

Chapter One

Fooling the Gods



What can you tell by reading the story?

1. What is an oracle?
2. According to the oracle, why did the immortals decide Acrisius could not have a son?
3. How did Acrisius find out that a baby had been born?
4. What did Acrisius do after he found out about the baby?
5. What did the gods and goddesses on Olympus think about what Acrisius did to the baby?

What can you tell by thinking about the story?

1. Why wasn't Acrisius happy to just have a daughter?
2. Why does Acrisius think it is better to put Dana and the baby in a box than to kill them?
3. What is it about the kinds of things Acrisius does that makes the gods so angry with him?

NOTE: In case anyone wonders, the legends are pretty clear on where that baby came from: The often-lustful Zeus descended upon Dana in the form of a shower of gold. If you'd like to go there, be our guest. We're happy with a much less specific explanation: Zeus willed it. Hey, it's not like everything else in this story is going to follow strict biological rules.

Response Key

What can you tell by reading the story?

1. A fortuneteller or prophet who can tell people what the gods and goddesses on Olympus are planning. Don't underestimate the importance of this theme -- the urge to know (and try to get around) the intent of the immortals is central to this story!
2. They were angry with him for having made war on his brother. As in many cultures, it was important to the Greeks to make sense of the world by assuming the gods will reward the just and punish the wicked. It was also important for their sense of an ordered world to explain why some people got what they wanted and some were miserable.
3. He heard Dana ... talking to it, perhaps? Singing lullabies? Or was the baby crying? The story doesn't tell quite what he heard, and this is a chance to talk about what sounds mothers and babies make. But the strict answer is "he heard something."
4. He put Dana and the baby in a box and threw them into the Aegean Sea.
5. They thought it was the most foolish and wicked thing they had ever seen. It's important for the understanding of this story to realize that villains are not simply evil but that their deeds are being watched and judged. In action novels and Hollywood movies, they can simply come to ruin, but, in Greek legends, there is a justice beyond this mortal world. (Wait'll you see!)

What can you tell by thinking about the story?

1. He wanted a son to take over his throne. Greek culture is not unlike Middle Eastern cultures, not only in food and other material matters but also in the place of women. It's far too simple to say that women couldn't be monarchs. Women had a strong, distinct culture and a real place in Greek society. Indeed, there were powerful goddesses on Olympus, as we will see. But women did not sit on the thrones of Greek city-states, and Acrisius wanted a son to preserve the throne he had struggled for.
2. The text says he knew Zeus would blast him for simply killing the baby, but let's go beyond that. Acrisius wants them dead, but he wants to keep his own hands clean of the crime, so he exposes them to danger in a way he thinks will distance him from their deaths. He's not just a villain. He's also a weasel! (The next question deals with how the immortals feel about weasels.)
3. Certainly, if Zeus was angry over Acrisius's putting Dana in a dungeon, he's not going to be amused by this legalistic attempt to murder Dana and Perseus without actually killing them. This is a case of a mortal thinking he can put himself above the immortals. Sometimes, what people do to us is more insulting because it shows disrespect than because of the actual damage -- I might be angry with you for lying to me, even if what you lied about didn't really matter much. In this case, Acrisius is not only disrespectful to the immortals, but the things he does are serious -- making war on his brother out of greed, then locking his daughter in a dungeon and later trying to kill her and her baby. No wonder the immortals are angry with him!

Teachable moment: Is Acrisius just a character in an ancient myth, or is he like some modern people? How often do people today come up with elaborate ways to get around the simple morality we all understand? (For instance, cheating on taxes with legal deductions that are clearly NOT what the tax code had in mind ... or downloading copyrighted music because you have the technical ability to do so, and then justifying it by saying the record companies are greedy and deserve to be ripped off!) This prideful attitude, the arrogant thought that you can fool the gods and outwit your fate is known as "hubris" and is a central theme in Greek literature.