

# Loki and Prometheus: The Curse of Cunning-Intelligence

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When discussing their interpretation of Greek etymology and the trait of cunning-intelligence, Detienne and Vernant neglected to address its ultimate purpose. In an effort to further explore the idea of cunning-intelligence, the motivation of the characters who exemplify this trait, and the effects of their presence, the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus during the introduction of fire to man described in Hesiod's *Theogony* as well as *Works and Days* and the interactions of Odin and Loki concerning the murder of Baldr in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* will be discussed. These works are cultural perspectives of how the events in the divine world affect the mortal world and therefore offer interesting insight into the structure and values of the society of their respective origins. As such, this comparison will be approached from an anthropological standpoint and discuss how these stories reflect upon the role and dynamic of certain social qualities such as "cunning-intelligence," the retribution-based justice systems, and the perception of the divine in Greek and Norse culture. More importantly, to explore the idea of the characters themselves being liminality figures by which plot and society continue. In addition, the way in which these myths have made a place for themselves in modern society and the value we now assign them will allow us to see how they have evolved over time, both in meaning and content. Comparing topics such as the role of fate and the way in which society progresses among different geographic regions and time periods should allow us to better understand our own culture.

### *Cunning-Intelligence: the Fusion of Being and Becoming*

There is a division in Greek etymology between the idea of being and becoming, the stable and the transitory, intelligence gathered from a specific set of learned knowledge and sensibility we gain through new experiences. As Detienne and Vernant have discovered through their investigation of Plato, "In the intellectual world of the Greek philosopher, there is a radical dichotomy between being and becoming... On the one hand there is the sphere of being, of the one, the unchanging, of the limited, of true and definite knowledge; on the other, the sphere of becoming, of the multiple, the unstable and the unlimited, of oblique and changeable opinion."<sup>[3]</sup> The idea of intelligence being of a dual nature has lasted the test of time. Modern psychology has also felt the need to specify and differentiate between multiple aspects of intelligence. Namely, what the American Psychological Association has distinguished as crystallized intelligence and fluid intelligence. "In many theories of intelligence, a distinction is made between fluid and crystallized intelligence. Fluid intelligence comprises the set of abilities involved in coping with novel environments and especially in abstract reasoning; crystallized intelligence is the product of the application of these processes."<sup>[2]</sup>

And yet Detienne and Vernant also state, "Within this framework of thought there can be no place for *metis*. *Metis* is characterised precisely by the way it operates by continuously oscillating between two opposite poles."<sup>[4]</sup> This concept of metis, metic-intelligence, or cunning-intelligence is essentially facing the challenge of a changing reality by manipulating one's own limitations, therefore defying the initial nature of one's abilities. If a character had been in the same situation before, it'd be called experience, not cunning-intelligence. And yet this idea of metis is, in itself, a paradox. Changing one's limitations changes the definition of self. Yet, since metis was an inherent ability, we remain the same. This paradoxical idea is elusive and fascinating, and in an effort to further understand the nature of this

concept and its repercussions among different societies, I have scrutinized two characters from different cultural backgrounds that embody this trait: Loki from Norse mythology, and Prometheus from Greek mythology.

### *Loki as an example of “cunning intelligence”*

Through various anecdotes of the *Prose Edda*, we see examples of Loki manipulating seemingly impossible situations. It should be impossible for Thor to be beaten in a drinking and wrestling contest, but Loki finds a way to manipulate Thor’s perceptions with magic so that he yields defeat. Loki forces Thor to explore his own limitations when requiring him to drink the ocean and wrestle with old age. It should be impossible for Freyja to be the wife of a Giant, or for anyone (even the Aesir) to legitimately get out of a tightly bound oath. Rather than reverse the social custom of this tightly bound oath, Loki finds a way to prevent the Giant from upholding his side of the bargain.

In his last deception, Loki brings about “...the greatest misfortune ever to befall gods and men.”<sup>[7]</sup> The situation concerning Baldr’s death is initially described such that Frigg got oaths from everything on earth—living and inanimate—not to harm Baldr. In which case, how can he be killed? Also, the way in which Loki accomplishes his bloody goal questions the Norse system’s penalty of kin-killing. By tricking the blind Hod into killing his own brother, Loki unjustly subjects him to a supposedly just system.

### *Prometheus as an example of “cunning intelligence”*

In Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, we are given multiple versions of the same basic story. Whether giving fire to man or publicly deceiving Zeus with portions of a sacrifice unfit for the king of the

gods, Prometheus does the seemingly impossible. Because if Zeus swallowed Metis, his own wife, in order to assimilate her cunning-intelligence, how can he ever be deceived? This is a question that Hesiod only ambiguously answers, but somehow Prometheus found a way.

### *Correlations between Loki and Prometheus*

Through a plot structure similar in both myths, the crafty characters Loki and Prometheus use trickery to publicly challenge authority and upset the sanctity of the hierarchal pantheon in favor of their own ambitions. Loki has no prejudice when it comes to whom he tricks, and seems to trick people for the sake of seeing what he can get away with. Both characters are pushing the limits. Beyond that, they are pushing their own limits. Their actions correlate to the notion described earlier as metic- or cunning-intelligence. And yet, this also presents a problem: Loki and Prometheus are both exposed and punished for their deeds. Perhaps the actions of Loki and Prometheus shouldn't be categorized solely as acts of trickery, but as acts of rebellion since they make only thinly veiled attempts to hide their actions. Does being trickier than the trickster make you a trickster also?

### *What is the purpose of these characters?*

It is obvious these characters possess the trait "cunning-intelligence," and yet their last acts make them seem foolish rather than clever. Did Prometheus truly think Zeus was never going to notice that man possessed fire? Did they really think they wouldn't get caught? In the end, did they really choose the best course of action? They're both chained to a rock and tortured for eons on end in some of the most brutal ways imaginable. Each of their drastically tragic, albeit similar, outcomes makes the audience question whether their efforts were worth the consequences. And it is interesting to note that these

characters never appear in their respective culture's myths again after their punishment, except a brief mention discerning the situation of their release. To never be heard of again in stories symbolizes a figurative ending or death for a literary character. Although in Loki's case, Norse mythology gives him an actual death upon his release at Ragnarök.

So why do we put such importance on these characters? Perhaps these characters have tragic endings because they serve as a warning. Perhaps they have tragic endings and are blotted out from appearing in myth because their "death" signals the end of their ultimate purpose. Their importance is that they change things. What both characters have in common is that they shake things up a bit. Whether ethical or amoral, we see great changes come about through great, ambitious actions.

When I first began learning about Loki, he was described to me as the "trickster god." Perhaps these characters aren't necessarily tricksters, but bridges. When younger siblings play a joke on their older brothers, they maintain a similar rapport before and after the prank. In this way, Loki often plays tricks on other gods in the Norse pantheon while keeping up a similar impish rapport before and after his pranks, such as the previous mention of his deception of Thor. However, his actions surrounding the death of Baldr separate him from this idea of being strictly a trickster character. Cunning-intelligence is necessary for many things in many other myths, but becomes the prominent attribute in characters that ultimately change the status quo. What if μοιρα or fate or dharma isn't the reason why events happened in unexpected ways? What if a character, a physical person with their own thoughts and motives, is necessary in order for change to occur?

It's ironic that the lone wolf characters that are best able to adapt and manipulate unexpected situations when thrust upon them also bring about change for the rest of us. Perhaps the most

important function of these characters is in the progression and continuation of plot and therefore society. These characters are able to do what no others can, and yet they pay a lofty price to be the catalyst of such incredible change. Society changes course through the characters that instigate unexpected events. Such is the curse of cunning-intelligence.

### *Turner's Ritual Theory Application: Characters of Liminality*

In Turner's Ritual Theory, he articulates that a hero goes through three stages during his rite of passage. These stages are Separation from an earlier fixed state, the Margin or Limen transitional stage, and Aggregation to a new fixed state. These stages are outlined in a simple example below.

Separation → Limen → Aggregation

Protagonist leaves his village as a boy → Goes on a journey to kill a dragon → Arrives at his village a man

By our notion, the Limen stage Turner suggests as part of his Ritual Theory could be applied to a complex character within the story, not just a situation the main protagonist undergoes in a one-dimensional hero epic. In the Separation stage, a previous fixed state is questioned in a major way in order to make room for the liminality stage. In the example above, this question might be 'What makes a boy into a man?' By Turner's own description, liminality is "a time outside time in which it is often permitted to play with the factors of sociocultural experience, to disengage what is mundanely connected, what, outside liminality, people may even believe to be naturally and intrinsically connected, and to join the disarticulated part in novel, even improbable ways."<sup>[6]</sup> Once the story progresses into the Aggregation stage, these possibilities become closed off and a new role in society is assumed by the protagonist. But the important aspect of this Limen stage is that it allows the exploration of new and

strange possibilities and instigates internal reflection among the audience because of the hero's external dealings. In this case, these "liminal characters" have a final and ultimate purpose that lies in the major change they've caused that affects the way all the other characters in the story interact.

#### *Characters of Liminality: Prometheus*

Though they are two very different versions of the same story, Prometheus turns events on their head in both the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. In *Works and Days*, the fall of humans from lavished pets that only have to work one day a year is part of the punishment Zeus deals to Prometheus for his arrogance in the deception of the sacrifice. Zeus the untrickable is tricked, and the weak suffer for it. In the *Theogony*, humans go from dumb worshippers for the vanity of the Greek gods to an elevated status through the technological advancement of fire, although they also inherit negative consequences. However, humans are now worthy for copulation and most of the gods develop personal emotions for individuals as they begin rooting for their children and grandchildren and those they deem worthy of their patronage. This sparks the Mortal Game, in which gods influence the lives of mortals and compete with the success of their own favorite heroes against those of other gods. Zeus the untrickable is tricked and the weak are championed. In both cases, the sovereignty of Zeus is what's being questioned, although it is a question that is ultimately answered with the re-assertion of his power.

#### *Characters of Liminality: Loki*

Baldr's prophetic dream incites fear from the entire Norse pantheon at the idea of the imminent death of a beloved god. In this case, the immortality of the gods is what's questioned. When only considering the Separation and Aggregation stage of plot progression—a prophesy showing imminent death, and

the acceptance of that death by loved ones—this story seems, like Turner describes, intrinsically connected. However, the liminality stage is what's interesting. Baldr probably would have been saved through either Frigg's initial oaths or the bartering with Hel. But all attempts by the Aesir to save Baldr have been thwarted by Loki. When they see their attempts have been in vain, the Aesir eventually resign themselves to accept the unjust deaths of Baldr and Hod. Furthermore, this resignation extends into acceptance of the upcoming events at Ragnarök, where they must face their own deaths. As a liminal character, Loki forces the gods to admit the limitations of their power and, more importantly, accept their own mortality.

#### *Counterparts of Loki and Prometheus*

If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Much like this age-old metaphor, cunning intelligence doesn't truly exist unless there's a situation that occurs to bring it out. Whether instigated or thrust upon, the nature of this quality is the ability to adapt and manipulate a situation to change something. These characters need authority figure counterparts such as Odin and Zeus to set rules of society in order to alter them.

#### *Odin and Zeus as Equalizers and the embodiment of justice.*

Both Greek and Norse divinities have very hierarchial systems. The characters that exemplify cunning-intelligence may seem to be the alpha dog in the moment, but in the long run, things are equalized at the hands of those who embody justice: Zeus and Odin. A major difference between Zeus and Odin, however, is how active a role they play in their own justice system. Zeus is very much in control of every aspect concerning Prometheus' punishment, seeking merciless and total retribution for the insult.

Prometheus' sentence is only ended, according to the *Theogony*, "...so that the fame of Heracles / Theban might be greater than before / Upon the fruitful earth... And gave the honour to his famous son." Even then, the attitude of Zeus as he gives the order to release Prometheus describes him as, "angry though he was, he checked the rage / He felt against Prometheus, who dared / To match his wits against almighty Zeus."<sup>[4]</sup> More importantly, Prometheus was released upon giving Zeus the information he needed to prevent a son being born that was more powerful than him, making sure his sovereignty was never in danger of being overthrown. Odin, however, knows his sovereignty has an expiration date, and that "all victories are tactical and temporary, serving perhaps to stave off but never to thwart the inevitability of Ragnarök."<sup>[8]</sup> Prometheus solidifies Zeus' reign, and yet Loki hastens the end of Odin's.

Also, the emulation of fire shared by Prometheus as the harbinger of fire to man<sup>[1]</sup> and Loki as the god of fire shows each character is a symbol of chaos conveying a cathartic and necessary force by which the king of gods must create order and give new life from a metaphorical death.

Although their motivations and crimes were quite different, each transgressor is in the midst of an ethical society, as shown by a sense of justice and ensuing punishment for immoral actions. A culture's depiction of religious divinity is a reflection of the social interactions of the culture itself, and these stories therefore shed some light into the subtle differences in their respective justice systems. In the martyred and principled Norse society, the pantheon is forced by law to hang the innocent Hod for kin-killing, while the harsh, subjective Greek society shows that Zeus' decisions are final and weighty, and the law ultimately depends on him as an individual.

*What are the effects of cunning-intelligence upon the social order set forth by Zeus and Odin?*

In the *Theogony*, the demonstration of the might of the gods, especially Zeus, serves as an eternal reminder of humility and acceptance. Zeus will never face his own death, and his physical presence goes hand-in-hand with the presence of justice, both immediate and long-term, in Greek society. Zeus himself is the Greeks' own internal equalizing force of justice and retribution. And yet, it is only through the figurative and literal incorporation of Metis—ultimately the only force capable of overcoming him—that Zeus is able to eternalize his reign.

In Norse mythology, the warrior-hero values give the gods motivation to overcome their own desires and face unpleasant experiences. Cunning-intelligence and sovereignty over the pantheon are related, like in Greek myth, but with an altered connotation because of the different outcome of events. Rather than the cunning-intelligence characteristic being assimilated into the sovereign, it is manifested into a figure instrumental in resisting and overthrowing the sovereign and his order. For example, Odin shows both strength in character as well as physical strength when he accepts fate and his eventual death as he restrains himself from killing Fenrir. Odin circumvents what he might want in the present for what he knows will be better in the future. In Norse mythology, the themes of justice are an external equalizing force that affects everyone, even the king of the gods, and Odin's death plays a part in Ragnarök, which enables the world to be destroyed and created anew. In this way, Odin joins the ranks of liminal characters, along with Loki and Prometheus.

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