Prometheus Bound

AESCHYLUS

c. 525–456 BC

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Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Prometheus Bound · Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Prometheus, a Titan, stole fire from the gods and gave it to human beings. For that, Zeus, the new ruler of heaven, has him nailed to a rock at the edge of the world. The play opens with Power and Violence dragging him there and the god Hephaestus reluctantly driving in the bolts.

Prometheus barely moves for the rest of the play, but visitors come to him: the daughters of Ocean, who make up the chorus; their father Oceanus, with cautious advice; and Io, a girl Zeus desired, turned into a heifer and driven across the world by a gadfly. To them Prometheus tells how he gave humans every art and skill, and hints that he holds a secret that could topple Zeus himself.

Ancient tradition credits the play to Aeschylus (died 456 BC), though many modern scholars doubt it. It was probably part of a trilogy whose other plays are lost, and its defiant hero has fascinated readers from the Romantics to Marx.

Prometheus Bound

A desolate crag in Scythia, at the edge of the world.

PROLOGUE

Power and Hephaestus nail Prometheus to a Scythian crag for giving fire to mortals; alone, he cries out.

POWER [1] We've come to the far edge of the earth, to the Scythian tract, an untrodden wilderness. Hephaestus, it's you who must see to the orders the Father laid on you: to clamp this criminal to the high-cliffed rocks in unbreakable fetters of adamant chain. It was your own flower, the gleam of fire that serves every craft, that he stole and gave to mortals. For a wrong like that he has to pay the penalty to the gods, so that he learns to accept the tyranny of Zeus and gives up his love of humankind.[1]

HEPHAESTUS [12] Power and Violence, as far as you two are concerned, Zeus's command is carried out, and nothing stands in your way anymore. But I haven't the heart to bind a god, my own kin, by force to this storm-beaten ravine. Still, I have no choice but to find the nerve for it. It's a heavy thing to slight the Father's word.

[18] Son of Themis, whose counsel is straight, lofty-minded son: against your will, and against mine, I'll rivet you with bronze bonds that are hard to undo to this crag far from humankind. Here you'll make out neither the voice nor the shape of any mortal. Roasted by the sun's bright flame, you'll see the bloom of your skin change. You'll be glad when night in her spangled robe

1 For the Greeks, Scythia was the vast country north of the Black Sea, the edge of the known world.

hides the daylight, and glad when the sun scatters the morning frost again. And always the weight of the pain at hand will wear you down, for the one who will relieve it hasn't yet been born.

[28] This is what you've earned with your love of humankind. A god yourself, you didn't cower before the anger of the gods, and you gave mortals honors beyond what was just. For that you'll keep watch on this joyless rock, standing upright, sleepless, never bending your knee. You'll utter many laments and groans, and all of them useless, for the heart of Zeus is hard to move by pleading. Everyone is harsh whose rule is new.

POWER [36] Well? Why are you dawdling and wasting your pity? Why don't you hate the god the gods hate most, the one who betrayed your own prerogative to mortals?

HEPHAESTUS [39] Kinship has a strange power, and so does long companionship.

POWER [40] I agree. But to disobey the Father's words—how can you? Isn't that what you fear more?

HEPHAESTUS [42] You never change, do you? Always pitiless and full of brazen nerve.

POWER [43] Because lamenting him cures nothing. Don't waste your effort on what does no good.

HEPHAESTUS [45] Oh, this craft of my hands—how I hate it!

POWER [46] Why hate it? To put it simply, your craft is in no way to blame for the troubles we have here.

HEPHAESTUS [48] All the same, I wish it had fallen to someone else.

POWER [49] Everything is a burden except ruling the gods. No one is free except Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS [51] I can see it in all this, and I have no answer.

POWER [52] Then hurry up and throw the chains on him, or the Father may see you idling.

HEPHAESTUS [54] Look, the shackles are right here, ready to hand.

POWER [55] Get them around his hands, then strike with your hammer, with all the strength you have. Nail him to the rocks.

HEPHAESTUS [57] It's getting done, and the work isn't wasted.

POWER [58] Strike harder, tighten it, leave no slack anywhere. He's terribly clever at finding a way out even where there is none.

HEPHAESTUS [60] This arm, at any rate, is fixed fast. No getting it loose.

POWER [61] Now buckle this one securely too, so he learns that, clever one though he is, he's slower-witted than Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS [63] No one could justly fault me, except him.

POWER [64] Now drive the stubborn jaw of an adamant wedge clean through his chest. Put your strength into it.

HEPHAESTUS [66] Oh, Prometheus, I groan over your sufferings.

POWER [67] Hanging back again? Groaning for the enemies of Zeus? Watch out you don't end up pitying yourself one day.

HEPHAESTUS [69] You see a sight that's hard for eyes to look on.

POWER [70] I see him getting what he deserves. Now throw the girth-straps around his sides.

HEPHAESTUS [72] I have to do it. Don't keep ordering me about so much.

POWER [73] Oh, I'll order you, all right, and shout at you as well. Get down there and ring his legs with force.

HEPHAESTUS [75] There, the work is done, and it didn't take long.

POWER [76] Now hammer the piercing fetters in hard. The one who'll inspect this work is a severe judge.

HEPHAESTUS [78] Your tongue talks just the way you look.

POWER [79] You be soft if you like, but don't throw my stubbornness and my rough temper in my face.

HEPHAESTUS [81] Let's go. He has the net around his limbs.

POWER [82] Now go on, be insolent here. Steal the privileges of the gods and hand them to creatures of a day. What can mortals do

to bail you out of these troubles? The gods call you Prometheus, "Forethought," but it's a false name. What you need is someone with forethought yourself, to work out how you'll wriggle free of this handiwork.[2]

PROMETHEUS

Divine sky, and you swift-winged winds, and you springs of rivers, and the countless laughter of the sea's waves, and Earth, mother of all—and you, the all-seeing circle of the sun, I call on you: look at what I, a god, suffer at the hands of gods.
See the torments
that will grind me down
as I struggle through ten thousand
years of time.
Such is the shameful bondage
the new ruler of the blessed ones
has devised for me.
Ah, ah, I groan
for the pain that's here and the pain to come.
Where must the end of these toils
ever rise like a star?

And yet what am I saying? I know everything that's to come, exactly, beforehand; no suffering will come to me unforeseen. I must bear my allotted fate as lightly as I can, knowing that the strength of Necessity is not to be fought. And yet I can't keep silent about what has happened to me, and I can't speak of it either. Because I gave mortals privileges, I'm yoked, poor wretch, to these hard necessities. I hunted out the source of fire and stole it, packed in a fennel stalk, and it has shown itself to mortals as the teacher of every art and a great resource. That is

2 The Greeks heard in Prometheus' name the word for "forethought" (promētheia); Power mocks the name.

the wrong I'm paying the penalty for, nailed in chains under the open sky.[3]

Ah, ah! What's this?
What sound, what scent has flown to me, unseen—
sent by a god, or mortal, or a mixture of both?
Has someone come to this crag at the world's end
to gaze at my sufferings? Or what can he want?
Look at me, a god in chains, ill-fated,
the enemy of Zeus, at odds with all the gods

who come and go in Zeus's court,
for loving mortals too well.
Ah, ah, what is this rustling I hear
of birds close by? The air
whispers with the light beat of wings.
Everything that comes near me makes me afraid.

PARODOS

The daughters of Ocean arrive on the wind and grieve with Prometheus over Zeus's harsh new rule.

CHORUS

Don't be afraid. This flight of wings
that has raced to this crag
in swift rivalry
comes as a friend;
I barely won my father's heart over.
The swift-carrying breezes brought me here,
for the echo of clanging iron
pierced the depths of our caves
and struck the shy modesty from my eyes;
I rushed off without sandals in a winged car.

3 The dry pith of the giant fennel (narthex) will carry fire smoldering inside it.

PROMETHEUS

Ah, ah,
children of Tethys, mother of many,
daughters of your father Ocean,
who circles the whole earth
with his never-sleeping stream:
look, see with what chains
I'm pinned to the topmost crags
of this ravine,
to keep a watch no one would envy.

CHORUS

I see, Prometheus. And a mist of fear,
full of tears, came rushing over my eyes
when I saw your body
withering against these rocks
in this outrage of adamant chains.
For new helmsmen steer Olympus now;
Zeus rules lawlessly with laws of his own making,
and the mighty ones of old he now blots out.

PROMETHEUS

If only he had sent me under the earth,
beneath Hades, receiver of the dead,
into Tartarus, which has no way through,
binding me savagely in chains that can't be undone,
so that no god, nor anyone else,
could gloat over this!
As it is, poor wretch, I'm a plaything of the winds,
and what I suffer makes my enemies glad.

CHORUS

Which of the gods is so hard of heart
that this delights him?
Who doesn't share your anguish
at your troubles—except Zeus?
He, always in anger,
has set his mind unbending
and crushes the brood of Uranus,
and he won't stop until he has sated his heart,
or until someone, by some trick of the hand,
seizes the rule that is so hard to seize.

PROMETHEUS

And yet, I swear, though I'm tortured
in these strong fetters on my limbs,
the lord who presides over the blessed
will need me still
to reveal the new plan
that will strip him of his scepter and his honors.
He won't charm me
with the honey-tongued spells of persuasion,
and I'll never cower at his harsh threats
and disclose it,
until he frees me from these savage bonds
and is willing to pay
the penalty for this outrage.

CHORUS

You are bold, and you don't give way at all
to your bitter pains;
you speak too freely.
But a piercing fear has stirred my heart.
I'm afraid for your fortunes:
where will you ever have to put into harbor
and see the end
of these toils?
For the son of Cronus has a temper no one can reach
and a heart no pleading will move.

PROMETHEUS

I know he is harsh, Zeus,
and keeps justice in his own hands.
But all the same, one day
his mind will soften,
when he is broken in the way I've said.
He will calm his unrelenting anger
and come one day, eager to my eagerness,
to a bond of friendship with me.

FIRST EPISODE

Prometheus tells how he helped Zeus to power and saved mortals; Oceanus comes to urge submission.

CHORUS Reveal everything and tell us the whole story: on what charge did Zeus seize you, to torment you so shamefully and so bitterly? Tell us, unless it does you some harm to speak of it.

PROMETHEUS It's painful even to speak of this, but it's painful to keep silent too; either way it's misery. As soon as the gods began their quarrel and strife was stirred up among them—some wanting to throw Cronus from his throne so that Zeus, if you please, could be king, others striving the opposite way, so that Zeus should never rule the gods—at that point I gave the Titans,

the children of Uranus and Earth, the best advice, but I couldn't persuade them. They scorned crafty schemes in their stubborn pride and thought they would make themselves masters easily, by force. But my mother Themis—and not just once—and Earth, one form with many names, had foretold to me how the future would come about: that those who would prevail must win not by strength or by might, but by guile. [216] When I explained all this to them, they didn't think it worth a single glance. So the best course open to me then seemed to be to take my mother with me and stand at the side of Zeus, a willing ally to a willing friend. It's by my counsels that the black depths of Tartarus now hide ancient Cronus, allies and all. That's the help the tyrant of the gods had from me, and these vile punishments are how he's repaid me. There's a disease, somehow, built into tyranny: not trusting one's friends.

[228] As for what you're asking, the charge on which he torments me, I'll make that clear now.

[230] As soon as he sat on his father's throne, he straight away assigned privileges to the gods, different ones to each, and ordered his realm rank by rank. But of wretched mortals he took no account at all. He wanted to wipe out their whole race and breed another, a new one. And no one stood against this except me. I dared it. I rescued mortals from being smashed to pieces and going down to Hades. That's why I'm bent under torments like these, painful to suffer and pitiful to see. I gave mortals first place in my pity, yet I wasn't thought worth pity myself; instead I've been ruthlessly disciplined like this, a sight that does Zeus no credit.

CHORUS [244] Anyone who doesn't share your distress at your sufferings, Prometheus, has a heart of iron and is carved out of rock. I wouldn't have wished to see this, and now that I have seen it, my heart aches.

PROMETHEUS [248] Yes, to friends I'm a pitiful sight.

CHORUS [249] You didn't by any chance go even further than this?

PROMETHEUS [250] I stopped mortals from foreseeing their doom.

CHORUS [251] What cure did you find for that sickness?

PROMETHEUS [252] I settled blind hopes in them.

CHORUS [253] That was a great blessing you gave mortals.

PROMETHEUS [254] And besides that, I gave them fire.

CHORUS [255] And now creatures of a day have blazing fire?

PROMETHEUS [256] Yes, and from it they'll learn many arts.

CHORUS [257] So it's on charges like these that Zeus—

PROMETHEUS [258] —torments me, and never lets up on my pain at all.

CHORUS [259] And is there no end to your ordeal set before you?

PROMETHEUS [260] None at all, except when he decides.

CHORUS [261] And how will he decide that? What hope is there? Don't you see that you went wrong? How you went wrong is no pleasure for me to say, and painful for you to hear. But let's leave that. Look for some way out of your ordeal.

PROMETHEUS [265] It's easy for anyone who keeps his foot clear of trouble to advise and lecture someone who's faring badly. I knew all this. Willingly, willingly I went wrong; I won't deny it. By helping mortals I found suffering for myself. Not that I thought I'd be withered away by punishments like these, on rocks high in the air, given this desolate crag with no neighbors. Now, don't lament the pains I have at present. Come down to the ground and hear what fortunes are creeping toward me, so you learn the whole story to the end. Do as I ask, do as I ask: share the pain of the one who's suffering now. Misery wanders, you know, and perches now on one, now on another, just the same.

CHORUS

You've urged this on willing ears,
Prometheus.
Now with light foot I leave
my swift-rushing seat
and the holy air, the pathway of birds,
and I'll come close to this rugged ground.
I want to hear all your sufferings
through to the end.

OCEANUS

I have come to the end of a long road,
Prometheus, traveling to you,
steering this swift-winged bird
by my will alone, without a bit.
Your fortunes, I want you to know, give me pain.
Kinship, I think, compels me to it,
and apart from our blood, there's no one
I'd hold in higher regard than you.
You'll find that this is true, and that it isn't in me
to say pleasant things for nothing. Come,
tell me what I should do to help you.
You'll never say
you have a firmer friend than Oceanus.

PROMETHEUS What's this? What do I see? Have you too come to watch my sufferings? How did you dare to leave the stream that bears your name and your rock-roofed caves that no hand built, and come to this land, the mother of iron? Have you come to gaze at my fortunes and share my distress at my troubles? Then look at the sight: this friend of Zeus, who helped him set up his tyranny—see the torments he bends me under.

OCEANUS I see, Prometheus, and I want to give you the best advice, subtle as you are yourself. Know yourself, and adapt yourself to new ways, for the tyrant among the gods is new too. If you keep hurling words this harsh and this sharp, Zeus may

hear you, though he sits far above, and then your present crowd of troubles will seem like child's play. Come, poor sufferer, let go of the anger you're holding on to, and look for a release from these pains. Maybe what I'm saying sounds old-fashioned to you. But this, Prometheus, is the wage of a tongue that talks too high. You're not humble yet, and you don't give way to trouble; you'd rather take on more on top of what you have. [324] So if you take me as your teacher, you won't kick out against the goad, seeing that a harsh monarch rules who answers to no one. Now I'll go and try, if I can, to free you from these sufferings. You keep quiet, and don't be so loud-mouthed. Or don't you know perfectly well, clever as you are, that punishment is the lot of a reckless tongue?

PROMETHEUS [332] I envy you, because you've stayed clear of blame, though you shared in all this and dared it with me. Now let it be; don't trouble yourself. You won't persuade him whatever you do; he isn't easily persuaded. Watch out that you don't come to harm yourself on this journey.

OCEANUS [337] You're far better at giving your neighbors sense than yourself. I judge by facts, not words. Don't hold me back now that I'm setting out. I'm confident, yes, confident Zeus will grant me this gift: to free you from these sufferings.

PROMETHEUS [343] For that I praise you, and I'll never stop, because you lack nothing in eagerness. But don't trouble yourself. Your trouble will be wasted and do me no good, even if you do want to take the trouble. No, stay quiet and keep yourself out of the way. Just because I'm unfortunate, I wouldn't want suffering to come to as many as possible. Certainly not, when I'm already worn down by the fate of my brother Atlas, who stands in the regions of the west, propping on his shoulders the pillar of heaven and earth, a load not easy to hold. And I pitied the earth-born dweller of the Cilician caves when I saw him overpowered by force, the destructive hundred-headed monster, furious Typhon. He stood against all the gods, hissing terror

from his fearsome jaws,[4] [358] and from his eyes flashed a grim, Gorgon-eyed glare, as if he meant to sack the tyranny of Zeus by force. But the sleepless shaft of Zeus came against him, the swooping thunderbolt breathing out flame, and it struck him out of his high-sounding boasts. Hit to the very heart, he was burned to ash and the strength was thundered out of him. And now he lies, a useless, sprawling body, near the narrows of the sea, pressed down under the roots of Etna, while on its topmost peaks sits Hephaestus, hammering the molten iron. From there, one day, rivers of fire will burst out, devouring with savage jaws the level fields of Sicily, land of fine fruit. That is the rage Typhon will boil over with, in hot shafts of an unapproachable, fire-breathing storm, even though he's been burned to cinders by Zeus's thunderbolt.

[375] But you're not inexperienced, and you don't need me as your teacher. Save yourself, as you know how. I'll drain my present fortune to the dregs, until Zeus's mind lets go of its anger.

OCEANUS [379] Don't you know this, then, Prometheus: that for a sick temper, words are the doctors?

PROMETHEUS [381] Yes, if you soften the heart at the right moment, and don't try to shrink a swelling temper by force.

OCEANUS [383] But in being eager, and daring, what harm do you see? Tell me.

PROMETHEUS [385] Wasted effort and empty-headed foolishness.

OCEANUS [386] Then let me be sick with that sickness, since it pays best to be wise and not seem it.

PROMETHEUS [388] People will think the folly is mine.

OCEANUS [389] What you're saying plainly sends me home again.

PROMETHEUS [390] Yes, so that your mourning for me doesn't make you an enemy.

4 Typhon (or Typhoeus) was a monster born of Earth who challenged Zeus; here he is buried under Mount Etna in Sicily.

OCEANUS [391] An enemy of the one newly seated on the all-powerful throne?

PROMETHEUS [392] Watch out that his heart doesn't one day turn against you.

OCEANUS [393] Your misfortune, Prometheus, is my teacher.

PROMETHEUS [394] Off you go, get going, and keep the mind you have now.

OCEANUS [395] You urge this on me just as I'm setting out. My four-legged bird is already fanning the smooth road of the air with its wings. It would be glad to bend its knee in its own stall at home.

FIRST STASIMON

The chorus mourn Prometheus, and the peoples of the world, the sea and Hades lament with him.

CHORUS

[399] I mourn for your ruinous fortune, Prometheus.
Shedding a stream of tears from my eyes
I have wet my soft cheek
with their flowing springs.
For Zeus does these grievous things,
ruling by laws of his own,
and shows the gods of old
an overbearing spear.

[407] Already the whole land cries out in lament;
grand and time-honored …
they mourn your honor
and your brothers';
and all the mortals who make their home
in the settled seat of holy Asia
suffer with you
in your much-lamented pains,

and the maidens who live in the land of Colchis,
fearless in battle,
and the Scythian throng who hold
the farthest region of the earth
around the lake of Maeotis,[5]

and the warlike flower of Arabia,
who hold the high-cliffed citadel
near the Caucasus,
a fierce host, roaring
among sharp-pointed spears.

Only one other Titan before this
have I seen subdued in torments,
in the outrage of adamant chains:
the god Atlas, whose strength surpassed all,
mighty strength,
who holds up the vault of heaven
on his back, and groans beneath it.

The waves of the sea cry out
as they crash together; the deep groans;
the black pit of Hades rumbles below the earth,
and the springs of holy-flowing rivers
groan with pitiful pain.

SECOND EPISODE

Prometheus lists the arts he taught mortals and hints that Fate holds something in store for Zeus.

PROMETHEUS Don't think it's out of pride or stubbornness that I'm silent. My heart is eaten away with brooding, as I see myself outraged like this. And yet who but I marked out, once and for all, the privileges of these new gods? But I'll say nothing about that; I'd only be telling you what you know. Hear instead about the miseries of mortals: how, childish as they were before,

5 The fearless maidens are the Amazons; Lake Maeotis is the Sea of Azov, north of the Black Sea.

I made them intelligent and masters of their wits. I'll tell it not to find fault with humans, but to explain the goodwill behind what I gave them.

447 At first they had eyes, but saw in vain; they had ears, but didn't hear. Like shapes in dreams, all their long life they jumbled everything at random. They knew no brick-built houses facing the sun, no working in wood; they lived dug into the ground like tiny ants, in the sunless depths of caves. They had no sure sign of winter, or of flowery spring, or of fruitful summer, but did everything without judgment, until I showed them the risings of the stars and their settings, so hard to make out.

459 And number, too, the finest of all devices, I invented for them, and the combining of letters, the memory of all things, the Muses' mother, the skilled worker. I was the first to put wild beasts under the yoke, to serve as slaves to the yoke strap and the pack saddle, so that they could take over the heaviest of mortals' labors; and I led horses under the chariot, obedient to the rein, the pride of lavish wealth. And no one but I invented the sailors' linen-winged vehicles that roam the sea.

469 Such are the contrivances I devised for mortals—and I, poor wretch, have no clever device myself to free me from my present suffering.

CHORUS 472 You've suffered a shameful torment. You've lost your wits and wander astray. Like a bad doctor who's fallen ill, you lose heart and can't find what remedies will cure you.

PROMETHEUS 476 When you hear the rest, you'll marvel even more at the arts and resources I devised. The greatest is this: if anyone fell ill, there was no defense—nothing to eat, nothing to rub on, nothing to drink—and they wasted away for lack of remedies, until I showed them how to mix gentle cures, with which they now ward off every disease. I set out the many ways of prophecy. I was the first to judge from dreams which must come true in waking life; I made known to them chance words of omen, hard to interpret, and signs met on the road. I defined precisely the flight of crook-taloned birds: which are lucky by

nature and which unlucky, what way of life each kind has, and what hatreds, loves, and gatherings they have with one another; [493] and the smoothness of the entrails, and what color the gall must have to please the gods, and the dappled symmetry of the liver's lobe. And by burning the thighbones wrapped in fat, and the long chine, I led mortals into an art hard to read, and gave eyes to the signs in the flame, which before were clouded over. So much for these. As for the benefits hidden from humans under the earth—bronze, iron, silver, and gold—who could claim he found them before I did? No one, I know very well, unless he wants to babble nonsense. Learn it all in one short word: every art that mortals have comes from Prometheus.[6]

CHORUS [507] Then don't help mortals beyond due measure while you neglect yourself in your misfortune. I'm hopeful you'll yet be freed from these chains and be no less powerful than Zeus.

PROMETHEUS [511] Fate, who brings all things to their end, has not yet ordained that it will end like that. Only when I've been bent by countless pains and agonies will I escape these chains. Art is far weaker than Necessity.

CHORUS [515] Then who steers the helm of Necessity?

PROMETHEUS [516] The three-formed Fates, and the Furies, who never forget.

CHORUS [517] So Zeus is weaker than they are?

PROMETHEUS [518] Well, he certainly couldn't escape what is destined.

CHORUS [519] Why, what is destined for Zeus, except to rule forever?

PROMETHEUS [520] That you mustn't learn yet. Don't press me.

CHORUS [521] It must be something solemn you're keeping wrapped up.

PROMETHEUS [522] Think of some other subject. This one it's no time at all to speak of; it has to be kept covered as closely as pos-

sible. By keeping it safe I'll escape my shameful chains and my agonies.

SECOND STASIMON

The chorus pray never to offend Zeus and reflect on how little mortals can repay Prometheus.

CHORUS

May Zeus, who orders all things,
never set his power against my will;
may I never be slow to approach the gods
with holy feasts of slaughtered oxen
beside the unquenchable stream of my father Ocean;
and may I never offend in what I say.
Let this stay with me and never melt away.

It is sweet to stretch out a long life
in confident hopes,
feeding the heart on bright good cheer.
But I shudder to see you
worn away by countless toils ...
For you don't tremble before Zeus;
with a will of your own you honor mortals too much,
Prometheus.

Come, my friend, see how thankless your favor was.
Tell me, where is any help?
What aid can creatures of a day give? Didn't you see
the feeble helplessness,
like a dream, in which the blind race of men
is shackled? Never ...
will the plans of mortals get past the order Zeus has set.

6 Greek seers read the future from the entrails of sacrificed animals, especially the liver, and from the way the offerings burned on the altar.

I learned this by looking at your ruinous fortunes,
Prometheus.
And this song came flying to me,
so different from that other song I sang
around your bath and your bed
at your wedding,
when you won my sister, our father's daughter,
with bridal gifts,
and led Hesione home to be your wife and share your bed.[7]

THIRD EPISODE

Io, driven by a gadfly, tells her story; Prometheus foretells her wanderings and Zeus's possible fall.

IO

What land is this? What people? Who shall I say I see
storm-beaten here
in these bridles of rock?
For what offense are you paying with your ruin?
Tell me where on earth I have wandered in my misery.

Ah, ah! Ah, ah!
Again some gadfly stings me, wretched me—
the ghost of earth-born Argus—keep it off, *a, da*! I'm afraid,
I see the herdsman with his countless eyes.
He comes on, with his crafty gaze,
he whom even in death the earth will not hide.
No—up from the dead he crosses
and hunts me, wretched me, and drives me wandering,
starving, along the sand of the shore.[8]

7 Hesione, an Oceanid, is here Prometheus' wife; bathing before the wedding was part of the marriage rites.
8 Argus was the many-eyed herdsman Hera set to guard Io; Hermes killed him on Zeus's orders.

574 And under it the wax-joined reed pipe drones
its ringing, sleep-bringing tune.
Oh, oh, *popoi*! Where are they taking me,
these far-roaming wanderings?
What, son of Cronus, what fault did you ever find in me
that you yoked me to these miseries—ah, ah!—
and torment me so, a wretched, maddened girl,
with gadfly-driven terror?
Burn me with fire, or bury me in the earth,
or give me as food to the monsters of the sea,
and don't begrudge me my prayers, lord.
Enough—my much-wandering wanderings
have run me ragged, and I can't learn
how to escape my pains.
Do you hear the voice of the cow-horned girl?

PROMETHEUS 589 How could I not hear the gadfly-whirled girl, the daughter of Inachus? She warms Zeus's heart with desire, and now, hated by Hera, she is forced to run these endless courses.[9]

9 Inachus, Io's father, was the river of Argos and its first king; as a river he was a son of Ocean, so the Oceanids are his sisters.

IO

593 How do you know my father's name, that you speak it?
Tell me, in my misery—who are you?
Who are you, poor sufferer, that you address me, the
miserable one,
so truly,
and name the god-sent sickness
that wastes me, stinging me with its maddening goads? Oh!
Ah, ah!
With starving, leaping torments
I have come here in a headlong rush,
beaten down by Hera's vengeful schemes.
Of all the ill-fated, who—ah, ah!—
suffer as I do?
But tell me clearly
what still awaits me to suffer,
what remedy, what cure there is for my sickness—
show me, if you know.
Speak, tell it to the wretched wandering girl.

PROMETHEUS 609 I'll tell you plainly all you want to learn, not weaving in riddles but in simple words, the way it's right to open your mouth to friends. You see before you Prometheus, who gave mortals fire.

IO 613 You who appeared as a blessing shared by all mortals, long-suffering Prometheus—what is it you're being punished like this for?

PROMETHEUS 615 I've only just stopped lamenting my own pains.

IO 616 Then won't you grant me this favor?

PROMETHEUS 617 Say what it is you ask. You could learn anything from me.

IO 618 Tell me who clamped you in this ravine.

PROMETHEUS 619 The will was Zeus's; the hand, Hephaestus'.

IO [620] And for what offenses are you paying the penalty?

PROMETHEUS [621] That much is all I'll make clear to you.

IO [622] Then besides that, show me the end of my wandering. When will it come for me in my misery?

PROMETHEUS [624] Better for you not to learn it than to learn it.

IO [625] Please don't hide from me what I'm going to suffer.

PROMETHEUS [626] It isn't that I begrudge you this gift.

IO [627] Then why put off telling me the whole thing?

PROMETHEUS [628] There's no ill will in it. I'm only reluctant to shatter your spirit.

IO [629] Don't spare me more than I want to be spared.

PROMETHEUS [630] Since you're so eager, I must speak. Listen, then.

CHORUS [631] Not yet. Give us a share of the pleasure too. Let's first hear about her affliction, with her telling us herself the fortunes that have ruined her; then let her learn the rest of her trials from you.

PROMETHEUS [635] It's for you, Io, to do these women this favor—all the more since they're your father's sisters. To weep and lament your fortunes where you'll win a tear from those who listen is time well spent.

IO [640] I don't see how I could refuse you. You'll hear everything you ask in a plain account. And yet even to speak of it shames me: the god-sent storm, the ruin of my shape, and how it came swooping down on me in my misery.

[645] Night after night visions kept coming into my maiden rooms and coaxing me with smooth words: "Girl, so greatly blessed, why stay a maiden so long, when you could win the greatest of marriages? Zeus has been fired by desire's arrow for you, and he wants to join with you in love. Child, don't kick away the bed of Zeus. Go out to the deep meadow of Lerna, to your father's flocks and cattle-stalls, so that the eye of Zeus may find relief from its longing."

655 Every night I was beset by dreams like these, poor me, until at last I dared to tell my father of the dreams that walked by night. He sent envoy after envoy to Pytho and to Dodona to learn what he should do or say to please the gods. They came back reporting oracles that twisted their words, obscure and darkly spoken. But at last a clear message came to Inachus, plainly charging him and telling him to drive me out of house and homeland, to wander loose to the farthest bounds of the earth—and if he refused, a fiery thunderbolt would come from Zeus and wipe out his whole race.[10]

669 Persuaded by such prophecies of Loxias, he drove me out and shut me out of the house, against my will and against his own; but the bridle of Zeus forced him to do it. At once my shape and my mind were twisted. Horned, as you see, and stung by a sharp-mouthed gadfly, I rushed in frenzied leaps to the sweet waters of Cerchneia and the spring of Lerna. And the earth-born herdsman Argus, untempered in his rage, followed, watching my tracks with his crowd of eyes. But a sudden, unlooked-for death robbed him of life. And I, gadfly-stung, am driven from land to land by a whip from the gods.[11]

683 You've heard what happened. If you can tell me what remains of my troubles, tell me. And don't pity me and comfort me with false words, because I say made-up stories are the most shameful sickness there is.

10 Pytho is Delphi, Apollo's oracle; Dodona, in northwestern Greece, was the oracle of Zeus.

11 Loxias is Apollo's name as the god of oracles.

CHORUS

687 Ah, ah! Stop! Ah!
Never, never did I think
such strange words would reach my ears,
nor that sufferings so hard to look on, so hard to bear,
pains and defilements,
would strike my soul with a double-edged goad.
Oh fate, fate,
I shudder to see what has come upon Io.

PROMETHEUS 696 You're groaning too soon, and you're full of fear. Hold on until you've learned the rest as well.

CHORUS 698 Speak, tell it all. For the sick, it's sweet to know clearly beforehand the pain still to come.

PROMETHEUS 700 Your first request you got from me easily: you wanted first to learn about her, with her recounting her own ordeal. Now hear the rest—the sufferings this young woman must endure at Hera's hands. And you, child of Inachus' seed, lay my words to heart, so that you learn where your road ends.

707 First, from here, turn toward the sunrise and make your way across unplowed fields. You'll come to the nomad Scythians, who live in wicker houses raised high on well-wheeled wagons, armed with far-shooting bows. Don't go near them; keep your feet close to the surf-roaring shore and pass through their land. On your left hand live the ironworking Chalybes, and you must beware of them, for they're fierce and no friends to strangers.[12] 717 You'll come to the river Hybristes—the Violent—and it's well named. Don't cross it, for it isn't easy to cross, until you reach the Caucasus itself, highest of mountains, where the river blasts out its fury from the very temples of the peaks. You must climb over the summits that neighbor the stars and take the road south, where you'll come to the man-hating host of the Amazons, who will one day settle Themiscyra on the Ther-

12 The Chalybes were a people of the Black Sea's southeastern coast, famous as ironworkers.

modon, where the rough jaw of the sea at Salmydessus is hostile to sailors, a stepmother to ships. They'll guide you on your way, and gladly.[13] 729 Right at the narrow gates of the lake you'll come to the Cimmerian isthmus; you must leave it behind and boldly cross the Maeotic strait. There will be great talk among mortals of your crossing forever, and it will be called Bosporus after it. Leaving the plain of Europe, you'll reach the continent of Asia. Now, don't you think, all of you, that the tyrant of the gods is violent in everything alike? This god wanted to sleep with this mortal girl, and so he flung these wanderings on her. A bitter suitor you've found for your hand, girl. As for the words you've heard so far—think of them as not even the prelude yet.[14]

IO 742 Oh, no, no! Ah, ah!

PROMETHEUS 743 Crying and moaning again? What will you do, I wonder, when you hear the rest of the evils?

CHORUS 745 What—you've still more sufferings to tell for her?

PROMETHEUS 746 Yes—a wintry sea of ruinous misery.

IO 747 Then what's the good of living? Why don't I throw myself right now from this rugged rock, so that I crash to the ground and am rid of all my pains? Better to die once and for all than to suffer miserably all my days.

PROMETHEUS 752 You'd find my ordeals hard to bear, then, since for me it isn't fated to die—that would have been a release from suffering. As it is, there's no end to my labors set before me until Zeus falls from his tyranny.

IO 757 What? Is Zeus ever going to fall from power?

PROMETHEUS 758 You'd be glad, I think, to see that disaster.

IO 759 How could I not, when it's Zeus who makes me suffer?

PROMETHEUS 760 Then you may take it from me that it's so.

13 The Amazons, a nation of warrior women, were placed by legend at Themiscyra on the river Thermodon, in northern Asia Minor.

14 Bosporus means "cow's crossing"; this is the Cimmerian Bosporus (the Strait of Kerch), between Lake Maeotis (the Sea of Azov) and the Black Sea.

IO [761] Who will strip him of his tyrant's scepter?

PROMETHEUS [762] He himself, by his own empty-headed plans.

IO [763] How? Tell me, if there's no harm in it.

PROMETHEUS [764] He'll make a marriage he'll one day regret.

IO [765] With a goddess or a mortal? Tell me, if it can be told.

PROMETHEUS [766] Why ask which? It isn't something that can be spoken.

IO [767] Will his wife throw him from his throne?

PROMETHEUS [768] Yes—she'll bear a son stronger than his father.

IO [769] And he has no way to turn this fate aside?

PROMETHEUS [770] None—unless I'm set free from these chains.

IO [771] Then who's going to free you against Zeus's will?

PROMETHEUS [772] It's fated to be one of your own descendants.

IO [773] What did you say? A child of mine will release you from your sufferings?

PROMETHEUS [774] Yes, third in line, after ten generations more.

IO [775] Now that prophecy is no longer easy to make out.

PROMETHEUS [776] Then don't try to learn your own troubles either.

IO [777] Don't hold out a gift to me and then snatch it away.

PROMETHEUS [778] I'll give you one of two stories.

IO [779] Which two? Show me first, and give me the choice.

PROMETHEUS [780] I give it. Choose: either I tell you plainly the rest of your trials, or the one who will free me.

CHORUS [782] Be willing to grant one of these favors to her and the other to me, and don't refuse us the telling. Tell her the rest of her wandering, and me the one who'll free you—that's what I long to hear.

PROMETHEUS 786 Since you're so eager, I won't refuse to tell all that you ask. First to you, Io, I'll tell your much-tossed wandering. Write it on the remembering tablets of your mind.

790 When you've crossed the stream that marks the boundary of the two continents, toward the fiery east where the sun walks ... crossing the roaring surge of the sea, until you reach the Gorgonean plains of Cisthene, where the daughters of Phorcys live, three ancient maidens shaped like swans, who share a single eye and have a single tooth, on whom the sun never looks with his rays, nor the moon by night. Near them are their three winged sisters, the snake-haired Gorgons, hated by mortals, whom no mortal can look on and still breathe.[15] 801 That's the kind of garrison I warn you of. Now hear of another grim sight. Beware the sharp-beaked hounds of Zeus that never bark, the griffins, and the one-eyed host of Arimaspians on horseback, who live around the gold-flowing stream of Pluto's ford. Don't go near them. Then you'll come to a far-off land, a black race, who live by the springs of the sun, where the river Aethiops runs. Creep along its banks until you reach the cataract where the Nile sends out its holy, sweet stream from the Bybline mountains. It will guide you on your way to the three-cornered land of the Nile, where, Io, it's fated that you and your children will found your far-off colony.[16]

816 If any of this is unclear or hard to grasp, go over it again and learn it clearly. I have more time on my hands than I'd like.

CHORUS 819 If there's anything left or passed over that you can tell her of her ruinous wandering, say it. But if you've told it all, give us in turn the favor we ask. You remember it, I'm sure.

PROMETHEUS 823 She has heard her journey all the way to its end. But so she knows she hasn't listened to me for nothing, I'll

15 The daughters of Phorcys are the Graeae, the "Gray Ones"; the sight of their sisters the Gorgons turned men to stone.

16 The Arimaspians were a legendary one-eyed people at the edge of the world who stole gold guarded by griffins.

tell what she struggled through before coming here, and give her that as proof of my words.

827 I'll leave out most of the crowd of details and go straight to the end of your wanderings.

829 When you came to the plains of the Molossians and steep-ridged Dodona, where the oracle and seat of Thesprotian Zeus are, and that wonder past belief, the talking oaks, which hailed you plainly, not in riddles at all, as the one who would be the glorious bride of Zeus—does any of this stir you? From there, stung by the gadfly, you rushed along the coast road to the great gulf of Rhea, and from there you're storm-tossed back and forth on wandering courses. And in time to come that inner sea—know it well—will be called Ionian, a memorial of your journey to all mortals.[17]

842 These are signs for you that my mind sees further than what's been revealed. The rest I'll tell to you and her together, going back to the track of my earlier words.

846 There is a city, Canobus, at the farthest edge of the land, right at the mouth of the Nile and the silt it has built up. There Zeus restores your mind, stroking you with a hand that brings no fear, with a touch and nothing more. And named for that touch of Zeus's begetting, you'll bear dark Epaphus, who will reap the fruit of all the land the broad-flowing Nile waters. Fifth in line from him, a generation of fifty children, all girls, will come back to Argos, not willingly, fleeing marriage with their own kin, their cousins. And the men, their minds aflutter, hawks not far behind doves, will come hunting marriages they have no right to hunt; but the god will begrudge them those bodies. Pelasgia will take them in, the men struck down by a war of women's making, a daring that keeps watch in the night. For each wife will rob her husband of his life, dipping a two-edged sword in his blood. May love like that come upon my enemies![18]

17 The oaks of Dodona were said to speak Zeus's oracles; the "gulf of Rhea" is the Adriatic.

18 Epaphus' name echoes the Greek word for "touching." The fifty girls are the Danaids, who killed their bridegrooms on their wedding night.

865 But desire will charm one of the girls not to kill her bedfellow; her resolve will be blunted. Of the two she'll choose the one: to be called a coward rather than a murderer. She will bear a royal line in Argos. It would take a long account to go through all this clearly. But from this seed a bold man will be born, famed for his bow, who will free me from these sufferings. Such is the prophecy my mother, the ancient Titaness Themis, told me in full. But how and in what way—that would take a long account to tell, and you'd gain nothing by learning it.[19]

IO

877 *Eleleu, eleleu!*
Again the spasm, the mind-striking madness
burns me, and the gadfly's arrowhead,
never forged in fire, stings me.
My heart kicks at my breast in fear;
my eyes go spinning round and round;
I'm swept off course
by madness' raging blast, no master of my tongue;
my muddied words beat blindly
against the waves of hateful ruin.

19 The one who spares her husband is Hypermnestra; the archer descended from her is Heracles.

THIRD STASIMON

The chorus pray to marry their equals and never to draw the love of a god.

CHORUS

887 Wise, he was wise indeed,
who first weighed this in his mind
and spoke it out with his tongue:
that to marry within one's own rank is best by far,
and that one who works with his hands
should never long to marry
among those spoiled by wealth
or those made grand by birth.

894 Never, never,
revered Fates,
may you see me come to share the bed of Zeus,
and may I never be brought near a husband from among
those in heaven.
For I tremble when I see
Io's maidenhood, that wanted no man,
ravaged by the cruel wanderings
of Hera's torments.

901 For me, when marriage is between equals,
there's nothing to fear;
and may the love of mightier gods
never cast its inescapable eye on me.
That is a war no one can fight;
it makes a way where there is none.
I don't know what would become of me,
for I can't see how I could escape
the cunning of Zeus.

EXODOS

Prometheus refuses to tell Hermes his secret and sinks into the earth amid thunder and storm.

PROMETHEUS 907 I swear it: Zeus, for all his stubborn pride, will yet be brought low, such is the marriage he's preparing to make —one that will hurl him out of his tyranny and his throne into nothingness. Then the curse of his father Cronus will be brought fully to pass, the curse he called down as he fell from his ancient throne. No god but me could show him clearly a way out of troubles like these. I know these things, and how they'll come. So let him sit there now, bold and trusting in his thunderclaps on high, brandishing his fire-breathing bolt in his hands. 918 None of it will be enough to save him from falling a shameful, unbearable fall. Such is the wrestler he's now preparing against himself, a monster nearly impossible to fight, who will find a flame stronger than the lightning and a mighty crash to drown the thunder, and will shatter Poseidon's spear, the trident, the sea's plague that shakes the earth. And when Zeus stumbles against this evil, he'll learn how far apart ruling and slavery are.

CHORUS 928 Surely what you're mouthing against Zeus is just what you wish for.

PROMETHEUS 929 I say what will come to pass—and what I want, besides.

CHORUS 930 And are we to expect that someone will be master over Zeus?

PROMETHEUS 931 Yes, and his neck will bear troubles harder than these of mine.

CHORUS 932 How are you not afraid, flinging out words like these?

PROMETHEUS 933 What should I fear, when I'm not fated to die?

CHORUS 934 But he could give you an ordeal still more painful than this.

PROMETHEUS 935 Then let him do it. I'm ready for anything.

CHORUS 936 Those who bow down to Adrasteia are wise.[20]

PROMETHEUS 937 Revere, pray, fawn on whoever's in power at the moment. For me, Zeus matters less than nothing. Let him act, let him rule for this short while however he likes; he won't rule the gods for long. But wait—I see Zeus's runner here, the new tyrant's errand-boy. No doubt he's come to announce some news.

HERMES 944 You, the clever one, bitter beyond bitterness, who wronged the gods by handing their honors to creatures of a day—I mean you, the thief of fire: the Father orders you to declare this marriage you keep boasting about, the one that will throw him from power. And none of your riddles, mind you—tell it point by point. Don't send me running on a second trip, Prometheus. You can see that Zeus isn't softened by this sort of thing.

PROMETHEUS 953 What a pompous speech, so full of self-importance—just what you'd expect from the gods' lackey. You're young, all of you, and your power is young, and you think you live in a citadel no grief can touch. Haven't I seen two tyrants thrown out of it already? And I'll see the third, the one who lords it now, fall most shamefully and most swiftly. Do you think I'm at all afraid of the new gods, that I cower before them? Far from it—nowhere near. Now you hurry back the way you came. You'll learn nothing of what you're asking me.[21]

HERMES 964 It was stubbornness just like this, you know, that steered you into this harbor of misery before.

PROMETHEUS 966 I wouldn't trade my misfortune for your slavery—be sure of that.

20 Adrasteia, "the Inescapable," was a goddess of retribution; people paid her homage to avert punishment for proud words.

21 The two fallen tyrants are Uranus, overthrown by his son Cronus, and Cronus, overthrown by his son Zeus.

HERMES 968 Of course. I suppose it's better to be a slave to this rock than to be born Father Zeus's trusty messenger.

PROMETHEUS 970 That's how the insolent deserve to be insulted.

HERMES 971 You seem to be reveling in your present situation.

PROMETHEUS 972 Reveling? I'd like to see my enemies reveling like this—and I count you among them.

HERMES 974 What? You blame me for your misfortunes too?

PROMETHEUS 975 In a word, I hate all the gods who got good from me and pay me back with wrong, unjustly.

HERMES 977 I can hear you're mad—and it's no small sickness.

PROMETHEUS 978 Then I'd be sick, if hating your enemies is a sickness.

HERMES 979 You'd be unbearable if you were doing well.

PROMETHEUS 980 Oh, no.

HERMES 980a "Oh, no"? That's a word Zeus doesn't know.

PROMETHEUS 981 Time, as it grows old, teaches everything.

HERMES 982 And yet you still haven't learned to be sensible.

PROMETHEUS 983 No—or I wouldn't be talking to you, a servant.

HERMES 984 It looks as if you won't say anything the Father wants.

PROMETHEUS 985 Oh, but I owe him a favor, and I'd gladly pay it back!

HERMES 986 You're making fun of me, I see, as if I were a child.

PROMETHEUS 987 Well, aren't you a child, and sillier than one, if you expect to learn anything from me? There's no torture, no contrivance by which Zeus will drive me to tell this, until these outrageous chains are loosened. So let him hurl his smoky flame, let him stir up and confound everything with white-winged snow and thunder from under the earth: none of it will bend me to tell him at whose hands he's fated to fall from his tyranny.

HERMES [997] Consider now whether this looks like it will help you.

PROMETHEUS [998] It was all foreseen long ago, and decided.

HERMES [999] Bring yourself, you fool, bring yourself at last to think straight in the face of your present miseries.

PROMETHEUS [1001] You're wasting your breath pestering me, like talking to a wave. Never let it enter your head that I'll be frightened of Zeus's purpose and go soft, and beg the one I hate so much, with my hands upturned like a woman's, to free me from these chains. I'm nowhere near it.

HERMES [1007] I think I could talk on and on and get nowhere, for my pleas don't melt or soften you at all. You've got the bit between your teeth like a newly yoked colt, and you fight and struggle against the reins. But your violence rests on a feeble cleverness: for a man who doesn't think straight, stubbornness by itself is worth less than nothing. Consider, if my words don't persuade you, what a storm, what a towering third wave of evils will come down on you, with no escape. First the Father will shatter this jagged ravine with thunder and lightning-flame and bury your body, and the rock's embrace will hold you. [1020] And when you've completed a long stretch of time, you'll come back into the light. Then Zeus's winged hound, the blood-red eagle, will greedily carve your body into great rags of flesh, an uninvited guest coming to dine all day long, and he'll feast on your liver till it's eaten black.

[1026] Don't expect any end to such torment until some god appears to take your sufferings on himself, and is willing to go down to sunless Hades and the dark depths around Tartarus.

[1030] So think about this. This is no made-up boast; it's spoken all too truly. The mouth of Zeus doesn't know how to lie; it brings every word to pass. So you look around and consider, and never think stubbornness better than good counsel.

CHORUS [1036] To us, what Hermes says seems not out of place. He tells you to let go of your stubbornness and seek wise counsel. Be persuaded. For the wise, it's shameful to go wrong.

PROMETHEUS

I knew already the message
this fellow has bellowed out.
For an enemy to suffer at his enemies' hands
is no disgrace.
So let the double-edged curl of fire
be hurled at me; let the sky
be stirred up with thunder and the convulsion
of savage winds; let the blast shake the earth
from its foundations, roots and all;
let the sea's wave with its rough surge
heap up and choke the paths
of the stars of heaven;
and let him fling my body headlong
into black Tartarus
in the hard whirlpools of Necessity:
whatever he does, he will not put me to death.

HERMES

These, I tell you, are the plans and words
you hear from the brain-struck.
What does this prayer of his lack
of raving? Where does it let up from madness?
But you, at least,
who share in his sufferings,
get away quickly from here, somewhere else,
or the relentless bellow of thunder
may stun your wits.

CHORUS

Say something else, and urge on me
something you can persuade me of.
This word you've dragged in
is surely not one I can bear.
How can you tell me to practice baseness?
With him I'm willing to suffer whatever I must.
I've learned to hate traitors,
and there's no plague
I spit on more than this.

HERMES

Well then, remember what I'm telling you beforehand,
and when you're hunted down by ruin,
don't blame your fortune, and never say
that Zeus threw you into suffering
you couldn't foresee. No, not at all—
blame yourselves. For knowingly,
not suddenly, not by stealth,
you'll be tangled through your own folly
in the endless net of ruin.

PROMETHEUS

And now in deed, no longer in word,
the earth is shaken;
the deep echo of thunder
bellows past; the blazing coils
of lightning flash out; whirlwinds
spin the dust; the blasts
of all the winds leap at one another,
showing forth a war of wind against wind;
sky and sea are churned together.
Such is the onslaught from Zeus
that comes against me openly, working terror.
Mother, holy and revered, and you, sky,
who wheel the light all creatures share,
you see how unjustly I suffer.