

## Book Review: Leonard's *Protectress*

---

Leonard, Kendra Preston. *Protectress*. Unsolicted Press, 2022. 210 pages. ISBN: 978-1950730636

### Reviewed by Madison Kooba

As a child, I remember taking any online quiz I could find that would tell me who my Greek-god parent would be, inspired by mythology-influenced characters such as the titular demigod Percy Jackson of the *Percy Jackson* book series. While my growing out of these interests has come with the process of aging, it's also been in part due to recent scholarship that has revealed the damaging traits that typically revered mythological characters uphold. For example, Rachel Smythe's Eisner award-winning webcomic, *Lore Olympus*, depicts the complex drama, gossip, and relationships of Greek gods in a contemporary setting. Though this work might be niche, its recentness and incorporation of such popular and influential mythologies reflects larger efforts of late to reexamine our society's historical prioritization of exclusive and patriarchal ideals, especially as we find ourselves amidst a political climate that has left many people—particularly women—fearing for the safety of themselves and their rights.

It's with this in mind that I say I don't think Kendra Preston Leonard's hybrid poetry-prose novella, *Protectress*, could've arrived at a better time. A retelling of the myth of Medusa, *Protectress* subverts the traditional story of her as a villain who threatened ancient Greek heroes to instead present the tale of her as a once-mortal priestess of Athena who was raped by Poseidon then, cursed by Athena (in an act of victim-blam-

ing) to have snakes for hair and a (literal) stony gaze. Though centering predominantly on a contemporary Medusa who works as a successful college professor, the novella takes place over many centuries as Medusa becomes hardened by an immortal life spent navigating past trauma due to Athena's constant declarations of the supposed "shame" (13) she has brought because of her rape.

The first half of the novella focuses on exploring how Athena's mentality—a mentality that many people today adopt towards real-life rape and assault victims—is illogical and incredibly detrimental to the healing and recovery of Medusa, and the real world survivors she stands for, in its juxtaposition of Medusa's experiences as a beloved modern-day professor with the many sleepless nights and nightmares she still suffers in response to Athena's words that have echoed since her rape in Ancient Greece. This heavy emphasis on Athena rather than Poseidon—Medusa's rapist—as the main driver of conflict directs attention to a central theme of *Protectress*, which examines notions of sisterhood to reveal how women's interactions with and expectations of each other can do just as much—if not more—damage than the patriarchal values and hierarchies that they seek to fight against.

Explaining rather than excusing Athena's perspective, Medusa and her sisters' commentary urges the women in their lives to understand that the mere act of being a woman does not mean that one is exempt from upholding oppressive and/or patriarchal ideals: just because Athena is a self-proclaimed female "warrior" (82) does not mean that she "represents female agency" and thus, "her womanhood does not make her your ally" (93). This responds to recent movements that desire to call out gender inequality but unintentionally reinforce it, such as statements that have recently circulated on

social media declaring that “all men are trash”—an example of misandry rather than feminism, messages such as these curate a womanhood based on exclusion that Preston Leonard subtly but powerfully critiques in her centralization of the novella's conflict in Medusa and Athena's relationship.

Though this serves to condemn the act of women blaming and putting down others, Preston Leonard displays remarkable insight into these perspectives and highlights how they are ultimately the result of a society that has failed both victims of assault and those who blame them for it. As one of Medusa's sisters, Euryale, articulates, Athena's “being the daughter of the world's most / prolific rapist and rape apologist has got / to fuck [her] up” (96), a background which, as Preston Leonard explains, makes “The *shame* she calls for Medusa / ... an echo of the shame / her father called for her” (128). Thus emerges *Protectress's* ultimate argument for a movement “from violence / to serenity” (106) that supports Preston Leonard's notion of sisterhood as rooted in a shared compassion rather than a shared anger. This becomes clear in the second half of the novella, which describes a coming together of Medusa and her sisters with various other mythological women as they, drawing from shared experiences from which they've forged a sisterhood, induct Athena into a space of “welcoming and healing” (114) that they've created to help her recognize how the projections of her own shame and pain have hurt Medusa and other women, in the hopes of establishing a new world in which there are “real sanctuaries / for women, / places of protection, / [and] ways of power” (113) that don't serve to tear each other down.

Not adhering to any formal poetic structure, *Protectress* maintains a fluidity that lends itself well to the rhythmic changes that come with the shifts in environment and emotion, from

the tender descriptions of Medusa's "minute, coiled, delicate, transparent / baby snake[s]" (15) to the harshness of the italicized and unpunctuated tolling of Athena's "*shame shame shame you should die rather than bear this shame*" (20). This fluidity grants a softness to the novella as well that we find reflected in the attitudes of each character: though all are backgrounded with complex trauma, pain, and anger, a strong sense of sisterhood harbors an intense love shared by the women as they navigate their emotions and experiences together, concluding the novella with themes of rebirth and the hope for "a forward march" (205). I certainly see how this novella, despite perhaps not being the type of text typically utilized in the classroom, can go far beyond a pleasure read to be used as a tool for discussion across multiple disciplines regarding women's rights movements, societal responses to them, and how we can productively move towards a world of unity and support for women.