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978-1-107-63429-9 - Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound
Translated by R. C. Trevelyan
Excerpt
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INTRODUCTION

It is quite uncertain at what date the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus was composed and produced. It is generally thought to be earlier than his Oresteian Trilogy; but Mr George Thomson has given some plausible reasons for supposing that it was the latest of his surviving plays. Aeschylus died in 456 B.C. at the age of sixty-nine.

This drama was the first of a trilogy which consisted of the *Prometheus Bound*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *Prometheus the Firebearer*. In this play Prometheus is still the inflexible rebel against the tyranny of Zeus; but before the period of the two later plays many thousands of years are supposed to have lapsed, and meantime both Prometheus and Zeus have learnt wisdom, so that a reconciliation has become possible.

My object in this translation has been to reproduce as faithfully as possible for those who cannot read Greek, not only the meaning, but the form, phrasing and movement of the original. In the dialogue the problem is a simple one. A normal English blank verse, though shorter by two syllables than a Greek iambic line, and of different rhythmical structure, is yet not dissimilar in movement and general effect. It ought then to be possible, without omissions or padding, to translate the dialogue into blank verse line for line.

In the lyrics and anapaests the difficulties are far greater, and no solution can be quite satisfactory. I have tried to imitate as closely as possible the metrical pattern and phrasing, in such a way that one musical setting would fit both the Greek and the English words.

All Greek poetry is quantitative, the metrical design being determined by the length and shortness of the syllables, not by the stress, whereas the structure of English verse depends in the main upon stress. If then we are to reproduce the pattern of a Greek rhythmical phrase in English, we must, as it were,

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translate quantity into stress. At the same time, as often as possible, long English syllables must be made to correspond to long Greek syllables, and short to short syllables. The success or failure of such an experiment will depend upon the degree to which a reader who knows no Greek can feel that he is reading, a translation no doubt, but a translation into intelligible English metre and poetry.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

POWER (*Κράτος*)VIOLENCE (*Βία*)

HEPHAISTOS

PROMETHEUS

OKEANOS

Io, *daughter of Inachos*

HERMES

CHORUS OF OCEANIDS

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A desolate rocky landscape. Enter PROMETHEUS, led by POWER and VIOLENCE, and followed by HEPHAISTOS, who is carrying a hammer, chains and nails.

POWER

To Earth's remotest region are we come,
 To the Scythian tract, a wilderness untrodden.
 Hephaistos, now must thou perform the charge
 Laid on thee by the Father, to clamp fast
 This miscreant upon yon high-towering crags
 In adamantine fetters none can break.
 For thine own flower, bright fire, source of all arts,
 He has stolen and given to mortals. Such the sin
 For which he must pay penance to the Gods,
 That so he may be taught to accept the tyranny 10
 Of Zeus, and cease from championing mankind.

HEPHAISTOS

Power and Violence, for you the charge
 Of Zeus is now fulfilled: your part is finished.
 But I—no heart is mine to bind by force
 A kindred God to this bleak wintry cleft.
 Nathless must I find courage for this deed;
 For to neglect the Father's hest were perilous.
 Thou proud-souled child of righteous-counselling Themis,
 Against thy will and mine I must enchain thee
 In brazen bonds fast to this desolate cliff, 20
 Where neither voice nor form of man shall reach
 Thy sense, but scorched by the sun's pure flame, thy flesh
 Shall change its bloom; and grateful shalt thou be
 When starry-mantled night veils the day's beams,
 And the sun scatters the dawn's frost once more.
 And ever shall the weight of present misery
 Crush thee; for yet unborn is thy deliverer.
 Such thy reward for championing mankind.

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For unquailed by the wrath of Gods, a God
 To men thou didst grant honours beyond right. 30
 Wherefore on this grim rock shalt thou keep watch,
 Erect, sleepless, with never bending knee,
 Uttering many wailings and lamentings
 In vain; for inexorable is the heart of Zeus;
 And ever harsh is he whose reign is new.

POWER

Enough! Why linger and show pity in vain?
 Why hate you not this God, so God-abhorred,
 Who has betrayed your privilege to mortals?

HEPHAISTOS

Kinship hath dread force, and companionship.

POWER

So be it: yet how dare to disobey 40
 The Father's bidding? Do you not dread that more?

HEPHAISTOS

Aye, thou art ever merciless and hard-hearted.

POWER

It boots naught to bewail his fate. Thou then
 Waste not thy pains on what thou canst not cure.

HEPHAISTOS

O how I loathe this handicraft of mine!

POWER

Why hate it? since for what now vexes thee
 Thine art, in good sooth, is nowise to blame.

HEPHAISTOS

Yet would it had fallen to another's lot!

POWER

All functions have their burden, save Heaven's kingship;
 For there is no one free but Zeus alone. 50

HEPHAISTOS

I know it well. To that I have no reply.

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POWER

Come then, make haste to cast the fetters round him,
 Lest the Father behold you loitering.

HEPHAISTOS

You see, I have the armlets ready here.

POWER

Cast them about his wrists; then with main strength
 Smite with your hammer; rivet him to the rocks.

HEPHAISTOS

The work goes forward in good earnest now.

POWER

Strike harder; clinch; leave nothing loose. This knave
 Will find a way even out of desperate straits.

HEPHAISTOS

That arm at least is fixed past hope of loosening. 60

POWER

Now pin this other firmly, that he may learn
 He has but a dullard's wit compared with Zeus.

HEPHAISTOS

None save this wretch could justly blame my work.

POWER

Now drive the stubborn jaw of the steel wedge
 Right through his breast; nail it with all thy force.

HEPHAISTOS

Ai ai, Prometheus! For thy pangs I groan.

POWER

What, shrinking again, and groaning over the foes
 Of Zeus! Thyself thou wilt be pitying soon.

HEPHAISTOS

Thou seest a spectacle grievous to behold.

POWER

I see this knave here meeting his deserts. 70
 But come now, cast the girths around his ribs.

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HEPHAISTOS

Do it I must. Urge me not needlessly.

POWER

Urge you I will, aye, shout my orders too.
 Go down below and ring his legs round strongly.

HEPHAISTOS

Well, there that work's done, and with no long toil.

POWER

Smite now the galling anklets with strong blows.
 Severe is the taskmaster whom we serve.

HEPHAISTOS

The utterance of thy tongue matches thy visage.

POWER

Be thou soft as thou wilt; but chide not me
 For my stern will and the harshness of my mood. 80

HEPHAISTOS

Let us begone, now that his legs are chained.

Exit HEPHAISTOS.

POWER, *to* PROMETHEUS

There now, wax proud; filch from the Gods their rights
 To bestow them upon perishing men! What power
 Have mortals to relieve thee of these torments?
 False is that name given thee by the Gods—
 Forethinker! Of forethought thou thyself hast need,
 How to creep forth out of this artful snare.

Exeunt POWER and VIOLENCE. *After a long pause* PROMETHEUS
speaks.

PROMETHEUS

O thou divine Air, and ye breezes swift of wing,
 Ye river sources, and the multitudinous laughter
 Of Ocean's waves, and universal Mother Earth, 90
 And thou, all-seeing orb of the Sun, to thee I call;

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Behold what at the hands of Gods, a God, I endure.
 Look, look with what foul torturing pangs
 I am crushed, through the myriad lapsing years
 Agonized and racked!
 So shameful the bondage against me devised
 By this new-throned lord of the blest Gods.
 Woe, woe! For the misery now and to come
 Despairing I groan. Whence shall deliverance
 Dawn o'er me to end my afflictions? 100
 And yet, what say I? Is not clear foreknowledge mine
 Of all that shall be? Unforeseen, no suffering
 Will come upon me. I must bear my destined lot
 As patiently as may be; since I know that none
 Can strive against Necessity's resistless force.
 But neither can I keep silence about this my doom,
 Nor yet break silence. Because of blessings I bestowed
 On mortals, to this yoke of pain have I been bound.
 'Twas I who seized, and hidden in fennel-stalk conveyed
 That stolen fount of fire, now revealed to men 110
 Their teacher in every craft, their great artificer.
 Such the offence for which I endure this punishment,
 Riveted thus in bonds beneath the open sky.

A short silence.

Ah, Ah! Eā! Eā!
 A sound, hark!—A fragrance invisibly assails me!
 What is it? divine or mortal, or a blend of both?
 Unto this crag, here where the world hath an end,
 Comes one to view my miseries—or with what intent?
 Behold me then in bondage, that ill-fated God,
 That enemy of Zeus, that wretch who have earned 120
 Reprobation and hatred of every God,
 All those who have entry within his courts,
 By the too great friendship I showed unto men.
 Ah, list! What rustling again do I hear
 As of birds hard by? With light rapid pulsing
 Of whispering pinions the air is thrilled.
 I am fearful of all that approaches.

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The CHORUS have now entered.

CHORUS

Fear naught at all: nay, *Strophe 1*
 'Tis a friendly band that hither
 Upon swiftly racing pinions
 To thy cliff's foot hath advanced; yet hardly 130
 Our sire's consent might we persuade.
 Fleet were the breezes that bore me onward.
 For through the windings
 Of my cave a clanging sound pierced
 As of iron, and from me scared
 Shame's timid-eyed reluctance;
 So unsandalled I hasted on wing'd car hither.

PROMETHEUS

Aiai! Aiai!
 Offspring of fruitful Tethys, ye children
 Of him who engirdleth the Earth's whole circle
 With the coils of his stream sleeplessly flowing,
 Father Okeanos, 140
 Look now and behold with what vile bonds
 Pinioned here, nailed fast to this gorge's
 Uppermost precipice,
 My unwearied watch I am keeping.

CHORUS

I see, Prometheus; *Antistrophe 1*
 And alas, in fear and anguish
 Spreadeth o'er mine eyes a dim mist,
 As I weep, here on the rocks beholding
 Thy body thus withering away,
 Shamefully fettered in bonds of hard steel.
 For newly stablished
 Are the lords that rule Olympus,
 And with laws new-fangled Zeus
 Lawlessly holds dominion, 150
 And that which was mighty he now destroyeth.

PROMETHEUS

Would that beneath earth, deeper than Hades,
 Host of the dead, to the infinite gulf

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Of Hell he had hurled me,
 In chains unescapable savagely bound;
 So none of the Gods, no, nor of mortals,
 O'er me had gloated.
 But now am I martyred thus, for the winds
 A sport, to my foes a derision.

CHORUS

What God could be so hard of heart *Strophe 2* 160
 That such a sight should gladden his soul?
 Who shareth not, save only Zeus,
 Thine anguish, smitten with pity? But he, ever rancorous,
 Setting his soul inflexibly,
 Crusheth the Uranian
 Race, nor e'er will cease,
 Till he shall either have glutted his heart, or some other
 By guile shall have seized his impregnable empire.

PROMETHEUS

Aye verily of me, though shamefully now
 Tormented in stubborn chains, shall the Prince
 Of the Blessed Deities someday have need, 170
 To reveal to him that new plot, and by whom
 Of sceptre and throne he shall yet be stripped.
 By no honey-tongued persuasive charms
 Shall he soothe or coax me; no, nor before
 Stern menaces cowering, e'er shall I yield
 Nor disclose this secret,
 Until he release me from these cruel bonds,
 Aye, till he consent
 To grant me amends for this outrage.

CHORUS

Though bold thou art, and wilt not yield *Antistrophe 2* 180
 One jot for all thy misery's stress,
 And over-daring is thy tongue;
 Yet piercing terror is thrilling my spirit, and boding fears
 Fill me, of what shall be thy fate;
 Unto what haven arrived
 Thou shalt end thy long