

he grew and he grew and he grew (so the gods had decreed), till the whole of the sky with all of its stars could now bed down on his ranges

The winds had all been imprisoned by Aëolus, god of the tempests,
inside his cave. The morning star which summons to work

665 had risen, bright in the sky. So Perseus fastened the wings of his sandals again on his feet and girded himself with his hooked sword.

Soon he was cutting a path through the air on his fluttering anklets,
passing an infinite number of countries around and below him.

He finally sighted the realm of Ethiopian Céphæus,* where Ammon, the god of the land, had unjustly ordered the princess

670 Andromeda, innocent girl, to pay the price for her boastful mother who claimed to surpass the daughters of Nereus in beauty.

When Perseus noticed the maiden tied by the arms to a jagged rock-face (but for the light breeze stirring her hair and the warm tears coursing over her cheeks, he would have supposed she was merely

675 a marble statue), unconscious desire was kindled within him.

Dumbly amazed and entranced by the beautiful vision before him, he almost omitted to move his wings as he hovered in air.

Then once he'd alighted, he said to the maiden, 'Shame on such fetters!

You shouldn't be bound by these but the ties of passionate lovers.

I ask you to tell me your name, sweet girl, and the name of your country.

680 Tell me why you are chained here.' At first she was silent, constrained

by maidenly shyness in front of a man; if her hands had been free of their bonds, she'd have lifted them up to her face to cover her blushes.

Her eyes could speak, though, filled as they were with welling tears.

He continued to press her and therefore, not to appear to be hiding

685 a fault of her own, she told him her name and the name of her country, and how her mother had wickedly boasted about her beauty.

Her story was still unfinished, when out of the sea there resounded

a sinister roar and, advancing across the expanse of ocean, breasting the surge of the waves, there emerged a menacing monster.

690 Andromeda screamed; her sorrowing father and with him her mother

arrived on the scene, both greatly distressed, though the mother more justly.

They brought no help but simply engaged in the usual rituals

of weeping and beating of breasts. As they clung to the girl's chained body,

the stranger protested: 'Your tears and laments can be safely indulged

695 later on and at length; a rescue is needed now and with all speed.

I am the Perseus fathered by Jove and mothered by Danaë, impregnated by Jupiter's gold as she languished in prison,

the Perseus who killed the snake-headed Gorgon and
ventured to fly
through the air on fluttering wings. If I were courting this
maiden,
700 I'd be the suitor you surely preferred for her
husband-to-be.

To these most splendid endowments, if heaven is kind,
I shall add

my valiant service. These are my terms: if I rescue your
daughter,
she shall be mine.' Her parents agreed – they could
hardly refuse –

705 and to crown their entreaties they promised Perseus the
kingdom as dowry.

There comes the monster, parting the waves with the
thrust of his huge breast,
just as a war-galley, strongly propelled by its sweating
oarsmen,
speedily furrows a path with its sharp-beaked prow
through the ocean.

Now it was steadily nearing the cliffs, as close as the
range

710 of a spinning bullet discharged through the air from a
Balearic sling;

when suddenly Perseus, pushing away from the earth
with his sandals,
soared aloft to the clouds. When the hero's shadow
appeared
on top of the water, the frightened monster fiercely
attacked it.

Imagine an eagle sighting a serpent, sunning its dark
blue

715 back in an empty field, and swooping down on its prey
from behind; to escape the poison discharged from the
fangs, it greedily
grips the scaly neck in its talons. So valiant Perseus
swooped straight down through the air to stab the
beast in the back,

and through its right shoulder he buried his sword-blade
up to the curved hilt.

720 Roaring with pain and severely wounded, the monster
reared itself

high in the air, then plunged down into the waves, then
turned

like a savage but terrified boar when the dogs are baying
around him.

Poised on his swift wings, Perseus eluded his ravaging
enemy's

jaws and went for his weak points, hacking away with his
hooked sword,

725 now at its barnacled back and then at the ribs, then
again

at the narrowest point of the tail where it tapered into a
fish.

The monster spewed forth seawater mingled with crimson
blood,
drenching Perseus' sandals in spray and weighing them
down.

730 Not daring to trust his sodden wings any further, the man
caught sight of a rock whose summit projects from a calm
sea's surface

but cannot be seen when the ocean is rough. So Perseus the
valiant,
fracting himself against this, gripping its top with his left
hand,

plunged his weapon again and again through the monster's
vitals.

The shouts of applause re-echoed along the shore and
above

735 in the halls of Olympus. Andromeda's mother, Cassiopeia,
and Cepheus, her father, were both delighted; Perseus was
hailed

as their daughter's betrothed and proclaimed as the saviour
and stay of the house.

The princess, quickly released from her chains, came
forward to greet him.

Her danger had prompted his feat; she was now the reward for his courage.

740 The victorious hero cleansed his hands in the water they drew for him.

Fearing to bruise the Gorgon's snake-covered head on the hard sand, he softened the ground with leaves and covered it over with seaweed, to serve as a mat for the head of Medusa, the daughter of Phorcys.

The fronds which were fresh and still abundant in spongy pith

745 absorbed the force of the Gorgon and hardened under her touch, acquiring a strange new stiffness in all the stems and the foliage.

The sea-nymphs tested this miracle out on additional fronds

of seaweed. Excited to find this yielded the same result, they repeated the marvel by tossing the plant's seeds over the waves.

750 Coral even today preserves this identical property: contact with air induces its hardness and what was a flexible shoot under water is turned to rock on the ocean's surface.

Next Perseus built three altars of turf to three of the gods:*

the one on the left to Mercury, that on the right to Minerva,

755 the central altar to Jupiter. Victims were duly offered: a cow for the warlike maiden, a calf for the wing-footed guide and a bull for the king of the gods. Without any further delay,

Perseus claimed the reward for his valiant deed,

Andromeda,

seeking no further dowry. The wedding torches were

flourished

by Hymen and Love; the fires were richly supplied with

incense;

garlands hung from the palace roof; and everywhere

singing

to music of lyre and pipe auspiciously signified joy.

And now the doors were flung open, the golden halls were

revealed

with a sumptuous banquet prepared, and Cepheus' court

was admitted.

The feasting was over and hearts were relaxed with the

flowing wine,

765 when the bridegroom asked a few questions about the land

and its products,

social customs and attitudes held by the people who lived

there.

The prince who replied went on: 'Now, Perseus, bravest of

heroes,

please will you tell us the story of how your remarkable

courage

770 and skill combined to remove the head of the snake-haired

Gorgon?'

Their guest then mentioned a freezing glen at the foot of Mount Atlas,

rightly enclosed by a fortification of massive rocks.

Two sisters had lived by the valley's entrance, the daughters

of Phorcys,*

who shared the use of a single eye, which Perseus had

craftily

775 stolen as one was passing it on to the other, by slipping

his hand underneath, thus forcing the Graiae to give him

directions.

He travelled through rocky regions remote and secluded, littered

with broken trees, and finally came to the home of the
Gorgons.

780 Across the fields and along the tracks he had seen the
statues
of men and of beasts transformed to stone at the sight
of Medusa.

He, however, had only looked on those terrible
features

as they were reflected in bronze, on the shield which he
held in his left hand;
and while Medusa as well as her adders lay buried in
sleep,

785 he had lopped her head from its neck. In consequence,
swift-winged Pegasus*
sprang from his mother's blood, along with his brother
Chrysaor.

Perseus also narrated the dangers he'd faced on his
long voyage,
naming the seas and the lands he had viewed from his
flight through the air,
and all the stars which he'd lightly brushed with his
beating wings,

790 but his audience wanted more. He was asked by one of
the court
why Medusa, alone of her sisters, had snakes entwined
in her hair.

'That is an excellent question,' responded the guest; 'let
me give you
the answer. Medusa was once an exceedingly beautiful
maiden,

795 whose hand in marriage was jealously sought by an
army of suitors.

According to someone who told me he'd seen it, her
marvellous hair
was her crowning glory. The story goes that Neptune
the sea god
raped this glorious creature inside the shrine of
Minerva.

Jove's daughter screened her virginal eyes with her aegis* in
horror,

and punished the sin, by transforming the Gorgon's
beautiful hair

800 into horrible snakes.' (That explains why, to startle her foes
into terror,

the goddess always displays those snakes on the front of her
bosom. *)