

PROMETHEUS BOUND

ABOUT THE PLAY

Prometheus Bound

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Villa
Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, September 5–28, 2013

The Titan Prometheus, whose name means “foresight,” was a key figure in the early struggle of the Olympian gods for supremacy over the Titans. After Prometheus helped Zeus defeat his father Cronos to become king, the new ruler demanded absolute obedience. Furious that Prometheus—despite serving as an ally—disobeyed him by giving fire to humans and teaching them skills of civilization, Zeus punishes Prometheus by chaining and impaling him to a cliff at the ends of the earth. This is how *Prometheus Bound* begins.

Greeks in the fifth century B.C. would have known that Zeus also sent an eagle every day to devour Prometheus's liver, which constantly regenerated. In this first play of a probable tragic trilogy, Prometheus feels pain when he is impaled, but his mental torment at abandonment is even greater. His physical torture by the famous bird would not have occurred until the second play, *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Heracles shot the eagle and rescued the Titan. In a third play, *Prometheus Firebearer*, Zeus may have resolved the ongoing conflict and permitted the gift of fire to mortals, validating Prometheus's cult association with human crafts that require heat and flame.

Prometheus Bound was unusual even in the fifth century B.C. in its immobilized protagonist, depiction of physical torment onstage, and representation of Zeus as an unyielding, self-serving tyrant. The play's exact date is debated by modern scholars, but its tyrant-hating protagonist reflects changing attitudes in an Athens still experimenting with democracy. Admired in antiquity and reinvigorated in English by John Milton in his three major late poems, *Prometheus Bound* has proven enormously influential to Western literature and thought. Prometheus's opposition to authority has particularly attracted radical writers and artists, while his support of human progress and his stand against oppression inspire a broad audience. Joel Agee's poetic translation brings the original rhythms of the play to life, and the wheel of Prometheus is perhaps the most unusual solution in two-and-a-half millennia to the problem of staging the desolate cliff.

— Shelby Brown, Education Specialist

