

An unusual slave on the Greek comic stage: Xanthias as a ‘trickster slave’ in Aristophanes’
Frogs

In Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, Xanthias (the slave of Dionysus) is a character who, despite his short time on stage, demonstrates unusual theatrical cleverness that sets him apart from previous Aristophanic slaves. Dover (1993), Walin (2009), and Griffith (2013), argue for Xanthias’ “new kind of slave-role” (Sells 2013: 92), but do not further explore the components of the slave’s exceptionality. Building upon the research of these scholars, in this paper I argue that Xanthias’ theatrical dexterity and self-consciousness turn him into a ‘trickster slave’ unparalleled elsewhere in Aristophanic comedy. Aristophanes represents Dionysus as a foolish character, and this allows Xanthias to act in ways that overturn the typical master-slave relationship. Through his metatheatrical features, Xanthias functions as an anti-Dionysus and reminds his master/god of his appropriate role(s).

First, I suggest that Xanthias establishes his theatrical cleverness and sets up the metatheatricality of his character. In the prologue of the play, he demonstrates theatrical self-consciousness by showing an awareness of previous jokes and their effects, acknowledging the presence of an audience, and recognizing the type of jokes that elicit laughter (ll.1-2). When being ignored by Heracles and Dionysus, Xanthias complains about the frustration of the expectations regarding his onstage role, seeks an active role as an interlocutor in the conversation, and through personal deixis, he accentuates his theatrical “I” (περὶ ἐμοῦ δ’ οὐδεὶς λόγος / ἐπιτριβομένου τὸν ὄμιον οὕτωσι σφόδρα, 87-88). Finally, Dionysus acknowledges the dynamics of his slave’s role when he turns a pejorative form of address (πανούργος) into a compliment meaning “the one working at everything” (Stanford 1958: 74 *ad* 35), and validates

Xanthias' craftiness (κατάβα πανοῦργε..., l.35) by underlying his beneficiary bravery (χρηστὸς εἶ καὶ γεννάδας, l.179).

Second, I claim that Xanthias employs his metatheatrical persona and brags about his theatrical dexterity. While scolding Dionysus' cowardice, Xanthias assumes the role of his master's theatrical teacher and director (διδάσκαλος). In showing off his onstage prominence, he invites Dionysus to recall the dynamics of the props, commenting at the same time on parendysia and 'role-playing-within-the-role' technique (οὐ μὴ διατρίψεις, ἀλλὰ γεύσει τῆς θύρας,/ καθ' Ἡρακλέα τὸ σχῆμα καὶ τὸ λῆμ' ἔχων, ll.462-463). With an "effortless competence" (Lada-Richards 1997: 171; Lape 2013: 84) in role-playing-within-the-role, Xanthias takes on Heracles' disguise, and introduces himself as "Heracles-Xanthias". Proud of his meta-identity, he directs both Dionysus' and the audience's gaze towards himself, inviting them to pay special attention to the visible outcome of the role reversal (καὶ βλέψον εἰς τὸν Ἡρακλειοξανθίαν, / εἰ δειλὸς ἔσομαι καὶ κατὰ σὲ τὸ λῆμ' ἔχων, ll.499-500). Threatened by Pluto's doorman, Xanthias showcases his skillfulness in manipulating onstage roles and identities, and suggests that the doorman should torture the slave-Dionysus (*basanos*, ll.612-628). Being aware of the Athenian laws, Xanthias entraps Dionysus in a punishment intended for slaves.

In the "upperworld" scenes, Xanthias introduces his theatrical dexterity, while in the "underworld" scenes, he exploits and revels in the metatheatrical dynamics of his character. Building upon Dionysus' foolishness, Xanthias shows such theatrical dexterity that he proves to be a 'trickster slave'.

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