

PROMETHEUS MYTH IN THE POEMS OF LORD BYRON AND CAN YÜCEL

Emine KULUŞAKLI*¹
Ferit ŞAHİN**

*Asst. Prof. Dr. Malatya Turgut Özal University, School of Foreign Languages

**Lecturer, Siirt University, School of Foreign Languages

Abstract

This paper explores the employment of the myth of Prometheus as a representation of the rebellious feelings of human life and an expression of the meaning of the universe in the poems, *Prometheus* by Lord Byron, the British romantic and *Prometeus, A Thief* by Can Yücel, the Turkish poet, the translator and the critic. With this purpose, the paper concentrates on how Byron and Yücel employ their mythical background in these challenging poems. The study also responds in specific to the approach of mythical criticism that establishes the prominence of myths and examines its relationship to the themes of two poems grounded on the idea that the myths are reflected in literary works by passing through changes. While highlighting the poems, it gets impetus from the concept of 'collective unconscious', which was introduced by the Swiss psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung. The paper develops gradually by analyzing Byron and Yücel's reshaping of myth to evaluate specific political views and humanistic values in the personification of the god, Prometheus.

Keywords: Can Yücel, mythology, Lord Byron, Prometheus

LORD BYRON VE CAN YÜCEL ŞİİRLERİNDE PROMETHEUS MİTİ

Özet

Bu makale, insan yaşamının anlamı ve isyankar duygularının bir temsili olarak kullanılan Prometheus mitinin bir İngiliz romantîği olan şair Lord Byron'ın *Prometeus* ve Türk şair, çevirmen ve eleştirmen Can Yücel'in *Prometeus, Bir Hırsız* adlı şiirlerinde nasıl işlendiğini araştırmaktadır. Bu makale, Byron ve Yücel'in mitoloji geçmişlerini bu meydan okuyan şiirlerinde nasıl kullandıklarına odaklanır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma mitlerin ön plana çıkmasını sağlayan mitsel eleştiri yaklaşımına özel olarak yanıt vermekte ve mitlerin değişimlerden geçerek edebi eserlere yansıdığı fikrinden yola çıkarak bu iki şiirin temaları arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir. Şiirlere vurgu yapılırken, İsviçreli psikolog Carl Gustav Jung tarafından ortaya atılan 'kolektif bilinçdışı' kavramından yola çıkılmıştır. Makale, Byron ve Yücel'in tanrı Prometheus' un kişileştirilmesinde belirli siyasi görüşleri ve insani değerleri değerlendirmek amacıyla miti nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiklerini analiz ederek aşamalı olarak ilerlemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Can Yücel, mitoloji, Lord Byron, Prometheus

1. Introduction

Myths are defined in the sources in many different ways. According to the definition in the Oxford dictionary, it is explained as "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events" ("Myth", 2021, Oxford Dictionary). In another definition (Dickerson & O'Hara, 2006), myth is defined as "fundamentally oral and literary, is always taking new forms" (cited in Henderson, 2017: 53). Through myths, people learn how to relate to the world, what they should do in order to survive, how to dwell satisfying lives, how to assimilate within a particular culture, how to balance desire with responsibility, and how power is divided between nations, races, and men and women. It is touched upon the meaning of myth and its universality as "although every people have its own distinctive mythology ... myth is, in the general sense, universal." (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 2005: 149-150).

¹ Sorumlu Yazar E-mail: emine.kulusakli@ozal.edu.tr / Doi: 10.22252/ijca.900863

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1.1. Mythology and Literature

The close connection between mythology and literature is not ignored in that myths are the products of understanding, perception and representation of human existence like literature. Furthermore, myths are universal and prominent sources of literature and in the course of time, a lot of writers and poets have used mythological elements in their works in order to explain the human nature and they will most probably continue to do so. As Campbell (1973) states, mythology is “constantly changing shape” and “amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age” (cited in Dittmer, 2018: 7). Walker (2002) refers to Jung’s idea about the relationship between literature and mythology. According to Jung, literature imitates the “total dream of humankind” and mythology is “the textbook of the archetypes” (cited in Walker, 2002: 17). The concept of archetypes which was first introduced by the psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung in 1933 was defined as “archetypes are “primordial images” and “psychic residue” of repeated types of experience in the lives of very ancient ancestors that are inherited in the “collective unconscious” of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies, as well as in the works of literature” (Abrams, 1999: 2-13). When all this information is taken into consideration, it can be concluded that mythologies of different cultures share common motifs and meanings and these repeat themselves in societies throughout the ages. From this point of view, it is possible to say that archetypes are universal motifs and they are shared among the cultures.

1.2. The myth of Prometheus

The story of the god is told as Prometheus creates the human race by using clay. In an event, as known Trick at Mecone, he deceives Zeus by forcing him to make a decision by choosing between two alternatives: beef or bones wrapped in glistening fat. Zeus selects the bone, a precedent is formed in what human beings sacrifice. Zeus gets very furious at this event deciding to deprive mankind of fire. However, the god, Prometheus rebels against his will and secretly steals fire from the mountains of the gods, Olympus. After Zeus finds out his disobedience and theft he makes Prometheus arrest and chain to a mountain rock in the Caucasus Mountains. Every day two vultures are sent by Zeus and they gnaw at the prisoner’s liver, which grows whole again every night. Due to the fact that Prometheus is a god and immortal, he never dies and eventually, after long ages, Heracles, the son of Zeus, comes and frees the god from his bonds and sufferings. By referring to the idea that myths are “the collective unconscious” of the society and have universal features, the myth of Prometheus appears to have a common understanding and perception in literatures worldwide. “Prometheus is first mentioned in Hesiod’s *Theogony and Works and Days* as the titanic son of Iapetus and Clymene” (Luttrull, 2010: 17). He is referred in various forms from a past trickster figure to a symbol for a future mankind in literature. In other words, he is an ancient Greek myth which has been used from the Antiquity until today. Prometheus is also defined as “a champion of mankind from Greek mythology who revolted against the immortal gods to free mankind” (Manzoor, 2007: 105). Especially in literature, it gets a special attention for its moral and existential meanings as well as creative and rebellious ones. Sometimes it is used in a negative sense as a ‘trickster’ figure who is responsible for the human misery due to his theft as told by Hesiod in *Theogony*. However, Prometheus myth finds its interpretation in an exemplary way in literature due to the work, *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus which affects the positive understanding of the men of literature especially in the Romantic period (Greene, 1991). In literature, the myth of Prometheus has been an interesting for writers and poets from the ancient times to the modern times in that Prometheus has been introduced as a trickster, a great humanitarian, the creator of mankind, a fire-bringer and a rebel against the gods (Manzoor, 2007: 105). As a romantic writer, Goethe (1983) considers that Prometheus created human beings in his “own image” (Luttrull, 2010: 18) as in the following:

To suffer, to weep,
To enjoy, to be glad
And never to heed you,
Like me! (Goethe 25)

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus is portrayed as a rebellious figure that triumphs over Zeus by Shelley (1820). He even “becomes an ever more provocative call for rebellion against limitations and an exhortation for civilized humanity to realize their potential by breaking traditional boundaries” (Luttrull, 2010: 19).

Prometheus myth has also inspired many British romantic poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound*, (1820), Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) as well as

Lord Byron and in Turkish literature, Tevfik Fikret in *Promethe*, Yahya Kemal in *Sicilya Kızları* (Girls of Sicily) and Ahmed Hamdi Tanpınar in *İnsanlar Arasında* (Among People).

1.3. Lord Byron and Can Yücel

Lord Byron and Can Yücel are among the most influential poets of their periods. They have many common features although they both lived in different countries and centuries. Lord Byron (1785-1830) as a British poet was one of the most well-known poets of the Romantic period owing to his poems and scandalous life. After one hundred and fifty years later, Can Yücel who is generally accepted as one of the well known Turkish poets of the 20th Century in Turkey was born in Istanbul in 1926. While Yücel was interested in politics supporting the left party in Turkey with highly social awareness which finally led him to be imprisoned Byron was deeply affected by the revolutionary enthusiasm of the French Revolution which also had great impacts on British society and politics. Like Byron, Yücel also studied classics at Cambridge University and they both translated some literary texts from ancient Greek which could lead them to be interested in Greek mythology. Their classical education background at Cambridge could also be one of the reasons that made them become attached to Greek poetry and Greek ideals in their poetry.

Moreover, Byron's ideas on Greek literature were described by stating that "Byron believed that an integral step to forging a more intimate cross-cultural involvement between Modern Greeks and Britons was through Britons' knowledge of Modern Greek language and literature" (Grammatikos, 2016: 251). Byron's admiration to Greek works can be perceived not only in *Prometheus* but also in many of his other poems. He uses mythological elements in *Don Juan*, *The Greek Marseillaise*, *The Rossanglogallos* and *The Fair Shepherdess*. It is asserted that Byron writes *Prometheus* "as a symbol of protest against the traditional values of the society at that time such as religion, ethics, limitations to human efforts, prejudice, and the misuse of power. It is a role model for rebellion" (Mayerson, 1971: 46). However, Byron's use of myths in his poems can be interpreted as a response to his perception of contemporary historical events like the French revolution as well. It is also acknowledged that "the decay of organic energy; the fall and death of Napoleon; the exhausted state of Europe, bound in by the Urizenic Metternich, became fused for Byron into the myth of an expiring Prometheus" (Bloom, 1960: 81). Additionally, it is commented on Byron's poem referring to Prometheus "the heroic figure who could serve Byron as an archetypal hero for the exploration of his situation is Prometheus: either directly or indirectly through the presentation of heroes in Promethean predicaments or with Promethean characters" (Solomou, 1980: 94).

1.4. Purpose of the study

In the light of the information given above, it is clear to understand that myths are a part of our life and as well as of literature. Promethean myth has been one of the most common and popular ones among the Western literature, specifically in poetry and it still takes its importance in contemporary literature as well while reviewing literature on mythology. Despite of the fact that the Promethean myth has been taken its place many times in the prominent works of the literature, hence, to my knowledge nobody has concentrated on the significance of the Promethean myth in a comparative study of British and Turkish literatures in the presentation of the poets' philosophical arguments and ontological ideas yet. In order to bridge this gap, this paper aims to reveal the relationship between two poems, *Prometheus* and *Prometeus, A Thief* written by two distinguished poets, Lord Byron and Can Yücel who lived in different periods of time grounded on the idea that myths are imitated in the works of literature by passing through some changes although they come from different societal and cultural backgrounds.

2. Methodology

The literature on the various definitions of the myth, the relationship between literature and mythology and the myth of Prometheus was reviewed with the purpose of forming a basis of the current study. Besides, some background information about the poets was given during this process. Accordingly, it made it possible to compare two poems in accordance to the literature reviewed aforementioned.

3. The myth of Prometheus in Can Yücel's *Prometheus, A Thief* and Lord Byron's *Prometheus*

In his own life, Byron being under the influence of Romanticism fought against the Ottoman army on behalf of Greece supporting its independence from Ottoman Empire at a very young age. The impact of his admiration to Greek history and culture as can be clearly understood by his fight on behalf of the Greeks in the war could be one of the reasons that force him to write *Prometheus*. In the poem, Byron generally represents Prometheus in a known way as an immortal god who symbolizes courage, human intellect and his great sufferings by using binary elements in the lines consecutively. In the second stanza, he uses such words, Heaven, Fate, and Hate together:

“And the inexorable Heaven,
And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
The ruling principle of Hate” (Byron 18-22)

The word, Heaven is the abode of the god(s) and is usually associated with mercy. Nevertheless, Byron prefers to use it with a word that has an unfavourable meaning, “inexorable” referring to Prometheus' sufferings. Despite the fact that Byron creates sympathy for the god, hence, he continues making use of the word, Fate by attributing it a negative meaning, “deaf tyranny” and Hate as a “ruling principle” to refer to Zeus having the power to control humanity and deciding their destiny. He uses these three words purposefully in order to show the contradictions between these three concepts which are among some characteristics of the works of the Romantics. By using opposite thoughts, he questions the punishment by the ruling god, Zeus who sentences Prometheus and makes an analogy between the god and human being by ascribing him godly spirit and humanly flesh and blood:

“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;” (Byron 43-46)

Byron associates Prometheus with “a symbol and a sign”, idolizes him for mankind and sympathizes with him due to his tragic condition. He uses the god as a symbol to human beings by focusing on his talent to endure agony and to push through the difficulties of life. He intends to show mankind how to be a rebel against the tyranny of power and how to make death a victory. In fact, myths pay attention to the general struggles and problems of human beings by guiding people how to deal with these problems and how to respond to them. Byron applies Joseph Campbell's notion in the poem and wants human beings to place themselves in the punishment that Prometheus has to undertake and the agony that he experiences:

“Titan! to whose immortal eyes
The sufferings of mortality,
Seen in their sad reality,” (Byron 1-3)

He finds Prometheus' sufferings sarcastic in that he is a god and at the same time an immortal being but he can feel the pain like a usual human being. This idea includes a part of dualism as Prometheus expresses his feelings on how the punishment given by the gods is not fair, which comprises characteristics of human beings.

“Were not as things that gods despise;
What was thy pity's recompense?
A silent suffering, and intense;
The rock, the vulture, and the chain,
All that the proud can feel of pain,
The agony they do not show,” (Byron 1-9)

Although he suffers from torture, he rejects to accept defeat and prefers to be in silence waiting for the victory. He shows, in a way, passive resistance for he shows no anger or no attack; he does not try to take revenge against the punishment but at the same time he does not submit it. His passive disobedience surprises his oppressor, Zeus who is reflected as the representative of the totalitarian rulers of the period in England. Byron features the state of social sufferings faced by the society, by employing the mythical conflict

between Prometheus who steals the fire for humanity and Zeus who deprives mankind of fire. He exemplifies Prometheus as the symbol of the rebellious force of mankind who fights against the tyranny that finds its shape in the form of Zeus. The god presents the agony of human beings who by nature have defects yet at the same time have the power of mind and reason that help them to change their conditions. He wants the people in the society to revolt against the rulers serving the interests of the rich and suppressing the common men. He wants them to be a rebel just like the god who fights against his own kind and is spared a punishment. It is quite clear to see Byron's political criticism in the use of Promethean myth in the poem. He is a symbol for the human beings living on earth who can learn by imitating Prometheus' actions and conducts in order to abolish the values and ideas of the ruling class:

"A mighty lesson we inherit:" (Byron 41)

Despite of all sufferings he undertakes, the god's soul does not falter or break but survive and becomes "a mighty lesson" for human beings. It is true that the god is in a tragic situation, yet he has "a firm will" and this helps him to endure the punishment:

"And a firm will, and a deep sense,
Which even in torture can descry
Its own concentrated recompense,
Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory" (Byron 52-56)

In fact, Byron shows the human beings a way of how to make "Death a Victory" by giving Promethean myth as a symbol. Although the general tone of the poem is gloomy, he finishes it in an optimistic manner. He relies on the power human beings have and encourages them to revolt against the oppressors of the society. If they manage to refuse their oppressors' cruelty then, they can win the victory despite of all the sufferings that the god endures. Moreover, he presents the god to convey a moral message to the people in the society to criticise the contemporary political chaos. He believes that the human beings have the necessary talent to create a society in which justice and equality will reign in the power one day. It is this reality that we need in our contemporary world where tyranny and injustice are all in reign; people are helpless and can do nothing against all these forces. Maybe, Prometheus is the hero who can save humanity from this situation. Byron gives clues of this idea in his poem.

After analysing the Promethean myth and its use by a famous British poet, Byron from the British poetry, there is a need to examine a poem by Can Yücel from the Turkish poetry to support the idea that myths are universal and at the same time they reflect their societies. Can Yücel is purposefully selected among Turkish poets in that mythological elements abandon in his poems. Can Yücel's poems cover various topics; his themes vary in substance to involve woman, love, homeland, social satire and politics. In addition to his being an excellent reader of various subjects, his cultural background as a translator has made him a cultivated poet and a critic who knows how to employ his various linguistic and literary tools in his art including mythology. Like Byron, he often refers to the elements of mythology in his poetry in order to make it carry a universal message and sometimes he uses it to put emphasis on his love for woman, nature and life. It is certainly obvious to find mythological elements in his poetry. He handles Pan myth in 'A Goat Tale' (*Keçi Masalı*), the creation myth in 'No' (*Hayır*), Poseidon and Aphrodite myths in *Hidrellez* and *Seng-i Derya*, Hades and Persephone myths in 'A Greek Sonnet' (*Yunani bir Sone*) and Pandora myth in 'Pandora's Jar' (*Pandora'nın Kutusu*) and of course Prometheus myth in 'Prometheus, A Thief' (*Prometeus, Bir Hırsız*). Yücel starts his poem by introducing Prometheus as a thief who steals the burning gas from the gods:

"prometos, bir hırsız
tanrıları soymuş,
ateşi çalmış
yanar gazı," (Yücel 1-4)

(Prometheus, a thief
Robbed the gods
Stole the fire
Burning gas)

On the contrary to Byron, Yücel prefers introducing the god in a negative way by calling him a thief leading the classical version of the story told by Hesiod. Hesiod represents Prometheus as a god who is a deceiver, a thief, as well as a cheater. Indeed, he has not totally a positive image and his action is not acceptable when looking on behalf of the gods in that he has excessive pride and he does not obey the rules of the gods though he is also one of these gods. As he is most famous for using irony in his poetry, he speaks this talent at the very beginning of the poem by declaring the god a thief referring to Hesiod's trickster but then he continues by explaining that his crime is to rob the gods and steal the fire for the sake of humanity. In fact, it is not a real crime he transforms a negative sense of robbery into a positive image like Robin Hood who steals from the rich people and gives to the poor ones. Prometheus robs fire from the ruling class and gives it to the common man on earth. The poem follows on the god's sufferings resulted from his commitment in a similar way as Byron represents it:

"kafkas dağlarında bir
kayaya çakılmış,
iki kartal,
vur, allah vur!.." (Yücel 6-9)

(In the mountains of Caucasus
Was chained to a rock
Were two vultures on his liver
Tearing to pieces again and again!)

He describes the god's punishment chaining to a rock in the Caucasus Mountains. Two vultures are appointed by Zeus to tear his liver into pieces every day. The use of some symbols as the god's theft, the fire, the vulture, and the liver implies some traits of human beings such as perceptions of outrage, suffering and feeling guilty, besides, their reaction to these circumstances. He contains everything that a human being has as the human's logic and creative abilities and of course the inevitable sufferings inherited from Adam and Eve. In Byron's poem, Prometheus' rebelling glowing spirit has its special world and his attempts are for the sake of humanity. However, Yücel makes this similarity between the god and the leader and the founder of Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after a brief introduction to the god's story:

"mustafa kemal'den önce, ilk
kemalistti kendisi, belki de ilk siroz
prometos" (Yücel 9-11)

(Before Mustafa Kemal
Was the first Kemalist, perhaps the first cirrhosis
prometos)

A question immediately comes to mind why Yücel separates this myth and chooses Prometheus as a figure of a direct comparison to Mustafa Kemal and what he combines the stolen fire offering Prometheus' gift to mankind. In order to do this, he sacrifices his freedom and subsistence. Yücel has a purpose in comparing these two figures in terms of their contribution to society: one is the god who steals the fire to help mankind and the other is a human being who established the Turkish Republic after the War of Liberation and made several reforms in Turkish political and legal systems such as abolishing the Caliphate, bringing a new alphabet, making education secular etc. Like Prometheus, Mustafa Kemal robs the freedom of a nation from the enemies representing the rulers, the gods. His way of thinking emphasized the enlightenment and improvement in all levels of Turkish society. He took the idea of enlightenment as a role model from the Renaissance and applied it to bring modernity into Turkish society. In order to achieve his goal, he did his best. Prometheus not only opposes the tyranny of the gods by saving the human race from extinction but also gives important gifts: fire and reason to mankind. He says Prometheus whose energy is never intermixed with creative power, with human intelligence and vision is the first Kemalist, a term used to refer to a person performing the principles of Atatürk's reforms. Mustafa Kemal takes the traits of the god and finally becomes the god himself. By attributing the godly features to a mortal, Yücel unites the Promethean myth with Mustafa Kemal's individuality. Like the god, Mustafa Kemal is also a rebel who is full of courage and defiance. At the end of the poem, Yücel refers to cirrhosis, which is known as the reason that causes Mustafa Kemal's death. It is an illness in which the liver does not function appropriately because of damaging for a long time. The disease improves slowly over months or years and the patient suffers a lot.

He uses the word, cirrhosis related to the liver on purpose to show the similarity between the god and Mustafa Kemal's agony in that two vultures tear the god's liver while Mustafa Kemal also suffers from the liver illness that makes him dead.

4. Conclusion

The use of Promethean myth in Byron's and Yücel's poems is not a coincidence because of the fact that myths are universal and share common features of societies. Prometheus is a Greek god exemplifying Greek society and culture and Greece is usually an ideal land and a symbol for both poets. Byron's and Yücel's poems indicate that how they both appreciate their mythological background implied in Prometheus' agony. They also use this myth as a means of political and social commentary as well due to their political and social views. They both reshape Prometheus for specific social and political ends necessitated by the present time, and they employ him in their poetry as a dramatic representation of the deepest awareness of the inner meaning of human life as a rebel. Their poems reveal their appreciation of the communal and collective nature of myths, targeting at binding nations, in this case Turkish and British people, together in common universal activities. Their restated myth describes a deeper sense of binding the present of current values with past of traditional belief and reaching toward a future that is full of social and political aspirations. Beside this, the selected poems indicate how Byron and Yücel's poetry sets a good example of Jung's ideas in literature representing a lively component in human civilization. This paper has focused on both poets' application of mythology by focusing on finding out the Prometheus myth. It has also introduced their poems establishing the prominence of Promethean myth they are employing to explore its link to archetypal patterns and archetypes. Two poems are by no means elaborate, nevertheless present a few of the archetypal images that we encounter in their poems, "provided that they necessarily function as archetypes that should be interpreted as such only if the total context of the work logically supports an archetypal reading" (Moqattash, 2013: 208). To conclude, both poems clearly indicate that the relationship between myths and society is mutual in that myths not only echo the views and thoughts of the society but also form a basis for them.

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