

Caroline Corbeau-Parsons, *Prometheus in the Nineteenth Century: From Myth to Symbol*. Legenda Studies in Comparative Literature. London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2013. Pp. 196. £45. ISBN 9781907975523.

In *Prometheus in the Nineteenth Century: From Myth to Symbol*, Caroline Corbeau-Parsons begins with the premise that ‘a myth is in essence protean’ (4). Drawing upon the work of Martin Day, she examines how the Prometheus myth moves through three constitutive ‘levels’: from ‘the archaic myth, which essentially relies on oral tradition,’ to ‘the intermediate myth,’ which is a conscious, artistic production, to ‘the derivative myth’ (7). Corbeau-Parsons’s study examines the initial duality of ‘the archaic myth’ in its representation of ‘Prometheus *plasticator* and Prometheus the fire-giver’ (9), focusing on the role that Hesiod and Aeschylus play in the establishment of this level of the myth. She proceeds to dispel the idea that Prometheus was ‘a prefiguration of Jesus Christ’ (19) and chronologically examines how the myth was used during the Renaissance and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular, she notes that ‘[t]he interpretation of Prometheus from a social perspective flourished during the Enlightenment’ (32), and that this perspective would in turn shape the nineteenth-century adaptations of the myth.

In particular, Corbeau-Parsons identifies Goethe’s work as marking ‘the main turning-point in the history of the Prometheus myth’ (38). Specifically, she argues, ‘the essential issue of the myth, in Goethe’s works, shifts from that of Hesiod and Aeschylus,’ from ‘the transgression of divine power through hubris’ to ‘man’s power of creation’ (49). Corbeau-Parsons notes that this focus on creative power is adopted by Byron and Shelley, and once ‘the humanization of the Titan ... appears as a given fact’ (68) the Prometheus myth is employed across Europe – in particular, she examines its representation in France, in the works of Hugo, Liszt, and Balzac. Although Corbeau-Parsons notes that, in the case of Hugo’s poetry, there is relatively little mention of Prometheus, ‘other poets perceived a close link’ between Hugo and the figure of Prometheus. In effect, this connection marks a transition in the artistic use of Prometheus: instead of drawing upon the myth itself, Romanticism focuses on utilizing ‘the symbol Prometheus represented’ (82). Ultimately, Corbeau-Parsons concludes, ‘Because it took on a metaphysical value, men projected themselves onto the image of Prometheus, who became a typification of man, and, increasingly, of the artist’ (83). This pattern will, she argues, become an element of great artistic interest for the Symbolists.

The last part of *Prometheus in the Nineteenth Century* specifically examines the role of Prometheus in the Symbolist movement. After summarizing key issues and tenets of Symbolism, Corbeau-Parsons notes the particular appeal of Prometheus’ ‘tragic quality’ for the Symbolist movement, and examines the role that the interpretations of Nietzsche and Marx played in the perception of Prometheus during the late nineteenth century. By the start of the twentieth century, Corbeau-Parsons argues, ‘the Prometheus symbol’ had become ‘a prism, whose facets condensed the various beams of representation of the Titan’ (127). *Prometheus in the Nineteenth Century* concludes with a discussion of the Prometheus symbol in the work of Moreau, Scriabin and Kupka, and an examination of the conflation of the figures of Prometheus and Pygmalion that occurred over the course of the nineteenth century.

Overall, Corbeau-Parsons’ *Prometheus in the Nineteenth Century* is a well-written, systematic and comprehensive examination of the Prometheus myth and its many artistic adaptations and nuances. Corbeau-Parsons opts not to discuss Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, even though that particular novel is explicitly subtitled ‘The Modern Prometheus.’ This decision

seems rather paradoxical, given that Corbeau-Parsons herself will repeatedly insist that myths are both ‘bound to evolve’ and ‘constantly open to new interpretations’ (58). Because Mary Shelley’s interpretation ‘is not centred on [Prometheus] as such ... her view on the myth remains on the fringe’ (57) – this is Corbeau-Parsons’s reason for omitting any discussion of it.

Ultimately, this is perhaps the only major weakness of an otherwise thorough examination of the Prometheus myth: Corbeau-Parsons never fully accounts for her own specific choices in the trajectory of her analysis. Why focus on the role of Prometheus in Hugo’s work (where the Titan is rarely mentioned) but ignore his foregrounding in Mary Shelley’s text? Such omissions become particularly noticeable in the final chapters of Corbeau-Parsons’s study, where it becomes difficult to determine why she shifts to a discussion of the conflation of Prometheus with Pygmalion, instead of focusing on a more detailed analysis of Symbolist representations of Prometheus. Although she announces at the outset of her study that ‘the derivative myth’ is her ‘main concern,’ in the end, Corbeau-Parsons’s *Prometheus in the Nineteenth Century* does a better job of analyzing the nuances of ‘the intermediate myth’ – the consciously aesthetic reproductions and adaptations made by major figures of the nineteenth century.

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