

A Study In Comparison Between Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound And Shelley's Prometheus Unbound

Key words :

Prometheus Unbound is a four act verse play by P B Shelley first published in 1820. It has its inspiration from the classical trilogy Prometheia by Aeschylus. In both the plays, Prometheus challenges Jupiter and gives fire to the humans for which he is tormented at the hands of Jupiter. The core theme of both the plays is similar, however in the hands of Shelley, the story takes another treatment. While in Aeschylus, Jupiter and Prometheus reconcile, Shelley gives Prometheus a moral uplift by making him stand vis-à-vis an oppressor. Shelleyan Prometheus differs from Aeschylus' Prometheus in many ways. He endures sufferings and keeps patience for the sake of the welfare of humanity. Shelley's Jupiter is defeated by his own evils.

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Prometheus Unbound is a lyrical drama in verse inspired by Aeschylus' Greek tragedy titled Prometheus Bound. Originally the play was in three acts, but a few months after its drafting, Shelley added the fourth act celebrating the liberation of Prometheus. In this famous work, unlike the Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus, the dramatic action is not concluded by the reconciliation between Prometheus and Jupiter. On the contrary, it is only when Jupiter is dethroned that Prometheus regains his freedom. Shelley reworks the existing myth of Prometheus. Earl R. Wasserman remarks:

"...in Prometheus Unbound, he seems here to be fashioning his own master-myth, not by fabricating new materials and not by violating the structures of the ancient legends, but by causing his poetic idea to restructure the established legends into a pattern that is a possible interpretation of them".¹

Shelley mentions right at the outset of his Preface that although he is distancing himself from Aeschylus's dramatic account of the Promethean myth, he is actually following the tradition of the ancient Greek playwrights who

"in selecting as their subject any portion of their national history or mythology, employed in their treatment of it a certain arbitrary discretion" and "by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation or to imitate in story as in title their rivals and predecessors".²

Thereby, despite the obvious departures from Aeschylus, Shelley wrote this tragedy much in the ancient Greek tradition of change and continuity. His dramatic choice reflects a typically romantic sensibility, where the rebellion against the tyrant can only result in its overthrow.

Condemned to be chained to a rock in Mount Caucasus where an eagle devours his entrails continuously, Prometheus, the helper of mankind, bears his torments with the hope that Jupiter will be overthrown by the forces of

Good, as foretold by prophecy. Ironically, the dethronement of Jupiter could be prevented only by Prometheus, in case he reveals the secret about Jupiter's fate that only he is aware of. But Prometheus is able to keep the secret, despite the torture and the lure of Jupiter. Jupiter is finally dethroned by Demogorgon, who is the illegitimate son of Jupiter and Thetis. Prometheus is freed by Hercules, and he marries Asia. Together they initiate the reign of good and love on Earth and shout the famous slogan of the French Revolution – "Liberty Fraternity, Equality" – as "Truth, Liberty and Love!" This new slogan is certainly a more advanced form of the old.

The Titan who stole the gods' fire to benefit mortals, and therefore fascinated a lot of classical authors, like Aeschylus and Cicero, is here remoulded wiser as a hero, a martyr of freedom and an educationist, who fights for the cause of human progress against any tyrannical force by means of a non-violent attitude. The story is presented in an enchanted atmosphere, with a personified Nature and other ideal characters, according to the Romantic vision of the poet. In Shelley's moral fable, light and music recur as symbols of Happiness, Love and Hope, which finally will prevail over their opposites, if mankind wants it passionately.

Prometheus donated fire to the weak and disadvantaged mortals daring to defy Jupiter and consequently inverting the balance of power then constituted between men and the gods. Needless to say, such a rebellious mythical figure would have fascinated any Romantic poet. In 1820, after nearly two years of composition, the manuscript of Prometheus Unbound, a lyrical drama in four acts, was published for the intended readership of an audience familiar with the Aeschylean work. The title of the play clearly underlines the strong cultural familiarity of Shelley, who "had read much more widely and intensively in Greek literature than many professional scholars."³ The title of the

Shelleyan play calls to mind immediately the lost Promethean trilogy of Aeschylus. However, James R. Hurt notes,

“To say that the structure and technique of *Prometheus Unbound* are Aeschylean in inspiration is not to say, of course, that Shelley intended the work to be a play for the theater as Aeschylus intended his plays to be. The poem was intended for the stage of the reader's imagination rather than for the boards on which Shelley hoped *The Cenci* would be played.”⁴

Shelley never attempted a recovery of the lost stories of Aeschylus. Rather, in *Prometheus Unbound*, he developed a unique, original and a completely singular version of the classic plot. As is typical in Romanticism, poets take up sublime works of art only to produce a close variation. Shelley himself admits to this attitude in the Preface to the work, saying he has arrogated the right to a ‘license’. He does not reconcile the two oppositional figures, Jupiter and Prometheus, because this solution would have been too weak and obvious and it would have undermined and overshadowed the long suffering and the strenuous endurance of the protagonist. In his own words,

“The *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus supposed the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim as the price of the disclosure of the danger threatened to his empire by the consummation of his marriage with Thetis... Had I framed my story on this model, I should have done no more than have attempted to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus... But, in truth, I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary.”⁵

Already from this brief presentation of the plot, the originality of Shelley in the choice

of his characters is quite understandable. First, the author, through the mythological story of Prometheus, implicitly tells a love story with a happy ending, the one between the Titan and his beloved consort Asia (not present in the play of Aeschylus). Prometheus and Asia can therefore be considered the two protagonists of the lyrical drama, and this is confirmed by the space dedicated to them by the author: Act I to Prometheus, Act II to Asia, and Act III to both. Shelley paints a hero who is self-assured and determined in his opposition to Jupiter, but at the same time free from any vindictive intent. On the other hand, Asia is the allegory of love, the one who is transformed into pure light in Act III, illuminating the entire world in the universal good, in all its meanings of peace, justice, goodness, freedom and hope. Shelley therefore draws inspiration from the group of Oceanids, choosing three in particular: in addition to Asia, the sisters Panthea and Ione, who tirelessly console the Titan. Mercury intervenes in the first act to inflict further pain to the captive. He is the ruthless messenger of the gods in Aeschylus, aiding Jupiter in his conviction of Prometheus’ irreverence and arrogance. But the Shelleyan Mercury is a god who feels pity, self-hatred and contempt because he knows he cannot help his kinsman and must commit the will of Jupiter against his own. Jupiter appears directly in Act III, while his presence in the Greek tragedy was only evoked implicitly and suggestively. The focus then shifts to two other deities, Apollo and Ocean, who rejoice with the rest the dethronement of the father of the gods. Here then intervenes Hercules, the symbol of strength, in service of the tenacity, intelligence and wisdom shown by Prometheus. So far, apart from the changes outlined in the Aeschylean model, the characters are all representatives of classical mythology. The real innovation in the Shelleyan version is manifested in a sublime way in the choice of extras giving the drama a dreamy atmosphere, almost magical and enchanted. These include the ghost of Jupiter,

and the Furies who are responsible for torturing Prometheus with visions of evil corresponding to historical facts. The spirits of the Human Mind, on the other hand, console the Titan and announce his imminent victory. There are also present the echoes and the spirits of the enchanted forest that, as in a fantasy tale, guide Asia and Panthea throughout their journey. Demogorgon, an enigmatic figure and a symbol of eternity, is described as wrapped in a darkness that prevents to distinguish his physical outline. Finally, there are the spirits of Hours, whose chariots are driven by swift horses.

The Prometheus Unbound is a true hymn to freedom, a worthy culmination of the struggle between Good and Evil, outlining the conflict between the despotic powers represented by Jupiter and the exaltation of the freedom advocated and affirmed by Prometheus. Jupiter embodies the histrionic qualities of a tyrant. Shelley in his rendition of the Aeschylean tragedy lays off the neutral voice used by the Greek playwright and ascribes those very negative qualities to Jupiter which have enriched the term 'tyranny' over the centuries. In this regard, through the Furies in the first act, Shelley claims that those who have the task of governing do not always have the necessary requirements. Despite the power, they may lack in goodness, wisdom and love, which are essential for the proper functioning of a state.

Prometheus Unbound can be read as an original synthesis of classic and romantic values. The original model of course is the Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound. Shelley borrows from his predecessor's work the descriptions of the place of punishment of Prometheus (although with a shift in location from Scythia to Caucasus), the details of the sentence itself, his determined and incorruptible character, his gifts to humanity, and finally some of the characters, with variations. Nonetheless, Shelley creates a Prometheus who not only is a rebel against the abuses of a corrupt and unjust power, but also a staunch defender of freedom. Moreover, he is also a pedagogue, a wise

teacher of mankind. Shelley never fails to assert his originality. Prometheus in fact gave to the mortals (in addition to the fire, the principle of all Good) hope for scientific progress that would transform the ability of men to not only obtain the essentials from nature, but also make radical strides in the field of science and humanities. Prometheus Unbound is inspired by the French Revolution of 1789, it dramatises the triumph of democracy over tyranny. Reversing Aeschylus' Greek idea of fate and supremacy of the gods, Shelley dramatizes the victory of democracy and thereby of the suppressed people. How artistically has he incorporated the French slogan of democracy in Act IV! We all admire the ending. In "Ode to the West Wind" he hopes for the arrival of the spring season and abolition of all kinds of pain. Here the dream is changed into reality and all wishes are fulfilled. Shelley in Prometheus Unbound imagined and created a new golden age in which only peace, equality and social justice would 'reign' supreme.

References :

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5. Preface, Prometheus Unbound, p.206.

