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Mark Griffith

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

THE PROBLEM

The play known to us as Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης is one of seven which are preserved by the Medicean codex¹ as the work of Aeschylus, and one of the three which were frequently copied during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. (the so-called 'Byzantine triad'). The tradition records no doubt but that Aeschylus was the author, and no suspicion is voiced by the scholia or ancient lexicons; so we may take it that the ascription to Aeschylus goes back at least two thousand years.

The first discordant voice was raised by R. Westphal in 1869.² In his study of Greek metre, and of Aeschylus in particular, he noticed that *Prom.* displayed several peculiarities, both in its lyric metres and in the spoken trimeters, which led him to conclude that the play had suffered revision at the hands of a later writer. It was by this time quite widely accepted that *Seven against Thebes* had undergone just such a revision,³ and Westphal's theory won several adherents; over the next forty years further studies of the language, structure, style, staging, and metre led more scholars to accept his conclusions,⁴ though the majority remained unconvinced.

The nineteenth century witnessed many attempts to prove widespread interpolation, wholesale revision, multiple authorship, or outright spuriousness of a wide range of classical works. In retrospect, some of these attempts seem pedantic, some wild; others have been accepted and have become canonical. But it was not until 1911 that Aeschylean authorship of the whole *Prom.* was first denied. By then it was becoming clear that the linguistic and stylistic peculiarities of the play were not confined to any particular passages;⁵ thus those who found themselves unable to accept Aeschylean authorship of the peculiarities were forced to deny him the whole play. Faced with such an awkward choice, most scholars understandably preferred to accept the peculiarities in an author whose style is in any case strange, whose originality is undeniable, and whose surviving works represent a mere fraction of

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his total output.

The first to deny Aeschylean authorship outright was A. Gercke.⁶ His pupil F. Niedzballa found solid evidence in the play's vocabulary to support his case, but much of Gercke's argument was based on apparent contradictions between *Prom.* and the surviving fragments of Προμηθεὺς Λυόμενος, generally regarded⁷ as a companion-piece from the same Aeschylean trilogy; he concluded that the two plays could not belong to the same trilogy; that Λυόμενος was Aeschylean, that the third play, Προμηθεὺς Πυρφόρος, which most scholars regarded as the third member of the trilogy, was in fact the same as Προμηθεὺς Πυρκαεὺς (a satyr-play produced in 472 B.C. with *A. Pers.*); and that Δεσμώτης was composed not earlier than the 430s, but before 424, when it was parodied by Aristophanes in his *Knights*.⁸

Gercke's arguments were opposed by Wilamowitz and Körte,⁹ and his theory seemed at first to have won few supporters. Yet the defenders of Aeschylean authorship were often driven to rather desperate arguments of their own; Körte even admitted that 'if nothing else stood in the way, one would certainly place *Prom.* ten or twenty years later than the *Oresteia*', on the basis of the linguistic and stylistic evidence, but went on to argue from the structure and geographical details that an early date, soon after 475 B.C., was to be preferred: Aeschylus' connection with Sicily might explain the peculiarities. This suggestion was developed further by F. Focke, who argued for a Sicilian dilogy (Δεσμώτης and Λυόμενος), produced by Aeschylus for an audience with rather different expectations from those of the Athenians.¹⁰

But meanwhile another voice had entered the discussion on the other side. Wilhelm Schmid was a figure not lightly to be dismissed. In 1912 he had merely concluded that *Prom.* had undergone extensive revision;¹¹ but in the second volume of his monumental history of Greek literature, he omitted the play completely from his treatment of Aeschylus, and it appeared instead in the third volume, under the heading 'Die Tragödie unter dem Einfluss von Sophistik und Rhetorik'. Schmid gave his reasons in full in a separate monograph,¹² which remains in many respects the most thorough and detailed statement of the case against Aeschylean authorship. Apart from the linguistic and stylistic peculiarities noted by his predecessors, and others added by himself, Schmid

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dwelt at some length on the treatment of the myth and on the general tone of the drama, which he thought displayed unmistakable signs of sophistic influence and religious views incompatible with those of Aeschylus.

Schmid's overconfident tone, and the uneven quality of his arguments, which range from the feeble to the devastating, have often discouraged scholars from taking him as seriously as he deserves, and relatively few have been convinced. The opinion of the majority (particularly in England) is clearly that the play's peculiarities, though real and puzzling, are not weighty enough to cause serious doubt, when we possess only about one tenth of Aeschylus' works. Over the last forty years or so the tendency has been to ascribe *Prom.* to Aeschylus' last years, perhaps after the *Oresteia*, and to explain its peculiarities as being due to the influence of the young Sophocles, of the changes in Athenian society, or of Aeschylus' final visit to Sicily.¹³

Yet the problem has not been by any means fully explored. The defenders of Aeschylean authorship have relied heavily on the weight of tradition, and on the sense of outrage naturally felt at the denial to one of the world's greatest tragedians of one of the world's greatest tragedies. But a number of technical studies, not specifically directed towards the authorship problem but incidentally revealing further unaeschylean details unknown to Schmid, have continued to cause concern among those who recognized that a problem existed.¹⁴ Many scholars now feel that, although no conclusive proof of spuriousness has hitherto been produced, no sure decision either way is really justified.¹⁵

It seems then that the time has come to try to set the problem on a sounder factual basis, and thus enable us to assess more accurately the similarities and dissimilarities between *Prom.* and the extant work of Aeschylus. This can only be done if we can discover and apply truly objective criteria to the available material, and this has been my main concern throughout this study. As far as possible my approach has been impartial, and in particular I have taken care to compare *Prom.* with the work, not only of Aeschylus, but also of Sophocles and Euripides, so as to provide an adequate check on the evidence and ensure that it can be seen in the correct perspective.

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All authorship problems are bedevilled by the subjective nature of the judgements that have to be made; and ultimately, of course, the decision whether or not Aeschylus wrote all (or part) of *Prom.* must remain subjective. But we should try to explore all the possibilities of objective observation and measurement before we make that decision. It may be felt that the *prima facie* case for Aeschylean authorship is so strong that we should demand overwhelming proof before we give up the traditional ascription - and proof in such matters is rarely to be obtained. It seems to me, however, that we should try to assess, more or less independently, first this *prima facie* case (see chapter 2), and then the stylistic evidence of the play itself: only then should we put the two together and see what they add up to.

In looking for objective criteria, I have concentrated on those details of style in which we can observe a consistent and distinctive difference between Aeschylus and one or both of the other tragedians. In this way we can measure where *Prom.* stands in relation to all three. Most previous studies have been hampered by the vagueness of their criteria; and if *Prom.* is examined in relation to Aeschylus alone, it is impossible to estimate the true extent of its divergence or concurrence, in the absence of comparative material from any other author.

Modern stylistic studies may be said to have really started with the work of Lewis Campbell and A. Lutoslawski on the dating of Plato's dialogues.¹⁶ Their work has been supplemented, and new methods developed, by several scholars over the last seventy years; as a result, we can now ascribe most of Plato's works with some confidence to his early, middle, or late period. But beyond that it has not been possible to go. Studies of particles, of vocabulary, of sentence length, and other aspects of his style, have not been conclusive. Thus, for example, it has not been proven whether or not Plato composed such important and substantial works as the *Seventh Letter* or *Hippias A.* 'The conventional methods of statistical measurement are of little use with an author such as Plato, who constantly and deliberately changes his style from passage to passage and from work to work.'¹⁷ Similarly inconclusive results have attended the investigation of the *Corpus Lysiacum*, and of the works of Isokrates and Demosthenes.¹⁸

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If stylometrists have been relatively unsuccessful with Plato, a prose author whose work survives in considerable bulk, it might be felt that any attempt to measure a single tragedy against Aeschylus' small and varied remains is doomed to failure. Even in the case of *Rhesos*, where eighteen undisputedly Euripidean plays are available for comparison, objective stylometry has not been decisive: most scholars appeared to be swayed at least as much by *Gefühl* as by measurable evidence, and the question of authenticity still remains open.¹⁹ But stylometrists have rarely claimed to be able to prove a case one way or the other: usually they talk in terms of probabilities; and the twentieth century has, I think, made some progress towards a more systematic and thorough investigation of problems of authenticity, not least in the classics.

Modern advances in statistics and computer technology have also proven valuable in some authorship disputes.²⁰ My decision not to employ a computer was due, not simply to conservatism or ignorance, but to an awareness that, for the moment at least, its capabilities in dealing with Greek poetry are extremely limited, and that the corpus of Aeschylus' works, even of extant Greek tragedy, is small enough to allow most operations of collecting and counting to be done by hand. So too, I have only rarely had occasion to use the methods and terminology of true statisticians, as I have rarely found myself dealing with numbers and samples large enough to justify them. The result may seem unscientific or amateurish to a professional statistician, but I think it will be seen that I have not sacrificed all standards of objective measurement: instead I have tried to adapt them to the specific requirements of this study.

Perhaps the most satisfactory and genuinely objective criteria are to be found in the study of metre. Here the peculiar demands of the subject matter can be more or less discounted, and we are entitled to regard differences of technique as being truly characteristic of their author. We possess quite a substantial sample of lyrics from the three major tragedians, enough to identify quite distinct patterns in each. The anapaests too offer interesting information about their different practices. In chapters 3 and 4 I examine *Prom.* in relation to these differences; and in chapter 5 I consider various technical features of the iambic trimeters which seem also to be helpful.

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Less reliable as stylometric criteria are details of structure and dramatic technique, since these are more liable to be affected by the particular requirements of the subject matter of each play. Nevertheless we can identify certain individual preferences and aversions which we may regard as characteristic of each tragedian, and in chapter 6 I measure *Prom.* against these.

Much weight has sometimes been given to the alleged problems of staging presented by *Prom.* Although this is a field in which opinion necessarily rules over knowledge, in chapter 7 I consider some of the questions which do seem capable of resolution and which may bear upon the problem of authenticity.

In my vocabulary tests (chapter 8), I have taken care to avoid the mistakes of method displayed by my predecessors, and to use as much comparative material as possible from all three tragedians. Certain statistical methods which have proven successful in distinguishing between the vocabularies of some prose authors in various languages turned out to be unhelpful in the case of Greek tragedy (the same is true of the study of sentence-length: in each case I have explained briefly why these criteria are unhelpful, and shown that the results are inconclusive).²¹

Finally I study details of syntax and style which seem to be characteristic of *Prom.*, and measure them against the practices of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Here it is particularly difficult to remain objective, in that one inevitably tends to *look* for oddities, but in chapter 9 I have again tried to check this tendency by the use of Sophocles and Euripides for comparison.

Other areas of investigation naturally present themselves, which I have rejected, at any rate for the present study. The whole dramatic 'meaning' of the play has been interpreted by some as being entirely characteristic of Aeschylus, by others as being incompatible with his style and beliefs: it seems clear to me that any interpretation of the play is liable to be affected by our decisions as to its author and its possible place in a trilogy;²² I therefore prefer to consider first those arguments which are more capable of objective analysis and evaluation. So this study is no more than a prelude to the interpretation of the play. Such important and fascinating topics as the play's religious and political content, and even its patterns of imagery, have been

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excluded from consideration, simply because they are too hard to pin down. This emphasis on objective criteria inevitably involves closing the eyes to much that is beautiful and important in the play; we end up treating it as a problem rather than a drama. But we have no choice. Although many of the most interesting and challenging questions about *Prom.* ultimately concern its interpretation as a play, this is not the place to try to answer them.²³

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Chapter 2

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

AUTHENTICITY

The earliest explicit reference to a Prometheus-play is found in Aristotle (*Poet.* 18.1456a2f); we have no idea whether it refers to *Prom.*, to a Prometheus trilogy, or to another play, and there is no real reason to suppose that Aristotle considered Aeschylus to be the author.¹ So for our purposes this reference is useless.

The earliest attestation of Aeschylean authorship of *Prom.* is implicitly that of the Alexandrian tradition. This is not unusual for a Greek tragedy, though it so happens that of Aeschylus' six undisputed extant plays, four are attested as his by Aristophanes.² *Prom.*'s *hypothesis* does not record the occasion of its first performance. This too is not in itself remarkable (for only two of Sophocles' surviving plays do the *hypotheses* give us this information), though we are given didaskalic information about *Persians*, *Seven against Thebes*, and *Oresteia*, and we now have Pap. Oxy. 2256.3 to tell us about *Suppliants*.

The fact that we have no evidence from the 200 years after Aeschylus' death to connect him with *Prom.* does not amount to a positive indication that he did not write the play. An Aristophanic citation would be an unexpected bonus to a modern scholar, and there are few other likely sources of reference. Plato quotes nine times from lost Aeschylean plays, but only from *Th.* of his extant works (*Rep.* 2.361b-362a, cf. 8.550c); no dramatic source is suggested for Protagoras' story of Prometheus (*Prot.* 320c-323a), nor for the brief reference in the *Second Letter* (311b). Aristotle rarely mentions any fifth-century tragedians apart from Sophocles, Euripides, and Agathon: of Aeschylus' extant plays, he only refers to *Cho.* (*Poet.* 16.1455a4).³

It is clear that the scholiasts of *Prom.* are in no doubt that Aeschylus was its author, and that the play was at one time bound with *Λυδύενος* (cf. Σ513, 524 τὸ ἐξῆς δράμα); the list of τὰ τοῦ δράματος πρόσωπα includes the names of Ge and Herakles, who very

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probably took part in *Λυόμενος*. The Medicean Catalogue records three Prometheus-plays among its seventy-three titles, *Δεσμώτης*, *Λυόμενος*, *Πυρφόρος*. And if we conclude from this that the Alexandrians accepted *Prom.* as the work of Aeschylus (as Cicero accepted *Λυόμενος*, cf. fr. 193), we should be unwise to ignore their judgement. Their material for comparison was extensive, far greater than ours,⁴ and their critical powers seem in some cases to have been keen. They are known to have expressed doubts as to the authenticity of certain dramas, to have speculated about possible cases of dramatic plagiarism, and to have pointed to occasions on which sons of tragedians produced their fathers' plays.⁵

On the other hand, it seems pretty clear that the 'minor' tragedians of the fifth century were poorly represented with the Alexandrians and their scholarly successors, in comparison to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.⁶ The Suda appears to know very little about most of them, and we hear almost nothing from other ancient sources; even the most successful tragedians are rarely quoted. Aristophanes of Byzantium and his successors often wrote as if there were only three tragedians, and apparently had little interest in the work of their rivals. Our own knowledge of the history of the tragic texts from their first performance to their arrival in Alexandria is minimal:⁷ theirs may not always have been much greater. In short, it would be unwise to rest much weight on the Alexandrian ascription of our play to Aeschylus.⁸

THE DATE

The latest firm *terminus post quem* for the composition of *Prom.* is provided by 351ff, which undoubtedly refers, by *vaticinium ex eventu*, to the eruption of Etna, which can be fixed in 475 (Thuc. 3.116) or 479 B.C. (Marmor Parium 52).⁹ This passage and Pindar *P.* 1.15–28 (of 470 B.C.) are obviously not independent descriptions of the eruption; either one has borrowed from the other, or both have borrowed from a common (epic?) source.¹⁰ There is no need to conclude that *Prom.* must have been composed very soon after the eruption, or that this suggests a connection with Sicily. The Typhos incident is an important part of Zeus' *aristeia* in Hesiod's *Theogony*, and its inclusion in a play dealing with Zeus' new tyranny is therefore apt;¹¹ and to any dramatist writing after 470

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about Typhos, Pindar's description would be an obvious source to draw from.

The echo between Pindar *O.* 4.8 (452 B.C.) ἴπον ἀνεμδέσσαν ἑκατοκεφάλα Τυφῶνος ὀβρίμου and *Prom.* 365 ἰποῦμενος ῥίξαισιν Αἰτναίαις ὕπο, both concerning Etna, is unlikely to be mere coincidence: ἴπος, ἰποῦν are extremely rare words (confined mostly to comedy and medicine). But we can do no more than conclude that either *Prom.* imitated Pindar *P.* 1, and was in turn imitated by Pindar *O.* 4, or all three passages draw from a common source, or the author of *Prom.* had both Pindaric passages in mind when he wrote his Typhos-episode, in which case he was writing after 452.¹² Further Pindaric influence may perhaps be traced in the whole idea of the Thetis-secret, first found in *Isthmian* 8.30ff, of 478 B.C.

For a *terminus ante quem* we must look for passages in other works of known date which are unmistakably influenced by *Prom.* These are not easy to find. Echoes of individual phrases are common, indeed inevitable in the stylized *Kunstsprache* of tragic dialogue; they need not indicate any borrowing, conscious or unconscious, of one play from another, but may often be due to chance or to common borrowing from a source unknown to us (for example, the lost 'Homeric' epics). Thus of the seventy or so examples which Niedzballa cites of echoes between *Prom.* and the extant work of Sophocles, only about ten seem to me to be worth a second thought, and none of them are by any means certain.¹³ Even more frustrating for our purposes is the fact that, even when two passages seem to be interdependent, it is rarely possible to be sure which is the original.

The same is true of *Prom.* and Euripides: we cannot point to a single passage where imitation is certain.¹⁴ Attempts to show conscious echoes between *Prom.* and *E. Hks.* or *S. Ant.*,¹⁵ merely establish certain similarities of theme and treatment inherent in the basic elements of the plot. An interesting but inconclusive list of possible echoes can be drawn up for *Prom.* and the *Peirithous* and *Sisyphos* of Kritias or Euripides;¹⁶ but again this does not really help us.¹⁷ They merely balance the possible Aeschylean echoes in *Prom.* (which are similarly uncertain),¹⁸ and serve to remind us that *Prom.* is not noticeably more archaic, or more Aeschylean, in its allusions than we might expect any play of (say)