

# THOMAS PAINE: FROM MODERN PROMETHEUS TO PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

by Frances Chiu

This article is Part 3 of a three-part series based on Frances Chiu's paper delivered at Iona College, New Rochelle NY on October 9, 2014 at the visit on the Thomas Paine Tour, "Following in the Footsteps of Thomas Paine", sponsored by TPF. Part 1 appeared in the Bulletin, volume 15, number 4, Part 2 in volume 16, number 1. The paper itself is drawn from her upcoming textbook for Routledge Books on Paine's Rights of Man. It is scheduled for publication at the end of the year.

In Parts 1 and 2, we examined the ways in which Paine created a new radicalized political language while shaping the contours of the Gothic novel and a seemingly different approach to poetry as celebrated by Wordsworth in his *Lyrical Ballads*. But we might also wonder if Paine's own *life* did not also exert some influence on literature. This brings us back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which I mentioned in the opening paragraphs of Part 1: namely, the fateful night when Mary Shelley and John Polidori pitched their respective ideas for the novel *Frankenstein* and the short story, "The Vampyre." Here, just as William Godwin had already censured the relentless hounding of Paine in a preface to *Caleb Williams* back in 1794, we may wonder if Mary Shelley, Godwin's daughter by Mary Wollstonecraft and future wife of poet Percy Shelley, was not also inspired by the events in Paine's life after 1792 when he was exiled from Britain: or at the very least, the many populist radicals who believed they were helping the common man--only to be execrated by the Establishment and the populace at large during Pitt's "reign of terror."

Burned in effigy across Britain and spat at in America upon his return, Paine himself was variously referred to by the contemporary press as "monster," "dangerous fiend," "demon," "loathsome reptile," "drunken, beastly infidel" and "a compound of all that is base, disgusting, and wicked without the relief of any one quality that was great or good"--not unlike Victor Frankenstein's much beleaguered hodge-podge monster, referred throughout the novel as "the Creature." With a bit of imagination, it is not difficult to detect parallels between Paine, who once declared that "all mankind are my brethren and my religion is to do good", and the good-willed monster who makes similar attempts to help others. Indeed, just as Paine encouraged Napoleon to invade England, proclaiming vengefully in his pamphlet *To the People of England on the Invasion of England* (1796), that France could "hold the English Government in terror, and the whole country in alarm, whenever she pleases, and as long as she pleases," the monster would seem to follow suit by deciding to wreak vengeance on the family of his uncaring creator; conversely, the British government itself can be said to anticipate the role of Victor, continuing to search ships headed to America in order to apprehend Paine and repatriate him for a public hanging.

By the time of Paine's death on June 8, 1809, this so-called "monster" and "dangerous fiend" who craved companionship throughout his life and sought to better the human condition, according to his first sympathetic friend and biographer, Cleo Rickman, ended up back in America, "shunned where he ought to have been caressed, coldly neglected...and cruelly treated" to the extent that "He neglected his appearance, and retired from an ill judging, unkind, unjust world." Nonetheless, we

can't also help but notice how Paine's steadfast refusal to compromise his principles may be said to anticipate the eponymous hero of Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

But as art imitates life, life sometimes imitates art. Appropriately enough, fate intervened when William Cobbett, an erstwhile Tory who had once detested Paine, acknowledged that the old revolutionary really wasn't such a monster after all: in fact, the real monster was none other than the government-sponsored oligarchy responsible for increasing the disparities between rich and the poor, an entity which Cobbett scathingly referred to as "the Thing." Feeling more than a little sorry for the harsh judgment that he had meted out on Paine over the years, the newly radicalized Cobbett decided that the great revolutionary "belongs to England" after all--especially since Americans had apparently forgotten all about him as he remained buried "in a little hole under the grass and weeds of an obscure farm in America." As such, with the assistance of his son and a hired hand, Cobbett proceeded to sneak onto the grounds of Paine's farm late one night and unearth him.

Even if it's doubtful that Cobbett ever felt inspired to reanimate Paine's corpse with a spark of electricity a la Victor Frankenstein, he did believe that the re-interment of Paine's bones would help "effect the reformation of England in church and state." Yet for all their pain(e) in digging up his corpse, the bones would become the proverbial skeleton in their attic closet, both figuratively and literally. Perhaps Cobbett got tired of being constantly ridiculed by the press as "the bone grubber" and "resurrection man." Or, for that matter, having rhymes written about him like those by the Shelleys' friend, Lord Byron: "In digging up your bones, Tom Paine, Will Cobbett has done well; You visit him on earth again, He'll visit you in Hell." (Btw, it's worth taking a look at some of the cartoons on Cobbett and Paine at Iona College.) Or perhaps he sought to distance himself from a still dangerous seeming populist radical as he sought election to Parliament. Whatever the case, Cobbett tucked away the corpse in his attic and forgot about it. Today, the fate of the bones from this point remains a mystery--or as Paine's first significant biographer, Moncure Daniel Conway states: "As to his bones, no man knows the place of their rest to this day. His principles rest not." We too can agree. Over the centuries, this modern Prometheus--or Prometheus unbound--has inspired so many writers on both sides of the Atlantic "to defy Power, which seems omnipotent", as Shelley suggests in the final lines from *Prometheus Unbound*. Such is "To be Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free; This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory." We can only imagine how Paine will continue to inspire other writers to break the shackles of the manuscript-assumed authority of the dead, lighting up new visionary fires along the way.