

ATTRIB. AESCHYLUS

PROMETHEUS

THE FROGS

BY ARISTOPHANES

**CAMBRIDGE GREEK PLAY 2013:
RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS**



The 2013 Cambridge Greek Play
Prometheus and The Frogs
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PROMETHEUS

Synopsis

Background

The god Zeus has recently overthrown his father and established control over the universe. The scene is set at an isolated cliff far to the north of Greece.

Prologue

The immortal Prometheus is led in by the personifications Power and Force, with Hephaestus (the smith god). Zeus has ordered Hephaestus to nail Prometheus to the cliff in punishment. Power gloats that this is deserved, whereas Hephaestus expresses pity. Only after they have finished does Prometheus speak, to rail against Zeus's tyranny. He also reveals that he knows the future but cannot talk about it aloud.

Entrance-song

A chorus of young river-goddesses (Oceanids) arrive through the air to pity Prometheus. Prometheus now reveals that he knows a specific prophecy by which he will save Zeus in the future and so win his freedom.

First episode

The chorus ask Prometheus why he is being punished. He relates how his strategies helped Zeus to win power, yet he angered Zeus by saving humanity and giving them optimism and fire. Oceanus (father of the chorus, and personification of a huge river the Greeks thought surrounded the world) flies in, advises Prometheus to stop insulting Zeus, and offers to plead for his release. Prometheus curtly warns him away.

First chorus

The chorus sings of how humans are lamenting Prometheus' punishment.



Oceanus (far right – carrying a fish!) and Hephaestus (far left) with two goddesses; by Sophilos, c.590 BCE
(© Trustees of the British Museum)

Second episode

Prometheus describes in detail how he improved the human condition, and what skills he gave mankind.

Second chorus

The chorus affirm their obedience to Zeus, in contrast to Prometheus' desperate opposition.

Third episode

Suddenly Io enters – a young girl with horns, frenzied by invisible goading, and complaining about Zeus. The chorus ask about Io's back-story: Zeus fancied her and commanded her father to expel her from home; now she is being harassed by Zeus's jealous wife Hera. Prometheus foretells that Io will have to travel around the whole world before founding a dynasty in Egypt. He also specifies that his secret prophecy will prevent Zeus from lusting after someone whose child would overthrow him (this female is Thetis, though her name is kept secret), and that Zeus will thank Prometheus by getting one of Io's descendents (Heracles) to release him. Io feels Hera's goading again, and rushes away.

Third chorus

The chorus sing of their hope never to attract Zeus's lust as Io had done.



Above: Io with cow's horns, on a fresco from Pompeii, c.65 CE.
(© Stefano Bolognini.)

Fourth episode

Prometheus repeats his hints about the secret prophecy, and the messenger-god Hermes enters to quiz him about it. Prometheus scorns Hermes' servility to Zeus; Hermes scorns Prometheus' obstinacy, and reveals that Zeus is threatening more extreme punishments if Prometheus keeps his secret. The chorus briefly advise Prometheus to concede, but he refuses and they stand with him in solidarity. As Hermes leaves a giant storm arrives, and an unrepentant Prometheus is swallowed alive into the earth.



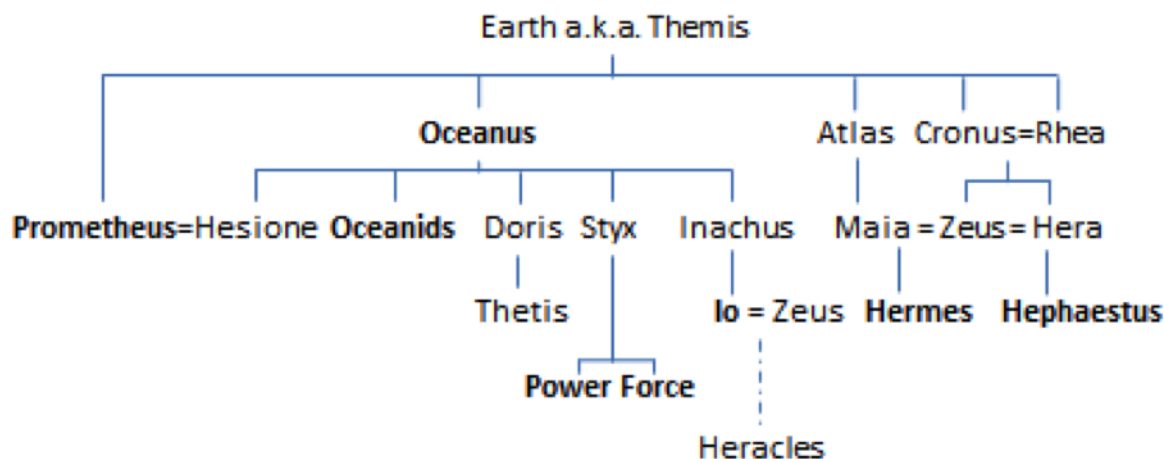
Zeus giving Hermes (left) instructions: Spartan cup by the Chimaera Painter, c.525 BCE. Image from Stibbe, *Lakonische Vasenmaler*.

Activities

Using the synopsis, come up with a description of each character in two sentences.

Imagine some conversations between characters who don't meet during the play, e.g. Hephaestus and Oceanus, Oceanus and Hermes, Kratos and Io. Write them out like a play; you might like to act them out.

Family tree



Passages to discuss in class

(i) Lines 447-506

Prometheus describes the kindness of what he offered human beings.

Prometheus:

At first they had eyes but looked in vain, heard but couldn't listen. Like dream-forms they muddled through all their long life at random. They knew neither sunny buildings of interleaved bricks nor carpentry, but lived underground in the dank recesses of caves, like tiny ants. They could not securely distinguish winter, flowery spring or bounteous summer, but did everything unscientifically until I showed them the rising and complex setting of the stars. I also invented arithmetic for them – an outstanding piece of cleverness – and combinations of letters, the tool which allows everything to be remembered and gives birth to the arts. I was the first to yoke beasts in teams to serve harnesses and saddle-packs, and take over mortals' greatest chores; and I led horses to love the chariot's reins – an ornament to pompous riches. Nobody other than me invented transport for sailors, which

Activities

Make a list of what skills Prometheus claims to have invented.

What would you include in a list of important human skills in 2013? As a class, find out which things you differ about and debate them on either side.

You probably didn't put prophecy on your list. Why did the playwright give so much emphasis to different forms of prophecy?

flies on sailcloth around the sea. Despite discovering such inventions for mortals – alas – I have no contrivance to escape my own current woe.

Chorus:

Now that you're suffering degrading pain, your mind has slipped off-course. Like a bad doctor, you've fallen sick and despair, unable to discover what medicine will heal yourself.

Prometheus:

After hearing the rest you'll be further amazed at what skills and pathways I devised. Here's the greatest. If anyone got ill there was no food, drink or ointment to protect them: they withered away through lack of medicines. That was until I showed them how to mix the soothing remedies they use to fend off all diseases. And I organised numerous modes of prophecy. I was the first to judge from dreams what was destined to happen in waking life. I let them recognise subtle omens from chance remarks, and signs encountered on journeys. I defined in detail the flight of clawed birds – those whose nature is favourable or sinister, and which hate or like or roost beside each other. I also described the smooth texture of organs, what colour makes bile pleasing to the deities, and the proper dappling of the liver. I set mortals on the route to a difficult craft by burning the long tailbone and femurs wrapped in fat, and brought into view signs from flames to which men had previously been blind. So much for that. Beneath the ground too, who can claim to have discovered humans' hidden aids – bronze, iron, silver, gold – before me? Nobody, I am certain, who didn't want to spout nonsense. Take my whole point in summary from this short sentence: all human skills are from Prometheus.

(ii) Lines 944-1013:
Prometheus' argument with
Hermes

Hermes:

You, smart alec, the one bitten by over-bitterness, who sinned against the gods by offering privileges to creatures of a day, who stole fire – I'm talking to you. The Father bids you declare what affair you're bragging about that will make him fall from power. But indicate it precisely and without any riddles, Prometheus, and don't burden me with a return journey. You see that those things don't mollify Zeus.

Prometheus:

A haughty instruction, and full of pride for a mere servant of the gods. You youngsters have your young government, and look at you thinking your citadel is free from grief. Haven't I seen two tyrants kicked out of them? And the present ruler will be the third I shall see – the quickest and most shameful instance. Perhaps you think I fear and quake at the young gods? Far from it – absolutely the opposite. You hurry back the way you came, since your questions to me won't be answered.

Hermes:

But it was by such obstinacy in the past that you got yourself into this painful fix.

Prometheus:

Rest assured: I wouldn't swap my sufferings for your subservience.

Hermes:

I suppose subservience to this cliff beats being the trusted messenger of Father Zeus?

Prometheus:

Insults like that suit the insolent.

Hermes:

You seem to be revelling in your present circumstances.

Prometheus:

Revelling? If only I could see my enemies revelling like this – and that includes you.

Hermes:

So you think I'm also to blame for your misfortunes?

Prometheus:

Bluntly, I hate all the gods who are wrongly injuring me after I did them a good turn.

Hermes:

What I'm hearing is that you have a serious case of insanity.

Prometheus:

I'm happy to be ill if loathing your enemies is an illness.

Hermes:

You'd be utterly intolerable if you were doing well.

Prometheus:

Alas!

Hermes:

There's a word Zeus doesn't know.

Prometheus:

But ageing time teaches every lesson.

Hermes:

Yet you haven't yet mastered being sensible.

Prometheus:

True: I wouldn't be speaking to you – a mere underling.

Hermes:

Apparently you won't say anything the Father wants.

Prometheus:

If I owed him any favour I'd do him one.

Hermes:

So you've bantered with me as if I'm a child.

Prometheus:

Aren't you a child, or something sillier still, if you expect to get any information from me? No torture or device exists by which Zeus will induce me to scream these things before my degrading chains are released. In the face of that, let him hurl smoky lightning, or stir up and confound the universe with white snowfall and seismic rumbling. None of that will bend me to indicate at whose hand he's fated to be deposed from his tyranny.

Hermes:

Consider if you think that's advantageous.

Prometheus:

That consideration and planning happened long ago.

Hermes:


Idiot, dare to think straight – dare that at last, in the face of your present pain.

Prometheus:

You're the idiot, hassling me like trying to advise the waves. Don't get the idea that I'll fear Zeus's decision, think girlish thoughts and beg that abominated enemy, with my palms raised like a woman, to release me from these chains – absolutely not.

Hermes:

Apparently a long speech will be spoken in vain, since my pleas do nothing to mollify or soften you. Like a newly-yoked foal you bite the bit, use force, and fight the reins. But your vehemence rests on a weak calculation:



unalloyed obstinacy is totally powerless for the wrong-headed.

Activities

Write a verb next to each sentence which says what the speaker is doing with their words (e.g. 'persuading', 'humiliating', 'cajoling'). This is called 'actioning the text', and is a technique actors often use in rehearsals.

Now split into pairs and act out the dialogue. Think carefully about what tone of voice you need for each statement. How many jokes does each speaker make at the other's expense?

When have you resisted authority? What arguments did you use and what arguments did you face?

The composition of the play

We can read the *Prometheus Bound* today because it was copied out in a continuous chain from the 5th century BCE to the earliest surviving manuscript in the 10th century CE. At some early point in this chain, the play was ascribed to Aeschylus, the oldest of the 'big three' writers of tragedy in 5th-century Athens (born c.525, died 456). However, the style of *Prometheus* is different in many respects from that of Aeschylus' six surviving plays. To take a couple of examples, the chorus is given a much smaller role, and there are far fewer striking mixed metaphors. The question is still disputed, but the more common view at the moment is that the play was written by someone else. One candidate is Aeschylus' son Euphorion, who is known to have both produced his father's plays and written his own. The date of the play might be c.450-430.

Prometheus was originally produced alongside a sequel, *Prometheus Unbound*, of which only about 5% survives. That play followed up on some predictions made within *Prometheus Bound*. An eagle has started devouring Prometheus' liver, and eventually Heracles arrives, shoots the eagle, and frees Prometheus. As well as tying up these loose ends, *Prometheus Unbound* matched the basic structure of *Prometheus Bound*: again a chorus of immortals (this time Prometheus' brothers and cousins) arrives to commiserate with Prometheus; again a human (Heracles) then arrives, to whom Prometheus gives instructions for a future journey (in this case, two of Heracles' Labours take him to the far west of Europe).

Unfortunately we do not know whether these

two plays were a self-standing production at Athens' secondary dramatic festival (the 'Lenaia'), or whether they were composed along with two further plays to make up the standard tragic production of four plays at the main festival (the 'City Dionysia').



Prometheus with eagle eating his liver; to the left, his brother Atlas having to hold the world on his shoulders.

Cup by the Arkesilas Painter, c.550 BCE.

Background to the myth

Greek myths were not fixed stories. Some basic elements, like Prometheus being punished, are standard, but story-tellers had plenty of flexibility to reinvent the details. So how does *Prometheus Bound* manipulate traditions about Prometheus, and what effects might this have created?

The most important literary source for Prometheus before the tragedy is Hesiod (early 7th century BCE). In both his works – the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* – he tells how Prometheus tricked Zeus into letting humans eat almost all the meat at Greek

sacrifices, then stole fire and gave it to humans so that they could make things, especially bread. Zeus responded by sending the first woman, Pandora, to Prometheus' less clever brother. She came with a jar containing various evils like disease, which she introduced into human life by opening the jar. Hesiod mentions briefly that Zeus chained Prometheus up and sent an eagle to torture him, but is not clear about his eventual release. In this version, Prometheus is engaged in a battle of wits with Zeus which defines the human condition as one of having to cook, craft, put up with diseases, etc. Hesiod barely connects this to the main thrust of his *Theogony* – the story of how Zeus overthrows his father Cronus to take control of the universe.

Other works accepted that Prometheus' actions were crucial for understanding mankind's condition, but take a different approach. Some writers say that he was the father to the 'Greek Noah', Deucalion, and advised him and his wife on how to survive a massive flood with which Zeus destroyed everyone else. According to different sources again, such as Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, Prometheus and his brother moulded humans from clay in the first place.

Athenians also worshipped Prometheus as a deity, to a degree not matched in any other Greek city. Every year, Prometheus' festival included a big choral competition, and a relay-race to carry a lit torch from his sanctuary to the city centre. Prometheus' altar was, at least later, shared with Hephaestus; this makes good sense given their similarity as craft-deities, and may also explain why Hephaestus is so sympathetic to Prometheus in the tragedy's prologue.

Compared to other accounts, *Prometheus*

Bound turns Prometheus from a rather lightweight trickster into an obstinate opponent of Zeus with far greater 'foreknowledge' (which is what his name means). Zeus is also changed, into a tyrant with henchmen (Kratos, Bia, Hermes) whom even the moderate Oceanus agrees is being autocratic, as he ignores Prometheus' past help and stamps his authority on his new rule. The poet had the clever idea of merging Prometheus' story with Io's, which shows us a different side of Zeus's willingness to make humans suffer. Finally, rather than the normal emphasis just on fire, Prometheus gives a more comprehensive picture of the development of human technology, which was a popular topic of speculation in Athens at the time.

In short, the playwright has changed a number of features of the traditional Prometheus to turn him into a dramatically effective larger-than-life hero, who makes us think about where human achievements come from, and question any sense of divine justice.



Rubens, *Prometheus Bound*, 1611-12.

Influence

Prometheus Bound has had an enormous influence on European writers and artists since the Renaissance, and especially since around 1770.

Prometheus' importance at that time rests on two connected ideas. Firstly, there is the political reading of the play which see Prometheus as an embodiment of what resistance to autocracy can achieve. In 1789 the French Revolution overthrew King Louis XVI and then, through Napoleon's successes, spread Republican ideals and lawcodes through much of Europe. Both artists and poets of the time connect Prometheus to this Republican spirit. One theme from Beethoven's ballet-score *Creatures of Prometheus* reappears in the final movement of his 3rd symphony, which Beethoven at least initially planned to dedicate to Napoleon. But Napoleon ended up in lonely exile on St Helena in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, as Prometheus is exiled to isolation at the start of his tragedy. Lord Byron is one poet who drew a connection between Prometheus and Napoleon at this stage of his life, whereas the "Prometheus Bound" and "Prometheus Unbound" by Byron's close friend Percy Bysshe Shelley present a more optimistic message that human aspiration can eventually transcend suffering and force.

Elsewhere, Byron also demonstrates a second, more aesthetic reading of *Prometheus Bound*, where Prometheus embodies human creativity, particularly as imagined at that time in the misunderstood genius of a Romantic artist or writer. A similar reading of *Prometheus* had already appeared in German in the 1770s in works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and similar ideas extend throughout the 19th century, for example in the American poet

Henry Longfellow's "Prometheus".

Prometheus continued to change with the interests of great thinkers from later times. Karl Marx gave a new twist to the political reading of the play, seeing Prometheus as a symbol of how the working class (rather than the bourgeoisie or the Romantic artist) is shackled into submission by capitalism (rather than by monarchy or conservative values). Sigmund Freud in the 20th century applied his new psychoanalytical theories to the myth, trying to find in it Greek intuitions about the nature of human desires and their constraints.

Prometheus still pervades popular culture. In Season 5 of *The Wire* (2008), senator Clay Davis arrives for his corruption trial clutching a recent translation of the play (by Scully and Herington), and explains to the press how his trial matches Prometheus' unfair punishment by the 'powers that be' for helping the poor. And if you Google 'Prometheus' now your top hit will probably refer to Ridley Scott's 2012 sci-fi film of that name. In it, a group of future humans travel on a scientific expedition on the spaceship *Prometheus* to find out who created humankind and whether immortality is possible; they find their creators, but suffer in the attempt. This version gives, in some senses, Zeus's side of the story: the humans' scientific advances, conveyed by *Prometheus* (the spaceship), lead them to rash curiosity which their creators fight against and punish brutally; this time, *Prometheus* provides little in the way of assistance.

Many of these 'versions' of *Prometheus*, like those of Goethe and Ridley Scott, diverge freely from the original tragedy or other Greek sources. In doing so, they show the same desire to adapt mythological material to present concerns that the ancient Greeks themselves did, and that

modern theatre director does. Most of the people mentioned also share the belief that *Prometheus Bound* is not merely a made-up story about Prometheus, but a work open to a wide range of symbolic interpretations which make it say something fundamental about the human condition. Like Prometheus' liver, which regenerated whenever the eagle came to feed on it, *Prometheus Bound* continues to be revived as new audiences chew over its ideas.

DID YOU KNOW?

In the 13th century, *Prometheus Bound* was often read in schools in Constantinople. Many copies from that period survive, including some with annotations by teachers. That means we can still see which words the students of 750 years ago found difficult!

HEROES

Synopsis

The play opens with Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of wine and theatre, and his long-suffering slave, Xanthias, arguing over what is the best type of joke. Dionysus visits his half-brother, the hero Heracles, and explains that he has a great longing for Euripides, the recently-deceased tragedian, and wants to bring him back from the dead. In order to do this, he must journey down to the Underworld. Since Heracles has already been to the Underworld in the past (to fetch the three-headed dog Cerberus), Dionysus has come to get tips from him on the best way to proceed - in fact, he has also disguised himself as Heracles! Heracles imparts his advice, telling them to look out for the Mystic initiates who live close to the palace of Pluto, the divine ruler of the Underworld.

Dionysus and Xanthias set off, soon arriving at the lake which forms an outer boundary of the Underworld. Here they encounter Charon, the ferryman whose boat carries the souls of the dead across the water. Xanthias is sent running around the lake, since he is only a slave, while Dionysus rows the boat across. As he rows, a Chorus of Frogs appears and sing a song with a croaking refrain ('Brekekekex koax koax!'). Dionysus arrives at the shore and is reunited with Xanthias, who terrifies him by pretending to see various monstrous creatures, including the monster Empousa.

A second chorus of Mystic initiates appears, and sings a long hymn to the god Iacchus (another name for Dionysus, although he does not seem to recognise this in the play) and to Demeter, goddess of the harvest.

Dionysus and Xanthias now encounter Aeacus, the doorkeeper of Pluto's palace. Because of Dionysus' disguise, Aeacus mistakes him for Heracles, and, since he is still angry about the theft of Cerberus, threatens him. Dionysus soils himself in fear, and makes Xanthias trade clothes with him. A maid comes out and invites 'Heracles' (i.e. Xanthias) inside for a feast with dancing-girls. He accepts, but Dionysus makes him swap clothes again. Two innkeepers now appear, angry with Heracles for eating up all of their food the last time he came by. Frightened by their threats, Dionysus makes Xanthias trade clothes with him for a third time.

Activities

Pick a scene from the synopsis above.

Think about the sense in which it is funny, and how you might update or translate that humour for a modern production.

Aeacus returns, and Xanthias, now dressed as Heracles, offers his 'slave' (i.e. Dionysus) up for torture. Dionysus reveals his true identity, and both he and Xanthias are whipped as Aeacus tries to determine which one of them is really a god. Unable to work it out, Aeacus takes them inside to meet his master, Pluto.

The leader of the chorus of initiates offers advice to the audience: the city ought to restore citizen rights to those who had been disenfranchised after the oligarchic coup in 411 and the restoration of democracy in 410.

Xanthias comes out of the palace with one of Pluto's slaves, and learns that the din coming from inside is being caused by Aeschylus and Euripides. The slave tells Xanthias that in the Underworld, the person who was the best at their profession while they were still alive is entitled to a special chair, near to Pluto. Aeschylus held the Chair of Tragedy, but when Euripides died and came down to the Underworld he challenged him for it (Sophocles did not contest Aeschylus for the chair, but said that if Euripides won, he would challenge him). Aeschylus and Euripides will now compete for the Chair of Tragedy, and Dionysus has been appointed judge in the competition.

The contest begins. Euripides accuses Aeschylus of writing overblown and swollen tragedies, and believes his own to be better because they deal with everyday matters and are more true to life. Aeschylus responds by stating that his plays encouraged bravery and valour, while Euripides' plays have only taught women to be shameless and encouraged base and idle behaviour. The two tragedians continue to quote and mock each other's verses and music, while Dionysus offers his own opinions. The contest closes with the 'weighing' of their poetry on a set of scales, and each tragedian takes it in turn to contribute a verse. Aeschylus wins by quoting verses which refer to heavier objects, but Dionysus still cannot decide between them. He finally decides to take the poet who will be the most useful for the city, and asks both Aeschylus and Euripides for their opinions on various matters relating to Athenian policy. Finally, Dionysus chooses Aeschylus, whom he believes will be more beneficial to the city. Pluto releases Aeschylus (who asks that Sophocles look after the Chair of Tragedy while he is gone) and the tragedian, Dionysus and Xanthias set off back to Athens.

The Frogs and tragedy

The Frogs is very much a comedy all about tragedy. Produced shortly after the deaths of the both Euripides and Sophocles, the comedy asks what role tragedy can and should play in society, now that the three leading tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) are no longer alive. Dionysus starts out as a comic and cowardly buffoon but by the end of the play he is revealed as a knowledgeable tragic theatregoer, able to preside over the competition between Aeschylus and Euripides and offer critical comments and judgements on their work. As a result, the *Frogs* can also be seen as a valuable, if not always entirely serious, work of ancient literary criticism, offering us an insight into the way in which ancient audiences thought about the genre of tragedy.

When *Frogs* was produced in 405 BCE, Aeschylus had been dead for just over fifty years, while Euripides was only recently deceased. The contest between the two dramatists thus pits the traditional Aeschylus, associated with the glory and bravery of the past, against the more 'modern' and 'true to life' Euripides.

In both cases, it is assumed that tragedy has a didactic function - that is, drama teaches its audience how to behave and provides models and examples for them to follow. For example, in *Frogs* Aeschylus claims that his own work inspired the Athenians to be brave and courageous, while Euripides' plays, which often featured adulterous female characters, have encouraged the shamelessness of women. However, Euripides believes that his own work has in fact helped the Athenians to

be more critical, practical and intellectual, while Aeschylus merely distracted his audience with bombastic language and cheap theatrical effects - such as keeping main characters silent for a long time, so that the audience is always wondering when they are going to start speaking.

The Frogs also closely scrutinises the dramatic language of each tragedian. Euripides parodies Aeschylean language as being over-the-top and ridiculous. By contrast, Aeschylus accuses Euripides of being monotonous and predictable in the openings to his tragedies. He proves this by asking Euripides to recite the beginning lines of several of his plays, interrupting each time to show how the line can be finished with '...lost his little oil-flask'. Finally, Aeschylus and Euripides mock each other's musical effects, with each tragedian singing songs in the style of the other. Euripides sings the first lines of five different Aeschylean choral odes, putting them together into a single nonsensical song. In turn, Aeschylus ridicules Euripides by singing a song made up of snippets of Euripidean tragedy, and then parodies his style by singing an aria in the character of a poor woman whose cockerel has been stolen!

Aristophanes makes fun of both Aeschylean and Euripidean plots, language and style in the *Frogs*, but in doing so, he reveals a very deep and sophisticated understanding of their work. Aristophanes' jokes rely on the audience being able to recognise and appreciate his parodying of tragedy, and so we can deduce from *Frogs* that the Athenian audience would have shared Aristophanes' appreciation for, and knowledge of, the work of the great tragic poets.

Aristophanes and Old Comedy

Aristophanes was born around 445 BCE and died around 386 BCE. We have very little biographical information about him, but do know that he was an Athenian citizen, and we are told that his father was called Philippos, from the Athenian *deme* (i.e. village or suburb) of Kydathenaion. Over the course of his career, Aristophanes produced at least forty comedies. Only eleven have survived in full for us to read today, while the others are known through citations and fragments. Although Aristophanes competed against many other comedians during his lifetime, their work has all been lost. Aristophanes' plays therefore provide the only complete surviving examples of the Greek dramatic genre which we now call 'Old Comedy'.

Old Comedy is characterised by its heavy use of scathing satire. The plays frequently pick on well-known political, military and public figures in order to ridicule them, often savagely, and contain direct and outspoken critiques and comments on public affairs. They are also characterised by plenty of sexual innuendo and physical humour. The comedies usually involved imaginative, fantastical themes and staging. For example, in Aristophanes' plays we find choruses consisting of clouds, birds, and, of course, frogs!

Although Aristophanes' plays are full of comic buffoonery, they also contain serious messages. For example, in *Peace* (421 BCE), the Athenian Trygaeus flies to heaven on the back of a giant dung-beetle to negotiate an end to the current war between Athens and Sparta (the 'Peloponnesian War'). The War is also the historical backdrop and theme of *Lysistrata* (411

BCE). In this comedy, the women of Greece organise a sex-strike, refusing to sleep with their husbands and lovers until the men agree to end the fighting. The strike is successful, and peace is restored. While the audience would have found the idea that women could take charge of political and military affairs to be completely fantastic (and potentially quite threatening), this play, like *Peace*, tackles the very real and urgent question of how to negotiate an end to the Peloponnesian War.

In fact, Aristophanes' comedies also contain scenes in which the main actors leave the stage, and the chorus and chorus leader directly addresses the audience in the theatre, and offer them advice on social and political issues. This is called the parabasis (literally, the 'stepping-forward'). During the parabasis the chorus usually temporarily abandons its dramatic character and speaks directly to the audience about topics unrelated to the events of the play, such as Aristophanes' own career, or political events. In *Frogs*, we find a long parabasis which appears to contain serious political advice for Athens. In 411 BCE, there had been an oligarchic coup in Athens. Democracy was restored in 410 BCE, and many of the aristocrats who had participated in the coup were stripped of their citizenship. In the parabasis of *Frogs*, the chorus leader advises the audience to restore rights to these people, arguing that it is time to welcome back those had helped Athens in the past. In the autumn of 405 BCE, this did actually happen: full citizen rights were restored to many of those who had taken part in the coup. Ancient sources tell us that the parabasis of *Frogs* was particularly admired, and that Aristophanes was praised for writing it. Old Comedy, it seems, was not just a form of entertainment, but could intersect with serious politics.

Activities

1. Comedy has many different forms. How many can you think of?
(Examples: Satire, Master/Servant, Farce, Slapstick/Physical, Musical Comedy. Frogs contains examples of all of these!)
2. Discuss in groups your favourite comedy characters and shows. What makes them funny? What genre of comedy do they belong to?
(Examples: Mr Bean – Physical comedy; Blackadder – Master/Servant; Simpsons – Slapstick and Satire)

Passages to discuss in class

(i) Lines 718-46

Chorus leader:

It's often occurred to us that the city treats its fine and noble citizens just as with the old coinage and the new gold. Those were not counterfeit, but, as all agreed, the finest of all coins, the only ones honestly minted and tested everywhere among Greeks and barbarians alike - but we don't use them; instead, we use these wretched coppers, struck only yesterday or the day before with the worst kind of stamp. Similarly with regard to our citizens: those we know to be well-bred and wise and just and fine and noble, men educated in the wrestling-schools and in choruses and culture, we treat them outrageously, and instead for all purposes we choose those men of base metal, foreigners, red-heads, bad people from bad families, the latest arrivals – formerly the city wouldn't have used them even as scapegoats! But even at this late time, you fools, change your ways and make use of the good people again. This will be a credit to you if you are successful; and if you slip up, well, at least the wise will say that if something does happen to you, you're hanging from a good tree.

Activities

a. The Chorus leader uses the imagery of coins to reflect the good and bad in Athenian society. How effective do you think this is? What other metaphors could you use to differentiate between 'virtuous' and 'bad' models of behaviour?

b. This scene juxtaposes a serious message from the chorus-leader with a comic exchange between Xanthias and the slave of Pluto. What is the effect of this? Do Xanthias and the slave present a different picture of what it means to be noble in society from that of the chorus?

(ii) Lines 1053-6

Enter Xanthias and a slave of Pluto

Slave:

By Zeus the Saviour, that master of yours is a fine gentleman.

Xanthias:

Of course he's a fine gentleman; he knows nothing except boozing and bonking.

Slave:

But to think that he didn't give you a beating as soon as you, a slave, was caught pretending to be his master!

Xanthias:

He'd have regretted that.

Slave:

Spoken like a true slave - I enjoy doing that myself.

Xanthias:

You enjoy it?

Slave:

Yes, I'm in seventh heaven when I curse my master behind his back!

Aeschylus:

It is the duty of a poet to conceal that which is wicked, and not to bring it on-stage, nor to teach it. For young children have a teacher to show them how to behave, and adults have poets. So it's above all necessary for us to tell them things which are good.

Activity

Do you agree? What do you think the 'function' of drama is? What kind of lessons can we learn from reading or watching a tragic or a comic play? What do you think the ancient audience learnt from watching *Frogs*?

Activities

c. Think about the clash of the old and the new in the contest of Aeschylus and Euripides. Look closely at what happens in this scene, and make a list of the qualities that you think are embodied by each tragedian. What writers would you chose to re-create this contest nowadays, and why? What makes one writer more 'traditional' or 'modern' than another?

d. At the start of *Frogs*, Dionysus declares his wish to go down to the Underworld to fetch Euripides, but at the end of the play he changes his mind and chooses to bring back Aeschylus, because he believes that poet will be better for the city of Athens. Do you think that Dionysus made the right choice? Why does he think that Aeschylus can 'save' the city?

The original production

The original staging of *Prometheus* and *Frogs* would have taken place in spring in an open-air theatre just beneath the Acropolis in Athens. The audience – perhaps very roughly 5000 people – sat on benches in a roughly semi-circular arena, facing the orchestra, the central space where the chorus danced and sang. At the back of the orchestra was the *skene*, the stage-building. The *skene* had a door which characters could use to enter and exit. On each side of the orchestra was a long *eisodos* or entrance-passage. Just further down the slope was Dionysus' temple.

All the actors, and probably all of the audience, were male. The actors wore elaborate costumes, and masks which fully covered their faces. The actors therefore could not use their own facial expressions to convey emotion; they relied on gesture and on skilful tilting of the mask which can appear to take on different expressions.

Prometheus is one of the most visually spectacular of all surviving Greek tragedies. In the prologue, the main character is nailed to the *skene* which represents a cliff – an amazing way to constrain his ability to act (and there were almost certainly by this point prizes for the most impressive actor in the festival, as well as the best playwright and producer!). The chorus mention that they arrived through the air in a winged chariot, and Oceanus in a chariot pulled by a mythical creature with four legs and wings; Hermes may also fly in, on his winged sandals. Such airborne entries require impressive props, and may have employed a crane to winch the characters up from behind the *skene*. However, it is unlikely that the crane could carry all twelve or fifteen members of the chorus at once; they may instead have used an

internal ramp to get out on to the *skene* roof in their vehicle; later they climb down, to do most of their dances in the orchestra. The play also ends with a giant storm and Prometheus being swallowed into the earth. One suggestion is that Prometheus was nailed over the stage door, which at that moment was opened from inside to give the effect of him disappearing into blackness. But because the play requires such unusual staging effects, we don't know exactly how they were achieved.

We also shouldn't forget the effect of the costumes in a play where no character is a normal human: Io has cow's horns; Oceanus and his daughters are gods who represent rivers.

Frogs, like many comedies, uses its props and costumes to generate visual humour. At the start of the play Dionysus comes on disguised as his half-brother Heracles, wearing Heracles' traditional lion-skin over his own clothes. This costume will be used to great effect when he meets Heracles himself, and especially when Dionysus and Xanthias repeatedly swap clothes in front of the palace of Pluto. *The Frogs* also contains a striking scene in which Dionysus rows Charon's ferry across the Underworld lake. We don't know exactly how this moving boat was staged in the ancient theatre, but it must have been quite a spectacle. There is debate over whether or not the chorus of frogs actually appeared in the theatre, or if they sung their croaking song from off-stage. If they did come on-stage, the appearance of singing and dancing men dressed in frog costumes would have been particularly memorable! Finally, the comedy ends with the 'weighing' of the words of Aeschylus and Euripides. A large pair of weighing-scales would have been brought on-stage for this purpose. Not only would this have provided a visual focal point for the tragedians' contest, but the staging would also have

Activities

If you were directing and designing a production of these plays, you would need to make various decisions about staging. In small groups, pick one of the following to focus on:

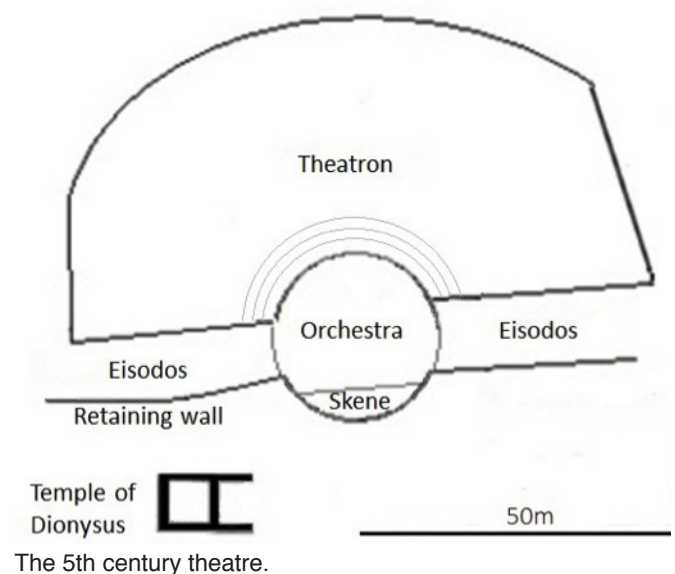
What time period would you set the plays in, in terms of costuming? What costumes would you choose?

How would you create effects such as Prometheus being nailed to the cliff, or Dionysus 'weighing up' Aeschylus' and Euripides' poetry?

What music would you choose for the chorus's songs?

In each case, explain your answer. Would you answer differently if you were putting on the play in a huge open-air theatre like the one in Athens?

recalled and parodied a tragedy of Aeschylus called *The Weighing of the Souls*, in which the souls of the heroes Achilles and Memnon were weighed in order to determine which of them would die in a duel.



Creating comic characters - activity

Much comedy derives from exaggeration, but also needs a basis in reality. Use the following exercise to create comic characters.

- Form into two equal lines facing each other.
- One side act normally. The other side look at the person opposite you.
- Identify something they are doing with their body. It should be very small like a slight movement in their fingers or a small rocking motion.
- Copy this as naturally as possible, it should barely be noticeable.
- Have the teacher count from one to five. As they do gradually increase the size and visibility of the action until it has become noticeable.
- Count from five to seven. Let the action begin to take over your entire body as it gets bigger and bigger, well beyond what is normal.
- As the teacher counts from seven to ten let the action completely dictate how you act. Think about what emotional qualities it makes you feel. What sounds would this person make? What kind of character do you feel you have created?
- Count back down to one, slowly reducing the action and swap sides.

Discuss: What was funny? Why was it funny? When did it start to become amusing? Can comedy go too far?

This production

Director Helen Eastman gave a Q-and-A in Cambridge on June 13th 2013. Here is an abridged version of the conversation.

***Q:** This is the first double-bill of tragedy and comedy at the Cambridge Greek Play since 1927. Tell us why you wanted to do that.*

A: The Cambridge Greek Play has presented only tragedies since the *Birds* in 1995. (I saw it as a teenager!) But tragedies are only half the story of Greek drama. It's rare to see Aristophanes' comedies in the original, because comedy is harder to put on: it's difficult to make people laugh at a foreign-language play, and you have to update all the political satire. But those things are (I think!) surmountable. Also, Alex Silverman [the composer] and I have worked on several political satires, so we were keen on this challenge. For a lot of young audience-members, going to the Greek Play on a school trip might be their one encounter with Greek drama in their early theatre-going years, and it's great to show them both ends of the spectrum.

***Q:** What difference does it make that the plays are in a foreign language?*

A: I'm used to it, because I direct quite a lot of opera. But the Greek Play is special for two reasons. First, I dearly love the Greek language, particularly for the various rhythms used in the plays. Secondly, there's less singing than an opera, which makes it harder to get the pronunciation right. Actors remember the rough meaning before their muscles remember how to make all the sounds fluently. I've built up a toolbox of ways to rehearse that stage. For example, I start with a literal translation, then we wade through the Greek, then go to a freer or improvised translation; or we boil each line down to a single action (e.g. 'I plead with you; then you humiliate me; then...'). Gradually the shape of the scene and the memory for the words come together. The Greek has to be in people's muscle-memory rather than just in their brains, or else you might panic

on stage - and it's hard to improvise your way through in ancient Greek!

Q: *The Cambridge Greek Play tries to address a really broad audience. Does that make it a special opportunity and also a special challenge?*

A: I can't tell you how exciting that was in *Agamemnon* [the 2010 Cambridge Greek Play]. I remember standing in the foyer, seeing 300 schoolchildren, half the Cambridge classics department, and an enclave of theatre professionals. This is a unique opportunity every three years to get all those different groups into one space, sit them down, and show why I'm really excited about Greek drama. Alex and I have recently been thinking hard about how to deal with the breadth of audience in terms of political satire and comedy. What musical references might a teenager and a classics professor share? I went to a panto last December with a classics professor, who was horrified when she was the only person in the audience who didn't know the number-one song everyone else was singing along to.

Q: *Does that mean there will be anachronistic modern references in the Frogs?*

A: Absolutely - lots. It's important to see anachronisms not as a replacement for an obsolete joke, but as themselves part of the humour. *The Frogs* is going to look contemporary. That allows for visual satire - e.g. you can turn the chorus into MPs with paper masks, or you can reference Kermit. The surtitles will also have fun with mixing the literal and the modernised: sometimes, they might give an ancient term and then explain it rather long-windedly as part of a send-up of the process of that way of explaining Greek drama.

Q: *Finally, how do you view the idea of being authentic to the original conditions of performance?*

A: I don't see theatre as involving revered texts

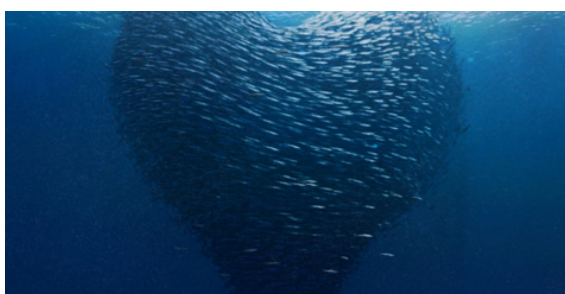
whose originality has to be recaptured. I write and direct plays which are of the moment, and require practical decision-making to get them on to the stage effectively. Anyway, you simply don't put on a play in ancient Greek to create an authentic experience. And this is a proscenium-arch theatre in Cambridge, not an open-air theatre pervaded by the smell of the Athenian spring. Among my reasons for putting something on in Greek is to allow people to hear an aurally fantastic language. Alex Silverman and I share a nerdy interest in Greek rhythm, and the plays use their verse and metre to communicate emotion in a way which our theatrical tradition stopped long ago. I want people to realise as much as I do how brilliant these plays are - not from a sense of reverence, but from a sense that we could learn a lot from their qualities about how to make contemporary drama.

Greek chorus activities

Modern day choruses:

The chorus serves myriad roles in Greek Theatre. They function as observers, emotional interpreters, commentators, companions, story-tellers and much more besides. In order to better understand the role of the chorus, discuss in a group choruses that exist in modern life. Try to be as creative as possible! For example:

- A group of sports fans
- A class of students
- A group of old women playing bingo



Movement and the chorus:

An effective way to begin thinking about how the chorus will move on stage is to look for examples of groups of animals moving as one in nature. This could include images of shoals of fish, flocks of birds, or sheep being rounded up by a sheepdog. In all these examples, the individual animal disappears as it becomes part of a homogenous group with its companions.

Activity 1: mirroring

Organise the class into pairs facing each other in a neutral position. Then, with no one in the pair being prescribed as leader, the students are to start moving slowly and to mirror their partner's movements, to experiment with speed and detail of movement, as well as to explore how effectively they can maintain synchronicity when using their peripheral vision.

Activity 2: shadowing

In pairs have your students stand one behind the other. The person at the front of the pair will move and the person behind follows and copies their movements exactly. When the person at the front rotates, the person at the back then becomes the leader. You can

then extend this task by making the groups larger.

Activity 3: shoaling.

Organise your students into groups of at least three people. Have them stand together in a tight clump. Whoever is at the front of the clump should then begin to move slowly and the rest of the group should join in with their movements. Whenever the clump turns, the new person at the front should take on the job of leading the movement, however, if conducted effectively it should look like there is no leader at all. Once the group have successfully synchronised into each other's movements, the chorus can begin to play with speed and different ways of travelling.

Activity 4: shoaling extension.

Once the group has learned to move in unison encourage the individuals to not copy each other exactly, and instead to maintain a similar quality of movement. For example, if someone begins to run, the rest of the chorus may run too, but not in exactly the same manner. This will serve to naturalise, or humanise, the chorus.

Chorus and vocals:

Think about, and discuss, all the different ways a group can make sounds together. For example, a chorus can speak in unison, individuals can speak certain lines, a line can be spoken by an individual whilst the rest of the chorus hum. Then look at this passage spoken by the chorus of *Prometheus* and put your ideas into practice:

**Who of the Gods is there so pitiless
That he can triumph in thy sore distress?
Who doth not only groan
With every pang of thine save Zeus alone?
But he is ever wroth, not to be bent
From his resolved intent
The sons of heaven to subjugate;
Nor shall he cease until his heart be
sated,
Or one a way devise
To hurl him from the throne where he doth
monarchise.**

(Prometheus Bound 160-7)

What works? What doesn't? What aural effects you can create?

Then go on to combine both vocals and movement.

Costume and design activities

Divine characters

Costume is designed to convey an immediate impression of characters: their nature, status and personality. *Prometheus Bound* features primarily mythical figures and gods who need to stand apart from the world of mortals but still be realisable on stage.

Discuss in groups of 4-5 how you would go about designing costumes for gods. What are the ways you can show power? What are they gods of? How are they inhuman? How are they relatable on stage?

Here are concepts from designer Neil Irish for the current production for Oceanus (god of the ocean) and Prometheus (primal god of fire):



Design for Oceanus, © Neil Irish



Design sketch for Prometheus, © Neil Irish

What impressions do the characters' appearances on the left create? How has their divine nature been presented? How do they contrast with each other?

Write down some ideas on what you could do for the following characters:

Prometheus

Kratos (Strength) and Bia (Violence) – Zeus' servants who chain Prometheus to his rock.

The Chorus of female Oceanids (Sea Spirits)

Hermes (The messenger God)

Io (A lover of Zeus who has been cursed and turned into a cow)



Peter Hall's *Oresteia*, National Theatre (1981)

Here are some things to keep in mind!

What period is your production set in?

What themes are you focusing on?

Do your costumes all look like they're from the same play?

Is there a hierarchy of status?

How is divinity conveyed?

Are the costumes practical to move around the stage with?

What props might the characters hold that would complement your costumes?



Agamemnon, Cambridge Greek Play (2010)

Design in Greek Theatre

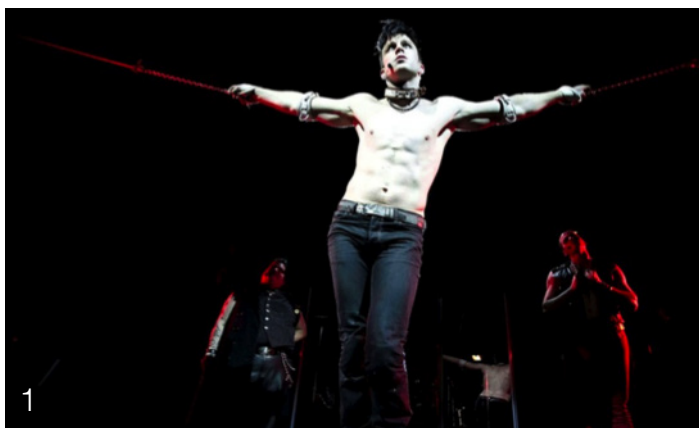
Traditionally, all the actors were male. They wore elaborate costumes and masks which fully covered their faces. This meant that they could not use facial expression as a physical way of conveying meaning, but rather relied on gesture. Over time, new productions of Greek tragedies have moved away from these concepts.



Polly Findlay's *Antigone*, National Theatre (2012)

Activity

The images on the previous page show a range of ways of presenting a Chorus. What are the differences? How has the traditional masked form been conveyed? How is the concept of unity (see the Chorus activities page) presented?



Prometheus:

The depiction of Prometheus has been something that has changed throughout human cultural history.

Activity:

Look at these four images and consider how the image has changed over time. What do you think the order is chronologically? What has remained the same? How has the character been altered and why?

Consider image 4 (below right). It is a political cartoon of Karl Marx as Prometheus. Who was Karl Marx? What has he been chained to? What might the eagle represent? Why might the image of Prometheus have been chosen?



Designs for *The Frogs*:
clockwise from right, design
sketch for *The Frogs*;

design sketch for the begin-
ning of *The Frogs*

design sketch for Dionysus

(all © Neil Irish)

