

# Reciprocity in *Prometheus Bound*

*Anthony J. Podlecki*

IN THIS ESSAY I shall analyze *Prometheus Bound* in terms of a feature which has generally been disregarded, a feature I shall call 'reciprocity': the constant recurrence of key concepts and terms, now applied by Prometheus to Zeus or his supporters, now shown by the other characters, or acknowledged by Prometheus, to be equally applicable to himself. To put it in another way, Prometheus can, I think, be shown—and will perhaps have been shown in the sequel—to be guilty of many of the same faults and excesses he accuses his adversary of possessing. One of the perennial problems of the play is how the two opponents are brought together in the sequel, for brought together in some sort of understanding they must be if Prometheus is to be released.<sup>1</sup> What I am suggesting is that some of these unfavorable traits which Prometheus imputes to Zeus are to be pointed out to him in his own character, perhaps by his mother Themis-Gaia, perhaps by Heracles or one of the other *personae*, and that the proud wisdom to which Prometheus repeatedly lays claim is shown to be lacking in this respect, that he does not know himself. "Know yourself," Oceanus advises him (309–10), "and renovate your character." And this is exactly what may have happened in the sequel.

One such key concept is 'stubbornness', 'self-will', *αὐθαδία*.<sup>2</sup> "Don't cast my stubbornness up to me," Might tells Hephaestus (79–80); "truly some day," says Prometheus (907–08), "even though Zeus' thoughts be stubborn, will he be humble." Hermes applies the term to Prometheus three times: "by such stubborn acts have you brought

<sup>1</sup> From the large modern literature on the "problem of Zeus" in the play may be mentioned: O. J. Todd, "The Character of Zeus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*," *CQ* 19 (1925) 61–67; L. R. Farnell, "The Paradox of the *Prometheus Vincitus*," *JHS* 53 (1933) 40–50; H. D. F. Kitto, "The *Prometheus*," *JHS* 54 (1934) 14–40; W. F. J. Knight, "Zeus in the *Prometheia*," *JHS* 58 (1938) 51–54; H. Lloyd-Jones, "Zeus in Aeschylus," *JHS* 76 (1956) 55–67; L. Golden, *In Praise of Prometheus* (Chapel Hill 1966) ch. v; A. J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy* (Ann Arbor 1966) ch. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Any such word-study should begin from Herbert S. Long's "Notes on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*," *ProcPhilSoc* 102 (1958) 229–80, esp. the selective Index, pp.275–79, to which I here acknowledge my indebtedness. Complete refs. are to be found in G. Italie, *Index Aeschyleus*<sup>2</sup> (Leiden 1964).

yourself to these sufferings” (964–65); “stubbornness by itself, for one whose thoughts are unsound, has worse than no strength at all” (1012–13); “never consider stubbornness better than prudence” (1034–35; cf. 1037). Prometheus seems to admit that there exists a basis for the charge when he tells the Chorus, “don’t think me silent . . . out of stubbornness” (436–37). Closely allied is *ὀργή*, ‘temper’ or ‘anger’. “Don’t reproach me with self-will and temper,” Might tells Hephaestus (79–80); “Zeus will one day smooth his inflexible anger and come to me,” Prometheus predicts (190). But Oceanus turns the charge back upon Prometheus (315): “put aside your anger.” Charges of being ‘rash’, *θρασύς*, are bandied: Hephaestus charges Zeus’ henchman Might (42) with being “pitiless and full of rashness”; “you are rash,” says the basically sympathetic Chorus to Prometheus (178); the word is also used in an ameliorative sense of Heracles and Io, at 871 and 730. Likewise, *τραχύς*, ‘harsh’, which is often confused with the foregoing in the Mss: “every new ruler is harsh,” says Hephaestus (35); “I know that Zeus is harsh . . .,” agrees Prometheus (186). But Oceanus applies the term to both antagonists alternately: “Zeus is a harsh monarch and rules irresponsibly” (324) and, to Prometheus, “if you hurl such harsh and sharpened words . . .” (311); it is significant that the term is also applied to natural phenomena, the “harsh Salmydessian jaw of the sea” (726), the “harsh surge” of the sea’s wave (1048).

The charge of irresponsibility cast at Zeus’ rule recurs throughout the play. He acknowledges no external standard of Justice, the Chorus maintains (403), but “rules with *his own laws*.” Again, they use the same word of Prometheus (542): “you reverence mortals too much with *your own* (*i.e.*, too independent) mind.” Zeus will one day be ‘humble’, *ταπεινός*, Prometheus predicts towards the end of the play (908); “you are not yet humble,” Oceanus tells Prometheus (320). Sickness and healing are recurrent metaphors.<sup>3</sup> Prometheus will not be released “until the bile of Zeus’ pride abates” (*λωφάω*, 376), the term used of Zeus’ infatuation with Io (654). “This is the tyrant’s disease,” Prometheus says of Zeus’ lack of gratitude to him (224–25), “not to trust his friends”; “are not words,” asks Oceanus (378), “physicians of a diseased temper?”—and he means Zeus’. But Prometheus, too, the Chorus tells him (473–75), is “like some inferior

<sup>3</sup> See B. H. Fowler, “The Imagery of the Prometheus Bound,” *AJP* 78 (1957) 173–84.

doctor, who, when he falls ill, despairs and does not know how to cure himself," although he had previously found a "medicament for disease", for mortals (249; cf. 480, 483, 606). And in the final scene Hermes shouts at Prometheus (977), "you are very sick—you are raving mad," to which Prometheus retorts (978), "let me be sick, then, if it be sickness to loathe one's enemies." It may be significant that the term is used repeatedly of Io in almost a literal sense, for she is demented and suffering from hallucinations. Now, Io is in some respects Prometheus' double, Zeus' victim who will ultimately be healed, and this theme of sickness, applied to both antagonists in the first play, may have had its correlative, that of healing, in the sequel.

At the heart of most Greek tragedies lies the motif of *hybris*, the arrogant pride of the hero which leads him to act and speak in a way that challenges the gods to reduce him to his proper mortal status. In this play, adjustments have to be made since Prometheus is also a god—his sense of outrage is increased, as he repeatedly says, by the fact that he a god is being maltreated by other gods; but some of the same overtones seem to apply to Prometheus' position within a new hierarchy of gods, with Zeus at the top as absolute ruler. References to arrogant pride abound and they, too, are seen to be double-edged, Prometheus applying them to Zeus while unconscious that they are equally, or perhaps more, applicable to himself. "Be insolent then," ὑβριζε, Might says to him bitterly (82). Prometheus defends his refusal to comply with Hermes' request in the last scene (970): "Thus should one be insolent to those who are insolent." "No one is free except Zeus," says Might (50); the Chorus warns Prometheus that he is "too free of speech" (180). But for 'freedom of speech' can be substituted 'pride of speech', 'boastful words', and the typically Aeschylean compound, ὑψηγορος, occurs only twice in extant Greek literature, both times in this play: Prometheus remarks (360–61) that Zeus "knocked Typhon from his high-tongued boasts"—exactly the charge that had earlier been laid against himself by Oceanus (318).

Perhaps the most dominant of all such ambivalent themes in the play is that of knowledge/ignorance. Prometheus is Foreknowledge, prophetic skill. Centrally in the list of his benefactions to men he lists the complicated skills of the diviner's art (484–99).<sup>4</sup> And yet there are

<sup>4</sup> For a suggestion as to the deeper significance of this passage, see Alfred Burns, *ClMed* 27 (1966) 74ff.

lines of his which must give us pause, even make us doubt, if not his sincerity, at least the comprehensiveness of his foreknowledge. “Alas,” he laments (98–100), “I groan for my present suffering, for that to come. Where, oh where are these sorrows to reach their fulfillment?” “. . . I knew all of this,” he boasts to the Chorus (265–68); “my crime I willed, I make no denial . . . But as far as penalty, I never thought that such would be exacted . . .” The *φάρμακα* he gave to men have failed him in his sickness (473–75). Rather too much emphasis is given to his mother as the source of his prophetic knowledge (211, 874). We wonder, then, whether his retort to Hermes (935), “everything has been *foreseen* by me,” is not to some extent mere bravado, whether the impasse reached in the famous exchange with the Chorus over the relationship between Zeus and Fate (515–20) is not, partially at any rate, the result of a failure of Prometheus’ intellectual powers: “do not press me, you’ll not find out” (520) sounds almost defensive.<sup>5</sup> Hephaestus’ address, *τῆς ὀρθοβούλου Θέμιδος αἰπυμῆτα παῖ* (18), becomes Oceanus’ charge that Prometheus is *ἀκριβῶς . . . περισσόφρων* (328), and if there is etymology in the second, there may well be deep irony in the first. The converse development, that Zeus’ ignorant power will be shown to be working according to an enlightened plan, has frequently been postulated, although we can argue from nothing more than our sense of fitness that this should turn out to be the case.

Certain of the play’s major themes, then, are embodied in recurring terms and images which, when examined closely, seem to be applicable not only to Zeus and his side, but also to Prometheus, even though he is not conscious of their applicability to himself. This ‘reciprocity’ extends even to minor terms. Prometheus remarks that, on assuming power, Zeus “arranged (*διστοιχίζετο*) his authority,” that is, apportioned the subordinate spheres of influence among the other gods (230–31); he uses a cognate term to describe his own action in ‘arranging’ or ‘setting in order’ the various techniques of prophecy (484, *ἔστοίχισα*). The former passage seems to be in conflict with Prometheus’ assertion that he was completely responsible for ‘defining’ their privileges among the new gods (440, *παντελῶς διώρισεν*), the same word he uses to explain his share in setting out the finer points of ornithomancy (489). The verbal root which means ‘provide, give’

<sup>5</sup> Long notes that 515–16 is a corrective on 149; but the adjectives in 516 sound antiquated, and the Chorus’ view, that Zeus’ hand is now at the tiller, may well turn out to be correct.

*πορ-*, occurs several times, generally of Prometheus' action in 'bestowing' fire and its attendant benefits on men (108, 946). Using the noun-form of this root Prometheus calls this gift of fire "a great resource" for men (111), and he applies the same term to the *τέχναι* or crafts he gave to mortals (477). In a verbal reversal, the Chorus warns him that Zeus will 'bestow' a still more painful suffering upon him (934).

Prometheus is bound fast; his only hope of release is the secret of Zeus' fatal marriage, which he says he will never reveal until Zeus 'slacken', *χαλάω*, his bonds (176, cf. 991), but the Chorus immediately retorts (178–79), using a compound form of the same verb, "you are brash and do not slacken at all for your sufferings." Zeus does not slacken from his punishment, Prometheus tells the Chorus (256); but does *he* "slacken from his mad defiance?" Hermes asks Prometheus in the closing scene (1057). "Strike him with the hammer (more literally, 'smasher', *ῥαιστήρ*)," Might tells Hephaestus in the opening scene (56), and it is precisely for having prevented men from being 'smashed to pieces', *διαρραισθέντας*, that Prometheus says he is now suffering (236). This vivid root recurs in a reciprocal context when Prometheus says, concerning Zeus, that "his temper will be softened when he is smashed (*ῥαισθῆ*, 189). The graphic term *ἄιστόω*, 'annihilate, obliterate', recurs several times. It is used of Zeus' treatment of the preceding generations of rulers on Olympus (151), of his intention to 'annihilate' the human race (232) and the family of Io if she will not yield to his advances (668), but it is flung back at Zeus by Prometheus (910): "he is arranging a marriage which will hurl him from his tyrant's throne and make him *ἄϊστον*."

The verb *ρίπτω* likewise is used reciprocally. "Let Zeus' thunderbolt be hurled," Prometheus challenges (992; cf. 1043); "let him hurl my body into dark Tartarus" (1051). Now, Oceanus had told Prometheus earlier that he was "hurling harsh and sharpened words" at Zeus (311–12). The concept of 'satisfaction', *ποινή*, too, is interchanged. Prometheus refers to his present punishment as "satisfaction for his errors" (112, cf. 268; Io uses similar language about him at 564 and 620), but he reverses the concept and says (177) he will never reveal the secret until Zeus "willingly pays satisfaction to me for his outrageous treatment." On *πόνων* at 46 Long comments: "Many times of the sufferings of Prometheus and Io [he collects the instances in his note on line 267]; . . . paradoxically of Zeus at 931, an instance of the theme *ἴσα πρὸς ἴσα*, which is common in the play, since Prometheus

longs for the day when the tables will be turned.”<sup>6</sup> ‘Persuasion’ is another theme which is double-edged. Prometheus warns Oceanus that his good offices with Zeus will be fruitless (333): “you will not persuade him at all, for he is not easy to persuade.” But he does not see that he is manifesting the same obduracy when he says (172–73), “Zeus will not charm me with the honey-tongued spells of persuasion” (cf. 1014). “Be persuaded,” Prometheus says twice to the Chorus, urging them to step from their carriage (*πίθεσθε*, 274); “be persuaded” to relent, they ask in vain in the final scene (1039), and they themselves manifest an obstinacy similar to Prometheus’ own when they refuse to comply with Hermes’ promptings to leave Prometheus before the final catastrophe. On *ἀγνομπτον* applied to Zeus by the Chorus at 163 Long well remarks: “Prometheus . . . is equally inflexible (e.g., 995, 1001–1006) . . . Prometheus is as inflexible as Cratos and Zeus.”<sup>7</sup>

Further instances of this kind of pattern of verbal repetition could no doubt be discovered, but these examples are perhaps enough to show that the dramatist has established in *Prometheus Bound* a ‘reciprocal’ relationship between Prometheus and his antagonist, Zeus. Prometheus makes certain accusations against Zeus and his aides, while himself remaining blind to the applicability of some of these charges to his own character. I would conjecture that some of these themes were resolved in the sequel, that Prometheus and perhaps Zeus, too, were brought to a new understanding of themselves, their situations, their necessary relationship to each other. The two antagonists may even have been made to see that they were really not so dissimilar as they had assumed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Long, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 235.

<sup>7</sup> Long, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 242.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. John Finley’s remark, “[Prometheus] falls out with Zeus not because he is unlike him but because he is like him,” *Pindar and Aeschylus* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1955) 222; and Herbert Weir Smyth’s observation, “But if Prometheus is guilty, Zeus is also guilty,” *Aeschylean Tragedy* (Berkeley 1923) 113.