

# Mythology

## Unit 2 of 6

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### Atlas



Atlas was the strongest of all the Titans. In the ten-year War of the Titans, he was the commander of the supporters of Cronos, which put him on the losing side. Zeus punished him by banishing him to live at the edge of the world and to support the sky on his shoulders.

Hercules (another of the gods) tricked Atlas into performing a seemingly impossible task -- to pick three golden apples from a magical tree in a faraway garden. Hercules agreed to hold up the sky while Atlas completed the task and brought the apples back to him. When Atlas returned, he did not want to take back the burden, so, with a little fast thinking, Hercules conned Atlas into holding the sky just long enough for him to put padding on his shoulders. Not realizing that he had been tricked, Atlas took back his burden. The Atlas myth was the ancient Greek's explanation as to why the sky does not fall.

#### 1. Write another fictional story that explains why the sky does not fall.

Some sources say that the Greek hero Perseus presented the head of Medusa to Atlas, who was exhausted from holding up the heavens. Atlas stared at the monster for a brief moment, and was immediately turned to stone. He became the Atlas chain of mountains in northwestern Africa.

#### 2. Write a poem about a geographical feature and its mythological beginnings.

From this myth we get the word "atlas," which has several meanings:

- \* a collection of maps
- \* a person carrying a heavy burden, physically or emotionally
- \* an Air Force intercontinental ballistic missile called the Atlas
- \* a chain of mountains in Africa
- \* the first cervical vertebra (bony structure) of the neck

#### 3. Why do you think Atlas is a good name for maps, the first cervical vertebra, and an intercontinental ballistic missile?

We see many words from mythology in the trademarks of businesses. For example, on grocery shelves is a well-known cleaning product, Ajax, the "foaming action" household cleanser, which gets its name from a Greek warrior in the Trojan War who "cleaned up" in battle. The Mercury automobile gets its name from the messenger of the gods Hermes (Mercury); the Odyssey Travel Agency, from the Odysseus myth; Xerox, from Xeros, the god of reproduction and replication; and Nike footwear, from Nike, the goddess of victory.

**4. Pretend an advertising agency has commissioned you to create a logo or trademark for a new product. Draw a trademark/logo for a product named "Atlas".**

### Prometheus, The Fire-Bearer

Prometheus, another Titan, is considered one of the great benefactors of mankind. The name means "forethought" (having the ability to foresee the future for everyone but oneself). Life did not exist on earth at this time, so the first task that Zeus gave Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus was to create animals and then, with enough clay and water left over, to create man by molding him into the image of the gods. Man was always to be dominant over animals.

**5. Do you think man should be dominant over animals? Explain.**

Prometheus grew to love the mortals he helped to create, but pitied them because they suffered in the cold, ate raw meat, and lived in caves. Fire was considered sacred to the gods. Zeus never wanted mankind to have fire for fear the mortals would become wise and as strong as the gods, and perhaps eventually overthrow him.

Knowing the risk he was taking by defying Zeus, Prometheus flew up to Zeus' palace of night, stole a few embers of fire from his fireplace, and quickly returned to earth, where he demonstrated the many uses of fire to the mortals.

**6. How do you decide whether a risk is too great to take?**

**7. Do you think Prometheus was strong or weak because of his actions to help the humans? Explain why.**

When Zeus awoke the next morning, he became so enraged at the sight of smoke coming up from earth that he ordered Herphaestus (Vulcan) to chain Prometheus to a far distant cliff that was guarded by an ugly vulture that tore away at his liver each day. Because Prometheus was immortal, meaning that he would never die, his liver grew back each night. He remained there, on the cliff, for ages, freezing in the winter, scorched by the blazing sun in the summer, and never complaining of his fate. Prometheus had learned from his mother's prophecy who planned to overthrow Zeus as King of the gods, but chose not to tell Zeus even though it would have meant his release.



**8. Explain why you think Prometheus chose not to tell Zeus who was planning on overthrowing him.**

The ancient Greeks revered Prometheus. Without any concern for himself, he became the benefactor of mankind. We can learn an important lesson from this myth: good acts are not always rewarded. Often those who make paths easier for others do so at the cost of making their own lives harder. Prometheus had the courage to stand up to Zeus. He knew the risk, and he took the punishment. He controlled his own destiny.

This myth has given us the word "promethean," which describes a person who is daringly creative in doing something beneficial for mankind. A good example of a promethean effort is that of Benjamin Franklin. Laughed at and ridiculed by critics, his experiments with a kite and a metal key in the midst of a thunderstorm gave mankind a better understanding of electricity. His lightning rod invention saved countless buildings and ships from disastrous fires. Lightning is a powerful force and extremely dangerous.

Time Magazine's *Franklin Anniversary Issue* states: "Franklin snatched lightning from the sky and the scepter from a tyrant."

**9. Interpret the above quotation. What do you think it means?**

Mythology's contribution to our civilization in the field of art includes a famous sculpture of Prometheus in Rockefeller Center, New York City. The area in front of it is flooded in the winter for skaters, and some days you can see it on the Today Show when the TV cameras are scanning the crowd. The mountain-like pedestal at the foot of the statue symbolizes earth, while the circle containing the signs of the zodiac represents the heavens. A long granite wall behind the statue has a quotation from the Greek playwright, Aeschylus, which says, "Prometheus, teacher in every art, brought the fire to earth that hath proven to mortals a means to mighty ends."

**10. Do the "ends" always justify the "means"? Explain.**

Like Prometheus, many heroes young and old have faced difficult choices between their own safety and some greater good. They must have relied on a compass within themselves.

**11. Who would you nominate to the Hall of Fame for a Promethean Effort? Be sure to include the who, what, why, when, and where details.**

Prometheus knew and understood the risk he was about to undertake. We, too, can see opportunity as (1) a risk and refuse it; or (2) a challenge for growth that will require changes, decisions, and commitment.

**12. Give two examples of opportunities, one you would consider too risky and refuse it, and another you would consider a challenge for growth and accept it.**

**Pandora**



According to mythology, it was Pandora, the first woman created, who was responsible for all the miseries in the world. Her name means "all-gifted". Zeus wanted to punish Prometheus one more time, so he ordered the gods to create a ravishingly beautiful woman, and the goddesses to dress her in lovely garments. She was given in marriage to Epimetheus, brother of Prometheus. As one of her wedding gifts, she received a box, which she was warned not to open. However, driven with overwhelming curiosity, she carefully opened the box. Out flew horrible little monsters in a black, stinking cloud that represented evils and torments that would plague mankind forever. Each of the gods had put in the worst thing possible -- sickness and suffering, death, envy, hatred, lying, jealousy, vengeance, anger, and many, many more. Hera, the queen of the gods, couldn't change what the other gods had already done, but she could try to help -- she put HOPE in the box.

**13. If Pandora opened her box today, what other evils or torments might fly out?**

Pandora, terrified at what she had done, quickly slammed the lid on the box and managed to keep one last thing inside.

**14. Do you think that HOPE flew out of the box? Or was HOPE left inside? Why?**

**15. Do you think that HOPE was intended to be a blessing or a curse? Explain.**

The term "Pandora's box" is commonly used to refer to a source of trouble or difficulty, creating an uncontrollable situation that would cause great grief. It also represents anything best left unopened, or not discussed for fear of what might come of it.

**16. What might the following New York Times headline mean: "The President Has Opened Up a Pandora's Box"? Give an example.**

A stereotype is defined as a preconceived opinion about persons who typify or conform to the same pattern, or who are "cast in the same mold." For example, the saying that "blondes have more fun" is a stereotype.

**17. Does the myth about Pandora have a stereotype about females? Explain.**

**18. Give an example of stereotyping in**

- a) TV programs
- b) Magazines
- c) Advertisements

### **Achilles**

This famous myth reminds us that we all have a place that can be hurt, and that even the strongest amongst us has vulnerability. The Latin word "vulnero" means "to wound." Once we recognize someone's "soft spot," we should not try to hit it. That's important! In everyday living, it is cruel to take advantage of a person's weakness.

**19. List three vulnerabilities that someone might have.**

Achilles was the mightiest of all the Greeks in the long drawn out war with the Trojans. When he was born, a soothsayer (prophet) predicted that Achilles would have a glorious life but a short one. In an attempt to change his fate, his mother took him as an infant to the Underworld and dipped him in the River Styx. That was a sacred river to the gods, and if a mortal was dipped in it, nothing could kill him. Unfortunately, she held him by the heel and, as a result, the waters did not touch his entire heel. That left him vulnerable to harm.

**20. Where do vulnerabilities come from? Are we born with them? Do we acquire them through experiences?**

At his coming of age, his father (King Peleus) gave him a helmet, a shield, and a horse -- all three normally considered powerful weapons. Achilles boasted that he was the strongest and the greatest! It was in the final moments of the Trojan War that he proved to be the champion of the Greeks. Almost single-handedly, he forced the fighting Trojans to retreat.

In the end, an arrow, guided by Apollo, the god of archery, struck his heel and killed him. Some stories say that Achilles' continual boasting angered Apollo.



In the human body, the Achilles tendon is located in the lower leg behind the ankle; it serves to attach the calf muscles of the leg to the ankle. It is the thickest and strongest tendon in the body.

Today, when we talk about any crucial flaw that causes a person to fail, we call that flaw the person's "Achilles heel".

21. Create a situation using the expression "Achilles heel."

22. What might be the Achilles' heel of the following:

- \* A bacterial infection
- \* A mosquito
- \* A computer
- \* A car

### The First Spider (Arachne)

Arachne  
nimble-fingered  
weaver of fine embroidery  
challenged Pallas Athena.

Pallas Athena  
beautiful goddess  
weaver of immortal robes  
conquered Arachne.

Arachne  
would hang  
to cover her shame  
but death was denied her forever!

For Athena  
transformed the shameful Arachne  
to preserve the beautiful weaving  
and Arachne became a spider.

Arachne had achieved excellence in her weaving. It was her only claim to greatness. However, she was not satisfied just to be the best mortal weaver. She got the idea that she was a better weaver than any of the gods. She lost her sense of perspective and forgot that she was a human. She became arrogant and insolent, even to the old woman who gave her advice. Everyone thought that only Athena could have been her teacher, because who could possibly be a better teacher than the goddess of wisdom?

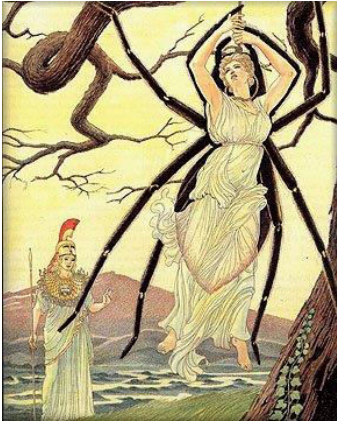
Then, to make matters worse, Arachne bragged about her skill and had the audacity to challenge Athena to a contest. "If she wins," said Arachne, "I shall accept whatever punishment or shame she wishes to impose upon me." Imagine how outraged Athena was that a mortal would dare to challenge a goddess! Even though she offered to forgive Arachne if she would accept the superiority of the immortal gods, the contest went on as scheduled.



Athena wove into her tapestry the immortal gods. Arachne wove into her tapestry many of the faults of the gods, and her work was filled with spite. The work was so beautiful that Athena was forced to admire it. Nevertheless, Arachne knew that she had insulted the gods, and she tried to hang herself in her own web.

### 23. Why did Arachne feel the need to show the faults of the gods?

Athena cried out: "Stay, wretched and perverse girl. You shall not die. You shall live to do the work for which you are best fitted. You and your children shall be among the greatest spinners in the world." Arachne was changed immediately into a spider. Look in dark corners, and you might find wonderful webs. That is Arachne at work!



### 24. Write an ending to the story if Arachne had won the contest.

25. It is important to do your best, but is it also important to recognize that there is always someone who can do the same thing just as well, and perhaps even better. Why?

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*Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes*

## Appendix Greek Mythology: Unit 2 of 6

### Citations

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