REVOLUTIONARY PROMETHEUS[1]

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> '« Per molto tempo sono stato angosciato da questo fatto : perché tutte le rivoluzioni, tutte, senza eccezione alcuna, sono cominciate come movimenti di liberazione e finite come tirannie ? Perché nessuna rivoluzione e sfuggita a questa condanna ? »' Ignazio Silone, *Pane e Vino* (1955)

My first contact with André Hurst arose from a common interest in Lycophron, and it was soon clear that I had found a stimulating and constructive critic on whom to try out *prima facie* far-fetched ideas. This *Festschrift* thus seems an appropriate environment in which to air my increasing unease about the current orthodoxy on the *Prometheus Vinctus.*

A decade ago I was very happy with what now seems to be the majority view among those who have considered seriously the question of the play's authorship, that it is essentially the work of a writer later than Aeschylus, most probably his eldest son Euphorion, whom we know to have been a successful dramatist and whose work got first prize at the festival in which Euripides' *Medea* came third. 1977 had marked a turning point, when what had previously been regarded as a maverick view became orthodoxy, with the publication of Mark Griffith's *The Authenticity of Prometheus Bound* and Oliver Taplin's *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus,* a double-pronged assault bombarding the traditional attribution with an almost overwhelming cannonade of un-Aeschylean features. I pass over subsequent discussions reinforcing the case made by Griffith and Taplin[2]; of those who still defend the play's authenticity it is now reasonable to ask what sort of argument would persuade them to change their minds (a question with very wide implications for literary scholarship).

Having accepted that the play is not Aeschylean, we needed to adjust to a later historical context. Much in it is nearer to the techniques of Sophocles and Euripides than to that of Aeschylus, and in outlook its author seems to have much in common with Sophocles and Herodotus.

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[1] This essay originated in a sub-faculty seminar on *Revolutions* in Hilary Term 2003, and I owe much to the ensuing discussion.

[2] See in particular Müller 1979, West 1990, Bees 1993, Marzullo 1993, West 2000.

Being Aeschylean is not the sole criterion of literary merit, but it has taken time to adjust to considering the play without regard to any relationship to the dramas whose attribution to Aeschylus has never been questioned. We have still, I think, some way to go.

The authenticity debate drew attention to very many features which appear to call for apology. Though the play is short, the dramatist seems at times to spin out his material far beyond what is dramatically appropriate; contrast the *Prometheus Solutus* (*PS*) in which, on any reasonable reconstruction, almost too much has to happen. Griffith (1977, 253) put one aspect of the difficulty very well: '[The writer's] intellectual grasp of fundamental human problems was firmer than his dramatic control of stage action, though he attempted to compensate for this by lavish use of spectacle and special effects; he was, in fact, a playwright of ideas first, of the stage second'. Taplin (1977, 260; 467) is more severe; 'Gratuitous spectacle is the resort of a poor playwright who is at a loss for true dramatic material'; 'It is all very well as a romantic vision of defiance against the powers of tyranny and destructiveness, but it is not so good as *drama.* It is episodic and disjointed, it lacks dramatic momentum, and it is on the whole sluggish and wordy'. It may be thought that the playwright was extraordinarily lucky to find an archon prepared to grant a chorus to this rather static tragedy combining a disturbing religious viewpoint with a potential for absurd, or even disastrous, accidents such as we associate with over-ambitious productions of Wagner. (This raises the interesting question whether the archon – or anyone else – was expected to read a text before granting a chorus: was an oral summary enough?) It is not surprising that the play is rarely staged.

The entry of the chorus is a notorious production problem. Even more worrying is the question of what is supposed to happen to them at the end of the play, as they apparently throw their habitual caution to the winds in a demonstration of futile loyalty. What are we to make of their lack of interest in their father's arrival, or his in their presence? Oceanus' visit might have been very naturally motivated by anxiety for his daughters, particularly since they told us that they had difficulty in gaining his consent[3].This mutual unconcern is perplexing. But there is much in the lyrics to suggest that the poet tends to think of the chorus not as the divine daughters of an ancient god but simply as nice girls. The brevity and banality of their lyrics[4] was what first suggested the hypothesis that a

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3 130f.

4 Pedagogically a recommendation. *PV* appears to have been the most commonly read of the plays of the Byzantine triad, since it regularly is placed first and the plays were arranged in order of popularity. Undoubtedly the fact that the *PV* has for very many

hand other than Aeschylus' had made a significant contribution to the play. These difficulties highlight the fact that the Chorus is simply not well integrated; an unkind critic might judge that the playwright viewed them primarily as a means to give Prometheus a rest and introduce some variety.

Yet, paradoxically, the play has proved enormously influential, over a long period. 'Qui dit Prométhée, pense liberté, génie, progrès, connaissance, révolte'[5]. This is the *tragic* Prometheus, not the Hesiodic trickster. For the Renaissance Prometheus was a symbol of the scientific-technical advance of men against divine or ecclesiastical limitations, for Goethe he was the image of human intelligence. The play's appeal to romantics and revolutionaries of very different types may be illustrated by the responses of Shelley and Marx. To Shelley Prometheus represented the courageous rebel against tyranny, the champion of freedom against oppression; his view of the play is memorably set out in the preface to his *Prometheus Unbound* (which of course was never intended to be staged). Comparing and contrasting Prometheus with the Hero of *Paradise Lost* he concludes: 'Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends'. Marx was clearly fascinated by the play; his view of Prometheus as 'der vornehmste Heilige und Märtyrer im philosophischen Kalender' comes from his doctoral dissertation. The relationship between Zeus and Prometheus chained to his rock seemed to him an apt analogy for that between capital and labour. As a natural consequence Prometheus has been seen as a Marxist hero, a kind of superior engineer. Occasional dissidents under state socialism found scope for ironic questioning of the officially approved image. Of course, these various developments emphasize some aspects of Prometheus' characterization at the expense of others[6].

Thus, whatever its shortcomings as theatre, the *PV* has been an enormous success as a *Lesedrama* (as indeed is attested by the unwavering faith in its authenticity displayed by the defenders of Aeschylean authorship). Is this just a curious chance? Or does it reflect the author's intention, as was argued in a famous monograph by Wilhelm Schmid[7]? This theory has not attracted much support[8], apparently because a play

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classicists been their introduction to Aeschylus has influenced the debate about authenticity.

5 Trousson 1976, iv.

6 See further Duchemin 1974, Trousson 1976, Bremer 1991, Watson-Williams 1967, 40-67, Prawer 1972, 1-51, Bernhardt 1983, Riedel 1990.

7 Schmid 1929, see also Schmid 1940.

8 But see Müller 1979, 632, Bees 1993, 51, 60-4.

composed for reading seemed such an unlikely undertaking in the fifth century. But that Schmid was on to something important seems to be indicated by Prometheus' own description of script in his *technogony,* his catalogue of the skills which mankind owes to him[9] (460f.), γραμμάτων τε συνθέσεις, μνήμην ἁπάντων, μουσομήτορ' ἐργάνην. Winnington-Ingram well comments that 'The lines are among the most intriguing in the play'[10]. Writing is now to do for the poet the work of memory; the fiction of orality is obsolete. 'Memory, mother by Zeus of the Muses, . . . who had personified the vast resources of formula, theme and myth drawn on by the oral poet, is here identified with the written word'[11]. Contrast the advantages of script listed in Euripides' *Palamedes* (F578); its applications are strictly practical – wills, contracts, overseas correspondence. The pre-eminence thus given to literature among the uses of script – and indeed no other use is mentioned – suggests a bookish milieu[12]. Aristophanes' presentation of Dionysus reading Euripides' *Andromeda* on shipboard in 405 (*Frogs* 52f.), absurd though it may seem, implies at least the development of a reading public at Athens not limited to unworldly intellectuals. (We might guess that this explains the survival of the *Clouds* in a version generally regarded as unproduceable)[13].

In his careful survey of the antecedents of Seneca's recitation dramas Otto Zwierlein (1966, 134f.) highlights the tragedies of Aristotle's contemporary, Diogenes of Sinope, as works not meant for the stage but intended to present the Cynic view of the world in a form to the taste of the public (*TGrF* 88: *Helen, Thyestes, Heracles, Achilles, Medea, Chrysippus, Oedipus*). We may recall Griffith's characterization of our author as 'a playwright of ideas first, of the stage second'. We need not suppose that Diogenes was the first to try his hand at this use of dramatic form. Such developments as Antiphon's *Tetralogies* and other speeches not intended for actual delivery attest a readiness to experiment with literary forms[14].

Nothing in the *PV* itself suggests a *terminus ante quem* for its composition. Discussion of its date, once we abandon the date of Aeschylus' death as the lower limit, depends on its relationship to the *PS*, of which the parodos (F 190-2)[15] is parodied in Cratinus' *Ploutoi* (F 171 K-A), pro-

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9 Modelled on the Aeschylean Palamedes' speech (F181a, 182, 182a).

10 Winnington-Ingram 1983, 182 n.21.

11 Knox 1985,8.

12 See further West 1979, 146f.; 2000, 349; Bees 1993 *passim.*

13 'Orality can be over-emphasised' Taplin 1986, 168. See further Morgan 1999.

14 The *Pirithous*, variously attributed to Euripides or to Critias (*TrGF* i. 43 F 1-14), might be another example; see further Dover 1993, 55.

15 A further phrase from this passage is perhaps preserved in Hesychius: see West 1996.

bably performed at the Lenaea in 429[16]. Alleged or apparent allusions to the *PV* in Aristophanes have very little evidential value; they may have been inspired by the *PS* or the *Prometheus Pyrphoros* (if that is indeed to be distinguished from the satyric *Prometheus Pyrkaeus*)[17] or by some other lost treatment of Prometheus whose legend, as Epicharmus' travesty in *Prometheus and Pyrrha* indicates, must already in the early fifth century have been familiar from other sources besides Hesiod[18]. We may find it surprising that the extraordinary portrayal of Zeus did not attract more attention. Plato's Prometheus (*Prt.* 320c-322a, *Grg.* 523d), too, quite fails to reflect any influence from this play; he is no perverse rebel but conscientiously serves the gods in their dealings with men.

It looks as if the *PS* is logically prior to the *PV*, as if the latter was modelled on the former, Oceanus being the counterpart of Ge, Heracles of Io[19]. Ge, as Prometheus' mother, and Heracles, traditionally his deliverer from the predatory eagle, have a much closer connection with Prometheus than have Oceanus and Io; indeed, discussion of the dramatic function of the two latter commonly involves an element of apology. Io's geography lesson, more depressing than useful, is much less well motivated than the similar instruction given to Heracles, the best return that Prometheus can make for the hero's service in shooting the eagle[20].

The *PV*, then, is parasitic on the *PS*; it would not have been written if the *PS* had not already existed. But the neat correspondences should not disguise more important differences. Shelley, in whose play Prometheus' deliverance is accompanied by the dethroning of Jupiter and thus becomes a symbol for the triumph of right over might, memorably highlighted a problem which should trouble anyone who supposes the relationship between the two tragedies to be straightforward. In his preface he wrote: 'In truth I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him unsaying his high language, and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary'. In 1820 one of the anonymous reviewers of Shelley's play drew attention to an apparent shift in conception which classicists seem

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16 Cratinus F 222, 223, 343 parody the general style of a *periodos,* not the *PV* specifically.

17 As Aristophanes' treatment of Prometheus in the *Birds* (1494-1552) rather suggests.

18 See further West 1994.

19 Cf. Griffith 1977, 247, Taplin 1977, 464.

20 If Plutarch is right in ascribing to Prometheus F 189a, describing the domestication of horses, asses and oxen (cf. *PV* 462-6), then here too Prometheus rehearsed his contribution to human civilization.

generally to ignore 'The fate of Prometheus probably suggested, even to the heroic bard by whom it was first celebrated in older time, the temporary predominance of brute force over intellect; the oppression of right by might; and the final deliverance of the spirit of humanity from the iron grasp of its foes. But, in so far as we can judge from the mighty fragment which time has spared, he was contented with exhibiting the visible picture of the magnanimous victim, and with representing his deliverance, by means of Hercules, as a mere personal event, having no symbolical meaning'[21]. We are also bound to wonder how successfully the *PS* could have counteracted the hostile presentation of Zeus developed and intensified during the *PV*. First impressions are important, and the opening scene of the *PV* encapsulates the worst features of a regime based on fear and cruelty. The gravity of the punishment corresponds to the ruler's power, not to Prometheus' offence. Nowhere in the play is it suggested, as piety might seem to require, that Zeus' ways are not our ways, that he is his own interpreter and in the fullness of time will make all plain.

What was the author's purpose? Undeniably this is a very skilful pastiche but that does not seem an adequate objective in itself. Is this 'an anti-tyrant tract which merely uses Zeus for political allegory'[22]? But if we are to be warned against tyranny, we need to be persuaded that in its beginnings it may appear speciously attractive, so that the limitation of freedom seems a small price to pay for law, order, and prosperity. Or is it, as Marx evidently thought, an attack on traditional theology? 'The gods of Greece, who had already been mortally wounded in the tragedy of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound,* had to die again, comically, in the *Dialogues* of Lucian'[23].

I would opt for a modestly political message, conveyed in an Aesopian mode. There is undeniable sympathy for rebellious spirits, but hardly encouragement; Prometheus' prospects of release lie in an immensely distant future. He can hold out hope to Io; but her sufferings have a much more limited term than his. There is much emphasis on the *newness* of Zeus' rule; the revolution which overthrew Cronus is not long past. Prometheus is not blameless; he deserted his kin, the Titans, to help Zeus to power (199-225). We realise that he expected to be allowed more initiative, more scope for independent action, than Zeus permitted. He sees himself as a grey eminence, an experienced adviser with a fascinating future as a power behind the throne. Of course, his concern for mankind's

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21 Barcus 1975, 244.

22 Taplin 1977, 469.

23 *MEW* 1. 381f.

survival when Zeus had decided on genocide (232ff.) puts us entirely on his side[24]. But in his increasing intransigence we see a growing resemblance to the tyrant against whom he is rebelling[25]. As the play draws to a close he displays a frightening recklessness, and it is as well that his rock is far from human habitation. We note that Zeus' hypothetical successor would control a weapon more powerful than the thunderbolt and Poseidon's trident (920-5); for men, the feeble creatures of a day, caught in a cosmic conflict, the future would be bleak. I think our play reflects the aftermath of major political change and was intended as a warning against further agitation (cf.391, 1034ff.). If such was the writer's intention, he would have been wise to keep a low profile. I leave it to others to guess at the historical context.

What we see or infer of the Olympians, with the exception of Hephaestus, is so very unedifying that we can hardly altogether deny the force of Marx's interpretation. Our view of Zeus is coloured at the outset by the brutality of his appalling agents, Kratos and Bia. This suggests a period when, at least in some circles, faith in the traditional Olympians was waning. But that will not give us a date[26].

The main difficulty for the *Lesedrama* theory is to explain the play's ascription to Aeschylus, unquestioned in antiquity, since its title must have been absent from the list of tragic productions given in the *Didaskaliai.* But in view of the fact that Aeschylus had spent time in Sicily and written plays for Hieron[27], it was to be expected that some of his works would not be recorded in any list of Attic productions. The elaborate, and not strictly relevant, description of the eruption of Etna[28] might have been intended to suggest this notion; Pindar[29] had provided the model. Pseudepigraphy was, I would argue, the writer's intention; hence the emphasis on the importance of divination among Prometheus' gifts to men and the rather odd limitation of the dialogue to two speakers[30], both motivated by the desire to make the composition look earlier than it was. As I see it,

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[24] Prometheus deals very summarily with matters about which we should like to know more; but almost certainly he here alludes to his part in saving Deucalion from the universal flood; see further West 1994.

[25] Cf. Gagarin 1976, 135.

[26] For a learned and ingenious, but not, to my mind, convincing attempt to extract a date from the play's geography see Finkelberg 1998.

[27] See further Griffith 1978.

[28] 363-72.

[29] *P.* 1.17ff., cf.*O.*4.8.

[30] Hence the curious theory that a dummy represented Prometheus in the prologue. The long scene 436-525 with only one actor and the chorus on stage also suggests deliberate archaization.

there was no advantage to our author in broadcasting his identity, and some gain in making use of the slipstream of a grand reputation.

The inclusion of the *Rhesus* among Euripides' works indicates some bibliographical laxness. Even now, nice discussions of authorship often yield to practical problems of intelligible reference; we may believe that the correct designation of the author of *de sublimitate* is Anon., but catalogue and shelve under Longinus. This may sound a rather cavalier approach (like much in my rather summary discussion); but there was clearly a danger period for the texts of the great tragedians between their first production and the decree of Lycurgus, and it is certainly to be hoped that librarians in charge at crucial periods erred towards inclusivity [31].

For Welcker the *PV* was 'das mächtigste und tiefsinnigste Werk des Alterthums'[32]. Scholars do not commit themselves so unreservedly these days. But perhaps a large part of the play's appeal arises from the fact that we are less at a disadvantage than usual compared with a fifth-century audience: 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter' (Keats, *Ode on a Grecian urn*).

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[31] Quintilian's sole reference to Aeschylus (*Inst.* 10.1.66) reports drastic revision to some plays, bringing to mind eighteenth-century rewriting of Shakespeare; the implications are disturbing.

[32] Welcker 1849, 418.

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