

Of the same stock, still kept him out of Argos,  
 Took arms against the god, would not admit him  
 The son of Jove. Nor would he grant that Perseus  
 Was also son of Jove, the child begotten  
 On Danae in the golden rain. But truth  
 Is powerful: Acrisius learned repentance  
 For his attack on the god, and his denial  
 Of his own grandson. Bacchus was in Heaven,  
 But Perseus, bringing back the wondrous trophy  
 Of the snake-haired monster, through thin air was cleaving  
 His way on whirring wings. As he flew over  
 The Libyan sands, drops from the Gorgon's head  
 Fell bloody on the ground, and earth received them  
 Turning them into vipers. For this reason  
 Libya, today, is full of deadly serpents.

From there he drove through space, the warring winds  
 Bearing him every way, as a squall is driven.  
 From his great height he looked on lands outspread  
 Far, far below; he flew the whole world over,  
 Saw the cold Bears, three times, and saw the Crab  
 With curving claws, three times, whirled often eastward,  
 Whirled often to the west. As the day ended,  
 Fearful of night, he came down for a landing  
 On the West's edge, the realm of Atlas, seeking  
 A little rest, till the Morning-star should waken  
 The fires of dawn, and Dawn lead out the chariot  
 Of the new day. Atlas, Iapetus' offspring,  
 Loomed over all men in his great bulk of body.  
 He ruled this land and the sea whose waters take  
 The Sun's tired horses and the weary wheels  
 At the long day's end. He had a thousand herds,  
 No neighbors, and he had a tree, all shining  
 With gold, whose golden leaves hid golden branches,  
 Whose golden branches hung with golden apples.  
 Perseus greeted Atlas: "If the glory

### *The Story of Perseus*

They had one comfort in their changed condition:  
 India, conquered, worshipped Bacchus; Greece  
 Thronged to his temples. King Acrisius only,

Of lofty birth has any meaning for you,  
 I am the son of Jove; if you prefer  
 To wonder at great deeds, you will find that mine  
 Are very wonderful. I ask for rest,  
 For friendly shelter." But Atlas, doubtful,  
 Thought of an ancient oracle of Themis:  
*Atlas, the time will come when your tree loses  
 Its gold, and the marauder is Jove's son.*  
 Fearful of this, Atlas had walled his orchard,  
 Given its keeping to a monstrous dragon,  
 And kept all strangers off. He answered Perseus:  
 "Get out of here, you liar! Neither Jove  
 Nor glory gets you entrance here." He added  
 A lusty shove, though Perseus resisted,  
 Argued, and tried appeasement. But at last,  
 Inferior in strength (for who could equal  
 The strength of Atlas?), he told the giant:  
 "Well, anyway, since you will give me nothing,  
 I have something here for you!" He turned his back,  
 Held up, with his left hand behind his body,  
 Medusa's terrible head, and, big as he was,  
 Atlas was all at once a mountain: beard  
 And hair were forests, and his arms and shoulders  
 Were mountain-ridges; what had been his head  
 Was the peak of the mountain, and his bones were boulders.  
 But still he grew, for so the gods had willed it,  
 And his great bulk upheld the starry Heaven.

And Aeolus by now had closed the winds  
 In their eternal prison; the bright star  
 That wakes men to their toil, had risen brightly  
 In the clear morning air, and Perseus fastened  
 His winged sandals to his feet, took up  
 The scimitar, and soared aloft. Below him  
 Lay many lands, and finally he saw  
 The Ethiopians, King Cepheus' people.

There the god Ammon, not without injustice,  
 Ordered a daughter, who had not deserved it,  
 To pay the penalty for her mother's talking,  
 And Perseus saw her there, Andromeda,  
 Bound by the arms to the rough rocks; her hair,  
 Stirred in a gentle breeze, and her warm tears flowing  
 Proved her not marble, as he thought, but woman.  
 She was beautiful, so much so that he almost  
 Forgot to move his wings. He came down to her  
 Saying: "My dear, the chains that ought to bind you  
 Are love-knots rather than shackles. May I ask you  
 Your name, your country, the reason for this bondage?"  
 At first she made no answer, too much the virgin  
 To speak to any man; she would have hidden  
 Her modest features with her hands, but could not  
 Since they were bound. Her eyes were free, and filling  
 With rising tears. And Perseus urged her, gently,  
 Not to seem too unwilling, but to tell him  
 What wrong she had done, if any; so, at last,  
 She gave her name, her country, adding further  
 How her mother had bragged too much about her beauty.  
 She had not told it all, when the sea roared  
 And over the sea a monster loomed and towered  
 Above the wave. She cried aloud. Her parents  
 Were near at hand, both grieving, but the mother  
 More justly so, and they brought no help with them,  
 Only the kind of tears and vain embraces  
 Proper on such occasions. This struck Perseus  
 As pretty futile. "There is time, and plenty,  
 For weeping, later," he told them, "but the moment  
 For help is very short. If I were here as suitor,  
 I, Perseus, son of Jove and Danae,  
 Conqueror of the snaky-headed Gorgon,  
 The daring flier through the winds of Heaven,  
 You would accept me, I think, before all others.  
 But to such great endowments I am trying

To add, with the gods' blessing, a greater service.  
 If I save her by my valor, do I have her?"  
 What could they say but Yes? They promised also  
 A kingdom as her dowry.

As a galley

Bears down, with all the sturdy sweating rowers  
 Driving it hard, so came the monster, thrusting  
 The water on both sides in a long billow.  
 A slinger from the cliff could almost hit him  
 When Perseus rose cloudward, and his shadow  
 Fell on the surface, and the monster, seeing  
 That shadow, raged against it. As an eagle  
 Sees, in open field, a serpent sunning  
 Its mottled back, comes swooping down upon it,  
 Grasps it behind its head, to miss the poison  
 Sent through the deadly fangs, and buries talons  
 In scaly neck, so Perseus came plunging  
 In his steep dive down air, attacked the monster  
 That roared as the right shoulder took the sword-blade  
 Up to the hilt. The wound hurt deep, the sea-beast  
 Reared, lashed, and dived, and thrashed, as a wild-boar does  
 When the hounds bay around him. Perseus rose  
 When the fangs struck, he poised, he sought for openings  
 Along the barnacled back, along the sides,  
 At tapering fishy tail; the monster's vomit  
 Was blood and salty water. The winged sandals  
 Grew heavy from that spew, and Perseus dared not  
 Depend upon them further. He found a rock  
 Projecting out of the sea when the waves were still,  
 Hidden in storm. There he hung on, from there  
 He struck, again, again, and the sword went deep  
 Into the vitals, and the shores re-echoed  
 To Heaven with applause. Father and mother,  
 Rejoicing, hail their son-in-law, the savior  
 Of all the house. The chains are loosened  
 From the girl's arms, and she comes slowly forward,

The cause, and the reward, of all that labor.  
 Water is brought so that the victor may  
 Wash his hands clean of blood; before he washes,  
 Lest the hard sand injure the Gorgon's head,  
 He makes it soft with leaves, and over them  
 Strews sea-weed for a cover, and puts down  
 Medusa's head. And the twigs, all fresh and pliant,  
 Absorb another force, harden and stiffen  
 In branch and leaves. The sea-nymphs test the wonder  
 With other boughs, and the same wonder happens  
 To their delight, and they use the twigs as seedlings,  
 Strewing them over the water, and even now  
 Such is the nature of coral, that it hardens,  
 Exposed to air, a vine below the surface.

Now Perseus built three altars to three gods,  
 The left for Mercury, the right for Pallas,  
 The central one for Jove, and sacrificed  
 Heifer and bull and yearling steer. He wanted  
 No dowry save Andromeda in payment  
 Of his reward. And Love and Hymen shook  
 The marriage-torches, fires fed fat on incense,  
 Glowing and fragrant, and the garlands hung  
 Down from the timbers, and the lyre and flute  
 And song made music, proof of happy spirits.  
 Great doors swung open, and the golden halls  
 Were set for splendid banqueting, and courtiers  
 Came thronging to the tables.

So they feasted  
 And took their fill of wine, and all were happy,  
 And Perseus asked them questions about the region,  
 People and customs and the native spirit.  
 They told him, and they asked in turn: "Now tell us,  
 Heroic Perseus, how you slew the Gorgon."  
 He told them how there lay, beneath cold Atlas,  
 A place protected by the bulk of the mountain

Where dwelt twin sisters, daughters, both, of Phorcys.  
 They had one eye between them, and they shared it,  
 Passing it from one sister to the other,  
 And he contrived to steal it, being so handed,  
 And slipped away, going by trackless country,  
 Rough woods and jagged rocks, to the Gorgons' home.  
 On all sides, through the fields, along the highways,  
 He saw the forms of men and beasts, made stone  
 By one look at Medusa's face. He also  
 Had seen that face, but only in reflection  
 From the bronze shield his left hand bore; he struck  
 While snakes and Gorgon both lay sunk in slumber,  
 Severed the head, and from that mother's bleeding  
 Were born the swift-winged Pegasus and his brother.

And he went on to tell them of his journeys,  
 His perils over land and sea, the stars  
 He had brushed on flying pinions. And they wanted  
 Still more, and someone asked him why Medusa,  
 Alone of all the sisters, was snaky-haired.  
 Their guest replied: "That, too, is a tale worth telling.  
 She was very lovely once, the hope of many  
 An envious suitor, and of all her beauties  
 Her hair most beautiful—at least I heard so  
 From one who claimed he had seen her. One day Neptune  
 Found her and raped her, in Minerva's temple,  
 And the goddess turned away, and hid her eyes  
 Behind her shield, and, punishing the outrage  
 As it deserved, she changed her hair to serpents,  
 And even now, to frighten evil doers,  
 She carries on her breastplate metal vipers  
 To serve as awful warning of her vengeance."

## BOOK V

*The Fighting of Perseus*

So Perseus told his story, and the halls  
 Buzzed loud, not with the cheery noise that rings  
 From floor to rafter at a wedding-party.  
 No; this meant trouble. It was like the riot  
 When sudden squalls lash peaceful waves to surges.  
 Phineus was the reckless one to start it,  
 That warfare, brandishing his spear of ash  
 With sharp bronze point. "Look at me! Here I am,"  
 He cried, "Avenger of my stolen bride!  
 No wings will save you from me, and no god  
 Turned into lying gold." He poised the spear,  
 As Cepheus shouted: "Are you crazy, brother?  
 What are you doing? Is this our gratitude,  
 This our repayment for a maiden saved?  
 If truth is what you want, it was not Perseus  
 Who took her from you, but the Nereids  
 Whose power is terrible, it was hornèd Ammon,  
 It was that horrible monster from the ocean  
 Who had to feed on my own flesh and blood,  
 And that was when you really lost her, brother;

She would have died—can your heart be so cruel  
 To wish it so, to heal its grief by causing  
 Grief in my heart? It was not enough, I take it,  
 For you to see her bound and never help her,  
 Never so much as lift a little finger,  
 And you her uncle and her promised husband!  
 So now you grieve that someone else did save her,  
 You covet his reward, a prize so precious,  
 It seems, you could not force yourself to take it  
 From the rocks where it was bound. Let him alone!  
 He took her from the rocks—I am not childless,  
 Now, nor in my old age. He has earned his prize,  
 I keep my word. You have this much of comfort,  
 The choice was not between two men, but rather  
 Between one man and death.”

There was no answer,

As Phineus looked in doubt from one to the other  
 Wondering which to let alone, and waited,  
 And then, with all the strength that anger gave him,  
 Let fly the spear at Perseus, but the weapon  
 Missed, piercing through the bench's coverings,  
 And Perseus, all warrior, leaped down  
 And flung it back again, and would have killed him,  
 But Phineus cringed and hid behind the altar  
 And so found safety, but the spear-point found  
 Another victim; it drove through Rhoetus' forehead,  
 Somebody pulled it loose, and Rhoetus groveled,  
 Spattering blood across the ground and tables.  
 Nothing could stop them now. They all hurled weapons,  
 And some said Cepheus ought to die, with Perseus,  
 But Cepheus was gone, far from the palace,  
 Calling on Justice, Faith, and all the gods  
 Who care for host and guest alike, to witness  
 That he had tried to stop it, all this madness.  
 And then Minerva came, the warrior-goddess,  
 To give her brother shield and reassurance.

There was a youngster there, Athis, from India,  
 Whose mother was a river-nymph, Limnaee,  
 And he was beautiful, with beauty doubled  
 By the rich robes he wore, the purple mantle  
 With fringe of gold, and a golden chain adorning  
 His throat, and a golden circlet holding in  
 His hair, perfumed with myrrh. At sixteen years  
 He threw the javelin well, and bent the bow  
 With even greater skill, and would have bent it  
 Once more, but Perseus, snatching from the altar  
 A smoldering brand, used it for club and battered  
 His face to splintered bones.

And this was seen

By Lycabas, who loved him, very dearly,  
 As one boy loves another, and who wept  
 For Athis, gasping out his life, his features  
 Fouled in his lifeblood, and he seized the bow  
 Which Athis once had bent. “You have me to fight,”  
 He cried, “It will not be long, the cheap rejoicing  
 In having killed this boy: all that you gain  
 Is hate, not praise!” As the last words were spoken,  
 The arrow was on its way, but missed, and fastened harmless  
 In Perseus' robe, and Perseus turned, and swung  
 The scimitar that once had slain the Gorgon  
 And now slew Lycabas, who, in the darkness  
 That swam before his eyes, looked once around  
 For Athis, and once more lay down beside him  
 And took this comfort to the world of shadows  
 That in their death the two were not divided.

Phorbas, Metion's son, and Amphimedon,  
 Eager to join the battle, slipped and stumbled  
 In the red blood, and, rising, took the sword,  
 One in the ribs, one in the throat. Another,  
 Erytus, son of Actor, had an axe,  
 And Perseus used no scimitar against him,

But lifted a great mixing-bowl, and heaved it  
 Full in his face, and saw the red blood spouting,  
 The head beating the floor in death's convulsion.  
 Then Perseus struck down others, Polydaemon,  
 Lycetus, Abaris, Helices, Phlegyas,  
 Clytus, and stood on heaps of dying victims.

Phineus dared not close, but flung the javelin,  
 And missed, and by some error hit another,  
 One Idas, who, it seemed, had vainly striven  
 To fight on neither side. Now he was angry,  
 Challenging Phineus, "Since you force me to it,  
 Accept the enemy you have created  
 And match me, blow for blow!" He drew the javelin  
 From his own body, and he would have flung it,  
 But found his wound too deep, and went down lifeless.  
 Clymenus killed Hodites; Prothoenor  
 Went down from Hypseus' sword, and Hypseus fell  
 Before Lyncides. There was one old man,  
 Emathion by name, who feared the gods  
 And cared for justice. Much too old for fighting,  
 He tried to win by talking, and came forward  
 Cursing the evil brawlers; his old hands  
 Clung to the altars, and Chromis struck him there,  
 Beheading him, and the head fell on the altar,  
 Still upright, and the tongue kept up its cursing,  
 Thickened, and stilled, and the breath failed over the fires.  
 Ammon and Broteas, brothers, undefeated  
 In any boxing-bout, found Phineus' sword  
 Too strong for them to parry, and the headdress,  
 All white around the temples of Ampycus,  
 The minister of Ceres, was no helmet.  
 And poor Lampetides—he had been summoned  
 To no such revels, only to play the lute,

To grace the feast with song, and so he stood there  
 Holding the ivory quill, surely no fighter,  
 And Pettalus mocked him: "Sing that song in Hell,  
 The rest of it, at least!" and pierced his temple,  
 And as he fell, the dying fingers struggled,  
 To play once more, and made only a discord.  
 Lycormas, mad at what he saw, took vengeance  
 On Pettalus, broke his neck with a bar wrenched loose  
 From the iron door, as butcher kills a bullock.  
 Pelates tried to rip another bar loose,  
 And found his hand pierced by a spear and pinned  
 Fast to the wood, and Abas ran him through,  
 But could not make him fall, and so he hung there,  
 Nailed by one hand. Melaneus was slain,  
 (He was one of Perseus' men) and Dorylas,  
 Who was very rich, and the end of all his fortune  
 Was a spear jabbed through the groin; that spot is fatal.  
 His killer, Halcyoneus, said something,  
 By way of taunt, about his new-found acres,  
 And Perseus flung the spear, snatched from the wound,  
 Still warm, still red; it drove through nose, through neck,  
 Hung balanced there. And, with good luck still on him,  
 Perseus slaughtered Clytus and Clanis,  
 Who had one mother at their birth, but, dying,  
 Had different wounds. Celadon fell, and Astreus;  
 Aethion, who, men said, foretold the future  
 Did not foresee his own; down went Thoactes,  
 Cepelus' armor-bearer, and Agyrtes  
 The parricide.

And Perseus, faint and weary,  
 Found them all coming at him: honor, service,  
 Were nothing to them; only three were loyal,  
 Father-to-be, and bride-to-be, and mother,  
 And all they did was fill the hall with shrieking,  
 And that was hardly heard in the clash of arms,

The groan of dying men, the while Bellona  
Pollutes the house with blood, renews the struggle.  
And now he stands alone; a thousand follow,  
With Phineus, against him, and spears flying  
Like slanting winter sleet. At his back he has  
A great stone column, and he stands there, facing  
All who come madly on. Ethemon, Molpeus,  
Stalk him from right and left, and as a tiger,  
Half-starved, hears two herds lowing in two valleys,  
And knows not which to rush, but burns for rushing,  
So Perseus, hesitant between left and right,  
Gets Molpeus with a leg-wound, does not bother  
When he goes limping off. Ethemon gives him  
No time to think, comes rushing on; the neck,  
He thinks, is the right target, but his sword  
Drives with more strength than aim, and the stone column  
Splinters the point, and breaks the blade, and turns it  
Into its master's throat, a wound not deep  
Enough for one to die of, but another  
Follows, from Perseus' scimitar, as Ethemon  
Stands reaching out his empty hands, in vain.

And Perseus knew his strength at last would fail  
Before those endless numbers. "Since you ask it,"  
He cried, "I call my enemy to help me.  
If any friend is here"—he raised it high,  
The Gorgon's head—"If any friends are here,  
Then turn away your faces!" Thescelus answered:  
"Seek some one else to frighten with your magic!"  
And raised his javelin, and became a statue  
Poised for a javelin-throw. The next was Ampyx,  
Who thrust a sword, and felt the right hand stiffen,  
The wrist grow rigid. Nileus, a liar,  
Who said his father was the famous river  
Whose seven mouths, part silver and part gold,

He wore as shield's device, called: "See, O Perseus,  
The fountain of my blood, and take this comfort  
Down to the silent shades—a hero killed you!"  
The last words broke, half spoken; if you saw him  
So, open-mouthed, you might perhaps have wondered  
Why the lips made no sound, for all they tried to.  
They were cowards both, thought Eryx, and he said so,  
Said there was nothing in this Gorgon-magic,  
Urged them to join his charge, and he was charging,  
Or would have charged, but the floor seemed to hold him,  
And there he stood, a flinty man, unmoving,  
A monument in armor.

They deserved it,  
All three, but there was one, a soldier fighting  
On Perseus' side, Aconteus, whose bad luck  
It was to see the Gorgon, and what happened  
Afflicted friend, for once, and not a foeman.  
Astyages, mistaking rock for flesh,  
For living flesh, struck at him, and the sword  
Rang with a sound not made on flesh or armor,  
And as it rang, Astyages, in wonder,  
Was wondering marble. It would take too long  
To tell the names of all of those who perished;  
Two hundred men survived; at least as many  
Looked at the Gorgon and were turned to stone.

And Phineus, now, repents this evil warfare,  
But what is there to do? He sees them all,  
All images, posing, and he knows each one  
By name, and calls each one by name, imploring  
Each one for help: seeing is not believing,  
He touches the nearest bodies, and he finds them  
All marble, all. He turns his face away,  
Holds out his hands, cautiously, sideways, pleading:  
"You win, O Perseus! Take away that monster

That face that makes men stone, whoever she is,  
 Medusa, or—no matter: take her away!  
 No hate for you, no lust for power drove me  
 Into this fight; it was my bride I fought for.  
 Your claim was better in merit, mine in time.  
 I yield, and gladly, and now I ask for nothing  
 Except my life: let all the rest be yours!”  
 And all the time he spoke, he dared not look  
 At the man he spoke to. Perseus made answer:  
 “Dismiss your fear, great coward: I can give you  
 A great memorial; not by the sword  
 Are you to die; you shall endure for ages,  
 Be seen for ages, in your brother’s household,  
 A comfort for my wife, her promised husband,  
 His very image.” And he swung the head  
 So Phineus had to see it; as he struggled  
 To turn his eyes, his neck grew hard, his tears  
 Were changed to marble, and in marble still  
 The suppliant look, the pleading hands, the pose,  
 The cringe—all these were caught and fixed forever.

So Perseus, victor, and his bride, went home  
 To his ancestral city, and there made war  
 On Proetus, who had driven out his brother  
 By force of arms; but neither force of arms  
 Nor fortress could resist the awful power  
 Of the snake-headed monster.

Polydectes,

The king of little Seriphos, stood hard  
 In hate and unrelenting, unjust anger,  
 Against the hero; neither manliness  
 Nor trials had power to move him, and, he added,  
 It was all a lie, this fiction of Medusa.  
 “So, we had better prove it!” Perseus cried,  
 Warning his friends to look the other way,  
 And one more enemy was turned to stone.



## METAMORPHOSES

translated by ROLFE HUMPHRIES

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS • Bloomington