

VISIBLE SPIRIT
THE ART OF
GIANLORENZO BERNINI

VOL. II

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XXI

Bernini's Bust of the Medusa: An Awful Pun

AS an intellectual discipline the history of art has labored under what might be called an endemic disability when it comes to expressing visual ideas in words. It is a well-known fact that antiquity left nothing for the visual arts to compare with the vast body of classical theory and criticism centered upon the expressive and persuasive use of words, or rhetoric, in various literary genres. A consequence of this discrepancy is that much of the language of art that developed subsequently, notably in the Renaissance, was borrowed from the domain of literature, especially poetry.¹ The title of the present paper adopts, *faute de mieux*, one of these loan concepts in two forms, in name and in example, in order to convey the thought which, as I believe, underlies one remarkable work of visual art. In English, the term “pun,” meaning specifically the equivocal use of a single word with more than one meaning, is itself singularly appropriate to its meaning because its origin is quite mysterious — the etymological equivalent, as it were, of the uncanny, illuminating effect such plays on words can sometimes achieve.² And “awful” is here meant to suggest both that which is reprehensible, and that which is terrifying, stunning — in the present case, indeed, petrifying.

* * *

¹ The point is made in the classic study by Lee 1967, 6f.

² See *Oxford* 1961, VIII, 1594, center column.

I take as my point of departure what seems to me one of the most startling and least appreciated of the numerous *obiter dicta* by and attributed to Bernini in the contemporary sources.³ The statement is recorded, in slightly varying form, indirectly by his biographers, Baldinucci and his son Domenico Bernini, and in Bernini's own words in Chantelou's diary of the artist's visit to Paris in 1665: "He said that among the works of antiquity, the Laocoön and the Pasquino contain, in themselves, all the best of art, since one sees in them all that is most perfect reproduced without the affectation of art (Figs. 1–4). The most beautiful statues existing in Rome were those in the Belvedere and among those still whole the Laocoön, for its expression of emotion, and in particular for the intelligence it displays in that leg which, already being affected by the poison, seems to be numb. He said, however, that the Torso (Fig. 5) and the Pasquino seemed to him more perfect stylistically than the Laocoön itself, but that the latter was whole while the others were not. The difference between the Pasquino and the Torso is almost imperceptible, not to be discerned except by a great man, and the Pasquino was rather better. He was the first in Rome to place the Pasquino in the highest esteem, and it is said that he was once asked by someone from beyond the Alps which was the most beautiful statue in Rome, and that when he responded, the Pasquino, the foreigner thought he was mocking him and was ready to come to blows."⁴ Bernini's assertion was

³ The basic studies of Bernini's views on art and art theory remain those of Barton 1945–7 and Schudt 1949.

⁴ The texts concerning Bernini and the Pasquino, on which I have commented in another context (Lavin 1990, 32), are as follows: M. le nonce, changeant de matière, a demandé au Cavalier laquelle des figures antiques il estimait davantage. Il a dit que c'était le Pasquin, et qu'un cardinal lui ayant un jour fait la même demande, il lui avait répondu la même chose, ce qu'il avait pris pour une raillerie qu'il faisait de lui et s'en était fâché; qu'il fallait bien qu'il n'eut pas lu ce qu'on en avait écrit, et que le Pasquin était une figure de Phidias ou de Praxitèle et représentait le serviteur d'Alexandre, le soutenant quand il reçut un coup de flèche au siège de Tyr; qu'à la vérité, mutilée et ruinée comme est cette figure, le reste de beauté qui y est n'est connu que des savants dans le dessin. (Chantelou 1885, 25f.) Diceva che il Laocoonte e il Pasquino nell'antico avevano in sé tutto il buono dell'arte, perchè vi si scorgeva imitato tutto il più perfetto della natura, senza affettazione dell'arte. Che le più belle statue che fossero in Roma eran quelle di Belvedere e fra quelle dico fra le intiere, il Laocoonte per l'espressione dell'affetto, ed in particolare per l'intelligenza che si scorge in quella gamba, la quale per esser ve già arrivato il veleno, apparisce intirizzata; diceva però, che il Torso ed il Pasquino gli parevano di più perfetta maniera del Laocoonte stesso, ma che questo era intero e gli altri no. Fra il Pasquino ed il Torso esser la differenza quasi impercettibile, nì potersi ravvisare se non da uomo grande e più tosto migliore essere il Pasquino. Fu il primo il Bernino che mettesse questa statua in altissimo credito in Roma e raccontasi che

the more provocative in that the Pasquino was the most notorious of the “speaking statues” of Rome to which the common, and often the “uncommon” populous, like Aretino, Bembo, Francesco Berni, gave voice by affixing to the disfigured and disreputable sculpture acerbic, mocking diatribes against the august and powerful, written in vulgar (in terms of content as well language) prose and poetry (Fig. 6).

It should be said at once that Bernini was not the first to appreciate the Pasquino; even the popular Rome guidebooks pointed out the high quality of the group.⁵ But as far as I can discover, Bernini was indeed the first (and perhaps also the last) to give it the highest rating among the statues of Rome. That he meant the evaluation seriously is evident from the critical compositional role the Pasquino played throughout the early series of heroic male figures, Aeneas, Neptune, Pluto, and David; the theme reverberates again years later in the centerpiece of the Fontana del Moro — perhaps with a particular significance, since the fountain is located in the Piazza Navona, adjacent to the Piazza Pasquino (Figs. 7–11).⁶

essendogli una volta stato domandato da un oltramontano qual fusse la più bella statua di quella città e rispondendo che il Pasquino, il forestiero che si credette burlato fu per venir con lui a cimento. (Baldinucci 1948 [1682], 146) Con uguale attenzione pose il suo studio ancora in ammirar le parti di quei due celebri Torsi di Hercole, e di Pasquino, quegli riconosciuto per suo Maestro dal Buonarota, questi dal Bernino, che fu il primo, che ponesse in alto concetto in Roma questa nobilissima Statua; Anzi avvenne, che richiesto una volta da un nobile forastiere Oltramontano. Quale fosse la Statua più riguardevole in Roma? e rispostogli, Che il Pasquino, quello diè sù le furie, stimandosi burlato, e poco mancò, che non venisse a cimento con lui; E di questi due Torsi era solito dire, che contenevano in se tutto il più perfetto della Natura senza affettazione dell'Arte. (Bernini 1713, 13f.)

⁵ See Lavin 1990, 43 n. 51

⁶ It might be said that Bernini's preoccupation with the Pasquino distinguishes the contrapostal action of his figures, which he developed from the serpentine movement he learned from his father: compare Pietro Bernini's St. John the Baptist in S. Andrea della Valle (Lavin 1968b, where the infusion of the spirit of antiquity generally in Bernini's early work is stressed). Nor was Bernini's interest in the Pasquino purely formal. He certainly appreciated the tradition of anonymous public satire with which the sculpture was associated, since he undoubtedly referred to it (rather than himself, as usually assumed) when he spoke of “someone” in Rome “à qui le public a toujours rendu la justice qui était due à son savoir, quelque chose qu'on ait pu dire et faire contre lui; ce qui fait voir que si le particulier est injuste à Rome, enfin le public ne l'est pas” (Chantelou 1885, 59); Bernini may have linked this high moral function with the noble style of the work. Although identifications varied, all understood the group as portraying an heroic action of salvation; see Haskell and Penny 1981, 192. D'Onofrio 1986, 444, also notes the relation of the Moro to the Pasquino.

Among the many points of interest in this anecdote, two concern me here. The first arises from the fact, surprising to our modern sensibility, that Bernini found in the Laocoön and the Pasquino all the perfection of nature, *without* the affectation of art. Conversely, Bernini's esteem for the emotional content of the Laocoön is hardly a surprise coming from the Italian Baroque artist *par excellence*. It is important to learn, however, that the full- or indeed overblown visual rhetoric we tend to perceive in Hellenistic style, Bernini regarded not even as a justifiable exaggeration but as the epitome of naturalism. And we can only understand his emphasis on the Laocoön's unaffected naturalness in the expression of emotions, in terms of an ideal or heroic notion of beauty — precisely the concept implicit in his view that the sculpture comprised all the good in art because it reflected all the most perfect in nature. Particularly moving in his eulogy — and this is the second point in the passage I want to address — is the fine subtlety with which he singles out for praise the leg that rigidifies (*intirizzata*) at the first touch of the serpent's fangs. Virgil in his famous description of the event makes no reference to such a process, and it seems clear that Bernini understood this transformation as a metaphor for the miraculous paradox of the sculptor's capacity to bring stone to life by portraying the onset of *rigor mortis*.⁷

In my view Bernini in this passage must have had in mind a modern work he greatly admired and carefully studied, the Farnese Gallery, where Annibale Carracci had manipulated the heritage of antiquity with grandiose artificiality in order to demonstrate the power of art (the power of love, in terms of the mythological narrative) to obliterate the distinction between fact and fiction (Fig. 12).⁸ This artifice was patently evident in what might be called the double *paragone* embedded in the complex imagery and formal illusionism of the frescoed ceiling: *ut pictura poesis* with respect to the relationship between two temporal states, the past made present by words (mainly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* — itself, after all, a text about magical transformations of reality) and their visual equivalents in paint and stone; and *ut pictura sculptura* with respect to the relationship between two existential states, one polychrome but painted on a flat surface (that is, visually

⁷ *Aeneid* II, 199–227; Virgil 1999, I, 330f..

⁸ The amatory theme of the gallery has been emphasized above all by Dempsey (most recently, 1995). The vault bears the date 1600, evidently in reference to the marriage in that year of Ranuccio Farnese to Margherita Aldobrandini; one of the scenes, *The Rape of Cephalus*, corresponds to a play by Gabriello Chiabrera produced for another marriage in the same year (Lavin 1954, 278–84).

true but physically false), the other monochrome but sculpted in the round (that is, visually false but physically true).⁹

Specifically, Bernini's observation concerning the Laocoön's leg inevitably calls to mind what were perhaps the most conspicuous and portentous depictions of such a transformation, the pictures of Perseus rescuing Andromeda and slaying Phineus on the facing end walls of the Farnese Gallery (Figs. 13–15). In the first scene the pale coloration of the body of Andromeda seems to allude to Ovid's comparison of her nude body chained to the rock as resembling a marble sculpture; and for the episode of Perseus killing the sea monster, Carracci adopted a version of the story in which Perseus dispatches the beast not with a sword, as in Ovid, but by petrifying it with the head of Medusa, a process that the stony color of the animal indicates has already begun. In the Phineus scene the competition among the arts in the representation of nature is given an additional turn through a specific reference to one of the acknowledged masterpieces of antiquity. Perseus wields the Medusa's head toward the enemy band, while Phineus recoils in fear, his upper body undergoing the unholy transformation from flesh to stone — metamorphosed proleptically into its obvious sculptured prototype, the Belvedere Torso (Fig. 5).¹⁰ Given the exalted reputation of the Torso, Carracci's reference to it here constitutes an ironic thrust in the epic battle of the visual paragone. Having intruded in Perseus' wedding feast to abduct the bride, the defeated Phineus pleads for mercy. Perseus responds ironically by sparing his cringing enemy a proper warrior's death by the sword, and using instead the Medusa's head to turn him into "a monument" of stone for permanent display in his father-in-law's house.¹¹ The putatively heroic remnant of the classical sculptor's art thus embodies

⁹ On the significance for Bernini of this aspect of the illusionism of the Farnese Gallery see Lavin 1980, 42–5. On the Gallery in general in relation to the painting-sculpture *paragone* see Scott 1988. The literary paragone of sculpture with *poesis* as metamorphosis has not been extensively explored; references will be found in Preimesberger 1989, Barolsky 1996, Schmidt 1998, and especially Bolland 2000. On Dante's Medusa in this context, see Freccero 1979.

¹⁰ On these transformations see Scott 1988, 252f., Dempsey 1995, 95f. Bellori carefully noted the color changes in these scenes (see n. 13 below). For repercussions of these themes in Rubens, see Muller 1981–2.

¹¹ *Metamorphoses* V, 226–8; Ovid 1984, I, 254f.: "nullo violabere ferro. quin etiam mansura dabo monumenta per aevum, inque domo soceri semper spectabere nostri."

one of antiquity's notorious cowards!¹² The conceit — painting recreates the transformation words can only describe and sculpture can only recall — is epitomized in the story of Perseus and the Medusa, which Carracci co-opts as a metaphor for the virtue of the Farnese, and himself.¹³

¹² The irony — one is tempted to call it persiflage — is augmented by the reference in the pose of the figure as a whole to a famous ancient warrior type, the “kneeling Persian”; see Marzik 1986, 113 n. 3, Scott 1988, 253 n. 15.

¹³ Bellori's Christian-moralizing interpretation of the vault of the Farnese gallery has been rejected by recent scholarship, but the significance of the Perseus scenes on the walls as an allegory of Virtue cannot, and has not been doubted: Dempsey 1968, 365; Posner 1971, 123. A politicizing view of the Gallery has been offered by Marzik 1986, while the ethical content of the wall scenes has been reconfirmed by Reckermann 1991, 98–103.

In Bellori's interpretation Perseus, representing reason, prudence, and honesty in the defeat of vice, may be an allegory of the artist himself, who rescues beauty by his transformative power, which Bellori likens to that of the poet. “Ma, per toccare la moralità della favola, Perseo viene inteso per la ragione dell'animo, la quale riguardando nello scudo di Pallade e regolandosi con la prudenza, tronca il capo al vizio figurato in Medusa, mentre gli uomini affissandosi in esso senza consiglio divengono stupidi e di sasso” (Bellori 1976, 54); “. . . Perseo, cioè la ragione, e l'amor dell'onesto . . .” (77). Bellori emphasizes the intellectual content of the Farnese gallery: “dobbiamo avvertire che la loro forma richiede spettatore attento ed ingegnoso, il cui giudizio non resta nella vista ma nell'intelletto” (56). For Bellori the essence of Carracci's portrayals of the Perseus episodes are the material transformations, not only of living beings but also of inanimate things into stone, thus equaling the poet's capacity to give life to objects by making them participants in human emotions: “tiene per li cappelli la formidabil testa di Medusa e l'oppono contro la balena, che già impallidisce in sasso e diviene immobile scoglio” (73; and 54, as above); “. . . Tessalo, il quale vibrando l'asta ed opponendo lo scudo, in quest'atto in cui si muove resta immobile e cangiando in bianca pietra” (74); “. . . e 'l compagno che lo segue di fianco, armato anch'egli, s'inridisce in bianca pietra” (74); “. . . Fineo supplice e genuflesso, che avendo riguardato Medusa, in quel punto allora s'indurisce in sasso, serbando il senso stesso con cui si raccomanda, ed una morte con l'altra commuta. Questa figura tutta ignuda è differente dall'altre nella sua trasformazione, vedendosi con tutto il petto di bianco marmo e 'l resto del corpo in varia mistione tra 'l sangue vitale e la riggidezza della pietra, contaminate le coscie da pallida inarazione” (74); “. . . In questa favola Annibale, all'uso de' poeti si servì dell'impossibilità per iacrescere la meraviglia, dando senso alle cose inanimate; poiche si rende impossibile per natural che l'armi e le vesti di gli assaltatori di Perseo restino impietrite da Medusa, non avendo nè vista nè vita. Questa impossibilità e falsificazione di natura fu usato da' poeti con le virtù varie attribuite all'armi favolose, alle pietre ed alli sassi, facendoli partecipi d'umani affetti” (74). And he cites Ovid himself who refers to the defeated companions of Phineus as armed statues: “ed Ovidio stesso descrivendo questa favola chiama statue armate li trasformati assaltatori . . .” (74f.). And to complete the paragone metaphor Bellori describes the paintings as Annibale's most noble poem, in which the artist was so elevated by his ingenuity

I believe that Carracci's display of artifice in the service of truth was crucial to the genesis — by a process of visual and conceptual inversion, a sculptor's *paragone* — of one of Bernini's most remarkable and least considered works. I refer to the *Medusa* in the Capitoline Museum (Figs. 16, 17, 18), which bears an enigmatic inscription on its pedestal recording that it was donated by Marchese Francesco Bichi in 1731, and describing it as the work of a "most celebrated sculptor," who is not named.¹⁴ Although the sculpture is otherwise undocumented, its stunning (I use the word advisedly, as will become evident) quality — the powerfully expressive physiognomy and the brilliant display of technical virtuosity in the fragile locks, twisted, perforated and daringly suspended in space — inevitably evoke Bernini's name, and the attribution to him has been generally accepted.¹⁵

that he won immortal praise: "Pose nel vero Annibale ogni più esquisita industria nel ritrovare ed ordinare le favole con gli episodii di questo suo nobilissimo poema; così può chiamarsi tutto il componimento, nel quale egli prevalse tanto e tanto si elevò con l'ingegno, che acquistossi al nome suo un'ornatis simo lode immortale" (75).

¹⁴ "The image of Medusa once inscribed on the shields of the Romans to the terror of their enemies, now shines in the Capitol, the glory of a most celebrated sculptor. The gift of Marchese Francesco Bichi Consul in the month of March of the year of Our Lord 1771." MEDUSAE IMAGO IN CLYPEIS/ ROMANORUM AD HOSTIUM/ TERROREM OLIM INCISA/ NUNC CELEBERRIMI/ STATURARIJ GLORIA SPLENDET/ IN CAPITOLIO/ MUNUS MARCH:/ FRANCISCI BICHI CONS:/ MENSE MARTIJ/ ANNO D/ MDCCXXXI (Forcella 1869–84, I, 78, No. 230). Bichi was elected Capitoline Consul of Rome in 1731 and 1740 (Forcella 1869–84, XII, 13, 14).

The Bichi were an important old Sienese family. As we shall see, the most likely candidate as recipient of the sculpture would be Cardinal Alessandro Bichi (1596–1657), who shares a splendid tomb with his brother Celio (1600–1657), including remarkably fine portrait busts of both, in the church of S. Sabina (Darsy 1961, 134f., 143; see the biographical inscription in Forcella 1869–84, VII, 313, no. 640). Alessandro was a particular protégé of Bernini's patrons Urban VIII and Alexander VII, Celio a notable jurist of the Roman Curia. A portrait of Cardinal Antonio Bichi (1614–1691), nephew of Alexander VII, was made by Bernini's pupil Baciccio (Matitti, ed., 1994, 61, fig. 63). On Alessandro, Antonio and Celio see *Dizionario* 1960ff., X, 334–47). My search for documentation concerning the Medusa bust in the Bichi family archive (Bichi Ruspoli 1980) were unsuccessful; see also the catalogue entry by Cirulli, 1999.

¹⁵ First published and attributed to Bernini by Fraschetti 1900, 405, who mentions two bronze (*recte* marble) copies in the Louvre, and notes the attribution to Bernini by Nibby in 1838–41, II, 626; Wittkower 1981, 208f.; Nava Cellini at first doubted but later, 1988, 30, emphatically affirmed the attribution ("...inconfutabile e l'opera dichiara, a chi l'esamina senza pregiudizio, tutta la sua suggestione ed anche la rarità del suo significato"); Fagiolo dell'Arco 1967, cat. no. 83; aspects of the iconography of the sculpture have been discussed by Posèq 1993. The extremities of the interlace of snakes have been broken off at many points, so the sculptural pyrotechnics would have been even more spectacular originally.

I want to discuss certain aspects of the sculpture that have not been commented upon, and which together help to define its distinctive character and significance.

The physiognomy and expression are quite different from the riveting repulsiveness frequently attributed to the Medusa, as in Caravaggio's famous version of Minerva's shield (Figs. 19–21), and Rubens's depiction of her decapitated head (Figs. 22, 23). Bernini's Medusa also seems to reflect the tradition, exemplified by the "dangerous beauty" of the famous Medusa mask from the Palazzo Rondinini (Fig. 24), that she was the most beautiful of the three Gorgon sisters, and the only one who was mortal; her deadly appearance was Minerva's punishment for having defiled the temple of the maiden goddess of truth and wisdom.¹⁶ This sort of maleficent vanity and flirtation with beauty was actually focused on the venomous hair: Lucan writes that Medusa was by nature evil, and that the snaky tresses actually pleased her, like the stylish coiffeurs that women wore.¹⁷ Moreover, rather than screaming out her horrendous cry, Bernini's Medusa seems to suffer a kind of deep, moral pathos, a conscious, almost meditative anguish

¹⁶ *Metamorphoses* IV, 794–803; Ovid 1984, I 234f. On the Rondanini Medusa, the most famous of many examples of the "beautiful" Medusa type presumably invented by Phidias, see Viernseil-Schlörb 1979, 62–7; its history can be traced to the early seventeenth century in Rome. On the "humanization" by Phidias of the grotesque Gorgoneion of early Greek art, see classic study by Buschor 1958, whose brilliant insight is epitomized by his phrase "gefährliche Schönheit." (p. 39). On the many permutations of the Medusa Ronadanini, see Noelke 1993.

¹⁷ *The Civil War* IX, 628–37; Lucan 1928, 552f.: In her body, Malignant nature first bred these cruel plagues; from her throat were born the snakes that poured forth shrill hissing with their forked tongues. It pleased Medusa, when snakes dangled close against her neck; in the way that women dress their hair, the vipers hang loose over her back but rear erect over her brow in front; and their poison wells out when the tresses are combed. These snakes are the only part of ill-fated Medusa that all men may look upon and live.

Hoc primum natura nocens in corpore saevas
 Eduxit pestes ; illis e faucibus angues
 Stridula fuderunt vibratis sibila linguis.
 Ipsa flagellabant gaudentis colla Medusae,
 Femineae cui more comae per terga solutae
 Surgunt adversa subrectae fronte colubrae,
 Vipereumque fluit depexo crine venenum.
 Hoc habet infelix, cunctis inpune, Medusa,
 Quod spectare licet.

of the soul; this affective passion is clearly related to, but also quite different from the utter abandon of Bernini's bust of the *Damned Soul*, with which the Medusa is often compared, conceived as the counterpiece to his *Blessed Soul* (Figs. 25, 26). I think it no accident that in discussing the Medusa, and affirming the attribution to Bernini, Antonia Nava Cellini, with her wonted perspicuity, compared the head to the splendid *réprise* of the head of Laocoön in the Galleria Spada, which Italo Faldi had earlier attributed to Bernini (Fig. 27).¹⁸ As we shall see presently, I suspect that the peculiar expressive quality of the Capitoline head has a significance of its own. Here I want to emphasize the irony that, in this sense, the sculpture, in contrast to what might be called the hyper-realism of the paintings by Caravaggio and Rubens, has the "natural" affectivity Bernini admired in the ancient works.

The Capitoline sculpture owes much of its impact to the fact that it is an independent, free-standing work of art. In the case of the Medusa, whose *raison d'être*, as it were, consists in her severed head, this isolation and self-sufficiency constitutes a startlingly evocative visual pun. The nearest precedent for a Medusa's head sculpted fully in the round — also evocative of the Rondanini Medusa's "dangerous beauty" — was brandished before the people of Florence by Cellini's great figure of Perseus in the Loggia dei Lanzi (Figs. 28, 29). Despite the obvious differences both in form and context, I doubt whether the Capitoline sculpture would have been conceived without Cellini's example, and not only for formal reasons. The Perseus was endowed with an unequivocal ethical and political message, as a warning to the actual and potential enemies of Duke Cosimo de' Medici, liberator and defender of the Florentine Andromeda.¹⁹ The bronze Perseus was also

¹⁸ Faldi 1977.

¹⁹ See Braunfels 1948, 3–7; further to the Medicean political symbolism of the sculpture in Mandel 1996, with intervening literature. I would add that the "beaux gestes" of Perseus-Cosimo, brandishing head in one hand and sword in the other, seem to recreate the explicit message of the emperor Commodus menacing the senators of Rome from the amphitheater: "And here is another thing that he did to us senators which gave us every reason to look for our death. Having killed an ostrich and cut off his head, he came up to where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and in his right hand raising aloft his bloody sword; and though he spoke not a word, yet he wagged his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way." Dio, *Roman History* LXXIII, 21; Dio 1982, IX, 112–5.

understood as a victorious paragon in relation to its petrified predecessors placed nearby, the *David* of Michelangelo and especially the *Hercules and Cacus* of Baccio Bandinelli, Cellini's hated rival.²⁰ I suspect that the paragone may also underlie the Medusa motif that appears at the end of the sixteenth century in the famous fresco of the *Apotheosis of the Artist* by Federico Zuccari in his Roman palace. There the Medusa shield — painted in color to suggest metal sculpture, which can be imitated in painting, whereas in stone the reverse is impossible — appears as a trophy at the feet of the triumphantly enthroned artist who wields the pen of *disegno* and the brush of painting (Fig. 30).²¹

In another respect the Capitoline sculpture differs from Cellini's, and indeed from all previous depictions of the subject, as far as I can discover. The work does not actually represent the head of Medusa, as normally conceived. Part of the essence of the myth involves the severed head alone, its use as a physiognomical talisman with fascinating eyes and dripping blood that engendered the myriad serpents of the Libyan desert.²² Bernini's sculpture, however, does not represent the head alone, but a bust of the Medusa; it is not a transfiguration of the mortal apotropaion as such, but a portrait of the "living" monster. As a portrait bust Medusa herself has been metamorphosed into stone, and in this context the image seems to make still another pun, this time on the traditional topos of the portrait as an analogue of the living subject. One of the most celebrated instances is in fact another anecdote recounted by Bernini himself and his biographers about his portrait of Monsignor Pedro de Foix Montoya (Fig. 31). Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, the future Urban VIII, with various other prelates, visited Bernini's studio and saw the bust, just as the sitter himself entered the room. By way of introduction, one of the visitors said of the portrait, "This is Montoya turned to stone"; to which Cardinal Barberini added, addressing the sitter, "This is the portrait of Monsignor Montoya", and, turning to the sculpture, "and this is Monsignor Montoya".²³ The anecdote, and the

One also wonders whether Cellini's conception, which is based on Etruscan bronze statuettes (Braunfels 1948), might have engendered the other familiar traditions of heroic victors displaying the repugnant heads of defeated monsters: David with the head of Goliath, Judith with the head of Holofernes.

²⁰ See Shearman 1992, 46–57, 2000.

²¹ Acidini Luchinat 1998–9, II, 207–9; Hermann Fiore 1979, 60f., identifies the shield as an attribute of Hercules

²² *Metamorphoses* IV, 618–20; Ovid 1984, I, 222f.

²³ Baldinucci 1948, 76; cf. Bernini 1713, 16; Chantelou 1885, 17.

phraseology as well, are redolent of the story of the Medusa, except that in the Capitoline bust the conceit, or rather the wizardry of the artist, is turned against the Medusa herself.

To make a free-standing portrait bust of the Medusa is a stunning idea, comparable indeed to Bernini's equally unprecedented depictions of human souls as portrait busts: independent, self-contained images of extreme psycho-theological states.²⁴ But whereas in the "soul portraits" the bust form served to evoke the disembodied human spirit, in this case the "mezzo busto," as the type was frequently termed in contemporary sources, was a kind of existential metaphor for the fact that the Medusa was indeed only half-human, part woman part bestial. I suspect, however, that here the bust form also had an affective significance, alluding to the power of the sculptor, and the sculptor alone, physically to mimic human nature in its most terrifying, and terrified, aspect.

Bernini must have been familiar with the famous madrigal written by Giambattista Marino to celebrate Caravaggio's Medusa shield, then in the collection of Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici, to whom it had been presented as a wedding gift.²⁵ The poem, which is included in the section devoted to painting in Marino's collection of poetic evocations of works of visual art, *La Galeria*, is significant in our present context because it makes two important inversions of the classical story. Perseus had avoided being petrified by looking at the Medusa only as a reflection in Minerva's polished shield. Mirror imagery was thus inherent in the classical Medusa story.²⁶ But Marino's poem begins by referring to the enemies who will be turned to stone by looking upon the Grand Duke's painted shield: "Now what enemies would not be quickly turned to cold stone regarding that fearsome and cruel Gorgon in your shield...?"²⁷ Caravaggio's image, which in the classical story can only be a mirror, has instead the wondrous power of reality

²⁴ On Bernini's "soul portraits" see Lavin 1993; on the evocative nature of the bust form, Lavin 1970, and Lavin 1975.

²⁵ See the rich discussion of the Caravaggio-Marino relationship and its implications for the poetry-painting paragone, by Cropper 1991. Caravaggio's picture has inspired a large bibliography recent years, including much new iconographical material: Marini 2001, 178f, 180f., 414–7; Caneva 2002, *Caravaggio* 2004

²⁶ On the mirror motif in the classical Medusa story, see the many astute observations in Ziegler 1926, and Vernant 1991, 95–111 ("In the Mirror of Medusa").

²⁷ "Or quai nemici fian, che freddi marmi/ non divengan repente/ in mirando, Signor, nel vostro scudo/ quel fier Gorgone, e crudo..." (Marino 1979, I, 31).

itself: like the actual Medusa, it can turn the Duke's adversaries to stone. The poem concludes by transferring the Medusa's power to the Duke, declaring that Ferdinando's real defense, his "true Medusa," is his own valor: "But yet! That formidable monster is of little use among your weapons, since the true Medusa is your valor."²⁸ Marino's association of personal virtue with the power of the Medusa was, following the leads of Cellini and Carracci, a critical step in transforming the image into a sort of reverse reflection of personal rectitude. A further step occurs in two, less well-known poems, a madrigal and a sonnet, which Marino included in the section of *La Galeria* called "Statue." Here portrayals of the Medusa are indeed treated as independent, sculptured images. Both poems are based on the conceit that, unlike Caravaggio's picture, the Medusa, which turns viewers into stone, is itself here turned to stone. In the madrigal the image speaks: "I know not if I was sculpted by mortal chisel, or if by gazing into a clear glass my own glance made me so."²⁹ In the sonnet, the poet speaks: "Still alive one admires the Medusa in living stone; and whoever turns his eyes toward her is by stupor stoned. Wise sculptor, you so vivify marble that beside the marble the living are marble."³⁰ Although to my knowledge there is no classical warrant for the idea that the Medusa was turned to stone, it was not Marino's invention.³¹ He was preceded and no doubt inspired by a poem by the Andrian poet Luigi Groto, entitled, significantly, "Scoltura di Medusa": "This is not a sculpture by him who changed it into stone, but

²⁸ "Ma che! Poco fra l'armi/ a voi fia d'uopo il formidabil mostro:/ ché la vera Medusa è il valor vostro" (Marino 1979, I, 32).

²⁹ "Non so se mi scolpì scarpel mortale,/ o specchiando me stessa in chiaro vetro/ la propria vista mia mi fece tale" (Marino 1979, I, 272).

³⁰ "Ancor viva si mira/ Medusa in viva pietra;/ e chi gli occhi in lei gira,/ pur di stupore impètra./ Saggio Scultor, tu così 'l marmo avivi,/ che son di marmo a lato al marmo i vivi" (Marino 1979, I, 272).

³¹ Curiously, in his essays dealing with Caravaggio and Medusa imagery, Marin 1995, 118 (cited by Cropper 1991, 204), "imagines" a Medusa who petrifies herself by looking at her image reflected in the shield; and he gives no source for the idea. A variant on the theme occurs in a madrigal by Marino on a *sculpture* of Andromeda, in which the monster is turned to stone, obviously based on the same version of the story adopted by Carracci, and the poet does not know whether it is the work of the Medusa or of Love or of Art: "Ma che resti di marmo,/ non so s'opra sia questa/ (veggendo ch'è scolpita ogni sua parte)/ di Medusa, d'Amore, o pur de l'Arte" (Marino 1979, I, 271; cited in connection with the Farnese Gallery by Dempsey 1995, 33).

Medusa herself. ... Looking into a mirror to regard herself, she turned to stone."³² Grotto's poem on the transformatory power of vision becomes especially poignant when one recalls that he was blind and was famously known as "il Cieco d'Hadria." Caravaggio himself may have had something of this kind of self-reflexive metamorphosis in mind as his Medusa looks down in horror to perceive the pale underside of the head of one of her snaky locks as a presagement of her stony fate (Fig. 20). These are the only instances I have found of the conceit that clearly inspired the Capitoline sculpture: the Medusa is herself turned to stone by gazing into the reflexive chisel of the sculptor, whose virtue lies in mirroring the truth in stone with all the vividness of life, in portrait-bust form.

For a contemporary viewer the Medusa would have had two, contradictory moral associations, which in the Capitoline sculpture have become complementary. Partly no doubt owing to her association with Minerva, the Medusa was an emblem of wisdom and reason: according to Lomazzo, just as the Medusa turned men who looked upon her into stones, so wisdom silences those who do not understand.³³ For Cesare Ripa, the head of Medusa shows the victory attained by reason over the enemies of virtue, rendering them dumb, even as the head of Medusa rendered dumb those who looked at her.³⁴ In the *Ovide moralisé*, on the other hand, the serpents engendered by the blood flowing from Medusa's head are interpreted as the evil thoughts that spring from evil hearts.³⁵ It is noteworthy in our context that the same attribute is taken up by Ripa in his description of Envy, which might well be identified with the Medusa: "Her head is full of serpents,

³² "Non è scoltura di colui, che'n sasso/ Cangiava questa, ma Medusa stessa./ Pero tien, chi qua giungi, il viso basso! / ... Che poi, che gli occhi in uno specchio tenne,/ Per stessa mirar, sasso diviene" (cited by Fumaroli 1988, 173f.).

³³ "Lo scudo, sotto la tutela di Minerva, significava riparo, e con la testa di Medusa in mezzo, sapienza; perciocché, sí come quella faceva diventar gl'uomini che la guardavano sassi, cosí la sapienza ammutisse quelli che non sanno" (Lomazzo 1973-4, II, 406).

³⁴ "...testa di Medusa ... dimostra la vittoria, che há la ragione de gli inimici contrarij alla virtù, quale gli rende stupidi, come la testa di Medusa, che faceva restare medesimamente stupidi quelli, che la guardavano" (Ripa 1603, 426). Cited also by Posèq 1993, 20, who, although in a different sense, also stresses the moral nature of the Capitoline sculpture in relation to the libido.

³⁵ "Derechief par les serpens qui furent engendrés du sang cheant du chief de la Meduse sont entendues les mauvaises pensées qui procedent de mauvais couraiges" (De Boer 1954, 162).

instead of hair, to signify evil thoughts.”³⁶ In the context of Bernini’s demonstration of the prevalence of sculpture over painting in the art of petrification, a reference to this professional deadly sin was not inappropriate: a kind of *riposte* to Zuccari’s use of the Medusa shield in his *Apotheosis of the Artist*.

The Medusa image started life in the archaic period as a monstrous, deformed figure with a halo of decoratively stylized, curly snakes for hair, enormous eyes, tongue protruding from a toothy mouth stretched into a ghoulish grimace, calculated to instill fear of the petrifying death the slightest glance would provoke (Figs. 32, 33).³⁷ The emphasis was on the figure’s grotesquely menacing and therefore protective apotropaic effect. Thereafter, in company with the evolution of Greek art generally, the image became ever more human and, apart from narrative scenes, curtailed to the severed head. In the classical period, the face acquired the perfectly regular features of an ideal beauty. The emphasis had shifted from Medusa as a stultifying monster to Medusa as a maiden whose beauty was the fatal attraction that induced Neptune to possess her in the temple of Minerva, the chaste and austere goddess of Wisdom. The classic example of this beautiful Medusa type is the famous *Medusa Rondanini*, now in Munich, which came from Rome, where Bernini may have seen it. Only a few snakes and other demonic features remain, and the apotropaic effect is conveyed in an uncanny way by her chillingly expressionless, one might well say stony face — her “dangerous beauty,” as it has been perspicaciously described. This classical process of humanization through the Hellenistic period culminated in what has been called the “pathetic” mask of Medusa, a veritable *persona* in theatrical terms. The face is once again contorted, but now with furrowed brow, open lips and upward glance that matched the suffering of the Laocoön (Figs. 34, 35). Emphasis shifted from the magical, apotropaic, terrific power of the monstrosity, to the beautiful maiden whose mortal human nature — unique among the three

³⁶ “Ha pieno il capo di serpi, in vece di capelli, per significazione de’ mali pensieri...” (Ripa 1603, 242). On Envy with the snake hair of the Medusa, see De Tervarent 1958–64, I, cols. 167–8.

³⁷ The development of ancient portrayals of the Medusa was first traced in a remarkable, pioneering study by Konrad Levezow 1833, who understood that the progressive humanization of the demonic monster offered a fundamental insight into the development of Greek art generally. Levezow provided the basic structure for the classic treatise of Adolf Furtwängler 1886–90, which has been the basis for all subsequent discussion. The largest collection of material will be found in *Lexicon* 1981–99, IV, 1, 285–362.

Gorgon sisters — had not been destroyed by the divine retribution but now suffered, physically from the pain of decapitation, and psychologically from the awareness of its own misfortune. This understanding of the event as a specifically human tragedy had been expressed by Hesiod in terms of “pathos”: speaking of the three Gorgon sisters he says that Medusa “suffered woes [τε Μέδουσά τε λύγρὰ παθοῦσατε]. She was mortal, but the others are immortal, the two of them.”³⁸

The new image reflects, in effect, a new focus on the origin of Medusa’s viperous transformation, namely that her beauty had induced Neptune to ravish her in the temple of Minerva, a desecration of her sanctuary for which the goddess exacted retribution by turning Medusa’s hair into snakes and applying the horrendous decapitated visage to her shield to frighten future violators of her sanctity. Crucial to the significance of the story was the nature and reason for Minerva’s punishment as recounted by Ovid: the attraction and the stimulus for Neptune’s lechery, was precisely Medusa’s hair, the most beautiful of all her attractive features:

The hero [Perseus] further told of his long journeys and perils passed, all true, what seas, what lands he had beheld from his high flight, what stars he had touched on beating wings. He ceased, while they waited still to hear more. But one of the princes asked him why Medusa only of the sisters wore serpents mingled with her hair. The guest replied: Since what you ask is a tale well worth the telling, hear then the cause. She was once most beautiful in form, and the jealous hope of many suitors. Of all her beauties, her hair was the most beautiful — for so I learned from one who said he had seen her. ‘Tis said that in Minerva’s temple Neptune, lord of the Ocean, ravished her. Jove’s daughter turned away and hid her chaste eyes behind her aegis. And, that the deed might be punished as was due, she changed the Gorgon’s locks to ugly snakes. And now to frighten her fear-numbered foes, she still wears upon her breast the snakes which she has made.”³⁹

³⁸ Theogony, 276–8; Hesiod, 2006, 24f.

³⁹ *Metamorphoses* IV. 787–803; Ovid 1938, I, 234f.:

Addidit et longi non falsa pericula cursus,

Hence the object of Minerva's retribution, Medusa's hair, was appropriate to the cause of the offense. And, quite apart from the formal and physiological significance, the nature of the punishment, turning the hair into snakes, was equally appropriate. For in antiquity snakes were above all emblematic of lust, and specifically of its dire, indeed mortal, consequences for men: according to Pliny, the serpents having intertwined their bodies during copulation, the male thrusts his head into the mouth of his mate who bites it off as the couple reaches the climax of their orgy (Figs. 36, 37).⁴⁰

In essence the tale is one of illicit, carnal lust and just retribution, and so the story came to be interpreted ever after by moralizing Christian interpreters in the Christian tradition — Medusa, carnal vice, Minerva-Perseus righteousness and justice. In the *Ovide moralisée*, of the three Gorgon sisters, Medusa embodied “delectacion charnelle.”⁴¹ For Natale Conti, “To demonstrate how constant we must remain in our confrontation with pleas-

quae freta, quas terras sub se vidisset ab alto
 et quae iactatis tetigisset sidera pennis;
 ante exspectatum tacuit tamen. excipit unus
 ex numero procerum quaerens, cur sola sororum
 gesserit alternis inmixtos crinibus angues.
 hospes ait: ‘quoniam scitaris digna relatu,
 accipe quaesiti causam. clarissima forma
 multorumque fuit spes invidiosa procorum
 illa, nec in tota conspectior ulla capillis
 pars fuit: inveni, qui se vidisse referret.
 hanc pelagi rector templo vitiasse Minervae
 dicitur: aversa est et castos aegide vultus
 nata Iovis texit, neve hoc inpune fuisset,
 Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros.
 nunc quoque, ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes,
 pectore in adverso, quos fecit, sustinet angues.’

⁴⁰ “Snakes mate by embracing, intertwining so closely that they could be taken to be a single animal with two heads. The male viper inserts its head into the female viper's mouth, and the female is so enraptured with pleasure that she gnaws it off.” *Natural History* X, 169; Pliny 1938–63, III, 398–401. Rursus in terrestribus ova pariunt serpentes, de quibus nondum dictum est. coeunt complexu, adeo circumvolutae sibi ipsae ut una / existimari biceps possit. viperae mas caput inserit in os, quod illa abrodit voluptatis dulcedine. Pliny's text and the emblem of Camerarius 1590–1604, f. 92r, were cited by Koslow 1995, 147, in connection with Rubens's *Medusa*. I have argued in another context that Caravaggio was deeply conversant with Capaccio's theological texts, especially as concerns light and penitence, Lavin 2001..

⁴¹ De Boer 1954, 162.

ures, the sages depicted Medusa as the most beautiful of women, on account of her appearance and charm that allured others, but all who saw her the ancients said were changed into stone by her, Minerva having given her this damnable power to make her odious to everyone after she had polluted Minerva's temple with Neptune. . . . So did the ancients warn that lust, boldness and arrogance must be restrained because God is the most exacting avenger of these flaws. For not only did Medusa lose her hair, Perseus through the counsel and support of the Gods having been sent to destroy her utterly." ⁴² Perseus slew Medusa "because reason is that which breaks in upon or circumvents all illicit pleasures, and it can do so only with the help of God, through divine intervention, no one good unless God bestows upon her the blessing which is always sought."⁴³ For Ludovico Dolce, the gift of Caravaggio's *Medusa* "would denote that he to whom it was sent should be armed against the seductions of the world, which make men into stones, that is, deprive him of human senses and harden him to virtuous actions, so that he can perform none."⁴⁴

Evidently in the wake of a lost painting of the Medusa by Leonardo, a new conception emerged around 1500. The formula seems to combine the electrifying distortion of the archaic Gorgoneion with the emotional intensity of the Hellenistic pathos formula: the ugly grimace of the one and the heroic suffering of the other are now merged in a wide-open-mouthed scream of anguish (Figs. 38, 39). Caravaggio and Rubens followed this lead: their gory, exophthalmic, gaping displays of thoroughly monstrous — all snakes, no hair — still living, quintessentially human body-fragments, recapture in personal terms the frightful, petrifying horror of the original apotropeion.⁴⁵

Bernini, on the contrary, evinces the pathetic catharsis Aristotle attributed to Tragedy.⁴⁶ In contrast to the classical humanizing tradition, Bernini

⁴² Natale Conti, *Mythologies*: DiMatteo 1994, 374f.

⁴³ DiMatteo 1994, 377.

⁴⁴ "denoterebbe che colui a cui si mandasse dovesse stare armato contro le lascivie del mondo che fanno gli uomini divenir sassi, cioè gli priva dei sensi umani e gl'idurisce alle operazioni virtuose in guisa che niuna ne possono fare." Dolce 1565 [1913], 104; cited by Posèq 1993, 18f., after Battisti 1960, 214 n.

⁴⁵ On the lost Leonardo painting as the model for subsequent images of the Medusa, see Posèq 1989, 172; Varriano 1997.

⁴⁶ Wittkower 1981, 209, likened the Medusa to the ancient tragic mask. I have discussed Bernini's relationship to antiquity, especially in relation to his "theatricality," in Lavin 1989.

follows his immediate predecessors in transforming virtually all of Medusa's hair into snakes, and in displaying the cannibalistic agony of viperous concupiscence prominently beside Medusa's cheek (Figs. 18, 21, 23). Following Caravaggio and his own Damned Soul Bernini's Medusa turns her head affectively to the side and downward, not aghast at the gory sight, as with Caravaggio and Rubens, but in a baleful glimpse of her own shadow in the underworld (according to Apollodorus and Virgil, Medusa was actually seen as a shade in Hades).⁴⁷ Quite apart from her serpentine hair, Bernini's Medusa, shown as a classical bust portrait, but in abbreviated form like the Dammed and Blessed Souls, and wearing the one-shouldered chiton of an Amazon, is finally not, or is no longer altogether human; and in fact, she was accorded a kind of anti-heroic immortality when Minerva affixed the decapitated head to her shield.

So far as I know, Bernini was the first to understand the ancient pathetic Medusa in light of this Christian moralizing tradition: in his unprecedented portrayal of Medusa as a portrait bust, rather than a decapitated head, she is, as it were, not still living but still alive, and her anguish is spiritual, not physical. The lamenting image does indeed evoke a cathartic cleansing of the soul in the Aristotelian sense, and Bernini's empathetic response to a real human being provides finally an ulterior motive for the singular format and a key to the personal significance of the work.

Speaking of Bernini's portraits in his biography of his father, Domenico Bernini recounts a singular, infamously scandalous episode that took place in 1638 when the artist was turning forty. Bernini fell madly in love and had an evidently torrid affair with the wife, Costanza, of the sculptor Matteo Bonarelli who was working under his direction at St. Peter's.⁴⁸ When he dis-

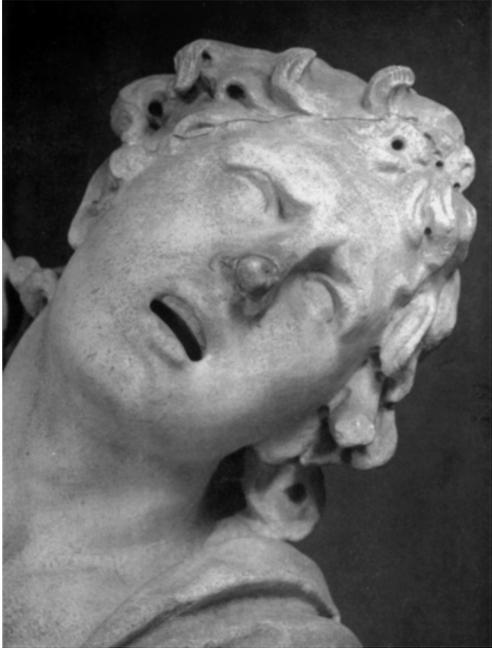
⁴⁷ Apollodorus (*The Library* II, 12; 1921, I, 232–7) and Virgil (*Aeneid* VI, 289–94; 1999, I, 526f.) report that when Hercules and Aeneas descended into Hades they saw and drew their swords against Medusa, until they learned she was but a harmless shadow.

⁴⁸ “e sopra tutti rimangono famosi due Ritratti di sua persona, e di sua mano, l'uno de' quali si conserva in Casa Bernini, l'altro in più degno Theatro, cioè nella rinomata Stanza de' Ritratti del Gran Duca, fatti tutti dalle proprie mani de' più insigni Pittori: Quello tanto decantato di una Costanza si vede collocato in Casa Bernini, & il Busto, e Testa in Marmo della medesima nella Galleria del Gran Duca, l'uno, e l'altro di così buon gusto, e di così viva maniera, che nelle Copie istesse diede a divedere il Cavaliere, quanto fosse innamorato dell'Originale Donna era questa, di cui egli allora era vago, e per cui se si rese in parte colpevole, ne riportò ancora il vanto di essere dichiarato un grand' uomo, & eccellente nell'Arte; Poiche ò ingelosito di lei, ò da altra che ci fosse cagione trasportato, come che cieco l'amore, impose ad un suo servo il farle non sò' quale affronto, come seguì, che per essere

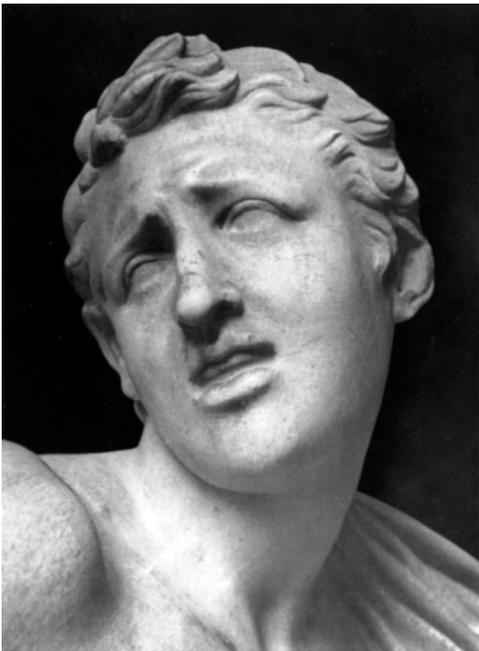


1. Laocoön. Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican, Rome.

808



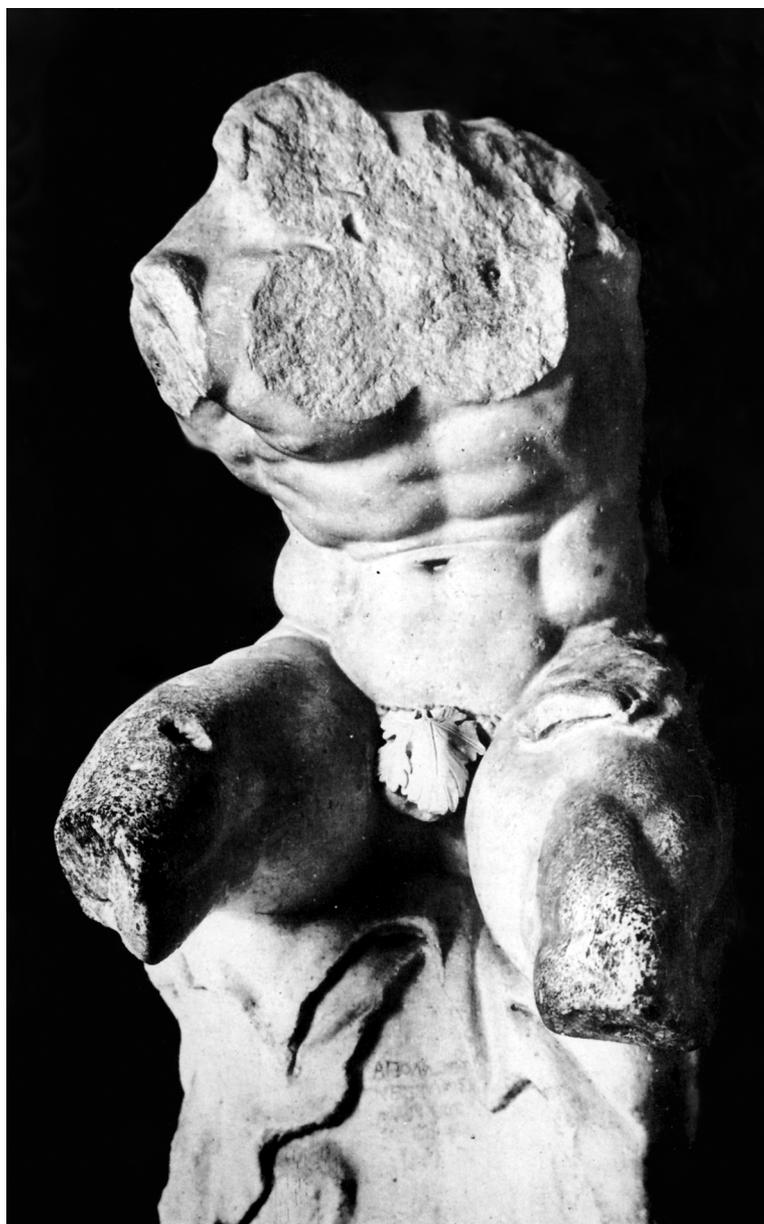
2. Laocoön,
heads of Laocoön's sons.
Cortile del Belvedere,
Vatican, Rome.



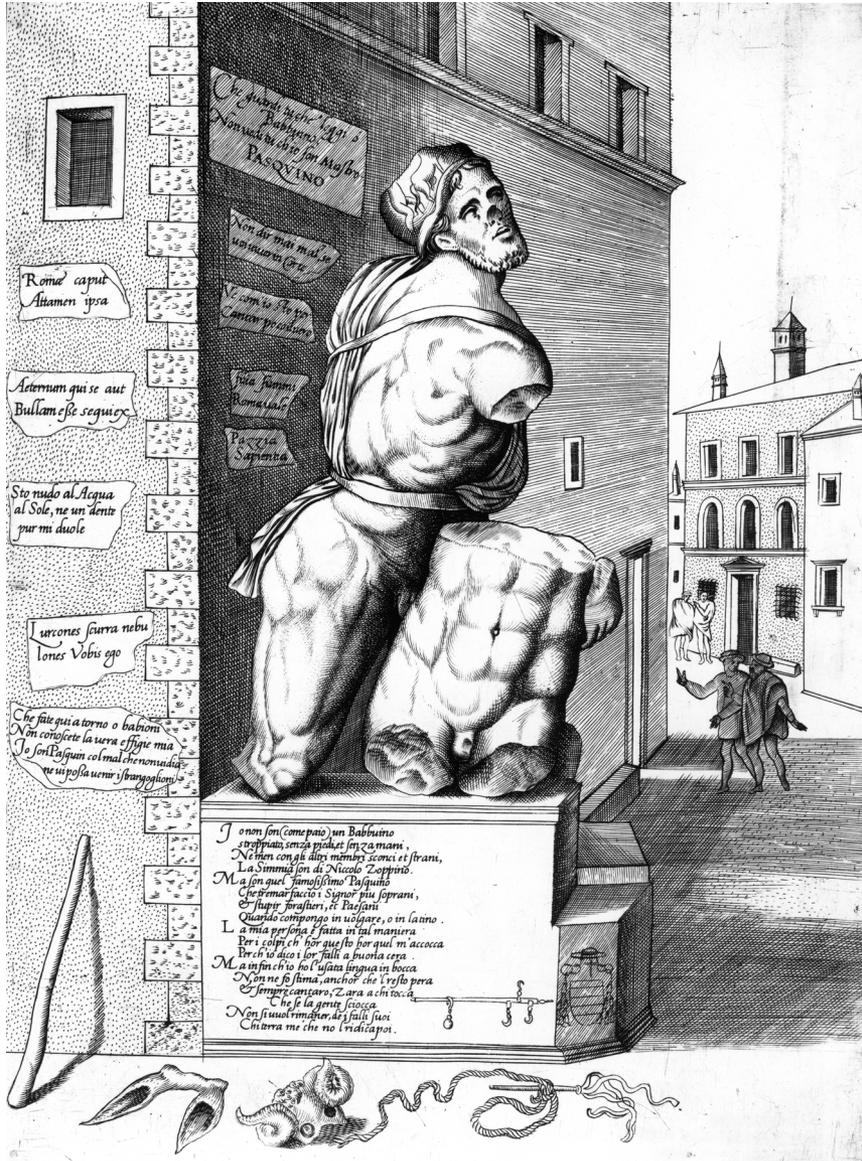
3. Pasquino. Piazza del
Pasquino, Rome.



4. "Menelaos carrying the
body of Patroclus." Loggia
dei Lanzi, Florence.



5. Torso Belvedere. Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican, Rome.



6. Antonio Lafreri, Pasquino. 1550. Engraving.

812



7. Bernini,
Aeneas and
Anchises.
Galleria Borghese,
Rome.



8. Bernini, Neptune (reversed). Victoria and Albert Museum, London

814



9. Bernini, Pluto and Proserpine. Galleria Borghese, Rome.



10. Bernini, David (reversed). Galleria Borghese, Rome.

816



11. Bernini, Fontana del Moro. Piazza Navona, Rome.



12. Annibale Carracci, Galleria Farnese. Palazzo Farnese, Rome.

818



13. Annibale Carracci, Perseus and Andromeda, Galleria Farnese. Palazzo Farnese, Rome.

14. Annibale Carracci, Perseus and Phineus, Galleria Farnese. Palazzo Farnese, Rome.



15. Annibale Carracci,
Perseus and Phineus,
Galleria Farnese, detail.
Palazzo Farnese, Rome.



16. Bernini, Medusa. Museo Capitolino, Rome.

820



17. Bernini, Medusa. Museo Capitolino, Rome.

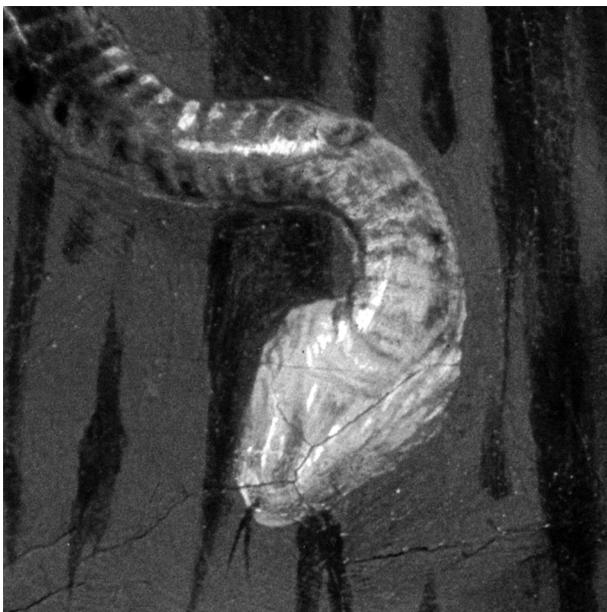


18. Bernini, Medusa, detail.
Museo Capitolino, Rome.

19. Caravaggio, Medusa.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



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20. Caravaggio,
Medusa, detail.
Galleria degli Uffizi,
Florence.



21. Caravaggio,
Medusa, detail.
Galleria degli Uffizi,
Florence.



22. Rubens, Medusa. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

23. Rubens, Medusa,
detail. Kunsthistorisches
Museum, Vienna.

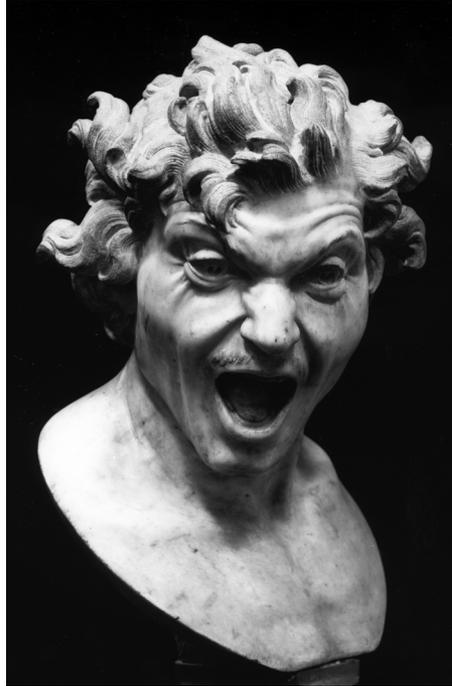


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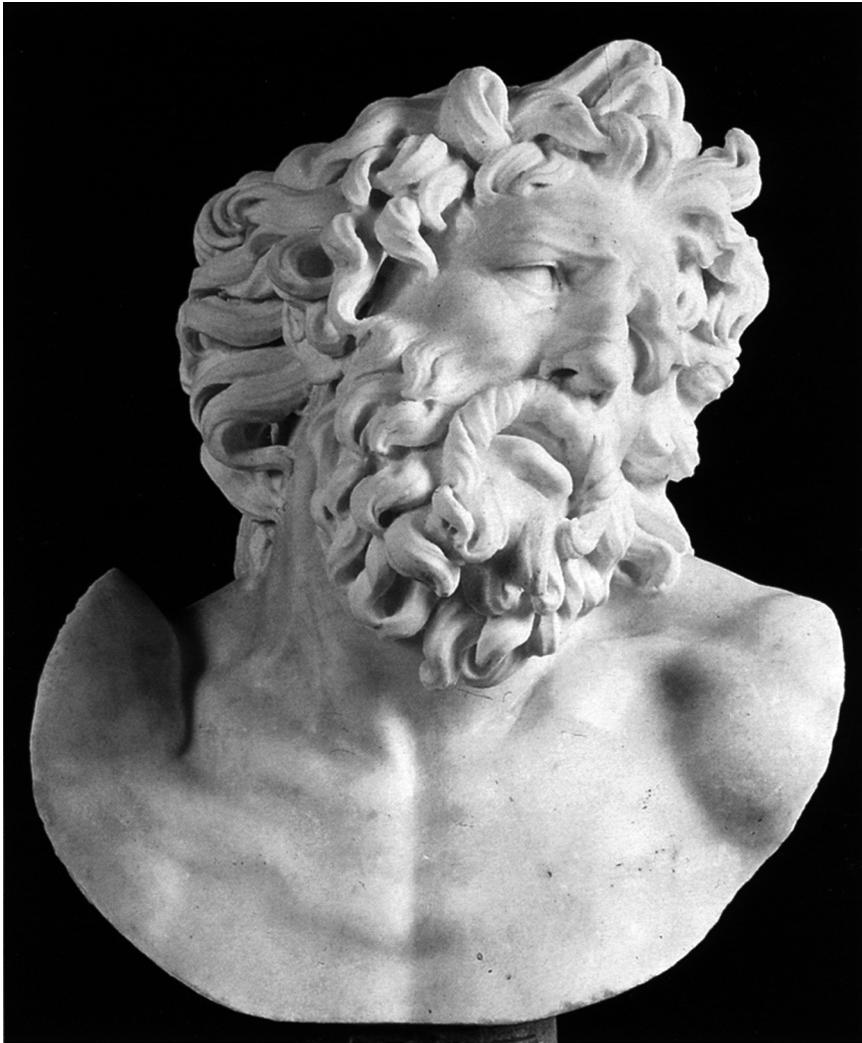
24. Medusa Rondanini. Glyptothek, Munich.

25. Bernini,
Anima Dannata.
Palazzo di Spagna,
Rome.

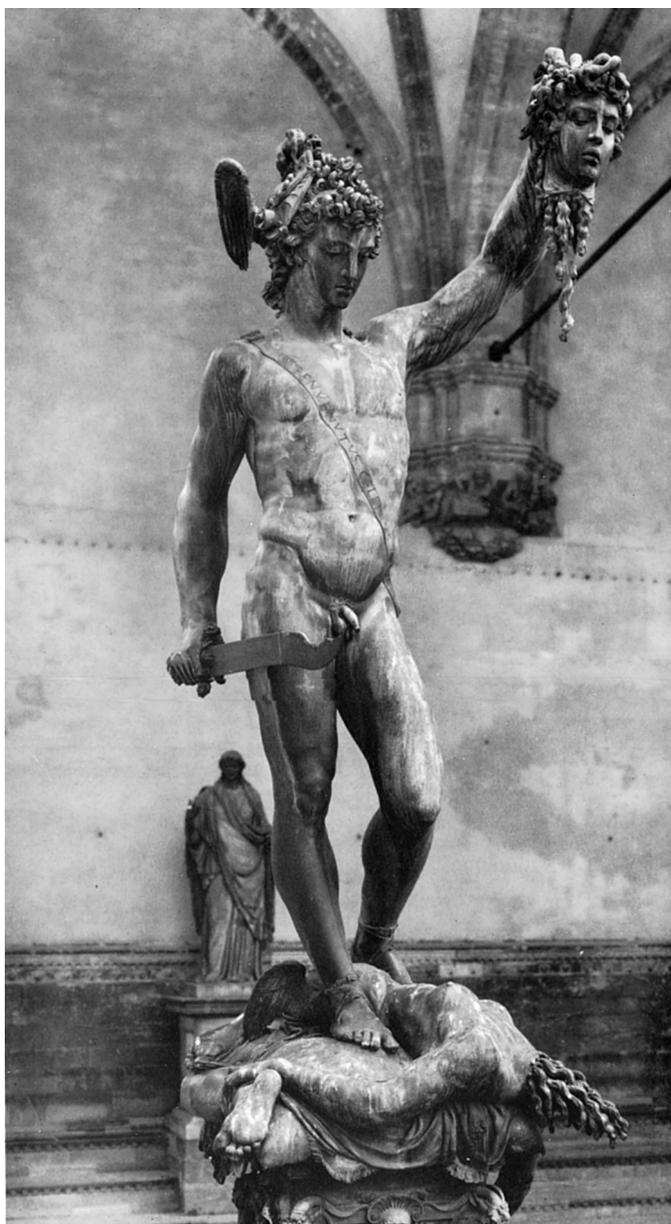


26. Bernini,
Anima Beata.
Palazzo di Spagna,
Rome.

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27. Bernini (?), head of Laocoön. Palazzo Spada, Rome.



28. Benvenuto Cellini, Perseus. Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence.



29. Benvenuto Cellini,
head of Medusa.
Loggia dei Lanzi,
Florence.

30. Federico Zuccari, Apotheosis of the
Artist. Palazzo Zuccari, Rome.





31. Bernini, bust of Monsignor Pedro de Foix Montoya.
S. Maria di Monserrato, Rome.

830



32. Archaic
Gorgoneion.
Syracuse,
Museo Regionale
"Paolo Orsi".



33. Archaic
Gorgoneion,
antefix, from
Taranto.
Antikenmuseum,
Heidelberg
University.

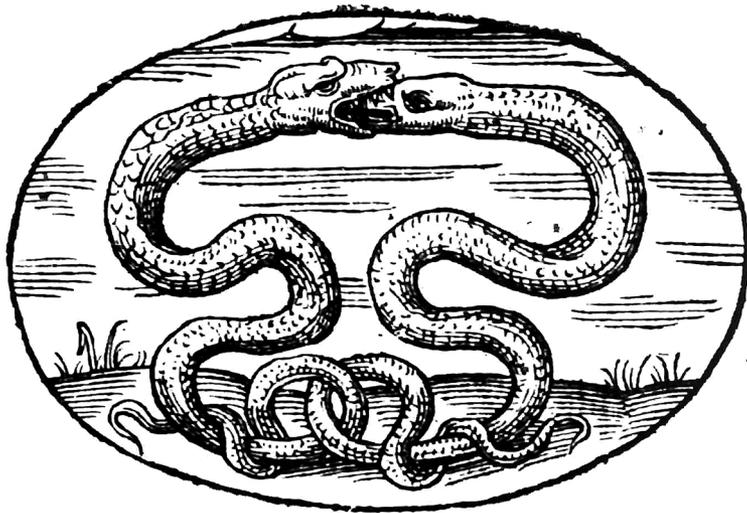


34. Emperor Hadrian. Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome.

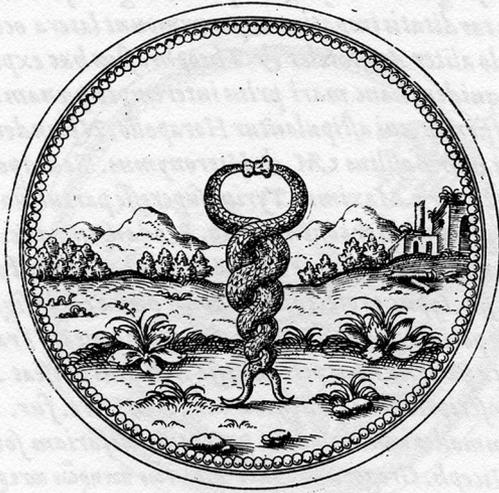


35. Emperor Hadrian, detail. Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome.

36. Vipers in coitus, engraving. Capaccio 1592, fol. 9r.



XC. ⁹¹
VENVS IMPROBA.



*Sic pereat quisquis meretrici turpiter haeret,
Per Venerem ut nimiam vipera morsa perit.*

Z § VBI

37. Venus improba, engraving. Camerarius 1590–1604, f. 92r.

834



38. Medusa,
plate from Cafaggiolo.
Victoria and Albert
Museum, London



39. Shield with the
head of Medusa.
Museo nazionale del
Bargello, Florence



40. Bernini, bust of Costanza Bonarelli.
Museo nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

836



41. Bernini, bust of
Costanza Bonarelli, detail.
Museo nazionale del
Bargello, Florence.



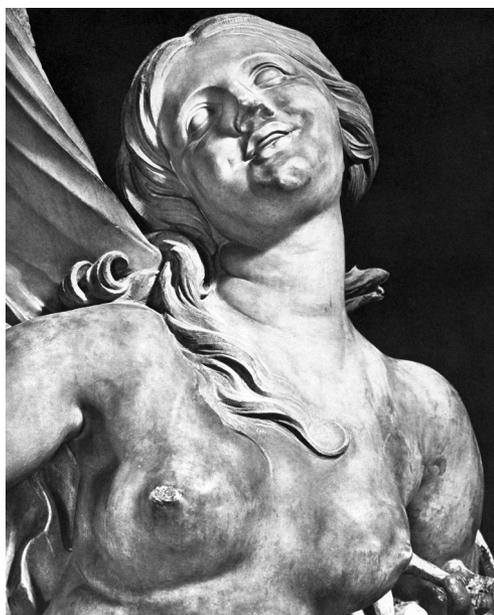
42. Bernini,
Medusa, detail.
Palazzo dei Conservatori,
Rome.



43. Bernini, tomb of Urban VIII, detail.
St. Peter's, Rome.



44. Bernini, tomb of
Urban VIII, detail.
St. Peter's, Rome.



45. Bernini, Truth,
detail.
Galleria Borghese,
Rome.

covered that his younger brother, and invaluable assistant, Luigi was also trysting with the woman, in a fit of rage he attacked and wounded Luigi and ordered a servant to cut Costanza with a razor. Bernini's exasperated mother wrote a desperate letter to Cardinal Francesco Barberini recounting the event (but without explaining the motivation) and imploring him to control her arrogant elder son, who was behaving as if he were "Padron del mondo." Luigi and the servant were sent into exile and Bernini was fined three thousand scudi. In the end Urban VIII himself issued an official document absolving him, for no other reason, as Domenico says, than that he was "excellent in art" and a "rare man, sublime genius, and born by Divine inspiration and for the glory of Rome, to bring light to that century."

Bernini was, in effect, an inordinately gifted, indispensabile, and divinely ordained national treasure. The pope's absolution was evidently accompanied by an urgent recommendation that Bernini mend his ways and marry. Bernini at first resisted the idea but soon acquiesced and on 15 May 1639 married Caterina Tezio, reputed "la più bella giovane che habbia Roma," by whom he had nine children and with whom he lived — so far as we know — faithfully ever after. (It may not be coincidental in our present context that he appreciatively described for the pope Caterina's many perfections — which included her "Beauty without affectation" — in terms of a portrait of his own making.⁴⁹)

The tangible results of Bernini's fulminary affair with Costanza were a painted double portrait of himself and this unconventional woman, now

stato pubblico, e dannevole, doveva con non dispregievole pena punirsi. Il Papa assicurato del fatto, diede ordine, che all'esilio fosse condannato il servo, & al Cavaliere mandò per un suo Cameriere l'assoluzione del delitto scritta in Pergamena, in cui appariva un Elogio della sua Virtù degno da tramandarsi alla memoria de Posterì: Poiche in essa veniva assoluto non con altro motivo, che, perche era Eccellente nell'arte, nè con altri Titoli era quivi nominato, che con quelli di *Huomo raro, Ingegno sublime, e nato per Disposizione Divina, e per gloria di Roma a portar luce a quel Secolo.*" (Bernini 1713, 27)

The story is retold with relish by D'Onofrio 1967, 130–8; and by Avery, as in n. 52 below. The full documentation is conveniently summarized by Oreste Ferrari in Bernardini and Fagiolo dell'Arco 1999, 307f. Much new light will be shed on the subject in a monograph on Costanza currently in preparation by Sarah McPhee.

⁴⁹ Bernini 1723, 51: che gli venne fatto trovarla, quale appunto, com'egli poi disse al medesimo Urbano, non averebbe potuto da se medesimo farsela meglio, se convenuto gli fosse lavorarla a suo gusto nella cera: Docile senza biasimo, Prudente senza raggiri, Bella senza affettazione, e con una tal mistura di gravità, e di piacevolezza, di bontà, e di applicazione, che potea ben'ella dirsi dono conservato dal Cielo per un qualche grand'huomo.

lost, which he cut in two but which remained in his house, and the hauntingly seductive sculptured portrait bust of his mistress, itself unconventional in the sense that it was made without a commission, to fill a personal need — literally “for love” (Figs. 40, 41). Costanza Bonarelli is depicted, equally unconventionally, in a disheveled negligee that seems to evoke the intimate, revelatory state in which Bernini saw her during their assignations. It embodies in a personal and private domain the conversational warmth, intimacy, and informality Bernini had vested in the open-lipped, unbuttoned, cocked hat, motion-filled busts of Cardinal Scipione Borghese and Pope Urban himself (1633).⁵⁰ The bust must have been made sometime between October 1636, when Matteo Bonarelli started working at St. Peter’s, and March 22, 1638, when Luigi’s regular payments as overseer of the works there ceased. Luigi worked on a Bernini project in Bologna during his exile, and returned to work at St Peter’s, having been absolved in October 1639 by Cardinal Francesco — at Bernini’s instigation.⁵¹

Shortly after his marriage, in companion gestures signifying his change of heart, Bernini gave the sculpture away, and, so I am convinced, created its moral counterpart in the bust of the Medusa, also for purely personal reasons, and also, I suspect, to be given away.⁵² Taken together, the two sculptures may be understood as companion-counterpieces — “contrapposti” was the term Bernini used to describe such mutually dependent, complementary contrasts that were fundamental to his conception of his art — in this case personalized lineal descendents of his portraits of the blessed and damned souls (Fig. 42).⁵³ It is worth noting, finally, that the circumstances of the Medusa’s creation discussed here coincide with the dating on stylistic grounds generally agreed upon in recent years. Wittkower perceived that the Medusa is not an early work. He assigned it rather to what he regarded as a deliberately classicizing period of Bernini’s development,

⁵⁰ On the informal urbanity of these portraits, including the “unbuttoned” ecclesiastical mozzetta, see Lavin (2004) in course of publication.

⁵¹ Curiously, the payments to Luigi resume in August 1639; D’Onofrio 1967, 132, 138. Years later (1670) Luigi committed a violent act of pederasty, from which Bernini again redeemed him with great difficulty; the records were retrieved and discussed by Martinelli 1959 (1994).

⁵² After I realized that the busts of Bonarelli and Medusa were related, I discovered that Charles Avery had offered the very same hypothesis (1997, 91f., 274f.). I am glad to acknowledge Avery’s precedence.

⁵³ On Bernini’s concept of the “contrapposti” see Lavin 1980, 9f.

about 1635.⁵⁴ Maurizio and Marcello Fagiolo dell'Arco then made bold to place it still later, in the mid-1640's, relating it stylistically to elements of the tomb of Urban VIII (Figs. 43, 44).⁵⁵ Another remarkable insight of Nava Cellini was to recognize the extravagant forms and expressivity that linked the Medusa to the figure of Truth, made in the same period (Fig. 45).

The name of Cardinal Alessandro Bichi appears in Chantelou's diary, in an amusing passage that follows a curious thread through a conversation at dinner, which was interrupted by a message that some ladies were asking to be allowed to see the bust of Louis XIV, then in the making. The subject of women must have stuck in Bernini's mind when the subject then turned to purchases Bernini planned to make. Bernini quoted the adage, "who decries wants to buy" (*chi sprezza vuol comprar*), to which Chantelou replied that he had heard the phrase used by Cardinal Bichi. Bernini remarked that he had once made use of the proverb in one of his comedies, in which the servant of a painter was told by his employer not to admit to the studio any young men who might not be interested in buying but in cajoling his pretty daughter. He obeyed zealously, refusing to admit some young men who came praising the paintings. The painter rebuked the servant who defended himself by saying that he had remembered the proverb and assumed that their real purpose was to flirt with the daughter. The servant told a young suitor who wanted to gain favor with the girl that he did not know how, that he kept speaking of past things, that with women one must deal neither in the past nor in the future, but stay on top in the present (*con le donne non bisognava trattar di cose passate, neanche delle future; ma star sopra il presente*).⁵⁶ It has been aptly suggested that this play was identical with one mentioned by Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini entitled "How to give women in a com-

⁵⁴ Wittkower 1980, 209. In a review of Wittkower's book I argued that this formal reference to antiquity was as much thematically as stylistically motivated, since other, contemporary works were more "Baroque." (Lavin 1956, 258; also Lavin 1968b, 38f.). The juxtaposition and contemporaneity of Bonarelli and the Medusa support this view.

⁵⁵ For a summary chronology of the Urban VIII tomb see Wittkower 1981, 198f.

⁵⁶ Chantelou 1885, 195f.: A l'issue de table, discourant ensemble de quelques achats qu'il devait faire, il m'a allégué le proverbe qui dit : *chi sprezza, vuol comprar*. Je lui ai dit que je l'avais autrefois appris de M.le cardinal Bichi. Il m'a conté sur cela, qu'il s'en était une fois servi dans une de ses comédies où il avait introduit un peintre, dont la fille était fort belle, que le Raguey, valet du peintre, étant demeuré une fois à la maison, le maître lui avait dit qu'il ne reçût point chez lui ces Zerbins qui ne venaient pas pour acheter, mais pour cajoler sa fille. Après quoi, quelques jeunes galants étant venus et louant les tableaux qu'il avait mis à l'étalage, d'abord il leur ferma la porte au nez et ne voulut jamais les laisser entrer quelques instances qu'ils fissent; de quoi s'étant plaints au peintre et dit qu'ils étaient cavaliers et gens

edy” (*Modo di regalar le Dame in Commedia*).⁵⁷ The word “regalar” in the title of the comedy is curious, and it has been taken as a misprint for “regolar,” manage, except that both Baldinucci and Domenico give the same spelling.⁵⁸ Perhaps the title was deliberately ambiguous, referring both to the management of women and Bernini’s gifts of both the Bonarelli and Medusa busts after that chapter in his life had closed. In any case, it seems unlikely that these cross references were coincidental — more likely that Cardinal Bichi had heard the phrase from Bernini himself, or his comedy, and that it was through the Cardinal that the Medusa passed to the Bichi family, and hence, a century later, to the Palazzo dei Conservatori. Bichi had been appointed papal nunzio in Paris, then Bishop of Carpentras, then cardinal, by Urban VIII. He played a major political role, and his long presences in Paris and close associations with the French court may also explain the twin copies of the Medusa now in the Louvre. As one of Urban VIII’s closest associates, and well-acquainted with the artist, Bichi, hence also his family, was surely aware of the scandalous circumstance in which the bust was created. And hence also a century later, Francesco Bichi, recording his conspicuous gift to the city, thought it best to identify the sculptor not by his name but, equally unmistakably, by his unrivalled celebrity.

In the end, it might be said that Bernini’s *Medusa* is a kind of ironic, metaphorical self-portrait: the demonstration of the transformative power of his art embodied not only the visual inversion of the point of the myth, and his contempt for affectation, but also his exercise of that power in the service of a higher moral purpose, expiating the anguish of his own fallibility. The bust embodies the noble victory of virtue over vice, the engaging witticism of a stony image of petrification, and the disturbing expression of tragic suffering.

d’honneur et à n’être point traités de la sorte, et le peintre faisant réprimande de cela au Raguët, il répondit que comme il avait vu qu’ils avaient commencé par louer si fort ses tableaux, il avait jugé qu’ils ne venaient pas pour acheter, mais pour cajoler sa fille, pour ce que quoiqu’il ne fût pas habile, il n’ignorait pas le proverbe qui dit: *chi sprezza, vuol’ comprar*, qui fut une application qui plut assez. Ce même Raguët dit à un qui voulait gagner les bonnes grâces de cette fille, qu’il n’y entendait rien, qu’il lui contait toujours des histoires du temps passé, *che con le donne non bisognava trattar di cose passate, ne anche delle future; ma star sopra il presente*.

⁵⁷ Fagiolo dell’Arco 1967, Scheda no. 168.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

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