

PROMETHEUS CHAINED

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Prometheus Chained by Charles Cavendish Clifford

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CHARLES CAVENDISH CLIFFORD

**PROMETHEUS
CHAINED**

Cambridge College Library
with the translator's respect
—
Dec. 10, 1853

P R O M E T H E U S
C H A I N E D.

P R O M E T H E U S
C H A I N E D.

of
Aeschylus

BY

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TRANSLATOR OF THE FROGS OF ARISTOPHANES.

OXFORD,
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M D C C C L I I I.

TO HIS GRACE

THE DUKE OF DEVONSHIRE, K. G.,

THIS PLAY IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

BY HIS OBEDIENT SERVANT

CHARLES CAVENDISH CLIFFORD.

INTRODUCTION.

ÆSCHYLUS has been called the father of the Greek drama. Indeed he raised it from mere buffoonery to be the vehicle of the most glorious literature which the world has known. In excellence of the plot, in development of character, and pourtraying the passions, Sophocles surpassed him, but none have approached him in majesty. In speaking of their rival poetry, I would, if it be not considered fanciful, borrow an illustration from the sister art of architecture. The works of Sophocles I should compare to such a temple as that of the Olympian Jupiter at Athens must have been when it stood entire. With the beauty of its proportions, the perfect harmony of the general design, and the chaste splendour of its ornaments, the severest critic could find no fault. The genius of Æschylus I should liken to one of those Egyptian temples, vast, stupendous, impressing the mind with solemn awe, embellished with devices of vicious taste, and full of strange uncouth monsters, whose stony gaze seems enigmatic of some hidden mystery. Æschylus had nothing in common with the modern Greek civilization which grew up around him. His mind was imbued with the spirit of an earlier, the heroic age. Even in religion he seems not to have conformed to the later mythology, the established order of gods whom Greece worshipped. His deities were of primæval rule, and belonged to the Saturnian age, when giants walked the earth, when the Titans flourished; and though these had succumbed, there was still a viewless power, stronger than their subduer, Fate or Necessity, which was one day to avenge their fall. In this play the idea which so often dimly reveals itself, as though struggling for existence, but as

soon repressed in the works of the heathen writers, namely, that the gods are envious of the prosperity of mankind, is boldly brought to light and clothed in express words. Zeus or Jupiter is represented as the direct enemy of man, desirous of his destruction, and only prevented from effecting it by the interposition of Prometheus. Owing to his unorthodox notions the poet was accused before the tribunals of treating lightly sacred mysteries, and was forced to retire to Sicily. He afterwards wrote Prometheus Unbound, which is lost to us, probably in consequence of its inferior merit. Indeed it is difficult to imagine how the interest could be adequately sustained. I have read Shelley's play, and am not insensible to the striking beauty of many of the passages, but as a drama it is in my opinion a failure. It is throughout so diffuse, so full of furies, Demogorgon, the talking Moon, the Spirit of the Hour, various other spirits, that we scarcely see anything of Prometheus himself, and the stale jest of Hamlet omitted is almost realized. In Æschylus from first to last Prometheus is on the stage, and concentrates the interest upon himself. The nearest point of resemblance between the two plays is the bond of sympathy which in both exists between Prometheus and the friendly nymphs, spectators of his agony. It is a trite saying, that there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous. Even Milton, the poet whom perhaps Æschylus most resembles, has incurred the imputation, when in his magnificent description of the battle between the powers of good and evil, he makes his devils gain a temporary advantage by hitting on the invention of cannons and gunpowder. And certainly this play does not present an exception to the rule. I can allow the incarnation of Force and Strength, as two giants, to be on the right side of the line of division; I can admit that, with skilfully constructed machinery, the entrance of Ocean on a hippogriffin (a creature of which Æschylus was very fond, and which supplied a fund of inexhaustible pleasantry to his admirer Aristophanes) is not out of keeping with the unearthly nature of the persons represented, and the wild weird character of the whole piece; but how the introduction of Io as a cow, leaping about the stage and telling her tale of woe, could possibly be saved

from the ridiculous, nor violate the dignity of the drama, I cannot understand. The diction of the play varies considerably, in some parts swelling into loftiest grandeur, in others relapsing into homely phraseology; at times even running into sarcastic banter and abuse. Thus Prometheus seems to treat Ocean much as a man of the world might address a good-natured but obtrusive country cousin; while on Mercury he pours the virulence of his bitterest contempt and hatred. In some passages the noble simplicity recalls strikingly the language of Scripture; while occasionally there occur, chiefly in the choruses, touches of tenderness, which, like the flowers found blooming among Alpine glaciers, gain additional loveliness from the horror and desolation around. But it is for the end of the play that the chief interest is reserved, when amid storm and lightning the undaunted champion of suffering humanity is whirled away and disappears, firm to the last. Whatever blemishes may exist in preceding parts, it is impossible to conceive any thing more sublime than this close.

I have endeavoured to translate as literally as possible, and to follow the changes of metre, giving the iambics in blank verse, and the anapestic portion in rhyme. A writer in the Quarterly Review observes on this, "Scarcely anything can be finer than the accelerated movement given to the speeches in the last sixty lines of the drama, beginning with

*εἰδέναι τοί μοι τάσδ' ἀγγελίας
ὅσ' ἔθάρξεν—*

It is like the preparatory rapid of Niagara, which you see not till you feel the whirl. The play goes off, like the great Titan himself, in a flash of fire, and skilfully compensates to the reader now, as it did once to the auditor, the slow narrative march of so much of that which has preceded!" How inadequately I have fulfilled the task I am only too conscious.