

Themes in Aeschylus  
**Punishment**

**Preface** The prehistory of the Olympian mythological system in ancient Greece takes us back to texts like Hesiod's *Theogony*, which was composed in the eighth century B.C.E. That theological epic—'theogony' means 'birth of the gods'—derives from the living popular belief in mythological figures and tales. Out of those tales, themselves embodied in popular worship, emerges a large narrative pattern sufficiently coherent to convince us of the archaic power of the Greek god system, and of its dominant patriarchal thrusts, those biases that align individual behaviors with control, and especially with punishment. Greek tragedy is as full, as ancient Hebraic belief, of punishment, retribution, and discipline. Nowhere is this vast religion more comfortably expressed than in Greek tragedy itself, with its diversity of punishments and its implicit warnings to behave along the trend line of the cosmically just.

**Prometheus Bound.** *Prometheus Bound* is devoted to the awfulness of the punishment Zeus was capable of inflicting on a fellow deity, especially on a god willing to give gifts of immense power to mankind. A lowly Titan, as Hesiod puts it, Prometheus was a wily infighter in the early struggles of the Olympian gods to muscle out the most archaic of the Ur god forces. As the evolution of the Greek god system took on increasing sophistication, Prometheus found ways to express his good will toward human beings, who were inexorably becoming dangerous competitors to the *theoi*, the classic denizens of Olympus. Intellectual and analytical, Prometheus concluded that he could best help mortals by enriching their adaptation to their environment, particularly through gifts of intelligence. (What better way to undermine Zeus' reign of darkness?) In a reed of fennel, Prometheus stole sparks of fire, which he could give to mankind as sources of light, foremost, but then of discernment, understanding of our natural environment, and, on the level of knowledge, approaches to astronomy, and the visual arts. For this act of heroic humanism, on which Prometheus could pride himself as the greatest benefactor of mankind, Zeus chained this upstart to a crag in the Caucasus—symbolic for the Greeks of the most remote and inhuman corner of the earth—where for countless ages the rebel was to remain, battered by the storm winds, his liver gnawed by a passing eagle, the symbol of Zeus' power. Punishment eternal appears to be the lot of Zeus's enemies, though in the end Heracles frees the advocate of mortals.

**Agamemnon.** Inexorable chains of guilt and punishment pulse through the body of Greek myth. Agamemnon qualifies for such punishment by sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia, in order to promote his naval expedition against Troy, then by returning, postwar, to his home in Mycenae, with his prophetess lover, Cassandra: two acts by which the leader of the Greek forces shows cruelty and indifference to his wife, and invites from her a savage counterbalancing punishment. Like Prometheus, Agamemnon invites his punishment; Agamemnon defies decent behavior—the Greek *nomos*, or regulatory law—while Prometheus shows contempt for the father of the gods.

**Persians.** The *Persians* stands out, from the outset, as a Greek tragedy in which an Athenian playwright sees world events from the perspective of 'the enemy.' (Euripides also walks this unusual path, in such plays as *The Trojan Women*, but this extension of sympathy is not common in Antiquity.) The key to this extension, in the *Persians*, may be the distinctive Greek understanding of the backdrop to the Persian response to defeat. For the Greeks the Persian state is being punished for the *hybris* of Xerxes in daring to attack the Greeks at Salamis. This perception, of the backdrop to the play, is for the Greek audience what makes it possible to sympathize with the Persians, especially with Atossa, in their grief. Their grief is the punishment they must pay, for willingly undertaking to fight a fleet so mighty as the Greek. Of course the Persians were simply being punished.