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Reimagining Monstrosity: Bakhtinian Polyphony and Feminist Mythmaking in Natalie Haynes' *Stone Blind* (2022)

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Abstract

This study examines Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind* (2022) as a feminist revisionist retelling of the Medusa myth, analysing how the novel employs a Bakhtinian polyphonic narrative form to interrogate and destabilise patriarchal constructions of monstrosity. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel, alongside feminist revisionist mythmaking as articulated by Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker, the paper argues that *Stone Blind* resists monologic, patriarchal mythmaking by distributing narrative authority across multiple autonomous voices, including gods, mortals, and inanimate objects. Through close reading, the article demonstrates how Haynes reconfigures Medusa from a monstrous object within hero's heroic narrative into a self-aware, ideologically independent subject. The novel exposes monstrosity as a culturally and politically constructed category rooted in fear, bodily difference, and patriarchal judgment rather than inherent moral corruption. By foregrounding narrative plurality and ideological tension, *Stone Blind* not only recuperates Medusa's silenced voice but also offers a structural critique of the mythic traditions that have historically marginalised female figures. This study concludes that Haynes's polyphonic strategy advances feminist revisionist mythmaking by transforming monstrosity into a contested site of meaning, agency, and cultural critique.

Keywords: Natalie *Haynes, Stone Blind, Medusa, Bakhtinian polyphony, Feminist revisionist mythmaking, Monstrosity*

I n classical mythology, Medusa is persistently reduced to a monstrous figure—her identity flattened to mere physical traits and her role confined to serving Perseus' "heroic" journey. However, the rhetorical question, "I'm wondering if you still think of her as a monster" (Haynes 178), posed by Gorgoneion in Natalie Haynes's fictional novel *Stone Blind* (2022), functions as a critical intervention into both the reader's perceptions and the broader classical mythological canon, revealing the stability of Medusa's horrific reputation as a result of literary tradition rather than innate nature.

In her non-fiction work *Pandora's Jar Women in the Greek Myths[1]* (2020), Natalie Haynes observes: "He who fights monsters, Nietzsche tells us, should take care that he himself does not become a monster. But what happens when we look at this advice from the other direction?… In the case of Medusa, she can cite both kinds of genealogy, depending on who tells her story" (Haynes 75). This insight underscores that monstrosity is not an inherent quality but a narrative construct shaped by the narrator's perspective. Haynes further contends that female monsters in Greek mythology often become monstrous immediately after a "bruising encounter with a god" (Haynes 75), thereby illuminating the cultural mechanisms by which women's bodies and actions are recast as threats.

Stone Blind, published in 2022, offers a contemporary retelling of the Greek myth of Medusa, the sole mortal among the three Gorgon sisters. Haynes's novel critically re-examines Medusa's portrayal by revising the traditional narrative: she reconstructs Medusa's formative years and her relationships with her Gorgon sisters as nurturing and familial, reframes Poseidon's actions as explicit, traumatic sexual assault, recontextualises Athene's punitive transformation as an act of victim-blaming, and characterises Perseus's subsequent decapitation of Medusa not as a heroic feat, but as a premeditated act of murder. From the outset, Haynes signals her intention to disrupt the canonical narrative by foregrounding Medusa's subjectivity and autonomy, and by exposing the patriarchal and cultural structures that have historically defined her as a monster.

Ovid is widely recognized as the earliest poet to present Medusa's origin myth alongside a narrative that highlights her broader cultural significance. In his *Metamorphose*s, Ovid initially depicts Medusa as "clarissima forma", "most beautiful in her appearance" (Haynes 76). However, Medusa subsequently becomes the victim of sexual violence perpetrated by Poseidon within the sacred confines of Athena's temple. Rather than directing her retribution toward the perpetrator, Athena punishes Medusa by transforming her beautiful hair into serpents as a form of admonition (Ovid 135). Ovid's account not only underscores the importance of beauty but also explicitly identifies the

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[1] Natalie Haynes's *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths (*2020) offers a nonfiction counterpart to her feminist mythmaking, reframing the roles of women traditionally marginalised in classical narratives. Blending classical scholarship with a contemporary critical voice, Haynes reconsiders several figures such as Medusa, Pandora, and Clytemnestra, foregrounding the cultural mechanisms through which their stories have been distorted or diminished (Angel 125).

encounter between Poseidon and Medusa as sexual assault. Nevertheless, even within this version, the narrative remains governed by patriarchal authority. Medusa's beauty and her violation are presented solely as explanatory devices leading to her transformation into a monster, while her inner experience, grief, and potential resistance remain unexplored.

Likewise, Hesiod's portrayal centres on corporeal monstrosity, offering a vivid description of Medusa and her sisters: "two serpents hung down at their girdles with heads curved forward. Their tongues were flickering, and their teeth gnashing with fury, and their eyes glaring fiercely" ((Pseudo)-Hesiod 229). Hesiod's depiction reduces them to a collection of menacing body parts, rather than individuals possessing agency or identity. Their monstrosity is constructed through a distorted aesthetic: serpentine limbs, furious motion, and exaggerated features define them as objects of dread rather than as subjects with interiority. Such descriptions thus exemplify how classical literature conceptualises monstrosity as the result of female deviation—figures deemed excessively peculiar, powerful, or divergent from prevailing norms of femininity.

Hesiod and Ovid collectively establish the prevailing classical paradigm in which Medusa is depicted either as an embodiment of terrifying corporeal excess or as a figure of beauty subjected to divine retribution. Through their respective accounts, Hesiod and Ovid foreground the cultural logic of classical mythology, wherein female figures are positioned as either monstrous bodies or passive victims, their identities circumscribed by patriarchal narrative imperatives. Hesiod constructs monstrosity through the spectacle of bodily excess, while Ovid utilises Medusa's violation as a mythic device rather than exploring it as a lived trauma. Both narratives demonstrate how ancient myth functioned as a political storytelling mechanism, reinforcing social hierarchies by rendering female difference either dangerous or punishable. In each case, the female body is either feared or violated, yet never afforded agency or a voice. In *Stone Blind,* Medusa is redefined; she is no longer Hesiod's or Ovid's creation but rather Natalie Haynes' interpretation, as Haynes gives her a distinct voice to narrate her own story.

Formally*, Stone Blind* is organised into a series of alternating chapters that foreground a multiplicity of narrative perspectives, incorporating not only Medusa, Athene, Perseus, and Poseidon, but also inanimate entities such as the Gorgoneion. The narrative deliberately centres Medusa's subjectivity and emotional complexity, resisting her reduction to a monstrous archetype or a marginal figure within the hero's journey. This is enacted through a fragmented, multi-voiced, and frequently contradictory narrative mode, a formal strategy that resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of the polyphonic novel. In this paper, I examine how Haynes employs a polyphonic narrative structure in *Stone Blind* and investigates the extent to which this approach subverts patriarchal constructions of monstrosity while reimagining Medusa as an autonomous, self-aware subject. Furthermore, it addresses the cultural frameworks that have historically conflated femininity with monstrosity and

silenced female voices. By demonstrating how narrative polyphony reclaims Medusa's agency and subjectivity, this study argues that literary form can be utilised to historicise and empower marginalised figures within ancient myth, and can   expose the cultural and political mechanisms that have historically silenced them.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984)*,* Mikhail Bakhtin delineates the concept of polyphony as a mode in which "the character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent… A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses… with equal rights and each with its own world" (50-51), enabling each consciousness to express itself with complete ideological significance, countering authorial control, and characters are not mere objects for interpretation; they are subjects who convey their own truths, perspectives, and contradictions. Furthermore, Malcuzynski's observation regarding Bakhtin's polyphonic novel—"each narrative segment or chapter…represents a different point of view expressed by an autonomous voice, each questioning the credibility of a similar event, symptom or symbol, or even the authenticity of a similar character, in the chapter or chapters preceding it" (Malcuzynski 79) exemplifies how the novel's polyphonic structure, with several autonomous voices challenge each other's perspectives, undermines narrative authority but also empower marginalised characters. This operates as the principal analytical framework for interrogating Haynes's strategic distribution of narrative authority amongst deities, mortals, inanimate objects, and, crucially, Medusa herself.

Bakhtin's formulation substantiates the argument that the novel's formal structure confers upon Medusa a discursive agency comparable to that of traditionally privileged mythic figures; by affording each character an equivalent degree of ideological authority, the narrative resists the dominance of any singular perspective and thereby destabilises the patriarchal, monologic discourse that has historically constructed Medusa as monstrous. Bakhtin's polyphony elucidates the formal dynamics of Haynes' novel; however, its wider implications emerge through feminist reinterpretation, revealing how this polyphony disrupts cultural memory of myth— destabilising traditional representations of Medusa and redefining the conceptual frameworks of femininity and monstrosity.

Theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker articulate a critical feminist perspective, advocating for feminist 'polyphony re-vision' as a means for women writers to achieve critical self-awareness and participate politically in reshaping literary history and culture (De Oliveira 4). Within the broader discourse of revisionist mythmaking, this approach conceptualises the reinterpretation of canonical narratives from alternative standpoints as both a political and imaginative intervention. In her influential article "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" (1971), Rich defines re-vision as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction… A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live." (18). This perspective underscores the potential of re-engaging with established

narratives to interrogate cultural assumptions, expose the mechanisms of patriarchal discourse, and facilitate the reimagining of subjectivities.

Similarly, Alicia Ostriker, in "The Thieves of Language" (1982), contends that "[w] henever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist… the old vessel filled with new wine… making cultural change possible" (72). Ostriker's assertion emphasises the transformative capacity of myth revision to challenge canonical narratives that have historically been shaped by patriarchal discourse, which has marginalised women.

These theoretical perspectives illuminate not only the manner in which *Stone Blind* recuperates Medusa's marginalised voice, but also the distinctive formal strategies it employs. Unlike many feminist revisions that privilege a singular reclaimed female perspective, Haynes adopts a Bakhtinian polyphonic structure. Within this framework, Medusa's voice emerges in relation to, and often in tension with, divine, heroic, and object narrators. The distribution of agency across multiple consciousnesses accomplishes more than merely "giving Medusa a voice"; it exposes the ideological mechanisms responsible for constructing her monstrosity. In this context, Haynes not only revises the myth but also offers a structural critique of the patriarchal narrative frameworks that have historically silenced Medusa.

In this analysis, I employ a close reading of *Stone Blind*, drawing upon Jonathan Culler's conception of close reading as a mode of estrangement. In "The Closeness of Close Reading" (2010), Culler articulates close reading as the practice of "looking at rather than through" language (23), emphasising the ways in which textual form itself generates meaning, as opposed to treating form as a transparent conduit. Adopting this framework, the examination of Haynes' polyphonic formal strategy enables a nuanced understanding of how specific stylistic and structural elements facilitate this polyphonic revision, revealing the mechanisms by which meaning emerges through form as shifting voices and perspectives produce formal estrangement. This methodological approach reconfigures Medusa's narrative from a monologic account of punishment to a multivocal investigation of female empowerment. The novel deliberately challenges patriarchal ideologies, cultivating a plurality of self-reflexive and intersecting perspectives, rather than sustaining a singular, unified female voice.

Close Reading of *Stone Blind*

The novel commences with the Gorgoneion's statement: "I see all those who *men* call monsters… And the monster? Who is she?" (Haynes 12, emphasis mine). This introduction challenges the authority of classical mythology by demonstrating that the identification of 'monsters' serves as a mechanism of control, naming, fixing, and rendering difference manageable. The Gorgoneion constructs monstrosity not as an intrinsic quality but as a label imposed by men, thereby revealing its cultural and political underpinnings.

The subsequent observation that "this particular monster is assaulted, abused, and vilified" (Haynes 12) reframes Medusa's narrative, shifting the focus from her purported menace to the violence enacted against her. This claim juxtaposes the traditional narrative— "as the story is always told, she is the one you should fear" (Haynes 12)—with a direct challenge: "We'll see about that" (Haynes 12). Haynes deliberately destabilises the Western conception and cultural construction of monstrosity, redirecting critique toward the gods and so-called heroes who exploit such categories to justify the mistreatment and abuse of women (Velvin 44). The Gorgoneion's reflective and interrogative discourse operates as "an ideologically independent voice" (Bakhtin 50) that refuses to resolve or stabilise Medusa's status as a "monster," instead exposing the inherent instability of the category itself.

The initial interaction between Poseidon and Medusa constitutes a nuanced intellectual debate concerning the definition of monstrosity. Poseidon persistently characterizes Medusa's sisters through a visual and hierarchical logic—"with their tusks and snaking manes of hair" (Haynes 57)—thereby reducing them to bodily excess and artistic deviation. His assertion that Medusa is "beautiful" (Haynes 57) precisely because she is unlike her sisters reinforces a patriarchal framework in which beauty is dictated by male judgment and physical conformity. Medusa's rebuttal— "My sisters aren't monsters" (Haynes 57)—not only rejects Poseidon's judgment but also undermines its foundational logic. By stating that her sisters "care about me and protect me" (Haynes 57) and by concluding, "[t]hat is beauty" (Haynes 57), Medusa shifts the evaluative framework from physical appearance to relational qualities.

Whereas Poseidon perceives only the physical features, tusks and snakes, Medusa recognizes the two caring sisters who nurtured and safeguarded her. As she explains, "Euryale tends every one of her sheep like it is a child. Sthenno learned to cook so she could feed me when I was little. They care about me and protect me" (Haynes 57), highlighting that, for Medusa, physical beauty is secondary to compassion and care (Velvin 45). This scene deliberately maintains Poseidon's and Medusa's interpretations of monstrosity as distinct and ideologically dominant, thereby resisting the narrative closure that patriarchal myth typically imposes on female identity.

While patriarchal myth relies on the identification, fixation, and demonisation of monstrosity, the Gorgoneion instead poses inquiries that deconstruct the very concept itself. The Gorgoneion interrogates monstrosity through questions such as, "Monsters are, what? Ugly? Terrifying? … Can a monster be beautiful if it is still terrifying?" (Haynes 178). Rather than proposing an alternative definition, this approach suspends the possibility of fixed meaning altogether. This series of rhetorical questions fragments the concept of the monster into contingent elements—appearance, affect, and morality—each subjected to independent scrutiny. Instead of replacing one authoritative interpretation with another, the Gorgoneion reveals monstrosity as a relational judgment, shaped both by perspective, as in "how you experience fear" (Haynes 178), and by evaluative criteria, as in "how you judge beauty" (Haynes 178).

This discursive strategy exemplifies Bakhtinian polyphony: the Gorgoneion articulates an autonomous consciousness, whose statements possess substance but are not assimilated into any dominant authorial or moral stance. By endowing the Gorgoneion with ideological agency, Haynes destabilizes patriarchal logic that equates female difference with moral evil, thereby enacting a feminist revision in which monstrosity is redefined as a culturally constructed effect rather than an innate quality. The categorisation of monstrosity proves contingent upon the perspectives of those who undertake the act of classification (Velvin 45).

In the dialogue between Perseus, Hermes, and Athene, Haynes conceptualizes monstrosity as a judgment rooted in perceived difference and hierarchical positioning of the self. Perseus's question, "Why would anyone love a monster?" (Haynes 223), exposes his assumption that monstrosity is self-evident and incompatible with love. Hermes challenges this presumption by asking, "Who are you to decide who is worthy of love?" (Haynes 223), momentarily destabilising the fixedness of the monster category. Perseus attempts to deflect responsibility by asserting that Athene labelled them monsters; however, Athene promptly clarifies: "I called them deadly creatures, which they are. You are the one who believes that anything that does not resemble you must be a monster" (Haynes 223). Through this distinction, Athene differentiates between danger and monstrosity, while Perseus conflates difference with moral alterity.

His concluding remark—"They have snakes for hair!" (Haynes 223)—reduces monstrosity to visual excess, exemplifying what Pushpathadam and Reshmi identify as the Western construction of monstrosity: a condition of difference defined in opposition to normative identity, appearance, and behaviour (Pushpathadam and Reshmi 3). Haynes's deliberate refusal to endorse Perseus's perspective ultimately illuminates how heroic authority depends upon the unexamined conflation of diversity with monstrosity.

A close reading of Medusa and her sisters' dialogue demonstrates feminist revisionism by deconstructing the patriarchal construct of monstrosity. The central question— "Who decides what is a monster?" —is answered by Medusa with, "I don't know. Men, I suppose" (Haynes 276), thereby stripping the term of its presumed mythological permanence and exposing it as a sociocultural convention. This insight aligns with Alicia Ostriker's assertion that revisionism involves "hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (Ostriker 74). The Gorgons recognise that their ostensible monstrosity originates from dominant culture's fear of their intrinsic power, as Euryale observes: "They fear us, so they call us monsters. But they don't know who you are" (Haynes 236–237).

Rejecting the male-authored narrative becomes a pivotal act in reclaiming agency over their own story. By interrogating the origins of the concept, the text exemplifies Adrienne Rich's characterisation of revision as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich 18), thereby recasting monstrosity from an inherent trait to an ideological and cultural mechanism imposed by patriarchal forces.

The dialogue between Medusa and her sisters underscores the Gorgons' individuality, redefining the concept of "monster" as a self-determined source of strength and agency. Euryale's assertion—"I don't mind being a monster… I would rather have power than not. I like being what scares them"—explicitly rejects gendered narratives that associate femininity with fragility, passivity, or moral purity. This stance complicates favourable revisionist interpretations, positing that empowerment does not necessitate the erasure of fear or difference. The novel articulates multiple feminine responses to monstrosity, privileging none. Such an approach reinforces a polyphonic structure wherein autonomy arises through divergence rather than consensus, exposing how it is socially and culturally constructed.

This motif of reclamation recurs in the novel's concluding passages. The Gorgoneion explicitly reframes monstrosity as a deficiency in masculine perception rather than an inherent flaw in female bodies. As the Gorgoneion asserts, "Men will tell you that Gorgons are monsters, but men are fools" (Haynes 277). This statement illustrates how monstrosity is constructed through a limited visual economy, wherein men are unable to perceive "any beauty beyond what they can see" (Haynes 277).

The narrative juxtaposes Perseus' fear of claws, teeth, and wings with Medusa's lethal gaze, demonstrating that otherness becomes monstrous only through patriarchal anxiety. This shift in perspective echoes Hélène Cixous's exhortation to look at Medusa "straight on" (Cixous 885), revealing her as "beautiful and… laughing" (Cixous 885). By sustaining this reoriented viewpoint, *Stone Blind* participates in what Alicia Ostriker terms feminist revisionist mythmaking. The original myths are "changed utterly" (Ostriker 73) by women's knowledge of their own experience, thereby

resisting their function as vehicles for collective male fantasy. Rather than supplanting one authoritative narrative with another, Haynes's polyphonic structure retains monstrosity as a contested site of meaning. In this way, monstrosity is reclaimed through agency, perception, and discourse, exposing the cultural prejudices that inform conventional representations of monsters (Pushpathadam and Reshmi 2).

Conclusion

This study has analysed how Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind* employs a polyphonic narrative structure to interrogate patriarchal constructions of monstrosity and to reconceptualise Medusa as a conscious, autonomous subject. Through a close examination of Haynes's novel, this analysis demonstrates that Medusa's conventional depiction, as a visual spectacle of fear, reduced to bodily excess and a narrative device within Perseus's heroic journey, is not an inevitable or objective representation, but rather a culturally and politically constructed one. By juxtaposing the voices of Medusa and several characters the novel resists narrative closure and refuses a singular, authoritative interpretation of monstrosity, thereby embodying Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, in which multiple consciousnesses interact without hierarchical resolution.

This polyphonic approach not only recovers suppressed voices but also exposes the mechanisms that have historically silenced them. Haynes' narrative does not simply replace patriarchal myths with new feminist monologues; instead, it frames monstrosity as a contested category shaped by fear, perception, and power. The narrative foregrounds the ways in which difference is dehumanised within dominant cultural paradigms. In this way, *Stone Blind* advances feminist revisionist mythmaking beyond sympathetic recovery, offering a more structurally critical intervention that interrogates both the subjects of representation and the narrative forms through which meaning is produced.

Through the lens of feminist revision, as articulated by Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker, Haynes' reinterpretation of the Medusa myth demonstrates how traditional narratives may be repurposed to embody female wisdom and lived experience. *Stone Blind* distinguishes itself from earlier feminist retellings through its sustained resistance to confining Medusa within a fixed moral or emotional framework. The formal strategy foregrounds the political stakes of revisionist mythmaking, challenging the cultural processes that have historically mythologized, misrepresented, and rendered women monstrous in service of dominant conceptions of heroism and humanity.

Consequently, *Stone Blind* demonstrates that revisionist mythmaking constitutes not only an attempt at narrative rectification but also an incisive form of cultural critique. Haynes invites readers to reconsider the enduring influence of myth on contemporary conceptions of gender, power, and difference. In this manner, the novel's polyphonic structure contributes to a broader socio-political

discourse concerning whose voices are afforded authority, whose fears delineate normativity, and how traditional narratives may be reinvented to accommodate multiplicity without erasure. Rather than simply soliciting sympathy for Medusa, *Stone Blind* encourages readers to interrogate the discursive structures that have produced her monstrosity.

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