Bernini and the Poetics of Sculpture: The Capitoline *Medusa*

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FOR MORE than a century, scholars have interpreted many of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptures in relation to poetry, whether ancient, such as the odes of Pindar; Renaissance, such as the *canzoniere* of Petrarch; or contemporary, such as the sonnets of Giambattista Marino. This is especially the case with his *Apollo and Daphne*, carved between 1622 and 1625, a work that Andrea Bolland, in a wonderful article published in 2000, convincingly read as an embodiment of Petrarch and Marino's poetics of *desiderio* and *diletto*, desire and delight.[1]

This essay focuses on another poetical sculpture, the *Medusa* in the Musei Capitolini, Rome (Fig. 1). Slightly over life-sized, it is a work no less striking than the *Apollo and Daphne* in its technical virtuosity, with its surfaces brilliantly carved, from the mass of writhing serpents that emerge from Medusa's head to her deeply set eyes, heavy brow, and fleshy lips. But even more compelling, if not also somewhat unnerving, is the Medusa's psychological and emotional tenor, and her vivid sense of physical presence. These very qualities—the brilliance of its carving and its remarkably expressive potency—mark the *Medusa* as the work of an exceptional master, whose identity is, unfortunately, still undocumented. When the marble was donated to the Capitoline Museum in 1731, an inscription attached to its pedestal—our first notice of the work—declared it to be by the hand of "a very celebrated sculptor [*celeberrimus statuarius*]." This claim led, by the early nineteenth century, to its being attributed to one of Italy's most celebrated sculptors—Gian Lorenzo Bernini—an

Fig. 1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Medusa*. Marble. ca. 1638. Front view. Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy. Photo: Jastrow, 2006, Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

attribution that has been widely accepted and to which I ascribe.

Medusa's story is, of course, a familiar one, recounted nu-

merous times in Greek and Latin literature by such authors as Homer, Apollodorus, and Ovid. Variations in this tale are many, but the basic story can be summarized as follows (and note that for convenience, I use the Greek names): Perseus, the son of Zeus and Danaë, promised the head of a gorgon to Polydectes, the king of the island of Seriphos, as a wedding gift. With the aid of Athena and Hermes, who provided him with a mirrored shield and sword, Perseus was led to the domain of the gorgons, three sisters named Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa, whose heads were encircled by snakes. Because the gorgons turned those who looked at them into stone, Perseus had to be on his guard. Warily, he approached the sisters as they slept and because Medusa alone among them was mortal he selected her as his victim. Guided by Athena, he viewed Medusa's reflection in his shield and, with a single swipe of his blade, severed her head and seized it. On his way home, Perseus stopped in Ethiopia, where he encountered Andromeda chained to a rock and guarded by a monster. Having vowed to her father that he would slay the beast if Andromeda would be his bride, he killed it, whereupon Phineas, who had been promised his niece Andromeda's hand in marriage, became outraged and plotted Perseus' death. But the hero, learning of the plot, confronted Phineas and his cohorts with the head of Medusa, turning them all to stone. Later, after finally arriving home, Perseus presented the head of Medusa to Athena, who placed it at the center of her aegis.

Fig. 2. Jacopo Sansovino, *Athena*. Bronze. ca. 1545. Loggetta, Venice, Italy. Photo: Author.

Rich in adventure, violence, and passion, Medusa's legend found

frequent expression in art. From antiquity on, artists most often depicted the gorgon's decapitated head as an isolated, disembodied form. This could appear as a grotesque apotropaic mask, as on the Hellenistic gem known as the Tazza Farnese (National Archaeological Museum, Naples), or as an

Fig. 3. Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus*. Bronze. 1554. Side view. Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, Italy. Photo: Paolo da Reggio, Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

Fig. 4. Antonio Tempesta, *Perseus and Medusa* (from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pl. 41, 1606). Etching. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1951, Public Domain.

iconic, but highly expressive visage, as Jacopo Sansovino depicted it on Athena's shield in a work of ca. 1545 in Venice (Fig. 2) and as did the Milanese armorer, Filippo Negroli, on the parade shield (Real Armería, Madrid) he crafted in 1541 for Charles V. Particular moments in the narrative were also commonly taken as subjects. Benvenuto Cellini's famous bronze group in Florence, unveiled in 1554, shows the victorious Perseus holding aloft the severed head of his victim (Fig. 3), much as we see in Antonio Tempesta's illustration to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* of 1606 (Fig. 4). Perseus' encounter with Andromeda was another popular subject, exemplified by the Cavaliere d'Arpino's painting of about 1592 in the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, in which the hero petrifies the monster with Medusa's head (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Cavalier d'Arpino, *Perseus and Andromeda*. Oil on slate. ca. 1592. Photo: Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Public Domain.

And Perseus' confrontation with Phineas and his cohorts was another frequently depicted episode, as in Annibale Carracci's fresco of 1597 in the Galleria Farnese, where the hero brandishes Medusa's head to transform his enemies into stone (Fig. 6). In the Cellini bronze, where she conforms to what has been called the "*schöne*" (beautiful) type, her head is represented not as an abstract mask, but naturalistically, with blood streaming from her neck. And this type of vivid, naturalistic severed head also appeared in isolated form, divorced from a narrative context—in Leonardo da Vinci's legendary lost painting, so vividly described by
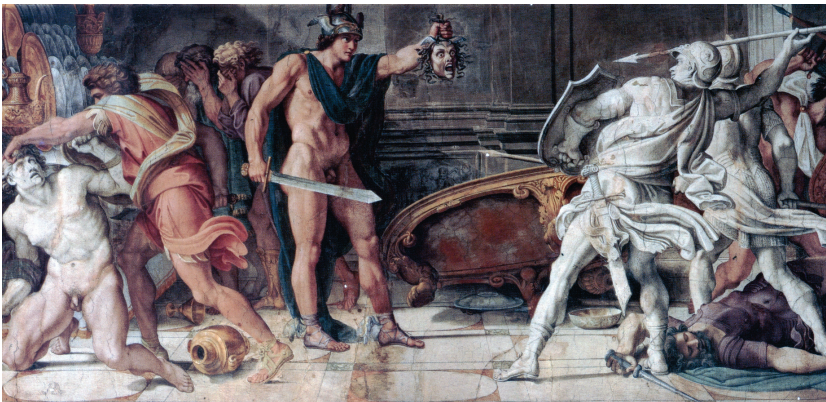

Fig. 6. Annibale Carracci, *Perseus and Phineas*. Fresco. 1597. Galleria Farnese, Rome, Italy. Photo: Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

Fig. 7. Anonymous Flemish Artist, *Medusa*, Oil on panel. ca. 1600. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo: Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

Giorgio Vasari;[2] in Caravaggio's celebrated parade shield of about 1597 (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence); in an early seventeenth-century Flemish painting, also in the Uffizi, which Luigi Lanzi and Percy Shelley, among others, erroneously believed to be Leonardo's painting (Fig. 7); and in Peter Paul Rubens's mesmerizing picture in Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum) of about 1618 (Fig. 8).

In carving his *Medusa*, Bernini departed radically from this visual tradition in a number of significant ways. First and most importantly, her head is not severed; she appears as a living being in the form of a bust, complete with neck and partially draped shoulder. Second, she is not the horrific creature normally encountered in art, but rather a handsome and sensuous woman; and instead of her usual fearsome grimace, this Medusa offers a very different expression (to which we will return). Third, whereas all of its post-Antique precedents that depict the Medusa head as an isolated form are—as far as I am aware—either painted, engraved, or in relief, Bernini's *Medusa* is carved in marble and in the round. All

Fig. 8. Peter Paul Rubens, *Medusa*. Oil on canvas. ca. 1618. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo: Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

of these departures from tradition, I argue, were introduced intentionally by Bernini in order to challenge the viewer to think deeply about the very nature of art—especially the art of sculpture—and about the power of vision, of the gaze, the very essence of the Medusa story itself.

Let us begin with the form Bernini gave his *Medusa*. Rounded at the bottom and set upon a base, it conforms, in all ways, to the classical Roman portrait bust. Whereas the Romans developed the sculptured bust form almost exclusively for portraying likenesses of individual people, Renaissance artists extended the type to the depiction of historical and mythological figures. Antico's *all'antica* bronze busts of *Bacchus* (Fig. 9) and *Ariadne* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) of about 1520 illustrate well this adaptation. While rooted in antique models, they are not copies of ancient works. They are poetic evocations of the Roman past, imaginative portraits, if you will, of the god of wine and his bride, and, as such, can be seen as precedents to Bernini's concep-

tion of Medusa, although he certainly had never seen them. So, too, may Michelangelo's *Brutus* (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence) of ca. 1540, a work Vasari tells us was modeled after an ancient gem, but which is presented in the guise of a contemporary portrait.

By adapting the conventions of the portrait bust for his depiction of Medusa, Bernini—like Antico and Michelangelo before him—blurred the boundaries between artistic genres, much as he had done with his *Anima Beata* and *Anima Dannata* (Palazzo di Spagna, Rome) of 1619 (Fig. 10). As Irving Lavin has eloquently and convincingly written of them, these depictions of blessed and damned souls are "portrayed not as masks or full-length figures but as busts, they are isolated from any narrative context, and they are independent, freestanding sculptures. The images are thus blatantly self-contradictory. They constitute a deliberate art-historical solecism, in which Bernini adopted a classical, pagan form invented expressly to portray the external features of a specific individual, to represent a Christian abstract idea."[3] In contrast to the *Anime* busts, however, Bernini's *Medusa* does not represent an abstract idea. Rather, it depicts a specific ancient creature, the serpent-haired gorgon. But like his "soul portraits" (as Lavin aptly called them), Medusa has been conceived as a portrait bust, seemingly isolated from

Fig. 9. Antico, *Bust of Bacchus*. Partially gilded bronze. ca. 1520. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo: Spencer Alley, Public Domain.

Fig. 10. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Anima Beata* and *Anima Dannata*. Marble. 1619. Palazzo di Spagna, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

any larger narrative context, and as an independent, free-standing sculpture. And, like the *Anime*, she is a being of extraordinary expressive power, whose physiognomy is central to its meaning.

How may we read her expression? As noted above, Bernini's *Medusa* is neither the traditional terrifying monster, the paradigm of ugliness, as Rubens portrayed her, nor the beautiful and serene gorgon, as in Cellini's bronze. Instead, the artist endowed her face with handsome and attractive features, which contort in a woeful expression (Fig. 11). With her head inclined to one side, Medusa arches her heavy brows, raising them higher at the center of her face, causing her forehead to tense and crease. Beneath swollen lids, her eyes are half shut as if shedding tears; her nostrils flare; and her half-open mouth, its corners turned slightly down, seems to release a moan of sadness. This expression—one of sorrow, even tearfulness—anticipates in a remarkable way how Charles

Le Brun would later codify these passions, in both written and visual form, in his famous *Conference sur l'expression*. Sadness (*La Tristesse*)), he wrote, is "represented by movements which seem to reflect the restlessness of the brain and the depression of the heart, the eyebrow being raised higher at the inner end than the outer. In a person suffering from this passion . . . the eyelids [are] lowered and rather swollen, the area around the eye livid, the nostrils drawn down, the mouth slightly open and the corners drawn down, the head negligently leaning to one shoulder." "He who weeps" (*Le Pleurer*), he also wrote, "has his eyebrows depressed . . . , the eyes almost shut . . . and sloping down at the corners, the nostrils swollen . . . ; the mouth will be half open, with the corners lowered. . . ."[4] Bernini's *Medusa*, then, sobbing and filled with grief, may be seen as an *exemplum tristitiae*, a model of sadness.

As to why Bernini would have depicted her in this unprecedented way, the answer, I believe, is rooted in the particular moment of Medusa's tale that most intrigued him—a moment narrated by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, a late sixteenth-century annotated translation of which, by Giovanni

Fig. 11. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Medusa*, detail. Marble. ca. 1638. Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy. Photo: Jastrow 2006, Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

Andrea dell' Anguillara, he owned,[5] and which also appears in Ludovico Dolce's verse paraphrase of Ovid of 1568, as well as in Vincenzo Cartari's *Vere e nove imagini* and Natale Conti's *Mythologiae*, two of the most important mythographical texts of the late Renaissance. Ovid, whose account of the myth is the longest surviving in Greek and Latin literature, described Perseus' beheading of the gorgon in a brief five lines. He devoted considerably more attention to an earlier point in the story, recounted as a flashback in the voice of Perseus, when Medusa first acquired her serpent coiffure and was transformed into a monster. As translated by A. D. Melville, the text reads:

> Her beauty was far-famed, the jealous hope
> of many a suitor, and of all her charms
> her hair was loveliest; so I was told
> By one who claimed to have seen her. She, it's said,
> Was violated in Minerva's shrine
> By Ocean's lord. Jove's daughter turned away
> And covered with her shield her virgin's eyes,
> And then for fitting punishment transformed
> The gorgon's lovely hair to loathsome snakes.[6]

For Bernini, who was always interested in depicting the most dramatic moment of a story, and, as his *Apollo and Daphne* and *Pluto and Proserpina* make vividly clear, in demonstrating, as Paul Barolsky has written, "the metamorphic virtuosity of his Ovidian art,"[7] Medusa's transformation from an alluring maiden with lovely tresses to a repulsive creature with a tangled mass of writhing serpents on her head was a far more appealing and challenging subject to portray than her post-decapitated state. And it is clearly this moment of metamorphosis, and the resulting sorrow that Medusa experiences, that Bernini represents in this bust, capturing in stone the fleeting instant of her transformation, engendering what W. J. T. Mitchell called the "Medusa effect."[8] Thus, instead of avoiding her petrifying gaze, we are drawn to her in this moment of despair. And by virtue of the

particular moment in Medusa's story that he has depicted—by reinvigorating the gorgoneion—Bernini has effected a change in mode as well; for although his Medusa appears as an isolated bust, the iconic Medusa has been reconfigured into a sort of narrative. In so doing, the sculptor may have been inspired by Cornelis Cort's engraving of around 1568–70 (derived from a drawing in Indianapolis attributed to Francesco Salviati), which captures the same moment of transformation. But in contrast to Bernini's gorgon, Cort's Medusa (Fig. 12)—which appears to
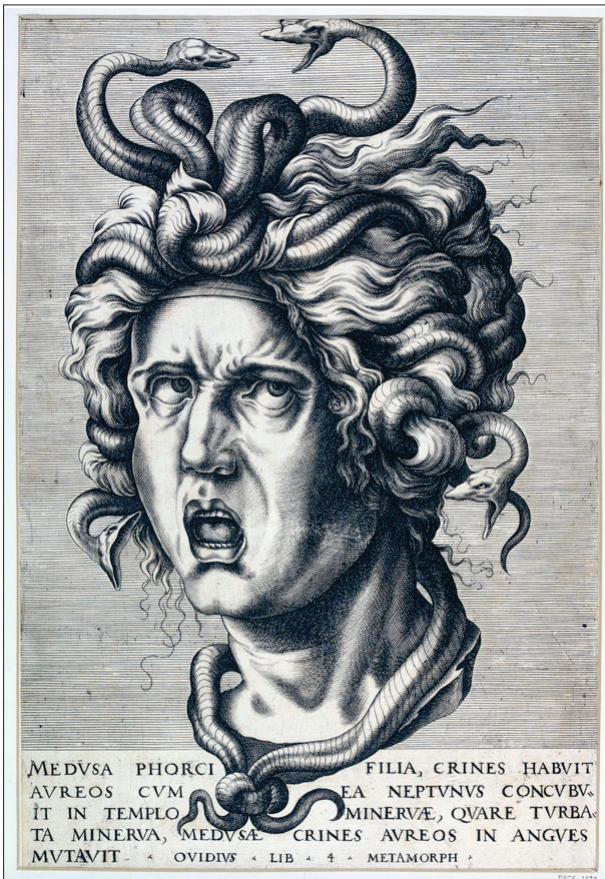

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Fig. 12. Cornelis Cort (after Francesco Salviati), *Head of Medusa*. Engraving. ca. 1568–70 (?). Photo: Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England, Public Domain.

be a sculpted fragment broken off at the base of the neck—grimaces in pain, rather than in sorrow, and rolls her eyes upward to witness the serpents emerging from her head.

And what of the *Medusa*'s medium? By carving his Medusa out of marble and in the round, Bernini enacted a clever and deliberate play on the gorgon's story and gave visual expression to the *paragone*—the ongoing theoretical debate over the relative merits of painting versus sculpture, with which he was engaged throughout his career. In the first place, he reverses her power of petrifaction by transforming, through his art, Medusa into stone. Bernini inverts Pygmalion's virtuosic artifice, for instead of his statue becoming living flesh, the living gorgon is metamorphosed into stone. But it is not just stone that she becomes, but a work of art, a marble statue, a simulacrum. It cannot be coincidental that in Ovid's text Medusa, in turning people to stone, creates statues; in other words,

Fig. 13. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Medusa*. Marble. Three-quarters-rear view. ca. 1638. Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy. Photo: Author.

she makes art. In the original Latin the ancient poet referred to Medusa's victims as "*simulacra*," and in his translation Giovanni Andrea dell' Anguillara called them "*statue*." And, with respect to her transformation—her petrification—of Phineas, "*in marmore . . . mansit*" ("in marble . . . he remained"), Ovid wrote. Thus, instead of Medusa turning into stone those who gaze upon her face, it is the artist who trans-

forms the gorgon into marble. Bernini thus thematizes the art of sculpture itself, and the sculptor's ability—his ability—to enact a metamorphosis. The evocative rendering of her hair, with the strands appearing to come alive as snakes (Fig. 13), what dell' Anguillara described as the transformation of each of her "long, fine, elegant, and beautiful" locks into "a horrendous serpent,"[9] allows the viewer to see and to marvel at the sculptor's metamorphic power, his ability to bring stone to life.

Bernini's *Medusa*, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is about artifice, and through this work Bernini makes a theoretical statement about the powers of his art—sculpture—as being superior to those of painting, for it alone has the ability to turn a gorgon into stone and, simultaneously, stone into a gorgon. And in so doing, he performs a triple metamorphosis: the beautiful and living Medusa transforms before our eyes into a repugnant serpent-haired creature; that creature is metamorphosed into a marble sculpture and an unprecedented work of art; and, in turn, the marble "portrait" petrifies the viewer. Like his *St. Lawrence* of 1617 (Contini Bonacossi Collection, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), which Rudolf Preimesberger so perceptively analyzed as an early demonstration piece intended to display the powers and skill of Bernini's art,[10] the *Medusa* should also be understood as a *dimostrazione*—a demonstration of its creator's artistry and *invenzione*, whose aim is to elicit *meraviglia* (wonder). For in gazing at Bernini's stunning marble and observing the convoluted movement of serpents twisting around and emerging from Medusa's head, the overall treatment of the stone, which appears as "malleable as wax,"[11] and the delicate nuance of her sorrowful expression, we can only be awed at the artist's ability to transform a conventional subject into a work of unprecedented mastery and originality—one that surpasses painting and vies with Ovid's poetry. Bernini demonstrates, in short, his ability to enchant—*méduser*, as the French say—the viewer. And in being so enchanted, even

transfixed, we fall victim to Medusa's and, in turn, Bernini's, petrifying power.

The Capitoline *Medusa*, then, is a unique creation. It presents an ancient mythological being in the guise of a portrait bust; it portrays her as a highly particularized living being, reacting with sorrow and tears to her transformation into a horrifying creature; and it is carved in marble and in the round. And it was only by blurring the boundaries between traditional genres, by transforming an historical subject into a portrait, that he was able to find the appropriate vehicle for his subject. By adopting the bust form for his *Medusa*, he evoked the idea of a specific individual, a sentient being depicted at the very moment of her metamorphosis. Bernini thus challenges the viewer to think deeply both about what art and vision can do. Stone has become the gorgon; the gorgon has been made stone; and, perhaps, having looked into her face, so too have we, for, in the words of Percy Shelley, ". . . it is less the horror than the grace / Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone," [12] and as Giambattista Marino wrote, "stupor so deprives me of sense / that I am almost the statue, and she seems alive." [13]

NOTES

This paper was first presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association in Toronto, Canada in 1998. Although some of the key observations I made about the *Medusa* were repeated, independently, in an essay by Irving Lavin—"Bernini's Bust of the Medusa: An Awful Pun," in A. Gramiccia, ed., *Docere Delectare Movere: Affetti, devozione e retorica nel linguaggio artistico del primo barocco* (Rome 1998), 155–74—the larger theoretical and interpretative reading of the work presented here is new. The most substantial discussions of the *Medusa* are: R. Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque* (London 1955), 201–02, cat. no. 41; A. Nava Cellini, "Ipotesi sulla 'Medusa' e sulle probabili 'teste' di Gian Lorenzo Bernini," *Paragone* XXXIX.457 (1988), 29–34; A. W. G. Posèq, "A Note on Bernini's Medusa Head," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* LXII (1993), 16–21; C. Avery, *Bernini Genius of the Baroque* (London 1997), 91–92; and P. Haughey, "Bernini's 'Medusa' and the History of Art," *Thresholds* XXVIII (2005), 76–86 (which is largely derivative of Lavin's essay). On the occasion of the cleaning and conservation of the *Medusa*, a volume of essays (including an expanded version of Lavin's from 1998) was

published: E. Bianca Di Gioia, ed., *La Medusa di Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Studi e restauri* (Rome 2007). For the sake of brevity, only texts quoted and/ or authors referenced will be cited in notes. I am grateful to the anonymous readers and to Nicholas Poburko, the Managing Editor of *Arion*, for their thoughtful comments.

1. A. L. Bolland, "*Desiderio* and *Diletto*: Vision, Touch, and the Poetics of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*," *Art Bulletin* LXXXII (2000), 309–30.

2. G. Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, G. du C. De Vere, trans. (London 1913), vol. IV, 93–94.

3. I. Lavin, "Bernini's Portraits of No-Body," in I. Lavin, ed., *Visible Spirit: The Art of Gianlorenzo Bernini* (London 2009), vol. II, 682.

4. C. Le Brun, *Conference sur l'expression generale et particuliere* (Amsterdam 1698), 31–32 and 39, respectively. I quote the translation in J. Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's* Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière (New Haven and London 1994), 136 and 138, respectively.

5. See S. McPhee, "Bernini's Books," *The Burlington Magazine* CXLIII.1168 (2000), 444, inventory item no. 12.

6. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, A. D. Melville, trans., with an introduction and notes by E. J. Kenney (Oxford 1986), book IV, 98.

7. P. Barolsky, "Bernini and Ovid," *Source* XVI.1 (1996), 29.

8. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London 1994), 78. He defines the "Medusa effect" as a particular genre of representational imagery that engenders conflicting responses, from repulsion to attraction, and from disgust to fascination. See also S. Baumbach, "Medusa's Gaze and the Aesthetics of Fascination," *Anglia* CVIII.2 (2010), 234.

9. Ovid, *Le Metamorfosi*, Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara, trans., with annotations by M. Giuseppe Horologgi (Venice 1584), 149.

10. R. Preimesberger, "Themes from Art Theory in the Early Works of Bernini," in I. Lavin, ed., *Gianlorenzo Bernini: New Aspects of his Art and Thought* (University Park and London 1985), 1–18.

11. See F. Baldinucci, *Vita del Cavaliere Gio: Lorenzo Bernino Scultore, Architetto, e Pittore* (Florence 1682), 67–68; F. Baldinucci, *The Life of Bernini*, Catherine Enggass, trans., with an introduction by M. Delbeke, E. Levy, and S. F. Ostrow (University Park 2006), 74–75.

12. P. B. Shelley, "On the Medusa by Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery (1824)," in Thomas Hutchinson, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works* (New York 1912), 577. Shelley's poem refers to the Flemish painting in the Uffizi referred to above.

13. G. B. Marino, *Le sculture, parte seconda della galeria* (Ancona 1620), 3; I cite the translation in E. Cropper, "The Petrifying Art: Marino's Poetry and Caravaggio," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* XXVI (1991), 202.