

**SHELLEY'S PROMETHEUS UNBOUND.
A STUDY OF ITS MEANING AND
PERSONAGES; BEING A LECTURE
DELIVERED TO THE SHELLEY SOCIETY
ON 7TH DECEMBER, 1886**

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WILLIAM M. ROSSETTI

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PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY,
FROM THE ORIGINAL PICTURE BY CLINT

SHELLEY'S
PROMETHEUS UNBOUND.

A STUDY
OF ITS
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BY
WILLIAM M. ROSSETTI.



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BY WILLIAM M. ROSSETTI.

*Being a LECTURE delivered to the SHELLEY SOCIETY
on 7th December, 1886.*

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—

I have undertaken to deliver to the members of the Shelley Society a lecture constituting a study of our poet's most colossal performance, the *Prometheus Unbound*. This is, I am fully aware, a task which might well appall the boldest of Shelleyites: nor do I undertake it with a light heart, or with any idea of rendering adequate justice to it from any point of view—still less from all the points of view which might properly be taken. It would be possible to consider the *Prometheus Unbound*—1, in its essential meaning or main outline and purport; 2, as a poem and work of art; and 3, in detail, or the individual significance and value of its successive passages. I can only expect, in the short space at my disposal, to treat the drama in the first of these relations—*i.e.*, in its essential meaning or main outline and purport; in other words, I will explain to you what I regard as having been Shelley's intention in the substance and structure of his masterpiece, the *Prometheus Unbound*. My interpretation may be right, or it may be wrong: it will certainly fall very far short of being final or exhaustive. It is at any rate the outcome of repeated readings and prolonged consideration. I might add that this is by no means the first time that I have put into writing, or into print, my view of the meaning

of the poem ; but it is the first time that I have done so with any moderate degree of fullness or precision, and with the opportunity of quoting from the poem itself those passages upon which the interpretation has to rely for its stability—what the French call the *pièces justificatives*.

Without further preface, I will now come to close quarters with *Prometheus Unbound*; and, asking you to bear in mind what I have just said—that I deal only with its essential meaning or main outline and purport—I shall analyse this meaning under five principal heads—1, What is the Myth, or (as we might call it) the vertebrated skeleton, of the *Prometheus Unbound*; 2, Who is Prometheus; 3, Who is Asia; 4, Who is Jupiter; 5, Who is Demogorgon. And 1, as to the Myth.

In debating the Myth of *Prometheus Unbound*, I shall leave entirely on one side the question as to what is the primary Greek myth about Prometheus the son of Iapetus. He must take care of himself: and Æschylus, or any other poet or promulgator of that myth, must take care of himself. With Shelley alone, and his creation the *Prometheus Unbound*, can I now be concerned. He voluntarily and determinately parted company with Æschylus, saying in his preface that he was "averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind."

The general myth of *Prometheus Unbound* is set forth very definitely in a leading speech of Asia in Act 2. I will read it *in extenso*, and afterwards consider in detail its terms and bearing.

"There was the Heaven and Earth at first,
And Light and Love; then Saturn, from whose throne
Time fell, an envious shadow. Such the state
Of the earth's primal spirits beneath his sway
As the calm joy of flowers and living leaves
Before the wind or sun has withered them,
And semivital worms. But he refused
The birthright of their being, knowledge, power,
The skill which wields the elements, the thought
Which pierces this dim universe like light,
Self-empire, and the majesty of love;
For thirst of which they fainted. Then 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.

To know nor faith nor love nor law, to be
Omnipotent but friendless, is to reign.
And Jove now reigned ; for on the race of Man
First famine, and then toil, and then disease,
Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,
Fell ; and the unseasonable seasons drove,
With alternating shafts of frost and fire,
Their shelterless pale tribes to mountain-caves :
And in their desert hearts fierce wants he sent,
And mad disquietudes, and shadows idle
Of unreal good, which levied mutual war,
So ruining the lair wherein they raged.
Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes
Which sleep within folded elysian flowers,
Nepenthe, moly, amaranth, fadeless blooms,
That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings
The shape of Death ; and Love he sent to bind
The disunited tendrils of that vine
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart ;
And he tamed fire,—which, like some beast of prey
Most terrible but lovely, played beneath
The frown of man, and tortured to his will
Iron and gold, the slaves and signs of Power,
And gems and poisons, and all subtlest forms
Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves.
He gave Man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the universe ;
And science struck the thrones of earth and heaven,
Which shook but fell not ; and the harmonious mind
Poured itself forth in all-prophetic song ;
And music lifted up the listening spirit,
Until it walked, exempt from mortal care,
Godlike, o'er the clear billows of sweet sound ;
And human hands first mimicked, and then mocked
With moulded limbs more lovely than its own,
The human form, till marble grew divine,
And mothers, gazing, drank the love men see
Reflected in their race, behold, and perish.
He told the hidden power of herbs and springs,
And Disease drank and slept. Death grew like sleep.
He taught the implicated orbits woven
Of the wide-wandering Stars ; and how the Sun
Changes his lair, and by what secret spell
The pale Moon is transformed when her broad eye
Gazes not on the interlunar sea.
He taught to rule, as life directs the limbs,
The tempest-winged chariots of the ocean
And the Celt knew the Indian. Cities then
Were built, and through their snow-like columns flowed
The warm winds, and the azure ether shone,
And the blue sea and shadowy hills were seen.
Such, the alleviations of his state,
Prometheus gave to man : for which he hangs,
Withering in destined pain. But who rains down
Evil, the immedicable plague, which, while
Man looks on his creation like a God,

And sees that it is glorious, drives him on,—
 The wreck of his own will, the scorn of Earth,
 The outcast, the abandoned, the alone?
 Not Jove. While yet his frown shook heaven, ay when
 His adversary from adamant chains
 Cursed him, he trembled like a slave. Declare
 Who is his master? Is he too a slave?"

This speech is fertile of meaning and suggestion. We find that according to Asia (or, let us say, according to Shelley) the primal powers of the World were four—Heaven, Earth, Light, and Love. This was the world; which, so far as Asia's speech is concerned, is postulated as self-existent,—of a creative power no word is breathed by her: but it is true that Demogorgon, with whom she is in colloquy, had already said that the world and its contents were made by God. Then came Saturn, the author of Time. Under him human life was agreeable sensation without sentiment: life became (as we might express it) individuated, but barely self-conscious; Saturn refused to men the birthright of their being—knowledge, power, and those other prerogatives named by Asia. The Saturnian reign was interrupted by Prometheus.

"Then 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."

I regard these few words as being supremely important to the correct understanding of *Prometheus Unbound*: but, as we are for the present only occupied with the myth of the poem, I shall not analyse them here, but leave them for consideration when we discuss Prometheus and Jupiter. The rule of Jupiter was perfidious and cruel: every kind of material and moral evil resulted from it to the race of man. Prometheus again came to the rescue.

"He gave Man speech, and speech created thought,
 Which is the measure of the universe."

For this, and for his other boons to mankind, was he doomed by Jupiter to incessant torture.

Asia then proceeds (as we have seen) to ask, "Who is the Author or Lord of Evil?" Not Jove, as she says; for he trembled even before his own victim Prometheus.

"Who is his master? Is he too a slave?"

Demogorgon replies—

"All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil :
Thou know'st if Jupiter be such or no."

This certainly means, he *is* a slave.

Asia next recurs to what Demogorgon had said in the earlier part of the colloquy, that God had made the world, with all that it contains of thought and sentiment: she asks, "Whom call'dst thou God?"—and Demogorgon replies (note it well)—

"I spoke but as ye speak,
For Jove is the supreme of living things."

In other words—There is no creative God, apart from the Universe. He adds that the deep truth is imageless—it cannot be made palpable in words; and he intimates that, save eternal Love, all things are subject to Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change. Shelley's own ideas in theology are probably expressed in these terms with a near approach to accuracy.

Prometheus, chained by Jupiter to Caucasus in torment, endures "three-thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours." This is a remarkable expression: three-thousand years is but a brief estimate even of the historical period of human development; and, as the unbinding of Prometheus ensues immediately after his speaking of the three-thousand years, it would appear that Shelley contemplated a very early awakening and emancipation of the race. But of course we must not lay, upon such a point as this, any stress beyond what it may naturally have been intended to bear. At the end of the three-thousand years Prometheus has ceased to disdain or hate Jupiter: he pities him. He wishes no living thing to suffer pain. He re-hears, from the phantom lips of a phantom Jupiter summoned for the purpose, the curse which he had of old pronounced against the tyrant god, and he revokes it. He is then re-tormented by the Furies with visions chiefly intimating that evil flows out of good—as out of the mission of Jesus Christ and the French Revolution. The agonizing night closes, a new dawn appears, and Panthea, one of the sister Ocean-nymphs who attend on Prometheus, rejoins in an Indian vale his bride and her sister Asia.

Asia and Panthea are led by mysterious spirit-songs to