

The Unchaining of Prometheus in Black Metal

One of the most recent iterations of the Prometheus myth can be found in a genre of music just now coming to public attention. Black metal, an extreme form of underground heavy metal, has remained underground for its controversial atheist and satanic messages. Classical myth is a common symbol set in the genre, being only second to the metaphorical use of Satanism as a form of rebellion rather than an actual spiritual belief or practice. In this paper I will demonstrate how Black metal musicians draw on the Prometheus myth found in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, although heavily mediated through the interpretation of the Romantic poets, not only to bolster their artistic legitimacy through the Classical tradition, but to recast the metaphoric use of Satan in a more positive light. By using recent scholarship on modern popular music genre of Black Metal and Aeschylus' play, I intend to display how Prometheus has been resurrected once again to add to the metaphor of a rebellious Satan already in place.

Prometheus is a fitting figure for any genre of metal. "Controversy," writes Titus Hjelm et al, speaking more broadly of metal as a genre, "is an integral part of heavy metal culture — almost to the point where it is the 'nature' of heavy metal to be controversial" (8). Satanic imagery is a common way for Black Metal bands to express a controversial, rebellious nature. Whether metaphor or legitimate belief, the satanic imagery has become overused. In his article, "'Sons of Northern Darkness': Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music," Kennet Granholm identifies the use of Norse mythology in Black Metal. He writes that the Norse mythology serves as a symbol set "to replace that of the now too familiar Christian Devil" (537). As Norse mythology becomes a substitute an overused metaphor in the Black Metal, Prometheus is brought in by artists to revive the rebellious nature of metal.

The notion of rebellion is essential to Black Metal, and the addition of Prometheus to the pantheon of its symbols simultaneously enforces the notion of rebellious ethic and elitist nature of the genre. This elitist nature of the genre is, as Lucas et al claim, “its shared meanings and symbolic boundaries are informed and legitimized by the symbols and myths of the origins of ‘true’ black metal” (282). Prometheus adds the weight of the Classical tradition to this genre of intentional misfits.

The influence of the Romantic poets on the understanding of Prometheus as symbol of rebellion is crucial, but it is too vast to address thoroughly in this paper. The sympathy evoked by Aeschylus in his *Prometheus* is the most useful for the Black Metal community and the focus of my comparison for this paper. The overused image of Satan, forever the enemy of the Christian West, is revived as the Titan of forethought, technology, and defender of humanity. Black Metal, popularized in the 1980’s by murder between bands and dozens of burned churches, has found a way to express the same rebellious ideas through the Classical tradition as well as satanic imagery.

In 2001, the Norwegian Black Metal band Emperor released their album “Prometheus: The Discipline of Fire & Demise.” This concept album draws heavily on Prometheus, while their previous albums drew heavily on satanic imagery and anti-Christian philosophy. This was their last album before disbanding. Behemoth mixes Prometheus with the occult in their song “Prometherion.” Lyrically, the song is more of an ode to Adam “Nergal” Darski’s personal life philosophy, but he states in a liner note the reference to Prometheus, John Milton, and Percy Shelley. Finally, Gorgoroth exemplifies the comparison most starkly. After a drawn out legal battle between Infernus and Gaahl once Infernus returned from prison, the band released their aptly titled “Quantos Possunt ad Satanitatem Trahunt.” The ninth track is “Satan-Prometheus.”

While the title of the song draws on the Prometheus metaphor, the lyrics stay true to the traditional satanic imagery of Black Metal.

The influence of the Romantic poets on the understanding of Prometheus as symbol of rebellion is crucial, but it is too vast to address thoroughly in this paper. However, I believe the rebellious nature inherent in the Prometheus myth, cast in Aeschylus' redeeming light, is what shows most prominently in Black Metal music.

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