

# Perseus myth analysis

Business



The story of Perseus, Medusa, Cetus and Andromeda is one of the first of the founding myths who established the pantheon of the twelve Olympians and the origin of the Danaans. Founding myths usually involve the slaying of some kind of archaic monster, perhaps the idol of a previous religion or some symbol. In this case, it was Medusa, who was brought to Greece from Libya, where she was worshipped by the Amazons as Metis, a serpent goddess.

Cetus was a constellation first seen years before the Greeks by the Mesopotamians, who labelled it as some sort of huge sea-creature in the sky that represented the all-encompassing female principle, called Tiamat. Along the way, the Greeks must have adopted part of their version of the nightly heavens and conveniently used Cetus as the monster that terrorised Ethiopia.

The murder of Medusa and killing of Cetus by Perseus, the first hero and founder of Mycenae, obviously reflects how the Greeks asserted their superiority and authority over others and to demote the role of females and female goddesses.

As the Greeks believe the Amazons and Mesopotamians were nothing but brutish savages on account of their matriarchal society, it was easy to turn their deities into nothing more than some sort of monster to be slain, an easy way to incorporate and destroy other societies and religions in order to glorify their own patriarchal ones. This is emphasised as Perseus saves Andromeda, a maiden that must be sacrificed to appease a god, as the result of her mother's hubris in boasting that she (mother or daughter) is more beautiful than the Nereids.

In this story, women are portrayed as being helpless, vain and monstrous, or simply the instigator of trouble. Danae as the woman for whose sake Perseus goes on the dangerous quest, Medusa as the ‘monster’ he must kill, Andromeda as the woman he saves, Cassiope as the reason he had to save Andromeda in the first place, and perhaps even the Nereids, for complaining to Poseidon.

All in all, this doesn’t place females in a very positive light, which represented how the Greeks viewed women, often unfavourable, so women had lower status and ranking than the men (e. . women were not allowed to vote, though this stemmed from a different myth concerning Poseidon personally). This story is also a good example of what the Greeks strongly believed in: that the killing of someone, even by accident, must result in the exile of the murderer. This is seen in Perseus, who almost willingly goes into exile after killing Acrisius, though the way he did so can be described as innovative; he swapped kingdoms with his cousin, Megapenthes.

The idea of a hero going into exile after some terrible deed is often repeated: Oedipus, after learning of his unwitting incest, ripped his eyes out and banished himself. Heracles (who is Perseus’ descendant) went into exile himself after killing his wife and children, even if it was because Hera caused him to go insane. Jason is driven into exile when his wife, Medea tricked Pelias’ daughters into killing their father (the story of the old sheep becoming a young lamb again).

All these reflected the Greeks’ deep conviction that manslaughter for reasons other than honour (Megapenthes’ eventual killing of Perseus to

avenge his father, Proetus can be used as an example) is a grave sin, and can only be purified after many years at exile, expiation and a ritual cleansing, supposedly from the gods (another example would be the pardon of Orestes for matricide before the court of gods).

This seems to be because great heroes must be law-abiding, pious and have a great sense of justice, as they are the role models of young Greeks and set an example for the men.

While resourcefulness/cunning (seen in Odysseus and Perseus) and gallantry (from Theseus volunteering to destroy the Minotaur) and such are highly valued, it is the humility to realise they have done wrong and the courage to take the responsibility that sets these heroes apart from others.

This legend of Perseus is a classic instance of the Greek's ideals and beliefs, including what men should be like, using Perseus as the epitome of a great Greek, and at the same time cast females in a negative way; demoting pagan gods and symbols and creating a divine heritage for themselves. It also displays the humbleness of these great men, again impressing upon the Greeks how the heroes are worthy of their title and should be followed in example.