



Bellerophon and Pegasus

When Perseus [PER-see-uhs] cut off the head of Medusa [meh-DOO-suh], a horse with wings sprang up from some drops of her blood. Named Pegasus [PEG-uh-suhs], he was a noble, marvelous horse of a shining bay color (reddish brown). His two wings were big enough to hide his rider and keep him warm from the wind—but he had never had a rider.

The man who would bridle, mount, and ride Pegasus was Bellerophon [bell-AIR-uh-fon]. He was a young prince of Corinth, handsome and brave. Bellerophon knew all about Pegasus, the wonder horse, whose stamping hoofs on the Muses' mountain of Helicon had caused Hippocrene, the sacred spring of poets, to bubble up from the ground. The young prince of Corinth yearned for that horse as he had never desired anything in his life.

The oracle of Corinth, old man Polyidus [paw-lee-I-duhs], counseled a visit to Athena's [uh-THEEN-uhz] temple, explaining that only the divine aid of the gods could capture a divine horse. Bellerophon prayed and slept in the temple; the goddess appeared and gave him a bit and bridle of gold. The next day he found the horse in the high pastures. He slipped the bridle over his head and the golden bit into his mouth. Pegasus was calm and did not resist. Then Bellerophon, wearing his bronze armor, leaped onto his back (there were no saddles or stirrups in those days). Never was a horse more quickly tamed.

Then trouble came. Bellerophon accidentally killed a man and needed to be purified by a king's touch. He went to King Proetus [pro-EE-tuhs] of Tiryns, made his confession and atonement, and was absolved.

But Anteia [an-TAY-uh], the wife of Proetus, fell in love with Bellerophon. He rejected her advances, but she told lies to her husband, saying that Bellerophon had dishonored her. King Proetus was in a bind: Bellerophon was a guest, and the king could not violate the laws of hospitality by killing him. So he sent him off with a letter to his brother-in-law Iobates [i-AHB-uh-teez], the king of Lycia. The letter was a request that Iobates kill Bellerophon at the first chance. But King Iobates was also reluctant to kill Bellerophon. Even more than Proetus, he was incapable of violating the laws that bind host and guest—Zeus [ZOOS] would be furious.

So Iobates sent Bellerophon off to fight the Chimaera [kie-MEE-ruh],



Athena

Athena = Minerva



With Athena's help, Bellerophon was able to tame and ride Pegasus.

Zeus = Jupiter, Jove

who had been laying waste to the land. This was a truly formidable monster, with a lion's head, the body of a goat, and the tail of a snake. Bellerophon took his best weapons—bow and arrows and spear. But his best weapon of all was actually the flying bay horse.

It was a tremendous encounter—the man and horse plunging down to attack the foul beast as it reared up, growling, bleating, and hissing from the filthy rocks of its den, each downward swoop a flurry of arrows or lunges and thrusts with the spear. The green smoke of the monster's breath almost blew them down. But Pegasus swept down once more, and Bellerophon launched one more thrust; he drove the spearhead down deep into the green blood of the beast. A few more thrusts and it lay dead, the corpse smoldering away in greenish dust and gray ashes.

The devastated land rejoiced, and Bellerophon joined the ranks of the real heroes. But after a time, hubris—excessive pride—proved too strong. Bellerophon thought he would ride Pegasus up to Mount Olympus and become immortal. However, immortality is only granted to those the gods choose. Pegasus, wise horse, knew this. He balked at the bridle and threw his rider, crippling him. Poor, lame Bellerophon wandered the earth he yearned to leave for the rest of his life, waiting for his winged horse to come back. But Pegasus was given a refuge in the Olympian stables with the fierce steeds of Zeus. He was honored to fetch Zeus his bolts of thunder and lightning.



Zeus

Beyond the Myth

1. Have you read any other stories about horses that you especially like?
2. Write a myth of your own about the winged horse, Pegasus. It may be set in ancient or modern times. You may include any of the other mythical characters or creatures you have learned about, or make up your own.

Identify:

Medusa
Iobates

Hippocrene
Anteia

Proetus
Chimaera

Define:

bay (color)

formidable

bit

balked

bridle

Locate on a map:

Corinth

Mount Helicon

Tiryns