

GREEK & ROMAN STUDIES 209

7. *Prometheus & Pandora*

Assigned Reading: Chapter I.4, in Mark Morford et al.,  
*Classical Mythology* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.), pp. 91-99



*Prometheus the Fire-Bringer.* Detail of gilded bronze statue. Paul Manship, 1934.  
Rockefeller Center, New York.

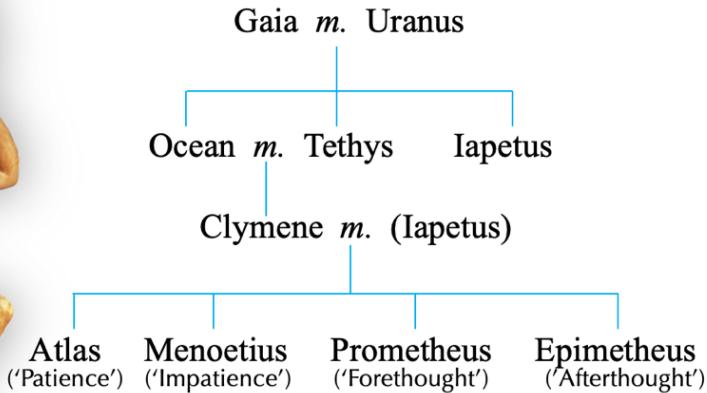
**A Trickster Tale**

Hesiod interrupts his account of Zeus' serial victories over the Titans and Typhoeus with a curious episode that comes perilously close to spoiling the whole point of his poem. The Theogony's trajectory, after all, is towards Zeus' ultimate elimination of all opposition. The tale of Prometheus, however, is an ill-fitting piece, at best, in that overarching plan. We see Prometheus deceiving Zeus not once but twice: first, by securing for humans the best part of animal sacrifices, leaving only bones and fat for the gods; second—after Zeus has retaliated by hiding fire—by stealing from the Olympian's hearth a glowing ember and delivering it back to humans. (Read Theogony 535-569 on pp. 91f. for the full account.) In each case, Prometheus more than matches wits with Zeus, though the latter's rulership is supposed to rest on his superior wisdom. Zeus is *Mētieta* ('the Wise One'; cf. #2 below), but Prometheus is *poikilos aiolomētis* (lit. 'manifold in his quick wit', which your textbook translates more pejoratively as 'devious and clever', #1 below). *Mētis* (Gk. 'wisdom' or 'craft') is the common component in these epithets, and Prometheus would appear to have more of it!

Perhaps, in an earlier—now lost—telling of the myth, Prometheus' superior cunning was precisely the point of the story. Every mythology, after all, seems to have a trickster figure who outwits the other gods (e.g., the Norse Loki, Hindu Hanuman, Navajo Coyote). To be sure, in a later Greek telling of the same story (by Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound*), that interpretation is explicit: Prometheus is cleverer, farther seeing (the very meaning of his name!), and more benevolent towards us than Zeus (cf. the excerpts from that play on pp. 95-97 of the textbook). Hesiod's aim, however, is entirely different: to praise Zeus no matter what. He can insert such a traditional 'trickster tale' into his poem only by manipulating it in the most blatant fashion. "Zeus, whose wisdom is immortal, knew and was not unaware of the trick", insists Hesiod (Theogony 550, p. 92). In other words, Zeus was playing along! Why? In order to have an excuse for making human life more miserable, first by hiding fire and then by creating Pandora ("he foresaw in his heart evils for mortals, which would be accomplished" [ibid.]). The resulting portrait of Zeus is not a flattering one, no matter how hard Hesiod tries to justify it.

### Prometheus' Genealogy

1. “Iapetus led away the girl Clymene, an Oceanid [i.e., daughter of Ocean], and they went together in the same bed; and she bore to him a child, stout-hearted **Atlas**; she also brought forth **Menoetius**, of very great renown, and devious and clever [*poikilos aiolomētis*] **Prometheus**, and **Epimetheus**, who was faulty in judgement [*hamartinoos*] and from the beginning was an evil [*kakon*] for mortals who work for their bread.”  
 Hesiod, *Theogony* 507ff. (Morford et al., p. 91)



(left) “Farnese Atlas”. The son of Titans supports the globe of heaven, marked with the zodiac. Roman marble sculpture, 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. A.D. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

*Note: The abbreviation ‘m.’ in a family tree signifies union by marriage.*

The family tree in the figure above illustrates the genealogy of four brothers, *Atlas*, *Menoetius*, *Prometheus*, and *Epimetheus*. Although they are Zeus’ cousins and do not belong to the original generation of Titans (being, rather, the offspring of a Titan, *Iapetus*, and *Clymene*, herself a daughter of two Titans), they are nevertheless usually depicted as Titanic figures. At any rate, they side with the regime that Zeus will ultimately overthrow (cf. #3 below). Unlike Zeus’ other opponents who are relegated to the Underworld, *Atlas’* punishment is to stand at the westernmost edge of the world and support the heavens above. We shall hear no more of him until he is re-introduced in the heroic myths of *Perseus* and *Heracles*, still holding up the sky! As though in symmetry with his brother, *Prometheus*, too, will be chained to a rock (some artists depict it as a column), this time in the far East (the Caucasus). They are two supporting pillars, as it were, at either edge of the world, securing the heavens from crashing down upon the earth. Their two other brothers, *Menoetius* and *Epimetheus*, seem to exist merely to balance the folk etymologies of *Atlas* and *Prometheus’* names: *Menoetius* (*‘Impatience’*) is to *Atlas* (*‘Patience’* or *‘Endurance’*) as *Epimetheus* (*‘Afterthought’*) is to *Prometheus* (*‘Forethought’*).

### Atlas & the Hesperides

2. “Atlas stands and holds the wide heaven with his head and tireless hands through the force of necessity at the edge of the earth, and in the sight of the clear-voiced Hesperides; this fate Zeus in his wisdom [*mētieta*, lit., ‘Zeus the Wise One’] allotted him.”  
*Ibid.* 517-520 (p. 91)

(right) *The Garden of the Hesperides*. The Hesperides are daughters of Hesper ('Evening', just as the Oceanids are the children of Ocean). They dwell on an island in the realm of Evening (the far West), tending a garden in which grows a tree that bears golden apple and is guarded by a serpent (Ladon). While serving his punishment in that part of the world, Atlas also acts as a chaperone for these maidens, whom we meet again in the myths of Perseus and Heracles. Red-figure lekythos from Paestum (Italy), c. 350-340 B.C. J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

(below) *Atlas and Prometheus*. Laconian (Spartan) black-figure cup, c. 560 B.C. Vatican Museums, Rome. (Cf. Morford, p. 91). The serpent (Ladon) behind Atlas represents the far west, while the rooster atop Prometheus' column stands for the morning (the east). The two brothers are, thus, depicted as framing or 'book-ending' the known world.



### **Titanic Rebellion**

3. "When the Titans tried to mount to heaven, Jupiter [Zeus], with the help of Minerva [Athena], Apollo, and Diana [Artemis], cast them headlong into Tartarus. On Atlas, who had been their leader, he put the vault of the sky; even now he is said to hold up the sky on his shoulders."

Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 150 (Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. A.D.; not in Morford)

### **Crime & Punishment**

While later tradition justified Atlas' punishment by associating him with the seditious Titans (see #3 above), Zeus' persecution of Prometheus is harder to explain. The latter's offence, it seems, was to be too clever (*poikiloboulos*), daring to match wits against Zeus on behalf of mortals (who appear here for the first time in the Theogony). In other words, Prometheus was too kind-hearted toward our pitiful race, while Zeus' heart is characterized as full of anger (Theog. 550ff.). Not a pretty picture of Zeus, nor of our human condition. We hear of Prometheus' punishment (#4) before we learn of his specific crime(s) (##5 and 6).

4. "And Zeus bound devious and wily [*poikiloboulos*] Prometheus with hard and inescapable bonds, after driving a shaft through his middle; and roused up a long-winged eagle against him that used to eat his immortal liver. But all that the long-winged bird would eat during the whole day would be completely restored in equal measure through the night."

Hesiod, *Theogony* 521ff. (Morford, p. 91)

### **An Aetiological Myth**

5. "For when the gods and mortals quarreled at Mecone, then Prometheus with quick intelligence divided up a great ox and set the pieces out in an attempt to deceive the mind of Zeus . . . . But Zeus whose wisdom is immortal knew and was not unaware of the trick. And he foresaw in his heart evils for mortals, which would be accomplished. He took up in both his hands the white fat, and his mind was enraged, and anger took hold of his heart as he saw the white bones of the ox arranged with crafty art. For this reason, the races of human beings on earth burn the white bones for the immortals on the sacrificial altars."

*Ibid.* 535-557 (p. 92)



(above) Priest and attendants prepare to sacrifice a goat. Attic red-figure bell krater by the Pothos Painter, c. 420 B.C. Yale University Art Gallery.

Prometheus' trick, by which he secured the best part of animal sacrifices (i.e., the edible meat) for humans while leaving only bones and fat for the gods, is a good example of an 'aetiological' myth. Such stories explain the cause (*aitios*) of an unusual fact of life, such as the apparent inequality of sacrifices in favour of humans. Hesiod insists, however—somewhat unconvincingly—that Zeus merely played along with this trick in order to make human lives more miserable, first by denying us fire with which to cook our meat, and secondly (after Prometheus the 'Fire-Bringer' stole it back for us) by devising an even worse recompense for mortals.

6. "From this time on [Zeus] always remembered the deceit and did not give the power of weariless fire out of ash trees to mortals who dwell on the earth. But the noble son of Iapetus tricked him by stealing in a hollow fennel stalk the gleam of weariless fire that is seen from afar. High-thundering Zeus was stung to the depths of his being and angered in his heart as he saw among mortals the gleam of fire seen from afar."

*Ibid.* 558-569 (p. 92)



(Fig. 1) Pandora is adorned by the gods: (left to right) Zeus (with thunderbolt), Poseidon (with trident), Athena (with spear and crown), Pandora, Ares (with shield), and Hermes (barely visible, with winged sandals and kerykeion). Red-figure kalyx-krater (wine bowl), 460-450 B.C.

British Museum, London.

### Pandora

7. “Immediately [Zeus] contrived an evil thing [*kakon*] for mortals in recompense for the fire. The renowned lame god, Hephaestus, fashioned out of earth the likeness of a modest maiden according to the will of the son of Cronus.”

*Ibid.* 569ff. (p. 92)

Fig. 2 (right) Pandora emerges from the earth, with Zeus, Hermes, Hephaestus (Epimetheus?) and Eros. Red-figure volute krater, c. 450 B.C. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig. 3 (left) Birth of Pandora from the earth. Red-figure vase. Brussels, Royal Museum of Art and History.

That Hephaestus, who will not be born until the end of this poem (*Theogony* 927ff.), already finds a place in this story reminds us that the account is not chronological, much less self-consistent. Ambiguity also marks ancient visual depictions of the episode. In each of the vase paintings below, the figure carrying a tool (a hammer [or mallet?] in one, a pickaxe[?] in the other) would seem to correspond to the artisan’s role that Hesiod gives Hephaestus. On closer inspection, however, the painter in Fig. 2 has named him Epimetheus, who was “the first to accept from Zeus the virgin woman he had formed” (*Theogony* 512; p. 91); a winged Eros hovers nearby, as though to indicate that sexual desire is what blinded Epimetheus into receiving this dangerous “gift” on our behalf. In Fig. 3, moreover, a goat-

tailed, sexually aroused satyr has taken Hephaestus' place! May we at least interpret the twin depictions of Pandora rising from the earth as faithful echoes of Hesiod's account? Perhaps. It is just as likely, however, that she owes her iconography to near-contemporary depictions of the primordial goddess Gaea, who is similarly shown in the sculpted frieze from the Great Altar of Pergamum (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. B.C.; cf. image in Morford et al., p. 88) as an outsize female figure emerging from below.

This analogy with Gaea was noticed by the pioneering classical scholar and feminist, Jane Harrison, who observed that “to the primitive, matriarchal Greek, Pandora was a real goddess, in form and name, of the Earth . . . [I]n the patriarchal mythology of Hesiod”, however, “her great figure is strangely changed and diminished. She is no longer Earth-born, but the creature, the handiwork of Olympian Zeus” (Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* [1903], pp. 283f.). Even Pandora’s name, Harrison argued, had lost its original meaning: ‘giver of all gifts’, so suitable for a goddess of fertility. Hesiod, instead, substituted an awkward etymology that subordinated Pandora to the Olympian order:

8. “The herald of the gods [Hermes] put in her a voice, and named this woman Pandora, because all who have their homes on Olympus gave her a gift, a bane to men who work for their bread.”

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 80ff.; Morford et al., p. 94)

The ‘gifts’ in question, namely a housewife’s skills (from Athena), grace and painful longing (from Aphrodite), even “the mind of a bitch [i.e., female dog] and the character of a thief” (from Hermes), tell us as much about the individual personalities of each Olympian as they do of Pandora’s character (cf. *Theogony* 570-84 and *Works and Days* 59-89, pp. 92ff.). What they convey most of all, however, is Hesiod’s deeply misogynistic view of women, an attitude that is confirmed by his story of Pandora’s “box” (or, more correctly, “jar”).



Figs. 4, 5 & 6. *Pandora and Her Box*. (above, left to right) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, coloured chalk, 1878. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool. John William Waterhouse, oil on canvas, 1896. Private collection. Jules Joseph Lefebvre, oil on canvas, 1882. Private collection.

*Pandora's Jar*

*Everyone has heard of Pandora's 'box'. As it turns out, they have misheard—or, rather, been misled by Erasmus' mistranslation in the sixteenth century, who construed Hesiod's pithos ('jar') for a pyxis ('box'). Artists ever since have associated her with the infamous chest, usually made of gold or inlaid with precious materials (see images below), instead of a more authentic earthenware jar. It is, at any rate, a container filled with human woe, from which Pandora proceeds to lift the lid. "But the woman removed the great cover of the jar with her hands and scattered the evils within and for mortals devised sorrowful troubles" (Works and Days 94f.; Morford, p. 94).*

The shape of Pandora's container is probably significant after all. Pithoi (see example at right) were large ceramic jars used for the storage of staples such as grain, olive oil, wine, etc. To preserve their contents in a cool environment, the bigger ones would be buried in the earth up to their necks, leaving only their wide round mouths (covered with a protective lid) accessible. They were symbols, in other words, of bounty, especially as associated with the earth, the original source of plenty. (Here Pandora's original identity as a fertility goddess is pertinent, if Jane Harrison's theory is correct.) More than that, the shape of a pithos was reminiscent, to the ancient mind, of a woman's womb—that storehouse, as it were, of humanity's hope for the future. Since hope is, ambiguously, one of the contents of Hesiod's pithos, this aspect of Pandora's jar must be examined further.

Fig. 7 (right) Large storage pithos from Knossos, Crete. 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.



Hope

*When Pandora opened up her jar of evils and let loose its contents, one item did not escape;*

9. "Hope alone remained within there in the unbreakable home under the edge of the jar and did not fly out of doors. For the lid of the jar stopped her before she could . . . . But the other thousands of sorrows wander among human beings, for the earth and the sea are full of evils. . . . Thus it is not at all possible to escape the will of Zeus." Hesiod, *Works and Days* 96ff. (Morford, p. 94)

*How are we to interpret this detail in Hesiod's text? Has hope been preserved in Pandora's jar—the one element that enables humans to confront an earth and sea filled with woes—or has access to it been sealed off forever? Are we a hopeless species or a hopeful one? I invite you to consider both possibilities and decide for yourselves which fits Hesiod's context (and his known personality) best. Hesiod's ultimate lesson, at any rate, is clearly stated: no one can escape Zeus' will.*

