Thomas Jefferson

In *Thomas Jefferson: A Modern Prometheus*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses provides a critical assessment of Thomas Jefferson and the Jeffersonian influence. Scholars of American history have long debated the legacy of Thomas Jefferson. However, Moses deviates from other interpretations by positioning himself within an older, "Federalist" historiographic tradition, offering vigorous and insightful commentary on Jefferson, the man and the myth. Moses specifically focuses on Jefferson's complexities and contradictions. Measuring Jefferson's political accomplishments, intellectual contributions, moral character, and other distinguishing traits against contemporaries like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, but also figures like Machiavelli and Frederick the Great, Moses contends that Jefferson fell short of the greatness of others. Yet amid his criticism of Jefferson, Moses paints him as a cunning strategist, an impressive intellectual, and a consummate pragmatist who continually reformulated his ideas in a universe that he accurately recognized to be unstable, capricious, and treacherous.

Wilson Jeremiah Moses is Professor Emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and the author of six books: *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (1978); *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (1982); *Alexander Crummell: A Study in Civilization and Discontent* (1989); *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African-American Life and Letters* (1990); *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (1998); and *Creative Conflict in African American Thought* (2004).

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"Though shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife," e.g. Maria Cosway.

Thomas Jefferson

A Modern Prometheus

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108470964
DOI: 10.1017/9781108557344

First published 2019

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
NAMES: Moses, Wilson Jeremiah, 1942– author.
TITLE: Thomas Jefferson, a modern Prometheus / Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Pennsylvania State University.
DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, [2019] | Series: Cambridge studies on the American South | Includes index.
IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018043272 | ISBN 9781108470964
SUBJECTS: LCSH: Jefferson, Thomas, 1743–1826 – Knowledge and learning. | Jefferson, Thomas, 1743–1826 – Influence. | United States – Intellectual life – 18th century. | United States – Intellectual life – 19th century.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC E332.2 .M67 2910 | DDC 973.4/6092 [B]–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018043272

ISBN 978-1-108-47096-4 Hardback

In Memoriam, Miriam, 1944–2017

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Preface

Prometheus was the Titan of Greek mythology who stole fire from Olympus and gave it to mankind, along with its powers of illumination and destruction. As punishment for his offense, Zeus, the ruler of gods and men, had him chained to a desolate rock where an eagle tore diurnally at his liver. There are radically differing variations on this story, for Prometheus was a "hero with a thousand faces," a trickster god, portrayed both positively and negatively over the centuries by successive communities of ancient Greeks. To Hesiod, he was a fool, who vainly attempted to befuddle Zeus with a spoiled sacrifice, but other authors of antiquity stressed his role as mankind's instructor and benefactor. The parallels between Prometheus, the kindler of enlightenment, and Lucifer, who endowed mankind with the knowledge of good and evil, have fascinated students of comparative mythology. Even little children have been known to recognize the similarities between Bible stories, Greek myths, and Norse legends, and, with or without reference to Carl Jung's theory of archetypes, such academic luminaries as Joseph Campbell, Maud Bodkin, Northrup Frye, and Zwi Werblowsky have discussed parallels between Lucifer, Prometheus, the Norse god Loki, and the titans of William Blake's prophetic books.[1]

[1] Carl Jung wrote the preface to Zwi Werblowsky, *Lucifer and Prometheus* (London: Routledge, 1952). Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1949). J. G. Frazier mentions Prometheus in *The Golden Bough* (1890, and 1906–15). Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns of Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934). Northrup Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton University Press, 1947). Other manifestations include the African tricksters, Anansi and Esu Elegbara, and the Native American trickster

Thomas Jefferson and the archetypal Prometheus were strangely overlooked by journalist Cory Pein, who almost stole my fire with his clever, amusing article, "Donald Trump: Trickster God," which presented its subject as only the most recent in a procession of slippery American presidents. Jefferson also foreshadowed Trump, setting aside the facts that Jefferson had nice manners, enjoyed Mozart, and knew classical Greek. Reflecting on the history of presidential legerdemain one may recall how George Washington once brought an audience of battle-hardened veterans to tears with "spectacular" theatrics and eighteen softly spoken words, and how Abe Lincoln supposedly wise-cracked on how often "you can fool all of the people." In graduate school I encountered a book called *The Lion and the Fox*, a study of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Machiavellian traits.[2]

John Adams, our second president, who was anything but a crowd-pleaser, learned to his chagrin during his single term in office that successful executives must be politicians. Years later he drily observed the "Stupidity with which the more numerous multitude become their Dupes, but even love to be Taken in by their Tricks." He always felt privately that his friend Jefferson had effected a "Coup de Theatre" with his "Penmanship of the Declaration of Independence," so that he "ran away with all the glory." Jefferson again stole Adams' fire when he defeated him in the venomous presidential campaign of 1800. Adams had already applied to himself the imagery of "sad Prometheus fasten'd to his Rock" in a letter to his wife, Abigail, where he accused Jefferson of encouraging "incendiaries."[3]

In Jefferson's day, allusions to the saga of Prometheus were recurrent throughout Western literature as metaphors for revolutions in thought. Prometheus appeared in the writings of Goethe, Herder, Beethoven,

"Coyote." Percy Bysshe Shelley compares Prometheus to Milton's Satan in his "Preface to Prometheus Unbound."

[2] Corey Pein, "Donald Trump, Trickster God," *The Baffler* (March 4, 2016), https://thebaffler.com/magical-thinking/donald-trump-trickster-god According to the Mount Vernon website (www.mountvernon.org/), when restless officers threatened to march on Congress with demands for backpay and provisions, George Washington, in preparing to read a letter from Congress explaining its financial difficulties, paused to put on his spectacles and apologized, "Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind." It is said that several of the officers wept. Lincoln's purported wisecrack is untraceable. John Adams to Benjamin Rush, September 30, 1805; John Adams to Benjamin Rush, June 21, 1811.

[3] John Adams to Abigail Adams, November 26, 1794, "Jefferson it seems is to give the first Passport to these Incendiaries. Malignity seemed to have Seized upon that Mans mind as deeply as upon Paines & Callenders."

Byron, Blake, and Jefferson himself. In 1755 Kant made his ironic reference to Benjamin Franklin as the "Prometheus of the New Era, who wanted to disarm thunder … to extinguish the fires in Vulcan's workshop, all such efforts prove the audacity of man." But Baron Turgot and the Marquis de Condorcet portrayed Franklin with less restrained enthusiasm as "le promethée moderne." The metaphor could be extended to others among America's Revolutionary founders, as it was in William Blake's visionary poem, "America, a Prophecy." Jefferson's rhetoric has inflamed many revolutionary struggles, and his words have had universal appeal, but, in his own day, the African American pamphleteer David Walker believed he was only "cramming fire down our throats."[4]

Jefferson was familiar with the titanic bearer of light and fire, and he mentioned owning a copy of *Prometheus Vinctus*, a scholarly bilingual edition in Greek and Latin of *Promētheus Desmōtēs*, the play, attributed to Aeschylus, whose English title is *Prometheus Bound*. When he founded the University of Virginia, he did not recommend that the work be placed on the list of required Greek classics. There is apparently only one specific and direct reference to Prometheus in Jefferson's writings, and that is neither sympathetic nor heroic. It is directed at Napoleon:

> and, thanks be to god, the tyger who revelled so long in the blood and spoils of Europe, is at length, like another Prometheus, chained to his rock, where the vulture of remorse for his crimes will be preying on his vitals, and in like manner without consuming them.[5]

Jefferson's contemporaries usually exploited the myth more positively. Goethe presented Prometheus as the titanic revolutionary who, in defiance of Zeus, created mankind in his own rebellious image. Percy Bysshe Shelley presented him as the heroic symbol of poetic enlightenment and creative energy. But an ironic twist came when Mary Shelley, his teenage wife – the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin – achieved her own immortality in the same year that Jefferson founded the University of Virginia by publishing *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*. Like the tragic protagonist of Mary Shelley's novel, Jefferson may have unwittingly unleashed a monster, by founding an

[4] Blake's "America, a Prophecy" apotheosized "Washington, Franklin, Paine, and Warren, Gates, Hancock, and Green," but ignored Jefferson, possibly, although not necessarily, because the Declaration of Independence deployed ideas of John Locke, Isaac Newton, and the construct of "Nature and Nature's God" that Blake considered nefarious.

[5] Jefferson to Antonio Dugnani, February 14, 1818.

anti-government tradition that led Theodore Roosevelt, in his capacity as progressive historian, to call him "the father of nullification, and therefore of secession," and elsewhere the twenty-sixth president said, "In my estimation Jefferson's influence upon the United States as a whole was very distinctly evil." The old Rough Rider blamed the Promethean of Monticello for kindling the Civil War.[6]

It would require Herculean labors to unbind every intricacy of the Promethean myth in Jefferson's times, and such is not my purpose. I mention only that he and his contemporaries were familiar with the legend, but my ambition is not to explore all its manifestations, either in the ancient world or in the Age of the Enlightenment. Nor have I attempted to repeat on every page that Jefferson was a Trickster God. I have been much more fascinated with the manifestations of Jefferson's erudition and genius. His brilliant rhetorical pyrotechnics and gift of hyperbole made him a Modern Prometheus when he drafted the Declaration of Independence, for nobody really thought it "self-evident" all men were created equal, regardless of how one might interpret those words, and Jefferson soon retracted them with his "suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites." He also referred to ordinary white children as "rubbish" and declared that "The tender breasts of ladies were not formed for political convulsion."[7]

It is altogether fitting and proper, but it requires little imagination, to condemn Jefferson for embodying the self-satisfied hypocrisy of the so-called "Age of Enlightenment." Accusations in the same spirit lead moralists to gnaw away at Earl Warren's unconscionable treatment of the Japanese Americans or W. E. B. Du Bois' reprehensible apology for Stalin. Those of us who are equally flawed may admit that we too have yielded to the peculiar temptations of our own time and place. Jefferson was – in Henry Cabot Lodge's words – "a child of his times." He gives somber meaning to Ralph Waldo Emerson's aphorism about "Great men" who have always "confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age." Bound to such ideas as "child of his times" and "genius of their age," we speak of the "Age of Jefferson," or the age of "Jeffersonian Democracy."

[6] Theodore Roosevelt, *The Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (St. Charles, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), p. 95. Theodore Roosevelt to Frederick Jackson Turner, November 4, 1896.

[7] Authentic Jefferson quotations are easily searchable at Founders Online (see Note on Methods and Bibliography below).

We recognize that Jefferson's Democracy, like that of ancient Athens and that of the German Democratic Republic, was profoundly flawed.

Jefferson was capable of reverse snobbery and anti-intellectualism, as he showed in the following sentences to his nephew, Peter Carr:

> State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.[8]

This seeming genuflection before folk wisdom was one of many examples of Jeffersonian hyperbole, for his communications with ploughmen were neither frequent nor familiar; his attitude towards bourgeois artisans was contemptuous, and his dealings with professors could be impatient and dismissive. Jefferson designed schools based on the classical trivium, a system for raking the best "from the rubbish," while training the rest to be content with their "condition of life."

If the "Age of Jefferson" were truly an "Age of Democratic Revolution," perhaps its "Representative Man" should be not a landed aristocrat but a small tradesman, like the Boston shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes, someone from that class of "artificers" that Jefferson disparaged as "panders of vice" and a threat to republican virtue. Unlike Jefferson, Hewes actually fought in the American Revolution. Slightly older, but still outlasting Jefferson by fourteen years, he lived to see the arrival of railway transportation, photography, electric communications, modern commerce, and the impending industrial capitalism. Unlike Jefferson, Hewes lived out his life among the people of the city, which allowed him to witness the coming of a newer, if still imperfect, democracy, as historian Alfred Young has famously shown. But neither man could have foreseen the economic, technological, and moral issues that confront us today, and we cannot rely on their generation for guidance. The realities of the present are such that neither the Prometheans who kindled the fires of the American Revolution, nor the proletarians who fueled them, can offer our generation much enlightenment in the darkness that threatens.[9]

[8] Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787.

[9] Alfred F. Young, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742–1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 38, no. 4 (October, 1981), 561–623; although Jefferson hailed with enthusiasm the arrival of steamboats navigating the rivers of Tennessee, Jefferson to George W. Campbell, October 15, 1815. Jefferson's contempt for artisans is discussed in Chapter 7.

Acknowledgments

Early draft portions of this book were delivered at the W. E. B. Du Bois institute as three of the Nathan Huggins Lectures in February of 2013, on which occasion I benefitted from commentary by Professors Henry L. Gates, Annette Gordon-Reed, Tommy Shelby, Ibrahim Sundiata, Allison Blakely, Thabiti Asukile, and numerous others in the audiences. An early version was delivered at Purdue University in October of 2008, at the invitation of Professor Cornelius Bynum, where questions and comments from the audience enriched my understanding or my own unanswered questions. I was also the beneficiary of incisive and encouraging commentary by the Pennsylvania State University Society for the Study of Religion and its membership, particularly the late Paul Harvey, Annie Rose, and Gregg Roeber, when I addressed the Society on February 20, 2014. At the invitation of Professor Jonathan Brockopp, and at the kind invitation of Professor Derrick Alridge, I presented my work in progress at the University of Virginia on February 12, 2014, on which occasion Professor Peter Onuf provided a detailed commentary; this he supplemented later through correspondence. Peter also arranged a fruitful exchange with the late Peter Nicolaisen on matters related to Jefferson's German contacts. On that occasion, I also had the opportunity to dine with Mr. Henry Wiencek, who was in the audience, and later to correspond with him. Through Henry's good offices I was able to benefit from correspondence with Professor Billy Wayson, who was so kind as to share portions of his ongoing research. Professor Paul Kerry invited me to share some of my ideas in his seminar at the University of Oxford on March 10, 2016, on which occasion I benefitted from the insightful commentary of Professor Nicolas P. Cole, and the path-

breaking research of Professor Jeffrey High. Professor David Waldstreicher arranged for me to offer an early draft of the chapter on Jefferson's religion at the University of Pennsylvania on January 17, 2014. He subsequently gave the manuscript two thorough readings, as a result of which I was able to eliminate or to refine several rash judgments. Professor Edward Countryman also provided a detailed and thorough reading of the manuscript's penultimate draft, and encouraged me, as others did, to eliminate the excessively redundant. My late sister, Miriam Elaine Moses (1944–2017), read more than one chapter, and saved me from several pretentious digressions, stylistic infelicities, and other self-indulgent eccentricities. My wife, Maureen, also made stylistic corrections in the process of her numerous readings and reactions to the manuscript during its five-year gestation. John Vandevanter Carter and Mark Smith helped me immensely in tightening up the Preface. Mr. Lew Bateman, who was my editor on two previous books with Cambridge University Press, offered me invaluable encouragement at the early stages of this project, and his successor, Deborah Gershenowitz, has assumed the supervision of this project with graciousness and understanding. Her assisting staff, Kristina Deusch, Rachel Blaifeder, and Julie Hrischeva, have consistently shown competency, diligence, and attention to detail. I was extremely fortunate in that the copy editing of this book was assigned to Chris Jackson, a deep scholar in his own right and magisterial in the intricacies of academic citation. If I had listened to every critical reader with the respect to which they were entitled, I am certain that this could have been a better book. For those errors that, due to my stubbornness or inattention, may have survived their scrutiny, I take full responsibility.

Note on Methods and Bibliography

I have found several bibliographies useful, although often so compendious that they served only to intimidate. For example, the overwhelming bibliography of Jon Meacham's *Thomas Jefferson and the Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012) is more than my poor brain could master, even if I'd begun this enterprise as an undergraduate. I have been tantalized by the much shorter, but somewhat mystifying, list of references in the guide to abbreviations of Robert M. S. McDonald's penetrating and insightful *Confounding Father: Thomas Jefferson's Image in His Own Time* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016). This pays homage to obsolete early editions of Jefferson's writings by Paul Leicester Ford, Andrew Lipscomb, and Albert Ellery Bergh that are always interesting, but hardly essential today. A critical overview of the early editions of Jefferson's papers, and their flaws, was made by Merrill Peterson, the late dean of Jefferson scholars, in his edition of *Thomas Jefferson, Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984) in the prestigious Library of America series. Peterson regularly hovered over Monticello and was ensconced in the history department of the University of Virginia. He was winner of the Bancroft Prize for his *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (originally printed by Oxford University Press, 1960). Other than Peterson's successor at the University of Virginia, Peter Onuf, few can approach his familiarity with Jefferson, especially now that the project for a complete edition of Jefferson's papers, begun by Julian Boyd in 1944, appears to be approaching its climax, if not its detumescence.

Before I began this project, my copy of Peterson's edition of *Thomas Jefferson, Writings* had become dirty and ragged, and I have often cited it

in my footnotes as the most readily available and most authoritative compilation available. Peterson's 1,000-page *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (Oxford University Press, 1970) is often disparaged for its scant attention to the Sally Hemings controversy. Fawn Brodie, Lucia Stanton, and Harvard Law School graduate Annette Gordon-Reed have argued persuasively for a paternity suit against Jefferson, the likely father of Sally Hemings' octoroon children, and they have convinced many historians, including the magisterial Peter Onuf, that in the absence of exculpatory DNA evidence Jefferson might be convicted as a predator and a pedophile in a present-day courtroom. In fact, Gordon-Reed's brilliant accomplishment reduces the DNA evidence to the status of mere "icing on the cake." But Peterson wrote *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* several years before discussion of Sally Hemings became mandatory. Dumas Malone did provide the chronology of Jefferson's comings and goings, to which Gordon-Reed paid homage in constructing her case. Despite the deficiencies of Peterson's superficial treatment of race relations, his work remains the best biography, with the obvious exception of Dumas Malone's six-volume *Jefferson and His Time* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1948–81).

I have clambered, of course, onto the shoulders of one more giant, namely Julian P. Boyd, who oversaw the editing of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton University Press) over twenty volumes published between 1950 and 1982 (a full list of the volumes, by other editors, continuing up to 2016, can be consulted at https://founders.archives.gov/content/volumes#Jefferson). My footnote citations in this study are to that edition. I used the bound volumes I–XVI, which I came to possess courtesy of the History Department of Pennsylvania State University. These were accompanied by a general index of limited usefulness, and I seldom consulted them after gaining access to Founders Online, National Archives (https://founders.archives.gov/).

It would have been cumbersome to have constantly cited all originally paper-based editions in full bibliographic form, however. It would also have been dishonest and useless to pretend that this work was conducted primarily with print editions. Perhaps those editions will stand the test of time, but of such things no one can be certain. Page numbers and volume references to earlier editions are now obsolete and completely frustrating, and who is to say what new developments will occur in the dawning age of "Artificial Intelligence"? With that thought in mind, as I advanced over the years in this study, all quotations from Jefferson and his correspondents were increasingly taken from the Founders Online

edition. In the present volume, all dates are consistently entered in the format month, day, and year, e.g. "John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776"; interested readers should bear in mind that Founders Online uniformly utilizes the format of day, month, and year, which often departs dramatically from the dating format of the original sender. In rare and hardly memorable instances I have found a Google search to prove more fruitful than a search on the Founders Online website. As explained within individual footnotes, certain other sources cited there can be found (e.g. at https://home.monticello.org/) by using the search option on the homepage. Another useful website referenced in the footnotes is the Online Library of Liberty, http://oll.libertyfund.org/ (but here one must bear in mind that the original pagination of sources may not be preserved at that site). Another useful source is Internet Archive (https://archive.org/), which offers reproductions of books, sometimes in numerous editions, with a choice between photographic facsimiles and "full-text" formats as digital reproductions.

I have in general, however, avoided giving url links at each citation, for at least one friendly scholar has kindly instructed me that I ought not to provide evidence of my having utilized electronic sources. (That said, for a small number of references a url is provided where it is felt it would be particularly helpful.) In coming decades the existing url may conceivably become as obsolete as the vaunted technologies of the "Gutenberg galaxy." The documents at Founders Online and the other websites referenced here are eminently searchable by words and phrases, but caveats are in order. What is cut and pasted into that search engine should be as short as possible, since idiosyncratic eighteenth-century punctuation will very often confuse the search engine, especially when challenged by Jefferson's inconsistent spellings, creative punctuation, and often ambiguous sentence structure.

There are many references to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which I have occasionally abbreviated to *Notes on Virginia* (or even just *Notes*), as is customary. There are numerous editions, and I have no idea which will be available in future years. The standard edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia* is that edited by William Peden for the University of North Carolina Press (1955), but the most easily acquired print edition is that of Bedford Books, reliable and well-edited by David Waldstreicher (2002), and my references are to this edition unless otherwise indicated. Readers are also directed to the Avalon Project of Yale University Law School. Founders Online is the most scholarly and accessible source for reliable editions of the Madison and Adams papers, and their

correspondence with Jefferson is cited copiously in this work. That site directs the researcher to the Leonard W. Labaree, Yale University Press edition of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, or one may consult *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* sponsored by the American Philosophical Society, and the Yale University digital edition by the Packard Humanities Institute, which has an exemplary search engine. While readers are reminded that they need not be fully dependent on the bound volumes, two bound scholarly editions comprising the Jefferson–Adams correspondence and the Jefferson–Madison correspondence are worthy of note, as they are well-indexed and rich in scholarly apparatus. See Lester J. Cappon, *The Adams–Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill, NC, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1959). The same holds true for James Morton Smith, *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776–1826* (New York: Norton, 1995), which has the added virtue of being aesthetically pleasing. The letters to be found in these eminently useful bound editions can also be found and searched electronically at Founders Online.