

**Thomas Jefferson, A Modern Prometheus
Bearer of Light and Trickster God**

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From an early age Thomas Jefferson revealed Mercurial wiles and Promethean artifice. According to family tradition, when his father sent the boy into the forest to prove his hunting skills, he returned with a purloined turkey. His devoted grandson recorded the anecdote, familiar to historians and seemingly more authentic than the fable of George Washington and the cherry tree. In later years, John Quincy Adams remarked that “Mr. Jefferson tells large stories.” American cultural mythology requires both Washingtonian rectitude and Tom Sawyerish cunning.

He became a Founding Father without fighting in the American Revolution, and drafted the Declaration of Independence after the battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. Washington had already forced the British evacuation of Boston, and during Washington’s grueling winter at Valley Forge, Jefferson was entertaining elite British and Hessian prisoners of war with banquets and chamber music. He never forgave the upstart Alexander Hamilton for storming the redoubts of Yorktown. In his writings, he more than once retracted the assertion that all men are created equal, and he referred to the children of poor whites as “rubbish.” In practice and in writing, he vacillated on separation of church and state. He hated dogs, beat horses, thought the Bible should be kept out of the hands of children, and stated that women should be banned from public affairs “to prevent deprivation of morals and ambiguity of issue.”

But to Jefferson’s credit, he was committed to advancing American intellectual life, and his own studies in the arts and sciences often approached the highest standards of his day. He was honest and unsentimental in his appraisal of the Constitution, which he saw neither as a divinely inspired document, nor as a perpetual framework for governing the Republic. Insisting that “the world belongs in usufruct to the living,” and knowing that the United States required a Living Constitution, he famously, and perhaps too idealistically, advocated its complete revision every nineteen years.

Wilson J. Moses grounds his work in archival documents, and while he pays due homage to recent scholarship, he writes unapologetically in the classical federalist tradition of Henry Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge. He concludes that Jefferson should neither be vilified as the seducer of a young girl, nor venerated as the oracle of self-evident truths. He was a bearer of light, but a trickster god—a Titan with an ambiguous legacy, a modern Prometheus.