

AESCHYLUS' PROMETHEUS:
REGRESS, PROGRESS,
AND THE NATURE OF WOMAN*

The plots of almost all Greek tragedies are based on earlier versions of Greek myths, but in most cases the tragedians, like the poets who preceded them, crafted significantly different versions of the story. Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (*PV*) is no exception.¹ The poet drew on the Hesiod's version of the myth of Prometheus in the *Theogony* (*Th.* 509–616) and *Works and Days* (*Op.* 42–105), but changed the myth in many ways, both large and small, that affect its overall meaning.² Scholars who have discussed these changes have mostly been interested in the characters of the two main figures, especially Zeus, whose nature, and particularly his apparent injustice in Aeschylus' play, was for many years the main issue in the debate over *Prometheus Bound*'s authenticity.³ The ethical issues are certainly important, but in this paper I wish to examine a different aspect of Aeschylus' changes – one that has been relatively neglected by scholars – namely that Aeschylus changes the Prometheus story from a myth of regress in Hesiod to one of progress in his tragedy.⁴ A comparison of the two versions with regard to this overall change will help us understand the ways in which specific features, some of them quite small, contribute to the overall meaning of the play.

* It is an honor to present this small offering to Bernd Seidensticker in admiration and gratitude for a forty-year friendship.

¹ I will refer to the author of *PV* as Aeschylus for convenience. Most scholars agree that the play was written in (roughly) the middle third of the fifth century, and for the purpose of this paper, the question of authorship is irrelevant. I will also set aside the many difficult questions concerning the remainder of the trilogy (if it was a trilogy); whatever other events occur after *PV*, the ultimate freeing of Prometheus would almost certainly have reinforced the progressive nature of the myth.

² The fullest comparisons of the two versions are Vandvik 1943 and Solmsen 1949, 124–157; see also Jaeger 1954, I, 262–267; Conacher 1980, 10–17; Griffith 1983, 1–6; McKay 1990–1992; Lloyd-Jones 2003, 51–52; Podlecki 2005, 2–5.

³ Griffith's study of the metrical idiosyncrasies of the play (Griffith 1977) immediately changed the focus of discussion for the question of authenticity.

⁴ The only scholar who explicitly mentions this aspect of the change is Jaeger 1954, I, 263.

Hesiod's version of the myth in the *Theogony* first notes that Prometheus and his brothers, Menoetius and Atlas, are all being punished by Zeus for challenging his supremacy (509–525). Prometheus' punishment is ended, we are told, when Zeus allows his son Heracles to kill the eagle that has been eating Prometheus' liver every day, thereby giving glory to his son (526–534). Prometheus' story began during a sacrifice at Mekone, when he outwitted Zeus by placing two portions in front of him – one that appeared good but consisted mostly of bones, the other unappetizing in appearance but containing the best meat. Zeus (who was not deceived according to Hesiod) chose the first of these, with the result that forever after humans burn the bones of a sacrifice for the gods. We can infer, though Hesiod does not mention it, that another result was that humans kept the meat from the sacrifice for themselves (535–560).

After the sacrifice Zeus was angry and punished Prometheus by sending an eagle to eat his liver; and because they profited from Prometheus' act, humans were also punished when Zeus withheld fire from them. Prometheus then stole back fire for humans but Zeus immediately retaliated by giving humans a beautiful evil (καλὸν κακόν), namely woman. In fitting reprisal for Prometheus' deceptive sacrifice, this woman was a marvelous beauty to behold, but in her inner nature she was an evil for all mankind. Even worse, she was an unavoidable evil, because men need women in order to create sons who will care for them in old age (561–612). Thus, marriage too is an evil, though it is necessary for the benefits it brings in old age. The final message Hesiod draws from this is that no one can (successfully) deceive Zeus, since those who try, like Prometheus, will be punished (613–666). And as the whole story shows, humans are punished along with Prometheus, and are worse off afterwards than they were before Prometheus deceived Zeus at Mekone.

Hesiod repeats the story in *Works and Days* (42–105) with a different emphasis – the origin of human hardships vs. the story of Prometheus' life – but with many of the same details and the same overall conclusion. As in the *Theogony*, Zeus withholds fire from humans because Prometheus deceived him, Prometheus steals the fire back, and in return Zeus gives men a woman, beautiful in outward appearance but deceitful and thievish in her inner character. Most of the story in *Works and Days* is devoted to this woman, Pandora (not named in the *Theogony*) – her creation, her acceptance by Prometheus' foolish brother Epimetheus, and her famous jar with all the evils. The deceptive sacrifice, the withholding and stealing of fire, and the decision to retaliate by giving men a woman are all recounted briefly (47–58) as background to the lengthy account of Pandora and her evils. The stated message (105) is the same as in the *Theogony*: it is impossible to deceive Zeus; and the overall message is given at the

beginning (42): the gods have hidden the means of life (βίος) from humans. In other words, humans have a very hard life thanks to Prometheus.

In historical terms, the main thrust of the two stories is thus that the human condition has worsened since Prometheus first interfered in the affairs of gods and mortals. The only benefit that has resulted from this act, that in a sacrifice humans keep the meat for themselves while they burn the bones, is ignored by Hesiod, who says nothing about humans keeping the meat for themselves but notes only that ever since Mekone humans burn the white bones on altars for the gods (556–557). The only other possible benefit for mortals might be “hope” (ἐλπίς), but the meaning of ἐλπίς in *Works and Days* is problematic and few commentators understand it as an unambiguous benefit.⁵

In contrast to this regressive view of human history, Aeschylus presents a version of the myth that emphasizes the progress made by humans. His basic story of Prometheus’ crime is the same: Prometheus stole fire from Zeus for humans and is punished for it. But in Aeschylus humans suffer no harmful effects as a result of Prometheus’ crime but benefit from it in several ways. And Prometheus’ punishment is eventually lifted because he has power over Zeus and can force him to act – not because Zeus wishes to glorify his son. Although Aeschylus does not narrate this story as a continuous account, as Hesiod does, but reveals it in bits and pieces throughout the play, the basic elements outlined above are confirmed in several different places by various characters. Many of the other details, to be sure, are provided by Prometheus himself, and one may legitimately suspect, especially in his long account of the benefits of civilization he gave to humans (450–468, 478–506), that he is exaggerating his own benefactions. Even if exaggerated, however, the progressive force of his actions is undeniably present throughout.

The most general (and most obvious) of Aeschylus’ changes is that instead of the many misfortunes humans have suffered on account of Hesiod’s Prometheus, Aeschylus’ Prometheus brought humans out of their initial state of foolishness (νήπιοι), in which “they looked but looked in vain, heard but did not hear, like shapes of dreams” (442–450) and gave them all the tools (πάσαι τέχναι) needed to create civilization (450–468, 478–506). Among these τέχναι are two that clearly refer to Hesiod’s version of the story. First, the art of medicine (478–483), by which humans

⁵ The main questions – whether ἐλπίς is positive (“hope”) or negative (“expectation [of evil]”) or neutral, and whether by remaining in the jar it is withheld from mortals or conveyed to them – are discussed at some length by Warman 2004; see also (among many others) West 1978, ad loc., Verdenius 1985, 66–71.

defend themselves against diseases. In Hesiod, men did not know diseases until they were let loose on earth by Pandora (*Op.* 92), whereas in Aeschylus men appear to have suffered from diseases from the beginning but Prometheus gave them the possibility of curing diseases through medicine. Second, Prometheus gives humans the art of prophecy by various means, including sacrifice ("burning bones hidden in fat", 496–499, cf. *Th.* 540–541).⁶ In Hesiod, the primary effect of Prometheus' actions with respect to sacrifice is that humans suffer the consequences.⁷

Besides medicine and sacrifice, other specific contrasts include Prometheus' theft of fire (*PV* 109–110), hope (250), and women (*passim*). For Aeschylus, fire is Prometheus' initial crime. In Hesiod, humans possessed fire before Prometheus; then, after Zeus concealed it from them in retaliation for Prometheus' actions at Mekone, Prometheus stole it back, causing Zeus to retaliate again by creating woman (*Th.* 562–570). Thus, humans were in the same condition, namely that they possessed fire, after Prometheus as before. In Aeschylus, on the other hand, Prometheus steals fire for humans, who did not previously have it.⁸ His reason for doing this was that Zeus took no account of the human race but wanted to destroy it and create a new one (231–233). Only Prometheus opposed this plan, taking pity on humans (234–241). He gave humans fire, from which they will learn many τέχναι (252–254).

Hope is another point of contrast. Prometheus administered a drug (φάρμακον) to humans, namely "blind hopes" (τυφλὰς ἐλπίδας, 250), in order to cure them of the disease (νόσος) of foreseeing their own death (προσδέσκεσθαι μόνον). In contrast to Hesiod, where ἐλπίς is ambiguous at best, Prometheus clearly considers blind hopes a benefit for humans, and the Oceanids agree, calling his act a great benefit (μεγ' ὠφέλημα 251). As Griffith explains (1985, ad loc.), hope is blind because it allows humans to forget about death for much of the time and thus devote themselves to other accomplishments, which are then made possible by Prometheus' gift of fire.

The most interesting aspect of the changes made by Aeschylus to the story of Prometheus is his portrayal of women. For Hesiod, women are

⁶ There may also be an allusion to Hesiod's sacrifice when the Oceanids speak of "bull-slaying feasts" (530–531).

⁷ Right after recounting his gift of the art of prophecy, Prometheus tells of discovering the use of metals, "bronze, iron, silver and gold", for humans (*PV* 500–503). If this is an allusion to the myth of the ages in *Op.* 106–201, it is another example of Aeschylus replacing Hesiod's regressive story of human existence with his own progressive account of humans learning a new τέχνη.

⁸ According to Kratos and Hephaestus, Prometheus does this because of his "human-loving nature" (φιλόανθρωπος τρόπος, 11, 28).

lumped together into one woman, Pandora. Beautiful on the outside, and thus seductive, she is greedy and devious inside, making her a constant danger to men, waiting to seduce them and then drain them of all the prosperity they might acquire through hard work. Despite these drawbacks men have little choice but to accept marriage with a woman; otherwise a miserable old age awaits them, with no sons to care for them.

The portrayal of women in *Prometheus Bound* has received very little notice in scholarly discussions of the play, but it presents a striking contrast with Hesiod's picture.⁹ The play makes no mention of Pandora or any generic "woman", but it does bring female figures on stage and occasionally refers to female mythological characters. The first women the audience sees on stage are the Oceanids. Although they are divinities, they are portrayed as timid young girls who respect their father and pity Prometheus, though they also criticize him for revering mortals too much (σέβῃ θνατοῦς ἄγαν, 543–544). In their view, Prometheus' opposition to Zeus and his attempt to save the dreamlike human race are futile (545–552) and they refuse to endorse this sort of rebellion. Their attitude begins to change after hearing Io's story, when they express their fear of becoming the object of Zeus' lust or the victim of any of the other powerful gods (894–906). Despite this, they continue to urge Prometheus to yield to necessity (936), and when Hermes enters and expresses similar advice, they initially approve (1036–1039). When Hermes addresses the Oceanids directly, however, and orders them to leave the stage and abandon Prometheus to his suffering (1058–1062), they somewhat surprisingly refuse to act basely and instead assert their determination to stand by him (1063–1070).¹⁰

Besides the Oceanids, the only other female figure to appear on stage in *Prometheus Bound* is Io. Prometheus tells us that she has enflamed the heart of a male (Zeus), but unlike Pandora, she is not presented as a danger to men but as the victim of male lust (589–592). She is suffering the same fate that the Oceanids fear for themselves. To be sure, her current suffering,

⁹ A notable exception is White's discussion of Io (2001, 134–136). White sees Io as (among other things) fulfilling a woman's "three principal roles in Greek culture", daughter, wife, and mother; in the play she is in transition from the first to the second of these roles. Sienkewicz 1984 discusses the Oceanids' changing attitude toward Prometheus but says nothing about them as women. Neither scholar mentions a contrast with Hesiod.

¹⁰ Although some (e. g. Griffith 1983, ad loc.) have seen inconsistencies in the Oceanids' position at the end compared to what it was previously, Sienkewicz 1984 argues that Aeschylus has prepared the audience for it. I would add that it is quite normal for anyone, perhaps especially a young person, to stiffen their resistance in the face of a direct threat; essentially, Hermes pushes the Oceanids into standing by Prometheus.

wandering cow-shaped and tormented by a gadfly, is brought about by Hera, but Hera is only acting in response to Zeus' actions, and it is clearly he who is the initial cause of all her sufferings. Thus, as one who is also suffering because he resisted Zeus, Prometheus is immediately sympathetic to her plight and can relate fully to her past and future suffering. And in keeping with the progressive message of the play, Prometheus reveals that in the end Io will in fact become the "famous wife" (κλεινὴ δάμαρ, 834) of Zeus, and not by force. She will accept Zeus' desire in the form of a gentle caress, she will be impregnated and she will give birth to a long line of descendants (846–852), one of whom (Heracles), thirteen generations later, will be Prometheus' savior (771–774). In this way, as White notes (above n. 9), Io will eventually fulfill the roles of wife and mother. Thus, not only is she not a danger to men, she provides the greatest benefit to Prometheus.

No other female character appears on stage in *Prometheus Bound* but among the descendants of Io, Prometheus tells us, will be the Danaids, fifty young women who will flee to Argos, trying to escape marriage with their fifty cousins (853–869). The story would have been well known to the audience, many of whom probably saw the dramatized version Aeschylus presented in his *Suppliants* trilogy a decade or two earlier. Although Prometheus makes clear that this marriage with kin (συγγενὴς γάμος) is wrong (the men are "hunting marriages not to be hunted"), he predicts that the cousins will succeed in their chase and marry the girls. On their wedding night, however, all the brides except one will kill their husbands and remain chaste. The Danaids are thus, like Io, victims of male desire. All but one could also be seen as the same sort of threat as Pandora, seducing their husbands and then destroying them, but Aeschylus gives more emphasis to them as victims and implies that the male cousins brought their fate upon themselves.

The one remaining female figure we must consider is Thetis.¹¹ Although she is not mentioned by name, the audience would certainly have recognized her as the one who was destined to bear a son mightier than his father (768). Having such a son might seem a good thing to many fathers,¹² but Thetis is clearly presented as a threat to Zeus, not in herself

¹¹ We could also include Hera among the female figures of the play. Her anger toward Io is her traditional reaction to all her husband's pursuits of women, human or divine. In this, she differs from the other women in *Prometheus Bound*, but because she is no danger to Zeus himself, she also differs from Pandora.

¹² There is no hint in the *Iliad* that Thetis' eventual son, Achilles, poses any threat to his father Peleus. Rather, Achilles seems to have had a warm relationship with his father and speaks fondly of him to Priam at the end of the poem. Because he is killed in war, however, Achilles cannot care for Peleus in his old age.

but as the potential mother of a son, who far from caring for his father in old age, as in Hesiod, would instead overthrow him. Zeus must, therefore, avoid “marriage” (γάμος, 764, cf. 947) with the woman whose son may destroy him, and he can only do this by learning (from Prometheus) her identity.

As a group, then, the women of *Prometheus Bound* differ significantly from Hesiod’s archetypal woman. None is described as physically beautiful, and no mention is made of female attraction or seductiveness. On the contrary, these women are all weak in comparison with the male figures who have desired or might desire them. The only deceitful act of theirs is the Danaids’ killing of their husbands on their wedding night, and this appears justified. Otherwise, the pattern is always one of lustful males actively targeting the passive women. The women, on the other hand, generally hope to fulfill the (subordinate) roles of daughter, wife and mother prescribed for them by tradition. Therefore, they resist, sometimes violently, relationships deemed inappropriate by that same tradition. And in their traditional roles they are a benefit to men and to human society as a whole – just the opposite of Hesiod’s woman.

Finally, marriage is an important consideration for all the women in *Prometheus Bound*. The Oceanids hope to find an “equal marriage” (901), Io is destined to become the famous wife of Zeus (834) and bear a line of distinguished descendants, the Danaids reject marriage with their unsuitable cousins, and the only reason Thetis is mentioned in the play is because she is a potential marriage partner whose destiny must be understood by any god who might wish to marry her.¹³ Thus, one can see a common message in all these situations, namely that women want a proper marriage with a suitable husband but fear and try to avoid marriage with an unsuitable husband. An improper marriage, moreover, threatens disaster for the husband, but a proper marriage will be beneficial.¹⁴

In sum, in accordance with Hesiod’s general view of the decline of the human race, most clearly expressed in the myth of the Five Ages, over the course of both his major poems he constructs a version of the story of Prometheus that emphasizes the disastrous consequences of Prometheus’ actions for human prosperity. In almost every way, humans have regressed,

¹³ As a goddess, Thetis ought to find a suitable husband among the other gods but according to tradition, they refuse to marry her once they know her destiny. Instead they determine that a mortal is the most suitable husband for her and marry her off to Peleus. Aeschylus gives no hint of this future.

¹⁴ We should add that even Prometheus himself is married (properly), to Hesione, a sister of the Oceanids (556–560); the wedding was evidently a happy occasion, and we have no reason to think that the marriage was not also a happy one.

and are worse off after Prometheus than they were before. By contrast, Aeschylus takes the same story, preserving many of the same features, but constructs from them a version in which everything Prometheus does benefits humans. Despite the disparaging view of the human race expressed by Zeus and some of his allies, the audience would surely have come away with a sense of the human potential for progress, if not at the end of the surviving play, certainly by the time Prometheus is released in the play that followed.¹⁵

Michael Gagarin
The University of Texas
gagarin@austin.utexas.edu

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¹⁵ I am grateful to Steven White for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

One result of the changes that Aeschylus makes to Hesiod's version of the myth of Prometheus is that the myth now emphasizes human progress as opposed to the Hesiod's regressive view of human civilization. I examine some of the specific changes Aeschylus makes, showing how even small details contribute to the larger sense of progress. In particular, I examine the women in *Prometheus Bound* – those in the play (Io, the Oceanids) and others who are just mentioned. Aeschylus' women differ greatly from Hesiod's woman (Pandora); rather than being a threat to men, they are mostly victims (actual or potential) of men's desire.

Изменения, привнесенные Эсхилом в гесиодовский миф о Прометее, подчеркивают прогрессивный характер развития человечества в противовес гесиодовской оценке развития цивилизации как регресса. В статье автор анализирует некоторые изменения, сделанные Эсхилом, показывая, как даже незначительные детали создают картину позитивных изменений. В частности, автор рассматривает женские образы в «Прометее прикованном» (участвующие в действии Ио и Океаниды и другие персонажи, лишь упоминающиеся в трагедии): они существенно отличаются от женского образа Гесиода – Пандоры, являясь не угрозой для мужчин, но по большей части жертвой (действительной или возможной) их желаний.

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