

## Xanthias as a Prototype of the *Servus Callidus* in Aristophanes' *Frogs*

Mark Griffith (2013) observes that the slave Xanthias in Aristophanes' *Frogs* exhibits many characteristics of the *servus callidus*-type character prevalent in later comic poets. He lists textual examples where Xanthias exhibits such traits but does not pursue the idea further. It is my intention to carry Griffith's observations further by investigating Xanthias in the *Frogs* as a prototype of the clever slave-type character, and by arguing that Aristophanes' representation of Dionysus as a fool allows Xanthias more freedom to act in ways that may not have been considered appropriate in a master-slave relationship.

The first instance in which Xanthias appears to stray from the expectations of a comic slave occurs within the first lines of the play. After asking Dionysus if he should make jokes common to slaves in comedy, we find out that Xanthias, although carrying baggage of his own, rides upon a donkey (27). Xanthias appears to be different from traditional slaves who presumably would not be carried but would be forced to walk and carry their own baggage. In addition, Xanthias' other interactions between him and his master, Dionysus, help set him apart from the representations of a typical slave. Of particular interest is the Empusa scene, where Xanthias takes advantage of Dionysus' cowardly nature in order to trick and scare him. Since Herakles warned the two of the countless wild beasts that they would find in the underworld (143), Xanthias cunningly pretends that Empusa, a monster that changes forms, is lurking near him and Dionysus (285-305). I argue that Xanthias employs this trick against his master because Aristophanes represents Dionysus as cowardly and not heroic.

Particularly illuminating is the dialogue between slaves that occurs directly before the *agon* (738-813). In this scene, Xanthias and one of Pluto's slaves talk apart from their masters. I

argue that this scene may be conceived of as a representation of how slaves would normally interact when away from figures of authority. The most important part of the dialogue for my purposes will be the first fifteen lines (738-53) in which Xanthias and the other slave discuss the joys they experience when they act in ways that do not befit a slave: cursing their master behind their back, eavesdropping on them, relaying the information to outsiders, and so on. I argue that much of what the slaves describe in their dialogue are things which Xanthias has been doing to Dionysus throughout the play, which I attribute to freedom granted by Dionysus' buffoonish behavior.

The examples above of Xanthias openly acting against his master foreshadow the actions of the *servus callidus* as suggested by Griffith. Characters of the *servus callidus* type, as Stace (1968) observes, are "agents of deception" (66) much in the way that Xanthias is throughout Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Slaves have a double function in comedy, according to Stace: they provide situations in which comedic action can take place and enact deception and trickery. In analyzing the instances in *Frogs* where Xanthias plays a major role, I argue that he fulfills both of these roles simultaneously. Xanthias' actions in the dialogue scene between him and another slave match the way he interacts with his master on a regular basis, and thus present him as a prototype of the *servus callidus*-type that is prominent in later comedy.

#### Bibliography

Dover, Kenneth J., ed. 1993. *Aristophanes: Frogs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Griffith, Mark. 2013. *Aristophanes' Frogs*. *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Stace, C. 1968. "The Slaves of Plautus." *Greece & Rome* 15: 64-77.