

Two Images of Medusa in the Sculpture of Harriet Hosmer

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Harriet Hosmer, born October 9, 1830, in Watertown, Massachusetts, was a pioneer for women sculptors. She was the first of a group of women expatriates, referred to condescendingly as the “white marmorean flock,” who traveled to Rome in order to sculpt in marble.¹ Her works have often been interpreted as feminist because of her fight for women’s rights later in her life, but at the beginning of her career her sculptures were decidedly conventional. Hosmer followed in the footsteps of male neoclassical sculptors in depicting beautiful, highly sexualized female victims.

Although Hosmer had been exposed to radical ideas regarding women’s rights before she moved to Rome in 1852, she did not fully realize these notions or communicate them in her works until the end of the decade. The atmosphere in Rome clearly affected her, as indicated by her use of the Medusa image in two sculptures from the same decade. In her ideal bust *Medusa* (1853-1854) (Figure 1) Hosmer broke into the world of sculpture in Rome. It exhibits the language of neoclassical sculpture used by her male colleagues, thus exemplifying its visual and thematic conventions regarding perspectives of the female body. Throughout the decade, Hosmer spent much of her time with other expatriate women who had moved to Rome to pursue an environment that was friendlier toward female accomplishment. Interactions with these women helped Hosmer more fully develop her ideas regarding women’s rights, and she communicated her newly formed ideas in her 1859 full figure sculpture *Zenobia in Chains* (Figure 2). This sculpture deviates from both neoclassical convention and its literary sources. Most notably, Hosmer repurposes the Medusa image as an apotropaic symbol placed on the subject’s belt that aligns Zenobia with Athena, the goddess of wisdom and military victory, thus communicating a very different ideal of female identity, power, and success.

Medusa was one of Hosmer’s earliest pieces and it was her first original commissioned sculpture created in Rome. After moving there with her father in 1852, Hosmer began working under the instruction of John Gilbert, one of the most famous English sculptors at the time. Hosmer spent her first winter in Rome creating copies of busts in order to learn the popular style before she was allowed to create original works.² Gilbert’s pedagogy comes through in *Medusa*; the piece falls firmly within the tradition of 19th century ideal sculpture.³ The bust is conventional in elements of its initial appearance, including the smooth surface of the marble and blanked eyeballs. Hosmer may have used fourth-century Hellenistic sculptures as models for the piece, such as the Lysippos-type Alexander heads, which were commonly used amongst sculptors trying to imitate antiquity.⁴ Sculptors frequently chose female subjects from antiquity, mythology, or literature and portrayed them as victims. Medusa was traditionally depicted as ugly, and this image was much more common and better known most likely because it illustrates the most compelling moment

¹Henry James coined this term in 1903 in his biography of sculptor William Wetmore Story. Ross, Jane Mayo. “Another Look at Henry James and the ‘White Marmorean Flock,’” *Woman’s Art Journal* 4 no.1 (Spring-Summer 1983): 29.

²Sherwood, Dolly. *Harriet Hosmer, American Sculptor, 1830-1908* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991): 54.

³Samuel Appleton of Boston officially commissioned this piece, although later documents refer to Mrs. Samuel Appleton. William H. Gerds, “The ‘Medusa’ of Harriet Hosmer,” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, vol. 56, no. 2 (1978): 101.

⁴Gerds, “Medusa,” 101.

in the tale⁵. Hosmer's choice to portray this moment could be seen as feminist because it is a departure from previous images of Medusa that show a grotesque monster defeated by Perseus,⁶ depicting a beautiful woman about to acquire deadly powers. However, formal elements of the piece and its relation to other ideal sculpture of the period show that it reflects contemporary concerns and questions regarding the female body and a woman's role in society rather than communicating a feminist statement.

Viewers would have been familiar with the story of Medusa in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this tale, Medusa is a beautiful young maiden who takes a vow of celibacy and dedicates her life to working in the temple of Athena. Her long, beautiful hair attracts many suitors and the envy of the goddess Athena. One day, Neptune sees Medusa, is unable to contain himself, and raps her in Athena's temple. Athena sees this act and becomes furious when she sees her temple desecrated. She punishes Medusa with a curse that turns her hair into a knot of snakes and makes her ugly enough to turn anyone who gazes upon her into stone. Hosmer was likely inspired by the part of Ovid's piece that describes her transformation:

The bashful Goddess turn'd her eyes away,
Nor durst such bold impurity survey;
But on the ravish'd virgin vengeance takes,
Her shining hair is chang'd to hissing snakes.⁷

Hosmer's sculpture reflects the story at the point when Medusa is cursed and experiences the anguish after receiving her punishment. This allusion to sexual violation played upon the audience's ideas of female sexuality, as many viewers understood it at the time: "resigned, aloof, passionless, and endangered."⁸ Medical literature of the period stressed female vulnerability and woman's "delicate nervous system."⁹ Venereal disease and death during childbirth were common at the time, and contributed to the pressure on women to repress their sexuality in favor of health and morality. Hosmer's *Medusa* expresses anxiety regarding the female body and the dangers of sexuality are indicated by the curse that Athena has placed upon the Gorgon. Snakes "seen as symbols of evil" are shown coming out of *Medusa*'s headpiece, and some mingle with the hair near her temples, showing that the transition has begun. The snakes that terminate the bust with a Gorgon knot echo this imagery. Hosmer was intent on making these snakes particularly lifelike so that viewers would be reminded of the curse. To achieve this effect, she caught snakes and anaesthetized them in order to create casts before setting them free.¹⁰ The anguish seen on *Medusa*'s face is an expression of distress after being torn from her domestic, pious sphere. She shows nostalgia and regret for a lost past, a frequent theme in ideal busts, especially those by Hiram Powers.

Powers was the most popular American sculptor in the mid-nineteenth-century, and he created pieces that specifically targeted upper-middle class American buyers.¹¹ Powers, like Hosmer, drew his inspiration from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid wrote that Proserpine was abducted by the

⁵Sherwood, *Harriet Hosmer*, 83.

⁶Some examples of Medusa sculpture during the Renaissance have been interpreted as visual displays of the subjugation of women, especially Benvenuto Cellini's famous *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, (1545), which Hosmer would have most likely been familiar with. Cellini's piece separates Medusa's head from her body, removing her erotic, tempting body from her mind, thus allowing for complete male victory over the female figure. Yael Even, "The Loggia dei Lanzi: A Showcase of Female Subjugation," *Woman's Art Journal*, 12 no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1991): 10-14. Also Gerdtts, "Medusa," 101.

⁷Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden.

⁸Joy S. Kasson, "Narratives of the Female Body: The Greek Slave," in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in 19th Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels. (Oxford University Press: 1992): 182.

⁹Ibid

¹⁰Gerdtts, "Medusa," 101.

¹¹Lauren K. Lessing, "Presiding Divinities: Ideal Sculpture in Nineteenth-Century American Domestic Interiors," (Dissertation, Henry Radford Hope School of Fine Arts, Indiana University, 2006): 4.

lustful god of the underworld, Hades, and was only allowed to return and reunite with her mother once a year. One hundred fifty-six copies of Powers' ideal bust of *Proserpine* (1844) (Figure 3) were produced in his studio, making it the most popular ideal bust in both Europe and the United States during this period.¹² Hosmer would have been familiar with the piece and its success and likely used it as inspiration for her own busts.

Proserpine's story, like Medusa's, speaks to the vulnerability of the female body and the dangers that awaited it once seen by men. *Proserpine* also carried messages of maternal love and separation,¹³ and copies of the piece were frequently given to brides taken from their homes at a young age, possibly as a reminder of reunion with family. Ideal busts such as these were displayed occasionally in public exhibitions, but were more commonly seen in private settings such as parlors, where they helped shape the identities of those who frequented the spaces, and served as moral and behavioral examples.¹⁴ The subjects of these works provided models for the self-contained emotion and anguish that resulted from being ripped from their young, innocent lives with their parents and placed into a world of domestic responsibility.¹⁵ In the 1840s the intense emotions that viewers saw in these sculptures were hidden beneath a mask of passive resignation. During the 1850s and 60's, however, stylized expressions of distress and anguish became acceptable and even popular, as with Hosmer's *Medusa*.¹⁶ Although the facial expressions are quite different, many of the themes from *Proserpine* can be found in the ideal bust of Medusa.

Although sculptures such as those by Powers were meant to embody contemporary family values, some saw his works as a critique of "married American women's disenfranchised position."¹⁷ While in the United States, Powers had been exposed to radical views about marriage, but he believed in the importance of the union between man and wife, so these interpretations were created entirely by viewers.¹⁸ Regardless of Powers' views, his pieces, especially *Greek Slave* (Figure 4), show in much greater detail the complexities and contradictions with which people viewed ideal sculpture, coloring their interpretations of the piece and creating a new meaning for the work.

Greek Slave was first sculpted in 1844 and has become an icon of nineteenth-century art, serving as a model for future sculpture during the period. Like *Proserpine*, this piece deals specifically with the vulnerability of the female body and a woman's sexuality. To many American viewers, a nude female figure would have been scandalous. Powers added a narrative to the piece in order to "clothe" the figure in moral values, thus making it safe for public viewing. Powers ensured that the sculpture was accompanied by a written piece explaining that the figure was a young Greek maiden who had been taken captive by the Turks during the revolution. When given the choice to give up her religion and be let free, or become a captive but keep her vows of Christianity, she chose the latter. Powers set a precedent for other sculptors, and nude marble women became very popular. Nudity was in high demand, and ideal busts with their breasts revealed sold for much higher prices than those with covered breasts.¹⁹ Hosmer knew from Powers' example that leaving her subject exposed, sexual, and erotic would increase the monetary value of her piece. However, the chastity of the story behind the subject made it appropriate. Both *Medusa* and *Greek Slave* illustrate the

¹²Richard P. Wunder, *Hiram Powers, Vermont Sculptor, 1805-1873, vol. 2* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991): 187-202.

¹³Lessing, "Presiding Divinities," 82.

¹⁴Wendy Katz, *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class in Antebellum Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Ohio State University Press, 2002): 171.

¹⁵Lessing, "Presiding Divinities," 5.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁷Lauren K. Lessing, "Ties that Bind: Hiram Powers' Greek Slave and Nineteenth-Century Marriage," *American Art* 24 (2010): 41-65.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Melissa Dabakis, "The Eccentric Life of a Perfectly 'Emancipated Female': Harriet Hosmer's Early Years in Rome," in *Perspectives on American Sculpture before 1925*, ed. Thayer Tolles. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003): 36.

juxtaposition between chastity and sensuality with which viewers approached sculpture.

Powers' piece, for example, is pure but still contains highly erotic elements. The statue's hands are bound to show her enslavement and are held over her genitalia, showing her modesty, but also drawing the viewer's eye directly to the area.²⁰ The narrative that accompanied the statue would have been interpreted as a fate of sexual slavery in a Turkish harem.²¹ While this would have been particularly exciting to Victorian audiences, it also seemed threatening to the sacred union of marriage.²² The *Greek Slave* was a model for modesty, faith, and traditional marriage for nineteenth-century viewers who wished to preserve their traditional view of domesticity.

Despite her vulnerability, the subject was also viewed as a symbol of spiritual power. Many viewers saw her choice to hold fast to her Christian faith and meet her fate with quiet resignation as a narrative of the inevitable victory of religion and moral integrity over hardship and misfortune.²³ Some viewed this piece as an argument for the women's rights movement or as an abolitionist work. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a close friend of Hosmer's, wrote a poem in response to the piece that highlighted the strength of the captive:

Appeal, fair stone,
From God's pure heights of beauty against man's wrong!
Catch up in thy divine face, not alone
East griefs but west, and strike and shame the strong,
By thunders of white silencer, overthrown.²⁴

Browning refers to a reversal of power roles in the statue that echoed her abolitionist beliefs. Lucy Stone, an abolitionist, was moved to tears by the piece, inspiring her to speak out on women's oppression.²⁵ Despite these interpretations, it was also widely popular amongst slave-owners in the South, and was commonly seen as an example of values such as modesty, chastity, and a quiet, passive demeanor.

Abolitionists, women's rights activists, and their conservative counterparts all adopted the statue because they could project their own beliefs onto the beautiful figure before them. When viewed in terms of contemporary viewer reactions, the statue has come to show the conflicting attitudes towards the shifting society, especially the idea of the female body and a woman's role in public and private life.²⁶

Although Hosmer's *Medusa* did not elicit such strong political responses, it was still seen in terms of the play between power and powerlessness. Hosmer does not directly reference Medusa's bloody end at the hand of Perseus, but the audience would have had this in mind when viewing the sculpture due to the popularity of Ovid's poem, in addition to both paintings and sculptures of the beheaded monster. The deadly capabilities of Medusa were directly alluded to because of Hosmer's choice to sculpt the subject at her moment of transformation. Viewers recognized that the sculpture represented a potentially powerful and dangerous subject: one anonymous viewer who saw the bust in Hosmer's studio wrote, "It was hard for me to look away from this statue; if long gazing could have turned one to stone, the old tradition would have been fulfilled."²⁷

²⁰Joy Kasson, "Mind in Matter in History: Viewing the Greek Slave," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11, no. 1, (1998): 79-83.

²¹Kasson, "Narratives of the Female Body," 175.

²²Ibid.

²³Kasson, "Narratives of the Female Body," 187.

²⁴Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave," 1850. Quoted by Prinz, Yopie. "Classics for Victorians: Response," *Victorian Studies* 52, no.1 (Autumn 2009): 52.

²⁵Sally G. McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 81.

²⁶Kasson, "Narratives of the Female Body," 195.

²⁷Quoted in Gerdtts, "Medusa," 107.

By creating a sculpture that alluded to both vulnerability and power, Hosmer allowed viewers of any background or political leaning to see what they wanted in her work. She was not making any statement in particular other than an assertion of her prowess as a sculptress in a field dominated by men.

Hosmer's choice to represent Medusa could be seen as autobiographic. She is well known for vowing to never marry because she was fully dedicated to her profession.

Even if so inclined, an artist has no business to marry. For a man it may be well enough, but for a woman, on whom matrimonial duties and cares weigh more heavily, it is a moral wrong, I think, for she must either neglect her profession or her family, becoming neither a good wife and mother nor a good artist. My ambition is to become the latter, so I wage eternal feud with the consolidating knot.²⁸

Some scholars have interpreted *Medusa* as an expression of Hosmer's fear of the "curse" of marriage and entrapment in the domestic sphere, but at this time in her life, Hosmer was mainly attempting to create sculptures that would gain praise from critics.

Medusa that could have been interpreted in multiple ways by contemporary viewers and indicates Hosmer's attempts to gain the approval and sponsorship of the wealthy both in Rome and the United States. Her portrayal of Medusa is one of the first sympathetic interpretations of the subject, but it falls firmly into the conventional category of ideal sculpture, rather than communicating Hosmer's individual opinion on the issues raised by viewers when exposed to similar sculptures such as the *Greek Slave* or *Proserpine*.

Medusa employs the accepted language of neoclassical ideal sculpture, but Hosmer did not remain a conventional sculptor for long. At the end of the decade, she sculpted *Zenobia in Chains*, in which she repurposed the Medusa image in the detail of the queen's belt buckle to align Zenobia with the Greek goddess, Athena, and to communicate her growing sympathy towards the struggle for women's rights and her dedication to the cause.

Hosmer takes the popular themes of a captive queen and a tragically doomed female character and communicates a very different idea of the subject through her visual choices. In the 1850s, she spent time with a group of forward-thinking women including feminists, authors, intellectuals, and poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The environment in Rome gave women, and especially women sculptors, a chance to recreate their identities while surrounded by other women who had moved to Rome for the same purpose.²⁹ Hosmer's time with these women profoundly influenced her view of the world, which is apparent in *Zenobia*.

Zenobia in Chains is based on the queen who ruled Palmyra from 262-272 CE. She was the wife of Odenathus, but after his death she became regent for their son. While in power, she extended Palmyra's borders to Arabia and Egypt, which encroached on Roman borders. Zenobia cut off grain supplies, causing a shortage of bread in Rome, and issued coins with her face and the face of her son on them. Her armies were so strong at this time that she was not challenged until 270, when Aurelian came to power.³⁰ Aurelian defeated Zenobia in two battles and Palmyra was sacked in 272. After refusing the terms of surrender, she was captured while fleeing to seek Persian aid, after which she was taken to Rome and paraded through the streets as a sign of victory.³¹

Although literary source material was readily available, there were almost no existing visual depictions of the queen, so Hosmer used written material in addition to ancient sculpture as inspi-

²⁸Alicia Faxon, "Images of Women in the Sculpture of Harriet Hosmer," *Woman's Art Journal*, 2 no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1981): 26.

²⁹Melissa Dabakis, "Feminist Interventions: Some Thoughts on Recent Scholarship about Women Artists," *American Art* 18 no. 1 (Spring 2004): 2-9.

³⁰Susan Waller, "The Artist, the Writer, and the Queen: Hosmer, Jameson, and 'Zenobia,'" in *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 4 no. 1, (Spring-Summer 1983): 21.

³¹Ibid.

ration.³² She began her work after thorough research on the “Queen of the East.” She searched through libraries for any mention of Zenobia and studied ancient coins and medieval mosaics³³ in addition to communicating extensively with writer Anna Jameson. Jameson (1794-1860) was widely recognized as an authority on art in the 1850s and advocated strongly for the rights of women, particularly for women artists.³⁴ Jameson wrote an entire chapter on Zenobia in her 1831 book *Celebrated Female Sovereigns*, which, along with lengthy correspondences between the two, impacted Hosmer’s choices in her depiction more visibly than any other source and contributed to the feminist ideas conveyed in the piece.³⁵

Hosmer was known to have read the *Augustan History*, in which both Vopiscus and Pollio described Zenobia as faltering under the weight of chains and jewels so heavy that she was unable to carry them by herself and had to be aided by a slave.³⁶ William Ware’s popular novel, *The Letters of Lucius Piso* (1832), echoed previous accounts of her oppressive chains and jewels and also described the queen as profoundly melancholy during the Roman procession, in a way suggesting her spirit was broken.³⁷ Hosmer was likely aware of this source due to its popularity, but never mentioned it in her correspondences, even though various newspapers identified it as a source of inspiration for the sculpture.³⁸

These descriptions are vastly different from Hosmer’s favorable depiction of a strong and powerful woman ruler who maintains her dignity. *Zenobia* is much closer to Jameson’s illustration of the queen as a majestic figure who attracted the gaze of everyone present.³⁹ Although this portrayal of female power is clearly present in Hosmer’s sculpture, Jameson’s account emulates previous descriptions of Zenobia’s heavy chains, something that Hosmer did not include in her finished work. Hosmer’s decision to deviate from the standard representation illustrates that she consciously and deliberately changed historical descriptions to portray the queen not as a helpless and weak female, but in such a way to show her “womanly modesty, her manly courage, and her intellectual tastes.”⁴⁰ Hosmer’s choice to ignore the heavy jewels, which were seen as a symbol of pride and vanity, both weaknesses associated with females, removes any implication that Zenobia’s downfall was caused by her gender and the nature of women. *Zenobia* celebrates the power of women and moves away from notions of women as weak and easily tempted. Hosmer’s portrayal of the queen also clearly removes any implications of sexual vulnerability, which is a departure from other treatments of the subject of captivity or doomed queens.

The idea of sexual vulnerability was frequently associated with captivity in sculpture such as in Powers’ *Greek Slave*, but Hosmer removes any implication of this in *Zenobia*. Lydia Marie Child, a friend of Hosmer’s, wrote that she was “so much in love with her subject that she rejected as unworthy of belief the statement that Zenobia was ever shaken by her misfortune. To her imagination she was supremely regal in the highest sense of the word, from first to last.”⁴¹ This indicates Hosmer’s intent on avoiding issues concerning Zenobia’s sexuality. Hosmer communicates

³²Waller, “Hosmer, Jameson, and ’Zenobia,” 22.

³³Joy Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, (New Haven London, Yale University Press, 1990): 152.

³⁴Waller, “Hosmer, Jameson, and ’Zenobia,” 22.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Cornelia Crow Carr, *Harriet Hosmer, Letters and Memories* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1912): 120, as in Waller, “Hosmer, Jameson, and ’Zenobia,” 23.

³⁷William Ware, *Letters from Palmyra, by Lucius Piso, to His Friend Marcus Curtius, at Rome, Now First Translated and Published*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), 2:326. Quoted by Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 153.

³⁸Waller, “Hosmer, Jameson, and ’Zenobia,” 24.

³⁹Anna Jameson, *Lives of Celebrated Female Sovereigns and Illustrious Women*, (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1870): 32. Quoted by Waller, “Hosmer, Jameson, and ’Zenobia,” 24.

⁴⁰Lydia Marie Child, “Letter,” *Boston Transcript*, February 2, 1865. Hosmer Collection, Watertown Public Library, MA. Quoted by Waller, “Hosmer, Jameson, and ’Zenobia,” 23.

⁴¹Quoted in Carr, *Hosmer*, 192.

this through the visual treatment of the sculpture. The heavy drapery of *Zenobia's* dress obscures the viewer's access to her body. Admirers of the piece wrote about the chaste effect that the sculpture had and its "apparent inability to arouse desire."⁴² While the queen is wearing shackles, which, like in *Greek Slave*, symbolize her captivity, *Zenobia's* chain is much longer, providing her with greater mobility than Powers' subject. She is holding the chain herself, showing that she still has some control over her own fate. Hosmer would have been familiar with *Greek Slave* and altered treatments of the theme in multiple ways to show the subject's dignity. In addition to lengthening the shackles, Hosmer also gave the queen the ability to move. While Powers' subject is static, *Zenobia* takes a step forward, showing her action and mobility, even in the face of adversity. This, coupled with her clothing, removes the sexual connotations present in *Greek Slave*.

Hosmer wanted to invoke some of the purity that viewers saw in *Greek Slave*. The sculptor, who called herself a "faithful worshipper of Celibacy,"⁴³ may have admired the queen for her "female dignity and discretion," or lack of sexual involvement with men, including her husband "save for the purposes of conception."⁴⁴ Some saw *Zenobia's* personal decisions as acts of sexual manipulation and compared her to Cleopatra, a popular sculptural subject at the time, who notoriously used her feminine beauty and sexuality as a weapon against men. The two queens were rumored to have been related, but Hosmer's treatment of *Zenobia* sets her apart from Cleopatra. William Wetmore Story's *Cleopatra* (Figure 5) is deep in thought at the moment just before her death. Cleopatra committed suicide by allowing an asp to bite her in the breast rather than becoming a slave, which also meant giving up her sexual freedom. *Cleopatra's* exposed breast and the thin, revealing fabric of her dress allude to the sensual undertones of the story and provide an erotic visual. In contrast, *Zenobia's* heavy robe adds impressive weight to the sculpture and covers her completely. Cleopatra's relaxed posture shows that she has accepted defeat, while *Zenobia* stands upright, facing her punishment with dignity. Both females were said by some to be sexually manipulative—an element male sculptors often focused on—but Hosmer removes it entirely from her piece and focuses instead on the dignity of her tragically doomed queen.

Hosmer used sculptural references to antiquity as a way to highlight the regality of her subject. It is known that she used the Vatican's *Athena Giustiniani* (Figure 6) as a model for the posture, drapery, and other formal aspects of *Zenobia*, as noted by Nathaniel Hawthorne when he visited Hosmer's studio in 1859.⁴⁵ Correspondences with Jameson indicate that she may also have used the *Athena Giustiniani* as an inspiration for *Zenobia's* jewels based on references to the warrior-queen and her helmet-like diadem and cuirass.⁴⁶ The "helmet-like diadem" was replaced, at the advice of Jameson, by a crown to assert her intelligence, but most other aspects of Athena's costume do not appear in Hosmer's finished piece.⁴⁷ The element from the aegis that Hosmer chose to keep is the face of Medusa, which appears on *Zenobia's* belt buckle (Figure 7). This Medusa image would have been an obvious reference to Athena even for viewers who had not seen the *Athena Giustiniani* because it was mentioned in popular literature, including in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book IV, when Athena places the head of Medusa upon her breastplate. Hosmer was directly aligning the queen with the goddess of war and wisdom by repurposing the Medusa image that she had used in her earlier ideal bust.

⁴²Gabrielle Gopinath, "Harriet Hosmer and the Feminine Sublime," *Oxford Art Journal* 28 no. 1 (March 2005): 67.

⁴³Ibid. 35

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Works: Passages from French and Italian Notebooks*, 15 (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1871), 188-89, quoted by Carr, *Harriet Hosmer*, 142, quoted by Waller, "Hosmer, Jameson, and 'Zenobia,'" 25.

⁴⁶Letter from Jameson to Hosmer, Folder #24, Hosmer Collection, Schlesinger Library, quoted by Waller, "Hosmer, Jameson, and 'Zenobia,'" 25.

⁴⁷Waller, "Hosmer, Jameson, and 'Zenobia,'" 26.

The choice to use the *Athena Giustiani* may have been a response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), which Hosmer would likely have read because of their acquaintance. In this novel, the "doomed woman of passion" was named Zenobia, and she summarizes her messages after her downfall:

A moral? Why, this: that in the battlefield of life, the downright stroke, that would fall only on a man's steel head-piece, is sure to light on a woman's heart, over which she wears no breastplate, and whose wisdom it is, therefore, to keep out of the conflict.⁴⁸

Although Hosmer's *Zenobia* is clearly not wearing armor, the presence of Medusa's head alludes to and serves as a subtler version of the full breastplate of Athena. This image counters Hawthorne's assertion that women must stay in their place and not assume positions of power traditionally reserved for men or act courageously because they are emotionally fragile. By referencing the goddess of wisdom and war and providing an image that references her breastplate, Hosmer asserts that women can be equally as powerful and successful as men.

Hosmer may have also used the face of Medusa in a way similar to Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and her Maidservant* (1613-14), in which Judith's sword has the face of Medusa on it. This image may have been a reference to the iconographic type of Medusa as a powerful protector and mother figure that predates all written versions of the myth. In ancient Greece, the image of Medusa's face was used on coins and antefixes (terra cotta tiles placed above doorways on temples and houses) to provide powerful protection against evil. The head also served an apotropaic purpose to Athena when she wore it on her breastplate, which inspired future military rulers to place the Medusa image upon their shields and on their armor in an attempt to emulate the goddess. The Gorgon image references a myth that predates Ovid's poem, in which Medusa was the only mortal of her three Gorgon sisters, ugly monsters with scaly skin, fangs, and beards. This Medusa type survived into the Renaissance in gems, jewelry, and on coins which Hosmer could possibly have seen while researching images for *Zenobia's* costume.⁴⁹

Rather than showing Medusa as a victim, here it is her power that is on display and that indicates the divine associations between Zenobia and Athena. Whether or not the detail of the Medusa alludes to her earlier works or to the ancient goddess cult, Hosmer's point would have been very clear to contemporary viewers. She showed that Zenobia had the strength, power, and courage of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, reason, and military victory. Hosmer's use of the Medusa image in a new context shows how her views changed over the course of the decade.

Unfortunately, Hosmer came under fire when *Zenobia* was revealed because some said it was impossible that a woman could have created such a phenomenal work of art in marble. Hosmer refuted such claims by publishing a detailed article describing her process, but she was continuously forced to defend her art against the doubt of her male colleagues. She became increasingly outspoken regarding her views on women's rights, especially for female artists, and counseled female sculptors such as Edmonia Lewis and other members of the "white marmorean flock" in Rome.⁵⁰ Hosmer's example paved the way for female artists wishing to find success in a world dominated by men both in Rome and around the world.

⁴⁸Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, in *The Blithedale Romance and Fanshawe*, Centenary Edition of the Works of N.H., vol. 3 (1852. Rpt. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964) 224, quoted by Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 153.

⁴⁹Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi, The Image of the Female Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989): 319.

⁵⁰Naurice Frank Woods, "An African Queen at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition 1876: Edmonia Lewis's 'The Death of Cleopatra,'" *Meridians* 9 no. 1 (2009): 65.

Figures



Figure 1. Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, *Medusa*, 1853-54



Figure 2. Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, *Zenobia in Chains*, 1859



Figure 3. Hiram Powers, *Proserpine*, 1844



Figure 4. Hiram Powers, *Greek Slave*, 1851 after 1844 original



Figure 5. William Wetmore Story, *Cleopatra*, 1858



Figure 6. *Athena Giustiniani*, Roman copy of Greek Bronze, 5th-4th century BCE



Figure 7. Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, *Zenobia in Chains* (Detail), 1859