

## Literary and Political Criticism in Aristophanes' *Frogs*

Aristophanes claims to teach his audience something in many of his extant plays. In *Frogs*, Dionysus searches for a poet who can teach *ta dikaia*, indicating that the genre's patron deity sees drama as a didactic form of literature that has the potential to teach an audience what is right. A number of scholars have read Aristophanes' insistence on education as indicative of a latent political theory lurking beneath his comedies (Slater 1989, 2002; Halliwell 1980, 1991). However, Aristophanes satirizes both democratic and oligarchic politicians, as well as poets, artists, philosophers and other highly visible contemporary personalities, and thus it seems difficult to prove that he is pushing a single unified political theory (Sommerstein 1986, 1996).

In *Frogs*, Aeschylus claims that children have a teacher to educate them, while young men have the poets, and Euripides seems to agree. The focus of the *agon* between the two tragedians shifts from its initial interest in poetic techniques and method to become in essence a contest between teachers, since Aeschylus and Euripides each claim that their own dramatic executions are more useful to the city.

In this paper, I discuss parody as one important way of exposing the techniques of literary language and thus as a teaching method of sorts for the Athenian *demos*. While *Frogs* is often considered Aristophanes' most overtly political play because of its *parabasis* in which he directly asks for the pardon of the overthrown oligarchs and Dionysus' final question addressed to the two tragedians about the recall of Alcibiades, this play could also be described as the most "literary" of his plays, as it is so focused on depicting and understanding literary styles and poetic techniques. In fact, Aristophanes' political advice takes the form of literary criticism in that Dionysus finally chooses the poet who can save the city, and thus Aristophanes foregrounds the relationship between political thought and poetry. In his earlier plays containing war plots, Aristophanes marks out potential saviors of Athens who are able to terminate the war and bring peace to Athens. In *Acharnians*, it is the simple-minded farmers of Acharnia, in *Lysistrata*, it is the cunning women of Athens and Sparta, but in *Frogs*, arguably the last and most serious of his "war dramas," Aristophanes gives this role unambiguously to the playwrights—here, Ezra Pound's emendation to Shelly is realized and poets are acknowledged as the legislators of the world. In this paper, I examine in detail the *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides and the connotations and nuances of the critical language Aristophanes uses to argue that Aristophanes' parody of the two tragic styles is a cogent criticism of contemporary literary methods and approaches. Since the contest begins as one concerned with style, but ends as one concerned with education and ethical matters, I also propose a connection between poetic style and political didacticism.

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