

Aeschylus, *Prometheus Vincitus*

Enter FORCE and VIOLENCE carrying PROMETHEUS, and HEPHAESTUS.

FORCE

Now we have come to the land at the end of the earth,
to the Scythians' road, a desert where are no mortals.
Hephaestus, you must look to the orders
Father Zeus laid on you, to fetter
this insolent creature to the high-cragged rocks
in adamantine-chained unbreakable bonds.
For he stole your bloom, the brightness of all-crafting fire,
and bestowed it on humans. For this offence
he must pay their price to the deities,
so that he may learn to love Zeus's rule
and cease from his custom of caring for mortal men.

HEPHAESTUS

Violence, Force, through you the will of Zeus
has its way, and nothing can obstruct it.
But I lack the daring to bind by violence
a cousin-deity to this bitter cliff.
And yet somehow I must find the presumption for this;
a grave thing it is to ignore the Father's word.

High-thinking child of Themis of right judgement,
unwilling I will hammer unwilling you
with unloosable bronze to this abominable rock
where you will see neither shape nor sound of men.

The bloom of your skin blisters off in the sun's
fierce Phoebus-flame. Your only relief
as an age of grief seeps out of each moment's evil
is when the glittering robe of night-frost hides that fire
till again the sunrise strips off your dawn-time ice.
Only one can respite you; he's not yet alive.

And this your reward for your custom of caring for men.
You a god, unshrinking before the gods' anger,
bestowed on mortals an honour outrunning their vengeance.
For this you will stand guard to this sullen stone,
sleepless, at attention, knee unbent.
Countless will be your cries, your groans unheeded;
for prayers do not deflect the mind of Zeus.
Everyone is harsh whose dominion is new.

FORCE

Why then do you pity when pity is in vain?
Why don't you hate this god most hostile to gods,

this thief of your fire, betrayer to men of your pride?

HEPHAESTUS

Kinship and friendship cannot be denied.

FORCE

I grant you that. So ignoring the Father's will,
no difficulty there, and nothing ill?

HEPHAESTUS

As for you—you are pitiless always, presumption-full.

FORCE

To sing laments for him is a job for a fool.
Do not labour in vain on what cannot be fixed.

HEPHAESTUS

But what a hateful work of hand is this!

FORCE

Why should you hate it? I will say it again:
It's not your work that causes him his pains.

HEPHAESTUS

Yet I wish this had been somebody else's job.

FORCE

All tasks weary, except being king of the gods;
no one in the world is free—no one but Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS

So I have learned here; a lesson I cannot refuse.

FORCE

You've learned this, have you? Then get to your work
before the All-Highest spies your slothful shirk.

HEPHAESTUS

His chains are made already. Here they are.

FORCE

Then get them on his wrists. Lay on his bars
with battering of your hammer, stake him out.

HEPHAESTUS

Your commission's performed not neglected, have no doubt.

FORCE

But hammer him harder, twist him in, turn upon turn.
From even impossible bonds this one could break free.

HEPHAESTUS

See a forearm here fastened beyond all release.

FORCE

Then shackle the other securely too; he must learn,
for all his wisdom, that he is a fool next to Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS

No one who knows my work faults it; except in this use.

FORCE

And now drive that pitiless fang, that pin of steel,
Clear through his ribs with all the force you can wield.

HEPHAESTUS

Alas for Prometheus! How sharply I feel what you feel!

FORCE

You shrink back again? You groan for Zeus's foes?
What if Zeus made you groan over—your own woes?

HEPHAESTUS

You see a sight that no eyes ever should see.

FORCE

I see Prometheus punished in due degree.
Go on. Girth in his thighs with more constraint.

HEPHAESTUS

Since I act of necessity, spare me command and complaint.

FORCE

Command you I will, and hound you and harry you too.
Look to his legs, bind him and hoop him below.

HEPHAESTUS

That I have done already, not spun out my chores.

FORCE

Hammer the nails home! Pierce him with full force!
Heavy the judgement that judges your workmanship!

HEPHAESTUS

Your tongue sings a song as ugly as your shape.

FORCE

You can be soft if you like; yet you need not gape
to see my set mood and the harshness of my wrath.

HEPHAESTUS

His limbs have their bonds. Enough now, let us be off.

Exit.

FORCE

Strut your insolence *there*; steal the gods' gifts *there*;
 From *there* bestow them on creatures whose lifespan's a day.
 You think your humans can wind you out of these woes?
 The gods called you *Forethought*, Pro-metheus;
 the gods were wrong. What forethought have you taken,
 what could you take, to wriggle out of *this*?

Exit FORCE and VIOLENCE.

PROMETHEUS

On the heaven that has Zeus in it, on the swift-flying winds,
 on the river-springs and on the infinite laughter
 of the unresting waves of the sea, and on you, mother Earth,
 and on the all-seeing disc of the sun I call
 to witness what I, a god, endure from the gods.

See with what torments
 tortured I wrestle
 millennia long.
 Such is my shameful
 imprisonment made by
 the new lord of heaven's throng.
 I groan at my present
 and future pain; who will command
 a close to this anguish, this wrong?

But these words are vain. In advance I'm aware
 and exactly of all that is coming.
 No surprise in my pain. I merely must bear
 a fate I foresee—as I can; must merely admit
 necessity's strength is unwavering.

Yet a burden like mine! How can I be silent—
 or yet how speak? In necessity's chains
 I hang here because I helped humans.
 I found first the stolen springs of fire,
 hid in a fennel-stalk fire, the teacher of men
 in all kinds of skill, fire their great resource.
 Exposed to the four winds, chained up and impaled,
 that's the offence for which I am paying here.
 Aiai!

Enter CHORUS.

Ah, ah...

I see no one, but what sound, what scent is this?
Has some being divine, or mortal, or mixed
come where the edge of the world is fixed
to gape at my anguish?

Why else would they come?

Then gape at my chains! At the god of ill doom,
at Zeus's foe, whom all the gods hate
who hang as his courtiers at Zeus's gate,
who stoop to crawl into Zeus's small hutch;
and hate me why? *I love mortals too much.*

Alas alas, what fluttering is this
and close at hand
of flying things?
The wide air rustles
is swerving-spanned
with beating wings.
Whatever hops near
brings me dark fear
in my suffering.

CHORUS

Yet do not fear.

With plummy commotion
on wings of peace
our kindly flight,
by pleas barely released
from our father Ocean,
bears down to alight.
Swift the breeze lifting us blew me on;
so deep our cave echoed with clanging of bronze
changing our hidden-faced modesty into alarm;
barefoot in our hurry, borne by these wings, here we are.

PROMETHEUS

O woe on me, woe!
You child of Tethys the many-mother,
you daughters of the Ocean, of the world-encircling
sleepless sea-stream's father,
look at me, look with what chains' encumberings
I am nailed to the wall of hell,
on what bitter peak I must leap to Zeus' torturings
the all-scorned sentinel.

CHORUS

I am looking, Prometheus, but to my eyes
 comes the fear-filled mist as my tears arise
 as I see your frame stretched to waste on this rock
 in the withering steel grip of Zeus's mock.
 A new helmsman rules in Olympus all right.
 Zeus skews the laws just to show off his might.
 The ancient powers have all vanished from sight.

PROMETHEUS

Would he had hidden me
 deep under ground,
 below corpse-swallowing Hades
 at Tartarus' ultimate bound,
 had staked me out there with cruel chains that no one can release,
 there where no god or mortal mocks because no one sees.
 But here, raised up like a tattered flag bleached in the wind, my name
 is the open joy of my enemies and my shame.

CHORUS

No; which of the gods is so cruel
 as to take joy in *this*?
 Which god is not secret-outraged at your ruin
 except Zeus?
 But he, always vengefully
 padlocking his mind,
 chases down mercilessly
 Ouranos's kind:
 he will not give up
 till he's glutted his heart-spite,
 or the locks of his kingdom
 are picked by some hand-sleight.

PROMETHEUS

Hand-sleight?

Yes, one day that sheikh
 of the silken blest
 though I hang here in irons
 pierced, tortured, and pressed
 will need me as informer.
 A threat, a theat against him and his clique!
 Where then will he find it,
 the honey to charm me to speak?
 What pain could he possibly threaten me with?
 No, *he* must grow meek,
 must unchain me and pay me the price of my pain
 before I will speak.

CHORUS

You are thrawn, and so unconfined

by your own crushing endless woe
 that too freely you speak of freedom. But my mind
 is embattled and torn by fear what fate you will know,
 what harbour from pain you must see as your end assigned.
 Cronus's son is unreachable in his ways,
 his mind is inexorable, shut against what anyone says.

PROMETHEUS

Brutish Zeus, racking and screwing in jail
 his court-hostage justice... Yet his mood will fail,
 will turn to soft policies soon when he too is broken.
 Then he will have to bite back his unsubtle rage,
 come begging a friend and ally to this cage,
 speak back to me words of pact—once I have spoken.

CHORUS

Tell the full story; explain to us why
 Zeus binds you, convicted of treachery,
 in this bitter shame so dishonours you here.
 In telling us this, there is no harm to fear.

PROMETHEUS

No harm, you say? Just to speak of it hurts.
 Yet silence pains too. All my ways are cursed.

Think back when the swift-kindled wrath of the gods
 raised civil war among them. On the one side
 those who aimed at deposing Cronos from rule,
 supplanting him with Zeus; and on the other
 Cronos's host, resolved to keep Zeus down.
 I intervened. My kindly-meant counsels for
 the Titan race, divine-born of Ouranos
 and of the goddess Earth, persuaded none.
 Scorning my sly indirections, with brash force
 they thought to conquer heaven at a stroke.
 But my mother Themis who is mother Earth,
 she of one form, many names, had told me often
 that not the strength of overwhelming might,
 but a stratagem, would win the war in heaven.
 I argued all this out to them in words
 that they weighed not at all; not even a look.
 In this predicament it seemed best to me
 and to my mother Themis to lend instead
 our willing counsel to a willing Zeus.
 My counsel, then, sank Cronos and his friends
 to Tartarus' dark void where now they writhe.
 The tyrant of the gods, he took my help,
 and in exchange he tortures me with this.
 This disease costs a tyrant all his friends:
 that he hates most those on whom he most depends.

But you ask me of his pretext for this crime.
Let me reveal that now, in its own time.

Zeus' first enactment when he came to rule,
mounting his father's throne, allotted powers,
dominions, thrones, lordships, each to each,
to the various gods. But his plan for mortals,
for the helpless sons of earth, was genocide;
to kill them and replace them with some better breed.
And not one god stood up for them but me.
I alone braved him, and so saved mankind
from bitter destruction and descent to death.
For this am I twisted in such torments here,
pitiful to watch and painful to endure.
Pitying mortals, I have found no pity;
for me a merciless sentence is decreed.
Thus I become the symbol of Zeus' shame.

CHORUS

Prometheus, he has a heart of steel,
he is made of stone, who looks on you
outraged and is not outraged too,
who can see you and not feel what you feel.
Better not to see such bitter things,
the sight that snaps the heart's overstraining strings.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, the sight of me brings pity—to my friends.

CHORUS

Is there more to tell? Did you go further yet?

PROMETHEUS

I taught them not to sit and wait for death.

CHORUS

What anaesthetic dulls men's hearts' despair?

PROMETHEUS

Hope that is blind; and that's what I put there.

CHORUS

Hope's a great gift, whether truth-telling or a liar.

PROMETHEUS

Then besides hope, my gift to them was fire.

CHORUS

What! Fire bestowed on those creatures of a day?

PROMETHEUS

Fire, the first step, for them, on science's way.

CHORUS

And this is the accusation on which Zeus—

PROMETHEUS

—torments me in these chains that none can loose.

CHORUS

And he will torture you like this until...?

PROMETHEUS

Until *not* torturing me becomes his will.

CHORUS

How could it be his will? What hope of that?
Do you not see the wrong you've done? A wrong
that speaking of would pain you, not please me.
But let that be, and think on your escape.

PROMETHEUS

How quick they are whose feet are out of the trap
to bring advice and sermons to the ensnared.
But I know all this, know that I chose—
yes chose—the way of wrong. I don't deny it:
setting free humans, I enjailed myself,
but never dreamt how harsh my punishment:
to be starved to the bone on a mid-air precipice,
left to fate's chance, transfixed amid nothingness...

But enough of wailing for me, whatever my woes.
Be still and hear how fate crept up on me,
so you may understand it all. Hear me,
hear and share my suffering. The pain that squats
and grins and gluts on me today—it *roams*;
tomorrow it will hunch over other prey.

CHORUS

Hear me, you say. Yes, we'll willingly hear.
On quick feet we come down now to give ear,
leaving the holy path of the birds, smooth air,
onto the harsh jagged rocks where we will be near,
to be told the long crushing tally of your care—

Enter OCEANUS, riding on a creature of the air.

OCEANUS

I come to the end of this weary stretch of plain

and reach you on this speed-winged creature, tamed
 not by a bridle but mere force of mind.
 By these your fortunes—know it!—I am pained;
 would be forced to grieve, I think, by our shared kind
 even if I honoured no one more in my mind.
 You will know this as a truth made sure and plain;
 in me no flatterer's nimble tongue speaks vain.
 Just indicate what help there is to lend.
 Than Oceanus there's no sounder friend.

PROMETHEUS

Oceanus? Another gawping ghoul,
 spectator of my pain? How dared you leave
 the stream you called after yourself, the gravelled rocks
 you grubbed beneath to hide you in the depths,
 to come to the land that gives the world its iron?
 You say you've come to see and share my pain?
 Then gaze your fill on me, the son of God,
 coequal stablisher of Zeus's tyranny,
 and watch what torments Zeus here twists me with.

OCEANUS

Prometheus, I see you. You are subtle,
 and yet I'll try to give you best advice.
 Begin to know yourself. Begin to bend,
 to fit new ways to your new king in heaven.
 For if you fire off javelin words like these,
 be sure Zeus hears you, even from afar,
 be sure that he can make this crowd of woes
 that presses on you now, seem childish nothings.
 In wretchedness, let drop the wrath you clutch,
 and seek reprieve from this your punishment.
 Perhaps you think you've heard all this before.
 But what you suffer here is all the wage
 of your own pride and windiness of mouth.
 Even now unhumbled, making no truce with ills,
 you seem in search of further sufferings.
 But be advised: don't bare your back for flogging.
 You see this savage despot's unaccountable.

Yet I will go on embassy; will try
 if I can win reprieve for you from punishment.
 And you, wait quiet here and curb your speech;
 or can it be that you, so wise-acute,
 don't see the cost your running tongue exacts?

PROMETHEUS

I envy you. You've found a way to share,
 so daring as you are, in these my pains
 that leaves you free of blame? No, let it be.

It's no concern of yours, and *he won't hear*.
 Your words of plea will sway him not at all.
 Your embassy won't help me, may ruin you.

OCEANUS

Your nature's to advise in others' need
 far better than in your own. I say I judge
 by facts, not words, so do not hold me back.
 My boast, yes *boast*, is certainty that Zeus
 will give to me this gift: Prometheus freed.

PROMETHEUS

I praise this in you, and I always shall:
 you don't lag in do-gooding. Yet let be.
 Your pains in going to Zeus, even if you take them,
 will bring me no relief from these my pains.
 No, *you* wait quiet, keep *your* foot from the snare.
 Because of my misfortunes, should I wish
 the same disasters fall on other heads?

For I am haunted by a brother's fate,
 Atlas, Zeus-banished to the utmost west,
 sentenced there to stand and shoulder heaven,
 made pillar of the sky-roof's staggering weight.

I pity too Mother Earth's cave-dwelling son,
 fierce-fiery, hydra-headed Typhon, whom I saw
 Zeus-vanished into nothing by sheer violence.
 He beat back all assaults by Zeus's allies,
 hissing stark terror from all his dreadful jaws,
 while in his glares the gorgon-lightning flashed,
 with fierceness fit to overthrow the tyrant.
 But then fell on him Zeus's sleepless spear.
 The fire-exhaling thunderbolt shot down,
 faster than movement, blink-swift swap of frames,
 and crushed his loud defiance into nothing.
 His mind was burnt up instantly, his strength
 shrivelled to floating cinders in one flash.
 What's left of him is useless disject rubble
 that lies unmoving by Messina's straits
 pressed flat beneath the stony roots of Etna.
 Meanwhile on Etna's highest ridge Hephaestus
 sits, waits, heats his molten-iron fires.
 From there will spout black fire-rivers soon,
 from there the creeping scorching wasting flame
 will eat the velvet meadows of green Sicily.
 Thus Typhon will become a parching wrath,
 a driving rain of irresistible fire,
 though burnt to charcoal by the bolt of Zeus.

But you've seen all this too. You need no tutor.
 Save yourself by whatever means you know
 while I will here endure my present fortune
 till maybe Zeus's mind will slake its spite.

OCEANUS

But surely wise Prometheus appreciates
 wrath's madness is best cured by gentle tones.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, when there's the chance to alleviate,
 not harden more a heart already stone.

OCEANUS

For my concern for you, the risks I take,
 say: you foretell some coming penalty?

PROMETHEUS

A naïve soul squashed flat's what I foresee.

OCEANUS

But let me then mistake my own mistakes.
 It's not naïve to fake naivety.

PROMETHEUS

The blame for your "mistakes" will be my own.

OCEANUS

So clearly you advise me: go back home?

PROMETHEUS

I do. To plead for me brings you too hate.

OCEANUS

From our new-throned resistless potentate?

PROMETHEUS

When Zeus' wrath-flares blow towards you, *move*.

OCEANUS

It's by your suffering that your teaching's proved.

PROMETHEUS

Then leave while still its lesson's unremoved.

OCEANUS

As though you repel me, when I am already retreating.
 See how my Pegasus' wings are already beating
 the yielding medium of air, how he's already sating
 his limbs with rest in his stable that's already waiting.

Exit

CHORUS

Prometheus, the fate that destroys you
 chokes me with groans.
 The fountains of grief I feel course down my cheeks
 in drenching flows.
 On the kingdom of do-what-he-wants
 Zeus secures his grip,
 with laws he himself invents
 and a conqueror's spear-tip
 raping and ripping the hearts of the previous gods.

The whole of this land echoes already with woe.
 Voices lament your honour, your glory now long ago,
 lament the lost honour that you and your brothers endure.
 Every human settler of Asia, the ancient-pure,
 weeps what you weep, to your sufferings adds sufferings more.
 The savage tribeswomen of golden Colchis weep.
 The Scythian clans from beyond Azov—they weep.
 The warlike flower of Arabia, those who hold
 the cliff-citadels of the Caucasus, warmen bold,
 a roaring ocean of lance-points—yet they weep.
 The fall of the wave on the beach is a cry of grief.
 the ocean sighs, black Hades' gulf roars beneath.
 The pure-flowing river, up from the sea to its source,
 for all its length grieves the piteous pain he endures.

PROMETHEUS

Do not believe self-indulgence keeps me silent,
 nor stubbornness. But it eats my heart to see
 how I am shamed, defiled, by his contempt.
 When it was me alone who shared all out—
 who gave these novel gods their privileges!
 But I won't speak of that, for I would speak
 what you've long known. Hear instead the pains
 of mortal men—how I found them mere infants,
 put mind within them and accomplished thought.
 I'll speak of it, not to hold humans blameful,
 but to display the good will behind my gifts.

Humans could see at first, but they saw in vain;
 hearing they did not hear, but like shapes of dreams,
 in all they did through their lives they acted at random.
 They knew no woodwork, nor to build a house
 so its bricks kept off the sun. An anthill life,
 dug underground in the sunless nooks of caves.
 When winter came, it was like they'd had no warning.
 Spring's flowers, summer's fruit—a complete surprise.
 They lived without thinking at all, until I taught them

the hard-to-distinguish stars, how they rise and set.

And I taught numbers to them, best wisdom of all,
and how ordered letters can store any memory—
how writing can be the mother of all art;
and I was first to yoke wild beasts for them,
to make them servants under strap and saddle,
that they might bear great loads for mortal men;
I first broke in wild horses to chariot traces,
and so began that craze of their pampered rich.
And before me no one else made the sea-wanderers,
the ocean-vessels, fly with their rippling sails.

I invented all these things for the use of men,
yet left no scrap of wisdom to contrive
a means for myself, to make my sufferings end,
a method of escape to keep myself alive.

CHORUS

Degraded by your suffering, you have lost
your prophet's craft; as a bad doctor, tossed
by fever and low spirits, cannot think
of the potion he makes all his patients drink.

PROMETHEUS

You wonder at me now. But wonder rather
hearing of the ingenuities I invented.
Greatest of all was this. When men fell ill
there was no help for them—no pill, no salve,
no draught, no potion, nothing. No, for want
of medicine they melted into skeletons,
till I showed them the blending of kind remedies,
defences they could use against all disease.
And I—Fore-Thought by name—I taught them prophecy,
first taught them how to judge, by reading dreams,
what future was to come in the waking world,
explained what omens lurk in word and road;
defined the lore of crooked-taloned birds,
which ones fly sinister and which fly right;
how each bird lives—which birds are enemies,
which love-charms to each other and roost-sharers;
defined the entrails' smoothness, and what colour
in a sacrifice's guts would please the gods,
what shape was good in a speckled liver-lobe.
I burned the fat-wrapped vertebra and femur
to put them on the way to divination;
I made them *seers* of these smoke-faced signs
whose eyes were, till then, filmed with cataract.
All this I did for them. And then the gifts
that hide within the earth as helps for men—

its bronze, its iron, its silver and its gold—
 no one denies that I discovered them first,
 no one, at least, who is not speaking nonsense.
 In one brief line learn all of it at once:
every human art comes from Prometheus.

CHORUS

Prometheus, as you care too much for mortals
 don't care too little for your wretched self.
 I have good hopes that soon Zeus will turn gentle,
 will return you from your shackles to full health.

PROMETHEUS

Not like that will the fate that brings completion
 release me from these thousand-torturing binds
 till what squats and feeds on me has reached repletion.
 This much weaker than necessity is mind.

CHORUS

Who steers, then, this necessity on which all waits?

PROMETHEUS

The unforgetting Furies; the three Fates.

CHORUS

By them is even Zeus' strength restrained?

PROMETHEUS

Not even Zeus can escape from what's ordained.

CHORUS

Then is Zeus not ordained to rule eternally?

PROMETHEUS

You should not ask more. Do not harry me.

CHORUS

You're keeping close some holy mystery?

PROMETHEUS

Don't harp on this. Talk about something else.
 This is no time to shout it out to all.
 Kept hidden as I can, this is the spell
 ends these harsh indignities when at last I tell.

CHORUS

May Zeus who imposes all order
 never poise his power against my choice,
 nor I delay to bring his gods their due
 of sacred cattle slain upon the border

of Father Ocean's never-quenching flow,
and may there be no trespass in my voice.
Let this imprint my mind and not fade out:

sweet it always is to stretch life further,
strong in the absence of all weakening doubt,
to feed the hungry spirit full among
bright enduring happiness of heart.
But Prometheus, when I look on you
scarring under ten thousand tortures' use,
ah then I feel a shuddering fearful start.
Too stubborn still to tremble before Zeus,
you go on going your way ages long
and won't desist; to humans must impart
honour above the honour that's their dues.

Admit it, then:
yes, you helped them
but they can't help you.
Help you? And their span
no longer than
a hot morning's dew?
Help you? Can you have missed
their hopeless feebleness,
their lives half-lived in lands of dreamingness,
their blind and binding sightlessness of view?
Can mortal choice
impose its voice
to oversing what's Zeus's chosen tune?

I've learned it can't
by watching what
your fates have done to you.
To you, Prometheus,
who once was
in clothes of bright cleansed happiness endued,
to you whom we blessed
in your joyousness
as you waited for the marriage-bed of bliss,
while we all stepped
the dance of marriage-guests
when you wed Hesione our sister with a kiss.

Enter IO.

IO
What earth? What breed? What shall I call what I see,
this storm-weathered rock-enhaltered refugee?
How have you earned *your* ruining injury?
And where do I wretchedly stray? In what territory?

(cries aloud)

Ai! *Oh!* The burrowing grub beneath my skin—
 the fierce foul needle of the fly that squirts it in—
 crawling capture of Argus born of beneath—
 O help me, someone help me find relief
 from fleeing the herdsman-huntsman's thousand eyes
 hypnotic to his web; whom earth not hides
 even in death's funnel but he wriggles out,
 Hera's stalker, hellbeak of horror-rout,
 trapping me turned at bay, a thing accursed,
 horns lowered where tide's out, confused by his and my thirst;

until from wax-caulked tubes of buzzing reed
 I hear a different note, hypnotic-shrill:
 Zeus's servant Hermes hunts to kill
 Hera's servant Argus herding me.
 O God, O God, where next for my fouled trail?

How I, O how have I wronged you, Cronus's son, how
 that you should wrong me with this harsh yoke now,
 with pest-fly-panic froth my tossing brow?
 Earth bury me, fire burn me, bane me now,
 or fork me as fodder into some sea-beasts' slough,
 but hear my mood-prayer, answer with your vow;
 the schooling I've endured has left me bowed,
 O, I moan low for escape but can't know how.
 Tell me, Zeus, do you hear this and feel proud?
 Do you hear the voice of the girl you turned into a—

PROMETHEUS

How

would I not know the herd-fly-frantic girl,
 daughter of Inachus, Hera's priestess,
 Zeus' passion's whirl?
 Io, whom Zeus's "love" saved by disguise,
 now stung and goaded ever away from him
 by Hera's spies.

IO

You know my father's name? But who are you?
 To wretched me, how is it wretched you
 can thus express my wretchedness so true?
 You have named the plague that falls on me from heaven
 that wastes me with the stings by which I'm driven
 weeping out "Io!", my name once given;
 I own I amble a swinging galloping rush,
 crazed with hunger, herded, penned in, crushed
 by Hera's mind for vengeance on me, by
 a trail of suffering none has trod but I.

O prophesy to me clearly: what remains
to suffer, and what cure for my pains,
what way out there may be, if speak you can.
Tell it all to the miswandering daughter of Man.

PROMETHEUS

I will tell clearly what you wish to learn.
Not mystery-spinning but plain words return
the due that speech to friends and kin requires.
You see Prometheus here. I gave man fire.

IO

You gave yourself for humans' benefit
and, poor Prometheus, you now suffer this?

PROMETHEUS

Lamenting's done. I won't go back to it.

IO

Then you won't give to me the gift I ask?

PROMETHEUS

Ask what you will. To tell will be my task.

IO

Tell me who spikes and splays you in this gorge.

PROMETHEUS

Zeus's tool's Hephaestus' tools' forge.

IO

For what infraction do you here atone?

PROMETHEUS

I've done enough revealing that alone.

IO

But foretell too my end of wandering,
show me the close of all my suffering.

PROMETHEUS

Better for you to not know than to know.

IO

No, show my future. Even anguish show!

PROMETHEUS

Not from disdain is my reluctance grown.

IO

Why not then make all of my future known?

PROMETHEUS

For fear I turn your frantic heart to stone.

IO

Take no more thought of that. It's my desire.

PROMETHEUS

Since you are eager, I must speak. So hear.

CHORUS

Not yet. For my part, now oblige me too.
First let us hear her tale, what she's gone through,
in her own words past fortune, past ill fate;
and then the future, Prometheus, you relate.

PROMETHEUS

Then, Io, it's for you to grant them this;
they are your father's sisters; and it is
a healing labour to rehearse past woe
to those whose tears sympathetic flow.

IO

I see no way I might refuse you all.
You shall hear all you ask in clearest speech.
Though even as I speak, the fat slow tears
drop at the blizzard of ills my heaven's snowed,
drop for my human form's swift instant ruin.

To my virgin purdah in Argos every night
the sweet seductive-whispering visions came
with "Hail" to me, "you maiden greatly favoured;
but why a *maiden* still, when you could wed
the Most High, when your passion's arrow stands
in Zeus's heart, when his longing's overshadow
falls across you? Child, who says No to Zeus
when he comes courting? Lie up in your father's meadows,
in Lerna's dream-wet fens, where the randy cattle
bask and slurp through the slow-burn afternoons;
there maybe Zeus' hot gaze will slake its glare."

And so my silk dreams held me, stupid fool,
light in their shimmering noose, till my father heard
of heaven's spasms honeying my sleep.
He sent and sent soothseekers to the gods,
to Delphic Apollo and Dodonian Zeus,
to know what they demanded done or said.

All came back with the west wind in their mouths,
 brought back to Argos glib ambiguous riddles.
 Until one last, un-Delphic utterance.
 Apollo told Inachus clearly: "Chase her out.
 Exile her from home and fatherland.
 Abandon her to the land at the end of the earth.
 Do it. Or Zeus's flame-faced thunderflash
 incinerates your entire family."

Nothing to do. Obeying this oracle,
 agonised he exiled me agonised,
 banned me his kingdom, barred his doors against,
 bridled, broken, beaten by Zeus's whip.

The moment Inachus did it, I turned to this.
 By this horned and uddered form, by the sudden whine
 of the panic-driving gadfly's needle mouth
 cowed in truth, I trampled in stampede
 back to the fresh cold river-springs of Lerna,
 back to the pools where I played when I was a girl.
 Till Hera's huntsman Argus drove me off,
 that slave to her rage, that monstrous stalking Titan,
 his clustered eyes close on my every step.
 Then Zeus fought back against Hera; I their battlefield
 when all Argus' eyes missed Hermes' ruse to help me.
 Bewitched to sleep by music, Argus' goggling head
 came off at Zeus's word. Thereafter still the fly,
 Argus' and Hera's unresting maddening fly,
 still it routs me out from every refuge I try.

This is all my story. If you know then say
 what troubles still may face me. But I pray
 speak truth to me, not comfort. The soft lie
 shames both the hearer and the mouth it's spoken by.

CHORUS

Enough, alas. Enough, no more, no more.
 I never thought, I never thought to hear
 so strange and crazed a story reach my ear,
 to have my soul so chilled, pierced to its core
 by pains and shames and terrors such as yours,
 barely to be heard, still harder borne.
 Io, O I tremble when I hear what you relate.
 O fate that waits for us, O pitiless fate!

PROMETHEUS

You're quick to wail, you creatures full of fear.
 Be still, though; there is far more yet to hear.

CHORUS

Speak on and teach us, then; the sick like to know,
before it happens, how their ill will grow.

PROMETHEUS

Your first desire from me you easily had;
for first you wanted Io's past woes told
from her own mouth. Now hear from mine the future,
what she still has to suffer in her flight from Hera.
Daughter of Inachus, mark me closely too,
and I will teach you how your strayings end.

From here you will be turned first towards the east
and run through lands that never knew a plough;
you will see the Scythian nomads, wagon-dwellers,
wicker-sheltered, living off the ground,
most skilled in deadly long-range archery.
You cannot go close to them. Flee through their land
by the shore of the Outer Ocean, hooves in the surf.
Left of you will be the Chalybes, the iron-weaponed.
Them also you must dread, since they are savages
who show no welcome to a stranger guest.
Then you will reach what is named the Taunting River
and is well-named: it is not to be swum.
Blocked by its course you must follow it up to the south,
to the highest of all mountains, to the source
where that river gushes forth in all its power
from the topmost crag. Your hard escape lies over
that starlight-crowding snow-crest, still on south,
to the Amazons, warrior-women who hate men,
whose home will one day be in Themiscyra
upon the River Thermodon; that's where
the sea splits on the rough cape of Salmydessus,
that treacherous friend both to sailors and to ships.
But the Amazons at least will guide *you* on;
they will lead you, by the tight neck of Azov,
on your onward way to the isthmus of Cimmeria,
where you must take good courage in your heart
and pass across the narrows of Maiotis;
for ever humans there will remember you,
will name it as "the strait where cattle cross".
Then you'll have passed from Europe into Asia.

—Does he not seem, this tyrant of the gods,
does he not seem a cruel blunderer in all he does?
See how Zeus's longing indeed *overshadows* this human:
how it's turned her sweet life to a panicked beast's stampede.
My daughter, your *Most High* is a poisonous wooer.
And what so far you have heard me prophesy
is no more than the overture of your agony.

IO

I—oh... I—oh... my name, my shame, my curse!

PROMETHEUS

You moan and low at this, the very first?

Then what will you do when you learn the rest of your ills?

CHORUS

“The rest of her...”—you mean more sufferings still?

PROMETHEUS

I mean a whirlwind-sea of withering pain.

IO

So if I go on living—how do I gain?

Why don't I charge at once off this precipice-rock,
smashed open on landing, never to suffer again?

Better burn instantly, one fiery lightning-shock,
than freeze to death slowly through drizzling decades of rain.

PROMETHEUS

With difficulty, then, would you bear my lot,
since death for me's the relief that never came,
a dreamed escape, a way out I've not got.

Term to my long misery there is not
till Zeus our tyrant fall from his long reign.

IO

What, is it possible that Zeus should fall?

PROMETHEUS

And if he did, I doubt you'd grieve you at all.

IO

Why would I, when it's Zeus who makes me grieve?

PROMETHEUS

Well, he will fall. Enjoy it, and believe.

IO

And who will strip him of his tyrant rule?

PROMETHEUS

He'll strip himself, by governing like a fool.

IO

How will that be? Explain, if nothing bans.

PROMETHEUS

His troubles will come to him from his marriage-plans.

IO

Marriage-plans mortal, or divine? O if you can, speak!

PROMETHEUS

Why ask me this? I can't say what you seek.

IO

Is it his bride will cast him from his throne?

PROMETHEUS

Yes: for she'll bear a Zeus-outstripping son.

IO

And this is a fate that can't be turned aside?

PROMETHEUS

Only by me, if these fetters were untied.

IO

And who will untie you against the will of Zeus?

PROMETHEUS

It's by your descendant that I must be unloosed.

IO

What do you mean? *My* child, your liberation?

PROMETHEUS

Your child indeed—in the thirteenth generation;
glory of Hera, strong-man of the nation.

IO

Your prophecy's sense falls apart into riddling words.

PROMETHEUS

Then maybe the rest of your own tale's not to be heard.

IO

You can't withdraw *now* a favour already conferred!

PROMETHEUS

I'll tell one of two stories. You say which one you prefer.

IO

Say which they are; explain and allow me to choose.

PROMETHEUS

The rest of your woes, or who will release me from Zeus;
one or the other of these I'll foretell. Now you choose.

CHORUS

One of these stories for her, the other for me.

Do not deny us both of these histories.

Teach her how long she must carry on fleeing from Zeus;
foretell for us—we long to know—of your freeing from Zeus.

PROMETHEUS

Since you press me, I will not refuse your pleas,
nor keep from you what you long to hear from me.

To Io first, how I foresee you fugitive;
impress what I say on the wax block of your mind.

Crossing the straits of Azov, then, into Asia,
on your way to the flame-faced east, the path of the sun,
crossing that restless sea you will come to the plains
of Cisthene the remote, the land of the Gorgons
and of their monstrous sisters the Graiae, shrivelled spinsters
with swan-white hair and one eye for the three of them,
a single tooth; so foul they are to see
that neither the sun nor the moon will shine on them.

The Gorgons themselves are near, wrapped in their wings,
wound in their serpent hair, abominable,
whom humans cannot see and stay alive;
but let my warning against them be your stronghold.

The silent sharp-toothed hounds of Zeus,
the eagle-headed lions; and the Cyclops people
trotting on their ponies by a distant golden river—
these are the next weird terrors you must avoid;
beware, do not approach them, continue till you come
to the furthest land from this, to the rising sun,
to the dark-skinned race by the Ethiopian stream.

Follow its course downstream till you come to the falls,
the cataract whence flows sweet holy Nile;
there Nile will meet you, Nile will lead you on
to the resting place that Io has sought so long,
to the delta-levels at last, to the settled plain
where a home for Io and Io's children is ordained.

My lecture's done. But if you don't grasp the prophecy—
why, ask your questions again for full clarity.

Time I'm not short of; of that I have over-quantity.

CHORUS

If there is nothing left out of your summary,
nothing left of her terrible torture-itinerary,
then foretell now the tale of your own delivery;
that's what you promised, as surely is still in your memory.

PROMETHEUS

I promise you now, Io's heard the end of her journey.
But that she may know what Prometheus *foretells* is no mockery,
I will *aftertell* a brief part of her former misery;
this I will do as surest proof of my prophecy.
Here, then, 's one more part of what Zeus has inflicted on you;
the last of the crowd of toils that he's put you through.

You come here from Epirus, Io. You've been at Dodona,
you have crossed the Molossian plains to the oracle's seat,
folded in mountain-ridges, where Zeus' voice speaks
(a barely-credited thing) through the whispering oaks.
And his voice has told you again, this time without riddles,
that you will indeed be renowned as bride of Zeus.
What? Is none of this what you wanted to hear me say?
But that's what you heard. Then the gadfly took you over,
driving you north by coast-paths of the Adriatic,
paths of storm where you paused in uncertain flight,
panicked, yet looking back over that sleeve of the sea,
that gulf that—believe it—will always be Io's, *Io-nian*,
named in your wanderings' honour by wondering mortals.

Take this as your evidence, then, of the might of my mind,
how I see what is hidden as clear as what's any's to find.

the rolling helpless panic of my liquid eyes.
 I stray the bitter mania-fields again.
 My slobbering tongue rolls random words. I rave
 overshadowed by destruction's towering wave.
Exit

CHORUS

A wise man he, a wise man he indeed,
 who first weighed in his mind and spoke this truth:
 that love of like to like most answers need,
 that a poor man's love of a rich bride breeds—reproof,
 that the slave should never seek the hand of her master,
 that a god's seed mixed with a mortal's brings disaster.

Never then, o never, Fates, bestow
 on me the trembling glory of Zeus' concubine.
 No bridegroom high for me who am below,
 for my slight self no Olympian lord divine.
 For look at Io, barren, lost, unmanned,
 unwombed, unhoused by Hera's hard command.

A well-matched match is well. No fear falls for
 those who avoid the hot gods' resistless gaze.
 Only there is the one unwinnable war,
 the no-way-out that barriers all our ways.
 For what would he turn *me* into, once seduced?
 Yet who can escape the marriage-plans of Zeus?

PROMETHEUS

Yet Zeus's marriage-plans will bring *him* low.
 Harsh-arrogant as he is, he will be humbled:
 the bond he schemes to bind spells overthrow
 and utter ruin for his tyranny:
 the curse that Kronos placed, when overthrown,
 upon his traitor son, will come home to roost.
 And no divinity can ward this ordeal off

or save Zeus' face except Prometheus,
Prometheus who knows both what and how
is threatening Zeus. So let him sit in pomp,
trust in his thunder-rumpus and his flash,
the hot-breath bolt he shakes in his pudgy fist.
None of these toys will help him in the least
to avoid or to endure his fall from grace.
And the opponent who will wrestle him to this fall
he'll bring upon himself: an invincible hero
who will find a fire hotter than Zeus' lightning,
than Zeus's thunder will find a more shattering crash;
who will trip Poseidon too and smash his trident,
the trident that ruled as a scourge both sea and land.
Wrecked on this reef of ill, king Zeus will see
the gap between being commanded and command.

CHORUS

You speak ill-wish-fulfilment, and not prophecy.

PROMETHEUS

It's both my ill-wish, and what will come to be.

CHORUS

So there comes one by whom Zeus will be undermined?

PROMETHEUS

Yes, though he go through tortures worse than mine.

CHORUS

Do you feel no fear to let such calumny fly?

PROMETHEUS

Fear of what? I am fated not to die.

CHORUS

Fear he torment you even worse than now.

PROMETHEUS

Let him then. I foresee all anyhow.

CHORUS

Due homage to the quelling Fates is wise.

PROMETHEUS

So creep, pray, cringe to whatever power you prize.

Zeus I care for less than not at all.

Let him do and rule! His time is small;

his reign among the gods soon meets its fall.

Enter HERMES.

But look, here's the message-boy to that new king,

Zeus' travelling fellow, fellow-travelling.

I've no doubt Hermes has *new* news to bring?

HERMES

You who set up to be wise in all wisdoms there are,

you with the acrid acid rancorous tongue,

you who insult the gods by stealing their glory

to squander on creatures whose lifespan is a day,

you, the guilty thief of fire, I address.

The All-Father bids you say what marriage you boast

will be the downfall of his sovereignty.

This he would have you speak not riddlingly,

but plain explicit. You are not to waste

my time with doubled errands. As you will see,

Zeus' will is not deflected by your knavery.

PROMETHEUS

The pompous mouth, the self-important mind

the mouth is full of: thus the gods' slave speaks.

Oh, you new gods, your new dominion! Do you think
 your palaces beyond the fret of pain? Forget
 how I've seen Cronos and Ouranos fall from there
 though they felt safe as Priam? I'll see, too,
 the current tyrant-tenant Zeus's overthrow,
 most quickly and most thick with sickly shame.
 Do you see me cower and bow to your new gods?
 Am I not as undutiful as can be? But you,
 back you bustle to Zeus with your bobbing and puffing.
 For all you ask me, I will tell you nothing.

HERMES

Here is the blown-out sail of wilfulness
 by which you've steered your way to wrecked distress.

PROMETHEUS

Yet I would not swap my plight—nothing is surer—
 to be bound liar to Zeus and his procurer.

HERMES

I'm bound to Zeus as herald. This you mock?
 I'm sure *you're* better off, bound to—a rock.

PROMETHEUS

From shameless mouth must come shameful reply.

HERMES

You seem to enjoy your pain, Prometheus. Why?

PROMETHEUS

Enjoy it! Then my hope my foes enjoy
 this same enjoyment goes for you—bell-boy.

HERMES

So now your woe is somehow my fault too?

PROMETHEUS

I count my enemies, in sum, all those gods who
repay my kindness to them with harsh wrong.

HERMES

And what you sing is some sick madman's song.

PROMETHEUS

Am I sick or mad to hate my enemy?

HERMES

If all were your friends, you'd be no better company.

PROMETHEUS

Aside

The pain...

HERMES

Pain, you say? Zeus knows nothing of this state.

PROMETHEUS

Yet we may be sure old Time will educate.

HERMES

Time's not taught you how an aristocrat behaves.

PROMETHEUS

That's true; for an aristocrat knows not to talk to slaves.

HERMES

So you will say nothing of what Zeus requires you to say?

PROMETHEUS

My debt to Zeus is nothing. And I pay.

HERMES

To insult me like a child is your intent.

PROMETHEUS

But aren't you a child, or still more innocent,
if you nurse any hope that I will talk?
No engined agony, no slow machine of pain
the malice of Zeus could drive, can make me speak.
Until these chains are loosed my mouth is locked.
So let him stage his smoky lightning-show,
wind-storms on high and thunder-quakes below,
stir all things to a vortex of confusion,
contort the reeling world; he can't twist me
to tell him who will hurl him from his tyranny.

HERMES

You think your stance will bring you help, or woe?

PROMETHEUS

My stance was foreseen and settled long ago.

HERMES

Will you not dare, vain one, not dare to bend
to the rightness of mind that brings your pains an end?

PROMETHEUS

You might as well tell the wave to leave the strand.
Do you suppose that I so fear Zeus' doom
that I will raise a woman's pleading hands,
a woman's pleading mind, and beg of him—
Zeus, in whom nothing's great except my hatred—
for my release? If so, you do not know me.

HERMES

It seems my many words are wasted breath.
 Your parched soul takes no water, your harsh mind's
 unsoftened by my pleas. Like a wild colt
 you tear the bit, you fight against the reins.
 Yet it's a paltry wisdom makes you hot:
 stubbornness is not strength, not in itself,
 not in one whose whole mind is awry.

But if you won't hear my arguments, think of this.
 Think of the howling triple-waved tornado
 that moves towards you now with no escape.
 Think how the All-Father first will break this cliff,
 shatter your jagged crag with bolt and flame,
 bury your form alive within the debris,
 still leashed and tethered to your stony cross.
 Think, second, of the age you will endure
 thus smothered and entombed in living death
 till—third—Zeus choose to bring you back to light
 not for your comfort. Think how his winged hound,
 his blood-bespattered eagle, hopping up,
 your uninvited famished banquet-guest,
 will grin and squat and glut all day on you,
 your bared marred liver blackening in his beak.

What would it take to bring an end to this?
 No less than a god willing to take your suffering,
 prepared for you to breach dark sunless Hades
 and freely sink himself in Tartarus' depths.
 No less than that; and will it ever happen?

In view of all this, think. No made-up boasts
 come from the mouth of Zeus, but all too true.
 Zeus lacks your sly deceptive arts; Zeus speaks
 then does what Zeus has spoken. Therefore you

look well you think, consider, whether stubbornness
be ever preferable to wise well-counselledness.

CHORUS

What Hermes says has sense in it,
or so we say.

He bids you not be obstinate,
take prudence' way.

We think you should accommodate
since for the wise
persisting overlong
in pain-wracked wrong's
to be despised.

PROMETHEUS

No, I was right; this noise says nothing new.
Enemy maltreats enemy—so it goes:
nothing new, and nothing shameful there.
So may Zeus set his elements upon me,
hurl fiery two-edged zigzag lightnings down,
bend the death-whistling air with thunder's blast;
so crazed winds swing the earth's foundations loose,
the crazed sea's surges drown the stars of heaven;
my helpless body may he lift and pitch
down the black infinite falls of Tartarus
to spin in the whirlpools of necessity;
yet one thing he can't break. My immortality.

HERMES

Such are the words of brainstruck lunatics.
To hear him is to hear a madman speak.
If this is his *prayer*, I would not hear him *rave*.
But you at least, cosufferers of his woes,
get out of range of this, the target zone,
before your minds are pulverised with his

by Zeus's indiscriminate artilleries.

CHORUS

No.

You would have to speak less brutally
to have the slightest hope of moving me.
The net of words you trail for catching me
is insolent insufferable trickery.
You dare to ask me to act cowardly?
I stand now with him in his chosen destiny
because he's taught me to hate treachery;
no poison could I spit back in your face more scornfully.

HERMES

Remember, then, my words. Blame no ill fate
if you are trapped like insects in your web.
When Zeus's thunder-blow arcs down on you,
any minute now, feel no surprise.
The guilt is on your own heads, and the loss.
Not suddenly and not unknowingly
you've swum into the bottle of destruction.
When you are beached and dying, think of this.
Exit

PROMETHEUS

It comes on me, his curse comes on in truth:
the earth spasms, thunder-echo breaks the roof
of heaven where it splits,
the lightning-spirals blaze with smoky flame,
the whirlwinds skip
the desert's grit aloft; the sandstorms rise
to snarl and snap and battle over me, their prize;
the way of the stars is swallowed in the sea;
intended terror and monstrosity,

open chaos, Zeus-sent, falls on me.

O holiness of my mother, O you light
that all minds share in as it turns the sky,
O endless heaven above that has Zeus in it,
you witness what injustices I endure.

PROMETHEUS is engulfed. The CHORUS vanish.