

Tales from Ancient Greece

5. PERSEUS AND THE GORGON

- HERMES Once there was a boy, a prince, who wasn't wanted. Perseus was his name. And this story begins with the king who didn't want him. He was called Akrisios - and he was king of Argos. Akrisios was no spring chicken, he was getting on a bit, so he went to the oracle at Delphi - that's a place where they make prophecies and you can get your future told. And he asked the oracle:
- AKRISIOS How long have I left to live?
- HERMES That question doesn't bother me of course - I'm immortal, I'll live forever - but it mattered to Akrisios. And the oracle replied:
- ORACLE How long will you live? How lo-o-ong?
- AKRISIOS Yes! How long?
- ORACLE Ahhhh!
- AKRISIOS What is it? What can you see?
- ORACLE Oh, king, you will die...
- AKRISIOS Yes?
- ORACLE You will die - ahhhh!
- AKRISIOS Yes?
- ORACLE You will die at the hands of your daughter's son!
- AKRISIOS My grandson?!
- HERMES And this grandson, yes, was Perseus. Obviously, the king was horrified! So what does he do? He locks Perseus and his mother in a wooden crate and throws them in the sea. Nice, eh? He thinks he's out of danger now, but no! The crate doesn't sink: it keeps bobbing over the sea till Perseus and his mother are rescued by a fisherman - off the isle of Seriphos. Hooray.

5. Perseus and the Gorgon

- HERMES The king of the island, Polydectes, thinks Perseus's mother is gorgeous and wants to marry her. Hooray again? 'Fraid not! He's a foul man with rotten teeth and disgusting breath, who does nothing but stuff himself with food.
- POLYDECTES By the gods these eels are good! Now what's your answer, woman?
- DANAE I've told you, my lord: I'm grateful for what you've done for us but I've no wish to marry.
- POLYDECTES You'll change your mind. I know you want me really!
- HERMES Gross! Anyway, she keeps refusing to marry him, but he keeps on insisting. Perseus is growing fast, and he gets fed up with all the pressure on his mum - and the burping - and one day he looks at himself in the mirror and thinks:
- PERSEUS I'm a man now, not a boy! I'm not putting up with this!
- HERMES And in the middle of a royal feast that night, Perseus puts a stop to all the noise and laughter as he stands up and tells the king:
- PERSEUS My mother doesn't want you! Go and marry someone else, and I'll give you anything you ask!
- HERMES And the king, who wants Perseus out of the way, says:
- POLYDECTES Will you indeed?
- PERSEUS Yes!
- POLYDECTES Anything?
- PERSEUS Anything!
- POLYDECTES Very well then - give me a hundred horses!
- PERSEUS You know I have no horses!
- POLYDECTES Then a thousand pounds of gold!
- PERSEUS You know I have none!
- POLYDECTES In that case bring me the head of the Gorgon!



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

- PERSEUS The Gorgon? What's that?
- DANAE Oh, my son, you don't want to know - the king is mocking you!
- PERSEUS No matter - I'll do it. I'll fetch the head of the Gorgon!
- POLYDECTES Will you now?
- PERSEUS Just tell me what it is.
- DANAE My son, he's mocking you - the Gorgon is a monster called Medusa!
- POLYDECTES A monster? Yes, that's a fair description! Medusa has bronze claws, wings like a bat, teeth like a shark and her hair, well, it's no hair at all - it's a writhing mass of snakes!
- PERSEUS Are they poisonous?
- POLYDECTES Oh, they won't bite you! You'll never get that close!
- PERSEUS Why not?
- DANAE My son it's been prophesied that no one will ever survive a meeting with Medusa. Anyone who sets eyes on her is turned to stone.
- POLYDECTES Your mother's right! So, young Perseus, what do you say now?
- PERSEUS To save my mother from you, I'll do it.
- HERMES Brave words, but I knew he was scared - because that night I could hear him praying to me for help.
- PERSEUS Dear god Hermes, I've taken on a fearful challenge. Help me, I pray.
- HERMES I was touched to be asked, so I flew down to him and explained:
- The trouble with the Gorgon is that she can turn up anywhere at any time. There's only one way to find out where she'll be: the Grey Sisters.
- PERSEUS Grey Sisters? Who are they?
- HERMES Her three ancient guardians. They live in a cave to the north of the sea - I'll take you there. Here: have my winged boots!



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

HERMES

There's not many I'd lend my flying gear to, but, well, he was a young lad with a lot on his plate. So I kept my winged cap and lent him my boots so we could both fly together - and off we went.

I took Perseus over the sea, far, far to the north. Wind howling, icy waves crashing bleak and grey, far as the eye could see. And talking of eyes...

The Grey Sisters have only got one between them.

PERSEUS

One what?

HERMES

One eye.

PERSEUS

What?! You mean two of them are blind?

HERMES

Yes, at any one time. They take it in turns to have the eye.

PERSEUS

How does that work?

HERMES

You'll see in a moment - we're nearly there.

And we were: below I could see the cavern home of the three Grey Sisters - we'd arrived.

HERMES

So, Perseus and I flew down and landed in the cavern on the sea's edge. At first there was no sign of the three Grey Sisters with their one eye between them.

PERSEUS

Where are they?

HERMES

See that glimmer at the far end of the cave?

PERSEUS

Yes.

HERMES

That'll be them. Hello-oh! Anyone at home?

No answer. So we crept forward. And there, crouched over the embers of what had once been a fire, we saw three wizened creatures huddled in shrouds, the colour of ash. The Grey Sisters.

Morning, ladies! How are we? All tickety-boo, I trust. Erm - there's a young fella here who needs your help.



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

PERSEUS	Er - yes. My name's Perseus, and I need to know -
1ST GREY SISTER	Never mind what yer name is - let's have a look at yer. Who's got the eye?
2ND GREY SISTER	Not me.
3RD GREY SISTER	Nor me. I thought you had it!
2ND GREY SISTER	Yeah, you had it last!
1ST GREY SISTER	No - oh yes - it's in me pocket. Hang on, I'll just put it in.
HERMES	And the first of the Grey Sisters took the eye out of her pocket, the eye they shared between them, and fixed it in her head.
1ST GREY SISTER	Oh, such nice looking lad! Lovely pair of legs!
2ND GREY SISTER	Let's have a look!
HERMES	And she pulled out the eye and tossed it to the second sister, who plonked it in her own head.
2ND GREY SISTER	Oh, yes! Nice and firm!
3RD GREY SISTER	My turn! My turn!
HERMES	Out came the eye again, and into the head of the third.
3RD GREY SISTER	Oh, lovely! There's plenty of juicy meat on him!
PERSEUS	What? You didn't tell me they were cannibals!
HERMES	I didn't know!
PERSEUS	Listen! I just want you to tell me where to find Medusa!
2ND GREY SISTER	Here, I'll grab 'im! Gimme the eye!
1ST GREY SISTER	No, you're useless! Give it 'ere!
3RD GREY SISTER	Ow! Don't snatch!
2ND GREY SISTER	Where's it gone?



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

3RD GREY SISTER I've dropped it!

2ND GREY SISTER Dropped it?!

1ST GREY SISTER Where is it? Quick!

3RD GREY SISTER Find it, before he gets away!

PERSEUS I have it!

1ST GREY SISTER What?!

PERSEUS I have your eye - and I'll return it if you tell me where to find Medusa.

2ND GREY SISTER We weren't really going to eat you!

1ST GREY SISTER Honest!

PERSEUS I don't care about that - just tell me where Medusa is.

2ND GREY SISTER We can't!

3RD GREY SISTER She'll kill us if she knows we said!

PERSEUS There's no fear of that - I'm going to kill her. Laugh if you like, but what will you do without your eye? Tell me where Medusa is, or I'll throw your eye to my friend, like this - catch!

HERMES Urrrrh!!! I don't want it!

PERSEUS And he'll fly out and throw it in the sea!

HERMES Just tell him, ladies, and you can have it back!

1ST GREY SISTER All right! All right! If you'll give us the eye!

HERMES No problem!

So they told us the way, and I tossed back the eye - and wiped the gooey jelly off my hands. Then on we flew - to a land I didn't recognise a desert, not a single sign of life. Only, as we landed, we saw:

PERSEUS Statues. Everywhere. Statues of people...birds...animals...



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

- HERMES You know what's happened, don't you?
- PERSEUS What?
- HERMES Medusa the Gorgon has turned everything to stone! Just like your mother said: anything that's ever looked the Gorgon in the face has turned to stone!
- PERSEUS Right. And that must be the cliff - the cliff where the Grey Sisters said she'd be.
- HERMES It is - 'cause look!
- PERSEUS It's her!
- HERMES High up on a rocky crag, perched like a monstrous eagle, we saw a figure with bat-like wings spreading them wide and taking flight towards us.
- PERSEUS She's coming!
- HERMES Don't look! Tell you what - you wait there - I'll be back in a sec!
- PERSEUS What? Where are you going?
- HERMES It'll be all right - just keep your eyes shut!
- PERSEUS Hermes! You coward!
- HERMES Don't look her in the face! I shan't be long! Promise!
- PERSEUS Herme-e-es!!!
- HERMES Now you might think I was chickening out. But not at all - I'd simply had an idea! I zoomed off to Olympus, home of the gods -
- Just pick up one or two bits and bobs...special sword, good, a bag and not forgetting the shield. There we go!
- And then back I flew...to find Perseus standing with his back to Medusa, the monster poised behind him, her hair of writhing snakes hissing.



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

MEDUSA	Handsome youth, turn. Turn and look upon my beauty!
PERSEUS	Hermes, help! Where have you been!
HERMES	Don't look at her!
HERMES	I couldn't bear to look at that hideous face. Good job I am a god, or I'd have been a statue like the rest!
MEDUSA	Turn and look!
PERSEUS	Help me, Hermes! What have you got there?
HERMES	Oh, just a couple of things I picked up on Olympus. Er - a special sword, to lop off her head.
PERSEUS	What?
HERMES	A big bag to keep the head in - so you can't look at it by mistake.
PERSEUS	But listen -
HERMES	And a shield.
PERSEUS	A shield? Hermes how can I fight her, how can I aim a blow, if I can't even turn to look?!
HERMES	Exactly! That's where the shield comes in!
PERSEUS	What?!
MEDUSA	Look at me!
HERMES	The shield works like a mirror. Here you go - stand with your back to her, hold up the shield, and you can see her without looking her in the face! See?
PERSEUS	Oh, that's - !
HERMES	Yes, it's not a pretty sight, is it?
PERSEUS	Hermes, I -



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

- HERMES Hang on in there! You're doing great! Grab the sword - that's it! You'll need to use your backhand, know what I mean? Just keep on looking in the sh -
- PERSEUS Aaaahhh!
- HERMES Medusa lunged at Perseus's back with teeth and claws.
- MEDUSA Look at me!
- PERSEUS No!
- HERMES Backhand, Perseus!
- PERSEUS What?
- HERMES Backhand! Swing a backhand!
- PERSEUS Aaaahhh!
- HERMES Blimey. Now that is what I call a backhand.
- PERSEUS I did it! I kept looking in the shield!
- HERMES You did! You di - ! NO! DON'T LOOK DOWN!
- Perseus almost looked down at Medusa's head, lying severed in the dust.
- PERSEUS Oh! That was a close one.
- HERMES I picked it up by the hair of snakes:
- Urrrhhh! what a day!
- and stuffed it in the bag I'd brought from Olympus.
- Right - let's not hang about.
- PERSEUS What now?
- HERMES What d'you mean 'what now'? We've got to save your mother from the burping king!



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

- PERSEUS Oh, yes, right!
- HERMES And off we flew again, back to the palace - home of the burping king, Polydectes.
- POLYDECTES Well, what have we here?
- HERMES He was pretty surprised to see Perseus back - but not half as surprised as Perseus was to see him on the very point of marrying his mother!
- DANAE My son! You're back!
- PERSEUS What's going on?!
- DANAE He thought you'd be gone forever. He's forcing me to marry him!
- POLYDECTES And I still will! That was the deal - you bring me the Gorgon's head or I marry your mother.
- PERSEUS And I've got it, here in my bag.
- POLYDECTES Of course you have!
- PERSEUS If I show it to you, you'll let my mother go?
- POLYDECTES Yes, let's see it! He thinks we're going to be fooled by some wax dummy!
- HERMES And Perseus reached into the bag...
- PERSEUS Mother, look away!
- HERMES ...and he held the ghastly head on high, and the king looked it straight in the face.
- POLYDECTES Oh, now, I have to say, that's very impre -
- HERMES King Polydectes never burped again. At the sight of the Gorgon's hideous face, he and all his courtiers were turned to stone. So, Perseus becomes the new king of the island and word of his triumph spreads far and wide. And it reaches his granddad, Akrisios. Well, he's horrified to hear Perseus is alive and king of a nearby island! So he thinks:
- AKRISIOS Am I going to stay here and wait for him to come and kill me? No!



5. Perseus and the Gorgon

- HERMES And he runs away to another land. He thinks he can escape his fate. But one day, he goes off to Olympia to watch the Olympic Games. And guess what? Perseus has turned up to take part because he's a dab hand at throwing the discus.
- AKRISIOS No!
- HERMES His granddad, in the crowd, is terrified -
- AKRISIOS It's him!
- HERMES - and tries to run away. Then Perseus throws and his discus flies. It flies way, way beyond anyone else's. And where should it land -
- AKRISIOS Aaagghh!!!
- HERMES - but smack on his granddad's head. Akrisios is dead. So, had the oracle's prophecy come true? Maybe. Or maybe no one's future's fixed at all. After all, it was prophesied that Medusa would never be defeated and look what happened. What do you think?

