Prometheus Bound

KRATOS We have come to the world’s end. Here, Hephaistos, obeying Zeus, you must bind this rebel to the cliffs with unbreakable fetters.

He stole bright fire, your prized possession, and gave it to men. He must suffer to satisfy the gods and teach him to accept the rule of Zeus and cease to love mortals.

HEPHAISTOS You, Kratos and Bia, have done all that Zeus ordered. I find it hard to fetter a god here, but I must for the Father must be obeyed.

Son of Themis, I have no choice but to fix you with shackles here far from men. You will be scorched by the dazzling fires of the sun.

You will be glad when night hides day and when the sun drives back the frosts. Always pain will wear you down – no-one yet born can free you from it.

This comes from love of humans. A god, you did not fear the anger of the gods and honoured mortals too much.

So you will stand here against the rock, no rest, no sleep, your groans unheard, for Zeus is harsh, like everyone who has just come to power.

KRA. Why do you delay, pitying him? Do you not hate this thieving god?
HEPH. Kinship and friendship have power. I hate the skills of my craft!

KRA. Why so? They are not the reason why you must perform this task.
HEPH. But I wish someone else had them.

KRA. Everything is a burden, except ruling the gods: only Zeus is free.
HEPH. These shackles prove it, I admit.
KRA. So won’t you fasten them now, before the Father sees you idling?
HEPH. I have all the harness here.

KRA. Fasten his arms, then, and hammer the nail well into the rock.
HEPH. I’m doing it now, with no delay.

KRA. Hammer it harder, make it tight – he’s very good at escaping.
HEPH. This arm’s secure.

KRA. Now the other. He may be clever but must learn that Zeus is cleverer.
HEPH. No-one could fault my work – except him.

KRA. Now drive the adamantine wedge hard, right through his chest.
HEPH. Can you bear to see the terrible sight?

KRA. What I see is him getting his deserts. Now the ribs and legs!
Knock the nails in hard.
HEPH. You talk the same way as you look.

KRA. You may be soft, but don’t blame me for being harsh and pitiless.
HEPH. His legs are fastened now. Let’s go.

KRA. Now try to defy the gods, stealing their treasure for short-lived men. Can mortals pay your penalty? Your name is a misnomer, though you’ll need ‘forethought’ to get out of these.

PROMETHEUS. O sky, winds, rivers, and laughing waves of the sea; Earth, mother of all, and all-seeing Sun: see what I, a god, suffer at the hands of gods. See my torture, endless, degrading! These shackles were devised by the gods’ new commander-in-chief.

Alas, I groan for the pain I suffer now and what is to come. What end can there be to this misery?

But why lament? I foresaw it all. Nothing can surprise me. I must bear
my fate as I can, for the power
of necessity is invincible.

But I can neither keep silent
about my fate nor speak.
I am shackled here in misery
because of what I did for mortals.

I stole fire for them, carrying it
in a fennel-stalk. It taught them skills,
but I am punished for it, pinned here
in fetters beneath the sky.

First Visitation

The Daughters of Ocean

Oh! What is that sound? That scent?
Something comes this way – from gods?
from mortals? or both? Has someone
come to the world’s end to see my pain?

Look, here I am, the prisoner,
the unhappy god, the enemy
of Zeus, hated by all the gods
for loving mortals too well.

Ah, what is that rustling of birds
I hear nearby? The air pulses
with the light beat of wings.
Whatever is coming, I fear it.

CHORUS. Do not be afraid. We are friends.
We have flown swiftly to this rock
with our father’s consent, hard-won.

Swift breezes carried me here.
From my deep cave I heard hammering
and was so shocked, I forgot modesty
to fly here in a winged car.

PROM. Children of Tethys, of Oceanus
who rolls unwearied round the earth,
see how I am pinned to these high cliffs
to keep a thankless watch.

CHO. I see, and I weep with fear
to find you here bound to the rock
by adamantine hoops.
Zeus, new lord of Olympus, rules
by new laws, and overthrows old powers.
PROM. I wish he had thrown me into Hell and chained me there, so that no god or other creature could gloat over me. Up here I am exposed to the winds and that delights my enemies.

CHO. What god could take pleasure in this? Who does not feel your pain? — except Zeus!

Bent on defeating the Titans, he will not stop till he has his way — or someone stops him: but that is hard.

PROM. Though I am shackled here, the President of the Immortals needs my help to tell him of the plan that will cost him sceptre and throne.

He won’t charm this secret out of me, nor extort it by threats. I’ll tell it only if he releases me and makes compensation.

CHO. You are bold and stubborn, and you speak your mind too freely.

I fear for you. When will you ever find haven, an end to pain? The son of Cronos cannot be moved, his purpose never changes.

PROM. He is harsh and his whim is law. But one day he will yield, subdue his wrath and seek my friendship, as eagerly as I shall give it.

CHO. Tell us everything. On what charge did Zeus seize you? Why did he degrade you like this? Tell us, if you can do so safely.

PROM. It is painful to speak of it, but just as painful to be silent.

The gods began to quarrel, and discord arose among them, because some wished to depose Cronos so that Zeus could rule — imagine! — while others opposed him.

I advised the Titans wisely,
but was ignored.
They scorned clever plots, thinking
they could easily win by force.

My mother Themis had prophesied
that cunning, not force, would triumph.
I told them this: they would not listen.

So I thought it best to support Zeus.
He and I both entered willingly
(my mother too) into this alliance.

So now Cronos and his supporters
are in the black depths of Tartarus.
I helped the tyrant. This is my reward.
Tyrants seem not to trust their friends!

You asked why he degraded me.
When he seized power he assigned
privileges to the gods – but mortals
he planned to destroy, and make a new race.

I alone defended them
and saved them from Hell.

I showed pity
but was shown none.
I was given this harsh punishment,
a spectacle to put Zeus to shame.

CHO. Only a heart of stone or iron
would not pity you, Prometheus.
I would not have wished to see this,
and having seen, feel pain.

PROM. Yes, my friends will pity me.
CHO. Did you not do something else besides?
PROM. I spared men foreknowledge of their deaths.

CHO. What medicine did you use for that?
PROM. I put blind hope into their hearts.

CHO. That was a great gift you gave them.
PROM. And beyond that, I gave them fire.
CHO. Those short-lived beings have fire?
PROM. With its help they will learn many skills.

CHO. So these are the crimes for which Zeus –
PROM. Degrades me and allows no respite.
CHO. Will this ordeal ever finish?
PROM. No, never, unless he wills it so.
CHO. How could that happen? What hope is there?
Do you not think you were in the wrong?
I am loth to say that, and give you pain.
Let’s rather think how to set you free.

PROM. It is easy for an outsider
to offer advice and rebukes.
I knew very well what I was doing:
helping mortals brought me torment.

But I did not expect all this:
to be left to rot on these high cliffs,
condemned to these lonely rocks.

Enough of my present suffering,
come down and hear my future fate,
then you will know the whole story.
Come, share my misery. Such trouble
can happen, you know, to anyone.

CHO. Gladly we hear your call, Prometheus.
Now I shall come down lightly
from this swift car and the upper air,
to hear the rest of your story.

Second Visitation

Ocean

OCEANUS I have come a long way to find you,
Prometheus. I steered this swift bird
by my willpower, with no bridle.

I feel for you as a kinsman
and because I greatly respect you.
I shall prove the truth of this
and that I speak no empty words.

Tell me what I should do to help;
you shall never say, Prometheus,
that you have any better friend
than Oceanus.

PROM. What’s that? Have you too come to see
my torment? How did you dare to leave
your river and your rocky cave
to come to this land of iron?

Did you come to watch, and grieve with me?
Here I am then, the friend of Zeus
who helped him to become a tyrant.
See how he punishes me now!
OCE. I see; and clever as you are
I have advice for you: know yourself
and choose new ways, for we have
a new tyrant among the gods.

If you abuse him so wildly
Zeus may hear you from on high

and then your present suffering
will seem like no more than a game.

My poor friend, control your anger
and look for escape from this pain.
My words may seem trite: but this is
what you get for speaking proudly.

You won’t be humble and submit?
Do you want to add fresh pain?
If you’ll learn from me, you won’t resist:
the tyrant is cruel and capricious.

I shall go to see what I can do
to get you released. Meanwhile, curb
your tongue. You are clever, you must know
that rash speech leads to punishment?

PROM. Well done! You risk nothing,
yet dare to show me sympathy!
Now leave it. Stay clear. He won’t be moved.
And beware of danger as you go.

OCE. You advise others better than
yourself. The facts make that plain.
But I shall go, don’t stop me. I am sure
Zeus will grant me your freedom.

PROM. I’m grateful: you are full of zeal
but your trouble will be wasted.
Keep safe. No one else need suffer
just because I am suffering.

I grieve for my brother Atlas
who stands far away to the west
with the pillars of heaven and earth
on his shoulders – no light burden!

You’ve seen the world: no need
to teach you how to save yourself.
Meanwhile I’ll endure my fate
till the anger of Zeus dies down.

OCE. The new occupant of the high throne?
PROM. Try not to provoke his anger.
OCE. Your example is a lesson.
PROM. Go then, and stay true to yourself.

OCE. I'm on my way, even as you speak. My winged beast is beating the air, he will be glad to sleep in his own stable.

CHO. I weep, Prometheus, for your fate. I let my tears flow freely and my cheeks are wet.

Zeus shows his arrogance towards the gods of the past by this display of power under laws he has invented.

Now every land mourns for the Titans; and the dark caverns of Hades and the sacred rivers lament your pitiable suffering.

PROM. My silence does not come from pride. I brood on the outrage done to me. Was it not I who assigned all their privileges to these new gods?

But you know all that. Learn instead how I helped mortals, so childish until I gave them intelligence. That proves my goodwill towards them.

Till then they looked – and saw nothing, living their whole lives like wraiths. They could not build solid houses, but lived underground like ants.

I showed them the art of counting, foundation of all skills; and how to record words in writing, giving rise to all the arts.

It was I who invented linen-winged ships, for sailors to explore the seas. All this I invented but cannot think of a single device to free myself from this misery.

CHO. You are distraught because of pain; like a bad doctor who falls ill you despair and cannot find a cure.

PROM. Hear what more I did. In sickness they could not help themselves until
I taught them to make the drugs
which now protect them from disease.

And the things hidden in the earth _
copper, iron, silver, and gold –
who else but I can claim
to have discovered them first?

In short, be sure of this:
all the skills that mortals possess
have been the gift of Prometheus.

CHO. But do not do too much for mortals
and neglect your own misfortune.
I am sure you will be unchained
and rival the power of Zeus.

PROM. Fate has not decreed that it
should happen yet. I must suffer
countless pains before my bonds are loosed.
Craft is weaker than Necessity.

CHO. And who controls Necessity?
PROM. The three Fates and the Furies
who forget nothing.
CHO. Are they stronger than Zeus?
PROM. He cannot escape destiny.

CHO. What is the destiny of Zeus
if not to rule eternally?
PROM. I may not tell you: do not ask.
CHO. It must be some dread truth that you hide.

PROM. Talk of something else: I cannot
reveal this yet, it must be secret,
for by concealing it I shall
escape these fetters and this pain.

CHO. May Zeus who orders all things
never crush my will.
May I always approach the gods
piously, with sacrifices;
and may my words never offend.

It is sweet to live one's life in hope,
feasting the soul in joy.
But I shudder to see you tortured
because you do not fear Zeus
and think too highly of mortals.

What good has this kindness done you?
Can these short-lived creatures help you?
Did you not see their feebleness?
What Zeus ordains, mortals cannot thwart.

Third Visitation

Io

IO What land is this? What race lives here?
Who is this fettered to the rock?
For what crime are you condemned?
Where have my wanderings driven me?

The gadfly bites again. Oh, oh!

Son of Cronos, what have I done
to deserve this yoke of torment?
Why am I plagued to madness
by this tormenting gadfly?

Burn me, bury me, throw me
as prey to sea-monsters. Lord Zeus
hear me: I am exhausted.

Do you hear Io with her cow’s horns?

PROM. I hear you, daughter of Inachus,
desired by Zeus, hated by Hera
who drove you into this long flight.

IO How do you know my father’s name?
Tell me who you are,
that you know my name,
and the torment sent by the gods.

Tell me what else must I suffer,
what cure can there be?
Tell me, if you know.
Speak to me in my misery.

PROM. I’ll tell you clearly all you wish
to learn, plainly and simply, as a friend.
You see the god who gave the gift of fire
to mortals – Prometheus.

IO Unhappy Prometheus who gave
such gifts to mortals, tell me
how long my wanderings will last.

PROM. It is better for you not to know.
IO Please tell me what I must suffer.
PROM. If you are so determined
I must tell you. So, listen.
CHO. Not yet. Let us share this pleasure. 
Let us first ask her about her story. 
She can tell us what has happened 
then you can tell us what is to come.

PROM. It is for you, Io, to meet their request.

IO I cannot refuse. You shall hear 
all you ask, though I am ashamed 
to speak of my persecution 
and how my shape was changed.

At night in my room visions would come 
which seduced me with coaxing words.

‘Most blessed maiden, why remain 
so long a virgin when you might wed 
the highest? Love waits. 
Zeus desires you – do not spurn him, 
go to Lerna, assuage his desire.’

Every night such dreams troubled me 
till at last I dared to tell my father. 
He consulted oracles, to learn 
how to please the gods by word or deed.

The answers were obscure, but at last 
Inachus was told to cast me out 
and if he refused, a thunderbolt 
from Zeus would destroy his whole race.

Persuaded by these oracles 
he drove me out, against his will 
and mine. Zeus forced him to do it.

My body changed at once, my mind too. 
Horned, as you see me now, bitten 
by a gadfly, I rushed off, maddened, 
to the pure stream of Cerchnea.

I have been driven from land to land 
by the gadfly. That is my story. 
Tell me if you can what lies ahead. 
Don’t tell me lies out of pity, 
for made-up stories are a curse.

CHO. Io! What a terrible destiny! 
I shudder at what Io suffers.

PROM. You’re filled with fear so soon? 
Wait till you hear the rest!’

CHO. Tell us. It is good to know 
in advance what pain is still to come.
PROM. Hear what this young girl must still suffer at Hera's hands. Learn, Io, of your journey's end.

From here go east, over untilled lands.

You will reach Scythia, then the well-named Violent River; do not cross this until you reach lofty Caucasus from whose peak the river springs.

After crossing its summit, turn south, and leaving Europe you will come to the continent of Asia.

Do you think the tyrant of the gods is always so cruel? He dooms this mortal to wander because he lusts for her.

You have a savage suitor, Io.
All I have told you so far is not even the beginning of things.

CHO. You intend to tell her of pain that is still ahead of her?
PROM. Yes, a stormy sea of sorrows.

IO What use is my life? Why should I not jump from this rock and kill myself? It is surely better to be dead than to go on with a life of pain.

PROM. You would find it hard to bear my pain. Death would mean release, but I am fated not to die. I can expect no end to torment until Zeus is deposed from his throne.

IO Who will rob Zeus of his sceptre?
PROM. He will, by his own foolish choice.

IO If it cannot harm you, tell me how.
PROM. He plans a union that will hurt him.
IO With goddess or mortal, can you say?
PROM. Why ask that? I must not speak of it.

IO Will this wife dethrone him?
PROM. Her son will be stronger than he.
IO And can Zeus not escape this fate?
PROM. Not unless he frees me from these bonds.

IO If it is against the will of Zeus, who else will release you?
PROM. A child of yours will set me free.
IO What? A child of mine will free you?
PROM. He will be the thirteenth in descent.
IO Your prophecy is not entirely clear

PROM. There is a city called Canobus,
by the mouth of the Nile. There
Zeus will restore you from madness
and make you conceive, just by a touch.

You will have a black son, Epaphus,
whose name will mean ‘child of a touch’.
He will reap the harvest of all lands
watered by the broad-flowing Nile.

From his line will be born a son,
a famous archer, who will set me free.
This my mother Themis foretold,
the Titan of ancient birth.

IO Ah, ah! I feel madness return,
the gadfly stings me with fire.
My heart pounds in terror and my wild
words flow into the surf of ruin.

CHO. Fates, may you never, never see me
share the bed of Zeus or any god.
For I shudder to see Io,
a virgin, condemned by Hera
to wander restless for ever.

PROM. Yet Zeus will be brought down
through this union he plans
which will end his tyranny
and cast him down from his high throne.

The curse which Cronos uttered
when he lost his ancient throne
will then be fulfilled.

I alone can show Zeus how
he could avoid this. I know it all.
So let him now sit there,
reliant on noise and thunderbolts.

They will not save him from a fall,
a shameful, unbearable fall.
When that happens he will learn the gulf
between ruler and slave.

CHO. Your threats against Zeus
are no more than wishful thinking.
PROM. I am saying what will happen but also what I wish for.

CHO. You mean we should expect to see someone ruling over Zeus?
PROM. And he will suffer a harsher yoke.
CHO. How can you dare to say such things?

PROM. Why fear? I am not fated to die. Zeus is less than nothing to me. Let him do as he likes, just for a little while. He will not rule the gods for long.

But here comes his errand-boy, the tyrant’s toady. He will surely have something new to announce.

Fourth Visitation

Hermes

HERMES I’ve a message for the clever fellow, you, sharp-tongue, who sinned against the gods by stealing fire and giving it to mortals.

The Father orders you to tell him what is this marriage that may cause his downfall. And say it plainly, no riddles: do not make me come again – Zeus would not like that.

PROM. Fighting words for a slave! You are all new to power, and you think that you live in an impregnable fortress.

I have seen the fall of two tyrants. The same will happen to the third, shamefully and soon. You think I fear these upstart gods?

You’re totally wrong! Hurry back to where you came from. You’ll get no answers from me.

HERM. It was your stiff-necked pride that got you into this state.

PROM. Let me tell you, I would not change my plight for your servility. HERM. Better to be enslaved to this rock than trusted as Zeus’s messenger?
PROM. Insolent words!
HERM. You seem to enjoy your present state.
PROM. Enjoy? May my enemies ‘enjoy’
like this – including you!

HERM. Do you blame me for your suffering?
PROM. It’s simple: I detest all the gods
who harmed me after I’d helped them.

HERM. I think you’re totally insane.
PROM. Insane? Yes, if it is insane
to hate one’s enemies.
HERM. You’d be unbearable in power.

PROM. Alas!
HERM. Not a word that’s known to Zeus.
PROM. But Time, growing old, teaches everything.

HERM. But you’ve not learnt any sense.
PROM. No, or I wouldn’t talk to you.
HERM. You won’t tell the Father what he asks?
PROM. I’d be glad to pay him what he’s due.

HERM. You laugh at me as if I were a child.
PROM. Well, aren’t you? And worse than childish
if you think I’m going to tell you
anything you want to know.

Nothing Zeus can do, no torture
will make me reveal this secret
till these degrading bonds are loosed.

So let him hurl his firebolts,
or deploy blizzard and earthquake,
one of that will persuade me to say
by whom he will fall from power.

HERM. Is this likely to help you?
PROM. I have thought it out, and decided.

HERM. You fool: think of your pain
and take a more sensible line.
PROM. You’re annoying me for nothing:
you might as well talk to the sea.

Don’t imagine I might fear Zeus,
or become like a woman,
stretching out my hands, pleading
to be released. No, never!

HERM. I seem to have said a lot to no purpose.
But if my words don’t persuade you,
think what will happen. Zeus will shatter this rock and bury you beneath it.

After long ages you will come back to the light, and the eagle of Zeus will tear your flesh to shreds and feast all day on your liver.

Expect no end to this torment unless some god agrees to suffer in your place and go down to sunless Hades and the dark depths of Tartarus.

Think of that when you decide, for I am not making it up. Zeus cannot lie and carries out his every word.

So think about it, and bear in mind that wise counsel is better than stubborn self-will.

CHO. We think Hermes’ words make sense. He urges wise counsel, not self-will. Heed his advice: it is shameful when a wise man acts foolishly.

PROM. I knew in advance what he would say. An enemy is not dishonoured by suffering ill treatment at the hands of an enemy.

So let the lightning come, thunder and gales. Let the earth be shaken to its very foundations.

Let the waves of the sea rise up and engulf the courses of the stars. Let him cast my body headlong into Hell: he cannot kill me.

HERM. These are the words of a madman. Doesn’t everything he says show signs of lunacy?

But you who pity his suffering should leave this place at once before you are stunned by the thunder.

CHO. Change course: that advice will surely not persuade me. Your words are not to be endured. How can you tell me to be a coward?
I mean to stay with him, and suffer whatever may befall. I was taught to hate those who desert their friends: it is what I most despise.

HERM. Well, remember my warning and when disaster hunts you down do not complain about your fate or say that Zeus took you by surprise.

You brought it on yourselves, you were not tricked, nor caught unawares, but trapped by your own folly.

Postlude

The Dungeon

PROM. Now words to actions yield. The earth is shaken and thunder roars in answer from the depths. The lightning coruscates, the dust is swirled, the winds clash headlong in deadly rivalry. Sky and sea are merged.

This tempest was sent by Zeus to strike me down with fear.

O honoured mother Earth! O Sky that gives the light to all the world! See how I suffer, and what unjust pain!