Rick Riordan, author of the best-selling series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians*, talks with Associate Curator Seán Hemingway about what inspired him to create characters from the gods, heroes, and monsters of Greek mythology, and the connections between his books and the Metropolitan Museum's Greek collection. The opening scene of the first book in the series, *The Lightning Thief*, takes place at the Met. Recorded March 14, 2010.

Transcript

Seán Hemingway: I'm Seán Hemingway, Associate Curator in the Department of Greek and Roman Art here at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and I'm here today with Rick Riordan, the author of the Percy Jackson series. Welcome to the Metropolitan Museum, Rick.

Rick Riordan: Thanks, Seán. It's good to be here. Always good to be at the Met.

Seán Hemingway: From an early age, I've been fascinated with Greek mythology, and it's led me on a path toward becoming a curator of Greek and Roman art. So I was especially fascinated how *you* bring Greek mythology into the world today. I thought it was really fantastic how you did that, and I wondered, when did you get interested in Greek mythology?

Rick Riordan: Well, I think, like you, I've been interested in mythology since I can remember. One of my earliest memories is sitting with my dad and he would read me folklore from the Americas. He would read me tall tales of Paul Bunyan and Native American mythology. And from there we got back into Greek and Roman myths. And when I was a schoolchild, I loved those old stories. I think there's something that's very universal about them. It really doesn't matter where or when you grew up. There's something you can relate to in those old stories about gods and heroes. They've just got everything you could possibly want. They have mystery, treachery, murder, loyalty, romance, magic, monsters—everything is in there. So I can't remember a time when I wasn't interested in mythology and that just continued when I was a teacher. I loved teaching it and it was always one of my students' favorite things.

Seán Hemingway: One of the interesting things about myths—Greek myths and other myths, as you were saying—mutable they are, how they come out of oral traditions and they change, and different local places have different versions. We have, in our collection, a fragment of Homer's *Odyssey*, an early third-century B.C. copy of *The Odyssey*. It actually has a local version of it. We know which book it's from, and the passage, and it's different from the one that's been passed down to us today. So we know that these stories changed. And one of the things I found so neat about your first book, *The Lightning Thief*, is that you take these stories and you change them and they go in different directions and they're exciting. They really bring you into the story.

Rick Riordan: That's a really important thought about the oral tradition, and what we think of as sort of a fixed text really isn't. It's something that's evolved over the years, over the centuries. Kids will often write to me, or talk to me, and say, "You said that Hephaestus got thrown down Mount Olympus by Hera, but the story I read said that Zeus did that. Which one is right?" And I have to tell them, "Well, it sort of depends on what source you read. You know, you'll hear both versions of the story." And that's one of the neat things about mythology, is that there are so many versions that you can pick the ones you like and develop the ones that seem to make the most sense.

Seán Hemingway: Perseus is your main character for the books. And I wondered if you considered other heroes, or how you came to choose Perseus as your hero.

Rick Riordan: Right, right. In the series—several fans have asked me that. They've said, "Well, the original Perseus was the son of Zeus, but Percy Jackson, who is named after Perseus, is the son of Poseidon. Why did you do that and why did you choose Perseus?" His mom—Percy's mom in the story—explains it by saying that in the versions that she has read, Perseus is usually the hero who has the happy ending, you know, and that's not always true in all of the versions. But she could at least imagine that being a lucky name, and that's why she names Percy that. But I've always loved the story of Perseus. And as to why I sort of changed it around and made him the son of Poseidon—I sort of modeled that after the Theseus story, which has always been one of my favorites. But I thought it's too obvious to make the hero the son of Zeus. Everybody's always the son of Zeus, you know, because he's the big guy. I thought it would be a little more interesting to have a hero who had to try a little bit harder because his dad was the second-most powerful guy, rather than the guy sitting in the big throne.

Seán Hemingway: I think it's great. In our collections, we have many representations of Zeus and Poseidon. One of my favorite ones of Poseidon is a cup attributed to the Amasis painter. It's a black-figure Attic cup of the late sixth century B.C. But it shows the mythical stables of Poseidon. He was also the god of horses, as you know, and so he had underwater stables. So how do you represent that in art? And this very creative Athenian vase painter does this sort of mythical world and we must have a look at it together sometime. It's a wonderful piece. I think your choice of Perseus is really good, too, because he's one of the heroes that we do know something about his whole story, or his story from birth. And his mother is an important part of that. The original Perseus—and his mother Danae—they were cast adrift to die. And she took care of her son. And your relationship between Percy and his mom is wonderful. She's very caring for him, and so I thought that was a very nice parallel. Because you have many strands of parallels with antiquity. And we have a vase in our collection that shows them about to be set adrift in a box, in an Attic vase of the fifth century B.C. So it's wonderful to be able to see some of these scenes in mythology that relate to the works in your book.

Rick Riordan: Oh, yeah, there are so many great pieces in the collection here, and when I was thinking about this story, I kept coming back to the images that I had seen. And I don't have a background in archaeology, necessarily, but it's so wonderful to just sort of go through and see the different depictions through the ages, and how different artists have depicted these stories that were so much a fabric of Greek civilization and are still a fabric of civilization today. I mean, you can't walk down the street without running into something that's influenced by Greek or Roman architecture or mythology, statuary—it's everywhere, it's still all around us. My hope is that when the kids read the Percy Jackson series, that will trigger some things inside them, and so that when they do read Homer in high school, they'll say, "Hey, that's just like what happened in the Percy Jackson books." Or as they're walking through a park, they see a statue, and they might, something might trigger with them. And they'll appreciate what they're seeing and the world that they're passing through a little bit more, because of what they know about mythology.

Seán Hemingway: When I first read the book, which was just recently, *The Lightning Thief*, it opens at the Metropolitan Museum. And I was just amazed to see that. And I wondered why you decided to choose the Metropolitan Museum to open the first scene in your book.

Rick Riordan: Yeah, you know, I didn't give it any conscious thought, because I just knew that this is where it had to be. Part of that is that I started thinking about the idea of the Greek gods sort of following Western civilization, the way they moved from Greece to Rome and sort of developed into the same gods, but the gods of the imperial Roman culture, and that they sort of took on a slightly different persona, but they stayed with us. And I think in the same way, the Greek stories, the Greek gods, the Greek heritage has stayed with us throughout the strand of, you know, what we call Western civilization. It's always there. And when a new power grows, like France or Great Britain or America, they always put on the trappings of ancient Greece and Rome. You know, the government buildings always look Greek and Roman. We have the eagle, the symbol of Zeus, as our national symbol. You know, these things stay with us. So I started playing with that idea. And I thought that if I were a Greek god and I was around today, I would want to be in the center of everything. And that, for me, just seems to be Manhattan. So I parked Mount Olympus over the Empire State Building, and as I was looking for a place where a student might start an adventure as a Greek hero in America, it made sense to me that the Met would be sort of the crux of the confluence of Greek civilization and modern American civilization. The collection here was a natural place for Percy to start his journey. And it's such a wonderful space, and there are so many ways I could play with it. And the idea of having a Fury come to life and flying through the Greek and Roman section of the Metropolitan Museum was just too good to pass up.

Seán Hemingway: That's a wonderful image, yeah. I wonder, too—just thinking a little bit about your writing, which is so fluid and really brings me back to that

young age with Percy—what authors were influential for you as you were writing the book or have been in your life?

Rick Riordan: Right. Really the oral tradition. Again, it was so important to me growing up. The stories that I tend to remember are the ones that I read with my parents, that they read aloud to me—E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, *The Trumpet of the Swans*. *The Tales from the Western World*. All of those were really important to me. And just growing up hearing stories, I think, kind of opened my mind to the idea of Greek myths as sort of this continuing storytelling tradition. And then later on I was very drawn to fantasy. Probably the first book that I read on my own, just for pleasure, that I remember, was the Lord of the Rings trilogy. That got me into fantasy. I had a great English teacher in eighth grade, who said, "You do know that those stories come from Norse mythology." And she sort of worked me backwards into the source material. That's how I got into Odin and Loki and all those wonderful stories. So again, it all kept coming back to mythology for me. And that's really where I started my journey, I think, as a writer and a reader.

Seán Hemingway: One of the things that you bring out in your book, about Greek mythology, that is so true and interesting, I think, is that the gods are immortal but they also have human qualities, and in some cases even failings or weaknesses. I thought it was so interesting that you latch onto that. Part of that, in my field, you don't see it so much in Greek art. Often the gods are just the gods. But we have a few cases in our galleries, in our collection, that show that. And one of my favorite pieces is a vase that shows the gods fishing. Herakles has a fishing rod and Poseidon has his trident. And they're just almost like a Sunday day off. And you capture the gods a little bit in that way. You capture very human qualities in them. And I thought that was very interesting. And Percy, too, as a demigod, has mortal qualities and godlike qualities. And I wondered if there were any reasons why you really bring that out so well in your book.

Rick Riordan: It's a really good point about the gods being mortal, in a way. They have these failings that we associate with humans. And the idea of divinity is not really what *we* think of when we think of sort of a divine force as being this very removed, perfect entity. The gods are very accessible. They get angry, they get jealous, they get envious of each other, they do stupid things, they get trapped by each other in these ridiculous situations. Hephaestus traps his wife in a net with Ares in bed—you know, just all these ridiculous situations that you would never think that this divine being would ever allow themselves to get into. But that's what makes them lovable, too. That's what makes them relatable. We see ourselves in the gods and the different situations that they get into. And I think that's one of the reasons that the stories have held up so well. They don't feel removed. These feel like characters in a soap opera that we've followed all our lives, and we know these characters. And even when they fail, we're sort of rooting for them and we're on their side. And that's what's also, I think, what makes them so mutable and so adaptable, and why we see them over and over

again in literature and art and music and all these different art forms. They are our first superheroes. In fact, one of my favorite comments—I was asking a group of students one time who they would want as a parent, if they had a Greek god, and this girl raised her hand very excitedly, and said, "Batman!" You know? And everybody laughed. But really, she had a point. You know, Batman and Superman and all those characters are sort of our modern equivalent to the Greek gods. They are these super-powerful characters who are also very flawed and very human. And they have that double identity to them that we can all associate with.

Seán Hemingway: I think it's so interesting, too, how Percy has a learning disability. I mean, he is a demigod, but he overcomes not just extraordinary monsters but he overcomes very human problems growing up that we all overcome and I thought it was wonderful, how your hero overcomes a whole range that—even, for some of us, getting through a day is a small feat of heroic quality.

Rick Riordan: Yeah, absolutely. And I think all kids feel that way, that every problem is huge and every undertaking that they have to do in their day is heroic. I know I felt that way when I was in middle school. Golly. I don't know, I mean, if I were given a choice between asking a girl out or fighting the Hydra, I would probably take the Hydra. Doing that the first time is pretty tough. Learning to drive. You know, all these things that you have to learn and get through, all these rites of passage that you take as a normal American teenager, they do feel like a kind of heroic journey. I think that's one reason that kids relate to the Greek gods still. I also think it's true that—especially with the age that I worked with, middle-school kids, aged, say, twelve to fourteen—they feel caught between two worlds. They're not really sure where they belong. Are they children? Are they adults? How do they feel about their parents? How do they feel about their friends? Who are they supposed to be loyal to? They're changing in every possible way. And, in a sense, they are very much like demigods who are also trapped between two worlds. They're not quite human, they're not quite divine, they're somewhere in the middle. And they're not really sure where they belong or if their parents care about them, and it's sort of a nice allegory for what any teenager is going through. I think that's one reason that the myths resonate particularly well with that age group.

Seán Hemingway: On a different subject—you have so many wonderful mythical monsters in your books, too. I loved Aunty Em and the Medusa, which is a natural Perseus story. I actually live in New Jersey, so I've seen lots of garden shops like that along the highway. So I thought, it's wonderful how you've transformed these monsters. And monsters are powerful creatures of every age. You're very creative in reinventing these creatures of the past.

Rick Riordan: Yeah, thanks. Apologies to New Jersey for sending Medusa your way, but, yeah, it did seem like kind of an interesting place for her to be, at a

garden gnome emporium, you know, on the side of the road somewhere. And that was one of my favorite parts about writing the series is sort of taking these old myths and monsters and figuring out a way to transpose them onto America. And I had no trouble seeing Ares, the god of war, riding his Harley Davidson across the West with a shotgun. You know, this seemed like a natural pick. And putting the Underworld under Los Angeles. You know, some things just have to be. But, yeah, the monsters—and really, I thought I knew Greek mythology pretty well until I started writing the series and then I started going back to some of the old, old primary sources and reading about these monsters that I either had never known about or had forgotten. And some of them appear in the artwork as well. But many of them have sort of been lost in time. Everyone recognizes Medusa, but there are so many other amazing monsters that are there, but we don't necessarily remember them today. So getting to dust off some of the older, less-known myths was a lot of fun, too.

Seán Hemingway: Medusa was a very popular one in Greek and Roman art. On our guide that we put together for the Museum for families and children to go through and find different pieces, there's the famous Canova *Perseus with the head of Medusa* in the European Sculpture galleries. We have many Greek vases with the same scenes of Perseus approaching the Medusa with Athena; we have a famous vase by Polygnotus—Athenian vase—that shows that, and he's not looking at her, he's looking to Athena for guidance. And the minotaur, too, of course, is a huge favorite for representations in Greek art and in later periods. We even have—talking about the antiquity of these myths, a seal stone from Minoan times—from the late Bronze Age, from about the fourteenth century B.C. that shows a bull-man. So these myths that are recorded in Greek times really do go back much earlier, and it's amazing to think of such a thing from Crete showing the bull-man and this idea of a labyrinth and the minotaur has such antiquity. And now, also, thanks to your series and other works of art and books, continues as a long tradition.

Rick Riordan: Yeah, it's really special to think that, in a way, I'm doing my small part to continue these stories that have been such a part of our shared tradition for so many years. That a story can stretch all the way back to Minoan times is—it's amazing. It tells you something about the power of the image, it tells you something about how powerful that story is, for whatever reason. Those images—the bull-man, the Medusa with her hair made of snakes—they're so powerful that they stay with us over the centuries and they still have the power to ignite the imagination.

Seán Hemingway: Thank you, Rick, so much for coming here today.

Rick Riordan: That was fantastic. I appreciate talking with you today.

Seán Hemingway: I'm Seán Hemingway, here today at The Metropolitan Museum of Art with Rick Riordan, the author of the Percy Jackson & the

Olympians series, published by Disney Book Group. We hope you'll come to the Metropolitan Museum and follow in Percy's footsteps with the Museum's newly published Art Adventure Guide.

Rick Riordan: I'm Rick Riordan, visiting The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *the* place to get your Greek and Roman fix while you're in the city.

DIRECTIONS:
Answer the following questions *IN COMPLETE SENTENCES* on a SEPARATE SHEET OF NOTEBOOK PAPER:

1. What is the appeal of mythology according to Riordan? What does Hemingway mean by the "mutability" of myths? Ask students to give their own examples of "mutability".

2. Why did Riordan make Percy the son of Poseidon rather than Zeus?

3. Give a few examples of the influence of Greek or Roman mythology in the present day world (may not necessarily be in the article; draw from your own experiences).

4. Why did Riordan set the first scene in his novel at the Metropolitan Museum?

5. What connection does Riordan draw between Greek gods, comic book superheroes and today's teenagers?