

Religion, theatre, and the salvation of the city: some thoughts on Aristophanes' *Frogs*

Religión, teatro y la salvación de la ciudad: algunas
reflexiones sobre las *Ranas* de Aristófanes

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I do not intend to write a revolutionary article on *Frogs*. My choice aims to underline some aspects of this comedy by drawing attention to some details that reinforce and enlarge what seem to be the most significant features of this wonderful play. Thus I will enjoy a double opportunity: first of all, to pay homage to a good friend and a great expert on Greek comedy; and, additionally, to recover and summarize some issues studied by me some years ago¹. My contribution will rely on two major aspects: (I) the main religious – mostly Dionysiac – features of this comedy; and (II) its value as a witness of the Aristophanic opinions on poetry in general, and tragedy in particular, pointing to quite a high level of 'literary criticism', on the one hand, and to a strong awareness of the role of the theatre in the Athenian *polis*, on the other. I will emphasize the conflation of these aspects in the *mise en scène* of the comedy, with a clear political purpose. Finally, it is substantial for my arguments to take into account that we must analyse all these elements from the point of view of the *public* attending the performance: I mean, how the combination of all these means was

¹ Suárez de la Torre 1982, 1997, 1998, 2002. Many of the ideas developed in these articles can be found in this paper, though I will not quote them in detail.

perceived by the spectators, and how the complex code of visual, spoken, and ideological ingredients helped to transmit a unified message in the context of a 'carnavalesque' performance.

I. Comedy and religion: *Frogs* and the ritual context

After many years of fertile research on Aristophanes in general and on *Frogs* in particular², it is obvious that this play is the most 'Dionysiac' of all the preserved comedies of this author. Indeed the way this Dionysism is perceived by commentators comprises a wide range of assessments, but I dare to say that every aspect of this comedy 'oozes' Dionysism, in form, content, intention and relationship with the civic context³. Needless to say, Aristophanes did not intend to combine Dionysiac rituals in a coherent and ordered disposition: *Frogs* is not a guide to Athenian Dionysism. However, conversely, it is clear that it is the Aristophanic comedy with the most patent Dionysiac elements. These elements are of a very variegated nature, with a strong local (Athenian) flavour. First of all, the rites, especially the Anthesteria and the Eleusinian mysteries. Yes, this is not a mistake: I mean the mysteries in the local version that could be described as 'Orphic Dionysism'⁴. In a way, the role of the chorus⁵ and other allusions allow us to talk of an 'extended Eleusinian Dionysism' throughout the play⁶. This is not very difficult to accept, but the problem comes when to this Dionysian perspective we add

² At this point I shall limit this list to some important works dealing with *Frogs* that I deem substantial for any approach of this kind: Gelzer 1960, Russo 1961, Segal 1961, Fraenkel 1962, Sicking 1963, Stanford 1963, Woodbury 1976, 1986, Zimmermann 1988, Heiden 1991, Dover 1993, García López 1993, Bowie 1993, Konstan 1995, Lada-Richards 1999, Del Corno 2000, Edmonds III 2003, 2004, Rosen 2010.

³ I want to underline the coincidence with Euripides' choice (*Bakchai*) in a period of crisis. This remark is independent of the question of the possible influence, for which I refer to Riu 1999, pp. 115.

⁴ See Graf 1974, pp. 40-50; Brown 1991, Suárez de la Torre 1997, pp. 207-212; Seaford 2006, pp. 55-58; Bernabé 2008, Sattler 2013. Edmonds 2004, p. 112 remarks that «in contrast to the gold tablets, which make use of the difference between the worlds of the living and the dead to mark the difference between the valuation of the deceased in life within society and her true worth in the ideal, divine realm, Aristophanes comically blurs the dichotomy between the worlds and then recreates it in his own terms». This is right, but it does not invalidate the presence of Orphism in this presentation of Athenian Dionysism.

⁵ Bierl 2001, p. 96, rightly talks of «das Zusammenfallende von Rolle und Funktion».

⁶ Cf. the analysis in Bowie 1993, pp. 228-253.

the issue of *initiation*. Though some formal aspects could point to it, I myself am reluctant to see an initiation of Dionysus here⁷. Even if it is possible to identify in this play the scheme of a rite of passage⁸, this feature should not be forced beyond the mere formal structure: Dionysus is not subjected here to an initiatory rite, nor is it necessary to interpret the *katabasis* in terms of an Eleusinian initiation. The change of opinion – he intended to rescue Euripides, but finally prefers Aeschylus – is not due to a ‘revelation’, but is to be seen in the context of the ideology of the competitive Dionysian festival and as the effect of a dialectic *agon*: the god is persuaded by what he has listened to⁹. However, what can be accepted is that the way the author presents the sequence of actions can call to the mind of the spectators some familiar initiatory rituals. In other words, at a structural level, the action follows some patterns deeply rooted in the minds of the spectators.

The Dionysism of this comedy is not limited to these great Dionysiac rites or festivals¹⁰. Throughout the comedy we find points of contact with other Dionysiac motives, sometimes connected to the ‘visual’ experience of the citizens. See, for instance, the parallelism between the group of Dionysus pulling a donkey on which is mounted Xanthias and the representations of the so-called ‘return of Dionysus’¹¹, which can be linked to the sympotic tradition and to the *komos*, as has been shown by Lada-Richards¹². She also proposes a relationship with other local ritual and social traditions, scattered throughout the comedy, but more patent at certain moments, such as, for example, the connections of these sympotic motives with the *theoxenia*¹³.

⁷ This theory has been defended in many of the works on *Frogs*, reaching a detailed and elaborate version in Lada-Richards 1999. In this question I side with Edmonds III 2004, p. 115, where he observes that this theory ‘presents a distorted picture of the character of Dionysos and his *katabasis* in the *Frogs*. A *katabasis* does not necessarily imply an initiation nor an initiation a *katabasis*».

⁸ Lada-Richards 1999, pp. 45-122.

⁹ See Bremmer 2014, p. 1, n. 3, on the tendency to make an excessively linear description of the ritual of Eleusis, with an explicit critical reference to Lada-Richards 1999, 81-84, where she «completely confuses the two stages of the Eleusinian Mysteries».

¹⁰ See a revision of the various Dionysian motives in Riu 1999, pp. 115-142.

¹¹ Suárez de la Torre 1997, pp. 203-204, Lada-Richards 1999, pp. 132-133.

¹² *loc. cit.* in preceding note.

¹³ See details in Lada-Richards, 1999, chapter 3, «The God of Wine and the *Frogs*», pp. 122-158: «It is the thesis of this chapter that the various legends clus-

Thus it is evident that the particular comic distortion of all the aforementioned Dionysiac rites configures a conceptual and visual code, with a strong connotative power, in order to vehicle the exhortative message of the play, without losing the comic force of this distortion. Moreover, beyond the ritual level, *Frogs* is a comedy full of connotations and evocations that could explain the impact that this play could have had on the Athenian public. For instance, in some way the confrontation of the two tragedians has something of the ideology of the *logos epitáphios*, since the dramatized eulogy of the two poets is linked to the interest of the *polis*¹⁴. Even the underlying ideology unifies a threefold typology of immortalization: heroic, mystic, and that resulting from competition, as has been proposed by Konstan¹⁵.

Altogether, the result is a very effective use of the dramatic (comic) resorts that the author has at his disposal. But they are not the only ones used by the author, as we will verify in the next section.

II. Dionysiac contexts and music: poetry, politics, and literary criticism

The different parts of this play configure a kind of mosaic in which Dionysiac rites are linked to different modes of song or to usual parts of the structure of the comedy, that now become reoriented by a strong Dionysiac shift¹⁶. At the same time, the connection between poetry – including theoretical aspects – and politics, linked within the framework of the Dionysiac world, pervades the whole play, with different degrees of intensity¹⁷. To un-

tering around Dionysus' visits and ultimate reception into Athens not only inform the thematic structure of the *Frogs* but, more importantly, provide one of the very prominent mythical models upon which the comic god's reaggregation into the dramatic *polis* of the play is built» (p. 123). But note that I think that the concept of 'reaggregation' is not necessary.

¹⁴ See *infra*, part II.

¹⁵ Konstan 1995, pp. 61-74.

¹⁶ In the following remarks I will not include references to the issue of the metrical parody, analysed by Zimmermann 1988 (and, for the characteristics of Aristophanes' metrics in general, see also 1984, *passim*). Anyway, this feature must be added to the refined *paratragodia* practised by Aristophanes (on which in general see Rau 1967).

¹⁷ «I have tried to show that in the *Frogs* Aristophanes treats as one issues that we should divide into religious, political and artistic, if no more, and, further,

derline these features, I will now present some remarks on four parts of this comedy: the frogs' song (ll. 209-268), the *parodos*, with the relevant songs of the *mystai* (ll. 312-459), the *parabasis* (ll. 674-737), and the whole second part of the comedy (from l. 738 on), in which the interconnection of poetry, politics and religion becomes really exceptional.

A. THE FROGS' SONG (209-268)

We have alluded above to the importance of this part of the play in connection with the Dionysiac rites and feasts: the first important allusion to a major Dionysiac tradition corresponds to a commemoration of Dionysos' arrival and reception by the city by means of a rite in which the first wine plays an important role. According to a recurrent feature of this play, the link between the action and the city is made through a comic resource, this time the experience frogs have of the way the Athenians behave in a part of the Anthesteria, namely the *Choes*. Aristophanes creates a particular reversal of the real world, by staging a kind of confrontation between the frogs and the god, who finally gets to silence the persistent animals. What I want to point out now is the way the frogs describe their songs and the allusions they make to the actual ritual. The onomatopoetic *ritornello* βρεκεκεκεξζα κάξ κάξ becomes an almost mystic sequence evocative of the ritual ἐν Λίμναις (they are λιμναῖα τέκνα), whereas the description they make of their song is evocative of the experience of the ritual. Thus, the song is first described as a ζύναυλος βοά (embracing voice and music) and an εὔγηρος αἰοιδά, and then an explicit mention is made of the procession to the temple on the day of the Χύτραι (209-220). At the same time, and for the first time in the play, this part includes a kind of assessment of the qualities and effects of the music, this time with the immediate reference to the frogs' song. Thus, its effects on the gods (none less than the Muses, Pan, and Apol-

that as a comic poet he is perpetually shifting the ground of his humour»: Harriott 1969, p. 157. This author provides a good synthesis of the particularities of Aristophanes' literary criticism in *Frogs* on pp. 148-161, but I want to emphasize also the importance of the contributions of Ugolini 1923, Sicking 1963, Walsh 1984, Heiden 1991, and Ford 2002 (very important for the history of ancient literary criticism), of which I fully subscribe this assessment: «By the time of Aristophanes' *Frogs* in 405, the art of criticism had arrived, and the main task left to Aristotle was to redeem the art of poetry after Plato's aberrant moral attacks» (p. 3).

lo) are described with the verbs *στέργω* and *προσεπιτέρπομαι*, and they illustrate their own pleasure (*χαίροντες*) either when singing *μέλη* while diving or when organizing a ‘variegated’ (*αϊόλα*) *χορεία* – a term embracing both dance and song – amid ‘bubble-splutterings’ (*πομοφολιγοπαφλάσματα*). Aristophanes has an exceptional ability to fuse technical terminology and comic vocabulary, parodying the poetic terms. Thus, this effective combination serves (a) to evoke the annual Dionysiac festivity of the Anthesteria, (b) to link the underworld to civic life through Dionysos, and (c) to introduce the item of the quality and effects of the music in a kind of micro-*agon* between the god and the frogs, ending with the victory of the former – or, more exactly, with the imposition of his authority.

B. *THE PARODOS* (312-459)

This is a substantial part that synthesizes the main features of this play. Once again, the life of the *polis*, the ritual tradition, and the poetic and musical elements are combined and strongly intensified, making one more step towards the total fusion of these elements, which will reach the highest point of intensity later in the *parabasis* and in the *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides.

Leaving aside the problems related to the assignment of the lines to one chorus or more or even the possibility of some solo parts¹⁸, this *parodos* presents a perfect fusion of (a) the realm of the underworld – including the local conceptions of it – and the ordinary life of the Athenian citizens, (b) religion and politics, and (c) music and poetry as substantial elements of the preceding aspects – I mean, rites, communication with the gods, and their role both in the education of the citizens and in the attacks against corrupt politicians.

Let us see a few examples. To begin with, the transposition of the chorus of initiates into the underworld is part of the general Aristophanic tactics oriented to blurring the limits between this world and the world beyond¹⁹, already detected in the case of the

¹⁸ For these matters, I refer to the exhaustive commentary by Dover (1993).

¹⁹ «Questa ambivalenza si protrae per tutto l’episodio, in uno dei più suggestivi effetti del metateatro giocati nell’opera di Aristofane: la commedia trascende la finzione scenica per richiamare i suoi origini rituali, e di converso l’occasione festiva della comunità invade la dimensione della scena, s’identifica con l’azione drammatica»: Del Corno 2000, p. 174.

singing frogs. At the same time, the play with Iakchos' identity allows the poet to maintain the ambiguity of the rite in relation to Dionysos, though in fact the whole part points to Dionysos and Demeter as divinities who warrant the salvation of the people. And we find again the central function of the musical and poetic components everywhere. So, in the lyric parts of the initiates' songs, the repetition of terms like χορός, παίζειν, χορεύειν, χορεία, χοροποιός, μέλος, μολπάζω, ᾄδειν, ᾠδαί, as well as the epithets φιλοχορευτής (Iakchos) and καλλιχορώτατος (referring to the members of the chorus), persistently present us with the joyful nature of the procession. Moreover, the correspondence between the real ceremony and the situation in the underworld is underlined by the mention of the invectives and the σκώμματα of the initiates, reproducing the so-called γεφυρισμοί²⁰. But this feature, again, allows the transformation of this *parodos* into a kind of 'sustained *parabasis*', something that becomes more evident in the lines traditionally labelled as a 'pseudo-*parabasis*' (354-371). These anapaests fuse, once again, religion, politics and poetry. The usual initial formula of the mysteries to exclude the non-initiated gives rise to an interesting ambiguity of meaning: the demand of εὐφημία and the formula of exclusion, usual in the mystery cults, become an exigency of identity based on dance, music, skill in the use of the right words, and thought. The secret rites mentioned at the beginning are those of expertise in the right words and poetic initiation, along with purity... of mind²¹, followed by nine other conditions of a poetic and political nature (not to be initiated in Cratinus' 'Bacchic' language or in others' clownish style, to be peaceful, not ambitious, nor susceptible to being bribed or to treason and so on). Note that, after the anapaests, a new lyric strophe resumes and summarizes the activity of the chorus, exhorted to go to the flowery meadows ἐγκρούων κάπισκώπτων καὶ παίζων καὶ γλευάζων (374-376): the ritual invectiveness and the theatrical function of a *parabasis* are thus perfectly blended²².

²⁰ This part has inherited the elements of the ancient iambic tradition.

²¹ ὅστις ἄπειρος τοιῶνδε λόγων ἢ γνώμη μὴ καθαρεύει/ἢ γενναίων ὄργια Μουσῶν μήτ' εἶδεν μήτ' ἐχόρευσεν (355-356).

²² See Edmonds III 2004, pp. 142-143, on the contents of the *prorrhesis*. For the relationship in general between ritual and comedy, see Bowie 2010.

C. *THE PARABASIS* (674-737)

This *parabasis* only has the two pairs *odé-antodé* and *epirrhema-antepirrhema*, because the anapaests are included in the *parodos*, as we have seen. It is a very balanced *parabasis*, the two odes being centred on attacks against individuals (Cleophon and Cleigenes²³ respectively) and the two *epirrhema* dealing with general items concerning the *polis*. At first sight it might seem that the proposed homogeneity of the different parts I am dealing with is lacking in the *parabasis*. Of course, there is no specific allusion to poetic or musical matters, or to rites or religious questions, but only to political issues. That is quite true, but we must also take into consideration the following aspects. First, the connection with poetic activity is not fully absent from this part: in the first lines of the ode the chorus invokes the Muse²⁴ and remembers the pleasant effect of the song: Μοῦσα, χορὸν ἱερὸν ἐπίβηθι καὶ ἔλθ' ἐπὶ τέρψιν ἁοιδᾶς ἐμᾶς (674-675)²⁵. Second, this is not just any insignificant chorus, but one which defines itself as *ἱερός* (675, 686), which gives it a particular authority. The chorus is composed of initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries and, just as in the *parodos* they had included a series of anapaests establishing a profile for those to be admitted among the privileged who attend the mysteries in terms of political 'righteousness', they insist now on similar arguments. This Eleusinian group – who, in some way, has 'seen the truth' – is able to give advice to the citizens in terms of harmony for the city and reasonable behaviour in the delicate historical and political circumstances of Athens²⁶. The main message they send is per-

²³ On the reasons for focusing on these characters (probably related to the prescriptions of purity of the Eleusinian rites) see Bowie 1999, pp. 240-242.

²⁴ This Muse is probably Terpsichore.

²⁵ Of course, this phrase is followed by an adulation of the spectators, based on their *μυρία σοφία*. Note that the Muse is summoned upon to become in turn a 'spectator' of the public (τὸν πολὺν ὀψομένη λαῶν ὄχλον, οὗ σοφία μυρία κάθηται, 676).

²⁶ This work was performed in the Lenaea of 405 BC. After the regime of the 'four hundred' (411), political life was complicated and oscillating, as the vicissitudes of Alkibiades, for instance, allow us to perceive. The victory of the Arginousai (406) – after a tremendous effort to reconstruct the fleet – had left a bitter taste, and the demagogue Cleophon pursued a clearly wrong policy of hostility against Sparta. Aristophanes' attacks against this politician were well justified, as the defeat in the battle of Aegospotamoi against Sparta (a few months after the performance of *Frogs*) made patent. Additionally, the evocation of the Mysteries could have a particular effect on the public because, as Sattler (2013, p. 168) puts it,

fectly in accordance with the arguments of the *parodos* and with those that will reappear in the final *agon*. The first epirrhema is a kind of exhortation to keep the harmony between generations, to show generosity with those who made mistakes and to behave correctly towards the allies, whereas the second one strongly stresses the need to rely on the best citizens and to regenerate the city. Lines 733-734 synthesize well a leitmotif of this comedy that will reappear in the *agon* of the poets: ἀλλὰ καὶ νῦν, ὄνότητοι, μεταβαλόντες τοὺς τρόπους / χρῆσθε τοῖς χρηστοῖσιν αὐθις.

D. *THE CONTEST AS THE CULMINATION OF THE PLAY* (738-1499 + *EXODUS* 1500-1533)

As a whole, this is usually considered the ‘second’ part of the play. This is not wrong, of course, but this division runs the risk of effacing the interrelation of all the aforementioned parts with this long scene of the infernal contest. On the other hand, this ‘second part’ shows a masterful ability – not new in Aristophanes – to adapt form and contents. It is necessary to take into account not only the epirrhematic *agon* as such, but also the preceding dialogues, the preparation of the *agon* and the rest of the confrontation until the *exodus*. Beyond some problematic lines, the internal coherence and the harmony with the preceding parts are quite perfect, involving all the underlined aspects (religion, poetry, politics). Of course, the perspective is now inclined towards the didactic values of the theatre and their orientation towards the salvation of the city and the attainment of peace, civic tranquillity and prosperity. But all this is but the evident culmination of the play, during which the spectator has been subtly brought to this conclusion through a tactics based on a progressive and increasing series of situations in which the main arguments have been dropped.

(a) *Dialogue between the slaves* (738-813)

After the first exchange of jokes between Xanthias and the servant of Pluto on the quotidian experiences of a slave, we are

«they were very much on the mind of the audience»: since 413 the Spartan fortress of Decelea prevented the Athenian to make the annual procession and they were obliged to make a sea journey.

informed that a confrontation is taking place in Hades between Aeschylus and Euripides for Pluto's throne. This is a clear transposition into the underworld of an Athenian debate, as can be seen in the fact that the promised prize, along with the right to sit on Pluto's throne, is public maintenance in the Prytaneion. Indeed this is in line with the abovementioned tendency to blur the limits between this world and the underworld, but I deem more significant that the way the slaves allude to both poets advance some of the main arguments to be used in the *agon* and in Dionysus' final decision. The portrait of the infernal *demos* is parallel to that of Athens. Aeschylus has occupied the throne so far, but Euripides' challenge is supported by nothing less than all sorts of thieves and criminals²⁷, dazzled by Euripides' ἀντιλογίαι, λυγισμοί and στροφαί. The knavish people (πανούργοι) are those who have forced the *agon*, and Aeschylus lacks allies, because honest people are scarce, both on the earth and in the underworld (ὀλίγον τὸ χρηστόν ἐστιν, ὥσπερ ἐνθάδε, 783). A clever way of preparing the development of the confrontation and a new hint at the strong unity of poetry and politics.

(b) *Prelude to the agon (814-829)*

These lines can be qualified as a *proagon*. They provide a condensed demonstration of Aristophanes' high degree of sensitivity as a literary critic. They are composed in a bombastic style with an evident epic tonality, in which traditional epithets are combined with new *ad hoc* coinages. The different styles of the contending poets are concisely defined with epithets and refined phrases that anticipate the details of the subsequent *agon* (see *infra*). Aeschylus is presented as an ἐριβρεμέτας in front of an enemy with a sharp tooth, 'glib of tongue' (ὀξύγαλον...ὀδόντα). Apparently, the more epic definitions describe Aeschylus' style, whereas Euripides is defined by allusion to a too subtle vocabulary: a φιλοτέκτων fighting against a σμιλευματοεργός, a creator of ῥήματα γομποπαγῆ confronted with a στοματοουργός who knows how to καταλεπτολογεῖν. Once again, we find a substantial appraisal in the mouth of the chorus, subtly representing the Aristophanic opinion and his deep knowledge of both styles.

²⁷ Λωποδύται, βαλλαντιοτόμοι, πατραλοῖαι, τοιχωρύχοι: the patraloiai were among the condemned to eternal punishments in Plato's *Phaedo* 114a.

(c) *The first confrontation of the two poets and the epirrhematic agon (830-1118)*

I will emphasize now only the main features of each part related to my central argument.

- *A first quarrel (830-874)*. The first ‘profile’ that each author gives of his adversary prosecutes that advanced by the chorus: Euripides disqualifies Aeschylus, because he is a creator of rude and primitive characters, excessive in his speech and, therefore, «pomp-bundle-worded» (*LSJ* for κομποῦκελορρήμων), whereas Euripides is a «gossip-gleaner», creator of characters wrapped in rags and physically disabled, among other qualities. Dionysus stops this quarrel because of its inadequate tone. Note that Aeschylus affirms that, in contrast with that of Euripides, his poetry has not died with him (ἡ ποίησις οὐχὶ συντέθνηκέ μοι).
- *Offerings and prayers to the Muses (875-884)*. Dionysus prepares incense for the Muses and exhorts the chorus to sing to them. Note that the Muses were mentioned in the frogs’ song. Now, it is an invocation suitable for an ἀγών σοφίας.
- *Prayers to other divinities (885-894)*. The contrast is great: Aeschylus prays to Demeter (he was born in Eleusis) and Euripides to the *Aither*, the ‘hinge of the tongue’, the intelligence, and the nostrils: an effective design of a ‘materialist’ ideology, contrary to the traditional deities.
- *The epirrhematic agon (895-1118)*²⁸. In this part the style and traits of the works of the two authors are subjected to a deep analysis: ‘visual’ effects, characters, themes (cf. the question of ‘equality’ vs. aristocracy 895-1118). I wish to underline the contents of Aeschylus’ defence (1006-1076/7).

²⁸ The division of the *agon* and the contents are: 895-904 *Ode*: the chorus thinks that the combat will be that of a clever (‘urban’, ἀστειός) poet against an impulsive one. 905-6 *Katakeleusmós*. 907-970 *Euripides’ speech*: he condemns the *mise en scène* of the *Niobe* (he accuses Aeschylus of ‘cheating’ the spectator and presenting a false tragedy (πρόσχημα τῆς τραγωδίας) and the use of too solemn words. He defends his more subtle style and his ‘equalitarian’ and popular presentation of characters. 971-991 *Prigios*: The arguments of ‘popularity’ are criticized by Dionysus. 992-1003 *Antode*: exhortation to Aeschylus. 1000-1005 *Antikatakeleusmos*. 1078-1098 *Antiprigios*. 1099-1118 *Sphragis*. For the origins, function and development of this *agon* see Gelzer 1960.

He affirms that his characters are noble and epic, whereas those of Euripides have the features of the most vulgar and contemptible people. This part of Aeschylus' reaction is very important for understanding the final decision. He argues that good poets must be useful for the people and show noble actions and characters endowed with many virtues: the *διδάσκαλοι* teach children, but when they have grown up, then the teacher is the poet.

(d) The final debate (1119-1413)

In the subsequent dialogue Aristophanes continues to demonstrate his profound knowledge of the different characteristics of the two poets, this time by separating the treatment of each component: *Prologues and lexical issues* (1119-1250), and *choral and monodic sections* (1251-1363)²⁹, to which a new stylistic feature is added, through the comic tool of the *weighing of verses* (1364-1413), a part that must be analysed in connection with a well-established tradition of vocabulary of poetic composition based on the terminology of craftsmanship³⁰, and also as an evocation of the mythical motive of the *psychostasia* or «weighing of souls»³¹. But this is more than a personal demonstration of Aristophanes' masterful knowledge of tragedies. It gives us proof of the existence of a quite consolidated poetic criticism and practice in the analysis of dramatic works among cultivated citizens and, simultaneously, it casts a reflection of what could be called a 'spontaneous and intuitive literary criticism' among the people in general. Aristophanes is not explaining before the Athenians the characteristics of either style, but he is relying on current and extended opinions of the people, who were able to catch the deviations of the original texts, as well as the puns.

(e) Conclusion: tragedy and the polis

- *'Political' criteria* (1414-1466). In the last part, when the decision of the trial approaches, the debate takes a turn towards

²⁹ Note that the distribution reveals a clear awareness of the different sections and styles of a tragedy.

³⁰ Cf. the interesting remarks in Porter 2010, pp. 262-275.

³¹ Cf. *Il.* XXII 209 sq. and see Del Corno 2000, p. 238 *ad vv.* 1364a-1413.

the political dimension. At the request of Pluto, Dionysus makes it definitively clear that he is determined to save a poet capable of giving the best advice and stimulus to the citizens (ὀπότερος οὖν ἂν τῇ πόλει παραινέσειν / μέλλῃ τι χρηστόν 1420-21). He then puts two decisive questions to the poets: first, what opinion they have on Alkibiades³², and then how they propose to save the city (περὶ τῆς πολέως ἦντιν' ἔχετον σωτηρίαν 1436). A remarkable feature of this part of the dialogue is that in both cases it reproduces oracular language, as I emphasized some years ago³³. The connotations of this fact are very complex and go beyond the issue of the language employed. First, it is a reflection of the tradition of consulting oracles – to be more exact the Delphic oracle – at moments of crisis, to sanction important decisions of the city, more specifically those dealing with religious matters³⁴. Second, these consultations are made to dead people, recovering the old tradition of the 'oracles of the dead'³⁵. And, finally, this time the comic reversal relies on the fact that the consultant is... a god.

- *Dionysus' decision* (1467-1481). The god finally decides to rescue Aeschylus, according to the wish of his 'soul' (αἰρήσομαι γὰρ ὄνπερ ἢ ψυχὴ θέλει 1468)³⁶. It is contrary to what he expressed at the beginning, but note that his option implies a preference for the poet that he has qualified as σοφός more than once³⁷. Incidentally, the unexpected result of this ἀγών σοφίας does not lack an important precedent, this time the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*³⁸, where the result runs

³² On the – perhaps surprising – mention of Alkibiades in this part, see the clarifying note in Dover 1993, pp. 374-375.

³³ See Suárez de la Torre 1997, pp. 214-216, for details of the alluded oracles. The closest examples belong to the series cited by Herodotus on the Bakchiadae of Corinth (V 92β); the motive of 'pregnancy', with political intention too, reappears in Theognis (I 39-40). On the oracular motive in Greek comedy, cf. Suárez de la Torre 1998.

³⁴ Cf. Suárez de la Torre 2009.

³⁵ On which see Ogden 2001(a) and 2001(b).

³⁶ See Dover 1993, pp. 19-20.

³⁷ Examples 1154, 1413 (but in this line there is a possible ambiguity: cf. Stanford 1971, p. 192, *ad loc.*)

³⁸ The version of this *certamen* that has reached us belongs to the times of Hadrianus, but the tradition was much older: Aristophanes cites two lines in *Pax* 1282-3. Cf. Ford 2002, p. 282. See also Suárez de la Torre 2014, pp. 34-38.

contrary to ‘popular’ opinion, although the reasons for the decision are of a different nature: the king prefers the author of practical and wise advice for human life, instead of the poet of the aristocracy of warriors.

- *Opinion of the chorus* (1482-1499) and *exodus* (1500-1533). The chorus sides with Dionysus and celebrates the victory of Aeschylus as a victory of his σύνησις and εὐφροσύνη. This final part shows a kind of ‘parabolic’ spirit, as the chorus and, even more, Pluto return to personal attacks ὀνομασί. The first choral part has a light Odyssean tone, with the encomium of the return home³⁹, and we find also a new claim in defence of poetry and tragedy, by means of an attack against Socrates, an enemy of the μουσική and the τραγωδική τέχνη (1493-95)⁴⁰. As for the *exodus* as such, it summarizes the hopes placed on Aeschylus as saviour of the city, whereas Euripides is finally defined as πανούργος, ψευδολόγος and βωμολόγος. The city deserves the benefits of good *daimones* and liberation from suffering.

III. Conclusion (with a final coda)

Frogs is a highly elaborate comedy and the most *metatheatrical* of Aristophanes’ known works, but at the same time it is perfect to illustrate the fusion of the elements that make up Greek ‘old’ comedy. The Greek comic plays are strictly linked to historical circumstances, and *Frogs* is no exception; we could even say that those circumstances have contributed to the special combination of the abovementioned elements. Paradoxically, Aristophanes made the same choice as Euripides⁴¹, when he decided to present a play with Dionysus as protagonist to make a plea, from the particular perspective of the comedy, to the conscience of his citizens to ‘save’ the city.

Thus, *Frogs* is a sustained appeal for this salvation by means of the religious traditions and the social function of the theatre. In historical circumstances in which Athenian democracy and, in a way, the basic traits of identity are at risk, Aristophanes adopts the most powerful means offered by the theatre in order to make an appeal to react at such delicate moments. Dionysus and his

³⁹ It becomes a kind of *heureux qui comme Ulysse* by Du Bellay, *avant la lettre*.

⁴⁰ This is an important testimony of the fidelity of the Platonic theories on these matters.

⁴¹ See above, n. 3.

world are at the core of this recovery: he is the god of the evoked and performed rites, the god of tragedy and comedy, and he appears as the main character of the play.

The Dionysism of this comedy reflects the particular Athenian Dionysism, interwoven with Orphism and with the Eleusinian mysteries, not only explicitly but also through less patent appearances; this is why I have spoken of 'extended Eleusinian Dionysism'. And not only that: many Dionysiac religious and mythical motives are scattered throughout the play, as well as other local and institutional religious traditions.

However, the most original aspect of this comedy is the role assigned to poetry, to its critical appreciation by the citizens, and to the consideration of its function in Athenian society. I have emphasized that this perspective pervades the whole play and I have tried to show that it is not limited to the *agon*: this – and the subsequent quarrel – is but the culmination of a tendency that pervades all the parts of the play, to the point of reaching a kind of 'functional' equalization of the different structural sections. This comedy displays a wide range of moments in which this fusion of religion, poetry, and a remarkable literary criticism are intermingled.

The central message of this comedy is that both features – the religious and the poetic – are inseparably joined, because they are the key for the salvation of the city at a critical moment, due to their nature as primary traits of identity and their significance in forming good citizens. Thus, the political perspective is the third side of the triangle, although this metaphor is perhaps not very apt to describe what in fact is a total fusion of the three compounds. It is really a full melting of them, in the same way as the limits between the life of the 'living' city and the life in the underworld are intentionally blurred in this exceptional comedy.

Finally, I will finish this paper with a suggestion, aimed at opening up a line of further reflection on ancient intertextuality. In my opinion, *Frogs* caused a strong impact on Plato, and the effects of this impact can be easily detected in the *Symposium* (more than it seems at first sight). But this is an issue that I leave open for a future paper⁴².

⁴² Cf. Suárez de la Torre 2002, pp. 81-88.

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ABSTRACT

The author emphasizes the fusion of the three main elements of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, that is, religion, poetics and poetry, and politics, through an analysis of their presence in the different parts of this comedy. He suggests that the most original aspect of this comedy is the role assigned to poetry and to the consideration of its function in Athenian society. This role becomes patent in the *agôn* between Aeschylus and Euripides, but in some way it permeates also the whole play. The coalescence of Dionysism with the social and educative function of the theatre becomes essential for the salvation of the city in a period of crisis.

KEYWORDS: Aristophanes, comedy, religion, Dionysism, poetics, literary theory, politics.

RESUMEN

El autor pone de relieve la fusión de los tres componentes esenciales de las *Ranas* de Aristófanes, a saber, la religión, poética y poesía, y política, mediante un análisis de su presencia en las diferentes partes de esta comedia. Propone que el aspecto más original de esta comedia consiste en el papel asignado a la poesía y a la consideración de su función en la sociedad ateniense. Este papel se muestra evidente no sólo en el *agôn* entre Esquilo y Eurípides, sino también en el resto de la obra. La fusión del dionisismo con la función social y educativa del teatro resulta esencial para la salvación de la ciudad en un período de crisis.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aristófanes, comedia, religión, Dionisismo, poética, teoría literaria, política.

