

THE LEGEND OF PERSEUS AND JOHN BARTH'S CHIMERA

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A number of outstanding scholars, including Stith Thompson, Archer Taylor, Daniel Hoffman, Alan Dundes, and Richard M. Dorson, have speculated about the nature and form of folklore's influence upon literature.¹ However, most of these scholars limit their studies to the identification and analysis of "unadulterated" folklore in literature--in other words, folklore whose authenticity can be proved by comparatively recent observation and collection of it in oral tradition. Unfortunately, many of the folkloric allusions in literature are to narratives and motifs which are of clear folkloric heritage, but which were recorded without the benefit of today's scrupulous and comprehensive field techniques. Consequently, the folkloric materials often referred to are available to us only in "tainted" collections and histories; hence, our knowledge of them is usually second- or third-hand. This may hamper our ability to study these material as true folklore texts, but at the same time we cannot ignore major folkloric traditions such as those created by the ancient Greeks and Semitic peoples, just because we have only "tainted" field data from which to work. Even if we as folklorists wished to avoid them, as students of the influence of folklore on literature we cannot, primarily because they have such a wide currency with literary authors. As much as we may be skeptical of the folklore in Graves' or Hamilton's versions of the Greek myths, we must acknowledge two crucial points: first, a large part of that material is originally from oral tradition; and second, there are numerous allusions to that material in Western literature.²

So if we are to study the influence of this "adulterated" folklore upon literature, we should employ a careful method of study that sheds the most light on both the folkloric item and the literary text that alludes to it. The scholars cited above already

have suggested a methodology suitable for the study of "unadulterated" as well as "adulterated" folklore in literature. This methodology includes identifying the folkloric allusions in the literature, authenticating as well as possible the essential folkloric nature of the material or motifs alluded to (a major problem for "adulterated" folklore), and interpreting the significance of the use of that material within the work. We can test this methodology and observe first-hand the problem of literary allusions to "adulterated" folklore by considering John Barth's use of the Perseus legend in his novel, Chimera.

Barth's Chimera draws extensively on the quasi-folkloric remains of Greek and Semitic folk narratives. The novel is a compilation of three novellas: the first alludes frequently to Burton's translation of the Arabian Nights, while the second and third draw heavily on Graves' Greek Myths.³ Because of the numerous references to and uses of this quasifolkloric material in Chimera, this essay focuses primarily on the use of one major folk narrative in the novel: the legend of Perseus. This narrative is centrally important to the second novella, The "Perseid," and of related importance to the third novella, the "Bellerophoniad." The essay will describe and authenticate the folkloric quality of the legend of Perseus, explicate the motifs and messages generally associated with that narrative, and document and interpret Barth's use of the legend in the context of Chimera.

The legend of Perseus, which is actually more a Märchen than a legend, is a folk narrative that has been redacted and retold over the years by numerous authors and collectors.⁴ One major version available to us, and which Barth by his own admission used (Chimera, p. 207), is found in Graves' Greek Myths.⁵ In turn, it was taken from classical authors such as Apollodorus, Pindar, Hyginus, Pausanius, and Ovid, who got their versions from still different sources, either oral or written. In brief, the story of Perseus involves the slaying of a snake/woman and a giant sea serpent in order to prevent an unwanted marriage for the mother figure, and to achieve a desired marriage for the hero. Even at the risk of repeating what most readers

already know, I would like to describe the major events of the story of Perseus in order to facilitate authentication and interpretation.

According to Graves, King Acrisius had only a daughter, Danae, and when he asked an oracle how to procure a male heir, was told, "You will have no sons and your grandson must kill you." Despite Acrisius' precautions, Zeus impregnated Danae and she bore Perseus. Acrisius locked mother and son in a wooden ark and cast them into the sea. They were rescued by a fisherman, Dictys, who took them to his brother, King Polydectes, who reared Perseus in his own house. Some years passed, and Perseus, grown to manhood, defended Danae against Polydectes, who tried to force marriage upon her. Under the pretense of planning another marriage, Polydectes asked for wedding gifts, and Perseus rashly promised to get whatever gift Polydectes named. Polydectes promptly asked for the head of Medusa, a woman with snakes for hair, who was so ugly that she literally petrified all mortals who gazed upon her. With the help of Athena and Hermes, Perseus obtained an adamantine sickle and a shield and then found the three Graeae, who had a single eye and tooth among them. He stole the eye and tooth as they were being passed from one to the others and thus forced the Graeae to reveal the location of the Stygian Nymphs, from whom he collected a pair of winged sandals, a magic wallet, and a helmet of invisibility. Perseus then found Medusa and decapitated her with his sickle by looking at her reflection in the shield, and placed her head in his wallet. On his way home, Perseus discovered a naked woman chained to a sea cliff, a result of her mother's claim to rival the gods. Consequently, the daughter, Andromeda, was to be offered as a sacrifice to the female sea monster that had been sent by the gods to punish the girl's arrogant mother. Perseus obtained a promise of marriage in return for saving the maiden, and promptly decapitated the sea serpent; but the marriage that followed was interrupted by Andromeda's uncle, Agenor, who claimed her as his bride. Perseus was forced to extract Medusa's head from his wallet and petrify all the wedding guests and family (save

Andromeda) who had turned against him. Upon reaching home, Perseus repeated this action when Polydectes and his feasting company refused to believe that he had indeed brought back the promised wedding gift. Finally, at the funeral games for another king, Perseus' discus went astray, hit Acrisius' foot, and killed him.

This story line corresponds to some extent to the widely popular tale of "The Dragon Slayer" (AT 300). Also entitled "The Rescue of the Princess," this tale type describes the story of Perseus as follows:

- I. (h) The Hero receives a sword
- II. The Sacrifice (a) A princess is demanded as a sacrifice and (b) exposed to a dragon. She is offered to her rescuer in marriage.

There is clearly more folkloric contribution to Perseus' story than this tale type reveals, however. An examination of the specific events and elements in the narrative reveals a number of popular folkloric motifs. These include:

- M343.2 "Prophecy: murder by grandson"
- M371 "Exposure of infant to avoid fulfillment of prophecy"
- S141 "Exposure in a boat. A person (usually a child or woman) set adrift in a boat (chest, basket, cask)"
- M223 "Blind Promise (Rash Boon)"
- F526.3 "Gorgon"
- D581 "Petrification by glance"
- H1332.3 "Quest for Gorgon's head"
- H1211 "Quests assigned in order to get rid of hero"
- D1081 "Magic Sword"
- D1101.1 "Magic Shield"
- F512.1.2 "Three women have but one eye among them. Pass it around"
- F513.11 "Three women have but one tooth among them. Pass it around"
- K333.2 "Theft from three old women who have but a single eye among them. The hero

- seizes their eye"
- D1361.15 "Magic cap renders invisible"
- D1520.10.1 "Magic transportation by sandals"
- D1532.4 "Magic sandals bear person aloft"
- C54 "Tabu: rivaling the gods"
- B11.10 "Sacrifice of human being to Dragon"
- R111.1.3 "Rescue of princess (maiden) from Dragon"
- Q551.3.4 "Transformation to stone as punishment"
- A525.2 "Culture hero slays his grandfather"

The extensive occurrence of these folkloric motifs in Graves' version indicates that in creation and in essence, the story of Perseus is the product of oral tradition. We may have lost the exact artistic styling of the folk narrators and the performance context of their tellings, but we still have the heart of their story. And we can still interpret the significance of the core of the narrative.

Essentially, the tale of Perseus is the story of the development of the child from boy to man, and of overcoming the childish fears and inhibitions that prevent normal maturation. Two major problems that plague the man-child are his awakening sexuality and his relationship to his parents. We can see these anxieties represented fictionally in the story of Perseus. In the complex relationship between Perseus and his various mother figures (Danae, Medusa, Athena, Casseopeia, and the female sea monster) and father figures (Acrisius, Dictys, Polydectes, Hermes, Cepheus, and Agenor), we can see a developing dramatization of the child's attitude toward his parents. And in the sequence of events in the story, we can trace an allegory of the hero's successful attainment of sexual maturation. A closer examination of the specific actions in the tale of Perseus should confirm our hypotheses; we will proceed chronologically through the story.

At the outset of the story, the latent anxiety between parent and child is represented symbolically by the prophecy that Perseus would kill Acrisius. It is

developed further when Acrisius locks Perseus in a chest and sets him adrift. This action may be interpreted variously with regard to the parent/child relationship: as the dramatization of the stifling influence of the father figure, as a recreation of the act of procreation in which the father's role is one of life-giver, or as a symbol of the fetal (or early) development of the child. As we might expect, the child often has some difficulty coping with the ambiguous role of the father figure, who appears as both life-giver and stifling life-threatener. Perseus responds by splitting the parent figure in two--one part entirely good and the other completely evil. Accordingly, in the legend of Perseus, Dictys portrays the benign father who acts the role of life-giver and rescues Perseus from the sea, and Polydectes plays the evil father who challenges the son for the affections of the mother.

As Perseus matures, his affection for his mother begins to have sexual overtones, and he resents the sexual advances of the father figure, Polydectes, toward his mother. The child is at an awkward turning point in his life--he must learn to cope with his increasing sexuality and to free himself from the dominating influence and stagnating security of his parents. There are two problems associated with the development of sexual awareness: one is that the child is apt to be confused by the difference between the male and female sexual roles; the other is that the child is apt to direct some of his sexual attention toward the parent figure if the opposite sex (in this case, Danae). Hence, we have Perseus's jealousy of Polydectes and his unconscious conceptualization of his mother as Medusa, an image of the mother tainted by the child's sexual desire. The snakes surrounding Medusa's head symbolize both the phallic projection of Perseus' incestuous lust and his confusion of male and female sexuality.

Using his new-found sexuality (his sickle), Perseus destroys the image of his mother that aroused his sexual desire, threatened to petrify him forever as a child dependent upon and in love with his mother, and

represented his confusion of male and female sexuality. Once he has rid himself of the dominating and stifling attachment to his mother, Perseus is free to turn his attentions naturally to Andromeda. The embodiment of his sexual and parental anxieties, however, rises once more from the sea of his unconscious. And once more he decapitates the threat with the assertion of his own rightful male sexuality.

Finally, in related actions, Perseus rids himself of the dominating father figure by successively doing away with Agenor, Polydectes, and Acrisius. Perseus destroys the psychological representations of the father figure (Agenor and Polydectes) by turning upon them the threat they seem to hold for him; in other words, he petrifies the figures who threaten to hold him or who forever regard him as a child. In short, he leaves his outgrown and outdated conception of them in the past while he grows up and goes on to live in the future. He discovers that the threat he feared from them was only an illusion left over from his younger years. Appropriately, Perseus kills Acrisius by accidentally striking the latter's foot (the foot being a traditional metaphor for sexual power) when Acrisius was a spectator at the funeral games. He usurps the father's role as the sexual authority simply by acting out the natural development of his life, thereby fulfilling the prophecy and promise of his birth.

Although not a complete explication of the legend of Perseus, the above analysis should provide enough insight into the tale to enable us to understand Barth's treatment of it. However, before we can examine the major themes in Barth's handling of the Perseus folktale, we should briefly review Barth's literary history and development in order to understand his reasons for choosing to retell the story of Perseus.

In an interview with Israel Shenker, Barth claimed that in his early works he set out to destroy all non-mystical thought and simultaneously any basis for absolute or relative conceptions of morality or

ontology.⁶ As Barth said, somewhat facetiously, he thought he had discovered nihilism.⁷ Whether he discovered it or not, at the outset of his literary career he examined this philosophy carefully, and he argues rigorously that the essential human condition was nihilistic: any notion that the world was rational, moral, or even objectively knowable was an illusion. In his early novels, Barth demonstrated that attempts to comprehend or cope with life were useless and dead-ended if based on the premise that some absolute or relative values existed, or that man could rationally fathom or explain his existence. In The Floating Opera, Barth revealed the failure of rationality to account for existence, and in The End of the Road he demonstrated the inability of rationality to order existence. Like Perseus, the Destroyer, Barth attacked and decapitated the false ideals, dogmas, philosophies, and values that his characters espoused. These beliefs were false because they did not honestly accept the nihilism of the human situation and, consequently, could not successfully describe the infinite vicissitudes of human experience nor properly celebrate them.

In a reversal of his role as destroyer of false values, Barth turned in his later works to the more positive task of finding the human arena in an essentially nonhuman environment. He said that "for a half dozen reasons, I was subsequently persuaded that there were better ways to go at the writing of fiction."⁸ But he did not renounce the insights of his earlier works. Remaining scrupulously honest to his nihilistic vision (occasionally still dispatching a philosophical ogre or two), Barth tried to find some room to live, some way to achieve a qualified victory before and in spite of the inevitable unqualified defeat by death. The possible qualified victory he found lay in man's admirable abilities to find some coherence and enjoyment in a world of gratuitous events, to affirm and embrace the cosmic absurdity of existence, and to "confront an intellectual dead-end and use it against itself to create new human work."⁹ It was in the potency of thought and fiction making that Barth found the means to create an interesting

and enjoyable work of art or life.

For these reasons, Barth turned to the richly imaginative world of folk literature for his novel, Chimera, which retells, among other folkloric borrowings, the story of Perseus from the viewpoint of an over-the-hill hero looking back on his life and wondering where all the glory has gone. The power to stay awake, to enliven existence, is what Perseus is searching for in the "Perseid," and is what Barth is searching for and says we must search for as well. Barth employs an old folktale to provide a baffling labyrinth of meanings and reflections of meanings. He works with the Perseus legend, comparative mythologists' interpretations of the legend, and his own rendition of it to build a new story--one that incorporates and supersedes the old. Two major themes that link the original folktale and Barth's treatment of it are the threat of pertification and the power of sexuality. If we examine these themes, we might understand more clearly how Barth uses the story of Perseus to construct and communicate his philosophical vision.

While the Perseus folktale focuses on the problems of developing adolescence, Barth's "Perseid" considers the problems that beset the middle-aged hero. Perseus has now become a father figure himself and threatens to become the repressive, stagnating, and petrifying influence against which he once fought. However, while the scene has changed, the problem, in a sense, has remained the same. In the original tale, Perseus had become petrified by the security and domination of his mother and had to force himself to break free. Barth plays upon this theme in his version, and the security of Andromeda has now become the influence that threatens to petrify Perseus. This conflict of stagnation and security versus growth and freedom in an important theme in Barth's philosophical vision. The attempted definitions of ontological concepts and metaphysical principles by

rational and logical argument gives us something to hold onto, just as Andromeda's and Danae's love provides security for Perseus. But Barth does not accept such definitions because they result in false and stagnating views of the world, just as Perseus' continued attachment to his mother would have given him a false sense of security. The attempt to fix permanent boundaries and metaphysical laws definitely and rationally only leads to imprisonment, failure, and stasis. As Barth says, "Permanent relationship [is] fatal to passion."¹⁰ And achieving the proper passion is a prerequisite for a satisfactory existence.

Achieving the proper passion or sexuality is the second major theme that links Barth's adaptation to the original story of Perseus. In the original tale, we can understand Perseus' decapitation task as a sexual ritual which represents the power and ability to procreate, to achieve sexual fulfillment. In the "Perseid," Barth places an equally important emphasis on sexuality. The importance is suggested by the fact that much of the story is told from a bed--the world navel and the place of birth and sexual fulfillment. Perseus's repeated attempts to achieve prolonged intercourse (Perseus: "Yes, I'm a hero! Virtuoso performance is my line of work!" /p. 78/) underscore the concern for potency and sexual drive:

"Somewhere along the way I'd lost something, took a wrong turn, forgot some knack. I don't know; it seemed to me that if I kept going over it carefully enough I might see the pattern, find the key."

"A little up and to your left," whispered Calyxa (p. 80).

Sexual potency is human potency is artistic potency. What Perseus and Barth search for is the ability to do, act, create--not just endlessly-repeating, meaningless action like that of Sisyphus, but satisfactory climax and union. It is the human climax and union (love) which we have created for ourselves that we may strive for; it is a fiction, but it is the best one we have.

In the conclusion of the "Perseid," Perseus kills the old male-dominated image of himself as a young, handsome hero who is holding a phallic sword by hitting him with a goblet, a symbol of femininity and fertility. "Intaglio'd in his temple was the image of his bowled foredropper" (p. 131). Just as the original tale had the hero rid himself of unconscious, outdated, and stagnating images of his parents, Barth's hero rids himself of unconscious, outdated, and stagnating conceptions of himself as a young hero. In both stories, Perseus must learn to keep pace with the changes and shape shiftings that are essential parts of living in the temporal plane of existence. Barth uses this fictional recreation of the story of Perseus to make the point that any attempts to establish permanence lead only to petrification and death.

One way to avoid petrification is through commitment to love and sexuality and acceptance of their (and life's) essentially unpredictable, mysterious, and chaotic nature. The older Perseus returns to the unconscious representation of love and sexuality that he had decapitated earlier (Medusa) and now forces himself to confront it directly. It holds a powerful, mystical, and frightening influence over him because it is the undiluted source of feeling and emotion. The earlier Perseus learned to control these feelings and emotions so that he could live a satisfactory existence; the later Perseus must learn to get back in touch with and to free these feelings, which have become repressed and stifled in his own unconscious. In sum, Barth uses the legend of Perseus to communicate two important statements: first, life essentially is in flux, and man must be equally flexible to remain an integral and functioning part of life; and second, man's goal in this mystical and chaotic existence is to celebrate what life has offered us--sexuality, love, and a fertile imagination.

NOTES

1. For the study of the influence of folklore upon literature, consult the following works: "Folklore in Literature: A Symposium," Journal of American Folklore 70(1957): 1-24 (hereafter cited as JAF); Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore and the Historian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Alan Dundes, "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation," JAF 78 (1965): 136-41; Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); Archer Taylor, "Folklore and the Student of Literature" in The Study of Folklore, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 34-42; Stith Thompson, "Folklore and Literature," PMLA 55 (1940): 866-74; and Stith Thompson, The Folktale (New York: The Dryden Press, 1951).
2. Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (Penguin Books, 1974) and Edith Hamilton, Mythology (New American Library, 1969).
3. Sir Richard Burton, Tales from the Arabian Nights (New York: The Pocket Library, 1957).
4. For a more comprehensive study of the story of Perseus, consult Edwin Sydney Hartland, The Legend of Perseus, 3 vols. (London, 1894-96).
5. Graves, Greek Myths, chapter 73.
6. "Interview with Israel Shenker," New York Times Book Review, 24 September 1972, p. 35.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," Atlantic Monthly 220 (August 1967), pp. 29-34. For an in-depth consideration of these ideas and Barth's literary career consult: "John Barth: An Interview," Contemporary Literature 6, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1965); Beverly Gross, "The Anti-Novels of John Barth," Chicago Review 20, no. 3 (November 1968): 95-100; Richard Hauck, A Cheerful Nihilism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971); Gerhard Joseph, John Barth, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 91 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970); Rich Noland, "John Barth and the Novel of Comic Nihilism," Contemporary Literature 7 (1966):239-57; Earl Rovit, "The Novel as Parody: John Barth," Critique 6 (Fall 1963): 77-85; John C. Stubbs, "John Barth as a Novelist of Ideas: The Themes of Value and Identity," Critique 8 (Winter 1965-66): 101-116; Tony Tanner, City of Words (London: The Trinity Press, 1971), chapter 10; and Campbell Tatham, The Novels of John Barth (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).
10. John Barth, Chimera (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1973), p. 95. All further page references are to this text.