

A Goat Amidst Frogs: The Pharmakos Complex in Aristophanes

On three separate occasions throughout his extant poetry, Aristophanes uses a peculiar comedic insult: *pharmakos* (*Frogs* 734, *Knights* 1406, fr. 634 K). The term, which is attested for a number of related rituals throughout the Greek-speaking world, refers to a human scapegoat who is cast out of a community to provide ritual purification. The evidence for this particular set of rituals is relatively sparse, and these three instances make Aristophanes one of the classical authors who refers to it most frequently. Given Aristophanes' role as an author who, through the relative amnesty of the comic theater, examines critically many aspects of Athenian society, including religion, his references to the *pharmakos* have the potential to illuminate the fifth-century Athenian perception of this set of rituals in a way that those of most other authors cannot. Given the prevalence of thematic ritual elements in Aristophanes, some scholars (e.g. Adrados 1979: 96-97) note the abuse suffered by Aristophanes' characters and are inclined to see the author as using the *pharmakos* as a recurring theme. I suggest that Aristophanes does this in his *Frogs*. It is my hope that this study will provide new insight into our understanding of the Athenian perception of one of the most peculiar and, in my opinion, fascinating rituals in the Greek world.

Such an endeavor inevitably raises questions of methodology. Larry J. Bennett and Wm. Blake Tyrrell discuss the *Knights* in terms of what they call the "*pharmakos* complex". The term refers not only to the specific elements present in the rituals themselves, as they are attested in various locales, but also to the set of tropes which an author can employ to identify the protagonist in a narrative as a *pharmakos*, as the anonymous author of the *Vita Aesopi* does in the final chapters of his work (Wiechers 1961). Todd Compton identifies the complex in a wide variety of biographical traditions but comes under criticism for finding it where other scholars do

not believe that it is present (Lefkowitz 2007, Elmer 2008). A quick look at Compton's staggering list of themes (2006: 358-62) does suggest that he applies his theory too broadly. Therefore, I will draw comparisons from only two sets of sources: (1) the primary sources regarding the various *pharmakos* rituals in the Greek world and (2) the literary narratives which have been securely identified as etiologies of the *pharmakos*. Among the elements within the *Frogs* which suggest that Aristophanes uses the *pharmakos* as a recurring theme are his pointed use of the word in the parabasis (733), Xanthias' forced circumambulation of the Styx (190-96), Xanthias' reaction to being accused of theft (612-17), and a reference to the odd activity of beating someone with onions (621-22).

Even a cursory glance at Greek literature or history enables one to see countless examples of people banding together against a common enemy. In any *pharmakos* ritual, hatred and scorn create solidarity: the inhabitants of a *polis* band together to exclude someone for the purpose of saving their city. The *Frogs* treats many of the political, economic, and religious issues of its day through the comical scenario of a trip to the Underworld to save Athens. Therefore, an investigation of the *pharmakos* complex should provide an interesting new lens through which to interpret the work as a whole.

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