

Feminine Io as a Natural and Political Principle In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*

Matthew Green

Prometheus Bound re-enacts and addresses two colossal shifts in power: on the divine level, the transition from the natural, earth-born Titans to the rational Olympians; and on the mortal level, the emergence of political civilization. The titan Prometheus straddles these deeply related, parallel developments. He gave fire and the technical arts to humans, bestowing on them a drive to overcome and innovate. This drive requires proper direction to be good, and although political order as embodied by Zeus may represent this end, his authority at this nascent stage is not fully informed, and manifests as tyranny. I will argue that the mortal Io presents the missing link necessary for well-ordered human civilization. She embodies both a natural principle, incorporating the chthonic Titans into the new order of Olympians, and a feminine political one, creating and preserving human political order through marriage and childbirth.

Prometheus' long list of the technical arts, or *techne*, that he taught to humans includes astronomy, writing, animal husbandry, medicine, divination, and metallurgy.¹ But throughout the play, it is made clear that these arts are neutral relative to the ends that they make possible. The possession of *techne* does not entail goodness or civilization, as evidenced by the savage foreigners Io is fated to encounter on her journey. The Scythian nomads, who possess transportation and weaponry, and the Chalybes, who possess metallurgy, remain savages, "wild" and without cities.² More immediately, the chaining of Prometheus himself is effected by Hephaestus, the Olympian technician, against his own sense of justice, and for the sake of Zeus' tyranny. Zeus employs Power and Force to carry out his will, deemed unjust by most characters of the play, including the Chorus, who refer to him as "cunning," "unbending," and "ungoverned."³ Zeus' rule at this stage, then,

1. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Deborah H. Roberts (Cambridge: Hackett, 2012), 460-517.

2. *ibid.*, 726.

3. *ibid.*, 912, 182, 163.

is not the guiding hand that human *techne* requires if it is to work towards the collective and political good of an inchoate society.

One of Zeus' principal flaws is his failure to respect and incorporate the natural into his new rule, especially as represented by his conquered adversaries, the Titans. When visited by Ocean, Prometheus laments the fate of the last Titan, the fire breather Typhon, pinned by Zeus beneath Mt. Etna. Though Typhon sought to "raze the tyrant realm of Zeus by force,"⁴ Zeus did no better in overcoming him by the same forceful means with his "bolt that breathes out flame."⁵ Prometheus prophesies that fighting fire with fire and imprisoning this fiery principle will result in the eruption of Mt. Etna, rendering infertile the bountiful earth of Sicily. Similarly, Prometheus implies that Zeus, in his newfound power, has forgotten that he too is subject to necessity and Fate: an oversight that will result in his downfall.⁶ Necessity is governed by "the triple Fates and the Furies who remember,"⁷ the Fates being half-Titan and the Furies chthonic deities avenging interfamilial bloodshed – which, of course, Zeus committed to win his throne. Zeus' frequent epithet in this play, *tyrannos*, stems in part from his disregard for the integrity and importance of the Titans, and the natural principles that they represent.

Io's sojourn on stage is somewhat brief, but embedded in her narrative are several telling clues that bring her significance and importance to light. One of these is her experience at the oracle at Dodona, which Prometheus describes thus:

You had arrived at the Molossian lands/
near steep Dodona, the oracle of Zeus/
of Thesprotis, the shrine where oak trees speak/
(an unlikely marvel). They addressed you clearly/
without riddles, as the glorious wife to be/
of Zeus. Does this come back to you with pleasure?⁸

This is the second mention of Dodona in Io's tale. Mitchell notes that it was one of the oldest oracles, associated with Zeus, and Greeks

4. *ibid.*, 387.

5. *ibid.*, 384, 389.

6. *ibid.*, 525-530.

7. *ibid.*, 527.

8. *ibid.*, 834-839.

of the fourth and fifth centuries thought of it as their spiritual homeland. The site was important during the formative years of the epics, being mentioned in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and an early version of the *Argonauts*. But literary and archaeological evidence point to an even earlier origin for the sanctuary – one that involved not Zeus, but a chthonic cult connected with the Great Goddess, a widely worshipped Neolithic fertility deity. Two distinct strata exist at the site, the earlier one being linked with the Goddess, and the later with the arrival of Zeus. A fifteenth century gold bezel found at Mycenae depicts an “ancient earth mother under the sacred oak with her three priestesses”, and has been linked with Dodona. Hesiod and Pausanias both allude to the chthonic and pastoral nature of the Dodonian cult.⁹ Even in Aeschylus’ time, Mitchell suggests that a “strong cultic memory [of the nature goddess]... and vestigial cultic practices” would have been apparent at the site.¹⁰

The transition at Dodona from the worship of the Goddess to that of Zeus was effected by marriage between Zeus and Dione (the Dodonian incarnation of Hera), who “was probably in origin the Great Goddess, reincarnated as Zeus’ wife.”¹¹ In fact, a hierogamy, or ritual re-enactment of this marriage, presents a possible origin for the Io myth itself. Traditionally, though not in Aeschylus, Io was a priestess of Hera at the Heraion in Argos.¹² Hera was deeply associated with cows, with many of the rituals of her cult involving them, and one of her common epithets being *boopis*, or cow-eyed.¹³ A mortal priestess impersonating the cow-goddess Hera, then, would certainly exhibit strong parallels with cow-horned Io. In any case, Io’s relationship with Dodona cannot be accidental. As Mitchell summarizes: “that Io is called the bride of Zeus by the oracle at Dodona invites the possibility that the relationship between Zeus and Io represents and mediates the hierogamy which seems to have been effected between the old chthonic goddess and Zeus.”¹⁴ Not only does Aeschylus call on

9. Lynette G. Mitchell, “Euboean Io,” in *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 51, no.2 (2001): 339-352, see 342. All information in the preceding sentences is also drawn from Mitchell, 342.

10. *ibid.*, 343.

11. *ibid.*

12. Ken Dowden, *Death and the Maiden: Girls’ Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 124.

13. P. M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 48.

14. Mitchell, “Euboean Io,” 343.

Io's connection with natural, pastoral Dodona, but he also largely omits Olympian Hera from the picture, further emphasizing Io's side of the marriage, and recalling its chthonic heritage and debt to goddess of the old order. This is strengthened by the play's setting in historically and mythologically remote times, by Io's river-god father Inachus connecting her to the Titanic order (Aeschylus 602), and by her role in myth as mother and ancestress over and against the primary role of Hera as wife (Irving 49). Io's immaculate conception by Zeus, then, represents not only the end of his tyranny in the particular mortal realm, but an acknowledgement of a natural, Titanic principle connected with natural fertility, especially in the description of her son Epaphus, which will be addressed later in this paper.

In his boastful vision of human progress, Prometheus makes a crucial omission, which, White notes, would have been striking to an Athenian audience: mortals, as described by Prometheus, are exclusively male.¹⁵ Most of the *techne* he lists – such as shipbuilding, sailing, metalwork, and handling livestock – are exclusively performed by men, and the rest, mainly by men. Completely absent is the marginalized but essential female sphere centred on the *oikos*, including the production and preparation of food and clothing and, most importantly, the birthing and rearing of children. As White declares, “this disregard for women's skills and functions betrays a striking ignorance of the nature of mortality and its cycles of birth and death. Prometheus... showed mortals only how the living can survive and ignored their need to reproduce before and because they die.”¹⁶ Quite fittingly, then, it is not long after this passage that Io appears on stage. As the mortal mother of Zeus' child, and the head of a long line of illustrious ancestors, Io represents the overlooked maternal element in nascent human society. Reproduction is essential to the human mortal character, and its stability and consistency are necessary for the physical propagation of human civilization on a very basic level.

But beyond this, Prometheus' description of Io's genealogy and the creation of the Argive dynasty communicates that the principle of continuity by childbirth is also essential to creating

15. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 114.

16. Stephen White, “Io's World: Intimations of Theodicy in Prometheus bound” in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001): 107-140, see 115.

and maintaining political order.¹⁷ Of course, Greek society was patriarchal and power was passed down through the male seed. But, if we look to Athenian society – as tragedians so often did when they sought ideals of political civilization – a more nuanced conception of heredity and continuity is apparent. Bouvrie notes that the marital institution of fifth-century Athens acted as a kind of “sorting mechanism” which separated the landowning political elite from the less privileged, and solidified this hierarchy.¹⁸ The absolute legitimacy of children born within this elite class was essential to its continuity and integrity – and due to the biological fact of the elusiveness of fatherhood, the onus of filial legitimacy was placed on respectable, chaste women. Thus, “on an abstract level women constituted the central element in the continuity of the polis. They physically perpetuated the citizen body, and by guaranteeing the legitimacy of offspring they also perpetuated the hierarchic power structure within the polis.”¹⁹

Interestingly, the priority of chastity in making the citizen boundary impermeable meant that women were, on the concrete level, strictly controlled and relegated to a limited, segregated space. This resulted in what Bouvrie calls a “strange paradox of on the one hand admiration and reverence for women, and on the other hand segregation and misogyny.”²⁰ Prometheus’ omission of the female sphere, then, cannot simply be ascribed to Greek misogyny, for the importance of the feminine was respected and honoured on a conceptual level. Hence, Io’s particular and manifest fate, which is undeniably cruel, would, for an Athenian audience, perhaps be eclipsed by her abstract importance as a virginal maiden and mother of a royal dynasty.²¹

In several ways, Io’s arrival in Egypt and the birth of her son, Epaphus, encapsulate all of the principles that she represents and presents the necessary elements for good political organization. Entering Egypt is a virgin maiden, rendered sexually unappealing by her animal transformation, thus guaranteeing her chastity.²² Her child, Epaphus, is born not of the Nile – as in other versions of the

17. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 872.

18. Synnove des Bouvrie, *Women in Greek Tragedy: an Anthropological Approach* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1990), 58.

19. *ibid.*, 58.

20. *ibid.*, 59.

21. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 664.

22. *ibid.*, 664.

myth, such as Apollodorus²³ – but of Zeus, the rational Olympian seed. If Io represents an older, chthonic principle, then their fruitful union is especially significant, and Zeus' political principle is cleansed of its tyranny. Aeschylus writes that Epaphus "will harvest all the land irrigated by the broad-flowing Nile."²⁴ His harmonious relationship with the Nile, a son of Ocean, is a testament to Zeus' changed ways and the incorporation of the natural into his rule, especially if it is contrasted to Prometheus' prophecy of the destroyed fields of Sicily that resulted from Zeus' disrespect of natural principles. And finally, it is crucial that Io's narrative is not a dismissal of Promethean *techne*: his constant advice to her implies that it is in part his foresight that helps her through her trials, and Epaphus' agricultural exploits would not be possible without the technical arts. Of course, it is also Io's descendant Herakles who will free Prometheus from his prison.²⁵ Whether for ethnocentric or dramatic reasons – or both – Aeschylus defers the establishment of a dynasty, and actual political order, to later in time, on Greek soil:²⁶ but the elements are certainly present here.

Clearly, the character of Io represents principles that are necessary for both human and divine political order to be realized and made complete. Her hierogamous connection to Dodona, emphasized in this play, represents a natural, chthonic principle associated with the Titans, which Zeus acknowledges in fathering Io's son, Epaphus. Io's role as mother in this union and in the creation of the Argive dynasty suggests that the feminine principle in all its conceptual integrity must also be incorporated into political society, just as it was in fifth century Athens – even if this didn't entail individual freedom in either case. Prometheus' account of the birth and prosperity of Epaphus is a manifestation of these two necessary elements, working in harmony with Promethean *techne*, and thus setting the stage for the establishment of proper political order.

23. Dowden, *Death and the Maiden*, 126.

24. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 855-856.

25. *ibid.*, 779.

26. *ibid.*, 872.