

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Aeschylus

PROMETHEUS (determined)

Character Prometheus acquired the power of fire, and against the will of Zeus gave this fire to mortals, to help them on their difficult path through life. It is also Prometheus' downfall that he was punished by Zeus, and nailed to a rock in the Caucasus, where his liver was constantly gnawed by an eagle. Prometheus typically figures as compassionate to mankind, ingenious, daring, and totally determined to carry through his rebellion against the supreme ruler. Nothing less than such determination would enable him to survive the bleak, and seemingly endless, torture to which Zeus consigns him.

Illustrative moments

Kind As the cast of figures and henchman passes the chained Prometheus, and exchanges greetings, commiserations, and tales of private suffering and punishment exercised by the harsh new rule of Zeus, Prometheus explains the source of his determination to resist and to retain his precious secret. As a defender of mankind, he has been determined to provide his struggling favorites, who crawl as helplessly as ants across the earth, with a few gifts which will assure their survival. The first of these gifts is fire, he explains, adding that this is the gift Zeus above all refused to share. With the gift of fire Prometheus gives the arts which will enable mankind to prosper on the earth, with a newfound warmth against the cold, and with ironwork which will enable ploughs and agriculture. He also gives man the knowledge of astronomy and the numerical skills which will make calculation and positioning available. Only when we learn how evolved is the gift Prometheus wants to assure mankind, do we realize how much more his determination is than a simple power play within the realm of the gods.

Determined Aeschylus' Prometheus first appears to us as he is being chained to a rock in the Caucasus, an area known to the Greek imagination as the ultimate in remoteness and severity. The two henchmen of Zeus are brutal and unfeeling, and Prometheus, defiant, treats them with the contempt they deserve. The audience is driven to sympathy for the rebel god, though at the same time they feel awe at his behavior, which threatens to undermine the order of the universe. We get our first sense that nothing will bend Prometheus in his determination, to keep to himself the secret of the power that will eventually depose Zeus.

Parallels Great literature abounds in characters who are self-sacrificingly good to others. One thinks immediately of such figures as Penelope, in the *Odyssey*, Uncle Tom in the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ophelia or Cordelia in Shakespeare. Hester Prynne, in the *Scarlet Letter*, and *Jude the Obscure* only who how easily the list can be enlarged. From the Byronic Don Juan, through the Sieur de Roland, to Antigone's undying resistance to Creon world literature tracks an undying stream of characters in whom gracious care for fellow humans is life's driving motif.

Discussion questions

The three 'Religions of the Book' include a 'devil' of one sort or another in their theological mapping. Is Prometheus, who is the incarnation of opposition to the 'ruling God,' in any sense a devil, or is he quite the opposite? Is he a saintly figure?

Do you know of other works of literature in which the protagonist is physically passive, immovable? If you have trouble with this question, substitute spiritually (or mentally) for physically passive. Who do you know in literature whose mind is immovably fixed?

Why does Aeschylus present Prometheus with such an extensive encounter with the figure of Io, who is pursued globally by a gadfly, and by the lust of the very Zeus who is punishing Prometheus?

