

## Prometheus Unbound:

A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts.

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

The text is drawn from the old Cambridge edition.

Excerpts with notes

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[Summary—Prometheus is chained to a mountain, where he is daily punished by Jupiter's eagle, while the two daughters of Ocean, Panthea and Ione sit silently at his feet. The excerpt below opens the play and reveals the depth of Prometheus' suffering. Later in the first act, aided by his mother, the Earth, he starts to recall his curse of Jupiter: the Phantasm of Jupiter is summoned and repeats Prometheus' curse. Upon hearing his own hatred repeated back to him, Prometheus' hatred for his adversary turns to pity. Mercury is sent by Jupiter with a vast chorus of Furies who tempt him to despair with visions of human inadequacy: war, famine, industrial urbanization, the failure of the French Revolution, and Christ's crucifixion. Panthea reminds Prometheus of his own eternal love Asia, whom he has forgotten. Panthea also proclaims her own love for Asia and goes off to "the far Indian vale" to waken Asia. The excerpt below opens the play and is Prometheus speaking of his suffering, but also exhibiting his Christ-like pity for his tormentor Jupiter.]

### ACT I

Scene. — A Ravine of Icy Rocks in the Indian Caucasus. Prometheus<sup>1</sup> is discovered bound to the Precipice. Panthea and Ione are seated at his feet. Time, night. During the Scene, morning slowly breaks.

#### Prometheus.

Monarch of Gods and Dæmons,<sup>2</sup> and all Spirits  
But One, who throng those bright and rolling worlds  
Which Thou and I alone of living things  
Behold with sleepless eyes! regard this Earth  
Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou [1.5]  
Requitest for knee-worship, prayer, and praise,  
And toil, and hecatombs<sup>3</sup> of broken hearts,  
With fear and self-contempt and barren hope.  
Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate,  
Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn, [1.10]  
O'er mine own misery and thy vain revenge.  
Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours,  
And moments aye<sup>4</sup> divided by keen pangs

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<sup>1</sup> Prometheus: "forethinker" in Greek

<sup>2</sup> Monarch of Gods and Daemons: Jupiter (Jove). In Shelley's terms, a symbol of political and religious tyranny. Daemons: intermediate beings between gods and mankind.

<sup>3</sup> hecatombs: numerous sacrifices.

<sup>4</sup> continually

Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,  
Scorn and despair, — these are mine empire: — [1.15]  
More glorious far than that which thou surveyest  
From thine unenvied throne, O Mighty God!  
Almighty, had I digned to share the shame  
Of thine ill tyranny, and hung not here  
Nailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mountain, [1.20]  
Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb,  
Insect, or beast, or shape or sound of life.  
Ah me! alas, pain, pain ever, for ever!

No change, no pause, no hope! Yet I endure.  
I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt? [1.25]  
I ask yon Heaven, the all-beholding Sun,  
Has it not seen? The Sea, in storm or calm,  
Heaven's ever-changing Shadow, spread below,  
Have its deaf waves not heard my agony?  
Ah me! alas, pain, pain ever, for ever! [1.30]

The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears  
Of their moon-freezing crystals, the bright chains  
Eat with their burning cold into my bones.  
Heaven's wingèd hound, polluting from thy lips  
His beak in poison not his own, tears up [1.35]  
My heart; and shapeless sights come wandering by,  
The ghastly people of the realm of dream,  
Mocking me: and the Earthquake-fiends are charged  
To wrench the rivets from my quivering wounds  
When the rocks split and close again behind: [1.40]  
While from their loud abysses howling throng  
The genii of the storm, urging the rage  
Of whirlwind, and afflict me with keen hail.

And yet to me welcome is day and night,  
Whether one breaks the hoar frost of the morn, [1.45]  
Or starry, dim, and slow, the other climbs  
The leaden-coloured east; for then they lead  
The wingless, crawling Hours,<sup>5</sup> one among whom  
— As some dark Priest hales<sup>6</sup> the reluctant victim —  
Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood [1.50]  
From these pale feet, which then might trample thee  
If they disdained not such a prostrate slave.  
Disdain! Ah no! I pity thee.<sup>7</sup> What ruin  
Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!  
How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror, [1.55]  
Gape like a hell within! I speak in grief,  
Not exultation, for I hate no more,  
As then ere misery made me wise. The curse  
Once breathed on thee I would recall.<sup>8</sup> Ye Mountains,  
Whose many-voicèd Echoes, through the mist [1.60]

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<sup>5</sup> Hours: Latin 'Horae', female divinities supposed to preside over the changing of the seasons.

<sup>6</sup> hales: drags.

<sup>7</sup> Ah no, I pity thee: one of the pivotal statements of the play. Prometheus's Christ-like pity for his torturer is his redemption.

<sup>8</sup> recall: revoke.

Of cataracts, flung the thunder of that spell!  
Ye icy Springs, stagnant with wrinkling frost,  
Which vibrated to hear me, and then crept  
Shuddering through India! Thou serenest Air,  
Through which the Sun walks burning without beams!  
[1.65]

And ye swift Whirlwinds, who on poisèd wings  
Hung mute and moveless o'er yon hushed abyss,  
As thunder, louder than your own, made rock  
The orbèd world! If then my words had power,  
Though I am changed so that aught evil wish [1.70]  
Is dead within; although no memory be  
Of what is hate, let them not lose it now!  
What was that curse? for ye all heard me speak.

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## Act II. [omitted]

[Summary—Panthea tells Asia of her dream, in which she sees Prometheus rejuvenated by love. Together the two sisters follow the mysterious echo of a second dream to the dark underworld of Demogorgon, whom Asia rouses into action with her passionate declaration of love for suffering humanity. Later in the act, a stream of chariots of the Hours pours across the stage. One of these carries the grim fate of Jupiter, another the happy reunion of Asia and Prometheus.]

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## ACT III

[Summary—Jupiter is overthrown by Demogorgon, and the unchained Prometheus is reunited with Asia in a forest cave. Later in the act, the Spirit of the Hour describes the universal liberation after the fall of kings and the end of social classes, nations and racial distinctions.]

### Scenes I and II. [omitted]

### Scene III.

—Caucasus. Prometheus, Hercules, Ione, the Earth, Spirits, Asia, and Panthea, borne in the Car with the Spirit of the Hour. Hercules unbinds Prometheus, who descends.<sup>1</sup>

#### Hercules.

Most glorious among Spirits, thus doth strength  
To wisdom, courage, and long-suffering love,  
And thee, who art the form they animate,  
Minister like a slave.

#### Prometheus.

Thy gentle words  
Are sweeter even than freedom long desired [3.3.5]  
And long delayed.

Asia, thou light of life,

Shadow of beauty unbeheld: and ye,  
Fair sister nymphs, who made long years of pain  
Sweet to remember, through your love and care:  
Henceforth we will not part. There is a cave, [3.3.10]  
All overgrown with trailing odorous plants,  
Which curtain out the day with leaves and flowers,  
And paved with veinèd emerald, and a fountain  
Leaps in the midst with an awakening sound.  
From its curved roof the mountain's frozen tears [3.3.15]  
Like snow, or silver, or long diamond spires,  
Hang downward, raining forth a doubtful light:  
And there is heard the ever-moving air,  
Whispering without from tree to tree, and birds,  
And bees; and all around are mossy seats, [3.3.20]  
And the rough walls are clothed with long soft grass;  
A simple dwelling, which shall be our own;  
Where we will sit and talk of time and change,  
As the world ebbs and flows, ourselves unchanged.<sup>2</sup>  
What can hide man from mutability? [3.3.25]  
And if ye sigh, then I will smile; and thou,  
Ione, shalt chant fragments of sea-music,  
Until I weep, when ye shall smile away  
The tears she brought, which yet were sweet to shed.  
We will entangle buds and flowers and beams [3.3.30]  
Which twinkle on the fountain's brim, and make  
Strange combinations out of common things,  
Like human babes in their brief innocence;  
And we will search, with looks and words of love,  
For hidden thoughts, each lovelier than the last, [3.3.35]  
Our unexhausted spirits; and like lutes  
Touched by the skill of the enamoured wind,  
Weave harmonies divine, yet ever new,  
From difference sweet where discord cannot be;  
And hither come, sped on the charmèd winds, [3.3.40]  
Which meet from all the points of heaven, as bees  
From every flower aëreal Enna<sup>3</sup> feeds,  
At their known island-homes in Himera,<sup>4</sup>  
The echoes of the human world, which tell  
Of the low voice of love, almost unheard, [3.3.45]  
And dove-eyed pity's murmured pain, and music,  
Itself the echo of the heart, and all  
That tempers or improves man's life, now free;  
And lovely apparitions, — dim at first,  
Then radiant, as the mind, arising bright [3.3.50]  
From the embrace of beauty (whence the forms  
Of which these are the phantoms) casts on them  
The gathered rays which are reality —  
Shall visit us, the progeny immortal  
Of Painting, Sculpture, and rapt Poesy, [3.3.55]  
And arts, though unimagined, yet to be.  
The wandering voices and the shadows these

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<sup>2</sup> we will sit . . . ourselves unchanged: *King Lear*, V.iii.8-19: "We two alone will sing like birds I' th' cage" and talk with rogues of "Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out . . ."

<sup>3</sup> Enna: plain in the middle of Sicily often regarded as an earthly paradise.

<sup>4</sup> Himera: river which nearly bisects Sicily.

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<sup>1</sup> According to legend, Hercules killed the eagle torturing Prometheus and freed him after Prometheus made his peace with Jupiter.

Of all that man becomes, the mediators<sup>1</sup>  
Of that best worship love, by him and us  
Given and returned; swift shapes and sounds, which grow  
[3.3.60]

More fair and soft as man grows wise and kind,  
And, veil by veil, evil and error fall:<sup>2</sup>  
Such virtue has the cave and place around.

[Turning to the Spirit of the Hour.

For thee, fair Spirit, one toil remains. Ione,  
Give her that curvèd shell, which Proteus old [3.3.65]  
Made Asia's nuptial boon, breathing within it  
A voice to be accomplished, and which thou  
Didst hide in grass under the hollow rock.

**Ione.**

Thou most desired Hour, more loved and lovely  
Than all thy sisters, this is the mystic shell; [3.3.70]  
See the pale azure fading into silver  
Lining it with a soft yet glowing light:  
Looks it not like lulled music sleeping there?

**Spirit.**

It seems in truth the fairest shell of Ocean:  
Its sound must be at once both sweet and strange. [3.3.75]

**Prometheus.**

Go, borne over the cities of mankind  
On whirlwind-footed coursers: once again  
Outspeed the sun around the orbèd world;  
And as thy chariot cleaves the kindling air,  
Thou breathe into the many-folded shell, [3.3.80]  
Loosening its mighty arms; it shall be  
As thunder mingled with clear echoes: then  
Return; and thou shalt dwell beside our cave.  
And thou, O, Mother Earth! —

**The Earth.**

I hear, I feel;  
Thy lips are on me, and their touch runs down [3.3.85]  
Even to the adamantine central gloom  
Along these marble nerves; 'tis life, 'tis joy,  
And through my withered, old, and icy frame  
The warmth of an immortal youth shoots down  
Circling. Henceforth the many children fair [3.3.90]  
Folded in my sustaining arms; all plants,  
And creeping forms, and insects rainbow-winged,  
And birds, and beasts, and fish, and human shapes,  
Which drew disease and pain from my wan bosom,  
Draining the poison of despair, shall take [3.3.95]  
And interchange sweet nutriment; to me  
Shall they become like sister-antelopes  
By one fair dam, snow-white and swift as wind,  
Nursed among lilies near a brimming stream.  
The dew-mists of my sunless sleep shall float [3.3.100]  
Under the stars like balm: night-folded flowers

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<sup>1</sup> mediators: man's works of art are the mediators of love between him and Prometheus.

<sup>2</sup> evil and error fall: Shelley regards human nature as progressive.

Shall suck unwithering hues in their repose:  
And men and beasts in happy dreams shall gather  
Strength for the coming day, and all its joy:  
And death shall be the last embrace of her [3.3.105]  
Who takes the life she gave, even as a mother  
Folding her child, says, "Leave me not again."

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**ACT IV.**

Scene. — A Part of the Forest near the Cave of Prometheus.

[Summary—The final act, added a few months later by Shelley, is a cosmic coda or epithalamium sung first by a chorus of Spirits of the Hour and another chorus of the Spirits of the Human Mind, then by the Spirit of the Earth and of the Moon. It ends with Demogorgon's powerful word, included below, announcing the new world order.]

**Demogorgon.**

This is the day, which down the void abyss  
At the Earth-born's spell<sup>3</sup> yawns for Heaven's despotism,  
[4.555]

And Conquest is dragged captive through the deep:  
Love, from its awful throne of patient power  
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour  
Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,  
And narrow verge of crag-like agony, springs [4.560]  
And folds over the world its healing wings.

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,  
These are the seals of that most firm assurance  
Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;  
And if, with infirm hand, Eternity, [4.565]  
Mother of many acts and hours, should free  
The serpent that would clasp her with his length;  
These are the spells by which to reassume  
An empire o'er the disentangled doom.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite; [4.570]  
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;  
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent; [4.575]  
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

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<sup>3</sup> the Earth-born's spell: i.e. Prometheus' revocation of his curse.