
Aeschylus Offers Paradigms for Today's Politics

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WE RECOGNIZE the pattern immediately. A rebel leader supported by a broad coalition overthrows the ruling order. Quickly assuming dictatorial powers, he executes, imprisons, or exiles his more liberal supporters, tortures those who still have essential information, and threatens mass exterminations of certain groups regarded as inferior. The Soviet Union under Stalin? Nazi Germany under Hitler? Iran since 1979? Other more recent revolutions in Africa and the Middle East? Yes, all of the above, but also a drama first performed almost 2,500 years ago.

In *Prometheus Bound*, usually attributed to the dramatist Aeschylus and first seen by Athenian audiences in the mid-fifth century BCE, Zeus—with the advice and assistance of his cousin (or uncle) Prometheus—has overthrown his father Kronos, leader of the Titans, and installed himself as ruthless ruler of the new order of Olympian gods. Because Prometheus, no longer the trickster as which he was represented by Hesiod and others, defies him with his democratic ideas and actions—civilizing humankind and giving it the gift of fire—Zeus has had him chained to a mountainside in Scythia, where an eagle will gnaw daily at his entrails. But Zeus doesn't kill him because Prometheus, whose name suggests foreknowledge, knows a secret concerning a threat to Zeus's future. What we witness is perhaps the earliest depiction of the contest between the rebellious intellectual and political authority.

Why, apart from its value in Trivial Pursuit, should this analogy interest us? What does it demonstrate other than the ancient truth: *plus ça change . . .*?

Aeschylus (525/24–456 BCE), born in Eleusis, witnessed in his youth the end of tyranny in Athens, when the brothers Hipparchus and Hippias were, respectively, assassinated and driven into exile. But although he experienced the growth of democracy in Athens, his focus was not primarily political but religious and philosophical. As a member of the Eleusinian aristocracy, Aeschylus was ambivalent about some of the reforms that also swept away revered institutions. He was interested not in action so much as in character. In *Prometheus Bound*, more conspicuously than in his other plays, nothing happens. Prometheus is chained to the rock and cannot move. He simply converses with various figures who pass by.

But in the course of these conversations we learn a great deal about the character and motivation of the two principals. Both Zeus and Prometheus are exposed as proud and unrelenting men, unwilling to compromise. Zeus, we learn, has imposed new laws, turned against many of his onetime supporters, and threatened to exterminate the human race as inferior beings. Prometheus, clinging belligerently to his own principles, hints at Zeus's eventual overthrow. At the end of the play the two in their respective *hubris* remain irreconcilably opposed. Does this paradigm sound familiar? Only the knowledge that this drama is the first in a trilogy suggests that a compromise may be possible in the distant future.

Others have recognized the symbolic implications of the myth. But most, from the early Romantics to the present, have been less interested in the overall paradigm and fixated instead on Prometheus as the benefactor of humankind. The classically educated Karl Marx, in the preface to his doctoral dissertation, called him “the noblest saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar.” Later Marxists, inspired by this remark and a passage in *Das Kapital* where Marx says that “the law forges the worker more firmly to capital than Hephaestus's wedges nail Prometheus to the cliff,” appropriated the Titan as their hero. What gets lost in these idealizations is the stubborn refusal of Prometheus to compromise his lib-

eral ideals and the dramatic tension vis-à-vis the tyrannical Zeus and his dictatorial regime.

An earlier drama by Aeschylus provided writers with an equally compelling paradigm. In *The Persians*, Aeschylus, who himself had fought in two wars against invading Persians (at Marathon and Salamis), depicts with compelling insight the misery of the women left behind in Susa, when Xerxes in 480 BCE mounted his mighty offensive on land and sea against the much smaller forces of the Athenians. The poet does not gloat about the overwhelming victory of the Athenians. He is concerned with the *hubris* that drives Xerxes into his expansionist war and unthinkingly into the military traps of the Greeks, and he has enormous sympathy with the despair of the women, including Xerxes' own mother, who suffer from his ambition.

The obvious political associations of the paradigm—and could they ever have been more obvious than today?—have attracted ideologically oriented writers and directors. In 1960, the German dramatist Mattias Braun shifted the action from Persia (modern Iran) to Berlin, representing Xerxes as Hitler and the chorus as the sober citizens who will eventually restore Germany. In Peter Sellars's grotesquely altered adaptation (1993), which was performed worldwide to often shocked audiences, the scene is set in modern Baghdad, Xerxes is a maddened Saddam Hussein threatening nuclear war, and the victorious Greeks become bloodthirsty American forces ruthlessly decimating the enemy. To counter such simplistic stagings the German poet Durs Grünbein appended a note to his translation (2001), arguing explicitly that Aeschylus's play is not the antiwar work featured in most late-twentieth-century adaptations but, rather, "a work against the arrogance of excessive armament and the blindness of war-mongering."

What is the lesson here? Perhaps, rather than restricting Aeschylus to humanities courses at our universities, we should put a good translation of his plays into the hands, or at least onto the night tables, of our political leaders, to be

studied alongside the position papers prepared by their staffs. The sometimes instant experts all too often neglect historical and psychological perspectives and consider nothing but the immediate situation or “deal.” The present state of affairs changes from land to land, from year to year. But the Xerxes-like arrogance of its leaders has often caused grief to the people of Persia/Iran in the course of twenty-five centuries. The contest between Zeus and Prometheus is eternal, down to the most recent political assassinations in Russia. Aeschylus understood long ago that today’s politics results from underlying and long-standing issues of character, conviction, and personal ambition.