Beatrice Palmieri, "Entry on: The Beauty of Medusa and the Other Faces of the Myth [La bellezza di Medusa e gli altri volti del mito] by Sabina Colloredo , La Tram", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1041. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Sabina Colloredo , La Tram

The Beauty of Medusa and the Other Faces of the Myth [La bellezza di Medusa e gli altri volti del mito]

Italy (2019)

TAGS: Acis Aphrodite Ariadne Athena Clymene Demeter Epimetheus Eros Galatea Hades Helios Medusa Minos Minotaur Oceanus / Okeanos Odysseus / Ulysses Pandora Persephone Perseus Phaethon Polyphemus Poseidon Theseus Zeus



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General information	
Title of the work	The Beauty of Medusa and the Other Faces of the Myth [La bellezza di Medusa e gli altri volti del mito]
Country of the First Edition	Italy
Country/countries of popularity	Italy
Original Language	Italian
First Edition Date	2019
First Edition Details	Sabina Colloredo, *La bellezza di Medusa e gli altri volti del mito*. Novara: DeAgostini, 2019, 205 pp.
ISBN	9788851173357
Genre	Mythological fiction, Novels, Retelling of myths*
Target Audience	Children (8+)
Author of the Entry	Beatrice Palmieri, University of Bologna, beatrice.palmieri@studio.unibo.it
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Sabina Colloredo (Author)

Sabina Colloredo is one of the most popular Italian authors for children. In the 1980s she worked for some of the largest advertising agencies in Milan as a copywriter and creative director, then opened her own agency. Thanks to this background of communication she refined the skills required to create unique projects aimed at schools and children. After the birth of her two daughters, with whom she currently lives in Milan, she started writing children's books for various publishing houses. She has written approximately a hundred stories, historical and mythological novels, female biographies, and poems, which have been translated into many languages. Every year she meets many children who have read her books and whom she sets on the path of education through the love of reading.

Sources:

grandieassociati.it (accessed: May 18, 2020);

edizioniel.com (accessed: May 18, 2020);

Official website (accessed: May 18, 2020).

Bio prepared by Beatrice Palmieri, University of Bologna, beatrice.palmieri@studio.unibo.it

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La Tram (Illustrator)

La Tram is an Italian illustrator based in Livorno. She studied International Relations at “Università L’Orientale” and comic book drawing at “Scuola Italiana di Comix” in Naples. She has worked for a long time as a graphic designer for NGOs, merging her two main interests, cooperation and design. Her creative world is built with exaggerated, clean shapes, big animals and bright colours. She has illustrated many books for children. Since 2017 she has also taught Colour Theory at The Sign – Comics & Arts Academy in Florence.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 26, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

The Beauty of Medusa and the Other Faces of the Myth is an illustrated children's novel which retells some of the most popular myths from an unusual point of view. It is divided into six short chapters, where the author gives voice – in the order of appearance – to Medusa, Minotaur, Pandora, Polyphemus, Persephone, and Phaeton, all of whom tell their story first-hand.

Medusa grows up with an alcoholic violent father, described as a monstrous being, and a beautiful but surly mother. Unable to love, they abandon their daughter as soon as they can, forcing her to become a priestess in Athena's shrine. Here she grows up "sad and lonely" until Poseidon comes and confesses his love for her. Feeling loved by someone at last, Medusa falls into his arms and is persuaded to consummate their love at the temple of Athena. However, the all-seeing goddess discovers the two lovers and goes on a rampage, particularly raging against her priestess. Guilty as a result of the desire to experience love, the beautiful Medusa is punished for her crime by being transformed into the monster we all know, with snakes instead of her beautiful long, auburn hair, bronze claws and eyes of fire. She lives now relegated into a cave with her sisters. Just before the arrival of Perseus, Medusa discovers her pregnancy through a dream in which she flies and carries her son with her. Suddenly, a long-forgotten sentiment, love, is rekindled in her. It is out of love that she does not look at the child, fearing to turn him to stone; and it is always out of love that she fights to the end against Perseus with the only weapons she has, her gaze, nails, and hair, her ancient beauty transformed into a lethal weapon. Finally, Pegasus is born from her body cut in two, and with her last cry, he flies away.

Asterion is greeted at birth by a scream of terror. He is the fruit of a coupling between Pasiphae and a sacred bull: he is a Minotaur, half-man, and half bull, monstrous in appearance, condemned to solitude. He lives confined in a secret area of the Palace of Minos and only the arrival of Ariadne, his sister, seems to break the curse. She visits him often, and a strong relationship of friendship between the siblings is established. The magic of this profound bond that united them fails, however, when Daedalus is commissioned by the king to build a new home for the Minotaur. Time passes, and Ariadne grows up, gradually moving away from her brother. The Minotaur is thrown into the

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labyrinth and, treated as a monster, becomes a monster: victims, both humans and animals, are brought to him. Then comes the war between Crete and Athens. Victorious Minos imposes a tribute of seven boys and seven girls to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Theseus is sent to kill him. The Minotaur is deceived by the sight of the red thread that Ariadne had previously shown him promising to use it to free him from the labyrinth. Nevertheless, Theseus reveals that it was Ariadne who gave it to him in order to put an end to this story, and he finally kills him.

Pandora, modelled by gods from water and clay, is the first mortal woman, born for the sole purpose of marrying a mortal and giving rise to the human race. She receives a sealed jar with unknown contents and is sent to Earth. For a long time, she wanders peacefully through various landscapes, with a procession of animals in tow. Finally, the gods send Aphrodite to contrive a meeting of Pandora and Epimetheus, brother of Prometheus, the Titan god who for stealing fire from gods and delivering it to the mortal kind was punished by Zeus: he was bound to a stake on Mount Kaukasos (Caucasus) where an eagle was set to feed upon his ever-regenerating liver. As intended by the gods, the pair falls in love and spend their life together passionately loving each other and working the land. However, the jar becomes an obsession: first for Epimetheus, who would like to open it to hurt those evil gods who tortured Prometheus; later also for Pandora. Although at first, she was loyal to the will of the gods, a feeling of despair and dissatisfaction, caused by Aphrodite, then crept in. Pandora is aware that the gods are playing with them, as if they were puppets, and decides to rebel. After discovering that she is pregnant, she ends the torment of the vase to prove that she can make decisions on her own, without playing the role of an obedient slave of the gods. Torments of grief and illnesses, and all the bad and sinful feelings that the gods had in store for men are freed. But although the gods meant to blame a woman for the evil of the world by giving her the responsibility for the jar, Pandora, on the contrary, becomes the bearer of an essential and purely human feeling: hope. In fact, Pandora gives birth. A new life born in pain brings hope for a better future.

Polyphemus, son of Poseidon and Thoosa, is a demigod living alone on an island, where he takes care of his sheep and lives of the land. As a one-eyed giant Cyclops, he is monstrous, and he is punished for his lack of beauty by Aphrodite, who orders Eros to make him fall in love

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with Galatea, a Nereid. The poor Polyphemus cannot hope to win her even though he tries to be kind to her. This love only causes him suffering. The sight of her with another boy sends him on a rampage, and he kills the unfortunate rival. For this brutal act, his father, Poseidon, abandons him. Although he no longer suffers from love, he now suffers from abandonment. When Ulysses and his companions land on the island and invade the cave of Polyphemus, they violate the sacred rules of hospitality by eating and drinking his supplies and defiling everything. Driven by anger, he kills and eats some of them. Then the intruders devise a plan to escape: they offer him wine as an apology for their behavior, but as soon as Polyphemus is rendered unconscious, they blind him with a tree trunk. Despite his blindness, Polyphemus now appreciates the tranquility of his life and his surroundings even more.

Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, a mother all too present in her life: she protects and cares for her daughter keeping her obedient, unaware and inexperienced of the world, of love, even of herself. One day in a meadow, she is irresistibly attracted to a narcissus. She brushes the flower with her lips and suddenly the ground beneath her splits in two. Hades, the lord of the Underworld, drags her with him into the depths of the Earth, where time does not exist, and memories of earthly life vanish. Demeter desperately looks for her daughter, but although Persephone hears her calls, she does not want to answer. She is in love with Hades, torn between the longing to return and the desire to stay. For the first time, Persephone is the mistress of her fate. When the fearsome Demeter discovers that her daughter has been kidnapped by Hades, she rages against the Earth of which she is a mother and brings devastation and famine. After the visit from Zeus, who tries to bring Persephone back to Earth, Hades urges her to return to her mother to calm her down and gives her a pomegranate: if she decides to return to him, all she has to do is eat the grains of the fruit. Persephone accepts, returns to the mother, who does not accept her love for Hades. Once again submissive to her mother’s will, the girl suffers from Demeter’s hostility towards Hades. Invaded by the spirit of rebellion, Persephone eats the pomegranate seeds in front of her mother and Aphrodite. Zeus intervenes to solve the conflict. He decides that Persephone will spend six months a year on Earth and six in the Underworld.

Phaeton, son of the Oceanid, Clymene, and the sun god, Helios, grows up under the protective wing of his mother and sisters, without ever

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having seen his father. He spends his time designing well-made models of everything he sees. Epaphus, son of Zeus and future king of Egypt, chooses him as a victim to torment and one day he destroys the model of Helios' chariot; to make matters worse, he bullies and derides Phaeton because of the absence of his father. Clymene feels outraged and decides to bring her son with her to her father, Oceanus, but life under the water is not for Phaeton, a creature of the sun. To please him, his grandfather sometimes takes him to the surface to see the sun, where he dreams and fantasizes that one day, he would see his father and drive his father's chariot. The older he gets, the less tolerant he becomes of all the care and attention with which he is surrounded, until the long-awaited day finally arrives. The mother takes him to meet his father, the god of the sun, who welcomes him as he had hoped and confirms that he wants to recognize him publicly. He also promises to grant him one wish: Phaethon asks to drive the chariot of his father, his hero, and he gets his wish. Although terrified and aware of the risks everyone points out to him, Phaeton finally has his moment of glory. As it was easily foreseeable, Phaeton fails to control the horses, causing devastation on Earth. Zeus intervenes and throws his thunderbolt on the chariot: Phaeton ends his long fall in the arms of the river Po, happy for having been able to experience the thrill of freedom.

Analysis

The strongest point of this book is the way it retells the best-known classical myths. As she said in an interview, the author wanted to overturn the canonical perspective of the winners, of the heroes,* inserting herself in that literary field which highlights the role of men and societies in creating their own monsters. Colloredo wants to give voice to the defeated, who, as she said, are not losers: "if I lose a battle and then rise, I have won, but if I don't rise, I am a loser." This different approach underlies the story of the protagonists: Medusa, Minotaur, Pandora, Polyphemus, Persephone, Phaeton. Who were they before losing their battle? Before becoming monsters, as we have been told?" Firstly, the protagonists recall their childhood and adolescence. Then, they retell the myths as seen from the point of view of the monsters, the villains, the losers. The main idea is that if one is treated like a monster, one ends up acting like a monster.

Colloredo says that myths are great conveyors of content, and the storyteller decides which part to narrate, but that the story also has a

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prequel and a sequel, and we should not disregard this. Moreover, the myth is often narrated as pure action, but as the author underlines in an interview, the psychological aspect is essential. The psychological introspection into the characters makes monsters and demigods more human, which seems like a paradox, but it helps to understand the reasons for individual actions or choices. In this way, readers are discouraged from judging and encouraged to identify and understand, an attitude that in the global scenario of our contemporaneity – but in general of all times – is more necessary than ever. The acceptance of otherness, whatever it may be, starts from the observation that behind each human being there is a completely personal story, and if we know how to listen to it and understand it then we will have enriched our own a little too. The encounter with the other – which is then only the encounter with ourselves – is a wealth that globalization and technology have amplified to unimaginable levels in a time like that of myth. But speaking of these themes in the context of the myth, it allows us to adapt the universality of myths to the themes themselves.

Medusa grows up in a family where it is impossible to experience the feeling of love: she is neglected by those who are supposed to take care of her, namely her family, and forced to become a priestess against her will. “I grew up sad and lonely”, she says, and so this denied love insinuates itself into her personality like an indelible shadow. The author decides not to follow Ovid’s version of the myth, where Medusa is said to have been raped by the god. Here the relationship with Poseidon is seen as a direct consequence of the girl’s childhood trauma. Medusa is aware of this; in fact, she says: “I was ready to risk everything just to feel loved for a few hours”. She is desperately searching for someone to love her and not abandon her as her mother did, and Poseidon makes her believe he is that person. Medusa falls in love, perhaps not so much with Poseidon as with the idea of love. However, who cannot see him/herself in this teenager? Still, loneliness is not her only weakness; there is also her beauty. Medusa is punished and transformed, by retaliation, into a monster: her gaze, sweet and tender as a young girl, has now become a weapon feared all over the world. Finally, she discovers pregnancy by having a dream where she flies carrying her son with her, which allows her to remember a long-hidden feeling, namely love. It is out of love that she does not look at the child, fearing to petrify him: “What an effort not to be able to look those you love in the eyes “; and, to the end, it is always out of love that she fights Perseus. In the final moment, it becomes clear how all the actions of Medusa are the consequences of

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the shadows that she carries inside: the love that was denied her, the love that binds mother to son, is Medusa's motivation, as well as Perseus'. How can we judge the two protagonists?

In this version of the myth, the author invites us to re-evaluate the concepts of victory and defeat. Below the hissing hair of Medusa, we find flaming eyes of a woman who seeks justice and who stands as a symbol of women free to self-determine and to refuse to be an object of other people's negotiations. It was always someone else who decided what to do with her and her body: first the mother, then Poseidon, and finally, Athena. Despite this, Medusa never lost heart and fought to the end, pursuing that ideal of love which she had always given but never received. Medusa is an archetype of a woman who still finds a light to follow among the shadows that haunt her. She will always remain faithful to this spark. Oppressed by solitude and by an overwhelming need to be loved, Medusa, at the showdown with herself, appears coherent and faithful to herself. Perhaps the author will not be the first to implement such a reversal of perspective in retelling the myth. However, for an audience of teenagers, her mode of narration is undoubtedly successful. They too, like Medusa and the other protagonists in the book, have to deal with their shadows and contradictions, to challenge the limits imposed by others and sometimes by themselves. Medusa, placed as an emblem of this category, teaches us that even darkness may contain the germ of redemption and greatness. Lastly, the fact that, out of three stories of women and three of men, that of a woman, Medusa, is chosen as the title and emblematic story, may suggest a desire to address especially girls. And in fact, the stories of Medusa, Pandora and Persephone do not hide a certain feminism, as it is often underlined the female empowerment, for example when it comes to deciding who to marry, and more generally to deciding for oneself about one's life without the mediation of men.

The story of Medusa, which is told first and which gives the title to the book, is representative of all the stories that come after: the thread that connects all the narrations is the deep loneliness and the monstrous need to be loved. In addition to this central connection, in each story other problems emerge concerning the affirmation of one's identity in contrast with one's parents or in general with society: the Minotaur, unlike the beautiful Medusa, is discriminated against for its monstrous appearance, as is Polyphemus; Pandora and Persephone stand as symbols of issues related to the role of women in society and

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in a couple; Phaeton brings up the topic of bullying and redemption. In these stories, the universal power of the myth is revealed, as it succeeds in touching the most intimate and profound essence not only of the young audience but also older readers. Lastly, the role of childhood is shown as representing a decisive moment when the shadows with which the adult will inevitably have to come to terms, take shape. This typically human condition is legitimized here because it is elevated within the scope of the myth.

* Prof. Lisa Maurice added here a comment that “This is a popular and not uncommon post-modern way of retelling myths. See e.g. Tobias Druitt’s Corydon books, Kate McMullan’s *Myth-O-Mania* series, Emma Bridges, *Making Monsters: A Speculative and Classical Anthology* and the large number of fractured fairy tales now available.”

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Acis Aphrodite Ariadne Athena Clymene Demeter Epimetheus Eros Galatea Hades Helios Medusa Minos Minotaur Oceanus / Okeanos Odysseus / Ulysses Pandora Persephone Perseus Phaethon Polyphemus Poseidon Theseus Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Appearances Authority Character traits Coming of age Conflict Desires Disobedience Emotions Expectations Family Freedom Humanism Identity Individuality Justice Life Love Obedience Parents (and children) Psychology Punishment Relationships Resilience Subjectivity Success and failure Values

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