

Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 3

September 2015

'We Are All Greeks:' Sympathy and Proximity in Shelley's Hellas

Kyle J. Klausning

University of Minnesota, Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/horizons>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Klausning, Kyle J. (2015) "'We Are All Greeks:' Sympathy and Proximity in Shelley's Hellas," *Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal*. Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/horizons/vol2/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.

History Senior Seminar *Scholarly Horizons*

Kyle Klausing

6/1/2015

'We Are All Greeks:' Sympathy and Proximity in Shelley's *Hellas*

Percy Bysshe Shelley first learned of the Greek Revolution in the summer of 1821 while enduring self-imposed exile in Italy. Whatever feelings of enthusiasm he might have had for the long awaited revolt against Ottoman occupation quickly withered as reports of violent Turkish reprisals slowly trickled in. Resenting his inability to aid in the uprising and scorning the general apathy that he felt pervaded the 'civilized world,' Shelley quickly set about extolling the virtues of the Greek cause in a 1100 line poem eventually published in January of 1822 as *Hellas*. Asking his agent in London to "send the M[anuscript] instantly to a Printer,"¹ Shelley hoped that by revealing to the reader the reality of conditions on the ground, he would engender sympathy for the revolution (as well as hopefully donations of arms and money). A major obstacle to Shelley's consciousness raising efforts, however, was the negative preconceptions held by many Europeans about modern Greeks. To circumvent this obstacle, Shelley bridged cultural and political differences between the reader and the Greek subject by using classical structure, vocabulary, and themes as a way to collapse the distance between reality and ideality. This literary reworking hinged on the popular connotations of this classical imagery, which Shelley used to accentuate commonalities between the British tradition of liberty and his representation of the Greek revolutionaries. This transcendence of boundaries created an imagined proximity between the reader and the subject that served to engender sympathy for Greece.

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Hellas," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 406.

Shelley was not alone in his commitment to Greek independence. The Greek Revolution had seized the imagination of the British radical intelligentsia in a way unseen since the French Revolution – and the bloody Turkish suppression that followed enraged it in equal measure. Towering public intellectuals such as Jeremy Bentham, David Ricardo, and Lord Byron banded together over their shared sympathy for the embattled Greek people. These philhellenes (literally, ‘one who loves Greece’) constituted a vast network of dedicated activists thinly spread across Europe and North America. Even before the revolution began, many of these activists helped to establish various Greek associations and organizations for the purpose of publicizing the plight of the Greeks and trying to sway political opinion to join their side. While the viability of philhellenism quite clearly depended upon the general interest of its adherents, it also benefited from the early 19th century flowering of radical political associations across Europe working on issues including abolitionism, republicanism, and social reform.

In spite of the remarkable consensus among radical left wing circles in Europe over the moral necessity to ‘rescue’ the Greeks, Shelley and the philhellenes faced serious opposition from a number of sources. Of primary concern was the unwillingness of the Great Powers to intervene on behalf of the Greek nationalists. Political unwillingness in many cases bordered on open hostility to philhellenic activists perceived as threatening the balance of power so painstakingly established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. In Britain, the Tory government of Lord Liverpool was especially adamant in its refusal to support the Greek cause. While not particularly sympathetic to the actions of the Ottoman Empire, Liverpool and his Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, wanted to preserve the European state system at any cost, even if that meant the continued subjugation of Greece to Turkey. Of particular concern was the possibility of Russian expansion into the eastern Mediterranean by way of a Greek satellite state,

and the broader destabilizing consequences of changing European borders so soon after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars. Non-intervention thus became the order of the day. In justifying such a policy in the face of egregious Turkish atrocities, Castlereagh (who acknowledged that the Turkish suppression of the uprising “made humanity shudder”), wagered that by upholding “the fundamental obligations of the Alliance [...] the present European system [...] will long continue to subsist for the safety and the repose of Europe.”² By recognizing the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire to crush civilian revolts within its own borders, Castlereagh hoped to prevent another general continental war. In the opening months of the revolution, a conservative consensus existed in Europe that was fundamentally at odds with the goals of Shelley and the philhellenes.

The determination with which the British government adhered to this policy of non-intervention stoked outrage among the philhellenes, transforming an informal network of Greek sympathizers into a well-organized movement of dedicated activists. Philhellenic critique of British policy was rooted in a larger critique of the Tory Party and the British conservative establishment that had been brewing long before the outbreak of the revolution. Using the unpopular Foreign Minister as a figurehead for the Tory establishment, Shelley blasted off verses with a ferocity that outdid even his most stinging attacks on the Ottoman government:

I met Murder on the way –
 He had a mask like Castlereagh –
 Very smooth he looked, yet grim:
 Seven blood-hounds followed him.

All were fat; and well they might
 Be in admirable plight,
 For one by one, and two by two,
 He tossed them human hearts to chew

² Viscount Castlereagh, “Letter to the Tsar, 16 July, 1821,” in *Correspondence, Dispatches and Other Papers*, ed. The Marquess of Londonderry, (London, 1848-1852), 403.

From which his wide cloak he drew.³

One point upon which both Castlereagh and the philhellenes agreed, however, was the potentially universal nature of the revolution. Castlereagh earnestly believed that the uprising was fuelled by “a brand of that organized spirit of insurrection which is systematically propagating itself throughout Europe and which explodes wherever the hand of the governing power, from whatever cause, is enfeebled.” It was this universal revolutionary impulse that Castlereagh feared would indeed excite “every ardent adventurer and political fanatic in Europe”⁴ to take up arms in the name of Greece. To conservatives, an assault by the philhellenes on the Ottoman Empire was by extension an assault on their own realms – a conclusion with which Shelley would have readily agreed.

Yet official resistance to the revolution was the least of Shelley’s concerns. Despite general hostility to the Ottoman Empire, few Europeans were prepared to see Greeks as anything close to equals. For the most part, Greece occupied the periphery of geopolitical significance and denigrated as a degenerate and backward country lacking in development and civilization. Published accounts of modern Greece did not begin to appear in London bookstores until the late 17th century, and most depictions of Greek people meet by traveling Europeans were overwhelmingly negative. One popular account by the British traveler Aaron Hill described the modern Greek man as “sordidly Illiterate, and Inexpressibly Ignorant in anything beyond the dressing of his Horses.”⁵ Another British traveler, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wrote disappointedly in 1717 that “instead of demy Gods and heroes,” the whole of Greece was, “over

³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Mask of Anarchy,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 301.

⁴ Castlereagh, “Letter to the Tsar, 16 July, 1821,” 403-4.

⁵ Maria Koundoura, “Between Orientalism and Philhellenism: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s ‘Real’ Greeks,” *The Eighteenth Century* 45 (2004): 255.

run by Robbers.”⁶ In most accounts, however, the local inhabitants were entirely excluded. Instead, travelers focused on the classical ruins and surrounding natural landscape, paying little heed to the impoverished peasants they encountered along the way (who were, as Lady Montagu noted, “full of Absurditys”).⁷ Such disparaging caricatures helped form latter popular perceptions of Greek people – in fact, the depictions were so widespread that even dedicated philhellenes (ostensibly committed to the liberation of the Greek people) frequently belittled the Greeks they were supposedly helping. One contemporary of Lord Byron who eventually went to fight against the Turks, John Galt, observed acidly that “the Greeks of these times, as seen among the ruins of the ancient temples, are but as the vermin that inhabit the skeleton of a deceased hero.”⁸ Another prominent philhellene, George Finlay (who not only fought in Greece, but ultimately moved there permanently after 1827), variously characterized his adopted neighbors as “selfish,” vain,” and “presumptuous.”⁹ Their practice of Greek Orthodoxy, widely regarded as a bastardized form of Christianity in the west, added to their otherness and hindered potential sympathy along religious lines.

Even if potentially sympathetic Europeans had wanted to understand the Greeks, the geographic gulf in location presented a critical obstacle. Overall, Europeans had little exposure to Greece and its people. It was not until the outbreak of war on the European continent in the early 1790's that aristocrats began to include Greece as part of the Grand Tour. Even then, Ottoman officials severely limited the access granted to visiting foreigners, and as a result, Greece was mostly perceived in the public imagination as a ‘faraway land about which little was known.’ Inaccessibility grew with the outbreak of war in 1821. Ferocious fighting impeded free

⁶ Koundoura, “Between Orientalism and Philhellenism,” 257.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁹ Liz Potter, “‘Two Thousand Years of Suffering’: George Finlay and the *History of Greece*,” *British Schools at Athens Studies* 14 (2009): 20.

movement for journalists. Accurate accounts were difficult to find and most drew more from rumor and less from eyewitness testimonies; – in fact, many reporters assigned to write about Greek and Balkan affairs often did not even travel to the lands they were responsible for covering. For instance, news of the massacre of several hundred Greek civilians at Kydonies in June did not reach the British public until late August, and even then, several months were to pass before the arrival of more objective accounts. In other reports, specific numbers and locations were either ignored, or wildly misrepresented (one Russian reporter bizarrely estimated that 25 million Turks were living in Greece).¹⁰ Shelley, who had never been to Greece, received most of his information through Prince Alexander Mavrocordato, a leading Greek nationalist and future Prime Minister – hardly an objective source. The British public’s geographical distance from and cultural unfamiliarity with modern Greeks made it difficult to rouse popular sympathy for the revolution.

The difficulty in galvanizing public sympathy presented a major challenge to Shelley and the philhellenes. It was difficult for people to identify with another group with whom they were either unfamiliar or who were thought of as ethnically inferior, a problem compounded by the lack of media connectivity to comparatively remote and distant places like Greece. The concept that sympathy related to proximity was an important observation of Adam Smith who noted that a man would worry more over the loss of his little finger than he would the destruction of millions of fellow humans granted he never had to *see* them.¹¹ Smith understood proximity in the context of the small isolated villages of 18th century England; however, it is possible to extrapolate wider theoretical implications for a variety of other situations. Indeed, religious and secular notions alike have often engendered sympathy from people far removed and disparately

¹⁰ Bass, *Freedom’s Battle*, 56-7.

¹¹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 136-7.

located, while people have conversely shown the capacity for extreme callousness towards neighbors and friends. When David Hume wrote that this “diminution of vivacity [changes] in proportion to the degrees of distance and difficulty,”¹² he established the possibility of imaginatively circumventing the physical boundaries that, in normal circumstances, would have made genuine sympathy impossible. If less proximity produced less sympathy, then the logical solution was to bridge that proximity. Because physically bridging differences was impossible in most cases, it became necessary to use an alternative medium with which to connect spatially and culturally disparate people.

The basis for this constructed proximity lies in the ability of people to “imaginatively enter into the conditions and motivations of others with potentially very different histories.” Imaginary proximity enables people, in the eyes of political scientist Fonna Forman-Barzilai, to “transcend historical spaces.”¹³ The use of literature to reimagine historical and cultural spaces was well underway during the early 19th century, especially as it pertained to the development of nationalist ideologies. As the historian Gary J. Bass observes, “The same kind of processes that generated national identity could create some kind of solidarity with foreigners as well.”¹⁴ Relational reimaginings during the early 19th century occurred in tandem with the popularization of literature for a mass readership. In her book *Inventing Human Rights*, the historian Lynn Hunt demonstrated how widely available printed material created a new space in which activists could provide literary contexts relatable to the reader. “In reading,” Hunt argued, “[the reader] empathized across traditional social boundaries between nobles and commoners,

¹² Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 271.

¹³ Fonna Forman-Barzilai, “Sympathy in Space(s): Adam Smith on Proximity,” *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 207.

¹⁴ Bass, *Freedom's Battle*, 27.

masters and servants, men and women, perhaps even adults and children.”¹⁵ The empathy was imaginary only in the sense that it did not necessarily reflect their *lived* experience. All the same, it was rooted in a very real emotional response to the *actual* suffering of people with whom they could identify. The imagined proximity and subsequent sympathy come out of, in the words of Hunt, “a new social context” created by reading.¹⁶

By reimagining spatial and temporal contexts in Shelley’s *Hellas*, the reader is forced to reconsider their relationship with the subject. Analyses of this relationship have focused on Shelley’s treatment of the Greek subject in his poem, and the extent to which this reflects broader attitudes and notions within philhellenism. Academic views on literary representations of Greek people and culture in *Hellas* generally adopt some type of cultural-political binary. On the one hand, some point to Shelley’s fascination with classical Greek culture as a significant factor underpinning his depiction of the Greek cause. At the same time, others highlight the intersection between the work’s literary dimension, and the broader political climate of the early 19th century. Additionally, understanding how Shelley creates an imagined literary proximity between Greece and the reader necessitates a critical engagement of the work with philhellenism as a whole. While it would certainly be incorrect to say that Shelley’s view is completely representative of the opinions of other philhellenic activists, it is crucial to recognize that *Hellas* exists in tension with outside intellectual trends. Viewing the work as both an historical and literary text creates a sounding board of sorts with which to approach and analyze a variety of issues pertinent to philhellenism.

In an immediate sense, Shelley’s interest in the classical past clearly manifests itself in the structural dimension of his work. In the poem’s preface, Shelley acknowledges that

¹⁵ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

Aeschylus' *The Persians* inspired the work. This classical work from the 5th century BCE stands as the only surviving classical drama to have depicted contemporary events (the failed Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE and the Greek victories at Marathon and Salamis). Aeschylus' plot centers on the reaction of the Persian emperor Xerxes to news of his defeat with occasional interjections by external choruses, a typical poetic structure of the time. In *Hellas*, Shelley employs a similar plot model. The poem's tension stems from a dialectical exchange between two opposing viewpoints – the ruminations of the downtrodden Turkish sultan, Mahmud, and a chorus of enslaved Greek women intended to represent the 'Hellenic spirit.' As the sultan (representative of the Ottoman Empire) laments what he sees as the inevitable destruction of his empire, the chorus triumphantly extol the coming resurrection of classical glories. In a more general sense, the form of *Hellas* borrows from the classical style of dramatic poetry: the plot occurs in a 24 hour cycle, in a specific space (the sultan's palace), and surrounding a very specific event – important aspects of the Greek style of verse. Many of these structural similarities would have been immediately obvious to the reader given the popularity of classical form in Romantic and popular literature.

The notion that cultural affinity for Greece shaped Shelley's appeal for sympathy reflects a relatively static view of language, and interpretation rooted in early academic research on the British philhellenes. One observer of the relationship between classicized imagery and philhellenic activism, for example, was the British historian C.W. Crawley. He linked the writings of people like Shelley and Byron to the 18th century literary tradition of antiquarianism, concluding that the philhellenic basis for sympathy "was quite independent of the character of the Greeks and the real conditions of Levantine politics; it lay in the European appeal of classical

tradition.”¹⁷ A contemporary of Crawley, Terence Spencer, highlighted the role of literature in inspiring “the notion that there existed an urgent moral obligation for Europe to restore liberty to Greece as a kind of payment for the civilization which Hellas had once given to the world.” Applying this historical outlook to *Hellas*, Spencer contends that the poem itself is “based upon the moving comparison between what Greece then was, and what Greece had been and always will remain in the imagination.”¹⁸ Scholars who interpreted literary representations in *Hellas* as ‘realistic’ portrayals reinforced the view that support for the Greek revolution was nothing more than a convenient excuse for literary excursions into the classical past.

While classical imagery does figure prominently in *Hellas*, however, key aspects of the poem highlight the nuanced engagement the poem has with external political realities. Instead of relying on an extended metaphor that locates the work concretely in the historical past, Shelley instead focuses the work on actual living people caught in the middle of an unfolding geopolitical event. Shelley repeatedly makes clear that his poem intends to bring light to the situation of the Greeks by accentuating the moral outrages of the conflict. In the preface, Shelley worries about the necessary loss of the work’s literary dimension as a consequence of his blunt portrayal of events (so much so, that he notes that if his poem were to be read in ancient Athens, it would have been awarded nothing more than a goat as a prize). Again, this ties back to Shelley’s intent to appeal to as many readers as possible. Eschewing any complex metaphysical meditation, Shelley contends that “Common fame is the only authority which I can allege for the details which form the basis of this poem, and I must trespass upon the forgiveness of my readers for the display of newspaper erudition to which I have been reduced.”¹⁹ Shelley notes the

¹⁷ C.W. Crawley, *The Question of Greek Independence: A Study of British Policy in the Near East, 1821-33* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 294.

¹⁹ Shelley, “Hellas,” 408.

boundary that exists between the literary and popular forms of literature and then proceeds to blur it to make his message as accessible to the British reading public as possible.

The poem's political dimension clearly undermines the classical interpretation by including a more nuanced view of language and form. Peeling back the classical rhetoric common among the philhellenes shows a text intimately rooted in a political context distinct from the classical past. Although the work bears figurative components, it was the historical realities of the 1821 uprising that necessitated, in the words of the historian William St. Clair, philhellenism's transition "from being an intellectual, mainly literary concept, to a practical [political] programme."²⁰ Instead of negating the significance of the classical imagery, incorporating political sources of literary inspiration enables a more complex understanding of how Shelley engages the reader. The ancient influence on *Hellas* is thus hardly a failure to "resist the inspiration of ancient names and the classical tradition,"²¹ (as one historian framed it). Instead, the classical-political binary represents a powerful literary device that Shelley masterfully employs for engendering an imagined proximity between the reader and the Greek people. The dynamic relationship between the classical and the political in *Hellas* furthermore provides Shelley with a subtle strategy for transcending reality and the many obstacles entailed therein.

The opening of the poem immediately begins with a striking classical-political binary – the dialogue between the Ottoman sultan and a chorus of enslaved Greek women, which brings to mind similar collective groupings of enslaved female oracles from classical literature (an historical parallel not lost on the reader). Shelley's literary-historical link helps to establish their identity as a representative voice speaking for the entire Greek nation. Yet the national metaphor

²⁰ William St. Clair, *That Greece might still be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 52.

²¹ Bass, *Freedom's Battle*, 54.

does not necessarily reflect the views and attitudes of the modern Greek people; rather, the chorus represents a higher Greek consciousness that Shelley vaguely identifies as the Hellenic spirit. The spirit enters the scene, not as a vibrant entity reminiscent of Greece's 'glorious' past, but as a captive and subdued force shackled in Ottoman chains. Shelley clarifies this distinction through the extended cyclical metaphor of sleep. In the opening monologue, the chorus laments:

Sleep, sleep! our song is laden
 With the soul of slumber;
 It was sung by Samian maiden
 Whose lover was of the number
 Who now keep
 That calm sleep
 Whence none may wake, where none shall weep.²²

Shelley's vision of Hellenic slumber suggests a surface-level lack of historical consciousness among the Greek. Repeated juxtapositions between the classical past and the enslaved present serve to underscore the point that the Turkish occupation of Greece not only carries a human toll, but a cultural and philosophical one as well – a far more potent tragedy for the cultured reader. Greeks, if not literally in a state of slumber, have fallen into a culturally and morally degrading slavery.

Shelley employs this cycle to describe the broader trajectory of history. Two primary perspectives characterize this larger historical dialectic. The first views Greece's Classical period as the apogee of human civilization, a 'glory age' framed in temporally relevant language: "In the great Morning of the world/ The spirit of God with might unfurled/ The flag of Freedom over chaos." The morning of history equates with the highest achievements of the ancient Greeks – a comparison that necessarily requires an end cycle that undoes the glory of the past through a natural return to chaos and slavery. To the reader familiar with this uniquely Romantic structural tendency, the end of the same stanza comes as no surprise, "Then Night fell – and as from night/

²² Shelley, *Hellas*, 411.

Re-assuming fiery flight.”²³ The coming of night and the ‘flight’ of the Hellenic spirit ends the historical cycle, a natural progression Shelley reinforces with the addition of a life metaphor. Drawing from Christian theology and popular notions of progress, Shelley hints at the immutability of this cycle through time. When the chorus jubilantly predict that:

With the gifts of gladness
Greece did thy cradle strew –

With the tears of sadness
Greece did thy shroud brew!

With an orphan’s affection
She followed thy brier through Time

And at thy resurrection
Reapeareth, like thou, sublime!²⁴

By allowing for a restoration of classical values and ideals, Shelley explicitly presents his revolution as fundamentally atemporal. The blurring of temporal boundaries elicited by this starting framework helps to drive the poem forward and lays the groundwork for Shelley’s larger political claim.

Converse to this cyclical presentation of history is the portrayal of the declining entity (assuming, of course, that Greece and the Hellenic spirit are historically ascendant). The extended monologue above takes place within the context of a dream had by the Ottoman sultan, Mahmud. Moved by the chorus’ prophecy of imminent defeat, Mahmud exclaims:

The times do cast strange shadows
On those who watch and who must rule their course,
Lest they being first and peril as in glory
Be whelmed in the fierce ebb: -- and these are of them.²⁵

²³ Shelley, *Hellas*, 412.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 413.

²⁵ Shelley, *Hellas*, 414.

From the beginning, Shelley casts the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as an immutable event dictated by the ‘tides’ of history. Thus, Mahmud becomes a tragic hero of sorts, gallantly committed to the defense of his realm yet faced with the inevitability of his own defeat. The defeat rests not just with the character of Mahmud, nor even with the Ottoman Empire. Mahmud enters the poem as an allegorical figure representing the ‘spirit of the East.’ Just as with Shelley’s portrayal of the Hellenic spirit, it is not exactly clear what this eastern entity involves. References to Islam clearly denote a religious presence of some kind, but this rarely moves beyond a purely aesthetic considerations (“Look, Hassan, on yon crescent moon emblazoned/ Upon the shattered flag of fiery cloud/ Which leads the rear of the departing day”).²⁶ Contextualizing Mahmud as a necessary victim of the ascendant Greek revolution helps to elicit a more pertinent understanding of his role as a character. The importance of his declining fortunes comes from the implicit ascendancy it entails of Greece. Not only is this decline happening in the here and now, but its occurrence is also inevitable. Atemporal inevitability is thus the product of Shelley’s cyclical view of history and highlights the metaphor of some Hellenic destiny imbued with metaphysical qualities. Mahmud is quite knowledgeable of this truth, which becomes a source of immense consternation for him; “Shall we be not renewed!/ Far other bark than ours were needed now/ To stem the torrent of descending time.”²⁷ Again, Shelley metaphorically presents a fundamentally cyclical view of human progress, one dependent on the rise and fall of nations while intimately linked to larger historical and political considerations.

The atemporal structure of the piece created by the cyclical plot also extends to cultural and historical considerations. In fact, the blurring of spatial and chronological factors enables a closer relationship between the context of the moment and the general prominence of classical

²⁶ *Ibid*, 420.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 420.

references and allusions. Just as philhellenism synthesizes political and cultural elements in articulating its argument in favor of Greek independence, *Hellas* borrows classical language to achieve its political ends. Besides the obvious parallel with the dramatic structure of the piece, the work is replete with classical tropes reflecting both cultural and historical motifs. These classical allusions represent several important dynamics at work within the poem. None of these aspects can be fully divorced from the political context out of which Shelley wrote the work, nor however can they be purely allegorical strategies. As will be shown, the inclusion of classical language within a cyclical literary framework provides Shelley with unique opportunities to bridge spatial and temporal boundaries otherwise hindering broader popular sympathy with the Greek cause.

While *Hellas* obviously relies heavily on the ancient past to frame its portrayal of the Greek revolution, rarely do the classical figures or events represented speak to some larger objective truth rooted in historical realities. In fact, Shelley makes little effort to illustrate concrete historical concepts of any kind. Instead, these allusions come more from Romantic notions of the classical than they do from any objective historical record. The relevance of these classical allusions also hinges on their comparison to the non-classical present. Generalized historical juxtaposition occurs when the chorus declare the eternal presence of the Hellenic spirit:

Here ye the blast
Whose Orphic thunder thrilling calls
From ruin her Titanian walls?
Whose spirit shakes the sapless bones
Of Slavery? Argos, Corinth, Crete
Hear, and from the mountain thrones
The daemons and the nymphs repeat
The harmony.²⁸

²⁸ Shelley, *Hellas*, 429.

Historically speaking, Shelley's portrayal of "Orphic thunder" and his obscure geographic and mythological allusions, have little basis in any realistic understanding of ancient culture. From the perspective of the reader, however, the popular notion of divine revelation would have reinforced the understanding that the revolution was irresistible, while the reference to Jason and the Argonauts would have elicited a number of contemporary literary connotations. Indeed, throughout the work, the reader is bombarded by classical allusions often framed in rather blunt phrasing without any consideration for actual conditions either from historical or contemporary Greek contexts. Classical allusions thus enable Shelley to reconfigure a vastly complex socio-political movement into a simple historical metaphor understandable entirely through cultural references from 2,000 years ago.

Ancient Greece in this generalized depiction represented to many Romantics the fountainhead of human civilization. The Greek tradition of literature, politics, art, and religion was not just infinitely superior to current forms of social organization, but they were inherently the crucible without which human progress would not have been possible. In the preface, Shelley unambiguously makes plain that "our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece [...] The human form and the human mind attained to a perfection in Greece which has impressed the its image on those faultless products whose very fragments are the despair of modern art."²⁹ The inclusion of classical imagery within a fundamentally cyclical literary structure provides Shelley with the immortal language required to overcome the cultural and geographic boundaries separating the reader from the revolution in Greece. Furthermore, by directly linking the reader's own background with the social context of another people far away (regardless as to whether or not this classicized portrayal objectively reflects their own realities), Shelley is able to engender greater proximity, albeit of an imagined sort. The literary scholar Earl

²⁹ *Ibid*, 409.

Wasserman points out that the cyclical form and substance of *Hellas* springs from an “effort to locate the Greek revolution – and even the play itself – in those recurrent historical cycles and thereby to transform the merely temporal events into an eternal truth and the specific play into a universal statement.”³⁰ What Wasserman calls universalism is really just another way to frame an imagined proximity that links the reader with the subject based on a series shared commonalities.

The manner in which this ancient connection is articulated hints at a broader significance of the classical language intimately rooted in radical and liberal attitudes from the early 19th century. Throughout the poem, Shelley consciously links classical metaphors and motifs with more relevant understandings of liberty and tyranny. The notion that classical Greece somehow represented the fountainhead of enlightenment was a common one, and was widely viewed as a critical aspect of radical and liberal political movements during the period. Following the European Enlightenment, radical political programs were couched using Greco-Roman visual and literary symbolism both as a nod to their ancient philosophical debt but also as an aesthetic calculation intended to link their own goals with a romanticized glorious past.³¹ Shelley and other Philhellenes were closely associated with these radical circles, and often employed similar rhetorical devices in their own writing. The progression from Hellenism to politics, however, was not necessarily a logical or straightforward process. In other words, Shelley has neither a classicized political vision nor a politicized classical aesthetic. Instead, the labels become almost interchangeable, reflecting both popular notions of classical liberty and genuine philosophical connections between ancient political thinking and early 19th century radical ideology.

³⁰ Earl J. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 376.

³¹ For an extended analysis of the classical-radical relationship, see Craig Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, The Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

The vocabulary employed by Shelley, therefore, would have had a particular connotation with the reader at the time. Of particular concern to Shelley and the philhellenes was presenting the revolution as a binary contest between opposing views of liberty (the Greek nationalists) and tyranny (the Ottoman Empire). In the opening scene, the Greek chorus of enslaved women assert that:

So from Time's tempestuous dawn
Freedom's splendour burst and shone: —
Thermopylae and Marathon
Caught, like mountains beacon-lighted,
The springing Fire. — The winged Glory
On Philippi half alighted,
Like and eagle on a promontory.³²

The articulation of freedom as a product of the classical past conversely links it to the present in a way that mirrors Shelley's own cyclical view of history and human progress. In this instance, Freedom has two meanings that Shelley synthesizes through the development of this stanza. Freedom is initially the product of historical conditions, namely the struggle of the ancient Greeks against the Persian invaders at the battles of Marathon and Thermopylae. The poem develops an internalized martial virtue through the progression of historical accounts in which the contextual significance superseded by a more archetypal significance. As the literary scholar Ian Macgregor Morris shows in his analysis of literary representations of the Battle of Thermopylae, "Liberty and Virtue [were] inextricably linked and seen, by many, to be embodied in their purest form in ancient Greece. The placing of these ideals in ancient Greece was the real beginning of Hellenism."³³ This process of archotyping complicated historical events became a common occurrence during the 18th century as the Enlightenment helped spark new interest in classical ways of thinking.

³² Shelly, "Hellas," 412.

³³ Ian Macgregor Morris, "'To Make a New Thermopylae': Hellenism, Greek Liberation, and the Battle of Thermopylae," *Greece & Rome* 47 (2000): 213.

The particular refashioning of classical vocabulary by philhellenes took on added significance within the context of the Greek revolution. The demands of organizing an armed resistance to the Turkish occupation of Greece necessitated a politicized vocabulary that could simultaneously elicit broad support for the revolutionary cause while also maintaining itself within the relatively narrow confines of popular literature. As Mark Kipperman notes, “Shelley’s particular brand of Hellenism would have been immediately obvious to his contemporaries as an alignment with republican radicalism.”³⁴ These radical connections helped to substantiate Shelley’s poetic voice and provide him with an audience of potentially supportive readers. It also provided a space in which the complicated political triangulations of Balkan politics became readably digestible for even the most uninformed reader. Appealing to a classical past to articulate a revolutionary position in the present became a way for Shelley to overcome the obvious boundary of historical distance, while also appealing to commonly understood themes of liberty and resistance to despotism. The vocabulary employed by Shelley is often quite simple, however, the ideas underpinning it are quite complex:

Let there be light! said Liberty,
And like sunrise from the sea,
Athens arose! – around her born,
Stones like mountain in the morn.³⁵

Here, Shelley articulates a progressive historical view of liberty using an atemporal representation of Athens. To highlight the inevitability of this Athenian restoration (note, not a literal restoration of the city-state of Athens, but rather, a restoration of the underlying philosophy from which radical writers drew inspiration), Shelley frames the ongoing revolution within the cyclical structure of light/day and birth/death. Again, the intent is to narrow the

³⁴ Mark Kipperman, “History and Ideality: The Politics of Shelley’s ‘Hellas,’” *Studies in Romanticism* 30 (1991): 153.

³⁵ Shelley, “Hellas,” 429.

problems of distance by finding areas of commonality between the Greek revolutionaries and the reader.

Shelley's method of designing an imagined proximity is therefore twofold. Drawing from a structural cyclicity that privileges a universalist worldview, he employs a classicized vocabulary that incorporates alternative political connotations. This political agenda focuses mainly on the parallel between the overthrow of Turkish control over Greece and the return of a liberal socio-political system based on classical notions of virtue and freedom. Together, these two elements form the backbone of Shelley's vision of a world revolution. In his understanding of the Greek revolution, this uprising is a continuation of the liberal spirit that originated in the classical period of ancient Greece. The loss of this classical virtue in Greece came about because of the Roman occupation that perverted the Greek people and reduced their country to a cultural backwater. The cultural fall continued through to the Turkish period, whose presence in Greece Shelley highlighted as the principal factor for Greece's continued backwardness. For many philhellenes, it was common practice to divert criticism of the modern Greeks as people by using the Turkish occupation as an excuse to justify negative perceptions held by the popular imagination.³⁶ Conscious of negative popular perceptions of the Greek people, Shelley carefully argued in his preface to *Hellas* that "if in many instances he [modern Greeks] is degraded, by moral and political slavery, [...] let us reflect that the corruption of the best produces the worst."³⁷ He goes on to add that the restoration of the Hellenic spirit in Greece is attainable only through the overthrow of Ottoman rule and the creation of a sovereign Greek republic. The degradation, however, is not the product of some inherent aspect of Greek people or modern

³⁶ Potter, "Two Thousand Years of Suffering": George Finlay and the *History of Greece*," 14-5.

³⁷ Shelley, "Hellas," 409.

Greek culture, but the systematic negation of the classical notions of freedom and liberty that arose as a result of the Turkish occupation.

The civilizational fall experienced at the end of the classical period in Greece is unrestrained by geographical boundaries. Shelley makes very plain that the loss of classical virtue was a *human* catastrophe, and that the struggle to return it to Greece is a universal struggle. Equally, the universalized portrayal of Turkish despotism invites comparisons with other systems of power opposed to the ideals of Hellenism. Employing classical language in the context of historical temporality, Shelley bridges geographical boundaries and firmly connects the reader with the plight of the Greeks in a very intimate way:

Its unwearied wings could fan
The quenchless ashes of Milan
From age to age, from man to man
It lived; and lit from land to land
Florence, Albion, Switzerland

This spirit of revolution underpinning the Greek uprising (in Shelley's imagination) is universal. The Turkish occupation engenders its dormitory state in Greece just as the tyranny of the conservative courts breeds docility among the oppressed of Europe. Indeed, Shelley had no qualms with equating Turkish tyranny with the policies of the Tory government he so despised. In equal measure, Shelley sidestepped the English public's servility by pointing to the corrosive effects of despotism and how it impeded the forward progress of the Hellenic spirit of liberty and virtue: "The English permit their own oppressors to act according to their natural sympathy with the Turkish tyrant, and to brand upon their name the indelible blot of an alliance with the enemies of domestic happiness, of Christianity and civilization."³⁸ By envisioning a common alliance of reactionary forces, Shelley hoped to present a picture of the Ottoman Empire that would have resonated with readers incensed by the actions of their own government. As the

³⁸ Shelley, *Hellas*, 409.

historian C.M. Woodhouse observes, “[Shelley’s] Philhellenism was simply an element in a broad and catholic humanity which embraced the English labourer on the same level as the Greek peasant.”³⁹ Again, the language and structure of the piece enable a more relatable representation of the Greeks and their cause which facilitates expressions of sympathy on the part of the reader.

The coming “age of the war of the oppressed against the oppressors”⁴⁰ (as Shelley himself called it) hinges also on a universalist response capable of eradicating sentiment contrary to the ideals of Classical Greece. For Shelley, the Greek revolution is the beginning of this process:

A second sun arrayed in flame
 To burn, to kindle, to illumine.
 From far Atlantis its young beams
 Chased the shadows and the dreams
 France, with all her sanguine steams
 Hid but quench’d it not; again
 Through clouds its shafts of glory rain
 From utmost Germany to Spain.⁴¹

The spirit of revolution that has gripped Greece was already active in the form of radical groups across Europe. In this sense, Shelley confirmed the fears of conservative ministers such as Castlereagh and Metternich; the Greek revolution was exportable, and its ability to destabilize the Ottoman Empire threatened the Concert of Europe as well. Internationalizing the revolution, however, required active assistance on the part of philhellenes and other activists. Within the framework of imagined proximity between the reader and the Greeks, failing to arouse foreign support endangered the survival of liberty not just in Greece, but in other countries as well. The distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed here is intentionally blurred. While it would

³⁹ C.M. Woodhouse, *The Philhellenes*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1969), 47.

⁴⁰ Shelley, *Hellas*, 410.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 412-3. In this excerpt, Atlantis is referring to the United States of America and the “sanguine steams” of France is a nod to the French Revolution – common political references in radical and reformist circles.

certainly be a stretch to label Shelley's views on the Turks as positive in any sense, his insistence on the universality of Hellenism comes out strongly when the Sultan responds to his advisor Hassan's growing uncertainty about the future of the empire by observing, "your heart is Greek."⁴² The potential for all people to transgress the limits of their own spatial and cultural boundaries becomes central to the future advancement of Shelley's radical revolution.

Hellas therefore finds itself at the crossroads of two critical currents; the first involves Shelley's own particular notions of human progress and the revolutionary potential for change inherent to radical politics; the second draws from the wider philhellenic tradition in British literature, and the impact it had on rhetoric and cultural archetypes. The advent of the Greek revolution, therefore, simply provided Shelley the opportunity to synthesize the two. Through writing *Hellas*, Shelley carved out a space in which to create Hunt's new social context. In doing so, Shelley linked a broad web of radical and revolutionary activity that spanned many nations and cultural contexts. As P.M.S. Dawson notes, "For Shelley it seemed self-evident that these (and other) events were connected, and that the common source of them lay in the realm of ideas."⁴³ By eliminating the ways in which the reader might differ from the Greeks, Shelley helped to reduce the degrees of separation that Hume saw as preventing proximity and thus engendering apathy towards suffering people. The political significance of *Hellas* lay not in its ability to present accurate information of the revolution, but in its ability to show how the cause of the Greeks reflected the broader cause of humanity. Appealing to the classical past was the most direct way of accomplishing this. The Greeks of *Hellas* are thus not the illiterate peasants depicted by European travelers of the 18th century, nor are they the property of the Ottoman Empire as the conservative establishment of Europe would have preferred them. They are equal

⁴² Shelley, *Hellas*, 422.

⁴³ P.M.S Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 42.

participants in a global revival of Hellenism and the virtuous principles of liberty and freedom that that this revival entailed.

In an age before mass media, literature served as the vehicle that created this imagined proximity. Reflecting on the political significance of the arts, Shelley commented that “they may, as I conceive, be made powerful instruments of moral and political improvement.”⁴⁴ Many modern scholars criticize Shelley and the broader philhellenic movement for their inclination to romanticize the Greek side of the conflict and their general failure to reflect the ‘realities’ of the Greek revolution. The criticism, while being technically true, again fails to grasp the broader intent of the work and the movement. The intent of Shelley was never to properly convey to the reader what the realities of the revolution were. This is not to say that Shelley’s work reflects the escapist tendencies of political propaganda. As Kipperman notes, “For Shelley’s audience in 1821, the idealization of Hellenism would not have been escapist; rather it intensified the sense of the present, where British action could uphold the ideological fantasies of [the] Holy Alliance or intervene on behalf of emergent nationalism.”⁴⁵ The intent of *Hellas* was to alter the spatial and cultural considerations of the reader and create an otherwise non-existent proximity between them and the Greek people. While it would be futile to try to assess the extent to which Shelley was successful in this endeavor, the strategy employed by Shelley is symptomatic of a broader trend within the philhellenic movement. The creation of an imagined proximity in this sense therefore anticipates later developments in transnational communications. The debate over the cultural or political foundations of philhellenism therefore become irrelevant in this context – what is important is how Shelley uses them to serve a broader purpose.

⁴⁴ Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator*, 212.

⁴⁵ Kipperman, “The Politics of Shelley’s *Hellas*,” 165.

Understanding this radical renegotiation of human boundaries imagined in *Hellas* also clarifies the ostensibly conflicting academic views on philhellenism. The debate over whether classical or political considerations helped influence the philhellenic movement takes on a new dimension by properly assessing the role of spatial and cultural manipulation. Specifically, highlighting the nuanced applications of classical imagery shifts the focus of analysis away from irrelevant considerations about authorial intent, and back to how the reader was intended to engage with the text. By drawing from the historical and literary context in which Shelley lived, one perceives specific archetypes and literary tropes were intentionally employed to elicit responses from the reader. Moreover, this series of textual responses served as the basis for an imagined proximity between the reader and the Greek subject. Thus, critically assessing the role of proximity and the impact it has on the ability of the reader to sympathize with the poem's subject opens a completely new area of study relevant not just to philhellenism, but other efforts of consciousness raising.

Bibliography

- Bass, Gary J. *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008.
- Castlereagh, Viscount. "Letter to the Tsar, 16 July, 1821." In *Correspondence, Dispatches and Other Papers*. Edited by the Marquess of Londonderry. Volume 12. London, 1848-52.
- Crawley, C.W. *The Question of Greek Independence: A Study of British Policy in the Near East, 1821-22*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930.
- Dawson, P.M.S. *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley in Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
- Forman-Barzilai, Fonna. "Sympathy in Space(s): Adam Smith on Proximity." *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 189-217.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
- Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.
- Kipperman, Mark. "History and Ideality: The Politics of Shelley's 'Hellas.'" *Studies in Romanticism* 30 (1991): 147-168.
- Koundoura, Maria. "Between Orientalism and Philhellenism: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's 'Real' Greeks." *The Eighteenth Century* 45 (2004): 249-264.
- Morris, Ian Macgregor, "'To Make a New Thermopylae': Hellenism, Greek Liberation, and the Battle of Thermopylae." *Greece & Rome* 47 (2000): 211-230.
- Potter, Liz. "'Two Thousand Years of Suffering': George Finlay and the *History of Greece*." *British School at Athens Studies* 17 (2009): 13-26.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "The Mask of Anarchy." In *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, 301-310. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977.
- . "Hellas." In *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, 407-440. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977.
- Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Spencer, Terance. *Fair Greece, Sad Relic: Literary Philhellenism from Shakespeare to Byron*. Trowbridge: Redwood Press, 1954.
- St. Clair, William. *That Greece might still be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Wasserman, Earl R. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1971.
- Woodhouse, C.M. *The Philhellenes*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1969.
- Woodring, Carl. *Politics in English Romantic Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.