C·S·C·P Cambridge School Classics Project

CSCP Support Materials for Eduqas GCSE Latin Component 3A

Latin Literature (Narratives)
Ovid: The Adventures of Perseus

For examination in 2024 and 2025

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Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge,
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p. 2 Figure 1: Perseus and Andromeda, Flemish School 17th century. François Lemoyne, public domain, available at Wikimedia Commons

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p.28 Figure 7: Perseus holding the head of Medusa
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A note on the use of these resources

The notes and commentaries presented here are provided by CSCP **to support teachers** in preparing their students for Eduqas GCSE Latin, component 3A. They contain a good deal of information intended for general interest and to satisfy the curiosity of teachers and, at their discretion, of students. There is **no expectation that all these notes need to be learned by students**. The examination requires knowledge outside the text **only** when it is needed in order to understand the text. In particular, there is no requirement for knowledge of the writings of other authors.

Introduction

Ovid: His life and works

The poet we know as Ovid (*Publius Ovidius Naso*) was born in Sulmo approximately 100 miles east of Rome in 43 BC. His family was wealthy, equestrian in status and Ovid was set for a glittering public career. He studied in Rome and Athens, but we hear in one of his poems (*Amores* 1.15) that neither a military nor legal career beckoned him; he was going to be a poet. He began his career with love poems but, as an admirer of Virgil whose epic poem the *Aeneid* was composed in the 20s BC, he eventually followed his lead into epic with his 15-book poem, in which he gathered together myths and legends from the Greek and Roman world and wove them into a narrative around the theme of changes of shape (*Metamorphoses*). As Wilkinson says, Ovid could 'simply have recounted the stories in succession, without connections or setting; but instead his ingenious mind wove a continuous narrative …', He began with the Creation and ended with the deification of Julius Caesar and the transformation of Rome from a village to the capital of the world. Like other poets of his time, he intended that his reputation would live on in his work and he concluded book 15 with *vivam*! (I shall live on!).

Ovid appears to have been on the periphery of the Augustan court; he seems to have known Propertius and Horace; he saw Virgil, though it appears he did not know him, and he mourned the early death of Tibullus. These famous writers are often termed 'Augustan poets', but much of their poetry was written early in Augustus' reign and looked back to the bitter civil wars that had wrenched the country apart. Ovid's poetry however was written mostly after Augustus came to power and established his First Settlement in 27 BC, but the poetry that Ovid wrote was to an extent outside the mainstream and did not really comply with Augustan values, particularly when dealing with relationships.

Ovid seemed unable to write without humour – we can see this in various places in his *Metamorphoses*. In his telling of the story of Perseus, for example, we hear the hero bargaining with the grieving parents as the sea monster approaches their daughter, and there are numerous other moments of irony and humour, both subtle and overt. In AD 8 Ovid is believed to have been banished to *Tomis* (now Constanta in Romania) on the Black Sea. In another of his poems, he claims that it was for a poem and a mistake (*carmen et error*) but we do not know the exact circumstances. We do know, however, that around the same time Augustus banished some family members possibly due to scandals. Around 20 years earlier Augustus had established marriage laws to promote an increase in the birth rate amongst higher status Romans and Ovid's poetry often dealt lightly with adultery. This may have provoked Augustus displeasure or Ovid may have been associating with people who more explicitly contravened the virtues Augustus was trying to establish. We do not know. What we do know is that Ovid continued writing in exile, asking his friends to facilitate his return and also composing poetry that praised Augustus' achievements. He never returned to Rome and died in *Tomis* in AD 17.

The narrative

The story we have in the prescribed sections is that of Perseus and his rescue of Andromeda. This story follows on after the transformation of Cadmus into a snake, and the story of Perseus' grandfather, Acrisius, who, like Cadmus, was descended from Neptune, and who also refused to accept the worship of Bacchus into his kingdom. Perseus is also the cousin of Bacchus. We meet him as he has already slain the Gorgon, Medusa, his most famous feat, and is carrying her snake-haired head with him. We only hear mention of this story at the very end of the prescribed text as the majority of the narrative is taken up with Perseus' time with Atlas and the rescue of Andromeda. The prescription concludes with a brief etymology of coral that demonstrates the power of the Gorgon's head to turn living things to stone.

Figure 1: Perseus saves Andromeda from the monster. François Lemoyne, Flemish School 17th century.

Greek myths have long been the subject of painters and in Figure 1 we can see a version of Perseus' rescue of Andromeda from the 17th century. In this picture, Perseus seems to be carried on a cloud rather than flying with the aid of Mercury's winged sandals or even the winged horse, Pegasus, as he appears at other times in Ovid's stories.

As metamorphosis is the theme of the epic poem, in the prescribed texts, we are treated to three examples:

- drops of Medusa's blood create the snakes of Libya
- Atlas becomes a mountain
- Medusa's head causes seaweed to become rigid and create coral.

Otherwise, the narrative is about the journey of Perseus and his rescue of Andromeda who is to be sacrificed because her mother Cassiope's boastfulness about her own beauty has angered the gods. Perseus is clearly the main character, but we learn very little about him in the story other than that he is a confident hero and that he is very aware of who his father is (i.e. Jupiter). His confidence is apparent in his requesting hospitality from Atlas, in his bargaining with Cepheus and Cassiope; and in the wedding banquet (Sections I and J) we hear the typical hero's speech. However, what do we know of Medusa? The story Perseus himself tells shows the power of the gods to punish mortals whether they are blameworthy or not and it is Perseus' heroic status that he leads the listener to admire. Whether Ovid meant his readers to give Perseus unequivocal praise, or whether there is some irony in his description of him is not so

straightforward. The sympathetic description of the innocent Medusa having her hair turned to snakes, Perseus' helplessness when buffeted about by the winds and his fear of the night, the less than heroic image of him bargaining with Andromeda's parents and his extravagant boastfulness to Atlas and at the wedding feast all give pause for thought.

Background

Figure 2: Map showing the voyage of Danae and Perseus from Argos to Seriphos.

The background to Perseus' quest is that Danae, his mother, has been imprisoned by her father, Acrisius, because he has heard a prophecy that a child of hers will kill him. However Jupiter appears in a shower of gold and Danae gives birth to Perseus. Acrisius, who is still trying to avert his fate, sets the mother and son adrift in a box and they wash up on the island of Seriphos where they are taken in by Dictys, a fisherman. He later turns out to be the brother of the king of the island who takes a fancy to Danae and tries to rid himself of her annoying son by sending him on a quest to find and bring back the Gorgon's head. He does not bank on Perseus' father sending him help in the forms of Mercury and Minerva.

Themes

In terms of themes running through this story, students might like to consider:

- the nature of heroism in the ancient world as opposed to the modern world
- victim-shaming – e.g. Minerva's punishment of Medusa as she could not punish Neptune
- boastfulness / *hubris*
- the power of the gods.

Further reading (and listening)

Fry S. *Heroes* (2018) Penguin

Haynes N. *Stone Blind* (2022) Mantle an imprint of Pan Macmillan

Hill D. E. (1985, reprinted 2010) Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I-IV, Aris and Phillips (Oxbow Books, Oxford)

Morgan L. *Ovid*: *A Very Short Introduction* (2020) OUP

Ovid, Metamorphoses, trans. Innes M. R. (1955) Penguin

For an entertaining overview of Ovid's life and works teachers might like to listen to this episode of *Natalie Haynes Stands up for the Classics,* though some of the humour may not be suitable for classroom use.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07756bd

There is also an interesting analysis of the various versions of the Medusa myth in this podcast (again aimed at an adult audience).
https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000w4s2

Acknowledgement of works used in preparing these notes

Hill D. E. (1985 reprinted 2010) Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I-IV, Aris and Phillips (Oxbow Books, Oxford)

Otis B. *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (1975) CUP

Wilkinson L.P. *Ovid Surveyed* (1962) CUP

Reading the Text

The key aims are:

- understanding the meaning of the Latin
- developing literary appreciation

It is often useful to adopt the following approach when introducing students to original literature:

- Read the Latin aloud to emphasise phrasing and stress word groups
- Break up more complex sentences into constituent parts for comprehension
- Focus on comprehension of the text and understanding the content through questioning and using the vocabulary
- Look closely at how the Latin is expressed and the ways in which the literary devices enhance the meaning.
- Although a sample translation is provided in the course resources, teachers might want to encourage their students to make their own version after various options have been discussed and evaluated. The first step is a literal translation, then something more polished in natural English that is as close to the structure and vocabulary of the original Latin as possible. Students will soon see that a degree of paraphrase may be required when the Latin does not readily translate into correct and idiomatic English.

About the Notes

The prescribed text is broken up into short sections and the notes on each passage are followed by a Discussion and Questions. The notes focus both on language and content, but also include some comment on style and literary effects. The Discussion and Questions focus mostly on understanding the Latin, the context and the style. The notes are designed to provide for the needs of a wide spectrum of teachers, from those with limited knowledge of Latin and who are perhaps entirely new to reading Latin literature, to teachers experienced in both language and literature. It is hoped that all will find something of use and interest.

The notes and commentaries presented here are provided by CSCP to support teachers in preparing their students for Eduqas GCSE Latin, component 3A. They contain a good deal of information intended for general interest and to satisfy the curiosity of teachers and, at their discretion, of students. There is no expectation that all these notes need to be learned by students. The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text. In particular there is no requirement for knowledge of the writings of other authors, these are only provided to give perspective.

Section A

Perseus begins his return home after killing Medusa.

Notes

It is not necessary for students to know everything that these and subsequent notes contain. They are here to provide context. Knowledge outside the text is only required for students to understand the text and wider knowledge will not be tested in the examination.

1-2 **viperei … alis** – a vivid depiction of Perseus as he flies home with the recently severed head of Medusa. The focus on snakes is clear with the placing of *viperei* at the beginning of the sentence and the casual use of *monstri* at the end of the line. The choice of *spolium* (plunder) is also stark and reinforces the idea of Medusa deserving her death. *stridentibus alis* at the end of the line increases the vividness of the scene as we hear the whirring of the winged sandals that Hermes had lent to him to help him defeat her. The choice of *carpebat* suggests effort as it can mean to seize. The translation is: [Perseus] bringing back (**referens**) the famous plunder (**spolium memorabile**) of the snakey monster (**viperei … monstri**) was passing through the thin air (**aera carpebat tenerum**) on whirring wings (**stridentibus alis**).

3-5 **cumque … angues** – *cumque* + *victor penderet* (imperfect subjunctive), while he, the victor, was hanging … suggesting a hovering motion. This is the first metamorphoses of our prescription. *Gorgonis capitis* – again the monster is not named, Ovid assumes his readers will all know who he is talking about. *guttae cecidere cruentae* – the harsh sounding consonants are continued in the description of the drops of blood. *quas* relates to *guttae*, and the participle, *exceptas* (also referring to the *guttae* but in the relative clause), is subordinated to the main verb in typical Roman fashion. Also typically, the adjective, *varios*, is separated from its noun (*angues*), so we only find out what the drops of blood turn into at the very last moment.

6 **unde … colubris** – a single line reminds us that this is a collection of stories about changes.

7-10 **inde … orbem** – *immensum* refers to the vastness of the sky though there is no word included for sky. *nunc huc nunc illuc* – a neat use of assonance to indicate how Perseus was being carried here and there by the winds like a watery cloud (*nubis aquosae*) i.e. a raincloud. We have further examples here of nouns and adjectives being separated: *alto … aethere*, *seductas … terras*, *totum … orbem*. Verbs with prefixes reinforce what Perseus is doing – *despectat* – he looks down, *supervolat* – he flies over.

11-12 **ter gelidas … in ortus** – note the repetition of **ter** (three times) to emphasise how Perseus is being carried here and there by the winds. *Arctos* literally means bears and is associated with the Great Bear constellation. It is from this that we get our word Arctic. Ovid is reminding us that Perseus went a long way north as the Great Bear is a constellation of the northern sky. *cancri bracchia* – 'the arms of the Crab' refers to the constellation that is seen in the sky near the celestial equator, so therefore representing the south. In this line we hear how Perseus is also sent to the west (*occasus* – where the sun sets or falls, from *cado* I fall) and to the east (*ortus* – where the sun rises, *orior* I rise). Line 12 falls nicely into two parts each part preceded by *saepe*.

13-16 **iamque … diurnos** – at dusk Perseus manages to land in one of the western regions. The Gardens of the Hesperides, from where Heracles took the Golden Apples, is thought to have been situated in southern Spain near Gades (modern name Cadiz) so at the western extreme of the Mediterranean. Atlas was one of the Titans who fought against the Greek gods. After the gods defeated them, Atlas was condemned to spend eternity holding up the sky. The Atlas Mountains are a range of very high mountains in Morocco and Algeria. They separate the Saharan desert from the sea. Atlas appears in Heracles' labours as he assists the hero in getting the apples, so it is appropriate that these mountains are just across the straits from Spain. Ovid often refers to stars by their mythological names. Here Lucifer – the bringer of light – is Venus, the morning star (or evening star) though, of course, nowadays we know that Venus is really a planet. Aurora was the goddess of dawn, and she was represented in art as driving a chariot (*currus*) across the sky during the day.

Discussion

We are not given Medusa's name at first, she is simply described as 'the snakey monster' and later as 'the Gorgon' and Perseus himself is referred to as the victor/winner as though he has fought a battle. However, the idea of snakes being numerous in Libya appears in other ancient authors - Herodotos a 5th century BC Greek historian, and in Lucan, a Roman epic poet of the 1st century AD, who repeats the aetiology of the snakes. Given Lucan's dates, he may well have taken this idea from Ovid. Perseus' journey back with the severed and dripping head of the Gorgon is well told by Ovid, with vivid images and geographical hints to tell us where he was. The description of him being buffeted by the winds adds peril to the story but perhaps also leaves Perseus looking slightly less than heroic, particularly in his fearfulness of entering the night that is waiting for him towards the east and it is not a surprise that our young hero decides to take a rest in the west where it is still daylight. Ovid's descriptions of the raw force of nature are typically dramatic and well-observed with careful mythological references for added colour.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

To familiarise your students with the text, read the entire section of the text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then re-read each section and ask leading questions so that the class can comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. Once the class are familiar with the Latin, it may be desirable to produce a written translation, but the understanding of the Latin should be the primary objective.

Lines 1-2 (**viperei … alis**):

- What was Perseus carrying at the beginning of this passage?
- What was he using to move through the delicate air?

Lines 3-5 (**cumque ... angues**):

- Who is meant by *victor*? Whom did he overcome?
- What is the victor doing?
- What happens to the drops of blood when they fall onto the desert sand?
- Whose blood is it?

Line 6 (**unde … colubris**):

- What explanation does Ovid give about the country here?

Lines 7-10 (**inde … orbem**):

- What is happening in these lines?
- How are the winds behaving?
- Where is our hero looking down on the world from?

Lines 11-12 (**ter gelidas … in ortus**):

- How does Ovid represent the four points of the compass?
- Explain how we know which is which?

Lines 13-16 (**iamque … diurnos**):

- What does Ovid mean by *cadente die*?
- What was Perseus afraid of?
- Where does Perseus stay and why?
- Whose kingdom is he in?
- Who does Ovid mean by Lucifer and Aurora?
- What did Lucifer call forth? What did Aurora call forth?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-2 (**viperei … alis**):

- In line 1, how does Ovid emphasise the heroic nature of Perseus victory over the Gorgon?
- What weather conditions are suggested in line 2?

Lines 3-6 (**cumque … colubris**):

- How does Ovid emphasise Perseus' heroic status in line 3?
- How do lines 4 to 6 explain the number of snakes that are found in Libya?

Lines 7-9 (**inde … fertur**):

- Describe Perseus' journey after the flight over Libya.
- How does Ovid emphasis the power of the winds and Perseus' inability to steer his own course?
- Ovid likens Perseus to a raincloud. How does this simile contribute to **or** undermine his image as a hero?

Lines 9-10 (**et ... orbem**)

- How does Ovid emphasise the height at which Perseus is flying?

Lines 11-12 (**ter gelidas … in ortus):**

- How do these lines build on the description of the power of the winds in lines 7 to 9?
- Do you consider this description to be realistic or might there be an element of hyperbole? Justify your answer.

Lines 13-16 (**iamque … diurnos**):

- Explain how and why Perseus avoided progressing east into the night. How does this contribute to or undermine his heroic status?
- What is the mythological name for the Morning Star?
- Why would it be appropriate for Aurora to drive a chariot?

Section B

Perseus asks Atlas for hospitality.

Notes and Discussion

Figure 3: Sun setting into the sea looking as though the sea is dividing to admit it.

Stories about Atlas, as often happens in mythology, show some inconsistencies. In Hesiod (*Theogony* 517), Atlas, the Titan, held up the sky, a common explanation as to why the sky did not fall, but here and elsewhere he was portrayed as a king ruling his fertile kingdom, which so Ovid tells us extended as far west as you could go. Ovid again refers to the path of the chariot bearing the Sun, this time sinking into the west, where the sea seems to divide its water to receive the panting horses and weary chariot wheels.

In Ovid's story here, the golden apples of the Hesperides are said to be growing in Atlas' own kingdom. As he arrives, in his desire to be offered hospitality, Perseus boasts to Atlas about being the son of Jupiter, not realising that his potential host has heard a prophecy that a son of Jupiter will come to steal those golden apples. Of course, the son of Jupiter mentioned in the prophecy is Hercules, not Perseus, but Atlas does not know that.

Mount Parnassus is the mountain on whose slopes Delphi sits, and Delphi was the foremost oracle of the Greek world. The tragic playwright Aeschylus (525-456 BC), in his play *Eumenides*, tells us that the oracle was first held by Earth, then Themis (who makes the prophecy in Ovid's story), then by Phoebe and lastly by Apollo; Ovid himself in *Metamorphoses* 1, tells us that Pyrrha and Deucalion arrived at Themis' oracle on Parnassus after the flood.

Questions

- Why might Atlas be so much bigger and stronger than mortals?
- What is being described when Ovid talks about the sea dividing its waters for the horses of the Sun?
- Why was Atlas worried when Perseus said that he was a son of Jupiter?

Section C

Atlas refuses Perseus hospitality and suffers the consequences.

Notes

1-3 **id metuens … omnes** – fearing this (**id metuens**)Atlas had closed off (**clauserat Atlas**) his orchards (**pomaria**) with solid walls (**solidis … moenibus**) and had given [them] (**et dederat**) to a huge snake (**vasto … draconi)** to look after (**servanda**) and [this] was preventing/keeping out (**arcebatque**) all strangers (**externos … omnes**) from his lands (**suis … finibus)**. Atlas was taking matters into his own hands but presumably had not counted on a stranger flying over the walls. According to Apollonius Rhodius, the snake was called Ladon.

4-5 **huic … absit** - Atlas speaks and tells the stranger whose name he does not yet know to go away. He clearly does not believe Perseus' claim to be a son of Jupiter as he accuses him of lying (**mentiris**) and adds that Jupiter himself will be of no use to his alleged son.

6 -7 **vimque … dictis** – Atlas becomes violent when his threats do not deter the visitor. He tries to throw him out. The present participles both refer to Perseus who is uncertain how to react (**cunctantem**) and tries to soothe the giant by mixing (**miscentem**) strong words with calming ones (**placidis … fortia dictis**).

8-11 **viribus … ora** – Ovid is very clear that Perseus is the less strong of the two – *viribus inferior* – and he reinforces this idea by repeating *viribus* at the beginning of the next line but this time referring to Atlas. The translation of Perseus' words is: but since (**at quoniam**) my gratitude (**gratia nostra**) is of little importance (**parvi … est**), receive this gift (**accipe munus**). Perseus looks away (**retro versus**) and using his left hand (**laevaque a parte)** presumably because he was carrying a sword in his right hand, he produces the head of Medusa which is described as filthy or vile (**squalentia ora**), literally dry or rough.

12-17 **quantus erat … in illo** – these lines describe the metamorphosis of the giant Atlas into a mountain that reaches so high into the sky that he looks as though he is holding it up. *quantus* is often paired with *tantus* but here it stands on its own – Atlas was made a mountain (**mons factus Atlas)** as big as [he] was (**quantus erat**). The description of the metamorphosis is detailed – the beard and hair becoming forests on the mountainside (**barba comaeque in silvas),** his hands and shoulders mountain ridges (**iuga sunt umerique manusque**), and his head the summit (**summo est in monte cacumen**), while his bones become rock (**ossa lapis fiunt**). After that we hear that he began to grow in all directions (**partes auctus in omnes/crevit**) and to an incredible size (**in immensum**). The aside – **sic, di, statuistis** – suggests that this increase in size was divine will and the gods do not disapprove of Perseus overcoming Atlas using the Gorgon's head. . Finally, we see that he is holding up the sky when we are told that the whole sky (**omne caelum**) and the numerous stars (**cum tot sideribus**) rest upon him. This is the second metamorphosis of our selection.

Discussion

Atlas has clearly been living with anxiety caused by the prophecy about the arrival of a son of Jupiter which explains his rather gruff response to Perseus' request for hospitality. He disputes Perseus' self-proclaimed status as a hero though Perseus sees himself as heroic for killing the Gorgon which was an heroic act in terms of personal glory (*kleos*) in the style of other heroes such as Hercules, Theseus or Achilles. Atlas' reaction, however, to Perseus is violent, and as the giant is the bigger of the two, Perseus resorts to bringing out the Gorgon's head that he is carrying in his left hand. There is no description of Atlas' reaction to seeing the Gorgon, there is no need, the metamorphosis is more important for the telling of the tale and is treated in a very detailed way. It is even claimed that the gods increase Atlas' size after the transformation, suggesting they approve of the punishment. There is a similarity in the way that Virgil (*Aeneid* 4 246-51) anthropomorphises Mount Atlas as an old man holding up the heavens on his pine-wreathed head, suggesting that Ovid may have been inspired by Virgil's, description to provide this transformation as an etymology for the mountain.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-3 (**id metuens … omnes**):

- Why did Atlas fortify his orchards?
- What did he put in charge of protecting his trees?
- How else did he try to protect his property?

Lines 4-5 (**huic … absit**):

- Who is speaking to Perseus here?
- What does he accuse Perseus of?
- What does he say about Jupiter?

Lines 6-7 (**vimque … dictis**):

- How did Atlas try to get rid of his visitor?
- Was Atlas justified in behaving in this way?
- How did Perseus behave?

Lines 8-11 (**viribus … ora**):

- What disadvantage did Perseus have against Atlas?
- What advantage did Perseus have?
- Why does Perseus turn away when he brings out Medusa's head?
- How is the head described?

Lines 12-17 (**quantus erat … in illo**):

- How big a mountain did Atlas become?
- What happened to his beard and hair?
- Which part of Atlas became mountain ridges?
- Which part of the mountain did his head become?
- What happened to Atlas' bones?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-3 (**id metuens … omnes**):

- What prophecy has Atlas heard that causes him to keep strangers from his kingdom? (look back to section B)
- How does Ovid show that Atlas is extremely worried about strangers coming into his lands?

Lines 4-5 (**huic … absit**):

- How does Ovid show Atlas' disrespect for Perseus and his claims?

Lines 6-7 (**vimque … dictis**):

- How are the actions of Atlas and Perseus contrasted in these two lines?
- With which of the two do you have more sympathy and why?

Lines 8-10 (**viribus … ora**):

- How does Ovid add drama to the actions of Perseus in these three lines?

Lines 11-17 (**quantus erat … in illo**):

- How, in these lines, does Ovid convey the huge size of the mountain?

Whole passage:

- How well do you consider that the punishment of Atlas fits the crime of his refusing Perseus hospitality?

Section D

Perseus arrives at Cepheus' kingdom.

Notes and Discussion

Aeolus is best known as the ruler of the winds. In Homer's *Odyssey* (10.2 ff) he provides Odysseus with adverse winds safely trapped in a bag to prevent them blowing him away from Ithaca, and in Virgil's *Aeneid* (1.51ff) he is a minor god who keeps the winds locked up in a cave which like Ovid, Virgil also calls a prison. The night which Perseus feared has now passed and Ovid describes the beginning of the day – the winds have dropped and the morning star – Venus to us, Lucifer to the Romans – was shining. The heroic theme begun with Perseus' introduction of himself to Atlas returns as Ovid describes him getting ready to go in a manner reminiscent of an epic arming scene such as are found in the *Iliad.* He reminds readers of the winged sandals and curved sword that Mercury has given Perseus for his quest and that will enable him to travel so far around the earth.

Perseus flies across north Africa towards Ethiopia, where since its telling by Euripides, the legend of Andromeda's rescue had been located. Both Euripides and Sophocles (5th century BC) wrote tragedies on the story of Andromeda – sadly only fragments are left. Herodotos (*Histories* 7.61) refers to this story as the origin of the Persian race, since he claims that Perseus and Andromeda' son, Perses, was left with his grandfather Cepheus who had no male heir, and his descendants became the Persians.

Figure 4: Map showing Perseus' journey from Seriphos to Atlas's home and then to Ethiopia.

Cepheus was married to Cassiope, a beautiful and vain woman who had claimed to be more beautiful than the Nereids (though some versions of the myth say she made the claim for her daughter) and that it was the anger of the gods at this *hubris* that caused Jupiter Ammon to call down punishment on the innocent Andromeda. Jupiter Ammon was the epithet by which he was known in north Africa. The map in Figure 4 gives an idea of the distances travelled by Perseus.

Questions

- Why do you think Ovid now refers to the winds dropping?
- Why would Ovid write about Perseus as though this were an arming scene from epic?
- Who had provided the sword and sandals for Perseus?
- Why does Ovid say that Jupiter Ammon's punishment of Andromeda was unjust?

Section E

Perseus sees Andromeda chained to a rock and questions her.

Notes

1-6 **quam simul … pennas**: the word order of this sentence is quite challenging as the subject (**Abantiades**) does not appear until the second line. As soon as (**quam simul**) the descendant of Abas (**Abantiades**) saw (**vidit**) the girl tied (**religatam**) by her arms (**bracchia**) to the hard rocks (**ad duras … cautes**) … *Abantiades* (referring here to Perseus) is a patronymic, a word used often in epic poetry to refer to someone by an ancestor, in this case Perseus' grandfather, Abas. Andromeda's fate was to be offered as a sacrifice to a sea monster because of her mother's rash words about her own (or her daughter's) beauty in comparison to the Nereids who were the numerous daughters of the sea god, Nereus. This punishment involved being tied to a rock as prey for the monster.

…unknowingly he fell in love (**trahit inscius ignes)** …*traho* generally means I drag but it can, as here, be used metaphorically to mean to draw inside yourself or drink in. The literal translation would be: unknowing, he drank in the fires (of love)' which is made even clearer by his behaviour immediately afterwards: he was both amazed (**et stupet**) and carried away (**et … correptus**) by the image **(imagine**) of the beauty he had seen (**visae … formae).**

Presumably when Perseus first sees the girl, he is high above the rock so mistakes her for a statue. It is only when a light breeze (**levis aura**) moves her hair and he sees that she is weeping (**tepido manabant lumina fletu**) that he realises she is alive.

lumen (light) in the plural is often used to mean eyes in poetry.

The parenthesis uses the idea, common in antiquity, that marble, particularly marble from the island of Paros, was a symbol of beauty because of its whiteness. Remember that high status women in the ancient world stayed largely indoors away from the sun so their untanned skin was prized as a sign of their husband's wealth.

paene … pennas – 'he almost forgot to keep moving his wings in the air.' Ovid adds a humorous comment that makes our hero look ridiculous and which 'makes Ovid's attitude to this tale quite plain.' (Hill).

7-10 **ut stetit … geras** – Perseus is evidently hovering above the poor girl as he speaks – *stetit* here must mean to halt rather than to stand as he is still in the air. His initial comment is typical of love poetry though it may possibly have been seen as crass in this view of Andromeda's predicament even in Ovid's day. It is in any case not much immediate help to the captive, but he does continue with more practical queries in asking her name, her country and why she is chained.

10-13 **primo ... obortis**

primo … virgo – understandably the girl is silent at first and Ovid then gives the explanation that she as a virgin/young girl (**virgo**) did not dare to speak to a man (**virum**) i.e. to a man who was not of her household. The Latin word order is more effective with the alliteration of *virum virgo*. In ancient times it was not considered respectable for high status, unmarried women to talk to men to whom they were not related by blood or marriage.

manibus … vultus – and she would have hidden (**celasset)** her modest face (**modestos … vultus**) with her hands (**manibusque**). Raising your hands was a sign of supplication (pleading) in the ancient world and Andromeda is unable to do this or even hide her face out of modesty. Ovid uses this idea of his characters being unable to raise their hands in several places in *Metamorphoses* e.g. Io tries, but cannot raise her hands as she has been transformed into a cow, and Pentheus cannot because he has been dismembered. The example we have here is less grotesque but is a variation on the theme of the inability of those transformed to resist their punishment. *celasset* = poetic contraction of *celavisset* (pluperfect subjunctive), *modestos … vultus* is plural for singular which is common in poetry.

quod potuit …supply 'she did' what she could…

13 - 17 **saepius … indicat** – *instanti* – dative singular present participle of *insto*, referring to Perseus to whom she replies. She seemed (**videretur**) not to want (**nolle**) to confess (**fateri**) in case they [seemed to be] her crimes (**sua ne delicta)** i.e. she was afraid of her situation seeming to be her fault.

indicat (line 17) is the verb here and Andromeda continues as the subject. **nomen terraeque suum … indicat** – she told [him] the name of her country and her own [name].

She also explains about her mother's mistake; and what great confidence (**quantaque … fiducia**) there had been (**fuerit** – perfect subjunctive) in/of her mother's beauty **maternae … formae**.

17-19 **et nondum … aequor –** Andromeda does not go into the details of her story as the sea monster makes his entrance. And before she had told him everything (**et nondum memoratis omnibus**) the sea roared (**unda insonuit)** …The arrival of the monster itself is delayed as long as possible until almost the end of the line with the adjective and the noun it describes framing the monster so that the impression of size seems to apply to the monster as well as the sea (**immenso belua ponto**). *belua* is the subject of both verbs – *imminet* and *possidet* (it threatens and possesses) and reinforces the idea of the huge size of this creature. Virgil's description of the arrival of the sea monster in *Aeneid* 2 (lines 203-211) has some similarities, so Ovid may be facetiously situating his tale within the tradition of the epic hero.

Discussion

This section takes up the Andromeda story begun in section D. The innocent girl had been chosen by Jupiter to atone for her mother, Cassiope's claim that she herself was equal in beauty to the Nereids, sea goddesses and daughter of the sea god, Nereus. She was therefore taken to a rock on the seashore and chained there to await the arrival of the monster. Ovid's take, as so often, adds in elements of humour to a potentially gruesome story. Perseus just happens to be passing on his way back from north Africa to Seriphos. One look at a map tells us that he is way off course and he cannot blame the winds as we have already been told that they are now shut in their cave by Aeolus. When he sees the girl, he comically nearly forgets to keep moving his wings, which presumably would result in him plunging into the sea. Andromeda is nicely characterised as a modest girl who does not seem to deserve her fate, and just as we have been introduced to her, the sea monster makes its dramatic entrance.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-6 (**quam simul … pennas**):

- What did Perseus mistake the girl chained to the rock for?
- How did he realise his mistake?
- What effects did seeing the girl have on Perseus?

Lines 7-10 (**ut stetit … geras**):

- How did Perseus say the girl should be bound rather than by being chained to a rock?
- What three things did Perseus ask her to tell him?

Lines 10-13 (**primo … obortis**):

- Why was the girl silent at first?
- What could she not do? Why?
- What could she do to express her feelings?

Lines 13-17 (**saepius … indicat**):

- What was worrying the girl about telling her story?
- What did she say about her mother?

Lines 17-19 (**et nondum … aequor**):

- What happened before she had finished her story?
- How is the sea described?
- What did the monster do?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-6 (**quam simul … pennas**):

- How does Ovid show the helplessness of Andromeda in these lines?
- How does he convey the suddenness with which Perseus falls in love?

Lines 7-10 (**ut stetit … geras**):

- What impression of Perseus' character do you form from what he says here?

Lines 10-13 (**primo … obortis):**

- How does Ovid build a picture of Andromeda's modesty in these lines?

Lines 13-17 (**saepius … indicat**):

- What does Andromeda tell Perseus is the cause of her punishment?

Lines 17-19 (**et nondum … aequor**):

- How does Ovid add drama to the first appearance of the monster?
- How does Ovid emphasise the vast size and power of the monster?

Section F

Perseus offers to rescue Andromeda from the monster.

Notes and Discussion

The idea that Cepheus and Cassiope were clinging to their daughter as she stood chained to the rock seems implausible – surely Perseus would have seen them as the same time that he saw Andromeda? It does however create an emotional scene, and Ovid places the blame for Andromeda's plight squarely on Cassiope.

Perseus' speech is full of confidence as he refers to himself as the son of Jupiter for the second time in our prescribed lines, even allowing himself time to go into the details of how he was conceived. He does not hold back in extolling his own bravery which would be understandable in someone who was offering to fight a sea monster, but it is also implausible and somewhat ridiculous in terms of the urgent situation, but this is an epic poem and heroes need to explain their genealogy though there does seem to be an element of inappropriately long-winded self-promotion in the exchange. Andromeda's desperate parents are understandably keen for him to rescue their daughter, and Ovid acknowledges this with his aside – 'for who would have hesitated?'

We move back to the sea monster who is likened to a ship cutting its way through the sea using its breast like the keel. The distance is likened to that achieved by a sling shot (a simile bringing to mind other heroic action) so for anyone who is interested in learning to use a Balearic sling, there is a link below. You judge how far away from the rocks the beast was!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4-LpLtrGqs

Perseus chooses to attack the monster from above making use of the winged sandals loaned to him by Mercury. As his shadow on the sea distracts the monster, he begins his attack.

Questions

- Why did Andromeda's mother have more cause to be sorrowful?
- Why do you think Ovid gave Perseus such a long speech in so urgent a situation?
- Do you think Perseus right to bargain with the grieving and desperate parents?
- How effective is the image of the monster cutting through the waves?
- What do you think of Perseus' tactics?

Section G

Perseus fights with the sea monster.

Notes

1 -7 **utque … hamo**: *praepes* means swift-flying, so refers to a bird and calling it the bird of Jupiter means we know it is an eagle as this bird is a symbol of Jupiter (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Roman second century AD clay oil lamp showing Jupiter and an eagle.

The translation is: As the swift-flying bird of Jupiter (**utque Iovis praepes**) when it has seen (**cum vidit**) in a deserted field (**vacuo … in arvo**) a snake (**draconem**) offering (**praebentem**) its blue-black back (**liventia terga**) to the Sun (**Phoebo**) … ie Phoebus Apollo, the god of the Sun, here used to signify the sun itself.

Ovid's extended simile of the eagle continues to tell how the eagle attacks (**occupat**) the snake as it basks in the sun (**aversum**) and prevents it from twisting (**neu retorqueat**) its savage jaws (**saeva … ora**) back to bite by grasping its scaly neck (**squamigeris ... cervicibus**). Vivid adjectives are used of the eagle's talons (*avidos*) and the snake's neck (*squamigeris*). Perseus is described as swooping (*praeceps)* through the empty sky (*per inane*). The drama is intensified by the build-up of words expressing movement (*celeri missus praeceps … volatu*). We are told that Perseus, here called *Inachides*, attacks the monster as it roars (*frementis*), using a word which suggests an angry roar or howling noise. Inachus was the great river of Argos, home of Perseus' mother, Danae, and in the tradition of natural phenomena being inhabited by gods, Perseus is described as a descendant of the river Inachus. Ovid chooses the verb *abdidit* (hid) to describe how far Perseus' sword went into the beast and reinforces this by including *tenus* (right up to …) and *hamo* (the hilt) at the end of the line. This emphasises Perseus' strength and the violence of the blow.

8-10 **vulnere … terret**: Ovid uses the simile of an angry boar fighting back when it is wounded in the hunt and gives us a vivid description of the monster's attempt to escape its pain or wound its attacker – at least it is distracted from eating Andromeda at this point! The narrative is made more dramatic by the tricolon of repetition, *modo … modo… modo…*(now it ……now it …. now it …) and by *sublimis* (high up) and *subdit* (plunged, dived), word which have the same prefix but dramatically different meanings. Ovid's simile concludes with the image of the boar at bay, and terrified as the hounds surround it, though here Perseus is the only hound. *circumsona* is an Ovidian coinage and suggests the barking surrounds the prey. These linguistic techniques add up to an image of a desperate animal thrashing about in agony from its wounds and unable to escape the hunter.

11-16 **ille … pennae**: *ille* refers to Perseus, who is described as avoiding the greedy jaws (*avidos morsus*) on his swift wings (*velocibus … alis*), he is presumably ducking and diving, and keeping his distance as the desperate monster rears up and dives down. However, whenever he can (*quaque patet* literally means wherever it opens up i.e. an opportunity) he strikes,

and we have another tricolon with *nunc … nunc … nunc …* showing us how and where he struck the doomed monster. There is a clear image of the monster when we hear of Perseus targeting the monster's back which is studded with hollow shells (*cavis super obsita conchis*). We might think of it as covered in barnacles like the hull of a ship. The second blow hits the ribs on its side (*laterum costas*) and the third its tail (*tenuissima cauda*) which is described as tapering away like a fish tail. The actual blow comes last in the line and reminds us that the sword Perseus carries is curved (*falcato … ense*). Note that in line 10 we also heard of the *curvo … hamo* (the curved hilt). This is the curved sword given him by Mercury (Section D). The gory images continue with the monster spewing water red with blood (*puniceo mixtos cum sanguine fluctus …*), with the alternating word order representing the mixture.

puniceus the adjective originally means Punic or Phoenician after the sea-faring people of Phoenicia on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and who settled along the northern coast of Africa. They were famous for trading purple dye which was expensive and a symbol of wealth because of its vivid colour. See the link below for more information.

https://www.odysseytraveller.com/articles/phoenicians-and-purple-dye/

Peril for Perseus is introduced in line 16 when we hear of his wings growing heavy with the spray. Ovid uses a similar idea in *Metamorphoses* 8. 205 (*ne … unda gravis pennas*) when Daedalus warns his son, Icarus, not to fly too low in case the seawater makes his wings heavy.

17-21 **nec bibulis … ferrum**: Perseus changes tactics to avoid being weighed down by water-logged wings. Perseus did not dare to trust (**nec … ausus credere**) any longer (**ultra**) in his water-logged winged sandals (**bibulis … talaribus).** He spotted a rock (**conspexit scopulum**) whose top rose out of the sea (**qui vertice summo … exstat**) when the water was calm/standing still (**stantibus … aquis**), [but] was covered (**operitur**) by the moved water i.e. by breaking waves. (**ab aequore moto**).

Ovid gives a very precise image of how Perseus arranges himself on this rock. He leans against it (**nixus**) and grasps the top of it (**rupisque tenens iuga prima)** with his left hand (**sinistra**). *prima* here agrees with *iuga* – the short syllable at the end confirms this, and suggests the topmost parts, i.e. the first parts you see when the sea begins to fall after crashing over it.

ter quater – three times, four times – a dramatic start to the line, reinforced by *repetita* (repeatedly). The verb chosen (*exegit*) he drove, is violent in meaning as we see the sword bearing down on the monster's belly. However ambiguous Perseus' status may have seemed in other sections, here he is shown as a real action hero.

22-25 **litora … pater**: The reader's view moves to the onlookers who have been watching this terrible battle. The cheer (**clamor**) of rejoicing they raise fills the seashore (**litora**) and even the high-up houses of the gods (**superas deorum … domos**). *implevere* = *impleverunt*, a shortened (syncopated) version often found in poetry, translate as a perfect.

Andromeda's father and mother – Cepheus and Cassiope – also rejoice – though their names are delayed to the end of the sentence, ensuring the section closes with the cinematic focus on their united happiness. They praise Perseus as their (future) son-in-law (**generum**) and call (***fatentur***) him the help (**auxilium**) and saviour (**servatorem**) of their house (**domūs**).

Discussion

This section is full of excitement and danger as Perseus attacks the sea monster sent by Neptune to avenge Cassiope's insult to Nereus and his daughters. As Perseus flies in to attack the beast we are reminded that he is the son of Jupiter by the simile comparing him to his father's special bird, the eagle. Some versions of this story have Pegasus, the winged horse, carrying Perseus but in Ovid's version, our young hero must rely upon his winged sandals to keep him out of range of the monster's jaws. The description of the fight is detailed and gory with our hero swooping in the air and thrusting with his sword at the snake-like beast. We see the first blow struck in the shoulder of the beast, and vividly hear about the dramatic reaction it has, rising up and plunging down in pain. Ancient authors loved similes and we have a brief one here of a wild boar cornered by baying hunting dogs. There is some description of what the sea beast looks like – a back encrusted with shells and a tail that tapers like that of a fish. We are aware that the beast is mortally wounded by the gruesome image of it vomiting up blood and sea water with the added detail of the vivid red/purple colour. The potential threat to Perseus if his winged sandals become more water-logged adds jeopardy to the moment. The battle ends with our hero clutching at a rock with his left hand and stabbing at the monster with his sword arm. The fight ends swiftly and Perseus is hailed as a worthy son-in-law by Andromeda's grateful parents.

In Section C, we learnt that Perseus produced Medusa's head from his left-hand side, presumably in his left hand, here he seems to have that hand free to grasp the rock. Let's ascribe this to poetic licence rather than thinking that Ovid has forgotten about Medusa! It does raise the question of why he did not use the head to turn the monster to stone. Perhaps Perseus was trying to impress his future bride and parents-in-law with his swordsmanship and bravery? There are also other versions of this myth in which Perseus carries the head of Medusa in a bag (see Figure 6 and a rather comedic image on a water-jar at the British Museum: here) so Ovid might also have assumed this.

Figure 6: Corinthian black-figure amphora 575-550 BC. showing Perseus carrying Medusa's head in a bag as he seemingly attacks the monster with stones while Andromeda looks on.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-7 (**utque … hamo**):

- To which bird is Perseus likened and why?
- In this simile, the bird attacks a snake. What is the snake doing?
- Where does Perseus first wound the sea monster?
- Why is Perseus called Inachides (descendant of Inachus)?

Lines 8-10 (**vulnere … terret**):

- How does the monster react?
- To what hunted animal is the sea monster likened?

Lines 11-16 (**ille … pennae**):

- Does Perseus have a plan for this fight, do you think? Explain your reasons.
- Could you draw the sea monster from the description we have?
- How do we know that the monster is mortally wounded?
- What is the danger for Perseus and how does he deal with it?

Lines 17-21 (**nec … ferrum**):

- What did Perseus not trust?
- What does Perseus do next?
- Through which part of the sea monster does Perseus thrust his sword?

Lines 22-25 (**litora … pater):**

- How loud was the shouting from the shore?
- How do Andromeda's parents react?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-4 (**utque … ungues**):

- Explain the effects of Ovid's choice of simile for Perseus' attack on the monster.
- How does Ovid make the picture of the eagle's attack on the snake very vivid?

Lines 5-7 (**sic … ungues**):

- How does Ovid emphasise Perseus' swift movement in these lines?
- Why do you think Ovid refers to Perseus as *Inachides* in line 7?

Lines 8-10 (**vulnere … terret**):

- How does the language and style of these lines convey the violent movement of the monster?
- In line 10, what does the simile of the boar suggest about the predicament of the monster?
- Do you think the simile of the boar reflects well on Perseus as the hero of this story? Give reasons for your answer.

Lines 11-16 (**ille … pennae**):

- How does Ovid's description of the slaying of the monster reflect Perseus' heroic abilities as a fighter?
- Can you see anything in these lines that evokes sympathy for the monster?

Lines 17-21 (**nec … ferrum**):

- How do these lines bring out the peril which Perseus faces in slaying the monster?
- How does Ovid emphasise the violence of Perseus' final blows?

Lines 22-25 (**litora … pater):**

- How does Ovid emphasise the change in mood from the drama of the kill to the joy of the celebrations?
- In the final line, why might Ovid mention Cephus' role as Andromeda's father, but not Cassiope's as her mother? You may be able to think of more than one reason.

Section H

Andromeda is freed from her chains and Medusa' head creates coral.

Notes

Lines 1-6 (**resoluta … Medusae**): Andromeda is not named but *virgo* at the end of the first clause refers to her. The next phrase also refers to her, as she is the prize (*pretium*) and the reason (*causa*) for Perseus' task. Although she has stepped forward, Ovid focuses on Perseus rather than the rescued girl, and we see him washing his victorious hands (*manus … victrices*). The victory is attributed to the hands rather than to Perseus in a poetical convention. *hausta unda* is ablative – with water drawn from the sea. At this point we are reminded of Medusa's head which has been notably absent during the fight. It is described as snake-bearing (*anguiferum*) just as it was described as *viperei*, in Section A. There is a tenderness in the way that Perseus creates a soft pile of leaves – he softened the ground with leaves (**mollit humum foliis**), spread twigs grown beneath the sea (**natasque sub aequore virgas / sternit**) ie seaweed, and placed on it (**imponit**) the head of Medusa, daughter of Phorcys (**Phorcynidos ora Medusae**).

Lines 7-12 (**virga … undas**): The fresh seaweed (**virga recens**), absorbent and alive (**bibulaque … viva**) snatched (**rapuit**) strength (**vim**) with its core (**medulla**) and hardened (**induruit**) at the touch (**tactuque**) of this monster (**monstri … huius**)…. This is our third metamorphosis – the creation of coral. This seems to be the earliest reference to the creation of coral in Ovid or other extant authors, though Ovid does briefly return to it later in the *Metamorphoses* (15.416-417) without mentioning Perseus or Medusa.

Ovid delightfully tells us that the sea nymphs experimented with this miracle by testing it (i.e. the effect of the head) on other twigs, and scattering seeds from the coral through the water.

Lines 13-15 (**nunc … saxum**): Ovid goes on to explain how coral retains this rigid nature, though he claims it is only rigid when exposed to air, while reef-building coral has a skeleton and is rigid beneath the sea. Some Mediterranean coral is soft and has no skeleton so it may be that this does harden only on exposure to air as seaweed itself does. However, 'red coral' that grows in the Mediterranean does have a skeleton and so Ovid's description of it here may not quite connect with its real nature. For more (optional) information on red coral, see below.

Discussion

The battle is done, and the captive girl is freed, the prospective parents-in-law are delighted and relieved. We hear nothing of Andromeda's feelings though relief might well be one. Ovid concentrates now on the hero, Perseus, who washes his doubtless blood-spattered hands in the sea. The care with which he builds a leafy bed for the head of Medusa is touching but then he does have to bring it back to Polydectes to stop the king marrying Danae. All else is forgotten for a few lines as Ovid moves into

the third metamorphosis of this story – the creation of coral. Coral reefs as we recognise them in places like the Great Barrier Reef are not present in the Mediterranean but there are corals which look very similar to leafy plants. If you are interested, the link below has a brief explanation and some pictures of the corals you may see in the Mediterranean.

https://www.oceano.org/en/ocean-in-question/is-there-coral-in-the-mediterranean/

Ovid's picture of the sea nymphs experimenting is delightful, and perhaps very cleverly significant in that the image of the beauty of the Nereids is put before his readers rather than that of Andromeda or her mother.

Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-6 (**resoluta … Medusae**):

- Who is the *virgo* mentioned in line 2?
- How is she described in the second part of line 2?
- What does Perseus do after Andromeda is released?
- What does he do with Medusa' head?

Lines 7-12 (**virga … undas**):

- What does the freshly gathered seaweed do when it touches Medusa's head?
- How do the sea nymphs react to this strange occurrence?

Lines 13-15 (**nunc … saxum**):

- What does Ovid say about the coral in these lines?
- What does he say makes the coral hard?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-6 (**resoluta … Medusae**):

- What impression does Ovid give of Andromeda in the first line?
- What impression do you form of Perseus from his behaviour towards her in lines 2 to 6
- How does Ovid convey the tenderness with which Perseus treats the head of Medusa?

Lines 7-9 (**virga … rigorem.**):

- How does Ovid make vivid his description of the transformation of seaweed into coral?

Lines 10-12 (**at … undas.**):

- How does Ovid's writing convey the delight of the sea-nymphs?

Lines 13-15 (**nunc … saxum**):

- Explain how the nature of seaweed and some Mediterranean coral might make Ovid's description of its origin plausible.

Section I

At his wedding feast Perseus explains how he acquired Medusa's head.

Notes and Discussion

After his defeat of the monster, Perseus ensures the favour of the gods who have helped him by setting up altars and making sacrifices. Mercury and Minerva were instrumental in helping him kill the Gorgon by lending him the equipment he needed – a polished shield and sword from Minerva and the winged sandals from Mercury which helped him travel all that way; he also sacrificed to Jupiter, his father. Perseus and Andromeda (who again is hardly mentioned) are married and at the wedding feast Perseus asks about the kingdom of Cepheus and, without supplying any detail of the reply, Ovid then has Cepheus ask Perseus about himself and about the head of Medusa, providing the cue for more accounts of his heroism. One imagines that our young hero was very pleased to be able to tell his story to an adoring audience. In his story we learn about twin sisters who are also daughters of Phorcys. These (though there are often said to be three sisters) are the Graiae who share one eye (one tooth also in other stories). Perseus managed to grab the eye and persuade the sisters to tell him where to find the Gorgons. Ovid passes quickly over the journey to the Gorgons' home, and Perseus realises, presumably, that he is getting close when he starts to see statues of men and animals littering the fields and roads. This is the story that everyone knows about Medusa, that anyone who looked at her would turn to stone. Perseus, however, was prepared as he carried Minerva's highly polished shield which he used to reflect Medusa's image and by means of this ruse he was able to cut off her head while she slept. In passing Ovid mentions that from the blood of Medusa were born Chrysaor (the golden man) and Pegasus, (the winged horse), though we hear no more of them. We also hear nothing of Medusa's two immortal Gorgon sisters who are often depicted in art as chasing after Perseus as he escapes with Medusa's bloody head.

Questions

- Why does Perseus build altars and make sacrifices to the gods?
- Why would winged sandals have been very useful for Mercury?
- Why do you think the twin sisters and the Gorgons are said to live so far to the west?
- What difficulties might there be in only looking at Medusa's reflection in a shield while cutting off her head? Try picking something up while only looking at it in a mirror.
- Why do you think Ovid did not tell us more about Chrysaor and Pegasus?

Section J

Perseus is asked to explain why Medusa had snakes for hair.

Notes and Discussion

Perseus's description of his journey enthralled his audience. Did he exaggerate? Who knows what Ovid intended his audience to think? When Perseus stopped talking one of the leading men of Cepheus' kingdom, for Cepheus had no sons, asked about the Gorgons. Perseus' reply told them that Medusa had once been renowned for her beautiful hair and that he had evidence of this because he had met someone who had seen her then, but that Neptune had assaulted her and, to make matters worse, he had done it in Minerva's temple. Minerva, the virgin goddess, was so horrified that she needed to get revenge for the act but because she could not punish her uncle, the sea god, she chose to punish the victim, Medusa, and she changed her beautiful hair into snakes (another metamorphosis). Perseus also added that Minerva then took the snakes themselves as the image on her breastplate. It is sometimes said that the image was actually the Gorgon's head itself, but presumably this would have to be fixed on the breastplate after Perseus had returned to Seriphos with the head for Polydectes – Ovid's chronology, not for the first time, is a little vague.

We do not know for sure how Ovid's first audiences would have reacted to Minerva's punishing the victim, Medusa, for her assault, but in recent times the story of Medusa has been pushed to the fore by those seeking action against sexual violence. A controversial statue created by Luciano Garbati and exhibited in New York challenges perceptions of Perseus as a hero and Medusa as a monster. What does its contrast with Cellini's statue of Perseus with the head of Medusa make you think?

Figure 7: Perseus holding the head of Medusa, Cellini c.1550.

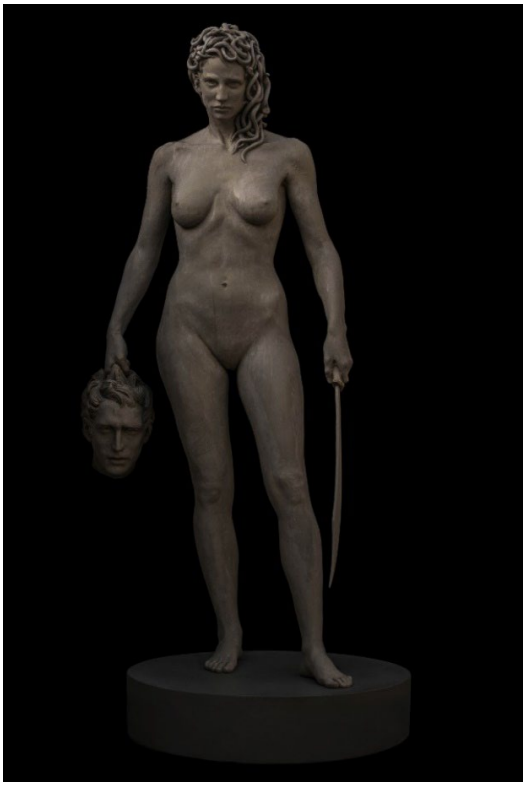

Figure 8: Medusa with the head of Perseus, ©Luciano Garbati, 2008.

Questions

- Why do you think Ovid says that the nobles in Cepheus' court wanted to hear more from Perseus?
- Why might they ask about the Gorgons?
- What do you think about the story of how Medusa acquired her snaky hair?
- Why do you think Minerva put the Gorgon's head on her breastplate?