

**OPPOSITION TO TYRANNY:  
SHELLEY'S ATHEISM AND *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND***

**THESIS**

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## Introduction

. -- why has man such a scope

For love and hate, despondency and hope?

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever

To sage or poet these responses given.--

Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,

Remain the records of their vain endeavour

Frail spells-- whose uttered charm might not avail to sever

From all we hear an see,

Doubt, chance, and mutability. – Shelley, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

(23-31)

Such was the belief of Percy Bysshe Shelley, that the idea or conception of God was merely a failed attempt to ascertain the nature of something so abstract that it must be without form or being. In this poem, Shelley, as the poet, is imbued by the spirit of Beauty with an exultant joy unlike anything he has previously experienced. However, this spirit is sufficiently Platonic in its conception that it cannot be comprehended by mere words. Thus, Shelley’s spirit is a subjective one, and not something that can be contained within institutionalized dogma. This idea is typical of Shelley’s anti-religious views, which inform both his poetry and his philosophy

In fact, much of Shelley's poetry and prose is linked to his philosophic and political beliefs. Atheism, Platonism, a resistance to monarchical authority, and a precocious intellect that began to flourish during his school days at Eton and Oxford are a few of the important influences that shaped his later work. This is especially true of one of his masterworks, *Prometheus Unbound*.

Using Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* as a framework upon which to build his own work, Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound* between 1818 and 1819 while traveling in Italy. The gorgeous scenery influenced the writing of his lyric drama, as the tragic deaths of his two children during this period must have. However, the two most important influences on the poem are the philosophical influence of his atheism and the literary influence of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

*Prometheus Unbound* is divided into four acts, only the first of which prominently features Prometheus himself. In Act 1, Prometheus, chained to a rock on the Indian Caucasus, speaks to the seemingly omnipotent Jupiter, who has chained him there for his defiance. Prometheus is tortured by agents of Jupiter, but in a revelatory moment he recants his curse on Jupiter and thus frees himself spiritually from his imprisonment. Prometheus' recantation of his desire for revenge against the tyrant then sets in motion the downfall of Jupiter and the regeneration of humanity, which occur in the following three acts.

In Act 2, Panthea relates her two dreams to Prometheus' wife, Asia (Reiman, *Percy Bysshe Shelley* 58), which foreshadows her reunion with Prometheus and Demogorgon's meeting with Jupiter. Demogorgon, more of a force created by Jupiter's tyranny than an actual character, is thus introduced.

Act 3, originally conceived by Shelley to serve as the final act of his drama, presents Jupiter at the height of his tyranny in Heaven. In the first scene, Demogorgon arrives and promptly drags Jupiter down from his throne. In the following scenes, Prometheus is released from his bonds and reunited with Asia. And in the final speech of Act 3, the Spirit of the Hour proclaims that Jupiter's godhead has been taken away from him, and that he exists now only as a man.

Although this was originally meant to be the poem's end, Shelley composed a fourth act later, after the death of his son. In it, Shelley presents a hopeful vision of the world as it can be, freed from tyranny and able to break free of the destructive cycle which always brings tyranny about.

In this fashion, Shelley sought to write his own version of *Paradise Lost*. Prometheus, like Satan, defies omnipotent power. However, unlike Satan, Prometheus transcends his own petty desire for revenge and personal glory, and in doing so he succeeds and discovers that omnipotence is only perceived. This is a radical departure from Milton's intent in his epic poem, and it is informed by Shelley's much maligned atheism. And it is this atheism that becomes the central problem of my thesis.

Shelley's atheism first manifested itself in print when he and Thomas Jefferson Hogg published *The Necessity of Atheism* while they were students at Oxford. The notorious pamphlet got them expelled, but Shelley's views remained firm. However, one of the problems with his atheism has been the critical rejection of it. Shelley's contemporaries within the British publishing establishment generally regarded him as a mad heretic, while modern scholars have either chosen to ignore it, apologize for it, dismiss it altogether, or regard as really being an agnostic belief.

The view of Shelley as an agnostic, steeped in the skepticism of David Hume has been particularly tenacious, and has been espoused by prominent Shelley scholars such as Donald Reiman and Harold Bloom. However, I think it is a mistake to dismiss the avowal of a poet of Shelley's genius and conviction in order to place upon him the more benign and indecisive mantle of agnosticism. Although it must be admitted that Shelley's atheism is problematical, that does not mean that it is not legitimate. It is my goal, then, to show that Shelley's atheism is a genuine belief that denies the existence of God. It is a belief that helps support his view of religions and monarchies as tyrannical institutions, but does not prevent him from appreciating the humanistic elements of the teachings of Christ. Therefore, it is not merely a reaction against orthodox Christianity, but rather the reasoned, rational belief of a radical, visionary intellect. Thus, the purpose of my thesis is to examine Shelley's atheism and remove it from the bonds of Christianity, and to show how his atheism influenced one of his most important works, *Prometheus Unbound*.

The thesis is divided into three chapters: critical, biographical, and analytical. The first chapter will serve as a survey of the critical reaction to *Prometheus Unbound*. It will examine the initial reviews Shelley's work received, as well as some of the nineteenth-century responses to Shelley's work in general. And it will give an overview of the significant trends in twentieth-century scholarship of *Prometheus Unbound*. In this chapter, I will also look at how Shelley's atheism did or did not affect the critical response.

The second chapter is biographical, and recounts early experiences that informed Shelley's beliefs and the events that surrounded the composition of the poem. Of

particular use will be some of Shelley's own letters written during his travels in Italy, as well as the memoirs of his friends Thomas Jefferson Hogg and Thomas Love Peacock

The third and final chapter will both defend Shelley's atheism and examine its influence in *Prometheus Unbound*. The defense will attempt to define atheism and to clarify how it differs from agnosticism, while also looking at Shelley's *The Necessity of Atheism* and other prose works to clarify his specific atheism. The analysis of *Prometheus Unbound* will be linked to an analysis of *Paradise Lost*, as well as Shelley's poetic theories from *A Defence of Poetry*. However, this analysis will be limited to the characters of Prometheus, Jupiter, Demogorgon, and their Miltonic influences. More complete readings have already been done by more accomplished scholars than myself, and I do not feel it would benefit my thesis to attempt one here. As my thesis is focused on Shelley's atheism, so too is my analysis of *Prometheus Unbound*.

Thus, it is my hope that this thesis will demonstrate the need to approach Shelley on his own terms, rather than attempt to dilute his radical beliefs by trying to fit him into any Christian framework

### **Textual Note**

In writing this thesis, I have taken as my standard for all of Shelley's major poetic and prose works *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, the critical edition by Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Prometheus Unbound* and *A Defence of Poetry*, as well as all other poetic works, will be taken from this edition. However, it needs to be noted that not even this edition of *Prometheus Unbound* can be considered completely authoritative. Donald Reiman has stated that it is not definitive,

since it mediates “between the three imperfect authorities-- Shelley’s intermediate fair copy manuscript at the Bodleian Library (MSS > Shelley e.1, e.2, and e.3), the first edition of 1820, and Mary Shelley’s edition of 1839” (131).

In addition, all letters, short prose, and prose fragments written by Shelley have been taken from the 1965 revised, ten-volume edition of *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. This revised edition was published by Gordian Press, and should not be confused with the earlier Julian edition by the same editors.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A CRITICAL HISTORY OF *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* was completed in 1819, and its critical history has gone from scant notice upon its release to a flourish of attention in the late twentieth-century. Although condemned at first for its immorality, the poem found an audience in the early to mid-twentieth century. However, most of the critics of the time were either uncomfortable with or felt apologetic for Shelley's openly declared atheism and disgust for all forms of organized religion. However, as the century has progressed so has an acceptance of Shelley's revolutionary ideas about religion, which in turn has led to more varied interpretations of his work. Although no critic seems to have openly embraced Shelley's atheism, and some even still feel the need to infuse *Prometheus Unbound* with overt Christian symbolism, the respect accorded the poem has certainly increased.

The purpose of this chapter is to survey both contemporary reception of *Prometheus Unbound* and twentieth-century criticism of the poem. Although this certainly cannot cover all of the vast criticism of the poem, my intention is to cover the major trends in criticism of *Prometheus Unbound* over the century. For clarification, it should be mentioned here that all criticism of *Prometheus*

*Unbound* that was contemporary to his life is taken from *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of the British Romantic Writers*, edited by Donald Reiman.

### Contemporary Criticism

When Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* was published in 1820, it was greeted by English reviewers with near-universal scorn. Given the anti-Christian tone of the poem, though, this should not be surprising. However, the reviewers often contradicted their own stances by marveling at his gift for poetry

In comparing Shelley's poem to its original source material from Aeschylus, John Gibson Lockhart oddly states

It would be highly absurd to deny that this gentleman has manifested very extraordinary powers of language and imagination, however grossly and miserably he may have tried to pervert its purpose and meaning. (Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed* 139)

Ironically, Lockhart attributes to Shelley the same faults that Shelley finds in Milton's Satan. Similarly, the anonymous article published in the November 1820 issue of *Dublin Magazine* remarks that "we [the editors] think his [Shelley's] talents unworthily devoted to evil purposes in his imitations,-- and, let him account for the fact as he will, all his poetry is imitative. We see little else than an eloquent use of language, wild and rhapsodical declamation" (Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed* 315). Still another critic, in the *Monthly Review*, states that he is "disposed to welcome all that is good and useful in him, as well as prepared to condemn all that is the contrary" (Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed* 724).

What links these reviewers together is that, in spite of their own beliefs, they acknowledge that Shelley is a very powerful poet. Their condemnation of his beliefs, then, can perhaps be attributed to the rigidity of their own thinking

Other critics, though, were completely opposed to *Prometheus Unbound* and refused to give it any due credit. The anonymous reviewer of *The Literary Gazette* remarks that “were we not assured to the contrary, we should take it for granted that the author was lunatic-- as his principles are ludicrously wicked, and his poetry a melange of nonsense, cockneyism, poverty, and pedantry” (Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed* 524) And William Sidney Walker of the *Quarterly Review* wrote of the poem

So Mr. Shelley may plume himself upon writing in three different styles one which can be generally understood; another which can be understood only by the author; and a third which is absolutely and intrinsically unintelligible Whatever his command may be of the first and second of these styles, this volume is a most satisfactory testimonial of his proficiency in the last. (Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed* 780).

Unfortunately, this comment on Shelley’s power as a poet seems to be typical of his contemporary critics. They remained ignorant of the poem, and instead of attempting to comprehend its meaning they were satisfied with their own snide remarks In addition, most of these reviews tended to rely heavily on large block quotations without many comments on them

However, there is at least one positive review of *Prometheus Unbound*, which was published in *London Magazine* The review lauds Shelley’s belief in individual

liberty and his attacks on cruel authority. And even though the anonymous reviewer obviously objects to Shelley's atheism, he nonetheless receives the poem more generously than others of his time when he states:

Although there are some things in Mr. Shelley's philosophy against which we feel it a duty thus to protest, we must not suffer our difference of opinion to make us insensible to his genius. As a poem, the work before us is replete with clear, pure, and majestic imagery, accompanied by a harmony as rich and various as that of the loftiest of our English poets (Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed* 638)

This is perhaps the kindest printed critique of *Prometheus Unbound* that Shelley received during his lifetime. However, as the editors of *The Romantics Reviewed* (the volume in which these reviews are contained) note, the author still does not understand much of the poem he has reviewed (Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed* 627). Thus, during his own life, Shelley's lyric drama, and much of his other poetry, was generally misunderstood or ignored by the literate population of England.

In the later nineteenth-century, though, Shelley did gain some positive reception. Kenneth Neill Cameron notes that "such Shelley admirers as George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, H. Buxton Forman, H. S. Salt, and William Michael Rossetti regarded Shelley as an intellectual poet" (*Romantic Rebels* 6), which unfortunately led to the conception of Shelley as a pure lyric poet (6) and ignored the significant influence of his political and antireligious views. Thus, any analyses of *Prometheus Unbound* published by these men would likely have been ignorant of its social ramifications. In fact, *Prometheus Unbound* remained largely ignored for over a hundred years.

### Early to Mid-Twentieth Century Criticism

It has been well documented by the major Shelley critics (Bloom, Cameron, and Reiman, among others) that prominent early twentieth-century figures C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot read Shelley's poetry, including *Prometheus Unbound*, but inevitably tended to dismiss the incendiary nature of his work. This reading helped to perpetuate the idea that Shelley's only contribution to literature and society was his lyricism. In Lewis' well-known *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, which attempts to assimilate *Paradise Lost* into orthodox Protestant Christianity, he dismisses the Shelleyan view of Milton's Satan as an admirable character, a belief expressed in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, as "wholly erroneous" (94). Of course, Lewis was a devout Protestant, and I think any devout Christian would find it necessary to reject Shelley's political and religious views, since they are deeply influenced by his atheism. Similarly, Eliot embraced Christianity and took "an extreme right-wing authoritarianism" (Eagleton 74) that bordered on fascism. Given his political beliefs, it is easy to see that Eliot would have to reject the radical liberalism of Shelley, who, as a precursor to the flower-children of the 1960's, advocated free love and "favored open-necked shirts and long hair" (Cameron, *Romantic Rebels* vi). If he had not rejected Shelley's beliefs, then Eliot would have had to question his own.

Shelley was also rejected, along with many others, by the influential English critic F. R. Leavis. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton notes that Leavis' critical journal *Scrutiny* was influential in codifying what was high literature and what was merely pretty language.

With breathtaking boldness, *Scrutiny* redrew the map of English literature in ways from which it has never quite recovered. The main thoroughfares on this map ran through Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jonson, the Jacobean and Metaphysicals, Bunyan, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Austen, George Eliot, Hopkins, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. This *was* 'English literature': Spencer, Dryden, Restoration drama, Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Browning, most of the Victorian novelists, Joyce, Woolf, and most writers after D. H. Lawrence constituted a network of 'B' roads interspersed with a good few cul-de-sacs (28)

In this fashion, Leavis' stronghold at Cambridge continued to make Shelley, in the literary sense, an expatriate from his country. It is perhaps fitting, then, that *Prometheus Unbound* received its first important interpretation in the United States.

Among the first examples of significant American criticism and interpretation of *Prometheus Unbound* is Carl Grabo's book-length study, *Prometheus Unbound: An Interpretation*, which appeared in 1935. In it, Grabo acknowledges the general lack of critical understanding and appreciation of Shelley's canon when he asserts

Shelley was, nevertheless, a thinker of very great importance, indeed, one whose thought was so far in advance of his time that it is only today that it can be understood by any great number of persons. In *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley has reconciled neo-Platonism with the advanced scientific speculation of his day and with the radical social philosophy which underlay the French Revolutionary period. He has

sought to find amid the determination of science a place for the freedom of the moral will. And he has seen the universe endlessly evolving, as God, or the One, Himself endlessly evolves (v)

Grabo purports to be one of the first critics to consider Shelley as a philosopher, stating that most others of the time only appreciate him as a lyric poet (v). To that end, he examines Shelley's Platonism, his pessimistic Romanticism, his scientific interests, and, to a lesser degree, events in his life. He argues that Shelley is a modernist, and he was probably the first to do so. In addition, he also devotes attention to the influence of Zoroastrianism, which would also be examined further by modern critics.

Grabo's work is significant in that it is the first real attempt to understand both *Prometheus Unbound* and Shelley's philosophy. However, Grabo's significant flaw is in his insistence on using Christian doctrine to help further his interpretation. Although he does not insist that Shelley extols Christianity (which would be absurd), he does remark

And to all this (Shelley's plan for *Prometheus Unbound*) must be added as a strain of his thought or as a solvent wherein the other elements of his philosophy were blent, his acceptance of the ethics of Christianity, which in his earlier days he had rejected together with the forms of institutional religion. To these latter he was throughout his life wholly averse, but the ethics of Christ became his and are embodied in his conception of Prometheus. (10)

This theme is re-stated often in Grabo's work, and thus becomes a focal point of his interpretation of Prometheus' liberation as redemption. But since Prometheus transcends his condition rather than receives redemption from it, this does not completely fit the

poem. Grabo is, through his writings, obviously a Christian. And it is perhaps his own beliefs that allow him to disregard Shelley's atheism to the point that it is not even significantly discussed. (Unfortunately, he would not be the last to assert a Christ-Prometheus connection.) Still, Grabo's interpretation does lay the groundwork for other significant Shelley scholars.

In the forties, Shelley scholarship began to grow, primarily due to Historicists who examined Shelley's political beliefs and New Critics who confined their analysis primarily to the poetic text itself, with only marginal references to biography and history.

In "The Father-Child Symbolism in *Prometheus Unbound*, William Marshall, like Grabo, becomes an apologist for Shelley as he asserts that Shelley's atheism is compatible with a belief in Christ (44). Although this claim is highly suspicious, especially given Marshall's obvious Christian beliefs, he does make an interesting case for this proposition by dividing Christ into the human and the divine, one of which destroys the other as Marshall equates Prometheus with Christ

Still other critics have looked at Shelley's platonic influence In "The Abstractness of Shelley," Richard Fogle notes the diversity of opinions on Shelley, which try to label him at different times "Platonic and neo-Platonic, Naturalistic and Necessitarian" (363) However, Fogle rightly asserts that Shelley does not fit any of these categories In an effort to demonstrate the fluid nature of Shelley's poetry, Fogle focuses on what he considers to be the key metaphor of the veil, which is used in varying degrees in *Prometheus Unbound*, *Queen Mab*, and *Adonais*. He describes this veil as a device that obscures the true, absolute nature of things and thus helps to maintain a dualistic relationship between mind and nature (378). In *Prometheus Unbound*, he suggests that

“the dizzying elusiveness of an essence or absolute (is) concealed from the perception beneath many veils” (375) He further states that this key metaphor is contained in Panthea’s dream of Prometheus in Act 2 (375). Although his analysis *Prometheus Unbound* lacks depth and is devoid of comment on anything external to the poetry, Fogle rightly observes Shelley’s essential search for meaning, a search that was manifested both in his life and in his work.

Other critics, though, searched for the sources of Shelley’s inspiration. Earl K. Wasserman, for instance, points out that Shelley’s choice of Asia as Prometheus’ wife is verified by sources in Herodotus, as his choice of Ione as Asia’s sister is by the *Bibliotheca* of Apollodorus (182-3) In a similar fashion, Bennett Weaver looks at the relationship between Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* He examines both the character and the plot of both dramas, concluding that where Shelley differs from Aeschylus is in his “transmutation of the character of Prometheus into something approaching the character of the Galilean” (132) Thus, he unfortunately, like Grabo and others, misreads Shelley by imposing his own Christian values onto a poem which is decidedly un-Christian. Furthermore, he, like Fogle, takes a New Critical approach that fails to take his radical political views into account It is thus significant, then, that Kenneth Neill Cameron’s work on Shelley was also appearing at this time.

A formidable Shelley scholar, Cameron has written extensively on Shelley’s political beliefs and intentions. In “The Political Symbolism of *Prometheus Unbound*,” Cameron argues that the poem is both an allegory of the failed French Revolution and an explanation of what must be done to achieve true social liberation He states that “Shelley is thinking of Prometheus mainly as a symbol of the intellectuals of his own day, and that

the Furies are the tormenting thought-images of the aftermath of war and dictatorship and the French Revolution” (730)

Using Shelley’s prose to reinforce his claims, he also interestingly argues that Necessity is an uncontrollable and amoral force. He describes it as “a blind, ineluctable force acting independently of the mind or wishes of man” (744). In this way, Necessity can be seen as similar to the power of nature in “Mont Blanc.” He continues on with this line of reasoning to further assert that a cyclic relationship of anarchy and despotism is evidenced through the relationship of Demogorgon and Necessity to Jupiter

Cameron discusses Shelley’s political beliefs even further in “The Social Philosophy of Shelley ” In this essay, Cameron’s goal is to rescue Shelley from other critics of the time who saw him as naïve and ultimately ineffectual, or as the fragile Ariel who is unable to cope with the realities of the physical world Cameron rescues Shelley by focusing on his dualistic view of the struggle between the forces of liberty and despotism as outlined in Shelley’s *A Philosophical View of Reform* (512) He further points to Shelley’s prose critiques on several revolutions, including the French and American, as well as events in Spain, Naples, and Greece from 1820 to 1821 (513) Of *Prometheus Unbound*, Cameron states in this essay:

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley takes a still broader canvas, depicting the vast movement of historical evolution from a period immediately before the outbreak of the French Revolution into the immediate future of the overthrow of the despotic state, and the remoter future of the equalitarian society The struggle of Prometheus is the struggle of the leader of humanity-- specifically the peoples of post-war

Europe-- against the despotic state (Jupiter)-- specifically the rule of the Quadruple Alliance. In this struggle, humanity is assisted by the forces of historical evolution (Demogorgon) and by the strength of human love and comradeship (Asia) Aided by these forces mankind overthrows the despotic state and advances into the new order (517-8)

Here Cameron tends to overstate the historical aspect to the detriment of the other facets of the work. And even though the political context of *Prometheus Unbound* is not the only prism through which to view the poem, Cameron cleverly covers himself by stating that his intention is only to view the political aspects that informed and affected Shelley's work

Cameron's work is interesting not only because it is a refreshing counterpoint to the critics who will not see beyond the poetry on the page but because he presents a viable external context through which Shelley's abstractness can be made clearer. Cameron has a single-minded and thorough focus on the political aspects of Shelley's poetry and prose. Still, his analysis remains with Shelley in the nineteenth-century, and offers no suggestion as to what insights his radical politics might offer to modern society.

Cameron, though, has not been the only critic interested in Demogorgon, the mysterious son of Jupiter. In "Jupiter's Fatal Child in *Prometheus Unbound*," Pierre Vitoux examines the third act of the poem and argues convincingly for a similarity between Demogorgon and Milton's Son in *Paradise Lost*, he also briefly examines the possible debt of *Prometheus Unbound* to Robert Southey's *The Curse of Kehama*. Vitoux points to Prometheus' secret, which holds the power to cause Jupiter's fall, and he also cites the source material involving Zeus and Thetis in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. He

then cleverly argues that Prometheus' secret is not some sort of hidden knowledge but something that occurs at the moment when "Prometheus has recalled and cancelled his curse on Jupiter, when he repudiates all hatreds, discards the notions of revenge and punishment which belong to the dark ages of the mind, and realizes that evil is not to be hated but pitied as an error" (117). However, the central point of Vitoux's argument is located in the character of Demogorgon. Like Cameron, he notes that Demogorgon is "an obscure but genuine mythological character" (118), a character which is also mentioned by Milton in *Paradise Lost* (2 965) Building on the obvious Miltonic influence, Vitoux demonstrates that Demogorgon, in a perverse way, represents the same kind of eternal spirit as Milton's Son when he states.

If Demogorgon is Eternity, he cannot have been created by Jupiter, since he is necessarily preexistent to time. But what Shelley means is made clear by the use of the word "incarnation" in the text I have quoted. Just as Christ was born and began to exist as man, though he was eternal and consubstantial with God-- so Demogorgon is actualized and brought into our world and made an active force in it (120)

Although Vitoux does not make a direct link with Milton here, it seems clear that the theology is consistent with that of Milton, who was a considerable force on Shelley's thought Thus the connection to Milton is not a great leap of faith And although Vitoux is duly impressed with the dynamic force of Demogorgon and the third act, he seems to regard Shelley's fourth act, which was completed later, as a failure (125)

Vitoux recognizes the inherent difficulty of working through Shelley's often abstract characters, as does Mildred Sloan McGill. In "The Role of the Earth in Shelley's

*Prometheus Unbound*,” McGill notes the inconsistency in Shelley’s players when she states that “Prometheus is more nearly anthropological than is Demogorgon, and for a great part of the poem, Asia is near to pure abstraction” (119). Following the Shelleyan ideas about dualism that have been expounded on by Cameron, McGill centers her argument on the figure of the Earth, suggesting that Earth in Act 1 is a Demeter-Earth who contains a “masochistic dualism” (122), since “she is both attracted to and repelled by evil” (122). McGill then views the Spirit of the Earth in Act 3 as “a combination of Eros and the Greek torch bearer” (126). Finally, she sees the Earth of Act 4 as a figure who combines both of the previous Earth figures in order to “effect the revitalization of Demeter-Earth’s chthonian qualities, and to enlarge and refine the erotic limitations implicit in the Spirit of the Earth” (128). Written in 1968, McGill’s analysis of the Earth figure is significantly more complex than that of some of her predecessors, and although it is only concerned with the poem itself, it begins to point toward a widening of the scope of criticism of *Prometheus Unbound*

### Late Twentieth-Century Criticism

With the continuing expansion of critical diversity that came after the primacy of the New Criticism, interest in both Shelley and *Prometheus Unbound* have risen. Although *Prometheus Unbound* does not appear to have received many Marxist or Feminist readings, Deconstructive and Post-Structural readings, as well as rhetorical and close textual analyses, have proliferated. In addition, the insistence on a Christian misreading, although not completely gone, has partially subsided. The nature of

Demogorgon and the problem of Necessity have continued to be topics of interest, in addition to a greater interest in and acceptance of Act 4.

In looking at the problem of Necessity in *Prometheus Unbound*, Stuart Sperry argues that Shelley had already abandoned this philosophy of Godwin, his mentor, and was indeed not naive enough to still believe that the universe was a “good and radically beneficent place” (246). Sperry points to the depiction of Necessity as an indifferent force in “Mont Blanc,” which he regards as “more than any other work of the poet, a preliminary sketch for *Prometheus*” (247). However, Sperry does not deny the power of Necessity in *Prometheus Unbound*, but rather asserts that Shelley transforms it through the character of Demogorgon into a force “active in and beyond the very framework of the drama, a destiny with which Prometheus himself fully cooperates but to which he remains subordinate” (248). Sperry also counters the critics who condemn Shelley’s idealism, especially in the fourth act, by stating that “in Shelley’s mature thinking an extreme idealism draws its strength from an extreme skepticism; the two reinforce rather than counteract each other” (252). Sperry’s argument for Shelley—without—apologies is very compelling, and is made more so by his condemnation of the critical attempt to convert Prometheus into a Christ figure (246).

Also interested in Demogorgon, John Reider argues that the “One” who resists in Prometheus’ defiant address to Jupiter is neither simply Demogorgon nor Prometheus as himself, or as what Earl Wasserman calls the “One-Mind” (777), but rather that it is a disunified dualism of anarchy and love that demonstrates “the radical antagonism between the inescapable structures of its individualist ideology and the utopian content which fills and overflows them” (800).

Many critics have also been intrigued by the dramatic and theatrical problems that *Prometheus Unbound* poses. Although hardly discussed in earlier criticism, some recent critics have considered its theatricality from more metaphysical and psychological points-of-view. In "The Style of Millennial Announcement in *Prometheus Unbound*," V. A. De Luca contends that the speeches of the Spirit of the Earth and the Spirit of the Hour in Act 3, along with "Panthea's vision of the Earth chariot and its revelations" (81) in Act 4, comprise a dramatic movement that works to bring about the perfect Shelleyan creature who is able to rise above tyranny through love, a creature that De Luca calls a "millennial man" who is "indivisible, undifferentiated, exercising compelling force" (100). James Bennett has also paid attention to the theatricality of *Prometheus Unbound*, particularly Act 1. Citing Shelley's own prefatory remarks about the relationship of his work to Dante, Shakespeare, and the ancient Greeks, he asserts that Act 1 is a "moral and psychological drama" (32) that moves in four scenes from the suffering of Prometheus to his liberation and transcendence

Similarly, James Twitchell, in his analysis of Act 4, concludes that Shelley's problematic act is a psychodrama that gives the play closure as it allows the human mind to move beyond the "perverted cosmos" (42) of the first three acts. Unfortunately, Twitchell's theory is seriously undermined by his insistence on Shelley's Christian influence in the statement that "the Christian hierarchies are rearranged so that Lucifer-Jupiter is above, Christ-Prometheus is still in the middle, and Demogorgon-God is far below" (42). Twitchell's observation sounds nice and unified, but it is fallacious and arrogant to assume that a poet so opposed to Christianity and possessed of such a fine

intellect would create such an obvious and simple trick for a work he regarded as one of his best. In addition, Lucifer should not be conflated with Jupiter

In contrast, John Schell examines the theme of harmony in Shelley's poetry by looking at Act 4 as well. He notes that it "presents the reunion of the moon and the earth, their symbolic mating, and their subsequent regeneration" (37), while also using Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* to bolster his arguments. Schell further argues that the harmony in *Prometheus Unbound* arises from "an esoteric philosophical system whose premise is the special nature of humankind" (35), which he also describes as a secular humanism that is "contrary to Christian dogma" (35).

Another approach that has flourished and continues to illuminate *Prometheus Unbound* is a rhetorical analysis that has focused on the problems of voice and language in the poem. Ellen Brown Herson, for instance, has studied the use of oxymoron in the poem. She states that over three hundred uses of oxymoron as a rhetorical device occur in *Prometheus Unbound*, including five subtypes (376). She sees these uses of oxymoron as "the very organ of his (Shelley's) unique insight" (37), and asserts that it functions as a system that moves the poem through its journey from suffering to transcendence, or "a journey toward perfection without a single reference point for perfection, a path without an ultimate goal, a theodicy without a god" (374). In another example of the rhetorical perspective, John Pierce has examined the use of silence in the poem, arguing that it is both a deconstructive device that demonstrates "Shelley's philosophical skepticism" (125) and a vacancy that allows the reader to perceive his own meaning in the poem (126).

In “ ‘Unsayings His High Language’: The Problem of Voice in *Prometheus Unbound*,” Susan Hawk Brisman notes that “a repeatedly renewed conflict about the nature of language underlies the transformation of the Promethean voice from defiance to sympathy and love” (52). Also relying heavily on comparisons to Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Brisman asserts that the Promethean voice is a force that “brings word and world into being” (86) and is instrumental in his freedom. Marlon Ross also picks up on the problem of voice, stating that “what Prometheus has to learn is how to assert his own speech without deserting the dialogic community” (118). He points out that Shelley subverts typical meanings in words, even words that have simple concrete referents (119). He also states that Shelley “encourages apprehensions through linguistic obstruction” (120) by removing the concept of traditional sight. Shelley respects the visceral power of sight, but does not want the reader to become enslaved by “the tyranny of the eye” (120). In fact, Ross seems to argue that through the obstruction of language in some of its traditional forms Shelley wants to obstruct the traditions and patterns that lead to tyranny, which is of course one of the major themes of *Prometheus Unbound*. Ross offers a fascinating viewpoint by observing this idea at the linguistic, rather than thematic level. Ross then concludes that the poem should not elude the average reader, even if it is found to be confusing. He suggests that it “need only distract and distress the reader temporarily, thereby bringing the person back to the actual world with a slightly altered mental state” (132).

Also concerned with the use of language in the poem are critics influenced by deconstruction and post-structuralism. Unfortunately, many of these critics are so

concerned with the promotion of their own theories that they seem to forget about the text they are analyzing.

In “*Prometheus Unbound*, or Discourse and Its Other,” Christine Berthin argues that the poem is a revolutionary text as it “tests its own freedom as transgression of the linguistic” (140). Marshaling her Saussurean vocabulary of signifiers, paroles, and figurations, she works her post-structural voodoo in order to deliver a pseudo-scientific description of *Prometheus Unbound*’s power:

*Prometheus Unbound* is a figural text, not only to the extent that it is a reminder of the way in which language deflects and complicates the poetic project, but also insofar as it deflects language in order to launch the poetic project. Although the text cannot fully embody revolution (since as discourse it is necessarily constrained within a linguistic system), the Figural nevertheless functions as a force of resistance that inhabits the text and interferes with it. Superimposing alternative modes of expression on the order of the signifier, treating words as things or sound, the figural opens breaches in discourse (129)

Although her observation of Shelley’s subtle manipulation of language is valuable, her own prose inhibits understanding as she writes with a technical specificity that would seem more appropriate to a lecture on physics.

Similarly, Linda Brigham asserts in “The Postmodern Semiotics of *Prometheus Unbound*” that the value of Shelley’s poem lies in its ability to undo the act of revolution through the “creation of a revolutionary mentality” (56) in which “theory usurps action”

(56). Unfortunately, Brigham's jargon-laden article is much less about the poem than it is about her own critical theories, a problem not uncommon in much modern critical theory

However, Tilottama Rajan's equally complex article, "Deconstruction or Reconstruction: Reading Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*," succeeds where many other modern theory articles fail because her focus never wavers from Shelley's work even as she deals significantly with hermeneutics and deconstruction. Rajan argues that Shelley has attempted to create a hermeneutical text, which he then attempts to deconstruct in order to prevent his threads of meaning from being unraveled by someone else. She points to such instances as Prometheus' ambiguous and uncertain forgiveness of Jupiter (318) and the possible confusion of the intentions for the dark and light chariots that arrive for Demogorgon and Asia respectively, thus suggesting that the text is deliberately elusive here and may intend the dark chariot for Asia. This possibility could herald "a second coming in which the center no longer holds" (332), rather than the paradisaical end prophesied in Act 4. Rajan further notes that, as both a figurative and a historical text, *Prometheus Unbound* resists a post-structuralist interpretation (337-8). She then concludes by asserting that Shelley's work, written as drama, may be best understood in the semiotics of theater (338), a point that is somewhat undercut by her own acknowledgement of Shelley's theater of the mind (338), as well as the knowledge that Shelley had stated that it was written only for a few close friends. Rajan raises some important questions about how the play should be interpreted, but the deconstructionist theory has a nihilistic hollowness to it. For in order for it to work, authorial intention must be put aside, historicity must be devalued, thematic issues must be eschewed, and what Harold Bloom might call the aesthetic power of the poetry itself must be ignored.

At this point, it is appropriate to mention Harold Bloom's contribution to Shelley scholarship. Known for his concept of the anxiety of influence and the way it causes poet's to deliberately misread their predecessors in order to become powerful poets in their own right, Bloom has written extensively on Shelley and the other Romantics in *Shelley's Mythmaking*, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, and other critical works. A defender of Shelley against attackers and apologists, Bloom states in *The Visionary Company* that "Shelley is a prophetic and religious poet whose passionate convictions are agnostic, and a lyrical poet whose style is a deliberate gamble within the limits of poetry" (282). Bloom's explications of *Prometheus Unbound* are straightforward and indicate his belief that Shelley is necessarily misreading Milton in order to assume his own place in the poetic universe, which of course also necessitates Shelley's attempt to correct Milton. Considering *Prometheus Unbound* to be Shelley's last truly optimistic work, he writes of the conclusion in the fourth act

Like Blake, Shelley has offered a vision of a last judgment that each man passes upon himself, by his own assertion and in the cultivation of his own understanding. The Life and Joy available here are created by Hope from its own wreck, and in the image of the thing it contemplates. (323)

Bloom's enthusiasm for the subject and the persuasiveness of his theory of poetry make him an indispensable authority for any close reading of Shelley.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is sufficiently complex to accommodate many of the theories employed to explain it, and its relevance to the modern reader. However, the Christian tone of many of the approaches to the poem tends to weaken them. To understand the poem, then, it is necessary to understand Shelley's atheism, as well as the

events in his life that brought it into being. The next chapter will look at Shelley's life, focusing on the years that encompass the composition of *Prometheus Unbound*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SHELLEY'S LIFE AND THE COMPOSITION OF *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

Although the events of Shelley's life are well documented, the emotional impact of many of these events will likely always be subject to interpretation and distortion. Humbert Wolfe has collected biographical records by three of his friends, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Edward John Trelawny, and Thomas Love Peacock, into two volumes. As such, they constitute one of the most easily available and widely referenced contemporary biographies. However, each of these individual works consists mostly of personal memoirs augmented by letters from and relating to Shelley. Thus, much of the information contained in them, excluding easily verifiable dates, must be viewed with a skeptical eye.

Another valuable source of information comes from the author himself. Contained in Roger Ingpen and Walter Peck's *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (which, revised and published in 1965, is the most current complete edition of Shelley), Shelley's letters offer detailed description of his travels and the probable dates of composition of his works, as well as insights into his influences. In typically English fashion though, Shelley remains emotionally aloof about his personal life and thus does not shed much

light on how his writing was affected by the many deaths, particularly of children, that occurred around him.

Although other modern biographies exist, the one used in this chapter will be Donald Reiman's revised 1990 edition of his 1969 study of Shelley's life. Some relevant works by Kenneth Neill Cameron will also be used. One of the foremost Shelley scholars, Reiman succeeded Cameron and is the current editor of *Shelley and His Circle*. He has also edited, along with Sharon Powers, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, which is at present generally considered to be the definitive critical edition of Shelley's work. Unless otherwise noted, all dates and events in Shelley's life that are discussed in this chapter refer to Reiman's biography.

### **Shelley's Early Life and Influences**

Born August 4, 1792, Percy Bysshe Shelley was the oldest child of Parliament member Timothy Shelley and Elizabeth Pilfold Shelley. Five of his six siblings were female, including one who died in her first year. Thus, Shelley became the protective older brother of a family of girls (1). Reiman asserts that "the most important influences that shaped the character of Percy Bysshe Shelley lie hidden in his early relationships with his family, servants, neighbors, teachers, and schoolmates" (1). His grandfather, Sir Bysshe Shelley, whom Cameron describes as "a flamboyant and dominating character" (*Romantic Rebels* 2), was likely admired by the young Shelley, who described him as an atheist in a letter to his friend Elizabeth Hitchener (*Romantic Rebels* 2). In addition, his father Timothy seems to have been rather liberal in his own religious views and in his method of instructing his son in religion. Cameron writes that "Shelley's subsequent

views were not, therefore, as is often stated, the result of a rebellion against a conservative home. On the contrary the basis for them was laid in that home” (4).

At Eton, his preparatory school, Shelley’s rebellious tendencies surfaced early, as Shelley was regarded by most of his schoolmates as “refined” and “aristocratic” (Wolfe 2: 311), labels that should be taken as pejorative. In his account of Shelley’s life, college friend and collaborator Thomas Jefferson Hogg states that “on being placed at Eton, Shelley had to undergo aggravated miseries from his systematic and determined resistance to that law of a public school, denominated fagging” (Wolfe 33) Fagging, which seems not very different from the sort of hazing that occurs at military academies and in college fraternities today, was completely repugnant to Shelley, who likely viewed it as a form of tyranny. Even at this early stage in his life, the ideas that would inform Shelley’s life and work appear to be firmly in place. And although Shelley wrote no letters at Eton about this hazing, he did discuss it in later years with Thomas Love Peacock. In his *Memoirs of Shelley*, Peacock states

Shelley often spoke to me of Eton, and of the persecutions he had endured from the elder boys, with feelings of abhorrence which I never heard him express in equal degree in relation to any other subject, except when he spoke of Lord Chancellor Eldon. He told me that he had been provoked into striking a penknife through the hand of one of his young tyrants, and pinning it to the desk, and that this was the cause of his leaving Eton prematurely. but his imagination often presented past events to him as they might have been, not as they were. (Wolfe 2. 313)

Peacock rightly concludes that such a sensational event would have been remembered by others; and since it was not it should not be taken seriously. However, the story still demonstrates the level of hatred Shelley held for such petty tyranny

In addition to the hazing he endured at while at Eton, he also suffered in his private life for his liberal, increasingly anti-religious views. Shelley was apparently involved in a relationship with his cousin Harriet Grove, and had the approval of both families until letters expressing some of his opinions came to light In *Romantic Rebels*, Cameron states:

The understanding was broken off, we are informed by Harriet's brother Charles, because of "the tone of his [Shelley's] letters on speculative subjects," letters which Harriet showed to her father (4)

Shelley's first real notoriety, though, would come at University College in Oxford, when he, and perhaps Hogg, published *The Necessity of Atheism* The anonymous, seven-page pamphlet was published in February of 1811, and although it did not cause an immediate scandal, the eventual uproar over it caused Shelley and Hogg to be expelled from Oxford on March 25, 1811 In writing this essay, Shelley apparently desired a conversation with clergy on the nature and possibility of a deity, as is evidenced in his letter to his father upon being expelled.

We [Shelley and Hogg] therefore embodied our doubts on the subject and arranged them methodically in the form of *The Necessity of Atheism*, thinking thereby to obtain a satisfactory answer from the men who had made Divinity the study of their lives (Ingpen 8 59)

Although the boldness of this statement was typical of Shelley, it should also be considered that as a man not quite nineteen years of age, his youthful exuberance was bound to overpower his judgment, especially when dealing with authority figures. It should be noted here that the actual content of *The Necessity of Atheism* will be studied more closely in Chapter Three.

In addition, Reiman has noted that this incident caused an estrangement between Shelley and his father that led Shelley to become “an increasingly eloquent opponent of authoritarian power” (7). Shelley then moved to London where he lived alone, as this estrangement became, more and more, both financial and emotional. At this same time, Shelley began seeing Harriet Westbrook, with whom he eloped on August 29, 1811. Shelley also struck up an acquaintance with Robert Southey, a poet who would later become his adversary, and began to be more politically active, a fact shown by his public support of Irish nationalism (8-9). However, Shelley’s religious beliefs and his political beliefs were not separate, and they would merge in *A Refutation of Deism* and *Queen Mab*. Designed as a dialogue between the Deist Theosophus and the Christian Eusebes, Shelley’s *A Refutation of Deism* was intended, according to Reiman, to be “purchased by intellectual Christians who, expecting to find arguments against Deism, would find their own faith undermined by the arguments of Theosophus” (12). The work was also intended as a companion piece to *Queen Mab*, Shelley’s first major work and an attack on both Christianity and the English monarchy.

Also during this time, Shelley had begun corresponding with William Godwin, a radical reformer to whom Shelley looked as a mentor. Godwin, as an atheist and a political reformer, “attacked most of the existing laws and customs of this country

[England] and was especially severe on marriage” (Ingpen 8: xxi). At Eton, Shelley had already read Godwin’s reformist tract *Political Justice*, and was impressed by it. In *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical*, Cameron describes tract including the assumption that man is perfectible and the idea that a “national morality is rooted in the political structure as a whole and not by moral or religious education for their own sakes” (62) In addition, Godwin advocated a doctrine of Necessity

By the doctrine of Necessity (a doctrine much maligned by his critics), Godwin meant that there were laws operating in the physical universe, in history, and in the human mind which made for consistent and unalterable patterns of movement in all three realms (66)

Although Shelley challenged many of Godwin’s ideas and suffered a schism with him due to his relationship with Mary, the doctrine of Necessity would be of importance to Shelley, as has been noted in the critical response to Demogorgon as Necessity, which was described in Chapter One.

Shelley first wrote to Godwin in 1812 Later, he began to visit Godwin in London, where he met Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, his mentor’s sixteen-year-old daughter (17) Even though Harriet had borne him a daughter, Shelley became estranged from her and eventually declared his love to Mary in 1814 This led to a complicated situation that even caused Shelley to attempt suicide by a laudanum overdose (18) To make matters more complicated, Harriet gave birth to Charles, Shelley’s first son (19) Eventually, Harriet resigned herself to Shelley’s new life In 1815, another woman entered Shelley’s domestic entanglement Jane “Claire” Clairmont. As part of a free-love proposition by Shelley (19), Clairmont would prove a consternation for Mary and would be more

important in the Shelleys' later lives as they would assist her in the care of Allegra, her daughter with Lord Byron.

In 1816, Shelley published *Alastor: or the Spirit of Solitude*. This poem is generally regarded as the poet's first major, mature work. Harold Bloom states that "this is his first poem of consequence, and is already both characteristic of his genius and premonitory of the development he was to undergo in the less than seven years that remained to him" (*Visionary Company* 283). In the poem, the poet who prematurely chooses solitude is pursued by it and eventually succumbs to a lonely death. *Alastor* marked the beginning of Shelley the poet.

In the same year, Shelley, plagued by debt, left for Europe with Mary, their infant son William, and Claire (26), eventually arriving in Switzerland to meet Byron. It was during this time that Shelley, Mary, and Byron began their famous writing contest, which culminated in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Shelley was also inspired by his trips to the Swiss Alps, and the result was "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Mont Blanc." In these poems, Shelley elaborates on the power of Imagination as it possesses the soul of the poet, as well as the terrible force of Necessity that renders corporeal existence mutable and cyclic (Reiman 27-8).

Shelley returned to England in August of 1816. On returning to Bath, he was informed of the suicide of Harriet Shelley (31), an incident that would have two serious, indirect consequences. First, Shelley and Mary were married a few months later. Second, Shelley was not given custody of his two children with Harriet as a result of his opinions on government, religion, and marriage (32). During the next year, though, Shelley deepened his intellectual while staying in London and in Great Marlow,

Buckinghamshire. He often kept company with Leigh Hunt, and also met John Keats and William Hazlitt (33). During this time he wrote *The Revolt of Islam*, *Laon and Cythna*, and his fragmentary “Essay on Christianity.” However, Shelley’s personal fortunes were not as good. Perhaps because of the previous custody battle, Shelley feared that he and Mary were in danger of losing William and their new daughter, Clara. In addition, their financial situation was worsening. According to Peacock, though, there was no real danger of the children being taken from them, and thus the real reason for their leaving was Shelley’s “restlessness and embarrassment” (Wolfe 2: 350). In any event, Shelley left England with Mary, Claire, and the children on July 11, 1818 for Italy (45). It was Shelley’s last day in England.

### **Italy and The Writing of *Prometheus Unbound***

Once in Italy, Shelley began no new poetry, but instead spent time walking, reading, and horseback riding (48). At this time he was in reasonably good spirits, as he wrote to Peacock that “no sooner had we arrived at Italy than the loveliness of the earth and the serenity of the sky made the greatest difference in my sensations-- I depend on these things for my life” (Ingpen 9: 293-4). While in Milan, however, he also informed Peacock of his continuing writer’s block:

We shall pass by Piacenza, Parma, Bologna, the Apennines, and Florence, and I will endeavor to tell you something of these celebrated places in my next letter, but I cannot promise much for though my health is much

improved my spirits are unequal, and seem to desert me when I attempt to write (Ingpen 9: 308)

In addition, Shelley's aristocratic sensibilities were offended by the local Italians he met on his travels. To Hogg, he wrote that "the Italians-- at least those whom I have seen-- are a very different people from the French They have less character; and the women especially seem a very inferior race of beings" (Ingpen 9 306). This is a disturbing comment from a champion of liberty, but on its own it should not be taken as an indication of any deep-rooted prejudice. More likely, it represents Shelley's aristocratic bias toward the lower classes and all things common

In August of 1818, the Shelleys altered their plans to visit Naples and instead Shelley embarked on a trip to Venice with Claire so that she could see her daughter Allegra, who was being cared for by friends of Byron (48) It is possible that sometime during this journey that Shelley began work on *Prometheus Unbound* The first mention of it in his letters is a casual instruction to Mary, who was in Este while he was in Padua, to bring him the twenty-six pages of *Prometheus Unbound* (Ingpen 9 332) Reiman has also suggested that "the conversation of Byron and his circle in Venice apparently stimulated Shelley" (48) to begin the work, although the idea for it had already been in his head And Mary Shelley, in her "Note on *Prometheus Unbound*," states

We spent a month at Milan, visiting the Lake of Como during that interval Thence we passed in succession to Pisa, Leghorn, the Baths of Lucca, Venice, Este, Rome, Naples, and back again to Rome, whither we returned early in March 1819. During all this time Shelley meditated the subject of his drama, and wrote portions of it (Ingpen 2 268-9)

Unfortunately, only two days after the letter to Mary was written, Shelley's daughter Clara died from dysentery (48). This event marked the beginning of an estrangement between Shelley and Mary, and also "reduced Mary to a kind of despair" (Ingpen 9: 333).

However, Shelley managed to continue work on *Prometheus Unbound* and on October 8 wrote to Peacock, with whom he seemed the most comfortable corresponding about his poetry, that he had finished the first act while at Este (Ingpen 9: 336). In this letter, he also inquired if there was any mention in Cicero of Aeschylus' possible sequel to *Prometheus Bound*. Peacock himself wrote little about the poem, but he does mention the effect the Italian scenery had on Shelley's composition of it:

He delighted in the grand aspects of nature, mountains, torrents, forests, and the sea, and in the ruins, which still reflected the greatness of antiquity. He described these scenes with extraordinary power of language, in his letters as well as his poetry; but in the latter he peopled them with phantoms of virtue and beauty, such as never existed on earth. One of the most striking works of this kind is *Prometheus Unbound* (Wolfe 2: 351).

The effect of Italian art on the poem has also been noticed. Reiman, for example, notes in "Roman Scenes in *Prometheus Unbound* III iv," that the scene involving the descent of the chariot of the Spirit of the Hour is based upon La Sala della Biga, a two-horse chariot exhibit in the Vatican, and also incorporates features of the Pantheon (69-72).

After the death of Clara, the Shelleys traveled to Rome, and eventually to Naples. As noted, Shelley was delighted and fascinated by the antiquity of Rome. Still, his

aristocratic tastes forced him to continue to regard the Italian people with contempt. In a letter to Leigh Hunt, he wrote.

There are two Italies-- one composed of the green earth and transparent sea, and the mighty ruins of ancient time, and aerial mountains, and the warm and radiant atmosphere which is interfused through all things. The other consists of Italians of the present day, their works and ways. The one is the most sublime and lovely contemplation that can be conceived by the imagination of men, the other is the most disgusting, degrading, and odious (Ingpen 10: 9-10)

Later, Shelley would write to Peacock that he found the Roman women to be quite lovely, and referred to them as “gentle savages” (Ingpen 10: 46-7).

On April 16, 1819, Shelley wrote to Peacock that he had just finished *Prometheus Unbound* (Ingpen 10: 48). However, Shelley had only completed it as a three-act drama. Shortly after this first completion, Shelley suffered the loss of his son William. The Shelleys were inconsolable and left Rome (68). In an uncharacteristically brief letter, Shelley informed Peacock of his son’s death and stated that “it is a great exertion for me to write this, and it seems to me as if, hunted by calamity as I have been, that I should never recover any cheerfulness again” (Ingpen 10: 53). Yet Shelley recovered enough that he was able to draft the optimistic fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound*. About the composition of this last act, Mary Shelley states:

At first he completed the drama in three acts. It was not till several months after, when in Florence, that he conceived a fourth act, a sort of hymn of

rejoicing in the fulfillment of the prophecies with regard to Prometheus, ought to be added to complete the composition. (Ingpen 2: 269)

Shelley himself confirms this fact in letters written in December to Charles Collier and John and Maria Gisborne, which affirm that “an additional act to *Prometheus*” (Ingpen 10: 136) was being transcribed by Mary and sent to them for publication

Shelley was extremely proud of *Prometheus Unbound* and thought it to be his best work at the time of its completion. And although he may have later considered other works to be better, it was still his favorite. In 1822, the year of his death, he told his friend Edward Trelawny.

My friends say my *Prometheus* is too wild, ideal, and perplexed with imagery. It may be so. It has no resemblance to the Greek drama. It is original; and cost me severe mental labour. Authors, like mothers, prefer the children who have given them the most trouble. Milton preferred his *Paradise Regained*, Petrarch his *Africa*, and Byron his *Doge of Venice* (Wolfe 2. 198)

From these comparisons, particularly to *Paradise Regained*, Shelley could be admitting that he saw some deficiency in *Prometheus Unbound*. Still, it could be construed that this is merely an admission of the difficulty inherent in reading a poem intended for a very small audience. As he also stated to Trelawny, “‘I have the vanity to write only for poetical minds, and must be satisfied with few readers’” (Wolfe 2 198).

On July 8, 1822, Shelley, along with Edward Williams and a young sailor, drowned after a storm sank his boat, the *Don Juan* (134-5). At the time of his death, Shelley had become quite bitter and remarked in a letter to John Taaffe that he was

“predestined to everlasting damnation” (Ingpen 10 400) It is possible that Shelley had become pessimistic about his life and was ready to die (Reiman 136) And at the time of his death, Shelley’s anti-Christian and atheistic views were still very much intact At this point, it is necessary to fully discuss the nature of Shelley’s atheism and how it impacts *Prometheus Unbound*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *ATHEISM AND PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

In the first stanza of Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton boldly states his intention to “justify the wayes of God to men” (26). Given that Oliver Cromwell’s revolution against Charles I had failed, and Milton had suffered for his part in it, he also might well have been attempting to justify God’s ways to himself. Milton, like Shelley, was absolutely opposed to tyranny and even advocated regicide. His frustration, then, at the failed overthrow of a despotic regime, must have been particularly bitter. Thus, Milton turned to his poetry, and in *Paradise Lost* he was able to reconcile seemingly inconceivable acts of betrayal and brutality with a merciful, all-powerful God.

For Shelley, though, the God of Christianity was a tyrant as surely as every monarch in Europe and England had been. And as a revolutionary and incendiary poet who had once aspired to take political action, much as Milton did, Shelley used his writing to oppose Christianity at every opportunity. Therefore, when he read *Paradise Lost*, particularly marveling at the character of Milton’s Satan, he was so impressed that he would write that “Milton’s poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system of which, by a strange and national antithesis, it has been a chief popular

support” (*Defence* 498). Thus, in a similar fashion to Blake, whose work Shelley was unfamiliar with, he may have believed Milton to be “of the Devil’s party” (Blake 1352). Taking this anti-Christian view of the poem, then, it was easy for Shelley to see the heroic implications

Furthermore, Shelley believed strongly in the power of mimesis in poetry. In *A Defence of Poetry*, the most thorough and only complete explanation of the nature and purpose of his poetry, Shelley states that “every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification” (484), an idea also echoed in Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*.

Thus, taking into account Shelley’s Miltonic influence, his belief in mimetic poetry, and his professed atheism, it can be argued that *Prometheus Unbound* stands as an atheistic rereading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that attempts to explain mankind’s place in the world, rather than justify the acts of a tyrannical God. Like Milton, Shelley rails at tyranny, but with a much different result.

In this chapter, I will attempt to show how Shelley achieves this act. The structure of the argument will consist of two parts. First, I will give a defense of Shelley’s atheism, which should prove its validity and refute the belief that it is merely agnosticism. Second, I will analyze *Prometheus Unbound* as a rereading of *Paradise Lost*, specifically through the purpose and function of Prometheus, Jupiter, and Demogorgon.

### **Part One: A Defense of Shelley’s Atheism**

Harold Bloom has stated that Shelley’s beliefs were agnostic (*Visionary Company* 282). Carl Grabo has asserted that Shelley’s Prometheus is endowed with “the ethics of

Christ” (10). And Donald Reiman, who does not seem particularly concerned with the subject, notes that Shelley’s *The Necessity of Atheism* “follows the skeptical reasoning of David Hume and is agnostic” (7). However, Shelley declared himself to be an atheist and never recanted. In what way, then, do these critical refutations of his stated beliefs betray Shelley, and how do they illuminate his work?

In labeling Shelley as an atheist, an agnostic, or other, one runs the danger of equivocating; for one of the real problems with atheism is that it is firmly opposed to any sort of dogmatism or codification, and thus behaves almost as a sort of chimera. Without a set system of beliefs, one man’s atheism may be vastly different from another’s, and therefore very hard to systemize in the way that an organized religion like Christianity can be. It is first necessary, then, to look at a general definition of the term

From the Greek, atheism is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as “disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of a God” (1.745). However, this definition is rather broad and needs clarification. In *Philosophy and Atheism*, Kai Nielson points out that it is also important to clarify a definition of God when he states:

First, not all theologians who regard themselves as defenders of the Christian faith or of Judaism or Islam regard themselves as defenders of theism. The influential twentieth-century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, for example, regards the God of theism as an idol and refuses to construe God as a being, even a supreme being, among beings or as an infinite being above the finite beings. God, for him, is being-itself, the ground of being and meaning. (11-12)

When these kind of distinctions are made, then the question of existence becomes muddied. In addition, it should be pointed out that atheists, in their denial, should not be seen as haters-of-God, as many people are likely to do. Rather, they are skeptics, a fact which is at the heart of Nelson's own definition of atheism, which is stated here:

Atheism, as we have seen, is a critique and a denial of the central metaphysical belief systems of salvation involving a belief in God or spiritual beings; however, a sophisticated atheist will not simply contend that all such cosmological claims are false but will take it that some are so problematic, that, while purporting to be factual, they actually do not succeed in making coherent factual claims (21)

Thus, atheism is not merely a position taken against God, but is instead a denial of his existence based on logic and a lack of empirical evidence. However, this does not mean that an atheist must rule out the possibility of a god entirely, but rather that the belief cannot be supported by the evidence. In what way then, does atheism differ from agnosticism?

The term agnosticism can be defined as a belief "that nothing can be known or at least that it is very unlikely that anything will be known or soundly believed concerning whether God or any transcendent reality or state exists" (Nielson 55). It is generally acknowledged that the term was originated by T. H. Huxley in 1869, a fact that immediately makes its use anachronistic to Shelley's poetry. Huxley, a Darwin-influenced biologist, was unable to endorse any system of belief, from atheism to Christianity, to the point that he chose to suspend judgment upon all of them (Nielson 57). In short, agnosticism occupies a fence-sitting position and thus an agnostic will not

make a decision toward any belief. Following this logic, Nielson shoots down the contradictory idea of “theistic agnosticism” (56), as well as the “philosophical skepticism” (55) that Reiman has alluded to as being agnostic

Therefore, the difference between atheism and agnosticism lies in the atheist’s ability to make the leap from the belief that nothing can be known about the existence or non-existence of God to the assertion that God cannot exist. Yet an atheist, much like a devout Christian, must acknowledge his own human fallibility and allow for the alternative possibility. And as an atheistic belief is predicated on logic, such a belief is not negated by this allowance.

The question this distinction leads to is that of the nature of Shelley’s atheism, which has its earliest definition in *The Necessity of Atheism*.

Even though it is considered a piece of juvenilia, Shelley’s tract on atheism is very provocative. And it has noted previously that it is considered by some critics to be agnostic in tone. Reiman, in his biography of Shelley, even notes Newman White’s comment that “ ‘except for the title and the signature to the advertisement (‘through deficiency of proof, an Atheist’) there was no atheism in it’ ” (6-7). However, given the definitions of atheism and agnosticism already established, this assertion does not hold up.

In his pamphlet, Shelley states that there are three methods of proving the existence of a deity. “evidence of the senses” (Ingpen 5: 208), or personal contact with a deity; “Reason” (Ingpen 5: 208), or logic and rational thought; and “Testimony” (Ingpen 5: 208), or statements of faith and eyewitness accounts. Shelley, showing his Platonic influence, then dismantles each proof after explaining it. He dismisses personal contact,

as this can only be believed by the person who has experienced it. He finds Testimony unreliable, not only because personal accounts should not be believed, but because “the Deity was irrational, for he commanded that he should be believed, he proposed the highest rewards for faith, eternal punishments for disbelief” (Ingpen 5: 209). Here, Shelley’s opposition to tyranny emerges. Finally, he determines that a proof of God as a force of generative power cannot be established by reason when he states.

We admit that the generative power is incomprehensible, but to suppose that the same effect is produced by an eternal, omniscient, Almighty Being, leaves the cause in the obscurity, but renders it more incomprehensible. (Ingpen 5: 208)

Therefore, finding no method or evidence that can give him proof of God, Shelley asserts:

From this it is evident that having no proofs from any of these three sources of conviction: the mind *cannot* (Ingpen’s italics) believe the existence of a God, it is also evident that as belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality can be attached to disbelief, they only are reprehensible who willingly neglect to remove the false medium thro’ which their mind views the subject (Ingpen 5. 209)

Although I cannot be certain if the false medium mentioned here is Christianity or two of the mentioned sources of conviction, it is regardless a damning indictment of Christianity and the Church. More importantly, this passage clearly establishes that Shelley denied the existence of God. There should be no doubt that here Shelley has declared himself an atheist.

It is important to note, however, that Cameron, in *The Young Shelley*, identifies Shelley as a Deist at the time of composition of *The Necessity of Atheism* (76). Central to his argument is the belief that the pamphlet was a collaboration between Shelley and Hogg. Citing the correspondence of Shelley to Hogg during the period of its composition, Cameron argues that Hogg was responsible for the atheistic elements of the arguments (76). However, Cameron's notes do not cite any correspondence from Hogg to support this argument. Rather, he depends upon some second-hand testimony and Shelley's own belief, prior to the composition, of the existence of God.

In a letter to Hogg, dated January 12, 1811, Shelley states

I hear take God (and a God exists) to witness, that I wish torments, which beggar the futile description of a fancied hell, would fall upon me, provided I could obtain thereby that happiness for *what* I love which, I fear, can never be! (Ingpen 8 43)

The content of this letter, though, and the context in which this statement was made, clearly indicate that Shelley's purpose is to lament his doomed relationship with Harriet Grove. And at the end of this letter, he writes: "Excuse my mad arguments; they are none at all, for I am rather confused, and fear, in consequence of a fever, they will not allow me to come on the 26<sup>th</sup>, but I will" (Ingpen 8 45). As is typical of many of Shelley's letters of this time, grandiose statements are made and then quickly apologized for. Whether this "mad argument" refers to his mention of the existence of God is unclear, but it should not be discounted.

More importantly, in Shelley's letter to his father, written after his expulsion, Shelley writes that he and Hogg were writing their tract in order to prove the existence of

a deity, but instead found that “the proofs of an existing Deity were as far as we had observed defective” (Ingpen 8: 59). And in his own substantial notes regarding the question of authorship of *The Necessity of Atheism*, Cameron acknowledges that Shelley, in a letter to Godwin, states that “in the meantime I became, in the popular sense of the word ‘God,’ an Atheist” (328). For his book, Cameron used the Julian edition of *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* when referring to these letters. The revised Gordian edition contains the same letters and substantiates this claim. Therefore, I tend to agree with Cameron that Hogg was indeed the co-author of the pamphlet. I do not, however, find sufficient reason to conclude that Shelley was a Deist at the time of its composition. And without such evidence, I will take Shelley at his word and not against it.

Still, to say that Shelley was an atheist and leave it at that would be unfair to him. Although I believe that Reiman and Bloom are incorrect in labeling him an agnostic, perhaps because their definitions differ from the ones established here, or because they have not thought the subject merited their full attention, I must admit that Grabo makes a good point in noting the “ethics of Christ” (10) in *Prometheus*.

Shelley’s attacks on Christianity and organized religion never abated, but what gradually emerged in his prose was a genuine love for the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. However, this appreciation he developed never transformed into a belief that Christ was the flesh and blood son of God, visited upon the Earth to impart Divine wisdom. In his “Essay on Christianity,” Shelley states that “Jesus Christ did what every other reformer who has produced any considerable effect upon the world has done. He accommodated his doctrines to the prepossessions of those whom he addressed (Ingpen 6: 242). In this

more politicized view of Jesus, Shelley expresses admiration while distancing Jesus from Divinity by equating him with other men. Shelley furthers this by asserting that Jesus' beliefs were in direct contradiction to the practices of the Church and the contemporary, fearful view of God. Speaking of God, Shelley says:

Jesus Christ would hardly have cited as an example of all that is gentle and beneficent and compassionate, a being who shall deliberately scheme to inflict on a large portion of the human race tortures indescribably intense and indefinitely protracted. (Ingpen 6. 233)

And in his fragment, "The Moral Teachings of Jesus Christ," Shelley asserts that "the doctrines of Jesus Christ though excellent are not new" (Ingpen 6. 256) Shelley further argues that there is nothing original in the tenets of Christianity, and that much of Christ's ideas were already contemplated by Plato (Ingpen 6. 256). In this fashion, Shelley separates Jesus-the-man from Jesus-the-God and liberates Christ's ethics of love and compassion from the tyranny of the Church. However, this in no way compromises his atheistic beliefs. In fact, Shelley's pagan-like view of Christ's teachings is best summed up in his *A Defence of Poetry*, where he relates Plato to Jesus:

Plato, following the doctrines of Timaeus and Pythagoras, taught also a moral and intellectual system of doctrine comprehending at once the past, present, and future conditions of man. Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths contained in these views to mankind, and Christianity, in its abstract purity, became the exoteric expression of the esoteric doctrines of the poetry and wisdom of antiquity. (496)

Although uncommon for his time, Shelley managed to produce a philosophy that allowed for an acceptance of the teachings of Christ, while at the same time denying the existence of God and fighting the tyranny of organized religion. This philosophy would, of course, inform *Prometheus Unbound*.

### ***Prometheus Unbound and Paradise Lost***

*Prometheus Unbound* is an allegorical, prophetic work, and as such it is often highly abstract. Characters like the Earth and Panthea are nearly formless, and Demogorgon is more of prophetic, inevitable force than an individual character. Prometheus and Jupiter are perhaps the most concrete figures in the poem. This abstraction makes the poem a very difficult read. However, Shelley offers a key to its form when he states in the preface that “the imagery which I have employed will be found in many instances to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed” (133). A little further along in the preface, he also gives his view on the importance of mimetic poetry:

As to imitation, Poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man or in nature, but 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. (134)

From these two statements, the following conclusions can be drawn. If the imagery comes from the way in which the mind works, then the mind can be seen as the true theatre where *Prometheus Unbound* is performed. And since his poetry is mimetic, it is important to understand what influenced the poem's creation. And the biggest influence on *Prometheus Unbound* is Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Harold Bloom has noted that, in writing *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley had "an ambition to replace *Paradise Lost*" (*Visionary Company* 283). Indeed, Shelley wrote frequently about Milton's influence, declaring that "Milton stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him" (*Defence* 491). Shelley even considered the possibility that Milton, for a time, may have lost faith in God. In his *Essay on the Devil and Devils*, Shelley states:

It is difficult to determine, in a country where the most enormous sanctions of opinion and law are attached to a direct avowal of certain speculative notions, whether Milton was a Christian or not, at the period of composition of *Paradise Lost* (Ingpen 7 91)

Of course, Shelley had no God to lose faith in and was able to view *Paradise Lost* from a perspective that allowed him to interpret Milton's work in a way that would likely have been rejected by Milton himself. And in this way, Shelley created in *Prometheus Unbound* what Bloom would call a misprision

At this point, it is necessary to briefly discuss Harold Bloom's theory of poetry, which he first wrote about in *The Anxiety of Influence*. According to Bloom, all strong poets are defined by a relationship to a parent poet, and in writing their own poetry they commit a misprision, a deliberate, somewhat Freudian misreading of an earlier poet. He

states that “every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety” (94). He further asserts.

Poetry is the anxiety of influence, is misprision, is a disciplined  
perverseness. Poetry is misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misalliance.

(95)

Although Bloom breaks his theory down into six distinct categories, this is the essence of it and will suffice to help view *Prometheus Unbound* as a deliberate misreading

As a misreading, then, *Prometheus Unbound* presents a world in which God is not omnipotent, and the satanic, adversarial character of Prometheus is justified in cursing the tyrant who has chained him to the rock on Caucasus. And like *Paradise Lost*, *Prometheus Unbound* presents a hopeful vision of the future in which mankind is finally free of its suffering. Shelley achieves this “theodicy without a God” (Herson 374) through Prometheus’ transcendence of his own suffering through his revocation of his curse on Jupiter, and through the downfall of Jupiter, which is brought about by Demogorgon’s arrival in Heaven. And in this way, Prometheus is influenced by Satan, Jupiter represents a tyrannical God, and Demogorgon resembles Milton’s Son. Prometheus, though, surpasses Satan through his transcendence.

### Prometheus

Before discussing Satan’s influence on the character of Prometheus, it is first necessary to examine Shelley’s view of Satan as the tyrant-defying transgressor. Romantic Satanism is often thought of as a naive hero-worship of Milton’s Satan, as indeed it would be if it really existed. But, as Stuart Curran has pointed out in “The Siege

of *Hateful Contraries: Shelley, Mary Shelley, Byron, and Paradise Lost*,” it is really a fiction created by Milton critics who have dismissed the intelligence of the Romantic poets and adopted a term coined by Robert Southey in one of his many diatribes against Byron and Shelley (211). As Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. has argued, Shelley is not a Satanist who believes the character to be morally admirable (827), but rather that he sees Satan as an embodiment of Milton’s own struggle with Christian theology (825). As an atheist, Shelley, unlike Milton, was freed from the constraints of a hierarchical religion that corresponded to the hierarchical societies of man. Thus, any absolute authority, including Milton’s God, was seen by Shelley as tyrannical.

In addition, both Milton and Shelley were revolutionaries, although Milton played a more active role in his day. And as Milton was affected by the ascension of Oliver Cromwell and the subsequent restoration of Charles II, so too was Shelley affected by the ultimate moral failure of Napoleon. As Curran notes, Shelley and the other late Romantics clearly identified their current events with Milton’s ultimate battle.

One can never ignore the “peculiar relations” the younger generation of Romantics established with the literature and culture of the past. They survived the intellectual terrors of a quarter-century of war that devastated and impoverished Europe within a pervasive metaphorical assumption: Napoleon pitting himself against that amalgam known as the Holy Alliance was the Satanic rebel defying the upholders of orthodoxy (227).

For Shelley, Napoleon was his Cromwell, starting out as a savior of the people and ultimately suffering defeat due to his own moral failures. Therefore, Shelley envisioned Milton’s Satan as a tyrant-defying hero, albeit a flawed one. And as he was flawed,

Shelley saw the need to perfect him and turned this impulse toward the creation of his Prometheus.

In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley unequivocally states the nature of Satan's influence on Prometheus when he says:

The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan because, in addition to courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling, it engenders something worse. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest of motives to the best and noblest ends. (133)

Here, Shelley is clearly sympathetic towards Satan even in his most pitiful stature, perhaps viewing him as a fallen comrade-in-arms in the war against tyranny. Thus, he must be perfected in Prometheus.

The key to Prometheus' perfection is the stunning, revelatory moment when he revokes his curse on Jupiter. This revocation is early foreshadowed in Act 1, in which Prometheus speaks to Jupiter while chained to the precipice of rocks in the Indian

Caucasus. He tells Jupiter of his own impending downfall, and also foreshadows the appearance of Demogorgon, as he says.

Their wingless, crawling Hours, one among whom  
 - As some dark Priest hales the reluctant victim--  
 Shall drag thee, cruel king, to kiss the blood  
 from these pale feet, which then might trample thee  
 If they disdained not such a prostrate slave.  
 Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.-- What Ruin  
 Will hunt thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,  
 Gape like 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 (48-59)

Here Prometheus appears to be broken, yet the promise for transcendence is shown in his suggestion that he would revoke the curse on Jupiter. And in a perverse way, this resembles Satan's moment of clarity on Mount Niphates when, upon spying Paradise, cries:

Me miserable! which way I shall I flie  
 Infinite wrauth, and infinite despaire?  
 Which way I fly is Hell; my self am Hell,  
 And in the lowest deep a lower deep  
 Still threatening to devour me opens wide,  
 To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.

O then at last relent: is there no place

Left for Repentance, none for Pardon left? (4.73-80)

In both of these passages, the hero has been brought low. Satan justly laments his condition. Once the most brilliant of angels, his testing of obedience to God has brought him very far from what he once was. His actions, even though they are taken against a tyrannous ruler, are not above reproach. His guilt renders him into a pitiable state, ready to repent. His actions have engendered Hell within him. It is a state of mind, and one that he cannot remove without removing his Self. And Satan knows that he cannot submit, and thus will not repent.

Prometheus, though lamenting his condition, does not regret the action he has taken against Jupiter. Additionally, all of his rage has gone and, even though it is painful, he is resigned to his fate and the suffering that it entails. He does lament his curse on Jupiter, a curse that is repeated to him by the Phantasm of Jupiter, who appears to him and says:

I curse thee! let a sufferer's curse

Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse,

Til thine Infinity shall be

A robe of envenomed agony,

And thine Omnipotence a crown of pain

To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain. (280-91)

Jupiter, in his omnipotence, has heard Prometheus' speech, and uses a spirit to taunt Prometheus with his own words. Prometheus, though, regrets these words and instead of lashing out at Jupiter, he says to his mother, the Earth:

It doth repent me words are quick and vain,

Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine

I wish no living thing to suffer pain (303-5)

Thus, Prometheus revokes his curse on Jupiter. Here, Grabo's idea that Prometheus embodies the ethics of Christ is relevant. Prometheus and his newfound love for all things must withstand Jupiter's sadistic tortures and punishments, which include the unleashing of five furies from Hell to torment him. However, Prometheus refuses to either hate them or pity himself. Thus, the furies are vanquished. Like Christ on the cross, Prometheus forgives his enemies for the pain they have inflicted on him. And in this way, he surpasses the character of Satan, who is emblematic of an inability to forgive. Thus, Prometheus transcends both the faults of Satan and the deification of Jesus Christ, as well as the dogmatizing of his teachings, to become a character who is actually a melding of the two figures.

### **Jupiter and Demogorgon**

Another key to Shelley's deliberate misprision of *Paradise Lost* is his view of the omnipotence of Milton's God. Shelley's philosophical beliefs were influenced by, among others, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *A Defence of Poetry*, for example, he describes Rousseau as working "in favour of oppressed and deluded humanity" (502). And like Shelley, Rousseau was decidedly against organized Christianity. In *The Social Contract*, he writes

Christianity preaches nothing but servitude and dependence. Its spirit so favors tyranny that the tyrant always benefits from it. True Christians are

made to be slaves, they know it and are hardly bothered by it; since this short life, in their eyes, is worth too little. (165)

In light of these opinions, it comes as little surprise that Rousseau advocates disobedience to the father when he states

The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family. Even in this case, the bond between children and father persists only so long as they have need of him for their conservation. As soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. The children are released from the obedience they owe to their father, the father is released from the duty of care to the children, and all become equally independent. (46)

Under Rousseau's non-Christian theory, then, no one is perennially required to be obedient to God, the grand parent of all. These beliefs are very similar to Shelley's; therefore, like Rousseau, Shelley would likely have believed that the highest authority is man's own imperfect authority. And it is one that must be tested again and again, so that it can remain as incorrupt as possible.

For this belief to be true, omnipotence cannot exist. According to Milton, though, God is omnipotent. Yet to Shelley, God was merely another monarch, and thus a tyrant. This is not Milton's intention in *Paradise Lost*, but his intention is a Christian one. In an atheistic misprision, God, as a tyrannical monarch, as Shelley implies him to be in *A Defence of Poetry* (498), must be subject to the laws of all monarchs. In Book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, a smiling God warns the Son of Satan's impending attack:

Let us advise, and to this hazard draw

With speed what force is left, and all employ

In our defence, lest unawares we lose

This our high place, our Sanctuarie, our Hill.

To Whom the Son with calm aspect and clear

Lightning Divine, ineffable, serene,

Made answer. Mightie Father, thou thy foes

Justly hast in derision, and secure

Laugh'st at thir vain designs and tumults vain. (729-37)

In Roy Flannagan's edition of *Paradise Lost*, this passage is noted as evidence of God's sense of humor on display, mocking the impossible attempt to overthrow him (334-5). A non-omnipotent God, though, would be guilty here of overconfidence. His boasts and jokes are nothing short of arrogance.

What is crucial, then, to Shelley's atheistic interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, is that omnipotence must be denied. In *Poetry and Repression*, Harold Bloom relates his theory of misprision to Sigmund Freud's concept of negation (224-5). Freud, for his part, states that "by the help of the symbol of negation, the thinking-process frees itself from the limitations of repression and enriches itself with the subject-matter without which it could not work efficiently" (214). In this fashion, omnipotence can be negated. And once he was able to negate it, Shelley was free to question the nature of God's authority and test the arbitrary rule of obedience through the character of Jupiter.

Jupiter, although seemingly omnipotent, is unable to lift himself up to the level of Milton's God. The penultimate imagining by Shelley of a cruel tyrant, Jupiter is less a god and more a monarch. First appearing in Act 3, Jupiter sits arrogantly on his throne, even as Demogorgon approaches.

Ye consecrated Powers of Heaven who share  
 The glory and strength of him ye serve,  
 Rejoice! henceforth I am omnipotent  
 All else has been subdued to me-- alone (1-4)

Shelley's supreme deity is clearly a tyrant, as his words suggest slavery and subjugation. Jupiter's declaration of omnipotence, though, is false. As Prometheus' first lines in Act 1 state, Jupiter is the "Monarch of Gods and Daemons, and all spirits / But One" (1-2). The existence of a power or being beyond Jupiter's control clearly contradicts the Miltonic omnipotence that exists removed from time and space. In addition, Demogorgon demonstrates his power over Jupiter. In Act 3, after Jupiter has announced victory, Demogorgon arrives and declares himself as the inevitable result of Jupiter's actions.

I am thy child, as thou wert Saturn's child,  
 Mightier than thee; and we must dwell together  
 Henceforth in darkness —Lift thy lightnings not  
 The tyranny of Heaven none may retain  
 Or reassume, or hold succeeding thee . (54-9)

In this declaration, Demogorgon does not usurp Jupiter's power, but instead strips him of it and leaves the world without a monarch to preside over it. As Bloom points out, in the beginning of Act 3 the last bits of Promethean spirit that could lead mankind to rebel against Jupiter have been repressed.

The agent of repression is to be Jupiter's "fatal child," supposedly begotten upon Thetis by the sky tyrant. At "the destined hour" this child will rise from Demogorgon's throne, having usurped the might of that read

power, and ascend unto his father, Jupiter. But the dialectical irony of the destined hour has trapped Jupiter; he has engendered no child at all, this being the secret known only to Prometheus as the ultimate representative of the human Imagination. (*Visionary Company* 315)

According to Bloom, then, Jupiter is sterile (315) and Demogorgon is Jupiter's son only in the sense that he is the consequence of Jupiter's tyrannical suppression of mankind. Unlike Milton's Son, Jupiter's child is an offspring that will bring about the downfall of his parent.

Demogorgon, then, can be seen as a sort of perverted representation of the Son of God, rather than God himself as James Twitchell has suggested. However, Demogorgon has no form. Instead, he is, similar to the idea of Necessity, a force put into motion by the events of the past. He is an inevitability. As Bloom states it, "the shapeless spirit is the child of Jupiter's dark aspirations in that he transcends and so obliterates them"

(*Visionary Company* 316)

However, Demogorgon is merely a misprision of Milton's Son. As he is formless, he is not bound by the limits of time or space. In this way, he is like Milton's God, yet he cannot be personified. Demogorgon acts also as the agent of a prophecy. Freed by Demogorgon and through Prometheus' revocation of his curse, humanity is offered a vision of what will come, much like Michael's revelations to Adam at the end of *Paradise Lost*. Demogorgon, at the close of Act 4, proclaims

This is the Day which down the void Abyss  
 At the Earth-born's spell yawns for Heaven's Despotism,  
 And the Conquest is dragged Captive through the Deep;

Love from its awful throne of patient power  
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour  
Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,  
And narrow verge of crag-like Agony, springs  
And folds over the world its healing wings. (554-61)

Thus, the throne of Christianity is usurped and the transformative power of Love is able to heal humanity. The long-desired freedom will be a reality once this has passed. Unlike *Paradise Lost*, the vision here is somewhat abstract, but more importantly there is not more suffering to come. This is Shelley's admonition to the world to throw off the shackles of religious tyranny, not through violent overthrow, but by a transcendent passive resistance that will liberate the soul. The cycle of violence and repression that leads to perpetual tyranny is halted by the revocation of Prometheus' curse; he free both himself and mankind. And thus Shelley, in response to *Paradise Lost*, creates in *Prometheus Unbound* a reformed world that needs no justification of God's tyrannical ways.

### Conclusion

As both a poet and a philosopher, Shelley was opposed to the practice of tyranny in both the ruling monarchies and the institutional Christianity that informed them. In Milton, he saw a kindred spirit. And in Milton's Satan, he saw a character that represented the struggle against tyranny that was always present in his own poetry. Thus, his opposition to tyranny took its strongest poetic form in *Prometheus Unbound*. And one of the strengths of this poem lies in the atheistic way in which Shelley is able to combine the rebellious, defiant nature of Satan with the compassionate, humanistic teachings of Christ into the character of Prometheus.

Shelley's atheism is an important component in his complex system of philosophical, political, religious, and social views. It is not a cynical or pessimistic belief, but rather an optimistic attitude, tempered by his skepticism, in which he saw a way for man to break free of the destructive cycles of life that beget revolution and tyranny time and again. As Prometheus broke free of this cycle by vowing not to hate or wish harm on any living thing, so Shelley urged mankind to do the same. At the end of his life, Shelley was virtually unknown and feared he would never see the changes he wanted come about. Yet today, he remains one of the most vital and modern of the English Romantic poets.

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