

Post-Patriarchal Pandoras for Very Young Readers

Hesiod's *Works and Days* provides us with the fullest ancient account of Pandora. Responding to Prometheus' theft of fire, Zeus orders the creation of Pandora, who is intended to be a "bad thing" (57) in exchange for fire. She is fashioned from clay by Hephaestus, clothed by Athena, bedecked with ornaments by the Graces, Persuasion, and the Hours, and given tricky words as well as a cunning nature by Hermes. Hesiod explains that Pandora, gifted by the gods, is aptly named "All (*pan*)-Gifted (*dora*)" (80-82) and is bestowed on Epimetheus. Pandora proves to be trouble when she opens a storage jar, a *pithos* (94), and releases ills among humans. Hope remains in the jar, life has been made difficult for humans, and Zeus' intention is borne out. Hesiod's tale presents Pandora as a paradigmatically problematic female: her agency causes lasting trouble and can serve as a justification for the patriarchal control of women. That said, Hesiod leaves open interpretive room for questioning Zeus, the patriarch in chief who orchestrates Pandora's creation to punish humans for a violation they did not themselves commit.

Two now-familiar features of Pandora's story are absent from Hesiod's version: curiosity and a box. Curiosity becomes a feature of the myth in later antiquity as it is conflated with and influenced by the Biblical story of Eve, and the box is substituted for the *pithos* in Erasmus' 16th century retelling.¹ The near ubiquity of these elements nowadays reminds us that traditional stories may be refocused over time and that aspects currently considered crucially constitutive may not have always been so.

My ultimate aim in this paper is to contextualize and highlight two works for young audiences that adapt and refocus the myth of Pandora in significant ways: *Be Patient, Pandora!*,

¹ Panofsky and Panofsky 11-12 and 14-19.

a boardbook by Joan Holub and Leslie Patricelli published in 2014, and *Pandora*, a picturebook by Victoria Turnbull published in 2017. Since both of these books feature Pandoras whom I characterize as “post-patriarchal,” I thought it would be useful first to discuss two examples of “patriarchal” Pandoras found in children’s literature.

In *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths*, as in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Pandora is created at Zeus’ command in response to Prometheus’ theft of fire. But the d’Aulaires’ Zeus is more hands-on than Hesiod’s: the d’Aulaires’ Zeus gives Pandora the jar and explicitly tells her not to open it; he also gives Pandora curiosity. The d’Aulaires tell us that it was Zeus’ hope that the miseries in the jar, once unleashed by Pandora’s curiosity, would goad humans into being better. Ah, this Zeus is motivated by a desire for human moral improvement! The d’Aulaires strive to make their Zeus a patriarch whose master-plan places him beyond the kind of critical scrutiny we may feel invited to train on Hesiod’s more ambivalently-portrayed deity.

While elevating Zeus, the d’Aulaires diminish Pandora. Although she’s an agent insofar as she opens the jar, she is belittled as “a beautiful but silly woman” and is filled—by Zeus—with an “insatiable curiosity” that “got the better of her” (74). Such judgmental, patriarchal circumscription is reinforced by the illustration of Pandora as a korē statue, object-like, and the d’Aulaires’ arrangement of the page makes her visually comparable to the unleashed miseries themselves.

I mention the d’Aulaires’ book, published in 1962, because of its iconic status; my next example is more recent: *The McElderry Book of Greek Myths*, published in 2008, with text by Eric Kimmel and illustrations by Pep Montserrat. In words and images Kimmel and Montserrat’s Zeus is presented as akin to the Biblical creator God: we see Pandora in the palm of Zeus’ hand and are told that Zeus himself fashioned her to be a companion to Epimetheus,

who presides Adam-like over other animals. Zeus bestows Pandora on Epimetheus, whom Pandora recognizes as “handsome, kind, and truly in love with her” (8). Although Epimetheus says that they share equally in their home, he makes Pandora promise not to open a particular box and does not explain why. Her curiosity about it grows, and she is finally prompted to open it when “a tiny voice, like the cry of a baby kitten” (9) calls out, pleading that it and its siblings are weak and in danger of dying without light or air. Pandora’s compassion leads her to peek inside the box, which then flies open as the enclosed “worries and misfortunes” (11) escape. Pandora, bitten and stung by the creatures, apologizes to Epimetheus for breaking her promise, and Epimetheus acknowledges that he should have told her that he had boxed up the “ugly things” (11) that he had not thought fit to distribute among the animals. Together Pandora and Epimetheus release Hope from the box, “a shining creature with gold wings” who stays in their hearts, ensuring that “the sorrows and troubles of the world can never defeat us” (12).

Kimmel and Montserrat’s patriarchy might be kinder and gentler than the d’Aulaires’, but it’s a male-privileging hierarchy nonetheless. Pandora is passed from Zeus to Epimetheus; the males are in charge, and when Pandora finally acts on her own, her compassion proves gullible and leads to trouble. This Pandora’s care may seem more positive than the Zeus-implanted curiosity in the d’Aulaires’ book, but in both cases a woman is disastrously overcome by one of her traits when acting outside the oversight of her husband. Montserrat’s illustrations visually enforce Pandora’s assumedly “proper” relationship to her husband—physically oriented toward and subordinated to him.

At this point one might reasonably say that we should expect a patriarchal trajectory in texts explicitly purporting to relay this ancient Greek myth. But I’d like us to notice that the authors of both books have reconfigured the patriarchal constraints that bear on Pandora and her

depiction as if to make patriarchy itself more defensible or palatable. These reconfigurations are then retrojected and presented as part of the ancient Greek story. I want to be clear: of course a retelling of a myth is going to bear the stamp of its particular time and tellers. But there is something disingenuous in offering the 20th and 21st century elements of these retold stories as if they hail from archaic Greece. In substituting forms of female subordination that may be more familiar or seem less objectionable to their modern audiences, the d'Aulaires, Kimmel, and Montserrat consolidate—and, in the context of children's literature, *teach*—contemporary patriarchal tropes while making them appear timeless, given, and authorized by the “wisdom” of an ersatz antiquity.²

By contrast, my first example of a post-patriarchal Pandora locates Pandora in the present day. In *Be Patient, Pandora!* Joan Holub (author) and Leslie Patricelli (illustrator) present a young girl who is told by her mother not to open a tied-up box. Left alone and obviously intrigued by the container, Pandora touches it, leans on it, sits on it, and even stands on it. She does not outright open it, but when she jumps on it, cupcakes spring out spectacularly. One cupcake remains inside: decorated with a heart, it becomes a symbol of the mother's steadfast love for her daughter.

² Stephens and McCallum 68. The retellings of Pandora by the d'Aulaires, Kimmel, and Montserrat may illustrate the “danger of writing our way deeper and deeper into [patriarchy]” mentioned by Purkiss (447-448). Also consider Nodelman and Reimer: “...the versions of myths and legends found in books intended for children have almost always been reworked to suit current ideas about what children might enjoy or ought to hear. They represent a form of the ‘claw back’...a version of the alien that makes it more familiar and less frightening” (326). I suggest that, in the case of Pandora's story, “claw back” retrojection supports patriarchy by rendering it seemingly unchanging, and hence unstrange, in its manifestation.

Holub and Patricelli make their Pandora playful, and her accidental opening of the box through miscalibrated exuberance does little lasting harm. Though Pandora's insistent interest in the box leads to its opening, I would differentiate it from the insatiable curiosity of the d'Aulaires' Pandora or the gullible compassion of Kimmel's in that Holub and Patricelli's Pandora is a child. Her fascination with the box is a kind of boundary-testing—she does all sorts of things to the box, but she does not actually open the box itself. The messy consequences of Pandora's "letter of the law" envelope-pushing become part of a learning process, and the mother's loving reassurance at the end of the book illustrates that learning does not require externally imposed punishment. Holub and Patricelli's Pandora faces no abiding blame or lasting negative effects; the book steers clear of a punitive point as well as a belittling or judgmental tone. And there is no patriarch, human or divine: the mother-daughter relationship is affirmed, unmediated by an authoritative male figure. Unlike illustrations by the d'Aulaires and Montserrat, which position viewers at a removed or superior vantage point, Patricelli situates Pandora and readers in a shared, dynamic space in which Pandora's gender is not problematized. We are not encouraged to observe Pandora from a hierarchical perspective but from a friendly one. Indeed, Pandora even seems to look at and talk directly to us: "I am not opening the box. I am only touching it" (9-10). In *Be Patient, Pandora!* Holub and Patricelli use both visual and verbal narrative to develop their Pandora outside the male-privileging parameters which have shaped her predecessors.

While Holub and Patricelli set their boardbook in a contemporary familial context, Victoria Turnbull brings readers into a fantastical place in her picturebook *Pandora*. Turnbull's Pandora is a girl-fox who lives alone amid heaps of trash. In a seemingly post-apocalyptic setting Pandora collects and fixes broken things. When she finds an injured blue bird, she makes

it snug in a box and nurses it back to health. As the bird grows strong, it brings Pandora sprigs of plants, which take root in the box. Though Pandora becomes depressed when the bird disappears, the plants grow. One day Pandora awakens to sunshine, greenery, and her returned bird-friend. The book closes with Pandora in a vibrant landscape of flourishing plants and creatures.

Turnbull works some transformative changes on Pandora's story. Pandora becomes an effective agent who repairs things. She does not unleash lasting troubles for humans like her traditional counterpart nor even create a temporary confectionary mess as Holub and Patricelli's Pandora does; instead, she participates in the recuperation of her environment. Questions of Pandora's culpability thus don't enter the text, and Pandora's actions can't become a justification for a male-over-female hierarchy. Though the bird is gendered masculine, he and Pandora are bound by friendship, and the reciprocity of her careful nursing and his plant-sharing becomes the engine of positive change. The traditional, patriarchal story of Pandora situates her squarely in the context of punishment and suffering: she is created as a kind of retribution for Prometheus' theft of fire, and her action ensures that misery is a part of human existence. Turnbull's story, by contrast, starts with the trash that humans themselves have accumulated, and we see Pandora move beyond the piles of rubbish and the broken-ness they represent. The world thrives, and Pandora takes a happy place in it.³

³ When I delivered this paper at the 2021 meeting of the Society for Classical Studies, Deborah Lyons mentioned that Pandora's name—etymologically explained by Hesiod as "All-Gifted"—can also be understood as "All-Giving," and this alternative understanding of the ancient Pandora's name and identity connects her to Gaia, the Earth. (See Lyons 42.) Lyons then wondered if we could similarly see Turnbull's Pandora as an avatar of the all-giving Earth. While Turnbull's Pandora is definitely allied with the natural environment, I would suggest that

Turnbull's adaptation reverses the mythological Pandora, and her use of a fox character can also be seen as a kind of reversal since foxes in children's literature are often marked as tricky and even villainous⁴—Turnbull's girl-fox is anything but. And what should we make of Pandora's being neither fully fox nor wholly human? The presence of anthropomorphic animals in children's literature has been connected to the Romantic equation of children and animals as beings adjacent to but not entirely contained by adult human society; according to such categorical logic, anthropomorphized animals can readily serve as stand-ins for child readers.⁵ Anthropomorphic animals promote identification while simultaneously providing an enabling distance,⁶ allowing readers to engage a narrative intently yet safely. In this way, anthropomorphic animals help a narrative to function a bit like myth: they create a symbolic discursive space that is both connected to yet separate from an audience's lived reality, inviting and allowing them to explore ideas. With her Pandora Turnbull prompts us to envision what could lie beyond our current world—apart from adults, post patriarchy, and (perhaps) even post human. The hybridity of Turnbull's girl-fox allows Pandora to represent possibilities beyond disasters created by human adults, including gendered subordination and environmental degradation. Young readers identifying with this Pandora are given the chance to imagine

Turnbull holds back from making her Pandora represent or symbolize the earth (or Earth). Turnbull's Pandora contributes to the rejuvenation of the environment but does not solely cause it. This distinction is significant, I think, because Turnbull refrains from making Pandora all-powerful, a move that would keep hierarchy intact, even if it elevated Pandora in that hierarchy. Diane Purkiss discusses some limitations of such moves in women's rewriting of myth.

⁴ Dunn 34, 36.

⁵ Marcus 129-130, Ratelle 7.

⁶ Burke and Copenhaver 212, Marcus 128.

themselves as involved in making a renewed world, partly out of and partly in spite of the old one.

Both *Be Patient, Pandora!* and Turnbull's *Pandora* side-line patriarchy: male perspectives and concerns aren't privileged, and female subject positions aren't subordinated. Although both books are clearly related to the ancient Greek myth, they do not replicate or reinforce a founding narrative for gender-based hierarchy or antagonism. Indeed, neither book presents Pandora as part of an origin story; neither depicts her as the first woman who sets the stage for women to come. However, the books may become "firsts" in their own right.⁷

Accessible to very young readers, they could be a child's first encounter with Pandora. Like a *hysteron-proteron* with a political valence, each book potentially displaces the primacy of the ancient Greek Pandora. *Be Patient, Pandora!* provides an afterword with a version of the myth; the myth thereby becomes backstory, superseded by the satisfying fulfillment of the boardbook's contemporary tale. Turnbull's *Pandora* makes no explicit reference to Greek mythology beyond Pandora's name, but its very workings suggest that myth is another thing to be reclaimed and remade amidst the detritus of a disaster-ridden past. Performing acts of transformative salvage, Holub, Patricelli, and Turnbull offer the hopeful possibility that young audiences won't see a patriarchal Pandora as given or inevitable.

Holub, Patricelli, and Turnbull participate in a recuperation of Pandora in children's literature traceable back to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*, published in 1852. Conflating Pandora and Eve, Hawthorne tempers the misogyny and punitive edge of both traditional tales: Pandora opens the box when tempted, but Epimetheus shares in the blame,

⁷ Murnaghan and Roberts discuss the way in which versions of myth encountered in childhood may supplant ancient versions for readers (98-99).

and they both release Hope, who points toward the ultimate goal of a blessed afterlife. Although we may now consider Hawthorne's treatment limited in a number of ways, he revises the ancient Greek myth to address some Christian and patriarchal prejudices common in 19th century America. Holub, Patricelli, and Turnbull push their reclamatory projects further, and their post-patriarchal Pandoras see hope realized in their here-and-now: Holub and Patricelli's Pandora is given not merely the hope but even the guarantee of her mother's love, and Turnbull's Pandora aids and enjoys the thriving interconnectedness of the natural world.

It seems fitting that Hawthorne, Holub, Patricelli, and Turnbull all eschew the mantle of the "mythological anthology" when presenting their non-traditional Pandoras. Instead of offering a comprehensive reference-ready survey of mythology like other books of Hawthorne's time, *A Wonder-Book* strikes a playful tone and presents its stories as if narrated by a very un-authoritative undergraduate romping with his young relatives during vacations from school. The reading audience becomes part of the circle of fun. As a boardbook *Be Patient, Pandora!* is fashioned for and friendly to young hands—its very physicality manifests an eagerness to engage its audience un-hierarchically and where they are. The book even incorporates smudges into its pages; no child need worry that their fingermarks may disturb a pristine surface. (Unlike the box of cupcakes, this book is ready for rough-and-tumble handling). Turnbull's *Pandora* harnesses picturebooks' hallmark power to bring readers into an experience that is both immersive and highly personal. The book's generous size (open, it measures 19 by 11 inches) invites us to enter its world, yet each reader has freedom to move between words and images—as well as within the lovingly detailed pictures—as they see fit. *The Wonder-Book*, *Be Patient, Pandora!*, and

Turnbull's *Pandora* all use formats that complement and reinforce their counter-traditional content.⁸

I'd like to close by underlining a final, significant way in which Holub, Patricelli, and Turnbull are strategically similar to Hawthorne: they offer their stories as adaptations—not retellings but patent remakings. They do not present themselves as conveying ancient Greek versions of Pandora's story, and they thereby avoid problematic claims of historicity that arise—as we saw—through undisclosed retrojection. As adaptations, *Be Patient, Pandora!* and Turnbull's *Pandora* can engage Pandora's story without repeating in another key—and so bolstering (implicitly or explicitly)—its ancient patriarchal bent.⁹ With the post-patriarchal Pandoras of Holub, Patricelli, and Turnbull, we witness the ongoing life of a myth in children's literature. We encounter not compromised and compromising versions of what Pandora was, but suggestions of what she—and we—could be.

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A version of this paper was delivered at the 2021 conference of the Society for Classical Studies as part of the “Think of the Children!” panel sponsored by the Women's Classical Caucus.

Posted on pegasus-reception.com 2021

⁸ We might view post-antique lyric poems which offer alternative perspectives on Penelope's experience in the same light: they use a non-epic format to challenge epic's presentation of Penelope. Doherty (162) mentions such poems but does not explore the possibility that the very choice of a shorter poetic form might be part of the strategy of revisionism.

⁹ Stephens and McCallum discuss the limitations put on a retelling: “the shape and outcome of the story finally offer very little room to move” (87-88). I see adaptations as offering more opportunity to engage traditional stories in transformational—liberating and refocusing—ways.

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