

Aristophanic Political Dissent in *Frogs* 686-705

In the *Hypotheses* that come down with the manuscript tradition of Aristophanes, we learn that the *Frogs* was a big hit. Not only did it win the top awards at the Lenaeae Festival of 405 BCE, but it received a second command performance. “The play was a source of wonder,” one *Hypothesis* records, “on account of the parabasis in it.”¹ In studies of the *Frogs*, the parabasis (vv. 686-737) does not attract the same level of attention that helped to endear the comedy to the audience.² I attempt to read the epirrhema, the opening sally of the parabasis (vv. 686-705) within its political context and argue that it functions as a piece of political dissent that *prima facie* was not necessarily destined for success.

As with other Aristophanic parabases, the epirrhema of the *Frogs* departs from the main dramatic action. The choryphaios offers criticism of recent Athenian policy surrounding the Battle of Arginusae (406) and the aftermath of the short-lived oligarchic regime of 411. Thomas Hubbard is characteristic of scholarship when he summarizes the message of the parabasis as follows: “the chorus urges a restoration of full political rights to all former supporters of the oligarchic revolution of 411.”³ This summary, however, misrepresents Aristophanes’ rhetorical strategy. His choryphaios does not refer to the revolution of oligarchs by names, nor does he directly advocate for the restoration of civic rights. The choryphaios appeals with a mixture of allusions, euphemisms, and inside jokes. The choryphaios further establishes solidarity with the

¹ Translations my own unless otherwise noted.

² Consider the commentaries by Kenneth Dover (Oxford 1993) and Alan Sommerstein (Oxford 1997); they

³ Hubbard, Thomas K. *The Mask of Comedy: Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. 207.

audience by deploying the first person plural that makes a distinction between the “real” and “counterfeit” Athenians.⁴ The epirrhema indeed argues for a course of action, but with caution.⁵

Aristophanes’ rhetorical strategy shows that he is treading lightly with a topic as controversial as the disenfranchisement of allies of the oligarchic coup of 411. This rhetorical strategy shows evidence of Aristophanes’ participation in what Josiah Ober has called the “Athenian critical community.”⁶ Unlike other members of the critical community whose works reached a more limited audience, Aristophanes’ works were addressed to a broad swath of the *dēmos*, where anti-democratic elite opinion would meet less sympathetic audiences than in the homes of elite writers. The parabasis of the *Frogs* speaks to a critic employing his comic toolkit. While it is clear with the hindsight of the *Hypothesis* that the parabasis struck a chord with the audience, my close reading of the parabasis’ epirrhema shows that Aristophanes was prepared to face an audience suspicious of re-enfranchising those associated with the oligarchic coup. The parabasis is a testament to Aristophanes’ poetic and political communication in a moment of acute crisis for the city.

Works Cited

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⁴ This opposition between real and counterfeit motivates the antepirrhema (vv. 719-737).

⁵ Were it not for the choryphaios’ allusion to the “the underhanded moves of Phrynichus” (Φρυνίχου παλαίμασιν 694), there would not be a direct link to the actors in the 411 coup. The reference to Phrynichus (whose oligarchic fervor Thucydides described in 8.68) confused scholiasts to the *Frogs*. Such scholiasts thought the reference was to the tragedian Phrynichus’ *Antaeus*.

⁶ Ober, Josiah. *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. 46.

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