

Prometheus Unbound by Aeschylus

Story The play opens on a scene of brutal cruelty. Zeus, the new ruler of the Olympian gods, has sent his henchmen to chain his arch rival, the Titan Prometheus, against a rock in the Caucasus. The Olympians' blacksmith, Hephaistos—accompanied by Kratos and Bia, the raw personifications of power and might—sees to the chaining of Prometheus to a rock in the Caucasus, which to the Greeks of the time represented the ultimate in bitter isolation. Though Hephaistos has some sympathy for Prometheus, who had fought against the Titans, with Zeus, Kratos, the real god-thug insists on the criminal nature of Prometheus' theft of fire from Zeus, and has his heart fully in the enterprise of punishing Prometheus.

The subsequent play essentially consists in a series of unearthly visitors to Prometheus; figures who alternately warn him, threaten him, console him, and in the end oversees his doom. The first visitor to Prometheus is the chorus of Ocean Nymphs, his cousins, who arrive at his rocky perch in order to comfort the proud Titan, and to praise him for the wonderful gifts he has dared to offer to mankind, the civilizing arts of writing, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, and metallurgy. It is for these gifts in particular, they assure us, that Prometheus has forever remained a symbol of the values of civilization.

The next visitor is the Titan Oceanus himself, who offers to go to Zeus, and to speak to the supreme god on Prometheus' behalf. He is dissuaded by Prometheus, who feels confident that Zeus will ultimately give in to Prometheus, whose fatal secret against Zeus cannot otherwise be broken.

The brutality of Zeus is illustrated by the next visitor, the once beautiful maiden Io, who has become the victim of Hera's jealousy, and has been driven to the ends of the earth in flight from the Zeusian gadfly that is punishing her. In confronting Io, Prometheus once more reveals his prophetic power, claiming that she will ultimately give birth to the god Heracles, who will assure the final freedom of Prometheus himself.

Near the end of the play, Zeus sends down Hermes the messenger god, to Prometheus, to learn who will be the final threat to the power of Zeus. When Prometheus refuses to answer this demand Zeus heaves a huge thunderbolt from heaven, smashing Prometheus into Tartarus, hell, where the rebel will be expected to suffer the eternal pains of damnation.

Characters

Prometheus Prometheus is both a lover of mankind and a determined resister of tyranny. Prometheus is determined to conceal the secret of Zeus' ultimate downfall, for in that secret lies his own power, Zeus' weakness, and the eventual triumph of the human condition.

Zeus Zeus is the new ruler of the Olympian gods, proud and arrogant, and ruthless toward such Titans as Prometheus who long to overthrow him. Zeus is especially desperate to learn from Prometheus the name of the god who will supersede him.

Themes

Resistance to tyranny. Prometheus is the ultimate symbol of resistance to tyranny, unyielding but just in his fury. This god has reason and virtue and enlightenment on his side, but still he remains the brutalized victim of a cruel power system.

Fighting for justice Prometheus becomes the ultimate representative of those who fight for the down trodden. Unyielding but enlightened, he fights to the end for justice.

Fate **Fate** is another important thematic element. Prometheus trusts in fate to work out his painful dilemmas. He trusts fate to support him in the end and he is justified by the way things turn out.