Aristophanes' *Frogs* as Social and Literary Satire

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Abstract

Satire is a mode of writing to reform human weaknesses through laughter and the satirist is the man who is sensitive to the gap between what might be and what it is. In line with these, Aristophanes, as a satirist of the classical times, satirizes both the social conditions and the dominant literary traditions of his time in his ***Frogs.*** *He criticizes the changing social class structure through his representation of master/slave dichotomy and through a literary competition between Euripides and Aeschylus, he compares and contrasts the old and new literary traditions. Thus, this paper will discuss the use of social and literary satire by Aristophanes in* ***Frogs.***

Key Words: Aristophanes, ***Frogs***, social satire, literary satire

1. Introduction

Aristophanes, the representative of Old Comedy, wrote the last of his surviving plays, ***Frogs*** during the period of the Peloponnesian War (De Ramilly, 1985, 88). ***Frogs*** received the first prize and it was given the right to be performed twice without any revisions by the author, which was an honorary incident for Aristophanes (Solomos, 1974, 210-11). In fact, Aristophanes had begun to write the play after Euripides' death but he revised it after the death of Sophocles, who was the last poet of the older generation. He aimed at presenting his own ideas about the poetic values (Konstan, 1995, 61). He must have felt the need to discuss the new literary tradition of his time because the three great poets of the Athenian theatre, that is Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles all died and this meant, in a way, that "the Athenian theatre, practically speaking became a wasteland" (Russo, 1994, 199), which is reflected in the play as the reason of Dionysos' discontent with Athenian tragedy (Pütz, 2007, 66). All these can be accepted as the reasons for Aristophanes to stage "an underworld agon between Aeschylus and Euripides, the old tragedy and the new" (Reckford, 1987, 403), which turns into a satire in the end.

2. Argument

The aim of this paper is to present the employment of satire by Aristophanes in *Frogs* which contains a lot of discussion about the old and new tragedy as the satire of the contemporary literary traditions along with the social satire that constitutes the grounds to build up the literary satire.

3. Analysis

The play opens with the discussion between Dionysos and his slave Xanthias on the way to Heracles' house. The relationship between the Dionysos the master and Xanthias the slave is problematized in that Dionysos is constantly criticized by Xanthias although he is the master. Aristophanes begins questioning the relationship between the master and slave even at the very beginning of the play and the criticism of the social class structure that would be developed later in the play begins. Moreover, there is another problem about the identity of Dionysos. He arrives at the house of Heracles as almost disguised as Heracles bearing his emblems such as a lion skin and a club, which entertains Heracles very much because "he is confronting a parody of himself" (Dane, 1988, 53). When the dialogue between Dionysos and Heracles begins, Aristophanes directly states the reason of Dionysos' visit. He wants to see Euripides, "[s]uch is the longing that devours my soul" (***Frogs*** 426[1]). The criticism of the contemporary poets is directly put forward. After defining Euripides as the "clever rogue," Aristophanes criticizes the poets of new generation through the mouth of Dionysos:

> DIONYSOS: Mere nubbins, with a silly gift of gab;
> Shrill swallow choirs, murderers of Art!
> One single play produced, and they are spent –
> Small piss-ants, fouling the bed of Tragedy!
> What potent poet can you find today,
> To father one full-bodied, ringing phrase? (***Frogs*** 427)

[1] All references are to Aristophanes, "Frogs," *The Complete Play*, ed. and trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Bantam Classics, 2006): 422-78. References are given as page numbers.

He has so much discontent that no sooner he learns about the easiest way to Hades, Dionysos and Xanthias go on their way immediately. Meanwhile, they have to cross the river with the assistance of Charon, but "Charon does not allow Xanthias on his boat, since he is a slave according to Athenian law, for he did not participate in the naval battle, as he truthfully admits" and thus he "is compelled to walk around the lake while carrying the luggage; it looks as if the difference between free men and slaves will be as important in Hades as it is on earth" (Strauss, 1980, 239). This is another example of social satire in that it criticizes the strictly class structured society. Aristophanes, living in the class structured society of Athens, cannot stay away form the consciousness of the necessity of some kind of social reformation to end up the class difference and reshape the social structure. The issue of class is regarded to be so much natural that the reflection of it in underworld as reflected in the play is presented as a parodic extension of this idea.

It was during this passage that Aristophanes presents the first of the two choruses. Actually, "***Frogs*** is the only play that has two choruses, not confronting each other […] but succeeding each other. The play is not called after the main chorus but after the chorus of frogs, which is never heard of again after its brief contest with Dionysos. The duality of choruses corresponds to the duality of the terrors of Hades and the bliss in Hades" (Strauss, 1980, 241). There is again a conflict between the Chorus and Dionysos because of "the failure of the chorus to recognize the hero" (Strauss, 1980, 240), that is, the identity problem of Dionysos goes on.

Moreover, "***Frogs***' chorus is […] a satire on contemporary poetasters whose poems contained an overflow of croaking or whose dramatic productions did not leave any other acoustic memory than a monotonous and ill-sounding *brekekekex*" [***Frogs*** 432] (Solomos, 1974, 215). The many times repeated but meaningless line of "Brekekekex ko-ax ko-ax" (***Frogs*** 432) creates both the comic and ironic effect. It is ironic in that the traditional Chorus that is generally considered to comment on the action of the play wisely now speaks unwisely. This can be taken as a reflection of the new literary tradition, represented by the Chorus of ***Frogs***, which will be criticized much by Aristophanes later on in the play.
Turning back to the Dionysos, the 'quest' of Dionysos is itself satirical and parodic. In Reckford's words,

> Dionysus' descent to the underworld offers diverse possibilities of parody and satire, which Old Comedy must often have exploited. First, the comic hero undergoing the adventure can be contrasted with his serious predecessors. The fat, lazy, and very cowardly Dionysus of the ***Frogs*** is set against the steadfast Heracles, who for his last labor fetched Cerberus out of Hades […]. Second, the hero's visit to Hades can become a vehicle for topical satire and comment, if prominent figures in the underworld are shown to behave like known, everyday Athenians. There is something of this in the ***Frogs***, where Cleon and Hyperbolus are mentioned as patrons of the offended tradeswomen, but much less than we might expect. And third, Hades can provide a satiric foil, or corrective, to the present-day vices and follies of Athens. (1987, 408)

It is clear that Aristophanes parodies the epic convention as well. His 'hero' Dionysos is a so-called hero of a heroic action and he is to discover himself at the end of his quest and this quest will also serve for the well-being of the society. However, although the epic elements are used, they are just abused by the writer to satirize the contemporary literary conventions.

Moreover, there is the use of paradox to increase the ironic and satirical effect. Ironically enough, although Dionysos seems at first concerned with the idea of comedy, his real concern turns out to be tragedy. Before choosing the best poet as represented in the agon part later, Dionysos has to rediscover himself, his values and interests and "[i]t may be that for Aristophanes the identity crisis of the old comedy itself had to be resolved in mythic, poetic, and dramatic terms before that of tragedy – and of Athens – could be faced. Dionysus must learn to laugh and play again before he can judge" (Reckford, 1987, 408).

When Dionysos and Xanthias reach the gates of Hades at last, Aristophanes again employs satire by means of thematization and problematization of disguise (Dane, 1988, 51). He presents the god of theatre, Dionysos, who wants to disguise and wants his slave to act as if he is the master, Dionysos. However, the irony is that Dionysos is himself not Dionysos but Heracles because of his lion skin and club. Out of fear, Dionysos thinks that Aeacus would want to take revenge from Heracles (in fact now Dionysos) and offers Xanthias "since you are a dauntless saoul, / With such a hero complex, *you be me*/Put the lion skin on and take the club, / And I will tote the baggage for a change" (***Frogs*** 442). Thus, when Aeacus turns back, he is to think that the man he sees is Heracles who is in fact Xanthias disguised as Dionysos who has been disguised as Heracles. This chain of disguises creates not only the comic effect but also constitutes social satire, because it creates "the confusion of status categories in Athens at the time of the production of ***Frogs***, when there were, as Aristophanes presents it, citizens who had been disenfranchised and slaves elevated to the rank of citizen" (Konstan, 1995, 70).

Consequently, "[d]isguise and parody equate god and slave" (Dane, 1988, 55) in the play and "[h]aving enjoyed the slapstick of this scene which is the climax of the first half of ***Frogs*** and having appreciated the contrast between coward and brave man, master and slave, god and mortal, self-image and reality which makes us laugh" (Harriott, 1986, 109-10), the play blurs the distinction between the respectable and the unrespectable. If it is remembered that the slaves that fought for their Athens were given the right to be free citizens with equal rights, this blurring of the distinction between the social classes can be accepted as a reference to the social problems created by the politics of the time.

Meanwhile, literary satire comes to the foreground in the play. It is decided by Pluto that Dionysos is to choose who is better, Aeschylus or Euripides. This contest constitutes the agon part of the play and shows also the originality of Aristophanes in that "[t]he comic *agon* is not in the beginning of the play, as heretofore customary, but at the end" (Solomos, 1974, 211). It was decided that there should be a single combat "an attempt to decide an issue without full-scale battle. The warlike language of the choral odes with which the contest is prefaced and interspersed turns the setting into a field of battle and in some cases specifically indicates that a duel is envisaged [...]. not only, of course, is the language warlike; it is frequently reminiscent of Homeric epic" (Harriott, 1986, 113). It may also be claimed that these parts are almost mock-heroic. It is clear that "[t]he literary contest is satirical, often approaching parody, but never arbitrary" (Solomos, 1974, 219). As a comedy of ideas (Reckford, 1987, 429), ***Frogs*** immediately takes attention to the literary criticism. Euripides starts the combat and begins to attack Aeschylus and to show off. It is possible that "Aristophanes may have disliked much of Euripides but he has no doubt about his merits and rightly regards him as the only tragedian except Sophocles who is worth the trouble of comparing with the great Aeschylus" (Sinclair, 1973, 307), yet it is also asserted in-between the lines he utters during the contest about his talent as a great poet that "Euripides' distinctive quality is neither his dramaturgy nor his lack of scruple but his capacity to produce original and striking sayings" (Harriott, 1986, 107). Thus, he is the representative of novelty unlike traditional Aeschylus. However, ironically enough again, not only Aeschylus' words about Euripides but also Euripides' own style in contest are placed within the play as a "real attack on Euripides" (Sinclair, 1973, 307). Moreover, Aeschylus indicates that Euripides

> […] by portraying to them a race that was morally lower, has also lowered and impaired their souls […]; the rich are no longer willing to sacrifice their wealth for their country […]; now the young think of nothing but learning the art of talking – they have abandoned the palaestra for the debauch; and even the sailors, who formerly were ragged and subject to discipline, have become subtle talkers who know how to refute their captains […]. So the city is overrun with hireling scribes and buffoons, who fool the people with their apish tricks […]. (Croiset, 1973, 152)

4. Findings

It is clear that Aristophanes satirizes not only the literary tradition but also the attitudes of common people in their duties for their countries and "[a]ll these attacks testify to the novelty and (in the eyes of some) the incipient decadence of Euripides, with his Sophistic leanings; but the attacks themselves, the allusions, and the parodies are also a measure of his renown" (De Romilly, 1985, 87-88). He is totally a foil character to Aeschylus as he "preaches, like Socrates, that there are no gods. He […] believes in abstract ideas: to Ether, to the Language, and to the Brain. He made men skeptical and they began to avoid temples and sacrifices" but he still "boasts that he taught the Athenians to think, to observe, to understand, to doubt, to suspect evil, to have perception of all things: in two words, that he made Logic and Intellect the cornerstones of tragic art" (Solomos, 1974, 223). However, he could not revive the patriotic feelings in the society. Although Aeschylus criticizes "Euripidean metre, vulgarity, or monotony of syntax and / or caesurae" (Penella, 1973, 337), Dionysos still approves of him in that he "is a clever man but the need to show off his wisdom too often becomes a purpose in itself" (Solomos, 1974, 222). It is clear that the distinction between the two poets is clearly established: "Euripides is the poet of reason and, if you will, of sophistry. Aeschylus is the poet of religion" (Sheppard and Verrall, 1910, 250).

When it comes to Aeschylus, he "rests his claim on the warlike and patriotic character of his plays, while admitting as a matter of course that noble poets may also teach mystic rites, abstention form bloodshed, the healing of diseases, oracles, the working of the fields, and the seed times; still, the divine Homer stands out for having taught orders of battle, deeds of bravery, and the arming of men" (Strauss, 1980, 252). Actually, he does not see the point to 'fight' a linguistic battle with Euripides because "[…] my dramas did not die with me…/ His did, and are available for use (***Frogs*** 455-56). The idea is that although Aeschylus died, he is still alive with his works unlike Euripides whose plays are not that much popular. Unlike Euripides, Aeschylus "taught the Greeks to be brave and bellicose, disciplined, always striving for victory, always having Marathon as their ideal. He believes that a poet most conceal evil and never demonstrate it.

If teachers are the guides of boys, poets are those of young men; they should, therefore, say only honest things" (Solomos, 1974, 222). Moreover, his use of language is "capable of reimposing form on the disordered state of Athenian political life, as Aristophanes depicts it. The power of the word to enchant is required to deliver the city from its limibal anonymity" and this bears the hope that he "offers a route back to traditional structures and enables the "reaggregation" that marks the third stage of the ritual process according to the scheme of Van Gennep" (Konstan, 1995, 72-73). He is the symbol of the lost values and promises restoration of those values to the society if he returns to life. Moreover, as Dane indicates

> Aristophanes' treatment of Aeschylus and Euripides in *The **Frogs*** is not simply a critical comparison of two playwrights. When Aristophanes compares Aeschylus and Euripides, he is comparing two entirely different things: (1) an author of texts, whose plays had already begun to assume the status of museum pieces and (2) a contemporary playwright (recently dead), whose productions were familiar to the Athenian audience. This distinction is equivalent to a distinction between texts and performances. Aeschylus' poetry did not die with him […] because it lived on the text. So firmly does Aristophanes associate Euripides with theatrical performance and machinery that it is easy to assume that his "poetry" (which represents these performances) ends with his death. Aeschylus' victory is a victory of the text over the performance. (1998, 51)

It is clear that the written tradition is favoured over the mere performance as it provides immortality to the author. All these critical parts lead Aristophanes to be defined as "one of the first literary critics" because in this second part of the play "drama ceases to be defined by the *bomolokhos* Dionysos and his slave Xanthias and becomes defined by two verbal artists, Euripides and Aeschylus" (Dane, 1998, 49). Turning back to the parody issue, it is clear that ***Frogs*** "is, in a sense, a parodic myth of origins concerning the creation of criticism; criticism is possible through a reduction of artistic works to artistic texts. The transformation of a play into a text enables the comic playwright to gain a critical distance from his now objectified and fixed targets, even if that critical distance does not and cannot lead to a definitive critical judgement" (Dane, 1998, 58). Thus, it may be better to call these critical parts "qua literary criticism, pure fun" (Sheppard and Verrall, 1910, 249). Moreover, the final choice of Dionysos between Aeschylus and Euripides is also important in that it again refers to the social problems and satirizes the citizens of the time.

Furthermore, Aristophanes takes attention to the role of the poets in the society as well, which reminds the reader of Plato's *Republic*. Poets are regarded to be the teachers of the society "though the use of the term *didasko* for staging a dramatic production may originally have referred to the poet's role in instructing the chorus and actors […]. It is clear that for Aristophanes it also connotes the kind of moral education that playwrights ought to provide for the citizen audience, intended to make them noble and courageous" and the idea is that "the poet's path to immortality is based on civic responsibility and political service to his fellow citizens" (Konstan, 1995, 63). Although Dionysos can not select between them at first as "neither of the two poets is simply refuted by the other," yet he implies the ideas that "[t]he position of each has its strong and its weak sides. Aeschylus does not give their due to Aphrodite and to compassion; Euripides does not give their due to the city or warlike patriotism and to the need for concealing the unwholesome truth," which implies that "[p]erhaps in Aristophanes' view there are two kinds of heterogeneous needs that must be satisfied by tragedy but that can not be satisfied except by two different kinds of tragedy" (Strauss, 1980, 254). He, in fact, satirizes both sides and wants a middle way for an ideal writer. However, despite the lacking aspect of the two poets, the idea of patriotism is to determine the winner because of the important social responsibilities of the poets. At this point, Dionysos [Aristophanes] makes use of the Alcibiades question. Actually,

> [t]he ***Frogs***, produced several months before Aegospotami, conveys a feeling of crisis unusual even for Aristophanes. It refers to the shortages of money, ships, and manpower, to internal dissension and bad politics, and above all, to a sinking of morale. The "Alcibiades question" is introduced towards the play's end, amid much uncertainty. And Aristophanes seems especially to remember those corpses tossed in the sea near [405] Arginusae. Mention of the "battle of meats," at which Xanthias was not present, may refer to them. […] Perhaps the naval victory itself was a good dream from which Athens had to wake up. In any event the corpses were unforgettable, and the politicians too, who could snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. (Reckford, 1987, 406)

Alcibiades, who was brilliant but not trustworthy, at first, contributed much to the well-being of the society in terms of economics and politics before he began to constitute a threat to the nation (Reckford, 1987, 405), but later he betrayed his country and so after he returned from exile, at first "he is uncertain about his reception at the hands of his countrymen, whom he had betrayed eight years ago. The Athenians, however, rush to the harbor to hail him, kiss him, and crown him with olive leaves. They justify his former behaviour by saying, as Xenophon reports, that he was "forced to serve his hateful enemies, risking his life daily" (Solomos, 1974,

208). At this point, it becomes clearer why Dionysos selects the Alcibiades question as the determining question. While it is true that "Aristophanes had never liked Alcibiades," as "[h]e had blamed him for his youthful exhibitionism, his impostures, his dreams of glory, his arrivistic tendencies, and his treachery" (Solomos, 1974, 208), he still makes Dionysos choice Aeschylus who says about the Alcibiades question that "[b]est it is never to rear a lion in the city; / but if reared / It has been, 'tis best to yield to its ways" (***Frogs*** 475). Thus, he presents the patriotic aspect of him, which is the most important thing to restore the lost unity and peace in Athens. Euripides loses because his attitude is just hatred for Alcibiades. He says "I hate a citizen slow to help his country, swift to / harm it / Ingenious for himself, for the state feckless" (***Frogs*** 475). He speaks with personal feelings unlike Aeschylus putting his social responsibilities before his personal feelings. Thus, Dionysos' choice of the best poet comes as a result of the answer given in favor of Alcibiades for the good of the society and thus Aristophanes again reminds the poets their social roles. Of course, Dionysos comes Hades to find a poet "who can give the city good advice, i.e., who can bring about the salvation of the city and thus secure the external conditions for Athens' theatrical excellence" which "means that Dionysos will pronounce his judgement not on poetic but on political grounds" (Strauss, 1980, 258).

> In this respect, the figure of Aeschylus is doubly determined as an emblem of the functioning Athenian democracy and as a representative of a traditional aristocratic style of politics. This ambivalent characterization corresponds to Aristophanes' own hesitancy over the extension of Athenian citizenship. At one moment, Aristophanes represents himself as prepared to welcome loyal slaves into the citizen body, and even, in an exuberant gesture of inclusiveness, to extend Athenian civic rights to all mankind. But he is equally comfortable in endorsing a natural title to civic status on behalf of the traditional nobility and in impugning popular leaders as servile foreigners. The overdetermination of the character of Aeschylus is analogous in function to the complex representation of the chorus in *Wasps* and of Lysistrata and her partisans; it permits Aristophanes to exalt Athens for its generous openness to outsiders, while simultaneously restricting the ideal citizen body to a privileged segment of society. (Konstan, 1995, 73)

The idea that there was a hope of "renewal of spirit and perspective is the true center of the ***Frogs***, from which all else follows: the confrontation of changing values in the agon, and the choosing of Aeschylus, not by the mind's critical discrimination, but by deeper perceptiveness of a reawakened hearth" (Reckford, 1987, 403). Euripides was rejected because of the fact that "[t]he shrewd mastery of language imparted by Euripides, as by the sophists and the teachers of oratory, is the key both to successful tragedy-writing and to grasp of both private and public affairs that every Athenian naturally wants" (Reckford, 1987, 425) and it was found in Aeschylus. This is the reason why "we behold the god of the theatre, who had gone to the underworld in quest of Euripides, return to earth with Aeschylus: not because he finds him a superior poet but because Athens needs his patriotic sentiments" (Solomos, 1974, 220). This can be taken as a reason for why ***Frogs*** was given the first prize. However, "his [Aristophanes'] victory was not exclusively a comic poet's victory, but also a triumph, delayed perhaps but definite, of an Athenian patriot. The comedy was presented for a second time, and Aristophanes was crowned with the sacred olive of Athena as a national benefactor" and this was the reason why "his countrymen were especially impressed with his advice that "[w]e should make all men our brothers and restore the honor of our citizens" (Solomos, 1974, 225). The importance of Aristophanes lies in the fact that "the disappearance from Old Comedy of its charged political atmosphere paved the way for the literary contest as being less incriminating, less occasional, and more universal. Both devices are symptomatic of the changing political and social conditions which were working themselves out during these intensely dramatic years (Young, 1933, 24).

5. Conclusion

It is clear that ***Frogs*** is such a rich play that it embodies not only literary but also social satire blended with many comic elements and aims at contributing to the well-being of the society. Aristophanes wants to restore the order in the society by satirizing the existing norms in the society and by parodying the literary conventions. As a result, he becomes the representative of the beginnings of literary criticism as well.

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