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Dark comedy in *Frogs*

In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the competition between Aeschylus and Euripides in the underworld with Dionysus as a (more or less competent) judge occupies central place in the plot. The outcome of the competition will determine which of the two tragic poets will rise from the dead in order to save the future of tragic productions in Athens and the city of Athens itself. Thus, in many ways *Frogs* is more heavily preoccupied with tragedy than comedy. At the same time, it is probably the only Aristophanic play that explicitly shows awareness of its status as a comedy. The very first lines contain a debate between Dionysos and his slave, Xanthias, about the sort of jokes that a comedian should or should not make: toilet humour, baggage-carrying scenes and slapstick comedy, all these are well-trodden tricks bound to bore and wear out the audience. Of course this is tongue-in-cheek humour as such jokes feature heavily in all of Aristophanes' plays - not least in the *Frogs*' opening scene. But the sophisticated spectator, Aristophanes seems to suggest, is weary of such low gimmicks, and takes pleasure in novel, bold forms of humour. Even though we are instructed about what we should *not* find funny, if we are to live up to Aristophanic expectations, the question remains open: what is it then that *should* make us laugh? And what makes the humour of this play distinctive, if we are to believe Aristophanes' signpost?

What is unique about the *Frogs* is that it is the first extant dark comedy in antiquity - with the caveat that we have indeed a very limited knowledge of 5th century Athenian comedy. The story pattern of a descent in Hades and the resurrection of great men of the past was not unknown in comedy: Pyronides in Eupolis' *Demes* brings up from the dead four great Athenian leaders, and Aristophanes' *Gerytades* features three poets travelling to the underworld, although the fragments do not allow us to determine the goal of the mission or, indeed, any other plot details. These plays utilize the mythological theme of the *katabasis*, the descent to the world of the dead, led by an extraordinary character while alive who has a determined purpose and is keen on returning. In the mythical stories the hero's motivation is to bring up an inhabitant of the underworld (Heracles-Cerberus, Orpheus-Eurydice, Heracles-Theseus) or, more abstractly, to gain knowledge or information (Odysseus). The comic heroes follow the example of their mythical precedents by undertaking the task of bringing back dead politicians or poets in order to restore 'good old days'. In Pherecrates' comic play *Krapataloi*, of which only fragments survive, the ghost of Aeschylus may have featured as a character - and that is the extent of the interaction between the living and the dead in a comic environ. *Frogs* is exceptional in this sense. It is the only surviving comic play that has its scene set in Hades, and it is the only comic play that exhibits the full repertoire of the katabatic saga: the journey to the land of the dead, the description of the Underworld, the encounter and conversation with the dead. In fact, the humour of the whole play relies on the premise that all the non-divine characters (with the exception of Xanthias) are dead.

It is all good fun of course: both Dionysus and Xanthias are threatened with or actually suffer physical violence first at the hands of the inn-keeper and then the doorman of Hades; the dramatic competition is adequately silly and, quite often, obscene; and all ends well, with Dionysus' decision, in a sophistic twist reminiscent of Euripides' tricks, to bring Aeschylus to the world of the living - a promise for a glorious Athenian renewal in poetic and civic terms. But we are not allowed to forget that all this is taking place in the world of the dead, as references to death and the dead constantly seep into the action, albeit jokingly: Aeschylus complains about the unfair advantage that Euripides will have over him, since his poetry died with him (868, συντέθηκεν) and he will have it with him to recite; the citizens of Athens are 'the dead in the

upper-world' (424, ἐν τοῖς ἄνω νεκροῖς). References to death, the underworld and corpses crop up regularly in the various stages of the competition, such as the critique of the prologues and the weighing scales: the lines recited from the beginning of the *Oresteia* are those of Orestes praying at the tomb of his father and calling upon his ghost; Aeschylus' lines weigh heavier as he puts on the scales Death, 'who desires no gifts', and 'dead corpses upon corpses'. It is twice stated that the punishment for a poet who does not uphold traditional values or does not give good counsel to his fellow citizens should be death. In two places satire of politicians and poets is mixed with morbidity. In the first instance, the chorus, in the usual crude Aristophanic manner, mocks Cleisthenes for his supposed passive homosexuality: his arsehole, bereft of his lover, laments the loss in the cemetery (422-6). Another lament is found in Aeschylus' lampoon of Euripides' arias: he delivers a ridiculously hyper-tragic mournful song for the loss of a cockerel (the double-entendre is again obvious here), preceded by a frightful prophetic dream (1333-7):

coming forth from obscure Hades
having a life with no life,
child of black Night,
a terrible sight, that makes one shudder,
in black corpse-clothing
murder murder in its eyes,
and big claws.

In no other contemporary play do we have such a blend of the comic with the morbid. Most importantly, in no other Aristophanic play is the political so strongly combined with the theatrical. The *parabasis*, the part of the play where the chorus breaks the fourth wall and speaks to the audience directly, is the most political in the surviving works of Aristophanes, giving explicit advice instead of just criticising the current status-quo: the chorus suggests that they should restore citizen rights to those currently deprived of them after the collapse of the oligarchic regime of the Four Hundred, which temporarily disrupted democracy in Athens in 411; and that they should favour well-born leaders over the current demagogues. As already observed, in other comic plays that feature a *katabasis* the quest is either for a good poet or a politician. Aristophanes merges the two strands in Dionysus' katabatic mission: the restoration of good tragic poetry is strongly linked to the salvation of the city. As Dionysus gets ready to escort Aeschylus to the world of the living, to save the city with his good counsels (1500-3), Pluto is contemplating the imminent death of Cleophon and a number of other politicians, handing useful equipment for their journey to the underworld (probably a sword, a rope, a pestle and mortar). We have come full circle: the image is reminiscent of the beginning of the play, where Heracles offered advice to Dionysus for a quick entrance to the underworld, such as hanging or drinking the hemlock. Hopefully, the vile politicians will be more receptive to the idea of a quick death (indeed, the partisans of oligarchy would soon arrange Cleophon's trial and execution). Thus, the renewal of poetry through the restoration of Aeschylus brings about the death of the old political forces and the revitalization of the city.

Aristophanes' choice then for such a bleak setting for his comedy is not accidental. Dark humour is often used to both conceal and signify feelings of endangerment. Through the protective guise of a joke, in this case the underworld setting, hidden fears can be voiced: about the state of politics, the quality of dramatic production, no-good leaders, and apathetic citizens. In the light of the equation between the poetic and the political realm, it is not just tragic poetry that is dying out, but also the city itself. It can only be brought back to life through a symbolic death, a journey

into the underworld. But before we rush to rejoice in the joyous ending, we, the sophisticated audience, should remember that the situation is so gloomy that it can only admit of a macabre solution. The laugh of the δεξιοί θεαταί, the clever spectators, is a bitter, hollow one. That Aeschylus leaves open the possibility of his return to Hades (517-8), a remark that has hardly received attention, further stresses the unsustainability of the resolution. As the play ends, we may wonder: did the cheerful crowd even made it out of the underworld up to the 'living dead'?