# Prometheus Bound

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus was born into a wealthy family in Eleusis, the capital city of the West Attica region of Greece, around 523 BCE. His father, Euphorion, may have come from an ancient line of Greek nobility, and Aeschylus led a life of privilege. As a young man, Aeschylus reportedly had a dream in which Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and theater, came to him and told him to write tragedies. As the story goes, Aeschylus began writing his first play the very next day. At the center of Athenian life during Aeschylus's time was an annual festival, the City Dionysia, held each spring in honor of Dionysus. The festival ended with the staging of several plays, including three tragedies and five comedies, and one winner was selected from both categories by a panel of judges. Aeschylus's first play was staged around 499 BCE, but he didn't win first place at the City Dionysia until 484 BCE. Aeschylus is thought to have written somewhere between 70 and 90 plays during his lifetime, but only seven plays have survived. Of Aeschylus's seven surviving plays, including *The Libation Bearers*, *Seven Against Thebes*, and the *Oresteia* trilogy, each won first prize at the City Dionysia. While history attributes the writing of *Prometheus Bound* to Aeschylus, many scholars maintain that it was the work of a different writer—potentially even Aeschylus's son, also named Euphorion, who was also a poet and playwright. *Prometheus Bound* is thought to be the first in a trilogy called the *Prometheia*. The second and third plays, *Prometheus Unbound* (not to be confused with Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem of the same name) and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer* respectively, did not survive antiquity. While the authorship of *Prometheus Bound* may be disputed, Aeschylus's status as a celebrated Greek tragedian is not. Aeschylus is said to have won first place at the City Dionysia a total of thirteen times, and he is generally regarded as the father of the tragedy. In addition to having been a successful tragedian, Aeschylus is also remembered for his bravery in war. Aeschylus twice fought for Greece; first, in 490 BCE during the initial Persian invasion of the Greco-Persian Wars, and again in 480E BC at the Battle of Salamis, in which the Greeks fought off the invading Xerxes I, again of Persia. The Greeks were victorious both times, but Aeschylus lost his brother, Cynegeirus, during the Battle of Marathon. According to legend, Aeschylus was killed in 456 BCE in the city of Gela, Sicily. According to legend, an eagle or vulture dropped a tortoise from the sky and struck Aeschylus on the head, killing him instantly. Ironically, this tragic accident reportedly occurred after Aeschylus was given a prophecy that he would be killed by a falling object, and he mistakenly believed that he would be safer outdoors.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For much of Aeschylus's life, the Greeks and the Persians were involved in a lengthy war. The Persian Wars, also known as the Greco-Persian Wars, were a series of battles that lasted from 499 to 449 BCE. Dissention between the Greeks and Persians began years earlier, however, in 547 BCE, when Cyrus the Great, the founder of the first Persian Empire, invaded and conquered Ionia, a Greek region in present-day Turkey. After the Persian invasion, several tyrants were appointed to rule over the newly conquered Ionian cities, prompting nearly a century of war and political unrest. Aeschylus fought in the Greco-Persian Wars in 490 BCE when an army of Persians was sent across the Aegean Sea to conquer Greece. At that time, the Persians successfully overtook the Cyclades Islands and the city of Eretria before finally being defeated by the Greeks during the Battle of Marathon. In 480 BCE, Aeschylus again fought in the Persian Wars when Xerxes I, the king of Persia, invaded Greece in the famous Battle of Thermopylae. During the Persians' second invasion, 7,000 Greeks met upwards of 100,000 Persians on the shores of Thermopylae. Xerxes and the Persians gained control of both the Phocis and Boeotia regions of Greece, before finally being defeated by the Greeks in 479 in the Battle of Platea. The Greco-Persian Wars did not officially end until the Peace of Callias, a treaty between the Persians and Greeks, was signed in 449 BCE.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The fifth century BCE (499-400 BCE), during which time Aeschylus lived and wrote, is known as the Golden Age of the Classical Period. Some of the most important works of poetry, drama, and philosophy came out of the Golden Age, including the only three tragedians whose work has survived antiquity—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Surviving plays of the time include Sophocles's

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Prometheus Bound*
- **When Written:** Unknown. Most likely, *Prometheus Bound* was written near the end of Aeschylus's career (late 450s BCE); however, if the play was not written by Aeschylus, some scholars believe it could have been written as late as 430 BCE.
- **Where Written:** Unknown; most likely Athens or Sicily.
- **When Published:** Unknown.
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek Period

- **Genre:** Greek Tragedy
- **Setting:** The top of the Scythian mountains, at the very edge of Greek civilization
- **Climax:** Hermes is sent to the top of the mountain by Zeus and threatens Prometheus if Prometheus refuses to tell Zeus about Zeus's fated marriage and son.
- **Antagonist:** Zeus, through his servants, Kratos and Bia, and his messenger, Hermes

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Sworn to secrecy.** Aeschylus was a member of the Eleusinian Mysteries, a cult of Demeter and Persephone, in which members—including Aristotle and Plato—were told the ancient secrets of the afterlife. Members were sworn to absolute secrecy; however, Aeschylus was accused of divulging cult secrets during the staging of a play. Aeschylus was nearly killed by a mob of angry theatergoers afterward, but he was later tried and acquitted.

**Like father, like son.** Aeschylus's son, Euphorion, who was also a tragedian, won first place at the City Dionysia in 431 BCE, beating out an unknown play by Sophocles, which was awarded second place, and Euripides's *Medea*, the third-place winner that year.

## PLOT SUMMARY

As *Prometheus Bound* opens, Kratos and Bia, the servants of Zeus, escort an imprisoned Prometheus and a reluctant Hephaistos to the top of the Scythian mountains, the very edge of Greek civilization. Kratos is the will of Zeus, and he lives to carry out the king's orders. He is the personification of Zeus's unyielding power, and he cannot be swayed from his course. Bia is also beholden to Zeus, and is the embodiment of Zeus's violence. Kratos orders Hephaistos to "bind the criminal" to the face of the mountain. Prometheus has stolen **fire**, Hephaistos's "flower," and given it to humankind. "This is the crime for which he must now pay," Kratos says, so Prometheus can "learn / to love the tyranny of Zeus / and quit his friendship with the human race."

Hephaistos does not want to bind Prometheus. Prometheus is his "kin," Hephaistos says, and he doesn't have the "courage" to treat a god in such a way. However, "Necessity compels [him] to it," and he is forced to **chain** Prometheus to the rock face. Hephaistos is "compelled / by the same power that holds [Prometheus] captive," and he has little will to resist. "No mortal voice or form will bring you solace," Hephaistos says to Prometheus as he begins to bind him. He will be left alone to suffer in the elements. Hephaistos tells Prometheus that his "rescuer is not yet born," but his punishment is "the fruit of [his] philanthropy." Prometheus has granted "mortals honor above their due," and he must pay the price to Zeus. Thus, Prometheus will remain chained to the mountain, "upright, unsleeping, and never bend a knee," until Zeus sees fit to free him.

Kratos berates Hephaistos for his "foolish pity." No amount of sympathy will help Prometheus now, he says. Hephaistos curses his "skill" and connection to fire and wishes it was someone else's burden. "There are no carefree gods, except for Zeus," Kratos reminds Hephaistos. "He rules us all, so he alone is free." Hephaistos understands, but he is still torn, and he apologizes as he finishes binding Prometheus. As Kratos and Bia turn to leave with Hephaistos, Kratos turns to Prometheus to mock him again.

Left alone, Prometheus "cannot accept [his] lot." He has given humankind fire and taught them "every art and skill, / with endless benefit," and now he is forced to live on the mountain with nothing but misery headed his way. Prometheus hears a noise in the distance. "Whatever it is," Prometheus says, "I fear it."

Suddenly, the play's chorus, the daughters of Okeanos, arrive in a "winged chariot." They are sympathetic of Prometheus's plight, and have come to offer their compassion. "What god, what creature, / would be so hard of heart / as to delight in this?" the women ask. Prometheus tells them that it was indeed Zeus who ordered his misery and confinement, and the women are eager to hear his story. Prometheus tells the women how he had initially sided with Kronos and the Titans in the early days of the Battle of the Titans. His mother, Themis, has gifted Prometheus with foresight, and he knew that the battle would be won by those with "superior guile, not might." However, Kronos and the others refused to listen to Prometheus, preferring to rely on their strength and force instead. Prometheus then joined forces with Zeus, who defeated the Titans and banished them to Tartaros. Afterward, Zeus had planned to "expunge" the human race in his new role as king, but Prometheus saved them from being "scattered into Hades," by giving them fire and "blind hopes to live as their companions."

Soon, Okeanos himself appears on the back of a winged horse. He has come to help Prometheus and is prepared to appeal to Zeus on Prometheus's behalf. He warns Prometheus not to speak ill of Zeus; he may hear him and unleash even more misery. Prometheus is grateful for his friendship, but he begs him to go home and avoid being punished himself. He reminds Okeanos of the punishment of Atlas, who is made to bear "the weight of heaven and earth" upon his shoulders, and the fallen serpentine monster, Typhon, whom Zeus buried deep beneath the mountain of Aetna. Okeanos reluctantly agrees and heads in the direction of home. Prometheus resumes his story for the chorus: he also gave the humans architecture, science, literature, mathematics, and medicine. In short, he says, "all human arts were founded by Prometheus."

As Prometheus tells his story, Io arrives unexpectedly. "What

land is this?" Io asks. She has been turned into a cow by Zeus and made to wander the land aimlessly, pursued relentlessly by a biting gadfly. She doesn't know who Prometheus is, but she is hoping that he can tell her when her suffering will end. He tells her that he is Prometheus, the god who has given fire to man, and he tells her that her misery will endure for the rest of her days. Using his foresight, Prometheus tells Io of all the hardships she will suffer during her wandering, and he warns her of the trouble she is headed for. He tells her to keep to the "shoreline," and to avoid the savage beings she meets along the way. She will wander through all of Europe and arrive in Asia, where she will give birth to a child, whose descendant will release Prometheus from his chains and usurp Zeus's power. Io shrieks as the gadfly begins its biting, forcing her to resume her wandering.

As Io exits, Hermes, Zeus's son and the messenger of the gods, arrives. Zeus has heard Prometheus talking, and he wants to know what Prometheus knows. Hermes orders Prometheus to tell him about Zeus's fated marriage and son, but he refuses to oblige. Hermes claims it is "arrogance" that silences Prometheus. He says that if Prometheus stays silent, he will befall a "threefold tidal wave of misery." He will remain on the mountain until Zeus strikes it down, burying Prometheus in the process. Then Zeus's "winged hound, a scarlet eagle," will feast upon Prometheus's **liver** each day, until some other god willingly takes his place. Prometheus is still unyielding. "I'll say it plainly," Prometheus proclaims. "I hate all the gods / for repaying right with wrong and good with evil." As Hermes leaves Prometheus alone with the chorus, Prometheus can feel the misery coming his way. "Oh holy Mother Earth," Prometheus cries, "oh sky whose light revolves for all, / you see me. You see / the wrongs I suffer."

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Prometheus** – A Titan god and the protagonist of *Prometheus Bound*. As the play opens, Prometheus is being bound to the face of the Scythian mountains by "unbreakable" **chains**, his punishment from Zeus for stealing **fire** and giving it to humankind. Prometheus is seen as the quintessential artist within the play—he created humankind from clay and gifted them all arts and sciences—and he also suffers and sacrifices on their behalf. Prometheus has the gift of foresight, and he knows that he will suffer for giving the humans fire, but he does it anyway to save humanity. In this way, Aeschylus not only implies that suffering is an important part of artistic creation, but that suffering on behalf of one's creation is an artist's duty. Through Prometheus's character, Aeschylus also highlights the power of reason and intellect over that of brute strength and force. Zeus is only able to defeat Kronos during the Battle of the Titans because of Prometheus's cunning, and it is Prometheus's gift of reason that helps ensure the survival of the human race. Aeschylus further implies that Zeus will again need Prometheus's reason to shed light on Zeus's future "fated" marriage and the birth of his son. In this way, it is Prometheus's reason, not Zeus's force, that truly has the upper hand. Furthermore, the character of Prometheus also serves to underscore the power of hope in the face of suffering and misery. After Prometheus gives humankind fire and reason, he "sowed blind hope to live as their companions," as fire and reason alone are not enough to sustain humankind through the widespread misery and suffering of human existence. Prometheus himself finds the courage to keep suffering on behalf of his creation in the hope that his savior will one day be born. While Prometheus is certainly comforted by the compassion of others, he is able to keep going through hope alone, which Aeschylus implies is essential to enduring the hardships of suffering, a widespread condition of humankind, and, as it turns out, the gods as well.

**Zeus** – The ruler of the Olympian gods and the antagonist of *Prometheus Bound*. Zeus as an actual character never makes it into Aeschylus's play, but his violent wrath and immense power are present throughout. Zeus orders Prometheus to the top of the Scythian mountains to be bound by **chains** for all of eternity as punishment for Prometheus stealing **fire** and giving it humankind, and his power is seen in other ways as well. Prometheus tells of the Battle of the Titans—the legendary war fought between Zeus and the Olympians and Kronos and the Titans for power of the universe—and he also warns Okeanos against angering Zeus by reminding Okeanos of the fates of Atlas and Typhon at the hands of an angry Zeus. Io herself tells the story of how Zeus transformed her into a cow and turned her out to wander the world endlessly pursued by a biting gadfly. Zeus's power and wrath are immense, and he is often unyielding and tyrannical. His wrath is often arbitrary and used only as a display of force and power. As he is presented in the play, he knows nothing of loyalty or friendship, and even after Prometheus helps Zeus win the Battle of the Titans using his foresight and reason, Zeus still punishes Prometheus severely for giving fire to humanity. Zeus rules by brute force and fear, although Aeschylus implies that this type of power is limited and cannot be sustained indefinitely. Prometheus's foresight means that he has the power to see Zeus's impending "downfall," and unless Zeus sets Prometheus free, he won't tell him what he knows. Zeus threatens to bring the Scythian mountains down around Prometheus and then dispatch his "winged hound, a scarlet eagle," to feast on Prometheus's **liver** every day until he talks, but Prometheus won't budge. Zeus may have the upper hand now, Aeschylus implies, but he will one day need Prometheus's foresight—again. The character of Zeus underscores Aeschylus's overarching argument of the ultimate power of reason and intellect over that of brute force and strength.

**Io** – A mortal princess and Zeus's lover. Io comes across Prometheus as he is **chained** to the mountain. Io has been transformed into a cow by Zeus and turned out by Hera, Zeus's jealous wife, to wander the world aimlessly while being relentlessly pursued by a biting gadfly. Io is an example of Zeus's power and ability to confine and imprison others through various means and to inflict endless suffering, but she is also the woman from whom Prometheus's savior will eventually come. "My savior will descend from your womb," Prometheus says to Io. By this he means the future birth of Heracles in "ten generations, then another three," but Io's own child with Zeus will set off a chain of events and births that will result in the birth of the god who will break Prometheus's chains and set him free. Prometheus uses his gift of foresight to tell Io of her future, to help her along her journey, and to ease her suffering, even though he informs her that her suffering will not end for a very long time. Prometheus tells Io that she will be chased by the gadfly all the way across Europe and into Asia, and she will ultimately end up in Egypt where she will give birth to Zeus's son, "the one conceived by touch." Five generations later, Io's descendant will return to Greece and give birth to "a race of kings." From this "seed" will "spring" Prometheus's savior, "famous for his bow." While Io is an important link between Prometheus and his own hero, she is also a powerful example of suffering and misery for which their can be no comfort, save for the hope of an end.

**Okeanos** – The Titan god of oceans and streams. Okeanos goes to Prometheus's aid when Prometheus is **chained** to the mountain, and intends to go to Zeus and appeal to him on Prometheus's behalf. Like his daughters, the chorus, Okeanos is compassionate and sympathetic of Prometheus's predicament, but Prometheus implies that Okeanos shouldn't be so kind to him. "Witness the friend of Zeus," Prometheus says to Okeanos, "who helped create the tyrant's rule." Zeus came to power over the Titans, of which Okeanos is a god, only with Prometheus's help. Now, Prometheus suffers at the hand of Zeus, and it is a Titan god who comes to save him. Prometheus warns Okeanos, the one who "escaped all blame"—Okeanos was not sent to Tartaros with the rest of the Titans after the Battle of the Titans—that he has "risked everything to lend" Prometheus his "support." Okeanos's compassion and sympathy could summon the wrath of Zeus, and Prometheus doesn't want Okeanos to suffer after having miraculously escaped Zeus's anger once already. Okeanos ultimately leaves Prometheus and agrees not to go to Zeus, but his kindness and support remain until he goes. Also like his daughters, Okeanos represents the comfort of compassion in the face of suffering, which Aeschylus implies is widespread among gods and humans alike.

**Kratos (Might)** – Zeus's servant and the personification of Zeus's will. Along with Bia, Kratos takes Prometheus and Hephaistos to the top of the Scythian mountains so that Hephaistos can **chain** Prometheus to the mountain as punishment for giving **fire** to humankind. Kratos exists within the play to exact Zeus's punishment against Prometheus and threaten the wrath of Zeus's power and anger. He lives to induce fear and misery, and everything he does is in service of Zeus. In this way, Kratos is merely an extension of Zeus and has no will of his own to act on. Like every other character in the play, Kratos is not free but is imprisoned by Zeus. Unlike many of the other characters, however, it is implied that Kratos is happy to do Zeus's bidding, and if he had a will of his own, it would entail similar actions.

**Hephaistos** – The god of **fire** and blacksmithing. Hephaistos is ordered by Zeus to bind Prometheus to the top of the Scythian mountains using "unbreakable" **chains**. Hephaistos is made to bind Prometheus not only because Prometheus stole fire, Hephaistos's "flower," and gave it to humankind, but also because as the blacksmith of the gods, Hephaistos's chains are stronger than any other. Hephaistos, however, has compassion for Prometheus, like Okeanos and the chorus, and does not want to participate in Prometheus's punishment. Hephaistos thus claims to "hate" his "skill" and "handiwork" because they obligate him to add to Prometheus's misery. In response to Hephaistos's resentment, Kratos tells him that "there are no carefree gods, except for Zeus. / He rules us all, so he alone is free." This indeed appears to be one of Aeschylus's central arguments made most clear through the character of Hephaistos—Hephaistos, like everyone else in the play, is not entirely free but beholden to Zeus and his power in one way or another.

**The Chorus** – The daughters of Okeanos. Okeanos's daughters are also known as the Oceanids in Greek mythology, and they are typically represented as three thousand sea nymphs. The chorus are the first to come upon Prometheus as he is **chained** to the mountain face, and they are exceedingly compassionate and sympathetic to Prometheus's punishment and suffering, even though they do not agree with Prometheus's decision to give **fire** to humankind. "You give too much honor to mortals," the chorus says to Prometheus, "this is your punishment." Despite this, however, the chorus refuses to leave Prometheus to suffer alone, even after Hermes warns them to go. "I want to suffer with him what he suffers," they say of Prometheus. The chorus represents the comfort of kindness and compassion to those who suffer.

**Hermes** – Zeus's son and the messenger of the gods. Hermes visits Prometheus on Zeus's behalf while Prometheus is bound to the mountain, and he tells him that his suffering will increase by a "threefold tidal wave of misery" if Prometheus does not tell Zeus what he knows about Zeus's future marriage, son, and supposed "downfall." Like Kratos and Bia, Hermes exists within the play to carry out Zeus's orders and do his bidding, and Aeschylus infers that Hermes isn't exactly free either. Hermes threatens Prometheus with continued confinement and horrific suffering if he does not bend to Zeus's will, but Prometheus

implies that it is Hermes who is really confined by Zeus. "I would not exchange / my own misfortune for your slavery," Prometheus says to Hermes. While Prometheus is the one in **chains**, Hermes acts on Zeus's will, not his own, and it is in this way that he is psychologically confined. Prometheus won't submit to Zeus's will so easily, and Aeschylus implies that Prometheus is freer than Hermes because of this.

**Bia (Force)** – Zeus's servant and the personification of Zeus's violent will. Bia doesn't speak during the play, and like Zeus's violence, he offers no excuse or explanation. He is ordered to take an imprisoned Prometheus to the top of the Scythian mountains and ensure that he is tightly bound to the rock face. While Bia doesn't participate in the dialogue of the play, his violence is a constant presence and threat. Bia also serves to illustrate Zeus's ability to psychologically confine others. Bia is technically free, but he exists to carry out Zeus's will and does not appear to possess a will of his own.

**Hera** – Zeus's wife and sister. Hera is the goddess of family and childbirth, and she is exceedingly jealous of Zeus's love for Io. According to myth, Zeus tried to hide Io from Hera by turning Io into a cow, but Hera knew immediately what was going on and insisted that Zeus give her the cow as a gift. Hera left Io with her servant, Argos, and ordered him to keep Zeus away and ensure Io's suffering until she died.

**The Furies** – The female gods of vengeance in Greek mythology. The Furies are often interpreted as the embodiment of curses, and they serve a similar purpose in *Prometheus Bound*. Prometheus tells the chorus that Kronos had cursed Zeus after the Battle of the Titans, and the Furies, or "the triple Fates," "plot the course" of "Necessity" regarding Kronos's curse. The Furies are "unforgetting," Prometheus says, and there can be no escape from them—not even for Zeus.

**Kronos** – King of the Titans and Zeus's father. Kronos refuses Prometheus's help during the Battle of the Titans and instead relies on his strength to win the war. Zeus, of course, is victorious thanks to the help of Prometheus, and Kronos and the other Titans are banished to Tartaros, which underscores Aeschylus's argument of the power of reason over force. Before Kronos is banished, however, he curses Zeus, and Prometheus claims that Kronos's curse will be Zeus's ruin.

**Atlas** – A Titan god and Prometheus's brother. According to Greek mythology, Zeus ordered Atlas punished after the Battle of the Titans, and he was forced to stand holding "the weight of heaven and earth" upon his shoulders for all of eternity. Prometheus reminds Okeanos of Atlas's suffering when Okeanos wants to appeal to Zeus on Prometheus's behalf. Atlas serves as an example of Zeus's power in *Prometheus Bound* and his ability to physically punish and imprison those who stand against him.

**Typhon** – A monster serpent within Greek mythology. Typhon's origins are disputed; some sources claim Typhon is the offspring of Hera while others claim he is the son of Kronos. According to Greek mythology, Typhon challenged Zeus for control of the universe, but Zeus struck him down with his thunderbolt. Zeus buried Typhon deep beneath Mount Etna ("Aetna" in the play), an active volcano in Sicily. Aeschylus references the myth of Typhon as an example of Zeus's power and his ability to imprison others, both literally and metaphorically.

**Argos** – Hera's servant. After Zeus turned Io into a cow, Hera ordered Argos to guard Io and keep her away from Zeus. According to Greek mythology, Argos is covered with a hundred eyes, and he is represented in the gadfly that relentlessly pursues Io in *Prometheus Bound*. Zeus couldn't get close to Io with Argos guarding her, so he ordered Hermes to kill Argos. Io claims that she is bitten by "the ghost of earthbound Argos," as the gadfly harasses her and prods her to continue wandering.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Heracles** – The son of Zeus and descendant of Io. Heracles is the epitome of masculinity, and he is the strongest of the gods. According to *Prometheus Bound*, Heracles will shoot the eagle that feeds on Prometheus's **liver** and break the **chains** that bind him.

**Themis** – A Titan goddess and Prometheus's mother. Themis gifted her son "foresight," which allows him to see into the future.

**Hades** – Zeus's brother and the Olympian god of the dead and king of the underworld.

## TERMS

The Battle of the Titans – An epic ten-year battle between the Titans and the Olympians for control of the cosmos and gods. **Zeus** and the other Olympians were victorious after **Kronos** rejected **Prometheus**'s foresight and reason to help outsmart Zeus. Prometheus knew that the war would be won by "superior guile, not might," but Kronos believed only in strength. Prometheus offered his services to Zeus, and he gladly accepted. Afterward, Zeus banished Kronos and the other Titans to Tartaros, deep beneath the underworld of **Hades**. Aeschylus's reference to the Battle of the Titans underscores his overarching argument that reason is more valuable than brute force.

Dodona – The oldest Greek oracle. According to **Prometheus**, **Io** will cross the oracle Dodona during her aimless travels, where Io is told that she will be "the fabled bride" of **Zeus**.

Tartaros – The dungeon beneath the underworld of **Hades** where **Kronos** and the other Titans are punished after the Battle of the Titans.

The Olympians – The younger generation of Greek gods led by **Zeus**. The Olympians clash with the Titans, the older generation of Greek gods led by Zeus's father, **Kronos**, during the Battle of the Titans. Zeus and the Olympians are victorious, thanks to **Prometheus**'s foresight.

The Titans – The older generation of Greek gods led by **Kronos**. The Titans warred with the Olympians for rule of the universe during the Battle of the Titans, but they were defeated when Kronos refused to accept **Prometheus**'s help. The Titans believed they could defeat Zeus with their strength and force alone, but Prometheus knew that whoever was most cunning would win. The defeat of the Titans highlights Aeschylus's central claim that reason wins out over brute force and strength.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### POWER VS. REASON

At the center of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* is the tyrannical power of Zeus, the king of the Olympians. Zeus as a character never actually makes it into the play, but his unrelenting power is a constant presence throughout. As the play opens, Prometheus, a Titan, is chained to the side of a mountain in Scythia, at the very edge of Greek civilization. Prometheus has stolen **fire** from the gods and given it to humankind, and because of this, he has been sentenced to Zeus's wrath. Zeus's power is well known to both gods and mortals. Zeus turns Io, a mortal princess, into a cow; and when Typhon, a deadly serpentine giant, tries to "crush the sovereign tyranny of Zeus," Zeus hits Typhon "in the very middle of his power, and his strength turns to ash." Zeus's power is clearly a force to be reckoned with, but it is nonetheless Prometheus's reason that proves to be the ultimate threat. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is portrayed as a seer and trickster god. Instead of physical power or force, Prometheus's true strength is his cunning and intelligence. Aeschylus pits the awesome power of Zeus against the sound reason of Prometheus, and in doing so, he effectively argues that reason will always prevail over brute force, even when it seems most unlikely.

Zeus is all-powerful in *Prometheus Bound* and has usurped his father, Kronos, and the other Titan gods to become king of Mount Olympus. However, it was Prometheus's reason that actually defeated the Titans, which implies that it is intelligence, not brute strength, that is the more powerful force. When the Battle of the Titans was heating up between Zeus and Kronos, Prometheus initially offered his services to Kronos, but Kronos and the other Titans could not be persuaded to Prometheus's plan. They were too "proud" of their strength and power and believed they could win by "force alone." Prometheus, whose name means "forethinker," was given the gift of foreknowledge by his mother, Themis, and he knew that "victory would fall to those who showed superior guile, not might." Knowing that Kronos's power alone would do him little good, Prometheus offered his reason and intelligence to Zeus. Zeus readily accepted Prometheus's offer and willingly followed his plan to overcome Kronos. Zeus was indeed victorious thanks to Prometheus, and Kronos and the other Titans were banished. Despite Kronos and the Titans' power, they were no match for Prometheus's reason, again suggesting it is intelligence, not force or raw power, that reigns triumphant.

Prometheus knows that there is no match for sound reason, not even the power of nature, so when he gave humankind the gift of fire, he also gave them reason. "I gave shrewdness to their childish minds, and taught them how to reason," Prometheus says. Before Prometheus's gift, the humans lived underground, "like ants," but Prometheus gave them "knowledge of brick houses" that were "built to face the sun." With Prometheus's reason and intelligence, humankind could better face the elements. Prior to Prometheus's gift of reason, the humans' "every act was without purpose," but he taught them to recognize "the approach of winter, or of flowery spring, or summer with its fruits." Because of Prometheus, humankind can now read the weather, anticipate seasons, and grow and harvest food. Of all Prometheus's gifts of knowledge, "the greatest of them [is] this": he showed the humans "how to mix soothing elixirs that can steer the course of any sickness." That is, Prometheus gave humankind the knowledge of medicine, allowing them to live through what had before been fatal. Not even the power of illness and disease has a chance next to Prometheus's reason and intelligence.

Prometheus taught humankind "every art and skill, with endless benefit." Even Zeus knows that the progress of humankind made possible by Prometheus's reason is a threat to his own power, which is why he punishes Prometheus so severely. Zeus also knows that Prometheus's reason and intelligence will win out in the end, and therefore he sends the god Hermes to find out what Prometheus knows—that a future marriage and son will be Zeus's downfall. The play states that Zeus's own punishment, when it comes, "will be far harsher" than Prometheus's, for Kronos has cursed Zeus and there can be no escape. No amount of power or force can save Zeus from Kronos's curse; his only hope is Prometheus's reason and intelligence. "I know the What and the How," Prometheus says of Zeus's fate, but Prometheus's lips are sealed if he remains bound to the mountain. While Zeus may seem to have a powerful upper hand for the time being, the play makes it clear

that he will eventually "be brought low" despite his strength, unless he again turns to Prometheus.

## SUFFERING, COMPASSION, AND HOPE

Prometheus, the title character and protagonist of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, is made to suffer for the entirety of the play. At the beginning, Prometheus is chained to the side of a mountain by Kratos and Bia, the servants of Zeus, and this is only the start of his misery. He will remain chained to the rock until the thunder and lightning that is Zeus's wrath bring the mountain down around him, burying him in darkness. Then, "Zeus's winged hound, a scarlet eagle," will shred Prometheus's body and "feast upon [his] blackened **liver**" day after day. Prometheus knows he will suffer for "ten generations, then another three," until the mighty descendant of Io, a mortal princess and Zeus's lover, is eventually born and frees him. Many others are also forced to live in misery in Aeschylus's play, but it nonetheless shows that where there is great suffering, there is often great compassion as well. The sympathy of others is of great comfort to those who suffer in the play, but comfort alone is not enough to keep them going. Through the depiction of misery in *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus convincingly argues that, while compassion is helpful, it is "blind hope" alone that will keep one going through perpetual suffering.

While Aeschylus's play focuses on Prometheus's suffering, he is not the only character who suffers. "Misfortune is a migrant bird that settles," Prometheus says, "now here, now there, on each of us in turn"; this reflects the widespread suffering of the human condition. When Zeus defeated Kronos and the other Titans after the Battle of the Titans, he banished them "beneath the earth, / beneath the House of Hades, / down to the endless depths of Tartaros." Kronos and the other gods are not simply banished to the underworld but to the *dungeon* of the underworld. They were sent to the basement of hell, so to speak, where their suffering is no doubt much greater. After the fall of the Titans, Atlas, a Titan and the brother of Prometheus, is likewise made to suffer and must bear "the weight of heaven and earth" upon his shoulders. Zeus has punished Atlas with a burden "too vast for his encircling arms," and he is forced to endure this misery for all eternity. Io too is made to suffer after Zeus transforms her into a heifer and turns her out to be perpetually pursued by a biting gadfly. "Pain, hunger, and deadly fear are my only friends," Io tells Prometheus of her forced existence. She even considers throwing herself from the top of the Scythian mountains to "free [herself] of all this horror." Like Prometheus and, Aeschylus implies, humans in general, there is no end in sight for Io's suffering.

In the face of this widespread suffering, however, there is also great compassion, and Prometheus is showered with the kindness and sympathy of others. As Prometheus is being punished for stealing **fire** and giving it to humankind, Hephaistos, the god of fire and forge, is ordered by Zeus to **chain** Prometheus to the mountain. As he binds a silent Prometheus to the rock, Hephaistos expresses great sympathy. "Oh pitiful Prometheus, forgive me!" he cries. Despite being tasked with binding him, Hephaistos shows his friend and "kin" love and compassion. While Prometheus is chained to the mountain, he is visited by his old friend, Okeanos, the Titan god of the oceans and rivers. Okeanos is prepared to go to Zeus and appeal to him on Prometheus's behalf. Despite the obvious risk involved, Okeanos displays compassion and is willing to go to great lengths to ease his friend's suffering. The play's chorus—made up entirely of Okeanos's daughters—refuses to leave Prometheus alone as he suffers on the mountain. "This is a tyrant's act, cruel and remorseless," the women say to Prometheus. They stay with him throughout the course of the play, even after Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, warns them to leave. The chorus's compassion cannot be swayed no matter the risk to their own safety.

Regardless of the kindness and compassion of others, these comforts are not enough to get Prometheus through the endless suffering that lies before him, just as fire and reason alone were not enough for the human race. In addition to giving humankind fire and reason to protect them from Zeus, who "intended to expunge their race" and grow another in their place "more to his liking," Prometheus also gave humankind "blind hope." Without the hope for something better, suffering—with or without the compassion of others—is unbearable. Like the hope he gifts to humankind, Prometheus survives on the hope that his suffering too will end. His forethought tells him that from the "womb" of Io will "spring a hero, famous for his bow," and this hero will "release [him] from [his] suffering." While the sympathy of others is certainly a comfort to Prometheus, he is kept alive by his hope for this savior. The play implies that such hope is necessary for anyone to endure deep suffering, no matter how much compassion might appear along the way.

## FREEDOM AND CONFINEMENT

As the title of Aeschylus's play suggests, the Titan Prometheus is bound to the side of a mountain by Zeus's servants, Kratos and Bia. Shackled by **chains** and fear, Prometheus is made to endure endless suffering. He is exposed to the elements as he waits for Zeus's thunderbolt to strike him down, at which time a ravenous eagle will peck at his "blackened **liver**." Each night, Prometheus's liver will regenerate only to be shredded again the next day, and this will continue until Zeus decides to spare him or until Prometheus's savior is born in "ten generations, and another three." Even in the face of this immense suffering, however, it is Prometheus's confinement that is most torturous. For Prometheus, there is no chance of escape, and since he is immortal, he cannot even hope to die. "There are no carefree gods, except for Zeus,"

Kratos says. "He rules us all, so he alone is free." But while many of Aeschylus's characters are indeed confined, both physically and by other means, Kratos's comment is not entirely true. Despite his confinement, Prometheus's will cannot be broken, and it is through his example that Aeschylus argues that psychological confinement is just as powerful as physical confinement.

Prometheus is not the only character in *Prometheus Bound* who is physically confined. Several other characters endure this fate as well, each punished by the powerful wrath of Zeus. When Typhon, a massive serpentine monster, challenged Zeus for control of the cosmos, Zeus struck him down with thunder and lighting. Now, Typhon is but "a sprawling, helpless form" "pressed down, close by the narrows of the sea," far "beneath the roots of Aetna." In other words, he is buried deep beneath Mount Etna, a volcano off the coast of Sicily, with no hope of escape. After Io, a mortal princess and Zeus's lover, is transformed into a cow by Zeus to hide her from his jealous wife, Io is held captive by the "hideous mock of [her] appearance." Her mind as well as her shape is "distorted," and she is "ashamed" of what she has become. She sets out alone, imprisoned by her unsightly form, to "wander" the "very limits of the world." While Typhon's confinement is more literal and Io's is more psychological, they are both imprisoned by Zeus, just as Kronos and the other Titans were banished to Tartaros, the dungeon of the underworld, and Atlas is forced to hold up heaven and earth for all of eternity. Like Prometheus, nearly every character is confined in some way, robbed of their freedom by an all-powerful Zeus.

Even those who are not physically confined by Zeus are still not wholly free, which implies that freedom is more than just the absence of imprisonment. When Hephaistos is forced by Kratos to bind Prometheus to the mountain, he does not want to do it. "Not of my own will but compelled," Hephaistos says to Prometheus, "by the same power that holds you captive." That is, Hephaistos is not held physically captive by Zeus, but he is still bound by him. After Hephaistos leaves, Okeanos (the Titan god of oceans and streams) comes to Prometheus, his old friend, to save him. "Don't try to hold me back," Okeanos says to Prometheus, "my will is set." But Okeanos eventually comes to recognize that his will is not his own, and he is forced to leave Prometheus bound to the mountain or risk Zeus's wrath himself. Even those who punish Prometheus, Kratos and Bia, are not free. They are but the servants of Zeus. Bia, or Force, is Zeus's unyielding violence; and Kratos, or Might, is Zeus's will. Both exist only to do Zeus's bidding, and they are not free to act on their own volition, even if they were so inclined. Their sole purpose is to deliver punishment as handed down by Zeus.

Hermes, Zeus's son and messenger, is likewise under Zeus's control. According to Prometheus, Hermes is "the mouthpiece of the gods" and Zeus's "lackey." He is but "the carrier pigeon of our new commander in chief," Prometheus says, and when Hermes arrives to get information of Zeus's fate from Prometheus's famous "forethought," Prometheus refuses to talk. "I would not exchange my own misfortune for your slavery," Prometheus says to Hermes. Regardless of the torment Zeus can rain down on Prometheus, he "won't bend," and being bound to the mountain is not enough to break his will. Despite his physical confinement, Prometheus is mentally free—he won't be beholden to Zeus and his power.

## CREATION, ART, AND SACRIFICE

Prometheus is the ultimate creator and artist in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. According to ancient Greek mythology, Prometheus is the creator of the human race, having molded them from clay. He gave humankind life, and when Zeus threatened to exterminate them, Prometheus gave humankind **fire** and reason to ensure their survival and continued progress towards civilization. Prometheus is also seen within Greek mythology as the father of human arts, sciences, and architecture, and his likeness is immortalized in numerous works of literature, art, and sculpture. As an artist himself, Prometheus knows that the creation and support of humankind will anger Zeus, but he sacrifices himself anyway to save his creation from the tyrannous king. In this vein, Prometheus is often interpreted as the consummate tortured artist, suffering for the sake of his art. The trope of the suffering artist is often of one who is isolated and misunderstood on account of their art, and Prometheus indeed fits this stereotype; however, through the depiction of Prometheus's relationship to humanity, Aeschylus suggests that suffering is a necessary part of artistic creation.

In addition to creating humankind and giving them fire and reason, "all human arts were founded by Prometheus," which reflects his role as the supreme artist and creator. Prometheus "invented" for humankind "the joining of letters, which is the very memory of things." In other words, Prometheus gave humans the gift of language and words, which will lead them in time to the art of writing and literature. Prometheus also introduced humankind to the "muses' arts," referring to the inspirational goddesses of art, music, and writing. Within Greek mythology, the muses are the source of poetry and song, and they will likewise stir the same inspiration in humankind. In addition to language, art, and song, Prometheus "made plain" to the humans "all that was hidden," and revealed "the treasure concealed beneath the earth, bronze, iron, silver, [and] gold." In addition to weapons and armor, these precious metals will also be molded in beautiful sculpture and architecture, again underscoring Prometheus's role as master artist and creator.

However, Prometheus is made to suffer for his creation and love of humankind. The play makes it clear that for a creator as skilled and dedicated as Prometheus, suffering is inevitable. As Kratos orders Hephaistos to bind Prometheus to side of the Scythian mountains, Kratos says to Hephaistos: "This is the

crime for which [Prometheus] now must pay / the price to all the gods, that he may learn / to love the tyranny of Zeus." When Prometheus chose to help the humans, he effectively turned his back on Zeus, and he is made to suffer for it. As Hephaistos reluctantly chains Prometheus to the mountain, he says to his friend, "This is the fruit of your philanthropy. / A god, you scorned the anger of the gods / by granting mortals honor above their due." In other words, it is specifically because of Prometheus's charity and creativity that Zeus has sentenced him to a life of pain and despair. Despite the severity of Prometheus's punishment, he remains amazingly calm. "For this offense / I now must pay the penalty: to live nailed to this rock beneath the open sky." Prometheus has held his love for humankind above all else, and he willingly pays the price. Thus, the play suggests that while the work of creation is tied to agony, it can also bring immense peace and satisfaction to the creator.

Throughout Aeschylus's play, Prometheus doesn't flinch. Even when Hermes, Zeus's son and the messenger of the gods, appears on the mountain and tells him of the horrendous pain that awaits him, Prometheus still will not budge. He won't apologize for his love of humankind and he won't attempt to lessen his punishment by giving in and telling Zeus what he most desires to know—Zeus's fate, which Prometheus's gift of "forethought" has revealed to him. Instead, Prometheus hardens his resolve and suffers for his love of humankind. "For an enemy to suffer at an enemy's hand is no disgrace," Prometheus says, and as the sun rises on the first day of his punishment, he prepares himself for what is to come. "Oh, holy Mother Earth," Prometheus cries, "oh sky whose light revolves for all, / you see me. You see / the wrongs I suffer." Prometheus's creation—that of humankind—could not have survived without his sacrifice, and he willingly suffers on behalf of his art, which, Aeschylus implies, is an essential part of artistic creation.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### FIRE

Fire is referenced repeatedly throughout *Prometheus Bound*, and it is symbolic of many things in Aeschylus's play. Fire at once represents Hephaistos, the Greek god of fire and blacksmiths, as well as Zeus's power, and the spark of human intellect and knowledge given to humankind by Prometheus in the form of reason. When Prometheus stole fire to give to humankind, he technically stole it from Hephaistos, which is why, in part, Hephaistos is forced to **chain** Prometheus to the mountain. However, Hephaistos's compassion and his "kinship" to Prometheus makes him a reluctant participant. He recognizes that Prometheus has betrayed *all* the gods by giving humanity fire, but he still resents his role in Prometheus's punishment and, as Hephaistos later reveals, his own connection to fire.

Fire is also symbolic of Zeus's power in *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus alludes to the myth in which Zeus initially took fire from the humans, prompting Prometheus to steal it to give it back. Indeed, Zeus took fire this first time as revenge for one of Prometheus's pranks, deying the human race fire as a show of strength to both humankind and Prometheus. Interestingly, Zeus's power in the form of fire is not entirely his own; it comes to him by way of Hephaistos, which again underscores the limitations of Zeus's strength.

Lastly, fire represents human intellect and knowledge within the play. Along with fire, Prometheus also gave humankind the ability to reason, and he gifted them every form of human arts and sciences. Prometheus is often interpreted as the guardian god of geniuses, and genius is frequently associated with the symbol of fire. Prometheus refers to this potential genius, or spark, when he explains his gifts of literature, architecture, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. Though this spark of potential genius, Aeschylus underscores the infinite possibilities of human intellect and the superior power of reason over force.

### CHAINS

When Prometheus is punished by Zeus for stealing **fire** and giving it to humankind, Prometheus is chained to the face of a steep mountain. Thus, chains represent Prometheus's imprisonment and physical confinement within *Prometheus Bound*, but they are also symbolic of Hephaistos, the Greek god of blacksmiths and metalworking. Zeus forces Hephaistos to chain Prometheus to the mountain because Hephaistos is the god of fire and Prometheus has stolen Hephaistos's "flower," but Hephaistos is also the blacksmith of the gods. In addition to forging all their weapons and armor, he presumably fashions the strongest "unbreakable" chains as well. Hephaistos has compassion for Prometheus, however, and doesn't want to bind him, but that choice is not Hephaistos's to make. As he binds Prometheus to the mountain with his chains, Hephaistos curses his own "skill." "I hate you," Hephaistos says of his "handiwork" and ability to forge metal in fire, thereby reflecting his resentment for both the chains and his "flower," fire.

While chains represent Prometheus's physical confinement, they represent Hephaistos's confinement as well. Hephaistos is not physically chained in quite the same way as Prometheus, but he is bound by his chains all the same. Even though Hephaistos doesn't want to bind Prometheus and feels compassion and sympathy for his plight, he is still forced by his

own fear of Zeus's power to participate in Prometheus's punishment. Hephaistos isn't free to act upon his own will, and Aeschylus thus implies that Hephaistos is just as confined as Prometheus is.

## THE LIVER

The liver plays an important role in *Prometheus Bound*, representing Prometheus's passion—his reason and dedication to the survival of the human race—within Aeschylus's play. The liver is seen as the source of passion, or emotion, within Greek mythology and is frequently associated with anger and wrath specifically. Bile, which is produced by the liver, is often said to rise in instances of extreme emotion, principally anger. When Prometheus gives **fire** and reason to humankind, he teaches them many arts and sciences, including the reading of "entrails" as a form of divination and sacrifice to the gods. Prometheus teaches humankind "the necessary color of the gall to please the gods, as well as the mottled splendor of the liver's lobe." The liver in particular, the very source of passion and emotion, is preferred by the gods.

Furthermore, the importance of the liver is reflected in Prometheus's punishment. After Zeus strikes the mountain down around Prometheus, Zeus's "winged hound, a scarlet eagle," will "feast upon [Prometheus's] blackened liver" each day for eternity. Prometheus's liver will regenerate each night, and the eagle will "feast" again the next day. Not only is this punishment agonizing (and, incidentally, the liver is an organ that can naturally regenerate), it is also a direct insult to Prometheus. Prometheus's liver, as the source of his passion and reason and, presumably, his own anger at his fate, will be eaten by Zeus's "winged hound," a representation of Zeus himself. In this vein, Zeus will consume Prometheus's own passion and use it against him in the form of Zeus's never-ending wrath. By eating Prometheus's liver, Zeus not only destroys Prometheus's passion but also fuels his own wrath and power, so to speak.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the New York Review Books edition of *Prometheus Bound* published in 2015.

## Prometheus Bound Quotes

We have arrived at the far limit of the world.
These are the Scythian mountains, desolate and vast.
Hephaistos, you must carry out the Father's will
and bind the criminal to this steep looming rock
with chains of adamant, unbreakable.
It was your flower he stole, the bright and dancing fire,
and gave its wonderworking power to mortals.
This is the crime for which he now must pay
the price to all the gods, that he may learn
to love the tyranny of Zeus
and quit his friendship with the human race.

**Related Characters:** Kratos (Might) (speaker), Zeus, Bia (Force), Prometheus, Hephaistos

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the very beginning of *Prometheus Bound*. It is significant because it establishes the context of the play, but it also underscores Zeus's power and Prometheus's love and willingness to suffer for humanity, his own artistic creation. Zeus's servants, Kratos and Bia (Bia doesn't speak, but his violent presence is implied) have taken Prometheus to the very edge of Greek civilization as punishment for giving fire to humankind, whom Prometheus also molded from clay. Zeus planned to extinguish the human race, but Prometheus stole fire from Hephaistos, the god of fire and forge, and gave it to the humans. With fire came endless possibilities, and humankind became a little less vulnerable to the power of Zeus.

This passage also introduces Aeschylus's theme of freedom and confinement. Hephaistos's chains—which are unbreakable, since he is the god of metalworking and blacksmithing—are symbolic of Prometheus's physical confinement, but Prometheus is confined by isolation as well. Kratos and Bia take Prometheus to the top of the Scythian mountains, at the borders of Greek civilization, to exact his punishment. In addition to Prometheus's physical and metaphorical confinement, Aeschylus implies that Bia, Kratos, and Hephaistos are not technically free either. While they are not confined in quite the same way Prometheus is, they are forced to act directly on behalf of Zeus and his power. Bia and Kratos are willing while Hephaistos is reluctant, but their own will isn't factored into

the equation. They are beholden to Zeus and made to do his bidding, through which Aeschylus argues that psychological confinement is just as powerful as physical confinement.

> Thus at all times one torment or another
> will plague you. Your rescuer is not yet born.
> This is the fruit of your philanthropy.
> A god, you scorned the anger of the gods
> by granting mortals honor above their due.
> For that, you will keep vigil on this rock,
> upright, unsleeping, and never bend a knee.
> And many a groan will pass your lips, and sighing,
> and bitter lamentation, all in vain.
> Zeus' vengeance is implacable. His power is new,
> and everyone with newborn power is harsh.

**Related Characters:** Hephaistos (speaker), Heracles, Zeus, Prometheus

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 6

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs as Hephaistos is binding Prometheus to the rock, and it is significant because it again highlights Prometheus's love and willingness to suffer for his creation. This passage also introduces Heracles, whom Prometheus later describes in more detail as the god who will eventually free him. Until then, Prometheus's punishment will be especially harsh; he will be exposed to the elements, and while his location is remote, strangers may still happen upon him and mock him. Notably, this is one of the earliest uses of the word "philanthropy," which aptly describes Prometheus's intentions. He is concerned only with the welfare of humankind, regardless of what harm comes to him.

Hephaistos's words also suggest that Prometheus is a traitor to the gods. Hephaistos does not say that Prometheus has "scorned the anger" of Zeus specifically—or even Hephaistos himself, which would make sense as Prometheus technically stole fire directly from him—but instead says Prometheus angered "the gods." This suggests that the Olympians collectively dislike the humans and do not want to see them survive and progress as a civilization. In short, Prometheus has betrayed all the gods, not just Zeus. Aeschylus implies, however, that this isn't done out of malice. While Prometheus *is* a trickster, his love for his artistic creation is genuine, and if saving his creation through the betrayal of others is necessary for its survival, he is willing to make that sacrifice and suffer on behalf of his creation. In this way, Aeschylus argues that sacrifice and suffering is an integral, and necessary, part of artistic creation.

> Go play the rebel *now*, go plunder the gods' treasure
> and give it to your creatures of a day.
> What portion of your pain can mortals spare you?
> The gods who named you the Forethinker were mistaken.
> You'll need forethought beyond your reckoning
> to wriggle your way out of *this* device.

**Related Characters:** Kratos (Might) (speaker), Themis, Prometheus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 11

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kratos is about to leave Prometheus alone on the mountain to suffer, but before he does, Kratos insults him one last time. This passage is significant because it introduces Prometheus's forethought, or reason, and his ability to anticipate the future. Kratos mocks Prometheus, and, pointing to his chains, dares him to try to help the humans now. According to Kratos, Prometheus's love for humankind has brought Prometheus nothing but pain, and no one can save him from the tyranny of Zeus. Kratos's assumption isn't true, but Kratos doesn't know this, which is what makes this passage ironic. Prometheus's name does mean "forethought," and he was given the gift of foresight and prophecy by his mother, Themis, a Titan goddess.

Kratos implies that Prometheus's famous gift is not what it is rumored to be. If Prometheus can predict the future and knew of his punishment, Kratos seems to ask, why would Prometheus still offend Zeus? Prometheus *did* know he would be punished—although he later reveals that he didn't realize it would be quite so harsh—but that makes little difference to Prometheus now. Prometheus has already foreseen the hero who will break him from his chains and free him from his torture. Prometheus, however, never speaks to Kratos and doesn't gloat directly to him about what he knows. There is power in Prometheus's foresight, and he will use that power to his own advantage over Zeus, which again reflects the power of reason over strength and

force.

> And yet
> I can't accept my lot—
> neither in silence, nor in speech:
> that I was yoked in chains
> for bringing gifts to mortal men.
> I hunted out and stole the secret spring
> of fire, and hid it in a fennel stalk,
> to teach them every art and skill,
> with endless benefit. For this offense
> I now must pay the penalty: to live
> nailed to this rock beneath the open sky.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 12

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs as Prometheus is lamenting his fate chained to the rock. It reflects Prometheus's sacrifice on behalf of his creation, but it also lends additional insight into his myth and character. Prometheus's punishment is agony, which is why he "can't accept his lot," but he is determined to suffer his necessary fate. This again underscores Prometheus's love for his creation, and his determination to see them survive and flourish. The gift of fire, while essential to sustaining life, also represents the spark of intelligence that Prometheus gave humankind in the form of reason.

This passage also reflects the story of how and why Prometheus stole fire in the first place. According to Greek myth, Zeus initially took fire from the humans as revenge for a prank played by Prometheus. Prometheus gave Zeus the choice between two offerings; he presented to Zeus beef wrapped in a cow's stomach and bones wrapped in meat and fat. Zeus chose the bones wrapped in meat and fat, as it was more pleasing to the eye, which established future sacrifices made to Zeus and the other gods. From that moment on, humans would eat the meat and then burn the bones as an offering to the gods and a way to "entice" them (as Prometheus mentions later in his list of gifts to the humans). Zeus was angered by this form of sacrifice and took fire from the humans as payback for Prometheus's trick. Prometheus then stole fire back in a giant "fennel stalk," a flowering plant native to the Mediterranean. Fennel stalk also happens to be poisonous to cows—an association that has particular significance considering that cows are symbolic of Hera, Zeus's wife.

> And yet, though I am tortured now
> and bound immovably,
> the Lord of the Immortals will one day
> have need of me
> to show him the new plot
> that dooms his scepter and his pride.
> No honeyed words, or threats, will sway me
> to tell him what I know,
> until he frees me from my chains
> and grants me what he owes me for this outrage.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), Zeus, The Chorus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 15-6

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs in Prometheus's exchange with the chorus, when they first arrive and ask him why he is being punished. Zeus's immense power means that he can punish Prometheus and make him suffer for betraying the gods and giving humankind fire, but even Zeus's awesome power is limited and cannot be sustained indefinitely. Prometheus later claims that Zeus will enter a "fated marriage" and father a son who will be his "downfall," and Prometheus's comment here alludes to this fact. Prometheus's foresight means he knows the "How" and the "What," as he later says, of Zeus's fate, and this gives Prometheus power even over the king of the gods.

Prometheus also later claims that Zeus's fate cannot be escaped. He says it is ordered by the Furies that Zeus will pay (a curse leveled by Kronos after the Battle of the Titans), and there is nothing Zeus can do; however, Prometheus implies here that there is an advantage in knowing the specifics of said "downfall." Aeschylus debates the advantages of knowing one's fate and future suffering throughout the play, and he seems to ultimately argue that there are advantages to both knowing and not knowing one's fate, but here that knowledge is represented as power on Prometheus's behalf. Aeschylus also argues the power of reason and intellect over that of brute force, and while it may not seem like it now, it is Prometheus who has the

upper hand over Zeus, despite Zeus's display of force and might.

Chorus: Did you perhaps go further than you told us?
Prometheus: I gave men power to stop foreseeing their death.
Chorus: What cure did you prescribe for this disease?
Prometheus: I sowed blind hopes to live as their companions.
Chorus: Truly you brought great benefit to mortals.
Prometheus: I gave them fire.
Chorus: Bright fire! Do the ephemerals have it now?
Prometheus: And from it they will learn much craft and skill.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus, The Chorus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 19-20

**Explanation and Analysis**

This exchange between Prometheus and the chorus occurs early in the play. It is significant because it underscores the infinite possibilities of Prometheus's gift to humanity, but it also reflects Prometheus's guilt in betraying the gods to save the human race. As Hephaistos says earlier in the play, Prometheus angered *all* the gods, not just Zeus, when he gave fire to humankind and turned his back on the gods for the benefit of humans. Here, Prometheus is reluctant to tell the chorus exactly why he is being punished (he tells them beforehand only that he has angered Zeus and now must endure his wrath), and the chorus must specifically ask Prometheus if he is leaving out part of the story.

Prometheus's reluctance is evidence of his guilt. The chorus is made up entirely of Okeanos's daughters, the Oceanids—three thousand sea nymphs—who are minor deities within Greek mythology and an example of the very gods Hephaistos references earlier in the play. Prometheus knows that he has betrayed Okeanos's daughters, as well as all the other gods, and he is tortured by this fact, but it was necessary for humankind's survival. Furthermore, this quote underscores the power of hope in the face of suffering. It was not enough for Prometheus to give humankind fire alone; he had to also give them "blind hope" to keep them going. Without the belief that their lives can be more than death and suffering, the human race has no incentive to continue living and progress.

I transgressed willfully, I won't deny it.
By helping mortals I drew suffering on myself,
and did so of my own will, freely.
Yet never did I think that by such punishment
I would be made to parch suspended in midair,
clamped to this barren solitary rock.
But don't lament over my present woes.
Descend from your high carriage, stand beneath me,
that you may hear what is to come
and know the whole of it.
For my sake, please, come down and share my sorrow.
Misfortune is a migrant bird that settles,
now here, now there, on each of us in turn.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), The Chorus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 21

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Prometheus is speaking to the chorus in response to their compassion and sympathy for his plight. This quote is important because it again reflects Prometheus's foresight, or reason, and his ability to see the future, but it once again suggests that his foresight is somewhat limited. Prometheus says that he knew he would be punished by Zeus for giving fire to humankind. In fact, Zeus's punishment seems like a given, not something one would need the gift of foresight to predict, and Prometheus "transgressed willfully." Yet Prometheus admits that he is somewhat surprised by his punishment (he, ironically, says this *after* claiming he can't be surprised), as he says he "never" thought he would be "made to parch suspended in midair," chained to a "barren solitary rock."

This quote also reflects Prometheus's dedication to his own sacrifice on behalf of his creation, humankind, and his willingness to suffer so that they can survive. Prometheus claims to have brought his punishment on "freely," and as such, he doesn't feel completely deserving of the chorus's compassion. Still, Prometheus implies that their kindness is a comfort to him, and he invites them to sit and "share [his] sorrow." Through the suffering of multiple characters in *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus suggests that suffering is a major part of the human condition, as is reflected in Prometheus's reference to "misfortune" as a "migrant bird that settles" on everyone at one time or another.

To know my brother Atlas stands,
at the gates of evening, bearing upon his shoulders
the weight of heaven and earth, too vast
for his encircling arms, gives me no comfort.
With grief as well I saw the earthborn dweller
in Cilicia's cave, the hundred-headed monster
Typhon, conquered, his fury violently subdued,
who once braved all the gods with gruesome jaws,
hissing out terror, eyes ablaze, aiming to crush
the sovereign tyranny of Zeus. But flying
down against him came Zeus' weapon, the sleepless,
fire-breathing thunderbolt, which cast him
out of his triumphant boast, for he was struck
in the very middle of his power, and all his strength
turned into ash. And now, a sprawling, helpless form,
he lies pressed down, close by the narrows of the sea,
beneath the roots of Aetna.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), Typhon , Atlas, Zeus, Okeanos

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 24-5

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs as Prometheus attempts to talk Okeanos out of appealing to Zeus on his behalf. It highlights Zeus's strength and power, and his ability to confine others and imprison them through various means. Okeanos wants to go to Zeus and convince him to release Prometheus, but Prometheus convinces him not to, using the suffering and imprisonment of others at the hands of Zeus as examples. Prometheus's brother, Atlas, is a Titan god whom Zeus punished after the Battle of the Titans. Instead of banishing him to Tartaros with Kronos and the other Titans, Atlas is made to stand perpetually with "heaven and earth" upon his shoulders, suffering under the strain. Like Prometheus, Atlas is a prisoner, confined by the power of Zeus.

Typhon is Prometheus's second example of Zeus's power and ability to physically confine others. Typhon is a giant monster within Greek mythology, usually represented as a massive snake, and he is known as one of the most deadly and powerful creatures in all of mythology. Yet when Typhon challenges Zeus for control of the universe, Zeus easily strikes him down with his "fire-breathing thunderbolt," the symbol of Zeus's power and wrath. According to legend, Typhon was reduced to a "sprawling, helpless form," and Zeus buried him deep beneath Mount Etna, a large volcano in Sicily. This myth is reflected in Prometheus's reference to the "roots of Aetna."

Listen instead to what I have to tell
of human misery. How I gave shrewdness
to their childish minds, and taught them how to reason.
It's no reproach to humans when I say this,
but to make clear the benefit I brought them.
From the beginning they could see, but seeing
was useless to them, and hearing, they heard nothing.
Like dreams with shifting shapes, their long lives
ran their course in meaningless confusion.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), The Chorus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 29-30

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs after the chorus offers Prometheus their kindness and compassion. It illustrates the gifts given to humans by Prometheus, but also implies that compassion alone is not enough to see one through suffering and misery. Prometheus is accepting and thankful of the chorus's compassion, but here, he tells them to "listen instead" to what he has to say about "human misery." In addition to fire, Prometheus gave humankind "reason" in the form of "shrewdness." Prior to Prometheus's gift, humans were helpless and more vulnerable to Zeus's wrath, but through his gifts, Prometheus empowered the humans and gave them "blind hope," as he says in an earlier passage.

Prometheus's explanation of the humans prior to his gifts reflects their level of "suffering." They could see and hear, he says, but what they heard and saw was "meaningless confusion." Prometheus is "clear" that he means not to insult the humans, which again reflects his deep love for them, but without his help they were destined to die and suffer all the while. Prometheus obviously has compassion for their suffering—he does care for them and ensured their survival, after all—but he also implies that they needed more than his compassion to save them from their misery, just as he needs more than the chorus's compassion to save him from his misery now. Without "blind hope" that life will get better, humans can't make it through their suffering, and neither can Prometheus.

[...] Their every act
was without purpose, until I showed them
the rising and the setting of the stars,
not easy to discern. And numbers, too,
the subtlest science, I invented for them,
and the joining of letters, which is
the very memory of things,
and fecund mother to the muses' arts.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), The Chorus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 30

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote reflects Prometheus's love for his art and creation, the human race, and also highlights his identity as the giver of all human arts and sciences. In *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is displayed as the ultimate artist; not only does he create humankind by molding them from clay, but he is the creator of all art in general. In short, Prometheus is the consummate artist, and he is also made to suffer for the sake of his art, an important step in artistic creation according to Aeschylus.

Here, Prometheus taught humans of "the rising and the setting of the stars"—that is, he gave them knowledge of astronomy. Astronomy is a particularly complicated science involving physics and chemistry; thus, it "not easy to discern." He gives them mathematics as well, "the subtlest science," and created language and communication. Most importantly, Prometheus implies, he gave the humans writing and the ability to record and keep "the very memory of things." This, of course, leads to poetry and literature, and so writing is the "fecund mother," or fruitful bearer, of "the muses' arts"—the very source of artistic inspiration. Prometheus is thus the father of all arts and the personification of a suffering artist in Aeschylus's play.

You will be more astonished when you hear
the rest from me: how many arts
and skillful means I invented,
the greatest of them this:
If anyone fell ill, there was no remedy,
no healing food or drink, no salve, no potion.
For lack of medicine they wasted,
until I showed them how to mix
soothing elixirs that can steer the course
of any sickness.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), The Chorus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 31

**Explanation and Analysis**

This too is part of Prometheus's explanation to the chorus of the gifts he gave humankind, and it introduces Prometheus's identity as the creator of medicine, a particularly important science in the continued advancement of humanity. The importance of Prometheus's gift is reflected in his use of the word "astonished," and he even goes as far as to say that medicine is his "greatest" gift of all, greater than even fire or hope. Because of Prometheus's gift, what had previously killed the humans can now be overcome. And he doesn't just give them one or two medicines; on the contrary, he speaks of "healing food" and "drink," as well as "salves," "potions," and "elixirs."

Prometheus gives the humans multiple advantages and gifts, but his attention to medicine and the art of healing is more in depth than his other gifts. This also underscores Prometheus's status as the personification of the quest for knowledge and scientific advancement, both within Aeschylus's play and in the greater context of Greek mythology. Medical progress, as explained by Prometheus, is often held above all other advancements as it directly contributes to quality and longevity of life, which is needed for continued progress in other areas of science and art as well. Like fire and reason, the advantage given to humankind through medicine is potentially infinite.

What did I do, son of Kronos, what fault did you find in me
that you would yoke me to such pain, driving me mad with fear
of a gadfly's sting?
Destroy me with fire,
bury me under the earth,
throw me as food to the monsters of the sea,
but Lord, hear my prayers, do not grudge me the favor I ask.
Surely my endless wandering has taught me enough.
I can't find a way to escape my troubles.
Do you hear the lament of the cow-horned maiden?

**Related Characters:** Io (speaker), Zeus, Kronos, Prometheus

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 37

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Io is lamenting her suffering at the hands of Zeus. This passage reflects Zeus's power and Io's misery, but it also lends insight into Io's story and history with Zeus. Io directly addresses Zeus as the "son of Kronos," and she asks what she ever did to deserve such suffering. The short answer is *nothing*; Zeus forces Io to suffer simply because he can, and it is evidence of his immense power and tyranny. Aeschylus again uses the image of a yoke to illustrate Zeus's ability to confine and imprison others. Like many other characters in the play, Io is technically free—that is, she can freely move about of her own volition—but she is nevertheless "yoked" by Zeus's power and wrath.

Io refers to Zeus's history of punishing and exacting pain on others and implies that hers is most torturous. Her reference here to Zeus's ability to "destroy" her with "fire" and "bury [her] under the earth," like he did to the serpentine monster, Typhon, would be preferable to her plight of aimless wandering and a nuisance gadfly. Io's inability to "escape" her suffering also harkens to Aeschylus's overarching claim that only hope can effectively see one through the trials of suffering. Through Io's travels, she has encountered many with compassion, including Prometheus and the chorus, but this is little consolation. What Io seeks above all else, from Prometheus especially, is to know when her suffering will end. Essentially, Io is kept going by the hope that her suffering will someday stop.

> How can I not comply?
> In clear words you will learn
> all that you want to know.
> Though just to speak of it—
> the god-sent storm, and then
> this hideous mock of my appearance—
> makes me ashamed.
> Into my maiden chamber, visions came
> by night, and came again, secret
> visitors that spoke to me
> with smooth and urging voices:
> "Oh maiden greatly blessed,
> why are you still a virgin,
> when you could be the bride of the supreme?
> Zeus is in love with you, the dart of passion
> has set him on fire, he wants to share his pleasure with you.
> Don't spurn the god's bed, child, but go to Lerna,
> to the deep meadow where your father's flocks graze,
> so Zeus's eye may find relief from longing."

**Related Characters:** Io (speaker), Zeus, The Chorus, Prometheus

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 41-2

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs after the chorus asks Io to tell her story and explain her appearance, or "sickness." This quote again underscores Zeus's power and ability to confine and imprison others, and it also tells of Io's suffering. Io's story, "the god-sent storm," is directly the result of Zeus's power, as is the "hideous mock of [her] appearance." Zeus fell in love with the mortal Io, and to hide her from his wife, Hera, he turned Io into a beautiful white cow. Cows, however, are Hera's signature animal—and she also knew what Zeus was hiding—so she insisted that Zeus give her the cow. Zeus was unable to deny Hera's request without raising suspicion, and Io's existence as a cow went downhill from there.

Now, Io's appearance as a cow "makes her ashamed." She is imprisoned in the form of a cow by the power of Zeus, and there is nothing she can do about it but wander the countryside. However, Io wasn't free before she was turned into a cow either. She had little choice in "spurning the god's bed," and was forced to succumb to Zeus's advances because of widespread fear of the god. Zeus's "passion" has "set him on fire," and he soon threatens to strike down Io's people with a fiery thunderbolt if she doesn't accept his

advances. Indeed, Io is confined even before she is transformed into a cow, but her suffering is made worse by her shame of her appearance.

> [...] Immediately my shape and mind
> became distorted, my head grew horns, and I,
> chased by the gadfly, fled with frantic leaps
> to that sweet stream, Cerchnea, good to drink from,
> and Lerna's spring. But my appointed cowherd
> was earthborn Argos, terrible in his wrath.
> He followed me, he watched my steps,
> peering with his countless eyes.
> Then an unhoped-for sudden death destroyed him.
> But I continued, driven by the god-sent scourge,
> the gadfly, from land to land.

**Related Characters:** Io (speaker), Argos , Zeus, The Chorus, Prometheus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 42-3

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote continues Io's explanation of her appearance, further revealing her story and underscoriing her suffering at the hands of Zeus's power. Here, Io describes the moment Zeus transformed her into a cow. With her transformation, Io's "shape and mind became distorted," and the "horns" of a cow grew from her head. As Hera knew who and what Io was, Hera appointed her loyal servant, Argos, to keep an eye on Io and keep Zeus away from her. Argos was indeed "terrible in his wrath." He was abusive and never let Io out of his sight, and since mythology depicts Argos as having one hundred eyes, he was perfectly suited for the job. He followed her everywhere, reigning her in, presumably with a whip that "bit," and Zeus could not get near her.

According to legend, Zeus ordered Hermes to kill Argos, which he did by luring each of his one hundred eyes to sleep. This did not stop Hera, however, and Io later implies that Argos lives on in spirit in the biting gadfly. As flies have multiple eyes, Argos is seemingly represented in the fly, and through the fly's biting and torture, Argos is still able to keep Io moving, and keep her miserable as well. While Io's fate is certainly part Hera's doing, it was Zeus that began her suffering, and it is only Zeus who has the power to end it. This not only reflects Zeus's power but the widespread suffering of the human condition, which Aeschylus implies is shared by the gods as well.

> First, from this spot, turn toward the rising sun,
> and cross the untilled plains until you reach
> the Scythian nomads, whose wicker houses
> are built on top of wagons with well-wrought wheels,
> a warlike tribe armed with far-reaching bows.
> Do not go near them, rather keep to the surf line
> of the groaning sea, and travel on.
> Off to your left there live the ironworking
> Chalybes, of whom you must be wary,
> for they are savage and do not
> bid strangers welcome.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), Hera, Zeus, The Chorus, Io

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 44

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage is part of Prometheus's prophecy of Io's future suffering. It is further evidence of Prometheus's foresight, and also lends additional insight into Io's story and extended suffering. Prometheus tells Io that she will leave the Scythian mountains and head in the direction of "the rising sun," east toward Asia. Io's wandering and suffering will take her so far that she will leave continental Europe and cross into Asia, and she will encounter danger and misery all along the way. Prometheus's reference to the "Scythian nomads" refers to the roaming people of the Middle East and China, who were known historically to live in tent-covered wagons and were among the first to hunt from horseback. The Scythian nomads were renowned for their aggressive war tactics, and their relationship with the Greeks who lived near Scythia was tenuous as best.

According to Prometheus, Io's travels will take her to the Black Sea and the region of Pontus and Anatolia, a portion of Asia Minor in present day Turkey. During antiquity, the area was inhabited by the "Chalybes," some of the world's first ironsmiths. Prometheus hints at the Chalybes' ironworking skills, and he also implies that they are "savages" and should be given a wide berth. Like most of the people Io encounters on her journey, they overwhelmingly mean to bring her harm. Every second of Io's day is filled with fear and misery, either in the constant bite of the gadfly or in the constant threat of danger and death. Zeus's power over Io is complete and unyielding, and nothing short of the

hope that Zeus will transform her back into her human form can lessen her misery.

> The Amazons will guide you on your way,
> and they will do so gladly. Then,
> just by the narrow portals of the lake,
> you'll reach the isthmus of Cimerria.
> You must move on from there and with a bold heart
> cross the channel of Maiotis. Forever after
> mortals will remember this your crossing,
> and call it Bosporus, the Cow's Ford.
> With Europe at your back, you will arrive in Asia.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), The Chorus, Io

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 45

**Explanation and Analysis**

Prometheus continues his prophecy of Io's future suffering. Again, this quote underscores Prometheus's foresight and further explains the myth of Io. As Io continues to wander, prodded on by the gadfly, Prometheus claims that she will encounter the Amazons, the first of group of people who won't mean Io harm. According to Greek myth, the Amazons are a group of warrior women who are closely related to the Scythian nomads. The Amazons have sworn enmity to all men, which is why they will gladly agree to guide Io on her way.

The "isthmus of Cimerria" refers to the Straight of Kerch, the waterway that separates the Black Sea from the Sea of Azov, but Io's journey and suffering will not stop there. She is to continue to the "channel of Maiotis," or the Straight of Istanbul in present day Turkey, that is also, as Prometheus says, known as the Bosporus after Io's crossing there. This will lead Io out of Europe and into Asia. Io's wandering will ultimately lead her to Egypt, where Zeus will finally transform her back into her human form, but her suffering along the way will be nearly unbearable.

> However, one of the maidens will be charmed
> by love to spare her bed companion.
> Faced with the choice, and with her purpose blunted,
> she will prefer to be called coward than murderess,
> and it is she who will give birth in Argos
> to a race of kings. It would take many words
> to tell it clearly. But from this seed
> shall spring a hero, famous for his bow,
> who will release me from this suffering.
> Such was the prophecy my ancient mother,
> the Titan Themis, revealed to me.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), Themis, Heracles, The Chorus, Io

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 53

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs near the end of Prometheus's prophecy of Io's future suffering, and it is important because it identifies Heracles, Io's future descendant and the savior who will free Prometheus from his chains. Here, Prometheus refers to Danaus, the king of Libya and a descendant of Io, who takes his fifty daughters, the Danaides, to Argos to marry the fifty sons of his twin brother. As the story goes, all but one of the Danaides kill their husbands on their wedding night. The one Danaide who spares her husband, Hypermnestra, will instead prefer "to be called coward than murderess," and their child will begin "a race of kings."

From Prometheus's convoluted story of kings, daughters, and murder, comes the birth of Perseus, the son of Zeus and a Danaide. Perseus is also the great-grandfather of Heracles, Prometheus's future savior and the god of strength and heroes, whose symbol happens to be a bow and arrow. According to Greek legend, Heracles will break the chains binding Prometheus to the mountain, and he will shoot Zeus's "scarlet eagle" with his bow and arrow, effectively freeing Prometheus from his suffering.

Pompously spoken, as befits
a mouthpiece of the gods.
You're young, the lot of you, and young in power,
and think your fortress is secure from sorrow.
But I've already seen two tyrants fall
and see the third, our present ruler,
falling soon, more suddenly
and much more shamefully than they.
Or do you think I'll cringe
before these upstart gods, and tremble?
I'm farther from that than you can imagine.
So scurry back again the way you came.
You will receive no answer to your question.

**Related Characters:** Prometheus (speaker), Kronos, Zeus, Hermes

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 59

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote, spoken by Prometheus, occurs after Hermes appears on the mountain and demands that Prometheus tell Zeus what he knows about his "fated" marriage and son; it is significant because it reflects Prometheus's psychological freedom in the face of his physical confinement. This quote also shows the confidence Prometheus has that his forethought is accurate, and that Zeus will ultimately be "brought low." Hermes is known as the messenger of the gods, which is why Prometheus refers to him as "a mouthpiece of the gods." Clearly, Prometheus resents Hermes and his connection to Zeus and the other gods, and like Bia and Kratos, both Aeschylus and Prometheus imply that Hermes is not free under the power and influence of Zeus.

Prometheus remains convinced that Zeus will fall and that his foresight will come to fruition. He refers to the fall of two previous gods, presumably Zeus's defeat of Kronos during the Battle of the Titans, and the fall of Uranus, the very first god who gave birth to the power of Kronos, before that. In Prometheus's experience, sheer power and force cannot be sustained long term, and he is banking on the same holding true for Zeus. Prometheus refuses to look to Zeus—whom he refers to as an "upstart god," or a god young and inexperienced in power—and "tremble" or "cringe," because he is secure in the fact that Zeus will fail. In this way, Prometheus holds power over Zeus in the form of his intellect and reason, and he bolsters his resolve to continue to deny Zeus both his power over Prometheus and the satisfaction of watching him cower in fear.

But all your vehemence rests on a weak foundation,
mere cleverness, a scheme. What good is obstinate will
untamed by sound thought and good measure?
Consider the storm that will rise up against you
if you refuse to heed my words,
a threefold tidal wave of misery,
impossible to escape. For first,
the Father will destroy this jagged cliff
with thunder and lightning, and bury you,
still gripped by its embrace, inside it.
Then, after an enormous span of time,
you will come back again into the light,
and Zeus's winged hound, a scarlet eagle,
will carve your body into ragged shreds
of flesh. He will return, day in, day out,
as an unbidden guest, to feast upon
your blackened liver.

**Related Characters:** Hermes (speaker), Zeus, Prometheus

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 64

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs as Hermes continues to attempt to persuade Prometheus to tell Zeus what he knows about Zeus's future downfall. The passage illustrates what will come of Prometheus if he continues to rebel against Zeus, and it is a violent continuation of the suffering he has thus far endured. However, this quote also reflects the irony of Prometheus's situation. Hermes claims that it is Prometheus's anger and wrath that "rests on a weak foundation," yet it is Zeus's wrath that is arbitrary and tyrannous. Hermes implies that Prometheus isn't "clever," and that he is lacking "will" and "sound thought," but these are the things Prometheus possesses in abundance, which are decidedly lacking in Zeus's fickle and thoughtless displays of power.

This quote also reflects the sheer agony Prometheus will be forced to endure for the creation and salvation of his creation, humankind. Zeus will strike Prometheus down with his fiery fury and bury him in darkness, and the light will only return with Zeus's eagle, who will tirelessly feed on Prometheus's liver. The liver is often associated with emotion and passion in Greek mythology, and by eating Prometheus's liver, Zeus destroys—through his representative, the eagle—both Prometheus's love and dedication to humankind, and his reason and anger in the

face of Zeus's power, which Zeus in turn will use against him to further force Prometheus into suffering.

> And to this pain
> do not expect a limit or an end,
> until some god appears as a successor
> to take your tortures as his own and willingly
> go down into the gloom of Hades
> and the black depths of Tartaros.
> Make your decision in the light of that!
> These are no boastful threats but true words
> all too clearly spoken. For Zeus's mouth
> does not know how to lie. Each word of his
> comes true. But you, weigh carefully
> what you must do, and don't hold stubbornness
> above considered judgment.

**Related Characters:** Hermes (speaker), Hades, Zeus, Prometheus

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 64

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs near the end of *Prometheus Bound*, after Prometheus refuses to tell Hermes what Zeus wants to know. Here, Hermes gives one last-ditch effort to entice Prometheus into talking, and he does so with continued threats. He reports there will be no "end" or "limit" to Prometheus's suffering until someone else offers to take his place, which won't be likely since Prometheus will be exposed to the elements as his liver is feasted on by Zeus's "winged hound." Hermes implies that Prometheus's savior will also be forced to pay the price in Hades or Tartaros, which makes it even less likely that anyone will ever step forward.

Hermes further claims that his intimidations are "not boastful threats" but "true words," since Zeus "does not know how to lie"; however, nothing of what Hermes says is true. Prometheus will be free without another god taking his place, and no one will have to go to Hades or Tartaros to save him either. Heracles will easily break Prometheus's chains, and he will shoot Zeus's eagle with his bow and arrow. In this case, Zeus is not powerful enough to exact his desired punishment of Prometheus. While it may appear as if Zeus has the advantage now, he will not be able to sustain his power. Prometheus's foresight and reason will triumph, in keeping with Aeschylus's primary argument of the power of reason and intellect over brute strength and force.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### PROMETHEUS BOUND

Kratos and Bia, the servants of Zeus, arrive at the top of the Scythian mountains, the very edge of Greek civilization, with Hephaistos and a captive Prometheus. "Hephaistos," Kratos says, "you must carry out the Father's will / and bind the criminal to this steep looming rock / with **chains** of adamant, unbreakable." It was the "flower" of Hephaistos, the "bright and dancing **fire**," that Prometheus has stolen and given to humankind; thus, it is Hephaistos whom Zeus has ordered to bind Prometheus.

*Hephaistos is the Greek god of metalworking and fire, so it is doubly appropriate that he is made to bind Prometheus. Not only did Prometheus steal fire, which technically belongs to Hephaistos, but Hephaistos is the blacksmith of the gods and makes all the weapons and chains. Hephaistos's chains are surely "unbreakable" and will tightly bind Prometheus to the rock face. This also reflects the power of Zeus. Prometheus himself is a god, yet Zeus has the power to condemn him to misery and pain.*

Because Prometheus has stolen **fire**, he must "pay / the price to all the gods, that he may learn / to love the tyranny of Zeus / and quit his friendship with the human race." Hephaistos doesn't want to **chain** Prometheus to the rock, but "Necessity compels [him] to it." Hephaistos is forced by the same "power that holds [Prometheus] captive," and he has little choice in the matter. Prometheus will be chained to the side of the mountain and left exposed to the elements. "Thus at times one torment or another," Hephaistos says to Prometheus, "will plague you. Your rescuer is not yet born."

*Hephaistos's reluctance is evidence of his sympathy and compassion. He is friends with Prometheus, and even refers to Prometheus as his "kin," but he is forced by the threat of Zeus's power. This underscores Aeschylus's argument that one can be confined psychologically as well as physically. Hephaistos is technically free, but he isn't free to act according to his own will when it goes against Zeus. This also foretells Prometheus's revelation that he will be freed by the future birth of a god, who Aeschylus implies is Heracles, the god (though originally a human) of strength and heroism.*

"Why hold back now?" Kratos asks a hesitant Hephaistos. "What's all this foolish pity?" Kratos can't understand why Hephaistos doesn't "hate" Prometheus—"the gods' worst enemy"—especially since Prometheus gave Hephaistos's "treasure to those dayflies," but Hephaistos is torn. "Kinship holds fearsome power. So does good fellowship," he says. Crying for Prometheus will do no good, Kratos says, and ignoring Zeus's orders is not advisable. "My skill, my handicraft, I hate you!" Hephaistos cries.

*Kratos calls Prometheus "the gods' worst enemy" because Prometheus has ensured the survival and progress of humankind, which is the greatest threat to the power of Zeus and the gods. Zeus scorns the human race, and this is reflected in Kratos's reference to them as "dayflies." Kratos lives and breathes to carry out Zeus's will, and Kratos's obvious disdain for humanity is as good as Zeus's own.*

Hephaistos wishes his "skill" belonged to someone else. "There are no carefree gods, except for Zeus," Kratos says. "He rules us all, so he alone is free." Hephaistos continues to bind Prometheus to the massive mountain, and Kratos prods Hephaistos along, reminding him of his task. "Now drive that wedge right through his chest," Kratos says, "and let its bite reach deep into the rock." Hephaistos is still reluctant. "Oh pitiful Prometheus, forgive me!" he cries. "*More* pity for the enemy of Zeus?" Kratos asks. "Take care you don't bewail yourself some day," he warns.

*This too reflects Aeschylus's argument of the power of mental confinement. As the entire universe fears Zeus and his power, no one is technically free. Many of the characters act on Zeus's will, even if it directly contradicts their own. The only character who is not beholden to Zeus's power, psychologically speaking, is Prometheus, but he is physically confined. This also reflects compassion in the face of suffering. Obviously, Hephaistos does not want to bind Prometheus, but he is forced against his will.*

"The job is done," Hephaistos says as he finishes binding Prometheus to the mountain. "It didn't take long." Hephaistos is eager to leave, and he says as much to Kratos. "Be soft if that's your way," Kratos says to Hephaistos. "But don't begrudge me / my iron will and furious disposition." Then, Kratos turns to Prometheus. "Go play the rebel *now*," he says, "go plunder the gods' treasure / and give it to your creatures of a day." Prometheus's beloved "mortals" can do nothing to spare him his pain now. "The gods who named you the Forethinker were mistaken," Kratos says as he leaves with Bia and Hephaistos.

*Kratos is the personification of Zeus's "Might," or will. When Kratos speaks of his "iron will and furious disposition," he is describing the uncompromising violence of Zeus. According to legend, Prometheus's mother, Themis, gave him the gift of "foresight," or prophecy. Kratos implies here that Prometheus failed to see his future; however, this isn't true. Prometheus knew he'd be punished and saved humankind away, which reflects Prometheus's sacrifice on behalf of his artistic creation—humankind.*

"Oh Mother Earth! Oh Sun, all-seeing brilliant eye!" Prometheus cries once he is alone. "I call you all to witness—see what I, a god, must suffer at the hands of the gods." He will be **chained** to the mountain to suffer "through endless time" and "miseries." Prometheus knew he would be made to suffer for giving the humans **fire**, and he knows that his future will be nothing but pain. There is no "hidden hurt" that can "take [him] by surprise." Prometheus will "bear as lightly as [he] can" the "fate" that has been "decreed" for him. "I know full well / no power can stand against Necessity," Prometheus says.

*Prometheus claims that he cannot be taken by surprise, but his foresight does appear to be somewhat limited. While he knew he would be punished, he later claims that he did not know it would be so severe, and he also "fears" the sound of unknown footsteps coming in his direction. In this way, Prometheus's foresight, while certainly advantageous, cannot tell him exactly what the future holds. Each time Prometheus speaks of "Necessity" it is with a capital "N," and Prometheus later attributes "Necessity" to "the triple Fates," or Furies, from which there is no escape.*

But Prometheus still "can't accept [his] lot." He is "yoked in **chains**" for giving the mortals **fire** to "teach them every art and skill, / with endless benefit," and now he must "pay the penalty." Prometheus hears a sound in the distance. He isn't yet sure who or what is coming to see the "ill-fated god" bound in chains by Zeus. "Whatever it is," Prometheus says, "I fear it."

*This too reflects Prometheus's love and sacrifice for his creation. He has given the human race infinite gifts through fire and knowledge, and he willingly pays the price. Aeschylus repeatedly uses the image of a "yoke," a wooden beam used to tie animals to a cart, to describe Zeus's confinement of the other characters.*

The chorus, the daughters of Okeanos, arrive in a "winged chariot" and approach Prometheus. "Don't be afraid," they say. "We come as friends!" Prometheus is happy to see them. "Aaah!" he cries. "See / the cruel watch / I must keep!" Okeanos's daughters are sympathetic. "I see you, though my eyes are dimmed / by terror and a haze of tears / at your predicament," the women say. Prometheus tells the chorus he would rather have been sent to the "House of Hades" or even Tartaros. "But here I hang up high, / a plaything for the winds to buffet, / and for my enemies to gloat on," he says.

*Hades is the god of the underworld and the dead, and his name is synonymous with the ancient Greek equivalent of hell. Zeus often banishes those he punishes to Hades and, in severe cases, to Tartaros, the dungeon beneath Hades made specifically to hold the Titans. Prometheus's punishment is even worse than Tartaros for several reasons, but to Prometheus, it is particularly awful because it is so public.*

"Who would not groan with pity / at your sight—except for Zeus?" the chorus asks. The women claim that Zeus's "wrath is constant," and "his resolve / to crush the Progeny of Heaven" will not yield until he is "satisfied" or struck by another whim. "And yet, though I am tortured now," Prometheus says, "and bound immovably, / the Lord of the Immortals will one day / have need of me / to show him the new plot / that dooms his scepter and his pride."

*This too hints at Prometheus's reason and foresight. Prometheus claims that Zeus's downfall is coming in the form of a "fated marriage." Zeus may have Prometheus now, but one day Prometheus will hold all the power in the form of his foresight and reason. This too harkens to Aeschylus's argument of the power of reason over force.*

Still, Prometheus refuses to tell Zeus what he knows, unless Zeus agrees to free him "from [his] **chains**." The chorus is in awe of Prometheus. "You are so daring, / unbending in the face / of such atrocious pain," the women say, "but you give too much freedom / to your tongue." Zeus is sure to hear him, they say, and when he does there will be trouble. Prometheus knows "very well" that Zeus is "cruel" and "rules by whim," but he also knows the day will come when Zeus will need him. Zeus's "heart will soften" then, Prometheus says, and "his rage will finally relent."

*This reflects Prometheus's dedication to his art and creation. He is "daring" and "unbending" as he accepts his punishment, and he won't lessen it by telling Zeus what he knows now. While the chorus implies that Prometheus is too proud (a popular theme in Greek tragedies), Aeschylus seems to celebrate Prometheus's pride, not condemn it, and it is one of the qualities that makes readers so sympathetic to Prometheus's plight.*

The chorus asks Prometheus why he has been punished so severely by Zeus. "Tell us," they say, "unless telling adds to your pain." Prometheus says there is "no escape" from his "misery either way," so he may as well tell them the story. At the beginning of the Battle of the Titans, Prometheus tells the women, he had "offered to advise the Titans," but he was unable "to persuade them." The Titans were "proud of their strength, and arrogant," and they "despised" Prometheus's plan, believing that they could instead be victorious "with little effort and by force alone." But Prometheus's mother, Themis, gave him "foreknowledge," and he knew "that victory would fall / to those who show superior guile, not might."

*This shows the compassion of the chorus. The women badly want to hear the story, unless it is too painful for Prometheus to tell. Prometheus's story also reflects Aeschylus's central argument of the power of reason over force. The Titans were not able to win over Zeus and the Olympians "by force alone," and Zeus was only able to win by listening to Prometheus's cunning. As it does throughout the play, reason is always victorious over force, even if it takes a while to come around.*

The Titans refused to listen to Prometheus, so he joined forces with Zeus. Zeus "willingly accepted" Prometheus's plan, and Kronos and the Titans were defeated and sent to the "depths of Tartaros." Prometheus had been of "service to the tyrant god," but he has still punished him. "There is a sickness / among tyrants," Prometheus tells the chorus. "They cannot trust their friends."

*Zeus doesn't care about loyalties or friendships, just as he didn't care about his own father, Kronos, whom he willfully challenged and defeated during the Battle of the Titans. Zeus cares only about power—the mark of a true tyrant—which he wields violently over the entire universe.*

Not long after the Battle of the Titans, Prometheus tells the chorus, Zeus "intended to expunge" the human race and "grow another one more to his liking." Prometheus couldn't let his creation die, so he saved them. "And that is why you see me racked by suffering," Prometheus tells the chorus. "I wish my eyes had never settled / on this sight," the chorus says, "for now my heart is wounded." They ask if Prometheus might be leaving something out of his story. "I gave men power to stop foreseeing their death," Prometheus says. "I sowed blind hopes to live as their companions," and "I gave them **fire**," he says.

*According to Greek mythology, Prometheus molded humankind from clay. Through the gift of fire, Prometheus has given them endless possibilities for progress. Fire will keep them warm, cook their food, and protect them from predators, but it also symbolizes the spark of human intelligence and creativity. Because of Prometheus, humans can now think, and, with hope, they have anticipation that life can continue to get better.*

"Are these in truth the charges on which Zeus—," the chorus asks. "Torments me and will never let me go," Prometheus finishes. "Let the pronouncement that would hurt us both / remain unspoken," the chorus says, "but find a way to end this!" Prometheus has "willfully" offended Zeus, but even he did not think that his punishment would be quite so severe. "But don't lament over my present woes," Prometheus says as he invites the chorus to sit near him. "For my sake, please, come down and share my sorrow," he continues. "Misfortune is a migrant bird that settles, / now here, now there, on each of us in turn."

*Prometheus invites the chorus to sit with him because he is comforted by their compassion. Aeschylus draws attention to the widespread suffering of the human condition and the comfort of compassion to those who suffer, but he also suggests that compassion alone is not enough to keep one going through immense suffering. Only hope can do that, Aeschylus implies, and Prometheus hopes that Zeus will again someday need his foresight, or that his savior will be born and free him, whichever comes first.*

Suddenly, "on a winged horse," Okeanos arrives. "I've traveled far to find you, Prometheus," he says. "But even kinship aside, in my heart / no one dwells higher than you." He has come to help Prometheus, but Prometheus can't understand why. "Look at me, then, / and view the display," Prometheus says. "Witness the friend of Zeus, / who helped create the tyrant's rule, / twisted in agony by his command." Okeanos offers Prometheus "a better wisdom." A "new master" rules now, Okeanos says, and if he hears Prometheus talking like he is, there is sure to be even more trouble. "Humility, just / a small touch of it," Okeanos says to Prometheus, "would serve you well."

*Prometheus can't understand why Okeanos wants to help free him because Okeanos is a Titan god who somehow managed to avoid being sent to Tartaros after the Battle of the Titans. Prometheus too was a Titan, and he essentially betrayed Okeanos and the other Titans when he helped Zeus defeat them. Prometheus thinks Okeanos should leave him to suffer since Prometheus was a traitor to him and the rest of their kind. Again, Okeanos implies that Prometheus's hubris is a negative thing, but his excessive pride is also seen as a strength in the play.*

"Now I will go / and see what I can do to set you free," Okeanos says to Prometheus. "I envy you, that escaped all blame," Prometheus replies, "though you risked everything to lend me your support." He begs Okeanos not to attempt to persuade Zeus, as the king is unyielding. "Just see to it that *you* don't come to harm," Prometheus says. But Okeanos claims that his "will is set," and he is "indeed very sure" that Zeus will hear his plea and free Prometheus from his suffering.

*Prometheus again alludes to the fact that Okeanos was not sent to Tartaros with the rest of the Titans. Prometheus may have "escaped" Zeus's blame for being a Titan, but he cannot escape his punishment for giving fire and reason to humankind. Okeanos too risks Zeus's wrath for trying to help Prometheus, which Okeanos must be aware of as well; however, he still wants to help Prometheus, which is an obvious sign of Okeanos's compassion.*

Prometheus is thankful for Okeanos's support, but he cannot let him go to Zeus. "So don't concern yourself," Prometheus says to Okeanos, "steer a wide berth / from all action, and rest easy." He reminds Okeanos of his brother, Atlas, whom Zeus has made to bear "upon his shoulders / the weight of heaven and earth" for all eternity, and Typhon, the "hundred-headed monster," who challenged Zeus and now is "a sprawling, helpless form" deep "beneath the roots of Aetna." Prometheus says he will "drain out [his] suffering / until the day when Zeus gives up his wrath."

*Atlas and Typhon are further evidence of Zeus's power and ability to physically confine others to Hades, Tartaros, or elsewhere, as is the case with Typhon deep beneath the volcano Etna. This also underscores Okeanos's psychological confinement at the hands of Zeus. Okeanos claims it is his "will" to help Prometheus, but he knows that he is not really free to act on his will, at least not without suffering Zeus's wrath himself.*

"Clearly your words are sending me back home," Okeanos says to Prometheus. "So that your pity won't draw hate against you," Prometheus replies. Okeanos agrees to leave the mountain and not approach Zeus on Prometheus's behalf. Okeanos climbs on his winged horse and flies away. "I weep for you, Prometheus, and I mourn your terrible fate," the chorus says. "This is a tyrant's act, cruel and remorseless."

*Again, Okeanos is not free to act as he wishes. Zeus's power as king of the gods is successful in large part because of the tyrannous hold he has over the universe. Prometheus's imprisonment is successful not just because Hephaistos's chains are strong but because others are too afraid to help him—until Heracles is born, that is.*

"Don't think that I am silent out of pride / or stubbornness," Prometheus says. "My backward-turning thoughts / eat at my heart on seeing myself discarded / in this way." Instead of speaking of his own misfortune, he asks the chorus to listen to what he has to say of "human misery." He gave "shrewdness" to the humans' "childish minds, and taught them how to reason." From the start they could hear and see, but this was "useless to them." Their lives were "like dreams with shifting shapes" that had been only "meaningless confusion."

*What others in the play see as Prometheus's excessive pride is actually love for his art, and his willingness—or his responsibility, even—to suffer on its behalf. In order for humankind to survive, Prometheus had to anger Zeus, there was no way around it. While it certainly pains Prometheus to bear Zeus's punishment, he submits himself to it because it is necessary for the sake of his creation.*

Before Prometheus gave the humans reason, they knew nothing of "brick homes / built to face the sun," and they "burrowed underground and dwelt" like "ants." They did now know about "the approach of winter, or of flowery spring, / or summer with its fruits." Without reason, every human act "was without purpose." Then Prometheus showed them how to read the stars, and he created "numbers" and "the joining of letters, which is / the very memory of things." He gave them "the subtlest science" and taught them to "bring wild beasts / under the yoke."

*Prometheus is often depicted as the father of all arts, including architecture, which is represented in the "brick homes" Prometheus teaches the humans to build. He is also often interpreted as the genius god, which is mirrored in the wisdom of the changing seasons and the invention of mathematics. Prometheus also gave them language, which will lead to literature—"the very memory of things."*

All these things Prometheus has given to humankind. "But I have no device to free myself / from this disaster," he says. He also gave them "many arts / and skillful means," including the knowledge of "how to mix / soothing elixirs that can steer the course / of any sickness." He taught them to read the "flight" of birds and how to "burn a thighbone" in the "difficult to learn" art "of enticing the gods." He revealed the "treasures" deep in the earth, of "bronze, iron, silver, [and] gold." Every last "human art" was "founded by Prometheus," he tells the chorus.

*Prometheus also gave the humans the knowledge of medicine and metallurgy, which ensures their survival and continued progress toward civilization. The burning of a "thighbone" is a reference to the ancient "art" of oracle bones, a type of pyromancy that includes burning specific bones to bring about visions and prophecy. Animal bones are placed in a fire until they begin to crack, and the cracks are then read, or divined.*

"You have already helped these mortals beyond measure," the chorus says to Prometheus. "Now don't neglect yourself, unfortunate god." They tell him he will be as powerful as Zeus by the time he is free. "The fate who brings to fulfillment / has made no such decree," Prometheus says. "Skill is weaker than Necessity." The chorus asks who "plots the course" for Necessity. "The triple Fates," Prometheus answers. "The unforgetting Furies." Even Zeus cannot escape the Furies, Prometheus says. The chorus asks him what Zeus's fate is, but Prometheus refuses to tell. "For only / by holding it away will I escape / these agonies and this humiliation," he claims.

*Within Greek mythology, the Furies are the three goddesses of vengeance and retribution. The Furies, also known as the Erinyes, are the embodiment of curses and revenge, and they cannot be escaped or destroyed. According to the myth, the Furies were formed when Kronos castrated his father, Uranus, and hurled his genitals into the sea. The three Furies were born from the drops of blood, and they are older, and have more power, than any of the Olympian gods.*

"You give too much honor to mortals," the chorus says to Prometheus, "this is your punishment." Suddenly, Io appears. "What land is this?" she asks. "What tribe?" She looks to Prometheus but doesn't know who he is. "Ah! Ah! Eh! Eh!" Io screams. "The gadfly, it stings me." She claims that the fly "chases" her, "wretched and hungry, / along the sands of the seashore." Io only wanders now, pursued by the gadfly. "What did I do, son of Kronos, what fault did you find in me," asks Io, "that you would yoke me to such pain?"

*According to Greek myth, Zeus fell in love with Io, the mortal daughter of a king, and, in another display of power, turned her into a cow to hide her from his jealous wife, Hera. Hera, of course, knew who the cow was, and took Io as her pet. Hera then ordered her servant, Argos, to guard Io and keep Zeus away. Argos is often depicted as having one hundred eyes, like a fly, and after Zeus ordered Argos killed by Hermes, Argos's ghost—that of a gadfly—continues to plague Io, who remains a cow wandering the earth.*

"Who are you?" Io asks Prometheus again. "Tell me, tormented one, who you are, speak to my misery. / Oh my unfortunate life! Pain, hunger, and deadly fear / are my only friends." She begs Prometheus to tell her what the future holds. "Is there a cure for me?" she asks. "Tell me plainly." Prometheus tells Io who he is, and that he gave **fire** to mankind. "When will my suffering end?" she asks. "Is there a limit to this misery?"

*This too reflects the great misery and suffering that Zeus is capable of inflicting with his power. This is also an example of Zeus's ability to confine people, both literally and metaphorically. Io is confined and tortured by her physical existence as a cow. She is certainly free to roam, but she is still very much imprisoned by Zeus.*

"Better for you to not know than to know," Prometheus says to Io of her suffering. "Do not be kinder to me than I want," Io says. "Since you demand, I will tell you," Prometheus says. "Listen." The chorus interrupts. They want to know more about Io's condition. "Then let her hear from you / the future trials that she must suffer," the chorus says. Prometheus encourages Io to tell her story, especially since the chorus are her "father's sisters." "It will be worth your waiting / if you unburden yourself of your bitter tale / while they pay tribute with their tears," he says.

*Io's father, Inachus, is also a god born of the Titan Okeanos. The chorus is made up entirely of Okeanos's daughters, a group of three thousand sea nymphs often referred to as the Oceanids. Prometheus claims it is better for Io if she doesn't know what suffering is in store for her, but the chorus later makes the opposite claim, that suffering is lessened, or at least more bearable, if it is known. Aeschylus implies that both are painful, but compassion, like that found in the chorus, is a comfort to Io.*

Io tells Prometheus and the chorus of the "hideous mock of [her] appearance," which she says makes her "ashamed." She claims that "visions came by night" into her "maiden chamber," and "visitors" spoke in "smooth and urging voices." The voices asked why she was "still a virgin" when she could "be the bride of the supreme." Zeus was in love with her, "the dart of passion" having "set him on **fire**," and he wanted to "share his pleasure" with her. The voices warned her not to "spurn the god's bed," and to go to Lerna, where her "father's flocks graze, / so Zeus's eye" could "find relief from longing."

*The "hideous mock of [Io's] appearance" is a reference to her form as a cow. When* Prometheus Bound *is staged, whoever plays Io usually wears horns or something similar to mark her existence as a heifer. Lerna is an ancient Greek region just south of the city of Argos, where Io's father, Inachus, was the first king. Like the other characters in Aeschylus's play, Io was not free to reject Zeus's advances, even if she had wanted to.*

Io told her father about the voice and he sought guidance in the oracles, whose prophecies were "too dark to fathom" and full of "double meaning." One day, a message came that was "unmistakable." If Io's father did not "drive [Io] from [her] home" and turn her out to "wander at [her] will," Zeus would "blot out" all of Io's people with a **fiery** thunderbolt.

*Aeschylus's language here reflects Io's existence as a cow. The oracle tells her father to "drive" her from home, which connotes the movement of cattle and livestock. Like Io and the others, Io's father is not free to act on his own will either. He obviously doesn't want to cast his daughter out, but he must or else suffer the wrath of Zeus.*

And so, Io's father "shut his doors against [her], weeping." It was, of course, not of his own choosing, but Zeus "pulled the reins and forced him against his will." As soon as Io's father closed the door, Io's "shape and mind / became distorted." Horns grew from her head, and a gadfly began to chase her relentlessly. Io has been wandering ever since, "driven by the god-sent scourge, / the gadfly, from land to land." Io looks to Prometheus. She has told them everything, she says, "and if you know / what still awaits me, tell me, / don't serve me the cold truth warmed up with false words. / There is no sickness worse than that."

*Again, Io implies that her suffering is made worse because she doesn't know what is coming or when it will end. Io is held captive by Zeus both by her physical condition as a cow and by the immense fear of her future suffering. Io does not have to be physically chained like Prometheus to be a prisoner of Zeus, which reflects Aeschylus's overarching argument of the power of psychological confinement and metaphorical imprisonment.*

"Ea, ea, stop!" the chorus shrieks. They had not anticipated that Io's story would be so awful. "Horror / freezes my heart with a double-edged point," they claim. "You moan too soon," Prometheus says, for he must still tell of what's to come. "Wait till you hear the rest." He claims that Io will greatly suffer at the hands of Hera, Zeus's wife, but if Io heeds Prometheus's words, she will "recognize the end" when it arrives. He tells Io to turn and head in the direction of the "rising sun" until she comes to the village of the "Scythian nomads." He warns her to stay away from them and travel on to the river Hubristes.

*Hera's servant, Argos, will continue to sting Io in his ghostly form as the gadfly, and he will chase Io all the way across the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, which connects Europe and Asia. This too is evidence of Zeus's power and Io's suffering. She is driven a vast distance alone and without rest from the stinging gadfly. According to myth, Zeus doesn't turn Io back into a woman until she wanders all the way to Egypt.*

Prometheus tells Io she must continue to Mount Caucasus, "the highest mountain," and then walk until she finds the Amazons, "a race of women sworn to enmity of men." The Amazons will "gladly" show Io the way to the "isthmus of Cimerria," where she must "cross the channel of Maiotis." This crossing will forever be remembered by mortals as the "Bosporus," or "Cow's Ford." Upon Io's crossing, Prometheus says, she will "arrive in Asia." This is just the beginning, Prometheus tells Io. She is headed for a "storm-swept sea of pain and misery."

*The Bosporus, also known as the Straight of Istanbul, is a narrow waterway between Asia and Europe, located in present day Turkey. According to Greek myth, the Amazons were a tribe of warrior women who lived on the riverbanks of northern Turkey. They rejected all men and patriarchal society, which they frequently warred against. The Amazons were even said to have each cut off one breast so that they could better shoot their bows.*

Io is distraught. "What is the good of life to me now?" she asks Prometheus. "It would be better to die once, and quickly, / than to drag myself through years and years of pain," she says. "Ah, you would find it hard to bear what I must bear," Prometheus says. "I cannot die." He must suffer "until the tyranny of Zeus is overthrown." Io is shocked. "Zeus overthrown—is that conceivable?" she asks. Prometheus says it is. "It will come to pass," he affirms. Io wants to know how. "A marriage he will regret," Prometheus says. The bride will bear a son "who's stronger than his father."

*That fact that Prometheus is immortal and can't die is further evidence of his confinement as ordered by Zeus—Prometheus can't even escape by dying. Prometheus's claim that Zeus will fall must have been considered near blasphemy in Aeschylus's day, and no other known myth or ancient play depicts the downfall of Zeus in such a way.*

According to Prometheus, Zeus can "avert this doom" only if he frees Prometheus from his **chains**. "But who will free you against Zeus's will?" Io asks. "My savior will descend from your own womb," he answers. In "ten generations, then another three," Prometheus's "savior" will be born. Prometheus offers Io one more prophecy; to tell of her "further suffering" or the story of his savior. The choice is hers. The chorus again interrupts. "Grant her one of the two, and me the other. / Do not begrudge me your words."

*Prometheus's chains are symbolic of Zeus's power and Prometheus's confinement, which, incidentally, is not entirely Zeus's own. The strength of Hephaistos's chains is part of Zeus's power over Prometheus, while Prometheus himself holds power over Zeus in the form of his foresight and knowledge of Zeus's supposed fate at the hands of his son: Io's descendant and Prometheus's savior, Heracles. This ultimately reflects the vulnerability of brute force—it cannot be sustained long term.*

"Since you're so eager," Prometheus says to Io and the chorus, "I won't disappoint you." He begins with Io. Once she crosses the water between the two continents, she will move in the direction of the "sunrise." There, she will arrive at the "Gorgonean plains of Kisthenes," where there are "three ancient maidens / in the shape of swans, with but one eye among them / and a single tooth." Close by, Io will find "their winged sisters, snake-haired, / human-hating Gorgons." Beware of them, Prometheus says, for the Gorgons will kill "any mortal who beholds them."

*Here, Aeschylus refers to the Graeae, the three daughters of sea deities in Greek mythology. The Graeae are typically represented as witches or old and grey women, but Aeschylus describes them here as taking "the shape of swans." According to myth, the Graeae have one eye and tooth that they share between them, and they are the sisters of the Gorgons, of which Medusa is a popular example. The Graeae and Gorgons are further evidence of Io's suffering.*

"Beware as well / of Zeus's sharp-toothed barkless dogs, the gryphons," Prometheus says to Io, "and the one-eyed horsemen called the Arimaspians." Stay clear of all them, Prometheus warns. Io will then arrive at "a very far-off land, / inhabited by black men living near the sources / of the sun." She is to follow a river called the Ethiops until she reaches the Bybline mountains. There, Io and her "descendants" will begin a "distant colony."

*In ancient myth, gryphons are the kings of the beasts—with the body and legs of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle—and they guarded the gold deposits in the foothills of the Asian mountains, where the Arimaspians, the one-eyed people of northern Scythia, lived. Again, the gryphons and Arimaspians are further evidence of Io's suffering and misery, as she frequently comes up against danger.*

The chorus is eager to hear the story of Prometheus's savior, and he begins to tell it willingly. "I have more time than I would like," he says. According to Prometheus, after Io arrives at "Thesprotian Zeus's shrine of prophecy," she will meet Dodona "on her lofty ridge." "Thou shalt be Zeus's fabled bride one day," Dodona will say, and Io will "smile" and be "flattered." Still plagued by the gadfly, Io will move along the coast to "the great gulf of Rhea," where a storm will force her to change direction. This part of the sea will forever bear the name, "Ionian," Prometheus says.

*Thesprotia is a region in Greece and home to the oldest Greek oracle, where Io receives a prophecy that she will marry Zeus. Interestingly, Io smiles at the idea, which also reflects the level of power and control Zeus has over her. Io knows that Zeus is in large part to blame for her confinement and misery, but she still relishes the idea of being chosen by Zeus to be his wife.*

In the town of Canopus, Prometheus tells Io and the chorus, Zeus will "cause [Io] to conceive, simply by touching [her]." Io will "bring forth / a black son, Epaphos, "the one conceived by touch." Five generations later, "fifty daughters" will be forced to return to Argos to marry their cousins, but they will flee, only to be pursued by the men "like hawks in chase of doves." The men will be killed by a "female Ares' murdering hand," and the women will "find refuge on Pelagian soil." One of the daughters will be "charmed / by love to spare her bed companion," and she will go on to give birth to a "race of kings" in Argos.

*Canopus is an ancient Egyptian city, near present-day Alexandria. According to myth, Io wanders all the way to Egypt, where Zeus finally turns her back into her mortal form. Zeus and Io's son, Epaphos, becomes a king of Egypt, and Io's grandson, Danaus, later returns to Greece, as Prometheus says, with his fifty daughters, the Danaids, who were betrothed to the fifty sons of Danaus's twin brother. All but one of the Danaids kill their husbands, a story which Aeschylus tells in his play* The Suppliants.

From this "seed," says Prometheus to Io and the chorus, "shall spring a hero, famous for his bow, / who will release me from this suffering." This prophecy has been revealed to Prometheus by his mother, Themis. "Elelelelelelelеu!" screams Io. The gadfly is again biting at her and standing with Prometheus is nearly unbearable. Io turns and continues her wandering. The chorus notes "that a marriage of equals / surpasses all others. The women hope to "find a husband who is equal," and not fight a "war without a battle," of which there is "no way out."

*Here Aeschylus refers to Heracles, the son of Zeus and Alcmene and the great-grandson of Perseus, who was also the son of Zeus and Danae, a direct descendant of Danaus and the Danaids. Heracles is the epitome of Greek strength and masculinity and he is frequently represented by a bow and arrows. According to myth, Heracles shoots Zeus's liver-eating eagle and frees Prometheus from his chains.*

"I tell you," Prometheus says to the chorus, "Zeus with all his arrogance / will be brought low." Zeus is already planning his marriage to Io, which "will throw him / from his omnipotence into oblivion." When Zeus drove Kronos to Tartaros, Kronos cursed Zeus, and Prometheus knows "the What and the How." Zeus's "downfall" cannot be avoided, Prometheus says. "Struck by that fist," Prometheus tells the chorus, "[Zeus will] understand the difference / between a ruler and a slave."

*This too reflects Aeschylus's argument of the limited power of brute force. Foreknowledge of his downfall—which can't be overcome by strength alone—can only help Zeus in the future, and the fact that Prometheus knows "the What and the How" but not Zeus, gives Prometheus power over Zeus. Zeus's marriage to Io will begin a series of events that ends in the birth of Heracles and the freeing of Prometheus, so why would Prometheus warn Zeus unless he frees him?*

"You threaten Zeus with what you hope will happen," the chorus says to Prometheus. "I speak the future *and* what I desire," Prometheus says. "[Zeus's] yoke will be far harsher than my own." The chorus asks Prometheus if he is scared to speak of Zeus in such a way. "What should I fear?" Prometheus answers. "It's not my fate to die." Zeus can only bring Prometheus pain, but "he cannot surprise" Prometheus. "Let him rule a little while," Prometheus says. "Let him play King. He will not be / the highest god for very much longer."

*Aeschylus again uses the image of a yoke to represent power and confinement, but here it is used against Zeus. However, Zeus is never "brought low" as Prometheus predicts, and it has already been established that Prometheus can technically be "surprised" (he didn't know he would be punished so harshly and he is frightened by the sound of unknown footsteps), so it appears as if Prometheus's power of reason is limited just as Zeus's physical power is.*

Suddenly, Hermes appears. "But look," Prometheus says, "here comes [Zeus's] lackey, / the carrier pigeon of our new commander in chief." Hermes approaches Prometheus. "Supreme conniver," Hermes says, "master of complaints, / fire-thief who mocks the gods and / idolizes dayflies: The Father wants to know / what is this marriage which you boast / will cause his downfall." Prometheus refuses to give Hermes the answer he seeks. He claims that Zeus is "young in power," and Prometheus has already seen "two tyrants fall."

*By claiming Zeus is "young in power," this implies that all inexperienced rulers are violent and tyrannous, but they eventually learn their lesson. This further suggests that there is not much thought and intellect behind brute force, which is in keeping with Aeschylus's theory of the value of reason over force. Hermes is also another example of a god who is psychologically confined and beholden to Zeus. Prometheus calls him a "carrier pigeon" and a "lackey," suggesting that he is little more than Zeus's flunky.*

Hermes claims it is only "arrogance" that has brought Prometheus to the mountain face. "Let me assure you," Prometheus says to Hermes, "I would not exchange / my own misfortune for your slavery." Hermes thinks his own "slavery" is better than Prometheus's fate **chained** to a rock. "A tyrant's trust dishonors those who earn it," Prometheus says.

*This too reflects Hermes's metaphorical imprisonment. Prometheus calls Hermes a "slave," which basically implies he is anything but free. Like Hephaistos and Okeanos, Hermes is physically free, but he can't act on his own will if it goes against Zeus.*

Hermes asks Prometheus "what honor is there in [his] insolence," and Prometheus claims that his "insolence" "spits contempt at insolence itself." Hermes says that it appears as if Prometheus "relishes" his current predicament. "Relish?" Prometheus asks. "I wish my enemies could relish / this. And I count you among them." Hermes cannot believe that Prometheus is blaming him for his own plight. "I'll say it plainly," Prometheus remarks. "I hate all the gods / for repaying right with wrong and good with evil."

*Prometheus disrespects Zeus because Zeus disrespected humanity when he vowed to "expunge" them and create a new race. Prometheus's fate on the mountain is pure torture, but it is a necessary evil to save humanity, Prometheus's art and creation. In this way, Aeschylus implies that the artist always suffers—is obligated to suffer even—on behalf of their art.*

"You've clearly lost your mind," Hermes says to Prometheus. "This is a sickness." Hermes again asks Prometheus to answer Zeus's question about his fate. "Am I indebted to him for his kindness?" Prometheus asks. Hermes accuses Prometheus of "mocking" him, like a "child." Still, Prometheus refuses to talk. "No torture, promise, or device / will ever move me to tell Zeus / the things I know until he sets me free," he says. Prometheus knows that Zeus's fury will be severe, but it makes little difference. "I won't bend," Prometheus says.

*Again, Prometheus's foresight is the only power he has over Zeus—save for waiting for Heracles to be born—and giving Zeus his knowledge for simply a lightened sentence is no good. This is also evidence of Prometheus's dedication to his art and his sacrifice on its behalf. Prometheus knew (at least in part) what was in store for him, and he knows (roughly) what will happen, but he will not give up—he remains determined to sacrifice himself for the sake of his creation.*

"Think better of it, fool!" Hermes says to Prometheus. "Take stock / of who you are and where your fate has brought you!" Prometheus is unyielding. Hermes may as well "try to persuade / a wave out of its course" before he convinces Prometheus to tell Zeus what he knows. Prometheus tells Hermes that he will not beg Zeus to free him. "I do not have it in me," Prometheus says. Hermes can see that Prometheus will not budge. "What good is obstinate will / untamed by sound thought and good measure?" Hermes asks.

*Ironically, Prometheus is the personification of "sound thought" and "good measure," but Hermes can't see past Zeus's power and force. According to Prometheus, Zeus will need him one day, and when he does, Zeus will have to set him free first. However, Prometheus's inability to beg Zeus is evidence of his psychological freedom—even though Zeus may have him chained to a mountain, he doesn't control Prometheus's mind and spirit.*

Hermes warns Prometheus that if he doesn't tell Zeus what he knows, "a threefold tidal way wave of misery" will come his way. First, Zeus will "destroy" the mountain with "thunder and lightning." The mountain will crumble, burying Prometheus. After an "enormous span of time," the light will return, and bring with it Zeus's "winged hound, a scarlet eagle," to tear the flesh from Prometheus's body. The eagle will feast on Prometheus's **liver** each day—and "he will return, day in, day out." This will continue without end until Zeus sees fit to stop.

*Here, Aeschylus's language reflects the power of a "wave," just as it does when Prometheus says Hermes may as well "try to persuade / a wave out of its course." In this way, both Zeus and Prometheus are equally powerful and can't be stopped or persuaded. Zeus's eagle eats Prometheus's liver because as an organ, the liver can regenerate, but also because the liver is symbolic of passion and anger in Greek mythology. By eating Prometheus's liver, Zeus takes on Prometheus's own anger, or wrath.*

"Heed his words!" the chorus cries. "It's shameful for the wise to dwell in error!" Prometheus had known that Hermes was coming, however, and he also knew that he would refuse him. "But for an enemy to suffer / at an enemy's hand / is no natural disgrace," Prometheus says. He is prepared for the "doubly twisted / blade of fire" that will likely strike his head, and that the world with shake with Zeus's fury. Zeus can even banish Prometheus to Tartaros if he wishes. "He cannot kill me," Prometheus says.

*While Prometheus earlier counts his immortality as a negative thing, here it gives him strength. He knows that no matter what Zeus does to him, he can't be killed, and that gives him a strange comfort moving forward. Furthermore, Prometheus is not "dwelling in error," he is paying the necessary punishment for saving humanity and ensuring their successful survival.*

Hermes again says that Prometheus is "mad." He turns to the chorus. "But you, who weep / on this behalf, hurry / and leave this place, / go far away, and quickly" before they become the next target of Zeus's wrath. "Speak to me in a different voice, / or give me counsel I can follow!" the chorus says. They wish to "suffer" as Prometheus does and will stay by his side. They have "learned to despise traitors," they claim. "There is no plague more worthy of / being spat on," they claim. "Do not blame fortune when / disaster hunts you down," Hermes says to them and departs.

*This too is evidence of the chorus's compassion and sympathy; however, the comment that they "despise traitors" is ambiguous and a bit ironic. Hermes is the son of Zeus and not technically a traitor, but Prometheus has betrayed the Titans by fighting with the Olympians, and he deceived Zeus and all the gods when he stole fire and gave it to humankind. Readers typically sympathize with Prometheus because he is a champion of humanity, but he is decidedly a traitor to both the Titans and the Olympians.*

"The earth is shaking now / in truth, no longer in words," Prometheus says. He can hear a "hollow roar / of thunder" in the distance and see "great winding coils / of light shoot forth / with heat and hissing." He can see it coming "in plain view, / the onslaught / sent by Zeus / for [his] own terror." Prometheus is ready. "Oh holy Mother Earth, / oh sky whose light revolves for all, / you see me. You see / the wrongs I suffer."

*Even staring into the face of certain and prolonged suffering is not enough to lessen Prometheus's resolve. He is committed to suffering for the sake of his creation, and he is prepared as the thunder and lightning of Zeus's power sound in the distance.*

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