Monstrous: The Grotesque, Abject, and Monstrous in "The Husband Stitch"

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Abstract

This literary analysis of Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" reinterprets women who exist outside patriarchal prescripts. The bildungsroman narrative follows an unnamed woman who struggles with the slow decline of her autonomy, which includes her husband and her obstetrician mutilating her vagina with the eponymous husband stitch. The Narrator presents her unreliability and evasiveness through a metanarrative cast of voices that identifies males as evolving beings while women remain in stasis. Machado describes the Narrator's sexuality with grotesque and abject terms, separating her from the patriarch's preferred sexual and domestic compliances. To this end, I align the Narrator with Medusa through secondary research, marking her as an archetypal monster through her overt sexuality, pregnancy, and green ribbon. My interpretation ends in the finale as, like Medusa, the Narrator's husband beheads her, resulting in the satirical conclusion that the perfect patriarchal woman dies as soon as she is created.

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Presented in the first-person, “The Husband Stitch” traces the heteronormative narrative of an unnamed woman who meets and marries her husband and bears a child before passing in an unexpected manner. The author, Carmen Maria Machado, guides her character through a bildungsroman horror maze filled with patriarchal gender constructs and castration anxiety, which results in the husband beheading the Narrator in the finale. The Narrator takes the form of a monstrous-feminine, placing her firmly in the company of other engendered monsters, such as Medusa, particularly through her overt sexuality. By aligning the unreliable Narrator with a classical monster and employing elements such as the grotesque in describing her sexual appetite and notorious green ribbon, Machado creates a fragmented postmodern horror story that satirizes the loss of a woman’s autonomy under the patriarchal thumb.

Machado opens “The Husband Stitch,” the first in her collection of short stories entitled *Her Body and Other Parties* with a cast of voices that reads, “(If you read this story out loud, please use the following voices)” and proceeds to describe the Narrator, her eventual spouse, her father, her son, and other women. The postmodern metanarrative quality of the cast of voices breaks the fourth wall and complicates the Narrator’s reliability as her descriptions of the other characters reflect her biased point-of-view, which is compounded further with her continued evasiveness, suggesting she has something to hide. Throughout the story, she carefully skirts over topics that threaten to disrupt the “goodness” of her life, such as her husband and her obstetrician conspiring to mutilate her vagina with the eponymous husband stitch. Her evasiveness can be read in her own description of herself, “as a child high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same” (Machado 3). She is careful not to describe herself fully; however, the narrative unpacks a character riddled with trauma and stripped of everything: her mind, her sexuality, her body, and finally, her life.

Conversely, “The Boy Who Will Grow Into a Man and Be [Narrator’s] Spouse” is described as “robust with serendipity” (Machado 3). Machado draws a clear distinction in movement and growth between the “Boy” who will grow and move toward being “A Man” and the Narrator who is “forgettable” and “the same” (3). While he is “robust,” meaning strong, healthy, and vibrant, the Narrator is “high-pitched,” carrying a negative, shrill connotation, very similar to a crying child (Machado 3). To this end, the Narrator is static while the men evolve, the only sign of movement reflected in her sexuality, which also defines her as a symbolic monster; the idea of the story’s women as fixtures rather than growing beings is compounded further by the casting of the voices of “All Other Women” as “interchangeable with [The Narrator] own” (Machado 3).

From Eve in the Garden of Eden to Greece’s Lamia, engendered monsters are common across many centuries as various patriarchal societies developed creative means of demonizing the female form. Even Sigmund Freud contributed through his identification of Medusa’s head as a representation of the female genitals. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbare Creed uses the term “monstrous-feminine” to describe female monsters and to identify the “shocking, terrifying, abject” elements of women (1). The monstrous-

feminine concept, however, relates to sexual difference and castration (Creed 31). While Creed's analysis focuses on the film format, her theories are equally applicable to literature, as depictions of women in various art forms were largely driven by male creators. In support of her argument, Creed calls on Laura Mulvey, a feminist cinema theorist who first introduced "the male gaze"—film production methods that replicate an assumed heterosexual male protagonist and the associated perspective. However, the ubiquitous "male gaze" supersedes any one art form, as the all-seeing eye is evident in literature as well. Mulvey's "male gaze" assumes men as subjects and women as objects. I further abstract the male gaze to include the roles women are meant to play under specific male gazes. Under her father's watchful eye, the Narrator plays the part of a "good girl." However, once "[her] father doesn't notice [her]" during the party, she gains her autonomy, enabling her to seek out her future husband, as well as take him outside and kiss him (Machado 3). Reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the Narrator consummates a newfound love and awakened sexual desire out of her father's sight, relinquishing her from his control. In reality, she merely transitions from one male gaze to another. Building on this, Stephen Neale states in his book, *Genre and Hollywood*, that "it is a woman's sexuality, that which renders them desirable—but also threatening to men, which constitutes…ultimately that which is really monstrous" (61). When combined, Creed and Neale suggest that it is the female form and her utilization of it that creates a monster. For Machado's Narrator, her overt sexuality creates a grotesque template for a monstrous-feminine that supersedes the physical body.

The grotesque is multifaceted, and no two uses are necessarily the same. As a literary element, Kenneth Burke finds the grotesque "comes to the fore when confusion in the forensic pattern gives more prominence to the subjective elements of imagery than to the objective, or public, elements" (59-60). Also, when speaking on James Joyce's writings and the grotesque, Burke writes, "The maker of gargoyles who put man's-head on bird's-body was offering combinations which were completely rational as judged by his logic of essences" (112). The sculptures that designed and created gargoyles did not create "man" or "bird"; they took existing ideas, images, and perceptions, and blended them to create something new. When considering Machado's Narrator, Burke's perspective on the grotesque emerges in her independence as a teenager ("It isn't that I don't have choices"), her sexuality that leads to her "rutting" outside in the dirt like an animal, and her green ribbon that absurdly keeps her whole (Machado 3).

In his work *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke identifies the grotesque further as a "mystical reversal of the customary meanings of dark and light" (59). While Burke's words are in reference to day and night, the quote translates to a multidimensional idea that infers humanity's avoidance, distrust, or fear regarding things it cannot fully understand or control. The sun will always rise; night will always come. The Narrator's grotesque behavior represents an uncontrollable force, and, as the story concludes, her green ribbon remains an unanswered question to her husband and the reader. Moreover, Machado's "The Husband Stitch" questions the extent to which women's bodies and conduct are under their control, with the female grotesque employed as a pivotal component in a horror story about the patriarchal culture and the woman who are sacrificed to it.

Machado's key use of the grotesque predominantly appears through language designed to denigrate sexual autonomy and pregnancy. Despite the opening cast of voices, the teenaged Narrator demonstrates a moderate level of autonomy, as she states, "I know I want him before he does. This isn't how things are done, but this is how I am going to do them" (Machado 3). The Narrator's declarative voice identifies hers as a strong voice, and her observation that "it isn't that I don't have choices," circumvents the readers expectations (Machado 3). However, Machado redirects toward systemic patriarchy as the narrator states, "I am beautiful. I have a pretty mouth. I have breasts that heave out of my dresses in a way that seems innocent and perverse at the same time" (3). The diametric opposition of "innocent" and "perverse" alludes to the common Madonna/Whore dichotomy, which demotes a patriarchal perspective identifying women as either good (chaste) or bad (promiscuous). Despite her assertions that she is "a good girl, from a good family," the Narrator and her boyfriend engage in pre-marital sex in public, even going so far as to copulate outside in the dirt (Machado 3). In this regard, the Narrator becomes Eve, an accepted progenitor of female sexuality and viewed as the Virgin Mary's opposite; however, in keeping with the grotesque, the Narrator also resembles an alternative female sexuality symbol: Medusa (Tumanov 507).

When speaking specifically of Medusa, Freud identifies the mythological create as a "symbol of horror" who is "unapproachable and repels all sexual desire"; however, Freud's analysis is limited by his male perspective and fails to address Medusa's eyes that, according to Susan R. Bowers in *Medusa and the Female Gaze*, watch "with all the force of a powerful subjectivity" (Freud 105-106; Bowers 219). By staring men in the eyes, Medusa does more than turn them to stone; she takes their autonomy and renders them static fixtures, much like the Narrator and all the "other women" in her story (Machado 3). In fact, it is the Narrator's gaze that first challenges the male hegemony, as she states, "In the beginning, I know I want him before he does" Machado (3). With a nod to Genesis, by starting the story with "In the beginning," Machado sets her characters up as Adam and Eve; however, in this version, Eve is introduced first and tasked with shaping the world through her experiences, her gaze (Machado 3). She symbolically creates her husband through her eyes, as she "[sees] the muscles of his neck and upper back, how he fairly strains out of his button-down shirt, like a day laborer dressed up for a dance, and [she runs] slick" (Machado 3). Here, Machado takes a Horatian satirical approach to religion by juxtaposing the sexually adventurous Narrator with her meek soon-to-be-husband, which inverts the biblical narrative of Adam as active and Eve as passive. The sexual role reversal turns the Narrator into a hunter and predator, while the teen boy "seems sweet, flustered," (Machado 4). Once "the boy notices [her]," he is trapped in her gaze and unable to free himself, similar to Medusa's victims (Machado 4). This allows the Narrator to "choose her moment" and strike (Machado 4).

While this self-sexualization can positively empower women, Machado's Narrator demonstrates sexual autonomy as grotesque, particularly in the stories she shares about other women. Specifically, she recounts a story about "a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family and they had her hauled off to a sanatorium," and the Narrator

admits that "[she doesn't] know what deviant pleasure [the girl] asked for, though [she] desperately [wished she] did" (Machado 4). These urban legends become parables that dictate how a woman should behave. After having sex with her boyfriend for the first time, the Narrator invokes the image of a hook-handed man, associated with a popular urban myth regarding a man with a fishing hook for a hand killing a young couple in a car. There is a particular iteration of the story that has the young man leave the car only to return and find the young woman brutally murdered. When considering these parables as reflections of the status quo, the urban legends featured in "The Husband Stitch" create a darker, misogynistic, and satiric set of commandments, fleshing out the foundation on which the story's patriarchal society is built. These indirect rules emulate Juvenalian satire, which is appropriate considering Juvenal's Satire VI frequently criticizes the decline in feminine virtue. A key figure of Juvenalian satire is its universal target, as opposed to Horatian that is topical. By creating misogynistic rules of engagement through these urban legends, Machado criticizes a society that creates fantasies of killing women who violate the rules.

Hazel Barnes builds on Bowers' argument regarding Medusa's gaze in *The Meddling Gods*, finding it is not Medusa herself "which destroyed the victim but the fact that his eyes met those of Medusa looking at him" (13). Within her research, Barnes aligns her thoughts with Jean-Paul Sartre, who believes, "…when another person looks at me, his look may make me feel that my free subjectivity has been paralyzed, this is as if I had been turned to stone" (22). The "look" addressed by Barnes and Sartre is therefore correlated with a fear of losing one's identity to the subjectivity of the Other. Patriarchal males, Bowers finds, have had to make Medusa—and by extension, all women—the object of the male gaze as protection against being objectified themselves by Medusa's female gaze" (220). Machado's Narrator unveils the "otherness" of female sexuality as her future-husband "pulls away" and "seems startled" when she moans as they kiss (4). Almost as if he is afraid, he avoids her gaze as "his eyes dart around for a moment," indicating her arousal disturbs him (Machado 4). The couple's next sexual experience is different, as the Narrator describes that after they have sex, and he "breaks" her, she "runs [her] hand over [her vagina] and feels strains of pleasure from somewhere far off," and his response is "[his] breathing becomes quieter," and he watches her (Machado 5). This scene strikes a blow against male hegemony as the Narrator is the chief architect of her boyfriend's satisfaction, as well as her own, bringing him to climax before finishing herself with her own hands, usurping his position. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes, "men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of actions and of possession" (217). This idea makes the future husband's actions ironic. Despite his claim that he "needs more," he "does not rise to do anything," identifying him as a passive participant (Machado 5). The Narrator's masturbation gives her power and aligns her Medusa, as her future husband is incapable of movement or action. Moreover, much like the gorgon, the grotesque visage of the Narrator's sexual autonomy petrifies the man and renders him impotent.

Machado takes great care to make the sex scenes in "The Husband Stitch" grotesque through careful word choice. Despite repeated assertions that the Narrator's significant other is

“good” and “nice,” once he and the Narrator are alone, she sacrificially “[offers] herself to him,” and the two “find a patch of clear group,” like a pornographic Adam and Eve tableau (Machado 7). Machado’s wording complicates the love, caring, and tenderness between the couple as the Narrator begs him for sex, or as she describes it, “[rutting] in the clearing” (7). She degrades herself by saying she has “heard all the stories about girls like [her]” and aligns female self-gratification with filth, as she starts “to touch [herself], but [her] fingers, which had been curling in the dirt beneath [her], are filthy” (Machado 7). The scene closes with Machado requesting the reader simulate sex noises:

> (If you read this story out loud, the sounds of the clearing can be best reproduced by taking a deep breath and holding it for a long moment. Then release the air all at once, permitting your chest to collapse like a block tower knocked to the ground. Do this again, and again, shortening the time between the held breath and the release. (7)

The Narrator identifies that her sexual experience is taboo, stating that “It is not normal that a girl teaches her boy, but [she is] the one showing him what [she wants],” which reflects the phallocentric society within which she lives (Machado 9). More importantly, the Narrator’s eroticism is born from the same world that prioritizes male sexuality and satisfaction in human sexual discourse. Much like Medusa, the Narrator is a victim of sexual assault, as she admits that her teacher forced her to touch his penis as a child. The horror of this act changes the dynamic between the Narrator and her boyfriend, especially since she recounts scrubbing her hands with a steel wool pad until they bled. By circumventing the teacher’s role and instructing her significant other, the Narrator relives the trauma; the legitimacy of this claim being further substantiated by her revelation that “the memory strikes such a chord of anger and shame that [after she shares] this [she has] nightmares for a month” (Machado 9). Jungian scholar Marion Woodman finds the patriarchy originated from the hero’s journey archetype, with the dragon or serpent traditionally related to the feminine lunar cycle (19). However, it is ironic that this act of violence and subjugation at the hands of an adult male contributed to the Narrator’s sexuality. According to several theory studies, including “The Sexuality of Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors,” childhood sexual abuse victims are more likely to exhibit long-term and frequent behavioral problems, specifically inappropriate sexual behaviors (Roller 48). Considering this, the teacher’s sexual behavior has shaped the Narrator, making her sexuality grotesque. In this regard, the patriarchal society first creates monstrous females and then punishes them.

By the time the Narrator marries her significant other, she has accepted herself as an object for her husband’s pleasure, as “[she tells] him that [she wants] him to use [her] body as he sees fit” (Machado 11). In answer to this, “He pushes [her] against the wall and puts his hand against the tile near [her throat]” (Machado 11). Once again, Machado describes the sex scene in a relatively violent manner, injecting disgust as the Narrator ponders, “if [she is] the first woman to walk up the aisle of St. George’s with semen leaking down her leg” (11). It bears mentioning that St. George is the Patron Saint of many individuals, particularly plague sufferers, furthering the connection between the grotesque and women’s sexuality. The Narrator aligns herself with sickness and a disease that killed millions in Europe. More important here is the symbolism

behind the Narrator carrying proof of her sexuality into the church, one of the key representations of the patriarchy and purity. In this scene, the Narrator desecrates this patriarchal temple with her sexuality, with each drop of semen articulating her defiance like sexual punctuation.

The Narrator's heteronormative narrative further unfolds; months after her honeymoon, she is pregnant with a child that swims "fiercely, kicking and pushing and clawing," transforming her behavior to that of an animal, "hissing through [her] teeth" (Machado 14). When discussing the concept of grotesque realism in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the grotesque's philosophy with "womb," which translates well to "The Husband Stitch" (21). The Narrator's pregnancy and delivery paint a grotesque picture, and her animalistic behavior align with Bakhtin, who comments, "[the] combination of human and animal traits, is…one of the most ancient grotesque forms" (316). He aligns degradation with the lower extremities, "the life of the belly and the reproductive organs…relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. […grotesque realism] knows no other level" (Bakhtin 21). Building on this idea, Julia Kristeva offers an additional perspective on the maternal body in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, referring to it as "abject" and associating it with the feeling that occurs when mother-child bodies separate from each other (Kristeva 3). This feeling is also associated when a body separates from its own wastes (Kristeva 20). In "The Husband Stitch," Machado straddles the trauma associated with childbearing through the two conditions of the grotesque and the abject.

Abjection, Kristeva finds, is common within everyday life and includes negative responses to blood, vomit, and corpses (71). As these examples suggest, Kristeva theorizes abjection in phenomenological terms that associate abject with repulsion and fascination with unsettling bodily experiences, such as death, decay, orifices, illness, pregnancy, and childbirth. Machado brings this level of grotesque and abject in "The Husband Stitch" through the Narrator's body that "changes in ways [she does] not expect—[her] breasts are large and hot, [her] stomach lines with pale marks, the inverse of a tiger's" (14). At this point, the Narrator truly sees herself, claiming, "I feel monstrous" (Machado 15). Through the phenomenological lens, Machado enables the reader to experience the grotesque through the first-person perspective, as the Narrator describes her labor and delivery:

> I go into labor in the middle of the night, every inch of my insides twisting in an obscene knot before release. I scream like I have not screamed since the night by the lake, but for contrary reasons. Now, the pleasure of my knowledge that my child is coming is dismantled by the unyielding agony.
>
> I am in labor for twenty hours. I nearly wrench off my husband's hand, howling obscenities that do not seem to shock the nurse. (15)

The Narrator is an animal once again, describing a painted, writhing creature screaming and howling. Moreover, Machado builds on the grotesque and abject by instructing the reader, "(If you are reading this story out loud, give a paring knife to the listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap between your index finger and thumb. Afterward, thank them)" (16). The

visualization of cutting a person's skin and spilling blood is horrific; however, Machado raises the grotesque by moving to the second voice, forcing the reader to visualize cutting their own skin. Moreover, in her article, "The Body of Signification," Elizabeth Gross examines Kristeva's views on the body and corporeality in humans, particularly those involving pregnancy and motherhood. Gross proclaims that motherhood erases a woman's autonomy and transforms her from subject to object, "blurring yet producing one identity and another" (95). Machado reflects this as the Narrator's husband treats her as an object by claiming her bodily autonomy for his own, discussing "that extra stitch" with her obstetrician:

> "Please," I say to him. But it comes out slurred and twisted and possibly no more than a small moan. Neither man turns his head toward me.
>
> The doctor chuckles, "You aren't the first—"
>
> I slide down a long tunnel, and then surface again, but covered in something heavy and dark, like oil. I feel I am going to vomit.
>
> "—the rumor is something like—"
>
> "—like a vir—" (17).

This scene offers a horrifying glimpse into the multiple unnecessary and non-consensual procedures, after which this story is named. The "husband stitch" or "daddy stitch" is an unnecessary procedure where the obstetrician sews a post-partum woman's vagina with an extra stitch to make her "tight." It is often accompanied by discomfort, trauma, and even extreme pain for the women who receive it. While often described as an urban legend, irrational fear, or even a joke, the stitch marks a serious intersection between the objectification of women's bodies and healthcare. Regardless of the Narrator's refusal, she is ignored by her husband and the obstetrician. However, this medically based assault offers an alternative psychoanalytical meaning that adds a further dynamic to the idea of the grotesque.

As Susan Lurie discusses in her article, "The Construction of the 'Castrated Woman' in Psychoanalysis and Cinema," men fear women subconsciously because a woman is physically whole, intact, and in possession of all her sexual powers. This theory aligns closely with Freud's interpretation of Medusa. Specifically, though, Lurie finds the men fear that women will castrate them psychically and physically (52). It is no surprise that Machado's Narrator cannot bear children after giving birth to her son and receiving the extra stitch. Freud finds that decapitation is tantamount to castration, and the visage of a decapitated Medusa, with which the Narrator is aligned, indicates the castrated female (273-274). By conspiring with her obstetrician to mutilate her vagina, the Narrator's husband participates in two acts of castration. In "The Medusa Complex: Matricide and the Fantasy of Castration," Jessica Elbert Mayock finds two forms of castration relevant to girls: they have no agency and do not control birth (171). By requesting "that extra stitch" and disregarding the Narrator's protests, the husband castrates his wife by eliminating her agency and bodily autonomy.

Despite the loss of her agency and bodily autonomy, the Narrator retains a small semblance of control in the form of the green ribbon that encircles her neck, which attracts her husband's attention during their first meeting:

> "What's that?" he asks.
> "Oh, this?" I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. "It's just my ribbon." I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away.
> "You shouldn't touch it," I say. "You can't touch it" (Machado 4).

Regardless of its innocuous appearance, the ribbon grows conspicuous as the Narrator expresses significant fear and dread as her future husband tries multiple times to touch it:

> His eyes drift over the water and then return to me.
> "Tell me about your ribbon," he says.
> "There's nothing to tell. It's my ribbon."
> "May I touch it?"
> "No."
> "I want to touch it," he says. His fingers twitch a little, and I close my legs and sit up straighter.
> "No." (Machado 4)

The Narrator's ribbon represents a transgression, which Justin Edwards and Rune Grauland identify in *Grotesque* as an "infringement on the boundaries of an aesthetic, ethical, or established form of behavior" (66). Within the confines of Machado's story, "a wife should have no secrets from her husband," to which the Narrator responds, "I've given you everything you have ever asked for. …Am I not allowed this one thing" (20-21). According to Edwards and Grauland's expansion of "transgression" identifies the Narrator's ribbon as more than a simple rule violation; it is a vital component in defining the rule. To the husband, the ribbon is *contra naturam*, against nature, eliciting hostility in him as the ribbon becomes a thin line he is forbidden from crossing. While Edwards and Grauland find three modes of expression of disharmony and transgression—exaggeration, extravagance, and excess—I find the Narrator's green ribbon highlights a fourth area: obscurity.

The negative attention the ribbon evokes, as well as the Narrator's continued evasiveness and refusal to divulge its purpose or history, make it obscure. This form of the grotesque matches and contrasts exaggeration. While the ribbon is not exaggerated in its appearance, its obscurity draws the reader's eye and distorts perception in a manner similar to intentionally exaggerated forms. Its presence is so offensive to the Narrator's husband that it inspires anger, as well as pertinent questions, such as "Why is it green?" It is nevertheless ironic that the same ribbon that spells death for the Narrator carries the color associated with vitality. A deeper understanding of the color green's wide associations delivers additional horror. In ancient Greek, the word closely matched with "green" is χλωρός, which translates to "pale" or "greenish," indicating an illness (OED 2020). The classical Latin *virdis* connotes a greenish complexion that suggests illness or an excess of bile" (OED 2020). In "Green," an analysis on the color green, Stephanie LeMenager and Teresa Shewry report that "green points to the in-between psychological space of existential nausea. …Green is slime, the monster" (128). On the medical front, green indicates infection, closely related to gangrene that occurs when blood flow to a large bodily area stops, causing the

tissue to break down and die. In keeping with the Greek and Latin words, gangrene relates to a gnawing sore or decaying tissue. Speaking symbolically, the Narrator's green ribbon is merely a symptom of what lies beneath the silken green ornament. There is a festering wound that divides the Narrator's mind and her body, and she only manages to keep herself whole by maintaining her last line of defense. The ribbon is symbolic of the final frontier of her mind, the last little bit of herself that she feels belongs to her.

In keeping with this mythological metaphor, the Narrator eventually unties the green ribbon and "[her] weight shifts, and with it, gravity seizes [her]" as her head falls from her shoulders and rolls across the floor (Machado 31). According to the myth, Perseus beheads Medusa while she slept, using a reflective shield to avoid her gaze ("Perseus"). Comparable, the Narrator's husband uses time to subdue her until "resolve runs out of [her]" and she submits the last of "her" self to him (Machado 30). Mento Carmela and Settineri Salvatore report in "The Medusa Complex: The Head Separated from the Body in the Psychopathology of Negative Affects" that the severed head "separates into two directions the spirit (wisdom, consciousness) and the corporeal (ego, sexuality)" (3). Up until she takes off the green ribbon, the husband has achieved dominion of the Narrator's sexuality; however, by "beheading" her, he destroys her spirit and with it her consciousness. In "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers: Notes toward a Preliterary History of Women's Archetypes," Annis Pratt finds the classical hero who conquers dragons, serpents, and gorgons are, in reality, "stories of 'riddance" (168). These narratives transform "powerful women of the pre-Hellenic religions…to seem horrific and then raped, decapitated, or destroyed" (Pratt 168).

The years the Narrator's husband has spent demanding knowledge of the ribbon have worn her down, meaning her consent to remove the ribbon resulted from coercion. Like Perseus, her husband is a willful intruder who seeks to destroy her for his own gain, distracting her with the reflection while he seeks to circumvent her autonomy. In this regard, the Narrator is raped symbolically, representing her husband's final domination of her. Machado punctuates the story with classic grotesque, as the Narrator returns to the second person and requests, "If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll" (31). This re-direction drives the reader to imagine the ribbon "wet with blood and openings" like a gangrenous wound, or "smooth and neutered" like a pretty object, much like a blow-up doll, to which her husband has systematically reduced her (Machado 31). Once again, Machado's careful word choice adds further depth to the narrative, as the Narrator uses the word "neutered" to describe the relationship between the ribbon and her body. Moreover, "neutered" is a synonym for castration, indicating her husband has not only decapitated her, but he has also castrated her, the final proof of her subjugation.

Despite the severity of the Narrator's outcome and the depressive and horrifying ending to the story, "The Husband Stitch" carries an undercurrent of humor indicative of satire. The notion that a woman's head is held in place by a thin green ribbon is absurd. Much like Sisyphus and his stone, the husband has spent their entire relationship attempting to uncover the meaning

of the green ribbon, and once he achieves this, he is right back where he started. The Narrator's head rolls across the floor as the boulder rolled back down the hill for Sisyphus, and the husband can only stand there and watch as all his patriarchal work amounts to nothing. The absurdity transcends the mere image of his headless wife, though; it highlights the wife as a parody of the patriarchal and heteronormative ideal: sexually and domestically compliant. In this way, "The Husband Stitch" reflects the way the husband stitches the perfect woman, cutting away unnecessary bits such as her agency, making her incapable of existing without him. The satirical aspect emerges as the husband's Stepford ideal dies once she is "perfect."

Regardless of its absurdity, Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" delivers a postmodern horror story that satirizes the patriarchal "good" husband and what it means to be a "good" wife. The Narrator's overt sexuality as a teenager and her pregnancy are turned into something grotesque as she is systematically stripped of her agency, ultimately resulting in her death. Her husband symbolically and literally beheads her, furthering her connection to Medusa, the classical monster who is also accepted as a symbol for female sexuality and castration anxiety. Much like Medusa, sitting alone in her cave on an island, the Narrator lies in stasis, unevolving and "the same" as she is as a teenager, while her husband is "robust with serendipity" and grows into a man. Despite this, the Narrator demonstrates overt sexuality and assertiveness, enabling her to take the form of a monstrous-feminine, furthering aligning her with Medusa. This alignment, combined with the grotesque and abject elements, results in a fragmented satirical narrative, with a keen goal of criticizing women's sacrifice to the altar of patriarchal heteronormativity.

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