Under the Eye of Gorgo: Apotropaic Acts in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*

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If the theme of Medusa has not ceased—from Antiquity throughout the Renaissance to the present day—to inspire and to act as a catalyst for a whole mass of studies in the domain of arts, literature and social sciences, it is astonishing to note that Medusa has been largely neglected in the realm of Shakespearean Studies. Indeed, in my investigating work for this paper, I found that there is only, to my knowledge, one study in which the theme of Medusa is directly treated and analysed in the context of a Shakespeare tragedy: "Macbeth, the Male Medusa," by Marjorie Garber.[1] *Macbeth* lends itself both relevantly and opportunely to a study relating to the myth of the Medusa when one recalls the words of Macduff, who on discovering the corpse of his king, Duncan, exclaims horrified,

> O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart
> Cannot conceive nor name thee!
> Approach the chamber, and *destroy your sight*
> *With a new Gorgon*: do not bid me speak;
> See, and then speak yourselves. (2.3.71-73 [my emphasis])

If Garber offers a brilliant reading of the Medusa complex in *Macbeth*[2]—to which I shall return later to look at more closely so as to propose alternative and complementary points of analysis—this reading constitutes, as I have pointed out, a rarity, even an exception in Shakespeare annals. For, generally speaking, and (almost) with one voice, Shakespeare critics have tended to describe and research artistic and literary techniques in what I could call *the forces of movement and/or the animated*—i.e., allowing statues of stone to take on life/flesh—rather than the opposite—i.e. ,the movement which leads life in the direction of immobility and turns flesh to stone. In order to illustrate this clear orientation of Shakespeare criticism towards the animation/enlivening of stone, suffice it to note the enthusiasm shown with respect to the famous scene in

The Winter's Tale (inspired by the ancient myth of Pygmalion by Ovid),[3] when King Leontes discovers that the statue of his dead queen, Hermione, suddenly becomes animated and returns to life. Also, rather than continuing to search how and why (Shakespearean) critical language has allowed itself so quickly and so lastingly to be drawn into/enclosed in this "rhetoric of animation,"[4] it seemed to us quite relevant and useful to consider the opposing case and to examine the point where Medusa finally triumphs completely in the annulment of that traditional expectation for movement/life/flesh and comes to create a specific aesthetic by achieving, as Macduff will say before his murdered king, "the great doom's image," horror's "masterpiece" itself (2.3.68).

I have selected for discussion specific scenes where the Medusa Complex lends itself to be analysed properly. Let us then first of all consider the famous Banquet Scene in act 3 of *Macbeth*. Placed directly in front of the banqueting room, we are present at the entry of a procession of Scottish lords making ready to feast at the table of their new king, Macbeth. Having beforehand ordered the murder of his rival, Banquo (for whom, according to the prophecies of the three witches, even though "lesser than Macbeth and [yet] greater," he "shalt get kings, though [he] be none"), Macbeth addresses himself to the assembled guests to express—with blatant insincerity for the spectator and reader—his anxiety with regard to the absence/lateness of his friend, Banquo:

> Here had we now our country's honour roofed,
> Were the graced person of our *Banquo present*;
> Who may I rather challenge for unkindness
> Than pity for mischance! (3.4.40-43 [emphasis my own])

To which Ross replies,

> *His absence,* sir,
> Lays blame upon his promise. Please't your highness
> To grace us with your royal company.
> (3. 4.44-46 [emphasis my own])

No sooner has this game of repartee noting Banquo's absence ended than his spectre makes its appearance and installs itself in King Macbeth's place:

> *Macbeth:* Prithee see there! Behold! Look! Lo! How say you?
> Why what care I? If thou canst nod, speak too.
> If charnel-houses and our graves must send
> Those that we bury back, our monuments
> Shall be the maws of kites. (3.4.69-70)

Macbeth's instantaneous reaction of stupefaction, horror and fright is occasioned by the vision of Banquo's ghost, which, moreover, Shakespeare describes as a head detached from its body, "his throat is cut" (3.4.16), and harbouring curls clotted with blood, "gory locks" (3.4.50), bearing a certain resemblance to the decapitated head of Medusa. Indeed, if this appearance prefigures Macbeth's own decapitation, it takes us back above all to the gorgon sight/site of the tragedy itself, i.e., to the murder of Duncan. This seems to be confirmed by the utterances of Lady Macbeth when she, deploring her husband's agitation, declares, telescoping to some extent the two events, "This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said, / Led you to Duncan" (3.4.63-64).

The reintroduction of this dagger at this particular point in the tragedy—which made its very first appearance (under the form of an hallucination) in act 2, scene 1, line 33, inciting Macbeth to commit the murder of his king—manifests here a hovering/floating *signifier* which ceaselessly indicates to us and points us in a certain direction (backwards once more) and which strives *in vain* to materialize into a *signified,* the place of Gorgô (the place where the king was murdered). This place could be apprehended as a pictural space wherein is exhibited, as Lady Macbeth will point out, "the very painting of y[our] fear" (3.4.62) and wherein Medusa's lopped off head hovers, leaving in its wake, in the very convolutions of its passage, drips and traces of blood. It would need only one more step to see Caravaggio's *Head of Medusa* appear (*fig. 1*).[5] We know that this picture of Medusa in the Galeria Uffizi in Florence was first of all commissioned by Cardinal del Monte and that he afterwards made a gift of it to Ferdinand, Grand Duke of Tuscany, on the occasion of his marriage in 1608.

Figure 1.
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Head of Medusa*, c. 1598, oil on canvas, 60 x55 cm., Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

Caravaggio gives us on a *rotella*,[6] a round or oblong surface, the head of Medusa at the very moment, at the precise and infinitesimal instant of her decapitation by Perseus. What Caravaggio gives us in this representation is an "instant portrait," a portrait suspended in time, in which the very gaze of Medusa is seized in the fright of her own reflection (representation) and decapitation.[7] In this way Caravaggio places us in the presence of a moment which is precisely *capital*, an interval/moment situated half-way between an action and a state, i.e., "just after the sword-stroke hewn by Perseus" and "just before the death of Medusa." In fact, by this quite peculiar process of construction, Caravaggio manages to make of this representation of Medusa a "captured/frozen" moment which, certainly, seems to become stagnant and yet does not cease—in the mind/the eyes of the spectator—torepeat itself in the pictural space assigned to it. *This instant never ends—and Medusa never stops looking at herself.* Listening to such an argument and confronted by the efficiency, the power and, indeed, the danger of such an image, we must, in the manner of the masterly study by Louis Marin on Medusa, wonder how to proceed so as to look on that head with its eyes wide open without being changed to stone in our turn. Marin asks himself the question and answers as follows:

> *How should one look at The Head of Medusa? One must be cunning, be extremely attentive and vigilant*: at every moment avoid the trap inherent in Caravaggio's picture which represents the trap of Perseus *in order to hold out traps for it ourselves, if the strength of the strong can be their weakness and the weakness of the weak their strength. So much for the gaze of Medusa, so much for the eye, the glance of Perseus.*
>
> *This is my first trick: "start" from the gaze—and from the orientation of the head in the work—since we are talking about Medusa here and the subject of the picture is a gaze, mine, hers, that of Perseus, that of the painter. The head is turned three quarters to the left. However, strictly speaking, Medusa does not look at me. … I try to position myself in her gaze. … Impossible.* I am transparent to her. She looks at me as if I were nothing, as if I were not there.[8]

Of course, Louis Marin will not stop there and will wonder, with the usual sophistication we associate with him, why the construction of the picture contains that slight deviation of Medusa's head, that diagonal, oblique movement from left to right of the picture. Even though *The Head of Medusa* is undeniably a full frontal picture, Marin reminds us that it was painted on a convex, rounded surface which entails a slight rotation of the painting. Indeed, if the gaze of the subject depicted (Medusa) is

ever so slightly out of kilter, affected on the surface by its support, the iconic relation between the seeing subject and the seen subject—the fatal visual exchange—will inevitably be *missed.* The effect that the depiction of Medusa creates could therefore be said to be almost incongruous, accidental, for a picture *a fortiori* apotropaic, for, even though she is facing me, Medusa does not look at me, not completely—there is, in effect, no reflection, no exchange of looks; we are transparent to her.

Now, to come back to the tragedy of *Macbeth,* and to the banquet scene in particular, we can detect a striking analogy when the Gorgon-like ghost of Banquo produces the same effect on Macbeth himself. Also, after the ghost's second appearance, Macbeth seems to give a more observant second glance at the blood-drenched head he sees appearing in front of him. And despite the fear and the feeling of horror that the sight of this head calls up, Macbeth—just like Louis Marin, if I may say so—will start *him as well* with his gaze, to declare to him directly,

> *Thou hast no speculation in those eyes*
> Which thou dost glare with me. (3.4.96-97)

Indeed, if the gaze of that ghostly head/face, just like Caravaggio's *Head of Medusa,* is henceforth attenuated, deprived of power by the application of the foregoing analysis/deconstruction, I could almost argue that the whole effective/efficacious dimension of the power of horror and fright is *lacking* in this image/apparition. But perhaps it is precisely here, in this reflection and, as Hecate will say with regard to Macbeth, in this feeling of security which is for mortals the greatest of dangers (3.5.32-33), that the whole power of Medusa resides. For what is well and truly *lacking* in this image of Medusa's head, and is suggested (potentially) to the gaze, is Perseus's gesture in its entirety: i.e., the gesture at one and the same time *absent* yet *productive*, of a blade coming to cut off a head and coming nevertheless to produce the very image of *this* head—the gesture then which prompted us to conceive of the picture of Medusa in the first place as a *cæsura* (interruption/suspension), but which from then on, only takes on its full meaning under the paradigm of the *cut*,[9] of something missing, i.e., *castration*.[10] On this subject, Freud in 1922 dictated a note (published posthumously in 1940) in which the theme of "Medusa's head" crops up in relation to castration. Perfectly conscious of the (almost) overused character of this text in reference terms, I have been content just to quote here one single extract, modestly expressing the hope of establishing an

enlightening correlation/connection with a passage from the banquet scene in *Macbeth*:

> To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of castration is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something.… [T]he occasion for this … occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe in the threat of castration, catches a glimpse of adult female genitalia, surrounded by a bush of hair, essentially those of his mother.…The sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. . . . For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and its stiffening reassures him of this fact.…If Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of a female's sexual apparatus . . . it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself. *We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took to his heels after the woman showed to him her vulva.*[11]

In point of fact, to attach and apply Freud's note to the tragedy with which we are concerned, we know that in the banquet scene the appearance of Banquo's Medusa-like head will not only render rigid with fright, *petrify* Macbeth with fear, but will also—as Marjorie Garber's article demonstrates, in conformity with Freud's analysis and interpretation—allow Lady Macbeth to bring up the whole theme of castration by means of an untimely interrogation of her own husband's masculinity/virility.[12] Indeed, no sooner will she have called into question (placed in doubt) Macbeth's sexual identity as a man, than a desexualising outburst (an emasculation, we might dare say) will follow:

Lady Macbeth: *Are you a man?*
. . . . . .
O, these flaws and starts
… would well beome
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authorized by *her granddame* …
Shame itself.
(3.4.58, 64-67 [emphasis my own])

The sight of this Medusa's head may be said to rob Macbeth of all male attributes, of all of his *penis*. It is therefore, as Freud writes, the representation of the female genital apparatus that repels and provokes fear by its castration. In order to illustrate and validate his argument, Freud will have recourse to Rabelais—and if we are

not mistaken in our minutious reading, Freud seems to make particular reference to Chapter 47 of the *Quart Livre* ("Comment le diable fut trompé par une vieille de Papefiguière" / "*How the Devil was deceived by an old woman of Popefigland*"), in which an old woman confuses the Devil himself by showing him her vulva full on:

> She then lifted her clothes to the chins, …[like] mothers used to of old when they saw their sons fleeing from the battle, and showed him her what's-its-name. When the devil saw this huge and continuous cavity extending in all directions, he cried out: "Mahound, Demiurge, Megaera, Alecto, Persephone, they won't find me here! I'm off! I relinquish the field to her!"[13]

We must at this point bear in mind and put aside for a moment Rabelais' illustration that Freud uses so as to juxtapose Macbeth's reply to his wife's question, "Are you a man?" For there is a thematic correlation shared by Freud, Rabelais, and Shakespeare whose interplay and encounter (triangulation) seem to simultaneously confirm in an even more cogent and perhaps pertinent manner the presence of the Medusa (complex) in *Macbeth*/Macbeth:

> *Freud:* Medusa's head takes the place of the representation of the female genital apparatus.… We read in Rabelais of how *the Devil took to his heels after the woman showed to him her vulva.*
>
> *Rabelais:* …and showed him her what's-its-name. When *the devil* saw this huge and continuous cavity extending in all directions, he cried out: … *I'm off! I relinquish the field to her.*
>
> *Shakespeare* *Lady Macbeth:* Are you a man?
> *Macbeth* Ay, and a bold one, *that dare to look on that*
> Which might appall the devil.
> (3.4.58-60)

As I have already shown, Macbeth, during the banquet scene, will see appear before him the head of Banquo as a veritable head of Medusa, and it behooves us now to follow the particular trajectory that this head traces in the tragedy. For this figure with Medusan qualities does not appear and is not uniquely contained in the banquet scene that we have just analysed—it moves, migrates, and becomes detached from the stage space and hovers in the shadows of the tragedy to reappear once more under the influence and at the instigation of the three sister witches. Also, to lay hold of this trajectory and to witness the reappearance of Gorgô in the

tragedy, it behooves us also to recall that after the horror that this apparition/vision provoked, Macbeth will decide to set off to meet the fatal sisters so that the latter can predict to him his future. If the three witches oblige themselves to respond to Macbeth's interrogation, it is only through a series of apparitions, the very first of which has no other function than to evoke the image of a head, "an *armed head*" (4.1.74), the head of Gorgô. If the image of this head is, without any doubt, the proleptic and apotropaic foreshadowing of Macbeth's own decapitation at the end of the tragedy, it is also the symbol of his tragic destiny—as Hegel would put it, "awareness of self but of self as an enemy."[14] If the two other apparitions that follow ("a bloody child" as well as another "crowned with a tree in his hand") will not have "gorgonesque" characteristics, we will then have to wait for the very last of the apparitions for a veritable spectacle of eight crowned heads to be offered to our sight: "*eight kings, and the last with a glass in his hand: Banquo's Ghost following.*" It is this last apparition that I now want to concentrate on, for the theme of Medusa is definitely intense in it, but another singular element or motif also appears: that of the mirror, "glass." If Marjorie Garber has also analysed this apparition in a highly relevant manner, I can only return to this passage today in the hope of suggesting a *different* interpretation, a *different* analysis which, as we shall see, is diametrically opposed to Garber's.

It should be remembered in the first place that this spectacle/this vision of crowned heads intervenes only after Macbeth has hinted to the three witches to allay his fear with regard to Banquo's lineage: "Yet my heart / Throbs to know one thing: tell me . . . shall Banquo's issue ever/ Reign in this kingdom" (4.1.101-103). This questioning, this inquietude, which has never ceased to gnaw at Macbeth, will find its fatal resolution—in the apparition/the vision conjured up by the three witches. However, we will pick up on the fact, like Garber, that the insistence of the witches on showing this apparition is so over the top that, right away, we know that what Macbeth is on the point of contemplating can only be taboo.[15]

1st Witch: Show!
2nd Witch: Show!
3rd Witch Show!
All the Witches: Show his eyes, and grieve his heart:
Come like shadows, so depart.

A show of eight kings, and the last with a glass in his hand: Banquo's Ghost following

Macbeth: Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo: down!
Thy crown *does sear mine eye-balls.* And thy hair,
Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.
A third is like the former. Filthy hags!
Why do you show me this? – A fourth? Start, *eyes*
What, will the line stretch out to th'crack of doom?
Another yet? A seventh? *I'll see no more*:
And yet the eighth appears, *who bears a glass*
Which shows me many more; and some I see
That two-fold balls and treble sceptres carry.
Horrible sight! … Now I see 'tis true.
For *the blood-bolter'd* Banquo smiles upon me,
And points at them for his. What, is this so?
(3.1.107-24)

No doubt about it, the vision of these crowned heads which float and pass one after the other in front of Macbeth's startled eyes reveals a theme inherent to Gorgô (*sear mine eye-balls*/Start, *eyes*/*Horrible sight*). Moreover, and judging by Macbeth's stupor, everything would lead one to believe that Macbeth is witnessing the setting in motion of a truly *gorgonesque* nebula. But here it is the mirror that the eighth king harbours, reflecting on its surface "many more [kings] to come," that I shall now focus on. The aforementioned study by Marjorie Garber explains that the "reflecting glass" is in the play a means of "transgression of the inside/outside boundary, crossing the barrier that separates the play and its spectators [as well as] the boundary between stage and reality."[16] Having established this circulatory movement between the external and the internal in the play, Garber then goes on to point out that, for Elizabethans and Jacobeans, the word "glass" was not completely contained semantically by the word "mirror," for another definition can be found for it along the lines of "model" or "example,"[17] which seems, besides, to fit with the speech made by James I on 21 March 1609 before Parliament when he asked of them to "look not vpon my Mirrour with a false light."[18] Still, with reference to the mirror shown by the eighth king and according to the research carried out in this field, *Macbeth* would have been performed by the King's Company at Hampton Court, and consequently, it is permissible to think that the mirror in question would have been held out directly to King James, thus reflecting the royal person.

Basing her observations on these elements, Garber suggests that "the reflecting glass or mirror in this scene is the counterpart of Perseus's reflecting shield. . . . In the context of *Macbeth* . . . the glass [that reflects the person of King James] is a *happy spectacle*

demonstrating the long line of kings descended from Banquo, a line which James would doubtless hope to have 'stretch out to th'crack of doom.'"[19] The episode may therefore be said to constitute a desire, according to Garber's own words, to *gratify* and *flatter,* on Shakespeare's part, his king, James I. In other words, James would have found, in the specular instrument that Shakespeare addresses and tends to him, the recognition and the legitimacy of his *Majestas regias,* of his lineage, of his status and his power.[20]

However, it will be agreed, such interpretations leave out the *capital* function played by the mirror in the iconography of Medusa. For the mirror remains, as Perseus has taught us, above all an instrument, a *device* compounded of cunning, a surreptitious and pernicious machine-cum-machination in which Medusa, the subject seizes herself, *is transfixed* in her own reflection. Also, in a context as *petrifying* as that of *Macbeth,* it would perhaps be possible to state (counter to Garber's study) that this scene seems to bring into play *a certain relationship of force,* both *turbulent* and *violent,* from one side to the other, on both sides of the mirror, viz., between Shakespeare the dramatist and King James I. For it will be agreed that from the imaginary fictional scene of the tragedy to the real/royal political scene, what Shakespeare *is aiming at* through the bias of the mirror (in a movement, it seems, that both transgresses and subverts) is the image of the king himself, i.e., the image of power itself (James I) so as to *sui generis* isolate/capture/seize all his power. *The image of power and power of/through image,* it is precisely here in this chiasmus, this crossing place, that all Shakespeare's art will be concentrated, the whole political and poetic project of Shakespeare.

Also, when the eighth king slowly walks forward in front of the audience, presenting a mirror, James *suddenly* and *instantaneously* discovers and identifies himself in the reflective (circular or oblong) surface that Shakespeare deploys before his very eyes. The effect produced will be, without any doubt, of the order of *stupefaction,* of *amazement.* In addition, projected into fictitious stage-space, is not James at this very moment a subject placed *outside himself,* a subject *lost,* immobilised and captured/frozen in the circular band of the mirror? In this way, does he not contemplate, just like Medusa, the *dazzling* performance/representation of his own power, carried to its culmination and even to *excess*? In other words or alternatively *postulated,* does not the last apparition produced and put on stage by Shakespeare reveal a veritable desire to petrify the king himself?

In the same way and/or further*more* (or shall we say here further*less*), if we admit that Shakespeare puts in place quite a *dangerous* circulation of power by means of which the internal aspect of stage-space reflects an *historical* external reality and vice versa, he also puts in place a *space-distance-gap* which is *exactly* the condition on which the portrait of the king in the mirror, the representation of the king, is based and is rendered possible/visible. I am definitely talking here of a hole, of an O, of an empty space, of a nothingness *between* the king and his portrait, but which can be nothing other than a trap through which the fracture of the royal subject is exposed, the schism shown between the theological and political unity of the king's double body (divine body/political body) and whose malign intention is to indicate in an infinitesimal, almost imperceptible moment the "yawning chasm" of King James's power in his portrait—or, in other words, to expose and to signify his own castration.

In the previous pages, it seemed important to go through the key passages in the tragedy of *Macbeth* in which the Medusa Complex lent itself directly to be analysed. It is now time to turn to another Shakespearean tragedy where the figure of Medusa deserves a well-overdue and *careful* scrutiny: *King Lear*. It will therefore now be my task to mark out and confirm the existence of this complex with precise and concrete examples taken from the text itself.

When King Lear walks forward onto the stage carrying in his febrile arms the body of Cordelia, nothing is comparable in intensity to that tragic voice which breaks out into a cry before the transfixed audience, "O you are men of stones" (5.3.256). Everything acts as if the voice of Lear, at that precise moment, unveiled with a tearing breath the true petrified landscape of the tragedy. However, it would be wrong to believe that the awareness of this petrification signifies Medusa's *capital moment* in the tragedy, for this is only about *the aftermath of Medusa*. In other words, what Lear contemplates is nothing other than the result of Medusa's action *once over*. Also, it will be agreed that the reaction, Lear's awareness, seems quite belated, even out of phase, for clues relating to the myth of Gorgô have not stopped being inserted throughout the tragedy and the king's eldest daughters being stigmatized thereby. In order to grasp and to realise what is involved in the process of petrification, in the movement of Medusa *in its happening,* I would take as my starting point the descriptions that Lear, in his anger, speaks out when he perceives that his daughters refuse him all the attention and the privileges that a father (-king) would be entitled to expect. On

learning that Goneril wants to reduce his retinue by half, Lear becomes indignant and exclaims,

> Ingratitude, thou *marble-hearted fiend,*
> More hideous when thou show's thee in a child
> *Than the sea-monster!* (1.4.242-44 [emphasis my own])

In three lines it is granted to us to see the process of petrification at work in Goneril, whom Lear compares to a certain sea-monster. The maritime paradigm used here certainly reminds us, in the first place, of Medusa's genesis. The fruit of the union of two maritime divinities, Phorcys and Ceto, Medusa was transformed into a monster by the goddess Athena, for having succumbed to the charms of the sea-god, Poseidon. But it should also be remembered that it was the decapitated head of Medusa which allowed Perseus to kill the horrible sea-monster, Cetus. This last point would perhaps fit in even more appropriately and relevantly with the words of Lear when the latter describes his daughter, Goneril, as a creature *even more* repulsive and hideous than the sea-monster itself. Even though such a chain of reasoning or such a mutation of the daughters of Lear into monstrous creatures finds itself asseverated much later in the play by the words of Regan's servant, "Women will turn into monster" (3.7.101), and of Albany, "Proper deformity seems not in the fiend/So horrid as in woman" (4.2.60-61), it may also be noted that a certain tension, an ambiguity, an indecisiveness does not cease to work the image, the apparition of Goneril and Regan. It is Lear himself who, confronted by them, will underline this sort of oscillation-vacillation of the aesthetic judgement.

Indeed, when Regan sides with her sister, Goneril, and with the same malignant fervour, to pare down even further her father's royal retinue, his two daughters will appear to Lear's eyes as "*wicked* creatures [and] yet [who] do look *well-favour'd"* (2.4.250). This essentially double-edged ambivalence of character of the king's daughters, which varies between "beauty" and "monstrosity," is also, as has already been pointed out in the introduction to this section, an intrinsic characteristic of the figure and the story of Medusa, at the heart of which opposites come face to face and expose each other.[21] Furthermore, if Medusa, the progeny of Mythology, and the medusas of *King Lear* by Shakespeare share this peculiar aesthetic of the double (janusian) face in which beauty is coupled with horror and horror with beauty, they also and in the same way find a common denominator in the destructive power of sight. And it is in the realm of the visual that, in a quasi-systematic manner, Lear's retorts are organised, faced with the

perverse ingratitude of his eldest daughters. In the passage that I am just about to quote, Lear will point directly at the "bad eye," at the dark and unwholesome look of Goneril, in order to add two other elements relative to the myth of Medusa.

> She . . .
> *Look'd black upon me;* struck me *with her tongue,*
> *Most serpent-like,* upon the very heart.
> All the stor'd vengeances of heaven fall
> On *her ingrateful top*! Strike her young bones.
> You taking airs, with lameness!
> (2.4.153-159 [emphasis my own])

If this chain of images (destructive gaze—vipers—head) is followed, everything would lead us to believe that *The Head of Medusa* by Caravaggio would reappear before our eyes with the facial traits of Goneril. However, the glance cast at him by the latter is for Lear a vision at once unacceptable and unbearable; also he will call forth, in the fire of his anger, flashes of lightning in the sky so that these—endowed with the power to blind—rush forward into the eyes of his daughter:

> *King Lear:* You nimble *lightnings,* dart your *blinding* flames
> *Into* her scornful *eyes*!
> (2.4.159-160 [emphasis my own])

If the powers of the literally gorgonesque sight of Lear's daughters are proven and confirmed by the examples we have analysed above, may it also be pointed out that Albany, the husband of Goneril, seemed already—as proleptically as concretely—to lay a foundation for them when he declared in the presence of his wife, "How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell" (1.4.328). But here the powers inherent in the piercing gaze of Goneril and Regan are still engaged in a process of maturation and preparation. They are only manifested in a state, if I can put it this way, *embryonic* and *latent* and have not applied for the moment their full effects on the play. The powers inherent in this look will, however, be liberated and materialise in their literal and symbolic totality at the moment of the violent enucleation that will strike Gloucester down.

As far as Medusa is concerned, this episode is of *capital* importance, decisive, for it is organised around a sort of *oculocentrism* and underlines at one and the same time the danger that the eye runs faced with Lear's medusas. The scene in question comes in the middle of the play when Gloucester is taken captive by Goneril and Regan for having sent Lear to Dover so that the latter can evade the plot being hatched against him or, as Gloucester will say

himself, "because I would not see thy cruel nails/ Pluck out [Lear's] poor old eyes" (3.7.53-54). No sooner will that remark be uttered than a terrible acting out of it will be sparked off, and Regan and Cornwall, echoing Goneril's first suggestion, will avidly tear his eyes out. Let us also remember this: before the terrible blinding takes place in the person of Gloucester, we should also note anecdotally or even hypothetically that a noteworthy desire to fix, to immobilise comes into play—a desire to petrify we might say—if Regan's violent exhortation for Gloucester to be bound and held fast even more be remembered: "*hard, hard*" (3.7.32). But, whatever the case may be, Gloucester, henceforth, is a blind man. His eyeballs savagely torn out of their sockets, Gloucester now exhibits two gaping and bleeding wounds. These two orifices—these two "bleeding rings / Their precious stones new lost" (5.3.183-84), as his son, Edgar, will describe them two acts further on, from which oozes a viscous and gelatinous substance, a "vile jelly" (3.7.82)—indicate, without any doubt, the loss of the male genitalia, i.e., castration. Indeed, Gloucester's violent enucleation proceeds as a substitute for castration in which there is a sort of correspondence between, on the one hand, eyeballs and male genitals and, on the other, viscous, gelatinous liquid and sperm.

The genital strength of this scene is such that it seems also to reveal characteristics analogous to a passage from Greek mythology in which Ouranos, mutilated by Chronos, sees his genitals cut up and thrown far away into the sea. It is this frothy liquid (*aphros*)—this mixture of water and salt, this effervescent whiteness which, incidentally, gives birth to *Aphro*dite, that must now be emphasized. For, as far as it concerns *King Lear,* this *aquatic pregnance* springing from castration, is certainly an echo of the maritime paradigm that Lear made use of before, relating to his daughter, Goneril: *the sea monster!* (1.4.244). The whole enucleation (castration) scene that we then took to be the acme of the gorgonesque now seems to shift and proceed to engage in a *constant work of displacement* so as to point us in the direction of another scene that is fundamentally *maritime*. It is not by chance, therefore, that Gloucester was sent to "smell his way" (3.7.92) to the cliffs of Dover where the sea is audible ("*Hark,* do you hear the sea?" [4.6.5]) and reveals all sorts of *monsters and marvels,* all sorts of viscous substances and gelatinous masses swimming around in the depths of its cold waters—all sorts of "*jelly* fishes" then, or, as French would term them, *méduses*.[22]

We are now on the cliffs of Dover, next to the sea. Accompanied by Poor Tom/Edgar, "the man worm" (4.1.33), "the naked fellow" (4.1.51) who has left his shelter two acts before,

Gloucester finally arrives at what he takes to be the very edge of the highest cliff of Dover. Just at that moment Poor Tom/Edgar elaborates rigorously and precisely a remarkable verbal perspectivist representation (albeit imaginary), a *perspectiva artificialis,* of a view looking down.[23] Gloucester, at the end of his tether, leans over and *falls* into the illusion:

> Come on, sir; here's the place. Stand still. How fearful
> And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
> The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
> Show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down
> Hangs one that gathers sampire—dreadful trade!
> Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
> The fishermen that walk upon the beach
> Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark,
> Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
> Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge
> That on th'unnumb'red idle pebble chafes
> Cannot be heard so high. I'll look no more,
> Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
> Topple down headlong.
> . . . . . .
> *Gloucester falls forward, and swoons. (*4.6.12-24, 42)

The perspectivist construction of this illusory spectacle seems to reach its fulfilment and to fully attain its objective when Gloucester kneels down and hits the ground of the stage. However, at the sight of Gloucester lying unconscious on the ground, one is entitled to ask why so much art and technical cleverness has been expended in the creation of this illusion—why so much detail, so much sophistication in the evocation/description of this view from the top of the cliff to end up with such an outcome—tragic certainly, but, it must be admitted, *so relatively undramatic in its staging*? Ironically, the illusion of Poor Tom/Edgar would appear to *fall short* or *fall flat* and offer *after the event* [*après coup*] a spectacle that is somewhat comical, almost pathetic, even sadistic, at the expense of an old blind man. The verbal power of Poor Tom's/Edgar's depiction, therefore, terminates at a single *stroke* [*coup*] with the noise of Gloucester's body collapsing on the ground. But just then—*coup de théâtre*—the perspectivist representation resumes and comes not only to offer another panel but also another angle, another point of view on the picture that Poor Tom/Edgar had painted beforehand. We are no longer henceforward on top of the cliff—this time we are beneath, on the same level as the shore, and it is Poor Tom/Edgar, disguised as a Cornish peasant, who will reascend, so to speak, the imaginary cliffs of Dover and open, in a sort of retroactive and inverted dynamic, a new representational/

pictural space in which figures and is delineated the agent who has orchestrated the initial illusion, i.e. Poor Tom/Edgar or, in other words, *himself*.

> *Edgar*: As I stood here below, methought his eyes
> Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses
> Horns whelked and waved like the enridgèd sea.
> It was some fiend. (4.6.69-72)

Here Edgar interpellates and exorcises himself with the description, the image he gives of himself. And it is indeed during this sequence of auto-exorcism that Edgar conjures up the demon [*fiend*] of himself, which has allowed Christopher Pye to argue in his noteworthy study, *The Vanishing,* that this singular description of Edgar overturns the visual scheme: "as if one viewed one's self from the other end of the perspective cone." Edgar, then, becomes the object of his own gaze, "he sees himself seeing himself." This episode clearly recalls—still according to Christopher Pye—"Lacan's claim that . . .a consciousness founded on the illusion of the self 'seeing itself see[ing] itself' makes itself felt in the . . . uncanny, reverting, inside-out structure of the gaze."[24]

But it is precisely this image, this *graphic* echo, which, with regard to the subject of this study, is currently about to capture our full and undivided attention. What is it *exactly* about the image of this monster? What does this perfectly incongruous and physically absurd image having thousands of noses, eyes like moons as well as "horns [that] whelked and waved like the enridgèd sea" signify? It is this same kind of questioning, this same fervent enthusiasm regarding this image that can also be found in the rich study by Scott Wilson on "The Nature of Britain in *King Lear*." Having as its starting point Philip Armstrong's thesis postulating that the image offered by Edgar at the bottom of the cliff is an anamorphic apparition thus denoting "the radical alterity inhabiting the scopic field";[25] and with writing that is sharp and precise, and thought without detours, Scott Wilson writes the following:

> But what beyond (or perhaps before) 'radical alterity' does this … fiend signify? . . .[T]he three main elements—the two moons, the "thousand whelked and horny noses" and the sea itself—suggest both feminine and phallic significations reminiscent of Medusa.…[T]he image of the fiend denotes the radical alterity of the gaze of the Other, since the interpellative power of Medusa's gaze was so strong it turned individual subjects into concrete.[26]

For Scott Wilson the image is assuredly gorgonesque. But he will validate his argument and, in so doing, deploy all his speed of

analysis when, by starting afresh from the first description of Edgar stated from the top of the Dover cliff, he goes to contemplate and examine the image in question—frame by frame—in all its value of movement and regression/diminution:

> Yond tall anchoring bark
> Diminished to her cock, her cock a buoy
> Almost too small for sight (4.6.18-20 Q; 4.5.18-20)
>
> The vanishing point, the point towards which the gaze is directed… the point where the gaze rests at its limit, as the spectacle disappears into the distance, is this 'anchoring bark' reduced to the size of its cock boat. But is there not another way of looking at, or hearing, this perfectly proportioned body at the limit of the gaze? 'Bark' is a frequent metaphor for the human body, here gendered female. It is phallic, it is diminished to a cock, or rather diminished to her cock, which is itself a "boy" almost too small for sight.[27]

It is then that in following with great exactitude the metonymic *displacement* of the elements (bark-cock-buoy) in their sexual meanings, Scott Wilson will see appear—at the vanishing point of the perspectivist construction painted by Edgar—the shape of a *clitoris*. For it is true that the deeply phallic nature of that "bark" which goes on diminishing, becoming almost indiscernible, should give rise not only to the idea of a fatal reduction—of a castration then—but, above all, should yield to the gaze, as Freud's *Abridgement of Psychoanalysis* indicates, a penis, almost invisible and all "*shrivelled up,*" i.e. a clitoris.[28] In conjunction with the violent enucleation (symbolic castration) of Gloucester, which has occurred a few scenes earlier, as well as the systematic bedevilment of Lear's daughters in the play, the image of this clitoris would signify that this *fiend* that Edgar made us see/hear from the bottom of the cliff, would be—Wilson argues most remarkably—the "monstrous figure for female *jouissance*": that is to say, to conclude this paper, the sexual omnipotence of Medusa in *King Lear*.

Notes

1. The study in question is to be found in Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (London: Routledge Literature, 1987), 87-123. I have not taken into account the studies which simply make allusion to the myth of Medusa.

2. I point out (one last time) that the whole expression "Medusa complex" was coined by Gaston Bachelard in "La Rêverie Pétrifiante" in *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris: José Corti, 1948), 208. This seems to have totally escaped the notice of Marjorie Garber.

3. I will not insist further on the ancient and mythical sources which inspired Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale.* I refer the reader in the first place to Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* XV.168-202, but also—something which is all too often forgotten in relation to *The Winter's Tale*—to Prometheus, that exemplary sculptor, who, as myth would have it, gives life and soul to his statues by animating them with his breath (*animae*) (I.363-64).

4. Lynn Enterline, "'You Speak a Language That I Understand Not': The Rhetoric of Animation in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1997): 17-44. Also repeated in *The Rhetoric of the Body: From Ovid to Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Ann Barton(Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 2000).

5. I point out that Leonardo da Vinci had also painted a head of Medusa on a rotella/circular surface, as Giorgio Vasari tells us in the bibliography he devotes to it:

> Leonardo … commincio a pensare quello chi vi si potesse dipignere su, che avesse spaventarechi le venisse contra, rappresentando lo effeto che la testa giàdi Medusa. Porto dunque Leonardo per questo effeto ad una sua stanza, dove non entrava se non egli solo, lucertole, ramarri, grilli, serpe, farfalle, locuste, nottole, ed altre strane spezie di simili animali, da la moltitudine de' quail variamente adatta insieme cavo uno animalaccio molto orribile e spaventoso. *Le vite dei più eccellenti pintori, scultori ed architettori (1550-1568)*, vol. 4 (Firenze: Testo), 21. (*Leonardo began to think what he should paint on it, and resolved to do the Medusa head in order to terrify all beholders. To a room, to which he alone had access, Leonardo took lizards, newts, maggots, snakes, butterflies, locusts, bats, and other animals of the kind, out of which he produced a horrible monster.*)

6. The term "rotella"also has the meaning in Italian of "shield" The picture may therefore be said to play, in the present case, an apotropaic role and, in this sense, has the power to petrify all those who look on it. Medusa is thus an offensive as well as a defensive weapon. On this theme, we remember that when Perseus offered the head of Medusa to the goddess Athena, the latter placed it at the centre of her *aegeis* shield so as to triumph over her enemies. Confronted by the picture of *The Head of Medusa,* I shall show, in the course of our analysis, the limits of this apotropaic picture.

7. On the theme of decapitation in Caravaggio's work, I refer the reader to the article by Louis Marin, "L'Épreuve du Temps," special issue, *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 49 (1990): 55-68, and his work *Détruire la peinture* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), 152 and following.

8. Marin, "L'Épreuve du Temps," 154 and following.

9. Let us also remember that the term used in rhetoric, "caesura," comes from the Latin *caedere*, meaning "to cut."

10. For a psychoanalytical analysis of the theme of decapitation in the work of Caravaggio insofar as it relates to castration, I refer the reader to the study by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "Losing it," in *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 85-99.

11. Sigmund Freud, "La Tête de Méduse" in *Œuvres complètes,* vol. 16 (1922/1940; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991); emphasis my own.

12. Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, 108. We must also ask ourselves a question about Lady Macbeth's function in this passage, for she seems to

actively participate in the Medusa Complex, if not to actually play the part of understudy to it. Such a hypothesis could find a most interesting echo if it is remembered that Lady Macbeth invoked the forces of evil by crying out, "Unsex me here"—it would seem that in this passage it is well and truly her husband whom she desires to "unsex." Lady Macbeth would appear on this basis to be the incarnation of castration. Such suggestions would be, however, partly contrary to Garber's argument when the latter writes, "*Macbeth* resists . . . the tendency to [read] the play in terms of anxiety about female power. Power in *Macbeth* is a function of neither the male nor the female but the suspicion of the undecidable" (110). For a comparable discussion about the theme of "female power" in *Macbeth*, I refer the reader in particular to the study by Janet Adelman, "'Born of Woman': Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*" in *Macbeth: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Alan Sinfield (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1992), 53-68. Adelman argues that "the whole of the play represents in very powerful form both the fantasy of a virtually absolute and destructive maternal power and the fantasy of absolute escape from this power."

13. François Rabelais, "Le Quart Livre," Chap. 47 in *Œuvres complètes,* Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 666-67. I also stress that the female genitalia as Rabelais indicates and underlines, "son comment a nom?" ("her what's-its-name ?"), is not named or determined by a name here. The vagina comes under the realm of the taboo, the forbidden—of what, such as Medusa, cannot and must not be named or even seen.

14. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Le Châtiment comme destin," in *L'Esprit du christianisme et son destin*, trans. Jean Martin (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2003), 53.

15. Garber, 115; emphasis mine.

16. Ibid., 116.

17. On the subject of the term "glass," it could be added that this term also had a particular meaning in the popular Elizabethan spectacles called "Mummers" plays or, yet again, among other expressions, "Sword dances." It was a particular kind of dance that consisted of placing swords around the neck of a dancer to depict his decapitation. This information foreshadows, as we shall see, the conclusion of our argument. For an analysis of the term "glass" with regard to the spectacles and feasts of Shakespeare's time, I can refer the reader to the seminal work by François Laroque, "Shakespeare et la fête," in *Essai d'archéologie du spectacle dans l'Angleterre élizabéthaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 56.

18. Charles Howard, ed., *The Political Works of James I, reprinted from the Edition of 1616* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918), 325; also cited by Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, 117.

19. Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, 117; emphasis my own.

20. For a reading of Macbeth considered from the angle of flattery/gratification with regard to James I, I refer the reader to the study by J.W. Draper, "'Macbeth' as a Compliment to James I," *Englische Studien* 72 (1937-1938): 207-20.

21. For an in-depth study of the evolution of Medusa as a theme inherent to Art History, I refer the reader once again to the work by Jean Clair, *Méduse, contribution à une anthropologie des arts du visuel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

22. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the seventeenth century (the *Oxford English Dictionary* also draws attention to it), the association of

ideas "jelly/sperm" only seems to find its semantic setting in an aquatic/maritime context, as John Donne's 1601 work, "The Progresse of the Soule," attests to, in which one can read, "A female fishes sandie Roe/ With the males jelly, newly lev'ned was." (A. J. Smith, ed., *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* [London: Penguin Classics, 1996]).

On the subject of jellyfish with regard to the Medusa myth, I would remind the reader that Roland Barthes, in his work *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, also relies on this correspondence between the myth of Gorgô and the gelatinous sea-creature, surrounded by tentacles with stinging and urticant powers, in order to formulate a metaphorical representation of "Doxa" (public opinion). (Éric Marty, ed., *Roland Barthes, Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 4, 1972-1976 [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002], 697-98).

It is also important to remember that this correspondence is not just due to French serendipity. We also find it in English poetry. Sylvia Plath's 1962 poem entitled "Medusa" plays on the similarity between Aurelia and Aurela, the first word being the Christian name of Sylvia Plath's mother and the second being the Latin name of a genus of jellyfish. (Plath, "Perseus" and "Medusa" in *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes, (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 206-208, 224-26.

23. The study by Jonathan Goldberg has shown, remarkably, that this spectacular view afforded by Poor Tom/Edgar to the imagination/gaze is rigorously constructed around the Albertian principles of perspectivist construction. See Jonathan Goldberg, "Perspectives: Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation" in *Shakespeare's Hand* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 142.

24. Christopher Pye, *The Vanishing: Shakespeare, the Subject, and Early Modern Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 93.

25. Philip Armstrong, "Uncanny Spectacles: Psychoanalysis and the Texts of King Lear," *Textual Practice* 8 no. 2, (1994): 414-34.

26. Scott Wilson, "Enjoying The Nature of Britain in King Lear," Chap. 7 in *Cultural Materialism, Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 162.

27. Ibid.

28. A work of Sigmund Freud written in 1938, published posthumously, *Abrégé de psychanalyse (Abridgement of Psychoanalysis)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949), 65.