

## Prometheus Unbound: A Romantic Rewriting of a Classical Myth

### PROMETHEUS UNBOUND: UNE REECRITURE ROMANTIQUE D'UN MYTHE CLASSIQUE

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#### Abstract

This paper examines Shelley's merit in recreating a well-known myth, which is adapted to fit his philosophical and Romantic outlook. Inspired by the French Revolution, the revolutionary fervor of Shelley's age should determine the interpretation of *Prometheus Unbound* as an advocacy of rebellion against all forms of tyrannical authority enslaving humans' souls and minds and limiting their imagination and potential. In dramatizing Prometheus's suffering and moral regeneration, Shelley suggests that rebellion is first and foremost an internal act, in which an individual must take the full responsibility of reforming the self by rejecting submission to all forms of evil. In other words, Shelley seems to stress the autonomy of the individual's will and its power in changing society. The ending of the play expresses Shelley's apocalyptic vision of the world yet his belief in the promise of a new order initiated by man.

**Key words:** Shelley; *Prometheus Unbound*; Romanticism; Myth; Drama; Criticism

#### Résumé

Cet article examine le mérite de Shelley à recréer un mythe bien connu, qui est conçu pour s'adapter son point de vue philosophique et romantique. Inspiré par la Révolution française, la ferveur révolutionnaire de l'âge de Shelley doit déterminer l'interprétation de *Prometheus Unbound* comme un plaidoyer de rébellion contre toutes les formes de l'autorité tyrannique asservissement âmes des humains et les esprits et de limiter leur imagination et leur potentiel. En dramatisant les souffrances de

Prométhée et de la régénération morale, Shelley suggère que la rébellion est d'abord et avant tout un acte interne, dans laquelle une personne doit prendre l'entière responsabilité de la réforme de l'auto en rejetant la soumission à toutes les formes du mal. En d'autres termes, Shelley semble souligner l'autonomie de la volonté de l'individu et son pouvoir de changer la société. La fin de la pièce exprime la vision apocalyptique de Shelley du monde encore sa croyance en la promesse d'un nouvel ordre lancé par l'homme.

**Mots clés:** Shelley; *Prometheus Unbound*; Le romantisme; Mythe; Drame; Critique

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The advent of the French Revolution, with its ideals of liberty, is considered a milestone in the history of Romantic English literature. The faith in the possibility of change which the revolution promised marks much of the Romantic poetry. Therefore, the impulse to challenge long-established hierarchies, validated by authority and maintained by custom, is exhibited in a great number of Romantic poems. Percy Bysshe Shelley, who belongs to the younger generation of Romantic English poets, espouses the necessity of freeing Man from the darkness of inherited beliefs and values. *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is an exemplary work of Shelley's deep conviction that moral regeneration is a form of revolt and an agent of social and political change.

Shelley chose Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* as a framework for his lyrical drama, in which he managed to rewrite creatively a well-known Greek myth by investing it with the Romantic fervor of his age. In the classical myth, Prometheus is chained to a rock and an eagle repeatedly tears at his ever-growing liver, a punishment

imposed by Zeus on Prometheus for stealing fire and arts from gods and giving them to man. In the “Preface” to the play, Shelley justifies his imitation of Aeschylus as follows:

Poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new... because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought and with the contemporary condition of them. (p.777)

Shelley’s adherence to the principle of imagination in writing poetry is greatly manifest in this passage. It is wrong to say that Shelley intends poetry to be a mere reproduction of previous great works; by contrast, he contends that poetry is a recreation of old patterns, symbols and themes which are given new significance if they are creatively combined and re-presented in new works of art.

Many Romantic poets were influenced by Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* and found in its protagonist a model for the ideal Romantic hero; they created heroes possessing some of the characteristics of the Promethean figure, which are consonant with the Romantic spirit. Prometheus is a rebellious figure, defying the tyrannical authority of Zeus; he defends and advances the cause of humanity by saving mankind from destruction and giving man fire which Prometheus steals from heaven.

Despite Shelley’s drawing upon the familiar Promethean myth, his departure from Aeschylus’s play is central in incorporating his Romantic, philosophical vision into his own work. The title of the work can serve as a starting point for Shelley’s deviation from the original work. While Aeschylus’s play accentuates Prometheus’s bondage, suffering, and his lack of means, Shelley’s work, as its title suggests, stresses the protagonist’s freedom and position of power. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus’s endurance of the pain and oppression inflicted on him by Jupiter continues, but the main addition is Prometheus’s apprehension that for three thousand years he has been not only physically but also spiritually confined; he realizes that attaining liberty cannot be achieved only by breaking free from Jupiter’s chains, which bind him to the precipice, but also by breaking the manacles of evil that tighten their grip on his soul. Prometheus here demonstrates internal heroism par excellence.

In the opening stanza of Act I, Prometheus describes the mountain he is nailed to as a scene of desolation: “Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb, Insect, or beast, or shape or sound of life” (lines 21-22). The barrenness of landscape parallels that of the soul; Prometheus states that “torture and solitude, Scorn and despair, —these are mine empire” (lines 14-15). The captivity of the soul is expressed in these lines as Prometheus has allowed despondency and disdain to reign in his soul. He also acknowledges his moral degeneration in being “eyeless in hate” (line 9); hence, evil moral

forces are the real oppressors which he must revolt against in order to free his soul. They are apparently different from his physical plight/pain.

The idea of moral regeneration is suggested as Prometheus declares that he has undergone moral transformation after being subjected to pain. The state of catharsis which the hero experiences is also postulated as a prerequisite for moral rebirth; Prometheus confirms the purgation of his soul from all the base feelings of hate, revenge, and disdain, which are converted into pity. Addressing his oppressor, Prometheus asserts his superior moral status when he says:

Disdain? Ah, no! I pity thee. —What Ruin  
Will hunt thee undefended through the wide Heaven!  
How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,  
Gape like a hell within! I speak in grief,  
Not exultation, for I hate no more,  
As then, ere misery made me wise.— The Curse  
Once breathed on thee I would recall.

(1.1. 53-59)

Despite Shelley’s atheism and his belief that Christianity is a form of tyranny, especially owing to the crimes committed in its name, he uses Christ as a metaphor for his hero. The reader can clearly notice the portrayal of Prometheus as a Christ figure who sacrifices his life and endures pain for the deliverance of mankind, when he is referred to as “a youth/ With patient looks nailed to a crucifix” (1.1. 584-85). According to Christian theology, man can reach salvation by the imitation of Christ’s morality. By the same token, Shelley presents a view of the ideal man whose example humans must follow in order to reach salvation. Shelley explains that Prometheus represents a commended type of heroism, “the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends” (“Preface”, p.776).

Prometheus’s conflict with Jupiter must be explored in order to understand why the protagonist’s defiance of him is presented as a sublime action in Shelley’s work. Maurice Bowra (1950) contends that Jupiter “is the incarnation of all that Shelley regards as evil, of those destructive forces which take many forms but all arise from the denial of the good” (p.108). Therefore, reform of society starts with the individual who must achieve moral growth and resist all forces of evil which keep an iron grip on his soul. The moral rebirth of Prometheus is an illustration of the moral responsibility of the individual in bringing about change in society; man must reject evil in order to be free from its hold. The reason for Prometheus’s retracting the curse he has cast on Jupiter is that he has come to the realization that evil breeds evil and in desiring vengeance, his spirit will continue to be enslaved to evil. In other words, Prometheus becomes morally superior to his adversaries.

Ronald A. Duerksen (1978) observes that the curse Prometheus has pronounced is a perpetuation of Jupiter’s

doctrine of vengeance and hate (p.625). In recanting the curse, Prometheus adopts a new principle which is that of love; thus "Prometheus, the moral and intellectual nature of mankind, the apex of human thought, dares to assume full responsibility for his decisions and actions and thereby to make possible the reattainment of his original or rightful condition: his being united with Asia, who is the spirit of all true beauty and loveliness" (p.625). Prometheus, defying the evil impact of revenge and bile feelings, says,

... 'tis just:  
He who is evil can receive no good;  
And for a world bestowed, or a friend lost,  
He can feel hate, fear, shame— not gratitude.  
He but requites me for his own misdeed.  
Kindness to such is keen reproach, which breaks  
With bitter stings the light sleep of Revenge.  
(1.1. 389-394)

Prometheus's insistence on the sovereignty of self-disinterested love in the human soul as the main path to an ideal existence is paralleled in Asia's speech in Act II, where she explains that love in the face of suffering is particularly ennobling:

... all love is sweet,  
Given or returned. Common as light is love,  
They who inspire it most are fortunate,  
As I am now; but those who feel it most  
Are happier still, after long sufferings,  
As I shall soon become.  
(2.5. 39-47)

C.S. Lewis (1960) observes that Shelley splits "the sufferer's role into two parts, those of Prometheus and Aisa," and gives "the latter a task to perform in the liberation" (p.265). Therefore, Aisa's role in the play must not be studied in isolation from Prometheus's. She undergoes a similar transformation, by descending into Demogorgon's cave. Her journey can be read as a psychological journey to the depths of the self, which parallels that of Prometheus's, out of which they both ascend inspired by love. The union of Asia and Prometheus in the final act is not only a physical one, but it is also a spiritual one where essential aspects of human existence should be reconciled in order for humanity to follow its potential and lead an ideal life.

René Wellek (1965) asserts that *Prometheus Unbound* is an example of how "Shelley is a symbolist and mythologist" whose poetry is highly "metaphorical", attempting "to create a new myth of the redemption of the earth" (p.190). The symbolism employed in this work is best understood in reference to the French Revolution, which Shelley believes to be "the master theme of the epoch in which we live" (qtd. in Greenblatt *et al.*, p.148). Jupiter can be viewed as a symbol of the authoritarian supremacy of monarchy or religion, which Shelley associates with the ills of the world. Prometheus condemns submission to the tyrannies of corrupt authority.

He refuses to submit to the will of his tormentors despite the punishment he receives: "Let others flatter Crime where it sits throned/ In brief Omnipotence..." (1. 401-402); he also denounces Christ for all the atrocities committed in his name: "Oh, horrible! Thy name I will not speak / It hath become a curse" (1. 603-604). Prometheus, thus, emerges as a new, liberated spirit.

However, what Shelley attempts to highlight time and again in the play is that acquiescence to tyranny is a partaking of its evil. Prometheus insists persistently on the freedom of his will as he refers to all those who succumb to Jupiter's power as "self-despising slaves of Heaven" (1. 429), and he deplores submission as follows: "For what submission but that fatal word, /The death-seal of mankind's captivity" (1. 396-397). The oppressed must rise against injustice in all its forms and must demonstrate great courage in combating it. Hope, endurance, and wisdom must substitute "Fear", "self-contempt", and "barren hope", which are all signs of evil. Shelley seems to suggest that resisting evil is an internal as well as external act. Tyranny is consolidated by targeting people's minds and hearts and imparting fear and complacency to them. Such a realization about the nature of tyranny is the first step toward resisting evil:

In each human heart terror survives  
The ravin it has gorged: the loftiest fear  
All that they would disdain to think were true:  
Hypocrisy and custom make their minds  
The fanes of many a worship, now outworn.  
They dare not devise good for man's estate,  
And yet they know not that they do not dare.  
.....  
And all best things are thus confused to ill.  
(1. 618-28)

Another example of the importance of rejecting tyrannical power is the series of questions Asia poses to Demogorgon, which reflects an attempt to cast doubt upon the validity of imposed hierarchies in the world. R.A. Foakes (1962) argues that eighteenth-century poetry mirrors the rejection of any imposed order; instead, "the notion of self-government" is brought to the fore (p.240). Also, in enumerating Prometheus's deeds intended for the benefit of humanity, Asia reveals how he applies the law of "Let man be free" as a principle for achieving "self-empire", which Saturn denies man his birthright of (2.4. 42-45). In another example, Prometheus reiterates the autonomy of the self: "Yet am I king over myself, and rule/ The torturing and conflicting throngs within" (1. 92-93). Accordingly, the play captures the Romantic spirit of rebellion against established authority and embracing, instead, free expression.

The chief Romantic characteristic of the play is its apocalyptic tone, which is again in line with the play's defiant tone. According to Norton Topics Online, "an apocalypse is a prophetic vision", which promises renewal through the violent termination of existing

human conditions. The promise of the destruction of evil is expressed in Prometheus's prophecy that the reign of Jove will come to an end in the near future. In response to Mercury's question about when Jupiter's doom will occur, Prometheus says, "I know but this, that it must come" (l. 413). Refusing to reconcile "the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind" ("Preface" p.776), Shelley insists that Prometheus should prefer the endurance of pain to being allied to evil. Bowra elaborates that Prometheus neither saves nor causes the death of Jupiter as "evil must be defeated by itself" (p.108); Interestingly, Jupiter is destroyed by his own son, which is essentially an act of self-annihilation. In Act III, the Spirit of the Hour pronounces a vision of annihilation of a previous world order and announces the birth of a new ideal world: monarchy is overthrown; moral illness disappears; truth replaces hypocrisy; love and hope reign in humans' souls; and women are liberated emotionally and intellectually from the constraints of custom and ignorance.

*Prometheus Unbound* manifests Shelley's optimistic and, intriguingly, apocalyptic view of the future. The work incontestably reflects the author's supreme faith in man and his ability to make tremendous change in the world; however, he is equally aware that such a transformation requires great courage, wisdom and sacrifice. In this work, Shelley has made an attempt to redeem the fallen state of man; Prometheus's rise from the state of despair into hopefulness—from death or death-in-life into life, from captivity into freedom—suggests Shelley's insistence on man's metaphorical reclaiming of paradise; but it is not a prelapsarian paradise of ignorant innocence, which does

not fulfill "the deepest human needs" (footnote No.7 in Greenblatt *et al.*, p.803); it is a new Eden illuminated by Prometheus's fire, which enables man to master the world and govern himself, without relying on some external forces.

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