

Humanities Institute
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The Frogs 405 B.C.E.

Aristophanes

Story.

Six years before *The Frogs*, Aristophanes staged the first performance of the *Thesmophoriazousae*, which broke with the thematic direction of the playwright's earlier work. This play concerned the annual women's festival in Athens, and provided insight into the women's views of literary culture in Athens, a culture which dominated, and showcased, the leading female attitudes toward the city's culture. We learn in that play that Euripides has been roundly (and dangerously) criticized for his uncomplimentary views of women, and that his refusal to respect them—the reference is especially to characters like Medea and Phaedra—is destined to be his downfall. The upshot of it is that now, from Aristophanes who is known for his social critique and deep satires of war society, we are encountering literary creations about literary creations. We are surely en route, here, to a new literature about literature; a route Aristophanes will take much farther in the six years leading to *The Frogs*, a period during which he has learned to think much more deeply, about the relation of literature to society. In the *Frogs*, as we know, it is no longer a question of the war between the sexes, but is now a matter of drama (or literature) in society as a whole.

Society. Aristophanes is raising the question of the value of great drama, which for a Greek mind of such eminence as his own has to have meant the very central Greek cultural event. When he pretends, at the opening of the *Frogs*, to be carrying out a major social mission, by sending Dionysus and Xanthias down to Hades, to bring back a new tragic poet laureate—Aeschylus and Euripides seem to be the only candidates, Sophocles still being among the living—he is making a comic but also a grave cultural statement. As a lifetime maker of the finest art of his culture, and as a still young genius in an explosive world civilization, Aristophanes is not kidding when he says his culture needs the guidance of a master poet. Isn't it the feeling of the present flyspeck writer that the vision of Eliot or Pound—pick your own instances-- would be welcome and bracing, in the age of writers' workshops and airport thrillers?

Judgment. The tale in question, therefore, is the journey of the god Dionysus, effeminate, fussy, and easily confused, with his tougher and more put together servant, Xanthias, to bring a new tragic poet laureate—the first intention is Euripides—back to earth. Arriving at the river Styx, Xanthias is obliged to walk around the water, while Dionysus has to help push the boat. (At this point, as though to underline the grotesquerie of the adventure, appears a chorus of frogs, who cry their raw croaking *berekekekex-koax-koax*, and engage Dionysus in an agonistic contest. A couple of slapstick episodes, playing on the easily spooked Dionysus, segue into the contest, for 'Best Tragic Poet,' which is going to settle the rivalry between Aeschylus and Euripides. An elaborate *agon* follows, in which each poet does his best to mock the language of the other, highlighting foibles and childish rhetorical tricks, with the weight of evidence leaning toward the point of decision; Aeschylus coming off as the graver and more mature poet, the model for behavior; a scale is brought in, and Aeschylus' words found to 'weigh more' than those of Euripides. Dionysus redeems himself for his formerly ludicrous role, by performing the task of literary judge, proving himself a master of finesse in the judgment of tragic language, and in the end deciding that Aeschylus is more worthy to return to the Athenians, bringing them salubrious moral advice, and practical wisdom in difficult times. Pluto gives free passage to Aeschylus, so that he can return to the world, while Aeschylus appoints Sophocles—who has just died—to chair the Underworld in Aeschylus' absence.

Themes

Underworld. The journey to the Underworld is a global folk theme, which was put to use frequently in Greco-Roman thinking, and which is the whole milieu of the present play. (We have seen Odysseus and Aeneas make the same questing journey as Dionysus in the present play, and a millennium later we will see Dante take the same path, in the company of Virgil).

Morality. Though Euripides is valued greatly as a critic—think of his acumen in the *Thesmophoriazusae*—the mantle of gravity and moral dignity keeps falling on Aeschylus' shoulders. This morality, according to Aristophanes, is what Athens most needs.

Slapstick. Though *The Frogs* makes a serious point, Aristophanes delights in hamming it up en route. The interplay between the effete and easily scared Dionysus, and the wisecracking Xanthias, is zaniness that will keep any citizen crowd awake.

Characters

Xanthias,	servant of Dionysus
Dionysus,	god of wine and orgies
Heracles,	deified hero
Corpse,	going to the Underworld
Charon,	ferryman of the dead
Aeacus,	doorkeeper of Hades
Maid,	of Persephone
Keeper of bistro, in Athenian street	
Plathane,	her assistant
Old servant,	of Pluto
Euripides,	tragic poet
Aeschylus,	tragic poet
Pluto,	god of the Underworld
Chorus,	of Frogs
Chorus,	of mystery Initiates of Dionysus

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dionysus Dionysus, though a wimp, is palpably the main character. He is such a chicken that he has to take support, and several garment exchanges, with his servant Xanthias, so he can stay out of harm's way. It is only after the agon between Aeschylus and Euripides, that we realize what a shrewd literary judge Dionysus is. He justifies his myth-historical role, as the founding spirit of the tragic genre, by penetrating the differences between Aeschylus and Euripides.

'Literal minded.' At the end of the poetry contest, when Dionysus must choose between the two poets, Dionysus gets out a scale so that he can weigh the two writers' words, and determine which is 'weightier.' (He chooses Aeschylus).

Combative. After Dionysus has crossed the River Styx he engages in a heated slangfest with the strident frogs, who call him a 'fussy old man.'

Chicken. When Dionysus discovers the dangers of wearing a Heracles outfit—he keeps getting beat up by the foes of Heracles—he insists on trading garments with his servant Xanthias.

Judicial. Dionysus proves statesmanlike and precise when it comes to judging the competing poets. He loves his role as savior of Athens, and at the same time as judge of fine literary points.

Parallels. The judgment of Paris, which gave the fateful, and preferential nod to the beauty of Helen, was an archetype, for Aristophanes, when it came to reimagining an action which would promote the rejuvenation of the Athens that was in need of inspiration. At the same time, Aristophanes will have had, at his disposal, a wide variety of underworld descents, like those of Odysseus and Aeneas, or of Orpheus and Eurydice, with which to frame his imagining of the plot of the present play. Both the underworld descent theme and the beauty-judgment theme coalesce around the slapstick wit of Aristophanes, to constitute a single parallel to *The Frogs*.

Discussion questions

Does Dionysus' final preference for Aeschylus reflect the conservative bias of Aristophanes? Or is Aristophanes giving a true judgment on the literary merits of the two candidates? What kind of rescue mission, on behalf of Athens, is Aristophanes carrying out?

Compare the views of Euripides expressed by Dionysus in the *Thesmophoriazusae* and the *Frogs*, respectively. Is the Euripides who loses in the *Frogs* nearly as adroit and perceptive as the self-defensive dramatist Euripides, in front of the women at the Thesmophoria?

How do you explain the memorable role of the frogs themselves, in this play? Do they 'represent' something to you the reader? Do they reinforce anything about Aeschylus and Old Fashioned Values?