

Prometheus Bound

Aeschylus

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

POWER: divine agent of Zeus.
FORCE: divine agent of Zeus.
HEPHAESTUS: divine son of Zeus, the artisan god.
PROMETHEUS: a Titan.
CHORUS: daughters of Oceanus.*
OCEANUS: a god of the sea.
IO: daughter of Inachus.
HERMES: divine son of Zeus.

[In a remote mountainous region of Scythia. HEPHAESTUS enters with POWER and FORCE dragging PROMETHEUS with them in chains.]

POWER

We have just reached the land of Scythia,
at the most distant limits of the world,
remote and inaccessible. Hephaestus,
now it is your duty to carry out
those orders you received from Father Zeus—
to nail this troublemaker firmly down

against these high, steep cliffs, shackling him
in adamantine chains that will not break.*

For he in secret stole your pride and joy
and handed it to men—the sacred fire
which fosters all the arts. For such a crime,
he must pay retribution to the gods,
so he will learn to bear the rule of Zeus
and end that love he has for humankind.

10

[10]

HEPHAESTUS

Power and Force, where you two are concerned,
what Zeus commanded us has now been done.
There are no further obstacles to face.
I am not bold enough to use sheer force
against a kindred god and nail him down
here on this freezing rock. But nonetheless,
I must steel myself to finish off our work,
for it is dangerous to disregard
the words of Father Zeus.

20

[HEPHAESTUS addresses PROMETHEUS]

High-minded son
of our wise counsellor, goddess Themis,
against my will and yours, I must bind you
with chains of brass which no one can remove
on this cliff face, far from all mortal men,
where you will never hear a human voice
or glimpse a human shape and sun's hot rays
will scorch and age your youthful flesh.* For you,

[20]

30

POWER

Well, every task
is burdensome, except to rule the gods.
No one is truly free except for Zeus.

[50]

HEPHAESTUS

I know. This work is proof enough of that.
I cannot deny it.

70

POWER

Then hurry up
and get these chains around him, just in case
Zeus sees you stalling.

HEPHAESTUS

All right. These shackles here
are ready. Take a look.

[Hephaestus starts chaining Prometheus' arm to the cliff]

POWER

Bind his hands.
Use some heavy hammer blows and rivet him
against the rock.

HEPHAESTUS

There! This part is finished.
It looks all right.

POWER

Strike harder. Make sure
he is securely fixed, with nothing slack.
He is an expert at devising ways
to wriggle out of hopeless situations.

80

HEPHAESTUS

Well, this arm, at least, is firmly nailed here.
No one will get this out.

[60]

POWER

Now drive a spike
in here as well—make sure it won't come loose.
No matter how intelligent he is,
he has to learn he is nothing but a fool
compared to Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS

No one could justly fault
this work I do, except for him.

POWER

Now smash
the blunt tip of this adamantine wedge
straight through his chest—use all your force.

HEPHAESTUS

Alas!

O Prometheus, this suffering of yours—
how it makes me weep!*

90

POWER

Why are you so slow
and sighing over Zeus' enemy?
Be careful, or soon you may be groaning
for yourself.

HEPHAESTUS

This sight is difficult to watch,
as you can see.

POWER

I see this criminal
is getting just what he deserves. Come on,
wrap these chains around his ribs.

[70]

HEPHAESTUS

Look, I know
I have to carry out this work, so stop
ordering me about so much.

POWER

Hold on—
I'll give you orders as often as I please
and keep on badgering you. Move down,
and use your strength to fix his legs in place.

100

HEPHAESTUS

Our work is done. That did not take too long.

POWER

Hit the fetters really hard—those ones there,
around his feet. The one who's watching us,
inspecting what we do, can be vicious.

HEPHAESTUS

The words you speak well match the way you look.

POWER

Well, your soft heart can sympathize with him,
but do not criticize my stubborn will
and my harsh temper.

[80]

HEPHAESTUS

We should be going.
His limbs are all securely fixed in place.

110

[Exit Hephaestus]

POWER *[to Prometheus]*

Now you can flaunt your arrogance up here,
by stealing honours given to the gods
and offering them to creatures of a day.
Are mortal beings strong enough to ease
the burden of your pain? The gods were wrong

to give that name 'Prometheus' to you,
'someone who thinks ahead,' for now you need
a real Prometheus to help you out
and find a way to free you from these chains.*

120

[Exit Power and Force]

PROMETHEUS

O you heavenly skies and swift-winged winds,
you river springs, you countless smiling waves
on ocean seas, and Earth, you mother of all,
and you as well, the all-seeing circle
of the celestial sun—I summon you
to see what I, a god, am suffering
at the hands of gods. Look here and witness
how I am being worn down with torments
which I will undergo for countless years.
This is the kind of shameful punishment
the new ruler of the gods imposed on me.
Alas! Alas! I groan under the pain
of present torments and those yet to come.
Who will deliver me from such harsh pain?
From what part of the sky will he appear?
And yet, why talk like this? For I possess
a detailed knowledge of what lies in store
before it happens—none of my tortures
will come as a surprise. I must endure,
as best I can, the fate I have been given,
for I know well that no one can prevail
against the strength of harsh Necessity.
And yet it is not possible for me
to speak or not to speak about my fate.*

[90]

130

[100]

140

I have been compelled to bear the yoke
of punishment because I gave a gift
to mortal beings—I searched out and stole
the source of fire concealed in fennel stalks,
and that taught men the use of all the arts
and gave them ways to make amazing things.
Now chained and nailed beneath the open sky,
I am paying the price for what I did.
But wait! What noise and what invisible scent
is drifting over me? Is it divine
or human or both of these? Has someone
travelled to the very edges of the world
to watch my suffering. What do they want?

150

[110]

[Prometheus shouts out to whoever is watching him]

Here I am, an ill-fated god! You see
an enemy of Zeus shackled in chains,
hated by all those gods who spend their time
in Zeus' court! They think my love for men
is too excessive!

160

[120]

What is that sound I hear?
The whirling noise of birds nearby—the air
is rustling with their lightly beating wings!
Whatever comes too close alarms me.

*[Enter the Chorus of nymphs, daughters of Oceanus, in a winged chariot, which hovers beside Prometheus].**

CHORUS

You need not fear us. We are your friends.
The rapid beating of these eager wings
has borne our company to this sheer cliff. [130]
We worked to get our father to agree,
and he did so, although that was not easy. 170
The swiftly moving breezes bore me on,
for the echoing clang of hammer blows
pierced right into the corners of our cave
and beat away my bashful modesty.
And so, without tying any sandals on,
I rushed here in this chariot with wings.

PROMETHEUS

Aaaiii! Alas! O you daughters
born from fertile Tethys, children
of your father Oceanus, whose current
circles the entire world and never rests, 180 [140]
look at me! See how I am chained here,
nailed on this cliff above a deep ravine,
where I maintain my dreary watch.*

CHORUS

I see that, Prometheus, and a cloud
of tears and terror moves across my eyes
to observe your body being worn away
in these outrageous adamantine chains.
New gods now rule on Mount Olympus,
and, like a tyrant, Zeus is governing [150]
with new-fangled laws, overpowering 190
those gods who were so strong before.

PROMETHEUS

If only he had thrown me underground,
down there in Hades, which receives the dead,
in Tartarus, through which no one can pass,
and cruelly bound me there in fetters
no one could break, so that none of the gods
or anyone else could gloat at my distress.
But now the blowing winds toy with me here,
and the pain I feel delights my enemies.

CHORUS

What god is so hard hearted he would find
this scene enjoyable? Who would not feel
compassion for these sufferings of yours, 200 [160]

apart from Zeus, who, in his angry mood,
has set his rigid mind inflexibly
on conquering the race of Ouranos.
And he will never stop until his heart
is fully satisfied or someone else
overthrows his power by trickery,
hard as that may be, and rules instead.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, and even though I am being tortured, 210
bound in these strong chains, the day is coming
when that ruler of those sacred beings [170]
will truly need me to reveal to him
a new intrigue by which he will be stripped
of all his honours and his sceptre, too.*
He will not charm that secret out of me
with sweet honeyed phrases of persuasion,
nor, for all his savage threats, will I ever
cringe down in front of him and let him know
the answer—no!—not until he frees me 220
from these cruel shackles and is willing
to pay me compensation for his crime!

CHORUS

With that audacious confidence of yours, [180]
you do not cower before these bitter pains,
but you allow your tongue to speak too freely.
A piercing fear knives through my heart,
my dread about your fate, how you must
steer your ship to find safe haven
and see an end to all your troubles.
For the son of Cronos has a heart 230
that is inflexible—his character
will not be moved by prayer.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, I know.
Zeus is a harsh god and holds the reins [190]
of justice in his hands. But nonetheless,
I can see the day approaching when his mind
will soften, once that secret I described
has led to his collapse. Then he will abate
his stubborn rage and enter eagerly
into a bond of friendship with me.
By then I will be eager for that, too. 240

CHORUS

Tell us the whole story of what happened.
How did Zeus have you seized and on what charge?
Why does he so shamefully abuse you
in this painful way? Give us the details,
unless you would be harmed by telling us.

PROMETHEUS

I find these matters truly unbearable
to talk about, but remaining silent
pains me, too. The events that led to this [200]
are all so miserably unfortunate.

When the powers in heaven got angry, 250
they started quarrelling amongst themselves.
Some wanted to hurl Cronos from his throne,
so Zeus could rule instead, but then others
wanted the reverse—to ensure that Zeus
would never rule the gods. I tried my best
to give them good advice, but I could not
convince the Titans, offspring of the Earth
and Heaven, who, despising trickery,
insisted stubbornly they would prevail [210]
without much effort, by using force. 260

Both mother Themis and the goddess Earth
(who has a single form but many names)
had often uttered prophecies to me
about how Fate would make events unfold,
how those who would seize power and control
would need, not brutal might and violence,
but sly deception. I went through all this,
but they were not concerned—they thought
everything I said a waste of time.

So then, when I considered what to do, 270
the wisest course of action seemed to be
to join my mother and take Zeus' side. [220]

I did so eagerly, and he was keen
to have me with him. Thanks to my advice,
the gloomy pit of Tartarus now hides
old Cronos and his allies.* I helped Zeus,
that tyrant of the gods—now he repays me
with this foul torment. It is a sickness
which somehow comes with every tyranny
to place no trust in friends.

But you asked 280
why Zeus is torturing me like this.

I will explain. As soon as he was seated [230]
on his father's throne, he quickly set about
assigning gods their various honours
and organizing how he meant to rule.

But for those sad wretched human beings,
he showed no concern at all. He wanted
to wipe out the entire race and grow
a new one in its place. None of the gods
objected to his plan except for me. 290

I was the only one who had the courage.
So I saved those creatures from destruction
and a trip to Hades. And that is why

I have been shackled here and have to bear
such agonizing pain, so pitiful to see. [240]
I set compassion for the human race
above the way I felt about myself,
so now I am unworthy of compassion.
This is how he seeks to discipline me,
without a shred of mercy—the spectacle 300
disgraces Zeus' name.

CHORUS

But anyone
who shows no pity for your agonies,
Prometheus, has a heart of iron
and is made out of rock. As for myself,
I had no wish to see them, and now I have,
my heart is full of grief.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, to my friends
I make a most distressing sight.

CHORUS

Was there more?
Or were you guilty of just one offence?

PROMETHEUS

I stopped men thinking of their future deaths. [250]

CHORUS

What cure for this disease did you discover? 310

PROMETHEUS

Inside their hearts I put blind hope.

CHORUS

With that
you gave great benefits to humankind.

PROMETHEUS

And in addition to hope, I gave them fire.

CHORUS

You did that for those creatures of a day?
Do they have fire now?

PROMETHEUS

They do. And with it
they will soon master many arts.

CHORUS

So Zeus
charged you with this . . .

PROMETHEUS *[interrupting]*

. . . and he torments me
and gives me no relief from suffering!

CHORUS

And has no time been set when your ordeal
comes to an end?

PROMETHEUS

No. None at all,
except when it seems suitable to Zeus.

320
[260]

CHORUS

How will he ever think it suitable?
What hope is there in that? Do you not see
where you went wrong? But I do not enjoy
discussing those mistakes you made, and you
must find it painful. Let us leave that point,
so in this anguish you find some release.

PROMETHEUS

It is easy for someone whose foot remains
unsnared by suffering to give advice
and criticize another in distress.
I was well aware of all these matters,
and those mistakes I made quite willingly—
I freely chose to do the things I did.
I will not deny that. By offering help
to mortal beings I brought on myself
this suffering. But still, I did not think
I would receive this kind of punishment,
wasting away on these high rocky cliffs,
fixed on this remote and desolate crag.
But do not mourn the troubles I now face.
Step down from your chariot and listen
to those misfortunes I must still confront,
so you will learn the details of my story
from start to finish. Accept my offer.
Agree to hear me out, and share with me
the pain I feel right now. For misery,
shifting around from place to place, settles
on different people at different times.

330

[270]

340

CHORUS *[leaving the chariot]*

Your request does not fall on deaf ears,
Prometheus. My lightly stepping foot
has moved down from the swift-winged chariot
and sacred air, the pathway of the birds,
to walk along this rugged rock towards you.
I want to hear your tale, a full account
of all your suffering.

350 [280]

[Enter OCEANUS on a flying monster]

OCEANUS

I have now reached
the end of my long journey, travelling
to visit you, Prometheus, on the wings

of this swift beast, and using my own mind
instead of any reins to guide it here.
You know I feel great sympathy for you
and for your suffering. It seems to me
our ties of kinship make me feel that way.
But even if there were no family bonds,
no one wins more respect from me than you.
You will soon realize I speak the truth
and do not simply prattle empty words.
So come, show me how I can be of help,
for you will never say you have a friend
more loyal to you than Oceanus.

360 [290]

PROMETHEUS

What is this? What am I looking at?
Have you, too, travelled here to gaze upon
my agonies? How were you brave enough
to leave that flowing stream which shares your name
and those rock arches of the cave you made,
to journey to this land, the womb of iron?*

Or have you come to see how I am doing,
to sympathize with me in my distress?
Behold this spectacle—a friend of Zeus,
who helped him win his way to sovereignty!
See how his torments weigh me down!

370 [300]

OCEANUS

I see that,
Prometheus, and although you do possess
a subtle mind, I would like to offer you
some good advice. You have to understand
your character and adopt new habits.
For even gods have a new ruler now.
If you keep hurling out offensive words,
with such insulting and abusive language,
Zeus may well hear you, even though his throne
is far away, high in the heavenly sky,
and then this present heap of anguished pain
will seem mere childish play. Instead of that,
you poor suffering creature, set aside
this angry mood of yours and seek relief
from all this misery. These words of mine
may seem to you perhaps too old and trite,
but this is what you get, Prometheus,
for having such a proud and boastful tongue.
You show no modesty in what you say
and will not bow down before misfortune,
for you prefer to add more punishments
to those you have already. You should hear me
as your teacher and stop this kicking out
against the whip. You know our present king,
who rules all by himself and has no one

380 [310]

390

[320]

400

he must answer to, is harsh. I will go
and, if I can, attempt to ease your pain.
You must stay quiet—do not keep shouting
such intemperate things. Do you not know, [330]
with all that shrewd intelligence of yours,
your thoughtless tongue can get you punished? 410

PROMETHEUS

I am happy things turned out so well for you.
You had the courage to support my cause,
but you escaped all blame.* Now let me be,
and do not make my suffering your concern.
Whatever you may say will be in vain—
persuading Zeus is not an easy task.
You should take care this journey you have made
does not get you in trouble.

OCEANUS

Your nature
makes you far better at giving good advice
to neighbours rather than yourself. I judge 420
by looking at the facts, not by listening
to what others say. You should not deter [340]
a person who is eager to help out.
For I am sure—yes, I am confident—
there is one gift which Zeus will offer me,
and he will free you from this suffering.

PROMETHEUS

You have my thanks—and I will not forget.
There is in you no lack of willingness
to offer aid. But spare yourself the trouble,
which will be useless and no help to me, 430
if, in fact, you want to make the effort.
Just keep quiet, and do not interfere.
I may be miserable, but my distress
does not make me desire to see such pain
imposed on everyone—no, not at all.
What my brother Atlas has to suffer [350]
hurts my heart. In some region to the west
he has to stand, bearing on his shoulders
the pillar of earth and heaven, a load
even his arms find difficult to carry.* 440
And I feel pity when I contemplate
the creature living in Cilician caves,
that fearful monster with a hundred heads,
born from the earth, impetuous Typhon,
curbed by Zeus' force.* He held out against
the might of all the gods. His hideous jaws
produced a terrifying hiss, and his eyes
flashed a ferocious stare, as if his strength
could utterly destroy the rule of Zeus.

But Zeus' thunderbolt, which never sleeps,
that swooping, fire-breathing lightning stroke,
came down and drove the arrogant boasting
right out of him. Struck to his very heart,
he was reduced to ash, and all his might
was blasted away by rolls of thunder.
Now his helpless and immobile body
lies close beside a narrow ocean strait,
pinned down beneath the roots of Aetna,
while on that mountain, at the very top,
Hephaestus sits and forges red-hot iron.
But one day that mountain peak will blow out
rivers of fire, whose savage jaws devour
the level fruitful fields of Sicily.
Though Typhon may have been burned down to ash
by Zeus' lightning bolt, his seething rage
will then erupt and shoot out molten arrows,
belching horrifying streams of liquid fire.
But you are not without experience
and have no need of me to teach you this.
So save yourself the way you think is best,
and I will bear whatever I must face,
until the rage in Zeus' heart subsides.

OCEANUS

Surely you realize, Prometheus,
that in the case of a disordered mood
words act as healers.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, but only if
one uses them at the appropriate time
to soften up the heart and does not try
to calm its swollen rage too forcefully.

OCEANUS

What dangers do you see if someone blends
his courage and his eagerness to act?
Tell me that.

PROMETHEUS

Simple stupidity
and wasted effort.

OCEANUS

Well, let me fall ill
from this disease, for someone truly wise
profits most when he is thought a fool.

PROMETHEUS

But they will think that I made the mistake.

OCEANUS

Those words of yours are clearly telling me
to go back home.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, in case concern for me
gets you in serious trouble.

[390]

OCEANUS

You mean with Zeus,
now seated on his new all-powerful throne?

PROMETHEUS

Take care, in case one day that heart of his
vents its rage on you.

490

OCEANUS

What you are suffering,
Prometheus, will teach me that.

PROMETHEUS

Then go.
Be on your way. Keep to your present plans.

OCEANUS

These words of yours are telling me to leave,
and I am eager to depart. The wings
on this four-footed beast will brush the air
and make our pathway smooth. He will rejoice
to rest his limbs back in his stall at home.

[Exit OCEANUS]

CHORUS

I groan for your accursed fate,
Prometheus, and floods of tears
are streaming from my weeping eyes
and moisture wets my tender cheeks.
For Zeus, who rules by his own laws,
has set your wretched destiny and shows
towards the gods of earlier days
an overweening sense of power.

500 [400]

Now every region cries in one lament.
They mourn the lost magnificence,
so honoured long ago, the glorious fame
you and your brothers once possessed.
And all those mortal beings who live
in sacred Asia sense your pain,
those agonies all men find pitiful . . .

510 [410]

. . . including those young girls who dwell
in Colchis and have no fear of war,
and Scythian hordes who occupy
the furthest regions of the world
along the shores of lake Maeotis . . .

. . . and in Arabian lands the warlike tribes [420]
from those high rocky fortress towns 520
in regions near the Caucasus,
a horde of warriors who scream
to heft their lethal sharpened spears.*

Only once before have I beheld
another Titan god in such distress
bound up in adamantine chains—
great Atlas, whose enormous strength
was unsurpassed and who now groans
to bear the vault of heaven on his back. [430]

The sea waves, as they fall, cry out, 530
the ocean depths lament, while down below
the deep black pits of Hades growl,
and limpid flowing rivers moan,
to see the dreadful pain you undergo.

PROMETHEUS

You must not think it is my stubbornness
that keeps me quiet, or a sense of pride,
for bitter thoughts keep gnawing at my heart
to see how foully I am being abused.
And yet who else but I assigned clear rights [440]
and privileges to these new deities?* 540
But I make no complaint about such things,
for if I spoke, I would be telling you
what you already know. So listen now
to all the miseries of mortal men—
how they were simple fools in earlier days,
until I gave them sense and intellect.
I will not speak of them to criticize,
but in a spirit of goodwill to show
I did them many favours.

First of all,
they noticed things, but did not really see 550
and listened, too, but did not really hear.

They spent their lives confusing everything, [450]
like random shapes in dreams. They knew nothing
of brick-built houses turned towards the sun
or making things with wood. Instead, they dug
their dwelling places underneath the earth,
like airy ants in cracks of sunless caves.

They had no signs on which they could rely
to show when winter came or flowery spring
or fruitful summer. Everything they did 560
betrayed their total lack of understanding,
until I taught them all about the stars
and pointed out the way they rise and set,
which is not something easy to discern.

Then I invented arithmetic for them,
the most ingenious acquired skill, [460]
and joining letters to write down words,
so they could store all things in Memory,
the working mother of the Muses' arts.*
I was the first to set wild animals 570
beneath the yoke, and I made them submit
to collars and to packs, so mortal men
would find relief from bearing heavy loads.
I took horses trained to obey the reins
and harnessed them to chariots, a sign
of luxurious wealth and opulence.
And I was the one who designed their ships,
those mariners' vessels which sail on wings
across the open sea.

Yes, those are the things
which I produced for mortal men, and yet, 580 [470]
as I now suffer here, I cannot find
a way to free myself from this distress.

CHORUS

You have had to bear appalling pain.
You lost your wits and now are at a loss.
Like some bad doctor who has fallen ill,
you are now desperate and cannot find
the medicine to cure your own disease.

PROMETHEUS

Just listen to what else I have to say,
and you will be astonished even more
by the ideas and skills I came up with. 590
The greatest one was this: if anyone
was sick, they had no remedies at all,
no healing potions, food, or liniments. [480]
Without such things, they simply withered up.
But then I showed them how to mix mild cures,
which they now use to fight off all disease.
I set up many forms of prophecy
and was the first to organize their dreams,
to say which ones were fated to come true.
I taught them about omens—vocal sounds 600
hard to understand, as well as random signs
encountered on the road. The flights of birds
with crooked talons I classified for them—
both those which by their nature are auspicious
and those whose prophecies are ominous— [490]
observing each bird's different way of life,
its enemies, its friends, and its companions,
as well as the smooth texture of its entrails,
what colour the gall bladder ought to have
to please the gods, and the best symmetry 610

for speckled lobes on livers.* I roasted
thigh bones wrapped in fat and massive cuts of meat
and showed those mortal beings the right way
to read the omens which are hard to trace.
I opened up their eyes to fiery symbols
which previously they could not understand.
Yes, I did all that. And then I helped them
with what lay hidden in the earth—copper,
iron, silver, gold. Who could ever claim
he had discovered these before I did?
No one. I am quite confident of that,
unless he wished to waste his time in chat.
To sum up everything in one brief word,
know this—all the artistic skills men have
come from Prometheus.

[500]

620

CHORUS

But you should not
be giving help like that to human beings
beyond the proper limits, ignoring
your own troubles, for I have every hope
you will be liberated from these chains
and be as powerful as Zeus himself.

[510]

630

PROMETHEUS

It is not destined that almighty Fate
will ever end these matters in that way.
I will lose these chains, but only after
I have been left twisting here in agony,
bowed down by countless pains. Artistic skill
has far less strength than sheer Necessity.

CHORUS

Then who is the one who steers Necessity?

PROMETHEUS

The three-formed Fates and unforgetting Furies.*

CHORUS

Are they more powerful than Zeus?

PROMETHEUS

Well, Zeus
will not at any rate escape his destiny.

640

CHORUS

But what has destiny foretold for Zeus,
except to rule eternally?

PROMETHEUS

That point
you must not know quite yet. Do not pursue it.

[520]

CHORUS

It is some holy secret you conceal.

PROMETHEUS

Think of something else. It is not yet time
to talk of this. The matter must remain
completely hidden, for if I can keep
the secret safe, then I shall be released
from torment and lose these shameful fetters.

CHORUS

May Zeus, who governs everything, 650
never direct his power at me
and fight against my purposes.
And may I never ease my efforts [530]
to approach the gods with offerings
of oxen slain in sacrifice
beside my father's restless stream,
the ceaseless flow of Oceanus.
May I not speak a profane word.
Instead let this resolve remain
and never melt away from me. 660

It is sweet to spend a lengthy life
with hope about what lies in store,
feeding one's heart with happy thoughts.
But when I look at you, Prometheus,
tormented by these countless pains,
I shiver in fear—with your self-will [540]
you show no reverence for Zeus
and honour mortal beings too much.

Come, my friend, those gifts you gave—
what gifts did you get in return? 670
Tell me how they could offer help?
What can such creatures of a day provide?
Do you not see how weak they are,
the impotent and dream-like state,
in which the sightless human race
is bound, with chains around their feet? [550]
Whatever mortal beings decide to do,
they cannot overstep what Zeus has planned.

I learned these things, Prometheus,
by watching your destructive fate. 680
The song which now steals over me
is different from that nuptial chant
I sang around your couch and bath
to celebrate your wedding day,
when with your dowry gifts you won
Hesione, my sister, as your wife, [560]
and led her to your bridal bed.

*[Enter IO]**

IO

What land is this? What race of living beings?

Who shall I say I see here bound in chains,
exposed and suffering on these cold rocks? 690
What crime has led to such a punishment
and your destruction? Tell me where I am.
Where has my wretched wandering brought me?
To what part of the world?

[Io is suddenly in great pain]

Aaaaiiii! The pain!!!
That gadfly stings me once again, the ghost
of earth-born Argus! Get him away from me,
O Earth, that herdsman with a thousand eyes—
the very sight of him fills me with terror!
Those crafty eyes of his keep following me.
Though dead, he is not hidden underground, 700 [570]
but moves out from the shades beneath the earth
and hunts me down and, in my wretched state,
drives me to wander without nourishment
along the sandy shore beside the sea.
A pipe made out of reeds and wax sings out
a clear relaxing strain.* Alas for me!
Where is this path of roaming far and wide
now leading me. What did I ever do,
O son of Cronos, how did I go wrong,
that you should yoke me to such agonies . . . 710 [580]

[Io reacts to another attack]

Aaaaiiii! . . . and by oppressing me like this,
setting a fearful stinging fly to chase
a helpless girl, drive me to this madness?
Burn me with fire, or bury me in earth,
or feed me to the monsters of the sea.
Do not refuse these prayers of mine, my lord!
I have had my fill of all this wandering,
this roaming far and wide—and all this pain!
I do not know how to escape the pain!
Do you not hear the ox-horned maiden call? 720

PROMETHEUS

How could I not hear that young girl's voice,
the child of Inachus, in a frantic state
from the gadfly's sting? She fires Zeus' heart [590]
with sexual lust, and now, worn down
by Hera's hate, is forced to roam around
on paths that never end.

IO

Why do you shout
my father's name? Tell this unhappy girl
just who you are, you wretched sufferer,
and how, in my distress, you call to me,
knowing who I am and naming my disease, 730

the heaven-sent sickness which consumes me
as it whips my skin with maddening stings . . .

[Io is attacked again by the gadfly. She moves spasmodically as she wrestles with the pain]

. . . Aaaiii! . . . I have come rushing here, wracked
with driving pangs of hunger, overwhelmed [600]
by Hera's plans for her revenge. Of those
who are in misery . . . Aaaiiii! . . . which ones
go through the sufferings I face? Give me
some clear sign how much more agony
I have to bear! Is there no remedy?
Tell me the medicines for this disease, 740
if you know any. Say something to me!
Speak to a wretched wandering young girl!

PROMETHEUS

I will clarify for you all those things
you wish to know—not by weaving riddles, [610]
but by using simple speech. For with friends
our mouths should tell the truth quite openly.
You are looking at the one who offered men
the gift of fire. I am Prometheus.

IO

O you who have shown to mortal beings
so many benefits they all can share, 750
poor suffering Prometheus! What act
has led you to be punished in this way?

PROMETHEUS

I have just finished mourning my own pain.

IO

Will you not grant this favour to me, then?

PROMETHEUS

Ask what you wish to know. For you will learn
the details of it all from me.

IO

Tell me

who chained you here against this rocky cleft.

PROMETHEUS

The will of Zeus and Hephaestus' hands.

IO

For what offence are you being punished? [620]

PROMETHEUS

I have said enough. I will not tell you 760
any more than that.

IO

But I need more.

At least inform me when my wandering ends.
How long will I be in this wretched state?

PROMETHEUS

For you it would be better not to know
than to have me answer.

IO

I'm begging you—
do not conceal from me what I must bear.

PROMETHEUS

It is not that I begrudge that gift to you.

IO

Then why do you appear so hesitant
to tell me everything?

PROMETHEUS

I am not unwilling,
but I do not wish to break your spirit.

770

IO

Do not be more concerned for how I feel
than I wish you to be.

PROMETHEUS

Since you insist,
I am obliged to speak. So listen to me.

[630]

CHORUS

No, not yet. Give us a share in this, as well,
so we may be content with what you say.
We should first learn how she became diseased.
So let the girl herself explain to us
the things that led to her destructive fate.
Then you can teach her what still lies in store.

PROMETHEUS

Well then, Io, it is now up to you
to grace them with this favour—above all,
because they are your father's sisters.*
And whenever one is likely to draw tears
from those who listen, it is well worthwhile
to weep aloud, lamenting one's own fate.

780

IO

I do not know how I could now refuse you.
From the plain tale I tell you will find out
all things you wish to know, although to talk
about the brutal storm sent by the gods,
the cruel transformation of my shape,
and where the trouble came from, as it swept
down on a miserable wretch like me—
that makes me feel ashamed.

[640]

790

During the night
visions were always strolling through my rooms
calling me with smooth, seductive words:

“You are a very fortunate young girl,
so why remain a virgin all this time,
when you could have the finest match of all?
For Zeus, smitten by the shaft of passion,
now burns for you and wishes to make love.
My child, do not reject the bed of Zeus,
but go to Lerna’s fertile meadowlands,
to your father’s flocks and stalls of oxen,
so Zeus’ eyes can ease his fierce desire.”

800 [650]

Visions like that upset me every night,
till I got brave enough to tell my father
about what I was seeing in my dreams.
He sent many messengers to Delphi
and Dodona, to see if he could learn
what he might do or say to please the gods.
But his men all came back bringing reports
of cryptic and confusing oracles,
with wording difficult to comprehend.

810 [660]

Inachus at last received a clear response,
a simple order which he must obey—
to drive me from my home and native land,
to turn me out and force me into exile,
roaming the remotest regions of the earth—
and if he was unwilling, Zeus would send
a flaming thunderbolt which would destroy
his entire race, not leaving one alive.

820

So he obeyed Apollo’s oracles
by forcing me away against my will
and denying me entry to his home.

[670]

He did not want to do it but was forced
by the controlling power of Zeus.
Immediately my mind and shape were changed.

My head acquired these horns, as you can see,
and a vicious fly began tormenting me
with such ferocious stings I ran away,
madly bounding off to the flowing stream
of sweet Cherchneia and then to Lerna’s springs.

830

But the herdsman Argus, a child of Earth,
whose rage is violent, came after me,
with all those close-packed eyes of his, searching
for my tracks. But an unexpected fate
which no one could foresee robbed him of his life.
And now, tormented by this stinging gadfly,
a scourge from god, I am being driven
from place to place.

[680]

So now you understand 840
the story of what I have had to suffer.
If you can talk about my future troubles,
then let me know. But do not pity me
and speak false words of reassurance,
for, in my view, to use deceitful speech
is the most shameful sickness of them all.

CHORUS

Alas, alas! Tell me no more! Alas!
I never, never thought my ears
would hear a story strange as this 850 [690]
or suffering so hard to contemplate
and terrible to bear, the outrage
and the horror of that two-edged goad
would pierce me to my soul. Alas!
O Fate, Fate, how I shake with fear
to see what has been done to Io.

PROMETHEUS

These cries and fears of yours are premature.
Wait until you learn what lies in store for her.

CHORUS

Then speak, and tell us everything. The sick
find solace when they clearly understand
the pain they have to face before it comes. 860

PROMETHEUS

What you desired to learn about before 870 [700]
you now have readily obtained from me,
for you were eager first of all to hear
Io herself tell you what she suffered.
Now listen to what she has yet to face,
the ordeals this girl must still experience
at Hera's hands. You, too, child of Inachus,
set what I have to say inside your heart,
so you will find out how your roaming ends.

First, turn from here towards the rising sun, 870
then move across those lands as yet unploughed,
and you will reach the Scythian nomads, [710]
who live in wicker dwellings which they raise
on strong-wheeled wagons. These men possess
far-shooting bows, so stay away from them.
Keep moving on along the rocky shoreline
beside the roaring sea, and pass their lands.
The Chalybes, men who work with iron,
live to your left.* You must beware of them,
for they are wild and are not kind to strangers. 880
Then you will reach the river Hubristes,
correctly named for its great turbulence.
Do not cross it, for that is dangerous,

until you reach the Caucasus itself,
the very highest of the mountains there, [720]
where the power of that flowing river
comes gushing from the slopes. Then cross those peaks,
which stretch up to the stars, and take the path
going south, until you reach the Amazons,
a tribe which hates all men. In days to come, 890
they will found settlements in Themiscyra,
beside the Thermodon, where the jagged rocks
of Salmydessus face the sea and offer
sailors and their ships a savage welcome.
They will be pleased to guide you on your way.
Next, you will reach the Cimmerian isthmus,
beside the narrow entrance to a lake.
You must be resolute and leave this place [730]
and at Maeotis move across the stream,
a trip that will win you eternal fame 900
among all mortal men, for they will name
that place the Bosphorus in praise of you.*
Once you leave behind the plains of Europe
you will arrive in Asian lands.

And now,
does it not strike you that this tyrant god
is violent in everything he does?
Because this maiden was a mortal being
and he was eager to have sex with her,
he threw her out to wander the whole world.
Young girl, the one you found to seek your hand 910
is vicious. As for the story you just heard,
you should know this—I am not even past
the opening prelude. [740]

IO

O no, no, no! Alas!

PROMETHEUS

Are you crying and moaning once again?
How will you act once you have learned from me
the agonies that still remain?

CHORUS

You mean
you have still more to say about her woes?

PROMETHEUS

I do—a wintry sea of dreadful pain.

IO

What point is there for me in living then?
Why do I not hurl myself this instant 920
from these rough rocks, fall to the plain below,
and put an end to all my misery?

PROMETHEUS

No, none at all—
except through me, once I lose these chains.

[770]

IO

Who will free you if Zeus does not consent?

PROMETHEUS

One of your grandchildren. So Fate decrees.

IO

What are you saying? Will a child of mine
bring your afflictions to an end?

950

PROMETHEUS

He will—
when thirteen generations have gone by.

IO

I find it difficult to understand
what you foresee.

PROMETHEUS

You should not seek to know
the details of the pain you still must bear.

IO

Do not say you will do me a favour
and then withdraw it.

PROMETHEUS

I will offer you
two possibilities, and you may choose.

IO

What are they? Tell me what the choices are.
Then let me pick which one.

PROMETHEUS

All right, I will.
Choose whether I should clarify for you
the ordeals you still must face in days to come,
or else reveal the one who will release me.

960

[780]

CHORUS

Do her a favour by disclosing one
and me by telling us about the other.
Do not refuse to tell us all the story.
Describe her future wanderings to her,
and speak to me of who will set you free.
I long to hear that.

PROMETHEUS

Well, since you insist,
I will not refuse to tell you everything
you wish to know. First, Io, I will speak
about the grievous wandering you face.

970

Inscribe this on the tablets of your mind, [790]
deep in your memory.

Once you have crossed
the stream that separates two continents,
[select the route that] leads towards the east,
the flaming pathway of the rising son,
[and you will come, at first, to northern lands
where cold winds blow, and here you must beware
of gusting storms, in case a winter blast
surprises you and snatches you away.]* 980
Then cross the roaring sea until you reach
the Gorgons' plains of Cisthene, the home
of Phorcys' daughters, three ancient women
shaped like swans, who possess a single eye
and just one tooth to share among themselves.
Rays from the sun do not look down on them,
nor does the moon at night. Beside them live
their sisters, three snake-haired, winged Gorgons,
whom human beings despise. No mortal man 990
can gaze at them and still continue breathing.* [800]
I tell you this to warn you to take care.
Now hear about another fearful sight.
Keep watching out for gryphons, hounds of Zeus,
who have sharp beaks and never bark out loud,
and for that one-eyed Arimaspians horde
on horseback, who live beside the flow
of Pluto's gold-rich stream.* Do not go near them.
And later you will reach a distant land 1000
of people with dark skins who live beside [810]
the fountains of the sun, where you will find
the river Aethiop.* Follow its banks,
until you move down to the cataract
where from the Bybline mountains the sweet Nile
sends out his sacred flow. He will guide you
on your journey to the three-cornered land
of Nilotis, where destiny proclaims
you, Io, and your children will set up
a distant settlement.

If any of this
remains obscure and hard to understand, 1010
question me again, and I will tell you.
For I have more spare time than I desire.

CHORUS

If you have left out any incidents
or can say more about what lies ahead [820]
in Io's cruel journeying, go on.
But if that story has now reached an end,
then favour us, in turn, with what we asked,
if you by chance remember our request.

PROMETHEUS

Io has now heard about her travels,
a full account up to the very end. 1020
But so she learns that what she heard from me
was no mere empty tale, I will go through
the troubles she endured before she came here,
and thus provide a certain guarantee
of what I have just said. I will omit
most of the details and describe for you
the final stages of your journey here.

Once you came to the Molossian plains
and the steep mountain ridge beside Dodona, [830]
the home of the prophetic oracle 1030
of Thesprotian Zeus, that miracle
which defies belief, the talking oak trees,
clearly and quite unambiguously
saluted you as one who would become
a celebrated bride of Zeus.* Is this
a memory that gives you some delight?
From there, chased by the gadfly's sting, you rushed
along the path beside the sea and reached
the mighty gulf of Rhea and from there
were driven back by storms. And you should know 1040
an inner region of that sea will now,
in days to come, be called Ionian, [840]
a name to make all mortal men recall
how Io moved across it.*

These details
are tokens of how much I understand—
they show how my intelligence can see
more things than what has been revealed.

The rest
I will describe for you and her to share,
pursuing the same track I traced before.
On the very edges of the mainland, 1050
where at its mouth the Nile deposits soil,
there is a city—Canopus. There Zeus
will finally restore you to your senses
by merely stroking and caressing you
with his non-threatening hand. After that,
you will give birth to dark-skinned Epaphus,
named from the way he was conceived by Zeus, [850]
and he will harvest all the fruit that grows
in regions watered by the flowing Nile.*
Five generations after Epaphus, 1060
fifty young girls will return to Argos,
not of their own free will, but to escape
a marriage with their cousins, while the men,
with passionate hearts, race after them,

like hawks in close pursuit of doves, seeking marriages they should not rightfully pursue.*
But the gods will not allow them to enjoy the young girls' bodies. They will be buried in Pelasgian earth, for their new brides keeping watch at night, will overpower and, in a daring murder, kill them all, and each young bride will take her husband's life, bathing a two-edged sword in her man's blood. I hope my enemies find love like that! But passion will bewitch one of those wives to spare her husband's life, and her resolve will fade. She will prefer to hear herself proclaimed a coward than the alternative, a murderess. And she will then give birth in Argos to a royal line.

[860]
1070

To describe all these events in detail would require a lengthy story. However, from her seed a bold man will be born, who will become a famous archer, and he is the one who will deliver me from these afflictions. My primeval Titan mother, Themis, revealed this prophecy to me in full, but to describe how and when it happens would take up too much time. And learning that would bring no benefit to you at all.

1080
[870]

IO

Alas, alas for me! These spasms of pain, these agonizing fits which drive me mad are turning me to fire. That gadfly's string—not forged in any flame—is piercing me. My fearful heart is beating in my chest, my eyes are rolling in a frantic whirl, and raging blasts of sheer insanity are sweeping me away. This tongue of mine is now beyond control—delirious words beat aimlessly against the surging flood of my abhorred destruction.

1090

[880]

1100

[Exit IO]

CHORUS

That wise man was truly wise who first devised that saying in his mind and then whose tongue expressed the words aloud—the finest marriages by far are those when both the parties have an equal rank. The poor should never yearn to match themselves with those whose wealth has made them indolent or those who always praise their noble birth.

[890]

O you Fates, may you never, never see
me going as Zeus' partner to his bed,
and may I never be the wedded bride
of anyone from heaven. I shake with fear
to look on this unmarried girl, young Io,
so devastated by the cruel journey,
her punishment from goddess Hera. [900]

For me, when a married couple stands
on equal footing, there is no cause to fear
and I am not afraid. So may the love
of mightier gods never cast on me
that glance which no one can withstand. 1120
That is a battle where there is no fight,
where what cannot be done is possible.
I do not know what would become of me,
for I can see no way I could escape
the skilled resourcefulness of Zeus.

PROMETHEUS

And yet Zeus, for all his obdurate heart,
will be brought down, when he prepares a match
which will remove him from his tyrant's throne
and hurl him into deep obscurity. [910]

And then the curse his father, Cronos, spoke,
the one he uttered when he was deposed
and lost his ancient throne, will all come true.
None of the gods can clearly offer him
a certain way to stave off this defeat,
except for me. I know what is involved
and how to save him. So for the moment
let him sit full of confidence, trusting
the rumbling he can make high in the sky
and waving in his hands that lightning bolt
which breathes out fire. None of these will help. 1140

They will not stop him falling in disgrace,
a setback he cannot withstand. For now
he is himself preparing the very one [920]
who will oppose him, someone marvellous
and irresistible, who will produce
a fiercer fire than Zeus' lightning flash,
and a roar to drown out Zeus' thunder.
Poseidon's trident he will split apart,
the spear which whips the sea and shakes the earth.* 1150

And when Zeus stumbles on this evil fate,
he will find out how great the difference is
between a sovereign king and abject slave.

CHORUS

You keep maligning Zeus because these things
fit in with your desires.

PROMETHEUS

They may be what I want,
but they will come to pass.

CHORUS

So must we then
expect someone to lord it over Zeus? [930]

PROMETHEUS

Yes. His neck will be weighed down with chains
more onerous than mine.

CHORUS

Why are you not afraid
to shout out taunts like this?

PROMETHEUS

Why should I fear
when I am destined not to die? 1160

CHORUS

But Zeus
could load you with afflictions worse than these.

PROMETHEUS

Then let him do it. I am quite prepared
for anything he may inflict.

CHORUS

But it is wise
to pay due homage to Necessity.

PROMETHEUS

Well then, pay homage. Bow your heads in awe.
Flatter the one who has the power to rule,
at least for now. But as for me, I think
of Zeus as less than nothing. Let him act
however he wants and reign for a brief while. 1170
He will not rule the gods for very long. [940]
But wait! I see the messenger of Zeus,
a servant of our brand new tyrant lord.
No doubt he has come here to give us news.

[Enter Hermes]

HERMES

You devious, hot-tempered schemer, who sinned
against the gods by giving their honours
to creatures of a day, you thief of fire,
I am here to speak to you. Father Zeus
is ordering you to make known this marriage
you keep boasting of and to provide the name
of who will bring on Zeus' fall from power. 1180
Do not speak in enigmatic riddles,
but set down clearly each and every fact. [950]
And do not make me come a second time,

Prometheus. What you are doing here,
as you well know, will not make Zeus relent.

PROMETHEUS

Your speech is crammed with pride and arrogance,
quite fitting for a servant of the gods.

You all are young—so is your ruling power—
and you believe the fortress where you live
lies far beyond all grief. But I have seen
two tyrant rulers cast out from that place,
and I will see a third, the present king,
abruptly tossed from there in great disgrace.*

1190

Do you think I am afraid and cower down
before you upstart gods? The way I feel
is far removed from any sense of fear.

[960]

So you should hurry back the way you came,
for you will not learn anything at all
in answer to what you demand of me.

1200

HERMES

But earlier with this wilfulness of yours
you brought these torments on yourself.

PROMETHEUS

Know this—

I would not trade these harsh conditions of mine
for the life you lead as Zeus' slave.

HERMES

I suppose

you find it preferable to serve this rock
than be a trusted messenger of Father Zeus.

PROMETHEUS

Insolence like yours deserves such insults.

[970]

HERMES

It sounds as if you find your present state
a source of pleasure.

PROMETHEUS

Of pleasure? How I wish

I could see my foes enjoying themselves
the way I do. And I count you among them.

1210

HERMES

You think I am to blame for your misfortune?

PROMETHEUS

To put it bluntly—I hate all the gods
who received my help and then abused me,
perverting justice.

HERMES

From the words you speak

I see your madness is no mild disease.

you should consider if this stance of yours
will help your cause.

PROMETHEUS

What I am doing now
has been foretold, determined long ago.

HERMES

You self-willed fool, for once you should submit,
given the present torments facing you. [1000]
Let your mind be ruled by what is right.

PROMETHEUS

It is pointless to pester me this way—
as if you were advising ocean waves. 1240
For you should never entertain the thought
that I will be afraid of Zeus' schemes,
turn into a woman, and raise my hands,
the way that supplicating females do,
and beg an enemy I hate so much
to free me from these chains. To act like that
is far beneath me.

HERMES

Well, it seems to me
if I keep talking to you at great length
my words will all be wasted—my appeals
do not improve your mood or calm you down. 1250
Like a young colt newly yoked, you bite the bit
and use your strength to fight against the reins. [1010]
But the vehement resistance you display
rests on a feeble scheme, for on its own

mere stubbornness in those with foolish minds
is less than useless. If these words of mine
do not convince you, think about the storm,
the triple wave of torment which will fall
and you cannot escape. First, Father Zeus
will rip this mountain crag with thunder claps 1260
and bolts of flaming lightning, burying
your body in the rock, and yet this cleft
will hold you in its arms. When you have spent [1020]
a long time underground, you will return
into the light, and Zeus' winged hound,

his ravenous eagle, will cruelly rip
your mutilated body into shreds
and, like an uninvited banqueter,
will feast upon your liver all day long,
until its chewing turns the organ black. 1270

Do not expect your suffering to end
until some god appears who will take on
your troubles and be willing to descend
to sunless Hades and the deep black pit [1030]
of Tartarus. And so you should think hard.

What I have said is no fictitious boast,
but plain and simple truth. For Zeus' mouth
does not know how to utter something false.
No. Everything he says will be fulfilled.
Look around you and reflect. And never think
self-will is preferable to prudent thought. 1280

CHORUS

To us it seems that what Hermes has said
is not unreasonable. His orders
tell you to set aside your stubbornness
and seek out wise advice. Do what he says.
It is dishonourable for someone wise
to persevere in doing something wrong.

PROMETHEUS

Well, I already know about the news [1040]
this fellow has announced with so much fuss.
There is no shame in painful suffering 1290
inflicted by one enemy on another.
So let him hurl his twin-forked lightning bolts
down on my head, convulse the air with thunder
and frantic gusts of howling wind, and shake
the earth with hurricanes until they shift
the very roots of its foundations. Let him
make the wildly surging sea waves mingle
with the pathways of the heavenly stars, [1050]
then lift my body up and fling it down
to pitch black Tartarus, into the whirl 1300
of harsh Necessity. Let him do all that—
he cannot make me die.

HERMES *[to the Chorus]*

Ideas like these,
expressed the way he does, are what we hear
from those who are quite mad. This prayer of his—
how is that not delusion? When does it stop,
this senseless raving? Well, in any case,
you who sympathize with his afflictions
should move off with all speed to somewhere else, [1060]
in case the roaring force of Zeus' thunder
affects your minds and drives you all insane. 1310

CHORUS

You will have give me different advice
and try to urge me in some other way
in order to convince me. For I believe
your stream of words is unendurable.
How can you order me to act so badly?
I wish to share with him whatever pain
Fate has in store, for I have learned to hate
those who betray—of all the sicknesses
that is most despicable to me. [1070]

HERMES

As you wish—but remember what I said.
Do not blame your luck when you are trapped
in Ruin's nets, and never claim that Zeus
flung you into torments without warning.
No—you can blame yourselves. For now you know
by your own folly you will be caught up
in Ruin's web, not by a secret ruse
or unexpectedly. And from that net
there will be no escape.

1320

[Exit Hermes]

PROMETHEUS

And now things are already being transformed
from words to deeds—the earth is shuddering,
the roaring thunder from beneath the sea
is rumbling past me, while bolts of lightning
flash their twisting fire, whirlwinds toss the dust,
and blasting winds rush out to launch a war
of howling storms, one against another.
The sky is now confounded with the sea.
This turmoil is quite clearly aimed at me
and comes from Zeus to make me feel afraid.
O sacred mother Earth and heavenly Sky,
who rolls around the light that all things share,
you see these unjust wrongs I must endure!*

1330 [1080]

[1090]
1340