

1977

The Grotesque Tradition in *Medusa* by Emilio Carballido

James J. Troiano

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Citas recomendadas

Troiano, James J. (Primavera-Otoño 1977) "The Grotesque Tradition in *Medusa* by Emilio Carballido," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 5, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss5/15>

This Artículo is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact elizabeth.tietjen@providence.edu.

**THE GROTESQUE TRADITION IN *MEDUSA*
BY EMILIO CARBALLIDO**

James J. Troiano

Emilio Carballido (1925) very often satirizes imperfections in our society in his comical plays, such as *Rosalba y los Llaveros* (1950) and *El día que se soltaron los leones* (1957). Frank Dauster's statement in reference to *Rosalba y los Llaveros* sums up Carballido's position regarding life's imperfections: "Ni censura ni elogia, sino que se burla con sentido humano, fraternal."¹ Nevertheless, *Medusa* (1958) is a bitter portrayal of the human condition in which Carballido utilizes the grotesque tradition in order to portray his anguished view of the world. The cloak of humor, which is so characteristic of Carballido, is torn away, and a bizarre and suffering world is cast abruptly before the spectator's eyes.

Before analyzing *Medusa*, it is essential to describe the grotesque as a literary tradition. The most fundamental aspect of the grotesque is uncertainty. The author delights in astounding the reader or spectator with completely unexpected events. Apparently tranquil moments often literally explode into terrible nightmares of tension and violence. Wolfgang Kayser writes that "surprise" is a fundamental component of the grotesque tradition.² An alien and unpredictable world is presented where life might be compared to walking on the edge of a precipice from which one might fall at any moment. The many shocks and surprises one encounters in the grotesque tradition are created to plunge the spectator into acceptance of the artist's chaotic view of the world.

In addition to the general element of surprise in the grotesque tradition, the world of the grotesque generally involves "the ludicrous demon" and the mask and face theme.

There is very often a purposeful ambiguity in the presentation of the devil or clown in the grotesque tradition. Lee Byron Jennings refers to this kind of confusion with the term "ludicrous demon."³ Monsters and demons often appear comical and completely innocuous, while harmless or heroic figures are transformed into dangerous and/or ridiculous creatures. This particular component is closely related to the element of uncertainty, which is so basic to the grotesque world. The author hence expends every effort in order to create a world in which man is so estranged from his environment, that he is subject to every surprise or misconception imaginable.

In the grotesque tradition, the author deliberately seeks to stress in his creations unnatural contradictions which exemplify an unpredictable world. One of the most common of these contrasts is the conflict which arises when authentic feelings and desires are pitted against those socially imposed upon the individual; a disparity which produces a virtual distortion of reality. Angela Blanco Amores de Pagella writes: "La máscara que simboliza la vida exterior oprime al pobre rostro, que sufre y soporta la máscara rígida. El rostro es la vida íntima y verdadera, el yo profundo, sin concesiones a lo convencional."⁴ This basic conflict is aptly illustrated in a grotesque play appropriately titled *La máscara e il volto* (1913), subtitled "grotesque," by Luigi Chiarelli. Here man is portrayed as constantly forced by society to conceal his true nature by a deceitful mask.

The use of the mask as a figurative symbol is much more satirical than frightening in plays such as *The Mash and the Face*. The mask, however, might be used in a more terrifying manner in what is called "the fantastic grotesque with its oneiric worlds."⁵ Terrifying and even lethal identities are exposed in "the fantastic grotesque" when the actual masks or disguises are lifted. In short, the Mexican dramatist presents in *Medusa* a grotesque world filled with shocks, surprises, and innumerable contradictions.

Before analyzing *Medusa*, an outline of Carballido's intricate plot is helpful. King Acrisio of Argos has cast his daughter Dánae into the sea when he refuses to believe that it was Zeus who had impregnated her. King Polidecto of Serifos then protects Dánae and her son Perseo from her father, Acrisio. Polidecto and Dánae become lovers and go to all extremes to hide this fact. On Perseo's twenty-first birthday, the goddess Athena appears to Dánae and orders that Perseo slay Medusa, the monstrous Gorgon. Polidecto and Dánae also demand that Perseo kill his grandfather, Acrisio. Despite Perseo's refusal to execute his grandfather, circumstances lead him to perform this act. Perseo willingly accepts the task of murdering Medusa, but decides against it when he finds a warm and beautiful woman, rather than the monster he has expected. Frustrated in his love for Medusa, however, Perseo is enraged to find that his mother has been impregnated by Polidecto; he then strikes the hypocritical king dead by exposing him to Medusa's uncovered head. Perseo is saddened when Dánae is accidentally killed in the same way. A disillusioned and lonely Perseo tells his new wife, Andromeda, in reference to the box which contains Medusa's head: "Aquí guarda todo el amor que me queda" (p. 150).⁶

A grotesque world is envisioned in *Medusa* where nearly every element or occurrence is contradictory and unexpected. One would anticipate, for example, that a father and daughter would share a kind of love or at least tolerance which would bind them together in some way. Nevertheless, Acrisio and Dánae are obsessed throughout the play by a profound hatred. This relentless loathing dominates the character's every word and action. The intensity and unexpected nature of this relationship provides another

example of the grotesque tradition as father and daughter behave in precisely the opposite way from that which one is socially programmed to expect. For example, Dánae states upon encountering her father after many years: "Te escupo también mi odio. Espero que te consumas de rencor impotente y te conviertas en lo que siempre has sido: un viejo gomoso y decrepito, carcomido por pasiones hediondas" (p. 102). Acrisio's response is equally shocking: "Hijo eres una perra. Lamento que vivas aun, y así como te arrojé al mar, te arrojé ahora mi mas profunda maldición" (p. 102). Later he refers to his daughter as "hija de puta" (p. 103). This astonishing depiction of abhorrence repels the spectator, who is catapulted, willingly or unwillingly, into the dramatist's bizarre and grotesque world.

Perseo, in the Greek myth, is the typical fearless hero, who slays dragons and saves maidens. Medusa, on the other hand, is the characteristic monster who savagely destroys all living things without a second thought. Carballido's Perseo behaves as a spoiled and vain child. He egoistically agrees to slay the monster in order to become a hero. The encounter between Medusa and Perseo is a splendid example of the uncertainty of the grotesque world created by the Mexican playwright. The great hero begins to cry out of fear after he encounters Medusa. Unaware that he is speaking to the monster herself, Carballido's Perseo meekly admits his fear: " ¡Lloré de miedo! Aquí me tienes; el héroe, llora de miedo porque ve de repente a una muchacha" (p. 109). This is a truly exceptional monster whose relationship to Perseo progresses from that of maternal fondness, to friendship, and then to a lover. Initially, Perseo sheepishly confesses to Medusa: "(como un niño) Quiero ser héroe" (p. 109). She gently informs him of the folly of striving to become superior to one's counterparts, and upholds the general equality of man. Later, Medusa speaks of being transformed from a lovely child to a monster, and thus becoming rejected and despised by everyone because of the jealousy of the gods. Carballido marvelously presents deeply moving and intimate scenes between these two enormously discrepant types, as they communicate their innermost fears and frustrations. Perseo is deeply moved by the suffering Gorgon, who sadly reveals to him: "¿Sabes? Eres el primer hombre en el mundo que llora por Medusa" (p. 121). Finally, Perseo's slaying of Medusa is not the traditional hero indifferently killing a cold, unfeeling monster, but a lover passionately murdering his beloved because the two realize the folly of attempting to fulfill their doomed relationship. Dauster discusses Perseo's necessity to slay Medusa: "Ha matado a Medusa, ha matado a su amor, porque es un amor sin posibilidades de vivir y en vez de dejar que este amor se corrompa como todo lo demás, lo dos prefieren que muera."⁷ Carballido astounds spectator and reader alike by adopting a myth concerning a hero's deadly encounter with a monster and completely transforming it to an unexpected and grotesque love story which, as it unfolds, becomes a tragic commentary on the human degradation of family and love, from which no one is exonerated.

One would expect the other Gorgons to be frightening monsters but, as with Medusa and Perseo, Carballido startles the spectators with a completely opposite direction from what would be anticipated. The Gorgons are actually very similar to Jennings' view of "the ludicrous demon." These monsters are not portrayed as snarling, killing, or plotting, as are Dánae, Polidecto, and the gods. A bizarre situation awaits the audience as the curtain falls in *Act IV*, for Carballido's frightening Gorgons behave like old women very much taken up with a game of cards. In contrast to almost all other characters in *Medusa*, these are good-natured and happy people. A grotesque world is presented here in which the heroic is childish, the classical villain is a hero, and the monsters are innocuous and even delightful. In *Medusa*, no one and nothing is what it seems to be.

The grotesque mask functions as both a satirical and frightening element in *Medusa*. Nearly all the characters conceal their true feelings and selfish intentions. Dánae and Polidecto are the most extreme examples of masqueraders. These two characters continually camouflage their true actions behind a veil of deceit. The two make love frequently, but constantly attempt to hide their actions with elaborate devices. They contrive to have guards posted to assure that no one enters Dánae's quarters, supposedly not even King Polidecto himself. They also agree not to use the intimate "tú" form of speech when anyone is near. At one point, Dánae exclaims with horror to Polidecto: "Estamos tuteando," as Perseo is about to enter. This is all particularly absurd since Perseo categorically denounces his mother and lover for the intimate relationship which they painstakingly strive to conceal. The mask becomes reality to the characters, as does madness to Henry IV in Pirandello's play, which is also interpreted as grotesque by Kayser.⁸ Henry becomes enslaved by his fictive mask of madness, as Carballido's two lovers seem to believe their farce. Polidecto and Dánae exert themselves to maintain a pure facade for Dánae, feigning that she is untouched by human hands, and enjoyed only by Zeus. The gods, too, wear masks in this play. The greedy Atenea wants Medusa slain not because the monster has killed innocent victims, but because the Gorgon's oracle is taking business away from hers. Polidecto and Dánae desire to have Acrisio murdered not really because he had cruelly cast Dánae and her son into the sea, but because they want to take material advantage of the wealthy island of Argos where Acrisio rules. Carballido uses the satirical mask in these instances to present a grotesque world, where truth is disguised and actual character and motives are impossible to distinguish.

In addition to these examples of the satirical use of the mask, the play has supernatural overtones. This aspect of the grotesque coincides with Kayser's description of "the fantastic grotesque." Carballido utilizes and transforms the portion of the Medusa myth in which people who look directly upon the Gorgon are converted into stone. In the Mexican's version of the myth, however, it is Medusa's exposed body, not her face, which

causes petrification. Carballido stresses the fact that the corruption is on the inside, and not the exterior of Medusa. The Gorgon herself reveals to Perseo: "mi pelo ... mi melena, está aquí adentro. La siento moverse. Ella es el horror, es la que petrifica. Si yo estuviera descubierta, tú serías ya tu propio monumento" (p. 111). Once again a variation of the mask and face theme is presented, for here the true corruption of man is hidden. Even Medusa, the best character in the play, hides her true nature behind a deceitful mask, a condition forced upon her by the envious gods. In this bleak, grotesque work, a world is exposed which is inhabited by characters similar to Dante's depiction of the classical monster Geryon: harmless, charming in appearance, and yet ready to strike the lethal blow. Medusa suffers greatly because of her horrendous condition, but even Perseo's love for her is useless in the face of it. No one is saved in this, Carballido's bleakest and most pessimistic work.

Initially, it might seem perplexing that Carballido wrote such a bizarre and grotesque work as *Medusa*, since his plays have been known to be basically lighthearted farces, such as *Rosalba y los Llaveros* and *El día que se soltaron los leones*. The seeds which blossomed into *Medusa* were, however, always there. Carballido has always been aware of, and concerned for, the flaws of society. *Rosalba y los Llaveros*, a comedy of customs, is the framework for criticism of life in rural Mexico. *El día que se soltaron los leones* is a fantastic and comical play which points out the absurdities of contemporary society. *El relojero de Córdoba* (1958), like *Medusa*, re-elaborates old material to attack many negative aspects of our time: wrong values, the distortion of justice, commercialism, and the like. The tone of *El relojero de Córdoba* is generally more farcical than *Medusa*, but the themes are basically the same.

The characters also mirror the author's social consciousness, for even in the lighter plays, such as *El día que se soltaron los leones* and *Rosalba y los Llaveros*, they are frustrated and in conflict with their environment. Ana and the poet, in the former play, speak of the lack of fulfillment in their lives and their alienation from society. Lázaro and Rita, in the latter work, are both tortured by their thwarted and sheltered lives. Carlos Solórzano observes the unhappiness of characters created by Carballido when he speaks of: "... un ambiente de marcada tristeza que no se desgarra nada, sino que mantiene a los personajes en un medio tono de angustia psicológica tristemente soportada."⁹ The characters are products of a highly sensitive man, who sees and feels the many tragic aspects of life, and attempts to communicate this concern through his art. Carballido's humor is an ironic humor which cloaks the writer's concern for the many imperfections of contemporary society. Carballido's situation corresponds in this instance 'to Lord Byron, who writes in *Don Juan*, Canto the Fourth: "And if I laugh at any mortal thing, 'Tis that I may not weep; and if I weep, It is that our nature cannot always bring itself to apathy."¹⁰ Carballido's laughter is trans-

formed into weeping in *Medusa* in very much the same way his Perseo mourns for the death of the enchanting Gorgon.

In short, Emilio Carballido presents an uncharacteristically dismal world in *Medusa*. The basic elements of surprise, "the mask and the face," and "the ludicrous demon," all defined as essential aspects of the grotesque tradition, are utilized by the author. *Medusa* is a play in which Carballido has decided to no longer entertain his audience by satirizing the many flaws of society, but instead to stun and shock them, as if in hope that one Promethean blow might end all the horror and injustice in the world.

NOTES

1. Frank Dauster, "El teatro de Emilio Carballido," *La palabra y el hombre*, (Veracruz), 23, (July-Sept. 1962), p. 372.
2. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 184-185.
3. Lee Byron Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grottesque in German Post-Romantic Prose*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1963), p. 11: "Death or the devil very often puts on a fool's garb, or the clown becomes a demon."
4. Angela Blanco Amores de Pagella, *Nuevos temas en el teatro argentino: la influencia europea*. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemel, S.A., 1965), p. 74.
5. Kayser, p. 186.
6. All quotations from Carballido's plays are taken from the anthology *Teatro de Emilio Carballido*, (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960).
7. Dauster, p. 381.
8. Luigi Pirandello, *Henry IV in Naked Masks*, ed. Eric Bentley, (New York: Dutton, 1952).
9. Carlos Solórzano, *El teatro latinoamericano en el siglo xx*, (Mexico: Editorial Pornaca, 1964), p. 176.
10. Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. Leslie Marchand, (Cambridge and Boston: Riverside Press, 1958), Canto the Fourth, p. 136.