

---

2023

## Mythology and Astronomy as Manifestations of Ancient Greek Culture

Paul Hay  
*Case Western Reserve University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.case.edu/discussions>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hay, Paul (2023) "Mythology and Astronomy as Manifestations of Ancient Greek Culture," *Discussions*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.28953/2997-2582.1077>

Available at: <https://commons.case.edu/discussions/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research Office at Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Discussions by an authorized editor of Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@case.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@case.edu).

---

# Mythology and Astronomy as Manifestations of Ancient Greek Culture

---



-Paul Hay-

Paul is a freshman at Case Western Reserve University, set to graduate in May of 2010. He is majoring in classics and English. His research interests include Augustan and Late Republican Roman literature as well as the poetry of Neil Peart. Paul is a member of Phi Kappa Tau and the Case Libertarians. He currently resides in Poland, Ohio.

## -Acknowledgements-

Paul would like to thank his research advisor, Earle Luck, for assisting him with this project. His support was crucial to the completion of this endeavor and his help was greatly appreciated. Paul would also like to thank Rachel Sternberg for her expertise in the field of Greek history.

It is common to think of mythical heroes as being “larger than life.” The stories of their legendary pursuits put these warriors on a level above that of the mere common man. The cosmic insignificance of the normal human being is also suggested through the study of astronomy. One cannot help but feel like an insignificant speck floating through space when one approaches the magnanimity of the night sky. Thus it is no surprise that many of the ancient star watchers graced the names of the constellations with those of the heroes of their mythologies. However, it is imperative to remember the human element in both of these pursuits. Stories do not exist without storytellers, and astronomy cannot be studied without astronomers to do it. No matter how much evidence exists showing that the Trojan War really happened, still it is Homer who made the myth what it is today. Similarly, even if a cluster of stars looks exactly like a horse, it takes an astronomer to give it the name Pegasus. Both mythology and astronomy are thus profoundly affected by the cultures of which the mythmakers and the astronomers were a part. The Greek hero Perseus provides one such example of this connection between mythology, astronomy, and culture, and since his legend was well known since at least the seventh century B.C., he is also one of the oldest such examples (*Masks* 83). The mythological story of Perseus and its subsequent astronomical associations contain reflections of cultural fears and values for the ancient Greeks.

The Perseus myth provides a valuable example of the ideal Greek man. Martial valor was one of the highest virtues of the Greek society; Victory itself was even deified and honored with a temple in the Acropolis. Because of the importance of warfare in defending the Greek way of life, becoming a worthy fighter was an important step in

---

the lives of many young Greek men. Perseus thus sets the bar: “The mass of men appreciate and pay homage to the courage and sacrifice of the warrior, defender of home and country. The hero’s risk is therefore the source of his nobility and subsequent privilege. Thus if they wish to uphold their claim to nobility and its rewards, it is their duty to fight” (Hatab 74). The Perseus story “has clear characteristics of an initiation myth: the hero travels to marginal areas to get his special weapon that commands death” (Bremmer 27). But in a very broad way, this story also is a battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. In it, “the individual heroes become more significant than groups of combatants in symbolizing the victory of virtue over vice, since this war is one that every soul must wage alone” (North 29). This has an astronomical suggestion: “some myths involving male heroes...have a mystical core in solar symbolism: for instance, Perseus’s struggle against the Gorgons is a battle of the solar cult against the forces of darkness” (Blok 44). The principal vice for the Greeks was hubris, a word that suggests overbearing pride or arrogance. The Perseus story warns against having hubris: “the sea serpent is sent as a consequence of Cassiopeia’s vanity, and Perseus’s confrontation with the Medusa results from his hubris in boasting to Polydectes of his valor” (Slater 332-333). This legend also teaches the importance of *xenia* in Greek culture. *Xenia* was the virtue of hospitality; Greeks were expected to be kind and benevolent hosts to their guests, or any supplicants at their doors. In the Perseus myth, *xenia* is exemplified when the fisherman Dictys “does [Perseus and Danae] both reverence, takes them into his hut and passes them off as his kinfolk” (Kerenyi 48). Susan Langdon notes that Greek boys took part in an actual male initiation rite that recreated the Perseus story. As Perseus maintains

social order through the slaying of monsters and evil men, so the story of Perseus maintains social order by instilling the cultural values of the Greeks into their young men in this initiation tale (Langdon). Men would wear Gorgon masks and fight young boys, who were required to “kill” the Gorgon (Langdon). The importance of this slaying is confirmed by the chosen pose of Perseus in his constellation: he is holding the recently slain head of Medusa. This physical example of martial prowess underscores the lesson taught by the Perseus myth.

The importance of religion in one’s daily life is also a value instilled by the Perseus myth. It is necessary to state that “myths were not intended as ‘speculation’ or even mere stories because they were functional, woven into the concrete lives of a people. Myths established social and educational values; prescribed daily tasks and ceremonial responses...[and] gave meaning to birth, maturation, and death” (Hatab 20-21). The gods, then, were believed to come down to Earth not only in myths, but in everyday life as well. The Greeks set up temples to deities with the actual expectation that those deities would have a presence in the temples. In the myths, therefore, “various deities make regular journeys to their appropriate cult places. Heroic travels are equally purposeful, involving as they normally do some important trial or quest” (Pozzi 51). The Perseus myth, like most Greek myths, specifies many actual place names in Greece; the notion is conveyed that Greek heroes were just normal men elevated to greatness by their decisions. In fact, “all over the country were the shrines and tombs of the heroes and heroines of early days, who seem to have filled a part very much like that filled by the saints of the Christian church” (Woodward xi-xii). Thus Perseus is an example of how the ideal warrior can

be immortalized in the stars despite being human. Perseus's religious significance also touches on the importance of genealogy to the Greeks. In a patriarchal and patrilineal society such as the one Greece had, one's parentage was an important factor of one's social status, and not just by considering one's immediate parents. For example, Martin Nilsson writes that in preparing their campaign against the Greeks, the Persians sent heralds to the Argives to dissuade them from taking part in the war because the Persians were descended from the Argives through Perseus (89). Also, the concept of the "divine right of kings," which gives a ruler authority over a people because of his divine lineage, was still being used by Greeks up until the beginnings of democratic stirrings in the sixth century B.C. Perseus is a hero with a social function, who is of divine descent but takes his place among mortals, who bears exceptional power and resources to rid the country of monsters, and who provides a genealogy for the nobility by marrying a king's daughter, winning glory and posterity (Blok 324-325). It is only fitting that the son of Zeus would rule over a people. Thus, the gods were expected to interact with Earth not only through themselves but also through their kin, the royalty of any given city-state. Perseus shows this distinction in the story because "the important position of the hero in later life within the community is thrown into greater relief by his earlier removal from that community" (Bremmer 44). Being godlike, Perseus is expected to take his place not only among the people but among the stars as well. His mythology shows the importance of religion in one's daily life.

The Perseus story also demonstrates the role of women in Greek society. The ideal Greek girl was called a parthenos. Young maidens were expected to be chaste and wholesome; they were to take their place in the

home until marriage, at which point they were expected to reproduce for the good of the city-state. Danae is representative of the parthenos, the ideal maiden girl of ancient Greece (Langdon). Thus Acrisius commits a terrible wickedness by locking up his daughter, keeping her away from suitors. Perseus is doing justice to the idea of the parthenos by going on his quest. As Richard Caldwell explains, Perseus "kills the female monster Medusa and then marries the Ethiopian princess Andromeda, whom he finds and rescues in exactly the same situation his mother Danae had been in at the beginning of the myth; each woman was loved by her paternal uncle and had been placed by her father in a situation inaccessible to all suitors" (65). Marriage was an intensely important aspect of the Greek social atmosphere. For girls, marriage became almost the point of living. "Greeks of the Archaic period, indeed, so equated marriage and death that the same vessel...served both for the wedding bath and for decorating the graves of those who died unwed, providing the deceased, as it were, with the accoutrements of the marriage that was not realized in the present life" (*Foreign* 84). It is interesting to point out that some historians feel the very earliest Greek societies included a great deal of female equality. Many scholars argue that women possessed a large role in the guidance of the smallest Greek communities. "According to [Joseph] Campbell, the story of Perseus's slaying of the Medusa marks the overthrow of that earlier mythology and culture and the relegation of the 'female principle' to a secondary position" (Meaney 26). Thus this myth sets the tone for the rest of the Greek civilization's history by reducing women to a level just above slave. The capture by Perseus of the eye of the Graiae, the imprisonment of Danae, and Medusa's death stare all symbolize the fact that "woman is denied the power of observa-

---

tion...her different view will become no view at all” (Meaney 32). Despite this contention, Cassiopeia is still immortalized in the heavens, which suggests that women were not reduced in stature, but merely given a different role in society. The Perseus story illustrates this role.

The Perseus story also explains the importance of maintaining social order. Although he is a member of Greek royalty and is of divine blood, Perseus is often seen as a peasant hero because his weapon of choice, a sickle, is a peasant weapon. “It is not the short straight sword we would expect, but has a curved blade, sharpened on the inside. The harpe is the characteristic weapon of Perseus, and much has been made of it. Robert Graves...associates the sword with the sickle of the moon and Perseus with lunar aspects” (Wilk 28) Wilk also says that several aspects of the myth, including the odd birth of Pegasus and Chrysaor from the neck of Medusa, the demand of a gift of a horse by Polydeces, the golden shower of Zeus, and the fact that there are three Gorgons instead of just one can all be attributed to earlier astronomy—science shaped the myth (142). But these details are in essence the icing on a cake that is a lesson in social structure. Perseus is seen as a hero because he overcomes the problems that arise from the follies of evil kings. In this sense, “the Gorgon head...became a vehicle for rectifying past injustices and restoring a fair and equitable social balance; once in the hands of Perseus it became a positive force” (*Masks* 90). Despite being royalty, “Perseus...is both the deindividualized ritual performer of one type of social order and the ego-oriented tyrant of another” (*Foreign* 79). This idea that Perseus stops society from devolving into chaos is significant, because at the time that the Perseus story is supposed to have taken place, Greece was fi-

nally coming into its own, from a cultural standpoint. “That the Perseus-Gorgon myth is about the establishment of a new kind of order...is incontrovertible...The story of his slaying the monster is like many others wherein the defeated is represented by a mask that becomes the signal for the opening of a new and radically different era” (*Foreign* 80). Medusa’s head becomes a symbol of Greek separation from earlier eastern cultures. “That the Gorgon likely was ritually associated with death and revivification is also suggested by an iconographic association between Gorgons and the wrathful Mistress figures of Asia Minor” (*Masks* 89). Greeks were historically quite wary of outsiders; Athens was infamous for its strict rules regarding citizenship. Aliens were not treated with the same social status as citizens in Greece. The Perseus myth cements this fundamental difference between Greeks and non-Greeks. A. David Napier notes that “it is important to realize that it was in the era of Peisistratus,” when the Perseus legend first significantly rose in popularity, “that the division between mystic ritual and public celebration was dissolved.” Napier continues, saying, “The return of the exiled Peisistratus was mirrored—even legitimated—by his support of Dionysus, the ‘outsider’ who embraced the common man” (*Foreign* 107). Perseus’s status as a common man provided a perfect parallel. Oftentimes, city-states worshiped a mythological idea of their own founder, creating a mythology to make that founder more than just a common man. Perseus, then, serves this role for Greece as a whole. “What is important is that, in achieving cultural identity, [the Greeks] perceived themselves as having entered into some kind of symbolic exchange. They took the Gorgon head as a trophy, as the symbol of both the conquering and the assimilation of the alien; in turn they offered Perseus, the son of Perseus,

as the invented ancestor of the Persians. They gave, through their hero Perseus, freedom to an Ethiopian princess while taking her to become Perseus's queen—that is, queen of Mycenae, and queen, therefore, of Greece" (*Foreign* 106-107). Perseus, through his myth, establishes the importance of social order.

The mythological story of Perseus and its subsequent astronomical associations include manifestations of the fears and values of the ancient Greek culture. It is

the culture that surrounds the storytellers and the star watchers which has the greatest impact on the nature of both the mythology and the astronomy of any civilization. As Lawrence Hatab puts it, myth is another way of saying culture (21). While the constellations as well as the legends of Greek mythology appear to be "larger than life," they are in reality no larger than the mortal men who shaped them.

---

## RESOURCES

Blok, Josine H. *The Early Amazons: Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth*. EJ Brill: New York, 1995.

Bremmer, Jan, ed. *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*. Barnes & Noble Books: Totowa, NJ, 1986.

Caldwell, Richard. *The Origin of the Gods: A Psychoanalytic Study of Greek Theogenic Myth*. Oxford University Press: New York, 1989.

Hatab, Lawrence J. *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths*. Open Court: La Salle, IL, 1990.

Kerenyi, C. *The Heroes of the Greeks*. Thames & Hudson: London, 1959.

Langdon, Susan. "It Take a Polis: The Art of Adolescence in Early Greece." Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Murch Auditorium, Cleveland, OH. 8 November 2006.

Meaney, Gerardine, ed. *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge: New York, 1993.