

# Barth's perseus: from the young destroyer to the new medusa'd man



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In *The Perseid*, the second novella from the novel *Chimera*, Barth intertwines gender roles in his postmodern portrayal of the myth of Perseus. The *Perseid*, akin to much ancient Greek mythology, is unabashedly male-centered as the eponymous narrator and his insufferable conceit render women to be no more than mere opportunities towards his ultimate goal: rejuvenation. With his descent from his glory days, Perseus yearns to both figuratively and literally relive his stardom.

From the beginning of the novella, Perseus is tasked with choosing between Andromeda and Medusa. While Andromeda represents an opportunity for Perseus to restore his status as a hero, Medusa provides him with the chance of immortality through her escape clause—the stipulation of her Gorgonhood which allows for her and her true love to ascend into the sky as stars for eternity. Barth depicts Perseus' mythic heroism as a false pretense—a façade that is solely dependent on the reciprocity of womanly affection used to mask his insecurities. In order to achieve his aspirations of immortality through New Medusa, Perseus must first repudiate his standards of masculine heroism embodied by his relationship with Andromeda.

Perseus' letters serve as a microcosm for his relationship with Andromeda and typify the ideals of heroism. During his sojourn in the temple with Calyxa, Perseus recounts the events leading to his estrangement from Andromeda. After a dispute over the itinerary of an intended therapeutic getaway, Perseus details the various items he packed in his trunk prior to leaving. When he mentions his letters, Calyxa promptly pressures him to elaborate, to which he states, “‘ Fan letters, mostly,’ I said. ‘ Nut mail, con letters, speaking invitations, propositions from women I never heard of— sort

of thing every mythic hero gets in each day's post. I swear I didn't save them out of vanity...I almost never answered them" (p. 79). Perseus' image as a hero is contingent upon his "fan" base, namely women he has "never heard of." He contends that his quotidian fan mail is standard for "every mythic hero," thus conflating masculine heroism with female impressionability. Furthermore, his assurance that he did not save his mail "out of vanity" seems increasingly disingenuous after affirming that he "almost never answered" the mail, rendering his letters to be a heap of unilateral correspondence; rather than a record of dialogue and mutual exchange, the letters serve no practical use other than to sustain his egotism. They serve as a metric for his heroism and personify the hero-female dynamic portrayed by Perseus and Andromeda's relationship.

Andromeda's disposal of the letters provokes Perseus' unrestrained ire, leading to his unprecedented response: "Hence my fury when Andromeda, herself unhinged by wrath, tore open the chest-lid just off Hydra and threw them to the first. For the first time in our life, I struck her" (p. 81).

Andromeda's destruction of the letters exemplifies her rejection of Perseus as a hero. Ironically, Perseus' fame and status as a hero is inextricably linked to Andromeda; were it not for her needed rescue, Perseus would not have been able to rise to the status of a "gold-skin" hero. The destruction of his letters and his consequent estrangement from Andromeda denote his transition from hero to human and engender his newfound identity crisis. As a result of the climactic altercation marking the end of their relationship, Perseus' sexual anxieties, namely his impotence and concern over the size of his phallus, become progressively prominent matters of consternation in his

life. During a discussion regarding the parity of genders, Calyxa responds to Perseus' description of her as "sexually adroit" by saying, "You reminded me once that you're a mythic hero, but you keep forgetting it yourself. Were you always psychosexually weak, or is that Andromeda's doing?" (p. 87). Calyxa's retort contrasts heroism with sexual impotence, masculinity with ineptitude—that heroism is mutually exclusive to psychosexual weakness. Her remark alludes to the notion that heroism is indeed incompatible with impotence as it is a compensatory construct—a pretense designed precisely to subdue and dissemble such male insecurities. Without Andromeda, Perseus is unable to maintain his sense of heroism and moreover, unable to quell and mask his feelings of inadequacy. Perseus counters Calyxa's response by asserting that, "No man's a mythic hero to his wife" (p. 87). Perseus' contention is indicative of an underlying commonality amongst all heroes: a façade. A man's inability to be regarded as a mythic hero to their spouse suggests that heroism is subjective, that the intimate relationship between man and wife invariably uncovers its veil.

Perseus and his conformity to the standards of male heroism serve to justify the inequality of genders—that salvation warrants subjection. Andromeda contests the pervasive concept of a justified female subservience by alluding to the irony of her heroic rescue: "she owed me nothing, more especially since I'd manumitted her into the bondage of my tyrant vanity, a mere bed partner and accessory to my fame: it was but a matter, in her view, of exchanging shackles for shekels, or iron manacles for gold" (p. 78). By delegitimizing one of the most consequential events, and arguably the inception, of Perseus' title as a hero, Andromeda effectively denounces and

invalidates Perseus' heroism. The paradoxical nature of her "manumission into the bondage" of Perseus' tyrant vanity further illuminates Barth's commentary on the standards of heroism by raising the question: does salvation without personal liberty truly merit the title of "hero"? Evident by her outspokenness, Andromeda thinks not. Andromeda's adamance in establishing independence and parity in her relationship with Perseus is subversive to the patriarchal power structure of mythical heroism, thus undermining Perseus' image as a hero. During one of his customary postcoital conversations with Calyxa, Perseus, in a moment of introspection, reveals that he had learned from Andromeda "what few men knew, fewer heroes, and no gods: that a woman's a person in her independent right, to be respected therefor by the goldenest hero in heaven" (p. 76). Masculine heroism is inherently misogynistic—there is an assumption of female subordination to their saviors. This sense of inferiority commensurately increases with ascension through the social hierarchy of ancient Greece; "few men" transitions to "fewer heroes" and develops into a complete unanimity against female individuality amongst the Greek pantheon. The upper echelons of ancient Greek mythology regard a fundamental respect for women to be an iconoclastic outlook. Such an attitude is representative of a woman's role in masculine heroism as an object to be saved and a means of fulfilling their savior's sexual desires and need for external affection.

Perseus understands the implications of Andromeda's contentious standpoint as he states "the more she became her own woman, the less mine" (p. 85). With Andromeda's rising status as "her own woman," Perseus' reputation

and self-regard as a hero diminish. Her autonomy transgresses the ideals of mythic heroism and divinity, thus rendering Perseus' roles as a spouse and hero to be incompatible. Old Medusa's posthumous reverence for Perseus, in conjunction with her passive position in the hero-female dynamic, are exemplary of her alignment with the precepts of masculine heroism. During Perseus' intimate, yet brief, shoreline residence with New Medusa following his rescue, Medusa reveals her sentiments towards their mythicized past: "Despite my having killed her she still loved me, and had lived, during her death, for those moments when I raised her by the hair and she withered my enemies with a glance" (p. 105). Old Medusa, or rather her head, epitomizes the objectification of women in the text; she is a mere possession of her "hero" Perseus, acting upon his volition and providing him with unconditional love (though unbeknownst to him at the time).

Another standard of traditional heroism is the bifurcation of gender into two polar capacities: males assuming the active role and females espousing the passive role. While retrospectively discussing her transformation into a Gorgon and her ensuing decapitation, Medusa confides her relationship troubles to Perseus: "She decided that if she was ever to have a lover she'd have to pretend in the cave what had been no pretense in the temple: not to know he was approaching" (p. 90). Old Medusa's banishment to Hyperborea and subsequent anticipation of suitors in her cave is symbolic of her embrace of passiveness and thus her accordance to the capacities of gender roles immanent in heroism. Perseus the hero, on the other hand, is tasked with the treacherous journey of locating and slaying Medusa—an active role. However, for Perseus to achieve his aspirations of rejuvenation

and immortality in his second cycle, he must defy the conventions of mythological gender roles. Perseus' noncompliance to the normative behaviors of heroes illustrates his partial rejection of the established mythological canon. Contrary to his position as a young hero, Perseus—under instruction from Athene—is faced with the challenge of assuming a passive disposition to succeed in his second enterprise for Medusa: “No circuitous, circumlocutions, reflections, or ruses—on the other, rather passive than active: beyond a certain point I must permit things to come to me instead of adventuring to them” (p. 94). By embracing an atypical “direct passivity,” Perseus is displacing himself from the status of hero, and adopting a more effeminate role; although unorthodox, Perseus' decision to maintain a passive demeanor is not wholly a repudiation of the standards of masculine heroism as the intentions of his endeavor remain to reacquire the nominal title of “hero”.

The inconsistency between Perseus' means and his ends is addressed by Calyxa when she asks, “‘how can Being Perseus Again be your goal, when you have to be Perseus to reach it?’ I was twice fetched up, by the cowl-maid and Calyxa's question” (p. 100). Perseus' response that he was “twice fetched up” is perhaps a reference to his two cycles of heroism, both of which ultimately proved to be unsuccessful. The nebulous distinction Calyxa raises between being and doing calls attention to the unattainability of Perseus' goal, that the paradox of his pursuit is perpetual in nature—a Sisyphean task. New Medusa, the savior of Perseus, inverts the established status-quo of masculine heroism and therefore serves as a foil to Old Medusa and Andromeda. Upon hearing of Medusa's resurrection, Perseus envisages

his "re-glorification". He is vocal of his desperation for rejuvenation as he states, "It wasn't Mother Danaë wanted rescuing now, but Danaë's-son" (p. 88). Actualizing his wishes, New Medusa does in fact rescue Perseus—"Danaë's-son"—following his failed attempts to locate the Styx-Nymphs. While Perseus envisioned his "rescue" as a result of Medusa's re-decapitation, he is ultimately saved out of necessity, facing certain death without her intervention. Medusa's salvation of Perseus signifies a transition in power; Perseus, the former hero and rescuer, now more closely mirrors Andromeda as the subject of Medusa's assistance.

The notion of female subordination and passivity inherent in masculine heroism is undermined by Perseus' salvation. Barth contrasts the Old Medusa, an archetype of female inferiority in the quintessential hero-female dynamic, with the New Medusa, a woman who is not rescued but rather rescues. The involuntary nature of Perseus' saving, however, prohibits his action as being a conclusive abjuration of the standards of heroism. Perseus' commitment to Medusa, manifested in his unveiling of her cowl, is emblematic of his renunciation of masculine heroism. In his last discourse with Andromeda as a mortal, Perseus acknowledges the decisive moment in which he abandons his aspirations of heroism, thereafter evolving into a new man: "Unpleasant middle Perseus, who had dwelt stonily between the young Destroyer and the New-Medusa'd man, interrupted her to sneer, 'And find another Phineus?' — his last words, as I put him to death promptly and forever on hearing me speak them" (p. 124). Perseus' indecision between Andromeda and Medusa in the final moments prior to his estallation exemplifies his internal strife between heroism and immortality, "the young



Destroyer" and "the New-Medusa'd man". Barth sets his story of Perseus at a crossroads, the "Unpleasant middle Perseus" representing the transitory stage of his life characterized by insecurity and a newfound identity crisis.

The "death" of the self-described "unpleasant Perseus" alludes back to his assertion that he was "a born reviser, and would die one" while inscribing, in uncertainty, his lovers' names in the sand: Andromeda and Medusa (p. 60). However, along with the demise of his intermediate self were his revisionist tendencies—an end to his prospect of revising and moreover, reviving his heroic persona. Instead, Perseus evolves into the "New-Medusa'd man" through his decision to remove Medusa's cowl, entering perpetuity amongst the stars: "I chucked wise dagger, strode over sill, embraced eyes-shut the compound predications of commitment—hard choice! soft flesh!—slipped back mid-kiss her problematic cowl, opened eyes" (p. 125-126). Perseus' resolution to commit to New Medusa, a discordant symbol of nonconformity to the ideals of traditional heroism, and depart from Andromeda, a representation of Perseus' former heroism and its unattainability, is indicative of his rejection of such standards—the conclusive end to his yearning for heroic "reglorification."