

Aristophanes and Athens

Sheet 11:

Aristophanes' *Frogs*

Relevant Syllabus: OCR A2 Classical Greek: F373 Greek Verse (Prescribed lines 1-208, 830-870, 1119-1208).

1. Key Questions

The first prescribed section for OCR A2 includes the opening of the play and Dionysus' explanation of his plan, the Heracles scene, and runs up to the entrance of the frog chorus. The second section comes from the start of the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, and the third section again provides an extract from the contest.

Because this is a new prescription for examinations in 2016-17, the only paper that exists is the specimen paper. This asked questions on types of humour and on the relative seriousness of Aristophanes' literary criticism in the play. Whether or not Aristophanes was ever sincere in his satire is a perennial question in both exam questions (from across examination boards) and scholarship, but will not be discussed at length here because it has been discussed in the sheets on **Satire and Seriousness** and on **The Acharnians**. Scholarly approaches towards the types of humour demonstrated by the play (including metatheatricality and parody) will be explored, along with the key themes of the play.

2. The Journey

The first half of the play is taken up by Dionysus' trip to the Underworld. Angus Bowie sees this journey as analogous to the 20-mile walk initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries carried out. He points out that Dionysus' journey closely emulates Heracles', and that the hero himself also often stands for the initiated. Moreover, he asserts that the chorus of initiates are "continuing to practise a form" of the Eleusinian mysteries in Hades. Indeed, Bowie examines the entire comedy through the mysteries and therefore for him, the journey is central to the whole play.¹

At the start of the play, the slave Xanthus enters carrying a great deal of baggage, but Dionysus refuses to allow him to make any of the jokes that seem to have been typical of other comic playwrights in such baggage scenes (all translations are those of Halliwell 2015):

Xanthias [*nonchalantly*]. Shall I tell them some of the usual gags
then, master,

The things spectators *always* find so funny?

Dionysos [*wearily*]. Say what you like—except 'I'm all
hard-pressed'.

Steer clear of *that*: it's trite and makes my gorge rise.

Xanthias. But something else that's witty?

Dionysos. Except 'I'm squashed'.

¹ Bowie (1993) 228-53.

Xanthias. Well then, should I tell them an excellent joke?

Dionysos. Go

ahead,

Feel free. But avoid that old routine—

Xanthias. Which one?

Dionysos. Where you shift your load and say that you need a shit!

Xanthias. But can't I say that I'm carrying such a weight

That unless it's removed I'll release an explosive fart?

Dionysos. Please don't, I beg you—unless you want me to vomit!

Xanthias. Well what was the point of making me carry this baggage

If I can't make the jokes you hear in Phrynichos' plays

Or the kind that Lykis and also Ameipsias writes?

Their comedies always have these baggage-slave scenes.

Dionysos. But just don't do it. I know that when I'm watching

And see that kind of 'sophisticated' humour,

I've aged by more than a year when I leave the theatre.

Xanthias. This neck of mine is damned to perdition in that case.

It's getting *squashed* but is being denied its jokes.²

Hesk notes the different forms of humour present in this scene. The joke is on the one hand metatheatrical – Dionysus and Xanthius “are both characters in the story the play will enact and at the same time they are speaking comically of the enactment as a theatrical event... The metatheatrical joke here serves to imply Aristophanes' superiority over his rivals.”³ But another aspect of the joke is that Xanthus slips in the forbidden terms anyway, and this is ironic. Halliwell notes a different tension; “if an audience laughs at this opening scene (and it may start doing so even before a word is spoken, when it sees the antics of the semi-disguised Dionysus and his donkey-riding slave), what is it laughing at – recycled comic clichés (if that is really what they were) or the ironic deprecation of them, Xanthias' vulgarity or Dionysus' 'discriminating' tastes? More pointedly, if it laughs at the suggestion of 'things that always make the audience laugh', is it proving itself predictably easy to please or showing its own sophistication by enjoying a game of double bluff between performers and spectators? And how could any audience be collectively sure of the difference?”⁴ So the scene invokes the humour of Xanthius' clichéd crudity, the characters' metatheatrical awareness of that clichéd crudity, and the ironic conflict between Dionysus banning any such crudity and Xanthius slyly ignoring him; at the same time, it also creates a (humorous) tension by questioning the audience's appreciation of these base jokes.

At this point, it would be worth sounding a note of caution. It can be tempting to see the audience as a single homogenous mass and therefore to assume that if something is present in the text, it is understood and appreciated by every audience-member in the same way. However, it is patently obvious that not all Athenians would have understood every possible layer of humour in this opening scene in the same way. As Hesk and others have argued, different “discursive communities”, for various complex reasons, will understand a text in different ways.⁵ To return to Halliwell's conundrum, some of the audience will be

² Aristophanes *Frogs* 1-20 (Halliwell 2015, p. 172)

³ Hesk (2000) 233.

⁴ Halliwell (2014) 191f. See also Halliwell (2015) 158-161 on the sophisticated and hilarious visual and verbal interplay between Dionysus as master/dressed as Heracles and Heracles himself: two very different brothers? Or more alike than one would first assume?

⁵ Hesk (2000) 241.

laughing at the crudity; some at Dionysus' discrimination. Some will be laughing at the tension produced between the two. Where a scene offers many potential layers of humorous meaning, there is no need to highlight only one 'correct' interpretation. Multiple interpretations allow a differentiated audience to appreciate humour on a multifaceted level.

3. The Contest

The contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in *The Frogs* is on one level a metatheatrical conceit, taking place as it does within another play (albeit a comedy) and during a theatrical competition. Griffith points out that the audience attending were experienced theatregoers and used to making judgements about the relative merits of competing tragedians – although Aeschylus, having died before Aristophanes was born, would be less familiar except through private reading and the occasional restaging of his plays.⁶ “The contest that is staged in *Frogs* is between two playwrights of different generations: thus at every turn it is a contest between old and new as well as between two of the three most famous theatre artists that Athens had ever produced,” he notes.⁷ Moreover, there were real differences between the authors – “even as Greek tragedy overall remained generally quite consistent and conservative throughout the fifth century (and later) in its conventions, language, and overall structure, there were several immediately recognizable ways in which Aeschylus' plays stood out as being different and more old-fashioned than those of Sophocles and Euripides.”⁸

It is fascinating to see the two authors being compared by so contemporary a source, and as Halliwell notes, *The Frogs* “is often elevated... to the status of a critical text in its own right” – even by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy*.⁹ However, he cautions against reading the play as serious textual criticism; “it is an immense cultural distance from a species of comedy performed by grotesquely masked, padded, and phallicly equipped actors to the post-Romantic metaphysical intuitions of *The Birth of Tragedy*.”¹⁰ *The Frogs* may be enlightening, but it is first and foremost a comedy.

Aeschylus' 'poetics' are characterised as variously martial, heavy and confusing, whereas Euripides' are slender, light and clever. Euripides is described as more democratic because he gave a voice to everyone – but, as Griffith points out, “this is not, of course, borne out by the evidence of Aeschylus' surviving plays.”¹¹ Nevertheless, all of Euripides' characters “do sound a bit more like ordinary people, less like epic heroes and demigods.”¹² At the same time, Aeschylus accuses Euripides of teaching immorality whilst the older playwright taught the Athenians to be strong.

For Halliwell, *The Frogs* is primarily about the difficulties inherent in textual and literary criticism. Dionysus as judge embodies this problem, because (even though he is the

⁶ Griffith (2013) 115f.

⁷ Ibid. 117.

⁸ Ibid. 120.

⁹ Halliwell (2011) 93-5.

¹⁰ Ibid. 95.

¹¹ Griffith (2013) 124.

¹² Ibid. 125.

god of both tragedy and comedy) he “stumbles (comically) across the manifold difficulties – even, in a sense, the impossibility – of fixing a stable set of standards with which to judge tragic drama and poetry.”¹³ He notes that the *agon* is Aristophanes’ only play to resolve without a clear winner.¹⁴ And he sees in the poets’ criticisms of each other the ultimate disintegration of both; the play’s “comic ‘sense’ somehow depends on conveying at least a subconscious perception of how the logic of agonistic ‘criticism’ may tend towards the *destruction* of the object of its judgement.”¹⁵ He sees this theme as culturally significant because “if Greek culture possessed (and could possess) no art for objectively measuring the excellence of poetry, it was nonetheless traditionally and vigorously committed, not least in the festival theatre of Athens itself, to the principle of evaluating poetry.”¹⁶ Halliwell’s interpretation of the central theme of the play focuses as much on the second act as Bowie’s does the first.

Why Dionysus changes his mind and picks Aeschylus has been debated at length by interpreters of the play. For Halliwell, the reason is “far from transparent”¹⁷ although he also notes that Dionysus refuses to explain his decision in picking Aeschylus.¹⁸ Dover, however, sees Aeschylus’ victory as less of a surprise; as the contest carries on, the previously “nasty” poet “cools down, gets into his stride, enjoys himself, and mounts a counter-attack which succeeds because it is... funnier than Euripides’ attack on him”. Dionysus’ uncertainty is only included because it is dramatically effective.¹⁹ Dover goes as far to suggest that the play may have caused the audience to genuinely believe “that a revival of Aeschylus would *cause* a revival of the great days of old.”²⁰

4. Characterizing the Tragic Playwrights

Academics have widely acknowledged that Euripides’ and Aeschylus’ (fictitious) personas in *The Frogs* are characterised in relation to their perceived poetical qualities. Aeschylus is brooding and brash because his poetry is so, just as Euripides is foppish and sophistic. Bowie argues that Aeschylus is therefore characterised negatively; “there is something barbaric, or even barbarian in [Aeschylus’] monstrosity... Beside this, Euripides’ sophistry might seem almost Greek... The negative elements of characterisation are not, therefore, all on Euripides’ side.”²¹ In the introduction to his new translation of the play, Stephen Halliwell offers a useful summary of the ways in which Aristophanes presents Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ tragedies as polarized forms of *self-expression*:²²

¹³ Halliwell (2011) 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 117f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 138.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 147.

¹⁹ Dover (1993) 455f.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 460.

²¹ Bowie (1993) 246.

²² Halliwell (2015) 165.

Aeschylus	Euripides
portentous grandeur	quotidian realism
heroic ethos	'democratic' ethos
larger-than-life characters	characters 'like us'
brooding silences	loquacious rhetoric
'Achillean' (in anger)	'Odyssean' (in craftiness)
opaque language	quibbling word-chopping
masculine vigour	female eroticism
warlike spirit	banal vulgarity
inspiring uplift	encouragement of 'suspicion'
toughens through fear	softens through pity
long, obscure choral odes	neurotic solo songs
mysterious openings	mechanically explanatory prologues
affinity with Eleusinian Mysteries	abstract deities (Tongue, Astuteness)

As Halliwell stresses, these oppositions are played for laughs by activating a fundamental 'asymmetry' when one considers the age and experience of the play's audience:

'The audience of *Frogs* were by definition part of the 'era' of Euripides; and since *Frogs* presents that era as one corrupted by Euripides' plays, the audience of the comedy was itself notionally implicated in Euripidean decadence. The point is made explicitly by both tragedians: Aeschylus condemns contemporary Athenians *en masse* (see especially 807–9, 1014–15, 1069–70, 1088), while Euripides claims that his plays have indeed shaped the mentality of this same generation (954, 960, 972). This does not, of course, compel individual spectators to feel in any particular way about the terms of the debate: individuals could dissociate themselves from the faults of their times. But it does add another layer of comic complexity to the whole competition, making it an intrinsically unbalanced clash between a nostalgically idealized past and a necessarily flawed 'modernity'.

5. Final thoughts and Further Questions

Academics have approached *The Frogs* from a number of different angles; as a commentary on the difficulties of literary criticism, as serious literary criticism itself, or as a metaphor for a religious ceremony, and an understanding of these different approaches would allow students to make a variety of points in an exam context. Students may also find it useful to consider that the different strands of humour present within any given scene, whether based around metatheatrical jokes, irony, crudity, physical humour or so on, may have been picked up and interpreted differently by different members of the audience. Finally, students ought to consider themes and questions which this information sheet has not covered. For example, how does the play's parabasis relate to the play's wider interest in the role and function of Athenian drama? In that parabasis the chorus claim to 'give the city | Best advice and best instructions' (686–7), and proceed to urge that Athens should restore full citizen rights to those previously punished for anti-democratic activities. As Halliwell concedes, 'there is no doubt that this 'advice' reflects a realistic political option for the city: something very like it was implemented, through the decree of Patrokleides, later in 405.' But he also argues that this point requires qualification:

'First, Aristophanes makes his chorus echo a sentiment which, as Patrokleides' decree confirms, must have been gradually winning support in Athens under the pressure of the city's increasingly acute shortage of manpower for the war against Sparta. To that extent, the parabasis is probably an attempt to strike a chord in tune with a growing mood of 'solidarity' in a time of political and military crisis (near-terminal crisis, as the defeat at Aigospotamoi later in 405 demonstrated). Secondly, whatever kind of gesture we might take the parabasis to be, it does nothing to determine the 'meaning' of *Frogs* as a whole [...] *Frogs* sends out inconsistent signals about Athens' policy in the war, not least in relation to the stance of the victorious Aischylos. What's more, it seems that in the contest of tragedians it is actually Euripides who, at 1446–50, comes closest to sounding a note that chimes with part of the parabasis. If we want to ascribe a 'poetics' to Aristophanes in *Frogs* (or beyond), we had better make plenty of room in it for comic caprice and incongruity.'²³

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²³ Ibid. 169.