

Why is the *Frogs* named the Frogs? The Vital Role of Two Choruses in Aristophanes' Comedy

Aristophanes' *Frogs* has an incredibly layered, nuanced, and in-depth approach to theater and transformation. The *Frogs* explicitly links ritual transformation through the use of its two choruses with theatrical transformation, and carries on an extensive investigation of both tragedy and comedy and how these dramatic forms and their poets transform the city and the *demos* of Athens. The two choruses in the *Frogs*, the Frogs and the Initiates, are one of the many signals to the audience that the main theme of the play is transformation, since both groups change their physical or spiritual selves during their lifetimes.

Many scholars have stumbled over why the play has two choruses and some even gloss over the fact that there are two – treating the frogs as just another character in one episode of the play (Stanford 1991, Dover 1997). Many recent readings of the play see ritual connections as the link between the two choruses (Lada-Richards 1999, Edmunds 2005); the Frogs explicitly mention the Anthesteria and the Initiates are part of the dense use of Eleusinian ritual in the play. Although this is true, the two choruses are related in a much more direct way – transformation. This relationship is the key to understanding this incredibly dense and layered text.

The Chorus of Initiates is not explicitly labeled as Eleusinian Initiates, and this has allowed some scholars to hypothesize other specific ritual connections (Segal 1961) or to see the Chorus as a general mystery religion chorus. I agree with Bowie and Graf that there are far too many Eleusinian specifics in the text to think that the Chorus of Initiates could be anything but initiates into the Mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis. Certainly, the theme of transformation would still be relevant if the chorus were initiates into another mystery religion, however, since the Mysteries at Eleusis were the largest mystery cult in the Greek world it makes sense that

Aristophanes chose them for the chorus since many people in his audience would have personal initiatory experience from their own journeys to Eleusis.

Like the two choruses, the character of Dionysus, the comedic hero of the play, is in a state of flux. Dionysus has many tiny transformations and also undergoes a play-long transformation. He begins the play as a buffoon version of himself, nothing less than one might expect in a comedy. I am certainly not the first person to see Dionysus' *katabasis* in the *Frogs* as a journey of initiation. Segal arguing against earlier critiques that the *katabasis* must have been an afterthought on Aristophanes part claimed that the *katabasis* was, in fact, the unifying factor of the play, and therefore the play was about Dionysus' own initiation (Morton 1989, Bowie 1993). David Konstan further develops this theme by demarcating three levels of the play, which constitute, "a logical arrangement imitating a ritual of initiation (291)". Lada-Richards takes this theory one step further and claims that there are also echoes of "other initiatory contexts, such as ephebic rites of passage (50)".

Although I agree with this tradition of seeing Dionysus' journey in the *Frogs* as an initiation, I think that putting too much emphasis on this aspect of the play risks missing the larger ideas that Aristophanes is presenting. Although the *katabasis* can represent an initiation, and although there are specific ritual elements from other initiatory journeys, the unifying idea of the *Frogs* is transformation; the initiation of Dionysus is one of many transformations happening in the play. This is a subtle but important distinction, if we interpret the *Frogs* as just about Dionysus' initiation we lose the amazing complexity of the poetry and plot. Using transformation as the unifying concept we can see the many layers of ritual, political, theatrical, and intertextual themes that Aristophanes has woven together and the radical claims the text is making about the vital role of comedy in Athens.

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