

γόνιμος ποιητής: Class and Aristophanes' Victory in *Frogs*

Class is central to the plot of Aristophanes' *Frogs*. From the beginning, the audience witnesses the slave Xanthias outdoing and undermining his master, Dionysus; soon, Xanthias goes from enjoying marginally better treatment than the god to achieving full-fledged victory over his master. The essentiality of this slave-master relationship to the play is underscored by many of the references to political issues and dramatists of the day. Jokes about typical slave behavior in Phrynichus, Lycis, and Ameipsias' comedies in the first 15 lines are quickly followed 20 lines later by clear references to the sea battle of Arginusae. The dialogue makes clear early on that the play will consider slaves and masters in the context of the Athens of 405 BCE, where the slaves who rowed for the city at Arginusae are now citizens. By the time of the parabasis of the comedy, a section ostensibly more closely linked to the voice of the dramatist himself than other passages, the chorus' advice revolves completely around Athens' use of advisors among the *nouveaux riches*, only to transition immediately to the gods' slaves; their exchange of pleasantries and introduction of the *agōn* to come are colored by the chorus' song in a way that demands analysis.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that class factors in importantly to the extended tragic *agōn* at the play's climax; indeed, Euripides and Aeschylus repeatedly confirm the role that social position plays in appreciating dramatic works. And yet, one must not make the mistake of reading this contest, and its commentary, apart from what has come before it. Indeed, among the wide range of references that comedians can make, including politics, other dramatists, various types of wordplay, and bodily humor, references made for the sake of laughter, social change, or both, perhaps no appeal is more readily available than the text itself, or for the original audience, the production that they have been witnessing together at a festival in celebration of Dionysus, in

this case the Lenaia of early 405 BCE. Taken in this context, and by carefully distancing characters' words from Aristophanes' voice, it becomes clear that the true effect of the centrality of class to the plot of *Frogs* is to undo Dionysus' credibility by the time that he must judge between Aeschylus and Euripides. The resulting end product of the play becomes instead a celebration of the talent of Aristophanes, the living dramatist who can appeal to the elite and rabble alike better than any demagogue or tragedian, resurrect and summarily dismantle his contemporaries, and ultimately judge better than the god of drama himself.

The specifics of what constitute 'class issues' in *Frogs* should be made abundantly clear before proceeding into analysis of the text. Xanthias, as Dionysus' slave, first appears as a companion on the journey to recover Euripides. But the slave quickly becomes much more than that, and the many ways that Xanthias is privileged over his master point to a reversal of expected social norms whose full meaning is only understood by the play's end. Similarly, the battle of Arginusae, a recent victory for Athens militarily while simultaneously a devastating loss in terms of unnecessary casualties both of abandoned rowers and executed generals, is brought in twice by Xanthias as a missed opportunity to gain his freedom from slave labor. In this way, the play invites consideration of the slave's perspective from very early on, and by so doing, heightens the impact of a reading of the rest of the drama with this socially minded approach. Such a reading is rewarded by insight into the discussion of types of appeals made by Aeschylus and Euripides during their competition; the outcome of their accusations can remain somewhat theoretical in their debate before Dionysus, but in the context of a play thus far so concerned with slaves and the recent admission of slaves into the citizenry, the effect ceases to be abstract. Aristophanes proves himself capable of appealing to audiences of every class, whether it be by depicting a god undone by his servant or by putting political advice into the mouth of his chorus.

The contest between Aeschylus and Euripides is thus undermined by the meta-contest between Aristophanes and all other dramatists, rendering Dionysus' judgement exactly as meaningless as his performance in the first half of the play suggests that it would be.