Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and Revolution

This week, we will look at the theme of revolution in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (specifically the first half), a four-act play first published in 1820. In the Prelude, Shelley states he was not content with the “reconciling [of] the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind,” calling it a “catastrophe so feeble,” and so his depiction of a Satanic figure departs from Milton’s; instead of surrendering to envy and ambition, Shelley’s Prometheus learns wisdom and pity through his suffering and brings peace and love to humankind. Influenced by Lord Byron’s writing, Shelley intended for his piece to be a “closet play,” so all the action would take place only inside the reader’s imagination (did this work for you?). Throughout *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley explores the possibility of a leaderless revolution (how to oppose the tyrant-rebel binary) and love (Shelley defines this as “that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that, a community with what we experience within ourselves”) as a means for change.

Prometheus’s Actions – Setting up the Binary System and the Lack of Leaders

- Act I, Scene I, lines 1-30, 69-73, 189-221…262-305
- A binary is set up between Jupiter as the tyrant and Prometheus as the suffering rebel, but Prometheus chooses to endure his sufferings in order to break this binary. Perhaps Shelley is providing us with a new means to escape the chaos and dictatorship the French Revolution later became.
- What happens when Prometheus summons the phantasm of Jupiter?
- Relations to Jesus? “Be what it is my destiny to be/The saviour and strength of suffering man/Or sink into the original gulph of things:/There is no agony, and no solace left;/Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.”
- (Prometheus and Asia leave to a secluded cave Earth provides for them at the end. The masses are enlightened, but Prometheus chooses to vanish. To me, this disappearance suggests the conclusion of the “leaderless” revolution, and Demogorgon appears to deliver the “happy ending” of the human race. But is the ending as tidy as it seems or needs to be?)

Love – the Education of Asia

- Act II, Scene IV, lines 1-33 (religious undertones?), 109-129 (Behold!)
- Why does it matter that Asia must realize the truth before Prometheus rises?
- Because both Asia and Prometheus must reason through their decisions (ultimately coming to their conclusion of love triumphing all), critics have sometimes likened Shelley’s concept of revolution as more evolutionary instead. There do not appear to be moments of intense action. Rather, inaction (endurance, in Prometheus’s case) seems to be more central, and perhaps Shelley posits this as a way to counteract the binary. (We could also look at Jove’s fall, which also happens without much “fuss,” although this is in the third act.)
- (The abstraction of Shelley’s content mirrors the intangibility of the “closet play” form. Maybe this is a stretch, but the fact that the reader must create his/her own images of love and revolution seems to promote the universality of Shelley’s message. By removing the performative element in this dramatic piece, Shelley more closely aligns the reader and his characters – we must read what Asia thinks. In a way, we embody each figure instead of merely watching the play performed on stage. Each man has, within himself, the ability to realize that love triumphs over all and (perhaps) that “God,” or Jove, is not as omnipotent as he appears. Interestingly, the truth is “imageless” which seems to parallel the invisibility of the several voices Shelley scatters throughout the play, although these spirits and echoes to
me were a little confusing. I would be interested to hear any of your thoughts on any of these ideas!

If we have time, I am very intrigued by Act II, Scene I and don’t quite know what to make of it. I’m interested in Shelley’s idea of a leaderless revolution but intrigued by what it means to be a “follower” then. Shelley’s repetition of “follow, follow” does not seem to have been simply on a whim.

- Act II, Scene I, lines 132-end
- First, the dream says: Follow, follow! So Asia and Panthea chase after this dream – the dream of revolution? Then even Nature is stamped with “follow” everywhere (does Nature revolt as well?). Finally, the echoes say, “follow” and guide the two to Demogorgon.
- I’m not sure where these echoes come from, but I’m assuming (?) they arise from the cave of Demogorgon, so essentially, Asia and Panthea could be following Demogorgon, but he speaks in riddles and Asia must figure it out on her own (Demogorgon does not quite lead then). Asia then “sets the revolution in motion” by having been a follower of a non-leader.