

A Commerce in Imperfection

REBEKAH SPEARMAN

In his article “Tragedy, Comedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*,” James Redfield explains that the *Frogs* “itself is about political decline.”¹ Redfield views this decline as the result of unbalancing class relations and concludes that Dionysus chooses Aeschylus because “Aeschylus speaks to the power of the communal order.”² Rather than representing a sage judge, however, who may intervene in Athens’ jumbled polity, Dionysus, functioning as a kind of Everyman figure, plays the part of the polis itself. Thus, his indecision, fickleness, and general folly mirror the behavior of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War, typified by the Sicilian Expedition. Dionysus’ choice of Aeschylus is not so much a nod towards “the power of communal order” as it is surrender to grim necessity and an acknowledgement of the failure of communal order.

At Dionysus’ first appearance, he eschews the low humor characteristic of Old Comedy.³ Nevertheless, his plebeian tastes cannot help but show through. When Xanthias demands whether he should say

REBEKAH SPEARMAN is a Ph.D. student in Classics at the University of Chicago. She received her B.A. in Classical Philology, with an emphasis on Greek, from the University of Dallas. These days, she is interested in studying conflicts between poetry and political power. Hopefully, the wisdom she gains from the ancients will help her survive the ensuing, anti-intellectual tyranny in America.

¹ James Redfield, “Tragedy, Comedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*,” 113.

² Redfield, “Tragedy, Comedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*,” 121.

³ Old Comedy is characterized by what moderns might refer to as low-brow and slapstick humor; Aristophanes is considered the last exemplar of Old Comedy. In contrast to New Comedy (like Terrence, Plautus, and others) which is driven by situational humor, e.g. slaves mistaken for masters, lost twins, etc., Old Comedy relies strongly upon the absurd, jokes, physical humor, and innuendo.

“τι τῶν εἰωθότων (one of the accustomed things),”⁴ Dionysus begs him to say anything but “πιέζομαι (I’m full of bricks)” (3). Despite his attempt to put an end to such crass scatological humor, Dionysus is actually the one who makes the joke. Xanthias counters by asking “μηδ’ ἕτερον ἀστεῖόν τι (Why not something else urbane)” (5). Dionysus, however, cannot conceive of an urbane comment that is not a scatological joke and again makes the joke himself to prevent Xanthias from doing it. This repartee continues, peppered with Xanthias’ complaints about carrying Dionysus’ luggage, till Dionysus outraged asks whether “ὦν Διόνυσος, υἱὸς Σταμνίου / αὐτὸς βαδίζω καὶ πονῶ (being Dionysus, son of Winejug, I myself should walk and toil)” so that Xanthias, a slave, can be comfortable (22–23). Dionysus’ sense of self-worth is incongruous with his heritage. By identifying as the son of a winejug, Dionysus calls into question his own paternity and suggests that rather than being born of Zeus, he is the son of a tippler. Dionysus’ birth is not much loftier than the birth of a slave. Why, then, is he so avid to exert his authority? Dionysus’ pretensions are characteristic of the low-born, simple Everyman. Insecure in his social position, he finds it necessary to exert his superiority over the less fortunate.

Moreover, his motivations are decidedly low and irrational. In explaining the purpose of his journey to Hercules, Dionysus explains:

καὶ δῆτ’ ἐπὶ τῆς νεῶς ἀναγιγνώσκοντί μοι
τὴν Ἀνδρομέδαν πρὸς ἑμμαντὸν ἐξαίφνης πόθος
τὴν καρδίαν ἐπάταξε πῶς οἶει σφόδρα.

And then on the ship to me, as I read
the *Andromeda*, suddenly upon my heart a longing
fell as strong as you could say. (52–54)

Dionysus is unembarrassed to announce that while on campaign, he was safely reading Euripides. Furthermore, a *pothos* strikes him both suddenly and violently. Dionysus’ language suggests that his *pothos* is of the decidedly irrational variety. It impresses itself into his heart so swiftly that even if he wishes to, he would not be able to evaluate it. Hercules, however, is incapable of comprehending Dionysus’ *pothos*. Thus,

⁴ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1, hereafter cited in text.

Dionysus, fishing for a proper metaphor, asks Hercules “ἤδη ποτ’ ἐπεθύμησας ἐξαιφνης ἔτνονς (now have you ever suddenly longed for soup)” (62). Dionysus’ “πόθος / Εὐριπίδου (longing for Euripides)” (66-67) is “τοιουτοῖσι (of such a sort)” (66) as the desire for soup.

Like hunger, Dionysus’ *pothos* arises quickly and fades just as soon. Although his longing was initially strong enough to send Dionysus, like Orpheus, down to the dead for his love, by the end of the play, it is utterly extinguished. Dionysus does not bring Euripides back to Athens and even snubs him in the process. Dionysus’ fickle *pothos* for Euripides mirrors the Athenian *pothos* for Alcibiades and the Sicilian Invasion. After Nicias and Alcibiades have spoken about the invasion, Thucydides comments,⁵

καὶ ἔρωσ ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πᾶσιν ὁμοίως ἐκπλεύσαι: τοῖς μὲν γὰρ πρεσβυτέροις ὡς ἢ καταστρεψομένοις ἐφ’ ἃ ἔπλεον ἢ οὐδὲν ἂν σφαλεῖσαν μεγάλην δύναμιν, τοῖς δ’ ἐν τῇ ἡλικίᾳ τῆς τε ἀπούσης πόθῳ ὀψέως καὶ θεωρίας, καὶ εὐέλπιδες ὄντες σωθήσεσθαι.

And eros to sail away fell upon all equally—the old men [thinking] that either they would subdue [the places] to which they sailed, or that [their] great power would be overturned in no way; and those in their prime in longing for distant sights and missions, and being hopeful that they would be safe.⁶

What began as a *horme* (impulse)⁷ has become *eros* and *pothos*. An impulse has been transformed into fully-fledged desire. For Thucydides, desire in the political realm is not necessarily an evil, although Nicias aptly remarks, “ὅτι ἐπιθυμία μὲν ἐλάχιστα κατορθοῦνται, προνοία δὲ πλεῖστα (that by desire the fewest things succeed, while by forethought the most do).”⁸ Athenian inconsistency incapacitates the Sicilian Expedition. Although Alcibiades was willing to face charges for defacing the *hermai*

⁵ I recognize that the publication of the *Frogs* and the Sicilian Expedition are separated by a space of ten years. Moreover, Aristophanes could not have had this passage from Thucydides in mind. Nevertheless, I think the parallel helps illuminate the situation in Athens, as understood by Aristophanes, in the last years of the war.

⁶ Thucydides, *Historiae*, VI.24.

⁷ Thucydides, *Historiae*, VI.6: “καὶ ἐπὶ τοσὴνδε οὖσαν αὐτὴν οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι στρατεύειν ὠρμητο [and against it, being such as it was, the Athenians were impelled to wage war]”

⁸ Thucydides, *Historiae*, VI.13.

before setting sail, his enemies hasten his departure, waiting to press charges until Alcibiades' popularity declines.⁹ As a result, "χαλεπῶς οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐλάμβανον (the Athenians took it hard)."¹⁰ Demoralized by the immorality and perceived betrayal¹¹ of their beloved leader, the Athenian invasion of Sicily falls apart under the weak leadership of Nicias.

As in the Sicilian Invasion, inconsistency and a lack of foresight are indicative of Dionysus' expedition as well. Although he has procured the trappings of Hercules and an emboldened attitude, Dionysus lacks both plan and *pronoia* in undertaking the Underworld. He has no idea how to arrive at his destination and is shocked when Hercules advises him that the fastest road to the Underworld is suicide. Even though the first two methods Hercules advises are hanging and hemlock (116-126), Dionysus, nevertheless, does not anticipate what Hercules is advising him to do, when Hercules orders Dionysus, "ἀναβὰς ἐπὶ τὸν πύργον τὸν ὑψηλὸν (Climb up to the lofty tower)" (130).

Moreover, once Dionysus has descended to the dead, every time he feels threatened on account of his assumed identity, he insists on switching costumes with Xanthias. When Aeacus, who is still angry at Hercules for his theft of Cerberus, threatens Dionysus, he commands Xanthias:

*ἴθι νῦν ἐπειδὴ ληματίας κἀνδρείος εἶ,
σὺ μὲν γενοῦ γὰρ τὸ ρόπαλον τουτὶ λαβῶν
καὶ τὴν λεοντήν, εἴπερ ἀφοβόσπλαγχνος εἶ:
ἐγὼ δ' ἔσομαι σοι σκευοφόρος ἐν τῷ μέρει.*

Come now, since you're high-spirited and brave,
and you be me, taking this here club
and the lionskin, if you're fearless:
and I will be the porter in your place. (494-497)

Dionysus is quick to shift responsibility from himself in a precarious situation, as Athens blames Alcibiades for the failure in Sicily, though the city herself was responsible for his recall. Happy to have a brave and high-

⁹ Thucydides, *Historiae*, VI.29.

¹⁰ Thucydides, *Historiae*, VI.61.

¹¹ Thucydides, *Historiae*, VI.61: In addition to charges of impiety, in Alcibiades' absence, he is associated with a perceived plot to betray the city to the Peloponnesians.

spirited leader protect him in moments of crisis, Dionysus is just as happy to oust his defender when the allotment of rewards is in question (522–525).¹² Contrary to Aeschylus' advice about Alcibiades,¹³ Dionysus is unwilling to treat his lion-clad defender like the lion he is. This fickleness results in trouble both for Dionysus and Xanthias. For, when Dionysus at last reveals his true divine identity, no one believes him, and he and Xanthias are both beaten to test their identities (628–643).

While Dionysus' woes and longings may seem to be a strictly personal affair, Aristophanes illustrates in the *parabasis*, the section of Old Comedy in which the chorus breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience (though, in the *Frogs*, the *parabasis* does not strictly fit Old Comedy's mould), how the desires of the citizenry inevitably intersect with the behavior of the state. At the outset of the play, Dionysus sets off for the Underworld on a personal quest for a good tragedian. He was reading (*ἀναγιγνώσκοντι*) (52) Euripides when it occurred to him to go, thereby demonstrating that the consumption of art was for Dionysus a private matter. In the Underworld, however, the status of art has taken on political implications. While elaborating upon the pleasures of being a slave, a household slave of the Underworld reveals to Xanthias, “*πρᾶγμα, πρᾶγμα μέγα κεκίνηται, μέγα / ἐν τοῖς νεκροῖς καὶ στάσις πολλή πάνυ* (A matter, a great matter has been stirred up, great / among the dead and a whole lot of civil strife)” (759–760). As above, so below. In the aftermath of the Sicilian Expedition and the overthrow of the Four Hundred, soon to be followed by the end of the Peloponnesian War, Athens was herself in upheaval. Aristophanes cleverly mirrors the *stasis* of the living among the dead: the Underworld is in disharmony because of a plethora of high-spirited and brave poets. Euripides demands the poetic throne, though Aeschylus currently holds it.

This contention is worsened by the fact that the poets cannot agree upon a man wise enough to judge between them. When Xanthias inquires into the matter, the household slave replies: “*τοῦτ' ἦν δύσκολον: / σοφῶν γὰρ ἀνδρῶν ἀπορίαν ἠύρισκέτην* (this was troublesome: / for the pair of them were finding a lack [*aporia*] of wise men)” (805–807). The poets are

¹² When a slavegirl offers the Xanthian Hercules her favors, Dionysus immediately insists on exchanging costumes again.

¹³ “*μάλιστα μὲν λέοντα μὴν πόλει τρέφειν' / ἦν δ' ἔκτραφή τις, τοῖς τρόποις ὑπηρετεῖν.* (It's best not to rear a lion in your state, but if one grows up, conform to its ways.)” Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1431–1432.

tightly connected by the dual, suggesting that the difference between them is more ephemeral than they themselves know. Nevertheless, they demand a judge to distinguish them. Moreover, the *polis* demands a judge to distinguish them, for “ὁ δῆμος ἀνεβόα κρίσιν ποεῖν / ὁπότερος εἴη τὴν τέχνην σοφώτερος (the *demos* was calling out to put to the test which of the two was wiser at his art)” (779-780). There is, moreover, an *aporia* in the deceased *demos*. The present *stasis* results from disputes in the allotment of scarce resources, though in this case, the resource is wisdom. Thus, upon his arrival, Dionysus’ journey takes on a new tone. It is no longer a merely personal endeavor, for “εἶτα τῶ σῶ δεσπότη / ἐπέτρεψαν, ὅτι τὴ τῆς τέχνης ἔμπειρος ἦν (then they turned to your master, because he was experienced in the art)” (810-811). Dionysus has assumed the role of savior: he must relieve the Underworld of *stasis* by judging between the poets.

Nevertheless, settling upon a judge does not ease the situation. After a prolonged litany of absurd contests, Dionysus declares:

ἄνδρες φίλοι, κἀγὼ μὲν αὐτοὺς οὐ κρίνω.
οὐ γὰρ δι’ ἔχθρας οὐδετέρῳ γενήσομαι
τὸν μὲν ἡγοῦμαι σοφόν, τῶ δ’ ἥδομαι.

The men are dear, and I will not judge them.
For I will not become hateful to either one;
for the one I consider wise, but the other I enjoy. (1411–1413)

Although Dionysus was hoped to relieve the city from its *aporia*, he finds himself entangled in it, unable to judge, to separate good from evil. Dionysus’ *pothos* has cooled, and he feels *philia* for both men. He cleverly compliments both of them, leaving it unclear, however, which compliment was intended for which man. After all, the compliments are also veiled insults. To suggest that a playwright is wise but not enjoyable or vice versa is to say that he is somehow deficient in his craft, only half a playwright.

Irritated by Dionysus’ ineffectiveness, Pluto at last emerges on stage, asking “οὐδὲν ἄρα πράξεις ὧνπερ ἦλθες οὐνεκα (Will you then do nothing on account of which you came)” (1413). Although Dionysus did not come with the intent to judge, he did intend to take one poet away,

thereby alleviating Pluto's civil unrest. The practical politician, Pluto does not seem to care which poet Dionysus takes; rather, he seems impatient for the salvific guest to go away, remarking, "τὸν ἕτερον λαβὼν ἄπει, / ὅποτερον ἂν κρίνης, ἴν' ἔλθῃς μὴ μάτην (Taking the other one, go away, whichever one you choose, so that you might not have come in vain)" (1415–1416). The justice of the result is entirely unessential; what matters is that there is a result. This emphasis on effectiveness over justice suggests a tacit criticism of Athens' conduct in recent affairs. She punishes strong leaders for being strong (Alcibiades and Phrynichus) and then bemoans the absence of great men when she needs them.

Indeed, Aristophanes makes explicit this subtext about Alcibiades, when Dionysus, in a last effort to distinguish between the tragedians, demands "πρῶτον μὲν οὖν περὶ Ἀλκιβιάδου τί ν' ἔχετον / γνώμην ἐκάτερος; ἢ πόλις γὰρ δυστοκεῖ (First then about Alcibiades what opinion do each of you two have? For the city is in labor)" (1422–1423). Alcibiades was, at this time, in exile because of his defeat the year before at Notium.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the city is still in labor and having a hard time of it on his account. Aristophanes' choice in words suggests something erotic in the case for Alcibiades. What is the city trying to give birth to? Surely not Alcibiades. When Aeschylus asks what the city thinks of Alcibiades,¹⁵ Dionysus explains that "ποθεῖ μὲν, ἐχθαίρει δέ, βούλεται ν δ' ἔχειν (First she desires him, then hates him, then wishes to have him)" (1425). Most translators take *echein* to mean "have him back," but given Aristophanes' use of erotic language in this section, it seems that *echein* also carries erotic implications. In the *Symposium*, Socrates explains that *eros* is not just desire for the beautiful things, but that they belong to oneself.¹⁶ Moreover, *echein* can mean to have a person as a spouse or lover.¹⁷ The city longs for Alcibiades, and, even as she hates him, she wishes to hold him. Thus, we wonder if the city is not, in fact, in labor with Alcibiades' child. The city, long accustomed to democracy, struggles to accept the product of her own *eros* for a tyrannical ruler.

To Dionysus' question, Euripides naively replies:

¹⁴ Xenophon, *Hellenica*, I.5.

¹⁵ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1424: "ἔχει δὲ περὶ αὐτοῦ τίνα γνώμην; [What opinion does she have about him?]"

¹⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 204d

¹⁷ LSJ, "ἔχω," A.I.4: "have to wife or as husband (usu. without γυναῖκα, ἄνδρα)".

μισῶ πολίτην, ὅστις ὠφελεῖν πάτραν
βραδύς φανείται, μεγάλα δὲ βλάπτειν ταχύς,
καὶ πόριμον αὐτῷ, τῇ πόλει δ' ἀμήχανον.

I hate the citizen, who seems slow to help his fatherland, and swift to hinder great things; who is resourceful for himself, but helpless for the city. (1427–1429)

Euripides still sees Alcibiades as a mere citizen, who ought to obey and assist the whims of the city. He does not recognize that Athens has changed; she can no longer afford to treat her leaders so heavy-handedly. In contrast to Euripides' response, Aeschylus' riddle seems to acknowledge the anti-democratic shift taking place in Athens: “*μάλιστα μὲν λέοντα μὴ ἴν πόλει τρέφειν, / ἣν δ' ἔκτραφῆ τις, τοῖς τρόποις ὑπηρετεῖν* (Best then not to raise a lion in the city, / but if one grows up, accommodate his ways)” (1431–1432). While Aeschylus acknowledges that it is best (*malista*) not to rear a lion in the state, he adds that if it happens, the city must tailor itself to the new regime and not vice versa. Aeschylus is traditional in that he does not necessarily want a tyrannical regime, but he is progressive inasmuch as he recognizes the impossibility of ignoring political changes or simply reverting to past ways.

Despite the clarity of Aeschylus' response, Dionysus still has a hard time deciding. Thus, Dionysus demands actual advice of what the city ought to do. Euripides answers with whimsical and nonsensical advice.¹⁸ But Aeschylus answers with another question, asking what the city does to her good citizens and to her wicked ones (1454–1457). To which Dionysus replies that she “*μισεῖ κάκιστα* (hates most evilly)” (1456) the good, while she “*χρηται πρὸς βίαν* (makes use of by force)” (1457) the evil. The city makes its decisions out of necessity, not virtue. When Dionysus asks again how the city might be saved (1449–1450), Aeschylus replies:

τῆν γῆν ὅταν νομίσωσι τὴν τῶν πολεμίων
εἶναι σφέτεραν, τὴν δὲ σφετέραν τῶν πολεμίων,
πόρον δὲ τὰς ναῦς, ἀπορίαν δὲ τὸν πόρον.

¹⁸ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1440–1441: “If they had a sea battle, and they had little vinegar bottles, they could squirt them into the eyes of their enemies.”

Whenever they consider their enemies land to be their own, and their own to be their enemies, and their fleet to be their wealth, and their wealth to be want. (1463–1465)

Lacking the apodosis, it is hard to make sense of Aeschylus' response. But, taken closely with Dionysus' question, "we would be saved" is the implied apodosis. Aeschylus seems to be suggesting that Athens must reinstate expansionist and militaristic policies. Again, Aeschylus is affirming the tendencies of the younger generation. His advice supports Alcibiadian over Nician foreign policy.

Poised to make a decision, Dionysus explains he will choose "ὄνπερ ἢ ψυχὴ θέλει (whichever my soul wishes)" (1468). He no longer longs (*pothei*) for either poet; he merely wishes one. At that, Euripides reminds him of his earlier intentions and begs that he "αἶρου τοὺς φίλους (choose friends)" (1470). But Dionysus parodies Euripides' own words and replies that "ἡ γλῶττ' ὀμώμοκ', Αἰσχύλον δ' αἰρήσομαι (the tongue swore, and I will choose Aeschylus)" (1471). Ironically, Hippolytus speaks these words in the heat of passion and does not actually carry through in breaking his oath. Dionysus, however, does. While Dionysus previously viewed Euripides as a friend and even beloved, he now chooses instead to make use of Aeschylus. Outraged, Euripides, while punning on Aeschylus' name, asks "αἰσχιστον ἔργον προσβλέπεις μ' εἰργασμένος (Having done a most shameful deed, you still look at me)" (1474). But Dionysus flippantly asks "τί δ' αἰσχρόν, ἦν μὴ τοῖς θεωμένοις δοκῆ (What's shameful, if it doesn't seem that way to the viewers)" (1475). Dionysus' choice betrays the inherently unjust nature of politics. Dionysus, the Everyman, the people, is not bound by oaths or promises; right is determined by consensus. If the viewers accept it, it is acceptable.

Dionysus' choice of Aeschylus is not a simple matter of older being better. On the one hand, his selection is an act of popular sovereignty, a manifestation of democracy's endurance; the judgment of the majority trumps oaths or obligations. But, on the other hand, Dionysus' choice characterizes the political shift occurring in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Old-fashioned ideals are sacrificed to necessity. The age of Harmodius and Aristogeiton¹⁹ is passed. The

¹⁹ In the midst of his discussion of the Sicilian Invasion, Thucydides digresses to discuss Harmodius and Aristogeiton, thereby drawing a distinction between the kinds of high-

Athenian people are no longer suited to be free, and as such, Aeschylus, once a bastion of aristocratic values, advocates the acceptance of tyranny.

spirited youth that once characterized Athens and the youth of the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides VI.54–59).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aristophanes. *Frogs*. Edited by Sir Kenneth Dover. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Dover, Kenneth. Introduction to *Frogs*, by Aristophanes, 1-38. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Liddell, Henry G. and Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon: With a Revised Supplement 9th Edition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

Plato. *Symposium*. Edited by Gilbert P. Rose. Bryn Mawr, PA: Bryn Mawr Commentaries, 1985.

Redfield, James. "Comedy, Tragedy, and Politics in Aristophanes' 'Frogs'." *Chicago Review* 15, no. 4 (1962): 107-121.

Thucydides. *Historiae* in two volumes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942.

Xenophon. *Xenophontis opera omnia*, Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.