and consent. Like Louise Gluck’s *Meadowlands*, which uses the story of the Odyssey to tell the story of a (breaking) marriage and the people who lived in it, it is sometimes witty.

Interweaving mythical material and references to Victorian literature, Schiff’s poem loosely concerns a property dispute. A “cult leader” has asked Schiff if he could cultivate her side of their shared driveway, “which in all honestly I did / not know I owned.” (Schiff 19) The classical source most present in the poem is Aeschylus’ *Oresteia Trilogy*, which concludes with *The Eumenides*, a play chronicling the resolution of the House of Atreus myth and the development of a justice system in Athens. In “A Hearing,” the first mention of myth is:

Aesop?
I meant to say Atreus.
Motion to Strike from the Record. **Motion** I
thought they were animals. **Denied.**
There was a dog who recognized Agamemnon.
She was on a dung heap scratching
herself in her

sleep when he returned. Madame Bovary
is what I think they call the same dog in hell (ibid 21)

There is a lot going on here. First, the confusion between Aesop and Atreus. This confusion: *Is it this or that? Wait, why are THOSE confused?* teaches us how to read the poem. Then, the line “I thought they were animals” reminds of the tension we have seen in other myths and poems about myths between human and animal—especially female and animal. Note that the dog is gendered

female. Also, the dog recognizing Agamemnon is another confusion. There was a dog, Argos, who recognized Odysseus when he returned, but there is no mention of a dog in the traditional story of Agamemnon's return that I know of. One wonders if the dog meant is Clytemnestra, especially as the poem continues: "Madame Bovary is what I think they call that same dog in hell." The legal term *motion* surprises with viscerality. To deny motion is to trap, a motion denied is a trap. Does their proximity suggest that the "motion denied" refers to Clytemnestra, Madame Bovary, or both? Or does it also refer to the motion denied of a sacrificed girl, a murdered husband or mother, or, in the case of Madame Bovary, a suicide?

The next mention of myth occurs as the speaker, unable to sleep, watches a segment about upholstering a loveseat. She observes

What tiny steel teeth the zipper had,
like ... the hit man from *The Spy Who
Loved Me* whose carnal name I can't
put my finger
on---let's call him Orestes---and when the
hand tore a piece off the
yellow foam insert and fed
it to its chewing face with
such tenderness I remembered the dripping
dog, whose howling was a wind in
itself, wasn't a dog at all, so goes the joke,
but the first war lord's cursed earth wife,
Clytemnestra

(ibid 22-3)

Clytemnestra seems to have something to do with the speaker as mother, and with all mothers. The idea of Clytemnestra as a dog recurs. The furies refer to Clytemnestra's experience of justice, and by extension, the speaker's experience of the legal system. This poem moves from visceral image to mythical allusion via intellect. Consider later in the poem, when Schiff addresses maternal love and its tensions across two stanzas through allusions which move from 20th-century cinema to the Oresteia and back to Thomas Hardy:

Jaws 3-D, the abysmal surfacing
of mother love; the most powerful jaw in the
world is the one that sucks. Viper
is what Clytemnestra dreamed she held in her arms
but loved nonetheless. "All the ex-
ecutioners

plead that they act for just retribution....
Every correction is
a blood bath," I read in the

Oresteia, intro. Rich-
mond Lattimore. "Don't read that in bed," my hus-
band said. Okay, okay, I'll just
finish *Jude the Obscure*. Terrible children of
the modern world, a shark pup in
captivity (ibid)

The "terrible" children of this poem include Orestes, who kills his mother and step-father, the children in *Jude the Obscure*, a novel which concludes with the oldest son killing all the other kids, babies in general—about which Schiff makes the epigrammatic observation that babies control the most "powerful jaw in the world," and shark pups which generally cannot survive in captivity or require tremendous care. These terrible, needy, vengeful children are interwoven with observations about the "the abysmal surfacing of mother love" incarnate in vengeful Clytemnestra. What do these layered allusions suggest both about motherhood and children? Is something lost in such density of outside referents? Why are the lines broken the way that they are, for example over Rich/mond and hus/band? What is gained?

Here and in the Iphigenia poems, mythical allusions (or versions) provide space for ambiguity and ambivalence. Later in the poem Schiff quotes Orestes in the *Libation Bearers* "A voice of fear was deep in the house. Here is my own soil that I / walk." "Fury / had to ask, "What // is this place, Athena, you say is mine?" In this reference, myth provides a forum for considering ambivalence in a relationship to property. After all, property, especially real property, endures much longer than humans, and in a sense we are all tenants. What are these places we think our ours? The poem's associations invite but do not dictate thoughts about the roots of fear in houses and families and our relationship to property.

Throughout "A Hearing," literary and personal sources interweave. Does this way of using myth control some of the rhetorical potency of its implied valued system? Or does myth, once invited into a poem, bring such systems into a poem along with it? Schiff cautions, "Do not / tempt the gods to board your craft. / You cannot get them off." Schiff's poem, which began within the frame of a property dispute concludes

... The wilderness goes all
the way down and pulls the roots from
underneath. A white rush where the fire burns hottest,
a white rush, like a sacred hart
ex machina

so Artemis enters the gaping
to console us all. It was a deer,
she tells Clytemnestra; a deer
on the altar; your daughter
lives; the wind is still;
and your father
is mortal. (ibid 25-6)

In the penultimate stanza wildness returns and with it, echoes of the Iphigenia poems, especially the cultural association of femaleness and wildness. The repeated phrase, “a white rush” is a quote from Yeats’s poem “Leda and the Swan,” which is about Zeus’s sexual escapade / assault of Leda (versions vary, but in Yeats’s poem it reads to me like rape), while he is in swan form. In his poem, the term “a white rush” is ambiguous, but might plausibly be understood as referring to the power of Zeus, the white feathers of Zeus’s swan form, ejaculate, or the psychological and somatic experience of being raped, etc. A “white rush” in Yeats’s poem has *something* to do with power, specifically with male or godly power over a female. So, when Schiff takes “a white rush”, and says that it is like “a sacred hart / exmachina,” is she saying that Artemis’s power is like Zeus’s power in Yeats’s poem, indifferent and cruel? What can we understand from the suggestion which comes across the stanza break, that Artemis comes “to console us all” via the same power of the indifferent white rush? What kind of consolation is that?

At the very end, I think Schiff suggests an alternate ending for Clytemnestra and Iphigenia. In this reimagining, the patriarchal godly power of Zeus is removed “your father is mortal.” This line refers to the fact that Clytemnestra is Leda’s daughter, but her father is King Tyndarus, not Zeus. Does this line suggest a casting off of the entire patriarchal structure of myth and religion? And does this poem end with a reimagining of a world less hostile to women, of humans not pursuing organized violence?

Similarly, Brenda Shaughnessy’s *Our Andromeda* is driven by “what ifs” and imaginings of better worlds. The *Our Andromeda* of the title refers to an invented world, located somewhere indefinitely within the Andromeda Galaxy, a world shared by Shaughnessy and her son Cal (named in the text), a world in which Cal does not suffer a profound birth injury. Shaughnessy does not refer to the Greek myth of Andromeda often within in the book; however, the title controls (or at minimum suggests) how we read the text. This use of myth resembles Sharon Olds’s poem “Cassiopeia;” in that poem, the title tells us a great deal about the mother who is the subject of the poem, but the myth is never mentioned again.

Andromeda is the beautiful daughter of King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia, the latter a proud mother who claimed that Andromeda is more beautiful than the sea Nereids. Poseidon, hearing that a mortal woman claims her daughter is more beautiful than his Nereids, is so incensed that he sends a sea monster to torment Cepheus’s kingdom and demands the sacrifice of Andromeda in exchange for making the sea monster stop attacking the kingdom’s ships. Andromeda is duly chained to a rock for the sea monster to kill. However, Perseus spots the beautiful, chained Andromeda as he is flying by, and swoops down to fight the sea monster and free the girl. After a little incident in which Andromeda’s uncle tries to marry her, leading Perseus to petrify the uncle with Medusa’s head, Andromeda and Perseus live happily ever after. That happy ending might be key to understanding Shaughnessy’s use of this myth.

The book’s final 22-page title poem, “Our Andromeda,” is partly a wish for a better, parallel world (a personal mythology) and partly a celebration of motherly love. At the same time, it is also lament that contains Cal’s tragic birth story, and invective against the medical system and the society isolating his parents. “Our Andromeda” is a wish poem of rage, blame, self-recrimination, and acceptance, all at the same time. Given its title, one suspects that Shaughnessy is comparing her own hubris, especially her blithe expectation of a perfect child, to Cassiopeia’s maternal hubris. In “Liquid Flesh” (from the same collection) Shaughnessy writes

...Mother. Baby
Chicken and egg. It's so obnoxious
of me: I was an egg

who had an egg
and now I'm chicken,
as usual scooping up

both possibilities,
or what I used to call
possibilities. I used

to be this way, so ontologically
greedy, wanting to be it all.
Serves me right. (Shaughnessy 22-3)

But what are both women guilty of? What is ontological greed? Is Cassiopeia guilty of pride or guilty of having a beautiful daughter? Is one point of Shaughnessy's title to make us consider how fickle and disproportionate the world is, especially in its treatment of mothers? Is the Andromeda myth's misogyny towards mothers an important lens for reading Shaughnessy's book? Is there something specifically about the way that women are linked to their children's outcomes that Shaughnessy is gesturing towards with this controlling and yet limited use of myth?

Our Andromeda's first four sections contain poems about self, art making, and memorably, motherhood. But the book bends towards the gravity of its title poem: Joy Katz describes the book as "three quarters cool thinkiness and one-quarter passion that's all released at the end." (Poetry) This arrangement has several effects. First, Shaughnessy creates suspense within her text, which is rare for a book of poetry. Sometimes she is quite coy. Our first motherhood poem doesn't come until page 22's "Liquid Flesh," quoted above, in which Shaughnessy observes her confusion at her changed state:

I know I am his mother, but I can't
quick click on the word's essential aspects,
can't denude the flora

or disrobe the kind of housecoat
"mother" always is.

.....

Do I like us? Can I love us?

If anyone comes
first it's him, but how can that be?
I was here way, way first.

Shaughnessy points towards, but not at, her situation in some poems leading up to “Our Andromeda.” In “Cover the Lamp with Its Own Light,” she writes, “did you know / there was a baby? You’d think / he’d be mentioned by now, / but the things I choose not to say / might keep you wondering to the end.” (ibid 82) I am interested in why Shaughnessy places the poems that are most about motherhood at the end of the book. Is it because, as Joy Katz observes: “a baby is a huge sentimental burden for a book. This book announces, by way of form, that it is not going to sink into maudlin content.” (Katz and Meitner) I am not as sure as Katz that *Our Andromeda* doesn’t sink into maudlin content, “You in my arms, your little searching fingers / on my face. Wistful, graceful / stars on a wet, clear night.” I am even less sure that maudlin content is bad. What is it about pain, especially female or maternal pain that makes it suspect in a book (and for that matter in society)?

Maternal culpability and hubris, along with female pain, link the Andromeda myth and “Our Andromeda.” In the poem, Shaughnessy writes,

Because it’s all my fault, you see.

I’m the one who joined that cult
of expectant mothers
who felt ourselves too delicate

and optimistic to *entertain the notion*,
as if I were inviting it to an unpleasant
afternoon tea, of something going wrong.

.....

I wasn’t careful enough. I thought
my experience of childbirth
was a consideration....

I thought....that I was doing everything right.

.....

I was arrogant, I was selfish. I wanted
to do it all correctly as if I were building
a model birdhouse at summer camp. (Shaughnessy 108-29)

With apologies to Shaughnessy, I have removed much of the poetry of her work because I want to look at how the events and emotions described might relate to the Andromeda myth. She is angry at her midwife, at God, but mostly at herself, for the injury her son suffered during childbirth. (Elsewhere in the poem, her instinct to blame herself is echoed by a doctor who asks Shaughnessy whether she had taken street drugs during her pregnancy.)

As I read Shaughnessy's self-recriminations in this poem, I cannot help but think of the punishment dealt Eve after eating the forbidden fruit. This punishment, known as Eve's Curse, comes in Genesis 3:16: "To the woman He said: I will sharply increase your pain in childbirth; in pain you will bring forth children." Readings of this curse vary, with many commentators agreeing that childbirth pain is punishment for Eve's original sin, although most do not go quite as far as Martin Luther, who described such pain as "happy and joyful punishment." (Coretti and Desai 182) I do not mention Eve's curse because I think it was on Shaughnessy's mind. I mention it because religious explanations of pain and suffering as punishment for moral transgressions, provide cultural background. Such beliefs condition and encourage the idea that pain, even childbirth pain, is blameworthy. Historically they even contributed to the idea that treating pain was immoral. (One English clergyman, opposed to chloroform, described it as "a decoy of Satan" that promised to "harden society.") (Golden 89) Female psychological and physical pain occurs in a cultural context that has—possibly more in academic and religious thought than popularly—considered female pain just moral punishment for the sin of being female. The Greek myths are not the same as the Christian myths, but on this point, there is a rhyme.

Karl Ehenkel and Frans van Dijkhuizen write in the *The Sense of Suffering*, that "pain is a deeply cultural phenomena; the experience of pain is powerfully mediated by cultural and historical context." (Coretti and Desai 182) In this light, consider Shaughnessy's determination to deliver Cal:

I know I can deliver him I know I can

*push. I don't care how much pain I'm in,
I can handle it! I can do it! I'm the strongest
fucking woman in the world!*

Does Shaughnessy's determination echo with (against?) historical opposition to anesthesia for religious reasons? Does Shaughnessy's attitude here also reflect Freud's association of femininity with masochism? I am not arguing that Shaughnessy is opposed to anesthesia or that she supports Freud's ideas about female masochism, rather, I am suggesting cultural currents which may be running underneath this poem and through this book. In *Slaying the Mermaid*, her study of sacrifice and the feminine ideal, Stephanie Golden writes, "Despite their differences, most Western women do share the tradition I have described, which tells them suffering is good, true womanhood means self-sacrifice, and so on." (Golden 85) Is it relevant that in the Protestantism that shaped American culture "self-deprivation, pain, and suffering became associated with virtue, nobility of character, and spiritual edification"? (Golden 7) In the 19th century, the ideal self-renouncing wife and mother, was epitomized by the "heroine" of Coventry Patmore's sentimental 1862 book-length (and for me, unreadable) poem "The Angel in the House." Patmore describes his protagonist: "Her will's indomitably bent / On mere submission unto him." and "A rapture of submission lifts / Her life into celestial rest." (Patmore) The sentimentalism that Katz suggested Shaughnessy is trying so hard to avoid is a product of the culture.

Some might rightfully observe that angelic attitudes of submission are no longer expected of women, and that might be true. But the socialization of women still contributes to an environment in which women are expected to, and are willing to, make sacrifices that men do not make. For

example, during the 2020-21 Covid pandemic, mothers prioritized caregiving, dropping out of the workforce at much higher rates than men. (Kashen, Glynn and Novello)

And what does this have to do with Shaughnessy's "Our Andromeda"? What does any of this have to do with myth? In answer, I return to Elizabeth Vandiver's working definition of myth: traditional stories that a society tells itself which encode the worldview, principles, or fears of that society. Shaughnessy is writing about one of the hardest things, an injury to a child. She is writing within a culture that has, at least among the small numbers constituting religious and cultural leadership, sometimes considered female pain in and resulting from childbirth as a just punishment to women. (Whether such an idea was ever widely accepted by women or the larger society is arguable; that it was promoted by authorities is certain.) The Andromeda myth indicts a mother for hubris. But what mother doesn't think their child the most beautiful of all?

Shaughnessy reaches out to the *what ifs* of myth for better conditions, not just for her son, but for herself. In one of the book's only direct references to the Andromeda myth, on the second to last page, Shaughnessy writes: "A mother's boast / is never merely delusion." In the Andromeda myth, things turn out well for Andromeda and Perseus. Their marriage is happy, they have many children and found several dynasties. The happy part of the myth also underlies Shaughnessy's use of it, along with the blameworthiness of mothers, and the tremendous misogyny. Shaughnessy has chosen a myth that is profoundly misogynist and used it to imagine a better version of this world. Ultimately, it is a messy creation story, *Our Andromeda*. Creation of a baby, but also, creation of a woman, a family, and art.

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