WHO IN HELL IS HERACLES?

Dionysus’ disastrous disguise in the *Frogs*

*Radcliffe G. Edmonds III*

Why, on his famous trip to the underworld in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, does Dionysus disguise himself as Heracles? Throughout the play, Dionysus presents a ridiculous spectacle, for he has combined the costume that marks his own identity, the effeminate yellow robe and tragic buskins, with a costume that marks the identity of the heroic Heracles, the lionskin and club. The sight is so ludicrous that Heracles cannot keep from laughing at it, and the contrast of the cowardly and weak Dionysus and his disguise as Heracles must have provided a running sight gag for the audience throughout the play. What motivates this disguise? A number of scholars, starting with Segal (1961) and most recently Lada-Richards (1999), have seen Dionysus’ disguise as symbolic of a loss of his own identity: Dionysus is not himself, so he tries to be Heracles. Gradually, they argue, by an initiatory journey through the underworld, Dionysus sheds this identity of Heracles and wins a sense of his own true identity. These commentators explain Dionysus’ achievement of a new identity through the familiar pattern of the initiation ritual, with its three-part rite of passage: separation, liminality, reaggregation. Dionysus’ disguise represents his confusion about his old identity, an identity that is replaced by a new, more mature and authentic identity by the end of the play. Dionysus’ new maturity allows him to be a fit judge of the poetic contest at the end of the play, thus resolving the concerns of scholars who see a radical discrepancy between the buffoonery of the first half of the play and the serious issues of the final poetic competition. As Segal puts it: “The central problem in the character of Dionysus is how the rather timorous and almost despicable figure of the first part of the play can serve as an arbiter in a contest of the gravest consequences at its end. Yet by the end of the parabasis, Dionysus has attained a certain dignity, and there is no question of his fitness.”

I would argue, on the contrary, that the dignity and fitness of Dionysus are rather questionable, even at the end of the play, and that scholars have overlooked significant elements in order to make the play fit into the idea of a maturing “Spirit of Comedy”. An interpretation that relies on the
maturation of Dionysus’ character neglects the text and context of Aristophanes’ play in favor of a metatheatrical idea of the “Spirit of Comedy” that means more to modern scholars of the comic genre than it could ever have meant to Aristophanes and his audience. The death of Dionysus’ old self and the creation of a new personality through his journey to Hades do not in fact occur in Aristophanes’ text, despite the attractiveness of this pattern for the modern scholar. The major problem with the ritual of initiation interpretations of the Frogs has been that scholars have distorted Aristophanes’ text in order to fit the details into the pattern. Such interpretations obscure the real reasons why, in hell, Dionysus should disguise himself as Heracles.

Aristophanes, in having Dionysus pretend to be Heracles, is playing with the variety of depictions of Heracles familiar to his audience from the Greek mythic tradition. He uses Dionysus’ and Xanthias’ troubles with the identity of Heracles to comment (humorously, of course) upon the relations between citizen and slave in post-Argiveusian Athens. The confusion over the identity of Heracles sets up Aristophanes’ plea for the inclusion as citizens of all, from slave to noble, who serve the city in its time of crisis. Aristophanes creates comic confusion by playing with familiar aspects of the identity of Heracles in the traditional scenario of an identity test at the gates of Hades. Rather than having Dionysus disguise himself as Heracles to symbolize the Comic Spirit’s loss of identity, Aristophanes uses the confusion in Dionysus’ and Xanthias’ changes of identity to blur the lines between citizen and slave, redefining the true citizen as the Athenian who serves the city nobly in its time of need.

The problem of the unity of the Frogs

The problem of the unity of the Frogs has been a major issue in the scholarship within the last hundred years, and much of the critical work on the play stems from the attempt to find an element that unifies the literary agon with the rest of the play. Dionysus’ quest to retrieve Euripides from the underworld has seemed disjointed from the great literary contest between Euripides and Aeschylus. Scholars have proposed various theories of revisions or hasty jointings of unrelated plot patterns. In the last forty years, however, beginning with Segal’s influential article, one solution has won increasing acceptance: the initiation of Dionysus. This argument, however, rests on a number of problematic bases, and this interpretation of the Frogs distorts or obscures a number of important elements within the play.

The initiatory interpretation is appealing, in the first place, because of the common equation of the katabasis story with a process of death and rebirth and the assumption that such a death and rebirth is always initiatory. As Eliade puts it: “Descending into Hades means to undergo ‘initiatory death’, the experience of which can establish a new mode of being.” The descent to the underworld fits into Van Gennep’s schema of the rite de passage, the three part transition consisting of separation, liminality, and reaggregation. The deceased separates himself from the world of the living, goes through a liminal period in the realm of the dead, and is finally brought back into the normal world as a new person.

Such a pattern provides a coherent framework to unify a disjointed narrative, since the tripartite schema delineates a nice beginning, middle, and end that follow one another in logical sequence. The end result of such an initiatory sequence must be, in the logic of this argument, the creation of a new identity for the protagonist as he is born upon completing his passage through the realm of death. Hence, for these scholars, Dionysus progresses in the play toward a new and better definition of himself, abandoning the uncertain state in which he starts the play. For Segal, “Dionysus appears as the embodiment of the comic spirit seeking a stable definition of itself and its aims; and his search is presented primarily through the motifs of disguise and changeability.” This metatheatrical idea that Dionysus represents the “Spirit of Comedy” permits a further connection of the katabasis with the agon, since Dionysus’ initiatory journey results in the true definition of Comedy, just as the agon redefines the proper nature of Tragedy.

Against an initiation interpretation

However, the basic premises of this argument—the equation of katabasis with initiation, the idea that Dionysus gains a new identity, and the metatheatrical identification of Dionysus with the “Spirit of Comedy” are all severely flawed, and the resulting argument, in all its incarnations from Segal (1961) to Lada-Richards (1999), presents a distorted picture of the character of Dionysus and his katabasis in the Frogs.

In the first place, despite the authority of Eliade, a descent into the underworld is by no means necessarily an initiation. Initiation rituals do frequently make use of the imagery of death and rebirth (although not as frequently as has sometimes been claimed), and the process of initiation is sometimes imagined or enacted as a journey through the realm of the dead. However, the pattern of action in which the protagonist leaves one status and gains a new status is not always connected with the journey to the realm of the dead, but other imagery (such as bathing or signs of physical maturation) may be used to express the same pattern of passage. Moreover, while a ritual of initiation may make use of the traditional mythic motifs associated with the journey to the realm of the dead to communicate the idea of a change in status for the initiate, the use of those motifs is hardly confined to initiatory ritual nor even to narratives in which a death and rebirth is experienced by the protagonist. Mythic narratives and rituals, in short, draw upon the same set of traditional images and patterns of action to convey their ideas, but the specific meaning of a given traditional pattern or image cannot be divorced from the way in which it is deployed within
the identity of Heracles, not because he has an identity crisis,他的身份因为他自己而没有一个身份。

Dionysus does not necessarily mean an initiation into a new identity, but rather the recognition of a new identity that is already present in the character. When Dionysus recognizes the identity of Heracles, he is essentially recognizing the character's own identity, even though he does not necessarily have an initiation into a new identity.

For some scholars, the initiation of Dionysus is viewed as a means to an end, a way to initiate a new identity for Heracles. This view is supported by the fact that Dionysus, in the play, merges with Heracles in a moment of identity crisis, and it is through this merger that Dionysus achieves the recognition of Heracles' identity.

The recognition of identity is not just a matter of character development, but also a matter of dramatic action. In the play, Heracles' identity is not just a matter of personal growth, but also a matter of dramatic growth. The recognition of Heracles' identity is a moment of dramatic action, and it is through this recognition that the play achieves its dramatic effect.

To be sure, the Fagg has many ways of making the point, and the sight of the Fagg's theatrical experience is not without its importance. The Fagg's theatrical experience is significant in that it brings to light the theatrical experience of the actors, and it provides a means to explore the theatrical experience of the characters.

Segal, in his analysis of the Fagg, argues that the theatrical experience of the characters is not just a matter of personal growth, but also a matter of dramatic growth. Through the theatrical experience, the characters are able to achieve a new identity, and this identity is achieved through the recognition of their own identity. The theatrical experience is a means to achieve this recognition.

The theatrical experience is not just a matter of personal growth, but also a matter of dramatic growth. Through the theatrical experience, the characters are able to achieve a new identity, and this identity is achieved through the recognition of their own identity. The theatrical experience is a means to achieve this recognition.

The theatrical experience is not just a matter of personal growth, but also a matter of dramatic growth. Through the theatrical experience, the characters are able to achieve a new identity, and this identity is achieved through the recognition of their own identity. The theatrical experience is a means to achieve this recognition.

The theatrical experience is not just a matter of personal growth, but also a matter of dramatic growth. Through the theatrical experience, the characters are able to achieve a new identity, and this identity is achieved through the recognition of their own identity. The theatrical experience is a means to achieve this recognition.

The theatrical experience is not just a matter of personal growth, but also a matter of dramatic growth. Through the theatrical experience, the characters are able to achieve a new identity, and this identity is achieved through the recognition of their own identity. The theatrical experience is a means to achieve this recognition.
transition is anticipated, and the rite of incorporation into Athens is left to our imagination.”

Which is to say that, while a motif of separation is present in the closing ode, the other two parts are not actually present, but can be imagined if the reader assumes that Van Gennep’s pattern is present. Such an analysis brings no insight into the structure of the play, but merely imposes the modern scholarly analytic pattern on top of it.

Other scholars have attempted to fit the whole plot sequence of the Fros into the sections of a specific initiatory ritual. Bowie, in particular, links various pieces of the plot with sections of the Eleusinian mysteries.24

Taking the play as a whole, we can see a pattern of mystic initiation. In the first part, there are prothesis, the “journey” and tribulation culminating in the procession of the Mystae, gephurismos, arrival and pannychis, things which even the uninitiated could know and partake in; and in the second part, there are the theosis, further “trials”, attainment of knowledge and rebirth. The god regains his identity, as the mister underwent the process of the dissolution of his personality and the creation of a new one.

The problem with Bowie’s interpretation lies not in his reference to myth and ritual, even specifically to the Eleusinian Mysteries, as a means of understanding the messages of Aristophanes, but rather in his use of the structure of the Eleusinian ritual as a rigid frame into which he attempts to fit the pieces of the play. While some elements in the play are certainly references to specific features of the Mysteries, e.g. the prothesis (the formal pronouncement banning certain people from the rites) and the long road from Athens, not every part of the Mysteries is reproduced, nor can every part of the play be fitted into its structure. Too often, Bowie forces the details of the text into the pattern of the Eleusinian ritual, creating distortions of meaning.

The comic abuse of prominent figures, for example, does not correspond specifically with the ritual gephurismos in the Eleusinian festival. Although both the chorus’ lampoons and the gephurismos involve obscene abuse directed at prominent Athenians, such abuse is a part of many rituals and occasions within the Athenian festival year, the comic competitions not the least of them. Whereas the gephurismos, the ritual abuse heaped on the procession as it crossed the bridge over the Cephissus into the territory of Eleusis, plays an important transitional role in the structure of the Eleusinian festival, the various choral songs of abuse play no such role in the Fros, recalling rather the sort of licensed scurrility at the Thesmophoria or the Haloa, carnivalesque settings in which transgressions of the social norms are given a controlled expression.25 To extrapolate the structural function of the choral abuse from the structural function of the gephurismos on the basis of the similarity of their content distorts the structure of the play, forcing it into the semblance of an initiation for Dionysus.

186
Bowie's identification of *thronos* (the ritual enthronement of the initiate) and of generic ritual ordeals in the *Frogs* creates the same problems. Bowie unconvincedly attempts to relate the silence and immobility of the characters in Aeschylus' prologues to what he calls the *thronos* ritual, but the allusion in the literary contest to someone sitting silently does not even fit into the place of the so-called *thronos* in the sequence of the initiation as Bowie lays it out.  

Bowie also tries to link the whipping contest, in which Dionysus and Xanthias try to avoid indicating that they are suffering pain, to the ritual requirement of silence for the Mysteries. However, not only is the silence in the Mysteries connected with the awe at the moment of revelation (and secondarily with the importance of not revealing the Mysteries to the initiate) rather than with keeping silent under torture, but, in fact, neither Dionysus nor Xanthias ever actually keep silent; they are continually cracking jokes or trying to disguise their exclamations of pain as some other outburst. Moreover, the whipping ordeal, whether imagined as an allusion to the silence of the initiates at Eleusis or as a general ritual ordeal, comes after the encounter with the festival of the blessed initiates, instead of being a necessary step on the way to that final reward.

Despite the claim that Aristophanes is making use of the pattern of initiation from the Eleusinian Mysteries, the motifs identified as Eleusinian do not, in fact, fit into the sequence of events in the Eleusinian rituals or an initiation ritual as it is imagined in general. Lada-Richards argues, reasonably enough, that “a ritual sequence encapsulated in a work of art is not expected to constitute an accurate reflection of the actual ceremony itself,” since an accurate reproduction is not the purpose of the use of the elements. However, if it is specifically the sequence of the ritual, the progression from uninitiated to initiated, that is significant, as those who want to see an initiation of Dionysus claim, then that sequence, at least, the pattern of actions involved, must be reproduced recognizably, even if the details are altered wildly and comically. If the temporal and logical sequence of action is not, in fact, preserved or pointedly rearranged, then the traditional and familiar motifs that recall the Eleusinian Mysteries for Aristophanes' audience must have some other resonance, a resonance that is obscured by the attempt to fit it into a pattern of initiation for Dionysus.

Both Bowie and Lada-Richards uncover a wide range of these resonances, pointing to the range of significances that these familiar motifs and ideas would have had for Aristophanes' audience. However, their attempts to fit all these elements into the initiatory pattern of action cause them to miss the full depth and richness of Aristophanes' use of these elements. The tradition on which Aristophanes draws includes both the many mythic tellings of journeys to the otherworld and the rituals associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries. Rituals are performances composed of a number of traditional actions set in a sequence that is itself traditional. Like the elements of a myth, therefore, the elements and patterns of action of a ritual have a significance to their audience whose scope is determined by the range of meanings evoked by

**WHO IN HELL IS HERACLES?**

the familiar signs and limited by the context in which they are arranged. The Eleusinian Mysteries are a particularly evocative symbol for the life of the Athenian polis, since the ritual performance of the Mysteries was a way for the city to define its borders of territory, of community, and of influence.

As recent studies have shown, Eleusis was a part of the Athenian polis from its formation, and the sanctuary at Eleusis served as an important marker of the boundaries of Athens, both spatially and ideologically. A large portion of the Athenian population participated in the Mysteries, which were open not only to adult, male citizens but also to groups of Athenians excluded from other civic institutions—women, metics, and slaves. Participation in the Mysteries cut across political faction as well as the barriers of gender and citizenship, so a group of initiates presented a very good way for Aristophanes to represent the group of Athenians, united in their celebration of a festival. The chorus of initiates redefine this united group of true Athenians in their comic prrorhesis (354–71), explicitly excluding as barbarians and polluted criminals certain Athenians whom Aristophanes sees as destructive to the city, while, in the parabasis (674–737), they urge the city to welcome back to the fold the oligarchs involved in the revolution of 411.

In the *Frogs*, however, Aristophanes depicts the chorus of initiates in the realm of the dead, the otherworld, because in the spring of 405 the Athen of the real world was fraught with disunity and faction, deprived of much of her authority over other Greek states, and powerless even to conduct her festival of the Mysteries. Dionysus goes on a quest to the realm of the dead to bring back a fertile poet to an impotent Athens, venturing into a world where everything is different and strange to bring change to the familiar world. The contrasts between the realms of the living and the dead provide a means by which Aristophanes can renegotiate the boundaries of the city, excluding those whom he sees as destructive to the city and recalling those whom the city needs to be whole.

**Redefining Athenians**

Aristophanes comically plays off the expectations of his audience familiar with traditional myths and rituals to set up these redefinitions of his society. Dionysus' disguise as Heracles is one of Aristophanes' most fruitful mythic manipulations. Not only does he make use of that old familiar pattern of action, the descent into the underworld with its traditional test of identity at the gates, but he comically exploits the variety of imagery and ideas associated with Heracles to create a situation in which Dionysus is trapped between the conflicting consequences of the contradictory associations of the character he has adopted.

Aristophanes' *Frogs* focuses not on Dionysus' passage from immaturity to maturity, but on his *katabasis*, his quest to return to the world of the living with a poet from the world of the dead, to save Athens from its dearth of
traditional versions, Heracles relies on his standard solution for most of the situations he encounters in his labors — violence. As the violent abductor of Cerberus, Heracles has angered the inhabitants of Hades by his violation of their realm, and Aristophanes thus can posit a hostile reception for Heracles at his next appearance. Aristophanes humorously switches back and forth between these two alternative receptions of Heracles in the scene before the gates, and Dionysus miserably fails to adapt himself to the situations by switching roles with Xanthias. Aristophanes uses these reversals of roles between Heracles and Dionysus, and between master and slave, to redefine the truly worthy and heroic citizen of Athens.

The identity of Heracles brings Dionysus only negative reactions from the inhabitants of the underworld when he expects positive ones, but Xanthias disguised as Heracles gets the positive reactions Dionysus had planned upon. Throughout this scene, Aristophanes assumes knowledge of the tales of Heracles’ katabasis to set up all of the comic reversals. The hostile reaction of the doorkeeper is provoked by Heracles’ theft of the dog, the very purpose of his traditional journey. Dionysus is also threatened with prosecution by the two innkeepers, since Heracles, the violent glutton, abused the hospitality of the innkeepers and stole their food. Dionysus, hoping to reap the rewards of Heracles’ last visit by claiming his identity, must instead pay the penalty for the relations Heracles established.

When Dionysus tries to escape the negative consequences of the Heraclean identity by passing off the disguise to Xanthias, Herakleoxanthias reaps the very rewards of being Heracles that Dionysus had wanted. Playing with the tradition, in earlier tellings, that Heracles had sacrificed a whole ox during his visit to the underworld, Aristophanes has a kitchen slave come out to invite “Heracles” in to another feast of ox, along with a whole catalogue of delights calculated to attract the hero, who was notorious as a glutton for food and sex.

Dionysus, the free man, behaves with the utmost cowardice throughout all these encounters, soiling himself with fright at the idea of actually having to live up to the heroic identity he assumed. He abases himself before the slave, Xanthias, pleading with him and promising to let himself be beaten like a slave without complaint if he tries to take the role of Heracles back. The chorus comments that his attempts to assume the identity that will bring the most reward at any given moment and his ability to wriggle out of any role that has negative consequences are like the famed skills of the politician Theramenes. Theramenes and Dionysus are accused (534–48) of not staying with a single form (schema), but always shifting to the softer side. Xanthias, on the other hand, though he is a slave and a mortal (531, cp. 583), has the courage (lema) that goes along with the form and appearance (schema) of Heracles. Although the chorus threatens that, if Xanthias does not live up to the part, he will lose his heroic identity and its privileges and become a slave carrying the baggage once more, Xanthias plays his part as Heracles well,
borrowing the hero’s tactic of violence to hold off the men coming to punish him for stealing Cerberus (607). However, his adoption of Heraclean violence is only temporary; he evades the consequences of his Heraclean identity by exploiting instead the consequences of Dionysus’ adoption of slave identity and transferring the violent retributions to him. This twist transforms the test of identity from the question of Heracles and the consequences of his identity to one of the identity of slave and master.

Xanthias’ maneuver leads to the final test of identity at the gates of Hades, the test by whipping. While this whipping might have had resonances from various rituals familiar to Aristophanes’ audience, whipping is a punishment appropriate for a slave, and the test is to determine which of the two is a slave and which a god. Comically, both Xanthias and Dionysus manage to conceal the pain they feel in the whipping contest, blurring the lines between master and slave even further. Aristophanes finally tops off the slapstick humor of the beating contest by making all these tests needless in the face of the real test of identity, a traditional confrontation with Persephone and Pluto that determines the fate of the traveller to the otherworld. Dionysus’ attempts to disguise his identity bring him nothing but comic trouble, trouble Aristophanes quickly dismisses when he wants to move on to other jokes.

Xanthias, on the other hand, after proving himself brave and heroic when dressed as Heracles, is relegated to the outside with the other slaves, who fear that the affairs of their masters will only result in further beatings for them (812–13). Aristophanes, however, makes fun of the distinctions drawn between the servile slaves and the noble nobles in the discussion between the doorkeeper and Xanthias about Dionysus. “By Zeus the Saviour, quite the gentleman your master is,” says the doorkeeper, echoing the term (gennadai) that both himself and Dionysus have previously applied to Xanthias. Xanthias, however, is quick to put Dionysus in his proper place with his own definition of what it means to be a “gentleman,” someone who knows nothing but personal pleasures, sex, and drinking. This exchange, following right on the heels of the chorus’ parabasis advice about choosing the noble and good to be leaders of the city (719, 728, 734), puts the parabasis in the perspective, as it were, of the post-Arginausia Athens. The freeing of the slaves who fought in the battle demonstrated that even slaves might prove themselves worthy of the city, whereas the debacle of the generals and their trial proved that the leaders of the city were not always the most noble. As Bowie suggests, “The relationship between Dionysus and Xanthias in the play thus provides an articulation of the relations between citizen and non-citizens in the state.” However, Aristophanes is primarily concerned with defining who is worthy to be counted among the members of the Athenian polis in its time of trial, and his concern for the slaves without citizens’ rights is overshadowed by his concern for the disenfranchised citizens whom he thinks are essential to the survival of the city and by his contempt for the leaders of the people whom he thinks have shown themselves to be no true citizens of the city by their self-serving behavior.

In the parabasis (674–737), Aristophanes calls for the city to put aside its factional squabbling and to unite behind the leadership of the noble families. The criterion for a true member of the Athenian family, however, must be the willingness to serve the needs of the polis, specifically in the navy that is Athens’ last military resource. The test of naval combat can prove even slaves worthy of citizenship, as it did at Arginausia, and naval service is a threat that recurs throughout the Frogs, from Dionysus’ laughable rowing lesson to Aeschylus’ grim lion metaphor. The importance of naval service serves as the crucial test in the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides at the end of the play. Aeschylus uses the metaphor of a lion cub he had applied to Helen in his Agamemnon to answer Dionysus’ question about Alcibiades, saying that if the state has reared such a dangerous creature, its best hope is to do good seaman’s service to his ways. Aeschylus uses a verb (hiperetein, 1432) that means to serve as a rower under the command of, a clear reminder of the importance of naval service throughout the play as well as an allusion to Alcibiades’ brilliant successes as a naval commander, since Alcibiades’ naval victory at Cyzicus in 410 even provoked an offer of peace from the Spartans. Earlier in the play, by having Charon bar any slave not freed by fighting at Arginausia and by making Dionysus do his own rowing instead of merely being carried by Charon, Aristophanes redrews the boundaries of the worthy Athenian. What good Athenians, slave or free, noble or poor, must do is serve in the navy, keeping the city afloat by pulling their own oars. Aristophanes therefore introduces the chorus of Frogs, whose swan song serves as a rowing chant to help Dionysus learn to row like a good citizen. Aristophanes is happy to elide the boundaries between master and slave, between ally and kinsman, if by doing so Athens can unite itself and be saved. The parabasis (674–737) includes a special plea for the oligarchs disenfranchised in the revolt of 411. If fighting in sea battles is worthy proof of good citizens, then surely, pleads the chorus, these oligarchs deserve to be reconsidered if they can serve their city in its time of need.

**Conclusion**

Dionysus’ disastrous disguise as Heracles, then, does not signal the character’s transformation through an initiatory descent into the underworld. Rather, the disguise provides Aristophanes with a number of opportunities to manipulate traditional mythic motifs and patterns to renegotiate the boundaries of the categories that define Athenian society. Aristophanes plays with elements familiar to his audience from traditional myths and rituals, humorously twisting the details to evoke familiar resonances with his own peculiar ring to them. Aristophanes breaks down some of the familiar categories of master and slave, citizen and non-citizen, familiar and strange, along with the
difference between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. By dissolving the familiar distinctions, Aristophanes opens the space to create his own definitions of what is a worthy member of the Athenian polis and what the city needs to rescue her from the perilous seas in which she sails.

Notes

1 Segal (1961) 208.

2 Rogers (1919) xvi, claims of the katahesis: “It can hardly be said to be woven into the texture of the play at all; it is but loosely tacked on, and the stitches by which it is attached to the main fabric are quite visible to a careful observer.” Russo (1966) 1–13 and (1994) esp. 206–8 argues that the fact that no reference is made to saving the city in the first part of the play proves that the story was radically revised and that the idea of bringing a poet back was not part of the original concept of the play. Hooker (1980) 169–82 also believes that the katahesis element is a last minute addition, worked in only after Aristophanes had obtained and read a copy of Euripides’ posthumously released work, the Bacchae. I agree, however, with Dover (1993) 9: “It is hard on a dramatist if his most striking and successful innovation in plot structure is to be treated by posterity, because his other plots are not so good, as the unhappy consequence of hasty revision.”

3 Elyae (1972) 27. See also Eliade (1958) 62: “From one point of view, we may say that all these myths and sagas have an initiatory structure; to descend into Hell alive, confront its monsters and demons, is to undergo an initiatory ordeal.” Thiery (1986) 305 discusses the initiation pattern he sees in Aristophanes as a cultural universal: “L’essentiel n’est pas pour nous attribuer une origine plus ou moins précise à cette notion d’initiation chez Aristophane, mais de constater que dans toutes les religions, les littératures et les civilisations, quels qu’en soient l’époque ou le niveau, la notion d’initiation est ancrée dans l’esprit humain, d’autant plus qu’elle répond toujours à un même scénario dont seuls les noms et les détails varient.”

4 Van Gennep (1960). Jane Harrison (1912) 19–20 was among the first to make use of Van Gennep (originally published 1909) to understand myths of death and rebirth as initiatory. Classicists, however, have for the most part still not availed themselves of more nuanced anthropological theories of initiation, preferring the simple Aristotelian schema of Van Gennep. Indeed, the more complicated pictures of liminality provided by Turner and others would not serve the desired function of unification of the narrative, so they are, for the most part, ignored.

5 For Whitman (1971) 236: “In the light of the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides, comedy puts on the buskin of high seriousness and the club and lion skin of heroic self-search, and undertakes the quest to recover poetic and political virility.” Segal (1961) 208 notes the references to various aspects of the deity Dionysus throughout the play and sees the journey through the underworld as a gradual quest for self-awareness by Dionysus.

6 Segal (1961) 211. Contrast the assessment of Stanford (1983) xxii: “So supple, fickle, wayward, panic, opportunistic, and unscrupulous is he that he rather resembles the oil which helps to blend a salad or lubricate a machine, than any solid substance.”


8 For example Lada-Richards (1999) 57 claims: “ritual liminality is a period deeply impregnated with the imagery of death”, but she makes no argument to show that the imagery of death in many circumstances of ritual liminality is more than a particularly useful set of images in the context, neither that it appears only in ritual liminality (which it obviously does not) nor that ritual liminality always and exclusively makes use of the imagery of death.

9 See Dover (1972) 59–65 on Aristophanes characters in general and (1993) 42 on Dionysus of the Fros in particular, and Silk (1990) esp. 153–65, who contrasts the “realist” technique of modern drama with what he terms an “imaginist” technique for Aristophanes theatre, whereby the character is represented through a series of images that do not connect in the same manner as a realistic depiction of the development of a character. He suggests that character change occurs rather through inversions and reversals than through a steady process of maturation (170–1). Bowie (see n. 24 below) also comments on the lack of development of Aristophanes characters, although he strangely suspends this idea in his analysis of the Fros.


11 Dover (1993) notes at 980–91, 1074–5, 1089–98, 1149, 1279–80, and 1308, that Dionysus’ responses are often coarse or bathetic.

12 1169.

13 Both accuse him of talking nonsense, 1136 and 1197, and they abuse his stupidity in 917–18, 933, and 1160. Whatever Aeschylus means in 1150, it is clearly not complimentary to Dionysus’ taste and good judgement.

14 Segal (1961) 214–15 claims that Dionysus is a “fair and impartial judge” simply because he cracks jokes about both poets, but his evenhandedness hardly implies that he is serious. He seems to take Dionysus’ calls for Aeschylus to break his silence or restrain his anger or for Euripides to stop babbling (832, 835, 844F) as serious, well-intentioned advice, and he claims that Dionysus “interjects his own newly gained conception of the dignity of poetry” when he tells the tragedians not to quarrel like market women (857–8). Higgins (1977) 71 also thinks that some of Dionysus’ advice (e.g. 835, 844, 855–6, 1132–3, and 1227–8) is an attempt “to direct the debate along sensible lines.” On the other hand Vaio (1985) 95 sees as serious only Dionysus’ recommendations that Aeschylus be beaten for making the Thesbans too martial (1023) and that a poet be put to death for corrupting the citizens (despite the fact, noted already by the scholars, that these poets are already dead).

15 Segal (1961) 213. Compare Thiery’s idea (1986) 317, that Dionysus does not realize that he is the Iacchus hymned by both choruses because, “la perte de son identité de Dionysus lui fait perdre en même temps celle de Iacchos.”

16 Dover (1993) 40 comments: “The initiates do not recognize Dionysus as their Iacchus, nor does he say anything to suggest that he regards them as invoking himself. Any such recognition would have been impossible to reconcile with the humor of the scenes in 460–673, and in the construction of a comedy humorous effect takes precedence.” The echoes of Athenian festivals in these passages, especially those concerned with Dionysus, may well be, as Segal argues, part of Aristophanes’ attempt to rebuild the communal solidarity of the Athenian audience through reminders of their communal religious tradition. Aristophanes makes such a use of ritual imagery above all in his borrowing of Eleusinian elements in the Fros, but these reminders do not require a framework of Dionysus’ initiation to be effective.

17 As Whitman (1971) 236 says: “Dionysus is a hybrid whose multiple guises indicate not the possession of secret and magical keys, but rather uncertainty as to who he is.” For
Segal (1961) 213, this identity crisis is occasioned by the historical situation of Athens: “The breakdown of the communal solidarity which the battle of Arginusae and its aftermath exposed requires drastic measures and the god of Comedy must strip himself of his previous identity in order to arrive at a positive conception of himself that will meet the new demands put upon him.”

Whatever its significance to the modern scholar of the genre of comedy, Aristophanes’ utterance, his play, had meaning to his audience, a meaning that, while it can never be entirely recovered, can be at least partially reconstructed by an examination of the context in which the text occurs. Such a perspective can uncover the range of meanings that Aristophanes and his fellow Athenians might have found in the play, whereas the anachronistic perspective of Segal, however fascinating the ideas it may generate, cannot locate the principles by which Aristophanes structured his drama. David Brooks Dodd raises a similar question in his essay in this volume for the meaning of the patterns of prehistoric rituals within traditional stories. If the meaning of the pattern is read as an indicator of the prehistoric ritual, the implicit or explicit meaning communicated by the story teller to his audience is lost or obscured.

19 Vaio (1985) 93 criticizes such a reading: “In place of Aristophanes’ protagonist, a genial but cowardly aesthete, there emerges a Dionysiosparisfal, virtually an antique clone of Wagner’s hero. Gone is the jovial joksmith who uses Aeschylus’ exposition of the true nature of dramatic art as the foil for his clownish wit. He is wholly submerged into a character of deep seriousness that develops inwardly from the shallow aesthetic of the opening scenes to the perfect wisdom and understanding of the final exaltation.” Compare Whitman (1971) 244: “And it is this which Dionysus is doing in the Fros. He seeks to extract from the boundless world of death the true poet, and to do so he must penetrate and pass beyond the infinite shiftingness and changeability of the phenomenal world, transcend the Many and find the One.”

20 For Segal (1961) 212 Dionysus is transcending the buffoonish treatment of Old Comedy: “In the descent to Hades Dionysus loses something of his traditional identity: he is, in a sense, purged of the mere buffoonery which belongs to Xanthias and Heracles and to the treatment of Dionysus in Old Comedy.” On the other hand, Padilla (1992) 360 sees Dionysus’ development as a move from Euripidean sophistic to good, old-fashioned comedy: “his encounter with the Heraclean axis ‘re-educates’ him by prompting him to take up a more normative Old Comedy role: he abandons his ‘sophistic decadence’ in favor of a heroic parody that maintains conservative civic values.” For Reckford (1987) Dionysus also ultimately affirms his Old Comedy nature through his switch from Euripides to Aeschylus, even as Old Comedy is about to vanish forever into New Comedy.

For example, she claims (1999) 209, that Dionysus’ movement from savage Dionysiac attributes to more civic and Heraclean ones is shown by his preference for the symposiastic delights of Persephone’s hospitality over the wild Spartans threatened by the doorkeeper: “The dramatized clash between Dionysus’ aversion to the gruesome picture of a ‘bacchic’-like dismemberment (479ff.) and his strong attraction to the prospect of a sacrificial banquet (522ff.) qualifies for his initiatory dissociation from the wild and his alignment with the tame and civilized side of his own mythical and cultic personality.” But Dionysus’ preference for the pleasures of food and sex over the pains of being ripped apart by savage eels has nothing to do with some deep transformation of his character. If one really wants to look for cultural patterns underlying his choice, the general Greek bias for doing (pinoein kai binein in this case) over suffering should be sufficient in this case. If Dionysus were choosing the pleasures of the symposium over a wild chase, hunting down someone else, the choice might have some meaning.

22 The eagerness with which commentators stretch the details of the text into the ritual patterns of separation, transition, and incorporation is matched only by the eagerness with which commentators at the beginning of the century stretched the details of the text into the Frazerian ritual pattern laid down by Cornford (1961) as the structure of all Aristophanic comedy. Nor, indeed, are the interpretive moves unrelated. Cornford’s theory of the origin of comedy from the Frazerian ritual of the death and rebirth of year-king not only reads the katakiasis in the Fros as a symbolic death and rebirth, but makes the same assumption that the text must play out a ritual preserved from an earlier stage of Greek culture. In both cases, the commentators presume that an underlying ritual pattern explains the details of the text, why they are there and what they mean. The assumption prevents the analysis from progressing beyond the idea that such a pattern is used in the work to an examination of how it is used.


24 Bowie (1993) 252. As noted above in note 9, Bowie (1993) 101 adopts the theory of Dionysus maturing through initiation against his own better judgement, expressed in his analysis of Philocleon in the Wasps, “The Chorus seem to think that Bdelyleon has changed his father (1449) but the evidence is against this view and their own words highlight the problem: ‘to depart from the nature one has been given is difficult’ (1457f.). . . . The Athenian character appears to be remarkably resistant to the kind of changes that can be wrought by rituals like the rite of passage.”

25 Henderson (1975) 13–17 gives an overview of obscenity in various cults and rightly denies (pp. 15–16 and n. 49) that the comic abuse by the chorus is a gaphartismos; he connects it instead with Dionysiac processes where jesters improvised ribald abuse on passers-by.

26 Bowie (1993) 247. Following Burkert (1983), Bowie calls thronos as the ritual in which the initiate sat, with head covered, on a chair or stool. Depictions of the seated initiate appear on a number of vases, but the words, thronos and thronos, do not appear in Eleusinian contexts. On the contrary, Plato describes thronos as a rite in which Corybantes dance wildly around the initiate, playing around and confusing him (Esbkyth. 277d). Such a rite differs dramatically from the somber silences of the protagonist in Aeschylus’ prologues.


30 E.g. Calame (1990) 29, who defines myth and ritual as follows: “Ils sont tous deux des manifestations distinctes du même processus d’élaboration intellectuelle: construction et manipulation d’objets conceptuels par le moyen de la langue et de la narration dans un cas, travail conceptuel par l’intermédiaire du corps et des objets du monde naturel ou culturel dans l’autre.”

31 See Redfield’s description (1990) 132–3, of the intertwining of myth and ritual in a culture: “Myths and rituals are knitted together by a system of metaphorical transformations which constitute the practical logic of the culture. This is not a language because the signs are not arbitrary; the objects manipulated are found already constituted in nature. But as they are organized into a system of meanings, they are
further formed and acquire new meanings; these in turn, by their coherence, prove to the
native the truth of the system as a whole.”

143, who shows how earlier views that Eleusis was not integrated into Athens until the
late sixth century are based upon a literalist reading of the myths of conflict between
Eleusis and Athens as history and upon the assumption that the absence of explicit
mention of Athens from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter implies that the hymn was written
before Athens had conquered Eleusis in these “historical” wars.

33 The ritual procession from the center of the city to the periphery at the Eleusinian
sanctuary reinforced the unity of the Athenian polis. See also de Polignac (1995) 40.
Although de Polignac did not see Eleusis as a peripheral sanctuary for Athens, Osborne
have convincingly demonstrated the applicability of his model. The Eleusinian Mysteries,
moreover, represented Athens’ claim to pan-Hellenic leadership, for Demeter’s double
gift of the Mysteries and grain made Eleusis a pan-Hellenic shrine, to which offerings
came from all over the Greek world. This pan-Hellenic position could be used as
justification for Athens’ leadership of other Greek states, that is, for her position as an
imperial power in the Greek world (e.g. Isocrates, Panegyricus 28–9, 31; Lysias 6.50;
Diodorus Siculus 13. 27.1; and Callias’ statement in Xenophon, Hellenica 6.3.6).

34 As Bowie (1993) 252 notes, “The Mysteries have acted as a model for stable life in a polis:
they are open to slave and free alike; they offer justice and proper treatment and equality
to all as well as happiness in the afterlife; they exclude the incomprehensible barbarian
and polluted criminal. They even offered peace in time of war: a truce from war of fifty-
five days was traditionally declared.”

35 Despite the fact that they are gods, both Heracles and Dionysus are, for the purposes of
the play, citizens and residents of the city of Athens. The humor derives from the fact
that Heracles and Dionysus converse like two regular citizens rather than from the fact
that the specific temple of Heracles is depicted as an ordinary house. The latter sort of
joke does appear to be made later in the transformation of the Hall of Hades into an
ordinary household.

36 Most famously, Odysseus goes to the realm of the dead to consult the shade of Tiresias
(Odyssey 10.490–5, 11.100ff) because only in the otherworld can he obtain the special
knowledge he needs to return to his homeland. See Pausanias’ account of the
Trophonius oracle (9.39.7–14) and Clark (1979) 13–52 who discusses the ancient Near
Eastern predecessors of the Homeric nekyia, especially the epic of Gilgamesh, and
carefully distinguishes this wisdom tradition of katagogies from other descents connected
with fertility cycles.

37 Aristophanes, of course, plays with the meanings of desire, pathos, which generally
conveys the idea of longing for one who is absent, but can have both erotic and funereal
connotations. The most basic meaning of Dionysus’ pathos is mourning at the absence of
the deceased, but Heracles takes it as an erotic desire for a woman or a boy, or even a man
(56–7). Even when he discovers that the object of desire is a dead man, he still takes it in
an erotic sense, as necrophilia rather than mourning. Only Dionysus’ declaration that he
will go to Hades to bring Euripides back makes the comical confusion clear (66–70).

Dover (1993) 14: “To be desirous is not simply to possess a perceptive intelligence, the
capacity for quick and deep understanding; in many instances, it covers creative
intelligence, skill, or expertise, and so overlaps with sophia.”

38 Dover (1993) 257 remarks: “It is quite possible that in vulgar belief Persephone fancied
Hercules, and that in this scene Aristophanes is quite deliberately, and rather daringly,
giving a touch of Sthenoeboia to Persephone.”

39 Plutarch, Nicotia 29.2–3, who also relates that some Caunians, who were pursued by
pirates, were allowed to enter the harbor of Syracuse because they could recite some
choruses of Euripides.

40 The civic and salvific ramifications of retrieving a poet are present from the very
beginning of the play, and the familiar modern division of aesthetic and moral
dimensions of art that so exercises the commentators on Dionysus’ supposed progress
would not necessarily have been significant to Aristophanes’ audience. Griffith (1990)
points out that poetic contests were judged on the basis of poetic sophia that was
composed of not merely aesthetic but factual and moral dimensions. The distinctions
between moral and aesthetic components were made, as a rule, only by those with a
specific axe to grind, such as Plato in his critique of the poets. As Griffith, ibid. 189, puts
it, “Ancient critics, and even the poets themselves, often blur the distinctions and slide
heedlessly – or opportunistically – from one to another, as if poets should be held
accountable at every moment for all three.”

41 “You can tell me about your friends who put you up when you went there to fetch the
Cerberus dog. Well, I could use some friends, so tell me about them. Tell me the ports,
the bakery shops, whorehouses, parks and roadside rests, highways and springs, the
cities, boarding houses, and the best hotels scarest in bedbugs” (lines 109–15 in the
Lattimore translation). Aristophanes transforms Dionysus’ inquiry into an ordinary
traveller’s questions about his prospective route. Showing a characteristic interest in
pleasures of the flesh, Dionysus wants to know about the everyday comforts he can look
forward to on his journey. See Xanthias’ characterization of Dionysus as concerned only
with sex and drinking (740). That he asks about inns and bakeries as well as brothels and
springs shows that he does not entirely neglect eating and sleeping.

42 Aristophanes, of course, plays off the familiar katabasis pattern of action in each of
Dionysus’ encounters in the underworld, but he makes the most of the resonances of
Heracles in the encounter at the gates of Hades. Up to that point, however, little is made
of Dionysus’ disguise, excepting, of course, Heracles’ first sight of Dionysus (41–7) and
Xanthias’ appeal to Heracles/Dionysus in the Empousa scene (298). If the choruses of
frogs and initiates fail to recognize the Dionysus whom they are hymning in various
aspects, they also fail to recognize him as Heracles. Chiron and Empousa show no signs
of being impressed with the hero’s lionskin.

43 Such an initiation would establish his special relation with Persephone, a relation that
may have been interpreted in other ways in comic treatments of the story. Dover (1993)
257 remarks: “It is quite possible that in vulgar belief Persephone fancied Heracles, and
that in this scene Aristophanes is quite deliberately, and rather daringly, giving a touch
of Sthenoeboia to Persephone.”

44 549–78. Here his disguise as Heracles is turned on its head, since the innkeepers take
Dionysus’ own yellow robe and boots as a disguise that Heracles is trying to hide
beneath. “O, you thought I shouldn’t know you with your buskins on!” (556–7 in the
Rogers translation).

45 503–21.

46 As he did in the encounter with Empousa (308). In this scene, Dionysus cracks a joke
about his reactions, distorting the ritual formula from the Lenaia, “the libation
is poured, call the god.” The scholiasts ad loc say that the torchbearer of Dionysus speaks
the formula, at which all call out, “Iacchus,” son of Semele.”

47 Theramenes had been a leader in the oligarchic coup of the Four Hundred in 411, but
managed to stay in favor during the restoration of the democracy by leading a pro-
democratic faction of the Four Hundred. He was one of the two trierarchs who should
have picked up the dead and wounded at Arginusae, but, by pressing for charges
against the generals, he escaped the consequences of the disastrous aftermath of that
victory, while the generals were executed after an unconstitutional mass trial. Dionysus
mentions Theramenes’ adeptness at political survival when Euripides has claimed him
as a disciple, along with the sophist Clistophon (967–70). Compare Thucydides, 8.68.4
and 89.2–94.1, and Xenophon, Hellenica I 6.35, 7.5–8. Lysias attacks Theramenes
(12.62–80), but the Aristotelian Constitution of Athens (28.5) praises him for moderation.
He became one of the Thirty Tyrants, but was executed by Critias when he attempted to
oppose the extreme policies of the Thirty and escape the consequences of his political
choices once again. Xenophon, Hellenica 2.3.31, relates that he was known as
“Kothromos”, because, like that kind of boot, he would fit on either foot.

Xanthias urges Dionysus to match his lema to the schema he bears before knocking (464).
Dionysus gives him the lionskin because he has the courage lematia to match the role
(494), and Xanthias boasts that he has the lema for the part (500). Dionysus emphasizes
the contrast between Xanthias’ appearance as a divine hero and his true identity as a slave
with his joke about Xanthias looking like the whipping boy of Melite instead of the
expected god of Melite. Note the emphasis on the slave as one who is whipped, since
citizens could not legally be beaten (cp. Doves, ad loc). The scholiast thinks the joke is
referring to Callias (cp. 428–30), but the allusion seems strained.

The whipping scene in the villa of Mysteries at Pompeii and the whipping contest at the
sanctuary of Arethusa Orthia in Sparta are mentioned by Bowie (1993) 236 as mystery
cult parallels, but the evidence is quite late in both cases. A scholion at line 622 mentions
a ritual in which boys were beaten with leek or onion (cf. Theocritus 7.106, and
Hipponax 6.2). Such a symbolic flagellation, perhaps for purification (see Hesychius
s.v. kalathethos and mastigethenai), is ruled out by Xanthias (621); he wants whatever is
done to his master to hurt.

This differentiation of fates in the afterlife according to status and relation to the gods is
familiar from the mythic tradition, from Menelaus’ fate in the Odyssey to the “Orphic”
gold tablets. Dionysus must reveal his mission to Pluto during the offstage conference
before the agōn of Aeschylus and Euripides, for Pluto knows of it at line 1414. While it is
unwise to press too far in the pursuit of dramatic logic in Aristophanes, nothing
suggests that Pluto would be opposed to Dionysus’ project once Dionysus contacts him,
despite the use of apodidaskein at 81 for the description of Euripides getting out
of Hades.

738–9 in the Rogers translation. See lines 640 and 179.
739–40; see Goldhill (1991) 204.
Aristophanes merely touches on the message of the possible worthiness of slaves, and he
continues the scene with a series of jokes that reinforce the outside status of the slaves,
who share their own pleasures and swear by their own special epithets (750, 756).
190–206.
Various scholars have classified Aristophanes’ political advice along a spectrum as
widely varied as their own, but his sympathies with this group of oligarchic politicians
come out strongly in this chorus passage.
INITIATION IN ANCIENT GREEK RITUALS AND NARRATIVES

New critical perspectives

Edited by
David B. Dodd and
Christopher A. Faraone

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK