

INTRODUCTION

In ancient Athenian society, women lived very difficult lives. They had no economic or political independence, and even in the home, women were treated as inferior and often lived in a special part of the house known as the women's quarters. Girls were not formally educated like their brothers. They lived in their father's house until they married as young teenagers, at which time they moved to their husband's home. They did not speak to men outside the intimate circle of family members. When Athens became a democracy at the start of the fifth century B.C., women could not vote.

Despite the fact that Athenian women were not offered equal opportunities in their society, women often play important, and sometimes menacing, roles in Greek mythology. It is a contradiction then that, in both myth and reality, women were expected to be virtuous and good; at the same time, however, it was commonly believed that they were devious and wicked beneath their noble façade.

In mythology, Pandora was the first human woman, and her story may represent the contradictory issues associated with Greek women. Hephaestus, the god of fire and the forge, created Pandora at Zeus's command. Zeus intended her to be a form of punishment for the newly created human males. Zeus and some of the other gods wanted to put the humans back in their place after their powers had been so greatly enhanced by Prometheus. To achieve the gods' ends, Pandora is endowed with many gifts, among them great beauty and charm. The gods also give her a gift that will ultimately set free all the evils in the world—an ornate box, or a jar, depending on the version of

Pandora



the tale. Despite her own good intentions, the first female causes much grief and pain for mankind.

The story of Pandora and her intriguing but destructive box comes to us through Hesiod's *Theogony*. Pandora is a figure who has been interpreted in many different ways. Much of the contradiction surrounding this famous mythological character is thought to come from Hesiod's understanding, or misunderstanding, of her name. Mythology scholar Richmond Y. Hathorn explains, "The name *Pandora* does not mean 'she who was endowed with all gifts' [as in Hesiod's version of the story] but rather 'she who is giver of all,' and as such it was an epithet [name] of the earth-goddess."¹

PANDORA



Zeus was furious. Prometheus had tricked him, and the king of the gods wanted revenge. He also wanted to remind the humans that they would never be as powerful as the gods.

So far, there were only men in the human population. Women did not yet exist, although certainly there were female gods, or goddesses. Introducing women to the human race was part of Zeus's plan for revenge. First, Zeus went to the forge of Hephaestus and asked him to design a human being that would be female. Carefully, Zeus explained that she should be like the men on earth, yet somehow slightly different.

Hephaestus was happy to do Zeus a favor, and he went right to work. The god of fire and the forge was a very talented smith. Everything he made was beautiful, and his new creation was no different. When he was finished with the creature he showed his work to Zeus, who was very pleased with the results. The new creature was named Pandora. She was human, but she was clearly a woman. She was very beautiful and looked like a goddess. She had long flowing hair, flawless skin, and bright shining eyes. She was as graceful as a soft breeze, and she had a smile precious to see. Zeus hoped that her beauty would make the male humans accept and trust her.

Pandora



After Hephaestus had put the finishing touches on the first human woman, the gods showered her with many gifts, including golden-threaded clothes, shining jewelry, and fragrant smelling flowers. Among the gifts was a box that was covered with jewels, intricate carvings, and decorations. The box was very pretty, and Pandora was certain that such a beautiful object must surely contain something of equal magnificence. However, the gods had given Pandora the beautiful box on one condition: She could look at it as much as she liked, but she was never to open it. Pandora did not understand the reasoning behind this rule, but because the box was so pretty, she agreed to follow the warning of the gods.

Soon Pandora went to live on earth with the other humans. When she got there, she met Epimetheus who was living among the humans with his brother Prometheus. Epimetheus was overwhelmed by Pandora's dazzling beauty, and he fell in love with her instantly. Prometheus, aware of his brother's infatuation with Pandora, became suspicious that Zeus and the other Olympians were planning a trick. Prometheus warned his brother to be wary of any gift sent to earth by the Olympian gods. As usual, Epimetheus did not listen to his brother. He was very much in love with Pandora, and despite his brother's warning, he married the wonderful new creature and brought her to his home. Epimetheus never thought to ask his new bride about the beautiful box she always carried with her.

The couple lived very happily after their marriage. Every day, Pandora would lovingly admire her beautiful box, but she obeyed the order of the gods and never opened it. Soon, however, looking at the box was not enough. Her curiosity became stronger and stronger, and finally one day she could no longer resist the urge to open the box, regardless of the consequences.



Pandora



When Pandora opened the box and discovered what was hidden inside its beautiful exterior, she knew at once that Zeus's revenge had been accomplished. Inside the magnificent box were all the evil spirits known to the gods. Now that the lid was open, they all quickly flew out. Sorrow, hunger, anger, disease, madness, and a hundred other horrible conditions filled Pandora's room and, like smoke, they escaped out into the world to plague mankind for the rest of time. As the evils swarmed around her, Pandora became frightened. As quickly as she could, she slammed shut the lid of the box, but Pandora realized that it was too late to regret not having obeyed the gods. Their revenge was final. However, Pandora noticed that one spirit still remained in her box. This was the spirit of hope.

Soon, when they felt the effects of the various plagues and evil spirits that had flown out from Pandora's box, the people on earth understood that their time of peace had ended. The people recognized the power of the gods' revenge, and understood that forces existed that were stronger than their own modest powers. From that time on, the people vowed to do their best to keep from angering the gods any further and were comforted by the fact that hope was safe in Pandora's box. The knowledge that hope had not been destroyed gave the people faith that peace would return some day.