

POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND CLASS IN SOCIETY: INSIGHTS FROM AESCHYLUS' PROMETHEUS BOUND

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the play Prometheus Unbound by Aeschylus. It examines the content of the text with a view to finding out how Aeschylus manipulated the Greek myth of Prometheus to his purpose. The analysis tries to show that while the play is a play about the relationship between the natural world and the supernatural world, Aeschylus intended it also to be a story of how human beings relate at political, social, economic and cultural levels. It examines how those with power covertly or overtly oppress those at their mercy by denying them the right to resources, development and self-actualisation. In short, the play is a play for all times exploring the concepts of power, privilege, and class at various levels of human existence.

KEYWORDS: *Power, Privilege, Class in Society*

Article History

Received: 28 Jun 2018 | Revised: 11 Jul 2018 | Accepted: 17 Jul 2018

INTRODUCTION

The play Prometheus Bound is a play that was written by an Ancient Greek dramatist and playwright Aeschylus. It is one of the plays that have received some discussion and which is not just on the themes found in the text but also like many popular texts its authorship. This paper takes the view that Aeschylus is the author of the text and focuses on the text's message.

Podleki. J. Antony(ed) in *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound* sums up the discussions that have been made on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* when he says:

...controversies continue to swirl about the work and its hero. What are we to make of Prometheus' extravagant claims? Was he, as he insists, the only force that stood between Zeus and extinction? Would Zeus really have been as misanthropic as his adversary paints him? Are we, in short, to think of Prometheus as a genuine hero or merely as a megalomaniac rebel without sufficient cause?"(Oct. 2005.)

However the position of this paper is that Prometheus is a character who is a benefactor of unprivileged classes, in the context of the play the humans and Zeus represent class privilege and class tyranny. Marianne McDonald 6 suggests:

This is a play that indicts the tyrant, Zeus the king of the gods who abuses Prometheus, the humanitarian. Both Prometheus and Io are his victims, Prometheus for opposing his will (he wanted to destroy man), and Io because he lusted for her. Most people would call them innocent victims, and so this play and Prometheus' heroism has inspired many oppressed people to fight back. He is the rebel par excellence. 6

PROMETHEUS –A REVOLUTIONARY

Asia puts forward the state of the humans in the story. While some critics doubt Prometheus's portrayal of Zeus, Asia supports through her explanation the position taken in this paper that Zeus is a tyrant a new ruler, obsessed with power and privilege and who does not care about human beings. Power supports Prometheus' punishment for loving humans. As Asia in *Prometheus Bound* puts it human beings are neglected and are prey to misery while the gods are enjoying life. Prometheus belongs to an earlier crop of gods many of whom are said to have been overthrown by Zeus and imprisoned in Tartarus:

And Jove now reigned; for on the race of Man
 First famine, and then toil, and then disease,
 Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,
 Fell, and the unseasonable seasons drove,
 With alternating shafts of frost and fire,
 Their shelterless pale tribes to mountain-caves:
 ...Prometheus saw and walked the legioned hopes
 Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,
 Nepenthe, moly, amaranth, fadeless blooms. (quoted in Rosett William. M 21)

CLASS DISPOSITIONS AND JUSTICE

The classes presented in the text are the gods who enjoy privileges and the humans who are deprived of many essentials, especially fire. Fire is, from what we glean from Prometheus, a prerequisite to skills that humans learn later. It is interesting to note that the god's, from the dialogue in the play. Are anthropomorphic, that is, they have human attributes. Zeus gives orders. He sleeps. Prometheus calculates and power bootlicks.

Rebecca Raphaels in *Enemy of the Gods: Prometheus Bound as Religious Critique* contends that "Zeus employs functionaries to torture and threaten Prometheus, not in the service of any justice but simply in order to perpetuate his power. His threat to Zeus is simply his knowledge that Zeus' power is temporary finite." (University of Texas, abstract). She argues that "Prometheus Bound as a whole enacts a kind of mask within which the problem of force as guarantor of justice can be exposed, deplored and explored." However, her focus is mainly on religion rather than politics.

Judith. A. Swanson also partly views Prometheus Bound in the context of religion. She argues that:

Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound is an example of literature from the classical world that has humanistic significance because it raises universal human questions. By dramatizing the Ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, about a god who is severely punished by the chief god for giving the human race the divine privileges of

intelligence, fire, and the arts, Prometheus Bound questions the nature of the divine world and man` relation to it.(p. 215)

She is, however, quick to note that the play is more anthropological than theological. She goes on to explain that “The drama is not primarily about man`s relation to the divine, but about the relation of human beings to each other or human community...the extent to which human beings should heed or incorporate that relation into their relation to each other.”(p. 215)

Prometheus Bound as a Political and Social Satire

One may fall for the position that, Prometheus being a titan and titans are gods that had been overthrown by Zeus, may have been acting in bad faith. However, judging from the evidence in the text, this paper takes a position that Prometheus was a benefactor of mankind and was promoting freedom and development in the human society while Zeus was a megalomaniac dictator.

The name of the character`s Power (Kratos) and Force (Bia) is no coincidence. Firstly power and force are servants of the ruler god, Zeus. They are servants of the god who has overthrown an earlier crop of gods, the Titans. Rulers who are dictators use force and power to dominate and coerce people to obey and also deal with perceived enemies who are lebeled rebels. Secondly, they are unquestioningly willing to do Zeus`s bid to protect him and because they fear him. Thirdly Zeus`s character is that of a despot. He denies the humans warmth as well as comfort. He also denies the human beings fire, a thing they would use for different purposes of development. This is what Prometheus sees: a tendency towards sadism, tyranny, and oppression. So he steals fire and gives it to the humans. This act is regarded as rebellion and betrayal and for this Prometheus is taken to a cold place to be firmly bound. The ideas can be gleaned from what power says and does and his attitude to Prometheus, Zeus and Zeus` actions and laws. When the gods arrive at the place where Prometheus is supposed to be bound Power, who is with force and Hephaestus, speaks to the other two gods:

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—

He has a strong allegiance to the extent of calling Zeus father, whom he calls father.

He goes on to call Prometheus a troublemaker because he upsets the status quo of denying human fire which was regarded as a privilege of the ruling class. Power (who is also called Might) is determined to see Prometheus serve his sentence which he feels is suitable for him. He feels this way Prometheus will learn a lesson not to go against Zeus` laws and siding with the ruled and lower class. Power sees Prometheus a class breaker who wants the humans to have the knowledge and skills that only the gods should have. For this, he deserved to be chained. Power tells Hephaestus, the god of fire and arts who has been given the order by Zeus to firmly bind Prometheus:

...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 10
 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. (14)

Hephaestus obeys Zeus but with a conscience. He sees the punishment is too harsh for a fellow god against a kindred god and he feels the force is not supposed to be applied to one who was in the category of the gods even if he had done something wrong. He however, has to do it out of duty not because he agrees with Zeus. This is seen in the declaration he makes to Prometheus on why he is to bind Prometheus.

I am not bold enough to use sheer force
 nonetheless
 I must steel myself to finish off our work,
 for it is dangerous to disregard
 the words of Father Zeus. (23)

DIFFERENT VIEWS ABOUT PROMETHEUS

Even when he wants to bind Prometheus he acknowledges his status and that he is doing the binding against his will. Unlike power and force who regard Prometheus as a rebel, Hephaestus sees Prometheus as a wise deity and that he does not approve of Zeus's sentence against Prometheus (line 20-25). Power becomes impatient against Hephaestus whom he accuses of disobeying the deity by not acting quickly (line 50-56) Hephaestus says

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.

Power urges Hephaestus to strike harder make sure that Prometheus is securely fixed and alleges that Prometheus is an expert at devising ways to wriggle out of hopeless situations alluding to his plan of stealing fire. Power dubs Prometheus Zeus' enemy whom Hephaestus has been wasting time on and he adds that if he keeps on wasting time he will be in trouble from Zeus himself (groaning). Power is discouraging questioning a system of justice. He advocates total unquestioning allegiance to Zeus's regime. Power says the following to Hephaestus:

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

Power answer in strong terms branding Prometheus as a great offender and betrayer of the gods who gets what is due to him for siding with the humans by giving them fire and skills to use to develop. The privilege of fire is now a thing to be enjoyed by mortals.

I see this criminal
is getting just what he deserves.

The point is from the words power uses -trouble -maker, ``Zeus's enemy` and` criminal` `getting what he deserves` and his other utterances, we can see that he shares Zeus` ideas` totally. Power is the personification of Zeus` tyranny and despotism. Force is a personification of coercing people to agree with his ideas out of fear and compulsion.

When Oceanus visits Prometheus whom she finds complaining against Zeus` tyranny, he advises him to change since the government has changed. The issue at the heart of the problem is Zeus` attitude toward human beings and how he reacts when Prometheus shows a caring attitude to that class. Zeus is in favor of the status quo. That is Prometheus`s offense. From Hephaestus, we learn Prometheus is wise and not a degenerate rebel but he suffers for his revolutionary spirit.

Oceanus counsels in lines 382-390

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. (391)

He advises Prometheus to humble himself and plead earnestly with Zeus so that he is pardoned. The implication is that Oceanus fears and respects Zeus. He continues:

Instead of that,
 you poor suffering creature, set aside
 this angry mood of yours and seek relief
 from all this misery.

Prometheus goes on to tell us about other tyrannical acts of Zeus. He speaks about how a god named Atlas was punished by Zeus to be a pillar holding the earth as punishment for offending Zeus. From Prometheus, we learn both through his own experience that Zeus is a ruler who deals harshly with offending gods. Prometheus seems to give an impression that Atlas` punishment was far harsher than his. This gives more information on Zeus` system of justice. It is harsh against the perceived offenders.

What my brother Atlas has to suffer
 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.(lines 350-354)

When he is visited by Io, a beautiful goddess, Prometheus tells her that he was a benefactor of mankind who was responsible for the artistic skills that they have acquired because he gave them fire. Prometheus affirms his commitment to lower classes and the magnitude of his sacrifice. He also portrays a situation that some classes in society if given skills can develop their quality of life.

To sum up everything in one brief word,
 know this—all the artistic skills men have
 come from Prometheus. (lines748)

Io agrees with Prometheus and pities him because he was being punished for helping mankind improve their lives. (lines 749-751)

Hermes sees Prometheus as a rebel. Hermes is a messenger of the gods and so he is a messenger of Zeus, who is totally loyal to him. His reaction to Prometheus` punishment reveals that he is the puppet to Zeus. He uses derogatory remarks. He chides Prometheus for alleviation the suffering of human beings, Hermes challenges Prometheus to announce Zeus`s marriage to Thetis and also to substantiate his prediction that Zeus will be overthrown one day. Prometheus in his agony and complaint said that Zeus` tyranny was short-lived and will soon be overthrown. Hermes believes Zeus will be in power forever. Therefore he mocks Prometheus` idea that the new ruler will be overthrown. He forgets that for Zeus to be a ruler he overthrew the Titans. Below is Hermes arrogant comment:

You devious, hot-tempered schemer, who sinned
 against the gods by giving their honors
 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.
Do not speak in enigmatic riddles
but set down clearly each and every fact. (1184)

CONCLUSIONS

Prometheus concludes that he has been unjustly been punished by Zeus for a noble act, so he pleads with the Sky and the Earth to intervene. He laments:

O sacred mother Earth and heavenly Sky,
who rolls around the light that all things share
you see these unjust wrongs I must endure (lines 1341)

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