CHAPTER 3

Prometheus Bound in Translation: “The True Promethean Fire”

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3.1 Introduction

The recent proliferation in means of electronic sourcing has ensured that access to the history of translation of the Classics has become a simpler and cheaper process. Early translations of Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides, once to be read only under Rare Books restriction, or through diligent scrutiny of booksellers’ lists, are now readily available on line, often for free. Searching for factors that account for the popularity to translators of certain ancient plays and the unpopularity of others can now properly raise the profile of translation. No longer should translation be seen merely as a peripheral refinement of classical studies, signifying little more than the amount of spare time available to eighteenth-century clerics and nineteenth-century men and women of letters. Now the selection of plays can properly be linked to socio-cultural and historical concerns and preoccupations.

It is this area which I wish to address in this chapter with reference to Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound. The choice of translations and examples is necessarily confined to those in the English language, and further refined by sensitivity to the original and the attitude of the translators towards the process of translation itself. Such a historical approach will lead to considering how and when translators began to appreciate that the Greek tragedians had created pieces for stage production rather than for the kind of literary analysis which once dominated their appearance in the curricula of schools and universities. This is especially significant for a play which is as amenable to stage production as Prometheus Bound. Most translations from the last seventy years have taken such issues into consideration. Accordingly, this study will concentrate on the earliest translations. Edith Hamilton’s Prometheus Bound of 1927/37 will be the terminus, though some comparative illustrations from other periods will be offered alongside specific quotations.

A search in 2006 for the number of published translations in English of the forty-four surviving Greek plays from the classical period (Menander was excluded because no complete comedy of his was discovered until 1957) revealed that the most popular single tragedy has been Aeschylus’ Agamemnon of which
ninety-one different translations were known. This was followed by Sophocles’ Antigone with eighty-nine and Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound with eighty-two, ahead of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus, and leaving anything by Euripides or Aristophanes trailing behind. Least popular were Aeschylus’ Suppliants (twenty-eight), and Euripides’ Suppliants and Rhesus (both with fourteen).¹

These figures raise a number of questions. Why should Agamemnon be the most favored when it is only the first part of a trilogy, the other plays of which have also come down to us? As cogently, why are Prometheus Bound and Rhesus at opposite ends of the “hit parade” when they are the two plays whose authenticity has been most challenged?² Though the entire list does not merit further exposure here, some tendencies are revealed.

Agamemnon can stand alone either as a poetic statement or as a dramatic entity. Then again, Prometheus Bound and Rhesus contravene many of the assumptions about the formulaic nature of Greek tragedy, never mind its staging, which is quite enough for generations of the literary and literal-minded to have opposed the right of these two plays to a place in the canon. Rhesus (whose authorship by Euripides was not disputed until recent times) is a brisk and stimulating adventure story which plays with theatre conventions, but at first sight may seem to amount to not much else. What Agamemnon, Antigone, and Prometheus Bound have in common is that they are all plays about those who fight back and refuse to submit to ruling authority. Martyrs make better heroes than suppliants, and if Aeschylus’ portrait of Clytemnestra is hardly that of a browbeaten wife, the myth reminds us of what happened to her daughter in order for the Trojan War to take place.

Prometheus stands out as an archetypal figure defying punishment in the face of authority, represented as the will of Zeus. So does Antigone, though in her case the resistance is to temporal authority, not to the higher powers that control the universe. Whether or not any or all of Prometheus Bound is by Aeschylus, and notwithstanding the fact that there is even argument about whether it was first or second play in a trilogy, the image of the Titan crucified against a rock for defying the supremacy of the gods is irresistible. This offers reason enough for the play to be visited time and again by those attracted to its

¹ A list of the translators, translations and publication details can be found in the appendix to Walton (2006a). Since publication, as anticipated, others have turned up which for one reason or another I had overlooked. The overall pattern and “batting order” has not been affected.

² The case for rejecting Prometheus Bound as written by Aeschylus was most strenuously argued by Mark Griffith (1977). It would nonetheless be unthinkable to publish a book about Aeschylus without including the play.