

ASPECTA MEDUSA:
THE MANY FACES OF MEDUSA IN THE
PAINTING AND THE POETRY OF DANTE ROSSETTI

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The excavations of Pompeii in the eighteenth century that led to the discovery of colourful mosaics and frescoes illustrating Ovid's myths fuelled the Victorian as well as the Romantic imagination--an influence that we can trace in the Pre-Raphaelites' reinterpretation of the best known myths in their paintings as well as in their poetry. In most cases the use of classical mythology appears as a kind of kaleidoscope through which reality can be obliquely viewed or projected, idealized, or transformed. In its Victorian treatment, the classical myth of Perseus and Andromeda which opposes the innocent maiden and the monstrous Medusa, the angel and the demon, thus seems to illustrate the dichotomy between the two main types of women defined by bourgeois morality, the "angel in the house" and "the fallen woman," reinforcing the idea that femininity is "split between surface and depth, knowable exterior appearance and unknowable interior desires" (Psomiades 5). At the same time the myth reiterates the message that the power of man resides in his retaining control of both types of women. In this context, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "Aspecta Medusa" first appears as a typically Victorian interpretation of the myth:

Aspecta Medusa

Andromeda, by Perseus saved and wed,
Hankered each day to see the Gorgon's head:
Till o'er a fount he held it, bade her lean,
And mirrored in the wave was safely seen
That death she lived by.

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