

**PROMETHEUS UNBOUND: A
LYRICAL DRAMA IN FOUR ACTS,
EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION
AND
NOTES BY G. LOWES DICKINSON**

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Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, Edited with Introduction and Notes by G. Lowes Dickinson by Percy Bysshe Shelley

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PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

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THE TEMPLE DRAMATISTS

Shelley's PROMETHEUS UNBOUND





Percy Bysshe Shelley



PROMETHEUS
UNBOUND

A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts
by
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

*Edited with Introduction
and Notes by*
G. LOWES DICKINSON

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Introduction.

The Text. The text of the *Prometheus Unbound*, as of all Shelley's works, presents peculiar difficulties to an editor. The sources are (1) an imperfect MS., preserved at Boscombe, (2) the first edition, of 1820. This does not appear to have been corrected for the press by the poet himself, and we have his own authority that it contained numerous errata. (3) Mrs Shelley's first edition of 1839. The importance of this edition is that it embodied Shelley's own list of corrections to the edition of 1820. But it is impossible to say what unauthorised alterations may have been introduced by Mrs Shelley herself, or what new misprints may have crept in. The net result is that an editor is left very much to his own judgment in choosing between various possible readings. The variants are all given fully in Mr Buxton Forman's edition, which is thus invaluable to all students of the text. In this edition, I have thought it sufficient to give, in the notes, those variants only, whether in the punctuation or in the actual words of the text, which affect the sense in some important way. The final choice among them must always, in some instances, be a matter of uncertainty. My own judgment, as was to be expected, has not agreed throughout with that of any former editor; but the reader will find, as I have indicated, the materials for reviewing it given in the notes. Reference may be made here to an article by Miss Blind in the *Westminster Review*, July 1870, giving some readings from the MS.; and to

Mr Swinburne's 'Notes on the Text of Shelley' in his *Essays and Studies*.

The Composition of the Drama. The *Prometheus Unbound* was published in 1820, Shelley being then twenty-eight years old. Included in the same volume were the following poems:—The Sensitive Plant, A Vision of the Sea, Ode to Heaven, An Exhortation, Ode to the West Wind, An Ode, written October 1819, before the Spaniards had recovered their Liberty, The Cloud, To a Skylark, Ode to Liberty. The *Prometheus* was originally designed in three acts, which were composed at Rome, under circumstances described by Shelley himself in his 'Preface' printed below. The fourth act was added later, at Florence. Shelley regarded the work at the time as "the most perfect of my productions," "the best thing I ever wrote;" and certainly it is the completest expression we have of his philosophy of life, and contains some of his finest poetry.

The Myth of Prometheus. The Greek myth which suggested the subject of Shelley's drama is treated as follows in the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus.—In the battle between the Gods and the Titans, Prometheus sided with the former, and by his counsels secured them the victory. Zeus (Jupiter) being thus established in power, determined to destroy mankind, and create in their stead a new race. Prometheus intervened to save them, mercifully closed their eyes to the future, gave them hope for their comfort, and instructed them in the arts of life. To punish him for this, Zeus chained him to a rock in Scythia. But Prometheus had still a hold on his enemy; he knew the secret on which his fate depended. Should Zeus make a certain marriage, he would be overthrown by the child born of it; but what

Prometheus Unbound ❧ Introduction.

the marriage was, no one knew but Prometheus. As he was boasting of this knowledge, Zeus sent down his messenger Hermes to demand the disclosure of the secret; Prometheus refused, and Zeus, in retaliation, hurled him down to Tartarus. At this point the *Prometheus Bound* ends; but Aeschylus wrote also a *Prometheus Unbound*, of which however only a few fragments are preserved, and these insufficient to indicate in detail how he treated the theme. In the *Prometheus Bound*, we are told that after a long lapse of time, Prometheus was to be restored to the upper air, there to be preyed upon by an eagle, as represented in Shelley's drama (l. 34). Of his deliverance two versions are suggested, which appear to be mutually inconsistent. According to the one, his punishment was to endure until some god should volunteer to take his place in Hades, a prophecy which is said to have been fulfilled by Cheiron. According to the other, which was the one adopted by Aeschylus in his *Prometheus Unbound*, and after him by Shelley, the deliverance was to be effected by Hercules, who was to kill the eagle and unbind the captive. In the drama of Aeschylus, it appears that the deliverance was preceded by a reconciliation of Prometheus with Zeus. Prometheus, it seems, purchased his release by informing Zeus that the marriage which would prove fatal to his power would be a marriage with Thetis. What Shelley thought of this solution is indicated in his 'Preface':—"I was averse," he says, "from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary." In his drama, accordingly, the secret is unrevealed;