

# ARISTOPHANES ON TRAGEDY

Paul Epstein  
Oklahoma State University  
paul.epstein@okstate.edu

Fifty years before Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*, Aristophanes had devoted two comedies, *Thesmophoriazusae* (411) and *Frogs* (405), to the subject of tragedy. In both plays the plot shows the education of the main character in the nature of tragedy. Euripides learns in *Thesmophoriazusae* that he must present noble and not base women in his dramas. His depiction of perverse women in the theatre had moved real-life husbands to keep a narrow watch on their wives, and in order to be free of this tyranny, the women use their Thesmophoria<sup>1</sup> to compel Euripides to change. *Frogs* shows the education of the god who presides over tragedy: Dionysus discovers that the telos of the tragedy-writer's art is the education of the spectators to a heroic defence of their country. This discovery reverses the god's earlier assumption that his own taste could judge the excellence of a poet. For both comedies, tragedy is a theoretical activity with direct practical results; what the spectators see in the theatre will determine their activity in the family or the State.

These 'statements' about tragedy occur through an argument<sup>2</sup> whose general form

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an Athenian festival which celebrated Demeter and Persephone as the Thesmophoroi, a term which B. B. Rogers understands as "the givers and guardians of Home." [*The Thesmophoriazusae of Aristophanes* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1920), pp. x, xi.] Certainly, the drama concentrates on this particular meaning of the Thesmophoroi, even though the festival also marks the annual cycle of death and rebirth that the story of the two goddesses celebrates. The peculiar way in which the women transform the Thesmophoria into a revolt against their husband makes sense only against the backdrop of a festival that celebrates the marital and familial tie. For a full account of the festival, see Rogers, *o.c.*, pp.ix-xix.

<sup>2</sup> Many classicists hold the fantastic dogma that there is not a unified argument in the plays of Aristophanes. It is a dogma because they neither offer nor can they offer an argument for their assertion. Prominent among them is Kenneth Dover, who cannot restrain himself from this outburst against the possibility of a plot in *Thesmophoriazusae*: "It is not difficult to say what the play is about: major parodies of *Helen*, *Andromeda*....and at least one play of Agathon, plus minor parodies of some other Euripidean plays and a parody of the proceedings of the assembly, are combined with slapstick, vulgar buffoonery, jokes about adultery and the ways of women, and a foreign policeman's pidgin-Greek, to present something for all tastes, and the happy ending (happy for everyone except the policeman) leaves us with nothing difficult to think about." [*Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 168-9.] But this is pure fantasy. The commentator cannot find any dramatic unity, whether from lack of wit or the press of time, and instead of admitting his incapacity, he attributes the lack of unity to the author. The idea that a great playwright should write a pastiche is

animates all the comedies of Aristophanes. A central character, who is in some measure representative of the Athenian people, finds himself radically alienated from an aspect of Athenian life or the whole of the city's life; then he seeks to find his individual well-being in the realm of nature, a non-political community, or his own private concerns. When the hero has reached this extreme state of alienation, it too becomes unsatisfactory to him. The hero then returns to the institutions of the polis and the gods who preside over them. His new adherence to them is not simply identical to the old, since it is now mediated through his initial flight.

Both plays under consideration here follow this pattern. In *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides does not directly understand his own art of tragic mimesis, or imitation. At first he uses mimesis in the form of masquerade, by which his kinsman, dressed as a woman, can infiltrate the women's festival, the Thesmophoria, and foil their plot against him.<sup>3</sup> Only the failure of this masquerade compels him to the deeper knowledge of Tragedy indicated above. Similarly, in *Frogs*, Dionysus initially thinks of mimesis as that which allows him to dress as his half-brother Heracles, in order to invade Hades and bring back the recently deceased Euripides, whose poetry he adores. When this fails, he then learns

---

not only unprovable but contrary to the best ancient evidence. In *Symposium* Plato presents Aristophanes as having a definite view about eros, a view that expresses a deep consideration about man's alienation from the gods and himself and the possibility of overcoming that alienation. Plato could not attribute this view to Aristophanes unless he thought that his own readers could see in his Aristophanes a view they too could recognize. The view that Plato attributes to Aristophanes could not, of course, be expressed in a few sentences uttered between various parodies and vaudeville-like skits, but only in the extended treatment of entire dramas. It is of course true that Plato did not have a Ph.D. in Classical Philology, nor was he versed in the methods developed over the last century and a half for criticizing great works of poetry. This is precisely why his witness is of greater weight than that of Kenneth Dover. The most important matters in Aristophanic Comedy are not susceptible of the categories and methods used by philologists qua philologists. These central questions treat of the hero and his relation to his city and to his gods. To specify this relation precisely belongs to philosophy, theology, and aesthetic intuition.

<sup>3</sup> In his *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), Cedric Whitman says of the play, "...the parody is without venom, and the plot or fantasy, is without reference to very much beyond its own inconsequential proposition: How would old Euripides, with all his supposed subtlety, extricate himself if the women, by solemn vote at the Thesmophoria, should condemn him to death?" (p.217) The terms 'parody' and 'fantasy' explain nothing. I indicate in my discussion of the second part of the play why the first term does not properly describe Aristophanes' use of Euripidean texts. The second term means little more than "non-historical" and it is clear that the plots of Aristophanes are largely non-historical. Since, however, all his plays begin with a historical reality, the question for analysis is the relation of the historical to the non-historical. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, the historical reality is the tendency of Euripides to present characters on the stage who are less heroic than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles and more like every-day people of his time. The plot explores the consequence of this important change.

about tragedy by refereeing a contest in poetry between Aeschylus and Euripides.<sup>4</sup>

These two dramas about tragedy, and especially *Frogs*, mark an unsurpassable milestone in Aristophanes' development. Although all the plays present a similar structure of the hero's alienation and return, the scope of the hero's experience is different in each. This includes three elements: the extent to which the hero is representative of the spectator; the particular institutions of Athenian life from which the hero is alienated; and the final relation of the hero to the institutions which he returns to. In the plays before *Birds* (414 B.C.) the hero tends to be only partially representative of the spectators who observe his career. His alienation then is not from institutions *per se* but from their particular working, and his return to these institutions or their ground is found not in his being equalized with them, but in a general dependence on them. A character such as Strepsiades in *Clouds* feels burdened by the debts that his son has run up under the influence of an aristocratic mother. This results first in his embrace of sophistry and a naturalistic atheism. His rejection of these then shows his relation to essential forms of Athenian life, his family, fellow citizens, and the gods. Nevertheless that relation occurs through the filter of an attitude which is common but not universal at Athens.

The plays after *Birds* show a more directly representative hero. *Lysistrata* represents the desire of her whole sex to put an end to the Peloponnesian War. The dramatic action through which this is accomplished involves both sexes as a whole, the institutions of family and state, and Athens' relation to Sparta as part of Hellas. The action ends with the praise of Athena, because the women, in acting politically, have protected the well-being of the polis, over whom that goddess especially presides. Their

---

<sup>4</sup> In "The Character and Cults of Dionysus and the Unity of *The Frogs*" (*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* LXV, pp. 207-242) Charles Segal argues that what unifies the play is "the development of Dionysus into a god of communal solidarity" (p.217). Because this way of speaking tends to understand Dionysus as a symbol or allegory, it overlooks his real subjectivity. No god of the Olympian order is simply identical with that over which he presides. Zeus is not the thunder or justice, although he presides over both. He is a free subject who within an imaginative polytheism has spheres of reality with which he concerns himself. The plot of *Frogs* is grounded precisely in this two-sidedness of Dionysus. He is both the god who presides over tragedy, and the comic subject who does not understand his own sphere. The drama is essentially about his own self-discovery, and within that the play treats of tragedy, Aeschylus, Euripides, and the city of Athens.

Certain contemporary attitudes made understanding the Greek gods difficult. It is generally assumed that earthly realities, whether natural, institutional, or artistic are primary, and the gods who preside over them, epiphenomenal. One thus has first the polis, and then a god of the polis, or first poetry and then the Muses. Within such a view, one can ascribe various degrees of self-consciousness to those who "invented" the gods. Perhaps these are naïve, or worse, evil priests plotting to control the people. Human subjectivity has nowhere in Aristophanes such an independence. Every hero finds his ground in institutions or the gods who preside over them. Even in *Plutus*, which treats of individuals who live beyond the world of the polis and are concerned with private ends, a god rewards the virtuous with wealth. The god *Plutus* is the ground even of private ends.

action is the human realization of the goddess.

*Birds* marks the dividing line between those earlier plays such as *Clouds* in which the hero represents a tendency within Athenian life and those such as *Lysistrata* in which the hero represents an entire sex or essential institution. This play of 414 B.C. presents a hero so thoroughly alienated from the polis that he first founds a nature-city with a nature religion, in which birds are at once citizens and gods. When the hero returns from this alienation, he can only be re-integrated into the Olympian order of the state by displacing Zeus himself. The poet posits a new goddess, a Miss Sovereignty,<sup>5</sup> who possesses true dominion over both the polis and nature; Zeus rules only because she is within his control. The comic hero wins her from Zeus, and his marriage to her makes him the ruler of the world.

*Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* were both presented in the ten years after *Birds*, and they both unite the three elements of the hero's experience in a novel way. After the revolutionary result of *Birds* even Zeus did not seem a sufficient ground of the hero's activity and in both *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* the poet chose religious festivals, in which a divine-human relation is present, as the ground of the hero's activity. Euripides is compelled to a deeper depiction of women through his collision with the women celebrating the Thesmophoroi, Demeter and Persephone. Dionysus is both a spectator who watches tragedy and the god who presides over it. Further, in both plays, the hero is directly representative of the spectators. Euripides is the poet whose plays have caused men to keep a close watch on their wives. As the patron of tragedy, Dionysus has no end other than the proper education of the spectators.

This paper will first consider the dramatic arguments of both *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, through which the heroes, respectively a poet and a god, are educated in the nature of tragedy. Then it will seek to show how Aristophanes' treatment of tragedy advances the argument beyond the standpoint of *Birds*. It will argue that *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, because they reveal a comic hero's relation to a divine-human festival, can present a more comprehensive view of the individual's relation to the ground of his being and action than can the other dramas. It will conclude by arguing that *Frogs* shows the individual's relation to the whole range of his theoretical and practical interests more radically than even its sister play, *Thesmophoriazusae*, can and therefore is truly the complete comedy.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The coinage is that of B.B. Rogers in his edition of the play (London: George Bell and Sons, 1906), l. 1536.

<sup>6</sup> This paper builds on two earlier papers of mine, "Dionysus' Journey of Self-Discovery in *The Frogs* of Aristophanes, (*Dionysius IX*, 1985, pp.19-36) and "Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* and the Nature of Tragedy," (*Animus* 9, 2003). The current paper is an advance on the standpoint of both, and in two ways. First, if the comic treatment of tragedy is an important advance in the development of the Aristophanic argument, it is necessary to treat both plays together. Second, I treat *Frogs* in the first paper mostly as the hero's unification of the upper and lower worlds. Here I expand that idea to emphasize the hero's fulfillment of the divine-human potential within him from the beginning. The earlier paper on *Thesmophoriazusae*, while by no means indifferent to its

In *Thesmophoriazusae* the poet Euripides learns that he must depict only heroic women in his plays. This results from a severe collision between the poet and the women of Athens, whose freedom of action his plays have adversely affected. Because Euripides has depicted vulgar and criminal women on the stage, their husbands have kept a close watch on them at home. Alarmed that they can no longer indulge their favorite vices, such as stealing the household stores of wine and oil, the women resolve at their Thesmophoria to be rid of the interfering poet.<sup>7</sup> His counter-plot against the women does not succeed, and he must agree to a positive portrayal of women in the theatre.

The constant background to this collision is the women's relation to their own festival. Their willingness to pervert it, by adding to their celebration of Demeter and Persephone the plotting of their liberation from Euripides, is the occasion for the dramatic action. As they resist Euripides' counter-attack, they turn their attention to the business of the festival itself without the earlier additions. First they unmask and guard the infiltrator Euripides sends against them, and then they sing the praises of the gods.

The collision between Euripides' use of mimesis and the women's resistance to its effects outside the theatre underlies every episode of the drama. In the first half of the play, Euripides experiences the confusion between mimesis and every-day life and in the second part, their gradual clarification. As the play begins Euripides is looking for a way to infiltrate the Thesmophoria. When the tragedian Agathon refuses to help him, his kinsman Mnesilochus agrees to imitate a woman and speak on Euripides' behalf among the women. Euripides' wish to use Agathon as his agent expresses well the first stage of his confusion. He imagines that he can use his mimetic arts outside the theatre in order to create a character who will serve his ends. Agathon is both effeminate and committed to the view that if a poet is to delineate a woman he must imitate a woman while writing her part.<sup>8</sup> He feels no obligation to Euripides and therefore refuses to acquiesce in Euripides' request.

As a kinsman, Mnesilochus feels closer to Euripides than Agathon. Because he is a burly, bearded fellow, Euripides' mimetic abilities are reduced to those of a costumer in order to prepare him for his masquerade.<sup>9</sup> This fails, both through the content of his speech to the women, and the subsequent investigation of his person. Mnesilochus attempts to dissuade the women from action against Euripides by arguing that while the poet has exposed some, he has not exposed all, their vices.<sup>10</sup> When this proves less than persuasive, Mnesilochus is attacked, and it is revealed that he has a penis.<sup>11</sup> This is not a mere piece of comic 'business' designed to elicit a laugh from vulgar groundlings. It shows that the women have a merely physical view of what defines the difference

---

treatment of tragedy, emphasized the relation of Euripides' activity to the Thesmophoroi. Here I emphasize the comic hero's ability to educate the spectators.

<sup>7</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 383-433.

<sup>8</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 149-152.

<sup>9</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 213-263.

<sup>10</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 473-475.

<sup>11</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 643.

between men and women. This pre-occupation with the natural then reaches its nadir, when Mnesilochus seizes what one woman has described as her child. It turns out to be a bottle of wine, and the woman is enraged when he drinks it. This nadir is also a turning point for the women. Hereafter they do not plot against Euripides but occupy themselves with their festival itself. They are concerned now with the punishment of the invader, and in the second half of the play with the celebration of their rites.

Mnesilochus and Euripides for their part have both failed in their effort to create a counterfeit woman. The former has proven ersatz in both body and sentiments. With his kinsman captured and put under guard, Euripides begins to clarify the relation between his art and life outside the theatre. This has two main stages. First, Euripides tries to extricate his kinsman from trouble by using rescue scenes drawn from his own plays that honour the marital tie. When this fails, he first agrees not to slander women on the stage and then he uses a masquerade to save his kinsman from the guard.

For much of the second part of the play, both Euripides and Mnesilochus assume roles drawn first from the poet's *Helen* and then his *Andromeda*. First Euripides is Menelaos, and his kinsman Helen.<sup>12</sup> Then Euripides takes the role of Perseus, and Mnesilochus becomes Andromeda.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, a heroic woman is being saved from danger by her heroic husband or a man who wishes to be her husband. These scenes advance the dramatic action quite directly. Euripides is bringing his own dramatic poetry to bear on a situation outside the theatre. Earlier, his kinsman had devised his own lines to serve Euripides' purpose. Now, both use actual poetry for the common purpose of the kinsman's rescue. By using scenes of marital devotion they draw closer in spirit to the women, who, between the two attempted rescues, celebrate the rites of the Thesmophoroi.<sup>14</sup> The comedy lies in the men's attempt to directly subsume the everyday under the poetic, and the insufficiency of this to achieve the end desired.

The attempt of classical philologists to explain these scenes as "parody" explains nothing.<sup>15</sup> The identification of passages in the drama as Euripidean, while accurate, is the merest beginning of interpretation. The next, and only real, question is why Euripides and his kinsman are using these passages. There is no dramatic reason why they should want to "parody" Euripides, and if their use of these passages is out of character, then the poet has merely imposed extraneous jokes on his characters. Moreover, one must then believe that a great poet at times decides to break off the dramatic action to have his characters engage in vaudeville skits.

The primacy of poetry, however, cannot be established so directly, and Euripides cannot free his kinsman with scenes from his own dramas. Only a radical change in the theatre, the true locus of mimetic poetry, can free him, and Euripides promises to say nothing bad about women in exchange for his freedom. The rescue scenes have shown that not all his plays are critical of women but that some treat women as worthy of heroic

<sup>12</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 846-928.

<sup>13</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 1010-1135.

<sup>14</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 947-1000.

<sup>15</sup> Whitman, *l.c.*

men. Euripides secures his own familial end, saving his kinsman, by agreeing to depict women in the theatre as worthy of family life.<sup>16</sup> This accomplishes the primacy of the theatre over the every-day.

While the women agree to free Mnesilochus, they leave it to the poet to elude the Scythian guard who had been appointed to watch his kinsman. This he does by masquerading as a music-woman and promising the delights of a dancing-girl to the guard.<sup>17</sup> Thus the poet establishes the difference both between the realm of mimesis and that of masquerade, and between the tie which unites married citizens and that which unites a barbarian guard with the object of his desire. The poet thereby shows that he understands the difference between the mimesis of the heroic, which belongs to the theatre, and that of masquerade, which belongs to the contingencies of everyday life. The poet thus undoes his initial confusion of the two realms.

In *Frogs*, Dionysus, the patron of the theatre, is himself educated in the nature of the tragedy over which he presides. He first wishes to snatch the recently dead Euripides out of Hades so that he might again enjoy his plays. When this fails, he co-operates with the authorities there to choose Aeschylus as the poet with whom he will return to Athens. The god has learned that in order to exercise his divinity he must bring back a poet who can educate the citizens in heroic devotion to the City.

His journey involves all the elements of both tragedy and comedy. He knows that he is a character in a comedy, and he is moved as a spectator of tragedy to bring back Euripides from the dead. On his journey to Hades he imitates both Heracles and his own slave, and thus the whole range of human/divine individuality. This completeness of mimetic experience then allows him to realize his own particular divinity. By presiding over a debate between Euripides and Aeschylus, he acknowledges the place of poets and their *techne* in tragedy. By asking them what advice they will give the City, he shows a knowledge of the *telos* of tragedy beyond what *technitai* can know. Finally he decides to bring Aeschylus back, so that he might best make his own divinity actual.

The play begins with Dionysus and his slave conscious of being in a comedy, as they discuss what kind of jokes to tell.<sup>18</sup> The real comedy occurs, however, when Dionysus gives subjective form to his patronage of tragedy. This appears both in his love of Euripides and what that love leads him to do. He admires the poet's capacity to make grand things familiar and to emphasize the power of human inwardness.<sup>19</sup> Dionysus undertakes an extreme modification of the Olympian religion to achieve this end: he will imitate his half-brother Heracles' trip to Hades and bring back not Cerberus, but Euripides. Both Dionysus and Heracles are sons of Zeus by a mortal woman, and this divine sonship expresses itself differently in each of them. As the great benefactor of mankind, Heracles is a model of courage and heroic virtue. A depiction of his labours

---

<sup>16</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 1160-1163. In context, his promising never to speak badly of them can have no other meaning.

<sup>17</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* 1172-1201.

<sup>18</sup> *Frogs* 1-30.

<sup>19</sup> *Frogs* 98-102.

decorated the temple of Zeus at Olympia, where the games originated and athletes sought to imitate his virtue. Dionysus is a more democratic god, presiding over tragedy, comedy, and the cult depicted in *Bacchae* that allowed men and women a mystic union with nature.

Here Dionysus seeks to make Heracles' virtue his own, so that he might again watch the plays of Euripides. He wears the costume of Heracles, but the action reveals that he does not have the virtue of Heracles. This becomes clear when Dionysus and his slave Xanthias journey into Hades. Dionysus is willing to imitate Heracles only when danger does not threaten. When it does, he persuades Xanthias to 'be' Heracles.<sup>20</sup> When they confront a kind of Hades-policeman, Xanthias is happy to play this role and have Dionysus treated as a slave.<sup>21</sup> Even when Dionysus asserts his own divinity, he cannot prove it or show that Xanthias is not Heracles.<sup>22</sup>

Dionysus' attempt to imitate Heracles has resulted both in the loss of his standing as a god and in the equal ability of both a god and a slave to imitate gods and slaves. Both the imitators and imitated cover the whole range of self-conscious individuals, from slaves to demi-gods. Since Dionysus cannot master Hades, as he had hoped, for the rest of the drama, now obedient to Hades, he gradually regains his stature and a knowledge of what his place in the upper world as patron of tragedy really means. This occurs in four stages, in which progressively his relation to his slave, the poets Aeschylus and Euripides, the State, and finally his own divinity, reveals itself. These relations clarified, he can return with Aeschylus to the upper world in order to save the State.

The first stage in Dionysus' regaining of his position shows the distinction between him and his slave. Their equal capacity for masquerading as Heracles had made them seem equal, but in the first scene of the second half of the play, their radical difference appears. His slave can learn from a local slave about the dispute between Aeschylus and Euripides concerning who is the best tragedy-writer,<sup>23</sup> but Xanthias has no further part in the resolution of that dispute.

Only a contest between these poets over which Dionysus will preside can resolve this dispute, and it reveals the god's relation to the *technitai* whom tragedy depends on. Aeschylus and Euripides both think that they are entitled to hold the chair of tragedy in Hades, where excellence in each *techne*, or craft, is acknowledged. The contest between them is one that can be held only in Hades but it can be resolved only on principles that belong to the upper world. In the upper world, poets competed only at a particular festival of Dionysus. Now they compete about who the best poet in general is, and the measure will be their ability to save the city of Athens.

The contest reveals both that poets are necessary to tragedy and why poets are not the patrons of tragedy. In his attempted imitation of Heracles that proved to be a mere

---

<sup>20</sup> *Frogs* 494-496.

<sup>21</sup> *Frogs* 615-617.

<sup>22</sup> *Frogs* 629-641.

<sup>23</sup> *Frogs* 755-813.

masquerade, Dionysus was, as it were, his own poet. He determined the *telos* of the imitation and the form of imitation. Now, he experiences the place of *technitai* in mimesis. Earlier, he had acted out of his love for one poet alone. Now he must hear the opposing views of two poets about what constitutes excellence in tragedy.

Aside from Dionysus' direction to the poets that they pray before the debate,<sup>24</sup> they themselves determine the *quaestiones disputatae*. The dispute is not systematic, nor can it be. The poets are not in their element, but have become critics of poetry. In the course of their wrangling and cross-examination of each other, they cover several subjects, the relation of tragedy to the spectator, prologues, monodies and general versification, without assigning greater weight to any particular area.

Neither disputes the fact that tragedy has a direct effect on the spectator. They do dispute what that effect should be. Aeschylus argues that his presentation of war-like heroes encourages the citizens to a courageous defense of their city.<sup>25</sup> Against this, Euripides argues that his more democratic poetry depicts humans as they are and thus encourages the spectators to manage their households better.<sup>26</sup>

A dispute between *technitai* on criteria of their choosing does not allow Dionysus to choose between them.<sup>27</sup> Pluto then reminds him that if he makes no choice, he will negate the purpose for which he has come.<sup>28</sup> Although he came originally to bring back Euripides, he now offers a revised account of his trip and its goal, to bring back a poet, "so that the city, having been saved, might lead its choruses."<sup>29</sup> The well-being of the whole City and its dramatic festivals are here understood as inseparable.

Once Dionysus has learned that the true end of tragedy is the salvation of the City, he knows that the true measure of a play and of the poet who wrote it is the effect they have on the spectators. The god can now ask what advice each poet has for the city,<sup>30</sup> which at the time of the drama (405 B.C.) was on the verge of losing the Peloponnesian war. The poet who will return with his divine patron to the upper world must, like him, be conscious of the effect that his play has on the spectators.

The answers of the two poets are typical. Euripides would replace the current bad rulers with good,<sup>31</sup> while Aeschylus would have the citizens desert their physical city so that they could fight better.<sup>32</sup> Since both poets have given good advice, this test is not sufficient to allow Dionysus to make a choice. He concludes that he will choose the poet

---

<sup>24</sup> *Frogs* 885.

<sup>25</sup> *Frogs* 1013-1022.

<sup>26</sup> *Frogs* 971-979.

<sup>27</sup> *Frogs* 1411-1413.

<sup>28</sup> *Frogs* 1414.

<sup>29</sup> *Frogs* 1419.

<sup>30</sup> *Frogs* 1420-1421.

<sup>31</sup> *Frogs* 1446-1450.

<sup>32</sup> *Frogs* 1463-1465.

whom his soul wishes.<sup>33</sup> Euripides reminds him to remember those gods by whom he swore to bring him back.<sup>34</sup> Dionysus' response shows that he accepts this reminder as describing his earlier state of soul, and indeed it does. This does not serve Euripides well, because Dionysus has experienced the progressive loss of his independent standing by wanting to bring Euripides back. The scenes since that loss have shown the re-establishment of his status as patron of Tragedy. Neither as a master of slaves, a judge of poets, nor as a political man can he define his patronage of the theatre, but only as a god. To affirm his divinity, he must choose that poet who affirmed the old order, its gods, its institutions and heroism in defence of the State, and that of course is Aeschylus. To release himself from his earlier vow, he now uses a notorious line from the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, "My tongue has sworn but my spirit remained unsworn."<sup>35</sup> Dionysus quotes only the first clause, before he says, "and I shall choose Aeschylus,"<sup>36</sup> but this is sufficient. When he had determined on bringing Euripides back from the dead, he had not acted according to his true self, but according to the desires of a particular spectator. His true self is the patron of Tragedy who wishes to save the City and its Festivals; these he affirms by choosing Aeschylus. Dionysus is choosing Aeschylus, but in a manner that is mediated by the experience of what Euripides stands for and the overcoming of it. Having experienced the consequences of following his own personal feelings about tragedy, the god now affirms the *telos* of Tragedy as that which educates the citizen-spectators to a perfect patriotism.

Dionysus' search for the true ground of tragedy, a search that ends with himself, unites the realm of Hades with the life of the city. He has not accomplished his original purpose of stealing Euripides from Hades but he can return to Athens with an even greater poet. With the free consent of Pluto, he revivifies the dead to serve the living City.<sup>37</sup> This will be done by the poet's analogous power to animate the spectators with the spirit of heroism. Aeschylus can be declared the best poet in Hades; but only in the city can he exercise the office of poet by moving the people from their capacity for heroism to an actual heroic defense of their city.

Both *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* treat Tragedy as a festival in which the spectators are directly educated in heroism. In so doing, they both advance the Aristophanic argument beyond even *Birds*. They do this in three ways. First, because both dramas show the relation of the comic hero to tragedy, the spectator of each comedy from the beginning sees himself playing in the drama. Although the centre of every Aristophanic comedy is a hero representative in some sense of Athenian life, in the plays before *Birds*, he was representative of a sector only of Athenian life. Even where in *Birds* the central character represents all Athenians in their general alienation from Athenian life, it belongs to the comic imagination of the poet to devise a facetiously named hero

<sup>33</sup> *Frogs* 1467-1468.

<sup>34</sup> *Frogs* 1469-1470.

<sup>35</sup> *Hippolytus* 612.

<sup>36</sup> *Frogs* 1471. For an eloquent description of Dionysus' choice, see Kenneth Reckford, *Aristophanes' Old-and-New Comedy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p.431.

<sup>37</sup> *Frogs* 1500-1501.

who embodies this alienation. In *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, the central character is already in himself, whether historically or religiously, a representative Athenian. In *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides' plays have made husbands watchful over their wives. As the patron of tragedy in *Frogs*, Dionysus has a relation to all Athenians.

Second, the alienation of the hero and his return out of that alienation are more radically comprehensive of the relation between citizens and the polis than *Birds*. There the representative hero turns first to a natural paradise and then is restored to the City and its religion. This paradise is not in itself an essential part of the life in the city. In *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, the alienation falls within the institutions of the City and its festivals. The women almost negate the nature of the Thesmophoria by using it to maintain their marital vices, and they then return to a celebration of those gods who protect the marital tie. For his part Euripides first perverts his mimetic skills for a masquerade aiming at personal ends and then comes to know the difference between masquerade and the true end of mimesis. In *Frogs*, Dionysus' perversion of mimesis leads him to the loss of his status as patron of tragedy in Hades. He can then gradually regain that status as he returns to the upper world.

Third, the human subject is equalized with its divine ground in *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* in a way that it cannot be in *Birds*. In this last play, the subject can find its ground only in a factitious god, Miss Sovereignty, who is beyond the limits of Zeus. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, Euripides' whole comic career is praises the family-tie that the Thesmophoroi have given. In *Frogs*, the interest of the god Dionysus is nothing other than that of the human subject himself.

Thus *Frogs* unifies the elements of comedy even more radically than *Thesmophoriazusae*. From the beginning, the hero Dionysus contains all the possibilities of human self-consciousness within himself. Even the situation with which this comedy begins, the death of Euripides, is not outside of him, since the work of poets is included in his presiding over the theatre. The god's comic career as Heracles, Xanthias, and then finally himself makes actual what is latent within him. When he returns from Hades with Aeschylus to save the city, he unites the realm of the dead with the realm of the living to animate the spectators with heroism. This is the perfection of comedy.