

The Prophetic Imagination of PB Shelley



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In his *Defense of Poetry*, Shelley claims, “Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets” (*Shelley’s Poetry* 513). This identification of the poet, and specifically Shelley, with the prophetic has been fertile ground for academic inquiry. Even a cursory glance of Shelley’s poetry and political beliefs reveals a keen interest in what is wrong with the world, how to fix it, and what will happen if no positive action is taken. Too often, however, these studies confine their discussions of Romantic prophecy to conceptions of prophetic inspiration, futurity, and rhetoric – divorcing the work from its radical impetus for social change and empowerment. Drawing on the work of two prominent Old Testament scholars, as well as Shelley’s own Biblical allusions, I will focus on one of Shelley’s earliest poems, “Queen Mab,” as an intentionally prophetic text that seek to critique the dominant consciousness of his (and future) times and energize a community of resistance to the status quo.

Literature Review

A relatively large and distinguished body of criticism has linked the Romantic poets to the prophetic tradition. This work has been most useful in establishing some of the prophetic modes in which the Romantic poets operated and how this prophetic reading of their work changes how we view them. Specifically, good work has been done regarding prophetic inspiration, prophetic rhetoric and the power of prophetic language, exploring both the futurity and historicity of prophetic speech, and on the symbolism of prophetic poetry. However, most of these discussions take place in the abstract – confining their discussion do Romantic poetry merely to the realm of thought, ideas, and writing – all useful realms for exploration, to be sure, but the prophetic also has a very real poetic agency, it acts in some very real world ways.

Ian Balfour’s book, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* is perhaps the most comprehensive and useful study on the subject. He asserts that prophecy is “not a single thing, and one has to attend to the differences that are sometimes tenuously grouped together under a single word” (4). For his purposes, however, he chooses to define prophecy in terms of “personal revelation and charisma” (4) combined with a focus on the efficacy of the spoken word. He places a lot of emphasis on the fact that the prophet claims to speak for God and that his words claim to hold real power (5).

In *Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind*, Terence Hoagwood moves us a little closer to a definition of prophetic poetics grounded in the radicalism that is so apparent in the Biblical texts. Specifically, he analyzes the prophetic works of Blake and Shelley as they related to the philosophical traditions of the time. He asserts that “the central symbolic pattern of biblical prophecy is the overthrow of spiritual tyranny,” and that “the prophet and philosopher both narrate a revolution of mind in order to effect a renovation of vision” (5). This prophetic vision, according to Hoagwood is “composed of images that are to be read as the shapes of ideas... [it] is a composite form, containing verbal and visual images” (40). Thus prophecy is linked to written, spoken, and visual art in that it uses images to convey its radical re-visioning of the world. This provides a glimpse of how prophetic prophecy, through the use of images and symbols can begin to enact a real revolution of ideas that spills out into the world at large.

My research into both the poetry of Shelley and Old Testament prophetic tradition seems to indicate that prophetic poetry is in reality a conglomeration of all of these models. It is based on inspiration and the efficacy of the words, but it also involves a radical reassessment of dominant cultural patterns and a complete re-visioning of how the world should work. In order to better understand these ideas, an alternative prophetic framework becomes useful.

The Purpose of the Prophetic Imagination

“What manner of man is the prophet?” (Heschel 3) asks Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his work, *The Prophets*. The answer lies in the true

nature of the prophets' calling. A prophet, in the Old Testament sense is not concerned *only* with futurity, as several critics have observed. For instance, Balfour quotes Blanchot, who writes, "the term of prophet – borrowed from the Greek to designate a condition foreign to Greek culture – deceives us if it invites us to make of the *nabi* [the Hebrew word for prophet] he in whom the future speaks. The prophetic word is not only a word of the future" (5). What Blanchot hints at is that, throughout most of history, the Hebrew word *nabi* and the Greek translation of the word *prophetes* have been unfairly linked. For whereas *phrophetes* denotes futurity only, *nabi* is far more complex. Balfour contends that the word comes from a verb meaning "to call" or "to announce (6)." As Heschel puts it, he is one who is "called (by God), [and] one who has a vocation (from God)" (405). Thus the prophetic function encompasses far more than just predicting the future – it is involved with confronting the culture with a word from God that may or may not contain an element of futurity.

Walter Brueggemann, a prominent Old Testament scholar from Columbia Theological Seminary, has identified the two key characteristics that make up what he calls the "prophetic imagination." First of all it "serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant [or royal] consciousness (3)" of a culture; and secondly it seeks to energize an oppressed community against the dominant cultural consciousness (3).

The concept of the royal consciousness is key to Brueggemann's idea of what a prophet's calling actually is. In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, he begins by describing Moses' famous struggle against an oppressive Egyptian regime that was holding the Israelites captive. In Brueggemann's construction, Pharaoh is the instigator of a royal consciousness of oppression and exploitation in which no dissent or freedom is possible. Furthermore, he uses religion of "static triumphalism (6)" to justify and extend this regime, setting up the Egyptian gods as the justifiers of continued oppression. Moses sets out to undermine this social consciousness by proving, through a series of confrontations with Pharaoh's advisors, that the Egyptian gods are no gods at all. In place of this consciousness, Moses sets up "the alternative religion of the freedom of God. Thus, in setting up freedom over a system of oppression, Moses is instead proposing a system of a "politics of justice and compassion (6-7)." The critique of the royal consciousness is in reality a setting up of an alternative, just consciousness of freedom and hope against a politics of oppression. In other words, "He was not engaged in a struggle to transform a regime; rather, his concern was with the consciousness that undergirded and made such a regime possible (21)."

Secondly, the prophetic imagination must serve to "energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move (Brueggemann 3)." It is important to critique the royal consciousness, but progress takes time. In the mean time, people must still live with the reality of present day oppression and it is part of the prophetic function to energize a community of hope. A prophet must "create the sense of new realities that can be trusted and relied upon just when the old realities had left us hopeless (14)." He or she does this in three ways:

1. By pointing out that the alternative community knows something that those of the dominant consciousness do not know. In the case of Pharaoh, that God is moving in dark and mysterious ways on behalf of the children of Israel (14-15)
2. By taking sides with the "losers and powerless marginal people (16)." By "daring to speak before the data are in" and "daring to affront more subtle thinking (16)."
3. By engaging in doxology "in which the singers focus on this free one and in the act of the song appropriate the freedom of God as their own freedom (16).

The Efficacy of Language

For both the Old Testament prophets and the Romantics, language (and especially poetic language) plays a major role in critiquing the dominant consciousness, energizing the oppressed, and affecting real change in the world. However, it is one thing to simply critique and energize through the means of poetry and prophecy – it is another thing entirely for this poetry to interact with reality and institute social change.

As far as prophecy goes, here Brueggemann is helpful. For, in forming the poetic language of prophecy, the Biblical prophets are implicitly participating in the idea that their words have agency, that they can act and that by speaking, or naming, an alternative consciousness can be set in place and energized, as Brueggemann puts it:

The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric. The language of the empire is surely the language of managed reality, or production and schedule and market. But that language will never permit or cause freedom because there is no newness in it. Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality, and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible (18).

Thus the very language of prophecy is involved in creating the reality it hopes to see. This also helps us get a better picture of what Shelley means when he names poets as "prophets and legislators," for it would seem that he too is wrapped up in the idea that poets, and creative forces in general have the power to shape reality. Thus poetry, for Shelley, becomes something much more elemental than simple words on a page – it has agency. As Balfour notes:

Shelley is concerned to garner for poetry something of the aura specific to prophecy. Poets as prophets may not know the form of

events... but they do know their *spirit*, which is surely the most essential thing. And more than this, the prophetic poets, insofar as their thoughts are the germs of the flowers and fruit “of latest time,” help produce the very future that they might otherwise seem merely to know in advance (39).

Prophetic poetry is a tool whereby an alternative consciousness can be tracked and created in the world at large, an alternative consciousness that both attacks the dominant consciousness of the day and of ages to come; and which energizes this alternative community, providing it with the hope that, one day, they will be able to look back on events like the Peterloo massacre as ancient history – drowned out by the light of freedom, justice, and compassion.

Queen Mab

Queen Mab, Shelley’s first great prophetic poem, follows, almost to the letter, the prophetic pattern laid in the works of Brueggemann and Heschel. He critiques the dominant consciousness of his age by pointing out the oppression and injustice created by the alignment of religion and religious sanction with power, and then energizes an alternative community by aligning himself with the marginalized and providing them with a vision, a doxology really, of hope.

True to its prophetic form, the poem starts out with an overview of the prophetic function within the poem. After the fairy queen Mab has awakened Ianthe from her slumber, she explains that she is “the Fairy Mab,” to whom is given “the wonders of the human world to keep: / The secrets of the immeasurable past,” along with “the future (*Shelley’s Poetry* 21).” Mab, then, functions as the prophetic voice in the poem who will instruct Ianthe on the realities of the world. She explains that “the past shall rise; / Thou shalt behold the present; I will teach / The secrets of the future (*Shelley’s Poetry* 25).”

With this valediction, the fairy queen embarks on her survey of the past and present, which is, predictably, marred with tyranny and violence. What is interesting here is how Shelley chooses to frame the problems of oppression and injustice. Throughout the poem, he sounds a sustained note of discontent and accusation against the church and the role it plays in oppressing humankind. But it is not simply the church he is angry at, but the alliance of the church with temporal power. Often, Shelley’s diatribes against king and church go side by side and it is clear that he sees them as in league with each other. He begins several stanzas with some variation of the phrase “Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast the human flower / Even in its tender bud; their influence darts / like subtle poison through the bloodless veins / Of desolate society (*Shelley’s Poetry* 38).”

Specifically, Shelley sees the government (represented by the kings and statesman) and the church (represented by the priests) as complicit in a scheme to subjugate and plunder the poor. He writes that “War is the statesman’s game, the priest’s delight / The lawyer’s jest, the hired assassin’s trade (*Shelley’s Poetry* 39),” which is enacted simply for material gain. On the subject of commerce, he sees the economic system of the industrial revolution as something created by this two-headed power:

Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,

The signet of its all-enslaving power

Upon a shining ore, and called it gold: (*Shelley’s Poetry* 43).

Thus the capitalizing impulse is what drives the powerful to amass wealth at the expense of the many. As he wrote in his *Defense of Poetry*, the rich become richer and the poor become poorer.

In and of itself, this concern for the poor and their oppression by those in power could be considered prophetic in the Biblical sense. But, combine that with the identification of religion as a tool of power for repression, and the resemblance is uncanny. Remember that both Pharaoh and Solomon set up a religion of “static triumphalism (Brueggemann 6)” to justify and extend their regime. By exercising absolute state control over religion, these rulers were able to utilize religious sanction in order to set up oppressive social policies that enriched the powerful and the expense of the masses. According to Brueggemann, “It is precisely religion that legitimates and makes possible the economics and politics that emerged [in the times of Pharaoh and Solomon] (30).” These ideas of course predate Marx, who would have heartily agreed that religion has been historically used as an instrument of oppression.

In this light, Shelley’s attack on religion is not simply a diatribe against God and organized religion, but an attack on the dominant consciousness of his day in which the church and state were, not only linked, but almost identical. For Shelley, the church in his time had gotten so far away from the principles of Jesus that he expresses admiration for in his *Essay on Christianity* and had instead moved towards simple moralizing as an instrument of oppressing the people mind, body, and soul. This cold, state-controlled religion, Shelley is pointing out, is really no religion at all, just another tool in the hands of the powerful. A tool which “the tyrant tempers to his work, / wields in his wrath, and as he wills destroys (*Shelley’s Poetry* 41).

If the first half of *Mab* is a vision of the past and present in all its bloodiness, oppression, and degradation; then the second half is a doxology and revelation of future hope. After listening to the depressing catalogue of humankind’s depravity, the spirit Ianthe inquires:

O Fairy! in the lapse of years,

Is there no hope in store?

Will yon vast suns roll on

Interminably, still illumining

The night of so many wretched souls,

And see no hope for them?

Will not the universal Spirit e'er

Revivify this withered limb of Heaven (*Shelley's Poetry* 48)?

The depressing truth of the dominant consciousness has been revealed, an alternative community or resistance formed; but given the depressing reality of oppression and injustice, can there be any room for hope?

It is here that the prophetic function of energizing comes into play, and Queen Mab obliges by presenting Ianthe with a revelation of hope for a new day and a doxology of praise for the powers of nature that will fulfill it. Using her power of looking into the future, she envisions a day in which the religious powers that have so long oppressed humankind are gone and nature has been revitalized. "How sweet a scene will earth become!" sings Mab, "Of purest spirits, a pure dwelling place, / Symphonious with the planetary spheres; / When man, with changeless nature coalescing, / Will undertake regeneration's work (*Shelley's Poetry* 49)."

In this vision of nature's revitalization, everything has been reordered. In a description that clearly references the book of Revelation, Shelley writes, "The lion now forgets to thirst for blood: / There might you see him sporting in the sun / Beside the dreadless kid; / his claws are sheathed, / His teeth are harmless, custom's force has made / His nature as the nature of a lamb (*Shelley's Poetry* 63)." Nature itself then, is portrayed as something animate that has been harmed by human cruelty, but in this revisioning, even the most natural of enemies can play together without fear.

It does not end there, though. Not only nature will be reordered but also human beings:

Here now the human being stands adorning

This loveliest earth with taintless body and mind:

Blest from his birth with all bland impulses,

Which gently in his noble bosom wake

All kindly passions and all pure desires (*Shelley's Poetry* 65).

In this new world, humankind's worst impulses have been negated – war and poverty are no more and humans can live together in harmony.

This revelation of hope is given to Ianthe, who is instructed to carry it back to the world of sorrow and despair. It is a prophetically energizing vision, a vision upon which she must fix her eyes as she toils against injustice. It is a vision that no doubt can easily be criticized as idealistic, impractical, and impossible given the pragmatic realities of the world. But true prophecy will have none of this, it will not be bogged down by what the world thinks is *possible*. It knows something the rest of society does not and presses on undaunted toward that day when the earth will be revitalized and renewed, toward that day when the alternative community of hope can be restored.

Conclusion

As we have seen, P.B. Shelley was a truly prophetic poet who utilized the poetic form to criticize and dismantle the dominant consciousness of his time and then energize an alternative community of hope and resistance against it. In place of this dominant consciousness he consistently sets up an ideal of freedom and justice that is incredibly consistent with the prophetic tradition.

Finally, Shelley's prophetic poetry is specially marked by prophetic power in that it is not strictly delineated by time or place – it spans all times and addresses all situations that are inherently unjust. It confronts the dominant cultural assumptions of the every age and argues for radical change. It withstands attempts to co-opt its message for purely aesthetic purposes and stands against a view of poetry as strict historic artifact. In sum, poets truly are the legislators and prophets of the world in that their work continues to live on even after they and the situations they fought against have

vanished into history.

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Shelley English Romantic poet 2. Martyred by society and conventional values, the Christ figure is resurrected by the power of nature and his own imagination and spreads his prophetic visions over the earth. • Shelley further separates his Christ figures from traditional Christian values in

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