

Aristophanes

Frogs



Translated by Ian Johnston

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by

Ian Johnston

Malaspina University-College

Nanaimo, British Columbia

Canada

Richer Resources Publications

Arlington, Virginia

USA

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Frogs

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Richer Resources Publications
1926 N. Woodrow Street
Arlington, Virginia 22207
or via our web site at
www.RicherResourcesPublications.com

ISBN 978-0-9797571-4-3
Library of Congress Control Number 2007937532

Published by Richer Resources Publications
Arlington, Virginia
Printed in the United States of America

For Annie
in whom the best spirit of Aristophanes still lives on.

Translator's Note

Note that in this translation the normal line numbers refer to this text and the ones in square brackets refer to the lines in the Greek text. In the line numbering, a short indented line has normally been included with the short line above it, so that the two partial lines count as a single line in the reckoning.

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help of W. B. Stanford's edition of *The Frogs* (London: Macmillan, 1963).

Historical Note

Aristophanes (c. 456 BC to c. 386 BC) was the foremost writer of comic drama in classical Athens. His surviving plays are the only complete examples we have of Old Comedy.

Frogs was first produced in Athens in 405 BC. By this time Athens had been at war with Sparta for over twenty-five years.

Aristophanes
Frogs

Dramatis Personae

XANTHIAS: a slave.

DIONYSUS: the god, appearing in human form.

HERCULES: the legendary hero.

CORPSE: a dead man being carried off to Hades.

CHARON: the ferry man transporting the dead to Hades.

CHORUS OF FROGS

CHORUS OF INITIATES

AEACUS: a gatekeeper in Hades.

SERVANT

FIRST HOSTESS (PANDOCHEUTRIA)

SECOND HOSTESS (PLATANE)

SERVANT OF PLUTO

EURIPIDES: the playwright

AESCHYLUS: the playwright

PLUTO: king of Hades

VARIOUS ATTENDANTS

[The play opens on a street leading to Hades, with a door in the centre of the backstage area. Enter Dionysus, appearing as a middle-aged man with a noticeable paunch, wearing a yellow tunic and over that a lion skin. He's carrying a huge club, one commonly associated with Hercules. On his feet he wears soft leather lace-up boots. Behind him comes his slave Xanthias, riding on a donkey and carrying a huge amount of baggage. Xanthias notices the audience]

XANTHIAS

Look, master, an audience! Shouldn't I speak up?
Tell them one of those jokes they always fall for?

DIONYSUS

Oh, all right—say what you like. Only no jokes

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about how you're dying to piss. I can't stand those—
they're all so stale.

XANTHIAS

What about my other jokes?

DIONYSUS

Go ahead—just nothing about your bladder,
about how it's going to burst.

XANTHIAS

What? You mean I can't tell
that really funny one . . .

DIONYSUS

I suppose so—
but don't say anything about the bit.

XANTHIAS

What bit?

DIONYSUS

The bit about how you need to shift your load
to take a piss.

10

XANTHIAS

Not even this one—
“Here I am transporting such a load
if I get no relief I may explode.”

[10]

DIONYSUS

No! Please, please, don't tell them that one—
not unless I'm sick and need to throw up.

XANTHIAS

Then what's the point of my being here like this?
Why do I get to carry all the heavy baggage
if I can't tell the usual porter jokes—you know,

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the ones Ameipsias and Phrynichus
and Lycias, too, in all their comedies
provide the slave who carries all the bags?¹

20

DIONYSUS

Just don't. Those jokes are all so feeble—
when I have to watch a play and hear them
by the time I leave I've aged at least a year.

XANTHIAS [*striking a heroic tragic pose*]

Alas, for my neck beneath this triply damned yoke.
I suffer all this pressure and can't tell my joke.

[20]

DIONYSUS

It's an outrage, sheer insolence, that I,
Dionysus, son of Winejar, have to walk like this,
sweating along so he can ride at ease
without a care and carrying no load.

XANTHIAS

What!?

30

Aren't I carrying the load?

DIONYSUS

How can you be?

You're riding on your ass.

XANTHIAS

I'm loaded down.

All this stuff . . .

DIONYSUS

What do you mean by that?

¹*Phrynichus, Ameipsias, Lycias*: comic poets, rivals of Aristophanes.

XANTHIAS

What I just said carries lots of weight.

DIONYSUS

Isn't the donkey carrying our load?

XANTHIAS

No, no way. Not the load I'm holding.

DIONYSUS

How come?

How can you be carrying anything at all
when someone else is carrying you?

XANTHIAS

I've no idea.

But my shoulder's falling off.

[30]

DIONYSUS

All right, then.

Since you claim the donkey's useless to you,
why not take your turn and carry it?

40

XANTHIAS

What a wretched life!

I should have gone away to fight at sea—
then I'd be free, and I'd have told you straight
what you could do with that ass of yours.¹

DIONYSUS

Get down, you useless idiot! We're there—
by the door I'm aiming for, my first stop.

[Dionysus knocks very aggressively on the door and calls out in an imperious tone]

¹The *fight at sea* refers to the Athenian naval victory of Arginusae (406 BC). Athenian slaves who had fought were freed (this is the first of a number of references to this action).

Hey, in there! Doorman! I'm summoning you.

[The door opens and Hercules steps out, wearing a lion's skin and carrying a club. He's amazed that someone is dressed up to resemble him]

HERCULES

Who's banging on this door—smashing at it like some wild centaur. My god, what's this?

[Hercules inspects Dionysus' outfit and starts to laugh uproariously]

DIONYSUS

Hey, my boy . . .

XANTHIAS

What?

DIONYSUS

Didn't you see?

XANTHIAS

See what?

50 [40]

DIONYSUS

How scared he was of me?

XANTHIAS

Yes, by god, he was,
scared you're nuts.

HERCULES *[doubling up with laughter]*

By holy Demeter,
I can't stop laughing. I'll try biting my lip.
No, no use. I can't stop laughing at him.

DIONYSUS

Come here, my good man. I need something from you.

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HERCULES [*still laughing out of control*]
I can't help myself—he's so ridiculous.
Seeing that lion skin above that yellow dress.
What's going on? Do people with large clubs
now walk around with leather booties on?
Where on earth do you think you're going?

60

DIONYSUS

I've done naval service under Cleisthenes.¹

HERCULES

At that sea battle?

DIONYSUS

Yes—and sunk enemy ships,
twelve or thirteen of them.

[50]

HERCULES

Just the two of you?

DIONYSUS

Yes, by Apollo, we did.

XANTHIAS

Then I woke up.

DIONYSUS

I was on board with Euripides' *Andromeda*,
reading to myself aloud, when suddenly
a huge urge seized my heart. You've no idea.

HERCULES

An urge? How big was it?

DIONYSUS

¹*Cleisthenes*: a well-known homosexual in Athens, a favourite target of Aristophanes.

The size of Molon—tiny.¹

HERCULES

For a woman?

DIONYSUS

No, no.

HERCULES

A young lad, then?

DIONYSUS

Certainly not.

HERCULES

Well, then, a man?

DIONYSUS

Ugh!

70

HERCULES

Did you grab hold of your Cleisthenes?

DIONYSUS

Don't mock me, brother.² I'm not doing so well,
tormented by such hot desires.

HERCULES

Tell me,
my little brother, what's it like?

DIONYSUS

I can't explain.

[60]

²*Molon*: a man remarkable for his size—either very large or very small. The joke would seem to demand something very small. Given the sexual innuendo, it may be the case that Molon was a very big man with (reputedly) a very small penis.

¹*brother*: Hercules and Dionysus are both sons of Zeus, hence brothers.

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But I'll try to show you by analogy.
Have you ever had a craving for some stew? ¹

HERCULES

For stew? In my life maybe ten thousand times.

DIONYSUS

Is that explanation clear enough to you?
Or shall I try some other way?

HERCULES

Not about stew!
That I understand completely.

DIONYSUS

Well then,
that's how much I'm eaten up with my desire
for Euripides.

80

HERCULES

Even when he's dead? ²

DIONYSUS

So no one's going to talk me out of it—
I have to find him.

HERCULES

Right down in Hell?

DIONYSUS

Or even lower,
by god, if there's such a place.

[70]

HERCULES

² *stew*: Hercules was famous for his enormous appetite.

¹ *dead*: Euripides, the well-known tragic dramatist, had died in Macedonia the year before the first production of *Frogs*.

What's the point?

DIONYSUS

I need a clever poet. There's none around.
The ones we've got are all so wretched.

HERCULES

What? Isn't Iophon still up there?

DIONYSUS

He's the only good one left—if he's any good.
I'm not really sure if that's the case.

90

HERCULES

If you've got to take a playwright back,
why not Sophocles? He's better than Euripides.

DIONYSUS

Not till I get Iophon all by himself,
without his father, Sophocles, so I can test
the metal of his poetry.¹ Besides, Euripides
is such a rascal he may try to flee Hades
and come with me. But Sophocles was nice—
easy going while on earth and down there, too.

[80]

HERCULES

What about Agathon? Where is he?

DIONYSUS

He's left us—
a fine poet lamented by his friends.

100

HERCULES

Where's he gone?

¹*Iophon*: the son of Sophocles and a writer of tragedies.

DIONYSUS

Off to feast with saints.¹

HERCULES

And Xenocles?

DIONYSUS

Oh by god, may he drop dead!

HERCULES

Well then, Pythangelos?²

XANTHIAS

What about ME?

In pain all this time—my shoulder's sore as hell.

HERCULES

Surely you've other artsy-fartsy types—
thousands of tragic poets—all of them
way more wordy than Euripides?

[90]

DIONYSUS

No, no—

all chatterboxes, twittering swallows in a music hall,
mere foliage—disgraces to the artist's craft.

Once they get a chance to stage their plays,
to crap all over tragedy, they disappear.

110

If you looked you'd never find one playwright,
someone creative who could well declaim
a worthy sentiment.

HERCULES

That word "creative"—

what's it mean?

²*Agathon*: an important and successful Athenian tragic playwright. He'd recently left Athens and was living in Macedonia.

¹*Xenocles* and *Pythangelos* were minor Athenian tragic playwrights.

DIONYSUS

Someone poetical enough
to give utterance to something grand,
something like

[Dionysus strikes a tragic pose]

“the sky, Zeus’ pied-a-terre,”
“the foot of time,” or this—“a mind that will not swear [100]
on sacred offerings but a perjured tongue
that’s false with no sense of its perfidy.” 120

HERCULES

You like that stuff?

DIONYSUS

Like it? I’m crazy about it.

HERCULES

I swear it’s all bullshit—and you know it.

DIONYSUS

Now, now, don’t try to tell me what to think,
not with tragedy. You’re no expert there.

HERCULES

I still say it sounds like total rubbish.

DIONYSUS

Why not teach me how to stuff my guts?

XANTHIAS

What about ME?

DIONYSUS

That’s the reason I’ve come here
and dressed like you—so you can fill me in,
in case I need to know, about this place—

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who welcomed you down here, who you met
that time you went down after Cerberus.¹
Tell me about the harbours, resting places,
bakeries and brothels, water fountains,
the cities, highways, all the detours,
the local customs and the fine hotels,
the ones with fewest bugs.

130 [110]

XANTHIAS

Still no word of me.

HERCULES

Oh you valiant heart! Are you man enough
to venture down below?

DIONYSUS

Forget my courage.

Show me the highway, the shortest one there is,
that takes me directly down to Hades.
Don't prattle on about the temperature
and say it's way too hot or cold for me.

140

HERCULES

Let's see . . . what should I mention first of all?
Which one? Hmm. You could try a stool and rope—
you could just hang yourself.

DIONYSUS

Stop it right there.
That way gives me a choking feeling.

HERCULES

There's a direct short cut, well travelled, too—
with pestle and mortar . . .

¹*Cerberus*: In one of Hercules' most famous exploits, he went down into Hell and returned with Cerberus, the watch dog of Hades.

DIONYSUS

You mean hemlock.¹

HERCULES

That's it!

DIONYSUS

Too cold—too much like winter. Right away
the shins get frozen solid.

HERCULES

All right, then.

150

You want me to tell you how to get there fast.

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god. I'm not one to take a hike.

HERCULES

How about a stroll to Kerameikos . . .²

DIONYSUS

Okay, what then?

HERCULES

Climb up the tower there—
right to the very top . . .

DIONYSUS

And then what?

[130]

HERCULES

Take a look at the torch race starting up—
when the spectators all yell out "They're off!"
then off you go as well.

¹*hemlock*: a lethal poison which begins by numbing the lower limbs.

¹*Kerameikos*: a district in Athens.

DIONYSUS

Off? Where to?

HERCULES

Down.

DIONYSUS

No, I can't take that road. I'd pulverize
both rissole wrappers of my brain.

HERCULES

What's left?

160

DIONYSUS

The road you used.

HERCULES

Oh, an enormous journey.
At the very start you come to a vast lake—
immense and bottomless.

DIONYSUS

How do I get across?

HERCULES

In a tiny boat—miniscule—like this.

[indicating the size]

An ancient sailor takes you for a fee—
two obols.

[140]

DIONYSUS

Two obols? It's amazing
what two obols can buy anywhere.¹
How come it's here in Hades, too?

¹*two obols*: the standard amount for welfare payments or daily pay for soldiers and sailors.

HERCULES

Theseus—

he started it.¹ Once past the lake you'll find snakes,
thousands of them, horrific monsters, too.

170

DIONYSUS

Don't keep trying to scare me. That won't work.
There's no way you'll get me to turn back.

HERCULES

Then a huge sewer, always full of liquid turds—
and lying in it anyone who harmed a guest
or screwed a lad and then took back the cash,
or smacked his mother, punched his father's jaw,
or swore false oaths, or else had copied out
a speech of Morsimus.²

[150]

DIONYSUS

By god, with them in the shit
should lie whoever learned a war dance by Cinesias.³

HERCULES

Next the breath of flutes will sound around you.
You'll see the finest light, just like in Athens,
and myrtle groves, with happy men and women
gathered there to celebrate and clap their hands.

180

DIONYSUS

So who are they?

¹ *Theseus*: the legendary founder of Athens, who made his own journey to Hades and back, and hence (according to this comment) introduced Athenian customs into Hades.

² *Morsimus*: an inferior tragic playwright.

³² *Cinesias*: an Athenian poet.

HERCULES

Those are the initiates,
the ones who celebrate the mysteries.¹

XANTHIAS

Then, by god, in these mysteries I play the ass.
I'll not stand for this a moment longer.

[160]

[Xanthias starts unloading all the baggage he's carrying]

HERCULES

Those ones will tell you all you need to know.
These initiates live closest to the road
which takes you to the doors of Pluto's place.²
And so, my brother, I bid you fond farewell.

190

DIONYSUS

Good bye—god keep you healthy, too.

[Hercules exits back through the door. Dionysus turns to Xanthias, who has just about finished putting down all the luggage he has been carrying]

You there—take up the baggage once again!

XANTHIAS

Before I've put it down?

DIONYSUS

Yes, and hurry up.

[Enter a solemn funeral cortege parrying a dead man towards Hades]

³ *the mysteries*: secret cult religious rituals for special groups of initiates.

⁴ *Pluto*: god of Hades (another name for the god Hades).

XANTHIAS

Come on, I'm begging you. Hire one of them—
someone carrying the corpse. That's why they're here.

DIONYSUS

And if I don't find anyone?

XANTHIAS

I'll do it.

DIONYSUS

Fair enough. All right, they're hauling off a corpse [170]
You there . . . you stiff . . . I'm talking to you . . . Hallo!

[The corpse suddenly sits up straight]

You want to take a little luggage down to hell? 200

CORPSE

How much?

DIONYSUS

This stuff here.

CORPSE

Will you pay two drachmas?

DIONYSUS

My god, no! Less than that.

CORPSE

Then go away.

DIONYSUS

Hang on, my dear fellow. Can't we haggle?

CORPSE

If you don't pay two drachmas, forget it.

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DIONYSUS

How about nine obols?

CORPSE

No bloody way!

I'd rather you shoved me back to life again.

[Corpse lies down and the funeral procession moves away]

DIONYSUS

What a pompous boor!

XANTHIAS

To hell with him—

I'll take the stuff myself.

[Xanthias starts loading himself with the baggage once again]

DIONYSUS

That's my good man—

a loyal and worthy slave. Let's get that boat . . .

[Enter Charon rowing his small boat across the stage]

CHARON

Ahoy there! Coming alongside.

[180]

XANTHIAS

What's this?

DIONYSUS

This?

210

By god, it's the lake Hercules talked about.

And I see the boat . . .

XANTHIAS

You're right. Thanks to Poseidon.

This must be Charon.

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DIONYSUS

Ahoy there, Charon . . .
Greetings, Charon . . . Charon, halloooo!!!

CHARON

Who's seeks a rest from work and trouble?
Who's heading for Fields of Forgetfulness,
Never-never land, the Cerberians,
the Ravens and Taenarus.¹

DIONYSUS:

That's me.

CHARON

Then jump aboard.

DIONYSUS

Where do you put in?
The Ravens? Is that a stop?

CHARON

Yes, by god—
a special stop for you. So climb aboard.

220

DIONYSUS [*to Xanthias*]

All right, my lad, hop in.

CHARON

I won't take the slave—
not unless he fought at sea to save his skin.

[190]

XANTHIAS

Not me, by god, no way. My eyes were bad.

CHARON

Then you must make a detour round the lake.

¹*Ravens* is a reference to a curse invoking the ravens to pick someone's bones. Charon lists various regions of Hell like so many stops on a bus route.

XANTHIAS

Where do I wait for you?

CHARON

At Wuthering Rock¹—
right by the rest stop.

DIONYSUS

You got that?

XANTHIAS

I got that.

[picking up the bags]

Why am I so unlucky? When we began
I must've really pissed somebody off.

CHARON *[to Dionysus]*

Sit down there—at that oar.

[Dionysus sits on one of the oars]

Anyone else?

230

Hurry up—all aboard! What are you doing?

DIONYSUS

What am I doing? I'm sitting on this oar.
That's what you ordered me to do.

CHARON

Come on, fatso—park your butt right here.

DIONYSUS *[moving off the oar]*

There!

[200]

¹ *Wuthering Rock* is a part of the landscape of hell (possibly invented here by Aristophanes).

CHARON

Can you pick up the oar? Stretch your arms.

DIONYSUS

Like this?

CHARON

Don't be such a fool. Set your foot there.
Now pull the oar with all your force.

DIONYSUS

How can I?

I've had no practice. I'm no sailor.
And besides, I'm not from Salamis.¹
How am I supposed to row a boat?

240

CHARON

It's not hard. You'll hear lovely melodies
once you make the effort.

DIONYSUS

Songs? Whose songs?

CHARON

The amazing music of the swan frogs.

DIONYSUS

All right, then. Get the tempo going.

CHARON

Yo ho, heave ho. Yo ho heave ho.

[As the small boat begins to move, the Chorus of Frogs is heard from off stage]²

¹*Salamis* is an island close to Athens, famous for its sailors.

¹*Chorus of Frogs*. It's not clear whether this chorus remains off stage or not.

HORUS OF FROGS:

Brekekekex koax koax

Brekekekex koax koax.

[210]

Children of the marsh and lake
harmonious song now sweetly make,
our own enchanting melodies
koax koax.

250

The songs we sang for Nysa's lord,
for Dionysus, son of Zeus,
in Limnai at the Feast of Jars¹
as people in their drunken glee
thronged into our sanctuary.

Brekekekex koax koax.

[220]

DIOYSUS [*still rowing*]

I'm starting to get a pain in the ass
from all your koax koax.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

260

DIONYSUS

Not that you give a damn about it.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS

Piss off—and take that koax koax with you.
Nothing but koax koax.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Yes, and for us that's fine
you meddling fool—so asinine.

² *feast of Jars*: a reference to an annual Athenian festival (the Anthesteria) held early in the year in the precinct of Dionysus “in the marsh” (Limnai). The festival involved a lot of drinking.

Music-loving Muses love us too
as does goat-footed Pan [230]
playing music on melodious pipes.
Apollo as he strums his lyre 270
loves us and what we sing,
for in the marshy waters here
we grow the reeds that bridge his string.
Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS: *[still rowing]*

Well, I'm getting blisters and a sweaty bum.
Next time I bend down it's going to speak . . .

[As Dionysus leans forward for the next stroke he lifts his rear end up in the air to fart at the Frog Chorus, but their next line drowns out the sound]

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS

Stop it, you music-loving tribe! [240]

CHORUS OF FROGS

No, no. We'll sing on all the more—
if we've ever hopped on shore 280
on sunny days through weeds and rushes
rejoicing in our lovely songs
as we dive and dive once more,
or as from Zeus' rain we flee
to sing our varied harmonies
at the bottom of the marsh,
our bubble-splashing melodies.

DIONYSUS

Brekekekex koax koax— [250]
from you I'm catching your disease!

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CHORUS OF FROGS

If that's the case, you'll never please.
That's hard on us.

290

DIONYSUS

But worse for me—
I may blow up here as I row.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax

DIONYSUS

Go on. Keep croaking. I don't care.

CHORUS OF FROGS

We'll croak on till our throats wear out.
We'll croak all day.

[260]

DIONYSUS

Brekekekex koax koax
You never beat me in this play!

CHORUS OF FROGS

And you've no chance to win your way,
not matched with us.

DIONYSUS

You've no hope outdoing me.
No, no. If I must, I'll yell all day,
koaxing you to get my way—
Brekekekex koax koax!

300

[Dionysus listens for a response from the Chorus, but there is none]

You see. Sooner or later I would win—
and make you stop your harsh koaxing din.

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CHARON

Stop it. Ship that oar alongside here.
Get out . . . and pay your fare.

DIONYSUS

Two obols? Here.

[270]

[Dionysus pays Charon, who rows his way off stage. Dionysus starts looking around for Xanthias]

Xanthias! Hey, Xanthias!

XANTHIAS *[offstage]*

Over here!

DIONYSUS *[still calling]*

Come here!

[Xanthias appears with the baggage but without the donkey]

XANTHIAS

Greetings, master.

DIONYSUS

All right, what have we got?

XANTHIAS

Nothing but filthy muck—mud and darkness.

310

DIONYSUS

Did you see the men who beat their fathers—
or perjurers—the ones he mentioned?

XANTHIAS

You mean you don't?

DIONYSUS *[looking at the audience]*

By Poseidon, yes I do!

Now I see them. So what do we do next?

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XANTHIAS

We'd better get away from here.
Hercules mentioned to us it's the place
where wild beast prowl.

DIONYSUS

To Hell with him!

He was talking big to make me scared. [280]
He saw I was a fighter, and he's jealous.
No one's more full of it than Hercules. 320
But I'm eager now for some adventure,
some exploit worthy of this expedition.

XANTHIAS

Of course you are. What's that? I hear a noise.

DIONYSUS

What? Where is it?

XANTHIAS

Behind us.

DIONYSUS [*pushing Xanthias*]

Get behind me.

XANTHIAS

No, it's up ahead.

DIONYSUS [*pushing Xanthias again*]

You get in front.

XANTHIAS

My god!

Now I see it. Ooooh, a monstrous beast!

DIONYSUS [*cowering behind Xanthias*]

What's it like?

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XANTHIAS

It's weird—all sorts of shapes.
Now it's an ox—no, no, a jackass—
now it's a woman—what a gorgeous babe!

[290]

DIONYSUS

Where is she?
I'll go say hello.

XANTHIAS

Hold on a minute!
She's not a woman any more. Now she's a bitch!

330

DIONYSUS [*terrified*]

It's Empusa!!¹

XANTHIAS

Her whole face is on fire!

DIONYSUS

Her legs—does she have one made of bronze?

XANTHIAS

Yes.
By Poseidon, yes. The other's made of cow shit.
And that's no lie.

DIONYSUS

Where can I run?

XANTHIAS [*imitating Dionysus*]

Where can I run?

DIONYSUS [*appealing the audience*]

¹*Empousa* was a celebrated Athenian ghost-monster who could change her shape.

O holy man, save me—so we can drink together.¹

XANTHIAS

We're screwed! Oh, lord Hercules!

DIONYSUS

Don't call me that!

I'm begging you, my man—don't say that name.

XANTHIAS

Then Dionysus . . .

DIONYSUS

That's worse than Hercules.

[300]

XANTHIAS [*to the imaginary monster*]

Beat it! Shoo! Come on, master.

DIONYSUS

What's going on?

340

XANTHIAS

Cheer up—we've come through everything just fine.

Now like Hegelochus we can recite

"After the storm I see the seals are calm."²

Empousa's left.

DIONYSUS

You swear?

XANTHIAS

Cross my heart.

¹*so we can drink together*. Dionysus here appeals to the audience, specifically to the Priest of Dionysus who traditionally sat in the front row.

²*Hegelochos . . . seals are calm*: Hegelochos was an actor in Euripides' plays who garbled a word and made the lines ridiculous (like changing "sea" to "seal").

DIONYSUS

Swear again.

XANTHIAS

Yes, by Zeus.

DIONYSUS

Swear it one more time again.

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, I swear.

DIONYSUS

That was a close shave—
looking at her almost made me puke.

XANTHIAS

You were so terrified you stained your pants.

DIONYSUS [*in a tragic tone*]

Woe, woe, why do such ills afflict me so?
Which god shall I accuse of thus destroying me?

350 [310]

XANTHIAS

How 'bout Zeus' airy pied-a-terre or the foot of time?

[The sound of music being played on the pipes comes from inside the house]

XANTHIAS

Listen!

DIONYSUS

What is it?

XANTHIAS

You don't hear that?

DIONYSUS

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What?

XANTHIAS

A tune played on the flute.

DIONYSUS [*continuing his tragic rant*]

Ah yes, and now
the scent of torches just came wafting o'er me,
torches of mystery . . .

XANTHIAS [*interrupting*]

Shhhh. Let's squat down here—
keep quiet and pay attention.

[*The Chorus of Initiates is heard offstage*]

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Iacchus, O Iacchus,
Iacchus, O Iacchus.

XANTHUS

Master, this is it—the initiates
doing their chant, the ones he talked about—
Diagoras' hymn to Iacchus.¹

360

[320]

DIONYSUS

It sounds like that to me. We'd best shut up,
so we find out for sure.

CHORUS OF INITIATES [*offstage*]

Iacchus, living here
in your highly honoured shrines—
Iacchus, O Iacchus
in this meadow come to dance
with partners in your mystery.

¹*Iacchus* was a minor divine presence associated with Dionysian celebrations. Diagoras may refer to a notorious Athenian atheist.

Shake the garland round your head,
the fruit-filled myrtle, come and tread
our playful rite's unbridled steps
where the Graces join in, too—
our pure and sacred dance and song,
the chant of your initiate throng.

370 [330]

XANTHIAS

O holy noble daughter of Demeter,
I just smelt roast pork—how sweet a smell that is.¹

DIONYSUS

If you keep quiet, you may just get a slice.

[Enter the Chorus of Initiates carrying torches]

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Awake the blazing torches in your hands!

[340]

CHORUS OF INITIATES

O Iacchus, Iacchus—with us you stand
light-bearing star in our nocturnal rite.
For now the meadow blazes light,
old men's knees will move again
as they dance off their ancient pain,
the lengthy cycle of their aged plight
in this your ceremonial night.
As your radiant torches blaze
bring to this flowery marshy place
the forward march of all the young
that constitute your choral throng,
O sacred one.

380

[350]

390

CHORUS LEADER

Let all those stand in silence here
and keep their distance from our dance—

¹ *daughter of Demeter*: a reference to Persephone, wife of Pluto, king of Hades.

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all those who have no sure command
 of ritual words and purposes,
 who have not purified their hearts,
 the ones who've never seen or danced
 the noble Muses' ritual songs,
 or played their part in Bacchic rites
 of bull-devouring Cratinus,¹
 or like words fit for foolish clowns 400
 when such words are not suitable—
 or anyone who just can't turn away
 from fights and hateful party strife,
 who cannot be a genial citizen,
 and easy going with countrymen,
 but lights and fans the flames of war,
 ambitious to advance himself, [360]
 whoever guides our state through storms
 and is corrupted by some bribe,
 betrays our watch posts and our ships 410
 or from Aegina smuggles goods,
 like that wretch Thorycion,
 our customs agent who shipped off
 illicit stuff to Epidaurus²—
 oar pads and cloth for sails and pitch,
 or who persuades some other man
 to send supplies to hostile ships,
 or anyone opposing Hecate
 in dithyrambic choruses,
 or any politician setting out 420
 to pare back pay our poets get
 because they mock him in these rites,
 ancient rites of Dionysus.

¹ *Cratinus* was a well-known and successful comic poet before Aristophanes.

² *Aegina . . . Thoracion . . . Epidaurus*. Aegina was an island centre for illegal trade during the war. Thorycion was (one assumes) well known as a corrupt official. Epidaurus was a naval centre close to Athens.

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I say to all such people, and I say again—
and for a third time I state once more—
stand back from our choral mysteries. [370]
But those now here begin the songs,
the dances lasting all night long,
as fits our ceremonial throng.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Now each one boldly marches on 430
into the meadow's flowery lap,
and each one stamps the ground—
we joke, make fun, we mock,
our bellies crammed with breakfast food.

CHORUS LEADER

Move on, now—but see you praise
the saving goddess in a noble way,
as you sing out our melodies.
She says she acts to save our land [380]
from season unto season,
against the wishes of Thorycion. 440
Come now, cry aloud another chant
for goddess Demeter, our harvest queen,
a celebration made in sacred song

CHORUS OF INITIATES

O Demeter, queen of our sacred rites, stand with us here,
preserve us now, your chorus. Let me play in safety,
let me dance all day, tell lots of really funny jokes,
and offer many serious reflections, too. [390]
Then, as befits your ceremonial rites, let me,
with my ridicule and fun, take off first prize,
let me wear the wreath, garland of victory.¹ 450

CHORUS LEADER

¹These lines remind us that the play is being produced in a competition.

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Come now, with your singing summon here
that lovely god, our partner in this dance.

CHORUS

Widely honoured Iacchus,
creator of the sweetest joyful song,
come here with us to Demeter, [400]
show us how you move along
this lengthy way with so much ease.

Iacchus, lover of the dance,
escort me forward as I prance.

In your playful penny-pinching mood 460
you've torn my tiny dancing shoes,
you've ripped my dress to shreds—
Iacchus, you've found a way
for all of us to dance and play
what more, we never have to pay.

O Iacchus, lover of the dance
escort me forward as I prance.

What's more, as I just glanced aside
around me here, I saw a girl, [410]
a lovely partner in the dance— 470
her scanty dress was ripped in two,
I saw a nipple peeking through.
Iacchus, lover of the dance,
escort me forward as I prance.

DIONYSUS

Hey, I'm always keen to enjoy myself.
I'd like to dance with her.

XANTHIAS

So would I.

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CHORUS OF INITIATES

Would you like to join us now in making fun
of Archedemos, who at seven years old [420]
was toothless, no genuine Athenian teeth.
And now he plays big shot in politics 480
among the dead above—the best there is
at double dealing and corruption.¹
And Cleisthenes, I hear, still picks his ass
and rips his cheeks apart among the tombstones,
blubbering over his dead lover Sabinos.
And Callias, they say, son of the man
who used to bugger his own horses,
has fights at sea, naval entanglements,
his arse hole covered by a lion skin. [430]

DIONYSUS [*approaching the Leader of the Chorus*]

Could you please inform the two of us 490
where Pluto lives when he's at home down here?
We're strangers in these parts. We've just arrived.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

No need to travel very far from here—
so don't ask me again. You should know
you're there—right at this very door. [440]

DIONYSUS [*to Xanthias*]

All right, lad, pick up the bags again.

XANTHIAS [*grumbling as he picks up the luggage*]

What's this all mean—the same old story line,

¹*Archedemos . . . teeth*: a complex joke about a prominent Athenian politician, alleging that he is not a genuine citizen (something that was determined at seven years of age).

with Corinth, son of Zeus . . . all this baggage.¹

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Keep up the dancing
along the round path sacred to our goddess, 500
to the flower-bearing grove—let’s play
with those who join this festival,
the one our goddess so adores.
I’ll join the women and the girls
who dance to the goddess all night long,
the ones who bear the sacred light.
Let’s move on into flowery meadows, [450]
the rose-filled fields, and worship there
the way we always do, with song and dance,
where blessed Fates assemble, too. 510

For we’re the only ones to whom
the sun and daylight bring such joy—
the ones initiated in ritual ways,
who practise holy reverence
to foreigners and private men.

[The Chorus exits]

DIONYSUS

Let’s see—what style do I use at this point [460]
to knock upon the door? Which one to use?
What’s the local style of knocking here?

XANTHIAS

Stop wasting time. Try chewing on the door—
act like Hercules. You’ve got his length and strength.

²*Corinth, son of Zeus*: an expression meaning (in effect) “always the same old stuff.” People from Corinth were (by reputation) never tired of boasting about the divine origin of the founder of their city.

DIONYSUS [*knocking*]

You in there! Doorkeeper!

AEACUS [*from inside*]

Who is it?

DIONYSUS

It's great Hercules!

[Aeacus bursts through the door and grabs Dionysus very roughly]

AEACUS

Oh you monstrous, you shameless reckless wretch—

villain, villain, damned smiling villain—

the man who made off with Cerberus my dog!

You grabbed him by the throat and throttled him,

520

then took off on the run, while I stood guard.

Now you're caught—black-hearted Stygian rocks,

[470]

and blood-dripping peaks of Acheron

will hold you down. Roaming hounds of Cocytus

will gnaw your guts to bits—Echidna, too—

she's got a hundred heads. The Tartesian eel

will chew your lungs, your kidneys bleed

from entrails Tithrasian Gorgons rip apart.

I'll set out hot foot in their direction.

[Aeacus lets go of Dionysus, who drops to the ground in terror. Exit Aeacus back into the house. Dionysus lifts his tunic and inspects his underpants]

XANTHIAS

What have you done?

DIONYSUS

I've made an offering. Call the god.

530

XANTHIAS

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You're being ridiculous. Get up. Move it,
before some stranger spots you.

[480]

DIONYSUS

I'm going to faint.
Bring the sponge here—set it on my heart.

[Xanthias rummages through the bags and finds a large sponge]

XANTHIAS

I've found the sponge! Here—you can do it.

[Dionysus takes the sponge and begins to clean up his crotch with it]

XANTHIAS

Where are you putting that sponge? O golden gods,
you keep your heart in there?

DIONYSUS

It was scared—
it ran off to my lower bowel.

XANTHIAS

Of all gods and men
no one's more cowardly than you.

DIONYSUS

Me?
How can I be when I asked you for the sponge?
Another man would not have asked, as I did.

540

XANTHIAS

What would he have done?

DIONYSUS

Well, a coward
would have lain there and stunk up the place.
But I stood up—what's more, I wiped myself.

[490]

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XANTHIAS

By Poseidon, a valiant act.

DIONYSUS

By Zeus. I think it was.

Weren't you scared shitless by his angry words,
by all those threats?

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, I never thought of them.

DIONYSUS

All right then, since you're so brave, so valiant,
you can be me. Take this club and lion skin.
If you're got the guts, I'll trade places with you.
I'll carry all the baggage.

XANTHIAS

All right.

550

I've got no choice. Quick, give me that.

[Xanthias takes the club and puts on the lion skin]

XANTHIAS *[in the grand style]*

Now gaze upon the Xanthian Hercules—
see if I turn coward and act like you.

[500]

DIONYSUS

No, by god, you'll well deserve a whipping.
Come on, then, I'll pick up the baggage.

[Dionysus starts to pick up a few of the smaller pieces. A Servant enters through the door]

SERVANT

Have you come back, my dearest Hercules?
Come on in. Once the goddess heard you'd come,
she had us baking bread loaves right away,

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boiling up pea soup—two or three cauldrons full,
roasting an entire ox, baking honey cakes
and cookies. So do come in.

560

XANTHIAS

That's really nice,
but I'm afraid . . .

SERVANT

I won't let you get away—
by Apollo, no. She's stewing bird meat,
toasting fresh desserts, mixing sweetest wines.
Please come in.

[510]

XANTHIAS

I appreciate it, but . . .

SERVANT

You can't be serious. I won't let you leave.
There's a lovely flute girl in there, just for you—
two or three dancing girls, as well.

XANTHIAS

What's that?
Did you say dancing girls?

SERVANT

Young and in full bloom—
all freshly plucked. So come on in. Right now
the cook's all ready to produce the fish.
The table's being brought in.

570

XANTHIAS

You go on back.
First, tell those dancing girls inside I'm coming.

[to Dionysus]

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someone who's sailed about a bit
and always rolls himself around
to the right side of the ship.
He's not one to stand transfixed
like some image made in paint
or frozen solid like a stone.
To move away from where one stands
to places much more comfortable—
that indicates a clever man,
a born Theramenes.¹

[540]

600

DIONYSUS

Now that would be extremely funny
to see Xanthias, my slave, lying at ease
enjoying bed linen from Milesia,
as he smooches with some dancing girl.
He asks me for a pot to have a piss—
but I, looking at him straight, grab him hard
right by his cucumber.

[Dionysus laughs at the thought, but then reconsiders]

But then he'd see me
and, being a rascal, sock me on the jaw.
He'd knock my front teeth out for sure.

*[Pandokeutria, a landlady, enters through the door, looks at
Dionysus, and calls back through the doorway]*

PANDOKEUTRIA

Plathane, Plathane, come on out here.
That fellow's back who came to our hotel
and ate up all our bread, all sixteen loaves.

610

[550]

[Enter Plathane, another landlady]

¹*Theramenes*: An Athenian politician famous for his political survival skills.

PLATHANE

My god, that's the one.

XANTHIAS

Oh, oh. Someone's in trouble.

PANDODEUTRIA

And twenty boiled hams afterwards as well—
at half an obol each.

XANTHIAS

Now he's in for it!

PANDOKEUTRIA

And lots of garlic, too.

DIONYSUS

My good women, you jest.
You don't know what you're saying.

PANDOKEUTRIA

Oh yes, we do!
You thought I wouldn't know you any more
because you've got those little booties on.
What else was there? I haven't said a word
about the pickled fish.

620

PLATHANE

You left out
all the fresh cheese, by god, the scoundrel ate.
He gobbled up the baskets, too.

[560]

PANDOKEUTRIA

To top it all,
when I tallied up his bill, he just looked at me
and yelled, a massive roar right in my face.

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XANTHIAS

That's just like him. He does that everywhere.

PANDOKEUTRIA

Then he pulled out his sword—he looked insane.

PLATHANE

My god, you poor dear!

PANDOKEUTRIA

We were both terrified.
Somehow we ran up fast onto the shelf,
and he took off, grabbing up the mats.

630

XANTHIAS

Well, that's exactly how he operates.

PANDOKEUTRIA

We've got to deal with him somehow. I know—
go call my patron Cleon.¹

PLATHANE

If you meet him,
get Hyperbolos, as well. We'll fix this fellow.

[570]

PANDOKEUTRIA

You wretched greedy swine—I'd be so happy
to smash your molars with a rock, those teeth
which gobbled down my stuff.

DIONYSUS

That's really nice—
and I'd like to dump you in a deep ravine.

PLATHANE

I could take a sickle and slice that gullet

¹*Cleon . . . Hyperbolos*: Athenian politicians with a special interest in leading the common people.

which wolfed down all my tripe. Instead of that,
I'll get that Cleon to draw up a charge,
so we can fish food out of him right here.

640

[Exit Plathane and Pandokeutria]

DIONYSUS

Now, may I die the nastiest of deaths,
my little Xanthias, if I'm not fond of you . . .

XANTHIAS

I know what you're thinking. Just stop right there.
Don't say a word. I'm Hercules again—
but I won't do it.

[580]

DIONYSUS

Dear little Xanthias,
don't say such things.

XANTHIAS

How could I be Hercules?
Remember I'm a slave and mortal, too.

DIONYSUS

I know you're angry—you've a right to be.
But even if you hit me, I won't criticize.
And if in future I take anything from you,
may I be chopped down root and branch.
Let me die in the worst way possible—
me, my wife, and kids—and Archedemus, too—
the man who's got such clammy eyes.

650

XANTHIAS

On those conditions I accept your oath.

[Xanthias and Dionysus exchange the lion skin and club once again]

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[calling inside the house]

Ditylas, Sceblias, Pandocus—outside!—
come here and punch this fellow out.

680

[Servants appear and begin to fight Xanthias]

DIONYSUS

It's shameful, a complete disgrace—
the way he hits them back—and more than that—
he steals.

[610]

AEACUS

That's shocking.

DIONYSUS

It's even worse.
It's scandalous and dreadful.

XANTHIAS

Now, by god,
I'm prepared to die if I was ever here
before today, or stole a thing from you
that's worth a hair. What's more, I'll make an offer,
like a true gentleman—take this slave of mine
and torture him. If you find out from him

690

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A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston is a retired university-college instructor living in Nanaimo, BC, Canada. Texts of his lectures and translations are available on the Internet at the following web address:

<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>

For a brief introduction to Aristophanes' *Frogs*, please consult the following link:

<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/aristophanes/clouds.htm>

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Aristophanes

Frogs

Translated by Ian Johnston

Frogs is by common consent one of the finest achievements of Aristophanes (456 BC to 386 BC), the greatest writer of comic drama in classical Athens and among most famous writers of dramatic comedy in our Western tradition. The play was first performed at a Festival of Dionysus in Athens in 405 BC, at a time when the disastrous Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta was nearing its end. The production so popular that it received the extraordinary honour of a second production and Aristophanes received a special honour from the city.

In the play the god Dionysus, in the form of a middle-aged human being, insists on travelling to Hades to bring back the tragic poet Euripides (who had died the year before), so that Athens can once again enjoy fine poetry. His slave Xanthias accompanies him. The trip is full of robust comical encounters with a range of characters, including Hercules, Charon, the famous Chorus of the *Frogs*, various underworld figures, and, finally Euripides and Aeschylus, who stage a debate over which of them is the greatest poet, an argument which has them mercilessly satirizing each other's work

For all its extremely funny stage business, *Frogs* raises some important and still relevant questions about the nature of dramatic art and the role of the dramatist. It also explores and exposes the self-serving attitudes of citizens during a time of war.

About the Translator



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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