

# Perseus: Myths and Retcons(tellations)

## Intro

Jordan: [Music]

Jordan: [Music] Hi, I'm Jordan.

Kit: And I'm Kit.

Jordan: Welcome to Starry Time, where stars plus lines

Kit: equal stories.

Jordan: Today we're going to be continuing our exploration of the constellation Perseus with a focus today on the myth and history of this constellation.

## Background and History

Kit: So this constellation is named after the Greek ahem quote unquote hero Perseus. Though there is some debate about Perseus's origins, at least from an etymological perspective. Uh, there's some suggestion that Perseus is just a very uncommon name in Greek, and so maybe it's not actually Greek but, uh, then again, like his origin story is that he's from a Greek island. So he's a Greek hero, just a unique name.

Jordan: However, this part of the night sky hasn't always been Perseus domain. In Babylonian star lore, this is known as the old man constellation. But not just any old man Enmesharra, who's basically like a, uh, primordial underworld god. He's later supplanted by other gods in Babylonian mythology.

Kit: And in traditional Chinese star lore, this part of the night sky is in the western quadrant in the White Tiger of the West. And it has parts in several different mansions, including bond, stomach, hairy head and net.

Jordan: Hairy head's definitely got to be my favorite.

Kit: There are also some other associations in other cultures and periods with this constellation, but they seemed a bit more tenuous or there was sort of like some question as to whether or not I, or to what extent this was actually recognized as other things. So I think we'll leave our history at that for now.

## **Myth Retelling**

Jordan: Perfect. Let's move on to talking about the Greek myth of Perseus. If you listen to our episode on Cassiopeia, Cepheus and Andromeda from earlier this season, you'll know Perseus as, uh, the guy who rolled in and instantly fell in love with a naked Andromeda tied to a rock, killed the sea monster and then whisked the princess away to his homeland to be his wife.

Kit: Yeah, we don't hear any more about Andromeda. And they just go on and have like, uh, like seven kids or something like that. As most hero stories in Greek myth begin,

Perseus is the son of a god. Which god, do you want to guess?

Jordan: Uh, Hermes?

Kit: No.

Jordan: Ares?

Kit: No.

Jordan: Poseidon?

Kit: Nope.

Jordan: Is it the most promiscuous? Is it the big Z?

Kit: Perhaps, it may, in fact be the big Z. Perseus's dad is none other than the King of the gods, lord of the lightning bolts, Zeus.

Jordan: So of course this means his mother is Hera, Zeus's wife. Right?

Kit: Yep, no.

Jordan: No? Shocker. [laughter]

Kit: Shocking. Perseus's mother is a mortal woman called Danae. And Danae is the only child of a king, who is the King of Argos.

Jordan: Of course. Zeus

Kit: mm m so Danae's life is kind of interesting because her dad is basically mad because he doesn't have a male heir. Just the one child.

Jordan: Well, surely that's her fault. Yeah, of course.

Kit: So the King of Argos goes to the Oracle at Delphi to find out if, you know, um, is there a son coming? Is he gonna get a son or what? But as oracles do, this one simply says, you're gonna get murdered by your grandson.

Jordan: Classic. I mean, that does provide some answers. Not exactly the answers he was looking for, but an answer.

Kit: Yep. So the King does what any normal father would do and puts Danae into a tower. Just locks her up in a tower.

Jordan: Well, when in doubt, tower your daughter.

Kit: Then you might ask, okay, so she's locked in a tower and the tower's kind of in the middle of the property, sort of like a panopticon situation. um, how does she get pregnant? Well, I want you to really, I really want you to get ready for this because this is gonna be a lot. This is a lot to think about. Are you ready?

Jordan: How does she become pregnant?

Kit: Okay, so Zeus comes to her in the form of a golden shower.

Jordan: No. No. I wasn't ready for that. No. I mean, if you had given me 50 guesses I'm not sure that would have been- I didn't know that was even in Zeus's

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Jordan: repertoire. Leave it up to me to underestimate the guy.

Kit: And so that is how Perseus comes to be. So instead of murdering Danae and the baby and, um, incurring the wrath of Zeus, of course her father, the King of Argos puts them in a box and sets them out to sea.

Jordan: Perfect. Yeah. Let nature kill them. It's indirect. If you indirectly kill people, just set them on the course to die, surely Zeus will be like, I don't know how they wound up in this box. It won't come back to you at all.

Kit: No. So somehow, uh, Danae and Perseus survive. They are taken in by a fisherman whose brother is named Polydectes and is the king of the island they washed ashore on.

Jordan: Mmhmm

Kit: So this is where things kind of get interesting. Um, Perseus grows up and that seems to happen without issue. So Danae is taken in by this fisherman, raises Perseus and then Perseus is grown and Polydectes the brother of the fisherman, is like, okay, Danae, you are looking good.

Jordan: Perseus's mom has got it going on.

Kit: Yeah, exactly. But Perseus is like, I don't like the way that Polydectes is looking at my mom. And he's like, back off.

Jordan: Yeah, come on.

Kit: Because for some reason, not having Perseus's blessing is a problem. Probably because women are property in ancient Greece, and somehow now that he's a grown man, he owns his mom. I guess. I don't, I don't really, I don't know the laws of ancient Greece. So Polydectes comes up with a plan to get rid of Perseus. And the basic idea is a classic tried and true, send them on an unachievable quest. And this quest was to kill the Gorgon Medusa.

Jordan: This is seen as an unachievable quest as Polydectes intends it wholly to be. The Gorgons are three sisters that are the children of the primordial sea goddess Phorcys and Ceto. However, Medusa is the only one of these three sisters who's mortal. And her sisters, Euryale and Stheno were immortal for some, I'm sure, very sensible reason.

Kit: Yeah, it's confusing. Like, Greek myth genetics are confusing. You have two primordial god parents who are siblings, by the way. Um, but you're, Medusa, mortal. It doesn't, I don't, I don't.

Jordan: Basically, one of them has to be mortal, so Perseus has a chance to win, right?

Kit: Yeah, I mean, I guess so. Right. Just has to serve the story. Um, also, so this idea that the Gorgons are these three sisters of the primordial sea gods is actually somewhat contested. So in the Ovid's version of this myth, Medusa has a very different

origin story. So in his work, Medusa has been cursed to having snake hair, to becoming this snake haired creature when Neptune, aka Poseidon, sleeps with her in Minerva, aka Athena's, temple. And so Athena becomes enraged that they would dare to have sexual relations in her temple and turns Medusa into a snake haired creature that turns people to stone. So, yeah, so that's the sort of contested alternative version of who Medusa is and where she comes from. And then there's also some suggestion that at one point in time, these Gorgons were just purely monsters. So they were depicted as not human like at all, just sort of, um, creatures. But somewhere along the way, they were translated or depicted also as beautiful women who also had snake hair. So that's another sort of evolution of this myth. And um, what these Gorgons are

Jordan: Like there's a variety of myths as to Medusa's origin, there are quite a few different versions as to her demise, including a couple different versions of what happens when Perseus goes to kill her, all depending on who's telling the story, of course. However, it's usually agreed that Perseus got some help from his Daddy Z, Zeus, by way of Hermes and Athena. Hermes provides Perseus his winged sandals, as well as a nice shiny shield along with a special bag to hold the head of the Gorgon, which is given to him by Athena. Athena also lets Perseus know that, uh, you might want to try to avoid

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Jordan: this whole, like, looking in the Medusa's eye thing. It doesn't tend to go well for people. So he's getting some cheat codes, he's getting some hints. Zeus by way of Hermes and Athena.

Kit: And then some versions of the myth, Perseus also gets a special sword from

Hephaestus and also gets Hades' helm of invisibility. So Perseus is coming into this fight geared, uh, up with some magical objects.

Jordan: In the most common version of the myth, Perseus is cunning and essentially gets Medusa to look at herself in the shiny shield and then cuts off her head. But in at least one other depiction, Perseus beheads her as she sleeps in an act of cowardice.

Kit: Okay, so remember in the Ovid origin story that she had sex with Poseidon? Well, one way or another, Medusa was pregnant in some versions of the myth. And so when she was killed by Perseus she birthed Pegasus.

Jordan: The Pegasus? The winged horse, Pegasus? Wow.

Kit: Right. Birthed the winged horse and also Pegasus's, I guess, paternal twin who is a human. Well, an, um, immortal but not a horse called Crys-a-saur? [laughter] How do you say that?

Jordan: I would say it as Chrysosaur but I like Crysasaur

Kit: Crys-a-saur [laughter] Okay.

Jordan: So, I guess chrysosaur or Chrysosaur or you want to call it and Pegasus, they just kind of fly off or otherwise, you know, they let Perseus go on his way because he leaves and they leave, go their separate ways, and he takes Medusa's head in a bag and leaves the scene. And at this point, you know, he intends to be heading home. However, along the way, he stumbles upon Andromeda.



Kit: Yeah. So just insert the myths and retcons from our previous episodes in the Andromeda episode, the Cassiopeia episode, they can all just kind of go right here.

Jordan: Well, eventually, Perseus does return home with Andromeda and the head of Medusa. He returns all of his godly objects and gifts and artifacts. And Medusa's head is affixed, to Athena's shield- The Aegis

Kit: Perseus's story isn't over after all, the Oracle said he was gonna kill his granddad.

Jordan: He's got a granddad to kill. And he does. In two of the three traditional myths, however, he didn't do it, you know, on purpose. It was, it was an accident. It was an accidental grandpatricide. I mean, who hasn't accidentally thrown a discus and killed their estranged grandfather?

Kit: Great point.

Jordan: I mean, just accidentally.

Kit: Right.

Jordan: Perseus's story ends with him becoming King of somewhere, probably hiring a lot of other people to do his dirty work for him, like all the other kings in this story. And he lives happily ever after with seven sons and two daughters. And get this, this guy, he names one of his daughters Gorgophone. You know what that means?

Kit: Uh-uh

Jordan: Gorgon killer.

Kit: Oh, yikes. And yeah, so Perseus gets to live happily ever after. We don't hear, I don't think, really anything about Danae or Andromeda or Medusa's sisters.

Jordan: So since we already talked about Andromeda and her backstory, our analysis today will be both on Danae and the Zeus origin story as well as the Medusa murder story.

## **Myth Analysis**

Kit: One last comment, uh, on Perseus. He is somehow both the grandfather and half brother of Hercules. So I'll be sure to post that very confusing family tree over on our socials so we can all puzzle over that. One of the many strange things happening in this story. I think there are a few familiar elements that we've seen before in other myths, in the Danae and Zeus story, we have this idea of how inevitable fate is. Um, we have a punishment, however long in coming for imprisoning the innocent. Um, so there are some things here that I think we've seen before. We have this idea of divine births, the mythological origins of Greek heroes. It's interesting to see just how often these Greek heroes are demigods. They're not just regular mortals. And this reinforces the idea that to navigate the world of the gods, you yourself have to be sort of special in some way. And even the heroes that

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Kit: don't have god like powers or aren't demigods are often conceptualized or

understood as being favored or protected by a god, which, again, just reinforces this boundary between god and mortal that we see a lot in these Greek myths. I'm really kind of perplexed by the whole golden rain choice. um I don't like the idea of thinking about gods's semen as golden, and so I think I'm going to move on from that.

Jordan: Kit,

Kit: Yep.

Jordan: Fair enough. Let's just pass on the rest of that. And I think you said a lot of it there. So let's move on to the Medusa and the Gorgon myth. There's been a lot of great analysis of this myth already, so I'll summarize some of the ideas that I've been reading about. Historically, some believe this is a mythological version of a real event where Perseus or another hero, essentially destroyed the shrines of local goddesses or deities, and it was retold in this type of story to make sense of the trauma. Freud, unsurprisingly, saw this as a fear of castration story and or, uh, Oedipus related situation, with the idea being that Medusa is the forbidden, mother, and her snake hair is a stand in for pubic hair. And Freud supports this interpretation with the fact that we don't hear about Medusa or the Gorgons turning women into stone.

Kit: You know, I'm really glad that Sigmund decided to weigh in on this really, uh, really a compelling interpretation.

Jordan: Unsurprisingly, I am more convinced or interested and compelled by the feminist interpretations. And these analyses focus on the way the myth functions to either demonize women's rage or women's desires, and then how society rewards or even makes heroes out of men who take it upon themselves to destroy powerful women.

Kit: Yeah. And there's definitely some overlap here, although it's a bit more, I think, explicit in the Medusa myth, but a little overlap with the idea of the Amazons and the Maenad stories that we talked about in our Maenad episode.

Jordan: Definitely this vilification of a feminine power.

Kit: Yeah. And there has been a lot of writing and thinking about the Medusa myth, um, from that sort of feminist perspective. And so I'll be sure to post some of those, uh, over on the socials if you want to get in a little bit deeper into those. But I think ultimately, I think it's pretty clear what we need here. We need some retcons.

Jordan: Kit, it's reinstallation time, so let's take a quick break, and we'll return with our rec constellations of this myth.

## **Retconstellations**

Welcome back to our segment, ret-constellation In this segment, we reimagine, reboot, and revise the myths of our monthly constellation in hopes that we can modernize them, subvert them, or perhaps even deepen the story of our monthly constellation. Sometimes, Kit, it's the best we can do just to make them a little less cringy. I think we got a lot of room to work with with this one, Kit. So would you start us off this week?

Kit: Yeah. So I think especially when thinking about the Medusa myth and also the Andromeda myth to some extent, but I'm going to sort of leave that in the Andromeda episode. I think this is an area where, like the Orpheus stories we've seen some ret-constellations already been done. Um, again, a shout out to the book shadow of In the

Shadow of Perseus by Claire Heywood, which I think I mentioned in a previous episode. I'm not sure if I had read it in that previous episode. I have now read it. So if you're looking for a retelling of Perseus's life, but from the perspective of his mother and Medusa and Andromeda, this is definitely one, um, that you should check out. Um, I do want to sort of add a caveat here, which is that it is, like, persistently discouraging. Um, it is not really a ret-constellation as much as a recentering. And so that recentering, I think, is really interesting, but it is kind of a book that I really, I did really enjoy it, but it definitely were parts where I was like, this is just unrelenting. Unrelenting in terms of just feeling really depressing and just frustrating that, um, this hero was sort of behaving in this way. But a really beautiful book that really thinks about how these recasts Perseus and thinks about how the, um, people around him are impacted by him.

Jordan: And it seems like there's some other Medusa

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Jordan: and Perseus myths that have also been recentered and retold in a few ways.

Kit: Yeah. Uh, Natalie Hayes, who's another person that writes in that sort of Greek myth, uh, retcon has Stone Blind which I haven't read that one. Um, but it is a sort of perspective shift. But yeah, so these stories, the ones especially that I've read already, you know, there's a whole genre of these- Song of Achilles- uh, are really about recentering. Right. They're about perspective shift. Um, but they're not necessarily changing the story, if that makes sense. And so anyways, all this is really just to say that there are big names in this retelling space that are working with these stories. And, yeah, I wasn't really, really sure, you know, where to go with it. So, yeah, so I went back to our Andromeda episode to see if I could come up with any inspiration there. So I

thought maybe, um, Medusa could be part of the Maenads mythos, which kind of works in that we're thinking about misbehaving women. We're thinking about people that like snakes. And so I thought maybe there's something there.

Jordan: Maenads often are depicted with snakes. See our asterisms on the Maenads episode for more. So. All right, I see some of the symbols that you're pulling together here.

Kit: Okay, so here's what I got. Perseus sets off to kill Medusa to win over his soon to be stepdad. But when he gets there, he actually finds himself quite afraid of Medusa, not because she turns people to stone or has snake hair, but because she behaves unlike any woman that Perseus has ever met. She's free and wild and, like, maybe she's a little bit of a stoner. Um, so she gets Perseus high, and he spills his guts. He's got a bad stepdad. He has a bad grandpa. He's literally the child of Zeus's golden rain. And Medusa's like, bro, that does sound rough. So she helps him devise a plan where they tie together a bunch of dead snakeskins into a knot, and he can just bring it back to his stepdad's house in all the glory. And she's like, I, cool, I'll be dead that's fine. I don't really like living in this cave anyways. And so she decides to relocate with her sisters, and they find a new community and home with the Maenads, who, of course, in my podcast extended universe, are the neighbors of the Amazons. Meanwhile, Perseus goes back with the snakeskin head, quote unquote. And people are like, oh, my gosh, wow, Perseus, look at you. What a hero. But his time with Medusa has actually really changed him. And he decides, you know, he's not really cut out to be a hero. Um, he doesn't want to kill random people or kidnap people. And so he decides that he's gonna eschew all the expectations of him and focus on his real passion games. So he goes on to invent quoits, which is what the myths say he does. It's basically like ring toss. And maybe he creates the first tabletop game, too. And he just decides to commit himself to

a life of creativity and play instead of murder and vengeance.

Jordan: Wow, Kit, love this one.

Kit: So how about you, Jordan? Where did you go with this Perseus myth?

Jordan: So my ret-constellation here, Kit, I think it also is a bit of a recentering, but I did try to take some of the elements of the original myth and reimagine or ret-constellation them to the best of my ability. In my myth, we have two scientists specializing in bioengineering and infectious diseases. When the first cases of something known as the Medusa's curse begin to surface, which is a disease that creates the seeming ability of turning people into stone.

Kit: Mhm.

Jordan: After an expedition into the deep sea. And these two doctors, Doctor Perseus and Doctor Andromeda

Kit: yeahh!!

Jordan: must work together to solve the Medusa's curse and find a cure. And as they do, they discover secrets about the world that they never knew. That the Medusa's curse, it was designed by a malevolent corporation known as CETUS

Kit: ooooo!

Jordan: which can be an acronym for all sorts of great things that I made the Internet

tell me. I came up with this corporation called the Corporate Energy Torment Utility Services.

Kit: Okay.

Jordan: Answers from Chat GPT are much better. So in my ret-constellation Doctor Perseus and Doctor Andromeda work together to discover a serum to counteract the petrification process. And throughout their journey, they fall in love and tackle the CETUS Corp together. And instead of killing in order to feel a sense of purpose or a sense of connection, they use science and the profound impact of molecular biology to stand up to true malevolence and forge a love and a bond that saves humanity itself.

Kit: Oh, my gosh, I want this book to exist. I think we should write it. I think we should cut this entire section out so we can write this book. It's a contemporary retake that has like, oh, it's so good. I'm obsessed with it.

Jordan: Kit, I did the best I can to do a better version, or at least a little bit less cringey version.

## **Oracle AI**

Now it's time to see where our Oracle took this myth in our segment, Oracle AI.

Kit: Uh, so we first asked the Oracle to retell us the myth of Perseus and Medusa and then to tell us about its problematic features and then to tell us in about a paragraph or so, uh, another version of the myth that addresses these problematic themes. So to



start off with, the problematic elements that the Oracle identified in the Perseus and Medusa myth included victim blaming and punishment, glorification of Perseus specifically for killing Medusa. Misogynistic undertones. Lack of agency for Medusa, and divine intervention and moral ambiguity, which was very vague, and I think was getting at, like, this idea that gods treat people unfairly. It's like, like everyone's helping Perseus whereas, like, Athena's punishing Medusa. But I I didn't really understand that one.

Jordan: Kit, well, it sounds like some of these are reasonable and others may be a little bit, um, less so. But in asking the Oracle for a short retelling that addresses these issues, so saith, our friend the Oracle: In a reimagined version of the myth, Medusa was a revered priestess of Athena, known for her wisdom and beauty. One day, Poseidon approached her with unwanted advances. But this time, Medusa courageously defended herself and sought Athena's protection. Recognizing Medusa's bravery and the injustice she was facing, Athena bestowed upon her the power to turn anyone who meant her harm into stone, ensuring her safety and autonomy. Meanwhile, Perseus was a young hero on a quest to prove his valor, not through violence, but through wisdom and compassion. Hearing of Medusa's plight, he sought her out, not to kill her, but to learn from her strength and resilience. When he found Medusa, he approached her with respect and empathy. Instead of a battle, their meeting became an exchange of stories and wisdom. Together, Medusa and Perseus formed a bond, and he vowed to spread the tale of her courage and the injustices that she endured, challenging the dominant narratives that vilified her. Athena, seeing the positive outcome of the meeting, honored Medusa by lifting the curse that caused her isolation, allowing her to live freely and to continue her role as a wise and respected priestess.

Kit: Already, like in a one paragraph thing, it has a contradiction. It's like I thought you

had a protective skill and now it's actually a curse. Okay.

Jordan: Okay, good. I'm glad I wasn't the only one.

Kit: It didn't make sense. Anyways, okay, so, according to the Oracle and I quote, this version of the myth celebrates Medusa's strength and agency and redefines Perseus's heroism as one of empathy and understanding rather than conquest, promoting a narrative of mutual respect and justice.

Jordan: Great microcosm of what oracles do.

Kit: Mhm.

Jordan: They recycle a lot of words that have meaning and a lot of symbols. Wisdom, um, compassion, empathy, respect, justice. Challenging narratives, isolation, curse, bravery. They say all these things, but at the end of the day, when you take what the Oracle is saying at face value, it's completely self contradictory and makes no sense whatsoever, but it gives you a lot

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Jordan: of the gestures of sense or a lot of the echoes of meaning, and we fill in the blanks and overlook the contradictions or the parts that just blatantly are quite silly. So in this sense, I think AI is doing a great job of representing what oracles have done for all time.

## Outro

This brings us to the end of our episode this week. Please join us next week for the pop culture segment of our exploration of the constellation Perseus

Kit: This has been Kit

Jordan: And Jordan.

Kit: Sisters, lovers of stars and stories.

Jordan: And we'll see you next time

Kit: On Starry Time.

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