

Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
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The Comic Poet, The City, and the Gods: Dionysus' *Katabasis* in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes

STEVEN FORDE

University of North Texas

The *Frogs*, like all of Aristophanes' surviving plays, presents the problem of the relationship of comic poetry to the city.¹ The *Frogs* is unusual in its systematic focus on the proper relation of tragic poetry to the city as well. The play culminates in a contest in Hades between the tragic poets Aeschylus and Euripides, presided over by the god of the theater himself. In that contest, Dionysus chooses Aeschylus over Euripides for purely political or public-spirited reasons, though his original preference was strongly for Euripides. Something happens in the course of the play to cause a change of heart or mind in the god. The decisive event appears to be an education in civic virtue that Dionysus receives during the first half of the play, during his *Katabasis* or descent into Hades. Xanthias, the slave who accompanies the god during his descent, takes a leading or directing role in this education, and to that extent plays the part of Aristophanes himself.

The *Frogs* is the only surviving play of Aristophanes whose opening scene deals explicitly with the subject of comedy. Dionysus and Xanthias violate the dramatic illusion by debating what may be properly said on stage in order to make the audience laugh. Specifically, Xanthias, who is carrying Dionysus' baggage while riding on an ass, his master walking alongside, wonders what comic complaints he may make. Dionysus leaves him free to make any complaints except those habitually used by bad comic writers, such as those of gratuitous vulgarity. Whenever Dionysus is a spectator at productions using such devices, he says, he comes away older by more than a year. This may seem a strange complaint for an immortal being to make, but it does not satisfy Xanthias for another reason. He construes Dionysus' prohibition of vulgar comedy as a prohibition of comedy as such (20); he considers himself deprived of the possibility of relieving his suffering through laughter. Xanthias wonders, sensibly enough under the circumstances, why he is being forced to carry such a ponderous load of baggage if he is not to engage in any of the buffoonery which baggage-carrying slaves commonly engage in in comedy.

This essay began its life many years ago as a paper for one of Allan Bloom's graduate seminars at the University of Toronto. This version of it is dedicated to Professor Bloom's memory, as a small token of the things I learned from him, in and outside of class.

Dionysus is descending to Hades to find and retrieve his favorite dramatic poet, the recently deceased Euripides. He has disguised himself as Heracles to facilitate the task, and from what we soon learn of his plan, he foresees no change of costume or other obvious reason for bringing baggage. The baggage certainly receives no use in the course of the play except as an instrument to some of its buffoonery. Aristophanes seems to introduce the baggage only as a comic device, in the vein of the “vulgar” comedians. Moreover, we cannot fail to notice that the very lines Dionysus finds so disgusting in vulgar comedy are delivered in the opening exchange between him and Xanthias, under cover of censuring them. Aristophanes makes his spectators laugh by the use of these lines, for the most part putting them in the mouth of the god himself. Whatever the difference between Aristophanean and “vulgar” comedy may be, it is not the lack of vulgar jokes in the work of Aristophanes (see, e.g., 87–88, 221–38, 479, and of course countless passages in Aristophanes’ other plays). Aristophanean comedy, with its peculiar juxtaposition of high and low, incorporates vulgarity as one of its parts. Dionysus, whose ignorance about the standards by which to judge tragedy is one of the major themes of the *Frogs*, is revealed at the beginning of the play to be more ignorant than his slave about comedy.

Dionysus and his slave arrive at their first destination, the dwelling of Heracles. When Heracles answers the door to find the effeminate Dionysus dressed as Heracles himself, he is overcome with unquenchable laughter. The first character in the *Frogs* to laugh, Heracles laughs at the manifest boasting of Dionysus. For the second time in the play, however, Dionysus misses the joke; he has come, he says, to get advice on the easiest road to Hades. His concern with ease only reminds us of the disproportion between his disguise and his true nature. In the course of his exchange with Heracles, Dionysus is forced to explain the reason for his mission, and therewith his desperate longing for Euripides. In an attempt to make this longing intelligible to the crude and unpoetic Heracles, Dionysus resorts to an analogy to the hero’s desire for bean soup, an analogy which, however, due to its ineptness or the unrefined tastes of Heracles, fails to instruct: why should not any number of tragic poets suffice for the same purpose? Heracles is unimpressed with Euripides in particular (89–91). It is his good instinct no doubt, as well as his crudeness, that causes Heracles to express disgust at the refined and perhaps impious lines that Dionysus raves over (104). Heracles cannot believe that Dionysus does not perceive the same taint in these lines.

Having received a tolerably detailed account of the way to Hades, its terrors and delights, Dionysus and Xanthias depart. There is an abortive attempt to hire a dead man as porter, inspired by Xanthias’ reluctance to carry his master’s baggage on this journey, after which the two arrive at Charon’s lake. Dionysus is accepted for passage in Charon’s boat, but Xanthias, being a slave, is forced to walk around with the baggage. After learning where he is to wait on the other side—he seems to assume it will take Dionysus longer to cross by wa-

ter—Xanthias leaves the scene. Thus it is contrived that Dionysus crosses the lake alone with Charon; neither Xanthias nor the dead man who was just encountered travel with him. Why Aristophanes arranges things this way is not immediately clear.

The scene that follows is a brief but puzzling one (196–270). Its significance to the drama as a whole is indicated clearly enough by the fact that it features the sole appearance in the play of the chorus of frogs, the chorus that gives the play its name. Yet on its face, the scene is rather unremarkable. Dionysus and the frogs exchange words, even angry words, and engage in a rather heated contest of some sort. In itself, the scene does not seem to contribute greatly to the action of the play, and the meaning of Dionysus' interaction with the frogs is murky at best. Its significance becomes intelligible only once we recognize it as a foreshadowing or synopsis of the education Dionysus receives on his journey to Hades, an education that prepares him to judge tragic poetry as he is called to do in the second half of the play.

According to the orders of Charon at the outset of the scene, Dionysus will have to learn to row in order to cross over to Hades. For, as becomes abundantly and comically clear during this scene, Dionysus is utterly without nautical experience (203–5). This obstacle is not insurmountable, however, for Charon says that Dionysus will be taught to row by the wondrous melodies of the frogs. Thus the frogs are introduced as teachers, teachers who instruct through music. Sure enough, as soon as the two travelers leave shore, Dionysus is enabled, or driven, to row even better than he would have wished by the poetry of the chorus. He begins positively to suffer under their tutorship from blisters on his hands and posterior. Needless to say, he does not appreciate the music of the frogs. He begins instead to complain bitterly and rather vulgarly about what they are doing to him. Some of his complaints unmistakably take on the low quality he had inveighed against in the opening scene of the play (221–22, 236–41). If we are guided by the opinion Xanthias expressed there, we may conclude that Dionysus uses the language he does in order to relieve some of his pain. In any event, Dionysus seems to have learned something about comedy as well as seamanship.

But his ordeal is not yet over. The frogs begin to sing all the more vigorously when they realize how much it annoys Dionysus. They insist that other gods—they mention the Muses, Pan, and Apollo—are delighted with them, apparently on account of the music they make (229–34). Charon, we recall, promised Dionysus that the frogs' music would be delightful. Is Dionysus the only one who does not appreciate their song? In the course of their recitation, the frogs mention two different types of life they lead (241–49), one delightful in the sun and marshy waters, another on the bottom, fleeing the rain of Zeus. The second of these might remind us of the fact that one of the sights Heracles had promised Dionysus on his way to Hades was evildoers who were buried in mud and ordure as punishment for their misdeeds (145–51). Indeed, this is the

only sight promised by Heracles that Dionysus does not encounter on his journey—unless the frogs themselves, when on the bottom, fleeing Zeus’ rain, represent this group (cf. Strauss, p. 241). We note that immediately after he disembarks from Charon’s boat, Dionysus does claim to have seen the criminals of whom Heracles had spoken (274–77), though he has in fact encountered none but the frogs.

The best-known part of the frogs’ music, though, is not their description of the life, or lives, they lead, but their onomatopoeic refrain, *Brekekekex, koax, koax*. This refrain seems, and is usually taken to be, nothing but onomatopoea—syllables strung together with no sense of their own. But there is reason to think the chant is more than that. Elements of the frogs’ refrain bear a striking resemblance to words that have a wider resonance in the play. George Elderkin has proposed a significant interpretation of the frogs’ chant based on these resonances.² The Greek listener, he maintains, would associate *brekekekex* with the verb *brechesthai*, “to get wet, be rained upon.” *Koax*, meanwhile, would remind him of *koas*, “fleece,” which in turn suggests “cloud” (cf. *Clouds* 343). Furthermore, the fleece was associated in the Eleusinian mysteries with a cult of Zeus, and the *Frogs* is permeated, as Elderkin shows, with references to Eleusinian ritual (*kodarion*, a diminutive of *koas*, is mentioned later by Aeschylus as a word he could use to destroy Euripides’ prologues: 1203). Putting these elements together, then, Elderkin deciphers the frogs’ refrain to read, “Rain, rain, cloud (of Zeus).”

The harmony between this and what the frogs say about fleeing to the bottom to escape the rain of Zeus is obvious. And if the frogs’ flight to the bottom represents the punishment of the wicked in the mud and ordure of Hades, then the rain of Zeus, and the frogs’ mysterious chant, refer to the punishment of evildoers meted out by the gods. Thus the frogs’ refrain becomes significant indeed and lends significance to the scene between them and Dionysus as a whole. The scene develops into a contest between Dionysus and the frogs, revolving around this very refrain. As the frogs call the refrain ever louder, Dionysus, growing ever more vexed, tries to retaliate. Eventually, he threatens to take the refrain from them, to which the frogs reply that they will then suffer terribly (252–53). After a few more shrill exchanges, Dionysus finally makes good on his threat. He bellows out the refrain of the frogs (267–68), whereupon they immediately fall silent, and Charon’s boat reaches shore.

Dionysus’ brief trip in Charon’s boat has given him the beginnings of an education in some very important matters. He has learned something about comedy, he has learned the quintessential Athenian art of rowing—and he has learned the refrain of the frogs. In the case of the frogs’ refrain, it is important that he has not merely learned it, but appropriated it from them. Only by taking their refrain, only by screaming it in anger (264–68), does he silence the frogs—causing them pain, sending them to the bottom—and free himself from torment. This is the key lesson he learns from the frogs, a lesson in exercising

the divine power to punish the wicked in Hades. This is the divine prerogative *par excellence*, but it is not simply a prerogative. It is a necessary function of gods from the point of view of the city or of political life. It is in some sense the source of gods or of the need for gods. To Dionysus' ear, which has been corrupted by the softness of Euripides, the frogs' refrain seems jarring and unpleasant, despite the fact that other gods delight in it. The most important lesson Dionysus takes from his encounter with the frogs is to overcome his distaste for this refrain. In the final analysis, we might say, this is a patriotic or political lesson. In the context of Athenian politics at least, it is not at all surprising that this should be coupled with a lesson in rowing or seamanship.

Upon reaching the other side, Dionysus encounters Xanthias once more. Xanthias' original estimation of the relative lengths of time it would take him and Dionysus to get to the other shore proves to be not far off. Still, he does not come back on stage until the frogs have been silenced and Dionysus has disembarked. The frogs themselves do not vanish, if the scholiast is correct in asserting that they were never visible to the audience in the first place.³ In that case, a spectator might be forgiven for concluding that Xanthias, when he left the scene to go around the lake, joined the chorus of the frogs for their part in the play. At any rate, when Dionysus asks him to characterize the regions he has traveled through, Xanthias simply replies, "darkness and mud" (273). He also insinuates that he has seen the archcriminals that Dionysus here claims to have seen as well (274–75). Moreover, an ancient stage direction identifies the first utterance of Xanthias when he reappears, a mysterious salutation of some sort, as an imitation of a reed pipe, something alluded to by the frogs as one of their musical contributions to the gods (see note 3). If these indications collectively point where they seem to, Aristophanes is suggesting a close association between Xanthias and the chorus of the frogs. Such an association would give Xanthias a leading role in the education of Dionysus.

This suggestion is greatly strengthened by what follows. As soon as Dionysus and he are alone, Xanthias reminds the god of terrible monsters that Heracles said would appear at this stage of their journey. Dionysus boasts that he would love to come across one, to experience an adventure worthy of his journey. Immediately, Xanthias claims to see such a monster, causing Dionysus to be overcome with terror (285–305). But the monster is clearly a fabrication: Xanthias is testing Dionysus' mettle, while contributing of course to the comedy of the play. Thus Xanthias openly plays the part of the poet, and acts as though it were part of his task to cure Dionysus of his boasting. In his fright, the god seems ready even to foresake his divine identity in order to escape danger (298–300). In a parallel gesture, he breaks the dramatic illusion by calling upon the priest of the theater to save him (297). After Xanthias tells him that the monster is gone, Dionysus is free to wonder what god is the source of his miseries: Xanthias, by sarcastically reciting some phrases of Euripides, suggests in effect that it is his love of Euripides.⁴

Having braved all the terrors of Hades that Heracles had warned of—some if not all of which have turned out to be poetic inventions—Dionysus and Xanthias encounter the chorus of blessed initiates that Heracles had foretold as well. This chorus gives the audience a heavy dose of political instruction. This of course is far from unusual in Aristophanean comedy; what is somewhat unusual is this chorus's emphasis on the virtues of war (362–65), along with its failure to praise or plead for peace. The chorus does elsewhere express a desire for peace, but only in the briefest and most muted way (714–16, 1530–31). In fact, we could generalize about the chorus in this play by saying that it follows an unswervingly patriotic line, part of which is a solicitude for the Athenian war effort. We can find in this an echo of the teaching of the frogs, most obviously their lesson in seamanship. This was the sole lesson Charon promised the frogs would teach (or perhaps the only one he thought Dionysus/Heracles lacked; 203–7). The chorus of blessed initiates, the official chorus of the play, resembles the chorus of frogs in this and other ways. Overall, the almost complete lack of distance between this chorus's perspective and the patriotic Athenian perspective distinguishes it from other Aristophanean choruses.⁵

Xanthias and Dionysus arrive at Pluto's palace. Reminded by Xanthias of his disguise as Heracles, Dionysus knocks peremptorily at the door and announces himself to the slave Aeacus as "Heracles the mighty" (464). What follows is essentially a repetition of the encounter with the imaginary monster a moment before: Dionysus' manifest boast brings down on his head the famed terrors of Hades, which quickly reveal the god to be anything but Heracleian in his valor. Moreover, the terrors summoned seem once again to be simple poetic creations; at any rate Aeacus, who leaves with the express intention of setting all those terrors in motion, returns somewhat later with only a few of the palace guard. Aeacus, the only slave in the *Frogs* aside from Xanthias, plays what looks surprisingly like a poetic and didactic role as well, for terrifying Dionysus seems to serve an educative, as well as a comic, purpose. The two slaves certainly come to share a very close and curious rapport.

Xanthias now ridicules Dionysus openly as the most cowardly of gods and men. Dionysus naturally asks whether Xanthias was then not in fear of Aeacus' threats. Xanthias replies that he gave them not a thought. His sang-froid might be explained by his knowledge as poet of what is behind the threats of Hades and what is not. At any rate, when Dionysus then proposes that they change roles, since Xanthias is so valorous, Xanthias immediately agrees. Thus for the second time Dionysus forswears his divine identity in order to escape danger. But the exchange of roles does not last long. With a swiftness that makes one feel the presence of the comic poet Aristophanes, a servant appears to invite the supposed Heracles in to a lavish feast prepared by Persephone. This is enough to entice Dionysus into taking back the skin and club of Heracles and into speaking of how ridiculous the original switch was (542–48). But his resumption of the role of Heracles, which represents of course the resumption of his

boast, is tested with a swiftness that once more belies the presence of Aristophanes. Two women enter and accuse Heracles/Dionysus of thievery and violence on his previous trip to Hades. The god is quickly reduced once more to entreating Xanthias to don the costume of Heracles. He says he wouldn't blame Xanthias for beating him for taking back the costume, and offers the most solemn oath that he will never reclaim it. Xanthias accepts the oath, in full knowledge that Dionysus will not keep it if the situation changes again (599–601). He doesn't give Dionysus that opportunity, however, and at the same time effectively takes up the god's offer to submit to a beating. When Aeacus reappears with the palace guard, Xanthias offers his "slave" Dionysus for torture by Aeacus. This proposal is introduced purportedly to demonstrate the truth of Xanthias/Heracles' statement that he has never been to Hades before nor committed any thievery there. In fact, the beating that ensues performs a much more serious function.

When faced with the prospect of a whipping, Dionysus protests that he is a god, whom Aeacus dare not beat. But this time Dionysus is not allowed to reclaim his divine identity so easily. Xanthias uses Dionysus' protest to transform the issue from the truth of Xanthias/Heracles' statement to the truth of Dionysus' claim to divinity, which Xanthias maintains can also be established by whipping the god. The highly comical whipping contest that ensues—for Xanthias, in support of his claim to be Heracles, must offer himself to be beaten too—proceeds from the premise, advanced by Xanthias, that gods do not feel pain. Yet he is in a better position than anyone to know the falsehood of this premise, at least in the case of Dionysus. He certainly knows that he himself is not a god and would be unmasked by the contest if it bore out the premise. It is doubtful that Aeacus is any more taken in by the conceit: he betrays a conviction that Xanthias is human by addressing him as *gennadas aner* immediately before the contest begins (640). It almost looks as though Xanthias and Aeacus are conspiring to torture the god. We note that Dionysus receives more blows—and, it seems, more painful ones—than Xanthias does. And it is somewhat suspicious that, when Aeacus finally proposes the recognition test as a substitute for the whipping contest (Dionysus accepts the substitution unhesitatingly, while complaining that it should have been thought of earlier) he does so in terms that suggest he was mindful of this possibility all along (669–71). The premise of the recognition test is that Pluto and Persephone, being gods, will be able to distinguish who is a god and who is not. While this test is being carried on inside, the parabasis of the play takes place.

The contest between the two tragedians, Aeschylus and Euripides, occupies the second half of the play. The two poets hurl many stylistic criticisms at each other, but the contest between them is ultimately decided not on the basis of style or form, but of content or teaching. In this respect it reminds us of the implicit contest between Aristophanes and the vulgar comedians at the opening of the play. There, Dionysus was concerned primarily with style, but at the end

of the play he makes content the basis of his decision between Aeschylus and Euripides. He chooses the former for his political virtues, despite the fact that he originally intended to retrieve the latter. The education that prepares Dionysus to make this choice culminates in the recognition test for divinity. That culmination is hidden from us, the audience, by the parabasis of the play, and hidden for political reasons.

When the two slaves emerge after the recognition test, Aeacus is evidently convinced that Dionysus, whose divinity has supposedly just been certified, is a man. At any rate, he refers to him in the same words that revealed his knowledge that Xanthias was a man before the whipping contest (*gennadas aner*, 738). We note that Aeacus confines himself to saying that the recognition test has established who is the master and who the slave, not that either one of them is divine. This being the case, the slaves can certainly have no good reason to believe that Pluto is more than a man, just as Persephone must be a woman; and so with all the rest of the gods. Yet this knowledge does not prevent the two slaves from swearing by Zeus in public or before the spectators. Rather, oaths are multiplied—with such significant variations of epithet as “Zeus the Preserver” (738) and “Zeus the God of Kinship” (750)—in their short conversation before the commencement of the poetic contest. This is in spite of the fact that the two agree that their greatest pleasure as slaves consists in giving away their masters’ secrets (752–53). The slaves act on the principle, later propounded by Aeschylus (1050–56), that a poet should not always say what he knows. Aristophanes sufficiently demonstrates his commitment to this principle by concealing the recognition test from the audience. Xanthias and Aeacus make clear they are both firm supporters of Aeschylus or, by their own classification, they are among the good (771–83). As such, they are opposed to the mob of parricides and other evildoers who form Euripides’ constituency in Hades (771–83)—the same group Heracles spoke of as languishing in mud and ordure. We recall that according to Heracles this group included followers of bad poets (145–53).

Dionysus’ position as a god is clearly much more precarious than he had thought. Here, it depends upon the good will—or the wisdom—of the poets Xanthias and Aeacus. It depends upon social-poetical convention, or it is in essence a “social position” (Strauss, p. 245). Not only does it depend upon agreement among the gods—this is what Dionysus will have learned from the recognition test (Strauss, p. 258)—but upon convention among men, convention supported if not established by poetry. From this point of view we can perceive why Dionysus’ love of Euripides, a poet who denied the Athenian gods (889–94), constituted in fact a great boast: it implied the belief that he could survive as a god in spite of Euripides’ denigration of convention, in particular the conventions surrounding the gods. This is not to deny, of course, that there was a corresponding boast on Euripides’ part.

We can see in retrospect that all the elements of the education Dionysus has

received during his descent to Hades have been directed to making him aware of the precarious nature of his position and of what he must do to preserve it. During the descent, Dionysus has shown an alarming readiness to shed his guise as a god, under the influence of his cowardice and general softness. Xanthias and Aristophanes have had to thwart Dionysus in this, to demonstrate to him the gravity of his actions, and finally to instruct him concerning his duties as a god. The whipping contest represents the culmination of this part of his education. By its very institution, the contest showed Dionysus how easily his divinity could be called into question. The whipping itself, based on the questioning of his divine status, is thus the comic equivalent of Dionysus' annihilation as a god. The contest gave Dionysus some sense of the painful consequences of his behavior, and some insight into his dependency on convention and hence on (the right kind of) poetry. From here it is a rather short step to the condemnation of Euripides which concludes the play, to the realization that a god's love for Euripidean tragedy is dangerous—indeed self-contradictory. It is for this reason appropriate that the *Frogs* presents successively a whipping contest and a music contest (cf. Strauss, p. 249). This succession was foreshadowed in Dionysus' contest with the chorus of frogs. Just as Dionysus' love for Euripides leads by an inexorable logic to his being whipped—his condemnation of Euripides being the precondition of his escaping that pain—Dionysus had to appropriate the frogs' chant, or learn to condemn the wicked, in order to escape the torment the frogs inflicted on him.

The love of Euripides is not the only defect Dionysus must overcome. That love is a mere symptom of deeper defects in his understanding, defects exemplified in his encounter with the frogs. The pervasive softness that made him such a likely follower of Euripides, and such an imposter in his disguise as Heracles, prevented him from recognizing, or performing, his duty as a dispenser of justice in general. What we learn from the *Frogs* is that gods, whose very being is grounded in social convention, cannot decline to perform this function, for which the political community relies on them. In effect, the gods' punishment of injustice is a precondition of their existence. In the words of the frogs, Dionysus must dispense the "rain of Zeus," a task that requires Aeschylean hardness. Thus again the boast embodied in Dionysus' love of Euripides: it amounted to a claim that he could exist as a god in spite of the city and the city's needs.

We can see now that Aristophanes' decision to make Dionysus descend to Hades in the costume of Heracles—despite the fact that the disguise turns out to be unnecessary for the journey (cf. Strauss, p. 242)—was far from coincidental. The disguise caused Dionysus much suffering and of course was indispensable to much of the comedy of the play. But we, and Dionysus, learn through it that the harshness and prowess of Heracles, despite his crudeness if not vulgarity, provide a better guide to politically salutary poetry than does the effeminacy of Dionysus. Comically stated, the tastes of the city and of the

city's gods in poetry must always bear a certain resemblance to the taste for bean soup. Poetry can fulfill the highest desires of men only after the basic needs of the city, which is its precondition, have been fulfilled (cf. 376). Heracles, as portrayed in the *Frogs*, is closer to those needs. Dionysus' education in the first half of the play consists largely in his learning not to abandon his Heracleian disguise, and then to live up to it. This does not change the fact of course that it *is* a disguise, and that Dionysus' use of it is a laughable boast. But it is a boast that Dionysus, like all gods, must make. We learn in the course of the *Frogs* that much of the reputation of Heracles himself rests on his own false reports of how great the terrors of Hades are, not to mention his silence (and the poets' silence) about the skulduggery he was guilty of on his own journey there. Dionysus' boast was simply his belief that he needed not make this boast; but that was the greatest boast that can be imagined (cf. Strauss, p. 143).

The whipping contest to which Dionysus was subjected along with Xanthias taught him the necessity of Heracleian hardness, or rather, the facade of such hardness. The premise of that contest was Xanthias' claim that a god will not feel pain, a claim he knew was false. Dionysus, forced by Xanthias to make that claim, is taught by Xanthias as well to conceal the pain he feels, for the sake of his reputation or social position. A god who is thoroughly soft cannot preside over an Aeschylean drama any more than he can over an Aeschylean city. And given the enigmatic exclusion of Sophocles from any serious role in the *Frogs*, Aeschylus is the only poet presented as such who is compatible with the city at all. However much Dionysus may suffer from the Aristophanean education he receives in the *Frogs*, it is nothing compared to the harshness of the education Aeschylean drama would have given him. The punishments and labors characteristic of that drama are so great as to cause Dionysus pain simply upon hearing them spoken of (1264–80). The phenomenal anger of Aeschylus is highlighted during the second half of the play; among other things, he is compared to a raging rainstorm (e.g., 851–55). Relatively speaking, the descent into Hades that Aristophanes prepares for Dionysus is a journey without tribulation (cf. 401), and it is only the softness or ignorance of the god that leads him to the opposite conclusion. Thanks to the use of comic equivalents and the toil-assuaging character of comedy in general, Aristophanes can teach the god, and the city, Aeschylean lessons with at least some of the softness of Euripides.

Still, the *Frogs* is a play in which Aristophanes embraces the Aeschylean/Heracleian pole of poetry as his own, out of public-spiritedness. This is seen in the lessons of the chorus of frogs, as well as the main chorus's close alignment with the Athenian patriotic perspective and the virtues Athens needs in war. In the parabasis the chorus recommends that all who are willing to fight on the Athenian side at sea should be accepted as citizens; in particular they commend the Athenians' enfranchisement of the slaves who showed their valor at the

recent battle of Arginusae (694–702). Given the peculiar role of the two slaves who appear in the *Frogs*, one might interpret this as a call for the enfranchisement of the comic poet, were it not for the fact that Xanthias at any rate did not participate in the battle of Arginusae, as he informs us more than once (33, 190–93). Given that fact, the exhortation of the chorus serves only to remind us that the comic poet is not simply a patriotic man in the sense understood by the city. What the *Frogs* teaches instead is that the comic poet is under a necessity to teach a kind of “Aeschylean” patriotism despite the fact that he may not share this patriotism. In fact, his ambivalence may be instrumental to his role as educator: it appears in the *Frogs* that if Xanthias had fought in the battle of Arginusae, he would not be playing the role that he does (33–34, 190–93).

There is an inevitable tension between the convictions or predispositions of the comic poet and his duty to the city. This is the tension the slaves Xanthias and Aeacus must feel when they swear by Zeus despite their knowledge of the real status of the gods, foresaking the great pleasure they would receive from revealing their secret. More politically wise than Socrates or Euripides, however, they reveal their knowledge to few among the spectators. They accordingly escape the punishment those two sophists suffer at the conclusion of two Aristophanean comedies. Nonetheless, for the comic poet, the tastes of Hercules and the kind of poetry that does no more than fulfill the political requirements of the city, are quite unsatisfying. The primary theme of the *Frogs* dictates that it revolve substantially around the lowest function of comic poetry (cf. *Wasps* 1030). It shows the activity of the comic poet insofar as he is a slave to the city and to the gods, just as it shows the gods as slaves to the city in turn (cf. 756). This is sufficient to explain both the reluctance of Xanthias to follow his master to Hades (33–34, 167–68) and his willingness to do so if required (169). It should not surprise us that Xanthias, despite his pivotal role in this play, disappears as soon as his minimum task is accomplished, leaving Dionysus on his own for the second half; nor that Aristophanes should decline to make Xanthias, or anyone else in the *Frogs* for that matter, his explicit spokesman. In contrast to two other Aristophanean plays where the comic poet appears as a character—the *Acharnians*, where the poet turns his back on the city but does not cross the gods, and the *Peace*, where he acts against the gods but with the city (see Strauss, p. 158, and also the *Birds*)—in the *Frogs*, Aristophanes is acting in harmony with both the city and the gods. Consequently, his *ennui* is greatest. Here alone his object is not peace, but valor in war. Since Socrates turned his back on both gods and city, or at least was not a slave of either, we may say that the *Frogs* shows most clearly Aristophanes’ envy of Socrates (cf. Strauss, p. 5).

It is characteristic of the *Frogs* that the standard by which it judges poetry is the useful (cf. 783). Aeschylus is victorious in the poets’ contest because of the application of that standard, which he is the first to propose openly (1035,

1056). The chorus of the play claims, as does Praxagora, that it is teaching the useful things (686–67; *Ecclesiazusae* 584). This is in contrast to other Aristophanean choruses who claim to teach what is just. The *Frogs* cannot claim to teach the just things pure and simple because it does not do justice to the comic poet. There is a higher sort of justice, of which the justice of the city is perhaps a part, that always prefers Aphrodite and Peace, and that is hinted at in the name “Dikaiopolis.” To say nothing of the many indications in the second half of the *Frogs* that this justice is closer in some ways to Euripides than to Aeschylus, the example of Dikaiopolis is enough to show the real kinship that exists between Euripides and the private pleasures and motivations of Aristophanes himself.

Xanthias respects the social position of Dionysus and the gods because it is his duty to teach what is useful; that is the precondition of every other sort of teaching. His failure to do so could only lead to his own demise. He could indeed depose Dionysus and the Olympian gods, but only if he were to take all the trouble that Pisthetairos does in the *Birds*, which is very little in the character of a comic poet. And even if he were to take such pains, found his own city so to speak, he would be under the same obligation to teach the useful, in another but essentially similar form. In the *Frogs*, the comic poet prefers to remain frankly a slave of the existing order.

NOTES

1. This essay rests on the general understanding of Aristophanes' plays found in Leo Strauss's seminal study, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Midway Reprint ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For the sake of brevity, I shall occasionally rely on Strauss's interpretations of plays other than the *Frogs* without elaborating them. Numbers in the text in parentheses refer to lines in the play.

2. George Elderkin, *Mystic Allusions in the Frogs of Aristophanes* (Princeton: Princeton University Store, 1955), p. 17.

3. The scholiast is cited in the Bohn's Classical Library edition of *The Frogs*, trans. William James Hickie (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), vol. 2, p. 539. As a matter of staging, it would have been inappropriate to present the chorus to the audience before it appeared in its proper guise, as the chorus of initiates.

4. 311. I follow the reading of the Oxford Greek text in assigning this line to Xanthias; others give it to Dionysus. The line makes much greater sense in the mouth of Xanthias.

5. The Athenians seem to have appreciated this feature of the *Frogs*. The play received the apparently unprecedented honor of being staged a second time, owing to the patriotism of its chorus (“Introduction,” Loeb edition of the *Frogs*, pp. 293–94 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press]. Cf. also “The Argument,” preceding the Bohn edition, p. 20). Aristophanes' choice of such a patriotic approach, and the Athenians' enthusiastic response to it, might be explained by the precarious position of Athens at this time in her war with Sparta, and the most welcome victory the city had just enjoyed at Arginusae.