

The Law of Hubris in Greek Mythology

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Hubris, in Greek mythology, is an act in a rebellious nature against the Gods. It can be seen in Greek myth in spite of the Gods, questioning if they are real or not.¹ This spite can occur in many different ways including trickery, arrogance, and competition (feats of strength). Through this paper, we will look at specific examples of hubris occurring and the resulting outcome from the Gods from early ancient Greek myth. We will then use this data to conclude on if the Gods had a definite consequence for humans who showed hubris against the Gods. Specific key events we will be looking into include the creation story with man and Prometheus. Man had displayed very intelligent actions and began to use their ability of free will to question the existence of the Gods. Zeus then forces Prometheus to have man admit they are a lesser being and must give sacrifice to the Gods. When the first sacrifice occurs, man attempts (and succeeds) in tricking the Gods, but are promptly punished. We will also be investigating the post actions of this myth. Since Prometheus goes against Zeus' punishment for man, he is in turn punished directly. This situation displays a conflict between two members of the divine as opposed to human and the divine. Another example which will be studied is the myth of Pandora's jar. After the new punishment of Prometheus, Zeus must decide on a new fitting punishment by creating Pandora. She is an irresistible woman who is showered with gifts and temptations. These temptations lead to inevitable suffering for all of man. Through these examples, we will determine if the Gods have a specific process on how to handle situations hubris is displayed against them, or if each individual situation is handled on a case by case basis.

In example one, Zeus is clearly uncomfortable with the new species and worries they may attempt to overtake him. We can note that when the Gods feel like their position may be threatened, they immediately find a way to maintain their power. Prometheus does not want any negative consequences to come to his creation, so he creates the idea of sacrifice. The humans would be required to give a sacrifice of their goods to the Gods to show they understand that man is below them. The first sacrifice occurred at Mekone, where man would sacrifice an ox to the Gods to show their understanding of the Gods power. Man separated the ox into two uneven piles, the meat, and the bones and fat. After presenting both piles to the Gods, Zeus had chosen the pile of bones and fat.² Zeus later recognises his poor decision and needs to punish man for giving him a poor choice of sacrifice. He determines taking fire away from man would be a suitable punishment as it would prevent them from being able to cook the meat they kept. Zeus has created a punishment for the human's actions which he felt acceptable for the current situation. This action against the Gods can be seen as hubris, creating the original sin of man; they displayed a form of arrogance against the Gods in an attempt to outsmart them.

This story continues to progress to Prometheus' actions to protect man; he works around the other Gods to return fire to the humans. At this moment, Prometheus shows

¹ DJT, Lecture 3, January 19th 2017

² Hesiod (Trzaskoma, 147) ll. 537-143.

arrogance against the other Gods and goes against Zeus' command. Once again, Zeus is forced to find an appropriate punishment for Prometheus since he has now undone his punishment to man. Since Zeus is unable to reverse Prometheus' actions, he decided to take Prometheus from the humans so he is unable to assist more. He determines the best form of punishment for a divine being is for him to be tortured. This resulted in having Prometheus tied to a rock, with an eagle being sent every day to eat his liver.³ Since Prometheus is a divine being, he can never be killed, but will suffer for eternity for his actions. In this situation, Zeus choose a different approach to his punishment by directly harming Prometheus instead of taking away or hiding an element of life from him. Perhaps Zeus found this to be a more fitting form of suffering since in any other situation, Prometheus would be able to free himself or create an easier way of living for himself. This displays a very different outcome of hubris; initially Zeus' actions would have cause death among all of mankind as they have no source of heat or cooking food. This new action will cause pain and suffering for Prometheus with no way of him escaping.

Since the secret of fire has been revealed and Zeus is unable to remove it, he must create a new form of punishment for both man's act of hubris at the first sacrifice and Prometheus' act of hubris by revealing the secret of fire to man.⁴ This begins the well known myth of pandora's jar or box. Man would be tempted by a woman who is completely irresistible,⁵ however she will be the cause of pain and suffering should anyone fall through with the temptation. Pandora herself was also tempted by being showered with gifts, one of which was a pithos or a jar. She was told that she should never open the jar, if she did mankind would be cursed for an eternity with pain and suffering. At this point, Pandora engages in hubris by inevitably opening the box. As punishment for this action, the box releases all of the negative aspects of the world, plaguing it forever. Once all of them elements have escaped, the only thing left in the bottom of the jar was hope. Perhaps this means Zeus' punishment for the world was to leave them with everything except hope. Although this final moment in the story of Pandora is open to many different interpretations, there is no direct relation is made between Pandora's instance of hubris and the resulting action. Pandora's actions had caused all of man to suffer, not specific subsets of man or only herself.

When analyzing these examples of hubris, we can see there is a definite cause and effect relation between either a human or the divine committing an act of hubris and them having a negative punishment applied to them. Through each of the three examples we analyzed, there was a different outcome which was a unique result which occurred. By further analyzing the specific punishments, there do not appear to be a direct relation between the act which occurred and its effect. In example one, it could be argued there is a correlation, however the relation is slim. It appears as if Zeus removed fire from the humans to prevent them from

³ Hesiod (Trzaskoma, 146) 525-127.

⁴ Lucian (Trzaskoma, 280) 5.

⁵ Palaephatus (Trzaskoma, 329) 34.

being able to cook the meat, however there are many different options which could have been used. Perhaps the removal of water required by humans, or preventing the ox from reproducing, limiting the food supply. In example two, Zeus' decision to have Prometheus tied to a rock is a very unexpected action. A more related outcome would have been for Zeus to directly harm the living conditions of Prometheus' creation. This would have caused Prometheus to be forced to watch his creation suffer while not having the power to stop or work against their suffering. Instead, his punishment was directly towards him and separate from the situation; although he is suffering himself, his creation is still gifted with fire and are able to carry on with their lives. In the final example of Pandora, the resulting punishment is very unrelated to her actions. The effect of her actions did not have a direct punishment for her, but for all of mankind. This example of hubris varies the most of any other example we have analyzed. Prior to this example, the Gods has only created punishments including the involved parties; anyone who may not have been involved in the act was not reprimanded. With the story of Pandora's jar, we see all of man is now affected by all the troubles of the world, not specifically Pandora or only man who has sinned.

In conclusion, there are many different situations where hubris is shown and there is a direct outcome from the Gods each time that it is encountered. The individual examples which we analyzed in this paper had a specific and different outcome from Zeus. By analyzing the Greek creation story (specifically the creation of man and their original sin) we can see there is not a specific outcome which will result for each specific occurrence of hubris. Our examples show Zeus creating a punishment for each specific situation different from each other with different degrees of suffering. There may be some relations between the cause and the outcome which can be argued, however this analysis shows a much stronger disconnect of punishment as hubris requires a more case by case judgment which may not always relate to the ending outcome.