

The responsibility of choice



Aeschylus' play *Prometheus Bound* centers on the struggle between Prometheus and Zeus. Prometheus is an intelligent god who is concerned with the welfare of others. Zeus is a tyrant who acts rashly according to his emotion. The two figures clash when Prometheus, a loyal friend of mankind, bestows gifts upon humans to make them more independent. Zeus feels that this threatens his power and determines to put a stop to it. When Zeus punishes Prometheus, a battle between force and intelligence ensues in which the rational mind will ultimately prevail. Zeus' actions are based purely on a desire for power. At one time, Prometheus had been a good friend of his, helping him to overthrow Kronos and take his seat atop Mount Olympus. Yet, when Zeus feels that Prometheus is threatening his personal power, he erases any memory of their friendship. By human standards Zeus may be considered amoral because he is disloyal and self-serving. His evilness can be better supported, however, by the fact that he does not logically think through his behavior; his deeds are based purely on emotion. He never thinks ahead to see the ultimate effect his actions will have; he merely does what he believes will benefit the most at the moment. Because Zeus has no reasoning behind his acts, they may be deemed unfair. Prometheus, unlike Zeus, is an intelligent god. He values loyalty in friendship because he realizes that relationships are give and take: if he helps someone, they will be more likely to give him aid when he needs it. Prometheus pities man because he has been given no way to fend for himself. In order to make mankind a more independent and credible race, Prometheus endows him with many gifts. It is the gift of fire and blind hope that causes Zeus to become angry with him. As the play opens, Zeus' servants Might and Violence along with Hephaestus nail Prometheus to a cliff

in the Caucasus where he will serve his punishment. Although the sentence is harsh, Prometheus has no regrets. He believes that his actions were good and just and will make the world better in the end. With their gift of blind hope humans can no longer foresee doom, but Prometheus, a god, is aware of the future. During his time on the cliff, he receives many visitors who pity him and all others who are subject to Zeus' cruelty. One of these visitors is Io, a young maiden cast out because of Zeus' lust for her. She was transformed into a cow and now must wander the earth. By the time she reaches Prometheus, she has given up all hope; she is miserable and discouraged. Prometheus is able to encourage her though with a promise of an overthrow of Zeus through her own descendents. It is Io's son who will free Prometheus so that he may help in the dethronement of the highest god. Zeus' downfall will come through his own lineage and mankind. This is a promise of Prometheus', Io's, and all mankind's freedom. Man's freedom will be won through a battle of wits; his physical strength is no match for that of Zeus. The gift of fire has enabled humans to become individuals. Up to this point, Zeus has been ruling as a master rules slaves—people who do not think for themselves. As man learns to reason and make decisions, he also learns defiance. He holds Zeus' overbearing personality in contempt. He is not a child who needs instruction in every move; he is an adult ready to discover things for himself. With freedom comes responsibility. Man is now accountable for his actions. He is no longer a carefree being; when he does something wrong, he may be punished by man or god. There can be no claim of ignorance or variability in his dealings. This freedom is a burden of consciousness. Man has taken a step closer to godhood with this new consciousness. Not only does man act, he acts knowing what the

consequences of those actions may be. It is no longer enough to think one is doing the right thing for the moment: one must consider future ramifications and merit. Man cannot live for his own pleasure; he must live for the good of other men. Is this new social responsibility worth the freedom of choice? If one wishes to be an individual, the answer can only be yes. It is true that living in a role where Fate guides one's life is easy and often painless, but it is also binding. One cannot decide to think for him or herself nor can one decide if he or she likes the path his or her life has decided to take. A life without choice is imprisonment. There is no need to think and reason. Each one simply wanders aimlessly, like Ió, through the world. With a reasoning intellect, one can dream and set goals; one can have something to live for. Zeus had a difficult time regulating his own ability to make choices. He was a jealous god, wary of competition from any being. Although he had the full resources of the intellect, he chose not to employ them, opting instead for using only brute force to control others. Instead of taking time to resolve problems with reason he rid himself of them in one fell swoop. He chose the easy way which eventually led to his destruction. Man should learn from the god's mistake: intelligence will always win out over might. Although one may have the option to take care of things swiftly, he or she should always consider all options and future costs. This is the responsibility of free will. Zeus was unable to bear the responsibility; can man do better?