

The Golden Hair of Medusa Mindy Belloff, Intima Press

The Golden Hair of Medusa – A Contemporary Illumination by Mindy Belloff, artist, designer, printer. (New York: Intima Press, 2025). Text from Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Gorgon's Head" (1852). 108-pages, 14½ x 10¾ inches. Over 100 original drawings. Letterpress printed on handmade cotton rag papers in white, light grey, dark grey, and black. Head and tail gilt in 23-karat gold with cover design and label in gold on leather, gilded by Peter Geraty, MA. Hand sewn with linen tapes with quarter leather cover, housed inside a yellow cloth clamshell box, bound by Celine Lombardi, ME. Fine press edition of 40, plus up to 8 design bindings. web: inimtapress.com

WHEN LOOKS CAN KILL

Reviewed by Michael Ryan

Mindy Belloff's latest book returns to classical mythology by way of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, Hawthorne's age-appropriate version of the Greek myths. The artist also drew on Hawthorne for *A Golden Thread* (Theseus, Ariadne, and the Minotaur); now she turns to the story of Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa in *The Golden Hair of Medusa*.

Golden Hair? Really? The title will strike some as a joke or as just preposterous, since Medusa was she with the hair of intertwined snakes. And her visage really did kill: to look at her was to be turned to stone. So, what's with the "golden hair"?

To appreciate the art of the book, it helps to know the backstory that Belloff sneaks into the narrative. Hawthorne's version focuses on Perseus, an attractive, eager New England lad, ready to do the bidding of the evil king Polydectes: he must sally forth and slay Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, and bring her head back to the king. But how did Medusa become Medusa? Mid-way through the narrative, Belloff reaches back to Ovid for the origin story, which is crucial for the artist's project. Medusa had once been a ravishing beauty and priestess in the temple of Athena. But she was seduced in the temple by Poseidon, which enraged Athena. The latter, in turn, blamed the victim and transformed Medusa into the monster with snakes for hair, as we commonly see her. The origin story, in short, complicates the narrative and gives it a feminist slant, a theme that runs through much of the artist's earlier work. In her horrible metamorphosis, Medusa gets her revenge: death to all who gaze upon her. But, as Belloff subtly reminds us, transformed though she may be, she is still a girl. And a girl victimized twice over. We are not to forget those facts.

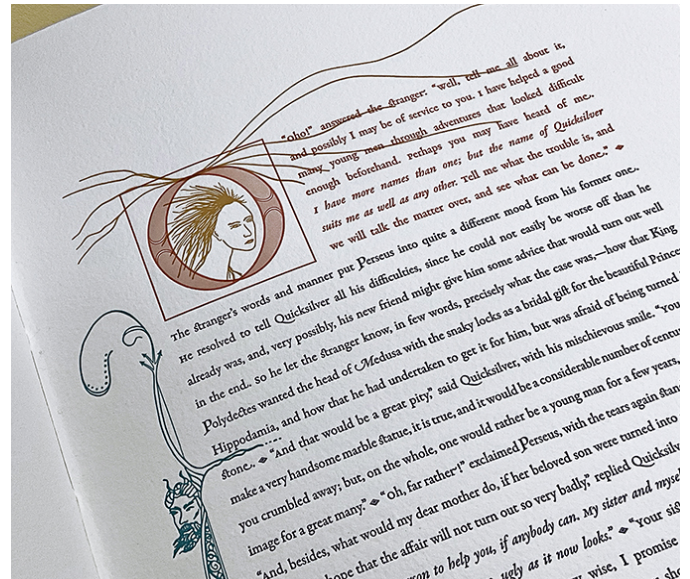


PHOTO BY MINDY BELLOFF, INTIMA PRESS

The full story of *Medusa* thus combines beauty and innocence with horror and fright, giving the artist a rich palette of tones with which to work. It is a virtuoso performance, in which the artist renders the dynamics of the text in visually dramatic ways.

Like *A Golden Thread*, *Medusa* is a tactile delight, bringing together the rich sensuality of contrasting and complementing papers that stand on their own as art. The leaves begin bright and encouraging but progressively darken as Perseus, guided by Mercury, flies to his rendezvous with the Gorgons. The early elegance of the page layout, mimicking an illuminated manuscript and adorned with Belloff's playful and enchanting marginal images of children, frogs, insects, seas, and framing devices, communicates the mood of the story as Perseus learns of his duty and innocently assents to it. However, as Perseus nears his target, the elegant Adobe Garamond typeface gives way to a cacophony of styles and sizes and colors suggesting turmoil, uncertainty, and danger. The charm of the first part yields to the alarm of the task now upon Perseus: to behead Medusa without looking at her and then bring the head back to Polydectes. The climax of the story occurs when we turn a leaf and confront a truly menacing, coiled snake. (I actually jumped when I first encountered it.) This is Belloff at her best, bringing type, paper, and color together to evoke a scene, a mood, an experience.

As she did in *A Golden Thread*, Belloff includes two pieces of commentary as sort of ironic anti-codas. One is from Freud's unpublished essay on Medusa as illustrative of the "castration complex" and is cleverly framed by a pipe with the appropriate tag from Magritte: "this is not a pipe." Freud actually says as much when he notes the proliferation of penis images in mythology. The other is from Freud's

one-time pupil and heir designate, Carl Jung, calling attention to the archetypal value of myths as stories pointing to something beyond themselves. Belloff winds Jung's excerpt around inside an appropriate image: the ouroboros, the snake devouring itself. Whatever these two slices of psychological theory have to offer, they are literally appendages to the text, wryly wrought afterthoughts. Their messages seem alien to the extraordinary power of the artist's rendering of the myth. We are free to smile at them and move on.

The Golden Hair of Medusa is thus a remarkable work which exists on several different levels. It provokes and challenges. It invites us to consider what may be really going on in this tale. Above all, it demonstrates what a mature artists' book can be, utilizing text and artifact to create a complex integrated whole. But this is what we expect from Mindy Belloff, an artist whose body of work never lets the viewer off easily. While Hawthorne intended his volume for children, *Medusa* metamorphoses it into something altogether different.

Above all, *Medusa* the book subverts Medusa the myth. In its sheer beauty, its drama, its subtleties, and its powerful creativity, it completely reframes the myth as a magnificent piece of art to behold, rather than turn away from. We can look at Medusa in the last pages of the book and behold not a monster, but the beautiful girl blessed by the gods that she once was. To look at this Medusa is to marvel and admire, not die. To behold Medusa here is to live and learn. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Belloff herself has reconceived the myth, and in doing so has rehabilitated it for a 21st-century sensibility. We must hope that the artist continues her journey through the bequest of remote antiquity in future work.

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