

L.I. I understand the myth of Perseus.

Lesson 11: Perseus

Long ago, when fortune-tellers told the truth, there lived a very frightened man. He lived in Tiryns and his name was King Acrisius. King Acrisius had one child only, a lovely girl, called Danaë. Being very anxious to have a son to succeed him, Acrisius sent to ask the oracle of Apollo what he had done that meant that a **male heir** was denied him. His question was not answered; instead the oracle warned him that his daughter would have a son who would kill him.



"We'll see about that!" cried Acrisius, and, vowing that Danaë should never marry, he shut her up in a tower at Tiryns which was plated all over with brass so that it shone in the sun like gold. The brass plates have gone from it today, but you can still see the brass nails embedded in the stone which one held them in place.

But Zeus had taken a liking to Danaë and, one night, approached the tower. The brass plates were no deterrent for almighty Zeus - he broke into Danaë's palace of entrapment. Soon later, they had a son called Perseus who was born there in the prison-tower at Tiryns.

When Acrisius heard that, **in spite of all his precautions**, he had a grandson, he was filled with anger and fear, and these passions made him cruel. He would not believe that Zeus was the child's father, but said that it was Proteus, his brother, whom he hated, who had stolen the key for the brass tower and married Danaë in secret.

He had a great wooden chest made, and he put Danaë in it with the baby in her arms, and **callously** pushed it out on to the rippling waters of the sea. As he did this, he thought to himself: "It would be a terrible crime to kill my daughter and my grandson. Besides, I have to think of myself - the Immortals would send a curse upon me. I cannot kill them. No, I am **merely dispatching** them across the sea. I'm not in the wrong." He looked back at the wooden chest with his daughter in it: "If the waves fill the chest and make it sink, I am *not* to blame!"

Away floated the chest, over the deep blue sea and out of sight; and soon the waves began to rise and the winds to blow, and Danaë wept with fear and clasped the baby Perseus close in her arms.

"Oh what a fate is yours," she sobbed, "and yet you do not cry but sleep as peacefully as ever, feeling no terror of this dreadful place. You do not fear the heaving sea, nor will the salt spray on your hair...Oh, perhaps it is because you know that you father Zeus protect us... Then sleep on, my child, for the waves swell only to rock your cradle, and I will pray to Zeus that we may come safely to land."

By the grace of Zeus, Danaë and her baby son floated ashore, where they were met by a fisherman in his boat.

The fisherman who rowed the boat was named Dictys. He took Danaë to the little wooden shack where he lived, and showed her and Perseus great kindness.

Unfortunately, the king of that country was not as good a man as Dictys. King Polydectes liked to collect wives, as other people like to collect pictures. And as soon as he heard about Danaë, he wanted to add her to his collection. Danaë politely refused when King Polydectes proposed to her. And she went on refusing for seventeen years.



Left to himself, the king would have forced Danaë to marry him, but of course there was Perseus to consider. The boy was strong, afraid of nothing and very quick-tempered ... in short, just the sort to let fly with a sword if anyone laid a finger on his mother. Worse still, he was very popular on the island, and there would have been an uproar if something horrible had “accidentally” happened to him.

So Polydectes devised a scheme to remove Perseus without **incurring any blame** for killing him. He announced his marriage, but pretended that he was going to marry another girl, the daughter of a friend of his. He then threw a great **banquet** and invited everyone in the neighbourhood. Of course, everybody brought gifts. But when Perseus turned up at the wedding, he turned up **empty-handed**. For Perseus, besides being very young, bold and strong, was also very poor. When he saw Perseus, King Polydectes pretended to be furious. But secretly he was pleased, for he had known all along that Perseus wouldn't be able to afford a present.

“What, no present!” he shouted. There were gasps of surprise around the banqueting tables. “Don't you know that it is a tradition to bring your king a present when he decides to get married?”

“But I don't have any money, sire,” Perseus explained.

“No money! That's what comes of being a lazy good-for-nothing!”

All these words were intended to make Perseus lose his temper, and they worked. For his cheeks burnt with shame as he cried out: “I am not, sir! And to prove it, you can have anything you want for your wedding present. You only have to name it.”

“Anything?”

“Anything,” Perseus said.

“Then what I would like for my wedding present is a Gorgon's head. Bring me a Gorgon's head.”

Several of the courtiers lost their appetite with sheer terror.

“Very well, sire. If the head of a Gorgon is what you want, then a Gorgon's head is what you'll have”.

“Bravo!” cheered the courtiers. “Well said, Perseus!”

“Bravo!” thought King Polydectes. “He'll die, of course.”



Activity A: Answer the following questions in the space below. Make sure you use a capital letters to begin every sentence and a full stop to finish each sentence.

1. Who's head do you think Perseus will try to gift to Polydectes?

2. What is Polydectes' aim in asking Perseus to collect a gorgon's head? What is he hoping will happen?

3. Who's head do you think Perseus will try to gift to Polydectes?

4. What is Polydectes' aim in asking Perseus to collect a gorgon's head? What is he hoping will happen?

Activity B: Read the events below. Write a number next to each event to put it into the correct order.

1. Danaë and Perseus meet Dictys.
2. Danaë is locked in the tower by her father.
3. Polydectes asks for Danaë's hand in marriage.
4. Acrisius is desperate for a male heir.
5. Polydectes tricks Perseus into agreeing to bring him a gorgon's head.
6. Acrisius hears the Oracle's prophecy.

Activity C: In your book, summarise the myth of Perseus so far in exactly 3 sentences. You must use the words 'cunning' and 'persistence'.