

## Editor's Preface: Pandora's box. Gender and Power

It is our pleasure to present the second volume of *Journal of Gender and Power* to you, with hope that it will arouse your interest. Not accidentally can the *Pandora* painting by John William Waterhouse be found on the cover of the journal. The categories of knowledge, cultural gender and power are leitmotifs running through the whole painting and determining its significance. Let us take a closer look at the painting.

Night. A black wood. A beautiful woman with a calm expression is kneeling at the foot of the stone plinth. A grand beautiful golden box is standing in front of her. The glow of the box is illuminating her face and the alabastrine skin of her naked arms. On the right there is a flowing stream, an often-encountered symbol of the evanescence of life. The woman is no one else but mythological Pandora. In subsequent interpretations and rewritings of the myth, the box given to her as a dowry would transform from a simple clay vessel into a box which is presented as a fine piece of craftsmanship by Waterhouse. This box looks nothing like the clay bottle described by Hesiod. Pandora is opening the box in the thick wood which appears to be dense with meanings. The wood is a symbol of concentrated and unforeseeable difficulties and it is a recurring topos in fairy tales. However, there is nothing disturbing about the wood in the painting. The stream flowing next to Pandora and blue lights coming from the distance are showing that the bright day is nearby and that regular life is going on. Pandora has not lost her way. Just a few steps away, the wood ends. She can be seen at the moment of opening the lid of the box. The time has stopped and nothing augurs the approaching misfortune. However, those who are familiar with the myth know that all the evils of the world are about to escape. Pandora, similarly to biblical Eve, symbolizes the betrayal of one's will and trespassing against the ban which results in the end of calm and happiness. Mythological Pandora is the first woman created by Zeus out of earth and fire.

She was sent to the world full of harmony and homogeneity which was populated solely by men. Nevertheless, the Pandora myth can be also interpreted in a different way, especially in the context of the painting by Waterhouse. His Pandora seems to be opening a box full of knowledge, prompted by curiosity. This knowledge is tantamount to different discourses which introduce anxiety and chaos into the one-sided and ordered world. The world based on simple and binary schemes. Even though this knowledge brings anxiety and is frequently unwanted, it allows for showing diversity and complexity of reality while not necessarily facilitating its understanding. Pandora's box symbolizes knowledge. It can be the knowledge about 'a woman', but also about 'a man' which is not always uttered by a female voice in the discourse of femininity. Pandora is also a symbol of unconstrained woman's power.

The beautiful Pandora is led by emotions—curiosity and desire—but at the same time she acts very logically: she makes a choice, opens the box which was given to her as a dowry. Is it possible to imagine someone who would not open it? This curiosity is dangerous but life-giving in nature—it gives rise to comprehension and transgression (what is more, if Pandora had not opened the box, then who would remember her a thousand years later?). The content of the box would always change according to the wishes of the authors of the myth's subsequent versions. However, anxieties and hope have always remained on the bottom of the box. The opening of the box is an act of losing control over what will happen, while the locked box used to give a feeling of stability and safety.

Several decades ago, American feminists started to claim that history had been written by men, about men and for men. As a result, they believed that the English word 'history' is nothing more but 'his story'. Thus, they put forward an idea of writing history by women, about women and for women—her-story.

This might be the case with the myth about Pandora which so far could have been rewritten and reinterpreted by men. But how about reading it differently?

The opening of the box can symbolize new breakthroughs in science and social life, which initially might appear to be disastrous and appear to question the social order in a destructive way. However, such breakthroughs via numerous transgressions and (re)interpretations can give rise to different emancipating discourses of knowledge and power. Who knows, maybe after opening the box one of the thoughts born out of it

---

led to the idea that even though femininity and masculinity are always inherently biological, they can give rise to a number of social constructs. Cultural gender, which is still considered by many as a plague and misfortune, for others opens the door to freedom, equal rights and empowerment. What seemed to be a disorder or even a misfortune from the perspective of old stereotypes is transforming into its opposite, namely, into the ability of defining a woman and a man and the ability of expressing the freedom to creating one's biography. Undoubtedly, this interpretation of the Pandora myth is much closer to the intention of the authors. In the gender discourse we are often presented with the knowledge which is difficult, ambiguous and prone to multiple interpretations. This knowledge is inextricably connected with power, especially the power of understanding. Thus, the curiosity of researchers who frequently open the proverbial 'Pandora's box' leads to pluralism of discourses and to transgression. The knowledge offered in the myth about Pandora and Pandora herself are contradictory, ambiguous and incoherent. We need to bear in mind that Pandora literally means 'the all-gifted' or 'the all-giving'. She was endowed with beauty and sensuality by Venus, and with the gift of intelligence, eloquence and the power of seduction with words by Mercury. Enjoy the reading and do not hesitate to publish your articles in the next volume.

Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik  
Editor-in-Chief