

**THE PROMETHEUS OF
ÆSCHYLUS, WITH NOTES,
FOR THE USE OF COLLEGES
IN THE UNITED STATES**

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The Prometheus of Æschylus, with Notes, for the Use of Colleges in the United States by
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PROMETHEUS

OF

ÆSCHYLUS,

WITH

NOTES,

FOR

THE USE OF COLLEGES IN THE UNITED STATES

By THEODORE D. WOOLSEY,

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PREFACE.

THE subject of this tragedy is a struggle between absolute power and the spirit of freedom as displayed by an unsubdued will amid the severest sufferings. Prometheus is condemned by the ruler of the Gods to atone for having stolen fire from heaven, by being nailed and chained to a lonely rock. There can be but little action in such a plot where the chief character is passive; but the poet has thrown into it a very deep interest by the person of the sufferer and the grandeur of the scenery, while the few incidents of the play tend directly or by contrast to manifest the unconquerable will of Prometheus. His offence itself enlists our sympathies; it is, that he raised the human race from the lowest misery, against the will of a monarch who sought to destroy it. He is a divinity, and the chief of the allies through whose aid Jupiter tore the sceptre from his father's hand; and by his prophetic spirit he looks through long ages of torture to the time when he is destined to be loosed. Thus, though powerless, he is not in despair; but alive as he is to the feeling of pain, and bewailing, as he does, his lot, he can yet make up his mind to come to no terms with his oppressor, and already triumphs in the prospect that Jupiter will be forced, for his own sake, to set him free.

The play opens with the preparatives for the torture.

PREFACE.

Force and Might, two giant ministers of Jove, (see Hesiod's *Theogony*, 385,) accompanied by Vulcan, appear upon the stage; Force is a mute spectator, and his office may be conceived to have been that of dragging the struggling God to the place. But Might oversees the fulfilment of the sentence; and while Vulcan drives the nails, and clasps the chains, he chides the tardiness of the work, and taunts Prometheus with the folly of his opposition to the Gods. After these executioners have withdrawn, the Chorus of sea-nymphs (probably fifteen in number), hearing the sound of driven steel, assemble and condole with their kinsman: they are the representatives of that honest but weak class, whose open sympathy with the oppressed is beneath the tyrant's notice. Oceanus, their father, next appears, gives wholesome advice to Prometheus, and offers to intercede with Jove in his behalf. The offer is scorned, and indeed was made rather for form's sake, than from any belief that it would be accepted. Oceanus is one who feels a degree of kindness for the oppressed, but wishes mainly to keep himself out of danger, and to stand well with both parties. After his departure, Prometheus, as one who has resolved to endure his evils, and who seeks to occupy his mind with other thoughts, tells the Chorus the blessings which he had conferred upon mankind by the gift of fire. Thus he calls forth our interest, and shows the malignity of Jupiter.

A new sufferer now appears. Io, the victim of lust and vengeance, driven through the wildest parts of the earth in an altered form, passes the spot where Prometheus is chained. He predicts her future course, and relates her past wanderings. She leaves the place, goaded by the same maddening spectre of Argos which drove her thither. The dramatic connection of this part with the rest of the play is somewhat remote. It lies partly in the fact that Prometheus and Io are victims of the same oppression; but chiefly in the decree of fate, that one of her descendants, Hercules,

PREFACE.

shall loose him from his bonds. But, viewed in regard to internal unity, this part is quite one with the rest, and Io, by the entire contrast of her character in the same circumstances, acts as a foil to Prometheus. She is all passive endurance; he, free resistance; she is despair, and he hope. Even their very woes are contrasted: he, the free one, is chained, and she, the passive one, is left free to wander at large. It must have been the perception of the effect of these contrasts that led the poet, perhaps unconsciously, to select the story of Io from the variety of incidents which he might have woven into the plot.

Prometheus boasts, before Io and the Chorus, that he foresees a ruinous marriage, into which Jupiter will enter, unaware of his danger. Mercury now appears, to demand what marriage he speaks of. He refuses to tell; and the play closes with a wilder display of vengeance than that with which it opened. The bolt is hurled from heaven; the elements are thrown into disorder; the rocks are blasted around Prometheus; his body is thunder-riven; but, unyielding still, he cries to the sky and to his mother Themis to behold the injustice which he is suffering. "The triumph of subjection," says Schlegel, "was never celebrated in more glorious strains, and we have difficulty in conceiving how the poet could sustain himself on such an elevation."

It is worthy of remark, that *Æschylus* in this play seems to scorn the poetical religion of Greece, and to show little reverence towards the chief of the Gods. Elsewhere, and especially in the Choruses of the Suppliants, the character of Jupiter is set forth in terms worthy of the supreme ruler. But here he is the successful usurper, who forgets the friends that helped him; is a foe to the race of man; acts according to his will rather than his reason; and is controlled by fate. It is not easy to say why so religious a poet ventured to guide his hearer's sympathies against Jupiter and in favor

of Prometheus, or how he ventured to choose a plot in which human feelings could take no other channel. One might almost think that he conceived of Jupiter as passing through the changes of character which were to be seen in some Greek tyrants;—as reigning arbitrarily and by force at first, crushing his foes and strengthening his power by whatever means; but afterwards, when his end was gained, becoming mild, just, and the father of Gods and men.* Or it may be that he stood aloof from the pop-

* This paragraph of the preface was written for the second edition, in 1840, and the theory here propounded was probably suggested by what Dissen says in Welcker's work, to which reference is made just below. Since that time, in the year 1844, Prof Schömann, of Greifswald, has published his poetical translation of the Prometheus Bound, and a Prometheus Loosed of his own, written with a view to illustrate a theory in regard to the Promethean trilogy. That theory in its outlines is, that we have no right to judge of the final impression of the *tout ensemble* from this play, which formed the middle act of the great drama, and in which Prometheus has the field almost entirely to himself; that the poet did not sympathize with Prometheus, but regarded him as a transgressor of divine law justly punished; and that, in the closing act, where he was freed from his chains by the clemency of Zeus, he owned his fault, submitted, and was heartily reconciled. As for the human sympathies which he enlists by his resistance, on behalf of mankind, to the plans of Zeus, he misrepresents the feelings of Zeus toward the human race, and his intervention is uncalled for. In short, he is partial in his statements, a σοφιστής in a worse sense than that in which Hermes applies to him the term, as well as *κατὰ τὴν ὑπερτίκρον* (v. 944). The closing member of the trilogy must have purified the minds of the audience from the impressions which the Prometheus Loosed by itself is calculated to make.

It would be idle, within the limits of a note, to discuss this theory, which, proceeding as it did from an admirable scholar, made quite a sensation, and yet failed to work conviction in many minds, and, I must confess, in my own. It defends the religious consistency of Æschylus at the expense of his dramatic skill; for what ought to be said of the art of a poet who, through one whole drama, gives no sign that he does not regard Zeus as acting tyrannically? No character in the piece takes side against Prometheus, except Hermes, the "runner" of

ular religion, and thought it right to use its fables in his dramas with little scruple as to their tendency, while yet his own idea of God was a lofty one, and was inculcated wher-

Zeus, and Kratos, who has no more of the moral person about him than a thunderbolt. The Chorus, indeed, pronounces that he has made a mistake in helping mankind (v. 260), and exhort him to greater moderation of language and feeling (vv. 928, 936, 1036); but then they show all along a tender compassion for him, and are willing to share his woes (vv. 1066-1070), as those of an injured person whose side they have espoused. Their father, Oceanus, urges Prometheus to a milder and more yielding course, not because he has sinned, but because a "rough monarch and an irresponsible bears away." As for Io, it is not easy to see why she is drawn into the stream of the action, unless to increase the tide of feeling against Zeus. And what is most worthy of notice, the words of Hephaestus himself, own son of Zeus, are to his disadvantage:—

ἀρας δὲ τραχὺς ἔστις ἐν νέον κρατῆ.

Who does not see that the poet, speaking through the mouth of the Fire-god, — who, by the way, is not so very resentful against Prometheus for stealing his attribute of fire, — condemns Zeus as sweeping too clean with his new broom of power?

Upon the whole, I am willing to believe that the last play of the trilogy, if extant, would *modify* the feelings which this drama leaves on the mind. I am willing also to admit, that the sympathy on behalf of Prometheus exacted by the present play is more a modern feeling, than one which would be awakened in the breasts of an Athenian audience. But if they did not go along with the sufferer in their sensibilities, surely they cannot have abstained from compassionating Io, whose wrongs at the hand of Zeus are not to be explained by any *dénouement* in the third part of the trilogy, and must have been inconsistent with the moral standard of the poet himself. Thus we see that he cannot have intended in this drama to exhibit Zeus as a perfect sovereign, having all the right on his side, but rather as a sovereign who found it necessary to resort to severity in order to establish his power, while the question of the right and wrong of the plans of Zeus is entirely put out of sight. The two foes then came together at the last in a compromise. Prometheus, disclosing an important secret, was treated mildly, while he gave in his adherence to the new government. — 1849