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**Opening Pandora's Box**

Presentation & Workshop

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**Part I**

The idiom "Pandora's box" is so common in everyday speech that many people are no longer aware of its mythological background. Even those who have heard the story of Pandora do not always realize that what they know is only a superstructure, built on scattered fragments of ancient myth that are only partly known to us.

Unlike for other mythical figures, such as Oedipus, Prometheus, Odysseus, or Medea, no ancient poet composed a coherent and consecutive story out of the mythical materials connected with Pandora—or at least, no such work has survived. The only poetic works that refer to her story are Hesiod’s*Works and Days* and *Theogony* (700 B.C.), but as we will see, these two versions are little more than scraps. Beyond that, short references to the myth of Pandora have been found in a commentary on Hesiod written in late antiquity. This commentary is based on a quotation from a lost work by the neo-Platonist philosopher Proclus which, in turn, is probably based on a lost satiric play by Sophocles. Later post-Renaissance versions have reconstructed Hesiod's sources in entirely different ways.

The abruptness and incoherence of the story can be easily explained by the various goals of all these sources, which were never purely narrative. Hesiod's *Works and Days* is a didactic epic aimed at educating hardworking Boeotian peasants. Its worldview is highly pessimistic, in accordance with the hard and hopeless life of its intended audience. The poet's intent is not to charm listeners through masterful storytelling, like Homer, but to use narrative fragments for his rhetorical needs. Hesiod uses the myth of Pandora to explain the hardships of his listeners' lives. The story which emerges in various ways from the epics is fragmented, and Hesiod only emphasizes the parts of it that support his views. Scholars do not agree whether Hesiod’s retelling is so fragmented because he was referring a well-known myth that he could expect his audience to know, or because he was inventing a new variation on an old myth.

The anonymous commentator who quoted Proclus also did not have narrative aspirations. He only summarizes the myth of Pandora in order to explain a specific line from Hesiod's work. The Erasmus version of the myth, which dates from 1508, is the first version from modern times and also the story on which most later versions are based. This retelling also amounts to no more than a short summary in an essay, presented mainly to demonstrate an idea.

The myth of Pandora is related to a story that was much more central in Greek literature, and is known to us through more famous adaptations: the Prometheus myth. This related story can also support the reconstruction of the myth of Pandora.

From the ancient materials described above, I will attempt to reconstruct a story that is as coherent and logical as it can be. I will return to modern reconstructions later.

This is more or less what we can learn by combining the ancient materials:

In the old days, people were much happier than nowadays. One reason was that only male humans existed; the female sex had not yet been created. But Zeus, the head of the gods, was very hostile toward humans and found their happiness disagreeable, so he tried to rob them of the resources they needed to live. In the first stage, he expropriated fire from the people. However, Prometheus, a god who favored human beings, stole it back and returned it to humanity.

Another reason why these early humans were so happy was that all misfortunes that set them apart from gods, from old age and sickness to misery and death, were all still stored in heaven. When Prometheus heard that Zeus intended to spread these misfortunes among humans, he urged the satyrs to steal them for him, then locked them in a great jar. He deposited the jar in the house of his brother Epimetheus for safekeeping and warned him never to open it, and also to refuse any gift from Zeus.

Prometheus needed his brother's help because he himself was already being pursued by Zeus. Indeed, Zeus punished Prometheus severely, binding him to a rock in the Caucasian mountains. These events are described in Aeschylus’ tragedy *Prometheus bound* and in various other adaptations of the myth.

But Epimetheus was not equally gifted as his brother: as implied in their proper names, Prometheus was capable of forethought (*pro*-*mêtis*), while Epimetheus only had afterthoughts (*epi-mêtis*) when it was too late.

To take revenge on humanity, Zeus commanded the gods to create a woman. She was called Pandora, which means a present (*dora*) from all (*pan*), since all the gods took part in her creation. Hephaestos made her body out of clay, Aphrodite bestowed on her beauty and desirability, Athena taught her the arts of weaving and spinning, and Hermes gave her the capacity to deceive. The result was a very beautiful girl. When she was ready, Zeus gave her to Epimetheus to be his wife.

Epimetheus, who lacked forethought, was bedeviled by Pandora’s charms and took her in, forgetting his brother's warning. Pandora opened the jar of misfortunes left behind by Prometheus. The misfortunes burst out in the form of a host of ugly winged creatures, instantly spreading among humanity. The terrified Pandora closed the jar, trapping the last creature: Hope.

A comparison between Hesiod's well-known version and this reconstruction reveals a series of improbabilities and information gaps. Even the most iconic part of the myth, the closed jar, is described in a highly fragmented way. Hesiod says nothing about its origins, neglecting to explain whether the jar was in Epimetheus' house from the start or brought there by Pandora. If the jar was sent together with Pandora, we immediately find ourselves with two problems. First, Epimetheus loses any narrative significance: Pandora could have opened the jar anywhere, so there was no need to give her to Epimetheus. Moreover, as others have commented (Verdenius 64), the Greek word *pithos* means a huge storage jar of the kind that is sometimes half buried in the earth. If Pandora carried such a vessel from Mount Olympus, this would have been a tale of its own.

More plausible from a narrative perspective is the version transmitted by Proclus, according to which the jar was already in Epimetheus’ home. Here, Zeus has to scheme to give Pandora to Epimetheus because he wants someone to open the closed jar of misfortunes hidden in the man’s house.

However, this is not the only way the story is told. Some versions treat the vessel of misfortunes as a metaphor for Pandora, as we will see later. These versions may talk about a smaller container, a box, actually brought by her.

Another point of contention is Pandora’s motives for opening the container. Was it innocent curiosity or wickedness? This, too, is unclear. Indeed, while Hesiod is quick to assign blame to women in a range of areas, this tendency is not strongly reflected in his version of the Pandora myth. Hesiod does not mention any warning given either to Pandora or to Epimetheus concerning the jar; Epimetheus is only warned not to accept any gift from Zeus. If Pandora did not go against any admonitions given to her, she simply opened a jar in her husband's home. Regardless of the outcome of her deed, she cannot be considered truly guilty.

Finally, what is the place of hope in Hesiod's version? Does Hesiod mean to say that Zeus wanted to spread misery among humans and withhold only hope? Or is he suggesting that hope was preserved for humans as a remedy for their misfortunes? In Hesiod's version, the narrative supports both possibilities, although the events of the story are presented as a direct result of Zeus’ hostility toward humans.

Also, what is the source of hope? Hesiod says nothing about where either hope or the misfortunes come from. According to the myth referred to by Proclus, Prometheus stored the jar in Epimetheus’ house, suggesting that Prometheus is also the source of hope. Hesiod leaves this topic entirely untouched, but according to Aeschylus' version of Prometheus' story, as we shall see later, Prometheus is the one who bestowed hope on humankind. Does this mean that Prometheus was the one who put hope in the jar as a remedy for the misfortunes stored there, should they be released in spite of his precautions? This is never mentioned explicitly, but it certainly aligns with the rest of the myth.

Another point of interest is the lack of proportion between the narrative elements in Hesiod’s version. He describes the process of Pandora’s creation in great detail, but devotes only a few lines to the heart of the story—her arrival in Epimetheus' house and the opening of the jar. Hesiod ignores narrative structure in favor of elaborating on the part of the tale where he can express his attitude toward women.

The vessel in which the misfortunes are locked is almost an afterthought for Hesiod, but in Western cultural memory, it became the central image of Pandora's myth. This shift was accompanied by another change: the vessel, originally a big storage jar (*pithos*), was turned into abox and became cemented as such in Western awareness.

On the face of it, this represents no more than a formal change in the visual appearance of the container. However, it is a meaningful transformation. The source of the change is a translation error or memory lapse that affected the summary of the myth formulated by the Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (1508). Erasmus substituted the Latin word *pyxis* for the Greek *pithos*.

Erasmus' version roughly follows the structure of Hesiod's in that it minimizes the role of Prometheus. Erasmus explicitly describes Pandora as descending from heaven with the box in her hands. The box is also specified to be very pretty. Like Hesiod, Erasmus too does not mention the origins of the vessel's contents. He is also unclear on whether it was Pandora or Epimetheus who opened the vessel. In any case, the motive is implied to be mere curiosity. Erasmus' summary also makes no mention of hope.

The substitution of a box for the jar does not introduce an alien object into ancient Greek culture. Many artistic renditions have been preserved of young women with small jewelry boxes, mostly on reliefs or painting representing women who died unmarried. Erasmus may have considered such images as portraits of Pandora. But it is much more probable that, consciously or unconsciously, Erasmus conflated the myth of Pandora with another ancient story in which a woman opens a box in spite of warnings not to do so, causing a crisis.

This is Apuleius' fairy tale *Cupid and Psyche*, told in the second-century Roman novel *The Golden Ass*. The complex and picturesque plot recounts the wanderings and hardships of Psyche as she tries to win back her lover, the god Cupid. Psyche must pass endless trials and fulfil strenuous assignments. The last task, imposed upon her by Cupid's mother Venus, is to take a box, descend with it to the underworld, and ask Proserpina, the queen of the dead, to send in it a dose of her beauty. Psyche is forbidden from opening the box. However, since she, too, is blessed with almost godly beauty, she is curious to see Proserpina's divine beauty. But when she opens the box, she finds it contains deathly torpor instead. Psyche falls asleep, but Cupid comes to her aid at last. He wakes her up and marries her.

This fairy tale from late antiquity is far removed from Hesiod's archaic world. However, Erasmus' assimilation of both heroines leads to a much more positive representation of Pandora and smoothens out the crude misogyny in the ancient myth.

Erasmus may also have felt that Psyche's story was also a myth of femininity, as Erich Neumann would later explore, and that it can serve as a response or alternative to the myth of Pandora. His assimilation of both characters certainly contributed to later interpretations of the tale of Pandora as a myth of womanhood, like the story of Eve. This gendering of the myth is doubtlessly what made it so attractive for poets, artists, and scholars who would go on to revisit it again and again.

Some of them would be inspired by this “enigma of femininity” to develop an adoration of womanhood. Goethe, for example, was preoccupied with the character of Pandora throughout his life; he mentions her in the dramatic fragment *Prometheus*, written during his youth, and in the dramatic fragment *Pandora*, which he composed 40 years later. Others interpreted Pandora as a kind of fearful and threatening femme fatale, as Frank Wedekind did in his two-play drama *Pandora's Box* and *Earth Spirit*, also known as *Lulu*.

In her ground-breaking scholarship, Jane Harrison interprets Pandora as a late avatar of the archaic Earth goddess Rhea, who was also referred to by the ritual name “pandora”, meaning “all-giving” mother. The new worship of the Olympian gods caused Rhea to be downgraded to the mortal, harmful figure of the Pandora we know. We should also mention Vered Lev Kenaan's *Pandora's Senses*, a book that considers the myth of Pandora the birth of the inside-outside and concealing-revealing opposition that paved the way for the rise of Greek culture and philosophy.

Poets and thinkers occupied themselves mainly with the gendered aspects of the figure of Pandora. Meanwhile, for the general public, the myth became associated mainly with the image of a vessel which, if opened imprudently, could release a deluge of unwanted and harmful content.

This understanding may also be related to by the assimilation of Pandora with Psyche. The meaning of the name Psyche, soul, makes it possible to read the story not only in a gendered light, but also as a myth about the soul. This enables us to locate the notorious box in a sort of mental space. Terminology from the field of psychoanalysis, which speaks about repression, the unconsciousness, et cetera, seems to reflect that image.

This use is also the one we will focus on during this workshop. The question is: if, when, and under which conditions is it right to open such “Pandora’s boxes”?

The myth may lead us to an answer, at least to some extent. Of particular interest here is how we should understand the concept and function of hope, both in the myth and in our present-day world.

As mentioned, Hesiod's account of the myth is quite ambiguous about the concept and function of hope. However, it is useful here to look at the myth of Prometheus, which is closely connected with that of Pandora. As described in Aeschylus' drama *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is the one who gave hope to human beings.

In the drama, Prometheus tells the chorus about the history of his conflict with Zeus. He finishes by stating that he has saved humanity from the destruction Zeus planned, and is now being severely punished for the compassion he showed the human race. The chorus then asks if any other things may have incited Zeus' rage:

Chorus: Did your offence perhaps go further than you have said?

Prometheus: Yes: I caused men no longer to foresee their death.

Chorus: What cure did you discover for their misery?

Prometheus: I planted firmly in their hearts blind hopefulness.

Chorus: Your gift brought them great blessing.

Prometheus: I did more than that: I gave them fire. (247-252)

Remarkably, Prometheus considers hope as his most important gift to humans. The theft of fire, which is usually so closely associated with Prometheus, earns only a secondary mention (“I did more than that”).

Prometheus' mention of hope comes with a significant qualification: this hope is blind. It is created by preventing humans from knowing the day of their death. Curiously, when Prometheus details his gifts to humanity later in the drama, he says almost the opposite. He recounts that in the beginning, people entirely lacked orientation in space and time, and he is the one who bestowed on them the capacity for orientation and foreseeing the future:

 [They] knew no certain way

To mark of winter, or flowery spring, or fruitful summer;

Their every act was without knowledge, till I came.

I taught them to determine when stars rise or set –

A difficult art. (454-8)

As it turns out, this development of orientation was made possible by a primal act of erasing knowledge. Prometheus planted a certain blindness in the hearts of men. Here, blind hope is a substitute for foreseeing the day of death; in a way, it is the opposite of knowledge.

When one knows the time of their death, when the future is uncovered, it becomes possible to look upon one’s life as a spectator and observe it as a process that is realized before one's eyes. One is not required to do anything, so one becomes, in a way, a witness to one's own life rather than an active participant.

Once people can no longer foresee the future, they take responsibility for their lives and become active participants in processing them. Hope is not based on knowledge and certainty, but on expectations mixed with will, wishes, and intentions—and belief in one's capacity to act on all of these. Hope is what makes possible human endeavor; it is what makes people take action.

According to myth, Prometheus was the creator of human beings. He made them different from the gods, especially with regard to their mortality. At the same time, he provided them with everything they need to be more like the gods. His gift of hope is a good example. On the one hand, hope is rooted in human mortality. On the other hand, the fact that they are ignorant of the day of their death makes people feel and act as if they will live eternally, like gods.

Interestingly, Prometheus and Epimetheus, through their names and their actions, represent this duality of foresight and blindness that is so crucial to generating hope.

We should note that there also exists an opposite conceptualization of hope, one in which hope leads to passivity. Here, hope is based on absolute trust and belief. Absolute trust and belief are like knowledge: they cannot be represented as blindness. When one has absolute trust and belief, there is no need to take action to realize one's destiny. One simply has to wait and see how the divine plan will be realized without one's involvement.

This is the kind of hope we encounter in legends about faith and belief, for example, Chasidic legends. In the ancient Greek world, however, hope was conceived of in a very different way. There, hope was always connected with will and initiative; sometimes it was presented almost as a synonym for ambition. The hopeful man is active and energetic. He sees the future on the horizon as a blank slate that invites him to act.

Consider this description of the Athenian temperament by a Corinthian politician who was seeking to warn the Spartans about their rivals, as quoted in Thucydides' *Histories*:

They again are bold beyond their strength, adventurous above their own reason, and in danger hope still the best. [---] If they fail in any attempt, they do what is necessary for the present and enter presently into otherhopes. (Ibid. I, 70).

Also note the way Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric*, uses the term “hope” when describing the temper of young men:

They are [---] full of hope, for they are naturally as hot blooded as those who are drunken with wine, and besides, they have not yet experienced many failures. For the most part they live in hope, for hope is concerned with the future, as memory is with the past. For the young the future is long, the past short; for they are in the morning of life it is not possible for them to remember anything, but they have everything to hope; which makes them easy to deceive, for they readily hope. And they are more courageous, for they are full of passion and hope, and the former of these prevents them fearing, while the latter inspires them with confidence, for no one fears when angry, and hope of some advantage inspires confidence. [---] They are high minded for [---] there is high mindedness in thinking oneself worthy of great things, a feeling which belongs to one who is full of hope. (II, 12)

Old people, on the other hand, are described as lacking in hope:

And they are little given to hope owing to their experience, for things that happen are mostly bad and at all events generally turn out for the worse, (---) They live in memory rather than in hope, for the life that remains to them is short, but that which is past is long, and hope belongs to the future, memory to the past. (ibid. II, 13).

In conclusion, in the myth of Pandora, hope is conceived of as a kind of living potion that energizes people into taking part in their destiny instead of remaining passive victims of the misfortunes locked in the box. This is the case regardless of whether we interpret hope’s remaining under the lid as hope being preserved to support humanity, or as hope being prevented from spreading through the world.

That means the question of whether it is right to open a “Pandora’s box” depends entirely on the place and function we ascribe to hope.

**Part II**

[Workshop]

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