

WORLD RECLAMATION IN SHELLEY'S *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

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## DEDICATIONS

Joel—thank you for all of your love, support, and encouragement. I could not have done any of this without you! I love you!

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WORLD RECLAMATION IN SHELLEY'S *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*  
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ABSTRACT

Myth has a fluid function within culture, literature, and time. How myth is interpreted depends upon which element of it inspires or interests a person. The mythical figure of Prometheus has become embedded in the cultural consciousness since Ancient Greece in part because of how his changing role in myth speaks to both the individual and the world. Prometheus plays many parts—trickster, creator, benefactor of mankind, symbol of the suffering artist—and perhaps the most famous of all—fire-bringer. Each interpretation builds upon one of these roles as well as thematic elements, the relationship between the Titan and the gods, as well as the relationship between Prometheus and mankind.

This work seeks to first explore the various iterations of Prometheus and his myth to determine the major characteristics he is associated with in order to trace his arc from Classical literature to Percy Bysshe Shelley's groundbreaking work, *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley's work is Promethean in its vision of how the Titan's act of rebellion and subsequent punishment actually incite an act of world reclamation. Earlier interpretations of the myth tend to individualize the Titan's acts or embed them within a single culture. By promoting an idealized vision of world change, Shelley shapes Prometheus into a figure of change—a benefactor of mankind who replaces the tyranny of the gods with a new order of love and freedom. However, there is a dark underpinning to this vision—one that will be explored in film.

## Introduction

Myths are part of our inheritance as human beings. Myths shape our understanding of the past, the present, and the future. Because of their fluidity, they can be reinvented and reshaped based on "individual creation" to suit the needs, attitudes, or beliefs of the time (Corbeau-Parson 48). When analyzing myths, the inclination could be to trace their changes through time, cultures, geographical regions, or form. It is important to consider genre as well and how it informs interpretations of a particular myth or mythical figure. The Prometheus myth is a prime example of how one figure can become embedded with a variety of meaning and hold a specific place in the cultural and literary consciousness. Prometheus is unique in that he is not entirely a god, but he is not really a man. His eternal presence within his own narrative of theft and punishment is what opens up his myth to constant reinvention as different aspects of his figure or story inspire writers and artists across time, culture, and genre. He is associated with various roles: thief, fire-bringer, benefactor of mankind, and rebel. The individualization of his myth from ancient Greece up until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century culminates in Percy Shelley's vision of the Titan as a symbol of total world reclamation. While Prometheus has been interpreted as an agent of change, Shelley's revolutionary vision of world recovery enlarges the myth to encompass the universe as a whole.

In order to fully comprehend the breadth of Shelley's work with Prometheus, it is necessary to trace the origins of the myth. Chapter one seeks to address the ways in which the role of Prometheus has changed since its traceable origin in ancient Greek religion, culture, and literature. It is unsurprising that Prometheus should play a role in

Greek religion, particularly since fire figures so prominently in their religious practices (Dougherty 48). Fire serves the basic survival needs of people but also opens up “communications between the divine and human worlds” (48-49). Outside the worship of the Greek pantheon, Prometheus appears in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days* where he acts as a trickster figure, one gifted with foresight but still outmaneuvered by Zeus. Prometheus’s theft of fire, deception of Zeus regarding sacrificial portions, and the creation of Pandora all stem from Hesiod’s accounts. Aeschylus’s surviving play, *Prometheus Bound*, focuses on how the theft of fire benefits mankind as well as how mankind no longer can foresee their own deaths. His Prometheus suffers on the Caucasus because of his compassion for the helpless mortals on earth, whom Zeus would rather destroy than help survive. Prometheus's gift of foresight allows him to see the potential for change within man, as Alfredo Ferrarin observes, and thus his suffering is worthwhile (298). The potentiality of man is a theme Shelley and other Romantic writers will place in the foreground of their interpretations, although it will be filtered through a different ideological or cultural lens.

Another essential aspect ascribed to Prometheus is the role of creator of mankind. The Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains one of the most famous examples of Prometheus *plasticator*, although the concept appears in works by Aesop, Hyginus, and Apollodorus, to name a few. Ovid's Prometheus creates man from earth that he has sprinkled with raindrops and "Thus clay, so lately no more than a crude and formless substance, / Was metamorphosed to assume the strange new figure of man" (I.87-88). Man is formed to look heavenward in worship of the gods, a concept later poets like Goethe will explore and subvert. In terms of genre, Prometheus appears not only in plays



and encyclopedic-like works but in humorous and satirical dialogues as well. Lucian plays with the roles assigned to Prometheus in many of his works, each one serving a larger purpose. Plato also adapts the Prometheus myth into one of his dialogues. There Prometheus functions as a metaphor for the issue debated between Protagoras and Socrates.

Prometheus's popularity begins to wane slightly in the Middle Ages and Renaissance era. He primarily becomes associated with Christian iconography because of the Roman idea of *plasticator* while "the other episodes of the legend disappear from the art of the High Middle Ages" (Raggio 50). He is interpreted through an allegorical lens by many writers and artists as a result. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, encyclopedic volumes on ancient mythology became popular, particularly as a means of aligning the past with the present under the umbrella of Christian religious beliefs. Jacob Bryant writes an exhaustive multivolume set called *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, perhaps inspired by Boccaccio's significant work during the Renaissance, which seeks to orient myth across culture. These works would have been well known to many poets and writers, particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

By the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, poets return to Greek and Roman mythology with renewed interest. Chapter two examines how three poets explore the concept of Prometheus as an artist or as the symbol of man as the artist. Jonathan Swift fuses myth with satire and presents Prometheus as the debased artist in order to parallel his critique of the Wood halfpence scandal. While his poem is rarely if ever associated with the arc of Prometheus's myth in literature, it shows that Swift had a keen understanding of mythology as well as how to reinvent it for his own purposes of satire. Nearly fifty years

later, Goethe explores the idea of Prometheus as the symbol of man's artistic potential. His Prometheus rejects the constraints laid down by the gods, Zeus in particular. His glowing heart symbolizes the self-sufficient, independent artist who works in solitude. Goethe's own artistic identity is reflected in his depiction of Prometheus. Just as Prometheus shapes man in his own image, Goethe is able "to create himself through his poetry" (Dougherty 96). Byron's focus is similar in that he sees the Titan as a reflection of himself. However, his poetic interpretation reflects on the concepts of power and suffering. His Prometheus suffers in complete silence while an anonymous speaker interrogates the circumstances and motivations of Prometheus for showing compassion to mankind only to face severe punishment. Prometheus is the suffering artist here, and mankind's inheritance is the knowledge that by following the Titan's example, victory (even in death) is assured. The 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century poetic interpretations tend to focus on the individual artist's relationship to Prometheus. Shelley expands the relationship from a one-on-one level to the Titan's relationship with the world as a whole.

Chapter three's focus is two-fold; first, it aims to explore how Shelley's lyric drama expands the Prometheus myth by concentrating on the transformative power of love, and secondly it examines the effect of Shelley's futuristic vision on subsequent, modern interpretations of the myth. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley explores the concept of change on the individual and universal level. While he maintains that it must begin with the individual, his concept of Prometheus and his sacrifice is rooted in futurity. He does not intend to merely recreate Aeschylus's lost play into a didactic text—his focus is on the myth itself and how he can reshape it into a vehicle for world recovery. The cycle of tyranny and violence enacted by Jupiter (Zeus) through the

punishment of Prometheus has all but enslaved the Earth and her inhabitants. Jupiter relies on his false belief that the offspring of his rape of Thetis will carry on his tyrannical rule. Instead, Demogorgon is part of Jupiter's undoing and actually helps to break the cycle of violence and oppression. Once Prometheus is freed by Heracles, a regeneration takes place which was only possible once the Titan had exchanged his anger for love. His inner change of heart has positive ramifications for the world at large, and in the end, a new cycle has begun.

The latter part of chapter three examines how the film *Prometheus* by Ridley Scott functions as the dark alternative to Shelley's idealistic vision of change. The gift of fire, stolen by Prometheus from the gods, is still man's inheritance but it functions as the first in a long line of technological advances. There are no Titans—man is the new god now. The film's central plot revolves around the crew of the "Prometheus" and their search for mankind's creators on a distant planet. This hubristic endeavor unleashes forces of destructive creation which threaten to perpetuate a cycle of violence rather than end it. The 'Engineers' or creators of the human race may have created life through sacrifice, but it becomes clear in the film that it is a sacrifice which they regret and wish to remedy. The crew of the "Prometheus" inadvertently unleash a biological weapon designed by the Engineers with devastating consequences. While Scott's film contains a small sliver of hope for mankind, the film seems to suggest that without any desire to change, the old cycles will repeat themselves until the end of time.

While it may seem like an abrupt leap to compare Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* to a modern science fiction film like *Prometheus*, in doing so the legacy of Shelley's groundbreaking work becomes clear. His lyric drama opens wide the door of

interpretation concerning the Prometheus myth, raising it from the individual's response to a universal experience. If myth can be shaped and molded to suit the teller, then works like *Prometheus* are following a long heritage of interpretations comprised of different perspectives, beliefs, and genres. By looking back at the past to fully trace the origins and path of Prometheus and his myth, one can then look forward to the future, as Shelley did, to contemplate future iterations.

## Chapter One:

### “One man in his time plays many parts”: The changing role of Prometheus in Classical literature

While Shakespeare's theatrical analogy for the life of man is well-known, it is not often applied to mythology and its reinvention throughout time and literature. Mythology is “like the god Proteus” as Joseph Campbell says, constantly changing shape and it is as “amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age” (381-382). In other words, myth “evolves throughout history, depending on mentalities, on cultural, moral, and religious values” and it can “be ignored or can fall into oblivion for a period of time, before being revived by a society which will project itself onto it” (Corbeau-Parsons 4). What myth means to the ancient Greeks will most likely be vastly different from how 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>-century authors interpret it. If the purpose of myth changes, so too can the roles of mythological figures. Prometheus, for example, undergoes a transformative arc from his origins in ancient Greek myth to 18<sup>th</sup>-century interpretation and beyond. His role fluctuates from trickster and fire-giver to rebel and humanity's benefactor. Even the act of stealing fire and giving it to man takes on a different interpretation, depending on the writer, artist, or reader and his or her time. Carol Dougherty notes the myth of Prometheus is a popular one because the Titan "embodies the human condition with all its potential for brilliant innovation and for cruel suffering," an embodiment that becomes more and more complex with the accretion of shifting roles and interpretations around the original myth (3). In addition, Dougherty notes, the flexibility of the myth allows for authors from Hesiod to Aeschylus to Shelley to focus on "a particular theme or element of the myth to elaborate within a specific

literary or cultural context" (8). This chapter focuses on the religious, cultural, and literary interpretations or associations of Prometheus in the Classical world in order to untangle the complicated history of the Titan and his literary trajectory to the present.

In terms of ancient religion, Prometheus holds a minor place in Greek religious practices, particularly in Athens. He is associated with Athena, the goddess of Athens, through a play by Euripides, where he is given credit for using an ax to help with her birth (other interpretations usually associate Hephaestus with that role). In addition, Prometheus becomes linked to other Athenian myths, including one involving the birth of Erichthonius—this specific association weaves the Titan into "Athenian civic identity" as well as Athenian history (Dougherty 50). Prometheus also becomes tied to Athenian religious beliefs not just because "fire plays a part in almost every religious act of the Greeks" but because his theft from Zeus opens up "communications between the divine and human worlds" (48-49). Hephaestus is also linked to the technology of fire, and so he and Prometheus shared an altar in the Academy and, along with Athena, were "celebrated with festivals that include torch races" (50-51). These festivals were known as "the Panathenaea, the Hephaestias, and the Prometheia" respectively (Corbeau-Parsons 14). Pausanias describes the torch race in honor of Prometheus, saying:

In the Academy, there is an altar of Prometheus, and they run from it towards the city holding burning torches. The contest is both running and keeping the torch burning at the same time. If the torch of the first runner goes out, he no longer has the victory, but it belongs to the second runner in his place; but if he too allows his torch to go out, the third runner is the

winner, and if everyone's flame is extinguished, no one gains the victory (qtd. in Dougherty 53).

The torch is meant to recall the fennel stalk in which Prometheus hid the fire that he stole from Zeus (Dougherty 53). The overlapping worship of Prometheus with that of Hephaestus and Athena serves a reminder of how the gods themselves, much like myth, can be reshaped by mankind's interpretation and utilization of them in everyday practice.

One of Prometheus's earliest roles is that of trickster and thief whose actions lead to extreme punishment for himself and mankind. Hesiod's *Theogony* recounts how "Clever Prometheus was bound by Zeus / In cruel chains, unbreakable," and was forced to suffer the agony of his liver being devoured daily by an eagle (525-526). His punishment is the result of daring to "match his wits against the almighty Zeus" by tricking him out of the better portion of a sacrifice (531). In addition, he steals fire "hid in the hollow fennel stalk" which Zeus has purposely withheld from mankind (566). Zeus plots his revenge carefully, punishing both Prometheus and mankind—first with eternal torment for the Titan, and secondly with the creation of the first woman, who is responsible for the misery of man. In both instances of punishment, it is interesting to note that Zeus is described as far-seeing by Hesiod. He actively plots and waits before exacting revenge. When he sees that mankind still has fire because of Prometheus's deception, he plans a final punishment which will harm mankind forever. He has Athena and Hephaestus create a beautiful young woman, the first of her kind, because Zeus knows that she will be a "lovely curse" and "hopeless trap" for man (588, 594). Pandora, here unnamed, unleashes a curse which is two-fold. As E. F. Beall summarizes it, now "women are like drones in a beehive, living off the labor of others, and that... to remain

single or marry comes down to a choice between dying alone with one's inheritance stolen by kinsmen, and life of at best alternating good and evil with a woman" (364). Man may have fire and the better portion of the sacrifice owed to the gods, but now he must contend with "the deadly female race" which will bring misery either way (Hesiod 587). It appears that according to Hesiod, mortals are doomed to a life of hardship as a result of Prometheus's deceptions and Zeus's desire for revenge.

In *Works and Days*, Prometheus is merely mentioned in a speech by Zeus, who rails against the Titan's craftiness. The actual crime of stealing fire is described in two or three lines whereas the creation of Pandora dominates this portion of the narrative. Once again, Zeus plots his revenge in terms of how humanity will suffer into eternity. He openly acknowledges that Pandora will be irresistible to men—" an evil thing for their delight, / And all will love this ruin in their hearts" (57-58). Beall notes that in *Works and Days* the detailed description of Pandora's creation makes it clear that her nascence is part of "a calculated diabolical concept" on the part of Zeus to seek revenge on Prometheus (362). She is crafted through the efforts of Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Hermes, and Athena. Hermes' gift is perhaps the most disturbing—he fills her heart with lies and "cunning ways" (Hesiod 79). Once she is complete, Zeus takes the punishment one step further by sending her to Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus. Epimetheus forgets Prometheus's warning "to take no gift from Zeus, / But send it back, lest it should injure men" (86-87). Pandora's jar is opened as well and out of it "scattered pains and evils among men" although hope does remain inside (94). Corbeau-Parsons argues that there is a noticeable shift in the character of Prometheus just between these two works. In *Theogony*, he is a fire-giver "determined to ensure that men would benefit from a civilized life" and in



*Works and Days*, he is "responsible for man's misery" (9). I disagree with her reading in part because of how extensively the motives of Zeus are laid out in *Theogony*. While Prometheus may have acted out of concern for mankind, the punishment he endures as well as the punishment heaped on mankind stems from Zeus' anger at the deception: "From that time / He bore the trick in mind... He found a price for men to pay for fire" in the form of Pandora (Hesiod 60, 70). What is more disturbing in both accounts perhaps is Zeus's ability to 'out-trick' Prometheus, who is described as having all of the hallmarks of a trickster figure. Prometheus is supposed to possess foresight and yet there is no description of him attempting to avoid punishment or prevent mankind from suffering because he gave them fire. Hesiod's view of Prometheus and his contribution to mankind, then, is one that is steeped in pessimism.

In contrast to Hesiod's view that Prometheus "is the destroyer of a... golden age" Aeschylus offers up an optimistic interpretation of the theft and its effect on mankind (Raggio 45). *Prometheus Bound*, the only surviving play of a Promethean trilogy, envisions the Titan as an agent of positive change for mankind, an "initiator of progress" as Corbeau-Parsons terms it (10). Aeschylus does examine Prometheus's actions from multiple angles, for example, the theft of fire and his subsequent defiance of Zeus is perceived as an act of folly or rebellion by the other gods. Hephaestus tells Prometheus while chaining him to the rock that "Your kindness to the human race has earned you this. / A god who would not bow to the gods' anger—you, / Transgressing right, gave privileges to mortal men. / For that you shall keep watch upon this bitter rock" (ll. 28-31). Prometheus's act on behalf of mankind breaks Zeus's law and yet it is the punishment the Titan will endure which troubles Hephaestus because it is being dealt to his divine equal.

Considering the way in which Zeus came to power by overthrowing his father Cronos with the help of Prometheus, the torturous, eternal nature of the punishment reflects an interesting development of Zeus's character. While Zeus in *Theogony* and *Works and Days* plans his revenge carefully with an eye towards the future, the Zeus described in *Prometheus Bound* seems petty and reactionary. Prometheus goes so far as to call him a tyrant (l. 222). The extremity of Zeus's response to Prometheus highlights another important dynamic within the myth seen in both Hesiod and Aeschylus's work: "humans owe their origin to two acts of injustice perpetrated... against the king of the Olympian gods" (Ferrarin 298). Aeschylus does omit the first deception involving sacrifice, however Ferrarin's observation is interesting because it emphasizes the idea that a cycle of oppression and deception is the birthright of mankind.

While Prometheus acts against the will of Zeus, Aeschylus allows the Titan to voice his own motives and concerns in order to explore the positive results of his rebellious act. Prometheus explains that he "saved the human race from being ground / To dust, from total death" out of pity because Zeus had decided to annihilate them (Aeschylus ll. 236-237). Part of this 'salvation' means that "men no longer... foresee their death" (l. 249). He replaces this misery with blind hopefulness instead. The Chorus replies that his gift brought "great blessing" to mankind (l. 252). This kind of hope is restorative, but in later interpretations of the myth, it could become "one of the main obstacles on mankind's way to self-reliance" as Ferrarin speculates (295). However, in the context of Greek drama, it is seen as a means to alleviate the miserable condition of humanity. Not only does Prometheus provide physical and emotional relief to humanity, he also provides them with knowledge. Mankind can now write and reason, tell the

passage of time, make medicines from herbs, understand prophecy and interpret signs in sacrifices—in essence, "All human skill and science was Prometheus' gift" (l. 502).

While mankind appears helpless and weak until Prometheus gives them fire and knowledge, "we are led to imagine... that Prometheus sees in them more than their present appearance: the possible development, the future, of a different condition" which in part makes his suffering worthwhile (Ferrarin 298). The potentiality of mankind is what spurs Prometheus into acting as their benefactor, despite the punishment which follows.

Unlike Hesiod's Prometheus, the Titan in Aeschylus's work has not been 'out-tricked' by a far-seeing Zeus. It is Prometheus's knowledge of the future that threatens Zeus's wellbeing and also offers up a glimpse of hope for the Titan. His punishment does appear eternal until he encounters Io, who is cursed to wander the world as the result of incurring Hera's wrath after attracting the unwanted attention of Zeus (Aeschylus ll. 589-591). She recounts her tale of woe at the request of the Chorus before Prometheus describes the future sufferings which await her. He tells her that in spite of her misery, "a child of yours is named my deliverer" (l. 772). It will take thirteen generations for Heracles to free Prometheus, but at least there is an end in sight (Dougherty 70). After Io leaves, stung by the ever-present gadfly, Prometheus hints at the secret he harbors that will lead to Zeus's downfall, saying "I swear that Zeus, for all his obstinacy, shall yet / Be humbled, so disastrous shall this marriage prove / Which he proposes—a marriage that shall hurl him out / Of throne and sovereignty into oblivion" (Aeschylus ll. 907-910). Prometheus gloats at the thought of Zeus's fall, which will be "sure, shameful, unendurable!" (l. 919). It will be more painful than all of the torment he has endured, he

assures the Chorus. In the midst of his somewhat hubristic exultation over the impending downfall of the king of the gods, Hermes appears with a message from Olympus. Zeus must know “what this marriage is / Through which you boast that he shall fall from power” (ll. 947-948). Prometheus responds by first insulting Hermes and then saying “...I have seen / Two dynasties already hurled from those same heights; / And I shall see the third, today’s king, fall to earth / More shamefully than his precursors, and more soon” (ll. 956-959).

The cyclical nature of the rise and fall of power is a theme which Aeschylus "never tires of reminding us of," as Ferrarin says, but it is with good reason (298). For Prometheus to be perceived as mankind's benefactor, he must act in opposition to a tyrant like Zeus who only holds power because of Prometheus' actions. This is a strong shift from the dynamic of Hesiod's Zeus and Prometheus. In the end, Prometheus is defiant in the face of Zeus's threats (as communicated by Hermes) and refuses to divulge his secret. As Zeus makes good on his threats and Prometheus is struck by thunder, thus falling into Tartarus, he calls out to his mother, the Earth, “You see how I am wronged!” (Aeschylus l. 1093). There is a sense of uncertainty regarding his fate—because the other two plays are missing, can there be any hope of reconciliation for Prometheus and Zeus? Or must the torment continue until Heracles is born? Based on fragments of two subsequent plays, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus Fire-Bearer*, it seems that in the second play “Prometheus is liberated by Heracles from his shackles and the daily visit by the eagle” and as a result the final play “[celebrates] the reconciliation of Zeus and Prometheus and the inauguration of Prometheus’ torch race in Athens” (Dougherty 70). The plays have been lost in their entirety but what remains is still enough to inspire a variety of

interpretations of the myth as well as thematic elements for later writers to expand upon (particularly with writers such as Shelley, Byron, and Goethe).

There is another aspect of Prometheus which is perhaps less well known than trickster or benefactor—that of actual creator or Prometheus *plasticator*. The Prometheus of Aeschylus may be read as the "spiritual father for mankind," but there are some iterations of the myth where he takes on a more literal role; in fact, "Aesop was the first to depict Prometheus in that function" as Caroline Corbeau-Parsons notes (13). In one of his fables, the creation of man is part of a competition as "Zeus made a bull, Prometheus made a man and Athena made a house" only to have the 'judge' Momos criticize their handiwork, leading Zeus to cast him out of Olympus in irritation (Aesop 124). In fable 322, Prometheus is told by Zeus to make animals and men. However, Zeus thinks there are too many animals, and so he ordered Prometheus to change some into men, which "resulted in those who hadn't been given human form in the beginning taking the shape of men but having the souls of beasts" (Aesop). In both fables, the creation of man by Prometheus leads to a greater truth about the world in which people live but does not enlarge our understanding of the Titan in any new or profound way. The same could be said for the instances found in the works of Apollodorus and Hyginus. Apollodorus writes that "Prometheus fashioned humans from water and earth" before stealing fire and giving it to them, which leads to the familiar story of his punishment upon the rock (I.7.45-46). Hyginus's *Fabulae* mentions briefly in the myth of Pandora that "Prometheus son of Iapetus was the first to fashion men out of clay. Later, Jupiter ordered Vulcan to make out of clay the form of a woman" (142). Each of these examples are brief, but they contribute to the overall understanding of Prometheus and his perceived role in the world.

Ovid's interpretation of Prometheus *plasticator* is "one of his legacies" according to Corbeau-Parsons, because of its influence on later iterations of the myth (13). Ovid describes the creation of man thus:

So Man came into the world. Maybe the great artificer  
 Made him of seed divine in a plan for a better universe.  
 Maybe the earth that was freshly formed and newly divorced  
 From the heavenly ether retained some seeds of its kindred element—  
 Earth, which Prometheus, the son of Iapetus, sprinkled with raindrops  
 And moulded into the likeness of gods who govern the universe.  
 Where other animals walk on all fours and look to the ground,  
 Man was given a towering head and commanded to stand  
 Erect, with his face uplifted to gaze on the stars of heaven.  
 Thus clay, so lately no more than a crude and formless substance,  
 Was metamorphosed to assume the strange new figure of man. (I.78-88).

The creation of mankind here at the hands of Prometheus is one in which humans are not made as part of a contest or as a means of reconstituting an overwhelming number of animals at the behest of Zeus. Instead, man stands above the beasts of the world, and his gaze is focused upwards, presumably to worship the gods. This implied purpose of man is one later writers will explore and critique. Overall, the myth itself still does not change much through Ovid's retelling, but its influence is seen in the works of Boccaccio and Goethe (Corbeau-Parsons 13). It is interesting to note, however, that the majority of texts that describe Prometheus as mankind's creator are not Greek texts. Olga Raggio writes that "it is significant that it [Prometheus as *plasticator*] did not inspire any great literary

or artistic creation among the Greeks, nor was it represented by them in any visual form” (46). Instead the myth of Prometheus as creator “took root firmly in the culture of the Romans” as seen in Ovid and other writers’ works (46).

Prometheus also figures into other forms of ancient literature and serves different functions within those texts. Lucian uses Prometheus as the “key element of rhetorical games” in his prologia ‘*So You Think I’m the Prometheus of the Literary World?*’ (Corbeau-Parsons 14). A prologia is simply a “short [piece] thought to have served as introductions to longer works, often probably dialogues” (Sidwell, Introduction xv). In this humorous introductory work, Lucian “asserts his originality in combining Old Comedy, the philosophical dialogue and Menippean satire to create a strange new hybrid—the comic dialogue” (xviii). It is a first-person narrative which features a “self-conscious parading of the author,” a hallmark of Lucian’s style, while “at the same time, the persona presented is hedged about with literary reminiscences, often presented in enigmatic form, as a sort of challenge to the audience to use their education to spot citation or allusion, recall its context and the scholarship which surrounds the text, and then read between the lines” (Sidwell, “Preface” 3). In this instance, the allusions are to the various attributes of Prometheus. Here Lucian’s ‘speaker’ turns a potential compliment back on itself as he weighs whether or not he is truly like the Titan. He says “Perhaps, my dear man, you mean that, like him, I also fashion my works from clay. If so, I recognize the point of comparison” although he notes that his clay is far more inferior (Lucian 5). However, the speaker changes his mind when confronted with the possibility that is his “inventiveness” which earns him the comparison to Prometheus (5). He quickly rejects that by saying “What exactly is the remarkable cleverness and

Promethean quality my writings possess?" and instead suggests that it is more likely that "you people who have great reputations for pursuing your cases as lawyers" have earned the compliment (5). He continues along this pattern, first describing an attribute of the Titan and how it might pertain to him, before rejecting it soundly in favor of another. If potters can be called "Prometheuses" in Athens because of their line of work, he admits that the comparison to the Titan is once again deserved because his words can "be easily broken, all it takes is to throw a small stone," perhaps of criticism, and then they are destroyed like shards of pottery (6). But perhaps the real comparison to Prometheus can be found in the speaker's "originality, the fact that [he] had no model to work to" (6). The description of Prometheus as the creator of men which follows this assurance is fairly familiar, although here Athena is given credit for actually breathing life into the clay men. While the speaker goes on to contemplate the relationship between dialogue and comedy, he does highlight a few more attributes of Prometheus. He references giving his audience "a feast of bones covered in fat" which evokes the first deception practiced on Zeus in *Theogony* (8). He makes a more obscure reference to Prometheus "causing intercourse between female and male," indirectly through the creation of Pandora. In the end, eager for the last laugh, the speaker declares "But what's a man to do? I've made my bed, and I'm going to have to lie on it. After all, it's Epimetheus' job to have second thoughts, not Prometheus" (8). While this comic dialogue uses allusions to Prometheus to formulate a more significant point about originality, it does also serve as a reminder of how embedded Prometheus and the other gods were in ancient culture.

Lucian has two other dialogues which feature Prometheus, although for two entirely different purposes. The first, while short, depicts Prometheus regaining his



freedom not through the efforts of Heracles but by finally revealing the secret Zeus fiercely desired to know at the end of *Prometheus Bound*. Zeus references the past deceptions he has fallen victim to as his reasons for keeping Prometheus bound.

Prometheus counters his fears by saying “If I tell you for what purpose you are now on your travels, shall I have credit with you, when I prophesy about the rest?” (*Lucian’s Dialogues* 2). After rightfully predicting that Zeus is on his way to Thetis, Prometheus warns the king of the gods that any union with her will lead to terrible things. The fear of losing his kingdom is enough for Zeus to declare: “Good-bye to Thetis, then. And as for you, for these *timely warnings* Hephaestus shall set you free” (2). While it does not change the character or role of Prometheus, this short dialogue does offer two things: a glimpse at what a reconciliation between Zeus and Prometheus could look like and (perhaps more anecdotally) it posits that sixteen vultures, instead of one, devour Prometheus’s liver although this could be hyperbole on the part of Lucian. The second dialogue is far more significant because it “[contributes the] idea that the gods are the creation of men... and that the world would be useless without men, since gods would not know their happiness if mankind were not unhappy (Corbeau-Parsons 14). In “Prometheus,” Hephaestus and Hermes are tasked with chaining up the rebellious Titan, who alternates between pleading with them and mocking them. Most of the familiar aspects of Prometheus are mentioned here—how he cheated Zeus out of the better portion of a sacrifice, stole the gods’ most valuable possession of fire, and created man and woman (*The Works of Lucian* 245). Hermes tells Prometheus that mankind should not have been created, to which Prometheus replies in a lengthy speech, saying “I shall try to show that it has done the gods no harm to bring men into the world, and... that it is

actually advantageous" (255). He launches into a humorous explanation of his 'motives' for creating man and how it was all intended to benefit mankind because "divinity was not quite complete in the absence of its counterpart" (255). He then proceeds to explain how temples only came into being because there were men to build and worship in them. Besides, how would the gods know whether they were happy or not if they did not have mankind to compare themselves to (259)? In the end, Hermes does admit that Prometheus makes a compelling argument but that he will still chain him up rather than risk the wrath of Zeus (265). While humorous in many ways, the influence of this dialogue can be seen much later in the work of Goethe, whose Prometheus challenges the relationship between man and the gods.

I want to address one final example of how Prometheus functions in ancient texts, although it occurs prior to Lucian's work. Plato's "Protagoras" uses Prometheus didactically as a means for the character of Protagoras to attempt to counter Socrates's claim that virtue cannot be taught. He uses myth because it is "simply a more pleasant way to make his point, ostensibly of more lasting and impressive impact on his audience, whom he considers as a group of young and naturally subordinate auditors" (Ferrarin 304). Protagoras describes the creation of "mortal creatures... [from] a mixture of earth and fire" by the gods as well as how Prometheus and Epimetheus "[were charged] with the task of equipping them and allotting suitable powers to each kind" (Plato 320d). Epimetheus asks to do it all on his own and predictably messes everything up because he is "not a particularly clever person" and possesses afterthought rather than forethought like his brother (321c). When Prometheus comes "to inspect the work, and [finds] the other animals well off for everything, but man naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed"

he ends up stealing fire as a “means of salvation” for man although it ultimately will lead to punishment for the Titan later on (321c). Protagoras describes the two benefits mankind experiences as a result of this theft. First man now has “a share in the portion of the gods” and builds altars to them in order to worship them (322a). Secondly, man can now “articulate speech and names, and [invent] houses and clothes and shoes and bedding and [get] food from the earth” (322a). However, men still live scattered and alone which leads to Zeus’s fear that they will all die. He sends Hermes to endow them with “the qualities of respect for others and a sense of justice” to bring order and help man to bond with each other (322c). Hermes asks whether he should “distribute them as the arts [are] distributed—that is, on the principle that one trained doctor suffices for many laymen?” (322c). Zeus decides that these virtues must be given to all and that it is now “[his] law that if anyone is incapable of acquiring his share of these two virtues he shall be put to death” (322d).

In terms of how Plato reinvents the myth within this dialogue, it seems that Prometheus's theft is born out of the necessity of fixing his brother's mistakes. Zeus, unlike his portrayal in *Prometheus Bound*, is concerned with mankind's survival, although he benefits from Prometheus gifting fire to mortals because now they can worship him. Epimetheus does make mistakes, much like his iteration found in *Works and Days*, but what is most interesting here is that he is actually capable of persuasion. Ferrarin highlights this aspect because it is "a very clever and subtle transformation of the myth" that situates persuasion "at the very origin of humanity" (306). Furthermore, it is ironic that Protagoras, who is called a sophist, would use this rendition of Epimetheus to make his point to Socrates. In the end, he attempts to cement his claim that virtue can

indeed be taught by using the example of Athenian justice. The punishment of wrongdoers "shows that they [the Athenians] too think it possible to impart and teach goodness" (Plato 324d). This interpretation of justifiable punishment here is a definite departure from the tyrannical punishment of Prometheus associated with the myth.

The myriad roles Prometheus plays in Classical literature serve to inform future interpretations of both him and his mythical attributions. In subsequent centuries, he remains a popular figure in certain kinds of literature as well as a subject of various art forms. Olga Raggio traces different artistic interpretations of him in early Medieval and Renaissance art. She notes that "[w]hile the Roman representation of Prometheus *plasticator* is thus absorbed into Christian iconography, the other episodes of the legend disappear from the art of the High Middle Ages" (50). His role as creator of mankind draws correlations to Christ as well, although given Prometheus's rebellion against Zeus, the allegorical reading only goes so far (Corbeau-Parsons 21). Prometheus is featured in many "universal histories, as well as in the mythological and allegorical handbooks" of the Middle Ages, through primarily a euhemeristic lens (Raggio 50). In this mode, he is credited with inventing flint, creating philosophy, teaching man to store and carry fire, as well as sculpting the first idols (50-51). During the Renaissance, Boccaccio reshapes the perception of Prometheus in his extensive, encyclopedic work *De Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (Corbeau-Parsons 24). His methodology uses three interpretations: literal, allegorical, and moral to approach myth. The most original claim he makes within this work is that there are actually two Prometheus figures (24). One is "Ovid's character Prometheus *plasticator*, or the distorted pagan image of the Creator, God Almighty. The second Prometheus... [is] a wise man, an ascetic who had retreated to the Caucasus..."

before teaching sciences and the art of living within society to his fellow man” (24).

Boccaccio’s humanist interpretation causes Prometheus’s “relationship with mankind [to be examined]” for perhaps the first time in greater detail (25). Mankind is no longer presented as ungrateful for Prometheus’s sacrifice but instead grateful recipients (25).

This renewed focus on his sacrifice and suffering is reflected in famous paintings and engravings of the period as well. Titian’s famous painting entitled *Tityus* is “traditionally thought to be a representation of Prometheus, and... became a great source of inspiration for subsequent painters” when in fact it is a representation of Tityus being punished for violating Latona (28). However, the tangled pose of the body mirrored by the rocks it rests on and contrasted by the vicious vulture feasting on a liver is replicated by Cort, Rubens, Jordaens, and de Valentinis to name a few Renaissance painters and engravers (Raggio 9). The continued interest in the graphic nature of his punishment contributes to the establishment of “a traditional visual representation of Prometheus, which persisted throughout the centuries, but which would be abandoned by late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists” (Corbeau-Parsons 31). While the Greeks and Romans related Prometheus to their conception of the world, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers link Prometheus and the gift of fire to artistic endeavor and psychological exploration. In many ways, the modern perception of Prometheus is shaped by the poetic works written in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and while these works are original and unique, it is important to understand how they are formed, influenced, and inspired by the many roles Prometheus played on the stage of Classical culture and literature.

## Chapter Two:

### Prometheus as a Reflection of the Artist: 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Interpretations

Traditionally when considering significant interpretations of Prometheus in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century poetry, the works of Goethe and Byron come readily to mind. Both men were singularly fixated on the Titan's particular myth and its various interpretations. Prometheus emerges over and over in different poems, play fragments, even individual lines of poetry; each time he is reinvented and renewed to reflect a particular interpretation. As Prometheus finds new symbolic status first with the Sturm und Drang movement and then in British Romanticism, he is associated with man-as-artist as well as his own role of creator and shaper of mankind. His suffering begins to be applied to the human condition, both positively and negatively. One work often not associated with 18<sup>th</sup>-century iterations in particular is Jonathan Swift's protest poem involving Prometheus. Perhaps it is because of its satirical form and association with a historical event in Ireland which leads it to be discounted from the Promethean canon of 18<sup>th</sup>-century works, but it addresses the idea of the Promethean artist creatively. It is clear from the text of the poem that Swift is familiar with many classical myths and that he is comfortable with subverting or reshaping them to fit his satirical bent. Swift's poem should be part of the conversation surrounding Promethean interpretations of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century because while Goethe and Byron are reinventing elements of the myth, they are enlarging the idea of Prometheus as the inspired artist and Swift is challenging that perception.

To analyze the originality of the three poetic accounts of Prometheus in this chapter, it is important to consider what sources the poets themselves were exposed to. In

addition to classical writers like Hesiod and Aeschylus, there was a trend starting back in the Renaissance era of mythical dictionaries being compiled. Boccaccio's *De Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, written during the Renaissance, provides an exhaustive study of myth and legend. While this work proved to be highly influential to Renaissance scholars in particular, similar works appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Corbeau-Parsons 24). Tooke's *Pantheon* was a dictionary of ancient mythology which was so popular, it went through twenty editions. Andrew Tooke originally translated the book into English in 1698 from Pomey's version and according to its cover page, the mythology collection was designed for schools ("The Pantheon"). Given the popularity of the text and its specific function within schools, it is extremely likely that it was well-known to poets like Swift, Byron, or Shelley. Prometheus is of course listed among the gods, goddesses, Titans, and monsters. He is described as "the first (as we find in History) that formed a Man out of Clay" (Pomey 365). His theft of fire appears purposeful but not born out of malice or rebellion. Minerva (Athena) takes him to Heaven to show him its splendors and he realizes the heat and light of the sun might be useful to the men he just created. Jupiter unleashes Pandora and her box out of anger and then has Prometheus bound and tortured by an eagle devouring his liver (366-367). While it is clear from both the content of the story and the footnotes that this version is constructed from multiple ancient sources, it is important to consider Tooke's preface which states his particular attitude towards mythology. Chapter one's subtitle is "The Origins of Idolatry" (1). The attitude towards myth appears to be one that is focused on revealing the connection between myth and idolatry, thus dispelling any notion of myth's veracity.

Jacob Bryant's *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* takes a similar approach. His ambitious multivolume series was published in 1774, which is well after Swift's death but within the realm of Byron and Shelley to encounter. Burton Feldman, in his introduction to volume one, writes that "*A New System* is one more effort to provide a comparative mythology. As such, it was read with great interest as a major entry into the most ancient past, and as proof that all men's many mythologies and histories were unified at the start" (v). Within the three volumes, Prometheus's name appears at least fifteen times in connection with various stories. His punishment on Caucasus with the eagle, his creation of mankind, and his association with the Biblical flood story via his son Deucalion are interspersed across three volumes as Bryant compares their origins to similar stories found in various ancient cultures. While there are other similar works written around the same time, these two compendiums described here are some of the most popular and well-known ones of their time. Both are reflective of specific attitudes towards mythology and mythological characters as well reflective of how embedded Classical mythology had become in education and culture.

Swift's "Prometheus, A Poem" is notable for its satirical form and how Swift subverts the benefactor and artist aspects of Prometheus which are prevalent in classical representations of the Titan. The poem uses mythical allusions to target William Wood, Swift's contemporary and the face of a controversial plan involving Ireland's currency. In 1724, Irish citizens were expressing concern in poetry and pamphlets over "Wood's Halfpence, the envisaged introduction of debased copper money into Ireland by the English government" (Baltes 375). While "[g]ranting the right to manufacture copper coins was seen as nothing unusual in Government circles... [this] affair was attended by a



whiff of scandal” as there were rumors of bribery (377). Swift’s use of “ballads replete with puns and moral maxims from folklore as well as burlesque versions of fables refashioned from classical mythology were the irreverent genres needed to unmask the vices and pretensions of the patentee and his backers in high stations” and his work succeeded in building the “spirit of opposition among the common people” (375). Swift eagerly takes up the mantle laid down by Lucian by incorporating familiar Classical aspects of Prometheus into his comparison with Wood which would be familiar to his audience. However, because he is a satirist, he works through the lenses of distortion and subversion to frame his poem around Wood and Prometheus.

The structure of the poem is such that the speaker begins with a brief description of how “the *Squire and Tinker, Wood*” decided for the good of Ireland to create the new halfpence (Swift l. 1). He forms it out of “Smith’s *Dust, and Copper, Lead and Brass*” which he mixes through “Chymick Art” or alchemy (ll.4-5). The poetic minting of the halfpence leads to a united uproar as “All *Parties and Religions* joyn” together to voice their protest to the debased currency (l. 11). Swift’s speaker observes that for many people “*Gold incites / To Blood and Quarrels*” while brass unites (l.20-22). Swift's Irish readers would have been all too familiar with the circumstances described at the beginning of the poem as well as the growing sentiment of outrage at the coining of the halfpence. The decidedly negative and uniting force of the halfpence brings “Troops of all Tongues and Nations” together under the “*Harp of Ireland*” (ll. 28-29). James Woolley and Stephen Karian note in their commentary on the poem that “the Irish harp is a “symbol of Ireland... [and] has been in wide and continual use since 1534, when it began to appear on Irish coins” as well as on the “reverse side of Wood’s halfpenny”

(354). By invoking a nationalistic symbol, Swift seems to imply that to accept the 'counterfeit' coin would be a betrayal of national identity and pride.

He abruptly changes tactics in the next line by introducing his Prometheus myth. In his retelling, Prometheus steals a golden chain which is "let down from *Jove* / But fasten'd to his Throne above; / So strong, that from the lower End, / They say, all human Things depend" (Swift ll. 31-34). While other aspects of Swift's Prometheus are familiar in their Hesiodic origins, the golden chain theft is a new association. It originates from the "Homeric idea that Jove's throne is linked to earth by a golden chain" according to Sabine Baltes (385). In Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, Zeus says in book eight to "Let down our golden everlasting Chain, / Whose strong Embrace holds Heav'n, and Earth, and Man" (qtd. in Woolley and Karian 355). Swift combines these Classical sources to invent his own myth with which to parallel Wood's actions with the halfpence described in the first thirty lines of the poem. After Prometheus steals the golden chain, he has it "Dissolv'd and into *Money* Coin'd" and replaces the chain with one of brass (Swift ll.38). Jove notices the theft after:

...all *Devotion* fail'd;  
 No *Temple*, to his *Godship* rais'd,  
 No *Sacrifice* on *Altars* blaz'd;  
 In short such *dire Confusions* follow'd,  
*Earth* must have been in *Chaos* swallow'd. (ll.42-46).

While Ovid's Prometheus creates mortals who worship the gods, Swift's Prometheus breaks the sacred connection between earth and Olympus. Unlike Aeschylus's Prometheus, whose punishment at the hands of Zeus seems unjust and pitiable, Swift's

Prometheus is met with little sympathy. He is "Ty'ed with the *Chain* himself had made" while his regenerating liver is eaten (l.54).

Now that the groundwork for the parallel with Wood has been laid, Swift moves on to reveal the moral of the 'fable' although the correlation was no doubt obvious to many. It is clear that Swift delights in making a show of "discovering the application which has been perfectly obvious throughout," as Mark Loveridge notes, because of the way in which he frames the ending (qtd. in Baltes 386). Wood is clearly "that old Thief *Prometheus*," and Jove is King George (Swift l. 60). Wood's theft of the "*Chain of Gold*, / Which links the *Subject* to the *King*" clearly threatens the connection between the king and his subjects (ll. 64-65). Baltes emphasizes the enormity of this accusation by noting that Swift also "suggests that the substitution of gold by other metals is an offence against divine authority" which is an "act of rebellion" against the monarchy (386). A further implication not seen in Swift's other poems about Wood is the critique of King George. Swift "[implies] that his Majesty has been negligent of his people's interests in the affair" (386). If the chain of brass ever cracks, "*Our Devotion may Grow Slack*" the poem warns (l.70). The solution is simple, then:

But *Jove* will soon convert I hope,  
 This *Brazen Chain* into a *Rope*;  
 With which *Prometheus* shall be ty'd,  
 And high in Air for ever ride;  
 Where, if we find his *Liver* grows,  
 For want of *Vultures*, we have *Crows*. (ll.71-76).

The suggested punishment of Wood is interesting for a few reasons. First, it parallels the idea of deserved punishment described earlier. In effect, Wood has wrought his own condemnation through his efforts to exchange a gold chain for brass. Although the gallows imagery "reduces Wood to a common criminal" it does not diminish his 'rebellious' act, contrary to what Baltes argues. She states that "Wood can never pretend to the extraordinary stature of a rebel like Prometheus" (386). Why should he aspire to those heights though? Swift has brought Prometheus down to the realm of mortals and in doing so subverts the positive perceptions traditionally held of the Titan as the selfless benefactor of mankind. Prometheus is no longer a shaper of mankind but a thief and con artist. In the same way, Wood is revealed to be "a wicked enemy" of people, in this case, the Irish specifically (Coleborne 1631). By rewriting the myth to reflect contemporary concerns, Swift can pick and choose which aspects of the Titan (or Classical allusion) he wants to enlarge or diminish through satire. In terms of the broader picture of literary treatments of Prometheus, he is following in the footsteps of Lucian's irreverent depictions. Unlike Lucian though Swift aligns his Prometheus with a living person in order to provoke a strong response from readers. While Swift owes some of his source material to Classical interpretations, his portrayal of Prometheus differs drastically from neo-Classical mythical interpretations by his contemporaries as well as the budding Romantic movement decades later.

The perception of Prometheus as a symbol for the inspired artist comes to the forefront of literary works in the 18<sup>th</sup> century through Goethe's works. Nearly fifty years after Swift's poem, Goethe grapples with his own changing conception of Prometheus through both drama and poetry. In 1773, he began to write a play about Prometheus

influenced by "the *Sturm und Drang* ('Storm and Stress') movement" which originated in Germany (Corbeau-Parsons 38). As noted by Corbeau-Parsons, this artistic movement is signaled by a shift from a focus on poetic style and convention to "an attempt to give an account of individual experiences" (38). Poets are writing based on emotion and a belief "that genius made them creators," which is why mythology appeals to many writers and artists at this time (38). While many would have been familiar with encyclopedic works like Bryant's *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* or Tooke's *The Pantheon*, poets begin to reject allegorical interpretations of myth in favor of "[capturing] the intrinsic poetical value in each mythological figure" (39). They also begin to identify personally with individual mythological figures. Thus, it is hardly surprising that a writer like Goethe should spend so much time exploring the figure of Prometheus (39). Jonas Jølle analyzes Goethe's literary struggle, noting that he made multiple "attempts at the myth, yet all but the poem remained fragments. Other scattered references to Prometheus throughout Goethe's works speak of his sustained preoccupation with the story" (394). Goethe's interest in Prometheus manifests itself in explorations of the different aspects of the Titan, some of which are informed by classical sources.

The primary aspects of Prometheus which interest Goethe are the Titan's roles of creator and rebel and how they relate to the conception of man as artist. In the 1773 play fragment *Prometheus*, Goethe explores the Titan's role as creator and educator of man. In the play, Prometheus is equal to the gods in power and desires a world uninterrupted by the gods in order for mankind to thrive (Corbeau-Parsons 39-40). There is an underlying level of rebellion in his attitudes towards the gods. He asks Athena:

What sort of claim

Do the proud dwellers of Olympus

Think they have upon my powers?

They are mine and mine to use. (ll. 128-131, qtd. in Corbeau-Parsons 39).

Although it is Minerva who actually "endows him with the power to give life to his creatures [mankind]," Prometheus feels that he does not owe the gods anything (41).

While the fragment is obviously incomplete, it's clear that Goethe is beginning here to formulate his interpretation of Prometheus in terms of his perception of what an artist is.

If like Prometheus, a true artist must create without interference by anyone, the implication is that a true artist works in isolation. In addition, the artist must rebel against any system or group of people that seek to interfere with the creation of art. Goethe explores this idea further in his poem "Prometheus," written in 1773, which was initially intended to function within the third act of the unfinished play (Corbeau-Parsons 44).

In "Prometheus" the Titan is allowed his own voice, uninhibited by other gods or a Chorus who might seek to intervene, accuse, or question him like in Aeschylus's play. While the poem is often considered an ode, it is more of an "Antihymn" that negates, or defies, the gods in language and form that hymns employ to invoke or praise them" (Jølle 395). Prometheus's invocation of Zeus is far from reverent:

Cover your heaven, Zeus,

With cloudy vapors

And like a boy

Beheading thistles (Goethe ll.1-4).

He compares Zeus to a heedless child, willfully destroying nature because he can. In

Prometheus's eyes, Zeus is petulant and selfish. He tells Zeus to "leave / My earth intact /

And my small hovel, which you did not build" despite how much the King of the gods envies his creation (ll. 6-8). Goethe begins to establish in this stanza Prometheus's role as artist, and it is important to note that all of the Titan's creative powers are focused on earth and mankind rather than the realm of the gods. Prometheus is protective of everything he has established on earth and turns a critical eye to the function of the gods:

Meagerly you nourish  
 Your majesty  
 On dues of sacrifice  
 And breath of prayer  
 And would suffer want  
 But for children and beggars,  
 Poor hopeful fools. (ll.14-20).

He recalls how he was once a child who raised his eyes heavenward "as if above there were / An ear to hear my complaint, / A heart like mine / To take pity on the oppressed" (ll.24-27). There is no kindness or empathy to be found with the gods and Prometheus rejects the notion that even he should pay homage to them. To think back to Swift's Prometheus for a moment, it appears there is a minor correlation here. Swift's Prometheus severs the literal connection between heaven and earth by his theft of the chain, and here Goethe's Titan seems to imply a similar scenario should occur. Due to their arrogance and indifference to mankind's suffering, Prometheus rejects the idea of their continued worship as well as the idea that he or humankind owes the gods anything.

Prometheus further interrogates the idea of god worship in the next two stanzas through a series of questions still directed at Zeus. He asks who helped him "Against the

Titans' arrogance" or "rescued [him] from death" (ll.29-30). The answer lies in his "holy and glowing heart" which was unaided by any outside force (l. 32). References to fire appear twice in the poem, first in line 10 with "glowing heat" and then here in line 32. While Goethe excises the traditional trappings of the Promethean myth like the theft of fire, its numerous interpretative qualities, and the subsequent punishment, he still plays with one aspect of the Classical tradition here: fire. Corbeau-Parsons observes that "the original gift of fire is understood here in a metaphorical and symbolic way, since the heat of the flame is instilled in the human heart. In this context, the flame does not appear as a symbol of knowledge or of passionate love, but as another form of love... a great generosity... [and] sense of empathy for fellow man" (50). His empathy is further revealed in lines 37-40, where he asks "Have you ever relieved / The burdened man's anguish? / Have you ever assuaged / The frightened man's tears?" (Goethe). The implication is that these are precisely the actions Prometheus has taken on behalf of mankind.

His association with mankind is another theme Goethe revisits in this poem. In the play fragment, he asks "What was the forge of my manhood / If not almighty Time, / My lord and yours?" which some critics like Corbeau-Parsons have interpreted as a literal exchange of status (ll. 29-31, qtd. in Corbeau-Parsons, 40). The question is echoed in the poem with slightly different wording in stanza five:

Was it not omnipotent Time  
That forged me into manhood,  
And eternal Fate,  
My masters and yours? (ll.41-45)



The recurrence of this image of a humanized Titan suggests that Goethe's conception of the artist is a mixture of the divine and the mortal. Here Prometheus by virtue of his generous heart and attitude towards mankind rejects his equality with the gods as seen in the play fragment but he cannot wholly erase his own divine heritage as Jølle observes (408). Instead, Prometheus allows his own nature and experience to inform his final act for man. He ends the anti-hymn with the image of his benevolence for mankind:

Here I sit, forming men  
 In my own image,  
 A race to resemble me:  
 To suffer, to weep,  
 To enjoy, to be glad—  
 And never to heed you,  
 Like me! (ll.51-57).

The final act of defiance against Zeus is simply to “[invoke] his own mixed experiences to illuminate the inherent duality of the human experience” (Dougherty 94). Here he is not a creator in the traditional or Biblical sense. He is using his experience to shape man in his rebellious but compassionate image so that the gods will have no power over mankind. By choosing to align himself with mankind and shape their emotional range in contrast to the gods’ indifference, he shows that “he has the power to create his own image” or identity (Dougherty 95). The sense of identity which permeates the poem reflects Goethe’s “poetic genius—his own artistic identity, [and] his ability to create himself through his poetry” (96). Now man as the artist can create in total freedom, away from the influence or reach of the gods, because he has no need for them (Corbeau-

Parsons 51). While the poem and play fragment are only two examples of Goethe's extended exploration of the Prometheus myth, they showcase his "[rejection of] the whole decorative Hellenism prevailing in Germany and elsewhere" in favor of a return to "myth [as] the source and realm of wide energy [and] heroic greatness" as reflected in the inspired artist (Richardson and Feldman 261).

Byron's poem "Prometheus," published in 1817, is the next major poetic work to tackle the Romantic notion of the artist in relation to the myth. Much like Goethe, Byron was preoccupied with Prometheus, specifically in the context of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, which he read numerous times since childhood (Bush 71). The influence of the Titan on Byron is profound—there are at least "seventeen allusions to Prometheus, of varying length and seriousness" if not more found in his work (78). In the summer of 1816, Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Shelley stayed together in Geneva and Prometheus figured prominently and "simultaneously in their works" during that time (Corbeau-Parsons 57). While Byron's work focuses on Prometheus as the suffering artist, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* addresses an expansive cosmogony and ideology. Mary Shelley's famous novel *Frankenstein* draws inspiration from the myth to explore the duality of Promethean qualities in Victor Frankenstein and the Creature. The variety in these three interpretations of the Prometheus myth indicates the degree to which Romantic writers responded individually to the inherent themes and qualities of the myth. For Byron, it is the act of compassion and the subsequent suffering which seems to fascinate him, unlike Goethe who completely disregards the punishment aspect. Swift's incorporation of the punishment is rooted in the conviction that it is deserved and

necessary. Byron uses the poem in part to meditate on power and suffering as well as the role of Prometheus as a model for mankind.

Prometheus remains silent throughout the entire poem, leaving the speaker to apostrophize and question the actions of the Titan. In the opening lines the speaker asks what kind of compensation he received for his compassion on mankind, only to provide the answer in the next few lines:

A silent suffering, and intense;  
 The rock, the vulture, and the chain,  
 All that the proud can feel of pain,  
 The agony they do not show,  
 The suffocating sense of woe,  
 Which speaks but in its loneliness, (Byron ll. 6-11).

Prometheus suffers in silence at the hands of pitiless gods because he cared enough for mankind to try and help them. Stanza two elaborates on both the punishment and Prometheus's relationship with the gods. The gods seem to function under a "ruling principle of Hate, / Which for its pleasure doth create / The things it may annihilate" (ll. 20-22). Aeschylus's Prometheus rebels under similar circumstances when Zeus decides to destroy all of mankind. However, his punishment is understood as the result of rebellion whereas Prometheus's punishment here is reflective of the gods' treatment of mankind. Because he dares to intervene, they "reward him with a contemptuous punishment similar to that which they previously inflicted on man" (Dennis 145). Despite Prometheus's foresight, he refuses to appease Zeus and allay his own suffering (ll. 29-30). Perhaps the only consolation is that "in thy Silence was his [Zeus's] Sentence, / And

in his Soul a vain repentance, / ...That in his hand the lightnings trembled" (ll.31-32, 34). These lines recall the secret of Zeus's downfall after his union with Thetis, which in some versions of the myth is averted by Prometheus confessing the truth.

The third and final stanza of the poem addresses the potential outcome for mankind as a result of Prometheus's "Godlike crime" of trying to lessen the "sum of human wretchedness" (ll. 35, 37). In describing his crime as godlike, Byron returns to the issue of dual natures—is Prometheus more man than god or vice versa? Or is it that he has renounced the way of the gods in favor of the ways of man? In the end, he has become "a symbol and a sign / To Mortals of their fate and force," despite his inability to die (ll.45-46). Unlike the Titan, man "in portions can foresee / His own funereal destiny" and so at least is consoled by the knowledge that suffering is not eternal (ll. 49-50). Ironically, the ability to foresee one's death is exactly what Aeschylus's Prometheus took from man and replaced with blind hope. Byron's Prometheus does not dwell in any kind of optimism about the human condition. Instead, his last gift to man is the performance of:

...a firm will, and a deep sense,  
Which even in torture can descry  
Its own centred recompense,  
Triumphant where it dares defy,  
And making Death a Victory. (ll.55-59).

The last two lines encourage a spirit of resistance against "the terrible trinity of heaven, tyranny, and Fate" (Dougherty 99). The fatalism of accepting that suffering is an inevitable part of life is tempered by the knowledge that in death, man is victorious at

last. The duality of human nature (part divine, part mortal) is the very aspect of humanity which Prometheus knows will help to set mankind free. Already by stanza two, Zeus has lost, he just does not know it yet. Because the gods do not care for even the "merest crawling worm," they will not anticipate ruin through the defiance of man, their "intended victims" (Dennis 147). Prometheus's patience in suffering may never be rewarded since he cannot die but the implication is that once man follows his example, victory is assured.

The concept of resilience in suffering seems to resonate with Byron as does the sense of eternity surrounding Prometheus's punishment. For Byron, it seems that the physical struggle through life is one which will be rewarded. His self-association with the Titan reflects the "fundamental [ideal]... [associated] with the notion of individuality: remaining faithful, to the end, to one's essential character" according to Jerome McGann (xxii). To live, for Byron, "was to suffer and to change" and only die once, unlike the poetic regenerations of some of his contemporaries (xxiii). The idea of suffering and defiant resistance as man's inheritance is Byron's original and individualistic contribution to the myth of Prometheus. Through the Titan's silence, "there is one entirely permissible witness to the Titan's proudly secret anguish: the (human) reader of the poem" (Dennis 149). Readers of the poem are allowed to take a direct part in their inheritance by experiencing stanza by stanza the suffering artist's journey towards victory.

As eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers grapple with their reinventions of the Prometheus myth, they draw it farther from the realm of allegory and Classical themes to centralize the myth around the human experience. Goethe projects himself as the artist into the figure of Prometheus who claims equality with man. Goethe's poem rejects the tyranny of absent gods and envisions a world where man as an artist can create

without the limitations laid out by the gods. Byron's Prometheus remains silent in the face of eternal torture and serves as a model for mankind to emulate. Only by doing so can man find victory in death, as this is the inheritance left by the Titan. These interpretations of the myth differ from Swift's satirical description of the Titan as the degraded artist and thief. However, his work, like Byron's and Goethe's, forms another part of the legacy of myth, which is that it is flexible and subject to change in the hands of those who wish to shape it to their need.

### Chapter Three:

#### “We are the gods now”: Analyzing the Shelleyan Concept of World Reclamation in the Future

While the poetic interpretations of Prometheus by Goethe and Byron explore the relationship between the artist and the Titan, the scope for potential or future change remains limited. For Goethe, the legacy of Prometheus allows for the artist to work in perfect, defiant isolation. Byron describes a cycle of suffering which ends in the victory of death as the chief inheritance of humanity from Prometheus. In both instances, the scope for potential or future change remains limited. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* broadens the idea of change by extending it first to the individual and the inner self, then to mankind as a whole and the surrounding exterior world. While he finds inspiration in one of the initial versions of the myth, Aeschylus' long-lost work of the same name, Shelley makes it clear in his preface to the lyric drama that he is uninterested in imitation or didacticism, but rather in “beautiful idealisms of moral excellence” (209). He instead uses the myth as a vehicle for world recovery, born out of the transformative power of love. Shelley's reinterpretation of the myth is also rooted in futurity, as it describes an end to a cycle of tyranny and the beginning of a new age that will reshape mankind and the world. This dramatic departure from traditional retellings of the Prometheus myth allows for the possibility of subsequent interpretations of the myth to explore the possibilities of internal change and world recovery.

If Shelley's lyric drama is a vehicle for world recovery, it is essential first to identify what has been lost or what needs recovering. It is clear from the early speeches of Prometheus and the voices in nature that Jupiter's tyranny over heaven and earth has

cast a pall of fear over the world and its inhabitants. Because of the inflexible nature of Jupiter, "there is no development in his [Jupiter's] mind, and every relationship he establishes is asymmetrical and unbalanced" (Marino 10). The unbalanced nature of power and hierarchy are both conditions Shelley seeks to explore and ameliorate in his work. To discern the best method of recovery, he sets up Prometheus as a double for Jupiter. Prometheus has lost his freedom and appears at the beginning of the lyric drama "nailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mount" (Shelley I.i.20). His torment has no end in sight, "no change, no pause, no hope!" and even nature seems deaf to his pleas (I.i.24). In the years of punishment, however, he has relinquished his hate for Jupiter despite the curse he called down upon him so long ago. The lingering effect of the Titan-issued anathema is such that the voices in nature and the Earth herself dare not repeat it, for fear of calling down Jupiter's wrath once more. Only the Phantasm of Jupiter can recall the words of defiance and hate. When confronted by his own words, Prometheus acknowledges that he has changed: "Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine. I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (I.i.304-305). The blindness of his grief mirrors "Jupiter's blind violence in chaining" Prometheus to the rock and highlights the similarity between "victim and oppressor" (Marino 10). By relinquishing hate, Prometheus has begun the work of breaking the cycle of violence and tyranny that originated out of early myth. More importantly, Shelley uses this shift to highlight the importance of the mind and its ability to foster change. He acknowledges in his preface, however, that change is dependent on individual choice, saying: "[I am] aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust" (209).



The concept of change beginning in the mind is further highlighted in the exchange between Prometheus and Mercury in Act I. Mercury counsels the Titan to submit to Jupiter and reveal the secret which threatens Jupiter's reign:

Let the will kneel within thy haughty heart;

For benefits and meek submission tame

The fiercest and the mightiest (Shelley I.i.377-379).

Prometheus counters the idea of humility (possibly even false humility) towards his torturer by saying: "Evil minds change good to their own nature" (I.i.380-381). Any act of contrition or sign of regret on his part would be misinterpreted by Jupiter, for "He who is evil can receive no good" (I.i.390). Mercury fails to convince Prometheus to submit and so leaves the Titan to the mercies of the Furies, who work as extensions of Jupiter and seek to torture Prometheus mentally and emotionally rather than physically. They remind Prometheus of his past attempts to awaken change:

Dost thou faint, mighty Titan? We laugh thee to scorn.

Dost thou boast the clear knowledge thou waken'dst for man?

Then was kindled within him a thirst which outran

Those perishing waters: a thirst of fierce fever,

Hope, love, doubt, desire—which consume him forever (I.1.541-545).

Prometheus is aware of the mind's ability to change; he has witnessed the possibility of it with humankind. The Furies remind him that the condition is reversible, however: "if the mind can shape the world, the world can condition the mind" (O'Neill, "Percy Bysshe Shelley" 260). Left to their own devices, mankind has embraced despair and the "struggling World" is slipping under the rule of tyranny once more (Shelley I.i.577).

Even with the gift of 'fire' in this case, a kind of mental and spiritual awakening in mankind, the balance of power has shifted during the Titan's long years of punishment.

The condition of the world under Jupiter's rule is explored through Asia's interactions with Demogorgon in Act II. Demogorgon tells her to ask what she would like to know, and she replies: "Who made the living world?... Who made all / That it contains—thought, passion, reason, will, / Imagination?" (II.iv.9-10). She is trying to "unveil the secrets of a universe gone so wholly wrong," as Stuart Curran terms it, and her conception of the world recalls Prometheus's speech to the natural elements of the world in Act I (294). Asia reflects the rhetoric of internal change in that her "world is informed by thought processes alone" (294). Demogorgon simply replies "God, Almighty God" although the god of what religion is left unclear (Shelley II.iv.11). In contrast to the more favourable powers of the mind, Asia asks to know:

...who made terror, madness, crime, remorse,  
 Which from the links of the great chain of things  
 To every thought within the mind of man  
 Sway and drag heavily—and each one reels  
 Under the load towards the pit of death;  
 Abandoned hope, and love that turns to hate;  
 And self-contempt, bitterer to drink than blood;  
 Pain whose unheeded and familiar speech  
 Is howling and keen shrieks, day after day;  
 And Hell, or the sharp fear of Hell? (II.iv.19-28).

Demogorgon will only respond with the ambiguous answer of "He reigns" (II.iv.29). Asia recognizes the imbalance of good and evil within the world and how both elements affect the mind. Demogorgon will not utter the name of the being responsible and so Asia recalls the events which led to Prometheus's punishment. Shelley structures Asia's retelling of the past like a second Genesis: "There was the Heaven and Earth at first / And Light and Love," Asia says as she recounts the circumstances under which Jupiter comes to power (II.iv.32-33). She describes how Prometheus "gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter / And with this Law alone: 'Let man be free,' / Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven" (II.iv.44-46). Despite the mandate to allow mankind its freedom, Jupiter rains down every kind of imaginable hardship on man and the answer to Asia's question is now clearly answered. Prometheus sees all of this and decides to "[give] man speech, and speech created thought, / Which is the measure of the Universe" (II.iv.72-73). By doing so, Prometheus has brought relief to mankind as well as awakened the inner depths of man. Through Prometheus's act of awakening mankind, Shelley gives readers a brief glimpse into a world that has not fully embraced despair. However, Jupiter's jealousy leads to Prometheus "Withering in destined pain," and the uneven balance of power suppresses any hint of internal change in mankind (II.iv.100).

While Jupiter fulfils the role of tyrant perfectly, Roland A. Duerksen sees Prometheus's punishment as self-inflicted. It is only because Prometheus failed to "[retain] the power and responsibility that rightfully belonged to him" that the Titan suffered for so long (Duerksen 625). While Duerksen's reading of *Prometheus Unbound* ignores the concept of fate which permeates the original myth as well as Shelley's lyric drama, he does home in on both the importance of Prometheus's curse and his later

unbinding. By cursing Jupiter, Duerksen argues that Prometheus has committed an “egregious moral failure” in “[calling] down a horrendous curse... motivated by hatred through all the years” of torture (626). Prometheus revokes his curse early on in the lyric drama, an act that Duerksen refers to as “regeneration” (626). It is only through his internal and conscious decision to exchange hatred for love that the old cycles can be broken, Prometheus can be unbound, and Jupiter can fall. The punishment, torture, and eventual freeing of Prometheus could be read as an act of fate, particularly in the way in which Jupiter is deposed. Caroline Corbeau-Parsons describes the condition of Prometheus’s freedom as “bound to the inevitable collapse of a cruel god” as well as the “purification” of the self (64).

Act III culminates in the enacting of Shelley’s vision of world reclamation. Jupiter sits upon his throne, declaring that “henceforth I am omnipotent. / All else has been subdued to me” (Shelley III.i. 3-4). He boasts of his offspring, borne of his rape of Thetis, and declares that victory has come upon the “Earthquake of his [Demogorgon’s] chariot thundering up / Olympus” (III.i.50-51). While the balance of power is restored, by bringing Jupiter down into the abyss, Demogorgon acts in a long tradition of children overthrowing their fathers. The familiarity of this act reflects both the origins of the myth that Shelley is reworking to fit his greater vision and the repetition inherent in the cycle of violence and oppression. In this instance, however, Demogorgon descends with Jupiter rather than taking his throne. Prometheus is unbound by Hercules and reunited with Asia and thus “the beginning of an era of peace and freedom, a proper golden age for mankind, inasmuch as a recreation of the world” is set into motion (Corbeau-Parsons 64). The

change begins almost immediately. The Spirit of the Hours describes to Prometheus and Asia how:

...the impalpable thin air  
 And the all-circling sunlight were transformed  
 As if the sense of love dissolved in them  
 Had folded itself round the sphered world.  
 My vision then grew clear and I could see  
 Into the mysteries of the Universe. (Shelley III.iv.100-105)

The atmosphere of the world shifts and the Spirit describes how revealed beneath it on the earth "thrones were kingless" and mankind was free of "hate, disdain... fear" (III.iv.131, 133). The self-satisfying, hypocritical qualities of humankind have given way to "gentle, radiant forms / from custom's evil taint exempt and pure" (III.iv. 155-156). As a result, external symbols of power such as "thrones, altars, judgement-seats and prisons" are "not o'erthrown, but unregarded now" by mankind (III.iv.164, 179). The "loathsome mask has fallen," and now man is "Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed... the King / of himself" (III.iv.193-194, 196). The reign of the tyrannical Jupiter has finally ended, and man is free but for one condition: he is not "exempt... From chance and death and mutability" (III.iv.200-201). Maureen McLane notes that because "Shelley retains mortality as a condition of human life... *Prometheus Unbound* is, surprisingly, one of his more 'realistic' works" (142). Even though man is self-governed in this new state, he is still in a way ruled by the inevitability of death.

Had the lyric drama ended with Act III, the reclamation of the world would have appeared incomplete and unresolved, leaving one to wonder if the inner change of

mankind is enough to carry the future of the world? Or will the old systems of power eventual fall back into place? Shelley's addition of Act IV to *Prometheus Unbound* "[broadens] the scope of his most ambitious work from a myth of the renovation of the human psyche to a renewing of the whole cosmos" as Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers describe it (qtd. in Corbeau-Parsons, 63). Act IV begins first with the unsettling of Time who is borne to "his tomb in eternity" by the dead Hours (Shelley IV.i.14). As choruses of Spirits and Hours describe the changes they are witnessing, there is a sense of chaos in the way that the new order is replacing the old. The voice of unseen spirits tells of how "Waves assemble on Ocean, / They are gathered and driven / By the Storm of delight, by the panic of glee!" (IV.i.42-44). Panthea has a vision of "Wells of unfathomed fire, and watersprings / Whence the great Sea, even as a child, is fed" coupled with the image of "the melancholy ruins / Of cancelled cycles; anchors, beaks of ships, / Planks turned to marble, quivers, helms and spears / and gorgon-headed targes" (IV.i. 284-285, 288-291). She sees "prodigious shapes / Huddled in grey annihilation" as well as skeletons and creatures she cannot name (IV.i. 300-301). McLane describes Panthea's vision as one in which the "weapons of war and the symbols of power... stand annihilated... Panthea's speech points beyond the inversion or even surpassing of prior forms and materials toward the destruction of the very categories of 'ruin' and 'death'" (144). In contrast to the chaos and destruction Panthea describes, the Earth "begins to rejoice in Jupiter's vanishing into nothing and in love's filling the void and darkness left by his disappearance" (Duerksen 637). The reclamation of the world is nearly complete, as the Earth declares that mankind's inheritance is "This true fair world of things"

(Shelley IV.i. 384). Demogorgon reappears at the very end of the lyric drama to provide one final affirmation of the new cycle:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
 To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;  
 To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;  
 To love and bear; to hope, til Hope creates  
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
 Neither to change nor falter nor repent:  
 This, like thy glory, Titan! is to be  
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory. (IV.i.570-578)

Demogorgon reasserts Shelley's greater vision of change by describing how the cycles of violence and destruction can finally be broken. Hope, forgiveness, love—these are qualities of an inward change that will precipitate a regenerative act of change in the world at large. For Shelley, world recovery comes about through the "apocalyptic renewal" that follows internal changes in mankind (Curran 297). *Prometheus Unbound* is an exercise in what life could (and should) be like if mankind were to take the necessary measures of transformative thought. Shelley possesses the conviction and foresight to see that the cycle of repression can come to an end, that from the cave "the renovated future will spring (as it has sprung recurrently in the past) out of the fulness—and the full understanding—of history" (McGann 119). The question is this, however: will mankind embrace love and be transformed to make way for this renovated future?

Shelley's interpretation of the Prometheus myth expands the perception of the Titan himself as well as the legacy of his sacrifice and subsequent punishment. He has laid out an ideology for change rooted in an idealistic "faith in men" but it is also rooted in futuristic vision (Corbeau-Parsons 64). If *Prometheus Unbound* is, as Jerome McGann describes it, "an example of a human life" then mankind has a choice to make: follow the example or create one's own way toward change (123). Ridley Scott's 2012 film, *Prometheus*, offers up a dark alternative to the concept of change and world recovery intimated by Shelley's lyric drama. Set in the future, *Prometheus* explores a version of the world in which mankind has resisted the desire to change or redeem the world in the Shelleyan sense. The sheer intensity of destruction born out of Scott's version of creation provides a sharp contrast to the world reclamation of Acts III and IV of *Prometheus Unbound*. The film also draws on the classical origins of the myth in its depiction of the cyclical nature of tyranny and violence. The hierarchies in place in *Prometheus* fall closely in line with the Greek concept of hubris, which fuels the overwhelming desire to escape mortality felt by several characters. Just as Shelley reinvents the Prometheus myth to propose an ideology of change, Scott assimilates aspects of the original myth and Shelley's lyric drama to craft an alternate future fraught with destructive creation, brought about in part by mankind.

There are no Titans in this imagining of the future: man is god now and creates life in his own image, in this case, androids who are nearly indistinguishable from their creators except for the fact that they lack souls. Peter Weyland, the founder of Weyland Corporation (a company whose motto is "Building better worlds") and creator of androids, possesses a somewhat obsessive desire for immortality born in part from his



own interpretation of the Prometheus myth. In a short promotional video for the film itself, Weyland delivers a TED Talk to discuss his desire to change the world. He calls the fire stolen from the gods by Prometheus "our first piece of technology" and recounts how the Titan's theft results in the extreme torment of Prometheus and the first step in technological growth for humanity ("Peter Weyland's 2023 TED Talk"). Now, in 2023, Weyland marvels at how far technology has come, declaring that "we are the gods now" ("Peter Weyland's 2023 TED Talk"). His vaulting ambition allows for his company (seemingly in his stead) to fund an expedition of massive proportions, allowing a crew of scientists to begin a journey to find humanity's creators—a mysterious alien race referred to as the Engineers.

Weyland's desire to be a god and creator recalls the ancient Greek concept of hubris, or "excessive self-confidence," which in Classical literature traditionally leads to a person's downfall (*OED Online*). In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus learns to turn from his hate before he becomes like Jupiter. Jupiter, while a god, must fall because he represents absolute tyranny. Weyland's desire to be a god blinds him to the fact that they too can be destroyed. He is fixated on measuring the progress of mankind through their technological advancement, which goes against Shelley's convictions voiced in "A Defence of Poetry" where he warns that the "cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave" (530). Weyland wishes to storm Mount Olympus itself, unaware of the dangers of his own ambition. Initially, it appears his efforts come too late, as he is presumed to be deceased from old age at the start of the

film. Meanwhile, scientists Elizabeth Shaw and Charlie Holloway accept funding from Weyland Corporation to launch their expedition to follow the coordinates they discovered on a series of star maps from disparate geographical locations and cultures back on Earth. They perceive these coordinates as an open invitation from their creators to meet face to face (McWilliam 532). Rather than leading to any kind of Olympian paradise, the crew of the *Prometheus* land on a planet labelled LV-223, a desolate, rocky place dominated by a large stone structure half-buried in dirt—not unlike the “vast and trunkless legs of stone” and “shattered visage” of Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (2, 4).

Shaw and Holloway, along with the rest of the scientific crew, decide to explore the structure upon landing. They descend into its dark, cave-like tunnels and soon discover the bodies of a group of Engineers crowded up against a door to what appears to be some kind of temple room. The temple room poses both a warning about and a hint of the creative forces responsible for humanity's existence. At the center of the room, surrounded by large metal vases or ampules, is a large humanoid stone head. Above the head, we see a mural of an Engineer posed like God in Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam," only instead of Adam, the Engineer itself is being transformed into a new creation—although precisely what is difficult to say. By opening the door, the scientists have changed the atmosphere of the room. The mural fades and the vases begin to sweat dark liquid. As the crew scrambles to retrieve the decapitated head of an Engineer, they fail to see the one final warning—the xenomorphic figure posed as if crucified, the unmistakable curved head familiar to fans of Scott's film, *Alien* (McWilliams 537). The pose of the figure evokes both Christ crucified and da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, which raises these questions: if the Engineers are the actual creators, then what is the role of

religion or faith? Are the faiths and religions back on Earth all springing from the same source? What kind of creator abandons their creation?

The question of abandonment is one that haunts Shaw in particular. She is the only spiritual or religious person onboard the *Prometheus*. She chooses belief in a higher power over evolutionary theory but cannot conceive of a creator who has no desire to be involved with its creation, particularly after she runs a DNA scan based on a sample taken from one of the dead Engineers and discovers that it is a perfect match for humans. The question of the role of creator and creation is examined through multiple relationships within the film. The Engineers appear to have no interest in humans post-creation, having left Earth only a millennium or more before the movie begins. The 'clues' left behind in the caves serve as "unsettling hints about... archaic alien 'gods' whose presence seems tacitly to affirm an indifferent cosmos" rather than a welcoming map for humans to follow (Johnson 108). Despite the *Prometheus* *plasticator* role the Engineers seem to fulfill, they are not concerned with the well-being of humanity, nor do they appear ready to sacrifice much more for humanity. While men like Weyland can create other beings, humans still must succumb to the inevitability of death. David the android is superior to his creators in strength and intelligence but limited by his lack of a soul. He is designed to be as human as is technologically possible because, as he tells Holloway, "You people are more comfortable interacting with your own kind" (Scott). Beyond a physical similarity, David shares a human desire to create as well as a recognition of the destructive tendencies in the race he was designed to mirror. He begins to experiment with samples taken from the vases, although it is ambiguous as to whether he does this of his own volition or at the order of the Weyland Corporation. He

first experiments on Holloway, who unwittingly accepts a drink containing a small drop of black ooze cultivated from the leaking ampules. Holloway falls violently ill and is later killed by Meredith Vickers, daughter of Weyland, who uses a flamethrower to prevent him from boarding the ship and possibly spreading contagion. By using Holloway as a test subject, David asserts his own desire to be a creator and, in essence, on equal footing with humans.

While Shelley's vision of world reclamation and change does entail a destruction of the old order, creation and destruction are both violent forces in *Prometheus*. At the beginning of the film, an Engineer lands on Earth and drinks a dish of black ooze as he stands above a waterfall. In mere seconds, he doubles over in pain, his skin darkened and pulsing, before falling into the water, his body completely disintegrating. His DNA breaks apart and then reforms, confirming Shaw's later conviction that the Engineers were the ones to first create life on Earth. The death of one Engineer to create the inhabitants of Earth may appear sacrificial on the surface but it does not answer the question of why the Engineers abandoned mankind. The black ooze has the power to create life but, in the case of Holloway, it can also destroy it. Another scientist, Fifield, falls victim to the Engineers' more alien creations when he and the biologist, Millburn, get lost in the stone structure and have to stay there overnight. They take shelter in the temple room, unaware that the vases have begun to sweat their deadly contents. Millburn is attached by an eel-like creature that breaks his arm and then kills him. Fifield attempts to cut the creature free only to be sprayed in the face with its acidic blood. The next day, his mutated, deformed body makes its way back to the ship where it viciously kills several of the security officers until Captain Janek intervenes. While David is not directly

responsible for this particular act of destructive creation, his 'poisoning' of Holloway yields a surprising result: Shaw, who was previously barren, finds herself three months pregnant with an alien fetus.

As Shaw discovers the horrible truth about her unexpected pregnancy, another sinister secret is revealed to the rest of the crew. Weyland, presumed dead from old age, is actually aboard the *Prometheus*, surviving in cryogenic sleep until he can meet his fellow 'gods.' His appearance leads to a confrontation with his daughter, Meredith Vickers, who coldly informs him that he will die on the planet because "a king has his reign and then he dies. It's inevitable. That is the natural order of things" (Scott). For all his ambition, Weyland has raised a daughter who has no qualms about trying to overthrow her father. This scene serves as a reminder that the cycle of destruction has occurred since the dawn of time. David echoes a similar sentiment when Shaw asks him what he will do after Weyland is no longer alive. David replies "I suppose I'll be free" but rejects Shaw's suggestion that he will finally get what he wants. "Want?" he replies, "Not a concept I'm familiar with. That being said, doesn't everyone want their parents dead?" (Scott). It is clear at this point that the actions of Weyland, David, and Shaw are going to unleash another cycle of violence akin to those in Greek myth rather than "break the cycle of disappointment and suffering" as Shelley's *Prometheus* manages to in order to help mankind (O'Neill, "Percy Bysshe Shelley" 262). Shaw successfully fights to extract the alien fetus from her body, refusing to be a part of the next chapter of destructive creation as much as she possibly can. Weyland meets his death at the hands of his maker, appealing to a newly awakened Engineer as a supplicant rather than an equal, in the last few seconds of his life. What Weyland fails to realize in death and Shaw has

already begun to understand is that their creators are not benevolent beings who waited to be reunited with their creation. The stone structure half-buried in the sand of LV-223 masks a spaceship carrying a cargo of literal black death and coordinates for Earth. While “[U]nbuilding’ is a crucial activity in Shelley’s work” the unmaking of mankind here through the use of a biological weapon rejects the regenerative effect of unbuilding which Shelley explores in many of his poems, not just *Prometheus Unbound* (O’Neill, “Shelley’s Defences of Poetry” 23).

The devastating effect of the biological weapons created by the Engineers feels reminiscent of the scenes of destruction described in Shelley’s “The Sensitive Plant” which was published with *Prometheus Unbound*. In this poem, an Eden-like state is disrupted after the death of the woman who cares for the plant. Shelley lays out brutal image after image of the decay and destruction that follows:

And plants, at whose names the verse feels loath,  
 Filled the place with monstrous undergrowth,  
 Prickly, and pulpous, and blistering, and blue,  
 Livid, and starred with lurid dew. (lines 58-61)

Whereas the descriptions of the natural order changing in *Prometheus Unbound* appear rooted in storm imagery and a focused change for the better, “The Sensitive Plant” describes organic and visceral destruction (although there are hints of renewal in the end) that nearly rivals the kind seen in *Prometheus*. The Engineer aboard the buried ship had existed for centuries in stasis until the expedition crew of the Prometheus awakens him, allowing him to continue with his plan for destruction. In an ironic reversal of the ancient

Titans' fall, the Engineers wish to rise up against their own progeny from the Tartarus-like planet of death they have been trapped on.

While the ending of the film threatens to collapse into one last cycle of destruction and chaos, there is a glimmer of hope for humanity. Janek, the captain hired by Weyland Corporation, tells Shaw that he will do whatever it takes to make sure they do not bring any destruction back home. As the Engineer's ship emerges from the ground and begins to climb into the atmosphere, Shaw pleads with Janek over her comm, saying "If you don't stop it, there won't be any home to go back to!" (Scott). Faced with the reality of mass extinction, Janek abandons company protocol and decides to fly the Prometheus straight into the Engineer's vessel before it can make orbit. His two chief officers volunteer to stay behind and help him, all three men knowing full well they will die. This act of sacrifice, whether born out of a love for friends and family back on Earth or out of a desire to stop the cycle of violence and destruction, signals hope for mankind. Whatever their motivation, the selfless act of Janek and his crew stops the Engineer from returning to Earth. There is irony in the fact that a ship called Prometheus is used as a means of destroying mankind's creator. The willing destruction of the Prometheus at the hands of Janek reflects one of the critical themes of the Prometheus myth—the act of sacrifice born out of love. Weyland never understood the theft of fire in terms of it being a selfless act. He remained clouded by his hubristic desires to live forever as an equal to his creator.

In the end, Shaw is the only member of the crew left alive. She manages to drag herself to a crashed escape pod to refill her spacesuit's oxygen tank and gather supplies when she receives a message from David who, although he is decapitated, cannot die. He

warns her that the Engineer survived the crash and is coming for her. Shaw has spent her entire life trying to meet her creator and now finds herself preparing to fight one to the death. In a scene reminiscent of Jupiter's fall upon the arrival of Demogorgon, Shaw fights the Engineer, pushing him towards a trap she has laid. Also aboard the escape pod is the alien fetus she removed from her body via an emergency medical pod. The fetus has grown rapidly into what Scott refers to as a "Trilobite"—a massive, tentacle being with no discernible face. Shaw releases the Trilobite on the Engineer and then flees for her life, leaving her "offspring" to envelop and destroy her creator. She is able to retrieve David's body and head and together they journey back into the stone structure to find another ship. David offers to calculate the coordinates to Earth but Shaw has other plans. She decides that they will search for the Engineers' home planet because she still has questions and deserves answers. Brian Johnson reads the end of the film as "an iconic image of human indomitability" but I believe the end is much more sinister (113). Shaw's firm belief in her creators and her hubristic assertion that she deserves answers from them in some ways almost negates the act of sacrifice by Janek. That act of love could have broken the cycle of violence and destruction, but the ambiguity of what Shaw will find on her journey leaves a sense of uncertainty for the future at the end of the film. Shaw's final lines of the film are a recording she leaves behind telling whoever hears her message to "make no attempt to come to its point of origin. There is only death here now, and I'm leaving it behind... My name is Elizabeth Shaw, last survivor of the Prometheus. And I am still searching" (Scott).

While Shaw appears confident in her quest to once again attempt to meet her creators and demand answers from them, the ending credits of the film reveal a



frightening epilogue to the story. The body of the dead Engineer writhes and spasms on the floor of the escape pod until his chest bursts open and the familiar conical head of an Alien emerges. At the heart of the film, it is the actions of mankind which spur the acts of violence and destruction initially begun by their creators. Perhaps a more fitting epitaph for the film than Shaw's message is this: "but the new race also looked on the gods with contempt. Their passionate lust for ferocious violence and slaughter prevailed. You'd have known they were born of blood" (Ovid I.159-162). For those familiar with the franchise, the birth of the Alien at the end connects *Prometheus* to the *Alien* trilogy. In those films, the cycle of violence is perpetuated by the Aliens on the humans they encounter. The only remaining uncertainty is whether or not Shaw will be successful in her journey to find her creator.

The difference in genre, structure and time period between Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Scott's *Prometheus* affords some further exploration in order to understand their shared influences fully. Shelley's lyric drama was not meant to be performed in a theatre unlike its lost namesake by Aeschylus. The work is "grounded...formally...in the practices of Greek drama, [but] in the end its form transcends its model" (Curran 295). The juxtaposition between blank verse and lyric within *Prometheus Unbound* contributes to its classification of lyric drama but these two elements also serve to highlight the emotional or psychological state of characters (293-294). At the heart of *Prometheus Unbound* is the choral song, a device which, to Shelley, signals "the expression of spontaneous human desire for the perfection of love" (Curran 297). The structure of the lyric drama reinforces the theme of love's transformative power as well. Prometheus's change of heart is crucial because it helps set into motion the transformation of the world.

In addition, *Prometheus Unbound* reflects the changing ideology of early 19<sup>th</sup> century writers. Myth is used as a means of reflecting on the inner self. Shelley's work is genuinely Promethean in its scope of how he portrays love as a means of reclaiming the inner self and the outer world.

Ridley Scott's film *Prometheus* does owe much to the classical versions of the myth of Prometheus as well as Shelley's lyric drama. Scott uses the genre of science fiction to explore the legacy of Prometheus's theft of fire and punishment by Zeus as it relates to mankind's desire to create. Unlike most interpretations or reinventions of the myth, however, Prometheus does not appear in the film as a figure or character. Weyland interprets Prometheus as the being responsible for the first piece of technology known to mankind: fire. By gifting fire to mankind, Prometheus has set into motion the human desire to create through advancing technology. It is only fitting that Weyland's spaceship is named the "Prometheus," as the Titan is the chief inspiration for his journey to seek his maker. The film is meant to serve as a prequel to Scott's famous *Alien* trilogy, although it was released in 2012. By structuring the narrative as a means of providing a backstory for the trilogy, Scott situates the destructive nature of the Aliens against a broader backdrop of humanity's capacity for destructive creation and the cyclical nature of creation and death.

Shelley's lyric drama offers up the chance to destroy the old, tyrannical cycle of violence and replace it with a new order built on the transformation of the inner self. Prometheus serves as a guide for mankind to follow. His change of heart towards Zeus despite the seeming eternity of his punishment is the beginning of an entirely new era. Once Heracles frees him, the rest of the world begins to reflect this change in its very

landscape. World reclamation is two-fold for Shelley; the inner self has to reclaim what is good within a person and the outer world must reclaim the natural elements in order to reflect the universality of change. Scott's film, however, shows the dark alternative to Shelley's vision. He portrays a future in which mankind has embraced rather than rejected the destructive powers of creation. Humans have rejected the opportunity to change internally. In Weyland's account of the Prometheus myth, he never mentions the Titan becoming unbound. In the world of the film, the Titan's punishment never ended, nor is it clear if he ever resented Zeus in the first place. This omission allows for humans to continue on their path of self-destruction because they have no model for change. Scott's dark vision of the future does rely on the futurity so apparent in *Prometheus Unbound*. The lyric drama and the film work together, despite differences in structure and genre, to serve as both a warning and an optimistic alternative to man's inclination for self-destruction.

## Conclusion

Shelley's lyric drama *Prometheus Unbound* centers the power of the myth on an individual and cosmic level in a way that defines his particular vision of Prometheus's legacy in myth. From the earliest known origins of the myth to the poetic interpretations examined here, it is interesting to note the changing relationship of the Prometheus myth to mankind. While there is not a binary set in stone, it seems that the Classical iterations address the role of the Titan in terms of a particular culture's beliefs while later works, like those of Goethe and Byron, relate the Titan directly to the individual's experience or artistic ideology. This is an oversimplification in many ways, but I offer it up as a contrast to the expansive vision of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. Prometheus becomes an agent of change for the universe in Shelley's work and the future of humanity seems secure and guaranteed—snatched from the fire, as it were, before there was ever a danger of falling.

Due to the increasing narrowness of my scope in this work, I neglected to include two important texts which link directly to the overall argument I am making. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* warrants its own exploration for many reasons, most of which are apparent based on the title of the novel and Mary Shelley's relationships with Percy and Byron. In some ways, her novel is more deeply embedded in the collective consciousness, although the tendency is to separate the name 'Frankenstein' from the work itself and ascribe it to the creature. Mary Shelley's interpretation of the Prometheus myth manifests itself in how she balances the duality of Promethean qualities between Victor Frankenstein and the Creature. While there is plenty of scholarship on the novel through a variety of lenses, there could be more conversation

between her text's and Shelley's. There are correlations to be drawn between *Frankenstein* and Scott's *Prometheus* as well in light of how "Mary Shelley's meditation on the creative process reveals the dark underside to the visionary dreams of remaking man that fueled the imagination of Romantic mythmakers" as well men like Weyland (Dougherty 114). In many ways, Scott's film is a thematic inheritor of her novel.

Another text which warrants consideration relates directly to Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*. The 2017 sequel, *Alien: Covenant*, reveals the fate of Elizabeth Shaw and the android David years later. The crew of the colony ship "Covenant" accidentally stumbles upon a seemingly uninhabited planet which is later revealed to be the home of the Engineers. In true Scott fashion, the crew is picked off one by one by a new and terrifying hybrid alien creature. The surviving crew members eventually cross paths with David, who has become obsessed with crossbreeding and creating new aliens in an attempt to create the perfect being. Any sense of lingering hope from *Prometheus* is immediately quelled with this film. The cycle of destructive creation has been continued, this time by an android who is created in the image of man. The film continues to draw inspiration from Romantic art and literature as well as Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The horrific nature of David's experiments also indicates connections to Mary Shelley's novel.

Due to the Prometheus myth's ability to "[embody] the human condition with all its potential for brilliant innovation and for cruel suffering," as Carol Dougherty writes, it is fair to assume that there will be more literary, artistic, and cinematic interpretations of the myth in the future (3). Indeed, I owe a debt of gratitude to scholars like Dougherty and Caroline Corbeau-Parsons for their extensive overviews of the myth and its

interpretations through a variety of media. Their works have contributed to a more substantial understanding of the importance of Prometheus across time, culture, and medium. One has only to continue to look forward with Promethean patience for the next reinvention of the myth in order to continue to explore how Prometheus as an agent of change, a benefactor of man, and a world reclamer remains relevant to the world.

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