

“Lord Byron and Greek Mythology”

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Greek gods symbolize the extremes of the human desires; they are representations "of men as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are" (Butcher, 2009, online). Through these gods, Greek mythology interprets the origin of the world giving them the benefits of creating the universe and Man, all the reason why Byron was infatuated with Greek mythology even before his first visit to Greece. During his first visit to Greece, Byron visited several sites linked to Greek mythology; this helped him connect with the myths. Among these places was the Delphi, Ephesus, the Hellespont, Morea, and Sounion. This connection to Greek mythology that Byron showed was the main subject of several critics. According to Peter Graham (Graham, 2001, Online), Byron took three Greek gods Leander, Orpheus and Prometheus as role models in his life in an attempt to overcome his lameness, connect with his audience through his writings, and finally classify himself as unique by alienating himself from the people. "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" (Graham, 2001, Online). According to Charles Dupin, "Byron is a generous, noble, unequalled Greek hero." Just like many Gods, and mainly Prometheus, he makes it his primary goal to help the misfortunate people (Dupin, 1824, pp. 451-452). In this work, I contend that by exploring Greek mythology, Byron lived and embodied Greek mythology in his personal life and affairs.

One of the myths that played a role in shaping Lord Byron's life is that of Hades and Proserpina. According to this myth, Hades, King of the underworld, makes a deal with his brother Zeus to take Proserpina, his daughter as a wife. Without the consent of the bride, or her mother Demeter, Goddess of agriculture. Hades kidnaps Proserpina on one fine day while she is innocently picking flowers with some of her nymphs. This drives Demeter to search for her daughter all around the world, neglecting herself while doing that. This leads to a terrible famine that leaves the mortals starving everywhere. At the scene of the horrible assaults on the earth, Zeus sends Herms, the messenger

God, to bring Proserpina back, which Hades agrees on after he tricks Proserpina and secretly makes her "eat a pomegranate seed". Soon after mother and daughter reunite, Proserpina tells her mother about Hades' trick which leads to Proserpina's ordeals. As a result, and after the deal that Demeter makes with Hades, Proserpina spends half of every year in the underworld with her husband, during which the earth dies, while the other half she has to spend it with her mother during which the earth flowers. In this version of the myth, Proserpina is described as "the maiden whose name may not be spoken" (Hamilton, 1942, pp. 50-54).

Hades and Proserpina's characters surface and show resemblance with the characters of Lord Byron and his wife. Among the resemblances is the fact that both marriages seem more of a pact than a marriage; that of the gods was agreed on between the groom and the father of the bride because Hades was attracted to Proserpina's beauty. While Byron's marriage was meant to relieve Byron from his debts and keep all suspicion away from him. Another similar aspect is that both male figures are powerful demanding characters that sweep their wives away and in a way or another appeal to them. Nevertheless, the females' characters are a bit ambiguous, for in general they both show resistance and coldness toward their husbands; however they also show attachment to them. According to Edith Hamilton, Proserpina, "with all her beauty there was something strange and awesome about her" (Hamilton, 1942, pp. 54). Proserpina and Lady Byron control their men in their own ways, for Proserpina captivates the king of the underworld by her beauty, while Annabelle satisfies Byron in bed. By his marriage to Annabelle, Byron snatched her innocence just like Hades stole Proserpina while innocently picking flowers. As Hades is a god that is hard to please, Lord Byron spent his life searching for what may please him. On his wedding night, "Byron awoke, saw a candle burning on the other side of the scarlet bed-curtains, and exclaimed, 'Good God! I am fairly in Hades, with Proserpina by my side!'" This comparison made by Byron on the first night of his marriage to Lady Byron could summarize his whole marital life, which was filled with upheavals and problems. Byron implies the distance between him and his wife although she is in the same bed with him. He alienated himself from her for there was no real love or passion between them. This difference is what links this couple to Hades and Proserpina, for Hades is the evil king of the

underworld that sees the earth as the enemy of his kingdom, while Proserpina is the innocent daughter of the mother earth that looks upon Hades' world as hell. In addition, just like Hades binds Proserpina to him for the rest of her life by tricking her, Lord Byron also bounded Lady Byron for the rest of her life. For even though she left him shortly after the birth of their child, she was bounded to Byron not only via her and his accusations but also through the accusations of Byron's fans who blamed her for the destruction of their marriage, and ultimately of Byron's self-exile. In his poem *Lines on hearing that Lady Byron is ill*, Byron describes Lady Byron as the "moral Clymnestra of thy lord" wife of king Agamemnon. In Greek mythology, Clymnestra tried to stop her husband from going to war but couldn't, so she cheated on him with the acting-ruler and had him killed when he came back (Grant, 1962, pp. 144-148). In this same poem, he also asserts that he finally got his revenge by saying "I am too well avenged, but 't was my right;/wate'er my sins might be, thou wert not sent/To be the Nemesis that should requite". (ll. 13-15)

Another myth that was at the base of Byron's fame is that of Hero and Leander's, which is a mythology exposing forbidden love. Hero, from Sestos, is the priestess of the goddess Aphrodite, while Leander, is a youth from Abydos; they are separated by the Hellespont. As a priestess of the Goddess Aphrodite, Hero must stay a virgin for the rest of her life. However, their love is stronger than all boundaries, and they meet secretly. Every night, Hero would lighten the way for Leander who would swim across the Hellespont to meet her. Their relationship lasts a whole summer; however one winter night, the flame is killed by the wind and Leander loses his way and drowns. The next morning, at the scene of his lifeless body, Hero throws herself from the tower and joins her lover in death (Grant, 1962, pp. 373-374).

Byron was greatly influenced by this Greek myth, as during his first visit to Greece he visited the historic site and swam from Sestos to Abydos, and stamped this event in a poem, "*Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos.*" Before his swim and after reading the first book of *Iliad*, Byron visited the Trojan plain, and claimed it faithful to the myth of the Trojan War. "I still venerated the grand original as the truth of *history*...and of *place*," he wrote. (Qtd. in Graham, 2001, Online). By swimming the Hellespont, Byron needed to feel the reality of Hero and Leander's

myth, and to connect with Greek mythology. What is noticeable in Byron's brave action is that he adhered to Leander's main goal, but he added his own touch to it; for in his poem Byron claims that he "swam for Glory, not for Love" (Graham, 2001, Online). He also crossed the sea without any lamp in the company of the captain of the ship, and didn't swim back to the starting point. Still, Byron was keen to let everybody know of the heroic act that he achieved, for it was the first thing he wrote about to Henry Drury after a year of silence. He later brags about it in a passage in *Don Juan* when he writes:

A better swimmer [than Don Juan] 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.
(*Don Juan*, II, 105, ll. 837-840)

As it is evident, Byron was not interested in swimming the Hellespont for love; he wanted to prove to himself and the people that his lameness could not stop him from anything, that he was powerful and strong as Leander. He may have not swum for love, but the reassurance he was seeking included also romance: that this handicap won't scare his lovers away, as Peter Graham believes. (Graham, 2001, Online)

Another God that Lord Byron respected and took as a model in life is Prometheus, who is known as the creator of Humans in Greek mythology. His love for mankind pushes him to trick Zeus when he discovers his desire to steal from Man. Furious at Prometheus, Zeus takes fire from Man as a punishment for his betrayal; however Prometheus lights a torch from the sun and brings it back to Man, which makes Zeus even angrier. That is why he decides to punish them both horribly. As a punishment for mortals, Zeus makes the gods create a very beautiful but deceptive mortal, Pandora, and gives her a jar as a gift, which she is forbidden to open, and sends her to Epimetheus, brother of Prometheus who is staying among Man. Pandora's beauty deceives Epimetheus, and he lets her stay with him even though Prometheus has long time warned him about Zeus' gifts. Pandora opens the jar which inflicts on Man all kinds of evils. As for Prometheus, Zeus makes his servants chain

him to a rock, where he would be tortured by a giant eagle that would devour his constantly growing liver. Finally, Prometheus refuses Zeus' help and deals, and is saved years later by Heracles and Chiron. (Hunt, 2011, Online).

For many writers and poets, Prometheus became a symbol of "the unconquerable human spirit" (Graham, 2001, Online). In the above version of the myth, Prometheus is portrayed as the creator and benefactor of mankind; and as a punishment for his siding with them and betraying his own race he is punished by Zeus. In his poems, Byron refers several times to the myth of Prometheus, usually by mentioning, the chains, the rock or the theft of fire; however, his major goal was to shape and express his political opinions. For in real life, he was like Prometheus to his British community; even though he was a member of the House of Lords, in 1812 he delivered a speech against the inhumane bill that was issued at the time for the Luddites. He defended the common people that were fighting for their rights of work and living against the leaders. The Greek War for Independence, which drove Byron to Greece to fight for the liberation of the Greeks, is another example of Byron's loyalty to the people and his support of their rebellion. However, just like Prometheus, Byron was distant from the people; he "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," Graham believes (Graham, 2001, Online).

However, in his poem, Byron treats the original version of the myth in a more complex way to express his ideals. He questions Prometheus' benefit from helping Man, "What was thy pity's recompense?" (Byron, l.5); his answer is human silent suffering. In earlier versions of this myth (Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*), Prometheus is described by many characters as the god with the "free tongue". None of his Romantic contemporaries had a freer tongue than Byron. "Byron's *Prometheus*, written some two thousand years after Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, is a response from his age where power is not just rivalrous, but reciprocal" (Dennis, 2001, pp. 146). Through his poem, Byron wanted to deliver a message to his readers, a message of patience, for they should consider Prometheus as their model: "A Mighty lesson we inherit:/Thou art a symbol and a sign/To Mortals of their fate and force." According to DeMoss, "Lord Byron's *Prometheus* presents a different perspective than the ancient

myths, with a purpose for rebellion” (Demoss, 2005, Online). Byron took this myth as a model when he went to Greece in 1824 with the purpose of fighting for the people and died in the process. (Graham, 2001, Online)

In conclusion, Byron's excessive interest in Greek myths began to influence him after his first visit to Greece which implies his need to see and connect with the Greek gods. Even though he took them as models, reacted some of their achievements and also some of their mistakes, Byron made sure to add his own touch to these experiences. He wanted to believe in himself but also to prove himself as a leader and poet. This embodiment of Greek mythology that Byron showed during his life exposed not only his unique personality but also the great goals that he set for himself.

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