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FL3002 British Romanticism
20 December 2021

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Romantic Fascination of Prometheus

Explain the appeals of Prometheus in the Romantic Period (such as Byron, the Shelleys, Beethoven, etc.) Do you find this figure relevant in our time? Why and why not?

The Romantic Period is an era of change and revolution. Its historical and social context is a time of physical confrontation, violent rebellion in parts of Europe (marked by the French Revolution) and the New World. Thus, many Romantic texts focus on such ideas, as well as the possibility of a better world: more liberating, and equal society. Prometheus, in his unenlightened state of primordial energy, provided Man with the fire of enlightenment, but at the same time, angered Jupiter by his disobedience and the theft of the divine gift. (Jung, page number) He is thus forced to endure brutal tortures as punishment. Bearing in mind this Greek mythology, the fables – moral stories, symbolism, and ideals embodied by Prometheus, it seems reasonable that the God had become a highly politicised mythological figure, used dramatically by Romantic poets and writers. However, I think it will be too insubstantial and narrow-minded to simply perceive Prometheus as a political icon of revolution. I believe the Romantic poets and writers such as Percy Shelley and Byron have attributed Prometheus to ideologies that are greater and far deeper than being a mere political or military hero. Furthermore, Revolution and rebellion, though in the name of social betterment and progress, often is a double-edged-sword that involves great moral conflicts. Ergo, the appeals of Prometheus in the Romantic Period are of intricacy and perplexity.

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Therefore, in this reflection, I aim to analyse the Romantic fascination with Prometheus on two levels. Firstly, examining how Prometheus is emblazoned as a political and allegorical figure of revolution, change, and a symbol of enlightenment. Secondly, on a more academic level, I will attempt to delve deeper into the Romantic idealism of eternity, imagination, morality, and love that are also conceptualised by the figure of Prometheus.

In the Preface of Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley has explicitly expressed his view on "great writers" being "the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it" and that we "owe the great writers of the golden age of our literature to that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian Religion" (Shelley, page number). It is evident that various Romantic writers perceive themselves as "forerunners" of revolutionary change in the Romantic era, in which the historical context involves social oppression and great disparity between the aristocrats and commoners. Therefore, Prometheus as a rebel against the Olympian gods is embodied as a political figure in revolution. *Prometheus Unbound*, though multi-dimensional, is also an obvious place to locate the inherent political dimensions of the figure of Prometheus. The very title of the lyrical drama, Shelley's choice of diction "Unbound" manifests his advocacy for liberation and justice. The conflict between Jupiter and Prometheus is introduced at the very beginning of Act I when Jupiter is invoked by Prometheus "bound to the Precipice" of "Icy Rocks in the Indian Caucasus," as Monarch of Gods and Daemons, and all Spirits/ But One." Prometheus accuses Jupiter of the various injustices of which the latter is guilty.

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...regard this Earth
Made multitudinous with thy slaves,
whom thou Requistest for knee-worship, prayer, and praise,
And toil and hecatombs of broken hearts,
With feat and self contempt and barren hope;
Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate, (Shelley, **act and scene and line number**)

Prometheus's accusation of Jupiter refers to the God's absolute oppression of mankind, that is the enslavement "Made multitudinous with thy slaves," of those whom Prometheus provided with fire and consciousness of knowledge. The "One" God demands absolute obedience of "knee-worship, prayer and praise," which causes sufferings of "broken hearts," destroyed symbols of the hope for progress, truth, happiness and love. As Prometheus confronts Jupiter and **protest** against such Master-Slave relationship, he is "eyeless in hate" for such injustice and human exploitation.

Prometheus's revolutionary spirit can also be seen in Lord Byron's *Manfred* as Manfred declares "And yet yee see I kneel not" (Byron, **act, scene, line numbers**). Similarly, in Shelley's earlier work *Queen Mab*, "Nature rejects the monarch, not the man;" as Man's "stakes are vice and misery. The man Of virtuous souls commands not, nor obeys. Power, like a desolating pestilence, Pollutes whate'er it touches; and obedience, Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth, Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame A mechanized automaton." (Shelley, **page number**). Through the repeated mention of slavery, and misery caused by tyrannical "Power," a ban of "freedom" and "truth," I believe the revolutionary ideals and changes they wish to convey is liberation: both social, physical oppression and psychological enlightenment, including the "denunciations of institutional religion, aristocracy and monarchy" (Lynch, **page number**). Therefore, I personally think Prometheus acts as a vessel and political symbol for the Romantic writers to express their revolutionary sentiments, as the Greek Titan survive and transcend oppression to bring forth change for mankind; heroic acts that seem to parallel what they aim to achieve for the society.

The historical reference to the French Revolution is also evident in Shelley's *Prometheus unbound*. Prometheus has exclaimed "with one voice, "Truth, Liberty and Love!" values that echo the three ideals of French Revolution, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. A legacy of the Age of Enlightenment where those oppressed finally sought change. The symbolism of "fire" plays great importance in this aspect of Enlightenment. Fire, is an allegorical focus of civilisation that initiates change. Prometheus has "tamed fire" for Man, and his defiant energy described in terms that are analogous to Jupiter's rage, he can thus be perceived as a strong figure who brought upon Enlightenment for mankind and a resistance to tyranny. Shelley has repeatedly mentioned that without the enlightenment of "freedom," "truth" and "knowledge," Man is incomplete. We are simply "mechanized automaton" (*Queen Mab*, **line number**) or "semivital worms" (*Prometheus Unbound*, **act, scene and line number**) without the essential elements of enlightenment. Prometheus "Gave wisdom, which is strength" to Man as he "Let man be free" to ameliorate human conditions. I am thus confident to conclude that Romantic writers utilise Prometheus as an allegorical figure for enlightenment and a political figure for revolution.

The sacrifice Prometheus has made, the sufferings and torture Prometheus has endured for mankind also carries a religious reference to Christ. Jesus dies on the cross for Man's sins as Prometheus "fix those tortured orbs in peace and death/ So thy sick throes shake not that crucifix," (*Prometheus Unbound*, **act, scene and line number**). The biblical reference and

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parallel of Prometheus to Christ conveys the sacrificial sentiment of atonement as both Prometheus and Christ atone for the sins of mankind. However, I think it is very interesting to note Shelley's deliberate mixture of Greek mythology and Biblical reference. This Religious Syncretism, makes Prometheus an inclusive figure in its symbolic application. This allows the figure of Prometheus not only appeal to the Christian readers of the Romantic Period, but even those in the modern era regardless of their faith, to appreciate Prometheus's sacrifice for Man, further strengthening his symbolism.

Beyond the allegorical and political symbolism of Prometheus, the Greek Titan manifests wider ideologies of the Romantic Period. Though in *Queen Mab*, Shelley appears more radical and political, he did not use Prometheus in a narrowly political or revolutionary sense in *Prometheus Unbound*. He conceptualises Prometheus as something greater than merely a response to current events, but rather an exploration of the "timeless laws underlying the repetitive patterns of human motivation and activity, political and private" (Carey [page number](#)). Perhaps, the symbol of Prometheus even exceeds that of sacrificial figures, but one who symbolises a "great abstract idea" (Bowra [page number](#)). Prometheus is not only a political icon for change, but a "moral" figure that is characterised by his sufferings and endurance, and beyond that, a "firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force," who is "exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge and a desire for personal aggrandisement" which distinguish Prometheus from other characters such as Byron's *Manfred* or Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, whose characters are dominated or at least, influenced, by these "taints." Shelley's Prometheus even teaches himself to overcome his hatred for Jupiter "For I hate no more" and seek repentance "It doth repent me... I wish no living thing to suffer pain" ([act, scene, line number](#)). I think the centrality of love and truth are constituents of Shelley's idealism and they are portrayed through the figure of Prometheus.

Shelley sees Prometheus as representing "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the vest and noblest ends." Shelley's Prometheus can be interpreted as the noblest force in the human self, the desire for the good and willingness to make any sacrifice for it. At the end of the drama, Prometheus proves victorious, for his idealism "Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance" will bring forth "Life, Joy, Empire and Victory." Demogorgon, the oracle of fate announces the downfall of Jupiter, proving Prometheus's Platonic idealism consisting of love and truth to be hopeful. Shelley has expressed his purpose to "familiarise the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence "aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct," conceptualising Prometheus as an expression for his hopes for ages yet to come.

Hence, I think it is reasonable for me to regard Prometheus bestowing fire on mankind as "an act of kindness" (Jung [page number](#)), a part of Shelley's "beautiful idealism." The act of bringing the fire to man, may be comprehended not only as an expression of sympathy with the oppressed and unenlightened, or an act of rebellion and revolution, but also an expression of the love with the help of which is enabled to overcome the hatred of his oppressor. Such ideal is articulated by Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*: "Realms where the air we breathe is Love... Harmonizing this Earth with what we feel above" ([act, scene, line number](#)). Prometheus's Platonic idealism of truth and love has helped him in reaching the turning point of his suffering where he overcome his hatred of Jupiter. Instead of hating Jupiter, he pities him; "Disdain ? Ah no! I pity thee" ([act, scene, line number](#)). Christ-Like, he is able to "pity" and "love" the tyrant who has tortured him.

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Though I think Prometheus's renouncement of his curse on Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound* is rather anti-climatic, and perhaps a little too abrupt, making him appear contradictory and inconsistent, it does testify to his awareness that Jupiter's ill tyranny is doomed and will come to an eventual end. I believe his change is also imperative to enforce Shelley's idealistic vision of love.

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Shelley also shone light upon the idea of Eternity, another key element explored in the Romantic Period. When Asia mentions Saturn's reign "from whose throne time fell, an envious shadow," the idea of "timelessness"- the Golden age where "time" is of irrelevance during Saturn's rule, is criticised by Shelley. Such Golden age where "calm joy of flowers and living leaves" creates the imagery of an eternal spring. Yet, such "Golden" Age seems rather ironic in Shelley's version, as Saturn refuses to grant mortals knowledge and science, so that it was an age of "ignorant innocence" in which the deepest human needs remained unfulfilled, making Man "semivital worms." This resonates with the idea of unenlightened Man which I've explored earlier. Despite being immortal, Prometheus is punished to suffer repetitive torture, to have his liver torn by vultures during the day, and regenerate again at night. Such agonising cycles of torture is eternal. Prometheus may live for eternity, but so does his excruciating misery.

Using *Prometheus unbound* as an example, when analysing from a political perspective, it may be safe to assume Jupiter as a political tyrant, that bears resemblance to many dictators whom remain existent in today's society. Military leaders in the Middle East or communist states who disregard humanitarianism may be viable examples. In these scenarios, Prometheus may perhaps mirror the opposition democratic leaders. These leaders like Mahatma Gandhi or Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi (as a most recent example) often make great personal sacrifices and endure extreme sufferings for their beliefs and pursuit of democracy, and in their words, for their people. Therefore, I think one of the greatest beauties of literature is its power to transcend time and space. Unbounded by geographical locations and time, classic literature is always relevant till the modern ages. Figures like Prometheus, who symbolises change and revolution, yet promotes an inherent love and peace for humanity, together with an uttermost upright believes of morality, are indeed still very relevant in our time.

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ROMANTIC FASINATION OF PROMETHUES:
REVOLUTION AND ROMANTIC IDEOLOGIES

CHRISTINA WONG

I mark this piece 95. I like your careful consideration of Christianity and Greek mytholody.

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