

CHAPTER 14

COSMIC CONFLICT AND EVOLUTION: AESCHYLUS'S TRANSFORMATION OF THE PROMETHEUS MYTH

MAIN POINTS

1. Although most scholars attribute *Prometheus Bound* to Aeschylus, some critics wonder whether it may have been actually written by Euphorion, his son. The critical portrait of Zeus in *Prometheus* is completely different from the wise Zeus presented in the *Oresteia* (see Chapter 15).

NOTE: Aeschylus shaped tragedy into the dominant literary form of Greece's Golden Age, c. 480–404 B.C. His oldest surviving play may be *Persians* (c. 472 B.C.), one of the few based on contemporary history.

2. While borrowing the subject from Hesiod, Aeschylus changes Prometheus into a heroic rebel and makes Zeus a tyrant. This image of Zeus was radically different from what the audience was used to. Aeschylus also presents him as neither omnipotent nor omniscient—and vulnerable to fatal error.

3. *Prometheus Bound* is the first part of a trilogy; the other two parts, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*, remain only in fragments.

4. Aeschylus follows the tradition in which Zeus allows Heracles to kill the eagle feasting on Prometheus's liver. In Aeschylus's interpretation, this leads to a reconciliation between Zeus and Prometheus, in effect restaging Zeus's swallowing of Metis to assimilate her qualities.

5. The first part of the trilogy casts divine power against divine intelligence: Zeus versus Prometheus. The play opens with Prometheus being immobilized on the rock.

6. Prometheus admits to having helped humans because he has compassion for their suffering.

7. The poet Shelley interpreted Prometheus as an image of the human mind, remaining free despite its physical bondage.

8. From the human viewpoint, Prometheus is a savior; from Zeus's perspective, he is a lawbreaker. This reflects the Greek ambivalence toward an individualism that may disrupt social order.

NOTE: The punishment of Prometheus has a parallel in the story of the Norse trickster god Loki; however, Prometheus's crime is committed for the benefit of humanity, while Loki mainly looks out for himself. Son of the ancient giants (jätter, in some ways comparable to the Titans), Loki's main function seems to have been to aggravate the Aesir in any way possible, including telling them truths about themselves that they did not want to hear, although he is also represented as Odin's travel companion and an occasional helper of the other gods. Loki transgresses against the gods, either by causing the death of the god Balder or by breaking up a party by slandering the gods (an older tradition). After a long chase, he is caught and chained to a rock; as chains, the gods use the intestines of one of his sons, killed by another son as part of his punishment. Above his head the gods place a poisonous snake with venom dripping onto his face. His faithful wife Sigyn remains by his side, catching the venom in a bowl, but every time she has to empty the bowl, the venom drips on Loki's face, causing him to shake in agony. That is the Norse explanation of earthquakes. Scholars have pointed out the mythological parallels between other trickster gods such as the Native American Coyote and the Ossetic trickster Syrdon, and some have pointed out that the "bound giant" may be a very ancient mythological theme. Christian monks collecting the Norse myths seem to have given Loki particularly diabolic traits to create a parallel between him and the devil.

9. Hesiod claims Prometheus is a second-generation Titan; Aeschylus identifies him as a son of Gaea.

10. The chorus of the play charges that Prometheus misses the mark of wise self-interest, displaying hubris.

11. The play's Prometheus is the last free mind in the universe to distinguish between good and evil; his virtue of intellectual honesty brings about his suffering.

12. A character's tragic error is hamartia, to "miss the mark." It can apply to any action that fails in hitting the target of divine approval.

13. Two scenes help convey Aeschylus's interpretation of Prometheus. In the first, the young woman Io is continually stung by a gadfly sent by Hera, victimized because of Zeus's lust for her. Both the King and Queen of Heaven are chillingly indifferent to the suffering they cause. In the climactic episode, the chorus sides with Prometheus against Hermes and Zeus, although the Greek chorus usually takes a mediating position. Thus the audience is asked to choose to support principle over power.

14. Prometheus's defiance gives Zeus an opportunity to save himself from a future downfall at the hands of a stronger son. In his turn, Prometheus is liberated when Chiron wants to die to escape suffering. In dying, Chiron vicariously atones for Prometheus's offense.

15. Because of an oath sworn by Zeus that he wouldn't release Prometheus, Prometheus must wear a fragment of the rock attached to a steel ring.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Aeschylus,
Prometheus Bound

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Zeus

Prometheus

Heracles

Chiron, the wise centaur

Io, Zeus's lover, punished by Hera by being transformed into a cow and stung by a gadfly

Hermes, messenger of the gods

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Hesiod (eighth century B.C.)

Aeschylus (c. 525–456 B.C.)

Percy Bysshe Shelley, English poet (1792–1822)