

THE IDENTITY OF THE FROGS

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IN MOST of the plays of Aristophanes, the choruses are clearly related to the play as a whole. The birds and the clouds and the wasps are intrinsic parts of their plays, and one need not question why Aristophanes chose choruses of women for the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the *Ecclesiazusae*, and the *Lysistrata*, and choruses of country folk for the peace plays, the *Peace* and the *Acharnians*. Even the central chorus of initiates in the *Frogs* seems a reasonable enough choice for a trip to Hades. However, the case is very different with the other chorus in this play, the chorus of frogs, which participates in only one brief episode and yet lends its name to the play. The frogs have seemed to many people to be irrelevant to the play as a whole. Rogers believes that they are totally unconnected with the general plot.¹ Schmid says that the purpose of the frogs is simply to give rise to one brief and irrelevant comic episode.² Stanford suggests that they seem to have been chosen, at least in part, as a rustic note to appeal to the country people who were forced to live in Athens because of the Peloponnesian War.³ This apparent irrelevance of the frogs has puzzled many scholars, and occasioned a variety of attempts to connect the frogs with the play as a whole. For instance, Leo Strauss sees a symbolic

significance in the frogs.⁴ He suggests that they represent Heracles' list of the archcriminals of Hades, who would, as such, be inclined to appreciate the plays of the charlatan Euripides. Cedric Whitman seems to come closest to seeing the frogs as an integral part of the play when he points out that the grotesque song of the frogs balances the sublime song of the initiates and is therefore bound to the rest of the play by the theme of true and false music.⁵ In this paper I should like to suggest another answer to the question of the identity of the frogs.

I believe that Aristophanes gives us a clue to the identity of the frogs in the opening lines of the play, when he mentions the comic poet Phrynichus (line 13). The name occurs together with the names of two other comic poets, but it stands out because it is the name of one of Aristophanes' own competitors in this particular festival. We know that the play of Phrynichus which competed with the *Frogs* was called the *Μοῦσαι* or the *Muses*.⁶ We infer from this that it featured a chorus of Muses. The opinion of most scholars, based upon a study of the existing fragments of the play, is that the *Muses* included a contest or trial of literary merit, perhaps involving Euripides and Sophocles.⁷ Thus the comic Phrynichus was competing

1. *The "Frogs" of Aristophanes*² (London, 1919), p. 34.

2. *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (Munich, 1940), pp. 212, 334. Schmid suggests that the irrelevance of the frogs was deliberately intended as an ironical comment upon the customary titling of comedies after the chorus in a period when the chorus was declining in importance. However, it seems open to question whether Aristophanes would have seen any significant lessening in the importance of the chorus in 405 B.C.

3. *The "Frogs"* (London, 1963), p. xxxi.

4. *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York, 1966), p. 241.

5. *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 247-49.

6. From the hypothesis of the play.

7. The evidence for the plot of the *Muses* is very slight. Meineke gives the fullest discussion of the evidence in *Fragmenta comicorum Graecorum*, I: *Historia critica comicorum Graecorum* (Berlin, 1839), 157. The evidence for the presence of Sophocles in the play consists in the encomium given Sophocles (Frag. 31); Schmid infers from this fragment that Phrynichus may have given the victor's wreath in the presumed contest to Sophocles. Meineke cites passages in other

against the *Frogs* of Aristophanes; and his play may well have been strikingly similar to the *Frogs*: it had a chorus of *Musai* paralleling the Aristophanic chorus of *mystai*, and it may have included a contest of some literary sort involving Euripides and Sophocles, paralleling the Aristophanic debate between Euripides and Aeschylus.

During the course of the play, Aristophanes uses the name "Phrynichus" three more times, referring to two other well-known men named Phrynichus, the tragedian Phrynichus and the politician Phrynichus. In line 689 he mentions the politician Phrynichus, who was associated with the oligarchic revolution of 411. This was the Phrynichus who had tripped up the very citizens on whose behalf the parabasis of the *Frogs* is being presented. Aristophanes represents the struggle between Phrynichus and these citizens as a wrestling match, and he exonerates the citizens by laying full blame upon the corrupting influence of Phrynichus. In lines 909–10, and again in line 1299, Aristophanes mentions the tragedian Phrynichus, who was a rival of Aeschylus. In this way, Aristophanes associates the name "Phrynichus" with the notion of struggle or competition to form a minor theme which recurs throughout the course of the play. In each case, the relationship was one of competition, and in each case, there was a connection with the present play: Phrynichus the comedian opposed the *Frogs* with the *Muses*; Phrynichus the politician opposed the citizens on whose behalf the parabasis

of the *Frogs* is offered; Phrynichus the tragedian opposed Aeschylus, who was the final choice of Dionysus in the *Frogs*.

In connection with the Phrynichus theme, we might recall one of the favorite comic devices of Aristophanes, the use of significant personal names. This device goes back at least as far as Homer. At times Aristophanes used the names of real persons, such as Lamachus, the general, whose name meant "very warlike." Often he invented names, such as "Pheidippides," "spare the horses," for the horse-loving son in the *Clouds*; "Pseudartabas," "false measure," for the Persian ambassador in the *Acharnians*; and "Bdelycleon" and "Philocleon," "hate-Cleon" and "love-Cleon," for the father and son in the *Wasps*. He also made use of the names of real people in disguised forms. For instance, he used the name "Bursine," "leather strap," for Mursine, the wife of Hippias, mentioned in the *Knights* (448); and "Lysistrata," "loose the army," for Lysimache, "loose the war," the real priestess of Athena Polias;⁸ and, of course, he used "Paphlagon" for Cleon in the *Knights*. If we notice that "Phrynichus" is also a significant name, I think we shall have the answer to the question of the identity of the frogs, and we shall understand why Aristophanes chose to incorporate them into this particular play. As the ancients themselves recognized, *φρυνικός* means "toadlike" and is derived from the word for toad, *φρύνη*. I suggest that the *batrachoi*, or frogs, involve a thinly disguised reference to Phrynichus, Aris-

ancient writers which may refer to the presence of Sophocles in the *Muses*: Diog. Laert. 4, 20; schol. Soph. OC 17; and Ath. 2, 44D. The evidence for the existence of a contest or trial consists in Frag. 32: *ἰδοῦ, δέχου τὴν ψήφον ὁ καθίσκος δέ σοι / ὁ μὲν ἀπολίων οὗτος, ὁ δ' ἀπολλῶς ὁδε*. The possible presence of Euripides is suggested by Meineke and by Rogers (*op. cit.* [above, n. 1], pp. xxxvii–xxxviii), perhaps because of Euripides' recent death, perhaps because of the similarity which seems to exist between the *Muses* and the *Frogs* on the basis of the above evidence. Some authorities postulate a

contest between two poets, perhaps Sophocles and Euripides: Meineke (*loc. cit.*), Körte (*RE*, XX¹ [1941], 920), and Schmid (*op. cit.* [above, n. 2], p. 138); Rogers suggests that perhaps Euripides is being tried for crimes against the art of tragedy. Some degree of similarity between the two plays is admitted by Lesky (*Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*² [Bern and Munich, 1963], p. 483), Schmid, Körte, Meineke, and Rogers.

8. D. M. Lewis, "Notes on Attic Inscriptions," II, *ABSA*, L (1955), 1–36.

tophanes' toadlike competitor. Thus the frogs represent Phrynichus, and their croaking contest with Dionysus represents the actual contest taking place between Phrynichus and Aristophanes with the presentation of this play in the Lenaean Festival of 405. Furthermore, by the victory of Dionysus over the frogs in the croaking contest, Aristophanes is both predicting and suggesting to the judges his own victory over Phrynichus in this festival.

There is evidence that fifth-century Athenians did in fact see the connection between the name "Phrynichus" and the *phrynē* or the toad. We have a fragment of the poet Pratinas, dated early in the fifth century, which compares the new music of that day to the croaking of a *phrynē*.⁹ Here Pratinas clearly is using the word *phrynē* to refer to some contemporary poet. The passage has long been recognized as a reference to the tragedian Phrynichus. Whether or not Aristophanes was deliberately echoing this earlier passage, we at least have evidence here that a toad had already served as the alter ego of a poet named Phrynichus in the service of literary criticism. As for the connection between the *phrynē* and the *batrachos*, the ancients themselves appear to have confounded the two. Both Aetius¹⁰ and Hesychius identify the *phrynē* with the *batrachos*, as does the *Etymologicum magnum*.

Besides the play on words itself, Aristophanes offers his audience other clues to the identification of the frogs with Phrynichus. It is hinted at by the continued repetition of the name "Phrynichus" in connection with contests, as we saw above. Aristophanes also provides a further clue in the fact that, as Rogers noted, the fee for the boat trip to the underworld is not the usual one obol, but two obols.¹¹ Two

obols was the entrance fee for the theater. If the frogs represent Phrynichus, then the contest between Dionysus and the frogs becomes the dramatic contest between Aristophanes and Phrynichus, and the fee of two obols for the boat trip is justified as the price of admission to a dramatic contest.

From a practical point of view, would it have been possible for Aristophanes to have created the frogs as a parody of Phrynichus? Assuming that the frogs came into being after the granting of choruses by the archon (since we cannot assume that Aristophanes would have known the identity of his competitors before this), there are two possibilities. Either Aristophanes presented a completed play to the archon, which he later revised by adding the frogs, or he presented something less than a completed play (a proposed sketch, or merely samples of his work), and worked out the play as a whole after the chorus had been granted. Given what we know about the process of receiving a chorus and producing a play, let us consider the latter possibility first. Unfortunately, our evidence about the production of plays is very slight. The choice of poets was made by the eponymous archon. The poet asked for a chorus, *χορὸν αἰτεῖν*,¹² and the archon granted a chorus, *χορὸν διδόναι*.¹³ We do not know on what basis this was done; however, from a passage in Plato's *Laws* (817D), we might infer that it was at least not unknown for it to be done on the basis of samples of the poet's work. There is no evidence that specific choruses were asked for (that is, a chorus of knights, or a chorus of birds), or that any commitment was made as to the title. Thus our evidence does not preclude the possibility that Aristophanes presented something

9. H. W. Garrod, "Hyporcheme of Pratinas" *CR*, XXXIV (1920), 129–36.

10. Nicander: "Alexipharmaca," ed. J. G. Schneider (1792), p. 274.

11. Rogers, *op. cit.* (above, n. 1), on line 140.

12. *Ar. Eq.* 513.

13. *Arist. Poet.* 5; Cratinus, *Frag.* 15.

less than a completed play to the archon, working out the details (including the frogs) later. The frog chorus and the title would not necessarily have formed any part of the original application for a chorus. On the other hand, if Aristophanes did present a completed play to the archon, would he have been prevented from adding the frogs later? As far as the machinery of production is concerned, there seems to be no difficulty in supposing that he could do so. He could have asked for a chorus (i.e., the initiates) even if the frogs did not yet exist, and we have no evidence that he had to ask for permission to use a specific title. We do know that some additions were made to plays after the choruses were granted,¹⁴ and nothing we know about Old Comedy leads us to infer any strict regulation of an approved text. As far as the play itself is concerned, the frogs could well have been added after the basic play was completed: their song is brief and would have been easy for an existing chorus to learn, and they seem to have been an invisible chorus¹⁵ and hence would have required no costumes or choreography. Therefore, from the evidence which we have, there is no reason to suppose that Aristophanes, from a practical point of view, could not have created the frogs as a specific reference to his Lenaeon competitor, whatever form the play took at the granting of choruses.

An interesting aspect of the suggestion that the frogs are to be identified with Phrynichus is its effect upon our understanding of the play. One of the reasons why the identity of the frogs has been a problem is that, taken simply as frogs, they seemed to have little connection with the rest of the play. Therefore, I would like to point out some ways in which the

frogs, when they are identified with Phrynichus, appear as an integral part of the play.

By their multiple reference to all three Phrynichuses, the frogs link together three aspects of the play: its external setting, the political advice of the parabasis, and Dionysus' choice of Aeschylus in the final literary contest. They also contribute to the theme of literary criticism that appears again and again throughout the course of the play. The hero of the play is Dionysus, the god of the theater. The play opens with criticism of contemporary comic poets. The journey to Hades is made in search of the true poet. The play ends with a literary contest. In a play centering upon literary criticism, as this one does, even a singing contest involving frogs is relevant, as Whitman has noted. However, it becomes even more relevant to this theme when it is seen that Aristophanes is using the song of the frogs as an instrument of literary criticism, to suggest his own impressions of the literary abilities of his competitor.

Finally, one might even suggest that the episode of the frogs provides the play with an over-all structure of a ring-composition type. Whitman remarks upon the symmetry provided by contrasting the sublime song of the initiates with the grotesque song of the frogs. However, when the contest between Dionysus and the frogs is seen as a literary contest, we find that we have an additional, and perhaps more fundamental, symmetry between two literary contests in the play. Early in the play we have the frogs' episode which represents an agon between living comic poets. The play closes with the famous agon between the tragic poets Euripides and Aeschylus in the world of the dead.

14. One purpose of such additions was to allude to recent events. Cf., e.g., *Thesm.* 804, where the reference to Charminus concerns the battle of Syme which took place in December

of 412 or January of 411. The *Thesmophoriazuse* was most likely presented at the Greater Dionysia of 411.

15. Stanford, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), on lines 209 and 227.

Thus the action both arises from, and culminates in, literary criticism and a literary agon: on the one hand, a comic agon in the world of the living, on the other hand, a tragic agon in the upside-down world of the dead.

The very fact that the frogs, seen as Phrynichus, do provide the play with a unifying structure is a final argument in behalf of this identification. The identification of the frogs with Phrynichus, once

recognized by us, is almost self-evident, as it certainly must have been to Aristophanes' fifth-century Athenian audience. It was suggested by Aristophanes in the title and in the play itself, and it is an essential element in the unity of the play. It rescues the frog chorus from the undeserved charge of irrelevance.

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