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DECEPTION, DISGUISE AND WHAT LIES BEYOND: ARISTOPHANES' *THE FROGS*

Payal Das
B.A. (Calcutta University, Kolkata),
M.A. (Presidency University, Kolkata),
Product Development Executive
(Oxford University Press, Kolkata)
payeldas.8dec@gmail.com

Abstract

Considered by many to be Aristophanes' greatest work, The Frogs was performed at the Lenaia, one of the Festivals of Dionysus, in 405 BC, when Athens was in dire straits in the war with the Peloponnesian League. As implied by Aristophanes in this play, in that period of political belligerence, the poet's role in saving the nation from the morass of war is of paramount importance, but more than that is the role of the "right" poet, whose words would inspire the people to make the "right" choices, and take the "right" decisions. The present paper attempts to show how through the devices of "deception" and "disguise", used both structurally and thematically, Aristophanes, in a subtle manner, gives the erstwhile audience and the readers choices throughout the play, ultimately leaving the play open-ended. This idea is illustrated with reference to the title of the play, the scenes played out between Dionysus and his servant Xanthias, the masculine-feminine role-play, the use of the significant double chorus, the "agon" or "contest" between Euripides and Aeschylus and finally Dionysus' own disillusionment leading to realization and self-knowledge. Again the culmination of the play, at one level is directive of Aristophanes' own views, which is essentially, as Kenneth Dover says "old ways are good, new ways are bad". But the very presence of options or choices blurs the line between appearance and reality, and an apparently distinct solution is shrouded by other possibilities. This choice of one over the other involves prioritizing one but not doing away with the other. In The Frogs too, the old virtues and values, as represented by Aeschylus, triumphs over but does not necessarily negate the new-fangled notions, as those of Euripides. Here parallels are drawn with Jonathan Swift's The Battle of The Books, which is again an open-ended literary debate, where the scales seem to tip in favour of the "old", signified by the Classics, rather than the "new", signified by the modern contemporary writings, albeit in a mock-heroic manner.

Keywords: Aristophanes, The Frogs, Aeschylus, Euripides, deception, disguise, Classics, mock-heroic

Aristophanes' comedies are numbered among the greatest creations of the human spirit, they are a triumph of the creative imagination over the debilitating constraints of reality, a flight into a realm of absolute freedom. "It is to this absolute freedom of spirit which is utterly consoled in advance in every human undertaking", wrote G.W.F. Hegel, "that Aristophanes conducts us". As a playwright, Aristophanes is associated with the tradition of the Old Comedy, or *comoedia prisca*, as the Roman poet Horace termed it and he used the power of comedy throughout his long career to ridicule and condemn the shortcomings of his society.

The Peloponnesian War (c. 431- April 25, 404 B.C.), fought between Athens and Sparta for supremacy in the Hellenic world, provided the tragic backdrop of Aristophanes' comic stage. Considered by many to be Aristophanes' greatest work, *The Frogs* was performed at the Lenaia, one of the Festivals[1] of Dionysus, in 405 B.C., about six months after the great naval victory at Arginusae. The essence of the play appears embedded in these lines:

What do you want a poet for?
save the City, of course. (Act 2, Sc. 1)

As implied by Aristophanes, in that period of political belligerence, the poet's role in saving the nation from the morass of war is of paramount importance, and "in no other play did Aristophanes insist so firmly on his conception of the poet's proper function in society; in no other play did he endeavour so earnestly to fulfil it." (Barrett)

But who is this poet? How does one know who is the 'right' poet, whose words would inspire the people to make the 'right' choices, and take the 'right' decisions? This is where this play ceases to be just a comedy, rising to the level of a socio-politico-economic document giving the audience and the readers, choices- between good and evil, right and wrong, old and new, appearance and reality. Endeavouring to bring out this dichotomy that exists throughout the play, Aristophanes' use of the devices of 'deception' and 'disguise', both structurally and thematically, calls for much attention.

According to Charles Paul Segal, the presence of Dionysus alone unites the two parts of the play- the journey and the *agon* or contest. However, if the matter of choices is considered, one sees a pattern emerging, contributing to the unity of the play and the coherence of such apparently disparate elements as Heracles[2], the Frog chorus, the Eleusinian Mysteries[3], Aeschylus and Euripides.

The very first deception occurs in the title of the play, though it is seen in accordance with the style Aristophanes practised in naming his plays after the chorus, as seen in *The Wasps*, *The Birds*, etc. The title of a literary work usually plays an important role in the appreciation and evaluation of the work. Being the title of the play, it alludes to the fact that the frog-chorus must be of chief significance, both to the plot and to the action of the play. But a close reading of the play reveals that the journey and the *agon* form the most important events of the play, Dionysus being responsible for most of the action. The frogs are not even the principal chorus, as K. J. Dover rightly points out, the choruses of the Mystae being far superior. In fact, the frogs are not even seen, but only heard! So the title does not tell much about the play, and one is left with the choice whether to look deeper into the title or whether to overlook the frogs altogether, seeking matters of more relevance in the other aspects of the play.

The scenes between Dionysus and his servant Xanthias, involve disguise and deception in a literal as well as a figurative sense. There is the primary disguise of Heracles, which the two keep shuttling between themselves. Dionysus, in spite of his divine stature, comes across as a gluttonous, licentious braggart, whose real cowardliness is exposed in these scenes. He is, as Segal says, a typical ancient "*miles gloriosus"*[4], while Xanthias appears to be braver and wittier than his master. Moreover, there is the constant inversion of the master-servant concept, due to Dionysus' whims mainly- he wants to be Heracles at the promise of dancing girls, but pleads with Xanthias to exchange costumes when the landladies and Aeacus[5] threaten him with dire consequences. Segal says:

> Not only does he take up the slave's garb, but he also endures the basest of necessities of slavery, physical punishment and an accuser's right of torture.

The pain, which he unsuccessfully tries to conceal, furthermore, is an indication of his loss of divinity- "For if he's God", says Xanthias, "he won't feel it".(Act 1, Sc.2)

Dionysus identifies himself at the beginning of the play as "Dionysus, son of the Winejar,"(Act 1,Sc.1) but again there the lines in which he forbids Pluto's servant to torture him at his peril- "for I am an immortal, Dionysus, son of Zeus*"*.(Act 1,Sc.2) The masculine-feminine dichotomy also comes to play here. The effeminate coward Dionysus chooses to imitate Heracles, the epitome of masculine qualities. Although furnished with the hero's lion-skin and club, in sentiments he is so unlike him that as a dastardly voluptuary affords one much matter for laughter.

The choices given by Aristophanes exist here subtly- whether to accept Dionysus at face value, with all his Heraclean rigmarole or strip him of this disguise, revealing the puny coward hiding inside; whether to accept the normal master-slave dynamics, imparting partiality to Dionysus because of his divine status, or to see in this relation a reflection of a society, where things are in chaotic state, where roles are ever-changing, like the Empusa[6], where slaves become masters by a quirky twist of fate, and where Gods are pulled down to the level of the humans, perhaps being thrust still lower.

The Frogs has a unique feature in its double chorus, unlike most of the other Greek plays, which usually had a single chorus. As discussed earlier, the title points to the supposed significance of the frog-chorus, but their "*Brekeke-kex-ko-ax, ko-ax"* seem almost nonsensical when compared to the odes of surpassing beauty, which are sung by the Initiates. Their hymns to Iacchus[7] and Demeter[8] alternate between the holiest strains of praise and the most scurrilous satire. Moreover, Dionysus manages to silence the frog-chorus ultimately, but mingles effortlessly with the Initiates, without trying to upstage them. With the Initiates, he is back where he belongs, from the braggart he is finally on the path of rediscovering himself as the God that he truly is. So, the choice again remains as to favour which chorus, though it is the Initiates that Aristophanes is acknowledging, through Dionysus, even if the frog-chorus lends its name to the play.

In the 'agon' or 'contest', the deception lies right in the plot structure. Often in Aristophanic plays, the 'agon' precedes the 'parabasis'[9], and "the hero in the latter half of the

play joyously reaps the fruits of his earlier victory". (Segal) But here Aristophanes has radically altered this convention by transforming the *'agon'* into a minor scene of little intellectual content (the whipping of Dionysus and Xanthias), whereas the true 'agon', a prolonged literary competition between Aeschylus and Euripides for the throne of tragic excellence in Hades, comes after the 'parabasis'. This anomaly, though it seems disparate, is attuned to the flexible plot-structure of *The Frogs*, with all its dualities. In the 'agon', which is judged by Dionysus himself, both the tragedians agree that moral value of poetry is most important, Aeschylus arguing that his plays made men better and Euripides replying that his made them think. Ultimately it is the traditionalist Aeschylus who is chosen to advise Athens on its problems.

The culmination of the play, at this level is directive of Aristophanes' own views, which is essentially, as K. J. Dover says "old ways are good, new ways are bad". But the very presence of choices throughout the play and in the *agon* too, blurs the line between appearance and reality, and an apparently distinct solution is shrouded by doubts.

Aristophanes leaves the play subtly open-ended, never mentioning if Aeschylus indeed managed to "save the City*",* if he was truly the 'right' poet. This choice of one over the other involves prioritizing one but not completely doing away with the other. In this play, the old values and virtues, as represented by Aeschylus, triumphs over but does not necessarily negate the new-fangled notions, as those of Euripides. Just because Euripides lost the contest, it does not take away from his greatness or cannot deny the fact that he was a reality and represented the other side of the coin, which however disliked and condemned by Aristophanes, still did exist. That Euripides, with all that he stood for was given the role of the adversary in this very important *agon* is proof of his acknowledgement by Aristophanes. But again, the deception continues in the fact that Dionysus undertook this journey into Hades to bring back Euripides, seemingly tipping the scales in his favour, from the start of the play, but at the end chose Aeschylus as the winner. Moreover, the *agon* itself, being very well-balanced makes it difficult for one to take sides. George Saintsbury says:

> Aristophanes, fanatic as he is and rightly is, on the Aeschylian side, is far too good a critic and far too shrewd a man not to allow a pretty full view of the Aeschylian defects, as well as to put in the mouth of Euripides himself a fairly strong defence of his own merits.

It is as if Aristophanes, rather than guiding the audience to what is 'right', is presenting both sides of the situation, both laden with their respective pros and cons. He does indicate that his stand is of the traditionalist, but he is not forcing his choice over anyone. It is just a small hint, a slight nudge towards the direction he would want the Athenians to follow, but the ultimate decision is theirs and theirs only.

The ultimate deception occurs in the character of Dionysus- his development from the timorous, almost despicable figure at the beginning of the play to serve as arbiter in a contest of the gravest consequences at its end. The journey that he makes into Hades to bring back Euripides is merely superficial, it is also his journey from illusions and self-deception to

realization and self-knowledge. From the start, one sees Dionysus, as anyone but Dionysus- he is the "son of Winejar", disguised as Heracles, changing places with his servant Xanthias, but by the end of the play, he has not only regained his identity but also celebrated for the God that he is. Dionysus, at the beginning of the play, would not have sided with traditionalists, he did not seem to know or care much about old virtues, but the disillusionment does take place finally. In Dionysus' sudden decision of choosing Aeschylus over Euripides, the choices are again exhibited- was Dionysus labouring under the same deceptions that seems to be governing this play? He might have had doubts about Euripides right from the start which he chose not to show or the profound realization of the integrity and power of Aeschylian values came to him at the spur of the moment, or as he says "Well, in my heart of hearts I have known all the time. No question about it...", one is open to conjecture.

This open-endedness, illustrated throughout the play, with just a gentle tilting of balance on the side the author favours reminds one of a similar literary debate in Jonathan Swift's *The Battle of the Books*, a satire published as part of the prolegomena to his *A Tale of a Tub*, in 1704, as a result of the raging Ancients vs Moderns debate[10] of that time. The satire depicts a literal battle between books in the King's Library, as ideas, authors and critics struggle for supremacy. Swift skilfully manages to avoid saying which way victory fell, portraying the manuscripts as being damaged in places, thus leaving the choices with the reader. But there are plenty of references as to which side Swift belonged. There was the famous metaphor of the 'bee' and the 'spider'-

The bee is like the ancients and the authors: it gathers its materials from nature and sings its drone in the fields. The spider is like the moderns and the critics: it kills the weak and then spins its web (books of criticism).

Swift also saw modern man as a reflected light, while the ancients were the real sources of light. One can see that this open-ended literary debate, where the scales seem to tilt in favour of the 'old' rather than the 'new', albeit in a mock heroic manner, is quite similar to the techniques used and the ideas expressed by Aristophanes in *The Frogs*. It may also be seen as an instance as to how the Ancients truly do influence the Moderns.

Using the devices of deception and disguise, Aristophanes methodically undermines the reality in which his comedies are rooted, and as Cedric H. Whitman suggested, offers an intimation of "another reality, a truth beyond truth... which is, in fact, the spirit's formulation of the way things are".

NOTES

[1]The Athenians celebrated three winter festivals in honour of Dionysus- the Rustic Dionysia in December, the Lenaia at the end of January or beginning of February, and the Anthesteria later in February or early March.

[2]Heracles or Alcides, was a divine hero,the son of Zeus and Alcmene, half-brother of Perseus. He was the greatest of the Greek heroes, and a paragon of masculinity.

[3]Initiation ceremonies held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone based at Eleusis in ancient Greece.

[4]A stock character from the comic theatre of ancient Rome, and variations on this character have appeared in drama and fiction ever since. The character derives from the 'Alazon' or 'braggart' of the Greek Old Comedy. This term is occasionally applied in a contemporary context to refer to a posturing and self-deceiving boaster or bully. The term was used by Plautus in his play *Miles Gloriosus*.

[5]Son of Zeus and Aegina, doorkeeper of Hades in this play.

[6]A frightful hobgoblin, noted for its incessant changes of shape.

[7]An epithet of Dionysus, particularly associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries. He was the torch bearer of the procession from Eleusis.

[8]In Greek mythology, she is the Goddess of grain and fertility, the pure nourisher of the youth and the green earth, the cycle of life and death and also the preserver of marriage and the sacred law.

[9]In Greek comedy, it is a point in the play when all of the actors leave the stage and the chorus is left to address the audience directly. The chorus partially or completely abandons its dramatic role to talk to the audience on a topic completely irrelevant to the subject of the play. The Greek verb is *parabainen*, so the term is *parabasis.*

[10]In France at the end of the seventeenth century, a minor furore arose over the question of whether contemporary learning had surpassed Classical learning of ancient Greece and Rome. The 'Moderns', epitomized by celebrated French author Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, took the position that the modern age of science and reason was superior to the superstitious and limited world of Greece and Rome. In his opinion, modern man saw farther than the ancients. The 'Ancients', represented by statesman and essayist Sir William Temple, Jonathan Swift and others, for their part argued that all that is necessary to be known was still to be found in the works of Virgil, Cicero, Homer and especially Aristotle. This debate came to be known as the Ancients vs Moderns Debate.

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