

College Guild
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Mythology

Unit 3 of 6

Perseus and Medusa

Perseus is one of the earliest Greek heroes. The son of King Polydectes, Perseus was given the seemingly impossible task of beheading Medusa and returning her head to his palace. Medusa was one of three beautiful sisters known as the Gorgons. She had an affair with Poseidon in the temple of Athena. This infuriated Athena, and her revenge was to transform the sisters into horrible-looking creatures. She covered their skin with scales, gave them tusk-like teeth, made their hands into brass, and filled their hair with snakes. Not only were they hideous to look at, but they were dangerous. Anyone who looked at them was instantly and irreversibly turned into stone.

1. Draw your image of what you imagine Medusa looked like.

King Polydectes felt that his kingdom had suffered enough with Medusa and her sisters roaming around the countryside and turning the poor unfortunates who caught her gaze into stone. Perseus, always the would-be hero, said to his father, "I fearlessly offer you my services for I would go anywhere on earth; I would even kill the horrible Gorgon, Medusa, to prove my loyalty and courage." The king accepted the offer, for he had ulterior motives. He had feared for a long time that his hero son might one day overthrow him and end his rule of the kingdom; accepting this offer would be a great way to get rid of Perseus.

2. Notice that a lot of myths have a distorted relationship between parents and children. Why do you think this is?

All the king's cronies howled with laughter at Perseus' willingness, for they knew that he would probably never return from the task. He, too, would probably get turned into stone. But they had forgotten about the power of the gods. Athena and Hermes (Mercury), the winged messenger of the gods, joined forces in the venture to assist Perseus. Athena provided Perseus with a sword, a magic winged helmet that could render him invisible, and a highly polished shield that shone like a mirror.

Off they flew, and after a long search for Medusa, they found her asleep in a cave filled with stone men -- her unfortunate victims. Using his shield as a mirror, so that he would not have to look at her, and his magic helmet so as to be unseen, he performed the dastardly deed with his sword.

When he returned to the king's palace with the head of Medusa, the cronies turned into stone when Perseus showed her head to them.

Here is a great hero who persevered to accomplish a task that appeared to be impossible. Any of the heroic deeds you have read about would have deterred even the strongest-hearted would-be hero. We have to admit that Perseus must have had divine assistance.

3. Does having help accomplishing a task make the feat any less heroic? Explain.

Tales from the past generally equate heroism with physical strength and raw courage -- often with divine assistance. Today's heroes do not always fit that old definition. New kinds of heroism and new kinds of heroes have emerged. To many, research scientist Jonas Salk (developer of the polio vaccine), astronaut John Glenn, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King are contemporary heroes. And we have POWs, sports figures, and the list goes on.

4. Write an essay (at least three paragraphs) on the subject of heroism. Include:

What are some traits that make people heroes?

Can anyone be a hero?

Who are our heroes?

What are some of the best examples of heroism?

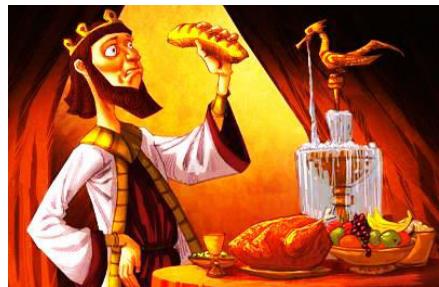
Poseidon (Neptune)



Poseidon, brother of Zeus and Hades, was the king of the seas, earthquakes, and for the Romans, horses. His famous symbol was the trident -- his greatest weapon -- a long spear with three prongs. When angered, he was prone to strike the mountainside with the trident. This caused floods, earthquakes, shipwrecks, and drownings. Once, he tried to shipwreck Odysseus and his crew on their way home to Greece from the Trojan War. More out of fear than respect for Poseidon, sailors prayed to Poseidon for safe voyages, and they would even throw a horse or two into the seas as a sacrifice. Some sources say that he was the most infamous of all the gods. Funny thing -- there was a moral code for mortals but none for the gods themselves.

5. What would you give as a gift to an all-powerful god?

The Midas Touch



Midas was a foolish king, but not an arrogant one. Dionysius, the god of wine, was being entertained at a banquet hosted by King Midas. During the course of the meal, Dionysius told the king to make a wish. "Anything you want," he said, "and I will grant it. And furthermore, I will swear upon the waters of the River Styx." King Midas was overjoyed at the thought and replied, "Let everything my body touches turn into gold." Although he thought the king showed poor judgment, Dionysius granted the wish.

6. If you could be granted any wish, what would it be? Explain why.

7. What is the danger in having that wish granted?

As he left the banquet, the king cautiously picked a branch from a nearby tree and, sure enough, it turned into gold. Then he grabbed a little rock -- a lump of gold. And so it went, all the way back to the palace. The next morning, his servant served a delicious-looking meal, but when he picked up his utensils to eat, everything turned into gold. His servants tried hard not to laugh at the pitiful sight of their hungry master unable to eat. King Midas was parched with thirst. He was starving for food, but his riches could not satisfy either. Unthinkingly, he one day took his daughter's hand and she turned to gold. He then began to detest the power he had acquired, which only brought him pain and misery.

Raising his hands to the gods, he prayed, "O Dionysius, help me! I have used your generous gift unwisely. Pity me, and free me from this golden curse." The god did free Midas, because he pitied him. Dionysius showed compassion.

8. Would you have freed Midas from his 'gift'? Why or why not?

Volumes have been written on money and its effects on individuals. The Bible addresses the issue in two parables, and from it comes a well-known proverb: "The love of money is the root of all evil."

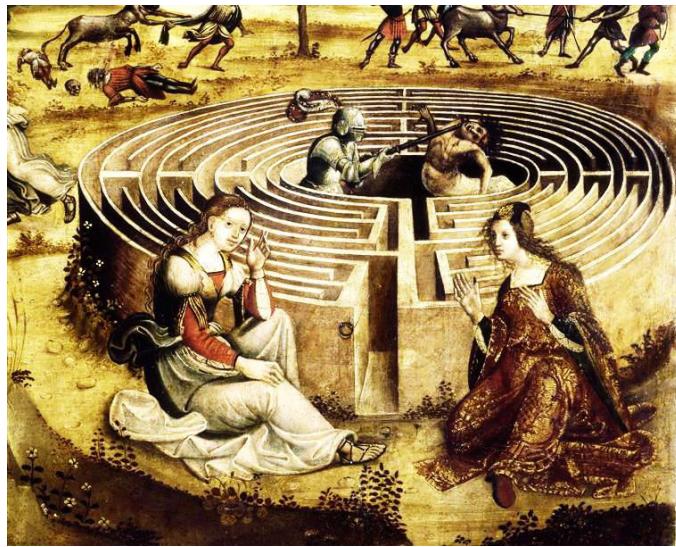
9. Explain an exception to this proverb.

10. What do the ads on TV and in magazines reveal about the values of our society concerning money?

Today the commonly used expression "Midas touch" comes from the myth. It is the ability to create wealth and success at every turn, and it is thus that we apply the phrase to individuals who seem to succeed at every enterprise they undertake.

11. Give an example of someone who has the "Midas touch". (This can be a real or fictional person.)

Theseus - The Minotaur - The Labyrinth



Theseus is considered to be the greatest Athenian hero. He possessed all the qualities the Greeks looked for in their heroes: courage, compassion, great strength, and cleverness.

His home was in the south of Greece. In search of his father, whom he had never met, he set out on foot for Athens to meet him. At that time, the road to Athens was a dangerous route because it was infested with robbers and villains who roamed the area. The safest and most traveled way was by boat, but Theseus preferred to go on foot. He thought there would be

many adventures waiting for a would-be hero. He was right. The Athenians were terrorized for a long time by three "monsters" who each had "specialties."

One was Sinis. He fastened the victims he waylaid on the route by tying them to the branches of young pine trees. Then he bent the branches back to the ground, letting the victims fly off to their doom.

Next was Sciron, the bandit, who made his victims kneel before him at the edge of a cliff. Then he kicked them over the cliff to their doom.

And last, but not least, was Procrustes (often referred to as the "stretcher"). He invited travelers to spend the night free of charge in his house. The problem was that he had only one bed. If the guest was too tall for the bed, he was cut to size until he fit, (the first "one size fits all") and the short guest was stretched until he fit.

The first heroic deed for Theseus was to dispose of Procrustes in the same manner in which he treated his victims.

12. Would you consider this heroic? Why or why not?

The word "procrustean" now means arbitrarily forcing someone into your way of thinking or doing things.

13. Give an example of another "procrustean" method.

In the course of time, Theseus arrived in Athens, where another danger faced him. Medea, a sorceress, knew that Theseus was the king's son. This was as yet unknown to the king. Fearing she would lose her influence on the king if Theseus should be acknowledged as his son, she tried to poison him. Failing in that endeavor, she fled Athens, and Theseus was declared the rightful successor to the throne.

14. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a King/Queen?

Now at this time the Athenians were faced with a dreadful problem. An unsuccessful war with King Minos of Crete ended with the Athenians being forced into paying tribute (payback) to the king. Every year they had to send seven boys and seven girls to King Minos, and he threw them into the labyrinth as food for the giant Minotaur (a half man, half bull creature) caged inside. It was common knowledge that no one could ever escape from this structure.

Theseus volunteered to be the champion of heroes and rid the city of Athens of the menace. Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, having fallen in love with Theseus, came to his aid. She gave him a sword to kill the beast and a clue (a magic piece of string) by which he could find his way out of the labyrinth. Theseus tied the string at the entrance and unwound it as he searched for the Minotaur. With the sword he slew the creature, then retraced his way out. Grateful crowds of Athenians greeted him upon his arrival back home.

The myth has given us the word "labyrinth," which can mean a maze, a graphic puzzle, any physical situation in which it is easy to get lost, or an intricate, usually confusing network connecting one point to another.

Clew is an Old English word meaning "a ball of string." That word has gradually changed from "clew" to "clue." The expression is now used to refer to any situation that leads to solving a great mystery.

15. Draw a picture of a labyrinth.

16. Create a "ball of string" mystery situation and tell how it was solved.

Labyrinths are very popular today. The ones used in churches are not considered mazes, as they are not designed to make you lose your way, and they do not have multiple entrances and exits. People who have walked a labyrinth say that it is a journey of peace and quiet, trusting the path, and being receptive to your inner self, and that it refreshes them.



Hospitals sometimes use them for their patients. Cancer groups use them for strength and for finding their way through difficult times. Hypertension (high blood pressure) clinics use them to help their patients lower their stress levels.

Labyrinths are created in private backyards and outdoor ice-skating rinks; churches or other meeting places use portable mats with labyrinth paths on them.

17. If there something in everyday life that seems like a labyrinth?

Daedalus and Icarus



Daedalus was a master inventor, craftsman, and architect of his time. He had received this gift from Athena, the goddess of wisdom, warfare, and crafts. He was responsible for building the labyrinth into which Theseus dared enter and kill the Minotaur. The king of Crete was outraged and ordered Daedalus and his son, Icarus, to be imprisoned in the labyrinth.

While there, Daedalus plotted an escape by constructing wings out of feathers and wax, which would fly them to safety. Before they "took off," he warned Icarus not to fly close to the sun. But the young Icarus was so overwhelmed with the thrilling experience of flying that he paid no attention to his father's warning: "Icarus, my son, I charge you to keep at moderate height, for if you fly too low, the damp will clog your wings, and if too high, the heat will melt them." Icarus flew too close to the sun. The sun melted the wax, and he fell into the sea.

18. Think of another way that Icarus could have escape the labyrinth.

Daedalus escaped to Sicily, and Hercules buried the body of Icarus. His body can be seen today as a small promontory jutting out into the Aegean Sea. It is the site of a posh resort for the wealthy.

19. Write a quote about the lesson we should learn from the story of Icarus.

20. Both Daedalus and Prometheus (the god who gave fire to humans) were clever and innovative. Whom do you prefer, and why?

Athena



Athena (Minerva) was the goddess of wisdom, warfare, and arts and crafts. Her male counterpart was Ares (Mars), god of war. She is usually pictured with several symbols: a helmet, a spear, her divine shield (called an aegis), and an owl, a symbol that is still used today to represent wisdom.

Here is a simple, often repeated little poem, author unknown:

"A wise old owl lived in an oak.
The more he saw, the less he spoke.
The less he spoke, the more he heard.
Why can't we be like that wise old bird?"

21. Why did the owl speak less as he saw more?

Skilled in strategic warfare, Athena preferred negotiation to settle disputes, and she went to war only as a last resort. Ares, first and foremost a warrior, was the opposite in character. He represented to the Greeks the worst aspects of war: brutality, rashness, and barbarism.

22. How has warfare changed over the ages, if at all? What lessons have we learned? Write your thoughts on the subject, and give examples when you can.

Athena was the favorite daughter of Zeus. Her "birth" was highly unusual. Once, Zeus was having a bad day of severe headaches. Hephaestus (Vulcan), the god of the forge, struck his skull, and out sprang Athena completely dressed in her battle gear. Because of that unnatural birth, she could never become a threat to her father and overthrow him. You will recall previous gods and kings who had the same fear of losing power.

Her favorite occupation was to assist Greek heroes in their exploits, offering them her advice, assistance, and protection. Nike, the goddess of victory, often accompanied her.

23. Write a fictional story about Athena and a battle.

Aegis is the name identified with the weapons system of the U.S. Navy. A class of ships, called the Aegis destroyers, has strengthened our navy, enabling it to cope with the potential threats of the 21st century. According to the Navy, "Aegis is a most appropriate name for these destroyers that are best able to defend our battle groups."

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Appendix Greek Mythology: Unit 3 of 6

Citations

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