

The Frogs, and Other Plays. Translated with an Introd. by David Barrett Study Guide

The Frogs, and Other Plays. Translated with an Introd. by David Barrett by Aristophanes

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Plot Summary

This collection is composed of three of Aristophanes best known and most interesting plays. Although Aristophanes is best known as a political satirist, while all these plays involve some political aspect, only Wasps is directly political.

Wasps is the story of a man addicted to sitting in judgment on others in court and the son that tries to save him. Philocleon, the old father of Bdelycleon, is addicted to serving on juries. In ancient Athens, any citizen could bring a suit against any other and the jurymen, who were paid to be there, would be able to decide the fate of the accused. In this play the litigious Athenian jurymen are portrayed as wasps with sharp stingers that they will use against those that stir up their frenzy. Philocleon is the worst of the group though. He needs no provocation, taking joy out of inflicting punishment and passing judgment on others for its own sake. His son, fearing that his father has taken his love of judgment too far, attempts to lock his father in the house so he can't go to court. The father enlists the help of his fellow juror, the wasps, to help free him. Eventually the wasps agree to hear a trial between Philocleon and his son over whether or not the juries are used as a tool for the political elite. The son wins his case and the father is forced to quit his judging.

In *The Poet and the Women*, the playwright Euripides is afraid for his life because he believes that the women of Athens, tired of him slandering them in his plays are gathered during the festival of Demeter to sentence him to death. He convinces his cousin to dress up like a woman and infiltrate the women's assembly and to defend Euripides. Of course the cousin is found out and much of the play involves Euripides trying to free his cousin from the grips of the women and the state. Eventually Euripides swallows his pride and makes a deal with the women not to slander them if they will help him free his cousin.

Frogs is the story of the god Dionysus traveling down to Hades with his loyal slave to find Euripides and bring him back to earth. After several misadventures on the way to Hades, Dionysus finds Euripides and Aeschylus involved in a debate over who is the greatest dramatic poet. Dionysus agrees to hear each poet make their case to him and then he will decide who is the better poet and take them back to earth. After listening to a long and thorough debate, Dionysus decides on political grounds that he would rather take Aeschylus back to Athens with him because he will be more useful to the city. *Frogs* then ends with Sophocles snubbing Euripides and telling Aeschylus he will hold his place until he returns from Hades. Dionysus and Aeschylus then ascend to the world of the living to help solve the political problems of Athens.



The Wasps, Part 1

The Wasps, Part 1 Summary

The play begins with two slaves, Sosias and Xanthias drunk from the night before keeping watch over their master's house. Xanthias has fallen asleep and is awakened by Sosias who also fell asleep a little earlier. Xanthias is sleepier and has, apparently, drunk more wine than Sosias, though both are quite drunk. To keep awake they tell each other the dreams they have just had. Xanthias dreamt of an eagle descending to pick up a shield with its talons only to have Cleonymus throw the shield down. Xanthias thinks that this dream bodes ill for him. Sosias tries to calm his friend and then tells him his dream about the ship of state. Sosias' dream is more complicated and topically political, and Xanthias assures his friend that his dream is a good omen. Sosias congratulates his friend on his masterful interpretation of the dream and then Xanthias addresses the audience. In this prologue Xanthias addresses the audience directly and warns them not to expect anything too grand or vicious, though there is at least a little irony in this address. He goes on to tell the audience that their master, Bdelycleon (Cleon Hater), has commanded them to keep watch of all the ways out of the house lest his father try to escape.

Bdelycleon has locked up his father, Philocleon (Cleon lover), in his own house to protect himself and the family. Xanthias claims that the reason Bdelycleon has locked up his own father is to protect his father from his addiction and Xanthias asks the audience to guess the addiction, believing no one will guess. One man suggests that Philocleon is addicted to gambling or drinking. Xanthias, laughing, replies that no, he is not addicted to either of those two vices. Drinking is, he argues, a vice of gentlemen after all and hence not open to Philocleon, who is no gentleman. Another man suggests that he may suffer from a love of hospitality, that is, a love of entertaining strangers. No, no, laughs Xanthias who suggests that no one will ever guess. Instead of continuing the guessing game, Xanthias decides to tell the audience Philocleon's addiction: sitting in judgment in the local law courts. Philocleon shows up early every day to the law courts so that he can sit in judgment on his fellow citizens and takes great pleasure in sentencing his unfortunate countrymen to punishment. The son, Bdelycleon, is disgusted by his father's addiction and has tried everything to rid him of the vice so far to no avail. In desperation he has decided to use his slaves to guard the house and make sure his father can't leave and go down to the courts.

After this address to the audience from Xanthias, the slave's master Bdelycleon, who has been sleeping on the roof, asks the slaves if they are watching the house or if they have been asleep. The slaves deflect the question but just then, Bdelycleon notices something wrong with the chimney. It is Philocleon, trying to force his way out of the chimney to escape and his son has to use all of his force to stop Bdelycleon from escaping. Moving to a doorway, the old man tries to escape again, but is stopped again by his son. The Old man, realizing he won't be able to get to the court cries out that if he can't go to court, someone may be acquitted. He tells of how the oracle claimed that if



any defendant escaped from Philocleon's judgment, the old man would die. His son, disgusted by the old man's lust for vengeance through his legal judgments realizes the seriousness of his father's addiction.

Continuing his attempts to escape with trickery, the father begs his son to let him leave so he can sell his donkey in the market. Offering to sell the donkey for the old man instead, he coaxes the donkey out of the house. As the donkey is being led out of the house, one of the slaves notices a man hanging to the underbelly of the donkey. Of course, it is the father disguised and claiming to be "no-man" but this doesn't fool the son who forces his father back into the house. Before he is inside, though, Philocleon calls for the help of the other judges, most prominently Cleon. The son, realizing that his father's fellow jurymen will be arriving soon to take his father to court and will try to free him tells his slaves to pile up rocks in front of the house so that it may withstand the assault by the other jurymen. The other jurymen, resembling wasps with stingers on their back arrive in the form of the chorus. As they march towards the house they tell of their patron, Cleon, who makes sure that they are paid well so long as they prosecute the rich Athenians. Because of the war, the old waspish jurymen are quite poor and they need their daily fee for being jurymen to survive.

The wasps arrive at Philocleon's house and surprised not to find the old man ready to go to court, they inquire why he is not ready. Philocleon informs the wasps that his son and his slave, who are now asleep, has imprisoned him to prevent him going to court and sitting in judgment. He prays to Zeus either to allow him to escape or to strike him down. His love of inflicting punishment on others is so great that he would prefer to die than to have to give up going to court. The Wasps demand that the father be released, but, of course, he refuses and the wasps to buzz. Philocleon demands that the Wasps attack his son and Bdelycleon tells his other slaves to brace for an attack by the wasps.

The Wasps, Part 1 Analysis

The first part of the Wasps is rich in symbolism. Some of the humor and satire, as in many of Aristophanes' plays, may not be apparent to a reader who does not have a basic understanding of the history of ancient Athens. At this time, Athens was a democracy and any citizen could bring a lawsuit against another. This system was abused by the demagogue Cleon and used for political purposes. Aristophanes is satirizing the litigious nature of Athenian society comparing it to a kind of disease or addiction. In the opening scene, the slaves set the stage and allude to the inversion of political society in Athens in the time of Cleon. Both slaves have dreams as if they were citizens or political men instead of slaves. In the play citizens, notably the jurymen wasps, behave as if they are slaves to the court, rushing to it for their pay. Furthermore, the old man and father is the one who must be restrained by his son another inversion of the proper order of authority and respect. The juries of Athens could sentence citizens to exile or death and the old man takes pleasure in the task—so much so, in fact, that he doesn't want to go on living if he is not able to pass judgment on other people.



In the scene where the old man tries to escape, his method of escape mirrors Odysseus' escape from Polyphemus the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*. The old man uses the *nome de guerre*, "noman" a pun that Odysseus uses to confuse the Cyclops. He also escapes on hanging on to the bottom of animal in the same way. Furthermore, when his son questions him, the old man says he is from Ithaca, the home of Odysseus. This association makes the old man into a kind of ridiculous Odysseus, using guile to escape from his home instead of to return to it.



The Wasps, Part 2

The Wasps, Part 2 Summary

The wasps attack using their stingers to threaten the younger man and his slaves, but the slaves don't let the wasps capture the old man and try to fight them off with torches. Bdelycleon and the slaves fight off the wasps somewhat easily and the defeated wasps argue that the son is an enemy of the people for trying to subvert a lawful jury. He tries to reason with the wasps by arguing that they are forgoing more reasonable pursuits but the wasps do not listen to him. Finally the father argues that he would rather be a juryman than have all the riches in the world. The son replies to his father that while he may love the thrill of having power over those accused, he is really on the tool of the tyrant Cleon who is using Philocleon and the other wasps to advance his political interests. The father claims that he is a slave to no one and, in fact, is the ruler of everyone in his role as juryman. Feeling that there may be a way to solve this impasse and to indulge his love of litigation, the father proposes that they settle the matter by making the wasps the jury and having son and father argue their cases before them.

Bdelycleon agrees for each party to make their case before the wasps and he orders his slaves to release his father so that he may freely argue his case. The wasps ask both men what they are willing to take as a punishment if they lose the case. The father agrees to commit suicide if he loses the case, confident that he will win but believing the life is not worth living if he is not allowed to go to the courts anymore. Bdelycleon doesn't want his father to commit suicide and argues that the father's punishment should be, instead, to be banned from the law courts. The wasps agree and the case begins. They remind their fellow citizens what the question is, namely, whether jurors in Athens are slaves or masters of the political class, namely Cleon.

The old man begins by describing the joys of being a juryman. Who in Athens is not afraid of a juryman and who does not fawn over him and treat him like a god, the old man asks. Furthermore, he enjoys being paid for his services. Bdelycleon asks his father whether or not he is reliant on the political class for his food and drink and Philocleon responds that this is also one of the benefits. Bdelycleon, having already insinuated to his father that he is a slave now calculates the amount of the city's revenue that goes to pay jurymen. Philocleon and the wasps are shocked to find out that it is only a small fraction of the overall revenue. The rest of the money, Bdelycleon argues, goes to the political class, who use the jurymen to keep the populace in fear and then extort bribes and favors from those that they oppress with the courts.

It is this argument that wins over the wasps and Philocleon. The wasps rule in favor of Bdelycleon and the father is banned from the court. Still, the father loves judging and even though he realizes that he has been exploited by Cleon, he still wants to be a judge. Not wishing his father to be completely despondent, Bdelycleon agrees to make his father the judge of the home and he proceeds to set up a court in the house for his father to sit on.



While Bdelycleon is finding the necessary items to make a home court, Philocleon reconciles himself to his fate a judge over the household. While he is gone, a dog named Labes steals and eats some cheese off of a table. The servants find another dog to act as an accuser and Philocleon readies himself to sit in judgment over the accused dog. The accuser, Kyon, argues that Labes is guilty of stealing the cheese and not sharing it with any of the other dogs. Philocleon, nasty as ever, wants to convict the dog without even hearing his case. Bdelycleon steps in though and makes a case for the other dog, arguing that he has had a hard life and by showing his father the poor puppies. This unusual sense of pity has the effect of driving the father to cast his first ever not guilty ballot, acquitting the dog Labes.

After the parabis, we find Bdelycleon trying to educate his father in the ways of the gentleman, namely by teaching him how to dress nicely and how to behave at a fancy dinner party. The father does take to this very well, but agrees to go with his son to the dinner party, but still refusing to drink alcohol. Philocleon, though, apparently has trouble controlling himself and we see him after the party dragging a flute girl back home with him. He has gotten drunk and took a fancy to the slave girl. The son confronts his father on the way home and demands that he let the flute-girl go. Some of the other people arrive from the party and accuse the father of all kinds of bad behavior at the party. Realizing that a mob is developing, the son takes his father inside to hide him as the play ends.

The Wasps, Part 2 Analysis

In part 2 of the Wasps, Aristophanes shows us a mock court scene meant to indict the Athenian legal system itself and those that serve it. Philocleon's arguments in favor of the legal system can be used to indict that very system as they rely on the corrupt gifts that he receives because of his power and the joy that he gets from abusing his power and having his fellow citizens fear him. These are not generally seen as virtues of a properly functioning legal system and this shows how far the Athenian system is from a good system. Bdelycleon uses this argument against his father and uses his father's greed and envy as a way to defeat him in the argument. Bdelycleon argues that it is really the demagogues, in this case Cleon, who are getting the lion's share of the money from the city's treasury and even though they use the courts to intimidate the citizenry out of their money, they only give a pittance to the juries. This riles up the father's envy and he now realizes that he is indeed being used by the demagogues.

One of the themes that comes out in this debate is the inversion of slaves and masters. Philocleon believes that he is the master of the demagogues as a juryman, but his son shows him that he is, indeed, really a slave. Furthermore, it is the son, who should show deference to his father and the other elder wasps, who convinces them to give up their ways and ultimately is able to make his father conform to his will. Eventually going so far as to lead his father to do the one thing he has never done, in this case, cast a not guilty verdict and acquit a defendant.



The Poet and the Women, Part 1

The Poet and the Women, Part 1 Summary

The Poet and the Women begins with the tragic poet and playwright Euripides dragging his cousin by marriage, Mnesilochus around Athens. Euripides does not tell his cousin where they are going and Mnesilochus complains that he has been wandering around all day without knowing where the two men are going. Euripides explains that he does not need to explain where he is taking his cousin and that; in any case, they will be at their destination soon. They arrive at a house of the tragic poet Agathon. As they are arriving, a servant of Agathon's begins a sacred sacrifice for the success of the poet's new play. Euripides and his cousin hide to observe the sacrifice. Midway through the rite, the servant sees the two men hiding and calls them out. They emerge from hiding and Euripides tells the servant to call his master. Indignant, the servant says the poet will emerge shortly and that they must wait. This, of course, angers Euripides who at the insistence of his cousin explains why they have come to visit Agathon.

Euripides tells his cousin that on this day, the festival of Demeter, the women of Athens have gathered for the Thesmophoria and are holding a trial for Euripides. They accuse Euripides of treating the women badly in the way that he has portrayed them in his dramas and he is afraid that they will convict him of the crime in secret. He has come to Agathon's house to try to persuade the, apparently effeminate poet, to dress up as a woman and infiltrate the assembly of women so as to defend Euripides. As he is explaining his plan, a woman appears and begins singing elaborate hymns to a variety of gods. The woman is, in fact, Agathon in disguise. The poet Agathon explains that a poet must adapt himself to the part that he is writing and in this case, since he is writing a woman's drama, he has dressed as a woman.

Euripides addresses Agathon and explains that the women of the town are judging him in absentia and that they will, no doubt, find him guilty and sentence him to death. He needs the artful Agathon to disguise himself as a woman, infiltrate the assembly and speak, as only he can, in artful defense of Euripides. Agathon responds by asking why Euripides himself does not go in disguise and defend himself. Euripides replies that everyone knows who he is and that he has a manly appearance and a beard unlike Agathon. Agathon, citing one of Euripides' own plays, refuses to go defend him. The cousin gets indignant at Agathon and Euripides feigns despair. Seeing his cousin despair so greatly, the cousin tells Euripides that he will do anything necessary to help his cousin. Without a pause, Euripides takes his cousin up on his generous offer and asks him to go in disguise to the women's assembly.

Euripides shaves his cousin's beard and removes any other manly features from the man's face despite the pain that this causes his cousin. He then asks Agathon to loan him some women's clothing. As the cousin is putting on the female attire he begins to act more and more like a woman becoming very picky about his outfit. After he is done dressing, Euripides tells him to make sure to talk in a woman's voice and his cousin



asks the poet to swear to do everything in his power to help if his cousin is discovered. Euripides agrees and first swears to the ether but this, not being a solemn enough oath, the poet then swears to Zeus. The cousin hurries off to the assembly and Euripides goes back to his house.

The cousin, disguised as a woman arrives at the temple of Demeter where the women are assembled. He makes the appropriate sacrifice to Demeter and asks for good health for his imaginary daughter. The assembly finishes the introductory rites and the leader of the assembly asks all of the women to pray to all of the gods to protect the society of women and to bring misfortune on all those who oppose the women. The women then catalog all of the insults that Euripides has leveled against them in his plays. The list is long and all of the women agree that Euripides is guilty all that remains now are to decide on a penalty. The first woman tells how Euripides has said many bad things about women, namely their propensity to adultery and their practice of cuckolding their husbands and then presenting their lover's children as their own. The woman admits that women do all of these things; she is upset at Euripides for alerting the husbands of Athens to all the dirty tricks of the women. After Euripides, the women can't get away with anything. Because of these crimes, she recommends that Euripides be put to death. The second woman agrees with what the first woman has said and adds that since her husband has been killed in the war she must support her children by selling religious items for people to use in various rites. Euripides, she claims, has convinced all of the men that there are no gods and now she can't make a living selling her goods. She also recommends that Euripides be put to death. The second woman then runs off to take care of some business in the marketplace.

The Poet and the Women, Part 1 Analysis

The first part of *The Poet and the Women* is very interesting for several reasons. First, this play, like two other plays of Aristophanes' *The Clouds* and *The Acharnians* involves a poet and playwright or a thinker defending himself against the people of Athens. In this case it is the greatest tragic poet of the period who must defend himself against the lowliest group in Ancient Athens, namely the women. Euripides can't defend himself as himself though; he needs his cousin to disguise himself as a woman to defend him. So in some sense, the play is about the relationship between the poet and the society around him. The second part of the first half of the play that should instantly grab the reader's attention is the address to the assembly of women by the first two women. The first woman gives a litany of reasons why Euripides should be convicted but the reasons themselves could only be given to other women. That is, she admits that Euripides is correct in arguing that the women of Athens are notorious adulterers and liars. The problem is, according to the first woman, that Euripides has "spilt the beans" so to speak and has informed the men of their crimes.

The second woman, though, makes a much more serious accusation, namely that Euripides has taught the city to disbelieve in the gods and has thereby impoverished her. Although the second woman doesn't realize it, the reason she gives against Euripides is a public reason, that is, it is a reason that the public at large could accept,



not only the assembly of women. In that sense, it is a much more serious accusation. Interestingly, the woman herself seems to be only concerned about Euripides' actions insofar as it has hurt her business. She either doesn't take theism as a serious proposal or she is indifferent to religion.



The Poet and the Women, Part 2

The Poet and the Women, Part 2 Summary

At this point, Mnesilochus stands up and argues that Euripides is, as they would all admit, quite right about the women's crimes and they are lucky that Euripides hasn't even told the half of the evil the women perform behind their men's backs. He tells the women imaginary accounts of his own crimes; foremost among them the rude adultery he has committed while his imaginary husband was away on military service. The other women are outraged at the cousin's accusations, but realizing that he is speaking the truth about the evil of women, they don't know how to respond. One woman who is outraged by the cousin's accusations argues that they should continue to prosecute Euripides and to also put this woman to death for being a traitor and for defending Euripides. Mnesilochus, realizing that he had better go on the offensive, responds by making even more accusations and by arguing that all the positive accounts of women from older poets, namely the portrayal of Penelope, are now out of date and all of the women have forgotten how to act virtuously. This leads to a fight between the cousin and the only woman who has dared to attack him.

The chorus breaks up the fight as Cleisthenes arrives to the assembly. Cleisthenes is really a man but such a womanly man who loves women and imitates them that the women have made him a kind of honorary member. Cleisthenes reports to the women a rumor he has heard in the market place that Euripides is sending a relative of his, disguised as woman to spy on the assembly and to plead his case. Mnesilochus tries to dismiss the report as silly, but the rumor has strong credibility and Cleisthenes assures the women that he has it from a trustworthy source. The women decide that it is extremely important to find out the man in disguise and they enlist Cleisthenes in the search. Naturally they can't just undress everyone so they decide that they will ask who knows each woman and, in effect have the women vouch for each other. The man disguised as a woman will not have anyone vouch for her and will hence be found out.

They line the women up and ask each in turn who her husband is. Cleisthenes eventually gets to the cousin and asks him who his husband is and the cousin gives an obviously false name. None of the other women can remember him either. The women ask Mnesilochus what they did during the festival the year before and Mnesilochus gives an answer that does not satisfy Cleisthenes. They now believe that the cousin is the man they are looking for and ask him to undress. They begin to undress the man but midway through they realize that there might be other men in the assembly and continue their search. Meanwhile, Cleisthenes runs off to get the authorities. The cousin, worried about his fate, decides to kidnap one of the women's babies and hold it hostage so that he can escape. The baby that he steals is actually just a wine skin dressed up as a baby though and Mnesilochus, despairing of his fate waits for the authorities and hopes that Euripides will make good on his promise and save his cousin.



While the cousin waits for the authorities, the chorus engages in their Paribas. The women of the chorus attempt to defend themselves against the charges made by Euripides. Of course, there is no one to respond to them so their case will, no doubt, be easier to make. They argue that if women are so bad, why do all the men want to be with women? It is men, not women they argue, that are responsible for the evils of the world. Women may lie about sex or cheat on their husbands, but men deceive whole nations and lead their countries into war. Furthermore, the women are more pious than their male counterparts.

Mnesilochus, waiting with his guard begins to act out a scene from Euripides' play Helen. Pretending to be Helen he recites the lines from Euripides. Just then Euripides does indeed arrive dressed as Menelaus and acting the part of Helen's husband. While acting out their parts, the two men attempt to elude their captives, but the Athenian authorities arrive and Euripides is forced to flee. Euripides shows up again to try to free his cousin who has been cruelly bound by an archer and is awaiting his death sentence. Euripides tries several other dramatic devices to fool his captives and rescue his cousin, all to no avail. Eventually, Euripides realizes it is time to throw in the towel and swallow his pride. He goes to the women and agrees not to say anymore-bad things about them if they will help him rescue his cousin. They won't help him, but they also agree not to interfere with his rescue. Through a clever ruse, he distracts the guard and rescues his cousin. The two men run off, safe from the women of Athens.

The Poet and the Women, Part 2 Analysis

Part two continues some of the themes and devices from the first part but in a different form. In the first part, the women admitted to their evil doing and the cousin used that information to indict them. This time, the degeneracy of the women works against him when he tries to steal a baby to aid in his escape. The baby is really a wineskin, a sign that the women are using the festival, a religious festival, as, at least in part, an excuse to indulge in the very crimes and vices the Euripides has accused them of. In trying to free his friend, Euripides attempts to use his dramatic arts of poetry and disguise to beguile and fool first the woman guard and then the jailor. He dresses up as the Spartan king from his play and then later as a variety of characters all to no avail.

His inability to save his friend seems to be a commentary on the ability of the poet to affect the audience. Only when Euripides makes a deal with the women will they agree to help him. After he makes the deal with the women, his dramatic method works to free his friend. Here Aristophanes seems to be saying that the work of the poet can only have force if the audience is, in some sense, complicit with the poet. This is an indictment of the people of Athens, especially the women because Euripides' accusations would only work if they were true, which they admit they are, and if the women and men of Athens believe them, which they do. Aristophanes seems to be saying that however, Athens may blame her poets and playwrights the city itself is at least to blame for what art there is as the playwright is.



The Frogs, Part 1

The Frogs, Part 1 Summary

The Frogs opens with the god of theater Dionysus and his slave Xanthias wondering along the road. Xanthias asks his master how they should open the play, that is, what joke they should use. Dionysus answers that he may use any joke that he like so long as it is, in some sense, in good taste. Xanthias then complains about the burden he is carrying and how sore it is making his shoulders. Dionysus then asks Xanthias how he can be carrying a burden while a donkey is carrying him. Xanthias and Dionysus then wonder if it would be better for him to carry the donkey instead but Xanthias assumes that this would only makes matters worse. The continue riding, apparently without opening the play with any joke at all.

Eventually Dionysus tells Xanthias to dismount because they have arrived at their destination, the house of Heracles. Dionysus, imitating Heracles, is dressed in a lion's skin and is carrying a great club, which he uses to knock on Heracles' door. Heracles, who is in fact Dionysus' half-brother sees Dionysus and bursts out laughing. Why, he inquires, is Dionysus dressed up in such a silly outfit? Dionysus relies that he has just come from the naval battle at Arginusai and has forgotten to take off his clothes. Dionysus relies that while he was on his ship in the navy, he read Euripides' *Andromeda* and was filled with a longing to see the dead poet again. He must, he argues, descend to Hades to retrieve Euripides from the kingdom of the dead. All the living poets are inferior to the great Euripides and Athens is need of a great poet once again. Heracles who like any pious, practical man dislike and disapproves of Euripides wonders why his brother wants to bring back Euripides instead of Sophocles. Dionysus argues that Euripides, being impious and unconventional would be willing to escape from Hades whereas Sophocles, who is pious and conservative will not want to leave his appointed place.

Heracles suggests that maybe Agathon will be more to his liking and Dionysus completely rejects the notion. Only Euripides will do. In any case, argues Dionysus, Heracles doesn't know what he is talking about because all he cares about is food. Dionysus needs Heracles' help because Heracles has gone down to Hades before and he will know the way. Dionysus want the hero to direct him to the underworld by the least harmful route and also asks Heracles to tell him who he will encounter in Hades. First Heracles suggests several ways that Dionysus can commit suicide and thereby descend to the underworld. Dionysus has no interest in killing himself, however. After all, he has brought Xanthias at least in part to carry all of the luggage he will need on his journey. Heracles then tells Dionysus about another route he can take across a foul lake on the boat of Charon to the shore where many heroes and great men await and who can direct the god to Euripides. Dionysus disguises himself as Heracles expecting to be greeted as the hero when he arrives in Hades.



Dionysus and Xanthias descend into Hades until they reach the shores of the river Styx. The boatman, Charon, greets the two men rudely and tells Xanthias that since he is a slave and not a Greek citizen he must walk around the lake rather than ride on the boat. Carrying Dionysus' entire luggage, Xanthias heads off around the lake. Dionysus and Charon begin to row across the lake. Charon tells Dionysus to listen to the chorus of Frogs who sing praises to the god of theater Dionysus. The Frogs don't realize that the god is in the boat because he is disguised as Heracles. Dionysus, unaccustomed to rowing and enjoying the substance of the Frogs' song but annoyed by the song of their croaking makes his displeasure clear. The Frogs, insulted, begin to croak louder to annoy Dionysus even more. The god then begins to croak louder and louder in competition with the Frogs until the boat arrives at the shore of Hades.

On the shore, Dionysus meets Xanthias who claims to have met several criminals on the way around the lake. Dionysus is concerned that Heracles has misinformed him about Hades. Rather than finding the place filled with horrors and monsters the only challenge he has had to face is the annoyance of the Frogs and he claims to have been able to out-croak them. He now wishes to see a genuine monster and Xanthias claims that he does see one, though Dionysus doesn't catch sight of him. Despite the fear that soon passes the two men walk further from the shore and see torches approaching. They seem to have passed through the land of monsters unharmed into the part of Hades inhabited by the blessed. The blessed form a second chorus and welcome Dionysus, still undetected by them as a god, and his slave. The dance and sing the blessings of Dionysus the god, still not recognizing him in their presence. Dionysus asks the chorus how he can find Pluto, the king of Hades and the chorus replies that he is only at the gates of Hades and he must enter before he can find Pluto.

The Frogs, Part 1 Analysis

The Frogs is one of the most sophisticated and interesting of all of Aristophanes' plays because it, like Euripides' Bacchae uses the god of theater, Dionysus as one of the main characters. In so doing, the nature of drama itself becomes part of the subject matter as is obvious towards the end of the play. The start of the play already signals to the audience the self-referential nature of the drama to come. Xanthias and Dionysus begin by arguing about what is the best way to start the play. Xanthias wants to start with a crude joke and Dionysus, who has, apparently, more delicate sensitivities than his slave would prefer a tasteful joke to open the play. While they are debating how to open the play, the joke becomes the word play between Dionysus and Xanthias itself.

Once the two arrive at the house of Heracles we see the distinction between Heracles and his half-brother Dionysus. Dionysus, while claiming to be a soldier, is clearly unfamiliar with the hard life of Heracles. This is reflected in the two men's preferences for entertainment. Heracles prefers Sophocles while Dionysus prefers Euripides. Heracles, acting the part of the ideal citizen according to Aristophanes, prefers the more noble, pious, and moral Sophocles while Dionysus; the effeminate art lover prefers the base, impious, and sophistic Euripides. We will see these distinctions arise again during the debate between Euripides and Aeschylus in the underworld it is curious that



Aeschylus never comes up as a candidate in the conversation between Heracles and Dionysus. This is a strange omission that is never really explained in the play. Maybe Dionysus has so little interest in the, to some, obscure and stilted language of Aeschylus. Maybe Heracles, being an ideal citizen but not a gentleman or educated man can understand and prefer Sophocles but find the more obscure Aeschylus mysterious.



The Frogs, Part 2

The Frogs, Part 2 Summary

Dionysus, standing at the gates of Hades not knowing how to proceed decides to use his disguise as Heracles to help him gain entrance into the underworld. As Heracles would, Dionysus betas the gate with his club until Aikos arrives to see what all the racket is. Seeing a man he assumes is Heracles, he starts to insult him and tells him that he better bring Kerebos, the three headed dog that Heracles stole from Hades, back or he will unleash all the horrors of Hades on him. Dionysus, genuinely afraid, and not sure what to do is paralyzed. Dionysus, regaining his wits suggests that Xanthias and Dionysus switch roles. Xanthias will dress up as Heracles and Dionysus will disguise himself as the slave who carries the luggage. Flattered, Xanthias agrees. Meanwhile, Aikos has left and an attendant of Persephone has now arrived at the gate. Persephone who remembers Heracles fondly has arranged a feast inside to his honor. She has also arranged several flute-girls for Heracles' entertainment and pleasure. Xanthias exited with his good fortune is ready to enter, but Dionysus insults the girl by telling here that she has made a mistake and is addressing a slave who she mistakenly believes to be Heracles. The girl invites Dionysus in to the gates of Hades and praises him for his guile and cunning.

Once inside the gates, again dressed as Heracles, Dionysus is accosted by two women who believe that he is Heracles. They remember how, when he was in Hades before to steal Kerebos, that he ate all of their food and refused to pay for it. Instead he threatened both of the women and went on his way. The women, excited that they now have an opportunity to get justice, run off to find Cleon so that he might try Heracles. Dionysus, again afraid, asks Xanthias yet again to switch places with him. Xanthias, still miffed because of the last role reversal is not eager to bail his mater out again. Xanthias agrees to wear the Heracles disguise for Dionysus only if the god will promise not to switch spots with him again.

The two switch roles at just the moment that Aikos arrives with his henchmen. He orders his men to chain Xanthias up, who he believes to be Heracles. Dionysus, as slave, expresses approval of the imprisonment of his slave which angers Xanthias. Unable to endure anymore abuse, Xanthias tells Aikos that he is not Heracles but that his slave should be tortured to find out who he really is. Dionysus, fearing torture admits to being the god. Dionysus tells Aikos to torture both men and Dionysus, who is a god, will not be pained by the torture. Both men are tortured and Xanthias does not cry out. Aikos is pretty certain that Xanthias is a man but he is impressed with his endurance nonetheless. He orders the two into the house of Persephone and Pluto who will decide their divinity.

While Dionysus goes indoors, the chorus conducts their Paribas. While we do not witness what goes on in the house, Aikos outdoors refers to Xanthias as a slave though he clearly admires both Xanthias and Dionysus. Inside the house, there is a commotion



between Aeschylus and Euripides. In Hades, the greatest poet has a pride of place next to the throne of Pluto, a spot occupied by Aeschylus until Euripides arrived. Euripides, who is beloved by the depraved men who populate Hades has a large following, while Aeschylus who appeals to a more select audience has lost favor. Pluto, the ruler of Hades decides that they will have a dramatic contest to decide once and for all who the greatest dramatist is. Apparently Sophocles is not included in the contest because he agrees with Aeschylus that Aeschylus is the greater of the two poets. The two dead poets agree to the contest but they need a suitable judge. Fortunately, the god of theater himself, Dionysus, is among them and agrees to judge the contest.

The two poets begin trading lines from their plays and lobbing insults at each other. Euripides, true to form, excels in wit and cleverness, while Aeschylus is the more serious and grave poet. Euripides claims that he has challenged the Athenians by making them question themselves and think critically. Aeschylus responds that he has morally ennobled the Athenians while Euripides has exposed them to vice. They then go on to debate dramatic form. The contest at a standstill with both poets presenting good cases, Dionysus claims that the real reason he came to Hades to bring back a poet is that Athens needs someone to save them from error. Dionysus asks both men political; policy related questions and is more impressed with Aeschylus' answer. He agrees to take Aeschylus back to save the city. On their way out, Aeschylus tells Pluto to make sure the Euripides never gets pride of place in Hades and Sophocles agrees to make sure that Euripides stays in his place.

The Frogs, Part 2 Analysis

In part two of The Frogs we see the debate between the proper role of drama continued and also the continuation of the theme of role reversals and disguises. First, Dionysus fearing his safety orders his slave to switch disguises with him, then finding out that his disguises would have proven useful, orders his slave to switch back. We learn through this action that Dionysus is both fickle in his desires and in his form. He can take different costumes and impersonate different characters depending on what is most useful at the time. This is not only a useful skill to possess, it is also characteristic of drama as an art form. This constant changing upsets Xanthias but, being a slave, he really has no right to complain as he himself admits.

Once in Hades, Dionysus must decide which poet to bring back with him from the underworld. Euripides has been stirring up trouble for Pluto with his throngs of criminal followers and Pluto would prefer for Dionysus to take Euripides back with him. Against his own and Pluto's inclinations, though, Dionysus decides to take back Aeschylus because he believes he will be more useful to Athens politically. Notice though that Dionysus is not really deciding on their artistic merit. There is some evidence, even at the end of the play, that Dionysus still prefers Euripides as a poet. This raises the natural question about what determines good art for the city. Dionysus settles the question for himself, but one wonders how stable that solution really is. After all, it was, at least at the beginning, Dionysus' love of Euripides that led him to Hades in the first place. Surely that interest in the language and the beauty of Euripides is not irrelevant.

We must wonder whether Aristophanes is being ironic when he has Dionysus chose Aeschylus or not.



Characters

Dionysus

Dionysus is the Greek god of theater and wine. According to legend Dionysus hails from Thrace, a northern, wilder part of Greece or from the east. In any case, the implication is that Dionysus comes from non-Greek lands. Typically, he carries a Thyrsus, a staff with an acorn at the end and is often accompanied by a jaguar. His festivals in ancient times were notorious for their drunkenness and wild ecstasies. The tragic and comedic festivals where poets like Aristophanes and Euripides staged their plays were originally religious festivals in honor of Dionysus. Because of this, Aristophanes' use of Dionysus as a character would have more impact than the usual use of a god in a play as a character.

Dionysus displays himself in *The Frogs* as a kind and gentle master. He does ask his slave to carry his luggage; apparently he needs a lot of luggage for his trip to Hades. He also makes his slave switch positions with him several times, but ultimately he is not unkind to his slave. Dionysus is in the first part of the play a kind of romantic in love with the beauty of the language of Euripides and later he becomes a practical man concerned with Athens and her political future. There is no explicit account of this change, though his experience in Hades may have, reasonably, had an effect on the god's outlook. This would mirror the mythological transformation that was supposed to have occurred to the god Dionysus and is repeated in the variety of mystery cults to Dionysus and Orpheus in the classical period.

Euripides

Euripides was one of the three great tragic poets of the classical period of ancient Athens, though the last and most innovative of that period. His plays deviate from many of the traditional tragic conventions and many of the devices and themes that he introduces in his later plays became staples of later drama in Europe. Many of his plays involve women and some of the portrayals could be construed as negative but considering how anti-woman Athens of that time was, some of his misogyny needs to be reevaluated. Still, it is clear that the women of Athens were not happy with his portrayal of them as *The Poet and the Women* shows.

Euripides was known for being innovative not only in dramatic techniques and for changing some of the conventions of tragic drama, but also because of the themes that he dealt with in his plays. The women in *The Poet and The Women* accuse Euripides of preaching atheism and while this may be an exaggeration, it is not far from the truth. In many of Euripides' plays, he portrays the gods as morally degenerate and unconcerned with human affairs. Often he will try to excuse his human characters by comparing them to the gods. Aristophanes, a notorious conservative, claims, in *The Frogs* to prefer to Aeschylus to Euripides, but it is not clear whether Aristophanes prefers Aeschylus



because of his political value or if he prefers him on artistic grounds. Aristophanes' own plays are much closer to Euripides than to any other tragic poet.

Cleon

Cleon was an actual leader of Athens who used his popularity with the lower and middle class Athenians to abuse the richer Athenians. Cleon came from a family of tanners and took control of the city after the death of Pericles. Aristophanes singles out Cleon in several of his plays as a target of satire and Cleon even attempted to prosecute Aristophanes early in his career.

Bdelycleon

Bdelycleon literally translates in "Cleon hater" and his role in the Wasps is to undermine the power of one of Cleon's most effective weapons, namely the Athenian court system. He is a son that has several slaves and is opposed to letting his father continue to go to the courts to sit in judgment on his fellow citizens.

Philocleon

Philocleon is the father of Bdelycleon and his name literally translate into "Cleon lover" as his attitude towards the courts suggest. The old man is addicted to sitting on juries and passing judgment on his countrymen. Until the end of the play, the man is so vicious in his judgments that he has never cast a not guilty verdict.

Agathon

Agathon was a tragic playwright in Athens of some popularity, though less admired than Euripides. According to the accusations that Aristophanes makes here, Agathon must have been a very effeminate and homosexual man.

Mnesilochus

Mnesilochus is the cousin of Euripides and a great admirer of the great poet. Euripides convinces his cousin to disguise himself as a woman and to defend him at the women's festival.

Cleisthenes

Cleisthenes was apparently a notorious homosexual man about town in Athens at the time of these plays.

Xanthias

Xanthias is the slave of Dionysus in *The Frogs*. He is treated well by his master and he proves to be made of stern stuff when he agrees to be flogged in the underworld.

Pluto

Pluto is the god of the underworld and the husband of Persephone. Partially desiring to get rid of Euripides, who has been causing problems in Hades, Pluto wants Dionysus to take Euripides back with him



Objects/Places

Athenian Courts

The Athenian courts were composed of at least 200 people citizens drawn from lot that would sit in judgment for that day. Jurors were paid for their service.

Libations

Libations are given in celebration and to quench the thirst of the dead and the gods. Usually wine, libations can also be any drink that party-goers may drink.

Shield

All Greek soldiers had a shield and javelin and maybe a sword. They needed to provide their own shield and these shields were heavy. The first thing troops will do when retreating is to throw down their shields so they can run faster. The implication then if someone throws their shield is that they are a coward and a traitor.

Sparta

Sparta was a Greek city-state south of Athens that was engaged in a long war with Athens. Aristophanes was opposed to the war, which was bankrupting his city and he accuses Cleon of keeping the war going.

Demeter

Demeter was the Greek goddess of fertility, childbirth, and of the woods. She was a virgin and worshiped by women, especially to provide children and to ease childbirth.

Chorus

The Chorus in a Aristophanean comedy is the group of people that speak to the audience, often in the voice of the poet. All of the names of Aristophanes' plays refer to the relevant chorus.

Wineskin

A wine skin was a kind of container use to store wine, made out of animal hide.



Styx

The river of the damned that separates the natural world from the underworld in Greek Mythology.

Hades

Hades is the land of the dead in Greek Mythology. Sometimes the god Pluto is identified with Hades and Hades is referred to as a place.

Kerebos

Kerebos is the three headed dog that guarded the gates of Hades until Heracles stole him during his trip to the underworld.

Themes

Inversions

Inversion of the social and moral order is a key technique in all of comedy and especially in Aristophanes. This is often portrayed in men dressing as women or in slaves dressing as their masters. It is comic to see someone pretending to be something they are not. This is especially true when slaves impersonate their masters. To the Greeks this would be similar to seeing children pretending to be adults. Furthermore, in the *Wasps* we see two key inversions. The first is the inversion of the legitimate legal order into a tool for gain by jurymen and demagogues. This inversion is so serious that it leads to another equally serious inversion, namely the inversion of the proper relationship of father to son.

Aristophanes has dealt with this relationship before, notably in the *Clouds* but here the inversion is portrayed, at least in some sense, as being the proper response to the legal and political inversion that has occurred in the society at large. Of course the transformation of Mnesilochus into a woman is another serious deviation from the norm for dramatic and practical purposes. These inversions are comedic and serious because they represent a deviation from and perversion of nature. Nature, to Aristophanes and many other Greek thinkers, is the yardstick by which they measure actions and states of affairs. Arguing that something is "unnatural" as in a man dressing as a woman or a son lording over his father is a serious indictment. Aristophanes uses this technique as a tool of comedy as well as satire.

Aeschylus vs. Euripides

Although we only directly see the debate and conflict between Aeschylus and Euripides in *The Frogs*, it is in the background of much of Aristophanes' thinking about drama and poetry. Aristophanes is very concerned about the social order and how to restore it. In his day, Athens has degenerated from the grand state that it was in under the rule of Pericles to a crude imitation of itself. He sees his countrymen persuaded by demagogues like Cleon to continue disastrous wars and to prosecute poets like himself. Aristophanes sees the way forward as the way back, that is he longs for the good old days before the war and Cleon. Because of this he prefers the old to the new, at least intellectually. The old, in terms of poetry and drama, is Aeschylus. Aeschylus' plays express noble morals and portray moral heroes for citizens to admire and imitate. The plays of Euripides on the other hand are more modern in that the characters are more ambiguous and rather than expressing clear morals in his drama, Euripides is more apt to call the moral conventions of his society and the status of the gods into question. Aristophanes clearly thinks it is this tendency among his countrymen to innovate morally and politically that is causing the problems that he diagnoses. Still, despite his concern for the political effects of the plays, it is not clear that Aristophanes prefers Aeschylus on



artistic grounds. Though he mocks Euripides in both the *Frogs* and *The Poet and the Women*, Aristophanes shows Euripides great respect as a dramatist.

Poetry in Society

Most, if not all, of Aristophanes' comedies have a political point. This is partially because Aristophanes was deeply concerned with the direction of his city, especially under the rule of Cleon. When he is not directly railing against Cleon in his plays, he is attacking the war that Cleon is continuing. For that reason, Aristophanes is concerned not only with politics as such but also with the role of poetry and drama in relation to politics. In the *Frogs*, Dionysus, standing at least partially in for Aristophanes himself begins by favoring Euripides because of his art but ends up favoring Aeschylus because of his political value. This leads us to suspect that Aristophanes believes poetry has a dual purpose in society. It is important for the purposes of entertainment and beauty, this is what draws Dionysus to Hades in the first place after all, but though this may be what draws us to the poetry, ultimately poetry must serve a political purpose. This is why, despite his obvious love for the poetry of Euripides, Dionysus takes Aeschylus back with him. Compare this view to Plato's dislike for all poetry specifically because it leads men to immorality and away from the good. Plato recognizes the power of poetry but decides that the harm of bad (from the point of view of society) outweighs the benefit from good art. Aristophanes, who after all did persecute Plato's teacher Socrates, hold the view that poetry must be beautiful and good at the same time.



Style

Point of View

These works are, of course, meant to be plays and not merely works of literature. Hence the point of view is from the audience's perspective. Interestingly, Aristophanes, though presenting a drama to an audience often breaks the "fourth wall" by addressing the audience directly. This was common, at least for the chorus, Aristophanes though uses his non-chorus characters to address the audience in various ways. This technique is jarring and reminds the audience that they are seeing a play not witnessing a real event. For one reason or another though, this technique can sometimes make satire more effective because it will train the audience to look for hidden and ironic meanings in what the players say and do. Once the poet addresses the audience directly, we know that the play is vehicle of dramatic content rather than a recreation of life, we are apt to realize that the playwright is communicating with us directly, rather than just attempting to realistically portray characters. The chorus also presents the point of view of the poet in the Parabis, usually towards the end of the play. Sometimes Aristophanes will justify himself to the audience, making political points or insulting his enemies. In some cases he will even admonish the audience for not liking one of his previous plays better than they did. This is a clear place where the poet can address the audience, though Aristophanes uses other opportunities to address the audience as well.

Setting

The settings of these three plays vary dramatically. *Wasps* take place in Athens in and around the house of Philocleon. Mention is made of several other Athenian landmarks and there is also mention of a party at another person's house, though, the play only recounts the action from those places rather than actually showing us the action. This is no doubt due to some of the logistical restraints of the time, but it is worth noting that according to the standards of tragedy at the time, a play should take place in a uniform location over the course of one day. The play itself should only take place during the time that the actual play takes place. Of course, this is not true for all of Aristophanes' comedies, notably the *Frogs*. It takes place in several locations, namely Hades, the house of Heracles and on the river Styx. *The Poet and the Women* also takes place in several locations. It starts outside of Agathon's house and then moves to the Temple of Demeter. It is clear then that Aristophanes has no qualms about switching locales if the play demands it. His locations are never exotic for their own sake, however, and follow the necessity of the drama. Of course, Hades is an exiting setting and in *Frogs*, the location itself adds something to the themes of the play. This is primarily true only of *Frogs*, though, as the other settings are pretty prosaic.



Language and Meaning

As is the case with most classical Greek drama; it is hard to get a clear sense of exactly what the type of language being used is because we are forced to read the work in translation. This even more true of comedy, which often relies heavily on word play and puns. Still it is not impossible to get some sense of what the language of Aristophanes is like. First of all we know that he both admires and lampoons the language of Aeschylus. By that measure then, it is pretty clear that the language of Aristophanes is not along those lines. Furthermore, we know from what Aristophanes says that the language of Euripides is beautiful and clever. It is probably true that Aristophanes speaks in a different voice from Euripides as well but is, no doubt closer to Euripides than to Aeschylus.

Like most comedy, but more so in Aristophanes, irony is a constant tool of the poet. Irony is the art of hiding meaning in artful ways. The poet says one thing while hinting obliquely that he means the opposite of what he says. Socrates, the target of one of Aristophanes' best plays also employed this tool effectively. Irony allows the poet to get away with saying more than he might be able to otherwise say. After all, he is not directly attacking this or that poet, this or that god, this or that politician, only indirectly with a kind of knowing wink. In the same way that someone can excuse themselves from blame by saying "just kidding" after an insult, Aristophanes also couches his barbed satire in the cloak of irony.

Structure

Aristophanes as the best example of Old Attic Comedy, embodies and to some extent defines the conventions of that art form. He doesn't stick to them slavishly though; rather he sues them when necessary and leaves them when he wants. Most comedies of this form begin with a Prologue. In Aristophanes, prologues generally involve two slaves or other lowly characters complaining. *Frogs* is notable in this respect because the play doesn't begin with a complaint but rather a comment on the play itself. Next will typically follow a *Parados*, which involves the introduction of the chorus, which in most Aristophanean comedies is a key scene.

Later in the play, the chorus will engage in a *Paribas* wherein the poet will speak directly to the audience. Of course, as already mentioned, this may not be the only time in the play that the poet will speak to the audience directly. Often there is also an *agon* or debate between several characters. *Wasps* features a debate prominently and is, in effect, a play about *agon*. *Frogs* also features a prominent *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides. The *agon* will typically involve two characters debating and then ultimately resolving one of the key dilemmas in the play. In *Wasps*, the *agon* is decisive. In *The Poet and the Women* however, the *agon* if we assume it is the debate between Mnesilochus and the women about Euripides goes against the ultimate conclusion of the play. In *Frogs* the conclusion is only conclusive insofar as it leads to a decision by

Dionysus though it is not entirely clear how much of that decision is directly due to the debate itself.



Quotes

Wasps 144 Xanthias: A man throwing his shield away is terrible.

Wasps 147 Xanthias: he's a lawcourt-lover, like no one else.

Wasps 165 Philocleon: Hades will do the judging before I yield.

Wasps 178 Xanthias: That old man was the worst reprobate and the drunkest of the company.

The Poet and the Women 333 Euripides: There's a great danger brewing for my life.

The Poet and the Women 336 Agathon: Each man must bear his sorrows for himself.

The Poet and the Women 348 Mnesilochus: He's who-d'ye-call-it's son

The Poet and the Women 352 Mnesilochus: What have we here? A flask and not a baby!

The Poet and the Women 366 Chorus: Merrily, merrily, merrily, on to your own confusion go.

Frogs 371 Dionysus: Such is the longing that devours my soul for sweet...Euripides.

Frogs 375 Frogs (Chorus): Brekekekekex lo-ax ko-ax

Frogs 414 Pluto: Aeschylus, go and save our hard pressed city by your precepts grave.



Topics for Discussion

Explain the role of the jury in ancient Athens. In what way is it different or similar to modern juries?

Why does the father behave badly at the party? Why does he oppose alcohol?

What are the crimes that the women level against Euripides? Are they justified?

Contrast Agathon and Euripides in *The Poet* and *The Women*.

Compare and contrast the portrayal of Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs*.

Why does Dionysus decide to bring back Aeschylus? Is it the right reason?

Is the portrayal of Dionysus in *Frogs* pious or impious from the point of view of the average Athenian.