

# Prometheus as a Mythological Hero: A Comparison between Byron's Poem "Prometheus" (1816) and Miller's Novel *Circe* (2018)

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Date of Article</p> <p>Received : 2024/2/20</p> <p>Received in revised form: 2024/3/11</p> <p>Accepted: 2024/3/18</p> <p>Available online: 2024/6/12</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p>Greek mythology, Prometheus, rebel, god, mythological figure, hero, Miller, Byron</p>	<p>Throughout centuries, Prometheus has been regarded as an important mythological character in literature in general, and in Greek and English literature in specific. Oftentimes he is portrayed to be an advocate for the good, or perhaps a hero to humanity, who, according to the Ancient Greeks, was significant for the discovery of fire to mankind. Other times, however, he is referred to as a mighty god who used his power and intelligence to fool the gods surrounding him, and who eventually got punished for that. The ideas of justice, humanity, and freedom are central to the story. To understand what Prometheus stood for, and how he was portrayed by different authors in different periods, the poem "Prometheus" (1816) by George Gordon Byron will be compared with the modern novel <i>Circe</i> (2018) written by Madeline Miller. Although different forms of literature, both writers mentioned the same character from various perspectives which will be the focus of this research.</p>

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## 1- Introduction

Greek mythology may seem to belong to an era long past, but in reality, it still plays a great role in art and literature. Although Greek gods used to be worshipped by the Greeks and Romans, today their tragic and heroic stories are taken as symbols or inspirations for other writings and artistic works. (Dougherty, 2018:XI) Moreover, many words and concepts are taken from Greek myths and most names of the planets and constellations are named after them as well. (Ollhof, 2011:10)

Mythology could be defined as "a body or collection of myths from any given tradition." It could be broken down into two different words, the first of which is derived from the

Greek word 'muthos' which means tale or story, whereas 'logos' means speech. (Hemingway, 2011:1) The modern concept as well as the scholarly term of 'myth' goes back to the German philologist Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812). He is amongst the first who founded mythological research in Germany in particular, in a way that his ideas influenced Germany's education on antiquity. Hyne believed that to understand myths, it is important to understand their origins. Myths are not an invention by the primitive man, on the other hand, he believed that they were the results of frightening or fascinating natural phenomena, that they were unable to explain,

and were assigned to mythological figures instead. According to Heyne, "myth served primarily to explain natural phenomena and secondarily to memorialize events of the past." (Graf, 1993:9-10)

Along with Heyne, another important person who is considered to be the founding father of modern myth is the Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico. Both applied the word 'mythos' to what the French author Bernard de Fontelle used to call 'fabulae' and the French missionary Joseph-François Lafitau called 'fables allégoriques'. Meaning hereby that the Greeks didn't "invent[ed] stories to make sense of natural things", like the Chinese or the Incas did. Rather than just fables, Heyne and Vico believed that myths explained and expressed how the soul felt: "it was an early way of philosophizing on the nature of things, even before, as human wisdom progressed, attempts were made to express what lay beyond the senses by giving human form to entities that were considered to be divine." (Calame, 2009: 19) Oftentimes these myths reflected a history of how human beings have struggled with death and gave it their meaning through their stories. (Hemingway, 2011:1)

Greek myths originate from people's imagination and the most basic beliefs. In a way, these myths explicate nature's phenomena as mentioned in the previous paragraph, but they also could serve as warnings, or moral lessons, even if they do not represent reality itself. (Bartok et al, 1995:8) Like human beings, the Greek gods are also part of this world, but while gods are undefeatable, mortal humans have lost their way being unable to find the cure against aging and death. Yet as they all have been born on

earth, the lives of both the humans and gods are continuously being compared. (Sissa and Detienne, 2000: 4)

One of the many mythological gods, Prometheus, created human beings, and he hoped that by helping them they would be able to develop further and become advanced. Zeus, on the other hand, believed that human beings should remain as they are until their death. Prometheus decided to risk Zeus' revenge in order to still give them support and hidden knowledge they never knew before, to allow them to become more sophisticated, giving them in the end the fire that lit their dark caves. This did not happen without consequences, however, for he was hanged on a cliff in the Caucasus Mountains, where every day an eagle would take his liver, leaving it to regrow during the night, and then the following day the same punishment would be repeated. (Kock, 2014:28)

## 2. The Selected Literary Works:

The novel *Circe* is written by Madeline Miller (1978), an MA-holder in Classics from Brown University. Her first book *The Song of Achilles* (2011) won the Orange Prize for Fiction 2012 and was shortlisted for the Stonewall Writer of the Year 2012, being an international bestseller, translated into twenty-five languages. Her second book *Circe* was published in 2018. It was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2019 and was again an international bestseller. (Miller, 2018)

Circe is the daughter of Helios who is god of the sun, as well as one of the most powerful of Titans. Through her perspective, the reader delves into the world of Greek mythology in the form of a story on love, loss, power, and death. By raising her voice and using her

power of witchery to make the one she loved immortal, as well as by transforming a beautiful nymph into a monster out of jealousy, she gets punished by her father and Zeus, a mighty Olympian, and is exiled to live eternally on the island of Aiaia. However, she never gives up and continues strengthening her powers on her own, while the story continues with her meeting those who visit the island, the men of the seas, amongst whom is Odysseus, the mortal yet undefeatable man. In this novel, then, many mythological figures play a significant role and make up the famous Greek myths into one coherent story.

George Gordon Byron (1788-1824) learned about Greek and Latin poetry ever since he was a little boy at Harrow school in England. It was in 1804 that he took a passage from the tragic play *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, and transformed it into verse, having always been inspired by how this drama described Prometheus. It was Byron's first time that he used myth in order to examine the political situation of his time. In general, during the Romantic age, Prometheus was regarded as a "symbol of rebellion against tyrannical authority, the benefactor of mankind, or the very image of human suffering" (qtd. in Dougherty 97). Byron used this Promethean image for most of his rebels who risk everything to get hidden knowledge, freedom or any form of power. One might even say that Prometheus' creative powers mirrored Byron's own creativity and suffering in his attempts to reach eternal fame as a poet. (Dougherty, 2006:97) It is not only his works that he used Greek mythology as a form of inspiration, but Byron even fought against the Turkish rule in Greece, where he died in Missolonghi

supporting the Greek insurgents. (Bertagnolli, 2007:20)

### 3. An Analysis

Miller starts early in the novel describing who Prometheus is, retelling the story that "[l]ong ago, when mankind was still shivering and shrinking in their caves, he had defied the will of Zeus and brought them the gift of fire. From its flames had sprung all the arts and profits of civilization that jealous Zeus had hoped to keep from their hands." Through the words "gift of fire" and "jealous Zeus" it is possible to see the stance of Miller, or that of Circe, the main character of the novel. It was after the rebellion of Prometheus that he was forced "to live in the underworld's deepest pit until a proper torment could be devised. And now Zeus announced the time was come." (Miller, 2018:11) Although it was not possible to kill Prometheus, "there were many hellish torments that could take death's place", for such eternal punishment could make any god wish to become mortal. (Ibid., 13-14)

Seen as the basis of Byron's art and theme in many of his writings, the gift of fire plays an important role in the poem *Prometheus* as well. Byron expresses here the start of the same story of rather strong emotions from Prometheus' point of view. In the first stanza, Prometheus is wondering what he got in return for his compassion towards the mortals. He was the one with the immortal eyes who felt "the sufferings of mortality, / seen in their sad reality," (Byron, lines 2-3) and yet, "what was thy pity's recompense?" (Byron, line 5) It was only "The rock, the vulture, and the chain". (Byron, line 7) With this, Byron is following similar ideas to the tragedian Aeschylus who celebrated Prometheus' endless endurance

against Zeus, in which the latter is portrayed as a tyrant, as well as the representation of evil and hate. (Dougherty, 2006: 98)

Prometheus in Byron's poem is shown to be superior to human beings, calling him "the proud" in line 8: "All that the proud can feel of pain, / the agony they do not show". Although he aided men, he does not belong to mankind. Prometheus, like most Titans, suffers from negative characteristics that have become part of their nature, including pride, anger, and resentment. (Gier, 2000:75) It is of importance to understand the difference between the Titans, like Prometheus, and Olympians, that include Zeus. In the past only Titans existed, and one of them, Kronos, heard that one of his children will one day get more powerful, which as a result, he decided to swallow every child his wife Rhea birthed as a whole, until one day she came up with a plan. (Miller, 2018: 11)

Rhea swaddled a stone and gave it to him to swallow instead. Kronos was deceived, and the rescued baby, Zeus, was taken to Mount Dicte to be raised in secret. When he was grown he rose up indeed, plucking the thunderbolt from the sky and forcing poisonous herbs down his father's throat. His brothers and sisters, living in their father's stomach, were vomited forth. They sprang to their brother's side, naming themselves Olympians after the great peak where they set their thrones. (Miller, 2018:11-12)

Byron focused on Prometheus' pride of silent suffering, as seen in the lines "And then is jealous lest the sky / Should have a listener, nor will sigh / until its voice is echoless" (Byron, lines 12-14), afraid of letting even the sky know of his pain, choosing deliberately to

not speak nor even sigh. Despite his great punishment, he is still "a compassionate observer of human reality", caring for their fate and development. Prometheus had to make a very difficult choice between his will to help and sympathize with humans, or performing a sin and suffer eternally for it: "Titan! to thee the strife was given / Between the suffering and the will" (Byron, lines 15-16), but he chose to relief humanity of their suffering and neglected his own. (Bloom, 2005:85)

Miller in her novel did not fail to mention the same scenery: "Prometheus was silent and alone." He was even given the chance to beg Zeus for lesser punishment and yet he nevertheless refused to do so. (Miller, 2018:15-16) This was for a great part because of the same characteristic of pride that Byron also mentioned in his poem. Prometheus admits to Circe that it was he himself who confessed his sin to Zeus: "Is it true that you refused to beg for pardon? And that you were not caught, but confessed to Zeus what you did?" whereby he simply answered her: "It is". "Why?" but he replies to her question with another question: "Perhaps you will tell me. Why would a god do such a thing?" (Miller, 2018:15-16) It is then up to the reader to imagine the possible reasons for him doing so. In a way, he may never have perceived his deeds as a sin at all and was confident that he should do what he believed to be right regardless of its outcome. Also, it could have been his own way of rebelling against the all-powerful Zeus whom no one dared to stand up against. In fact, one might regard the latter as a tyrant and a symbol of injustice.

To Prometheus, Heaven which usually is portrayed as merciful for all, is in Byron's



second stanza described as “inexorable”, Fate is like a “deaf tyranny” and hate is a “ruling principle”, which defies all the ideas gods had on life. (Byron, lines 18-20) Moreover, he regards eternity itself as “the wretched gift”, for such endless suffering knows no end. (Byron, line 24) This wretchedness is also described in the novel *Circe*, where immortality plays an important role in the story. Circe contemplates on the meaning of her life, having the mortals Penelope and her son Telemachus as her only companions on her island:

And so it would go, I thought, on and on, forever the same... They would wither, and I would burn their bodies and watch my memories of them yellow and fade as everything faded in the endless wash of centuries...Even Telegonus. [her son] Sixty, seventy years, a mortal might have. Then he would leave for the underworld, where I could never go, for gods are the opposite of death...For me, there was nothing. I would go on through the countless millennia, while everyone I met ran through my fingers and I was left with only those who were like me. The Olympians and Titans. My sister and brothers. My father. (Miller, 2018:309-310)

Just as Byron mentioned that “the fate thou didst so well foresee” (Byron, line 29), Miller also mentioned in a conversation between Circe and her brother Aeëtes in which he said: “Prometheus was a god of prophecy. He would have known he would be punished, and how. Yet he did it anyway.” (Miller, 2018: 24)

Prometheus’ “Godlike crime was to be kind” (Byron, line 35), in order to “strengthen Man with his own mind” (line 38). Because of him, human beings were able to understand their

fate and develop themselves despite any difficulties. Humans became “in part divine” (line 47). Prometheus dared to stand up against the mighty Zeus, enduring patiently the pain he received in return to him helping mankind. It is these qualities of him that Byron perceived them to be “‘a symbol and a sign’ for mankind”. (Dougherty, 2006:98)

Circe also greatly sympathized with Prometheus, and one day decided to do something: “‘I could bring you nectar.’ I said. His gaze rested on mine. ‘I would thank you for that,’ he said. His voice was resonant as aged wood. It was the first time I had heard it; he had not cried out once in all his torment.” (Miller, 2018:16) Although this act may be seen as small, in the world of gods, helping a sinner is considered to be an awful crime and may be punished in an even more painful way. Despite the fact Circe was aware of this; she still helped Prometheus because she believed he was on the right side. She understood the terrible unjust done by the greater powers, without having mentioned this directly. Just like Circe, Byron again shared his sympathy through the following lines:

Still in thy patient energy,  
In the endurance, and repulse  
Of thine impenetrable Spirit,  
Which Earth and Heaven could not convulse,  
A mighty lesson we inherit:  
Thou art a symbol and a sign  
Prometheus stands for “the essence of the human experience”, who despite knowing his own “funeral destiny”, still has a powerful spirit of rebellion against “the terrible trinity of heaven, tyranny and Fate.” With this, Byron believed that even death itself became a victory. Prometheus is not merely a myth, but

he represents everyone who stands against injustice. With this poem, Byron's focus lies on tyrannical oppression by those who are in power, celebrating thereby the human experience of suffering and defiance. Rather than a rebel, Prometheus has turned into a hero. (Dougherty, 2006:99)

As to the novel, no matter how many years and centuries have passed, Circe always remembered Prometheus and his courageous stand against Zeus. In one of the scenes later in the story, she calls up her father Helios, god of the sun, and threatens him with her one act of kindness towards Prometheus:

"I stayed behind, when all the rest of you left. I brought him comfort, and we spoke together.' His gaze burned into mine. 'You would not have dared.'

'If you doubt me, you may ask Prometheus himself. Or Aeëtes. [her brother] Though if you get any truth from him it is a miracle.'

'If you did such a thing it is deep treason. You are more owed to exile than ever. You deserve greater punishment still, all I can give you. You have exposed us to Zeus' wrath for some foolish whim.'" (Miller, 2018:312)

Kindness towards those who have stood against a god is considered to be the worst of crimes, yet throughout the entire story, Circe never showed her guilt or regret for helping Prometheus in his tribulation. Even after having gone through so much and being aware of terrible punishments gods could inflict upon one another, she stood her ground and showed her strength towards her mighty father. Knowing that she did nothing wrong, it seems that, like Byron, she too considered Prometheus to be a hero for selflessly doing what he believed to be right, even if being

remembered as one would require an immense self-sacrifice.

## Conclusion

With a difference of about two centuries between the publication of *Prometheus* and *Circe*, it is interesting to note the way Prometheus is viewed by both writers. While Byron used metaphorical and poetic descriptions according to how he viewed Prometheus, Miller wrote the story in the form of prose, from the point of view of Circe; a nymph not much respected by other gods, but strong in her own way. Although she may be an immortal goddess, she is more humane than any of her family and fellow immortals.

The similarities lie in the descriptions of the immense agony that Prometheus went through, yet silence was his only response no matter how much he suffered because he aimed to help mankind by stealing fire and sharing it with the people so that they would develop and prosper. Both Byron and Miller recognized the sacrifice of giving up himself for the sake of others, and they treated him as a heroic figure without any negative reference attached to him. The fact that Prometheus knew what would happen in the future and was well aware of what his actions might lead him to, raises him further in position, for he had a goal, and he chose to follow it despite what the Divinities believed in, and despite its severe consequences.

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بروميثيوس كبطل أسطوري: مقارنة بين قصيدة بايرون  
"بروميثيوس" (1816) ورواية ميلر سيرسي (2018)

هبة مصدق مسلم

جامعة المثني / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

المخلص: يعتبر بروميثيوس على مر القرون شخصية أسطورية مهمة في الأدب بشكل عام وفي الأدب اليوناني والإنجليزي بشكل خاص. يتم تصويره في كثير من الأحيان على أنه داعية للخير أو لربما بطل للإنسانية والذي كان وفقاً لليونانيين القدماء مهماً في اكتشاف النار للبشرية. ومع ذلك يُشار إليه في أحيان أخرى على أنه إله عظيم استغل قوته وذكائه لخداع الآلهة المحيطة به والذي عوقب في النهاية على ذلك. فكرة العدالة والإنسانية والحرية هي محور القصة. من أجل فهم ما يمثله بروميثيوس وكيف تم تصويره من قبل مؤلفين مختلفين في فترات مختلفة سيتم مقارنة قصيدة "بروميثيوس" (1816) لجورج غوردون بايرون مع رواية سيرسي (2018) الحديثة التي كتبها مادلين ميلر، ورغم اختلاف أشكال الأدب إلا أنهم ذكروا نفس الشخصية من وجهات نظر مختلفة والتي ستكون محور هذا البحث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأساطير اليونانية، بروميثيوس، المتمرد، الإله، شخصية أسطورية، بطل، ميلر، بايرون.