

PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

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.

Themes

Resistance 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.

Freedom-struggle 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.

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.

MAIN CHARACTER

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.

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.

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.

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?