CHAPTER 2

Cellini’s Perseus and Medusa: The Paradigm of Control

The story of Perseus and the Gorgon is paradoxical to its core. In one respect Danae’s son destroyed her, but, on the other, severing her head unleashed Medusa’s powerful interior. What follows is a discussion of Cellini’s bronze for the Loggia dei Lanzi as an essentialization of the paradoxical nature of Ovid’s tale. In this capacity the statue translated into a remarkable echo of Duke Cosimo I’s political achievements, but the salient similarity between the bronze Perseus, the duke’s surrogate, and Medusa emphasizes her power and her share in the hero’s triumphs. Further, the iconography of Cellini’s statue points up the fact that the influence of women played a crucial role in Cosimo I’s rise to greatness.

The Commission and Cellini’s Innovation

In 1545 Cosimo I commissioned Cellini to sculpt Perseus holding the head of Medusa. Nothing more is known about the duke’s intentions, so much of one’s judgment must focus on the way the bronze statue appears in its final form. Cellini deviated from his patron’s order by including the body of Medusa in his frame of vision. An unprecedented configuration exists in her spiralesque form, which comprises legs and arms that are bent to varying degrees. Her left

1 Cellini’s letter to Cosimo I’s secretary, Bartolommeo Concino discusses the commission for the Perseus: “Il mio Illustriissimo ed Eccellentissimo Signor Duca mi commise, che io gli facessi un Statua di un Perseo di grandezza di tre braccia, colla testa di Medusa in mano, e non altro. Io lo feci di più di cinque braccia con la detta testa in mano, e di più con il corpo tutto di Medusa sotto i piedi; e gli feci quella gran basa di marmo con il Giove, e Mercurio, e Danae, e il Bambino Perseo, e Minerva, e di più la Storia di Andromeda, si come si vede.” (“My most illustrious and excellent Lord Duke commissioned me to make a statue of Perseus, three braccia high, with the head of Medusa in hand, and nothing more. I made it more than three braccia high, with the said head in hand, and, in addition, with the entire body of Medusa under his feet; I also made him that great marble base, with the Jupiter, Mercury, Danae, the Baby Perseus, and Minerva, and, in addition, the story of Andromeda, as you see.”) This letter is quoted in Opere di Benvenuto Cellini, ed. Giuseppe Guido Ferrero (Turin: UTET, 1980), 474–475.
hand holds onto her ankle and thus defines her circular shape. The Gorgon’s nude figure hangs onto the last shreds of life and lies contorted upon a pillow and beneath Perseus’ feet. Athena’s shield serves as a support for the Gorgon’s body as Medusa’s figure twists around the shield’s rim. Perseus’ right foot is grounded upon the shield that contributed to Medusa’s destruction, while his other foot rests on his victim’s stomach (Fig. 2).

Perseus proudly holds Medusa’s head aloft, while thick rivulets of blood fall from the two halves of the Gorgon’s gruesome neck. Her eyes are not entirely closed and her mouth gapes open (Fig. 3).