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978-0-521-17257-8 - Cambridge Translations from Greek Drama:

Aristophanes Frogs

A New Translation and Commentary by Judith Affleck and Clive Letchford

Excerpt

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List of characters

DIONYSUS

XANTHIAS

HERACLES

CORPSE

CHARON

CHORUS OF FROGS

CHORUS OF INITIATES

AEACUS

MAID

INNKEEPER 1 (Pandoceutria)

INNKEEPER 2 (Plathane)

SLAVE OF PLUTO

EURIPIDES

AESCHYLUS

PLUTO

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PROLOGUE (1–315): comic warm-up

Aristophanes opens with what feels more like a well-worn stand-up comedy routine than a play. Even to a modern audience this double act feels instantly familiar. We learn that the slave's name is Xanthias at 271; his superior master identifies himself as a god at 22.

Types of humour

Various types of humour are on display here, from the visual slapstick of an overloaded slave riding a donkey, to verbal wit and banter as the two argue about who's doing the work. There is innuendo and scatological humour involving bodily functions (**dump**, 9; **fart**, 10; **puke**, 12), and some feeble jokes that Dionysus crushes before Xanthias can come out with them (2–9).

- Act this scene out in front of an audience. At which moments, if any, do they laugh? How could a pair of actors make the most of this opening?
- How might costumes (see 47–8) or sound effects help?
- Is the absence of stage directions in the text (see 'Stage direction', p. 24) liberating or unhelpful?

14–15 Phrynichus ... Lycis and Ameipsias The only complete comedies to survive from this period are by Aristophanes, but other great playwrights are known from fragments of their works and other sources. **Phrynichus** (son of Eunomides) was in direct competition with Aristophanes at the Lenaea of 405 BC where his play, *The Muses*, came second after *Frogs*. **Ameipsias** was another successful comic poet who competed against Aristophanes in the late fifth century. Little is known of **Lycis** and no fragment of his plays survives.

21 the limit The Greek is *hubris*. Xanthias, a cheeky slave, oversteps the mark, provoking his master and a god, but this is a comedy, without the consequences of tragic *hubris*.

22 I, Dionysus, son of Flagon It was not unusual for gods to appear on the Athenian stage. For example, Euripides' *Bacchae* (see 67n) opens with the announcement *I Dionysus, son of Zeus, have come to this land of Thebes*. Dionysus' claim here to be the son of a flagon highlights his role as god of wine, but Dionysus was also god of the theatre. The plays at the Lenaea and City Dionysia were performed in his sanctuary, at his festivals.

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- XANTHIAS Should I tell one of the usual, sir? One the audience always laughs at?
- DIONYSUS Fine, whatever you want – but not, ‘I’m feeling the pressure.’ Keep off that one. It’s so irritating.
- XANTHIAS Some other little witticism, then? 5
- DIONYSUS Yes, anything except ‘I am really feeling the squeeze.’
- XANTHIAS Oh. Shall I tell them a really funny one?
- DIONYSUS For god’s sake, out with it. Only don’t...
- XANTHIAS Don’t what?
- DIONYSUS ... shift your pole around and say you need a dump.
- XANTHIAS I’ve such a load that if I can’t relieve myself, I’ll fart it all away... 10
- DIONYSUS No, please. Wait until I really need to puke.
- XANTHIAS Then why do I have to carry all this equipment, if I don’t get to do any of that stuff you see in Phrynichus’ plays? Lycis and Ameipsias always have baggage-handling routines in their comedies. 15
- DIONYSUS Just don’t. Whenever I go to the theatre and see one of those jokes, I come away with a year off my life.
- XANTHIAS O thrice ill-fated shoulders! My neck’s so squished it can’t even tell a joke. 20
- DIONYSUS This is the limit. It’s what comes of spoiling him. Here am I, Dionysus, son of Flagon, and I am the one walking and doing all the hard work. I let him ride so that he won’t get worn out by carrying the burden.
- XANTHIAS And aren’t I the one carrying it? 25
- DIONYSUS How can you be carrying it, when you are the burden?
- XANTHIAS I’m carrying all this.
- DIONYSUS And how are you bearing it?
- XANTHIAS Very badly.
- DIONYSUS Now this burden you’re bearing – isn’t the donkey carrying it?
- XANTHIAS Definitely not. I’ve got it, I’m the one bearing it – not the donkey, goddammit.
- DIONYSUS But how can you be doing the carrying, when you are actually being carried by something else?
- XANTHIAS I don’t know. But my shoulder’s feeling the pressure. 30

Lines 1–30 3

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34 that sea-battle! The sea-battle of Arginusae was in 406 BC (*Background to the story*, pp. v–vii; Xenophon, *Hellenica* 1.6.24). The Athenians had rebuilt their navy under great pressure after defeats at Notium and Mytilene earlier in the year. Recruitment now extended to slaves, who earned their freedom (see 694n). Many slaves had already gone over to the enemy, conveniently based at Decelea in Attica, but this policy limited further defections.

Heracles (see also illustration, p. 8)

The door is opened by a character instantly recognisable to the audience as Heracles (the Greek name for Hercules). Over his own traditional **yellow** gown (48), a colour worn by women, Dionysus is dressed in *his* costume: the skin of the Nemean lion and the club he used to defeat it. Rather than looking heroic in this outfit, Dionysus appears ridiculous. Dionysus mistakes Heracles' amusement for fear.

38 like a centaur These half-man, half-horse creatures were renowned for their rough, uncivilised ways, especially when drunk.

44–5 By Demeter The dialogue is littered with oaths, even by gods. **By Zeus** appears about fifty times in the Greek text of *Frogs*. Demeter, Apollo and Poseidon are also regularly invoked.

48 Cleisthenes Mentioned in almost all of Aristophanes' plays, he is routinely mocked for his passive homosexuality (see 57, 422). Wealthy Athenians, such as Cleisthenes, might be liable for a special form of taxation which involved sponsoring a play or equipping a trireme.

50–1 twelve or thirteen enemy ships Towards the end of the war, the Spartan fleet regularly numbered over a hundred ships. Dionysus' boast would constitute a major victory for a fleet, never mind an individual ship or two crew members.

53 reading *Andromeda* The Athenians generally encountered tragedy only in performance at the dramatic festivals, but here is evidence that written texts were available (see 943n, 1115, 1410).

55 Just a little one – the size of Molon Comic irony may be confusing: ancient commentators suggest that Molon was a large actor.

56 for a boy? Although Dionysus is taken aback at the suggestion, paedophilia was a feature of Athenian life, idealised in art. The suggestion that Dionysus' passion is **For a man** is more insulting.

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Excerpt[More information](#)**DIONYSUS** Since you say the donkey's no help to you, swap over.

You pick the donkey up and carry him instead.

XANTHIAS Ah woe is me, poor wretch! Why didn't I fight in that sea-battle! Then I could tell you to bugger off.**DIONYSUS** Get down, you idiot. My journey's taken me right up to this door here, my first destination. 35

Slave, I say, slave, slave!

HERACLES Who's that battering the door, flinging himself at it like a centaur? Who the ... say, what is all this?**DIONYSUS** Slave.**XANTHIAS** What is it? 40**DIONYSUS** Did you notice that?**XANTHIAS** Notice what exactly?**DIONYSUS** How scared he was of me.**XANTHIAS** Oh, yes, by Zeus – scared that you're a maniac.**HERACLES** By Demeter, I just can't stop laughing. I'm biting my lip, but I just can't stop myself. 45**DIONYSUS** My good chap, step forward. I have a favour to ask of you.**HERACLES** I can't stop laughing – look at that lionskin on top of your little yellow number. What's the idea? Why these boots and club? Where on earth were you heading?**DIONYSUS** I was sailing with Cleisthenes.**HERACLES** You fought at sea?**DIONYSUS** Yes, and sank – oh, must have been twelve or thirteen enemy ships. 50**HERACLES** The two of you?**DIONYSUS** Yes, by Apollo.**XANTHIAS** In your dreams ...**DIONYSUS** And while I was on board, reading *Andromeda* to myself, a sudden desire filled my heart – you wouldn't believe how strong it was.**HERACLES** Desire? What kind of desire? 55**DIONYSUS** Just a little one – the size of Molon.**HERACLES** For a woman?**DIONYSUS** No, no, no!**HERACLES** Then for a boy?

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58–60 my brother ... little brother Both Dionysus and Heracles were sons of Zeus. Alcmena bore Heracles, Semele conceived Dionysus.

Euripides (66)

Euripides is one of three great Greek tragedians, along with Aeschylus and Sophocles, whose work was deliberately preserved in antiquity. Although Euripides was the least successful of the three in terms of poetic prizes (he won five first prizes at the City Dionysia, compared to Aeschylus' 13 and Sophocles' 18), more of his plays (19) have survived complete. He was a well-known figure in Athens, caricatured by Aristophanes in *Thesmophoriazusae*, 411 BC. Euripides' lost tragedy *Andromeda* (53) is parodied in the same play.

Plot

So far the audience have been left to guess the nature of the plot. Our first clue comes with the mention of Euripides. More will be revealed.

67 Even though he's dead? A necrophiliac joke completes Heracles' attempts to find out what excites Dionysus. An ancient anecdote tells of news of Euripides' death in Macedon reaching Athens in time for Sophocles to show his respect: chorus and actors appeared without the customary crowns in the procession before Sophocles' final production in the City Dionysia of 406 BC. Sophocles died in that year, perhaps too late for Aristophanes to make more than a few gracious references in *Frogs* (82, 787–9, 1515–19). Euripides' final victory at the City Dionysia was posthumously awarded a few months after *Frogs*, for a trilogy including *Bacchae*, still one of his most popular plays.

74 Iophon Sophocles' son won first prize in 435 BC and came second to Euripides in 428 BC; 50 plays (all lost) have been attributed to him. He may not be quite as reliant on his father as Dionysus implies.

83 Agathon The setting of Plato's *Symposium* is a dinner party celebrating Agathon's first triumph at the Lenaea of 416 BC, with his dazzling speech praising love; he also appears in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, caricatured as a talented but temperamental transvestite. Agathon's plays were much admired, but few fragments survive. At 86, **banquet of the blest** is less a euphemism for death than a hint at the comforts of the court of King Archelaus in Macedon, where Agathon and Euripides both chose to retire from Athenian life.

86–7 Xenocles ... Pythangelos? Like Iophon, **Xenocles** followed in his father's steps and wrote tragedies. He is caricatured as a little crab (a play on Carcinus, his father's name) in Aristophanes' *Wasps* and parodied in *Clouds*, 1266. **Pythangelos** is otherwise unknown.

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- DIONYSUS** Certainly not.
- HERACLES** For a man?
- DIONYSUS** Argh!
- HERACLES** Well, you were with Cleisthenes.
- DIONYSUS** Don't make fun of me, my brother. I really am in a bad way. The longing's so strong it'll kill me.
- HERACLES** What kind of longing, little brother? 60
- DIONYSUS** I can't explain. Let me try an analogy: have you ever felt a sudden craving for lentil soup?
- HERACLES** Lentil soup? Mmm-mmm. Thousands of times in my life.
- DIONYSUS** Am I explaining clearly, or should I put it in another way?
- HERACLES** No, no. Lentil soup. I understand perfectly about lentils. 65
- DIONYSUS** Well, just such a craving consumes me – for Euripides.
- HERACLES** Even though he's dead?
- DIONYSUS** No mortal alive could keep me from going after him.
- HERACLES** Then you would descend to the underworld?
- DIONYSUS** Yes, by Zeus, and the under-underworld, if there is one. 70
- HERACLES** What do you want?
- DIONYSUS** I need a good poet. Those that aren't dead are dread-ful.
- HERACLES** What? Isn't Iophon still around?
- DIONYSUS** He is the only good thing left, if he is any good. 75
Actually, I don't even know that.
- HERACLES** Then why don't you fetch Sophocles rather than Euripides, if you must bring someone back?
- DIONYSUS** Not until I have got Iophon on his own, without Sophocles, to test what he's made of. Anyway, Euripides is a complete crook and would have a go at running away from the 80
underworld with me, whereas Sophocles is completely easy-going, wherever he is.
- HERACLES** And where's Agathon?
- DIONYSUS** Gone and left us. A good poet, a good friend, much missed.
- HERACLES** Where on earth did the poor fellow end up? 85
- DIONYSUS** The banquet of the blest.
- HERACLES** And Xenocles?

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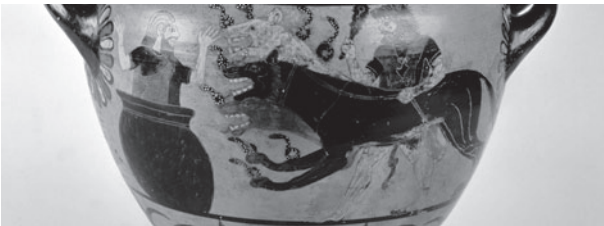
87 No mention of me While Xanthias can't expect a mention as an up-and-coming tragedian, he would like to be noticed. His whines to the audience, upstaging the action, become a running joke (107, 115).

95 a tragic chorus Three dramatists were selected to compete several months before the festival by a senior magistrate or *archôn*. A wealthy citizen – the *chorêgos* – was appointed to finance the chorus and other aspects of production, a tax comparable to financing a trireme (see 48n).

98 What do you mean, original? Dionysus recites Euripidean lines: **foot of time** (100) is in *Bacchae* 889; the last phrase is a garbled version of *Hippolytus* 612, *it was my tongue that swore, not my heart*, a notoriously slippery and sophistic defence of perjury (see 'Review of the character of Euripides', p. 100).

107 Stick to what you know Dionysus warns Heracles off his territory. As god of theatre, judging poetry is his domain, whereas Heracles was a notorious glutton. In a democracy, though, everyone was a critic and a modern audience may sympathise with Heracles.

Heracles' twelfth labour



Caeretan black-figure hydria, 6th century BC, Musée du Louvre. Heracles abducting Cerberus from Hades' house, the last of 12 labours imposed on him by King Eurystheus (see 466n). He wears the skin of the Nemean lion and carries his club.

Plan

Dionysus now reveals the full purpose of his visit. He needs to go down to the underworld to retrieve Euripides and has come to ask for some travel tips, since Heracles made the journey himself when completing his final labour. As we shall see, Heracles' visit has not been forgotten by others in the underworld (see 464–588).

Problem

Since Dionysus seems to be in a hurry, Heracles gives tips on sudden death: hanging, poisoning and leaping off a tall building. Dionysus objects, not on the grounds that he's immortal (and therefore can't die) but because these methods sound unpleasant.

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- DIONYSUS** Dead, for all I care.
- HERACLES** Pythangelos?
- XANTHIAS** No mention of me, with my shoulder completely worn away.
- HERACLES** Aren't there lots of other chappies writing tragedies up here – thousands of them – churning out far more than Euripides? 90
- DIONYSUS** Slim pickings. A flock of artistic tits twittering away. A disgrace to their profession. Once they've got their hands on a tragic chorus, they piss on the opportunity and vanish. Gone. Even if you looked, you couldn't find an original poet able to construct a noble phrase. 95
- HERACLES** What do you mean, original?
- DIONYSUS** I mean someone adventurous, someone who'll risk a phrase like *the airy apartment of Zeus or the foot of time, or a mind that refuses to swear on oath, but a tongue that's sworn already, never mind the mind.* 100
- HERACLES** You like that stuff?
- DIONYSUS** Actually, I'm crrrazy for it.
- HERACLES** It's a load of cobblers – you must see that.
- DIONYSUS** Get out of my brain. Stay in your own. 105
- HERACLES** But it's obviously complete and utter rubbish.
- DIONYSUS** Stick to what you know – food!
- XANTHIAS** No mention of me!
- DIONYSUS** No. The reason I came here dressed like you was so that you could give me your contacts, the ones you used that time you went after Cerberus. Just in case I need them. I want the following: the ports, the bakeries, the porn-shops, the rest-areas, where to turn off and get a drink, the streets, the cities, the rooms to rent, what the landladies are like and where you won't find too many bed-bugs. 110
- XANTHIAS** No mention of me! 115
- HERACLES** You crazy fool, do *you* dare go as well?
- DIONYSUS** One last question, then. What is the quickest route to the underworld? Nothing too hot or cold.
- HERACLES** Hmm, which shall I mention first? Let's see. There is 120

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124 hemlock This plant could be ground to create a poison. An account of its use by the state to execute criminals is found in Plato's idealised description of Socrates' death (*Phaedo* 117e–18).

128 Ceramicus The potters' quarter in Athens (our word 'ceramic' comes from it) extending from the agora to and beyond the Dipylon gate. Appropriately, it incorporated part of the cemetery outside the walls. The **tall tower** (130) has not been identified, but this was the route taken by runners in ritual torch-races (132) held at night (see plan of Athens, p. x).

Homer's underworld

In Homer's *Odyssey* 10.508–14 (see also *Odyssey* 11 and 24, and *Iliad* 23.71–3), Circe directs Odysseus to the underworld: *But when you pass through Ocean in your ship, there lies a fertile shore and Persephone's grove with tall poplars and seed-shedding willows. Beach your boat . . . and go yourself to Hades' dank house, where Fire-blazing Phlegythos, and Cocytus, River of Screams, tributary of Styx, flow into Acheron.*

Death in Homer is bleak and frightening: unburied souls flit squeaking like bats; even those that are buried, who can *pass through Hades' gates* and *mingle with those beyond the river* are frail and bloodless. Homer mentions Cerberus briefly (see 466n) but not Charon (see p. 14 and illustration p. 16). Minos judges the dead and some (e.g. Tantalus, 1232n) are condemned, but the moral judgement of minor crooks is more characteristic of Orphic (1032–5n) than Homeric death, where heroes stride indiscriminately across asphodel meadows.

- What similarities to and differences from the Homeric world of the dead are there in Heracles' description (137–64)?

Eleusinian Mysteries

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* offers an alternative to Homer's bleak picture of death for those initiated into the goddess's Mysteries. A significant number of Athenians were initiated into annual rites celebrating the idea of rebirth and hope for the afterlife, based on the story of Demeter and Persephone (see 336n and '**Demeter**', p. 28). The ceremonies at the climax are not revealed by ancient sources, but remains of the sanctuary survive. Details of the initial sacrifices and the 22 km procession of initiates from Athens to Eleusis are known.

140 two obols The usual fee for the ferryman was one obol (173n), placed in the mouth of the dead. The term *diobelea* (two obols) had recently become widespread in Athens after a measure introduced by Cleophon (see 1504n) in 410 BC, which offered income relief to the poor. **Theseus** was the only Athenian known to have entered Hades.