

## Frog Chorus as Means of Return

Greek dramas possess many different kinds of choruses, among them are humans, inanimate things found in nature, and animals. Appearing for only 58 lines, a frog chorus precedes the main chorus of initiates in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Scholars have debated the purpose of this shorter frog chorus for years without reaching any suitable conclusion. This paper contends, however, that Aristophanes' chorus mirrors a current Greek belief that frogs annually descended to the underworld in winter and back to the upper world in summer.

The Greek word *katabasis* refers to a mythological journey, normally performed by a god or hero, to the underworld. Examples of a *katabasis* are prevalent in Greek and Roman literature, e.g. Heracles, Odysseus, Theseus, Persephone, and Aeneas (Griffiths, "Cerberus," *OCD3* 2003: 312; *Od.* 11; Athenagoras *Apologetica* 557a; *Hom. Hymn Dem.*; *Aen.* 6). Common characteristics of these journeys include the need for a means by which the god or hero can cross into Hades and the fact that he/she descends in order to obtain some sort of boon for the living (Lada-Richards 1999: 53). In the *Frogs* Dionysus performs a similar *katabasis*. Declaring his intent to retrieve Euripides from the underworld, Dionysus effectively seeks a boon for the Athenian people. The means by which he will successfully complete his journey, moreover, lies in the frog chorus itself.

Frogs yearly go through a cycle of life and death; alive, they live in the upperworld, seemingly dead, while hibernating, they live in the underworld. Although modern people understand the process of hibernation, ancient people thought that frogs melted into the earth, essentially non-existent and dead (Plin. *HN* 9.74.159). This paper argues that *Frogs* exemplifies this belief.

Crossing the lake of Charon, the ferryman who takes dead souls into Hades, Dionysus undergoes ritual death and initiation (Lada-Richards 1999: 58-60). Encountering the frog chorus in Charon's lake, Dionysus begins a ritualized struggle with the frogs. Such struggles were prevalent in ancient Greek cult initiation (Burkert 1985: 286). These events coincide for a reason. While his old self dies, Dionysus undergoes initiation into the frog chorus. This initiation becomes his means of successfully returning to the upperworld.

Looking at the frog chorus in this manner, this paper demonstrates that the ancient Greeks regarded frogs as creatures which journeyed between two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead.