

SHELLEY'S INSPIRATION IN 1818 VI THE MYSTERY OF 'A VISION OF THE SEA'

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(1) *Prometheus* and the Poems

As I said in my previous papers on *Prometheus Unbound* (i.e. 'Shelley's Inspiration in 1818 I-V', 1997-98), Shelley was blessed with rare inspiration by translating Plato's *Symposium* in July 1818. His Greek study with Peacock (Thomas Love, 1785-1866) and other friends bore poetical fruit almost for the first time in the form of *Prometheus Unbound* (written 1818-1819), where his philosophy and poetical imagination are found in perfect harmony. In his letter to his publisher Charles Ollier (6 March, 1820 from Pisa) we can see how he was satisfied with this lyrical drama. "'Prometheus Unbound", I must tell you,' he wrote, 'is my favourite poem; I charge you, therefore, specially to pet him and feed him with fine ink and good paper.'¹ And even with those merits, he thought, it wouldn't sell 'beyond twenty copies' (in the same letter). *Prometheus* was for him a very special work of art, very different from *The Cenci* (written May-8 August 1819) or 'Julian and Maddalo' (written autumn 1818), and expected to be read by the very few, among whom were Peacock and Hunt (Leigh, 1784-1859).

With such *Prometheus* were published in 1820, nine poems (written in 1819 and 1820), among which are his most well-known odes such as 'Ode to the West Wind' and 'To a Skylark', while a few of them are little known, not easy to understand or even mysteries to the readers.

The nine poems, in the order of this first edition of *Prometheus*², are as follows (The place and date of composition etc. are from OSA edition.):

1. 'The Sensitive Plant' (Composed at Pisa, early in 1820.)
2. 'A Vision of the Sea' (Composed at Pisa, early in 1820.)
3. 'Ode to Heaven' (1819)

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4. 'An Exhortation' (1819)
5. 'Ode to the West Wind' (1819)
6. 'An Ode, Written October, 1819, before the Spaniards had recovered their Liberty' (1819)
7. 'The Cloud' (1820)
8. 'To a Skylark' (Composed at Leghorn, 1820.)
9. 'Ode to Liberty' (Composed early in 1820.)

(The numbering is mine.)

Shelley again indicates the special character of these poems to be published with *Prometheus*, in his letter to Ollier (Pisa, 14 May, 1820):

If I had even intended to publish 'Julian and Maddalo' with my name, yet I would not print it with 'Prometheus'. It would not harmonize. It is an attempt in a different style, in which I am not yet sure of myself, a *sermo pedestris* [prose sermon] way of treating human nature quite opposed to the idealism of that drama.³

Indeed, *Prometheus* is a work of lofty idealism of Platonic philosophy and those nine poems Shelley chose to be harmonized with that lyrical drama, deserve our special attention. What is interesting is each of the nine pieces is a product (or record) of the poet's divine (if transient) inspiration, contributing, together with the rest of the nine, when they are assembled, to form the idea expressed in *Prometheus*. Each expressed a phase or two (or more) of the drama: 'An Ode', 'A Vision' and 'Ode to Liberty' show how to accomplish or simply praise Liberty or Revolution; 'Ode to the West Wind' and 'The Cloud' sing mainly how the elements in the universe work keeping their balance and harmony; and 'An Exhortation' how poets should be, and so on.

As I have mentioned above, the four (i.e. Nos. 1, 5, 7 & 8) are fairly popular in our country but the rest are little known especially in their relation with *Prometheus*. The least known and the least understood is probably No. 2, 'A Vision of the Sea' which seems really a mystery.

(2) How Was 'A Vision' Read? 1

When the poem was published, the contemporary reviews were favourable. They unanimously admit Shelley's poetic genius, magnificence of description and original thought. *Blackwood's* 88 (326)

Edinburgh Magazine (September 1820), after discussing *Prometheus* with quotations, quotes lines 1-58 and 66-79 of 'a magnificent "VISION OF THE SEA"'.⁴ *The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review* (September and October 1820, ii) is favourable of his vigorous thought and fresh inspiration: 'The miner pieces are stamped throughout with all the vigorous peculiarities of the writer's mind, and are everywhere strongly impregnated with the alchymical properties of genius. But what we principally admire in them is *their strong and healthy freshness, and the tone of interest* that they elicit. They possess the fever and flush of poetry; the fragrant perfume and sunshine of a summer's morning, with its genial and kindly benevolence.' (Italics mine.)⁵

The unsigned reviewer of *The Lonsdale Magazine or Provincial Repository* (November 1820, i) sees in 'A Vision' Shelley's 'superior talents as an author' and pronounces this to be 'a piece which for grandeur of expression, originality of thought, and magnificence of description, stands almost unrivalled'.⁶

(3) How Was 'A Vision' Read? 2

Such favourable reviews we have seen above are more or less a surprise for us who live almost two hundred years later, for this piece entitled 'A Vision of the Sea' has been, as it were, an enigma for a long time. In 1880, John Todhunter had a strong doubt about this poem explaining that 'Why the fragment entitled *A Vision of the Sea*, which, in spite of its graphic power, is rather chaotic, should have been published in such company, and in this unfinished state, must remain as great a mystery as the fate of the mother and child who figure therein'. He then, admitting the presence of 'something vigorous and new in these leaping anapaests', guesses the whole thing to have been 'a vision, which ceased as suddenly as the verses in which it is chronicled'.⁷

Then in the first half of this century Carl Grabo said this poem to be 'seemingly descriptive only, a description which in its story of shipwreck and storm is expressive of the cruelty and remorselessness of the sea'.⁸

(4) What Is Clear and What Mysteries?

At this point, when we have seen the responses to the poem in the author's time and in the time after that, we should pick up what is clear to the reader and what are mysteries.

What is clear are:

1. This poem has the graphic power, but is rather chaotic.

2. There is something vigorous and new in the leaping anapeasts, in which this poem is written.
3. It certainly seems a descriptive piece of a story of shipwreck and storm.
4. It seems a sort of vision as the title shows.
5. The strong and healthy freshness is felt in this poem as well as through the rest of the nine and peculiar tone of interest is elicited by them.

What is mysterious are:

1. What are the tempest and the sea; what do they symbolize, if they do any?
2. Who is 'She' that 'sees the black trunks of the waterspouts spin' (l. 5)?
3. What is the vessel or the black ship? Is there anything it signifies?
4. Who is the child and its mother (l. 76)?
5. What are the twin tigers (l. 40) and their hidden meaning?
6. What is the boat with twelve rowers (ll. 152-3)?
7. Is the story of the tempest, shipwreck and an infant child consistent or not? And the poem itself complete or unfinished? And also does the poem or the vision really cease suddenly?
8. Is this poem as a whole, nothing but a description with no other hidden meaning?

(5) Nora Crook's Treatise

As if to answer these questions, there came out in 1996, a treatise on 'A Vision' by Nora Crook, 'The Enigma of "A Vision of the Sea", or "Who Sees the Waterspouts?"'⁹ Crook proposes that 'A Vision' is an allegorized family history of the Shelleys, based on Mary and Shelley's deep sorrow on their son William's death (on 7 June in 1819), 'remembering the week-by-week experience of living in a pestilence-stricken Rome in 1819 and watching a child die, an experience shaking to its foundations Shelley's hope that evil could be expelled not only from society but from nature itself'.¹⁰

She proposes that since William was killed by an epidemic disease of malaria in Rome, this city became for the Shelleys a terrible, monster-like sea of tempest polluted with pestilence; that they 'retreated to Leghorn from Rome's "pestilential air" "anxious for a time to escape a spot associated too intimately with his [i.e. William's] presence and loss" (OSA, 335)', as Mary writes in her note on *The Cenci*; then that 'The child' is William; that 'She' in line 5 of the poem, an idealization of Mary Shelley herself; that 'the black ship, the "inanimate hulk", is the grieving "spirit's bark"'; and that 'the twin tigers' are Hope and Fear related to William's life, the first tiger Hope to die after a struggle with a serpent, then the other tiger Fear, hurrying 'towards death "with the speed of despair"', only to be dispatched by the three marksmen on the other boat.¹¹

Looking through Mary's letters, it is easily understood how the Roman air was bad, both cold and hot; it was so cold even in late April as to produce colds and fever to the feeble infant, while the summer heat there was dreadful. And the poor 'William died at noon on 7 June, a victim of the malaria epidemic that swept Rome in 1819, 1820 and 1821 (*SC*, VI, 838)'.¹² And we also know, after William's death, how Mary felt helpless, as she wrote 'Everything on earth has lost its interest to me.' (Mary's letter to Miss Curran, Leghorn, June 27)¹³

So it is quite natural that Mary would have written an allegory of the lost William, and it is a very fresh and interesting idea that Shelley wrote an allegory from Mary's viewpoint, introducing the mysterious female character 'She' in the earliest part of the poem. But what we should remember is that not all that Mary felt and thought was true to the poet. For instance, I don't believe Shelley felt 'Everything on earth has lost its interest to me', however deep his sorrow was. And it is not probable that Shelley should have written on behalf of Mary, especially in this Promethean volume of idealism. So we should say, with his (and Mary's) deep sorrow silently in his mind, he tried to fight with and conquer his sorrow and its cause, supported by philosophy.

(6) My Interpretation 1 : Deluge and Liberty

Then I would propose thus:

1. The tempest is Deluge or the Wrath of Heaven, and the sea is Universe or Nature.
2. 'She' in line 5 is (the goddess of) Love and Beauty.
3. The vessel (later black ship) is the Earth or the dying human soul.
4. The child is Spirit of Love.(Cf. the newborn Spirit of the Earth, *Prom.* III. iii. 148)
5. The twin tigers are King (or Tyrant) and Priest.
6. The boat (l. 152) is Philosophy (or Wisdom) and the three marksmen are Plato, Dante and Milton.
7. The story of the Deluge and the shipwreck is consistent and complete. The poem is not only a powerful and effective description but full of hidden meanings, based on lofty thought and Greek spirit.

Now let us discuss these points in Shelley's poetry. The poem opens with these awful and powerful lines:

'Tis the terror of tempest. The rags of the sail
Are flickering in ribbons within the fierce gale:

From the stark night of vapours the dim rain is driven,
And when lightning is loosed, like a deluge from Heaven,
She sees the black trunks of the waterspouts spin
And bend, as if Heaven was ruining in,
Which they seemed to sustain with their terrible mass
As if ocean had sunk from beneath them.

(11. 1-8)¹⁴

From this scene of terrible storm, we think of two things. First, we guess that this storm must be the result of the wrath of Heaven, from such expressions as 'lightning is loosed, like a deluge from Heaven', 'Heaven was ruining in', and 'ocean had sunk'. And among others 'a deluge from Heaven' related with lightning, the awful weapon of Zeus, King of Heaven, reminds us of that Deluge and its only survivors, Deucalion (son of Prometheus) and Pyrrha (daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora) in the Greek myth. Greatly disappointed and angry at Lycaon's impiety and the moral corruption in general of the men of the Bronze Age, Zeus caused the Deluge to destroy all the evils from the Earth. Deucalion, by the advice of Prometheus, was safe with Pyrrha, after floating in a chest for nine days and nights. (Apollodorus, I. vii. 2; Ovid, *Met.*, I. 1-415)¹⁵ Shelley read Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in 1815 and 1817, at least, and probably in 1813 or before as well.¹⁶ There is no record of his reading Apollodorus himself but he must have known the story elsewhere among Greek authors.

Secondly this scene, especially the first two lines remind us of the storm scene of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* quoted by Shelley as the motto for his 'Ode to Liberty', one of the nine poems in the *Prometheus* volume. Shelley quotes the first two lines of stanza xcvi of Canto IV but the whole stanza is highly suggestive of the whole story of the present poem. So let me quote the whole stanza:

Yet, Freedom! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind;
Thy trumpet voice, though broken now and dying,
The loudest still the tempest leaves behind:
Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopp'd by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts, — and still the seed we find

Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North;
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth.¹⁷

Stimulated by these lines of the Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold* (which had been published in January 1818), Shelley was confident of the rebirth of Liberty who prospered in Athens. So in the same way this vessel, with its sail torn in ribbons flickering in the fierce gale, seems to stand, if not go forward, firmly against the storm. 'She' in line five is at this point mysterious but I would suggest that it is the same being as 'a woman more fair Than Heaven' (11. 66-67) and 'she' who grasps the child (1. 160-161), and that all of these are the Goddess of Love and Beauty, for she sits at the helm of the vessel which represents the Earth with most of its inhabitants degraded and morally pestilenced.

(7) My Interpretation 2 : The Vessel in the Tempest

Thus far we see a vessel with a female being at its helm in the middle of tempest where all the elements are in mad tumult. The vessel is now at the mercy of the tempest, up and down, and then the surf in all the monstrous forms surrounds it, of which the description is both exquisite and vigorous, full of life:

The vessel, now tossed
Through the low-trailing rack of the tempest, is lost
In the skirts of the thunder-cloud: now down the sweep
Of the wind-cloven wave to the chasm of the deep
It sinks, and the walls of the watery vale
Whose depths of dread calm are unmoved by the gale,
Dim mirrors of ruin, hang gleaming about;
While the surf, like a chaos of stars, like a rout
Of death-flames, like whirlpools of fire-flowing iron,
With splendour and terror the black ship environ,
Or like sulphur-flakes hurled from a mine of pale fire
In fountains spout o'er it.

(11. 11-22)

Then follows the tempestuous tumult of all the elements all over the universe, making a hell of battlefield, with the sea and Heaven intermingled. The vessel is burst and destroyed, its mast split.
And

The heavy dead hulk
On the living sea rolls an inanimate bulk,
(11. 31-2)

which is the lifeless Earth with dying inhabitants (Cf. *Prometheus* l. 159-179), just like the fallen Roman Empire or the world of the Dark Ages where the human soul was morally dead.

As the destruction of the ship goes on, it begins to sink, water coming up, and the chained tigers are in the agony of terror. Then while the vessel is left on the windless sea for nine weeks (I would suggest these nine weeks to be the nine dormant centuries of the world history, from the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, finished in 1321), quick pestilence and the cold sleep creep over the vessel. (11. 45-52)

Of these pestilence and sleep the mariners die one by one morning and evening until the last seven become the victims of the thunder and 'an oak-splinter'. (11. 52-65)

(8) My Interpretation 3: The Woman at the Helm

Just then when it seemed no one remained on the vessel,

At the helm sits a woman more fair
Than Heaven, when, unbinding its star-braided hair,
It sinks with the sun on the earth and the sea.
(11. 66-68)

This scene reminds us of Agathon's discourse on Love as a divinity of surpassing beauty and goodness and the trustiest helmsman. (Plato, *Symposium*, 197 C-E)¹⁸ Agathon declares that 'Love is the divinity who creates peace among men, and calm upon the sea, the windless silence of storms, repose and sleep in sadness.' And he continues that Love fills our hearts with overflowing sympathy making us gather in a company like that symposium and that Love is 'the cherisher of all that is good, the abolisher of all evil; our most excellent pilot, defence, saviour and guardian in labour and in

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fear'. (Shelley's translation)¹⁹

The fair woman sitting at the helm is the Love and Beauty herself and playing the part of the pilot or the helmsman (*ἡ ἑλμύνη*) (*Symp.* 197 E). So as long as she sits there, the vessel (or the Earth) is to be well guarded. If I add a little more on her beauty, it is as if the Heaven with all its star lights and the sun came down on the earth and the sea. The infant child (with the woman) seems the Spirit of Love (and Earth), for it smiles even on the tigers and becken them, which its mother restrains.

As the last minute is drawing the mother's fear becomes desperate. She wonders:

'Alas what is life, what is death, what are we,
That when the ship sinks we no longer may be?
What! to see thee no more, and to feel thee no more?'

(11. 82-84)

Starting with simple questions as these from her maternal love for the child, she passes from the world of perception to that of lofty thought, it seems, like this:

'Not to touch those sweet hands? Not to look on those eyes,
Those lips, and that hair, — all the smiling *disguise*
Thou yet wearest, sweet Spirit, which I, day by day,
Have so long called my child, but which now fades away
Like a rainbow, and I the fallen shower?'

(Italics mine.) (11. 86-90)

If our real existence is the soul itself now dressed in our carnal garments, all our body should be the temporary 'disguise' which hides our true existence. Then all the visible appearance of the child should also be the temporary 'disguise' of the Spirit that should soon fade away like a rainbow. Here it is implied that even when our mortal part dies, our immortal part 'goes away unharmed and undestroyed, withdrawing from death'. (*Phaedo*, 106 E)²⁰ The immortality of the soul is one of Shelley's favourite ideas.

(9) My Interpretation 4: The Hurricane and the Tigers

Just then as the sea water slowly draws inch by inch on the tigers, a long hoarse cry bursts from their vitals, when as if to hurry the cry on, there comes the hurricane from the west passing through between the Heaven and Ocean and through the path of the eastern gate to 'the cloud on the verge of the world'. (11. 92-107) This curious hurricane rising in the west passing between the Heaven and Ocean to the eastern gate sounds like the blast of Revolution, from the American (1776), to the French (1789) and more to follow. For in the end 'it came to the clouds on the verge of the world' (1. 107) and 'the dense clouds in many a ruin and rag,' (1. 112) 'on the whirlwind are cast'. (1. 114) So this strange hurricane (of Revolution), or Shelley's Liberty herself, passing through the Atlantic Ocean, has dispersed the dense clouds of Tyranny and Religion, bringing the wonderful morning of sunrise:

. . . where
The wind has burst out through the chasm, from the air
Of clear morning the beams of the sunrise flow in,
Unimpeded, keen, golden and crystalline,
Banded armies of light and of air; at one gate
They encounter, but interpenetrate.

(11. 115-120)

This is literally a glorious morning sight after the tempest, i.e. the beginning of the new age, and the 'Banded armies of light and of air' reminds us of the story of Deucalion and Myrrha that after their survival of the Deluge of punishment, when they threw stones over their shoulders, according to the order of Themis, there sprang up men from the stones thrown by Deucalion, and women from those by Myrrha. (*Met.* 348-415; Apollodorus, I. vii, 2)²¹

Nature calmed by Love expands a glorious scene, with blue Heaven above and the heaved waves (of Ocean from the Andes to Atlas) below, the latter reflecting the former, a peaceful state of the Universe. (11. 121-135) (Cf. also *Prometheus* III. ii. 18-34)

Meanwhile, one of the tigers is found in a fierce struggle with a serpent, of which the victor a shark is waiting for, while the other is shot by the three marksmen on a boat. These twin tigers are, as I have already said, King or Tyrant and Priest, twin slaves of Fear. For earlier in this poem, it is suggested that they are the slaves of Fear:

What now makes them tame is what then made them bold.

(1. 42)

Fear made them bold when they made people tremble with it, but now they are tame because they fear the reformed world, or the awakened soul of man. King and Priest are the main objects of Shelley's attack in 'Ode to Liberty', as well as in *Prometheus*.

Then what is this boat? Since 'twelve rowers with the impulse of thought urge on the keen keel', (11. 153-154) this is a savior boat of philosophy, so accordingly, the three marksmen are the best philosophers or thinkers and Shelley probably had in mind, Plato, Dante and Milton: Plato, the author of Shelly's inspiration in 1818; Dante, the betrayer of the corruption of the Popes and harmonizer of Plato's philosophy and poetry; and Milton, the political and religious reformer and the type of poet for Shelley.

(10) My Interpretation 5: Conclusion

In the final scene, when the enemies of Liberty are executed and the tempest and hurricane are calmed, the mother and child are found safe:

One fragment alone, —
'Tis dwindling and sinking, 'tis now almost gone, —
Of the wreck of the vessel peers out of the sea.
With her left hand she grasps it impetuously,
With her right she sustains her fair infant.

(11. 157-161)

The mother, Beauty and Love, as the pilot of the vessel of the Earth even in the stormy weather can thus wonderfully guard us human beings and her son the Spirit of Love and Earth can lightly and innocently survive the formidable tempest. The child, as if nothing had happened, continues to play with the Nature or rather the Universe keeping it in harmony. The last lines of this seemingly unfinished piece are thus:

Death, Fear,
Love, Beauty, are mixed in the atmosphere,

Which trembles and burns with the fervour of dread
Around her wild eyes, her bright hand, and her head,
Like a meteor of light o'er the waters! her child
Is yet smiling, and playing, and murmuring; so smiled
The false deep ere the storm. Like a sister and brother
The child and the ocean still smile on each other,
Whilst —

(11. 161-169)

Since the last line is finished with a dash, this composition has been called incomplete or unfinished. But as we have seen what parts the mother and child have played, it seems their task has been done and that there remains nothing to be added. Probably Shelley wanted to suggest something of the mother but thought it better to be left to the reader's imagination. When we think that he himself chose this poem to be published, he should have thought it complete.

As for the chaotic aspect of the poem, it is not so much chaotic if you distinguish the hurricane from the tempest or the deluge, though the storm itself is a tumult.

As for the anapaest in which this poem is written, it is 'perhaps the chief enlivening and inspiring force in English poetry, and, while powerful for serious purposes, is almost indispensable for comic.'²² This rhythm is very suitable for the powerful scenes of storm, and at the same time, for those ironical scenes of the punishment of the tigers, and that of the innocent child playing with the ocean.

This poem, when read through at the speed of hurricane, leaves a magnificent vision of life in our mind.

(19th December 1999)

NOTES

¹ F. L. Jones, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* Volume II, Shelley in Italy, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1964 (Hereafter cited as *Letters of PBS.*), p. 174.

² *Prometheus Unbound* | A Lyrical Drama | In Four Acts | With Other Poems | By | Percy Bysshe Shelley | . . . |1820. I am grateful to Professor Kazuya Honda of Bunkyo University and the Koshigaya Library there for this information.

³ *Letters of PBS*, II, p. 196.

⁴ James E. Barcus, ed., *Shelley, The Critical Heritage*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, p. 239.

- ⁵ *Ibid.* p. 243.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* p. 249.
- ⁷ John Todhunter, *A Study of Shelley*, London, C. Kegan Paul & Co., [1880] rep. 1969, pp. 185-6.
- ⁸ Carl Grabo, *The Magic Plant, The Growth of Shelley's Thought*, The University of North Carolina Press [1936] 1965, p. 286.
- ⁹ Timothy Clark and Jerrold E. Hogle eds., *Evaluating Shelley*, Edinburgh University Press, 1996, pp. 152-163.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 154-155.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 154-158.
- ¹² Betty T. Bennett ed., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* Volume I "A part of the Elect", the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, pp. 94 and 100.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 100.
- ¹⁴ Quotations of Shelley's verse are from *Shelley, Poetical Works* ed. Thomas Hutchinson, Corrected by G. M. Matthews, Oxford University Press [1905] 1970.
- ¹⁵ Loeb edition of Apollodorus, *The Library* with an English Translation by James George Frazer, in Two Volumes, Volume I, pp. 52-57;
Loeb edition of Ovid, *Metamorphoses* with an English Translation by Frank Justus Miller in Two Volumes, Volume I, pp. 2-31.
- ¹⁶ Frederick L. Jones ed., *Mary Shelley's Journal*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1947, pp. 43, 44 and 90;
Letters of PBS, I, p. 353.
- ¹⁷ from Frederick Page ed., *Byron, Poetical Works*, Oxford University Press [1945] 1975.
- ¹⁸ Loeb edition of *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias* with an English Translation by W. R. M. Lamb, pp. 158-161.
- ¹⁹ Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck eds., *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in Ten Volumes, Gordian Press and Ernest Benn, 1965, VII, p. 191-192.
- ²⁰ Loeb edition of *Euthyphro* etc. with an English Translation by H. N. Fowler, pp. 366-369.
- ²¹ Ovid, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-31;
Apollodorus, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-57.
- ²² George Saintsbury, *Historical Manual of English Prosody*, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1922, p. 270.