



Prometheus Unbound

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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One of the most ambitious dramatic poems ever written, Percy Bysshe Shelley's Prometheus Unbound tells the story of the Titan Prometheus who gave mankind the secret of fire in open defiance to the decrees of Zeus, and who, as punishment for this generosity, was chained to the Caucasus Mountains and exposed to horrible tortures. Inspired by the Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus, Shelley's play serves as a sort of sequel, matching its Greek predecessor in stature and pure poetic power.

It depicts its philanthropist hero's ultimate triumph over the superstition and bigotry of the gods. As Shelley himself stated in his Defence of Poetry, Prometheus Unbound awakens and enlarges the mind.

Prometheus Unbound Details

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From Reader Review Prometheus Unbound for online ebook

Mohammad Ali says

[illegible]

Thou pitiest them? I speak no more!

[illegible]

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Mercy! Mercy!

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John Devlin says

Oh the romanticism. Oh the purple prose. Oh the WTF are the characters chirping about over and over.

David Sarkies says

The War between Faith and Reason

13 April 2013

This is probably what you would consider to be Shelley's Magnus Opus. This would be his most ambitious work and also what he is probably most famous for (though at least one lecturer has suggested that as a poet Shelley is somewhat dwarfed by his wife Mary Shelley, who is also the author of *Frankenstein*). This is sort of a sequel to the Aeschylan play *Prometheus Bound* and I say sort of a sequel because we have fragments of the original sequel, but the play itself is lost.

Prometheus Unbound is what you call a lyrical drama, which is in a similar vein to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. The idea of a lyrical drama is that it is not written to be performed but rather to be read (and as I have indicated reading a drama without watching it being performed can be a difficult task), the performance, as some have suggested, goes on in the imagination.

The scope of this work is immense and Shelley explores some of the themes that have come out of the original play, and then brings them through to his own conclusion. While Shelley was an atheist, he uses the mythological as a method of criticising his own society, and the conflict that had arose between faith and science. Shelley's Jupiter is representative of God, which, to Shelley, is representative of the church who seeks to hold society in chains and prevent them from being able to examine and question the world in which he lives. His Prometheus is representative of the rational human, the one who questions and explores, but is attacked by the church because of that desire. Demogorgon could be seen as social change, which frees the rational mind from those chains, and pushes blind faith into the background.

The idea behind the original play is that humanity had fallen from grace and was living in a world of suffering, so Prometheus, against the decree of Zeus, teaches them the art of making fire and for doing so he is punished by being chained to a rock and having his liver ripped out on a daily basis by a vulture. The play ends with Prometheus being cast down into the netherworld. The idea that I see in this play is the concept of humanity being given the gift of technology (which is representative of fire) and by having this ability it strengthens them against the power of the deity. In Shelley's mind this is the idea of science, and we see in the past when people began to explore the nature of the world the church would respond in an aggressive manner, for fear that in doing so God would be unseated from his throne. This war continues to this day, with fundamentalist preachers (and I am only speaking of Christianity here) claiming that science unseated God from his throne, and evolution unseated humanity from the pinnacle of creation. In the end though, no matter how much faith we have, the Earth is not the centre of the universe.

Notice though that the original play ends with Prometheus being cast into hell, and that the second play, where Zeus and Promentheus are reconciled, no longer exists. It may be just coincidence, but the play ends with the triumph of faith over reason, and the play in which faith and reason come together in mutual agreement no longer exists. In a way this is very Hegalian in that we have opposites, with the thesis being faith and the anti-thesis being reason (or is it the other way around?), but the reconciling (or the synthesis) of faith and reason never comes about. Even today many a church baulks at the concept of a synthesis between faith and reason, and forces reason, and with it humanism, out of the door. My position is that since God gave us the gift of reason, the ability to be able to think and question, then to deny that gift, and to deny everything that comes from that gift, is to do a disservice to God. However that does not mean that we do not question what comes out of humanism, for to blindly accept what is said without questioning is to once again do a disservice to God.

As for *Prometheus Unbound*, there is no synthesis of faith and reason. In fact faith comes out as the loser in the struggle, with reason being freed by Demogorgon (and being an atheist we cannot consider that Shelley would necessarily believe in Satan), with represents the complete destruction of faith. In the end reason

triumphs, and faith, and the church, are left being in the dark annals of history. Notice though, that it is Demogorgon and not Satan. Shelley is purposeful in this in that he indicates that the character of Satan, as painted by Milton, is a rather poor character in his opinion. Granted, Shelley could have created his own Satan, however he seems to feel bound to Milton's interpretation, and a creature that is fuelled and dominated by revenge would not serve the purposes of his poem. Shelley did not want a character with a chip on his shoulder, but rather a character that frees reason from his chains to allow him to prosper and flourish.

I have also written a blog post on the original play, however I do touch on this poem as well.

Owlseyes says

"For my part I would rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon, than go to Heaven with Paley and Malthus."

In Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, we see him by the end of the book being buried under the rocks that crumble, midst thunder and lightning. Prometheus, the god,(unjustly) bound to a rock by other gods, had though made a promise: "I swear in that moment there won't be no fear ". He had a secret; "there will be a day when my value shall be needed." The god wanted to give the fire to men...and got punished.

Shelley, maybe inspired by the "bright blue sky" of Rome decides to resurrect Prometheus; now he'll be unbound. ...released by Hercules.

The book starts with him bound to a precipice, morning breaking...Panthea and Ione meeting Prometheus. The voices of the air, the springs and mountains, the whirlwinds...and Earth itself, have kept silent for many years (3,000 years of sleep)...for fear of the Monarch of the Gods and the daemons.

Now, pierced and mocked Prometheus has no more hate, though.

Akanksha Chattopadhyay says

First attempt Skipped through parts, glossed over choric songs, and I hate myself for that?

I will definitely try and reread soon, for doubtless, this book is one I should love.

#stillaShelleyan

Reread Vastly improved experience. However, this new overly non-violent philosophy does not sit too well with me. Even Shelley himself cannot really stick with it. I give him another star owing to this endearing contradiction??

Third Reading

Pure love! Another star added.

Kastoori says

By far one of the most original, lofty poetic works I have read in a really long time. I wasn't a Shelley fan ever, I don't think I am a fan of his even now, but I certainly found this book Sublime in all senses of the word.

I like how he has morphed the myth that was penned into a play by Aeschylus and given it an alternate ending, more daring and emboldened by tempering it with quintessential Romantic sentiment. The poem is darkly poetic, grandiose and prophetic.

This is perhaps the only work of PB Shelley that I truly love.

Anand says

I finally decided to read this. I think this is truly fantastic. Very inspired by John Milton's Paradise Lost - my favorite all time book; the verse is soaring and heightened in its blank verse, which has an authentic difficulty amid its grandiloquent flights of poetry.

The characterization is quite interesting. Prometheus, Hercules, quite interesting. I also am struck by the "fall of Jove" echo, and the recurrent optimism of a better hope amid the painful sufferings of Prometheus.

In many ways, Shelley writes a very classical work with a Romantic flavor, with its own experimentalism - especially in Act IV, where the verse varies in meter and form, though all in the elevated register.

Highly recommended.

Nora says

I am a huge fan of mythology, particularly Classical mythology. While Shelley is undoubtedly a talented poet, I found his interpretation of the Roman pantheon to be off somehow. I wasn't convinced that the Jupiter and Mercury I was reading about were the deities that I had read about since childhood. The characters were all rather flat, as well, being designated as either wholly good or wholly evil.

Now I know Shelley was a Romantic poet, but I really cannot emphasize enough how flowery and unnecessary 75% of the writing was. It was very melodramatic and made the story hard to understand or picture in my head. All in all, if you're interested in the works of the Romantics, I'd recommend you try Coleridge instead.

Jordan says

What a strange play! Totally very Romantic - loaaads of lush nature imagery which paints pretty pictures in my head!

And I love the idea that 'love' and equality can unlock the secrets of the universe and cause a wide-spread

party, at the end of this even the moon is celebrating!

Odd, but pretty cool!

Sarah says

Hmm. I think that maybe my expectations were a tad too high for *Prometheus Unbound*. On one hand, it is an interesting follow-up to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, but it is actually inferior to the earlier work. I know that Shelley was going for being Romantic but also taking from the style of the Greek dramatists, but I don't think that it worked for me. I usually would praise Shelley's beautiful use of the English language, but in the case of a dramatic work, I think that flowery verse obscures the story, making it hard to understand for anything but its pretty outer shell of description.

Additionally, Shelley has a way of being super philosophical and super metaphorical about everything; while that works okay for his poems, I feel like that can only hurt a drama. Sure, a small dose may be okay. But anyone who has read any Shelley knows that he lays it on thick- there's no such thing as "a little bit" of philosophy for him. Therefore, this play comes off as clunky, pseudo-Greek, and difficult to follow.

I would definitely recommend the original work of Aeschylus over this.

Bbrown says

So there are a lot of ways to look at Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: as a continuation of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, as its own closet drama, or as a framework for Shelley to write poetry on nature and classical mythology. Unfortunately, in my opinion *Prometheus Unbound* fails no matter which of the three ways you look at it, and I'm actually left scratching my head at how badly Shelley messed up considering that he was handed such an interesting subject on a silver platter.

Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* is a work with amazing potential, the only surviving play in a trilogy that functions as a fascinating introduction to the Prometheus myth. Both Prometheus and Zeus are established as characters with depth, and their conflict is both nuanced and dramatic. It's impossible to say whether the potential of *Prometheus Bound* was fulfilled by Aeschylus's later plays, but I know for certain that said potential wasn't realized by Shelley. Instead of the fully developed characters of *Prometheus Bound* Shelley takes Prometheus and makes him a one-dimensional martyr, reassigning the pride that was evident in the Aeschylus version of Prometheus to Zeus. Shelley's Prometheus has no flaws of any consequence, instead he's just a name that undergoes unjust suffering and whose eventual release heralds a new age of peace and prosperity. He's the prophesied chosen one, a role which apparently Shelley doesn't think requires any further characterization. Zeus is also far less interesting here than in *Prometheus Bound*, as Shelley has made Zeus into a pure tyrant, with no reference to his recent rise to power and subsequent shift in behavior that made him an interesting character when crafted by Aeschylus, despite the fact that Zeus never appeared onstage in *Prometheus Bound*. Even minor characters like Mercury are made less compelling by Shelley than the ancient source material he had to draw inspiration from. While *Prometheus Bound* was the beginning of what promised to be a play of both emotional and potentially moral complexity, Shelley's play is one of black-and-white morality and one-dimensional characters. Compared to *Prometheus Bound*, *Prometheus Unbound* is banal and unimpressive.

Looking at Prometheus Unbound independent of Prometheus Unbound it still fails to excite. Shelley wrote this as a closet drama, meaning it was not intended to actually be performed, and I have to say that's an excellent decision because I can't imagine any way to stage and perform this play that wouldn't be mind-numbingly boring. All the flat characters only communicate through page long speeches, the actual action of the play occurs solely in the first act and the first few pages of the third, and the fourth act is so superfluous that Shelley didn't even originally include it as part of the play but instead tacked it on later. The ancient tragedians knew how to get to the point, and even more contemporary playwrights to Shelley like Shakespeare knew the art of merging their exquisite language with dramatic and compelling plots. There is no evidence in Prometheus Unbound that Shelley possessed that ability, and the story of Prometheus isn't one that precludes dramatic tension by any means. Shelley's four act play rambles on, brushing the key events out of the way as quickly as possible so as to fit in more passages of Earth and Asia and the Moon and other "characters" either despairing over the fate of Prometheus and the current state of the world, or in the second half of the play praising the changes that have occurred and the new state of things. Jupiter (Zeus) literally appears for all of three pages. The Moon gets more lines than Jupiter does. In sum Prometheus Unbound, even if you aren't comparing it to other plays, is a poorly structured work that fails to be at all compelling, instead continually going off on tangents and focusing on minor occurrences while giving very little attention to major ones.

These failings are why I believe Prometheus Unbound should really be considered a framework for Shelley's poetry instead of as a drama of any sort, closet or otherwise. Seriously, even if Shelley was a complete fool he probably could have written a play with better structure than this if crafting an interesting play was his goal. Instead, if his intention was to use the classical framework established by Aeschylus as a jumping off point for his poetry, then the structure of the play and the characters he chose to focus on makes far more sense. Unfortunately, while more understandable, Prometheus Unbound isn't very good when considered as a poetry framework either. Shelley can write great poetry, no question, the go-to example that almost everyone is familiar with being Ozymandias, and other efforts by Shelley (some included with Prometheus Unbound when it was first published) are also impressive. In Prometheus Unbound there is little of Shelley's best on display when it comes to poetry. For every character's speech that works well as a poem there are a dozen that seem mediocre poetry at best- and I'm probably being generous, as most lines don't even seem to meet the threshold of poetry but merely read as prolix prose. Additionally, reading over a hundred pages of Shelley's second tier poems stapled together isn't the format to appreciate his poetic talents. Especially when the fourth act rolls around and the story has already been completely resolved, the poetic dialogue of the various characters is distinctly underwhelming, more tedious than anything else. There is good Shelley poetry out there, but Prometheus Unbound does not showcase his best work, largely giving us overwritten and unimpressive speeches instead .

Shelley set out to not only complete Aeschylus's play, but to surpass it. Instead, he stripped Prometheus Bound of all its most interesting elements and wrote a bland play that serves more as a funnel for some of Shelley's more mediocre poetry than it does a compelling drama. Where Aeschylus wrote complex characters Shelley gives us mere archetypes of the martyr and the tyrant, not that they even receive much attention. Instead Shelley has the play focus on different nature entities talking amongst themselves, or praising the new dawn brought about by the overthrow of Jupiter, all in the form of some of Shelley's most lackluster poetry (for the most part indistinguishable from too-flowery prose). Based on statements he made to his wife before his death Shelley was actually happy with how Prometheus Unbound turned out. For my part, I can't imagine how Shelley could believe for one second that this mess of a closet drama belonged alongside the works of the great tragedians of antiquity.

char says

i hated reading this in part because my edition was formatted in the most eyebleeding way but also because it's just not good. I guess since this is percy's masterpiece I never need to read anything else by him, which is a relief. anyway i have no idea where my copy is so i'm never finishing it

Adil El Azraki says

Expressed in outward things; but soon I looked,
And behold; thrones were kingless, and men walked
One with the other even as spirits do,
None frowned, none trampled; hate, disdain, or fear,
Self-love or self-contempt, on human brows
No more inscribed, as o'er the gate of hell,
"All hope abandon ye who enter here"

Shelly continued Aeschylus's story and transformed it into a symbolic drama about the origin of evil and its elimination. He wrote in his preface that Prometheus is, "as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature." But he also warned that it is a mistake to suppose that the poem contains 'a reasoned system on the theory of human life.

Prometheus unbound is not a dramatized philosophical essay, nor a normal allegory, but a large and very intricate imaginative construction which involves premises about the nature of man and the springs of morality and creativity. It represented the view that both the origin of evil and the possibility of reform are the moral responsibility of man himself, just as social chaos and wars are gigantic projection of man's moral disorder and inner division and conflict.

To end up, with the Triumph of Life and some of the longer lyrics, Prometheus Unbound constitutes a weighty claim to rank Shelly as among the major poets.

Tereza says

Já ty romantiky prost? nemusím. Overflow of powerful feelings budiž, ale na tolik stránek v kuse?

Biblio Curious says

Shelley is a lexical, storytelling boss! Move over Byron, you've been whupped!

The nature imagery is powerful and animates each aspect of nature. It reminds me of Homer's Ancient animist themes from The Iliad but has what I'm guessing is the updated Romantic, idealist themes slant added.

Naturally, I've got to read the original, Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound next.
