

The Ballad of Bellerophon

Bellerophon was raised by his mother, which was his first mistake. According to rumor, his father was the town drunk, who after fathering his greatest achievement, was found drowned in a half-full wine jug. Bellerophon's mother argued this fact. She swore up and down that the jug was half-empty.

She couldn't bear to tell her son the truth about his whole coming into the world, so like most crafty women of the time, she told him that he was fathered by a god instead. While she was telling this lie, she happened to be looking out at the ocean, and so that fathering god became Poseidon. Luckily, Poseidon was unavailable for comment on the matter, and this little white lie worked very well—so well, in fact, that Bellerophon soon got certain ideas into his head—ideas that usually come with being the son of a god.



His empty head was filled with all kinds of nonsense about being a hero, traveling to the ends of the world, and sticking pointed sticks into man-eating monsters. This is the usual trap that most immortally-sired boys fall into. Mother vowed to put a stop to this foolishness as quickly as possible. Killing monsters didn't put food on the table, she said. Besides, he was way too scrawny to be a strongman, too tongue-tied to be a trickster, and way too dumb to do too much of anything else. The best thing for him, she had decided, was to be a pig-herder.

Now swine-herding was no great art. In fact, most who engaged in such a practice were usually the victim of permanent ignorance, inbreeding, or a healthy combination of the two. But her mind was made up: this was the course for her son. It was practical. And she'd never seen a swineherd come home with a nubby arm.

And as it is with all overprotective, borderline-psychotic mothers who try to force their children into a life of safety, Bellerophon grew up as a slightly strange boy.

His mother took the first step down the road to swine-herding by secured him a hog. She didn't have much money, and it was one of the more diseased ones she could find. She laid his obligations before him: it was his duty to befriend this hog, learn its personality and habits. He would make his pallet next to it every night and sleep beside it—just to get used to the sensation of waking up by a cold snout to the face. Pig-herders were a proud folk, and the sooner he got started on learning their ways, the better.

This whole situation with the hog was the “acorn that gagged the sow” (as the swineherds say), and at only sixteen years of age, Bellerophon ran away. He disappeared into the shadows of the night, whistling, a satchel slung over his back. That satchel's only content: a side of pork.

He was on his way. He wanted to be someone great. Someone that people would remember for ages to come.

His first obstacle to overcome was that his mother had been right. His mind was weak, and his body even weaker. Weaklings rarely became heroes, and even if they did, their popularity rarely lasted long. But he knew of one thing that could make anyone fierce, anyone worthy of hero-worship, and that was Pegasus.

Everyone had heard of Pegasus. He was the winged horse that had sprung from the blood of Medusa. Pegasus was the same horse that had kicked the high mountain with a pristine hoof and made the enchanted spring. It was no mystery how to find this creature either. Every night it settled to earth at the Pool of Pierian for a midnight drink. The only problem was that it was unruly, untamable, and completely un-catchable.

Bellerophon thought about this predicament for many days. As his mind wandered, so did his feet. One evening he happened to look up. He was standing in the middle of a clearing. A building was also standing there: it was the Temple of Athena. Although Bellerophon had never been a devout follower of Athena, he knew that she was everything that he was not: strong, smart...masculine. He didn't know if she helped miserable mortals like him, but at this point he was out of options. He went inside.

After hours of endless begging, supplication, prostrating, burning offering after offering, Bellerophon collapsed into a heap in the midst of the temple floor. Groveling takes a lot out of you. The temple priestesses must have thought he was too pathetic to do any harm, and so he was left there—his spirit broken.

It was in this state that Athena took pity on him. Even goddesses sometimes decide they need a charity project, an up-and-comer that has nearly no hope of success. Not everyone can be a Heracles. If anything, this boy had desire, and surely that was enough to succeed.

She stealthily slipped into his dream. It was definitely an odd one. A line of sickly looking hogs were jumping a fence, and a shrew-faced woman was cracking a whip on their bony behinds. This boy needs my help desperately, Athena told herself. She cleared away all this oddness at once, straightened her helmet, and struck her most regal pose.

"Noble mortal!" she boomed.

"Who? Athena!" he gasped. "Is this a dream?"

"Don't annoy me, boy," she snapped. "I've come to grant you a boon and help you on your quest."

"I don't understand!"

"I am giving you this golden bridle. With it, you may tame the object you so much desire." A shimmering device appeared in her hand, and she grandly lowered it into his.

The boy stared dumbfounded. "I thought you said you were giving me a boon."

"I did."

"But this is a bridle."

“Zounds, boy! Do you want to be herding pigs the rest of your life? Go catch your horse.”

“Thank you, sir—I mean, ma’am.”

Seriously second-guessing her decision, the Goddess of Wisdom disappeared, and the boy awoke at once. The golden bridle was still in his hand.

“She said she was giving me a boon, but this is even better!”

He ran off at once to the spring where the winged horse was said to visit each night.

The part that follows is pretty embarrassing (for boy *and* horse). Even though Bellerophon was an idiot, and Pegasus was a divine creature of beauty, the two shared one weakness: shiny things. Upon seeing the bridle, the horse was at once mesmerized by its grandeur. Of course, even though *he* was the one using it for bait, Bellerophon couldn’t stop staring at it as well. For a few minutes it was an inter-species staring contest. At last some sense came back into the boy’s head, and he slipped the harness over Pegasus’ pristine muzzle. The horse was his.

To tell the truth, Pegasus had become a bit listless. Sure, he had gained Greece-wide acclaim for being the only molting stallion on record, but there was so much more to be had. Kicking springs into existence does get a bit tedious. Perhaps having this moron around would be a good thing for a fantastical creature on the rise to popularity. A legendary partnership was begun.

It took many days for Bellerophon to get the hang of a flying horse. He hadn’t even ridden a non-flying horse. You don’t have to have ridden either to know there’s a big difference between the two. Even one as dim as Bellerophon understood that falling off a skyhorse is a much serious mistake than falling off a landhorse. That is why they both decided it best that he be tied on—at least for the early stages of their partnership. He also got to where he was able to shoot an arrow in *almost* a straight line from horseback. Since the horse couldn’t shoot the bow herself, Pegasus learned to just aim *Bellerophon* in the right direction. They were set.

All they needed now was a monster. There was a nearby city-state headed up by a King named Proteus that was currently under a plague from just such a monster. The King had used the word “plague”, but it was a bit strong. Only two people had died. Two Athenian tourists. Usually plagues consisted of a few more deaths. Plus, nobody really mourns the death of a tourist.

As for the beast, it was the Chimaera: the front quarters of a lion, the mid-quarters of a goat, and the hindquarters of a serpent. And despite all laws of nature that would say the opposite, this creature was able to function and, more importantly, exist. It even gave a bit of milk from its scaly udder.

More about the two Athenian tourists. They had heard about the birth of this hideously deformed and highly improbable creature and decided that it must be some kind of newborn god. People in Athens have always been a little weird. They traveled all the way into the wilderness, beating tambourines, carrying laurel branches, and making so much noise they couldn’t have snuck up on a rock.

Hearing them coming (for it wasn’t a rock), the Chimaera had hid in its cave. It was actually a kind-hearted creature. It also followed the general rule of wild animals: they’re more afraid of you than you are of them. The Athenian god-worshipping tourists pressed on into the cave and let out a real

tambourine-whooping combination when they saw the creature cowering in fright. By this time, the Chimaera had made the decision most people around tambourine music make: it's kill or be killed. No need for any gratuitous blood and guts. You can guess what happened.

When the King Proteus met Bellerophon, he was very nice to the potential hero. Most kings who have a tourist-eater running amok in their kingdom are. He promised him one of his homeliest daughters in return for killing the creature. After a dramatic speech (he would not sleep until he could slay or correctly pronounce the Chimaera), Bellerophon soared away on Pegasus. If the boy succeeded, Proteus would be free of this mutated beast—not to mention that daughter he'd been trying to unload for years.

There isn't much that can be said about the death of the Chimaera. It was lapping up water from a gentle river when Pegasus and Bellerophon flew overhead. It never saw it coming. With the horse's help, Bellerophon fired forty-four arrows into the back of the docile beast. The serpentine tail let out hiss, the lion-head roared in defeat, and the pale goat-udder shuddered its death-rattle. The scourge of the Athenian tourist was dead. Some gratuitous head-hacking followed. Bellerophon wasn't about to leave without a trophy of his heroic kill.

The returning hero was married to the homely daughter—but it was a sham. Bellerophon could never stop his adventuring, and she was more interested in her knitting. Before too long, the wife began sending him on mission after mission to the far ends of the earth—just to get a bit of peace and quiet. Each heroic deed Bellerophon did grew lesser and lesser in magnitude—the former pizzazz of the Chimaera was leaving the young man. He didn't know what to do.

Ever since his first fifteen minutes of fame, he had been expecting a very important call—the highest call—the call of Olympus. He had heard of this happening before: When a young mortal kills a flesh-eating monster, naturally, the Olympians want to have a chat with him—pick his brain. He wanted his brain picked, but it'd never happened. Now, all hope of that seemed to be failing.

He began to get angry. Who did these gods think they were? He was the slayer of the most improbable creature in the world! The fearsome tamer of Pegasus! He was the mighty (though unconfirmed) son of Poseidon! If anyone deserved to be up on that floating mountain, it was him. Bellerophon decided to take matters into his own hands. He had a flying horse. He was the greatest hero Greece had...at the moment. He would go to Olympus on his own and declare that they make him a god—or at least give him Sicily. He spurred Pegasus toward the cloud-shrouded mountain.

During the last few years, Pegasus' interest in the boy had waned. The horse had begun to long for the days of his youth: the free-wheelin', spring-kickin' days of his colthood. He had helped this moron murder enough severely-handicapped beasts, and now he was going to get them both killed. Any idiot knows that Zeus will not let a measly mortal fly up his mountain. That is, Pegasus told himself, any idiot except the one on top of him.

It suddenly came into the winged horse's mind that Bellerophon was leaning very hard to the left—dangerously hard to the left—swinging his scrawny arm out over the vastness of the world below. What a pity if he should, say, lean too far—overbalance—and fall a thousand feet to a bloody yet suitable death. Here the steed saw his chance, and he nonchalantly shifted to the right—right out from under the unsuspecting rider.

Everyone tells this part of the story differently. Some say that Bellerophon made sort of a whistling sound as he fell to earth. Others say they heard the high-pitched whine like a bat or a screaming girl. A few even reported hearing him yell, "Olympus is lost!" That story seems a bit cliché and overdramatic. They all agreed on the ending though: he hit the ground like a goat bladder filled with cheese.

He should have been happy. The fall didn't kill him. It had thrown the youth from his body. His skin became thin and translucent, and his eyes leaked watery despair. He spent the rest of his days wandering the world, blind and crippled. He made wild accusations at any horse he passed, threatening to turn it into a nice pair of moccasins. When people happened upon him, he desperately tried to convince them of who he had once been—the man on the flying horse—Bellerophon—surely you've heard of him—haven't you? Sorry, they'd mumble. In the end, he died alone— of a wound to the ego.

1. A parody is a piece of writing that pokes fun at another. This story is a parody. What are some of the words or phrases that the author uses to hint that this story is not completely serious? Explain your answer by using examples from the passage.

2. Think about this story in relation to the other hero tales we have read. What events from other tales are parodied here? What events are similar, and how are they changed to alert the reader of their less-than-serious nature? Use examples from the passage to back up your claim.