

Anger: Embracing the Medusa Trope as an Act of Resistance

Forthcoming in *Philosophy of Girls* (Oxford University Press: 2020)

Melissa Shew and Kimberly Garchar (editors)

Myisha Cherry

University of California, Riverside

My name is Medusa. You may have heard of me. I was once the protector of the Temple—a job assigned to me by the goddess, Athena. But no jobs last forever. After a violent encounter with Poseidon (this is an understatement, but I don't have much time to go into it here), Athena decided that I should be fired. Her motive is unclear. Some think it was out of jealousy. Others surmise that it was outrage over my inability to protect the Temple's sanctity. In either case I was fired, let go, dismissed. Well, punished is a better word for it. The punishment: my long hair would become threads of snakes and any man who looked upon my face would be turned into stone. I'm sure you have seen my image or read about men who dared to make my acquaintance. The typical story goes as follows: a man attempts to pass my way, but then I turn in rage, catch his eye and you know the rest. He turns into stone. I'm that dangerous they say. I am so dangerous that even after I'm defeated in death, my decapitated yet raging head is used to protect others in battle. Anyone who possesses my head can use me—my rage and my powers—to turn their enemies into stone. My name is Medusa. You might think that because you, my fellow sisterly comrade, have a different name that you are different from me. But maybe we are not so different. I am Medusa. Although I was a victim of a crime, I became blameworthy for it. I am Medusa. I was full of rage and as a result was perceived as dangerous. You might think that because thousands of years have passed since I roamed this earth that we are different. But maybe, my sisterly comrade, we are not.

The Medusa story is an interesting one particularly because, like most good stories, it is not just about the main character. As Medusa hints or warns at the end of the anecdote above, her life is not so different from the lived experiences of many women and girls. To lay out exactly what such a life comprises, it is best to see Medusa's as the following: a woman is a victim of a crime but is declared blameworthy and must be punished. As a result, she is full of rage and perceived as dangerous. A combination of her blameworthiness, angry emotion, and dangerous perception provide reasons for why she must be conquered and controlled. We can describe the perception of such a life as conforming to the *Medusa formula* or, more precisely, the *Medusa trope*. Now, the trope is not perfect with how it latches on to every detail of Medusa's life, but I think it gives us valuable insight into a certain perception and treatment of women today. The Medusa trope depicts women who are angry as having no real reason for being angry since, more often than not, they are not really victims. (Note that Medusa is punished for being a victim of Poseidon's violence against her.) The trope also depicts such angry women as

dangerous, and society concludes that these angry, blameworthy women must be conquered and controlled through patriarchal norms, laws, expectations, and hostility.

In what follows, I describe the reality of such a trope for many women and girls. I then discuss some implications of it, particularly the urge for women and girls to escape features of the trope in order to escape being conquered and controlled. I also wonder to what extent it is possible to escape the trope, and I offer some reasons for why women should not escape it, even if they could. I conclude by arguing why and how women and girls can embrace the Medusa trope as a form of resistance against sexism and misogyny.

1. The Facts on the Ground

While Medusa's story may sound like a mythological tale that appeals to our fascination with monstrous villains, for many, it may speak to and about our current world. If we look closely, we can see that the ways in which the gods and warriors treated and perceived Medusa are not so different from the experiences of many women and girls today. A common trope that besets lots of women is that when it comes to moral wrongdoing against them, they are blameworthy and not "real victims." They are angry and dangerous, and therefore, they must be conquered and controlled. Let's address each of these elements in turn to provide some detail for how each plays out in contemporary times.

First, what causes societies to judge women as blameworthy for mistreatment directed towards them? The answer to this question depends on the nature of the crime, the social position of the particular woman as well as the perpetrator, and the type of society that is often judging front and center as well as from the sidelines. For example, some perceptions are racialized. A society might struggle to view black women as victims given stereotypes about their inability to experience pain. Other judgments depend on the crime and the perpetrator. We are likely to blame women for their own domestic abuse and sexual assault then we are to blame a male victim for his own homicide. When women report being victims of inequality, mistreatment, and violence at the hands of men, they are not often perceived—at least as a default position—as victims. This might be due to our over-sympathy for men as well as our over-sexualization of women.

In many cases, women and girls are either seen as complicit in the wrongdoing or are thought to be lying about the event. Responses such as "she knew what she was getting into" or "why was she wearing that dress?" are examples of accusations of complicity. These accusations can point to either direct or indirect complicity, for she can either be viewed as someone who had a direct hand or agreement in the act, or someone who did not do enough to ensure that she would not be a victim. Indirect complicity is the responsibility we put on women to prevent being victimized, to "be safe" (as if their victimization is always the result of their unwillingness to properly act). Soraya Chemaly points out, though, that the admonishment to be safe is never really about safety, since we do not teach boys the same lesson. It is about social control (2018, 130). More on this later.

In the 2018 documentary "Surviving R-Kelly," when black women accused the singer of abuse, online responses such as "they were of consenting age" and "they should have paid attention to the previous accusations" were rampant, proving that the

complicity accusation around victimization is not just a theme in Greek mythology. Further, when women are not viewed as complicit, they are often depicted as liars. When Anita Hill brought accusations of sexual harassment against supreme court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991, she was accused of not telling the truth and “trying to bring a black man down.”

When charges of complicity and lying prove inadequate, an act of mistreatment directed at a woman is often minimized by questioning the extent to which the act was actually wrong or harmful to begin with. It was not surprising that when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford made public her allegations of sexual assault against supreme court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in 2018, many wondered “why did she wait so long?” The thinking, although irrational, was that assaults only have strong moral weight if they are reported by the victim within a particular time frame. Based on this kind of thinking, if reports of mistreatment do not meet a hypothetical timestamp, nothing “wrong” or “harmful” has actually occurred.

Even when there is consensus that a wrongdoing has occurred, in some cases the effects of that wrongdoing are not taken seriously. For example, we often do not take the physical pain of women seriously. Women are frequently viewed as hysterical, dramatic, or just weak. The pain they experience is not “real” in the way that men’s pain is. To wit, implicit bias studies show that women are treated differently than men by health professionals; women usually wait more time in the emergency room than men, and their reports of pain are often dismissed if they look healthy or pretty (Samulowitz 2018). This type of treatment is not limited to responses to physical pain but psychic pain as well. When women report sexual harassment, for example, their reports of pain are often dismissed. If women are perceived as weak and hysterical, then if Anita Hill did experience sexual harassment at the hands of Clarence Thomas, it was not the kind of wrongdoing that deserved an attentive moral response from the public; for Hill only perceived it as a wrongdoing because she was not “strong enough” to let certain office banter go. (At least this is how the thinking goes.) If sexual harassment made her feel uncomfortable, it was only due to her own susceptibility and not to any objective act of wrongdoing.

As I have argued elsewhere, there is a connection between value, respect, and anger (Cherry 2020). When we judge that someone is valuable, we think they have claims to—that is, they deserve—respect. When that valuable person is disrespected through wrongdoing, our anger in response to that wrongdoing is justified. If women were valued and respected in the same way that men are, they would be justified when becoming angry in response to mistreatment and violence, as well as the dismissal of their reports of such. However, unlike their male counterparts, women’s anger is often not taken seriously. This situation arises partially because in a sexist and misogynistic society, women are thought to have no inherent value but only value in respect to men. Thus, when women are disrespected (which, of course, occurs frequently in sexist and misogynist societies), they have no right to anger. When women are angry in these societies, their claims to anger stand in contrast to patriarchal norms and expectations, and they will be considered a danger to the status quo. Like Medusa, women’s anger in response to their own mistreatment is unacceptable in misogynist societies.

Instead, women will be taught to comply to patriarchal norms by thinking that their anger is always inappropriate. It is not surprising that a 2010 study found that only

6.2% of women (yes, women) in America and Canada view the expression of women's anger as ever appropriate (Prall 2010). Judgments of inappropriateness in turn cause negative emotions for the angry woman. Psychologist Ann Kring (2000) reminds us that although women and men experience anger in similar rates, women report feeling shame about their angry experiences. In scholarship on the philosophy of emotion, "appropriate" is used to describe emotions that fit the occurrence. We might say that sadness is an appropriate response to death and joy is an appropriate response to a job promotion. Likewise, we tend to think that anger is an appropriate response to wrongdoing. However, when we leave the world of the theoretical and examine the ways in which we actually evaluate the emotional responses of certain socially positioned people, we discover that the emotions we typically label appropriate do not always fit the neat formula above.

Although anger is indeed a fitting response to wrongdoing, women's anger is often judged to be inappropriate. It is viewed as inappropriate not because it is anger, but because it belongs to, is in response to, and protests treatment of and defends women. To this end, some suggest that we should get rid of the term "appropriate" all together. Chemaly writes, "If there is a word that should be retired from use in the service of women's expression, health, well-being, and equality, it is appropriate—a sloppy, mushy word that purports to convey some important moral essence but in reality is just a policing term used to regulate our language, appearance, and demands. It's a control word. We are done with control" (2018, 261).

While I agree with Chemaly's analysis, I do not fully agree with her prescription. While it is indeed true that the term "appropriate" has been used as a form of control, we can also use the term to refute the control and criticize the critics who deem women's anger as inappropriate. Evaluations of the appropriateness of certain emotions are not random, subjective assessments. Certain requirements must be met for an emotion to be judged appropriate and they are fairly simple: the emotion must match a particular occurrence. An emotion need not occur in a particular, socially positioned body to be deemed appropriate. When there is wrongdoing, anger is appropriate. End of story. Any other assessment provides us with evidence that the evaluation of appropriateness is indeed a misuse of the term. It also provides women with an easy way to detect schemas of patriarchal control, for where we see this misuse, we can be more confident of its patriarchal roots and intent.

According to the Medusa trope, women's anger in their own defense is not only inappropriate, but its inappropriateness also provides reasons to view such women as dangerous. I am not claiming that women who are angry are perceived as dangerous. Rather, I am claiming that *women's anger* is perceived as dangerous. For example, I can be angry at the injustices of others. As a black woman, I can be angry that black men are being systematically shot by the police. I can be angry that my best friend did not get the promotion he deserved. In these cases, my anger is what Audre Lorde describes as being "in the service of other people's salvation or learning" (2007, 132). There is nothing conceptually wrong with this type of anger; it can show solidarity with other groups as well as motivate us to act in support of them. I am not considered dangerous when I am angry for reasons like these. In a patriarchal society, though, women are often encouraged to be angry at the injustices of others, particularly men, but not at the injustices that they experience themselves. Recall that when Perseus cuts Medusa's head off, he doesn't

bury it. He keeps it and uses it for future battles. Note the irony. While it is not acceptable for Medusa to use her rage for herself, it is acceptable, and is even ingenious, for Perseus to use her raging head in the service of his own goals.

“Women’s anger” is different from “the anger of women.” Women’s anger is not anger in response to men’s pain or injustices suffered by them. Women’s anger is, instead, a woman’s response to her and other women’s experiences of pain and the suffering of injustice. Women’s anger makes demands not that men get relief, but rather that women do. In a male-dominated culture, this is a radical act. Women’s anger focuses on and thus centers women. Women’s anger does not support patriarchy. It challenges it.

If women’s anger is perceived as dangerous, women must then be controlled and conquered to alleviate the danger. The control of women, and thus control of their anger and its dangerous potential, is manifest in patriarchal norms, expectations, punishments, and rewards. Consider, for example, the infamous street harassment call for women to “smile, baby, smile.” This admonishment highlights the inability of some men to risk the existence of women’s anger, even when such anger is not directed his way. When such a woman is spotted in public, the “smile, baby, smile” encouragement is a call for her to remember her “emotional place.” It also provides comfort to men who, if only briefly, may see signs of a potentially dangerous woman because of her anger.

This form of control does not only manifest on public streets, but as we saw in the 2010 study cited earlier, it is also internalized. Women and girls themselves will begin to think that only a smile, not a frown, is an appropriate expression. This internalization often arises quite early for girls as a result of punishment and rewards systems imposed by adults in early childhood. We punish and reward young girls and boys differently when it comes to negative emotions such as anger. Recognizing the difference in the ways that adults and peers respond to their anger and the anger of boys, girls begin to conform to gendered emotion norms. They learn to “put on a pretty face” (Chemaly 2018: 7). While little girls can be sassy, teenage girls learn quickly that they are less cute when they are angry. They also learn that their anger may be dismissed as just a “teenage raging hormone stage.” Boys are not treated in the same way. Girls consequently learn to self-police their anger so that they will not be perceived in a negative light.

Continuing into adulthood, women are continually punished for their anger. These forms of punishment are not only retributively directed at the woman whose indignation roars, but they are also deterrently directed; these punishments are a societal way to suppress the anger of all women. We punish women for their anger by labeling them as bad, misinterpreting their expressions, and depicting them in sexist stereotypes. While we allow the anger of men to work on their own behalf, we make the anger of women work against them. Angry men are viewed as passionate and fierce leaders. Angry women are irrational bitches. Women learn that their anger cannot be expressed like their male friends and colleagues, and the others watching them learn this as well. All women are likely to self-police their anger as a result.

While I am highlighting restrictions on anger and anger expression in the public sphere, there is a distinct moral nature of these restrictions that should not get lost. The punishment and policing of anger has a particular ethical and social significance because a person’s anger makes claims about value and protests injustice (in this case, disrespect, sexism, misogyny, etc.). When we try to control women’s anger and angry expressions,

we are not just prohibiting their freedom of expression. We are also attempting to control and refute their claims to value, equality, and respect, which is morally troubling. Control is about making women stay in their place and can be achieved through rewards, punishments, stereotypes, double standards, internalization of sexist standards, and self-policing. The Medusa trope operates to ensure that women are and remain subservient, silent, and never a threat to patriarchy.

2. The Escape Option

If angry women are viewed as dangerous and must be conquered, then a woman who does not want to be conquered might think that if she escapes the trope, or the parts of it she can control, she can also escape domination by others.

How might a person go about escaping the trope and the conquering fate? A woman could act contrary to the trope in hopes that she will be a recipient of different treatment. While a woman might not be able to escape being a victim, perhaps she could choose to not respond with anger and therefore be perceived as less dangerous. If she is less dangerous, perhaps she can escape being conquered. The logic is quite similar to respectability politics in the African American community, an option originally proposed by black men and women thinkers in the late 19th century. The logic of respectability politics suggests that if blacks act respectable (e.g., don't drink, dress well, keep their surroundings clean, act moral, and work hard), then they will win the respect and thus the same rights and equality of those of the dominant society, whites.

Similarly, a woman might attempt to escape the trope by not getting angry. Or if she is angry, she could try not to express her rage. She might deny that she is angry. She could excuse the wrongdoing of others as a way to not have reason to be or remain angry. She might continue to question her own assessment of the wrongdoing, preferring to stay in a state of confusion or doubt rather than moral judgment—a judgment that could result in anger. She might “wear” a smile when there is no reason to have one so that her mere appearance will not figuratively turn others into stone. She may intentionally misidentify her emotions to make members of the dominant group feel less threatened. She may prefer to describe her emotions as disappointment or sadness instead, for surely, no one would ever find a sad woman threatening. A woman could also decide to maintain and express her anger but do so in ways that she believes conform to the standards of rationality, discipline, virtue, and femininity imposed by the patriarchy. Conformation to these norms, she thinks, might convince others that she is not dangerous.

There is no direct, empirical evidence that shows any of these strategies work in the context with which we are concerned, though. While there are many examples of them working, there are a seemingly equal number of counterexamples. We can see this in the respectability politics examples. For as many black women and men that we can find who were not harassed by the police because they were wearing professional clothing, we can find counterexamples of professional black folk getting harassed.

Psychologists often suggest strategies to counter tropes and stereotypes, but the strategies are usually not directed at those who are said to embody the stereotype or trope. Instead, they are directed at the stereotyper. Consider scholarship about implicit bias. In order to lessen implicit bias, psychologists do not offer suggestions for the

stereotyped. They do not suggest that women never get mad, for example. Instead, researchers suggest that stereotypers expose themselves to more positive images of women. In our case, a psychologist might say that a way to escape the conquering and dominating consequence of the trope is for the stereotyper to challenge his own idea of women and girls as outraged, hysterical, dangerous, and in need of control. This solution is not one that the angry woman can affect. It is the job of those who believe in the Medusa trope to somehow unlearn the same trope.

Lack of empirical data aside, some women and girls might still think that they can escape domination by being a “good girl,” and a person might be particularly persuaded by this if she thinks that misogyny only targets folks like Medusa, women who act out in rage. In her 2017 book on the logic of misogyny, *Down Girl*, Kate Manne agrees that misogyny “typically differentiates between good women and bad ones, and punishes the latter,” but she also points out that misogyny is not just about what we do to “bad women.” Misogyny is about “rewarding and valorizing women who conform to gendered norms and expectations” (2017, 72). Escaping punishment for our lack of outraged expressions is not the only form of patriarchal control. Being rewarded for our lack of rage or outraged expression is also a form of control.

Additionally, one need not be perceived as Medusa in order to be considered a threat and thus subject to control and domination. As Manne explains, “Since one woman can often serve as a stand-in or representative for a whole host of others in the misogynist imagination, almost any woman will be vulnerable to some form of misogynist hostility from some source or other” (2017, 68). Mocking, shaming, vilifying, and condemning are examples of forms of hostility that serve to punish, deter, and warn all women. Manne uses Elliot Rodger’s violence as an example. His victims on that dreadful day in 2014 were not his actual targets. Rodger’s violence was motivated by his feelings of neglect and humiliation he felt were brought on by certain kinds of women. When he arrived at the Alpha Phi sorority house near the University of Santa Barbara, he was not targeting any particular “bad woman.” His victims that day were not his actual targets but only representatives of the kinds of women he believed treated him in a certain way. Those women paid for the so-called sins of others (2017, 53).

Patriarchal domination need not target every individual, 21st-century Medusa who roams the earth. Misogyny operates in such a way that it targets actual, perceived, or representative challenges to or violations of patriarchal norms. Even if a woman were to cleanse herself of any feature of the Medusa trope, she will still remain vulnerable to perceptions of danger as well as patriarchal control because of the way misogyny operates at a social level.

Thus, even if the above strategies did work, women ought not use them. The trope operates to control and conquer women. It is a way for women to police themselves so they will not be a threat. Self-policing is still policing, and policing is an instrument of control. It is a task that the dominant class does not have to directly engage in themselves, but it still manages to accomplish their aim: the control of women. When a woman monitors herself in order not to appear full of rage and therefore a threat, she is giving into the controlling and conquering efforts that the trope aims to achieve. As Manne reminds us, “Misogyny upholds the social norms of patriarchies by policing and patrolling them” (2017, 88). Its very purpose is to maintain or restore a patriarchal order and protest

when it gets challenged. It develops irrespective of who is doing the policing at any particular moment.

This form of control does not just operate within the Medusa trope, but also in stereotypes like the “angry-black woman” and the “sassy Latina woman,” both of which feature distinctive types of the Medusa formula. If a situation calls for anger, a black woman, given the stereotype, will be less prone to express her anger because she may be afraid to give in to the stereotype. Her reasons can be praiseworthy. She may want to represent black women in the best light possible. She may not want to satisfy the negative, racist perceptions that whites may have of black women. She may want to be an individual and not a stereotype in that moment. I am sympathetic to these reasons; however, there are other results to consider when one self-polices in this way. By doing so, a woman may risk not expressing her feelings, perceptions, desires, and judgments. In addition, her unexpressed, suppressed anger is unlikely to challenge injustice, hold people accountable, and make claims of value and respect. It is more likely to compromise her physical and psychological well-being. These results are not unintentional. They are one of the main purposes of the stereotype. Sexist and racist stereotypes that deal with emotions are not just false overgeneralizations of a particular group. They operate as policing mechanisms. Anger is then unable to do the important moral work for marginalized groups that it has the potential to do in contexts of systemic injustice, oppression, and domination.

Refusing to embody any feature of the trope out of fear of how the dominant class will react is a way of surrendering to the conquering efforts of the dominant class. In fact, a person is likely to get the very results that the escape strategy is trying to subvert. However, by refusing to let go of certain features of the trope—angry and dangerous perceptions—a person resists controlling efforts. Not only does she resist the domination that self-policing aims to perpetuate, but through refusals to give up her anger, she is also able to call out controlling and conquering projects. Moral protest names injustice and shines a light on it wherever it is hidden.

3. The Embrace Option

If my argument for why we should not resist features of the trope sounds tenable, then a better option is to embrace the Medusa trope rather than attempt to escape it. Embracing the Medusa trope is the opposite of the strategies mentioned in the previous section. Embracing it includes expressing one’s rage, identifying oneself as angry, refusing to give up one’s anger in order to appease misogynists or silence racists, and being a danger to oppression by refusing to give in to its demands and perceptions of women. In this view, a person acknowledges and calls out moral wrongdoing enacted on women while refusing to be vilified by such wrongdoing. In embracing the Medusa trope, women and girls can also recognize their power to resist domination and therefore embrace the danger they pose to it. Embracing the trope of an angry, dangerous woman does more than just contribute to the “bad woman” perception. By embracing the Medusa trope, women and girls are also able to control their own narrative instead of allow dominating systems to do so. Unlike the first-person anecdote that begins this essay, the story of Medusa has never been told from her point of view. The narrative of Medusa has been told by others. Men were warned by others not to look upon her face. Others declared she was guilty and

dangerous. Her story was supposed to be a cautionary tale about the danger of women. However, it is contemporary feminists, not ancient storytellers, who have decided to reimagine and reinterpret Medusa. Argentine-Italian artist, Luciano Garbati, asked a question before he began sculpting “Medusa” in 2008: “What would it look like, her victory, not his? How should that sculpture look?” (Griffin 2018). What he created was an image where Medusa is victorious over Perseus. It is she that beheads him. In 2018, that image became an avatar for women’s rage in the wake of the #MeTooMovement. Likewise, by embracing the trope, women can reinterpret what it means to be a victim, angry, and dangerous.

Conclusion

As argued throughout this chapter, anger at patriarchal norms and misogynistic hostility is an act of moral protest. It brings attention to moral wrongdoing enacted on women, making that which is invisible, visible. It declares that these are injustices that should not be permitted. In doing so, the angry woman resists logics of domination by refusing to accept sexism and misogyny as the norm. Since anger is connected to certain perceptions of value and respect, embracing the option declares that girls and women, regardless of background, have inherent value and deserve respect despite their compliance or noncompliance to patriarchal norms and expectations. A woman who is angry at misogyny does not just express an emotion at injustice or gender mistreatment. She calls injustice out, points us to its unfairness, makes claims to the value and respect of women, and demands change. Since anger motivates us to act in the world and affects our beliefs and risks we are willing to take to actualize certain goals, it can help women engage in actions and projects where they can challenge our current world and create a better one.

Any woman or girl who does these things is indeed dangerous, but such an angry agent, in the spirit of Medusa, knows that this danger is not pejorative but necessary and even beautiful. She also knows that she is just as or even more heroic than the mortal men who seem to demand our attention as we obsess over mythological tales of gods and monsters.

References

Chemaly, S. (2018), *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger*, New York: Atria Books.

Cherry, M. (2021), *The Case for Rage: On the Role of Anger in Anti-racist Struggle*. MS.

Griffin, A. (October 3, 2018), *Quartzly*. “The Story Behind the Medusa Statue that has become the perfect avatar for women’s anger. <https://qz.com/quartzly/1408600/the-medusa-statue-that-became-a-symbol-of-feminist-rage/>

Kring, A. (2000), “Gender and Anger.” in Agneta H. Fischer (ed.) *Gender and Emotion: Social Psychological Perspectives*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lorde, A. (2007), *Sister Outsider*, California: Crossing Press.

Manne, K. (2017), *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Prail N. (2010). Unpublished MSW thesis. Wayne State University; Detroit, Michigan: An evaluation of women's attitudes towards anger in other women and the impact of such on their own anger expression style.

Samulowtixe, A. Et. Al., (2018). "Brave Men and Emotional Women: A theory-Guided Literature Review on Gender Bias in Health Care and Gendered Norms Towards Patients with Chronic Pain," *Pain Research and Management*.