

## PROMETHEUS AS TEACHER AND THE CHORUS'S DESCENT, P.V. 278 ff.<sup>1</sup>

The Chorus of Oceanids in the *Prometheus Bound* enter at line 128 in what they call a winged chariot (135). They do not descend, however, until Prometheus asks them to do so (272–3), and then they fulfil his bidding, describing their descent from the 'swift-rushing seat and the pure sky, the pathway of the birds, to the rugged earth' in lines 278–81. Although controversy has long existed over the manner of staging the Chorus's entrance and their subsequent descent, critics have given little consideration to the dramatic purpose of Aeschylus' emphasis upon this descent, particularly in regard to the teaching relationship which Prometheus establishes between himself and the Chorus. The following discussion of this question does not purport to enter into the controversy over the staging of the *Prometheus Bound*, but implicitly assumes an interpretation similar to that of Pickard-Cambridge, and supports by reference to the larger dramatic context of the play the view that an actual descent must be portrayed in some manner.<sup>2</sup>

An assessment of the significance of the delay of the Chorus's descent until after the *parodos* and their first dialogue with Prometheus is important for an understanding of the development of their relationship to Prometheus which remains uncommitted until the end of the play. The dramatic device of delayed

<sup>1</sup> Line references to the *Prometheus Bound* are those of the second edition of G. Murray's Oxford Classical Text of Aeschylus (1955) unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens* (Oxford, 1946), pp.38–40, suggests that the Chorus approach Prometheus, who is evidently fastened to 'some high central erection on the far side of the orchestra from the audience', by means of a winged car which is rolled forward to the front of the upper story or roof of the stage buildings whence the Oceanids descend into the orchestra during the Oceanus-scene. Pickard-Cambridge introduces his proposal with the remark that, 'The *Prometheus Vincit* raises problems of which no solution satisfactory to all scholars is likely to be found', especially as the dating of this play is not firmly established although most recent scholars agree upon a date of 460 or later (p.37). There are those like U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf ('Die Bühne des Aischylos', *Hermes* 21 (1886), 597–622; 610–11, *Aischylos: Interpretationen* (Berlin, 1914), pp.115–16, and *Die griechische Tragödien und ihre drei Dichter, griechische Tragödien* 14 (Berlin, 1923), 31, 31 n.3) who believe in the existence of a flying machine capable of holding a chorus of twelve. P. Richter, *Zur*

*Dramaturgie des Aischylos* (Leipzig, 1892), p.79, conjectures that this machine is supported by the wall and beams at the back of the stage. D. L. Page, *Actors' Interpolations in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1934), pp.82–3, and G. Murray, *Aeschylus: The Creator of Tragedy* (Oxford, 1940), p.40, envisage a T-shaped crane. Ed. Fraenkel, 'Der Einzug des Chors im Prometheus', *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 2, 23 (1954), 269–84, suggests that each of the Oceanids enters in a separate winged car at an elevated level of the cliff to which Prometheus is bound and to which they eventually descend. Cf. also R. Unterberger, *Der gefesselte Prometheus des Aischylos: Eine Interpretation* (Stuttgart, 1968), p.11, A. Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellen* (Göttingen, 1972), p.146, and N. G. L. Hammond, 'The Conditions of Dramatic Production to the Death of Aeschylus', *GRBS* 4 (1972), 387–450; 423–5. In contrast with the above proposals, G. Thomson, 'Notes on *Prometheus Vincit*', *CQ* 23 (1929), 155–63; 160–1; and *Aeschylus: The Prometheus Bound* (Cambridge, 1932), nn. 130, 131, 293–9, argues that the Oceanids enter the orchestra, not in a chariot or chariots, but in a dance formation conventionally associated with sea-nymphs riding upon sea-horses.

descent represents a progression in this relationship whereby the Chorus, in finally abandoning their chariot and agreeing to approach Prometheus and listen to him, jeopardize their detachment from him and his fate, offer tentative support, and give him scope to develop his storytelling abilities and apply his persuasive powers. Although this progression does not represent an unequivocal commitment to Prometheus—for the Chorus fluctuate throughout the play between sympathy and reproach for him—it is none the less a crucial step as signalled by the intensity of Prometheus' insistence that they descend and hear his story through to the end.<sup>1</sup>

The Chorus waver between regarding Prometheus as an example provided by Zeus for the benefit of potentially rebellious deities,<sup>2</sup> and accepting him as a teacher in his own right. Their natural sympathy for Prometheus and their fear of the consequences which its expression may have for them produces their marked and frequent shifting of allegiance from Zeus to Prometheus. Thus, they express sympathy for Prometheus and deplore the tyrannical nature of Zeus (cf. 128, 144–51, 160–7, 184–5, 242–5, 397–435, 472–5, 1066 ff.), yet chastise Prometheus (cf. 178–80, 259–60, 507–8, 542–51, 932, 1036 ff.), and give voice to that loyalty to Zeus which he commands by instilling fear in his subjects (cf. 181–2, 526–60, 898–900, 932).

The Chorus's indecision is particularly evident just prior to Prometheus' request that they descend, for in vv. 193–6 they ask Prometheus to be their teacher and reveal, if there should be no harm incurred by speech, the story of the cause of his present sufferings at the hands of Zeus. After Prometheus delivers his first long speech (197–241) concerning his alliance with and subsequent opposition to Zeus over the fate of mortals, the Chorus's initial response is sympathetic (242–5). When, however, Prometheus tells them of the specific nature of his benefits to mankind, fire and blind hopes (248–54), they firmly remind him of his errors:

οὐχ ὁρᾷς ὄτι  
ἡμαρτες; ὥς δ' ἡμαρτες οὐτ' ἐμοὶ λέγειν  
καθ' ἡδονὴν σοὶ τ' ἄλγος. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν  
μεθῶμεν, ἄθλου δ' ἐκλυσω ζῆτει τινά. (259–62)

Prometheus responds to the Chorus's recriminations in lines 263 ff. In lines 263–5, he states clearly that it is only by actually experiencing his form of suffering that the Chorus will learn not to counsel and advise lightly: 'it is easy for him who keeps his foot outside of suffering to advise and counsel those who are faring badly.' Prometheus objects to the Chorus's implicit affirmation of Zeus' standards by their characterization of him as a rebel who deserves punish-

<sup>1</sup> That the chariot represents a rapid means of escape is stressed through the emphasis upon the rustling and flapping of its wings, and upon the winged rivalry (124–9, cf. 132), reminding us not only that the Chorus, whose natural habitat is ocean's subterranean caves (cf. 133–4), are aflight, but also that they, as long as they sit in the chariot, are mere spectators (cf. 143 ff.), however sympathetic to Prometheus. T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy: Essays on Six Greek Dramas* (Austin, 1963),

p.93, stresses the physical distance between Prometheus and the Chorus throughout the play. Although Prometheus' isolation is undeniably persistent and incurable, he does reach out to the Chorus here and they respond to the extent that they can at this point of the play.

<sup>2</sup> That Zeus is a *didaskalos* in using Prometheus as an example to other gods who might consider rebellion is a recurring theme: cf. 51, 391, 553. Cf. below, p.259 n.1.

ment. In 271, he tells them not to lament his present sorrows, τὰ . . . παρόντα μὴ δύρεσθ' ἄχη, but in 274–5, he bids them emphatically to share in his labours,

πίθεσθέ μοι, πίθεσθε, συμπονήσατε τῷ νῦν μογοῦντι.

Although this last imperative is most readily interpreted as 'share vicariously my πόνοι',<sup>1</sup> nevertheless it alone in the play foreshadows the Chorus's final decision to share literally in Prometheus' physical sufferings. In 271 ff., Prometheus tells the Oceanids the methods by which he will transform them from sympathizers of the present (271) into fellow-sufferers (274): they must step down from their chariot to the earth in order to listen and learn the complete version of his story of τὰς προσερχούσας τύχας. Prometheus' insistent plea that the Chorus be persuaded by him reflects his anxiety that they may have already decided that his words are harmful (cf. 196), and that consequently they will depart, depriving him of his only audience.<sup>2</sup>

Words are, of course, the chained Prometheus' sole means of achieving his desired end. Prometheus' success in securing his audience is marked by the positive response of the Chorus who echo him verbally (277 ff.): ἐπεθώυξας describes the imperative mood of Prometheus in 271 ff.; their desire to hear the whole story echoes Prometheus in line 273; and the description of their descent (278–81) fulfils his bidding in 272. That they are not unwilling further echoes Prometheus' description in 266 of his own attitude when he committed offences against Zeus. The Oceanids willingly submit themselves to Prometheus' prolonged storytelling and his powers of persuasion (cf. 274). They subject themselves to the words which Oceanus in the ensuing passage calls τραχεῖς καὶ τεθηγμένους (311), to the words which can both heal (378, 698–9) and inflame or cause disease (685–6).<sup>3</sup> At the very end of the play, when the Oceanids decide to suffer with Prometheus, Hermes emphasizes that they, αἱ πημοσύνας συγκάμνουσαι ταῖς τοῦδε (1058–9), will suffer εἰδυῖαι (1075–9). They have been transformed from eager but distant sympathizers into willing listeners and finally into deliberate fellow-sufferers. Prometheus seems to predict the Oceanids' changing fortunes when he says, ταῦτά τοι πλανωμένη πρὸς ἄλλοι' ἄλλον πημονή προσῖάνει (275–6), lines which perhaps refer ostensibly to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. S. Long, 'Notes on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*', *PAPhS* 102 (1953), 229–80; n.274.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. J. Podlecki, 'Reciprocity in *Prometheus Bound*', *GRBS* 4 (1969), 287–92; 292, on the intensity of Prometheus' appeal that the Chorus descend. My interpretation of the Chorus's relationship to Prometheus accords with views such as that of K. Reinhardt, *Aischylos als Regisseur und Theologe* (Bern, 1949), pp.64–6, in contrast with, e.g. L. S. Farnell, 'The paradox of the *Prometheus Vincit*', *JHS* 53 (1933), 40–50; 44, who explains away the Chorus's criticisms of Prometheus as 'the bourgeois function of all Chorus', and G. -J. -M. -J. Te Riele, *Les Femmes chez Eschyle* (Groningen, 1955), pp.15–16, 20, 30–3, 47, 53, 58–60, who sees in the Chorus an

overwhelming curiosity which motivates them to compel the reluctant Prometheus to reveal more and more information.

<sup>3</sup> The references to the pointed power of Prometheus' speech are pervasive, illustrated in the word *τορῶς* (cf. 604, 699, 870), whose primary meaning is 'piercingly'. The painful effect of tales of sufferings is not confined to Prometheus' storytelling abilities, for when the Oceanids have heard the story of Io's torment (640–86), they ward off her words, their soul is 'chilled' by the 'two-edged goad' of the story of her pains, and they shudder at her plight which they now see in all its horror (690–3; contrast 631). The imagery of the shaft in reference to the pointed power of speech as well as to other forms of weapons in the *P.V.* is so extensive that I am treating it in a separate paper.

Prometheus himself and Zeus, but surely to all the inhabitants of the cosmos as well, including the Oceanids. Prometheus' persuasive powers have indeed proved compelling.

The force of Prometheus' speech has in fact already been anticipated in 277 ff., for the verb, *ἐπεβούξας* (277, cf. 393) echoes Kratos in 73, *καπιθωύξω*, and *οὐκ ἀκούσας* (expressed negatively rather than positively) echoes the unwilling Hephaestus, *ἄκοντα* (19), who is being shouted at and hounded on by Kratos. Prometheus' speech contains an imperative force no less compelling and finally no less painful than the physical might of Kratos, the agent of Zeus. Prometheus' listeners, however, and eventual fellow-victims commit themselves to him willingly—unlike Hephaestus, unlike the Prometheus of the present (19), unlike Io and Inachus (671), all of whom commit themselves unwillingly to the commands of Zeus, Zeus whom Hermes claims 'knows not how to lie, but fulfils every word' (1032–3), the same claim that Prometheus makes for himself (cf. 824–6, 842–3). Yet, the Prometheus of the past had chosen willingly to stand by Zeus (*συμπαρασταεῖν*—218), just as now the Chorus decide willingly to stand literally and metaphorically by Prometheus. The consequences of this decision are ominous in view of the precedent set by their newly acquired ally: just as Prometheus suffered as a result of his alliance to Zeus, so the Chorus will suffer for their alliance to Prometheus.

The change in the Chorus that is so striking at the end of the play is thus already anticipated at its beginning when the Chorus, remaining fixed for an inordinate length of time in the chariot suspended in the air with its 'foot' outside calamity (263), finally descend barefooted (135) to the rugged earth (281, 272) upon which Prometheus is tormented. Despite the Oceanids' fluctuating attitudes towards Prometheus and Zeus during the course of the play, they here take the first steps towards exchanging Zeus as their 'didaskalos' (cf. 259–60) for Prometheus (cf. 273: *μάθητε*). Zeus, who teaches Prometheus the lesson of obedience and allegiance by overt physical force, and the Oceanids through the example he has created in Prometheus, is finally superseded by Prometheus as their teacher. Prometheus teaches opposition to Zeus by storytelling; he teaches defiance of Zeus' methods of physical force.<sup>1</sup> When the Chorus decide to defy Hermes' warning and to suffer with Prometheus, *μετὰ τοῦδ' ὅ τι χρὴ πάσχειν ἐθέλω* (1067), they give as their reason, *τοὺς προδότας γὰρ μισεῖν ἔμαθον, κοῦκ ἔστι νόσος τῆσδ' ἥντιν' ἀπέπτυσσεν μάλλον* (1068–70). They have learned from Prometheus to despise above all the teachery of Zeus, and are willing to accept the terrible consequences of their choice.

The visit of Oceanus, which delays Prometheus from the fulfilment of his promised storytelling, stresses by contrast the significance of the Chorus's descent, and provides some explanation for Aeschylus' curious emphasis upon Oceanus' four-legged bird (286–7, 395–6). It is likely that Oceanus remains upon this winged beast throughout his presence on stage, and his departure marks his flight through the *αἰθήρ* (393–4).<sup>2</sup> Further, Oceanus, unlike his

<sup>1</sup> The words, *διδάσκω* and *μανθάνω*, are used in reference to Zeus as teacher of Prometheus by methods of physical force in lines 10 and 62, and as teacher of the other members of the cosmos; cf. above, n.2, p.257. These words are also used in reference to Prometheus as storyteller in lines 196, 273, 505, 609, 624, 706, 776, 817, 876. For

some observations on the teaching motif in the *P. V.*, cf. Long, loc. cit., nn. 110, 273, 487, 553, 981.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Murray, op. cit., p.41, Pickard-Cambridge, op. cit., pp. 40–1, and Wilamowitz, *Interpretationen und Die griechische Tragoedien* . . . p.31 n.3.

daughters, spontaneously proposes to Prometheus to share in his suffering, supplying the *οὐν*-prefix freely (288, 289, 295), but Prometheus rejects the offer, advising Oceanus to look, to lament (303–6), but not to suffer with him (334, 344). The difference between Prometheus' attitude to Oceanus and to the Chorus is marked by the way in which he limits his stories to Oceanus to stories about *other* suffering deities (if lines 347 ff. are to be ascribed to Prometheus at all<sup>1</sup>). Prometheus does not attempt to be Oceanus' teacher (373–4; cf. 382 ff.), but he presents himself to him as the lesson of Zeus, and lets Zeus be Oceanus' 'didaskalos' (391). Certainly, it is partly from the contrast with their father's absence of commitment to Prometheus that the poignancy of the Oceanids' final commitment to him is derived, a commitment which is anticipated dramatically in their very first decision to descend.

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<sup>1</sup> All manuscripts except M assign these lines to Oceanus, but most commentators

agree that they are more appropriate to Prometheus.