The Promethean Library



Prometheus Bound

The Tragedy of the Fire-Bringer, with Seven Evenings of Reflection

Aeschylus

Translated by E. H. Plumptre

Greek Originals · No. 5

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AESCHYLUS *(attributed to Aeschylus)*

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With an introduction, notes, a glossary and seven evenings of reflection



The Promethean Library · Greek Originals · No. 5
Transatlantic Press

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The text. E. H. Plumptre's verse translation of Prometheus Bound, first published in 1868, from the 1901 D. C. Heath edition of his Æschylos: Tragedies and Fragments, as transcribed for Project Gutenberg. Plumptre's footnotes and his asterisks marking conjectural readings are left out; his line numbers, which follow the Greek, are kept. Plumptre died in 1891; the translation is in the public domain worldwide.

How this edition was made. The introduction, notes, glossary, practices, questions, chronology and reading list were drafted with the help of artificial intelligence and checked by hand against the text and against published sources. Every quotation in them matches the text printed in this book word for word, and every fact was checked against a published source before it was printed. The publisher keeps a record of the source checked for each fact. No quotation, fact or story was invented. The translation itself is unchanged.

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In fennel stalk
I snatched the hidden spring of stolen fire,
Which is to men a teacher of all arts,
Their chief resource.

PROMETHEUS BOUND, LINES 109–111

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Before You Begin

A god is nailed to a mountain for giving fire to human beings. That is the whole situation of *Prometheus Bound*, and the hero never moves from it. He cannot walk away, and so the world comes to him: a sea god with advice, a chorus of sea nymphs with sympathy, a wandering girl who has also been wronged by the king of the gods, and finally a messenger with threats. Each visitor tests him, and each conversation turns on one question. When power is unjust, what do you owe it?

The play is short. Most readers finish it in an evening, and it reads aloud well with friends taking the parts. Because so much of it is argument, prophecy and memory rather than action, it rewards a second reading.

Its questions have not gone away. What do we owe the people who taught us our skills? Can knowledge be power over the powerful? Is defiance a virtue, or a stubbornness that hurts the one who defies? The play does not settle them.

This edition gives you the full text of E. H. Plumptre's Victorian translation, with his line numbers in the margin every ten lines. Notes on the Text follow the play and are keyed to those numbers. After them come a glossary of names and old words, seven evenings of reading and practice, questions for groups and classes, a chronology and suggestions for further reading. Read the introduction first if you like a map; read the play first if you like to be surprised.

Introduction

A Play About Fire

Prometheus Bound opens with a punishment and ends with a worse one. In between, almost nothing happens on stage, and yet the play has long been read as one of the great statements about power and conscience. Its hero is a Titan, one of the older generation of gods, who has defied Zeus by giving human beings fire and, with fire, every skill that makes a human life possible. Zeus has him chained to a rock at the edge of the world. The question the play keeps asking is whether Prometheus is a criminal, a benefactor or both.

This series takes its name from him, so it is worth seeing clearly what the myth said before this play, what the play adds, and how readers have used the figure since.

Who Wrote It, and When

The play has come down to us as one of the seven surviving tragedies of Aeschylus, the earliest of the three great Athenian tragedians whose work survives. Aeschylus was born in 525 or 524 BC; his family probably lived at Eleusis, west of Athens. He fought against the Persians at Marathon in 490 BC, where his brother was killed, and again at Artemisium and Salamis in 480 BC. He first competed as a playwright in 499 BC and won his first victory in 484 BC. He is said to have written about ninety plays, of which seven survive complete. His *Persians* won first prize in 472 BC, and his *Oresteia* trilogy was produced in 458 BC. He died at Gela in Sicily in 456 or 455 BC.

Whether he wrote *Prometheus Bound* is a real and open question, and you should know that before you read. Doubts were first raised in print by the German scholar R. Westphal in 1869. They were pressed in detail by W. Schmid in 1929 and, most carefully, by Mark Griffith in 1977. These scholars argue that the play differs from the other six in its structure, its staging, its style, its vocabulary and its meter. Defenders reply that we have less than a tenth of what Aeschylus wrote, so we cannot be sure what was typical of him, and that a play with a hero fixed to a rock will naturally be built differently. Griffith himself allowed that new evidence could settle the matter in favor of Aeschylus. No consensus has formed.

The date is uncertain for the same reasons. If Aeschylus wrote it, many scholars place it in his last years, before his death in 456 or 455 BC. An older argument tied it to an eruption of Mount Etna, which the play seems to describe in the speech about the monster Typhon (lines 359 to 380). Ancient sources place an eruption of Etna in the 470s BC, and the 1901 edition from which our text comes dated the play to about 470 BC on that ground. A recent study argues that the Etna passage draws on older poetry about Typhon and so cannot date the play at all. If Aeschylus did not write it, it may have been composed twenty to thirty years after his death. The scholar Martin West suggested that his son Euphorion, himself a playwright, staged it as a lost work of his father; Euphorion won first prize in 431 BC, defeating both Sophocles and Euripides. That theory remains controversial. One fixed point helps: a comedy by Cratinus, generally dated to 429 BC, parodied the sequel, *Prometheus Unbound*, so that play at least existed by then.

In this book we call the author Aeschylus, as tradition does, but read that name as a label for a disputed attribution. The possible dates run from about 470 BC to about 430 BC.

The World It Came From

Athens in the fifth century BC was a young democracy. The reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 BC had reorganized the citizens into ten local tribes and put new power in the assembly and the council. A generation later the city helped turn back two Persian invasions. A play about a new ruler who takes power by force, rewards his friends, crushes his enemies and trusts no one would have struck a nerve in such a city.

Tragedies were performed at the Great Dionysia, a festival of the god Dionysus. Each competing playwright presented three tragedies, which might or might not form a connected trilogy, followed by a lighter satyr play, and the set of four was judged together. That custom matters here, because *Prometheus Bound* was almost certainly the first or second part of a larger story whose other parts are lost.

The Myth Before the Play

The oldest full account of Prometheus that survives is in two poems by Hesiod, who lived around 700 BC: the *Theogony*, a history of the gods, and the *Works and Days*, a poem about honest work and the farming year. In Hesiod, Prometheus is the son of the Titan Iapetus and Clymene, a daughter of Oceanus, and the brother of Atlas and Epimetheus. He is clever and full of tricks.

Hesiod tells the story as a contest of wits that human beings lose. At a place called Mecone, gods and mortals divided the first sacrifice. Prometheus cut up an ox and laid out two portions: the good meat hidden under the unappetizing stomach, and the bones wrapped in shining fat. Zeus chose the bones, and Hesiod says that from that day men burn bones for the gods. Angry at the trick, Zeus withheld fire from mortals. Prometheus stole it back, carrying it in a hollow fennel stalk. Zeus answered with a gift of his own: a woman, shaped from earth by Hephaestus and given to Prometheus's foolish brother Epimetheus, who accepted her though he had been warned never to take a gift from Zeus. In

the *Works and Days* she is named Pandora, and she opens a jar that lets loose toil and sickness on the world; only hope stays inside. Prometheus himself is bound, and an eagle eats his immortal liver by day while it grows back by night, until Heracles kills the eagle with Zeus's consent.

Hesiod's sympathies lie with Zeus. Prometheus's cleverness brings trouble on the people he meant to help, and the lesson is that no one outwits the king of the gods.

What the Play Adds

The play keeps the fire and the fennel stalk, the binding, the eagle and the promise of Heracles. It changes almost everything else.

First, it drops the sacrifice trick and Pandora entirely. Prometheus's crime is pure generosity. Zeus, newly in power, meant to wipe out the human race and plant a new one; Prometheus alone stood against him and saved us (lines 239 to 243).

Second, it makes fire the beginning of all the arts. In the long speeches at lines 446 to 514, Prometheus describes human beings before his gifts as creatures who saw without seeing, living in caves like ants. He taught them to build houses and to read the seasons in the rising and setting of the stars. He gave them number and writing, tamed animals for plowing and riding, invented ships, discovered medicine, taught every kind of prophecy and found the metals under the earth. He sums it up himself: "Allarts of mortals from Prometheus spring." It is an early and powerful account of human progress as something learned, and its teacher is a rebel.

Third, it gives Prometheus a new mother and a new kind of knowledge. Here he is the son of Themis, the goddess of right order, who is also identified with Earth, "one form though bearing many names." From her he has learned the future. His name means Forethought, and in this play forethought is literal: he knows what will happen.

Fourth, it adds Io. She is a mortal girl from Argos whom Zeus desired. Because of that desire she has been turned into a creature with a heifer's

horns, driven across the world by a gadfly sent by Zeus's jealous wife, Hera, and haunted by the ghost of Argos, the many-eyed herdsman who guarded her. Prometheus foretells the rest of her wanderings: across Europe and Asia to Egypt, where Zeus will restore her with a touch and she will bear a son, Epaphus. From that son will come, thirteen generations later, the archer Heracles, who will set Prometheus free. Io's scene doubles the play's case against Zeus, since she is a second victim of his will, and it ties the two sufferers together across time.

Fifth, and most important for the plot, it gives Prometheus a secret. Zeus is planning a marriage that will produce a son stronger than his father, and that son will overthrow him as Zeus overthrew Cronus. Only Prometheus knows who the bride is, and he will not say until he is released. The play never names her. Other ancient sources tell the story: the poet Pindar has Themis warn that the sea goddess Thetis is destined to bear a son mightier than his father, and Zeus gives her up to a mortal husband, Peleus, so that her son is Achilles. Later mythographers say that it was Prometheus who revealed the danger to Zeus in exchange for his release. That bargain is the lever of the whole trilogy.

What Happens

The play falls into clear movements.

In the prologue (lines 1 to 87), the brutal Strength and the silent Force drive Hephaestus, the smith god, to nail Prometheus to a cliff in Scythia. Hephaestus pities his kinsman; Strength mocks him for it.

Alone, Prometheus calls on the sky, the winds, the rivers, the sea, the Earth and the Sun to witness what he suffers (lines 88 to 127). The Chorus of Ocean Nymphs arrive on a winged car, drawn by the sound of the hammering. He tells them how he helped Zeus defeat the Titans, how Zeus repaid him, and what he did for mortals (lines 128 to 295).

Oceanus, their father, comes on a winged steed and offers to plead with Zeus if Prometheus will only soften his tongue (lines 296 to 403). Prometheus sends him away. After a choral song of mourning, Prometh-

eus describes his gifts to humanity in full (lines 446 to 514) and hints that Zeus cannot escape Necessity (lines 515 to 534).

Io enters, half mad (line 573). She tells her story, and Prometheus foretells her future and his own release by her descendant, revealing as he does so that Zeus's fall depends on a marriage (lines 573 to 906). The Chorus sing that it is best to marry one's equal.

Hermes arrives with Zeus's demand to know the secret (line 966). Prometheus insults him and refuses. Hermes threatens that the rock will be blasted, that Prometheus will be buried for ages, and that he will return to daylight only to have an eagle feed on his liver. The Chorus choose to stay with him. The play ends in earthquake and storm, with Prometheus calling on his mother and on the upper air to see what wrongs he bears.

The Lost Companion Plays

Prometheus Bound is a fragment of a larger story. Ancient sources name two other plays about Prometheus that belong with it: *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*. A third title, *Prometheus the Fire-Kindler*, was a satyr play, probably performed with the *Persians* in 472 BC, and is a different work.

Of *Prometheus Unbound* about eleven fragments survive, quoted by later writers. They show a chorus of Titans, now released from Tartarus by Zeus's mercy, coming to see Prometheus, who is again in the Caucasus with the eagle tearing at his liver; the Roman writer Cicero translated a long lament from it into Latin. Heracles arrives, receives directions for his own journey, and prays to Apollo to guide his arrow against the eagle. Prometheus greets him as the son of his enemy and his deliverer. Of *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer* almost nothing remains. Scholars disagree about its subject, which may have been the theft of fire or the founding of the Athenian torch festival in Prometheus's honor; it is usually placed third, after *Unbound*, though not everyone agrees.

Two consequences follow. First, the play's harsh picture of Zeus may not have been its last word; the trilogy probably ended with Zeus and

Prometheus reconciled. Whether Zeus changes, or only his relation to Prometheus changes, is one of the oldest arguments about the play. Second, when Prometheus says that he will be freed by Io's descendant, he is pointing to events the original audience would have seen in the next play.

Central Ideas

Forethought and its limits. Prometheus foresees everything, including his own suffering, and still cannot prevent it. He says plainly that "Art is far weaker than Necessity." Knowledge does not exempt anyone from the order of things; it only removes the excuse of surprise.

Gifts and debts. Prometheus is a benefactor whose gifts are stolen goods, and the play asks you to hold both facts at once. Notice, too, what he gave: not luxury but skill, the means by which people help themselves.

Power, new and old. Hephaestus states the political theme in the opening scene: "Who holds a power But newly gained is ever stern of mood." Prometheus adds that suspicion of friends is a disease of tyranny (lines 232 to 233). Zeus never appears, but every visitor describes him as a ruler who answers to no one.

Endurance and defiance. Prometheus will not bend, and the play does not hide the cost. Oceanus, the Chorus and Hermes all call his defiance stubbornness, and the Chorus at one point says he has sinned. Hermes's warning that self-will without wisdom is worth nothing is a real position the play leaves standing.

Sympathy. The Ocean Nymphs begin timid and end brave. When Hermes orders them away, they choose to share Prometheus's fate: "With him I will endure Whatever is decreed." Their change is the play's quiet answer to its own loud arguments.

How Prometheus Has Been Read

In antiquity Prometheus was honored at Athens with a sanctuary at the Academy and a torch race. In Plato's *Protagoras*, the sophist Protagoras retells the myth: Epimetheus hands out all the natural gifts to the animals and leaves human beings naked, so Prometheus steals the crafts of Hephaestus and Athena, together with fire; but the art of living together in cities remains with Zeus, who later sends Hermes to give everyone a share of reverence and justice. That version keeps Prometheus as the giver of skills while insisting that skill alone does not make a community.

In modern times the figure became a symbol of defiance against tyranny. In the early 1770s the young Goethe wrote a dramatic fragment and a poem in which Prometheus scorns the gods and shapes human beings himself. Beethoven's ballet music *The Creatures of Prometheus* had its premiere in Vienna in 1801. Byron published a short poem, "Prometheus," in 1816. Mary Shelley subtitled her novel of 1818 *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, turning the giver of fire into a warning about the maker who cannot control what he makes. The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley published *Prometheus Unbound* in 1820. In its preface he explains that the lost Aeschylean sequel reconciled Prometheus with Zeus in return for the secret about Thetis, and that he refused to follow it, because a hero who submitted to his oppressor would lose all moral grandeur. In 1841 the young Karl Marx, in the preface to his doctoral dissertation, took Prometheus's line to Hermes about hating all the gods as a motto for philosophy and called him the noblest saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar.

So the figure has been read in at least three ways: as the trickster punished for overreaching (Hesiod), as the patron of human skill and civilization (the play and Plato), and as the rebel against unjust authority (the Romantics and their heirs). The play itself makes room for all three.

Reading It Well Today

Read it aloud if you can. It was written to be heard. Give each character a reader; let the Chorus be several voices.

Do not expect action; expect pressure. Each visitor presses on one immovable will: pity (Hephaestus), prudence (Oceanus), shared suffering (Io), threat (Hermes). Ask which comes closest to moving him.

Hold the missing plays in mind. You are reading the middle of a story, and Prometheus's prophecies of Heracles and of Zeus's need for him are promises the original audience expected to see kept.

Finally, do not let the Romantic reading, splendid as it is, flatten the play. Prometheus is generous and brave. He is also proud, insulting and sure that he alone is right. The play lets you admire him and argue with him at the same time, and that is its gift to a reader.

A Note on the Translation

Edward Hayes Plumptre (1821 to 1891) was an English clergyman, scholar and poet. Born in London, he was educated at University College, Oxford, and spent many years at King's College London as chaplain and professor, before being installed as Dean of Wells in 1881. He translated Sophocles in 1865, all of Aeschylus in 1868 and Dante's *Commedia* in 1887. He died at Wells in 1891. Our text comes from the edition of his Aeschylus published in Boston by D. C. Heath in 1901.

Plumptre put the spoken dialogue into unrhymed lines of five beats, like Shakespeare's blank verse. For the choral songs he used unrhymed lyric measures that keep the Greek arrangement of strophe and answering antistrophe, which this edition marks with small labels such as Strophe I and Antistrophe I. His Greek text was based mainly on F. A. Paley's edition of 1861. Where respected editors thought a passage was not genuine, he printed it in square brackets, as at lines 811 to 814; we keep those brackets.

His English is Victorian and deliberately old: "thou" and "thee," verbs like "trow" and "ween," and words such as "hest" and "levin," all explained in the glossary. He spelled Greek names close to the Greek: Hephæstos for Hephaestus, Okeanos for Oceanus, Caucasos, Skythia, Kilikian, Sikelia for Sicily, Neilos for the Nile, Cronos, Tartaros, Kypris and Errinyes. In our own prose we use the common modern forms. A few quirks deserve warning. Typhon is given a hundred hands (line 361), where other translations, following the Greek, give him a hundred heads. At line 514, "Allarts" stands for "All arts." At line 795 a speaker's tag, *Prom.*, appears inside the line itself; the line is Prometheus's.

The margin numbers come every ten lines and follow the Greek line numbering of Plumptre's edition. An English line does not match a Greek line one for one, and his Greek edition was older than those in use now, so his numbers drift from modern ones as the play goes on. Io's first words come near line 573 here and at line 561 in Herbert Weir Smyth's Loeb translation; Hermes enters near line 965 here and at line 944 there. When comparing editions, look as much as twenty lines either side.

Nothing in the translation has been changed. Plumptre's own footnotes have been left out, along with his footnote numbers and the asterisks with which he marked conjectural readings. The stage directions in parentheses are part of the printed English edition.

Persons of the Play

Strength (Kratos): A servant of Zeus who supervises the chaining. In Hesiod, Strength and Force are children of the river Styx who never leave Zeus's side.

Force (Bia): Strength's companion, who helps lead Prometheus in but never speaks.

Hephaestus: The smith god, son of Zeus and Hera, who forges and fixes the chains and pities the prisoner as his kinsman.

Prometheus: A Titan, son of Themis in this play, who gave fire and the arts to human beings and knows a secret that threatens Zeus.

Chorus of Ocean Nymphs: Daughters of Oceanus and Tethys, who come to comfort Prometheus and stay to share his fate.

Oceanus: God of the great river that the Greeks believed encircled the earth; father of the Chorus and kin to Prometheus.

Io: A mortal girl from Argos, daughter of the river Inachus, transformed and driven across the world because Zeus desired her.

Hermes: Messenger of Zeus, sent at the end to force the secret out of Prometheus.

The stage directions also bring on the ghost of Argos, the many-eyed herdsman who guarded Io; he does not speak.

Prometheus Bound

SCENE.—SKYTHIA, on the heights of Caucasos. The Euxine seen in the distance

Enter HEPHÆSTOS, STRENGTH, and FORCE, leading PROMETHEUS in chains

Strength

Lo! to a plain, earth's boundary remote,
We now are come,—the tract as Skythian known,
A desert inaccessible: and now,
Hephæstos, it is thine to do the hests
The Father gave thee, to these lofty crags
To bind this crafty trickster fast in chains
Of adamantine bonds that none can break;
For he thy choice flower stealing, the bright glory
Of fire that all arts spring from, hath bestowed it
On mortal men. And so for fault like this
He now must pay the Gods due penalty,
That he may learn to bear the sovereign rule
Of Zeus, and cease from his philanthropy.

Hephaestos

O Strength, and thou, O Force, the hest of Zeus,
As far as touches you, attains its end,
And nothing hinders. Yet my courage fails
To bind a God of mine own kin by force
To this bare rock where tempests wildly sweep;
And yet I needs must muster courage for it:
'Tis no slight thing the Father's words to scorn.

O thou of Themis [*to* PROMETHEUS] wise in counsel son,
Full deep of purpose, lo! against my will,
I fetter thee against thy will with bonds
Of bronze that none can loose, to this lone height,
Where thou shalt know nor voice nor face of man,
But scorching in the hot blaze of the sun,
Shalt lose thy skin's fair beauty. Thou shalt long
For starry-mantled night to hide day's sheen,
For sun to melt the rime of early dawn;
And evermore the weight of present ill
Shall wear thee down. Unborn as yet is he
Who shall release thee: this the fate thou gain'st
As due reward for thy philanthropy.
For thou, a God not fearing wrath of Gods,
In thy transgression gav'st their power to men;
And therefore on this rock of little ease
Thou still shalt keep thy watch, nor lying down,
Nor knowing sleep, nor ever bending knee;
And many groans and wailings profitless
Thy lips shall utter; for the mind of Zeus
Remains inexorable. Who holds a power
But newly gained is ever stern of mood.

Strength

Let be! Why linger in this idle pity?
Why dost not hate a God to Gods a foe,
Who gave thy choicest prize to mortal men?

Hephaestos

Strange is the power of kin and intercourse.

Strength

I own it; yet to slight the Father's words,
How may that be? Is not that fear the worse?

Hephaestos
Still art thou ruthless, full of savagery.

Strength
There is no help in weeping over him:
Spend not thy toil on things that profit not.

Hephaestos
O handicraft to me intolerable!

Strength
Why loath'st thou it? Of these thy present griefs
That craft of thine is not one whit the cause.

Hephaestos
And yet I would some other had that skill.

Strength
All things bring toil except for Gods to reign;
For none but Zeus can boast of freedom true.

Hephaestos
Too well I see the proof, and gainsay not.

Strength
Wilt thou not speed to fix the chains on him,
Lest He, the Father, see thee loitering here?

Hephaestos
Well, here the handcuffs thou may'st see prepared.

Strength
In thine hands take him. Then with all thy might
Strike with thine hammer; nail him to the rocks.

Hephaestos
The work goes on, I ween, and not in vain.

Strength
Strike harder, rivet, give no whit of ease:

A wondrous knack has he to find resource,
Even where all might seem to baffle him.

Hephaestos

Lo! this his arm is fixed inextricably.

Strength

Now rivet thou this other fast, that he
May learn, though sharp, that he than Zeus is duller.

Hephaestos

No one but he could justly blame my work.

Strength

Now drive the stern jaw of the adamant wedge
Right through his chest with all the strength thou hast.

Hephaestos

Ah me! Prometheus, for thy woes I groan.

Strength

Again, thou'rt loth, and for the foes of Zeus
Thou groanest: take good heed to it lest thou
Ere long with cause thyself commiserate.

Hephaestos

Thou see'st a sight unsightly to our eyes.

Strength

I see this man obtaining his deserts:
Nay, cast thy breast-chains round about his ribs.

Hephaestos

I must needs do it. Spare thine o'er much bidding;
Go thou below and rivet both his legs.

Strength

Nay, I will bid thee, urge thee to thy work.

Hephaestos

There, it is done, and that with no long toil.

Strength

Now with thy full power fix the galling fetters:
Thou hast a stern o'erlooker of thy work.

Hephaestos

Thy tongue but utters words that match thy form.

Strength

Choose thou the melting mood; but chide not me
For my self-will and wrath and ruthlessness.

Hephaestos

Now let us go, his limbs are bound in chains.

Strength

Here then wax proud, and stealing what belongs
To the Gods, to mortals give it. What can they
Avail to rescue thee from these thy woes?
Falsely the Gods have given thee thy name,
Prometheus, Forethought; forethought thou dost need
To free thyself from this rare handiwork.

Exeunt HEPHÆSTOS, STRENGTH, and FORCE, leaving PROMETHEUS on the rock

Prometheus

Thou firmament of God, and swift-winged winds,
Ye springs of rivers, and of ocean waves
That smile innumerous! Mother of us all,
O Earth, and Sun's all-seeing eye, behold,
I pray, what I a God from Gods endure.
Behold in what foul case
I for ten thousand years
Shall struggle in my woe,
In these unseemly chains.

Such doom the new-made Monarch of the Blest
Hath now devised for me.
Woe, woe! The present and the oncoming pang
I wail, as I search out
The place and hour when end of all these ills
Shall dawn on me at last.
What say I? All too clearly I foresee
The things that come, and nought of pain shall be
By me unlooked-for; but I needs must bear
My destiny as best I may, knowing well
The might resistless of Necessity.
And neither may I speak of this my fate,
Nor hold my peace. For I, poor I, through giving
Great gifts to mortal men, am prisoner made
In these fast fetters; yea, in fennel stalk
I snatched the hidden spring of stolen fire,
Which is to men a teacher of all arts,
Their chief resource. And now this penalty
Of that offence I pay, fast riveted
In chains beneath the open firmament.
Ha! ha! What now?
What sound, what odour floats invisibly?
Is it of God or man, or blending both?
And has one come to the remotest rock
To look upon my woes? Or what wills he?
Behold me bound, a God to evil doomed,
The foe of Zeus, and held
In hatred by all Gods
Who tread the courts of Zeus:
And this for my great love,
Too great, for mortal men.
Ah me! what rustling sounds
Hear I of birds not far?
With the light whirr of wings

The air re-echoeth:
All that draws nigh to me is cause of fear.

Enter Chorus of Ocean Nymphs, with wings, floating in the air

Chorus

Nay, fear thou nought: in love
All our array of wings
In eager race hath come
To this high peak, full hardly gaining o'er
Our Father's mind and will;
And the swift-rushing breezes bore me on:
For lo! the echoing sound of blows on iron
Pierced to our cave's recess, and put to flight
My shamefast modesty,
And I in unshod haste, on winged car,
To thee rushed hitherward.

Prometheus

Ah me! ah me!
Offspring of Tethys blest with many a child,
Daughters of Old Okeanos that rolls
Round all the earth with never-sleeping stream,
Behold ye me, and see
With what chains fettered fast,
I on the topmost crags of this ravine
Shall keep my sentry-post unenviable.

Chorus

I see it, O Prometheus, and a mist
Of fear and full of tears comes o'er mine eyes,
Thy frame beholding thus,
Writhing on these high rocks
In adamantine ills.
New pilots now o'er high Olympos rule,
And with new-fashioned laws

Zeus reigns, down-trampling right,
And all the ancient powers He sweeps away.

Prometheus

Ah! would that 'neath the Earth, 'neath Hades too,
Home of the dead, far down to Tartaros
Unfathomable He in fetters fast
In wrath had hurled me down:
So neither had a God
Nor any other mocked at these my woes;
But now, the wretched plaything of the winds,
I suffer ills at which my foes rejoice.

Chorus

Nay, which of all the Gods
Is so hard-hearted as to joy in this?
Who, Zeus excepted, doth not pity thee
In these thine ills? But He,
Ruthless, with soul unbent,
Subdues the heavenly host, nor will He cease
Until his heart be satiate with power,
Or some one seize with subtle stratagem
The sovran might that so resistless seemed.

Prometheus

Nay, of a truth, though put to evil shame,
In massive fetters bound,
The Ruler of the Gods
Shall yet have need of me, yes, e'en of me,
To tell the counsel new
That seeks to strip from him
His sceptre and his might of sovereignty.
In vain will He with words
Or suasion's honeyed charms
Soothe me, nor will I tell

Through fear of his stern threats,
Ere He shall set me free
From these my bonds, and make,
Of his own choice, amends
For all these outrages.

Chorus

Full rash art thou, and yield'st
In not a jot to bitterest form of woe;
Thou art o'er-free and reckless in thy speech:
But piercing fear hath stirred
My inmost soul to strife;
For I fear greatly touching thy distress,
As to what haven of these woes of thine
Thou now must steer: the son of Cronos hath
A stubborn mood and heart inexorable.

Prometheus

I know that Zeus is hard,
And keeps the Right supremely to himself;
But then, I trow, He'll be
Full pliant in his will,
When He is thus crushed down.
Then, calming down his mood
Of hard and bitter wrath,
He'll hasten unto me,
As I to him shall haste,
For friendship and for peace.

Chorus

Hide it not from us, tell us all the tale:
For what offence Zeus, having seized thee thus,
So wantonly and bitterly insults thee:
If the tale hurt thee not, inform thou us.

Prometheus

Painful are these things to me e'en to speak:
Painful is silence; everywhere is woe.
For when the high Gods fell on mood of wrath,
And hot debate of mutual strife was stirred,
Some wishing to hurl Cronos from his throne,
That Zeus, forsooth, might reign; while others strove,
Eager that Zeus might never rule the Gods:
Then I, full strongly seeking to persuade
The Titans, yea, the sons of Heaven and Earth,
Failed of my purpose. Scorning subtle arts,
With counsels violent, they thought that they
By force would gain full easy mastery.
But then not once or twice my mother Themis
And Earth, one form though bearing many names,
Had prophesied the future, how 'twould run,
That not by strength nor yet by violence,
But guile, should those who prospered gain the day.
And when in my words I this counsel gave,
They deigned not e'en to glance at it at all.
And then of all that offered, it seemed best
To join my mother, and of mine own will,
Not against his will, take my side with Zeus,
And by my counsels, mine, the dark deep pit
Of Tartaros the ancient Cronos holds,
Himself and his allies. Thus profiting
By me, the mighty ruler of the Gods
Repays me with these evil penalties:
For somehow this disease in sovereignty
Inheres, of never trusting to one's friends.
And since ye ask me under what pretence
He thus maltreats me, I will show it you:
For soon as He upon his father's throne
Had sat secure, forthwith to divers Gods

He divers gifts distributed, and his realm
Began to order. But of mortal men
He took no heed, but purposed utterly
To crush their race and plant another new;
And, I excepted, none dared cross his will;
But I did dare, and mortal men I freed
From passing on to Hades thunder-stricken;
And therefore am I bound beneath these woes,
Dreadful to suffer, pitiable to see:
And I, who in my pity thought of men
More than myself, have not been worthy deemed
To gain like favour, but all ruthlessly
I thus am chained, foul shame this sight to Zeus.

Chorus

Iron-hearted must he be and made of rock
Who is not moved, Prometheus, by thy woes:
Fain could I wish I ne'er had seen such things,
And, seeing them, am wounded to the heart.

Prometheus

Yea, I am piteous for my friends to see.

Chorus

Did'st thou not go to farther lengths than this?

Prometheus

I made men cease from contemplating death.

Chorus

What medicine did'st thou find for that disease?

Prometheus

Blind hopes I gave to live and dwell with them.

Chorus

Great service that thou did'st for mortal men!

Prometheus

And more than that, I gave them fire, yes I.

Chorus

Do short-lived men the flaming fire possess?

Prometheus

Yea, and full many an art they'll learn from it.

Chorus

And is it then on charges such as these
That Zeus maltreats thee, and no respite gives
Of many woes? And has thy pain no end?

Prometheus

End there is none, except as pleases Him.

Chorus

How shall it please? What hope hast thou? See'st not
That thou hast sinned? Yet to say how thou sinned'st
Gives me no pleasure, and is pain to thee.
Well! let us leave these things, and, if we may,
Seek out some means to 'scape from this thy woe.

Prometheus

'Tis a light thing for one who has his foot
Beyond the reach of evil to exhort
And counsel him who suffers. This to me
Was all well known. Yea, willing, willingly
I sinned, nor will deny it. Helping men,
I for myself found trouble: yet I thought not
That I with such dread penalties as these
Should wither here on these high-towering crags,
Lighting on this lone hill and neighbourless.
Wherefore wail not for these my present woes,
But, drawing nigh, my coming fortunes hear,
That ye may learn the whole tale to the end.

Nay, hearken, hearken; show your sympathy
With him who suffers now. 'Tis thus that woe,
Wandering, now falls on this one, now on that.

Chorus

Not to unwilling hearers hast thou uttered,
Prometheus, thy request,
And now with nimble foot abounding
My swiftly rushing car,
And the pure æther, path of birds of heaven,
I will draw near this rough and rocky land,
For much do I desire
To hear this tale, full measure, of thy woes.

Enter OKEANOS, on a car drawn by a winged gryphon

Okeanos

Lo, I come to thee, Prometheus,
Reaching goal of distant journey,
Guiding this my winged courser
By my will, without a bridle;
And thy sorrows move my pity.
Force, in part, I deem, of kindred
Leads me on, nor know I any,
Whom, apart from kin, I honour
More than thee, in fuller measure.
This thou shall own true and earnest:
I deal not in glozing speeches.
Come then, tell me how to help thee;
Ne'er shalt thou say that one more friendly
Is found than unto thee is Okean.

Prometheus

Let be. What boots it? Thou then too art come
To gaze upon my sufferings. How did'st dare
Leaving the stream that bears thy name, and caves

Hewn in the living rock, this land to visit,
Mother of iron? What then, art thou come
To gaze upon my fall and offer pity?
Behold this sight: see here the friend of Zeus,
Who helped to seat him in his sovereignty,
With what foul outrage I am crushed by him!

Okeanos

I see, Prometheus, and I wish to give thee
My best advice, all subtle though thou be.
Know thou thyself, and fit thy soul to moods
To thee full new. New king the Gods have now;
But if thou utter words thus rough and sharp,
Perchance, though sitting far away on high,
Zeus yet may hear thee, and his present wrath
Seem to thee but as child's play of distress.
Nay, thou poor sufferer, quit the rage thou hast,
And seek a remedy for these thine ills.
A tale thrice-told, perchance I seem to speak:
Lo! this, Prometheus, is the punishment
Of thine o'er lofty speech, nor art thou yet
Humbled, nor yieldest to thy miseries,
And fain would'st add fresh evils unto these.
But thou, if thou wilt take me as thy teacher,
Wilt not kick out against the pricks; seeing well
A monarch reigns who gives account to none.
And now I go, and will an effort make,
If I, perchance, may free thee from thy woes;
Be still then, hush thy petulance of speech,
Or knowest thou not, o'er-clever as thou art,
That idle tongues must still their forfeit pay?

Prometheus

I envy thee, seeing thou art free from blame
Though thou shared'st all, and in my cause wast bold;

Nay, let me be, nor trouble thou thyself;
Thou wilt not, canst not soothe Him; very hard
Is He of soothing. Look to it thyself,
Lest thou some mischief meet with in the way.

Okeanos

It is thy wont thy neighbours' minds to school
Far better than thine own. From deeds, not words,
I draw my proof. But do not draw me back
When I am hasting on, for lo, I deem,
I deem that Zeus will grant this boon to me,
That I should free thee from these woes of thine.

Prometheus

I thank thee much, yea, ne'er will cease to thank;
For thou no whit of zeal dost lack; yet take,
I pray, no trouble for me; all in vain
Thy trouble, nothing helping, e'en if thou
Should'st care to take the trouble. Nay, be still;
Keep out of harm's way; sufferer though I be,
I would not therefore wish to give my woes
A wider range o'er others. No, not so:
For lo! my mind is wearied with the grief
Of that my kinsman Atlas, who doth stand
In the far West, supporting on his shoulders
The pillars of the earth and heaven, a burden
His arms can ill but hold: I pity too
The giant dweller of Kilikian caves,
Dread portent, with his hundred hands, subdued
By force, the mighty Typhon, who arose
'Gainst all the Gods, with sharp and dreadful jaws
Hissing out slaughter, and from out his eyes
There flashed the terrible brightness as of one
Who would lay low the sovereignty of Zeus.
But the unsleeping dart of Zeus came on him,

Down-swooping thunderbolt that breathes out flame,
Which from his lofty boastings startled him,
For he i' the heart was struck, to ashes burnt,
His strength all thunder-shattered; and he lies
A helpless, powerless carcase, near the strait
Of the great sea, fast pressed beneath the roots
Of ancient Ætna, where on highest peak
Hephæstos sits and smites his iron red-hot,
From whence hereafter streams of fire shall burst,
Devouring with fierce jaws the golden plains
Of fruitful, fair Sikelia. Such the wrath
That Typhon shall belch forth with bursts of storm,
Hot, breathing fire, and unapproachable,
Though burnt and charred by thunderbolts of Zeus.
Not inexperienced art thou, nor dost need
My teaching: save thyself, as thou know'st how;
And I will drink my fortune to the dregs,
Till from his wrath the mind of Zeus shall rest.

Okeanos

Know'st thou not this, Prometheus, even this,
Of wrath's disease wise words the healers are?

Prometheus

Yea, could one soothe the troubled heart in time,
Nor seek by force to tame the soul's proud flesh.

Okeanos

But in due forethought with bold daring blent,
What mischief see'st thou lurking? Tell me this.

Prometheus

Toil bootless, and simplicity full fond.

Okeanos

Let me, I pray, that sickness suffer, since
'Tis best being wise to have not wisdom's show.

Prometheus

Nay, but this error shall be deemed as mine.

Okeanos

Thy word then clearly sends me home at once.

Prometheus

Yea, lest thy pity for me make a foe....

Okeanos

What! of that new king on his mighty throne?

Prometheus

Look to it, lest his heart be vexed with thee.

Okeanos

Thy fate, Prometheus, teaches me that lesson.

Prometheus

Away, withdraw! keep thou the mind thou hast.

Okeanos

Thou urgest me who am in act to haste;
For this my bird four-footed flaps with wings
The clear path of the æther; and full fain
Would he bend knee in his own stall at home. *[Exit.]*

STROPHE I

Chorus

I grieve, Prometheus, for thy dreary fate,
    Shedding from tender eyes
    The dew of plenteous tears;
With streams, as when the watery south wind blows,
    My cheek is wet;
For lo! these things are all unenviable,
And Zeus, by his own laws his sway maintaining,
    Shows to the elder Gods
    A mood of haughtiness.

ANTISTROPHE I

And all the country echoeth with the moan,
    And poureth many a tear
    For that magnific power
Of ancient days far-seen that thou did'st share
    With those of one blood sprung;
And all the mortal men who hold the plain
Of holy Asia as their land of sojourn,
    They grieve in sympathy
    For thy woes lamentable.

STROPHE II

And they, the maiden band who find their home
    On distant Colchian coasts,
    Fearless of fight,
Or Skythian horde in earth's remotest clime,
    By far Mæotic lake;

ANTISTROPHE II

And warlike glory of Arabia's tribes,
    Who nigh to Caucasos
    In rock-fort dwell,
An army fearful, with sharp-pointed spear
    Raging in war's array.

STROPHE III

One other Titan only have I seen,
    One other of the Gods,
Thus bound in woes of adamantine strength—
    Atlas, who ever groans
Beneath the burden of a crushing might,
    The out-spread vault of heaven.

ANTISTROPHE III

And lo! the ocean billows murmur loud
    In one accord with him;

The sea-depths groan, and Hades' swarthy pit
Re-echoeth the sound,
And fountains of clear rivers, as they flow,
Bewail his bitter griefs.

Prometheus

Think not it is through pride or stiff self-will
That I am silent. But my heart is worn,
Self-contemplating, as I see myself
Thus outraged. Yet what other hand than mine
Gave these young Gods in fulness all their gifts?
But these I speak not of; for I should tell
To you that know them. But those woes of men,
List ye to them,—how they, before as babes,
By me were roused to reason, taught to think;
And this I say, not finding fault with men,
But showing my good-will in all I gave.
For first, though seeing, all in vain they saw,
And hearing, heard not rightly. But, like forms
Of phantom-dreams, throughout their life's whole length
They muddled all at random; did not know
Houses of brick that catch the sunlight's warmth,
Nor yet the work of carpentry. They dwelt
In hollowed holes, like swarms of tiny ants,
In sunless depths of caverns; and they had
No certain signs of winter, nor of spring
Flower-laden, nor of summer with her fruits;
But without counsel fared their whole life long,
Until I showed the risings of the stars,
And settings hard to recognise. And I
Found Number for them, chief device of all,
Groupings of letters, Memory's handmaid that,
And mother of the Muses. And I first
Bound in the yoke wild steeds, submissive made

Or to the collar or men's limbs, that so
They might in man's place bear his greatest toils;
And horses trained to love the rein I yoked
To chariots, glory of wealth's pride of state;
Nor was it any one but I that found
Sea-crossing, canvas-wingèd cars of ships:
Such rare designs inventing (wretched me!)
For mortal men, I yet have no device
By which to free myself from this my woe.

Chorus

Foul shame thou sufferest: of thy sense bereaved,
Thou errest greatly: and, like leech unskilled,
Thou losest heart when smitten with disease,
And know'st not how to find the remedies
Wherewith to heal thine own soul's sicknesses.

Prometheus

Hearing what yet remains thou'lt wonder more,
What arts and what resources I devised:
And this the chief: if any one fell ill,
There was no help for him, nor healing food,
Nor unguent, nor yet potion; but for want
Of drugs they wasted, till I showed to them
The blendings of all mild medicaments,
Wherewith they ward the attacks of sickness sore.
I gave them many modes of prophecy;
And I first taught them what dreams needs must prove
True visions, and made known the ominous sounds
Full hard to know; and tokens by the way,
And flights of taloned birds I clearly marked,—
Those on the right propitious to mankind,
And those sinister,—and what form of life
They each maintain, and what their enmities
Each with the other, and their loves and friendships;

And of the inward parts the plumpness smooth.
And with what colour they the Gods would please,
And the streaked comeliness of gall and liver:
And with burnt limbs enwrapt in fat, and chine,
I led men on to art full difficult:
And I gave eyes to omens drawn from fire,
Till then dim-visioned. So far then for this.
And 'neath the earth the hidden boons for men,
Bronze, iron, silver, gold, who else could say
That he, ere I did, found them? None, I know,
Unless he fain would babble idle words.
In one short word, then, learn the truth condensed,—
Allarts of mortals from Prometheus spring.

Chorus

Nay, be not thou to men so over-kind,
While thou thyself art in sore evil case;
For I am sanguine that thou too, released
From bonds, shall be as strong as Zeus himself.

Prometheus

It is not thus that Fate's decree is fixed;
But I, long crushed with twice ten thousand woes
And bitter pains, shall then escape my bonds;
Art is far weaker than Necessity.

Chorus

Who guides the helm, then, of Necessity?

Prometheus

Fates triple-formed, Errinyes unforgetting.

Chorus

Is Zeus, then, weaker in his might than these?

Prometheus

Not even He can 'scape the thing decreed.

Chorus

What is decreed for Zeus but still to reign?

Prometheus

Thou may'st no further learn, ask thou no more.

Chorus

'Tis doubtless some dread secret which thou hidest.

Prometheus

Of other theme make mention, for the time
Is not yet come to utter this, but still
It must be hidden to the uttermost;
For by thus keeping it it is that I
Escape my bondage foul, and these my pains.

STROPHE 1

Chorus

Ah! ne'er may Zeus the Lord,
Whose sovran sway rules all,
His strength in conflict set
Against my feeble will!
Nor may I fail to serve
The Gods with holy feast
Of whole burnt-offerings,
Where the stream ever flows
That bears my father's name,
The great Okeanos!
Nor may I sin in speech!
May this grace more and more
Sink deep into my soul
And never fade away!

ANTISTROPHE 1

Sweet is it in strong hope
To spend long years of life,
With bright and cheering joy

Our heart's thoughts nourishing.
I shudder, seeing thee
Thus vexed and harassed sore.
By twice ten thousand woes;
For thou in pride of heart,
Having no fear of Zeus,
In thine own obstinacy,
Dost show for mortal men,
Prometheus, love o'ermuch.

STROPHE II

See how that boon, dear friends,
For thee is bootless found.
Say, where is any help?
What aid from mortals comes?
Hast thou not seen this brief and powerless life,
Fleeting as dreams, with which man's purblind race
Is fast in fetters bound?
Never shall counsels vain
Of mortal men break through
The harmony of Zeus.

ANTISTROPHE II

This lesson have I learnt
Beholding thy sad fate,
Prometheus! Other strains
Come back upon my mind,
When I sang wedding hymns around thy bath,
And at thy bridal bed, when thou did'st take
In wedlock's holy bands
One of the same sire born,
Our own Hesione,
Persuading her with gifts
As wife to share thy couch.

Enter IO in form like a fair woman with a heifer's horns, followed by the Spectre of ARGOS

Io

What land is this? What people? Whom shall I
Say that I see thus vexed
With bit and curb of rock?
For what offence dost thou
Bear fatal punishment?
Tell me to what far land
I've wandered here in woe.
Ah me! ah me!
Again the gadfly stings me miserable.
Spectre of Argos, thou, the earth-born one—
Ah, keep him off, O Earth!
I fear to look upon that herdsman dread,
Him with ten thousand eyes:
Ah lo! he cometh with his crafty look,
Whom Earth refuses even dead to hold;
But coming from beneath
He hunts me miserable,
And drives me famished o'er the sea-beach sand.

STROPHE

And still his waxened reed-pipe soundeth clear
A soft and slumberous strain;
O heavens! O ye Gods!
Whither do these long wanderings lead me on?
For what offence, O son of Cronos, what,
Hast thou thus bound me fast
In these great miseries?
Ah me! ah me!
And why with terror of the gadfly's sting
Dost thou thus vex me, frenzied in my soul?
Burn me with fire, or bury me in earth,

Or to wild sea-beasts give me as a prey:
Nay, grudge me not, O King,
An answer to my prayers:
Enough my many-wandered wanderings
Have exercised my soul,
Nor have I power to learn
How to avert the woe.
(*To Prometheus.*) Hear'st thou the voice of maiden crowned with horns?

Prometheus

Surely I heard the maid by gadfly driven,
Daughter of Inachos, who warmed the heart
Of Zeus with love, and now through Hera's hate
Is tried, perforce, with wanderings over-long?

ANTISTROPHE

Io

How is it that thou speak'st my father's name?
Tell me, the suffering one,
Who art thou, who, poor wretch,
Who thus so truly nam'st me miserable,
And tell'st the plague from Heaven,
Which with its haunting stings
Wears me to death? Ah woe!
And I with famished and unseemly bounds
Rush madly, driven by Hera's jealous craft.
Ah, who of all that suffer, born to woe,
Have trouble like the pain that I endure?
But thou, make clear to me,
What yet for me remains,
What remedy, what healing for my pangs.
Show me, if thou dost know:
Speak out and tell to me,
The maid by wanderings vexed.

Prometheus

I will say plainly all thou seek'st to know;
Not in dark tangled riddles, but plain speech,
As it is meet that friends to friends should speak;
Thou see'st Prometheus who gave fire to men.

Io

O thou to men as benefactor known,
Why, poor Prometheus, sufferest thou this pain?

Prometheus

I have but now mine own woes ceased to wail.

Io

Wilt thou not then bestow this boon on me?

Prometheus

Say what thou seek'st, for I will tell thee all.

Io

Tell me, who fettered thee in this ravine?

Prometheus

The counsel was of Zeus, the hand Hephæstos'.

Io

Of what offence dost thou the forfeit pay?

Prometheus

Thus much alone am I content to tell.

Io

Tell me, at least, besides, what end shall come
To my drear wanderings; when the time shall be.

Prometheus

Not to know this is better than to know.

Io

Nay, hide not from me what I have to bear.

Prometheus

It is not that I grudge the boon to thee.

Io

Why then delayest thou to tell the whole?

Prometheus

Not from ill will, but loth to vex thy soul.

Io

Nay, care thou not beyond what pleases me.

Prometheus

If thou desire it I must speak. Hear then.

Chorus

Not yet though; grant me share of pleasure too.
Let us first ask the tale of her great woe,
While she unfolds her life's consuming chances;
Her future sufferings let her learn from thee.

Prometheus

'Tis thy work, Io, to grant these their wish,
On other grounds and as thy father's kin:
For to bewail and moan one's evil chance,
Here where one trusts to gain a pitying tear
From those who hear,—this is not labour lost.

Io

I know not how to disobey your wish;
So ye shall learn the whole that ye desire
In speech full clear. And yet I blush to tell
The storm that came from God, and brought the loss
Of maiden face, what way it seized on me.
For nightly visions coming evermore
Into my virgin bower, sought to woo me
With glozing words. "O virgin greatly blest,
Why art thou still a virgin when thou might'st

Attain to highest wedlock? For with dart
Of passion for thee Zeus doth glow, and fain
Would make thee his. And thou, O child, spurn not
The bed of Zeus, but go to Lerna's field,
Where feed thy father's flocks and herds,
That so the eye of Zeus may find repose
From this his craving." With such visions I
Was haunted every evening, till I dared
To tell my father all these dreams of night,
And he to Pytho and Dodona sent
Full many to consult the Gods, that he,
Might learn what deeds and words would please Heaven's lords.
And they came bringing speech of oracles
Shot with dark sayings, dim and hard to know.
At last a clear word came to Inachos
Charging him plainly, and commanding him
To thrust me from my country and my home,
To stray at large to utmost bounds of earth;
And, should he gainsay, that the fiery bolt
Of Zeus should come and sweep away his race.
And he, by Loxias' oracles induced,
Thrust me, against his will, against mine too,
And drove me from my home; but spite of all,
The curb of Zeus constrained him this to do.
And then forthwith my face and mind were changed;
And hornèd, as ye see me, stung to the quick
By biting gadfly, I with maddened leap
Rushed to Kerchneia's fair and limpid stream,
And fount of Lerna. And a giant herdsman,
Argos, full rough of temper, followed me,
With many an eye beholding, on my track:
And him a sudden and unlooked-for doom
Deprived of life. And I, by gadfly stung,
By scourge from Heaven am driven from land to land.

What has been done thou hearest. And if thou
Can'st tell what yet remains of woe, declare it;
Nor in thy pity soothe me with false words;
For hollow words, I deem, are worst of ills.

Chorus

Away, away, let be:
    Ne'er thought I that such tales
Would ever, ever come unto mine ears;
Nor that such terrors, woes and outrages,
    Hard to look on, hard to bear,
Would chill my soul with sharp goad, double-edged.
    Ah fate! Ah fate!
I shudder, seeing Io's fortune strange.

Prometheus

Thou art too quick in groaning, full of fear:
Wait thou a while until thou hear the rest.

Chorus

Speak thou and tell. Unto the sick 'tis sweet
Clearly to know what yet remains of pain.

Prometheus

Your former wish ye gained full easily.
Your first desire was to learn of her
The tale she tells of her own sufferings;
Now therefore hear the woes that yet remain
For this poor maid to bear at Hera's hands.
And thou, O child of Inachos! take heed
To these my words, that thou may'st hear the goal
Of all thy wanderings. First then, turning hence
Towards the sunrise, tread the untilled plains,
And thou shalt reach the Skythian nomads, those
Who on smooth-rolling waggons dwell aloft
In wicker houses, with far-darting bows

Duly equipped. Approach thou not to these,
But trending round the coasts on which the surf
Beats with loud murmurs, traverse thou that clime.
On the left hand there dwell the Chalybes,
Who work in iron. Of these do thou beware,
For fierce are they and most inhospitable;
And thou wilt reach the river fierce and strong,
True to its name. This seek not thou to cross,
For it is hard to ford, until thou come
To Caucasos itself, of all high hills
The highest, where a river pours its strength
From the high peaks themselves. And thou must cross
Those summits near the stars, must onward go
Towards the south, where thou shalt find the host
Of the Amâzons, hating men, whose home
Shall one day be around Thermôdon's bank,
By Themiskyra, where the ravenous jaws
Of Salmydessos ope upon the sea,
Treacherous to sailors, stepdame stern to ships.
And they with right good-will shall be thy guides;
And thou, hard by a broad pool's narrow gates,
Wilt pass to the Kimmerian isthmus. Leaving
This boldly, thou must cross Mæotic channel;
And there shall be great fame 'mong mortal men
Of this thy journey, and the Bosporos
Shall take its name from thee. And Europe's plain
Then quitting, thou shalt gain the Asian coast.
Doth not the all-ruling monarch of the Gods
Seem all ways cruel? For, although a God,
He, seeking to embrace this mortal maid,
Imposed these wanderings on her. Thou hast found,
O maiden! bitter suitor for thy hand;
For great as are the ills thou now hast heard,
Know that as yet not e'en the prelude's known.

Io

Ah woe! woe! woe!

Prometheus

Again thou groan'st and criest. What wilt do
When thou shall learn the evils yet to come?

Chorus

What! are there troubles still to come for her?

Prometheus

Yea, stormy sea of woe most lamentable.

Io

What gain is it to live? Why cast I not
Myself at once from this high precipice,
And, dashed to earth, be free from all my woes?
Far better were it once for all to die
Than all one's days to suffer pain and grief.

Prometheus

My struggles then full hardly thou would'st bear,
For whom there is no destiny of death;
For that might bring a respite from my woes:
But now there is no limit to my pangs
Till Zeus be hurled out from his sovereignty.

Io

What! shall Zeus e'er be hurled from his high state?

Prometheus

Thou would'st rejoice, I trow, to see that fall.

Io

How should I not, when Zeus so foully wrongs me?

Prometheus

That this is so thou now may'st hear from me.

Io

Who then shall rob him of his sceptred sway?

Prometheus

Himself shall do it by his own rash plans.

Io

But how? Tell this, unless it bringeth harm.

Prometheus

He shall wed one for whom one day he'll grieve.

Io

Heaven-born or mortal? Tell, if tell thou may'st.

Prometheus

Why ask'st thou who? I may not tell thee that.

Io

Shall his bride hurl him from his throne of might?

Prometheus

Yea; she shall bear child mightier than his sire.

Io

Has he no way to turn aside that doom?

Prometheus

No, none; unless I from my bonds be loosed.

Io

Who then shall loose thee 'gainst the will of Zeus?

Prometheus

It must be one of thy posterity.

Io

What, shall a child of mine free thee from ills?

Prometheus

Yea, the third generation after ten.

Io

No more thine oracles are clear to me.
Prom. Nay, seek not thou thine own drear fate to know.

Io

Do not, a boon presenting, then withdraw it.

Prometheus

Of two alternatives, I'll give thee choice.

Io

Tell me of what, then give me leave to choose.

Prometheus

I give it then. Choose, or that I should tell
Thy woes to come, or who shall set me free.

Chorus

Of these be willing one request to grant
To her, and one to me; nor scorn my words:
Tell her what yet of wanderings she must bear,
And me who shall release thee. This I crave.

Prometheus

Since ye are eager, I will not refuse
To utter fully all that ye desire.
Thee, Io, first I'll tell thy wanderings wild,
Thou, write it in the tablets of thy mind.
When thou shalt cross the straits, of continents
The boundary, take thou the onward path
On to the fiery-hued and sun-tracked East.
[And first of all, to frozen Northern blasts
Thou'lt come, and there beware the rushing whirl,
Lest it should come upon thee suddenly,
And sweep thee onward with the cloud-rack wild;]
Crossing the sea-surf till thou come at last
Unto Kisthene's Gorgoneian plains,

Where dwell the grey-haired virgin Phorkides,
Three, swan-shaped, with one eye between them all
And but one tooth; whom nor the sun beholds
With radiant beams, nor yet the moon by night:
And near them are their wingèd sisters three,
The Gorgons, serpent-tressed, and hating men,
Whom mortal wight may not behold and live.
Such is one ill I bid thee guard against;
Now hear another monstrous sight: Beware
The sharp-beaked hounds of Zeus that never bark,
The Gryphons, and the one-eyed, mounted host
Of Arimaspians, who around the stream
That flows o'er gold, the ford of Pluto, dwell:
Draw not thou nigh to them. But distant land
Thou shalt approach, the swarthy tribes who dwell
By the sun's fountain, Æthiopia's stream:
By its banks wend thy way until thou come
To that great fall where from the Bybline hills
The Neilos pours its pure and holy flood;
And it shall guide thee to Neilotic land,
Three-angled, where, O Io, 'tis decreed
For thee and for thy progeny to found
A far-off colony. And if of this
Aught seem to thee as stammering speech obscure,
Ask yet again and learn it thoroughly:
Far more of leisure have I than I like.

Chorus

If thou hast aught to add, aught left untold
Of her sore-wasting wanderings, speak it out;
But if thou hast said all, then grant to us
The boon we asked. Thou dost not, sure, forget it.

Prometheus

The whole course of her journeying she hath heard,

And that she know she hath not heard in vain
I will tell out what troubles she hath borne
Before she came here, giving her sure proof
Of these my words. The greater bulk of things
I will pass o'er, and to the very goal
Of all thy wanderings go. For when thou cam'st
To the Molossian plains, and by the grove
Of lofty-ridged Dodona, and the shrine
Oracular of Zeus Thesprotian,
And the strange portent of the talking oaks,
By which full clearly, not in riddle dark,
Thou wast addressed as noble spouse of Zeus,—
If aught of pleasure such things give to thee,—
Thence strung to frenzy, thou did'st rush along
The sea-coast's path to Rhea's mighty gulf,
In backward way from whence thou now art vexed,
And for all time to come that reach of sea,
Know well, from thee Ionian shall be called,
To all men record of thy journeyings.
These then are tokens to thee that my mind
Sees somewhat more than that is manifest.
What follows (*to the Chorus*) I will speak to you and her
In common, on the track of former words
Returning once again. A city stands,
Canôbos, at its country's furthest bound,
Hard by the mouth and silt-bank of the Nile;
There Zeus shall give thee back thy mind again,
With hand that works no terror touching thee,—
Touch only—and thou then shalt bear a child
Of Zeus begotten, Epaphos, "Touch-born,"
Swarthy of hue, whose lot shall be to reap
The whole plain watered by the broad-streamed Neilos:
And in the generation fifth from him
A household numbering fifty shall return

Against their will to Argos, in their flight
From wedlock with their cousins. And they too,
(Kites but a little space behind the doves)
With eager hopes pursuing marriage rites
Beyond pursuit shall come; and God shall grudge
To give up their sweet bodies. And the land
Pelasgian shall receive them, when by stroke
Of woman's murderous hand these men shall lie
Smitten to death by daring deed of night:
For every bride shall take her husband's life,
And dip in blood the sharp two-edgèd sword
(So to my foes may Kypris show herself!)
Yet one of that fair band shall love persuade
Her husband not to slaughter, and her will
Shall lose its edge; and she shall make her choice
Rather as weak than murderous to be known.
And she at Argos shall a royal seed
Bring forth (long speech 'twould take to tell this clear)
Famed for his arrows, who shall set me free
From these my woes. Such was the oracle
Mine ancient mother Themis, Titan-born,
Gave to me; but the manner and the means,—
That needs a lengthy tale to tell the whole,
And thou can'st nothing gain by learning it.

Io

Eleleu! Oh, Eleleu!
The throbbing pain inflames me, and the mood
Of frenzy-smitten rage;
The gadfly's pointed sting,
Not forged with fire, attacks,
And my heart beats against my breast with fear.
Mine eyes whirl round and round:
Out of my course I'm borne

By the wild spirit of fierce agony,
And cannot curb my lips,
And turbid speech at random dashes on
Upon the waves of dread calamity.

STROPHE I

Chorus

Wise, very wise was he
Who first in thought conceived this maxim sage,
And spread it with his speech,—
That the best wedlock is with equals found,
And that a craftsman, born to work with hands,
Should not desire to wed
Or with the soft luxurious heirs of wealth,
Or with the race that boast their lineage high.

ANTISTROPHE I

Oh ne'er, oh ne'er, dread Fates,
May ye behold me as the bride of Zeus,
The partner of his couch,
Nor may I wed with any heaven-born spouse!
For I shrink back, beholding Io's lot
Of loveless maidenhood,
Consumed and smitten low exceedingly
By the wild wanderings from great Hera sent!

STROPHE II

To me, when wedlock is on equal terms,
It gives no cause to fear:
Ne'er may the love of any of the Gods,
The strong Gods, look on me
With glance I cannot 'scape!

ANTISTROPHE II

That fate is war that none can war against,
Source of resourceless ill;

Nor know I what might then become of me:
I see not how to 'scape
The counsel deep of Zeus.

Prometheus

Yea, of a truth shall Zeus, though stiff of will,
Be brought full low. Such bed of wedlock now
Is he preparing, one to cast him forth
In darkness from his sovereignty and throne.
And then the curse his father Cronos spake
Shall have its dread completion, even that
He uttered when he left his ancient throne;
And from these troubles no one of the Gods
But me can clearly show the way to 'scape.
I know the time and manner: therefore now
Let him sit fearless, in his peals on high
Putting his trust, and shaking in his hands
His darts fire-breathing. Nought shall they avail
To hinder him from falling shamefully
A fall intolerable. Such a combatant
He arms against himself, a marvel dread,
Who shall a fire discover mightier far
Than the red levin, and a sound more dread
Than roaring of the thunder, and shall shiver
That plague sea-born that causeth earth to quake,
The trident, weapon of Poseidon's strength:
And stumbling on this evil, he shall learn
How far apart a king's lot from a slave's.

Chorus

What thou dost wish thou mutterest against Zeus.

Prometheus

Things that shall be, and things I wish, I speak.

Chorus

And must we look for one to master Zeus?

Prometheus

Yea, troubles harder far than these are his.

Chorus

Art not afraid to vent such words as these?

Prometheus

What can I fear whose fate is not to die?

Chorus

But He may send on thee worse pain than this.

Prometheus

So let Him do: nought finds me unprepared.

Chorus

Wisdom is theirs who Adrasteia worship.

Prometheus

Worship then, praise and flatter him that rules;
My care for Zeus is nought, and less than nought:
960 Let Him act, let Him rule this little while,
E'en as He will; for long He shall not rule
Over the Gods. But lo! I see at hand
The courier of the Gods, the minister
Of our new sovereign. Doubtless he has come
To bring me tidings of some new device.

Enter HERMES

Hermes

Thee do I speak to,—thee, the teacher wise,
The bitterly o'er-bitter, who 'gainst Gods
Hast sinned in giving gifts to short-lived men—
I speak to thee, the filcher of bright fire.
The Father bids thee say what marriage thou

Dost vaunt, and who shall hurl Him from his might;
And this too not in dark mysterious speech,
But tell each point out clearly. Give me not,
Prometheus, task of double journey. Zeus
Thou see'st, is not with such words appeased.

Prometheus

Stately of utterance, full of haughtiness
Thy speech, as fits a messenger of Gods.
Ye yet are young in your new rule, and think
To dwell in painless towers. Have I not
Seen two great rulers driven forth from thence?
And now the third, who reigneth, I shall see
In basest, quickest fall. Seem I to thee
To shrink and quail before these new-made Gods?
Far, very far from that am I. But thou,
Track once again the path by which thou camest;
Thou shalt learn nought of what thou askest me.

Hermes

It was by such self-will as this before
That thou did'st bring these sufferings on thyself.

Prometheus

I for my part, be sure, would never change
My evil state for that thy bondslave's lot.

Hermes

To be the bondslave of this rock, I trow,
Is better than to be Zeus' trusty herald!

Prometheus

So it is meet the insulter to insult.

Hermes

Thou waxest proud, 'twould seem, of this thy doom.

Prometheus

Wax proud! God grant that I may see my foes
Thus waxing proud, and thee among the rest!

Hermes

Dost blame me then for thy calamities?

Prometheus

In one short sentence—all the Gods I hate,
Who my good turns with evil turns repay.

Hermes

Thy words prove thee with no slight madness plagued.

Prometheus

If to hate foes be madness, mad I am.

Hermes

1000 Not one could bear thee wert thou prosperous.

Prometheus

Ah me!

Hermes

That word is all unknown to Zeus.

Prometheus

Time waxing old can many a lesson teach.

Hermes

Yet thou at least hast not true wisdom learnt.

Prometheus

I had not else addressed a slave like thee.

Hermes

Thou wilt say nought the Father asks, 'twould seem.

Prometheus

Fine debt I owe him, favour to repay.

Hermes

Me as a boy thou scornest then, forsooth.

Prometheus

And art thou not a boy, and sillier far,
If that thou thinkest to learn aught from me?
There is no torture nor device by which
Zeus can impel me to disclose these things
Before these bonds that outrage me be loosed.
Let then the blazing levin-flash be hurled;
With white-winged snow-storm and with earth-born thunders
Let Him disturb and trouble all that is;
Nought of these things shall force me to declare
Whose hand shall drive him from his sovereignty.

Hermes

See if thou findest any help in this.

Prometheus

Long since all this I've seen, and formed my plans.

Hermes

O fool, take heart, take heart at last in time,
To form right thoughts for these thy present woes.

Prometheus

Like one who soothes a wave, thy speech in vain
Vexes my soul. But deem not thou that I,
Fearing the will of Zeus, shall e'er become
As womanised in mind, or shall entreat
Him whom I greatly loathe, with upturned hand,
In woman's fashion, from these bonds of mine
To set me free. Far, far am I from that.

Hermes

It seems that I, saying much, shall speak in vain;
For thou in nought by prayers art pacified,

Or softened in thy heart, but like a colt
Fresh harnessed, thou dost champ thy bit, and strive,
And fight against the reins. Yet thou art stiff
In weak device; for self-will, by itself,
In one who is not wise, is less than nought.
Look to it, if thou disobey my words,
How great a storm and triple wave of ills,
Not to be 'scaped, shall come on thee; for first,
With thunder and the levin's blazing flash
The Father this ravine of rock shall crush,
And shall thy carcase hide, and stern embrace
Of stony arms shall keep thee in thy place.
And having traversed space of time full long,
Thou shalt come back to light, and then his hound,
The wingèd hound of Zeus, the ravening eagle,
Shall greedily make banquet of thy flesh,
Coming all day an uninvited guest,
And glut himself upon thy liver dark.
And of that anguish look not for the end,
Before some God shall come to bear thy woes,
And will to pass to Hades' sunless realm,
And the dark cloudy depths of Tartaros.
Wherefore take heed. No feigned boast is this,
But spoken all too truly; for the lips
Of Zeus know not to speak a lying speech,
But will perform each single word. And thou,
Search well, be wise, nor think that self-willed pride
Shall ever better prove than counsel good.

Chorus

To us doth Hermes seem to utter words
Not out of season; for he bids thee quit
Thy self-willed pride and seek for counsel good.
Hearken thou to him. To the wise of soul

It is foul shame to sin persistently.

Prometheus

To me who knew it all
He hath this message borne;
And that a foe from foes
Should suffer is not strange.
Therefore on me be hurled
The sharp-edged wreath of fire;
And let heaven's vault be stirred
With thunder and the blasts
Of fiercest winds; and Earth
From its foundations strong,
E'en to its deepest roots,
Let storm-wind make to rock;
And let the Ocean wave,
With wild and foaming surge,
Be heaped up to the paths
Where move the stars of heaven;
And to dark Tartaros
Let Him my carcase hurl,
With mighty blasts of force:
Yet me He shall not slay.

Hermes

Such words and thoughts from one
Brain-stricken one may hear.
What space divides his state
From frenzy? What repose
Hath he from maddened rage?
But ye who pitying stand
And share his bitter griefs,
Quickly from hence depart,
Lest the relentless roar
Of thunder stun your soul.

Chorus

With other words attempt
To counsel and persuade,
And I will hear: for now
Thou hast this word thrust in
That we may never bear.
How dost thou bid me train
My soul to baseness vile?
With him I will endure
Whatever is decreed.
Traitors I've learnt to hate,
Nor is there any plague
That more than this I loathe.

Hermes

Nay then, remember ye
What now I say, nor blame
Your fortune: never say
That Zeus hath cast you down
To evil not foreseen.
Not so; ye cast yourselves:
For now with open eyes,
Not taken unawares,
In Atè's endless net
Ye shall entangled be
By folly of your own.

A pause, and then flashes of lightning and peals of thunder

Prometheus

Yea, now in very deed,
No more in word alone,
The earth shakes to and fro,
And the loud thunder's voice
Bellows hard by, and blaze

The flashing levin-fires;
And tempests whirl the dust,
And gusts of all wild winds
On one another leap,
In wild conflicting blasts,
And sky with sea is blent:
Such is the storm from Zeus
That comes as working fear,
In terrors manifest.
O Mother venerable!
O Æther! rolling round
The common light of all,
See'st thou what wrongs I bear?

Notes on the Text

1–2 The scene is Scythia, the Greek name for the steppe lands north of the Black Sea, which Plumptre's heading calls the Euxine, from its ancient name Pontus Euxinus. To a Greek audience this was the wild edge of the world.

1–11 Strength and Force are personifications. Hesiod makes them children of the river goddess Styx who always stand beside Zeus; here they are his enforcers, and Force never says a word.

7–9 Fire is Hephaestus's own element and craft, which is why Strength calls it "thy choice flower" and why the theft wrongs him in particular.

18 Here Prometheus is the son of Themis, goddess of right order. In Hesiod his parents are the Titan Iapetus and Clymene.

26–27 "Unborn as yet is he Who shall release thee" looks ahead to Heracles, whose birth from Io's line is foretold at 870–891.

85–86 Prometheus means Forethought. Strength mocks the name: the forethinker could not foresee his own capture. In fact, as he says at 101–105, he foresaw it all.

88–92 Left alone, Prometheus speaks only to the elements and to Earth, "Mother of us all." The waves that "smile innumerous" are the countless glitter of the sea.

93–94 "Ten thousand years" stands for an endless term. An ancient commentator reports that in a companion play, *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*, Prometheus spoke of having been bound for thirty thousand years.

101–105 Necessity is the fixed order of things that even gods must accept. Prometheus's foreknowledge gives him no escape, only clarity.

107–111 The fennel stalk is the hollow plant stem in which, as in Hesiod, Prometheus carried the stolen fire. Fire is "a teacher of all arts" because nearly every craft depends on it.

128–135 The Chorus are Oceanids, daughters of Oceanus. They arrive by air on a winged car; how this was staged in the ancient theater is still debated.

140–142 Tethys and Oceanus are Titans. Oceanus was imagined as a river that runs around the whole earth, "with never-sleeping stream."

152–155 "New pilots" and "new-fashioned laws": Zeus is a recent ruler. Uranus was overthrown by his son Cronus, and Cronus by his son Zeus.

156–160 Tartarus is the deep pit beneath the underworld where Zeus imprisoned the defeated Titans. Prometheus says he would rather be there, unseen, than mocked in the open air.

167–177 The first hint of the secret: a "counsel new That seeks to strip from him His sceptre." The rest of the play turns on it.

205–228 Prometheus tells of the war between Zeus and the Titans. He sided with Zeus because his mother had foretold that the war would be won by cunning, not force, and his counsel sent Cronus and his allies to Tartarus.

217–218 Themis and Earth, "one form though bearing many names": the play makes the goddess of right order and the Earth the same being. This is why Prometheus calls on Earth as his mother at the end.

239–243 The play's new motive for Zeus's anger: he planned to destroy humankind and make a new race, and Prometheus alone resisted.

256–258 Before fire, Prometheus took away mortals' habit of brooding on their death and gave them "Blind hopes." Compare Hesiod, in whose story hope is the one thing left in Pandora's jar.

293–303 Oceanus arrives on a winged steed, which Prometheus later calls a four-footed bird (402). Plumptre gives his speech a jaunty, quick rhythm unlike the rest of the play. In Hesiod, Prometheus's mother is a daughter of Oceanus, so the kinship is close.

317 "Know thou thyself" echoes the maxim traditionally inscribed in the entrance porch of Apollo's temple at Delphi. Oceanus means: know your place.

331 To "kick out against the pricks" is a farming image: the pricks are the goad that drives an ox, and an ox that kicks against it only wounds itself.

355–358 Atlas, Prometheus's brother in Hesiod, holds up the sky in the far West. He is a second example of a Titan punished by Zeus.

359–380 Typhon, a monster from a cave in Cilicia, rose against Zeus and was struck by his thunderbolt and buried under Mount Etna in Sicily. The volcano's fire is Typhon's rage, and Hephaestus's forge sits on its peak. This passage has been used to date the play; see the Introduction.

405–435 The peoples of the earth mourn with Prometheus: the inhabitants of Asia, the warrior maidens of Colchis, the Scythians by Lake Maeotis (the Sea of Azov) and the tribes of "Arabia" near the Caucasus. The geography is poetic rather than exact.

446–456 "Think not it is through pride." Prometheus breaks a silence and begins the speech of gifts. Mortals had senses but no understanding, "like forms Of phantom-dreams."

467–469 Number and writing. Writing is called "Memory's handmaid" and mother of the Muses; in myth Memory, the Titan Mnemosyne, was the Muses' mother.

492–507 The arts of prophecy: reading dreams, chance words heard on the road, the flight of birds and the organs of sacrificed animals. A "chine" is the backbone cut of meat burned for the gods. The irony is that the eagle of Zeus will one day feed on Prometheus's own liver.

523–527 The Fates are the three Moirai, who spin, measure and cut the thread of each life; the Erinyes are the Furies, avenging goddesses. "Not even He can 'scape the thing decreed": Zeus too is subject to fate.

563–572 Hesione, an Oceanid and so the Chorus's sister, was Prometheus's wife. The memory of the wedding song sets present grief against past joy.

573–585 Io enters, stung by a gadfly and pursued, she believes, by the ghost of Argos, the many-eyed herdsman whom Hera set to guard her. Plumptre's stage direction gives her a woman's form with a heifer's horns.

605–608 Inachus was the river god of Argos and, in some traditions, its first king. Hera's hatred is jealousy: Zeus desired Io.

663–673 Io's dream visions, urging her to go to Lerna, in the Argive country, where her father's flocks grazed.

676–690 Pytho is Delphi, the oracle of Apollo; Dodona, in Epirus, was an oracle of Zeus. Loxias is a title of Apollo as the spokesman of Zeus. The oracles force Io's own father to drive her out.

694–699 Kerchneia and Lerna are springs of her homeland. Argos's "sudden and unlooked-for doom" is left unexplained here; in other tellings, Hermes killed him.

726–760 Io's first route runs east from Prometheus's rock: past Scythian nomads living in wagons, the Chalybes, who work iron, a river "true to its name" (other translations call it the Hybristes, from hybris, violent outrage), the Caucasus and the Amazons, who will later live at Themiscyra by the river Thermodon on the south coast of the Black Sea. Do not try to follow the route too closely on a map.

749–753 The Maeotic channel is the strait, now called the Kerch Strait, that joins the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea. It takes the name Bosporus, Cow's Ford, from Io's crossing.

781–789 The secret, half revealed: Zeus will make a marriage whose child will be mightier than his father. The play never names the bride. Other sources make her the sea goddess Thetis, whom Zeus gave up to the mortal Peleus; her son was Achilles.

793 "The third generation after ten": Heracles, Io's descendant in the thirteenth generation, will free Prometheus.

811–814 Plumptre printed these four lines in square brackets because editors suspected they were not part of the original.

815–820 The Phorcides, or Graeae, are the three gray-haired sisters who share one eye and one tooth; their sisters are the Gorgons, whose look killed.

823–826 Griffins, beasts with eagles' heads and lions' bodies, guard gold in the far north, where the one-eyed Arimaspians fight them for it.

827–835 Io's route ends among the "swarthy tribes" of Ethiopia and down the Nile to the "Three-angled" land, the triangle of the Nile Delta in Egypt.

843–860 To prove his foresight, Prometheus tells Io's past: the oracle of Zeus at Dodona with its talking oaks, and the sea that will be called Ionian after her.

865–872 At Canopus, at the mouth of the Nile, Zeus will restore Io's mind with a touch, and she will bear Epaphus, whose name Plumptre glosses as "Touch-born."

873–888 Five generations later, fifty daughters of Danaus, descended from Io, will flee marriage with their fifty cousins, the sons of Aegyptus, and kill their bridegrooms on the wedding night. One of them, called Hypermestra in other sources, spares her husband, Lynceus. Aeschylus's *Suppliants* dramatizes the sisters' arrival in Argos.

877 "Kites but a little space behind the doves": the pursuing bridegrooms are birds of prey chasing the fleeing brides.

883 Kypris is Aphrodite, named for Cyprus, the island associated with her birth from the sea.

889–892 From the one merciful bride will come a royal line, and from it the archer Heracles. Themis is again the source of Prometheus's knowledge.

928–940 Cronus cursed his son when Zeus drove him from his throne; Prometheus says the curse will now be fulfilled.

940–948 The son of the fatal marriage will wield a fire mightier than the thunderbolt and break Poseidon's trident. Zeus will learn "How far apart a king's lot from a slave's."

957 Adrasteia, "the Inescapable," is a title of Nemesis, the goddess who punishes boastful words. The Chorus is warning Prometheus to watch his tongue.

962–967 Hermes is the courier of the gods. Prometheus greets him with contempt as the servant of the new regime.

976–980 "Ye yet are young in your new rule." The "two great rulers driven forth" are Uranus and Cronus; Zeus, the third, will fall as well.

987–990 Plumptre gives the lines about being "the bondslave of this rock" to Hermes, as a sneer. Some editors give them to Prometheus instead, as a proud retort, and Karl Marx quoted them as his.

995–996 "all the Gods I hate." In 1841 Karl Marx took this line as a motto for philosophy.

1001–1002 Prometheus cries "Ah me!" and Hermes replies, "That word is all unknown to Zeus." Zeus has never had cause to grieve.

1030–1034 Hermes compares Prometheus to a colt fighting a new harness and warns that "self-will, by itself, In one who is not wise, is less than nought."

1038–1046 The future punishment: the cliff will be blasted and Prometheus buried in rock for ages, then brought back to the light to be fed on by Zeus's eagle. This is the situation of the lost *Prometheus Unbound*.

1047–1050 He will be released only when another god agrees to go down to death in his place. Later mythographers link this condition to the centaur Chiron, who gave up his immortality.

1098 Atè is the goddess of ruinous folly, who traps people into their own destruction. Hermes says the Chorus has chosen its fate with open eyes.

1113–1116 The last words go to his mother, Themis or Earth, and to the Æther, the bright upper air. "See'st thou what wrongs I bear?" ends the play as a question.

Glossary

Adamant: a legendary stone thought to be impossible to break; used for anything unbreakable.

Adrasteia: "the Inescapable," a title of Nemesis, the goddess who punishes arrogance.

Æther: the bright, pure upper air of the heavens, personified as a god.

Antistrophe: the second part of a pair of choral stanzas, sung to the same pattern as the strophe before it.

Atè: the goddess of reckless folly and the ruin it brings.

Chine: the backbone of an animal, or a cut of meat that includes it.

Chorus: the group of performers in a Greek tragedy who sing and dance together and comment on the action; here the Ocean Nymphs.

Erinyes: the Furies, goddesses of vengeance who pursue wrongdoers; Plumptre spells them Errinyes.

Fates: the three Moirai, goddesses of destiny who spin, measure and cut the thread of each life.

Fennel stalk: the hollow plant stem in which Prometheus carried the stolen fire.

Forethought: the meaning of the name Prometheus; also the foreknowledge he has from his mother.

Gadfly: a fly, such as a horsefly, that bites and torments farm animals; here Hera's instrument for tormenting Io.

Gloze, glozing: to explain away or smooth over; glozing speeches are smooth, flattering words.

Griffin (Gryphon): a winged beast with an eagle's head and a lion's body that guards gold.

Hest: a command or order.

Leech: an old word for a physician.

Levin: lightning.

Loxias: a title of Apollo as the god of prophecy.

Necessity: the fixed order of events that no one, not even Zeus, can escape.

Oceanids: the daughters of Oceanus and Tethys; the Chorus of this play.

Oracle: a sacred place where a god was consulted about the future, or the answer given there, as at Delphi (Pytho) and Dodona.

Philanthropy: love of humankind; in this play, Prometheus's crime.

Purblind: partly blind; dull of understanding.

Pytho: the older name of Delphi, the oracle of Apollo.

Rime: frost.

Satyr play: the lighter play that followed a playwright's three tragedies at the Athenian festival.

Shamefast: shamefaced; modest.

Sovran: an old spelling of sovereign.

Strophe: a stanza of a Greek choral song, originally sung as the chorus turned in its dance; answered by the antistrophe.

Tartarus: the deepest pit beneath the underworld, where Zeus imprisoned the defeated Titans.

Tetralogy: the set of three tragedies and a satyr play that a playwright presented together at the festival.

Titans: the older generation of gods, children of Uranus and Gaea, overthrown by Zeus.

Trilogy: three connected tragedies telling one story.

Trow: to think or believe.

Unguent: a soothing or healing ointment.

Ween: to think or suppose.

Wight: a living being, especially a person.

Seven Evenings with Prometheus

Evening 1: The Name Forethought

Read: 1–127

Practice: Before bed, write down one decision you will face tomorrow and list three things you can foresee about it. Afterward, note which you foresaw rightly and which you missed.

Evening question: Is it harder to suffer what you saw coming, or what took you by surprise?

Evening 2: What We Were Given

Read: 446–514

Practice: List five skills you use every day, from reading to cooking, and next to each write the name of the person who taught it to you, if you know it. Thank one of them this week.

Evening question: Which of Prometheus's gifts would you find hardest to live without, and why?

Evening 3: The Price of Power

Read: 197–256

Practice: Think of one rule you follow at work, at home or in your town. Write a sentence on who made it, whether they answer to anyone, and what would happen if you broke it.

Evening question: Why does Prometheus think a new ruler distrusts even his friends, and have you seen that happen?

Evening 4: The Friend Who Advises

Read: 296–403

Practice: The next time someone gives you advice you do not want, listen to the end without answering, then repeat back the strongest part of what they said before you reply.

Evening question: Is Oceanus a coward, a wise friend, or both?

Evening 5: Enduring Together

Read: 573–720

Practice: Ask someone you know how they are really doing, and listen to the whole answer without offering a solution, as the Chorus listens to Io.

Evening question: What does Io's suffering add to the case against Zeus that Prometheus's own suffering does not?

Evening 6: Knowing the End

Read: 720–896

Practice: Write a short letter to yourself to be opened in a year, describing one hard thing you are carrying now and what you hope will be true by then.

Evening question: Does knowing her future help Io, or only add to her pain?

Evening 7: Defiance

Read: 960–1116

Practice: Write one sentence stating something you believe so firmly that you would not take it back under pressure. Then write one sentence on what holding it might cost you.

Evening question: When does refusing to yield become a virtue, and when does it become the folly Hermes warns against?

Questions for Reading Groups and Classes

1. Strength mocks Prometheus's name at 85–86. In what ways does the play show forethought as a strength, and in what ways as a burden?
2. Hephaestus pities Prometheus but binds him anyway. What does his choice tell us about obedience to power?
3. Prometheus says he gave mortals "Blind hopes" before he gave them fire (256–260). Why might hope come first? Is blind hope a gift or a trick?
4. Compare the play's version of the myth with Hesiod's, as described in the Introduction. What is lost when the sacrifice trick and Pandora disappear, and what is gained?
5. Look at the list of gifts at 446–514. What do these skills have in common? What is missing from the list?
6. Oceanus urges Prometheus to "Know thou thyself" (317). Is his advice cowardly, or the wisest thing anyone says in the play?
7. Prometheus admits, "Yea, willing, willingly I sinned, nor will deny it" (274–275). Does a crime done out of love for others remain a crime?
8. Why do you think the author brought Io into a play about Prometheus? How does her story change the way we see Zeus?
9. Prometheus says, "Art is far weaker than Necessity" (522), yet he also believes Zeus will fall. How do skill, fate and power relate in this play?

10. The secret about Zeus's marriage is Prometheus's only weapon. Is keeping it an act of courage, of revenge or of bargaining?
11. Hermes warns that self-will without wisdom is "less than nought" (1033–1034). Is Hermes right about Prometheus in any way?
12. The Chorus begins frightened and ends by choosing to share Prometheus's punishment. What changes them?
13. We never see Zeus. How does keeping him offstage affect our judgment of him?
14. Scholars still debate whether Aeschylus wrote this play. Does knowing that change how you read it? Should it?
15. The trilogy probably ended with Prometheus and Zeus reconciled. Shelley refused to write that ending. Which ending would you choose, and why?
16. The Romantics made Prometheus a symbol of rebellion against tyranny; Mary Shelley made him a warning about creation without responsibility. Which reading does the play itself support better?
17. Is there a figure in modern life, real or imagined, who plays the part of Prometheus: a giver of knowledge punished for giving it?

Chronology

c. 700 BC · Hesiod composes the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*, with the earliest surviving full account of Prometheus.

525 or 524 BC · Aeschylus is born; his family probably lived at Eleusis.

508 BC · The reforms of Cleisthenes lay the foundations of Athenian democracy.

499 BC · Aeschylus competes as a playwright for the first time.

490 BC · Aeschylus fights at Marathon against the Persians.

484 BC · Aeschylus wins his first victory.

480 BC · Aeschylus fights at Artemisium and Salamis.

c. 479–475 BC · Mount Etna erupts; ancient sources differ on the year.

472 BC · Aeschylus's *Persians* wins first prize; the satyr play *Prometheus the Fire-Kindler* was probably part of the same set.

458 BC · Aeschylus produces the *Oresteia*.

456 or 455 BC · Aeschylus dies at Gela in Sicily.

c. 470–430 BC · *Prometheus Bound* is composed; the date and the author are disputed.

431 BC · Aeschylus's son Euphorion wins first prize over Sophocles and Euripides.

c. 429 BC · Cratinus's comedy *The Wealth-Gods* parodies *Prometheus Unbound*.

AD 1801 · Beethoven's *The Creatures of Prometheus* has its premiere in Vienna.

AD 1818 · Mary Shelley publishes *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

AD 1820 · Percy Bysshe Shelley publishes *Prometheus Unbound*.

AD 1868 · E. H. Plumptre publishes his translation of Aeschylus.

AD 1869 · R. Westphal first raises doubts in print about the authorship of *Prometheus Bound*.

AD 1891 · Plumptre dies at Wells.

Further Reading

Hesiod, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, tr. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, in *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homerica* (1914). The earlier Prometheus and Pandora story; free on Project Gutenberg.

Plato, *Protagoras*, tr. Benjamin Jowett (1871). Protagoras's retelling of the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus; free on Project Gutenberg.

Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*, tr. E. H. Plumptre (1868). The Danaids, Io's descendants, arrive in Argos; in the same collection as this translation.

Aeschylus, *Aeschylus*, Volume 1, tr. Herbert Weir Smyth (Loeb Classical Library, 1922). A plainer prose translation with modern line numbers; free on the Perseus Digital Library.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). The great Romantic answer to the lost sequel.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The myth turned into a warning about the maker.

Lord Byron, "Prometheus" (1816). A short poem of defiance and endurance.

Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (1930). A classic, readable introduction to Greek literature and thought.

Mark Griffith, *The Authenticity of Prometheus Bound* (1977). The fullest modern case against Aeschylus's authorship.

Mark Griffith, ed., *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound* (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics, 1983). The standard commentary on the Greek text, with an introduction useful to all readers.

Alan H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylean Tragedy* (1996; 2nd ed. 2010). A clear survey of all of Aeschylus, including the Prometheus plays.

Edition Notes

The text: E. H. Plumptre's verse translation of Prometheus Bound, first published in 1868, from the 1901 D. C. Heath edition of his Æschylos: Tragedies and Fragments, as transcribed for Project Gutenberg. Plumptre's footnotes and his asterisks marking conjectural readings are left out; his line numbers, which follow the Greek, are kept. Plumptre died in 1891; the translation is in the public domain worldwide.

The apparatus: The introduction, notes, glossary, practices, questions, chronology and reading list were drafted with the help of artificial intelligence and checked by hand against the text and against published sources. Every quotation in them matches the text printed in this book word for word, and every fact was checked against a published source before it was printed. The publisher keeps a record of the source checked for each fact. No quotation, fact or story was invented. The translation itself is unchanged.

Locators: the numbers in the margin of the text are the numbers the notes, glossary, practice and questions refer to. They are explained in the note on the translation.

Corrections: readers who find an error are invited to report it to the publisher. Corrections will appear in later editions.