

Aristophanes

# Frogs



Translated by Ian Johnston

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Frogs

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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](http://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 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,  
the ones Ameipsias and Phrynichus  
and Lycias, too, in all their comedies 20

provide the slave who carries all the bags?<sup>1</sup>

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?

XANTHIAS

What I just said carries lots of weight.

<sup>1</sup>*Phrynichus, Ameipsias, Lycias*: comic poets, rivals of Aristophanes.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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]*

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

*[The door opens and Hercules steps out, wearing a lion's skin and*

<sup>1</sup>The *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).

*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.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

The size of Molon—tiny.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>*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.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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]

But I'll try to show you by analogy.  
Have you ever had a craving for some stew?<sup>2</sup>

HERCULES

For stew? In my life maybe ten thousand times.

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

<sup>2</sup> *stew*: Hercules was famous for his enormous appetite.

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? <sup>1</sup>

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

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?

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

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.<sup>1</sup> 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?

DIONYSUS

Off to feast with saints.<sup>2</sup>

HERCULES

And Xenocles?

DIONYSUS

Oh by god, may he drop dead!

<sup>1</sup>*Iophon*: the son of Sophocles and a writer of tragedies.

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

HERCULES

Well then, Pythangelos? <sup>1</sup>

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

110

HERCULES

That word “creative”—  
what's it mean?

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  
on sacred offerings but a perjured tongue  
that's false with no sense of its perfidy.”

[100]

120

<sup>1</sup>*Xenocles and Pythangelos* were minor Athenian tragic playwrights.

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—  
who welcomed you down here, who you met  
that time you went down after Cerberus.<sup>1</sup>  
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.

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

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? Hmmm. 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 . . .

DIONYSUS

You mean hemlock.<sup>1</sup>

HERCULES

That's it!

DIONYSUS

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

HERCULES

All right, then.  
You want me to tell you how to get there fast.

150

<sup>1</sup>*hemlock*: a lethal poison which begins by numbing the lower limbs.

DIONYSUS

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

HERCULES

How about a stroll to Kerameikos . . .<sup>1</sup>

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.

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.

<sup>1</sup>*Kerameikos*: a district in Athens.

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.<sup>1</sup>  
How come it's here in Hades, too?

HERCULES

Theseus—  
he started it.<sup>2</sup> 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

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

<sup>2</sup>*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.

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.<sup>1</sup> [150]

DIONYSUS

By god, with them in the shit  
should lie whoever learned a war dance by Cinesias.<sup>2</sup>

HERCULES

Next the breath of flutes will sound around you. 180  
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.

DIONYSUS

So who are they?

HERCULES

Those are the initiates,  
the ones who celebrate the mysteries.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 190

<sup>1</sup>*Morsimus*: an inferior tragic playwright.

<sup>2</sup>*Cinesias*: an Athenian poet.

<sup>3</sup>*the mysteries*: secret cult religious rituals for special groups of initiates.

<sup>4</sup>*Pluto*: god of Hades (another name for the god Hades).

And so, my brother, I bid you fond farewell.

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]*

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.

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.

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.<sup>1</sup>

DIONYSUS:

That's me.

CHARON

Then jump aboard.

DIONYSUS

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

<sup>1</sup>*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.

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.

XANTHIAS

Where do I wait for you?

CHARON

At Wuthering Rock<sup>1</sup>—  
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.

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

*[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]

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.<sup>1</sup>

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?

<sup>1</sup>*Salamis* is an island close to Athens, famous for its sailors.

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]*<sup>1</sup>

CHORUS 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 Jars<sup>2</sup>  
as people in their drunken glee  
thronged into our sanctuary.

Brekekekex koax koax.

[220]

DIONYSUS *[still rowing]*

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

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

260

<sup>1</sup>*Chorus of Frogs*: It's not clear whether this chorus remains off stage or not.

<sup>2</sup>*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.

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.

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!

CHORUS OF FROGS

If that's the case, you'll never please. 290  
That's hard on us.

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.

300

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

*[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.

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?

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.  
He saw I was a fighter, and he's jealous.  
No one's more full of it than Hercules.  
But I'm eager now for some adventure,  
some exploit worthy of this expedition.

[280]

320

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?

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!

330

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

DIONYSUS [*terrified*]

It's Empusa!!<sup>1</sup>

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.

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

DIONYSUS

Where can I run?

XANTHIAS [*imitating Dionysus*]

Where can I run?

DIONYSUS [*appealing the audience*]

O holy man, save me—so we can drink together.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup>

Empousa's left.

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

<sup>2</sup>*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

You swear?

XANTHIAS

Cross my heart.

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

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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

in this meadow come to dance  
with partners in your mystery.  
Shake the garland round your head,  
the fruit-filled myrtle, come and tread 370 [330]  
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.

XANTHIAS

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

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. 380

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 [350]

the forward march of all the young  
that constitute your choral throng,  
O sacred one. 390

CHORUS LEADER

Let all those stand in silence here

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

and keep their distance from our dance—  
 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,<sup>1</sup>  
 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 Epidaurus<sup>2</sup>—  
 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.

<sup>1</sup>*Cratinus* was a well-known and successful comic poet before Aristophanes.

<sup>2</sup>*Aegina . . . Thoracion . . . Epidauros*. 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.

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.<sup>1</sup> 450

#### CHORUS LEADER

Come now, with your singing summon here

<sup>1</sup>These lines remind us that the play is being produced in a competition.

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.

#### CHORUS OF INITIATES

Would you like to join us now in making fun

of Archedemos, who at seven years old  
was toothless, no genuine Athenian teeth. [420]

And now he plays big shot in politics  
among the dead above—the best there is  
at double dealing and corruption.<sup>1</sup> 480

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  
where Pluto lives when he's at home down here? 490  
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,  
with Corinth, son of Zeus . . . all this baggage.<sup>2</sup>

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Keep up the dancing

<sup>1</sup> *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).

<sup>2</sup> *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.

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.

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

You're being ridiculous. Get up. Move it, [480]  
before some stranger spots you.

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]

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,  
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]*

You, slave, follow me. And bring the baggage.

[520]

DIONYSUS

Hey, hold on a minute. All this pretence,  
you can't be taking it so seriously.  
The fact I dressed you up as Hercules—  
that was just fun. Don't play the fool with me.  
Pick up these bags again and bring them in.

XANTHIAS

What? You're not intending to take back from me  
what you gave in person?

580

DIONYSUS

You bet I am.

Take off that lion skin.

XANTHIAS

I want witnesses—

I entrust my law suit to the gods.

DIONYSUS

What gods?

To think that you, a slave and mortal, too,  
could play Hercules, Alcmena's son—  
so arrogant and stupid.

[530]

XANTHIAS

All right, all right.

Have it your way, then. Take the costume.

Perhaps some day the gods will make you need me.

*[Xanthias hands the club and lion skin to Dionysus]*

CHORUS

There's a man with brains,  
with keen intelligence—  
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.

590

To move away from where one stands  
to places much more comfortable—  
that indicates a clever man,  
a born Theramenes.<sup>1</sup>

[540]

600

DIONYSUS

Now that would be extremely funny  
to see Xanthias, my slave, lying at ease  
enjoying bed linen from Milesia,

<sup>1</sup>*Theramenes*: An Athenian politician famous for his political survival skills.

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. 610  
That fellow's back who came to our hotel  
and ate up all our bread, all sixteen loaves. [550]

*[Enter Plathane, another landlady]*

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.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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  
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. 650  
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.

XANTHIAS

On those conditions I accept your oath.

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

CHORUS

Since you've taken up the skin,  
the one you had before, [590]  
your task is now to start again, 660  
to reinvigorate yourself—  
once more put on that dreadful stare,  
recall the god you imitate.  
If you get caught in foolish talk  
or squeak out squeals of fear,  
you'll be compelled a second time  
to carry all the bags from here.

XANTHIAS

Men, the advice you give me is not bad.  
I was thinking the same thing myself.  
What's more, if all this turns out a success, 670  
he'll try to take this back from me again. [600]  
I know that for a fact. But I'll make myself  
a manly man—with a gaze like mustard.  
I need to do that—for just as I thought  
I hear the sound of scraping by the door.

*[Enter Aeacus with servants]*

AEACUS

Tie up this dog thief. Get a move on, too—  
so we can punish him. Be quick about it.

DIONYSUS

Oh, oh. Someone's in trouble now.

XANTHIAS

What the hell!

You stay away from me!

AEACUS

O ho, you're fighting back!

*[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

I've done wrong, then take me out and kill me.

AEACUS

How should I torture him?

XANTHIAS

All the ways there are.

Tie him to a ladder, hang him up,  
whip him with nails, twist him on the rack,  
strip off skin, fill his nose with vinegar,  
load bricks on him—do everything you can.  
Just don't flog him with fresh onions or a leek.

[620]

AEACUS

That offer's fair. So if I beat the slave  
and cripple him, I'll pay for damages.

XANTHIAS

Not to me. Just take him off for torture.

700

AEACUS

No. I'll torture him right here, so he'll confess  
before your very eyes.

*[To Dionysus]*

Put down that load.  
And hurry up. Don't give me any lies.

DIONYSUS

I here proclaim no one should torture me.  
I'm an immortal god. If you do so,  
you'll have yourself to blame.

AEACUS

What are you saying?

[630]

DIONYSUS

I'm saying I'm Dionysus, an immortal,  
a son of Zeus—this man here's a slave.

AEACUS

You hear that?

XANTHIAS

I hear what he claims to be—  
all the more good reason for flogging him.  
If he's a god, he won't feel a thing.

710

DIONYSUS

You're right.  
And since you also claim that you're a god,  
why don't you take as many blows as me?

XANTHIAS

Fair enough. Then whichever of the two  
you see bursting into tears or flinching  
as he's whipped—you'll know he's not the god.

AEACUS

You're a fine gentleman—that's obvious.  
You stand for justice. All right—the two of you,  
take off your clothes.

[640]

*[Xanthias and Dionysus remove their clothes and get down on all fours in preparation for the whipping. Aeacus produces a massive whip]*

XANTHIAS

How will you judge this?  
How will you keep it fair?

AEACUS

That's easy.  
I'll alternate the blows.

720

XANTHIAS

A fine suggestion.

AEACUS [*striking Xanthias*]

There!

XANTHIAS

Watch closely if I flinch or not.

AEACUS

But I just hit you.

XANTHIAS

By god, I didn't feel a thing.

AEACUS

All right. Now I'll lay into this one here.

[*Aeacus strikes Dionysus*]

DIONYSUS

When are you going to start my whipping?

AEACUS

I just did.

DIONYSUS

Why didn't I sneeze?

AEACUS

I haven't a clue.

Back to this one again.

XANTHIAS

Get on with it!

[*Aeacus strikes Xanthias much harder than the first time*]

XANTHIAS [*feeling the pain*]

Ahhhh!!!

AEACUS

What's that sound about? Did that blow hurt?

XANTHIAS

No, by god. I was just remembering  
the feast for Hercules at Diomeia.

[650]

730

AEACUS

The man's a saint. All right, now this one's turn.

*[Aeacus strikes Dionysus, again much harder than before]*

DIONYSUS

Oooowww! Ahhh!!

AEACUS

What was that cry?

DIONYSUS

I see men on horseback.

AEACUS

Why are your eyes full of tears?

DIONYSUS

I smell onions.

AEACUS

You didn't feel a thing?

DIONYSUS

No, nothing—  
nothing that bothered me.

AEACUS

All right, then,  
back to this one here.

*[Aeacus hits Xanthias really hard]*

XANTHIAS

Aiiieeee!!

AEACUS

What was that?

XANTHIAS [*pretending he has a thorn in his hand*]

A little prickle. Pull it out.

AEACUS

What's going on?

Now it's this one's turn.

[*Aeacus strikes Dionysus very hard*]

DIONYSUS

Aaaiiii!! O Apollo,  
who presides at Delphi and at Delos . . .

XANTHIAS

You hear that—the man's in pain.

DIONYSUS

No, I'm not.

740 [660]

I was remembering some poetry,  
a verse from Hipponax.

XANTHIAS

You're getting nowhere.  
Hit him on the ribs.

AEACUS

A good idea, by god.  
Stick out that pot of yours.

[*Aeacus hits Dionysus savagely on the ribs and stomach*]

DIONYSUS

Aaaiiii! O Poseidon . . .

XANTHIAS

Someone's feeling pain.

DIONYSUS [*continuing to recite poetry*]

. . . you who command

Aegean headlands and the green-grey sea . . .

AEACUS

Holy Demeter, I can't sort this out.

Which one's the god? You'd best come inside.

My master Pluto will know who you are,  
so will Persephone, his wife—they're gods.

[670]

750

DIONYSUS

Now you talking. I'd have liked it better

if you'd thought of that before these whippings.

*[Dionysus and Xanthias and Aeacus go into the house leaving the Chorus on stage]*

CHORUS

You Muses, enter now our sacred dance.

Enjoy our songs and gaze upon

the massive crowds of people here,

thousands of clever thinkers in their seats,

in love with honour more than Cleophon,

on whose snarling lips a Thracian swallow sits,

making an awful din—on that foreign leaf

she squawks her nightingale's lament,

for he'll be sentenced soon, sent to die

although the jury's votes create a tie.<sup>1</sup>

[680]

760

CHORUS LEADER

It's just and proper in this city

our sacred chorus give advice and teach.

So first it seems appropriate to us

to free the citizens from inequalities—

<sup>1</sup>*Cleophon . . . votes are equal*: Cleophon was an Athenian politician in favour of the war. The gibe here suggests he's not a true Athenian. Aristophanes' prediction that Cleophon would soon be sentenced to death came true a year later.

to ease their fears. So if a man slips up  
 thanks to the wrestling tricks of Phrynicus,<sup>1</sup>  
 I say we should allow the ones who fall [690]  
 to state their case, reform their evil ways. 770  
 Besides that's no dishonour to our city.  
 It would bring benefits. It's scandalous  
 that those who fought a battle once at sea  
 should instantly become Plataeans,  
 masters instead of slaves.<sup>2</sup> I don't deny  
 this worked out well—in fact, I praise it.  
 It's the only well-intentioned thing you did.  
 But as well as this it stands to reason  
 we should forget the single blow of fortune  
 of those who fought so much at sea beside you, 780  
 just like their fathers, your ethnic kinsmen—  
 that's what they keep requesting. But you here,  
 whom nature made the wisest of all people, [700]  
 should drop your anger and make everyone  
 who fights alongside us at sea a kinsman  
 and a citizen. For if we are too proud,  
 too puffed up with self-worth, especially now,  
 when we're encircled by the sea's embrace,  
 in future time we'll look like total fools.  
 If I've a keen sense of the life and style 790  
 of someone who will someday cry in woe,  
 this tiny irritating ape Cleigenes, [710]  
 the most corrupt of all our laundry types,  
 those noble men who cut the soap with ash,  
 dilute the mix, and use Cimolian earth,  
 won't be with us long. He knows it, too—  
 that's why he's not a man promoting peace.  
 He knows that someday in a drunken fit

<sup>1</sup> *Phrynicus* was an Athenian politician who led the revolution in 411 BC.

<sup>2</sup> *Plataeans . . . masters instead of slaves*: after the naval battle of Arginusae, the Athenians freed the slaves who had fought and gave them rights of citizenship equivalent to the rights of the Plataeans, important allies of Athens.

he may well lose his staff of office,  
 and, more than that, be stripped of all his clothes.<sup>1</sup> 800  
 This city, it so often seems to me,  
 treats our best and worthiest citizens  
 the way it does our old silver coins,  
 our new gold ones, as well.<sup>2</sup> This money [720]  
 was never counterfeit—no, these coins  
 appeared to be the finest coins of all,  
 the only ones which bore the proper stamp.  
 Everywhere among barbarians and Greeks  
 they stood the test. But these we do not use.  
 Instead we have our debased coins of bronze, 810  
 poorly struck some days ago or yesterday.  
 That's how we treat our finest citizens,  
 the nobly born, our righteous men,  
 our best and brightest, the ones well trained  
 in music and the dance at the palaestra.<sup>3</sup>  
 Instead we use foreign bronze for everything—  
 useless men from useless fathers, red heads,<sup>4</sup> [730]  
 men who've come here very recently—  
 the sort the city at its most negligent  
 would never have used in earlier days, 820  
 not even as a scapegoat.<sup>5</sup> But now,  
 you silly fools, it's time to change your ways.  
 Use worthy people once again. You'll see—

<sup>1</sup> *Cleigenes . . . clothes*: Aristophanes here attacks the keeper of a public bath and laundry for cheating his customers, predicting that soon he will lose his political office.

<sup>2</sup> *our new gold ones, as well*: a famous comparison between the political leaders and the debased coinage (one of the effects of the war).

<sup>3</sup> *palaestra*: The traditional school in Athens, emphasizing physical fitness and the arts.

<sup>4</sup> *red heads*: a reference to foreigners or slaves, not true Athenians.

<sup>5</sup> *scapegoat*: Once a year in Athens two condemned criminals were beaten out of the city and executed in a purification ritual to cleanse the city of its collective guilt.

if you're successful, then you'll merit praise.  
And if you fail, well, you'll be a fine match  
for the tree you're hanging from. At any rate,  
should you slip up, that's what the wise will say.

*[Enter Xanthias with a servant from the house]*

SERVANT

By Zeus who saves us, that master of yours  
is a very cultured gentleman.

XANTHIAS

Of course, he is.  
The only things he knows are how to drink  
and dip his dink.

830 [740]

SERVANT

But not to beat you on the spot  
when they proved that you're the slave—and one  
who claimed you were the master.

XANTHIAS

If he had,  
he'd have had regrets—and that's a fact.

SERVANT

What you just did is worthy of a slave,  
something I love to do.

XANTHIAS

Forgive my asking,  
but what is it you love to do?

SERVANT

It's more than love—  
almost ecstasy—when I can curse my master  
out of ear shot.

XANTHIAS

What about really bitching,  
whenever you've received a total thrashing  
and run outside?

840

SERVANT

Yes, I do like that, too.

XANTHIAS

What about sticking your nose in everything?

SERVANT

By god, there's nothing finer—that's for sure.

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, divine protector of our race,  
what about listening to our masters' chat  
when they spread gossip . . .

[750]

SERVANT

I'm even crazier for that!

XANTHIAS

. . . then passing on the gossip all around,  
to everyone outside the house?

SERVANT

You mean me?

Every time I do that, I piss myself.

XANTHIAS

By Phoebus Apollo, give me your hand,  
let me kiss you, and you kiss me.

850

*[Xanthias notices a noise from inside the house]*

Tell me,

by Zeus, patron of all flogged slaves like us,  
what's going on inside the house, that noise,  
all that yelling and abuse?

SERVANT

Oh that—  
that's Euripides and Aeschylus.

XANTHIAS

Ah ha!

SERVANT

Big, big trouble's in the works down here  
among the dead—a massive civil war.

[760]

XANTHIAS

What about?

SERVANT

There's a custom in these parts  
that in the arts—the great and worthy ones—  
the best man in his special area  
gets all his meals for free at City Hall  
in the chair of honour next to Pluto . . .

860

XANTHIAS

I get it.

SERVANT

. . . until someone else arrives  
who has more skill than he does. At that point,  
he has to yield his place.

XANTHIAS

But why would this  
get Aeschylus upset?

SERVANT

Well, he had his chair,  
the one for tragedy, as the finest  
in that form of art.

XANTHIAS

Who's got it now?

[770]

SERVANT

When Euripides came down to Hades  
he started showing off his rhetoric  
to thieves, bag snatchers, parricides,  
to all the ones who steal—and here in Hades  
that's most of us. Well, they listened to him,  
heard his counter-arguments, his twists and turns,  
and went nuts for him. So they then proposed  
he was the wisest of all men. With that,  
Euripides got so worked up he claimed  
that chair where Aeschylus sits down.

870

XANTHIAS

Didn't people throw stuff at him?

SERVANT

My god, no.  
Quite the opposite. They all cried out  
to have a trial set up which could find out  
which of the two men was the wiser poet.

880

[780]

XANTHIAS

The crowd of scoundrels?

SERVANT

Yes, that bunch—  
they made a din, by god—right up to heaven.

XANTHIAS

Didn't Aeschylus get some support?

SLAVE

It's like this audience—too few good men.

XANTHIAS

So what's Pluto planning to set up?

SLAVE

A contest— there's going to be a trial right here,  
a test of skill.

XANTHIAS

What about Sophocles—  
how come he didn't claim the poet's chair?

890

SLAVE

My god, he wouldn't. When he first arrived  
he kissed Aeschylus, shook him by the hand,  
and kept his distance from the chair of honour.  
And now, according to Cleidemides,  
he means to sit by as a substitute.  
If Aeschylus wins out, he'll keep his place.  
If not, in this contest of poetic skill  
he says he'll fight on to the bitter end  
against Euripides.

[790]

XANTHIAS

So this affair is on.

SLAVE

Yes, in a minute. In this very spot  
some fairly weird things will be going on—  
they're testing poetry with balance scales!

900

XANTHIAS

What?! They'll weigh tragedy in milligrams?

SERVANT

And they're bringing out some measuring sticks,  
rods to measure words, framed rectangles . . .

XANTHIAS

Will they be constructing bricks?

[800]

SERVANT

. . . bevels, too,

and wedges—all because Euripides  
says he'll test their tragedies, every word.

XANTHIAS

Well, my guess is that Aeschylus  
isn't liking this at all.

SLAVE

He just glared,  
lowering his head as if he were a bull.

910

XANTHIAS

Who's going to judge this trial?

SLAVE

That's difficult.  
Wise men are hard to find—in short supply.  
And Aeschylus didn't really hit it off  
with the Athenians . . .

XANTHIAS

Perhaps because  
he thought that most of them were criminals.

SERVANT

. . . and he considered other people  
worthless as judges of true poetry.  
So at last they turned toward your master,  
since he's got some knowledge of that art.  
But let's go in. There's always trouble for us,  
every time our master's in a rush.

[810]

920

*[Xanthias and the Servant go into the house]*

CHORUS *[in a parody of the tragic style]*

Now the loud-roaring hero feels in full his fury—  
that valiant vehemence which surges up within,  
when he confronts his rival in poetic craft  
sharpening smooth-talking tusks, just like a boar.

His frenzied passion's going to make those eyeballs roll.  
The battle's here at hand—helmet-glancing war,  
horse-crested words, while splintered axles break apart,  
as the subtle chisel-worker tries to push and parry 930 [820]  
steed-prancing phrases from the man who builds our minds.  
The bristling crest erect there on his shaggy neck,  
his natural hair, a fearful scowl upon his brow,  
and bellowing, he'll launch his language fixed with bolts,  
like planking for a ship, he'll rip the words apart,  
blasting with his giant's lungs. The other man,  
the one who works his mouth, who tortures every word,  
unrolling his smooth tongue and shaking envy's rein,  
will dissect and parse those words, and, splitting hairs,  
refute all that large labour of the former's lungs. 940

*[Enter Aeschylus, Euripides, Dionysus, and Pluto, with attendants]*

EURIPIDES

I'll not give up the chair—no more advice. [830]  
I say I'm better in poetic skill.

DIONYSUS

Why are you silent, Aeschylus? You hear  
the claim he's made.

EURIPIDES

His high-and-mighty pose—  
he does that at the start of every play,  
some hocus-pocus for his tragedies.

DIONYSUS

My dear fellow, that's too much big talk.

EURIPIDES

I know the man—and for a long time now  
I've studied him. He makes crude characters  
with stubborn tongues. As for his own mouth, 950  
it's unrestrained and uncontrolled, unlocked,

no proper discourse, bombastiloquent.

AESCHYLUS

Is that so, you garden-goddess child? [840]  
You say that of me, you gossip-monger,  
a beggar's poet who picks and stitches rags?  
You'll regret those words.

DIONYSUS

Hey, Aeschylus,  
hold on. Don't fire up your heart so angrily,  
with such ill will.

AESCHYLUS

No, no, I won't hold back,  
till I've exposed the man and clearly proved  
this cripples' poet is a boastful fool . . . 960

DIONYSUS [*to the attendants*]

Hey, boys, bring out a sheep—a black one, too.  
It looks as if a storm's about to break.<sup>1</sup>

AESCHYLUS

. . . collecting all those monodies from Crete,  
importing impure marriage into art . . .<sup>2</sup> [850]

DIONYSUS [*interrupting*]

Whoa, hold on there, much-honoured Aeschylus.  
And you, my poor Euripides, back off  
beyond this breaking storm—that would be wise,  
in case his anger cracks your skull in two,  
some heady phrase makes all the brain leak out  
your hero Telephos. And you there, Aeschylus, 970

<sup>1</sup>*about to break*: Dionysus pretends he needs to offer a sacrifice to placate the god of storms.

<sup>2</sup>*monodies . . . marriage into art*: an attack on Euripides' innovations and on the alleged immorality in his plays. Monodies are long lyrical solos for main characters.

don't get so angry. Test him, but calmly—  
and then be tested, too. It's just not right  
for poets to engage in such abuse,  
like two women selling bread. You bellow  
as if you were a tree on fire.

EURIPIDES

I'm ready.

[860]

I don't mind biting or being bitten first,  
whatever he prefers, about my diction  
or the songs and sinews of my tragic plays—  
and by god, about Peleus, as well,  
my Meleager or my Aeolos,  
or, even more about my Telephos.<sup>1</sup>

980

DIONYSUS

What do you want to do? Tell us, Aeschylus.

AESCHYLUS

I have no wish to enter battle here.  
The war we fight is not on equal terms.

DIONYSUS

Why's that?

AESCHYLUS

My poetry did not die with me,  
but his did once he died. So it's down here—  
he'll have it with him when he wants to speak.  
But nonetheless, since it's what you want,  
we must go through with this.

[870]

DIONYSUS [*to the assembled group*]

Come now,  
someone bring an offering here and fire as well,  
so I can pay before this contest starts,  
our battle of the brains, and judge the fight

990

<sup>1</sup> *Telephos*: a beggar hero of one of Euripides' plays.

with maximum aesthetic expertise.

*[addressing the Chorus]*

Now for the Muses you should sing a song.

CHORUS

Oh you nine sacred Muses  
mighty Zeus' virgin daughters,  
gazing down on subtle minds,  
you see intelligence at work  
in men who write our maxims.  
When such as these go out to fight,  
with counterarguments and tricks,  
with fiercely studied wrestling moves,  
with crooked throws, come to us here,  
observe the power of these mouths,  
their awesome skill in making words,  
sawing phrases up like sawdust.  
Now our great contest in this art  
stands ready—let the business start.

1000

[880]

DIONYSUS

Before we have you two recite your lines,  
you ought to offer up your prayers.

AESCHYLUS

O Demeter,

1010

who nourishes my mind, make me worthy  
to be there in your mysteries.

DIONYSUS *[to Euripides]*

It's your turn—  
take some incense. Make an offering.

EURIPIDES

All right—  
but I pray to different gods.

DIONYSUS

Personal ones?  
Your very own? Freshly minted?

EURIPIDES

That's right. [890]

DIONYSUS

Then pray on to those private gods of yours.

EURIPIDES

O air, my food, O pivot of my tongue,  
O native wit, O nose that smells so fine,  
whatever words I seize upon, let me  
refute them—let the victory be mine. 1020

CHORUS

Now we're filled with great desire  
to hear from poets with such skill,  
the pathway in this war of words  
they'll walk along. Their tongues are wild,  
no lack of boldness in their mood,  
nor are their intellects asleep.  
It looks as though we're going to see [900]  
one man say something quite urbane  
and finely trimmed. The other one  
will seize him and his arguments, 1030  
the roots and all, and then attack  
and scatter words around the place  
like rolling wrestlers on a mat.

DIONYSUS [*to Aeschylus and Euripides*]

You must speak at full speed. But see you talk  
this way—with elegance, no metaphors,  
and nothing someone else might say.

EURIPIDES

All right.

As for myself—the kind of poet I am—  
I'll say that in my final words. For first,  
I'll demonstrate this fellow's fraudulent,  
a cheat. I'll show just how he took them in, 1040  
and fooled those idiots reared on Phrynichos.<sup>1</sup> [910]  
First, he'd wrap a person up and sit him down  
with his face hidden away—some character  
like that Niobe or his Achilles—  
mere window dressing for the tragedy.  
They didn't speak or even mutter.

DIONYSUS

That's right. They didn't.

EURIPIDES

And then his Chorus thumped their lyrics out—  
strings of them, four in a row without a break.  
The character just sat on stage in silence.

DIONYSUS

Well, I liked that they kept quiet. It pleased me. 1050  
It wasn't any worse than those today  
who babble on and on.

EURIPIDES

You were a fool—  
no doubt of that.

DIONYSUS

I think so, too. But why so?  
Why did our friend here do that?

EURIPIDES

It was a trick  
designed to keep spectators in their seats,  
waiting for when Niobe might start to speak.  
So the play continued on and on and on . . . [920]

<sup>1</sup>*Phrynichos*: an important writer of tragedy before Aeschylus.

DIONYSUS

What a rascal! How he had me fooled!

*[to Aeschylus]*

Why are you fretting there and fidgeting?

EURIPIDES

I've caught him out. When he'd played this trick  
and half the play was done, someone would speak up,  
a dozen ox-like words—with eyebrows, crests,  
some fear-faced things full of the bogey man,  
which no one in the audience understood.

1060

AESCHYLUS

How miserable I feel . . .

DIONYSUS

Stay quiet please.

EURIPIDES

Nothing he said was ever clear.

DIONYSUS *[to Aeschylus]*

Don't grind your teeth.

EURIPIDES

He talked on about Scamanders, trenches,  
shields with bronze enamelled griffon-eagles,  
in horse-cliffed phrases hard to comprehend.<sup>1</sup>

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god, one long night I got no sleep  
from worrying what kind of bird was called  
the tawny clear-voiced horse cock.

1070 [930]

<sup>1</sup>The Scamander was the river near Troy. Euripides is criticizing Aeschylus' antique diction, reminiscent of Homer's style.

AESCHYLUS

You idiot!

It was a symbol painted on the ships.

DIONYSUS

I thought it was Eryxis, Philoxenos' son.

EURIPIDES

And did you have to work a rooster in  
just for the tragedy?<sup>1</sup>

AESCHYLUS

You god-forsaken wretch,  
what sorts of plays did you create?

EURIPIDES

None like you—  
no horse-cock monsters or goat-stags, by god,  
the sort they paint on Persian tapestries.  
When I first took this art of plays from you,  
crammed with bombast to the gills, fustian stuff,  
at first I made it slim, reduced its weight  
with vesicles, and walks, and laxatives.  
I gave a potion drawn from bookish chat,  
and took care nursing it with monodies.

1080

[940]

DIONYSUS

And mixing in Cephisophon, as well.<sup>2</sup>

EURIPIDES

I wasn't fool enough to put in there  
whatever stuff I chanced upon or add  
just anything I found. The character  
who came out first would right away explain  
on my behalf the background of the play.

1090

<sup>1</sup> *just for the tragedy*: Aeschylus refers to a rooster in his play *Agamemnon*.

<sup>2</sup> *Cephisophon*: an Athenian who lived in Euripides' house and was rumoured have assisted him with his plays and had an affair with his wife.

DIONYSUS

Which was better than your own, by god.

EURIPIDES

After those opening words I never set  
anything superfluous in the play. No.  
For me the woman spoke—so did the slave,  
the master, maiden, the old woman, too.

AESCHYLUS

Well, shouldn't you be killed for daring this?

[950]

EURIPIDES

By Apollo, no. I was doing my work  
the democratic way.

DIONYSUS [*to Euripides*]

My dear chap,

I'd forget that—from your point of view  
that's not the best line to take, not for you.<sup>1</sup>

1100

EURIPIDES [*indicating the audience*]

I taught these people here to speak their minds . . .

AESCHYLUS

I say so, too—and before doing that  
I wish you'd split apart—right down the middle.

EURIPIDES

. . . introducing subtle rules for words,  
for verses nicely trimmed. I taught them to think,  
to see, to understand, to love new twists  
and double dealing, to suspect the worst,  
to be too smart in everything . . .

AESCHYLUS

I agree.

<sup>1</sup>*not for you*: Euripides' sympathies in his life appeared to be with the oligarchs, not with the democrats in Athens.

EURIPIDES

. . . and I brought in domestic issues, too— 1110  
useful matters of things we understand,  
things people here could challenge me about. [960]  
They know their stuff—so they could test my art.  
I didn't boast or lose my common sense.  
Nor did I scare them all with characters  
like Cycnus and Memnon, who walk around  
with bells attached.<sup>1</sup> Look at our disciples,  
his and mine—you know them all quite well.  
Meganeitos and rough Phormisios  
are his—great long-beard-lance-and-trumpet men, 1120  
flesh-rippers with the pine—whereas, for me  
there's neat Theramenes and Cleitophon.<sup>2</sup>

DIONYSUS

Theramenes? Now, he's a clever man,  
expert in everything. When he meets trouble,  
when it hits him in the face, he gets away,  
no problem, by changing who he is—  
if being a Chian doesn't work for him, [970]  
he claims that he's Achaean.<sup>3</sup>

EURIPIDES [*rushing his concluding speech*]

I taught these people here  
to think about such things. 1130  
I brought logic into art.  
I made them questioners.

<sup>1</sup> *with bells attached*: Cycnus and Memnon were characters in plays by Aeschylus. Warriors had bells attached to their shields or to their horses' harnesses.

<sup>2</sup> *Cleitophon*: an Athenian member of the group around Socrates.

<sup>3</sup> *Achaean*: this joke is hard to render accurately. The Greek says (literally) “not a Chian [i.e., from Chios] but a Kian” or (more freely) “not a Chian with a ch but a Kian with a k,” indicating the man's slippery character, able to change nationality by altering the spelling of the word. The change to “Achaean” may make the joke somewhat more compressed and workable, especially when the speech is spoken rather than read.

Now they see everything  
and understand it all.  
Their minds are more profound—  
they organize their homes  
much better than before.  
So now they ask “Where’s this?”  
“What’s going on?” and “Who took that?”

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god, that’s what they do. 1140 [980]  
Now each Athenian man  
goes home and starts to yell—  
to scream at his own servants,  
“Where’s my pot? My sardine—  
who’s bitten off its head?  
My bowl from bygone years,  
is it, too, dead and gone?  
And where’s my garlic clove?  
I had it yesterday.  
Who’s munching on my olives?” 1150  
Before this, they’d just sit  
and gape there stupidly,  
like little mummy’s boys [990]  
and silly sweet-toothed fools.

CHORUS [*to Aeschylus*]

You see this, radiant Achilles,<sup>1</sup>  
Come now, what can you say to him?  
Don’t let your anger take control  
and carry you beyond the track.  
He’s charged you with some dreadful things.  
But now, you noble gentleman, 1160  
respond to him, but not with wrath  
Haul in your sails—except the tips— [1000]  
then bit by bit bring in your ship.

<sup>1</sup>*Achilles*: Calling Aeschylus “Achilles” is a reminder both of his traditionally noble character and of his mood. Like Achilles he sits there silent and enraged.

Keep watching for an easy wind.  
You just may get a gentle breeze.

DIONYSUS

Now you who were first among the Greeks  
to raise the solemn towers of spoken words  
adorning them with tragic gibberish,  
be strong and spout forth eloquence.

AESCHYLUS

This trial enrages me—it pains my spleen 1170  
to have to answer such a man. But still,  
to stop your claim that I'm incompetent  
you answer this for me: Why should anyone  
admire the man who is a poet?

EURIPIDES

For cleverness  
and good advice—and since we help improve  
the men who live within our cities.

AESCHYLUS

So if that's something you didn't do, [1010]  
instead transforming fine and decent men  
to make them scoundrels, what would you say  
you'd then deserved by way of punishment? 1180

DIONYSUS

Death—but don't ask him.

AESCHYLUS

Consider first  
the nature of the men he got from me—  
were they not nobly born and six feet tall?  
There were no runaways, no layabouts,  
no scoundrels like today, no ne'er-do-wells.  
No. Those men breathed spears and javelins,  
white-crested helmets, coronets, and greaves,

with passions wrapped in seven oxhide folds.

EURIPIDES

This is getting bad.

DIONYSUS

His helmet-making  
wears me down.

EURIPIDES

What exactly did you do  
to make these men so noble? 1190

DIONYSUS

Aeschylus,  
speak up. Forget your pride and stubbornness. [1020]

AESCHYLUS

I wrote a play brim full of war god Ares.

DIONYSUS

Which one was that?

AESCHYLUS

*My Seven Against Thebes.*  
Every man who saw it fell in love with war.

DIONYSUS

But you did something bad there with the Thebans—  
you made them more courageous in the war.  
For that you should be spanked.

AESCHYLUS [*to the audience*]

You too,  
you could have trained yourselves for war as well,  
but you weren't so inclined. Then after that,  
by putting on my *Persians* I instructed them  
so they were always keen to beat their foes— 1200

thus honouring our finest act.<sup>1</sup>

DIONYSUS

I was pleased  
when you cried out in sorrowful lament,  
“O child of Darius, who is dead,” and then,  
the chorus clapped its hands and all yelled out  
“Booo hooo.”

AESCHYLUS

Poets need to work on things like this. [1030]  
Look back—they’ve been useful from the start,  
the noble race of poets. There’s Orpheus—  
he taught us rituals and not to kill, 1210  
Musaeus showed us cures for sicknesses  
and oracles as well, and Hesiod  
taught farming, harvest times, and how to plough.  
As for divine Homer, where’s his renown,  
his special fame, if not in what he taught,  
those useful facts about courageous deeds,  
and battle ranks and how men arm themselves.

DIONYSUS

Well, that may be, but Homer didn’t teach  
a thing to Pantacles, that clumsy oaf.  
The other day while marching on parade, 1220  
he clipped his helmet on, and then he tried  
to tie the crest on top.

AESCHYLUS

And brave men, too—  
Homer gave us lots—with them the hero  
Lamachos. I took Homeric warriors [1040]  
and let my brain write many noble deeds  
about great lion-hearted fighting men

<sup>1</sup> *finest act*: a reference to the defeat of the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC, for most Athenians the high point of their city’s history. Aeschylus’ play *Persians* dealt with that event.

like Patroclos and Teucer—in this way  
I urged our citizens to match themselves  
with them, when they heard the trumpet sound.  
But by god I never made a single whore  
like Phaedra or that Sthenoboia.<sup>1</sup>  
No one's ever known me as a man  
who writes about the way a woman loves.

1230

EURIPIDES

No, by god. Whatever you possess,  
there's nothing there of Aphrodite.

AESCHLYUS

Let her stay away! But she took her seat  
when she sat down hard on you and yours.  
She really squashed you flat.

DIONYSUS

She sure did, by god.  
What you wrote about the wives of other men  
you had to suffer with your own.

EURIPIDES

You wretched man,  
How has my Sthenoboia harmed our state?

1240

AESCHYLUS

Because you helped persuade the noble wives  
of well-born men to drink down hemlock,  
ashamed of those like your Bellerophon.

[1050]

EURIPIDES

My Phaedra story—did I make that up?

AESCHYLUS

No—it was there. But it's a poet's task  
to conceal disgrace—not put it on parade

<sup>1</sup>*Phaedra or that Sthenoboia*: an attack on heroines in plays by Euripides.

front and centre and instruct men in it.  
Small children have a teacher helping them,  
for young men there's the poets—so we've got  
a solemn duty to say useful things. 1250

EURIPIDES

When you spout on of Lycabettus  
and subjects like magnificent Parnassus,  
does this involve your teaching useful things?  
We need to use the language people use.

AESCHYLUS

You pestering demon, don't you see  
that noble thoughts and fine ideas perform  
produce a language of commensurate size?  
Besides, it's fitting for the demi-gods  
to speak in loftier terms—just as they wear  
much finer robes than ours. But you besmirched  
what I displayed with such nobility. 1260 [1060]

EURIPIDES

What did I do?

AESCHYLUS

First, you dressed your kings in rags,  
to make them pitiful to all who watched.

EURIPIDES

If I did that, what damage did it do?

AESCHYLUS

It's your fault no rich man any more  
is keen to pay out money for a ship.  
Instead he wraps himself in rags and weeps  
and whines about how poor he is.

DIONYSUS

Yes, by Demeter, that's true. But underneath  
he wears a tunic of pure wool. And then, 1270

if he deceives them with a speech like that,  
he pops up in the market by the fish.<sup>1</sup>

AESCHYLUS

And then you taught them how to babble on  
with stupid gossip—so the wrestling schools [1070]  
stood empty and the buttocks of our young,  
who chattered all the time, were quite worn out.  
You then convinced the Paralos' crew<sup>2</sup>  
to argue with their officers. In my day  
they were ignorant of this—all they knew 1280  
was how to yell for food and cry “Yo ho.”

DIONYSUS

By Apollo, that's right—and how to fart  
straight in the faces of the rowers there, or shit  
on sailors down below, their mess mates.  
On shore they'd rob someone. Now they talk back—  
they never row—just sail out here and there.

AESCHYLUS [*rapidly summing up his opening argument*]

What crimes is he not guilty of?  
Did he not put up on display  
pimps and women giving birth  
in holy shrines and having sex 1290 [1080]  
with their own brothers and then claim  
that living is no life? So now,  
because of him our city here  
is crammed with bureaucratic types  
and stupid democratic apes  
who always cheat our people.  
Nobody carries on the torch—  
no one's trained in that these days.

<sup>1</sup> *by the fish*: a reference to the fact that fish was an expensive food in Athens at the time.

<sup>2</sup> *Paralos' crew*: The Paralos was the flag ship of the Athenian navy.

## DIONYSUS

No, by god, they're not. That's why  
while at the Panathenic games 1300 [1090]  
I laughed myself quite pissless—  
a slow, pallid, porky runner  
went on by—head drooping down—  
far behind the rest. In that race  
he wasn't very good. Well then,  
the folks at Kerameikos gate  
began to whack him in the gut,  
to hit his ribs and sides and butt.  
While their hands were slapping him,  
he let rip a tremendous fart 1310  
which killed the torch. Then on he ran.

## CHORUS

The event is huge, the strife intense—  
the mighty war goes on. It's hard to choose. [1100]  
When one man presses hard, the other one  
wheels round and launches the attack once more.

*[addressing Aeschylus and Euripides]*

You two, don't stay inactive where you sit.  
For wit knows many varied ways to strike.  
And so, no matter what you're fighting for,  
speak out, set to, bring up your works—  
the old and new. Put your daring to the test— 1320  
say something that's intelligent and deft.  
Don't be afraid the people watching here  
are just too ignorant and will not see [1110]  
the subtle points in what you two may say.  
Don't worry on that score, for it's not true.  
They've served in wars—and each man owns a book.  
He understands the witty parts. You see,  
it's in their nature to possess strong minds,  
but now the whetstone's really sharpened them.

So have no fears—examine everything—  
at least for the spectators' benefit  
since they've become so wise. 1330

EURIPIDES

All right, I'll turn to the prologues you composed,  
so I can start off with a test to check [1120]  
the first part of a clever poet's tragedy.  
In setting down just how events occurred  
this man was never clear.

DIONYSUS

Which one will you test?

EURIPIDES

Quite a few.

*[addressing Aeschylus]*

But first, will you recite for me  
an opening from your *Oresteia* plays.

DIONYSUS

Let everyone keep quiet. Aeschylus, speak up. 1340

AESCHYLUS *[quoting from the Libation Bearers]*

“Oh Hermes underground, who oversees  
my father's power, be my rescuer,  
my ally, answering the prayers I make.  
I've come back and returned unto this land.”

DIONYSUS

You see some flaws in this?

EURIPIDES

More than a dozen.

DIONYSUS

But the whole thing's only four lines long! [1130]

EURIPIDES

Every one of them has twenty errors.

DIONYSUS

I warn you, Aeschylus, keep quiet. If not,  
you'll forfeit these four lines and owe some more.

AESCHYLUS

Am I to remain silent just for him?

1350

DIONYSUS

I think that's best.

EURIPIDES

Right at the very start  
he's made a huge mistake—as high as heaven.

AESCHYLUS

You do see you're talking rubbish.

EURIPIDES

If so,  
it doesn't bother me.

AESCHYLUS

You claim I'm wrong—  
Well, where are my mistakes?

EURIPIDES

Recite the start again.

AESCHYLUS

“Oh Hermes underground, who oversees  
my father's power . . .”

EURIPIDES

Orestes says this  
at the tomb of his dead father, does he not?

AESCHYLUS

I won't deny it.

[1140]

EURIPIDES

Since his father died  
a brutal death at the hands of his own wife  
and by a secret trick, how can he claim  
that Hermes watches over anything?

1360

AESCHYLUS

That's not my sense—when he speaks, he means  
Hermes, god of luck, who watches all the dead.  
And his words clearly show that this Hermes  
obtained that office from his father Zeus.

EURIPIDES

So you've made an even bigger blunder  
than I thought—if this subterranean job  
comes from his dad . . .

DIONYSUS

If that's the case,  
he's a grave robber on his father's side.

1370

AESCHYLUS

That's cheap wine you're drinking, Dionysus,  
it lacks bouquet.

[1150]

DIONYSUS

Recite another line for him.

*[to Euripides]*

And you, take care about the damage you inflict.

AESCHYLUS *[quoting again]*

“. . . my father's power, be my rescuer,  
my ally, answering the prayers I make.  
I've come back and returned unto this land.”

EURIPIDES

The skilful Aeschylus has just revealed  
the same thing twice.

DIONYSUS

How so?

EURIPIDES

Look at the verse.

All right, I'll tell you—"I've come back"  
is followed by the word "returned"—coming back  
and returning—they mean the same. 1380

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god—  
exactly like a man who says to someone,  
"Hey, lend me a baking dish or, if you like,  
a dish for baking."

AESCHYLUS

You blithering idiot, [1160]  
it's not the same at all. That line of verse  
has beautifully chosen words.

EURIPIDES

It does?

Then show me what you mean.

AESCHYLUS

To come unto a land  
refers to someone with a native home—  
he's come back—there's nothing else implied.  
But when a man arrives who's been an exile, 1390  
he comes back and returns.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*and returns*: Aeschylus' hair-splitting point is that "come back" and "return" mean different things, because the latter is appropriate for those whose political status is uncertain. Euripides then confuses the issue still more by bringing in the notion of the secrecy of Orestes' return.



EURIPIDES

I'll tell you. And if I say the same thing twice  
or you see extra padding there, some verse  
that doesn't suit the plot, then spit on me.

DIONYSUS

Come on, speak up. I need to clearly hear  
the language in your prologues working well.

1410 [1180]

EURIPIDES [*reciting from one of his plays*]

"Oedipus to start with was a lucky man . . ."

AESCHYLUS

By god, no he wasn't—his nature  
gave him a dreadful fate. Before his birth  
Apollo said he'd murder his own father—  
he wasn't even born! How could he be  
a lucky man right at the very start?

EURIPIDES [*continuing to recite*]

"Then he became most wretched of all men."

AESCHYLUS

No, no, by god. He always was like that.  
And why? Because as soon as he was born,  
he was exposed out in the cold, in a pot,  
so he wouldn't grow into a murderer  
and kill his father. He dragged himself away  
to Polybus on mutilated feet.  
And after that he married an old woman,  
though he was young, and, as things turned out,  
she was his mother. So he poked out his eyes.

1420

[1190]

DIONYSUS

Then he'd have ended happy after all,  
if he'd gone with Erastinides off to war.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Erastinides*: Athenian general condemned to death after the battle of Arginusae.

EURIPIDES

You're being stupid. I make my prologues well.

1430

AESCHYLUS

Is that so? Well, by god, I won't scratch  
each phrase word for word, but with the gods' help  
I'll kill your prologues with a little oil jug.

[1200]

EURIPIDES

My prologues? With an oil jug?

AESCHYLUS

Yes, just one.  
The way you write, well, everything fits in—  
a little sheepskin, a little oil jug,  
a little bag—they all mesh nicely in  
with your iambics. Let me demonstrate.

EURIPIDES

What this? You'll demonstrate?

AESCHYLUS

That's what I'm saying.<sup>1</sup>

DIONYSUS

All right, Euripides, you've got to speak.

1440

EURIPIDES [*reciting some more of his own lines*]

"Aegyptos, so many people say,  
with fifty children in a rowing boat,  
landing in Argos . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

<sup>1</sup>*saying*: in the section which follows Aeschylus repeatedly uses the phrase "lost his little oil jug" to bring out the triviality of Euripides' verse, especially its rhythms and its imagery.

EURIPIDES

What's this stuff about an oil jug?  
You'll regret this.

DIONYSUS

Recite another prologue  
so I can see the point again.

[1210]

EURIPIDES [*continuing to recite*]

"Dionysus clothed in fawn skins leaps  
among the torches on Parnassus,  
on that mount he waved his thysrus—  
there he danced and . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

Oh dear,  
we've been stricken with an oil jug once again.

1450

EURIPIDES

It's doesn't matter. In this next prologue  
he can't tie in his little oil jug.  
"Among all men there's not one living  
who's blessed in everything—if nobly born  
he lacks sufficient livelihood, or else,  
if basely born, . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . he's lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

Euripides . . .

EURIPIDES

What?

DIONYSUS

It seems to me  
you should haul in your sails. This little oil jug—  
it's going to introduce a mighty storm.

[1220]

1460

EURIPIDES

By Demeter, I won't even think of it.  
Here's one will knock that oil jug from his hand.

DIONYSUS

All right, recite another one—take care—  
keep your distance from that oil jug.

EURIPIDES

“Abandoning Sidon city, Cadmus,  
Agenor's son . . .”

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

My dear fellow, buy the oil jug from him,  
so he can't shatter all our prologues.

EURIPIDES

What?  
I should purchase it from him?

DIONYSUS

I think you should.

EURIPIDES

No way. I've got lots of prologues to recite—  
ones where he can't stick in his little oil jug.  
“Pelops, son of Tantalus, arrived at Pisa,  
and riding his swift horses . . .”

1470 [1230]

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

You see—he stuck in that little oil jug  
once again. Look, my good man, pay his price—  
use all your means. You’ll get it for an obol.  
And it’s really nice—a good one.

EURIPIDES

Not yet—

I’ve still got plenty left: “Oeneus once  
from his own land . . .”

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

EURIPIDES

Let me at least recite the whole line first—  
“Oeneus once from his own land received  
a bounteous harvest—then while offering  
first fruits for sacrifice . . .”

1480

[1240]

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

In the middle of the service? Who stole it?

EURIPIDES

Back off, my dear man—let him speak to this:  
“Zeus, as truth reports . . .”

DIONYSUS

You’ll be destroyed—  
For he’ll just say “lost his little oil jug.”  
These oil jugs pop up in your prologues  
the way warts grow on eyes. For god’s sake,  
change the subject. What about his lyrics?

1490

EURIPIDES

All right. I’ll show how bad he is at them.

His songs are awful—they all sound just the same.

[1250]

CHORUS

What's going to happen now?  
I've got an idea how  
he'll criticize and mar  
the one whose lyrics are  
our finest songs so far.  
How will his censure ring  
to a Dionysian king,  
for me a fearful thing?

1500 [1260]

EURIPIDES

His songs are truly quite astonishing.  
I'll give quick proof, for I'll condense them all  
into a single song.

DIONYSUS

All right, you do that.  
I'll gather up some pebbles and keep score.

*[Someone begins the accompaniment on a flute]*

EURIPIDES *[beginning his parody of Aeschylus]*

Phthian Achilles, oh, you hear the crash—  
the loud man-slaughtering BASH, why don't you come,  
come here to help us? As the primordial race,  
we honour Hermes by the lake—BASH.  
Why come you not to our assistance?

DIONYSUS

That's two bashes for you, Aeschylus.

1510

EURIPIDES *[continuing the parody]*

Most glorious of Achaean men, O Atreus,  
who rules far and wide, learn of me—BISH BASH—  
why come you not to our assistance?

[1270]

DIONYSUS

There's a third bash for you, Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES [*continuing the parody*]

Be still! Attendants on the bee priestess  
are nigh to open up Artemis' shrine—BASH.

Why come you not to our assistance?

I have authority to utter out in full,  
to speak those fatal orders ruling us  
and this our expedition—BISH BASH.

1520

Why come you not to our assistance?

DIONYSUS

By ruling Zeus, what a pile of bashes!  
The toilet's where I want to be right now—  
this bashing's swollen both my kidneys.

[1280]

EURIPIDES

Don't go, not before you listen to  
another group of songs, compressed medlies  
of this man's lyric melodies.

DIONYSUS

All right, go on.

But you can leave out all the bash and crash.

EURIPIDES [*continuing his parody of Aeschylus*]

How the Achaeans' twin-throned power, youth of Greece—

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—

1530

sent by the Sphinx, presiding she dog of unlucky days—

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—

swooping bird with spear and with avenging hand—

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—

[1290]

granting eager sky-diving dogs to light upon—

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—

the allied force assembled to assault great Ajax—

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat.

DIONYSUS

What's this phlatto-thrat? Is it from Marathon?  
Where did you pick up your rope-twisting songs? 1540

AESCHYLUS

I brought them to a noble place from somewhere fine,  
lest I be seen to gather up my crop  
from that same sacred meadow of the Muse [1300]  
as Phrynichos. But this fellow over here  
gets his songs anywhere—from prostitutes,  
Meletus' drinking songs, flute tunes from Caria,  
from lamentations or dance melodies,  
as in a moment I will demonstrate.  
Let someone bring a lyre here—and yet  
who needs a lyre for this man? Where is she, 1550  
that girl who beats time with her castanets?  
Come hither, you Muse of this Euripides—  
for your style fits the songs we're going to sing.

*[Enter a very old and ugly woman who accompanies Aeschylus' parody by clicking her castanets and dancing very badly]*

DIONYSUS *[reacting to the old woman's appearance]*

This Muse is hardly the most gorgeous babe  
we've ever seen from Lesbos, that's for sure.

AESCHYLUS *[parodying Euripides]*

You chattering kingfishers in the sea  
in the ever-flowing waves [1310]  
who wet wing-tops with water drops  
like so much dripping dew,  
and spiders underneath the roof, 1560  
your fingers wi-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-inding  
threads for stretching on the loom,  
work of tuneful weaving rods,  
where dolphins, those flute-loving fish,  
leap at the blue-peaked prows,  
at oracles and stadiums.

I joy in early budding vines, [1320]  
the spiral cluster, killing pain.  
Oh my child, hurl your arms about me . . .  
You see this foot?

DIONYSUS

I see it.

AESCHYLUS

And the other one?

DIONYSUS

I see that too.<sup>1</sup> 1570

AESCHYLUS [*to Euripides*]

You write this sort of bilge and then you dare  
to criticize my songs—you, who wrote your tunes  
to twelve-stringed music of Cyrene?<sup>2</sup> Bah!  
So much for his songs. I still want to check  
his solo melodies, their lyric style. [1330]

[*parodying Euripides once more*]

O Night, O darkly shining Night,  
what are you sending me,  
what dreams of woe,  
from Hades' halls—  
what souls without a soul, 1580  
the children of black night,  
so horrible they raise my hair  
in black corpse-clothes—  
murder, murder—  
such huge fingernails.  
Now, servants, light my lamp for me,  
haul river water in your pails

<sup>1</sup>*that too*: Aeschylus is calling attention to the rhythmic feet in Euripides' verse. Dionysus, of course, misunderstands and starts inspecting Aeschylus' feet.

<sup>2</sup>*Cyrene*: a notorious prostitute.

and warm it up, so I  
may rinse away my dream, [1340]  
O spirit of the sea. 1590

That's it—O all you  
who share this house with me,  
gaze here upon these portents.  
My Glyce's fled away—  
she stole my cock and ran.  
You nymphs born on the mountain peaks,  
and you, O Mania, aid me now.  
There I was, poor wretched me,  
at work with all my daily tasks,  
my spindle full of thread, 1600  
my fingers wi-i-i-i-i-i-inding,  
as I wove skeins of yarn  
to carry off to market [1350]  
for sale in early morning.  
But now my bird has flown,  
flown off into the atmosphere,  
its wing-tips oh so nimble.  
It's left me woes, woes,  
and in my eyes tears, tears—  
they trickle, trickle down, 1610  
O miserable me.

O you Cretans, Ida's children,  
seize your bows and rescue me.  
Swiftly move your limbs,  
make full circle round this house.  
And child Diktyнна, Artemis,  
so beautiful, by all means bring  
your baby bitches to my home. [1360]  
And you, O Hecate, Zeus' child,  
with blazing fire-brands in both hands, 1620  
light my way to Glyke's place,  
so I can then reveal her theft

and catch her in the act.

DIONYSUS

Stop the songs.

AESCHYLUS

All right. I've said enough.

Now I want to bring him to the balance scale,  
the very thing to test our poetry—  
to check how much our phrases weigh.

DIONYSUS

Come here, then, if I have to do this—  
treating poets just like cheese for sale.

CHORUS

Clever men like these take pains,  
for here's a marvel once again.  
Devices new and strange they bring.  
Who else would think up such a thing?  
I'd not believe it—even though  
I met someone who told me so.

1630 [1370]

DIONYSUS

Come on. Stand beside the balance scales.

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES [*together*]

All right.

DIONYSUS

Now, each of you grab hold and don't let go  
until I yell at you—I'll say "Cuckoo!"

[1380]

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES [*each one holding a scale pan*]

We're holding on.

DIONYSUS

Speak your line into the scale.

EURIPIDES [*reciting*]

“I wish that Argive ship had never flown . . .”

1640

AESCHYLUS [*reciting*]

“O river Spercheios, where cattle graze . . .”

DIONYSUS

Cuckoo!!! Let go . . .

[*Dionysus inspects the scale pans and sees that Aeschylus' side has sunk more*]

The pan on this man's side  
has gone much further down.

EURIPIDES

And why is that?

DIONYSUS

Why? Because he put a river in it.  
He wet his words the way wool-sellers do—  
whereas you put in a word with wings.

EURIPIDES

All right, let him speak again and match me.

DIONYSUS

Grab hold again.

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES

We're ready.

DIONYSUS

So speak down.

[1390]

EURIPIDES [*reciting*]

“Persuasion has no temple except speech.”

AESCHYLUS [*reciting*]

“The only god who loves no gifts is Death.”

1650

DIONYSUS

Let go. Let go. This one's going down again.  
He put death in—the heaviest of harms.

EURIPIDES

But I put in persuasion—and my line  
was beautifully expressed.

DIONYSUS

Persuasion's light—  
she's got no brains at all. Say something else,  
a heavy line, immense and ponderous,  
to make you sink.

EURIPIDES

A heavy line like that,  
where can I find such lines in all my verse?

DIONYSUS

I'll tell you. "Achilles threw the dice—  
two snake's eyes and a four." You'd better speak—  
the last time the two of you get weighed.

[1400]

1660

EURIPIDES [*reciting*]

"His right hand grasped the heavy iron club . . ."

AESCHYLUS [*reciting*]

"Chariot piled on chariot, corpse on corpse . . ."

DIONYSUS

This time he got you once again.

EURIPIDES

How so?

DIONYSUS

He put in two chariots and two stiffs.  
A hundred Egyptians couldn't shift that load.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*shift that load.* Egyptians had a reputation for great strength.

AESCHYLUS

Compete with me no longer word for word—  
put him in the scale with wife and children,  
throw on Cephisophon. Let him step in,  
sit down—he can bring all his books. For me—  
I'll only speak two verses of my own.

1670

[1410]

DIONYSUS

These men are friends of mine, so I won't judge  
the two of them. I don't want to be at war  
with either man. One of them, I think,  
is really clever. The other I enjoy.

PLUTO

Won't you fail to get the thing you came for?

DIONYSUS

What if I chose the other man?

PLUTO

Take one—  
whichever one you wish, so you don't leave  
and make your trip in vain.

DIONYSUS

May gods bless you.  
Look, how's this—I came here for a poet.

1680

EURIPIDES

What for?

DIONYSUS

So I might save our city  
and let it keep its choruses. Therefore,  
whichever one of you will give our state  
the best advice, well, that's the man I'll take.  
So first, a question for each one of you—

[1420]

What's your view of Alcibiades? <sup>1</sup>  
This issue plagues our city.

EURIPIDES

The people there—  
what do they think of him?

DIONYSUS

What do they think?  
The city yearns for him, but hates him, too,  
yet wants him back. But you two, tell me this— 1690  
what's your sense of him?

EURIPIDES

I hate a citizen  
who helps his native land by seeming slow,  
but then will quickly inflict injuries  
which profit him but give our city nothing.

DIONYSUS

By Poseidon, that's well said. Now, Aeschylus, [1430]  
what's your view on this?

AESCHYLUS

The wisest thing  
is not to rear a lion cub inside the city,  
but if that's what the citizens have done,  
we'd must adjust ourselves to fit its ways.

DIONYSUS

By Zeus the saviour, this decision's hard. 1700  
One spoke with skill, the other was so clear.  
All right, each one of you speak up again.  
Tell me of our state—how can we save her?

<sup>1</sup>*Alcibiades*: a brilliant and charismatic, but erratic and controversial Athenian politician and general in the closing years of the Peloponnesian War.

EURIPIDES

Use Cinesias as Cleocritus' wings—  
then winds would lift them over the flat sea.<sup>1</sup>

DIONYSUS

A really funny sight. But what's the point?

EURIPIDES

In a sea fight, they'd take some vinegar, [1440]  
and dump the bottles in opponents' eyes.  
But I know the answer—let me speak.

DIONYSUS

All right, say on.

EURIPIDES

When those among us 1710  
who have no faith act faithfully, and things  
bereft of trust are trusted . . .

DIONYSUS

What's that?  
I don't get what you're saying. Speak out  
more clearly—more matter with less art.

EURIPIDES

If we removed our trust from politicians  
on whom we now rely, and used the ones  
we don't use now, we could be saved. It's clear  
we're not doing well with what we're doing now.  
If we reversed our course, we might be saved. [1450]

DIONYSUS

Well put, O Palamedes, you clever man.<sup>2</sup> 1720  
Did you come up with this idea yourself,

<sup>1</sup> *flat sea*: Cinesias was very tall and skinny, and Cleocritus was reported to look like an ostrich.

<sup>2</sup> *Palamedes*: a hero in the Trojan war.

or is it from Cephisophon?

EURIPIDES

It's mine alone.  
that bit about those jars of vinegar—  
Cephisophon's idea.

DIONYSUS [*to Aeschylus*]

Now you. What do you say?

AESCHYLUS

About our state—acquaint me first of all  
with those in her employ. Are they good men?

DIONYSUS

Of course they're not. She hates those worst of all.

AESCHYLUS

She loves the ne'er-do-wells?

DIONYSUS

Not really—  
but she's got no choice. She has to use them.

AESCHYLUS

How can one save a city like this one,  
which has no taste for woolen city coats  
or country cloaks of goat skin?

1730

DIONYSUS

By Zeus,  
to get upstairs, you'd best come up with something.

[1460]

AESCHYLUS

Up there I'd talk, but I don't want to here.

DIONYSUS

Don't be that way. Send something good from here.

AESCHYLUS

When they consider their foe's land their own  
and think of their land as the enemy's,  
and when they look upon their ships as riches  
and see their wealth as wretchedness . . .<sup>1</sup>

DIONYSUS

Yes, but jury members wolf down all the cash.

1740

PLUTO

You should decide.

DIONYSUS

I'll make my choice between them.  
I'll choose the one who's pleasing to my soul.

EURIPIDES

Do not forget those gods by whom you swore  
to take me home. You have to choose your friends!

[1470]

DIONYSUS

My tongue made that oath, but I choose Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES

What have you done, you foulest of all men?

DIONYSUS

Me? I've picked Aeschylus to win. Why not?

EURIPIDES

Do you dare to look me in the face  
after you've done the dirtiest of deeds?

DIONYSUS

What's dirty if this audience approves?

1750

<sup>1</sup> *wretchedness*. Aeschylus is here apparently defending the early Athenian policy of putting all their faith in the navy to prosecute the war, leaving the land open for enemy occupation.

EURIPIDES

You're heartless. Will you never think of me  
now that I'm dead?

DIONYSUS

What if living is really dying,  
or breathing dining, or sleep a pillow slip?<sup>1</sup>

PLUTO

Come inside now, Dionysus.

DIONYSUS

What for?

PLUTO

So I can entertain you here, before you go.

DIONYSUS

An excellent idea, by god. I won't say no. [1480]

CHORUS

Blest is the man with keen intelligence—  
we learn this truth in many ways  
Once he's shown his own good sense  
he goes back home again. 1760

He brings our citizens good things  
as well as family and friends,  
with his perceptive mind. [1490]

So to be truly civilized,  
don't sit by Socrates and chat  
or cast the Muses' work aside,  
forgetting the most vital skills  
of writing tragedies.  
Wasting time with pompous words,  
while idly scratching verbal bits— 1770  
that suits a man who's lost his wits

<sup>1</sup>*pillow slip*: Dionysus is here mocking Euripides with echoes of the latter's own verses.

PLUTO

So now, farewell, Aeschylus—go, [1500]  
save our city with your noble thoughts,  
and educate our fools—we have so many.  
Take this sword, hand it to Cleophon.  
Present this rope to tax collector  
Myrmex and his colleague Nicomachos—  
this hemlock give to Archenomos.  
Tell them to come here fast without delay.  
If they don't come soon, then, by Apollo, 1780 [1510]  
I'll brand and cripple them, then ship them down  
at full speed underground with Adeimantos,  
Leucolophos's son.<sup>1</sup>

AESCHYLUS

That I'll do. As for my chair of honour,  
give it to Sophocles to keep safe for me  
in case I ever come back here. He's the one  
whose talent I would put in second place.  
Bear in mind—the rogue right there, this clown, [1520]  
this liar, will never occupy my chair,  
not even by mistake.

PLUTO [*to the Chorus*]

Let your torches shine, 1790  
your sacred torches light the way for him,  
escort him on his way—and praise his fame  
with his own songs and dances.

CHORUS

First, all you spirits underneath the ground,  
let's bid our poet here a fond farewell,  
as he goes upward to the light. To the city  
grant worthy thoughts of every excellence. [1530]  
Then we could put an end to our great pain,  
the harmful clash of arms. Let Cleophon—

<sup>1</sup>*Adeimantos*: a general in Athens, later accused of treachery.

and all those keen to fight—war on their enemy  
in their ancestral fields, on their own property.<sup>1</sup>

1800

<sup>2</sup>*properties*. Cleophon was a leader of the pro-war party. The point here is that many of those advocating war were not putting their own property in danger, unlike many Athenian farmers and landowners whose lands were occupied by the enemy forces.

## A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, educated at McGill, Bristol, and Toronto universities, and taught for many years in the British Columbia college and university-college system. He is now retired and lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

Other translations by Ian Johnston are available on line at <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>.

The following translations are available as printed books from Richer Resources Publications:

Aeschylus, *Oresteia*  
Aristophanes, *Clouds*  
Homer, *Iliad*  
Homer, *Odyssey*  
Euripides, *Bacchae*  
Sophocles, *Antigone*  
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

Complete recordings of the translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are available from Naxos Audiobooks.

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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