The Frogs

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARISTOPHANES

Aristophanes was born in Athens around 446 B.C.E. He was a comic playwright and poet whose plays are considered defining works of the Old Comedy period of ancient Greek comedy—in fact, Aristophanes is the only playwright of this phase of comic drama whose works are not lost, and he and his legacy are chiefly responsible for Greek comedy's continued development following the fall of Athens to Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian War (Greek tragedy, on the other hand, ceased to evolve following the deaths of tragic playwrights Sophocles and Euripides). Despite the lasting influence of his work, not much is known of Aristophanes's life; indeed, scholars know more about his plays than about the playwright himself, and what little they do know they have derived from references he makes in his plays. Aristophanes wrote plays to be performed at the Lenaia and the Dionysia, dramatic festivals that took place in Athens. His career began in 427 B.C.E., when he won second place at the Dionysia for his first play, *The Banqueters*. He later won first prize at the same festival with his following play, *The Babylonians* (both plays are now lost). He's known for caricaturing prominent contemporary artists and politicians in his works, notably the tragedian Euripides (whom he caricatures in *The Frogs*). Despite the political themes that run through his plays, however, that Aristophanes survived the Peloponnesian War suggests he was not directly involved in politics. Other notable features of Aristophanes's works are his witty dialogue, satirical themes, and plentiful allusions to relevant cultural and political subjects of the time. Of the 40 comedies Aristophanes wrote, 11 survive, along with fragments of other of his plays.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first performance of *The Frogs* took place in 405 B.C.E., just one year before the end of the Peloponnesian War, a war waged between Athens and Sparta, the two most powerful city-states of ancient Greece. Athens's surrender in 404 B.C.E. shifted control of ancient Greece from Athens to Sparta. The Peloponnesian War began in 431 B.C.E. following a short-lived period of unstable peace between rival city-states Sparta and Athens when the Athenians violated the terms of the Thirty Years' Treaty (signed in 445 B.C.E.), leading Sparta to declare war. In 423 B.C.E., Athens and Sparta signed a peace treaty, the Peace of Nicias; though meant to last for 50 years, conflict resumed in 415 B.C.E. when Athens launched an attack against Sicily. Spartans assisted the Sicilian city of Syracuse and defeated the Athenian army handily. From there, Athens continued to experience setbacks. In 411 B.C.E., Athenian democracy was briefly overthrown in an oligarchical revolt. Though the Athenian navy restored the democracy by the end of that year, reinstated democratic leaders refused to accept Spartan peace offers. In 405, the Spartan fleet (led by Lysander) defeated the Athenian navy at the Battle of Aegospotami and held Athens under siege, forcing Athens to surrender to Sparta in 404 B.C.E.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Frogs, with its ample wit and satire, has much in common with other comedies by Aristophanes. *Acharnians*, the earliest of Aristophanes's surviving comedies, is a work of satire against pro-war politicians. *Wasps* (422 B.C.E.), Aristophanes's fourth surviving play, satirizes Cleon, an Athenian general in the Peloponnesian War. Aristophanes wrote *Lysistrata* (first performed in 411 B.C.E.) after a coup overthrew Athens's democratic government and briefly replaced it with an oligarchy. The comedy follows a woman, Lysistrata, who sets out to end the Peloponnesian War by convincing all the women of the land to withhold sex from men in an attempt to get the warring men to declare peace. In *The Frogs*, during Euripides and Aeschylus's competition in Hades, each poet references several of their rival's and their own plays. Aeschylus cites his *Seven Against Thebes* as an example of a play that inspired Athenians to go to war. *Seven Against Thebes* was produced in 468 or 467 B.C.E. and follows Oedipus's son Polynices's efforts to take Thebes from his brother Eteocles. The brothers face each other in a dual at the end of the play, and both die. In *The Frogs*, as Aeschylus praises his own plays for their noble themes and heroic characters, he criticizes Euripides's plays for their lurid subject matters and unnoble characters. He alludes to Euripides's *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.E.), which is about Phaedra, a married woman who falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus and makes false accusations against him when he rejects her.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Frogs
- **When Written:** 405 B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** First performed at the Lenaia in 405 B.C.E.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Greek Comedy
- **Genre:** Drama, Comedy, Satire
- **Setting:** Athens, Greece and Hades
- **Climax:** Dionysus deems Aeschylus the superior poet and chooses him to bring back to save Athens.

- **Antagonist:** Contemporary playwrights in Classical Athens

EXTRA CREDIT

Top Frog. *The Frogs* was first performed in 405 B.C.E. at the Lenaia, an annual festival and dramatic competition held in Athens, where it received first place.

Musical Frogs. *The Frogs* was adapted as a musical by Stephen Sondheim and Burt Shevelove. The first production took place in 1974 and was performed by the Yale Repertory Theatre in the Yale swimming pool.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dionysus and his slave Xanthias head toward the house of Heracles, Dionysus's half-brother. Xanthias, who is carrying the pair's luggage, rides on a donkey. The rather "effeminate" Dionysus walks beside him, looking absurd dressed in the robe and lion skin he has donned to disguise himself as Heracles. Dionysus laments the present state of Athenian drama—he's unimpressed with today's comic poets, especially compared to the older generation of great tragedians, all of whom have died. This, as it happens, is the reason he and Xanthias are headed to Heracles's house: Dionysus wants to go to Hades to find Euripides, one of the great tragedians who has recently died, and bring him back from the dead so that he can save Athens. But first, he must ask Heracles, who has been to Hades before to retrieve Cerberus, for directions.

Dionysus and Xanthias arrive at Heracles's house. Heracles is so amused by Dionysus's disguise that he falls to the floor in laughter. He recovers, however, and gives Dionysus directions to get to Hades. Dionysus and Xanthias then continue their journey.

Dionysus and Xanthias reach the big lake Heracles told them about and spot the ferryman, Charon. Charon allows Dionysus onto the ferry but prohibits Xanthias from boarding, explaining that he doesn't carry slaves—he says Xanthias can meet them near the Withering Stone. Reluctantly, Xanthias disappears into the darkness. Charon makes Dionysus row the ferry, and incompetent Dionysus struggles with the task. Just as he's settled into a rhythm, he's interrupted by singing frogs (Frog-Chorus) that perform the play's first choral interlude (parodos). Annoyed at the frogs' singing and croaking, Dionysus argues with the frogs and tries to compete with their croaking and singing, but the ferry reaches land before a winner can be determined. Dionysus pays Charon, steps back onto land, and reunites with Xanthias.

Dionysus and Xanthias continue their journey. It's exceptionally dark and spooky by this point, and cowardly Dionysus soils himself out of fear. Suddenly, they hear flute-playing in the distance and see an approaching crowd (Initiate-Chorus); Xanthias recognizes them as the Initiates Heracles said would give them directions to Pluto's palace. Dionysus and Xanthias hide as the Initiates sing, dance, and prepare their sacrificial meal. The Initiate-Chorus addresses the audience and condemns uninitiated, corrupt "heathens" who don't understand morality or "Conventions of Comedy." Dionysus and Xanthias emerge from their hiding place to ask the Initiates for directions to Pluto's palace, which luckily turns out to be nearby.

Dionysus and Xanthias arrive at Pluto's palace, where Aeacus, the frightening doorkeeper to Hades, greets them at the door. Aeacus, mistaking Dionysus for Heracles (due to Dionysus's Heracles disguise) angrily threatens to torture Dionysus-as-Heracles as punishment for Heracles's theft of Cerberus. While Aeacus goes back inside to summon monsters and gather torture devices, cowardly Dionysus begs Xanthias to trade clothing with him. Xanthias, who is far braver than Dionysus, does so. But the next time the door opens, it's not Aeacus who emerges but Persephone's maid, who happily greets Xanthias-as-Heracles and announces that Persephone is preparing a great feast in Heracles's honor. After she goes inside, Dionysus begs Xanthias to switch costumes once more. But just as they do so, two landladies pass by and berate Dionysus-as-Xanthias for other questionable acts Heracles committed when he was in Hades. Dionysus makes Xanthias trade costumes yet again, only this time Aeacus returns to torture Heracles. Xanthias-as-Heracles offers his "slave" (Dionysus) for Aeacus to torture instead. Panicked, Dionysus comes clean about his true identity—but not before Aeacus insists on flogging Xanthias and Dionysus to determine which is telling the truth (whoever is really a god wouldn't feel any pain from the flogging). Unable to determine whether Xanthias or Dionysus is telling the truth, Aeacus brings them to his masters to verify that Dionysus is indeed a god.

The action picks up after Pluto has identified Dionysus and set the record straight. Xanthias and Pluto's slave are doing chores; they bond over their shared love of complaining about and spreading rumors about their masters. Xanthias hears yelling, and Pluto's slave explains that the poets Aeschylus and Euripides are sparring over which of them is worthier of holding a chair in Pluto's Great Hall (Pluto reserves a chair for whoever is best in their field). Aeschylus had long held the chair, but ever since Euripides died, he's been threatening to take it away from Aeschylus. To settle the dispute, Pluto has decided to hold a contest to test the poets' skill; the contest is set to begin shortly, and Dionysus will be the judge. Pluto will provide various measuring implements, including a **scale**, to "weigh" the poetry. Xanthias and Pluto's slave exit so the contest can begin.

Dionysus and Pluto enter and take their seats. Then Euripides and Aeschylus take the stage. Enslaved people enter next, carrying tools to weigh and measure the poets' poetry. The Chorus introduces the competitors, praising Euripides's wit

and comparing Aeschylus's words to "weapons." Euripides and Aeschylus take turns quoting and praising their own poetry and criticizing each other's. Euripides claims that his poetry is superior because it's more logical. Also, it's written in everyday language and features ordinary characters that commoners can understand. Aeschylus claims that his poetry is better: it's written in an elevated style and features noble, heroic characters that teach audiences how to be virtuous and what an ideal world should look like. Aeschylus criticizes Euripides's plays for their predictable prologues. Euripides responds by criticizing Aeschylus's boring songwriting. Throughout the contest, Dionysus acts as judge and moderator, offering thoughtful commentary and interjecting to settle disputes that become too heated.

Eventually, Pluto orders the poets to recite some lines of their own poetry and then place their hand on the scale, which will tilt lower to determine which poet has recited "weightier" poetry. They repeat this process twice, with the scale tilting in Aeschylus's favor each time. Even so, Dionysus remains unable to decide which poet is better. Finally, he says that whichever poet can offer better advice on how to save Athens will be the winner. Euripides offers a compelling but vague answer about how Athenians should question everything and trust no one. Aeschylus offers more concrete advice, suggesting that Athens should elect better leaders and strengthen their navy. Still, Dionysus remains conflicted and decides that he'll "select the man [his] soul desires," which turns out to be Aeschylus, much to Euripides's chagrin. Euripides is removed from the arena, and Pluto invites Dionysus and Aeschylus inside to celebrate Aeschylus's victory. Afterward, he wishes them a safe journey back and good luck saving Athens.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dionysus – Dionysus is the god of theater and is the play's protagonist. Unhappy with the present state of Athenian drama, politics, and culture, Dionysus, accompanied by Xanthias, a man he has enslaved, journeys to Hades to bring the recently deceased tragedian Euripides back from the dead. Though a god, Dionysus is a foppish, cowardly, and rather incompetent character for most of the play, and Xanthias repeatedly outwits him. However, during Euripides and Aeschylus's contest to determine which is the superior tragedian, Dionysus proves himself to be a knowledgeable and competent judge of poetry. Still, when it comes time for Dionysus to choose whether Euripides or Aeschylus writes "weightier" poetry (and thus, whether he will bring Euripides or Aeschylus back from the dead), he ultimately finds himself unable to choose between the two poets. He ends up disregarding all the literary criticism the poets have engaged in over the course of their contest, opting instead to bring back the poet that his "soul desires," which perhaps suggests that poetry's ability to inspire great emotion is at least as important as any of its technical merits. In the end, though Dionysus initially traveled to Hades to find and revive Euripides, he deems Aeschylus the victor and the poet whose craft and insight are best suited to help Athens in its time of need.

Xanthias – Although Xanthias is a man Dionysus has enslaved (and thus, he is socially inferior to Dionysus, a god), he's wittier and braver than Dionysus, and he undermines, complains about, and outwits Dionysus at every opportunity he gets. In Hades, Xanthias and Pluto's slave bond over their mutual enjoyment of complaining and spreading rumors about their masters. Though Dionysus is a god, he appears "effeminate" and acts incompetently, and he relies on his Heracles disguise to exude the outward appearance of power and bravery—traits that Xanthias possesses, but which his low social status obscures. Dionysus demands that Xanthias trade costumes with him multiple times throughout the play, often in an attempt to evade punishment, as when Aeacus threatens to torture "Heracles" for theft—hearing this and fearing for his wellbeing, Dionysus demands that Xanthias swap costumes with him and endure punishment in Dionysus's place. While on the one hand Xanthias and Dionysus's frequent costume-swapping is played for comedic effect, it also makes a statement about identity and how the outward appearance of greatness can obscure a person's (and particularly a political leader's) shortcomings.

Euripides – One of the great Greek tragic playwrights, Euripides died in 406 B.C.E., the year before *The Frogs*'s first performance. In the play, Dionysus, longing for the poetry of the late tragedian (and finding the comedy that is popular in present-day Athens to be lackluster), travels to Hades to find and revive Euripides, hoping the poet will be able to restore power and greatness to the city and its culture. Since his recent death (and subsequent arrival in Hades), Euripides has been vying for Aeschylus's chair in Pluto's Great Hall. To settle their dispute, Pluto arranges for the poets to compete against each other to determine who is the better poet (and thus worthier of a coveted spot in his court). The winner of the contest will accompany Dionysus to the land of the living to save Athens. During the contest, Euripides praises his own poetry for its wit and for its use of everyday language that ordinary people can understand. In response to Aeschylus's claim that Euripides's prologues are overly predictable, Euripides attacks Aeschylus for his boring songwriting. In the end, though Dionysus originally came to Hades to revive Euripides, he ends up declaring Aeschylus the winner, much to Euripides's chagrin.

Aeschylus – One of the great Greek tragic playwrights, Aeschylus died around 456 B.C.E., roughly 50 years before *The Frogs*'s first performance in 405 B.C.E. In the play, conflict arises between Aeschylus and Euripides when Euripides, who has only recently died and come to Hades, threatens to steal

Aeschylus's coveted chair in Pluto's Great Hall. The poets face each other in a contest, judged by Dionysus, to determine which of them composes "weightier" poetry; the winner of the contest will take over Aeschylus's chair and return to the land of the living with Dionysus to restore Athens to its former glory. During the contest, Aeschylus praises his own poetry for featuring noble, heroic characters that audiences can look up to. Twice, the scale brought in to "weigh" the value of Aeschylus's and Euripides's poetry deems Aeschylus the superior poet. When as a final test Dionysus asks both poets what must be done to save Athens, Aeschylus offers the practical advice that Athenians should put nobler people in office and strengthen their navy. Though Dionysus originally came to Hades with intentions of bringing back Euripides, he ends up choosing Aeschylus, whose poetry Dionysus's "soul desires," instead.

Pluto – Pluto is the ruler of Hades. He organizes a contest to determine whether Euripides or Aeschylus is the superior poet; the winner will take over Aeschylus's chair in Pluto's Great Hall, and he'll also journey back to the land of the living with Dionysus to save Athens. At the end of the play, after Dionysus has deemed Aeschylus the winner, Pluto congratulates Aeschylus and wishes him luck restoring Athens to its former glory.

Alcibiades – Alcibiades doesn't appear in the play, but he's referenced in passing. He was an important (but controversial) Athenian general who was arrested in 415 B.C.E. for profaning the Mysteries. After his arrest, he joined the Spartans for a time until he was disgraced following an alleged affair. After defeating the oligarchs who overthrew Athenian democracy in 411, he was reinstated in Athens in 407—only to have his enemies take away his title once more. At the time of *The Frogs*'s first performance, he was a highly controversial figure, and Athenians were divided over whether or not to reinstate him.

Sophocles – One of the great Greek tragic playwrights, Sophocles died around 405 or 406 B.C.E., around the same time as Euripides. For decades, he was the most celebrated playwright of Athens. Sophocles doesn't appear as a character in *The Frogs*, but he's mentioned in passing. At the end of the play, Aeschylus asks Pluto to have Sophocles look after Aeschylus's chair in the great hall while he (Aeschylus) travels back to the land of the living with Dionysus.

Frog-Chorus – As Dionysus rows Charon's ferry across a large lake to Hades, he encounters a chorus of singing, croaking frogs whose song serves as the play's first choral interlude. Growing steadily more annoyed with the frogs, Dionysus argues with the frogs and tries to compete with them, offering his own lyrics and croaks, but the ferry reaches land before anyone can be declared the winner of the contest.

Initiate-Chorus – On their way to Hades, Dionysus and Xanthias encounter a group of Initiates engaged in a sacrificial feast and procession to honor "Iacchus" (a deity associated with Dionysus). The Initiates perform the parodos that comprises the play's main choral interlude. Per Heracles's suggestion, Dionysus asks the Initiates for directions to Pluto's palace, which they give him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Chorus – Throughout the play, the Chorus assumes numerous roles, including the Frog-Chorus and the Initiate-Chorus. In their various roles, the Chorus comments on events of the play and presents Aristophanes's views on political, cultural, and social arguments of the day.

Aeacus – Aeacus is the intimidating gatekeeper of Hades. When Dionysus and Xanthias arrive at Pluto's palace, Aeacus mistakes Dionysus for Heracles (Dionysus is disguised as Heracles) and berates him for stealing Cerberus the hell hound. Aeacus threatens to torture Dionysus (whom he thinks is Heracles) in retaliation.

Heracles – Heracles is Dionysus's half-brother and a divine hero in Greek mythology. Knowing that Heracles successfully traveled to and returned from Hades, Dionysus approaches Heracles at the beginning of the play for advice on how to get to Hades.

Pluto's Slave – Pluto's slave bonds with Xanthias over their mutual love of complaining about and spreading rumors about their masters.

Charon – Charon is the ferryman who transports Dionysus across the big lake to Hades.

Two Landladies – When Dionysus and Xanthias arrive at Pluto's palace, they encounter two landladies who, having mistaken Dionysus for Heracles (Dionysus is disguised as Heracles), berate him for the rude acts Heracles apparently committed when he was in Hades.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

OLD VS. NEW

In Aristophanes's *The Frogs*, Dionysus (the god of theater) strongly believes that the comic playwrights currently living in Athens simply don't compare to the famous tragedian Euripides, who recently died. Dionysus thinks Euripides and the older generation of tragedians taught Athenians how to live virtuously and be good citizens. In this way, Dionysus's rejection of contemporary

comic playwrights reflects his (and Aristophanes's) disdain for contemporary Athenian culture, which he considers debased and degraded—and which he blames for Athens's inevitable demise. Athens had been fighting against Sparta in the Peloponnesian War since 431 B.C.E. and was on the verge of collapse by the time *The Frogs* was first performed in 405 B.C.E. Indeed, at the time of the play's first performance, Athens was just one year away from completely falling to Spartan control. Against this political backdrop, *The Frogs* criticizes the way Athenians have left behind traditional values, and the play's argument against newness and change essentially functions as a rejection of the shifting political order, as Aristophanes implies that Athens is in its present state of political turmoil because it has lost touch with its roots.

In *The Frog*'s opening scene, Xanthias makes a crass joke about farting so intensely that it blows the luggage he's carrying off his back, which, he observes, is the kind of comedy that "usually happens" in contemporary comedies. In response, an unamused Dionysus remarks that he "come[s] away more than a year older" each time he sees a play that employs this type of humor. Thus, from the start, *The Frogs* establishes contemporary comedy as vapid and even harmful. In the days when great tragic playwrights—Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus—reigned supreme, by contrast, Athenians were exposed to plays that explicitly spelled out to them what they should care about and how they should act in order to be good citizens. In the parabasis (the part of Ancient Greek Comedy in which the chorus addresses the audience directly to comment on the play's main ideas), the Chorus calls Athenians "misguided souls" who no longer know how to differentiate between good, noble people and scoundrels. It compares Athenians' judgment of character to the way they "treat [their] money," noting how they used to value gold coins but now trade in "phony silver-plated coppers." If Athens wants to defeat Sparta and regain its former glory, then citizens need to become better judges of character—and the best way to do this is by exposing themselves to works of art that feature noble, heroic characters whose behavior they can emulate. Thus, in *The Frogs*, Aristophanes attributes Athens's degraded, politically vulnerable state to the phasing out of an older, tragic tradition of poetry and drama. In a broader sense, then, *The Frogs* suggests that Athens will only flourish if citizens reject the new ways and turn back to the old.

THE VALUE OF ART

In *The Frogs*, Aristophanes suggests that poetry—and art in general—is more than a mere source of entertainment. Not long after Dionysus and Xanthias arrive in Hades, the audience learns that recently deceased tragedians Euripides and Aeschylus are engaged in an impassioned dispute over which poet will lay claim to a coveted chair in Pluto's great hall. To settle their dispute, Euripides and Aeschylus compete in a contest to prove which poet writes "weightier" verse and therefore deserves the coveted chair. Upon Dionysus's arrival, Pluto announces that he will allow the winner of the contest to return to Athens with Dionysus in order to save the struggling, morally debased city. During their contest, Euripides and Aeschylus scathingly critique each other's poetry while lauding the merits and artistic value of their own. In particular, they argue about what the purpose of poetry should be, and which of them produces poetry that best embodies this purpose. Aeschylus asserts that his plays feature noble, heroic characters who serve as role models for his audience; as a whole, then, his plays serve as models for how to behave. Euripides, when Aeschylus asks him what makes a good poet, replies that good poets "teach people how to be better citizens." Rather than present an idealized version of how the world ought to be, as Aeschylus claims his poetry does, Euripides asserts that his poetry educates people by teaching them to think: to question everything and engage in debate, and through this, better understand the world the world around them. Though Aeschylus and Euripides criticize each other's methods, they agree that poetry should teach people how to live virtuously and be good citizens. The play reinforces this position, with Dionysus bringing the winner of their contest (Aeschylus, as it turns out) back to Athens to save the collapsing city from ruin. Thus, Aristophanes uses the play to assert that art is a valuable tool that can instill in people the morals and values a society needs to thrive.

LITERARY CRITICISM

Though *The Frogs* is a comedy, it also serves as an example of what would come to be known as criticism. The play's central drama involves a contest between recently deceased tragedians Euripides and Aeschylus in which they critique each other's poetry while reciting and arguing for the stylistic, structural, and thematic merits of their own work. It's only after hearing this critical analysis that Dionysus decides which man is the better poet—and thus, which man is better suited to reform Athenians and save their swiftly collapsing, morally debased city. To help Dionysus determine which poet is better, Pluto provides a variety of measuring tools, including a **scale** to determine which poet's poetry is "weightier." Metaphorically, the scale represents the value in engaging in poetry critically—in measuring a poem's thematic depth, structure, and rhythmic elements in order to assess a poem's artistic worth. In the contest, Euripides argues that poetry should depict the world *as it is*—for this reason, he writes in simple, clear language (the language ordinary people would use and be able to relate to and understand), and he portrays characters as normal, flawed people. He also values poetry's ability to teach the reader to think and to question the world around them. Meanwhile, Aeschylus takes issue with Euripides's approach, instead

asserting that poetry ought to depict the ideal world—that is, the world *as it should be*. For this reason, he uses floral, lofty language in his poetry, prioritizing style and beauty. His characters are noble and idealized—they depict what his audience should aspire to be, not what they are.

However, though the contest proves Aeschylus to be the technically superior poet (as confirmed by the scale), this isn't why Dionysus ultimately decides to bring Aeschylus back to Athens. Instead, Dionysus declares that he "shall select the man [his] soul desires." Dionysus's statement reaffirms the sentiment that inspired his journey to Hades in the first place—a passionate desire for Euripides and his poetry. In a broader sense, it suggests that engaging with poetry involves more than technical craft—it's also about poetry's ability to inspire great emotion in its audience. *The Frogs* thus shows that while engaging critically with art can allow people to better understand and appreciate good art, ultimately, art's ability to inspire great emotion in its audience is just as important as its technical, rhetorical strength.

CRITIQUE OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

At the time of *The Frogs*'s first performance in 405 B.C.E., Athens was embroiled in a bitter war against Sparta and was on the verge of collapse. Sparta held Athens under siege, preventing Athenians from leaving the city, and Athens was quickly losing the support of its most important allies. Indeed, the following year, Athens would surrender to Sparta, thus beginning an era of Spartan control over Ancient Greece. In *The Frogs*, Aristophanes criticizes numerous flaws in Athenian democracy and leaders for their role in Athens's decline. Democracy in Athens was restored following the overthrowing of the oligarchy in 411. Act One, Scene Two closes with the chorus attributing Athens's present state to the restored democracy's unwillingness "to forgive and forget" those who wronged them, or those whom the oligarchy disenfranchised. As well, the play criticizes contemporary leaders like Cleigenes, who put business interests above the health of the state.

The play also partly attributes the gradual fall of Athens to Athenian ambivalence over the exile of the general Alcibiades, who had been exiled on charges of impiety (he was accused of profaning the Mysteries) that his political enemies accused him of. Following his exile, he lived in Sparta as a defecator and helped them gain the upper hand in the ongoing war. Following a falling out with the Spartans, he was reinstated in Athens in 407, only to have his title taken away by his enemies. At the time of *The Frogs*'s first performance, then, Alcibiades was a hotly debated figure, with many Athenians still believing him to be a competent, respected martial figure undeserving of this punishment. In the play, Dionysus asks both Euripides and Aeschylus what should be done about Alcibiades to gauge which poet is better suited to save Athens (in response, the poets offer opposing, albeit vague, solutions). *The Frogs* thus is not just a comedy, but also a vehicle through which Aristophanes criticizes the present state of Athenian democracy, examines what has contributed to Athens's near-collapses, and poses potential solutions to restore Athens to its former glory.

APPEARANCE VS. REALITY

Though Dionysus is a god, he is portrayed in *The Frogs* as "effeminate," incompetent, and cowardly—he repeatedly soils himself at the first sign of danger, for instance, and he's more than willing to sacrifice Xanthias if it means sparing his own life. To mask his cowardice and other shortcomings, Dionysus dons a robe and lion skin—a costume he's assembled to disguise himself as his half-brother, the divine hero Heracles. Of course, the costume doesn't magically transform Dionysus into a braver and more competent character—indeed, without wise, capable Xanthias to guide him and get him out of the many predicaments his incompetence lands him in, it's doubtful he'd make it to Hades at all. But Dionysus's successful journey to Hades and his ability to command respect—in and out of his Heracles costume—suggests that, at least in the world of the play, actually possessing positive traits isn't nearly as important as *appearing* to possess positive traits.

Xanthias, for instance, is braver, wittier, and more capable than Dionysus, but his low social status as an enslaved person obscures these positive traits and causes other characters to dismiss and mistreat him. The ferryman Charon refuses to let Xanthias board his ferry, for instance, just because Xanthias is a slave. Yet, each time Heracles orders Xanthias to don his Heracles costume, characters immediately treat Xanthias as though he is the divine hero Heracles—despite the fact that nothing truly fundamental about him has actually changed. Thus, *The Frogs* suggests that looks can be deceiving. Just as an outward appearance of virtue and power can obscure inner moral shortcomings, a person's social status is no indication of their inner character.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SCALE

The scale that Pluto provides to "weigh" Euripides's and Aeschylus's poetry symbolizes the value of poetry, the superiority of old values over new values, and the overall practice of literary criticism. After Euripides and Aeschylus have made a case for their own poetry and critiqued

their rival's poetry, a scale is brought out to "weigh" the poets' work, literally determining which poetry is "weightier," or which poet's ideas are more valuable. In the end, the scale tips in Aeschylus's favor, proving that Aeschylus's poetry, which represents traditional values, is superior to Euripides's poetry, which embodies newer ideas. In presenting poetry's weight as a literal, measurable thing, the scale also gestures toward poetry's potential to effect real change—Aeschylus, after all, will return to Athens with Dionysus and, using poetry as a method of instruction, will teach Athenians to respect the traditional values they need if they want to restore Athens to its former glory.

The scale also illustrates the practice of literary analysis (then called "reading")—of measuring literature's "weight" or artistic merits through close reading and considering the technical elements at play in any given work. Though the notion that one can literally "weigh" poetry is played for laughs, the scale underscores the important role that careful analysis plays in one's appreciation of any work of art. At the same time, though, Dionysus's ultimate decision to select the poet "[his] soul desires" suggests that while literary analysis can deepen one's passion for art, the true value of any piece of art ultimately depends on its ability to stir deep emotion.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Frogs and Other Plays* published in 2007.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

XANTHIAS Do you mean to say that I've been lugging these props around but I'm not allowed to use them to get a laugh? That's what usually happens. Phrynichus, Lycis, Ameipsias – all the popular playwrights do it. The comic porter scene. There's one in every comedy.

DIONYSUS Not in this one. Every time I go to a show and have to sit through one of those scintillating routines, I come away more than a year older.

Related Characters: Dionysus, Xanthias (speaker), Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Heracles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Dionysus and Xanthias are headed to Heracles's house to ask for directions to Hades (Dionysus wants to go there to resurrect the poet Euripides, who has recently died). To pass the time and amuse Dionysus, Xanthias makes a crass joke about farting so loud he blows the luggage he's carrying right off his back. The joke disgusts Dionysus, but Xanthias complains that if he has to haul around all their luggage, he should at least be able to make light of his discomfort with humor. To further defend his joke, he cites a few contemporary comedic playwrights—Phrynichus, Lycis, and Ameipsias—claiming that "all the popular playwrights do it. The comic porter scene." But this only disgusts Dionysus further. He suggests that Xanthias shouldn't take pride in imitating comedic playwrights, since their material is decidedly lacking. Each time he's forced to watch one of their performances, Dionysus claims, he "come[s] away more than a year older"—and as the god of theater, Dionysus knows a thing or two about good theater.

This scene is played for comedy, but it also introduces a few of the play's key themes—namely, the superiority of the old ways over the new ways and the value of poetry. Without having stated the purpose of his trip to Hades, Dionysus implicitly lays out what has inspired him to make the trek: he's dissatisfied with the present state of Greek culture and theater (following the deaths of the great tragedians—Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles—tragedy effectively failed to evolve), and he longs to revive an older (and in his eyes, superior) artistic tradition.

DIONYSUS I need a poet who can really write. Nowadays it seems like 'many are gone, and those that live are bad'.

Related Characters: Dionysus (speaker), Xanthias, Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Heracles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Dionysus and Xanthias have arrived at Heracles's house (Dionysus stops there on his way to Hades to ask Heracles, who previously journeyed to Hades to retrieve the hell hound Cerberus, for directions). There, Dionysus explains to Heracles his reason for going to Hades: he wants to find and bring back the great tragedian Euripides, who has recently died. "I need a poet who can really write," says Dionysus, offering an explanation for why he wants to bring back Euripides specifically.

As Dionysus has alluded to previously in his comedic banter with Xanthias, he's thoroughly dissatisfied with the state of contemporary Greek theater. All the great tragic playwrights (Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides) have died, and the art of tragedy has ceased to develop. Comedy has developed in its place, and Dionysus repeatedly insists that this is an inferior art form that has had devastating effects on Athenian society and the people's morale. The great tragedians used poetry to instill positive values in Athenians and teach them to be good citizens, but contemporary theater doesn't do this. To drive home his point, Dionysus recites the line, "many are gone, and those that live are bad," taken from Euripides's play *Oeneus*. In quoting Euripides, Dionysus further cements his preference and reverence for the art of tragedy (and Euripides's tragedies in particular). And in using the character of Dionysus as a vessel through which to recite Euripides's poetry, Aristophanes pays homage to the tragic tradition, as well.

FROGS Brekekekex, koax, koax,
Brekekekex, koax, koax!
Oh we are the musical Frogs!
We live in the marshes and bogs!
Sweet, sweet is the hymn
We sing as we swim,
And our voices are known
For their beautiful tone
When on festival days
We sing out in praise
Of the genial god –
And we don't think it odd
When the worshipping throng,
To the sound of our song,
Rolls home through the marshes and bogs;
Brekekekex!
Rolls home through the marshes and bogs.

Related Characters: Frog-Chorus (speaker), Dionysus, Xanthias, Heracles, Charon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141-142

Explanation and Analysis

This is an excerpt from the opening of the Frog-Chorus's song, a choral interlude that takes place as Dionysus is traveling on Charon's ferry to Hades. Interestingly (and rather comically), this is the only appearance the eponymous frogs make in the entire play. The Frogs open their song with a series of grand, sweeping croaks: "Brekekekex, koax, koax, / Brekekekex, koax, koax!" From there, they sing of the "marshes and bogs" in which they live and sing, an allusion to Dionysus-in-the-Marshes, the location near the Acropolis where the Anthesteria (one of four Athenian festivals that honor Dionysus) takes place. The three-day festival celebrates the beginning of spring and the aging of wine from the previous year (Dionysus, in addition to being the god of theater, is also the god of wine). During the festival, existing social norms were put on pause, and enslaved people were allowed to join in the festivities with the people who enslaved them. This detail perhaps resonates with the costume/identity swapping that Dionysus and Xanthias will undertake in the following act, in which the characters take turns wearing Dionysus's Heracles costume, with one character playing the role of god while the other plays the role of slave.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

XANTHIAS Come on, don't dither. Remember you're supposed to be Heracles!

Related Characters: Xanthias (speaker), Dionysus, Pluto, Heracles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Dionysus and Xanthias have arrived at Pluto's palace in Hades, but Dionysus is suddenly nervous and hesitates to knock on the front door. Xanthias impatiently urges Dionysus to get on with it, reminding him that he's "supposed to be Heracles!" (Dionysus is wearing a lion-skin and robe to disguise himself as his half-brother, the divine hero Heracles, who has been to Hades before.) Xanthias's remark is played for comedic effect, highlighting the irony that though Dionysus is a god and thus (one would think) should be brave and powerful, he's in fact cowardly, bumbling, and flawed. But Xanthias also gestures toward the broader idea that looks can be deceiving. In disguising himself as Heracles and so appearing fearsome and all-powerful, Dionysus might have hoped to intimidate anyone he encounters over the course of his journey. But the reality is that his transformation is only skin deep: though he plays the part of a fearsome divine hero, he's still his same cowardly self underneath.

DIONYSUS Well, if you're feeling so brave and heroic, how about taking my place? Here you are, you take the club and lion-skin – a chance to show your courage – and I'll carry the luggage for you.

XANTHIAS Anything you say. You're the boss.

[*They exchange roles.*]

There, how do I look? Xanthias as Heracles! I reckon the part suits me better than it does you, you old coward!

DIONYSUS It's a very good imitation of a slave dressed up as Heracles. Come on, let me have those bundles.

Related Characters: Dionysus, Xanthias (speaker), Pluto, Aeacus, Heracles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

Dionysus and Xanthias arrive at Pluto's palace and are greeted by Aeacus, the gatekeeper. The moment Aeacus lays eyes on "Heracles" (recall that Dionysus is disguised as his half-brother Heracles), he angrily promises to torture and unleash fearsome monsters on him as punishment for Heracles stealing the hellhound Cerberus. As soon as Aeacus goes back inside to fetch the necessary monsters and instruments of torture, the terrified Dionysus urges Xanthias to trade costumes with him, which Xanthias does without question.

This passage gives the audience more insight into Dionysus's and Heracles's personalities. The nonchalance with which Xanthias agrees (though of course, as an enslaved person he has no choice but to agree) to wear the Heracles costume and possibly receive punishment in place of Dionysus highlights Xanthias's bravery and competence. Meanwhile, Dionysus's behavior betrays his cowardice and weak moral compass. Though he claims (albeit rather mockingly) that he's letting Xanthias wear the Heracles costume so Xanthias can "show [his] courage," he's only really concerned about himself: he doesn't want Aeacus to torture him, and he's perfectly willing to let Xanthias be punished in his place.

This passage also highlights how appearances can be deceiving. Xanthias and Dionysus repeatedly take turns wearing the Heracles disguise over the first half of the play. Just as the Heracles costume doesn't make Dionysus brave or noble, neither does it elevate Xanthias's social status from an enslaved man to a freed man. Though Xanthias might look the part of Heracles on the outside, his transformation is entirely superficial—Dionysus still sees him as an enslaved person and so looks down on him, as he demonstrates through his insult that Xanthias only looks like "a slave dressed up as Heracles."

CHORUS
Well now you're dressed up just the same as before,
A sight to make anyone tremble,
You must roll your eyes and swagger and roar
Like the god you're supposed to resemble.

If you flinch or waver or fluff your role
And forget to speak bravely and brag, man,
You'll be putting those suitcases back on that pole
And going back to your job as a bagman.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Dionysus, Xanthias, Pluto, Heracles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

Persephone's maid has just emerged from Pluto's palace and told "Heracles" (Xanthias wearing Dionysus's Heracles disguise) about the grand feast and dancing women Persephone has arranged to entertain Heracles. Dionysus demanded that Xanthias give him back his Heracles disguise. But after they traded costumes (with Dionysus now embodying Heracles), two landladies came out and berated "Heracles" for the rudeness he displayed the last time he was in Hades—so now Dionysus, in a cowardly attempt at self-preservation, demands that Xanthias once more assume the Heracles costume, hoping that Xanthias, not Dionysus, will receive any punishment intended for Heracles.

Here, as the characters swap costumes and Dionysus loads the baggage onto his back (thus embodying the role of a slave), the Chorus comments on this most recent costume switch. The Chorus stresses the importance of playing one's part. Though Xanthias, dressed as the divine hero Heracles, might "make anyone tremble," he also "must roll [his] eyes and swagger and roar / Like the god [he's] supposed to resemble." If he only appears but does not act the part of fearsome god, if he "flinch[es] or waver[s] or fluff[s his] role," then he'll "be putting those suitcases back on that pole / And going back to [his] job as a bagman," or demoted to his former, powerless role of slave.

First, the Chorus's interlude demonstrates one of the

conventional roles of the Chorus in Ancient Greek tragedy: to comment on ongoing actions of the play. In addition, the Chorus gestures toward one of the play's central themes, the superficiality of appearances. The Chorus here suggests that, while people who only appear noble (but are in fact ignoble) might initially fool onlookers, eventually their false nobility will come to light, and they'll have their title of authority taken away from them. This perhaps points toward Aristophanes's hope for the future of Athenian politics, in which democratic Athens will recognize the undeserving people in leadership positions and remove them from power, ultimately strengthening Athens's political standing.

CHORUS-LEADER
We chorus folk two privileges prize:
To amuse you, citizens, and to advise.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the *parabasis*, the part of an Ancient Greek comedy in which the Chorus, addressing the audience, conveys the play's central ideas and offers advice to the audience. Here, the Chorus states its two core purposes: "To amuse you, citizens, and to advise." Though the play is a comedy and should entertain its audience, it has a more serious and important purpose: to educate and instill good values in its audience, just as the works of tragic theater (i.e., the works of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles) the play repeatedly espouses did. Interestingly, though the play repeatedly advocates for a return to traditional values (values that older art forms championed), in emphasizing the Chorus's aim to "amuse" as well as "advise" its audience, Aristophanes, through the Chorus, is suggesting that comedy can be just as instructive as the art of tragedy it has replaced. Thus, while the play attributes Athens's presently weakened state to degraded morals and unsatisfactory art, Aristophanes is suggesting that Athens needn't necessarily turn back to these past works written by dead poets like Euripides and Aeschylus—instead, it can produce new works that embrace older values.

CHORUS-LEADER
[...]
These we abuse, and look instead to knaves,
Upstarts, nonentities, foreigners and slaves –
Rascals all! Honestly, what men we choose!
There was a time when you'd have scorned to use
Men so debased, so far beyond the pale,
Even as scapegoats to be dragged from jail
And flogged to death outside the city gates.
Misguided friends, change now, it's not too late!
Try the good ones again: if they succeed,
You will have shown that you have sense indeed;
And if things don't go well, if these good men
All fail, and Athens comes to grief, why, then
Discerning folk will murmur (let us hope):
'She hanged herself, but with a first-rate rope!'

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161-162

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the parabasis, the part of an Ancient Greek comedy in which the Chorus, addressing the audience, conveys the play's central ideas and offers advice to the audience. Here, the Chorus outlines one of the main social and political ills inflicting present-day Athens: citizens (i.e., the play's audience) have forgotten how to identify truly noble people, and as a result, they've instated undeserving "Rascals" to leadership positions, which ultimately has contributed to the city's weakened state (at the time of the play's first production, Athens was on the verge of losing the Peloponnesian War to Sparta). If Athens continues to disregard "good men" and uplift "knaves, / Upstarts, nonentities, foreigners and slaves," the Chorus suggests, then it will have "hanged herself"—that is, it will have deserved to fall to Sparta (which would in fact happen the following year).

This passage thus reinforces the play's main themes: that Athens is in trouble politically, and that in order to rectify this, its citizens must turn back to old values. Implicit in this idea is that Athens needs to revive older poetic traditions in which poets advised audiences on how to be good judges of character (how to be "Discerning," to borrow language from this passage). It is the play's stance that good poetry should be educational and instill morals in its audience—characteristics that have vanished with the passing of the great tragedians. Thus, this passage suggests that if Athenians don't "change now"—if it doesn't start producing art and poetry that can teach its citizens to be

more "Discerning" of character and so empower better, nobler leaders, then it will be doomed.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

SLAVE He's a real gentleman, your master, by Zeus.

XANTHIAS Of course. Like all real gentlemen he only understands two things: swigging and frigging.

Related Characters: Xanthias, Pluto's Slave (speaker), Dionysus, Pluto, Heracles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

After Xanthias and Dionysus arrive at Pluto's palace in Hades, Xanthias and one of Pluto's slaves are working on some tedious chores together. As they work, Pluto's slave, who has apparently heard about Xanthias and Dionysus swapping costumes outside Pluto's palace earlier that day (with Xanthias masquerading as a god and Dionysus posing as a slave) calls Dionysus "a real gentleman," suggesting that Xanthias is lucky that Dionysus didn't punish Xanthias for impersonating him. In response, Xanthias sarcastically agrees: "Like all real gentleman [Dionysus] only understands two things: swigging and frigging." With this, Xanthias insults Dionysus, arguing that he's not noble and brave and virtuous like one would expect a god or "gentleman" to be. Instead, he's morally corrupt and shallow, and he mostly spends his time drinking and swearing.

On the other hand, Xanthias's observation that "swigging and frigging" are habits that "all real gentleman" have in common suggests that Dionysus's debauched personality is the rule rather than the exception among supposedly upstanding people. *The Frogs* repeatedly criticizes contemporary Athenian society and politics, suggesting that Athenians no longer know how to identify and value good, noble leaders and thus end up electing scoundrels and thieves instead. So, when Xanthias makes a dig at "frigging and swigging" gentlemen, he's implicitly suggesting that people who held important social and political titles in Athens at the time of the play's first performance (405 B.C.E.E) were upstanding in title alone—on the inside, they were just as morally depraved and dishonorable as a common thief.

SLAVE Well, Euripides came along and started showing off to all the other people we've got down here, you know, cut-throats, highwaymen, murderers, burglars – a right rough lot they are – and of course he soon had them all twisted round his little finger, with all his arguments and clever talking. So they've all started saying he's the best, and he's decided to lay claim to the chair instead of Aeschylus.

Related Characters: Pluto's Slave (speaker), Xanthias, Euripides, Aeschylus, Pluto

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

As Xanthias and Pluto's slave do chores in Pluto's palace, Pluto's slave catches Xanthias up to speed on the ongoing feud between Euripides and Aeschylus. Though it should be obvious that Aeschylus is clearly the better of the two poets, Pluto's slave explains, the problem is that Euripides, through "his arguments and clever talking," has won over all the "cut-throats, highwaymen, murderers, [and] burglars" that reside in Hades. This passage reaffirms the play's stance that the culture of contemporary Athens is debased and immoral and thus has bred a generation of citizens who are incapable of judging good character (or good poetry). It also sheds light on how, exactly this has come to be. When Pluto's slave attributes Euripides's ability to win over the disreputable folks of Hades with his "arguments and clever talking," he is attacking dialectical logic, in which people come to know the world through doubting their surroundings, questioning everything, and engaging in debate (i.e., arguing). Pluto's slave is suggesting that the Socratic influence present in Euripides's body of work (the Socratic method is a form of dialogue in which speakers debate and ask questions to reach deeper understandings), hasn't taught Athenians how to be wiser, more discerning citizens—instead, it has inspired them to turn on one another and become overly suspicious of noble leaders they ought to trust.

XANTHIAS Weighing poetry? What, like slices of meat?

SLAVE Oh, yes, it's all got to be measured properly, with rulers, yardsticks, compasses and wedges, and god knows what else.

XANTHIAS A regular torture chamber.

Related Characters: Xanthias, Pluto's Slave (speaker), Dionysus, Euripides, Aeschylus, Pluto

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

After Xanthias overhears Aeschylus and Euripides arguing, Pluto's slave tells Xanthias about the contest that Pluto has organized to determine which of them is the better poet. He explains that Pluto will provide all kinds of measuring equipment so that the judge (Dionysus) can objectively "weigh" which poet is better. The literal "weighing" of poetry satirizes literary criticism, comically exaggerating the practice of closely analyzing the mechanics of literature. The play doesn't condemn literary criticism; to the contrary, it uses the "weighing" of poetry that takes place during Euripides and Aeschylus's contest to pay homage to great poetry, allowing each poet to recite aloud particularly resonant examples of their work while playfully ripping apart the other's work. At the same time, though, the idea of "weighing" poetry's worth with a scale is comically literal and thus suggests, perhaps, that being overly analytical and asking too many questions can detract from one's experience of good art.

AESCHYLUS My plays have outlived me so I don't have them to hand down here. His died with him. But never mind. Let's have a contest, if we must, by all means.

Related Characters: Aeschylus (speaker), Dionysus, Euripides

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Aeschylus and Euripides are about to commence the contest that will determine which of them is the better poet. Before the contest begins, Aeschylus, whom Euripides has been goading, speaks up to defend himself and his work and to attack Euripides. Here, he delivers a caustic insult to Euripides, comparing the lasting influence of his own work to the insignificance of Euripides's work. Unlike Euripides, whose poetry has "died with him," Aeschylus's "plays have outlived [him]," meaning that people continue to perform and find inspiration in his poetry even after his death around 456 B.C.E.E. But this line of dialogue resonates literally, as well: after Aeschylus's death, his plays were allowed to compete in tragic competitions against the works of living playwrights. Aeschylus's insult to Euripides thus reinforces one of *The Frogs*'s main themes, the superiority of older, traditional values to newer, modern values. In addition, Aeschylus's comment on the immortality of his work foreshadows Dionysus's ultimate decision to bring Aeschylus—not Euripides, as he originally intended—back to the land of the living to restore Athens to its former glory.

CHORUS
We're expecting, of course, to pick up a few tips
From these poets so clever and wise,
As elegant utterance falls from their lips
And their temperatures gradually rise.

Since neither is lacking in brains or in grit
It should be a thrilling debate:
While one pins his hopes on his neatly turned wit,
The other relies on his weight.

For shrewd dialectic he cares not a jot;
Though traps be contrived for his fall,
He'll swoop down like thunder and quell the lot –
Quips, quibbles, his rival and all!

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Euripides, Aeschylus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168-169

Explanation and Analysis

Before Euripides and Aeschylus's poetry contest begins, the Chorus interjects to introduce the two competitors and outline what it hopes the contest will accomplish. The opening lines of this passage, "We're expecting, of course, to pick up a few tips / From these poets so clever and wise," alludes to the Chorus's (and thus indirectly, Aristophanes's) view of poetry's value and purpose. Here, the chorus is suggesting that good poetry should enable audiences "to pick up a few tips," or that it should educate them. As the contest unfolds, both Euripides and Aeschylus will agree with this sentiment, asserting that good poetry should instill good morals in audiences and teach them how to be good citizens, though they diverge on the techniques through which poetry should carry out such an education.

In the second and third stanzas of this excerpt, the Chorus goes into greater detail about the qualities of Euripides and

Aeschylus as poets. Though "neither is lacking in brains or in grit," they convey their intelligence in different ways: "one pins his hopes on his neatly turned wit" refers to Euripides, whose poetry is characterized by a focus on "shrewd dialectic," or arriving at truths through question and debate. Note that while the Chorus praises the intelligence of both poets, it comes down rather harder on Euripides, criticizing his focus on "shrewd dialectic." This reflects Aristophanes's personal condemnation of rhetoric and the Socratic method.

The Chorus implies that Aeschylus, meanwhile, "relies on his weight" rather than on debate. He doesn't encourage his audience to debate until they settle on the truth; instead, he states the truth—that is, he conveys the message he wants his audience to take away from his poetry. These differing approaches to education will play out in greater detail as Euripides and Aeschylus recite and defend the merits of their own poetry and attack the shortcomings of their rival's poetry.

EURIPIDES I taught them how to apply subtle rules, how to turn a phrase neatly. I taught them to observe, to discern, to interpret; to use spin, to massage the facts; to suspect the worst, to take nothing at face value…

Related Characters: Euripides (speaker), Aeschylus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

During Euripides's and Aeschylus's contest to determine who is the better poet, Euripides defends his own poetry, lauding what he perceives as its most impressive features. In particular, he praises his ability to teach audiences "how to apply subtle rules, how to turn a phrase neatly," and how "to observe, to discern, to interpret." What he's alluding to here is the Socratic dialectic's influence. In this method, people arrive at the truth through dialogue and debate—they interrogate every aspect of the world around them and, as Euripides claims here, "take nothing at face value." But though Euripides uses this in his plays, his language (rather comically) points out the harmful consequences of such a worldview (at least in Aristophanes's opinion), thereby undermining himself.

Euripides proudly declares that he has taught audiences "to use spin, to massage the facts," and "to suspect the worst," which undermines his efforts to defend his work. Poetry, at least in the world of the play, should instill good morals in people. But rather than telling audiences what to think and how to behave, Euripides has in fact confused audiences even more, encouraging them to manipulate facts and to "suspect the worse" in everyone, even people (political leaders in particular, perhaps) they ought to trust. As the contest progresses, Aeschylus will attack Euripides's embrace of the dialectic, implying that it's weakened Athens by confusing citizen and thus eroding their morals and ability to judge character.

DIONYSUS That's right: whenever an Athenian comes home nowadays, he shouts at the servants and starts asking, 'Why is the flour jar not in its proper place? Who bit the head off this sprat? What's happened to that cup I had last year? Where is yesterday's garlic? Who's been nibbling at this olive?' Whereas before Euripides came along they just sat there staring blankly.

Related Characters: Dionysus (speaker), Euripides

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

After Euripides praises his own work for how it has taught audiences to interrogate the world around them and take no truths for granted—a characteristic of his work the play ultimately criticizes most harshly—Dionysus mockingly suggests that in teaching Athenians to ask questions, Euripides has done Athens more harm than good. He suggests that Athenians were doing fine before Euripides supposedly enlightened them, but now they're constantly caught up with unhelpful skepticism about mundane features of everyday life, wasting time and energy asking about misplaced cups and flour jars, half-eaten olives, and missing bulbs of garlic.

Dionysus's lines are played for laughs, but they also suggest that Euripides is mistaken in thinking that his plays have taught audiences to be smarter, more discerning citizens. Instead, they've sowed discord, compelling audiences to question reality and making it difficult for them to know whom they should trust. Ultimately, in teaching audiences to take nothing for granted—a frivolous stance, in the play's opinion—Euripides has distracted people from more pressing concerns, like making sure they've elected noble leaders and ensuring that their city is united and strong

enough to defend itself against its enemies.

EURIPIDES Technical ability. A poet should also teach people how to be better citizens.

Related Characters: Euripides (speaker), Aeschylus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

During Euripides and Aeschylus's contest, Aeschylus asks Euripides what he thinks is the most important quality of a good poet. In addition to a poet's "Technical ability," Euripides claims that good poets "should also teach people how to be better citizens." On this point, Euripides and Aeschylus agree: good poetry is more than mere entertainment, and its primary purpose should be to instill good values in audiences and teach them how to make sense of and behave in the world. As such, poets have a responsibility, at least as Aristophanes sees it, to ensure that their plays are successfully and clearly presenting audiences with good values and role models. However, as Aeschylus's response to Euripides's answer will soon reveal, the poets go about teaching their audiences in opposite ways—and in Aeschylus's opinion, Euripides's method of educating his audience by teaching them to doubt reality and question everything has in fact made audiences more confused.

AESCHYLUS Well, now, look at the characters I left him. Fine, stalwart figures, larger than life. Men who didn't shirk their duty. My heroes weren't like these marketplace loafers, delinquents and rogues they write about nowadays. They were real heroes, breathing spears and lances, white-plumed helmets, breastplates and greaves; heroes with hearts of oxhide, seven layers thick.

Related Characters: Aeschylus (speaker), Euripides

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

During Aeschylus and Euripides's contest, Aeschylus compares the moral superiority of his tragedies to the comedies that are popular in present-day Athens. In contrast to these modern plays, Aeschylus's tragedies featured characters "who didn't shirk their duty." His protagonists "weren't like these marketplace loafers, delinquents and rogues they write about nowadays." Aeschylus will apply this same criticism to Euripides's tragedies, citing *Oedipus* and *Hippolytus* in particular as examples of Euripides's unsavory characters and the questionable morals they instill in audiences (both plays feature themes of incest).

To Aeschylus, since the point of poetry is to instruct audiences on how to be virtuous, good citizens, it is vital that plays feature "real heroes" whose behavior and values audiences can model. Though Euripides's plays might entertain audiences and get them to think, they don't offer a clear blueprint for how to uphold one's civic duties. Finally, in applying the same criticism to Euripides and contemporary comic playwrights, Aeschylus reaffirms the play's central theme of returning to traditional values and rejecting new, supposedly morally corrupt values (though Euripides and Aeschylus are both considered major tragedians, Aeschylus was writing earlier than Euripides).

AESCHYLUS [...] Schoolboys have a master to teach them, adults have poets. We have a duty to see that what we teach them is right and proper.

Related Characters: Aeschylus (speaker), Dionysus, Euripides

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

During Aeschylus and Euripides's contest, Aeschylus critiques Euripides for featuring morally corrupt characters and lurid subject matter in his tragedies; in particular, he references the character Phaedra from Euripides's *Hippolytus* and the character Stheneboea, who appears in the play *Bellerophon*. Both are married women who fall in love with other men and then make false accusations against them when the men reject them. Aeschylus suggests that such plays have scandalized and set bad examples for audiences. Instead, Aeschylus suggests, poets should think of themselves as teachers, and they should think of their audience as impressionable young school children. "We have a duty to see that what we teach them is right and proper," asserts Aeschylus, implying that audiences learn by

example, and so it's imperative that plays only feature heroic characters who model behavior that society considers "right and proper."

Implicit in Aeschylus's suggestion is one of *The Frog*'s central themes: that a decline in Athens's cultural sphere has contributed to the city-state's weakened political influence—and that it is the "duty" of poets to create art that teaches audiences how to be good people and better citizens and so rectify this problem. Ultimately, arguments like this one contribute to Dionysus's ultimate decision to bring Aeschylus rather than Euripides back to the land of the living to save Athens.

AESCHYLUS Look, you fool, noble themes and sentiments need to be couched in suitably dignified language. If your characters are demigods, they should sound like demigods – what's more, they should dress like them. I set an example in this respect, which you totally perverted.

EURIPIDES How?

AESCHYLUS By dressing your kings in rags so that they appear as objects of pity.

EURIPIDES What harm is there in that?

AESCHYLUS Well, these days you can't get the wealthy to pay their ship levy. They dress up in rags and claim exemption on the grounds of poverty.

Related Characters: Euripides, Aeschylus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

During Aeschylus and Euripides's contest, Aeschylus criticizes Euripides for writing plays that confuse audiences and send them immoral messages. Here, Aeschylus establishes his own work as the gold standard for what good poetry should be: he writes in an elevated style and features noble, virtuous characters and themes that teach audiences how to think and act and what characteristics they should value in their leaders. He writes "in suitably dignified language," thereby presenting noble characters as identifiably, obviously noble and leaving no room for doubt and ambiguity. Euripides, by contrast, has "totally perverted" this structure. Aeschylus claims that Euripides's use of ordinary language and his presentation of authority figures like kings as flawed, ordinary "objects of pity" has encouraged corruption, doubt, and dishonesty among ordinary Athenian citizens as well as in people in positions of political power.

Aeschylus's comment about wealthy people "dress[ing] up in rags and claim[ing] exemption on the grounds of poverty" refers to the requirement of wealthy Athenian citizens to fund and command warships as an act of public service. To claim exemption from this civic duty, people could identify a richer person who hadn't yet paid their dues, take them to court, and propose that the richer person fund and command the warship in their place. People would often go to court wearing tattered clothing in an effort to appear less wealthy and gain the jury's sympathy. Aeschylus is suggesting that Euripides's heroes do the same thing—they evoke sympathy with understated, tattered clothing that conceals inner deceitfulness and poor character.

AESCHYLUS And look how you've encouraged people to babble. The wrestling schools are empty. And where have all the young men gone? Off to these notorious establishments where they practise the art of debating – and that's not all they practise either! These days even the sailors argue with their officers; in my day the only words they knew were 'slops' and 'heave-ho'!

Related Characters: Aeschylus (speaker), Euripides

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

During Aeschylus and Euripides's contest, Aeschylus accuses Euripides of confusing his audiences, encouraging them to take nothing for granted and to doubt everything. In a broader sense, Aeschylus is criticizing the Socratic influence that's present in Euripides's work. Euripides's contemporaries associated him with Socrates and the Western philosophy Socrates pioneered. The Socratic method is a method of critical thinking in which people engage in argumentative debate, seeking deeper understanding through asking questions and challenging assumptions about the world around them. Put simply, the basic gist of Socrates's philosophy is that the only thing people can know for certain is that they know nothing. Socrates was eventually put to death for his teachings in 399 B.C.E.E, having been accused of corrupting the youth.

This is the basic point that Aeschylus is making in this passage—that Euripides, like Socrates before him, is

corrupting the youth (or Athenians in general) by "encouraging them to babble" and question authority. When he complains, "The wrestling schools are empty," he's perhaps commenting on Athenians turning away from traditional pastimes that promoted good values—wrestling and sports in general were popular in ancient Greece (the birthplace of the Olympic Games), as physical strength was thought to signify and promote inner virtuousness.

But the Socratic method encourages people to turn away from pure, virtuous activities like wrestling, instead spending time in "notorious establishments where they practice the art of debating[.]" The ultimate result of all this debating, at least according to the character Aeschylus (who is conveying playwright Aristophanes's view), is that Athenians have no respect for authority or existing social orders (as evidenced by Aeschylus's claim that "even the sailors argue with their officers"), and that this has contributed to Athens's politically fragile state and morally degraded culture.

EURIPIDES [*after some thought*]
I loathe a citizen who acts so fast
To harm his country and yet helps her last,
Who's deft at managing his own success,
But useless when the city's in a mess.

Related Characters: Euripides (speaker), Dionysus, Aeschylus, Alcibiades

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

At the conclusion of Euripides and Aeschylus's contest, Dionysus, still unable to determine which poet is better, asks them multiple questions to assess which poet is better equipped to restore Athens to its former glory. One of these questions is what the poets think Athenians should do about the disgraced former Athenian general Alcibiades. Alcibiades was the nephew of Pericles and was friends with Socrates. He was arrested in 415 B.C.E.E for profaning the Mysteries, at which point he went over to Sparta (Athens's enemy in the Peloponnesian War). After his involvement in a scandal led him to fall out of favor with Sparta, he returned to Athens and was reinstated there in 407, but his enemies later took away his position once more. At the time of *The Frogs*'s first performance, he remained a controversial figure, and Athenians were largely split over how to deal with him—that is, whether or not they should forgive his past transgressions.

Euripides, when Dionysus asks what Athenians should do about the Alcibiades problem, suggests that Alcibiades should be punished, for he clearly held his own interests above the interests of Athens—yet it's unclear if this is in line with Aristophanes's thinking, as Aeschylus, when posed the same question, answers rather oppositely, suggesting that while Alcibiades may have a rather checkered and inconsistent past, its more politically advantageous for Athens to tolerate him and make use of his military prowess. Finally, that Dionysus asks Euripides and Aeschylus for their thoughts on a political matter reaffirms the play's central idea that good poetry should instill good values in people and teach them how to be good citizens.

AESCHYLUS
It is not very wise for city states
To rear a lion cub within their gates;
But if they do so, they will find it pays
To tolerate its own peculiar ways.

Related Characters: Aeschylus (speaker), Dionysus, Euripides, Alcibiades, Chorus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

At the conclusion of Euripides and Aeschylus's contest, Dionysus, yet unable to determine which poet is better, asks them multiple questions to assess which poet is better equipped to restore Athens to its former glory. One of these questions is what Athens should do about the disgraced former general Alcibiades. After Euripides condemns Alcibiades's betrayal of Athens, suggesting that his punishment is warranted, Aeschylus offers this in response. His answer is vaguer and more poetic than Euripides's, but he seems to suggest that while he condemns Alcibiades's actions (referring to the former general as "a lion cub" with "peculiar ways"), he thinks it's in Athens's best interest to "tolerate" Alcibiades and perhaps make use of his military prowess for the greater good of the city.

Aeschylus's advice echoes sentiments the Chorus expressed earlier in the *parodos*, in which it urged Athenians to reinstate citizenship for people who participated in the oligarchic revolution. Reinstating these people, the Chorus

suggests, is better for Athens in the long run, as it could give Athenians the upper hand against Sparta in the ongoing Peloponnesian War (which Athens was on the verge of losing at the time of *The Frogs*'s first performance). Finally, that Dionysus poses this political question to Aeschylus and Euripides in the first place highlights the play's stance that good poetry should instill good values in people and teach them to be good citizens.

DIONYSUS I'll judge between you on this score alone: I shall select the man my soul desires.

Related Characters: Dionysus (speaker), Euripides, Aeschylus, Pluto

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Euripides and Aeschylus's contest, Dionysus finds that he's still unable to determine which poet is better, even after the measuring equipment Pluto has provided to "weigh" their poetry has twice determined that Aeschylus's poetry is "weightier" than Euripides's. Thus, Dionysus announces that he's no longer judging the poets on their technical abilities; instead, he will "select the man [his] soul desires"—in other words, the man whose poetry inspires a greater emotional response. Dionysus's decision gestures back toward his motivation for journeying to Hades in the first place: a fierce longing for the poetry of Euripides. Thus, the sudden shift Dionysus makes here—from assessing poetry in a rather detached, objective manner to assessing poetry based on what resonates with him emotionally—provides a sense of closure and symmetry as the play wraps up.

In addition, Dionysus's decision to judge poetry on its ability to move him resonates with the play's theme of literary criticism. On the one hand, Dionysus decision to appeal to poetry's emotional resonance seems to imply that literary criticism can distract audiences from poetry's artistic, emotional aspects. On the other hand, though, it perhaps also implies that practicing literary criticism can allow audiences to engage with poetry on a deeper level and help them appreciate it better—after all, it's only after Dionysus listens to Euripides and Aeschylus's criticism that he's able to identify which "man [his] soul desires."

CHORUS
[...]

So it's not smart to sit and chat
With Socrates, tossing aside
Artistic merit, shedding all
That's best of the tragedian's art.
To fritter away all one's time
On quibbling and pretentious talk,
And other such inane pursuits,
Is truly the mark of a fool.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Dionysus, Euripides, Aeschylus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189-190

Explanation and Analysis

After Dionysus announces that Aeschylus is the winner of the contest (and thus, the superior poet), the Chorus interjects to elaborate on why, specifically, Euripides has lost. The Chorus explains that "it's not smart to sit and chat / With Socrates," implicitly criticizing the Socratic method, in which people arrive at the truth through discussion and debate. The Chorus rather scathingly dismisses the dialectical method as "quibbling and pretentious talk," insisting that only "a fool" would engage in the practice. Basically, Aristophanes, through the Chorus, is suggesting that Euripides's dialectical approach to tragedy diminishes the capacity of his work to instill good values in audiences. Instead, it just makes them doubt themselves and cast suspicion on others, which ultimately leads to civil discord and political unrest. Because of this, it's essential that Aeschylus be the poet to return to and revive Athens, for his poetry has true "Artistic merit." In other words, it presents audiences with clear models for good behavior and civic engagement—which, to Aristophanes mind, is what's most valuable about poetry.

CHORUS
[...]
To the city's counsels may he wisdom lend;
Then of war and suffering shall there be an end.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Dionysus, Euripides, Aeschylus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

These lines, which come from the play's *exodos*, or exit song, are the final lines of the play. Dionysus has just deemed Aeschylus the winner of the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides. As they prepare to embark on their journey to the land of the living, the Chorus sends its well wishes, hopeful that Aeschylus, through his instructive, virtue-espousing poetry, will be able to set "the city's counsels" on the right path and so restore Athens to its former glory. This passage encapsulates one of the play's central ideas about the value of poetry, namely that it can be a valuable social and political tool. Ultimately, this contributes to Dionysus's decision to bring Aeschylus back with him instead of Euripides, as he'd originally intended.

Though both poets demonstrate great intelligence in their work, and though both believe it's poetry's job to instill good values in audiences, ultimately Aristophanes (through Dionysus) seems to suggest that Euripides's approach to instructing audiences is inferior. Unlike Aeschylus, whose plays feature heroic figures whose values and actions audiences are meant to model, Euripides's plays often featured depraved and immoral characters—the purpose of this was to instill good values in audiences by awakening their minds and getting them to interrogate their preconceived notions about the world around them. In choosing Aeschylus over Euripides, Dionysus (and through him, Aristophanes) is suggesting that Aeschylus's more direct method of instruction, which overtly tells audiences what kind of behavior they should value. Euripides's approach, on the other hand, which encourages audiences to doubt and question everything, would only further sow discord and weaken the already imperiled state.

Also of note here is that Aristophanes has adapted these lines from the exodos of Aeschylus's play *Eumenides*, in which Athena gives the citizens of Athens her well wishes. In ending *The Frogs* with a paraphrase of one of Aeschylus's noted works, Aristophanes once more pays tribute to the tradition of Ancient Greek tragedy—and perhaps conveys his hope that future playwrights can recapture some of the restorative "wisdom" that characterized those earlier plays and made Athens a cultural bastion of the ancient world.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Dionysus walks toward Heracles's house. He's wearing a yellow robe and a lion-skin—it's clear he's trying to impersonate his half-brother, Heracles. Xanthias, whom Dionysus has enslaved, rides in on a donkey. He has a large pack on his shoulders. Xanthias gestures toward his pack and jokes that if nobody takes it off his shoulders, he'll fart so hard it flies right off. Dionysus disapproves. Xanthias complains that if he must carry around the heavy pack, then he should at least be allowed to joke about it. Plus, all the popular playwrights—like Phrynichus, Lycis, and Ameipsias— have a "comic porter scene" in their plays. Dionysus says those poets' plays are awful. Dionysus and Xanthias bicker back and forth, stopping only once they've reached Heracles's house. Dionysus knocks on the door. Heracles opens it and stares at Dionysus. Then he falls to the floor, laughing hysterically at Dionysus's ridiculous outfit.

From the beginning, the play teases the theme of false appearances, with cowardly Dionysus wearing a robe and lion-skin to masquerade as his half-brother, the divine hero Heracles—and, in effect, to appear braver and more intimidating than he really is. Dionysus's cowardice also subverts expectations—one would think that as a god, Dionysus would be brave and powerful, not cowardly and deceitful. The play thus gestures toward the idea that looks (and titles) can be deceiving. In addition, Dionysus's critique of contemporary poetry introduces another of the play's central themes: the superiority of older, traditional values (and art forms) to newer, modern values.

Heracles asks Dionysus what he's doing here. Dionysus explains that he was reading *Andromeda* when suddenly he was gripped with a fierce, almost erotic desire for the late Euripides—a desire as fierce as his desire for pea soup, which he craves constantly. So, he's going to go to Hades to find Euripides, as he "need[s] a poet who can really / *write*," unlike today's poets. When Heracles mentions several living poets he thinks are good, Dionysus shoots them all down, labeling them "insignificant squeakers" and claiming that none of them can write anything truly original. Dionysus asks Heracles for the fastest route to take to Hades. Heracles replies that Dionysus can hang himself, which Dionysus rejects, arguing that this "would be a pain in the neck." Heracles next suggests poison hemlock or jumping off a tower.

Andromeda *is a play by Euripides in which the hero, Perseus, rescues the princess Andromeda from a sea creature. Notably, Dionysus's reference to reading (as opposed to seeing the play performed live) is one of the earliest references to solitary reading in the ancient world. This (and Dionysus's intense longing for Euripides) gestures toward yet another of the play's central themes, the value of poetry, suggesting that poetry is valuable in its ability to evoke great personal passion and meaning in the reader. Dionysus further highlights the play's condemnation of the new, critiquing comic poets to make a broader attack against contemporary Athenian politics, values, and culture.*

Dionysus asks which route Heracles took to get to Hades (Heracles previous traveled to Hades to retrieve the hellhound Cerberus). Heracles tells him to go to a big, deep lake. There, he'll find a ferryman (Charon) who will take him across in a small boat. After that, Dionysus will encounter many terrifying beasts, and then he'll get to the Great Mire of Filth and the Eternal Stream of Dung, which are filled with sinners. After that, Dionysus will hear flutes, and it will be daylight. He'll come to a field, where he'll find people dancing and clapping. These people, explains Heracles, are people who've been "initiated into the rites of the Mysteries" and can direct Heracles to Pluto's palace. Heracles wishes Dionysus luck, and then he goes back inside his house. Dionysus and Xanthias continue on their journey.

It's notable that Dionysus only asks Heracles for the route he took to Hades as a last resort, when all the faster, easier options Heracles suggested (hanging or poisoning oneself) require dying. In addition to its comedic effect, this also gives the reader additional insight into Dionysus's character—not only is he cowardly, but he's perfectly willing to cut corners where possible and prefers to take the easy way out. He would rather avoid undertaking the arduous journey Heracles lays out here. The "Mysteries" that Heracles mentions here refer to the Eleusinian Mysteries, annual initiations (secret religious rites) for the cult of Demeter and Persephone that were held in ancient Greece.

Eventually Dionysus and Xanthias reach the ferry, which is driven by Charon, the ferryman. Dionysus boards the boat, but Charon stops Xanthias, explaining that he doesn't allow slaves on his boat. Xanthias will have to walk around the marsh—he can meet them at a resting place near the Withering Stone. Reluctantly, Xanthias disappears into the darkness. Dionysus misunderstands when Charon tells him to "[s]it at the oar"—he sits *on* an oar instead, and Charon berates him. Charon shows Dionysus how to maneuver the boat, and then he moves to the stern to relax. Dionysus struggles with the oars.

Charon's refusal to let Xanthias board his ferry underscores how strictly adherence to the social hierarchy governed daily life in ancient Athens. When Dionysus struggles to row the boat, it shows readers that his Heracles disguise is only skin deep—though his costume might make him resemble the strong, divine hero, his poor rowing skills show that he's no more capable than he'd be without the costume.

Dionysus has just settled into a rhythm with his rowing when he hears the Frog-Chorus in the distance. Croaking loudly, the Frogs sing a song about "the marshes and bogs" where they live and all the singing they do there. Annoyed at the distraction, Dionysus complains that the Frogs' song is boring. This offends the Frogs, who claim that they're well known for their talents. Dionysus ignores this and challenges the Frogs to a croak-off. The Frog-Chorus and Dionysus croak back and forth. Dionysus emits a particularly resonant croak, but the ferry reaches land before a winner can be called.

Animal choruses appear in numerous of Aristophanes's plays. Notably, this is the only time the eponymous frogs appear in the play. Dionysus's attempt to outdo the frogs with his croaking and singing perhaps foreshadows the contest between Euripides and Aeschylus (which is known as an agon*, or the part of Old Comedy in which two speakers debate, with each speaker outlining their argument) that occupies the second half of the play.*

Dionysus pays Charon, steps off the ferry, and reunites with Xanthias. It's much darker now, and ghostly shadows creep through the air. Xanthias says they better get going, remembering what Heracles said about the place being full of dangerous beasts. Dionysus scoffs, insisting that Heracles was exaggerating. Just then, Xanthias tells Dionysus to shush, claiming he's heard a noise. Dionysus, suddenly terrified, suggests that Xanthias walk ahead of him. Xanthias does so and claims to see "a horrible creature" that looks like a mule at first but then morphs into a woman and then a dog. Dionysus, still scared, guesses the creature is Empusa and runs off to hide. Xanthias scares the creature away. Dionysus returns to Xanthias, relieved the creature is gone. He remarks how it made him turn white. Xanthias disgustedly notes that Dionysus has soiled himself.

Once more, looks and titles prove to be deceiving. Not only is Dionysus a god, but he's also dressed as Heracles, who better embodies the bravery and capability one would normally associate with a divine being. Nevertheless, Dionysus is just as cowardly as ever in this scene, running off to let Xanthias face the shape-shifting Empusa alone and ultimately soiling himself in the process. Meanwhile, though Xanthias is an enslaved man and thus far beneath Dionysus on the social hierarchy, he displays more bravery and cunning here than Dionysus.

Just then, Dionysus and Xanthias hear flute-playing. Then they spot an approaching crowd of people holding torches and chanting "Iacchus, Iacchus!" Xanthias guesses that these are the Initiates (the Initiate-Chorus) that Heracles mentioned. Still hidden, Heracles and Xanthias watch the initiates sing, dance, and praise Iacchus as their sacrificial meal is prepared. When their meal is ready, the Initiates sit down to eat the sacrificial meat and drink the sacrificial wine. The Chorus-Leader demands that the uninitiated pray and remain silent and hidden until the Initiates' holy procession is finished—the Initiates have "no use for heathens who don't understand / Conventions of Comedy, noble and grand," or for traitors, corrupt officials, or smugglers.

The Chorus-Leader's remark that the Initiates have "no use for heathens who don't understand / Conventions of Comedy, noble and grand" resonates with Dionysus's earlier complaint about there being no worthwhile living poets in Athens. In voicing his disdain for "heathens who don't understand / Conventions of Comedy" alongside traitors and criminals, the Chorus-Leader draws an implicit link between culture, politics, and morality, suggesting that a lack of good art and culture can lead to bad morals, which, in turn, can lead to political instability.

After the feast, the Initiate-Chorus sings and dances to honor Persephone, Demeter, and Iacchus. Meanwhile, Dionysus and Xanthias see all the fun the Initiates are having and join them in their dancing. At this point, the Initiate-Chorus freezes, faces the audience, and jeers—just as they said they'd do in their Hymn to Persephone. Dionysus takes the opportunity to ask the Initiates for directions to Pluto's palace. They tell Dionysus the palace is nearby and point him in the right direction. Dionysus orders a grumbling Xanthias to pick up the luggage, and then they depart for Pluto's palace.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were secret religious rites held each year in Eleusis and Athens to celebrate the abduction and rescue of Persephone from Hades and to honor Demeter and Iacchus, a god identified with Dionysus. Thus, it's rather apt that Dionysus himself should happen upon their festivities. Though Dionysus likely wouldn't have made it to Hades without Xanthias's help, it's of little consequence to Xanthias's social status—as an enslaved person, he's still beholden to Dionysus, even if he far exceeds him intellectually. Not only does the play embrace older dramatic traditions (Dionysus's preference for the dying art of tragedy over contemporary comic plays), but it also upholds traditional, longstanding social hierarchies, as well.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Dionysus and Xanthias arrive at Pluto's palace; Dionysus knocks on the door and is greeted by Aeacus, the formidable doorkeeper to Hades. Dionysus introduces himself as Heracles but stutters. At this, Aeacus curses "Heracles," calling him a rotten criminal for stealing Cerberus and threatens to torture Dionysus-as-Heracles in retaliation. Then he disappears inside to fetch torture devices.

Heracles might cut an intimidating figure, but when Aeacus calls Heracles a thief and a criminal, it implies that Heracles, like Dionysus, doesn't necessarily embody all the greatness and flawlessness one might associate with a heroic god. By this point, it's well established that Dionysus is cowardly and inept, so it's unlikely he'll respond well to Aeacus's threats of punishment and torture.

Dionysus collapses to the ground, terrified. Then he soils himself, much to the disgust of Xanthias, who calls him a coward. Xanthias says he, unlike Dionysus, isn't scared at all. When Dionysus orders Xanthias to trade places with him, Xanthias shrugs and accepts Dionysus's clothing.

Now Xanthias will embody Heracles, not just in appearance but in demeanor as well; despite his lower social status, Xanthias is far braver and more capable than Dionysus.

Persephone's maid emerges from the palace and happily greets Xanthias-as-Heracles; she announces that Persephone got to work preparing an elaborate meal the minute she heard Heracles was coming. Also, there are girls waiting inside to dance for him. Excited, Xanthias tells the maid he'll be right there. After the maid leaves, Xanthias, addressing Dionysus as "boy," orders Dionysus to bring the luggage inside. Dionysus angrily insists he was only joking when he suggested that he and Xanthias switch places. Reluctantly, Xanthias returns the Heracles disguise to Dionysus. The Chorus chimes in to tell the moral of the story: if you want to "improve your position," you should "roll with the ship," not "stand like a fool with a stiff upper lip[.]"

In a comedic twist of fate, Dionysus's plan to make Xanthias suffer backfires—though Dionysus expected Aeacus to unwittingly torture Xanthias-as-Heracles in Dionysus-as-Heracles's place, Xanthias lucks out and apparently has a sumptuous feast and enticing women in his future. However, as the play has already established, Xanthias's new identity is only skin deep, and so even though he might have fun calling Dionysus "boy" and playing the part of master, he must put the game to rest when his real master orders him to change back into his original clothes. The Chorus's interjection further examines the difference between action and appearance, suggesting that if a person wants to enact real change or "improve [their] position," their actions or inner character must align with their outer appearance. This resonates with the play's broader criticism of contemporary Athenian politics, suggesting that politicians need to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

Dionysus has barely gotten back into his Heracles disguise when two landladies appear and identify him as the scoundrel who ate all their food and then left without paying for any of it. Xanthias encourages the women as they berate Dionysus-as-Heracles for his gluttony. The second landlady announces her plans to find Cleon to punish Dionysus-as-Heracles to court for his gluttony, then she and the first landlady go back inside.

In yet another comedic twist of fate, Dionysus-as-Heracles doesn't receive the hospitality that Persephone's maid just promised Xanthias-as-Dionysus; instead, he's berated by two women he apparently insulted when he ate a huge feast and then didn't pay the bill. That Xanthias and Dionysus are alternatively praised and punished for Heracles's past actions, just because they're dressed in Heracles's clothing, further highlights the play's idea that looks can be deceiving.

Dionysus tries to cajole Xanthias into trading places again. Xanthias resists but gives in after Dionysus promises he won't change his mind again. The two swap clothing once more. Aeacus returns, followed by slaves carrying ropes and chains. He orders them to tie-down Xanthias-as-Heracles and punish him. Dionysus excitedly urges them to give Heracles exactly what he deserves. Xanthias-as-Heracles makes a deal with Aeacus: he'll accept his punishment if he's found guilty, and in the meantime Aeacus can torture Xanthias-as-Heracles's slave. Aeacus agrees to this, and Xanthias-as-Heracles enthusiastically tells Aeacus to take his slave away and not hold back.

Dionysus forced Xanthias to change back into the Heracles costume to avoid incurring anyone else's wrath, but Xanthias swiftly finds a way to make Dionysus suffer alongside him, further demonstrating that he is both more capable and cleverer than Dionysus despite his lower social status. Regardless of which character wears the Heracles costume, their underlying personalities remain stable and unchanging.

Panicked, Dionysus tells Aeacus that he's the god Dionysus. Xanthias suggests that Aeacus give Dionysus a flogging to test if he's telling the truth—if he's really a god, he won't cry out in pain. Aeacus agrees and alternates whacks between Xanthias and Dionysus, delivering stronger blows each round. The first round, Xanthias and Dionysus pretend not to feel anything. The second round, Xanthias cries out in pain but pretends it was mere "pious impulse," which Aeacus buys. Dionysus also reacts to his second blow and tries to make an excuse, claiming he's just reacting to seeing men on horseback, but Aeacus suspects he's lying. He gives them each a third blow, and each reacts more strongly. Aeacus, frustrated, decides to take Xanthias and Dionysus to Pluto and Persephone, who will be able to tell which of them is a god. They all enter the palace.

This scene mostly serves a comedic purpose, but it also further develops Dionysus's and Xanthias's personalities. Try as he might, cowardly and bumbling Dionysus fails to match Xanthias's quickness and cleverness. Whereas Xanthias cleverly blames his yelp of pain on "pious impulse" (therefore finding an explanation that supports rather than disproves his divine nature), Dionysus makes the comparable but entirely unconvincing excuse that he's only reacting to a horse he's seen in the distance—a sight so painfully ordinary it wouldn't warrant a response under any circumstances. Dionysus's outward title of god doesn't match up with his inner cowardliness and incompetence—a discrepancy that resonates with the broader notion that people in positions of power (i.e., the Athenian political leaders Aristophanes ridicules throughout the play) aren't always as noble and well-intentioned as they appear on the outside.

The Chorus takes the stage. The Chorus-Leader, addressing their audience, states their two goals: to "amuse" and to "advise" its audience. They say it's time "to forgive and forget" those who have wronged them. If the slave Xanthias can don Dionysus's clothes and be treated as an equal, then surely the audience can do this with their enemies, too. The Chorus-Leader calls on the Athenians to get over their foolish pride and award citizenship to anyone who's fought for them in war. The rest of the Chorus joins in to say that "wash-house proprietor" Cleigenes will soon fall, but even then "he won't be persuaded to advocate for peace."

This is the parabasis, *or the part of an Ancient Greek comedy where the actors leave the stage and the chorus addresses the audience directly to convey the playwright's views on contemporary issues—as noted here by the Chorus-Leader, who specifies that the Chorus's two goals are to "amuse" and to "advise" the audience. Aristophanes also broaches the subject of contemporary politics explicitly, urging Athens to stop opposing peace with Sparta in the ongoing Peloponnesian War (Cleigenes was a radical democrat who opposed peace with Sparta and also possibly owned a bathhouse). The mention of awarding peace to anyone who fought in the war refers to the practice of awarding citizenship to any enslaved person who served in the Athenian military.*

The Chorus-Leader chimes in to compare the way Athenians treat men to the way they treat money: they used to be proud of gold and silver, but those coins have stopped circulating, and now Athenians barter with fake, silver-plated copper coins. Likewise, while Athens once valued noble men of good breeding, now it exalts only scoundrels. If Athenians don't change their ways, Athens will fail.

The Chorus uses the metaphor of Athenians mistaking phony, silver-plated copper coins for real gold to suggest that Athenians no longer know how to identify (and elect to office) reputable people of noble character, and this is why they're presently in a politically vulnerable situation (at the time of The Frogs*'s first performance, the Peloponnesian War was nearing its end—Athens was on the verge of collapse and would surrender to Sparta the following year).*

ACT 2, SCENE 1

In Pluto's palace, Xanthias and Pluto's slave are working together on some tedious chore. Xanthias gripes about Dionysus, but Pluto's slave thinks it's pretty unusual that Dionysus didn't beat Xanthias for pretending to be him. Xanthias says he'd make Dionysus pay if he did that, and Pluto's slave brightens on hearing Xanthias disrespect his master—he, too, likes to trash-talk Pluto. The men bond over their mutual love of insulting their masters.

Though Xanthias enjoyed a turn playing Heracles, his transformation was only skin deep, and his glory was ultimately short-lived; now he's relegated to enslavement once more, sent away to do tedious work with another enslaved person while more important characters tend to more important work.

The sound of nearby yelling interrupts Xanthias and Pluto's slave's conversation. Pluto's slave explains that it's Aeschylus and Euripides who are yelling: they're presently engaged in something of a "civil war." In Hades, whoever is the best in their field gets his own chair in Pluto's great hall, and Aeschylus and Euripides are vying for this same coveted position. Aeschylus previously held the chair for tragedy, but ever since Euripides recently died and came to Hades, he's been threatening to take Aeschylus's chair away from him. Xanthias doesn't understand what the problem is—surely Aeschylus is the best. But Pluto's slave explains that common rogues and criminals (at this point he gestures toward the audience) decided that they could decide which was the better poet, and hardly any of them sided with Aeschylus. To settle the matter, Pluto has decided to hold a proper competition to test the poets' skill.

Pluto's slave establishes a context for the agon, *the part of the play in which two speakers engage in debate or contest, with each arguing an opposing side and ending with one speaker being declared the winner. In this case, Euripides (the recently deceased tragedian Dionysus came to Hades to revive) and Aeschylus are debating the merits of their respective bodies of work, thus reinforcing the play's broader focus on the practice of literary criticism (then called "reading"). Complicating their debate are the people available to judge it—the play's audience. In claiming that the audience is full of rogues and common criminals, the play reaffirms Aristophanes's critique of contemporary Athenian society, culture, and politics. He also establishes a link between a society's cultural literacy and their morality.*

Xanthias asks if Sophocles is also competing for the chair. Pluto's slave explains that when Sophocles first arrived, he kissed Aeschylus on the hand and promised not to challenge him. However, if Euripides wins the chair, Sophocles will challenge him. Pluto's slave explains that the competition will involve using a **scale** to "weigh" the poetry. He also says that it's been hard to find anyone smart enough to be a judge, as Aeschylus "[doesn't] see eye to eye with the Athenians." In the end, it was decided that Dionysus will judge the competition. Xanthias and Pluto's slave exit so that the competition can begin.

Sophocles's move to kiss the hand of Aeschylus, the oldest of the three great tragedians, signifies his reverence for tradition. Meanwhile, younger newcomer Euripides's move to immediately challenge Aeschylus's authority demonstrates a lack of respect for tradition. Given the play's consistent embrace of the old and condemnation of the new, the reader may already suspect that Aeschylus will be the winner of the contest.

Dionysus and Pluto enter and find their seats. Slaves carry in a **scale** and other tools to weigh and measure the poetry. Euripides and Aeschylus enter next, engaged in a bitter argument. Finally, the Chorus takes the stage and introduces Aeschylus, comparing his words to "weapons." Next, the Chorus introduces Euripides, whose poetry is filled with "intelligence subtle and keen," though he throws adjectives around willy-nilly.

The scale makes literal the figurative task of analyzing or "weighing" poetry to assess its literary, artistic worth. Comparing Aeschylus's words to "weapons" suggests a certain clarity to Aeschylus's poetry and the morals it espouses. Meanwhile, the Chorus's observation of Euripides's "intelligence subtle and keen" has a more negative connotation, suggesting that his poetry is stylistically or artistically sound but perhaps lacks the moral clarity of Aeschylus's poetry.


Euripides speaks first, claiming to be the better poet. He argues that Aeschylus's poetry is all flowery language and grand declarations. Aeschylus finally responds to Euripides, calling him a "son of the seed-goddess." He criticizes Euripides's plays for containing overly simple, unadorned language and for including common characters and depraved topics, like incest.

The insult that Aeschylus directs toward Euripides is likely a mocking reference to a line from one of Euripides's plays in which Achilles is called "the son of the sea-goddess" (Thetis). Aeschylus is parodying the line to suggest that Euripides's mother Cleito sold greens, or was of humble origins—though it's not clear where this insult originated. His critique of Euripides's unadorned language illustrates a common feature of Aristophanes's plays—Aristophanes frequently criticizes Euripides's plays for featuring characters who speak in everyday language.

Dionysus announces the start of the contest. He goes to the alter and lights incense and pours a drink into the libation cup. Then he turns to the Chorus and orders them to pray to the Muses. The Chorus invokes the Muses as the two competitors, one whose words are powerful, and one whose words are witty, prepare to duel. Aeschylus prays to Demeter. Euripides explains that he prays to "other gods."

Aeschylus prays to Demeter because he was initiated into the Mysteries (recall the band of Initiates Dionysus and Xanthias encountered on their way to Hades). As an Initiate, Aeschylus aligns himself with Dionysus, a deity associated with the Mysteries. This perhaps suggests that he will be the contest's ultimate winner. Meanwhile, Euripides's choice to pray to "other gods" foreshadows his eventual loss.

The contest begins. Euripides insults Aeschylus some more, claiming that he "cheat[s]" his audience by relying too much on suspense, like introducing a veiled figure at the beginning of a play and then boring the audience with long speeches instead of revealing the veiled figure's identity. Dionysus finds Euripides's criticism convincing, and Aeschylus starts to moan and fidget in discomfort.

The contest begins, and with it, a live presentation of the practice of literary criticism. Euripides is specifically referencing two of Aeschylus's lost plays, Niobe *and* Myrmidons, *both of which featured characters who sat on stage in silence.*

Euripides continues. He argues that he saved the art of Tragedy from the poor state Aeschylus left it in. He got rid of all the floral language and unnecessary detail and replaced it with logic and wisdom—he doesn't tease his audience with non-linear timelines or rambling speeches. And every character in his plays—even the women, slaves, and old crones—serves a purpose. Aeschylus retorts that Euripides deserved to die for this, but Euripides says his death was merely "democracy in action." He points to the audience and explains that he taught people to "observe" and "interpret" language, "to take nothing at face value…" He wrote about ordinary life that the audience could relate to. He didn't confuse them with lofty language or "characters like Cycnus or Memnon[.]"

Euripides, in defending the logic and wisdom of his plays, aligns himself and his work with the teachings of Socrates, with whom Euripides's contemporaries associated Euripides. The Socratic method involves people engaging in debate and asking questions to reach deeper understanding, critically observing their surroundings and taking no supposed truths for granted. He also defends his use of characters of lower social statuses—ordinary people to match the ordinary language in which he wrote.

Dionysus, responding to Euripides's claim that he taught his audience how to think, mockingly says that Euripides is right: now, Athenians ask questions like, "Why is the flour jar not in its proper place?" and "Who's been nibbling at this olive?" Without Euripides, they'd just be staring dumbly into space.

Dionysus mockingly disagrees that learning to question and doubt everything has been good for Athenian society. Now, people are too occupied with trivial matters like missing flour jars and half-eaten olives to care about what's really important: reaching a peace settlement with Sparta in the ongoing Peloponnesian War.

Next, it's Aeschylus's turn to argue. Aeschylus begins by asking Euripides to identify what constitutes a good poet. Euripides replies that good poets "teach people how to be better citizens." Aeschylus accuses Euripides of portraying noble figures as brutes in his plays. Aeschylus's plays, like *Seven Against Thebes*, by contrast, portray heroes as heroic, virtuous, and dutiful. Aeschylus thinks this is the point of poetry: to teach audiences a lesson. Orpheus taught people that murder is wrong, for example. Aeschylus only includes role models in this plays, unlike Euripides, whose plays are full of lustful women like Phaedra. Euripides says his plays never hurt anyone, but Aeschylus claims that "every decent woman" was so aghast at Euripides's *Bellerophon* that she went home and poisoned herself.

Euripides's answer to Aeschylus's question brings a new degree of importance to this contest—whichever poet Dionysus deems the winner of this contest could have a hand in "teach[ing] people to be better citizens" and thereby restoring Athens to its former glory. Aeschylus has a similar answer to Euripides—he also thinks that plays should be instructive—but his idea about how to go about this differs from Euripides's. Aeschylus critiques Euripides's plays for involving lurid, immoral subject matters—he suggests that people learn by example, so plays that feature immoral characters, even if things end badly for them, can't possibly teach audiences anything useful about morality.

Euripides says it's not like he came up with the story of Phaedra. Aeschylus agrees but says poets should know not to talk about such vile stories. Instead, they should provide examples of how to behave—a poet is to their audience as the schoolteacher is to their students, after all. Euripides scoffs and asks Aeschylus if it's better to teach people using lofty language or common, everyday language. Aeschylus says that "noble themes" require noble language—and that this is a matter of respect. Euripides's plays have taught people to be immoral and lazy and stand around "babbl[ing]" and debating all day.

Aeschylus argues for a censorship of sorts, suggesting that it's a poet's responsibility to feed audiences only themes that will improve their morality and teach them how to act—everything that could corrupt audiences and sow discord, however, should be left out. He talks about the audience rather patronizingly, comparing them to impressionable young schoolchildren who must be fed clear, positive examples in order to learn. He also critiques Euripides's association with Socrates once more, claiming that Euripides's plays have taught people to stand around "babbl[ing]" all day, referencing the Socratic method, which centers around debate and interrogation.

Euripides next attacks Aeschylus's prologues, claiming they don't give the audience enough context. He cites the *Oresteia* trilogy as an example. Aeschylus recites the opening three lines of the play *Choephori*, in which Orestes stands over his dead father Agamemnon's grave and speaks of his plans to avenge Agamemnon's death. Euripides explains what's wrong with these opening lines. "For I have come back to this land and do return" is redundant, he claims, since coming back already implies a return. Dionysus agrees. Aeschylus replies that "come back" is more general, but that "return" specifically applies to something an exiled person would do. The poets argue back and forth, with Dionysus interjecting shallow commentary here and there.

So far, Euripides's attacks against Aeschylus seem rather comically picky and unsubstantial. He's dissecting Aeschylus's poetry for minor stylistic choices he happens not to like, not necessarily for anything that would signify that Aeschylus is a deficient poet. It becomes increasingly clear that Euripides isn't measuring up to Aeschylus. Given that Aeschylus is the older of the two poets, Euripides's shallow criticisms further suggest the play's central premise that the new is bad and the old is good.

Next, it's Euripides's turn to recite his prologue. He recites *Oedipus Rex* but can barely get through the first line about Oedipus being happy before Aeschylus cuts him off, arguing that this simply isn't true: Oedipus was never happy, for Apollo had already predetermined that Oedipus would murder his own father. And from there, things just get worse: Oedipus is kept in a pot to prevent him from growing up and murdering his father, then he marries a woman old enough to be his mother, and then it turns out she *is* his mother. Then he blinds himself. Euripides maintains that his prologues are still good.

In critiquing Euripides's portrayal of Oedipus as (at least at first) "a happy man," Aeschylus reaffirms his argument that Euripides's plays don't instill good morals in audiences, scandalizing them with the notion that someone who engages in the taboo of incest should be "happy" at any point in his life. In defending his prologues, Euripides suggests that the literary merits of his poetry outweigh whatever scandalizing, immoral themes they broach.

Aeschylus claims that Euripides's poetry is rhythmically bad. In fact, Aeschylus can "demolish any prologue [...] with a little flask of oil." To demonstrate this, Aeschylus asks Euripides to recite the opening lines of a prologue—then Aeschylus completes them with the phrase "lost his little flask of oil." Aeschylus does this four times more, much to Dionysus's amusement. Dionysus tells Euripides that he's probably lost this battle and should move on and address Aeschylus's lyrics instead.

Here, Aeschylus moves away from critiquing the lacking moral or educational value of Euripides's work, focusing instead on a stylistic concern: the predictable rhythms of Euripides's prologues, comically showing how the predictability of Euripides's use of iambic meters in his prologues allows each line to end with "lost his little flask of oil."

Euripides says that Aeschylus's lyrics are all the same; contrary to their popularity, there's nothing all that special about them. Euripides then mockingly sings excerpts from Aeschylus's lyrical writing, ending each excerpt with the phrase "*Ai, ai*, we're struck! Come quickly to the rescue!" much as Aeschylus did with the "flask of oil" bit. Aeschylus counters that he might use "traditional elements in [his] lyrics," but they all serve a specific artistic purpose. Aeschylus then criticizes Euripides's solo arias, singing a song that starts out sounding serious but ends up being about the theft of a cockerel.

Here, Euripides mocks Aeschylus's frequent use of dactylic rhythm, or a long syllable followed by two short syllables. Though the poets mock each other's work to a specific, picky degree, their exercise in literary criticism has an instructive as well as entertaining effect on the audience, helping them to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanics at play in the poets' respective works.

After Aeschylus finishes the aria, he suggests it's time to use the **scales** to decide which poet's "poetry is the weightier[.]" Dionysus calls the two poets to stand before the scale's two pans. He instructs them to each hold onto a pan and recite one line of their own poetry, then when he calls, "Cuckoo!" the poets should let go. They both do this, and the result is that Aeschylus's side of the scale slides down lower. Euripides demands they try again. Once more, Aeschylus's poetry proves weightier.

In deeming Aeschylus's poetry physically "weightier," the scale also suggests that Aeschylus's poetry will have a heavier influence on Athenian citizens and be better equipped to get them back on track morally and politically.

Euripides isn't ready to accept defeat. He argues that "Persuasion" ought to carry weight. Dionysus disagrees, calling Persuasion "hollow" and meaningless. Euripides considers something weightier he can offer, but Aeschylus interrupts, saying the "line-against-line business" is pointless—even if Euripides hopped inside the pan with his whole family, Aeschylus would still outweigh him. When it's time for Dionysus to decide the winner, he struggles. One poet is wise, but he "just love[s]" the other poet. Pluto says that Dionysus should just pick a poet; he can take the poet he picks back to earth with him, and that way he won't have wasted his time.

Euripides's argument that "Persuasion" should carry weight references his evocation of Socratic argument, as he focuses on the way his plays incite audiences to ask questions about the world and take nothing for granted. But Dionysus dismisses "Persuasion" as "hollow," suggesting it is lightweight and not intellectually valuable or politically or socially useful. Pluto raises the stakes when he declares that the winner of the contest will return to Athens with Dionysus—now, the winner will have the opportunity to put the power of poetry to the test, seeing if it's possible to educate the passes through poetry and, in so doing, restore Athens to its former glory.

Dionysus turns to the poets and explains that he came to Hades to "save" Athens. Therefore, whichever poet can offer the best advice to save Athens is the poet he'll choose. He poses a question to the poets: "what should be done about Alcibiades?" Euripides recites lines of verse condemning citizens who act selfishly and harm their country. Aeschylus recites lines of verse about how unwise it is for states to raise a lion cub—but that if they do, they should "tolerate its own peculiar ways."

Alcibiades was a former Athenian general who was a contentious figure at the time of the play's first performance—he'd been arrested for profaning the Mysteries, then reinstated following his involvement in defeating the oligarchs who overthrew Athenian democracy in 411 B.C.E., and then he had his titles taken away once more by his enemies. Athens was divided on what to do about Alcibiades, a position that The Frogs *seems to share—while Euripides advocates for Alcibiades's punishment, Aeschylus adopts a more ambivalent stance toward the disgraced former general.*

Dionysus can't decide which poet has given the better answer, so he poses another question: how should Athens be saved? Euripides thinks Athenians should question everything and everyone—even the people and ideas they trust. Aeschylus thinks Athenians are doomed unless they stop electing "hypocrites and swindlers" over noble people, and they need to be prepared to give up land to strengthen their navy.

Euripides doubles down on his embrace of the Socratic method and so dooms himself—by this point, it's well established that Aristophanes holds Socrates and anyone associated with him in contempt. Meanwhile, Aeschylus, with his practical suggestion that Athenians re-learn how to be better judges of character and start electing better people to office, seems to solidify his place as the victor of this competition.

Pluto says it's time for Dionysus to decide which poet he will take back with him. Dionysus explains how he will pick the winning poet: "I shall select the man my soul desires." Then he picks Aeschylus. Euripides, irate, calls Dionysus "shameful" and a "traitor." He asks if Dionysus is really going to leave him here to remain dead, and Dionysus replies mockingly, asking how one can know what life and death really are. Euripides struggles as he's removed from the arena.

Though both Euripides and Aeschylus have just presented a compelling argument that each is the better poet and that each is better suited to save Athens, Dionysus instead chooses to "select the man [his] soul desires," or the man whose poetry most moves him. With this, The Frogs *perhaps suggests that engaging with literature in a critical, focused manner can deepen a person's appreciation for it. Indeed, after hearing Aeschylus and Euripides make their respective arguments, Dionysus goes back on his initial impulse to bring back Euripides, opting to revive Aeschylus instead. This, it seems, is the result of having spent time thoughtfully considering Aeschylus's work, ultimately suggesting that this kind of careful rumination can change a person's mind (since Dionysus originally came to bring back Euripides, not Aeschylus).*

Pluto orders Dionysus and Aeschylus inside to entertain them before they leave. The Chorus stays behind and praises Aeschylus's "sharp intelligence," anticipating all the good he will do for Athens. By contrast, "it's not smart to sit and chat / With Socrates," nor is it smart to sacrifice "Artistic merit" for "quibbling and pretentious talk," which is what Euripides does.

Once more, Aristophanes, speaking through the Chorus, criticizes Euripides for promoting Socrates's ideas, which Aristophanes equates to "quibbling and pretentious talk." Athenians have gotten their priorities mixed up and have learned to doubt the system and one another, and this is partially why Athens has lost political power. To Aristophanes, it's Aeschylus's plays, which give audiences clear examples of noble themes and character, that have true "Artistic merit."

Pluto, Aeschylus, and Dionysus emerge from Pluto's palace. Pluto bids his guests goodbye and tells them to return to Athens and "Educate the fools." Aeschylus asks Pluto to have Sophocles keep his chair away from Euripides while he's away. The Chorus escorts Aeschylus to Athens, wishing him a safe journey and success in saving the city.

Pluto tells Aeschylus to "Educate the fools" of Athens, which is more or less what Aristophanes sets out to do in The Frogs. *In addition, the particular phrasing the Chorus invokes to wish Aeschylus a safe journey is based on lines from the Exit-Song of Aeschylus's play* Eumendies, *in which Athena gives Athenians her well wishes. In closing* The Frogs *with this literary allusion, Aristophanes pays homage to the old, dying Greek art of tragedy and the traditional values and conventions it represents.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Charles, Carly. "*The Frogs*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Feb 2023. Web. 25 Feb 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Charles, Carly. "*The Frogs*." LitCharts LLC, February 25, 2023. Retrieved February 25, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-frogs.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Frogs* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Aristophanes. The Frogs. Penguin Classics. 2007.

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Aristophanes. The Frogs. London: Penguin Classics. 2007.