

## Plato's *Ion* and Aristophanes' *Frogs* in the context of contemporary literary debates

This paper explores the connection between *Ion* and Aristophanes' *Frogs*, two nearly contemporary Athenian texts concerned with literary criticism. I argue that both texts respond in different ways to contemporary literary debates concerning poetic inspiration and the criteria by which to recognize good poetry, and that, moreover, *Ion* may engage with *Frogs* directly.

There is a long-standing agreement that Aristophanes' *Frogs* does not discuss literature in a vacuum, but participates in contemporary literary debates (Grube 1968: 73; Rosen 2004: 296). Furthermore, there is a growing realization that Plato regarded Aristophanes seriously, precisely because the latter was, under his burlesque surface, interested in serious questions (Nightingale 1995: 180). It now even appears that some of Plato's dialogues refer directly to specific comedies of Aristophanes - e.g. *Gorgias* to *Knights* (Nightingale 1995: 187).

In this paper I posit such a relationship between *The Frogs* and *Ion*. I argue that *Ion* contains several intertextual hints which recall *Frogs*. To take one example, in *Ion*, Socrates recites several passages of Homer, but he often does not get the verses right (e.g. in 538c he recites two verses which are in fact a combination of three verses from the *Iliad*:  $\Lambda$  630, 639-640). Something similar happens in *Frogs* whenever one of the characters attempts to cite poetry (e.g. 101, where Dionysus erroneously cites a famous line from Euripides [*Hipp.* 612]). The cumulative effect of a significant number of such parallels would have evoked Aristophanes' *Frogs* in the mind of Plato's reader.

Furthermore, Plato refers to *The Frogs* in *Ion* in order to respond, and oppose, views on poetry endorsed in *The Frogs*, specifically in two areas:

- (1) the origins of poetic inspiration

(2) criteria for judging poetry

In terms of poetic inspiration, Murray (2006) suggests that Plato is the first to have argued that the poet entirely depends on divine inspiration and has no creative agency. However, the same question seems to have interested Aristophanes and to have actually been a matter of a running debate. Throughout *Frogs*, Aeschylus, as a divinely possessed poet, is contrasted to Euripides' cool rationalism. For example, as the contest is about to start, Aeschylus prays to Demeter (886-7), while Euripides is represented as invoking "his personal gods," actually a series of intellectualist personifications, including 'ζόνεσις' ("intelligence" [892-894]). Furthermore, Aeschylus is described as suffering from "madness" (816), while Euripides is rather "mouth-laborer, examiner of phrases" (826). *Ion* can thus be seen as stepping into a contemporary debate about the nature of poetic composition, reflected in Aeschylus' and Euripides' approaches to their art in *Frogs*. Indeed, in the passage of *Ion* where Socrates most forcefully argues for the divine inspiration of poets, there are pointed references to the historical Euripides, framed so as to recall and oppose the rationalistic poetic theories of Aristophanes' Euripides.

Furthermore, traces of the debate about the right way to evaluate poetry are also present in both *Ion* and *Frogs*. Anxiety about this question in *Frogs* is represented by the various methods of evaluation that are suggested, including scales, bevels and wedges (798-802). Euripides boasts that he introduced to tragedy "domestic affairs which we are used to, which we know and on the basis of which I can be evaluated" (959-960). Conversely, he criticizes Aeschylus for introducing into his plays convoluted expressions with which the audience would be unfamiliar (926). *Ion* responds to these concerns - while Socrates does suggest that the possessors of different τέχναι will be able to evaluate individual passages pertaining to the skill they are familiar with (chariots, medicine etc.), the ability to appreciate and interpret the entire output of a poet

like Homer rests solely with the a divinely inspired rhapsode such as Ion, through his channelling of divine perspicacity. Therefore, while Aeschylus and Euripides, along with all the powers of Hades, are at pains to find a suitable way to evaluate poetry rationally, Socrates argues that the only viable path for assessing a poet is sharing in his frenzy through the magnetic influence of his divine source.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to a better understanding of two iconic texts of Athenian literary criticism by elucidating their relationship and the literary debate in which they both participate.

#### Bibliography

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