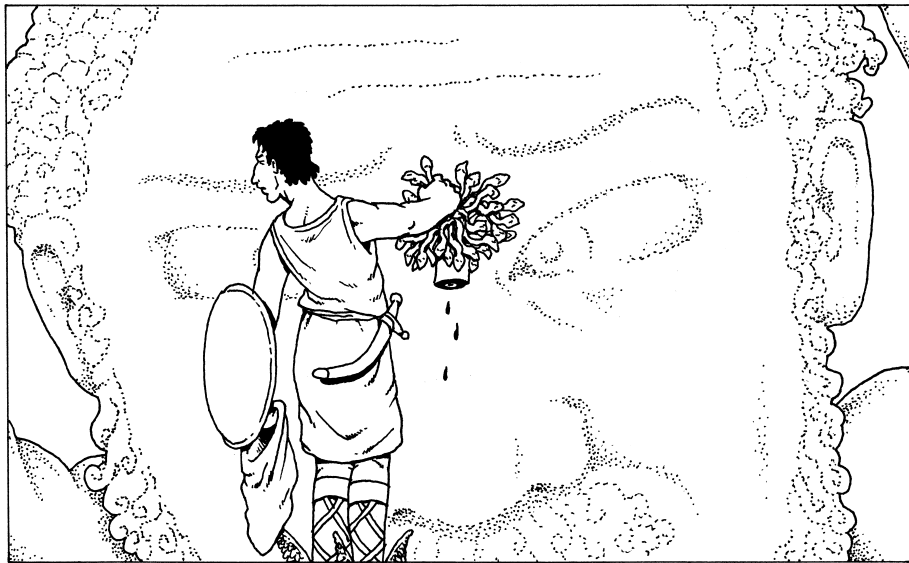


Chapter Eight

The Head of the Medusa



What can you tell by reading the story?

1. Who chased Perseus from the cave?
2. What happened when the blood of the Medusa fell upon the sand?

What can you tell by thinking about the story?

1. Why does Perseus think the Hesperides were probably delighted to see anyone who came to visit?
2. When he borrowed the helmet of Hades, Atlas made Perseus promise him something. What was it, and why did Atlas want that?

Let's Talk About It: The Hesperides are cheerful, generous and very cute, but Perseus knows that, when mortals stop to party with the Hesperides, they never leave that garden again. Have you heard of things that seem pleasant and even fun, but that might keep you from ever accomplishing anything important with your life? Who is more dangerous, Medusa or the Hesperides? (*SEE: Teachable Moment*)

Response Key

What can you tell by reading the story?

1. The Medusa's two sisters, who are also Gorgons but can't change people into stone. By the way, how come the bats aren't turned to stone? There was enough light in the cave for Perseus to use Athena's shield and see what he was doing, after all. Well, bats aren't really blind, but they don't use their eyes to look at distant objects in the half-dark. Or, at least the ones who were still alive to fly out of the cave didn't. We don't know how big a pile of little stone bats might be in there.
2. It turned into poisonous snakes and scorpions. This is our first glimpse of the power of the head of the Medusa, a foreshadowing of future events. (Because we see the head used on Atlas at the end of this chapter, it would be an appropriate time to talk about the important concept of "foreshadowing" with your students -- for example Harry Potter stories use foreshadowing when the Sorting Hat makes its choices each year!)

What can you tell by thinking about the story?

1. The Hesperides were delighted to see Perseus the first time he arrived, before they even knew who he was. They may be a lot of fun, but they don't seem like anyone whose friendship should be taken very seriously. Real friends like you because of what you are like as a person, and that sometimes takes a while to figure out.
2. Atlas had made him promise to show him the head of the Medusa and turn him to stone, so he would no longer be tired of holding up the heavens. Atlas was one of the Titans who had once ruled, before Zeus and the Olympians took over, and holding up the heavens was his punishment for opposing them in the war that changed the cosmos. The Atlas Mountains of North Africa are said to be his petrified remains. The famous 16th century Flemish mapmaker Mercator, whose Mercator projection is still used in maps, depicted Atlas holding up the globe and that became his common image, but it is actually the dome of the sky that he supports, not the earth. Talking about why the Hesperides are sad but accept the wish of Atlas could take you into some interesting but potentially touchy areas.

Teachable moment: The Hesperides are not the only characters who make Greek heroes forget what they were supposed to be doing. In "The Odyssey," Odysseus and his men come ashore in the Land of the Lotus Eaters and those who sample the local flowers soon forget how much they wanted to get home to their families. Here's how Odysseus told the tale, according to Samuel Butler's 1900 prose translation:

I was driven thence by foul winds for a space of nine days upon the sea, but on the tenth day we reached the land of the Lotus-eaters, who live on a food that comes from a kind of flower. Here we landed to take in fresh water, and our crews got their mid-day meal on the shore near the ships.

When they had eaten and drunk I sent two of my company to see what manner of men the people of the place might be, and they had a third man under them. They started at once, and went about among the Lotus-eaters, who did them no hurt, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their return; nevertheless, though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them fast under the benches.

Then I told the rest to go on board at once, lest any of them should taste of the lotus and leave off wanting to get home, so they took their places and smote the grey sea with their oars.

The "Let's Talk About It" question asks who is more dangerous, Medusa or the Hesperides. This is not only a chance to talk about substance abuse but about peer pressure, because few young men would find it easy to turn down a chance to party with the Hesperides!

(Keep this lesson in mind in later chapters, when we see what Perseus would have missed had he stayed in the Garden of the Hesperides.)