



Old Anew: *Hellas*

Mathelinda Nabugodi

To cite this article: Mathelinda Nabugodi (2022) Old Anew: *Hellas*, European Romantic Review, 33:5, 639-652, DOI: [10.1080/10509585.2022.2114209](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2022.2114209)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2022.2114209>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Sep 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 309



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Old Anew: *Hellas*


Mathelinda Nabugodi

Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT

Written in autumn 1821 and in print by April 1822, *Hellas* is the last work that Shelley published in his lifetime. It was suggested by the Greek War of Independence, which Shelley considered to be one of the great political events of his time: his preface links it to the revolutions in Spain, France, and Italy and closes with an assertion that Liberty is about to return to Europe. But despite Shelley's ambitions, *Hellas* is a failure. Rather than being regarded as the crowning achievement of Shelley's mature poetry, it is eclipsed by his occasional and fragmentary poems of 1822. This essay suggests that the problem with *Hellas* is that Shelley has chosen the wrong cause to sympathize with. From our vantage point in the twenty-first century, the most urgent political developments in the Romantic period concern the transatlantic slave trade and European colonial expansion across the world—all of which form the building blocks of today's global capitalism. Shelley's Hellenistic focus distracts him from what the future would come to regard as the defining events of his era. Nonetheless, the lyrical drama can further our attempts to reckon with the legacy of the past in our present.

What does the future know about the past? Or the past about the future? Would Shelley, so often moping about lack of popular success, be pleased to know that two hundred years after his death, H. R. H. The Prince of Wales would be the Patron of a Memorial Association in his name? “We are all Greeks,” Prince Charles proclaimed on the bicentenary of the Greek War of Independence, citing Shelley's preface to *Hellas*, “our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece” (*Shelley's Poetry* 431). For Shelley, we are Greek by virtue of our participation in the afterlife of Greek culture. Prince Charles, of course, is Greek in a slightly more literal sense—“after all, it is the land of my grandfather” as he put it in the same speech. We can situate *Hellas* at the confluence between these two ways of understanding the movement of history: as direct patriarchal lineage or as diffuse cultural heritage. The former is represented by the encounter between Sultan Mahmud and the Phantom of Mahomet the Second, the alpha and omega of the blood-stained Ottoman Empire that Shelley conjures. As the Phantom appears, Ahasuerus introduces him as follows to Mahmud:

CONTACT Mathelinda Nabugodi  mn539@cam.ac.uk

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

The Past

Now stands before thee like an incarnation
 Of the To-come; yet wouldst thou commune with
 That portion of thyself which was ere thou
 Didst start for this brief race whose crown is death[.] (lines 852–56)¹

In facing Phantom Mahomet, Mahmud at once sees who he has been before birth and who he will become after death, not so much a mirror image as a snapshot that superimposes antenatal and posthumous selves in the now. This suggests a view of history on which a return to the past is simultaneously a turn towards the future: a cyclical process in which past tyrants are reborn as future rulers. In the meanwhile, they live on in the shady realm of death. “I come / Thence whither thou must go!” Phantom Mahomet announces on arrival (861–62), which is to say a “throne on the abyss” hung round by “heavy fragments of the power which fell / When I arose, like shapeless crags and clouds” (865–68). As Phantom Mahomet continues speaking, it becomes clear that his abode is identical to what awaits Mahmud beyond the grave: “A throne ... round which thine empire lies / Boundless and mute” (880–81). It is equally clear that, for Mahmud, all this supernatural machinery is but a “mighty trance” (914) with no autonomous existence outside of the Sultan’s nightmares. Even his vision of the Phantom’s posthumous reality corresponds exactly to Mahmud’s own situation at the opening of *Hellas*, where we find him, sleeping, surrounded by a Chorus of Greek Captive Women who are singing a lullaby lament for their murdered friends (1–45); this lament also echoes around Phantom Mahomet’s throne, which is surrounded by “voices / Of strange lament [that] soothe my supreme repose, / Wailing for glory never to return” (867–69).

Borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche, we can think of the imperial lineage stretching from Sultan to Sultan as “the eternal return of the same” that forms one stream of the drama’s historiography. The Chorus of Greek Captive Women represents the other historiographical principle that structures the play: anonymous diffusion. Its song is essentially a lament to the Unknown Soldier, one “of the number / Who now keep / That calm sleep / Whence none may wake, where none shall weep” (17–20). In commemorating the number of those who fell, rather than any named heroic individual, the Chorus evokes a history from below, from the point of view of the unnamed and unremembered masses: “number” is, after all, a figure in which individuality is quenched. Today we can see it at work in war journalism listing this or that many dead in this or that blast, a mode of atrocity reporting that is anticipated in *Hellas* with its recurring depictions of genocidal slaughter. These scenes of violence numb us to the tragedy of each individual death and, in so doing, heighten the contrast between great man and unnamed number that is an important aspect of the drama’s revolutionary politics. As a result, when Mahmud wonders “did not Mahomet the Second / Win Stamboul?” his question begs the series of questions raised by Bertolt Brecht’s worker in his meditation on history:

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
 The books are filled with names of kings.
 Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
 And Babylon, so many times destroyed.
 Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima’s houses,
 That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?
 In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished

Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome
 Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom
 Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song.
 Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend
 The night the seas rushed in,
 The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.
 Young Alexander conquered India.
 He alone? (1–15)

Did Mahomet win Stamboul alone? Of course not, and the voices of the soldiers who secured his conquest, as well as their victims, are heard in the Chorus of anonymous voices surrounding the Sultan's throne. This Chorus thus suggest an alternative, more democratic, view of history: one built on the suffering of unnamed numbers.

Yet this democratic vision is undercut by the work's relentless focus on the psychodrama of Mahmud's mind. "*Hellas* everywhere insists on the psychological dimensions of its historical drama," William Ulmer writes (622), launching into a psychoanalytic reading that is fortuitously prompted by Mahmud's depiction of Ahasuerus as an "interpreter of dreams" (136; 757): "The confrontation of Mahmud and Mahomet, prompted by Ahasuerus as prophet-psychoanalyst, dramatizes the birth of the historicized subject by correlating the Sultan's quest for historical knowledge with the analyst's quest for identity" (Ulmer 622). In this gesture, Ulmer turns the extensive descriptions of violence, rape, and murder, recounted at great length by various messengers arriving in the Seraglio, into proto-Freudian allegories of the Sultan's state of mind: the pain of the oppressed is just scenery to display the mental anguish of one man alone. But the temptation of reading the violence allegorically is of course there in the play. While it is not uncommon for dramatists to present violence off-stage, in Shelley's lyrical treatment the excessive violence fails to convey any real sense of bodily harm. In their sheer repetitiveness, the drama's accounts of slaughter risk inducing boredom rather than horror. Certainly, Shelley's piling line upon line of overwrought representations of brutality is not as unsettling as one sentence from the slave owner Thomas Thistlewood's journal, in which he methodically records the crimes he commits against the people he "owns" in pretentious schoolboy Latin.² Thistlewood's classical learning not only remind us that some are more Greek or Roman than others, but also that a classical education is no bulwark against barbarity. In *Hellas* the effect is different. Here, the suffering inflicted upon the weak never loses its literary flavor: it is more rhetorical flourish than factual record. The more so because, for a reader familiar with Shelley's oeuvre, the play is suffused with an additional kind of cyclical return: the encounter between Mahmud and the Phantom of Mahomet is a re-enactment of the encounter between Prometheus and the Phantasm of Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound* (1.218–301), while the introduction of Ahasuerus harks back to some of Shelley's earliest works, such as *Queen Mab* or *The Wandering Jew*. These repetitions turn our attention from the violence at hand to a reflection on Shelley's development as a poet, with each iteration of a character or scene standing like the incarnation of an old work in the new. "The coming age is shadowed on the past / As on a glass," Ahasuerus says (805–06), and this is also true of Shelley's compositional practice: if a return to the past anticipates the future, then a return to past works becomes the basis for writing future ones. An individual poetic oeuvre can therefore be

read as a microcosm of history as a whole: a merry-go-round in which past scenes and characters are recycled in future works.

But *Hellas* is not only a reworking of Shelley's past works. In the drama's preface, Shelley proudly informs his readers that the "*Persae* of Aeschylus afforded me the first model of my conception," and also that "[c]ommon fame is the only authority which I can allege for the details which form the basis of the poem, and I must trespass upon the forgiveness of my readers for the display of newspaper erudition to which I have been reduced" (430; 431). The work is thus an amalgam of contemporary reporting and timeless tragedy. But it is also, equally importantly, a piece of propaganda writing, intended to stir his fellow Englishmen to intervene in the Greek War. "What little interest this Poem may ever excite, depends on its *immediate* publication," he wrote to his publisher Charles Ollier shortly after completing it (*Letters* 2: 365), a statement quite at odds with the eternal value that Shelley usually ascribes to poetry. "If *Hellas* is filled with atemporal ideals," Mark Kipperman comments on this letter, "they had timely urgency for Shelley" (151). Torn between atemporal and timely elements, the critical reception of *Hellas* has been preoccupied with balancing its idealist historiography with its engagement with European politics after the Congress of Vienna. This has distracted critics from the crux formed by Shelley choosing Aeschylus for his model. The *Persae* commemorates the Greek victory over the Persians at Salamis and so might seem an appropriate herald for a Greek victory over the Ottomans. But the very fact that that past victory has not led to present freedom—the Greeks are yet again ruled by an Oriental power—suggests the futility of the struggle: present liberation does not preclude future bondage.

This is why, when the closing chorus sings that "The world's great age begins anew, / The golden years return, / ... / A brighter Hellas rears its mountains / ... / Another Athens shall arise" (1060–85), the word "anew" sets off some alarm bells. The renewal of the world's golden age also implies the subsequent return of its nadir: the carousel of history will continue revolving until someone brings it to a halt. This realization causes the play's closing chorus to interrupt its own anticipation of a renewed Greece with an about-turn, a wish to arrest the cyclical course of history at its height. "O cease!" the final stanza exclaims, "must hate and death return? / Cease! must men kill and die?" (1106–07). For Jerome McGann, the closing stanza is a "counterstatement" that "overturns and denies the whole of *Hellas*" (26) and, in so doing, testifies to Shelley's failure to mediate between idealist states of being and real life; McGann emphatically describes it as the "total collapse of *Hellas* beneath the awful weight of human fact" (30). But is it really "human fact" that *Hellas* collapses under (if collapse it does)? Aligning Shelley's treatment of the Greek War to his comments on the French Revolution, Michael Erkelenz reads the ending in more pragmatic terms:

An ode that begins as a celebration of Greek battle victories ends as a call for mercy and a warning of the consequences of revenge. *Hellas* ... everywhere addresses the dangers that the modern Greeks may only repeat the mistakes of other revolutionaries before them. (330)

Timothy Webb has similarly suggested that, in the closing chorus, Shelley's "revolutionary optimism is tempered by the recognition that revolutions which are based on blood will, in their turn, give rise to other revolutions and further bloodshed" (200). But the issue in *Hellas*, seen as an experiment in literary historiography, is not simply that bloodshed begets bloodshed, revenge leads to further revenge; rather, the drama stumbles

on the acknowledgment that to wish for the past to be resurrected also implies a wish for the present to be repeated in the future. If Hellas of old returns anew, then the subjugation it suffers now will likewise return a few years down the line. Shelley's choice to model an emancipatory drama on a classical tragedy reveals the contradiction inherent in drawing on the past when trying to imagine a future that has broken free of said past. Far from collapsing, the final six lines are reaching for the emergency brake on the carousel of human history.³ "The world is weary of the past, / O might it die or rest at last!" are its closing words (1110–11).

The drama's closing caveat about a future return of the present notwithstanding, its preface is assured in its representation of the Greek War of Independence as one of the great political events of its time: Shelley links it to revolutionary upheavals in Spain, France, and Italy and closes with an assertion that the "world waits only the news of a revolution in Germany to see the Tyrants who have pinnacled themselves on its supineness precipitated into the ruin from which they shall never arise" (432). In other words, *Hellas* is the herald of a liberated Europe and, as so often in this period, Europe stands for the world at large. This is why the small-scale guerrilla warfare of the Greeks has world-historical ramifications. As much as dramatizing a particular conflict, Shelley conceives of the drama as a series of "lyric pictures" in which he has "wrought upon the curtain of futurity, which falls upon the unfinished scene, such figures of indistinct and visionary delineation as suggest the final triumph of the Greek cause as a portion of the cause of civilization and social improvement" (430). The drama is thus anticipating a future present in which the unfinished scene has been finished, the Greeks are free. This is also a moment when Shelley's future readers will be able to trace a visionary anticipation of their own civilizational and socially improved state in the "lyric pictures" that he has wrought.

As I read the drama in the present of Shelley's future, his ambitions for *Hellas* seem to have misfired. From my own vantage point in the twenty-first century, a time of global Black Lives Matter protests and concocted culture wars over the fate of statues and history curricula, the most urgent political development in the Romantic period is neither the conflict in Greece nor the power-plays between European monarchies, but rather imperial expansion fueled by an ascendant white supremacism. The period witnessed the growth and consolidation of a global racial capitalism that helped finance an industrial revolution in Europe even as it fed into further colonial extraction and expansion across the globe. It was the social and cultural transformations catalyzed by slavery, colonialism, and industrialization, rather than the Greek War, which led to the eventual overthrow of the monarchical system that Shelley deplors. These transformations are the foundation of the neo-colonial world we live in today. Against this backdrop, Shelley's Hellenistic concerns seem not only parochial but strikingly oblivious to the politics of his own time. Witness, for instance, his record of Freedom's birth and subsequent progress around the globe. "In the great morning of the world, / The spirit of God with might unfurled / The flag of Freedom over chaos," the story begins (46–48). Freedom first spread through Ancient Greece and then onwards to Italy, Britain, Switzerland, and the United States of America: "From age to age, from man to man / It lived; and lit from land to land" (61–62). Having kindled the American Revolution, Freedom reversed its westward flight and returned to Europe:

From the west swift Freedom came,
 Against the course of Heaven and doom,
 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 streams,
 Hid, but quenched it not; again
 Through clouds its shafts of glory rain
 From utmost Germany to Spain. (66–75)

The final mention of Germany and Spain brings the progress of Freedom into Shelley's present, and the Greek War through which Freedom is poised to return to Greece (82–84). This view of Freedom—as having moved from Europe to the United States (“far Atlantis”) and thence back to Europe—does indeed anticipate a twentieth-century Cold War logic, on which the United States, as self-styled guardian of the Free World, protects Europe from the barbarian enemy encroaching from the East (initially the Soviets, then the Islamists). But in the early twenty-first century, as the American imperial star appears to be on the wane, fewer people are willing to overlook the nation's foundational contradiction: it is a land of the free built on racial slavery. Take, for example, *The 1619 Project*, led by Nikole Hannah-Jones and *The New York Times*, which seeks to reframe the history of the United States by locating the birth of the nation not in the American Revolution, but at the first landing of enslaved Africans on the Virginia coast.

Such historical revisionism is, however, not necessary to acknowledge the bitter irony of the American Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” the founding fathers proclaimed even as they and their successors withheld these Rights from the African-American population until the 1960s (and still withhold them from people deemed “illegal” migrants). Their hypocrisy also taints Shelley's representation of Freedom arriving triumphant from the Americas. The question thus arises: am I justified in expecting that a poet so preoccupied with dissecting the operations of slavery, tyranny, and oppression as Shelley was would also have been able to foresee the significance of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial expansion for how the future would see his time? This question brings another one in its wake: what if the future moment in which *Hellas* was written to be read, the moment that would recognize in the Greek War of Independence the rebirth of its own freedom, has already passed?

Perhaps this moment was in 1848, the year of European Revolutions, a moment when the Greek War of Independence could indeed be understood as the herald of freedom and democracy then sweeping through Europe. Then again, trying to pinpoint an exact date in Shelley's future when *Hellas* is to be read surely misses the point. “A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not,” he writes in “A Defence of Poetry” (*Shelley's Poetry* 513). Even a work like *Hellas*, “written at the suggestion of the events of the moment” and deeply enmeshed in its time, inevitably transcends its historical present. And so the futurity it evokes likewise transcends any particular future present. In the drama's preface, Shelley captures the Janus-like duality of poetry—being at once directed

towards the temporal and the eternal—in an opposition between lyric and historiography. Since the Greek war is still ongoing, Shelley notes that the

subject in its present state, is insusceptible of being treated otherwise than lyrically ... Undoubtedly, until the conclusion of the war, it will be impossible to obtain an account of it sufficiently authentic for historical materials; but poets have their privilege. (431)

It would be tempting to conclude that the poet's privilege consists in speculating on things he does not know—the view of Shelley as an “inspired idiot” refuted by Carl Grabo years ago (vii)—but it would be more accurate to say that the poet's privilege consists in his participation in the timeless realm of poetry. This transcendent element, contained in any truly poetic work, unmoors it from the time in which it was written and ensures that it can be of the moment at any given moment.

Therefore, if *Hellas* seems out of tune with the future it seeks to reflect, we ought to look for moments in the drama that better resonate with our own present. For instance, we might emphasize that Shelley does cast a critical eye on the United States by approximating the “young Atlantis” to Rome: “Through exile, persecution and despair,” the final Chorus sings, “Rome was, and young Atlantis shall become, / The wonder, or the terror or the tomb / Of all whose step wakes Power lulled in her savage lair” (992–95). Shelley tended to contrast Rome and Greece, representing the former as a tyrannical empire and the latter as free democracy; the same chorus continues with a comparison of Greece to “a hermit child / Whose fairest thoughts and limbs were built / To woman's growth, by dreams so mild, / She knew not pain or guilt” (996–99). Jonathan Sachs has noted that, for Shelley,

Greece is always a paragon of liberty and artistic production, the model of an ideal democratic state, that inspires intellectual power. Rome, in contrast, is depicted as the model of an expansionist state, one that quells Greek liberties as it increases in breadth and might. (112)

The comparison of “young Atlantis” and Rome thus introduces a subtle criticism of American liberty, albeit a subtlety easily lost in the Chorus's clamoring promotion of Liberty's progress across the Western world.

While Sachs is right about Shelley's idealized picture of Ancient Greece, he does not comment on the one essay in which Shelley directly addresses the shortcomings of Greek society. In “A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love,” intended as an introduction to his translation of Plato's *Symposium* (the first complete English translation that did not censor Plato's celebration of male homosexuality), Shelley seeks to explain Greek homosexual practices by contextualizing them in the society of their time. “One of the chief distinctions between the manners of ancient Greece and modern Europe, consisted in the regulations and the sentiments respecting sexual intercourse,” he writes. “The fact is, that the modern Europeans have in this circumstance, and in the abolition of slavery, made an improvement the most decisive in the regulation of human society” (105). And yet, far from having abolished slavery, Europeans of Shelley's time were simply practicing it off-shore, in their colonies; if this counts as an “improvement” in “the regulation of human society,” the improvement consists in the geographical separation between production and consumption, the exploitation of labor and enjoying the fruits of that labor. In other words: the advent of global capitalism.

Be that as it may, the question of slavery occupies a marginal position in Shelley's "Dis-course": the thrust of his argument is to explain why Greek men preferred to have sex with other men. He does so with reference to the subjugation of women:

Among the ancient Greeks the male sex, one half of the human race, received the highest cultivation and refinement: whilst the other, as far as intellect is concerned, were educated as slaves, and were raised but few degrees in all that related to moral and intellectual excellence above the condition of savages. (107)

The "slaves" referred to here are of course not the kidnapped Africans of his own time, but the variety of chattel slavery that existed in ancient Athens. Nonetheless, the premise of Shelley's reasoning is clear: uncultivated and unrefined women, slaves, and savages are all equally undesirable. This explains why Greek men had to turn to other men for erotic satisfaction—a practice that Shelley here describes as a "gross violation in the established nature of man" (108). Whatever we make of Shelley's homophobia, it is curious to note how easily he is ready to dismiss the everyday violations practiced by ancient Greeks. While he acknowledges that "personal slavery and the inferiority of women" caused a "diminution" in "the delicacy, the strength, the comprehensiveness, and the accuracy of their conceptions, in moral, political, and metaphysical science, and perhaps in every other art and science" (106), he does not hesitate to proclaim their overall superiority. In the preface to *Hellas*, he describes the ancient Greeks as "glorious beings whom the imagination almost refuses to figure to itself as belonging to our Kind" and suggests that the "modern Greek" "inherits much of their sensibility, their rapidity of conception, their enthusiasm and their courage" (431). Since we modern Europeans are all, ultimately, Greeks, one may presume that we can also let our civilizational virtues cohabit with the oppression of women and "savages."

Shelley's readiness to overlook the existence of slavery in his celebration of Atlantic or Attic liberty is of course not unique to him, but rather symptomatic of mainstream Western historiography. In present-day UK, we see this in the insistence on cordoning off Black History from British History. This ensures that the history of Britain's involvement in the trafficking and ownership of Africans, rather than being the common heritage of all Britons, remains the purview of the descendants of the formerly enslaved. "Still today," Achille Mbembe has noted,

it is not obvious to the eyes of all that the enslaving of the Negroes and colonial atrocities are part of our world memory; even less that this memory, as common, is not the property of the sole people that suffered these events, but of humanity as a whole. (126)

And so it is left to me as one of few, in fact to my knowledge the only, Shelley scholar of African heritage to stand as an incarnation of this inconvenient topic.⁴ More than once, when, in the small chat of a coffee break at an academic conference or symposium, I have mentioned that I work on Shelley, the response has been: "I didn't know that Shelley wrote about slavery."

The notion that it is up to Black people to deal with slavery and its aftermath may explain the relative scarcity of critical engagements with the works of the major Romantic poets that are attuned to questions of race. Attempts to situate British Romanticism in the context of the transatlantic slave trade often remain of marginal concern even though both developments peaked in the same decades around 1800 and both were quite

crucially concerned with liberty and the dignity of the human condition. But, indeed, is it not easier to claim that we are all Greeks than to assert that we are all slavers because “our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts” have developed in symbiosis with racial slavery? Laws to police foreign bodies, literature to establish intellectual superiority, religion to cast cultural destruction as a civilizing mission, and arts purchased with the proceeds of exploited labor. But perhaps the kind of philosophic repression that Susan Buck-Morss has identified in her recovery of the links between Hegel and the Haitian Revolution also holds true for *Hellas*. Buck-Morss demonstrates that, although Hegel never directly commented on the Haitian Revolution, he kept himself well informed of developments to the extent that it is inconceivable that his formulation of the master-slave dialectic was *not* prompted by history’s first successful instance of slaves rising up to overthrow their masters. Similarly, while *Hellas* does not mention African slavery in the Americas by name, it is obsessed with the relation between enslaved and master and, furthermore, it inscribes this relation along a religious/ethnic boundary, in this case between Christian and Muslim. From Hassan rejoicing in how the blood will “stagnate in the veins of Christian slaves!” (545) to the Second Messenger celebrating “every Islamite who made his dogs / Fat with the flesh of Galilean slaves” (549–50), the Ottoman cause is not simply to rule the Greeks but to enslave them. And this can be read as an attempt to allegorically work through the politics of freedom at the intersection between European and non-European cultures.

Hellas’s entanglement in British empire-building comes into view more clearly when it is read alongside a poem that has become a centerpiece in the culture wars of the early 2020s: “Rule, Britannia!” The similarities between James Thomson’s representation of Britain and the vision of Greece presented in one of the drama’s choral passages are extensive. Take, for instance, the accounts of how the two states emerge out of the sea: “When Britain first, at Heaven’s command, / Arose from out the azure main,” are the opening lines of Thomson’s poem (1–2). Shelley’s Greece arises with a similar command: “‘Let there be light!’ said Liberty, / And like sunrise from the sea, / Athens arose!” (682–84). Although Shelley substitutes Liberty for God, his adoption of the phrase “Let there be light!” from Gen. 1: 3 indicates the divine nature of this decree. This also makes Britannia/Athens indomitable. “If Greece must be / A wreck,” Shelley writes, “yet shall its fragments reassemble / And build themselves again impregnably / ... / above the idle foam of Time” (1002–06). Thomson expresses a similar confidence in his Britannia: “Thee haughty tyrants ne’er shall tame; / All their attempts to bend thee down / Will but arouse thy generous flame” (19–21). Both nations are like those roly-poly dolls that always get up again: any attempt to subdue them will but result in a reassertion of their glory. Of course, in the 1820s, “Rule, Britannia!” had not yet become the jingoistic catcall that it is today, but it is only appropriate that Shelley evokes this kind of rhetoric in a poem seeking to rouse nationalist sentiment for the Greek cause in his English audience, much like he manipulates conventions of popular ballads in his political songs or “The Mask of Anarchy.”

A more disturbing feature that *Hellas* shares with “Rule, Britannia!” is the assumption that the state of being enslaved is the fault of the enslaved themselves: their nation is not so blest by God, their hearts not “manly” enough to guard it from invaders (Thomson 30). The sentiment permeates *Hellas*. As one of the choral interludes puts it:

O Slavery! thou frost of the world's prime,
 Killing its flowers and leaving its thorns bare!
 Thy touch has stamped these limbs with crime,
 These brows thy branding garland bear,
 But the free heart, the impassive soul,
 Scorn thy control! (676–81)

Like the mark of Cain, slavery brands the enslaved—they, not the enslaver, carry the crime stamped on their bodies. However, being outwardly branded does not make slaves of those who carry freedom in their heart. As with the many depictions of human slaughter that punctuate the drama, this passage does not refer to real physical anguish—such as the actual marks with which Europeans stamped Africans to claim ownership over their bodies—but drifts into allegory, functioning as a mere foil to the freeman whose heart and soul scorn the debasement of slavery. Inwardly free, the Greeks may be defeated, but they shall never be slaves. This attitude is captured in Hassan's description of the battle at Wallachia. According to the preface, the Greek "defeat in Wallachia was signalized by circumstances of heroism, more glorious even than victory" (431); in Hassan's speech, the heroism of the Greeks is manifested in their refusal to become enslaved:

... then said the Pacha, 'Slaves —
 Render yourselves — they have abandoned you,
 What hope of refuge, or retreat or aid? —
 We grant your lives' — 'Grant that which is thine own!
 Cried one, and fell upon his sword and died!
 Another — 'God, and man, and hope abandon me;
 But I to them and to myself remain
 Constant' — he bowed his head and his heart burst.
 A third exclaimed — 'There is a refuge, tyrant,
 Where thou darest not pursue and canst not harm
 Should'st thou pursue; there we shall meet again.'
 Then held his breath and after a brief spasm
 The indignant spirit cast its mortal garment
 Among the slain; — dead earth upon the earth!
 So these survivors, each by different ways,
 Some strange, all sudden, none dishonourable,
 Met in triumphant death (385–401)

This increasingly fantastical series of suicides—spontaneous combustion of the heart, a brief spasm of held breath—breaks with the visceral violence characteristic of the drama's battle scenes. The Greeks at Wallachia do not die from physical as much as moral wounds: their free deaths symbolizing their triumph over enslaved life. *Hellas*, then, is a drama all about slavery which roundly condemns the state of being enslaved.

The kind of newspaper erudition that informs *Hellas* has also shaped my reading, which is prompted as much by contemporary debates about the legacy of slavery as by the contents of Shelley's drama. Having started off by evoking Prince Charles in a ploy at topicality, before coming to the end of my reading I serendipitously discover him in the news again, speaking at the transition ceremony in which Barbados removed the Queen as head of state and swore in its first president. "From the darkest days of our

past,” he said, “and the appalling atrocity of slavery, which forever stains our histories, the people of this island forged their path with extraordinary fortitude.” These words are historical: the first time a senior royal openly acknowledged slavery as a stain on British history. “It was a very brave statement,” said Lord Woolley, the only Black Barbadian in the House of Lords and himself a brave defender of the rights of Black people in Britain, adding that this acknowledgement paves the way for “an adult conversation about these uncomfortable truths, and on how the past still influences the present in systemic inequalities” (qtd. in Davies). These systemic inequalities saturate British society on all levels—from the Windrush Scandal in which British citizens with Caribbean heritage were deprived of their rights and deported, to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex being hounded out of the country by racist abuse in the media. In comparison to that, what significance does the Greek War of Independence have for today’s Britain? In seeking to write a poem on the greatest political event of his time, Shelley simply chose the wrong one. But that does not mean that *Hellas* does not have anything to say on these matters: its representation of freedom and slavery is part of a growing ideology, according to which freedom is the highest political and moral value. This ideology was cemented by eighteenth-century and Romantic poets and philosophers. Although most celebrations of Liberty do not mention the specter of racial slavery in the colonies, it is firmly there in the background.

The freedom ideology still resonates in the continuation of Prince Charles’s speech on Barbados:

Emancipation, self-government and independence were your way-points. Freedom, justice and self-determination have been your guides. Your long journey has brought you to this moment, not as your destination but as a vantage point from which to survey a new horizon.

A new beginning, not unlike the one prophesied in the final chorus of *Hellas* (1060–95). The rhetoric of new horizons is typical of many independence struggles across the former European colonies, but how easy is it to leave the past behind? When slavery was outlawed in the British Empire, the government borrowed £20 million to compensate the slave-owners for their lost “property” while the enslaved themselves got nothing but their freedom (subject to several years of unpaid labor as “apprentices”). It took until 2015 for British taxpayers to finish paying off this debt, but even that has not been sufficient to leave the past behind given that, as Woolley notes, systemic inequalities that originated with colonial plantation slavery still structure British and Caribbean societies today. Thus, although the rhetoric of freedom—buoyed up by poems like *Hellas*—has a clear appeal, one might wonder whether a new dawn that forgets its past is actually compatible with justice. Anti-imperialist historian Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has explored why the notion of independence as a new beginning can be problematic:

This act of sealing off the past as the era of colonialism, separate from what follows, was typically replicated by a ceremonial proclamation of a new beginning, often named “independence,” through which the *unbelonging* of the (formerly) colonized to the empire received its ultimate stamp. Absent any agreements on substantial reparations between the formerly colonized and those who invaded their political space and ruled them differentially for years, decolonization was conducted as a territorial withdrawal with no debts owed by the colonizers. (76)

While Azoulay is primarily talking about the relation between colonizer and colonized, a similar dynamic informs the relation between enslaver and enslaved: the way in which slavery was outlawed made sure that “liberation” did not entail any claim that the enslaved population might have had on the wealth that had been generated by their labor. No debts owed. This is an arrangement that clearly benefits the colonizer/slave owner rather than the colonized/formerly enslaved, and we have still not overcome this injustice. Although it has been almost 190 years since the abolition of slavery in Britain’s Caribbean colonies, some Caribbean leaders and intellectuals are calling for reparations, a sum equivalent to the £20 million paid to slave owners, for this historic robbery. In addition to the material wealth there is also the issue of cultural heritage. “Decolonization with no reparations relegated colonial violence to a temporal realm beyond accountability, a past that is sealed off in museums and archives,” Azoulay continues (77). This is the domain of art. The sealed-off temporality of the archive is materially equivalent to the timeless realm in which poetry participates according to Shelley—and *Hellas* is, after all, a combination of the archival remains of Aeschylus’s *Persae* and articles from *Galignani’s Messenger*, Shelley’s main source of news about the Greek War (Rossington 235; Duffy 520). This testifies to Shelley’s ability to see the politics of his present reflected in the remnants of the past that are being preserved in archives: alongside *Hellas*, we may think of *Prometheus Unbound*, another instance of an Aeschylean drama offering Shelley a model of human liberation, or *The Cenci*, a tragic allegory on revolution based on a manuscript “copied from the archives of the Cenci Palace at Rome” (*Poems of Shelley* 2: 727). This is the spirit in which I have read *Hellas* through the lens of my own contemporary attempt to reckon with the legacy of the Black Atlantic. While not obviating the need for material compensation, my reading has tried to lay the groundwork for what reparation might mean in the study of Romantic poetry, which is to say poetry written in the era of racial slavery. This requires us to unseal the temporality of the literary archive and reintroduce questions of accountability in our engagement with the past. The old work reflected in a new future it did not anticipate.

Notes

1. The text of *Hellas* and other poetry by Shelley are quoted from *The Poems of Shelley* and cited by line (and act where present).
2. For discussion of Thistlewood’s journal, see Burnard; Hall; Hartman; Vermeulen; and Walvin.
3. This is to echo Walter Benjamin’s observation in one of the notes published as “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’”: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake” (402).
4. I make this claim in a narrow sense, referring to specifically Shelley specialists working in Britain today. The situation is not so bleak if one takes a wider perspective on the intersection of British Romanticism with questions of race and colonialism, including the work of Makdisi; Lee; Hickman; Youngquist; Chander; Senior; and Sandler; not to mention the work of the Bigger 6 Collective and two recent special issues: Matthew; and Burkett and Sigler. See also the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Romanticism and Race*, edited by Manu Samriti Chander.

References

- Azoulay, Ariella Aisha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London: Verso, 2019. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History.'" Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland. *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003. 401–11. Print.
- Bigger 6 Collective. 2022. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "A Worker Reads History." *Selected Poems*. Trans. H. R. Hays. London: Evergreen Books, 1959. Print.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. "Hegel and Haiti." *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000): 821–65. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Burkett, Andrew, and David Sigler, eds. *Toward an Anti-Racist, "Undisciplined" Romanticism*. Spec. issue of *Keats-Shelley Journal* 70 (2022): 86–172. Print.
- Burnard, Trevor G. *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004. Print.
- Chander, Manu Samriti. *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2017. Print.
- Davies, Caroline. "Praise for Prince Charles after 'Historic' Slavery Condemnation." *The Guardian* 30 Nov. 2021. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Duffy, Cian. "Percy Shelley's 'Display of Newspaper Erudition' in *Hellas, A Lyrical Drama* (1822)." *Notes and Queries* 61.4 (2014): 519–23. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Erkelenz, Michael. "Inspecting the Tragedy of Empire: Shelley's *Hellas* and Aeschylus *Persians*." *Philological Quarterly* 76.3 (1997): 313–37. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Grabo, Carl. *A Newton Among Poets: Shelley's Use of Science in Prometheus Unbound*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1930. Print.
- Hall, Douglas. *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–86*. Kingston: U of West Indies P, 1999. Print.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 1–14. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Hickman, Jared. *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery*. New York: Oxford UP, 2016. Print.
- Kipperman, Mark. "History and Ideality: The Politics of Shelley's *Hellas*." *Studies in Romanticism* 30.2 (1991): 147–68. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Lee, Debbie. *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002. Print.
- Makdisi, Saree. *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.
- Matthew, Patricia A., ed. *Race, Blackness, and Romanticism*. Spec. issue of *Studies in Romanticism* 61.1 (2022): 1–186. Print.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Trans. Steven Corcoran. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2019. Print.
- McGann, Jerome. "The Secrets of an Elder Day: Shelley After *Hellas*." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 15 (1966): 25–41. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Prince of Wales, Charles. "A Speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at The President's Dinner, Presidential Mansion, Athens." Presidential Mansion, Athens. 9 May 2018. Web. 29 August 2022.
- . "A Speech by HRH The Prince of Wales for the Transition of Barbados to a Republic." Barbados Transition to Republic Ceremony. Bridgetown, Barbados. 30 Nov. 2021. Web. 29 August 2022.
- Rosington, Michael. "'The Destinies of the World': Shelley's Reception and Transmission of European News in 1820–21." *Romanticism* 13.3 (2007): 233–43. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Sachs, Jonathan. "'Yet the Capital of the World': Rome, Repetition, and History in Shelley's Later Writings." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 28.2 (2006): 105–26. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Sandler, Matt. *The Black Romantic Revolution: Abolitionist Poets at the End of Slavery*. London: Verso, 2020. Print.
- Senior, Emily. *The Caribbean and the Medical Imagination, 1764–1834: Slavery, Disease and Colonial Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018. Print.

- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love." *Shelley on Love: An Anthology*. Ed. Richard Holmes. London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1980. Print.
- . *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Frederick L. Jones. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1964. Print.
- . *The Poems of Shelley*. Ed. Geoffrey Matthews, et al. 4 vols. to date. London: Routledge, 1989–. Print.
- . *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002. Print.
- Thomson, James. *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson*. Ed. J. Logie Robertson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1908. Print.
- Ulmer, William A. "Hellas and the Historical Uncanny." *ELH* 58.3 (1991): 611–32. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Vermeulen, Heather V. "Thomas Thistlewood's Libidinal Linnaean Project: Slavery, Ecology, and Knowledge Production." *Small Axe* 55 (2018): 18–38. Web. 15 July 2022.
- Walvin, James. *The Trader, the Owner, the Slave: Parallel Lives in the Age of Slavery*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007. Print.
- Webb, Timothy. *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977. Print.
- Youngquist, Paul, ed. *Race Romanticism and the Atlantic*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Print.