

Byron and Greek Mythology

Inaugural Lecture for the Messolonghi Byron Research Center
October 2001

Peter W. Graham

At the start of the 19th century, the British public schools such as Eton and Harrow and the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge offered an education that centered on translation and imitation of classical Greek and Latin texts. Not surprisingly, examples drawn from Greco-Roman myth and history became semi-instinctive ways for ruling-class British men to understand human behavior and natural subjects for those of them who, like Lord Byron, became writers. Themes, incidents, and characters drawn from Greek mythology appear throughout Byron's poetry, sometimes as inspirations and models, sometimes as ways of representing or describing Byron's contemporary world and its degeneracy as compared to the mythic past. But today I'd like to ask a question that's as personal as it is thematic. Which Greek myths seem to have been most important to Byron's way of understanding *himself*--as a

man and as a poet? My tentative answer to this question will center on a swimmer, a poet, and a revolutionary philanthropist: Leander, Orpheus, and Prometheus.

Byron's sense of the vital connection between myth and place emerged often during his Greek travels of 1810-11, but his reenactment of Leander's swimming the Hellespont is the mythic incident he mentioned most often in conversation and letters. In fact, Byron may have bored his friends and correspondents with retrospective accounts of this athletic adventure! During the days just before his swim, Byron had explored the Trojan plain after reading the first book of the *Iliad* by way of preparation. Although no ruins remained visible apart from the supposed tomb of Antilochus, Byron sensed the authenticity of Troy's myth and site alike. "I still venerated the grand original as the truth of *history*...and of *place*," he wrote. Such was Byron's state of mind when he resolved to reenact the legendary feat of Leander swimming the Hellespont. There were some differences in the two crossings. Unlike Leander Byron started on the European side at Sestos rather than at Abydos on the Asian side. Byron "swam for Glory, not for Love," as he put it in a

commemorative lyric on the subject. He crossed the strait by daylight rather than by the guidance of Hero's torch atop a tower. He swam with a companion, Lieutenant Ekenhead of the British frigate Salsette, rather than alone. Unlike Leander, Byron did not repeat his exploit and swim back to his starting point.

Byron's first account of reenacting Leander's swim appears in a letter to his former Harrow master Henry Drury. It seems no coincidence that Byron, who begins his letter by reminding Drury that on leaving England a year earlier he'd promised to write, proudly chooses to break his silence on the day he successfully crossed the Dardenelles: "This morning I *swam* from Sestos to Abydos," he writes. "The immediate distance is not above a mile, but the current renders it hazardous, so much so, that I doubt whether Leander's conjugal powers must not have been exhausted in his passage to Paradise." (BLJ I, 237)

Leander figures twice in Byron's poetry, in the humorously self-mocking verses "Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos" and in a passage from *Don Juan* describing young Juan's aquatic prowess. In this passage from *Don Juan's* first canto, Byron

erases a carefully drawn distinction between the poem's narrator, supposedly a bachelor friend of Juan's family, and himself, the author. As the narrator speaks of young Juan's skill at swimming, he admits to having himself swum the Hellespont, a feat Byron knew his readers would recognize as one of his personal accomplishments. Notice how the passage also blurs the line between life and myth—not just by bringing an autobiographical event from 1810 into Don Juan's story but also by including the legendary Leander in the company of two historical beings:

A better swimmer [than Don Juan, that is] you could scarce see
ever,

He could, perhaps have passed the Hellespont,

As once (a feat which on ourselves we prided)

Leander, Mr. Ekenhead, and I did. (DJ I, 105)

What might make the myth of Leander important to Byron?

Imitating Leander's success as swimmer and lover would be a pose attractive to many a 22-year-old, but especially to one who, like the club-footed young Byron, might need reassurance that bodily imperfection need not handicap him in manly pursuits, whether

athletics or romance. Throughout his life, Byron cultivated sports in which he'd be unhampered by his lameness—swimming, shooting, riding. And though the adult Byron did not share Leander's singleminded devotion to one lover or have to go to much trouble to attain a romantic partner, the loss of his amorous attentions drove women to distraction. As far as we know, however, none of Byron's cast-off mistresses went as far as the bereaved Hero and died for love!

If Leander the swimmer and lover offered a model for Byron to copy in youth, Orpheus the poet was a more enduring model to emulate. Byron's earliest poetic allusion to Orpheus comes, like his first poetic mention of Leander, in a lyric composed on his Mediterranean tour of 1809-11, "Stanzas Written on Passing the Ambracian Gulf." Here the young Byron aspires to rival Orpheus in two arenas, love and poetry, as he addresses his lady: "Florence! Whom I will sing as well/ As every yet was said or sung/ (Since Orpheus sang his spouse from hell)" (CPW I, 278). Orpheus's fidelity to Eurydice, a constancy that enraged the Bacchantes, is implicit in Byron's satire "Hints from Horace": "Orpheus, we learn from Ovid

and Lempriere/ Led all wild beasts, but women, by the hair” (CPW I, 312). Wry wit aside, the main point of this passage is that Orpheus has the verbal and musical power to charm. For Byron, this Orphic power is the essential trait of poets. Byron’s allusions to Orpheus are sometimes humorous—as in “Waltz” where the dance is termed “A sight unmatched since Orpheus and his brutes” or in “Hints from Horace,” where posthumously published poets are said to “Fool on—as fluent as an Orpheus head!” But Byron’s sense of Orpheus’ power residing in poets—the power to color and change reality for their audiences—shows how seriously Byron takes the myth.

To see what Orphic power exerted in a social environment means to Byron, let’s turn to *Don Juan*, Canto III. Juan, shipwrecked on a Cycladic island, is banqueting with Haidée, his current love and also the young lady who has nursed him back to health. A travelling poet entertains the lovers and their guests with a drinking song, the well-known lyric that begins “The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece!/ Where burning Sappho loved and sung,/ Where grew the arts of war and peace,/ Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!/ Eternal summer gilds them yet,/ But all, except their sun, is set.”

The lyric itself is a masterful juxtaposition of the glorious Hellenic past with the sad contemporary reality of late 18th-century Greece enslaved by the Ottoman Empire. The lyric's words are beautiful.

The feelings it evokes are, as seems fitting for a drinking song,

complex, potent, and intoxicating. *ierion oflf exquiapoeece i e s / A n d e c e*

the word “liars” (spelled l-i-a-r-s and meaning “deceivers) which in English has as its homonym “lyres” (l-y-r-e-s, signifying the stringed musical instrument played by Orpheus). Orpheus, as Byron understands him, is a liar with a lyre—a gifted being who temporarily alters reality through his poetic practice. Orpheus soothes wild beasts without changing their nature. He persuades Hades to yield up the dead Eurydice but fails to bring her back from the underworld. Similarly, the unnamed poet of “The Isles of Greece” entertains banqueters by conjuring up their lost heritage without inspiring them to take practical steps to regain it..

But what might a man who combined Orpheus’ changeable talent with unbending moral or political vision be like? He’d be a philanthropist or a crusader for freedom. In “The Irish Avatar,” Byron offers as one such historical example: the eloquent Irish statesman Henry Grattan, “With the skill of an Orpheus to soften the brute;/ With the fire of Prometheus to soften mankind;/ Even Tyranny listening sat melted or mute,/ And Corruption shrunk scorch’d from the glance of his mind.” The paired mythological allusions combining to describe Grattan’s talent and efficacy bring us

to Prometheus, the mythic titan whose example, I'd argue, is still more important to Byron's sense of self than is the poet Orpheus.

Prometheus, who defied the king of the gods, offered a powerful symbol of the unconquerable human spirit to many of the English Romantics—and to other liberal thinkers during the age of the French Revolution. Byron and his friends the Shelleys were particularly struck with the rich symbolic potential of Prometheus' story, which inspired Percy Shelley's philosophical poem *Prometheus Unbound* and Mary Shelley's Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*—but Prometheus had meanings for Byron that were different from, and more complex than, those depicted in the Shelleys' works.

As you know, there are a number of variations in the myth of Prometheus. Sometimes Prometheus is portrayed as the actual creator who formed human beings from clay and water and brought them to life with Olympian fire. Sometimes his role is more that of benefactor: he makes the development of human civilization possible by sharing a divine prerogative, fire, with mortals. In some tales Prometheus' punishment—being chained to a rock and suffering the

pain of having his immortal liver torn out by Zeus's immortal vulture or eagle—results from his betraying the gods by stealing fire for humankind. Elsewhere, Zeus punishes Prometheus for not revealing the details of a prophecy.

Several concrete details from mythic tradition recur in Byron's portrayals of Prometheus: the theft of fire, the chains, the rock, the vulture. Several other Promethean associations can be seen as shaping Byron's enduring political attitudes. Byron admired the titan's defiance of tyranny and throughout his life was a partisan of the people in political conflicts—whether in the English Parliament, the Italian Carbonari movement, or the Greek War for Independence. But just as Prometheus, an immortal titan, helped human beings without being a human, Byron was an arm's-length philanthropist. In classic Whig style, he saw himself as an aristocratic friend of the people, not as one of the people.

“Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte,” written in 1814 after Napoleon's first surrender, draws two parallels between the exiled emperor (a man Byron in later years would come to see as his own existential double) and Prometheus. Like Prometheus, “the thief of fire from

heaven,” Napoleon had defied tyrannical rulers—but unlike the titan he had become a tyrant himself. Now chained to the rock called Elba, Napoleon should, Byron suggests, strive to equal Prometheus’ noble stoicism. Byron sees the best stance in defeat--death before surrender, an alternative Napoleon had failed to embrace—as the one Prometheus would have adopted were it possible: “He in his fall preserv’d his pride,/ And if a mortal, had as proudly died!” In “The Prophecy of Dante” Byron associates the Promethean themes of fire and suffering particularly with the poet—a term he uses broadly in this case: “For what is poesy but to create/ From overfeeling good or ill; and aim/ At an external life beyond our fate,/ and be a new Prometheus of new men.” The fate of such “overfeeling” ambitious beings will be “vultures to the heart of the bestower” and the lonely rock. But Byron’s Dante claims that his fellow poets, unlike Napoleon in the ode, will be equal to the challenge: “So be it: we can bear.”

Philanthropy and stoical endurance dominate Byron’s poem “Prometheus,” written during the same summer of 1816 that engendered another of his poems on a chained sufferer, “The

Prisoner of Chillon.” Here, Prometheus displays a sympathy for humanity unique among immortals: “Thy godlike crime was to be kind,/ To render with thy precepts less/ The sum of human wretchedness,/ And strengthen Man with his own mind.” “And strengthen man with his own mind”: in this phrase lies my reason for thinking the story of Prometheus the most important Greek myth for Byron. Here Prometheus represents the human mind. His situation and his dilemma are emblematic of the human condition: “Thou art a symbol and a sign/ To mortals of their fate and force;/ Like thee, Man is in part divine,/ A troubled stream from a pure source.” Prometheus’s response to tyranny—righteous defiance and noble endurance of the punishment that comes from resistance—is likewise something the human will can achieve, “Triumphant where it dares defy,/ And making Death a victory.” Thus Byron makes Prometheus an ethical and spiritual example for all human beings, an example he chose to emulate in his own life. Greece gave the story of Prometheus to the world. Byron, taking that story to heart, returned to Greece with a high purpose and died here in Missolonghi in 1824.

