

# Monstrous Feminine: Returning Agency and Joy to Women

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## Abstract

Through much of mythology across different parts of Europe, many of the most well-known villains are women, or otherwise associated with femininity. While male monsters and villains do exist, the infamy that they receive is not to the same scale as monsters such as Medusa, the female gorgon that turns people to stone. Furthermore, the heroes of these stories are primarily male, and the female monsters are used to further the heroism and notoriety of the male hero, and these stories have been interwoven with both ancient and modern cultures. The Euroamerican patriarchal system has been deeply influenced by ancient Greece, therefore the mythological stories that were written in Greece have also been affected by the male-centered system, thus contributing to the villainization of women. Through a series of oil paintings, the artist seeks to rewrite these narratives of inherently ignorant, evil, and monstrous women by giving agency and joy back to the mythological characters. They are presented to be content and joyful as a form of protest against not only their demonization, but also to the depreciation of femininity as a whole because of the association to monstrosity. Oil paint as a medium is significant due to the most famous painters primarily being men creating pieces involving these villainized women such as Peter Paul Rubens and Caravaggio who often painted from myth. However, whether painting these mythological characters as beastly or catered towards the “male

gaze,” these painters still aim their paintings towards a male-centered society. This body of work focuses on representing the women as their own individuals rather than a means to an end; giving a voice to both them and women affected by patriarchal norms.

## Introduction

Women in history have categorically been seen as the lesser sex for centuries spanning across continents. This bias has been years in the making, having developed from before organized civilization, as soon as people realized that there could be a dominant and a submissive sex (Gerder 1986). With the passage of time, there has been an increasing amount of protest against this dynamic and its normalization. Most notably in recent years, more feminist movements have grown with this increased opposition within all fields that relate to gender in some way, including movements such as #MeToo and the Guerilla Girls. Literature and art fields that were once dominated by men had essentially excluded women from the conversation and yet wrote and made art about them, and this was not always in the most ideal light. In ancient civilization’s stories and mythologies, women are often portrayed as villainous and dangerous while being side characters in the main male hero’s story. Often, they are there to lead him astray or bolster his reputation. Much of art that represents these same characters do much of the same, with an additional erotic theme that often follows women in art. In this series of oil paintings, the artist allows these women to hold a different position in the painting. Portraying real people, the characters are easily connected with, empathized with, and encourages women to be unapologetically feminine and joyful despite consistent opposition and estrangement.

## The History of Patriarchy

In much of the western world, women exist under a patriarchal system that has been developed over thousands of years. It is therefore important to note that while the Euroamerican patriarchal system has been strongly influenced by Greece, the origins of the system have been under development for many centuries prior. There have been moments in history when the assignment of tasks in a community based on biological need was understandable and necessary. When life expectancy was much lower and many children died before adulthood or even still birthed, women needed to spend a lot of their existence pregnant to maintain their population. Because of the physical hindrance, women likely agreed to roles that required less exertion (Gerder 1986). However, in later societies the biological bias was maintained. These issues have stemmed from before developed civilizations and have existed prior to written and recorded history. It is that

same history that often excludes women from the narrative, dismissing the issues that women have faced through much of history as it is written primarily by men.

The Euroamerican patriarchal system has been deeply influenced by ancient Greece and Rome. The Western world adopted much of Greece and Rome's political ideologies, philosophies, and art (Grant, 1991). It's unsurprising that Greece and Rome, which was influenced by civilizations before even them, would then pass down their patriarchal system to the rest of the Western world. Therefore, the mythological stories that were written in Greece and Rome have also been affected by the male-centered system and contributed to the villainization of women. For example, in the story *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, the Chorus, in a blanket statement about women, states that "The female sex ranges too credulous, quick in resources; but by a speedy death perishes glory which is woman-heralded." This statement claims that women are quick to jump to conclusions and spread rumors, yet it is those same rumors that are easily dispelled as untrue. It's a generalizing and flattening view of women that expresses the perceptions of women at the time. They were characterized as the easily gullible, corruptible, and gossiping sex that required men to correct and inform. If not seen as intentionally mischievous, they would be seen as ignorant and untrustworthy with this characterization.

Another example of misogynistic ideologies in ancient stories can be seen in the poem *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, a Roman poet who lived from 43 BC to 17 or 18 AC. In the poem there is a substory about the two characters Daphne and Phoebus (aka Apollo). Daphne is a beautiful nymph and daughter of the river god Peneus, while Phoebus is known as the sun god. Being victim to the anger of Cupid, the god of erotic love and desire, Phoebus is struck with an arrow kindling a love towards Daphne, while the nymph is struck with an arrow repelling her from such desires. The misogynistic views of Ovid are seen in this pursuit. Daphne's desire is to remain chaste, being repelled from all male attention. She begs her father to allow her to remain a virgin, yet he claims that her beauty prevents this wish, implying that because she is beautiful, she cannot remain a virgin, at least not with ease. Phoebus eventually starts chasing Daphne and pleads for her to yield to him as she is running like prey from predator. He claims that she doesn't know who she is running from and implies that because of his status she should be more willing to consider him for companionship. Daphne, afraid of his desire and weakened by the chase, called on her father for help. Peneus then turned her into a laurel tree, which Phoebus still used for his benefit.

Despite Daphne's rejections, in the end even though she was not used sexually, she was still used by Phoebus, allowing him to still have her in a way. Daphne's requests are therefore portrayed as lesser than his, not only because he is a god, but also because he is a man. She is seen as an object of desire rather than a being with her own wants and needs. This is seen especially in the description Ovid gives of Daphne through Phoebus'

eyes. Despite being less than acquaintances, Phoebus consumes her with his eyes and even imagines that underneath her hair and clothing is even more beautiful (Ovid, 8<sup>th</sup> century). This phenomenon can be called by a term known as the “male gaze.” This most often includes objectifying a woman in a sexual and erotic manner for the pleasure of a viewer, often but not limited to male.

Women have been historically devalued as the lesser half of humanity, being made to be seen as lesser than men. Their sexuality has been used as a commodity to be traded and looted as spoils of war or other forms of enslavement. In written stories of ancient Greece, women are seen as a status symbol to bolster the reputation of the men that receive and keep them. This objectification of women is seen in many aspects of history; from written history, to stories, and then to art.

## Perceptions

Due to the observed implementation of patriarchy over the span of thousands of years, it is unsurprising that women have been portrayed as secondary to men not only in society, but literature and art as well. Stories of myths and legends have been around for centuries, and even further if stories passed by spoken words are to be counted. Art, however, is important to discuss as it has existed long before written history and arguably is more effective at connecting a viewer with a character, story, or concept.

When talking about the perceptions of villainous mythological women in history, it is important to discuss one of the most well-known examples of this specific archetype. Medusa is a character that is well known in modern-day society when discussing mythological women. The mortal Gorgon with snakes for hair that can turn anyone unfortunate enough to meet her gaze to stone. She is a classic monster that does not have her own story, yet she is used in the stories of Perseus to boast about his ability to behead the feared villain as a gift. One inconsistency in the ancient myths written about Medusa, however, is her origin. Some storytellers indicate she was born a Gorgon (Aeschylus, 5<sup>th</sup> century BC; Hesiod, 8<sup>th</sup> century BC), yet others claim she was turned into one when found being assaulted by Poseidon in Athena’s temple (Ovid, 8<sup>th</sup> century). Because of her nuanced origin story and lack of known victims, there has been a movement to reclaim her and her perception as a villainous woman.

A modern perspective, notably in regards to the feminism movement, has adjusted the lens to a now popularized retelling stating that Medusa was more a victim to circumstance and more importantly to a patriarchally created and supported circumstance. Her story and punishment once told women that if they were sexually assaulted, they were the ones to be blamed for it, or at the very least their assaulter will go unpunished (Duffy, 2020). The feminist movement and similar #MeToo movement on social media sought to

recontextualize this narrative, stating that she was a victim of sexual assault from rather than at fault because of it and started to stand behind her as a feminist icon. Luciano Garbati, an Argentinian-Italian artist from Buenos Aires, created a sculpture of Medusa with the head of Perseus in 2008 (fig. 1), the male hero that beheads her in the original myth. It was intended to be a mirror to Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (fig. 2) as it had inspired Garbati, and he simply wanted to reimagine the story from Medusa's perspective. Unbeknownst to Garbati, this sculpture would serve as an incredibly popular reimagination of Medusa within the #MeToo Movement, as it was a powerful reclamation of her character and story (Jacobs, 2020). While this art can help take strides towards voicing women's grievances of inequality, this is only in the modern day.



**Figure 1.** (Left). Luciano Garbati, *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*, 2008

**Figure 2.** (Right). Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*,

Much of art relating to women of mythology originating from Europe was often created, curated, and discussed without women. Painters such as John William Waterhouse, Titian, and Peter Paul Rubens, for example, are well known for their naturalistic and highly detailed work, often involving mythological themes from Greek or Biblical sources. Their paintings are highly acclaimed and have been used as reference for what these female mythological figures could have acted like or seen like. This is, however, far from women telling their story and only allows for the male perspective to be viewed as the norm. Using Medusa as an example, Rubens' rendition of her in 1618 (fig. 3) serves as an example of a woman who was perceived as a threat to men or humanity and therefore her beheading was seen as justified. Her head is severed and bloody, potentially eyeing the man who beheaded her with wide, horrified eyes and pale skin. Snakes and other small creatures

surround her severed head as if released from it. This depiction of Medusa is a gory reminder to women that they are other, and to separate from societal norms results in death.

In the artist's body of work, a piece of Medusa is included to accompany other positive representations of her character and her life (fig. 4). She is seen on a beach boardwalk with her sisters, who are also described as gorgons. Even though Medusa is the only mortal gorgon of the three, they are presented in a way that allows them to experience joy despite their unfortunate circumstances and suffering. Stone figures can be seen behind the trio indicating they are not harmless, and they are feared, but despite this they are still themselves. Perseus can be seen in the far-left corner indicating a looming threat to their joy and lives.

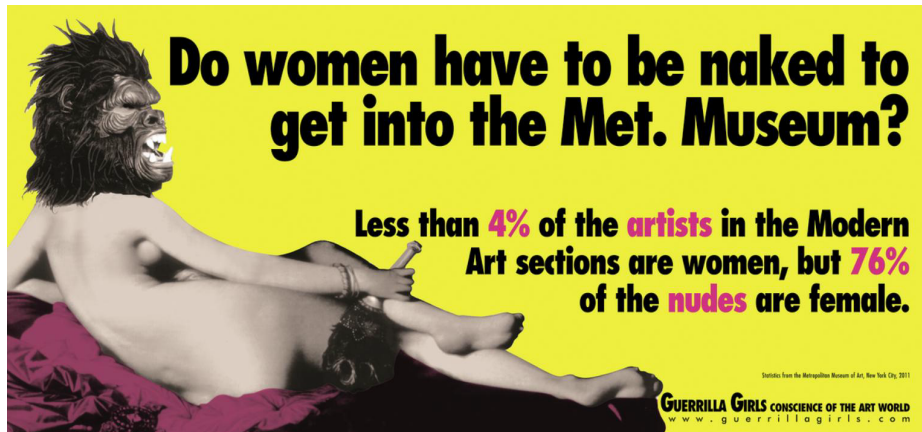


**Figure 3.** (Left). Peter Paul Rubens, *Medusa*, 1618, Oil on Canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



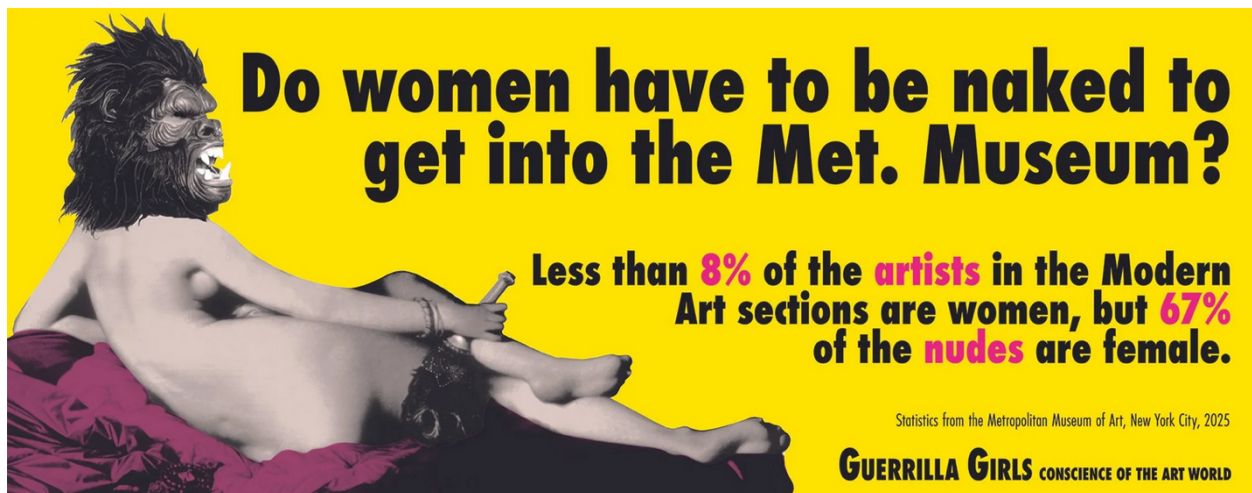
**Figure 4.** (Right). Liam Cheng, *Isn't She Lovely*, 2026, Oil on Panel

In addition to the portrayal of women in paintings as a threat that requires neutralizing, there are other ways that women are objectified within paintings. The standards that women are held to are not the same as those men are held to. While this can apply to many things, it's important to talk about eroticism and what that means in this context. Women that are overly eroticized in media and art is a widespread theme that overshadows the value of women. It has not gone unnoticed, as another feminist movement called the Guerrilla Girls had pointed out this discrepancy back in 1989 asking:



**Figure 5.** An eye-catching poster from [www.guerrillagirls.com](http://www.guerrillagirls.com) that presents a nude woman with a gorilla head asking the question “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 76% of the nudes are female.”

The Guerrilla Girls have continued to do recounts every couple of years, with the statistic looking remarkably the same since last year, 2025:



**Figure 6.** A similar poster from [www.guerrillagirls.com](http://www.guerrillagirls.com) that presents a nude woman with a gorilla head asking the question “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 8% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 67% of the nudes are female.”

It is this tendency towards the erotic that many classical painters such as John William Waterhouse leaned into, and quite enjoyed painting. Waterhouse was active from 1872-1916, during which he made many paintings of the character Lamia (fig. 7&8) whom he presented in sheer clothing and occasionally exposed in intentional areas such as the breasts. He also had her pose in a delicate manner, or in a way that is longing towards a

man. She never seems to be existing for herself, always for the benefit of a man either in the painting, or for the viewer. This is once again an example of the “Male Gaze”.

The artist’s version of Lamia (fig. 9) was inspired by the etymology of her name relating to sharks. While sharks are generally feared as predators of the sea to both fish and human alike, they are still beloved creatures to some. Taking inspiration from this appreciation despite the danger that they pose against many living creatures, in this oil series Lamia was based after a whale shark. These spotted sharks generally eat smaller zooplankton rather than posing a threat to other larger fish despite being one of the largest breeds of sharks. The pearls on her jacket imitate the spots that whale shark’s skin, as well as a tail in the bottom left. The figure poses confidently and joyfully dressing for herself rather than to the pleasure of anyone else. In the background there is both a bolt of lightning and a trident, to indicate the involvement of both Zeus and Poseidon in her story respectively.



**Figure 7.** (Left). John William Waterhouse, *Lamia*, 1909, Oil on Canvas, Petit Palais

**Figure 8.** (Right). John William Waterhouse, *Lamia*, 1905, Oil on Canvas, Private Collection



**Figure 9.** Liam Cheng, *Lone Shark*, 2026, Oil on Panel

These examples of the representation of women in art provide a clear reason for why oil painting is an important medium in which more positive depictions of mythological women are necessary to the benefit and normalization of women's equality and wellbeing. The nature of women's existence within paintings is such that they are often presented as having relation to a man, either through longing or seduction, mutilation, or presented in such a way that is pleasing for men to look at. These painters still aimed their paintings towards a male centered society. In addition to this, painting has existed long before photography, making it the primary way to visualize concepts and ideas inaccessible to the public. It was used for capturing the likeness of historical figures, recreating events, and of course visualizing fictional tales and what the characters may have looked like. However, if the only visual representations of women in mythology leaned negative, that association of those monsters with femininity then transfers onto the women in that society. As society evolves and slowly but surely moves past purely misogynistic views and representations of women in media and art, it's important that more positive depictions are included in the art space that has so often been dominated by men objectifying women.

## Reclamation

In the artist's series of oil paintings, each piece includes a unique representation of the women from myths across Europe and their circumstances. The paintings aim to reimagine and revisualize the inherent perception of these women, often written as ignorant, evil, and monstrous beings that are a danger to their surroundings. They do this by presenting these women as defiant through their misfortunate circumstances as a protest towards the expectations of how they are supposed to be. This is assisted through several methods such as presenting the women as joyful, giving examples of the misfortune they face, and painting the women in a naturalistic manner.

Joy and an embrace of femininity are the primary methods used in these paintings to reclaim the characters being portrayed in them. Within the paintings this is shown through the characters showing positive emotion such as a smile with bolder body language including looking at the viewer with a forward-facing head. This confidence helps the idea of joy and contentment regardless of circumstance to translate to the viewer. Being unapologetically feminine as well is a powerful form of protest in a world where masculinity has always been taken more seriously and seen as the norm. This slowly moves society towards seeing femininity as a real and powerful concept that is equal in value to masculinity. Joy in this way is also an incredible form of resistance, combatting the oppressive forces that seek to keep minority groups submissive and hidden with acts of enjoying one's life openly and brilliantly. Adrienne Maree Brown, a writer and activist who wrote the book titled "Pleasure Activism", speaks on this in an interview with NPR, asserting that:

In a society that's trying to erase you to not only say, I exist, but I exist and I'm having a great life... And it's, like, not only do we exist, we have existed before and we will exist after, there is something about that resistance that is fundamentally joyful.

The assertion of oneself in the world as someone who is happy, alive, and persistently themselves conveys the message that they are ineradicable and will continue to exist regardless of approval. It's this idea especially that is carried throughout the body of work and encourages women in modern societies to have a higher level of confidence in themselves and who they are without fear of judgement or estrangement. When the women presented in the paintings have already been shunned, feared, and estranged but can still find joy and contentment in their lives it brings a courage that can be resonated with.

The use of real women painted in a naturalistic manner to help the viewer instantly connect with the character challenges previous perceptions about the represented characters. It's been observed that in art, people will always look for the human form no matter what medium or art movement is being analyzed. Allowing the figure to be

undoubtedly realistic leaves little room for the mind to interpret the figure as anything but a person. Regardless of any extra features the character may have, such as snake hair in the case of Medusa or horns in the case of Lilith, they are still relatable and able to be easily empathized with as another individual (Rodway et al., 2016).

Including imagery of threat and misfortune is a symbol that reminds the viewer of both the oppressive forces working against the women depicted, but also the threat that the women have towards their environment. Women, seen as threats to men through seductive measures and other means, often receive threats of a need for neutralization causing them to be no longer of potential harm to them. This is once again observing how men have sought to maintain control over them.

The paintings above all else are contemporary in nature, offering themes such as aspects of internet culture, a “selfie” pose, and modern clothing. Not only does this allow the viewer to gather the implication that the villainization of women is still an issue, but that there is still hope in removing this connotation. Adding positive depictions of mythological women into the world of art not only helps normalize the idea that these women, while still villains and monsters, have the capability of owning their own lives and being joyful, but also that femininity is to be taken seriously. The sole fact that someone is a woman and feminine does not discount the life that they live and the experiences they hold.

## Conclusion

The discrimination of women in literature and art is something that has developed over centuries. Because of the level of influence art and literature can have in our culture, this bias has affected and has been affected by all the negative portrayals of women that diminish their courage to be themselves. In attempts to counteract the idea that women are inherently inferior to men, this body of work allows women to have a space where they can be seen as joyful and comfortable and unafraid in their existence. Although feminist measures and movements may be slow going, they are growing nonetheless, and every step no matter how small contributes to modern-day ideas about and surrounding women. More positive representation of women in art literature, and other media will ideally allow women to be seen not a victim nor an oppressor, rather people that deserve respect as much as the other sex.

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