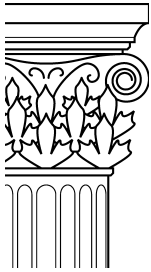
THE CLAY-FOOTED SUPERHEROES





MYTHOLOGY TALES *FOR THE* NEW MILLENNIUM

By Rose Williams



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The Clay-footed SuperHeroes
Mythology Tales for the New Millennium

Rose Williams

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I: SONS OF GODS AND MEN

PERSEUS

THE QUEST FOR THE GORGON'S HEAD

Most Greek heroes in childhood were beset by some power dead set on seeing that they never grew up. Perseus' situation began even earlier. His prospective grandfather, King Acrisius of the Greek city of Argos, did not want his daughter to have any children, and took great precautions to see that she never met any men.

This anti-descendant attitude of Acrisius seems a bit strange, but it was the result of his asking the **Delphic Oracle** of Apollo the god of truth whether he would have any male heirs. Apollo could never lie, but his oracle often made up for this possible handicap by skirting around the suppliant's question and flooring him with a bit of truth guaranteed to give him high blood pressure, if not outright apoplexy. Acrisius was informed that he would be killed by his daughter's child. With that stubborn, and totally useless, shortsightedness so typical of characters in ancient myth, Acrisius tried to forestall the oracle by imprisoning his daughter Danae in an underground bronze house with only a small opening for light and air. Here he was sure no man could reach her. No man did. But that did not solve Acrisius' problem.

Zeus, grandson of Heaven and Earth and youngest child of **Cronus** and Rhea, had become Lord of the Sky and General Superintendent of the Universe upon dethroning his father. From his lofty position he had an excellent view of the Earth and a special appreciation for its loveliest inhabitants, an appreciation which made Hera, his wife and queen, furious. She was not only Queen of the Gods, but also the protectress of marriage, which in her case proved to need a great deal of protecting.

Acrisius' precautions helped not at all; there was absolutely no future in trying to conceal lovely girls from Zeus. Eluding both Acrisius' precautions and Hera's watchful eye, Zeus showed the ingenuity he always used when engaged in mischief and visited Danae in a shower of golden rain. Soon she gave birth to a baby boy whom she named Perseus.

Upon discovering that, in spite of his best efforts, he had become a grandfather, Acrisius faced a dilemma which would come upon many other ancient characters. The **Erinyes**, or Furies, visited those who killed relatives. Since these immortal female avengers had snakes for hair and eyes that wept tears of blood, people were reluctant to encourage them to make an appearance. Therefore he put Danae and her son Perseus in a wooden chest and floated them out to sea, smugly reflecting that he had done no violence and that what happened to them next was no concern of his. Zeus, who always, if he happened to remember, kept an eye on his offspring, asked his brother Poseidon the sea god to calm the waves.

The chest washed ashore on the island of Seriphos, and the seafarers were taken in by Dictys, the brother of King Polydectes. After some years Polydectes fell in love with Danae, who was still beautiful though Perseus was now a young man. Perseus was very protective of his mother, and Polydectes decided to get rid of him. The king announced his approaching marriage, and invited all to the wedding, knowing that they would bring gifts and that Perseus, who had no source of income, would have nothing to bring. When the humiliated young man faced the king and his court, with the rashness and anger so typical of the young, he announced that he would bring as a gift anything that Polydectes might want. Polydectes, with the nastiest smile imaginable, said he wanted the head of Medusa. Perseus immediately swore that he would not return without it. Polydectes took great interest in the part about not coming back, as this was the outcome he expected. Medusa was one of the three Gorgons, monstrous females with snakes on their heads instead of hair and with bodies covered with impenetrable golden scales. To make matters worse, two of them were immortal, and they all looked alike. Not that this fact had up to this point made a great deal of difference, as everyone who looked at them turned to stone.

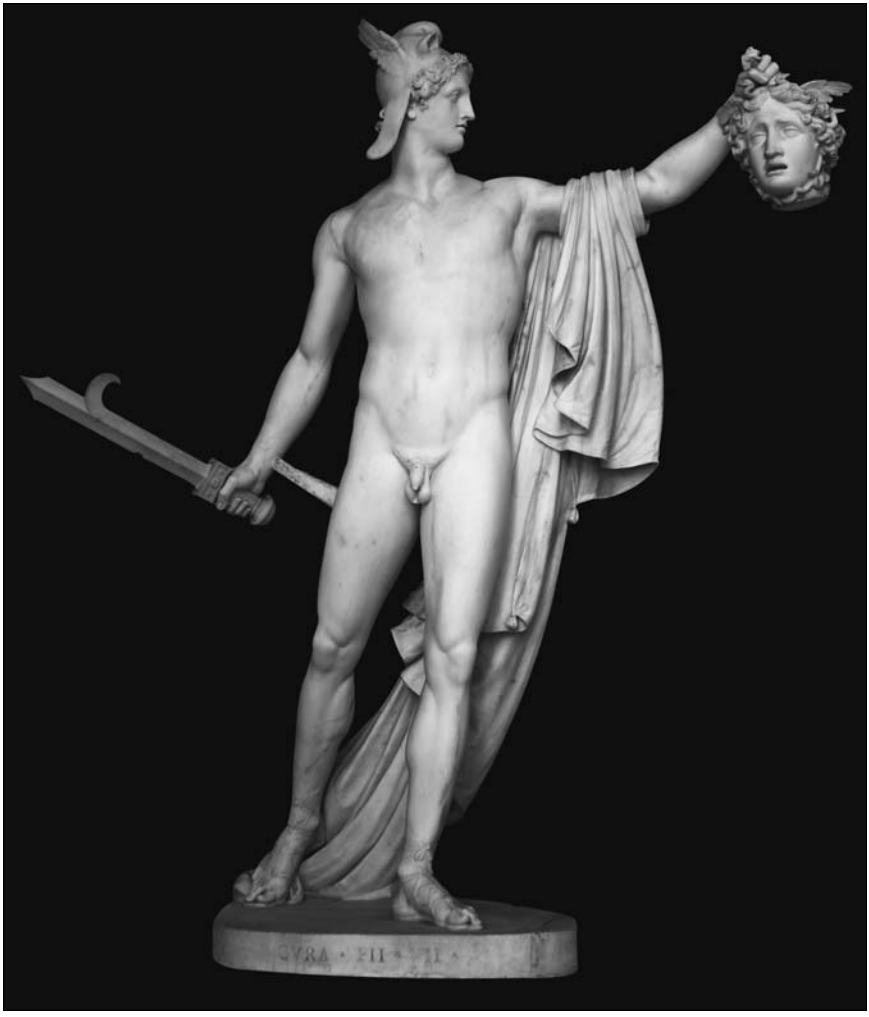
Perseus wandered around for quite a while trying to find the Gorgons' island, which was not on the map, before Hermes the messenger god and Athena goddess of wisdom came to his aid. No one knows why they did this; perhaps Zeus had taken a somewhat tardy interest in his son and encouraged the intervention of these half-siblings on Perseus' behalf. Hermes appeared, complete with winged sandals and winged hat, and gave Perseus some valuable though circuitous information. He said that Perseus, to put it mildly, needed some special equipment to deal with

the Gorgons. He went on to say that this equipment was in the possession of the nymphs of the North, and that Perseus must go to the Graiae to find out how to get to these nymphs. These three Gray Women lived in the land of twilight, and possessed only one eye among them, which they took turns using. They were extremely stingy with information, so Perseus was instructed to hide until one nymph started to hand the eye to the next; then he had to leap out, grab it, and refuse to give it back until they told him how to find the nymphs of the North. Evidently this was a test for Perseus, as Hermes, messenger of Zeus, knew very well where the nymphs were. He promised to guide Perseus to the Graiae, and also to lend him a sword which could not be bent or broken by the Gorgon's scales. Athena turned up at this point and gave Perseus her shield to carry, so that he could look into the polished metal and see the reflection of the Gorgon and cut off her head without looking at her.

After a long and shadowy journey Hermes and Perseus arrived at the twilight land. Perseus was somewhat taken aback at the sight of the Graiae, as they looked like swans except for having human heads and arms with hands beneath their wings. Still, he snatched the eye as instructed, and was told that the nymphs he sought lived with the Hyperboreans, a blessed race who lived at the back of the North Wind feasting and celebrating. Hermes led him there, and the nymphs stopped dancing long enough to give him three gifts: winged sandals, a bag which was always the right size for whatever was put in it, and a cap which made the wearer invisible. Perseus, now fully armed, was guided by Hermes to the island of the Gorgons.

By great good fortune (or the contrivance of some god) the Gorgons were all sleeping when Perseus arrived. Hermes and Athena were beside Perseus, pointing out which Gorgon was the mortal Medusa. Looking in the shield and guided by Athena, Perseus cut off Medusa's head and dropped it in the bag. Then man and gods departed quickly, as the other two Gorgons awakened with a start.

Hermes and Athena went about their divine business, and Perseus started the long flight home. As he flew over Ethiopia, he saw a strange sight—a maiden chained to a rock. He discovered later, when he had the leisure to ask, that she was Andromeda, the daughter of King Cepheus and an extremely foolish queen named Cassiopeia, who had boasted that she was more beautiful than the daughters of Nereus the sea god.



Perseus triumphantly displays the head of the much-feared Medusa.

Whether or not this was true was completely beside the point. Such ***hubris*** always drew the wrath of the gods, who sent a sea serpent to devour Cepheus' people and announced they would withdraw it only if his daughter Andromeda were offered to the serpent. Perseus, still showing that impetuosity typical of youth in general and mythological figures in particular, fell in love with her on the spot, waited beside her until the serpent came, and relieved said beast of his head. He then flew back to the palace and asked Andromeda's parents for her hand in marriage, which they gladly gave him.

When he arrived with his bride on Seriphos he found that all was far from well. Dictys and Danae were hiding from Polydectes, who was still furious with Danae for refusing to go ahead with the marriage. Perseus left Andromeda with them and went straight to the palace where Polydectes and his henchmen were feasting. He strode in noisily and, when everyone looked up, whipped Medusa's head out of the bag and considerably increased the island's supply of statues.

Having made Dictys King of Seriphos, Perseus took Danae and Andromeda and went back to Argos to see if they could make peace with Acrisius, but the king had gone on a journey, and no one knew where. Then Perseus went to Larissa, where he had heard of a great athletic contest. He entered the javelin throw, and as anyone who has read many Greek myths could have foretold, it swerved into the crowd and killed an elderly spectator, who just happened to be King Acrisius.

After he learned what he had done, Perseus, not wanting his grandfather's throne under these circumstances, exchanged cities with his cousin Megapenthes, who became king of Argos while Perseus became king of Tiryns, and according to the ancient Greeks, founded Mycenae. Later Tiryns went to war with Argos, and Perseus was killed. He left many sons, and after various contretemps among them Sthenelus succeeded his father as king of Tiryns, Electryon received Mycenae, and Perses ruled Ethiopia and became ancestor of the emperors of Persia.

Perseus was gone, but, in the manner of classical heroes, far from forgotten. Pausanius mentions the shrine to Perseus that stood on the left-hand side of the road from Mycenae to Argos, and also a sacred fountain at Mycenae called *Persea*.

HERACLES

THE QUEST FOR ABSOLUTION

Perseus had left entirely too many offspring. Electryon King of Mycenae was accidentally killed by Amphitryon, son of another **Perseid**. Amphitryon was exiled for this, and fled with his cousin Alcmene to his maternal uncle Creon, King of Thebes, who cleansed him of his blood guilt. Amphitryon married the beautiful Alcmene, but he was not alone in admiring her. Zeus, still observing precautions, came to Alcmene in the guise of her husband, and she bore two sons: the mortal Iphicles to